

# THE BIZARRE HISTORY OF TESSELLATED TILES

by Garry Cruikshank

"1984", George Orwell's apocalyptic vision of the future is now ten years behind us, and the Sydney Olympics are only six years ahead, so as we move inexorably towards the 21st century where more and more aspects of our working and leisure activities will be controlled by computers, where micro-chips will have shrunk to the size of .... small micro-chips and where an aging Andrew Denton will host the Logies and be soberly dressed, what are we to make of the strange phenomenon of 'the tessellated floor'? For that matter what is a tessellated floor? It sounds rather sinister and hi-tech, but nothing could be further from the truth.

The history of tessellated ceramic floors goes back to the 12th century, to the monasteries of England and France; and yet today, in Australia, they are all around us, in both their 19th and 20th century incarnations. How did this happen, and why?

Well to begin with a tessellated ceramic floor is not the same as a mosaic floor. Mosaic floors have a much longer history, dating back to ancient times. They can be made of coloured glass, stone or ceramic depicting such things as animals, flowers, landscapes and architecture. Because of this pictorial, sometimes even narrative quality, mosaic floors are often composed of irregular shaped pieces with numerous gaps between the individual tiles (which are filled with mortar) and the decoration is, in many instances, non-repetitive. A good example of a mosaic floor is in the Block Arcade in Melbourne. (Fig. 1.)



*Ornate mosaic floor of the Block Arcade, Melbourne showing wide gaps between irregular shaped tiles.*

Tessellated floors, as we tend to think of them these days, are formed from tiles of varying size, shape and colour that fit together leaving no spaces between the pieces. The patterns that are thus formed are strongly geometric (relying on encaustic border strips or centre pieces for any floral element to soften the effect) and quite repetitive. (Fig. 2.)



*Tessellated path and verandah, Sydney suburb of Annandale. Note the encaustic flowers in the border.*

Tessellated floors can be created with stone, ceramics and wood - parquetry is a form of tessellating. But by far the most common material in terms of Victorian and Edwardian floors was ceramic.

Why did this form of flooring possess such a fascination for the Victorian imagination? Given the origins of such floors, they seem a curious choice for a society undergoing an industrial revolution, coupled with equally revolutionary thinking in science, politics and art.

The two most energetic periods of tile manufacture in England occurred in the Medieval period (c. 1275-1600) and in the latter half of the 19th century. Though separate in time and social temperament, these episodes are linked.

The Cistercian monks at Byland and Rievaulx were experts in the craft of tile making. By the end of the 13th century, the earlier geometric irregular tile mosaic floors were largely replaced by patterned inlaid tiles. Inlaid tiles were made by pressing a shaped wooden block into the surface of the unfired clay, the indentation then being filled with a contrasting "slip" of white clay. The tile was then glazed and fired. It was the honey colour of the lead glazes that produced the characteristic yellow pattern on a deep red/brown background.

Inlaid tiles grew rapidly in popularity under the patronage of Henry III who used the new tiles throughout his royal buildings. Many cathedrals were paved in like fashion.

From the 15th century, partly due to increasing pressure from tiles imported from the Continent, the British industry experienced a steady decline, accelerated by the growing demand for greater colour and decoration. By the mid 16th century English manufacturers had virtually ceased production of ornamental floor tiles.

The dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in the early part of the 16th century was perhaps the final blow to the industry. The tessellated floors, which had once been such an important feature of the monasteries and churches, became so ill-regarded that those not destroyed during the wholesale demolition of the monasteries, were boarded over, only to be rediscovered at the beginning of the 19th century. This was the fate of the magnificent floor in Westminster Abbey's Chapter House, laid between 1246 and 1253 and uncovered in the early 1840s.

Such treatment has a curious parallel with Sydney's Queen Victoria Building, where the original tessellated floors were buried under concrete and new tiles. With the building's complete restoration between 1983-84 they were unearthed and repaired.

On the surface it seems odd that after nearly 250 years of Neo Classical architecture, Gothic should witness a revival. Georgian elegance, however, had run its course, while the horrors of the industrial revolution sparked a desire in the community at large for escapism and romanticism. It was felt that Neo-Classicism was an alien transplant that failed to adequately express the nation's soul, whereas Gothic was held to be a truly British style.

After the battle of Waterloo in 1815 England began to emerge into greatness and prosperity. The nation basked in the fierce glow of patriotism (comparable to the mood we Australians would have felt if, on the same day as being awarded the 2000 Olympics, we won the America's Cup). Searching for a mythical golden age, they found it in Gothic architecture. When in 1835, the design by Charles Barry and A.W.N. Pugin was chosen for the new Houses of Parliament, Gothic became the official 'English Style'.

The story of how Gothic Revival architecture achieved such dominance in Britain and subsequently Australia, and how it popularised the fashion for tessellated tiles in buildings grand and humble, domestic and public, will be the subject of the next article.



One of the restored floors in the Queen Victoria Building, Sydney

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Garry Cruikshank is marketing and design controller for the Renditions Corporation. He has a degree in history and has studied architectural heritage and conservation. For the past 10 years he has been a practising designer and for several years he has lectured in the restoration of period houses.

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