

Sparrow-pie, anyone?

Don Cooper

In the years since Roy Stephenson's seminal article¹, the sherds of more than 60 additional ceramic bird nesting pots have been found in London, which are, with one exception, all of the same type. No doubt, his promulgation of this form has greatly contributed to the increased total.

The distribution of the "find" sites (see Table 1) is probably not very revealing as it owes more to where excavations took place rather than where birdpots might be found. However, it is remarkable that so many of the sites are associated with great post-dissolution mansions and houses of wealthy occupants in London. Another remarkable fact is that, in a country-wide survey, there were *no* birdpots reported outside Kent, Essex, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Cambridgeshire and in those five counties, a total of only nine physical remains of vessels are known.

The form illustrated in Fig. 1 is the main form found in London. It is a wheel-thrown bottle-shaped vessel in a redware fabric (PMR). Dr Michael Hughes (a research scientist in ceramics) analysed 31 sherds from different vessels and from 16 different sites, using ICP-AES (inductively-coupled plasma atomic emission spectrometry) and reported that all the sherds tested came from vessels made of clay that came

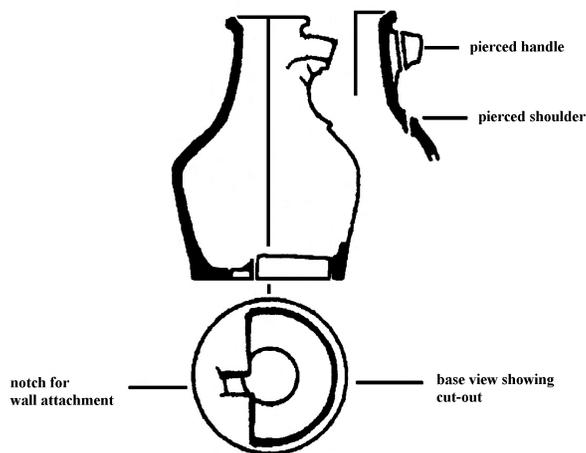


Fig. 1: birdpot from Medieval Pottery Research Group (1998) 1.2 Section 10.

from different parts of the Home Counties, and that none of the vessels were imports². His analysis also indicates that the vessels were produced at up to seven different production centres.

A characteristic of the form that distinguishes it from other redware jugs or bottles is a nib or "handle" half way down the neck with a hole in it and a corresponding hole in the shoulder of the vessel (Fig. 2). This is so that a piece of wood or twig can be inserted to make a perch for the birds.

Another characteristic is the cut-out in the base (Fig. 3). The "keyhole" cut-out at the top is so that the pot can be hung from the walls or eaves of a house by a nail or hook. The larger hole is known as a "robbery hole" and is so that human hands can reach in and take the contents. In terms of size, of the pots that could be measured, the height was between 190 and 200mm, the diameter of the base was between 110 and 120mm and the inner diameter of the neck was between 40 and 50mm. The body was slightly bulbous and the nib was variable in length between 30 and 50mm. The variations do not constitute a different type but are rather caused by the vagaries of the potters.

On the continent, especially Holland, these ceramic bird-nesting pots (although different types to the London variety) are known as starling pots after the species of bird encouraged to nest in them.³ However, in London, all the literary references point to their use being for sparrows (*Passer domesticus*). An early reference notes a payment in March 1527 for "for v sparrow pottys for the garden iijd." and later "to William Snethe...for sparrowe pottes iijd."⁴ Then there is a line from a poem to his mistress by Thomas Randolph, describing her as "with breasts like pots to nest young sparrows in".⁵ Thomas Randolph was living in London in 1632. Literary references continue right up to the mid-19th century, including the following quote: "in the vicinity of London, ... pots of unglazed ware... are fixed upon the walls of houses ... and sparrows ... very soon take possession of every pot thus provided for them"⁶



Fig. 2: neck of birdpot (photo: Don Cooper)



Fig. 3: base of birdpot (photo: Don Cooper)

Another describes sparrow pots as “a neat cottage ornament”⁷ and finally, one from a man who says that “his wife saw sparrow pots on the walls of the house of a celebrated physician in London”.⁸

So what did Londoners want sparrow pots for? Was it because they liked to have sparrows around? It would appear not! After all, a pot with no “robbery” hole would be much more comfortable for the birds, it wouldn’t let in water, there would be less draughts, and predators, such as rats, would have less chance of getting in. No, the “robbery” hole was there so that the eggs or chicks could be taken. Why? Over the years, many suggestions have been put forward; however, the three most frequent and logical are as follows:

1. That the young sparrows were bred so that they could be fed to birds used in hawking, particularly sparrowhawks, as these birds have to be fed a diet of live meat.⁹ The sport of hawking was the province of the privileged and to that extent may well account for some of the sparrowpots found in London. However, hawking is essentially a rural sport and it is surprising that, despite some literary references, there is little evidence of sparrowpots from the countryside or great country houses.

