

The medieval potters of Cheam

by Clive Orton

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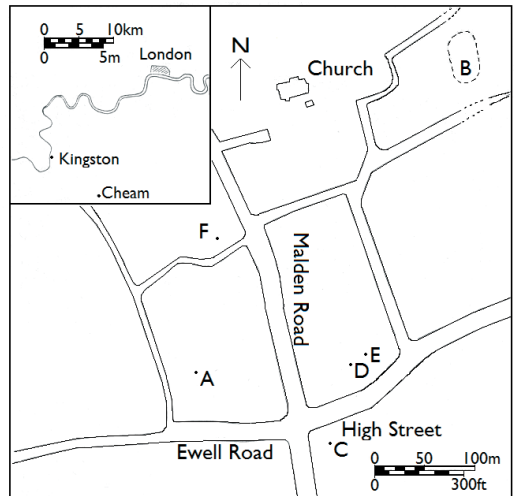
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Discoveries

In 1923 local architect Charles Marshall was surprised to see archaeological remains when a garden in Parkside, Cheam, was being levelled for a new tennis court. A 'dig' revealed the foundations of a medieval pottery kiln, as well as fragments of many *waster pots* of that period. There was a lot of interest nationally in his discovery, because this was the first medieval pottery kiln to be recognised archaeologically in England. In fact, others had been found in the 19th century, but they had been thought to be of Roman date. Marshall published the results of his work very quickly, in the following year.

Marshall continued to keep his eyes open for further discoveries in the area, and was rewarded in 1936 when more waster pottery of the same date was found behind the shop at 19 High Street, Cheam. At about this time, he discovered yet more pottery on a building site, but it proved to come from the soil being brought in from elsewhere to build up the gardens. He traced it back to The Harrow public house, on



Waster pottery: pottery that is not usable because it has gone wrong in the firing is known as waster pottery. It may be distorted, split, stuck to other pots, or in extreme cases, exploded. It is usually found close to where it was made, and can tell us a great deal about the way in which it was made.

Map of Cheam village, showing locations of sites mentioned in the text:

A = Parkside,

B = clay pit thought by Marshall to be the source of the clay used at Parkside,

C = The Harrow,

D = 19 High Street,

E = 23 High Street,

F = Whitehall.

Whitehall, Cheam: is a timber-framed house in Malden Road dating to about 1500. It is owned by the London Borough of Sutton, who open it to the public with the support of the Friends of Whitehall.

the other side of Cheam High Street, where land behind the pub was being levelled to extend the car park. Once again, Marshall was prompt to publish his findings, in 1941.

In 1968, yet more of this pottery was found behind the shops at 15–23 High Street Cheam. The local archaeological society mounted an excavation under the direction of Martyn Morris, which revealed the remains of a kiln similar to Marshall's one, which had been mostly destroyed by the building of a much larger later one. As well as more of the now-familiar waster pottery, they found fragments of much larger pots of a different type, which were also thought to be wasters. Finally, in 1978 when *Whitehall* was being prepared to be opened to the public, work in the back garden revealed yet more waster pottery, mixed with broken-up fragments of a kiln, in the packing



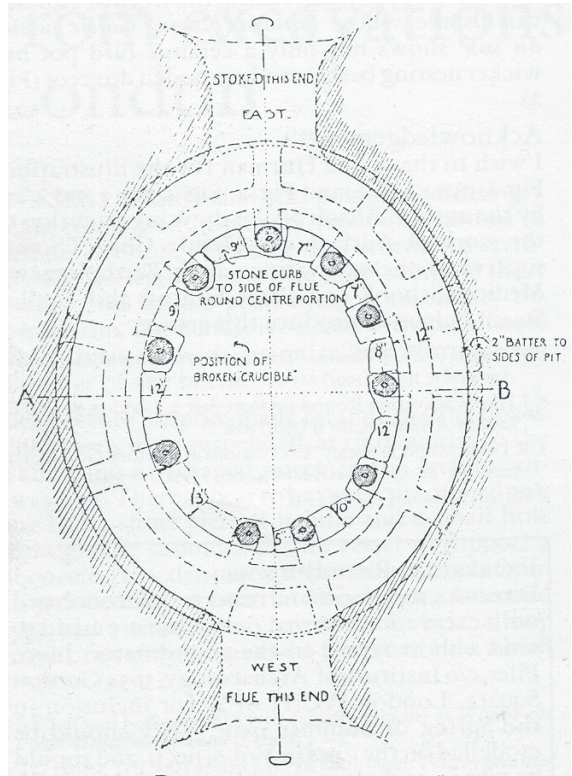
Archaeological excavations in progress at Whitehall garden

around a well shaft. They were excavated by the local archaeological society, this time under the direction of Norman Nail, and large quantities of pottery were found and put into store. An accident to Norman Nail prevented further work being undertaken at that time.

