

MEDIEVAL CERAMICS IN SOUTH-EAST ENGLAND:
A REGIONAL RESEARCH STRATEGY

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At a time when the 'regional groups' are working towards the comprehensive bibliography of medieval pottery which has been initiated by the Medieval Pottery Research Group, it is appropriate to look beyond the mere gathering of bibliographical information and to consider the value and potential uses of systematic regional surveys. The organisation of pottery production and marketing in medieval England has been the subject of important general assessments, copiously illustrated by specific local evidence (Le Patourel 1968; Moorhouse 1981). Regional contributions are now needed to substantiate and refine our understanding of these generalisations, and to define more precisely regional variations not only in the ceramics themselves, but also in the organisation of the industry.

It is a reflection of the administration of British archaeology that ceramic research tends to be based upon specific localities, and the rapid accumulation of data over the last decade or so no doubt accounts for the lack of recently published regional studies. Notable exceptions include the work of Barton (1979) and Vince (1981). This brief paper seeks to describe the strategy adopted for a survey of medieval pottery production and distribution in south-east England. The emphasis is on the practicalities of the operation in the hope of stimulating discussion of the methodology among others undertaking similar work elsewhere.

Nature and aims of the survey

Research on a regional scale is best suited to an appraisal of the economic aspects of production and distribution. Themes such as the pattern of use and disposal of medieval pottery are more conveniently approached through site-orientated studies and have not therefore been treated in depth. Understanding of the chronology and of variations in technology, however, requires both a regional perspective and a detailed assessment of specific sequences.

Thus the evaluation of pottery production in south-east England (comprising the counties of Kent, Surrey and Sussex) is concerned with the exploitation of raw materials; the relationship between the scale of production and potential customers; and changes in the location of manufacturing centres at different periods.

Assessment of distribution and marketing is based upon a programme of thin-section analysis both for the identification of products from specific kilns and for the definition of regional types. Variations in market areas linked with changes in the location of kilns at different dates are of particular interest. In an area such as this, it is important to examine the coastal distribution of locally-produced ceramics and to assess the penetration of imported wares into the hinterland of the south coast ports. Although thin-sectioning offers an objective means of identifying marketed kiln products, certain more general trends can be detected from visual examination of the fabrics.

Preliminary results of the work carried out in Kent and Sussex have already been discussed (Streeten 1980; Streeten forthcoming a), and the wider

implications of production and marketing are described elsewhere (Streeten 1981). Space does not permit discussion of the conclusions in this summary of the methodology.

