

Thursday, March 18, 1992

# Belleek Pottery

## From the kilns of a small Irish village comes a treasure in china

**BELLEEK**, Northern Ireland: Half of this tiny village is in Northern Ireland, and the other half is in the Republic of Ireland to the south. But that is not what makes the village famous. Catching a fish in one country and landing it in another is only a minor form of notoriety.



**Iris Jones**  
contributing travel editor

The few thatched-roofed cottages left in this part of County Fermanagh shine with a special luster, but that's not what makes Belleek famous either, although it's getting closer.

What puts this town on the map is an opalescent porcelain, much of it decorated with tiny green shamrocks, known to china lovers throughout the world as Belleek.

It gives new luster to an old treasure when you see it made in its setting, as I did here in this tiny village near Lough Erne, in the Lake District of Northern Ireland. The road winds out of gentle emerald hills down the two-block main street of town and turns left across the River Erne to a huge, three-story brick building that dominates the river and the bridge Belleek Pottery Limited.

An irritated Irish government official noted nearly 400 years ago that the people in this part of Northern Ireland were better craftsmen than swordsmen.

But they didn't have much to craft in Belleek until a man named John Caldwell Bloomfield inherited the Castle Caldwell estate after the great famine killed a million Irish people in 1849.

**JOHN WAS MORE** interested in mineralogy and ceramics than he was in farming. What was he to do to support the tenants on his estate, which included the village of Belleek itself?

It was those shining, whitewashed cottage walls gleaming with an unusual kind of limestone that made the young estate owner start looking for something that had never before been found in the area: feldspar and kaolin, the clays needed to make fine porcelain.

He found it five miles from home, and in 1857, with the help of a man from the Worcester Royal Porcelain Works, launched the pottery that would change the face of this part of Ireland.

At first, all they made were washstands and tiles from earthenware, but eventually they had kilns hot enough to fire the treasured Porcelain from which porcelain is made. Birds and flowers, fish and bees were the decorative specialties.

The pieces were quite extravagant by the time Queen Victoria gave a dinner set to the German royal family in the late 19th century.

The Belleek pottery died and was reborn twice, in 1884 and 1920, but Michael Maguire's shamrock pattern survives to this day.

It's the most popular Belleek pattern in the world, and most of it is sold in the United States, where a nostalgic Irish population dreams of that faraway land and every American becomes Irish on St. Patrick's Day.

**YOU CAN TOUR** the pottery on any weekday. It would take 14 days to follow a piece from the master mold to its final firing, but you can see the process from beginning to end on the two-hour tour.

A working mold is used once a day for two weeks before the pattern begins to fade and the mold is destroyed. "The wet clay, called 'slip,' is poured into the mold, left a moment or two, and poured out.

That thin layer, left to dry, is what

makes Belleek so translucent. The dried pieces go through the "fettling" process — the pattern is sharpened and the handles are added — and then it goes to the first firing, unless it must see the basketmakers and the flower-makers first.

It is fascinating to watch the famous Belleek baskets made with long strings of "spaghetti dough," and the ceramic petals formed one by one in a craftsman's hand.

Wherever you go in the pottery, you will see apprentices carrying long, flat trays of Belleek ware from one stage of the process to the next. They never seem to drop the china, and if they do, it is their master craftsman who pays the price, for he is paid by the finished piece.

Five percent of the Belleek made here is rejected (so, it is not sold in outlet stores), and the rest is quickly shipped around the world, leaving very little to buy in the town itself.

Collectors can join the Belleek Collectors Society, which gives them the opportunity to buy a limited edition piece once a year, as well as receiving a newsletter, catalog and other kinds of inside information of interest only to collectors.

**FOR MOST OF US**, the pottery, the village and the tourist possibilities in the surrounding area are of equal interest.

Belleek is at the western end of Lower Lough Erne, about 25 miles from the town of Enniskillen. The Lough attracts fishermen, nature lovers and historians, who are especially attracted to the medieval Christian ruins of Devenish Island.

You meet an occasional road patrol in rural Ireland, but little other sign of the Irish conflict is usually visible outside the cities. I was aware of the Troubles, as the Irish call it, when I saw high fences around hotels, and downtown areas converted to walking malls, but that was primarily in cities like Belfast and Londonderry. There is very little sign of it in the emerald green countryside that makes up most of this country.

If you follow Lower Lough Erne back to Belleek, you may see the island where the ruins of Castle Caldwell still stand. The entrance gate is a monument shaped like a bass fiddle, set up in 1770 "to the memory of Dennis McCabe, fiddler, who fell out of St. Patrick's barge, belonging to Sir James Caldwell, bart., and Count of Milan, and was drowned."

The party at which the fiddler was drowned would fill all our expectations of Ireland. Eighteenth century records show that the 120 guests washed down their dinner with 19 gallons of rum, six gallons of whiskey and two barrels of ale.

If you are more interested in pottery than the liquid it contains, you may wish to contact the Belleek Collectors Society at P.O. Box 755, Madison Square Station, New York, N.Y. 10010 or the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, c/o the British Tourist Authority, 680 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10015.



Workers (above) perform one stage in the 14-day process of producing Belleek porcelain.



The Belleek trademark (above) is shown in a plaque at the porcelain works. The pottery (right) is carefully produced by hand.

Photos by Iris Jones

### ... and it's Hummel time

Scratch an American traveler and you will often find a collector. Some people collect the creamy translucent dinnerware made by Belleek. Others get excited by small folksy figurines from Germany, called Hummels.

If you are a Hummel lover, visit Wally Bronner in Frankenthuth, March 22-26 for Goebel Hummel Days, an annual event for collectors and experts who get together to feast their eyes and minds on their favorite form of decorative art.

Bronner is the founding owner of Bronner's Christmas Decorations, which started with a hand-painted sign in the basement of his father's home in Frankenthuth and now spreads across a one-acre showroom.

He carries 30,000 items in stock, including 3,000 kinds of Christmas tree decorations and hundreds of different nativity scenes, animated figures, and decorative figurines, especially Hummels.

Frankenthuth is known for its German heritage, so it should not surprise you that Bronner specializes in Hummels. In fact, he has one sample of every Hummel figurine being produced today, spread across the wall of his reception room in a glass display case.

During Hummel days, there will be film showings several times a day. German experts to discuss the Hummel figures with you and a chance to explore the collectors books where every Hummel is listed. This event is not for antique collectors; Bronner's does not display old figures, only those presently in production and for sale.

— Iris Jones

Due to an editing error, last week's story on Club Med left the impression that the Playa Blanca resort is near Guadalajara, Spain. It is in fact near Guadalajara, Mexico.

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