



Fig. 1: volunteers recording pottery from the Pinner kiln in Gunnersbury Park Museum in 2014; John Marshall (left) and Bill Bass (right) are in the foreground

## A rescue project – Pinner medieval pottery kiln revisited

Don Cooper and Jacqui Pearce

### Background

In late summer 2014, after the award of a Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) grant to refurbish Gunnersbury Park Museum in the London Borough of Ealing, the then curator (Vanda Foster) reviewed the contents of the stores. She contacted MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) about a collection of some 146 boxes of medieval pottery from the 1975 excavation of a medieval greyware kiln in Pinner, then housed in the Museum's cellars. The original excavation, which took place in June 1975, was triggered when a large number of unglazed greyware sherds were discovered, spilling from the bank of an access road leading to a housing development in Potters Street Hill, Pinner. The find was brought to the attention of Alison Laws, then Field

Officer at the Museum of London, and she identified the pottery as of medieval date. The developers agreed to an emergency excavation, which was carried out by the Museum of London and the West London Archaeological Field Group (WLAFG).<sup>1</sup> A preliminary report on the site was published two years later.<sup>2</sup> A single-flue kiln and numerous waster dumps of 13th-century south Herts-type greyware were uncovered; the site appears to have been very little disturbed by subsequent activity. The finds were stored at Gunnersbury Park Museum, an arrangement that was originally intended as temporary, since Pinner is in the London Borough of Harrow. However, finding permanent storage proved problematic and the finds remained at Gunnersbury Park. With

the Museum closing until 2017, the considerable quantity of pottery recovered during excavation needed to be re-housed.

Apart from the initial survey of the material published in *London Archaeologist*, the finds had not been systematically recorded. A necessarily selective record was made and some illustration carried out during work on south Herts-type greywares for the latest volume in Museum of London Archaeology's (MOLA) *Dated Type-Series of London Medieval Pottery*, published in 2010.<sup>3</sup> A small sample of six sherds was sent for petrographic analysis and included as part of the wider survey of fabrics within the medieval greyware tradition. It was not possible at that time, however, to make the detailed record that this important

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production site so badly needed. Nor was it possible to repackage the finds to current archive standard, or to settle on a permanent storage solution.

Gunnersbury Park Museum recognised the need to tackle the problem of recording and re-housing the Pinner kiln finds, and a collaborative project was developed with MOLA, funded by HLF. The project involved sorting and recording all of the pottery, in line with current practice at MOLA, using standard codes for fabrics, forms and decoration.<sup>4</sup> Quantification was to be carried out using sherd count (SC), estimated number of vessels (ENV), weight in grams, and estimated vessel equivalents (EVE), with rim diameters also recorded. It was intended that a basic typology for rim forms and handles would be implemented, as well as a system for recording firing faults, developed by MOLA for ceramic production sites. The project was to be supervised by Jacqui Pearce, working with volunteers to carry out the seemingly daunting task. The late John Marshall, a long-term volunteer at the Museum, provided invaluable help at every stage of the work. The finds had been stored in the Museum's extensive cellars and

were in a poor state; rat droppings, spiders' webs and torn and disintegrating boxes were the order of the day. There had also been problems with damp and flooding. Fortunately, pottery is very durable and most of the sherds had been marked.

A call went out for volunteers and it was answered by the Hendon and District Archaeological Society (HADAS) and Richmond Archaeological Society (RAS). Following induction and training sessions, a working area was set aside in a public exhibition space at the Museum. For two days every week over a period of eight weeks, starting on 8 October 2014, the team turned up at the Museum to work through the mountains of pottery recovered from the site, making a fully quantified record that can now be interrogated to gain a better understanding of the Pinner industry and its impact on the local and regional pottery supply in the 13th century. Rims, bases, handles and decorated sherds were re-bagged separately within contexts, and storage of the considerable quantities of non-diagnostic body sherds was rationalised. The recording was carried out in the former dining room of the

Rothschilds under a magnificent chandelier, and was open to the public to observe and ask questions. On some days, as many as 12 volunteers came along and there were seldom fewer than eight (Fig. 1). Work finished just before Christmas 2014, with almost all of the original finds recorded, re-bagged and re-boxed. A small residue of 22 boxes was taken by HADAS for completion of the project, so allowing the Museum to clear its storage space of greywares once and for all.

