

Medieval English Pottery
from the Guildhall Museum, London



Medieval English Pottery
from the Guildhall Museum, London

An exhibition organized by the British Council
1962-63

This exhibition was selected from the collection of the Guildhall Museum of the City of London by Mr Norman Cook, Keeper of the Museum, Mr Bernard Leach, and Miss Muriel Rose, formerly of the British Council Fine Arts Department, for exhibition in Japan where it was shown in 1961. The British Council wishes to express its thanks to the Museum, which has now put the exhibition at its disposal for a tour of Europe.

Medieval pottery from London

by Norman Cook

Keeper, Guildhall Museum, London

The pottery industry throughout the Middle Ages in England was never more than a peasant industry. It is true that the great households were supplied with the products of those potters, but these were probably for the kitchen and the servants' quarters. On the nobleman's table, vessels of gold or silver were used, not earthenware.

As a consequence, these pottery vessels were not valued at all and none has come down to us preserved in collectors' cabinets or as family treasures from early times. Mostly they have been excavated from pits dug during the Middle Ages to contain household refuse. The commonest reason for throwing a pot away was, of course, that it was broken and that is the reason why most of the pottery in this collection has been restored. The fragments have been recovered, stuck together, and if necessary, the missing parts replaced with plaster.

In spite of this restoration, the beauty of form, colour and decoration still survives. The liveliness of medieval English pottery is mostly due to the speed at which the pots were made. Although of peasant character, pottery making was an industry, turning out large quantities of pots. For example, in the year 1260, the bailiffs of Kingston-on-Thames were ordered to supply 1000 pitchers to the King's butler at Westminster. There was not time for laborious second thoughts and these pots in consequence have a characteristic freedom and spontaneity – they seem to grow.

The clay body is usually coarse and sandy and the potters seem to have thrown to the extreme limits of their material. One of the most striking things about most of our medieval pots is their extreme lightness and thinness. When glaze is used, it is always a lead glaze containing impurities, especially iron, which explains the yellowish-brown colour of some of the otherwise clear glazes. Copper was added to give the green speckled appearance of perhaps the majority of medieval glazed pots. Slip was often used to decorate the pots – either brushed on, where a linear ornament was required, or the whole pot dipped in slip to give an extra brilliance to the over-glaze.

Plastic ornament on these pots is full of delightful invention. Pellets of clay added at the junction of

handle and neck were pulled out to form small 'ears' or horns. Other pellets were sometimes placed in rows around the body of the pot and then smeared down so that the vessel has the appearance of being covered with scales. Rouletted applied strips of clay, small rosettes and even conventional flowers were also added to the pot's surface.

The finest period of potting of the Middle Ages is undoubtedly the 13th century – with its tall jugs, coloured slips and glazes, and restrained plastic ornament. In the 14th century the pot shapes tend to copy metal forms not inherent in the potter's use of clay and the wheel. Pots became hard and broken in outline – knights on horseback and human masks being a favourite form of pot decoration, especially around Nottingham. In the 15th century the pots are plain or with just a little glaze, but with almost no attempt at decoration except the occasional use of dark slip brushed on to a light background, characteristic of the Cheam area, or the white slip on the dark background which was being made to the north of London.

Soon after the Norman conquest of England, there is evidence that some of the cooking pots were made within the City of London, for a few years ago a number of such pots were found at the back of Guildhall, in the heart of the City, which were certainly 'wasters', spoilt in the firing and unlikely to have travelled far from their place of manufacture.

During the 13th century, the London market was supplied from Surrey, where kilns and wasters have been found at Limpsfield, Cheam, and Ashted. The Cheam potteries continued in use throughout the 15th century, but by this time a new group of potteries was growing up to the north of London in Essex, at a place significantly called 'Potters Street'. The new products of the Essex kilns make their unmistakable appearance in City rubbish pits from 1480 onwards. They were certainly still supplying the London market in the mid 17th century, with mugs, plates, and dishes of slip ornamented wares and tygs.

