

POTTERY-MAKING ON THE NORTH NORTHUMBERLAND COAST

by R Carlton

Clay and sand found at Spittal, Cocklawburn and elsewhere on the north Northumberland coast have played an essential role in the development of several local industries, notably in the production of brick and tiles, which may well have been made in estate kilns established for farm building programmes in the 18th and 19th century, as well as in longer-lived commercial enterprises at Scremerston. In addition to bricks and tiles, pottery of various kinds was also made in and around the Peregrini landscape area, notably by Carr & Company who ran the brickworks at Scremerston in the 1850s and also had a warehouse in Berwick selling bricks, roofing tiles and field drains as well as some sanitary ware and plant pots (see *Picture*). There was also a shortlived attempt to make glazed white-wares at Scremerston in the early 20th century, presumably using ball clays brought north by train, but this proved unsuccessful and was soon abandoned. Other brick, tile, and earthenware pottery manufactories operated on a small-scale at several locations in and around Tweedmouth during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Production locations are known on parts of the riverside, in Pudding Lane and below Mill Farm, where bricks and earthenware were made until the early nineteenth century (Cowe 1998, 53-4). An 'old tileyard' is shown at Sunnyside adjacent to a (clay?) quarry known as the King's Quarry which was already partly occupied by the Tweedmouth Cemetery in the 1860s and by the 1920s is described as 'disused'; an associated property known as brickfield lodge stood until the middle part of the last century on the north side of Cemetery Lane. This brick & tileworks stood close to the Berwick town coal mine at Sunnyside, on the northern edge of a coalfield spreading from the coast north of Scremerston westwards to Ord and beyond. Also dependent on this fuel source was Tennant's Clay Pipe Factory which operated until at least the late 19th century in premises behind Main Street, north of Kiln Hill, using imported materials to supply a predominantly local market (though stamped examples commonly occur throughout Northumberland, perhaps spread by railway traffic).

Various amateur and art-potters have also left their mark on the area, notably on Lindisfarne in the late 1950s when an enterprising school-teacher taught schoolchildren to work with clay from the cliffs west of the school; those involved included Dick Patterson and Ralph Wilson, in whose posession one of the pots from this era survives.



Clay in the cliff-side at Cocklawburn near Scremerston and a stamped plant-pot handle from Scremerston tile-works (right).

Prior to the manufacture of pottery in the context of modern, industrial concerns, pottery-making in the coastal area between Tweedmouth and Bamburgh has a much longer history, probably beginning around 4000 BC in the early Neolithic period, exemplified by carinated and impressed-ware pottery found during extensive excavations in the Millfield Basin just inland. Some of the earliest pottery yet found on the north Northumberland coast, discovered as a scatter of pottery shards on Ross Links in the 1920s, is now interpreted as All-Over Corded (AOC) beaker pottery of later Neolithic or very early Bronze Age origin. Beaker pottery of this early period in Northern Britain is often associated with the immigration of people or ideas from continental Europe, most likely from the coastal area between current north-west Germany and north-east France. It is likely that, whatever the origins of its makers, the Ross Links pottery was produced close to its find spot using local raw materials, however. Sherds of very similar pottery dating to around 2,400 BC have been found in many burial contexts, such as at Kirkhaugh near Alston and at Amesbury near Stonehenge, but it was in a domestic context that the most recent find of this material was made in Northumberland, at North Seaton, near Ashington in the Summer of 2017 (see *Picture*). Also well-attested on Ross Links are finds of later bronze age pottery from a fire-blackened layer within sand dunes, including over 50 cinerary-urn sherds probably originally from barrow or cist burials of the sort unearthed during ploughing near Embleton, a little south of the current project area, in September 2017 (see *picture below*).



