

Teacher Training

A POTTER'S DAY – WENDY BUTLER teaches ceramics at Heathfield School, Ascot and makes smoke fired pots.

Teaching three days a week at Heathfield School in Ascot I am well aware of the wonderful facilities and of the good nature of the children, some of whom do GCSE and A-Level ceramics. Working to the best of my ability and seeking to establish a room as a fountain of nourishment filled with children's work that encompasses many techniques I know, I expect only the best in return. Soon I hope to expand into the school gardens. Although the luxury of working in the private sector is a joy, I also try to put something back into the State system and am indebted to the late Mr Dawes of Aldridge Grammar School, West Midlands, who recognised my interest in clay and my ability as an individual, gave me a push, a mountain of encouragement and on leaving, my first set of tools.

These are very different days. Funds are low and facilities not what they should be. Departmental ceramics specialists are few and far between and bewildered art teachers – specialists in their own right who already juggle print making, silk-screen printing, photography, sculpture and life drawing – are left to pick up the pieces, often quite literally. For the past five years I have been running In Service Training courses (INSET) in order to try to redress the balance. Teachers of all ilk spend between one and two days learning techniques and experimenting for themselves. I exploit methods for making savings and developing ways of working within a tight budget. Health and safety regulations are also considered. These once or twice yearly courses have been of great success and now extend to primary teachers (the national primary curriculum demands three-dimensional work) and to nursery and special education by request. Clay is heralded as a unique medium for personal expression in the developing or disabled child.

Looking back I never envisaged days such as these would exist. Once, to have left the comfort of my bed before 9am was unthinkable. Now, my day is well underway by 6.15am. By 8.30am the youngest of three sons has been delivered into the outstretched arms of the lollipop man and early morning is a merry-go-round of sandwich making, uniform checking, shoe hunting, Poptarts, Frosties, and breakfast TV. Three mugs of tea make possible the frenetic activity of packing the dishwasher and decanting food from the freezer for the evening, feeding the gerbils, the fish and the washing machine. Every day starts the same but on teaching days I must be at work by ten. Luckily school is only fifteen minutes away where it is also non-stop, followed by a mad dash at four to pick up my youngest son, check homework and prepare for the next day. By seven supper has been cooked and consumed, which is just as well since in the evening I teach adults at Reading Adult Education Centre to City and Guilds level and this is greatly rewarding. In the past I have run various



vocational courses, including intensive weekend sessions and holiday workshops. By 10.30, although exhausted, there is time for a quick piano practice and a cocoa before bed.

My own ceramic work has changed over the years, inspired by whichever techniques I might be experimenting with. Amongst others, Jane Perryman has been my inspiration for smoking pottery and at the moment I'm confining my work to bowls. The smaller tend to be thrown, though I do produce larger bowls in an enormous mould measuring 90cm across, it is incredibly heavy and sits permanently on the worktop. One working area is an outbuilding the size of a single garage that contains the kiln and wheel, here I do most of my finishing off, drying out, glazing and firing. In the summer I put the wheel outside enabling me to enjoy both fresh air and throwing. The basement, my other workspace, is damp making it ideal for hand building – work can be left for days without drying out. The large mould is lined with T material or heavily grogged clays, using flattened coils or slabs of clay pulled together with a kidney. When leather hard I tidy the bowl's underside then, onto the inside, paint several layers of white or coloured slip that will be burnished later. After slowly drying the bowl is fired to 950°C. Decorative techniques may involve the use of masking tape, or daubing slurry liberally over the surface then etching through this. Some bowls are smoked in a dustbin, brick built kiln or a sagger within an electric kiln. I have been known to smoke pots in the grate in the evening, carefully turning them to ensure an even heating up as I watch *Eastenders*. It is necessary to preheat before smoking and to use heavily grogged clay, which although expensive, is most able to withstand thermal shock.

Several applications of wax finish the bowls, I am quite addicted to the smell of charred clay and hot melting wax. There is a therapy in this type of polishing. Our household motto 'to work hard and to play hard' suits me as much of my work is play. Holidays are for relaxation and dare I mention, trips to the odd gallery or pottery, sketchbook and camera always at hand. **CR**