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AN EARLY SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY PIT GROUP FROM BENE'T STREET, CAMBRIDGE¹

MICHAEL R. MCCARTHY

IN 1968 workmen employed in rebuilding underneath Barclays Bank, Bene't Street, Cambridge, discovered a large quantity of pottery. Miss M. D. Cra'ster, of the University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology,² visited the site, where the workmen told her that all the pottery had come from one place in the ground and had been in a sticky, black soil. It seemed likely that the pottery had come from a pit although there was little to confirm this view.

The possibility that the material had come from a pit as well as a considerable measure of internal consistency in the pottery itself and an apparent lack of contamination by material derived from elsewhere, has led to the treatment of the pottery as a group.³ Furthermore, the size of the group (there are sherds representing over 140 vessels) and the distribution of vessel types have led to the view that deposition took place over a relatively short period of time.

The vessels represented can be divided into the following classes and the numbers are the minimum for each. (In addition there are a number of sherds of indeterminate form.)

1 saucer	8 serving dishes
17 platters	12 drinking mugs
22 porringers	1 sweetmeat bowl
4 pipkins	1 small vase
7 jars	2 lids
2 chamber pots	5 stoneware jugs
8 storage jars	2 chafing dishes
8 pans	1 costrel
1 colander	1 albarello

The interest of the assemblage lies partly in its size, far exceeding that published from Cambridge hitherto,⁴ and partly in the variety of classes of vessel represented.

¹ This paper formed part of an undergraduate thesis prepared for the Department of Archaeology, University College, Cardiff.

² I am grateful to Miss M. D. Cra'ster for drawing my attention to this pottery and for permission to publish it.

³ A number of fragments of fine glass vessels were also found with this group. These are contemporary with the pottery, and will be published in the next volume of *Proc. C.A.S.*

⁴ See P. V. Addyman and M. Biddle, 'Medieval Cambridge, Recent Finds and Excavations', *Proc. C.A.S.* LVIII (1965), 74-137.

With such a range, the neglected but closely related questions of ceramic nomenclature and the functions for which pottery vessels were intended is raised.

Throughout the Middle Ages potters seem to have produced a fairly restricted range of vessels – cooking pots, bowls and jugs principally – and only made the more exotic types such as lobed cups or aquamaniles occasionally. It seems likely that many of the pots were of a multi-purpose nature, although wooden and leather vessels may well have been just as important.

In the post-medieval period, however, economic, social and dietary changes enabled the potter to extend his repertoire, with the result that it is now possible to be a little more definite about the role of pottery in the household. That many pots were made for specific purposes is supported by the increased range of types, as in the present pit group, as well as the evidence contained in a number of documentary sources. The latter include menus and recipes,¹ in which we have detailed information about the layout of tables prepared for meals, the processes involved in cooking and references to various items of culinary equipment. Household inventories² tell us where, in the house, different types of vessels were to be found, as well as indicating the numbers of pottery, brass, pewter, leather and wooden vessels. Dictionaries and word lists³ give direct evidence of the names accorded to vessels, as well as saying something about their uses. Paintings, particularly of seventeenth-century date, give us visual proof of the functions of some of the pots found by archaeologists as well as constituting an important additional means of dating.⁴

The pottery

Only two fabrics were distinguished.

Fabric A. Hard, sandy, off-white to light grey. The filler is not very apparent as most of the vessels in this fabric have a thick glaze on both sides.

Fabric B. Hard, with some sand, brown. The amount of sand varies from pot to pot but there is never sufficient to be sure whether it is a filler or a natural constituent of the clay. The colours vary between brown and brick red but there is a darker core occasionally.

¹ There are a large number of menus and recipes surviving in a variety of places. See for example *Two Fifteenth Century Cookery Books*, ed. T. Austin, Early English Text Soc. xci (1888); *Manners and Meals in Olden Time*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, Early English Text Soc. (1868).

² Many hundreds of household inventories dating from the mid-sixteenth century survive and many are published in the volumes of county record societies. See, for example, F. G. Emmison, 'Jacobean Household Inventories', *Beds. Hist. Rec. Soc.* xx (1938), 50–143.

³ There are a few word lists surviving from the Middle Ages and many more dictionaries from the sixteenth century onwards. See, for example, *Catholicon Anglicum; an English-Latin Wordbook dated 1483*, ed. S. J. H. Herrtage, Early English Text Soc. xxx (1881); *A New Universal Etymological Dictionary*, ed. J. N. Scott (London, 1775), and many others of the seventeenth to twentieth centuries.

⁴ Manuscript illustrations such as the Luttrell Psalter are well known sources of information, as are the paintings of Brueghel and the later Dutch genre painters such as Jan Steen of the seventeenth century.

