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# **DOMESTIC POTTERY PRODUCTION AT THE BENHAR PIPE AND POTTERY FACTORY, SOUTH OTAGO.**

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The Benhar factory is an important part of Otago's regional history as well as the industrial history of New Zealand. Domestic pottery was produced on and off during Benhar's 112 year production history. It is the domestic pottery produced at Benhar is the focus of this paper. This topic was chosen because ceramics are "the most ubiquitous material class found in archaeological sites dating from the historic period" and are powerful tools for archaeologists as they provide a range of information vital to the archaeological interpretation of sites, landscapes and cultural areas (Majewski and Schiffer 2001: 34; see also Egan and Michael (eds.) 1999 for ceramic case studies). The information presented here has been summarised from Hurren's (2004) MA thesis, which builds on Gail Henry's (Lambert 1985, 1987 and Henry 1999) previous historic research on Benhar.

The Benhar factory was started by John While in the late 1870s and sold to Peter McSkimming in the early 1890s. The factory operated for over 100 years and produced a number of items but mainly focused on pipes, bricks and sanitation wares. A small part of Benhar's production was domestic pottery. The ceramics from Benhar were produced for over a hundred years, with a wide variety of vessel groups and decoration being produced.

Pottery production began at Benhar in the 1890s but little is known of this era, and it was not until 1917 that domestic pottery production began in earnest at the Benhar factory. Benhar's production can be broken up into four periods. The first period of domestic production began in the early 1890s and ended in the early 1900s. The second domestic production period began around 1915 and ended in the late 1920s. The third domestic production period was during World War II and the fourth period went from 1972 to the early 1980s.

The history of Benhar's domestic pottery is not too complex when considered in isolation from the rest of New Zealand and the world. However, Benhar was greatly influenced by events in New Zealand and the wider world.

This article will look at the history of ceramic production at Benhar as well as the national and global processes that influenced the process at Benhar.

### Location

Benhar is located in South Otago, three kilometres north of Balclutha (Figure 1).

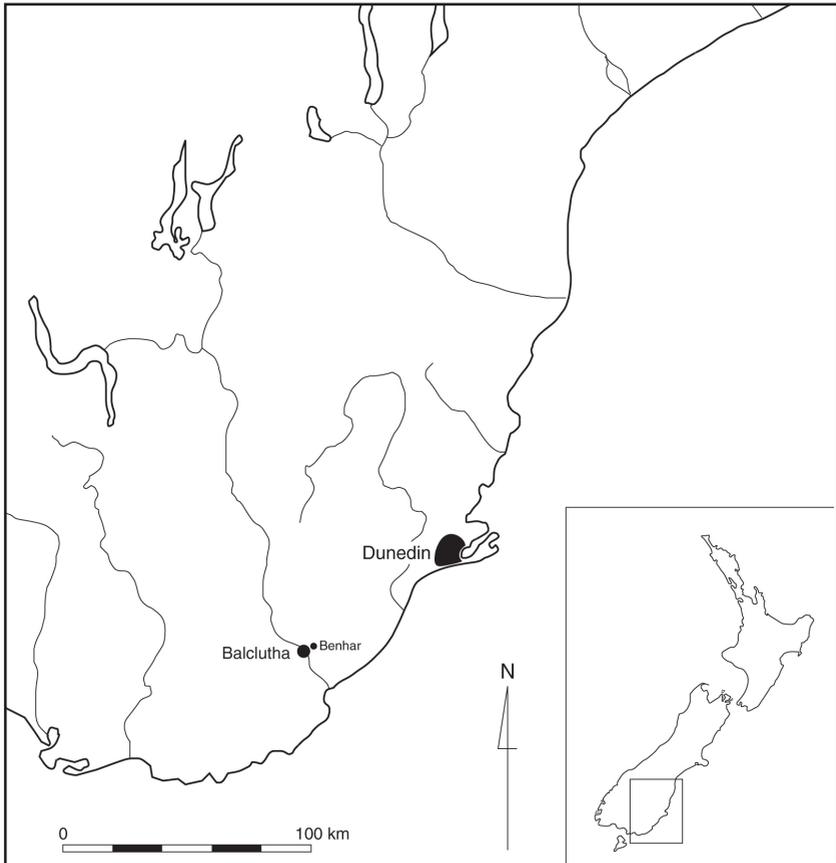


Figure 1. Location of Benhar.

