



Compendiario

An Assemblage of Notes and News



POTTERY HANDLING AT THE GUILDFORD MUSEUM

In 1967, a fallen tree in the grounds of a convent at Farnborough Hill in Surrey revealed the site of one of the major potteries of the Surrey-Hampshire Border Ware industry. Over the following five years, excavations uncovered the evidence for four kilns and a pottery industry that ran from at least the late 15th to the 17th century, with the main period of production in the late 16th century, c. 1550–80. For the first time since this important site was excavated, a large proportion of the recovered material was put out for viewing. During the weekend of 31st January–1st February 1998, the Guildford Museum displayed 110 boxes of pottery wasters and kiln furniture in an annexe of the museum, enabling public and specialists alike to look at and handle the material. It proved a very popular exercise with a total of 80 visitors, of whom seven were ceramic specialists.

Material absent from the displayed assemblage included vessels currently in the Aldershot Military Museum (on loan from the Farnborough Hill Convent and Guildford Museum) and Surrey Heath Museum in Camberley, and of course small fragments held in reference collections across south-east England.

Here, therefore, was an opportunity to see the bulk of the material waste products from a post-medieval pottery industry, and to view at the primary source a range of wares which are normally seen in their secondary, tertiary or quaternary locations, that is at the market, consumer or disposal sites. This pottery had a wide distribution over south-east England, but its most important market was London. Large quantities of Border Wares held in the Museum of London reserve collections and archaeological archive (Pearce 1992) are testimony to the prolific production of the Border Ware potteries and the high demand for these products in London. At Farnborough Hill, as at other potteries in the area, both white and red wares were manufactured, due to the ready availability of sources of white and red clays from outcrops of the Reading Beds and London Clay. The choice of white or red clay depended on the type of vessel being formed — most pipkins, for example, were made in white clay. By displaying the full set of material, such distinctive characteristics of the industry were immediately recognisable, as were the several non-standard, and as yet unidentified, pieces scattered through the boxes.

Since 1971 when Holling studied and wrote a preliminary assessment of the material from Farnborough Hill and the other known pottery production sites in the Hampshire-Surrey Border area (Holling 1971), the material from Farnborough Hill has not been examined. It is certainly now due for a re-examination using current methodologies, in the light of the abundance of vessels found at non-primary sites, in particular London. As Mellor noted in a review of

medieval ceramic studies across England, 'The study of production centres was highlighted as one of the largest areas of need . . .' (Mellor 1994, 10). Holling's work provides a very useful overview of the pottery industry in one geographical region from the medieval era to the 19th century, including the relationships of the potteries to their local and distant markets. A large part of his article focuses on the three post-medieval sites at Farnborough Hill, Hawley and Ash, dating from the late 16th century, early to mid 17th century and late 17th century respectively, with descriptions and illustrations of the main forms. Despite its unquestionable merits, as a preliminary overview the article lacks the broader detail that is now warranted by the material: an absence of any quantification and statistical analyses is a noticeable omission by today's practices (see also Pearce 1992, 1). The full range of products, relative quantities of forms, comparisons with consumer site assemblages, firing success rates and kiln technology have still to be investigated.

The amount of interest shown by the 'open box' Pottery Handling Session weekend, may be a telling sign that the Farnborough Hill material needs reassessment. More likely, however, the interest was provided by the rare chance to see the 'real thing' — the primary source assemblage of one of the main post-medieval pottery industries in the south-east of England. Direct visual and tactile contact with pottery is a vital need for those working in ceramics, but it is also obviously of great appeal to non-specialists as 75% of the visitors were amateur archaeologists and 12.5% were from the non-archaeological interested public.

Mary Alexander, John Boas, Kevin Fryer, Sue Roggero and others at the Guildford Museum and Guildford Museum's Voluntary Excavation Unit are to be congratulated on organising this event.

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