

◆ A medieval pottery assemblage from Lower Barn Farmhouse, Ringmer

By David Gregory

During 2017, the Lewes Archaeological Group's finds archive was moved to new premises in Hailsham, the finds being re-bagged, and re-boxed. The author took this opportunity to analyse pottery that had been recovered by C. E. Knight-Farr in 1979. The pottery assemblage showed that the intention of the potters was to produce a hard-fired vessel by using a reduced-firing kiln and to cause the vitrification of the clay matrix. This innovation improved the quality and durability of the pot.

INTRODUCTION

In April 1979 the remains of a waster heap were discovered by C. E. 'Jock' Knight-Farr at Lower Barn Farmhouse, Ringmer (Fig. 1). The assemblage had been stored with the finds archive of the Lewes Archaeological Group (LAG), along with a description and plan of the find spot. It would appear that it is the only waster heap assemblage found by Knight-Farr still retained in the LAG archive. Knight-Farr investigated much building activity in Lewes and the surrounding area, including Ringmer, from the 1970s to the 1990s. Some 40 boxes relating to his finds are stored at the Museum of Sussex Archaeology, Barbican House, Lewes. To date, only one site has been published: Brooman's Lane, Lewes (Locke 2001).

The Knight-Farr assemblage from Lower Barn Farmhouse consisted of eight bags of finds relating to the top soil (none of which were analysed for this report) and four bags relating to the waster heap (Context 1). Unfortunately, two of these bags had split open and a third one had no label. The LAG finds archive store suffered from flooding in 2000 and many of the labels in connection with this assemblage were either damaged or left indecipherable. It was therefore decided to amalgamate the four bags into a single context. Although a rough plan had been drawn for the location of the find spots, no measurements of the four holes that had been dug were given.

A 10m x 2m rectangular area, adjacent to the track shown on Fig 1, roughly covers the area of the four holes. Knight-Farr indicated that charcoal specks were noted to a depth of 0.762m. The waster-heap, Context 1, consisted of 1,345 sherds, with a total weight of 10.1kg, and 71 burnt clay fragments,

possibly the remains from a kiln, with a weight of 750g (see Table 1).

THE POTTERY

Table 1. Percentages of fabrics found within the assemblage.

Fabrics	Fabric Totals	Percentage
LBF1	596	44%
LBF3 and LBF3f	474	35%
LBF4	265	20%
Tile and Brick	10	1%
Total	1345	

FABRICS

Three main and one subdivision fabrics were found within the assemblage. These are closely related to Fabrics 1, 3, and 4 (with subtle differences) from Norlington Lane, Ringmer, (Gregory 2014) and therefore the Norlington Lane numbering has been used for this report, with the prefix LBF added to distinguish between them.

Fabric LBF1

Abundant quartz inclusions, well sorted, average size 0.2–0.3mm, with smaller abundant quartz inclusions in the matrix, along with occasional larger quartz inclusions, up to 1mm, and also mica flecks and iron mineral inclusions. Hard and well-fired, with a fairly rough feel. The colour of the core is frequently oxidised red to orange throughout, although light grey cores are also common. Several examples of a 'burnt' or black core were also noted, as well as occasional voids measuring 0.5mm. The surface colour is orange to light brown, with reduced grey varieties also common.

