

Continuing series on decorative craft ware complete with the usual price guide

Tremar Pottery

A new opportunity to collect

By Joan Witham

The focus now moves from Newlyn in south Cornwall, home of Celtic, Tremaen and Troika to Tremar near Liskeard in the east. Here, in the early 1960s a small pottery was opened by Roger Birkett, then a part-time art teacher, with his wife Doreen, Mrs Lampshire and a thirteen year old odd job boy. This was a humble beginning but the enterprise expanded and functioned very successfully for twenty years. The 1960s was a time when craft potteries started mainly as studios and developed into semi industrialised enterprises.

Here is a new and exciting area for collectors. Items of domestic ware and novelties are beginning to appear at antiques and collectors' fairs. The name 'Tremar' is beginning to be heard and prices, especially for the novelties, are starting to rise. However, pieces can still be found for a pound or two in charity shops, market stalls or car boot sales.

At first, Roger produced hand thrown domestic stoneware. He was the thrower, designer and originator of the formulae for glazes. His wife took charge of glazing and with Mrs Lampshire, packed the kiln, which was fired every night. Mrs Lampshire was also trained as a 'fettler' - tidying and cleaning up pieces before the first (biscuit) firing. The domestic pieces were gradually supplemented by lamp bases, money boxes, clocks, ashtrays, vases and paper weights. The appeal of the tableware lay in its sturdy, rustic simplicity, its good, straight forward design well suited to its purpose and the soft mellow glazes, first brown, then 'turnstone' green, sandpiper, a golden honey colour and 'oldmill', a creamy white. Decoration involved tube lining, like icing a cake through a nozzle, applied motifs, some being Cornish Celtic symbols and patterns incised in coloured glaze.

As demand increased and it became obvious that this was likely to be a highly successful venture investment was attracted and changes had to be made. Roger became full time, extended the premises at Tremar Coombe to increase working space and kiln capacity, and employed more workers.

This, at a time of high unemployment in Cornwall, was of great importance to local people and the local economy. Workers were trained on the job and as production methods changed, new processes were involved. Roger introduced slip casting. He made all the proto-

types by hand, obtained plaster moulds from Stoke-on-Trent and trained people to use them. This process involved securing the two parts of the mould, sealing the outlet hole at the bottom, and pouring in a creamy substance of clay and water. In time the water evaporated, leaving a skin of clay, the appropriate thickness around the walls of the mould. The surplus was then drained off and when the skin had dried to a leather hardness and the item could be handled, 'fettlers' cleaned off rough edges and smoothed down joints. A skilled fettler could thus give a moulded piece the appearance of handcrafted, studio produced goods. This quality was part of the attraction of the pottery, enabling Tremar to stave off competition from other producers.

'Home' or 'out' workers were also involved in manufacture. A small, measured block of clay was placed in the lower part of a spring mould and the top forced down. The pressure formed the solid shape. After drying to a leather-hard finish the novelties were again fettled giving a look of hand modelling. 'Home' or 'out' workers were also used at the end of the process to pack the novelties.

Alongside domestic wares Roger began to introduce new lines. He modelled sets of figures marketed under Liskeard Limited Figurines, 'the hippie' woman being a particular favourite. These are now commanding prices between £5 and £12 as collectors try to complete sets. (Though as yet, no trade lists have turned up, a leaflet giving a list of all pieces in that series and in all the other series was included in each box - a device intended, no doubt, to tempt collectors. There were also some sketches included). The leaflet reads:

'Tremar Potteries have been producing fine hand-crafted miniature sculptures, all individually gift boxed for a number of years. Due to the outstanding success of the Baby Birds, the following series listed in this leaflet have been produced for your enjoyment and collection. Each piece has been hand built and glazed by craftsman. We hope you enjoy collecting them as much as we have enjoyed making them'.

Alongside the figures came small birds, domestic animals, pets, safari animals, buildings, boats and cars. Such new lines had to be devised constantly in order to maintain

Tremar novelties.

Items vary in size and colours. Some are life-like, others whimsical.

Little Dog Series. Dachshund, Airedale, Cairn, Scottie, Cocker Spaniel, Old English Sheepdog.

Farm Animals. Hen, Horses (various), Sheep, Lamb, Cow, Ram, Duck, Pig.

Money Boxes. Inns, School, Tremar engine from mineral railway, Donkey, Owl, Rabbit.

Vehicles. Saloon car, Sedan car, Ships, Liner, Tugboat, Fishing Boat, Tanker, Galleon, Paddlesteamer.

