

Post-medieval pottery studies in Somerset

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This paper offers a brief summary of recent research into the Somerset potteries of c.1500–1750. The subject remains of fundamental importance to the archaeology of this period, not only because the dating of most archaeological contexts relies on pottery but because ceramics provide us with the most plentiful material evidence of regional distribution, foreign trade, status, practices in the storage, cooking and presentation of food, and changes in the furnishing of post-medieval households.

Pottery production

In the study of pottery production the last generation has seen two projects of national importance in the county. First, the long-running programme of fieldwalking, excavation, documentary research and study of museum collections carried out by Richard Coleman-Smith, Terry Pearson, Ian Morley et al. at Donyatt has been one of the major success stories in post-medieval archaeology in SW England. As John Hurst pointed out in the county *Proceedings* (Hurst 1991), the fine publication *Excavations in Donyatt Potteries* (Coleman-Smith and Pearson 1988) provides us with the fullest picture of the workings of a traditional pottery in Britain. With the recovery of some 55 tons of ceramics, it presents an exceptionally full picture of the range of products over a period of seven centuries or more. Equally important is the fine sequence of kiln plans (remarkably conservative by national standards in the 16th and 17th centuries); the publication also looks at such neglected issues as the health of the potters and the sources of fuel for their wood-burning kilns

(coppiced wood from hedgerows provided the staple wood supply). Run on a shoestring since 1964 with considerable organisational and practical problems (some will remember its tent cities and soup kitchens), the Donyatt project has surely been one of the most impressive achievements in the traditional amateur spirit of personal commitment and enthusiasm (Coleman-Smith 1999).

The second major research programme in this field has been the Bickley Kiln Project, run by David Dawson and Oliver Kent and now in its eighteenth season. This has consisted of a series of experimental firings of pottery in reconstructions of traditional kiln forms. Exercises of this sort are essential if we are to understand more fully the excavated evidence from kilns, to appreciate their technical capabilities, and to achieve a better understanding of the techniques and appearance of excavated pottery. The publications arising from the project (see now Kent and Dawson 1998; Dawson and Kent 1999) will be of fundamental importance to students of medieval and later ceramics.

Donyatt, of course, was merely one (albeit almost certainly the largest) in a series of kiln production centres spread across the southern half of the county, which included Wiveliscombe, Crowcombe, Nether Stowey, Wrangway, Langford Budville, Dinnington and Chard in the 16th and 17th centuries (when the industry also extended over the border to Clayhidon, Honiton and perhaps Hemyock in Devon, with comparable production in north Somerset at Wanstrow), and Dunster, Blue Anchor and Bridgwater in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. From many of these sites there are kiln wasters, and some

have received brief notices in journals, but several deserve more thorough investigation, including fresh fieldwork, chasing up earlier finds, further documentary work, and above all, publication. These would form ideal projects for local society members. Until such work is tackled (and further kiln sources surely await discovery), our identifications of pottery sources should be cautious; most attributions should be to the South Somerset industry rather than to specific kiln sites. That said, a few very experienced fieldworkers (Coleman-Smith, Dawson, Kent and Pearson) have learnt to distinguish by eye between the products of these closely related kilns, picking out variations, for example, in the mix of inclusions, the form of fracture of sherds and techniques of throwing, finishing, and decorating, which allow specific centres to be distinguished. These are best seen on near-complete pots or at least big sherds, and not all specialists agree on attributions, so this now needs to be tested by scientific analysis. A preliminary programme of Neutron Activation Analysis undertaken by Michael Hughes at the British Museum has shown that this technique will distinguish between at least some of the Somerset kiln centres, confirming in a limited number of samples, attributions made by Coleman-Smith on visual grounds (R. Coleman-Smith pers comm).

Chronology

Kilns produce limited dating evidence; progress in establishing chronologies of the many South Somerset vessel forms, decorative styles and specific traits has relied principally on the recovery of large pottery groups in the major towns. Such work remains fundamental before more sophisticated questions can be asked of the ceramics. The Taunton excavations (Hallam and Radford 1953; more importantly Pearson 1984, most of the latter sadly and unworthily buried in microfiche) have offered the best-dated local material and Taunton is the only place in the county where the changing ceramic market in a single place can be followed (albeit with gaps) through successive generations. Work in Bristol has recovered a good sequence of major groups, among which two – those from St Nicholas's Almshouses (of c.1656–60: Barton 1964) and Narrow Quay (of c.1600: Good 1987) remain nationally important. These were each the subject of an individual publication, and it would be most valuable to see them in the context of

the numerous unpublished Bristol groups recovered since the 1970s. A surprising amount of the most telling evidence for the chronology of Somerset pottery, however, comes from Devon, the best sequence of all being that from Exeter (Allan 1984), where most generations between c.1500 and c.1800 are represented by several published groups. Particular points in the dating of Somerset pottery are demonstrated by groups in Plymouth, and there is also useful evidence from the smaller towns, notably Totnes, Newton Abbot, Dartmouth, Tiverton and Exmouth.