In 2010 the *Time Cheam Project* was set up by Clive Orton, a retired professor of archaeology, to clean and study the pottery from the Whitehall excavation, and to relate it to other findings in the village. This work lasted for three years, and this little book summarises what we know about this pottery and the people who made it.

Kilns and potters

What did these kilns look like, and what do we know about the potters who worked them? The kilns all have the same basic shape: oval with a flue at each end for firing, and a pedestal in the centre on which to stand the pots. Marshall's plan of the Parkside kiln shows this very well, and also shows a curious basket-like structure, now called 'fire-



Plan of the Parkside kiln, drawn by C.J. Marshall



Replica of the Parkside kiln, built by the Science Museum, London

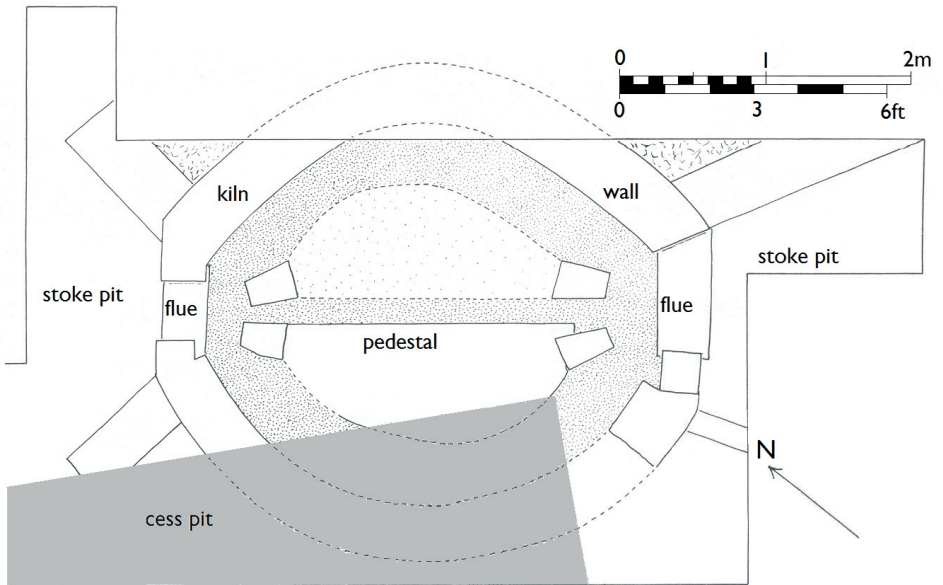


The inside of the Parkside kiln, showing some of the clay cylinders found there



Some of the kiln fragments found in the Whitehall garden excavation. Left: 'top' view of a reconstructed fragment; right: view of the 'inside' of a fragment

bars', that rises from the pedestal, and curves into the walls of the kiln. This feature was incorporated into a replica built by the Science Museum in London, but has not been found in any other medieval kiln, in England or elsewhere. For this reason, its function, and even its existence, has been disputed, and it has been



Plan of the kiln found at 15–23 High Street, excavated in 1969

suggested that Marshall over-interpreted the clay cylinders that he found. However, some fragments found at Whitehall support his view, and the debate goes on.

The later kiln at 15–23 High Street was much bigger than the others; in fact, it was probably the biggest kiln in the region for the next 150 years. Nevertheless, it seems to have worked on the same basic principles. They are all of what is called the ‘*twin-flue up-draught*’ type, and Marshall’s idea that his kiln was of ‘*through-draught*’ type is no longer supported.

Up-draught and through-draught kilns:

in an up-draught kiln, the hot gases from the flue or flues (there may be one, two, or even more flues) pass upwards through the stacked pots before escaping from the top of the kiln.

In a through-draught kiln, the hot gases pass through the kiln from one end to the other, heating the pots as they pass. Some sort of a chimney would be needed at one end to create the necessary draught.

Kiln furniture: fragments of the superstructure of a kiln, or of its internal fittings, are known as kiln furniture. They can provide important for the way in which kilns are made and used. They are rarely found from kilns of this date.



