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The Berkshire Record Office  
The Archives of the Royal County

October 2020

- Lustre in Aldermaston
- Craft in the community
- Competitive craft
- New to the Archives

# The Berkshire Echo

## WHAT'S ON

## From the Editor

Welcome to the Autumn edition of the Berkshire Echo where we look at the aspect of craft in Berkshire. Perhaps you've discovered a new hobby relating to arts and crafts during lockdown. Well, did you know that there was a pottery in Aldermaston? In 'Lustre in Aldermaston' we discover more about the place as well as the techniques used to make pottery. Certainly a fair bit of trial and error involved.

The Newbury Embroidery Guild co-ordinated a Community Embroidery Project for West Berkshire Community Hospital and in 'Craft in the community' we find out just what happened to the resulting creations.

For some, creating something by crafting it was all about the competition. In 'Competitive craft' you can find out more about nineteenth century competitions at Reading Town Hall as well as the Festival of Birtain.

Do remember to take a look at the 'New to the Archives' section as you never know what could be in it – this time there's even a 1950s jigsaw! Curious indeed.

Since the last edition we have reopened to onsite visitors. Daily bookings must be booked in advance and are available Tuesday to Friday for up to four people per session. The morning session is 10:00 to 12:30 and the afternoon session is 13:30 to 16:00. You can find out more about how to book and what to expect when you arrive on our website: [berkshirerecordoffice.org.uk/visit-us/planning-a-visit](http://berkshirerecordoffice.org.uk/visit-us/planning-a-visit).

We look forward to seeing you!

Stay Safe everyone.

Ivone Turnbull  
Senior Archivist


### CoVid-19

2020's pandemic has prevented us from putting on our usual events. Do keep an eye on our events page for anything we may have on in the coming months though: [berkshirerecordoffice.org.uk/events](http://berkshirerecordoffice.org.uk/events)

Top: Panel from The West Berkshire Community Hospital Embroidery (P/HA7/2/1/4)

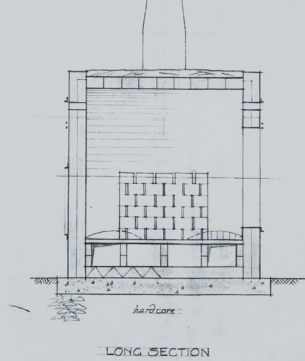


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## Lustre in Aldermaston

Aldermaston Pottery was founded by Alan Caiger-Smith and operated from 1955 until 1993. The pottery became renowned for training many pottery artists; allowing potters to experience every stage of the process, from forming ceramic to painting. Tin-glaze and reduced pigment lustre pottery techniques originated with Islamic potters around the 9th and 10th centuries. These techniques created eye-catching pottery with tin-glaze producing white, glossy ware and reduced-pigment lustre producing rich silvery and golden tones.

The complicated techniques saw a decline after the 14th and 15th centuries and it wasn't until the 20th century that Caiger-Smith began to experiment and created a resurgence with these types of pottery from his Berkshire base.

The journey to mastering such techniques was not linear, with many hundreds of firing tests producing different results. Some of the earliest experiments, with reduced lustre, had taken place in the back garden of Caiger-Smith's London home using an electric kiln. However, it quickly came apparent that a wood kiln would be a better environment for enabling a heavy reduction.

In 1961, he constructed a prototype wood-fired kiln with a 15-inch square chamber; fire on one side and a chimney on the other with a maximum capacity of 600-700c. Later the same year, having acquired the neighbouring property to the Old Smithy in Aldermaston, work began on a larger 160-cubic foot wood fired kiln.

Success was not immediate and on 11 August 1961 it was noted that the 'first test in Aldermaston wood kiln failed because paper in the chimney had not burnt up & therefore the chimney (put there to burn to cause a draught) was blocked'. The second test produced no better results 'Second test firing for lustres did not work because the saggars, made of 50% ballclay & 50 fireclay, cracked up'.

In their keenness to start testing, the potters recalled how the firing started very slowly as the muffle was still damp from the construction of the kiln. By December, on their ninth test, the desired lustre finish had still not been achieved and they recounted that 'it was a mistake to let the Kiln Cool down: very little trace of lustre disappeared, and those there were, were all from the hottest parts of the kiln'. Success was finally met on the 26th firing attempt. The lessons learnt from each attempt were recorded and incorporated into subsequent attempts.

In 1964, a larger wood-fired kiln made from second-hand material and fired from offcuts from the local cricket bat manufacture, was built in its place. Anne-Marie, wife of Alan, was also able to draw on her own design background in producing the working drawings for the wood-fired kiln and the new workshop, built in 1974.

The refining process continued over the years, and the variation in results added to the attraction of the final product. The records reveal that, even after 20 years' practice, the potters still faced challenges getting it right every time as climatic conditions varied:

'Lustre firing of February 2 1974. Very disappointing. All the W glaze was greyed, pretty uniformly, and dully. Most of the pigments came out weak and looked under-reduced, though we thought we had done plenty of reduction.' But on a happier occasion 'Results wonderful. The temperature was higher than we had thought during the reduction... the lustre was intense in most places'.

Alan Caiger-Smith sadly passed away in February 2020, aged 90; having created a lasting legacy to British ceramics.

