

GLAZED EXPRESSIONS

TILES
& ARCHITECTURAL
CERAMICS SOCIETY

Number 38 Spring 1999

The International Tile Company

Susan Ingham Padwee

Prior to the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, only two American manufacturers had apparently succeeded in establishing commercially viable potteries which produced decorated or "art" tiles.¹ English tile makers, eager to develop the vast potential of the virtually competition-free American market, produced lavish displays of their products at the exhibition. The arrays of their tiles had the desired effect. The British fashion for tiled floors, walls and mantels flourished as Americans rediscovered the fireplace as a symbol of their colonial past, endeavoured to make their houses models of scientific sanitation, and strove to demonstrate their aesthetic sophistication. But the English displays

Below: Fig 1. Advertisement from Lain's Brooklyn Business Directory for 1884-5.

INTERNATIONAL TILE COMPANY,
Factory, Third St., near Hoyt St., South Brooklyn,
MANUFACTURERS OF
**Encaustic, Geometrical, Mosaic, and
Plain Tile Pavements,**

For Entrance Halls, Corridors, Passages, Conservatories, Churches, Cemetery Chapels, Porches, Footpaths, Porticos, Verandahs, etc.

Also manufacturers of Majolica and Enameled Tiles, White-glazed, Decorated-glazed, and Hand-painted Art Tiles, Architectural Enrichments, etc., for Hearths, Fire-places, Stoves, Wall Linings, Dadoes, Bathrooms, Friezes, Sillings, Inscriptions, Flower-Boxes, Cabinet-work, etc., etc.

Architects' Designs carefully and skillfully carried out by competent workmen from Minton's and other leading firms in England.

The only manufacturers in America of the celebrated English Decorated-glazed Tiles.

The Managing Proprietor was awarded the following Prize Medals for his Exhibits, viz.: Gold Medal, Moscow Exhibition, 1872; Bronze Medal, International Exhibition, London, 1874; Silver Medal, Paris Exhibition, 1875; Bronze Medal, International Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876; Silver Medal, International Exhibition, Paris, 1878.

REGISTERED TRADE MARK—STAFFORDSHIRE KNOT.

P. O. ADDRESS, No. 92, THIRD STREET, SOUTH BROOKLYN.

Proprietors: J. W. IVERY, E. A. BULWER, C. W. R. WYNNE.
Showrooms and New York Office, 8 East 17th Street, NEW YORK.

also had a paradoxical effect: In the decade following the centennial exhibition at least two dozen American companies began to manufacture decorated tiles. Some were already producing tableware or roof and drainage tiles, but many were newly organised.²

This expansion and specialisation did not pass without notice in England. A British journalist reporting on the growth of the American pottery industry in 1882 noted that "the New Jerseyites are boasting that ere long their productiveness in fictile ware will practically enable them to defy and shut out all foreign competition," a development that he conservatively suggested might "... cause some anxiety in the potteries at home."³



Above: Fig 2. International Tile Company transfer printed floral tile.

Among the new American tile manufacturers, the International Tile Company of Brooklyn, New York was an anomaly. Incorporated in February 1883 for "... the purpose of manufacturing and Selling all kinds of Tile, Brick and Such building materials as are made wholly or in part of Clay."⁴ I.T.C. was the only company organised and financed in Britain. According to Fred H. Wilde, an English ceramist who worked for I.T.C. for about a year, "all presses, dies, and special machinery were brought from England. Many of the workers (all department heads) were brought over, including a printer and engraver."⁵ The company was primarily financed by members of the British aristocracy, John W. Ivery and his father,⁶ and an American, Pliny Norcross.⁷

Of the organisers of I.T.C., it appears that only John W. Ivery had previous experience as a manufacturer of ceramics. He had been employed by the 'Albion Blue Brick & Tile Works,'⁸ a company probably owned by his father. The firm was located in West Bromwich, Staffordshire, and produced blue terra-metallic building and fancy bricks, mouldings, coping, foot-path paving bricks, grooved stable floor

bricks, vases, and trusses, but no decorated tiles. John W. Ivery apparently had no working knowledge of decorated tile manufacture prior to the founding of I.T.C.

