

Getting a handle on medieval pottery

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Photography by Jon Bailey

CAN INDIVIDUAL medieval potters be recognised from their wares? Perhaps the most obvious means of identification are fingerprints, but although they are found on medieval pots, clear examples are too rare to be useful. More readily available is information on how the pot was made. Individual potters or communities of potters developed their own ways of dealing with the various stages of manufacture, which would have become second nature to them, and which they would have passed on to successive generations. If such 'trademarks' could be recognised, they could help in identifying groups of potters working within an industry, perhaps even individual workshops or families specialising in certain products, an aim whose importance has only recently been recognised¹.

This paper looks at one element of pottery manufacture – the way a potter made and attached handles to a vessel – since this is likely to be a procedure which he was taught, would continue to do all his life and eventually teach his apprentices, rather than something he copied from another industry. This is not to say that a potter would not move away from the workshop in which he learned his trade to work in a different area, nor that he might not need to adapt his methods to new forms, but it does mean that he would probably be inspired more by the 'external' appearance of pots from another industry than by what we might call the 'internal' features, *i.e.* the way they were made, even, perhaps, if they represented an improvement on his own methods.

The present study is concerned largely with the major late 12th- to late 14th-century pottery types found in London, and coming from sources in Essex (Mill Green ware), the London area itself (London-type ware), and Surrey (Kingston-type ware). These wares are being published elsewhere as parts of a corpus based on closely-dated material from D.U.A. excavations, especially along the Thames water-

front, and on substantially complete pots from the collections of the major London museums (over 600 pots in the Museum of London alone).

Jug handles – methods of manufacture

The commonest medieval vessel form during this period, apart from the cooking pot, was the jug, a type which by definition has a handle. Other forms of medieval handled pots, such as certain specialised types of cooking vessel – pipkins, cauldrons and dripping dishes – will not be discussed here.

Since the major jug types used in London from the late 12th century onwards are wheelthrown, or at least finished on a wheel, the question arises as to whether their handles were also thrown. 'Pulled' handles, recognisable by their distinctive shape, which tapers from top to bottom, are extremely rare on all the medieval jug types from London. It is commonly assumed that medieval jug handles were rolled from balls or slabs of clay into 'sausages' which could then be left as a 'rod' or flattened as desired. However, problems could arise with this method: the clay, if too dry, might resist being formed into the appropriate curved shape and be prone to crack horizontally across the section.

Suzanne Lang, a working potter who has made a study of medieval pottery, has suggested that nearly all the handles of medieval jugs found in London *could* have been made by throwing a cylinder of clay 'off the hump' and slicing off rings of varying thicknesses, which could then be cut into the required handle lengths. The clay can be manipulated without losing its strength or tendency to curve, and will not crack in the way that a rolled or pulled handle might. However, experiments in which both methods of making handles were used, and the finished handles applied to a replica jug body, showed that rolled handles could be applied without cracking, and when smoothed along their length could appear very similar to wheelthrown examples, which retain the throwing marks of the potter's fingers. It was in fact very difficult to tell the two methods apart. Examination of medieval jugs suggests that wheelthrown handles can only reasonably be identified on late 12th-century London-type

1. S. A. Moorhouse 'The medieval pottery industry and its markets' in D. W. Crossley (ed) *Medieval Industry* CBA Res Rep 40 (Edinburgh, 1981) 96-125.