From the early 17th century there is now evidence from North America (see below). Since the numbers of finds of Somerset pottery are small and in many cases dating is just as problematical as that in England, one should not be seduced into believing this will answer all our dating problems. Nevertheless a few individual excavations, such as that by Bill Kelso and his team in contexts of 1607–c.1611 at Jamestown Fort, Virginia, and Ivor Noël Hume's projects nearby at Martin's Hundred, with their contexts of 1619–21, offer precision in dating which no contemporary English sites can match.

The range of new evidence available should encourage us to re-examine the dating of earlier reports. For example, the large and important assemblages from site 2 (Coleman-Smith and Pearson 1988, 86–7) now seems much closer in their composition to dated groups of c.1660–1700, rather than those of early 17th-century date. Sometimes fresh perceptions of the nature of the South Somerset industry arise from new dating. For example, some commentators (eg Cherry 1988, xv–xvi) have stressed the conservative nature of the industry, evident in the use of old-fashioned kilns and traditional decoration. Whilst this is undeniable, some of the recent dating evidence emphasises the innovative nature of the South Somerset industry, at least in a regional context. It is now clear from Narrow Quay at Bristol, Queen Street, Exeter and Fore Street, Totnes (Good 1987; Allan 1984; Allan in Griffiths and Griffith 1984) that both true yellow-glazed slipware and sgraffito-decorated dishes were made in South Somerset before c.1600. This was a generation before the introduction of these techniques in north Devon, as the Kitto Institute group at Plymouth, (c.1625+, Allan and Barber 1992) illustrates. Indeed, by the mid-17th century, the South Somerset industry was employing a range of techniques – plain slipware, copper-green slipware,

line sgraffito, slip trailing, finger trailing, quartz-encrusting, rouletting, black-glazing etc – in a wide variety of combinations which was probably more varied than any used elsewhere in England.

Markets

The towns, many of them enjoying rapid expansion throughout the early modern period, evidently offered growing markets for the Somerset pottery industry. Not only were their populations growing; the volume of ceramics in each household increased considerably as a wider range of vessel forms came into circulation – a point made very evident in comparisons of the relative quantities of pottery and bone in pit groups of successive generations. In Exeter, for example, the volume of pottery in groups of c.1660–1720 was almost twice that in 16th-century groups and growth in pottery usage coincided with a growth in the range of vessel forms, particularly those used at table, together with the use of a much higher proportion of decorated pottery (Allan 1984, 12).

The ceramics excavated from the various towns of the South West in the 1960s and 1970s were published by a variety of researchers working largely independently of one another, some with rather different methods of analysis and quantification, others with none. To understand better the marketing of ceramics in these towns we need to be able to compare the range of wares displayed in contemporary households, and this is not possible without fresh analysis. Here Oliver Kent's researches, comparing in detail the composition of some major groups in different towns, should prove highly revealing. There may be significant local differences in pottery usage within the south-western region. The case study of contemporary groups in different parts of Exeter showed dramatic differences in pottery usage even within a single city, which correlate quite closely with distinctions of wealth (Allan 1984, 101–4). Some of the assemblages from small towns also offer potential in studying variations in wealth. The huge groups from the garden of the Deanery at Wells, with their impressive array of Chinese export porcelain and delftwares, are particularly striking instances, but the mass of finds from Glastonbury Abbey where one would expect high status material, may also prove equally rewarding.

Whilst there are some good samples from the smaller towns, like North Petherton (Pearson

1979), Axbridge and Bridgwater, the rural market for ceramics is much less well understood, in part because rural excavations rarely recover the large closed assemblages which provide such good samples in towns. The study by Christopher Gerrard and Alejandra Gutiérrez of the collections from Shapwick will thus be particularly important in offering a view of rural consumption.