Rim shards of late Neolithic All-Over-Corded ware found at North Seaton, Northumberland in 2017 (left); a bronze age beaker from a cist burial found near Embleton, also in 2017 and (right) Iron Age pottery from Mardon Enclosure (5cm scale)

Iron age pottery is poorly attested in the area, partly because so few sites of this period have been investigated (the largest and best preserved, Spindleshire fort, remains completely unexcavated, for example), but partly also because the iron age pottery in north Northumberland is of poor quality and survives badly in cases where it was made at all. Recent finds of such pottery from Flodden Hill in 2012 and Mardon Farm, near Branxton in 2017-18 show it to be mainly undecorated and made of coarse, silty clays liberally and variably tempered with sands and gravels of local origin.

Experimental Peregrini Pottery-Making

Local Cocklawburn clay was sourced and used in work led by the author for the Peregrini project in order to demonstrate how local resources were used to make pottery from prehistoric to modern times. Two kinds of clay were collected from the cliffs and different kinds of sand - from shell, silica, coal and whin - from different parts of the beach. The clay was prepared by drying, crushing and rehydrating, then mixed with sand to produce a smolte paste, allowing pots to be made in different ways, with and without hand-wheels based on medieval designs. The pots were then successfully fired at Holy Island harbour during the hot weekend of the Peregrini festival in June 2017, using wood also collected from the beach and other local sources.



Although it is often suggested that the early medieval of Northumberland was aceramic, with no pottery produced at all for several hundred years, recent evidence suggests is likely that iron age traditions continued into this period up to, or even after, the re-introduction of wheel technology. Cooking pots in this tradition are made in a similarly coarse fabric to pots of the iron age and fired at low temperatures, probably in open fires.



6th century Merovingian pots (<https://www.ancient.eu/image/5789/>) and (above right) similar stamped motifs on an early medieval vessel at North Seaton (AP Ltd. 2017)

The re-introduction of wheel technology to northern Britain seems to have occurred in the 9th or 10th century when wheel-made wares begin to be made at York and further north, represented by 'Whitby ware', for example. Wheel technology, probably initially using upwardly-pivoted hand-wheels rather than higher kick-wheels, may have been introduced to the colonising Danes and Swedes through contact with Baltic Slavs, or via Frankish influence to the south, where Roman pottery-making techniques survived into the medieval period amongst the Merovingians, for example. Both the Baltic Slavs and Merovingians typically use incised wavy-line decoration to decorate wheel-made pottery; similar decoration is found on gritty medieval pottery from Newcastle, some of which may be earlier than the post-Conquest date nominally ascribed to it.



(above left - from Spoilheap Archaeology) 9th or 10th century wheel-made pottery from East Anglia (prob. Thetford or Ipswich) showing possible Balto-Slavic or Frankish decorative influence, comparable to 'Whitby Ware' from the north-east coast;

(above centre) Unglazed, wheel-made rim sherd in fabric similar to late-Saxon 'York-type' ware from medieval deposits at Newgate Street, Newcastle (AP Ltd. 2017);

(above right) 10th century wheel-made Anglo-Scandinavian pot from York (York Archaeological Trust).

Whether this kind of pottery reached north Northumberland at this stage is unclear, but it seems likely that pottery of some kind, whether locally made or imported, would have featured in the domestic or monastic kitchens of early medieval Lindisfarne (Whitby-ware is a likely candidate, being found almost exclusively in northern monastic contexts), although none was found in the 8th century Green Shield farmstead excavated in the north part of the island in the 1980s.

Later medieval pottery of the 12th century and later is, by contrast, very commonly found on a range of sites from farmsteads to urban centres on the north Northumberland coast, being particularly abundant in excavations of settlement sites, notably in Berwick and Lindisfarne where it is commonly found associated with midden deposits (see *Photographs*, below).



Medieval pottery handles from
Lindisfarne
[Courtesy of Peter & Margaret Thomas]



Large rim sherd found in 2017 eroding from
the cliff-edge in the position of the village
rubbish dump on the west side of Lindisfarne



Medieval pottery from Selby House, Lindisfarne (5cm scale)



Medieval pottery from east side of St Mary's church, including rims (left), internal faces of body sherds showing rilling patterns consistent with throwing (middle) and exterior faces of body sherds showing splashed glaze (5cm scale).

