

POTTERY COMES ALIVE!

Lifestyles in Prehistoric Lincolnshire



A RESOURCE PACK FOR
TEACHERS

POTTERY COMES ALIVE: LIFESTYLES IN PREHISTORIC LINCOLNSHIRE

Lincolnshire County Council Museums hold a collection of Bronze Age pottery that is of both regional and national importance. This material is housed at City and County Museum and Grantham Museum. The wide variety of vessel types represented, many of which are almost complete, hold interest to researchers and members of the general public throughout the country.

With the aid of a Pilgrim Trust Grant, City and County Museum embarked on a project to make the collections more accessible to those wishing to use them. The project had two phases: the **Cataloguing** phase to produce a card database for the collections and the **Outreach** phase to produce an exhibition and information booklets about the material.

Dr Carol Allen, an expert on Bronze Age pottery from the East Midlands area, provided the specialist input to the project. We now have a fuller understanding of the collections, and the Bronze Age society in Lincolnshire which made, used and disposed of them.

Lincolnshire County Council is grateful to the Pilgrim Trust for their generous assistance with this project.

The ultimate aim of the Bronze Age pottery project was to increase public access to the Bronze Age pottery collection in Lincolnshire County Council Museums. The catalogue database is available for study to anyone who has a bona fide interest in the material and we welcome its use. Perhaps you are interested in the locality around where you live? Please contact City and County Museum or Grantham Museum if you are interested in using the catalogue. We look forward to hearing from you.

This booklet has been prepared specially for teachers. It provides background information about the Bronze Age period, and details of a pottery project to carry out in the classroom. The project will fulfill some requirements of the National Curriculum at KS1 and KS2 for Technology, Art, History and English.

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THE BRONZE AGE: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

WHAT IS THE BRONZE AGE?

This is the period of prehistory between about 2000BC and 700BC when people discovered how to form metals for the first time. Tools, jewellery and weapons were made from bronze, an alloy of copper and tin. Before this period tools were made from flint and stone. Iron making was discovered after the Bronze Age.

Everything we know about this period in Britain comes from archaeology. It is before written history, hence the name prehistory.

WHAT MATERIALS WERE AVAILABLE TO PEOPLE AT THIS TIME?

Metals were being used for the first time. Besides the appearance of bronze, gold was occasionally used for bracelets, necklets known as torcs and other items of jewellery.

Clothes were made from skins and woven wool cloth. In certain conditions, such as waterlogged sites, bodies have been found still wearing their woollen garments and wrapped in skin rugs.

Baskets were probably being used as containers for carrying many things from the baby to the corn! Wood containers were probably very common too. Pottery vessels were used for cooking and storage and also for religious and funerary purposes.

Houses were constructed from a timber frame. They had walls of wattle and daub and roofs of turf or straw. Tools were of stone, flint and bronze. Weapons too appear to have become more common as techniques of bronze manufacture improved.

