CERAMICS HANDBOOKS • CERAMICS HANDBOOKS

THROWING POTS

PHIL ROGERS

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Phil Rogers

A & C Black · London

A pot is a living thing. Its association so markedly human. We talk of the foot, the belly, the shoulder, the neck and the lip and we intuitively feel a good pot's honesty, strength, nobility or charm much as we do with people . . . Sometimes one can speak of a wet, newly thrown pot in which every movement is like frozen music. Life flowing for a few moments through the hands of a potter.

Bernard Leach

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Cover illustrations
front: Bottle by the Author
back: Detail of a large platter by David Frith
(see p. 55).

Frontispiece
Two salt-glazed pitchers by the Author.
The taller example is 15 in/38 cm tall and thrown from 12 lb/5.5 kg of clay.

Title page
The author's potter's mark. All potters, even aspiring ones, should make their own seal mark and then use it with discrimination.

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Contents

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Peter Harper for his care and patience in producing the clear and informative black and white sequence photographs. Thanks to Potterycrafts who supplied the potter's wheel that we used in the photographs. My sincere thanks also to all the potters who kindly supplied photographs of their work: Nigel Lambert, Sarah Walton, Jeff Oestrich, Joseph Bennion, Peter Beard, Will Levi Mershall, Josie Walter, Jim Malone, Svend Bayer, Ruthanne Tudball, Jeff Mincham, Micki Schloessingk, Duncan Ross and David Frith. Thanks also to the Crafts Study Centre in Bath for the photograph of the Korean honey pot.

My appreciation for her faith in me to produce this book to Linda Lambert at A & C Black.

British potters are well-known around the world for their openness and willingness to share hard won knowledge and information. My thanks go to all those well-established potters who were kind enough to help me when I was starting out. Amongst others, Michael Casson, John Maltby, David Frith, John Leach, Pete Starkey and Nick Edison-Giles.

Introduction

For many years I have organised and taught pottery summer schools here at my pottery in Wales. Over the years the workshop has played host to potters of various abilities from all over the world, every one eager to either learn how to throw pots or to improve their already developing throwing skills.

During this time I have developed a teaching method which seems to meet with some enthusiasm. It is based upon a direct and easy to follow progression through the various skills that are required to make good pottery. I endeavour to make the learning of skills as much fun as possible and to take away the drudgery of repetitive practice that so often dulls the most enthusiastic of appetites. Through the pages of this book I shall try to recapture the learning atmosphere of one of our summer workshops in the hope that it will inspire as it instructs.

Trying to learn to throw pots from a book is a little like reading the ABC of Brain Surgery or Build your own Space

The house and pottery set amongst the beautiful countryside of Mid-Wales.

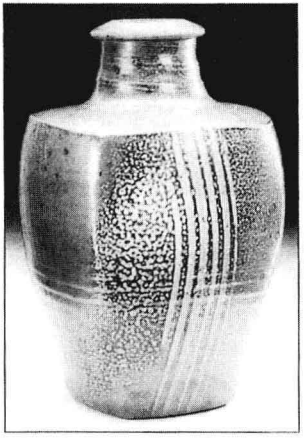
Shuttle in ten weekly parts. It's not easy! No book can totally replace hands-on-tuition with a thoroughly competent and hopefully, inspiring potter-teacher. There are basic skills that have to be learnt, often by dogged practice, before a confidence evolves that allows the potter to make pots unfettered by the restraints of inadequate skill. Although, paradoxically, it is often the case that the relatively unskilled or 'naive' student can produce work that is fresh and lively simply because too much 'greater' skill hasn't got in the way of a direct approach to the clay. Shoji Hamada, the famous Japanese potter, once said that he felt that he had become *too* good a thrower. By this he meant that his skill restricted him in that he could not allow himself to be as expressive with the clay as he would like. His solution to this dilemma was to revolve his wheel in the opposite direction!

My hope is that the reader will use this book in conjunction with a sustained period of tuition possibly at an evening class or local education college or, more suitably, a week or more intensive learning at the workshop of a practising potter.

A residential course, where you are free to learn for a sustained period without the day to day concerns and worries of every day life, is by far the best way of making real progress. Evening classes can be perfectly good but a lot depends upon the teacher's ability and commitment. Often, there are too many people wanting to use too little equipment and your precious work sits on its allotted shelf during the intervening week at the mercy of whoever uses that studio before your next visit.

