

Potters Marston Ware

by Deborah Sawday

Potters Marston ware, the product of a major local industry dating from c1100 – c1300, accounts for between 45 and 60% of the Saxo-Norman and medieval pottery found on excavations in Leicester. Work to date has concentrated on describing and characterising the ware within its chronological sequence. Further work is needed to refine the dating and patterns of distribution.

Work on post Roman pottery from excavations in Leicester has shown that on all sites examined, between 45 and 60% of the Saxo-Norman and medieval pottery is in Potters Marston ware. The name derives from the only known kilns, lying approximately 8 miles (12.8 km) to the south west of Leicester, at Potters Marston. Field walking, especially to the south west and west of the county, has also produced large quantities of the pottery, now recognised to be the product of a major local industry. The pottery has also been identified from field walking in north Northamptonshire and excavations in Nottingham, and may also occur at Coventry.

Potters Marston, together with other similar rurally based production centres as at Stanion in north Northamptonshire for example, represents a new post-Conquest pottery tradition, quite distinct from the fine wheel thrown products of the Saxo-Norman industries which were often centred on towns such as Stamford and Lincoln. The early medieval pottery was probably made in small workshops operated by seasonal potters who also worked on the land. The essentially conservative nature of this pottery tradition makes it difficult to date the material with any precision, but typologically, Potters Marston ware would seem to date from the late 11th or early 12th century. Documentary evidence confirms the typological evidence (Haynes 1952) that production continued during the 13th if not into the early 14th century. Work has concentrated on the pottery found in excavations in an attempt to describe the ware and to place it within a chronological sequence. More research is necessary both on the documentary evidence relating to the industry, and on the material from field walking and excavations in the county and beyond.

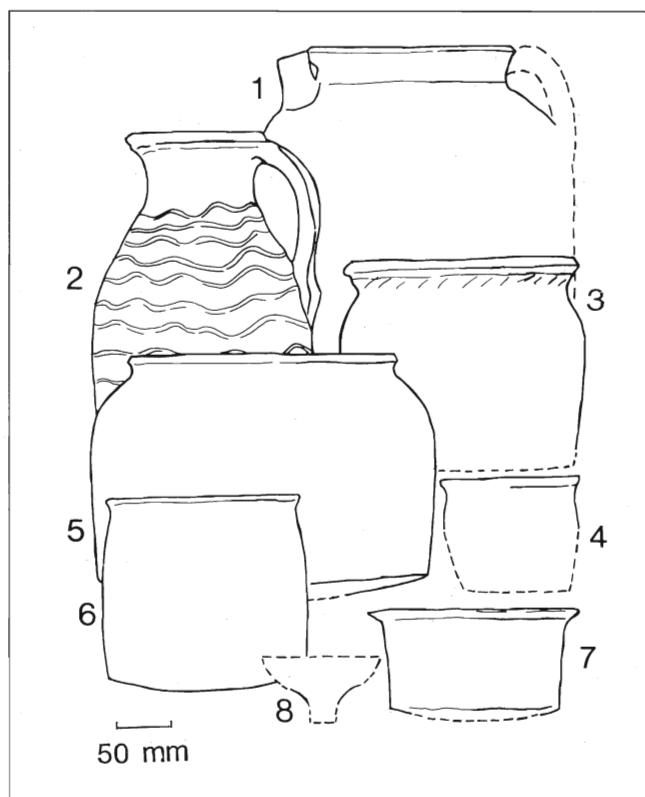
The fabric is light red or reddish yellow in colour, with large igneous rock inclusions clearly visible to the naked eye. The vessels are hand or coil built, the multi-purpose cooking pot/storage jars being the most common form. Other vessel forms, which occur in the early stages of the industry, are straight-sided bowls, lamps and spouted pitchers. From the 12th century, if not slightly earlier, jugs, which are often highly decorated, and large storage jars also appear, and occasionally handled cooking pots or cauldrons. During the 13th century, wide-mouthed bowls, dripping dishes, fire covers, pipkins and ridge tiles become increasingly common. Pottery loom weights and possibly one example of a urinal have also been found.

Both visual and thin section analysis have failed to distinguish any significant differences in the fabric inclusions present in sherds representative of the various periods

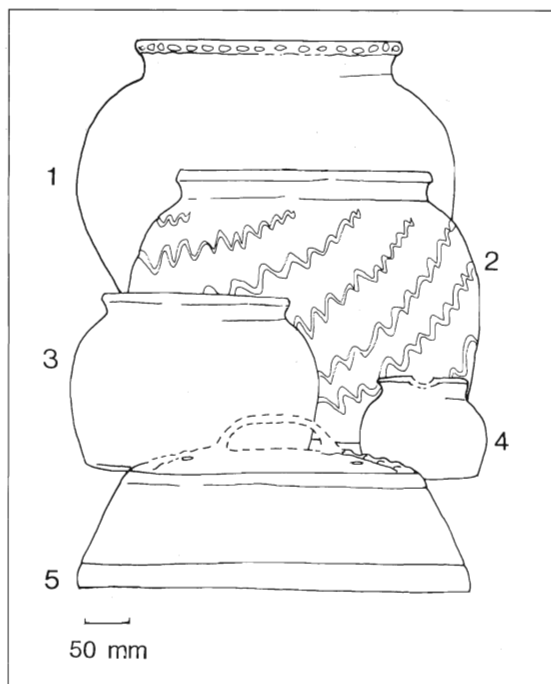
in the life of the industry. However petrological analysis has enabled the identification of the igneous rock as syenite, and a source of the rock has been pinpointed at Croft, just 3/4 mile (1.2 km) from Potters Marston, where at least three kilns are known, though only one has been excavated, (Haynes 1952).

