

The Colchester Collection of Historic Street Names. Robert Mercer 2019



Sir Isaac's Walk junction with Eld Lane and Trinity Street . 1903 ." Images of Essex,the photographs of Alfred Wire 1875-1913 " D Mander ,Vestry House Museum publication.

Colchester is fortunate indeed to have a considerable legacy of late 19th century ceramic street names formed from Minton Hollins & Co encaustic tiles. This Stoke on Trent Pottery Company was formed by Thomas Minton in 1790 to produce

table wear. Herbert Minton took over the company on his father's death in 1836 and he developed new production techniques notably including encaustic tile making through his association with leading architects and designers.

The encaustic process involves a pattern that is a product not of glaze but of different colours of clay . The pattern appears inlaid into the body of the tile so that the design remains as the tile is worn down. They can be glazed or unglazed. However it is process that imbues a tile with a particularly long life.

What is uncertain is when the lettering tiles were first produced given the lack of factory records. Perhaps the pattern numbers of 2916 – 2919 indicate a late date of circa 1890 to meet the new demand for street names.

There are several other towns with Minton lettering tiles and perhaps one of the most noteworthy is Torquay where Herbert Minton acquired a house in 1836. He died in 1838 but the house remained in the family until 1890. Nearby Dawlish, Exeter and Ilfracombe also used the same blue coloured tiles.

The Minton street name tiles also survive in good numbers in Hampstead; East Dulwich; Gosport; Aberdeen and Hull.

Individual examples remain in Berwick Street, Soho; Ball Alley in the City of London; Cambridge and Wolverhampton. Time and progress have seen their numbers dwindle but it is more than

probable that Colchester has the largest collection at 198 signs surviving.



A Minton Hollins & Co Pattern 2917 & 2919 .Catalogue 1900 Leicester Record Office ref 16D69/262

The tiles were available in a black /white and reverse or a blue/white as in Torquay. Two tile sizes were in the range and the smaller tile measures 2½” high and 2 “wide. The large tile is 5”high and 4 ¼” wide or 3” wide for the blank space or letter” I “for example.

The choice of tile sizes did offer the possibility of recording in smaller type, the more ancient original name where applicable for many of the older Colchester town names while using the larger type for the main name. This was a particular interest to Alderman Bawtree Harvey, the Chairman of the Borough Roads and Drainage Committee.

E. Alex Blaxill's "The Street Names of Colchester" (1936 Benham Printers) quotes from Alderman Harvey's report of 1889 on street names. This states that in 1882 a Committee was appointed "to place at the entry of streets, plates giving their destinations in conspicuous letters" and that 113 name plates were fixed. This would have been in response to the 1847 Town Clauses Improvement Act, section 64 which states how houses are to be numbered and streets to be named. This need was largely a reaction to the recent rapid growth of new house building in Colchester as in so many other Victorian towns and to the specific needs of the new Postal Service.

The decision in 1882 was possibly to use cast iron signs almost certainly made by one of Colchester foundries perhaps Stanford's of the High Street, A.G. Mumford's of Culver Street or more probably Bennell of Greenstead Road as all appear in the Council accounts.

All are 14cm or 5 ½ "high and between 80 cm / 31 ½" wide and 107cm/ 42 ¼" wide and use a simple block type face.



This sign in very original unpainted condition does illustrate how hard these are to see and read and perhaps why the Council Roads and Drainage Committee would seek to improve on the clarity and size.

These signs would seem to have been installed in the early phase of building in the New Town development and the streets between the town centre and the new Garrison such as South Street and Wellington Street as well as the Town centre streets themselves.



Providence Place cast iron sign .Photo : Nigel Henderson 1953 Tate Collection

Of these signs the Survey now shows that only 12 survive in 2019.

In 1983 E.J.Russell had reported that iron signs were still in Albert Street, St Peter's Street and Grays Cottages (East Street) which unfortunately have now disappeared. (Colchester Archaeological Group Bulletin no 16, 1983).

As Alderman Harvey states, 113 signs had been installed when the work was stopped leaving many street, courts and yards still requiring to be indicated in the same way.

The main purpose of Harvey's report was to examine the original names that many of the streets would have been known by and would illustrate much of the town's local history.

He then follows with the results of his study of the contemporary names and their previous historical names, many with an explanation.

The research that formed the report on "street nomenclature" was resolved unanimously to be entered on the minutes of the council with their best thanks. This research still forms the basis for our knowledge of the historic street names and it forms the core of Alderman Blaxill's "Street Names of Colchester". This small book has long formed the only history of the street names.