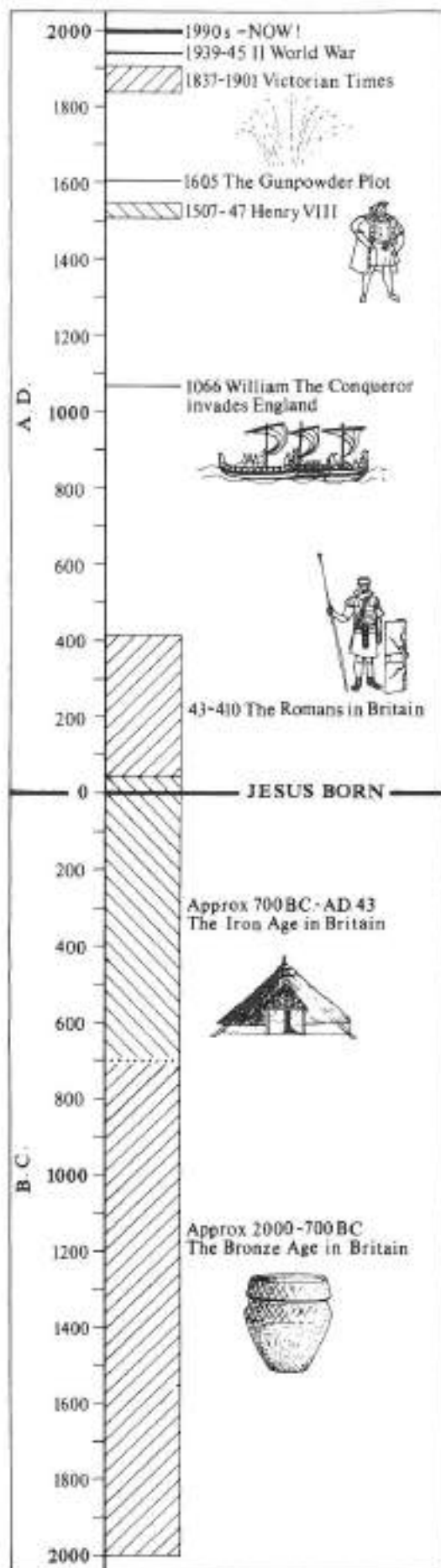


Fig 1: Timeline showing the relationship of the Bronze Age to the present day and some important historical events.

WHAT DO ARCHAEOLOGISTS FIND?

It has been estimated that 80% of what was used does not survive buried in the ground. Organic materials only survive in special conditions, so information about every day life - furniture, houses, tools, containers, food, hair, clothes - is lost.

Other materials such as stone, bone and metal do survive. The most usual find on many sites is pottery. Pottery is very useful to archaeologists. Its style and form can be dated and identified and it usually survives quite well. The shape might tell us what it was used for and the clay fabric might tell us where it was made. Pottery is easily broken and archaeologists find it in pits - the prehistoric equivalent of the dustbin!

WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE?

Most people were farmers and craftspeople were probably employed and paid by the farmers to make pots and tools as they were needed. There was no money so people bartered their labour in exchange for goods and food. The farmers grew cereals and kept animals for food and clothing. Their diet could have been quite varied, according to the season - birds, fish, eggs, cereals, fruits, roots, nuts and game.

Some children probably died in infancy due to poor diet and illness. Women, who were at risk during childbirth, rarely lived into old age, but most people would live into their twenties and thirties. Life was not all hard work and people probably had leisure activities, as we do today.

However, life was precarious with the possibility of poor harvests and disease ever present. Herbal remedies were used and there is evidence from trepanned skulls that some operations were carried out!