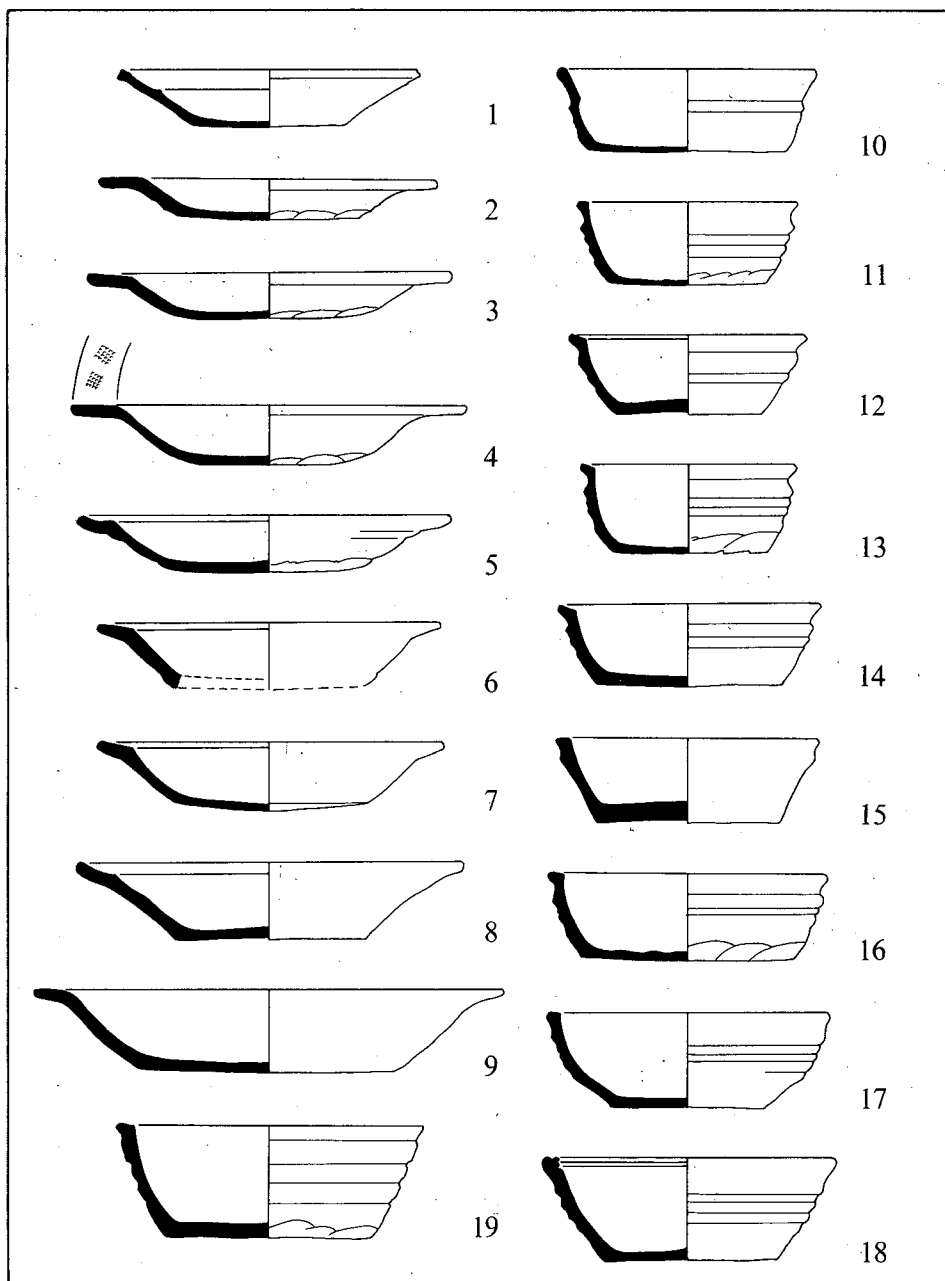


Fig. 1. Bene't Street pit group. Scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

A number of vessels have a thin white slip washed on to the external surface and most of the vessels are glazed. The glazes are all lead based and are either green, yellow or colourless. Generally speaking they show as bright green and yellow against fabric A and as a duller green or brown against fabric B.

Saucer (Fig. 1, 1)

Fabric A. This is the only example of this type of vessel. It has a rich yellow glaze internally and a mottled green outside.

The identification of this vessel as a saucer is open to some doubt but the shape and richness of the glaze suggest that it may be regarded as a table ware. Medieval references¹ imply a function connected with condiments and these are supported by post-medieval dictionary definitions.²

Platters (Fig. 1, 2-9)

All are in Fabric B.

These vessels are glazed internally only, and a number have traces of knife trimming on the basal angle. The only form of decoration is the grid-stamped device which is set at an angle to the rim.

References to platters are frequent in documentary sources of the post-medieval period where they are described as being made out of wood, metal and pottery. Platters made out of the latter material are uncommon as archaeological finds on medieval sites, but they appear fairly commonly in Tudor and later deposits. The alternative to the platter was the wooden trencher, which appears to have been common in households until the nineteenth century.

Porringers (Fig. 1, 10-19)

10, fabric A; 11-19, fabric B.

There is a slight scar halfway down the side of 10 which may indicate the position of a handle. It is thickly glazed in a yellow-green. All the other porringers are coarse by comparison with 10. All have a brown glaze internally with only the occasional splash on the external surface.

The present writer has found no references to porringers in pre-Tudor contexts though they may exist. In documents of the sixteenth and later centuries references are fairly frequent. As the name suggests they were used for eating broth or soup.³

Pipkins (Fig. 2, 2-6, 11, 12)

4, 6, 11 in fabric A; 2, 3, 5, 12 in fabric B.

Numbers 2, 3 and 12 have a considerable amount of soot on the outside, indicating use in a fire-place. All the pipkins in fabric B are glazed a dull brown colour internally.

