

DCPG NEWSLETTER

MARCH 1990

This is a rather shorter Newsletter than recent ones. The April issue will be even shorter - in fact it won't come out at all. This is because both Tony and I will be away for some time between now and the end of March. So may I suggest you mark April 6th, the date of the meeting after next, in your diary now.

The May issue, with your assistance, should be a more substantial thing. I hope we can begin to print some of the entries to the Christmas competitions - so you still have time to put in an entry if you haven't already done so; or another if you have.

Material for the next issue should be with me by April 20th.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

I am intrigued by the technique of burnishing with graphite and hope to find time to experiment with it during this year. Good examples of graphite burnished pots from the Central Cameroon can be seen at the Museum of Mankind, where the work of Pauline Bazama, a potter of the Gbaya tribe, is exhibited.

I do not know any potter who has worked with graphite, and can find no mention of this technique in any book, other than photographs which are not supported by text. Has any Guild member worked with graphite? I would be grateful for any information on method or history of this type of burnishing.

John Capes

RETURN TO SOIL HILL

Our recent Film Night was devoted in part to Isaac Button and his Soil Hill Pottery. The following extract traces some of the history of Soil Hill. It is reproduced by kind permission of David and Charles Publishers, Newton Abbot, Devon, from 'The English Country Potter' by Peter C D Brears (1971).

"In 1770 Jonathan Catherall moved his pottery from Keelham near Denholme to Soil Hill, Ovenden, near Halifax. A valuation of 1797 mentions house and 'Pott Oven', which he built on starting his pottery. After his death on 11th August 1807, the pottery was continued by his son John and his family. John's son Samuel returned to work here after abortive attempts to start a pottery at Bradshaw Head and he was responsible for the fine slipwares made at Soil Hill up to his death in 1887.

In about 1880, the pottery passed from the Catherall's possession, a Mr Wilcock taking it over and trying to run it himself. Apparently no potter, he soon converted the property to a chicken farm, still without success. In 1883 John Kitson, a member of the well established Yorkshire potting family, bought and reopened the pottery, working it up to his death in 1892. His widow and children tried to keep the the pottery in operation, but eventually sold it to Isaac Button in 1897. The pottery buildings were now over a century old, and in poor condition, so Mr Button demolished the old works and built a new pottery further down the hillside. The new pottery was extremely well designed, though small, and introduced many new features into the Yorkshire pottery industry: for the first time the kiln was down-draught instead of up-draught, and the clay-pan was heated from below by exhaust gases from the kiln passing through on way to the chimney [as we saw in the film]. Mr Button worked at Soil Hill Pottery from its rebuilding to the time of his death, when it passed to his son Isaac, who retired from the pottery in 1964, the last of the Halifax potters.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Soil Hill Pottery made redwares and slipwares in the usual range of Halifax shapes, including knifeboxes, candleholders, and

domestic and horticultural wares. Examples are in the Yorkshire Museum in York and Bradford and Halifax Museums. Twentieth century pottery from Soil Hill still continued earlier traditional wares including panchoons, puzzle jugs, stew pots etc. but made a greater range of ornamental wares, eg sgraffito wares. For these, Mr Button threw ornamental vase and cup shapes, gave them a coat of contrasting slip, and while still unfired, sold them to local people to decorate for themselves as a hobby, the pots being returned to the pottery for final firing and glazing. This accounts for many of the strange Soil Hill wares still to be found in the area."

GUILD EVENTS

Decorating for saltglaze

March 9th 8pm at Northchurch Social Centre
Northchurch, Berkhamsted

Gus Mabelson will be demonstrating, showing slides, and talking about the art of sprigging, stamping and using slips on stoneware for salt glazing.

Sawdust-fired ceramics

April 6th 8pm at Northchurch Social Centre
Northchurch, Berkhamsted

Antonia Salmon will be demonstrating, showing slides, and talking about making, decorating and burnishing pots for sawdust firing.

SLIPWARE WITH MURRAY FIELDHOUSE

Brian Bicknell

Here is a poser. What connects Roman pots, a subservient wife, and Michael Cardew's lodgings? Answer: the long thread of narrative given by Murray in his talk loosely based on 'Slipware'. The evening opened with a question. How many

types of slip trailers could the audience name? These ranged from Mary Wandrauch's bicycle inner tube to cow horns and goose quills. How many can you think of? Write in and tell us.

When I was young and discovered poetry for myself, freed from the influences of enforced learning of some long forgotten Victorian wordsmiths, I found the glory of the Georgian and early twentieth century poets. One in particular captured my imagination and made me look at words again. 'Under Milk Wood' by Dylan Thomas lifted the corner or peeled back the crow black night to see Eli Jenkins or Mrs Pritchard in thought word and deed. I mention this, not as a diversion from pots, but as a lead into that ever fertile mind of Murray. As I listened to his account of buying three slip trailers in Moscow for his Japanese hosts, I thought of Dylan Thomas. What would he have made of this? One large female Russian chemist refusing to sell even one trailer to an Englishman who was obviously up to no good, but who finally parted with the demanded three. Was there a greater need in England for such strange rubber goods, or did they dance through Milk Wood at dead of night when Mrs Pritchard put the cat out.

This was one of the many stories of the evening woven, or should I say embroidered, around particular pots, bowls and plates as they appeared on the screen. We must thank Murray for standing in for a speaker who did not appear. Murray claims the outstanding feat of reducing the Guild's first year membership of 400 to just 6, after a year of his talks and slide shows. With increasing finance and other speakers the seats filled again.

Murray appealed to the thrifty side of our natures with a suggestion for a novel slip trailer. Take a piece of clear, pliable and strong plastic sheeting. Cut a triangle and make a cone, similar to an old type of sweet bag or the bag used by cake decorators. Fill it with liquid slip, fold over the top and gradually squeeze down the cone. The hole at the bottom can be adjusted to control the flow. When you have finished, just unfold and wash in readiness for the next time.