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Crossrail: Assessment of the pottery from Old Oak Common (XSU-10)

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Introduction and methodology

The site produced a total of 421 sherds pottery weighing 5.461kg from two contexts. The Estimated Number of Vessels (ENV) was 87. The real ENV total however is probably closer to 66 vessels due a degree of double-counting (explained below). The assemblage mainly comprises mid 20th-century pottery including an interesting group of tablewares bearing the insignia of Great Western Railways and one or two other railway companies. It is unusual to recover such a late and distinctive group of marked tablewares from an archaeological context and to consider them from an archaeological viewpoint. For these reasons they have been recorded in some detail.

All the pottery was examined, spot-dated and fully catalogued during the present assessment stage (see Excel spreadsheet in archive). This was catalogued in accordance with the standards of the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) and using the system of post-Roman pottery fabric codes developed in London over several decades (MoLA 2015). For each context and fabric the total pottery sherd count and weight were recorded. Vessel form, if identifiable, was also recorded along with ENV (minimum vessel count). Vessel part, decorative details, makers' marks and any other points of interest were recorded in the comments field. A representative selection of vessels has also been illustrated by photography.

Date and nature of the assemblage

The railway depot at Old Oak Common was constructed in 1905 but saw almost continual alterations throughout its lifetime. The small amount of pottery from Context (906) comprises a few marmalade jars with marks allowing them to be dated to the period c 1873-1940 (see below). The larger assemblage of tablewares from Context (404) contains several pieces marked on the underside with makers' marks and in a small number of cases with factory batch marks which appear contain the date of manufacture. On the basis of these the latest pieces in the assemblage were probably made during the period c 1937-1943 (see below) and deposited soon after this and perhaps during the Second World War? The tablewares from (404), mainly cups and saucers, are robust canteen-style vessels made for frequent use and designed to last. Although many survive as large fresh sherds, including a few complete vessel profiles, it is notable that a large proportion of the assemblage appears to be heavily smashed or crushed; the fact that nearly all the teacup handles are present as detached sherds underlines this and suggests perhaps that the vessels were deliberately or accidentally crushed - perhaps during the collapse of surrounding buildings? Many vessels are also stained with an oily black deposit which is very difficult to remove and may be oil (engine oil?) or tar. Destruction during wartime bombing remains a possible explanation. The vessels were recovered from a makeup layer for a concrete slab.

Pottery Fabrics

A detailed breakdown of pottery fabric quantities is presented in Table 1 below.

Fabric	Common name	E Date	L Date	Sherds	Weight	ENV
BLUE	Blue stoneware	1800	1900	1	8	1
ENG BRST	English stoneware with Bristol glaze	1830	1900+	6	268	4
REFW	Plain refined white earthenware	1805	1900+	1	16	1
TPW	Transfer-printed refined whiteware	1830	1900+	413	5169	80
Total				421	5461	87

Table 1. Breakdown of post-medieval pottery fabrics

By far the commonest fabric here is transfer-printed refined whiteware (TPW), probably the commonest type of mass-produced pottery found in 19th- and early 20th-century Britain, and synonymous with Victorian 'Willow Pattern' blue-and-white tablewares. Most of this was produced at

the highly industrialised potteries of Staffordshire and the Midlands and at Stoke-on-Trent in particular. The version of this found at Old Oak Common however is a late development of this fabric and comprises functional and durable crockery made for use in canteens and hotels. This has a very hard white and sometimes almost porcelain-like body with a clear or slightly greyish glaze. In character it often resembles very closely the vitreous white near-porcelain used for sanitary wares in the late 19th and 20th century. The undecorated version of this is coded REFW. Although the fashion for blue-and-white printed 'Willow Pattern' pottery faded-out around 1900 transfer-printed designs and the white-bodied fabric of REFW and TPW remain in production to this day. English stoneware with a Bristol-type clear glassy glaze (ENGS BRST) was developed in the 1830s and remains in production to this day but its common use for domestic storage vessels declined sharply by the 1940s due to the increased use of glassware and plastics. 'English' stoneware during this period was made in many towns and cities across Britain but London and the Midlands were the main suppliers in England. Although Staffordshire remained the major supplier of pottery to most of the country, the later 19th and 20th centuries marked a period of mass-production and distribution when similar-looking tablewares or stonewares could be produced almost anywhere in Britain and end up almost anywhere in the world - particularly in the British colonies. Tableware services, such as the railway crockery seen at Old Oak Common, were often commissioned directly from Staffordshire suppliers by large organisations or companies for use anywhere where the company had offices or premises.

Summary of the pottery by context and vessel form

Full descriptions of the pottery assemblage are given in the detailed catalogue and only summarised here. All significant vessels were assigned an individual catalogue entry or record while groups of identical sherds were often assigned to a single record. As the pottery forms two distinct groups from from two distinct contexts these will be treated in turn - beginning with the earliest.

