

MEDIEVAL POTTERY KILNS AT BRILL, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE:

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS IN 1953¹

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DOCUMENTARY evidence has long been known for pottery manufacture at Brill from the early thirteenth century onwards, it may well be continuously, until the beginning of the present century (*V.C.H. Bucks.* II, 115; *Oxoniensa*, X (1945), 96). Fieldwork some eight years ago succeeded in establishing the site of the medieval kilns, through the presence of pottery wasters and areas of very black soil. These lay immediately to the north of the village, on the brow of the hill well above the clay diggings on Brill Common.¹

In July 1953 four kilns were excavated, three superimposed, and one at some fifty yards distance. It is clear that there are other medieval kilns in the immediate vicinity, and the site of the latest pottery working at Brill, within living memory, is only about one hundred yards away.

The four kilns excavated were all fired according to the same system, a type hitherto unrecorded. They were double stoke-hole kilns, a fire being lit at each end, and the flames and hot gases being deflected up on to the firing platform by bungs at the midway point in each flue (Fig. 1). The pots must have been stacked in a pyramid on the firing platform, and a clamp of brushwood daubed over with sandy clay (remains of which, with brushwood impressions, were found) made up over the stacked pots, and removed after each

¹ The work was financed by the Ashmolean Museum, and carried out by myself, my wife and Mr. H. W. M. Hodges, two workmen being employed over a period of four weeks. Mr. R. I. Threlfall, F.S.A., has done much invaluable work on the pottery, for which I am most grateful. We are extremely grateful to Mr. Harold Godfrey of Temple Farm for his kindness in allowing us to excavate in his field.

firing in order to take out the pots. The three superimposed kilns were oval and built of rough stone and broken sherds, whereas the fourth separate kiln was circular and much better built, of tiles with carefully built stoke-hole arches of specially shaped bricks 1½ in. thick. Each of the oval kilns had undergone at least one major reconstruction, and very many minor rebuildings and relinings with sandy clay.

The earliest kiln so far found appears to be of the later thirteenth century, and the two on top of it were evidently operating continuously onwards through the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The kiln some fifty yards distant was in use about the middle of the fourteenth century, the bricks in the stoke-hole arches and elsewhere being 1½ in. thick. The lowest kiln was, however, built into an already existing dump of discarded sherds of mid-thirteenth-century type, and there is a certain amount of pottery from the site which may be dated to the first half of the thirteenth century, the kilns for the manufacture of which have not yet been found.

There is thus some material from this site corresponding in date to the earliest documentary evidence for pottery-making at Brill, and revealing a continuously operating industry through much of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Little material has so far been found, however, which is datable securely to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Documentary evidence is clear enough for the fifteenth century, and again in the early seventeenth, and it would seem that the kilns of the later middle ages and Tudor period must be sought on a different site, though not necessarily far removed.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the pottery industry at Brill was evidently being conducted on a very considerable scale, as indicated by the succession of kilns and the vast amount of pottery rejected. It can be calculated that something approaching a quarter of a million pots had been made in these kilns during a period of less than a century. The great dump round these kilns must contain the remains of some 20,000 pots, and if we assume a wastage of some 10 per cent of the kiln products (over 5 per cent of the kiln's capacity was evidently damaged in firing and never removed from the kiln, and no doubt an equivalent amount was subsequently broken or discarded), it would appear that something approaching a quarter of a million pots had been made in these kilns alone during a period of less than a century.

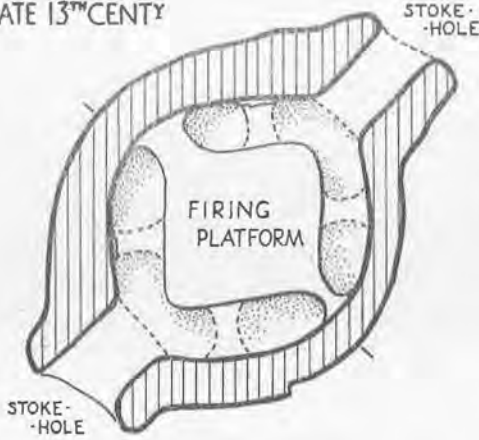
Unfortunately little was found in 1953 in the way of potters' buildings, though a large clay puddling hole and a smithy floor of the earlier thirteenth century were found beneath the level of the lowest kiln.

The main output so far found at the Brill kilns consists of cooking pots, mostly holding a half to one gallon, with a few smaller (down to about half a pint), large pans both deep and shallow, handled skillets, oval herring dishes, patchily glazed jugs, both baggy and carinated in form, plain or decorated with applied strips. The fabrics are good and hard fired, and all the pottery is regular, of uniform shapes and rim forms, in graded sizes, turned on a fast wheel. Among the less common types are pieces of pottery sounding horns (*Oxoniensa* XVII (1952); *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.*, LXXXVI (1951-2), 155, 158), and vessels designed to take lids (*Oxoniensa*, XIV (1949), 78-9).

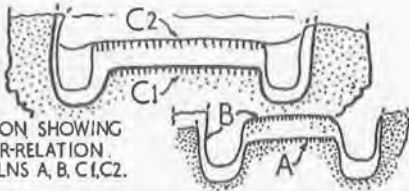
Many of the Brill products are highly individual, such as the pans and

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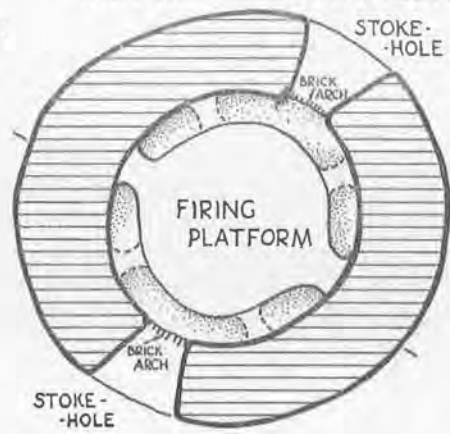
KILN C1.
LATE 13TH CENTY



SECTION SHOWING INTER-RELATION OF KILNS A, B, C1, C2.



