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Staffordshire Potteries

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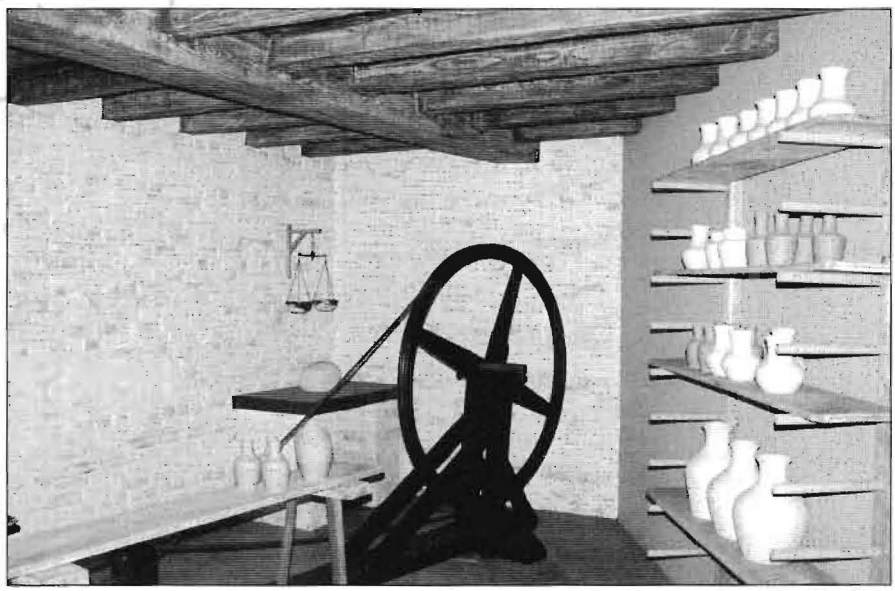
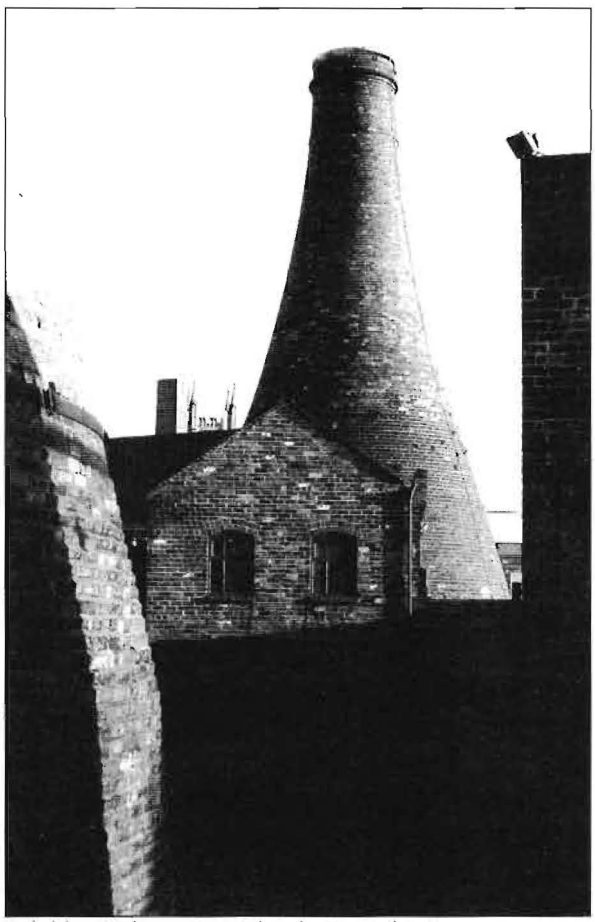
By Lisa Hudgins, SCIAA Graduate Assistant

English Staffordshire pottery may be familiar to many of us in the names of Wedgwood, Spode, or Aynsley China wares. But the tradition of Staffordshire potters dates to the early 1600s with family potters molding their trade in what was to become the main industry for the region. By 1650, potters in Stoke-on-Trent were known for their earthenware pots, which were utilized in transportation of market goods such as butter. At the same time, the now-famous slipware was being developed, with artists such as Thomas Toft coming to the forefront.

The Staffordshire region was perfect for the production of pottery. The necessary resources of clay and coal were available locally, and local residents will attest that the land was not particularly good for crops. So the pottery industry developed out of need and availability, and eventually attracted craftsmen from all over Britain because of its success. By 1750, most families had at least one member who worked in "The Potteries," which included potworks in the towns of Burslem, Hanley, Longton, Fenton, Stoke-on-Trent and Tunstall. By the turn of the century, several hundred potworks were producing in the region.



A possible reconstruction of the throwing room at Etruria. (*Photo by Lisa Hudgins*)