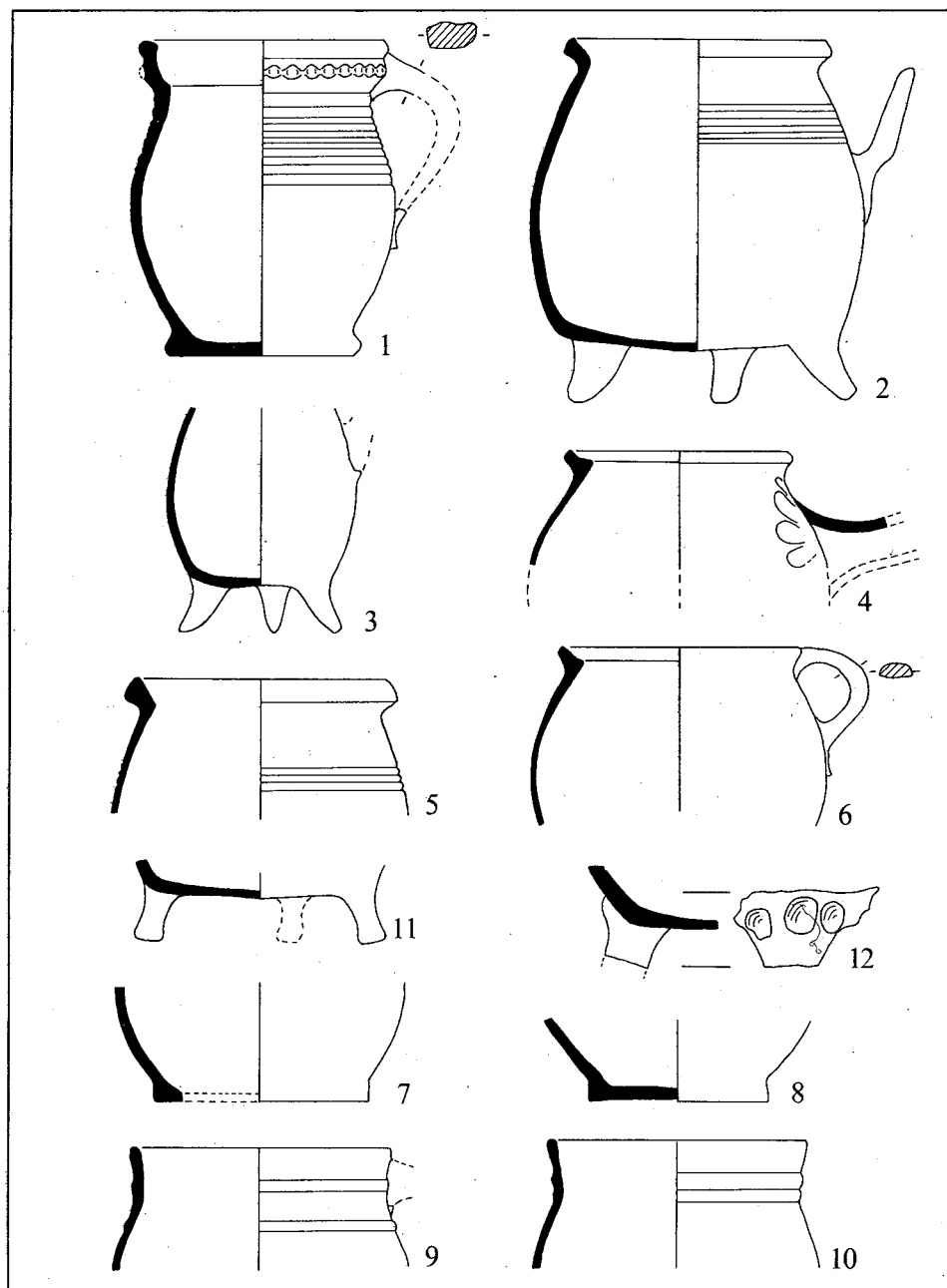
From an examination of menus, recipes, dictionaries and household inventories it would seem that references to pipkins are scarce. Those that do occur seem to be all of post-medieval date and indicate a hollow vessel with three feet and a handle. The hollow handle may have been intended for the insertion of a piece of bone or wood. The solid, everted handle may be a skeuomorph of the 'pippen', which was a wooden tub that had one of its staves prolonged upwards to act as a handle or 'ear'.⁴

¹ See p. 80, n. 1 above for references.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Robert Ainsworth's Dictionary; English and Latin* (London, 1773) and *A New English Dictionary of Historical Principles*, ed. J. A. H. Murray (Oxford, 1888).

⁴ See *N.E.D.* in n. 3 above.

Fig. 2. Bene't Street pit group. Scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

Jars (Fig. 2, 1, 7-10; Fig. 3, 2-4, 6)

Fig. 2, 1, 7-8 in fabric A. Fig. 2, 9, 10; Fig. 3, 2-4, 6 in fabric B.

The vessels in fabric A have a rich green-yellow glaze in contrast to the others, which have a dull green-brown glaze internally and occasional spots externally.

Chamber pots (Fig. 3, 7-8)

Fabric B.

Both vessels, which are almost complete, are devoid of glaze. The outer surface of both has a reddish brown slip. Both vessels have been poorly fired and 8 has been affected by the action of salts.

These vessels could be jugs, but as there is no lip for pouring such an attribution seems a little unlikely.

Storage jars (Fig. 3, 1, 5)

Fabric B.

These are large, coarse vessels, thickly glazed a brown colour internally; some have a thin off-white slip externally with brush-marks clearly visible.

