

Cracking the mysteries of Coade

by Clive Fewins

If you have a piece of Coade stone inside or outside of your house – treasure it. In 50 years of enthusiastic study of traditional English house styles, I have yet to meet a person with any Coade stone item in his or her house. Perhaps this is because of my lack of connections; you will generally only find a piece of Coade stone in grander houses and public buildings.

However broadly true this is, there is still the occasional find in a humbler listed dwelling, particularly if the house dates from the Georgian period. I always speculate that there must be a large number of as yet undiscovered Coade stone pieces in garden settings.

I continue to be amazed not only by many aspects of this extraordinary material, but also that relatively few listed property owners seem to be aware of how fascinating it is. Coade stone is a remarkably hard and weatherproof artificial stone made from 1769 until 1836 in the factory of Mrs Eleanor Coade (1733-1821) and her successors at Lambeth. Using designs by neo-classical architects and sculptors, the factory turned out cast pieces of exceptional durability. They were designed for doorways and porches, gate piers, pediments, keystones, reliefs to set in walls, chimneypieces, church memorials, churchyard table tombs and even fountains. The factory also produced countless statues of nymphs and river gods, garden urns and vases.

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The Gosford Swan: Philip Thomason made three in Coade Stone (see later pages) to replace missing ones at a mansion near Edinburgh (Photo: Karin Thomason)



The Nelson Pediment - a fine Coade Stone memorial set above the main entrance to the King William Courtyard at the Old Royal Naval College, Greenwich (Photo courtesy of Old Royal Naval College, Greenwich)





Philip Thomason at work on a pattern from the gate pier caps at Belmont House (Photo: Karin Thomason)

Fine examples of Coado stone are to be seen at the former Royal Naval Dockyard, Chatham; St George's Chapel, Windsor; The Royal Pavilion, Brighton; Carlton House, London; the Old Royal Naval College, Greenwich and many other prestigious locations. However, there must be large numbers of as yet undiscovered Coado stone pieces in garden settings.

Apart from the fact that it is often extremely hard to tell the difference between Coado stone and genuine stone, there are many fascinating features concerning this remarkable material. Mrs Coado's recipe – the composition of the material – was something of a mystery for many years as it is very difficult to identify the components of any material that has been transformed in a kiln. Ceramics are metamorphic so to some extent you have to deduce the basic mixture from trial and error. However, in 1954 it was shown that the stone was made by heating china clays mixed with finely ground quartz, flint and glass.

More recently experts from the University of London have used electron microscopy to identify the principal ingredients as a ball clay matrix – fragments of glass and 'grog' –

previously fired crushed clay, with the addition of a little sand, plus crushed powdered flint. It is all then fired in a kiln, which is the most difficult bit for those that try to replicate Coado stone, as the material shrinks when fired.

If you are as fascinated by the material as I have become, the next time you are in central London take a stroll across Westminster Bridge and look at the enormous Coado stone lion on its plinth at the south side. Ironically, this is only a brisk walk away from the site of Mrs Coado's 'Artificial Stone Manufactory' in Lambeth. The lion was cast in 1836 and placed here in 1966. It is an excellent testament to the longevity of Coado stone as it barely has a blemish despite decades of exposure to the corrosive atmosphere of the capital throughout the 19th and first half of the 20th

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This monument in the church of All Saints, Coleshill Oxfordshire is an elaborate confection of three tall ogee arches of Coado stone enclosing an inscription to Mark Stuart Pleydell. It is dated 1802



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centuries, caused by the heavy use of coal. The 12ft high beast is the companion of the Coade stone lion painted gold on a high plinth at Twickenham Stadium which was presented to the RFU in 1972 to celebrate its centenary. Both lions originally adorned the frontage of the old Lion Brewery on the Lambeth bank of the Thames, which was demolished in 1948 to make way for the construction of the Royal Festival Hall.

One of the most interesting properties to visit in connection with Coade stone is the Grade II* Belmont House in Lyme Regis, Dorset. It was once the seaside villa of Mrs Coade, who loved to escape from the capital to her native West Country.

