

THE POTTERIES OF WALES

An Introduction



Interactive map: <https://tinyurl.com/Potteries-of-Wales-Map>



Wales is a country built on clay as much as on stone or coal. Beneath the fields of Pembrokeshire, the common land of Buckley Mountain, and the banks of the River Tawe at Swansea lie deposits of red earthenware clay and fireclay that shaped, quite literally, centuries of everyday Welsh life. Every jug, pan, chamber pot and roof tile fired in a Welsh kiln began as clay dug from Welsh ground, and the story of who dug it, fired it and sold it is one of the least told chapters in the country's industrial history.

This survey sets out to bring that story together for the first time as a single, mapped record. It draws on sixteen sites spanning some six hundred years, from the fifteenth-century kilns uncovered beneath Newport's Memorial Hall in Pembrokeshire to the pottery still turning at Ewenny today. In between lie two quite different industrial traditions, each shaped by its own geology and its own ambitions.

The first is Buckley, on the high ground above the Dee Estuary in Flintshire. There, an exceptional seam of fireclay, exposed along the line of the Great Fireclay Fault, supported a pottery industry that ran with barely a break from the medieval period into the twentieth century. At its height in the early nineteenth century as many as fourteen works operated across Buckley Mountain at once, firing everyday stoneware that was shipped out through Chester to Ireland and along the Welsh coast. It was an industry built on volume and utility rather than art, and for that reason it has left less of a mark on the popular memory of Welsh ceramics than its southern cousin.

The second tradition grew up around Swansea and the Vale of Glamorgan from the mid-eighteenth century, and it reached for something altogether finer. The Cambrian Pottery, founded in 1764, began as a maker of everyday earthenware before turning to porcelain in 1814, producing wares so delicate and finely painted that Swansea porcelain remains among the most collected British ceramics two centuries later. A few miles away and a few years earlier, William Billingsley's short-lived works at Nantgarw produced porcelain of a purity that has never quite been matched, from a factory that survives today as the only early nineteenth-century porcelain works still standing anywhere in the United Kingdom. Around these two ambitious ventures grew a wider constellation of works, at Llanelly, Ynysmeudwy and Pontardawe, each supplying its own share of the domestic market until cheap imported enamelware and Far Eastern china brought the whole industry to a slow close by the early twentieth century.

Almost all of it, in the end, fell silent. What makes Ewenny, in the Vale of Glamorgan, remarkable is that it did not. Pottery has been recorded there since 1427, and the Ewenny Pottery itself, founded in 1610, has now been worked by the same family across eight generations, the last thread of a red-earthenware tradition that once ran the length of South Wales.

Where a kiln has been securely located, this survey draws on the grid references and site descriptions held by Coflein, the National Monuments Record of Wales, so that each pin on the accompanying map marks a verified location rather than a guess. Where no excavation has yet taken place, the entry is marked instead as approximate, built from documentary evidence, place-name evidence, or the general location of a lost works, so that the reader can judge for themselves how firm the ground is beneath each claim. The pages that follow take each site in turn, moving from the early folk potteries through the numbered works of Buckley and the industrial potteries of the south to Ewenny itself, the one pottery among them all still burning.

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What Defines Welsh Pottery

Welsh pottery was never one thing. What united a wassail bowl thrown at Ewenny and a porcelain plate painted at Nantgarw was little more than the clay beneath them and the country that made them. In practice, Wales produced two quite distinct kinds of ceramic tradition, one rooted in the farmhouse and the parish, the other reaching, briefly but brilliantly, for the drawing rooms of Regency Britain.

The Folk Tradition: Slip, Sgraffito and the Wassail Bowl

The older and longer-lived tradition, practised at Ewenny, Buckley, Claypits and the smaller farmhouse kilns recorded across Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire, worked in red earthenware, thrown from local clay and finished using two closely related techniques. The first was slip decoration, in which a thin coating of white or cream clay was applied over the red body before firing, creating a pale ground against which the potter could work. The second, sgraffito, involved cutting back through that white slip to reveal the red clay beneath, scratching lines, circles and figures into the surface with a sharp point before the whole piece was covered in a lead glaze and fired, the glaze turning the exposed slip a soft yellow against the darker red where the clay showed through.

Nowhere was this tradition practised with more ambition than at Ewenny, where it produced the single most distinctive named object in the whole of Welsh ceramics: the wassail bowl. Made for New Year gatherings when villagers travelled from farm to farm singing traditional songs and were offered spiced ale in return, wassail bowls were built on a scale unlike anything else the folk potteries produced, some standing over a foot high and carrying as many as eighteen or even twenty-five loop handles, originally hung with ribbons for the celebration.

