

The North Devon Ceramics trade and the American connection



The story of pottery production and trade with America is a tale of hard work, access to resources, skills and entrepreneurship, adventure, travel by ship, new lives in foreign land and profit. Through telling this story we can discover [why Bideford](#) was an important centre for pottery production, [who were the potters](#), why pottery was [exported and where](#); the relationship with the [tobacco trade](#) and evidence of pottery found in [American collections](#).

Replica Elizabethan Ships at Jamestown

Why North Devon and why Bideford?

The story of the enormous pottery production and trade is about having access to resources, being in the right place at the right time, hard work, skill, and enterprise.

Raw materials were readily available which shaped the distinctiveness of North Devon pottery, creating the signature plain earthenware and decorative honey- coloured sgraffito (design scratched through the surface to reveal a lower layer) wares. The much-prized red clay at Combrew is in a valley west of Barnstaple opening on to the Taw Estuary and Fremington Pill. It was deposited in the Woolstonian glaciation 420,000 – 340,000 BC by a lake where fine mud settled in its still water. Boulder clay was deposited above it by rapid water moving when the ice finally retreated 130,000 years ago. Potters also used white ball clay for slip (liquid clay) from Peter's Marland; gravel to temper (strengthen) the coarse wares was collected from the river Torridge. Wood and furze (gorse) were freely available to fire the kiln. Merchants supplied lead-ore for glaze from Chester, Aberdovey, and Bristol. Coal was also supplied to fuel the kilns.

North Devon potters produced goods from the 13th century and by the 17th century Barnstaple, Great Torrington and Bideford were the main centres of production. Millions of pots were supplied to South West England and exported to Ireland, Wales and America. 95% were plain earthenware such as jugs, bowls, jars and cooking pots for use in the home. Only 3- 5% of pottery made was the decorative honey-yellow sgraffito wares, including plates, mugs, candlesticks and dishes.

Bideford was the biggest centre of production and it's greatest days for making and trade were in the late 17th and early 18th century, the boom time being between 1630 and 1690. Fortunes were founded on the Irish trade fostered by Sir Richard Grenville. The 1573 Charter of incorporation for the town was Grenville's achievement whilst he was Lord of the Manor and this opened the way for merchant activity, particularly with foreign markets in the New World. As well as domestic trade, the 'bread and butter' trade was with Wales, particularly Swansea, Carmarthen and Cardigan and in the North Western and Southern coasts of England. Pottery was also sent to Ireland and the

Eastern Seaboard of the United States. Exports expanded the industry and contributed greatly to Bideford's and England's 17thC prosperity. As a result, Bridgeland St was built in 1690 with an impressive array of merchants' houses which are still there today.

Bideford Potteries

In 17th century Bideford there were only a few small potteries at both East and West of the River Torridge. These were mainly family based, but the industry grew and met demands of the expanding town and trade. Those with money and finance could invest and grow.

The main areas of production in Bideford were on the north side of town, presumably to minimise fire risk and for ease of access to 'Potter's Pill', the tidal inlet. In 'Potter's Lane' (Mill St extending on to North Road) up to 30 kilns billowed out black smoke from all the furze that was being burnt. The Beale family dominated production for over 100 years and set up several potteries and owned properties. It is believed that Thomas Beale lived at 28 North Road and there were five potteries in Mill St, North Road and adjacent tenements in 1671-1687 employing 17 men. This was the main production area into the 19th century, with eight kilns still operating in 1823. There were also at least two 17th C potteries at East-the-Water.



Crockers Old Pottery was built in 1668 on the northern end of town, between North Rd and The Strand. It lasted until 1896. Crockers has been identified as the supplier of decorative sgraffito wares exported to Jamestown, USA in about 1670. Following an archaeological dig in 1999 /2000 a large quantity of kiln waste was found at Stella Maris Convent school at the far end of The Strand (Allan, Horner and Langman). Amazingly, sherds (small pieces of pot), discovered here match the designs on vessels found in Jamestown, Virginia - [see American Collections below.](#)

Jamestown Complex Floral

Pottery exports

By finding out about the pottery forms that were made and exported to America and other New World places we can learn a lot about early British colonists at sites on the Eastern Seaboard of the United States and how they were living their lives. Wares exported include pipkins (saucepans), cooking pots, three-legged cauldrons, large dome topped ovens, storage jars, bowls and most frequently, milk pans.

Baluster jars were containers for foodstuffs such as fish and butter. They were made in enormous quantities between the late sixteenth and early century seventeenth centuries. In 1585 Bideford colonists carried them to the New World, only to be discarded at the short-lived North Carolina coastal settlement of Fort Raleigh on present day Roanoke Island.

Bideford had experienced sailors, ship-owners and merchants, who could transport goods to the New World. Barnstaple and Bideford were in effect a single port; ships sailed from each other's wharves and occasionally the two ports were listed together in the Port Books "As early as 1620 seven ships, some of Bideford and some of Barnstaple registry, sailed from Barnstaple for America but the height of trade between North Devon and the colonies occurred after the Restoration (after 1666) and lasted until the early part of the 18th century "(Malcolm Watkins, North Devon Pottery and its export to America in the 17th Century p22).

In the 17th and early 18th centuries, Ireland was a major market for Bideford Pottery and the majority of wares were exported there. The other big markets were the English Colonies in North America and the Caribbean. These were only about 15% of overseas export but they laid the foundation for Colonial trade. Bideford merchant Thomas Smith regularly traded with Virginia. This expanded greatly towards the end of the 17th century. North Devon settlers were on the Eastern shore of Chesapeake Bay in Maryland and Virginia and down through North Carolina's Outer Banks region in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Merchants offered passage there by ship, carrying servants from Bideford and Ireland so merchants sent ships to Virginia and developed trade.

