50 million years in the making

Using clay unearthed from beneath London Bridge station during the Thameslink redevelopment programme, Diane Eagles and Alison Cooke from the Associated Clay Workers Union (ACWU) have led a project to create new ceramic works

Inspired by the sight of a giant corkscrew-like piling machine, at work on the London Bridge Thameslink redevelopment in 2015, Alison Cooke, a founder member of the ACWU, instigated a project to obtain and use clay spoil from what are now the foundations of the new station.

Cooke approached Network Rail, who provided 360kg of earth from 30 metres below the station – clay laid down 50 million years ago. Network Rail and the engineering company Costain also gave ACWU members a tour of the construction site and access to some of the artefacts archaeologists had dug up as part of the initial development. ACWU applied for, and were awarded, a charity grant from the Craft Potters Association to help cover the costs of transporting and processing the clay, as well as exhibiting the work for a month at Southwark Cathedral from 9 January 2017. In addition, Alison Cooke also won the Henry Rothschild Ceramic Bursary 2016, which will pay for a large amount of dug clay to be processed and transported. Along with providing funds for studio machinery, part of the bursary is also allocated for a geologist and an archeologist to help with research of the chosen site.

RAW MATERIAL

The first batch of raw London Bridge clay was processed and tested at Morley College before being given to six fellow members of ACWU, with a brief to create ceramic works that responded to South London's railway network and the history of the London Bridge area. The spoil was found to consist of almost pure clay, but needed to be processed first. Soaking the earth in vats of water and then pressing through fine mesh sieves to remove stones and grit, the clay could then be dried and wedged for use.

The dark grey clay is known as London Blue. It's essentially an earthenware clay, challenging to work with, prone to cracking, bloating and discolouration, and rarely used outside the brick making industry. ACWU decided to avoid mixing it with commercial clays or additives that could have removed its unpredictability, and instead embraced the natural behaviour of the clay. None of the artists used glazing in their work, although two of them chose to over-fire and melt the clay, changing its texture and colour. An earthenware terracotta colour is achieved below 1040°C. At 1195°C, the clay would slump and bubble, but still keep some form. At 1250°C it tripled in size and puffed up with an oily dark surface.

The clay discolouration, a slight white bloom on the red terracotta, is efflorescence, which occurs as a result of salts in the water of the raw clay. As the clay dries out, the water migrates to the surface, taking the salts and minerals with it. The effect only becomes visible after firing.

ON DISPLAY

Two of the ACWU members, Diane Eagles and Duncan Hooson, had worked with raw clay prior to the London Bridge project. One of Eagles' raw clay pieces used London clay from the basement dug beneath George Orwell's house. With this clay she produced small pig sculptures in homage to Orwell's book, *Animal Farm*. Duncan Hooson, also of Clayground Collective, ran Project Clay (2007–15), in which volunteers dug clay from around the world and transported it to London for incorporation into a public artwork as part of the Clay Cargo project. Hooson produced saggars incorporating the natural clays.

The initial aim of the London Bridge clay project was to exhibit the work directly above the site where the clay had been excavated. Despite Cooke's negotiations with Network Rail, this proved too difficult owing to logistics and security. However they did provide ACWU with use of their photographer, Monica Wells, to record the work and their publicity department have offered to promote the project. The work will be shown in the annexe to Southwark Cathedral alongside the 17th-century Delft kiln, which remains in situ as it was discovered during their archaeological excavations for the building extension.

