

# 9 THE POTTERY ASSEMBLAGE,

*by Beverley Ballin Smith*

## 9.1 General observations

In total, the prehistoric coarse ware pottery recovered from Laigh Newton weighed 1,524g (including crumbs). Each collection of sherds from specific contexts has been given a catalogue number (see [Appendices 1–4](#)), and this number is used in the text.

The assemblage comprised 195 sherds of prehistoric pottery, which included 17 rims (*c* 7.7% of the assemblage), 166 body sherds (*c* 87%) and six base edge sherds (3.1%) ([table 1](#)). The low percentage of rim sherds is characteristic of many prehistoric

sites examined by this author. This, together with the even lower percentage of base edge sherds, is generally typical of domestic sites. Decorated sherds are present but the majority of sherds were plain and carinations, lugs and base sherds absent. The majority of sherds (67%) were recovered from Laigh Newton Central, with Laigh Newton West and Laigh Newton East yielding 27% and 21% of the assemblage respectively. A minimum of 16 vessels was recorded (see [table 2](#)), dating from the Early Neolithic to the Bronze Age.

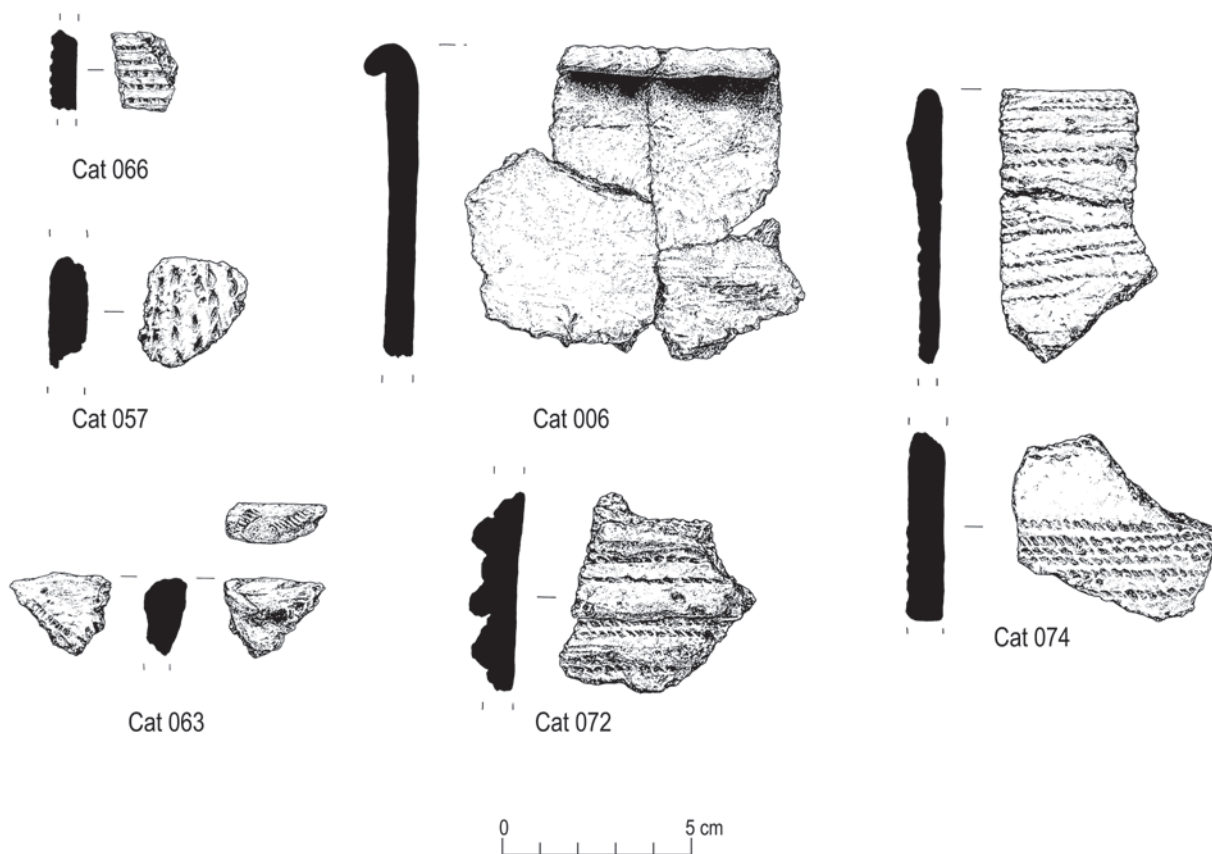
The assemblage was homogenous. Much of the temper was medium to coarse in size, comprising