Pottery People. Sailor, Soldier, Baker, Highlander, Yokel, Hippie girl (Teenager), Butcher, Carpenter, Sweep, Bishop, Bandsman, Fisherman.

British Wild Animals. Hedgehog, Badger, Stoat, Squirrel, Dormouse, Otter, Shrew.

Safari Animals. Bear, Elephant, Rhinoceros, Ant-eater, Hippo, Lion, (Large & Small) Bison.

Baby Birds. Bullfinch, Owl, Fledgling, Corncrake, Wren, Quail, Robin, Grouse, Long Tailed Tit, Jay, Nuthatch, Kingfisher.

Buildings. Windmill, Churches, Cottages, Town Hall.



Tableware. Coffee pots 8" to 10" priced around £4. Full sets with cups or beakers £25. Marmalade pot 4.5" £3.



Fancy Goods. Small vase 3.75" £3. Paperweight (can-can girls) 2" dia. £2. Lampbase 10" £18. Vase 6" £6.

COLLECTING & PRICING INFO



People. These are the most popular; 4.5" to 5.5" tall and priced £5 to £12.



Buildings. Average height 2". Prices £1 to £4.



Boats. Very popular. Sizes between 2.75" and 4". £4 to £12.



Farm Animals. Sizes between 2.75" and 2". Prices according to size £1 to £6.



Safari Animals and an example of an original box. Average size 2.5" prices depending on size £2 to £6.



Money Boxes, Inns. The Miners Arms, length 5". Price £7. The Pig and Whistle, height 6.5". Price £8. The Swan, length 4.75". Price £8.



Money Boxes. Owl, height 5.5". School, height 7.25". Rabbit 7" x 3". All current prices £4 to £8.



Dogs. Average size 2.25". £2 to £5.



Baby Birds. Average size 2.5". Prices £1 to £4.



British Wild Animals. Different sets vary in size. Average 3.25". Prices £2 to £6.



Vehicles. Very collectable. Prices between £4 and £10. Cars and steam engines 3" to 4".

public interest. Small novelties are now eagerly sought by collectors 'in the know', especially with prices currently ranging from £1 to £5. They are well designed and modelled with good detail and pleasant, subdued colours. Each piece came in its own illustrated box so value increases if the novelty has its box intact. Fortunately for the collector, almost all items are marked with Tremar either scratched or stamped in block capitals, or, on tableware, sometimes, with a printed circle, 'TREMAR POTTERIES MADE IN UK'.

At the peak of production, in the mid 1970s there were sites in Tremar, in an old mill at St Keyne, which burnt down in 1976 and at Penhale, St Cleer. A newspaper *The Western Morning News* reported the fire, which was caused by the explosion of cylinders which provided heating. The two storey timber framed building was flattened, damage ran into thousands of pounds and production was lost. The eighteen staff were transferred to the Tremar and Penhale sites. The insurance

money provided ready cash to extend the already flourishing pottery at Penhale. One hundred and twenty workers altogether were employed in various capacities. There were 10 kilns in a 16,000 sq ft site. The annual turn over was several million pounds.

Full-time sales staff were employed. Agents in various parts of the British Isles took samples to trade fairs where retailers placed orders for their gift shops and galleries. Crates were shipped to Europe, Australia and America provided a lucrative source of income. This widespread distribution is good news for collectors because it means that items may be found in towns, villages and cities throughout Britain and abroad. A shop sold products at Penhale and nine others were spread throughout Cornwall and Devon with Tremar products appealing to local people and holidaymakers. Ann Ripley visiting Tremar in the late 1960s saw an opening for what she called 'pottie parties' on the lines of the *Tupperware* parties. She set up shelves in her

garage and took in up to 20 huge crates of tableware and early novelties each week, delivered by British Road Transport. This proved to be a highly successful venture for five or six years.

Although there was competition from other potteries, Tremar, to its credit was extremely successful until the early 1980s. Recession brought a drop in demand, tastes in ceramics, especially tableware changed, and a crippling high bank rate all served to force closure of the enterprise. The pottery and contents were bought by Mr & Mrs Hirst in 1983 but trading continued for only two years. Though highly gifted, Mr Hirst could not restore the pottery's fortunes.

Maybe another contributory factor was that Tremar overstretched itself and thus helped bring about its own demise. Local people remember their employment as an extremely happy experience and have eagerly searched their memories to provide me with the facts for this article.