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## POTTERY FROM THE TUDOR MERCHANT'S HOUSE, TENBY

by

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### PART I: CONTEXT

#### Introduction

The Tudor Merchant's House, owned by the National Trust and formerly known as the 'Old House', Quay Hill, Tenby is a three-storey, stone-built structure, one of the few remaining examples of medieval domestic architecture in the town. Descriptions of the house with plans and elevations previously published<sup>1</sup> indicate a late 15th century date for its construction. A brief description of the building is included here to enable the pottery report to be more fully understood.

The ground floor (fig.1) is rectangular, with an entrance and window in the south-east end opening directly on to the street, a small window and blocked door on the north-east side and a modern door in the north-west end. The north-west end of the ground floor is dominated by a massive fireplace subdivided by a timber-and-plaster partition wall which originally enclosed a small room. On part of the remaining partition painted decoration in imitation of a post-and-panel wall survive<sup>2</sup>.

In early 1984 large scale restoration work being undertaken under the direction of the National Trust involved the removal of the thick concrete raft that had been laid on the ground floor in the previous restoration and repair work of 1939. Under the concrete some earlier floors and other deposits survived, though the majority of the floors associated with the later history of the building had been removed, presumably during the 1939 restoration. Several narrow trenches were excavated through these early floor deposits and the cess-pit at the base of the garderobe tower was emptied of its deposits. Selected drawings of the longitudinal sections of these trenches are reproduced here where relevant to the pottery report (fig.1, sections 2-5).

#### Section 4

The cess-pit contained two major deposits: organic material (85), a sample of which is being examined for environmental evidence, and back-fill of rubble and building debris (84). A later drain (28/80) and floor surfaces sealed the pit.

#### Section 3

This trench was excavated under the painted plaster partition wall and, as can be seen in the section, all the surviving floor layers pre-date the construction of the wall.

#### Section 2

All the floor layers excavated pre-date the construction of the painted plaster wall. No relationship between the floors and the drain (28/80) could be established.

#### Section 5

The pit 35 underlies all the floor levels in this section.

Layer 18 (see p 33 below) is not shown on any of the sections; it may pre-date the painted plaster partition wall although it was considered to have been contaminated during the laying and/or removal of the concrete-raft floor.

### PART II THE POTTERY

This small collection of pottery (Table 1, figs.2 and 3) is remarkable for its high proportion of imports, especially its series of Merida types. More than half is of North Devon origin, and only one sherd is definitely from West Wales. A wide variety of fabrics are represented, often by only a single sherd. They are not listed and described individually, but the range will be evident from Table 1. The largest groups of pottery are discussed and illustrated below.

