

THE ROMAN POTTERY INDUSTRY OF LONDON

BY PETER MARSDEN

A group of four Roman pottery kilns was found in 1677 during the rebuilding of St. Paul's Cathedral after the Great Fire of 1666 (fig. 1). Until recently these were the main evidence for there having been a pottery producing industry in Roman London. They were found 'in digging ye foundations of ye north east cross part of St. Paul's London' apparently at a depth of 26 ft., amongst gravel pits and loam pits. The kilns were grouped together around a single stokehole (fig. 2B), and are described in a contemporary account by John Conyers as 'made in the sandy loam, in the ground on the fashion of a cross formation and only that left standing (fig. 2A) was 5 foot from top to bottom and better, and as many feet in breadth, had no other matter for its form and building but the outward loam, naturally crusted hardish by the heat burning the loam red, like brick; the floor in the middle supported by, and cut out of, loam, and helped with old-fashioned Roman tyles' shards, but very few, and such as I have seen used for repositories for urns, in the fashion of and like ovens. The kiln was full of the coarser sort of pots, . . . so that few were saved whole, viz., lamps, bottles, urns and dishes'. Drawings of some of these survive and they seem to be of first or second century date.¹

NEWGATE AREA

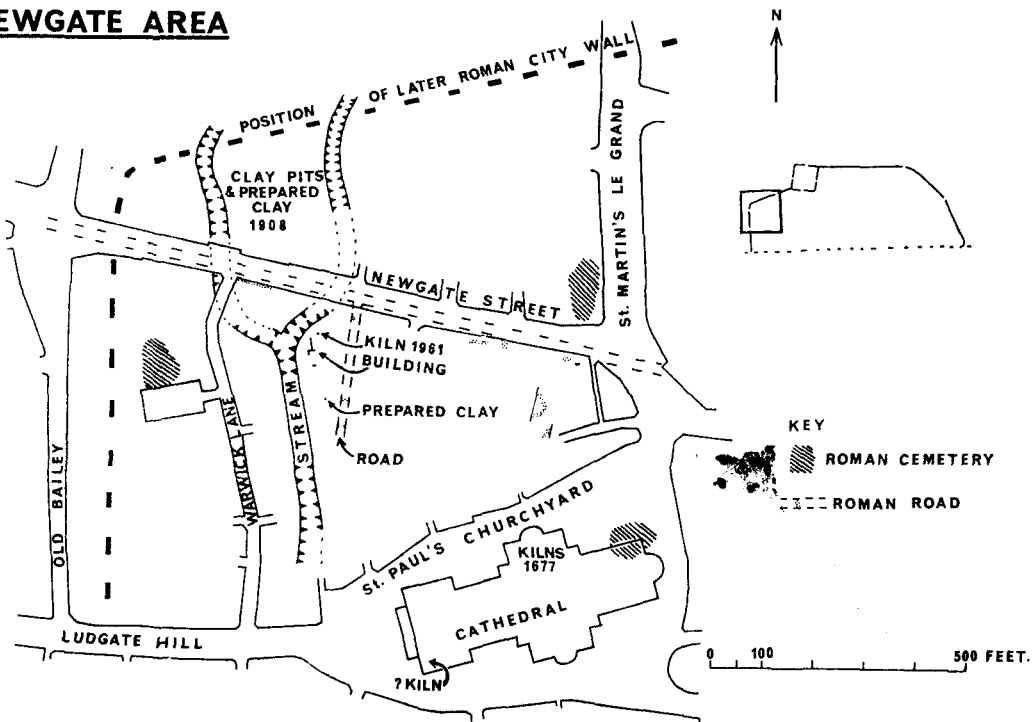


Fig. 1

Roman features in the Newgate area in the late 1st—early 2nd century A.D.

I am grateful to my colleague Mr. John Clark for pointing out that the John Conyers MS. states that the kilns were found in the north-*east*, and not the north-*west* part of the cathedral as has been supposed for more than a century in archaeological publications describing the St. Paul's finds. Conyers originally wrote that the kilns were found 'in digging ye foundations of ye north east part of St. Paul's, and later added the word 'cross' after the word 'east' to clarify the location of the kilns. The kilns were clearly found under the north transept of the existing cathedral, and this was sometimes significantly called a 'cross aisle' in other writings about the cathedral. Mr. R. Crayford of the Surveyor's Department at St. Paul's Cathedral helped to confirm the location of the kilns by discovering in the cathedral records that in 1677 the main excavation work for the whole building was being carried out on the north transept, and also that in that year no excavation had been started in the north-west corner of the cathedral, where the kilns are supposed to have been found.

