NATURECRAFT CHALKWARE PRODUCTION

This is my personal recollection of the processes involved in the production of Naturecraft wall hung and shelf ornament figures, 1964 until 1978. During these years I worked for the company on numerous occasions during my vacations and on Saturday mornings. I apologise for any unintentional errors. I have tried to verify dates where possible using census returns and records of births, deaths and marriages. Other information comes from family scrap books and local newspaper cuttings.

Inspiration for subjects for wall hung figures in the very early days was taken from the pages of 'National Geographic' magazine or occasionally from the products of local rivals, Bosson's. The company had a large collection of the magazines which was lost in the fire at 'Eaton Mill' (always referred to within the company as 'Daneside') circa 1969.

The wall hung figures were supplemented and eventually superseded by the shelf ornament figures which were inspired by the Italian 'Capo di Monte' figures which had been displayed in the 'Moyes Allatt' (Naturecraft) fireplace showroom located in the 'Albion Mill' on Havannah Street on the other side of the River Dane.

Many ideas arose from informal discussions between Mr Eric Tomlins and Mrs June Dale in the offices in 'Albion Mill'. Suggested subjects were jotted down informally on pieces of paper which were placed, for future reference, under a sheet of glass on Mrs Dale's desk. The inspiration for the 'Late Homer' ornament, for example, was my father, Clifford Dale, who was a keen homing pigeon enthusiast. I think that the golf themed ornaments, 'Golfer' and 'Bunkered' may have been inspired by Peter Tomlins, a keen golfer who was known to his friends as 'Bunk Tomlins'.

Once the decision had been made the modeller/sculptor would receive the details of the subject and a clay model would be commissioned and sculpted. From early days the creative 'genius' was Mr Arthur Mattison of Colwyn Bay, North Wales. He had a long association with the company, having been the designer of Naturecraft's ceramic fireplaces and Moyes Allatt marble fireplaces. In the late 1970's the modeller was Mr Michael Stanway who worked from a studio in the Albion Mill.

Once the clay model reached Congleton (one one occasion, circa 1974, I collected the delicate cargo from the home of Mr Mattison and delivered it to the factory in Havannah Street) the mould making process could begin.

My grandfather, Hector Leslie, was the first and only mould maker in these early days, working along side Keith Tomlins in the Daneside Mill and later in the basement of the Higher Washford Mill. He retired sometime around 1973.

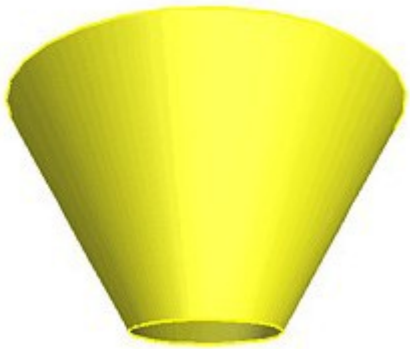
Moulds were made from a rubber compound produced by the CRODA company. This was supplied in crumb form in plastic drums. The clay model of a shelf ornament was placed under a truncated cone made from fibreglass and sealed around the bottom with clay.

The rubber crumbs were then heated until they became liquid. The liquid rubber was then poured into the top of the cone and over the clay model. Once the model was completely submerged heat lamps were suspended above the cone. This was to delay the solidifying of the rubber at the top so that as the main body cooled air bubbles could rise to the surface and escape.

When the rubber was completely cool and solid the clay model would be picked out by hand (destroyed). Once the mould was empty and the inside visible it would be cut down the side to allow for extraction of the finished plaster castings.

From this 'master mould' the first plaster casts would be made and further moulds created from them for use in the production process. The 'master mould' and a first casting would then be stored upstairs in the Albion Mill for future reference and the creation of future 'production moulds'. Each time a new mould was made the model inside it was destroyed in the extraction process. The empty mould could then be cut to allow for the extraction of future castings.

When a mould was used in the 'casting shop' it was re-inserted into an inverted truncated cone.



This would hold the mould securely and as it sank into the cone the force of gravity would tightly hold together the extraction cut/seam. This process meant that the moulds had a limited life. The rubber compound was heavy and dense and under its own weight in the cone it would stretch and elongate. This became permanent in a frequently used example. Models cast in older moulds can be identified by the thin, elongated appearance most easily identified in the heads and faces of the subject matter. The distorted and obsolete moulds would be recycled – they were cut into small cubes and re-entered the mould making process. On his retirement, Hector Leslie would have the old moulds delivered to his home where he would 'cube' them.