Among I.T.C.'s British shareholders were the Honourable O.F.S. Cuffe, the Honourable D. Lawless, the Honourable H.C. Plunkett, cadet members of the Irish aristocracy, and Messrs. W.J.R. Bulwer, H.A. Bulwer and F.W. Verney.⁹ Cuffe, Lawless and Plunkett were thirty, twenty-eight, and twenty-seven, respectively, when the company was established in 1883; Henry Alan Bulwer, named as a trustee in the company's certificate of incorporation, was described as a "young man not previously in any business . . . (who) represents his father;"¹⁰ and from Wilde's account, it was the younger Ivery who managed the company. It is possible that I.T.C. was established under the guidance of the senior Bulwer and Ivery to give these young men, especially their sons, experience in the world of finance and business.

No business records or product catalogues for I.T.C. are known to survive, but advertising for the company provides some documentation of I.T.C.'s history and product lines (Fig. 1). Two advertisements in the Brooklyn business directories provide the most information about the company, including an exhaustive list of their products and their uses. "Encaustic, Geometrical, Mosaic, and Plain Tile Pavements, For Entrance Halls, Corridors, Passages, Conservatories, Churches, Cemetery Chapels, Porches, Footpaths, Porticos, Verandahs, etc. Also manufacturers of Majolica and Enamelled Tiles, White-glazed, Decorated-glazed, and Hand-painted Art Tiles, Architectural Enrichments, etc. for Hearths, Fireplaces, Stoves, Wall Linings, Dados, Bathrooms, Friezes, Skirtings, Inscriptions, Flower-Boxes, Cabinet-work, etc."¹¹ I.T.C. made sure to mention its English pedigree,



Above: Fig 3. International Tile Company transfer printed tile with an allegorical scene depicting Knowledge.



Above: Fig 4. International Tile Company transfer printed tile with a scene from the life of Sima Guang, a Song dynasty Chinese statesman and historian.

"Architects' Designs carefully and skillfully carried out by competent workmen from Mintons and other leading firms in England," and made the somewhat questionable claim that it was "the only manufacturer in America of the celebrated English Decorated-glazed Tiles."¹²

The company had a capital stock of \$45,000.00, and by July 1883, the factory and kilns were built and the "latest machinery" had been imported from England and installed.¹³ During August, Pliny Norcross left the company¹⁴ and Charles Richard William Wynne took his place. During the summer and fall, the English workmen arrived and the potters and ceramists experimented with the unfamiliar American clays and glaze materials.

Only two of the English workmen have been identified. Frederick Henry Wilde, the ceramist who worked for I.T.C. from 1885 to 1886, had worked for Maw and Company in England. He "... brought with him recipes for making white wall tile and an extensive line of bright and mat glazes. He also had recipes for pinks and oxbloods."¹⁵ "In those days," Wilde said, "formulas and recipes were the private property of the ceramist; they were in fact, his capital."¹⁶ After a year at I.T.C., Wilde, like many contemporary ceramic workers, moved from pottery to pottery.¹⁷

Of the hand-painted tiles mentioned in I.T.C.'s advertising, only three are known, and two are signed "S. Jenks." An artist, Samuel Jenks, lived in Manhattan from 1882 to 1884 and in Brooklyn near the I.T.C. factory from 1884 to 1885.¹⁸ His move to Brooklyn and subsequent disappearance from the area, seem to confirm his involvement with I.T.C., and suggests that he may have left the country when the company was sold to Americans. The Minton Archives list a Samuel Jenks who was born about 1856 and was a



Above: Fig 5. International Tile Company relief tile depicting Summer - Young Adulthood.

student at the Newcastle School of Art in the late 1860s and an apprentice painter/gilder at Mintons China Works from 1870 to 1877.¹⁹

By the end of 1883, or possibly earlier, I.T.C. was ready to begin commercial production. The preference for transfer-printed tiles in England, I.T.C.'s reliance on British design, and Fred Wilde's assertion that a printer and engraver were brought from England, suggests that these were the first decorated tiles that I.T.C. produced. I.T.C. directly copied an enormously popular floral wall tile design (Fig. 2) that was produced by at least thirteen British manufacturers. "Knowledge" (Fig. 3) is one of a series of allegorical tiles that closely resemble a series produced by T. & R. Boote depicting personifications of classical virtues surrounded by a Japanese-style border, and a pair of Mintons China Works tiles were the prototypes for I.T.C.'s fan tiles, one of which is illustrated with a vignette from the life of Sima Guang, a Song dynasty Chinese statesman and historian (Fig. 4).

