

Sheila Herring.

Day in the life of an apprentice potter.

I have experienced through this apprenticeship that a potter's work is diverse requiring a vast range skills to address the myriad of tasks involved in potting. This variety makes for a rewarding and fulfilling job -and way of life. I love it.

My year of apprenticeship through Adopt a Potter scheme started in September 2009 at Wobage Pottery, Herefordshire. The pottery is housed in an old dairy building and stone barns that exude history and appeal. In a central area are pots (made by Mick Casson who established this pottery jointly with his wife Sheila in 1976) which act as a constant reminder to me that potting is at the heart of life here.

The months here have started to show me an overview of what it is like to work as a potter. My master potter Jeremy Steward organises our time between 'Making time' and 'Chores', which is anything that is not making pots. We often work together and have found we can be an effective team knocking off some of the more labour intensive jobs at quite a pace.

The firing dates of kilns get fixed in the diary, these often being set by forthcoming shows, and a timetable is worked back from them. Jeremy takes into consideration the time finished pots need to dry, the kiln packing time, an overnight pre-heat, the kiln cooling off period before the pots can be handled as well as the unpacking the kiln and cleaning off of fired pots so the are ready for sale. Tasks related to all these activities are allocated as needed.

Jeremy fires his stoneware and porcelain pots in a down draught wood fired salt kiln. In preparation for firing we cut, sort and stack the firewood, paint soda boards and weigh out salt and borax into dispensing packets as well as

preparing kiln shelves and wad pots. Following a preheat with gas, the firing has taken approximately 18 hours with both Jeremy and I attending the fireboxes. The gas fired salt kiln is used for student pots and I am in the process of learning to fire this. At the moment I am currently getting to grips with the reduction and salting phase. I've also been working alongside several of the potters to build a new kiln shed, under which a bottle kiln is now under construction.

This apprenticeship has allowed me to build on my throwing skills. Throwing for longer periods, and more regularly, plus practicing repetition throwing has improved my techniques. Jeremy has been very supportive, giving me guidance and feedback and setting me what feels like appropriate challenges. I feel I have gained so much from being able to see how Jeremy organises his own work, and am inspired by his energetic throwing and handling, the way in which he develops forms, his attention to detail and his expressive decoration and mark making.

Some of my 'chores' stem from the on-going evening classes taught by Jeremy as well as the range of summer and autumn day courses he runs here at the pottery each year. In preparation for these, we have had clay making sessions which includes reclaiming previously used clay. Ingredients are mixed in an enormous dough mixer, put through a pug and the slugs produced wheel barrowed to storage boxes. All our pots are once fired, and a range of slips and glazes required are mixed up in a separate glazing room. Early in my time here I made small thrown troughs to contain basic raw glazing materials, demonstrating how they respond going through a firing, and from the results of these new glaze recipes can be formed.

There are 5 potters who work from Wobage, as well as 2 woodworkers and a jeweller, and as a group they sell their work in a showroom on site. Some of my

time has been spent helping with preparations for the Christmas show and occasionally I get some retail experience as the showroom is now open Thursday to Sunday between March and December.

I love the variety here. There are so many advantages having an apprenticeship where several potters work. Each have their individual approach allowing me the opportunity to see the use of different clays, types of firing, as well as methods of making and some of the challenges they face. I've appreciated the support and encouragement they have offered me and I have gained a deep appreciation of a rewarding and fulfilling job.

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April 2010