

SAXON AND MEDIEVAL POTTERY FROM KIRBY BELLARS

by

J. G. HURST

In 1960 excavations in the churchyard at Kirby Bellars¹ produced over 500 sherds of pottery dating from the Roman period to the present day.² Over 350 of these were unstratified in the top three feet of disturbed soil but another 100 sherds were stratified, providing a most important sequence. The earliest finds, dating from the Saxon period, were found at the bottom of a narrow ditch. The top of the ditch was filled with early medieval pottery, while above this were traces of timber and cob buildings associated with thirteenth- and fourteenth-century pottery.

Eighty-three sherds of Saxon handmade pottery were found. Over half of these were unstratified, but 15 were found in the bottom 6 in. (layer T) of the early ditch which ran obliquely across the excavated trench. These comprised three fabrics, grass-tempered, sandy and gritty: 6 were grass-tempered, 7 were sandy and 2 were gritty. There were no shelly wares in this level which contained nothing later in date. The next 6 in. of the ditch infill (layers S & N) contained 5 sandy handmade Saxon sherds, 3 sherds of Stamford ware and 2 sherds of splashed sandy ware. The top two feet of the ditch infill (layers F & P) contained a single Saxon sandy sherd, a fragment of a loom weight, too small to determine the exact shape, 6 sherds of Stamford ware, 6 sherds of developed shelly ware, and 21 sherds of splashed sandy ware. Above this was three feet of disturbed levels. A grave dug in another part of the churchyard produced a mixture of pottery in the upper levels (layers G-L) but 6 sherds of Saxon sandy handmade pottery at the bottom (layer M).

At a depth of between three and five feet, and cutting into the early ditch, were found a series of patches of clay, stones and burnt soil presumably the collapsed remains of flimsy cob and timber buildings. Associated with these were 9 residual sherds of Saxon pottery and 6 early medieval sherds. The main bulk, however, comprising 26 sandy sherds and 10 glazed sherds were hard fabrics dating to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

There seems, therefore, to be a sequence starting with a Saxon ditch containing handmade pottery, followed by a late Saxon and early-medieval infill lasting until the twelfth century, with the remains of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century peasant houses above. The top three feet represent the disturbed built-up churchyard.

The pottery may be divided into five groups:

- (1) Saxon handmade
- (2) Wheel-thrown Saxo-Norman Stamford ware
- (3) Developed shelly early-medieval ware

- (4) Sandy splashed early-medieval ware
- (5) Hard sandy medieval ware

(1) SAXON HANDMADE (Fig. 1)

There were three main fabrics all typical of the rough handmade pottery in use over much of England from the end of the Roman period till the ninth or tenth century when it was replaced in eastern and Midland England by wheel-thrown wares.³ The main bulk of the Saxon sherds, 68 out of 83, were coarse and sandy. Seven sherds were very rough and gritty while only 8 were grass-tempered. Six of these were stratified at the bottom of the ditch, perhaps giving an untrue picture of the proportions of different wares. There were no early handmade shelly wares. This type of pottery is almost impossible to date, and there are, anyway, very few parallels in the Midlands. The settlement at Harston is the only other one known before in the area.⁴ This therefore makes the Kirby Bellars finds of considerable importance. The infill of the ditch seems to go straight from Saxon to early medieval so a date in the eighth or ninth century might be suggested for the handmade sherds. The coin of Burgred of Mercia (852-874) was not associated, but does suggest occupation on the site at this date. If this is so we have a most important assemblage of late-Saxon handmade pottery at a date when settlement sites are almost unknown.

(a) GRASS-TEMPERED

- 1. Six sherds forming the shoulder and lower part of a globular cooking pot with a carinated shoulder and rounded base. Thick coarse handmade fabric with large impressions of burnt-out grass. Black core with uneven patchy brown and black surfaces resulting from uneven firing in a clamp kiln. From the bottom of the ditch, layer T.

(b) SANDY

- 2. Simple upright rim fragment from a small handmade cooking pot. Coarse sandy black fabric with patchy black and red-brown burnished surfaces. From the bottom of the ditch, layer T.
- 3. Simple, slightly thickened, upright rim fragment from a small handmade cooking pot. Coarse sandy black fabric with a number of quartz grits, black burnished surfaces. From the burnt layer, four feet down, layer B.
- 4. Simple upright rim fragment from a small handmade cooking pot. Coarse sandy black fabric with a number of quartz grits. Rough red inner surface, black burnished outer surface. From the clay layer four feet down, layer D.
- 5. Simple slightly everted rim fragment from a small cooking pot. Brown sandy fabric with grey surfaces, rough neck but shoulder slightly burnished outside. From the upper disturbed layer E.

