

From Little Acorns, or If the Shoe Fits...

An Occasional Paper by John Sandon



Fig.1. Part of a stoneware jug imported from Cologne, circa 1500-1530

My story begins on New Year's Day in 1983. My wife, Kris and I were newly-weds (no kids!) and my parents had come to stay for our first family Christmas. My Dad, Henry Sandon, had grown up in the East End and he wanted to see for himself how much it was changing, so he persuaded Kris to drive through east London, across an area that was indeed changing rapidly. Many parts of Canary Wharf and Docklands were under construction and the new Billingsgate Market was largely a building site. Dad's eyes were drawn to a former lorry park that was derelict next to Billingsgate. This site was partly covered with isolated piles of soil and rubble. When I was a boy in Worcester my Dad had taught me never to walk past any pile of soil without taking a closer look, and he never went anywhere without a trowel in his pocket. So he yelled at Kris to stop the car. This area in East London was being used for fly-tipping, and Kris wasn't particularly happy that Dad and I wanted to stop and clamber over mounds of rubble and dirt.

My father had been drawn to a pile of very dark and smelly soil. Instinct told him it was a cesspit deposit—that smell is unmistakable. But there was no hole next to the soil. It hadn't come from this site at all. Somebody had fly-tipped a lorry load of soil that had been dug out from somewhere else, almost certainly in the city of London. Sadly this was happening all the time, during the building boom in the 1980s. To avoid archaeologists holding up an expensive re-development, if builders came across a site with potential, workmen would be paid to get rid of the evidence as quickly as possible, under cover of darkness.

There was no possible way to identify the source of this soil, so all archaeological value was gone. Any stratification or separate levels had been destroyed by the process of filling a lorry and dumping the soil. A metal detectorist was already at work, scanning the piles of darker soil for coins and treasure. He didn't want pot shards and so Dad and I got the choicest ceramic fragments. We

expected to find delftware but there was none, just lots of glazed coarse earthenware splashed in red, brown or green. Nothing seemed particularly diagnostic, except to tell us that the soil was late medieval, and then I found some bits of freshly-broken German stoneware. The shards fitted together and I hoped I might have located a whole jug, but there was only a quarter of the vessel remaining (fig.1). It was freshly broken, so the pot must have been smashed by the digger in the rush to get this soil away from prying eyes.

One shard of pottery I felt was interesting was a small bit of maiolica I presumed to be an import from Europe, painted in manganese and blue (fig.4). There was also a bit of ruby lustre from Spain, but too worn to identify or date precisely. A tiny bit of Venetian latticino glass (fig.3) confirmed that this soil had come from an area close to wealthy homes. Little wonder that there were now two detectorists climbing over the soil, which they spread out with shovels in their search for treasure, but if they found any datable coins they weren't letting on.



Fig.2. Leather fragments from Billingsgate: two associated pieces from a child's jerkin, including a sleeve (left) and a full-sized sleeve from a gentleman's jerkin (right). The stitching and crimping show these were high-status accessories. The larger Jerkin 21cm wide.

I concentrated on the spot where I had found the stoneware jug, hoping to discover the rest of it, but I was out of luck. Searching there I spotted some shapes that looked like black cardboard and soon I had gathered a bagful of pieces. Dad knew exactly what they were- bits of old shoes and leather clothing. The cesspit had remained damp for many centuries and, incredibly, the leather had not decayed. It had just turned black. He knew, though, that as soon as it dried it would shrivel so we sealed it up and took it home to be cured over many months, rubbing-in linseed oil every now and then. One of the Detectorists saw I was picking up some of the leather fragments and he tossed me something he had just found. His metal detector beeped when it located the rusted metal buckle still attached to a nearly complete shoe. From the diminutive size this shoe clearly belonged to a child.

Decades later, in a shoebox in a wardrobe I came across the finds from that New Year's Day expedition- or at least the few fragments I had deemed to be worth keeping. There was the stoneware jug, the tiny bit of latticino glass, some bits of metal, two sleeves from leather jerkins (fig.2) and the best of the shoes. Revisiting them, I wondered if they would help to date each other.



Fig.3. A fragment of latticino glass, 2nd half of the 16th century



Fig.4. metal fragments: a strap from a precious book, a shoe buckle and part of a pilgrim's badge

The fragment of glass (fig.3) probably came from the bottom of a beaker of *vetro a fili*. This means that it was decorated internally with fine stripes of white glass. This would be described as either Venetian or *façon de Venise* and likely dates from the second half of the sixteenth century. Similar beakers are usually attributed to the Low Countries, such as the Netherlands or Antwerp.



Fig.5. A fragment of maiolica from Tuscany, recovered near Billingsgate, probably end of the 15th century



Fig. 5a. An Italian maiolica bowl, Montelupo, circa 1470-80 (Museo Bargello, Florence)

The fragment of maiolica could be the oldest piece that we recovered (fig.5). Part of a small deep bowl, the inside is painted in blue and manganese and on the outside are further fine blue stripes. I had often wondered what it was and guessed it was Spanish or possibly from Antwerp. I finally found the answer when I was in Florence in 2016. I spotted a closely-related bowl or dish and I took a photograph of it in the maiolica gallery in the Bargello. The label dates their bowl to 1470-80, but such a basic, utility piece is hard to date so precisely and it could equally be an early 16th century production. The remarkable thing is that this bowl somehow found its way from Tuscany to London and ended up in our cesspit.



