

INTERIM NOTE ON A TWELFTH CENTURY POTTERY KILN FROM CANTERBURY

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Summary

A small excavation by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust has yielded the near-complete base of a small kiln, with its flue and firing-chamber densely packed with large sherds and wasters. The pottery is unlike the dominant local sandy ware for the period and shows very strong formal and decorative North French influences. Links with a Cathedral Precinct documented site confidently indicate a date between c. 1150-1175 for the kiln.

Introduction

Redevelopment in the forecourt of Barrett's Garage, Pound Lane, close to Canterbury's West Gate, received prior archaeological examination. The first day of machine clearance produced a large collection of mid-later 12th century pottery, deposited in a thick layer, amongst dark charcoal or ash-filled soil. Within a short time soft and underfired sherds were recovered, together with wasters - followed by the kiln itself. The implications of the kiln are wide-ranging, not least because it is the first post-Roman example recorded from the City. In retrospect it also represents the penultimate stage in a series of links arising from recent research. These are:

- 1 In 1977, excavation within the Cathedral Precincts, on the site of the 'Aula Nova', produced roulette-decorated local sandy ware pitchers, together with sherds from North French or Low Countries roulette-decorated grey ware pitchers. These all came from dump levels immediately preceding the construction trenches for the 'Aula Nova'. We know from documentary evidence that the building was in existence by c. 1170 and that initial construction was unlikely to have begun earlier than c. 1160-1165. For a number of reasons (see The Archaeology of Canterbury, Vol. III, forthcoming) it was felt that the pre-'Aula Nova' dump levels should be dated no earlier than c. 1150 or marginally later. This was a useful starting point for dating the local rouletted pitchers and though the link between these and the imported grey wares was not fully comprehended, it was strongly felt that the deep collars of these vessels (and possibly the rouletting - Fig. 1) were being inspired by continental material.
- 2 In 1979 further Precinct excavations (The Almonry Chapel - The Archaeology of Canterbury, Vol. III) produced two pit groups: one containing the pitcher illustrated in Fig. 2, the other, two pitcher rims identical to those in Fig. 6. The first group was dated to c. 1140/50-1160, the second rather later (which will now need some revision). At the time, the fabric of all three looked superficially like the normal range of 12th century sandy wares in Canterbury, assumed to be produced in the Tyler Hill area. However, the fabric appeared to be better refined, and the general finish superior. The formal and manufacturing differences were sufficient to prompt John Hurst to suggest close links with North France and that we should not exclude the possibility of a French potter possibly working in Canterbury.

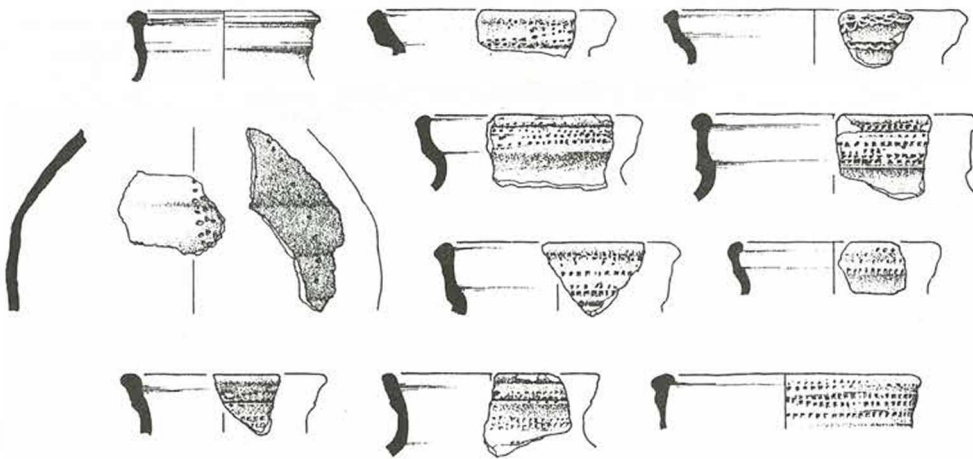


Fig. 1. Tyler Hill Brittaincourt Farm - type roulette-decorated pitchers sealed beneath the c.1160-65 Aula Nova foundations (scale 1:4).