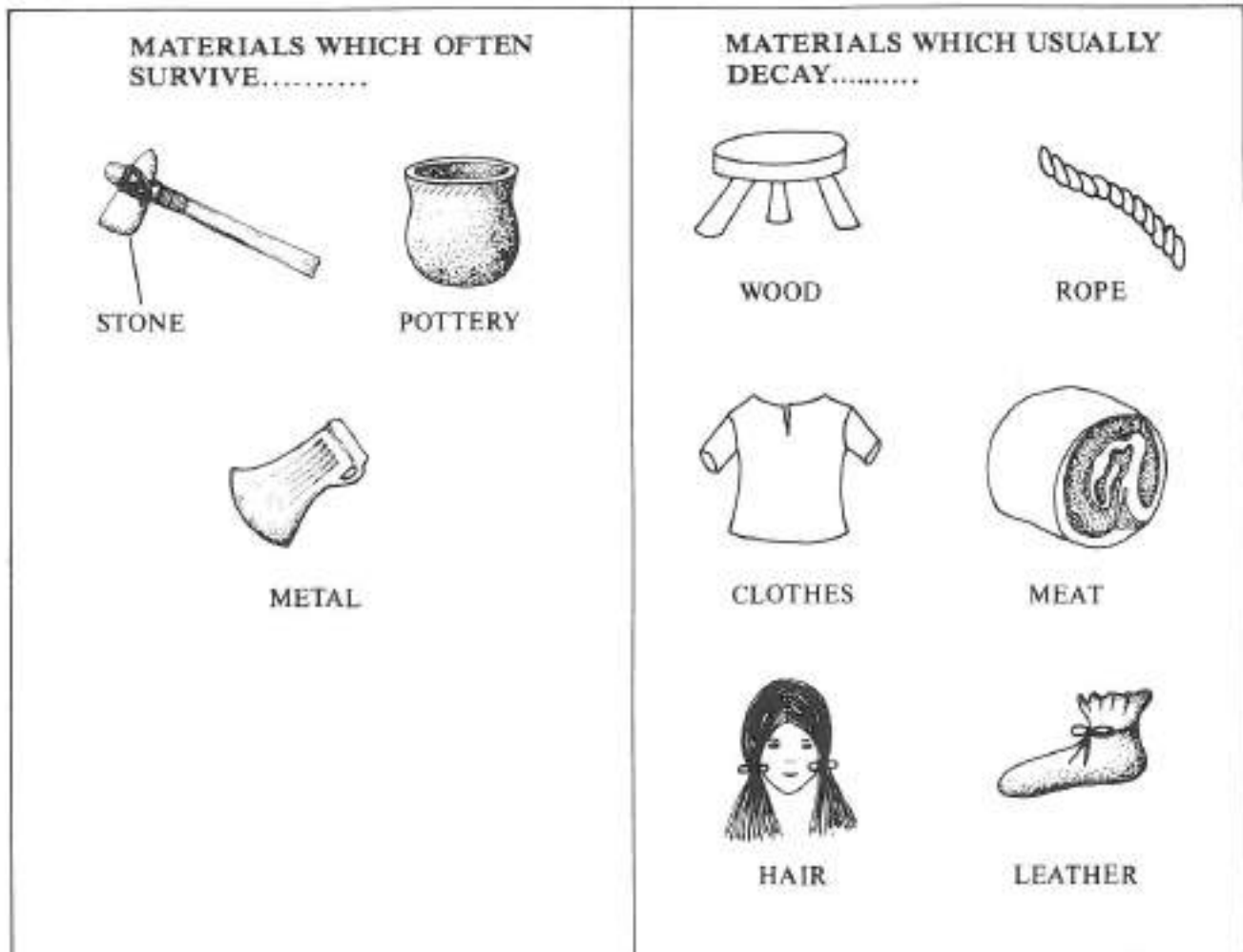


Fig 2: Diagram showing some types of material which do and do not survive in the ground.

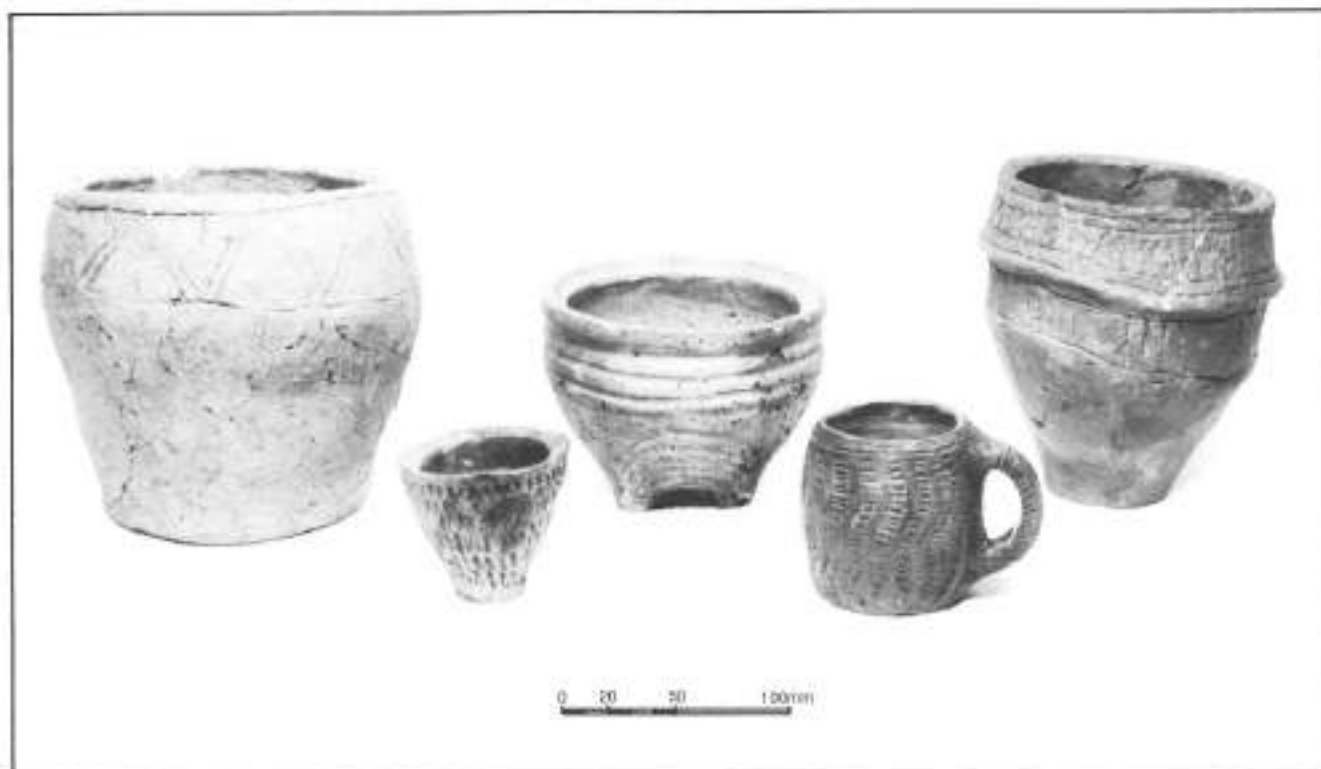
WHAT SORTS OF POTS DO WE FIND?

