

The Story of the Reynoldston Diamond Jubilee Mosaic Table

Gill Pittman

In November 2011 I was approached by the Reynoldston Jubilee Committee who said that as I had the only kiln in the village would I be prepared to help make a ceramic mosaic table with the children of Knelston Primary School to go on the Upper Green to commemorate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee.

It was decided the table top should be circular and four feet in diameter, and I did a design with a large oak tree, set in elements of the Gower landscape, and filled with birds and animals.

The birds and animals would be made by the children, and we initially intended to make everything else from broken up commercial tiles. Because the mosaic had to be frost proof, the tiles would need to be stoneware (i.e. fired to a high temperature), but after looking at what was available it became clear that the colours were very dull. An alternative was to use commercial tesserae (special mosaic tiles), but these are only 4mm thick, much too thin for the children to make the animals. So we decided we would have to make everything ourselves, including hundreds and hundreds of 2cm square tesserae, 8mm thick for the sky.

At the time I only had a few stoneware glazes in quite muted colours, so set about developing some much brighter ones using glaze stains – these are mineral colours you can mix into clear or semi-opaque white glazes; this involved firing lots of test tiles using different recipes.

By now it was January 2012, and the Knelston children all started to design an animal, bird or boat, about 80 in all. I rolled out sheets of clay and took them down to the school and with a lot of help from Dawn Thomas, the Forrest School teacher, the children cut out

their creatures. We were a bit prescriptive about size and colours as they all had to fit into the whole. The children worked from photos of real animals and we managed to avoid some exotic and fanciful suggestions in favour of the local fauna. The children loved doing it and in the end their work turned out extremely well. The younger children made simpler rectangular tiles for the sea, pond and tree trunk, and I made pieces for the tree foliage, Worm's Head, Whitford Burrows, the tesserae for the sky and lots of little flame-shaped pieces for the grass. With everything back from the school and dried out, I did two biscuit firings (1020°C) – this converts the clay to ceramic, ready for glazing.

I went back to the school in March, in the last two weeks of term, with all the children's pieces and pots of the prepared glazes and the children painted their creatures and tiles, again with help from Dawn and me. There were several hundred tesserae for the sky and grass, so I arranged many glazing parties of three or four Reynoldston ladies to gather in my kitchen and paint on the glazes.

In April I did four glaze firings to about 1250°C . Meanwhile, Adrian Hughes (Chairman of the Community Council and Gower Fire Chief) had cast the table top - a concrete disc four feet in diameter and four inches thick with a stainless steel band round the outside and including a reinforcing mesh welded to the band and embedded in the concrete. This weighed about a quarter of a ton. With help from local farmers and firemen, using a tractor, fork lift and palette truck, the slab was moved into my husband John's workshop next to the pottery and set on a stack of pallets.

John and I started assembling the mosaic in May. First a base layer of waterproof tile adhesive was put on the concrete, scraped perfectly flat, leaving an 8mm up-stand of the steel band at the edge. Then the pieces of the tree were stuck down, and birds and animals set into shaped cut-outs

that had been left in the foliage. Next the sky tesserae were laid using flowing lines, following the shapes of the tree foliage and merging into circular lines at the table edge. Within these, birds, bees, butterflies and dragonflies were set. Below the tree, the grass was formed from lots of small pieces in three shades of green, with ponies, sheep and other animals inset. The water in the sea and pond was made from elongated rectangular pieces in various shades of blue and green, with more creatures as well as boats in the water. To either side on the horizon are Worm's Head and Whitford Burrows with the disused lighthouse.

We realised by mid-May that we had only about half the necessary number of sky tesserae, and I had to rapidly make about another 750. There was no time to go through the usual separate biscuit and glaze firings, so I had to reconvene the glazing parties to raw glaze – that is, paint the glaze onto the unfired clay - and then fire to stoneware temperature. If it hadn't worked we wouldn't have made the Jubilee deadline, but fortunately it was OK.

Dan Morris, the local stonemason, built a fine circular plinth out of field stone on the Upper Green incorporating a beautifully engraved slate plaque made by Paul Jones (of J Cecil Jones, Monumental masons) also of Reynoldston.

The Reynoldston Jubilee Party and Table Unveiling was scheduled for 4th May, and this began to look like a tight deadline. Assembling the mosaic, which was mainly done by John, took most of May and was finally finished on the morning of Friday 1st June – quite a cliff hanger!

On the Friday evening in thick mist, Adrian and his volunteers arrived with tractor and fork lift and hoisted the table top away out onto the Green and cemented it onto the plinth. They then wrapped it in a red tarpaulin and locked it away behind a fence to keep it a surprise for Jubilee Day.

On the morning of 4th June there was a huge crowd on the

Upper Green, including most of the school children in fancy dress. The village party was opened by Councillor Richard Lewis, who unveiled the Table to the great excitement of all the young artists, who pounced on it with cries of 'There's my rabbit'... 'There's my buzzard...snake...butterfly' and so on.

Making the mosaic turned out to be a much bigger job than anyone anticipated, but it was very rewarding and we learned a lot. I should like to make another, vertical, indoor mosaic, but would need it to be commissioned first. Anyone interested, please ring [01792 390191](tel:01792390191) or email gillceramics@btinternet.com