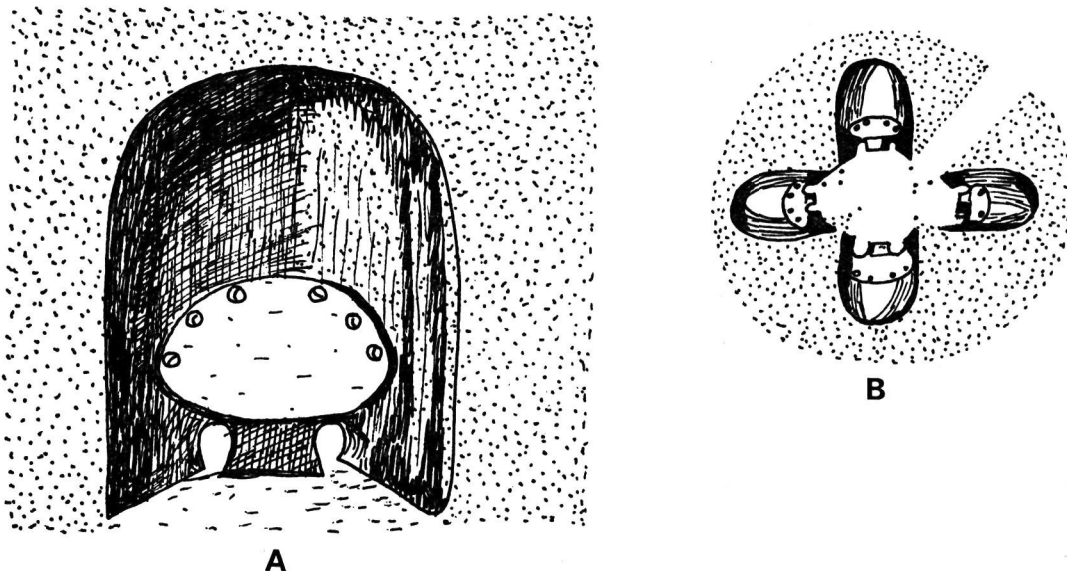


Fig. 2. Kilns found at St. Paul's Cathedral 1672. Sketched copy of original drawing

A further mention to the discovery of a Roman kiln during the construction of St. Paul's Cathedral is given by Strype in his edition of Stow's 'Survey' (book VI, p. 692). He states that 'on the south side of the said west end was found a potter's kiln, the shape of which was circular'.

The flat top of Ludgate Hill where these kilns occurred is capped by a thick deposit of natural brickearth, and flowing in a deep narrow valley southwards through this high ground was a stream which was evidently an important source of water for the Roman pottery industry (fig. 1). During the whole of the first century this area must have been outside the official western limit of the Roman city because parts of it were used as cemeteries. Concentrations of burials marking specific cemeteries have been found at the south end of St. Martin-le-Grand, at the north-east corner of St. Paul's Cathedral, and on the west side of Warwick Lane. In addition a scatter of isolated burials has been found throughout the entire area. Most of them were cremations of late 1st century date.²

During the first century several Roman roads were built across this area, the most important of which was the westward continuation of the main east-west street of the city and the start of the main road from Londinium to the south-western part of Britain. The gravel metalling of this lies mainly beneath Newgate Street, but its southern edge was located on the south side of Newgate Street in several places in 1961.³

In 1961 a huge site bounded by Newgate Street, Warwick Lane, St. Paul's Churchyard, and Panyer Alley was redeveloped as the Paternoster Development Scheme. A considerable length of the stream valley already mentioned was discovered, and on its east-side a previously unknown Roman road was found, aligned roughly north-east-south-west, and evidently linked to the main Roman road under Newgate Street. It was presumably a minor road as it was only about 12 ft. wide, but its considerable use is indicated by its having been re-metalled many times, resulting in a total surviving thickness of nearly 5 ft. Associated pottery dating evidence shows that it was in use during the late 1st century; that is, at a time when the cemeteries were in use and when this area was clearly outside the official western limit of the Roman city. Also significant is the fact that it seems not to have been built as part of a grid system of streets, for it did not lie at a right angle to the main road under Newgate Street. Instead its alignment seems to have been determined by the stream which lay a few yards to the west. In view of the evidence for a pottery industry closely associated with this stream, it appears that this Roman road was almost certainly a service road for the kilns and associated buildings which, as will be shown, were evidently scattered along the stream during the late first century.

Apart from the kilns recognised on the site of St. Paul's Cathedral in 1677, the evidence for a pottery producing industry in this area is extremely limited, since all the archaeological investigations were carried out during rebuilding operations. This was especially so in 1961 on the Paternoster Development site where several mechanical excavators were in operation loading their spoil into an ever present queue of lorries. Not only did the huge area being excavated limit the extent of the archaeological investigations, but also the speed at which clearance was carried out meant that such inconspicuous structures as kilns were not easily recognisable. Luck therefore played a considerable part in what could be examined, and the recorded features must be used as a rough guide to what probably existed in those areas which could not be investigated.

