

A SEMI-CIRCULAR FIRECOVER FROM THE TYLER HILL KILNS, CANTERBURY

Stephen Moorhouse
West Yorkshire Metropolitan County Council Archaeological Unit

Summary

The author describes a recent find of what is believed to be a semi-circular firecover from near Tyler Hill, Canterbury. Other examples of this particular type are known from two sites in Britain. Firecovers were in use throughout the Middle Ages and are referred to in documentary records.

Recent fieldwork on the site of the extensive medieval pottery kilns at Tyler Hill has produced three unusual sherds. They were found by Wes McLachlan in an ill-defined feature in the ploughed part of a field to the north of Tyler Hill. All are in a similar, hard-fired, fine, sandy fabric, light-brown surfaces with a blue-grey core, typical of late medieval Tyler Hill products. The first is part of (?) a beard-like lug projecting from the side of a vessel, the second is the top and canopy from either a crude lid or the top from a roof ventilator, and the third is the subject of this note (Figure 1).

The third piece is a large sherd from a vessel which has been thrown as a large bowl with steep, near vertical, sides and a flat rim which has been knife-incised on the underside (as drawn). The fabric is fine, sandy, very hard-fired, with medium-brown surfaces and a darkgrey core. Spots of watery, green-brown glaze occur externally, possibly splashes from a glazed vessel in the kiln. A large segment of the vessel, possibly half, has been cut away from rim to base. To strengthen the cut edge two thumbed strips have been applied on both surfaces. Oblique knife incisions have been cut into the external thumb impressions. The double applied strips on either side of the vertical cut edge appear to be strengtheners to a body which was substantially weakened by having been cut. The solidness of these strips

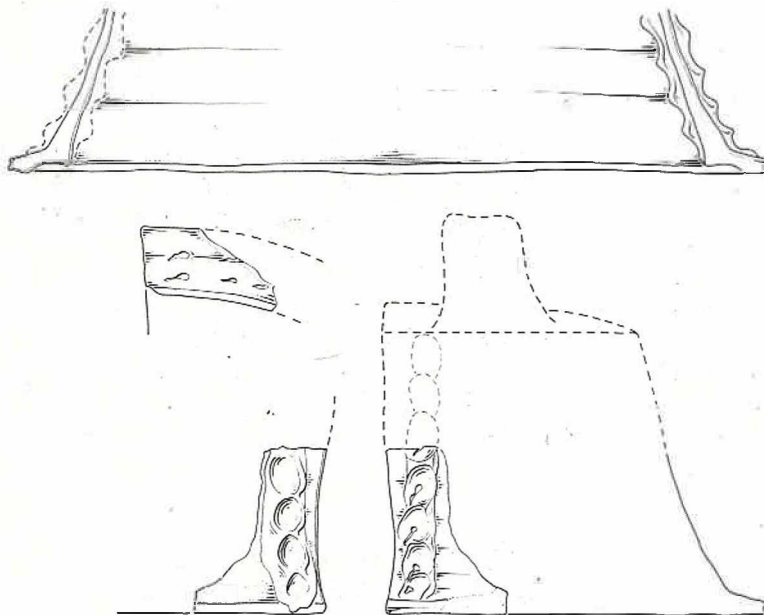


Figure 1.

suggests that a substantial part of the vessel had been removed, possibly half. The rim form and stabbing are typical of late medieval Tyler Hill bowls (Machpherson-Grant 1981,29 no. 115, 122).

A number of suggestions can be made as to the form of vessel from which the sherd comes. The most likely is that it comes from the front of a semi-circular firecover. Thanks to their identification by the late Gerald Dunning in the 1960's and subsequent study by John Hurst, firecovers are now recognised as a common medieval ceramic form in most parts of the country (Hurst 1963;1964; Dunning 1972;1977). The majority are circular in form to cover a central hearth. However the existence of the wall hearth or fireplace throughout the Middle Ages in this country (Wood 1965, 261-76) suggests that firecovers of semi-circular form were made to stand against the fireplace reredos.