(2) WHEEL-THROWN SAXO-NORMAN STAMFORD WARE (Fig. 1)

Forty sherds were found. Thirty-five were from rough sandy cooking pots and only 5 were fine glazed wares.⁵ This is of interest since it shows that Kirby was still within the range of distribution of the coarse wares from the Stamford group of kilns which were about 25 miles away. Only 9 sherds, none of them glazed, were stratified. Three of these came from the middle level of the early ditch and the other 6 from the top fill of the ditch. All the sherds were small and the date is almost impossible to determine. They could date anytime in the tenth or eleventh century, possibly into the early twelfth century. They may be regarded as the typical local pottery of this period.

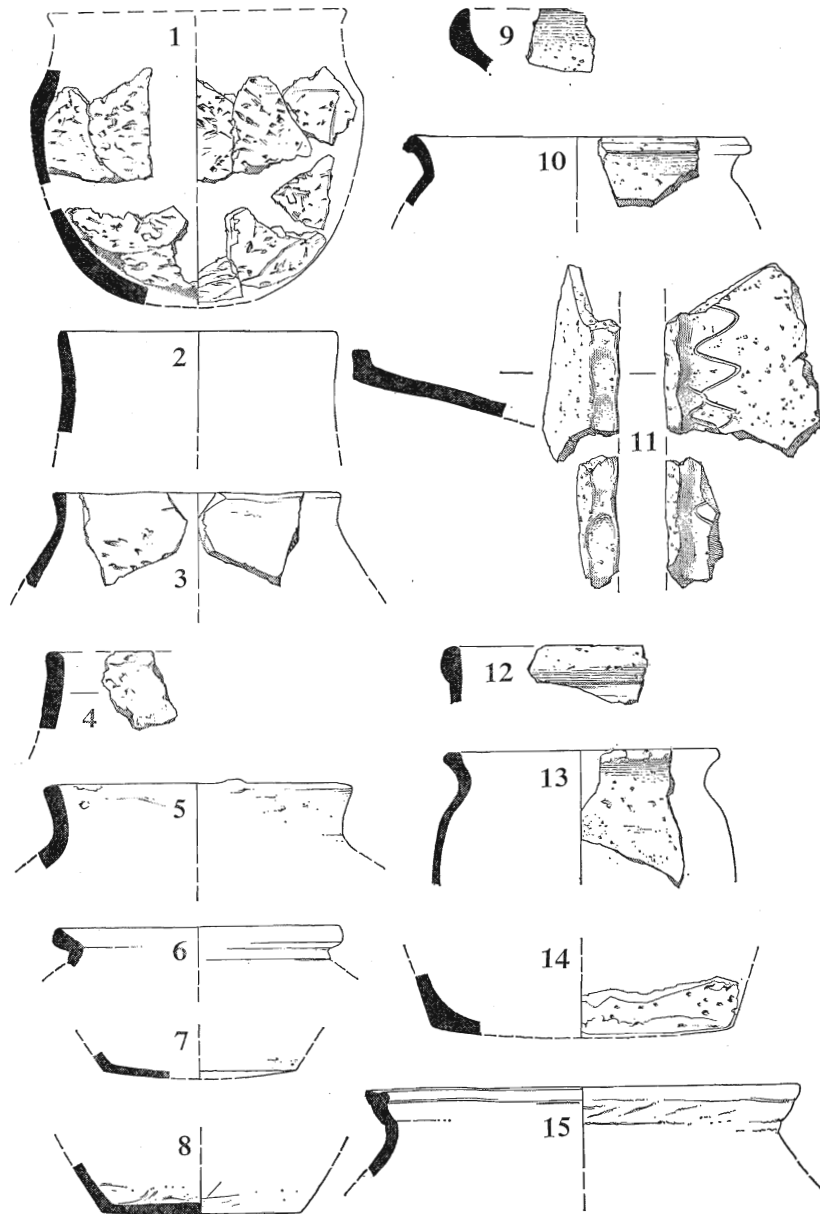


Fig. 1. Saxon and medieval pottery from Kirby Bellars (4).

