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(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

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Editor Alison Taylor

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A Medieval Kiln at Colne, Cambridgeshire

Hilary Healey, Tim Malim and Kit Watson

Summary

Trial excavations on the outskirts of the medieval village of Colne identified the disturbed remains of pottery kilns that had functioned between the 12th and 16th centuries. Kiln debris, wasters and dense quantities of sherds were recovered. Trenching identified the eastern edge of the kiln area, but to the west it extended into gardens. No traces of medieval building were noted, though pottery of Saxo-Norman and early medieval date indicated earlier settlement. Within the area examined the site was well preserved, the pottery dump surviving as a low mound beneath shallow topsoil. At least one more kiln and pottery dump is known to have existed near to the site discussed here.

Introduction

The excavation (TL 3705 7603) was undertaken as a result of a planning application affecting the farmyard of Moat House Farm, Old Church Lane, Colne, immediately south of Drury's Manor moat. Old Church Lane lies at the east end of a ridge, overlooking low-lying areas of both the Ouse and the Fens (Fig. 1). The ridge is capped by Boulder Clay immediately west of Colne, and lies on a narrow band of 1st Terrace River Gravels, surrounded by exposures of Ampthill Clay. The medieval village of Colne lay north and west of the present village, presumably centred on the now ruined St Helen's Church, between and to the south of two moated sites.

Although Colne lacks a waterway for transport of bulky material such as pottery, the neighbouring village of Earith is well placed on the Ouse. Original village roads would have included the present footpath which runs from the site of the medieval settlement to Somersham Bishop's Palace, and also to the bend in the present Earith to Somersham road at Deadman's Hill. The medieval village was probably on the crossroads of the Bluntisham/Somersham and Earith/Somersham roads, and the pottery industry would have had a direct relationship with the Bishop's Palace at Somersham, under whose control this area lay.

In 1921 a kiln and pottery dump was identified by

C.F. Tebbutt prior to construction of houses west of the present site (OS 6" 1958). Unfortunately, neither the records nor the finds from the excavation seem to survive, relevant OS records being destroyed during bombing of Southampton during World War II.

The trenches of the excavation described in this report were constrained by the standing buildings, access routes and services of a working farmyard. Their depth and extent were kept to a minimum as it was agreed, following the discovery of the remains, that development would avoid further damage to the archaeology. Therefore initial topsoil clearance was followed by only minimal excavation at selected points, referred to as test pits, and a transect across the kiln along the southern part of Trench B.

The Excavation

Description

Of the five trenches placed around the farm yard only Trench B produced extensive archaeological deposits, although Trench D contained redeposited sherds of Saxo-Norman pottery, probably from a single vessel. After removal of the topsoil from Trench B a sequence of deposits (including a compact area of layered pottery (Fig. 2)) was exposed and a rapid programme of sampling was devised in order to recover stratigraphical information and a better understanding of the deposits. Unfortunately the emphasis on minimal disturbance and the subsequent decision to undertake no further excavation as the area could be preserved under gardens, has resulted in limited archaeological knowledge, and the following brief account gives little detail to back up the general conclusion that the site represents the remains of a medieval kiln.

The earliest activity appears to have been a hollow (context 72) (Fig. 3, sections 4 and 5) at least 0.6m deep, perhaps a borrow pit for clay extraction, which extended across the north and centre of Trench B. Its eastern edges were picked up in Test Pits C and D and it was found to be filled by rubbish-free silty-clay layers (37, 53, 58–62, 64, 68 and 69) amongst which there was at least one sherd of 13th/14th century Grimston pottery. A similar depression (context 73) was found in

