

Relight my fire

Has Stoke's proud position as the centre of the ceramics industry really been consigned to history? *H&A* goes on a road trip with long-time Potteries fan **Eric Knowles** to find out...

FEATURE NATASHA GOODFELLOW PHOTOGRAPHS CLAIRE DAVIES

There are a couple of buildings I just have to show you,' Eric Knowles says excitedly as we walk through the centre of Burslem, one of the six towns that comprise Stoke-on-Trent. In the wake of a deluge of headlines over closures and takeovers, Eric – former director of ceramics at Bonhams and a stalwart Potteries fan – is taking us on a whistle-stop tour of some of the remaining manufacturers to assess what life is left in the city. Traffic and missed turnings have already made us late for our appointments, but Eric is having none of it. 'Follow me!' he says. 'It'll be worth it.'

It is. The two buildings he points out are spectacular; testament to the city's ceramic greatness and its vast former wealth. The Burslem School of Art, built in 1905 and where Clarice Cliff, Susie Cooper, Charlotte Rhead, Gordon Forsyth et al studied, is all huge, arched windows and graceful lines. Opposite, the Wedgwood Institute, built around 1870, is an architectural triumph in Venetian gothic style. Zodiac mosaics sparkle in arches on the upper storey while, below, terracotta reliefs tell the story of ceramics. Presiding over it all is a statue of Josiah Wedgwood, coolly inspecting a pot above the doorway.

Ever since the Josiahs Wedgwood and Spode set up here in the late 1700s, the towns of Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke, Fenton and Longton have been synonymous with ceramics. It was here where lavish tiles destined for palaces, pubs, schools, hospitals and libraries worldwide started out; where the recipe for English bone china was perfected; and where basalt and jasper ware were invented. For a population used to dull, functional ceramics, these new wares – delicate, decorative and fashionable – were a revelation.

When Wedgwood's 'Frog Service', commissioned for Catherine the Great of Russia, went on show in London in 1774, the capital was brought to a standstill as people rushed to see it.

Demand was unprecedented and, by the turn of the last century, the majority of the local population worked in the industry, with around 4,000 bottle kilns firing the wares. The Grand Trunk canal (now the Trent and Mersey), finished in 1777, was built expressly to shuttle Cornish clay into Stoke and finished pots out to the Liverpool docks. It was a time of innovation – in design, manufacturing and marketing.

A change of fortune

The success continued until relatively recently. In the 1960s, it was rumoured you could leave your job at a potworks at lunchtime and find another job that afternoon. 'Even in the 1980s, Stoke was heaving,' says Eric, an aficionado of the city ever since he went to hear Sam & Dave at the Golden Torch nightclub as a teenager. 'Wedgwood, Minton, Coalport, Royal Doulton, Carltonware – they were all thriving. I remember reading that Wedgwood had a two-year order book. But since then, I've seen this community, like so many of our industrial communities, take a hammering.'

Driving around the area today, how much of a hammering is clear. In 1907, there were 391 potworks; now there are 115, of which only 15 are of significant size. In the 1960s and 70s, it's estimated that 70,000 people worked in the industry. Today that figure is just 5,000. Where once there were bottle kilns, there are now office blocks or faceless retail parks. The Royal Doulton factory on Nile Street, opened in 1877, stands vacant and silent, its roof collapsed. The



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Facing page, from top Bottle kilns were a major polluter; machinery at Burleigh; its transfer-printed blue and white earthenware
This page Eric poses outside a defunct bottle kiln, now part of the Gladstone Museum in Longton

former Minton works is now a Sainsbury's. The Wedgwood Institute is empty, the art school given over in part to a library. Both Wedgwood and Spode (and its sister company Royal Worcester) went into receivership recently. 'The old saying, "You never know what you've got till it's gone," never rang truer than here,' says Eric.

But despite all this, another picture begins to emerge during our visit. In leafy Barlaston, to the south of the Potteries, Wedgwood still retains a sizeable manufacturing base, where 118 craftsmen make its Prestige range. 'We have a very skilled workforce here,' says Richard Davison, giftware plant manager. 'Often, these skills have been passed down through generations and families, and it is this that gives the product its value.'

Happily, Spode will also survive in the city, since Portmeirion bought the brand rights in April. 'We're now making part of the 'Blue Italian' and 'Woodland' ranges here,' says creative director Julian Teed, who has worked at the firm since 1984. Until recently, both were made in the Far East. 'The feeling in this factory has never been as electric as it is now,' he adds.

Secret success

Across town, Hudson & Middleton – 'still and always English' – continues to produce a lively range of fine bone china mugs from the Grade II-listed building that has been its home since 1875. In Burslem, Royal Stafford, founded in 1845, is doing likewise – its collection by iconic designer Eva Zeisel is particularly sought-after. And a few minutes' walk away on Nile Street, Moorcroft is still producing must-have studio pottery on the site of the factory built by Walter Moorcroft in 1913.