The pots vary in size from a few cms to 45cms in height. They differ in style, decoration and colour, but it is not always clear what their function was.

Description of Types and Possible Functions

The styles of Bronze Age pottery are usually described as **Beakers**, **Food Vessels**, **Pygmy Cups**, **Collared Urns** and **Bucket-shaped Pots**. This is the order in which they are generally thought to have come into fashion in this period. However, each style of pot overlapped with the preceding type and several different pots may have been in use at any one time, thus leading to similarities in decoration on the different shapes of pottery. All these vessels have been found in burials of the period, and have less commonly been found on settlement sites. However, more of this pottery is now coming to light on settlement sites in Lincolnshire.

Beakers are tall thin walled pots, usually orange or red in colour and have fine decoration, often made with a comb or small tool. Many of these pots do appear to have been drinking vessels and some have handles, as the example shown from South Willingham. A few vessels of this type have shown impressions of barley on their bases suggesting they may have been used for drinking beer! The pots may have been used for special occasions and were often buried with people when they died, possibly it was thought for use in the next world. The pots were placed with a body sometimes in a grave and covered with a round mound or barrow of earth and turf.



*Fig 3: Photograph of the different types of Bronze Age Pots
(left to right) Bucket-shaped Pot - Stainsby; Pygmy Pot - Wilsford; Food Vessel - Heighington;
Handled Beaker - South Willingham; Collared Urn - Sudbrook.*

Food vessels are usually bowl shaped and have fine decoration made with twisted cord or comb. These pots too were often buried with people in barrows when they died and may have contained some offering for the dead. Often food vessels have small lugs and grooves around them, or holes for ropes or cords, as the Heighington pot. These could have been used to suspend them, when storing liquids or cooking food.

Pygmy cups, like that shown from Wilsford, are small decorated vessels, which were occasionally found with burials in the Bronze Age. They may have contained some incense or herbs for use in the ceremonies which took place at the funerals when the dead were buried. The other types of pots too may have been used in this way for rituals and religious ceremonies particularly the highly decorated and prestigious Beaker pottery.

Collared pots vary in size, but are distinguished by their shape and these have decoration on their upper part, often made with twisted cord or incised with a sharp flint or tool. The pots could have been used for storage of cereals and would lend themselves to being covered with a cloth or skin, tied around the collar. These pots too were used in burials although in this case the remains of a cremated individual were put inside the vessel. Probably the pot was then also covered as often they were inverted into pits when buried.

Bucket-shaped pots are often quite plain and thick walled; if decorated this is confined to the upper part of the pot in finger tip or finger nail design, or an incised geometric pattern as seen on the Stainsby pot. These pots are found containing cremation burials in cemeteries, and are also known to have been used on settlement sites in Lincolnshire. They could have been useful for storing fruit, grain or eggs and also for cooking.

HOW WERE THEY MADE?

The potters would have been specialists who stuck to well-known traditional methods and traded their products in return for other goods, food and tools. Styles remained the same for a very long time - sometimes hundreds of years. The potter would have needed to know that there was a market for the pot - otherwise it would be a waste of time and materials. So the shape and form would have to meet the customer's needs.

The pot was made by hand, using rings of clay (refer to 'Making the Pot'). It would be decorated using geometric designs, dried out and then fired on a bonfire. Calm weather conditions were needed for this and the temperature of the fire could reach 850 degrees C. The fire would cool within about an hour.

WHAT WERE THE POTS USED FOR?