There are more and more residential courses appearing each year. Most are run by accomplished potters at their own studios, often providing on-site accommodation and meals. Sadly though, not all are exactly what we would expect them to be and it is worthwhile doing some research before booking to attend any summer workshop. Nearly all of the worthwhile courses are advertised in *Ceramic Review* or, for American readers, *Ceramics Monthly* but before you book to attend one of them I suggest you:

SUMMER WORKSHOPS



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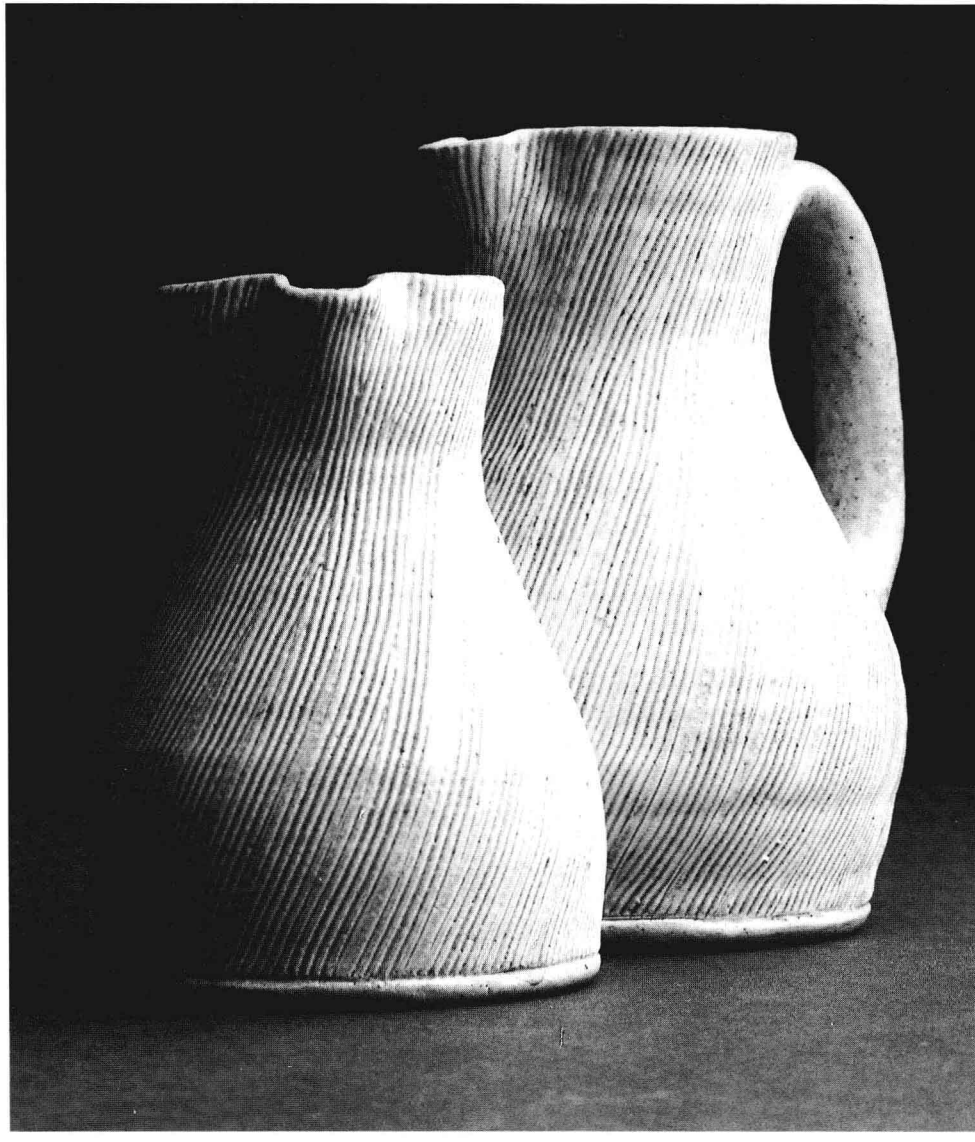

Two salt-glazed jugs by Sarah Walton. These two jugs, although their shapes are deeply rooted in the medieval European tradition, have a striking sculptural quality due to the complete harmony of form and surface treatment. Sarah Walton lives and works in Sussex, England and displays in her work a profound understanding of the salt-glaze surface and its unique relationship with form.

a. Check that you actually like the work of the tutor involved and that his or her work is of good quality. Send away for the course details and take up any references that might be offered.
b. Try to talk to someone who has already attended that particular course. It is very important to get a

personal recommendation.

c. Visit the workshop beforehand if that's possible.
d. Make some enquiries about the standards of accommodation and the meals etc. that are provided.