Context (906) c 1873-1940. Makeup layer for concrete slab

This comprised just 6 sherds (391g) from two vessels in transfer-printed whiteware (TPW), one of them nearly complete. These are cylindrical marmalade jars with a commonplace inscription or label for Keiller's Dundee marmalade in black lettering and with fairly elaborate ornamentation contained within an oakleaf wreath, all in black. The inscriptions on both list the medals for excellence won at exhibitions in London in 1862 and at Vienna in 1873. The jars themselves were made by the Maling company of Newcastle whose mark is on the base. The '1873' label remained in use into the first few decades of the 20th century; its end-date is unclear but pottery and stoneware preserve jars seem to have been gradually replaced by glassware versions during the 1930s and '40s. These would normally be associated with the pantry or the kitchen area of households.

Context (404) c 1937-1943. Makeup layer for concrete slab

This comprised 415 sherds (5070g) with an estimated vessel number (ENV) of 85 vessels. The true minimum number of vessels however is probably closer to 64 for reasons stated below. Only 6 vessels are not in transfer-printed whiteware (TPW); these comprise the following:

A stray saucer rim in blue-grey or 'celadon' coloured near-stoneware (BLUE), probably early 20th century.

Four vessels in English stoneware (ENGS BRST). These include 3 cylindrical storage jars in cream and pale grey stoneware - probably for preserves. One has a complete recessed flat base with an impressed trade mark or factory mark showing a ligatured symbol with a central 'M' with an 'F' on either side (mirror image) and a small 'C' above the M. The significance of the mark has yet to be traced but it is fairly common on stoneware jars of this period. The fourth vessel is represented by a body sherd from the front of a cylindrical-bodied bottle with part of an underglaze transfer-printed inscription in black mentioning 'Stone's Ginger Beer'.

A teacup rim in plain refined white earthenware (REFW). This is quite unlike the TPW 'service' below as it is thin-walled with spiral fluted (moulded) decoration. It is probably a stray from a late 19th- or early 20th-century service.

The remainder of the assemblage (at least 60 vessels) comprises tablewares - mainly cup and saucers - in transfer-printed whiteware (TPW). These all have a very similar, very hard and sometimes porcelain-like fabric, but closer to an earthenware than a true porcelain. Many pieces bear transfer-printed designs, mostly in black, including the names and insignia of railway companies and it is clear that the majority of these are tablewares items made for the Great Western Railway ('GWR') hotel at Paddington Station. They represent serviceable everyday crockery for use in hotels and cafes but united in style by their simplicity and company 'branding'. Several items bear the printed or impressed marks of Staffordshire pottery factories on the underside, all of them operating in and around Stoke-on-Trent. These include big companies like Mintons but also smaller ones like the Soho Pottery, Bridgwood's Anchor Pottery and the Crescent Pottery of George Jones and Sons. The latter mark dates after 1921 but most of the other company marks were in use from the late 19th-century onwards and cannot be dated very closely.

In addition to makers' mark a few vessels also have small transfer-printed numbers on the underside and these are probably batch-marks giving the month and year of production. The printed marks include '6.35' '3.37' and '5.37' suggesting production dates between 1935-1937. A few Mintons dishes are marked underside both with a printed company logo and a separate impressed mark with the company name and a group of three or four numbers below this which may also represent a dated batch mark. Unfortunately these are not very clear (and do not always start with a '19--') but three marks have digits ending in '33' or '35' and one clearly reads '5-36' while another mark ends in a '43'. If the impressed marks are date marks then the latest datable pieces in the collection were made in 1943. Although some vessels may have been a decade or two old at deposition it seems likely that the bulk of the assemblage was broken and deposited sometime during the period c 1937-1943. It is tempting to link the deposition of the assemblage with the War and this may well be the case - if not directly (eg by bombing) then at least indirectly. Documentary research into the history of the Old Oak Common railway depot shows it to have been a hive of activity during the war with almost constant renovations and repairs taking place including the installation of air raid shelters, anti-aircraft guns and extra-thick walls to protect men and engines from bombing. Despite this the depot was attacked by enemy aircraft on a number of occasions during the early stages of the Blitz of 1940 and the carriage depot was badly damaged in September of that year. Thereafter renovations continued until the end of the war and beyond. It is within this wartime context that the present pottery assemblage was probably deposited. It is impossible to say with certainty whether it was destroyed by bombing or not but the very fragmentary condition of many pieces makes this a strong probability. It is fairly certain however that it ended up as hardcore for a concrete slab in building operations during or very soon after the war.