Their surfaces carried whole scenes worked in sgraffito and applied relief, bands of interlinking circles, foxes carrying mice, hens, elephants, kangaroos, a man astride a barrel inscribed with a Welsh toast, even, on one surviving example, lines of musical notation. Several bear the potter's name and a date worked directly into the clay, among them bowls signed from the Clay Pits Pottery at Ewenny and dated to the 1830s, which remain the most sought after and highly valued pieces of Welsh folk ceramics to reach auction. Beyond the wassail bowl, the everyday output of these potteries was simpler and more utilitarian: jugs, milk pans, colanders, chamber pots and porringers, glazed in the same yellow-over-red palette but decorated, if at all, with plain drip-trailed slip rather than the full sgraffito treatment reserved for special pieces.

Buckley's output ran along different lines again. Working a harder, purer fireclay rather than the red earthenware of the south, its potteries specialised in robust, largely undecorated stoneware and mottled brown-glazed ware built for hard use rather than display, stone bottles, storage jars and coarse domestic pans shipped out in bulk through Chester rather than sold as individual named pieces.

The Porcelain Tradition: Duck-Egg Bodies and Painted Botany

The second tradition belonged almost entirely to the early nineteenth century and to two neighbouring works, the Cambrian Pottery at Swansea and William Billingsley's short-lived factory at Nantgarw. Both produced a soft-paste porcelain of exceptional translucency, a body so fine that held up to the light it showed a faint greenish cast that collectors still call, with real affection, duck-egg. Billingsley,

who had trained at Derby, brought the recipe to Nantgarw in 1813 and then to Swansea the following year, which is why porcelain from both factories can be almost impossible to tell apart from the body alone. It is the painting, not the clay, that identifies where a piece was finished.

That painting was the true achievement of the Welsh porcelain trade, and it was carried by a small group of named artists whose work is still identified individually today. Thomas Baxter, who came to Swansea from Worcester in 1816, was celebrated for finely detailed botanical and figure subjects, most famously an elaborate Shakespeare Cup, and painted at Swansea for three years before returning to England. Thomas Pardoe, an established flower painter who had worked at Derby and Worcester, came to Nantgarw in 1821 and remained there until his death two years later, decorating porcelain almost exclusively with botanical subjects direct from nature. David Evans became Swansea's own most celebrated local flower and fruit painter, continuing the tradition after the Swansea works itself closed in 1826. Behind them stood William Weston Young, a Quaker botanist and Billingsley's chief financial backer, and Lewis Weston Dillwyn, the naturalist and politician who owned the Cambrian Pottery throughout the porcelain years and whose own scientific interests shaped the botanical style for which Swansea became known. Genuine pieces carry the marks of this shared history: NANT-GARW C-W impressed into the base was used at both factories interchangeably, since Billingsley carried his own moulds between them, while Swansea ware is more often marked simply Swansea, impressed or written by hand in red or gold.

Named Patterns of the Industrial Potteries

Between the folk tradition and the fine porcelain sat the transfer-printed industrial wares of the Glamorgan Pottery, the South Wales Pottery at Llanelly and Ynysmeudwy, produced in volume through the middle decades of the nineteenth century for ordinary domestic tables rather than display cabinets. These works issued their patterns under their own names in the way that Staffordshire potteries did, and several are still traded and collected by name today. Ynysmeudwy alone is documented producing the Priory pattern in the 1860s, the Water Nymph pattern, and the Chantrey and Flora patterns of the late 1850s, each a distinct transfer design applied to standard domestic shapes and identifiable from surviving sherds recovered at the site itself. Cambrian Pottery transferware followed the same commercial logic on a larger scale, its blue and white printed wares and named borders documented well enough that specialist reference works have been written on the patterns and borders of Swansea transferware alone.

A Country of Two Traditions

What defines Welsh pottery, in the end, is this coexistence of extremes within a small country and a short span of time. On one hand a folk tradition unbroken since the fifteenth century, working red clay and white slip into wassail bowls loud with ribbons and animals for a New Year custom found almost nowhere else in Britain. On the other, a porcelain trade that lasted barely a generation yet produced, through the hands of a handful of named painters working a few miles apart at Swansea and Nantgarw, some of the finest botanical porcelain ever painted in these islands. Both grew from the same Welsh clay. Only one of them, at Ewenny, is still being dug today.