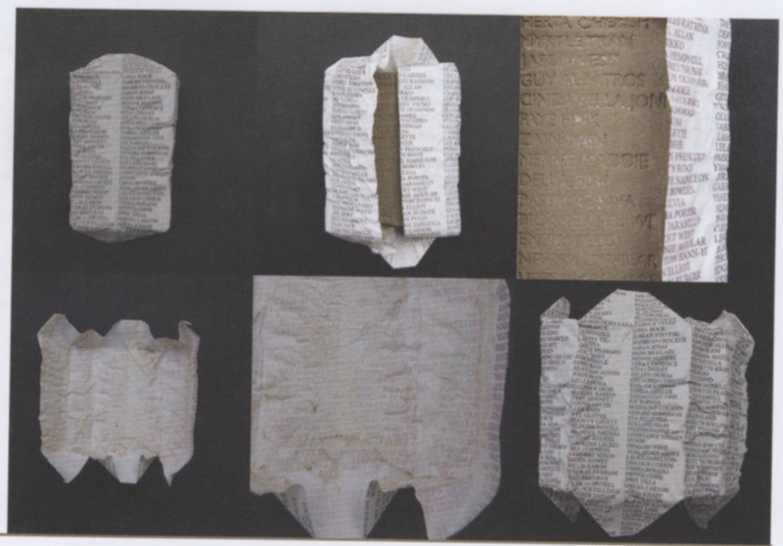
The Associated Clay Workers Union (ACWU) was set up in 2015 by founding member Diane Eagles. They are a group of London-based ceramic artists, most of whom have links to Morley College Ceramics Department. They make non-functional, site-specific works and exhibit outside the usual gallery settings. For more information visit acwu.co.uk

With many thanks to Network Rail, Costain, the Craft Potters Association and Southwark Cathedral

Image © Network Rail, Words: Alison Cooke, Diane Eagles

Stephanie Buttle – *Clay Commutes*
'Inspired by my artistic fancy for the naturally occurring emigration of underground seams of clay called "heave" – when clay moves into vacated areas underground, often caused by the removal of building foundations – this piece is based on structural solutions, such as the monolithic supports that were used to hold up the station during building works. These pillars extended 30 metres down into the deepest layers of London's history. Polystyrene was used in the lower pilings and delicate-looking pallet ties were used to hold together vast piles of bricks and architectural components. The materials describe the visual contradictions of scale and use.'

Alison Cooke – *Platform 6*
'Until recently, platform 6 at London Bridge held the title of the busiest platform in Britain. This work is part of a series of works based on train wheels with carved grooves in groups of six or nine, numbers that relate to the future track layout of 'terminating' and 'through' platforms. Some wheels are intentionally over-fired in reference to the 1861 Tooley Street fire, mimicking the melted artefacts that have been dug up near the station. Platform 6 is no longer the busiest platform, its title lost to its rival, platform 9, in the untangling of the tracks.'



Bea Denton – *Transience and transubstantiation*
'I've used unfired clay to create an ordinary memorial to those who have passed through the station over the last two centuries. The memorials, encased in Bible paper, are future relics that immortalise these anonymous and fleeting journey-makers heading towards their final destination.'

Diane Eagles – *Pipes*
'Inspired by the Tooley Street/Joiner Street tobacco pipe found during the archaeological work carried out prior to the development, my pipes mark the industries and history particular to the London Bridge area at the time when the new station opened in December 1836. They depict a pipe maker, railway worker, coaching innkeeper, wool merchant, dissenter, Guy's Hospital nurse, leather manufacturer, hat maker, St Olave's Grammar School mistress, river boatman, rope maker, and a hop-picker.'

Jo Pearl – *Votive Feet*
'This is a series of three votive feet inspired by a 1st-century Roman oil lamp in the shape of a foot that was found during the London Bridge archaeological works.'

Amy Leung – *Bartmann Jugs*
'These are based on 17th-century Bartmann jugs, a fragment of which was discovered during the station's excavation. The incised surface details are drawings made during my daily rail commute, combined with original Bartmann designs. En masse, their grouping suggests the commuter huddle.'

Duncan Hooson – *Fancy Goods*
'This is a collection of objects that could have been found by archaeologists. The date of the objects is unknown, but it is thought that they may have been used by digging or service crews in the construction of the original station, potentially while laying the tracks. "Fancy goods" is a term associated with Stoke-on-Trent and its production of decorative ornaments or items made with no specific function in mind. Similar goods were made by the Hooson family in the 1950s in the Longton New Art Pottery.'

Matt Raw – *Generic Meaningless Crap*
'This clay has no value to that lot. It gets in the way, and can't be controlled like immaculate glass and steel. The shiny façades have no value to us lot. We see it everywhere, and won't be duped by a daft corporate name. Us and them.'