Evidence for production

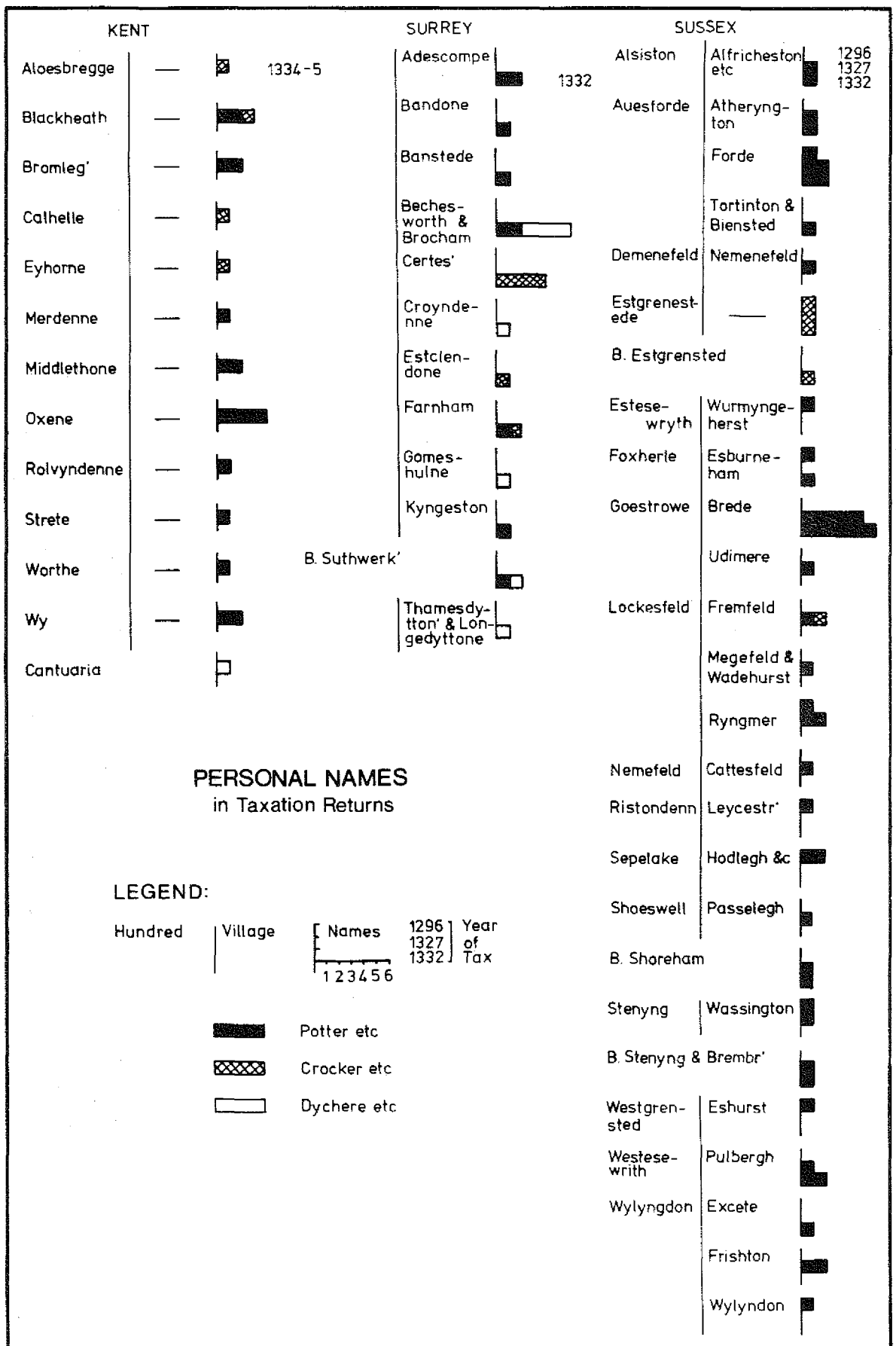
The extensive evidence for pottery production derived from archaeological fieldwork, documentary research and study of personal and place-names demands an organised approach to collection of the data and its evaluation. Pre-printed data sheets provide a means of recording the information required to compile period and thematic maps. These sheets are used either to summarise the evidence for a whole parish (Fig. 1) or to record details of specific kilns at a particular centre of manufacture. This level of information builds upon the more limited scope of the M.P.R.G. bibliography, but, for convenience, detailed assessment of the archaeological evidence for sites dated after c. 1600 has not been attempted.

Efforts have been made to achieve a reasonably comprehensive coverage of the published sources. Gathering the scattered unpublished documentary evidence, however, relies to a large extent upon being able to develop good lines of communication with historians and archivists who are aware of the potential archaeological interest of any reference to medieval potters which may come to light in the course of other work. Many of the place-names have been investigated by written enquiries to respective landowners concerning topography, local traditions and pottery scatters. Where necessary, this has been followed by a visit to the site, but there are numerous instances, particularly in the Weald, where the clay lands have remained under pasture for many years. Possible kiln sites are therefore located in the very areas which are least suited to effective archaeological fieldwork, and geophysical surveys would be required for an adequate assessment of many place-names in the Weald.

The information gathered from these sources is of variable quality and significance. Its usefulness as evidence for pottery production must therefore be evaluated. The personal and place-names can often be assessed on their own merits of date and etymology. More valuable conclusions, however, can be drawn from the combinations of evidence for a particular locality. Fig. 2 shows the occurrence of personal names possibly associated with pottery manufacture in the late 13th/early 14th century Lay Subsidy Rolls. Similar craft names found in the same township sometimes indicate the presence of potters, as in the case of Brede, East Sussex (Fig. 1), but more reliable evidence for the existence of an industry comes from the occurrence of different craft names in the same taxation district, as in the Hundred of Blackheath, Kent, for example. Place-names in an area can add geographical precision to this exercise, but do not necessarily confirm a craft association.