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A Timeline

Twelve milestones drawn from the sites and traditions surveyed here, from the first documentary trace of pottery in Wales to the one pottery still firing today.

Date	Event
1427	Earliest recorded pottery in the Ewenny area.
1610	Ewenny Pottery founded, probably by farmers turning local clay to commercial use.
1759	Buckley Pottery II first recorded, Flintshire.
1764	Cambrian Pottery founded at Swansea.
1813	Nantgarw China Works established by William Billingsley.
1814	Swansea porcelain production begins at the Cambrian Pottery.
1839	South Wales Pottery founded at Llanelly.
1845	Ynysmeudwy Pottery built on the Swansea Canal.
1870	Cambrian Pottery closes, Swansea.
1877	Ynysmeudwy Pottery closes.
1922	South Wales Pottery, Llanelly closes, the last large-scale ceramic works in Wales.
Today	Ewenny Pottery, eighth generation of the Jenkins family, still firing.

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A Survey of Pottery Sites and Their History

Introduction

Wales was never a single pottery-making tradition but several, scattered across four centuries and three quite different landscapes. In north Pembrokeshire and rural Carmarthenshire, small medieval kilns fired coarse ware for the immediate parish. On Buckley Mountain in Flintshire, a regional industry drawing on an exceptional fireclay ran without a real break from the medieval period into the twentieth century. And around the Tawe estuary at Swansea, and briefly at Nantgarw, a wholly different ambition took hold in the early nineteenth century, one that for a few short years placed Welsh porcelain among the finest made anywhere in Britain.

This survey brings sixteen of those sites together for the first time on a single map, drawn from the National Monuments Record of Wales at Coflein wherever a grid reference survives, and from documentary and place-name evidence where it does not. Each entry follows the order of the map's own layers: the early folk potteries first, then the numbered works of Buckley, then the industrial and porcelain potteries of the south, and finally Ewenny, the one pottery among them all that never stopped.

Medieval & Early Folk Potteries

Long before the industrial potteries of Buckley and the Glamorgan coast, small kilns across rural Wales were already firing local clay to serve the needs of parish and farm. Few of these early works left more than a scatter of sherds or a name in the record, but together they show that pottery making in Wales has roots reaching back to the fifteenth century and beyond.

Newport (Pembrokeshire) Medieval Pottery Kilns

Beneath the site of the town's Memorial Hall in Newport, Pembrokeshire, excavators uncovered the bases of two pottery kilns dating to the fifteenth century, each some five feet eight inches in diameter, with a flue two feet six inches wide connecting to an arched firehole. One kiln was destroyed during the building work; the other survives, preserved within the hall's basement. The find is a rare glimpse of medieval pottery production in north Pembrokeshire, long before the industrial potteries of the Glamorgan coast were ever conceived.

Brookhill Pottery (Site 18), Buckley

In 1975, fieldwalking across an arable field on the outskirts of Buckley turned up a remarkable scatter of medieval pottery, more than a thousand sherds in all, including 938 fragments of pottery and 161 pieces of ridge tile. The find marked the location as Site 18 in the sequential numbering later adopted for the Cadw-funded assessment of the Buckley potteries, and in 2015 the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust returned to the field to carry out a geophysical survey, seeking to define the buried kiln more precisely. The sherds place pottery production on Buckley Mountain firmly within the medieval period, centuries before the district's industrial heyday.

Pwllcrochan (Place-Name Evidence)

Some places carry their history in their name alone. Pwllcrochan, a small settlement in south Pembrokeshire, translates as Crock Pool, a name generally taken as evidence that pottery, or crocks, were once made or traded here, even though no excavated kiln has yet confirmed it on the ground. Place-names of this kind are a quieter form of archaeology, preserved in speech long after any physical trace has vanished into the soil, and they mark Pwllcrochan as a site worth watching should fieldwork ever reach it.

Laugharne Old Pottery, King Street

On King Street in Laugharne, Carmarthenshire, an archaeological watching brief recorded the site of a former pottery, known locally as the Old Pottery. Little detail survives of what was made there or by whom, but its presence on King Street places small-scale pottery production within one of Carmarthenshire's oldest and most storied towns, a trade carried on quietly alongside the boat building and cockling that shaped Laugharne's economy for centuries.