The world, it seems, was designed for potters. We can find all that we need to make perfectly functional, beautiful pottery from our immediate surroundings: clay to form the body of our pots and, sometimes, the slips and glazes to cover them. Rocks and the ashes from plants and trees can provide us with glazes. Pure salt can miraculously form a glaze when introduced into the mysterious alchemy of a searingly hot kiln.

It is this very elemental nature of the craft coupled with a long and revered history that attracts people to it. Throwing clay on a potter's wheel and the seemingly effortless and wonderful way that the clay will swell and climb in the hands of a skilled potter is merely the beginning to this most 'natural' and ancient of crafts.

The potter is called upon to be many things other than a thrower or former of pots. Labourer, electrician, bricklayer, carpenter, chemist, artist and pyro-technician are just some of the hats that have to be worn. But, for now, we shall concentrate on throwing and leave all those other facets to other books from this same series.

Hopefully this book with its clear and informative photographs by Peter Harper will illuminate and clarify some of those tricky areas that you may have had problems with. Remember though, it is not enough to merely learn the mechanics of throwing. To be able to throw clay upwards and outwards is of little use without some judgement as to what constitutes a good form or a bad form. For this reason I shall be attempting, with the help of some photographs of exemplary pots, to offer some guidance as to the questions that you will need to ask yourself about the pots that you make.

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Chapter One
Equipment

Potter's wheel

In his book *The World of Japanese Ceramics*, Herbert Sanders tells us that the earliest potter's wheel of the Orient was a circular pad of woven matting that the potter turned by hand. I have seen such 'wheels' in use today in East Africa. Ethiopian women make the traditional cooking and drinking pots by this very method, skilfully turning the mat with one hand whilst at the same time pinching and coaxing the clay with the other.

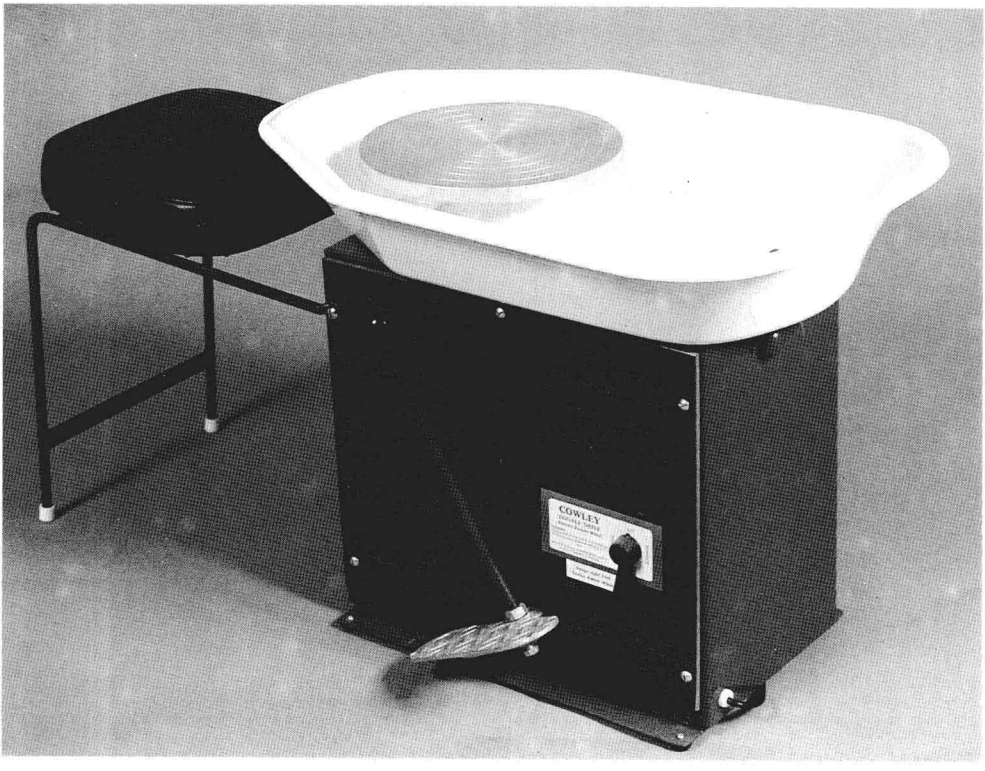
The potter's wheel as we understand it today in the West first saw the light of day in the Middle East some 5,000 years BC and has come a long way since its earliest beginnings as a flat disc of wood suspended on a crude wooden bearing. In many parts of the world these early wheels are still being used to make fine pots. Hamada, at his workshop in Masiko, used a wheel which was revolved by means of a stick that was inserted into the wheel's surface and spun much in the manner of a child's spinning top. It is the weight of the wheel that provided the momentum for its movement. In modern, non-motorised wheels the weight has been transferred to a fly wheel underneath the turntable which is turned by a simple treadle or geared pedal.

