



# Refiring *the kilns*

Once a thriving ceramics centre, Farnham Pottery was saved from redevelopment by a group of volunteers. *Claire Jackson* discovers the area's clay heritage and how the Pottery has been transformed into a new arts centre

The sign next to a bloom-covered roundabout on the road reads 'Farnham – a craft town'. The Surrey enclave was given the label in 2013, but its connections to the arts – particularly ceramics – go back much further. Ancient kilns have been found in the local area at Snailslynch, Stoneyfields and Alice Holt, where grey coarse pottery known as Alice Holt ware was produced during the Roman period.

Archaeologists believe the pottery industry was vital to the area, with pieces exported across the south-east; the success was due in part to the availability of natural resources. Excavations in the town, including at Farnham Castle, have revealed the continuing importance of the craft during the early modern period, culminating in the birth of Farnham Pottery – or Harris Pottery, as it was known – in 1872. The Pottery was set up by Absalom Harris, who recognised, like his predecessors, the quality of the local Gault clay. The Harris family would dig supplies twice a year, involving the wider community, using a gravity railway to move the clay from the surrounding fields to the pug mill room on site.

## RISE AND FALL

In 1880, Harris Pottery began making a green-glazed collection that chimed with the emerging Arts and Crafts movement of the time. It was an instant hit and was supplied to both Liberty and Heal's in London, as well as outlets in the US and Australia. The iconic late-Victorian owl figurines, such as the one pictured above, were particularly popular, and several pieces with the distinctive copper-green glaze can be seen at the Farnham Museum. The Harris Pottery output also included bricks and tiles for local villages and a range of garden pots, some standing waist high.

'Back then, a skilled potter would be throwing between 1000 and 1400 flowerpots a day, in Dickensian working conditions,' explains Farnham Pottery managing director Guy Hains. 'It would be either freezing cold in the draughty building, or fiercely hot in front of the kilns. When we give tours of the Pottery we try to bring this to life for visitors who love the atmospheric buildings, but have to be reminded of the toil that took place here.'

Sadly, Harris Pottery went into decline after the First World War when employees were lost and technological developments replaced hand-thrown pot making. In 1998 the site was acquired by the Farnham Preservation Society, who undertook essential repairs to prevent the building from deteriorating, and in 2000 the Harris family finally ceased production. Then, in 2011, a deeper crisis hit – the building, now in disrepair, was set to be sold to developers. Volunteers established the Farnham Pottery Trust, a fledgling group comprising artists and local supporters intent on saving the building from conversion. But the costs and work associated with such a mammoth task meant that even with the dedicated efforts of the Trust, the Pottery's future seemed uncertain.

Enter Hains, a quietly passionate supporter of the arts and long-time admirer of the Pottery, thanks to his wife Elaine's associations with West Street Potters, who have been based on the site for several decades. 'Buying a pottery wasn't in my life plan,' admits Hains, 'but the building was destined to be turned into offices and housing.' Hains made a 'considered snap decision' and joined forces with ceramist Ashley Howard, who was a member of the Farnham Pottery Trust, and the two managed to convince the sellers they were a serious proposition. Just weeks later, Hains took ownership of Farnham Pottery. At the time of the sale, the site was in a poor state of health, and the Hains' have had their work

**ABOVE:** Harris Pottery's Farnham Greenware, c.1880–1910

cut out. ‘Our guiding principal was to preserve the building, rather than renovate,’ Hains explains. Because renovations were as sympathetic as possible, the building work was a labour of love. However, just 18 months after the purchase, 318 Ceramics – an independent organisation of potters – was in residence. Within three years the building was thriving once again as a ceramic and creative centre par excellence.

**SUSTAINABLE ENDEAVOUR**

There is comfort within the rustic space. Artwork rotates; exhibits sell and, unsurprisingly, the on-site Farnham Pottery café has become a hit with local residents for weekend brunch. ‘The café aids awareness, but we don’t want to rely on that supporting the artistic endeavours – we’ve tried to establish a sustainable model,’ explains Hains, whose thoughtful, understated approach belies a steely shrewdness. ‘Guy’s business acumen has been invaluable,’ says Howard. ‘We are now a self-sustaining artistic organisation – funding adds extra layers, but luckily we don’t have to rely on it.’

Once the 318 ceramists – comprising Ashley Howard, Kim Bagley, Judy Dibiasse and Annie Hardy – had settled in, there was a move to encourage more amateur interest, which Hains believes was helped by the success of the BBC TV programme *The Great Pottery Throw Down*. ‘We ran taster days and a lot of the people are still here taking classes. There’s something very addictive about clay,’ he says. ‘We have a waiting list on our courses,’ adds Howard. ‘The weekend and short courses are very popular – particularly surface-related activities, which are fulfilling the demand for specialist teaching.’ Having practising artists on-site creates an inspiring atmosphere for up-and-coming ceramists, too. ‘It’s important to show students that ceramics can be so much more than just having a go on the wheel – it’s an art form,’ says Howard.

**CERAMIC FUTURE**

There are further exciting plans afoot at Farnham Pottery, including a new graduate scheme in collaboration with Farnham’s University of the Creative Arts that will enable ceramists to apply for subsidised studio space. Howard is also working with the Arts Council to secure more kilns and 318 are holding an Open House exhibition in November. And it seems that Hains has got the pottery bug – he’s just taken over Kate Malone’s old studios in Hackney, which will support nine graduates from the Royal College of Art. ‘It will be a great complement to Farnham Pottery,’ he says.

Thanks to Hains, Howard and the Farnham Pottery team, many more local people are engaging with ceramics – around 300 now attend classes every week, and that number is rising. Perhaps the sign should be amended to ‘Farnham – a ceramics town’.

For more details about Farnham Pottery, its ceramic classes and creative programme, visit [thefarnhampottery.co.uk](http://thefarnhampottery.co.uk)

**ART IN CLAY**

The annual *Art in Clay* festival is a highlight in Farnham’s cultural calendar. The 22nd instalment of the pottery and ceramics event takes place on 17 and 18 November, featuring exhibitors including Debbie Barber, Janet Halligan, Sean Gordon, Anna Lambert and Paul Wearing. The event takes place at Farnham Maltings, which was once home to a brewing company and is now a creative arts centre; [artinclayfarnham.co.uk](http://artinclayfarnham.co.uk)



**FROM TOP:** the original Harris Pottery site; Absalom Harris; stacking the kiln; the Harris Pottery potters

**FARNHAM POTTERY: TIMELINE**

- **1872:** Harris Pottery founded by Absalom Harris; it remained in the Harris family for five generations
- **1880–1920:** production of Farnham Greenware in Arts and Craft style, with Liberty London as the major selling outlet
- **1998:** Farnham Preservation Society acquired the site and undertook essential repairs to prevent further deterioration to the fabric of the building
- **2000:** end of production by the Harris family
- **2011:** Farnham Pottery acquired by Guy and Elaine Hains
- **2013:** new facility opened for creative organisation 318 Ceramics
- **2015:** renovations to the major part of the building are completed; café and function rooms open to the public
- **2017:** Farnham Pottery Arts programme is operational, offering workshops in ceramics, willow weaving, linocutting, cross stitch, jewellery and painting



**THIS PAGE:** *Silent Music* vessels by Ashley Howard from 318 Ceramics’ recent exhibition *Clay Stories* at National Trust property Leith Hill Place