

POTTERY COMES ALIVE!



LINC^oLNSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

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.

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PREHISTORY AND THE BRONZE AGE

The Bronze Age belongs to the period of prehistoric archaeology: before the time of written history, the discovery of iron working and the coming of the Romans in AD43. In the prehistoric period the only information available on life in Britain comes from the evidence of archaeology and excavated material has to be used to interpret the lifestyle of our ancestors. Fortunately in Lincolnshire archaeologists have unearthed remains which enable pictures of the past to be pieced together.

The Bronze Age in Britain covers a time about three to four thousand years ago. Between approximately 2000BC and 700BC the discovery of the knowledge of metal working brought new possibilities to the people of Britain. They had the raw materials to fashion copper and bronze tools and weapons, and began trading these valuable commodities with people in Britain and Europe.

LIFESTYLE IN BRONZE AGE LINCOLNSHIRE

The men, women and children of the Bronze Age were very much like people today, working to make a living and a home for their families, and spending time in leisure activities. However, unlike most people today, they were probably farmers and craftspeople, stone, wood and metal workers, and lived in small rural settlements. They communicated and worked together to build round houses of timber with walls of wattle and daub and roofs of turf or straw. Remains of a small settlement of this type have been excavated at Billingborough on the fen edge. In this and other areas of Britain, ditched field systems show that the families also co-operated to divide and work the land. In their evening around the hearth or fire, the people probably entertained each other with songs and stories of the past, thus transmitting orally their history, customs and the skills needed to maintain their lifestyle.

At other sites in Lincolnshire, for example at Sudbrook, remains have been found which show that the people constructed graves, often covered with small mounds or barrows, in which the dead were buried and around which they held religious ceremonies. Respect for their families, their ancestors and for their leaders seems to have been as important to them as it is to us today.

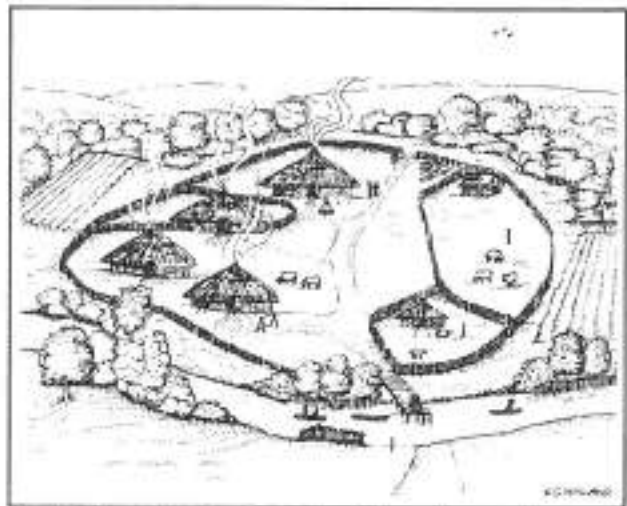


Fig 1: Reconstruction of a typical Bronze Age settlement.

SURVIVING EVIDENCE OF BRONZE AGE LINCOLNSHIRE

Much of the evidence of peoples' everyday lives unfortunately has not survived the three thousand years since the Bronze Age. For example, only in exceptional conditions does evidence of peoples' hairstyles and clothes exist, although finds of sheep bones on sites and evidence of looms and spinning suggest that people were making woven woollen garments and hair ties. Their food has not survived, but we can try to piece together people's diet from remains of animal bones, shells, plant seeds and pollen found buried on sites.

Tools and weapons of the Bronze Age period were made of stone, wood, bone, flint and bronze and many of these items have survived in Lincolnshire. Well-made barbed and tanged arrowheads of flint have been found in Lincoln and at Denton, and polished stone wrist bracers for use by archers were discovered at Calceby and Rauceby. From sites in Alford and Osgodby axes of flint have been found, and axe hammers and polished stone axes are known from various sites, including Saxilby and Legsby. Combs of bone and swords and axes of bronze have been excavated, for example at Caythorpe where a hoard of bronze of this period has been found. All these originally had handles or shafts of wood or bone, but these have usually not survived.

