

Object Biography: UWL-042, "Caerleon Ware Rough Cast Beaker"

Introduction

It has always been inevitable in life that everything we do will become a part of history, a fact that is true for all living things, and whether it is capable of being realised or not does not affect this outcome. The same applies to every item that is made, and each one has its own history and story to tell - or rather, be interpreted. Objects that have been created may be the most valuable to people in archaeology, as they are the vital guides alongside surviving written material that allow for supported interpretations about past societies and their daily lives.

The object chosen for this biography, catalogued as "UWL-042" is no different.

Caerleon Ware

UWL-042 presents evidence as being one of many pieces of the imitation pottery, 'Caerleon Ware', previously known as 'Legionary Ware' by Victor Nash-Williams and Mortimer Wheeler during his major excavations in the late 1910s, and early 1920s, whilst he served as the Director for the National Museum of Wales¹. Caerleon Ware was joined alongside South Wales grey ware in becoming an incredibly popular and frequent find during the second century AD when Wales was occupied by the Romans, specifically in Monmouthshire, Usk and Caerleon around and above Newport - before this, pottery was used nowhere near as widely, so Welsh potters around those areas had to adapt by learning to imitate the popular pottery styles that were brought with the Romans². Many of these would have been samian ware³, and the roughcasts would've been mostly imitating Argonne styles. Imitating samian ware would have required clay with a higher iron oxide content for the brighter red colours, red clay is naturally found in larger deposits in humid climates with lots of rainfall⁴ which Wales is the opposite of, so perhaps they achieved the orange colour through traded or clay brought from Rome or regions around the Mediterranean. Peter Webster assumes that the reason Caerleon Ware was created and may have had such a demand is because of a recorded 'disruption' in the supply of samian ware.⁵

Identification and Description

¹ "Roman Pottery in South-East Wales: An Introduction" Peter Webster, 1992. pg. 114.

² "Roman Pottery Factory Discovered beneath Celtic Manor Golf Course." Museum Wales, museum.wales/articles/1324/Roman-pottery-factory-discovered-beneath-Celtic-Manor-golf-course/#:~:text=Caerleon%20Ware%20was%20produced%20in,a%20style%20that%20it%20recognised. Accessed 22 Feb. 2026.

³ "Pottery Identification Guide", digschool.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Pottery-Identification-Guide-DigSchool.pdf. Accessed 22 Feb. 2026.

⁴ "Where Is Red Clay Found and How Does It Form?" Biology Insights, 28 Aug. 2025, biologyinsights.com/where-is-red-clay-found-and-how-does-it-form/. Accessed 22 Feb. 2026.

⁵ "Roman Pottery in South-East Wales: An Introduction" Peter Webster, 1992. pg. 114.

Figure 1⁶ (right, below) presents the bag 'UWL-042', which was catalogued in, and was identified as being a piece of 'Caerleon Ware', and the type of pottery it was created to be was a rough cast beaker and of Roman origin. The remaining sherd is the base of the beaker, which has a very symmetrical shape, and a thick rim at the very base to stand upright on.

Exterior

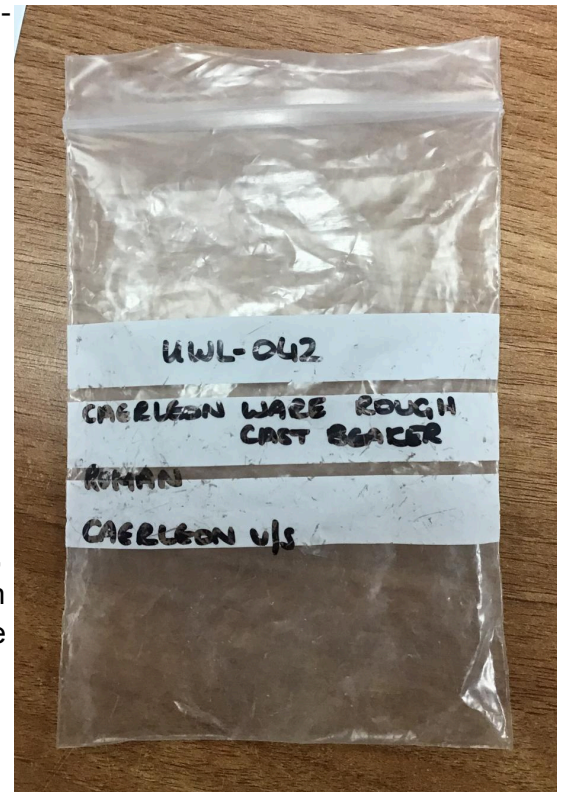


Figure 2⁷ (above) shows the fabric⁸ exterior of the beaker with a roughcast coating displaying variations in the overall orange-brown colouring. Many particles have a lighter, Beige colour, or more vibrancy. This colouring may have been the result of an oxidising atmosphere within the kiln. The base has a rim and a slight depression in the middle. There is also a subtle line from where the rim was touching the surface it was thrown, which could be from where a wire was used to remove it from the surface. Figure 2 displays two chips in the exterior beneath a previous breakage, and one on the rim. The rim itself is also well defined in Figure 3 (below) The potter has taken extra care in shaping it.