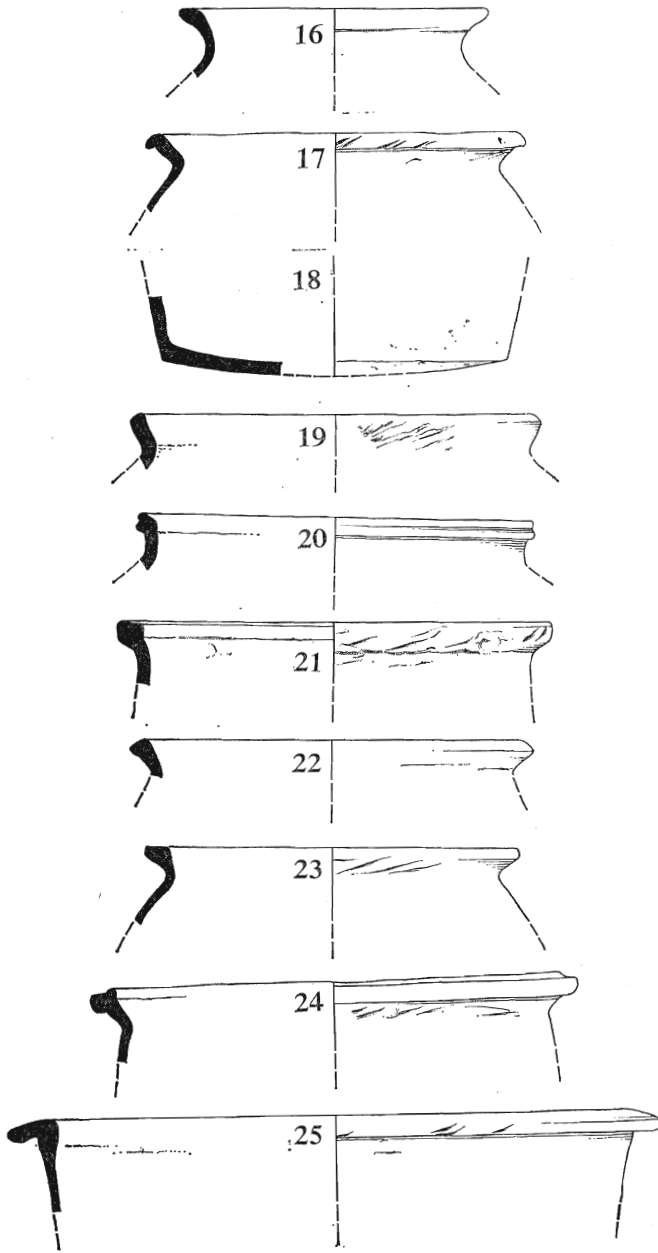


Fig. 2. Medieval wares from Kirby Bellars (4).

6. Small everted rim fragment rounded outside and hollowed inside from a small cooking pot. Fine sandy grey fabric with pink-brown surfaces. The top of the rim is reduced black all through, the result of being fired upside down with the rim covered by ashes. This is a typical feature of many Stamford cooking pots. From the upper disturbed layer A.
7. Small fragment from the sagging base of a small cooking pot. Fine sandy black fabric with pink-brown outer surface and reduced black inner surface. From a low level of the ditch, layer N.
8. Four sherds comprising more than half of the sagging base of a cooking pot similar to No. 7. Fine sandy brown fabric discoloured black in patches. The internal junction of the side and base is roughly finished off and there are traces of the characteristic Stamford knife trimming outside. From the upper part of the ditch, layer F.

(3) DEVELOPED SHELLY EARLY MEDIEVAL WARE (Fig. 1)

Sixty sherds of shelly ware were found, but 50 of them were unstratified. Six were found in the top level of the ditch and 4 others in the medieval levels. None of the sherds were in the early St. Neots Late-Saxon tradition with smooth soapy surfaces and small cooking pot forms.⁶ All the sherds were in a coarser fabric with the addition of sand tempering suggesting an eleventh- or twelfth-century date. There was only one inturned rim of Late-Saxon form (Fig. 1 No. 9) all the cooking pots were of medieval type.

