

Assignment two: the implementation,
approach and evaluation of the
ClfA Toolkit for finds: pottery (2024) at
the Colchester Archaeological Trust



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Figure 2: a selection of screenshots from the websites of each of the pottery research groups. These groups contributed to this toolkit but also the previous 2016 publication on which the toolkit is based.

Figure 3: a graphic highlighting a simplified version of the current collection, post-excavation and reporting processes at CAT.

Figure 4: a graphic highlighting a hypothetical version of the collection, post-excavation and reporting processes at CAT.

Additional information

Notes recorded from both interviews with Dr Loughton and Aileen Tierney.

As the responsible project manager, how would you approach the process of introducing a specified new piece of equipment (such as a survey unit or microscope) or change in working practice (such as revised recording form) for use by your team, and what measures you would take to ensure that it was being used correctly and safely (documentation, training and monitoring)? (40%, 3000 words or equivalent)

Introduction

‘If the study of pottery is to reach its full potential, it is vital that we recover and analyse it to a high and consistent standard.’

ClfA Toolkit for Finds: pottery, 2024, p.1

The above quotation surmises the entirety of the approach of the 2024 toolkit for pottery as produced by Ms K Hawkins and Dr E Johnson. Produced as one of the latest toolkits for ClfA, this toolkit was launched after a build-up of publicity and excitement amongst some members of the heritage sector. In line with the specifics of this assignment, I will hypothetically assess the toolkit’s implementation within my employer, the Colchester Archaeological Trust (CAT).

I will analyse the process of introducing the toolkit into my workplace, not only to be used by the current pottery specialist but across all individuals within post-excavation, excavation and management. Both the positive and negatives aspects will be explored. An analysis of the measures taken will then follow, of how it would be quantifiable that we were using the toolkit as it is currently stated. As a charity, commercial unit and a company which is centred in one of the most complex Roman settlements in the UK these factors will all be considered carefully.

Overview of ClfA Pottery toolkit

<https://www.archaeologists.net/work/toolkits/pottery/introduction>

In November 2024, the *Toolkit for finds: pottery* was launched officially. As a ClfA volunteer and a colleague of the authors I had been made aware of the upcoming guidance months before the official release. The authors were respectively Ms Kayt Hawkins and Dr Emily Johnson. Ms Hawkins is an Iron Age and Romano-British pottery specialist with extensive involvement within ClfA and the Study Group for Roman Pottery. It is worth noting that Dr Johnson is a zooarchaeologist however had mentioned to me her involvement in the project as a support for Kayt and official publication.

The Toolkit was launched online and introduces the document as a conversion of ‘the content of the published *A Standard for Pottery Studies in Archaeology* (PDF, Barclay et al 2016)’ (ClfA Pottery Toolkit Introduction, 2024). This book prides itself on introducing a robust approach to finds analysis. According to the authors several later documents were ‘influenced by and refer to its quality and content’ (ClfA Pottery Toolkit

Introduction, 2024). This specific project was funded by Historic England but its creation was supported by the 2016 authors, the Prehistoric Ceramic Research Group (PCRG), the Study Group for Roman Pottery (SGRP), and the Medieval and Later Pottery Research Group (MLPRG). The two toolkit authors work for the commercial unit of Archaeology South-East alongside the university UCL.

The toolkit has three sections of the toolkit itself, appendices and supporting information. Digitally it is accompanied by a twelve-minute walk-through video, narrated by Dr Johnson, to aid its use. The toolkit is split into different sections as seen as figure one. Within the content, there are areas of both ethical standards and unrealistic approaches for a commercial archaeological unit. The toolkit's content is admittedly a repetition of the previous standards completed in 2016. However, it is clear the authors have fleshed out the toolkit with additional resources and links.

Toolkit for finds: pottery
Version 1.0 - November 2024

CIfA | Chartered
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Archaeologists

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Note: words highlighted in purple within this document have definitions within the Glossary section.

Figure 1: a screenshot of the downloaded toolkit highlighting its different sections. It has been stressed that the toolkit is designed for different audiences from current specialists to students.

The appendices refer to approaching to recording and reporting within a project. Following this is the supporting information to the toolkit including templates,

metadata support, and links to the pottery research groups. There is also a complete list of references, a glossary and acknowledgements.

