

Kiln on the move

GREENWICH Borough Museum has recently undertaken the move of the earliest salt-glazed stoneware kiln yet found in Britain.

The Woolwich kiln, dated to c 1610-1640/60, was found in 1974 during an excavation of a site close to the Thames. The project had originally intended to look for phases of early occupation of Woolwich and had planned six weeks of work. Following discovery of the kiln sites, the excavation, sponsored jointly by the Borough of Greenwich and the then Department of the Environment, was extended to four months. The site is now occupied by the council's 'Waterside Leisure Centre' (TQ 433 793).

Despite wells, cess-pits and deep 19th century basements, which had cut through most traces of any earlier occupation, the excavators uncovered remains of two kilns and an earlier 'clay settling pit'. Although the Plumstead/Woolwich area had a well-documented pottery industry through the 18th and 19th centuries, the existence of this early group of kilns was unsuspected.

◊The square clay pit was clay-lined and revetted with timbers. It is thought by the excavators to predate both kilns. Its fill of dumped material was interpreted as waste from an earlier undiscovered kiln.

The remains of two kilns were located. The first was found below the 19th century houses fronting onto Surgeon Street to the west of the site. It was a round brick-built structure with twin flues, used for the production of both glazed and unglazed red earthenware of a type common in London in the 17th century. It was dated by clay tobacco pipes in the demolition layer to 1640-1680. The internal diameter was 2.50m (8ft); part was lost due to later cess-pits and sewer. Two brick walls, one found by each stoke hole, were interpreted as 'wind baffles'.

The second kiln was unique. It is the only kiln producing salt-glazed stoneware of this period yet found in Europe. This kiln has recently been moved. It lay to the north of the earthenware kiln, and was sealed by its north-east stoke hole and possible 'fuel storage area'. The brick-built remains survived to just above floor level, complete with three internal flues. The external diameter was 2.25m (7ft 4in) and the internal 1.60m (5ft 3in). Much of the western outer wall had been lost due to sinking of later cess-pits. The stoke hole and firebox area were below the ground surface and had been sunk into the natural Thanet Sand. No wood was found, but timber rivetting was suggested by staining on the sand. The only associated structures were a chalk-footed wall to the east, which was probably added at a later stage, and which may have enclosed the kiln in a yard, and to the east of the wall, a clinker and ash path.

Much pottery was found associated with this kiln, most being bellarmine jugs, but Westerwald wares were also found. Both these ceramic types were originally produced on the continent from the 16th century onwards, and were imported into Britain. This kiln is important, being the first to produce salt-glazed stoneware in Britain. Previously John Dwight's pottery in Fulham had been considered the earliest, with his patent dating to 1672.

The kiln is suggested to have had only a short life, or perhaps to have been in production experimentally. The large amount of fused waste and unsuccessful products, and the fact that the Woolwich pottery was never mentioned by Dwight may support this theory.

Due to its good state of preservation and associated range of pottery, it was decided that the kiln should be lifted and retained as a whole. Along with conservation experts from the British Museum, the Department of the Environment took charge of lifting

the kiln, enclosed in a specially-designed support. It weighed c 40 tons and was deposited in one of the council's depots for storage.

When the council recently undertook a reorganisation of its work depots, the local museum was asked to arrange removal of the kiln to an alternative site. With the help of a grant of £1000 from the Area Museums Service for South East England, the kiln was again lifted. This time it topped 43 tons after being sprayed with water for a week before its journey. The move was made using a low loader and with a police escort. The kiln was wrapped in the Museum's banner for its journey through Woolwich, and is now re-deposited in a secure location.

The finds from the excavation and the associated archive are available through Greenwich Borough Museum. finds include both the products from the stoneware kiln and from the later earthenware kiln. Videos of both the 1974 and the 1990 move may also be viewed by prior arrangement.

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Help from Hong Kong

THE BRITISH Museum has announced that Mr Joseph Hotung, a businessman and art-collector from Hong Kong, has made a gift of £2m to cover the cost of renovating most of the main gallery in the King Edward VII Building, which houses the Oriental Collections.

Renovation of this gallery is long overdue, and plans have been in preparation for over a year. It will be renovated in keeping with the original design; post-war additions will be removed. There will be a more open arrangement of cases and a greatly increased level of lighting. At the centre of the gallery will be a display of Buddhist material from the whole of Asia. Chinese exhibits will include bronzes, jades and the most comprehensive collection of porcelain outside Taiwan. Other spectacular works include the world-famous garnet-encrusted gold reliquary from Bimaran in Afghanistan and a life-size gilt bronze statue of Tara from Sri Lanka, the greatest of all solid-cast images from ancient South Asia.

The gallery closed to the public in October 1990 and work is expected to take between 18 months and two years. During that time there will be a temporary display of a small part of the Chinese and Indian collections in Room 50.

The British Museum Society

ANYONE wanting to help the British Museum in a less lavish way can join the British Museum Society. The Society helps the Museum by buying new objects for the collections, funding expeditions, acting as volunteers, sponsoring publications and looking after the needs of disabled people. Privileges of membership include free entry to paying exhibitions, 10% discount on purchases in the British Museum Shop, a magazine, and evening lectures and private views. The annual subscription is £15 (£7.50 for each additional member at the same address). For further details contact the British Museum Society office, c/o The British Museum, London WC1B 3DG, tel. 071-323 8605.

The Tebbutt Research Fund

THE FUND was established as a tribute to the life and work of the late C F Tebbutt, and applications are invited (from individuals and groups) for grants towards research into the Wealden Iron Industry. It is anticipated that about £200 will be available from the fund, and anyone interested should write a letter details of application giving details of themselves and the research envisaged. Details should be sent to the Hon. Sec. of WIRG, Mrs Shiela Broomfield (address on p 225) by 31 March.