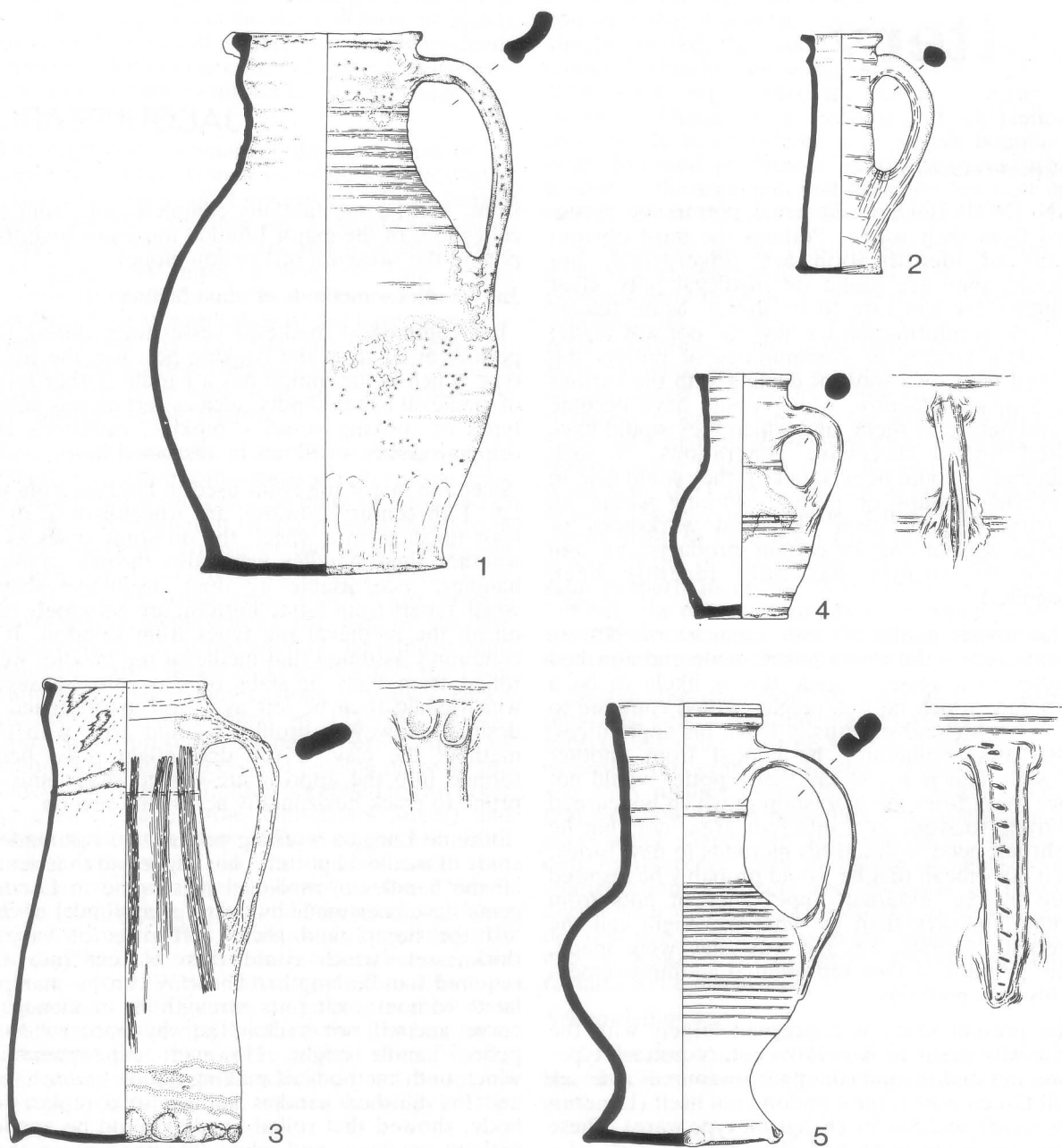


Fig. 1: London-type ware, 1. late 12th-century early rounded jug, 2. early 14th-century 'drinking jug';
 Mill Green ware, 3. late 13th-century conical jug;
 Kingston-type ware, 4. late 14th-century small rounded jug, 5. late 13th-century metal copy baluster jug.
 (Scale 1/4)



Fig. 2: London-type ware early 14th-century tulip-necked baluster jug showing internal view of lower handle attachment.

ware early rounded jugs whose strap handles have a very gentle S-shaped profile (Fig. 1, No. 1).

Preliminary thin-section analyses have been carried out by Anne Jenner to see whether changes in the alignment of the clay platelets could be detected in the experimentally-made rolled and thrown handles. The alignment of *laminae* and inclusions in the rolled handle was clearly horizontal, at a right angle to the direction of rolling. In the thrown handle, however, the *laminae* were curved, probably because of the centrifugal force resulting from pushing the clay both up and out as it turned on the wheel. These results are encouraging, although a larger sample of experimental handles is needed to test the method before it is applied to medieval examples. At present, all that can be said is that most 13th- and 14th-century jug types from London could have had wheelthrown handles, but that the same forms could just as well have been rolled.

Methods of attachment

It is generally easier to see how the potter attached

2. J. E. Pearce, A. G. Vince and A. Jenner 'A Dated Type-series of London Medieval Pottery Part 2: London-type Ware' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* (forthcoming).

the handle to the pot, and it is here that individual ways of dealing with questions of jug size, weight and function at different phases in the life of the various industries under discussion can profitably be examined.