Interestingly, much of the early pottery is imperfectly oxidised with a grey core and random patches of oxidation and reduction on the surfaces, implying that it was fired for a relatively short time in a bonfire or clamp kiln, in contact with organic material. The twin-flued kiln at Potters Marston is seen to represent an important technological innovation, occurring in the industry in the 13th century. However what proportion of the ware as a whole was kiln fired is not known.

There is some evidence that the local potters, although part of a different pottery tradition, were influenced by the finely made and widely exported products of the Saxo-Norman industry based at Stamford. Stamford Ware, a fine bodied wheel thrown ware, was apparently the most commonly occurring glazed ware in Leicester from the 11th to some time early in the 13th century. The trade links with Stamford were no doubt reinforced by the growth of the cloth making industry during the 12th century, when Leicester was a leading exporter of cloth to Northern Europe via the ports of the Wash. Nevertheless, as the Stamford pottery industry declined, Potters Marston Ware, which is only very rarely glazed, became predominant in Leicester by the late 12th century if not earlier. It should be borne in mind that much of the dating for Potters Marston Ware is



1. Potters Marston Ware 1: spouted pitches, 2: jug, 3-6: cooking pots/storage jars, 7: bowl, 8: lamp

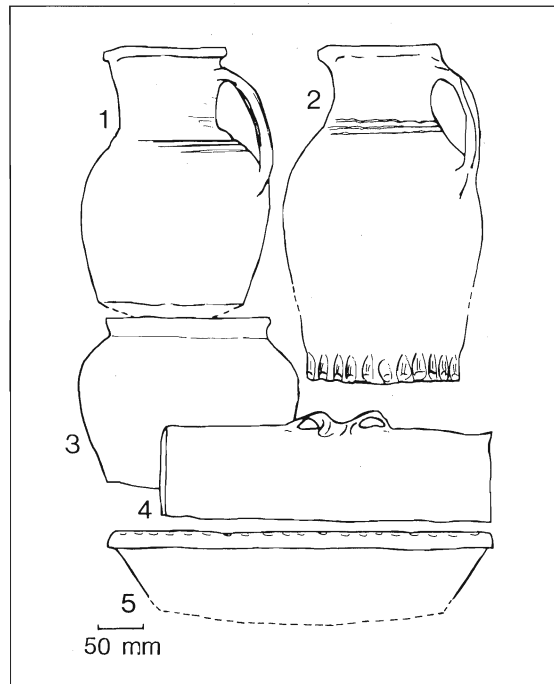


2. Potters Marston Ware 1: storage jar, 2-4 cooking pot/storage jars, 5: fire cover

dependent on the sequence at Stamford, as there are no significant stratified deposits dating earlier than the mid to late 12th century known from Leicester at present.

The predominant early Potters Marston vessel form, is the straight-sided, necked, cooking pot/storage jar, the rim and neck being reminiscent of the Stamford ware collared jars exported to Leicester in some numbers during this period, as are Stamford ware spouted pitchers. At least one spouted pitcher has been found in Potters Marston ware representing, as at Stamford, a modification of a basic collared or necked jar form, by the addition of a spout and handles. However the Potters Marston ware vessel is inexpertly made, the spout must have leaked, and the pot is apparently a 'one off', a failed attempt to emulate the more skilled Stamford potters. Upright flanged bowls very similar to Stamford products also occur; these presumably were easier to make. Nevertheless it must be added that Potters Marston ware generally is characterised by an extreme diversity in terms of skill and quality of workmanship. The potters at their best, most frequently during the early part of the industry, were able to minimise the constraints imposed by working with such a coarse bodied clay, and produced extremely thin walled, well proportioned pots. Many of the early jugs, for example, are elegantly executed, and often very imaginatively decorated, using a wide range of incised, stamped and rouletted motifs. The potters also experimented with powdered lead glazes during this period, but seem to have decided, probably rightly, that plastic decoration was more suited to the ware.

The decline in the potting industry at Stamford during the first half of the 13th century coincided with the appearance of the fine wheel thrown glazed products of the Nottingham and Chilvers Coton industries in Leicester. Potters Marston continued to dominate the local market however, especially for cooking pot/storage jars, and jugs also continued to be



3. Potters Marston Ware 1-2: jugs; 3: cooking pot/storage jar; 4: ridge tile; 5: bowl

imported into the town. Nevertheless the Potters Marston potters, perhaps in response to the competition from these new production centres, developed not only new firing techniques, and introduced new lead and copper glazes, but also produced a new range of vessel forms. The products of the industry evolved into the often squat, generally rounded and rather plain forms of the medieval period. Decorative motifs tended to be restricted to thumbing, thumb applied clay strips and the occasional slashing on jug handles.

Towards the end of the 13th century the potters at Chilvers Coton were switching from wood to coal as fuel, and developing at first triple and then multi flued kilns. These innovations produced higher firing temperatures, and the potters continued to diversify their range of products, possibly in response to increased demand for the harder fired wares. It is not surprising perhaps, that the Potters Marston industry with its relatively low fired, hand built, coarse bodied products ceased production some time during this period. Even if the potters had wished to take advantage of the new technology, the clay available to them may not have been suitable to higher firing temperatures, and they were not situated close to readily available supplies of coal.

Bibliography

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