

A RECENTLY EXCAVATED POTTERY ASSEMBLAGE FROM MERE, WILTSHIRE

Introduction.

The following comprises an interim statement on a group of 13th- to 16th-century pottery excavated at White Hill House, Mere (ST 81873075). Until 1980 the house and outbuildings were part of the adjacent White Hill Farm, which in the Norman period was known as La Leigh. The site lies on a plateau of Kimmeridge clay 1.75 km south-east of Mere, and 2 km from the castle situated to the west of Mere, which has been dated to AD 1253. The growing importance of Mere during the early 14th century is reflected in the fact that it returned two members of Parliament, one of whom was Henricus de Horsington, who owned land between White Hill and the borders of Gillingham Forest to the south-west. A Horsington Lane still exists in the parish today. A short distance to the north-west of White Hill House is Woodland Manor, which dates from c.AD 1375, while a disused mill lies nearby to the west.

The pottery discussed below was found during restoration work on White Hill House, when the owner removed the soil below the flagstone floor in a room at the west end of the house to a depth of approximately 0.90 m. The pottery was distributed throughout this soil, with no apparent stratification. More pottery was found outside the west wall of the house when a small excavation (depth 0.30 m), led by the writer, was carried out by members of the Shaftesbury branch of the Young Archaeologists Club. Further sherds were recovered from the ground surface in the garden some 50 m to the west.

The pottery.

A total of 11.730 kg of pottery was recovered from the site. The fabrics appear to fall into three main groups: Laverstock, Bath area, and 'local' (at present called West Wiltshire ware).

Laverstock-type ware. This includes both fine and coarse wares, all in a hard fabric. The abundant quartz temper accounts for up to 30% of the fabric (for further details see Spoerry 1990). Most sherds have unoxidised cores and are light grey or pinkish in colour, but some are dark grey. Some base sherds have an oxidised outer surface, grey core and black inner surface. The vessels appear to be made by hand and/or on a turntable; all the rims seem to be 'wheel'-finished.

A minimum of eleven rim forms has been identified. These range from upright with a flattened upper surface to everted with either a rounded or angular outer edge. The coarsewares mainly comprise cooking pots/storage vessels, but jugs (both plain and glazed) and a flat-bottomed 'dish' (see Jope 1952; Musty 1969, 107) were also found. Sagging bases and scratch-marked pottery are both present. The glazed jugs, which range from yellow, orange or brown to pale green, are also decorated, one having an anthropomorphic face.

Bath area. This small group may include some Minety ware (see Dunning 1949; Watts and Rahtz 1985; Vince 1991). The fabric is coarse, with occasional limestone and black inclusions. It is hard and mainly evenly fired throughout; the surface colour varies from buff to light brown to light grey.

A minimum of six rim forms have been identified, including both upright and everted; the bases are sagging. Only jugs and cooking pots are represented.

West Wiltshire ware. This 'local' ware probably includes material from both Mere and Crockerton (Le Patourel 1968), but some may be from Dorset (see Spoerry 1990). Most of the pottery is coarse, but some fine wares are present; all are hard. The fabric is micaceous with moderate fine (<1 mm) quartz inclusions (up to 15% of the fabric). Most sherds are buff-coloured throughout, but some have a buff core with oxidised surfaces. The surfaces generally have a smoother feel than the Laverstock wares.

A minimum of fifteen rim forms has been identified, some upright and flat-topped, but mostly everted with either a rounded or angular outer edge. The coarseware forms mainly comprise cooking pots/storage jars with flat or sagging bases; a few jug sherds, two 'plates' and three flat-bottomed 'dishes' are also present. The latter have convex sides and a base diameter of 280–320 mm; none are scratch-marked. The jug sherds include one rod handle (unglazed), and one strap handle with an olive green glaze. One of the 'plates' is unglazed, with a thumbled rim; the other, which has an olive green glaze, has a flanged rim decorated with an incised wavy line around the flat-topped rim edge (9 mm wide); another wavy line is present on the unglazed underside of the flange, 30 mm below the rim.

Other finds. Also present are fragments of Tudor Green (2lobed) cup. No imported wares have so far been identified. Other finds from the site include a silver coin of Edward I, dated AD 1302 (Canterbury mint) and objects of copper alloy, notably a seal matrix showing Saints Peter and Paul; a thumb ring with a cruciform impression on either side of the bezel and part of a damascened spur.

Discussion.

Most of the pottery described above is of relatively local origin, but all the wares found probably reached the site via markets and fairs which in the past were held regularly in Mere, where pottery made both locally and further afield could be purchased. Nash Hill, Lacock should, however, also be considered a possible distribution centre. Further work on the site, and research into the pottery from this area of Wiltshire is required before any real conclusions may be drawn.