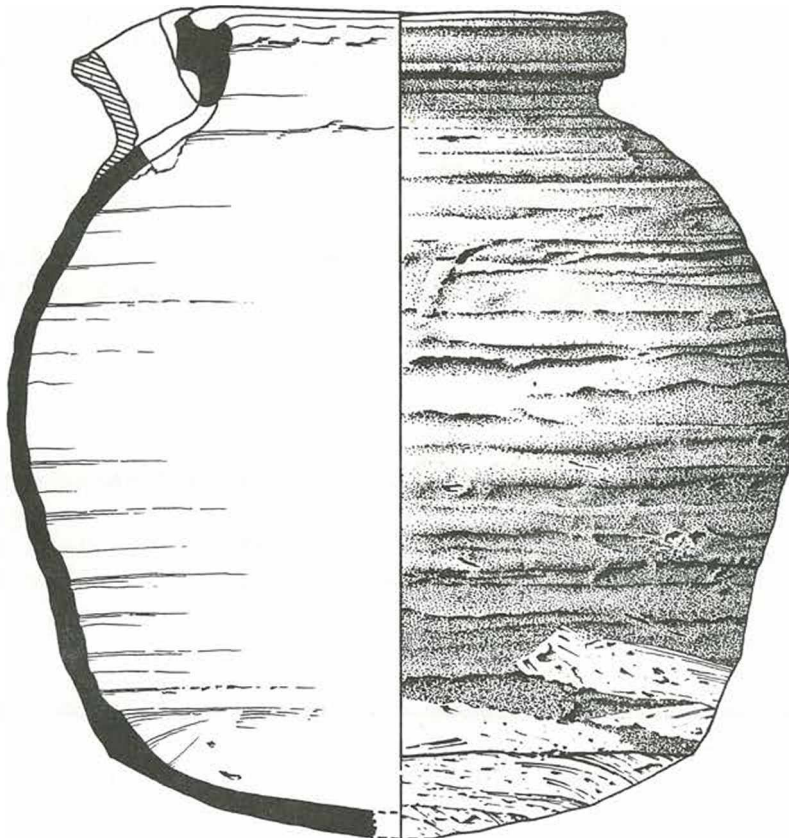


Fig. 2. Canterbury kiln product: pitcher from Almonry Chapel, Cathedral precincts (scale 1:2).

- 3 More recently (note in Archaeologia Cantiana XCIX, 1983, 130-1) field work in the Tyler Hill area by Wes McLachlan produced sherds and probably kiln debris from a site near Brittancourt Farm. The material included roulette-decorated pitcher rims identical to those found beneath the 'Nova'. This find was good on two counts: we now had a definite source for the latter, probably operating shortly after c. 1150, and we could now legitimately extend the confirmed period of Tyler Hill production back from the known mid or later 13th century sites to at least the mid 12th. This still did not account for the Almonry Chapel vessels though.

The 1986 Pound Lane Kiln

Post-excavation work on the kiln and its contents will not begin until the next financial year, so that the following is no more than an overview. The results were:

- 1 The base of a small kiln, with a stoke-pit, single flue and chamber divided by a central spine (Fig. 3). Around the back and side edges of the clay-lined chamber were a series of small stake holes, in an apparently sub-square arrangement. These were not renewed. When the full implications of these and the kiln features are fully assessed it should be possible to provide a fairly reliable reconstruction of the original above-ground structure. Initially, the impression gained is that of a small kiln, used only a few times before cessation. The excavation was small, but there is some stratigraphic evidence that could suggest another kiln nearby.



Fig. 3. Canterbury kiln after excavation. 1m scale in flue. Note stake-holes around the back.