Pans (Fig. 4, 1-6, 8, 9)

Fabric B

One of the characteristic features is the thick internal green-brown glaze. Noteworthy are the two types of rim, one being fairly simple in the tradition of Late Medieval pans (Fig. 4, 5-6), and the other appearing as a heavily moulded form (Fig. 4, 1-4) with a thicker base.

Colander (Fig. 4, 7)

Fabric B.

There are scars, one above the other, on the side that may mark the position of a handle. The sagging base, perforated at close intervals, may originally have had three feet in the manner of the Hungate examples.¹

Pottery colanders are rare finds on excavations of the medieval or post-medieval period but, if they can be equated with the 'strenour' of late medieval recipes and word lists,² they must have been made out of perishable materials, for they appear to have been an essential item of culinary equipment.

Serving dishes (Fig. 5, 1-4)

Fabric B.

These vessels are all glazed internally with only occasional spots on the outer surface. The broken end of 1 has not been restored as it could have had a lip for pouring for which no evidence

¹ See H. E. J. Le Patourel, 'The Medieval Pottery', in K. M. Richardson, 'Excavations at Hungate, York', *Arch. J.* CXVI, 1959, 90-9.

² See p. 80, n. 3 above.

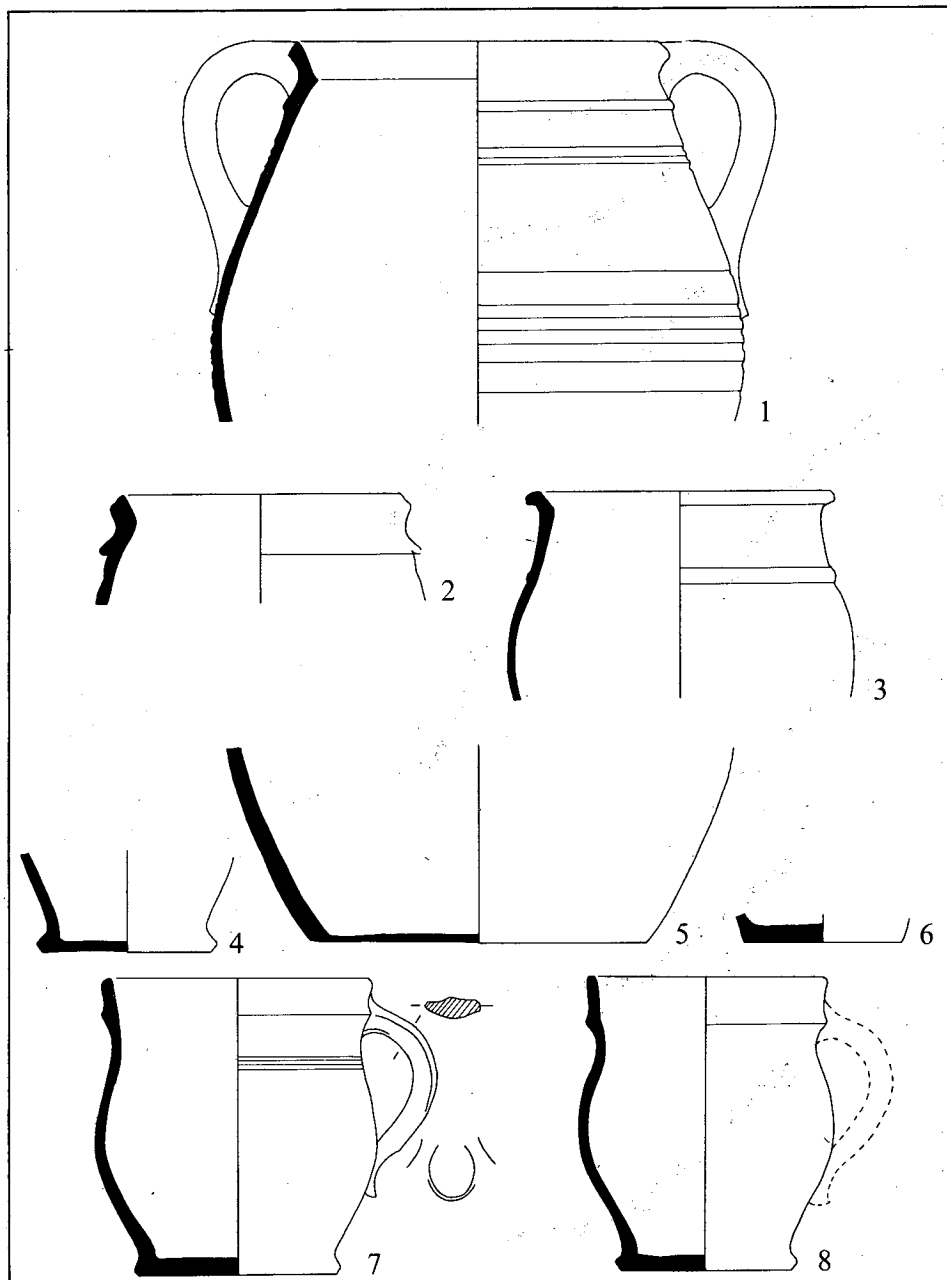


Fig. 3. Bene't Street pit group. Scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