Core



Figure 3⁹ (above) and Figure 4¹⁰ (right) present a consistent thickness throughout the exposed core, along with similarly consistent colouring and no trace of inorganic material. The core has a lighter colouring than the exterior and interior, likely due to a lack of oxidation.



⁶ Fig. 1. "Catalogue Bag for UWL-042", Mik Edmunds, Carmarthen, Wales. 2026.

⁷ Fig. 2. "Exterior of UWL-042", Mik Edmunds, Carmarthen, Wales. 2026.

⁸ "fabric" Oxford Reference, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095807282>. Accessed 22 Feb. 2026.

⁹ Fig. 3. "Exposed View of Exterior and Interior of UWL-042", Mik Edmunds, Carmarthen, Wales. 2026.

¹⁰ Fig. 4. "Core and Interior of UWL-042", Mik Edmunds, Carmarthen, Wales. 2026.

Some of the core has a different type of breakage; at the top of Figure 4, the breakage is almost level from the core near the exterior to the interior, yet at the bottom, the core has a more unique pattern of breakage, perhaps from a different causation.

Interior

Figure 4 offers a clear, top-down view of the interior of the beaker. There are small rings that may all be parallel with one another, going down towards the bottom of the beaker's interior, and it is likely that these also would have risen up towards the top or spout. These rings may be an indication that the beaker was wheel-thrown¹¹, alongside the evidence of its symmetry. There are also clear signs of dried material or staining all over the interior's base, which could be that the beaker, at its last use, was actively holding liquid or general material. The colour is a light to dark muddy brown, seemingly a result of the concentration of the material. At the very bottom, the sherd's colouring is visible again - by referring to Figure 5¹² (below) there is a gap where some of the dried material has potentially flaked off, leaving a small distance between the bottom of the sherd and the remnant material.



Life History

This beaker could likely have been used by anyone for daily life, as Caerleon ware was widely made and distributed, and beakers were versatile for daily life to carry liquids, powders, and more. The rough cast was a common addition to beakers specifically, but it is unlikely that UWL-042 was for a higher class person to have; middle class may be more feasible because the beaker has a much closer colour to samian ware than Caerleon or South Wales grey ware.

Pottery could be wheel or hand thrown, and most native clays around Roman occupied areas would've had a grey colour. Most of these would've been produced in and

¹¹ "Ceramics (Including the Pottery Guide)", Finds Recording Guides, finds.org.uk/counties/findsrecordingguides/ceramics-including-the-pottery-guide/. Accessed 22 Feb. 2026. higher-class the Samian,

¹² Fig. 5. "Angled View of UWL-042 Interior showing Material Flake", Mik Edmunds, Carmarthen, Wales. 2026.

after the second century, when local potters had learned the styles, obtained moulds and been able to mass produce specific types of pottery thanks to the extremely wide usage by the Romans. Each beaker on its own would not have much value, but its versatility for storing a multitude of things in small amounts to save room would've been useful to anyone in daily life - holding ingredients, being used for drinking or carrying liquids.

Its creation was a part of the mass production needed to fill the new amount needed by the Romans, and considering the material present inside of the sherd itself may mean it was accidentally discarded by being lost or forgotten about.

The sherd was most likely found in or around Caerleon or the wider area of Newport where it would've been created to meet the demand of the Romans, and transferred after being found and catalogued by what may have been an excavation held or helped by people studying, volunteering or teaching archaeology with the University of West London, as the initials match up with the catalogue code of 'UWL-042', with this sherd potentially being the 42nd sherd they found. UWTSD may have acquired this through their own staff or students helping with UWL's excavation as a collaboration due to locality, or vice versa, with UWTSD running the excavation, and this was the 42nd sherd the UWL group found, as UWTSD does have a connection with London through the summer schools.

The object biography has been an interesting experience in understanding that it isn't just the people in history who also have a story to tell, but also the objects made to help within our lives. Especially one where the requirement is to individually try to uncover the mystery of the object's past - what was most interesting was learning in depth how this sherd is one part of the story about a desperate adaptation that was needed in and of pottery usage, and potters, in Wales. To not be washed out by Roman potters, local Welsh potters had to learn how to keep up with the large demand of pottery then needed by the Romans because of their mass usage of all different kinds of pottery, and then learn not just how to produce a certain quality and colour of a pot, but do it every single time en masse and of multiple forms that ranged from usage in daily life, like the beaker, to specific jobs or decorative vases.

They would have also had to learn the correct methods to use to achieve the popular styles and looks the Romans preferred to use, as well as what was used more than other, the types and colours used or saved for higher class people - UWL-042 is a testament to the ability of adaptation the people living in Wales around Usk and Caerleon harnessed to survive in a changing world, and brings their story through itself to life.