

# Medieval Pottery Regional Research Groups

## Their contribution at a local level

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*The history of the Medieval Pottery Research Group (MPRG) would not be complete if it were not for the involvement of the local research groups which either inspired or evolved from the main society. The local groups provide additional meetings to that of the annual conference and allow for the exchange of information at 'grass roots' and wider levels. This paper was inspired by Anna Slowikowski's active participation in the South-East Midlands Medieval Pottery Research group, which under her joint tenure with other organisers, insured that at least two meetings of this group happened each year. In this paper, the present regional organisers of the local groups were asked for a contribution concerning reminiscences of Anna's involvement or aspects of their involvement with regional groups and what these activities at a local level achieved.*

### Introduction

Gareth Perry

Shortly after the MPRG was created specialists in the regions began to organise local meetings, where both professional and amateur archaeologists were afforded the opportunity to learn about the pottery from recent excavations and to view pottery held in local museums' collections. These meetings were the foundation of the MPRG's Regional Groups. Anna was heavily involved in the early days of the Regional Groups, particularly those of the South-East Midlands Pottery Research Group – SEMPER, and as her career carried her around the country she took her commitment and expertise with her. As we shall see, her effort and the enthusiasm was an inspiration to organisers in other regions.

In this review of the Regional Groups, members reminisce over the early days and the various meetings, exhibitions, training sessions and research projects that they were involved in. Anna's involvement shines through these recollections and I (Gareth Perry) for one, as the current Regional Groups Officer, am enthused by her commitment to the groups. In a time when regional meetings are few and far between, and some groups are even without an organiser, we can look back at someone like Anna as a source of encouragement for what the groups could be in the future.

### South-East Midlands Pottery Research Group (SEMPER)

Barbara Hurman

It was in the late 1970's, at an MPRG conference, that the idea of setting up the regional pottery groups originated. While queuing for lunch in the cafeteria at Hull University, the South-East Midlands Pottery Research Group was launched. Evelyn Baker suggested that the group should be known as SEMPER, the Latin for 'always'; perhaps this choice was an omen to our success. Covering the south-east Midlands, the initials fitted the group perfectly.

The group comprised ceramic archaeologists, both professional and amateur, from the counties of Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Huntingdonshire, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire and originally Berkshire. Memory fades, but I think Michael Farley (Bucks County Museum Field Archaeologist at the time) was our first organiser, followed by myself and then Anna. The organisation of these meetings was very much a combined effort and at a time when archaeological units and museum field archaeological groups were flourishing it was not difficult to find themes for discussion or venues for meetings. With plenty of excavations being carried out, there was ample pottery available for analysis and specialists frequently gave talks on their projects, with examples of pots and sherds available for viewing. Meeting attendees arrived with boxes and bags of sherds for identification and would give a short description of their site and material. The highlights at these sessions was trying to solve those mystery

sherds while listening to the constructive arguments. It was at these occasions in the past that we very much welcomed John Hurst and Alan Vince when they were able to visit us. They were always so willing to give of their expertise and are so sadly missed to this day.

The success of SEMPER is due to the way we run it, giving talks rather than lectures and carrying out the meetings in a friendly sociable way with cups of teas and biscuits, all rather informal. Having said that we always have an agenda with a structured day and with serious discussion. There was no fee to attend but in later years we have had to charge a nominal fee, though Buckinghamshire County Museum, Aylesbury looked very kindly on us in this respect. Several Saturday meetings were held there and attendees always enjoyed a visit to a Portuguese restaurant and antiquarian bookshop down the road.

It is hoped that it will not be too far into the future, that we will be able to fill the vacancy for a SEMPER organiser. It may be problematic to continue our success, after thirty odd years. Nowadays numbers attending meetings fluctuate, one reason being that employers do not always permit study days to be taken. The changing times within the archaeological pottery research world, have been most noticeable with the arrival of the archaeological consultancies following the demise of several County Units, where excavation is now undertaken by those strange to an area and its archaeology. This often results in the excavated pottery being taken out of the region for analysis. Local knowledge is vital to the study of regional pottery and to furthering and expanding a region's research.

