13. Pottery Production in Prescot

P.J. Davey

The documentary evidence

The Victoria County History of Lancaster records the paying of rents by potters in Knowsley and Roby for digging clay in Knowsley Park and making pots there (Farrer and Brownbill 1907, 161, note 4). The will of the second Earl of Derby which was proved on 27th of June 1524 implies that the rents of potters who dug clay in Knowsley Park might be increased, possibly as a means of inhibiting their activities near to the Hall itself. There is also a reference to the turbary as a source of income. Although this probably refers to the use of turf for domestic fires, it probably provided the major fuel for pottery firing as well. The 16th century Court Leet and related records contain regular references to potters and their activities. In 1534 the Churchwardens' Accounts include a complaint about potsherds being on the roads.

At least three individual potters are recorded in the sixteenth century. In 1577 Edward Glover is awarded damages of 30s for "an oven full of earthen pots" and another 18d for two loads of turves. In 1579 he is awarded 8s 8d for "half one oven of yearthen pots". In 1584 Lawrence Gorsuch, clay potter, is recorded as the father of the new tenant of a property belonging to Katherin Ollerton. A surrender of 1585 involved one James Ditchfield, clay potter, who, in the Survey of 1592, appears to be living on the opposite side of High Street to Edward Glover, in the north-eastern part of the town (Bailey 1937; Davey 1978a, 2, 51-53). Ditchfield is referred to again in the Court Leet for 1604 and for 1607 (Knowles 1980). It is possible that a number of other kilns referred to in the Survey belonged to potters, but without more specific information about their owners, the quantity in use at this date remains uncertain. In 1592 another potter, James Cropper of Eccleston, also held land in Prescot towards the east end of Eccleston Street, but it is not clear whether he actually possessed a kiln in the town.

In the 17th century documentary evidence for potting becomes more sparse. The paucity of references, after those to Ditchfield - a recent search of the Parish Records by Philpott (above p. 29) produced only one, a Thomas Willocke, who is also listed under Sutton (Davey and Morgan 1977, 128) - may indicate a decline in the industry during this period. Against this are the notices of petition from Prescot potters detailing grievances to the trade (Hoult 1927), which, although indicating financial problems do show that a number of potters were, in fact, still working. In addition, the large quantity of contemporary 17th century records which survive in the Lancashire County Record Office have not been systematically studied and published in the way in which Bailey dealt with those of 16th century.

The fact that, at least by the end of the 17th century, pottery production was in a reasonable state of health is indicated by the earliest 18th century references which imply a well established industry with developed markets. For the first 10 years of the century the Great Diurnal of Nicholas Blundell is particularly revealing (Tyrer 1968). On 24th September 1702 he records: "I went from Ditton to Mr Harrop in Warrington according to my Brother's orders, from thence I came to Prescot where I bought Fine Muggs of Mr Cubben thence I came to Leverpole." In October of the same year he packs up a case of "Prescott mugs" for export and resale by his brother in Virginia (Tyrer 1968, 19). His accounts of December 1709 include: "Coffy pots of Prescott Wair .... 3s 0d" (Tyrer 1968, 238). In addition Baines notes that an early 18th century plan of the town shows six potteries (Baines 1870, 245 no. 2).

Another feature of the 17th century is the growing documentary and field evidence for pottery production in the Prescot hinterland, especially in Rainford, Eccleston and Sutton (Chitty 1981, 50, Fig. 15). Many of these potters, whose townships of residence lay within Prescot parish may also have been considered and recorded as Prescot potters. Only field evidence will establish how completely pottery production during this period had moved out of town. The same applies to the tobacco-pipe making industry. Although the earliest reference to a pipe-maker in north-west England is to Henry Billinge in the Prescot Court Leet of 1622 (Knowles 1980, 50), the lack of any further references to pipe-making in Prescot itself and their dense concentration in Rainford, suggests that a rural setting for his production is more likely. Again the location of kiln sites would help to elucidate this problem. Whether or not pottery and pipes were made in quantity in Prescot during the 17th century, it is clear that the town would have provided the major market outlet for both commodities.

