

On some Fragments of English Earthenware lately Discovered at Derby.

BY L. M. SOLON.

WHILE digging for the foundations of the new buildings of the Midland Drapery Company, in East Street (formerly Bag Lane), the excavators came unexpectedly upon some fragments of old pottery, which no doubt came to light precisely in the same state as they were when, a couple of centuries ago, they had been thrown away on this spot, as broken and useless shards. The place, in effect, must have been a waste land, where, on the refuse heap, were deposited the litter and rubbish coming from the neighbouring houses. Had it marked the site of an old pot work, the find would have been of another kind; it should have consisted of numerous fragments of pieces, similar in shape and in colour, such things as the potter has to cast away after an unsuccessful firing; instead of that, the odd fragments that were found brought together are varied enough to represent, as it were, all the principal types of the different kinds of pottery manufactured at the time.

In the large field of the Midland counties the potter's craft had developed itself more than in any other part of England; historical documents, supplemented by the yieldings of numberless excavations, testify to the importance that the industry of the pot-maker had attained in these localities, and especially along the valley of the Trent. All over the country could be found, ready at hand, the most available and best sorts of clay, as well as the coals

required for firing the ovens; this alone accounts for so many potters settling there for centuries. Several districts, to which preference seems to have been given at first, lost, however, in the course of time, the prominence they had quickly reached at the start; the exploring potter, bent on finding places the situation of which would prove more favourable to the practice of his trade, removed gradually a little farther on. Amongst the places which were doomed to be abandoned, the most conspicuous was the territory which lay in the neighbourhood of Derby, and which was once a very important centre of manufacture. At Tickenhall alone, the area occupied by pot-works is said to have been immense; if we can judge by the quantity of fragments scattered all over the ground, it must have extended over two miles. Philip Kinder, who visited it in 1650, reports that from there "pots and panchions were carried all East England through." Farther on, going towards the North, small tenements of potters were still found, although at longer intervals, until at last, Lane End, Hanley, and Burslem were reached. These latter were steadily attracting the largest conglomeration of masters and operatives, coming to settle there from all the other points.

At first the work was not, however, conducted collectively, as it was to be in the succeeding period; each man owned his primitive kiln; alone, or with the assistance of his wife and children, he had to fill it with goods made with his own hands, and then proceed to the firing. Improving the state of the craft under such adverse circumstances, and in the wild and lonely countries where it was carried on, was, we need not say, next to impossible. We can picture to ourselves the miserable conditions of the worker in clay. He must have been one of the lowest labourers in the land. His daily toil was hard and thankless; the man had to dig deeply into the soil to extract the marl, which was afterwards to be painfully marched with the feet; the coals required for the baking of the ware had to be fetched and carried on his back to the mouth of the kiln; then, the firing once commenced, he had to attend to it night and day, up to the moment when he could at last hastily snatch out his ware from

the still red hot embers. The kneading and fashioning of his crocks was, indeed, a sort of relaxation to him; although the paltry price he obtained for his product obliged him also to go through this part of his work with relentless haste. His burned hands, his ragged clothing bespattered with mud, made him a repulsive object, even to the common labourer of the fields. Shunned by all, he led a semi-civilised existence, and it was seldom, if ever, that he was seen in the towns of the neighbourhood. Yet this same man, who for so long remained an outcast amongst the sons of toil, was one day to emerge from obscurity, and, transforming his debasing labour into an art beautiful and refined, gain for himself fame, fortune, and universal consideration. We cannot follow him here up to the brilliant period of his success; the fragments to which we have now to return belong to the intermediate stage, when the potter was no longer a mere kneader of mud, but was just entering on the way of improvements, which were subsequently to bring forth his handicraft to the level of the most prominent branches of decorative art.

Individuality is not yet to be detected in the various potteries discovered in the Midland counties; everyone seems to have followed the same traditions; shapes and processes are almost identical, therefore it would be a difficult task to identify any special article as coming from a particular pot-work, or even from a certain locality. Yet if we consider in what place the present fragments have been found, and that they are all pieces of daily use in the households of the time, we may safely surmise that they were of local origin. Those to which we want to call the reader's attention are six in number, and each, separately, is deserving of some appropriate remarks.

(No. 1.) A large pitcher, unfortunately much damaged, but still showing its whole shape, must, we think, be considered as the most rare and curious item of our little lot, insomuch as it belongs to an epoch that we believe to be somewhat anterior to that of the rest. The annexed sketch dispenses us from describing the form, or the rude attempt at decoration, consisting of six rosettes, produced by the impression of the finger tip in the wet material.