Taken as a whole, the evidence for medieval pottery production has been divided into five categories (Fig. 1). 'Positive' identifications comprise all valid archaeological evidence, whether from wasters or kiln structures, together with specific documentary references to the occupation of potter or clay rents associated with earthenware manufacture. These places may also have personal or place-names which would otherwise be treated with more circumspection. 'Probable' centres include places with a combination of two or more occupational surnames, and 'likely' evidence comes from personal or place-names of proven antiquity which do not contain a doubtful element. 'Possible' sites may be indicated by place-names such as 'Crock Kiln' which are of unproven antiquity but which are nevertheless likely to be associated with pottery production. The fifth group of 'improbable' sites comprises place-names containing a doubtful element or surnames which are thought to have ceased to describe the

Fig. 2



occupation of the bearer. Using these criteria it is possible to supplement the evidence of known kiln sites with an indication of the areas in which other sources of pottery may have been available to the medieval population. The pattern will always need to be amended in the light of chance archaeological and documentary discoveries.

'Consumer sites' and the evidence for distribution

As with the information about production, consumer sites are numerous, but the evidence which they offer is of variable significance. Compilation of a comprehensive gazetteer and numbered base maps forms the starting point for interpretation. Data from Kent and Sussex have been drawn from published sources, museums, and private collections, whereas the coverage of Surrey is more restricted. All known collections, however small, have been included, and the list of finds for the three counties now runs to well over 1000 entries. A 'site' can vary from the findspot of an individual vessel or a small group of sherds to a well-stratified sequence derived from a large excavation. In parts of the region, even the small groups can be of considerable geographical significance for the definition of fabric regions. There is, for example, a clear distinction between the 13th/14th century west Kent groups comprising predominantly grey coarsewares and the material from south-east Surrey and north-east Sussex which includes a higher proportion of oxidised coarsewares.

Data sheets are being used to record the information in predetermined categories (Fig. 3). Details of the sites themselves are similar to those recorded for the M.P.R.G. bibliography, but the nature of the dating evidence, the type of site, and the evaluation of the information have all been subdivided according to date. This takes account of changes in the nature of a site over time and can be used, for example, to indicate the changing function of monastic buildings before and after the Dissolution. Stratified groups are listed in chronological order on the right hand side of the sheet, but their composition is recorded elsewhere.

The reliability of each collection is shown by its 'evaluation' (Fig. 3). This is based upon the usefulness of the information for studies of distribution. 'Stratified groups' include all well-sealed deposits. Clearly the value of these groups for dating will depend upon the nature of their associations, as shown in Section IV of the form.

Following the criteria adopted by Hodder (1974:72), 'reliable groups' comprise 30 sherds or more. It is not claimed that these will yield statistically reliable data, but they are likely to reflect the general nature of the pottery on a given site. The larger surface scatters of 13th/14th century material from settlement sites in the Weald would fall into this category.

Where necessary, both 'stratified' and 'reliable' groups which have been examined are used on distribution maps to indicate the absence of a particular ware. This can be supplemented by recently-published material which has not been examined. Again, the 'absence' is a statement of present knowledge rather than a claim of statistical significance, but a repeated pattern of absences, even among the smaller groups, helps to define the limits of a distribution.

'Small groups' and 'casual finds' may yield isolated examples of a particular ware, but their value as more general indicators is limited. 'Unpublished material' and collections which have not been examined are plotted to show the extent to which the distribution maps take account of the available evidence.

Details of the pottery itself are recorded on side two of the data sheet, which is also subdivided according to date. Coarseware fabric groups are linked with the identification of regional types, and can be used, for example, to trace the extent of the flint-/sand-tempered wares with sparse shell, which can be presumed to reflect the occurrence of beach sands in pottery found along the Sussex coast. Categories for recording the forms of jugs and table wares are used more selectively, for instance to isolate the distinctive thumbled bases of 'West Sussex Ware' or the plain greyware jugs of west Kent. Identified kiln products or groups bearing a recognised common name are listed separately.

The subject of quantification has generated a substantial methodological literature. In a regional survey such as this, however, practical considerations dictate a quick and simple approach geared to mapping rather than to statistical manipulation. Where the material has been examined, an unquantified presence is denoted by '*' and one or two sherds amounting to less than 5% are shown as 'o'. Larger quantities measured by sherd count are indicated in 25% divisions by filling in quadrants of the relevant box. This data can then be depicted by proportional symbols on the distribution maps. Where specific figures are available from a published report or more sophisticated quantification of an important group, the proportion of a particular ware is expressed as a percentage of the contemporary material. 'Dissolution' assemblages dated to the second quarter of the 16th century on monastic sites have been usefully compared by these different methods of quantification. More advanced statistical studies in any period, however, would almost certainly require a wider geographical range of dated stratified groups than exists at present.

