



Left, the former Spode factory is the main venue for the British Ceramics Biennial. Below, among other work on sale through the BCB is Flux, tableware designed and made by MA students and teachers at Staffordshire University's ceramics department. Right, Totem: Trajectories in Tragedy and Triumph, by Corinne Felgate, uses discarded biscuit and hand-cast pieces of Spode to 'explore notions of power, success and failure'



CLAY DREAMERS

The British Ceramics Biennial in Stoke is an inspiring example of a city using its design and manufacturing heritage as a key regenerative initiative, promoting excellence and innovation rather than heritage-drenched nostalgia. **Veronica Simpson** applauds the vision of this unique design festival

Here's a highly relevant brief for today: The challenge is to revive the fortunes of a once thriving West Midlands town that had a fantastic history of manufacturing but which has now hit the bottom of the European league tables for all the key quality of life indicators – jobs, healthcare, education.

Not many would imagine that throwing a six-week ceramics festival every couple of years would be the answer to this blighted town's dreams, but that's exactly what Stoke-on-Trent has been doing for the past six years – with this year's festival marking the third – and its organisers and participants appear to have every faith that this event will be pivotal in turning this once mighty china town around.

Visiting Stoke during the 2013 festival in October was an Alice in Wonderland experience, filled with surprises. First, the arrival at the unbelievably grand, albeit shabby, railway station: built in 1848 in a style described as 'robust Jacobean manor-house', its scale was appropriate 150 years ago when Stoke was filled with the empire's most desirable tableware manufacturers – Spode, Royal Doulton, Wedgwood and Minton. But ravaged by the availability of cheaper china from far

afeld, it looks every inch the city in decline – streets filled with boarded-up shops, derelict factories and warehouses, their car parks overtaken by weeds.

In 2009, when the BCB launched, the Financial Times reported that Stoke's employment of ceramic workers had fallen from 50,000-60,000 in its heyday to just 10,000-15,000. One in five Stoke residents was said to be out of work then. However, china and clay manufacture continues here: Wedgwood still has a strong presence, as do high-end ceramics brands Dudson and Moorcroft, while Emma Bridgewater is one of the town's largest employers. Istock Brick and Johnson Tiles are makers of world renown. And all of these employers – and more – are united behind Stoke-on-Trent City Council's efforts to support the British Ceramics Biennial (BCB).

A reason for this unity is probably the quality that underpins the curatorial efforts of BCB founders Barney Hare Duke and Jeremy Theophilus. Rather than hark back to past glories, the BCB team deploys the city's assets to powerful effect to show how innovative, vital and engaging ceramics can be.

First stop on our introductory BCB 2013 tour is Airspace, the city's main contemporary art gallery. Today it is

densely packed with towers of fragile white china, looming like ghostly stalagmites, created by artist Corinne Felgate and called Totem: Trajectories in Tragedy & Triumph. Gallery owner Glen Stoker tells us that the media attention, the visitors and the boost to Stoke's artistic community that the BCB brings has 'absolutely made a difference to Stoke'.

Across the road, The Potteries Museum is showcasing all 22 finalists in the BCB's international AWARDS. Quality, craftsmanship, originality, technical brilliance and artistic exploration are prerequisites here, with artists competing for a £10,000 prize.

But few experiences are as poetic as a visit to the main venue, the Spode factory, vacated in 2008 when the company closed down. Despite the autumn drizzle, we find two Airspace staff happily patting flowers into a large circular flower bed at the entrance – though weeds and bushes and untrimmed trees proliferate behind them. The centrepiece is a delicate ceramic rose, made by Rita Floyd, one of the few surviving 'flower girls' (it takes eight years of training to be able to produce the requisite 150 blooms a day of all the key types). Thanks to a crowd-funding initiative, a real live version of this rose is being created by a local grower, to help raise funds for future ceramic initiatives – a legacy project with real-world appeal.

Inside, the building reveals itself as a huge, white cathedral, with vaulted ceilings and massive windows. And here there are not just exquisite examples of ceramic art at its finest but also initiatives aimed at ensuring ceramics has a future. For example, the Craft's Council's

ongoing Firing Up campaign to teach art teachers how to teach ceramics in school is being showcased with the exhibition of some excellent work by secondary school students, and an uplifting video demonstrating how much enjoyment and inspiration the activities have given the kids and the teachers.

There are other community initiatives: outreach projects with ceramic artists working with prison inmates and mental health users to make exuberantly impractical or simple and functional things in clay; a pilot scheme, Typecast, provides therapy through clay and 'mindfulness' practices for recovering drug addicts and alcoholics, so successful it has attracted funding and European partners; and Fresh,

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a celebration of the best work from recent graduates from the few colleges around the UK that still have ceramics capability (there are only two UK art colleges still offering a ceramics degree).

All through this massive complex of buildings we see the fruits of the past two years' residencies, collaborations, commissions, education and enterprise projects. New this year are the four artist-led, sponsored pavilions in Spode's 'China Hall'. Simeon Featherstone's collaboration with sponsor Johnson Tiles has resulted in a luminous, layered and

digitally printed ceramic tile that is deployed all over the pavilion interior.

A conversation with Johnson Tiles' specialist products manager Harry Foster reveals that, following substantial investment in new printing technology, this company is now just about the best architectural ceramic specialist available, and is currently engaged with recladding the rainbow-tiled exterior of the iconic Sixties' Waikiki Beach hotel.

Also new this year are rooms within the sprawling Spode complex on show again after being previously out of bounds for health and safety reasons. Students of Bergen Academy of Art and Design in Norway have been exploring and animating these spaces as part of their Topographies of the Obsolete exhibition. To secure city approval for visitors, Bergen Academy actually paid to have them made safe.

Thick with dust, the neglected workrooms and design studios are haunting. Most moving is the old boardroom, with its parquet floor restored (thanks to the Bergen grant), and its wood-panelled walls all buffed and beautiful. But the showcases that line these walls, most poignantly, have been left empty with the dust – and the drag marks – just where they were when all of Spode's trophies were removed.

The overwhelming impression is that ceramics as a material, as a British art medium – and Stoke as a city – still have much to offer. Can the festival turn the town's fortunes around? So far, it has generated an estimated £4m economic impact for the city, with 70,000 visitors. It has supported more than 400 artists and given 500 young people and communities across the city opportunities to engage with clay. And, small beer though this may be (until you think of the effect magnified by those 70,000 visitors) it has made me vow to buy British china from now on – no more plates from Ikea! ■

