

Stoke and the ceramic industry

When I was first elected to the Commons I was Chairman of a large quoted industrial group of companies. In our ownership was an important part of the UK's ceramic tile industry. The Group owned Johnsons Tiles, and Maws. We manufactured wall and floor tile. Even then we had competitive problems with the rest of the EU. Italian gas was considerably cheaper than UK gas, I was told, giving the successful Italian competitors an edge. In more recent years the extra costs of ever dearer energy has become a bigger problem for the UK ceramics industry, like other heavy energy using businesses.

It was also true then, and now, that there was one thing even more important to a successful ceramics company than affordable energy to fire the kilns. A growing business needs great designers, great commercial artists, great marketing to put before the architects, the house specifiers, domestic consumers and the design consultants styles, colours and finishes they want to buy. UK ceramics has numerous great names and brands from the past. Maws were famous for their Victorian encaustic tiles which graced many a home and grand public building. Wedgwood was perhaps the greatest potter of all time, with his long career of new glazes, shapes and textures, and his ability to recreate the best of the past in a modern idiom. In the last century Clarice Cliff, Susie Cooper and others launched homeware ranges that excited the imagination and became classics in their turn.

When I worked with managers over how to extend and improve our tiling range, my first reaction was to fall back on the old pattern books which we still had amidst the company's intellectual property. All those Georgian, Victorian and early twentieth century homes might want modern versions of the tiles the factories had made when the homes were first new. Some of the glazes, shapes and designs from the Victorian, Art Nouveau and Art deco periods were particularly fine. I also asked the business to contact design Colleges to see what was stirring and if they wanted to collaborate.

The UK industry needed to automate more of its plants, drive down kiln transit times, and get better at recycling and controlling heat use. Over the years since I left much of this has come to pass.

Today, in the wake of the Stoke by election, the government should ask itself what more can be done to encourage a larger and more vibrant ceramics industry in the Potteries. Emma Bridgewater has shown that a modern entrepreneur with design flair can still establish a decent business here. Moorcroft, Waterford Wedgwood, Wade and Steelite also show what can still be done. Government does need to address the issue of dear energy for this industry and others. It can also help establish the talent pool and the possible collaborations between our Commercial Design schools and the industries that need those skills.