



A selection of miniature items produced at the pottery and valued between £5-£8 a piece.

Fishley Holland - a family of craft potters

by Graham Gower



A selection of popular items produced by the pottery. Left to right: 3in high cream jug, ashtray and a basket vase. These items, depending on the design work, are valued between £8-£12.

To be called the last of the 'English peasant potters' may at first seem a little disparaging, but when given by one of our greatest craft potters, Bernard Leach, the comment has the quality of praise. Directed at the work of Edwin Beer Fishley of Fremington Pottery, Devon, Leach was emphasising the importance and tradition of English craft pottery of which Beer was an exponent.

From this long tradition has grown an extensive range of pottery wares, reflective of the skills of those who have worked clay into functional yet aesthetically pleasing objects. These objects, whether they are vases, bowls or dishes, are finding increased favour among collectors who have come to appreciate this aspect of ceramic production.

For the collector the choice in craft pottery is wide. The market offers pieces to suit all pockets and all tastes, giving the collector ample opportunity for selective buying and specialisation. However, there are some very high prices to be paid for quality items carrying the marks of well known and repeated craft potters.

Many dealers and most ceramic collectors have at one time or another seen, or handled, the pottery wares marked with the name *Fishley Holland* or its variants. For years this pottery has been around in the market place, quietly collected by enthusiasts who have come to recognise the quality and particular individuality of this ware. With a low market profile choice pieces are being found for as little as £10 to £15; values which will no doubt increase as the pottery becomes more widely known and collected.

Those who are unfamiliar with the pottery of Fishley Holland will quickly come to recognise the distinctive soft grey glaze of the wares, which are invariably decorated with white brushstroke designs. Most of this production is associated with the period running from the 1950s to the 1970s, and when some very stylistic pieces were produced at the pottery. The range of wares was geared to the domestic and giftware market and produced at the pottery works in Clevedon, Somerset, operated by William Fishley Holland. Tea and Coffee ware, bowls, jugs and

vases were the main production lines, which was complimented by studio ware and a range of coloured glazed items, a speciality of Fishley Holland.

Depending on the decorative style, which is predominately naturalistic, prices begin at around £5 to £10 for a small vase or jug decorated in a 'leaf' or simple abstract pattern. For larger items such as dishes or bowls decorated with a 'dragonfly' or 'bird' design for example, prices can reach the £30 to £40 mark. For studio pieces and the coloured glazed items, prices are higher and again depending on decorative style can command upwards of £40 to £50.

The beginnings of the pottery are found in the late eighteenth century when George Fishley opened his small 'country' pottery at Fremington. Over the coming decades the family became noted for its contribution to the potters craft, particularly with the above E.B.Fishley. This master craftsman was well known for his use of traditional skills in producing utilitarian as well as decorative and ornamental ceramics.

Such was his reputation that his pottery at Fremington attracted holiday visitors as well as those with a predilection for the potter's craft. Among the visitors who appreciated and purchased his products were the Cardew family from London who, on their visits during the 1900s, were accompanied by their son Michael, a young boy later to become one of our finest craft potters.

During 1902 E.B.Fishley was joined by his grandson William Fishley Holland, who had developed a keen interest in the business. Unfortunately the partnership was not to last long. In 1912 E.B.Fishley died and the pottery was put up for sale. Not wishing to stay Fishley Holland moved to Braunton, Devon, where he had been given the opportunity to build a new pottery.

It was to this pottery at Braunton that Michael Cardew came in 1920 to satisfy his long held desire to become a potter. Under the able direction of William Fishley Holland, Cardew learnt to master the art of throwing and other basic pottery skills. This experience he put to good use when a year later he joined Bernard Leach at his St. Ives's, pottery in Cornwall. Over the succeeding years Cardew was to develop as a potter of distinction; an achievement do doubt aided by his time spent with Fishley Holland.

The success of Braunton Pottery was to be short lived, when in 1921 the owner became bankrupt. Unable to purchase the pottery for himself, Holland moved to the Sunflower Pottery at Clevedon, Somerset, established by Sir Edmund Elton in the early 1880s. At the time of his arrival the pottery was experiencing difficulties following the death of Elton's in 1920. Nevertheless, Holland and his assistant managed to keep the pottery going for a few years until circumstances finally brought about its closure. However, compensation came to Holland when he was allowed to buy some land on the Elton estate and build his own pottery works. This he successfully achieved and by the mid 1920s Clevedon Pottery was well under way.

His new pottery centred around producing a range of slipped earthenware, functional and decorative but mainly of a traditional nature and similar to his previous work. Later, in response to changing tastes, Holland introduced a new style of ware. This was finished in a grey glaze with decoration reliant on slip trailing and the broad use of brushwork, a style which has since come to epitomise the pottery at Clevedon. These wares found a ready market, and became the main production line, taking the pottery through to its final years in the late 1970s.

With the pottery of *Fishley Holland* the collector will find an array of marks, which are usually found incised. Normally pieces will carry either the initials of *WFH* in one form or another, while often on larger pieces or studio items the signature *W Fishley Holland* will be seen. However, the collector will also come across pieces marked *GFH* and the signature *G.F.Holland*. These marks refer to the work of George Fishley Holland, who left the works at Clevedon to set up his own pottery in 1959 at Dunster, Somerset. Here he produce similar pottery, sometimes known as *Dunster Ware*, plus a range of coloured glazed ware. The collector will also find pieces bearing the impressed or incised mark of Isabel Fishley Holland who worked alongside her father during the 1930s.

Until recently the wares produced by the Fishley Holland family have been more or less under rated, with low prices being asked for many good quality and well decorated pieces. This has been much to do with the lack of market knowledge and information about the wares produced by this creative family. However, it suffices to say that they have done much to enrich the tradition of English craft pottery; an achievement which at long last is being recognised in the world of collecting.



A fine studio plate showing the confident use of brushwork and sgraffito to create a pleasing effect. Signed *W.Fishley Holland*. 8ins dia. Valued upwards of £25.



A 4in high Vase with an abstract leaf design, valued at around £10, and a flower holder showing the 'dragonfly' design, valued between £8-£10.



A small platter with a 'fish' design showing the broad use of brushwork for effect, 6in dia. Valued between £10-£15.



Two mugs showing popular designs produced by the pottery. Height 5ins. Depending on the design these mugs are valued between £8-£12.



A floral jug, height 4ins produced at George Fishley Holland's pottery at Dunster. Valued at around £10.



A large mug, height 5ins, valued £12-£15, and a hand thrown Studio vase, height 8ins, valued at around £25-£30. Both decorated using slip trailing techniques.