

A NOTE ON THE TERMINOLOGY OF POTTERY MAKING SITES

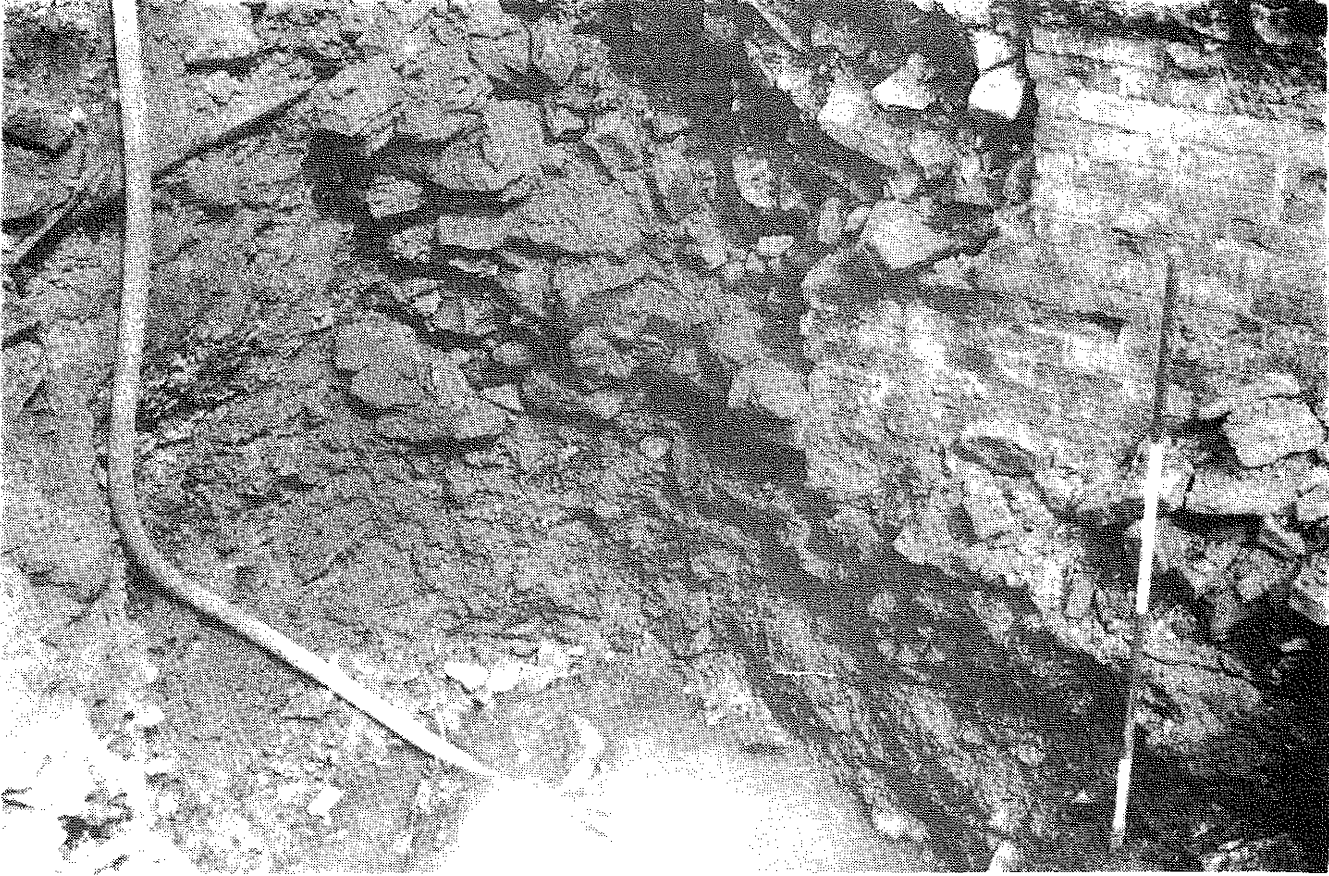
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Summary

When pottery manufacturing sites are referred to in the archaeological literature, they are, quite naturally, described as 'kiln sites'. This term is not only misleading, but it will be argued below that it has conditioned our attitude to the way in which we view such sites, and hence how we excavate them. The kiln and its associated waste debris is the most obvious evidence for a pottery making site once it has been disturbed. A settlement composed of timber-built structures, however, would never be described as a 'post-hole site'. It is suggested that in future when the whole complex is being referred to, the term 'production centre', 'pottery making site' or terms of similar meaning should be used, and when referring to the products associated with a kiln, the terms 'tenement' or 'workshop' (in the sense of a group of potters working together and producing a similar product) should be adopted.