Three examples are known to the writer. The most complete one comes from the late medieval kiln site at Olney Hyde, near Olney, Buckinghamshire (pers. comm. Denis Mynard). About three-quarters of the top of the vessel survives in a fabric typical of the late medieval Olney Hyde products. The fabric is very smooth, light-brown in colour with limestone inclusions. The top and sides are decorated and strengthened with thumbed, applied strips. A broad strap handle spanning the top is

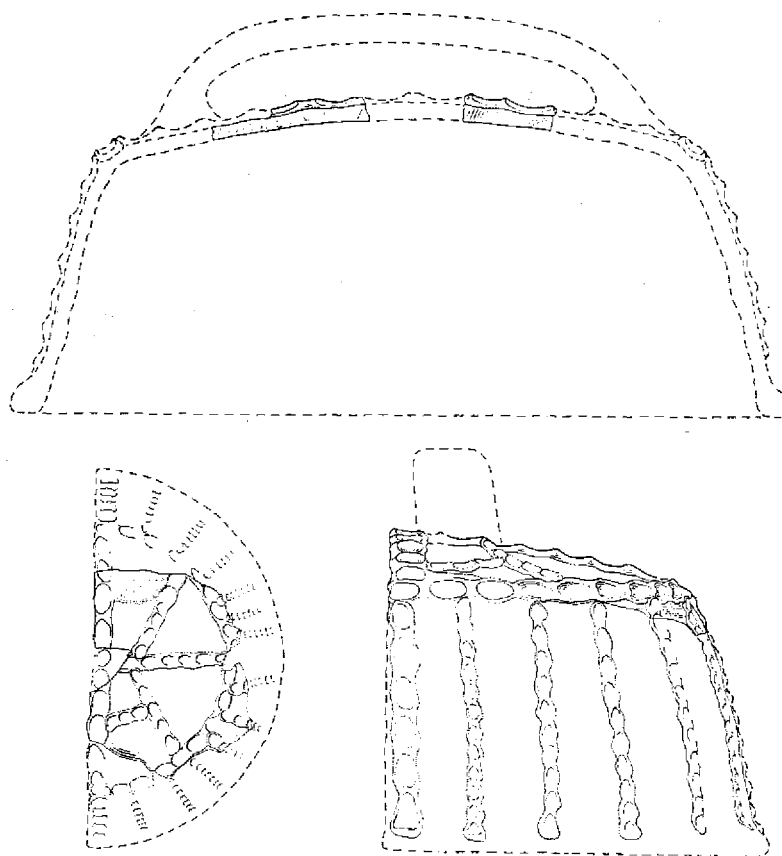


Figure 2.

central to the diameter but set back from the front (Figure 2.) The second example comes from the final phase of Site D (L. I. P. 3) on the medieval kiln site

at Lyveden, Northamptonshire, dating to the first half of the 14th century (Bryant and Steane 1971). (The piece, previously unpublished, is now with the rest of the material from the site in Northampton Museum.) The character of the vessel is typical of Lyveden products of the period. It is coil constructed, with a fine, though lumpy light-brown fabric, smooth surfaces, with sparse, small, angular, limestone inclusions. It is unglazed (Figure 3). The vessel is more fragmentary than the