This tribute to Anna is presented as a record of SEMPER, the successful regional pottery research group in which she was so very much involved. She was, also a valuable committee member of the MPRG. Over several years our paths crossed and a friendship developed. My association with her was not only with the above groups, but also through the Association of Archaeological Illustrators and Surveyors (AAI&S). She was a very experienced illustrator, as is seen in several of her publications.

Our most enjoyable times were when we were discussing our local pottery, its fabrics and forms. We discussed at length the topic of the regions medieval reduced grey wares. What an achievement for her completing her book 'Genius in a Cracked Pot' Late Medieval Reduced Ware: A Regional Synthesis', published in 2011. Little did we realise it was to be her last publication. I don't think I am alone when I say how we admired Anna taking on this subject: 'Those grey wares' can be a medieval pot specialist's nightmare, especially in our region. The sherds can be confusing especially when excavated from a multi-period site, which also has grey Roman sherds.

When not discussing pottery, Anna and I enjoyed our gardening conversations and comparing the

progress of our tomatoes. She will always be remembered with cherished memories.

## Recollections of Anna and SEMPER

Helen Walker

Anna is synonymous with SEMPER as she arranged and spoke at most meetings that have taken place during the last fifteen or so years. I don't remember exactly when I attended my first SEMPER meeting or when I first met Anna, but the earliest meeting that I have records for was held at Buckinghamshire County Museum in March 1991. The subject of the meeting was the pottery production sites of Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire and Anna spoke about a site at Flitwick. The programme also noted that this was the 10th Anniversary of SEMPER. In the early days the meetings were held at various venues, but from the mid-1990s, when Anna became increasingly active in organising these meetings, most were held at the museum at Aylesbury.

The meetings coalesced into a set format. Members were sent a programme listing the venue, theme, speakers and cost. Hiring the venue was usually the main expense but there was also the vital ingredient of tea, coffee and biscuits to be paid for. The programme also extolled members to bring along their 'interesting (or not so interesting) bits of pottery' for viewing.

Initially meetings were held twice a year, in the spring and autumn, although later, a meeting once a year was considered sufficient. The day always began with a cup of tea or coffee and a biscuit while the speakers loaded their slides in to the carousels or, as technology progressed, downloaded their PowerPoint presentations. Both could be rather stressful operations, especially on one occasion when the computer supplied by the museum was too old to recognise a memory stick! Anna must have found a way round this as the meeting went ahead as planned with only a short delay.

Lunches were usually taken at a local pub. One of our best was in Aylesbury, at a Portuguese restaurant. Everybody had Sea Bream and Anna wanted the fish bones for her new reference collection, as she had recently started teaching archaeology in schools. Unfortunately no one had any self-seal plastic bags in which to put them, a lamentable state of affairs for a group of pottery specialists!

Attendees were an eclectic group, comprising pottery specialists working for various archaeology units, freelancers, retired archaeologists and members of local archaeology societies. The meetings drew in people from far and wide, not only the south-east Midlands, but also East Anglia and the London area, and as far west as Wiltshire and Worcestershire. Possibly our most exotic speaker was John Hudson who came all the way down from Yorkshire to talk

about ‘potters’ mistakes’ at a meeting at the Museum of Harlow in honour of Wally Davey, another SEMPER stalwart who is no longer with us.

Themes of meetings could be on pottery traditions, such as shelly wares and early medieval ware, or on pottery from a particular part of the SEMPER region. Methodologies and guidelines were also covered and sometimes, rather than sticking to a particular theme, speakers were encouraged to talk about anything interesting they’d been working on. Of the latter, the most memorable was by Paul Blinkhorn, who spoke about the remains of an alchemist’s workshop in Oxford, which from the vitrified state of the glassware and pottery, must have been subject to an explosion – no sign of the hapless alchemist though!