- 2 The pottery from the kiln chamber (Fig. 4), flue and surrounding area is in a sandy ware, better refined and generally harder fired than the normal range of 12th century products. The vessels are thrown much more competently and are in forms essentially quite unlike local products for the period. The range of forms recognised to date include glazed and plain roulette-decorated spouted pitchers (Fig. 5a-d); plain cooking pots, with internally cupped, collared and sharply undercut rims (Fig. 6) - as are many of the pitchers; and large storage jars (Fig. 7). Some pitcher bases have spaced single or grouped thumbed feet (Fig. 8); bold spaced thumbing on large cooking pots (as the waster - Fig. 9) is a fairly

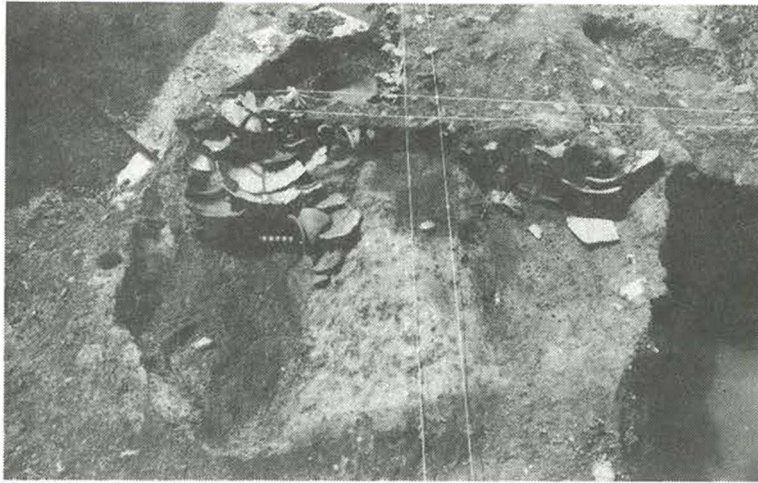


Fig. 4. Canterbury kiln during excavation, from the back.
Scale to left of central spine: 10 cm.

frequent feature, and possibly the only aspect that may reflect local influences. The large, excellently glazed, strap-handle (Fig. 10) is the only example - and since there is enough material to indicate the major formal elements, it is quite possible that pitchers were not generally supplied with handles.

Other than the manufacturing quality and deep collared rims, it is the rouletting which sets this material apart from the standard local products. Fig. 11 illustrates a typical sample. Comparison with Fig. 1 shows the difference. The 'Aula Nova' material, almost certainly produced at the Brittancourt Farm site, with its clumsy collared rims and crudely square-cut rouletting, is in marked contrast to the neat diamond or triangular impressions on the Pound Lane sherds. Both these and the accompanying rim forms can be paralleled amongst North French grey wares, and it is this link from the continent via Pound Lane that is most likely to have inspired the poor Tyler Hill copies.

- 3 Finally, on the 'Aula Nova' evidence alone, the operation of the present kiln can be placed with a more than average degree of confidence to between c. 1150-1175, and quite probably early within that bracket.

The implications of this kiln have yet to be thoroughly assessed, but one of the most interesting aspects is that its distinctive products have, to date, only been recognised once amongst the enormous quantities of excavated 12th century pottery. The single example is the unusual Almonry Chapel pitcher (Fig. 2) and the two rims mentioned earlier, from the same excavation. Both with these and the actual Pound Lane pottery, the continental characteristics are so strong that we may well have here a French potter, operating as a specialist for a strictly limited market, perhaps at the behest of the Cathedral authorities, either to supply them, and/or an immigrant French population, with quality wares.

