

Pottery and the Material Culture of the Medieval Peasant on Dartmoor

By John Allan

The pottery recovered from excavation in the medieval settlements of Dartmoor looks unappealing: small dull brown, black and grey sherds, usually unglazed, often crumbly and heavily weathered, normally devoid of decoration (Fig. 1). It is nevertheless of great significance, since not only does it offer the principal material evidence for dating the medieval settlements of the moor but it provides us with valuable information about the domestic customs of the moorland farmers – matters which are otherwise undocumented. A single Dartmoor find even ranks as a unique discovery of national importance; the pots recovered from Dinna Clerks, Widecombe, excavated by Mrs Minter in the 1960s in the very positions where they were placed when the longhouse burnt to the ground, give us the fullest picture in Britain of the specific places in a peasant household where pots were actually used.¹

Over the last 40 years or so, our knowledge of the medieval pottery of Devon has grown steadily, and we now have a general understanding of its chronology and production centres.² Thus, although the deserted sites of Dartmoor rarely yield any direct dating evidence, the pottery found there can be dated by relating this material to better-dated contexts. The sequences of finds from the castles of Okehampton and Launceston, and from urban excavation in Totnes and Exeter, are especially helpful in this regard (Figs 2–5).

We now believe that, after a long period when local pottery was not made or used in the county (AD 400–930/950), it was in general circulation in most or all of Devon in the 11th and 12th centuries. Detailed study of the inclusions present in sherds of this period has led us to the conclusion that the sole area producing ceramics at this date was around the Blackdown Hills of the Devon-Somerset border; from this distant area pottery was regularly carried far into north, central and west Devon (Fig. 6).³

This pattern of long-distance transportation must surely have been a business of little profit, considering the low value of pottery in the medieval world and the hazards and effort entailed in carrying such bulky and fragile objects. In the 13th century local kilns were set up in the county; they soon came to supply almost all the pottery used by the communities of central, west and north Devon (Fig. 7). By the early years of the following century we know from documentary evidence⁴ that there was a scatter of potteries over much of the county. Those in the south included Bridgetown Pomeroy outside Totnes, where production seems to have begun in the period 1250–1300; further kilns nearer Plymouth at Plympton and Bere Ferrers, known to have operated in later centuries, may have been operating by this time. They used local clays tempered with stream sand washed down from Dartmoor. Their products are highly distinctive, since their fabrics contain mica and other minerals derived from the granite (Fig. 8).

Potteries were also established in the 13th century in the north of the county, making another very distinctive product: the hand-made and normally unglazed North Devon Medieval Coarseware (Fig. 9). This too contains inclusions derived from the Dartmoor granite but its appearance is different. The source of this material has been presumed to be the Barnstaple-Bideford area, where there were major post-medieval potteries, but this has been challenged by Dr R.T. Taylor, who points out that the

petrology of this kind of ceramics would fit much better with a kiln source nearer Dartmoor.⁵

The pottery types and their dating

Medieval sherd collections have been retrieved from about a dozen sites on Dartmoor or close to its fringes (Fig. 10). It is a striking fact that the finds from the ring of sites around its northern margin are completely different from those to the south and south-east; North Devon Medieval Coarseware makes up almost the entire collection from the northern side of the moor, whilst sand-tempered micaceous ‘Totnes-type’ coarseware is by far the most common fabric from excavations to the south and west, with a few sherds from east Devon and the north (Fig. 11). This sharp distinction is likely to reflect the different marketing patterns of farmers on the opposite sides of the moor.

It follows that all the pottery found on the sites on the northern side of the moor and most of that found on the other sites belongs to the period when local production had begun. Our dating evidence for this is not very precise, and specialists do not agree entirely about its interpretation, but in my opinion the production of Totnes-type ware did not begin until after *c.* 1250,⁶ and the start date of North Devon Medieval Coarseware was only a little earlier, in the period 1200–50 (probably early in that range).⁷ The absence of 11th/12th-century pottery from these sites is a key piece of evidence that, rather than having a long history stretching back into the Norman and Anglo-Saxon periods, most of the excavated settlements represent colonisation of the moor at the time when settlement was at its height in the late 13th and early 14th centuries.⁸

There is one interesting exception: the sherds from Hound Tor site 2 consist almost entirely of the Upper Greensand-Derived wares – the products which preceded Totnes-type pottery. Contrary to the published accounts, therefore, this is the earlier of the two excavated Hound Tor settlements.⁹ The finds look 13th- rather than 11th/12th-century, and I suggest a date in the period 1200–1250/75. One other site on the northern margin of the moor has also yielded pottery of this type: Great Beere at North Tawton – but here there is just one vessel in a collection of North Devon Medieval Coarseware.¹⁰ It raises the possibility that, unlike the settlements at Okehampton Park and Sourton, Great Beere was established by the early 13th century, but this is far from certain.¹¹

When were these sites abandoned? In the late 1970s it was proposed that the peasants who lived in the excavated longhouses in Okehampton Park were driven from their homes *c.* 1300, and that Hound Tor, Hutholes and Dinna Clerks were probably abandoned by *c.* 1350.¹² When these structures have been discussed in relation to the standing buildings, they have often been dated ‘13th-century’ and have been presumed to be appreciably earlier than any houses standing on the Moor today. One or two sites, notably Hutholes and Great Beere, may indeed have been abandoned around the time of the Black Death but pottery from most of these sites indicates that they were occupied after 1350 and abandoned in the period 1350–1450.¹³ They were, therefore, contemporary with the earliest standing longhouses.