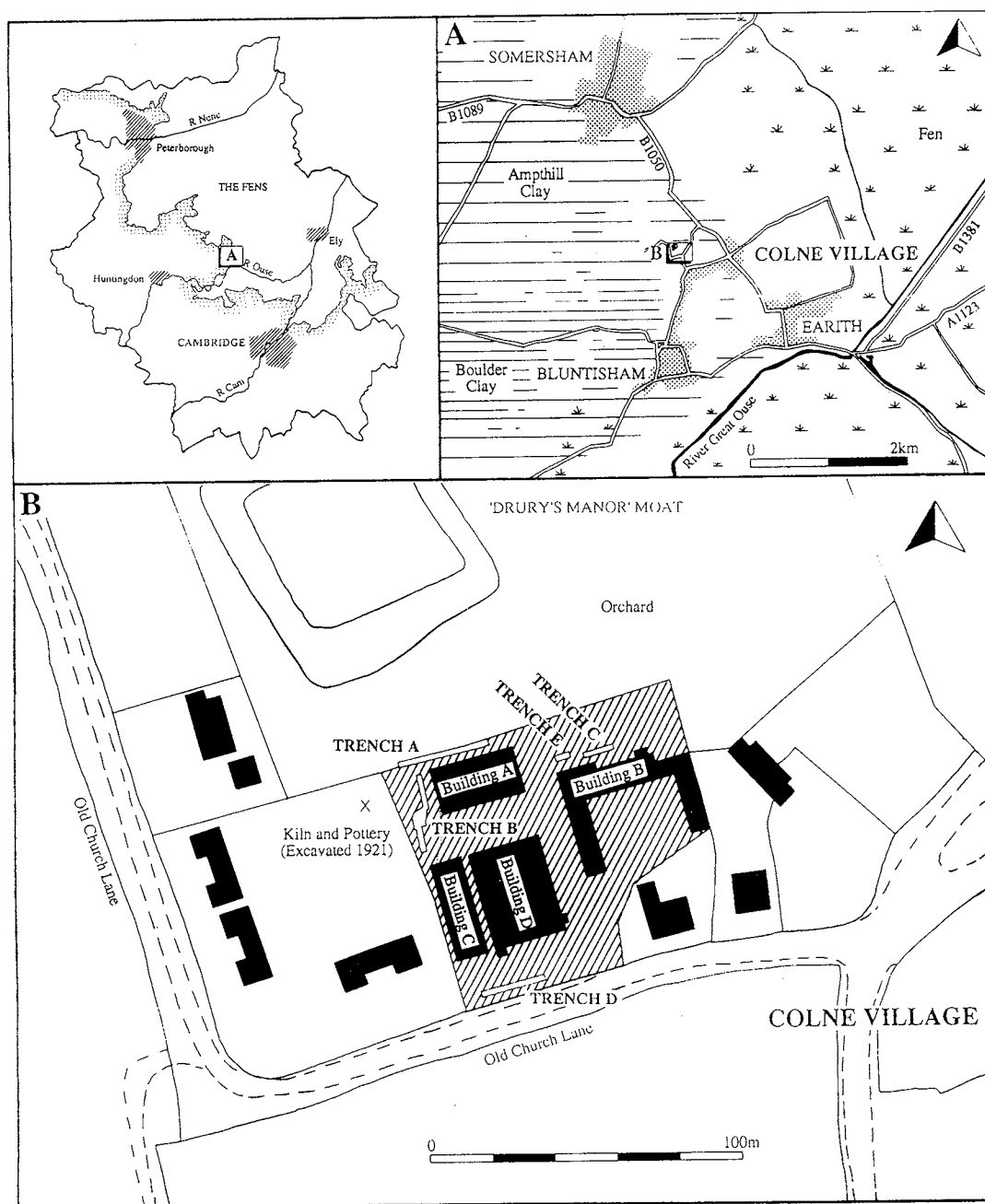


Figure 1. Location and site plan.

Test pit E (section 1), and at its southern end a sondage was excavated which revealed a pottery-rich fill of silty-clay (context 38) underlying a series of layers interpreted as "B" horizons.

Test pits C and D (Fig 3, sections 4 and 5) were located against the eastern side of Trench B to sample an area beyond the limits of a spread of pottery (context 31) in the centre-west of the trench. Both these Test Pits showed evidence of a ditch (contexts 34 and 66) which had been cut into the top fills of the hollow (72), and which might have been a boundary for the kiln itself or a foundation trench for a structure to house the kiln. They also revealed a clay surface (context 35) which sealed the infilled hollow and this infilled ditch, which post-dated demolition of the kiln.

Test pit A, along the western edge of the trench, was positioned to section the spread of pottery (context 31) and related deposits. This test pit proved to be a transect across a kiln (section 1). The silty-clay layers that infilled the hollow were cut by a feature over 3m wide and an unknown depth, in order to accommodate construction of a kiln. Remains of a 0.2m wide semi-circular lime-mortar wall (context 63: a curved band of dense but unconsolidated mortar containing fragments of brick) with an internal diameter of 1.7m was found, packed externally by silty-clays (context 49). The structure had been substantially robbed-out at a later date to judge by the occurrence of mortar fragments with brick and tile (context 57). The resulting depression had then been infilled with a gravel