Fabric analysis

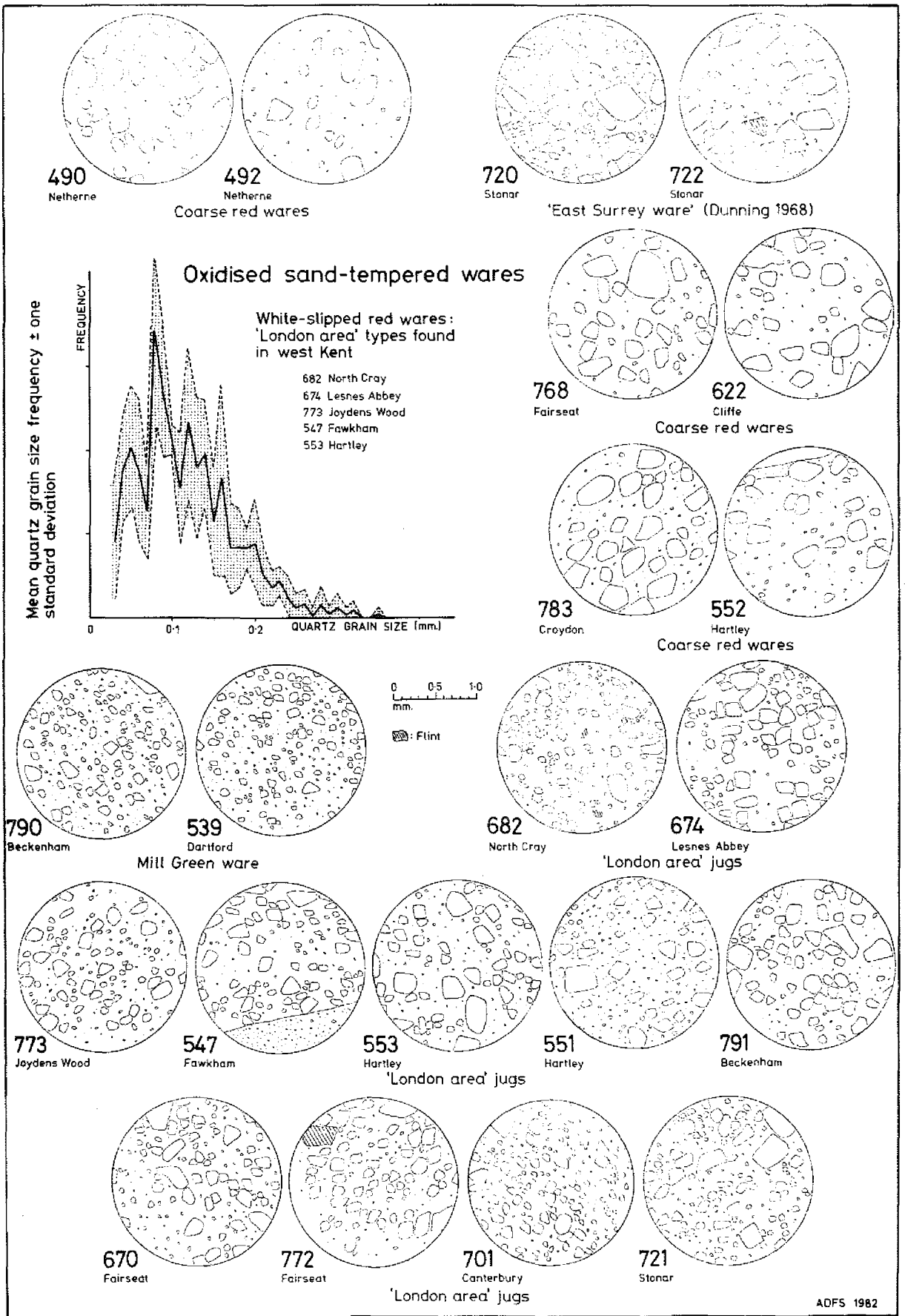
Visual identification of medieval wares in south-east England has been accompanied by a programme of thin-section analysis to substantiate the classifications. It would have been impractical to take samples from every site, and statistically-based random sampling would have required knowledge of the full range of available material at the outset. Instead, samples were selected as examination of museum collections and excavated finds progressed, with the intention of research into five major topics:

1. Characterisation of kiln assemblages.
2. Identification of marketed vessels capable of being attributed to known kilns.
3. Assessment of fabric variability within recognised ware types, in order to clarify whether they came from one or more sources of manufacture.
4. Analysis of coarsewares from diverse locations to assess the significance of visual similarities.
5. Selected site studies to trace the chronological development of certain fabrics and to assess the likely number of different manufacturing sources represented at given periods.