Fig.6. Part of a stoneware jug, Cologne, circa 1500-1530, 7cm high, recovered from soil near Billingsgate



Fig.7. A smaller, but clearly related Cologne stoneware jug, circa 1500-1530, about 10cm high (Museum of London)

The stoneware jug is very much more distinctive. It is the so-called gorge shape with decoration moulded on the surface using metal stamps or dies. The outlines of the dies can be seen around the oak leaves and the winged angel heads that adorn the neck. The applied acorns are beautifully crisp. The jug came from Cologne, where in 1897 workmen found hundreds of pieces of stoneware and kiln wasters on the site of a pottery in Maximinenstrasse. Many of these were decorated with a pattern of trailing oak leaves and acorns. David Gainster's book discusses this distinctive class of Cologne stoneware and how it has been discovered all over Europe and beyond¹. The design of acorns on a trailing stem is thought to represent the tree of Jesse, which refers to the ancestral lineage of Jesus Christ. But in the hands of the potters of Cologne the oak branches were probably just used as an attractive ornament. Lots of pieces have been found in Britain, some in archaeological contexts, and all can be dated to the first half of the 16th century, in particular the period from 1500-1520. The decoration seems to have fallen out of usage before the 1540s. A related though slightly smaller jug in the Museum of London has Tudor roses on the neck instead of angel heads (fig. 2). This will also have been dug up in London, proof that similar vessels were popular imports from Germany back in the 16th century. A massive bellarmine jug decorated with acorns and with a single Tudor rose is presently with E & H Manners Antiques. Their website gives a very detailed summary of research into stoneware bearing these motifs². Errol Manners illustrates a small Bellarmine jug with acorns, now in the V & A, that was found in the Solent close to the wreck of the Mary Rose³. If it did come from the wreck, sunk in 1545, it would have been a personal possession of one of the crew and he may have owned it for a considerable time.

¹ David R.M.Gainster, *German Stoneware 1200-1900: Archaeology and Cultural History* (British Museum Press, 1997)

² E & H Manners website- <https://www.rare-ceramics.com/stock/pottery/an-early-and-very-large-salt-glazed-stoneware-bellarmino/>

³ Victoria and Albert Museum, collection no. C.9-2002



Fig.7. The preserved remains of two leather shoes, one made for a Tudor gentleman, the other worn by a smartly-dressed child, found together in cesspit soil deposited near Billingsgate

Perhaps the man who dropped my jug, or tossed it into the cesspit, also wore the large shoe and the leather jerkin. The child's shoe could have belonged to his son. Among many fragments of plainer shoes that we recovered, these two stand out for these are certainly pieces of high-status footwear. They are types that were popular in Tudor times, a kind of sandal made of leather, the toes of which were decorated with cuts or slashes. The pointed shoes worn in the 15th century were replaced in the Tudor period with a new style of footwear with square or flattened toes. Some of these have been given names like 'duckbill' and 'hammerhead'. The examples I found are similar to a type referred to as 'horned' or 'eared'. The slashed decoration made the leather more flexible and therefore more comfortable to wear. These would have been worn with brightly-coloured linings which could have been glimpsed through the slashes. The upper part of a leather shoe of very similar type, with a slashed horned or eared toe is in the V & A, item T.594-1913. Excavated on a London building site, this has been given a date of 1520-1540.



Fig.8. The front of the gentleman's shoe from Billingsgate shows the 'horned' Shape and distinctive slashes for comfort and decoration. 13.5cm wide.



Fig. 9. (and detail below). Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, painted in 1533 (National Gallery, London)



I had been seeking images of similar shoes and then, just a few years ago I had a eureka moment when I was visiting the National Gallery. I stood in front of one of this country's greatest treasures. 'The Ambassadors' by Hans Holbein is one of the most talked-about works of art from Tudor times for it shows so many objects depicted with almost photographic realism⁴. The painting is famous for the distorted skull in the front of the image. Just to the left of the skull we see the feet of Jean de Dinteville, the French ambassador to the court of Henry VIII. Standing on a marble pavement, he wears black shoes held in place with a thin strap secured by a buckle. The end of the shoe that covers his toes is slashed, just like the ones I recovered from the soil. In Holbein's painting you can see a light-yellow lining through the slashes in the leather.

⁴ Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, National Gallery London, no. NG1314

The Ambassadors was painted in 1533. This links in nicely with my suggested date for the discarded soil. The glass beaker could possibly date from the 1530s, but is more likely a few decades later, indicating what I knew already, that the soil had been disturbed. Meanwhile, the stoneware mug that I found right next to the leather shoes is most likely to date from around 1500-1520, and so it could well have been in use for a decade or so before it was discarded in the cesspit sometime in the 1530s. Sadly it broke again in the 1980s and this time I could salvage only part of the vessel.

Our finds from the New Year expedition provide us with a snapshot of privileged living during the reign of Henry VIII. A gentleman wore fashionable clothes and dressed his son in matching attire. He used expensive imported pottery and glassware from the Rhineland and from Italy. He probably carried a prayer book and had visited holy shrines. I guess that he also carried a scented pomander, for near his home an open cesspit received all the domestic waste generated by his family and staff.

The good news is that rules are in place today to protect sites that have historical potential. This means that all must be investigated by experienced archaeologists before any building work commences. I've enjoyed looking again at the few bits that Dad and I rescued, and the good news is that after 39 years they no longer smell of Henry VIII's poo.