A stack of roof tiles fused together and warped, found in the Whitehall garden excavation



Fragment of kiln shelving from the Whitehall garden excavation, showing rim of a jug embedded in the upper surface

Only the parts of the kilns that were below the original ground level survived to be found, and we must use our imaginations and knowledge of surviving kilns elsewhere to reconstruct their appearance.

A common opinion is to see them as dome-shaped, with the pots covered by a clay dome which would have to be broken down to retrieve the pots after each firing. Finds of *kiln furniture* from the Whitehall garden excavation provide valuable new evidence about the design and operation of local kilns. First, a stack of roof tiles, fused together and warped by extreme heat, supports the idea that at least one of the kilns was cylindrical in shape, made of successive tiers of roof tiles, but of unknown height. The pots stacked inside could be covered by broken pieces of pottery (sherds) and a horizontal layer of clay. The second piece of kiln furniture is a fragment of roof tile which has ‘melted’ and collapsed under extreme heat. Embedded in each surface is the rim of a Cheam whiteware rounded jug (see

left), suggesting that the tile is part of a shelf which separates two layers of jugs, the uppermost of which are stacked upside-down. We do not know whether shelving would be used consistently throughout the height of a kiln, or whether some pots would be stacked directly onto the preceding layer of pots. Taken together, these two pieces of evidence suggest that the pottery at Whitehall may be the result of a kiln failure or melt-down, where the remains of a collapsed kiln were simply dumped.

The existence of tile shelving may help to explain the purpose of the fire-bars found at Parkside and at Whitehall. If the lowest tier of pots stood on the central pedestal, there would be a space between the pots and the sides of the kiln, which would allow the heat to escape too readily. A layer of tile shelving, standing partly on the pots and supported at its outer edge by the fire-bars, would trap the draft and diffuse the heat more evenly through the kiln. Another layer of pots would stand on the shelving; above this would be an unknown number of further tiers of pots, perhaps separated by further shelving.

We do not know how many kilns there were in Cheam, but it is likely that there were more than the three that we know. The remains from Whitehall, for example, may come from a kiln as yet undiscovered because, although similar in some respects to those from Parkside, they also show important differences.

We are fortunate in knowing more about the potters themselves than is often the case. This is because of the existence of *legal documents*, dating to the 1390s, recording disputes between the Cheam potters and the ‘men of Morden’ over land situated in what is now North Cheam. Not only do these give us a date when the pottery was operating (which supports other evidence), but also gives us the names of three potters: Walter the potter and John and Nicholas Waterservant. This latter may be a mis-recording of “John and Nicholas, Walter’s servants”, which would tell us that Walter, the master potter, had at least two assistants working for him at this time. These documents also tell us that Walter and the others were not only potters, but were also

Legal documents: Walter Pulter of Cheam for trespass in the lord's common pasture at Sparwefeld with his sheep on 2 occasions; pledges Ralph atte Rithe and John Carpenter. John Gerard of the same with his sheep at the same place; pledge Ralph atte Rithe. Likewise they present that John Shepherde, servant of Walter Potter, unjustly raised hue and cry upon Alan Berenger against the peace. Pledge Thomas Carpenter.

[extract from BL Add Roll 56039 (2 July 1397)]

Royal writ to (John Salerne) Sheriff of Surrey to arrest John Heruy, Richard Waterseruant, potter, and Nicholas Waterseruant, potter, of Cheyham, and bring them before the Justices at Westminster in Trinity Term to answer (William of Colchester) Abbat of Westminster on the plea of assaulting (together with John Prat, John Gerard sen., John Gerard jun., Walter Potter and Henry Hegger) John Gyldene, the Abbat's servant at Mordon Co. Surrey.

[Extract from Westminster Abbey Muniments 1831 (16 May 1397)]

sheep-farmers on some scale. This supports the view that many medieval potters, particularly in rural areas, were part-time and had other occupations, such as farming, although it is not clear which was their main source of income.



Some of the pots (mostly jugs) found at Parkside

The products

Two very distinct sorts of pottery were made in Cheam. These days they are referred to as Cheam whiteware and Cheam redware. The former is by far the more common: it is found at all the sites in Cheam, as well as in London, much of Surrey and parts of Middlesex and Hertfordshire. In contrast, the redware is really only known from 15–23 High Street; it may have been found

elsewhere in the region but it is not easy to distinguish it from other locally-made red wares.