Perhaps the most successful meetings were those that were more research orientated; we had meetings on ceramics from urban contexts (how did they differ from rural sites?), pottery distribution, symbolism and markings, and pottery production and technology. It was the latter which held the most interest for Anna; at one meeting she talked about the reshaping of broken pottery including one intriguing example from a production site, where there were sherds showing three straight sides and one curved side, which may have functioned as a forming tool. Anna’s powers of observation and analysis were also demonstrated from her work on late medieval reduced wares, which were made at several sites in Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire. Although all part of the same tradition, Anna was able to distinguish the products of individual manufacturing sites from one another by detecting subtle differences in vessel form, fabric, decoration or methods of manufacture.

Many of the themes and subjects explored during SEMPER meetings now appear in print. There is the recently published volume on shelly sandy ware and the greyware industry by Lyn Blackmore and Jacqui Pearce and Anna’s ‘Genius in a cracked Pot’ on late medieval reduced wares. Research I did for talks at meetings on symbolism and distribution was subsequently used in publications on Essex pottery industries.

The purpose of SEMPER meetings was of course to further medieval and later pottery studies, but they were sociable occasions too and over the years friendships were formed, even though I only saw people at SEMPER and other archaeological meetings and conferences. I always found Anna particularly supportive and down to earth and we emailed each other regularly, partly to organise these meetings and partly to see how each other was doing. Reflecting on the sociable nature of SEMPER, the last meeting, in June 2011, was a day out to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, where we were shown pottery from our region and were free to explore their reserve collection. Although unfortunately not very well attended, this was a very enjoyable day, but as I said my goodbyes and walked back to the railway station in the late

afternoon sunshine, I had no idea that this would be the last time I was ever to see Anna.

## Anna, SEMPER and the London Area MPRG Group

### Beverley Nenk

Anna and I got to know each other during the 1990s. We both served on MPRG Council, so would meet regularly at council meetings, annual conferences, as well as at local SEMPER and London area meetings. I had taken over the organisation of the London area group in 1990, and would see Anna at these meetings, and at the meetings which she organised for the SEMPER group. Her aim, usually achieved, was to organise two SEMPER meetings a year, spring and autumn, a success rate that one could only admire. My first recollection of hearing her talk at a meeting was at the SEMPER seminar on Potterspurty ware in June 1989, when she spoke on the subject of pottery and roof furniture from Grove Priory, finally published in 2013 as *La Grava: The Archaeology and History of a Royal Manor and Alien Priory of Fontevrault*, by Evelyn Baker, with Anna as the main contributor on the ceramics.

In December 1990, the London area group met at the British Museum to examine ‘Exotica and enigmatica’, a wide range of unusual forms, fabrics and imports, and again in June 1991 to discuss the Survey of Medieval Ceramic Studies in England as it related to south-east England and surrounding areas. In October 1991, Anna organised a SEMPER meeting in Bedford on the subject of Ceramic Building Materials. She recognised that this subject sometimes tends to be neglected at meetings in favour of research on pottery, so the meeting was particularly useful for those of us working on tile as well as pottery. This meeting also provided the opportunity to see the Archaeology Centre, the then new base for Bedfordshire’s Archaeology Service, situated in the specially converted Grade 1 listed church of St Mary. As ever, there was the opportunity for a convivial lunch in a nearby pub with friends old and new, and the chance to bring one’s ‘samples and mystery bits’ to show and discuss.

In March 1992, the SEMPER meeting was held at the Northamptonshire Record Office on the subject of ‘Early Middle Saxon Pottery from the South-East Midlands’, organised by Barbara Hurman, then of the Milton Keynes Archaeological Unit. The meeting was an opportunity to hear about the latest research on the Raunds pottery by Paul Blinkhorn, Alan Vince’s East Midlands Anglo Saxon Pottery Survey, and Saxon Oxfordshire by Sheila Raven, with handling sessions and contributions in the afternoon.