Teacups

These are all of similar form with a cylindrical body rounding into a footring base and a handle made in a mould and then applied to the vessel wall. The handles have a distinctive robust appearance with a solid bracket-like support below the finger loop (resembling an ear-lobe), typical of Art Deco-style pottery made between the 1920s and the 1940s. About half the teacup sherds have overglaze transfer-printed designs while the remaining plain sherds are almost certainly from the undecorated areas of the same vessels. Counts of teacups handles give a minimum of 21 vessels whereas counts of distinctively decorated teacup rims suggests at least 25 vessels (total 46 ENV). Obviously some of these are from the same vessels so a minimum of around 25 transfer-printed whiteware (TPW) teacups appears likely. The fact that most of the handles have become detached from the cups - despite their very strong design - has already been noted and is the strongest piece of evidence that the assemblage was smashed or crushed to some extent. Nearly all teacups (and others forms) are decorated on the outside - just below the rim - either with inscriptions and insignia (logos), or both, linking them to the Great Western Railway company. The inscriptions are fairly standard throughout but there are at least two main designs or styles of decoration seen on the teacups and lesser variants seen in the size of the lettering and the company logo. These may represent different batches of tablewares commissioned at different times, and/or possibly from different pottery manufactories? These include a set of Art Deco-style cups and a set of 'plain-style' cups. The first and more decorative style maybe the earliest. This has the company 'GWR' logo in black Art Deco-style letters within a circle and below this inscription '[GWR] HOTELS RETURN TO PADDINGTON STATION'. The same or very similar inscriptions appear on all the other GWR vessels but sometimes in slightly different arrangements. Some Art Deco-style cups and saucers have a black border line at the rim with a border of stylised laurel leaves below this, but some are border-less. The plainer-style cups are more numerous. These are border-less and have a design consisting of an inscription only. The letters 'G.W.R.' in larger font are enclosed by the other lines of inscription in smaller font arching over and underlining it: 'PROPERTY OF G.W.R.'

RETURN TO PADDINGTON STATION'. The plainer less fussy style evident here suggests a slightly later date perhaps in the later 1930s and '40s when Art Deco was falling out of fashion but it is likely that older and newer cups were in use alongside each other in the last few years of service. As the cups etc clearly weren't returned to Paddington Station but ended up 3 miles down the line at Old Oak Common one might ask how they strayed this far? Were they casual acquisitions by railway workers, or were they part of a legitimate supply of company crockery to GWR employees further up the line?

At least three teacups bear the marks of railway companies other than GWR. One cup bears the printed mark 'LMS' in light purplish-red letters near the rim representing the London Midland and Scottish railway company. Another bears a heraldic-style circular garter device in dark green containing the words 'SOUTHERN RAILWAY' on the strap area. A third cup bears a slightly different-shaped garter (damaged) in brown but the upper part with the company name is missing. These clearly represent stray vessels from stations others than Paddington. In addition to the teacup form there is a single sherd from a larger cylindrical mug possibly with traces of a poorly printed (or painted?) black design.

Saucers

There are around 25 of these - the same number as for teacups. Most show the same two main GWR designs as the teacups above. At least four saucers however are decorated on the inner wall (or flange) with the elaborate coat of arms of the GWR - a vertically bisected shield with the arms of Bristol on the right and those of London on the left with helmeted finials over both halves and the words 'GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY HOTELS' on a ribbon below. The rims have the same stylised leaf border as the Art Deco cups and saucers and are probably contemporary. A fragmentary plainer-style saucer bears a variant inscription including the words '[?COAC]HES & [?---]/ [?RETURN TO PADDINGTON] STATION'. The GWR saucers have rim diameters in the 160-170mm range. Two non-GWR saucers were identified including one with the same green 'SOUTHERN RAILWAY' inscription and garter as the cup above and another with the same 'LMS' inscription in purplish-red as a cup above.

Dishes or plates

At least five examples (all c 220-230mm diam). One has the same GWR coat of arms and leaf border as the saucers above. Four others are probably of the same design but no coat of arms survives. Three bear the Minton's trademark on the underside.

Teapot

A single example identified - a complete lid-seated rim in near-porcelain. It has the same stylised leaf border as the GWR-marked Art Deco vessels above. The body has not survived.

Lid

A single example represented only by a small discoid knob probably from a teapot similar to that above. The top is decorated with a 'bull's eye' in black - a large dot within a thin circle.

Illustration catalogue (Photos: All from XSU 10 (404) c 1937-1943)

Fig. 1. Group photo of detached handles from 'GWR' teacups. Date c 1937-1943.

Fig. 2. Group photo of Great Western Railway (GWR) teacups with Art Deco-style decoration. Date c 1937-1943.

Fig. 3. Group photo of Great Western Railway (GWR) teacups with plainer-style inscription. Date c 1937-1943.

Fig. 4. Two saucers with plainer-style 'GWR' inscription. Date c 1937-1943.

Fig. 5. Dish rim with 'Great Western Railway Hotels' coat of arms and Art Deco-style leaf border. Date c 1937-1943.

Bibliography

MoLA 2015 Medieval and post-medieval pottery codes (<http://www.mola.org.uk/resources/medieval-and-post-medieval-pottery-codes>)