

A PASSION FOR POTTERY

An Oxfordshire workshop produces teapots adorned with floral designs reflecting its vibrant garden

IN A CLUSTER of old stone barns in the Oxfordshire countryside, a film of fine grey clay dust coats every surface. Here, in the village of Aston, skirted to the south by the River Thames, a range of nature-inspired pottery is taking shape, fashioned by a small team of workers. Downstairs, moulds are being filled with liquid clay, while upstairs, stencilled designs depicting flowers and birds are applied with careful touches of a brush.

Adjacent to the 19th century barns is a purpose-built shop and café, where customers browse and tuck into lunch. The site is surrounded by five floral borders brimming with colour under a vivid blue sky.

This is Aston Pottery, a business started 35 years ago by Stephen and Jane Baughan. What began as a part-time enterprise has developed into a flourishing concern. The gardens, which have inspired many of the decorative pots, have become a popular summer attraction in their own right.

A learning process

Much of the pottery's success comes thanks to Stephen's energy and determination. Neither he nor Jane have any formal training. "It has all been trial and error," he says. >



“My introduction to ceramics was doing art A-level, and my interest came from having a really good teacher.”

In 1982, Stephen, who grew up locally, was working as a builder and already married to Jane when he decided to rekindle his interest in pottery by making decorated mugs, jugs and teapots to sell to shops. He rented a couple of suitable old barns with character nearby, bought mould-making equipment, the necessary machinery for making bowls and clay slip, and set to work in his spare time. Jane helped out, especially with the drawing. “I wanted to make something that people would use,” he explains. “We did it part-time for approximately six years, going to trade shows, and it took off within 18 months. Eventually, we borrowed a lump sum and went full-time.”



The two halves of the reusable plaster mould for making a teapot.

With the mould halves bound together, Stephen pours the slip into the spout.



The newly cast teapot is removed from the mould. Care is taken, as the clay is still soft.

They bought the barns and developed the site into what it is today. “In 2008, we built the new shop and café, to make it more worthwhile for people to visit us, and we started cultivating the borders so that they would still come on hot summer days.”

Making the moulds

At the beginning, Stephen and Jane spent their evenings drawing out possible designs and developing moulds for their nascent pottery. Mould-making involves first sculpting the required shape in solid plaster on a lathe.

A plaster mould is made using the model to create a negative version of the shape in two or more sections: four plus a lid for a teapot. This is called the block mould. From that, a case mould is made from plaster, which is a positive version, in sections. That is then used to make a number of plaster production moulds for everyday use.

“It takes time and patience,” says Stephen. “We designed our shapes to have an elegance, to spring from the base with a bit of life.” The pottery has 60-200 production moulds per shape, and each one lasts for approximately 50 castings. “My crowning glory is still the handle on our mugs. The ergonomics of it are amazing,” he adds with pride. “You can put two fingers through it with ease, unlike some of the loop handles you see.”

Aston Pottery sources its clay from Staffordshire. “We use a cream earthenware clay that has a warm look to it,” he says. “Traditionally, earthenware was used to make pots for the masses, so they didn’t fire it very high, only at 1,060°C, because firing is one of the biggest expenses in the ceramics industry. We decided to vitrify, or fire the clay until it melted, and that makes it very tough.”

Traditional teapots

A staff of six work in the pottery, including Stephen and Jane part-time. “Everybody is trained here,” says Jane. “They just need an aptitude for handwork and an understanding of materials.” The staff produce approximately 40 shapes, ranging from egg cups to 2 gallon catering teapots.

Moulded vessels, such as mugs, jugs and teapots, are made from liquid clay, known as slip. Solid clay is used for plates and bowls, however, as they are made in one piece. To make the slip, the clay is mixed in a tank, called a blunger, with water, sodium silicate and soda ash. To form a teapot, the slip is poured into the mould from a bucket, as opposed to the tap method used for other vessels. This ensures an even pour, essential to prevent air bubbles forming round the gallery where the lid sits.

“You leave it for 45 minutes, and the water in the clay is absorbed into the plaster mould,” says Stephen. “The clay which lies against the plaster turns solid, and that

“Tea would arrive... cups agleam and a faint wisp of steam rising from the teapot shawl”

Gerald Durrell

forms the teapot. You get a thickness of 1/8in after 20 minutes, and we’re looking for fractionally more than 1/4in to make sure the handle is solid, but not the spout.”

After the allotted time, the excess liquid is tipped out, and the teapot mould is left upside down to drain for approximately 6 hours. A trough below the slatted shelf is a mass of solidified clay waste, which is cleared out and recycled annually. When the mould is removed, the teapot is left to dry overnight. In this ‘leather dry’ state, it is slightly clammy to the touch.

Next, it is taken to another workbench, where the seam between the two halves is trimmed off with a knife and any excess removed from the spout and rim. This process is known as fettling. When it is fully dry, any vestiges of the seam are scrubbed away with a wet sponge. “It’s quite a skill to make sure the teapot pours properly,” adds Stephen. “It needs to have a thick leading edge to stop the tea dribbling down the spout.” >



Stephen and Jane Baughan among the flowers in the colour-filled borders outside their pottery.