Eric is a director of the company, so obviously partial, but the design studio is as impressive as the pieces are seductive. 'Everything is handmade and painted in exactly the same way as it has been for nearly 100 years,' he explains, as a bevy of talented designers and painters labour to keep a burgeoning collectors' club happy with regular new releases and limited editions. 'I still regret not buying Rachel Bishop's 'Destiny' design,' he says ruefully.

Less well known to collectors are the historic

firms of Dudson (founded in 1800) and Churchill (1795), both mass producers of high-quality catering and hotelware. Along with the newer Steelite, it is these companies who are widely credited with sustaining the area's supply chain. Churchill alone had a turnover of £42m last year, and has recently won the licence to supply the Jamie Oliver range of 'Keeping it Simple' dinnerware – all of which is made in Stoke.

In a return to the early days of the industry, new, smaller companies, such as tableware firm Repeat Repeat (featured in *H&A's* May issue) and Anita Harris have started up, too. Anita, who made her name at Poole Pottery, moved to Stoke seven years ago, excited to be working in an area with so much heritage. 'We even have two bottle kilns,' she says delightedly. 'We're calling one of them Eric!'

The admiration is mutual: 'Anita represents the vitality of what Stoke is all about,' says Eric. 'She's developed her artistic flair but remains focused on the business. It's no surprise to me her range does so well in John Lewis.'

Another firm that has had extraordinary commercial success is Emma Bridgewater – surely something of a modern day Wedgwood. Having taken a spontaneous decision to buy the

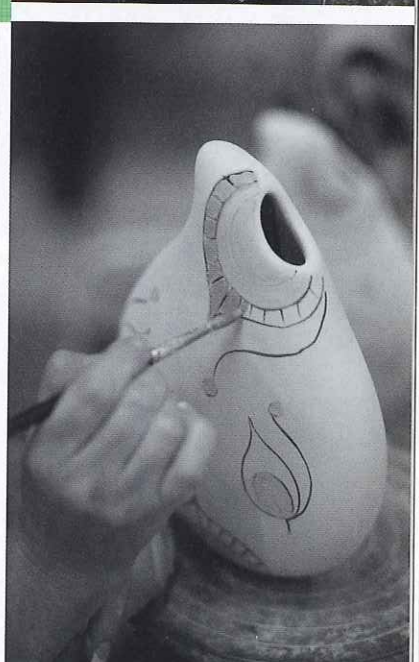
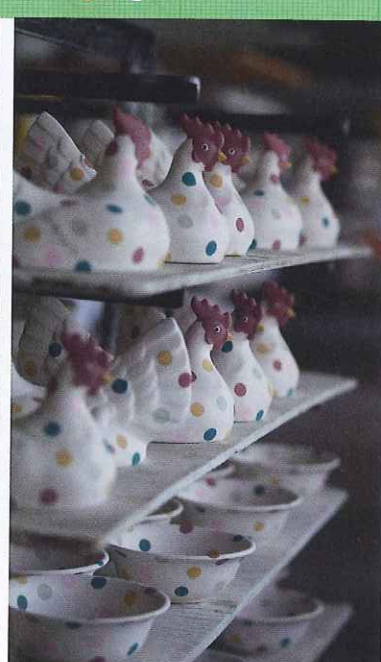
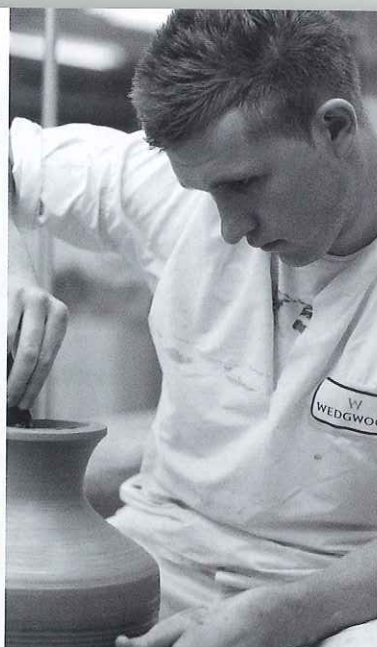
company that was making her wares when it ran into difficulty in the early 1990s, Emma now employs 184 people and has seven shops nationwide – and her jaunty spongeware polka dots, Union Jacks and hearts designs are seen on dressers the length of the country. 'Something extraordinary has survived in Stoke,' she says, 'some spirit of the Industrial Revolution. Even though so much has been destroyed, you still get a strong feeling here of our manufacturing heritage.' More than that, she says, Stoke pottery is unique. 'Ceramics made on the other side of the world just aren't the same. The clay and the chemical composition is different.' Eric agrees. 'English china has that "full cream" look,' he says, 'whereas mass-made ceramics from the Far East have a "skimmed milk" colour.'