Some of the pots may have been used by people in the home for storage and/or cooking. Other pots may have been transported from one location to another by traders, as the vessels were used as containers for materials. What was inside could have been more important than the pot itself. In the later part of the Bronze Age, for example, we are sure that pottery was used for transporting salt in this area - salt was an important commodity for flavouring and preserving food. Some pots may have been used in religious ceremonies and during funerals. Pots were often buried with people in mounds or barrows, in the nature of family heirlooms. Cremated bones were also placed within pottery vessels for burial purposes.

BRONZE AGE POTTERY IN THE CLASSROOM

The following ideas show how the Bronze Age Pottery project can be used in the classroom. It is up to you whether you follow all the processes through, or whether you just pick out some of it. It isn't even necessary to use clay! The questions can be put to the children for discussion.

THE MATERIAL

What are pots made out of?

Why do we use clay to make pots?

How do we change it to make it hard so we can use it in the house?

Why don't we use other materials - Try making a cup out of cardboard!

What are the disadvantages? Pottery is very breakable. Archaeologists more often find broken pieces than whole pots.

PREPARING THE CLAY

Bronze Age people would have got clay out of the ground. It would be very solid and sticky, making it very difficult to shape and later to fire. They added a tempering material or filler such as shell, limestone, sand, gravel, small pebbles, crushed pottery, grass or straw. This aided the shaping, drying and firing processes.

Why not try moistening the clay, so that tempering materials can be added. Try a variety of types in different pots and compare them to see what gives the best results - when working the clay and when the pot is fired.

DESIGNING THE POT

What is the pot going to be used for? The function of the pot will determine what it will look like. Is it for drinking, cooking or storage? Look at the drawing of the Bronze Age house for ideas. In the Bronze Age the potter would have had to be sure someone would want the pot - it was a waste of time and materials if no one needed it. This meant people stuck to the old pot making traditions rather than trying anything new. Look at fig. 4 which shows modern pots, and think about how function determines design today.



Fig 4: Look at these modern pots - How does function determine the design?

MAKING THE POT

Bronze Age potters would have made a flat, round base and then added 'sausages' of clay. The first ring would be attached and flattened. The rings would be smoothed over. The second ring would be added at an angle, with the join at a different position. The rim piece would be added when the pot reached the correct height. This is the only method used, so presumably it is the most effective.

Try getting different groups to use different techniques

- ring pot (as described above)
- coil pot (using continuous rings of clay)
- thumb pot (using fingers to shape a lump of clay)

Compare the results

- which was the easiest to form for the design required?
- which makes the largest pot?
- which is strongest?

DECORATING THE POT

Patterns were usually geometric. Objects like shells, twisted cord, nails, fingers, twigs and combs were pressed into the clay. Perhaps children could collect objects together from the classroom and playground - which are natural and which are man-made? Now see what patterns they make in the clay.

FIRING THE POT

The pots were dried out and then fired on a bonfire. Pots would be piled up either on the ground or in a pit and covered with fuel - wood, animal dung or brushwood and twigs. The bonfire would quickly reach a temperature to fire the pots and after an hour to an hour and a half would begin to cool. So to be really authentic why not try building a bonfire on the school playing field! Otherwise use the school kiln.