INSPIRATION IN THE BORDERS

Stephen Baughan started cultivating some of the land around the pottery in 2010. By 2015, there were five floral borders, known as the Hot Bank, Hornbeam Walk, Traditional Perennials, Dahlia and Annuals borders. Here, swathes of purple, orange and yellow flowers spill onto the paths, attracting bees, birds, including long-tailed tits and bullfinches, and butterflies such as Tortoiseshells and Red admirals. The plants include asters, salvias, heleniums, delphiniums, penstemons and ornamental grasses.

The Hot Bank, which is particularly vibrant in August, was formed on the rubble left from building the café and shop. Sun-loving plants, such as canna lilies, rudbeckias and red-hot poker, tumble down the slope, and a copper beech hedge runs along the top. “I wanted a really bright border that flowers from late May to the first frost,” says Stephen. The Annuals border contains 8,500 plants grown from seed, including sunflowers.

“I’ve had an interest in gardens since I was six, when I got boxes of seeds, so I’m doing now what I enjoyed as a child,” he explains. “On hot summer days, we didn’t see many people in the shop, but we thought they would come out to look at gardens. It’s gone beyond our expectations.

“It has sometimes been a struggle to get across to people that we actually make the pottery, but they can relate to the gardens because they’ve had a go at growing the same things themselves.” The gardens are now part of the Royal Horticultural Society’s National Gardens Scheme.

A large clump of Dahlia ‘Alfred Grille’, a cactus dahlia, replicated in Aston Pottery’s teapot design.



Left to right: Opening the spout with a sharp knife; roughening the teapot's surface with a sponge to better apply the paint; stamping the pottery logo onto the base of the pot.

The teapot is then put in an electric kiln for its first, or biscuit, firing. The kiln holds approximately 300 items and is heated to 900°C for six hours. When the pot has cooled down, it goes upstairs, where the base is rubber-stamped with the pottery's own mark, using heat-resistant ink. It is now ready for decoration.

Love of flowers

The Baughans have created approximately 170 designs over the past 35 years. "I did them in the beginning with

Stephen, but now it's a joint effort with the two other women who do the painting," says Jane. She takes much of her inspiration from the countryside. "We took photos, made sketches, then tested colours. We did a range of farm animals, which is still popular, then flowers. The geranium, agapanthus, aster and dahlia designs are from the gardens." Stephen cites Jane's wild blue clematis design as their breakthrough success. "It grew by our gate, and it's still in the top four sold in the shop."

The drawings are transferred onto acetate to make stencils. To do this, each drawing is divided into sections according to colour. The acetate is then stuck over the drawing and the relevant parts cut out with a sharp knife.

On the long workbench upstairs, decorator Emily Bon, who has worked at Aston for four years, is rhythmically dabbing paint onto a teapot. She has a group of saucers in front of her, containing various ceramic underglazing pigments mixed with water, plus a pot of circular, flat-topped brushes made of pig bristles. As a guide, she has a diagram outlining details of how to apply each design. The dahlia she is painting today comprises four stencils.

"The work was new to me, but it's very therapeutic, and every day you're doing something different," she says. "I've got a sample to follow, and we start with the lighter colours, using a stippling motion to ensure the colour is even. Then we dab the edges to take off any excess." As she paints, she holds the stencil in place with her free hand, carefully balancing the edge of the teapot on the table. The colour must be bold, but if it is too thick, the glaze will not cover it. "The stencilling has developed beyond anything I could have imagined," says Stephen.

Decorator Emily Bon uses multiple stencils and layers of colour to build up the petals, leaves and stamens in the dahlia designs.



Following the biscuit firing, a teapot is dipped into a barrel of glaze to ensure it is fully coated.



Glazed pottery cooling in the kiln, after firing at a temperature of more than 1,000°C.



Pouring a cup of tea from the finished product, emblazoned with the completed dahlia motif.

"The finish the girls create is fantastic." Approximately 20 teapots can be decorated per day, depending on the complexity of the design.

The paint dries almost immediately on the still-porous clay. Once the decoration is complete, the teapot is dipped into a vat of clear tableware glaze and removed, with a glugging sound, in one swift movement. The glaze contains a mixture of sand, flint, potash and feldspar, and is bought in ready-made. The teapot is then rubbed on the mat of a foot-wiping machine, which removes the glaze from the bottom to prevent it from sticking to the shelf in the kiln. The decoration has become obscured under the opaque glaze, but will reappear after firing.

The final firing takes 12 hours and reaches a temperature of approximately 1,170°C. Once it comes out, shiny and vibrant, all that remains is a quality check by Jane, who smooths the base with a cleaning stone before it is sent over to the shop. A teapot started on Monday can be finished by Friday.

Growing appeal

As the business has evolved, Stephen and Jane have recognised the need to pursue new avenues. The café

provides a hub for people to meet, and the gardens reach out to those who may not have considered visiting the pottery. Each component complements the others. "You can sit outside and admire the flowers or come into the shop and have tea," says Jane.

In the café, the pottery's own cheerful green and purple dot motif prevails on the crockery, and the homemade cakes sit on specially designed stands. "We like the fact that we're making a useful product which people will interact with each day," says Stephen. "But what is surreal is walking along the street and seeing one of your jugs in someone's window. You realise then that there's some longevity to what you've done." ■

• Words: Caroline Rees • Photography: Nicola Stocken

CONTACT

Prices from £9.99 for an egg cup, £39 for a 1 pint teapot www.astonpottery.co.uk