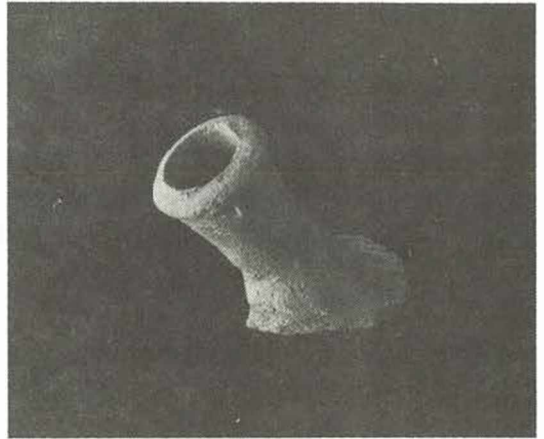
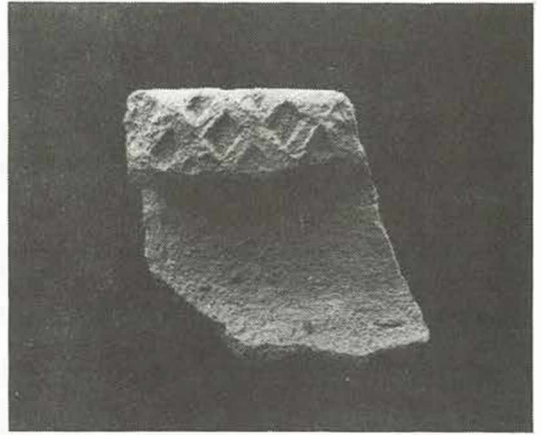
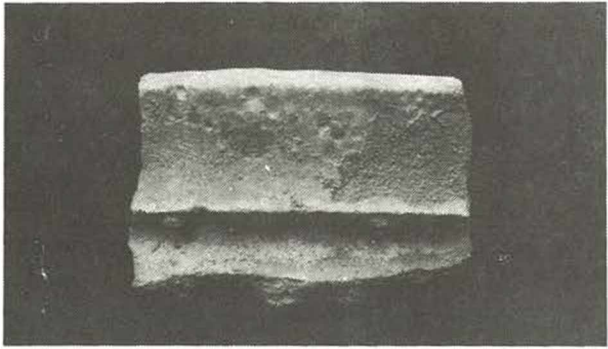


Fig. 5. Canterbury kiln. a-b Glazed and rouletted pitcher rims. c Ribbed pitcher body. d Spout (scales: a 3:4; b 1:1; c-d 1:2).

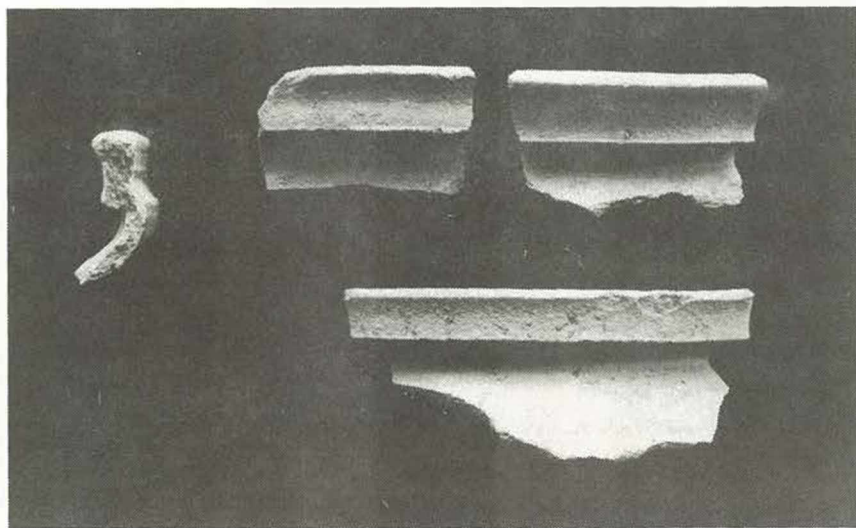


Fig. 6. Canterbury kiln. Cooking-pot rims (scale 1:2).

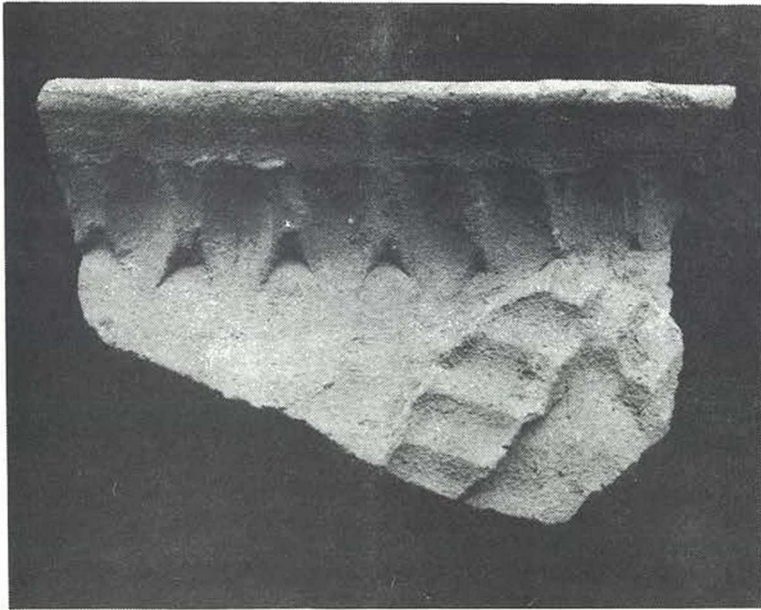


Fig. 7.

