Drive along the main road between Reading and Newbury in Berkshire and you will pass close to the village of Aldermaston. That name is still firmly associated with the government’s nuclear weapons research establishment, but Alan Caiger-Smith’s family moved to Aldermaston long before it elicited such unfortunate associations, and he established his pottery there as long ago as 1955. The sign outside does not bear his name, however, simply identifying the ‘Aldermaston Pottery’, and some of the pottery’s regular customers have never been aware of its owner’s name.

This is how it should be, for what differentiates Alan Caiger-Smith’s pottery from the majority of those represented in this Ceramic Series is that it is not a single-handed private studio, but a ‘working pottery’ employing seven or eight full-time assistants. This is not evident from the nature of the work itself, and many of those who are familiar with what a Caiger-Smith pot looks like may not be aware of its co-operative origin. It is unusual enough, and inspiring enough, to mention, because Aldermaston Pottery represents one of the very few remaining working potteries which retain to some degree the traditions of the ‘country workshop’. Unlike the old country workshops, however (and unlike the world of industry), there is no division of labour at Aldermaston Pottery, for everybody takes some part at some time in all of the various activities involved in running the workshop, from shaping, painting, and firing pots, to selling them to the public and packing and shipping items to Australia or wherever. Everyone gets the chance, as Alan Caiger-Smith puts it, ‘to get their arms round everything’, and thus a harmony is achieved in the resultant pots. Often the only way you would know that several hands have been responsible for a particular pot is the number of initials marked on its base. There have been forty-seven assistants working for short and long periods at Aldermaston Pottery over the years (the longest co-worker, Edgar Campden, has been there now for twenty-six years), and many have gone on to establish their own studios elsewhere – such as Oldrich Ašenbryl, who was the previous potter in this Ceramic Series. Aldermaston’s leader unsung talents are available to his assistants all of his expertise and thoughtfulness sometimes painfully acquired during thirty years professional experience, and they feed back new ideas and ways of doing things, in a flexible and enjoyable working atmosphere which has been described as a ‘capitalist co-operative’.

The visitor to the pottery walks straight off the street into a working place, but quite without the ambiguous ‘craftsman on display’ dimension of recent times. Upstairs is the large main showroom, where the labour intensive nature of the pottery is immediately evident, for it is constantly stocked with ranks of pots of all kinds – mugs, jugs, jars, bowls, plates, dishes, casseroles, teapots, tiles, etc. at prices ranging from £3 to over £300, with colour-coded price
Ceramic Series

labels, differentiating between 'pottery of regular quality', and 'pottery of extra quality, or of a design needing extra time.' And if you are looking for something even more special, across the road is a smaller showroom, housing exhibition pieces.

So the pottery undertakes a vast variety of work, from the humblest mug to elaborate one-off commemorative commissions (including, it is hard to resist saying, a commission in 1985 to make the largest teapot in the world). And yet within this great diversity there is a genuine consistency.

First and foremost, Alan Caiger-Smith’s pottery makes simple vessels for everyday use, ‘pots for using and living with’. Being functional, he says, does not render this a ‘low level’ activity, for even his more unorthodox commissions, such as a sundial or a ceramic altar cross, serve a functional purpose, though it may not be that of holding fluids or fruit. Many of the most popular and best-selling vessels made at the pottery use simple forms which, by now, have been repeated many times. Repetition need not in itself become deadening or dispiriting, however, for Caiger-Smith believes that each ‘return to the simplest thing is a new beginning’. Caiger-Smith started out as a painter, but turned to pottery having got completely lost in ‘complicated thoughts about what art is’. Refreshed by his encounter, he realised that he had discovered ‘a precious thing’, to which he has devoted himself full-time ever since, without the support of an income from teaching, like so many of his contemporaries. But like a painter, he still thinks in terms of colour, and it is the colour of his pots which we notice first and which draws us to them, not because it is flamboyant but because it is rich and full of associative emotional touchstones.