A minimum of five sherds has been used to characterise groups of wasters, but, in the case of marketed vessels, the fabrics identified at consumer sites are usually represented by only one thin-section. Thus the labour of preparing nearly 1100 thin-sections has been apportioned as 40% for kiln sites, 44% for miscellaneous consumer sites, and 16% for specific site studies.

The method of textural analysis developed for this project and the applications of this technique to studies of ceramic trade have been described elsewhere (Streeten forthcoming b). However, the process of measuring quartz grains and

Fig. 4



presenting the results is very time-consuming. This level of analysis has therefore been reserved for the characterisation of wasters; for the identification of marketed kiln products; and for the assessment of recognised ware types. Other samples have been examined by comparing the thin-sections one with another.

The concept of visual comparison charts for estimating the percentage of inclusions seen under a petrological microscope (Terry and Chillingier 1955) has been modified for the grouping of pottery fabrics. A projected plain light image of the thin-section is traced on to paper at a magnification of x 50. The outline of the grains is then compared with the view through the microscope, and any groundmass of small grains which did not appear on the projected image can be added in freehand. Conventional symbols are used to indicate inclusions other than quartz, such as flint or ironstone.

A large number of these sketches can then be compared at one time, and this has proved a satisfactory method of conveying on paper the grain size criteria used to define a particular fabric. Fig. 4 shows the application of this method to groups of oxidised sand-tempered wares found in west Kent and east Surrey. Visual comparison charts are combined with a graph representing the quartz grain size frequency for one group of white-slipped redwares. These so-called 'London area' jugs can be distinguished from Mill Green ware and other groups from unknown sources on the basis of the grain sizes shown by the sketches. It should be emphasised, however, that this method might prove less appropriate in areas other than south-east England where pottery fabrics contain a very limited range of inclusions.

