

Identify the key reference and data resources that you use in your specialism to ensure that your work is properly informed, and critically evaluate their accessibility, currency, reliability and relevance

Introduction

As a trainee pottery specialist there are two main types of resources I make use of when working on an assemblage: those designed to ensure the assemblage is analysed and reported on to a sufficiently high standard, and those used to properly identify the sherds within the assemblage. These two groups serve quite different purposes. The first are designed specifically to guide anyone, no matter their experience, through all aspects of specialist work, and as such they must be evaluated on their success in making that task as accessible and straightforward as possible. Could someone who has never looked at a pottery assemblage before produce a viable report based on them? The second group, however, is largely made up of resources which were not produced with the sole intent of being used for reference, only that they could be used as such. These have to be considered within the limitations of their formatting, but also have to be evaluated based on how well they have considered this potential future use, and how it has factored into the presentation of the data within.

Official guidance documents

As someone still getting to grips with the requirements and methodologies involved in specialist work, resources designed to guide a person through these processes are essential reference points. As a pottery specialist I currently find myself in a curious transitional phase where this kind of resource is concerned. Since 2016 the accepted guidance for anyone in the field had been *A Standard for Pottery Studies in Archaeology* (Barclay *et al.*, 2016), a document produced jointly by the three main archaeological pottery research groups – the

Prehistoric Ceramics Research Group, the Study Group for Roman Pottery, and the Medieval Pottery Research Group. This has been the first port of call for any assemblage I have been tasked with reporting on, and is the document I always keep closest to hand at my desk. Recently, however, this document has been refreshed as part of its absorption into the ClfA family of guidance documents and has now been superseded by the new *Toolkit for Finds: Pottery* (ClfA, 2024). The toolkit is, in large part, simply a reformatting of the previous *Standard* with only a few alterations to integrate it into ClfA's suite of specialist reporting toolkits. This limited difference between the two though means that as of this point the *Standard* is still my go to reference, for reasons I will explain.

Both the *Standard* and the *Toolkit* are basically set out to be 'idiot's guides' in the best interpretation of that. All of the information and instruction is laid out explicitly, in ways that could seem overexplained, but which genuinely helps prevent confusion. The changes between the *Standard* and the *Toolkit* in many respects are simply enhancements of this by adding clarifying wording, additional steps to processes, or helpful subdivisions to bullet-pointed lists. The structure of both documents, following the process from start to finish, project planning to archiving, is clearly set out in such a way that as long as you methodically follow each section of the guidance you should meet the expectations of an acceptable standard of pottery report by the end of it. With the *Toolkit* having been finalised in November 2024 it is also about as up to date in its advice as it could possibly be. The new digital format allows for its content to be changed easily in the future, meaning there should never be a time when it contains outdated information. It's hard to think of any way in which this approach is lacking in all honesty, but through active use you do obviously learn that there are plenty of parts of that can be, and at times are necessary to, skip over because the level of thoroughness either doesn't apply to the type of assemblage you're working on or the demands of commercial archaeological work.

The alterations to the *Standard* mainly constitute the addition of references to other ClfA documentation, with the only significant change found in the *Toolkit* being to the reporting portion of it, which now integrates the new 'type' categorisation for reports introduced in the *Toolkit for Specialist Reporting* (ClfA, 2021). Whereas the *Standard* provided a guide for the content of a pottery report in general with the suggestion to include whichever parts

you deem appropriate, the *Toolkit* offers some level of instruction on what to include based on the nature of the report. Though specifically which parts of the content guide should or shouldn't be included for each 'type' requires consulting the *Toolkit for Specialist Reporting*, which isn't quite as useful as having all of that information together in a single document.

Nesting the guidance within a suite of other documents that all cross-reference each other obviously has benefits in unifying many of the specialist approaches into a consistent format. They are primarily designed to be resources for novices and early career archaeologists, so teaching people to work in a way which allows their work to sit comfortably alongside their colleagues can only be a good thing. It does though add a layer of complication to things compared to the *Standard*. While new introductions to the field won't know any different if they start fresh with the *Toolkit*, more seasoned specialists may find the less self-contained nature of it to be a bit of a faff. Though to be honest, many of them will have well-established patterns of working, and therefore may be unlikely to feel the need to consult it too much anyway.

