



David Ballantyne – Renaissance Man of Clay

David Ballantyne, who died last year, was for many years Head of Ceramics at Bournemouth College of Art, inspiring many students with his enthusiasm and knowledge. With wide-ranging interests, David Ballantyne was also a practical potter, turning his hand to designing an ergonomic kickwheel, making pots as diverse as spittoons and door handles as well as elegant individual pieces. Peter Stoodley, who worked with David, remembers the achievements of this remarkable potter.

David Stamford Ballantyne was born in London in 1913, the son of a Unitarian Minister. He had two brothers and a sister, younger than himself. When he was six the family moved to Liverpool where he was educated and where he went to the Liverpool School of Art to study painting. From there he won a travelling scholarship and on this went to France to paint and from this experience became a lifelong Francophile. His painting then and since was greatly influenced by Ivon Hitchens whom he knew personally. From boyhood his mother had fostered in him a deep love of music and he was an excellent pianist, such that at the end of his art studies he considered seriously changing to music as a career. Music remained essential in his life and the design of his last house and home was conceived round the acoustics of his baby-grand piano.

He took the Art Teachers Diploma at the University of London Institute of Education and while there, like so many others subsequently, first handled clay at the Central School under the formative influence of Dora Billington. His first job was at West Ham Grammar School, which at the outbreak of war was evacuated to the Rhondda Valley in Wales and was later on to share premises with Wellingborough Grammar School in Northamptonshire. It was here that he met his wife Katharine. They were married in 1943 and had four children. When called up for military service he registered as a conscientious objector and spent the war engaged in agricultural work and this raised his interest in growing things and made him a more than competent and knowledgeable gardener. At his death he left a garden deftly planned and stocked with shrubs, flowers and vegetables and with a pond dug by one of his six grandchildren.

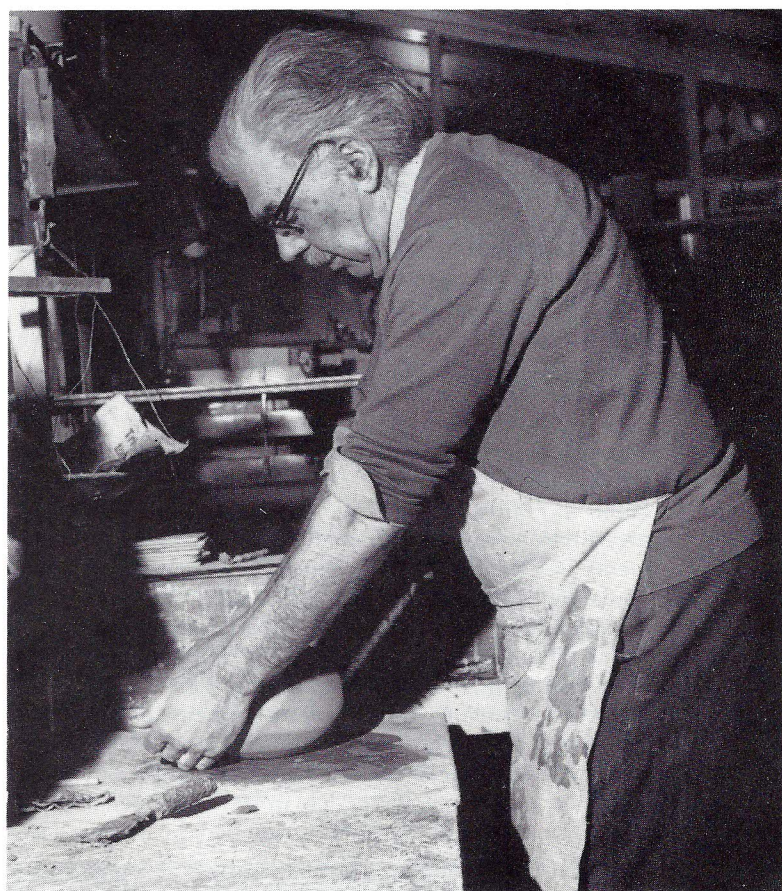
After the war he taught art at Bridgnorth Grammar School and received his first commission, to make fabrics for Attingham Park, an adult college nearby opened and directed by Sir George Trevelyan. In 1950, he was appointed to teach pottery and fabric printing at the Bournemouth College of Art where he stayed until his retirement in 1978. Many now middle aged potters will have memories of David in those days as he set out to create an efficient department and to start a course for pottery education. David Leach and Alan Caiger-Smith were

