

Medieval Encaustic Floor Tiles

A Tale of Two Colours



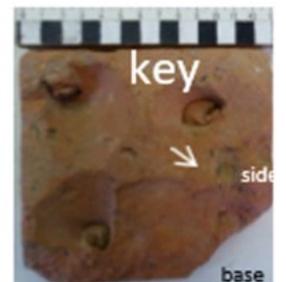
What are encaustic tiles? Encaustic or two colour tiles are decorated tiles that generally have a red clay background decorated with an inlay of contrasting colour clay (usually white).



The tiles were decorated with a wide variety of designs ranging from floral patterns to animal motifs, people and coats of arms.

The tiles were made by specialists who possessed detailed knowledge of the methods of decoration, the properties of the clays and the glazes used in production, and the construction of the kilns used to make the tiles.

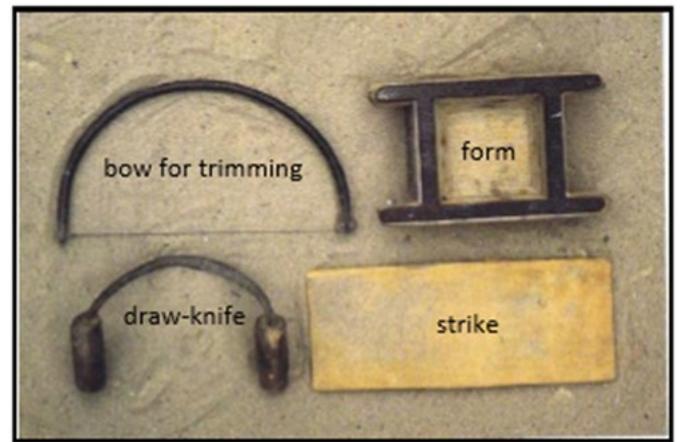
Tile production spanned the second quarter of the 13th century until the late 16th century. They were popular in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland and the continent.



Anatomy of a tile: The most common tile shapes were square or rectangular, they ranged from 100mm to 140mm square and from 18mm to 34mm thick. The underside of the tile often displays 3 to 5 depressions (keys) made with a knife that facilitated the bedding of the tile.

How were the tiles made? There is no contemporary documentation describing how tiles were made in the medieval period, but later practice suggests that they were shaped in a wooden frame called a form. The table on which the tiles were made was sprinkled with sand so that clay did not stick to the table.

The red body clay was worked to drive out pockets of air that would cause damage when the tiles were fired. The clay was forced into the form and the top cut flat with a wire bow. A grooved pattern was produced on the surface of the red body clay. White clay (slip) was then poured into the groove.



Tile maker's tool set (19thC)

From Eames

Kilns: The tiles were fired in specially built kilns. Kilns have been excavated at several places such as the royal palace of 'Clarendon' near Salisbury. Others, such as one at Otterbourne Hampshire are only known from contemporary writings.

