Pugin's Designs and Minton Tiles

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'I am a builder up of men's minds and ideas, as well as material edifices', wrote Pugin in 1851, 'and there is an immense work and a moral foundation required before they are prepared to receive, understand, and practically realise the glories of Christian art'. Augustus Welby Pugin is rightly regarded as the leading architect of the Gothic Revival in England, but it is clear that throughout his life he regarded himself principally as an instructor and a propagandist. 'Building, without teaching and explaining, is almost useless'.[1]

Pugin was also driven by technology. He was enthusiastic for the railways which made it possible for him to travel around the country far more readily than architects of earlier decades of the nineteenth century. Though based in London in the early part of his career, and at Ramsgate for the latter part of it, Pugin's diaries reveal some breathtaking itineraries from one site to another as he journeyed to inspect buildings in progress, to meet clients, and to discuss matters with those who executed his designs. Nor were his journeys occasions for relaxation or idly looking out of the carriage window. Letters were written and drawings were made *en route*, and at least one of the pattern-books for tiles in the Minton archive reveals where ink was accidentally spilled, probably when the train on which he was travelling made a sudden stop.

Pugin was not averse to using the latest industrial processes when it came to the implementation of his designs. This applied to the manufacture of ceramic tiles and the manufacture of ecclesiastical metalwork, and it enabled both of these products to become plentiful and affordable, as indeed they needed to be as the Gothic Revival gained momentum in the 1840s and the demand for the full range of Gothic art - both ecclesiastical and secular - grew rapidly. It was something of a paradox that the Great Exhibition of 1851 - a celebration of the new industrial age - should have had as one of its most popular attractions Pugin's Medieval Court, crammed with metalwork, ceramics and furniture inspired directly by the fashions of the fifteenth century. Pugin's chief collaborators in the creation of the Medieval Court included John Hardman (1811-67), the Birmingham metalwork manufacturer, and the potter Herbert Minton (1793-1858) of Stoke-on-Trent who also had his own stand at the Exhibition. Minton and Hardman, along with John Gregory Crace (1809-89) of the London decorating firm, and the builder and stone-carver George Myers (1804-75), were Pugin's closest associates in the execution of his building and decorative schemes; from the New Palace of Westminster to small country churches and houses, and Pugin's own family home (Fig. 1) at Ramsgate.

Figure 1

Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin: the architect of over one hundred buildings including cathedrals and major parish churches; the author of eight major publications on architecture and design; professor of ecclesiastical antiquities at Oscott College, the designer of ceramic tiles, dinner-services and garden furniture; also jewellery, textiles and wallpaper, church metalwork and stained glass; the man responsible for the interiors of the Palace of Westminster from the Queen's throne to the ceramic pavements of the lobbies and corridors, to inkstands, umbrella-stands, keyplates and hinges. Amidst all of this, Pugin found time for three marriages and eight children, plus two or three unsuccessful courtships, time to design and build two family homes, and to run a one-man lifeboat service off the Kentish coast at Ramsgate where he eventually went to live. Pugin died in September 1852 at the age of forty. When in the grip of his final illness, in February 1852, he wrote his last letter to Minton, in which he said, 'My mind has been deranged through over-exertion. The medical men said I had worked one hundred years in forty.'[2] If anything it was an understatement, for Pugin's actual working life spanned little more than the sixteen years from 1835 to 1851.

We need to bear it in mind too, that Pugin did not have an architect's office teeming with juniors and clerks. Apart from his eldest son, Edward Welby Pugin, he had only one pupil in the formal sense: his son-in-law John Hardman Powell; and when asked why he did not employ a clerk to do the routine parts of his drawings, Pugin retorted: 'Clerk! clerk, my dear fellow: I should kill him in a week!' All the more important then that Pugin should have as collaborators men who could understand his principles and apply his designs. Often Pugin would supply only a partial drawing; say half of a candlestick or one-quarter of a tile, kowing that Hardman's men, or Minton's, would be able to work up the full pattern and turn out the object to Pugin's satisfaction.

Pugin saw the restoration of medieval-style encaustic floor-tiles as an essential part of his revival of Gothic architecture, or - as he preferred to call it - 'Christian' architecture. In an article which first appeared in the *Dublin Review* in February 1842 (later reprinted as part of *The Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England*, 1843), he wrote:

> 'Unless [the ancient glazed and figured tile pavement] be revived, our churches will never produce the rich and harmonious effect of the ancient ones. The

> specimens now remaining of these ornamented tile floors are in general so worn and mutilated that they convey but a very imperfect idea of their pristine beauty to a general observer; but their effect on a grand scale, such as in the chapter-houses of Salisbury, Winchester, or York, must have been truly splendid; their manufacture has been lately most successfully revived in the Potteries. The chancel of the conventual chapel at Birmingham, and that of St. John's Hospital, Alton, have already been laid after the ancient manner with great effect; and it is proposed to lay the whole floor of St. Giles's church, now erecting at Cheadle..... In churches where much gilding and colour is introduced, these incrusted tiles of various hues are indispensable to produce harmony of effect: for if so large a surface as the pavement is left of a dull uniform tint, whilst the rest of the building is covered with diaper and ornament, the contrast will be painfully striking.'

