

Eighteenth and nineteenth century antiquarians and medieval tiles

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Studying medieval floor tiles in northern England opened my eyes to the wealth of information there is in antiquarian archives and publications that contributes to our knowledge and understanding of the medieval material. The nineteenth century records also demonstrate the enormous influence that discoveries of medieval tiles had on Victorian floor tile production at places like the Maw and Jackfield tile factories in Coalbrookdale. Early antiquarian records generally consist of brief notes of discoveries. The big monastic sites had lain in ruins since they were dissolved by Henry VIII between 1536 and 1540. Following dissolution, the monastic sites were physically dismantled and the moveable assets were sold. In some cases floor tiles were included in the lists of assets made for the Crown, and some floor tiles were probably sold for re-use elsewhere, while others remained under the rubble of the fallen buildings. From the eighteenth century the (now secular) owners of these sites developed a new-found interest in the ruins that formed part of their estates and, most importantly from our point of view, began to record their discoveries in diaries and journals.

Early snippets

The earliest record in the north of England was made by Ralph Thoresby who noted the accidental discovery in 1713 of a tiled tomb in the ruins at Kirkstall Abbey in Leeds. This event probably provided the inspiration for later diggings in the church at Kirkstall by Thoresby and his friends. Also typical were the diggings by Martin Stapylton at Byland Abbey in Yorkshire in 1818, recorded by Edward Baines.¹ The Stapylton family had acquired Byland some time after the Dissolution and Baines mentions the discovery there of 'a beautiful Roman pavement, in a high state of preservation'. The remains of the Plain Mosaic tiled pavement now on show at Byland was uncovered and put on public display in the 1920s and 30s after the site was taken into Guardianship by the Ministry of Works. These remnants give an indication of the impact that the discovery of medieval pavements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries must have had.

We know that some tiles from Byland were removed by antiquarians. The record of the removal occurred some years after Baines's initial account when, in 1843, an affronted reader of the *Ecclesiologist* complained that tiles and an altar slab from Byland were being used inappropriately in the floor of a summer house at the Stapylton family home.² Instances of the re-use of floor tiles in summer houses and the like are a theme of the time with examples in the grounds of the Steward's house (now a hotel) next to Jervaulx Abbey. The tiles removed from Byland by Stapylton have since been lost. However, if the concerned reader was still alive in 1870, they will have been glad to learn that their view regarding the altar stone eventually prevailed as it was donated to the recently founded Ampleforth College in that year.³

The accounts relating to Byland show that snippets of information do survive to put together some of the antiquarian history of the tiles and other architectural

fragments. In this and many other cases the early records relate to the re-use of tiles following discovery, rather than to the actual excavations themselves. The problem of what to do with tiles after they had been dug up is an issue that we continue to grapple with today, with the modern solution often being to re-bury them as quickly as possible! Some of the reasons for this are a consequence of what has been learned over the long term from the solutions attempted by antiquarians. You can date the re-setting of medieval tiles at different sites by their current condition. For example, the ones at Byland have been uncovered since the 1920s while those at sites like Fountains Abbey, which are now completely worn, were exposed a good deal earlier, probably by 1800.

Expressions of outrage at what people saw as the inappropriate re-use of tiles are always good fun but they are also a reminder of how controversial the creation of picturesque landscapes using monastic ruins was. The first record of an old pavement at Fountains Abbey is preserved in a scathing attack of 1772-3 on the work of William Aislabie by William Gilpin, the English author and critic.⁴ Aislabie had purchased the ruined abbey and added it as a picturesque vista to the gardens of Studley Royal created by his father. Gilpin noted that:

‘when the present proprietor made his purchase, he found this whole mass of ruin choked with rubbish.... The first work, therefore, was to clear and open.... But the restoration of parts is not enough; ornament must be added: and such incongruous ornaments as disgrace the scene are disgracing also the monastery. The monk’s garden is turned into a trim parterre...; a view is opened through the great window to a ridiculous – I know not what – ...that is planted in the valley; and in the central part of the abbey, a circular pedestal is raised of the fragments of the old pavement, on which is erected a mutilated heathen statue.’

The statue is now long gone but several fragments of the old tiled floor have been re-set in the church.

Notes like these were rarely accompanied by plans or drawings. However, a second phase of antiquarian activity involved more detailed recording of what was found, with notes often accompanied by plans and drawings. Much of this work belongs to the nineteenth century and was carried out by professional artists, surveyors and publishers as well as amateur enthusiasts. In several cases these antiquarian records preserve crucial information that would otherwise simply have been lost.

