

Sparrowpots in Greater London

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SUMMARY

This article describes in detail a redware ceramic bird nesting pot. This unusual form of vessel which was in use over a long period of time between 152, the earliest known and 1842, the last known record of one being made, occurs mainly in London where over 60 have so far been identified. Its purpose was to enable sparrows to breed so that the fledglings could be taken via a hole in the base of the vessel. Although previously considered to be of Dutch origin, all the London vessels were made locally. As well as sherds found in excavations, the vessels are well attested to in contemporary literature and paintings.

One of the more unusual remains of vessels found in excavations in Greater London are those of ceramic bird nesting pots, hereafter called “sparrowpots”. This vessel which is known from literary sources from the early 16th century to the late 19th, has been turning up more frequently in archaeological excavations in London since Roy Stephenson’s article (Stephenson, 1991) described the form and fabric. Mainly, I believe, this is because archaeologists have then known what to look for. Roy’s article was followed by an entry in *A Guide to the classification of Medieval Ceramic Forms* (1998) section 10.4.

By January 2003 over 60 sparrowpots had been identified from 32 sites as follows: (Table 1). With one exception they are all of the same form, as far as can be deduced from the sherds found. While there is, of course, the possibility that other forms exist which have not yet been identified, the main form known from London (hereafter called “London type”) is the subject of this article.

The London type is a wheel-thrown, bottle-shaped, red earthenware vessel with a bulbous body. It is unglazed, although there are often splashes of glaze, which presumably dripped from other vessels above it in the kiln. It is characterised by a cut-away base, which is designed so that the pot can be hung up at right angles to a wall or tree.

The cutaway is large enough to provide access by a human hand (Fig. 1). The V-shaped notch is so that a nail, screw or hook can be used to attach it. The size of the cutaway varies and the notch is sometimes squared off at the top. On some pots there is a slight lip on the top of the cutaway which helps to prevent rainwater entering the pot. The cutaway seems to have been made with a knife or other sharp instrument when the pot was “leather-hard” and cut marks are often still visible in the corners. If the pot has been



Fig. 1 An example of a cutaway

Table 1 recorded occurrences of sparrowpots on sites in Greater London

Site Code	NGR	Site address	No. of vessels
BA84	TQ 3340 7935	Bermonsey Abbey, Abbey Buildings, Long Walk, SE1	6
BAD89	TQ 3168 8201	Badger Yard, 12-13 St John's Square, EC1	6
BPL95	TQ 3302 8074	Monument House, 30-35 Botolph Lane & 29-31 Monument St. EC3	1
BRU92	TQ 3060 8110	Bruce House, 1 Kemble St. WC2	2
BUW98	TQ 3258 8208	City and Islington College, Bunhill Row, Chiswell St. EC1	1
CEF61-66	TQ 2280 8950	Church End Farm, Hendon	12
COW89	TQ 3163 8184	20-26 Cowcross St. EC1 and surrounding streets	2
FSU99	TQ3294 8197	27-30 Finsbury Square, EC2	1
GHL89	TQ 3392 8003	Guys Hospital redevelopment, St Thomas St. SE1	1
JAC96	TQ 3408 7976	Jacob's island, Bermondsey Wall West, SE1	2
KHS98	TQ 3273 8138	Kent House, 11-16 Telegraph St. EC2	1
L448/80	TQ 2927 7588	9-57 Rectory Grove, SW4	2
MED90	TQ 3196 8209	St Bartolomew's Hospital Medical College, Clerkenwell, EC1	3
MIN86-88	TQ 3390 8070	Royal Mint, East Smithfield, EC3	1
NHU99	TQ 3617 8086	43-53 Narrow Street, Limehouse, E14	1
NOR88	TQ 3070 7895	Norfolk House, 113-125 Lambeth Road, SE1	1
OCR97	TQ 2710 7765	6-16 Old Church Street Chelsea, SW3	1
OCU00	TQ 2708 7765	2-4 Old Church Street, Chelsea, SW3	2
SOA96	TQ 3756 7786	Former Deptford power station, The Stowage, Deptford, SW8	1
SPT82	TQ 3346 8187	Central foundation girls school, Spital Square, E1	2
SUT90	TQ 3527 8507	Sutton House, 2-4 Homerton High Street, E9	1
TYT98	TQ 3337 8010	London Bridge City, Tooley St. & Morgan's lane, & Weavers Lane, SE1	1
VIT96	TQ 3634 8077	Victoria Wharf, Narrow Street Riverside, E14	1
WCE01	TQ 3390 8130	Aldgate Union/Drum St. 27-29/Whitechapel High St. 2-4 Colchester St. E1	1
YPE02	No details	Prices Candle Factory, Battersea	1
	TQ 433 793	Woolwich ferry approach (no site code)	2
245BR87	TQ 3168 8042	245 Blackfriars Road, SE1	1
A24784		? Aldersgate St	1
A10396		?	1
73.162		? Upper Ground Blackfriars (possibly GM447) SE1	1
80-271/11		?	1
1887 3-7 B104		? British museum (original location unknown)	1
Total			62

used then the friction marks of the nail or hook can sometimes be detected at the top of the cutaway.