Sources of such pottery include known production sites such as Colstoun in East Lothian, Scarborough, Newcastle and elsewhere on the east coast of England, as well as continental producers. Additional, local production centres are suspected but evidence for them remains elusive in the north part of the county, as elsewhere in Northumberland, where only three kiln sites are currently known; at Newcastle, Shotton and Eshott, all in the south of the county. Tweedmouth, a source of reasonable potting clays and close to coal supplies, has been suggested as a likely medieval production centre in north Northumberland, while Lindisfarne - where workable clay is available in the cliffs west of the village and sherds of pottery are abundant in archaeological contexts - may be another. The case for Tweedmouth is supported by well-attested pottery-making there in the post-medieval period, perhaps starting as early as the later 17th century but certainly ongoing in the 18th century. Slip-trailed pottery from Tweedmouth is found in 17th or 18th and early 19th century contexts in Berwick and along the Tweed Valley at least as far as Kelso, while excavations at Norham as part of the Flodden Project in 2015 found it to be the most common type of pottery from post-medieval contexts close to the castle.

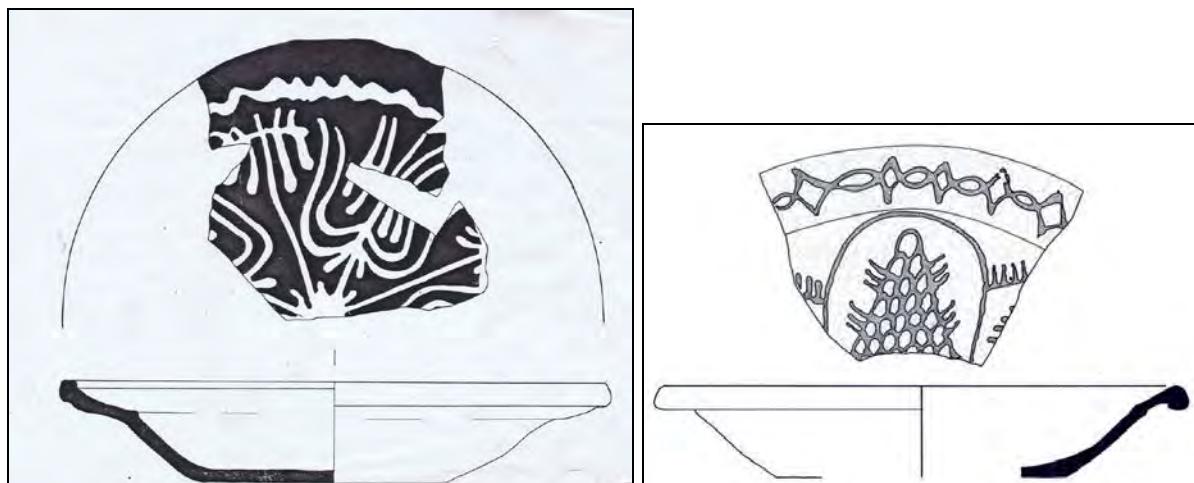


Post-medieval slipware shards from The SE corner of Berwick Town Walls (found by Jim Walker of Spittal)(above left); nr 'Workspace', Berwick (above right); Norham Castle (bottom left and Tower House, Tweedmouth (bottom right)

[all except the Norham sherd from the collection of Peter and Margaret Thomas]



*Post-medieval slipware
Pottery from Norham
Castle (2015) (5cm scale)
and (right) a comparable
example from the 18th
century Bigges Main
Waggonway on the
Walker riverside east of
Newcastle [AP Ltd. 2013]*



Drawings of decorated plates from Roxburgh Street, Kelso [above left, courtesy of Peter and Margaret Thomas]; and Berwick Quay Walls (above right, by Peter Ryder) – both c 30cm diam.