The bulk of the material comes from the organic layer at the bottom of

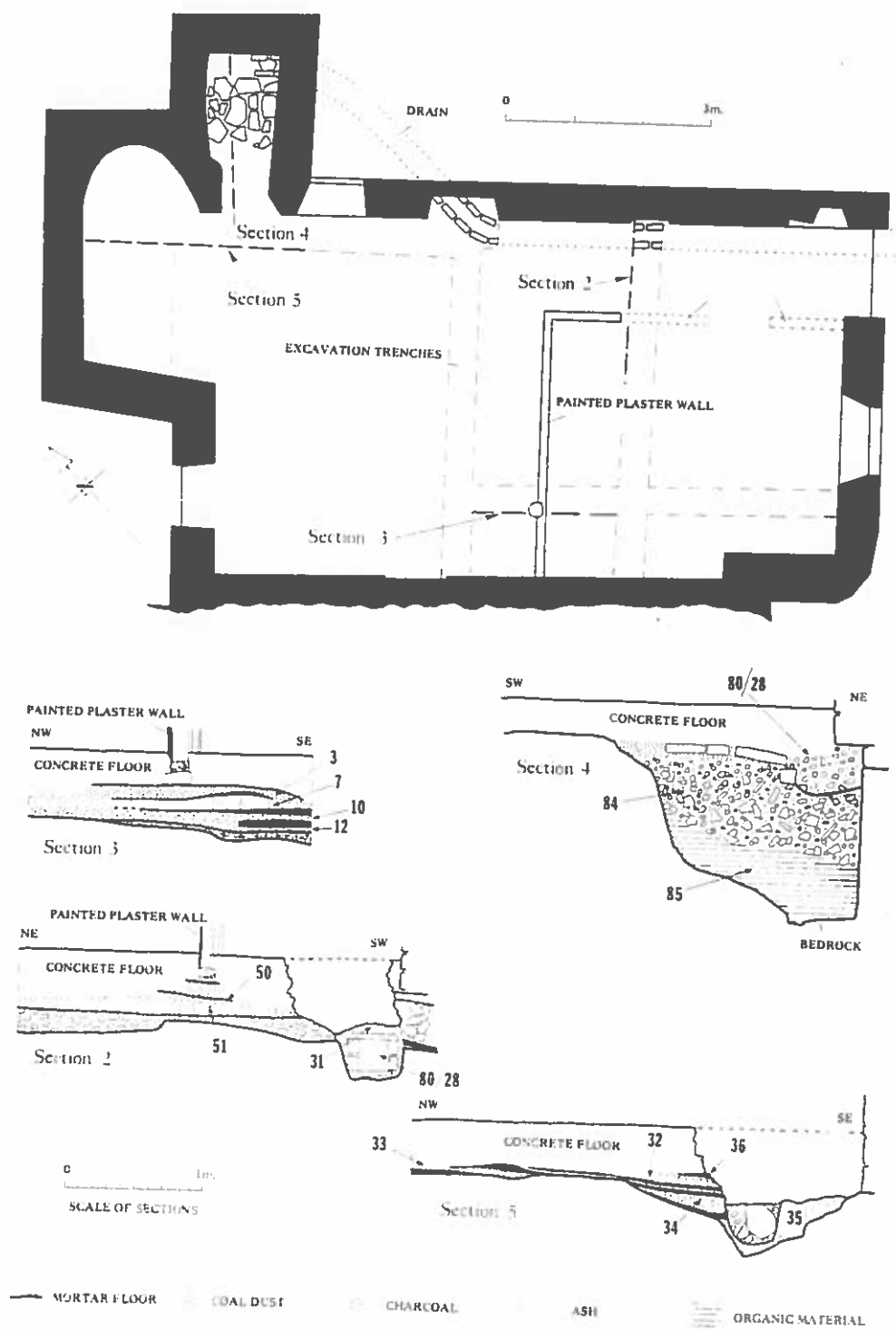


Fig.1. Site plan and sections

TABLE 1

CONTEXTS	POTTERY TYPES																				CLAY PIPES	TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20		
85			1:1	(1,2) 10:2	(4) 4:1	(3) 1:1																16:5
84/85				(5) 1:1		2:					(14) 1:1											4:2
84		(10) 1:1			2:		1:	(6,7,8,11,12) 12:9 (15) 2:1						(9) 2:1	(13) 3:1						1	21:12
80/28																	1:1	(16) 1:1	4:4	1:1		9:8
31																	1:1		1:1			2:2
51	1:1																					1:1
50					3:1																	3:1
12					(24) 1:1																	1:1
10								(23) 3:1														3:1
7								6:5		(21) 2:1	(22) 1:1	(20) 1:1				1:1					2	11:9
3								1:1 (19) 1:1		(17) 1:1												1:1
18																	1:1	(10) 1:1				4:4
35					(27) 1:1																	1:1
34					1:1																	1:1
32								1:1														1:1
33								1:1 (25) 1:1						(26) 1:1								2:2
36																						1:1
TOTAL	1:1	1:1	1:1	1:1	16:4	8:3	2:1	28:2	1:1	2:1	2:2	1:1	1:1	2:1	3:1	1:1	3:1	2:2	5:5	1:1	3	82:53