Another feature is a nib or handle protruding from the neck which has a hole in it. This hole is lined up with a hole in the shoulder of the pot to enable a twig to be inserted to make a perch for the nesting birds (Fig. 2). The size of the nib or handle varies as does the length of the neck. The holes in the nib and shoulder are made when the pot is “leather-hard” and are made from the inside of the pot so that there are often the remains of excess clay around the holes. The neck is “luted” on to the body of the pot rather than being thrown with the rest of the pot, presumably so that the pot can be sustained while the base cutaway is being made.

The sherds from 31 birdpots were submitted for inductively-coupled plasma atomic emission spectrometric analysis (ICP-AES) via Dr. Michael J Hughes. His report (Hughes, 2003) concludes that all the pots were produced from clay that came from London or its surrounds. The surprise, however, was that they were likely to have been made at a number of different production centres around London and the Home Counties. This would seem to indicate that the “London-type” was widely known and



Fig. 2 An example of Nib and shoulder

copied. Many of the pots are crudely made and vary considerably in dimensions, which may mean that the pots were made by local potters interpreting customers’

requirements or that the potters only had a vague idea of what a finished pot looked like. None of the pots tested were imports, although prior to this there was speculation that some might have been Dutch.

As far as size is concerned, most of the dimensions could not be determined from the sherds available. However, from those that could be measured a typical height was between 180 and 225 mm, the diameter of the inner neck opening was between 40 and 55 mm and the widest circumference around the body of the pot was between 145 and 155 mm. Sparrowpots could and probably did stay on walls or trees for many years, and, as a result, assessing surface colour may reflect their surrounding environment rather than their natural colour and then there are the taphonomic effects. In any event, they vary from being a light grey colour to a deep rusty brown.

The one variation known from London, comes from the excavation at 20-26 Cowcross Street, EC1 (site code COW89, context [171]). This has a square hole cut in the base with a separate small round hole for the nail or hook (see Fig. 3). It is less practical than the “London-type” in terms of hanging it up, which probably accounts for its rarity!

However, it does neatly illustrate the access or “robbery” hole cutaway in the base. Sparrowpots are known from Kent, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Essex and Cambridgeshire and apart from these counties, from nowhere else in the country, despite intensive enquiries. Again, apart from two exceptions they appear to be all of the “London-type”. One exception is in the Cambridge and County Folk Museum. It probably came from Thorney Fen in Cambridgeshire and seems to have been presented to the museum in 1943 (Barnard, 1948). As can be seen from Fig. 4, it is of white chalky clay with almost no inclusions and there is no nib or handle, however the hole for the perch is pierced in the rim of the neck and lines up with a hole in the shoulder.



Fig. 3 Pot with a square cutaway



Fig. 4 Perch hole in rim

The other exception is from Cassionbury Park, Watford, Hertfordshire, which we only know from a photograph. It appears to be similar to the one in the Cambridgeshire museum although it is more bulbous and the fabric is unidentifiable.

Precise dating of sparrowpots is difficult. Of the 25 or so that come from dated contexts on the Museum of London's database, almost all indicate an earliest date of the first half of the 16th century. A few such as those from Rectory Grove site code (L448/80), in Southwark come from an 18th century pit. The latest date quoted is the beginning of the 19th century.

Literary and illustrative references cover more or less the same time period. The earliest reference to a birdpot in London comes from a manuscript called the Bridge House Accounts, weekly payments, 2nd series, volume 2, 1516-1528 folio 377r, which is stored at the Corporation of London Records Office (CLRO). Christianson (2002) quotes from it that, on March 1527 payment is noted “for v sparrow pottys for the garden iijd.” and again, in the following volume, “to William Snethe....for sparrowe pottes iijd.” Unfortunately we don't know what type they were although from the reference to “pottys” they were probably ceramic, especially when considered with the quote from Lord Petrie's (of Ingatestone Hall in Essex) household accounts for February 1549 quoted by Barnard (1948) as follows:

“To a fellow of Stocke for 24 pottes for sparoweis to breede ine, 12d.”

And in April of the following year:

“Item pd. To Prentis ye potter of Stocke for 4 doz. D pottes for sparowes and starlynges and nayles to hange

them by – 2s. 2d.”

In 1621 John Fletcher’s play “*The Wild-Goose Chase*” was performed at the English court during the 1621-2 Christmas season. It contains these lines spoken by Mirabel at the end of Act III:

“Do they think to carry it away with a great band made of bird-pots and a pair of pin-buttockt breeches?”