Pugin had his own collection of medieval antiquities, and among them were specimens of floor tiles rescued from sites in Britain and northern France. These were among the 'authorities', as he called them, for his revivals of medieval art; but it was never just a question of copying medieval patterns. In another of his definitive publications, *Floriated Ornament* (1849), Pugin argued that constant reproduction of old patterns, without reference to the natural type for which they were composed, leads to debased forms and spiritless outline. He went on to say that:

> '*Nature* supplied the medieval artists with all their forms and ideas; the same inexhaustible source is offered to us: and if we go to the *fountain head,* we shall produce a multitude of beautiful designs treated in the same spirit as the old, but new in form. We have the advantage of many important botanical discoveries which were unknown to our ancestors; and surely it is in accordance with the true principles of art, to avail ourselves of all that is beautiful for the composition of our designs.'

In this way, Pugin anticipated William Morris and other designers of the later nineteenth century.

Floriated Ornament contains 33 pages of chromolithographs showing a wide variety of patterns in which plants are flattened - as they were in the Middle Ages - and arranged in abstract rather than naturalistic ways. There was no attempt to create anything like a three-dimensional effect, whether on tiles, fabrics or wallpapers, and the floral and leaf-patterns were deliberately simplified, stylized, and often arranged in geometrical patterns. Pugin was the undoubted master of two-dimensional art and design, and encaustic tiles were an ideal medium in which to work.

It seems that Pugin first met Minton in 1839 or 1840. Unfortunately very little of the correspondence between Pugin and Minton has surived; but in the latter part of 2000 a letter from Pugin to Minton turned up at a collectors' fair in Sydney, Australia. The main interest was the 'penny black' stamp on the outside; but the contents revealed quite clearly that Minton was making tiles for Pugin by the autumn of 1840 - two years earlier than was previously thought.[3] A second-generation potter, Herbert Minton had been a dominant influence in the Staffordshire Potteries since the 1820s. He was fascinated by new technology, and in particular the process for making inlaid floor tiles patented by Samuel Wright of

Shelton in 1830; a process which Minton developed and perfected after acquiring a financial interest in the patent. The very first tiles were produced in sepia and buff, for the chapels of St Mary's Convent, Handsworth, and St John's Hospital (Fig. 2),

Figure 2

Alton; both of these including heraldic patterns relating to the sixteenth Earl of Shrewsbury who was a benefactor of both establishments.

It was almost certainly Minton's passion for technical improvement that led Pugin to Minton; and by the time Pugin came to build what is generally acknowledged as his finest church, St Giles's, Cheadle (Staffordshire) (1841-6), Minton was able to produce tiles in three and four combinations of colours (Fig. 3).

Figure 3

By the winter of 1843 Pugin was able to tell Lord Shrewsbury - who paid for the entire building - that the tiles for Cheadle were proceeding well, and that they would have 'the finest floor there in Europe'.[4] Some of the tiles are complete in themselves, while others form part of a complex design over four or even eight tiles. The reredos in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel is made up of painted and printed tiles which fit together with jigsaw-like accuracy, and which are absolutely unique to that building. The biggest and most significant commission of all was undoubtedly that for the New Palace of Westminster which required highly-specialised heraldic patterns for pavements, wall-tiles, borders and fireplace surrounds. The pattern-book for these was held in the Minton Museum, and is now at the Gladstone Working Pottery Museum in Longton.

Pugin's tiles were greatly admired by visitors to St Giles's, and it was not long before similar floor-patterns appeared in other buildings. Many of the buildings which Pugin designed, or where he had a significant input, were floored by Minton using a combination of what might be called standard Pugin tiles combined with one-off designs such as the initials or coat-of-arms of the client. Pugin actually

encouraged Minton to put some of his designs into general production, and this helped to reduce the cost.