The use of pottery in the Dartmoor longhouse

A consistent feature of all the longhouse excavations has been the recovery of evidence of a hearth near the centre of the central room – the hall – sometimes with an adjacent group of stakeholes indicating some form of equipment or furnishing, as at Okehampton Park (Fig. 12), but sometimes without any sign of adjacent structures or

fittings, as at Hutholes. This presumably was the place where much of the medieval pottery was used: heavily sooted sherds, no doubt used for cooking, make up a high proportion of the fragments from these sites, indicating that cooking took place in earthenware pots rather than the cast bronze cauldrons which came into widespread use in the later medieval household. The excavation at Great Beere recovered fragments of one further piece of household equipment which was probably widely used on the hearth in the houses considered here: a flat iron plate 'about 8–9ins [20–23cm] across' (Fig. 13). Its size corresponds roughly with the diameter of many medieval jars/cooking pots (typically *c.* 22–28mm wide), raising the possibility that cooking in a medieval longhouse took place (commonly/usually?) in a pottery vessel inverted on an iron plate. This form of cooking is well documented on the Moor in the recent past; we may suggest that the cast iron baking kettle used in the 19th century was the successor to the medieval earthenware pot (Fig. 14).

I have mentioned that a single Dartmoor find is altogether more informative; the longhouse at Dinna Clerks in Widecombe parish suffered a disastrous fire, after which the site was abandoned, leaving the pottery and wooden objects in the positions where they had been used. The significance of the discovery was recognised by Steve Moorhouse, whose plan showing the locations of vessels, based on his re-examination of Mrs Minter's site notebook, is shown here (Figs 15–18). It is instructive to see how many pots there were in a peasant house. Nine vessels are substantially represented: three jugs, five cooking pots/jars and one cistern. Five of them were in the inner room and four in the hall; one of the latter was buried in the ground.

Some of these vessels deserve individual comment. First the buried pot – a cooking pot/jar with sooted sides. Steve Moorhouse has drawn attention to the documentary evidence for the use of buried pots in various medical and culinary recipes; they were for example used in fermentation, which may perhaps explain the presence of this vessel.¹⁴

Second, the cistern – a vessel form designed for storing an alcoholic drink with a sediment. Cisterns are common finds in excavations in the West Country; their most widespread use was probably in the storage of home-brewed ale. Peter Brears however has drawn attention to the traditional Devon practice of making the rough but very intoxicating white ale, and this custom may be relevant in explaining the Dartmoor finds. In this regard we may note the comments of John Hooker on the ale made around Okehampton, Hatherleigh, Iddesleigh and Chulmleigh in the 16th century:

*The drink which they do make of [spoiled oats] is spoiled drink, for it be never so well prepared and dressed, yet what creature so ever do eat or taste thereof, be it man, horse or hogge, it will make him to vomit and, for the time, very sick; notwithstanding, the people of that country, being used thereat, do endure the same very well.*¹⁵

Finally, two charred lathe-turned wooden vessels were also present in the hall. Such vessels are often published as bowls but are likely to have been used for drinking and would probably have been called cups in the later Middle Ages. They are a reminder that although wooden vessels would no doubt have been very common in the medieval household, they are usually absent from both the documentary and the archaeological record.

NOTES

- ¹ Reported in Beresford, G. 1979 'Three deserted medieval settlements on Dartmoor: a report on E. Marie Minter's excavations', *Medieval Archaeol.* **23**, 98–158.
- ² I last reviewed this subject rather more than 20 years ago: Allan, J.P. 1994 'Medieval pottery and the dating of deserted settlements on Dartmoor', *Proc. Devon Archaeol. Soc.* **52**, 141–7.
- ³ For a summary see Allan, J.P., Hughes, M.J. and Taylor, R.T. 2010 'Saxo-Norman pottery in Somerset: some recent research', *Somerset Archaeol. Natur. Hist.* **52**, 165–84.
- ⁴ Especially Erskine, A.M. (ed.) 1969 *The Devonshire Lay Subsidy of 1332*, Devon Cornwall Rec. Soc., new ser., **14**.
- ⁵ Taylor, R.T. in Allan, J.P. and Langman, G.I. forthcoming 'The medieval and later pottery' from Roadford, NW Devon.
- ⁶ Fresh evidence about this has been recovered by South-West Archaeology's excavations at The Lamb, Totnes, where early to mid-13th-century deposits contain UGSD but not Totnes-type ware.
- ⁷ A key context here is the material from the occupation of a building below the hall of Okehampton Castle, whose hearth gave a remnant magnetic date of AD 1205+/- 30 years, recently reviewed by EH & now regarded as slightly later, centring on c. AD 1220. This contains only UGSD, showing that it precedes pottery production in N Devon. However, A. Vince favoured a date before 1200 for the start of local production.
- ⁸ For a recent discussion of the archaeological evidence see Gent, T. 2007 'The re-excavation of a deserted medieval longhouse at Hutholes, Widecombe-in-the-Moor, Dartmoor', *Proc. Devon Archaeol. Soc.* **65**, 47–82. The question of whether the lack of early pottery might be evidence that the Dartmoor farmers did not use pottery before 1200 is discussed there by Allan & Langman (pp. 79–80). This seems unlikely but is hard to disprove.
- ⁹ And contrary to my conclusions of 1994.
- ¹⁰ For the site see Jope, E.M. & Threlfall, R.I. 1958 'Excavation of a Medieval Settlement at Beere, North Tawton, Devon', *Medieval Archaeol.* **2**, 112–40. The sherds came to light after my review of 1994 and are now in the collections of Exeter City Museums.
- ¹¹ because UGSD pottery was still produced in the late 13th and early 14th centuries and was still in regular use further east, as for example at Exeter.
- ¹² Austin, D. 1978 'Excavations in Okehampton Deer Park, Devon, 1976–1978', *Proc. Devon Archaeol. Soc.* **36**, 191–239; Beresford, G. 1979, 'Three deserted medieval settlements on Dartmoor: a report on E. Marie Minter's excavations', *Medieval Archaeol.* **23**, 98–158.
- ¹³ I have discussed this point more fully elsewhere (Allan 1994, 144–6). Sherds of earthenware cisterns – a vessel type introduced in the late 14th century – have been found at Okehampton Park, Dinna Clerks, Hound Tor site 1 house 7, Dean Moor and Sourton Down.
- ¹⁴ Moorhouse, S. 1972 'Medieval Distilling-Apparatus of Glass and Pottery', *Medieval Archaeol.* **16**, 79–121; *idem* 1986 'Non-dating Uses of Medieval Pottery', *Medieval Ceram.* **10**, 85–123.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Brears, P. 2015 'Culinary Artefacts in West Country Households, 1550–1700: Form, Function and Nomenclature' in Allan, J., Alcock, N. & Dawson, D. *West Country Households*, Soc. Post-Medieval Archaeol. monogr. , 255–70.