The wall hung product moulds were much simpler to produce as they were modelled to have no deep 'under-cuts' which required extraction cuts. Their shallow nature meant that the mould could be formed in virtually any shallow container and that they were stable on the work bench.

Once a number of the models had been cast they would be given to volunteer members of the workforce for them to paint as they thought fit. Workers would also suggest a name for the new addition to the range. Entries to both 'competitions' would be judged by Mr Eric Tomlins and Mrs June Dale. The best colour scheme and name would become the standard for that model.

Casting of the products initially took place on the second floor of the Daneside Mill, but with the acquisition of the Higher Washford Mill production crossed the river to the second floor of that mill. I recall working there during the early 1970's. During that time work was being carried out to make it suitable for use. The worn wooden floors of the former textile mill were too uneven for the 'dollies' (flat boards on four wheels) which carried the fragile products through out their journey in the mills. All floors were covered with a smooth layer of concrete.

Hector Leslie was the first caster, having experience from his time working for Tomlins & Ford (Naturecraft) in the tileries at North Rode. He produced the first Naturecraft products alongside Keith Tomlins.

The plaster used was 'Dental Plaster' which was delivered in large sacks to the Higher Washford Mill. In product description it became 'Hydrocal Stoneware'.

In the casting process water and plaster were mixed in a large jug and poured into the moulds. Tapping the sides of a mould would help to reduce air bubbles allowing trapped air to rise to the surface and escape. At this stage a 'back mould' would be inserted, and also in the case of wall hung products, a wire hook would be added. The back mould was usually kidney-shaped and contained product information and also a 'grid' for use in quality control. In the grid were coded boxes for the various stages of production.

C = initial(s) of caster ('H' for example would indicate that the product was cast by Hector)
F = initial(s) of fettler (BB for example was Barbara Blease – other fettlers I remember were Blanche, Joan and Irene. There were approximately 8 during my time there)
FI = initial(s) of fettling inspector (M for example was a Scottish lady called Margaret)
BW = initial(s) of the black or brown 'washer'. (D for example was Dorothy Phillips – my mother-in-law)
P = initial(s) of painter (L for example was Lynn. They were always referred to as 'paintresses' - all were female – I would estimate approximately 30 during my time there)
FO = initial(s) of final inspector

Each person would scratch their initials into the plaster when they had completed their task.

As soon as the cast was removed from the mould it was put into a polythene bag to retain the moisture through to the painting process. A dry plaster model was almost impossible to paint due to its absorbency. The water content mean that the paint finish was not too 'heavy' and thick. It gave a somewhat translucent finish. Heavy and thick paint is an indication of a re-touched or badly restored item.

The finished castings, in their bags, were placed into wooden crates and stacked onto the four wheeled dollies.

From the casting shop the products were moved on to holding areas either on the top floor of Higher Washford Mill or (in earlier times) at the rear of the Albion Mill. They were sprayed with water on a daily basis in order to retain the moisture content.

Fettling was the next process. (To fettle is to trim, clean or smooth rough edges, joints and seams in castings.) The fettlers would remove any imperfections from the castings, predominately the lines resulting from the extraction cuts in the rubber moulds and also repair minor holes, known as 'pin holes', which resulted from air bubble in the plaster mix.

These pin holes resulted in a change in design strategy. Early shelf ornaments had formal, classical bases similar to the 'Capo di Monte' Italian ornaments from which they derived. These were very susceptible to trapping air bubbles and the resultant pin holes were difficult to fill and disguise in the fettling process. Many products were remodelled with a less formal, naturalistic base such as rocks or grass. These were much easier to 'fettle' and greatly reduced the number of models rejected.

Once fettled and inspected for quality the models were then put back into their polythene bags and moved onto a holding area at the front of the Albion Mill near to the paint shop.

One of my jobs at Naturecraft was to deliver crates of models to the fettlers and then onto the paint shop holding area.

Painting. Once in the paint shop the crates would be distributed to the 'paintresses'. Each paintress would specialise in a small range of products and would have a pre-painted standard example for them to copy and ensure consistency.

In the mid 1970 an extra stage was added before painting. This was the 'Black Wash' or 'Brown Wash' depending on the requirement of individual painting schemes of individual models. Certain models would be removed from their bags and dipped into a bucket of dilute black (or brown) paint. On removal they would be wiped with a cloth until the dark paint remained only in the crevices. This would add extra depth to the final paint finish and add to the 3D appearance of relatively smooth surfaces. (The 'washes' may have been applied to the whole product range, but I am unsure of the extent to which it was used.)

