Humans began cooking food tens of thousands of years ago. Cooked food is easier to digest and often tastier than raw, so people began experimenting with different ways to heat things instead of just roasting over an open fire. One early method involved heating pebbles and dropping them carefully into water in a skin or wooden container, gradually bringing it to a simmering point. Once they had invented pottery, they could put pots onto embers and heat the water directly.

Many early pots had rounded bases, which deflected the heat of the fire around the sides of the pot. Once people began to use turntables and potters' wheels, though, their products had flat bases. As a result, pots polaced directly on the fire risked breaking from thermal shock as the base would heat quickly, but the liquids inside and the sides would stay cool, causing the bottom to break off. Cooks had to be very careful in using these sorts of pots.

During the early middle ages, potters in continental Europe discovered that if they made the bottom of a cooking vessel curved (often called a 'sagging base'), it reduced the risk of thermal shock. After taking the pot off the wheel, they would carefully push inside the base onto a mould to give it its shape. This style had become commonplace for English pottery by about AD 850 and remained a feature of ceramic cooking pots throughout the Middle Ages.

What did people cook in these vessels? Most poor people – the majority of the population – lived on coarse bread and a dish known as pottage.

Pottage is literally a dish 'made in a pot'. It was a thin soup-like stew or broth made from whatever vegetables the household had available, which meant what they could grow in their cottage gardens. It would include things like onion, garlic and turnips, which will keep for some time, and seasonal vegatables like cabbages and leeks. Sometimes the cook would add grains such as barley or legumes such as peas (which can be dried and stored for a long time). They would rarely be able to afford to add meat or fish, although the more reckless might hunt rabbits (which belonged to the lord of the manor), with the risk of being caught and punished. The peasant's diet was neither varied nor bursting with exciting flavours.

For the lord of the manor or for ecclesiastics, the situation was different. They could afford meat, fish, imported spices and all the best food available. A fourteenth-century English cookery manual, The Forme of Cury ('The Method of Cooking') gives recipes with ingredients such as almonds (including almond milk), cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, fennel, galangal, ginger, heron, lobster, mace, marjoram, nutmeg, olive oil, porpoise, pomegranates, quinces, raisins, saffron, sugar and walnuts. It also describes methods for colouring and gilding food, especially sweet dishes. Such things were far too expensive for cooks outside aristocratic households to make. Very occasionally a peasant might enjoy them when the lord of the manor held a feast to celebrate a special day.

The difference between the diet of peasants and the wealthy is the origin of the English distinction between the name of the animal (cow, pig, sheep) and the name of the meat (beef, pork, mutton). On the rare times that a peasant might be able to afford to kill their livestock, they would eat pigg; their Fench-speaking ovelords would eat porc regularly. As Middle English turned into Modern English and people became that little bit wealthier, they adopted the French terms for the meats they were now able to consume.

This cooking pot came from a peasant's property at the north end of Caldecote village. According to the excavator, Guy Beresford, the deposit containing it belongs in his Period 3 (about 1100 to 1360), but the vessel shape suggests an early origin, in the eleventh century. At this time, peasant houses in the village had no foundations, their cob walls (made from sub-baked clay 'bricks') sat directly on the ground surface. The identical construction method was seen during excavations at Green Lane in Letchworth Garden City in 1988 and the Norton Community Archaeology Group unearthed part of the collapsed wall of such a cottage at Church Field in August 2009. At Caldecote, these sorts of buildings left almost no traces.

The economy of the village depended largely on arable farming, with wheat, barley, rye and oat grains recovered from the excavations. People also kept cattle, horses, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, ducks and geese, although as we've already seen, they rarely got to eat them. Although the excavators found a few cat bones, there were no dogs at this time.

The pot itslef was not made in the village, but must have been bought at a nearby market. The closest at the time was Ashwell (Baldock had not been founded at the time it was made). It is a type known as medieval coarseware with chalk. The site at Green Lane had sherds from similar vessels, and others have turned up at Therfield Castle, Broadfield, Pirton, Ashwell and Stratton (Bedfordshire). The distribution suggests that it comes from a local (but so far undiscovered) kiln, probably in one of the North Hertfordshire parishes on the northern slopes of the hills.

So a pot like this would probably have held a bland, usually thin soupy stew of low nutritional value. Even so, it was an essential part of the family's daily life. Although the women of the household did the food preparation and cooking, they would put the pot on the table, where everyone could take a share of its contents, using bread to mop up the mainly liquid pottage. Food and cooking are an important part of what brings people together, creating a social atmosphere at meal times, so a simple cooking vessel like this is imbued with meanings and stories of the people who used it.

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