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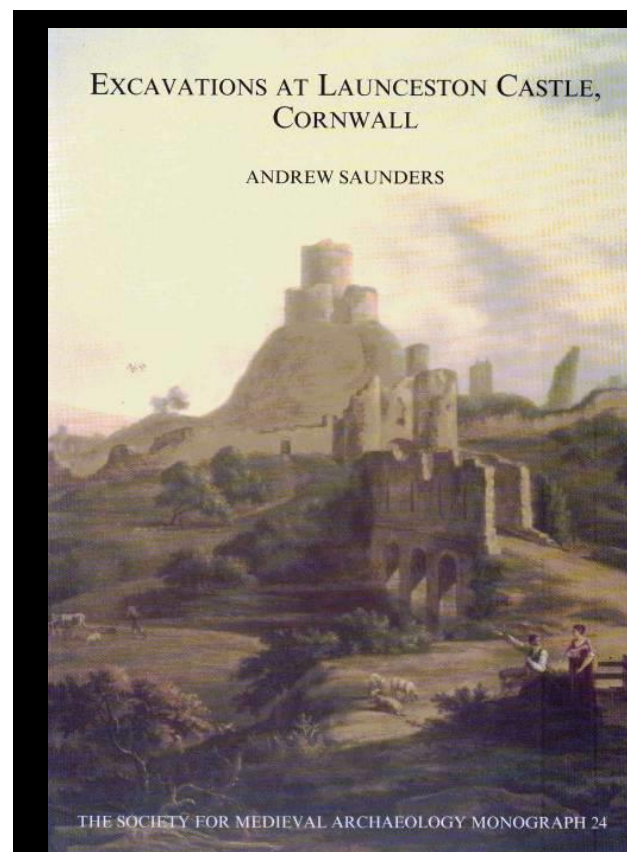
John Allan

Longhouses & Hard Lives
28 Feb 2015



Hutholes 1994: Hound Tor pottery
@ RAM Museum, Exeter

Fig: 1



Vince, Brown & Thomson:
Pottery from Launceston Castle

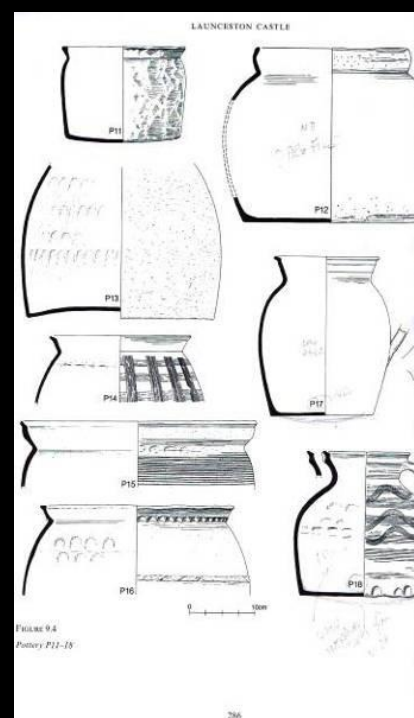


Fig: 2

Publication of the stratified sequence from Okehampton Castle: the 12th & 13th centuries

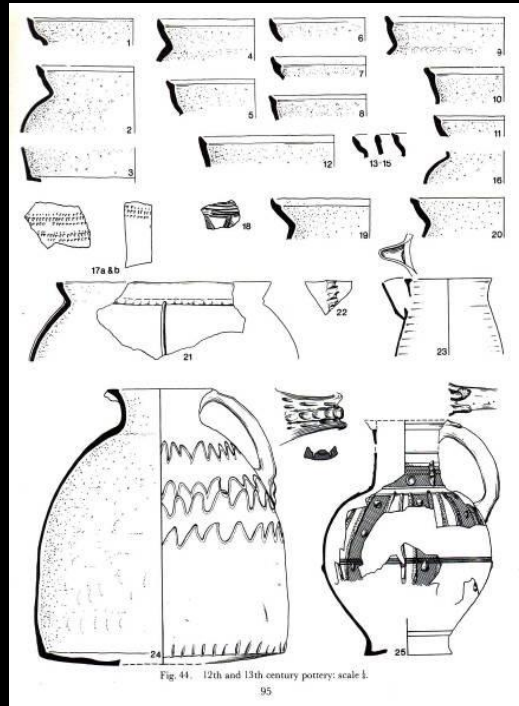


Fig. 44. 12th and 13th century pottery: scale 1.

95

Allan & Perry in *Proc. Devon Archaeol. Soc.* 1982

Fig: 3

Okehampton Castle: later medieval sequence

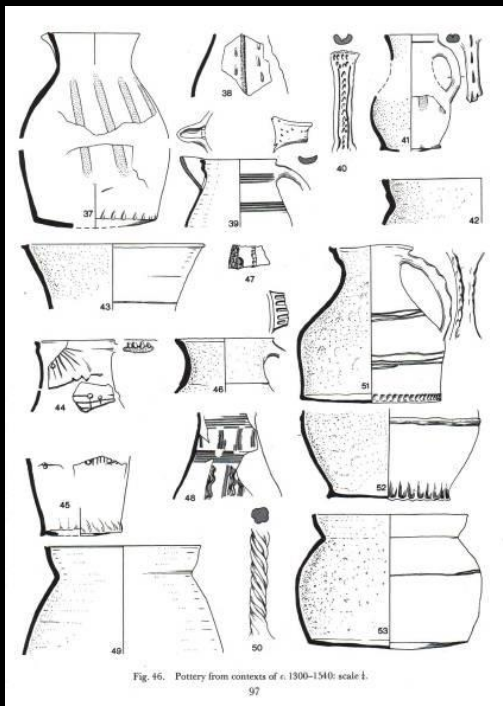












Fig. 46. Pottery from contexts of c. 1300-1340: scale 1.