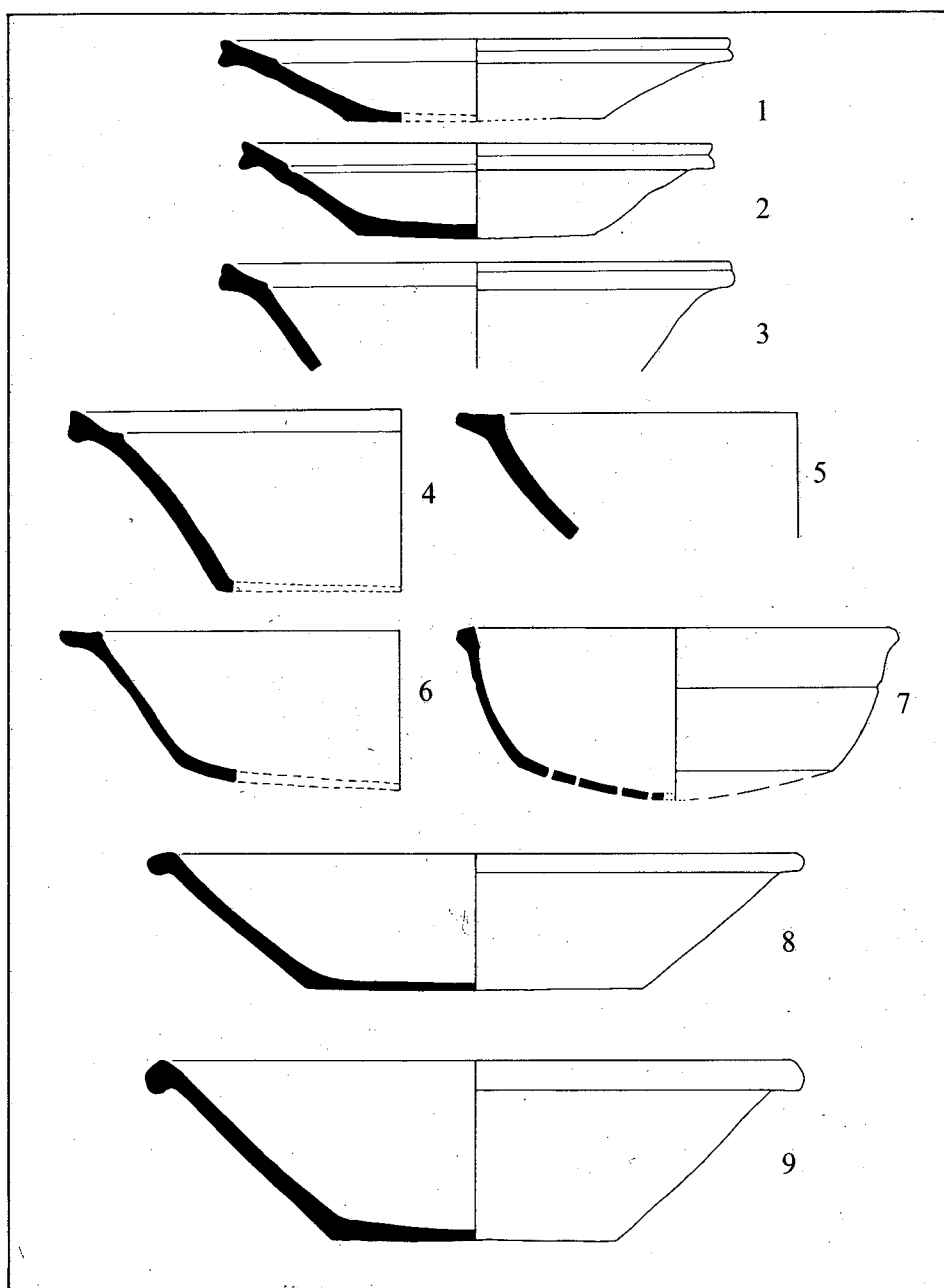


Fig. 4. Bene't Street pit group. Scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

survives. There are no traces of burning on the underside of the base of no. 1 but this does occur on the other examples.

Although archaeological literature describes vessels of this general shape as fish dishes or dishes for joints, they could equally well be used for serving other foodstuffs.

Mugs (Fig. 6, 1-6)

Fabric B.

With the exception of no. 3 which has a greeny glaze, all are thickly covered on both sides with a chocolate-coloured glaze. Noteworthy are the handles which are of single, double and twisted forms.

Sweetmeat bowl (Fig. 6, 7)

Fabric A.

This small vessel, which is over half complete, is completely covered in a matt green glaze. Its attribution as a sweetmeat bowl is slightly suspect, the alternative suggestion being a finger bowl or a side-handled cup, but the problem with the latter possibility is that a second handle would be necessary.

Vase (Fig. 6, 8)

Fabric B (?).

This is the only complete and unbroken vessel in the group and its fabric is consequently difficult to determine. There is a thick, brown glaze internally and half way down the outer surface. Whilst one cannot be sure that this is a vase, its shape and size make it difficult to see what else it may have been.

Lid (Fig. 6, 9)

Fabric B.

There is no glaze on the illustrated sherd and the small fragment which survives from another lid has been badly affected by the action of salts, making it difficult to see whether there may originally have been a glaze.

Stoneware (Fig. 6, 10-14)

10. Bellarmine. Dark grey fabric with a light grey internal glaze on grey. The beard and part of the mouth suggest that this is a part of a mask of Holmes Type III.¹ The arms below are badly smudged in places. There are cheesewire rings on the base.