Benhar is situated in a small valley system that has natural clay and coal deposits, and is close to the Clutha River. The built environment of Benhar has changed through time, but for the most part has consisted of the pipe works, pottery factory, houses for the workers, McSkimming's house, a church and school. The only surviving building relating to the Benhar Pipe and Pottery Factory is the Hoffman kiln which is presently in disrepair. The Hoffman kiln at Benhar is a registered Category I Historic Place with the New Zealand Historic Places Trust and the area that the Benhar factories are recorded as archaeological site H46/67 under the New Zealand Archaeological Association Site Recording Scheme.

### **Production history**

The production of domestic wares at Benhar can be considered a sideline and was not the main income for Benhar. It was, however, an important supplement and McSkimming's Benhar factory is considered important in the development of domestic pottery in the Otago region (Henry 1999, Lambert 1985). The bulk of wares made at Benhar were stoneware, consisting of drain-pipes and utilitarian wares such as crocks (large pottery containers used for food storage), jugs and churns.

### **Overview of the material culture chronology**

#### *Period One: 1890s-early 1900s*

Benhar started to produce domestic wares in the early 1890s. These wares were produced by two Benhar potters named Phillips and consisted of simple white utility wares including mixing basins, jam jars, jugs, teapots and crocks (Figures 2 and 3; Henry 1999, Lambert 1985). Little is known about this period of domestic production, but it appears that this initial domestic production was not particularly successful and thus production ceased in the late 1890s.

#### *Period Two: 1915-late 1920s*

The well-known period of Benhar domestic production began around 1917. The types of products produced by Benhar during the period 1917-1925 were chamber pots, butter jars, pie dishes, vinegar and bung jars, bread barrels, pudding bowls, mixing bowls, jugs, foot warmers, spill vases, teapots, jardinières, electric jugs and ornamental pieces such as dogs, swans, shoes, teddy bears and cats (Figures 4 and 5; Henry 1999, Lambert 1985). This production period can be attributed to the start of World War I, when there was a demand for ceramics in the local market. After the war ceased in 1918, production slowed down with only bowls and jars being produced until it finally stopped

in the late 1920s. Items that continued to be produced after the late 1920s were funeral urns and spill vases (Henry 1999, Lambert 1985).



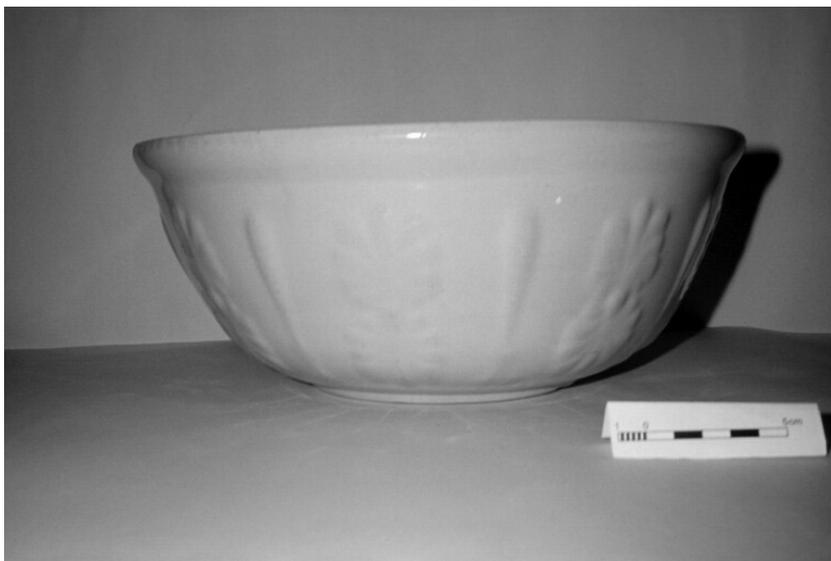
*Figure 2. Benhar jar from Period One. Private collection.*



*Figure 3. Benhar elephant from Period One. Private collection.*



*Figure 4. Benhar blue teapot dated to 1926. Otago Museum.*



*Figure 5. Large mixing bowl. South Otago Museum.*

Products from this period consisted of quite thinly glazed stoneware items in simple shapes. Other items produced during the 1920s consisted of

white utilitarian wares with dense glazes. The crocks and jars of this period still had thin glazes but figurines and vases tended to have quite thick and dense glazes, which were quite clear and shiny. During the 1920s, a larger range of colours tended to be used on ornamental items such as vases, teapots, the Golds jugs and figurines. Intense blues can be found on the Benhar teapot. The small vases tended to have bright greens and brown glazes on them. Utilitarian wares tended to be brown or clear glazed whereas ornamental items tended to have coloured glazes.

