

# The National Reference Collections of Medieval and Later Pottery

DAVID BARKER\*, BEVERLEY NENK\* & MARK REDKNAP\*

## SUMMARY

*The purpose of this note is to remind those involved in the study of medieval and post-medieval pottery of the existence of the National Reference Collections.*

### THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The history and aims of the National Reference Collection of Medieval Pottery which is housed in the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities in the British Museum, have already been discussed in an earlier volume (Cherry 1986). However, it may be useful to provide a summary of the contents of the Collection, which has been built up through the generosity of many individuals, archaeological units and museums, and which has recently benefited from the generous donation by John Hurst of his important collection of English wares, including many from kiln sites. The Collection includes material from Britain and Europe, although its main strength lies in the range of English fabrics. These fall into three main groups:

1. Representative samples of sherds from c.80 kilns or kiln groups;
2. Representative samples of sherds from well-dated deposits;
3. Collections of sherds donated on a geographical basis, many representing local fabric type-series.

The Reference Collection is stored alphabetically under country, county and site, and now that the records have been computerised it is hoped to introduce a more detailed and objective fabric description and a catalogue incorporating local fabric code, bibliography, any scientific research undertaken, the existence and location of thin-sections, etc. A computer printout providing an index of those sites and fabrics represented (to date) in the Reference Collection may be obtained on request.

The Reference Collection at the British Museum may be consulted (on weekdays, with prior arrangement) by any interested group or individual. This applies equally to the reserve collection of pottery, some 300 vessels, and to the library of books and offprints relating to medieval pottery throughout Europe, which is stored with the pottery. The library has recently been catalogued and is currently being updated. Visitors to the Collection include archaeologists and museum staff, students, colleagues from abroad and interested members of the public.

### NATIONAL MUSEUM OF WALES, CARDIFF

The National Museum received its Charter in 1907. Its collecting policy aims to collect from Wales, and to a lesser extent from the Welsh Marches, artefacts which reflect the whole heritage of Wales, and in particular to collect those items whose importance can be described as 'national' by virtue of intrinsic quality or their discovery at sites regarded as being of national importance within Wales. An important adjunct is the formation of teaching and reference collections of artefacts, whether Welsh or not.

The origins of the collection of medieval and later ceramics of the National Museum of Wales can be found in the collections of the earlier Cardiff Municipal Museum, which were transferred to the new institution in 1912 (having been authorised by the Cardiff Corporation Act 1909). Many of the early donations of medieval pottery are consequently from sites in Cardiff and the Glamorgans.

By 1987, medieval or later sherds had been acquired from approximately one hundred and thirty sites in Wales, fourteen sites in England, two in Scotland and two in Ireland. Selective samples from the medieval kilns at Denbigh, Newport (Dyfed), Penhow and Rhuddlan (Clwyd), and from the later kilns at Buckley (Clwyd), Ewenni (Glamorgan), Gwehelog (Gwent) and Trefaldu (Cwmcarvan, Gwent) have been acquired through the kind co-operation of the Welsh Trusts and excavators.

The collection is housed by county and site on roller racking in the archaeology store in the Museum basement, with a fabric series in separate drawers. It has yet to be computerised, but manual indices of sites exist. The Reference Collection may be consulted Tuesday–Friday by prior arrangement with the Department of Archaeology and Numismatics. The framework for a permanent Welsh reference collection is based on that of the British Museum: (1) kiln and wasters of sites within Wales; (2) sherds from sealed or well-dated deposits; (3) local fabric type-sherds.

The first category is partly filled by the kiln material cited above. However, these groups of pottery are at

## NATIONAL REFERENCE COLLECTIONS

present small and not fully representative of the traditions concerned. The basis for (3) already exists and a summary list has been published elsewhere (Redknap 1988) but a more systematic programme of collection is now required. Acquisitions from recent excavations include the Dark Age pottery from Longbury Bank. The second category is perhaps the hardest for the Museum to extend, being limited at present to the 13th-century hoard from Wrexham (Clwyd), and to some of the Welsh castle pottery.

The Department of Archaeology and Numismatics houses a large collection of medieval decorated floor tiles, incorporating representative material from major Welsh sites. A booklet published by the Museum provides an introduction to the collection (Lewis 1976), and a census of medieval floor tiles from Wales is in progress.