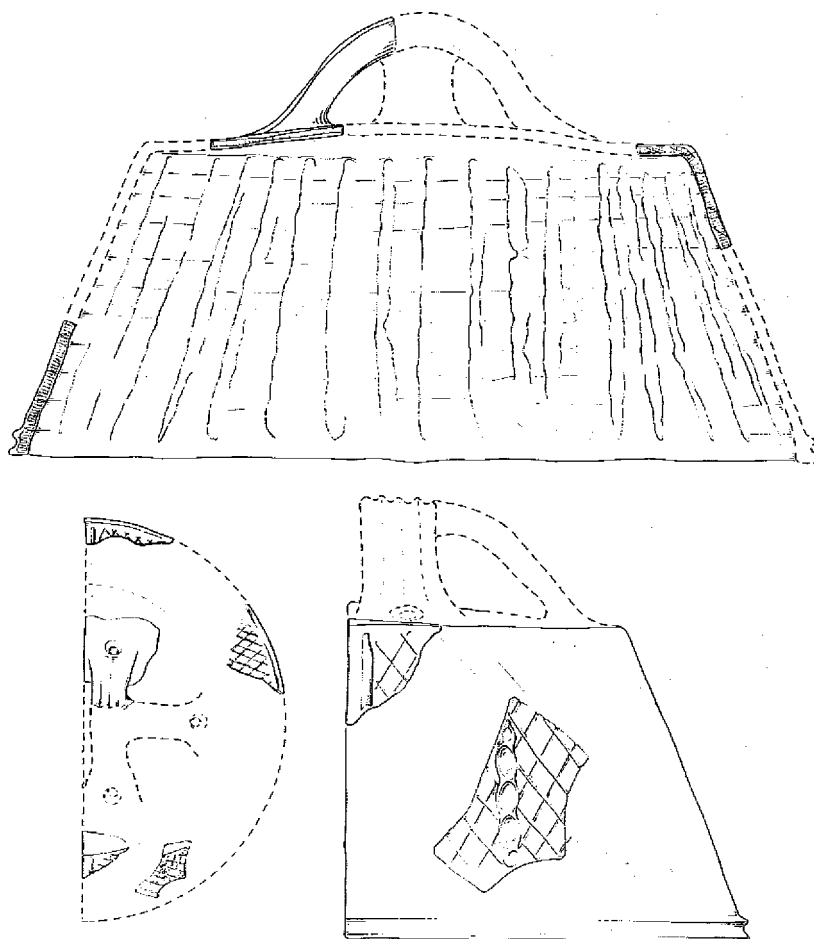


Figure 3.

Olney Hyde example but sufficient survives to show that it had a similar profile and that the circular form was coiled and then cut in half from top to bottom. The handle is of an unusual triple-strap form which would give added strength to the structure of the vessel when being lifted. The junction of a similar handle occurs on the same tenement but insufficient survives to make its identification as the handle of a half firecover certain. The incised criss-cross decoration on the body is found on jugs from the same tenement phase. The handle form and decoration are unique to this phase of Site D and suggest that they may be the hallmark of the potter(s) working the final phase of the tenement. The third firecover is the one from Tyler Hill, Canterbury.

All three are constructed in the traditional English manner. They are made as a large bowl which is then inverted and a handle applied symmetrically across the top. Thin walls are often strengthened with applied, thumbled strips, which also act as a decorative feature. Holes piercing the body, either in the walls or top, are an

essential feature of the circular form, for they allow the embers to breath within the enclosed body. The open back makes ventilation holes unnecessary in the semi-circular type, although they are present in the example from Lyveden.

The characteristic features of a firecover include a large diameter, large inverted bowl form, internal sooting, when found on occupation sites, holes piercing the top and/or sides, and a loop handle springing from and returning to the top. While most of these features are common to both forms, two help to distinguish the semi-circular form. The most obvious is the flat back. The second is the position of the handle. On the circular form they are usually positioned centrally so that when the cover is lifted it is equally balanced. The form of the half cover means that the handle has to be set back from the flat side, as seen in the examples from Lyveden and Olney Hyde. Here the positioning of the handle is more acute if the equilibrium of balance is to be achieved. It is this asymmetrical position of the handle which could help to differentiate between the two forms. If the vessel is thrown it should be possible to see to which of the two forms it belongs by the direction of the throwing grooves found on the underside of the top, beneath the junction of the handle with the cover. A fully circular form will have throwing grooves at right angles to the line of the handle, those on the semi-circular form will be oblique to the line of the handle.

Firecovers were in use throughout the Middle Ages. They are known in 12th century contexts but their floruit is throughout the 13th and 14th centuries (Hurst 1963,136). The suggested 10th/11th century date for the Brafield-on-the Green, Northamptonshire, firecover is almost certainly far too early (Kennet 1969,52). The cover forms part of a large pit group (unpublished and in Northampton Museum) which contained Lyveden wares suggesting a 13th/14th century date. Firecovers also survive into the 15th century, as shown by examples from Sandal Castle, West Yorkshire (Moorhouse 1983, 143, fig. 35, no. 400) and from Broughton, South Humberside (Moorhouse 1974,6-7, 16, fig. 3 no. 24), the latter certainly of circular form. While the basic inverted bowl form is typical of British firecovers, features found on them vary. The inverted bowl profile is not universal for a hemispherical form is known from Southampton (Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975,76, fig. 146, no. 344), and an ornate bell-shaped example with a raised knob finial and attached loop handles comes from Norwich (Jennings 1981,43, fig. 13, no. 269). While ventilating holes are usually simple apertures piercing the body, in the sides, in the top, or at the base of the handles, cylindrical ventilation spouts protruding from the top are known from the kiln sites at Hallgate, Doncaster, South Yorkshire (Buckland et al 1979) and Lyveden, Northamptonshire (Moorhouse forthcoming). A close study of the features of firecovers may reveal regional types. The variety in shape and details may also suggest that a number of vessels of similar form but of different and distinct functions might be masquerading under what are today termed generally 'firecovers'. Indeed one form, the fish smoker, has already been identified and is discussed below.

