

MEDIEVAL POTTERY KILNS AT BRILL, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE: Preliminary Report on Excavations in 1978

by
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Evidence for a large medieval and later pottery industry at Brill has long been known, though it was not until 1953 that any excavations took place. In July 1953 Prof. E. M. Jope excavated four double stoke-hole kilns, three of which were superimposed, and all of which dated to the later-thirteenth and fourteenth centuries [1]. Some years later, in 1961, Tite and Weaver re-excavated the latest of these kilns (Kiln D), and located and sampled a fifth (Kiln E), for the purposes of archaeomagnetic dating; both kilns yielded dates in the first half of the fourteenth century [2]. More recently M. Farley has excavated post-medieval pottery kilns in Brill, and has discovered evidence of medieval pottery kilns in the neighbouring parish of Boarstall [3].

An Inquisition held in the year 1254/5 (29 Henry III) states, in its description of the manor of Brill, that there were ten or more kilns and that the potters had the right to take small-wood from the wood adjacent to the fields of Boarstall [4]. Clearly there was a pottery industry of considerable size in the mid-thirteenth century; and this suggests that the Potter-name references, relating to Brill, which occur as early as 1170-75, are indicative of a twelfth century pottery industry [5].

During August and September 1978 a small scale excavation was carried out in Brill by the Department of Archaeological Sciences, Bradford University [6]. This excavation was designed to locate and re-excavate Kiln E, in order to establish its form and the nature of its associated products; also to provide samples for an analytical programme to be carried out at Bradford University.

Kiln E was located with the aid of the original excavation plan and a fluxgate gradiometer survey; this and subsequent geophysical survey work established the presence of a number of other kilns, in addition to those already excavated [7].

A ten-metre square surrounding the position of Kiln E was deturfed, and the kiln was revealed lying a few centimetres below the turf-line. The kiln was surrounded by black earth containing very large quantities of pottery; it proved impossible to detect any stratigraphic relationship between these deposits and the kiln structure.

Kiln E

The kiln was formed of a rough oval oven and opposed flues with a central pedestal and baffles, i.e. the same form as Jope type C (see note 1). The kiln was mainly built of rough limestone (with some pieces of kiln-bar and pottery), and was lined with clay; the structure also showed evidence of several re-buildings (see fig. 1).

The pedestal consisted of a ring of large stones the centre of which was filled with smaller stones, clay, ash, and potsherds. The baffles, which were built of stone, merged imperceptibly into the pedestal; clearly both were built as part of a single operation. The baffles butted on to the oven walls, the inner faces of which were battered; the oven was therefore constructed first.

