



Genuine clay plain tiles: *a look beyond the marketing*

Traditional, 'heritage' and 'conservation' are terms widely used to describe clay plain tiles. David Sherry from Dreadnought Tiles takes a look behind the marketing to examine the real history, tradition and importance of specifying genuine clay plain tiles.

The use of authentic building materials is widely recognised as a vital part of preserving the unique character of our historic buildings, however, in today's marketing driven society, things aren't always quite what they seem.

The words 'heritage' and 'traditional' can cover a whole spectrum of manufacturing techniques from handmade and handcrafted products through to volume produced machine-made alternatives and the term 'natural colours' can also be subjective and often misleading.

Furthermore, roof tiles carrying old-fashioned names that sound quintessentially English haven't necessarily been manufactured on these shores. They may, in fact, have been imported from Poland or Turkey or even as far away as Vietnam.

Clever marketing – persuasive though it is – is clearly not a stamp of English authenticity. In order to identify what is a truly traditional roof tile, it is important that heritage specifiers dig beneath the marketing and understand the history of tile making in the UK and how genuine plain tiles are made.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF NATURAL CLAYS

The origin of the clay has always been of great importance in tile manufacturing as the UK has a range of different clay deposits, each with their own distinct characteristics and properties, which lend themselves to the manufacture of the various types of roof tiles found in different regions.



Dreadnought handmade ornamental club tiles drying

For example, Alluvial clay from the Humber and Bridgwater has a low shrinkage during drying and firing, making it particularly suitable for producing large clay units such as interlocking pantiles. Weald clay, from the South East of the country, is associated with red, brown and orange clay tiles – often handmade and sand-faced – which is characteristic in the south of England.

The Etruria marl, which can be found in Central UK and Midlands, has a high shrinkage rate in the manufacturing process, which

lends itself perfectly to the production of very dense, strong smooth faced or sand faced plain tiles. Due to its high iron content, it can be fired to produce a wide spectrum of colour from reds and browns through to the most famous of all, Staffordshire Blue.

Plain clay roof tiles manufactured in the UK from native English clays are not only a more sustainable option than importing tiles from abroad, but their characteristics are perfectly suited to our regional architecture.

THE PRODUCTION OF NATURAL COLOURS

The subtle organic colour variation of genuine historic English plain tiles has a unique character and appeal, which is hard to replicate using artificial pigments and stains used in the production of some modern tiles.

In the Midlands, the rapid development of the coal fields and the abundance of Etruria marl during the 19th century led to the



Dreadnought craftsman making a bespoke ball finial



manufacture of plain clay tiles in a wide range of naturally fired clay colours.

These were produced by placing the tiles on their edge – instead of stacking them one on top of each other – in order to allow the kiln's atmosphere to come into contact with their exposed surface. This caused a chemical reaction with the iron in the clay, which produced an appealing range of natural brindle colours from red to buff to brown to purple and ultimately Staffordshire Blue.

This technique was adopted further by the Broseley works in Shropshire, Hawkins and Rosemary in Cannock, Ruabon in North Wales and Dreadnought in Brierley Hill and, with the growth of the railways, canal and river network, these attractive plain tiles were used far beyond their local areas.

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Dreadnought brown antique tiles on a grade II listed property in Worcestershire



THE DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL ENGLISH TILE MAKING

Sadly, the UK clay roof tile industry suffered a major decline after the Second World War and the majority of the surviving companies were bought by multi-national organisations, who often retained the old brand names, but moved production into new factories dedicated to manufacturing efficiencies.

Traditional firing techniques that had generated natural clay colours were replaced by the application of surface stains and coloured sands, which does not produce the same subtle organic colour variation associated historic clay roofs.

In addition, there was an increase in imported tiles from Turkey, Poland and in some cases as far afield as Sri Lanka and Vietnam, many of which bore traditional sounding product names associated with local areas and the names of historic colours, but which in some cases were nothing like the originals.

For example, the words 'dark' and 'light' brindle no longer refer to Staffordshire tiles in natural multi colours derived from the kiln atmosphere, but more often from the chemical additives in the clay mix. Consequently, the tiles known as 'brindle' until the 1990s bear little or no resemblance to those produced under the same name today.

MODERN TRAVESTIES

During my time in the industry, I have even seen tiles sold as 'Staffordshire Blue', which are bright red on the underside as a result of an applied stain. The best way to identify a traditional naturally coloured tile, is to simply turn it over and if the colour is the same on the back as it is on the front, then you can be

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Dreadnought mixed colour handmade ornamental tiles on a listed property in Surrey



Old Dreadnought Staffordshire Blue tile from the 1950's (right) and a new one (left)



sure that the tile will have been manufactured through traditional kiln firing methods rather than applied surface stains and coloured sands.

Similarly, descriptions of 'single lap' interlocking tiles as 'plain tiles' can also be misleading. Although their exposed face can be made to resemble the appearance of two plain tiles side by side, in terms of performance they remain single lap not double lap which has always been a crucial characteristic of plain clay tiles and they are not a good substitute for authentic heritage roofing.

THE CHALLENGE FOR HERITAGE SPECIFIERS

For specifiers and conservation officers the challenge is to choose those authentic tiles that will match the existing old roof tiles and preserve the integrity of our architectural heritage.

At Dreadnought Tiles, we have been making clay roof tiles continuously on the same site since 1805 and have retained the skills to produce 'like for like' bespoke components at our Heritage Centre in the West Midlands. Our skilled craftsmen work from drawings or original pieces to create new components, which will help restore the architectural detail and the character of the original roof.

Richard Davenhill, former managing director of Dreadnought Tiles for over 40 years, has witnessed many changes in the clay roof tile industry. His advice to specifiers researching the suitability of so called 'traditional', 'heritage' or 'conservation' clay plain tiles for a restoration project, is: 'find out how and where they are made and look beyond the marketing to discover how authentic they really are.' 🌀



Tyntesfield House featuring Dreadnought Tiles

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