Enamelled Slate.

GEE & COMPANY, LIMITED, GLOUCESTER.

**Slate and Marble Manufacturers.**

It may not be generally known even to those most familiar with Gloucester's industrial life that in this city originated the art of enamelling slate, to give it the appearance of marble or slate itself. The idea of substituting slate for marble in many of the uses for which the latter had been considered the only suitable material has resulted in a very rich local industry. The employment to a considerable number of hands, and adding not a little to the city's prestige as a manufacturing centre. The work of enamelling is performed by local artists, although no outside concern has as yet been able to turn out work of the high quality which has always been the mark of workmen elsewhere in need of skilled and experienced hands they advertise for them in our local papers.

The oldest existing firm of slate enamellers in Gloucester, and one of the leading in the kingdom, is that of Gee and Company, Limited, to whose successful history it is a pleasure to refer. The Company were established in 1869, beginning operations on a small scale, and occupying premises which would be wholly inadequate to the present volume of business. In 1888 the present premises were purchased, and several modern buildings erected, the Company installing the machinery and moving into the new quarters the following year.

The business was started in one of the best manufacturing sites in the city, occupying an ample piece of ground at the junction of the Bristol and the Wagon Works, within easy access to the canal and railway siding, and on two sides facing the electric tram lines. The adaptation of the changes that industry has wrought in Gloucester even in the memory of the living, it may be stated that but a generation ago the premises of Gee and Company, Limited, were part of a purely residential district, the Company's present offices having been for many years the home of one of our most widely known and highly respected magistrates.

Gee and Company, Limited, occupy a triangular space aggregating nearly 3,000 square feet which has been entirely adapted for the purpose to which it is put, are modern and substantial, and are particularly well-lighted and ventilated. The large show-room is particularly noteworthy by reason of its admirable lighting and heating arrangements, and is undoubtedly one of the finest in the city.

The various apartments are heated throughout with hot water pipes, and are provided with cranes and chutes for conveniently receiving and shipping the finished slate and the finished product. The excellent arrangement of the buildings not only facilitates production and minimizes labour in every stage of the work, but also adds to the comfort, and consequent efficiency, of the operatives.

The mechanical equipment is in keeping with the standard of workmanship in which the house is built. It comprises a number of heavy machines for sawing, planing, drilling, and sanding the slabs, the machinery being driven by steam. The equipment includes large ovens and enamelling rooms, and, in fact, every appliance which could add to the uniformly high quality of the product or lessen its cost.

The raw material, which is obtained from the Welsh quarries, although a considerable quantity required for special purposes is imported from abroad. For the benefit of those whose knowledge of enamelled slate is limited to the finished product, and who imagine that its manufacture is an easy matter, it should be stated that no impression could be more erroneous. In the course of transformation from rough slabs or blocks to artistically-designed and very highly-finished chimney-pieces, or other articles of use or ornament, the slate is operated upon by a number of workmen, and undergoes many processes, some of the latter requiring peculiar technical skill.

To the ordinary visitor to Gee and Company's works probably one of the most interesting sights is the process of colouring the slate to give it the appearance of marble, granite, or wood, or it is designed to imitate. In some cases, particularly in the cheaper grades, the manner of colouring it is ingeniously simple. The desired colours are floated on water, or air, and are intermingled in such a way as to produce the desired combination of colours. The slab of slate, the surface of which has already been prepared, is then gently placed on the surface of the water, and when removed it is found that the colours have adhered to it, forming a delicate tracery without the touch of the brush.

In most cases, however, (particularly when it is desired to exactly imitate the colouring of grain of wood or marble,) the colours must be applied with special tools, the work requiring great skill and nicety. The richest marbles and woods are so exactly imitated that even the closest inspection would fail to show the real character of the work it was not known. Not only are the finished pieces the exact counterpart of marble or wood in the tracing, but they are given the effect of the peculiar translucence of the former, and the soft, rich texture of the latter. As has been intimated, the Company's product has always been distinguished by its peculiar excellence. They have the credit of having gained the greatest number of medals and awards that has ever been given to any one manufacturer or firm in the trade. Their designs, which are constantly being added to, meet the requirements of changing styles and tastes, range from the simplest to the most ornate and expensive, and may be literally numbered by the hundred.

The introduction of enamelled slate chimney-pieces has done not a little to add to the beauty of many houses by giving them the appearance of having been expensively furnished, yet without entailing great cost. Messrs. Gee and Company, Limited, manufacture complete, and quite attractive, chimney-pieces at a small cost, these being principally designed for cottages. On the other hand, many of the more elaborate chimney-pieces are costly, though this is never anything like so great as would be required to obtain the same effect from the actual marble or wood.

It should be added here that it is a mistake to suppose because enamelled slate is an imitation, it is therefore of no more value than most imitations. This is one of the few instances in which the copy is nearly as good, and from many points of view quite as good, as the real thing. Before the general introduction of enamelled slate, chimney-pieces were usually made of marble or stone, which is far from ornamental if left plain, and, if carved, becomes so expensive as to be beyond the reach of the man of ordinary means. Moreover, marble is far from perfection; it is easily discoloured by smoke, and, owing to its chemically porous nature, is peculiarly susceptible to atmospheric influences, dingy yellow spots frequently appearing upon it, particularly on the Parian and other white marbles. Enamelled slate is free from these disadvantages. If properly executed, the enamel is nearly as hard and durable as anadum; neither dampness nor dryness affects it: and its brilliant surface may be maintained by ordinary polishing.

For many years Messrs. Gee and Company have done a very extensive business in other branches of stone work, having been particularly successful in their marble entablatures, facias, and other kinds of ecclesiastical and mural decorations. They have also made a special feature of designing and manufacturing baths, lavatories, cisterns, larder shelving, and general sanitary appliances, and, in fact, nearly all the articles fashioned from marble or slate. It is interesting to know that their work has gained a national recognition, and that there are but few important places in the kingdom that have not made some demand upon this Gloucester manufactory. Frequent shipments have also been made to the Colonies and elsewhere. It is but just to add that the members of the Firm are now, as they have always been, held in high regard for their personal as well as business traits. Visitors to the City will find the pleasure of their stay greatly enhanced by an inspection of the works, where they will receive every courtesy and attention.

View of Messrs. Gee & Co.'s extensive premises from Bristol Road, Gloucester.