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AN UNIDENTIFIED CERAMIC OBJECT FROM POOLE, DORSET

The ceramic find which forms the subject of this note (Fig. 1) is from one of a succession of upper beach deposits investigated at the Foundry site, Poole Harbour (Watkins forthcoming, context 353, Phase C). The ceramics from these beach deposits show little evidence of wear through water action, suggesting that the 'beach' was only occasionally submerged. The dating of these

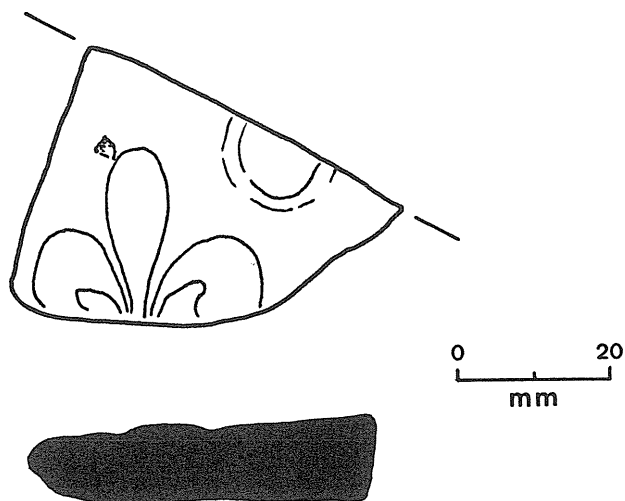


Fig. 1. A sherd from an unusual green-glazed ceramic object with fleur-de-lis decoration in white slip, found in Poole, Dorset.

layers is, however, not very tight, the phase assemblages suggesting quite lengthy periods of exposure/accumulation. This particular phase can be approximately dated to the period AD 1350–1550, but this context is more likely to be from the first fifty years of this range.

The provenance of the sherd is problematical; it is probably English, but could be French. The off-white fabric is sandy (the majority of the quartz grains are under 2 mm), with occasional larger grog. It is reduced to a light grey with an oxidised orange-brown layer under the glaze, which is thick, olive green, and present on both surfaces. The sherd is very flat; it does not appear to have been thrown on a wheel (there are no stress lines), but neither is there any direct evidence (such as a sanded underside) for mould manufacture.

The decoration comprises a neatly applied fleur-de-lis design in a fine off-white slip on the upper, or outer surface, which stands 1 mm proud at the centre. Adjacent to this is a separate body of off-white slip which is surrounded by a depression c.0.5 mm deep and about 2 mm across. The rounded surfaces of the white slip suggest that it was applied in a semi-liquid state. It is likely that a stencil was used to make the design, and that the depression was formed by the manufacturer pressing onto a stencil while applying the white clay.

The edges of the sherd appear to have been deliberately shaped by smoothing the breaks along the two straight edges and clipping and rubbing the rounded edge. This suggests a secondary use, perhaps as a gaming piece, but provides no clue to the original function of the piece. Suggestions have included a decorative lid, part of an ornamental salt or table decoration, or a local attempt at stove-tile manufacture. None of these, however, are very satisfactory, and any other suggestions are welcomed; slides can be provided for further consideration, if necessary.

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LATE MEDIEVAL POTSHERD HEARTHES

Recent excavations by the Milton Keynes Archaeology Unit at the deserted medieval village at Westbury, Shenley Brook End,

Buckinghamshire and by the Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit at West Cotton, Raunds, Northamptonshire revealed several unusual hearths constructed of potsherds for which a literature search and discussion with colleagues and members of the MPRG has produced no parallels. It is with this in mind that the following note is presented. The authors would be grateful for ideas on the nature and function of this practice.

Potsherds have been analysed from two of the better preserved and most easily recognisable hearths at Westbury; four hearths are known altogether from this site. The four hearths from West Cotton were of composite construction, using pitched limestone fragments and some pitched pottery which has not yet been analysed in detail.

Westbury, hearth 1.

The remains of this hearth (Fig. 1) appear to be positioned adjacent to a wall within a medieval building. The full extent of the hearth is not clear but enough survived to show that at least a part of it was circular. The bulk of this hearth was made up from half a vessel of uncertain form, partially glazed on the exterior. The fabric is a late medieval type from the Potterspurty area, Northants (Mynard 1970). This vessel when reconstructed reached from the shoulder to the base angle, of which only the smallest edge remained. Bowl sherds, a jug sherd and several sherds of unknown form were also used to construct part of the hearth. There was very little evidence of burning or sooting on the hearth sherds. The reconstructed pot showed a slight sooting on one edge, and a little pale smudging of soot on the inner surface of a few other sherds from it.

Westbury, hearth 2.

This example (Fig. 2) was much more complete, forming an approximate circle with smaller sherds concentrated towards the centre. It was made up from at least three reconstructable pots and other sherds of uncertain form. The material was again mainly Potterspurty ware of late medieval date. Not all sherds showed signs of burning or sooting and those on the northern edge were surprisingly clean. The position of this hearth within a building is not clear. Was this area used as hard standing?

West Cotton, hearths 1–4.

At West Cotton, hearths made of pitched stone and pot sherds were investigated in each of the four excavated tenements. They were all situated at, or near the centre of rooms containing a diversity of internal features indicating that they were kitchens, although in two instances it is also likely that a non-domestic activity, possibly dyeing or fulling, was also being carried out within the same or the adjacent room.

The hearths were between 0.8 m and 1.2 m in diameter and were sub-circular or oval in plan. Only a single example, Hearth F6182 (Fig. 3), was completely undisturbed, but all exhibit consistent characteristics from which a general description of their form and functioning may be provided. Each hearth consists of two elements:

1) A large horizontal limestone slab of square or rectangular plan, measuring 0.5 m to 0.6 m long, with a blackened, flaking and friable surface. In only one example (Fig. 1c), was the whole hearth-stone present; generally they had become cracked and fragmented with many of the fragments having been lost. There is no doubt that the horizontal slab formed the actual hearth-stone upon which the fire was set.

2) An oval or crescentic area of pitched limestone fragments set in concentric rings and incorporating pottery sherds deliberately set between the pitched limestone. These settings flanked and partially surrounded the hearth-stones. The projecting edges of the pitched stones were usually only reddened with minimal blackening, indicating that they had been subjected to less intense heating than the horizontal hearth-stones.