

Pit firing at Wytham Woods

Michaëla Smart

2019 was an exciting year for open firing potters at the Wytham Woods site. In early September 2019, Dr Robin Wilson, director of the Oxford University Kilns Project and Dr Peter Hommel (then a member of the Archaeology Dept, University of Oxford) asked local potters to build a pit fire site at the anagama kiln location, Wytham Woods, to not only serve the needs of Oxford students but also to promote pit firing techniques to local artists and potters. Ceramic artists Geoff Jones and Jo Marshall's input was key to this venture. I was lucky to be approached by Robin and Peter to discuss the site's design and the university's needs at the initial stages of this project. My interest in pit firing started early in my ceramic career, but it was thanks to Jo Marshall and Charlotte Sweeney that I had my first-hand experience with this open firing practice, and since then I have continued to regard it as more than just a low firing process.

Open firing is the oldest method of irreversibly converting clay into a durable material (ceramic) and it is still used in functional ware production in Africa and South America). It is estimated this technique was used as early as 29,000–25,000 BCE. Traditionally, pots are fired green (raw), nestled together in a ground recess, covered in fuel (wood, shavings, manure, leaves). We can distinguish two types of open firing of ceramics: pit fire (where the pots are placed in a deep pit and covered in fuel materials) and clamp fire (where the pots are placed on the ground and covered in ceramic sherds for thermal retention). The latter is most prominent in West African artisanal ceramics.

The Wytham Woods pit fire is of moderate size, a traditional circular structure with a metal grid at the bottom to allow air flow during the firing. We designed the pit with a view to potentially expand the cavity to add an air flume and control the oxygen flow in the pit itself during the firing. We are considering sustainability aspects by having a short firing time (generally 18 hours or so), and by using onsite materials which would otherwise be discarded. The location is of particular interest to me as a potter, due to the environmental restrictions with regards to uses of oxides and other materials often resorted to by artists to create colourful surfaces on the clay.



Clamp firing, Limpopo, South Africa



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Pitfired pot by Helen Woolner

This meant revisiting what is often referred to as primitive techniques, although I prefer to use the term traditional. This is because primitive is too often automatically associated with notions of rudimentary and crudity, whereas pit fired pottery is in fact as refined and artistically evolved as kiln fired ceramics in my opinion. The skills and knowledge of open fire potters have sometimes been overlooked, potentially due to the much shorter firing times than kiln fired pottery, where multiple firings and glaze chemistry expose the evident need for expertise. The rising popularity of raku firing in the last few years has helped promote pit firing and barrel firing as valid and valued ceramic techniques, and it is always a delight to see many more potters explore effects and invent novel ways of decorating the surface of the clay with atmospheric chemical reactions in open fires.

Pit firing continues to generate many exciting new ways of exploring artistic expressions with what remains an unglazed clay vessel, and yet presenting itself with a beautifully intricate painting of colours and movements from the fumes. My friend Jo Marshall is pursuing novel additions to her firing materials to create amazing smoke landscapes on her pottery.

I am currently working on a pit fired banquet, a body of work looking at identity and memory, the notions of history and story through the artifact and its use.

Geoff Jones and Helen Woolner are experimenting with local wild clays, which yielded wonderful results in our first firing at Wytham Woods .



Jo Marshall barrel fired vase



Helen Woolner's pit fired pots

Links:

Jo Marshall <https://www.moonhareceramics.co.uk>

Charlotte Sweeney <https://www.instagram.com/kittykilnpottery>

Michaëla Smart, Mimie Potterie, <https://www.mimiepoterie.com>

Helen Woolner <https://firedupstudios.co.uk>