Between the two branches of the stream, on the General Post Office site north of Newgate Street, the rebuilding excavations of 1908-9 exposed uncertain evidence of the Roman pottery industry. Several Roman pits were found which were thought to have been dug for clay; and one pit had clearly been used as a potter's store for 'prepared clay'.⁴ Unfortunately the published report on these excavations does not include a description of the prepared clay. In places the surface of the natural brick-earth had been burnt red; and at one point a horizontal hole was seen in section filled with wood ash and was thought to have been a flue. The evidence is very inconclusive, but considered with the information recovered in 1961 on the Paternoster Development site on the south side of Newgate Street, it does become more significant than at first appears.

In 1961 on the Paternoster Development site a number of sections through the Roman strata did occasionally show significant thin layers of fine pure white clay. These were only noted in the vicinity of the north-south road and on the east side of the stream. The deposits were limited in extent and were not naturally formed. The writer, who has investigated many London sites, has never seen similar deposits elsewhere in London, and there seems

little doubt that they were of specially prepared potters' clay for the local kilns. Whenever seen the white clay deposits occurred well down in the Roman-made ground and were probably of first century date. One white clay deposit found 30 ft. west of the Roman road was firmly dated by associated pottery to the late 1st century A.D.⁵ (fig. 1).

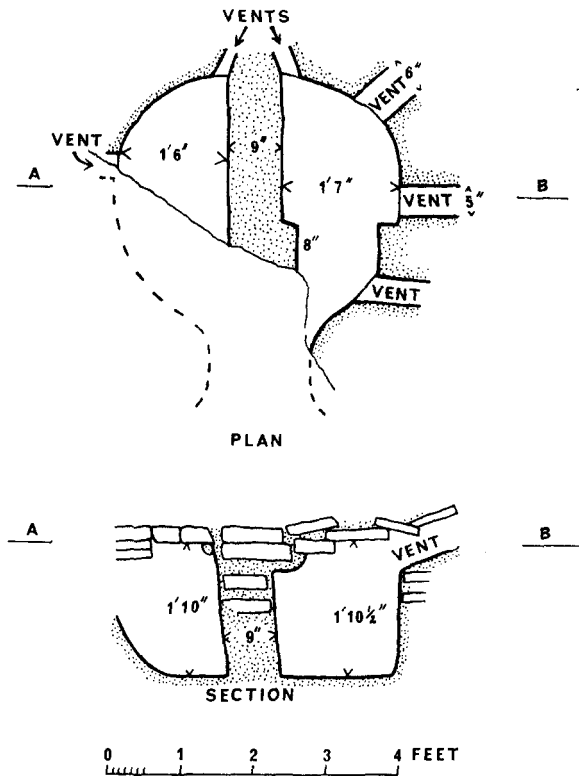


Fig. 3. Kiln found in 1961

Fortunately, however, one pottery kiln was found in 1961 which seems to confirm the suggestions described above. Only the furnace and the oven floor survived in the side of a deep excavation, but its characteristic form leaves no doubt about its identification. At the time it was discovered it was thought to be the stoke-hole for an undiscovered hypocaust in a nearby Roman stone building, but now that the excavation is completed there has been time to study the information and correct this wrong interpretation.⁶

The kiln (fig. 3, plate 1) furnace was nearly 4 ft. in diameter and 1 ft. 10 in. high. It had been dug into the natural brickearth, and had been lined inside by wet clay smeared on by hand for the finger smears could be clearly seen. The intense heat generated when the kiln was in use had burnt the clay and the natural brickearth hard and red. The overlying floor of the oven was obviously permanent as it was built of soft baked clay bricks, and this was supported on a central wall, 9 in. thick, of bricks set in burnt clay dividing this furnace in half.

The kiln was of the updraught type,⁷ and the oven floor was pierced around the edges by a series of vents through which hot gasses passed from the furnace into the oven above where the pots were fired. No sign of any other vents in the oven floor was noted, indicating that this kiln probably did not conform to the normal form. The side vents must have given an unequal distribution of heat in the oven.