Buckley Potteries, Flintshire

Buckley, twelve kilometres west of Chester on the high ground above the Dee Estuary, was for at least six hundred years the centre of a regional pottery industry unmatched anywhere else in Wales. The Buckley Fireclay, exposed along the line of the Great Fireclay Fault, gave potters an exceptional local clay, while nearby coal seams fired the kilns and lead ore in the same faulted ground supplied galena for glazing. By the early nineteenth century as many as fourteen separate works were operating across Buckley Mountain, producing jugs, pans, jars and stone bottles that were shipped out to Ireland and along the Welsh coast, particularly to Swansea. Several of those works have now been individually located and recorded.

Buckley Pottery I

Excavation between 1972 and 1974 uncovered a working floor and pan at this site, together with pottery and kiln furniture of seventeenth and eighteenth-century date, confirming that production here spanned Buckley's earliest and most formative pottery-making period.

Buckley Pottery II

This site preserves the memory of an eighteenth-century pottery first recorded in 1759. By the time the Ordnance Survey mapped the area in 1881 the works had already vanished from the ground, leaving only the documentary trace and the buried remains for later archaeologists to recover.

Buckley Pottery III

Excavation here revealed a kiln with two chimneys, drying sheds and a blunging pit for preparing clay, along with finds of nineteenth-century pottery and kiln furniture. The Ordnance Survey map of 1881 shows this works, along with several neighbours, set upon an area of former common land south-west of Alltami, ground the potters had gradually colonised as the industry expanded across Buckley Mountain.

Buckley Pottery (14), Brunswick Road

An archaeological watching brief on land east of the Roman Catholic presbytery on Brunswick Road recorded the site of a further Buckley pottery works, one of the numbered sequence of sites that together chart the full extent of the town's ceramic industry.

Buckley Mountain Pottery District

Taken together, the individual kiln sites of Buckley belong to a single continuous industrial landscape spread across the common land of Buckley Mountain. From the seventeenth-century cottage potters who first exploited the fireclay, through the fourteen works recorded in the early nineteenth century, to the last works that closed in the mid-twentieth, Buckley stands as the most sustained and extensive pottery-making tradition anywhere in Wales, a story only partly recovered through the excavations and surveys carried out to date.

South Wales Industrial Potteries & Porcelain

While Buckley supplied everyday earthenware to the ports of the Dee, a quite different pottery industry grew up around Swansea and the Vale of Glamorgan from the mid-eighteenth century, one that would in time produce some of the finest porcelain ever made in Britain.

Cambrian Pottery, Swansea

Founded in 1764 on the banks of the River Tawe, the Cambrian Pottery began by producing earthenware in the manner of Wedgwood before its owner, Lewis Weston Dillwyn, brought porcelain production to Swansea from 1814. The delicate, translucent Swansea porcelain made in the years that followed, prized for its soft-paste body and fine botanical painting, is now among the most sought after of all British ceramics, collected and exhibited long after the works itself closed in 1870.

Glamorgan Pottery, Swansea

Established in 1814 on the banks of the Tawe by George Haynes, previously manager of the neighbouring Cambrian Pottery, the Glamorgan Pottery grew directly out of a falling out between Haynes and Cambrian's owner Lewis Weston Dillwyn. Its wares, largely for domestic use and often marked with the initials of its later proprietors Baker, Bevans and Irwin, gave Cambrian real competition for over two decades until Dillwyn's son purchased and closed the works in 1838. Its assets, and many of its Staffordshire-trained workers, transferred to a new venture at Llanelly two years later.

Nantgarw China Works

In 1813, William Billingsley arrived at Nantgarw, beside the Glamorganshire Canal north of Cardiff, to establish a porcelain works despite there being no prior tradition of pottery making in the area and no trained local labour to draw on. The pottery closed within a year, reopened in 1817, and in its brief working life produced a pure white, bone-ash porcelain now regarded as among the finest ever made in Britain. Nantgarw China Works survives today as the only early nineteenth-century porcelain works left standing anywhere in the United Kingdom, its kilns preserved under the care of a dedicated trust, its wares held in the National Museum of Wales and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

South Wales Pottery, Llanelly

When William Chambers bought the assets of the closed Glamorgan Pottery in 1840, he used them to found the South Wales Pottery at Llanelly, close to the town's harbour. It would go on to outlast every other Welsh ceramic works, producing earthenware for eighty-two years before finally closing in 1922, the last large-scale pottery manufacturer anywhere in Wales and the works whose closure marked the true end of the industry's industrial age.

