

STOKING THE FLAMES

Over the past 10 years the British Ceramics Biennial has helped fuel the revival of The Potteries. Ahead of this year's edition, *Tristram Hunt*, director of the V&A and former MP for Stoke-on-Trent Central, assesses how ceramics are continuing to shape the city and outlines the challenges ahead



Above: Clay College Stoke student Zeba Imam at work. Right: the British Ceramics Biennial in the China Hall of the original Spode factory site



In *Anna of the Five Towns*, that small but perfectly formed masterpiece of life in The Potteries, Arnold Bennett describes the meaning of clay to the 'Bursley man'. 'He exists in it and by it; it fills his lungs and blanches his cheek; it keeps him alive and it kills him. His fingers close round it, as round the hand of a friend. He knows all its tricks and aptitudes; when to coax and when to force it, when to rely on it and when to distrust it. [...] Clay is always clay.'

The potters of Burslem, Stoke and Longton spent their working lives shaping clay. But, in turn, clay shaped the towns of Stoke-on-Trent (there are actually six). This 'rugged pot-making spot of earth', as Josiah Wedgwood called it, has been moulded and remoulded over the centuries by the mingling of clay and coal, flint and bone.