Most of Alan Caiger-Smith’s pots are earthenware shapes given an initial all-over opaque white powdery tin glaze, which furnishes a white ground for its subsequent brushed decoration with pigments which fuse into the glaze during firing. The resultant colours possess what Caiger-Smith has described as ‘a cloudy depth with a soft edge and an internal texture or grain not found in any other technique’. The white glaze also shows through rather in the way that the white grounds used by painters such as Van Eyck contributed to a luminous quality to their work. Associated with these techniques, Caiger-Smith has also developed the difficult technique of using ‘lustre’ pigments, for which a risky third firing is necessary. During firing the metallic compounds in the pigment are reduced to pure metal on the surface of the glaze, giving the decoration a coppery or silvery sheen. Using a wood-fired kiln has enabled Caiger-Smith to develop this technique to a virtuoso degree (the wood used for the kiln is that rejected by a local Kennet Valley cricket bat willow plantation).

The decoration itself is applied with various sizes of brush—from large thick ones to tiny brushes with only a few hairs—usually applied to the pot while revolving it by hand on a turntable. The forms taken by the decoration are almost as various as the shapes and functions of the pots themselves, ranging from bold and economical abstract patterns in one colour, to complex figurative images involving birds, animals, and dream cities. But here again, a remarkable consistency flows through all the designs, informed as they are by calligraphic marks which are full of dancing movement, and which reflect the influence of Islamic pottery traditions rather than those of the Far East which informed the work of many of Caiger-Smith’s contemporaries. Repetition is involved as much in the painting of the pots as in their shaping, and Caiger-Smith compares learning to paint the pots to learning to play a musical instrument, which once mastered requires daily practice to maintain fluency and confidence. Continuing the musical analogy, the different weights of the brushes, he says, produce ‘resonances’ as different as those of a cello and violin.

Every now and then, a pot will be thrown and painted which, while maintaining its functional aspect, will transcend the state of being simply attractive, attaining a point at which ‘design shifts over into poetry’. It is by no means only the larger items which can possess this quality; the brushstrokes made within a small bowl can create a ‘little world’ which, in Caiger-Smith’s words, ‘keeps its secrets forever’. People have always enjoyed pots over and above their function, he says, and the ‘mood’ created by a pot is important because we buy them to live with them as well as to use. A pot which you buy from the Aldermaston Pottery to use as a storage jar or teapot may also possess the ability to ‘soften your heart, or to awaken thoughts of joy, or to be mysterious’, and it is this sliding scale between function and poetry which is what pre-occupies Alan Caiger-Smith perpetually, and that which keeps him going.

David Brens
Pe baech chi'n gyrru ar hyd y brifforod rhwng Reading a Newbury yn Berkshire bydddech yn mynd heibio i bantref Aldermaston. Mae'r enw hwnnw yn dal i gael ei gysylltu'n ddigwydd â sefydlad ymchwil arfau newydd y llwydodraeth, ond symudodd teulu Alan Caiger-Smith Aldermaston ymheiri ffrind i lle tafu ei gysylltiadau antodus, ac fe sefyddodd yntau ei grochendy yno cyn bellied yn òl â 1955. Fodd bynnag nid yw ei enw'n ymrddangos ar yr anwydd y tu allan sy'n nodi'r symi mai dyma 'Grochendy Aldermaston, ac nid yw rhai o gweinendraid rheolaidd y crochendy erioed wedi bod yn yrwybodol o enw'r perchenog yng ngweithiau saith eraill. Ac fe ddylar hir hi fod, cherwydd yr hyn sy'n gweinued crochendy Alan Caiger-Smith ym wythun ifa'r rhan fwyaf o'r rhai a gyfrinacholir yn y Gyfrres Gerameg hon yw'r ffaith mai nid siwlio breifaeth un dyn yw ei grochendy ef. Ond 'crochendy gweithiol' sy'n cyflwr saith neu wyth o gynorthwywyr llawn amser. Nid yw hynny'n cael ei amlygu gan natur y cynyrch, ac mae'n bosibl na fyddai llawer o'r rhai sy'n digon cyfanwyd â gwraith Caiger-Smith yn yrwybodol o'i darllediad cydweithredol. Mae hynny'n digon anghyffredin, ac yn digon calonogol, i'r grynwyll, cherwydd mae Crochendy Aldermaston yn cymryd iawn o'i chwech bywydau sydd i'r rhwy daddol y 'gwraith gweithl/INFO'.

