

# A Special Place

Lucy Frears applauds the community spirit at Gaolyard Pottery, St Ives, established in 1999 by potter John Bedding.



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'My main reason for being here is John Bedding's vision of having somewhere with reasonable rent, support and a group of people... that's what is important to me.' Louise Thompson is one of the nine full-time potters who work at the Gaolyard Pottery in the centre of St Ives, Cornwall. After being shown the workshop on a tour from University College Falmouth she managed to get a studio a year after graduation, seven years ago. Across the courtyard of the horseshoe-shaped building is the studio of South African potter Roelof Uys who has been at the Gaolyard for nine years. 'Because of the nature of ceramics it's really difficult to go anywhere and set up a studio; it had everything for somebody like me who's just come here with a bag to start making pots. With links through John's gallery it just started from there – a career in Britain.'

Potter John Bedding set up Gaolyard Pottery Studios in 1999. He wanted to help new graduates and potters from outside the region establish their businesses with little outlay, with the expectation that they would move on to their own larger workshop after a couple of years. 'It's never happened once!' laughs Sam Hall, who manages the workshops and was the first potter to move in. 'Nine years ago it seemed like a nice idea but generally the pressure on work space in town has just stopped that.'

John Bedding, who also set up St Ives Ceramics, had learned much as a student apprentice and employee of the Leach Pottery, so brings with him a wealth of experience. There have been no financial rewards for setting up the Gaolyard but it is self-sustaining. A decade ago Bedding was already an established presence in the ceramics world with a successful showroom and studio in the town. So why did he decide to set up another large workshop? 'I liked my time at the Leach Pottery, I liked the community atmosphere but I realised that as a business profile it no longer stacked up. I found the Gaolyard site and it looked ideal for an idea that I'd always had – where people



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rented studios... I didn't get financially involved with them but I would have people around me, which was both supporting and social. Other artists and practitioners give you a buzz and enthusiasm for coming to work. There is also the practical side with people around to help with technical problems. At the Leach everyone used to go around and look at each other's work. When I left that was one thing I really missed. I went down a few wrong paths simply because there was no one around to intimate that things were going wrong.'

**COMMUNITY** The £100,000 project transformed the old building, historically a workhouse and gaol, that had sat empty for fourteen years. 'One of the most difficult things in setting up is working out how you can manage it. Firstly, you must get the property fairly cheap and then you mustn't overspend on the kitting out. The worst thing

1 View of St Ives 2 The Gaolyard potters  
 3 Rebecca Harvey – Beaker and saucer, porcelain, H12cm 4 Entrance to Gaolyard studios 5 Sam Hall unpacking kiln



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you can do is make it very slick and unaffordable.' With less than a fifth of the budget coming from the then DTI (Department of Trade and Industry) and a rural communities grant, it was Bedding's mix of business sense ('It's being sensible about money coming in and going out') and altruism that created the Gaolyard.

Social interaction is easy and happens incidentally as the kiln room and social area, a big table, are at the centre of the building. The potters can meet over tea or while one of the four electric kilns or gas kiln is being packed. There is communal use of the clay mixer, pug as well as the raku firing area in the yard.

'We've all got our own rooms but we can actually see across to each other. It feels like its own little community', says Sarah Dunstan, the only hand-builder amongst throwers at the workshop. She decorates flat rolled clay as an artist would a canvas before assembling her ornamental pots. 'All people are at different stages of their career



here, some are at the beginning and others are very experienced. You find your place and if you've got a problem there's always someone out of a group of nine that will help. That was a huge breakthrough when I first moved here.'

'There is a creative atmosphere and it's laid back and relaxed', says Rebecca Harvey, the newest arrival, fresh from her MA. Her work has already been included in the *Tea Ceremony* exhibition at the renovated Leach Pottery. 'There is a kind of sharing of a passion for clay and all you can do with it.' Raku jewellery maker Amanda Ray sits in the middle of pictures of sixties art, clothes, furniture and architecture, which influence her designs. Bedding showed Ray the techniques to raku fire when she moved back to Cornwall sixteen years ago to manage his gallery. 'We're all in it together, all trying to sell work from galleries, trying to get into different craft fairs and art fairs, so it's all being here as friends working alongside each other really.' Next door to Ray is Louise Thompson, who came in originally as the greenest potter. 'You just absorb so much. You watch how people do things. I was straight out of college and saw Roelof making twenty of this, twenty of that. It accelerated what I would have learned by myself.'

**INDIVIDUALITY** There is no Gaolyard house style. Bedding's experience at the Leach Pottery is possibly behind this unrestricted creativity. 'When you were making your own pots you couldn't go beyond the Leach style. I did break the style once before I left for Japan. My exhibition at the Leach Pottery sold well. Then, one day, there were red dots and blue dots, so I asked Janet Leach, manager of the pottery, what do the blue dots mean? "They're the pots I never want to see



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6 Rebecca Harvey preparing porcelain  
 7 Rick Henham decorating a bowl  
 8 Sarah Dunstan in her studio 9 Louisa  
 Thompson throwing 10 Rick Henham –  
*Wavy Line Vases*, stoneware, 2008, H38cm

11 Sarah Dunstan – Vessels, stoneware  
 and decorated porcelain slip, 2008,  
 H15cm 12 Amanda Ray – Raku fired  
 earrings, 2008 13 Trevor Corser –  
 Porcelain bottle vase, 2008, H27cm



again! You can take them home, you can break them but they're not coming back in the showroom". It was at that point, unsurprisingly, that Bedding realised he could not return to the Leach Pottery. 'I can understand it, looking back at it all. Firstly, if you put it in the showroom it jars with other things but also with training someone you have to restrict them. People are often allowed to go their own way before they're ready for it. That sort of tight restriction builds up and wants to burst out of you and when it does you're ready for it.'

