



For some it may come as a relief to learn that a miniature china slipper filled with flowers no longer fulfils the nation's desires; that the demand for floral ornaments, popular since the mid-18th century, has finally wilted under a more clean-lined, modern aesthetic. Until recently, the specialist skills of fashioning intricate, frilly blooms in china was preserved in flower-making departments at many of Stoke-on-Trent's top ceramics factories. All that is changing, however: in May Royale Stratford announced the end of its flower manufacture, following closures by Royal Doulton and Beswick, while Wedgwood-owned Coalport's production has been greatly reduced.

For the London-based designer Bodo Sperlein the closure of the Royale Stratford flower line poses a problem. Since last year he has been incorporating white Royale Stratford flower-heads into his lighting and tableware designs; in his latest collection, launched at the Milan Furniture Fair in April, a hand-blown glass pendant light is embellished with clusters of white flowers, to stunning effect. Using flowers is a big departure for a designer known for his unfussy aesthetic, but abstracted from their candy-coloured cousins they take on a quiveringly contemporary edge. With orders for his lights rolling in, he has had to move some of his production to the Gladstone Pottery Museum, where a few skilled local makers still produce flowers for the amusement of passing tourists. He

what has happened. Bone china is a British invention and the British should be proud of it,' he declares. 'Working in bone china should be preserved, not forgotten. The technique and detailing involved in a china flower is amazing. I am not talking about those awful painted roses with a plastic stem. I am talking about a beautiful product that has been made by hand and feels like it has been touched. In Stoke there is a significant skill base which needs to be given new exposure.'

At the museum it is clear that Sperlein has a point. Marion Baddeley is about to

**'Bone china is a British invention and the British should be proud of it. It should not be forgotten'**

complete a demonstration of bone-china carnation-making. Teasing the clay into stems and petals with extraordinary speed and dexterity, she gives a short account of life as a flower girl for Royal Doulton. The museum is expecting three school groups today. Between their visits she will make flowers for the gift shop, with just the radio for company. This is a far cry from the 40-plus years she spent on busy Stoke production lines, where in 1958 she earned 1s 3d per dozen flowers, and made at least a flower a minute.

New demand in the shape of Sperlein is encouraging for Baddeley and the two other Gladstone flower-makers, and they are keen to meet the designer's exacting brief. From beneath a display of traditionally painted china trinkets she produces a tray of biscuit-fired flowers for him to inspect: roses, chrysanthemums, peonies and pansies. 'These are just fabulous,' he exclaims, tilting each one to the light. Back at his studio they will become name-card holders for restaurants, be set into wall-light panels or chandeliers. Baddeley is happy, as this will lead to extra work for her and her colleagues. 'If he wants them white he can have them white, though I don't see what is wrong with the coloured ones,' she confides. The flower ladies of Stoke-on-Trent have found themselves an unlikely champion.

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## HARDY PERENNIALS

With the help of a contemporary designer the threatened art of bone-china flower-making lives on in its traditional heartland. By **Daisy Bridgewater**. Photograph by **Rachael Smith**

**Right** the designer Bodo Sperlein and flower-maker Marion Baddeley at the Gladstone Pottery Museum. **Above** Sperlein's Teardrop pendant light, from £800