In 1784 Mrs Coade's uncle, gave her the house, which it is believed he had either built or reconstructed. Eleanor Coade spared no expense in decorating the facade of the house with her trademark features in rusticated stone – chunky blocks of weathered stone separated from each other by deep joints – marching around the ground floor windows with classical regularity. Unlike normal stone, they were unlikely to become weather-beaten as they were made in moulded ceramic Coade stone. The same went for Belmont's quoins and urns, string course and frieze – all made as part of Mrs Coade's unashamed self-advertisement.

More recently, Belmont was home to John Fowles, world-famous author of *The Magus* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, who died in 2005. It recently underwent a two year £1.8m restoration and refurbishment by its owners, the Landmark Trust* and is now available as a holiday rental.

There is a fascinating small display in the information room, which is in the stable, and is open to the public on Friday afternoons between April and October. 'The house is really interesting because she (Mrs Coade) made it a three dimensional catalogue of her wares,' said Caroline Stanford, Historian at The Landmark Trust.

Belmont needed a great deal of work on the Coade stone on the very exposed west face during the restoration project. 'Nevertheless, the Coade stone had worn remarkably well over 250 years,' said Caroline. 'Most of it just needed cleaning.'

Where repairs were required they were carried out by sculptor and stone specialist Philip Thomason. His main task was to make new sections for the parts most badly weathered, especially the urns that adorn the roof. He also made two new caps for the gate pillars, taking moulds from an original donated to Lyme Regis museum by John Fowles.

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Left: The South Bank Lion. This huge beast was cast in Coade Stone in several parts. It has stood in its present position guarding Westminster Bridge, London, since 1966

Top Right: Lord Hill's Column, outside the Shirehall, Shrewsbury. The statue pictured here is in Coade stone and commemorates Rowland Hill, 1st Viscount Hill (1772-1842), who served under the Duke of Wellington at Waterloo and became Commander-in-chief of the British Army (Photo: courtesy of Friends of Lord Hill's Column)



Above & left: Belmont House, Lyme Regis, following its recent two year programme of restoration

A close-in shot of some of the Coade Stone rustication on the front of Belmont House (Photos: courtesy The Landmark Trust)

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This is a copy of a Coado stone fountain made by Philip Thomason for the owner of a private house in Ireland. It was funded by the sale of the original. This happens quite often, according to Philip (Photo: Karin Thomason)



This fine Coado Stone George III coat of arms above the gateway of the former Royal Naval Dockyard at Chatham was created in 1811. It was restored in 1994 (Photo: Roger Rosewell)

'People still find it hard to understand the manufacturing process of Coado stone,' said Philip. 'There are basically three processes: casting in the clay mix, embellishing with the finer details, then firing. All three processes are crucial. I make no secret of the fact that I use all the materials that scientists have found in the original Coado stone mix, but there are one or two other materials that I add that I don't talk about. I like to retain a bit of mystery!'

So, where can you buy a piece of Coado stone? They occasionally come up in sales run by leading specialists Summers Place Auctions, based in Billingshurst, West Sussex.

'Although we are specialists in garden statuary and sculpture we see less and less Coado stone, mainly because pieces are nowadays quite rightly respected for what they are and are usually listed alongside the properties they belong to,' said spokesman, James Rylands. 'Nevertheless, sometimes they come our way as a result of the owners having copies made and selling the originals. Price-wise there is little available in Coado stone under £2 - £3,000. This figure might buy a garden urn, or something of that sort. The last major Coado stone items we sold were two fine urns that fetched £55,000 for the pair.'



Of what interest is all of this to the average owner of a listed property? Well, I can only really finish where I began – the fascination factor. Anyone with a passion for listed houses is likely to be interested in the remarkable lady who, in a male-dominated world, showed amazing business acumen in producing this extraordinary material that has lasted so well. The story of Eleanor Coado and her many remaining pieces of 'sculpture' add to the immense richness of our historic and listed building stock in this country.

Finally, there is the 'find it' factor. There must still be many pieces of 'stone' garden ornaments around that are in fact Coado stone, but have not been identified as such.

So, I come back to my original point. I have yet to meet a listed property owner with

a house adorned inside or outside with a piece of Coado stone. If you do have a Coado stone object in your possession, apart from treasuring it, please get in touch with me via the Listed Property Owners Club. I'd love to hear from you! 🌟

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. To book Belmont or any other property owned by The Landmark Trust, visit the trust's website: www.landmarktrust.org.uk

Philip Thomason, maker and restorer of terracotta sculpture can be contacted at: www.thomasoncudworth.com

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