In November 1992, the London and SEMPER groups combined to meet in Cambridge on the subject of ‘Medieval Pottery in Cambridgeshire’, organised

with the invaluable help of David Hall. The morning consisted of lectures by David Hall, Chris Evans & Jim Hunter, Tim Malin and Hilary Healey and the afternoon sessions involved viewing the collections in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

Anna and I organised another joint group meeting of London, SEMPER and the East England groups at the British Museum in November 1994, on the subject of ‘Unpublished Kilns’ in the areas. The day was organised as a sequel to the MPRG Nottingham conference, which had taken place earlier that year, to give participants more of an opportunity to look at unpublished material from the region. A series of short talks in the morning giving an overview of the situation was followed, after lunch, by a viewing of pottery, to quote Anna, ‘from each of your unpublished kilns (or at least as many as you can carry!)’. She suggested participants might like to donate their kiln samples to the National Reference Collection in the British Museum if they were not already represented, as ‘it will save you having to take your pottery all the way home again!!’

In November 1995, SEMPER met in Oxford, on the subject of ‘Renaissance Europe and its Impact on the South-East Midlands’. The morning session consisted of a series of short presentations at Kellogg College, including Anna, who spoke on ‘Renaissance Bedfordshire: at the cutting edge or not?’, and in the afternoon our hosts were Tim Wilson and Arthur MacGregor at the Ashmolean Museum, where we had the opportunity to view European ceramics from the collections, and medieval and local pottery from local sites.

The Spring 1996 SEMPER meeting was held in Aylesbury on the subject of ‘Local Transitional and Early Post-medieval Wares’. The meeting followed on from the Renaissance meeting in Oxford, which concentrated mainly on imports and presented the local view of what was happening in the region during this period. As usual there was a chance for a good look round and ‘any queries/interesting bits not related to the theme of the day would also be welcome’.

In April 1996, the London area group held a meeting on ‘French Imports in South-East England’ at the British Museum: speakers included Helen Walker, John Cotter, Lyn Blackmore and Jacqui Pearce, Ian Betts and Beverley Nenck, followed by a handling session including material in the collections of the British Museum.

In September 1997 Anna organised a SEMPER meeting on the subject of ‘Essex Medieval Redwares: their characteristics and distribution’, which was held at the wonderful Cressing Temple, a medieval farm complex comprising 13th-century barns, a walled garden and later farm building. This was a memorable setting and with a chance to enjoy a picnic lunch and to look round the site in the afternoon. It was a lovely day which we all enjoyed tremendously.

In November 2001, Anna organised a SEMPER

meeting, also incorporating the East Anglian Pottery Group, at Buckinghamshire County Museum, on the subject of a ‘Regional Round-up and Ceramic Type Series’ discussion, with an impressive list of speakers including Anna herself, Paul Blinkhorn, Paul Spoerry, Helen Walker, Barbara Hurman, Derek Hurst, Laura Griffin and Chris Cumberpatch. The topic for SEMPER and the East Anglian Pottery Group, meeting in Aylesbury in October 2002 was ‘Ceramics from Urban Contexts: do they differ from rural assemblages? Where did townfolk get their pottery – did it come to market from afar or was it locally sourced? Was there a ceramic industry in the town? How did the pattern change over time?’ Again, Anna organised an impressive series of speakers for the day.

‘Pottery from Harlow and the route way of the rivers Lea/Stort/Cam and Roding’ was the topic for the SEMPER meeting at Harlow Museum in April 2003, organised by Anna and Helen Walker, and hosted by Wally Davey, another long-standing member now sadly missed. As Metropolitan slipware had been discussed the previous year at the MPRG conference, the theme for this day concentrated on black-glazed ware and plain redware made at Harlow, and on the evidence for a medieval pottery industry. The Metropolitan slipware collection was, however, available for handling. This subject was of course of great interest to members of the London group, as much pottery from Essex is found in London. The morning consisted of talks on pottery from sites along the Rivers Lea, Stort and Cam, which formed an important north-south route from London to Cambridgeshire, Harlow being on the River Stort, and from sites along the River Roding, the other north-south river in Essex. The afternoon consisted of looking at the pottery industries of Harlow, and ended with the customary tea and pottery viewing.