A wider range of documentary evidence is available for the 18th century. Surrenders of the 1740s and 50s show quite clearly that potters and kilns were occupying the town during that period and give some idea of the actual location of some of them. (McNeil above). Richard Edge's map of 1743 (frontispiece) shows what appears to be a large conical ?glass kiln to the north-west of the church and, at the north end of Trap Lane and just north of the junction of Derby Street with Church Street, two pairs of much smaller conical ?kilns which may well be for pottery. William Winstanley's engraving of the South Prospect
of Prescot also dated 1743 shows the larger ?glass kilns and a smaller one to the east of the church, which, again, is likely to have been for pottery production. These two views of the town are confirmed by Richard Pococke when he describes the potteries in his account of a visit made in 1751: "I went on to Prescot a little town most delightfully situated on a hill, its steep windmill, glasshouse and earthenware houses render it a very beautiful point of view at 2 or 3 miles distance. They have 2 or 3 houses for Coarse Earthenware and one for the Whitestone, where they also make the Brown stoneware and work it as they say higher with the fire than Lambeth. They make it of 2 sorts of clay which they find here" (Cartwright 1888).

Leases of land on Knowsley Estate, just to the north of the town boundary, show that at least two potteries were in existence in that area towards the end of the 18th century (cf. Site 28 above) and numerous references in the Parish Registers show that potteries were still active in Rainford and Eccleston (Davey and Morgan 1977, 126-128). The wills of six Prescot potters proved at Chester between 1734 and 1768 show them to have been men of substance and confirm the impression that this was a prosperous period for the industry.

The Victoria County History entry which reads: "1773 a manufacture of coarse earthen mugs ... 'Prescot for pan-mugs' says the old rhyme. A coarse red ware was the chief product but at one time there was a factory of white ware" (Farrer and Brownbill 1907, 353), suggests that the potteries had declined, at least in terms of the quality of their output. Webb, in his essay on the "Country Potteries of St. Helens and Prescot" notes six manufacturers in Prescot in 1825: Acres Pottery Co. and Mill Pottery, both in New Road, Edward Bradshaw of Eccleston, John Dale of Snig Lane, Moss Pottery and Webster Bros in Fall Lane, which later became the Brook Pottery (Webb 1982, 23). Three of these, the Brook, Mill and Moss Potteries are shown in some detail on the 1848 large-scale OS map (Davey 1978a, 56). The use of the term "country pottery" by Webb and others for such industrialized, urban production units, each with a sizeable labour force, is clearly inappropriate and seems to stem from a need to apply pejorative descriptions to the kinds of ceramic they produced, rather than to any attempt to assess their socio-economic significance. The three 1848 sites had all been abandoned by 1869 (Davey 1978a, 57) and by 1892 only two potters remained - Pearson Twist in Kemble St and Thomas Davies at Eccleston Lane Ends. Only Davies continued into the 20th century (Webb 1982, 24).

The Archaeological Evidence

1. "Medieval Pottery"

Fragments of pottery which is technologically "medieval", fairly highly fired, with quartz inclusions and patches of ?lead glaze have been recovered from a number of sites in the town. The most important is Site D, where 74 sherds out of 399 are considered to be wasters which, together with pieces of glazed daub, provide the only evidence for the actual production of medieval pottery between Cheshire and the Lune Valley. Although the material is very fragmentary, fabric and form contrast strongly with the identified kilns from Cheshire and seem to represent the division between the more sophisticated production of the west Midlands and the range of northern "gritty" types known from both sides of the Pennines. Holgate also found sherds of this type at both sites B and C in probable domestic contexts, 8 out of the 20 sampling excavations (Sites 6-26) produced a total of 46 pieces and the ploughsoil at Site F provided another good collection. These latter groups seem to represent the dispersal of domestic rubbish in adjacent fields and gardens. The sampling project recovered similar medieval pottery from eight of the quadrats (Fig. 9.2). Similar groups have been found in fieldwalking by the Archaeological Survey in Knowsley and Newton-le-Willows (Davey forthcoming).

The dating of these finds is extremely problematic. There are no reliably dated groups of medieval pottery to use as a yardstick for their assessment. The few finds from Birkenhead Priory (Laing 1975) and the published group from West Derby Castle (Droop and Larkin 1927), both of which are probably of 13th or 14th century date, do not appear to include pottery of this type. This is most probably because they pre-date the Prescot material, but may, of course, be due to the socio-economic differences between Castle or Abbey and the inhabitants of Prescot. Given the apparent establishment of a well developed "Cistercian" type industry in the region by the 16th century, together with highly fired local "purple" coarse wares, it seems likely that the Prescot kiln was in production before 1500. Until well dated groups are recovered, a 15th century provenance may be tentatively suggested.