Fodd bynnag, yna wahanol 'r hein weithiau gweithl/INFO' ac yna wahanol i fyd diwydiannol, does dim rhain iad yna'r Afon Ngrochendy Aldermaston, gan fod pawb yn cymryd rhyw ran ar rhyw bryd neu'r 'gilydd ymholun o'r amrywio weithgareddau ynglŷn â rheidig y gweithl/INFO'. Llunio, llwio a thracio polisau, eu gwerthus o chyhoedd, eu pacio a'u hafon dros y mor i Australia a mannau eraill. Mae pawb yn cael y cyfle, yna negresau Alan Caiger-Smith, i'r gael eu breichiau am boeth, a dyna sut y flwyddyn i gael cryfogion yr polisau sy'n deilio o'r llafrach. Yr unig ffordd yna amli'r bydddech yn gywysod fod amryw o ddwylo wedi bod yn gyfrifol am lunio llestr arbenig fyddei gweld nifer o llofnodion ar ei waelod. Bu saith a deugain o gynorthwywyr yn gweithio am gyfnodau hir neu tŷr yng Nghrochendy Aldermaston dŵr y blynyddoedd (i'w cawdorir a drefirol y cyfnod hwnnw) yw yw Edgar Campden sydd erbyn hyn wedi bod yno am chwe mlynedd ar hugain), ac aeth llawer chomynyth nagwythiant i sefydlu eu siwlo 'eu hunain mewn gwaith o fanau - Oldrich Asenbryl, yr orgraffiwr, y crochendy blaenonol yna y Gyfrres Gerameg hon. Mae pennaeth Aldermaston yn rhannu ei holl wybodaeth a'i fedrwnsydd yna hael â'i gynorthwywyr, a hwnnw'n amli wedi ei gynllunir drwy baddon chwirfa'n ystod deng mlynedd ar hugain o brofiat gweithl/INFO, ac mae hwnnw ac uchel eu tro. Yn cymryd siwldiau newydd a flwydd gwaitho o wneud pethau, a'r cwbli'nyn ddigwydd mewn awyrgylch gweithio hyblyg a hapus a ddigrifwyd fel 'mudiad cydweithredol cyfathol'. Mae'r sain sy'n ymwybod â'r crochendy yn cefnded ar ei union o'r stryd i mewn i weithdy,
Y Gwyddf Caïger-Smith

hwnnw na weithdy heb unrhwy awgrym o'r 'arddangos o grefenyw' amwy a fu mor bolegaidd ac ddieddor y gwyddf, gan ei bod wedi ei stochio bob amser a'r hoesi o boibau a bob math — myfiau, ysgau, jeariau, bowleini, pliatiau, dysguai, caserollenau, tebailiau, teiiau a bob math, a'r prisiau yna amrywio y 12 o ddiso $30, a labellau prin cod liw amrywiaeth a gyflawni a chroesenni a rhwng 'crochenni a safon arferol a'ch crochennw a oansawdd arbenig, neu o gyllin yw'n hawlio amser ychwanegol'. Ac os y bydd y chyd hwy rywbeth mawr arbenig byth, mae ystafell arddangosion lai ar draw y ffordd yw'ny cynyrsys eiemaeth a'ch arddangos.

