

Potting on the Heath: In search of the medieval and early post-medieval east Dorset and west Hampshire pottery industry

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Little is known of the origins of the pottery industry that dominated the markets of west Hampshire, Dorset and south Wiltshire during the post medieval period. This pottery was produced at the many production sites that have been collectively amalgamated together as the 'Verwood Pottery Industry'. This earthenware tradition has been shown to be produced at a minimum of 36 production sites (Algar et al., 1987); the vast majority of these lie within east Dorset, however two sites lie within west Hampshire at Harbridge.

Due to the variation in terminology and identification, the distribution of these wares has never been conclusively defined. Verwood pottery from the post-medieval period is known from most of Dorset, the western portion of the county of Hampshire and southern Wiltshire. This pottery type has been recovered from numerous towns and cities across southern England, such as Southampton (Platt and Coleman Smith, 1975), Winchester (Wessex Archaeology, 2010), and Salisbury (Rawlings et al., 2000) to name but a few. Therefore, the study of this industry has relevance not only for Dorset, but also Hampshire and Wiltshire.

This industry is known to operate from the 1600s into the 20th century, with the last known production centre closing in 1952 at Cross Roads in Verwood, Dorset (Algar et al., 1987). There are a number of documentary sources relating to pottery production near to the Dorset/Hampshire border at Alderholt, Dorset, during the medieval and early post-medieval periods; however, very little archaeological evidence exists to support this. Currently, archaeological evidence for medieval pottery production in both west Hampshire and east Dorset is sparse with the most recent extensive study carried out by Spoerry and Hart in 1988. More recent evidence comprises of a small number of sherds (e.g. Mephram, 2000, 35-6), which can be attributed to this region via fabric analysis at the macroscopic level. In addition to this, no medieval production sites are known that relate to the aforementioned wealth of documentary evidence; indeed, no sites can currently be shown to be operating before the 1600s.

In order to remedy this lack of archaeological evidence for medieval production in this region, this study will employ a suite of desk-based techniques ranging from a study of the historical documents and mapping, along with the consultation of available LiDAR data, may highlight possible production sites relating to this earlier phase of production. This will draw attention to possible sites for geophysical and topographic survey and subsequent 'ground truthing' of results using excavation. This approach was shown to be effective at Horton, Dorset (Carter, 2008) where one of the earliest known kiln sites in operation was shown to have evidence for an earlier phase of production. The kiln, dating from at least the 1600s into the 1700s, was shown to lie in close vicinity to a smaller kiln or oven, which has many similarities to that excavated at Hermitage, Dorset (Field and Musty, 1967). The site at Hermitage is currently the only medieval pottery kiln that has been both excavated and published within the county of Dorset. Thus, the Horton site could represent the earliest physical evidence for medieval production in the east Dorset area. The search for more sites relating to this date, in addition to the confirmation of production at the Horton site, form the key elements of this new research being undertaken as part of a PhD level study at Bournemouth University.

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