London-type ware

In the London-type ware industry², from the 12th century until its decline in the second half of the 14th century, jug handles, which were principally of rod or squashed oval section, were almost invariably attached at both the rim and the body by being pushed through the clay wall of the pot. Usually, the jug was stabbed with the point of a knife, or poked with a finger or pointed tool, to make a hole into which the end of the handle was inserted. Less frequently, a neat circular, oval or sub-rectangular hole was cut out with a knife, a rather more time-consuming process. Any of these preparations would make the handle more secure when the jug was in use, especially if additional pressure had been applied to the join from inside the vessel. Separate pieces of clay were then wrapped around the joins on the outside, both reinforcing them and giving a more professional 'finish' to the pot. The clay around the ends of the handle was well smoothed into the body with the fingertips, but slight cracks appearing around the edges after firing often betray the technique. Inside the rim, the wall of the jug was generally wiped smooth in order to disguise the means of attachment.

The lower end of the handle on larger jugs, such as the elaborately decorated products of the London-

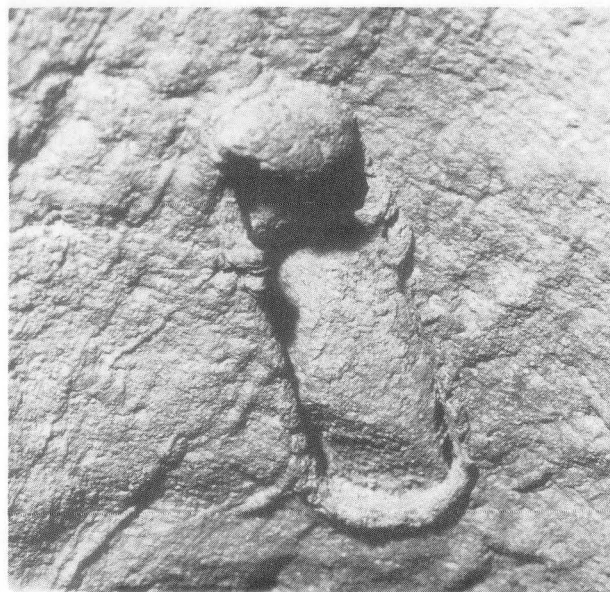


Fig. 3: London-type ware early-14th century conical 'drinking jug' showing handle end inserted through hole.

type industry at its height, may be quite well finished inside, leaving a neat circular scar, often with the impression of the potter's finger (Fig. 2). However, smaller vessels, such as small rounded jugs and 'drinking jugs' (Fig. 1, No. 2), were often left with the end of the handle protruding abruptly into the body. The latter form was a product of the industry in decline, and is far less competently finished than the earlier, more decorative forms. The rim was often markedly warped by the process of applying the top end of the handle, and small lumps of clay clumsily smoothed over the inside of the rim often fill in the neck cordon typical of the form. 'Drinking jug' handles were often, because of lack of attention to finish, inadequately bonded, so that cracks appeared around the joins in firing. Nevertheless, the technique of pushing the handle *through* the wall ensured that it remained well fixed in spite of poor firing. At the lower end, the handle may have been pushed into a round, sub-rectangular or even triangular hole made with a knife, finger or other tool, as on larger forms, or the wall may have been stabbed with the point of a knife to make V-shaped, vertical, or oblique slits. This part of the handle was usually left untouched inside (Fig. 3), and only occasionally was any effort made to smooth over the join, probably, if the potter's fingers could not reach, using a pad of cloth or leather on the end of a stick. A sample of 56 complete or nearly complete 'drinking jugs' in the reserve collection of the Museum of London was examined, and only one has the handle simply luted onto the outside wall. The uniformity in technique, in size and finish, or lack of



Fig. 4: Mill Green ware late 13th-century conical jug showing internal handle attachment.



Fig. 5: Mill Green ware jug showing internal handle attachment.

it, suggests that these forms are likely to have come from the same workshop over a few generations.