Overview of pottery and post-excavation specialism at CAT

This assignment has been aided by two individuals; Dr Matthew Loughton and Aileen Tierney. Dr Loughton is currently the sole pottery (and ceramic building material) specialist at CAT. Since Dr Loughton joined in 2018, he has assumed analysis and reporting of all pottery from all sites. After graduation Dr Loughton started a twenty-year career in France as an amphora specialist across major excavations including Roman *oppida* and aristocratic tombs. He has published across several journals and books in the past. In preparation for this assignment, I conducted an interview with him about his views of the pottery toolkit and its application to CAT.

In addition to an in-depth interview with Dr Loughton, I also conducted an interview with post-excavation project officer Aileen Tierney. Aileen has extensive experience of post-excavation, including archive depositions, finds reporting and project management. Her past employers include PCA, MOLA, LP Archaeology and Headland Archaeology. She recently joined CAT in 2024 and has made significant improvements to our approaches. It was necessary for this assignment to get her input of how the implementation of the toolkit would work from a post-excavation perspective versus a purely pottery specialist perspective. I am grateful to both for their support and candidness.

Use of toolkit within CAT

During discussions with Dr Loughton and Ms Tierney it became clear that the use of the toolkit with CAT would introduce both positive and negative aspects. This opinion is also informed by myself and my experiences, as both a field archaeologist and a lithics specialist.

As previously stated, the toolkit does include several useful factors for its application at CAT. The toolkit presents in-depth appendices, most of which are digital although printed resources are frequently referred to. These resources are often the first steps for those wishing to study pottery. Within pottery as a specialism, several research groups have formed focused on different time periods of pottery. The PCRG, the SGRP, and the MLPRG are all included as available links to follow. Each of these groups contain their own networks, event schedules and resources (see figure two). These resources vary between guidelines to newsletters. Promoting awareness of these groups between staff is line with ClfA's encouragement of continuing professional development (CPD) across all career levels (Wiggins, 2019).

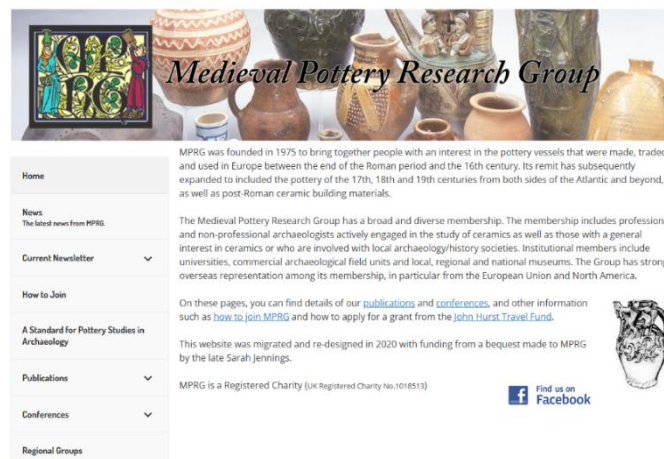
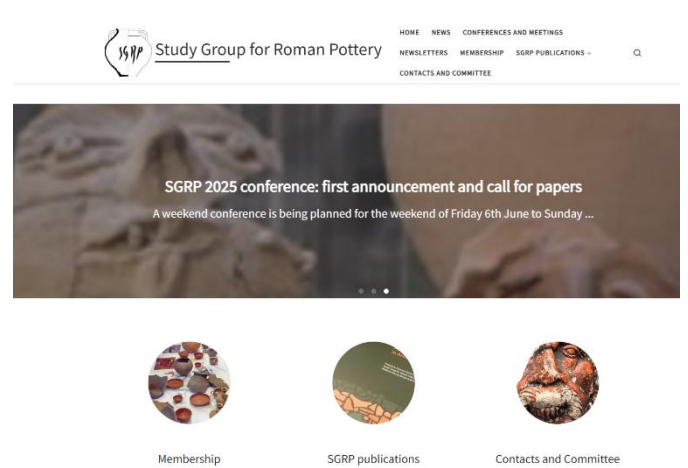


Figure 2: a selection of screenshots from the websites of each of the pottery research groups. These groups contributed to this toolkit but also the previous 2016 publication on which the toolkit is based.