Whatever technique was used in the production of pottery vessels or objects, a set procedure in the sequence of manufacture had to be followed. This involved a number of separate processes, from the digging and refining of the raw clay to the firing of the finished vessels and their subsequent storage. Apart from the kiln and waste heaps, the material remains for these various processes are likely to leave very little archaeological evidence. All these processes would take place within the potter's working tenement, whose layout would be constantly changing, often with the wholesale replanning of the interior. This picture has emerged from a small number of sites where attempts have been made to look at the working tenement (Moorhouse 1981, 96-108; Moorhouse 1986), as at Lyveden (Northants), Bourne (Lincs), Olney Hyde (Bucks) and recently at Wrenthorpe (West Yorks). At Lyveden the potting tenements mostly fronted onto the street in the valley bottom. The latest kilns in each tenement were revealed through plough damage. On Site D, however, the earliest kiln had been covered over and preserved beneath successive phases of occupation, and its existence was only revealed through excavation. Other sites along the stream were not detected in the plough-soil because they were protected by a considerable depth of natural hill-wash and plough-soil being moved down hill. The Lyveden evidence provides warnings for the plotting of waster and kiln deposits in plough-soil to determine the geographical extent of an industry.

Conversely, at Wrenthorpe (West Yorks), a series of pottery making sites in the centre of the village has been revealed through road works and building development over a period of nearly thirty years. Recent work here has highlighted the dangers of referring to chance finds of pottery waste as possible 'kiln sites' (Pl. 1). Firstly, it is now apparent that the whole of the eastern side of the village lies on a raft



Pl. 1. Wrenthorpe (West Yorkshire).

Waste heaps of 16th and 17th century date up to 3 metres deep, which led to the alteration of the course of the stream through the village by up to 30 metres westwards, and eventually to a major change in the topography of the western side of the valley on which the present village now lies

(Photo: S. Moorhouse, 1981)

of potting debris dating from the 16th and 17th centuries; any disturbance of the ground there is going to produce considerable evidence for pottery manufacture, as, indeed, it has. Secondly, the important pioneering work of Peter Brears in the late 1950s and early 1960s, based on archaeological and documentary work, identified what was thought to be the potting tenement of Robert Glover, complete with mid 17th century potter's house, workshop and kiln. Recent detailed survey and archaeological work on the site of and adjacent to both buildings has shown them both to post-date potting in the village and are no earlier than the mid 18th century (Moorhouse and Roberts 1987). The kiln was identified initially by a

small trench behind what was thought to be the potter's house, and was thought to date from the early 16th through to the mid 18th century. The recent large scale excavations on the site of the demolished buildings have shown that the kiln excavated in 1965 was the latest of a series of nine kilns, each on different sites, which related to eighteen phases of activity within the area excavated dating to between c. 1580 and c. 1660, when potting ceased on the site. At least three phases did not contain a kiln, suggesting that in those phases it lay elsewhere in the tenement, outside the area excavated. The area was chosen for excavation in advance of major road works on the basis of the earlier work. What was thought to be a complete tenement turned out to be the back of a very active, but relatively short-lived potting enclosure. As a result of the recent large scale excavations at Wrenthorpe it has been possible to alter radically earlier views on the history of the potting industry in the village and of the layout of the landscape which it produced. The plan of the modern village was created on top of the waste heaps after potting had ceased in the mid 18th century, for the roads, which had been assumed to be of medieval origin, cut across potting tenements in which pottery was produced until the mid 17th century (Moorhouse and Roberts 1987). The recent work in Wrenthorpe has demonstrated most vividly that key-hole archaeology for whatever reasons is likely to produce very misleading evidence, particularly on long-lived potting sites.

The early pioneering work at Wrenthorpe was carried out by watching road improvements and building developments. It is this kind of work which has revealed kilns and pottery waste dumps in the past, with little opportunity to excavate the rest of the tenement of which they formed part. Only rarely, as at Lyveden, Olney Hyde, Nuneaton (Harefield Lane) and Bourne, have such sites been tackled with a view to looking at the pottery making complex or tenement (Moorhouse 1981, 96-108; Moorhouse 1986). We have become accustomed to excavating 'kilns' in total isolation and recovering the associated pottery, assuming that it was the product of that kiln. This in turn introduces a further problem. If the site on which the kiln lies was a large commercial centre of long duration, then it is very probable that the material associated with the kiln was not made in it, and could be material accumulated through constant disturbance of the ground containing material which is dispersed both geographically and in time. At Chilvers Coton (Nuneaton), large areas of the village rest on a raft of pottery making build-up, in some cases upto four metres deep, which had accumulated from the 13th century. This had been disturbed many times through the digging of large clay pits and their subsequent back-filling with whatever material was handy, and the levelling and replanning of potting enclosures (Pl. 2). The recovery of meaningful assemblages from small rescue holes from such deposits is clearly of little value, yet these are the kinds of circumstances under which most of our excavated pottery making assemblages have been recovered.

The excavation of a series of adjacent potting tenements at Lyveden has highlighted a development hinted at from the documents and commonly found on domestic tenements within medieval rural settlements, that is that each tenement had a very different history. Although the overall plan suggested that it was created at one time, and therefore



Pl. 2. Chilvers Coton, Nuneaton (Warwickshire).
Machine-cut trial hole through over 3 metres of
redeposited waste built up during the 13th and
14th centuries. Natural was not encountered.
The trial hole lay c. 20 metres south of Site 15
(Mayes & Scott 1984, 20, Fig. 4)
(Photo: S. Moorhouse, 1967)

planned, the excavations suggested that the tenements were added to in succession. The use of each tenement was not devoted solely to pottery making. On Sites D and J potting activity was interrupted by phases of purely agricultural use. Two tenements on Site J were amalgamated during the 15th century to form a self-contained tilemaking complex with house, workshop, fuel store, and clay dump. Reflecting documentary evidence elsewhere for potters being involved in other craft activities, a bakery and a blacksmith's forge existed side-by-side with potting activity in phases of two separate tenements.

