

## An English earthenware bottle – 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century



In the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD, soon after the Norman conquest, the half-brother of William the Conqueror, Robert, Count of Mortain, built a castle on a hill in Somerset, Castle Neroche. This was close to a strategically important location at the crossing of two trackways through the largest area of woodland between Salisbury and Lands End. Archaeologists have found evidence of pottery manufacture there late in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The pottery was in the French style, probably made to meet the needs of the castle's Norman residents, possibly by potters who had come from Normandy.

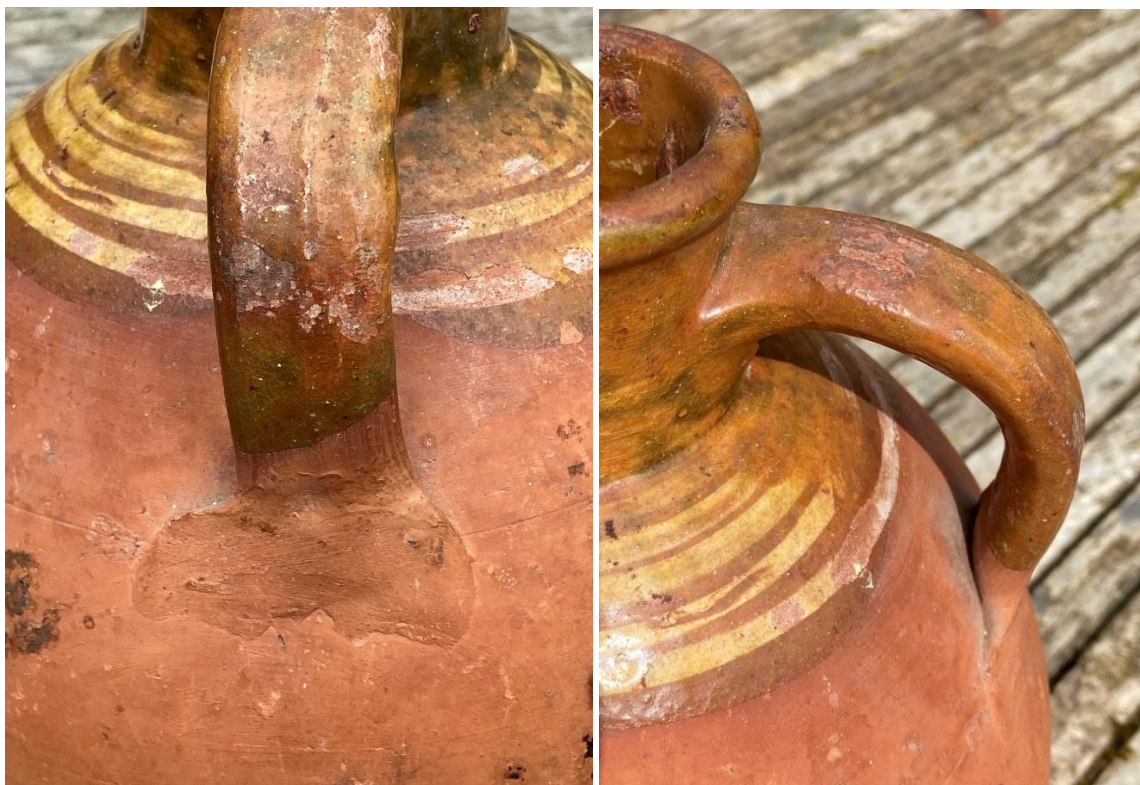
The 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries were a period of population growth, with new settlements developing and woodland being cleared. Maybe the early 12<sup>th</sup> century was also a relatively peaceful period in Somerset, because by that time century Castle Neroche was no longer regularly occupied. Now that pottery was no longer made at the castle, pottery started to be made near the village of Donyatt five miles to the east. Pottery continued to be made at Donyatt for the next 800 years, only ceasing in 1939, making it one of the English potteries with the longest continuous period of operation.

We know a lot about the forms and decorative styles of Donyatt pottery over this 800 year period, because there has been a great deal of archaeological excavation. Between 1968 and 1992 thirteen separate locations at Donyatt were investigated, including the remains of four kilns covering a wide range of dates. It has been estimated that over this period fifty five tons of Donyatt pottery pieces were excavated, washed, recorded and sorted. Over most of the 800 years of operation there was a

remarkable consistency in the styles and techniques used by the Donyatt potters. Some of the forms changed to reflect the fashions of the time and new sources of competition. For example, when German stoneware drinking jugs started to arrive in England in the 14<sup>th</sup> century the Donyatt potters started producing earthenware jugs with very similar shapes. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they stopped making cooking pots as people increasingly used iron pots for cooking. The key Donyatt decorative techniques continued to be used, in particular brushing or trailing a light-coloured slip over the red clay, sometimes making marks in the wet slip ('wet sgraffito'), and covering the decoration in a clear amber-coloured lead glaze.

Because of the consistency of techniques and styles over centuries it can be difficult to date a particular pot with any precision. The bottle (24 cm tall) shown in the picture at the top of this note was probably made at Donyatt some time in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The narrow brushed lines of white slip on the shoulder and the neck are characteristic of Donyatt pottery, and these have been coloured yellow by the amber glaze which covers the whole of the inside (to seal the pot), but only extends on the outside down to the bottom of the decoration. It would have been usual not to glaze the whole of the exterior of such utilitarian pottery, to save the cost of the lead in the glaze, which was sourced from a mine in the Mendip Hills, over 30 miles away, from a place still known as Green Ore.