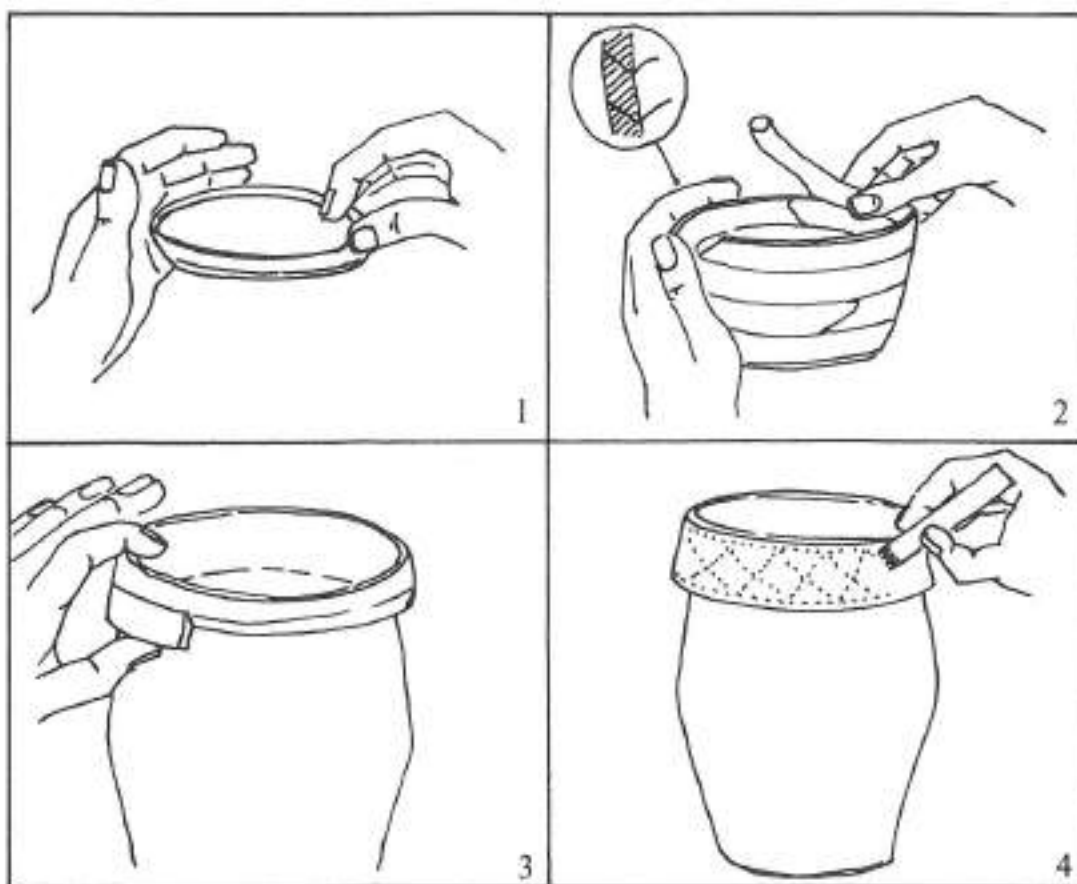


Fig 5: The process of making a prehistoric pot - (1) The base is formed (2) rings of clay are built up (3) The rim and collar are added (4) decoration is applied to the wet clay body.














	HORIZONTAL ROWS		DIAMOND
	VERTICAL ROWS		V SHAPE
	DIAGONAL ROWS		CHEVRON
	HERRINGBONE		TRIANGLE
	LATTICE		HORSESHOE
	DIAGONAL WEAVE		RANDOM
		HORIZONTAL & VERTICAL WEAVE	

Fig 6: Diagram showing different types of decoration.

EVALUATING THE PROJECT

Compare the pots

- which fillers allowed the pots to be fired the best?
- which most fulfills the design requirements?
- which technique worked the best?
- how would the children change the pots if they did the project again?

AFTER THE PROJECT

There is much potential for discussion about their work. It can be written up as an account of their experiments, or why not write a story on what it was like to be alive in the Bronze Age. Another idea is to create a museum display showing the different stages of the project, with captions to provide explanation.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Bronze Age:

the period between about 2000BC and 700BC.

Archaeology:

the study of the past using material remains.

Tempering material/Filler:

material such as shell, limestone and gravel added to clay to enable better shaping, drying and firing.

Coil pot:

pot made from a single 'sausage' of clay continually coiled round to form the vessel.

Wattle and Daub:

wall built by interweaving willow or hazel branches between posts set in the ground. The wattle is then covered with daub - a mixture of clay, straw and lime.

Alloy:

a mixture of metals such as copper and tin.

Lug:

a clay loop or eye for inserting cord to suspend a pot.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This booklet has been designed to help teachers through a pottery project in the classroom. Both City & County Museum (0522) 530401 and Grantham Museum (0476) 68783 have permanent collections of Bronze Age pottery. Please contact them to find out what is on display or available for research.

City & County Museum also has technology boxes available for loan to schools. These contain fragments of real pottery and replica pots.

An exhibition also entitled "Pottery Comes Alive" will be at three venues in 1994:

March 1st-May 8th Lincoln Castle. Please contact City & County Museum to arrange workshops and bookings at this venue.

May 30th-August 30th Grantham Museum.

September 10th-October 9th Gainsborough Old Hall.

This information was correct at the time of publication. Please contact City & County Museum for further information.

Suggested further reading

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