

LUKE ADAMS – NINETEENTH-CENTURY ARTISANAL POTTER

Rose McGowan

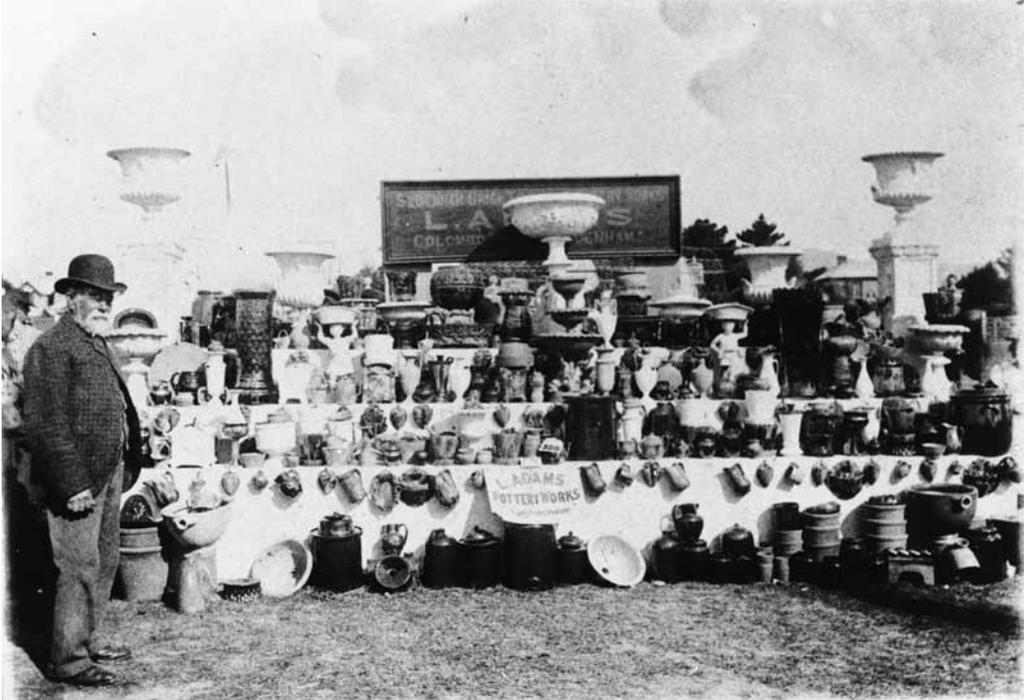


Figure 1. Luke Adams at November Show, 1897. Image: Canterbury Museum.

Luke Adams came from England with his wife and young children and the inherited knowledge from a lineage of clayworkers stretching back to the fifteenth century.¹ From the beginning, his interest and enthusiasm was for the production of colonial domestic and ornamental ware. His was a large artisanal establishment. Other clayworking companies of the time were manufacturing bricks, pipes and tiles as the mainstay of their industry, and domestic ware as a sideline.²

From our dining room window, we could look out at the 50-metre chimney at the brickworks over the river where Luke Adams worked from 1875 to 1880. I didn't realise it was such an important part of the landscape of my childhood until I watched it being demolished by explosives in the 1980s. The excitement of an explosion drew me home to watch. What I hadn't expected was the feeling of grief at its dissolution. After the explosion, the great chimney seemed to hang in the air in shock before it fell.

Some of the clay that was used by Luke Adams came from a mine in the hill very close to the end of the railway line that carried the coal and clay from the Malvern Hills to Christchurch. As children, we scrambled round on that hill. It rose behind our family bach, built on land won in a ballot by my mother: Kiddibricks, with "L Adams" stamped in the frog, had been a major feature of my solitary childhood play. They could be purchased by the scoop from a large barrel in the Luke Adams shop. The tactile feel, dimensions, colour and texture were very satisfying.

Luke Adams was born in May 1838 in Hampshire, the son of brickmaker William Adams. He served his apprenticeship in a village called Fareham, the home of bricks known as "Fareham Reds." Much of Victorian London was built with Fareham Reds, including the Royal Albert Hall. Chimney pots made in Fareham, with their distinctive white slip decoration, were vital for keeping the population of Victorian London warm.³ Luke was trained not as a brickmaker, but as a country potter. His training wasn't confined to one aspect of the process, as in a factory, but in all aspects, giving him an all-round ability in the production of domestic ware. This set him up well for his future enterprise.