The question remained of where to re-house this important collection of 13th-century pottery directly associated with a known production site. The Museum at Gunnersbury could no longer store them and Harrow Museum, in whose borough the kiln site was located, could only take seven boxes. At one point it seemed as though most of the collection (the body sherds) would have to be discarded. However, arrangements were made for a sample of 34 boxes of the newly re-boxed and recorded finds (key groups and diagnostic sherds) to be deposited in the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC), with MOLA taking the remainder into its deep storage facility. The project had proved



Fig. 2: part of the final collection of re-boxed finds from the Pinner kiln, before their final removal from Gunnersbury Park



**Fig. 3: lump of unfired potting clay from the kiln waste**

to be a remarkably successful exercise in collaboration between professional and non-professional archaeologists, and between Gunnersbury Park Museum, MOLA and LAARC. It also brought together members of two of London's local archaeological societies based on opposite sides of the Thames, and introduced practical archaeology in action to visiting members of the public. Furthermore, it achieved its original aims of finding a new home for the material from the Pinner kiln, of making a full record of all excavated material and of bringing the archive up to current standards – all in all, a great success (Fig. 2)! But what have we learned about one of London's earliest known medieval pottery production sites from all the hard work that went into the project?

### **The results – new light on the Pinner medieval kiln**

In the event, 61,722 sherds of medieval greyware were catalogued, bagged, labelled and boxed to the latest archive standards – a Herculean effort by all concerned. This amounted to 865,374g of pottery. The database created will be used to analyse the material with a view to producing a detailed report for publication in an appropriate journal. A brief preliminary survey of the findings is given here, and can be seen as complementing the illustrated summary.<sup>5</sup> Featured sherds and many of

the more unusual items were selected for illustration, and record shots taken.

Four main fabric variants were identified and recorded, reflecting firing and coarseness: reduced and oxidised, and within these coarse and fine. The sherds were all associated with the excavated kiln and represent production waste of one sort or another, even though firing faults are not always obvious. It does appear that deliberate reduction to produce a uniformly grey ware was the potters' aim, in line with the south Herts-type tradition. Oxidised

fabrics were much less frequent on the site and were noticeably more friable and prone to abrasion, and so less effective for the heavy-duty use for which most greywares were intended. A record of the main manufacturing faults was made and showed the most common problems to have occurred when vessels became warped and distorted, and when areas of the surface spalled off during firing. Firing cracks were also recorded, but the majority of pottery showed no obvious signs of failure during production – no doubt this was in large part the result of the small size of a high proportion of the sherds recovered. One remarkable find was a lump of potting clay that bore numerous fingerprints and fingernail nicks resulting from its being moulded into a rough shape (Fig. 3). The clay had been prepared (weathered and puddled), but includes no added tempering and had never been fired. Presumably it had dried out and become too hard to use, so was discarded. There were also fragments of kiln bars made in a coarsely tempered reduced fabric, and which had been used inside the firing chamber.

Although a wide range of forms was identified, jars or cooking pots were by far the most common (80.7% of all sherds, 83% by weight; Fig. 4). Jugs were the next most common form, chiefly recognised by their rim forms and handles, bearing the distinctive



**Fig. 4: selection of greyware cooking pot or jar rims, including warped wasters**

decoration that was such a feature of the south Herts-type greyware tradition. These include a variety of stabbing and thumbing in different schemes, as well as one handle with carefully inlaid decoration (Fig. 5). Bowls and dishes were also identified, and a number of other forms that were much less common on the site, including tripod pipkins, cauldrons and curfews. A basic record of rim forms and types of decoration was made, and it has been possible to work out approximate ranges of vessel size from the rim diameters recorded for various forms.

What next? There is much more to do. The pottery is now safely housed in the LAARC and MOLA, and it is hoped that a research project can be developed to look in detail at the data collected, with the aim of publishing a report that would substantially add to our knowledge of 13th-century pottery production in London. The site is an important one and if the collaborative venture between Gunnersbury Park Museum, MOLA, and two of London's local archaeology societies, HADAS and RAS (Fig. 6), can provide a model

1. The site has been recorded under the code P75.
2. D. Sheppard 'A medieval pottery kiln at Pinner, Middlesex' *London Archaeol* 3 (2) (1977) 31-5.

for future work on otherwise unpublished archive sites, the exercise will have proved to be very worthwhile.

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The stars of the project were the volunteers who turned up week after week and spent their days slaving away on the mountains of excavated sherds from the Pinner kiln; from HADAS, Bill Bass, Liz Gapp, Fiona Haughey, Geraldine Missig, Sigrid Padel and Mary Salton; and from RAS, Dot and Fred Flemen, Yvonne and George Masson. The late John Marshall was a wonderful support throughout, bridging both societies and the Museum – he will be very much missed.

3. L. Blackmore and J. Pearce *A dated type-series of London medieval pottery part 5: shelly-sandy wares and the greyware industries*, MOLA Monogr 46 (2010).



**Fig. 5: greyware jug handle with inlaid decoration**

All photographs were taken by Jacqui Pearce in the course of the project, at Gunnersbury Park Museum.

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4. These are available online at: [www.mola.org.uk/resources/medieval-and-post-medieval-pottery-codes](http://www.mola.org.uk/resources/medieval-and-post-medieval-pottery-codes) [accessed 3 April 2016].
5. *Op cit* fn 3.



**Fig. 6: members of the team of volunteers on the last day of the project, December 2014, with celebratory cake inspired by greyware jug handle decoration**