The appendix also contains regional and supra-regional downloads, including the *National Roman Pottery reference collection* website. It is worth highlighting within the regional section, the choices are very limited, and Essex is not included as an option. It is important to recognise that many of these resources may need updating, often at the time and budget of the pottery study groups. Dr Loughton spoke candidly about how many of these groups contain the same individuals across all committees, and the work was often voluntary unless external funding was sought. An example of this is this very toolkit which was funded by Historic England after a project proposal by Louise Rayner of ASE (ClfA Pottery Toolkit, 2024).

The toolkit also positively supports the involvement of a pottery specialist throughout a project's stages, which is seldom done to the levels required by the toolkit. Commercial archaeology has often had much budget and time constraints, impacting how and when a specialist can get involved (Darvill et al, 2019, Orange et al, 2017).

As highlighted by Ms Tierney, it would also provide CAT with a much-needed standardised process regarding pottery. At previous companies and units, she notes she has followed guidelines such as point two on page ten of the toolkit which states: ‘before examination of the pottery can take place, all material recovered should be cleaned, marked or labelled and packed in accordance with current standards for good practice (eg First Aid for Finds (Watkinson and Neal 2001, new version due 2024)’.

At CAT this process is not conducted, and pottery sherds are cleaned, analysed and appraised by Dr Loughton before they are then marked and bagged by our team. She has found that CAT is the outlier in this practise which is already conducted by other units. The toolkit also highlights as part of the documentation process in point two (page twelve) that ‘most pottery will be classified as a bulk find and the quantities present in each contextual unit should be recorded on bulk finds record sheets by material type (pottery), fragment count and weight in grams sherds’. This practise was implemented by Ms Tierney in her role as a post-excavation manager at other units. She highlighted during our interview that it allowed for pottery specialists to make estimates and provide work quotes as she could present them exactly how much pottery a site had (e.g. an archaeological monitoring and recording in Sussex led to the recovery of 150g of Roman pottery). If implemented at CAT, this would vastly increase our long-term efficiency and standard practise towards pottery, especially given the fact we only have one pottery specialist currently.

Implementing the toolkit at CAT would require a careful approach. Like many toolkits or guides produced for workplaces, they can often be idealistic instead of realistic and strive for a perfectionist approach in the workplace (Beheshtifar et al, 2011, Degraeve, 2018). It would be vital to implement the toolkit beyond simply use of one single specialist, in this case Dr Loughton. The toolkit lays out clear perimeters for use in the recovery, processing and marking of pottery. This covers multiple processes within commercial archaeology (commonly referred to as fieldwork and post-excavation processing). These sections are in addition to the appraisal and analysis which is currently conducted by Dr Loughton alone. If implemented the toolkit would have to be initiated across every member of staff within CAT, from the fieldwork project officers to the archaeologists to the management.

Within the appraisal and analysis of pottery, the toolkit’s approach falters in regards to our own approach at CAT. As Dr Loughton noted, his work is continuous and referred to as a “treadmill”. The importance of pottery for dating drives this, as does the simple fact our company is based in one of the largest Roman settlements in Britain and investigations within Colchester can produce thousands of pottery sherds at a time.

Approaching CAT with implementing the toolkit would also be impacted by the variety of investigations we conduct. As a company we frequently carry out smaller work such as AMRs which Dr Loughton highlighted the paradox of small sites having more money

available for analysis and report creation than larger scale sites which have more varied and interesting pottery. Research does not get enough time or scope within finds specialisms across archaeology (Beck et al, 2021). Our current methodology towards crushed or whole vessels would have to extend to more bags and labels for each individual sherd (as per the toolkit). The approach laid out in the toolkit requires each pottery sherd to be marked *before* specialist analysis. As stated, this currently contradicts CAT's current approach. It could be argued CAT's current approach leads to a quicker processing and therefore analysis. Marking is only completed at CAT when the final pottery assemblage is agreed.

One interesting point is that each county or museum service require different approaches. For example, the Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service asks that all finds (bar Ceramic building material, burnt flint, shell, metal and slag) are marked (point 6.4.2) (SCCAS, 2024). Whereas the Museums Essex guidelines state only pottery, ceramic building material and bone are marked (Museums Essex, 2022). The Cambridgeshire County Council archives only require pottery and worked flint to be marked, and animal bone if a large enough assemblage (CCC, 2020). If all pottery is marked only to be discarded as part of the specialist's selection strategy, it would be a waste of time and budget.