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Cooking-pot rims											
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	J	K
15th / early 16th century				•			•			••	
14th century		•••	•••		••	••		•••			
c. 1300		•		•			•	••		•	•
late 13th century		•	••	••	•••	•	•••	•••	•		


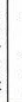



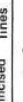


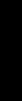


Jugs											
15th / early 16th century			•			•	••			•	•
14th century	•••	•	•••		•	••	•••		•	••	•••
c. 1300	•••	•	••		•	•	•••			••	•
late 13th century			•••	•		••	•••			••	•

Fig. 43. Summary of dating evidence from rims of fabric 1 vessels (each dot indicates appearance).

Fig. 43. Summary of dating evidence of traits of fabric 1 vessels (each dot indicates one vessel).

Specific rim forms and decorative details were found in successive deposits, probably showing that they were in use for long periods.

Fig: 4

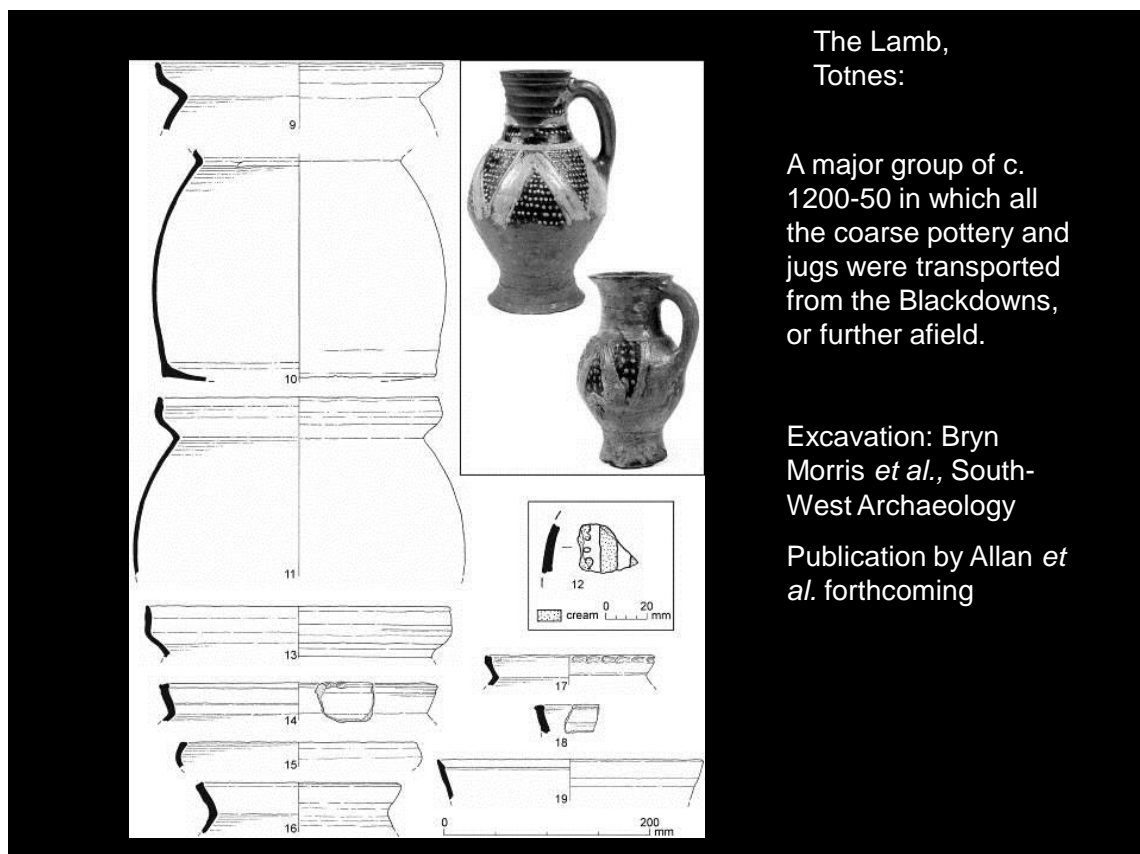


Fig: 5



Fig: 6

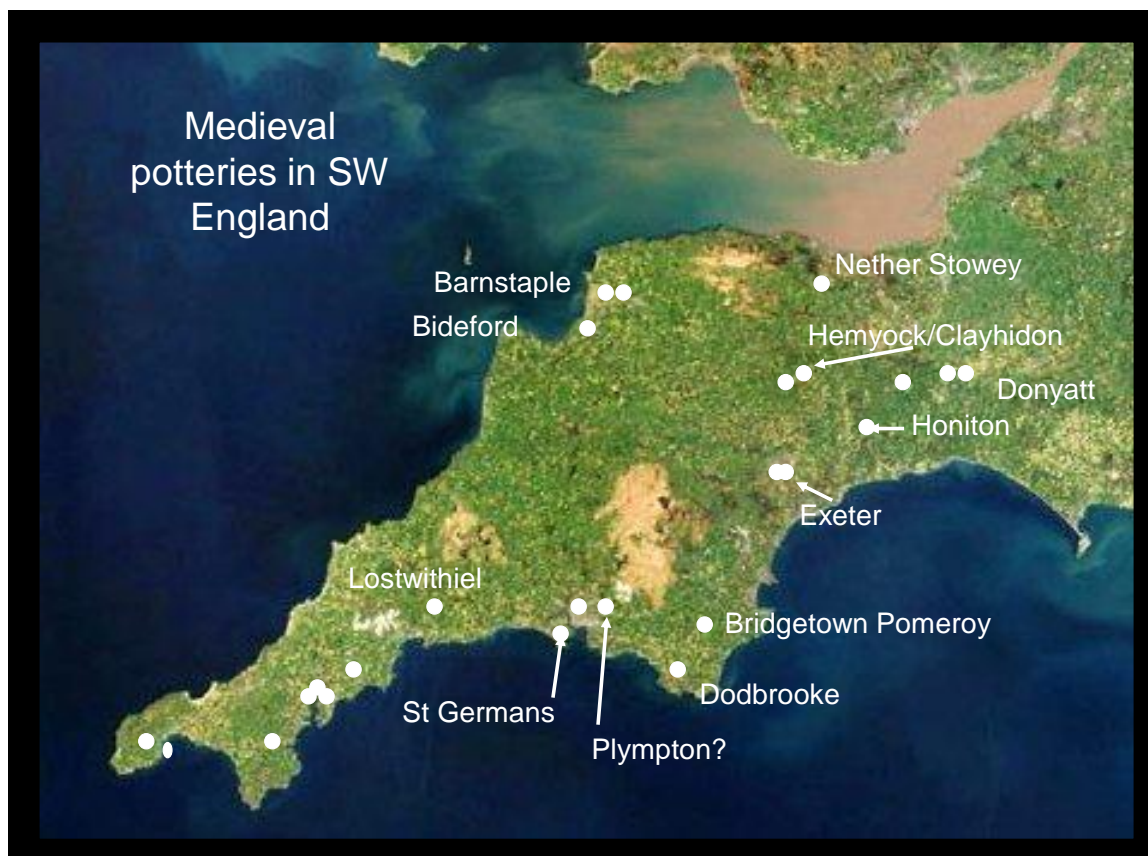


Fig: 7

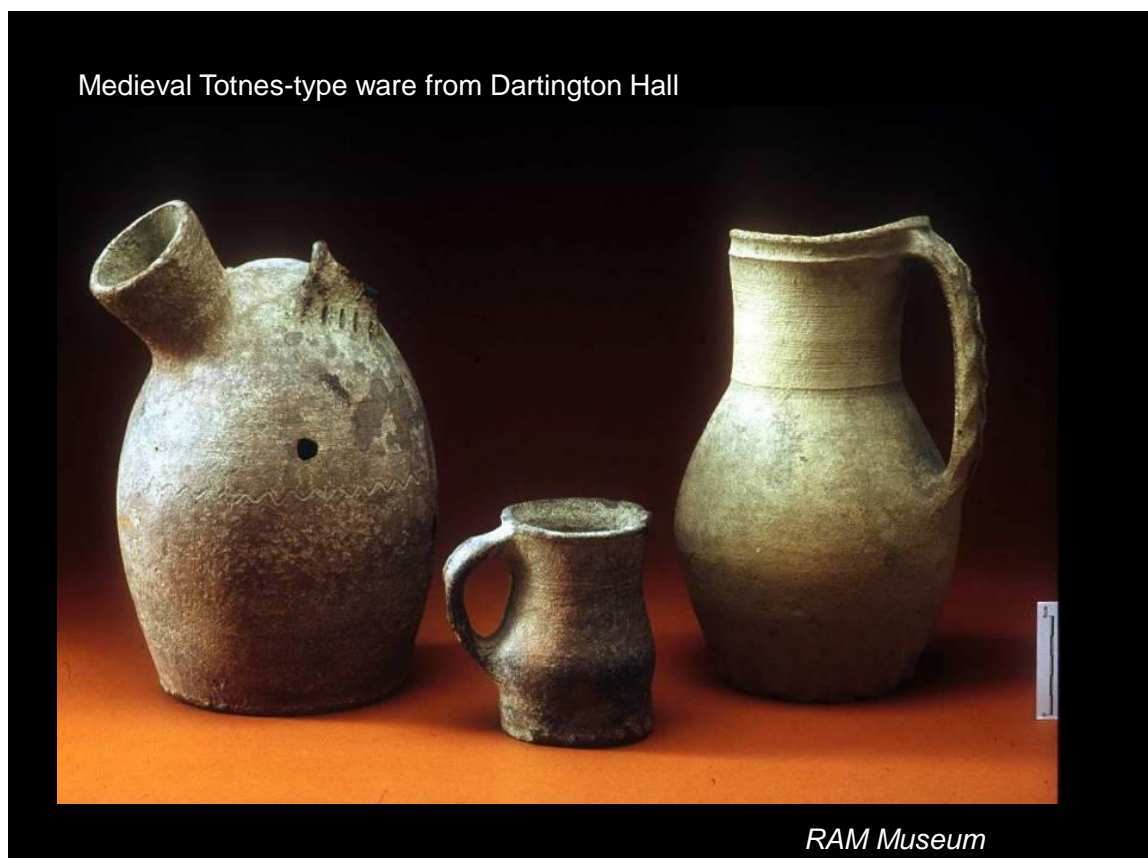


Fig: 8

North Devon Medieval Coarseware



Above: Dinna Clerks (*RAM Museum, Exeter*).

Right: Okehampton Castle (*Plymouth City Museums*)