### THE CITY MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY, STOKE-ON-TRENT

The concept of a National Reference Collection for Post-Medieval Ceramics pre-dates the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology. The subject was first discussed by the Society's predecessor, the Post-Medieval Ceramics Research Group, and the decision to begin building a collection was taken at the Group's Spring Meeting in 1965 (Post Medieval Archaeology 1965). It was agreed at that time that the collection should be housed at the City Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent, where it still resides today. Details of the Collection were first published in 1968 (Post-Medieval Archaeology 1968, 217) and contributions were invited.

The stated aims of the Collection were to provide:

- (a) A representative collection of pottery from closely and soundly dated deposits to form a permanent reference framework for the dating of post-medieval pottery.
- (b) A representative collection of material from every known kiln or group of kilns.
- (c) A collection of sherds built up on a geographical basis, illustrating in a fully representative way regional variations and conformities.

Twenty-two years on, these three basic aims still stand. No geographical limitations were made upon the material to be included in the Collection and a small quantity of material from the USA and Canada has been accepted over the years. It is felt, however, that, as a priority, samples from British sites should be actively sought, with greater emphasis being given to material from production sites.

The Collection comprises material from nearly sixty sites, of which half are kiln sites or production waste sites. The material is stored by site in seventy boxes. The pottery is indexed and retrievable by site, county, type of ware or box number. The size of samples from different sites varies considerably, ranging from a few diagnostic sherds to several boxes. The onus is currently upon the contributors to select the samples.

Ideally, these should include examples of all fabric types, surface finishes and decoration. Rim forms, bases, handle seatings and other diagnostic features are particularly welcome, as are complete profiles, if these are not available in a published report.

Identification of samples can rarely be made with any degree of accuracy at the Museum in Stoke-on-Trent and, consequently, potential contributors are informed of the level of information expected from them, and record cards are distributed.

It was the original intention, and still is, that relevant archive material should be stored alongside the samples. Slides, photographs, plans and reports are all seen as part of the Collection, although this is an area in which little progress has been made. However, an excellent reference library is available at the Museum to those using the Collection.

The Collection is surprisingly little used and contributed to by few. It is entirely dependent for its success upon the interest and goodwill of excavators and fieldworkers who are urged, time and again, to make this a truly national resource. In its present form, the Collection includes material from the late 15th–19th centuries, production waste and domestic waste, saggars and kiln furniture. Geographically it covers most of England, albeit thinly, while Scotland is not represented at all and Wales barely so. Quite simply, a much greater input to the Collection is needed, especially from those involved in the excavation of kiln sites.

Access to the collection is normally possible between 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, Monday to Friday, although an appointment is essential to ensure that staff are available. For those requiring access at weekends, special arrangements may be made.

### DISCUSSION

It is hoped that a standard procedure for the maintenance and recording of the Reference Collections throughout Britain can be devised, and that the National and Regional Reference Collections may be fully integrated. In order to be an effective teaching and reference collection, the National Reference Collections should duplicate *all* the fabrics in the regional collections (ie. not merely the commonest types), in order to represent the current national state of knowledge of medieval and later pottery. This should be not only for the sake of permanency, and for those whose time and funds do not permit travel to the regional collections, but also because atypical fabrics are less likely to be recognised by the researcher who is familiar only with the local types. The exception to this principle is the London fabric series, which it is felt is unnecessary to duplicate in its entirety at the British Museum.

The number of sherds from each kiln or site required for the Reference Collections varies. The fabric and surface finish of a ware are the most difficult aspects to convey accurately via publication; the form may be more

## NATIONAL REFERENCE COLLECTIONS

easily appreciated from the illustration. In cases where illustrations of all forms have been published, it is not necessary to acquire a full range of forms. This is impractical both for reasons of storage space, and because minor forms are often represented by few examples, which should, of course, remain with the main body of the pottery. The problems of defining the representative sample have been discussed (Cherry 1986, 127); concentration on the fabrics, at least when the pottery has been adequately published, eliminates the problem of selection of forms. The solution to the problem of unpublished pottery may lie in the loan of a greater number of examples, as an interim measure.

This note is therefore not only a reminder that the Reference Collections exist, but is also a plea to those responsible for the regional reference collections to provide duplicate examples of local fabrics as published under their numerous alphanumeric codes in previous issues of *Medieval Ceramics*, *Medieval and Later Pottery in Wales* and other journals, thereby enabling anyone to compare (for example) a Montgomery Castle fabric B6 with a Newtown fabric group MC and similar sherds from further afield, and to publicise agreed terminology for fabrics and forms. Lodging sample sherds with the appropriate National Reference Collection would, one hopes, become automatic with their parallel inclusion in regional series and with archive production in advance of publication. The practicalities of transporting the samples will, of course, be arranged by the Museum concerned. This plea applies equally to the Scottish and Northern Irish material and to our European colleagues.