Figures three and four below highlight the current process at CAT and a comparison flow chart of if the toolkit was implemented in its entirety to the workplace. The current process at CAT currently abides by the majority of the post-excavation requirements as drawn up by ClfA (2020a, 2020b). An approach of clarity and standardisation would be required to make the pottery toolkit work within an orderly methodology given the current restraints of commercial archaeology.

Current process at CAT



Figure 3: a graphic highlighting a simplified version of the current collection, post-excavation and reporting processes at CAT.

Process at CAT after implementation of ClfA Pottery toolkit



Figure 4: a graphic highlighting a hypothetical version of the collection, post-excavation and reporting processes at CAT.

Measures of it being used within CAT (documentation, training and monitoring)

In a hypothetical sense, if the toolkit was implemented at face value across CAT the following measures would have to take place to ensure that it was being used correctly and safely. These measures would take the form of documentation, training and monitoring. I have divided the measures into the relevant sections coinciding with the sections as stated by the toolkit (ClfA Pottery Toolkit, 2024). The following measures and actions are only described if they are changes or additions to our current CAT methodology. Actions or measures currently undertaken by CAT as per ClfA guidelines and our working practices are not focused on.

(ML – Dr Matt Loughton pottery specialist, AT – Ms Aileen Tierney Junior Project Officer for Post-excavation)

Fieldwork process (described as the <i>collection</i> within the toolkit)	
Action per toolkit (2024)	Measure within CAT workplace (2025)
‘A visit from a pottery specialist could also provide an indication of chronology, identify special deposits and highlight potential problems of redeposition.’	Communicate with ML for site visit, make him aware of site background, ensure feature or object he is visiting is left undisturbed and unexcavated (e.g. a Bronze Age cremation vessel).
‘Modifications to the collection strategy could include... the use of sieving to recover as many finds as possible’	Purchase correct size of sieves, ensuring everyone knows how to use a sieve for their spoil.
‘Modifications to the collection strategy could include... sherds from crushed vessels should be numbered and bagged individually, to aid post investigation reconstruction, refit analysis and interpretation’	Re-training of entire fieldwork team on how to plan draw a crushed or whole vessel, additional purchase of site labels and bags, spot-checks by supervisors to ensure vessel plans are done correctly.
‘Provide appropriately appointed, secure facilities and equipment for the cleaning, marking, labelling, documenting and packing of finds if these tasks are to take place on site’	Update current digital recording system (e.g. tablets) at CAT with new database which allows for further detail to be added (for example sherd count), update database so dating evidence inputted by ML at office is seen directly by fieldwork staff.
‘Ensure contact details for trained conservators to manage the packing, stabilisation and lifting of fragile finds are available’	Research into what training a trained conservator requires, discussion of upskilling workforce, or gaining contact details of local specialists or

	conservators who would be willing to aid the lifting and stabilisation of pottery on site.
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Post-excavation process (including washing, marking, bagging, packing, documentation) (described as the <i>processing</i> within the toolkit)	
Action per toolkit (2024)	Measure within CAT workplace (2025)
‘Most well-fired pottery can be washed in clean, lukewarm water, gently using a soft brush (a new toothbrush or nailbrush with no rubber bristles) or fingers to remove soil from surfaces’	Ensuring all staff members who wash finds are using lukewarm water for pottery, check of current toothbrushes to ensure they are of correct standard.
‘Pottery selected for analysis that has surface or absorbed residues, burnt deposits or soot may be air dried but not brushed, washed or overly handled, before being wrapped in tinfoil’	Ensure pottery chosen for further scientific analysis is tin-foiled, buy more tinfoil, re-train staff in pottery conservation for scientific analysis.
‘Mark pottery before it is sent to a pottery specialist for analysis’	Re-train staff in marking procedures, AT ensure communication channels with ML for what pottery is dried and marked for analysis.
‘Place two rot-proof labels in each bag, marked in permanent ink with the project and contextual unit / registered find / sample identifiers, as appropriate, together with any additional information required by the laboratory or the repository’	Add an additional label to each bag of pottery as opposed to current practise of one, AT to conduct spot-checks to ensure methodology is maintained.
‘Most pottery will be classified as a bulk find and the quantities present in each contextual unit should be recorded on bulk finds record sheets by material type (pottery), fragment count and weight in grams’	Train staff in skills of quantification of fragment count and weight in grams, provide additional weighing scales, adjust time and financial budgets to accommodate extra work.
‘Amend context and find records after assessment and analysis to include updated identifications. This might include, for example, changing a record from pottery to tile’	ML to carry out documentation process on fieldwork database, adjusting after his assessment and appraisal is complete, post-excavation manager Laura Pooley to monitor this alongside individual fieldwork supervisors.