The whiteware is characterised as being made of a distinctive *white-firing clay*, thought to derive from the Reading Beds, which run in a narrow band east-west across Surrey, just north of the North Downs. The pots are almost all wheel-thrown and fired to a temperature high enough to make them almost (but not quite) watertight. The two rim sherds which are embedded in the collapsed shelf are not over-fired, suggesting that Cheam whiteware could safely be fired to a temperature well above that needed for roofing tiles. The pots have a lead glaze, which is often coloured green by the addition of copper, but which rarely covers the whole vessel, and is often very patchy.

By far the bulk of the whiteware production consists of *wheel-thrown* jugs, which come in two broad size ranges: smaller (about 1 pint) 'biconical' drinking jugs and larger (about 2 to 3 pints) 'rounded' pouring jugs, which often have a pouring lip. All the jugs have handles; those on the drinking jugs are really distinctive in the way in which they are attached. First, several holes are pierced through the side of the jug in a

White- and red-firing clay: clay is a complicated mineral, and in its pure state it would usually fire to a white colour. However, pure clays are rare, and impurities, particularly of iron compounds, are common. The effect of them is to make the pot turn either red or grey (or sometimes both, in patches) when fired; red if there is plenty of oxygen in the kiln, (an 'oxidising atmosphere') and grey if not (a 'reducing atmosphere').

Wheel-throwing: pottery that is made on a wheel and is spun fast enough to be shaped by a combination of centrifugal force and the potter's hands is known as wheel-thrown. Other ways of making pots include 'coiling' (building it up from coils or rings of clay), 'pinching' (squeezing it into shape from a solid lump) and 'slab-building' (constructing it from flat slabs of clay). So far, all the pottery from Cheam is wheel-thrown, except for two examples of slab-building.



**Examples of Cheam whiteware jugs:
(left) rounded pouring jug (right) biconical drinking jug
(not to the same scale)**

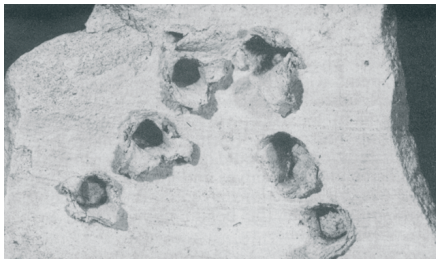


Photo showing how the handles are attached to Cheam whiteware drinking jugs, taken from the inside of the jug

horseshoe shape, and then the handle is squeezed on so that it fills the holes in the jug. Marshall called this the 'skewered' technique, and if you find it then you know that you have a Cheam jug. The latest whiteware jugs have a 'barrel' shape; they are less well made than the earlier jugs, for example the handles are poorly attached, and they

have even less glaze (or none at all). They come in a wide range of sizes, and appear to replace both the biconical and the rounded jugs. They are only common at *The Harrow* site, though a few occur elsewhere. Apart from jugs, the only pots that are at all common are small dishes or 'saucers' (which may actually be lids); there are also a few cooking pots and large bowls.

The Cheam redware, which was found only at 15–23 High Street, is completely different. Not only is it a different colour (although it is called 'red', some is grey and some is a mixture of red and grey), it consists of much larger pots. The most common are pitchers (very large jug shapes); some have a bung-hole suggesting that they were used in domestic brewing. Other common shapes are pipkins (a sort of cooking pot with

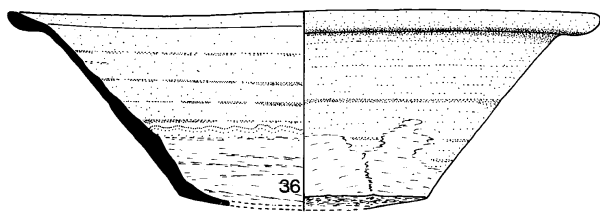
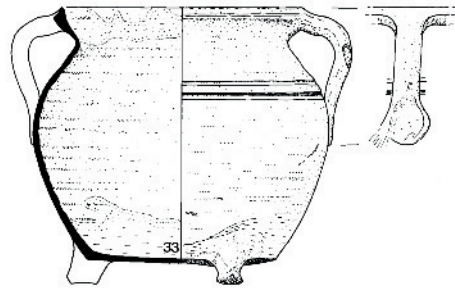
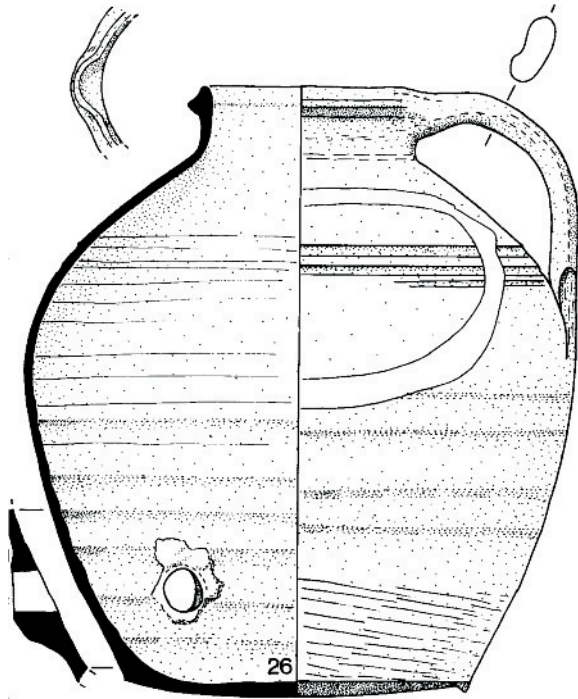


