

'THE POTTERY HOUSE IN THE PARK' DUNSTER

The rare survival of an 18th-century pottery kiln



Dunster and some other early surviving potteries in the South West of England

The kiln at Dunster is a survivor from a small mid eighteenth-century estate pottery making red earthenwares. Although small- and



industrial-scale pottery-making was widespread in the South West into the mid-20th century (studio pottery-making still is), relatively few old pottery kilns have survived. Three of them - Barnstaple (1650s), Dunster (1759), Winchcombe (1794) – are outstanding early survivals.

Barnstaple (Devon)

Barnstaple, Bideford and Great Torrington were the main centres of the North Devon pottery industry which flourished from the 16th century to 2005. One of the mid 17th-century kilns excavated in 1989 is conserved and reconstructed in the Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon where it is exhibited with examples of the distinctive North Devon pottery. For details see: www.devonmuseums.net.

Barnstaple (Devon)

One kiln of Brannam's former Litchdon Street Pottery has been conserved together with the building highly decorated with terracotta panels which once housed the showroom and offices. The kiln stands at the rear of the modern premises. It was one of five and probably built in the early 20th century designed to be fired with coal. It was converted to gas in the 1960s and was last used in the 1990s. There is an excellent collection and exhibition about Brannam's in the Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon.



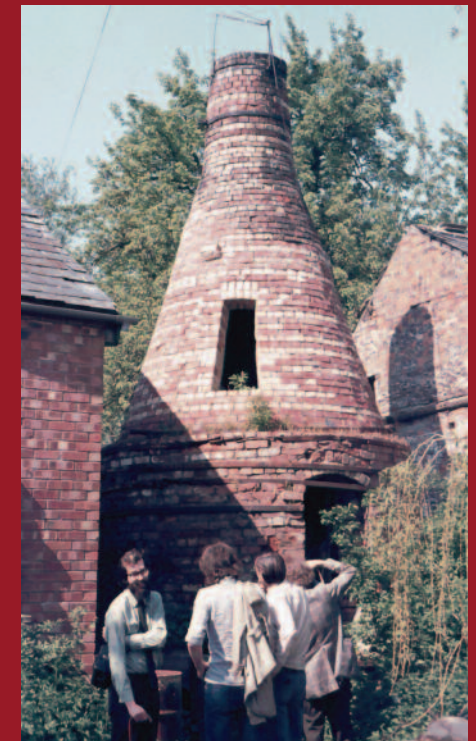
Bridgwater (Somerset)

On East Quay, Somerset County Museums and Sedgemoor District Museums Services have established a museum of the Somerset Brick and Tile industry adjoining the last surviving kiln of the former Barham Brother's works. It is a coal-fired kiln built in the early 20th century but converted in the 1950s to downdraft working. For details see:

www.somerset.gov.uk/somerset/culturecommunity/museums/somersetmuseums/bricktile.

Winchcombe (Gloucestershire)

Winchcombe Pottery is a thriving working pottery and has been since Michael Cardew leased the old pottery complex in 1926. The disused wood-fired kiln standing in the yard may well be the second oldest in England after the kiln at Dunster. Parts of its brickwork and its design indicate that this is the kiln that was first built in 1794. For details see: www.winchcombepottery.co.uk.



Bovey Tracey (Devon)

A bank of three coal-fired 'muffle' kilns are preserved at the Old Pottery, now a craft centre. The pottery closed in 1956. The kilns probably date from the early 20th century.

The kiln at
Winchcombe Pottery
(first built 1794).