I have many memories of Anna at these various pottery days, conferences and council meetings, speaking about her research, helping others to identify their fragments, and organising events with quiet efficiency and good humour. We each gave birth to our sons within a fairly short time of each other, and would usually compare notes on their progress whenever we met. Along with many other friends and colleagues, I did not realise our final meeting would be just that – the last time I would see her: in her customary place around the table for the MPRG council meeting in the Maiolica Room at the British Museum. She is sadly missed.

### South-West Region Pottery Research Group

Mike Ponsford, Oliver Kent, David Dawson and John Allen

An informal group started meeting in about 1975–6. We met quite frequently and enthusiastically in those



early years and concentrated on learning about the region's pottery. Those early members such as James Barber, Trevor Miles, John Allan, Terry Pearson, Steve Minnett, Dave Dawson, Mike Ponsford, Rod Burchill and Vince Russett occasionally undertook sorties into other regions (Wiltshire, Hampshire and even Wales) to learn about the pottery of our neighbours.

Over the years there have been many varied meetings, covering topics such as early post-medieval slipwares, Devon and Somerset wares, excavations at Potters Lane, Barnstaple, and the huge assemblage of c 45,000 sherds from excavations at Hemyock. The group frequently organised events in conjunction with other societies, for instance in 1979/80 an important exhibition was mounted at Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery, in collaboration with the Society for Historical Archaeology (SPMA), where David Dawson, Mike Ponsford and Cleo Witt drew together the evidence for large-scale pot manufacture in and around the city of Bristol. The SPMA were collaborators again in 2007 and their conference on West Country Households 1500–1700 provided the backdrop for an exhibition which saw the largest amount of south-west local and imported pottery ever assembled, and Ken Barton's impressive collection of European pottery, put on view at Taunton Museum to mark the event.

After the demise of Western Archaeological Trust, some of our scarce expertise was dispersed, particularly Terry Pearson to Norfolk. In the early 1990s Mike Ponsford left Bristol Museum and the archaeological input was all but privatised. Since then the expertise has resided in the units who have bought in experience but some local knowledge has been dissipated as a result. Sadly Rod Burchill, the only professional pot specialist in the northern part of the area, died in 2003. Those of us who remain are frequently asked to assess and advise on local groups of material for unit pot specialists who now need to have a wide knowledge of ceramics from across their unit's area of operations.

Members of the group were involved in the compilation of the Regional Archaeological Framework published as the 'The Archaeology of South-West England 2008' and the group met twice to contribute to the Research Framework for Post-Roman ceramic studies in Britain, as well as contributing to the discussion in the Wales Research Framework for Post-medieval ceramic studies.

The group was associated with The Bickley Ceramics Project (1981–2010), especially in relation to understanding the processes for pottery making and the archaeological techniques to be employed in investigating them. *The Bickley Book: The Bickley Ceramics Project 1981–2010* by David Dawson, Oliver Kent with Vicky Dawson and Heather Kent was published at the end of 2012.

We are still short of pot personae and some of us are now semi-retired. Remarkably Mike Ponsford

has just become a Museums Association Monument Fellow whose role will be to pass on his knowledge of the Bristol area's pottery to the current generation of curators.

## West Midlands Pottery Research Group (WMPRG)

### Stephanie Rátkai

The WMPRG came into being in 1983 and was begun and run by the late Mike Stokes, of the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry. It could not have come about at a more appropriate time for the West Midlands, since there were numerous large excavations, many a result of the Manpower Services Commission, which for a period in the 1980s must have been one of the biggest funders of archaeological works. Those of us of a certain age look back fondly at these schemes, which were by today's standards leisurely affairs with plenty of scope to learn about pottery and finds.

