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A 16th century stone spoon-mould from Coventry

by R Brownsword and E E H Pitt*

An early approach to 'permanent mould' casting is described, illustrated by a stone mould found in Coventry. It was used in the 16th century for the 'mass-production' of pewter spoons.

A large proportion of the collection of mediaeval artefacts in the Coventry museums was donated by an amateur archaeologist, Mr J B Shelton, who was active in the area over the period 1927 to 1958. His methods would now be regarded as less than satisfactory and most of the objects have poor documentation; many carry only a site name by way of provenance. In his defence, however, it must be said that the mediaeval collection would have been much the poorer without his contributions.

The lack of proper archaeological contexts and other data has discouraged publication of most of the material; Mr Shelton's publications amounted only to contributions to Austin's Monthly Magazine, a local paper, between 1932 and 1937. Some of the objects are, however, of sufficient intrinsic importance to warrant publication and one such item is part of a stone spoon-mould (Figs 1 and 2) (accession number 49/190/132) which is the subject of this note.

The mould fragment, found in the bed of the River Sherbourne (SP336792) is the major part of a coffin-shaped mould-half, forming the back of a spoon; the shape of the bowl suggests a date at the end of the 16th century. It has the recess forming the bowl and a part of the stem intact but the knop-end has been lost through damage. This breakage probably led to its being discarded after long service, since it had been used after the breakage of the piece at the side (on the right of Fig 1); the groove cut around the body of the mould-half would have been used to bind the detached piece to the rest by means of a piece of cord or wire. The crack across the bowl recess is probably a heat-crack from repeated use.

The stone used in its manufacture is a Liassic mudstone such as can be found at no great distance to the east and south-east of Coventry. A suitable piece was shaped and faced in a lathe, evidenced by circular marks (Fig 2), either before or after the spoon-shaped recess was made. This was carefully carved (the stone is soft enough for this to be done) and a pouring gate more roughly cut to provide access to the mould cavity for the liquid metal. Fine scratched grooves were made from the mould cavity outwards; these were probably to facilitate the escape of air from the cavity as metal flowed in, the grooves being too fine to allow metal to flow out through them. The two halves of the

mould would have been bound together and the complete mould set with the bowl-end upwards for pouring, after preheating to ensure a dry surface and as an aid to easy metal flow and filling of the cavity.

When sufficient cooling had allowed the metal to solidify, the mould would have been split and the rough-cast spoon removed. This would have had a small amount of finishing carried out on it, in particular the removal of the pouring gate and of any flash. A pewter spoon in the Museum (accession number 49/227/289) has not had this flash removal carried out and its unfinished state is a further indication of spoon manufacture in Coventry in the 16th century.

Base-metal spoons were made from pewter or latten, a copper-based alloy similar to brass. It is very unlikely that the mould was used to cast spoons in latten since it would

have been very much more difficult to fill thin mould gaps with high-melting point alloys without premature freezing giving rise to faulty castings. Latten spoons were either beaten to shape from flat sheet blanks or were cast with thick, undersized bowls later to be beaten to shape. It is virtually certain, therefore, that the present fragment was part of a pewterer's mould.

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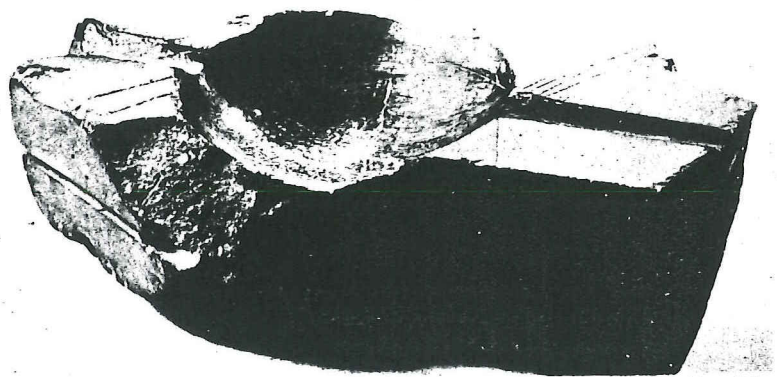


Fig 1. General view showing the fracture face, left after the detachment of the piece of mould, and the peripheral groove.

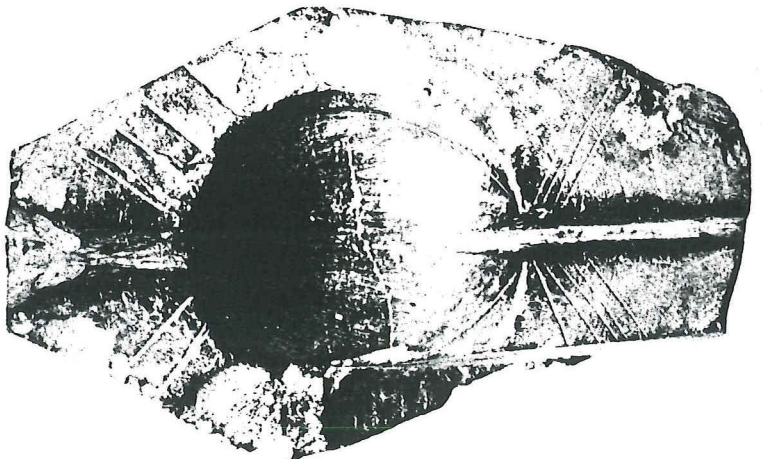


Fig 2. Plan view of the mould fragment showing the spoon-shaped recess, pouring gate, facing marks and vent grooves.

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