Sources: D/EX2422/3/1, 3; 6/2; Jane White, 'Alan Caiger-Smith and the Legacy of Aldermaston Pottery'

Top left: Design of kiln, Aldermaston Pottery (D/EX2422/6/1)  
Top right: Part of a set of lustre dishes showing the Stations of the Cross, commissioned for Burchfield Church in 1984 (D/EX2422/5/1/15)





## Arts, Crafts and Hobbies Exhibition

## Craft in the community

Craft can be a communal activity. In 2007-2010 Newbury Embroidery Guild co-ordinated a Community Embroidery Project for West Berkshire Community Hospital with the assistance of schools, hospital visitors, patients and staff.

It was inspired by an earlier project in which the expert members of the guild created four large banners depicting British flowers in the four seasons. Before being donated to a sewing school in Mozambique, the banners had been displayed at the newly opened hospital, and so much interest was generated that the hospital trust commissioned its own embroidery. The design featured large central panels showing the hospital and its staff, with smaller squares on a variety of health-related themes.

The separate pieces were mounted on craft vilene and applied to a backing of hand dyed linen, stretched over acide free mount board, and the final embroidery was framed and glazed. A total of 322 staff, patients and visitors took part in the stitching of panels in the hospital reception area.

Source: P/HA2/1/4

## Competitive craft

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were a number of opportunities for craftspeople to display their works in local exhibitions and competitions. Several organised by Broad Street Chapel were held in Reading Town Hall in the 1890s. They were open to all, from 'the veriest tyro in handicraft, as well as the most accomplished artisan'.

The programme for the 1895 event stated that it was more than a competition for prizes, affirming that 'It is a fact that the result is the outcome of many an hour of patient labour and anxious thought and study. To the spectator it is the revelation in many cases of mechanical skill or mental power which might have remained unknown and undeveloped but for the opportunities which the Exhibition presents for their recognition'.

Articles displayed included furniture, fretwork models, macrame, needlework and embroidery.

The Festival of Britain of 1951 saw a nationwide celebration of the country's talents. A five-day exhibition of 'Arts, Crafts and Hobbies' was held in Newbury Corn Exchange. Exhibits included model aircraft, handmade jewellery, bookbinding, leatherwork, baskets, and perhaps most enterprising, a pouffe constructed from syrup tins.

Sources: D/N11/7/7/7; N/D11/2/4

Top left: D/EX965/118 Learning to sew at a Berkshire school, c.1909 (D/EX965/118)  
Top right: Catalogue of Arts, Crafts and Hobbies exhibition, Festival of Britain, Newbury, 1951 (N/D11/1)





## New to the Archives

### Noisy tunes and dirty people: no room for the festival

The records of West Windsor Residents' Association, 1962-1983 (D/EX2076) focus largely on the problems of aircraft noise from Heathrow. In 1966, locals also complained vociferously about a proposed National Jazz and Blues Festival to be held in Windsor; in particular, they feared 'the constant repetition of noisy tunes'. A resident from Richmond-on-Thames, where this event had been held in previous years, warned darkly that it 'attracts a large number of long haired, dirty amoral people'.

Community cohesion is reflected in the records of Katesgrove Community Association, Reading, 1979-2000s (D/EX2681); and Roman Hill Residents' Association, Bracknell, 1970s-1992 (D/EX2677). We have also received records of the Reading Romilly Association, 1973-2002 (D/EX2548). This organisation was a forum for discussion of contemporary crime and delinquency.

### Art and charity: the Church of England

We have received additional records from Abingdon Rural Deanery, 1887-2015 (D/RDA). NADFAS reports on the art and architecture of churches in East Challow (D/EX2501), West Hanney (D/EX2500), and Old Windsor (D/EX2395) have been deposited, although access is restricted. We have also catalogued the records of the Warfield Parochial Charities, 1875-1973 (D/QX46).

### 'The only hope for humanity'

The minutes of Faringdon Labour Party, 1936-1949, contain much of interest (D/EX2740). In the 1930s, they saw 'the importance of Socialist work as ... the only alternative to Toryism, which would inevitably lead to some sort of Fascism ... Liberalism did not offer an alternative because the Liberals did not represent the working classes... In a continent, almost every country in which was Fascist, Socialism was the only hope for humanity'.

In September 1938 they submitted a resolution protesting the 'handing over [of] Czecho-Slovakia to Fascist aggression', calling it 'this last and grossest betrayal of everything decent that is left in our civilisation' and 'clearly a blow at the basis of our Christian civilisation'.



They feared that 'unless a stand is made at the present juncture, the manhood of Britain will soon be called upon to sacrifice itself in a worldwide slaughter of such magnitude that it is difficult to visualise that anything of our existing civilisation will be left standing'. Once the war was underway, members were divided between those who thought it 'was being fought merely in the interests of Capitalism' and those who affirmed that it was 'not a war of imperialism but a completely just war to uphold a standard of decency'.

### Businesses

A curiosity is a promotional jigsaw puzzle produced by Foster Brothers Clothing Company of Wokingham in the 1950s (D/EX2694). We have also listed papers relating to the Morland Brewery and family of Abingdon, 1911-n.d. [c.2010s] (D/EX2468).

### All at sea

We have been given a diary that Bernard Thackeray of Maidenhead kept of his voyages on the ship Port Albany as a teenage merchant seaman, 1923-1924 (D/EX2720).

### Opening Hours

Tues 9-5, Weds 9-5, Thurs 9-9, Fri 9-4.30.  
Closed Mondays, Weekends and Bank Holidays.  
Please contact us for further details.

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