Made of rough reddish clay, the jug is thrown on the wheel, and fired at a high degree of temperature, which makes its

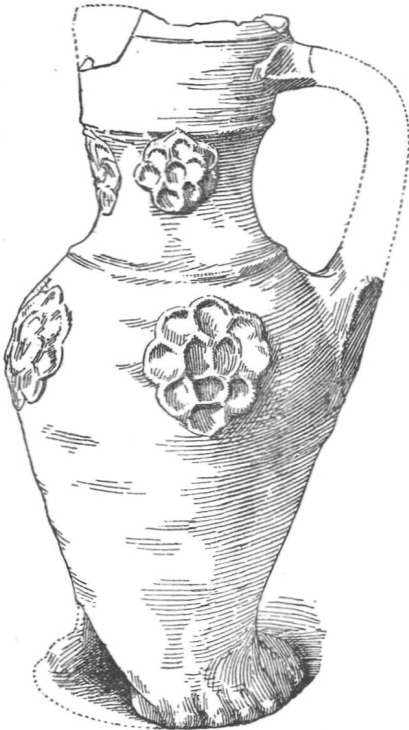


Fig. 1.

hardness approach that of the stone ware ; the surface is smeared with a plumbiferous glaze, containing some oxide of copper, the green colour of which is only partially developed. A fine jug, discovered a few years ago at Burley Hill, in Duffield parish, near Derby, presents all the same characteristics ; as far as clay, glaze, and making are concerned, both bear to each other a striking similitude. The Duffield jug shows a large fire-crack, which had made it unfit for use, and caused it to be thrown away by the maker, very likely in the vicinity of the kiln where it was baked. It was found associated with a great agglomeration of broken pots, which denoted the former existence of some pot-works on the spot. Five horse shoes and two buckles, worked in high relief on the surface, have at one time been thought sufficient to connect it with the Norman Earls of Ferrers, and consequently to bring back its antiquity to the medieval ages ; but as the Augustinian Priory, at Darley, near Duffield had also the same horse shoes in its coat of arms, it may with more probability be referred to some of the priors. It is not uncommon to discover remains of ancient kilns round the precincts of old convents. The monk may be said to have been everywhere

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the potter's friend. Not only were the earthen vessels used most extensively in the religious communities, but they were also often made on the premises. We all know the admirable tile pavements executed in the abbeys for the adornment of the sanctuaries. In England their date goes back into the mediæval ages, as far as those of any other country of Europe. Tiles were doubtless the earliest instance of pottery applied to a decorative purpose ; but the good friars, who knew so well how to mix and combine clays of various colours for their earthen mosaics, must have occasionally turned their hand to the making of such cups and jugs as were required to answer their daily wants. They appreciated the modest clay pitcher which keeps wine and beer so fresh and cool, and costs so little. In the ale-house, or in the guard-room, jugs of metal, wood, or leather were preferred ; the fragile earthen vessel could not stand the rough use it was there put to. Such objection could not be raised in the refectory, or the private cells of the monastery, where all was so sedate and quiet. But if, as it appears, the monks worked the clay with their own hands, they had to call to their assistance some labourers, to whom were entrusted the coarsest parts of the manipulations. By and by, these helps becoming acquainted with the different processes of potting, must have settled for themselves ; either remaining under the immediate patronage of their masters, or carrying their teachings into distant parts. To this the origin of many pot works might, we think, be traced.

We suppose the large Burley Hill jug, evidently an exceptional piece, to have been intended as a present, destined to be offered by the poor potter to his powerful neighbour, the prior. Its date still remains an unsettled question ; but if we take into account the similarity it bears to the one discovered at Derby, and if we consider that the latter was found associated with other fragments which cannot, to our knowledge, be older than the second half of the seventeenth century, we should feel inclined to believe that they both belong to a period much nearer to us than had at first been surmised. Should the Burley Hill jug be attributed to Norman time and make, this one should also be taken as being its contem-

porary ; then nothing would account for its being found in such a place together with comparatively modern potteries.

Before leaving our interesting specimen, we must notice the peculiar indentations strongly marked at the base ; the same impressions are to be seen on the feet of the most ancient pieces of German stoneware ; they served a special purpose. Strange as it may appear, the old potter did not know the simple process of cutting off with a thin wire the pot which had just been shaped on the wheel, but he had to wrench it off with his hand ; thus, the bottom of the foot became much warped, and to make it stand straight again, the workman placed it upon a flat stone, and impressing his thumb round the edge, made the under part resume its former flatness.

