

Medieval Ceramics

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# News



## OBITUARIES

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### John Evans

1940 – 2002



John Evans established a reputation as a chemist who studied organic residues found in archaeology. Such knowledge is hard-won and, when he first began contributing to this field, he was the recognised authority in the subject. Even today the numbers of archaeological scientists involved in chemical analysis of organic materials is relatively small compared to other areas of archaeological science. It is a difficult area to study because of the huge numbers of different organic compounds found in the natural world, the complexity of mixtures of organic compounds in a single natural material, and the effects of degradation that obscure and modify the original chemistry. Hence the interpretation of residues that are found at the present day on archaeological material require a sure grasp of organic chemistry. Among the materials he studied were food residues associated with pottery. He made numerous studies of this type, often of small numbers of samples, but studied chemically very carefully, and drew conclusions about the original materials from the results. He was pre-eminently a chemist of organic materials with a long and wise experience of such complex materials. Understanding very thoroughly the chemistry and having a vast knowledge of the subject involved enabled him to interpret the analysis results. Other scientists who worked with him commented that he had a great natural ability for tackling the chemical analysis of organic archaeological material.

After an initial period of teaching in schools, he took up

an appointment at West Ham Polytechnic in Stratford, East London; he remained there throughout his career, as the institution went through mergers to form first the North East London Polytechnic and then in 1992 the University of East London (UEL).

He had a great natural ability and popularity as a teacher and lecturer. A constant stream of students came to see him for advice. Many of his former students remained in touch with him long after they had graduated. His lectures were always laced with humour and he would use well-directed questions to the students to drive the message home. He saw it as his role to build up students' confidence in themselves, and he was immensely pleased and proud that the practical skills he passed on to his students through laboratory classes enabled many to go straight on to employment after graduating. Discoveries he and his students made in the laboratories often featured as news items in UEL newsletters, as they were invariably interesting or curious. He was a well-known and dedicated representative of UEL at higher education and history fairs, which he greatly enjoyed. For a time he was the Higher Education representative on the Council of the Royal Society of Chemistry, though committee work was not really to his taste.

He used Museum visits to memorable educational effect (the tasks he set were invariably couched in 'jokey' form, but with serious intent), but was careful to schedule the annual visit to the Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons (to view evidence of disease left on bone) before lunch. The British Museum, with less stomach-turning displays, was explored in the afternoon.

He was at home in the chemical laboratory – he is pictured talking to students in his laboratory, with an X-Ray fluorescence spectrometer (used to analyse for inorganic elements) in the background. He would often have two or three scientific instruments simultaneously running his samples - a feature of his experimental approach was to use several techniques, organic and inorganic, to examine material. A practical example of this was the identification of residues on Chester ware pottery (Evans 1985) where a variety of organic and inorganic compounds was identified, leading to the conclusion that the residue resulted from a vegetable and meat (salted?) soup which had been thickened with flour. One of the approaches he used consistently (appearing in many of his published reports) was the selective dissolution of organic compounds from residues using a variety of chemical solvents. This separated the compounds into chemical classes and made for easier interpretation of the subsequent chromatography and spectroscopy tests on these separated fractions.

He collaborated on projects with scientific research groups in Continental Europe and the USA, as well as with numerous archaeologists, museum curators and other researchers in the UK. He was an Associate Editor of the journal *Archaeometry*, recognised as the pre-eminent journal in the subject.

He bore his illness with great strength, and followed the

progress of his students even when he had to retire from work shortly before his death. His friends in many countries are very glad to have known him.

#### SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Evans, J. 1985, 'Organic residue on a Chester Ware sherd', in D.J.P.Mason (ed.) *Excavations at Chester, 24-42 Lower Bridge Street 1974-6: The Dark Age and Saxon periods*, Appendix 4, 61.

Mike Hughes

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### Peter Farmer

1946 – 2002



Over the last twenty years Peter Farmer had the unflinching habit of bursting into my life unexpectedly. We would usually have an exceptionally good dinner then he would disappear the next day not to be seen again for several months.

Peter was a man of many talents, he was a superb cabinetmaker, metalworker, and was a glider of international repute. Above all he was a workaholic who was always on the move. One of his many important commissions in this area was for a 6 ft high iron pendant for the Ashmolean Museum, which he built, gilded and installed. He also gilded and oversaw the erection of the large Muses at the Barbican and constructed a 10ft diameter corona for the refurbishment of the medieval apartments at the Tower of London. His

knowledge of early chandeliers was equal to that of anyone in the country. After the fire at Hampton Court, at the request of Historic Royal Palaces, he developed a wax-coated electric chandelier candle unit to comply with the UK's electrical regulations. He also constructed for the King's Apartments, at Hampton, a set of 6 candelabra decorated with rock crystal following a 17th-century design.

At another stage Peter dealt in antique furniture, was an expert on the etchings of Rembrandt and one way or another was involved in some of the most important renovations carried out in British stately homes over the last 20 years. However, Peter told me that the work that had given him the most satisfaction was the transformation that he accomplished for his good, friend Frank Chapman, at Norberry Park House.

The first time I met Peter was on a horrible wet day in Yorkshire, where I had gone to visit a friend who was digging for Daniel Brewster. Later in the pub Peter and the rest of the diggers sat around a huge fire with steam rising in clouds as they tried to dry their wet cloths. Through this and the thick cigarette smoke, like some sort of apparition, Daniel Brewster kept popping up with warnings to be vigilant as the men from Special Branch were watching him and he did not want the diggers talking to them. Peter and the others would just smile or nod. Not surprisingly I declined to stay the night.

I did not meet Peter again until the 1975 Chester Pottery Conference. There, if I remember correctly, we literally banged into each other as we crept out of a Lloyd Laing poetry recital. We fled to the pub where I got drunk and learned to my cost how fanatical Peter was on the subject of pottery, as I received a very long introduction to the pottery industry of Scarborough. I later learnt that Peter had already carried out a number of archaeological excavations in Scarborough and had published a number of articles, the most important of which was his 1976 paper, *Scarborough Harbour and Borough from the 10th to the 16th centuries*.

It was shortly after this that many of us living in towns bordering the North Sea got to know Peter well, as we played host to him and his wife Nita, as they were by now spending all of their holidays travelling around examining shards of Scarborough ware and recording archaeological contexts. It was this research that led to the publishing, in 1979, of his privately printed *Introduction to Scarborough Ware and A Re-assessment of Knight jugs*.

Peter soon became aware of the controversial nature of the dates and relationships that he had given to Scarborough fabrics I and II, when they were applied to the stratified pottery sequences then being excavated in ports like Aberdeen, Perth and Hull. It was with these difficulties in mind that he returned to the subject again. First he initiated the support of the late John Hurst and the predecessor of English Heritage in a program of thin-sectioning Scarborough type pottery at the Department of Archaeology, at the University of Southampton. This led to two important