John Ward and Henry Shaw

Foremost among these were the records made at Jervaulx Abbey, near Richmond. In the early years of the nineteenth century one of the piers in the ruined cloister of Jervaulx was accidentally uncovered and the owner, the Earl of Ailesbury, decided to identify the layout of the monastic buildings. Extensive clearance work was begun under the supervision of the Steward, John Claridge. It was soon discovered that one to two metres of the walls of the church were still standing, and that underneath the rubble in the church there remained ‘a large portion’, according to Henry Shaw, of the ceramic paving.⁵ The date at which this work was carried out varies in different accounts but the floor of the church was exposed by 1807 when a Mr P. A. Reinagle

was brought to Jervaulx from London to make measured drawings of the ruins and the tiled floor. The whereabouts of the original drawings is not now known. However, a set of reconstruction drawings based on the originals, made by John Ward, rector of Wath (a village south-east of Jervaulx) are now in the Yorkshire Museum.⁶ They were put on display for the annual meeting of the Archaeological Institute, held in Winchester in 1845 and were lent to Henry Shaw for publication. As shown in Shaw's published drawings, the pavement consisted of three large circular arrangements of segmental tiles with interlace patterns running between the bands.⁷ Shaw also recorded the square tile designs and suggested that these were laid in diamond shaped blocks of individual designs. This tile series is known as the Decorated Mosaic group.

Shaw acknowledged use of Ward's drawings, which he described as carefully made from the originals in the possession of the Marquess of Ailesbury but corrected using existing tiles. Shaw suggested that Ward's method was to make tracings of the original drawings, which were at a reduced scale, and then convert the tracings to full-sized reconstructions using both the scales on some of the originals and information from some extant tiles. Although some slight anomalies remain, this seems an accurate description of the work done by John Ward. The drawings he gave to the Yorkshire Museum show the Decorated Mosaic roundels at approximately their actual size (slightly smaller) and he donated a small collection of tiles from Jervaulx to the British Museum.⁸ However there are three things to note about the Ward/Shaw record of medieval paving at Jervaulx.

- 1) They are stylised after the fashion of the time – perfected, as the Victorians would have had it, to the state which the medieval craftsmen would have wanted to achieve if only they had had modern machine technology available to them. The tiles are always shown as complete and partial designs on broken tiles (often the reality) are not shown.
- 2) The plan of the site suggests very large areas of paving were found but the layout is odd with the elaborate roundel designs interrupted by pier bases in some locations.
- 3) The extant assemblage of tiles from Jervaulx is of reasonable size – though the tiles are mostly worn – but compared to the massive areas of paving shown on the plan, the assemblage is surprisingly small.

In fact an unattributed report in the *Gentleman's Magazine* suggests that little of the pavement was intact by 1821 and Shaw's report confirms that very few tiles remained on the site by the mid nineteenth century.⁹ The antiquarians blamed the loss of the tiles on theft, destruction by frost or re-use as building rubble.¹⁰

Destruction of the whole floor by frost is unlikely. The extant assemblage from Jervaulx is worn, not shattered by frost. At Meaux Abbey near the Humber, reconstructions of Plain Mosaic arrangements were achieved from a relatively small assemblage of tiles by Ken Beaulah, an extremely knowledgeable twentieth-century collector, archaeologist and historian. His records note that very few tiles were in fact found *in situ* and his reconstruction of the floor at Meaux was based on the locations of disturbed tiles. Comparison with Meaux might suggest that something similar occurred at Jervaulx, with disturbed segments of roundels and individual tiles found in the church. This scattering of tiles was then shown on the plan as a

full-scale pavement. Later antiquarians concluded that the pavement had been found as shown on the plan and sought to explain the absence of the large tile assemblage.

