The Saxon pottery from Barking Abbey: part i, local wares

Mark Redknapp

THE TWIN monasteries of Chertsey and Barking were founded by Eorcenwald (Bishop of London from AD 675-693) for himself and his sister Aethelburh respectively in about AD 666. Barking was a double house, in which nuns and monks lived under the rule of an Abbess (as, for example, at Abingdon, Hartlepool, Minster, Repton and Whitby). The site chosen, on the east bank of the river Roding, was well positioned to extend the network of minsters into pagan Essex. Traditionally the Abbey was destroyed by the Danish invasion in the 9th century, but reoccupied well before King Edgar made Wulfida Abbess in the 960s.

Archaeological interest in the site started with the antiquary Smart Lethieullier who attempted to recover the plan of the abbey church and probably paid labourers to expose foundations. It was not until roadworks by the Barking UDC on the construction of the new Abbey Road in 1910, and subsequent work by Alfred Clapham and the Morant Club, that plans were published of the excavations on the later monastic site. The West Essex Archaeological Group recorded finds on the demolition of the Church School in 1967; this was followed in 1971 by excavations by P. M. Wilkinson of the Passmore Edwards Museum in advance of landscaping. These excavations produced the first clear evidence for mid-Saxon Barking, with a small collection of Ipswich-type and chaff-tempered wares (Fig. 1). Large-scale excavation in 1985-6 on the Barking Abbey Industrial Estate (TQ 4392 8391), directed by M. Stone and K. MacGowan for the Passmore Edwards Museum, produced the first substantial Saxon features — including buildings, wells and a leat — associated with much mid-Saxon pottery. Work on the Gascoigne Estate site well to the south of the Abbey in 1987 produced another medieval contexts, but Saxon deposits, including a line of possible post-holes, were examined by K. MacGowan in 1988 during the widening of Abbey Road. Most recently, work on an area to the south of the 1985-6 excavations on the Barking Abbey Industrial Estate has uncovered a late Saxon glass-working kiln.

Dating

The 1985-6 excavations produced 8 sceattas of the Secondary Series from c AD 710-730. Most occurred in later deposits, and the most secure dating on the site comes from dendrochronology. Three wells were found, each with several phases of well-preserved timber lining. Well 2 provided a *terminus post quem* of AD 787 (interpreted as probably early 9th century). A leat running north-east/south-west contained many upright timbers: an early phase shortly after AD 705, and a third repair phase post AD 774, the leat being filled once the timber had rotted. Much pottery occurred in secondary or tertiary sequences on the site, a familiar characteristic at Hamwih and in *Lundenwic*. The best mid-Saxon sequences were those associated with the clay-floored building, which had settled into the fill of earlier mid-Saxon quarry pits. A silver penny of Aethelwulf of Wessex (phase 3, Canterbury mint c 845-56) was found in an upper horizon associated with this building.

The pottery

Over 196 kg of potsherds were recovered from the 1985-6 excavations. Of the later medieval and Tudor assemblages, those from the garderobe and feeder drain fills were exceptionally rich with over 41 kg of pottery (2241 sherds), including Surripuit ware; K. MacGowan 'Saxon Timber Structures from the Barking Abbey Excavations 1985-1986' *Essex Journ* 22 (1987) 15-38.


8. An account of these recent excavations by K. MacGowan for the Passmore Edwards Museum will appear shortly in *Current Archaeology*.


Fig. 1: Location map showing excavation sites and distribution of mid-Saxon pottery at Barking by weight.
rey Whitewares and Late Medieval Sandy wares, together with examples of Archaic maiolica, Andalusian wares, Valencian Lustreware and Faenza-style jugs. As with the mid-Saxon material, the original context of disposal for much material filling the drains is open to question. Of the mid-Saxon pottery (44% of the total recovered) over 21 kg (24%) were residual: in other words, about a quarter was redeposited in later layers and not found in a contemporary mid-Saxon context.