In spite of the immense popularity of transfer-printed tiles in England,



Above: Fig 6. International Tile Company relief tile with an ideal head.

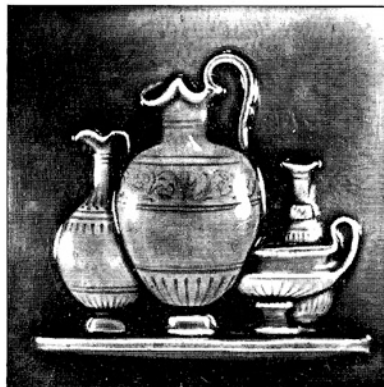
American tile manufacturers preferred to make relief tiles, a result of their lower production costs and the success of the relief tiles manufactured by John Low's art tile company in Massachusetts.

Figure 5, Summer-Young Adulthood, is from I.T.C.'s most ambitious series, a set of four tiles based on bas-reliefs sculpted by the Danish neo-classical artist, Bertel Thorvaldsen, representing the seasons of the year and ages of man. Like other American manufacturers, I.T.C. produced images of ideal heads (Fig. 6), and birds (Fig. 7), although its set of vase tiles (Fig. 8) seems to be unique.



Above: Fig 7. International Tile Company relief with birds in a nest.

On 14th August, 1886, the British investors determined that "by reason of its liabilities," the company should be "wound up"²⁰ and disposed of its stock to a group of American investors headed by Charles Arbuckle, of Arbuckle Brothers, the largest distributor of roasted coffee in America. I.T.C.'s "liabilities" were not specified, but unfavourable court rulings setting low tariff rates on imported decorated tiles were certainly among their concerns. John Ivery's inexperience in the manufacture of decorated tiles and the inefficient lay-out of the factory reported by



Above: Fig 8. International Tile Company relief tile with vases.

Fred Wilde, may have also been contributing factors.

Under American ownership, I.T.C. continued in business until 1891, although it is unlikely that the company produced decorated tiles following the British departure. Choosing to produce plain, undecorated tiles would have made sense for the new American owners of I.T.C., who had no previous experience in the manufacture of ceramics. Undecorated tiles, the economic mainstay of any tile manufacturer, required less technical expertise than did the transfer-printed and relief tiles, were less labour-intensive to produce, and were not subject to changing fashion.

Decorated tiles produced by I.T.C., like those made by other small regional manufacturers, helped to make the fashion for tiles accessible to the less affluent consumer and contributed to the development of an American taste that was distinct from English style. However, although American tile manufacturers proclaimed that their relief tiles were "an entirely new product," it was not until the Arts and Crafts Movement more than a decade later, that taste and design evolved at companies like Grueby and Rockwood where tiles were produced that were uniquely American. ♦

Notes:

1 The early history of American tile-making has been poorly documented and errors of fact have been perpetuated from author to author. It appears, however, that Samuel Keyes was successfully manufacturing encaustic tiles in the early 1870s at a Pittsburgh brickworks and was, by 1876, the superintendent of the Pittsburgh Encaustic Tile Company. [Julian Barnard, *Victorian Ceramic Tiles* (Greenwich CT, 1972), 85.] At the same time, Hyzer and Lewellen of Philadelphia, were experimenting with encaustic tiles and by 1876 were manufacturing wall tiles. [Edwin Atlee Barber, *Pottery and Porcelain of the United States* (1893. Reprint: Watkins Glen, NY, 1971), 344-345.]

2 More than thirty American potteries are known to have been producing tiles between 1876 and 1885, although there probably are others. Due to the paucity of research in this area and the ephemeral nature of early business records, it is often impossible to know at what point and for how long each company maintained a commercially successful tile production. The tile industry in late nineteenth-century America was remarkably fluid; owners and skilled craftsmen moved frequently from one factory to another, their numbers augmented by new arrivals from the pottery centres of Europe.