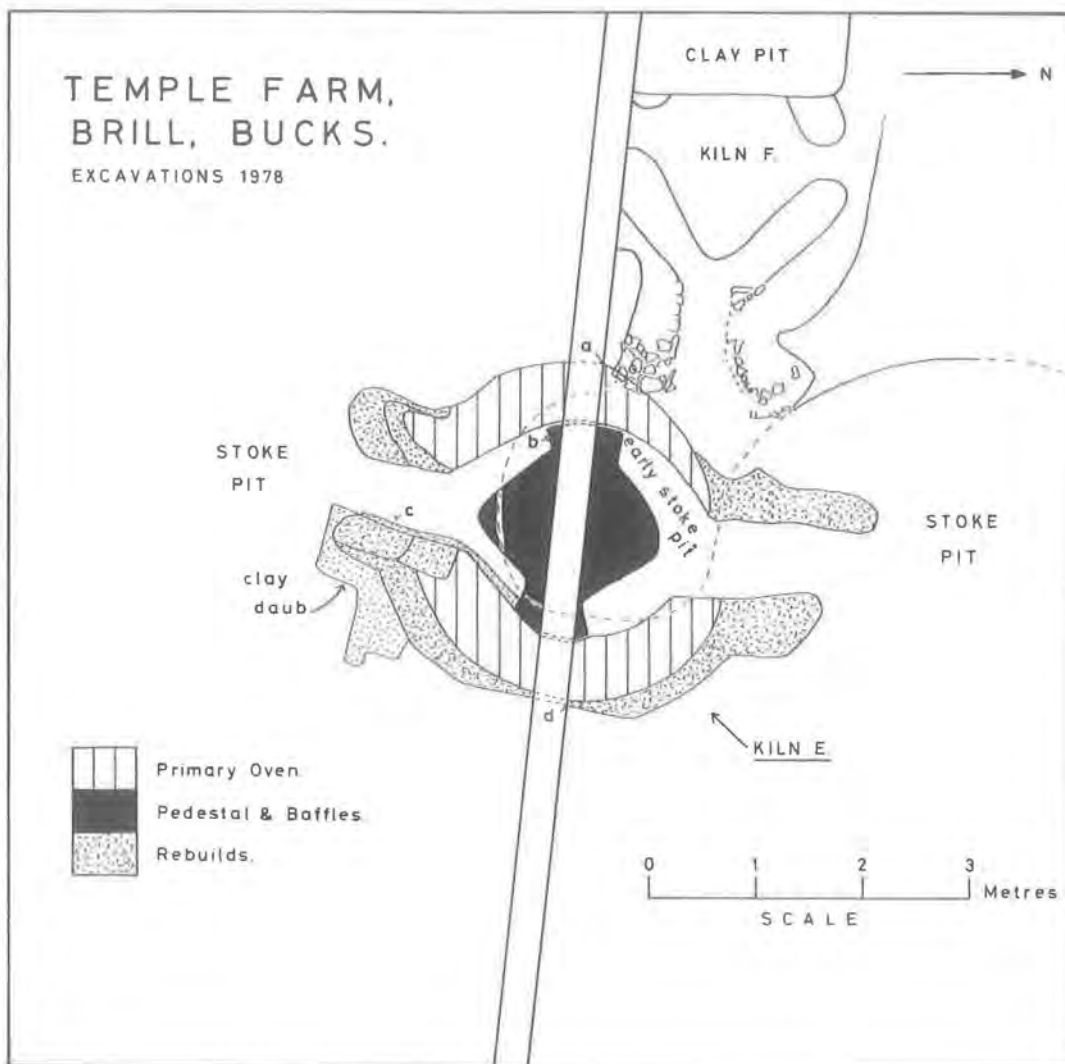


Fig 1. Medieval pottery kiln at Brill.

The oven walls were formed of two courses of stone rubble, separated by a layer of clay. The inner faces of the oven walls were carefully coursed producing a smooth battered surface, but they were only roughly built externally. The east wall had been widened by an additional rubble wall; this continued to form the east wall of the northern flue (there were no traces of any earlier flue at this point), and as a thickening of the east wall of the southern flue. The inner face of the south-east flue wall had also been covered with an additional course of stones, effectively narrowing the southern flue. The west wall of the northern flue consisted of a single phase, but there was evidence of two rebuildings of both of the southern flue walls. It appears that all the flue walls were constructed separately, following the building of the ovens. This was perhaps because they required rebuilding more frequently than the oven structure.

Lying against the outer face of the final phase of the south-east part of the kiln was a layer of clay daub, perhaps a part of the collapsed super-structure. In a kiln of this type the covering would almost certainly have been of wattle and daub. Two small pits filled with a

sandy clay were found adjacent to the kiln; this material was perhaps used for building the super-structure or for repairing it during firing.

The interior of the kiln was lined with clay. These linings survived only patchily and could not be related to the refurbishings of the oven and flue structures. However, at the southern end it was clear that all the linings were later than the pedestal/baffle structure as they all butted against it. The linings consisted of a series of superposed layers, each starting progressively nearer to the baffles, and each becoming thicker as the baffles were neared. Thus a smooth upward curve was produced, which allowed a smooth flow of hot gases to the firing chamber. The existing linings therefore represent a single phase, applied as a number of separate layers, probably to facilitate drying. The clay linings could be part of the original structure, but in view of the evidence for the rebuilding of the flues it seems more likely that the interior had been cleared and completely relined. This could have occurred on more than one occasion, even the pedestal and baffles could have been replaced without leaving any detectable archaeological

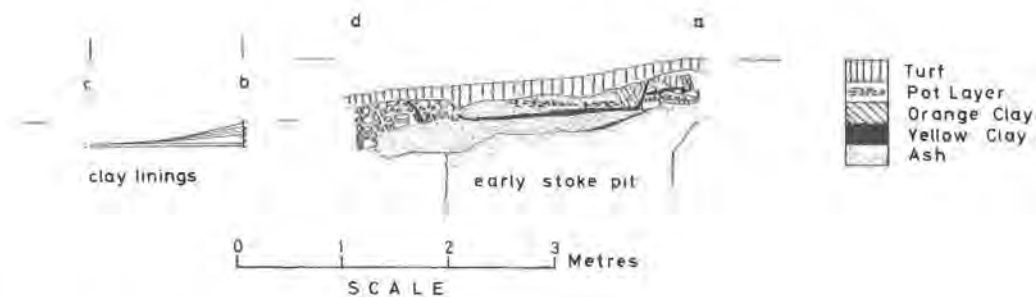


Fig. 2. Sections through kiln.

trace. The archaeomagnetic date for this kiln is based on samples of the clay lining taken in 1961. If the lining is a replacement then the date of 1300 – 1350 will be too recent; though perhaps not significantly, depending on the overall life of the kiln.