**Table 1 Distribution of sherd forms across the excavated areas**

Area	Trench	Rims	Bodies	Base/b. edge	Crumbs	Total
Laigh Newton East	2028 Tr. 39	7	32	2	✓	41
Laigh Newton Central	1259	2	19	–	✓	21
	2028	5	69	2	✓	76
Laigh Newton West/Area A	2420	3	40	1	✓	44
Laigh Newton West/Area B	2420	–	5	2	–	7
	2028 Tr. 55	–	1	–	–	1
	2028 Tr. 57	–	–	–	✓	0
Totals		17	166	7	✓	190

**Table 2 Minimum number of pottery vessels**

Vessel No.	Catalogue No.	Type
1	6, 8	Early Neolithic bowl
2	7	Early Neolithic bowl
3	9, 10, 11, 12	Early Neolithic bowl
4	13, 16	Neolithic
5	15, 18	Neolithic
6	31	Bronze Age Urn
7	40	Grooved Ware
8	45, 48	Early Neolithic
9	51, 56	Impressed Ware/Grooved Ware
10	57	Impressed Ware/Grooved Ware
11	62, 63	Early Neolithic bowl
12	66, 78	Beaker vessel
13	68, 71	Early Neolithic bowl
14	72	Grooved Ware
15	69, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77	Beaker vessel
16	83	Neolithic



*Illus 14 Prehistoric pottery: Catalogue nos: 6 Early Neolithic bowl fragment, 57 Impressed / Grooved Ware vessel fragment, 63 Early Neolithic vessel fragment, 66 Beaker vessel fragment, 72 Grooved Ware vessel fragment, 74 Beaker vessel fragments*

ill-sorted chunks of rock, predominantly quartz, with mudstone, shale and small pebbles of unidentified rocks. Some sand was also present but the identification of vegetable temper was difficult due to the weathering of the pottery, and was only positively identified in sherds from Laigh Newton East. The red/orange clay for the pottery is likely to have come from the banks of the River Irvine. It may have included naturally occurring flecks of mica, or mica may have been deliberately added. Some of the slip that was used on the earliest vessels also included mica.

Crumbs of broken-down sherds, indicating the fragmentation and condition of the pottery, were present in all excavation areas. There was a reasonably narrow range of sherd thickness across all sites, possibly suggesting that there was not a great variety in form and function over time. Excluding Catalogue 87, the thinnest sherds were found in the eastern and western excavation areas and these are likely to be the oldest dated pottery (see [below](#)). The thicker sherds from Laigh Newton Central suggest that either the pottery was heavier and therefore of a different period from that found in the other areas, or there was a range of different types of vessels from different periods.

Overall the preservation of the pottery was poor, with rare exceptions. The fracturing of the pottery

after its deposition and the abrasion of its edges has largely been the result of post-primary depositional changes. While ploughing is an obvious cause of abrasion of sherd surfaces and edges, the abrasion of pottery from features below the plough truncation horizon implies that these contexts are secondary to the initial deposition of the pottery. It has also been demonstrated that pottery derived from close to the edge of Laigh Newton West moved downhill due to soil creep and was located in the thick topsoil covering the western part of Laigh Newton North-west. Although these sherds did not join, they were from the same vessel (Catalogues 84–86).

All the pottery from Laigh Newton was slab- or coil-built using local raw materials. There was little differentiation between one vessel and another except in its form and surface treatment. Only three main types of vessel were identified: cooking pots, storage wares and Beakers.