### *Period Three: 1930s-1960s*

Production of domestic wares began again at Benhar during World War II. The types of products produced in this period consisted of mixing bowls, pudding bowls, jugs and cups and saucers. The range of products, glazes and the number of wares being produced during this period increased in comparison to products produced in the 1920s. The reason for the increase of production at Benhar was due to the war as again the international market was closed to New Zealand. Only a small minority of Benhar wares produced during World War II were actually sold to the New Zealand public as the majority of wares produced at Benhar went to the National Electric and Engineering Company Ltd (NEECO) and American soldiers stationed in the Pacific (Henry 1999, Lambert 1985). Production of domestic wares stopped at Benhar in the late 1940s after the demand for domestic wares declined due to world markets being opened up after World War II. In the 1950s the factory only producing workmen's personal pieces and small special orders (Henry 1999, Lambert 1985).

In the 1930s and 1940s there was a change in colours used. Colours were brighter and denser although clear glazes, brown glazes and white slips were still used on basic utilitarian wares such as jugs. Figurines made in this period had quite dense but shiny glazes. No figurines, apart from the elephants, date to this period. Thistle jugs appear in this period as seen by the white glazed (Figure 6).

### *Period Four: 1972-1980s*

Production of domestic wares began again around 1972 and continued to the early 1980s (Henry 1999, Lambert 1985). The types of wares produced in this period were ornamental animals, jars and vases. The moulds used to make wares in the 1970s were made from moulds taken from the Milton pottery factory (north of Benhar) when the factory closed down in 1915. The Milton moulds were then used at Benhar through most of its production history (Henry 1999, Lambert 1985).



*Figure 6. Thistle jug from the 1930s. South Otago Museum.*

Wares were produced and labelled under the mark of Crofter wares with a large proportion being sent to Australia and some being sold directly from the Benhar factory (Lambert 1985). The wares were again utilitarian and some bore the mark of “CROFTER WARE, MADE IN, NEW ZEALAND” on them or simply “CROFTER WARE”. A large range of items were produced in this period including salt and spice dispensers, jars of a range of styles, hanging pot plant holders and dish shaped pot plant holders and vases of a range of styles. Barrel crocks and creamers were remade without the lug handles and used for pickling. Some items made in the 1970s had ribbing on the body that can be seen on the jars, salt and spice dispensers and smaller sized vases. There was a range of glazes in this period, with the majority in the brown and green ranges. The items that were made in colour used very thick dense pastel glazes or slips. A wider range of vases appeared, ranging from small vases with tall necks and

round/rotund bodies to large spill vases and this indicates the possible range available throughout Benhar's production history (Figure 7). The glazes in the 1970s were duller and more opaque than earlier glazes (Henry 1999, Hurren 2004, Lambert 1985).



*Figure 7. Vase dating to Period Four. Private collections.*

### **National and global processes**

Even though Benhar was a small South Island pipe and pottery factory it was still affected by global and national processes. Changes at Benhar can be understood by examining the wider social and economic frameworks within which Benhar was operating, including a consideration of local, national and worldwide processes.

### *National and international competition*

Benhar only produced domestic wares sporadically when the McSkimmings family thought they might have a chance on the national market. Due to the competition of other New Zealand factories such as Crown Lynn and Luke Adams, as well as European markets, Benhar found the national market difficult to break into (Hannah 1982). The New Zealand national market was fickle as consumers wanted European wares such as those produced at Staffordshire

and had a bias against buying products made in New Zealand (Cryer 1999). The only time English wares were not imported into New Zealand was during World Wars I and II, as transport was expensive due to the dangers involved (Taylor 1986). During World War II several large shipments of English ceramics were lost at sea (Taylor 1986). The scores of china that were once found in warehouses could only be found in more remote retail shops where stocks lasted longer (Taylor 1986). Once markets opened after both the world wars there was a flood of English and European wares into the country, and these wares followed the newest trends.

