

Highgate Wood

A potted history of the kilns at Highgate Woods and their products

In 1962 a Roman pottery production site was discovered in Highgate Woods. There then followed a series of research excavations from 1966 to 1974 in the area excavating 10 kilns and associated features such as working platforms, pits for the levigation, puddling and storage of clay. The kilns were producing a range of kitchen and table wares such as beakers, bowls, lids, dishes and jars for storage and cooking.

Several fabrics have been identified, of which there are two main wares: the first is a grog-tempered fabric in which the earlier products are hand-made, although the use of the wheel is noticeable in later vessels; the second is sand-tempered and is exclusively used in the production of wheel-made vessels. All the pottery produced by the kilns is dark in colour apart from rare examples of platters which are made in the grog-tempered fabric but have a distinctive red coating on the upper surface in imitation of imported vessels from the Mediterranean. The earliest vessel types are developments of late Iron Age forms such as bead-rimmed jars and cordoned bowls (Brown and Sheldon 1974, fig 2). However, the industry does soon react to the tastes and demands of the new occupiers by producing vessel types associated with the Roman occupation such as platters. In the 2nd century AD the potters copy the highly successful style of bowls and everted-rimmed jars decorated with latticing first produced in the Durotrigian area of Dorset known as 'black-burnished wares' which start appearing in London in c AD 120, illustrating the Highgate potters willingness to adapt against this new competition.

The grog-tempered fabric is the most common reduced ware in London assemblages for the period AD 50–100 (Davies et al 1994, fig 60). The sand-tempered ware is most common in assemblages in the first half of the 2nd century AD. One of the most readily identifiable forms in the later fabric is the 'poppyhead' beaker. This form is decorated with raised dots and the slip on these vessels, where burnished, can have a gunmetal appearance which may have been the desired effect as metal vessels were more expensive than their ceramic counterparts.

Two types of kilns were identified at Highgate. The earliest were constructed in ditches and had twin flues and a single chamber and are associated with the production of grog-tempered pottery (Brown and Sheldon 1971, 302). The kilns associated with the later production of sand-tempered wares were all of the updraught type with a single flue. Pre-fabricated kiln bars were used to create a raised floor and were supported by a central pedestal and slots or side supports in the kiln walls. Vessels would have been placed on this floor separating them from the lower chamber and source of heat unlike 'clamp' firing where vessels would be put directly into the fire. Raw materials required by the industry would have been an accessible clay source, water and fuel. The Highgate potteries would also require a supply of sand to use as temper for the wheel-made pottery. One of the most interesting theories about the Highgate industry is that it is the result of itinerant potters returning to the area possibly on a seasonal basis. This was suggested to the site directors by the timescale of the industry, the small scale of the production, the lack of buildings and other evidence of habitation (Brown and Sheldon 1974, 224-5).

The Highgate industry can be contrasted with the contemporary pottery kiln complex situated alongside Watling Street between London and St Albans known as the Verulamium region industry. These kilns operated between c AD 50 to AD 170 and the main focus was at Brockley Hill which is 12 kilometres north-west of the City of London compared to Highgate which is 10 kilometres north of the City. The Verulamium region industry chiefly produced white and white-slipped pottery notably flagons, mortaria and in lesser quantities, bowls and jars. The Verulamium region industry is notably different from that at Highgate as the vessel types show no native antecedents and it has been suggested that the origins of this industry are continental (Marsh and Tyers 1979, 534).

The results of the excavations were written up in a series of interim reports (Brown and Sheldon 1969a, 1969b, 1970, 1971, 1974). However, funding is currently being sought by the site's original directors, Antony Brown and Harvey Sheldon, to fully publish the findings and analysis of the kilns and the products of the industry. One of the most important aspects of these excavations is that they looked not only at the kilns and their products but at the associated features of the industry and of the surrounding area, a recommendation for the study of Roman pottery kilns by the late Vivian Swan in the definitive publication on the subject, 'The Pottery kilns of Roman Britain' (1984).

Alongside the excavation of the Roman kilns in 1971, the research team organised the building of a series of three replica kilns and undertook experimental firings. They also produced imitation vessels from clay sourced from the Woods and fired them in the kilns. A record of the reconstructions and firings were published in the same year (Brightwell et al 1971a, 1971b). The kilns were based on one of the best preserved updraught kilns found in the excavations – kiln 2. An interesting finding of these experimental firings was the difficulty in replicating the dark colour of the original vessels and that one of the reasons for this was not keeping the kilns sealed long enough at the end of the firing. One of the aims of any new firings if they were to go ahead would be to see if it is possible to solve this problem.

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