

Caring for New Lynn's crown jewels

Ian Molyneux has been shouldering royal responsibilities acting as registrar on a project to catalogue and care for a comprehensive collection of Crown Lynn ceramics worthy of its own museum.

INTRODUCTION

This article describes the formation of the Portage Ceramics Trust in response to an opportunity that arose to secure a significant Crown Lynn collection for the people of New Zealand. It highlights the value of the collection to New Lynn and West Auckland and discusses the work currently being undertaken to facilitate access to it in the future.

A ROLE FOR HERITAGE AND THE ARTS IN URBAN RENEWAL IN NEW LYNN

New Lynn in Waitakere City is in the middle of an urban renewal programme focussed around the development of a new rail trench that is being sunk deep into the clay alongside Clark Street. It is an historic location for urban change, for it was here, a little over a century ago, that the Gardner brothers bought 48 acres to establish a brick company. This purchase saw the area slowly develop from the, "grim, unpainted, untidy and for much the greater part uncultivated" (Scott, 1979, p. 120) place that they found, to become the heart of an amalgamated local ceramic industry reaching a global market. The growth of what was to become the Amalgamated Brick & Pipe Company, Ltd., and later Crown Lynn Potteries Ltd, brought with it an era of good fortune, changing the face of New Lynn forever.

In 2009, twenty years have passed since the day the Crown Lynn factory closed its doors, and with that the fortunes of the area have changed significantly. All that remains of a once great industry are a few hidden away

pieces of public sculpture, the company headquarters Ceramco House, which narrowly escaped dereliction, and the names on road signs of the families who turned the clay beneath their feet into gold. Clark, Gardner, Crum and the other industrialists, who at first fought over the territory and then joined together under the AMBRICO name, are consigned to the history books and the memories of former employees. However, it is with a sense of renewal and restoration that the Portage Ceramics Trust is working hard to gather important material evidence of the historical significance of the area and contribute a cultural perspective and a heritage resource to its regeneration.

THE PORTAGE CERAMICS TRUST

The Portage Licensing Trust has a role in supporting community projects in West Auckland. This area includes New Lynn and the former Crown Lynn site. Recognising the importance of the area's ceramic legacy to New Zealand, the Portage Licensing Trust established the Portage Ceramic Awards to acknowledge excellence in the field of contemporary ceramic arts, and in 2005, created The Portage Ceramics Trust (PCT). The role of the PCT was to secure one of the most significant Crown Lynn collections yet to be offered for public sale.



Figure 1: Where it all happens – pristine storage for the Portage Ceramics Trust Collection. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: PORTAGE CERAMICS TRUST



Figure 2: Cataloguing a Crown Lynn cup. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: PORTAGE CERAMICS TRUST

The establishment of the PCT was followed by two years of negotiation and fundraising, which culminated in the successful purchase of the collection so that it could be kept in trust for the people of New Zealand.

In order to best care for and provide access to this collection, the Trust put together a board, which included well-respected museum and heritage professionals, thus ensuring a museological approach was central to its future. After years of hard work and fundraising, the beginning of 2008 saw a contract being offered to three museum professionals whose experience included working with industrial and social history collections, archives and working at Crown Lynn as an employee. The PCT team has an ideal mix of skills and experience to catalogue and care for the collection to the best possible standard.

THE COLLECTION

The collection represents the efforts of one local man wanting to take a new direction in his personal life and reshape the environment around him. Collecting became a life changing experience and enabled him to put together one of the most diverse and significant material records relating to the history of Crown Lynn Potteries Ltd in New Zealand.

Many of the objects and archives that make up the collection were excavated or negotiated for in the New Lynn area. Days of digging on the former factory site before its redevelopment unearthed examples of early wares: slip-casting moulds, factory trials and the ceramic 'rubbish' that can help to piece together a potted history

of the development of some of the many products made by the company. The final collection, which includes original design competition artworks, photographs, mouldmakers' record books, factory machinery and a large selection of the everyday wares was built from sources as varied as 'op shops', local auction sales and factory gate negotiations.

THE WORK SO FAR

In January 2008, the first boxes containing objects from the collection were opened in the offices of the Portage Ceramics Trust in New Lynn. A robust methodology for cataloguing the vast collection, which is estimated to consist of over 6000 objects and an archive, was put into place. So began the systematic process of applying best practice in preventative conservation and registration to this collection, which had suffered from many years spent in inappropriate storage and with little documentation.

The need to accurately identify the objects has been of paramount importance to the job of cataloguing the collection. A need to recognise the interests of the many people who are stakeholders in the Crown Lynn story, from former employees to everyone who has ever owned a piece of crockery that left the factory, has empowered the team to search hard for the story behind each of the objects. To do this, a comprehensive network of resources has been employed, including information from the archive in the collection, oral testimony from former employees and the referencing of comparable objects held in other collections and published works on New Zealand's ceramic history. It is hoped that the records



Figure 3: Wharetana ware canoe bailer, Crown Lynn 1945-1952. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: PORTAGE CERAMICS TRUST

created for each object can in time be researched, shared and used to provide evidence to support a diversity of viewpoints on the history of the factory and its wares.

Caring for the collection for a future held in public trust has also been a priority for the PCT team. The objects in the collection range from unglazed bisque to rubber backstamps and heavy machinery, all with different material preservation needs. Every effort has been made to provide the best possible storage conditions within the constraints dictated by the collection's current location and circumstances. To date over 4000 objects from the collection have been cleaned, documented and appropriately stored and the archive listed. There is still a lot to do, but with the Trust having successfully secured enough funding to complete the documentation by early 2010, the end of the registration project is in sight, and the next stage for the Trust of making it more accessible to the public will begin.

TOWARDS THE FUTURE

One of the core reasons for keeping a collection in trust for the public is to provide public access, enabling people to explore and gain inspiration, learning and enjoyment. These ambitions present a major long-term issue for the PCT.

As a first step towards addressing this by raising awareness, in September 2008 the PCT team created a presence on the *NZ Museums* website to highlight some of the objects in the collection. Further exposure will come in 2010 when some of the objects from the collection will be selected for a major exhibition at the Wellington City Art Gallery.

The lack of a permanent home for the collection, however, will remain an issue. With the major changes in the governance of Auckland and the infrastructure of New Lynn, maybe there is an opportunity for a more permanent role for the PCT collection in the area, allowing a greater understanding of the past to contribute to building a more inclusive future. Looking overseas to the recent opening of the Wedgwood Museum, which houses one of the largest collections of ceramics dedicated solely to the works of one manufacturer in Europe, it would be

marvellous to see an equivalent long-term home for the collection in New Lynn where it was created.

Ian Molyneux moved to New Zealand from the UK in 2005. He has a BA (Hons) in Art History and Media Studies, and a postgraduate diploma in Museum Studies from the University of Leicester. He worked for Leicestershire County Council Museum Service with their social history collections and in the development of a collections online website. He is currently an independent museum professional in Auckland on contract as registrar for the Portage Ceramics Trust.

THE PORTAGE CERAMICS TRUST

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Figure 4: Child's dinner set with box, Crown Lynn 1984-1989. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: PORTAGE CERAMICS TRUST

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