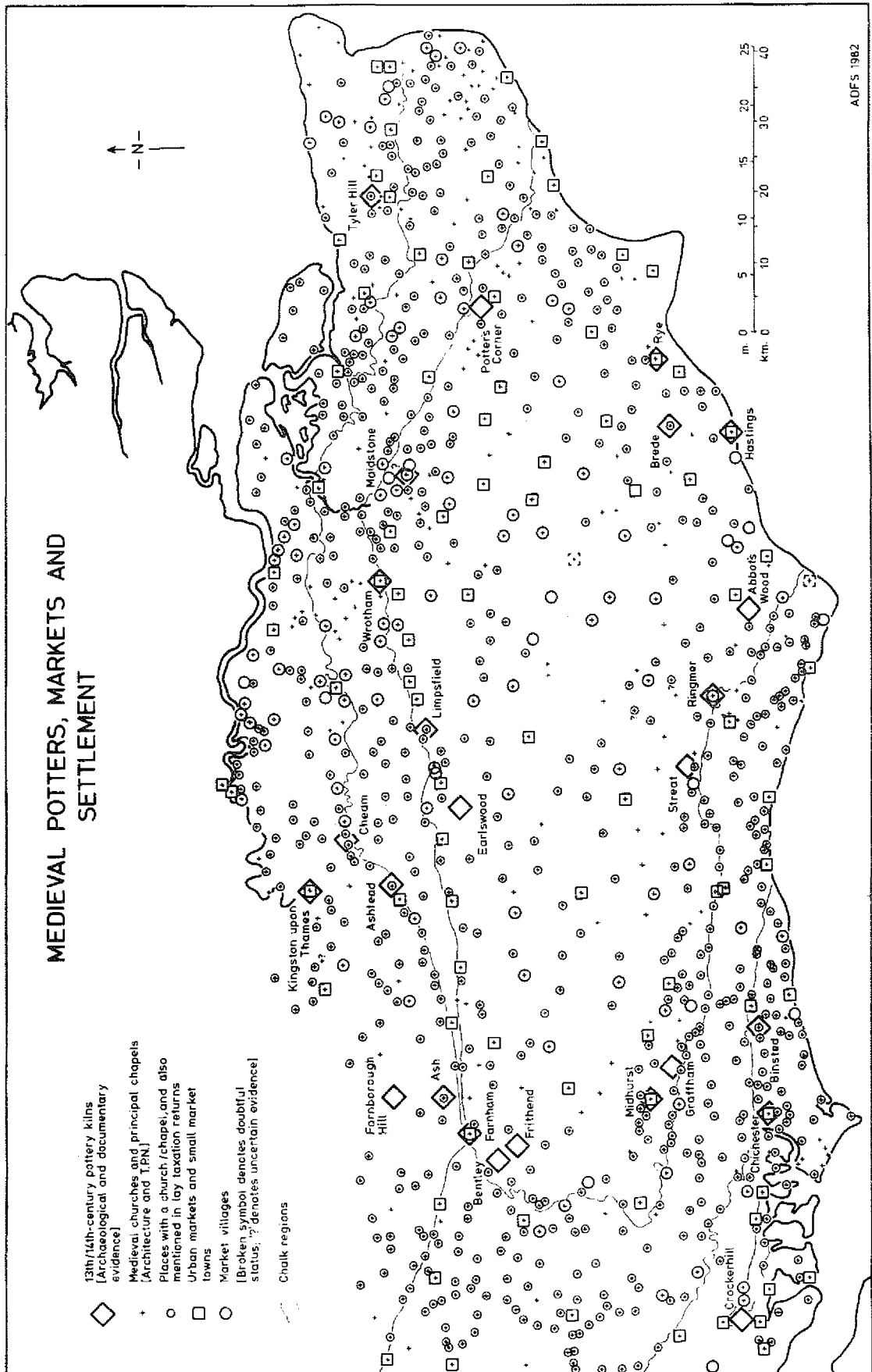
Conclusion

A geographical approach to studying the economic aspects of medieval pottery production and distribution can only be effective at a regional level. The very scale of such a survey, however, imposes limitations upon its scope. The methods of recording information which have been described are therefore tailored to generalisation rather than to the needs of an individual excavation.

In order to reap the benefits of such a survey, the archaeological evidence should not be studied in isolation. Topography, settlement, markets and communications will all contribute to understanding and interpretation of the observed distribution patterns. Much of the information required for assessment of minor settlements and communications in particular, must await the completion of a greater number of detailed local studies. Nevertheless, the evidence needed to examine the location of 13th/14th century kilns in relation to towns, markets and villages is more readily available from documentary and topographical sources. Fig. 5 shows the distribution of towns, village markets and other settlements which were large enough to have a church or chapel in the period c. 1290-1340. Evidence for the latter group of settlements is drawn from the published Lay Subsidy Rolls (Glasscock 1975; Hudson 1910; Willard and Johnson 1932) and from the Nomina Villarum of 1316. In addition, the list of churches and chapels identified from architectural evidence has been supplemented from ecclesiastical records prepared c. 1291 for the Taxatio Ecclesiastica. Not all of these settlements are nucleated villages in the Midland sense (Everitt 1976:10-11), but the marketing of pottery in the more densely settled areas, such as the coastal plain of Sussex, would have differed from the methods used among the scattered settlements in the Weald or on the Hampshire/Surrey heathlands.

Thus, there are kilns which were evidently situated both to exploit the natural resources of the claylands and to serve settlements on adjacent areas of chalk where pottery production would have been impractical (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5



ADFS 1982

Furthermore, the limited extent of settlement in the Hampshire/Surrey border area suggests that potters working in this region may have served wider geographical areas than their counterparts on the fringes of the Weald. Space does not permit discussion of the general issues here, but the evidence must be treated with caution. Study of markets and settlements which could be served by direct sales at the workshop should not overshadow the numerous other means by which the archaeological pattern could have been created. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that the distribution of marketed products from a given kiln ought to be assessed not only in relation to the often arbitrary pattern of archaeological findspots, but also in the context of known centres of medieval population.

Given the broad scope required for a regional study of medieval ceramics, systematic handling of the growing body of data becomes essential. Experience has shown, however, that it would have been impossible to embark upon detailed recording on data sheets without an extensive preliminary study of the material. These pre-printed sheets are used at present as a convenient personal means of storing information, but, as identifications and terminology become more clearly defined and accepted, there may be potential in some areas for different researchers to contribute to a regional archive. It is in this context that a microcomputer would almost certainly have a vital function to perform.

The M.P.R.G. bibliography will supply essential information for research into medieval ceramics, but its academic value will lie in the uses to which it is put. Whereas the bibliography is rightly a national enterprise, the need for more detailed information, which varies from area to area, is best fulfilled by regional inventories. In an ideal world, these would have a common format to which a nationally adopted retrieval system could be applied.

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