9. Small fragment from the rim of an inturned flanged bowl of St. Neots type. Rough shelly fabric with some sand giving a harsh surface. Grey core with black surfaces. The form should be early in date but the fabric shows that it should be a survival into the twelfth century. From the upper part of the ditch, layer F.
10. Thickened rim, sloping outside, from a cooking pot. Rough shelly fabric, grey core with red-brown surfaces. Twelfth century. From the upper part of the ditch, layer F.
11. Sherds from a shallow dish with short upright rim thumbed outside, incised overlapping wave pattern inside. Rough shelly fabric, black core with red-brown surfaces fire-blackened outside. Twelfth century. From upper disturbed level, layer A.
12. Rim fragment, thickened outside, from a straight-sided bowl. Shelly fabric with both large and small crushed shell. Lyveden kiln type,⁷ twelfth century. From upper disturbed levels, layer A.
13. Thickened squared rim and shoulder fragment from a globular cooking pot. Rough shelly fabric with a mixture of sand. Black core with red-brown surfaces. From upper disturbed levels, layer A.
14. Fragment of sagging base from a large cooking pot. Rough shelly fabric black core with red-brown surfaces fire-blackened on the base outside. From upper disturbed levels, layer E.
15. Thickened moulded rim from cooking pot. Smooth fabric tempered with small crushed shell of Lyveden type.⁷ The cordon under the neck is typical of the east Northamptonshire kilns⁸ while the oblique knife finishing is an early medieval feature.⁹ Late twelfth or thirteenth century. Unstratified.

(4) SANDY SPLASHED EARLY MEDIEVAL WARE (Fig. 2)

Twenty-five recognisable sherds were found in stratified deposits. There were 2 in the middle level of the ditch, 21 in the top of the ditch and 2 in the medieval levels. Other sherds were unstratified. These finds are of the greatest interest since they are of Nottingham type and have not been found so far away from this centre before, a distance of about 20 miles. This hard sandy ware with splashes of glaze falls into the group of early medieval ware which started about 1000 and gradually during the next 50 years supplanted the Saxo-Norman wares.¹⁰ This Nottingham type has been found stratified in the ditch of the Saxon Burgh at Nottingham which was filled in soon after 1066¹¹, and in a more developed form in the twelfth-century bank of the enlarged Norman town.¹² The forms of the Kirby Bellars examples are all fairly well developed and a date in the late-eleventh or early-twelfth century might be suggested for those in the top of the ditch. The middle layer sherds could be earlier but they have no datable features.

16. Two sherds forming part of slightly thickened everted rim of cooking pot. Very hard thin red-brown sandy fabric with spots of brown glaze inside and out. Eleventh or early-twelfth century. From the upper fill of the ditch, layer F.
17. Large sherd forming nearly a quarter of a thickened rounded rim of a cooking pot, roughly tooled on the outer edge. Very hard thin red-brown sandy fabric. No glaze. Early-twelfth century. From the upper fill of the ditch, layer F.
18. Sherd forming about a quarter of the sagging base of a cooking pot. Hard red-brown sandy ware with grey core. Spots and splashes of brown glaze, with some green patches, on the outer surface of the side and bottom. This pot is thicker and less well-fired than the other examples Nos. 16 and 17 but it must fall into the same group from its colour, and glaze and association with the others which all come from the upper fill of the ditch, layer F.

(5) HARD SANDY MEDIEVAL WARES (Fig. 2)

These are the typical brown sandy wares which are common over most of Leicestershire¹³ and Nottinghamshire¹⁴ during the thirteenth and fourteenth century. The fabric is very similar to the earlier splashed ware and it is possible to see group 4 developing into group 5. None of these sherds was found in the early ditch. They were all found in the remains of the later structures (36 sherds) or in the later disturbed levels.

19. Fragment from simple everted rim of cooking pot. Sandy grey fabric with some small quartz and shell grits. Neck roughly tooled outside. From upper disturbed levels, layer A.
- 20-24. Various cooking pot rims in the same fabric as No. 19 with variations of squared and moulded rim form, often roughly tooled, of general late twelfth- and thirteenth-century character. All from the upper disturbed levels, A, E, or C.
25. Three sherds from the rim of a straight-sided bowl with external turned down flange. Fabric as Nos. 19-24. From upper disturbed level A.