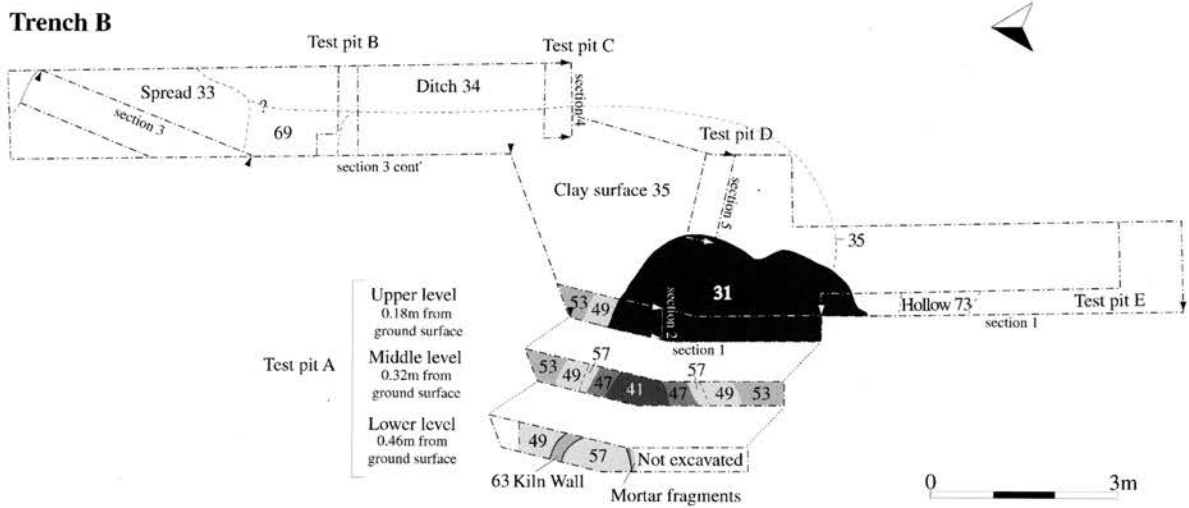


Figure 2. Plan of Trench B

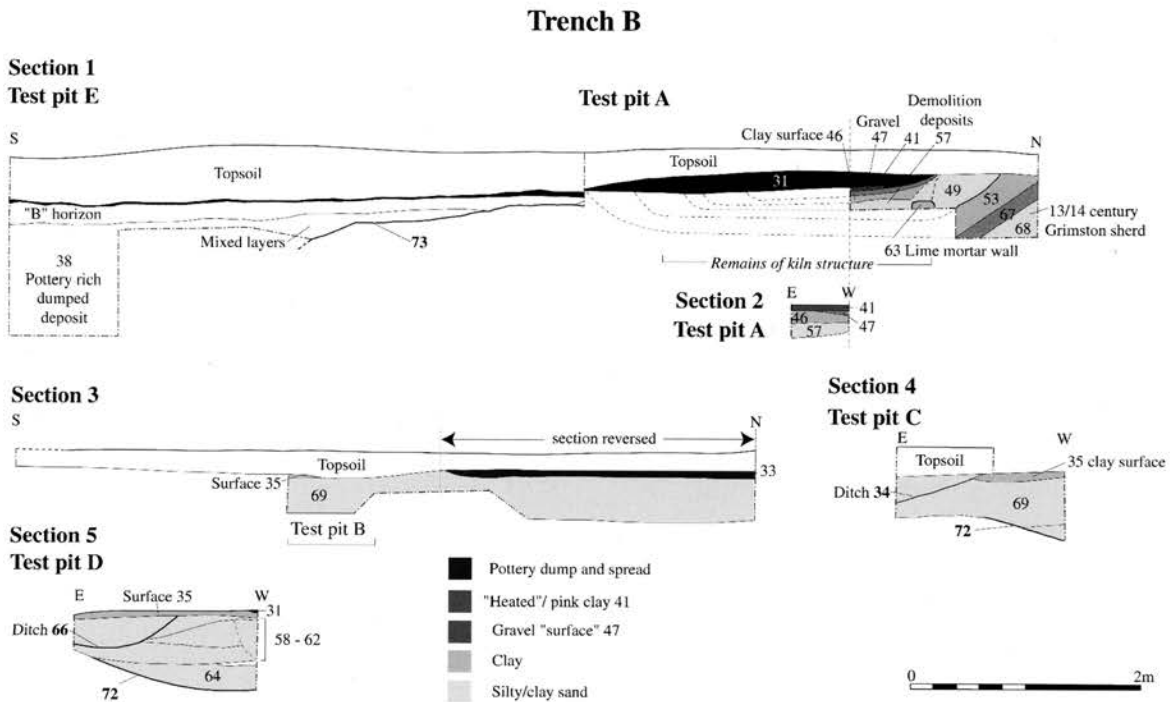


Figure 3. Trench B sections

capped clay layer (context 47 overlying 46, corresponding to context 35), possibly a surface caused by trampling, above which a pink clay deposit (contexts 39 and 41) contained sherds of pottery (sections 1 and 2). This latter layer had apparently been subjected to heat but not to a temperature high enough to fully bake the clay. Sealing the kiln and spreading out over a 4m wide area was a 0.2m high mound of horizontally layered pot sherds (context 31), continuing beyond the western limits of the trench but finishing at the edge of Test Pit D to the east. Beneath the southern part of this pottery dump in Test pit E, a humic soil with concentrations of burnt pottery and darker

soil was found infilling a lower-lying area adjacent to the kiln. A similar spread is apparent in the north of the trench (layer 33, section 3).

Conclusion

In summary, therefore, investigations around the dump of pottery indicated an initial episode of quarrying, followed by infill with largely sterile deposits, into which the curved brick and mortar wall of a probable kiln was constructed. A ditch representing a boundary or foundation trench for a structure was found to the east of the kiln. An episode of demolition and robbing of the structure together with trampled

surfaces was followed by levelling and the dumping of industrial waste in the form of hundreds of pot sherds. Evidence for interpretation of the site as a kiln comes from the amount of discarded and broken pottery indicating manufacturing, the circular wall suggestive of a kiln, a layer of pink clay above it and humic and dark deposits to the south of the kiln which probably all derived from burning; in short the kind of deposits that one would expect to find in association with a kiln.

The Ceramic Material (Figs. 4–6)

Hilary Healey

There seems no doubt that the Colne pottery is kiln waste, with the exception of a small number of sherds representing probable Late Saxon and medieval domestic activity on the site. By analogy with pottery from other kiln sites, chiefly at Bourne, Lincolnshire, a date range between the 12th and 16th century is suggested. Constraints of time and finance permitted only a general examination of the great number of sherds. The contents of four boxes were examined in detail, three of them from trench B context 31 (the pottery dump) and the fourth from three other contexts including 38 (a sondage at the south end of the trench) and 68 (the fill of a large hollow beneath the kiln). The fabric classification was made on a visual basis and sherds diagnostic of the vessels and forms seen were selected for illustration. Only one complete vessel profile was recorded. The numbers refer to the illustration catalogue. Three fabrics were identified.

Fabric A

Reduced dark grey-brown to black surface, red and grey core. Inclusions of sand and oolitic limestone grit. The latter have sometimes leached out, leaving small holes on the surface. No glazed sherds were recorded.

Forms

Four vessel types: bowls, large jars (including some cisterns with bung-holes), jugs and pipkins. The most common rims in the collection belong to bowls and jars. Bowls, or pancheons, have an average rim diameter of c. 350mm (1–5). The one complete profile (2) shows a bowl only 54mm deep, but this has a smaller diameter than some of the sherds. Large jar rims are generally round-edged and everted, with a diameter of 180–200mm (6–10). An unusual variation has a 'ginger jar' appearance, with the rim inturned, and no neck (11), but with similar dimensions to the ordinary jars. Jug rims are also of similar profile to jar rims, but with a smaller diameter of c. 100mm; some of these sherds have a plain or grooved handle (12–17). The sherd of a large jar rim with handle (18) is probably from a two-handled jar, although not illustrated as such. Amongst basal angle sherds are pronounced sagging bases with external knife trimming, and since no flat bases occur it is assumed that these bases (not illustrated) may belong to both jars and jugs. Jug or jar

handles are oval or grooved strap types, and are attached directly to the vessel rim rather than to the neck of the pot. Body sherds appear to come from thick-walled vessels. Pipkin handles (19–20) represent a further class of vessel of which no other parts have been identified.