Pottery was fairly common in the Bronze Age and was often broken and thrown into pits, the ancient equivalent of the dustbin. Many sherds or broken pieces of pottery are therefore found on sites, for example close to Stainsby where there was an early Bronze Age settlement. Pottery was also used in ceremonies and buried in graves beneath barrow mounds alongside the dead. The attractive Beaker vessels from Revesby and Grantham, the Food Vessel from Sudbrook and the Pygmy Cup found at Salmonby were all found in such burial contexts. Cremations were put into pots and buried in flat cemeteries, such as the one found at Pasture Lodge Farm, near Long Bennington. As the pottery used for burials was placed into holes dug into the ground and well covered, it usually survives as complete pots and is the best preserved of the Bronze Age ceramics.

POTTERY IN BRONZE AGE LINCOLNSHIRE

Distinctive styles of pottery were in use in the Bronze Age period and these are usually called Beakers, Food Vessels, Pygmy Cups, Collared Urns and Bucket-shaped Pots. This is the general sequence in which these types of vessels are usually considered to have come into fashion in this period. However, it

is clear that earlier styles of pottery were still in use when the later types began to be made and this led to similarities in decoration on the different forms of pot.



Fig 3: The famous Lincolnshire antiquarian, Henry Preston (second from left), finder of many of the pots in this collection, discussing his finds with colleagues. Photograph: Grantham Museum.



Fig 2: Pottery styles of the Bronze Age (left to right: ref & height in mm).
 Beaker, Grantham (EBP46, h177);
 Food Vessel, Sudbrook (EBP152, h128);
 Collared Urn, Sudbrook (EBP147, h176);
 Pygmy Cup, Salmonby (6.54, h51);
 Bucket-shaped Pot, Pasture Lodge Farm (PLF9, h186).

HOW THE POTS WERE FOUND

Many of the locations in use in the Bronze Age period have become known to archaeologists through information seen on aerial photographs, like the settlement site of Billingborough. Buried ditches and other features lead to variability in crop growth, particularly in dry conditions and these differences become more apparent when viewed from the air. Often archaeologists will find evidence of sites such as the Bronze Age cremation cemetery of Ropsley and Humby by systematically walking over fields after ploughing. Many other sites in Lincolnshire, including Salmonby and Pasture Lodge Farm, Long Bennington, have come to be known through the alertness of archaeologists and other local people. Farmers, builders and quarry workers, have noticed remains of bones, stone or pottery during the course of their work and have reported their finds to the archaeologists. Occasionally though, in the past, some Bronze Age pottery was unfortunately lost from Lincolnshire.

The Blankney Urns - During the construction of the Lincoln to Spalding railway in 1882, four complete clay pots of Bronze Age date were found by chance. Workmen digging into a gravel pit at Blankney, near Metheringham, about 8 miles south east of Lincoln, found four decorated bucket-shaped pots at a depth of about 1.2 metres. It is very likely that these had originally been deposited in a flat cemetery. The pots were sold at Derby market in 1882 and two eventually found their way to Derby Museum, from where they were recently returned to Lincoln. A third vessel was sold to another buyer who gave it to St Albans Museum, but this too has now been returned to Lincoln. The fourth urn has been traced in the Yorkshire Museum at York, but how it came to be there remains a mystery!

A single bag of cremated bones was returned with one of the vessels to Lincoln, but expert examination of the bones showed that at least three people were represented. It is very likely that these were the Bronze Age cremations which had originally been buried in the pots. So although the circumstances of their death and burial will always remain unknown, at last the people and their pots are reunited in Lincoln.

POTTERY AS EVIDENCE OF BRONZE AGE SOCIETY

As pottery survives so well compared to other materials from prehistory, it provides good evidence for archaeologists. The shapes and decorations of the pots were popular for a long time and are usually recognisable even if only a small piece remains. This makes the ceramics very useful for dating sites. Similarities in the style and decoration of the pots are likely to indicate contact between groups of people living in the county.

