

# ILLUMINATING

# ORIGIN

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SPRING 2020



HOW RESCUING  
A BONE CHINA  
FACTORY BECAME  
THE SIGNATURE  
MATERIAL FOR  
THIS BRITISH  
LIGHTING  
MANUFACTURER.

BY STEF SCHWALB

Inside Original BTC's factory

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Interior designers, hospitality specifiers, and consumers are already familiar with U.K.-based Original BTC's lighting designs from its company showrooms in London, New York, and Paris or from its presence in recent years at renowned trade shows such as ICFF® and BDNY in New York, Maison & Objet in Paris, Euroluce in Milan, and Light+Building in Frankfurt. However, the manufacturer's humble beginnings in 1990 might be less well-known.

In 2002, after Founder & Managing Director Peter Bowles rescued a Stoke-on-Trent bone china factory from closure, the warm tones and opaque appearance of bone china became the company's signature. Today, it's a material that remains in use extensively to produce new and diverse lighting collections. Bowles and his son, Charlie, utilize highly skilled, labor-intensive processes to create multi-faceted forms that explore, maximize, and celebrate bone china's translucency, luminosity, and versatility. Hand slip-cast at the factory, the Original BTC team's innovative production techniques – coupled with a commitment to local manufacturing – have resulted in an ever-expanding collection of British design classics. We reached out to Bowles for some insights on what his thought process is for using the material for lighting fixtures, industry trends, and more.

"When we originally started using bone china for lighting shades, we had a supplier that manufactured for us. After a few years of working together, we started to become frustrated with the poor service and quality," explains Bowles. "Upon confronting them, the supplier divulged that they were dealing with a slew of production issues and didn't have the financial resources to solve them. I have always loved manufacturing, and without any prior thought or planning, I suggested that I take the company over. Within the hour, they had agreed."

After Original BTC acquired the factory, Bowles kept the existing staff on and invested capital to solve all of the production issues.

The beginning was expensive, but after a few months, things started improving. "Quality, reliability, output, and profitability all went up," he notes. "Looking back, it sounds like madness, but I'm so glad I just went for it. We saved jobs and preserved skills that would have been lost, creating a future with young trainees. Bone china's translucency allows for a soft, ambient glow, making it ideal for lighting. It has since become our

signature material."

The range of Original BTC fixtures runs the gamut and showcases diverse originality that's quite impressive. The dome-shaped Hector is a prime example. It was one of Bowles' first lighting designs produced in bone china and also remains one of the company's most beloved. "I wanted to create an unprocessed light that customers felt at home with while also aiming for longevity, which is very important to me," he says. "Hector is a blend of ceramic and satin chrome, offset by the natural cotton braided cable. It features a mix of blended materials and gives off a beautiful light."

Naturally, the inspiration behind this design, as well as others – and the creative process – comes from a number of sources influencing Bowles and his team; but mostly, it stems from what appeals to the senses. "We are inspired by quality, raw materials, tried-and-true processes, and good solid British design. We love producing lights that we like and think other people will like, both today and for many years to come," he reveals. "Inspiration can come from anywhere, from childhood toys to detailing spotted in an old factory. We seek to infuse our lighting designs with details that make them a pleasure to touch and look at."

Because hospitality and workplace industries are taking design to new heights to make their spaces more residential in feel, Original BTC is in the market at the ideal time. However, that's not the only trend the team has seen in the lighting since the company's inception. "Ever since we first exhibited our lighting, people have always said we have just what people are looking for. They fortunately still say the same almost 30 years later. We were the first company in the lighting industry to capture the appeal of industrial styling, and today this trend still prevails in homes, hotels, and workplaces everywhere," notes Bowles. "We also introduced cotton braiding over normal electrical wire and ceiling roses that match the detailing of the lights themselves – both major trends in lighting as well. Bone china shades and copper finishes are two more examples of prevailing trends in lighting." Bowles adds that homeowners of all different backgrounds are becoming more and more interested in creating dwelling spaces that reflect their unique personalities and tastes. People want items around them that are visually appealing and pleasantly tactile. Because of this, he says there is a decreasing emphasis on mass



A behind-the-scenes look at the production stages in the factory.



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There is an emphasis on hand-work instead of automated production.



“I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN MOTIVATED BY A LOVE OF MANUFACTURING AND MY BELIEF IN ENGLISH- AND AMERICAN-MADE GOODS.”

—Peter Bowles

production, rough edges, and poor finish, and a heightening desire for quality in all areas.

Original BTC's Hector wall and table lights can be seen in the ROOST Apartment Hotels in Philadelphia and The Drifter Hotel in New Orleans, while a striking collection of the Hatton pendants can be found in the lobby of Werqwise, a co-working space in San Francisco. The Shipyard pendants were also recently included over the kitchen island in the Hamptons vacation home of American entrepreneur Hannah Bronfman and New York City DJ and Theophilus London manager Brendan Fallis. The company has a showroom in Manhattan and is available through retailers such as Rejuvenation Hardware, Anthropologie, Design Within Reach, and Guide Boat. Additionally, it is available across the country through several regional retailers including Lightopia (Los Angeles/Manhattan Beach, Costa Mesa); Illuminations (Washington, D.C.); Switch Modern (Atlanta); Lightology (Chicago); Chimera (Boston); Rypen Showroom (Minneapolis); Palette and Parlor (Chapel Hill, N.C.); Voltage Furniture (Cincinnati); Alexander Marchant (Austin); and Earth Elements (Jackson, WY.) – to name a few.

The Original BTC's portfolio is comprised of several design brands, including Davey Lighting, Bowles & Bowles, Beadlight, English Antique Glass, and Branksome China, as Bowles has a history of rescuing and repurposing companies on the verge of closing down. It's a strategy that has brought great success to the company. "I have always been motivated by a love of manufacturing and my belief in English- and American-made goods. We should always strive to preserve our heritage and skills," he concludes. "Keeping these traditions alive isn't easy, but it's worth it." [CL](#)

# THE MARKET HAS SPOKEN



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