SHERDS : VESSELS

ILLUSTRATION NUMBERS IN PARENTHESIS

## TYPES PRESENT, WITH APPROXIMATE DATES

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>1. Medieval: Bristol? 13th/14th century</p> <p>2. Medieval ridge tile: Welsh or North Devon?</p> <p>3. Local (Pembrokeshire/Cardiganshire), date uncertain</p> <p>4. Mature Valencian Lustre-ware, 15th century</p> <p>5. North Devon calcareous gravel-free fabric, late 15th-17th century</p> <p>6. Merida-type ware: Spanish or Portuguese, probably 16th century</p> <p>7. Unidentified red fabric: Bristol? date uncertain</p> <p>8. North Devon gravel-tempered, including tiles 16th-18th century</p> <p>9. Possibly North Devon jar rim, 16th century or later</p> <p>10. Weser slipware (German), late 16th century - early 17th century</p> | <p>11. North Devon sgraffito:<br/>A post-1620<br/>B 1670-1730</p> <p>12. Slipware, 17th/18th century</p> <p>13. North Devon slipware, post 1620</p> <p>14. North Devon? calcareous, gravel-free slipware, post-1620</p> <p>15. Bristol/Staffordshire slipware, late 17th century-first half 18th century</p> <p>16. Unidentified sgraffito ware (possibly Staffordshire), date uncertain</p> <p>17. Black glazed red earthenware, 17th-19th century</p> <p>18. English tin-glazed earthenware, late 17th-18th century</p> <p>19. 'China', late 18th century or later</p> <p>20. English stoneware, 19th century</p> |
|--|---|

the cesspit (85), and the backfill above it (84). The pottery from 85 suggests a 16th-century or possibly early 17th century date, and that from 84 a 17th-18th century one. Most of the parallels for the pottery come from the other side of the Bristol Channel, for little comparable material with independent dating has been excavated in Wales.

Context 85: Lower filling of cesspit (fig.1, section 4; fig.2, nos.1-4)

Sherds of five vessels were found in this deposit. For three of these vessels (1, 2 and 4) a 16th-century date seems appropriate, and the others need not be incompatible with this. The large proportion of whole vessels (1 and 4) found in 85 suggests that this was where they were originally discarded.

Nos. 1 and 2 are in a fine fabric with a very dense scatter of small calcareous inclusions, which is a variety of North Devon ware<sup>3</sup>. The earliest occurrence of this fabric is at Polsoe Priory, near Exeter, in a group dating to the end of the 15th century, and it figures at Exeter in several early 16th century groups. 90% of 16th-century North Devon wares at Exeter were of this type and all identifiable forms were jars<sup>4</sup>.

1. Type 5. The drawing is reconstructed from surviving upper and lower portions, so that the pot may have been deeper. The base and lower parts of the interior are completely covered with a green glaze; above this the glaze is only splashed, the unglazed interior surface being a purplish-red colour. The light brown exterior is largely unglazed except for a broad vertical band of dark green. These jars were usually internally glazed only<sup>5</sup>. The vessel is very hard-fired and well-thrown, although a little uneven in places. It has cracked during firing, in one broken area being partially glazed over the fracture, but would probably have been usable. Attached to the glaze on top of the rim and beneath the base are pieces of shale or slate<sup>6</sup>. The practice of using slates to separate vessels in the kiln was current in North Devon<sup>7</sup>, but it was not restricted to that area. Partially glazed slates with pot fragments attached occur amongst material from the kiln site at Newport, Pembrokeshire<sup>8</sup>. Although this vessel is not exactly a waster, it obviously not perfect, and perhaps it is surprising that it was shipped over from North Devon.
2. Type 5. Portion of jar rim in same fabric as no.1. There are very thick bubbles of glaze on top of the rim. Both nos.1 and 2 appear to have been fired upside down. (Internally glazed sherds in a similar fabric are found in contexts 50 and 34 (sections 2 and 5) and are the only pottery found in these contexts).

3. Type 7. An unusual rim form with a definite internal groove, in an unfamiliar fabric, hard-fired, and light orange-red in colour. There is a small splash of light brownish-green glaze externally and a larger glazed area internally beneath the rim. The only inclusions are very small angular quartz grains and occasional large red and white lumps. Date and origin uncertain (possibly Bristol?)
  