A group of Cheam whiteware jugs. The small one at the front and the large one at the back are 'barrel-shaped'



Drawing of a Cheam whiteware small dish

Archaeological drawings: archaeologists draw pots in a very standardised way. To the left of the centre line you can see the inside of the pot and a cross-section through the pot itself. To the right of the centre line you can see the outside of the pot. It may help if you can imagine looking sideways-on at a pot from which the front-left quarter has been removed. If this does not help, don't worry. Using this technique, archaeologists can make drawings that look like whole pots from a series of fragments.



**Drawings of Cheam redware pots:
(top) bunghole pitcher, (centre) pipkin, (bottom) large bowl**

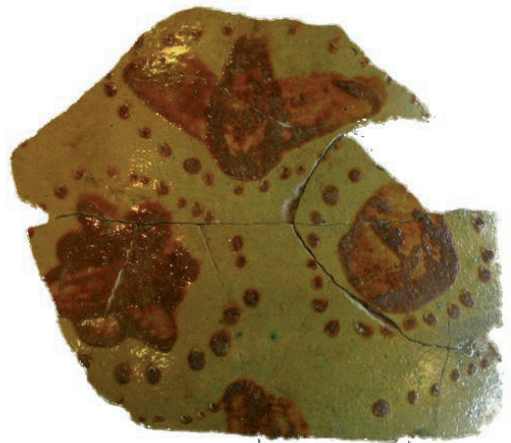
handles and feet) and large bowls; there is also a range of less common shapes. Glaze is used on the insides of pipkins and bowls, but it is rarely used for decoration. Instead, white stripes are sometimes painted on (see above).

The bigger picture

The archaeologist's task is to make sense of all this evidence in the context of its time and location. It appears that Cheam was supplying London and much of its region with whiteware drinking jugs from about 1350 to about 1500. It was definitely a 'niche' producer, as its other products are scarcely known outside Cheam. The earliest Cheam whiteware (probably that from Whitehall) is similar to the white ware being made in Kingston throughout the 14th century. Given that Kingston has no white-firing clay of its own, but may have brought it in from Cheam, it may be that after the disruption of the Black Death in 1348/49, some of the Kingston potters moved to Cheam to be nearer their source of clay. They may have concentrated their production on the smaller vessels, the drinking and pouring jugs, because of the

How can we tell the date of the pottery?

There is as yet no way of dating the pottery in itself. Instead, we rely on large dumps of rubbish (which include much pottery) that were deposited behind successive timber waterfronts to the Thames in the City of London. Each waterfront can be dated by dendrochronology (tree-rings), and these dates can be applied to the dumps behind the respective waterfronts, because the waterfronts needed the support of the dumps to resist the pressure of the incoming tide.



A fragment of a highly decorated jug or pitcher in Cheam whiteware, from the Whitehall garden site



A German stoneware drinking mug from Raeren

pottery declined over time, with (for example) less secure attachment of the handles and less use of glaze. Certainly, the most elaborately decorated pots come from the Whitehall site. It may be that the disaster represented by the kiln fragments from Whitehall discouraged the potters from their early ambitions.