Mid-Saxon local wares (Fig. 2)
The predominant local ware is the handmade chaff-tempered ware familiar at 
Lundenwic, and found at other Essex sites such as Waltham Abbey and 
Nazeingbury to the north. The forms from Bark- 
ing have parallels in the assemblages from West 
Stow and Mucking (where it becomes dominant in 
the latest phase in the 7th century). The evidence 
from the Strand indicates that chaff-tempered 
pottery was losing popularity from c AD 750/800, 
when Ipswich-type ware becomes more common. 
The evidence from the City supports the view that 
the production of domestic vessels in this fabric 
had ceased between the late 9th to 11th centuries. 
An important early find from East London, now 
in the collections of the British Museum (BM Reg. 
No. 1929-12.1) is that of a ‘bar-lug’ pot found at the 
Stonehall Pit, Barkingside in 1925, ‘at a depth of 3 or 
4 feet in a hollow filled with black soil’. If the 
provenance is correct, this may indicate a former 
site to the north of the Abbey.

The quality of the burnish can vary from a very 
high gloss to poor surface finish (most commonly 
on the exterior of the vessel). Smear and wipe 
marks may be visible, though burnishing has fre-
quently removed all trace of such treatment. The 
external surfaces of few sherds are patterned with 
the impressions of comb teeth (Fig. 2, nos. 9-10). 
Such ‘comb-point’ decoration has been recognised 
at the cemetery near Rainham, as well as at the 
Peabody site on the Strand, and is found in south-
east England in the 7th century. At Barking Ab-
bee Industrial Estate, chaff-tempered ware formed 
77% (weight) of the wares found in the quarry pit 
scaled by the mid-Saxon clay-floored building, 
but only 32% in deposits filling the leat (post AD 
770), and 46% of the pottery associated with the 
building. As at the Strand settlement, the ware 
would appear to be declining in local importance 
by the 9th century.

Two other handmade fabrics found with chaff-
tempered ware are Saxon Shelly ware, with abun-
dant shell and brown ferruginous inclusions and 
sparse quartz (Fig. 4, no. 10), and Saxon Sandy ware, 
with abundant coarse-medium quartz (often in a 
dark grey fabric). Both occur in small amounts and 
are found in the latest contexts on the Strand.

One area of difficulty confronting the pottery 
analyst when describing such wares is the continu-
ing diversity in prevailing terminology. This is 
fuelled by considerable overlap between divisions 
of classification, and the impossibility of identi-
fying discrete functions within these roughly 
made pots, especially when dealing with small 
body sherds. The adoption of definitions of a jar as 
‘a vessel with a neck constriction usually less than 
height’, and cooking pot with a ‘rim wider than base’ 
is not supported by the evidence of sooting and 
residues on both chaff-tempered and Ipswich fab-
ric groups. The inevitable multiplicity of possible 
domestic functions has been noted elsewhere.

At Hanwih, a few examples of perforated lugs 
suggest suspension or the fitting of a carrying 
rope. Small cups may be such, or act as cressets, 
while thicker-walled versions may have served as 
ointment stores or for crushing herbs.

Ipswich-type ware (Fig. 3)
The wheel-finished Ipswich-type ware occurs at 
Barking in the earliest mid-Saxon contexts yet to 
be identified, and in the 8th-century leat deposits 
it forms the major component (65%). The dated 
wells were surprisingly devoid of pottery, only a 
small quantity of Ipswich ware coming from the 
upper fill of well 2. Eight different stamp types 
have been recognised decorating the upper bodies 
of jars: gridded circle, gridded square, gridded 
pendant triangle, single and double segmented 
circle, single ring, and in the ‘impromptu tool’ class, 
‘stylus end’ and ‘reed’. Barking is one of a limited 
number of sites to produce such a range of stamps 
and while this may reflect its status it may only 
reflect the large quantity of Ipswich-type ware 
recovered (still a measure of the importance of the 
site). Some of the gridded stamps are used to create

