

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE POTS, POTTERS AND POTTERIES, c.1200–1910

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An attempt is made to list Buckinghamshire's pottery production sites and potters from the thirteenth century until c.1910 and to give a short description of their products where known. The information is derived from confirmed kiln sites, from surface finds of 'waster' material which indicate production, and from a range of documentary sources including field names. There remains considerable scope for further local research; a number of suspected production sites have not yet been located on the ground and further local study would certainly identify other potters and link named potters to specific locations.

Several features have emerged from the study. Firstly, a number of production sites are known to have been active in recent centuries, but for which there is no earlier record. It is suspected that some of these may have had earlier undocumented activity. Secondly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, many pottery centres were located on agriculturally marginal land. Thirdly, several of the pottery families followed their trade over generations and this is likely to have been the case long before documentation becomes available. Finally, the number of 'pot hawkers' recorded, particularly in the mid-nineteenth century, is surprising as it almost equals the number of working potters; their role in distributing the wares of country potteries may have been underestimated in the past.

INTRODUCTION

Until shortly before the Roman conquest all pottery used in Buckinghamshire was handmade, having been formed without benefit of the momentum of a potter's wheel ('throwing'). During the Roman period in Buckinghamshire, as elsewhere in England, wheel-thrown pottery became common, but in the immediate post-Roman period the technique fell out of use only to reappear during the eighth century in some areas of England, notably East Anglia. In Buckinghamshire, throwing does not seem to have been utilised again until the thirteenth century, although handmade vessels may well have been rotated while being made on a support such as a pre-fired dish, a process which is still common elsewhere in the world, for example India. For a useful summary of pottery development in the adjacent county of Oxfordshire see Mellor (2010) and in Britain as a whole McCarthy & Brooks (1988).

Hand-made pots which are generally fired at a relatively low temperature in bonfire-type kilns often have a fairly open fabric with added inclusions that can help in minimising thermal shock and fracture of a vessel. If such sherds are subse-

quently exposed, for example by being ploughed up, weathering of their relatively soft and open fabric may leave little trace of them. In contrast, wheel-thrown pots which commonly have fairly dense fabric, when reduced to sherds through breakage, are generally able to survive weathering better, and surface finds of sherds of such denser fabric can be readily identified. In addition, wheel-thrown pots are almost invariably fired in re-usable purpose-built kilns. The capital investment in constructing them means that these production sites can have a reasonably long life: this in turn results in there being a considerable number of broken sherds lying around indicating a kiln's presence below ground.

The shift from the production of hand-made vessels which could be readily produced on a domestic scale, to the production of wheel-thrown pots, seems also to have led to the development of greater craft specialisation. Recognition of this in the medieval period can occasionally be seen in personal names such as 'Sampson le Potter' who was working at Brill in the early thirteenth century.

Overall therefore, production sites of the medieval (or Roman) periods are easier to identify on the ground than those of prehistoric or Saxon date. However, the discovery of plentiful sherds