Mill Green ware

Jugs made in Mill Green ware³, which is found in London in late 13th- to 14th-century contexts, provide an interesting contrast with London-type ware in terms of handle treatment. The number of jug forms is quite limited, the commonest shapes being conical or pear-shaped, squat and baluster, all finely potted with very thin walls, and the baluster jugs often built to a surprising height. Stylistic influences from other areas were tackled in an individualistic manner: the decorative 'ears' – small pads of clay applied to the top of the handle where it joins the rim – common to early 13th-century north French jugs and copied in London-type and Kingston-type wares, were imitated in Mill Green ware by making two thumb-impressions in the same position (Fig. 1, No. 3). Shapes such as the baluster form, and body decoration based on the Rouen style were also copied. However, certain details of manufacture, such as the methods of handle attachment, appear to have been developed by the Mill Green potters and handed down throughout the life of the industry. Handles were most commonly of strap form, broad, thick and often long. The lower end was fixed to the body of the jug as the potter pushed up to four fingers deep into its base from *inside*, while pressing it against the outside of the jug,

3. J. E. Pearce, A. G. Vince and R. White with C. M. Cunningham 'A Dated Type-series of London Medieval Pottery Part 1: Mill Green Ware' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 33 (1982) 266-298.

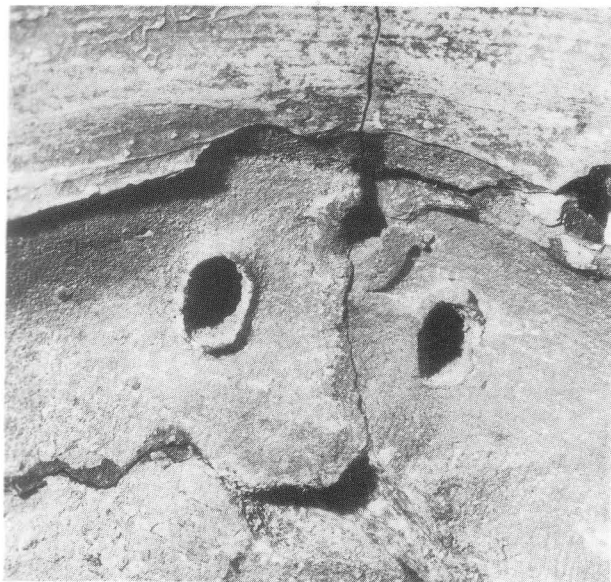


Fig. 6: Mill Green ware late 13th-century pear-shaped jug showing stab-marks inside rim.

breaking through the thin wall and making a very secure attachment (Figs. 4, 5). This technique is not found in London-type ware, and was ideally suited to the form of handle favoured by the Mill Green potters.

The upper end of the handle was treated differently for the sake of appearance. After being pushed through the wall of the neck, the join was smoothed over inside. The handle was then deeply stabbed with a pointed tool, both along its entire length and across the top where it joins the body. The effects of this may still be visible inside the neck as a number of barely-discernible pin-pricks or rather more vigorously-made holes (Fig. 6). However, these were generally hidden on the outside by extra clay wrapped around the join. The thumb-impressed 'ears' were then made and the entire jug white-slipped.

Kingston-type ware

Kingston-type ware⁴ began to be marketed in the London area in the mid 13th century, remaining popular until the late 14th century. A great variety of jug forms was made, many of them comparable with London-type forms, but again, the way the

4. A. Jenner, J. E. Pearce and A. G. Vince 'A Dated Type-series of London Medieval Pottery Part 4: Kingston-type ware' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* (forthcoming). See also M. Hinton 'Medieval Pottery from a Kiln Site at Kingston upon Thames' *London Archaeol Vol 3 No 14* (Spring 1980) 377-383.

5. i.e. the body is stabbed or broken and the handle pushed through, generally being left untouched at the lower end inside the jug.

potters treated the various stages of manufacture is related more to developments within their own industry than to the imitation of ideas drawn from other areas. Decorative style and jug shape do, however, display the influences of contemporaneous potteries.

The variety of shapes and sizes of jug made throughout the Kingston-type industry necessitated, or at least inspired, a number of different ways of applying handles. The commonest method involved some form of disruption of the jug wall, which gave a security seldom achieved by simply luting the handle onto the jug, particularly a large vessel. The only instances of luted handles are found on some of the smallest miniature jugs whose shape would probably have been seriously endangered by any of the more vigorous methods of handle application, which would hardly have been necessary anyway. On larger jugs, the upper end of the handle was only rarely pushed onto the wall of the jug, hardly disturbing the throwing marks on the inside. It was more frequently attached in the same way as the lower end, but because the inside was smoothed over, sometimes with a small lump of clay added, it is not always possible to see exactly how this has been done. As with Mill Green and London-type wares, therefore, the lower join is generally far more clearly visible.