Canterbury kiln.

Storage jar (scale 1:2).

Fig. 8. Canterbury kiln.
Pitcher base (scale 3:4).

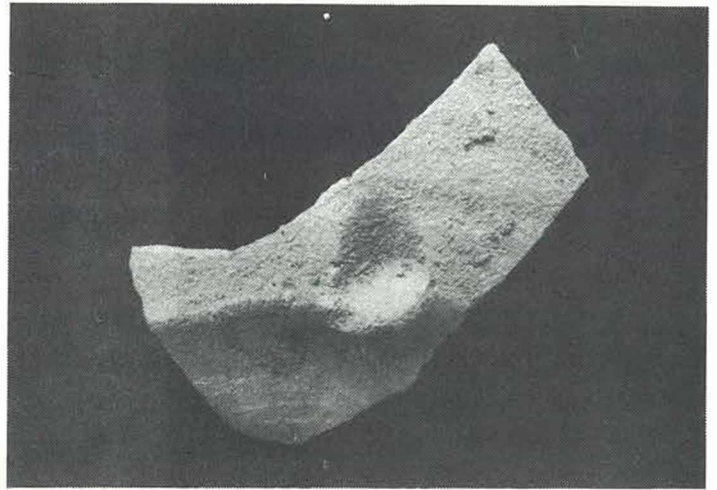


Fig. 9. Canterbury kiln.

Waster with thumb-decorated
rim (scale 1:2).

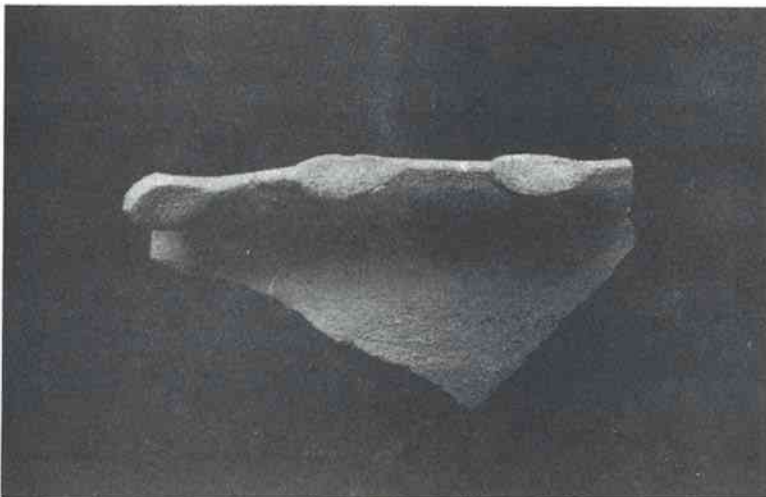
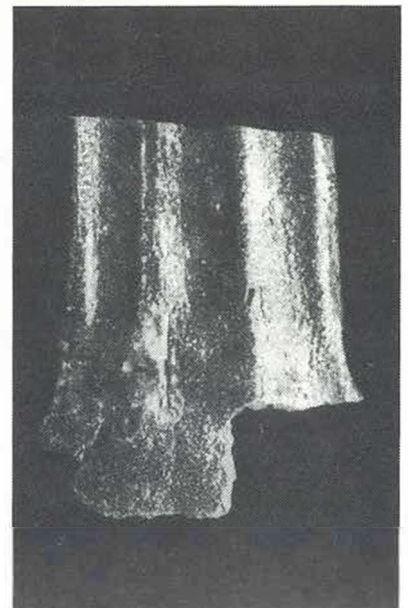


Fig. 10. Canterbury kiln.
Glazed strap-handle (scale 1:2).