Sarah Jane Churcher and Luke Adams were married when he was 22. They had four children. Sarah died in childbirth in 1870. The following year, he and Mary Annie Stow were married. With many small potteries closing down around Hampshire, concern grew about his future as a village potter. At the age of 35, in poor health from a lung ailment, he was advised to seek a warmer climate and was very interested when he heard of William Neighbours' successful brickmaking enterprise in New Zealand; if Luke was to emigrate, William Neighbours would employ him at his Nursery Road brick factory in Christchurch.

This period in the early 1870s was known as "The Great Migration," the most significant period of immigration in New Zealand history. Colonial Treasurer Julius Vogel had an ambitious vision of assisted passage. At the time, pre-industrial craftspeople were being assisted to emigrate to New Zealand by being given free passage from Britain. By 1870, New Zealand was suffering an economic depression, with gold production in decline and wool prices down, and the land wars between British colonists and Māori had created a negative impression overseas. Vogel's idea was to borrow funds from overseas to build infrastructure such as roads and railways, and also to fund large-scale immigration from Britain and Europe. Vogel believed social order could be engendered by settling immigrants on land bought or confiscated from Māori, thus creating a "British Civilisation." The Māori population had reduced from a quarter of a million to less than 50,000 by the turn of the century through disease, social dislocation and land confiscation.

The colonial government's authority over all of New Zealand was cemented through Vogel's public works and immigration programme. Many agricultural labourers and village craftsmen – carpenters, painters, blacksmiths, bootmakers, milliners and brickmakers – were actively sought under the scheme. Although I have no evidence to suggest that the Adams family was a beneficiary of this scheme, the Vogel programme of assisted immigration from 1870 to 1873 was at its height during this time. The £5 fare for adults was waived and travel to New Zealand was free, although it was expected that immigrants would pay back the fare after they had established themselves and were earning a living. In May 1873, the Adams family boarded the *Punjab* for the 16-week journey to New Zealand. Up to 40 people including their own baby daughter died on the voyage.⁴

Ripapa Island was the family's first landing place in New Zealand. Quarantined for nearly a month because of cases of fever on board the *Punjab*, they finally disembarked in Lyttelton in September 1873. They settled at Sandhills (now Brooklands) by the Styx River and Luke began working for William Neighbours. Over the next two years they developed a firm friendship, but the brick factory failed to provide an outlet for Luke's dexterity on the wheel. When the opportunity arose, he left the brickworks and started work as an "expert thrower," responsible for establishing a department of "fine wares" at Austin, Kirk and Company, the owners of Farnley Brick and Tile Works in what is now Centaurus Road. Adams could throw a six-gallon pot weighing more than 26 pounds and standing 20 inches high on the wheel, a feat requiring great skill and strength. For this standard of pottery, it was necessary to use the superior fireclay mined and transported by rail from the Malvern Hills where the company owned many hectares of land.

Riding the 16 kilometres to his workplace six days a week along Brighton Beach, over the Heathcote River bridge at Ferrymead and round the bottom of the hills, must have been good for Luke as his health markedly improved. The brickworks became a thriving industry and by 1880 it was employing 71 workers. Luke Adams worked at his wheel ten hours a day. The company was known for its good remuneration for employees. Mr Kirk described the conditions at the works: "We pay wages varying from 4 pounds to 2 pounds and 2 shillings per week. The men who work in the sheds make full time, the men who work outside have broken time in wet weather. About half our men work outside all the year round."⁵