Fabric B

A hard fired, light grey to buff, sand-tempered ware containing sparse oolitic inclusions. It is not dissimilar to fabric A as it might be affected by more oxidising conditions in the kiln, but the vessel rim forms are slightly different.

Forms

Fewer diagnostic sherds are present than in fabric A, but they include most of the same vessel types: bowls/pancheons and jars. The jar rims are more upright than in fabric A and average c. 140mm diameter (23–5). Handled rims (26–7) are likely to belong to two-handled cisterns, although few bung-holes (29) appear in the assemblages. Bowl/pancheon rims occur in sizes ranging widely around 400mm (30–32). One or two fragments of a flat-based vessel type, possibly a jug, are present (not illustrated) but sagging bases are more in evidence. Pipkin handles (not illustrated) complete the evidence for vessel types. Some sherds bear slight traces of glaze.

Fabric C

Oxidised red sand-tempered fabric. The proportion of sand varies a great deal and there are even a few examples of sherds entirely free of inclusions, but they are the exception. Most sherds examined are neither slipped nor glazed, but a white slip is frequently used, externally on jars and jugs, internally on bowls and pipkins. Beneath a clear lead glaze the slip produces a mottled effect with a range of colours, from brown and green to off-white and yellow. There is no evidence of sgraffito through the slip. In appearance this fabric has close parallels with the description of Coppack's red fabric from Denny Abbey (Coppack 1980). From the writer's knowledge it has close parallels with pottery from a kiln site at Glapthorn, Northamptonshire (Johnston & Foster n.d.; see Fig. 7) and with Bourne D ware (Healey 1968).

Forms

Vessel types cover the same range as those identified in the previous two fabrics. Handles with rims (33–35) may belong to jugs or cisterns, with smaller rims of up to 130mm for jugs (36). The handles seen suggest a wider range of jug sizes than is illustrated. A great variety of jar rims is evident (37–43, 47). Bowl/pancheon rims are small everted types (44) or flat ones lying almost horizontal (46). A small number of waster sherds have been noted throughout the collection, some in each fabric. They include examples of blistering, blowing, distortion, surface cracks, overfiring, and glaze overrunning a fractured edge.