Only the best of equipment and paint materials were used in the paint shop. Expensive sable paint brushes would have only a short life due to the abrasive nature of the plaster.

From the paint shop the crates of painted models would move on to the dryer.

Drying took place via a process similar to the tunnel kilns used in the pottery industry of nearby Stoke-on-Trent where Eric Tomlins had his first factory. There was an enclosed tracked/rail line from the paint shop to the spray shop. At the end of each working day the crates of painted ware were placed onto 'bogies' on the track, linked together and slowly pulled through the heated 'tunnel' towards the spray shop. I think this was at least a two day operation.

Spraying was then carried out using a cellulose varnish, a highly volatile substance which gave off noxious fumes. Dr Philip Leese, the factory doctor, insisted that the sprayer was given a pint of milk per day to drink to off-set any possible ill effects! The underside of all models was sprayed in silver paint. Coils of thin cane were occasionally sprayed too.

The cane would be cut into short lengths of approximately 6cm. The end 1cm was painted brown …. and they became the golf clubs of the 'Golfer' ornament. In the early days of our marriage (1975) my wife and I carried out this task. I have seen numerous 'Golfers' for sale, none of which have the 'club' and I wonder if collectors are aware that it existed.

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Unfortunately the cellulose varnish was somewhat unstable and yellowed over time. The yellow hue on older examples is a degrading of the varnish and not an intended colour scheme.

From the spray shop the crates of models would be hoisted up to the top floor of the Albion Mill. Here the final stages of production took place.

Flocking of the bases of the shelf ornaments was achieved by coating the underside with adhesive and then dipping the subject into a box of 'flock' - fine, short fibres which gave a velvety finish when dry. Any excess was blown off and when dry the models were passed on to 'final inspection'.

Final inspection was a rigorous process. If it was possible to rectify any blemishes the model was returned to the production line, otherwise it was destroyed.

Once inspected each model would be packed into an individual box. These were then placed into larger cardboard boxes according to orders received, labelled and send down a chute to the ground floor ready for dispatch.

NATURECRAFT/TOMLINS TIMELINE 1909 to 1978

1908 3rd December, birth of John Eric Tomlins in Tunstall, Staffordshire, UK. Known as Eric John Tomlins.

1931 Founding of 'NATURECRAFT', manufacturers of ceramic tile fireplaces by Eric Tomlins under the name of 'Tomlins & Ford'.

1932 Marriage of Eric John Tomlins to Olive Margery Clarke of Birmingham.

1934 Birth of Michael J Tomlins (son of Eric and Olive)

1939 Closure of Tomlins & Ford fireplace factory in Newcastle-under-Lyme on the outbreak of World War 2 when Eric Tomlins went to work in munitions at 'Royal Ordnance Factory Radway Green' where he met Hector Leslie of Buglawton near Congleton, Cheshire.

1939 Birth of Alec Peter Tomlins (son of Eric and Olive) Known as Peter Tomlins.

1946 Purchase and development of the 'Tileries' in North Rode, near Buglawton, Congleton, manufacturing ceramic tiles, fireplaces and a limited range of ceramic ornamental ware. Hector Leslie was a caster and mould maker working at this Tomlins & Ford factory – the product range was known as 'Naturecraft'.

1947 Birth of Keith John Tomlins (son of Eric and Olive)

1949 The purchase of Daneside factory (formerly known as Eaton Mill) in Buglawton.

1949 Birth of Cheryl J Tomlins (daughter of Eric and Olive)

1950 The purchase of Albion Mill, Havannah Street, Buglawton.

1951 Birth of Vanessa M Tomlins (daughter of Eric and Olive)

1956 June Winifred Dale (daughter of Hector Leslie) formerly working as a Civil Servant with the Ministry of Food, commenced work as an office junior for Tomlins & Ford (Daneside Works)

During this period Tomlins & Ford 'Naturecraft' ceramic tile fireplaces were phased out and replaced by Italian marble fireplaces under the name of 'Moyes Allatt', produced in the Daneside and Albion works.

At some point during this time Tomlins & Ford collaborated with Congleton Town Council to replace the wooden foot bridge over the River Dane between Havannah Street (Albion Works) and Eaton Bank (Daneside Works) with a more substantial steel and concrete structure which still exists today as the only river crossing in the Buglawton area.