two Middle Saxon occupation sites: excavations at Jubilee 
Hall and 21-22 Maiden Lane’ TLAMAS in press; R. L. 
Whytehead and R. Cowie forthcoming ‘Excavations at the 
Peabody site, Chandos Place and the National Gallery, 
TLAMAS.
14. A. Vince and J. Pearce ‘Aspects of Saxon and Norman London: 
The Saxon and Early Medieval Pottery of London’, LAMAS 
15. Like Nazeingbury, in the Roding Valley. There is some 
uncertainty about the findspot. Published in Mar 30 (1930) 93- 
5. It was published by G.C. Dunning in Anglo-Saxon Pottery: 
A Symposium, Medieval Archaeol 3 (1990) Fig. 20 no.1, where 
the caption states that it is from ‘Barking, Essex’ (no further 
details of provenance given).
16. There is one small sherd from Maiden Lane (L. Blackmore, 
pers. comm.), and other examples from Leighton Buzzard 
and Totternhoe (Beds.) in J. N. L. Myres A Corpus of 
Anglo-Saxon Pottery of the Pagan Period (1977), Fig. 362. Also V. I. Evison 
‘Anglo-Saxon finds near Rainham, Essex, with a study of 
glass drinking horns’ Archaeologia 96 (1916) 159-95.
17. Thin section of mid-Saxon Saxon Shelly ware from Jubilee 
only reflect the large quantity of Ipswich-type ware 
recovered (still a measure of the importance of the 
site). Some of the gridded stamps are used to create
19. Of the wares found in the quarry pit, 67% (weight) 
the major component (65%). The dated 
wells were surprisingly devoid of pottery, only a 
small quantity of Ipswich ware coming from the 
upper fill of well 2. Eight different stamp types 
have been recognised decorating the upper bodies 
of jars: gridded circle, gridded square, gridded 
pendant triangle, single and double segmented 
circle, single ring, and in the ‘impromptu tool’ class, 
‘stylus end’ and ‘reed’. Barking is one of a limited 
number of sites to produce such a range of stamps 
and while this may reflect its status it may only 
reflect the large quantity of Ipswich-type ware 
recovered (still a measure of the importance of the 
site). Some of the gridded stamps are used to create
16. There is one small sherd from Maiden Lane (L. Blackmore, 
pers. comm.), and other examples from Leighton Buzzard 
and Totternhoe (Beds.) in J. N. L. Myres A Corpus of 
Anglo-Saxon Pottery of the Pagan Period (1977), Fig. 362. Also V. I. Evison 
‘Anglo-Saxon finds near Rainham, Essex, with a study of 
glass drinking horns’ Archaeologia 96 (1916) 159-95.
horizontal bands or zones of decoration, overlapping designs to mimic rouletting. Burnished decoration in the form of the diagonal lattice and horizontal line occurs on a few examples. Some of the thicker sherds had secondary use, being used in the same way as Roman roof tile as lining material (sometimes industrial). The distribution of Ipswich-type ware is predominantly coastal from East Anglia to Kent, but examples are being reported further afield at York and the recently excavated 8th-9th century site at Flixborough, South Humberside.19

The Late Saxon wares (Fig. 4)

Interpretation of the later Saxon phase of activity is complicated by interruption of the archaeological deposits by later features, and a high degree of residuality. However there occurs a transition to wheelthrown pottery from sources which have yet to be identified, a trend recently published for the City. Late Saxon Shelly ware (LSS), predominant in the 10th century, was the most common fabric. The cooking pots with their distinctive rim are paralleled by examples from the City, and are followed in frequency by straight-sided bowls or dishes, some rim sherd having spouts. Samples from Barking have been submitted to neutron...
activation analysis in an attempt to establish whether sherds from Oxford and London originated from the same source in Mercia. 20 No significant difference has been found between the two groups, and it would appear that clay of the same composition was used. The shift from Thames Valley/Ipswich supply to Upper Thames Valley has been interpreted as a response to politically motivated changes in market forces, away from the Danelaw, and to changes in domestic demands.

Imports during this period are limited to small quantities of Ipswich/Thetford-type wares in the form of large storage jars (Fig. 4, nos. 11-12). As in the City, there are no Rhenish wares, although sherds of later Pingsdorf-type red-painted pottery occur in later medieval contexts.

Discussion

The mid-Saxon pottery from Barking can be seen as a counterpart to what was happening at Londinium. The distribution of pottery assists the definition of the area of activity on the east bank of the Roding (Fig. 1), but not the layout of Abbey compounds, church, oratories and the two cemeteries and, one imagines a profusion of scattered structures towards the river. The current programme of excavation and research should enhance the interpretation of the features encountered so far, and their relationship (industrial or devoted to other activities) to the higher quality structures of the ecclesiastical focus, which may have been on the site of the later Benedictine church.