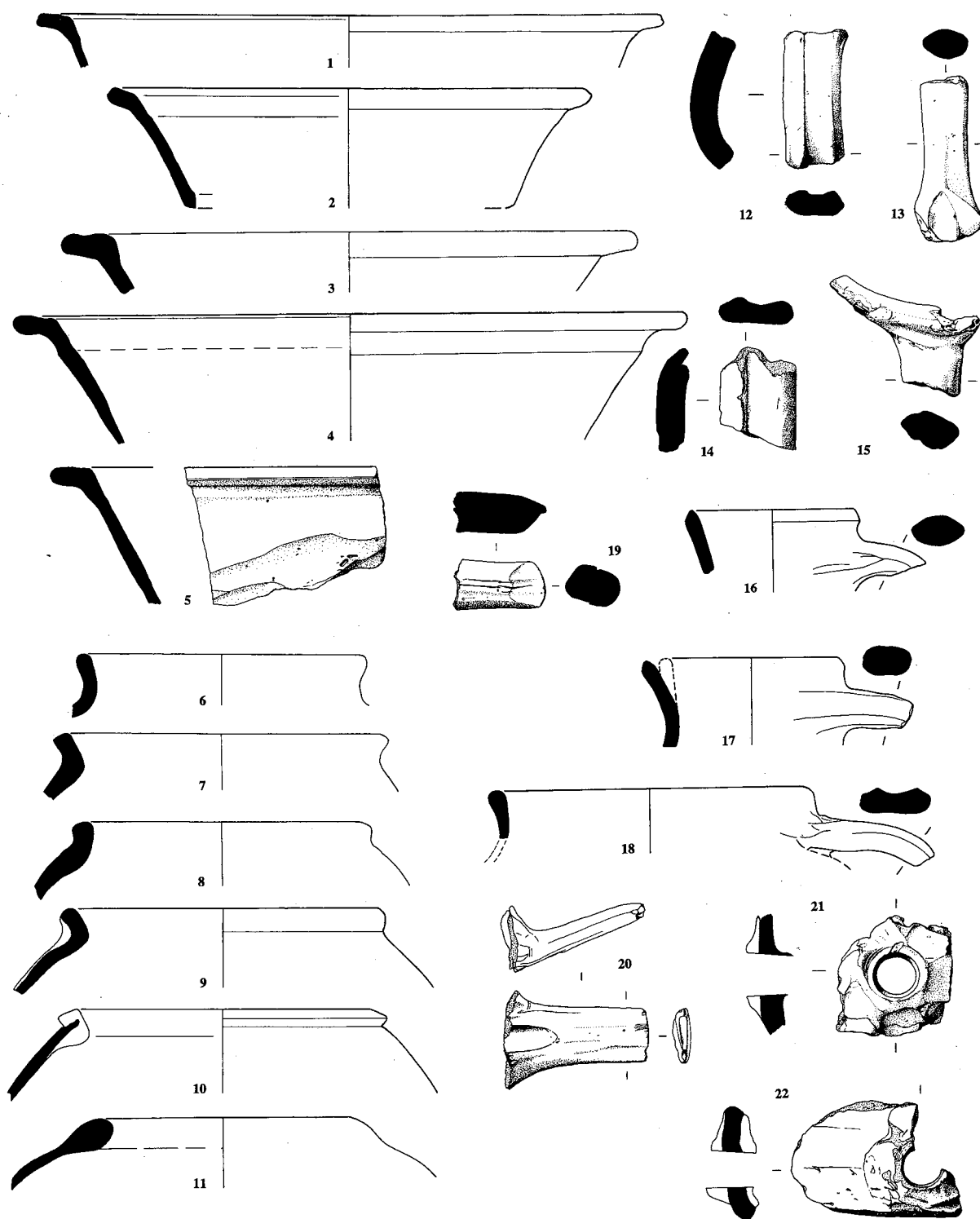


Figure 4. Pottery of Fabric A

Other Ceramic Material

Fragments of flat roof tile (58–9), among them one piece with a peg-hole in the corner, are also present, together with several lumps of fired clay. The fired clay is comparable to kiln structural material known from kiln sites in other counties, including Lincolnshire.

Technology

One peculiar advantage of kiln waste, which is what this collection appears to be, is the opportunity to study manufacturing techniques visible in numerous fractures. All the material seen had been wheel-made, with the additions which might be expected: handles, bung-holes and decorative features. Techniques do not vary much between the three fabrics.

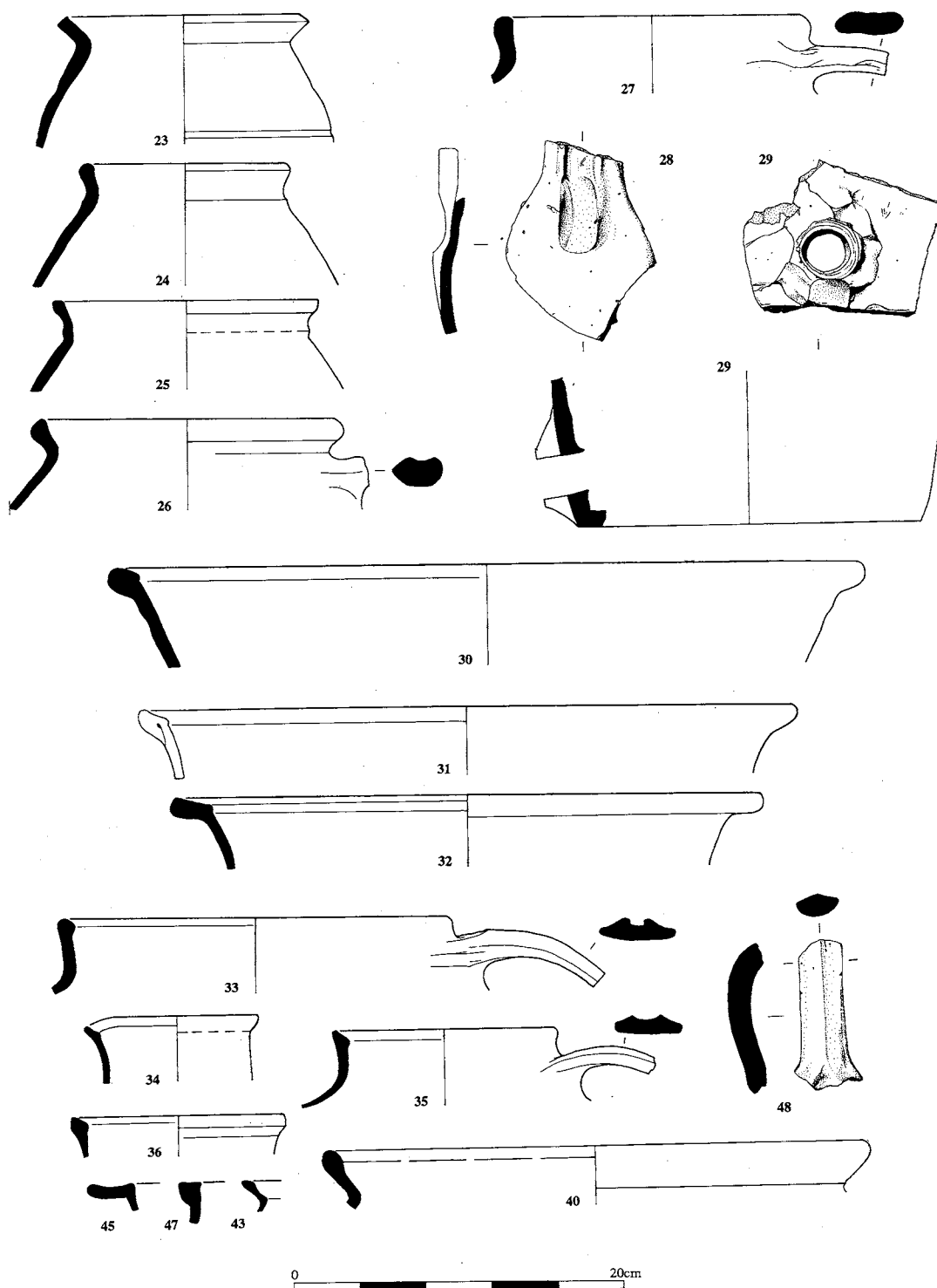


Figure 5. Pottery of Fabric B and C.