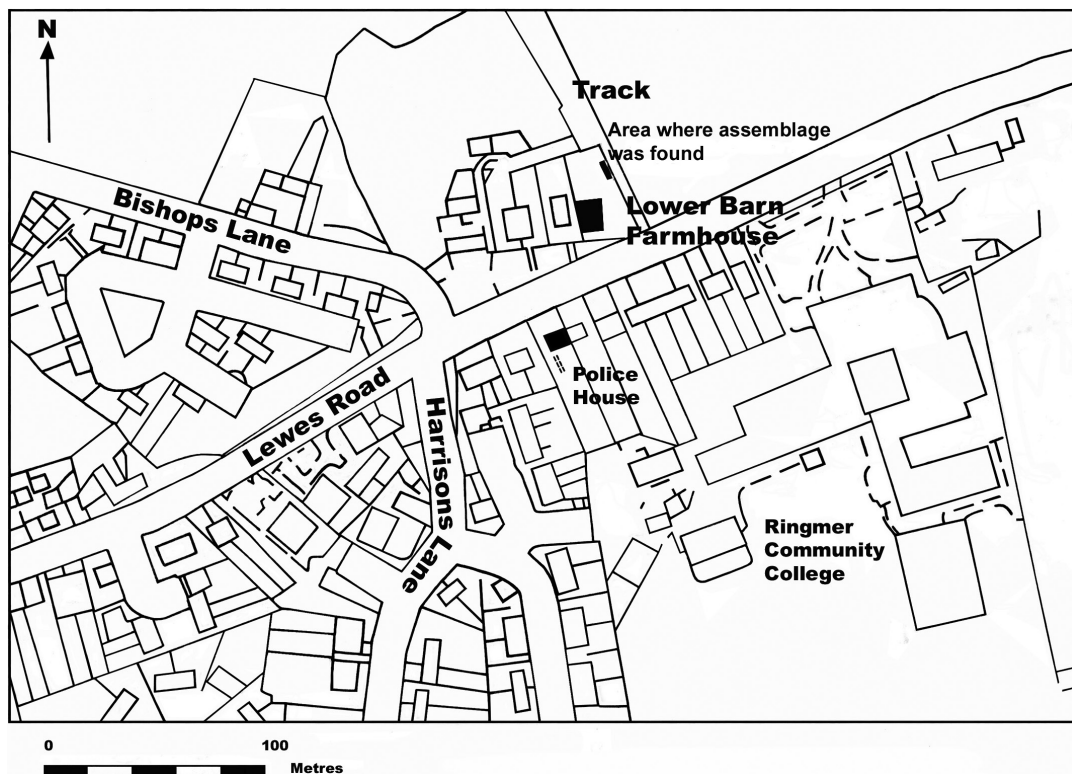


Fig. 1. Site location.

Fabric LBF3

Very well sorted and abundant quartz inclusions, average size 0.1mm, with occasional larger quartz and flint inclusions, up to 0.5mm, with mica flecks. Very hard and well-fired, generally a smooth feel. Several examples of a 'burnt' or black core were also noted. The colour is often harmonious throughout, ranging from orange to grey, with little or no difference in core colour.

Fabric LBF3f

Similar to LBF3 but fired in a reducing atmosphere in the kiln to produce a partial vitrification of the fabric (Newell 1998–99). Occasional flint inclusions, up to 0.5mm, with mica flecks and occasional, larger, quartz inclusions. Also, occasional small voids up to 0.5mm. Fired very hard, with a smooth feel. The surface colour is grey to dark grey, sometimes with a slight orange hue. An oxidised surface of orange to reddish-brown also occurs. The core is light grey in colour.

Fabric LBF4

Fairly well-sorted quartz inclusions, average size 0.4–0.8mm, with tiny inclusions of quartz in the matrix, along with frequent angular flint inclusions of 0.5–1.8mm. The matrix includes mica flakes and occasional iron minerals. Occasional voids up to 1.5mm. Hard, but medium-fired, with a rough feel. The colour ranges from an overall orange/red, due to oxidation in the firing process, to a grey surface with a light grey core. Many of the fragments were oxidised throughout.

It appears that, as at Norlington Lane, there were two main phases of pottery manufacture at Lower Barn Farmhouse. Phase one is represented by fabrics LBF4 and to a certain extent LBF1. This phase may be under represented because most of the vessels would have been found at the base of the waster heap or, if another kiln was involved, at an adjacent waster heap location.

Some of the vessel types may well be intrusive, for example pipkins, which are represented by one

Table 2. Analysis of fabric cores from identified wide-necked jar sherds.

