



The Society for Clay Pipe Research

SCPR Conference – Oxford, 15-16 August 2025

Susie White

For our 2025 conference we broke with tradition and ran a 3-day conference so that we could include a special handling session at the Pitt Rivers Museum on the Friday where delegates were able to select and examine some of the museum's superb pipe collection. The museum curators had pulled out of their stores an array of pipes ranging from white clay pipes from Oxford and other parts of the UK, to some splendid ethnographic pipes including chibouks from Egypt, clay and gourd pipes from the Upper Nile and some impressive Haida pipes from British Columbia. We are most grateful to the staff at the Pitt Rivers for giving us the opportunity to look at these pipes and for the extensive notes they provided for each piece.

For the main conference papers on the Saturday, we were based at the West Oxford Community Centre; doors opened at 9:15am so we could get set up ready for a prompt start at 9:45am. We had a very varied programme with lots of excellent speakers. John Cotter from Oxford Archaeology kicked off proceedings with a short presentation on the history and archaeology of Oxford, starting with Oxford's Saxon foundation. During his presentation he introduced us to a hoard, not of pipes, but of hair curlers. Around 3,000 curlers were excavated from a single deposit at Magdalen College, some of which had traces of newspaper print transferred to their surface during the heating of the curlers. Next to speak was Susie White, who introduced us to the pipemakers from Oxford and highlighted the incredible work carried out by Paul Cannon which has increased the list of pipemakers working in the city from the 24 listed in Oswald's 1979 list to the current total of at least 184.

David Higgins picked up the Oxford story to look at some of the pipes produced by the local makers. The earliest pipes copied London styles, for example, those of c1630-45 made by the earliest known Oxford Maker, Miles Higgs. Local clays from Shotover Hill were used to make pipes, especially during the Civil War when other clay from Northamptonshire was not available to mix with it. The local clay is distinctive in that it contains numerous fine grits, which are visible with a lens in the surface of the pipes. During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, some of the Oxford makers were producing particularly finely burnished pipes that were sometimes decorated with elaborate bands of decoration and stamped marks in a distinctive local style. Unusual bowl forms were also produced, as well as pipes that were probably commissioned specifically for individual colleges to use, and pipes with unusual striped of red ochre along their stems. Later pipes generally follow London styles of bowl form, decoration and mark.

Following a coffee break we moved on to pipes and pipemakers from a little further afield. Peter Taylor began the session by telling us about the original 1609 will of William Kipps of Hartley in Kent. In this will, William gave the right to dig clay to his wife and eldest son. It was their commercial dealings with Philip Foote which showed that this was pipeclay being supplied to London pipemakers. Evidence from litigation showed that Foote's patent was used as security against loans and referenced Foote's dealings in both the Netherlands and Ireland. His premises in Thames Street, London, was also noted in the papers which also provided details of the conflict between Foote and the London pipemakers in the early 1620s.

Germander Speedwell spoke next about pipe finding news from the Thames and included an update on the changing rules around mudlarking. The main issue stems from the limits on numbers being imposed by the Port of London Authority. Moving on from the politics of the hobby, Germander introduced delegates to some of her interesting recent finds including some interesting figural pipes, one of which she has been able to identify as a French product, pattern number 790, which appears in Gambier's 1894 catalogue.

Germander's paper brought the morning sessions to a close and give us the opportunity to enjoy a buffet lunch while looking at the interesting displays that delegates had brought along. We started back promptly at 1:30pm with a paper from Chris Jarrett looking at seventeenth-century pipemakers trade tokens where he posed the question, are these just names and addresses, or is there more to know? Trade tokens were in use during the medieval period but they really come into their own in the mid seventeenth century. At this time there was a problem with the lack of small change

which led to some tradesmen producing their own small coinage. During the reign of Charles II, a 1672 royal proclamation stated that the farthing was to be reinstated and the issue of private coinage was forbidden. As a result, the issuing of trade tokens ceased with the exception of the city of Chester and Ireland where tokens continued in use until 1674 and 1679 respectively. Chris looked at seven tokens included in Oswald's 1979 makers list. By tracing them in the documentary records using the addresses and dates given on the tokens themselves, Chris was able to extend their known dates in some instances, but more importantly to show that two of the issuers were not pipemakers at all.

Susie White then presented a paper on pipe stoppers and in particular those recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme and teased us with talk of developing a typology with the hope of being able to refine the dating of this class of object in the future. She will be publishing her paper in full very soon.

Just before tea break David Higgins gave his second paper of the day looking at the way in which particular styles of pipe were specifically produced for the various export markets by the British manufacturers. As early as the 1624 a shipment of pipes destroyed by a fire in Oslo shows that the Grocers Company was ordering pipes marked with their arms for the export trade. By the end of the century the Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies was ordering particular bowl shapes for the export markets that were not used in Britain and, during the eighteenth century, particular marks emerged that became specifically associated with pipes for export. These marks, such as WM and TD, took on a life of their own, so that they became an integral part of the design for certain types of export pipe, regardless of the manufacturer that made them. Even foreign factories copied these marks to compete with British production. Moulded bowl decoration was similarly used from the eighteenth century onwards to make pipes for the overseas trade, for example, bowls from the 1750s with the Portuguese arms, or from the end of the century with the American eagle for the newly created United States of America.

The final papers of the day were quite a contrast with a paper by Ian Beckey on pipes from Bristol, followed by one from Ruud Stam on pipes from South Sudan. Ian's paper was the final paper in a series of presentations made at recent conferences looking at pipe production in Bristol and focussed on the White family from Baptist Mills. Given our visit to the Pitt Rivers museum on the previous day, where we were able to view some splendid ethnographic pipes, it seemed appropriate that the final paper of the day should be about ethnographic pipes. Ruud took us on a fascinating journey to South Sudan looking at not only the pipes, tobacco boxes, snuff containers and water pipes that were produced and used by the various ethnic groups but also how European styles influenced the pipes made by the indigenous population.

With the conclusion of Ruud's paper, the formal part of the conference came to a close and the pipe talk moved from the conference venue to a local pub, *The Holly Bush*, and then on to *The Côte*, where we had a splendid conference dinner.

Nothing formal had been arranged for the Sunday, but a number of delegates did gather again at the Pitt Rivers Museum for a viewing of the public displays before moving to *The Chequers* pub for lunch. Dating back to 1279, the Grade II listed pub was originally an exhibition hall for animals and inventors, as well as a base for moneylenders. Of interest to our members was the fact that it was right next door to the building purchased by Oxford pipemaker Thomas Reeve in 1689, mentioned in David Higgins paper the previous day!

This brought to a close a very enjoyable conference in Oxford. Our thanks go to all those who presented papers and in particular to the staff of the Pitt Rivers for giving us access to some of their remarkable pipes. We were very pleased that some of the comments and additional information provided by our members during the handling session have since been added to the Pitt Rivers' online catalogue.