among the visiting lecturers and Henry Hammond acted as assessor. The course was highly regarded and always seemed on the brink of expansion, but it was to remain chronically short of students, largely, so it was thought, because of lack of proper publicity. Even within the College itself the physical isolation of the accommodation left many unaware of its existence. This was a great frustration for David but it had one benefit, in that his friendly contact with many established potters made it possible for all students to be offered a period of workshop practice as a regular part of the course.

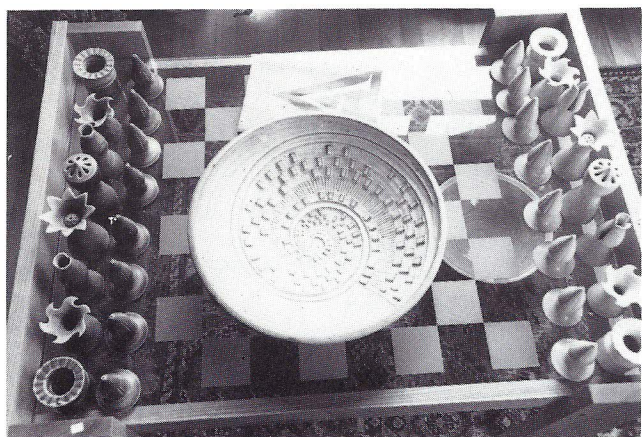
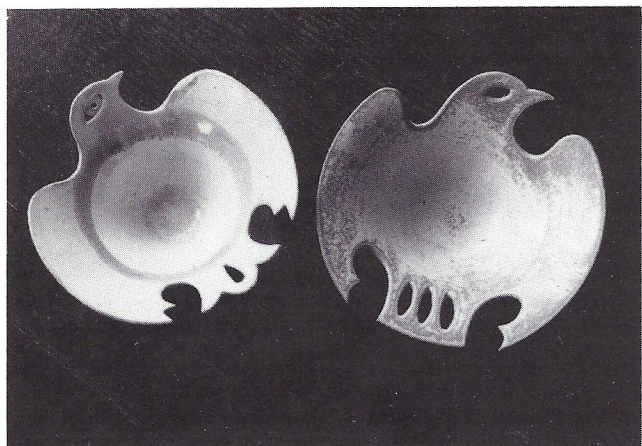
The College like many others went through a critical time. On the one hand it faced the prospect of an amalgamation with Poole College, which historically had a longer connection with pottery, and on the other, changes planned in art education were leading towards a new National Diploma in Art & Design. A complete rethinking of course aims and programmes was needed which David would have been particularly well qualified to face, but for a multitude of reasons the College failed to get approval for its proposals and this led to alterations in its structure which required the disappearance of all except vocationally orientated courses. Pottery was included along with interior design, and with painting and sculpture most clearly not vocational, in a new Department of Environmental Design.

It was typical of David that, although the change meant

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David Ballantyne – OPPOSITE TOP sculptural forms in concrete for memorial park. BOTTOM LEFT Whirligig chimney restoration, Lymington. RIGHT TOP Interlocking garden pots, terracotta. BOTTOM Tile mural, Barbers Wharf, Poole, 1990 (detail)



David Ballantyne – TOP Thrown and carved bowls in the form of birds, stoneware, 1976 and ABOVE Chess set and decorated bowl: the bowl, with decoration based on the inner structure of the ear, was made for presentation to David's brother John, an ear, nose and throat consultant.

that he give up control of the course he had spent the last ten years starting, he entered Environmental Design unhappily but prepared to support it with all his experience and knowledge. He cared for the students primarily above his own interests and the paradox is that out of the changed emphasis he saw new origins for the direction of his personal work and, in the wider field, an extending role for the craftsperson in all matters affecting the visual scene.