4. Type 6. Merida-type ware. The main production centre of these red micaceous wares was Extremadura in Spain<sup>9</sup>, although they were also made in Portugal<sup>10</sup>, and the vessels from Tenby could well be Portuguese. Merida-type wares were imported over a long period from the 13th century, but the earlier finds are mostly costrels and bottles<sup>11</sup>. An exact parallel for this pot, a jar with only one handle, has not been found. The form of the rim bears some similarity to those illustrated from Castle Street, Plymouth<sup>12</sup>, and to the pottery from the Spanish Armada wrecks<sup>13</sup>. The closest parallel for the profile is a short fragment of rim (1/4 - 1/3 of full circumference) from Cleeve Abbey in North Somerset<sup>14</sup>, which was found in a Dissolution context. This has a second deep groove further down the neck. The fabric of the vessel from Tenby is very fine, hard and reddish-orange, with a reduced core in places. The only obvious inclusions are plate-lets of white mica. The pot is very well-made and heavy wheel-marks are evident internally only. The distinctive form and finish of the handle are characteristic of Merida-type vessels. (For other Merida-type sherds, see below nos. 24 and 27)

The only other pottery from this layer is a broken sherd with mostly shale inclusions, similar to much of the pottery found at Cardigan Castle, and typical of the Cardiganshire/Pembrokeshire area; its date is uncertain.

No North Devon gravel-tempered ware (Type 8, below) was found in this deposit, but with only sixteen sherds representing five vessels perhaps the sample is not large enough for this to be significant. It is worth noting, however, that in the layer above (84) more than half the vessels are of this type. Although North Devon gravel-tempered ware is present at Exeter in deposits of the first half of the 16th century, the proportion is much smaller than in later post-medieval groups. At Okehampton Castle in a late 16th century deposit the proportion of the gravel-tempered ware is only 18% of all North Devon sherds<sup>15</sup>.

#### Context 84/85 Cesspit (fig. 1, section 4, fig. 2, no. 5, fig. 3, no. 14)

The demarcation between layers 84 and 85 was not clear enough for it to be certain in every case to which layer a vessel belonged (see Table 1). There were also joining sherds from each layer.

