

Our continuing and very popular  
 Craft Pottery Series  
**Chelsea c1952-1997**

By Joan Witham



Renowned cat pieces designed by Joyce Elaine Morgan. Prices from £35 to £65 for teapot, £75 for jug.



Jug 10" designed by Joyce Elaine Morgan £75 to £85.

'A New Pottery in Old Chelsea'. This was the headline above an article which appeared in 'Everybody's Weekly' in 1955. In fact the pottery studio had opened three years earlier in an old building at 13 Radnor Walk off King's Road and was, by 1955 beginning to establish a reputation for: "fine works of art, brilliantly made by a group of highly gifted young people".

Collectors will already be aware of the fine quality of its products, the high standard of potting in red earthenware clay, the carefully engraved outlines of flowers, fish, birds, animals, landscapes, women's portraits, Persian horses and the brilliant jewel-like glazes. New collectors will be helped in identification by the fact that all pieces bear a backstamp:

Chelsea England in script and may possibly have the original early sticker showing the Chinese yin/yang logo (symbol of harmony)



CHELSEA POTTERY HAND MADE IN ENGLAND in border.

It is still possible to find items in the price range £20 to £100. Less easy to find, but well worth seeking out, are the mugs, jugs, platters and figurines depicting members of the legal profession, schoolgirls, beefeaters, Chelsea pensioners and angels.

Frank Spindler came to Chelsea in the sixties as a thrower but soon revealed himself as a fine sculptor. Thousands of his figures, mostly lawyers but also magnificent owls, were sent abroad. A large number of commissions were taken over the years and these pieces are probably still in the hands of families who ordered them for special celebrations and presents for themselves. A plate was made for John Lennon; for twenty years Paul McCartney bought around one hundred and fifty Christmas mugs. The actress Sian Phillips, Bob Monkhouse and Ringo Starr were regular customers. A decorative frieze went out to adorn a bank in Baghdad; tiles were designed for a millionaire's floor; Bafta awards and environment award plaques were made at Chelsea.

The most lucrative years were the sixties when crates were regularly shipped abroad to high quality shops and restaurants in New York and Dallas, to Australia, Canada, Japan, Norway, Finland and South Africa. Dinner sets were sent out to luxury yachts and in London Peter Jones and Liberty stores were prestigious outlets. Sadly, these good times did not prevail throughout the lifetime of the pottery.

Chelsea was the brainchild of David Rawnsley, a highly gifted, idealistic and innovative man who had been trained as an architect and engineer but had also worked as a very successful art director in the British Film Industry. He was an accomplished painter, sculptor and designer who had established in Paris a highly successful 'Atelier



Joyce Elaine Morgan. Legal figures and Sherlock Holmes bowl. Rare, no prices available.



Seven plates and bowls, various sizes, frog and penguin plates by Amanda Barrie £35 to £55.



Four items left to right. Bowl 10" £45 to £55. Vase 5.5" designed by Patience Ifill £35 to £40. Vase 7" £40. Jug 8" designed by Jannik Le Troadec £50.

## COLLECTING & PRICING INFO

Libre', studio. There painters and sculptors could work alongside each other exploring the use of clay 'potting with a virgin eye' and sharing ideas and experiences, for a daily charge. David decided to translate this idea to a studio in England, not intending initially to set up a commercial pottery. He found premises in a former coach building business owned by William Buchanan, leasing the top floor and one ground floor area. What on earth did the people of Chelsea think when they watched David trundling away 200 baker's flat delivery carts to clear a space? The next task was to hoist five heavy pre-war electric and two kick wheels to the top floor and then to position the kilns on the ground floor. In this way the Chelsea studio was established. For an annual club fee of 5 guineas, plus 6d an hour for use of equipment and small charges for materials and firing, student potters, enthusiastic amateurs and potters without premises could explore their craft in a free-and-easy friendly atmosphere with David as their charming and genial mentor, offering individual tuition at 10/6 per hour.

Alas, though very popular, it soon became obvious that the studio would not generate enough income to be viable. Undeterred, David, his wife Mary and William Buchanan formed a separate commercial enterprise alongside the club, calling it 'the Rawnsley Academy Ltd' and the Chelsea pottery was underway. The studio which had its own separate member's club room, attracted people of all ages and from all walks of life and lasted for twelve years.

In addition to the adult club there was a children's club which met on Saturdays and attracted generations of youngsters throughout the life of the pottery under the tuition of gifted teachers. Some stars of the club became successful potters in adult life, in Britain and abroad.

In 1959 David Rawnsley decided to leave Chelsea and set up a pottery along similar lines, in Nassau in the Bahamas. He took with him a senior decorator, Joyce Morgan for a short period to help him train people there, leaving Brian Hubbard, a potter who had joined in 1954 and who stayed for forty years, as director-in-charge, and, in effect, as owner. A number of decorators came and went for a variety of reasons, some to set up on their own, others to seek better pay when Chelsea hit hard times. (Remuneration was according to piece work - 1/5 of the wholesale price). There were many good decorators and it is difficult to single out the best but these were probably Joyce Morgan, Daphne Cork, Beryl Owen, Eve Gosset, Susan Windsor, Barbara Ross, Hazel Livi and Patience Ifill. Collectors will usually find their initials on the front of their pieces. Decorators had to be highly skilled to master the complicated technique which was originated at Chelsea. This consisted of engraving the drawing onto the piece, spraying on an oxide, then laying and overlaying coloured glazes.

Over the years Chelsea's fortunes fluctuated, linked almost entirely by events beyond its control. Inflation, a series of recessions and the loss of the lucrative American market when exchange rates became unfavourable, brought a number of financial crises. It was inadvisable to increase prices of pottery which would have caused a further slump in sales. In the 1950s a 4 to 5 inch plate sold for 7s/6d; in the 1970s, only £2, despite rising costs. Collectors now would expect to pay £30 to £35 for such a plate. Attempts to boost sales were made but had little effect. It was a constant struggle to survive despite the fact that efforts were made to ensure that standards remained consistently high.

Disaster struck in 1994 when Chelsea was forced to move from Radnor Walk at very short notice. Richard Dennison came to the rescue, buying and moving all the equipment to an ideal location in Ebury Mews. Sadly there was a non-renewable lease and after its allotted three years Chelsea finally closed, unable to find or afford a new site.

Joyce Morgan looks back on her forty years at Chelsea as a time of great pleasure derived from the joy of working with David Rawnsley and the friendships made there. She recalls the many wonderful parties and the regular stream of visitors who climbed the rickety wooden stairs to have coffee or tea and usually to buy or place a commission. It is gratifying to her that collectors now find so much pleasure in acquiring the beautiful pieces made at Chelsea.

Prices are, inevitably rising but it is still a good time to buy as pieces are readily available and auctions may be likely to yield items of special interest.

**Acknowledgments to Joyce Morgan and Brian Hubbard.**



*Bowl (ibex) 9.5" £35 to £45. Bowl (rooster) 6.5" designed by Joyce Elaine Morgan.*



*Plate 10" designed by Joyce Elaine Morgan £35 to £45.*



*Oval dish 18" x 15" £80 to £100.*



*Bowl 10" designed by Patience Ifill £50.*



*Vase 8.5" £75, Bowl 10.5" designed by Kim Warman £35 to £45, Bowl 5.5" £35.*



*Vase 15" designed by Joyce Elaine Morgan £90 to £100.*



*Owl, 13" sculpted by Frank Spindler £120.*