Handles

Three principal types of handle are recorded, all of the 'pulled' type, i.e. drawn out gradually with the fingers from a sausage of clay. The A ware handles are rounded in section, as are those of some of the smaller jugs in the C ware. However most of the C ware handles are pulled into a strap formation with a central groove

(33). The groove may be a deep one with its sides pinched or almost folded over, as Healey type 12 (Healey 1976a, 11). The pipkin handles are pulled into required short lengths of c. 50mm and then pinched off (19, 20 and 50). The method of fastening handle to vessel usually involves forming the centre of the upper end of the handle into a small plug of c. 5mm

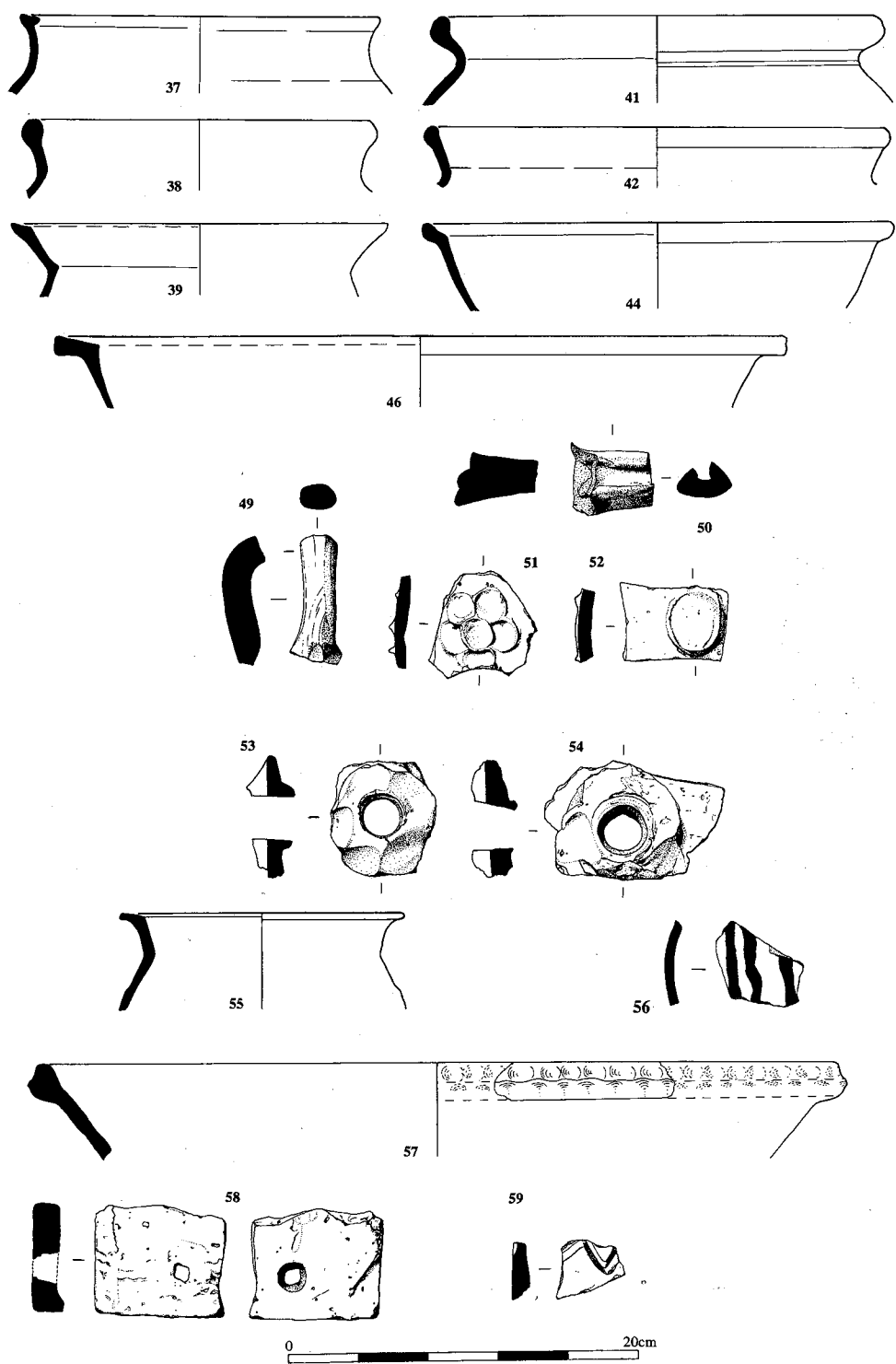


Figure 6. Pottery of Fabric C.

diameter and pushing it into a corresponding hole in the side of the vessel neck. The sub-circular shape of the hole suggests that it is made with a stick or with fingers (bearing in mind that there will have been some shrinkage of the clay since it was first shaped). The clay at the upper end of the handle is then smoothed over the external join. The part of the plug that protrudes internally is also flattened and blended

into the jug wall. At the lower end of the handle junction additional clay may be used to assist in luting the clay onto the wall. In the A ware, handles are fastened directly onto the rim with no plug. The lower handle end is flattened and spread in the process of being smoothed down to seal the join. Handles for pipkins are usually pulled in a straight length rather than curved as for jugs (19, 20), although the C ware pipkin

handle may have been more curved. As with jugs, the other end of the handle is plugged into the vessel wall in the manner already described.

Bung-holes and Decorative Features

For the reinforcement of bung-holes a pad of clay is applied and secured by finger pressure, often resulting in a rosette of finger impressions (21, 53). The central hole is set at a slight angle to the horizontal, with the higher part on the exterior, apparently being formed by use of a large stick, as it invariably tapers with the wider diameter on the outside hole. Evidence for the added clay being in position before the stick is passed through shows in the fact that clay has been pushed slightly to one side on the interior of the vessel. A rosette (51) is made in the same way by pressure of fingers or thumbs (generally termed 'thumbing' even where fingers have apparently been used) on a clay pad or a series of overlapping pads; the rosette has no obvious function although it may serve to assist the grip in lifting and holding the vessel.