In addition to comparing the antiquarian records for Jervaulx to what had been found in more recent times at Meaux, it was also possible to compare the Shaw and Ward's records with the extant collection of tiles. The Decorated Mosaic workshop is found at several sites other than Jervaulx, including Kirkstall Abbey, Leeds, where there is a reasonable number of surviving tiles. Comparison of all the extant Decorated Mosaic tiles with the antiquarian records showed that there were probably only two of the decorated mosaic roundels and not three. There were extant examples of all but one of the bands of tiles from the roundel with dark decoration on a light tile background and from one of the roundels with light decoration on a dark background. But there are no examples of the second light on dark roundel. Some of the outer bands of that roundel exist but they were probably just used with the other centrepieces to make variations or roundels of different sizes. This is important because a feature of the two big thirteenth century mosaic floor tile series (Plain Mosaic and Decorated Mosaic) was the repetition of patterns in two versions – light on dark and dark against light. This applied to Plain Mosaic as at Byland and other sites, as well as Decorated Mosaic and it included all the square tile designs, not just the roundels. This feature, and the continuous repeating designs themselves were surely intended for meditation on the eternal and all encompassing nature of God. The pavements were huge, painstaking undertakings laid in the abbey churches – the holiest places in the monastery. It seems certain that they held a deep significance and meaning for the monks and their visitors. The existence of two rather than three roundels makes more sense of the overall design and meaning of these floors.

It is important, then, to recognise that while some of the antiquarian records are of extremely high quality and, indeed, have never been surpassed, they were subject to the outlook and preferences of their time. All records need to be assessed for accuracy. There is a desire for perfection and completion in most nineteenth century work and if the evidence wasn't there it was more acceptable to make it up than to leave it blank. The survival of the extant and, crucially *provenanced*, collections of tiles from Kirkstall and Jervaulx and other sites supplied by the Decorated Mosaic workshop made possible a direct comparison with the antiquarian records.

Early records of tiles now lost/worn

There are several instances where tile designs are *only* known from antiquarian records. In fact one of these relates to the Decorated Mosaic series and to tiles re-set in one of the transept chapels at Kirkstall Abbey, Leeds. When faced with what to do with the tiles that they had dug up, the antiquarians of Leeds re-set a selection of examples in the southernmost transept chapel. The tiles remain here today but are now completely worn – with all the slip and glaze gone and none of the designs apparent. Luckily in 1896 *The Builder* published a drawing of the re-set arrangements which includes a number of tiles with letters of the alphabet on them. There are enough extant examples of these sorts of tiles in loose collections to show that there

were several runs of letter tiles, some on large squares, small squares etc. Also there are a few examples of tiles with two letters on them. The drawing in *The Builder* shows one with a C and what could be a reversed D. Among the extant collection there is only one tile with two letters – interpreted as a K and an upside-down L. There are also the consecutive letters R and S on one of the antiquarian roundel drawings. On the basis of this admittedly flimsy evidence it seems possible that some of the letter tiles were intended to have been laid as an alphabet.

The use of letter tiles to create an alphabet running around a band of one of the roundel designs might suggest an association between literacy and divinity. Literacy was knowledge held by the church and probably not very widely available to others in northern England in the thirteenth century. The reversal of letters on the tiles (and their poor form) might suggest that the stamp makers – the craftsmen who made the wooden stamps to impress the design on to the clay quarries – were not literate. A comparison of inscribed tile designs from northern England over the medieval period shows that early inscriptions were often reversed. By the end of the fifteenth century, when there was a workshop producing many inscribed designs, few were reversed and the quality of the lettering was high.

Other examples of drawings of tiled floors that have since been lost include a sketch of a pavement found at Louth Park in 1801 and published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.¹¹ This is the only record of floor tiles at Louth. They were found on a residential site in the town but probably originated from Louth Abbey. Although the drawing and brief record appears to contain little information, the shapes of the tiles shown suggest they were a mix of different workshops, supporting the idea that they were re-set on the site where they were found in 1801. Another example was John Tickell's 1796 record of tiles from Meaux, published in a history of Hull. A subsequent drawing of a similar roundel was made by Ken Beulah from tiles found in the abbey church at Meaux.¹²

William Fowler

From the beginning of the nineteenth century drawings of tiled flooring were being made by professionals. Important records were made in north-east England by William Fowler (1761–1832), an architect and antiquarian living at Winterton, a village about three kilometres south of the Humber in North Lincolnshire. Together with his son, Joseph, William Fowler carried out the whole process of drawing, engraving and printing, either working to commission or selling the sheets individually or in collected editions. A large, though not comprehensive, collection of his work, which includes engravings of stained glass, brasses, ornamental stonework and other material as well as floor tiles from sites in the region is held by the public library in Hull.