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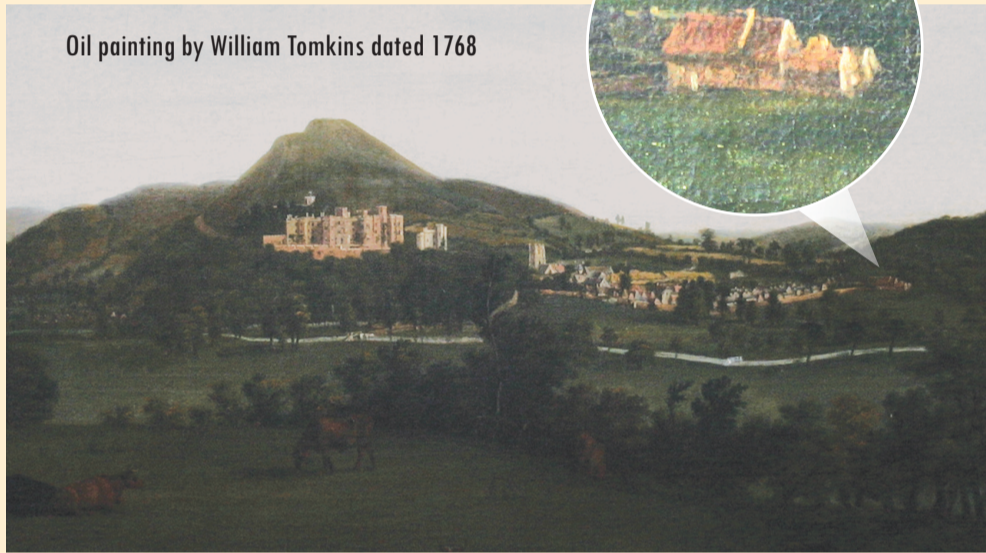
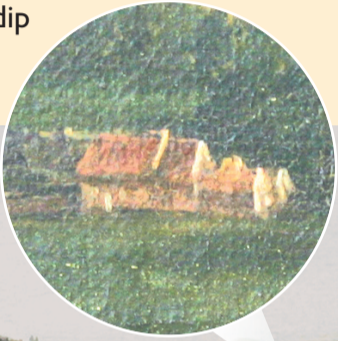
What is it?

The pottery kiln is a structure for firing earthenware pottery. From the available evidence it seems to date to 1759 and as such it is an extremely rare and important building.

There are three pieces of evidence to identify and date this remarkable building:

- The first is the kiln itself which has been archaeologically recorded and partly excavated to expose the fireboxes and system of flues which ran underneath the floor;
- The second is an oil painting signed by William Tomkins and dated 1768, at present hanging on the main staircase of Dunster Castle. The painting is a panorama of the Castle, the Old Park and Conygar Hill and the kiln is shown as part of a group of buildings then standing on this site (The marks left where the pitched roof of the building in which it partly stood can still be seen on either side of the kiln);
- The third is a series of accounts which form part of the Luttrell family estate papers on deposit in the Somerset Record Office. They record how John and Ruth Mogg of Bristol were commissioned in 1759 to build and operate a 'Pottery House in the Park' at Dunster and how they went about the business. All the building materials (bricks, stone and timber) were provided by the estate. The clay for making the pottery came from the estate brickfields at the Warren. Only the lead for glazing which was mined in the Mendip Hills had to be shipped in the estate dayboat from Bristol.

Oil painting by William Tomkins dated 1768



Why is it important?

As far as is known, this is the earliest pottery kiln to survive almost complete exactly where it was built. Only one other kiln may survive from the eighteenth century - that at Winchcombe in Gloucestershire, probably first built in 1794.

The Moggs came from Bristol, then a leading pottery-making centre, so it is likely that the kiln is a 'state of the art' design from the period before technical drawings were published. As such it is an important archaeological monument.

How did the kiln work?

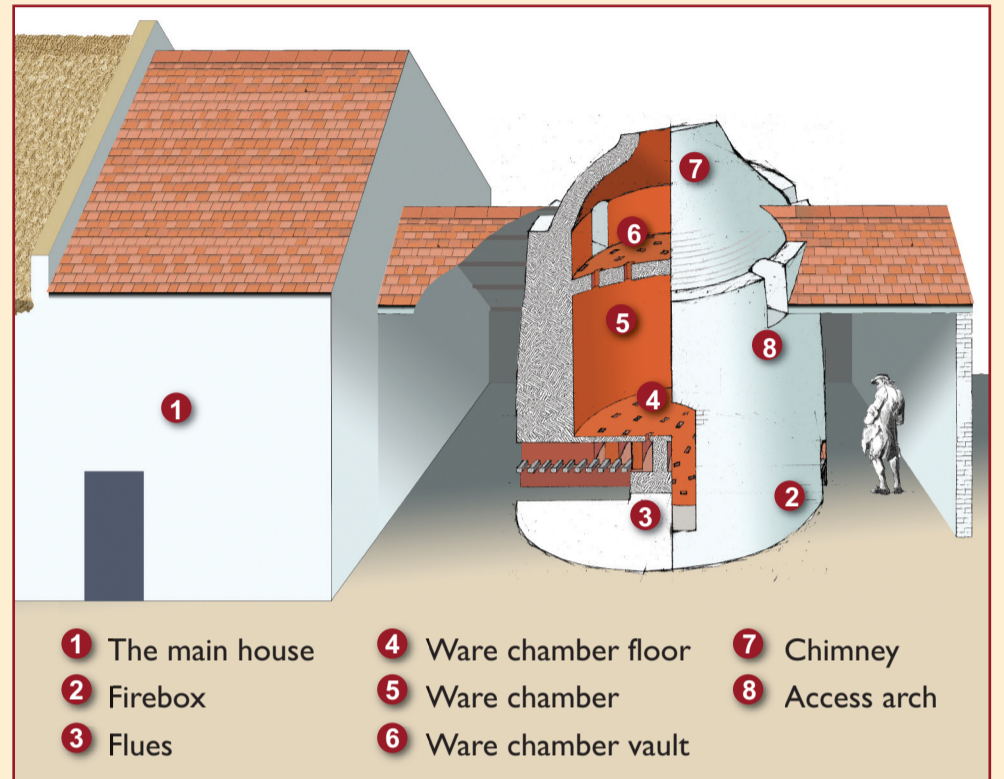
According to Tompkins' painting, the main 'House' (1) stood to the west (left) of the kiln. It would have contained the workshops where clay was prepared, the pots were made and probably space to store the finished ware. The low range containing the kiln was probably where the pots were dried before firing and fuel was stored, as well as providing cover for the potter firing the kiln.

