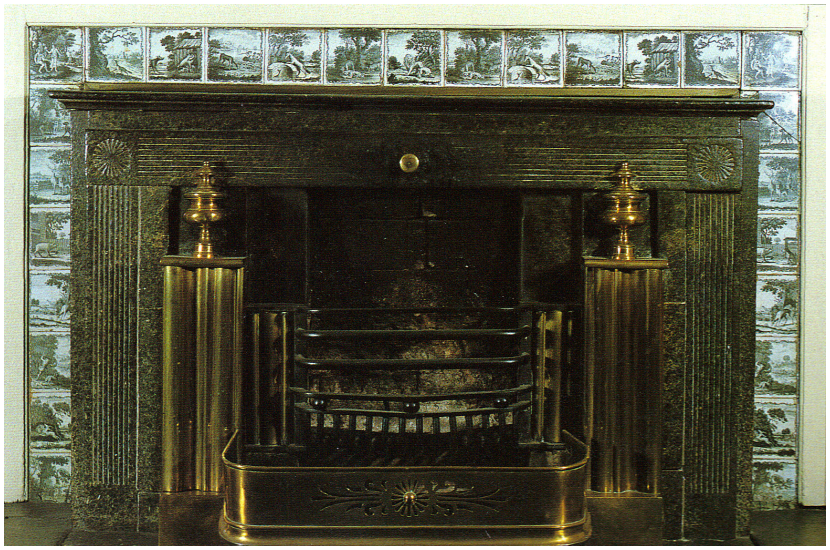
A Brief History of Transfer Printed Tiles

By Wendy Harvey

Mass produced transfer printed tiles trace their history to the tiles first produced by printer John Sadler and his partner Guy Green in the year 1756. On a sworn affidavit Sadler states "without the aid or assistance of any person or persons, did, within the space of six hours, to wit, betwixt the hours of nine in the morning and three in the afternoon of the same day, print upwards of twelve hundred earthenware tiles of different patterns, at Liverpoole [sic] aforesaid, and which as these dependents have heard and believe, were more in number and better and neater, than one hundred skillful pot painters could have painted in the like space of time in the common and usual way." (Van Lemmon p.127)

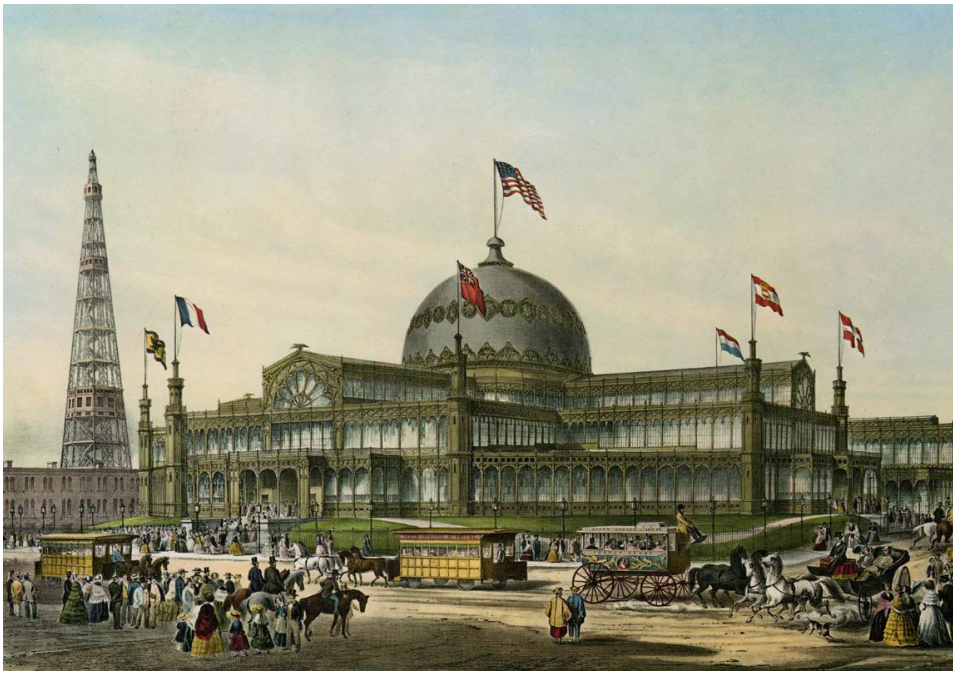


Fireplace Surround w/ Sadler & Green Tiles.