In 1880, Austin, Kirk and Company undertook a massive expansion programme financed by the Colonial Bank. A 14-chamber, circular Hoffman kiln, or ring oven, was installed. The 50-metre chimney stack reputedly made the kiln the largest and tallest in the southern hemisphere. This design, patented in Germany by Frederick Hoffman in 1858, was energy-efficient and economical. It revolutionised the brick and tile industry, allowing for mass production without the use of machines. The circular structure consisted of an endless tunnel which was divided into 12 to 24 chambers, all connected to each other and to a main flue leading to the chimney. Each chamber had an opening through which the bricks were loaded and unloaded, closed by a door or by a temporary brick wall. Each chamber, filled with 25,000 bricks, was fired in sequence. The heat from the fire not only baked the bricks to 1000 degrees Fahrenheit, but also preheated the bricks in the next chambers. When bricks were unloaded, air was drawn through the chamber in the opposite direction, cooling the already baked bricks in the preceding chambers. The fire was 'chased' around the tunnel in a never-ending process. Depending on the size of the kiln, it took between one and six weeks to complete a full circle. Austin, Kirk and Company gained a £500 bonus offered by the Canterbury Provincial Government for being the first to manufacture £1000 worth of salt-glazed wares.

With the installation of the Hoffman kiln, Austin, Kirk and Company restricted its production to bricks, pipes and tiles. There are two conflicting stories about what followed. One holds that Luke Adams purchased the redundant

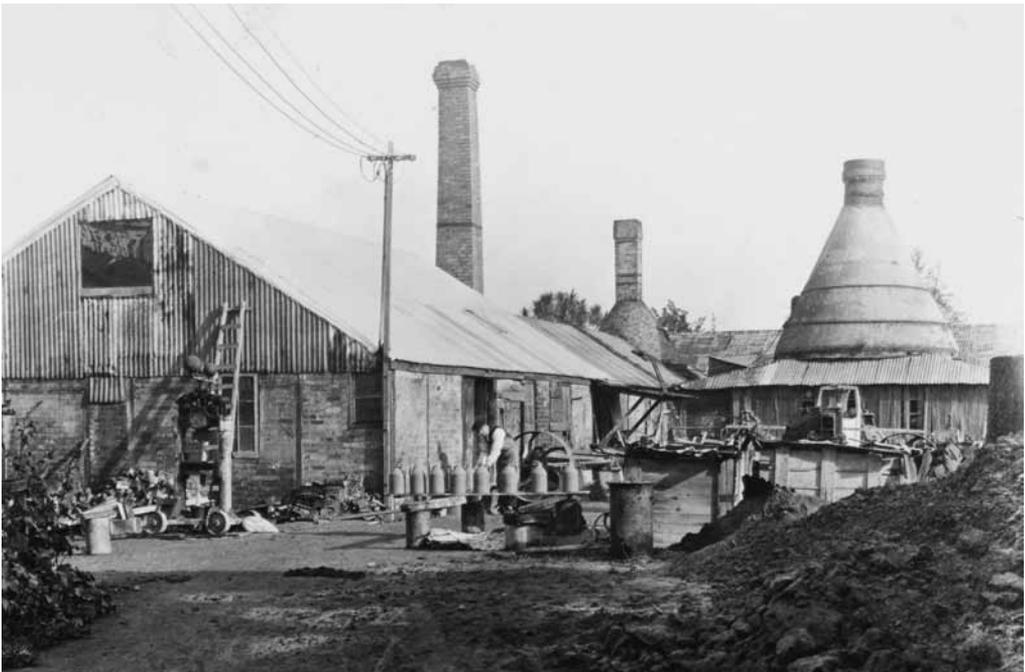


Figure 2. Luke Adams Pottery works, circa 1920. SW Perkins photograph, Canterbury Historical Association collection. Image: Canterbury Museum.

plant and moulds, and the other that he was given them by the company to help him establish his own business. Luke's two eldest sons, William and Albert, who were 'playing truant,' along with a younger son, Frank, were taken out of school and employed by their father to help establish a pottery workshop. The four built a kiln at a rented site with a workshop in Carlyle Street. Thus Sydenham Pottery Works was established, but after a year the landlord summarily sold up, and the fledgling company was forced to move. Despite this crisis, Luke Adams was determined to carry on and a fresh start was made on 1 December 1882, on a site at 283-85 Colombo Street. This time, a more cautious Luke Adams signed a 21-year lease.⁶ The two-storey building on the property became home to the growing family, with a shop fronting onto the street. Mary Adams' sister Jinny Stow also lived with the family and served in the shop. A new kiln was built with bricks provided by William Neighbours.