Discussion

Detailed examination of material from other sites in the county and region has not been carried out, and further work is required to find parallels for wares A and B. However, the fabric and forms of ware C invite comparison with other wares in eastern England. The most northerly production of similar wares is at Bourne, Lincolnshire (Fig. 7). Here, on present evidence, the comparable D ware represents the latest phase of an industry (Healey 1968).

Amongst the later pottery from Peterborough, Bridge Street West site (Nene Valley Research Committee, unpublished) there is not only Bourne D ware, but a 'Bourne D type' ware which was assumed to have a Cambridge source. It may be that this originates from Colne. Another kiln site producing material of similar appearance is Glapthorn, Northamptonshire (Johnston & Foster n.d.).

There is at present no firm dating for the Colne pottery, other than by analogy, since it is yet to be identified in stratified deposits. It is probable that the different fabrics belong to different phases of production, and analogy of Colne A, B and C wares with A, B and D wares from kilns at Bourne, Lincolnshire is suggested. At Bourne the fabrics appear to represent three phases of production, although with possible overlap between A and B (14th century), where some stylistic features occur in both wares. The same problem of a lack of stratified material applies equally to this Lincolnshire material, although the Bourne D kiln has been dated to the 1500s (Healey 1969). Kilns of a similar date at Toynton All Saints and Old Bolingbroke, Lincolnshire, were of brick construction (Healey 1968; Whitwell 1968). The existence of kilns of this type and date at Colne would fit well with the production of fabric C type pottery.

Colne fabric A has some similarities with early medieval pottery from Norwich; the 'ginger jar' form (11) appears to be paralleled by vessels from Norwich, which would place it in the 11th to 12th century

(Jennings 1981, 22–25). There are, however, inturned rims in Bourne D material, which is from the latest date range. Therefore this early dating is a tentative suggestion on evidence presently available.

Dating the Colne C ware appears to be less problematical. Wares in similar fabrics and forms for which dates have been suggested include Cambridge Sgraffito (14th to 15th century), Glapthorn (second half of 15th century) and Bourne D ware, (15th to 16th century). The dating information on Bourne D ware places it in the 16th century, continuing into the 17th century, but Bourne D type sherds from Kings Lynn were recovered in a 15th to 16th century context (Clarke & Carter 1977). At Bourne there was a strong medieval industry until the 14th century, and since it is unlikely that production ceased for a period of a hundred or so years it is reasonable to assume that Bourne D ware was first manufactured in at least the 15th century. The use of slip on late medieval wares in Essex ceased about the mid 16th century but seems to have continued later than this in Lincolnshire. The presence of thumbing bung-holes on the jars known as cisterns is a characteristic that had virtually died out by c. 1500 in Colchester and North Essex, whereas in Bourne D ware it continued until at least the 16th century. Other thumbing features such as the rosette (51) and large 'teardrop' (52) are typical of Bourne D ware, and the rosette has been seen on Cambridge Sgraffito types, including sherds in the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge.

On comparison therefore with similar material from the region, it is suggested that the Colne C ware may have a date range from the late 15th into the 16th century. The other wares are not easy to date at present, but on analogy with the situation at Bourne, Lincolnshire, may be postulated as earlier phases of the industry. More excavation is needed at Colne to investigate this further, although the existence of a long-lived pottery production site has been demonstrated. Evidence points to kiln structures which imply a phased sequence of construction, suggesting a well preserved assemblage of products and kiln types. In addition, the lack of plough damage indicates there may be surviving associated structures. As a medieval kiln site, this is of both local and regional importance. Cambridgeshire is unusual in that, apart from recent work at Ely¹ no medieval kiln sites have been excavated in the county, and this absence causes severe limitations in the study of regional pottery types, which in its turn affects national studies. The origins of the related fabric type known as Cambridge Sgraffito, for example, remain obscure.

Catalogue

Diameters given are from rims unless otherwise stated.

Fabric A (Fig. 4)

- 1 Pancheon. Diam. 290mm.
- 2 Bowl, complete profile. Diam. 300mm.
- 3 Pancheon. Diam. 360mm.
- 4 Pancheon. Diam. 420mm.
- 5 Bowl/pancheon, knife-trimmed exterior.
- 6 Jar. Diam. 180mm.

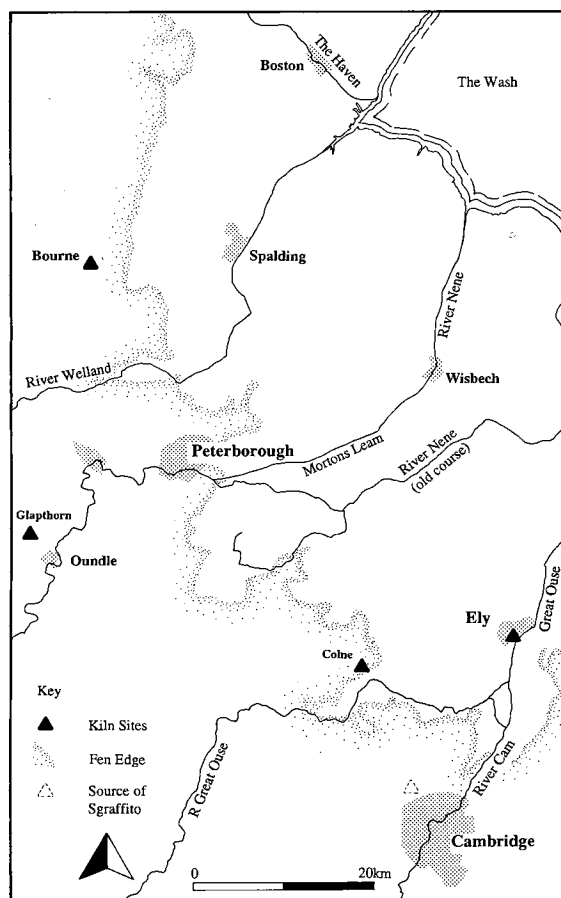


Figure 7. Kiln sites in the region.