Since there was no money currency, people traded and bartered their goods for food and tools. Pottery formed part of this trade, as the pot itself was required, or the goods it contained. Potters often added quartz sand, or other minerals or materials to the clay to make a pot suitable for firing and use. This tempering can sometimes be identified and traced to its source, thereby indicating trading routes.

In this way pottery provides evidence in prehistory for both dating and trade and, if the function can also be determined, gives important information on the lifestyle of the people. Special studies of the ceramics have revealed how the potters went about their work.

MAKING A POT IN PREHISTORY

Supply and Demand - The potter first decided on the market and function for the pottery. The pots were to be traded and therefore had to be acceptable in form, decoration and suitability for their use. Today we have pots which fulfill only one function, such as a teapot, but the original function of some of the pots made in prehistory is not immediately apparent to us. A single vessel may have had several uses and these may have changed through its life.

Materials for the Pot - Clay and tempering were needed for the pottery. If there was nothing suitable in the locality a potter might travel several miles to find materials, particularly if river transport was available. There were no roads and few trackways, but small boats, coracles and dugout canoes were probably quite common. Remains of such craft have been found at several sites in Lincolnshire, including Short Ferry and Brigg. The clay and materials collected were left out to weather, then worked and stored until required. The working of the clay and the addition of tempering materials made it easier to form the pots and assisted in letting out water vapour when the pot was being dried and fired.



*Fig 4: The Blankney Urns (left to right: ref & height in mm)
1193.47, h234 (Yorkshire Museum); 20.59, h303;
14.61, h274; CL2.83, h210.*