The handles of small jugs with a narrow rim and neck were mostly applied in the same manner as London-type ware jug handles⁵ (Figs. 7, 8). An

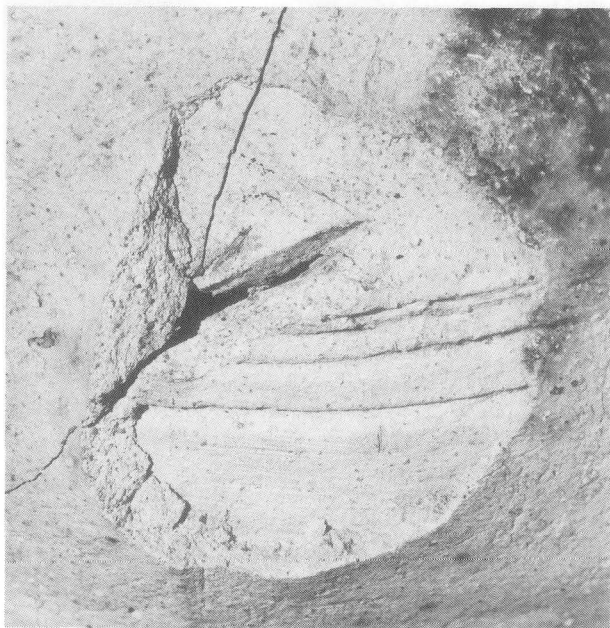


Fig. 7: Kingston-type ware late 14th-century small rounded jug with handle missing, showing external knife-gash.

interesting feature is the use of practical devices that also have a decorative effect, and appear to be simply automatic processes which the potter would have used almost without thinking twice about them. A large proportion of Kingston-type small rounded and small biconical jugs have either a single rounded and deliberate thumb impression made on the outside at the base of the handle, or a longer impression made quickly by pulling the thumb up or down, often leaving a definite nail-groove in the centre (Fig. 1, No. 4; Fig. 8). This procedure probably helped to strengthen the attachment when the jug was too small to allow the potter to apply pressure from inside. Small jugs treated in this way are remarkably uniform in terms of handle attachment and other details of manufacture, and comparison of measured capacities shows that they were also probably made to specific sizes. It is possible, therefore, that they were made at one particular workshop or group of kilns specialising in these forms.

Different methods of handle attachment were used for larger jugs, probably because of their size and shape, and also, perhaps, because they were made by different groups of potters working in the

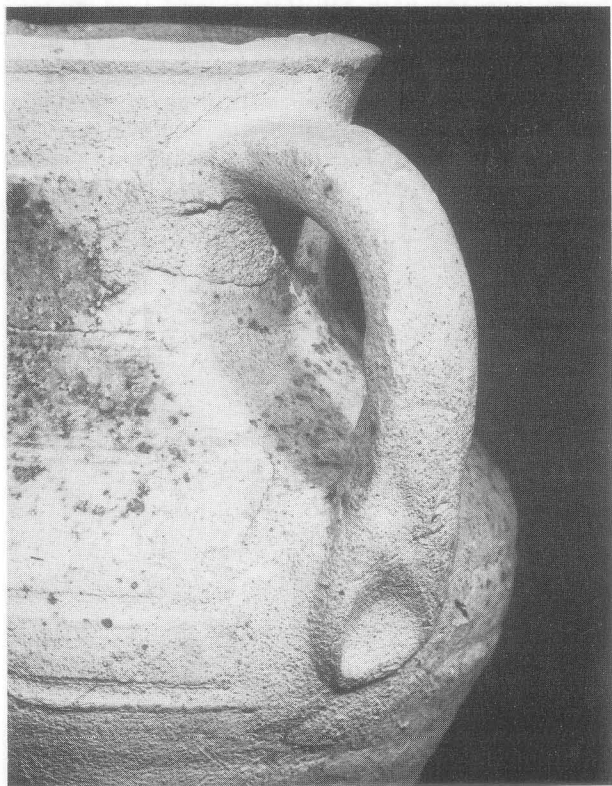


Fig. 8: Kingston-type ware late 14th-century small rounded jug showing poorly bonded handle and thumb impression at lower end.



