

Over the last 50 years, wood firing by studio potters has grown into something of an international cult. In Australasia and particularly North America, its modern history is well documented and supported by regular conferences such as *Cultural Confluence*, the wood-firing symposium that was held at The Archie Bray Foundation in Montana, USA, in October 2018. In the UK, however, little has been written about its development and the number of people using the process is low. My experience of wood firing is mainly based on my time at Farnham School of Art, where I studied from 1968 and taught from 1974 until the early 1990s. I hope that telling this particular story will encourage others to build a more comprehensive picture of wood firing in the UK.

According to the Australian potter Owen Rye, wood firing became popular in Australia, New Zealand and the USA as a result of potters such as Randy Johnston and Chester Nealie who spent time studying in Japan in the mid 1970s. Their interest tended to focus on Japan's early kilns such as those in Tamba and Bizen, where simple anagama kilns exposed the pots directly to the flames, producing results that chimed with the Abstract Expressionist interest in subconscious creation. Perhaps this experience of an Asian culture, where pottery has a high status, led to these potters viewing their work as a contemporary art form.

Ceramics viewed as art rather than craft ensured that wood firing in the 'new world' was seen as belonging to the ceramic artists' vocabulary. By contrast, wood firing in the UK was associated with the craft production workshop tradition. Making ceramics as art was predominantly an urban occupation, its technical signifier being oxidised glazes readily achieved in electric kilns. Initially this was work produced by Picasso-influenced artists such as William Newland, and the minimalist monochromes of Hans Coper. However, in the early 1970s this shifted to bright, low-temperature glazes on industrial clay bodies: the antithesis of the wood-fired aesthetic.

### BAPTISM OF FIRE

My introduction to wood firing took place at Farnham School of Art as a newly appointed lecturer, rather than as a student. The ceramics course back then was inspired by the practical self-sufficiency of Michael Cardew and the artistic aspirations of William Staite Murray. The programme included a course on the theory of ceramic-related geology, clays, slips, glazes, etc., but surprisingly nothing, as I recall it, on kiln design.

When I arrived in 1968 the college was in the town centre. The kiln site consisted of a salt kiln that was built by Peter Snagge and a series of other oil-fired kilns built by Graham Ellerby. A new campus that opened c.1969 backed out onto countryside, providing a suitable site for more extensive development. I believe the first wood kiln was built in 1972 under the direction of Walter Keeler –



a ditch, dug into the clay bank, roofed with kiln shelves. The following year I shadowed Michael O'Brien, who ran a more comprehensive project. O'Brien is one of studio pottery's unsung heroes. He was Cardew's right-hand man in Abuja, Nigeria, and is exceptionally knowledgeable about ceramic technology. At this time few of Farnham's staff were active makers, so thanks to O'Brien, firing became my particular contribution to the programme.

About the same time Takeshi Yasuda, newly arrived in the UK from Japan, introduced us to a firing technique that used charcoal. The results were spectacular and represented completely different priorities to those of O'Brien. A number of other events, including a visit to fire Cardew's kiln in Wenford Bridge, fed into the mix, which stimulated students to design and build their own kilns rather than rely on existing designs.

### KILN DEVELOPMENT

Throughout the 1970s and 80s we built many different wood kilns at the college. Having benefitted from the student's research, I eventually designed and built my own. The arch was supported by brick flying buttresses rather than by metal ties. The flue ran underground to the chimney some yards away, allowing easy all-round access to the chamber. The primary air was preheated with waste





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**PREVIOUS PAGE:** Svend Bayer tending his wood-fired kiln in the Devon countryside **CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE**  
**LEFT:** Randy Johnston's wood-fired kiln in rural Wisconsin, USA; cardboard kiln made by Sebastian Blackie; Clive Bowen, *Large Medieval Jug*, wood-fired earthenware, 2014, H58cm; Randy Johnston, *Large Jar*, anagama-fired stoneware with natural ash glaze, 2018, H26cm



gases by entering at the chimney base and then drawn through channels running parallel to the flue before reaching the two Bourry fireboxes. The newspaper and cardboard kilns I subsequently developed led to an invitation from Iowa-based potter Gary Hootman to speak at a 2004 conference on wood firing, on the premise that paper is made from wood. I support Rye's view that wood firing is as much a state of mind as a technique.

I recently assisted in firing the anagama kiln at Wysing Arts Centre in Cambridgeshire and was impressed by how quickly volunteers learned to 'read' the kiln by its sound and the behaviour of the flame rather than by pyro watching. It caused me to reflect on the future, particularly when the older generation is finding it increasingly difficult to sustain such a physically demanding process. The Wysing kiln and the University of Oxford's anagama kiln based at Wytham Woods may represent the way forward: both provide an infrastructure for high-temperature firings, where it is more of a group activity than a solo enterprise.

There are a number of opportunities to wood fire internationally, such as courses run by Pietro Maddalena (a Farnham graduate) at La Meridiana in Tuscany, Italy. Guldagergaard, Denmark's International Ceramic Research Centre, offers wood-firing residencies; it is currently hosting Callum Trudgeon, who trained at the Leach Pottery. The Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park in Japan offers residencies with wood firing, while there are also opportunities in China. Of these, I have personal experience of the Shangyu Celadon International Ceramic Art Centre in Zhejiang Province and Fu Li International Ceramic Art Museum in Shaanxi Province.

Wood firing needs to be understood in socioeconomic terms as much as by trends in ceramics. Wood as a fuel is not well suited to an urban environment in terms of supply and emissions; kilns using solid fuel tend to be large, heavy, fairly permanent structures not suited to the mobility of modern living. It is a fact that most English wood-firing potters secured rural properties before the housing price

boom of the mid 1970s. It seems likely that Richard Batterham or Clive Bowen, both significant wood firers, could not afford to buy their properties today even as successful and respected potters. No wonder there has been little further development into wood firing, technically or philosophically, since their generation came of age.

## FUTURE OF CERAMIC PRACTICE

Perhaps one of my most passionate students to become absorbed in wood firing was the late Patrick Sargent, who personified what many wood firers feel: that it is a relationship to process that applies as much to materials and making as it does to firing. If we understand it as a spirit rather than a technique then, in the face of the widespread destruction of ceramic courses in the UK and elsewhere, wood firing may offer a future for ceramic practice that is otherwise at odds with the modern world. As technology continues to mould and modify our behavior, as it has always done, and the cost of energy continues to rise, peripheral activities such as ceramic art will either disappear or increasingly occupy a specific niche. Rye believes that this niche could be wood firing, with its traditions of resourcefulness and its holistic approach to making.

There are many outstanding potters in the wood-firing tradition. In the UK, Svend Bayer is probably the best exponent of spectacular ash effects. At the other extreme is the Australian potter Sandy Lockwood, whose appreciation of flame is like the soft winds of a Shakespearian sonnet compared to Bayer's hurricane. We should also look out for newcomers like Lawrence Epps and Aaron Angell, both of whom are involved with the Wysing anagama. Fresh thinking may be brought to this ancient technique from those relatively free of the ideology associated with the studio ceramics tradition. ■

*Find out more about wood firing events in the UK at [oxfordanagama.org](http://oxfordanagama.org); [wysingartscentre.org](http://wysingartscentre.org)*



Sandy Lockwood, thrown porcelain dish, 2001, L50cm