3 Barnard 1972, 85. This is quoted from *The Artist and Journal of Home Culture*,

February, 1882. An editorial in *The Manufacturer and Builder*, September, 1881, notes this general trend. "The United States were for many years the largest buyers of British manufactures; but during the past decade we have made such rapid strides in developing manufacturing industries at home, that in a vast number of important items we have greatly diminished the importation of foreign products, and in many others have fully succeeded in supplying our domestic wants . . . [This is] abundantly shown in the almost constant disquisitions, explanations and lamentations of the British press in treating of the present condition and future outlook of British industries . . ." ["Industrial Emancipation of the United States," *The Manufacturer and Builder* 8 (September 1881), 195.]

4 *Certificates of Incorporation*, New York State Supreme Court, Vol 1 (7 March 1881 - 15 October 1885), 180-181.

5 Everett Townsend, "Development of the Tile Industry in the United States, *Ceramic Abstracts and The Bulletin of the American Ceramic Society* (15 May 1943), 130. Townsend's history of I.T.C. was based on information given to him by Fred H. Wilde. At the time Townsend was writing his article almost sixty years had passed since Wilde had worked for I.T.C. and there are some inaccuracies in the report.

6 Townsend 1943, 130. Either Wilde or Townsend mistook the spelling of John Ivery's name which is spelled with an "e", not an "o". Wilde identifies the elder Mr. Ivery only as Mr. Ivery, Sr., which makes interpreting the scanty biographical data difficult.

7 *Certificates of Incorporation*, New York State Supreme Court, Vol. 1 (7 March 1881 - 15 October 1885), 180-181. The clerk who transcribed the certificate miswrote Pliny Norcross's first name as Henry.

8 New York Vol. 145 (26 June 1883), 7. R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration.

9 At an Extraordinary General Meeting . . .", *The London Gazette for the Year 1886*. Vol. 2, No. 25618 (20 August 1886), 4090. The Honourable Otway Frederick Seymour Cuffe was born 11 January 1853, the son of the third earl of Desart, county Kilkenny, Ireland. He had been a captain in the rifle brigade and had served as aide-de-camp to the Duke of Connaught at Aldershot from 1880 to 1881. In 1884 he was living at 2 Tedworthy Square, S.W. London. [Bernard Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic Dictionary of the Peerage and Baronetage Together with Memoirs of the Privy Councillors and Knights* (London, 1886), 405 and Kelly's *Handbook of the*

Titled, Landed and Official Classes for 1884 (London, 1884), 239.] The Honourable Denis Lawless, the fifth son of the third baron Cloncurry, county Kildare, Ireland, was born 17 July 1854, and was also, from 1883, a captain in the rifle brigade. [Burke 1886, 303 and Kelly 1884, 522.] The Honourable Horace Curzon Plunkett, the third son of the sixteenth baron Dunsany of Dunsany Castle, county Meath, Ireland, was born 24 October 1855. [Burke 1886, 460 and Kelly 1884, 704.] Little is known about the Bulwers and no information about Verney has been located.

10 New York Vol. 145 (26 June 1883), 7. R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration.

11 *Lain's Brooklyn Business Directory for 1884-5*, 553.

12 *Lain's Brooklyn Business Directory for 1884-5*, 553. Period terminology for different kinds of tiles is not clear to modern researchers. If by "decorated-glazed tiles," I.T.C. was referring to transfer-printed tiles, their assertion may be true. (The date when A.E.T. began to produce transfer-printed tiles is unknown.) However, if they meant glazed relief tiles, Low Art Tiles was producing them in large quantities, and the Hamilton and Trent Tile Companies probably were also doing so by this time.

13 New York Vol. 145 (26 June 1883), 7. R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration and Townsend 1943, 130.

14 *Portrait & Biographical Album of Rock County, Wisconsin*, 254.

15 Townsend 1943, 132.

16 Townsend 1943, 134.

17 Townsend 1943, 130, 132, and 134.

18 *Trow's New York City Directory for the Year Ending May 1, 1883* (New York, 1882), 819; *Trow's New York City Directory for the Year Ending May 1, 1884* (New York, 1883), 839; and *Lain's Brooklyn Directory*, 1884-1885, 644.

19 Chris Blanchett, correspondence with author, 19 December 1997. Further research is necessary to confirm that I.T.C.'s S. Jenks is the Samuel Jenks who was an apprentice at Mintons China Works.

20 At an Extraordinary General Meeting . . .", *The London Gazette for the Year 1886*. Vol. 2, No. 25618 (20 August 1886), 4090.