Medieval pottery from London

by Bernard Leach

The fifty pots which have been sent out for this exhibition have never been bought or sold or fought over by collectors or dealers. They have been dug up in London by German bombs. More exactly, as the rubble has been gradually removed from the bomb holes, exposing the level of old London, British workmen have gathered the shards of medieval pots and they have been carried to the Guildhall Museum to Mr Norman Cook and his assistants for restoration. They belong to the City of London and may not be sold, and it is only through Mr Cook's kindness that permission to loan them has been granted.

Most of these pots are jugs to contain water, milk, beer or apple cider, and one curious feature of most of them is the rounded bottom with pinched down outer rim to allow the jugs to stand firmly on a flat surface. Why the potters did this, and how they did it, are two questions which have caused some controversy. I agree with Mr Cook after examining the clay strata of broken pieces of the bottoms that the jugs were thrown on the wheel in the normal way in one piece and that the flat, unturned bottoms were knocked out into a gentle curve from inside when they were leather-hard, but the question is why they wanted to do this extra work. I do not think it was primarily for the sake of the decorative effect of the pinched edge. That was not the attitude of the simple community craftsman of a healthy period for whom use and beauty were not yet separate. No, I feel that the rounded bottoms were less liable to crack and were a continuity of habit coming right down from paleolithic times and sand floors and that when benches and tables came into common use the habit persisted and its disadvantage on flat, hard surfaces was overcome in the simplest way by pinching down the edge of the foot in a pleasant, pastry-cook manner. More remarkable still are the pulled handles than which I know no better in the whole field of potting, so vigorous, so clay-like, so kind. Round, or flat, or hollow backed, in section; rammed home and stroked and pulled and notched into just positions on the contours of the pitchers by the homely hands of English artisans.

This pottery was an ordinary lead-glazed earthenware fired at about 900° to 1000°C in an oxidized atmosphere. The glazed surfaces were the result of

dry powdered galena (lead ore) being dusted over the soft pots. Copper filings were added when green was desired. Later, on, the glazes were made of about two thirds galena and one third raw clay. The kilns were round and up-draught, very similar in construction to those used in Japan for biscuit firing.

Besides jugs, cooking pots, beakers and watering pots, only a few other things were made. This seemed strange to me until I found out that it was not until about the 18th century that all the familiar variety of household and table wares of today gradually became available to ordinary people through the development of industry. Before that people ate off wood and drank from leather, leaving pewter, silver and gold to the upper classes.

I am no historian and do not dare to say much about the origins of these English medieval pots. Broadly, the shapes employed must have been a combination of primitive coiled and open-fired traditions with Roman and Continental advances in technique. The second half of the 13th century, however, seems to have been one of those flowering periods when a release of creative energy took place and something more than a mixture of cultures was achieved. When, as during the Tang dynasty in China, the deep religious purposes of life inspired the common activities of the whole community and the total became somehow greater than the sum of the parts, for 'when men and mountains meet, great things are done'.

As far as I know, only one book, *Medieval English Pottery*, by Bernard Rackham, has been published about these simple, rough, village-made English pitchers of the 13th century, and almost before perception of their true worth had begun in their land of origin they were appreciated in Japan. When these pots were exhibited in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kurashiki a year ago the reaction which I heard with my own ears was 'these are the finest pots which we have seen from Europe'. Hitherto, they have been taken for granted as ungainly peasant-wares, not worthy of any high repute. But with retreat from the limiting outlook of the Italian Renaissance and the general broadening of artistic values to include the primitive and the Oriental, and expansion of perception of values in art towards world scale, quite revolutionary reassessments have taken, and are taking place, and