Fig: 9

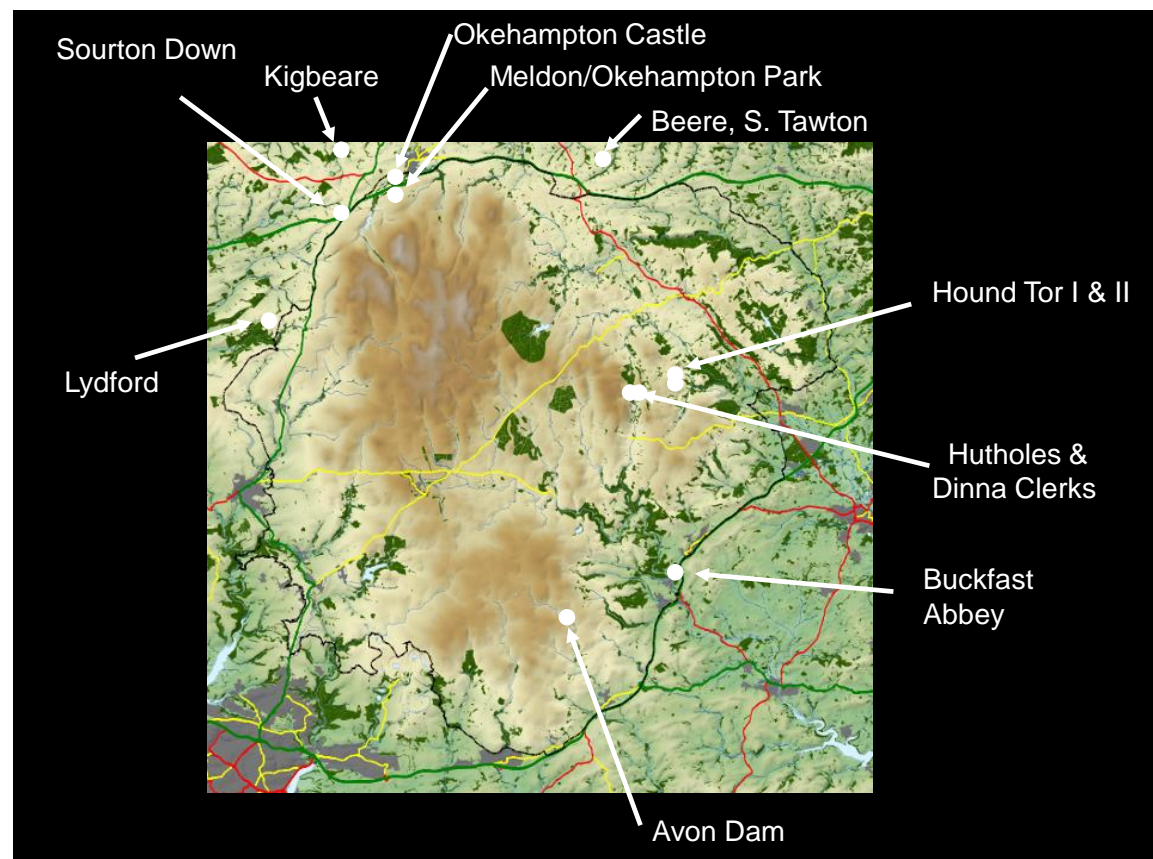
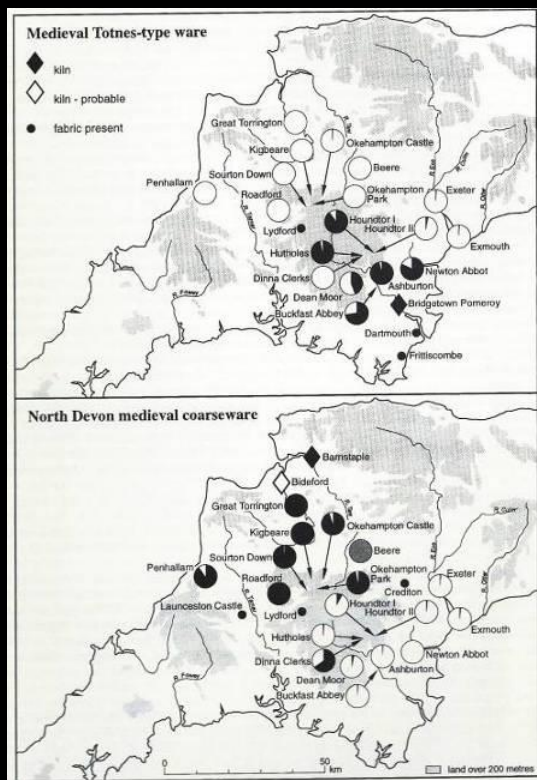


Fig: 10



The contrasting patterns of distribution of Totnes-type' ware and North Devon Medieval Coarseware

From Allan, J.P. 1994 'Medieval pottery and the dating of deserted settlements on Dartmoor', *Proc. Devon Archaeol. Soc.* **52**, 141–7.

Fig: 11



The hearth: Meldon/Okehampton Park



Photos: Courtesy of David Austin

Fig: 12

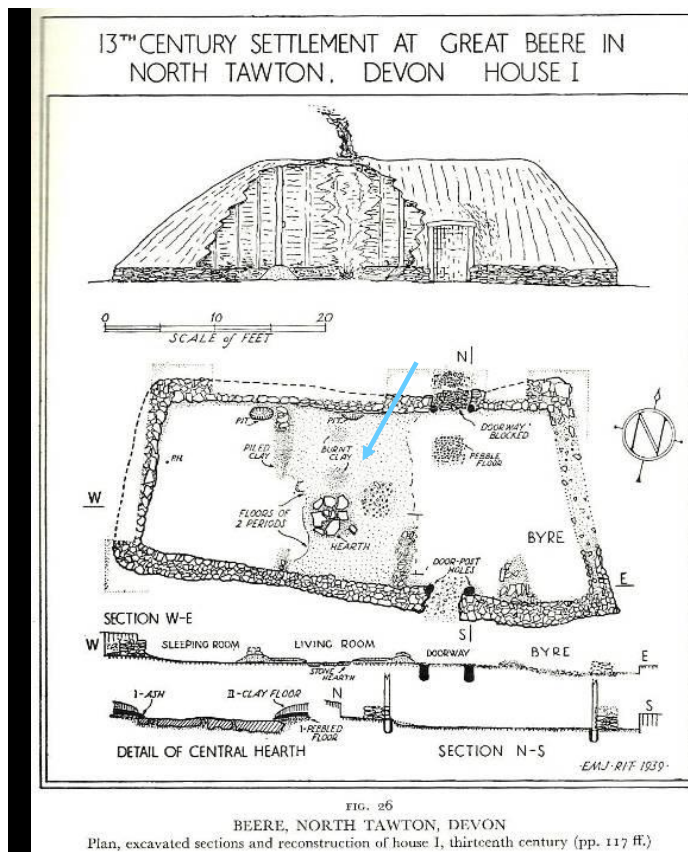
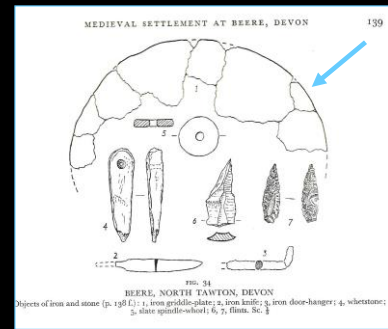
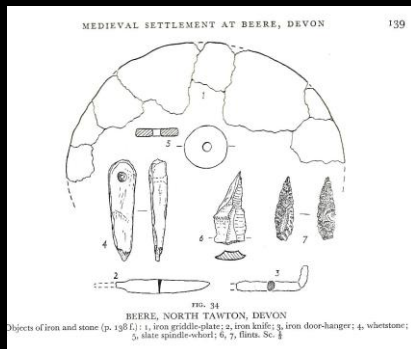