CONCLUSIONS

The pottery from Kirby Bellars therefore provides a most useful sequence for the area which is midway between Leicester, Nottingham and Stamford, a district from which very little pottery has been excavated or published. In the Saxon period the handmade pottery is very similar to that over most of the country. In the Later Saxon period the main influences seem to have been from Stamford with the introduction of fine wheel-thrown wares. By the eleventh century there is influence from the Nottingham area with the arrival of the early medieval splashed sandy wares which at first equal the Stamford types and then by the end of the eleventh century completely replace them. Shelly wares of the St. Neots and more developed types from the Northamptonshire area form a very small proportion of the whole. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries hard sandy and glazed wares from Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire kilns take over and become the dominant type till the fifteenth-century purple wares¹⁵ which are not represented at Kirby Bellars where the occupation in the churchyard does not seem to last beyond the middle of the fourteenth century. There were a few later sherds in the topsoil but none of these was stratified.

One of the main reasons for digging the trench was the presence of Roman sherds when graves were dug in the churchyard. In the area dug there were in fact only 18 sherds. Two of these came from the Saxon ditch, one from the medieval buildings and the rest from the disturbed levels. Miss S. Butcher reports that the pottery ranges from the second to the fourth century in date. A fragment of Samian gives the early date, and a flanged bowl and jug neck were both fourth century at the Jewry Wall, Leicester, and are usually late in the century.

	SAXON DITCH				MEDIEVAL PEASANT STRUCTURES				Total	
	Bottom layers		Top layers	Burnt layer B	Stone layer C	Clay Patches D & R	Top four feet disturbed			
	T	S	N					F		P
(1) Saxon Handmade— grass tempered sandy gritty	6	1	10	1		1	1	1	8	
(2) Stamford ware—unglazed glazed		1	2	3				26	35	
(3) Developed shelly ware				3		1		5	5	
(4) Sandy splashed ware		2		3				50	60	
(5) Medieval sandy—unglazed glazed									25	
						3	7	16	192	218
						2	1	7	38	48
TOTAL	15	4	12	10	24	7	9	35	358	474

NOTES

1. *Trans. Leics. Arch. & Hist. Soc.*, XLI (1965-6), 66. There were further unstratified finds in 1965, *ibid.*, 72.
2. I am indebted to Mrs. M. Gill for allowing me to study and report on these sherds, and for giving me further information about the excavation. The finds have now been deposited in the Leicester Museum, together with detailed plans and sections of the excavation. The references to "layers" in the present text are to those plans and sections.
3. G. C. Dunning, J. G. Hurst, J. N. L. L. Myres & F. Tischler, "Anglo-Saxon Pottery: a Symposium", *Med. Arch.*, III (1959), 1-78.
4. G. C. Dunning, "Anglo-Saxon Discoveries at Harston", *Trans. Leics. Arch. Soc.*, XXVIII (1952), 48-54.
5. J. G. Hurst, "Saxo-Norman Pottery in East Anglia, Part III Stamford Ware", *Proc. Cambs. Ant. Soc.*, LI (1957), 37-65.
6. J. G. Hurst, "Saxo-Norman Pottery in East Anglia, Part I, St. Neots Ware", *Proc. Cambs. Ant. Soc.*, XLIX (1955), 43-70.
7. J. G. Hurst, "Waterbeach: The Medieval Pottery", *Proc. Cambs. Ant. Soc.*, LIX (1966), 93.
8. J. G. Hurst, "Excavations at Wythemail, Northamptonshire", *Med. Arch.* forthcoming.
9. J. G. Hurst, "Excavations at Barn Road, Norwich, 1954-5", *Norf. Arch.*, XXXIII (1963), 155-7.
10. *ibid.*
11. R. H. Wildgoose, "The Defences of the Pre-Conquest Borough of Nottingham", *Trans. Thoroton Soc.*, LXV (1961), 19-26. The early medieval sherds were unfortunately not described or illustrated in this report.
12. J. G. Hurst in M. W. Barley "Nottingham Town Wall: Park Row Excavations 1964", *Trans. Thoroton Soc.*, LXIX (1965), 61-3. A re-examination of the Bridlesmith Gate sherds now in the Nottingham University museum show that some of them were stratified in the ditch and should therefore be pre-conquest.
13. J. Haynes, "A Thirteenth-Century Kiln-Site at Potters Marston", *Trans. Leics. Arch. Soc.*, XXVIII (1952), 55-62.
14. A. Parker, "Nottingham Poetry", *Trans. Thoroton Soc.*, XXXVI (1932), 79-124.
15. P. A. Rahtz, "Humberstone Earthwork, Leicester", *Trans. Leics. Arch. Soc.*, XXXV (1959), 1-32.