For all the advances that have been made in the construction and efficiency of the modern potter's wheel, some would argue that technical progress has been at the expense of certain qualities in the finished pot that can only be obtained having been made on a wheel where potter and wheel are in close harmony. There is much scope for the potter with woodworking and simple engineering skills to make his own potter's wheel and a number of plans have been published to enable you to do this. Personally, I feel that excellent pots can be made on any type of wheel, as ultimately it is the potter and his 'feeling' for the clay that really counts.

Traditional Ethiopian cooking pot, d. 11 in. Made from a coarse local clay, this pot has a rounded bottom that allows it to be set upon an open flame without cracking. It is made by the left hand pinching and forming the clay while the right hand revolves the rush mat on which the clay sits. The outer surface has been coated with a mixture of oil and ochre and then polished before being fired in a pit with Eucalyptus leaves and twigs.

The Japanese potter Shoji Hamada sitting at his wheel. The large wooden turntable is set in a pit surrounded by a wooden stage on which the potter sits. Most Western potters would find the level of this wheel in relation to the body extremely uncomfortable. The wheel is revolved by means of a stick which locates in a hole at the wheel's outer edge. Effectively the wheel is always slowing down which means that the potter works in 'tune' with his wheel. This characteristic rhythmic action of the wheel had a profound effect upon Hamada's pots.

A compact and portable potter's wheel built in New Zealand and supplied in the UK by Potterycrafts Ltd. At the lower end of the price range. I would recommend this type of wheel for the enthusiastic beginner or hobby potter. Its size means that it can be stowed away when not in use yet it is strong enough to handle large weights of clay.



In the West though, by far the majority of potter's wheels are now turned by electricity, often with quite sophisticated electronic variable speeds or sometimes with what is known as a cone drive. Either is fine. In fact, the potter has a daunting choice in the number of wheels available and after considerations of the pocket, I would say that comfort in the working position is probably the most important factor to influence your choice, especially if you have any intention at all of spending rather a lot of time making pots. It is worth noting that backache is often referred to as 'The Potter's Disease' and the throwing position is definitely a contributory factor. When choosing your wheel these are a few points to bear in mind:

1. *Try your chosen wheel before you buy it*

Having chosen the wheel you think might be right for you, endeavour to find someone who has the same wheel and try throwing a few pots with it. Feel for the comfort or discomfort. Are you severely hunched over? Is it difficult to operate the speed control whilst at the same time being able to bend for a view of the pot? If the answer to either of these questions is yes, then this wheel may be too small for you. Your comfort while throwing is very important. It is almost impossible to find a seated position at a potter's wheel that is perfectly comfortable but you must try, right from the very beginning, to sit with your back as straight as possible. Avoid prolonged, extreme bending in order to see the profile of a form. I know from personal experience that your back will suffer for it later on.

2. *Make sure you have an adequate sized slop tray*

It is very annoying to constantly have to stop work to empty an undersized slop tray.

3. *Buy with confidence*

If you are buying your wheel new rather than 'secondhand', give consideration to the company that you are buying it from. There will inevitably come the time that you will require spares or repairs and it's nice to think that the company will still be around when you need them. Most of the pottery wheels supplied by the potters' merchants have a good spares back up available. Indeed many of the component parts are standard engineering stock and available from engineering factors.