Tweedmouth post-medieval slipware and the present ‘Tower House Pottery’

At least one production centre for this kind of pottery is known in Tweedmouth from observations made by Peter and Owen Thomas in 1990, when a new drive was constructed at No. 3, Well Drive, formerly part of the grounds of Tower House into which Peter and Margaret Thomas had just moved to set up their own pottery workshop. The groundworks at Well Drive revealed the remains of a semi-circular structure of brick and stone, approximately one metre wide internally, with a perforated bogg wall and partially-melted bricks in the fire chamber. Fortunately, Peter was on hand to recognise these remains as those of a pottery kiln, but it seems likely that more kilns, or other remains of pottery-making, have been unearthed in the same area, as this is unlikely to have been the only kiln site. Others may be sought in the area between Well Road and Main St., where the local place name, ‘Potter’s Well’, suggests that a pottery once existed in the area. Pottery and brick sherds showing signs of over-firing – fragments displaying distorted shapes, or fused together by glaze – were subsequently found in the garden of Tower House along with more abundant examples of well-fired pottery displaying slip-trailed decoration (see *Photographs*). Berwick Museum was contacted at the time but expressed no interest in either the kiln structure or artifacts so the pottery sherds collected were handed to a representative of the Scottish Museum in Edinburgh and, in turn, passed on to a pottery specialist but are now believed lost. Similar sherds of pottery have been found at various locations in the area, including the Tweed riverbanks and walls, while Peter and Margaret continue to dig them up in the south part of their garden bordering the rear of Well Drive.



Post-medieval pottery from the grounds of Tower House (courtesy of Peter and Margaret Thomas)

Serendipitously, or at least coincidentally, Peter & Margaret moved from their Meadow Cottage Pottery in Tweedmouth to Tower House at this time to begin producing slip-trailed ware on the same site. Peter and Margaret had moved from Welwyn Garden City to set up Meadow Cottage Pottery in 1975, Peter to make slipwares and Margaret to weave and make quilts. Their pots at this time were based on traditional wares seen in Hertfordshire and Essex, as well as north-east England where historic wares from Newcastle and Sunderland potteries provided inspiration and Weatheriggs in Cumbria, then still-functioning, provided a nurturing local tradition. Further inspiration was provided by George Curtis at Littlethorpe and by Jill and Peter Dick at Coxwold Pottery near York, who were then making splendid high-fired slipwares. By the time of their move to Tower House 12 years later, Margaret, who had been focussing on textile weaving, had become more involved in pottery-making, applying her design skills and appreciation of colour to the decoration of Peter's thrown pots to produce the fine scraffito ware still made today.

Their carefully-honed production sequence involves covering thrown pots with a white slip into which outline patterns, usually figurative or floral, are etched when partially dry (see *Photograph*, below), revealing the red clay beneath. When dry, the pots are fired to 900°C then painted with metal oxides to enhance and enliven the etched sgraffito designs, after which they are covered with a transparent-firing glaze and re-fired to over 1100°C.



(above left) *Peter Thomas with vessels in preparation, including a slip-trailed dish;*
(above right) Vessels in preparation, some showing decorative outlines.



Inscribing patterns on a coating of dry white slip



A sea-themed jug, Tweed-themed plate and floral jugs and dish by Peter & Margaret Thomas

Their pots are made on the ground floor workshop of Tower House, overlooking the lower Tweed from which much of the inspiration for their designs is garnered. The workshop comprises throwing and kiln rooms at either end of a large workshop which is otherwise given over mostly to pottery decoration, which takes the bulk of their time. Over the years this partnership has developed a unique range of pottery, its distinctiveness based on the oxides of subtle hue used to decorate them with a wide range of themes and motifs which often respond to local influences and the specific requirements of commissions. Indeed, customers often play a direct role in designing their own pots, sometimes even modifying the designs at stages in the production process. In this sense their work is a successor to medieval and later tradition of English 'country pottery' which was closely aligned to the tastes and requirements of its customers, rather than seeing itself as aloof artistic expression.

While continuing with the production of the slip-trailed brown-wares, Peter and Margaret's more-decorated sgraffito-decorated range has become highly sought-after, with kiln loads selling fast, often by advance order, and their work ranks as an important contribution to the artistic and ceramic heritage of the area, complementing and sitting comfortably alongside the earlier, largely utilitarian slipware tradition on the same site.