Excavation of the Lyveden tenements has also shown that more than one potter was working within one archaeological phase of a tenement. On Site D, Phase 2, two separate dumps were revealed whose contents were slightly different in the subtleties of form, colour and in the size of the metacarpal bone, a standard template used in the forming of Lyveden bowl and jar rims. All products in Phase 2 on Site D were fired in the

same kiln. It was not possible to say whether the dumps were contemporary or successive.

The use of a potting tenement creates problems for both their excavation and interpretation. The legalities of land holding, and more importantly the money derived from it by the landlord, meant that the potter, like many other craftsmen, had to work within physically defined boundaries. Excavations at Lyveden and Wrenthorpe have shown that the preparation of the raw clay for potting, the storing of the fuel, its movement to the side of the kiln and the firing of the kiln creates many thin overlapping localised surfaces, particularly around the kiln and its associated working surfaces. The disturbance of such deposits by later potting activity or by more recent disturbance can create many problems of interpretation where kilns are excavated out of context. Coupled with the ephemeral remains of structures within potting tenements and the build-up of deposits through the replanning of the tenement (Moorhouse 1981, 96-105; Moorhouse 1986), the archaeology of a tenement in which pottery is produced is far more complicated than that of a contemporary rural domestic tenement.

Disturbed pottery waster heaps are the most obvious signs of a former pottery making site. Because of the way in which pottery dumps were created, sampling of them can provide no more than a glimpse of the material produced. The potter discarded material which he could not sell, and there is no guarantee that the material recovered has remained undisturbed since it was first discarded. If excavated along with the tenements of which they formed part, the waster heap(s) can provide one of the closest means of pottery dating, if the lenses are removed in the reverse order of their accumulation. Apart from showing technological development of the pottery, it might also reveal the effect of lead poisoning on the potter's ability. The excavation of a late 17th century potter's waste heap near Halifax (West Yorks) and modern controlled experiments on potters using raw galene glazes (now illegal in favour of synthetic glazes), have shown that raw lead has a progressive and very marked effect on the ability of the potter throughout his relatively short working life (Moorhouse 1981, 106; Klein *et al* 1970; Koplán *et al* 1979). The experiments have shown that, where a potter used raw lead, his products declined markedly throughout his working life, which is shortened by the lead attacking the nervous system. Excavations at Pule Hill, Halifax, revealed the better quality, more controlled vessels at the bottom of the dump, while the cruder wares were the latest to be deposited. How much has lead poisoning led to a misunderstanding in the difference between contemporary high and low quality wares of similar type and the decline in the aesthetic quality of pottery throughout the 14th century? It is probable that a very wide range in the quality of wares could be produced by the same potter within a very short working life of ten to fifteen years. Only the excavation of potting tenements would reveal such an important phenomenon.

While this note has appeared to have digressed from the terminology of pottery making sites to the philosophy of how they should be excavated, the two are inseparably linked. The use of the term 'kiln site' has produced an almost subconscious blind spot when interpreting assemblages from pottery making sites. The majority of assemblages recovered have come from the fill of or the immediate surroundings of a kiln disturbed either by development or ploughing. As such, much of our

surviving material cannot be assumed to be contemporary or produced in the kiln near which or within which it was found. All it can do is demonstrate that pottery was made on the site. In essence, the value of a particular group of material rests on the circumstances under which it was recovered. Reverting back to the analogy made earlier, we would never think of referring to the archaeological remains of a timber building as a 'post-hole site'. We should be thinking of the tenement in which the full cycle of pottery making took place, and even to the potting community as a whole, for it is clear from documentary evidence and from excavations at Lyveden that even on sites devoted to the production of pottery, tenements within them could have phases where potting is temporarily abandoned in favour of farming. A much greater understanding of the technology of pottery can be gained from the place where it was made than from the saleable products found on domestic sites. It is an appreciation of all aspects of pottery technology, from the method used to construct the vessel, through the variety of makeshift tools used by the potter, to the equally variable methods of stacking in the kiln which forms the basis of pottery identification. While fabric is the obvious starting point in any pottery definition, it is the recognition of traits in the technology and detailed styling of the pot that is the most meaningful approach to definition - in effect trying to identify the products of an individual potter or workshop. For commercially produced pottery, the excavation of complete pottery tenements holds the clue to our understanding of the technology, and hence the meaningful definition of pottery types. They can provide the best opportunity to see the potter in his contemporary setting, provide closer dating than could be gained on domestic sites (through being able to recognise the traits of the individual potter), and, perhaps most importantly in another context, provide a glimpse of an important but poorly documented medieval craft.

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