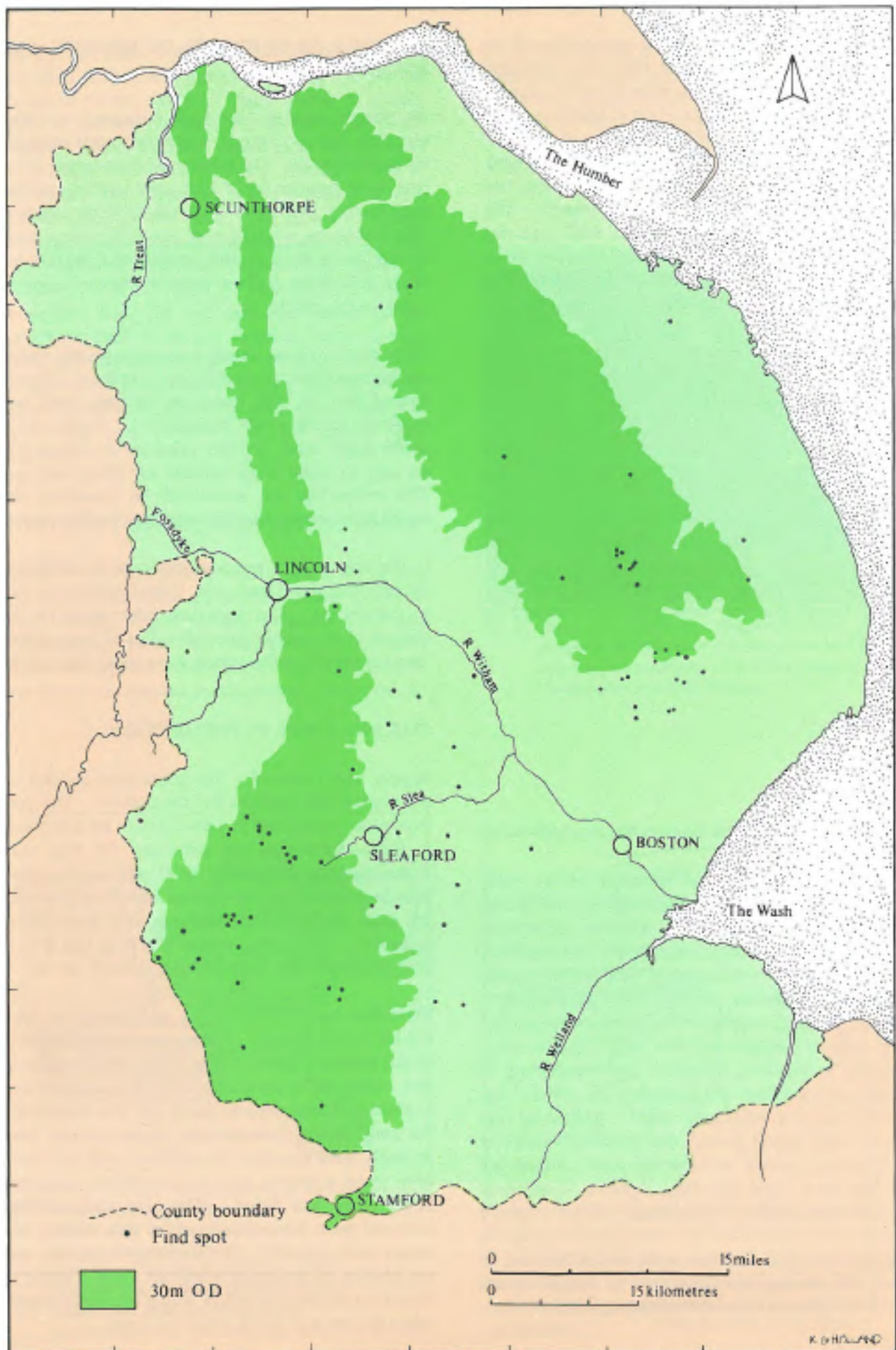


Fig 5: Location of pottery finds in Lincolnshire from Lincoln and Grantham Museums.