Creation of changes to post-excavation processes to be made into an accessible, easy to read document.	Document to be disseminated amongst all staff whose role is relevant to post-excavation (printed and circulated online).
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Reporting and publication process (described as the <i>recording and reporting</i> within the toolkit)	
Action per toolkit (2024)	Measure within CAT workplace (2025)
‘Before any recording begins, the project manager should contact the identified pottery specialists to agree the post-excavation timetable and establish effective communication’	Post-excavation manager Laura Pooley to establish a methodology regarding timetable and deadlines which is measured by regular communication between herself and ML.
‘Prior to recording, the pottery specialist should re-familiarise themselves with the requirements of the data management plan’	Change in work culture of data management plan being produced later in report process, and instead closer to the start of the report creation process. Measured by regular check in meetings in correlation with report timetable.
‘At the end of recording the pottery specialist should clean the digital record to remove any inconsistencies (eg in the varied use of capital letters within text fields, such as POTTERY, Pottery, pottery)’	ML to submit documentation after edits including changing abbreviations, and use of consistent spelling within a database or spreadsheet.

Archive and deposition process (described as the <i>archive</i> within the toolkit)	
Action per toolkit (2024)	Measure within CAT workplace (2025)
‘It is therefore advised that in most cases, pottery that has been analysed, or has the potential to reward analysis or re-analysis, should be selected for archive. Any decisions on selection made throughout the life cycle of the project should be recorded in line with the Toolkit for Selecting Archaeological Archives.’	ML to ensure that all material chosen for discard is recorded and accessible to AT and Laura Pooley. Discussions should be held mid-way through the reporting process what material will be chosen for discard and what percentage is represented by this of the entire assemblage.

‘Archive components resulting from the reporting stage that should be incorporated into the project archive include selected copies of drafts, together with the final version, of the full specialist report’	Readjusting current archiving strategies for digital data to ensure draft reports are uploaded alongside the final report. Cost and time calculations will need to be factored in. Checking of uploads to the ADS will ensure this is completed correctly.
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Conclusion of ClfA pottery toolkit introduction to CAT

In conclusion, the implementation of the *ClfA toolkit for pottery* (2024) would bring long-term benefits and standardization in line with other units. The toolkit is already in use at CAT, although unofficially and un-assumably in the form of the 2016 publication *A Standard for Pottery Studies in Archaeology*. Dr Loughton has used this publication regularly and it is the basis of all his analysis. The toolkit does make further additions, which if employed within CAT would cause an immediate pushback and change to our time and financial scales. However, it is clear after my interviews and an analysis of the toolkit, many of the practises within it are not only standard across other units but would also allow us to be a more archaeologically sensitive company and fairer employer. The ‘treadmill’ which Dr Loughton described may be aided by the toolkit if it was properly carried out throughout the recovery, processing and reporting of all pottery.

The toolkit is vague on issues like selection, realistic budgets and assemblage size. It was never intended however to fit every project but simply present a standard to aspire to. Progress and training within commercial units is hampered by different factors as highlighted in existing literature (Lock, 2012, Aitchison and Rocks-Macqueen, 2024). But in this case, the implementation of the toolkit would be hampered by enormous cultural change after years of an accepted system. The struggles of this system have been accepted, and adjustments have been made by those singularly tasked with finds analysis.

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Additional information

Interview with Dr Matt Loughton 07.05.25

1. What are your thoughts about the toolkit?
 - Repetition of other guidelines
 - All pottery study groups have issued guidelines in the past.
 - Same group of people doing the same thing as previously.
 - Power dynamic is at play constantly (some ardent volunteers/specialists).
 - Toolkit doesn't acknowledge doing pottery analysis as the site is constantly ongoing, toolkit only suggests reporting of pottery at site's end (described as a 'chicken and egg problem')
 - Point that my ongoing pottery analysis solves storage issue in units (also supports own career sustainability as will always have something to report on)
 - Bigger unit led the toolkit – bias!
 - Point about how toolkit applies to non ClfA members who are independent specialists (several major specialists aren't members!)
 - ClfA constantly producing toolkits – so much time and effort, increase workloads of those who read them and have to seemingly abide by them.
 - Retention of all pottery is difficult and causes issues (big urban excavations)
 - Residuality very common in commercial work – Medieval contexts often contain Roman pottery (lack of tied up thinking)
 - Paradox of small sites like AMRs having more money available for analysis and report creation than larger scale sites which have more varied and interesting pottery.