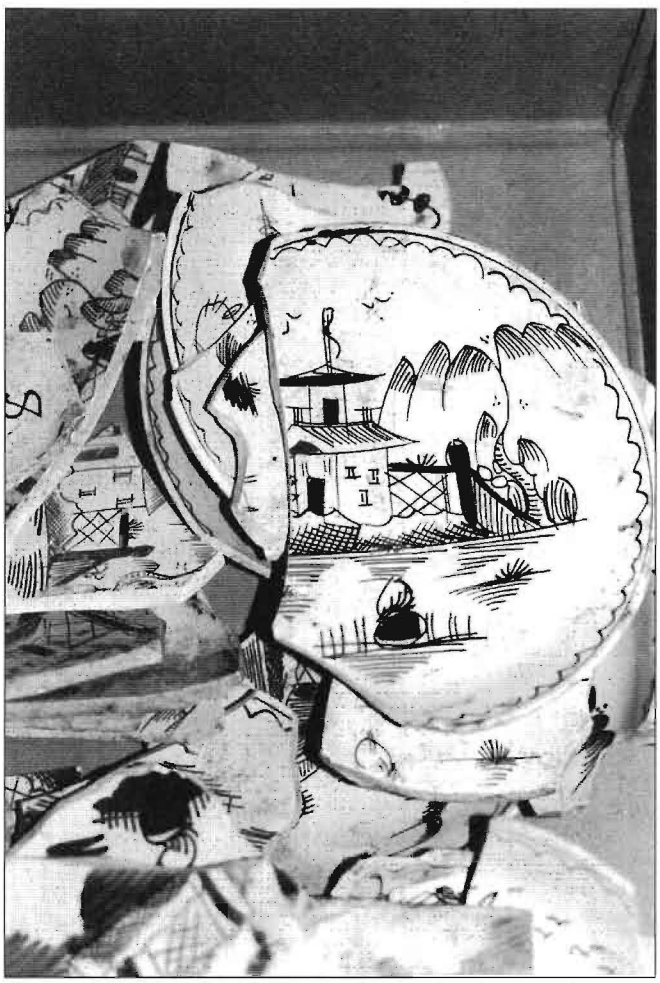


Bottle kiln at Stoke-on-Trent. (*Photo by Lisa Hudgins*)

A visit to the potteries in Stoke-on-Trent and Hanley was offered as part of the recent SPMA/SHA joint conference in London that I attended. Dr. David Barker provided his services as Keeper of Archaeology in the City Museum at Hanley. Barker's experience with the William Greatbatch pottery site may be familiar to many, but his work, and the collections of the Hanley Museum, range far beyond the scope of one potter. We visited one of three of the museum storage facilities which housed archaeological remains. Rummaging through the state-of-the-art collection facility brought us face to face with Greatbatch and other potters whose factories have long since been destroyed. Extraordinary turned-and-molded creamwares with rich colors and dense clay bodies reveal the craftsmanship of some of the early potters. Yet the range of wares also points to the quantity of potters as well. Hundreds of potters and their assistants created the pottery we refer to as Staffordshire, yet the idiosyncratic nature of each individual becomes evident as one views the collection in a comparative light.

"Staffordshire" pottery becomes obvious as an amalgam of unique styles which shared a common locale.

As a result of this booming industry, one of the distinguishing features in the Staffordshire landscape was the presence of bottle-shaped kilns used in firing the pottery. These enormous kilns were fired with wood, and could hold hundreds of pieces of pottery, fired in stacks of saggers up to 20 feet high. Kiln loaders, wearing padded caps, would place the heavy saggers on their head and climb ladders to place the uppermost saggers in position. Firing was a 24-hour process, and workers were expected to keep a steady fire and an even airflow–without the advantage of modern firing cones or dampers. Few of these kilns are still in existence in Staffordshire, but the Gladstone Pottery Museum in Longton has preserved an entire factory, including the bottle kilns, as a reminder of the laborious process required to produce the exquisite Staffordshire wares.



Blue-painted pearlware from the Greatbatch site. *(Photo by Lisa Hudgins)*

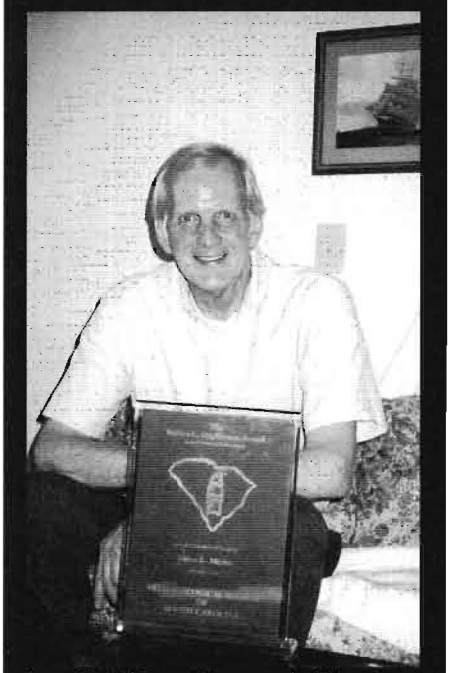
A visit to Staffordshire would not be complete without a trip to the factories which are still in production. The Spode factory offers factory tours to visitors during the week, and operates a number of "first" and "seconds" shops throughout the Staffordshire area. Resurgence of interest in historic ceramics had prompted Spode to reissue many of its early patterns, often found in the "Blue Room" at the Spode factory.

The Staffordshire potters, looking for a way to turn local resources into a way of living, began an industry which still survives as one of the primary ceramic markets in the world. Creativity, technical expertise, and good old fashioned competition have kept the industry going. But it is the keepers of the archaeology and others with a love for history who have kept the Staffordshire tradition alive.

JAMES L. MICHIE RECEIVES R. L. STEPHENSON LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD FROM THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

By Nena Powell Rice, Awards Comm.

On February 21, 1998, the Archaeological Society of South Carolina honored James L. Michie with the R. L. Stephenson Lifetime Achievement award. Jim was unable to travel to Columbia to accept the award, but he was given a standing ovation as a tribute to his lifetime contributions to the understanding of prehistoric and historical archaeology of South Carolina. In 1968, Bob Stephenson and Jim Michie founded the archaeological society with many supporters. Thirty years later, the society is strong due to archaeologists like Jim who have always reached out to those who were interested. It was my honor to present this special award to Jim when I visited him a week after the society's annual conference. He was happy and very grateful.



James L. Michie receiving award. *(Photo by Marion Rice)*

Jim would welcome cards and visits from friends. You may write to: Jordan Care Center, 2320 Hwy 378, Conway, SC 29527 (803) 397-2273. Inquiries may be directed to Bruce Rippeteau at (803) 777-8170 or Susan McMillan, his guardian in Conway at (803) 248-5169.