Ynysmeudwy Pottery

On the banks of the Swansea Canal at Ynysmeudwy, two Cornish brothers, William and Michael Williams, built a pottery around 1845 on the site of a former farm still known locally as Y Smitw. Using Cornish china clay brought up the canal and terracotta clay mined from the mountain opposite, the works produced bricks, roof tiles, jugs, pipes and chimney pots, employing around thirty workers between the ages of fourteen and forty. At its height Ynysmeudwy turned out twenty thousand items of earthenware a week, before its purchase by the Llanelli Pottery in 1871 and closure in 1877. Little remains today beyond a canal bridge still nicknamed the Pottery Bridge.

Pontardawe Pottery Kilns

Six feet below the surface near Pontardawe lie the remains of seven pottery kilns, evidence of a works that produced brick and good quality earthenware from 1844 until around 1870. The site was later absorbed into the Bryn Tinplate Works, one small pottery giving way, as so often in this part of the Swansea valley, to the heavier industries of the later nineteenth century.

Living Tradition

Ewenny Pottery

Records show that pottery has been made in the Ewenny area since 1427, and at the trade's height as many as fifteen separate potteries worked the local red earthenware clay at once, though rarely more than seven at any single time. Ewenny Pottery itself was founded in 1610, probably by farmers turning the clay beneath their land to commercial use and passed into the hands of the Jenkins family in the early nineteenth century when Evan Jenkins married Mary, daughter of the then owner John Morgan. Eight generations later, the Jenkins family still throw pottery on the same ground, the wassail bowls, jugs and sgraffito-decorated wares of the old tradition still made and sold from the workshop today. Of all the potteries once scattered across Wales, Ewenny alone has never stopped.

Sixteen sites, four centuries, three landscapes: the potteries of Wales were never one story but many, bound together only by clay, fire, and the hands of the people who worked them. Most have long since fallen silent, their kilns known now only through a sherd in a ploughed field or a line in an old survey. One has not stopped.

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A Summary

Sixteen sites, mapped and drawn together, do not by themselves make an industry, but they do make a pattern, and that pattern is the real finding of this survey. Three things stand out.

The first is how closely pottery followed geology. Every site in this survey sits on or beside a clay deposit that made it possible, from the red earthenware clay beneath Ewenny and its neighbours in the Vale of Glamorgan, to the exceptional fireclay of Buckley Mountain, to the imported Cornish china clay that reached Ynysmeudwy by canal. Wales did not choose to make pottery in these places by accident of enterprise alone; the ground chose for it, and the industry rose and fell largely where the clay allowed.

The second is how closely pottery followed transport. Nearly every site of any scale in this survey sits beside water, whether the Dee Estuary that carried Buckley's stoneware to Ireland, the Glamorganshire Canal that brought coal to Nantgarw and took porcelain away, or the Swansea Canal that linked Ynysmeudwy and Pontardawe to the coast. Where the canal or the dock declined, so as a rule did the pottery beside it, the South Wales Pottery at Llanelly's harbour being the last and longest survivor of that pattern before it too closed in 1922.

The third is decline, and it came from the same direction almost everywhere. Cheap enamelware and imported china from the Far East undercut the older red earthenware trade through the later nineteenth century, and one by one the small potteries of Ewenny, Buckley and the Tawe valley closed their kilns for the last time. By the outbreak of the Second World War, the only sites in this survey still producing anything at all were memories, sherds in a ploughed field, or lines in an Ordnance Survey map from 1881 already marking a works as gone.

Except one. Ewenny Pottery's survival, unbroken since 1610 and now in its eighth generation of the same family, is not simply a pleasant footnote to an otherwise closed chapter. It is the one place where the whole tradition surveyed here, the digging of local clay, the building of a kiln, the throwing and firing and selling of wares by hand, can still be seen exactly as it was practised across Wales for four hundred years before the imports came.

Not every site in this survey is yet resolved to the same standard. Coflein holds securely verified grid references for around half of the sixteen locations recorded here; the remainder rest on documentary or place-name evidence and are marked accordingly on the accompanying map. Buckley in particular is known to hold considerably more than the handful of individually excavated sites included in this first pass, with as many as fourteen works recorded by the early nineteenth century alone, and further sites in North Wales at Rhymney and Brymbo remain to be properly located. This survey should be read as a foundation for that further work rather than as its conclusion.

What it does establish, even in this first form, is that Wales had not one pottery tradition but several, running in parallel for centuries before nearly all of them fell silent together. Recovering their locations, however incompletely, is a small step toward making sure that when the last kiln at Ewenny does eventually cool, the rest of the story does not go with it.