

Delftware tiles from Mealcheapen Street

by Murray Andrews

On 18 April 2023 the study collection assembled by Henry Sandon, former curator of Worcester's Dyson Perrins Museum and leading expert on Worcester Porcelain, was sold at auction by Chorley's of Prinknash Abbey, Gloucestershire. The collection featured an important range of decorative ceramics, prints, and paintings, as well as some archaeological finds, including medieval and post-medieval pottery from sites in London, Worcester, and elsewhere. One of the more notable treasures to go under the hammer was a framed group of nine 18th-century wall tiles, which had been recovered by Sandon in 1972 from a fireplace in the Grade II listed Georgian townhouse at 16 Mealcheapen Street, Worcester (Fig 1).¹

The nine tiles measure 125 x 125mm each, and feature blue-on-white 'Figure in a Landscape' designs set in powdered blue octagonal frames with 'dandelion' corners. The central designs can be divided into two basic types. The first type depicts a farmer seen from behind, dressed in a hat and smock and holding a goad, as he stands in a field looking towards two cattle in the middle distance. The second, meanwhile, depicts a shepherd and his dog, the former wearing a

hat and smock and holding a crook, as they walk left across an area of countryside, with three sailing ships visible in the distance. This second type most closely resembles designs found on 18th-century tin-glazed tiles produced in Liverpool, whose tiles are otherwise notable for their use of 'dandelion' corners.² The tiles can be dated on morphological and stylistic grounds, and form a discrete set produced in c.1740-60.

The wall tiles from the Sandon collection belong to a class of tin-glazed ceramics most commonly known as delftware. As the name suggests, delftware was first introduced to Britain from the Netherlands in the late 16th century, and its fashionable Chinese-influenced blue-on-white designs quickly captured the attention and purses of gentleman tastemakers in London and elsewhere. It experienced a boom in popularity after the accession of the Dutch-born William III in 1688, and by the mid-18th century a lucrative domestic industry was well established in Lambeth, Southwark, Bristol, and Liverpool.³ These English manufacturers plied their trade at home and abroad, including a very active 18th-century trade with the colonies in North America and the Caribbean.⁴ Though eventually



Fig 1: Framed set of nine English tin-glazed ('delftware') wall tiles recovered from 16 Mealcheapen Street, Worcester, in 1972. Photo © Chorley's, reproduced with permission.

superceded in the late 18th century by lead-glazed creamwares and mass-produced china, delftware tiles remained something of a status symbol throughout the Georgian era, and could be found decorating the hearths and fireplaces of well-to-do townhouses, large farms, and country piles across England.⁵

The delftware tiles from Mealcheapen Street are a remarkable decorative survival from 18th-century Worcestershire, which has lost many of its Georgian fixtures and fittings at the hands of overzealous builders and home improvers. Only a handful of in-situ parallels are known from the county, which include an extant set at Stone House near Kidderminster and another group recorded at 38 Foregate Street, Worcester, in the 1980s.⁶ Like the tiles from Mealcheapen Street, the tiles at these sites occupy prominent positions on fireboxes, grates, and fireplace surrounds in Grade II listed 18th-century properties, and would have been important decorative fixtures in household parlours and drawing rooms. Archaeological counterparts are quite rare, and just one fragment has been found on Worcester excavations as of 2023 - an index, perhaps, of their former prestige and exclusivity.⁷

Since no Worcestershire manufacturers are known to have produced delftware in the post-medieval period, we might wonder how specimens like the Mealcheapen Street tiles made their way to the West Midlands in the first place. While some might have been purchased at source and dispatched from warehouses in London, Bristol, or Liverpool, many others would have been acquired indirectly through a network of specialist ceramic and glass dealers, the so-called 'chinamen'.⁸ Several such retailers are known to have been active in Worcester during the 18th century, many of them with shops and warehouses in prominent city streets. In the 1760s, for example, the goldsmith-turned-'chinaman, toyman, dealer, and chapman' Samuel Bradley was selling decorative ceramics from premises opposite the Guildhall, while in June 1775 the chinaman Thomas Hill welcomed customers to his newly opened warehouse on the High Street.⁹

While we cannot know exactly how the Mealcheapen Street tiles found their way to Worcester, we can at least be reasonably sure of who commissioned their purchase. Though later famous as an inn called the Shades Tavern, the building at 16 Mealcheapen Street (Fig 2) was originally built in 1748 as a home for the Russells, one of the more prominent families of St Martin's parish.¹⁰ Its most famous resident in this period was William Russell (1718-1801), who had a long and celebrated medical career - including nearly five decades of unpaid service as surgeon at the Royal Infirmary - as well as business and personal connections with John Wall's Porcelain Works and the so-called 'Worcester writer's circle'.¹¹ As one of the most eminent and wealthy figures in city society, William Russell would have been maintained suitably splendid

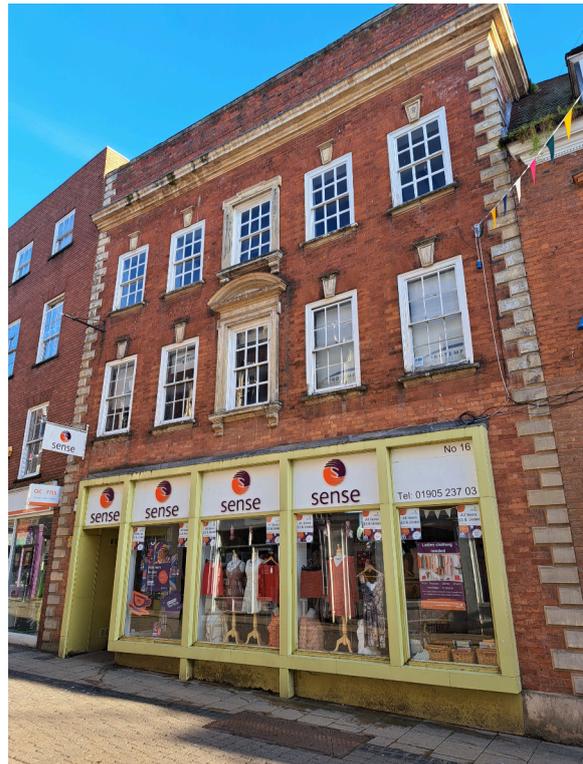


Fig 2: North-west facing view of 16 Mealcheapen Street, Worcester, in 2023. Photo by author.

livings, and these delftware tiles are almost certainly part of the original decorative scheme of his fine Georgian townhouse.

References

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