After thirty-nine years at the Leach Pottery Trevor Corser came to the Gaolyard. He'd been employed at the Leach Pottery to pack

kilns and mix clay but was encouraged by Janet Leach. 'They got me throwing and the first thing they had me making was little porcelain eggcups; my fingers used to bleed, it was awful. Then people started buying things and people came and asked for Trevor Corser pots, and you go "Oooh!"' Corser has had to adapt his work to suit the new kilns at the Gaolyard. 'I did have to change. For example, I thought I was putting the same amount of reduction in the kiln but it must have been heavier, so the glaze I'd used at the Leach Pottery fluxed too quickly and ran, resulting in things sticking on the shelves. It's working now.'

Sam Hall tries his hardest not to lose any of his distinctively shaped vessels. 'When I've thrown some, I probably work on three or four at once, I put them away for a while and then get another few out and slowly chip away at them. When I think they're finished, when I've fired them, I'll stick them away and bring them out a few months later, see how successful they are and then try and just keep working on them. If I think "oh that's a bad pot" I'll make it a good one. I'll refire it or try to rescue it. I almost bully them into submission. There's a lot of time and commitment to throw away there, and also you learn an awful lot by trying. Painters will paint and paint and paint until they've got the painting to work; potters do a very similar thing but they'll do it on different pieces, whereas I try to do it on the piece I'm working on at the time.'

The St Ives studio is near the beaches and cliffs. 'You can breathe, the air is fresh', says Harvey, who did her MA in London. Rick Henham is in the open studio next to hers. 'Escaping to Cornwall has been well worth the wait, even if it's taken a lifetime to get here. I'm still soaking up the peace and quiet and open space like a sponge.'



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Henham's wire-bound vases grew out of feeling slave to gridlock and the rat race. Now the tight wire collars have gone. 'My signature black and white *Wireneck Vases* evolved over time, and now have a few wiggly lines running round them instead, which are drawn from the sea and landscape that's all about me.' Louise Thompson's domestic ware uses decoration on a pale background. 'I don't want anything too busy, it brings out the light and colour of Cornwall as well, especially in St Ives where there's a luminosity. Saturating a pot with all one colour I think takes away from what I feel Cornwall is about – light and colour.'

Biking past Cornish hedgerows has influenced Harvey's work. 'All the wonderful flowers that are around are filtering into the work, the vivid pinks and the colour of foxgloves and the wild yellow flowers. London was all very white and reflected the urban environment. The light here just catches you out sometimes, the sand really is that yellow and the sea really is that blue.' Roelof Uys has come the furthest to work here. 'It's the reason for Bernard Leach coming down here in the first place, I like the distance from everywhere else. I like the fact that St Ives is known as a place where artists work and live and have done so for centuries. It's nice to know I'm part of that. It's advantageous.'

St Ives has been an artists' colony since the late 1800s. The Leach Pottery was established in 1920 but fell into disrepair before its renovation and re-opening last year. The Gaolyard kept the pottery tradition alive throughout those years. 'The initial idea of the Leach Pottery has progressed but this continues the tradition,' says Uys, who first learned about Bernard Leach at art college in South Africa.



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'I really admire what John's done with setting up the Gaolyard. He didn't have to do it – that's what he wanted to do.' Louise Thompson agrees. 'Not many people would do this; most people would be off with their own pottery and their showroom. It's an amazing concept; it's really a selfless act under-driven by a passion for helping out other potters. John's always very low profile in the pottery world, he hasn't got this big ego. That's the ethic of this, there's not a strong way you should be and quite a lot of original art grows out of that. We're not like the Leach Pottery at all, but the root is there. It's a very special place.' 

14 Trevor Corser in his studio 15 John Bedding – Arched pot, computer generated design, earthenware, 2008, H49cm 16 Louise Thompson – Bowl, stoneware, 2008, Ø32cm 17 Roelof Uys –

Incised glazed platter, stoneware, 2008, Ø38cm 18 Sam Hall – Medium flat form, stoneware, 2008, H25cm 19 John Bedding pugging clay in his studio 20 Amanda Ray glazing

**Photography** Studio shots by Gemma Waldron

**Web** Gaalyard Pottery [www.gaalyard-studio-pottery.co.uk](http://www.gaalyard-studio-pottery.co.uk); St Ives Ceramics [www.st-ives-ceramics.co.uk](http://www.st-ives-ceramics.co.uk); The Leach

Pottery [www.leachpottery.com](http://www.leachpottery.com); Sarah Dunstan [www.sarahdunstan.co.uk](http://www.sarahdunstan.co.uk); Louise Thompson [www.louisethompsonceramics.co.uk](http://www.louisethompsonceramics.co.uk); Rebecca Harvey [www.rebecca-harvey.f9.co.uk](http://www.rebecca-harvey.f9.co.uk)

