

From the Ismay archive. by Alex McErlain

Crowan pottery, Cornwall.

Harry Davis (1910-1986) & May Davis (1914-1995)



Breakfast cup and saucer, c.1960, reduced stoneware, cup h 9.1cm saucer dia. 16.5cm.

Photograph Phil Sayer.

Crowan pottery, owned by Harry & May Davis, was located near Praze-an-Beeble, Cornwall. The pottery was in existence from 1942 until 1962 and produced some of the finest studio tableware ever made in Britain. Renowned for its durability and efficiency in manufacture, the pots provide evidence of the exceptionally high quality that can be achieved through skilled handwork.

This cup and saucer is listed as 'breakfast cup' as distinct from a 'tea cup' or 'coffee cup' which are also included in the pottery's brochure. The design is elegant, beautifully proportioned and cleverly thought out. The upper part of the cup tapers in a gentle curve, designed to hold the shape from distortion during the firing. Cups of this kind are prone to distort at high temperature because of the gravitational effect of the handle. A curved form helps counteract this problem. The deep curve of the cup's base, lifts the form away from the saucer, providing ample space for fingers to grip the handle without disturbing the saucer. I was initially drawn to the pot because of the dramatic tenmoku glaze with its pronounced rust red rim, contrasting dramatically with the intense black. Inside the cup is completely brown as is the well and the back of the saucer. I now think that these colour changes were deliberately manipulated through clever glaze application rather than leaving it to happen naturally. The cup was probably dipped twice into the glaze whilst in an upright position, thus ensuring the evenness of transition from black to rust. Similarly the saucer has been very cleverly glazed to ensure a black inner surface with a rust coloured well. This attention to detail in making and glazing is typical of Crowan pottery.

I used to select this cup and saucer to drink from when visiting Bill Ismay. It is very satisfying to use. I had always wanted one for myself but never came across any for sale, so last summer I decided to try and make one. What a tricky shape it is to master. Getting the size and proportion correct was not too difficult. I knew the glaze would be impossible to replicate so didn't even try. What was most difficult was capturing the spirit of the form. I made a good run of them to try and understand it and in the end achieved a reasonable match but I'm sure Harry would have said 'keep trying'!

In the Ismay archive there is some fascinating Crowan related material including brochure and price lists but perhaps the most intriguing items are two typed letters (archive nos 478 & 479) from May Davis to Ismay, dated November, 1959. In the letters May explains that his order for cups, saucers and plates is delayed because of technical problems with the glaze. *'The tea plates have nearly all of them a small blemish, also they are shinier than the cups were, so I expect that you would prefer us to try again.'* She sends examples with evidence of glaze crawling and asks *'if you feel they will do I would charge them at half price'* She adds *'The breakfast cups will not be ready till just before Christmas, which is when we next fire the kiln.'* What a lovely Christmas present they must have been.

In 1962 Harry and May Davis moved to New Zealand where they established Crewenna Pottery. An excellent website about Crowan is maintained at <http://www.philoliver.com>



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