4. *Buy the best that you can afford*

As I have said, there is a huge choice available on the market. Buy the best quality wheel that you can afford bearing in mind the job that it will have to do. For instance, there would be little point in buying the wheel illustrated if you were embarking upon a career in large flowerpot making. Conversely, an expensive 'professional' wheel may be unnecessary if you are intending pottery as a part-time hobby activity.

5. *Secondhand?*

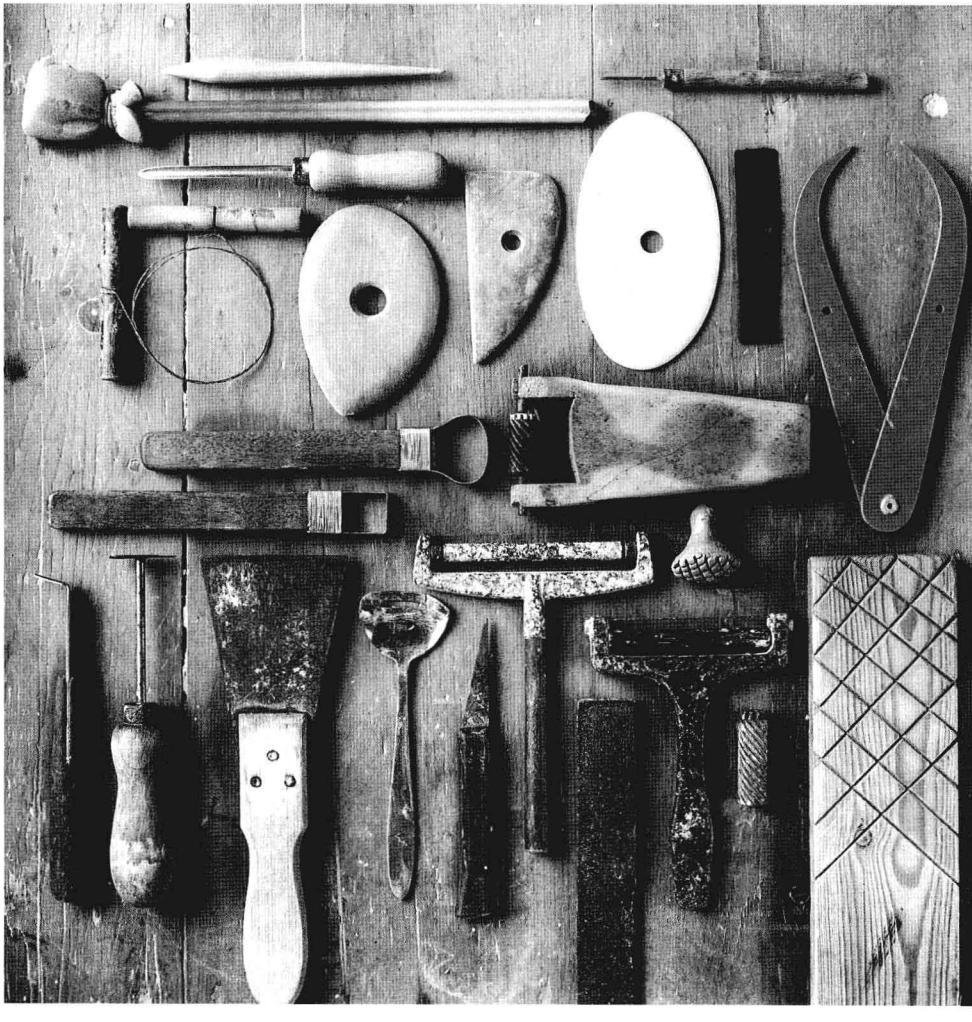
There is a lively secondhand market for ceramic equipment and it is well worth checking the classified ads in magazines such as *Ceramic Review* or *Ceramics Monthly*. People often purchase equipment and then find that pottery wasn't for them after all. Bargains can be found, often at a fraction of the new cost

but be sure to check that the manufacturer still exists if you are not the engineering 'do it yourself' type.