The group specifically avoided the use of medieval in its title, and papers on Roman and post-medieval pottery were from time to time given. There were also meetings which focussed on CBM, in particular, decorated floor tiles. The WMPRG toured the region, with meetings in Dudley, Hereford, Stafford, Stoke-on-Trent, Warwick and Worcester to name a few. The meetings were notable in the early years for drawing in specialists from outside the region. It was at these meetings that I first met John Hurst, Bob Thomson, Steve Moorhouse and Anna; she had travelled down from Yorkshire to Dudley to check up on whether West Midlands pottery had made it to West Yorkshire. The meetings were attended not only by ceramicists but by field archaeologists and local amateur enthusiasts. There was nearly always an opportunity to see various pottery collections which were laid out in the meeting room or, on some occasions, visit a museum's stores. Also notable were some rather splendid lunchtimes spent in local hostelrys, often followed by a post-meeting return, where ideas were discussed and views exchanged.

The group produced a newsletter, which was edited by Mike Stokes, and contained the full text, or abstracts, of the papers given at the meetings. I still have my rather well thumbed copies of the newsletters, which are often the only published information on certain sites or ceramic types. In total, 14 newsletters were produced, the last being in 1990. A quick perusal of Issue 11 reveals the astonishing fact that during its first five years, the WMPRG had met 16 times and had heard 100 papers, which led to over 200 pages of copy for the newsletters!

By the early-mid 1990s the landscape of archaeology had changed completely and the number of large-scale excavations was much reduced. Many pottery specialists who had contributed so much to the

## Medieval Pottery Regional Research Groups

WMPRG had either left the profession, left the area or changed their focus of interest. It became much harder to find full-time ceramic specialists working in the region or specialists working on large projects/research and as a consequence it was much more difficult to get speakers for the meetings and the fortunes of the group declined. It is against this backdrop that Anna's ability to keep SEMPER running is all the more admirable.

By 1996 the running of the group passed to me but by then the WMPRG meetings had virtually ceased. However, I looked forward to the yearly phone calls from Anna asking if I had anything to report on the WMPRG and the opportunity for a good moan about the group's fortunes, which was always met with good-humoured sympathy.

### North-East Region Research Group

Chris Cumberpatch

I have organised two regional meetings under the auspices of the North-East Region Research Group of the MPRG. These were held at Doncaster Museum and Art Gallery in 2013 and 2014. The 2015 meeting was subsumed into the national MPRG conference but planning has begun for a third meeting in 2016

The aims of the meetings were twofold. Firstly, they would bring together members of local heritage and archaeology groups, university researchers and archaeologists from the commercial sector in order to improve communication between these different sectors. The second main aim was to offer practical support to Doncaster Museum in a time of crisis. Like most local and regional museums in Britain, Doncaster has suffered severely from cuts to its budget and staff although it plays a vital role in the curation of site archives from many excavations, including those of a number of nationally important Roman and medieval potteries. In times such as these, when wilful ignorance and ostentatious philistinism characterise politics at both local and national levels, I believe that groups such as the MPRG must act positively to support the museums which hold and care for the archives upon which we and future generations of archaeologists depend. Attracting a sizeable audience drawn from the local area and the wider region is an excellent way of demonstrating the value of local museums while at the same time bringing together the disparate elements that make up archaeology in Britain today.

### Cauldrons and candlesticks: the creation of the Guide to the Classification of Medieval Ceramic Forms

Lorraine Mephram

The South Central has never been one of the most active regional groups of the MPRG – our regional meeting attendance was given as 6 in Maureen

Mellor's *Medieval Ceramic Studies in England* (1994), and has not risen significantly since – a state of affairs which cannot be entirely attributed to apathy amongst those working in the region. The truth is that there have never been very many of us working in the region at any one time, and we have generally been quite widely spread. We have viewed enviously, and with some feelings of inadequacy, the full and active programme of SEMPER under Anna Slowikowski's leadership, but have never attempted to emulate it.