Fig: 13

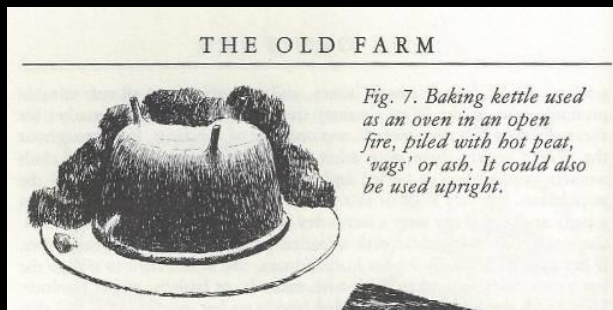


'Iron plate ...about 8-9ins across & 1/8ins thick... found in phase 1 floor in burnt area in the middle of the central room.

Medieval Archaeol. 1958, 138



Jope & Threlfall,
Medieval Archaeol.
1958, 139.

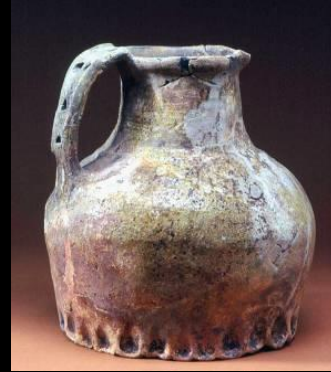
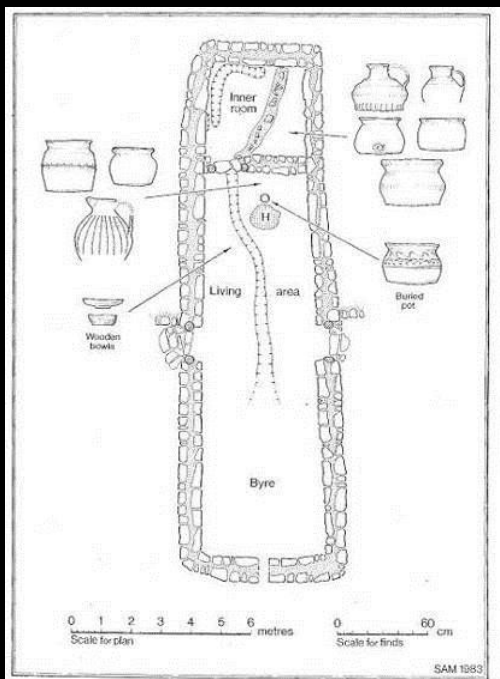


Robin Stanes *The Old Farm*
1990

Freda Wilkinson & Tony Beard (Widcombe) recall the use of baking kettles on Dartmoor farms without ovens as late as the 1960s.

