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POTTERY FINDS FROM THE COLONY SITE:
SOME INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Sue Taylor

SUMMARY

This is a commentary on some of the pottery finds made during excavations on Bennachie during the summer of 2013, focussing on those which were on display during the summer of 2014 in the Bennachie Centre. A complete analysis of the finds is underway and the final excavation report has still to be completed. The author did not participate in the actual excavation and so this article is based upon examination of the finds post excavation. The article will look at the social context in which these, and other, pottery items were acquired and utilised in the 19th century.

INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 2012 and 2013 excavations were carried out on two houses within what has come to be known as the Colony on the slopes of Bennachie. Published¹ and ongoing² research has provided much information about the people who lived in the properties, their occupations and eventual removal from their homes. The archaeological investigation of the ruins of the properties known as Hillside and Shepherd's Lodge offered an opportunity to find out more detail about the domestic, economic and social lives of the colonists. The details of the initial phases of the archaeological investigated were described in the previous edition of this publication.³ (See also Oliver, this volume).

Pottery finds from such excavations give us a tangible connection to the lives of the previous owners. Although it is not always possible to draw definite conclusions from the many fragments unearthed, they can confirm established facts concerning dates and daily activities while opening up other avenues for future discussion and research, and encouraging us to challenge existing assumptions about the way of life of inhabitants.

*"By their relevance to perhaps the most important of domestic activities - eating, drinking and food preparation - the ceramics introduce us to the very heart of the household and provide direct contact with their users."*⁴

Previous research has indicated that, although they came from different geographical locations before settling on the slopes of Bennachie, the colonists by and large adopted similar lifestyles as small subsistence farmers or crofters. Some supplemented this living by additional day labour, in some cases as stonemasons and drystone dykers.⁵ It would, however, be reasonable to assume that money was in short supply and unlikely to be utilised for the purchase of ceramic items be they practical or decorative. Pottery possessions were likely to be limited to essentials and almost certainly of the cheaper varieties, with perhaps an occasional gift or heirloom having pride of place in the home.

THE AVAILABILITY AND CONSUMPTION OF POTTERY IN RURAL AREAS

In past centuries, most rural areas of Britain had local potteries who produced fairly coarse wares for their local market, concentrating on items required for daily use around the kitchen, dairy and farm. In his work on English country potteries, Brears notes that such potteries were often run in conjunction with a smallholding, stating that the dual role of potter and farmer was common in many parts of the country⁶. The products of these potteries were commonly made of local clays and are often red, yellow or brown in colour, rather like the red clay flowerpots which we use today. This coarse, and rather porous earthenware could be rendered suitable for food preparation and storage by the addition of a lead glaze to the inner surface making it impervious to liquids and easier to clean. The author has found no evidence of local potteries such as those described by Brears in the immediate vicinity of Bennachie, although a variety of earthenware vessels were produced by an alternative duality of potteries and brickworks in the 19th century



Photograph 1. Fragments of large earthenware storage vessel, Hillside. (J Oliver)

in Aberdeen, at Seaton⁷, Torry⁸, and Pitmuxton⁹ and to the north west of the area earthenware goods were briefly manufactured by the Craigellachie Brick and Tile Co.¹⁰

It was not surprising to find the remains of such coarse earthenware vessels in the Bennachie excavations but, sadly, no intact vessels of this kind were found at the Colony site (Photos. 1 & 2). However, as they tended to be fairly large in size, it is

easy to visualise and reconstruct their original forms from the profiles of the foot and top rims. Examples were found of basin shaped pots (known as pancheons) which could have been used either as dairy vessels for skimming milk, or for storing bread dough while it rises or, indeed, for washing (Photo. 3). It is probable that other storage methods would also have been used, such as baskets or woven bags and that vegetables such as potatoes would have been stored in the ground, thus reducing the need for expensive ceramic storage vessels.¹¹

Where might the colonists have obtained these pots? Having suggested that such items were often sourced locally, it is clear that pottery was regularly imported to the north-east from other parts of the country. We find in the Aberdeen Journal of 1837 an advertisement for an auction in Peterhead of 'Devonshire Brown Earthenware [which] comprises a variety of Dairy and Culinary dishes and other vessels; and, being well leaded, are better adapted for Household purposes than Vessels of Wood &c. which taste and tint the liquids and substances put into them. Country Merchants and Others will find the Earthenware deserving their notice. It will be offered in such Lots as Dealers may wish to purchase.'¹² Perhaps this consignment was a return cargo into Peterhead harbour which could then easily find its way inland to the merchants of the Garioch, and thus to the farming communities of the area.