This piece can be identified as a bottle, rather than a jug, because the narrow mouth, without any lip, indicates that it was designed to be sealed with a stopper. It has a very full shape and I can't help feeling that the potter applied his lips to the mouth after throwing it and blew to inflate it a bit more. I find making nice handles a bit tricky so I'm always keen to see how other potters do it, and I find the fish-tail join at the base of the handle on this pot very attractive (see photo below). Made so quickly and with little care, but full of life. The handle was applied after the white bands of slip were painted, so it would not obstruct the painting on a spinning pot. Although there appears to be a gap in the upper bands on the shoulder underneath the handle, it seems that this is because some red clay slip was smeared over the bands when the upper end of the handle was joined to the neck of the pot (see photo below).



The peak of success of the Donyatt potteries was probably in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. One study has concluded that in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century/early 17<sup>th</sup> century around 95% of the pottery supplied to Taunton came from Donyatt. By late in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Donyatt pots were to be found in Bristol, Plymouth, Southampton and even London. In fact the remains of a Donyatt pot have been found in Newcastle, but this is more likely to have been taken there by its owner, rather than transported all that way for sale. Through the ports of Plymouth and Southampton (and also Exeter and Lyme Regis) Donyatt pots were exported to Ireland and America. After the archaeological studies had improved understanding of the Donyatt styles, 17<sup>th</sup> century pots in American collections previously believed to be made in America have now been identified as coming from Donyatt. In the Chesapeake region alone thirty three pots from Donyatt have been found from seventeen sites.

At that time, judging from probate inventories and the amounts they paid in rent, the potters at Donyatt, while by no means wealthy, appear to have been relatively well off. The probate inventories indicate that they owned livestock and hay, suggesting that they were also farmers. Having more than one source of income and subsistence must have reduced risks from unforeseen events. An interesting insight into this, from a rather later date (the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), can be gained by reading the book by George Bourne – ‘William Smith, potter and farmer’. Although they may have been respected members of the community, as with potters worldwide the smoke and dust of their workshops were not welcome within the boundaries of the village. At Donyatt the potteries were sited about 1 km west of the village itself.

The excavations at Donyatt have confirmed that until late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the fuel for the kilns was wood. There has been some debate about where this wood came from. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, most of the woodland around Donyatt had been cleared for settlement and cultivation. The woodland that remained was generally carefully managed by pollarding, which allowed crops of wood for poles to be harvested without them being damaged by grazing animals. It seems unlikely that the potters would have been allowed to use this carefully harvested wood for burning in their kilns. However, one expert has calculated that the hedgerows in the immediate area could provide sufficient trimmings to feed the Donyatt kilns, together with the products of clearance of unwanted undergrowth from the woods. This resonates with me as for the last eight years the main fuel for my kiln has been undergrowth cleared from local woodland and heathland.

After the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was a long slow decline in business for country potteries in England, due to a deadly combination of factors. The 17<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of large-scale manufacture in Staffordshire and Derbyshire, especially at Burslem and Ticknall, and by 1700 most of the potteries in surrounding counties had closed. Potteries in the west country survived longer, partly because they were more distant and also because of their good access to the export market via Bristol. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century and into the 19<sup>th</sup> century mass production techniques and railway transport made it more difficult for country potteries to compete. Also there was a prestige value attached to whiteware and, with increasing income levels, the money to pay for it. With their red clays this was not something most country potteries could make. New materials such as glass and enamelled steel were taking the market for some items and the demand for others was hit by lifestyle changes such as plumbed water supplies and the decline in home baking, cheese-making and brewing. My bottle may well have been used for holding home-brewed beer. In 1800 half of the beer brewed in England was made at home – by 1870 only one fortieth was home-brewed.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century these changes had driven the potters at Donyatt into poverty, which was not helped by their innate conservatism. For example, they were still using the same twin-flue wood-fired kiln design they had been using for centuries, whereas potters elsewhere were adopting newer designs of more reliable and efficient multi-flue kilns. The number of families making pottery

declined as sons no longer followed their fathers into the business. In fact the only reason that pottery at Donyatt survived into the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the arrival of a potter from Stoke on Trent, William Arlidge, late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who brought with him modern methods. He built a larger more efficient coal-fired multi-flue kiln and imported improved glazes from the Staffordshire Potteries. Pottery at Donyatt continued until the loss of men to the war effort in 1939 proved the last straw, as it did for many country potteries.

At the same time as country potteries were in steep decline, at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were inspiring a new generation of studio potters. Leach and Cardew both admired the products and the 'honest toil' ethos of country potteries. Cardew as a child regularly visited Fremington pottery in Devon and watched pots being made. By 1922 Fremington had closed and Cardew spoke of his longing to revive it. A few years later he considered working alongside the potters at Verwood pottery in Dorset. Eventually, when he started his own pottery, he took over a defunct country pottery at Greet in Gloucestershire and renamed it Winchcombe pottery. However, the economics that killed off the country potteries could not be defied, and Cardew struggled to make money, despite the increasing public interest in hand-made studio pottery.

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May 2023