Those rims that survived were mainly rolled or folded over and everted, and it was possible to measure the diameter of only three of them. Two vessels, Catalogue 6 ([illus 14](#)) and Catalogue 10, from Laigh Newton East had diameters of 200mm and 220mm and Catalogue 13 from the central excavation area was similar, with a measurement of 210mm.

Approximately 48% of the assemblage exhibited

evidence of surface treatments. The majority of these were acquired by the vessel during the manufacturing process and before firing. These hand-made vessels were treated by smoothing, slipping (including the addition of mica dust), burnishing, wiping and knife finishing. These processes are commonly noted on prehistoric vessels where the irregularities of slab and coil building and the use of coarse gritting temper could be removed by smoothing the wet clay of the exterior surface with the hands or wiping it with a cloth or dried grasses. Interiors of vessels were also smoothed but in many cases their subsequent use has removed any trace of treatment. Once partially dried, a thin clay slip was applied to some vessels into which a ground mineral such as mica may have been added, which would give the vessel a shiny appearance after burnishing and firing. Slipped vessels were usually burnished or polished by a smooth stone, bone or piece of wood. Burnishing would usually remove the last irregularities and produce a hard and shiny surface, and nearly one-third of the assemblage was finished using this technique. Cooking pots could receive other surface treatments but burnishing was usually reserved for vessels that were not put directly in the fire or on the hearth. The folded or rolled rims on the majority of rim sherds from Laigh Newton East were trimmed by a knife (Catalogues 1, 2, 6–10 and 12), as was a rim from Laigh Newton West (Catalogue 72). Accidental evidence from the pottery manufacture included the impressions of fingertips and from vegetable matter such as grasses or straw.

Residues found on this and other assemblages were of soot and carbonised or burnt food deposits and are commonly found on prehistoric and later vessels. At Laigh Newton they were found on pottery from all the major areas. Sooting is usually found on the exterior of pots which were used close to or in a hearth, while carbonised food deposits are most frequently found on the rims (both internally and externally), shoulders and body of vessels. One plain cooking pot (Catalogues 15 and 18) from Laigh Newton Central had continued to be used when damaged as the evidence of burnt food deposits in a crack indicated.

Decorated sherds were mainly found on vessels and sherds in Laigh Newton West, with rare examples in Laigh Newton East and Central. Apart from finger indentations which are likely to be accidental in this assemblage, there was a range of other types of decoration, including striations, nicks and pinches, linear and combed incisions, incised dots, applied cordons and cord impressions. Incisions and impressions were the most common and included the use of a tool such as a pointed stick, quill, comb or cord to make a surface decoration on vessels while their surfaces were still drying prior to firing. Impressions of single twisted cords were found on the surfaces of a Late Neolithic Grooved Ware Vessel (Catalogue 72 (vessel 14); [illus 14](#)) and a Late Neolithic Beaker (Catalogues 69, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77 (vessel 15); [illus](#)

[14](#)) from Laigh Newton West. There were also two examples in the assemblage, a Grooved Ware body sherd (Catalogue 72) from Laigh Newton West and another Grooved Ware body sherd (Catalogue 51) from Laigh Newton Central, where extra strips or roundels of clay were added to the exterior surfaces as decorative elements. A further seven body sherds (Catalogues 8, 40, 57, 66, 78, 68 and 79) from the east, west and central excavation areas and two rims (Catalogues 62 and 63) from the west excavation area were decorated by either stabbing, incising or combing using narrow and slightly broader pointed implements ([illus 14](#)).

## 9.2 *The Laigh Newton West assemblage*

The largest number of sherds and the greatest range of vessels from the western excavation area derived from the upper fill (258) of pit 250 on the western edge of this site. A Beaker vessel, possibly with All-Over Cord decoration and a surviving base with a diameter of 70mm, formed the largest part of the assemblage from this pit (Vessel 15; Catalogues 69, 73, 74, 75, 76 and 77; [illus 14](#)). Sooting and carbonised food deposits were present on its sherds, indicating it was used on a hearth or close to a pyre. The Beaker vessel is considered to be from the latter part of the Late Neolithic into the Early Bronze Age. Possibly contemporary with this was a sherd of a highly decorated Grooved Ware vessel (Vessel 14; Catalogue 72; [illus 14](#)). The sherd was from close to the rim of the vessel, and again it had carbonised food deposits. Two sherds from a well-burnished early Neolithic vessel (Vessel 13; Catalogue 68 and 71) and a sherd from another (Catalogue 70) of unspecified Neolithic date were also found in the same pit fill.