- 7 Jar. Diam. 210mm.
- 8 Jar. Diam. 190mm.
- 9 Jar. Diam. 200mm.
- 10 Jar. Inturning rim. Diam. 205mm.
- 11 Jar. Inward turning rim Diam. 170mm.
- 12 Jug handle, oval section. Width 20mm.
- 13 Jug handle, grooved strap. Width 30mm.
- 14 Jug handle, grooved strap. Width 35mm.
- 15 Jug rim and handle. Diam. not known.
- 16 Jug. Diam. 105mm.
- 17 Jug rim and handle Diam. 100mm.
- 18 Jar rim and handle. Diam. 200mm.
- 19 Pipkin handle. Width 27.5mm.
- 20 Pipkin handle. Width 22.5mm.
- 21 Bung-hole of cistern
- 22 Bung-hole of cistern

Fabric B (Fig. 5)

- 23 Jar. Diam. 150mm.
- 24 Jar. Diam. 130mm
- 25 Jar. Diam. 160mm.
- 26 Jar. Diam. 190mm.
- 27 Jar with two handles. Diam. 190mm.
- 28 Base of handle, thumb-impressed.
- 29 Bung-hole and jar base. Base Diam. 210mm.
- 30 Pancheon. Diam. 460mm.
- 31 Pancheon. Diam. 400mm.
- 32 Pancheon. Diam. 360mm.

Fabric C (Figs. 5 and 6)

- 33 Jug or Jar with handle. Diam. 180mm. (possibly distorted).
- 34 Jug. Diam. 105mm.
- 35 Jug. Diam. 100mm.
- 36 Jug rim. Diam. 130mm.
- 37 Jar rim. Diam. 210mm.
- 38 Jar or Jug rim. Diam. 200mm.
- 39 Jar. Diam. 210mm.
- 40 Jar. Diam. c.330mm.
- 41 Jar. Diam. 260mm.
- 42 Jar. Diam. 265mm.
- 43 Jar. Diam. not known.
- 44 Bowl. Diam. 270mm.
- 45 Bowl. Diam. not known.
- 46 Pancheon. Diam. 300mm.
- 47 Jar rim. Diam. not known.
- 48 Jug handle, oval section. with slight ridge. Width 20mm.
- 49 Jug handle, oval section. Width 14mm.
- 50 Pipkin handle. Width at centre 25mm.
- 51 Applied thumb-impressed rosette from jug or cistern.
- 52 Applied thumb-impressed pad, probably from cistern.
- 53 Bung-hole with applied thumbed surround.
- 54 Bung-hole with applied surround, thumbing not decorative.

Other wares and fired clay artefacts (Fig. 6)

- 55 Jar, shelly. Diam. 162mm.
- 56 Grimston (Norfolk) ware. Jug body sherd with applied trailed dark brown slip.
- 57 Bowl, Pancheon or (if turned upside down) Curfew. Coarse shell-filled fabric. Diam. 460mm.
- 58 Tile fragment with peg hole. Tile thickness 11mm.
- 59 Tile fragment with grooved wavy line.

Conclusions

The area of Colne represents a junction of several geological formations which can be used to suggest types of exploitation particularly relevant to medieval settlement and pottery production. The afforested Boulder Clay was a fuel resource during medieval times, and Amphthill Clay may have been a possible clay source. Fen peat could well have been used for fuel, whilst the gravel terrace would have been well drained for settlement and agriculture. If these interpretations are correct, these considerations could have outweighed the inconvenience of having to use road transport to reach the Fenland waterways or large markets such as St Ives. It is also interesting to note that the location of the Bishop's Palace at Somersham is closer than market towns such as St Ives, and the principle periods of occupation at the Palace (Taylor 1989) would correspond with the vague general dates we have for the fabrics found at Colne, with a termination of pot production that appears to coincide with disuse of the Palace. Therefore this kiln may not only have benefited from a specialist market, but may also have been established to supply the needs of this large household.

Endnote

- 1 Since the work on Colne was completed large-scale excavations in central Peterborough have been undertaken, and published together with an in-depth study of the medieval pottery in the context of its regional production and distribution; this work sheds much light on the Colne kiln(s). (Spoerry and Hinman 1998). In addition another kiln with wasters in fabrics similar to those from Colne has been found at Potters Lane, Ely in 1995, and the following brief account is taken from a preliminary report by Ben Robinson and Paul Spoerry.

"Pits and a gully were found packed with late medieval and early post-medieval pottery. A beam-slot, post hole and a ditch were found to incorporate similar ceramic waste, and a rectangular pit with clay lining was also found. The assemblage showed that large unabraded sherds of sandy, hard-fired, buff fabric dating to the 15th/16th centuries and found with lumps of kiln lining and unfired clay must represent waste from pottery production. This assemblage was dominated by pitchers with thumb-applied strips and combed bands. Another assemblage in softer, shell-tempered fabrics, was found in stratigraphically earlier features, perhaps representing waste from an earlier kiln, whilst a few abraded sherds of 13th/14th century date found in the stratigraphically earliest features represent domestic rubbish. A 15th century historical record notes the existence of a pottery on the site (Calendar of Patent Rolls, Henry V, Mem 5-1) and this date seems to accord well with the archaeological evidence found at Potters Lane".

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