Bede's mention of Eorcenwald's monasteries has been taken to reflect their importance. Chertsey (Cerotaesei) and Barking (originally known as Beddanhaam in the Hodilred Charter c AD 687, superseded by Berecingas) were founded respectively under Kentish and East Saxon rulers. Isleworth, an estate of 53 hides, was granted to Eorcenwald by Aethelred of Mercia, and then in turn to Barking c AD 677, and in the early AD 680s Eorcenwald had procured an estate at Battersea from Caedwalla of Wessex for the Abbey. Described as 'the source or channel of diplomatic ideas in south-east England', he may have been a member of the Kentish royal house, and Barking was endowed with estates not merely in Essex, but also Kent, Surrey and Middlesex. 21 He seems to have been one of the central figures in establishing relations between the kingdoms in the area, and in this respect the distinction between royal and ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the archaeological record is made difficult. Most of the mid-Saxon artifacts from Barking Abbey, including the ceramics, would fit happily within an assemblage from a trading port, with the possible exception of the quantity of specialised items such as stylis, window glass and gold thread from woven braids identified usually with monastic crafts. Certainly the limited range of imports found at Barking, and the large quantity of Ipswich-type pottery of East English tradition, together with other finds reflect the emergent authority of the bishops of London in the area, supported by royal patronage. Proximity to the river would have provided a perfect staging-post for craft plying their way up to or down from London, along the coast of Essex, and across to Thanet and beyond. Contact with the Continent is also reflected in the occurrence of Eifel basalt lava quernstones.

The chaff-tempered and Ipswich-type wares give way to a different range of pottery fabrics in the later Saxon phase of the site: the Barking area was probably under Danish control from c AD 870-2 to 896, and c AD 902-912, to which period a coin hoard found in the 18th century to the south east of the town belongs (likely to have been deposited c 865-875). 22 The precise boundaries during the agreement between Alfred and Guthrum are unclear. However it appears likely that with the period of abandonment, or associated with 10th-century rebuilding, the transport of soil and landscaping may have resulted in the redeposition of much mid-Saxon material. The lost cartulary of the Abbey contains a charter of Athelstan to abbot Beohrtsige dated AD 936, and three of King Eadred dated AD 946-7, by which time the community appears to have re-established itself. 23 Vince and Pearce have noted the presence of LSS north and east of London (Hendon, Waltham, Springfield, Orsett), and Barking lies on the eastern perimeter of the large market area identified, on the edge of the Danelaw. The period of loss and disruption affecting the country in the 9th century is represented at Barking by the transition from double house to reformed Benedictine house, and in the ceramic record by a change mirrored at London.


24. Lockwood, op. cit. f.n. 1.
This note has attempted to summarise the main characteristics of the Saxon pottery from Barking, and outline a few issues which bear on the study of the Abbey’s domestic and foreign relationships beyond the monastic enclosure.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Patricia Wilkinson and the Passmore Edwards Museum for permission to publish this note in advance of a more definitive report of the excavations, Ken MacGowan and Mike Stone for discussing their excavations, Graham Reed and David Williams for the pottery drawings, Paul Blinkhorn for information on Ipswich-type ware and Lyn Blackmore and Ken MacGowan for comments on this note.

Letters

The minster parish of Waltham
Peter Huggins’ paper in L.A. 6, no. 11, contains a lot of new ideas about the minster parish of Waltham and its relationship to that of London. It seems to me that a possible boundary on the northern edge of the Waltham parochia might well include the line running from the south-east of Roydon Hamlet across Roydon itself to near the Stanstead/Hunsdon boundary (this can be followed on Huggins Fig 1 from TL 423 073 to TL 410 102). This line has been postulated elsewhere (in 17 in the paper) as an estate boundary of c. 750, mainly on the basis of stretches of bank and ditch incorporated in it. Since the estate in question was granted by a king of the East Saxons for the foundation of a church, it seems reasonable that this boundary could follow the line of the minster parish boundary probably established a generation earlier.