By the 19th century, in addition to these relatively coarse products from country potters, most households would have owned some industrially



Photograph 3. Fragments of red earthenware bowl, Hillside. (S Taylor)



Photograph 2. Fragments of red earthenware bowl, Shepherd's Lodge. (J Oliver)

produced pottery and china from large manufacturing centres such as Staffordshire, Yorkshire, Liverpool, Fife, Glasgow and Edinburgh. As the transport and trading network within Britain was well developed by the time of the Colony, we should not assume that items from Scottish manufacturers would predominate in the finds from the excavation.

As with the example above of pottery arriving by boat from Devon, we can also find many instances of the products of, for example, the Staffordshire Potteries being marketed in the north-east. In the Aberdeen Journal of 1828, Mr MacSwein advertises that he will be auctioning in Aberdeen “Extensive and Magnificent Stock” from Mason’s earthenware factory in Lane Delph, Staffordshire.¹³ There were other 19th century links between the Garioch and Staffordshire, with McConochie reporting that a feldspar quarry on Pitfichie Hill was operated by an “agent of the Staffordshire Potteries” until 1835 “from which the stones, broken small and packed in casks, were shipped to England.”¹⁴ This same agent could have been instrumental in arranging return loads of pottery to the north-east. The 1845 Statistical Account of Scotland specifically comments on the fact that trade communication is good for Chapel of Garioch, with “three stage coaches, which pass every lawful day to and from Aberdeen through the parish; besides carriers from Huntly, Keith, and other parts of the country on their way to Aberdeen.”¹⁵

However, given their economic situation, a more likely way for the colony inhabitants to directly obtain household items such as pottery was via the travelling salesmen who had traditionally visited rural areas since the 17th century and can still be found visiting some rural areas today. Oral history tells of a ‘Bone Davy’ visiting the Alford area with pots in a backpack until the 1950s whilst ‘Pigger’ Mackie carried out the same sort of enterprise on Deeside around the 1930s using a Model T Ford as his method of carriage.¹⁶ These merchants were often prepared to accept goods in exchange for pots, a barter arrangement which could well have suited the colonists. It is recorded that such hawkers would accept old clothes, boots and even bones in return for pots,¹⁷ and the colonists would have had a supply of farm produce and perhaps hand-knitted items which could be traded. Brears suggests that such vendors would have had to offer a range of household goods to make a reasonable profit, as the pots they were selling were of low value and their customers were from the poorest classes with little to spend or barter.¹⁸

Other opportunities for acquiring pots would have been the regular round of local fairs and markets held throughout the county where vendors would have stalls and deals could be struck for cash or barter. Farm ‘roups’ or dispenish sales also afforded the opportunity to purchase second hand goods at affordable prices.

It is perhaps relevant to note that the upper and middle classes did not readily discard their damaged pottery as we would today. An 1842 inventory of the possessions of Sir Harry Niven Lumsden of Auchindoir lists a surprising number of pieces of crockery which were either “craked” or “chiped”.¹⁹ This suggests that such items were not necessarily made available for domestic staff to take home and use.

Brears notes that rural consumption of ceramics did not change as rapidly as in urban areas.

“The inhabitants of the large industrial towns were among the first to change over to factory-made wares, while the hill farmers....together with the agricultural communities were among the last. This was only to be expected, for the townfolk would have had little use for anything but tablewares, which were factory-made, but in the country districts there was still a demand for harvest barrels, bottles, ham pans, and butter- and cream-pots which no factory could provide.”²⁰

The remains of coarse earthenware pots found at the colony support this comment.

