

Unveiling new artwork at Portobello Kilns

A decorative wrap on the partially demolished kiln at the former A W Buchan & Co's Thistle pottery in Portobello was officially unveiled on Friday before an invited audience, many of whom used to work as decorators at the pottery.

'Collaborative Bannerwork by the Decorators of Portobello' is a temporary artwork around the hoarding protecting the structure which was taken down for reasons of safety several years ago. The aim is to draw some attention to the need for funding to rebuild the kiln which is a local landmark. The illustrations on the banner were created by women who used to work at the potteries, in collaboration with Rosy Naylor Director of Art Walk Porty and lead artist Nicky Bird. Each of the decorators had their own mark which they would paint on the bottom of any pottery they decorated.

The banner is a progression from the 2019-2021 project The Decorators undertaken by Nicky Bird as part of Art Walk Porty. The artist led three workshops with the decorators when all could share research and ideas used to complete the design. Head Decorator Irene Forbes designed the Iona blue and white border which runs all the way along the top of the banner.

City Archaeologist John Lawson explained that five years ago it was noticed that the top of one of the kilns which had been

rebuilt in the 1970s just after Buchan's Pottery had been demolished had begun to twist. For health and safety reasons the kiln was then demolished by the council working along with Historic Environment Scotland.

Mr Lawson said: "We considered what could be done in the short term while funding is explored. The horrible hoarding has in the past been vandalised. We decided to put something around it to liven the place up, celebrate the history of the decorators and draw public attention to the project.

"I would like to thank the wonderful decorators. It has been great to work with the decorators witnessing their enthusiasm in producing this artwork. It is exciting to see."

The council continues to make applications for funding to have the kiln rebuilt on a site where pottery was created for the best part of the twentieth century.

Dr Margaret Munro is Chair of the Portobello Heritage Trust. She said: "It was a great experience working with Rosy and Nicky. I am not an artist but I offered my advice and opinion and they have produced a unique decorative banner. I hope it isn't here for too long as I would really like the kiln rebuilt. We successfully rebuilt the 1909 kiln after a great struggle. We are very supportive of the council with their grant applications and hope it is not too long before we are able to work with them to rebuild this kiln."

Rosy Naylor Director of Art Walk Porty said: "I find this kind of area fascinating. This project comes from a previous project The Decorators of Portobello part of Art Walk Porty working with a number of women who worked as ceramic decorators in the 1960s. Out of that we were invited by the council to develop another project that really marked the location for a longer duration while planning work on the rebuilding of the kiln progresses. We devised the idea of this 35 metre long banner and the decorators would draw little

illustrations from the work they produced at the time in the potteries. We expanded that out and scanned in their images on a much larger scale.

“It was a bit of a challenge working with a flat surface when they were used to working around a vessel. They have been so good to work with along with lead artist Nicky Bird.”

One of the decorators, Mairi Fortuna, thanked everyone on behalf of the group who had mainly worked in the pottery just after leaving school. She said: “It has been great to work with Nicky and Rosy on this project and it has been a special time for all of us keeping our memories alive.”

The two bottle kilns are the only two surviving structures in Scotland, and were left behind when A W Buchan moved to Crieff in 1972. There were many kilns like this in Portobello firing ceramics for the various different potteries. In 2013 just before a flatted development was constructed nearby the site was excavated by archaeologists who found large amounts of dumped ceramic waste connected with the production of stoneware and pottery in the 18th and 19th centuries. These included salt-glazed ginger beer bottles and ceramic sinks and toilets which was evidence of the goods produced on the site.

The 1909 kiln was rebuilt in 2014 using as many of the original bricks as possible. Subject to funding the council also hopes to rebuild the second kiln.

[Art Walk Porty](#) is delivered every September along with all year round work such as the banner on the kiln. This September around 10 to 15 artists will respond to the theme Vessel which focuses on water, safe drinking water or access to water. The art event will highlight the connection between water and climate change in a series of events at 39 venues which includes artists' houses and installations including the 1909 kiln which will be opened to the public.



L-R John Lawson City Archaeologist, Rosy Naylor Director of Art Walk Party artist Nicky Bird former decorator Mairi Fortuna (née Keenan), Dr Margaret Munro Chair of Portobello Heritage Trust, and decorators Karen Mackie (née Mackay) Linda Clarkson (née Auchterlonie) Elizabeth McMillan (née Purvis) and Barbara Naughton (née Williamson).

The Portobello Kiln has been wrapped with a banner created by the Decorators of Portobello a group of women who worked at the Buchan Pottery there in the sixties PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter



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