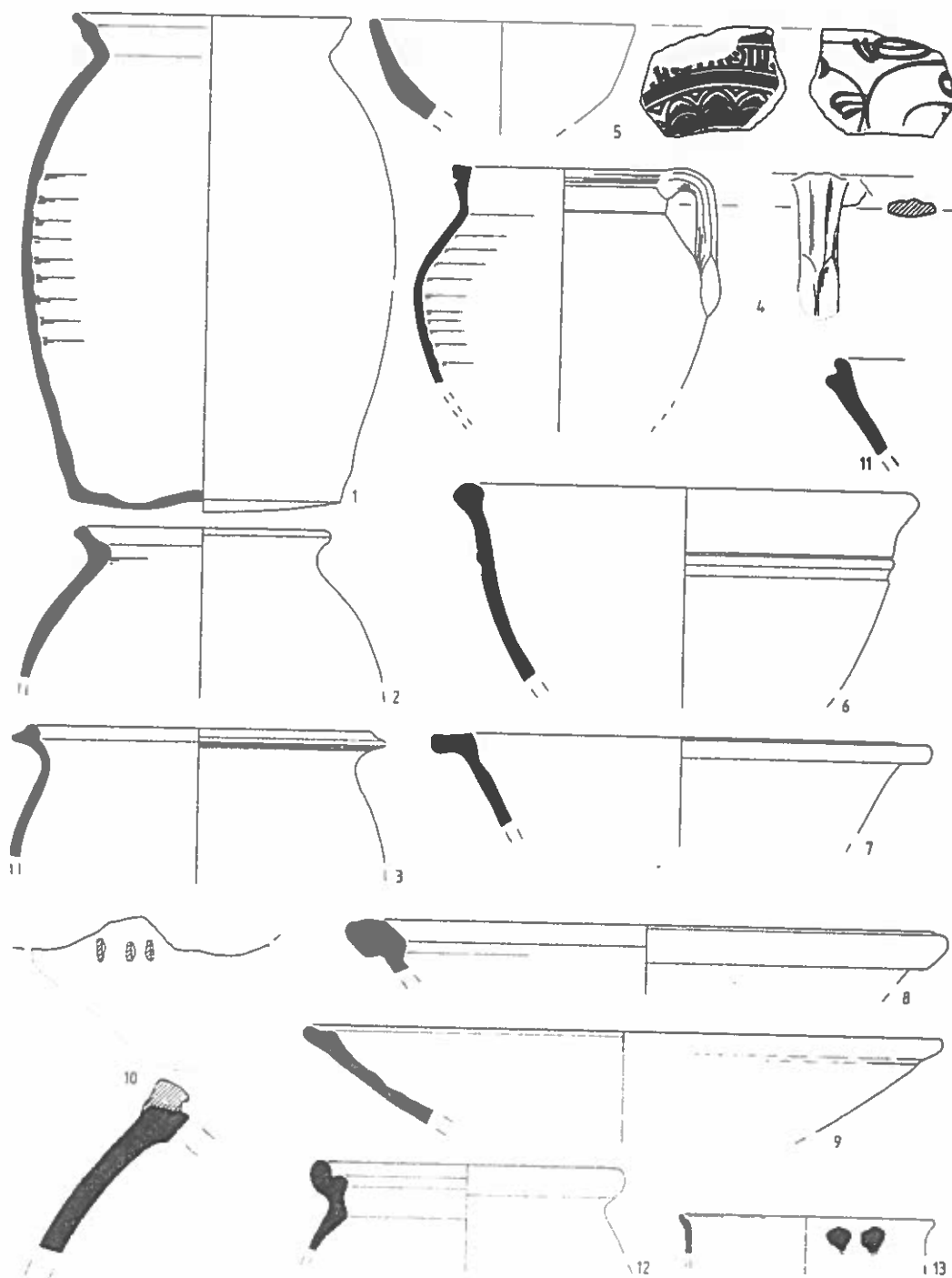


Fig.2. Pottery from the Tudor Merchant's House, Tenby: nos.1-13.

5. Type 4: Spanish lustre-ware<sup>21</sup> A single sherd of 15th-century date (Mature Valencian 1425-1475)<sup>22</sup>. These wares were luxury items often kept as heirlooms and are frequently found in later contexts. At Exeter four mid or late 15th century Valencian wares were found associated with early 16th century wares, and two in mid or late 16th-century deposits<sup>23</sup>.

The sherd is from a small bowl which may have had a foot-ring. The fabric is light buff, tinged slightly pink in places. The white tin glaze is discoloured but well-preserved. Most of the decoration is in a reddish-brown copper lustre; there is just one smudge of cobalt visible on the internal surface at the bottom. The stylised lettering on the interior appears to be neither Gothic nor Arabic.

14. Type 11B Part of a North Devon sgraffito dish. Rim chipped after first firing. The decoration includes dots made with a comb. American evidence confirmed by excavation in this country has shown that this technique was not introduced until the 1660s or 1670s<sup>24</sup>. North Devon sgraffito appears to have gone out of production in the early 18th century<sup>25</sup>.

Context 84. Upper filling of cesspit (fig.1, section 4; fig 2, nos.6-13)

This pottery need not be associated with the house and may have accumulated elsewhere over a period of time.

- 6-8, 11-12. Type 8: North Devon Gravel-tempered ware. Over half the sherds in this back-fill are North Devon gravel-tempered wares, not amenable to precise dating. Although close parallels for some of the forms can be found elsewhere in dated contexts, it now appears that the same forms were current over a long period, the rims of 16th century bowls not differing from those of the 17th and 18th centuries<sup>16</sup>. The only useful dating features are a preponderance of jar forms in 16th-century groups, and a change in the form of the jugs. Most of these sherds are from bowls.