At the mouth of both flues large stoke-pits were found cut into the natural subsoil; these pits were filled with a very large quantities of ash and pottery, and were only partially excavated.

Kiln F

A large area of slightly burned clay daub was found lapping against the north-west wall of Kiln E. This layer of clay daub formed a level platform, and may have been the base of a drying oven. On removal this material proved to contain a large quantity of pottery and to conceal the almost completely robbed remains of a second kiln (Kiln F). This second kiln was of the same general form as Kiln E, though orientated east-west (Kiln E was orientated north-south). The variable orientation of all the excavated kilns indicates that factors such as wind direction played no part in their design. The western end of Kiln F had been completely destroyed by one of the clay filled pits; its eastern half was indicated by the heavily burnt subsoil at the base of the flues; the position of the pedestal and the baffles was marked by an unburnt area. The extreme east end of this kiln, and its eastern stoke-pit, were sealed beneath Kiln E.

To date none of the excavations in Brill have yielded any evidence of workshops. It may be that the kiln area was merely an area for the

building and firing of kilns, and that the workshops were located elsewhere. The large number of kilns now identified in this small area leaves little room for any of the other potting activities to be carried out, so that a separate manufacturing area is highly likely. The risk of fire and the unpleasant fumes produced by pottery kilns also make it probable that the kilns would be located outside of the village.

A very large quantity of pottery was recovered during the course of this excavation, with many types of form but few of fabric. The great majority of the vessels were cooking pots with a characteristic squared and undercut rim, large pans and patchily glazed jugs. The jugs were mostly baggy, carinated and baluster types. The baluster jugs generally have stabbed rod handles, while the other jug forms have slashed strap handles, both types of handle show large thumb impressions at the junction with the neck. Pipkins and skillets were also fairly commonly found. Among the less frequent types were pottery sounding horns (see note 1), vessels with large bung-holes, and occasional roof tiles. Very little variation in fabric was noted, though the cooking pots tended to have a slightly coarser and sandier fabric than the jugs (these two wares conform to Oxford Types AM and AW [8]). Only one small group of pottery deviated significantly from the fabrics generally recognised as the products of Brill (examples of this type were also found in 1953, see note 1). This group of cooking pots was made of a coarse, heavily gritted fabric, had everted, thickened rims, and generally had a thin internal glaze [9].

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Jope, E. M. 1953–4 'Medieval pottery Kilns at Brill, Buckinghamshire: Preliminary Report on Excavations in 1953', *Records of Buckinghamshire XVI* (1953–4) 39–42.
2. Aitkin, M. J. and Weaver, G. H. 1962 'Magnetic Dating: Some Archaeological Measurements in Britain', *"Archaeometry"* 5 (1962) 4–24; also *"Oxoniensia"* 26/27 (1961–2) 336.
3. Farley, M. 1979 'Pottery and Pottery Kilns of the Post-Medieval Period at Brill, Buckinghamshire', *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 13 (1979) 127–152; also pers. comm.
4. *Rotuli Hundredorum I*, 22a.

5. Salter, H. E. 1930 'The Boarstall Cartulary', *Oxford Historical Society* 88 (1930) 4, 78, 135, 136, 144, 152.
6. My thanks to Mrs. Godfry and Mr. Honour, owner and tenant of Temple Farm, Brill for their permission to excavate the site. Also to the British Academy for a grant towards the cost of the excavation and the geophysical survey.
The original plans were kindly provided by M. J. Aitkin and E. M. Jope. It is not intended to publish the geophysical survey; however, a copy has been deposited at the Buckinghamshire County Museum in Aylesbury. For a plan of Brill showing the location of the medieval kilns see Farley, M. 1979 op. cit. figure 1, page 128.
8. Durham, B. 1977 'Archaeological Investigations in St. Aldates, Oxford', *Oxoniensia* 42 (1977) 111-139.
9. Jope, E. M. and Ivens, R. J. 'Some Early Products of the Brill Pottery, Buckinghamshire', this volume. A full report on the pottery is planned for the near future.