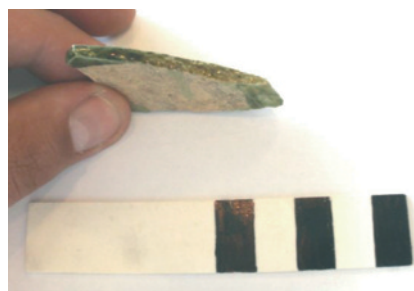


Strange sherds from Cheam

Clive Orton discusses some odd finds from an old excavation

Background

The back garden of the 16th-century timber-framed house of Whitehall, Cheam, was excavated in 1978–80. A large quantity of 14th-century pottery (Cheam white ware),¹ probably wasters from a nearby kiln,² was retrieved, mainly from the backfill around a medieval well. For various reasons, this pottery was not studied in depth until July 2010, when the *Time Cheam* (seventeen local volunteers) spent an intensive week sorting and cataloguing about 5000 sherds of the ware, and photographing the more interesting pieces. This brief note will summarise the main findings, and present some of the 'oddities' for discussion.



The ordinary

Statistical analysis revealed that about 85% of the Cheam ware consisted of jugs, most of the rest being small bowls/dishes (10%). Of the jugs, some 75% were small drinking jugs (around 1 pt capacity) and 25% were rounded jugs (around 2–3 pt capacity). Some of the rounded jugs had sagging bases, in contrast to the flat bases commonly found at Cheam, but similar to some from Kingston. This suggests that this assemblage is early in the Cheam chronology, soon after the move of some potters from Kingston.

The extraordinary

There was evidence that the assemblage had derived from a kiln accident, in the form of severely over-fired and distorted sherds and kiln fragments. There were also some 'shrapnel sherds', which had been spattered by small ceramic fragments, presumably from a pot exploding nearby in the kiln. There were other sherds, with glaze flowed over a broken edge, which we at first thought were firing accidents. Closer examination suggested that the edges appeared to have been cut, rather than accidental breaks. Were these from strange vessels with holes cut in the side, or were they perhaps test pieces for experimenting with glazes? It's notable that these sherds had a better quality of glaze than is usual at Cheam.

Even stranger was a sherd with holes that had been punched right through, just where the handle was attached. Many Cheam jug handles

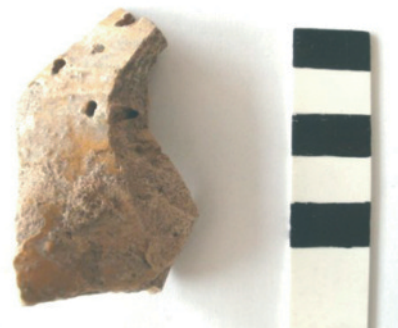
TOP LEFT: example of a 'shrapnel sherd'

LOWER LEFT: a body sherd with green glaze flowed over a cut edge

TOP RIGHT: a body sherd, thickening where the handle is attached, showing 'skewered' holes

LOWER RIGHT: unusual decorated sherd, with applied 'prunts' and a perforated raised strip

(Photos by Richard Westlake. All scales are in cm.)



were attached by 'skewering' holes right through the wall of the vessel, then pressing on the handle so that it filled the holes,³ but making the holes after attaching the handle completely defeats the purpose. What was going on?

Finally, there was one example with rather exuberant decoration: a small sherd with a glossy yellow glaze had applied 'prunts', as well as a raised strip perforated with small holes. This is unlike anything else from Cheam, and indeed from the London area in the 14th century, but has some similarities with techniques of glassware decoration.

These and other questions will be investigated next summer, when the *Time Cheam* hopes to return to study the rest of the Whitehall medieval pottery.

1. See J.E. Pearce and A.G. Vince, with A. Jenner, M. Cowell and J. Haslam *Surrey Whiteware. A dated type-series of medieval London pottery* 4. LAMAS Special Paper 10 (1988).

2. The nearest known medieval kiln is at Parkside, about 100 m to the south, see C.J. Marshall 'A medieval pottery kiln discovered in Cheam' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 35 (1924) 79–97.

3. See J.E. Pearce 'Getting a handle on medieval pottery' *London Archaeol* 5 no. 1 (1984) 17–23, for a description of this technique. It is not (yet) known from any kiln site other than Cheam.