6. Rim of deep bowl, green glaze inside, exterior sooted.
7. Rim of bowl, green glaze inside, exterior partially brown glazed and sooted.
8. Rim of 'bail' or bowl, orange-green glaze inside, exterior sooted.
11. Rim of bowl, green-brown glaze inside, exterior sooted.
12. Rim of jar. Thick bubbles of glaze in internal groove. Exterior a light colour, the result of a finishing process rather than a slip.

Sherds not illustrated include a body sherd of a very large vessel with a handle springing from it, probably a jar, and sherds of a thinner-walled, cordoned bowl similar to no.6, with a bright orange glaze inside. There is also a piece of glazed tile with shallow grooves.



9. Type 14. Sherds of a slipware dish in a gravel-free fabric containing calcareous inclusions. This differs from the fabric of nos. 1 and 2 (Type 5), in containing many small angular quartz grains. A white slip covers the interior and the top of the rim. The resulting yellow glaze is heavily streaked with brown from its iron content. If this is a North Devon product it must be post-1620. Both at Exeter and in North Devon plain slipwares occur in groups of early-to-mid 18th-century, but it is not clear when production ended.<sup>17</sup>
10. Type 2. Crest of ridge tile. Although there is documentary<sup>18</sup> and archaeological<sup>19</sup> evidence for the existence of post-medieval North Devon ridge tiles this one appears to be medieval; the crests of the later ones are usually finger-moulded and not knife-cut as this example. The fabric of this tile differs from the glazed tile mentioned above, containing some quartz as well as some slate or shale. It is uncertain whether this is a local or North Devon product.
13. Type 15. Three sherds, probably from the same vessel, of a Staffordshire/Bristol-type slipware cup or posset-pot, date this deposit to the late 17th-18th century (or later).<sup>20</sup> It is glazed a pale yellow inside and out, and decorated with pads of brown slip. A sherd (not illustrated here) has two rows of pads separated by a wavy line; the base rises in the centre and the underside is unglazed and blackened.

Context 80/28 Fill of drain (fig.1, section 4; fig.3, nos.15 and 16)

15. Type 8: North Devon gravel-tempered ware. Basal portion of very large jar? Green glaze inside, splash glaze on light coloured surface outside.
16. Type 18. Rim of tin-glazed earthenware dish. English, probably Bristol. Late 17th-18th centuries. Thick blue-tinged glaze covering interior and exterior. Thin blue line around interior edge of rim. Well executed green and blue painted decoration over this. Fabric hard creamy buff, no easily visible inclusions.

Context 18: Layer contaminated during the laying of the concrete floor  
(p.26 ; fig.3, nos.17-19).

17. Type 9. Rim of jar (diameter uncertain) in a light red fabric. Contains some large and many very small quartz inclusions, with some unidentified ones; also small calcareous inclusions as in nos 1 and 2. Splash of glaze on top of rim and externally. Different from normal North Devon products, but possibly of North-Devon provenance.

18. Type 18. Body sherd of tin-glazed earthenware plate. Pinkish tinge to glaze. Decoration includes very pale blue circular area outlined in purple, three purple stripes. External glaze discoloured. Fabric a warm, light pink, containing a few red inclusions probably English. Late 17th-18th century.

19. Type 8. Thin rim. North Devon; 18th century<sup>26</sup>. Finer fabric; splash of shiny green glaze internally.

Context 7: Trodden floor underlying partition wall (fig.1, section 3; nos.20-22)

20. Type 12. Rim of slipware cup. Brown glazed red earthenware, slip-trail decoration. 17th-century?

21. Type 10. Weser slipware<sup>27</sup>. The pink fabric and style of decoration of these two sherds are typical of these German wares of the late 16th century which were still exported in the early 17th century. A white slip covers the inside; over this are thin concentric bands of orangy-brown slip, with other decoration of this colour and of pale green, all covered by a clear lead glaze. There is a splash of slip and glaze on the exterior, but this is otherwise unslipped and unglazed. The sherds are probably from a bowl.