2. The Sixteenth Century

Despite ample documentary evidence of pottery production in Prescot during this period, no actual kiln sites have been located, nor have any wasters been recovered. Diagnostic finds from the domestic
assemblages are rare. Only the group from 21-23 Eccleston Street (Site 30) contained any material which might belong to this phase of activity. Even here, the single yellowish-brown tyg and seven sherds from large coarse vessels with a patchy, thin, purplish glaze which appear to be typologically and technologically earlier than the rest of the Cistercian-type wares seem well established all over the region at sites like Chester and Norton Priory, the latter in probable 16th century contexts. There is good evidence from Rainford that by the mid-17th century local potters were confidently using developed forms of the same technology, so it seems highly probable that potters like Glover, Gorsuch and Ditchfield were producing them in Prescot. The problem at the moment is that there is no proof of this. The recovery of good 16th century sealed groups, and in particular a kiln assemblage, is urgently needed. The sites, on either side of the High Street, known to have been lived on by Glover and Ditchfield, must be primary targets for future excavation.

The Seventeenth Century

Although there is less documentary evidence for pottery making in Prescot in this period, compared with the previous century, the evidence for the kinds of pottery being made in the hinterland at, for example, Rainford and Eccleston and in use widely over the north-west and beyond, is much better understood. The kiln group excavated at Rainford and waster assemblages from a large area beyond (Chitty 1981) establish the production of a local form of "Midland Yellow" as well as a range of fine wares in an almost black-glazed red earthenware, including a distinctive tyg with a faceted stem. In addition, patchily glazed coarse redwars were also found. The latter two types were also found in the group from 21-23 Eccleston Street (Site 30). Despite the suggestion that clay tobacco pipes may have been made in Prescot at an early date, there is no artifactual evidence to support this, nor any of the kiln debris which is so common in the surrounding townships of Rainford, Windle, Eccleston and Parr. Again, good, sizeable, stratified assemblages of both pottery and pipes are urgently needed in order to clarify production and use during this period.

The Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries

Material evidence for pottery production in the town is abundant from the middle of the eighteenth century up to the first two or three decades of the nineteenth. Twelve of the sampling quadrats produced saggars or stilts of this period, while seven of the other sites (B, C, F, 1, 27, 28, 29) recovered important groups. The technological and typological range is, throughout, quite limited. All of these groups included evidence for the production of mottled wares and black-glazed earthenwares and are dominated by large coarse kitchen or dairy vessels. The presence of finer wares in small quantities and the abundance of saggars used in their firing, suggests that the saggars were successful in protecting these small, thin-walled products from the most extreme of kiln conditions and that they will always make up a small element in any waste assemblage.

An interesting side-line in the later 18th century was the production of sugar-refining pottery including sugar-loaf moulds and syrup jars (Site F).

At Site B apparent wasters of off-white and white salt-glazed stoneware were found. These tend to support the assertions of Pococke that brown and white stoneware were in production by 1751. Brown stoneware flagons were found at the Moss Pottery (Site 1) and at 44-50 Derby Street (Site 29), where they had probably been brought from the nearby Brook Pottery. As both of these groups are of early 19th century date and included virtually no fine stoneware, there is a still major lacuna in the artifactual evidence for this period.

The early 19th century sites also illustrate some of the changes which took place in the industry between groups such as those from the Eccleston Street kiln site (Site F) and Twist's House (Site 28), which seem to represent fairly small scale production and the fully "industrial" units shown on the 1848 map. The early 19th century earthenwares are virtually all red bodied and made from a very consistent, well-prepared clay. They exhibit none of the variability and mixing of the earlier wares. The mottled wares, "self-coloured" wares and internally yellow slip-coated wares all use the same body. For the first time, too, a biscuit firing appears to have become standard. Separators seem to have been mould-made and mass-produced. Stilts became taller and thinner and saggars more standardized.

Summary

Despite nearly a decade of research unequivocal archaeological evidence for pottery production in Prescot remains elusive for many types and periods. The late medieval group from Site B is so fragmented and the technological evidence so slight that is is very difficult to reconstruct either the vessels themselves or the method of their manufacture. Evidence for any earlier medieval production is totally lacking.

Despite ample 16th and 17th century documentary references to pottery production no kiln sites have
been located. The attribution to Prescot of the most common wares, such as the "local" Cistercian and Midland Purple types, although likely, remains unsafe. A parallel lack of domestic sequences means that the evolution of these local wares is still only vaguely understood.

Whilst the output of black-glazed red earthenwares and mottled wares in the 18th century is much better represented from a number of sites, the few sherds of white salt glazed stoneware are tantalizingly fragmentary and cryptic.

Many more kiln sites, of all periods, are needed for a rounded picture of Prescot's pottery industry to be produced. In addition long, well-stratified domestic sequences must be examined before its economic significance can be truly assessed.