A large and coarse handle, rudely incised with a knife, made of the same red clay, coated over with dullish green glaze, and belonging therefore to the same sort of pottery as the jug described above, was found at the same place. Notwithstanding its broken condition, it offers nevertheless some interest, as showing that green glazed pottery may be found where we do not expect to meet with anything so ancient as Norman utensils.

The fig. 2 reproduces a fragment of some large dish which brings us to the second part of the seventeenth century ; many of these dishes have been preserved up to our time ; they are generally inscribed with dates ranging from 1650, for the earliest ones, to 1780. This one is of a bright



Fig. 2.

red colour, obtained by a thin coat of red clay, laid over the lighter clay of which the body of the dish is formed. It is decorated with cursive lines of yellow clay, by the process known under the name of "Slip Decoration." A rough tracery of dots and lines, light or dark according to the colour of

the ground worked upon, was formed on the surface by pouring through a quill a jet of diluted clay. This simple way of ornamenting earthenware was much used in England at the time when Dr. Plot described it at length in his "History of Staffordshire" published in 1686.

We must acknowledge that our sketch does not commend itself to admiration: but it puts us in mind of the numerous and important examples of the same ware, now preserved in the Museums and private collections, and which all bear witness to the skill with which the slip process has been handled by the English potter, and to the decorative effects he could obtain by its various combinations. Not far from the place where our fragment was disinterred stood the Cock-Pitt Hill works, where slip decorated dishes have been made in great number; the one of which we are now speaking may, perhaps, be attributed to that once important factory.

The find included also two small drinking cups. We give (Fig. 3) the reproduction of one of them. Both are almost identical in shape. From the particular disposition of their three handles they could be ranged amongst the vessels which went by the name of Tygs in Staffordshire and some of the Midland Counties. An indefinite number of handles constituted the Tyg. They were, as a rule, of large size, and on festive occasions the "posset" was brewed in them.

As the common cup stood on the middle of the table, the handles were so disposed, it is said, on every side of the cup, in order that each guest might more conveniently draw it to himself. This cannot be the case with our specimens. They are so small as to show plainly that one of



Fig. 3.

them was to be placed at the banquet before each person. Here, consequently, the three handles were nothing more than a mere ornamentation, reproducing on a reduced scale the characteristics of a well-known vessel of larger dimensions. At Tickenhall small tygs of the same description have been frequently discovered. Like ours, they were made of dark clay, thickly coated over with a rich glaze, coloured in brown with oxide of manganese. Brown and black ware, to which the English people always showed a great partiality, was produced all over England in a similar style ; but we cannot trace it much farther back than the period of slip ware, which was made conjointly with it—that is to say, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From our sketch, it can be seen that the form departs somewhat from the simple and traditional outlines of the Staffordshire Tyg. Its high and elegant foot, and its upper part opening as a calyx, recall the shape of the drinking glasses of the time, from which it was probably borrowed. A great number of handles ingeniously disposed round the centre, are often to be noticed on old glass vessels.

Lastly, we have to mention a huge knob, which accompanied the piece described above, and appears to have formed the top of some piece difficult to identify. We may perhaps venture the supposition that it made part of one of those curious contrivances in earthenware which crowned the roof of the dove-cotes that our forefathers liked to erect in their gardens. The piece of quaint design represented a small edifice, perforated on the sides, with big holes to allow the coming in and out of the birds, and, placed at the top corner of the gable, it terminated the building in a tasteful manner. We remember having seen one of them in a good state of preservation ; and the reproductions of such pieces, on a reduced scale, are to be seen in many collections. It is not perhaps useless to say that this knob is made of a clay perfectly white, covered with a glaze of sulphide of lead, which imparts to it a yellow tint. This clay is peculiar to Derbyshire, and does not exist in the district of the "Potteries." There, when the first attempts at a white ware, glazed with salt, were

undertaken, the lack of white clay on the spot obliged the potters to obtain from Dorsetshire the requisite materials.

Independently of the interest attached to each of the specimens we have briefly described, and which can be now seen in the Derby Museum, the whole of the find has a great value as supplying us with new documents towards the history of the potting trade in Derbyshire ; and we feel sure that all those interested in the study of the past industries of the county will welcome the discovery of such pieces, which can unquestionably be considered as being of local origin.