



Sir Clough Williams-Ellis' dream village of Portmeirion brought an eclectic mix of styles to a corner of North Wales.

Portmeirion and its Pottery

by Zita Thornton



Wandering beneath a blue sky, past pastel coloured buildings with contrasting shutters and red roof tiles, it is hard to believe that we are not in a corner of Italy. But this piazza with its colonnades, statues, formal pool and fountain, is in North Wales, in the totally artificial village of Portmeirion.

Familiar to many as the location of the sixties television series 'The Prisoner', Portmeirion was devised by Sir Clough Williams-Ellis in 1925 and buildings were added throughout his life.

Williams-Ellis was a collector on a monumental scale, collecting ideas, buildings and artefacts and placing them together in a most charming manner. You never quite know what awaits you around the corner. It could be a golden Buddha, a classical statue, St Peter on a balcony or Hercules holding up the world. Everywhere is evidence of his sense of humour: an inscription which commemorates the splendid summer of 1959; the boat that is really an extension of the sea front, or the many examples of trompe l'oeil.

Behind the village are woodland walks and a Victorian dog cemetery. Like every tourist attraction Portmeirion has a gift shop and it was for this that Portmeirion Pottery was first made.

It was in 1953 that Sir Clough Williams-Ellis asked his daughter Susan to take over the running of the Ship Shop. This already sold souvenir items from the Ashted pottery which displayed the village mermaid logo and the early spelling of the village Port Merion. When that factory closed in 1939 Grays Pottery took over production of their designs for Portmeirion.

When Susan started to be involved with the shop, she commissioned Grays to produce items decorated with a print she had designed based on a traditional nineteenth century engraving of Welsh women in costume, going to market. These were sold alongside items decorated with Grays own designs of a nautical nature and Susan's shell designs. In 1959 Susan designed *Dolphin*, which appeared on a wide range of exclusive souvenir items sold at The Ship Shop and at the Portmeirion shop at Pont Street in London. *Dolphin* with its two dolphins flanking architectural motifs, appeared on brightly coloured or lusted backgrounds for ten years.

In 1960, Susan and her husband Euan, bought Grays Pottery. Naturally enough, the pottery continued to supply the shops with exclusive designs. *Malachite* was one of Susan's patterns based on the semi-precious mineral, which spans this take-over period. Susan designed the rich green swirls and gilded handles and interiors of the range in 1959 and it was launched at the Portmeirion shops in 1960. These early pieces have a Portmeirion oval backstamp with a credit to Grays Pottery, whereas in later years they have the Portmeirion Ware stamp. Labour intensive and very expensive to produce, the range was discontinued in the mid sixties.

Grays was a decorating factory using bought in shapes, but Susan wanted to be able to design her own shapes too, so another pottery, Kirkhams Ltd was bought in 1961 and Grays was sold a year later. The resulting Portmeirion Potteries Ltd gave Susan complete control over the whole design process

from the shapes to the decorating. The new pottery continued to produce the Grays patterns as well as introducing new ones. One of the most popular patterns which used existing Kirkham shapes, was *Tiger Lily*, a floral pattern inspired by narrowboat art. From 1962 the backstamp lost the Grays credit. Variations listing instead *Portmeirion Pottery Stoke-on-Trent Made in England*, exist to the present day. Colours vary but green and yellow versions indicate shape seconds.

The first new shape produced to Susan's design was *Cylinder* which she adapted from Kirkham's own moulds for cylindrical sanitary ware. The elegant, tall coffee pot, in particular, became a Portmeirion classic and the shape was used, well into the seventies, for coffee, tea sets and later dinner sets, decorated in a number of different ways. Patterns included the sumptuous *Gold Sun* and *Gold Lion*, the variations of *Black and Gold Diamond*, the simple *Greek Key*, bold *Talisman*, the busy *Magic Garden* and the ever popular *Totem*.

Totem, first produced in 1963, is the most sought after and readily available of the old Portmeirion designs. Its decoration is formed from symbols such as stars and spirals, carved into the moulds themselves, the pieces being glazed in a single colour. It was withdrawn from general sale ten years later having been widely copied by other companies. Produced at the same time *Cypher* was similar in style but used symbols inspired by Minoan art and raised in vertical panels rather than an all over design.