Fig. 9: Kingston-type ware mid to late 14th-century large squat jug showing internal handle attachment.

Kingston area at various stages in the life of the industry, making what we now call Kingston-type ware. The lower, and possibly the upper, ends of the handle were pushed onto the body as the thumb or fingers were pushed into them from inside, in a way which recalls Mill Green ware (Fig. 9). Single impressions are more common than groups of impressions, which are generally only necessary to secure wide strap handles. The body of the jug may first have been stabbed or cut, as with smaller vessels, to make an even firmer join.

One very distinctive form of handle can be seen on the elegant Kingston-type baluster jugs made as copies of metal prototypes – it is rectangular in section and formed into a pointed ‘tail’ at the bottom (Fig. 1, No. 5). The best-finished jugs have a sub-rectangular hole cut carefully from the body with the ‘tail’ pressed over it and ending just below on the outside. It was not forced through the wall, nor was the wall of the pot pushed into it (Fig. 10). Extra clay generally had to be added to hide the join on the outside. However, on less carefully made jugs, especially metal copy forms of rounded shape with applied pellet or scale decoration, the end of the handle may have been laid on the outside of the pot and the wall pushed into it from inside as with other larger Kingston-type forms.

Closer examination and statistical analysis of such features on Kingston-type ware, particularly in conjunction with studies of decorative stamps, may well prove fruitful in identifying groups of potters



Fig. 10: Kingston-type ware late 13th- to early 14th-century metal copy baluster jug showing internal handle attachment.

working in the one tradition, especially since there is such a variety of form and technique.

Other wares

This article has concentrated on three wares – London-type ware, Kingston-type ware and Mill Green ware – since these have been examined in more detail than some of the other wares found in London. They are also the major wares supplied to London during the 13th and 14th centuries, and plentiful material is available for study. However, it might be useful to note a few of the different ways of attaching handles that were used in other industries. For example, a very distinctive feature of Cheam ware biconical drinking jugs⁶ is the way in which a number of holes were stabbed with a pointed tool through the body in an inverted V-shape to 'key' the handle very firmly when pressed onto the body (Fig. 11). This method has not yet been recognised on any

other wares current in the London area during the medieval period, and different methods were used on other Cheam ware forms. Late medieval Hertfordshire glazed ware⁷, on the other hand, displays a method similar to London-type ware, in which the ends of the handle were pushed from outside into the body of the pot and smoothed over on the inside at the top.

Conclusion

On typological grounds alone it could be argued that the Kingston-type pottery industry was started by potters from the London area. Examination of details of construction lends support to this suggestion – for example, the methods of attaching handles to early Kingston-type jugs are more or less the same as those used by the London potters at a time when the Kingston products most closely resemble London-type ware in form and decoration. The Mill Green potters, however, although they borrowed stylistic elements from London, appear to have developed their own ways of treating certain stages of manufacture, such as handle application, uninfluenced by other industries.

If this paper has not succeeded in identifying any particular groups or families of medieval potters in the London area with any certainty, it is hoped that it has at least indicated some of the possibilities and shown that there is considerable potential in a field which has as yet received little attention from archaeologists.

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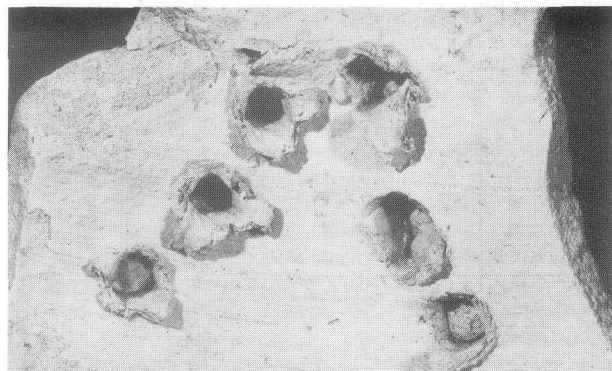


Fig. 11: Cheam ware late 14th-century biconical drinking jug showing internal handle attachment.

6. C. Orton 'The Excavation of a Late Medieval/Transitional Pottery Kiln at Cheam, Surrey' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 73 (1982) 49-92.

7. A. Jenner and A. G. Vince 'A Dated Type-series of London Medieval Pottery Part 3: A Late Medieval Hertfordshire Glazed Ware' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* (forthcoming).