

One of the best-known production sites lies beneath the Churchill Hospital. Excavations there between 1971 and 1973 uncovered workshops where potters – from stamps and graffiti we know the names of two of them: Vossullus and Tamesubugus – set up their wheels and other features associated with pottery production. Archaeological investigations at the site identified stone-lined pits to store clay and other raw materials, wells to supply water, pits and stone floors to refine, mix and weather the clay, ovens to dry the freshly thrown pots, and kilns to fire them.

The Roman pottery industry of East Oxford

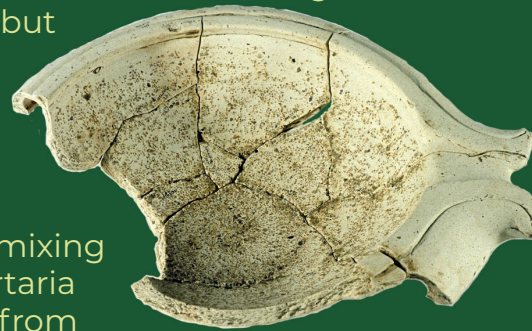


Unlike many cities in England, there is no Roman town beneath the streets of Oxford, but the area that the modern city now occupies was nevertheless important in Roman Britain, being the area of a major pottery industry that supplied pottery across much of the Roman province.



During the 1st century AD, potters came to Oxford to establish workshops and kilns, settling mainly in East Oxford around Headington Wick, Cowley, Rose Hill, Blackbird Leys and Littlemore. They were drawn to the region by the abundance of the resources they needed – clay, wood for fuel, sand to temper the clay, and water for refining and shaping it – and the proximity of the River Thames and Roman roads for transportation.

Initially, the potters supplied the local towns and other settlements with utilitarian pottery – jars for cooking and storage, bowls and beakers for dining – in dark grey wares, but during the 2nd century AD, the range expanded to include orange-coloured table wares and mixing bowls called mortaria using white clay from Shotover Hill.



In the middle of the 3rd century AD, potters began

making a very fine table ware decorated with a glossy red coating called a slip. This pottery – known today as Oxford red colour-coated ware – was intended to replace the high-quality samian ware imported from Roman France and Germany. The earliest forms of pottery in this fine ware copied those imported vessels, but the repertoire evolved and expanded over time. Oxford red colour-coated ware was the industry's most successful product, being exported to settlements throughout Britain until the industry ceased perhaps at the end of the 4th century AD.



The kilns at the industry's workshops were sunk into the ground and built in clay or stone. The dry pots were stacked on a raised floor within the firing chamber, which was then covered in clay slabs to create a temporary roof. Heat generated by a fire in the stokehole was drawn through a short flue into the chamber. After the firing, the roof was dismantled and the pottery removed and stored until it was ready to be transported to settlements throughout Britain.