Coleman-Smith and Pearson began the process of studying the distribution of South Somerset pottery, preparing a map of all Donyatt-type finds without any indication of the proportion of the market occupied by different competing centres (Coleman-Smith and Pearson 1988, 402). This showed that most lay within c.60km of the kiln sources, with only two major findspots (Plymouth and Southampton) much further afield. This writer has presented in more detail the marketing of Somerset pottery on a large number of sites in Devon (Allan 1984, 130; Allan 1999, 285) where one can see something of the proportion of the ceramics market occupied by competing industries. This exercise emphasised the very strong domination of the east Devon and Exe Valley markets by the South Somerset industry with a sharp decline in market share a few kilometres to the west and north of Exeter. Strong economic links between the Exeter area and south Somerset were already evident in the 14th century, as Kowaleski (1995) has recently shown. It would be most useful to balance the picture in Devon with similar work in rural Dorset and Wiltshire, where the Somerset potteries competed with other major industries such as that around Verwood.

It was Ken Barton who first demonstrated that South Somerset pottery was exported from the south coast of England, publishing many Donyatt-type pots from Jersey (Barton 1977). The writer subsequently found that these could be correlated with many records in the late 17th-century Port Books of Lyme Regis recording exports of pottery to the Channel Isles, alongside shipments to many ports along the coasts of South Devon and Cornwall (Allan 1983, 39–41). During the last few years, our picture of foreign trade in South Somerset pottery has changed greatly with its recognition on sites in North America. North Devon pottery has long been recognised on early colonial sites scattered along the entire length of the eastern seaboard, from Newfoundland to Barbados, and is indeed remarkably plentiful at many sites (Watkins 1960 – the classic study). By contrast, when Noël Hume wrote his ever-useful

Guide to artifacts of colonial America, he could point to only a single instance of Donyatt pottery in North America, and that of 18th-century date (Noël Hume 1970, 105, 107). Work in the last decade has changed this picture. The largest concentration of South Somerset finds is around Chesapeake Bay (unsurprisingly, since this has been the focus of so much excavation and research). In his examinations of collections in this area the Virginian archaeologist Taft Kiser has recorded about 20 examples of South Somerset pottery ranging in date from the earliest stages of settlement to the early 18th century (Coleman-Smith 1999, 271–5; Kiser forthcoming; Kiser and Coleman-Smith forthcoming). A second group of South Somerset pottery finds is now emerging in Newfoundland, where it is recorded on four 17th-century sites: Ferryland, the early “capital” (Pope 1986), Cupids (early 17th-century finds from a settlement established in 1610: Gilbert 1996b, Fig. 6, 77); Renew, an isolated planter’s house (Mills 1996 for the site), and from urban excavations in St John’s (Pope 1998). The quantities of these finds should not be exaggerated: the thirty or so South Somerset vessels recognised so far compare with thousands of sherds of North Devon pottery and should be considered in the context of many other classes of English earthenwares exported to North America. Since they were evidently not a commodity of regular trade, however, they may indicate specific links with Somerset, or with outlets in South Devon or the Bristol area. The writer has drawn attention elsewhere (Allan 1999, 283–4) to one of the ways in which such products will have arrived in America: some merchants in the south Devon ports such as Exeter and Dartmouth specialised in provisioning the American colonies, exporting from their home ports a range of domestic hardware including English pottery, alongside building materials, food and clothing.

Conclusion

The South West offers particular rewards to the student of post-medieval pottery. Whilst the sharp regional distinctions of the medieval ceramic world disappeared steadily in much of England in the early modern period, the potteries of the South-West largely retained their individuality into the industrial era. At their best, the south Somerset and north Devon industries practised an accomplished folk art as vigorous as any in England. Contrasting with the

drab world of Midlands Yellow wares or Northern Green wares, the potteries of south Somerset, north and south Devon, Cornwall and the Dorset heathlands produced wares, even in the 18th century, which can usually be distinguished from one another even from bodysherds. This allows one to study distribution and marketing patterns with much more definition than is feasible in most parts of England.

Of course, even if the fundamental problems of attribution and chronology were resolved, major questions would remain. We understand frustratingly little about the ways in which vessels were used, or their place in the early modern household. Studies of vernacular buildings in the region have emphasised the changes both in towns and in the countryside towards increasing privacy, a larger number of rooms with specific functions, and greater emphasis on comfort and display, which must underlie the changes we see in the ceramic record – for example towards a much wider range of vessel forms and a new emphasis on decorative wares. The introduction of new forms of furniture must have affected the pottery market. For example, the developing use of the dresser in the late 17th century must surely have provided a place in many households to show off fine Donyatt dishes alongside delftware and other fine pots, no doubt stimulating production. It is perhaps in the broad area of the role of ceramics in the household, with much more thought about the issues of social change, status and regional variation, that fresh research is most needed. In addressing these issues we need to have a broad approach, looking at architectural setting, documentary evidence such as probate inventories, and associated finds in each context – and not just at pots.

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