

MEDIEVAL CERAMIC TILES

Use this worksheet to put together your own medieval tile!

The Cistercian convent in North Berwick, (located around 100m to the south of the rail station), is one of the few confirmed examples of Scottish tile kilns. The priory of Cistercian nuns was founded by Duncan, Earl of Fife, in around 1150. The kilns are evidence of a thriving industry - at least during the 13th Century, but by 1587 the convent buildings had become 'ruinous' and were granted to Alexander Hume by James VI. North Berwick was a popular staging post for pilgrims on their way to visit the cathedral and shrine of St Andrew in Fife. These pilgrims would have been ferried from North Berwick harbour to Earl's Ferry on the north side of the Firth of Forth.

The nuns of North Berwick would have benefited from the trade provided by such pilgrims, manufacturing and selling them pilgrim badges with the representation of St. Andrew.

Excavated in the 1920s it produced a large number of striking Line-Imprinted tiles which would have been created with a pre-designed metal stamp. Carbon dates indicate that the kiln, and therefore the production of the tiles, were in use in the first half of the 13th Century, for a period of around 40 years.

Line-impressed tiles were a fore-runner of the Encaustic type, being easier to produce but much less visually striking. In order to create this type line-impressed tiles, tylers* would use a stamp - normally made of lead - to press a design into the soft clay. The metal stamps used to create Line-impressed tiles could create fine lines and intricate details which would be lost in the process of making the Encaustic tile. The tyler could also add further details and interest by hand with wooden or metal tools. These tiles may have raised or relief designs, depending on the stamp used. Unfortunately, these designs would be lost when spaces were dimly lit, unlike encaustic tiles, whose high-contrast designs would be visible in lower light. Line-impressed tiles were, however, less costly and time-intensive to produce.

Tylers were skilled craftsmen who, after serving an apprenticeship of around 6-8 years, became relatively well-paid. The tile making process was closely linked to the seasons: the clay that was required to make the tiles was dug out during autumn and exposed to the elements, thereby allowing it to be more easily worked. The tiles would then be manufactured in the spring and left to dry in open sheds throughout the summer.

Top right: A selection of decorated tiles from the North Berwick tile kilns. These tiles are decorated with floral and geometric designs as well as depictions of a lion and hunting dog.

(The information provided here draws upon the findings of the 2011 report funded by Historic Scotland and written by Derek Hall, "Excavations at North Berwick nunnery tile kiln, Old Abbey Road, North Berwick.")

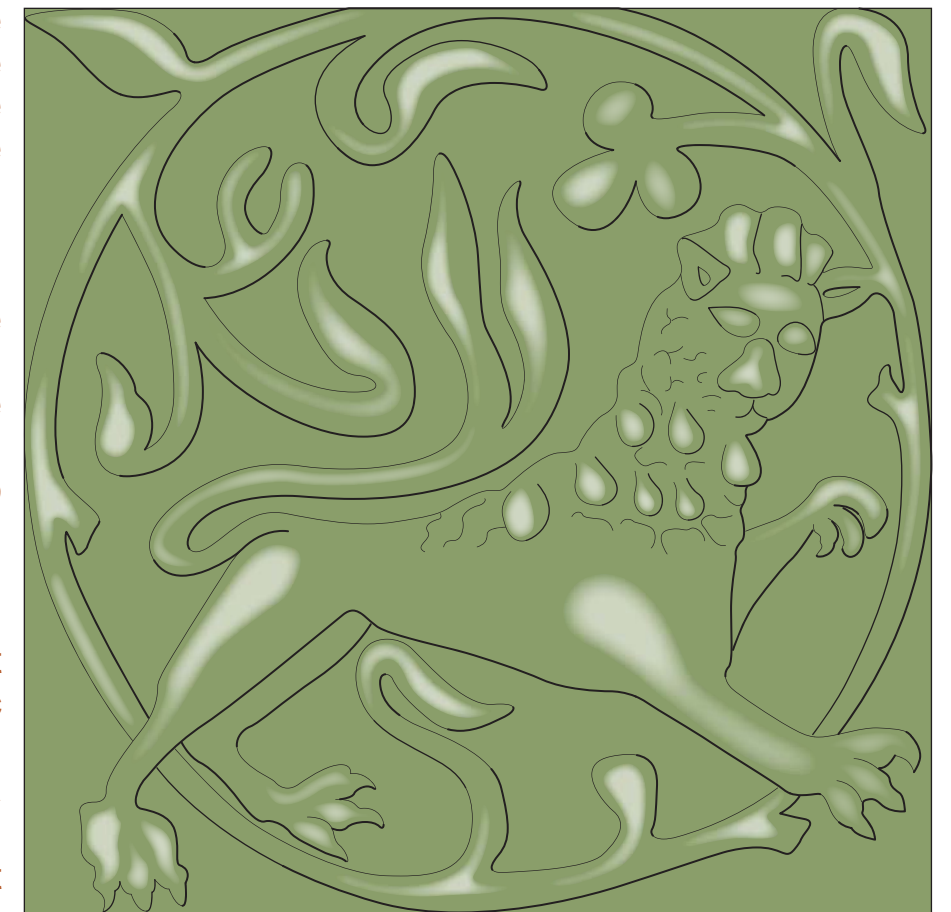


© Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland

Left: This is the completed image of the lion based on the photographic evidence above.

To make your own tile, simply cut out the image and glue onto foam-board. If you make more tiles you can arrange them into patterns of your own choice.

Why not experiment with your own geometric / floral designs? Or even draw your own tile with a hunting dog as shown above in the top-right corner?



*Therefore giving us the surname 'Tyler'