

## Penny Varley: professional potter. AMA's February speaker



Penny with the pot thrown during her talk

From the moment Penny Varley arrived it was clear that she is a highly organised and efficient professional. A collection of well packed boxes and a couple of stands came out of her car and within minutes she had arranged a display of work, including several ranges of pottery, matching teatowels, a work table for a small demonstration, a big pullup banner and an internet link for any card sales. She also spoke with the ease and confidence that comes with much practice and familiarity with a range of audiences.

Penny began by outlining her background. Her mother had made studio pottery and Penny herself was able to work in clay as part of her "O" and "A" levels taken at West Oxfordshire Technical College. She recalled that the wheels for throwing pots were of the "kick wheel" type, where you had to keep one foot powering it, like an old fashioned treadle sewing machine. Anyone who has tried throwing clay will know that, until you really get it, it's hard

enough trying to keep both hands and a lump of soggy clay in order, without having to remember what your feet should be up to. Penny described it as a nightmare and focussed (as this writer has!) on coiled and slab built pots.

As a young adult, Penny found that she did not have the space at home for a pottery studio and she also needed some money. A part time job with the Civil Service beckoned and she felt this would help out for about six months to build up funds. She stayed for 25 years rising to a position of fraud investigator, spending much time travelling around the country training staff. This experience, as a trainer, has come in useful in her pottery career, where she runs all types of educational sessions.

Before leaving the Civil Service, she had attended evening classes in Banbury, taught by a man who she described as her classic image of a potter: beard, fuller figure, socks and sandals and a fondness for folk music. Clearly he was an inspiring teacher because it was not long before she was selling pots through local fairs and cooperative outlets. She gave up the day job in 2005, setting up Penny Varley Ceramics.

We then turned to look at some of the things that Penny had brought with her. Her garden pots are large and heavy, built from crank clay using coiling and slab techniques and often put together with ironwork made up by a blacksmith in Brilles. We could only look at images of this work, due to weight and scale, but were introduced to very large vessels, ceramic lilies and alliums and a life study called "Wanda". This is where Penny does her most creative work letting the clay lead her to her results.



Emerging Bud

## Penny Varley: professional potter continued.....



Penny's main display was of her domestic ware. This is made from white earthenware, purchased from CTM pottery suppliers and is biscuit fired at 1000 degrees and glaze fired at 1060. She has set quantities for all her wares, measured out in pounds using an inherited set of weights. There are three ranges, "Edge Hill", basically bands of green and cream representing the landscape, "Hens" and "Bees". Her hen was copied from one seen on a cushion, but given a fancy tail. These are painted onto greenware (slightly damp, unfired clay) using coloured slips. Bees are moulded and applied at the greenware stage and painted with slips. All items are finished by dipping into transparent glaze, using a three stage process (interior, exterior and then, after a short drying period, the base). Glazed bases stick to kiln shelves during firing, so, to prevent this, each pot is raised on a metal, three pointed stand. The resulting small spots could be seen by the trained eye. There was a short discussion on the technicalities at this point amongst the potters in the audience and we were advised to let kilns cool completely to room temperature before opening and unpacking. While many potters would leave bare clay on the undersides of vessels, Penny feels that glazing the bases of her wares gives a better finish, seals in the clay and adds interest to the piece.



Red & copper platter

In stark contrast to her "safe", easy on the eye and easy to sell cream wares, Penny has her RED range. This consists of freer, more organic shapes and a brilliant, but temperamental scarlet glaze, which she dots and splashes with copper to provide green contrasts. It is her work in this area, which is perhaps the most memorable and forms her true signature pieces.

The talk finished with a brief demonstration. Clays had been handed round for inspection during the session and now Penny laid down a cloth (to prevent clay from sticking to the

## Penny Varley: professional potter continued.....

table), worked a lump into an elongated pebble and then rolled it out to, very approximately, 40 by 10 centimetres. This was then folded and sides pinched together to make a “bag” 20 x 10. By standing this upright, slumping it a little and tweaking edges, she made a rather organic looking vase. So easy (if you know how)!

Find out more about Penny’s work, workshops and classes here,  
<https://www.pennyvarleyceramics.co.uk/>

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