22. Type 11A Rim of sgraffito dish. Probably North Devon. Post-1620. The fabric contains some small, white, calcareous inclusions and is very similar to those of the gravel-free jars nos.1 and 2. Decoration consists of running S marks on the rim. There is a small indentation on the external rim edge.

Context 10 Occupation layer underlying partition wall (fig 1, section 3; fig 3)

23. Type 8 North Devon gravel-tempered bowl. Internal brown/green glaze, exterior sooted.

Context 12 Thin occupation layer underlying partition wall (fig.1, section 3; fig 3)

24. Type 6. Basal angle of probable Merida-type vessel in light orange fabric. Wheelmarks internally. Exterior and outer portion of fracture very black. Tool-marks visible externally.

Context 36 Thin mortar floor, probably quite late (fig.1, section 5, fig.3)

25. Type 8 Rim of North Devon gravel-tempered jar. Only partially glazed internally. Unglazed surfaces light-coloured in places as no. 12

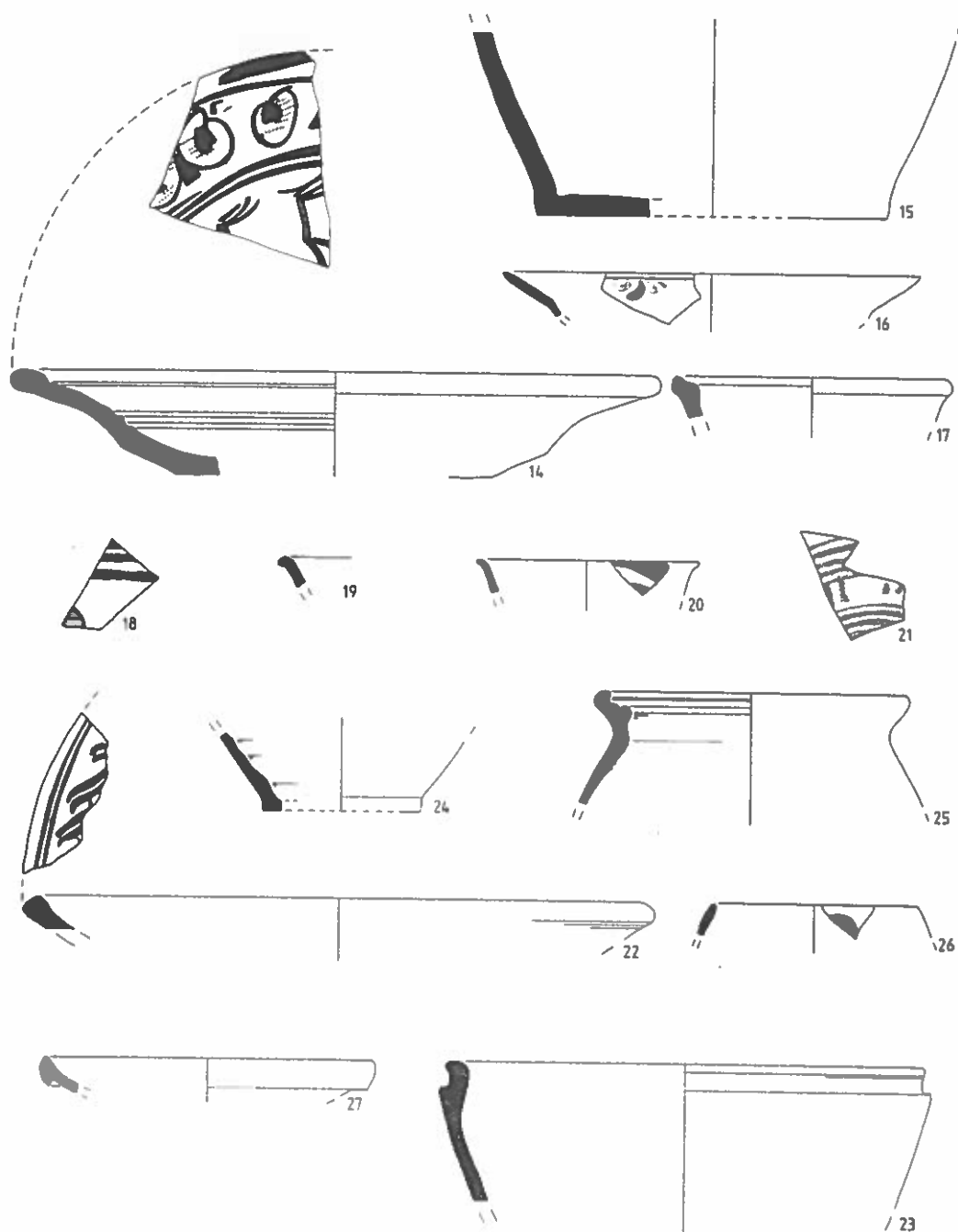


Fig.3. Pottery from the Tudor Merchant's House, Tenby: nos.14-27

Context 33: Ashy layer, possibly contaminated (fig.1, section 5; fig.3)

26. Type 13. Rim sherd of slipware jar, North Devon, post-1620. Covered with a white slip internally and a partial slip externally. Glaze rests in a thick, dark brown band at the top of the rim. Hard light red fabric.

Context 35: Fill of pit in hearth area (fig.1, section 5; fig.3)

27. Type 6: Merida-type. The fabric of this is coarser than the other Merida sherds, and contains many small inclusions. Its exact angle and form are difficult to determine: it has been drawn as a bowl, but it could be a lid, or (at another angle) the rim of a jar. If it is a bowl it compares well with some illustrated from Plymouth and there assigned to the 16th century<sup>28</sup>. The lower edge of the rim is very uneven, which may be the result of poor finishing or of wear, for the exterior surface beneath this is also very worn, perhaps through resting in another container. The interior surface is grey, which could be a result of reduction firing or of a deposit such as those observed on this type of pottery at Plymouth<sup>29</sup>.

Context 51 (fig.1, section 2)