11. Frechen jug. Light grey fabric with a similarly coloured internal glaze. Externally there is an evenly applied light brown glaze. Cf. 14.

12. Frechen jug. Narrow-necked jug in a light grey fabric and internal glaze. There is a mottled yellow-brown glaze over grey externally. There are cheesewire rings on the base.

13. Bellarmine. Grey fabric with a brown glaze internally and a mottled dark brown over grey glaze externally. There are cheesewire rings on the base.

14. Frechen jug. Grey fabric with a light brown glaze which gets darker on the neck internally. The neck has parts of three medallions of which enough survives to show that they represented a man's bearded profile.

¹ See M. R. Holmes, 'The So-Called Bellarmine Mask on Imported Rhenish Stoneware', *Ant. J.* xxxi (1951), 173-9.

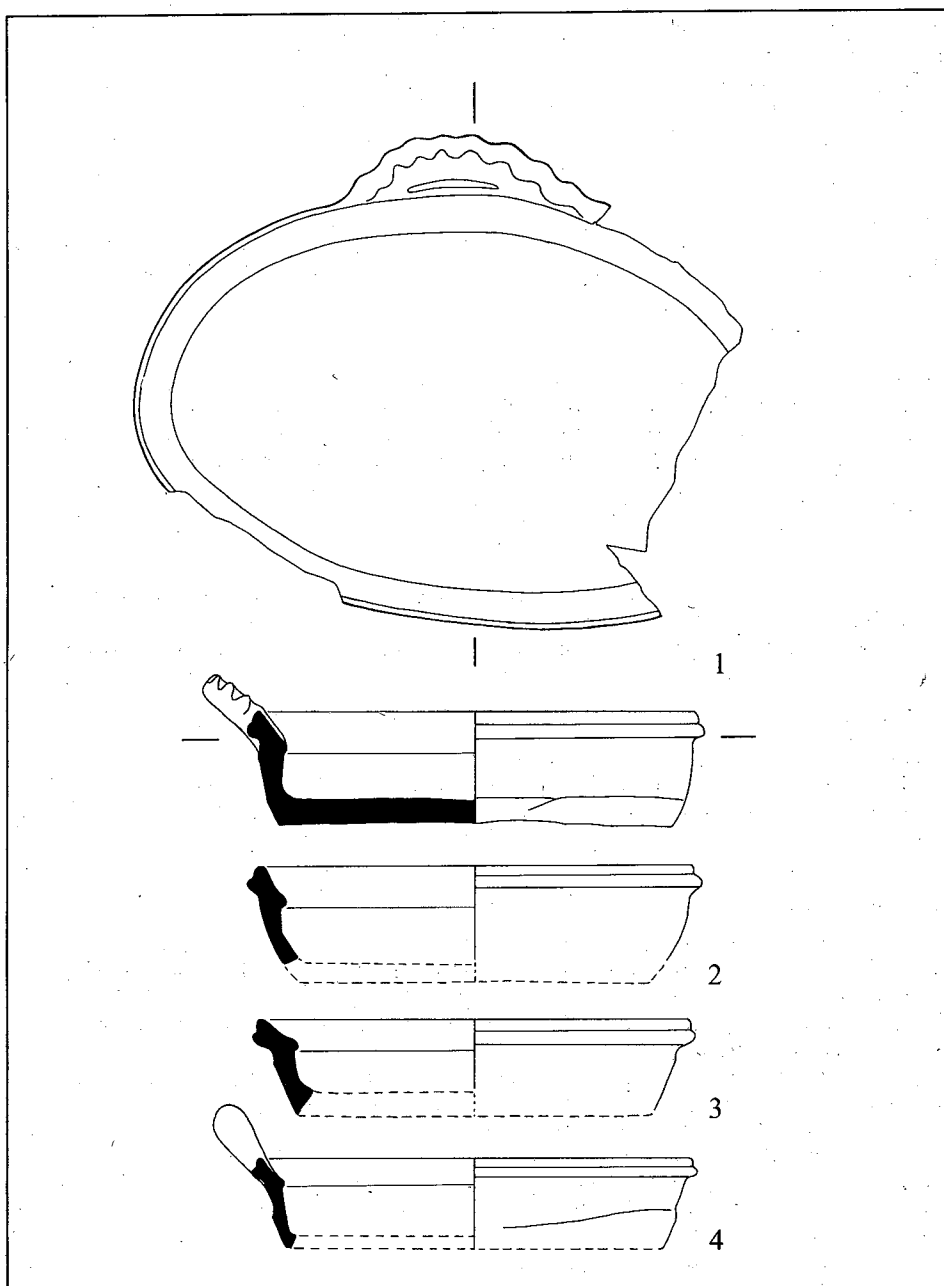


Fig. 5. Bene't Street pit group. Scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