Fig: 14

The positions of objects in the Dinna Clerks longhouse



S. Moorhouse, *Medieval Ceramics* 1986

Photos: RAM Museum

Fig: 15

Dinna Clerks: Nat Alcock's annotated version of the Steve Moorhouse plan

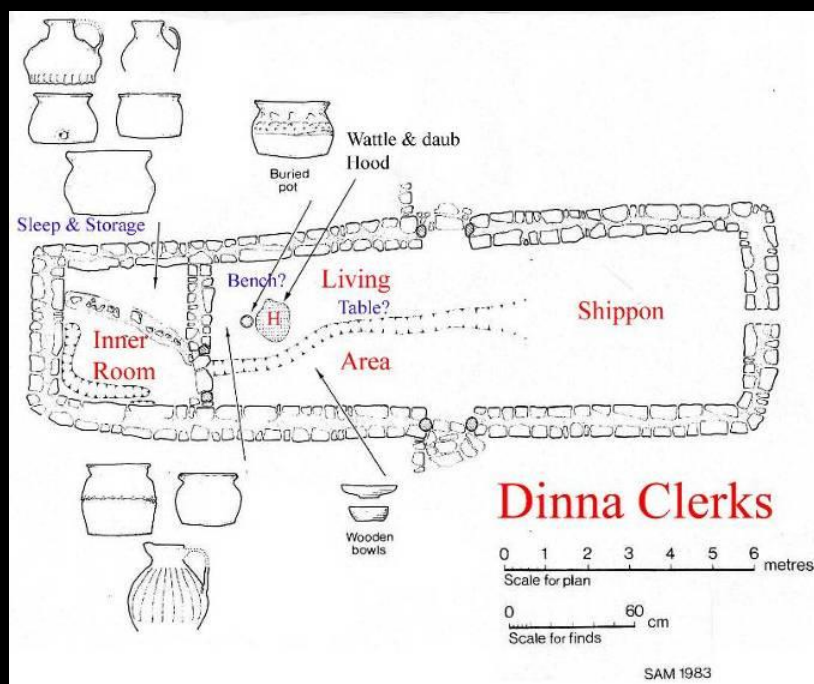
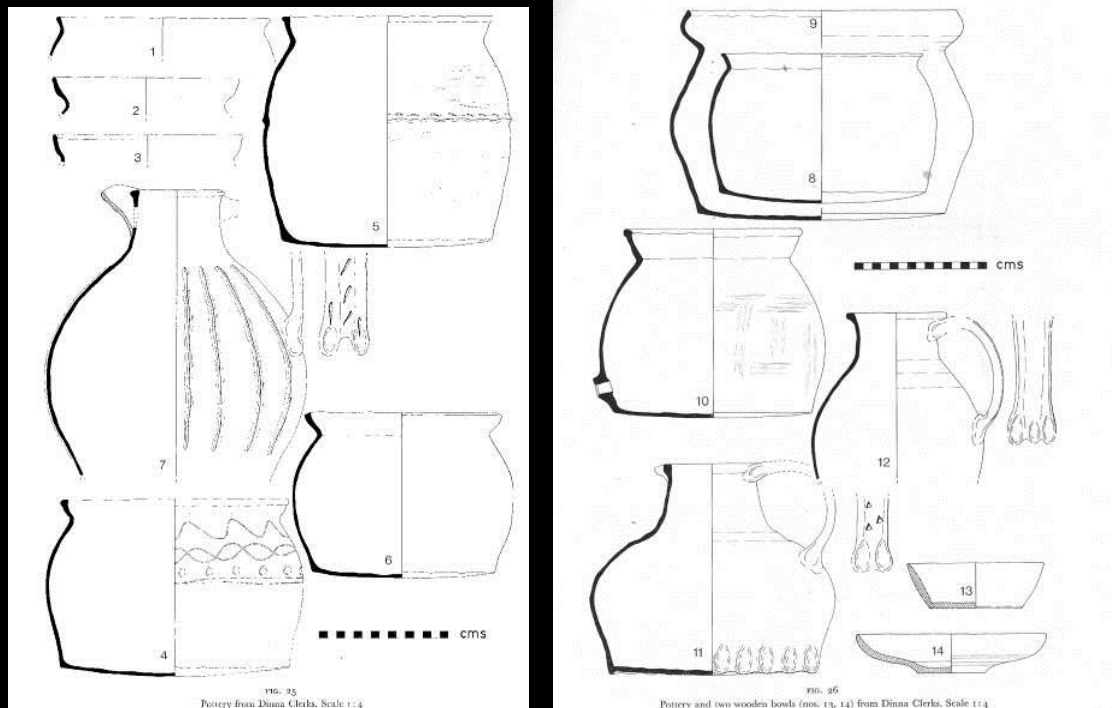


Fig: 16

Dinna Clerks: pottery & wooden vessels



Medieval Archaeology 1979; drawings by Trevor Miles

Fig: 17

Dinna Clerks finds



Cut halfpenny of Henry III,
issued c. 1253-60.

Fig: 18



Fig: 19

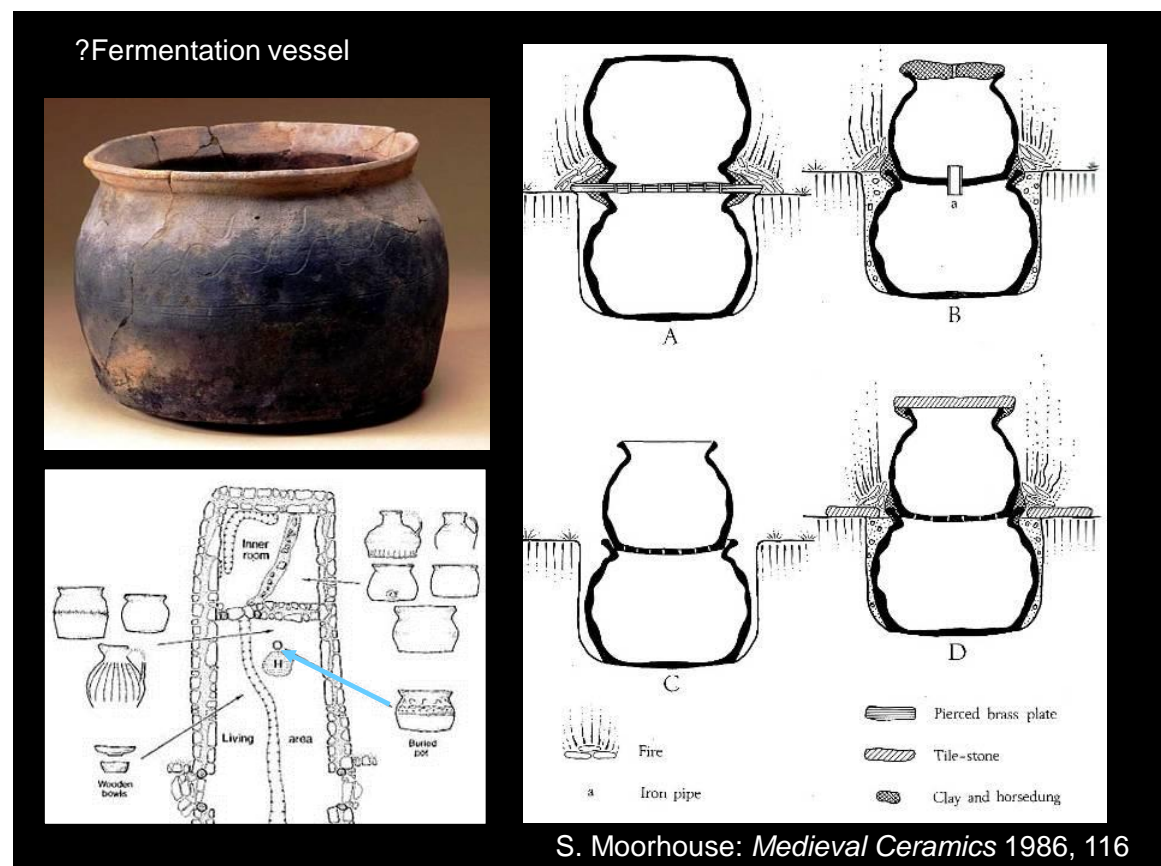


Fig: 20



Fig: 21