There is one way, however, in which the South Central Group has made a major contribution to the work of MPRG, and that is through the production of our first Occasional Paper, published in 1998, and entitled *A Guide to the Classification of Medieval Ceramic Forms*. The publication of a classification of medieval pottery forms, primarily as a means of establishing a common nomenclature, was a principal recommendation of Mellor's survey for English Heritage (1994), and was arguably one of the most crucial. Classification of vessel form and fabric are the two fundamental criteria on which all pottery analysis is based. Form type series are created as a step towards comparison between sites. Without some attempt to link all these separate type series together under a common standard, no real progress could be made in the study of vessel forms, and their chronological, functional and social significance.

Attempts had been made previously by MPRG to establish a classification system for medieval vessel forms. Delays in completion, however, left a methodological gap which was being filled with a variety of different classifications across the regions, some based on a specific production centre, some based on broad vessel classes, irrespective of source. Some used functional terms, some did not, while others combined both functional and non-functional terms. Some forms had several names in the literature, while some names were used in various regions (or by different practitioners) to refer to very different forms. Against this background, the main benefits of an over-arching typology and nomenclature included ensuring compatibility between sites; enabling more systematic archive compilation; and removing the need for repetitive definition in reports, thus freeing up resources to consider more interesting questions, such as what all the data gathered actually meant. "The publication of type series would be the start of more meaningful and planned study of the pottery industry in a locality or region, and would contribute to knowledge of the social and economic development of the area generally" (Mellor 1994, 13).

In the immediate aftermath of the survey's publication in 1994, the MPRG Council began to discuss ways and means of advancing this and the other principal recommendations. It was coincidental that Sarah Jennings, Duncan Brown and I were all serving on Council at this time, but it proved logistically practical for us, working in Portsmouth,

Southampton and Salisbury respectively, to form a sub-committee to try to bring this project to fruition. We met regularly over the next two or three years to achieve this.

Despite earlier efforts, the decision was taken to start the classification again from scratch. How then to begin? First, we needed to define our parameters. Our chronological range, after some debate, ran from the end of the Roman period up to the beginning of intensive industrial production of the 17th century onwards. We would only include vessel forms, although there was a vaguely expressed idea that we might tackle ceramic building materials, kiln furniture and ceramic objects as a separate project(s) later on (presumably if we still retained the will to live). We aimed to incorporate some definitions of vessel components, such as rims and bases, and also a glossary of terms used to describe aspects of the manufacture and subsequent treatment of pottery before and during use.

We agreed early on that the best way to tackle the project was to make a logical division of vessel forms into blocks; we would each then tackle two or more blocks. One crucial decision at the outset was that, as far as possible, the classification would not attempt either to define or to suggest vessel function, although it was recognised that function was implicit in many vessel form names, e.g. candlestick, alembic. Secondly, size was to be considered secondary to shape and/or profile, although we did offer, in an appendix, a means of further classification of profiles in which overall size and other vessel dimensions could be used.

It was clear from the start that the majority of vessel forms fell handily into three broad groups, which we could define on profile: (a) tall closed wares, with a maximum girth smaller than the overall height (jugs and bottles, also including flasks); (b) closed wares, with a maximum girth more or less the same as the height, but with an opening smaller than either (jars); and (c) open wares, with a rim diameter greater than both the maximum girth and the height (bowls and dishes). These three basic forms, with their various adaptations (by the addition of handles, feet, etc) make up in many cases the entire repertoire of forms found on any medieval site. Moreover, it proved possible to treat these basic forms in a largely non-functional way, once we had arbitrarily decided to eliminate the use of 'cooking pot' for 'jar' – at a stroke causing extreme anguish across the ceramic profession. Of course, we could not eliminate function entirely, and four further groups were defined on a purely functional basis: Drinking Vessels, Lids, Lighting & Heating, and Industrial Vessels. Everything else ended up in a Miscellaneous section.