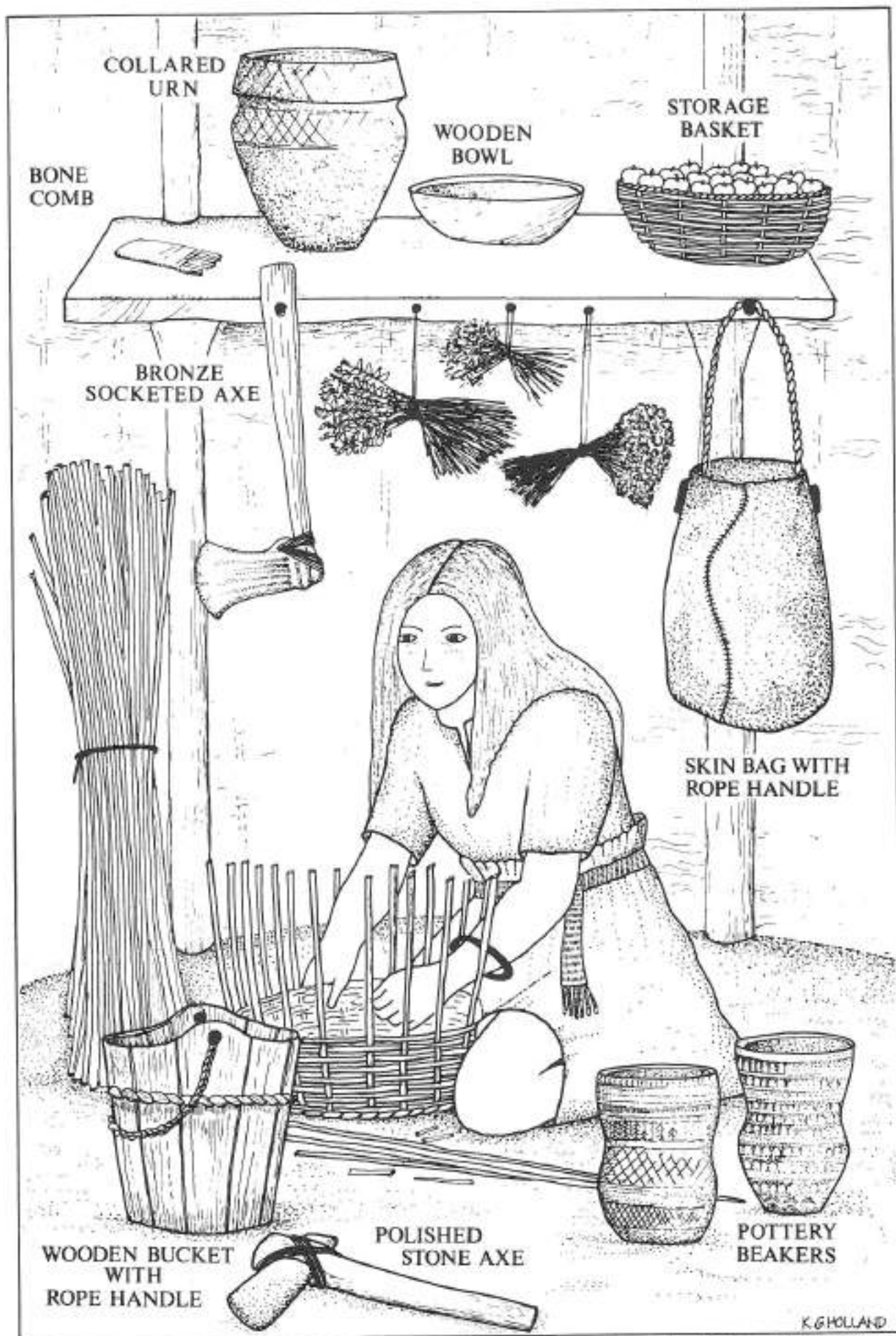


Fig 6: Pottery, stone and metalwork have survived quite well for several thousand years since the time of the Bronze Age, but many other materials which were probably in everyday use as shown above, have perished.

In the east of England the usual tempering materials added to the clay were shell, often from local limestones, sand, gravels and pebbles. Broken heated flint was also used and sometimes grass or straw. Crushed fired pottery, which potters call grog, was frequently added to the clay. The tempering materials used seem to have followed local traditions to ensure that the firing and use of the pots was satisfactory.

Forming the Pot - The pottery of this period was all hand-made and there was no paint or glaze used. The pots were decorated, often with great precision. Both the form and decoration of the pottery fitted into the local tradition in order that it would find a ready market. Figure 7 shows the stages in the forming of a typical Bronze Age pot, a Collared Urn found with a cremation burial earlier this century at Grantham.

The flat round base of the pot was first constructed (1) and then the body was formed of rings made from sausage-like lengths of clay. The first ring was attached to the base and then flattened and joined vertically. The second ring was similarly attached to the first, with the vertical join of the ring in a different place, so that the pot body was not weakened (2). The joints between the successive rings of the pot body were not made horizontally, but at an angle, so that the clay would not fracture across the join. The external surface of the pot was smoothed as further rings were added and when the required body height was reached, a final ring was used to make the rim (3). The rim shapes varied considerably, reflecting the traditions of the time and the function of the pot. If a collar was added to the pot, as in the illustration, rings were attached and then turned over the top of the pot to form a collar on the outside of the vessel. Decoration, handles or lugs were added to the pot before it dried out (4).