2. Do you think it contains unrealistic expectations for commercial units?
 - Some things in toolkit refer to practises that specialists wouldn't be directly involved in like marking/archiving/bagging. These practises should be separate in archiving toolkit.
 - Selection processes not focused on in toolkit.
 - Toolkit set up for one system (of appraisal). Every unit has singular quirks to its work!

3. If it was imposed as a policy we must follow by ClfA, how do you feel CAT as a company and archaeologists would cope?
 - No flexibility!
 - We do a lot of smaller jobs, one size approach doesn't fit everyone
 - Toolkit is vague about drawing and illustration (no rules and regulations) hit and miss approach to illustration (standard pots not included in many illustrations, only the perceived special pots)
 - Increased demands for more scientific approaches, drawing per percentage of assemblage

4. When the *Standards for Pottery Studies* by Barclay and others came out in 2016 what were your thoughts towards it?
 - Pot specialists have lots of experience and rigid approaches (do some of these things need saying?)
 - Typologies and fabric groups – are they actually up to date?
 - Some areas like Roman parts of Suffolk not referred to in research.
 - Some local areas which don't fit into fabric groups and accompanying photos.

5. Do you feel you are allowed time and budget to conduct your own research into pottery within East Anglia/Colchester/etc?
 - Evidence for use of pottery types is severely lacking – what vessels were used for what reasons.
 - Research must be focused, can't just pick any topic.
 - Future researchers will do this work (current specialists don't have the time or budget to push for this research line).
 - See my current job is to record what is there and report on that.
 - If had to do a research project would focus on pottery kilns in Colchester.

- Treadmill effect of my work – analyse, report, publish, analyse, report, publish – can be very tiring.

Interview with Aileen Tierney commenting on specific statements from the *CIfA toolkit for pottery* 07.05.25

- Point 1 (page 9) from *collection* section: ‘sherds from crushed vessels should be numbered and bagged individually’

this would slow us down on site, create more plastic bags and labels in post-excavation process overall, hugely increase chance for human error. However, it could make sense for refitting on a case-by-case basis

- Point 2 (page 10) ‘Before examination of the pottery can take place, all material recovered should be cleaned, marked or labelled and packed in accordance with current standards for good practice (eg First Aid for Finds (Watkinson and Neal 2001, new version due 2024)’

This has happened at past units as an integrated normal practise. At ASE and subsequently LP Archaeology there was a system of marking sherds, counting sherds and weighing sherds BEFORE it was sent to the specialist for analysis. At CAT this doesn’t take place to our detriment and subsequent inefficiency.

As a process it allows specialists to produce estimates and quotations for their work (doesn’t happen at CAT, no real estimates provided between specialist and post-excavation manager).

- Point 3 (page 11) ‘Mark every sherd (that is big enough) with project and contextual unit identifiers. If required by the archive repository, additional information may include the year and the repository accession number’

This is referencing in my opinion the marker’s ability and if they think it is big enough, not the size of the pottery sherd which typically anything bigger than a thumbnail was marked.

- Point 4 (page 12) ‘Most pottery will be classified as a bulk find and the quantities present in each contextual unit should be recorded on bulk finds record sheets by material type (pottery), fragment count and weight in grams’

Bulk finds are things that aren’t registered finds. Personally, haven’t used a bulk finds sheet for years.

- Overall comment: if the toolkit was implemented at CAT it might be a slow start but for longer term gain. It would vastly improve our efficiency towards pottery and make pottery of equal standing amongst all finds instead of its current 'vital' position.

If introduced I would recommend: expanding our tablet database to accommodate toolkit requirements like sherd count, train all field staff in these additional units, perform random spot checks on the pottery coming back, make pages 8 to 9 more accessible as infographics for field staff about collection of pottery and rely on feedback from POs about their input. It would require a massive cultural shift from all members of staff.