this is one of them. Almost suddenly it becomes apparent that these pots are the equivalent of our early Gothic architecture, stained-glass windows, of Gregorian music, of Chaucer's poetry and of English oak and iron and leather, and of stone carving, and that the sturdy, warm, and dependable spirit of old England lives in them, too. Worship is in them as well as a sense of humour and playfulness. The little 'wights' who made them lived in the precincts of monasteries and in awe of the tall stone churches and cathedrals, poor and downtrodden, no doubt, but full of earthy and, at the same time, reverential life. Tied down by dogma and dirt, and poverty they were, nevertheless, in certain ways freer, more imaginative, and more whole than we are. We have no outlet for our inner imaginative life, nor do we know how to employ our numbers, our wealth, and our materialistic knowledge to any great spiritual end. Most of the things which they made, such as these pots, were ends in themselves and contained spirit. This is what my friends in Japan have felt and what, as an English potter, I hope others will feel. The language of clay is international in the best sense; when potters of different lands meet, as we did at Dartington Hall in 1950, they can become friends without words. How excellent that spirit is in this time of wrath and suspicion and cold war.

The exhibits have all been dug up within the City of London, an area of one square mile formerly bounded by the medieval city walls.

1

Jug with round sectioned handle. Reddish clay with cream slip, greenish glaze. The slip has been brushed off in vertical lines, giving darker combed effect where the glaze covers the clay only. 13th century.
Height 37.5 cm, diameter 15.25 cm, base 11 cm
Guildhall ref. no. ER.524

2

Double Baluster jug, round sectioned handle, Buff clay, cream slip and greenish glaze. A characteristic London form. 13th century.
Height 41.25 cm, diam. 14.5 cm, base 11 cm
Guildhall ref. no. ER.524

3

Double Baluster jug, round sectioned handle. Reddish buff clay, sparsely covered with cream slip and greenish glaze. There is a vertical strip of yellow glaze running straight down the front of the jug. 13th century.
Height 43.25 cm, diam. 16 cm, base 12.5 cm
Guildhall ref. no. 5579

4

Jug, with lip, thumb-pressed base and flat ribbon handle. Light-red clay, cream slip with greenish glaze. 13th century.
Height 35.5 cm, diam. 17.5 cm, base 17.5 cm
Guildhall ref. no. 18902

5

Jug, with ribbed handle, lip, and sagging base. Red clay with dark-green glaze. Ornamented with vertical applied strips of clay, which have been decorated by impressing with a roughly circular sectioned tool. 13th century.
Height 31 cm, diam. 15 cm, base 12.75 cm
See BERNARD RACKHAM, *Medieval English Pottery*, Faber 1947, p.22, plate 73.
Guildhall ref. no. 5597











6

Jug, with applied spout. Buff clay with traces of yellow slip, green glaze, and thumb impressed base. The handle is ribbed and at its junction with the rim there are two applied 'ears' of clay. The body of the pot is ornamented with applied clay strip in form of chevrons, pellets of clay smoothed down to form a scale-like pattern and small circular rosettes. 13th century.

Height 35 cm, diam. 17.5 cm, base 12 cm
Guildhall ref. no. M.IX.95

7

Jug, with lip, thumb-impressed base round sectioned handle. Light-red clay, cream slip, clear glaze with added lines and spots of green glaze. 13th century.

Height 34.25 cm, diam. 18.5 cm, base 15 cm
Guildhall ref. no. 5674

8

Straight-sided jug with lip. Thumb-impressed base. Light-red clay, cream slip, greenish glaze. The body is divided horizontally by five cordons. The handle is flat and ribbon-like. 13th century.

Height 29 cm, diam. 16 cm, base 16 cm
Guildhall ref. no. 5658

9

Jug with round sectioned handle, marked lip and slightly thumb-impressed base. Buff clay, cream slip green glaze. 13th century.

Height 30 cm, diam. 14.5 cm, base 11.25 cm
Guildhall ref. no. E.R.524

10

Jug, with round sectioned handle having vertical scoring. Red clay, traces of cream slip, dark-green glaze. The neck has two shallow cordons and the body is ornamented with a number of shallow applied strips arranged in a series of triangles within which there are scored or combed lenticular-shaped patterns. 13th century.