Using available handmade white tin glazed delftware tiles, John Sadler applied the newly developed method of printing on ceramics to tiles. This printing method allowed for an image engraved onto a copper plate or cut from a wood block to be transferred to a tile using paper or a glue bat. The image could then be fired at a relatively low temperature for a very brief time (15 minutes). This method had the obvious advantage of hastening production both in decoration and firing. However, since the decoration was placed atop the tin glaze it was subsequently much less durable and subject to wear.

The first decorations that Sadler and Green produced were reminiscent of Dutch tiles. Since there was huge demand for blue painted Dutch tiles originating from Liverpool as well as from Holland, it is easy to see that this was an obvious attempt to compete in a well established marketplace. In fact, a certificate by Thomas Shaw and Samuel Gilbody, attached to the Sadler affidavit, states, "We are also assured that the Dutch may by this improvement be considerably undersold." (Van Lemmon p.128) The original Dutch design "copies" were soon abandoned and tile designs included romantic themes, genre scenes, ships, fables and fashionable society encapsulated by elaborate or scrolled

2 Examples of early 19th Century Sadler and Green Tiles.



The Crystal Palace, London, site of the Great Exposition of 1851: Minton tiles featured there were seen by 10s of thousands of English consumers.

and twisted borders were produced. The tiles were printed in black, red or brown as the traditional Dutch cobalt blue oxide proved difficult to use on copper plates.

The business expanded and Sadler and Green began a partnership with Josiah Wedgwood and started fairly extensive decoration of Wedgwood's creamware even at the expense of their own tile making. Over the next years, others makers started production of printed tiles and, after 12 years, Wedgwood started his own facility for printing creamware and tiles.

Transfer printed Sadler and Green tiles were not only used in England, they were also exported. Fine colonial homes in America used Sadler and Green tiles around the fireplaces and more examples of Sadler and Green tiles remain in situ here than in England. As anticipated by Shaw and Gilbody, Sadler and Green's use of transfer printing contributed to the demise of the British delftware industry.

Transfer printed tin-glazed tile use declined in the 1780's. This may have been due to changing fashion or the tendency for the tiles to craze when exposed to heat or the previously mention lack of durability. This decline in tin-glazed tile use signaled the end of transfer printed tiles until the middle of the nineteenth century.

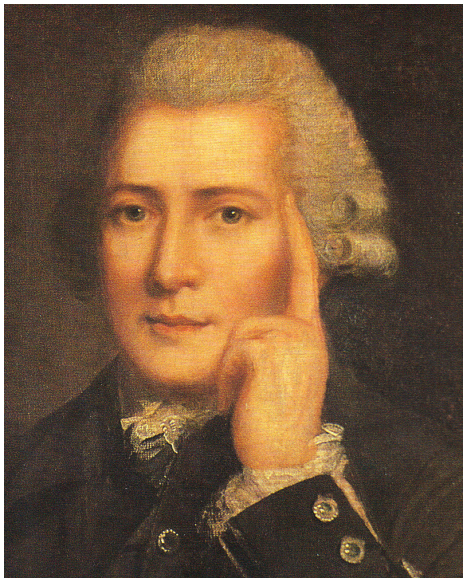
The New Age of transfer printed tiles

Beginning in 1828, Herbert Minton, son of Thomas Minton founder of the firm, became interested in encaustic tile production. His interest coincided with a renewed interest in Gothic architecture and technological innovations. Herbert had the foresight to anticipate the market for tiles and the wealth and business savvy to do so. Extolling the virtues of tile, he used his club connections with prominent architects and Prince Albert to create demand and cachet. Following the club demonstration, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert used Minton encaustic floor tiles in their home on the Isle of Wight. Building on his successes, Minton soon expanded his production into transfer printed and relief wall tiles. He was quickly joined by other tile producers.