Luke Adams and his sons made an astute assessment of the market and developed the capacity to turn out popular items such as flowerpots, demijohns and ginger beer bottles, which were sold in great quantities. These items were economical to produce and ready sellers, the latter for Hayward Brothers' pickles and Sharpe Brothers' ginger beer. Luke and his son Frank, who also became a highly skilled thrower, worked at the wheel and Albert made all the moulds and the press-moulded ware including bread pans, butter jars and cream crocks up to six-gallon sizes, teapots, jugs and a large range of ornamental ware, much of which Luke designed himself.

Luke Adams cornered the market in the common flower pot. This early success enabled Adams to develop a sideline in ornamental wares. The most popular glazes were sage green, treacle brown, a rich cobalt blue and mustard. Mottled glazes were popular in the early years. Luke Adams worked almost every day from eight in the morning till nine or ten at night, and after tea by candlelight. If he was not working in the pottery in the evening he would be off after an early tea, with his horse and cart, to grow vegetables on an acre section at Radley.⁷

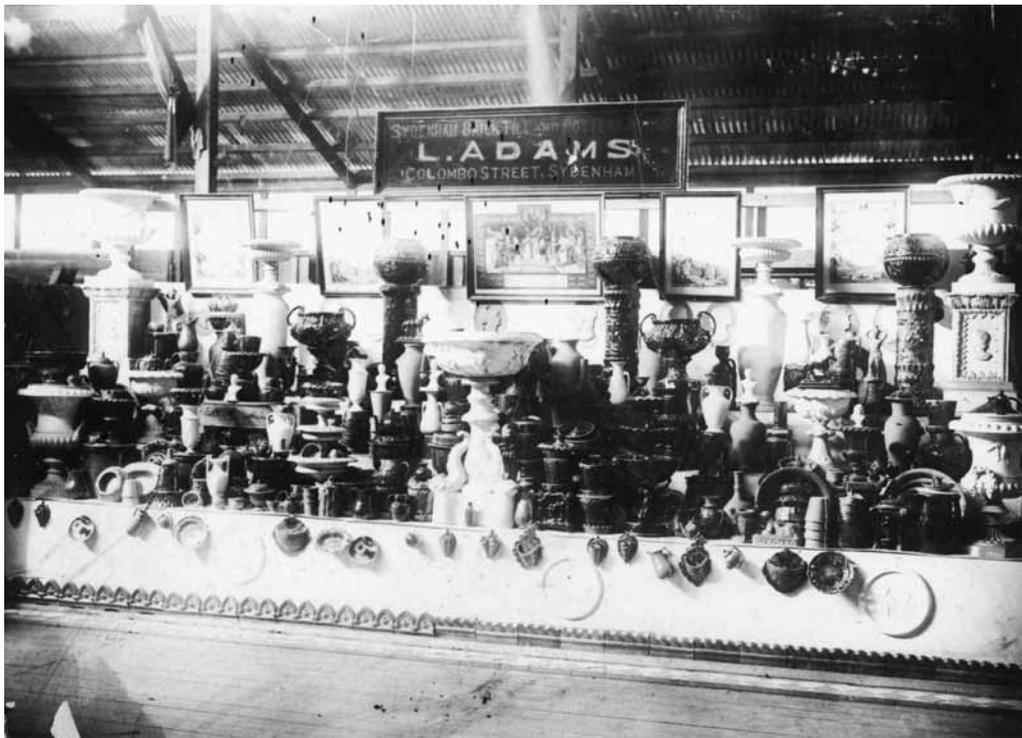


Figure 3. Luke Adams Potter Display, circa 1885. E Wheeler & Son photograph.
Image: Canterbury Museum.

At the 1885 industrial exhibition in Christchurch, Adams' pottery was described as displaying a great purity of design and a close adherence to classic models. "Figures and other artistic ornaments for the lawn or garden are shown, the most striking being a garden vase with dolphin supporters. Some very neatly made table ornaments, baskets and vases, and some very handsome candle sticks and plaques are also included."⁸

