

Alan Caiger-Smith

8.2.1930 - 21.2.2020

Potter, Writer and Countryman



Alan was a resident of Aldermaston and Wasing from his boyhood until his death at Shalford on 21st February, 2020 at the age of 90.

Shalford, in the parish of Wasing, was his family home for over sixty years, but Alan first came to Aldermaston in 1941. His mother Helen, still remembered by many locals, bought The Cottage (now Kiln House) after moving from Brighton, as hostilities overshadowed the south coast. Alan and his younger brother Mark were just eleven and eight years old.

Alan achieved international renown as the man who started Aldermaston Pottery in 1955 and built a creative enterprise in the former Smithy in the village street. It sold and sent work all over the

world and attracted potters, even beginners, from many countries. It was said that the Pottery and its kilns were 'the warm heart of the village'.

Some sixty or more potters went on to set up their own workshops elsewhere in the world, inspired by the experience of how such a lean venture could be such an enlivening place to work.

Early on, Alan joined forces with the potter Geoff Eastop, in a sort of partnership, until Geoff moved on to work for himself. Over 38 years, Alan then created a team, usually of seven or eight potters, making colourful, vigorously decorated tableware and iridescent decorative 'lustre' ware. The quaint showroom above the workshop was an Aladdin's cave of shapes, patterns and colours, all using distinctive brushwork and embracing the different personal styles of the potters.

In 1993, market conditions forced Alan to close the team workshop. By then he was appointed MBE (1987) for his services to the arts. The Pottery had completed an installation of a series of huge sculptural vessels, decorated in bold metallic-lustre brushwork, for the new Pearl Assurance headquarters building in Peterborough; a pair

of giant vases in similar style for the British Embassy in Washington, D.C.; and the Bramah teapot, commissioned to be the largest teapot in the world.

Alan was born in 1930 in Buenos Aires, to expatriate parents: Christopher, an industrial chemist, and his wife Helen. He returned as a young child to England, where Mark was born. Soon after, their father was tragically drowned during a family holiday and Helen took up a career as an orthoptist, practising in Reading and Newbury.

Alan was educated at Stowe School and King's College, Cambridge. He also studied fine arts and painting at the Camberwell School of Art and, after Cambridge, at the Central School of Art in London. In this phase of his life he became deeply interested in church mural paintings, then being uncovered in many parts of the country. He travelled in 'George Fisher', his little Morris 7, to seek them out and document them, living frugally and - he used to recount - sleeping in the open when he could.

At the Central, he explored ceramics under the tutelage of Dora Billington, who directed his interest in decoration towards tin-glaze earthenware. Seeing Potters at work in Seville during a sailing trip to Spain led him, by 1955, to pursue a career as a Potter.

In 1956 he married Anne-Marie, a building engineer from Stockholm working for a church architect in London. They had four sons by the time Shalford became the family home in 1966: Nick, Martin, Patrick and Daniel.

Anne-Marie was the love and support of his life and crucial to the success of the Pottery, the family and Alan's other enthusiasms including writing and painting. They shared a love of sailing and one of their big adventures later was to sail the Atlantic with friends.

Anne-Marie died from cancer in 1994 and the Pottery was left almost empty, except for Andrew Hazelden, continuing there as a solo maker. Over a period, the void at home was filled by Charlotte Davis, Alan's partner for the next 25 years, and at the Pottery by the emergence of an informal co-operative until the premises were sold in 2007. By then Alan had been making and selling pots there for over fifty years.

Alan was a natural story-teller: to his own children, the potters at tea-breaks, or to a dining table or a lecture hall. His great intellect, memory, curiosity, boyish sense of humour and his wonderment at Life in all its aspects fuelled a powerful imagination.

These characteristics also enabled him to follow his own lights for the whole of his long career. He was never beholden to an employer and he built a circle of contacts worldwide, through travel and the internet until late in life.

He could engage with people and make friends of them at home or abroad, through a natural charm and partly through his determined language skills. He could give a speech competently in Spanish, Italian, French and Swedish; even Arabic and Farsi were not beyond the challenge during travels to Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Iran, countries where the ceramics traditions he loved ran rich.

As both a practitioner and scholar, he became an authority in his fields of ceramics.

His writings included the definitive and scholarly history of *Tin-Glaze Pottery* (1973) and *Lustre Pottery* (1985) and later the human, philosophical story of the Pottery venture itself in *Pottery, People and Time* (1995).

Alan was a countryman and deeply fond of Aldermaston. Liked the bantams he kept in his orchard, he knew the territory intimately and every building and turn in the road held memories for him. For some thirty years he served Wasing church as a churchwarden, with Angus Campbell and then Colin Evans, and for two spells played the First King in Aldermaston's medieval Nativity Play. To his last season, he won prizes at the local Produce Show with fruit and vegetables from his own garden and was for a while its President.

Written by Nick Caiger-Smith