It may also be helpful to provide an updated list of those responsible for the acquisition and curation of the National Reference collections in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland together with regional contact addresses.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cherry, J.** 1986, *Medieval Ceramics*, 'The National Reference Collection of Medieval Pottery', *Medieval Ceramics* 10, 125–130
- Lewis, J.** 1976, *Welsh Medieval Paving Tiles*, National Museum of Wales, Cardiff.
- Post-Medieval Ceramic Research Group** 1965 'The National Collection of Post-Medieval Ceramics', Post-Medieval Ceramic Research Group, Broadsheet No. 3, September 1965, 2–3.
- Post-Medieval Archaeology** 1968 'National Reference Collection for Post-Medieval Ceramics', *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 2 (1968), 217.
- Redknap, M.** 1988 'The National Reference Collection of Medieval and Later Pottery for Wales', *Medieval and Later Pottery in Wales* 10, 33–39.

### Resumé

Le but de cet article est de rappeler à ceux qui travaillent sur la céramique médiévale et post-médiévale l'existence de tessoniers de collections nationales de référence au British Museum, National Museum of Wales et au City Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent, et que les chercheurs y sont bienvenus ainsi que toute contribution à leur enrichissement.

## NATIONAL REFERENCE COLLECTIONS

For further information, appointments, or copies of the Collections indices, please write to:

### British Museum

\*(Medieval Reference Collection) B. Nenk, Department of Medieval & Later Antiquities, British Museum, Gt Russell Street, London WC1 (071) 636 1555 ex 8286.  
(Post-Medieval inquiries) David Gaimster, address as above (071) 636 1555 ext 8734.

### National Museum of Wales

\*(Medieval and Post-Medieval Collections) M. Redknap, Department of Archaeology & Numismatics, National Museum of Wales, Cardiff CF1 3NP (0222) 397951 ext 223

### Royal Museum of Scotland

D. Caldwell, Royal Museum of Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh EH1 1JF (031 225 7534)

### City Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent

\*(Post-Medieval Reference Collection) David Barker, City Museum & Art Gallery, Bethesda Street, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent ST1 3DE (0782) 202173

Information may be obtained on regional collections through the MPRG Regional Groups, and the following contacts:

### East Anglia

Andrew Rogerson, Norfolk Archaeological Unit, The Union House, Gressenhall, Dereham, Norfolk

### Lincolnshire/Nottingham

Hilary Healey, Priest Cottage, Durry Lane, Bicker, Boston, Lincs PE20 3EB

### London

Roberta Tomber/Julie Edwards, DUA, Museum of London, London Wall, London EC2Y 5HN

### North East

Lindsay Allason-Jones, Archaeological Museums Officer, Newcastle University, Newcastle

### NWMPRG

David Higgins, 297 Link Road, Anstey, Leicester LE7 7ED

### South Central MPRG

Carole Warehouse, 88–90 French Street, Southampton SO1 0AT

### SEMPER

Mike Farley, County Museum, Aylesbury, Bucks.

### SW Regional Group

Mike Ponsford, Curator in Field Archaeology, City of Bristol Museums and Art Gallery, Queens Road, Bristol BS8 1RL

### West Midlands

Mike Stokes, 13 The Crescent, Nescliffe, Shropshire SY1 1QT

### Yorkshire/Humberside

Gareth Watkins, Humberside County Heritage Unit, Architects Dept, County Hall, Beverley, N Humberside HU17 9BA

### Northern Ireland

Lesley Simpson, Down Museum, The Mall, Downpatrick, Co Down, N Ireland

### Scottish Regional Group

J. C. Murray, Aberdeen Archaeological Unit, Art Gallery and Museums Department, Schoolhill, Aberdeen AB9 1PQ

### Welsh MPRG

Janet Rutter, 11 Wold Court, Hawarden, Clwyd

### Zusammenfassung

Dieser Aufsatz wird all Jene, die sich mit dem Studium der mittelalterlichen und neuzeitlichen Keramik befassen, das Existenz und Zweck der National Referenzsammlungen am British Museum, National Museum of Wales und am City Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent, bewusst machen.