One of the reasons for the firm's success was the collaboration, innovation and the building skills shown by Luke and his sons. This gave them the capacity to continually improve the efficiency of the operation. They were the first to conceive of preparing clay in a brick-lined trough in the ground. Two Clydesdale hack horses took turns at plodding around the outside of the trough, dragging a large 150 kg stone through the clay and water to make a rough slip which was then sieved and run off into open pits to allow the water to evaporate. Later a slip-kiln was added to speed up the process. In 1894, a semi-portable steam engine was obtained. The power was used to drive a vertical pug mill and two wash mills for red and ware clays respectively. The horses were still employed to take clay in and ware out of the workshop. Clay came from as far afield as Brunner, Balclutha and Nelson, but much of it was sourced from the Canterbury region including Whitecliffs. The bottle, continuous, and tunnel kilns built over the years were a familiar feature of the Sydenham townscape. They were fired with wood and coal, and stoked with coke from the gasworks for cleaner burning (air pollution being of concern even in those days).

The Adams family was skilled at public relations. People were encouraged to visit the shop. When industrial exhibitions were held, Luke was to be seen working at the potter's wheel.

The company seemed to go into mourning after Luke died on 24 February 1918. Frank, who had taken care of nearly all the executive work of the firm, had retired six years earlier to grow fruit trees. The company was left in the hands of trustees and the plant and the wares deteriorated. Many pieces were sold as seconds or discarded during this time. In 1926, a meeting of family members was called when the pottery was under threat of closure. No one in the family wanted this outcome. H R Adams (Herbert), the youngest of Luke and Mary's sons, heartened by the family's commitment to invest as much money as they could spare in order to save the business, took on the responsibility of management. Credit was generously extended by companies who supplied materials to the Luke Adams Pottery. Albert, who had previously retired, agreed to come back to re-establish a high standard of workmanship.

Glassware was becoming a cheap and desirable alternative for household containers and its widespread introduction was another crisis to assail the pottery industry. In the 1940s, demijohns came to be regarded as unhealthy, as it was difficult to clean inside them. A former employee recalled that it "sounded the death-knell" for this part of the pottery and of course "the thrower and his domination on the wheel came to an end."⁹ Fortunately, a local electrician Robert (Bob) T Daly, had started a small electrical factory and asked the pottery to make some electric radiator cones for him. The first attempt was quite successful, "if a trifle crude."¹⁰ Seeing great potential in the fledgling electrical industry, Herbert decided to do some research and experimentation on these refractories. One of the trade's best kept secrets was the technique of slip-casting intricate shapes. By 1928, Bert Adams, with his knowledge of chemistry, combined with more than a little patience, had solved this problem and could now cast a neater and lighter product using a superior grade of material for high-grade commercial uses.

Expansion into this line of business led to the firm to become a sustainable and successful operation once again. Atlas stoves came on to the market in 1931, and Luke Adams Pottery supplied all of their requirements for ceramic parts, approximately 85,000 pieces per month. To cope with the rising demand, it was necessary to improve the workshop. In 1934, a concrete floor was put down and a foot-operated press was built. Then an improvement in clay preparation was needed and a new filter press was obtained, giving a much improved supply of clay in both quality and quantity. A gas-fired kiln suited to firing electrical products was purchased. Arriving in cases from England, it was erected by Herbert. Mary Adams lit the kiln on her 90th birthday, 7 December 1934.

After Mary died in 1936, Luke Adams Pottery Ltd was registered as a company. Over the next few years, Herbert researched modern methods of clay treatment, and designed a whole new plant in collaboration with the director of

the New Zealand Pottery and Ceramic Research Association. The success of this enterprise kept the company going until its absorption by Crown Lynn between 1965, when Bert retired, and 1975, when the plant was demolished.

Carl Vandelbosch, who worked at Luke Adams Pottery Ltd in 1951, was employed to renovate all the company's old moulds. As a new immigrant from Holland, he struggled with Kiwi English when he arrived, but said that the people were marvellous. "There were fine, friendly people at that first pottery – oh yes it was a good time," Carl said. "The greatest shock was when a whistle went at 10 am and everybody walked away on my first day. It was smoko. That was a real revelation to us – to have 10 minutes off for a cup of tea."¹¹

In later years, Annie (Luke and Mary's daughter) and Jinny Stow served in the factory shop. According to pottery historian Noeline Brokenshire, "With its weatherboards and wood floor and haphazard display of wares in the shop and the street window, it had an air of unobtrusive antiquity."¹² Marie Maindonald treasures the memory of visiting the shop with other young women to buy small inexpensive vases to brighten up their flat. She still has a creamy, pale yellow Luke Adams jug. The slightly rugged texture feels warm, and its shape is homely and simple.