2. In 1532 an Act was passed¹⁰ that *inter alia* ordered the destruction of choughs, crows and rooks because of the fear that they were ruining crops. This act was revised and extended by an Act¹¹ called “An Act for the preservation of grain” which proscribed many more birds and animals. It did not name sparrows but they were deemed to be included under the phrase “other Byrde that devoureth the blowth of Fruite”.¹² The act charged parish authorities with its implementation and *inter alia* churchwardens would reward persons bringing in heads or eggs of the scheduled “vermin”¹³. It is said that sparrowpots were made for boys, so that they could take the eggs or chicks, and collect money from the churchwarden¹⁴. The great ornithologist Mr. Meade-Waldo is quoted as saying that sparrowpots facilitated the collection of sparrow’s heads and eggs for reward in parts of Kent and Sussex¹⁵. The act was repealed in 1863, and, throughout the period there are many examples of payments for the head or eggs of sparrows. However, this payment hardly concerned the wealthy households in London where the sherds of most sparrowpots are found! Putting up sparrowpots attracted sparrows and you could destroy each brood, but it is unlikely to have kept the population down.

3. The most popular theory is that the chicks were taken to be eaten by humans; mostly it seems as a dietary supplement, because many people could not afford meat but also as a gourmet morsel for the wealthy. “In olden days sparrows appeared at the tables of “la Noblesse” as well as the boards of their humble dependents”¹⁶. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a sparrow-pie as “a dish proverbially supposed to make the eater sharp-witted”. There are a great many literary references to eating sparrows of which the following are a small sample:

“Sparrow bottles were for sparrows to build their nest in; that, when the eggs were hatched, the inhabitants of the house took the nest for the sake of the young birds, which were considered a great delicacy at table.”¹⁷

“Sometimes I would put sparrows in the pie with different things to flavour it.”¹⁸

“Sparrow pie was regular country dish until the First World War.”¹⁹

“The Tourte of sparrows is served like that of young pigeons with a white sauce.”²⁰

But why take the chicks rather than the grown birds? Grown birds would have had more meat on them and could be trapped in a proactive way

with a simple net, without having to hope that the birds choose to nest in your sparrowpot. Perhaps it is much the same as nowadays we don't eat old birds; rather we prefer the eponymous chicken because it is more tender.

Currently the only archaeological correlation between sparrowpots and sparrows is from an excavation at the London Charterhouse (MED90). There the remains of a sparrowpot was found in a robber cut that is thought to be post-1715, but the sherds were considered to be residual and the excavators also noted the presence of sparrow bones in the “post-consumption waste” indicating “that these species may have been a special part of the meal”.²¹

For a form, that from literary sources seems to have been around for over 300 years, we have very few examples. Although difficult to recognise in excavations, it is to be hoped that current methods of finds processing will throw up a lot more of these fascinating artefacts and enable us to paint a more complete picture of their role.

Note: This article is based on my MA dissertation in the Archaeology of London at UCL in 2003.

| Site Code | Site address | Site description |
|----------------|---|---|
| BA84 | Bermondsey Abbey, Abbey Buildings, Long Walk, SE1 | Sir Thomas Pope's mansion |
| BAD89 | Badger Yard, 12–13 St John's Square, EC1 | 86 sherds – post St John's priory |
| BPL95 | Monument House, 30–35 Botolph Lane & 29–31 Monument St. EC3 | 16th-c merchant's house |
| BRU92 | Bruce House, 1 Kemble St. WC2 | Urban development in late 16th c. |
| BUW98 | City and Islington College, Bunhill Row, Chiswell St. EC1 | Gardens in 17th and 18th c |
| CEF61-66 | Church End Farm, Hendon Farm | House from AD 1650 |
| COW89 | 20–26 Cowcross St. EC1 and surrounding streets | Post-dissolution Tudor structures |
| FSU99 | 27–30 Finsbury Square, EC2 | 19th c feature – not published |
| GHL89 | Guys Hospital redevelopment, St Thomas St. SE1 | A timber lined channel early post-med. |
| JAC96 | Jacob's island, Bermondsey Wall West, SE1 | Med & post-med Mill & Water works |
| KHS98 | Kent House, 11–16 Telegraph St. EC2 | Possible horticultural or garden area |
| L448/80 | 9–57 Rectory Grove, SW4 | Near a late-17th-c structure |
| MED90 | St Bartholomew's Hospital Medical College, Clerkenwell, EC1 | Occupation by Lord North |
| MIN86-88 | Royal Mint, East Smithfield, EC3 | Royal Navy Victualling yard |
| NHU99 | 43–53 Narrow Street, Limehouse, E14 | High status ships captain's house |
| NOR88 | Norfolk House, 113-125 Lambeth Road, SE1 | Tudor structure |
| OCR97 | 6–16 Old Church Street Chelsea, SW3 | Back garden areas according to 1664 map |
| OCU00 | 2–4 Old Church Street, Chelsea, SW3 | |
| SOA96 | Former Deptford Power Station, The Stowage, Deptford, SE8 | 17th-c East India Company dockyard |
| SPT82 | Central Foundation Girls School, Spital Square, E1 | Post dissolution – large houses |
| SUT90 | Sutton House, 2–4 Homerton High Street, E9 | 16th-c mansion |
| TYT98 | London Bridge City, Tooley St., Morgan's, & Weavers Lane, SE1 | 16th-c tidal mill site |
| VIT96 | Victoria Wharf, Narrow Street Riverside, E14 | riverside: 16th-c wharf then buildings. |
| WCE01 | Aldgate Union/Drum St., 27–29 Whitechapel High St., E1 | |
| YPE02 | Prices Candle Factory, Battersea | |
| (no site code) | Woolwich Ferry Approach | Possible kiln site |

