

Medieval floor tiles in Wales

Fashionable and expensive, decorative ceramic floor tiles were the preserve of the wealthy in medieval society. This guide is an introduction to the tiles from across Wales.

Find more archaeology guides or get in touch with our museum archaeologists for help with identification: museum.wales/collections/on-your-doorstep or on Twitter @SF_Archaeology



What are they?

Tiles are everywhere! Today they come in many shapes, sizes, materials, colours and finishes and reflect contemporary fashions and trends. Medieval ceramic tiles were expensive, and tended to be used in castles, monasteries, churches and the homes of wealthy families. These distinctive objects, with colourful glazes and beautiful patterns were copied by the Victorians as they revived the Gothic style, and help us understand medieval fashions, trends, manufacturing and trade.

Tile collections

Medieval floor tiles are known from over 100 locations across Wales. Originally laid in pavements, many now exist as loose tiles in museum and private collections. Some are visible at their original locations, often re-laid during restoration. Unrestored medieval pavements are rare, with examples at St. David's Cathedral and St. Stephen's Church, Old Radnor (Powys). Amgueddfa Cymru has one of the largest reference collections, with over 1000 tile fragments from over 50 sites across Wales.

Production

Tile clay was dug from clay pits. Coarse and often gritty, it was weathered and softened before use. Evidence for tile production in Wales has been found at Monmouthshire and Denbighshire. The study of different clay types provides clues to where tiles might have been made. Small-scale production centres were often set up by itinerant tilers, using makeshift workshops close to the buildings they were supplying.

Appearance

Square tiles were common, followed by rectangular and mosaic shapes. Mosaic tiles were cut into shape using templates; square and rectangular tiles were formed by pressing clay into a mould. Decorative techniques were varied. Two-colour tiles were made by filling a negative design with white clay to contrast with the red clay. Single colour tiles often carried designs in relief, counter-relief, line-impressed and occasionally, hand-drawn designs. Lead glazes were applied to the top surface, coloured by the addition of metals, such as copper.

Distribution

In South Wales, two-colour tiles were most common, influenced by trade with the south west of England and the Severn Valley area. Single tile designs include fleur-de-lys, griffins and coats of arms. Multi-tile designs include gothic-style windows, hunting scenes and jousting knights. In mid- and north Wales, line-impressed and mosaic tiles were most common, influenced by links with the Midlands and northern England. Mosaic tiles of different interconnecting shapes formed intricate and detailed patterns.