Margaret Frankel, an early studio potter in Christchurch, taught pottery at Avonside Girls High School in 1939.¹³ Luke Adams Pottery Ltd was her only source of clay, as it was too expensive to import from England. She used the company's lead glazes and the students' works were fired for her in the company kiln. Margaret recalled that "Miss Adams, who was in the shop, was a retired primary school teacher and that is very much what she was. When I used to go in as a grown woman she always treated me like one of her infants, I think. However she was very helpful and would do anything she could for schools."¹⁴

Students were given small lumps of clay by their teacher to make into animals or, most popularly, ashtrays. They would carve their initials and a letter for a colour for the glaze and the work would be returned a week later, magically transformed for the grand price of one penny. Noeline Brokenshire remembers, as a third former at Avonside Girls High, being delighted when her teacher presented her with "the poor but colourful beasts" she had made.

Luke Adams and family fostered the evolution of studio pottery in Canterbury. Doris Lusk who taught pottery at Risingholme with Margaret Frankel also took the class pottery to the company's kilns for firing.

In writing this essay, I found it disappointing that there is almost no record of Luke or Mary's family life or the everyday atmosphere of the pottery, which is why I have included Carl Vandelbosch's recollections. Researching this subject took me to Darfield Brickworks, the only operating brickworks in the South Island and the biggest in New Zealand. I was excited to see that they had some 'Kiddibricks' on display. I asked if they had any information about Luke Adams.

The manager sent me down to Kirwee to see Allan Hooper, a potter and woodworker, who used to run a brickworks in Darfield, and who knows all about the geology of the Malvern Hills and the historic and ongoing exploitation of clay deposits there. We went on a field trip to Whitecliffs and Glentunnel to find clay from deposits that have been used for 150 years. We visited the Lucknow pit, from which millions of tons of fire clays have been mined and which is now nearly depleted. Visiting the site of the kiln and workshop that John Hobbs built, at what is now Whitecliffs domain, we found some fragments of salt-glazed, coggled pottery, a lovely find. The trip reminded me how exciting it is to dig clay, process it and make clay body or glaze out of local materials, as Allan Hooper has often done.

I was drawn to Luke Adams as a subject because his life in Christchurch was spent doing what he loved, while responding to people's needs and making a living. I think that is a perfect, harmonious triangle.

Rose McGowan has a Diploma in Ceramic Art and is currently studying at the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic in the final year of BVA in Ceramics.

- 1 Noeline Brokenshire, *Fired Clay: The Story of the Canterbury Potters' Association, 1870-1989* (Christchurch: Canterbury Potters' Association, 2000), Pamphlet from Halswell Potters Club Archive.
- 2 *Christchurch City Contextual History Overview: Theme III: The Built City*, "Chapter 7: An Over-all View of the Development of Christchurch," <https://www.ccc.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Culture-Community/Heritage/ChristchurchCityContextualHistoryOverviewThemeIII-docs.pdf> (accessed 3 August 2017).
- 3 www.localhistories.org/fareham.
- 4 Jock Phillips, "History of Immigration – The Great Migration: 1871 to 1885", *Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/history-of-immigration/page-8>.
- 5 Gail Henry, *Pottery in New Zealand: Commercial & Collectible* (Auckland: Heinemann, 1985).
- 6 New Zealand Federation of University Women, *Sydenham: The Model Borough of Old Christchurch: An Informal History* (Christchurch: New Zealand Federation of University Women, Canterbury Branch, 1977).
- 7 H R Adams, "A Resume in Brief of Notable Events in the 80 Years Since the Establishment of Luke Adams Ltd. 1881-1961." Manuscript National Library, Wellington.
- 8 Henry, *Pottery in New Zealand*, 90.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 H R Adams, "A Resume."
- 11 www.theprow.org.nz/arts/carl-vendelbosch/.
- 12 Brokenshire, *Fired Clay*.
- 13 Margaret Frankel also taught pottery at Risingholme with Doris Lusk.
- 14 Brokenshire, *Fired Clay*.