At about this time he was admitted to the Society of Designer Craftsmen as a Fellow and soon became its Honorary Co-ordinating Secretary. It was through his initiative that the Society started its Licentiate ship and he also composed a Code of Professional Practice. His natural gift for teaching was supplemented with a growing understanding of the nature of Design Education in all the media within Environmental Design and beyond, and he found ways in which theory could act through systems of presentation organised to enable students to find out for themselves the means and capacity in which to approach any design problem. He believed that all had a potential capable of development and that it was his responsibility to find this and bring it out to its limit, even from the weaker ones, and many of these found in him their chief hope of progress. During the student upheavals of 1968 Bournemouth College fared better than most and much must be attributed to the confidence which the students' leaders, one of them a potter, had in David's understanding of their intentions, however misguided he might have thought their actions.

Throughout the whole of his career David had kept an

active workshop at home, making and selling pots. His unity of mind saw no distinction between teaching and doing. The doing led directly to the teaching and vice versa. He was one of the first post war potters to make saltglaze, which was fired in a drip feed oil kiln built by himself. The fuel was waste sump oil from garages and the supply to the kiln incorporated a neat air carburation device to avoid any blocking by carbon sediments. He used a porcellaneous body and decorated the pots by impressing and engraving through painted slips.

After moving into his new house he gave up saltglaze saying it "had however inculcated a deep love and respect for the pre-industrial and early 19th century English tradition, both in its classical and popular forms. A week at Wedgwood's confirmed a growing commitment to drawing from the spirit of it – for example the figurative forms assembled from wheel thrown shapes and the later use of cutting and piercing in the 18th century creamwares". This experience constituted the one major influence which he admitted into his work and he made an extensive range of functional and decorative pottery, using a similar body but now under a limited number of cool stoneware glazes. Typical of the period were figurative pieces based on the circus rider and cut bowls of a bird with outstretched wings.

One unusually demanding commission came to him from the Parish of Christchurch and the Priory Church. A previously derelict section of the precinct was to be cleared and turned into a Garden of Rest. It was the intention to set aside a part suited to quiet contemplation and four wide brick circles were laid down, each some twenty feet in diameter, protected by a rose pergola and with seating. David was asked by the architect to provide four centre pieces. He chose as the overall theme 'Optimistic Symbols of Death' and for the circles in sequence 'Rest', 'Security', 'Release' and 'Continuity'. He made them himself in hand-trowelled shell-concrete based on hyperbolic paraboloids, cast on wooden shuttering, expressing the mood of each subject through its form. Few people ever see them as they are secluded and difficult to find, but they are still there though now somewhat the worse for wear.

At Wedgwood David had seen the technique of ground-laying enamels and he became highly skilled in this. He practised calligraphic letterform and used both together for a long series of commissioned commemorative bowls and plaques. The bowl series contain some of his most sophisticated and beautiful pots. He had little sympathy with the concept of the artist potter working exclusively for exhibition and he never had much connection with galleries, even though one of his brothers was a major collector. Perhaps the extent of his range was confusing to the viewer and awkward to show in a single exhibition. However a sample set of his door furniture, originally made for Sir Kenneth, later Lord Clark was chosen by Emmanuel Cooper for 'The Makers Eye' and in 1988, at Walford Mill in Wimborne, the Dorset Craft Guild, of which he was a member, put on a comprehensive exhibition covering his life's work in all its aspects, under the title 'Retrospect and Prospect'. Sadly the prospect was not to be long and as this exhibition appeared to be given only local publicity it was seen by few other than local people and was never reviewed nationally. He deserved better recognition.

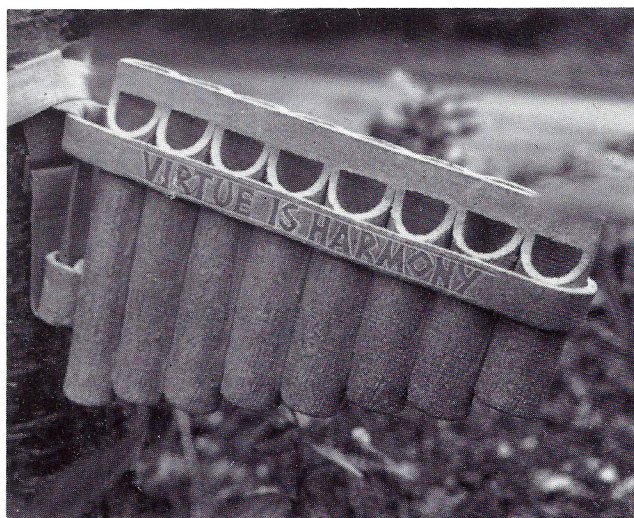
From the beginning one of his major concerns had been with pottery tools and equipment thinking that a knowledge of the design and making of these was essential for every potter. He had taken it as axiomatic that he should build all his own kilns and wheels and afterwards that those for the College should be built to his design. Others were made