The lines refer to a male character pretending to be a woman using birdpots as breasts. There are also references to birdpots in other John Fletcher plays.

Labbé (2000, 165) quotes a line from a poem to his mistress by Thomas Randolph, describing her as “with breasts like pots to nest young sparrows in”. Thomas Randolph was living in London in 1632.

In Francis Barlowe’s magnificent 1687 edition of Aesop’s fables, which was printed in London, there are three illustrations (Fig. 5 is an cropped example) which clearly show birdpots.

The pots are ancillary and unrelated to the topic of the illustration. Perhaps they were put in there to create a rural atmosphere. It is interesting to note that the pots (all seemingly the same type) are attached to different parts of a wall: one on a cross bar of wood, one into the plaster and one on an upright post of wood. They all appear on what looks like representations of a rural farmhouse. The prominence of the birdpots immediately catches the eye and must surely have been relevant to the readers of the book.

Another reference is also clearly a ceramic birdpot. It



Fig. 5 Birdpot in Aesop’s fables



Fig. 6 Hogarth’s birdpot

comes from an illustration by William Hogarth in *Hudibras* by Samuel Butler (1775) (Fig. 6 – a section of the illustration). Hogarth’s House museum at Chiswick kindly copied the print from the original copper plates and gave me permission to use it. The illustration was done by Hogarth when living in the house and was printed in London. The birdpot (similar to the ones portrayed in Barlowe above) with its perch in place is mounted with its base attached to the wall of the building. Hogarth must have not only known the form, but expected his viewers also to know it.

Rennie (1883, 485) says that:

“In the vicinity of London more particularly, pots of unglazed delf ware of a sub-oval shape, with a narrow hole for an entrance, are fixed upon the wall of houses, several feet below the eave, and the sparrows finding a domicile so suited to their habits, very soon take possession of every pot thus provided for them”.

It is impossible now to know what Rennie meant by “delf ware” but there is no incidence of other than redware birdpot sherds from any excavations in London so far! The only reference that I can find to a birdpot actually being made in London comes from Loudon (1842, 266), who, when describing the use of sparrow pots as “a neat cottage ornament”, goes on to say “we have seen pots made by Adams of Gray’s Inn Lane.” According to Kelly (1839) in the Postal directory, there was a brick and tile maker called Adams based in Gray’s Inn Lane. Ticehurst (1909, 149) says that birdpots were “doubtless made at the local brickworks”.

In Notes & Queries (1881, 153), as part of a chain of

discussion on sparrow pots, a correspondent is quoted as saying:

“my wife tells me she saw such bottles (or jars) fixed in the wall for sparrows to build in, only a few weeks ago, at the house of a celebrated physician in London”.

This sample of references spread over three hundred years or so, demonstrates that birdpots were known, recognised and understood by at least the literate members of the population.

On the face of it, therefore, sparrowpots have been around in London for over 300 years. As we have seen the form was widely known, based on the fact that there were multiple production sources and a great many literary and illustrative references.

Perhaps, it is surprising, therefore, that so few sherds of sparrowpots have turned up in London excavations.

Acknowledgements

Unless otherwise stated all the photographs were taken by the author me during April/May 2003 at the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC) with the kind permission of its director John Shepherd. Hogarth's House museum have kindly given permission to reproduce an illustration by William Hogarth in *Hudibras* by Samuel Butler (1775) (Fig. 6). Cambridge folk and county Museum have kindly given permission to reproduce Fig.4.

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Résumé

Cet article décrit de façon détaillée un nichoir en céramique à cuisson oxydante. Cette forme inhabituelle utilisée pendant une longue période, 1527 étant la date de la première connue et 1842 la date de la dernière répertoriée en production, se rencontre surtout à Londres où plus de soixante exemples ont été identifiés. Cet objet encourageait les moineaux à se reproduire et permettait aux oisillons d'être accessibles par un trou dans le fond. Considérés comme néerlandais pendant un temps, tous les exemples londoniens sont produits sur place. En plus de tessons retrouvés durant les fouilles, cette forme est bien attestée dans la littérature et les peintures contemporaines.

Zusammenfassung

Der Bericht beschreibt im Detail einen Vogelnistopf aus Rotwarenkeramik. Dieses ungewöhnliche Gefäß, das über eine lange Zeit, das früheste um 1527 und das letztbekannte 1842, hergestellt wurde, kommt hauptsächlich in London vor, wo über 60 bisher identifiziert wurden. Sein Zweck war, Spatzen darin brüten zu lassen, sodaß man durch ein Loch auf der Unterseite des Gefäßes die jungen Vögel herausnehmen konnte. Obwohl man zunächst annahm, daß diese Gefäße aus Holland stammten, sind sie jedoch alle vor Ort in London hergestellt. Abgesehen von Scherben, die man bei Ausgrabungen fand, sind die Gefäße in der damaligen Literatur und auf Gemälden wohl bezeugt.