Height 30 cm, diam. 15.25 cm, base 10.25 cm

11

Jug, red clay, cream slip, greenish glaze. Rib below rim, round sectioned handle. 13th century.

Height 29.5 cm, diam. 12.5 cm, base 10.75 cm
Guildhall ref. no. E.R.111

12

Jug with biconical body, long neck, and round handle with clearly marked thumb indentations at base and on each side at the top. Green glaze on shoulder. Characteristic of wares made at Cheam, Surrey, in the 15th century.

Height 18.5 cm, diam. 10 cm, base 7.5 cm
Guildhall ref. no. 263

13

Jug with flat ribbon handle with incised groove down its centre and stabbed holes at its junction with the neck. There are five incised girth grooves on the upper half of the body. Thumb-impressed base. Buff ware with speckled green glaze. Late 13th century.

Height 29 cm, diam. 26 cm, base 16.5 cm

14

Jug, with lip and flat ribbon handle. Dark red clay with vertical brush strokes of cream slip, greenish glaze. Late 13th century.

Height 22.5 cm, diam. 22.5 cm, base 17 cm
Guildhall ref. no. v.5

15

Jug with lip and flat handle, having stabbed holes down its centre and marked thumb impressions at junction with neck. Body with horizontal ribs and grooves. Dark-buff clay, with speckled green glaze. Three thumb-pressed feet on base to give stability. 13th century.

Height 20 cm, diam. 16.5 cm, base 10.25 cm

16

Jug, with flat ribbon handle, lip, and four groups of thumb impressions on base. Red clay, cream slip with greenish glaze. A series of groups of vertical combed lines on the body. 13th century.

Height 24.25 cm, diam. 21 cm, base 15 cm
Guildhall ref. no. 5600

17

Jug, with slashed handle, lip, and sagging base. Grey ware, unglazed. There is a raised band at junction of neck and body, below which, on the upper part of the pot, there are six horizontal-scored, wavy lines. 13th century.

Height 26.25 cm, diam. 24.5 cm, base 17.25 cm

18

Jug, with no lip and a round, sectioned handle at the top of which are two 'ears' of clay at its junction with the neck. Red clay with thin green glaze. The body is ornamented with a series of applied clay ribs and the neck is grooved. Mid 13th century.
Height 30.5 cm, diam. 14.5 cm, base 10.25 cm
Guildhall ref. no.17728

19

Jug with flat handle, scored and pricked. Grey clay with greenish glaze. 13th century.
Height 27 cm, base 14 cm
Guildhall ref. no.5631

20

Jug, four thumb impressions on a slightly sagging base. Red clay with raised ornament of two bands of fleur-de-lis between shallow cordons. Speckled green glaze.
Early 14th century.
Height 27.5 cm, diam. 21 cm, base 14 cm
See BERNARD RACKHAM, *Medieval English Pottery*, Faber 1947, p.22, plate 66.
Guildhall ref. no.5694

21

Jug with flat, pricked handle, sagging base with small thumb impressions to give stability. On the upper half of the body, three rows of raised ornaments, perhaps conventional leaves, between horizontal groups of incised lines. Red clay, green glaze. Early 14th century.
Height 23 cm, diam. 21.25 cm, base 13.25 cm
Guildhall ref. no.10325

21a

Jug, with lip and a round sectioned handle with heavy thumb impressions at base and on each side at its junction with the neck. Body ornamented with scale pattern, produced by smearing down rows of clay pellets. Buff clay, yellow slip, dark-green glaze. Late 13th/14th century.
Height 25 cm, diam. 20 cm, base 13.5 cm
Guildhall ref. no.1935.28-13,599