The 17th Century saw an important and mutually beneficial relationship between pottery exported to Virginia and tobacco being shipped back to Bideford on return This enabled Bideford ships to trade in tobacco with Northern Europe. Merchant ships were built in Maryland and the colonies up to the 19th century and transported to North Devon to be fitted out and finished. These ships were then used for the trade in earthenware with the colonies.

Tobacco trade – Bideford as a place of great wealth



In terms of trade outside of the domestic market, there was a significant and inter-dependent relationship between pottery and tobacco. Earthenware and household goods were exported, and tobacco imported on return. The heyday for this trade was between 1680 and 1730. Bideford was the second biggest port after London, for the trans-Atlantic tobacco trade. For example, 4 million lbs of New World or Virginian tobacco were exported on from Bideford in 1640.

In 1606 the Virginia Company was founded, a consortium of merchants and mariners who created settlements to grow tobacco crops in Virginia and they made huge profits. Household pottery and woollen goods were traded along the rivers with the English settlers, providing the means for them to prepare and cook food and keep warm.

Tobacco Jar in the Burton's Collection

“Bideford already had experienced trans-Atlantic ship owners and merchants. For example, local ship owners George Shurt and John Strange (also the Mayor of Bideford who died in 1646, helping his townsmen during the Plague) owned or part-owned several ships, including some that were engaged with the Newfoundland Fisheries. Both were significant in setting up trade with Virginia and New England. John Strange was one of few North Devon members of the Virginia Company and George Shurt traded back and fore with their large ships Friendship (80 tons) and Fellowship (170 tons), sending out blankets and returning with tobacco” (Pauline Smith, 2009).

Other notable merchants in Bideford included John Smith and John Davie, both of whom had great wealth. John Davie built his mansion Colonial House in 1688, parts of which remain in the fabric of The Royal Hotel located at the end of Bideford’s old bridge.

American collections and connections



There are many 17th century sites in present day Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland and other Eastern United States where examples of sherds and larger fragments of North Devon pottery have been found in archaeological digs and surveys carried out. They are very much prized by the curators of these collections and show us the functional wares that colonies were using.

1. **National Park Service (NPS) Colonial National Historical Park Collection. Jamestown, May-Hartwell Site ‘A Unique time capsule’** The NPS collection is “the most significant collection of 17th century North Devon slipware in Britain or America” (Merry Abbitt-Outlaw, *Ceramics in America* 2002) and includes collections from other plantations on the James River as well as from the Island itself. It holds thousands of sherds all found on Jamestown Island. The May-Hartwell site is a unique time capsule. Discovered in the 1950s it is an impressive collection of gravel-tempered plainware and sgraffito pieces, 600 fragments have been catalogued. Many of the sgraffito pieces were broken and are now stuck back together to create 47 vessels. They are all from a shipment of North Devon pottery dated between 1673 -1682.

It is very unusual for sgraffito to be matched to a potter or pottery due to lack of signatures or other identifying inscriptions but this collection links to wares produced at Crockers pottery in Bideford. Following an excavation of the Stella Maris Convent site in 1999 / 2000, sherds were found which exactly match the designs on the broken pieces discovered at the May-Hartwell site. (Allan, Horner and Langman). Among the designs there is what John Allan calls the 'Jamestown Complex Floral'.

2. **University of Virginia, Charlottesville collection from Flowerdew Hundred**, a tobacco plantation on the James River, 1619. It has some of the richest and best-preserved English settlement sites in America. There are many examples of pottery, mainly plainware in their collection. This includes a Baluster jar c1624-28, most likely used to transport butter; a milk pan base with a green glaze and several smaller gravel tempered sherds, some with a lead glaze c1650-1775.
3. **Colonial Williamsburg Foundation collection from Martin's Hundred, Virginia** is one of the earliest 17th C plantations, located along the James River and settled by English colonists in 1619. Finds in this collection are 18th C plainware and 17th C sgraffito ware, from the 1620s. The former pottery sherds were excavated in Williamsburg and the latter were found at Carter Grove, Martin's Hundred. The sgraffito ware is in the signature yellow glaze and decorated with both floral and wavy patterns.
4. **The Department of Historic Resources state archaeology collection of the Commonwealth of Virginia, State Historic Preservation office, Richmond, Virginia.** North Devon wares have been found in several sites comprising both plainware and sgraffito pieces. The collections pinpoint North Devon sherds from various sites, all of which are tobacco plantations in Virginia, mostly dating back to 1600 – 1635.
5. **Preservation Virginia Collection Historic Jamestown, Virginia.** The Preservation Virginia Collection has sherds of North Devon Pottery in Jamestown that were made in Bideford or Barnstaple (the pieces can't be pin pointed). Finds in the collection are many and feature a large piece of a dripping dish, used to catch meat juices, with a green glaze, c1610 and a broken vessel that is vase shaped, probably a Baluster jar. There is also a unique small handle-less cup that was used as a drugs cup and some smaller sgraffito sherds.
6. **Baluster or other jars on Roanoke Island, North Carolina.** North Devon sherds found at Fort Raleigh are from jars which could well be the classic Baluster jar but could have been from another jar shape as a few other forms were produced. They were brought over by Colonists from Bideford and North Devon and were most likely re-used as containers in the process of assaying minerals (a process used to determine proportions of precious metals in ores) that took place there.