1962 Keith Tomlins left education (Sandbach Grammar School) and commenced work at Tomlins & Ford.

1963/4 Keith Tomlins, with Hector Leslie as his mould maker and caster, started production of Naturecraft chalkware wall hanging ornaments in the Daneside works. The two of them *were* 'Naturecraft' chalkware, with the painting carried out by Lynn O'Reilly (nee Carlisle) in her own home next door to the Albion Works. Lynn was an ex-employee of Bossons who left on having started a family.

This was the peak of the popularity of 'Moyes Allatt' fireplaces. International football players and television stars visited the showroom upstairs at the Albion Works, to be sold bespoke pieces by June Dale. Fireplaces were displayed in separate bays – room settings furnished in Italian style with examples of 'Capo di Monte' figurines, Murano glassware and marble and onyx items such as ash trays, cigarette boxes and lighters. 'Moyes Allatt' also had a fireplace showroom in Cambuslang near Glasgow.

In the late 1960's fireplaces fell out of fashion in the UK. Homes began to dispense with fireplaces and opt for a gas or electric heater fixed directly to a plain chimney breast with a teak fire surround or no fire surround at all.

Keith Tomlins' chalkware was becoming increasingly popular. A growing number of 'out workers' painted the products in their own homes – often ex-employees of Bossons at home caring for young children.

1968 Eric Tomlins wound down the marble fireplace business, sold his designs and took over production of Naturecraft chalkware which had out-grown the young Keith Tomlins. It expanded from one floor of the Daneside Works to completely take over the whole of that factory and also the Albion Works across the river in Havannah Street.

1970 Purchase of Dane Valley Mill (formerly know as Higher Washford Mill) Havannah Street, Buglawton.

1972 Peter Tomlins married Jean Potts.

1975 Keith Tomlins left 'Naturecraft' and founded 'Heritage China' of 88, Park Street, Congleton, producing the 'Heritage' chalkware range under his own name.

1978 21st September, Eric John Tomlins died of a heart attack on a railway train in Cook County, Illinois, USA, just outside Chicago, on his way to the Toronto Trades Fair in Canada.

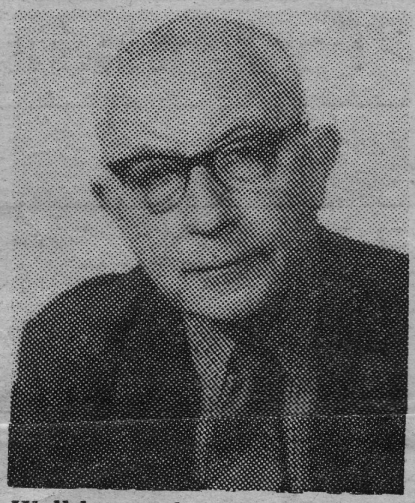
E J Tomlins bequeathed, in equal shares, the Naturecraft company to Peter Tomlins, Cheryl Tomlins, Vanessa Tomlins and June Dale.

1979 After a 'hand-over' period during which June Dale worked alongside Mrs Jean Tomlins, June Dale sold her share of the company to Peter Tomlins and retired.

I would like to dedicate this account to my mother and inspiration, Mrs June Dale 1931-1992

Martyn Leslie Dale 04.09.16

Business man's death in America



Well-known local businessman Mr. John Eric Tomlins died on Friday in Chicago, U.S.A. while on a business trip to the Toronto giftware trade fair.

Mr. Tomlins, aged 69, of "The Stone House", 87, Leek-road, Mossley, was managing director of the well-known art-ware company of Tomlins and Ford in Havannah-street, Buglawton.

Born in Tunstall, he set up his own business as a fireplace manufacturer in Newcastle, but it closed down at the outbreak of the Second World War, when Mr. Tomlins went to work in munitions.

In 1946, he bought the old tileries in Rode Heath and converted them into a tile manufacturing and fireplace producing factory. This he turned into a successful business, and in 1949 bought the Daneside Factory in Congleton, followed a year later by the Albion Factory and in 1970 the Dane Valley factory.

Ten years ago, he started to produce the wall hangings for which their company is now internationally known, and within two years, then it took over from the fireplaces and Mr. Tomlins sold his fireplace concern and concentrated on the fancy goods art-ware under the name of Naturecraft.

In 1930, he married Miss Olive Margery Clarke of Birmingham who died 15 years ago and for most of their married life they lived in Congleton.

He was very fond of travelling, and had visited most countries both through business and holidays. He was also very fond of gardening.

He leaves three sons, two daughters and four grandchildren. The funeral is today (Friday), at the United Reformed Church, prior to cremation at Macclesfield.