22

Jug, flat pricked handle, five thumb impressions on base. Grooved neck and groups of incised horizontal grooves on body. Light-buff clay, light-green glaze. 13th century.
Height 23.5 cm, diam. 18.75 cm, base 13.5 cm
Guildhall ref. no.20238

23

Jug with round sectioned handle. Body decorated with applied strips of white clay in form of chevrons, which are filled with pellets of white clay. Horizontal bands of applied slip around the neck. Glaze: pale green, except where the pellets are; here the glaze is dark brown.
Early 14th century.
Height 28 cm, diam. 16.5 cm, base 10.25 cm

24

Jug with lip and sagging base. Grooved neck, flat handle, red clay. Upper half of pot with green glaze. 13th century.
Height 22.5 cm, diam. 16.5 cm, base 14.5 cm
Guildhall ref. no.5601

25

Jug, with flat, grooved handle. Red clay, with applied horizontal bands of white slip alternating with interrupted bands of slip. Spare pale-green glaze. 13th century.
Height 21 cm, diam. 18.5 cm, base 13 cm
Guildhall ref. no.1940.1-15,301

26

Jug, round sectioned handle with marked thumb impressions on each side at junction with neck. Group of incised lines just above the greatest diameter. Buff ware, green speckled glaze. Late 13th century.
Height 22.5 cm, diam. 15 cm, base 10 cm
Guildhall ref. no.5696

27

Jug, with pinched lip; thumb-indented base, and flat handle with a central, vertical, incised line and stabbing on each side. Buff ware with three vertical, indented ribs from neck down to the bulge. In the two panels between these ribs small, circular applied, stamped rosettes. Green glaze on the body but applied ribs and rosettes brown-glazed. 14th century.
Height 25 cm, diam. 14.25 cm, base 10.75 cm
See BERNARD RACKHAM, *Medieval English Pottery*, Faber 1947, p.22, plate 72
Guildhall ref. no. M.A.2637-10632

28

Jug with biconical body and cylindrical neck. Round handle with pricked holes. Buff clay with cream slip and green glaze. Probably made at Cheam, Surrey. 15th century.
Height 22.25 cm, diam. 14.5 cm, base 9 cm
Guildhall ref. no.5648

29

Squat jug with lip and round, sectioned handle with pricked holes. At the top of the handle are two 'ears' of clay. Thumb-impressed, sagging base and upper part of body ornamented with a series of parallel, horizontal grooves. Buff clay, green glaze. 13th century.
Height 24.5 cm, diam. 24 cm, base 18 cm
Guildhall ref. no.1925.56-11388

30

Small Baluster jug with round, sectioned handle. Buff clay with sparse green glaze at about the bulge of the pot. Late 13th century.
Height 28.5 cm, diam. 11 cm, base 9.25 cm
Guildhall ref. no.5589

31

Jug with round sectioned, pricked handle, sagging base made stable by five small thumb-impressed feet. The body of the pot is covered with scale ornament made by applied pellets of clay, smeared down by the thumb. Buff clay, dark-green glaze. Late 13th century.
Height 14.25 cm, diam. 15.5 cm, base 10.25 cm
Guildhall ref. no.5623

32

Small jug or measure of unglazed red clay. Round sectioned handle, sub-conical body. 13th century.
Height 15 cm, base 5.5 cm
Guildhall ref. no.5588

33

Jug with cylindrical neck and biconical body, small, round sectioned handle. Buff clay with green glaze on upper part of body. Typical of pottery made at Cheam in the 15th century.
Height 17.5 cm, diam. 9 cm, base 5.5 cm
Guildhall ref. no.18736

34

Jug with flat handle, four thumb impressions on base. Buff clay with groups of brush strokes of white slip, perhaps representing foliage. Band of white slip round the neck. Small area of green glaze on one group of slip ornament. Late 15th century.
Height 22.5 cm, diam. 16 cm, base 12.25 cm
Guildhall ref. no.5723