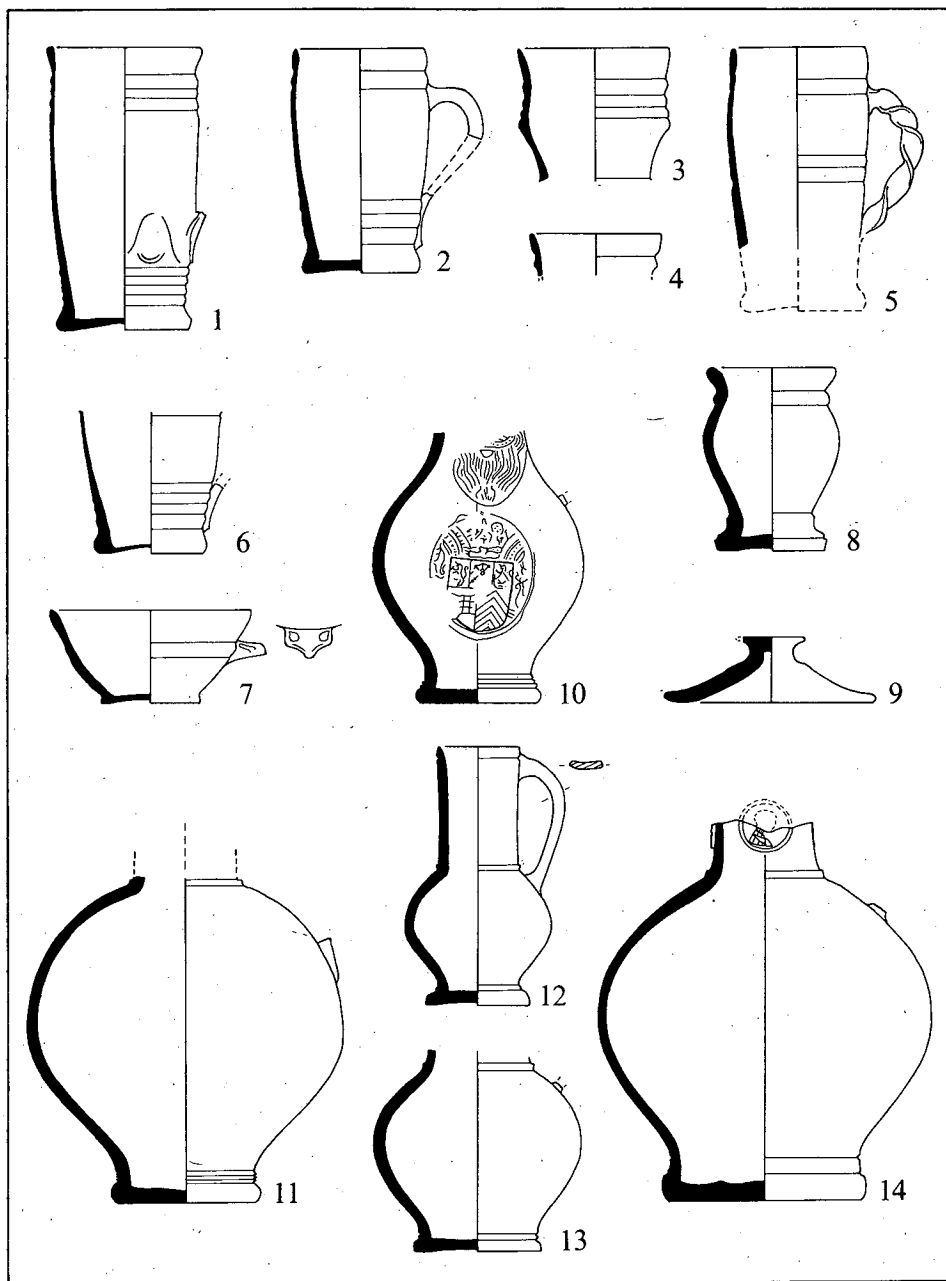


Fig. 6. Bene't Street pit group. Scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

Chafing dish (Fig. 7, 1)

Fabric A.

The bowl is covered with a thick, yellow-green glaze on the inside and parts of the exterior. There is a sherd of another chafing dish, unglazed and of inferior quality though of similar form to that illustrated.

References to chafing dishes occur fairly frequently in documentary sources from the late fifteenth century onwards.¹

Costrel (Fig. 7, 3)

Fabric B (?).

The fabric, which may have originated as fabric B, has been fired very hard almost to a stoneware. The two sherds which survive have been tentatively reconstructed but this cannot be regarded as anything but approximate. The inside has a thin slip and the exterior a thicker brown glaze.

Albarelo (Fig. 7, 2)

This fine, over half-complete vessel has a soft, white fabric with a thin internal lead glaze and a tin glaze on the outside. The outer surface has blue and purple floral motifs painted on. The only unglazed parts of the vessel are the very top of the rim, the squared foot and the underside of the base. The rim and the base are both warped. The glaze and decoration suggest a Dutch origin.

Miscellaneous

There are a number of other sherds in both fabrics forming parts of jugs, pans and cooking pots, most of which are too small to be illustrated. There are, in addition, six sherds in medieval fabrics two of which are similar to Northolt Group K,² and others are comparable to fabrics current in East Anglia in the Middle Ages. The latter are clearly derived and are of no value for dating purposes.

The date

The general range for the group is fixed by the Frechen jugs which are a late Tudor-early Stuart form, but an emphasis in the seventeenth century is more likely because of the presence of the bellarmines, the albarello and the tall drinking mugs. It is probably significant in a group of this size that there are none of the sixteenth-century locally produced hard, sandy, pimply surfaced reduced or oxidized wares amongst the coarse pottery.³ This would tend to confirm a seventeenth-

¹ See p. 80, n. 3. See also J. G. Hurst, 'Post-Medieval French Imports and Copies At Lincoln', *Lincs. Hist. and Arch.* 1 (1966), 54-6; and S. Moorhouse, 'Finds from Basing House, Hampshire', *Post-Med. Arch.* 4 (1971), 65-6.