KILN D. MID-14TH CENTY



SCALE OF FEET 0 10

EMJ.1953.

FIG. 1

DISTRIBUTION OF COARSE POTTERY FROM BRILL - LATE 13TH-14TH CENTURIES

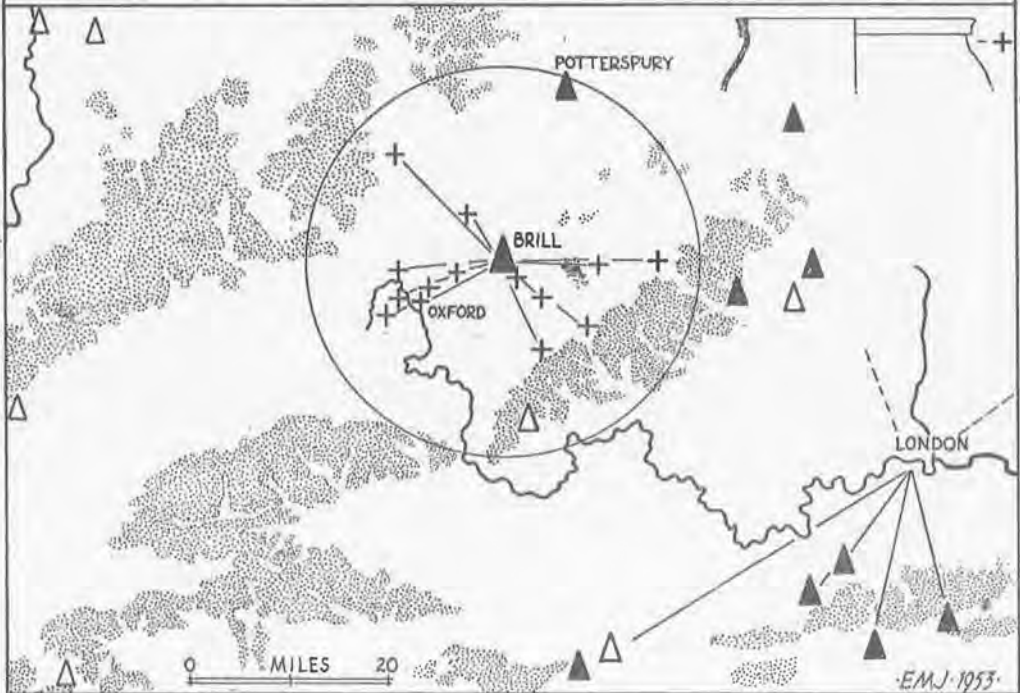


FIG. 2

cooking-pots with sharply moulded angular rims (*Oxoniensia*, VII (1942), 75), and 70 per cent of the jugs produced here have a deep thumb and finger impression at the top junction of the handle and the body (*Berks. Archæol. J.*, L (1947), 64, Fig. 8, No. 1). These and other features serve to mark out the Brill pottery among groups from medieval sites in the surrounding countryside. The cooking-pots and the pans seem to have been distributed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries over an area of a little less than twenty miles radius, reaching Oxford and Seacourt to the south-west. The jugs, however, were either marketed over a larger area (up to 50 miles and more) or very similar jugs were being made at other places, a problem that requires much further research (*Trans. Bristol and Glocs. Archæol. Soc.*, LXXI (1952), 61-76).

Although Brill is the only site in the Oxford region at which the sites of pottery kilns have actually been found and excavated, there is documentary evidence for pottery-making at other places. Fieldwork has not so far been successful in locating kiln sites, however. There are many other styles of pottery typical of Oxford and its region which are not accounted for in these kilns at Brill: there are reasons to suspect that perhaps some may have been made at other kilns in Brill, but others must have been the products of workshops elsewhere.

Bricks and clay tiles, both paving- and roof-, were also made at Brill, and in the 1460s at any rate bricks were being brought into Oxford from Brill (*Oriel Record*, June 1941; *Archæol. J.*, CIX (1952), 120). Brill seventeenth and eighteenth century pottery can be recognised over a similar radius of about twenty miles, and there is here an opportunity for a careful study of such a country industry at this late period, which is greatly needed.

FIG. 1. Plans and sections of two of the medieval pottery kilns excavated at Brill in 1953.

The walls are built of local rubble stone bonded with clayey lime mortar, and lined with a very sandy clay. The positions of the stoke-hole arches and fire-bars, deduced from the remains of the springers on the kiln-walls and from the deposits of fallen burnt clayey mortar, are shown by broken lines.

FIG. 2. Map to illustrate the known distribution of a particularly characteristic type of coarse pottery with sharply undercut rim, made in the Brill kilns in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Although this pottery was mass-produced for general use, and was therefore probably cheap, it was of good quality. Its distribution seems to have been confined well within the circle of 20 miles radius shown. The more decorative jugs made at Brill may perhaps have been marketed over a wider area (see *Trans. Bristol and Glocs. Archæol. Soc.*, LXXI (1952), 75).

Other pottery kilns working at this period within the area of the map are also shown:

- ▲—Kiln site excavated or known from the finding of wasters;
- △—Documentary evidence for pottery manufacture at this period.

Land over 500 ft. is stippled. Rivers are only shown for the stretches along which there is evidence for their navigability at this period.