William Fowler was under no illusion about the chances of survival of the objects and buildings he recorded. In 1821, in the preface to his collected works he wrote:

'This expensive, and inconceivably laborious undertaking, hath ... as his principal object ... to furnish a faithful and permanent resemblance of the highly interesting remains ... of the existence of which ... the corroding touch of time, and the barbarous depredations of ignorant curiosity, will ere the lapse of

many years, leave no other trace than the dwindled memorial of historical record.'¹³

He has been proved right in some instances. In the case of the floor tiles recorded by Fowler, there is an undated example that now forms the only record of medieval tiles at Ellerton Priory, near Selby. The arrangement of the mosaic tiles in this drawing may have been invented. In 1801 Fowler recorded patterned tiles from the chapel of St Nicholas in York Minster, including several designs that are no longer extant from that site.

Fountains Abbey tiled platform

In 1800 Fowler published an engraving of Plain Mosaic tiles found at Fountains Abbey. There are relatively few re-set tiles at Fountains, with the only substantial area of Plain Mosaic paving being a two tier platform in the presbytery. On Fowler's drawing the various mosaic arrangements are shown separately, rather than set in a platform, with the modern-day central panel missing. There is no direct evidence to suggest that Plain Mosaic tiles were found on the site of the high altar at Fountains, or to indicate that there was a medieval platform of this type there. Some aspects of the Plain Mosaic arrangements suggest that the platform was an antiquarian invention. No medieval altar platform constructions of this type are known elsewhere and it is probable that risers (tiles set in the vertical face of a step or platform) would have been used in the face of the top tier of the platform if had been medieval. It is certain that the platform was re-built at least once and John Walbran wrote in 1854 of the arrangement of the tiles as a 'long disputed question'. The earliest references to some kind of platform or tiling in this location were in 1782 (by Thomas Hearne, drawn from a sketch by Joseph Farrington and etched by W. Byrne and T. Medland). This engraving shows an indistinct construction of blocks that look like stone. A reference to paving 'at the altar in the church' was made in 1791.¹⁴ Records of the platform almost as it is now (but showing the light and dark coloured tiles) were made by various people including G. M. Hills in 1871 and J. B. Gass in 1875.¹⁵ Fowler's drawing, published in 1800, may record the fact that this platform was put together from several separate pieces of tiling, like a sampler, using pieces of Plain Mosaic discovered during early diggings at the site. These records allow us to reconstruct the history of the platform to some extent and to speculate on its origins. The number of engravings of the platform also shows the enormous interest there was in the romantic ruins of medieval monasteries by the second half of the nineteenth century.

George Maw

In some cases nineteenth century records of tiled floors were made in order to inform the production of new tiles for use in both new Victorian Gothic buildings and in the extensive restorations of churches which were being carried out at that time. George Maw of Maw & Co, one of the tile factories operating in Coalbrookdale, travelled to north-east England in 1863 and made careful records of several pavements. Maw's drawings and tracings now form part of the archives held in the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust's Library and Archive.¹⁶ He was among those to record the re-built altar platform at Fountains. He also made a record of a piece of

medieval paving that survived in the farmhouse at Rievaulx Abbey but which has since been demolished and the paving lost. And he recorded the Plain Mosaic flooring re-set in the so-called Tuscan Temple on Rievaulx Terrace. The Terrace, now owned by the National Trust, was an eighteenth century addition to the landscaped grounds of Duncombe Park, created by Thomas Duncombe. It runs for about one kilometre along the steep-sided valley, above and to the east of the Abbey, providing spectacular views of the monastic ruins below. A temple was built at both ends, one Ionic and one Doric. The floor of the Doric temple at the southern end is paved with medieval floor tiles, mainly Plain Mosaic. In the caption to his drawing, Maw noted that the tiles had been removed fifty years previously (that is in around 1813) from in front of the high altar of Rievaulx Abbey. So Maw's drawing not only provides a record of the floor but gives the provenance of the tiles and confirms that they were a later addition to the temple.

Restorations

Tiles made in Coalbrookdale by Maw & Co among others, and at Stoke-on-Trent by Minton, were used in nineteenth-century restorations of several northern churches and in some cases were almost certainly specially made to represent the medieval examples found at those sites. They demonstrate the great care and attention to detail that was often taken in these restorations. At Bolton Priory (now known as Bolton Abbey), in Wharfedale, there is a Victorian tiled pavement in the chancel of the parish church which was the nave of the medieval priory church. This was laid in 1867 as part of Street's restoration work.¹⁷ The tiles were probably made by Maw & Co at their Benthall works. Comparison of the Victorian and medieval tiles suggests that Street had the tiles made as replicas of examples found on the site. Copies of unusual line impressed examples thought to be of the fourteenth century were laid alongside copies of late fifteenth century tiles. The fifteenth century copies include one design which is not otherwise known from this site.