### Pre-World War I

International influences on Benhar were instantaneous. The first of these influences began in the 1800s in Britain. During the 1870s and 1880s, there were closures of many small British potteries due to a decrease in the European market (Belford 2001; Turton 1993). The social conditions of Europe during this period were poor with high unemployment, people forced to live in slum areas with overcrowding and terrible environmental conditions like smog (Belford 2001; Turton 1993). Because of the closures and unhealthy living conditions many potters decided to try their luck in British colonies and New Zealand was one of the prime options, as there were better opportunities and higher pay. Social and economic conditions were good in New Zealand up until the Great Depression (Rankin 1990, 1992, 1995). In the 1920s, prior to the Great Depression, factors such as the exchange rate, employment, retail prices and factory manufacturing were stable, thus enabling Benhar to produce domestic pottery easily (Rankin 1990, 1992, 1995).

The dwindling market and downturn in the economy led Benhar to stop most domestic production in the late 1920s, carrying on with only a few items such as urns and spill vases (Henry 1999, Lambert 1985). Another effect of the depression on Benhar was that the British market was dumping domestic wares onto the New Zealand market, meaning that Benhar and other New Zealand factories operated at a loss because the English wares were cheaper and of a better quality than their own (Hannah 1982).

### World War I and II

During both world wars New Zealand was cut off from the European market, which led to the opportunity for New Zealand factories to manufacture items that were usually imported from Britain. This led to an increase in employment and a boom in manufacturing due to the tightening of import controls (Hannah 1982, Henry 1999, Lambert 1985). During the years before World War II, the United Kingdom was taking 80 percent of New Zealand exports and was supplying nearly half of the imports. New Zealand's industries were depend-

ent to varying degrees on supplies of material and equipment from overseas and a wide range of consumer goods, including domestic pottery, needed to be imported. The United States was another source of items that needed to be (Baker 1965). This all changed during the war period as shipping and international trade was disrupted and import controls (Import control regulation 1938) were placed on all non-essential items. It was now impossible for New Zealand to maintain its exports so New Zealand production became increasingly important in supplying local needs. The New Zealand market was on its own and flourished as New Zealand made products and services were utilised instead of the standard European products. New Zealanders still preferred English wares so when valuable china was imported into New Zealand there was a rush to buy it. There are many examples of people damaging shops in order to gain highly prized domestic pottery. One such example occurred in November 1942 when J. R. McKenzie's store in Dunedin displayed imported wares and the crowd packed in so tightly at the doors before opening time that the plate glass windows shattered (The Press, 27 November 1942: 6).

Factory production in New Zealand during World Wars I and II was restricted to wartime essential items, and pottery production was considered an essential industry (Taylor 1986). As such, production increased, with wares being produced for the military and the domestic market (Hannah 1982, Henry 1999, Lambert 1985, Taylor 1986). During World War II New Zealand pottery factories such as Benhar produced domestic pottery for American soldiers situated in the main centres in New Zealand (Henry 1999, Lambert 1985; Taylor 1986).

### Post-World War II

Britain's economy was adversely affected during World War II but once the war was over, factories that had been closed during the war were rebuilt and reopened. Factories post-World War II helped to create a post-war economic boom in Britain as they helped to re-establish trade and improve methods of production and technology for Britain (Turton 1993). These post-war factories supplied Britain with products and materials that were needed in order for the country to rebuild itself and employed the new technologies developed during the war (Turton 1993). However, it had the opposite effect on Benhar. As people returned to their normal lives and the shortages of World War II vanished, the international markets reopened and import restrictions were lifted, resulting in competition for the markets that Benhar had supplied during the war. (Hannah 1982). This led to a decline in demand for Benhar products.

## Conclusion

The Benhar factory produced domestic pottery sporadically during its 112 years of production, and the main items produced at the factory were pipes and sanitation wares. Domestic pottery made up only a small proportion of production. Benhar went through three major domestic ware production periods with the first period beginning in 1917 and running to the end of the 1920s. The second domestic production period was during World War II while the third period went from 1972 to the early 1980s. The domestic pottery produced in the 1970s and 1980s stopped once Ceramco bought the factory, although sanitation ware production continued until the factory burnt down in 1990.

Although Benhar was an isolated village producing domestic pottery, bricks, pipes and sanitation wares, its manufacturing history was affected by wider local and global events. Global and national processes such as immigration, the Depression, World Wars I and II as well as the changes in the world economy, society and technology influenced the way Benhar operated. Benhar contains a wealth of information concerning New Zealand's industrial past and is an important part of Otago's regional history and the industrial history of New Zealand as a whole.

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