The occurrence of a medieval sherd of 13th or 14th century date (not illustrated) in layer 51 is not easy to explain. Presumably it must have been brought in from outside the house with other material. This could equally apply to much of the pottery, and also account for the medieval ridge tile (no.10 above) in 84.

Summary

Research has shown that in the 16th and 17th centuries the cost of land transport was eight or ten times greater than that by sea<sup>30</sup>. This helps to explain the high proportion of sea-bourne imports.

	Sherds	:	Vessels
Foreign imports	11	:	5
North Devon imports	46	:	27
Other pottery	25	:	21
<hr/>			
TOTAL	82	.	53

Among the other pottery are possible North Devon and Bristol products and also more recent earthenwares and china. The lack of local wares supports the theory that there must have been little or no production in South Wales at this date, the market being dominated by North Devon pottery<sup>31</sup>. It is uncertain when North Devon wares were first imported. Although there was trade between Barnstaple and Tenby in the late 16th century no record of pottery occurs in the surviving Port Books<sup>32</sup>, though vessels may have been used as containers for other goods and not specifically mentioned. The export of massive quantities of North

Devon products only appears to have begun in the 17th century. In 1602 'sixty dozen earthenware' were sent from Bideford to Carmarthen in the John of Bidiford<sup>33</sup>. The Barnstaple Port Books for 1650-1700 record more earthenware sent to Carmarthen than to Tenby, and it may have been re-distributed from there. However some was also sent direct to Tenby, e.g. 50 dozen by Christopher Hanniver in 1670<sup>34</sup>.

The Merida type wares may well be Portuguese rather than Spanish, for the recorded Iberian trade with Tenby in the first half of the 16th century was entirely with Portugal<sup>35</sup>. Although the quantity is not large enough to be remarkable it is worth noting that by contrast there are no French imports although trade with France was considerable. The Weser slipware so far west is of interest, most British imports of these vessels being found on the east coast of England. It can hardly have been a direct import and probably represents re-distribution through another centre, though it could fall into the special category of a gift.

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