POTTERY IN THE MIDDLE AGES IN SOUTH WALES

FACT SHEET NO.1 – POTTERY IN THE KITCHEN

Although built-in ovens were part of the equipment in the large kitchens for such establishments as castles and monasteries, most cooking was done on an open hearth with a wood fire. Most ordinary houses will not have had a separate kitchen, but will have done all their cooking on the main hearth in their living room (which might have been the only room of the house).

The type of pots that were used for cooking on the hearth were made from unglazed earthenware, which was usually made locally. Archaeologists refer to these types of pottery as coarseware. Potter’s wheels were known in the Middle Ages, but utilitarian pottery was frequently made by hand.

Pots like this can be used on a tripod or directly on top of the burning wood. Soot is often deposited on the outside of the pot where it is licked by the flames. However, care must be taken to avoid breakages caused by thermal shock. This will happen if the pot is heated too quickly, if cool/cold liquid is poured into a hot pot, or a hot pot is stood on something cool/cold and damp. This is because pottery does not conduct heat well, so when sudden heating or cooling occurs on a limited area, this area will expand or contract faster than the surrounding area and pottery is not strong enough to withstand the stresses caused. Little particles of materials like sand, flint or shell were mixed into the clay to help distribute the heat more evenly, but cooks still had to be careful how they used them or they would still break. (Of course lots of breakages would also have been caused by dropping pots, or knocking them too hard!)

A lot of the pots in use for cooking would also have been suitable for storage. Most cooking pots have a rounded body, and quite a wide rim which is useful for holding the pot with since they have no handles. The rim does not usually get as hot as the body of the pot when it is used on the fire, but you still need to protect your hands by using a thick cloth or a sheet of flexible leather. Metal cauldrons were also used, and could be made in larger sizes, but they rarely survive because metal objects no longer in use were normally recycled, whereas there is very little you can do with a broken pot other than throw it away.

Before matches were invented, it was more difficult to light a fire and people preferred to keep it going overnight if they could. However, it was important to ensure that it did not blaze up dangerously when everyone was asleep, so special pottery covers, shaped like upturned bowls with handles, were placed over the embers at night which allowed in just enough oxygen to keep the fire alive. These were called curfews, from the medieval French coverir = cover + feu = fire. (The time by which every household had to cover its fire might be announced by the town crier going his rounds. This has given rise to the modern meaning of curfew as the time of night when people are required to be indoors or back home.)
POTTERY IN THE MIDDLE AGES IN SOUTH WALES

FACT SHEET NO.2 – POTTERY ON THE TABLE

Poorer households would have mainly used dishes and bowls made from wood, and mugs and beakers made from wood, hardened leather or horn, all of which do not normally survive on archaeological sites because they are biodegradable. More affluent households, for example well-to-do merchants and the nobility, could afford to set their tables with plates, bowls and cups made from more expensive materials. Metal vessels were the most high status, made from pewter, or silver (or even gold) for those who could afford it, but again most of these would have been melted down to make new items when they went out of use. Glazed pottery was less expensive, but survives better because it was just thrown away when it was broken. It was more likely to be made on a wheel than pottery intended for cooking, and jugs were the commonest form.

The glaze, usually lead-based, was clear enough for the colour of the vessel underneath to show through. If the potter wanted a different colour, he could apply a thin slip of lighter coloured clay to the outside before the vessel was glazed. It was also possible to adjust the colour of the glaze by adding copper, which turned it green, or use copper to turn it green.

Techniques of decoration were:
- *Applied*, where the decorative elements, also in clay, were stuck on the outside, also helping to strengthen the vessel;
- *Sgraffito*, where a design was scratched on through the slip revealing the different colour of the body beneath,
- *Stamped*, sometimes pottery was ‘roller stamped’ and this was a common form of decoration with the Anglo Saxon pottery aswell,
- *Incised*, where a raw pot is incised with a sharp stick,
- *Painted*, for example Saintonge pottery (see below)
- *Slip trailed*, method of decoration where slip (a simple mixture of clay and water) is trailed onto a pot through a fine nozzle,
- Parts of some jugs were shaped to suggest animal or grotesque human heads, Parts of some jugs were shaped to suggest animal or human heads – some of the human faces have their hands up to their mouths as though they had toothache! (Or it could be a reminder not to let the wine loosen your tongue too much.)

This glazed pottery, which was frequently decorated, was worth trading over a wider area than the coarsewares. Many of the tablewares used in South Wales were made at Ham Green near Bristol, and would have been imported on boats sailing across the Bristol Channel. The Bristol-area pottery industry is quite well known. Production started in Ham Green in 12th century. There are also documentary references to potters, known as ‘crockers’ (information from Three Centuries of Ceramic Art in Bristol - The Story of Bristol Pottery and Porcelain
[http://www.kalendar.demon.co.uk/othermed.htm](http://www.kalendar.demon.co.uk/othermed.htm))

Much smaller amounts of pottery were imported from other places, for instance from Saintonge in France where it was made and exported as a by-product of the
Bordeaux wine trade from the early 13th century. The commonest forms, as might be expected, are wine jugs which characteristically are tall with slightly ovoid bodies, flat bases, parrot-beak spouts and strap handles. The body of the pottery was off-white or buff and was finer than the Bristol wares, making it possible to throw thinner vessels. Those that were glazed had a clear lead glaze on the outside which gave it the nickname ‘frog-skin ware’. Some of it also included copper filings, which produced a mottled mid green colouring. The Saintonge pottery was usually painted using copper filings to create images most commonly of a bird (possibly a parrot) and foliage (usually a fleur de lis). There is a theory that the different decorations identified what kind or wine was in it, and the jugs would be sent over from Saintonge along with the wine and given so illiterate people knew what they were drinking and could ask for e.g. ‘the bird’ if that’s what they preferred. One of the types of Saintonge jug was the ‘Puzzle Jug’ which was a fun challenge for people to try to drink from the jug without spilling, and as the name suggests, you have to figure out the puzzle for how to drink from it! (More information on (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saintonge) and French pottery in medieval Wales from NMW website (http://www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/rhagor/article/1944/).