An examination of Council records has revealed a Report of the Parliamentary Committee on 11th Oct 1892 to adopt various abbreviations, additions and substitutions of street names.

This changed a number of names to the familiar today.

For example: Park Lane becomes Port Lane

Osman Road becomes Three Crowns Road

Water Lane becomes Sheepen Lane

Pelham Road becomes Papillon Road

Nunn's Cut Road omits "Cut"

Northgate Street adds “formerly Dutch Lane “
Abbygate Street adds “formerly Lodder Lane “

Clearly the Roads and Drainage Committee were now of the Chairman’s view that preservation of the old names would now be desirable.

On the 10th March 1897 the Roads and Drainage Committee reports that “ the Surveyor submits samples of tile letters used for denoting names of streets and is desired to make arrangements for having same fixed in Head Street and High Street as an experiment “.

The bill for payment to Minton Hollins & Co appears in the accounts by April 24th 1897 for £1 13. 3.

The Benham’s Guide to Colchester 1900 shows a photo of No 1 High Street circa 1897 with the new trial signage.



As with all the Colchester tiles, these have been inset to the wall in a rebate to appear flush to the surface. A fine example of this can be seen at King Coel Road where tiles have been removed and re fixed further down.



Clearly this experiment was judged a success as a further purchase was to paid by July 24th for £ 7 19. 4

At the 1905 cost of 10/- per square yard of tiles this would have been a determined step and the records show a history of tile purchasing from Minton Hollins & Co until Sept 25th 1914.

The references to earlier street names are more uncertain.

In 1879 -81 amounts were paid for “painting names and lamps”

During 1882-1883 £ 9 11.11 was paid for street names.

In 1892 the large sum of £31 19. 4 was paid for street names followed by smaller bills in 1893, 1895 and 1896. It is possible that these were the accounts for the iron street names and the most likely foundry was Bennell’s who were doing the majority of the Roads Committee’s work.

The survey has included the two remaining examples of early developer’s street names. One is at Kendall Road and the name is on a stone plaque in the wall and the other is a small iron street name at St James Street of a quite unique pattern.



These would have named the streets in the period before the Council would have adopted them and no doubt enabled prospective purchasers to find the new houses.

The last of the street names patterns are a small group that appear to be a light metal possibly aluminium. These have a black colouring with white lettering today.



These are quite possibly street name plates that were purchased in 1921 or 1928 according to the accounts. There is a payment to Bluemel Bros Ltd of £ 6. 4.11 in 1928 for street name plates and these would no doubt be in the style of car number plates for which they were well known.

What is apparent in the Council records is the imperative placed on them to provide accurate naming but most particularly the numbering of the houses. The numbering programme ran in tandem and was the subject of much correspondence from the Post Office and the Register General of the 1901 Census as houses were regularly incorrect.

The earliest reference in the Council records is on the 18th March 1890 when the Borough Surveyor is authorised to obtain from Mssrs Willing & Co according to the design now elected at a cost of 3/- per dozen . These would be an enamelled plaque and a possible example is shown below at no 4 Beaconsfield



Avenue

The payment records are shown in parallel to the street names payments in the supplementary excel file and do illustrate the significant cost to the Council of this programme .

The large number of the Minton Hollins & Co street name tiles that have survived in Colchester are a testament to the high quality of the manufacturing process and to the wisdom of the Roads Committee in their choice . During a 120 years of change and rebuilding in Colchester many have been lost but some may have survived behind the more recent enameled signage as with the Oxford Road sign with the junction of Lexden Road which is placed directly upon the original. There may be others still in hiding.

Some are damaged or have missing tiles. These can be replaced by Craven Dunnill at the Jackfield factory in Stoke on Trent .

A partial list of the missing:

Sir Isaacs Walk by Sheregate Steps (see header photo)

Sir Isaacs Walk at side of Rebow House

Pelham Lane Crouch Street at corner of Headgate House

Headgate East Bay & Brook Street on the Port Reeves
House Quakers Court and Quakers Alley

North Station Road on side of the Riverside pub.
Middleborough at the corner with North Hill.

Vineyard Street on wall at “Aspects of Beauty “

Sheregate Steps at corner with St John’s Street.

St Leonards Road on Hythe Hill. Serpentine Walk off North
Station Road. Hawkins Road on the side of the “Rising
Sun” chimney.

This list is far from complete and many must have been lost at
the building of Southway.



**Pelham's Lane street sign circa 1955. One of the Lost Signs.
Photo: Nigel Henderson Tate Collection**