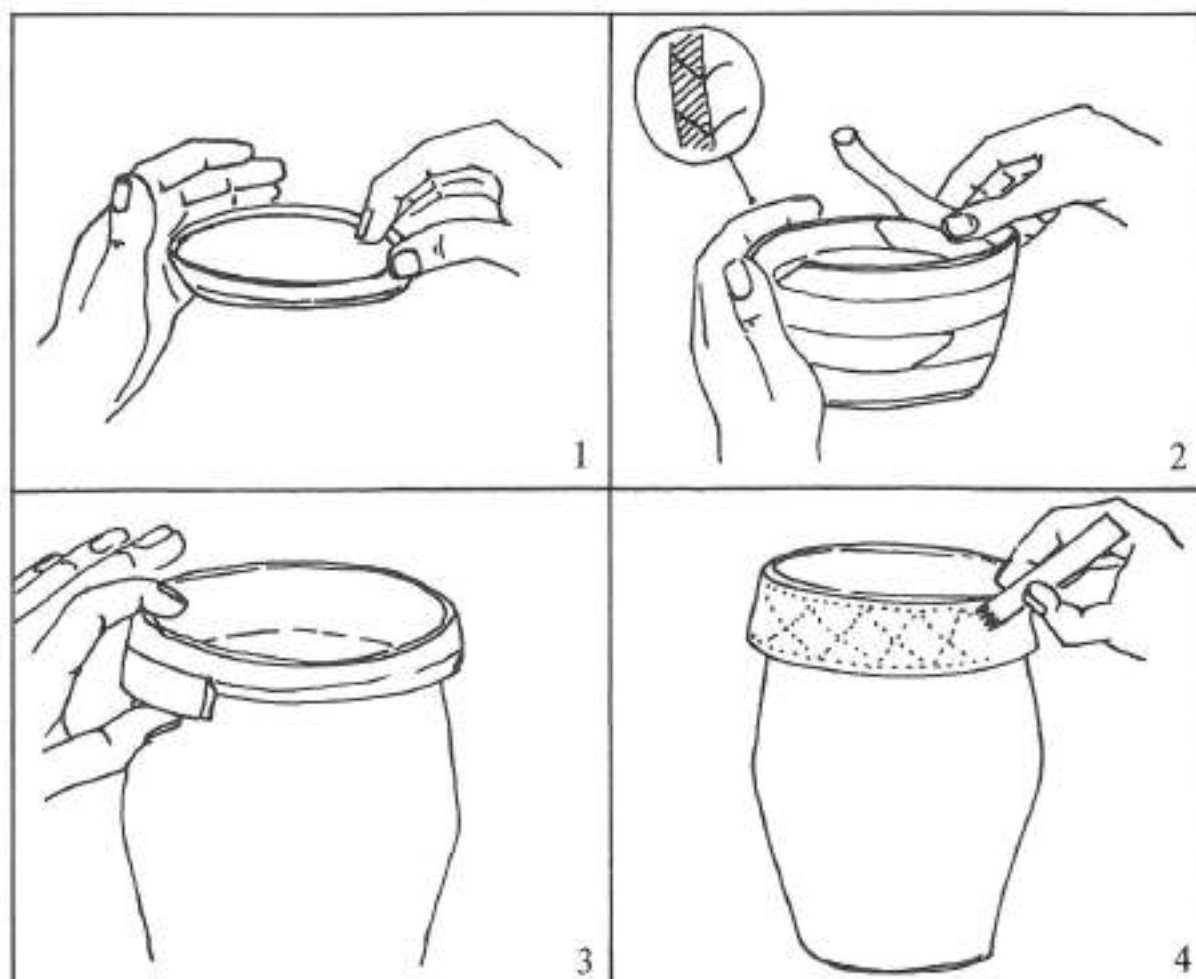


Fig 7: The process of making a prehistoric pot: (1) the base is formed; (2) rings of clay are built up; (3) the rim and collar are added; (4) decoration is applied to the wet clay.

Decoration - Decoration applied to Bronze Age pottery usually formed geometric patterns or diagonal, horizontal or vertical rows. Herringbone, diamonds, v-shapes, chevrons, triangles and combinations of these patterns are common on vessels, as seen on the finely decorated vessels from Colsterworth and West Ashby. Occasionally a woven pattern is represented and handles, lugs and grooves were sometimes added. Flints, shells, tools and combs of wood were probably used to impress or incise the decoration into the wet clay. Twisted cord decoration is also common and in some cases may have been made with a short length of cord attached to a small marking tool. Finger tip and finger nail decoration is frequent in this period and occasionally a clear Bronze Age finger print can be seen! Beakers were usually decorated all over the pot, whilst others had decoration only on the upper part or on the collar. Occasionally patterns were impressed upon or inside the rim.



Fig 8: Bucket-shaped Pot from Colsterworth (left -EBP136, h237mm) and Food Vessel from West Ashby (F66, h96mm) showing some of the methods and patterns of decoration on Bronze Age Pottery.