More relevant to the history of London are two references to grants claimed to have been made by king Offa of Mercia to the abbey of St. Alban, which he founded or re-founded in 795, the year before his death. Extant charters by Offa to his new foundation appear to be restricted to Cashio and Park (Hertfordshire), Stanmore (Middlesex) and lands in Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire. These charters exist only in 12th-century (B.L. Cotton Nero D1) and later copies, and it has been fashionable to describe them as spurious; textually they may be so, but in general they refer to lands owned by the abbey in Domesday Book. B.L. manuscript also contains lists further donations claimed for Offa, including Edelmetunam, and a late 14th-century manuscript mentions Edelmetuna and Enefeld, as well as the lands previously mentioned, among others. The archaic name for Edmonton, in particular, certainly suggests derivation from an Old English source, now lost. Other donors are recorded and their respective donations listed.

It seems to be generally agreed that Mercian power had reached the Lea Valley well before the 790s, although detailed documentation is lacking; but it does not seem to have been noted that Edmonton and Enfield were royal estates at this time. The Waltham church (Huggins Fig. 2) shows several close parallels with the church at Brixworth (Northants.): the two rows of porticus, the arrangement of the west end (so far as the Waltham evidence goes), and the widths of the two buildings being very similar. However Brixworth’s nave is longer and has four porticus on each side compared to three at Waltham, while the chancel at Waltham is not square as Brixworth’s is, and has no eastern extension of any kind. Professor Fernie dates Brixworth (795, c. 800-810 and the less-developed state of the east end at Waltham could imply a somewhat earlier date, putting it back into Offa’s reign (795-796). We thus have Mercian influence straddling the Lea, the river clearly not constituting a boundary. Did the Mercians advance further into Essex or were they concerned primarily with the protection of London against invaders (East Anglians) down the Lea valley?

Had St. Alban’s abbey retained Enfield and Edmonton it seems likely that these places, together with South Mimms (an outlier of Edmonton in Domesday Book, would have remained in Hertfordshire rather than providing a north-east excrescence to Middlesex. The date of the abbey’s loss is difficult to determine: the 9th abbot Eadmer, however, is said to have died (probably in the 890s) leaving the monastery much in debt, so that some possessions had to be sold and some timber cut down. Half a century later Enfield, Edmonton and Waltham were all in the hands of Tovi the staller, the legendary founder of the church of Waltham. The first two places were certainly attached to the office of staller, which seems to have involved inter alia the defence of London, and their allocation to this office would fit very well into the 890s, when Danish raids were developing for the second time.

Ken Bascombe
25 Monkswood Avenue
Waltham Abbey
Essex E40 1LA

The Museum of London
I REGRET THAT my concern about policy changes in the Museum of London should have been construed as personal criticism of the Director. I would also point out that Gromatius underrates Max Hebditch’s strong initial resistance to the changes imposed on the organisation of London archaeology by English Heritage. There was no capitulation until it became clear that English Heritage could not be dissuaded from using its financial muscle to achieve its ends. A deciding factor was clearly their decision to phase out the annual grant, initiated by the GLC to establish an archaeological service in Greater London. The Government had agreed that this should continue after the abolition of the GLC, and would in future be administered by English Heritage, whose own grant from Government was accordingly increased. As the decision to phase out the grant was taken at a time when the Museum was facing other grave financial difficulties—a decline in developer funding due to the recession and a Government decision that the museum could no longer be regarded as a local authority museum and must therefore pay VAT—the Director and Board of Governors could only accept English Heritage’s terms, which included funding for current post-exca-vation work and the probability of future payments for excavation in competition with others. Nevertheless most of those who have long been concerned with London archaeology are deeply saddened by the dismantling of an organisation that has served London well and is popular with local authorities and archaeological societies alike, in favour of something unknown and possibly inferior that has yet to be set up. We are further saddened because it will result in the enforced departure from the London scene of archaeologists with long experience and special knowledge of London problems. It is regrettable that these changes have been enforced for what seems to many of us an ideological quibble of little practical significance. It is ironical that they should have been imposed by a Quango at a time when the Government itself seems to be adopting a much more pragmatic attitude.

Ralph Merrifield
32 Poplar Walk
London SE24 0BU