Felly mae'r crochendo'r ymymyd a ddefnyddid amrywiaeth a oansawdd mawr, o'r mwy mwyf ystyried i'w comisiynu dathlu mwyf ymwili (gan gyflymwr, ac ni ellir gwerthfylch gartrefi yr demisawun i ddweud hyn, comisiyn ym 1983 i wneud y tebog mwyafyn y byd). Ac eto o' fewn i' r hol amrywiaeth cef y cyswyped gwirioneddodd.

Uwch Lawer popeth arall, gwneud i fenestr symr ar gyfer eu defnyddio bob dydd, "potiau i'w defnyddio ac i fwyyn yn eu cymryd, y mae crochendo Alan Caïger-Smith. Onid ni dda chynhyrchydu potiau defnyddiol, mawr ei, en i'w golygu gweithgareb ar 'fete' i'i wel, oherwydd mae i'w gosibiniu mwyaf anferoler, megis siclo hau neu groes geramig i'w dodi ar allor, wetth yw’i holl dafydd â nad da hŷl neu ffrwtho yna hwynt ym Mhynny. Defnyddir fluflâu symli gydað, erbyn hyn, wedi cael eu haladodd lawer tro i'w neud lawer, o'i llenwi mwyf poblogaidd a'r rai sy'n gwerther orau. Fodd bynnag, nid yw 'alladdod o'nganwheiriau ym anwyl a famyd dra a synhyn gan fod Caïger-Smith o'far bod 'ychwedl y at y pheth symlei ym dechrau newydd'.

Peintiar oedd Caïger-Smith ar gychwyn ar y ffeil, ond troeso at gorchennwch ar ôl mynd an gol yn llwyd 'rynhothal 'symiadau ymwil gyflym â theb yn union a chlyddyd'. Fe'i hadnewydwyd gan y proliad a symadowddol ei fod wedi dod o hyd i'w rhybwch gyflymwrw, ac mae wedi ei ymmrodli ei hun yna llawn amser iddo o hynny ymmlaen, a hynny heb ddiynnau ar gefnogaeth incwm wedi ei emnill wrth dysgu fel cymaint o’i gyfeswyr. Onid fel peintiwr, mae'n daf i feddiw yna hynnw a lliw a chwaraeu sy'n hynny’r siwl gyntaf ac yn denu pob albynl, a hynny ni am eu bod yno goegwych ond am eu bod yn glyfoddwch ac yna llawn o feni prawf emosiynol ymwylltio. Fluflâu pridd y drod gwydydd yna powndraith gwyyn ddiraid croeswi yw'r rhan fwyaf o boibau Alan Caïger-Smith. Mae eto trin fel y darparu cefndir gwyyn gyda'r gyfraith eu raddarn a broses rhai lliau sy'n doddo i gyflym wrth ystod y tani. O ganlyniad mae’r prthyfyn i’r lliwau yw hyn y dysgrifwyd gan Caïger-Smith fel 'dyndod cymhwylgyd gyda'r meddal a gread neu anasawd mewniol na'r rhai gyflym yr hyn y ceir ddefnydd o drregog arall. Mae’r gwydydd gwyyn yn trodd i'w gogwd mewn modd tebyg i'r ffordd yna mae’r cefndir gwyyn a ddefnyddid gan beintwr mawr Van Eyck yn rhoi ansawdd ymchwil i'w rhydd yr hynnw, o gyflymbr a'ngynedd. Efallai, gan fod y wahanol, efallai, gan fod yr hynnw, mae’r cyfansoddiol enwad yna yr hysbys yna cael eu troi ac iawn gan wedyn y gwyddon, gan ni defnyddid arian addoliu gyda'r gododd gan y llawer wrth y cyswiped gan yr hysbys gan y hysbys gan y hysbys.

Gweiri y na raddarn a broses o amrywiol fiant — rhai yna fawr a lliwau o'r hynnw, ac orau yna hynnw ac sy'n gweid i frawd ai'r llawer. Mae'r dysgu a chyflym a chwaraei a chwaraei a chwaraei a chwaraei a chwaraei a chwaraei a chwaraei a chwaraei a chwaraei.