Firing the Pot - Pots were fired in a bonfire and were stacked up either in a shallow pit or on the ground surface. They were covered with a blanket of fuel such as wood, animal dung or brushwood. The

fire would reach about 850 degrees C within ten to fifteen minutes, which was adequate for firing. After about an hour and a half the pots would begin to cool. From studies of present day societies who fire pottery in this way, it is certain that a calm dry day would be preferred for the firing. This would maintain a fairly uniform colour in the pottery. Firing is the most critical stage of the potter's job and if the materials were not properly selected or mixed, the time and effort employed in the manufacture was completely wasted.

BRONZE AGE POTTERY IN USE IN LINCOLNSHIRE

Domestic Use - Ceramics of this period were used for several different purposes. At the Billingborough Fen settlement site a quantity of Bucket-shaped pottery with finger tip and finger nail decoration was found. The vessels were probably used for food storage and for cooking. Pottery was found which was considered to have been used to dry and store salt and as there were also many cattle bones, this suggests that the Lincolnshire people of the time may have enjoyed salted beef.

Recent work on the Fenland project in Lincolnshire and investigations undertaken in advance of modern developments have made known a number of other locations which were probably occupied in this period. At Pinchbeck, Tetney and Deeping St James,



Fig 9: Handled Beaker from Denton (18.40, h145mm).

for example, small excavations have revealed pits, post-holes and a variety of pottery, including sherds of domestic Beakers, Food Vessels and Collared Urns.

Religious and Ceremonial Use - Some of the fine ceramics of the period, such as the handled Beaker from Denton, may never have been in everyday use. They were meant to be brought out only on very special occasions, possibly for festivals and ceremonial days. Many vessels have been found buried with the dead, perhaps in the nature of family heirlooms, sent with the person to another world. Originally these pots may have contained some offering of food or drink, but the contents have not survived. In some cases, cremations were buried within the pot.

Recent excavations into one of five round barrow mounds known at Deeping St Nicholas, revealed several cremations in association with pottery of Bronze Age type. The site was probably in use for several hundred years, with a succession of burials being made from the late Stone Age through to the Bronze Age.

In the Bronze Age period the burial mound was enlarged and several cremated individuals were buried. Two cremations had been placed in small graves lined with sand and gravel and close by two upright bucket shaped pots contained cremation deposits. Another six cremations in pits nearby were probably of the same period. A number of post circles found around and beneath the barrow structure suggested to the excavators that the site may have been in use as a ceremonial and burial site intermittently through the Bronze Age.

Some of the ceramics of Bronze Age date which have been found in Lincolnshire may have had several uses through their life. They may even have been the individual pot of a person which stayed with them through life and death. The fascination of archaeology in Lincolnshire, where people were living and working so long ago, is that new finds of Bronze Age pottery will continue to contribute more information. Unearthing and interpreting the buried evidence of three to four thousand years ago helps us to make the people and their pottery come alive!



Fig 10. Reconstruction of barrows at Deeping St. Nicholas. Artist: David Vale

Suggested further reading

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'Bronze Age Cremation Cemeteries in the East Midlands'
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Bronze Age Britain,
Batsford, London

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Prehistoric Houses in Britain,
Shire, Princes Risborough

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Figs 2; 4; 7 & 8
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Carol Allen graduated from Nottingham University in 1983 with a first class honours degree in Archaeology and Ancient History and in 1988 completed research for a PhD on the pottery of the Bronze Age in the East Midlands of England. Her research work has been particularly concerned with the tempering materials of prehistoric pottery and in discerning social and economic connections between sites from the fabrics, decoration and form of the vessels. Dr Allen is a Member of the Institute of Field Archaeologists and works as a free-lance pottery specialist and researcher and adult education tutor.

*Back Cover Illustrations: Top left - Collared Urn, Dunston (3034.6, h155mm);
Top right - Food Vessel, Alford (65.72, h125mm);
Bottom left - Thin section of pot from Billingborough showing fossil shells from Great Oolite clay;
Bottom right - Thin section of pot from Pasture Lodge Farm, showing re-cycled crushed pottery or grog, which in turn contains crushed pottery.*