Then, quite suddenly around 1480 to 1500, the production

difficulty of moving larger vessels over land. Certainly, the other suppliers of pots to London all had access via water, while Cheam did not. There is a hint that production moved slowly southwards within the village, ending at *The Harrow* site late in the 15th century, though future discoveries may show that this picture is too simple. There is also a suggestion that the technical quality of the

Stoneware: is pottery that has been fired to a temperature high enough to make it 'sinter' (almost melt) and become completely watertight. It was made in Germany from the 13th century onwards, but was not made successfully in this country until the 1670s, when John Dwight started to manufacture it at Fulham. It was particularly suited to making drinking vessels. Not all clays are suitable for firing to such temperatures; Cheam clay probably was (as has been shown by modern experiments) but the Cheam potters do not seem to have made stoneware, except possibly in small experimental quantities, or by accident. It may be that the extra expense involved in the final temperature rise was not thought to be worth it.

of Cheam whiteware stops. This coincides with the start of the import of large quantities of German stoneware drinking mugs, mainly from the kilns at Raeren. It may be that Cheam couldn't compete with a superior, or at least more fashionable, product, and just went out of business. On the other hand, it may not have been that simple. Cheam whiteware is nearly as watertight as stoneware, and other stoneware drinking vessels, jugs from kilns at Siegburg in Germany, have been found in London contemporaneously with Cheam whiteware. If Raeren mugs could out-compete Cheam, why could not Siegburg? The answer may be that of the three types, only Raeren mugs were glazed all over, and that may be their attraction, or it may be that there was a change in fashion from drinking from jugs to drinking from mugs (drinking mugs are unknown in London until this date).



A German stoneware drinking jug from Siegburg

Whatever the reason, Cheam whiteware disappears from the scene, and at about the same time, Cheam redware appears. It is tempting to see this as an attempt by the Cheam potters to diversify, following the loss of their main market. If so, they seem

to have little success. There are a few similar pots from Kingston (which may have been made there), but the red wares supplied to London in the 16th century seem to come from sources, such as Lambeth, Aldgate and Woolwich, which are nearer to London.

Nonsuch Palace: Henry VIII's palace at Nonsuch was built in 1538–46 and demolished between 1682 and 1688.

When it was excavated in 1959, most of the finds appeared to date to immediately before the demolition, say in the 1670s.

That might be the end of the story, except for some rather unusual pots from *Nonsuch Palace*. Large pots in a red ware, similar to Cheam redware, were found in deposits dated to the 1670s. For this date, they look distinctly old-fashioned. Are they the last gasp of what was by then a purely local producer? Or do they come from somewhere else, from a kiln that is yet to be discovered? Despite nearly a century of research, we still have much to learn.

Suggestions for further reading

The most comprehensive account of Cheam whiteware can be found in J. Pearce and A. Vince *A dated type-series of London medieval pottery. Part 4: Surrey Whitewares*. 1988. Published by London and Middlesex Archaeological Society.

For accounts of the individual discoveries, see:

C.J. Marshall 'A medieval pottery kiln discovered at Cheam' *Surrey Archaeological Collections* **35** (1924) 79–94.

C.J. Marshall 'The sites of two more 13th-century pottery kilns discovered at Cheam' *Surrey Archaeological Collections* **47** (1941) 99–100.

C.R. Orton 'Medieval pottery from a kiln site at Cheam: part 1' *London Archaeologist* **3** (1979) 300–4.

C.R. Orton 'Medieval pottery from a kiln site at Cheam: part 2' *London Archaeologist* **3** (1979) 355–9.

C.R. Orton 'The excavation of a late medieval/transitional pottery kiln at Cheam, Surrey' *Surrey Archaeological Collections* **73** (1982) 49–92.

C.R. Orton 'Pottery from the Whitehall garden, Cheam, and its place in the medieval Cheam whiteware industry' *Surrey Archaeological Collections* **99** (2016) 69–90.

For a discussion of how whiteware jugs may have been stacked in the kiln, see R.W. Newell 'Reduction and oxidation in English medieval kiln practices' *Medieval Ceramics* **22-23** (1999) 124–134.

For dating evidence from the Thames waterfronts, see C. Milne and G. Milne *Medieval waterfront development at Trig Lane, London*. 1982. London and Middlesex Archaeological Society Special Paper **5**.

For more than you ever wanted to know about German stoneware, see D. Gaimster *German Stoneware 1200–1900*. 1997. Published by the British Museum Press.

For John Dwight's pottery at Fulham, see C. Green *John Dwight's Fulham Pottery. Excavations 1971–79*. 1999. Published by English Heritage.

For the pottery from Nonsuch Palace, see M. Biddle *Nonsuch Palace. The Material Culture of a Noble Restoration Household*. 2005, especially pages 120–199. Published by Oxbow Books.

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John Phillips for the photograph of the kiln shelving.

The other drawings are by the author and the other photographs are by members of the *Time Cheam*.