The designs of many nineteenth century floor tiles were inspired more or less loosely by medieval examples. Antiquarian publications of medieval tiled floors were widely used as a resource by Victorian tile makers, with no direct connection between the site and the earlier design. It is possible, for example, that Shaw's publication of the Jervaulx roundels was the inspiration behind the roundel made by Godwin's for Chichester Cathedral.¹⁸ No medieval tiles of Decorated Mosaic type are known from this site.

Antiquarian tile collectors

Apart from the drawings and replicas, there were of course the antiquarian collections of medieval tiles. Decorated floor tiles were avidly collected in the nineteenth century and these collections form the basis of what is held by museums today. Most important among these was the collection of the Duke of Rutland, which was purchased by the British Museum in 1947.¹⁹ This consisted of 9,000 tiles, from sites all over the country, including substantial assemblages from some of the northern monastic sites. The collection had been built up by Captain Charles Ludovic Lindsay in the early twentieth century, with much of the material coming from excavations on the properties of friends and acquaintances. After Lindsay died in

1924 the collection was continued by the Marquis of Granby, later Duke of Rutland, who went on to acquire large samples from sites being excavated by the Office of Works in the 1920s and 1930s. Correspondence with the Office of Works regarding his acquisitions shows the difficulty that Rutland had in accepting that the status of these sites had changed, that they were now public property and could no longer be exploited for private gain. Rutland was largely successful, however, since the material in his collection includes the least worn tiles from Byland and Rievaulx, while those that remain in the loose collections of English Heritage tend to be completely worn. The Duke obtained smaller numbers of tiles from sites that were being excavated privately at that time, despite acrimonious telegrams from some of the owners. Nonetheless the direct access that Rutland had to sources of floor tiles, and the care taken of the collection, has meant that the provenance of this material is generally sound. The collection was published by Elizabeth Eames in 1980 and forms the premiere collection of medieval floor tiles in the country.

As a final example of antiquarian inventiveness there is a relatively little known pavement at Newbattle Abbey (now college), near Edinburgh, Scotland. Excavations at Lord Lothian's Newbattle mansion began in 1878 with a few details recorded and published by J. C. Carrick.²⁰ The excavations were intended to uncover the plan of the church and further open up the so-called 'crypts' upon which the mansion had been built. Following the excavations, the Marquess instructed that one of the restored rooms was to be floored with a replica of the paving found in the abbey church (which was Plain Mosaic as at Byland and the other Yorkshire site). The replica floor was made by John Ramsay, the Clerk of Works for the estate, using different coloured woods from trees grown in the park (yew, oak, maple, plane and laburnum). This extraordinary replica floor remains intact in the college chapel today.

To conclude: we owe a considerable debt to the antiquarian enthusiasts. Antiquarian records document the activities of the era, they serve as a record of the re-use of the tiles, and as a reminder of the ongoing disturbance there has been at the monastic sites. Some record the existence of tiles and designs that would otherwise be completely lost. Some are also extremely important in helping to indicate provenance. The museum collections built up by antiquarians contain most of the finest examples of individual tiles. Unfortunately, modern pressure on museums to commit their limited resources to exhibiting material, has been detrimental to recording and safe keeping. In the case of floor tiles this has meant that much of the material in museum collections is now unprovenanced. While those tiles that are re-set on the sites where they were found are under attack from the elements, gradually becoming worn and losing their slip and glaze, they do at least retain their provenance and can be used in studies comparing material from one site or area with another.

My work on the tiles in the north of England relied on using a combination of the antiquarian records, any well provenanced material in collections as well as the tiles re-set on site.²¹ In this work I was greatly helped by the immense expertise of Ken Beulah, who in many ways spanned the antiquarian and modern eras. Ken sadly died during the work on the northern tiles project but his collection of medieval tiles particularly from Meaux Abbey, where he had lived as a boy, and his

lifetime interest in both medieval and Victorian tiles were absolutely invaluable. His enthusiasm for the subject and the generosity with which he made information available to me were deeply appreciated and I am very glad to record my debt to him today.

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