Concurrent with the significant mechanical advances that made mass production of tiles possible, there was an increased awareness of disease and health following the cholera epidemics of 1831-32 and 1848-49. These epidemics provided the impetus for changes in the sewage system and the first public sewers were built in 1858-1874 replacing open cesspools. Upper class homes had indoor toilets and bathrooms by mid century and most homes had indoor plumbing by the end of the century.

Believing that the odors in the air carried diseases, reformers began advocating for building with non-porous surfaces just as city planners were advocating for non-flammable building materials following several devastating city fires, including one at the Palace of Westminster in 1834. Doctors and architects campaigned for the use of tiles as practical, beautiful, and washable for use in the new bathrooms, kitchens, sculleries and food shops. Style advocates and trendsetters urged the use of tiles around the fireplace.

Desire for tiles was fostered in the rapidly increasing middle classes by their exposure to the Great Exposition of the Works of Industry of All Nations of 1851. Championed by Prince Albert, the exhibition building covered 700,000 square feet and hosted 17,000 exhibitors from countries as far away as China. Minton displayed a huge se-



Portrait of Herbert Minton, who's foresight brought the Minton Pottery to the forefront of English tile production.

lection of wall and floor tiles at the exhibition. One third of the population of Great Britain at the time, 6.2 million people, attended. They were brought to the exposition from the countryside by the newly constructed railroads which made transportation faster and safer. Telegraphs and newspapers spread the excitement and wonders of the exhibition throughout the world.

England was the most powerful nation in Europe in 1850 and exerted enormous worldwide influence. English building throughout the Empire and world expansion created a ready marketplace for tiles. Steamships ensured quick and dependable transport of goods. As early as 1838, the use of steamships had reduced the travel time to cross the Atlantic to a mere 19 days.

Transfer printing which used one color and the similar block printing process which used many colors enabled a wide variety of patterns and design subjects to be produced efficiently and economically. Minton and the other tile manufactures employed both in-house and free lance artists to design and/or engrave scenes both historic and imagined. Artists drew upon interests of the era such as the natural world, history, ancient civilizations, literature, and science. Tile output during the last half of the century was extensive and both the quality and quantity produced remains unrivaled to this day.

English Tiles in America

America proved to be a fertile marketplace for English tiles for the same reasons they were used in England, and many English tile companies had offices and/or representatives in major U.S. cities. American fashion for tiles was, in part, created by the writings of Andrew Jackson Downing, a prominent American landscape designer, writer and advocate of the Gothic Revival style in the U.S. In 1850, he published an extremely influential book entitled; "The Architecture of Country Houses." In his book, Downing advocated the extensive use of tiles.

Transfer decorated tiles from the last quarter of the 19th Century.

In 1876, the Philadelphia Exhibition included elaborate displays of English tiles from 15 tile and 13 terra cotta companies. These impressive displays of tiles gave rise to the American tile industry and by 1885 there were at least 25 American tile producers. Drawing on the expertise of the British tile industry, most of the American companies were started with English potters, artists, and ceramicists, and initial American tiles were similar or identical copies of English production. Very quickly, however, the U.S. tile makers developed unique products and glazes. The American tile industry was a significant one until about 1929, but very few transfer printed tiles were ever produced here.

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Mintons Tile display at the 1876 Philadelphia (Centennial) Exposition, one of a number of English tile displays credited with igniting the American tile industry, which thrived until 1929.