Many buildings in the Middle Ages were made from wood and roofed with combustible materials such as thatch or wooden shingles. As such they were highly susceptible to destruction by fire. An early attempt to reduce the fire hazard was made in London in 1212 when thatched roofs were made illegal (Salzman 1923,74). No legislation appears to have tackled the root cause of most accidental fires, the

domestic hearth. Even so the frequency with which firecovers occur on domestic sites suggests that they were in common use throughout the medieval period as a precaution against fire. Despite their obvious importance, only one documentary reference has been found to a firecover, and then it is mentioned only in passing. The farming and household treatise known as Seneschaucy, written down in French probably during the period c. 1260-76 and based on experiences drawn from the Midlands, concludes the duties of the dairymaid by saying 'and she ought to keep and cover the fire so that no harm arises through lack of supervision' (Oschinsky 1971,288-9). (The translation gives 'screen' but a literal translation of the French coverir as 'cover' seems more appropriate.) The range of duties of the dairymaid mentioned in the treatise and those revealed in manorial account rolls show that she worked in many different parts of the farm complex. It is probable, therefore, that the 'fire' referred to is not connected with the dairy but is the principal fire in the hall, the central hearth. Documents are much more revealing about other associations between pottery and fire. These range from pottery vessels being used as an alternative to firecovers, in that the embers were held within a pot overnight (Moorhouse 1978,13), to pots as containers being used to transport lighted coals about (Moorhouse 1981,813).

A number of firecovers are linked together by distinctive features which set them apart from the conventional form. They appear to have a diameter to height ratio which is much smaller than for the conventional firecover and they display a much wider variation in handle positions. The major difference, however, is in the size of the air holes. All have a large central aperture in the top with a protruding collar, sometimes long enough to resemble a spout, suggesting that the intention may be to let air escape, rather than let air in, which is the purpose of the holes in normal firecovers. The positioning of holes around the body can be equally variable. On some Lincolnshire examples the canopy surrounding the holes has been utilized as a lifting device. Andrew White has suggested that these vessels are fish smokers, a use which may explain their distribution, which is mainly riverine and coastal. Examples are known from Sully Castle, South Glamorgan, and kilns at Rye, Sussex (Barton 1979,253 no. 4-6), a possible example from Lyveden, Northamptonshire (Moorhouse forthcoming), from various sites in Lincolnshire (pers. comm. Andrew White) and from a number of sites throughout East Anglia, including Norwich (Jennings 1981,43 fig. 13, no. 271-2), King's Lynn (Clarke and Carter 1977,305, fig. 139, no. 24), Gressenhall (Clarke and Carter 1977,306 note 313), and Castle Acre (op. cit). The similarity in form and features between the fish smoker and both types of firecover make it probable that sherds from all three forms have been mistakenly identified. Indeed unless diagnostic features of the semi-circular firecover and the fish smoker can be recognised, it will be very difficult to distinguish between them.

In conclusion, ceramic firecovers have a currency from the Saxo-Norman period in the British Isles. The majority are circular but three semi-circular examples, for covering a wall hearth, are known, all dating to the later Middle Ages. The existence of wall hearths from the 11th century in this country (Wood 1965,261) suggests that ceramic covers for them were made from that date. Their identification is made difficult by the majority of features found on them being common to the fully circular form and also to the fish smoker. It seems likely that examples of

both have been published in the literature as circular firecovers. Closer study of sherds which are thought to come from the conventional firecover may identify to which of the three forms they belong. This will help to establish the currency throughout the medieval period of two ceramic forms which are probably much more common than present evidence suggests.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Mr McLachlan for permission to publish the piece from Tyler Hill and Marion Green of the Canterbury Archaeological Trust for initially sending me the sherd and for providing details about its findspot. Denis Mynard kindly allowed me to trace his drawing of the Olney Hyde cover and to use it here in advance of his own publication. Thanks are due to Andrew White for drawing my attention to the fish smoker and for discussing the Lincolnshire examples with me. The Sully Castle fishsmoker is from excavations carried out by the Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust and I am grateful to Steven Stell for providing a drawing and details.

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