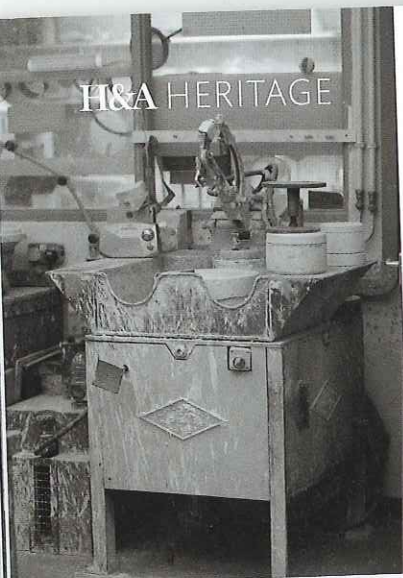
English to the core

Paradoxically, considering how much manufacturing has been shipped abroad, many

Facing page, clockwise from top left A sign of the times at Burleigh; enamelling a pot pourri jar at Wedgwood – it takes three weeks to complete each one; thrower Chris Mottram hard at work at Wedgwood; Burleigh jugs in 'Blue Arden'; Anita Harris at her new studio in Longton; handpainting at Anita Harris; quirky kitchenware at Emma Bridgewater; the lady herself, with poodle Panx; Sharon Beardmore in the design studio at Moorcroft; a plaque in the visitor centre. 'They make a new one every other week with the pieces they break,' jokes Eric; tools of the trade at Wedgwood Below Town of Flowers, a Moorcroft 2009 piece designed by Kerry Goodwin







Above, from top The New English development facility at the University of Staffordshire; 'Anatomica', part of its debut collection; CJ O'Neill's installation at the Old Post Office in Burslem; Eric strikes a pose

firms are finding that it is their very Englishness that sells, above all else. 'People don't want china from a Staffordshire company that has been made abroad,' says Eric emphatically. 'They want to know that it has come from Stoke, where we have the skills, honed by years of experience.' At Britain's last Victorian pottery, Burleigh – saved from closure 10 years ago when William and Rosemary Dorling sold everything they had to buy it – Japan and South Korea are now the firm's biggest customers. 'They appreciate quality ceramics,' says William. 'And they like the "English accent" of our patterns – even those that were originally inspired by Asia.'

Where Emma Bridgewater and Burleigh have a cosy, comforting take on Englishness, The New English, a joint venture between the University of Staffordshire and local entrepreneur Paul Bishop, draws inspiration from a wider interpretation of the term, reflecting themes such as street art, tattoos and punk rock.

'We want to give the ceramics industry a creative shot in the arm,' says Paul. 'At a time when the world is crying out for the new, lots of companies are clinging on to the old, sometimes taking up to 18 months to get a product out.' The company, whose first collection debuts in Liberty and London gallery Vessel in September, uses cutting-edge techniques to develop and market products in mere weeks. When orders reach a critical mass, it outsources manufacture to established Stoke companies. 'Stoke doesn't need more capacity,' he says, 'it needs more demand.'

'It's this kind of attitude the industry needs if

it's going to survive,' comments Eric. 'It's a breath of fresh air.' Others are obviously thinking along similar lines. October sees the launch of the inaugural British Ceramics Biennial (BCB), a 10 week-festival of exhibitions, installations and activities throughout the city. At the Old Post Office in Burslem – where businessman Mark Nixon has set up an impressive gallery space to showcase the work of up-and-coming artists alongside more established names such as Lise Moorcroft and Alan Clarke – BCB artist CJ O'Neill is already causing a stir with a vibrant graffitied installation. Using old plates gathered from charity shops, she worked with local disadvantaged young people to create the mural, based on the 'Cottage Garden' pattern of Aynsley China (still going strong in Longton), and is now looking for local manufacturers to produce a range of tableware based on the spray-painted designs.

Meanwhile, at Emma Bridgewater, they're preparing for the arrival of a roomful of ceramic cacti – a work thought up by ceramics star Jaime Hayón, creative director of Lladró. 'Who knows what it'll be like?' laughs Emma's husband Matthew Rice, 'but if it encourages people to come to Stoke then that's great.' Mark Nixon couldn't agree more. 'I want people to realise that we are still the heart of the ceramics community,' he says. A phoenix may rise from the ashes of Stoke's long dead bottle kilns yet. H&A

For more information on visiting Stoke-on-Trent and for the contact details of places mentioned in this article, go to visitstoke.co.uk

THE BRITISH CERAMICS BIENNIAL 3rd October-13th December Events to throw yourself into

✿ Work by 27 of Britain's hottest contemporary ceramicists will be on show at **The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery** (Bethesda Street, Hanley, Stoke, 01782 232323; stokemuseums.org.uk) from 3rd October-13th December.

✿ See work by some of the most exciting emerging makers and designers, including Churchills' Laura Cartner, at **Emma**

Bridgewater (The Courtyard, Eastwood Works, Lichfield Street, Hanley, 01782 201328; emmabridgewater.co.uk) from 3rd October-29th November.

✿ See CJ O'Neill's installation, made in conjunction with local charity Unity, at **Glazed Art**, The Old Post Office, 12 Wedgwood Street, Burslem, 01782 816978; theoldpostofficestudios.co.uk.

✿ A rare chance to see inside the **Wedgwood Institute**, the 'Our Objects' exhibition pairs historical, industrial ceramic objects with contemporary work. Wedgwood Institute, Queen Street, Burslem, from 3rd October-29th November.

✿ Full details of the programme can be found at britishceramicsbiennial.com.