A key factor in my continuing use of the older *Standard* though is simply that none of the changes made as part its reformatting into the *Toolkit* have introduced significantly new methods to the process of analysing an assemblage. No guidance has been deleted, just minor tweaks, and these changes are just concerned with increasing consistency rather than changing methodologies. The notable changes that relate to the reporting phase of the work only really require keeping a copy of the *Advisory Checklist* from the *Toolkit for Specialist Reporting* on hand in addition to the old *Standard*. Honestly, at its most basic level, the appeal of the *Standard* personally is simply that it is a physical document. The convenience and tactility of having a physical document makes it far easier to use than an online toolkit from a personal standpoint. A post-it note on key pages is still quicker and easier to access than a section of the toolkit that you need to click through links and scroll to the part you need. Even printed out the toolkit is lacking in some way, in part purely due to a matter of personal aesthetics regarding the format and colour palette of the *Standard* being more appealing to my brain. But also because the use of hyperlinks in the *Toolkit* is so intrinsic to its construction that it just does not function anywhere near as well as the *Standard* in printed form. You would need to have all of the other documents it references

printed off as well to compensate for that, which starts to get unwieldy. It is understandable that in an age where digital formats are almost the default that the toolkit would be designed to primarily be interacted with in this way. However, the more contained nature of the *Standard* simply makes it more approachable. Its continued relevance as an instructional document means that although any future reports I write will refer to the work as being prepared in line with the *Toolkit*, as they technically will be, the *Standard* will remain the go to reference during my actual workflow for as long as it retains its currency.

As for the *Toolkit for Specialist Reporting* itself, the main purpose of it is as a guide to the content of specialist report and it is reasonably successful in that respect. Though the only part I use is the *Advisory checklist* as it is a good quick reference to double check everything that should be included in your report is included. We are trying to introduce the checklist into regular usage in the post-excavation team (to some resistance), with the proviso that there is still some discretionary flexibility allowed on the inclusion of certain aspects. This flexibility is necessary simply because there are many assemblages that just don't fit neatly into the new 'type' categorisations. Its one downfall is that presentation wise it is a little busy on the eye and not as well formatted as it could be, but once you're used to it then I feel like it should definitely help introduce a little more consistency into specialist reports. The *Checklist for specialist reporting* part could potentially also be very useful for the novice specialist, certainly as a tool for reviewing their report with a supervisor. Again though, on a presentation front it's lacking. It would at least need reformatting to create different versions for each of the report 'types', as currently it lacks any indication as to which of the entries applies to each 'type'.

Pottery reference materials

For the purposes of pottery identification, I make use of a mix of resources consisting of site monographs, kiln site studies, general books on archaeological pottery, and ULAS's inhouse reference collection. With many of these you can get used to working around their quirks, but when looked at in comparison some of their issues become a little more apparent.

The first resources I go to when trying to identify a sherd of pottery are the reports from the two 'type sites' for Leicestershire, and the inhouse reference collection. For Leicestershire pottery the main documentary references are *Roman and Medieval Occupation in Causeway Lane, Leicester* (Davies and Sawday, 1999) and *Urban Life in Leicester: An Archaeological Excavation at Freeschool Lane* (Sawday, 2009). It's normally necessary to examine both reports as the Freeschool Lane report largely builds on information in the Causeway Lane one rather than superseding it. The dating on the fabric series in the Freeschool Lane report is, however, more up to date, though no longer completely accurate, having been updated in 2019. This updated dating table only exists in a Microsoft Word document on the company system at present, and so specialists outside of ULAS would be completely unaware of this inaccuracy.

Both of these documents are specialist reports within site monographs and so the data is presented as would be expected in such a format. This is more of an issue in the Causeway Lane report than the Freeschool Lane one, with its presentation style making finding what you're looking for difficult. The Causeway Lane report is sub-divided into smaller periods for the medieval material. These sub-divisions don't have date ranges assigned to them so it is not always obvious which section the description you're seeking will be in. There is also a lack of differentiation in heading sizes throughout, meaning the actual fabric descriptions blend into the mass of plot and phasing details and you can easily scan right past the section you were looking for.

The fabric descriptions in the Causeway Lane report are also limited in detail for many of the fabrics, and often don't provide enough information to be able to make comparative identifications. For many there is only basic information such as whether vessels are coil built or wheel thrown, and which is the coarser/finer version of the fabric. Potters Marston and the Leicester Splashed wares are the only fabrics given a more significant writeup, but even then, details still aren't provided of expected inclusions or of the key delineations between fabric sub-groups. The fabric descriptions in the Freeschool Lane report though are far better, starting with them all being grouped together close to the start of the report. These descriptions are also thorough enough that you could feasibly make accurate

identifications of some sherds even if you didn't have access to the physical reference collection. As should really be the case with any good fabric description.

The Causeway Lane report is best suited to checking to see if a specific form has already been recorded in a fabric, with the illustrations being the most thorough part of the report. These are largely of Potters Marston vessels, and the report currently provides the only comprehensive catalogue of these forms. Other fabrics are also illustrated alongside Potters Marston but the figures in general suffer from poor organisation and captioning that doesn't make it particularly clear what each figure of the illustrations is showing. Each figure is given the same caption of 'The medieval and post-medieval pottery illustrations' with the corresponding catalogue for these presented in arbitrary groupings every few pages. This can lead to thinking you're comparing forms of a similar fabric when in fact the figure is showing a mixture of different fabrics. At least when a similar captioning is used in the Freeschool Lane report the catalogue is presented in its entirety at the start of the illustrations, making it easier to jump straight to the figure you need.