² See J. G. Hurst, 'The Kitchen Area of Northolt Manor', *Med. Arch.* v (1961), 267-70.

³ In addition to the material published by Addyman and Biddle (see p. 79, n. 3 above) there are an increasing number of late medieval and post-medieval assemblages being published from the area. See in particular P. V. Addyman and J. Marjoram, 'An Eighteenth-Century Mansion, a Fishpond, and Post-Medieval Finds from St Neots, Hunts', *Post-Med. Arch.* vi (1972), 81-9; J. G. Hurst, 'The Pottery', in C. F. Tebbutt, 'St Neots Priory', *Proc. C.A.S.* LIX (1966), 64-7, and S. Moorhouse, 'Excavation of a Moated Site Near Sawtry, Huntingdonshire', *Proc. C.A.S.*

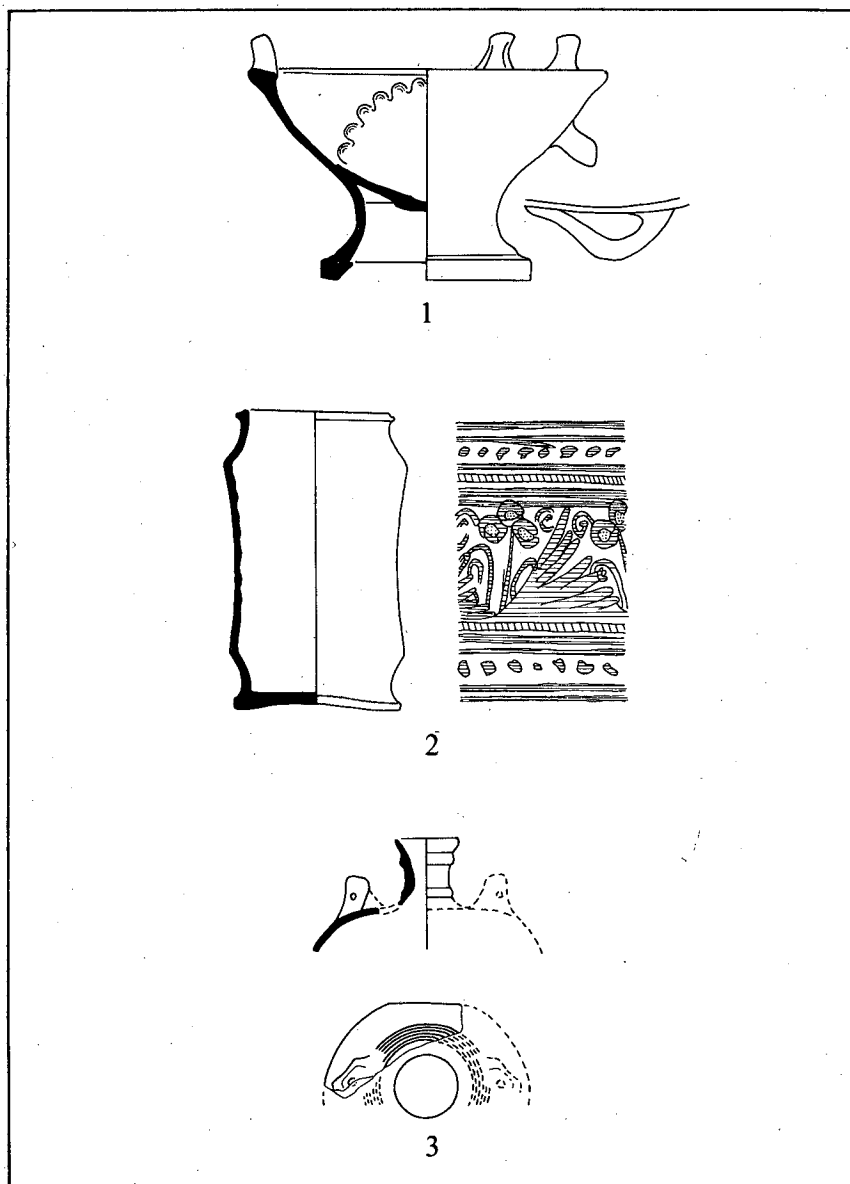





Fig. 7. Bene't Street pit group. Scale $\frac{1}{4}$. Key: , blue; , purple; , yellow.

rather than a sixteenth-century date for the group, but more important is the absence of slip-trailed wares which begin in Essex in the 1630s. A date early in the seventeenth century, perhaps in the 1620s, is suggested for the group, which could be seen as a reasonable cross-section of the ceramic contents of an early Stuart household.

LXIII (1971), 75-86. Further material will be published from Haddenham, Cambs. The dating of the Sawtry material is entirely dependent upon finds from elsewhere and is mainly early sixteenth century. Haddenham, Cambs. produced a number of small groups of pottery of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century date and these included slipwares and imports, showing that the former, in particular, were reaching the Cambridge area before the Civil War. H. E. J. Le Patourel and M. R. McCarthy, 'Excavations at Hinton Hall, Haddenham, Cambs', *C.A.S.* forthcoming. See also S. Moorhouse, 'Late Medieval Pottery in the Eastern Midlands', *Proc. C.A.S.*, present volume, pp. 46-59. I am grateful to J. G. Hurst for his comments on the albarello.

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