



Claire hard at work

A passion for PORCELAIN

Inspired by the rural surroundings of Somerset and drawn to exploring the intimate relationship between porcelain and light, Claire Springfield's ceramics are really rather special. Rachael D'Cruze-Sharpe heads to her studio in Cossington to find out more...



It's impossible not to be drawn to Claire Springfield's range of decorative tableware, adorned with detail-rich thyme and fern in colours reflecting that of the original plant, contrasted against the elegant white porcelain.

Her work is both decorative and functional and has a distinctly organic flavour.

On entering her studio, in the beautiful rural area of Cossington, I'm bowled over by how fine her work is. Claire explains that because porcelain has a very high strength it allows her to create thinner and more delicate pieces than are achievable with other clays.

Claire has always had an affinity with clay. Talking about her childhood, which is where her passion grew from, she says: "I was always playing with mud."

After having enjoyed doing ceramics as a GCSE and then taking Art at A-level, Claire found herself working as a service manager at a lifting company, having done no pottery for seven years. Feeling the pull back towards her craft, Claire went back to college in Weston-super-Mare and studied ceramics.

"It was the very last term of my last year at college when I tried porcelain and I loved it straight away," says Claire who favours



Above, left and below: Some of Claire's creations



the special clay for its translucent quality.

"Not enough people use it for lights - they're missing the brilliance of it," continues Claire who has made the special relationship between the porcelain and lighting her specialism. Indeed, her lamps and lights give exceptional ambient light - the porcelain taking on an incredible warmth and depth with the gentle light from the candle and her leaf motifs glowing triumphantly in their great detail.

On completion of her course, ceramics was an all-encompassing hobby for Claire and she quickly found herself running out of space at home.

Her progression from home hobbyist to worldwide seller and respected artist happened both quickly and organically. A village craft day, lead to selling at craft fairs and then Claire became represented by Love Local and Somerset Crafts, who sell and exhibit her work.

Claire has become known for her innovative and incorporation of plants into her work, notably thyme and also fern. "Thyme leaves are small, flexible and strong - the clay picks up all the detail, where as rosemary, for example, is too hard and would go through the clay," says Claire explaining her plant choice.

She tells us that her fern pieces take a lot longer than the thyme work, but she still

enjoys utilizing it. "I often go out walking collecting grasses and herbs then experiment in my studio."

We were lucky enough to spend an afternoon with Claire in her studio, where we got to see her fascinating process of making her thyme tea lights.

From a sheet of clay Claire's first step is to remove even the tiniest of marks, left behind from storage in canvas sheets.

Next, she'll mark out her template shape using a wooden ruler and score with a craft knife before cutting it all out with the same knife. She'll then roll sprigs of thyme, grown in her own garden, into the clay.

Claire then wraps the porcelain around a former, in this case a plastic beaker, first she adds in a layer of newspaper between the clay and the former though - as it's porous it stops the clay from sticking.

As Claire works her way through the small batch of tea lights she's making it's clear to see how much she enjoys her work and how it engrosses her. As different leaves are used for each piece, every light is unique. Claire tells us that the process actually helps her to practice mindfulness, which is a lovely quality to be able to find in one's work.

Next, it's time to add the bottoms to the lights, which is done by scoring the edges and adding a little water to form the bond.

Once they all been smoothed and perfected they are left to dry out completely and then fired, with the thyme in, to 950 degrees.

Once fired, the area of herb detail, left as an in-print, is brought to life with green stain and glazed (if it's being glazed) and fired for a second time at a temperature of 1250 degrees.

Claire has just finished a commission of 150 wedding favours, which she says she enjoyed greatly. There's lots of exciting projects on the horizon too, notably her Somerset scene lights.

Claire explains these will be flat porcelain panels backlit with LED lights, which will take in expansive views, for instance Crook Peak to Glastonbury Tor.

The scenes will start life as Claire's photographs, which she'll turn into lithograph stamps and use in the porcelain. As with the lights we've watched her make today, she'll do the whole process herself.

Claire's love affair with thyme will continue next year but she'll be expanding to encompass more plants and herbs, most of which will come from her own garden. Larger scale lamps and lights are on the horizon too, but Claire says she'll always make the tea lights we've watched her create today as she always wants her work to remain affordable to all. An inspiring artist. love-local.com and somersetcrafts.com ■