For many people Portmeirion conjures up the full colour illustrations of flowers and butterflies which adorn tableware to the present day. Susan's inspiration was an old book by Thomas Green, which she found at an antiquarian booksellers. The African daisy illustrated in *The Universal, or Botanical, Medical and Agricultural Dictionary*, became the centrepiece of a range which she called *Botanic Garden*, giving her scope to include all kinds of different plants, butterflies and insects. Her idea was to produce different motifs for each piece in the range. These she collected from various other old books and having found a German printer who could cope with the full colour effect she desired, the range was ready to launch in 1972. Botanic Garden has its own backstamp which has changed over the decades.

An identification guide can be found in *Portmeirion Pottery* by Steven Jenkins and Stephen P McKay, published by Richard Dennis Publications. £25. The book also lists every motif and piece produced until 1999 with dates of retirements. Full colour illustrations of all the Portmeirion earlier designs are included too.

As well as tableware and ornamental items, Portmeirion continued to produce souvenir and commemorative items for the village, on commission for other companies and for special events. The most common is the half pint tankard made from the seventies. Also popular are mugs, which commemorate royal events and Portmeirion anniversaries.

Pottery photographs courtesy of Richard Dennis Publications.



Greek Key - early tea and coffee items, Cylinder and Meridian shape (covered sugar). Portmeirion Pottery from 1960.



Malachite - selection of early shapes and Susan's Cylinder range, including the coffee pot which she adapted from an old inhaler mould. The covered box is a trial from Grays Pottery and possibly one of the first pieces made. Gray's Portmeirion Ware and Portmeirion Pottery from 1960.



Souvenirs: Ashted Pottery vase with Sir Clough Williams-Ellis design and Grays Pottery jug with a print and enamel version of the same image. Susan Williams-Ellis' 1958 version of the Portmeirion logo on fancies, and a sample 'Bermuda' tobacco jar. The Welsh engravings were commissioned from Gray's by Susan to sell in the gift shop of Portmeirion village.



Coloured Dolphin, selection of shapes and colours including apothecary jars, herb and spice jars, plates, sifters, vinegar bottle and rolling pin; the pale blue conical jar is from the 1961-2 period. Portmeirion Ware and Portmeirion Pottery from 1960.



A selection of original Botanic Garden motifs, from 1973.



Portmeirion Village souvenir mugs, 1969-99.

Portmeirion Pottery values

Most early Portmeirion pieces of tableware, such as *Tivoli* or *Greek Key*, including the popular *Totem* range, can be purchased for around £5 a piece, rising to £10-£40 for a coffee or teapot.

A *Totem* coffee set for 6 would be around £150, but a larger *Phoenix* set, which was produced in great numbers for longer, from 1968-1983, is worth less than £50.

Royal Commemorative mugs are £5-£8.

Novelty items such as ornamental chamber pots, the *Portmeirion Duck* egg holder, or rolling pins are available from £5-£20.

Retired *Botanic Garden* pieces including the first *African Daisy* and *Water Melon* designs are from £13-£25.



The cylinder shape was used in 1963 for *Totem*. It was a Portmeirion best seller.



Tivoli - Serif shape, the transfer sheets for this pattern could be cut to fit different shapes. Bright colours were trialed but only green/blue and blue/brown were produced commercially. Portmeirion Pottery from 1964.

Visiting the Village

Portmeirion is on the coastline of Gwynedd off the A487 at Minffordd. It is open to visitors every day from 9.30am to 5.30pm.

Accommodation is available in the village at the hotel, or self catering in many of the village buildings.

Alternative accommodation is available in nearby Porthmadog.

For further details telephone: 01766 770000

Take a virtual tour of Portmeirion village at www.virtualportmeirion.com

For information about the pottery and a collector's forum see www.portmeirion.co.uk



Country Life and Sporting Scenes - these images, after Bewick, were used by both Gray's and Kirkham's in the 1950s. Portmeirion Pottery from 1963.



Cylinder coffee pots and *Phoenix Zodiac* tankards from the late 1960s and commemorative items including the *Apollo moon landing* and the *Mayflower*.