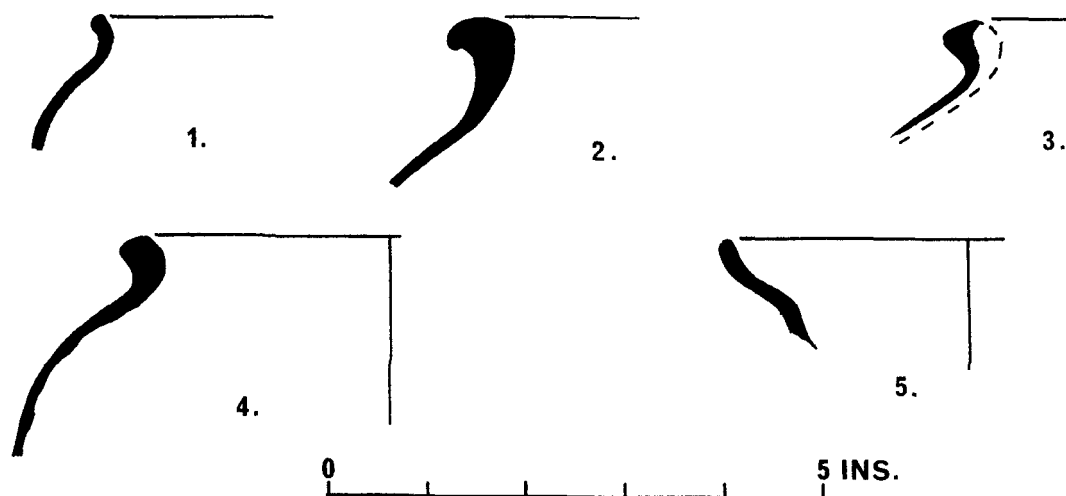


Fig. 4. Coarse Pottery found in the Kiln

Fig. 4. No. 1.

Rim of jar. Hard whitish-grey ware with a darker grey surface.

No. 2.

Rim of a large jar. Softish grey sandy ware.

No. 3.

Rim of jar. Soft grey slightly sandy ware.

No. 4.

Rim of jar. Hard pink-brown sandy ware with a brownish grey surface. This vessel appears to have been a potter's 'second', as a hole $\frac{1}{4}$ in. diameter in the side of the pot had been plugged with white clay which has also been smeared over the sides of the pot around the hole. Adhering to the outer surface of the pot are portions of brown baked clay probably from the lining of the kiln.

No. 5.

Cupped neck of jug (?). Hard white ware with dark grey outer surface. Similar fabric to No. 1.

Unfortunately the stokehole and the oven had not survived modern disturbances, and no obvious wasters were found. When found the furnace was empty, except for a shallow layer of wood ash containing a quantity of unburnt animal bones, and a quantity of broken pottery dateable to the late first or early second century. The date of the kiln therefore agrees well with the other dating evidence for the Roman pottery industry in this area. There was no obvious clue to the kind of product made here, but the type of kiln was normally used elsewhere in Britain for firing pottery rather than tiles. Most of the sherds found in the furnace were of a similar sandy coarse ware fabric suggesting that they were broken examples of pots produced in this area.

FINDS FROM THE KILN FURNACE (FIG. 4)

Fifty-nine pottery sherds were found inside the furnace together with a number of unburnt animal bones, one of which was the skull of a dog, and a few fragments of grey burnt clay probably from the roof of the oven. One fragment of the oven roof has the impressions of wattle or finger smears on one side, and the impressions of grass or straw on the other side.

The sherds represent at least ten pots, and they are mostly of a white or grey ware, usually with a sandy texture. Only one Samian ware sherd was found, and this is probably the rim of a Drag. form 38 or 45 of early 2nd century Lezoux fabric. This sherd was not burnt showing that it had arrived at its find spot after the kiln had been abandoned. Nearly all the grey coarse ware types are represented in the accompanying drawing (fig. 4), but there were also two sherds of pink ware.

NOTES

- 1 Royal Commission on Historical Monuments: 'Roman London' (1928), p. 140. Quotation from MS. of John Conyers (Brit. Mus. Sloane MS. 958, f. 105). A photograph of the MS. is published by P. Corder, in *Archaeological Journal* vol. 114 (1957), Pl. 2B; and in *Proc. Society of Antiquaries*, 1913-14, 2nd series, vol. 26, p. 225, fig. 4.
- 2 R.C.H.M., 'Roman London' (1928), p. 153-6 for details of Roman burials.
- 3 R. Merrifield, 'The Roman City of London' (1965), p. 192-3 for details of this Roman road.
- 4 *Archaeologia*, vol. 63, p. 282-6.
- 5 Guildhall Museum Excavation Register 709.
- 6 The kiln is incorrectly described as a stokehole on a site plan published in *J.R.S.*, vol. 53 (1963), fig. 21; *Trans. Lond. Middx. Arch. Soc.*, vol. 21, pt. 2 (1965), p. 137; and R. Merrifield, 'The Roman City of London' (1965), fig. 20.
- 7 P. Corder, 'The Structure of Romano-British pottery kilns', in *Archaeological Journal*, vol. 114 (1957), p. 10-27.