TYPES OF WARE EXCAVATED AT THE COLONY SITE

In the 19th century, pottery decorated with cut sponge patterns began to be produced in large amounts by industrial potters, particularly those in Fife and Glasgow. This was a quick and easy method of producing simple decorated ware for domestic use as it could be carried out by relatively unskilled workers. Several examples of this type of ware were found in the colony houses. Again, no complete items were found but a sizeable number of fragments of each pattern may permit some reconstruction to take place at a later date (Photo. 4). The finds suggest that these are smaller sized items, such as mugs, bowls and plates, which would have been in daily use in a small house



Photograph 4. Fragments of earthenware beer mug with sponged decoration, Hillside. (C Foster)

where more extensive table settings would not have had a place, and the type of food being eaten only required a bowl shaped vessel. In his paper on the crofting community on the Isle of Barra, Barker states that “the bowl is the ideal vessel from which to eat meals prepared in a single pot” and to be eaten with only a spoon.²¹ The north-east crofting diet of the time would have included basic meals such as soup, porridge and brose, all of which fit this description.

The majority of the finds feature one colour sponge prints, mainly in blue, this being the cheapest option for this type of decoration (Photos. 5-7). A few examples of multicolour sponge printing were also found, demonstrating



Photographs 5-7. Examples of sponge decorated earthenwares from Hillside and Shepherd's Lodge. (S Taylor)

how attractive these simple patterns can be. Although still relatively cheap, these multicolour pieces were generally more expensive to produce and buy (Photos. 8 & 9).

Barker notes²² that, at the time of the Colony, identical wares using identical raw materials and processes were being made throughout the country, and so, unless a maker's mark is found, it is rarely possible to attribute an item to a particular manufacturer or town. Although the sponged patterns, including those illustrated in Photos. 5 to 9, may look quite distinctive, it is not possible to identify their place of manufacture, apart from one plate with the impressed mark ROBERT MALING (Photos. 10 & 11). This identifies the plate as coming from the Ouseburn Pottery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and dates it between 1817 and 1859.²³

To further highlight the difficulty in attribution without a maker's mark, Photo. 12 shows some fragments from Bennachie with a distinctive sponged star pattern. In comparison, Photo. 13 shows a pattern excavated in 2010 at High Morlaggan near Arrochar in Argyll,²⁴ a similar rural agricultural settlement. This demonstrates how manufacturers copied each other's patterns, especially those which were known to be good sellers.

In the 19th century, one of the most popular styles of domestic pottery for the middle and higher classes was transfer printed ware – mainly in blue, although other colours such as green and pink were also developed at a later date. Manufactured by potters both in Scotland and south of the border, this was a technically more expensive method of decoration

and it is therefore not surprising that fewer examples of this were found in the excavation. For a colony housewife, it is likely that a plate such as the willow-type pattern (Photo. 14) would have ranked as 'best china' (although not bone china) and would have been kept for special occasions. Perhaps it was a gift, or a lucky barter with a visiting tradesman? Some of the ladies of the Colony worked as domestic servants and could perhaps have received such an item as a wedding gift from an employer.

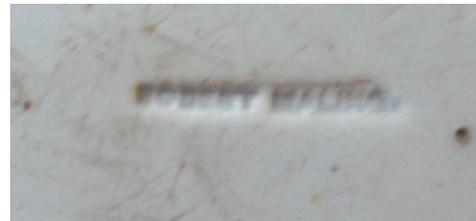
Printed wares such as this frequently bear maker's marks and so can be identified and dated. Sadly, on this occasion, only part of the mark is visible (Photo. 15). The banner Opaque China does not help us, as no less than 34 companies are known to have used this trade name, and there could be more.²⁵ Other printed and impressed marks still remain to be identified.

Examples of other types of surface decoration common in the 19th century were also found. These included industrially produced slipwares. An example can be seen in Photo. 16 where randomly dropped liquid clays of different colours are used to produce the decoration. These slipwares were often mugs, tankards and other small domestic items and are sometimes also called 'mocha' wares.