> 'Minton is always ready to make new patterns from my designs when the ornament is one that can be generally used. In this case, he does not charge for making a pattern as it is a gain to him'.[5]

In this way 'Pugin' designs found their way into buildings with which Pugin had no direct connection, and this was particularly true after the Great Exhibition which made Gothic items both popular and affordable as never before. The quadripartite 'sanctus' panels which Pugin designed for his own chantry-chapel at St Augustine's, Ramsgate, appeared again in the choir of St Mary's Church, Shrewsbury, laid in 1865. It is significant too that when in 1842 Herbert Minton came to build his own church, Holy Trinity Hartshill, Stoke-on-Trent, using the Anglican architect, George Gilbert Scott, it was Scott as influenced by Pugin. Not only is Hartshill church closely modelled upon Pugin's recently-opened church of St Oswald at Liverpool, the inside is profusely decorated with Minton tiles, many in the 'Puginian' style. At the same time Scott was carrying out his first significant church-restoration, St Mary's, Stafford, where the vast chancel is covered in Minton tiles rising in six levels towards the east end. Many of the tiles are recognisably 'Puginian', yet two years before the opening of St Giles's, Cheadle, and Pugin himself described St Mary's as 'the best restoration to have been effected in modern times'. Gilbert Scott could not have wished for higher praise than that.

By 1849 block printing techniques were in use in the Minton factory. The first designs were for wall-tiles for the smoking-rooms at the Palace of Westminster, and they were soon adapted for other uses, such as metal-framed jardinières of cubic shape with four ten-inch (or larger) printed tiles forming the sides. The final category of tiles were the embossed and pierced majolica-glazed tiles used to decorate the Great Stove that was made for Lord Shrewsbury's drawing-room at Alton Towers and displayed at the Great Exhibition. These tile-patterns were three-dimensional in the way that the encaustic or printed kind could never be. Tableware falls outside the remit of this paper, but dinner and tea services printed with Pugin Gothic designs were in production at Minton's from 1844 through to the 1920s.

The variety of ceramic wares designed by Pugin and produced by Minton highlights the close personal and business relationship that existed between the two of them. In January 1852, only a few weeks before he lapsed into his final illness, Pugin wrote to Minton:

> 'I declare your St. Stephen's tiles are the finest done in the tile way; vastly superior to any ancient work; in fact, they are the best tiles in the world, and I think my patterns and your workmanship go ahead of anything'.[6]

A short time afterwards there was a brief falling out over some financial misunderstanding. For his part, Pugin wrote a letter to Minton threatening to transfer all commissions to other manufacturers. Almost certainly it was Pugin's illness and the delusions which were a symptom of what lay at the root of it, that were to blame; for a time Pugin refused either to see Minton or to answer his letters. Minton was deeply distressed because he had no idea of what he was supposed to have done wrong, and he was prepared to make any apology rather than lose Pugin's friendship. The situation was finally resolved through the good offices of

Pugin's wife, Jane; and one of the last communications to pass between the two men was this touching letter written on 14th February 1852:

> 'My dear, ever dear Minton,
> Your capital letter to my wife has just arrived, thus leaving nothing, my dear friend, but a perfect reconciliation between us. You must attribute a great deal to the dreadful irritation of nerves left by this terrible fever under which I suffered; but nothing would contribute so much to the final re-establishment of my improved health, as a real and hearty reconciliation with you. It is ridiculous, and a delight to the many to see two such men as you and I quarrelling. We cannot afford it long, let us cut the row and embrace. I will endeavour when sufficiently restored to settle it over a leg of mutton at Huntsfield; and if you will come and see me I will give you a better reception at St. Augustine than the Emperor; for all my things are in the true style, which is more than you can say for the fancy patterns. I have written to Mr Barry by this post that we are quite reconciled .....'[7]

Appended to the letter was a rough sketch showing Pugin and Minton embracing over an altar inscribed *Pax Pugin et Minton* and on each side a crowd of people shouting *Pax Minton et Pugin*.

Following Pugin's tragic death in September 1852, Minton maintained the connection through Edward Welby Pugin, the architect's eldest son, who picked up his father's unfinished commissions, and undertook many of his own, incorporating tiled pavements, notable examples being at Chirk Castle near Llangollen, Abney Hall (Greater Manchester); and looking beyond Herbert Minton's own death in 1858 the production of Pugin-style Gothic tiles continued to the end of the century in the kilns of Stoke-on-Trent and the Severn Valley.

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Notes and references

1. Letter to the *Tablet,* 15 March 1851.
2. Quoted in Trappes-Lomax, M. (1932) *Pugin: A Medieval Victorian*. London, Sheed & Ward, p. 306.
3. See Irik, W. (2002) An 1840 Letter from Augustus Welby Pugin to Herbert Minton, *The World of Antiques & Art,* July-December, pp. 150-3.
4. Letter from Pugin to Lord Shrewsbury, 28 November 1844. Belcher, M. (2003) *The Collected Letters of A. W. N. Pugin, vol.2, 1843 to 1845*. Oxford, OUP, p.140.
5. Letter from Pugin to Lord Shrewsbury, undated but of c.1848: House of Lords Record Office MS PUG/3/39.
6. Trappes-Lomax (1932) *Pugin,* p. 302.
7. *Ibid*., pp. 304-5.