As mentioned, alongside the documentary references I also make use of our inhouse pottery reference collection. This is a well-used collection that over time has become slightly less organised than would be ideal, with a certain amount of loose unlabelled sherds which no longer function as reference material. The medieval pottery specialist who came before me was responsible for setting up the reference collection, and she unfortunately passed away not long before I joined the unit, taking the knowledge of some aspects of its categorisation with her. It likely needs some form of refurbishment in the future because of this, especially with the pending development of a new Leicestershire fabric series, but for now a majority of it remains up to date and in good enough working order that I'm able to confirm most identifications using it.

For out of county fabrics such as those from Stamford and Chilvers Coton the key resources are reports on the excavation of kiln sites where these wares were produced. These *The Pottery Industry of Stamford, Lincolnshire, c.A.D. 850-1250* (Kilmurry, 1980) and *Pottery Kilns at Chilvers Coton, Nuneaton* (Mayes and Scott, 1984). These documents include significant amounts of information, much of which isn't relevant to day-to-day pottery identification,

so the minor decisions made in the presentation of the parts that I do reference makes a big difference in their usability.

The Stamford ware volume was published in 1980, making it nearly 50 years old now. As Stamford is slightly outside of regular ULAS operating areas I'm unaware if there are new type sites or any updated fabric descriptions/classifications that have been established for the ware from the wealth of new archaeological material recovered during the intervening period. It has remained the ULAS go to for any work related to Stamford ware though and it is still regularly referenced in non-ULAS documents as well. So, while its currency may feel slightly in doubt, as long as it remains the agreed upon standard in the field I will continue to use it as such.

The volume itself isn't the easiest to work with though, as key elements I need for my work are difficult to find unless you've stuck a post-it note on the page. Neither the fabric or glaze description sections are mentioned on the contents page, and the glaze descriptions are also split across multiple sections. It is also a very thick book so finding these sections can be quite frustrating. The form illustrations at the end of the volume are very comprehensive and well organised into vessel types, but the accompanying catalogue is presented as an almost impenetrable series of codes rather than simple descriptions.

The Chilvers Coton volume on the other hand presents much of the key information all together in the appendices and that makes things so much easier. This volume is 40 years old though and debate now exists on the fabric classifications, but a firm replacement has yet to be established. The illustrations in it are just as comprehensive as the Stamford ware volume, taking up over half of the page count, but the organisation of these by kiln site is not as useful as organising by vessel types. Though there are divisions by vessel type within the illustrations for each kiln site, which makes comparisons slightly more accessible, but obviously not ideal.

The final document I frequently make use of for identification purposes is the *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon and Medieval Pottery from Lincoln* (Young *et al.*, 2005). This book is nearly 20

years old but in my personal opinion is the platonic ideal of a reference book. If I could put my name to a similar volume for the medieval pottery of Leicester before I'm done, then I'll retire proud. 206 pages of its 243 pages are purely concerned with detailing pottery forms and fabrics. These include thorough descriptions of all pottery finds from Lincoln, even down to those where only one sherd was recorded. Each type is laid out with details of the fabric, the technology of its production, the vessel types found, the likely sources of it, the dating, and the frequency with which it is found. Plenty of references to sites where examples were recovered are also included, along with extensive illustrations presented in close proximity to the corresponding pot descriptions. Each sub-period of the dating chronology is introduced with a national and regional contextualisation of pottery for those periods. The overall structure for each sub-sections is also well done, with a consistent analysis of local fabrics first, followed by non-local fabrics, before finishing with any continental imports. I cannot really think of an aspect of it I would say needs improvement, other than perhaps the need to produce an updated edition at some point that would include more recent research.

A general archaeological reference book such as Orton & Hughes' *Pottery in Archaeology* (2013) is a very informative introduction to the archaeological study of pottery, but its main body text is not something I have much need for in my day-to-day work. The appendices of this book, however, are a useful resource for maintaining consistency with the specialist literature it terms of recording terminologies. Despite the original edition of the book being published over 30 years ago now, the terminologies and descriptions of things such as pottery inclusions remain relevant today. A fact validated by the new ClfA pottery toolkit including these appendices as a recommended resource to consult. The text of the appendices is supported nicely by the inclusion of illustrations for things such as Powers' scale of roundness or pebble sorting, with these being an especially helpful visual aid for these more subjective categorisations. As familiar as I feel with some terminologies I always come back to these appendices when I want to make sure my writing is going to be understandable to other specialists.

Conclusion

What has become clear from this analysis is how important the first group of documents I looked at is to the production of the second. The previous lack of formal guidance is evident in the frustrating inconsistencies seen in many of the works I use for checking pottery identifications. As much as conventions change over time, the varying levels of detail, even in works produced by the same person, highlight the need for a more checklist-ed approach to specialist reporting. The effect of guidance such as that provided by ClfA at ironing out some of the issues may take some time to become fully evident, but it will make specialist reports of all kinds a more valuable research resource when it does so. As with all bureaucracy it will have its annoyances, but introducing some form of order and consistency to the way these reports are written can only help legitimise the work we do to those outside of archaeology. Something which continues to be a must for such a perennially under threat field.

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