

An English jug – probably 16th century



In most places naturally occurring clays are a red-brown colour, due to the presence of iron, and since prehistoric times potters in England have used these clays to produce practical earthenware pottery. Then, in the 11th century, Londoners started encountering a lighter coloured pottery – typically buff or grey coloured and often with an attractive green glaze. Some of this new pottery was made in Stamford in Lincolnshire and some was imported from the Low Countries. In the 12th century high quality light-coloured pottery was imported from northern France, particularly Rouen. Archaeologists call these light-coloured potteries ‘whiteware’, though they can only really be described as white in comparison with the normal darker coloured pottery, which is either reddish-brown (often called ‘redware’) or, if it is fired in a reducing atmosphere, dark grey (‘greyware’). Whitewares are made from relatively rare naturally occurring clays which have a lower iron content.

This new ‘white’ pottery became very desirable in London, probably partly due to its scarcity and its association with high quality wares. No doubt it was expensive and, to start with, only used by the wealthy, and therefore desired by the aspirational middle classes. The lighter clay body also allowed brighter and clearer coloured decoration and glazes. London potters urgently sought a local light-coloured clay which would allow them to compete. They found this clay south of the capital, in Surrey and on the Surrey-Hampshire border.

About 55 million years ago the region that is now South-East England was a coastal flood plain where clay, sand and shingle were being deposited by rivers flowing into the sea. Plants were growing and soil was starting to form. In some places the chemical changes which occur during soil formation allowed iron to be washed down and out of areas of clay, leaving them lighter in colour. Over geological time these deposits were buried and then re-exposed by the weathering away of the more recent deposits above them. These deposits are known as the Reading formation (or Reading

beds) and their light coloured clays can be found in a band of country running roughly north-east from Farnham to the area around Epsom. The light coloured clay is usually found in small deposits, often overlying a red clay which presumably received the iron washed down from the clay above it.

In the 13th century potters from London set up workshops on the south bank of the Thames, using this light-coloured clay, initially dug from clay pits near Farnham (from a place still known today as Claypit Wood). In doing this, they became the first potteries in England known to have relied on clay that was not from their immediate vicinity. The pottery, often highly decorated, was designed for the London market and the tables of the wealthy. It was quickly successful and by 1260 they were supplying the royal court. For a century these south bank potteries supplied the luxury market with beautiful and elaborately-decorated jugs and other pots. Then, in 1348, the Black Death came, killing half the population. The resulting poverty and labour shortage meant there was no longer much of a market for luxury goods. There was still a demand in London for whiteware, but it was for simple practical utilitarian pots. This demand was met by potters working in Surrey and on the Surrey-Hampshire border, closer to the deposits of light-coloured clay.

After the Black Death, pottery supplies to London came to be dominated by a group of very effective pottery workshops working on the Surrey-Hampshire border in the Blackwater Valley, near the towns of Farnborough, Farnham and Aldershot. In the 15th century this industry, which was by then the primary source of pottery in South East England, was producing huge quantities of jugs and pots mainly designed for cooking and storage. Near the end of the 15th century, probably in response to competition from other Surrey potteries which were producing basic white pottery for the kitchen, the Surrey-Hampshire border potteries started making fine whiteware pottery for use at the table, with an expanded range of products. This shift, combined with clever marketing, allowed the Surrey-Hampshire border potteries to dominate the market in London in the 16th and 17th centuries, only ceasing the production of whiteware early in the 18th century.

The small jug in the photo at the head of this note, 16 cm tall, was probably made by one of these pottery workshops in the 16th century. You may ask how this rather dark pot could be described as 'whiteware' or even light-coloured. On the unglazed part of the pot the surface appears to have been coated with a thin wash of darker material (see photo below) – in places it can be seen to have run when applied, and where the pot appears to have been handled in the final stages of making patches of lighter underlying clay can be seen. In excavations of kilns at Farnborough Hill it was reported that a lot of sherds found had been 'overfired or reduced' resulting in dark grey surfaces, but I believe that a pot from that time with a dark coating like this is unusual.



The inside of my jug is lined with a mottled green glaze, but on the outside only the neck, and part of the handle and shoulder, are glazed. This is a common feature on medieval and Tudor pottery, probably a way of achieving a decorative effect while minimising the use of expensive glaze material on the outside of the pot, where it has no practical function. The glaze is lead-based, almost certainly made using crushed galena (lead sulphide) suspended in water and mixed with a binder such as flour to help it to stick to the pot and achieve a more even application. The green colour comes from the addition of copper to the glaze and the speckling is probably caused either by inadequate sieving of the glaze material or by the use of copper filings.

There are also three patches of glaze at the bottom of the pot, one slightly larger than the others (see photo on left below), and when I put my thumb and two fingers over these marks I can use this grip to hold the pot upside down, suggesting that the inverted jug was dipped in glaze using a hand which was wet with the same glaze.



In one or two areas of the glaze, especially on the upper surface of the handle, there are rough lumps projecting from the surface. The pattern of these bits on the handle of my jug (see photo on right above) makes me suspect that before glazing the jug had been held by someone with dirty hands, transferring bits of clay to the handle in the shape of a thumbprint.



On my pot there are several chips in the glaze with a small white spot in the centre of the chipped area. This is a sign that particles of limestone or fragments of shell have found their way into the clay before the jug was made. During the firing these will have turned into lime (calcium oxide) and after firing, as the clay picks up dampness from the atmosphere or when the pot is cleaned, this lime particle swells and builds up pressure in the clay surrounding it, eventually blowing a piece of clay off the surface. This can happen some time after the pot is made, possibly resulting in a very irritated customer.

On the underside of my jug it is just possible to discern fan-shaped markings caused by a wire or cord as the potter cut the it off the wheel after throwing.



One slightly unusual feature on my jug is the very pronounced rim. I haven't found another example with a rim exactly like this anywhere in the literature. It was this odd rim which prompted me, rather cheekily, to send a photo of my jug to one of the foremost experts on medieval pottery in the UK. She kindly replied to me to say that "it looks to me as if Surrey-Hampshire border whiteware is the most likely source, and probably in the 16th century. There are rims with a slight collar in border wares, and this could just be an individual potter's way of finishing the rim, perhaps not something they did regularly". There were probably dozens of pottery workshops working in the Blackwater valley at that time and it would be surprising if there wasn't some slight variation in style and technique, so I'm not too concerned about idiosyncrasies such as the slightly odd rim shape or the dark wash covering the unglazed portion of the jug.

Finally, some of you may know that I like to imagine who might have used my old pots. Thinking about London, the main market for this type of pottery, and the 16th century, I immediately thought of Shakespeare. The small size of the jug and the absence of any lip suggests that it was intended to be drunk from, and it is fun to imagine Shakespeare drinking beer from it as he wrote Romeo and Juliet.

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June 2022