

Pottery from excavations on the site of King Street car park adjacent to The Futurist Theatre, Scarborough (FTS18)

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Introduction

The pottery assemblage from the excavations on the site of the King Street car park adjacent to The Futurist Theatre, Scarborough (FTS18) was examined by the author between the 21st and 23rd August 2018. The assemblage consisted of 103 sherds of pottery weighing 1378 grams and represented a maximum of ninety-four vessels. The data are summarised in Table 1. With the exception of one small sherd of refined earthenware (context 201), all of the material was of medieval date. References in the draft evaluation report (Turner 2018) imply that other, later, material was also present but this was not seen by the author. The pottery assemblage was accompanied by a quantity of medieval floor tile and other types of ceramic building material. These are listed in Table 2.

The pottery

The pottery assemblage from the site was notable for the very limited range of pottery recovered. Scarborough wares of types 1, 2 and 3 predominated with smaller quantities of Staxton/Pottery Brompton ware and unidentified local wares (Buff Sandy ware, Oxidised and Reduced Sandy ware, although the latter may be burnt Scarborough ware). The proportions of the different types of pottery (by estimated (maximum) number of vessels) are summarised in Table 3.

Buff Sandy wares were represented by five sherds forming 5.3% of the assemblage. The group included two rims (contexts 404 and 522), both from jars and one with a dished internal profile. Of the body sherds, two were hand-made (context 501) and one of these was decorated with impressed lines forming a grid pattern. Both were glazed externally although the glaze (and outer surfaces) had been badly damaged by mechanical abrasion. The identification of these hand-made sherds adds to the emerging evidence for an early phase of Buff Sandy and Buff Gritty ware production in the earlier medieval period during which vessels were hand-built. That this was a short-lived phase (unlike the case of the Staxton/Potter Brompton wares discussed below) is indicated by the much larger body of evidence for finely finished, wheel-thrown buff wares evident on sites across Yorkshire and neighbouring areas. Examples of the early phase of production can be found in Durham (Vince and Mould 2007, Cumberpatch 2018) and Wetherby (Young and Vince, nd) in addition to the present evidence and it appears to have been limited to the mid/late 11th and early/mid 12th centuries before wheel-throwing replaced hand-manufacture.

Staxton / Potter-Brompton ware is a distinctive type of pottery manufactured in the eponymous villages which lie to the south and south-west of Scarborough (Brewster and Hayfield 1992: Figure 1). Production focussed on hand-made cooking pots of both conventional and wide-based forms (peat pots) with smaller quantities of other types including straight-sided jars, lid-seated jars with applied and impressed strips and occasional jugs (Brewster and Hayfield 1992:

Figures 4 to 8). Although a number of sites in the villages of Staxton and Potter Brompton were excavated between the late 1940s and early 1960s and a short note was published in 1958 (Brewster 1958), little of the work approached modern standards and while considerable quantities of pottery were recovered, none of the sites were fully written up in the excavator's lifetime. Reviewing the information available in the early 1990s, Hayfield concluded that the industry was well-established by the late 12th century and was probably in steep decline by the late 14th century (Brewster and Hayfield 1992; 78).

Staxton/Potter-Brompton ware was present in small quantities (fourteen sherds, 14.8% of the total) across the site. The majority of sherds were featureless body sherds but included one jar rim and one bowl rim (contexts 501 and 503).

Scarborough ware constituted, in total, 75.5% of the pottery from the site with 20.2% Scarborough 1 ware, 53.2% Scarborough 2 ware and single sherds of Scarborough 3 and Scarborough type ware (1.06% of the total in each case). Although a very well known type of medieval pottery with an international distribution, Scarborough ware has not received the attention that it deserves and there remain major issues around its dating and the relationship of the industry to earlier and contemporary British and northern European pottery industries. The original analysis by Peter Farmer was privately published (1979) and complete copies of the monograph are almost impossible to locate. Farmer's conclusions regarding the dating of the industry have been challenged by a number of writers using archaeological data from sites in Britain and Scandinavia but a meeting organised by the Medieval Pottery Research Group, published in 1982 (MPRG 1982), failed to achieve a consensus on its date. Table 4 presents the results of a rapid review of the available literature conducted by the author for this report with respect to the date range. Farmer's early date for the start of production seems to lack general support while several authors suggest that Farmer's end date for Scarborough 2 ware is too early and that manufacture continued into the late 14th century. It is hard to see how this question will be resolved without further extensive excavations on stratified sites in Scarborough itself, ideally combined with a detailed analysis of a wide range of assemblages from other sites, comparable to that undertaken by Irving in the case of Cistercian ware (unpublished). On the positive side, the wide distribution of the type and its highly distinctive character would make this a relatively straightforward project (Cumberpatch unpublished). The only drawback would seem to be the lack of commitment (which in practice amounts to a positive aversion) to studies of medieval pottery in British universities.

The distribution of pottery on the present site does little to resolve the issues. Pit 209 (context 205) contained only Scarborough 1 ware but the assemblage consisted of just three sherds. Context 403, one of the two fills of pit 402, contained only Scarborough 2 ware which was associated with Staxton/Potter Brompton ware but context 404, the second fill, contained both Scarborough 1 and 2 wares, again associated with Staxton/Potter Brompton ware.

The fill of pit 500 (context 501) contained just one very small sherd of Scarborough 1 ware alongside a much larger group of Scarborough 2 wares but the same context also included two, possibly three, sherds of hand-made Buff Sandy ware, suggesting that the fill included residual material and was thus not suited to contributing to a resolution of the dating issue.

The data from the fill of pit 515, context 522, appeared to be slightly more reliable with an assemblage consisting predominantly of Scarborough 2 ware associated with two sherds of Staxton/Potter Brompton ware which might suggest an early 13th to late 14th century date range for the Scarborough ware although the feature also included single sherds of Buff Sandy ware and Scarborough 1 ware, again suggesting a degree of residuality in the fill. Other contexts contained single sherds of assemblages too small to be in any way reliable as source of robust inferences.

One sherd of Scarborough 3 ware was identified in context 400 (a demolition deposit). This type was identified and defined by Watkins (1987:113) who noted that it was limited to late 13th to early 14th centuries in Hull.

The single sherd of refined earthenware (context 201) was too small to identify with any precision but it appeared to be an intrusive sherd of mid to late 18th or 19th century date.

Discussion

The small size of the assemblage and the ambiguities surrounding the dating of the Scarborough ware industry render attempts to interpret the assemblage difficult. It does seem clear that the inhabitants of Scarborough, while using vessels made in the town on a large scale, were also buying pots from other manufacturers on a regular basis. The longevity of the Staxton / Potter Brompton industry, despite its conservative nature (in terms of production technology) suggest that its products, including the distinctive 'peat pots', were sought after even where another industry was well established and that they were marketed alongside the more flamboyant Scarborough wares. Something of the same may apply to the Buff Sandy wares.

Archiving and curation

In view of the many problems surrounding Scarborough ware and the importance of resolving these, it is considered that this assemblage should be deposited in its entirety in the appropriate local museum or finds depository where it will be available for further research in the future. It should not be sampled, downsized, dispersed or discarded and is unsuitable for use as teaching collection.

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