One sherd (Catalogue 78) from another Beaker vessel (Vessel 12), with combed rather than impressed decoration, was incorporated into the lower fill (278) of pit 250 while another sherd (Catalogue 66) from the same vessel was recovered from the fill (160) of a small post-hole (034) within Structure D near the centre of the site. Only two of the other pits arranged near the north-west corner of Laigh Newton West yielded any pottery. One undated sherd of pottery (Catalogue 79) with a fingernail impression was found in pit 280, to the immediate east of pit 250 and was the only sherd from this pit. Another single sherd of heavily eroded pottery (Catalogue 80) was found in pit (060) slightly to the north.

A single and very small sherd of possibly another Beaker vessel (Catalogue 82) was found in the topsoil, while a partly decorated and carinated Early Neolithic vessel (Vessel 11) was represented by sherds (Catalogues 62 and 63) from the fill (055) of a banana-shaped feature (095) in the north-eastern part of the site. No other diagnostic pottery was associated with this area.

Other small, plain undiagnostic sherds were sparsely distributed in other features across the

central parts of this site, but they throw little light on the form and function of vessels they represent.

### 9.3 *Laigh Newton North-west*

Topsoil and unstratified sherds from across this site (Catalogues 84–86) were very similar to each other and possibly came from the same Neolithic cooking vessel, as carbonised food deposits were common. All seemed to be residual prehistoric sherds, which due to topsoil creep and centuries of ploughing had probably moved downhill from their most likely origin at Laigh Newton West.

### 9.4 *Laigh Newton Central*

During the evaluation, sherds of a large, plain but well-finished Early Neolithic vessel (Vessel 4; Catalogues 13 and 16), with a rim diameter of 210mm, were found in the fill (298) of a small pit (297). The presence of sooting and carbonised food deposits suggests that this vessel functioned as a cooking pot. Other small sherds from possibly one vessel (Vessel 5; Catalogues 15 and 18) were found in nearby pits (295 and 293). From the characteristics that remain, the vessel was plain but it did not have evidence of burnishing. The internal carbonised food deposits and the fact that the vessel was used when cracked, indicate that it too was a cooking pot. The date of the vessel is less certain than for Vessel 4, but it is likely to be Neolithic.

Further excavation of pit 295 recovered an Early Neolithic vessel (Vessel 17; Catalogues 53 and 55) along with a coarse-tempered Bronze Age body sherd (Catalogue 52). Another sherd (Vessel 9; Catalogue 51) from the same pit fill had an applied boss and may have derived from an Impressed Ware bowl or Grooved Ware bucket-type vessel of Middle to Late Neolithic date. Pit 293 contained further evidence of an Early Neolithic cooking pot (Vessel 8; Catalogues 45 and 48). However, sherds from a less well-finished vessel (Catalogue 46) with surface grass marks, suggest a coarser type of cooking vessel was also present in this pit fill.

The fill (304) from a pit (303) situated to the immediate south of these pits, contained a sherd from another Impressed Ware or Grooved Ware vessel (Vessel 10; Catalogue 57). The deposition of this highly burnished sherd must be considered with the activities and functions associated with the nearby group of pits.