to outside order under the acronym SAVIAC (Striving After Values In an Age of Crisis). His most successful production, however, must surely have been the SK110 geared, wooden framed kick wheel, the 110 referring to the pound weight of the cast iron flywheel. Each of the 36 made in the original version was one off, allowing for progressive improvement in detail to reach the maximum mechanical and operational efficiency. A unique feature was the adjustable pedal unit which eliminated any pumping action and could be quickly adjusted to suit any stature. Those in the College have been examined recently and found to have survived thirty years of largely unmaintained student bashing without serious defect. One was bought by Michael Cardew for Abuja. Ladi Kwali tried it but it was unfortunately burnt in the fire.

After his retirement from College David became even more engaged with commissions in connection with architecture and restoration. His self confidence and resourcefulness prepared him to accept challenges which would have daunted many another. He did much in collaboration with Ian Hamilton Finlay, the Concrete Poet, and he has been compared with the Renaissance man, using his artistic powers and technical skill to fulfil any need, able to state his views with conviction and in everything conveying the warmth and strength of his personality. He was a very human person, enjoying food and company and capable of being taken up and diverted sometimes by idiosyncratic enthusiasms. An early one was cars, when he bought an elderly Citroen Light Fifteen and tried to restore it with his own hands. The article which he wrote for *Pottery Quarterly* No.29 (1963) under the title 'Non Potting' dramatically records this interlude and shows his elegant literary style. Indeed he had plans for several books, about the theory of perception and the origination of design programmes and about ceramic lettering methods. He liked the element of problem solving in the genre of detective fiction and had gone some way to writing a detective novel of his own. His response to any subject in which he became interested was to try it out for himself, to question the expert and never to follow without being personally convinced. Thus anyone talking to him had always to be on their toes.

A subject he had been thinking of for almost all his lifetime and which was finished provisionally in time for the 1988 exhibition, was based on the story from Genesis of the seven days of the Creation. David had written about it "the central column rising upward is a sequence of Primary Concepts. Possible alternatives and additions to the images suggested in the text are sampled at random horizontally, increasing in number towards the human stage of evolution. It must be left to everyone to puzzle out for themselves the meaning of the images . . . The fun is in translating ideas into this medium". At present they are formed in plywood, shaped overall like a bird in flight. David saw it as a plan for later development in any scale or material "(Ceramic? Anodized aluminium?)" for a permanent structure. As it stands it is both an indication of his inner maturity, deeply felt, and uncompleted work, illustrating his belief "that a design can detach itself from the person and have a life of its own" so perhaps there is still some hope.

David was the master of many different media, all held within a unity of aim which became in his later years prophetic in its desire to bring in craftspeople from the esoteric fringe of society and to give them an integrated modern role: a third force within the craft spectrum, one other than being either makers of domestic utilities (his own phrase) or of purely artistic objects, however original and



David Ballantyne – TOP Concrete litter bin designed for the Windsor Jubilee Committee, a project taken up by Townscape. ABOVE Wind pipe 'Virtue is Harmony' made for the poet Ian Hamilton Finlay

valuable. Towards the end of his life he had hoped to be able to stand back from the daily running of the pottery, if he could ever have done so, and to hand over to someone competent to carry it on in his stead. His wish was to return to his painting and to his piano. He was to suffer no long and debilitating illness but died in the same flood of pressing activity as he had always lived. The universal nature of his talent makes it difficult to place him in any conventional context. His profession was that of a teacher and practitioner of design, centred in ceramics, but to himself he was an artist and in completion of the circle from which he began, it is as a painter that he would have hoped most to be remembered.