Table 1: sites with birdpot sherds from London

1. R. Stephenson 'Post-medieval ceramic bird pots from excavations in Greater London' *London Archaeol* **6**, no. 12 (1991) 320-1.
2. M. J. Hughes 'Report on the analysis of 31 birdpots by inductively-coupled plasma atomic emission spectrometric analysis (ICP-AES)' (2003). Unpublished.
3. W. S. S. van Benthem Jutting, 'Een Middelburgsche Spreeuw-pot' *Oudheidkundig Jaarboek*. **11**, 3-4 (1942) 88-9.
4. Bridge House Accounts, weekly payments, 2nd series, volume 2, 1518-1528 folio 377r; Corporation of London Records Office (CLRO).
5. M. Labbé *Ces étonnants nichoirs traditionnels* (2000). Paris.
6. J. Rennie *Ornithological dictionary of British birds*, by Colonel G. Montagu (1833). London.
7. J. C. Loudon *An encyclopaedia of cottage, farm, and villa architecture and furniture*. 1842. London.
8. *Notes and Queries*, 6th series, Volume IV. (1881). Various correspondents' comments on birdpots. Oxford.
9. C. Oldham 'Payments for "vermin" by some Hertfordshire Churchwardens' *Trans Hertfordshire Nat Hist Soc and Field Club* **19** (1934) 79-112.
10. 24 Hen. VIII, c. 10.
11. 8 Eliz, c. 15.
12. *Op cit* fn 9.
13. J. C. Cox *Churchwardens' Accounts from the 14th Century to the close of the 17th Century*. 1913. London.
14. E. A. B. Barnard 'Sparrows and sparrow pots' *Trans Worcestershire Archaeol Soc* **25** (1948) 50-59.
15. N. F. Ticehurst *A history of the birds of Kent* (1909). London: Witherby & Co.
16. H. A. Macpherson *History of Fowling* (1897). Edinburgh.
17. *Op cit* fn 8.
18. G. E. Evans *Where beards wag all: The Relevance of the oral tradition* (1970). London.
19. J. D. Summers-Smith *The House Sparrow* (1963). London.
20. A. Davidson *The Oxford companion to Food* (1999). Oxford.
21. B. Barber and C. Thomas *The London Charterhouse*. 2002. London: Museum of London Archaeology Service. *MoLAS Monograph 10*.

Excavations and post-excavation work

London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre, Mortimer Wheeler House, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7EE. Contact Archive Manager, John Shepherd (020 7566 9317).

Croydon & District, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collections of pottery fabrics, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Jim Davison, 8 Brentwood Road, South Croydon, CR2 0ND.

Borough of Greenwich. Cataloguing of excavated and other archaeological material, the majority from sites within the Borough. Contact Greenwich Heritage Centre, Building 41, Royal Arsenal, Woolwich, SE18 6SP (020 8854 2452).

Hammersmith & Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from the Borough. Tuesdays, 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. At Fulham Palace, Bishops's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 85 Rannoch Road, W6 9SX (020 7385 3723).

Kingston, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society (KUTAS). Processing and

cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Thursday (10 a.m.) at the North Kingston Centre, Richmond Road, Kingston upon Thames KT2 5PE. Enquiries 020 8546 5386.

Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd., Unit 54, Brockley Cross Business Centre, 96 Endwell Road, Brockley Cross, London SE4 2PD. Environmental- and finds processing, cataloguing and archiving of excavated material. Contact Finds Manager, Märit Gaimster (020 7639 9091).

Surrey, by Surrey County Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Rob Poulton, Archaeological Unit Manager, Surrey History Centre, 130 Goldsworth Road, Woking GU21 1ND (01483 594 634).

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