

Pit-firing – 16-17 Sept

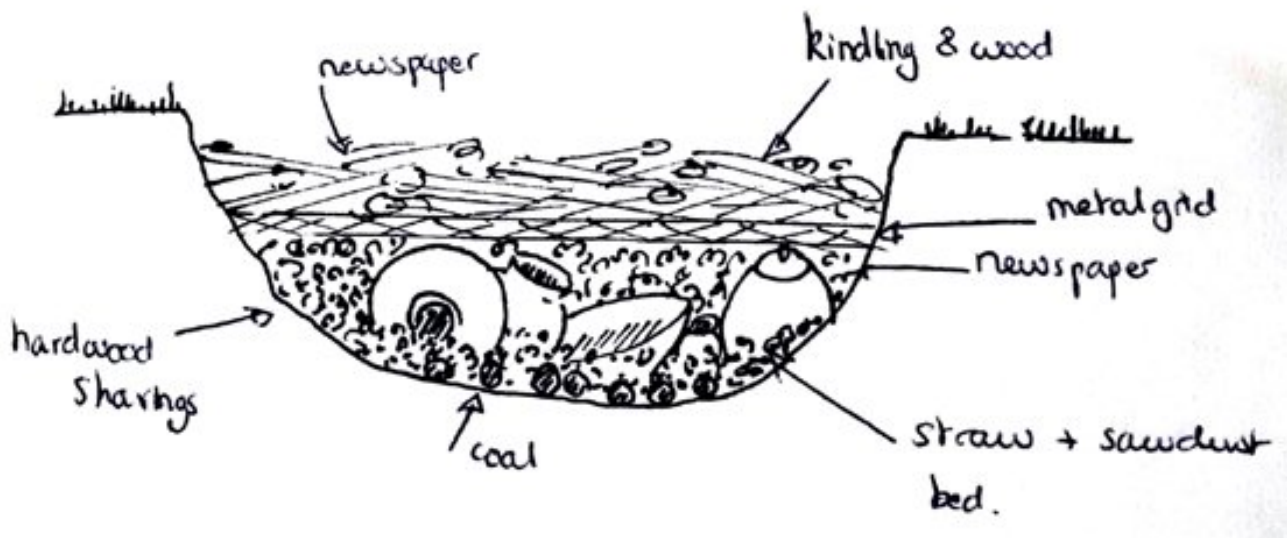
by Geoff Jones

Introduction

Of all the ways of firing a pot, pit-firing is the most unpredictable, but to everyone's delight at the pit-firing at Wytham in September we had many lovely pots. And this was despite the simplicity of the firing - by modern standards - with no added mineral pigments, relying on organic materials like coffee grounds, banana skins, avocado skins, sheep dung and more. The only prepared mineral used was some sea salt. Colour effects were surprisingly good. A strong case is made for this kind of pit-firing - it is much cheaper and less environmentally damaging with no risk of soil contamination.

NB: A big corrugated metal sheet will be needed to cover the pit.

Pit template #1 Ø 1m to 1.5m depth 50cm



Technical

A circular pit of approximately 1.5 m diameter and 50 cm deep at the centre was dug.

Michaëlla Smart's pre-firing plan for the pit is shown (above), though during the build the design was modified. The metal grid was positioned below all the pots and major fuel wood, and the coal was replaced by a few charcoal briquettes.



Peter Hommel working through the subsoil that contained many lumps of coralline limestone



Robin Wilson with the finished pit



Wood shavings and a few charcoal briquettes at the bottom



Fire bricks keep the mesh above the pit base



Fuel wood below the steel mesh grid



Michaëlla Smart with all but four pots to be fired



Helen Woolner and Robin Wilson wrapping organics next to the pots.



Some pots are naked, some wrapped in paper and some in foil saggars interspersed with organic materials, crumpled paper, kindling and fuel wood



Jo Marshall adding more fuel wood and scattering sea salt



Geoff Jones helping at fire ignition

After the fire had propagated throughout the fuel, a charge with larger diameter wood was added and allowed to burn, generating a significant amount of embers



Helen Woolner using a pitch fork to add fuel wood safely



Last wood added, 1 hr 5m after ignition - more wood was added wherever we could see pots poking through the ash, trying to keep them covered



Iron on at around 1 hr 45 min after ignition, and turf used to cover the holes at the edges

Helen at the reveal on the next day

We had the following suggestions for the next firing:

- Put a sand bag ring around edge of pit
- Put an Orton cone pack in the fire to record the temperature reached
- Perhaps dig a flue passage to increase air flow and attain a higher temperature



Ember covering of pots ranges from very little to complete cover



Michaëlla's collection



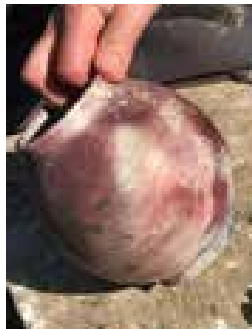
Helen's pots after washing



Iain Shield's pots, made from a grogged clay dug near his home



Geoff's collection



Earthenware with white stoneware terra sigillata spray around the top. The blue areas to the left are slightly corroded and therefore due to the action of sea salt. The effect of banana skin is clearly shown.

Jo's collection