The kiln consists of three parts:

- The lowest part contains the fireboxes (2), one on each side, and a series of flues (3) that distributed the flame and heat underneath the floor (4). The floor which would have been pierced by a series of holes in line with the flues, is now missing. The fireboxes were once fitted with firebars and could have burnt coal. It is more likely that wood was used as this was readily available from the estate.
- The second part is the main ware chamber (5). Here the dry pots would have been stacked from the floor almost to the vault, before the doorway was bricked up and the firing started. The vault (6) has a pattern of holes similar to that which once pierced the floor and through these hot gases and flame from the burning fuel were drawn up around the pots.
- The third part of the kiln is the chimney (7). No more than half a metre of its original height has been lost. The main function of the chimney was to improve the 'draw' of the hot gases through the pots. It was always difficult to produce an even heat through the load and so, to help the potter overcome this, four arched openings (8) provided

access to block those holes in the vault where the flame was hottest and divert it to cooler parts of the kiln. Some of the loose bricks found in the chimney may have been used for this purpose.

A kiln of this size was probably fired over about 36 hours. Most of the first 18 were spent warming the kiln and driving off the moisture in the clay. During the second, the temperature was gradually raised to about 1000 degrees centigrade to change the raw clay into red earthenware and to melt the lead to form a glaze over the inside of the pots. The kiln was then left for another 24 hours to cool before the blocking of the door was broken down and the finished pots removed.



What was made here?

What we know of the wares comes from the infilling of the flues. When the pottery was finally taken out of use, the floor of the ware chamber was removed and the sill of the door was lowered and the ground level outside raised, covering up the fireboxes. The exposed flues were filled with rubbish to form a new floor surface of beaten earth. This rubbish included unfired pots. These fragments agree with a later documentary reference to the pottery making kitchen wares - platters, pots, porringers, pitchers, bowls, pans. It was common for red earthenware pottery of this date to be given a plain lead glaze inside which appears brown on the red body.

Why was the pottery built here?

We have no written record for why the pottery was built. It is a strange choice of site, perched on the top of a hillock and far from a source of readily available water. It was built during a period when Henry Fowles Luttrell was making many improvements to the Park such as Castle Mill and the tower on top of Conygar Hill. It was also fashionable to have devices that would provide movement and interest in their parkland. It is therefore likely that the pottery - an industrial activity normally hidden away - was built in full view of the Castle. Apart from making an unusual group of buildings, a pottery kiln firing at night is always an impressive sight.

Why does the kiln survive?

John Mogg died in November 1760, a year after the first firing of the kiln. By then he had fired the kiln seven times and was part way to filling it for an eighth firing. After he died the pottery seems to have been worked for some time.

The Pottery House was demolished about 1850 and the estate must have taken the decision to preserve the kiln, perhaps because there was still some regard for it as a landscape feature. It was converted to a garden shed for the Luttrell Arms and used for over 150 years. It is now owned by the Luttrell Arms Hotel.



Exmoor National Park and the Conservation of Archaeological Structures And Buildings

Exmoor National Park Authority works with a number of partners to conserve and enhance the cultural heritage of the National Park. The Dunster pottery kiln, is a rare and nationally important industrial building, but it had gently deteriorated over a long period of time and a number of structural cracks were visible on the structure. A detailed investigation of the kiln was carried out to establish the best way of addressing these problems. As a result of this work, a series of repairs were made including 'stitching' the cracks together, consolidation of the interior of the kiln roof and whitewashing of its exterior to prevent water ingress. These works were funded by English Heritage and Exmoor National Park Authority.

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Photograph of the painting in Dunster Castle by kind permission of the
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