Fabric	Surface	Oxidised Cores	Reduced Cores	Burnt Core	Fused Core	Totals	Fabric %
LBF4	Oxidised	7	4	1		12	
	Reduced						10%
LBF1	Oxidised	24	11	2		37	
	Reduced		2			2	31%
LBF3	Oxidised	13	13	3		29	
	Reduced	1	5	1		7	29%
LBF3f	Oxidised				15	15	
	Reduced			1	22	23	30%
Total						125	

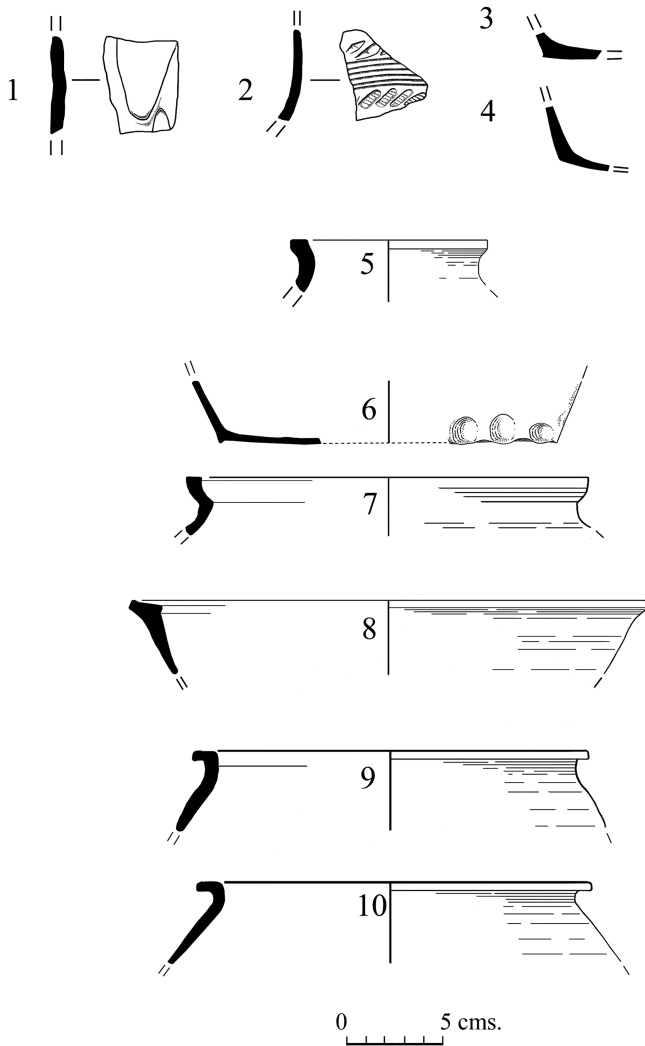


Fig. 2. Pottery. **1** and **2**: decoration on LBF 4 fabric vessels; **3** and **4**: base profiles for phase one and two vessels; **5**, **6**, **7**, **8**: vessels from the phase one kiln; **9** and **10**: wide-necked jars from the phase two kiln.

rim fragment and a possible pipkin/skillet handle (although this could easily be a foot from a cauldron) and four decorated fragments, all probably from the same bowl or jug (and all similar to fabric LBF4, but with a yellow core and a fairly soft hardness) (Fig. 2.1).

Another decorated jug fragment could also be intrusive (Fig. 2.2) but, with so little evidence, this remains inconclusive. Brick and tile (ten fragments) formed such a small quantity that their production at this workshop also remains inconclusive and they too may be intrusive to the waster heap. None of the phase one or phase two pottery showed any signs of being sooted or used for domestic purposes. Although no obvious firing faults were identified, the limited number of fabrics present shows that both phases represent pottery from waster heaps.