The fun part proved to be searching endless publications for form illustrations, bringing wallets full of clippings to our meetings for discussion and 'swapping'. We owe a huge debt of gratitude in particular to Michael McCarthy and Cathy Brooks for our intensive plundering of their book *Medieval Pottery in Britain AD 900–1600* (1988), but many other publications fed our voracious search for more and better forms. The basic format took shape quite early on: A5, one page per form, with the basic description and stylised illustration on one side, and further 'real' examples on the reverse. For each form there was a 'recommended' name, while cross-references to alternative names to be found in the literature were also given. The definitions, however, proved trickier to formulate in a consistent and simple fashion, particularly for such basic forms as jugs, jars, and bowls. My memory may be at fault here, but I have a feeling that at one point we defined a jug as 'a bottle with a spout' and a bottle as 'a jug without a spout'. There were many such grey areas. When does a squat jar become a tall bowl? And what exactly is the difference between a cup and a mug?

I cannot pretend that we agreed on every point, but the fact that there were three of us meant that we were never equally split, and we agreed to abide by the majority decision (although Duncan reminds me that neither of us ever won an argument against Sarah). Discussion was on the whole rational and reasoned, though umbrage may have been taken at some points, and we nearly came to blows over the definition of a 'flanged rim'. Despite that, we remained good friends (I think), and it remains one of my fondest memories of Sarah, particularly her sustaining soup.

Was it all worth it? I certainly think so, and that we produced something that fulfilled the original requirement to provide a standard classification and nomenclature, which has proved useful to researchers both old and new. The *Classification* still sells steadily, and a copy was recently advertised on eBay for £105 – MPRG may be missing a trick here. I don't religiously check pottery reports to see if the authors have used the classification, but I am aware that it is used widely, if not universally. As far as I know, nobody has ever sent in an example of a new form to be included, although individuals may have customised their own editions (the loose-leaf format was designed with this in mind). And I believe that we have been able to move on to more interesting questions, freed from the need to reinvent the wheel time after time, even if we still can't decide exactly what a flanged rim is.

### Résumé

L'histoire du 'Medieval Pottery Research Group' (MPRG) ne serait pas complète sans la participation des groupes locaux de recherche qui étaient inspirés ou ont évolués à partir de la société principale. Les groupes locaux offrent des réunions supplémentaires à celles de la Conférence annuelle, et permettent l'échange d'informations à un niveau plus large et de "grass roots". Cet article a été inspiré par la participation active d'Anna Slowikowski dans le groupe SEMPER, qui, en vertu de son mandat commun avec les autres organisateurs, s'est assuré qu'il y avait au moins deux réunions de ce groupe chaque année. Dans cet article, les organisateurs actuels de la région des groupes locaux ont été invités à faire une contribution au sujet de leurs réminiscences de la participation d'Anna ou des aspects de leur implication avec les groupes régionaux et les réalisations de ces activités.

### Zusammenfassung

Die Geschichte der Medieval Pottery Research Group (MPRG) wäre ohne die Einbindung lokaler Forschungsgruppen, die entweder durch den Hauptverein inspiriert wurden oder aus ihm hervorgingen, unvollständig. Zusätzlich zur jährlichen Konferenz bieten die Ortsgruppen ergänzende Sitzungen und ermöglichen den Informationsaustausch an der "Basis" und auf breiterer Ebene. Der vorliegende Beitrag wurde von Anna Slowikowskis aktiver Mitarbeit in der South-East Midlands Medieval Pottery Research Group inspiriert. Während der Amtszeit Slowikowskis und anderer OrganisatorInnen stellte die Gruppe sicher, dass jährlich mindestens zwei Sitzungen statt fanden. Für diesen Beitrag wurden die derzeitigen regionalen OrganisatorInnen der Ortsgruppen darum gebeten, ihre Erinnerungen an Annas Beteiligung zu teilen, oder auf Aspekte ihrer Einbindung in regionale Gruppen, und was diese Aktivitäten auf lokaler Ebene erreicht haben, zu reflektieren.



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