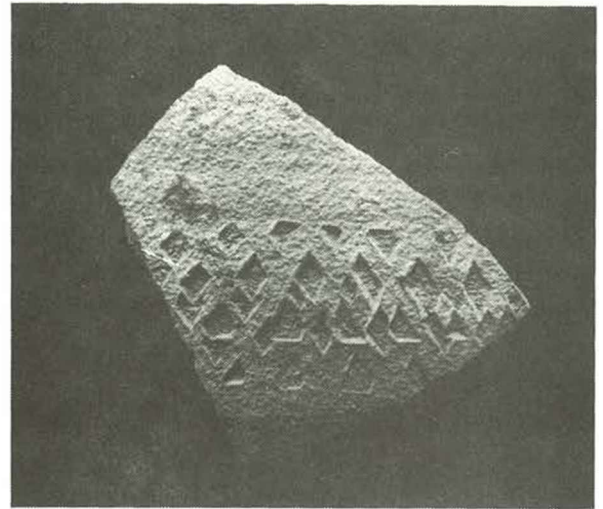
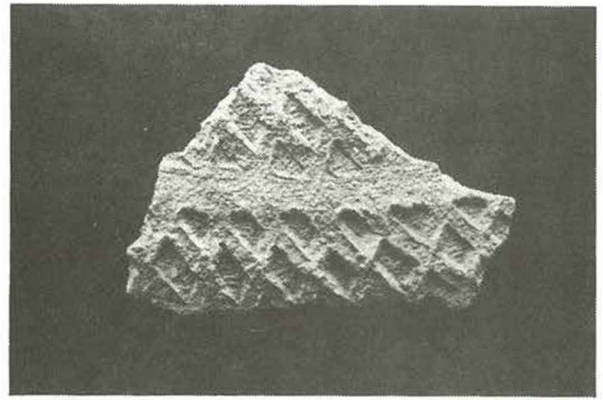
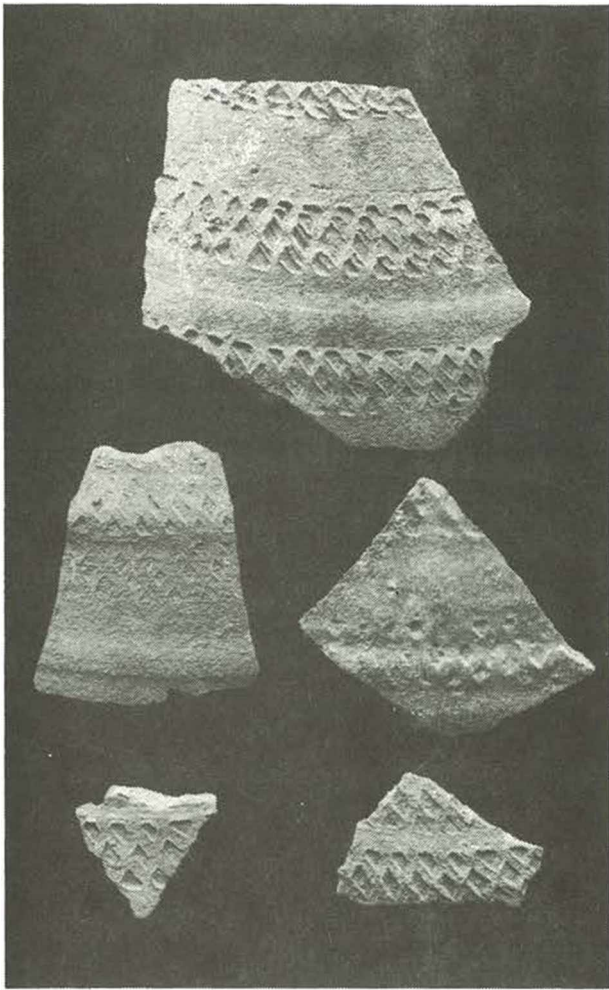


Fig. 11. Canterbury kiln. a-c Roulette-decorated pitcher sherds (scales: 1 1:2; b-c 1:1).

Acknowledgements

The Trust is particularly grateful to Dr Ailsa Mainman for the invitation to air this find and to Mr Geoffrey Barrett, the site owner, for financial assistance, encouragement and interest. I am equally grateful to John Hurst for the initial 'fore-warning', to John Cherry for enthusiasm, and to both for advice, discussion and confirmation. Finally to Andrew Savage for supplying excellent photographs at very short notice.

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