No British home would be complete without a teapot and the remains of more than one were found at the colony. Judging from the size of the base and handle of the teapot in Photo. 17 this would have been a family sized pot, probably in daily use. The brown glaze used on the teapot is known as a Rockingham style glaze and it is possible to see some decorative moulding on the spout. A decorative moulded knob from a Rockingham teapot lid was also found (Photo. 18). These brown teapots were manufactured and used throughout the country and, as with



Photographs 8&9. Multicoloured sponged earthenware, Shepherd's Lodge. (S Taylor)



Photographs 10&11. Earthenware soup plate with sponged decoration carrying impressed mark: ROBERT MALING (S Taylor)

the sponged wares, it is not possible to identify the manufacturer as there is no maker's mark on the base.

All of the examples shown are made of earthenware, the most common type of industrially produced pottery. Higher quality tablewares of this period would have been produced in bone china, and few examples of this were found.

There were also relatively few examples of stoneware bottles and jars of the type used to store and retail products such as whisky, jam, cream, ink and other pastes or liquids. These are useful for dating as they were frequently printed or impressed with the retailers' name or trade mark. The base of one bottle found at Shepherd's Lodge bears part of the mark for Bourne's Codnor Park Pottery, near Derby. This dates the bottle to 1833-1861

(Photo. 19). There could be two good reasons why so few examples of this type of ware have been found. Firstly, the crofters of the Colony would have produced much of their own food, such as dairy and fruit-based products, and would not have purchased them in jars and bottles from shops. Secondly, many of the bottles and jars of this type required payment of a refundable deposit and therefore had a monetary value. They would not therefore have been readily discarded.

In a relatively poor setting such as the colony houses one would not expect to find examples of decorative wares intended for the middle classes. It was therefore a surprise to find a small model of a sheep in the McDonald house, Hillside (Photo. 20). This became the most handled and iconic find of the excavation, with many theories circulating as to its origin. Models such as sheep, goats, poodles and other 'woolly-coated' animals were in production from around 1820, mainly in Staffordshire, and were either sold as individual models on a flat base or in pairs, as chimney ornaments (Photo. 21). It is likely that this sheep came from a broken ornament, as we can see that its legs have been snapped off from its base. Perhaps it was originally owned by one of the larger houses in the area where a colonist worked as a domestic servant and was given away when it was broken.



12. Sponged star decoration, Hillside.



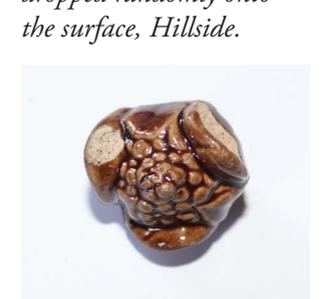
13. Sponged star decoration, High Morlaggan, Arrochar, Argyll. (G Haggerty)



14&15. Transfer printed earthenware willow pattern plates. Marked OPAQUE CHINA, Hillside.



16. Earthenware with coloured liquid clays dropped randomly onto the surface, Hillside.



17&18. Earthenware teapot with 'Rockingham' style glaze with decorative knob, Hillside. (All photos. except 13 S Taylor)

The remains of several clay pipes were found across the colony site. Such items were fragile and were disposable as they frequently broke during use, the pieces being discarded into walls or the ground as having no further use. Some of the finds bear manufacturers' trade names or moulded patterns which may help to identify their origins and dates (Photos. 22 & 23).

The children of the colony left behind some clay marbles as evidence of their outdoor games. Brears mentions these marbles when talking about travelling salesmen. "If trade was scarce, or if a new area was being tried, the prospective customers' children were tempted by free gifts – specially made whistles, pottery marbles, or small modelled birds..."²⁶ Visitors to the Bennachie Centre in 2014 remembered such clay marbles from their childhoods.

NEXT STEPS

The large amount of pottery finds has now been catalogued and is currently being more fully evaluated by a small group consisting of staff from the University of Aberdeen and members of the Bailies of Bennachie. Both quantitative and qualitative research will hopefully allow us to learn more about the lives of those who owned and used these pottery goods.

NOTES

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19. Base of salt-glazed stoneware bottle marked CODNOR PARK POTTERY, DERBY, Shepherd's Lodge, c.1833-1861.



20. Model of a sheep, detached from a larger object - possibly a chimney ornament, Hillside.



21. Example of complete Staffordshire chimney ornaments, c.1820.



22&23. Fragments of clay pipes found in several locations. (All photos. S Taylor)

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