35

Jug, with lip, flat base, body slightly indented. Flattish handle. Dark clay, ornamented with brush strokes of white slip. One band of slip round the neck and groups of brush strokes on the body, resembling foliage. This type of decoration, as in the preceding jug no.34 is typical of pots produced at Potters Street, near Harlow, Essex at the very end of the 15th century.
Height 21.5 cm, diam. 14.25 cm, base 9.75 cm
Guildhall ref. no.5734

36

Jug, with lip and sagging base. Round sectioned handle. Red clay with a 'beard' of slip on the front of the jug, made by holding it by the handle and pushing the front of the pot into a bowl of white slip. Yellowish glaze over slip and inside the mouth of the jug.
Early 16th century.
Height 22.5 cm, diam. 19 cm, base 13.25 cm
Guildhall ref. no.17809

37

Jug with lip and rounded handle, at the base of which are three thumb impressions forming a trefoil. Three lugs have been pulled down from the bottom of the pot to form small feet to stabilize the sagging base. The upper part of the jug is decorated with incised parallel grooves, in between which are incised zig-zag lines running horizontally round the pot. Early 16th century.
Height 38 cm, diam. 24 cm, base 15 cm
Guildhall ref. no.M.A.2642-10637

38

Watering pot, round sectioned handle, at the base of which are three thumb impressions making a trefoil. The base is perforated with many holes. It is filled by immersion in water and subsequent flow is controlled by opening or closing the hole at the top of the pot, by the use of the thumb. Dark-red clay, green glaze. Early 16th century.
Height 34.75 cm, diam. 21 cm, base 15.5 cm
Guildhall ref. no.6137-M.IX.570

39

Pipkin, with tripod base and tubular handle. Body strongly ribbed, of white clay, glazed internally with pale-yellow glaze. 16th/17th century.
Height 11.75 cm, diam. 11 cm, base 7.5 cm

40

Pipkin with tripod base and tubular handle. Strongly ribbed body of white clay glazed internally with green glaze. 16th/17th century.

Height 10 cm, diam. 10.5 cm, base 7 cm

Guildhall ref. no.5826

41

Porringer, carinated, with horizontal handle. White clay with pale-greenish or yellow glaze internally and externally on the upper part of the body only. 16th/17th century.

Height 8 cm, diam. 11 cm, base 6.5 cm

Guildhall ref. no.21214

42

Two-handled tyg, light-red clay with black glaze.

Probably made near Harlow in Essex. Mid 17th century.

Height 23 cm, base 9.6 cm

Guildhall ref. no.M.A.2279-10263

43

Cooking pot with sagging base. Grey clay, unglazed with rough surface. Pots of this description were in use for cooking purposes in this country from the 11th to 13th century. Late 12th century.

Height 21 cm, diam. 27 cm, base 24 cm

Guildhall ref. no.R.IX.223

44

Cooking pot, with sagging base. Grey clay unglazed with rough surface. These sagging bases seem to have been pushed out from the inside while the pot was leather hard. The purpose is not clear. Presumably it was functional and had something to do with putting the pot on the fire for cooking. 12th century.

Height 15.25 cm, diam. 20.5 cm, base 17.5 cm

Guildhall ref. no.1932.48-12780

45

Neck and handle of a large, unglazed jug of grey clay.

The use of thumb and finger impressions on the handle gives a fine ornament to the pot. 13th century.

46

Handle of an unglazed jug of grey clay showing the use of thumb prints and knife slashings to give a decorative effect. The knife slashing is also useful in that it decreases the risk of damage to the handle during firing. 13th century.

Guildhall ref. no.1942.55

47

Two jug spouts in the form of ram's heads.

Late 13th century.

Guildhall ref. no.M.IX.27 and M.IX.26

48

Three pottery masks from 13th/14th century jugs. This form of plastic decoration was particularly popular in the Nottingham area, where most elaborate anthropomorphic jugs were made.

Guildhall ref. no.1930.172; 1937.134 and M.IX.178

