

Signs & Symbols: Floor Tiles



Originally the floor in all buildings was simply beaten earth; compacted so hard that it could be swept clean. Sometimes rushes or straw would be laid on it both for cleanliness and to sweeten the smell in the room. Stone or plaster were used in later years but it wasn't until the 13th century that glazed tiles, durable, hygienic, and adding a new decorative element, were introduced to make pavements.

Decorative floor tiles began to be used in royal palaces, and the homes of wealthy citizens and it wasn't long before they made an appearance in abbeys and rich parish churches.

So what is a tile? Basically, it is a shaped segment of clay which has been fired - or baked. By 1300 two types of paving were well established. The first was single colour tiles, cut in various shapes, often using only two colours: very dark green being used for a black effect and a cream for white. They were fitted together in geometrical patterns, using the colour contrasts and the shapes to give the decorative effects.

The second style was formed by making square tiles and decorating a number of them, whilst leaving others plain. They were then arranged by placing the decorated tiles together within a border of the plain tiles. The decorating of individual tiles - encaustic tiles - was a process done by cutting into the surface of the unbaked tile and putting a contrasting colour of clay into that indent. So that when baked the two clays showed as different colours. They were often reddish-brown with the design in buff.

Over the years decorating tiles has changed enormously, with the pattern now generally being placed, by hand, machine or photographically (with or without a computer!) on top of the already baked clay tile and then being covered with a transparent glaze to protect it. The crucial invention which allowed the mass-production of tiles was made in 1840 by Richard Prosser. He discovered that it was possible to compact dust clay using a press, and thence to make tiles, rather than using damp plastic clay. The tiles were less moist, giving a faster drying time, and warped less during firing.

This month

Visit a church or cathedral (or even a museum) which has floor tiles and have a good look at how they are made and set together. How is your faith made? Is it a layer over you or have you been cut deep and it poured into you?

By The Rev Dr Jo White a vicar in Derbyshire

The image is of Medieval floor tiles in Exeter Cathedral. It shows part of the pavement of the Archive Chamber, on the south side of the choir. The tiles date to c.1280, and were made by impressing a wooden stamp in the red clay body of the tile, then infilling the impression with white clay. The image is from: www.exeter.gov.uk