The group of pits in the north-western area of Laigh Newton Central also produced pottery. Many of the sherds were small and the assemblage contained a high proportion of crumbs. A small rim from one of these pits (211) is probably Neolithic in date but the rest of the undistinguished and eroded sherds were from a plain vessel, possibly of Bronze Age date. Coarse sherds (Catalogue 31), possibly from an Early to Middle Bronze Age urn fragment, were

found within the fill (214) of pit 213. Evidence from the fill (228) of another pit (227), which included inturned rims with slight shoulders, suggests vessel(s) also of Bronze Age date. The pottery was very fragmentary and the lack of surface detail prevented these sherds from being defined further. The fill (230) of another pit (229) in this group produced a sherd (Catalogue 40), likely to be from a Grooved Ware vessel, spanning the latter part of the Early Neolithic or the early part of the Later Neolithic. Although the surface finish was lost, this sherd is likely to have derived from a bucket-shaped vessel with all-over surface decoration. A fragment of a possible Early Neolithic vessel (Catalogue 41) was also found in the same context (230).

The rest of the material from this site was mixed; generally the sherds were small and fragmented; there were many crumbs and much loss of surface detail.

### 9.5 *Laigh Newton East*

All the pottery, predominantly Early Neolithic bowls, came from the fills of two isolated pits (39005 and 39007) and was characterised by plain, straight-necked, thin bowls with the addition of a thicker baggy bowl (see [Appendix 4](#)). Although there was no evidence for any carinations, the bowls (a minimum of three e.g. Catalogue 6, [illus 14](#)) are likely to date to the Early Neolithic and form part of the Carinated Bowl tradition. Carbonised food remains are common, indicating the use of the vessels for cooking rather than storage. They may also have been used for serving food and drink ([Sheridan 2007](#), 213).

### 9.6 *Comparison, chronology and conclusions*

The assemblages from Laigh Newton derive from features associated with Neolithic and Bronze Age domestic activities. Laigh Newton East yielded only pottery of one period – the Early Neolithic, while Laigh Newton Central spanned the Early Neolithic to some time in the Bronze Age, most likely the early to middle part of that period. The identification of diagnostic sherds from Laigh Newton West suggests that this site was occupied from the Early Neolithic through to the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age.

Early Neolithic vessels found on the excavated areas at Laigh Newton are part of the ‘Carinated Bowl’ pottery tradition, which was widespread in domestic situations across Scotland and further afield. Recent examples of this type of pottery have been found in East Lothian during archaeological works along the A1 trunk road ([Sheridan 2007](#), 213).

The incidence of small sherds from four separate vessels (Vessels 7, 9, 10 and 14) likely to belong to either the Early Neolithic Impressed Wares or the later Grooved Ware pottery traditions is considered important. Grooved Ware sites in southern Scotland



are rare, and the nearest geographically to Laigh Newton are those of Biggar Common (MacSween 1995, 454) and Dreghorn (Addyman 2004, 87–90). Small fragments of Grooved Ware vessels were also found during the A1 excavations in East Lothian (Sheridan 2007, illus 4.14). The most productive Scottish sites with the widest range of decorative elements are those from Orkney. Recently published work from Barnhouse (Jones 2005, 261–281) and Pool (MacSween 2007, 287–306) update the existing knowledge about the range of styles and plastic ornament for this pottery type.

Vessel 14 (Catalogue 72) is particularly interesting in that it has both applied decoration and cord impressions. The incidence of the latter technique seems to be rare and may indicate that the piece is late in date, manufactured at a time when Beakers with All-Over Cord decoration were in circulation.

Beaker pottery from the end of the Neolithic and the beginning of the Bronze Age was the most numerous vessel type at Laigh Newton West, and it

was only found there. At least two separate vessels were identified; one had combed decoration and the other was cord-impressed. An All-Over Cord Beaker sherd was found in 1953 at the Roman fort at Loudoun Hill but there are no other finds of this type recorded in the near vicinity of the site (Clarke 1970, 514). One vessel (Catalogue 31) from Laigh Newton Central was tentatively identified as a Bronze Age urn. It was undecorated and quite likely to date late in the Middle Bronze Age period. No other vessels were associated with it, nor was there evidence of a cremation. Plain burial urns are commonly found with highly decorative ones, as those from recent work on the shores of Loch Lomond (Ballin Smith forthcoming) attest, and their dates tend to lie within the 1900–1600 cal BC range (Sheridan 2007, 164–5).

There has been little archaeological work in East Ayrshire and surrounding districts that has produced a range of vessel types and dates comparable to those recovered from Laigh Newton.