Potters’ health

In addition to the usual urban living conditions of overcrowding, inadequate sanitation and poor diet people living in the Potteries had the constant smoky atmosphere from the coal-fired bottle ovens to lower their resistance to the two main occupational killers

- plumbism – lead poisoning
- silicosis – ‘Potter’s rot’, caused by breathing in dust.

Who was at risk from lead poisoning?

- Dippers and their attendants
- Paintresses, groundlayers and colour dusters.

Lead is absorbed through the skin, by inhalation or by mouth (paintresses licked their brushes). Lead tended to be absorbed into the bones and affected the tendons, resulting in ‘dropped wrist’ and ‘dropped ankle’. Other symptoms included stomach disorders, miscarriages, anaemia, epilepsy and paralysis. Many workers died of lead poisoning.

Susceptibility to lead poisoning varies between individuals. Women and children were at greatest risk.

Who was at risk from silicosis?

Everyone in the clay workshops, because wherever there is clay there is dust - from clay scraps, spills on the floor, and clay on overalls.

Particularly at risk were:

- fettlers – scraping off clay seams
- towers – smoothing flatware using rough fibre (tow)

Dangerous dust was also associated with biscuit firing, affecting

- placers bedding pottery in flint
- drawers emptying the flint out
- women brushing the flint off the pottery
- biscuit scourers rubbing the fired surface

“He would sieve all that flint before it was re-used. Everything was sieved. You couldn’t see up his nostrils. Oh yes, he must have taken some dust. He might wear a scarf or something, and they probably had a fan, but they were never any good really.”
Other hazards included extreme heat and heavy work – who was at risk?

- mouldrunners – taking moulds to the drying rooms
- drawers – emptying hot kilns
- placers – carrying heavy saggars
- wedgers – preparing clay

Legislation

Most of the hazards of the pottery industry have been reduced by better working conditions enforced by Factory and Workshop Acts.

- After 1st August 1898 no person under 14 years of age and after 1st August 1899 no person under 15 could be employed in:
  - Dipping house or dippers drying room - Ware cleaning after the dipper
  - Glost placing - Colour dusting
  - Ground laying - Majolica painting
  - Glaze blowing - Transfer making
  - China scouring

- After 1st January 1899 all workshops had to be ventilated and cleaned at the end of the day, and exhaust fans had to be fitted in departments dealing with:
  - Towing of earthenware - China scouring
  - Ground laying - Colour dusting
  - Glaze blowing - Transfer making

- In 1899 it was decreed that no more than 5% standard solubility of lead would be allowed in glazes. This law was hard to enforce. One worker even went to arbitration saying that as he knew the risks and was prepared to risk death, he should be allowed to work with unfritted lead glaze. However, as a result of these improvements plumbism in workers began to decline. In 1949 the use of all lead glazes which were not low solubility was prohibited. Since 1949 there have been no deaths from lead poisoning.