PHASE ONE WORKSHOP

This is very poorly represented within the assemblage. Many of the fragments were oxidised throughout, and it was noted that several sherds had a ‘burnt’ core. Only eight bowl fragments could be positively identified. They had an average diameter of 110mm and Fig. 2.8 is typical of the rim form. Jugs are represented by one jug rim (Fig. 2.5), one fragment of a strap handle with stabbing (not illustrated),

and ten probable jug bases with thumbing on the base (Fig 2.6). Wide-necked jars (Medieval Pottery Research Group 2001) are represented by only three rim types (see Figs 2.7, 2.9, 2.10). Apart from the jug decoration, the only other decoration used was strapping, probably on both jars and bowls.

PHASE TWO WORKSHOP

Phase two pottery appears to have an even more limited range of vessels represented by fabrics LBF3 and LBF3f: wide-necked jars with similar dimensions (100mm diameter rim and 100mm diameter base). It seems the intention was to make only very hard-fired vessels in a reduced-firing kiln. A close parallel is for the Tyler's Hill pottery workshops (Cotter 2001), where similar reduced grey wares were produced in the latter part of the 13th century. Newell suggests that the grey ware was not intentional (Newell 1998–99) and that the process was used to produce a vitrification of the clay (LBF3f). Many of the Lower Barn Farmhouse fragments show surface evidence of re-oxidation after the reduction in the firing process (Table 2).

Only two specific rim types were recovered. Both had apparently the same dimensions (Fig. 2.9, 2.10). One type had a slight thumb imprint within about a centimetre of the top inner surface of the jar; the rim had then been pulled out and finished off with a tool, causing a slightly raised edge on the rim. The second rim was made by folding the edge over, giving a more rounded top, then finished off in a similar way. This suggests at least two different potters working in the potting shed.

It would also appear that strapping was applied to at least some of the vessels, as eight examples of fabric LBF3 were found with this decoration. Two types of bases were employed on the LBF3 and LBF3f fabric vessels, Fig. 2, No. 3, of which there were 18 examples. Fig. 2, No. 4, nine examples.

DISCUSSION

Without a reliable date for the workshop, only speculative dates can be suggested for the phase one and phase two pottery. Norlington Lane in its final stage gave an archaeomagnetic date of between 1200 and 1270 (Gregory 2014; McCann 1998). Since

there are some similarities between Norlington Lane phase one and Lower Barn Farmhouse phase one, a possible date for the Lower Barn phase two pottery is from the mid-13th century to the second half of the 13th century, although this could be as late as the early 14th century. It would seem from the three assemblages from Norlington Lane, the former police house (Gregory 2008), Ringmer, and Lower Barn Farmhouse, that the workshops were operating at roughly the same time. The Norlington Lane site, in the second phase, specialised in fine wares, whereas at Lower Barn Farmhouse, from the evidence, potters specialised in a standard size, wide-necked jar, fired in a reduced-firing kiln, to produce a tough vessel. The evidence would seem to show that there was a progressive development towards the achievement of the desired result, and that some experimentation was involved. It is more than likely that the local potters knew the effects of a reducing atmosphere in the firing process, and how to achieve this effect consistently, although it is possible that wares from outside Ringmer were influential in developing a vitrified reduced core. R W Newell gives a very good description of the reduction and oxidation practise in a medieval kiln (Newell 1998–99).

A problem now will be to identify phase two pottery from both Norlington Lane and Lower Barn Farmhouse from archaeological sites. Much of the documentary evidence for potters in Ringmer is for the early 14th century (Bleach 1982), with as many as eight potters then working in the area. As yet, no kiln assemblage for this date has been positively identified, although the phase two pottery from Lower Barn Farmhouse may fit into this bracket. David Millum (Millum 2016) has published a list of excavated kiln and waster heap sites and has suggested that a petrological analysis of the pottery from Ringmer production and consumer sites be made a priority. A petrological programme was initiated for the Norlington Lane fabrics by Kathryn Knowles (Gregory 2014) and this could help in identifying Ringmer Ware, which is proving to be more diverse than originally thought.

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