Tools

Having found your wheel or secured the use of one, you will need some basic tools to start you off. A potter's tool box very quickly becomes a kind of personal treasure chest that to the non-potter would seem an unlikely assortment of junk! Many of your tools can be simply and quickly made at home. Others may be purchased from a potters' supply company but may also be found for much less cost at the local DIY store or kitchen shop. I have found that the best time to buy tools from the potters' supply companies is at one of the potters'

A selection of my own tools. Some I have made myself, some I have had made for me and others I have bought. The pots that you make are, in some ways, a reflection of the tools that you use. It is also true that a new tool can be the catalyst for new ideas.

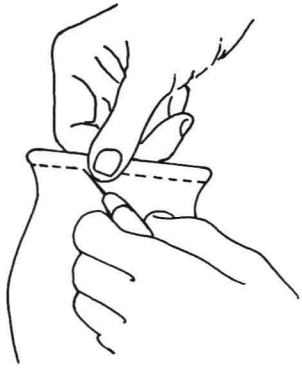


festivals that are popular at the moment where tools are often discounted to clear stock.

Of the tools illustrated on page 14, initially, as a 'starter set', you will require the following:

1. A selection of ribs
The potter's rib, so called because that's exactly what it used to be, a cow's rib, is useful for shaping the outside of your pots and removing water or slip. It also strengthens the pot by consolidating the clay. Ribs can be easily made from perspex off-cuts especially if you have a bench grinding wheel.

2. A needle
Every potter occasionally finds an air bubble in the clay and the needle can be used to prick it. At the beginning you will find that a needle is useful for trimming the top rim of a pot that has become uneven. As your skills increase, you will find that you need to do this less and less often.



Using a needle to cut off an unwanted or uneven rim.

Let the clay revolve through the thumb and forefinger. Rest the needle on the end of your thumb. With the needle angled back and the wheel on a slow speed gently push the point through the pot until it appears on the other side. Calmly lift the rim away with thumb and forefinger.

3. A sponge on a stick
(approx. 9 in./23 cm)
Useful for taking the water from the inside of a thrown form when it is either too tall or too narrow for the fingers. Can also be used as a throwing stick. See page 33.

4. A turning tool
I prefer the 'looped' type which, to me at least, seems to cut through the clay more cleanly than the solid blade.

5. A small piece of soft leather. Not chamois leather. (See page 33.)
It is used for rounding, smoothing and consolidating the rims of your pots.

6. A twisted wire secured at each end with a toggle
I use modelmaker's wire available from modelmakers' supplies shops. An alternative is trace wire used in angling which has the benefit of being stainless steel. Make yourself two wires, one from lightweight wire for cutting off your pots and another from heavyweight wire for wedging.

7. A flat metal strip with chisel ends
(This one is an engineering hacksaw with the teeth ground away.)
Useful for all sorts of throwing techniques: lids, rims, ridges and decorative lines etc.

8. A bench scraper which doubles as a bat scraper also

9. A turning tool that has a point in the shape of its head. (See page 33.)
I use this type of cutting tool for placing a bevel or chamfer at the base of my pots.

10. A small piece of soft upholsterer's foam
I do not like the natural sponge for throwing with because it has a granular

texture which often leaves lines in the soft clay.

You will add other tools to your collection as and when the need arises or when you have a decorative idea that requires a particular tool. For instance, in the picture you will see a roller set in a wooden handle and a simple clay stamp. The roller is made from part of the internal workings of a pencil sharpener and the stamp is just clay that has been impressed with the handle end of a paintbrush. This type of tool is quickly and simply made and will help you to produce pots that are individual to you.

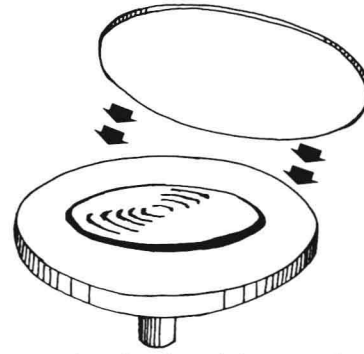
Try not to fall into the trap of believing that you have to have large numbers of shop bought tools. It's you that makes the pots, the tools only help. Lots of clever tools don't necessarily mean good pots.

Other sundry equipment

Throwing bats

I make all my pots on a 'bat' rather than directly on the metal wheel head. A bat is a circular piece of material, usually marine ply or chipboard that is positioned and secured on top of the metal wheel head, either by means of locating studs in the wheelhead and holes in the bat or simply by sticking it to a pad of soft clay. The benefits of using bats are that: a) pots that are either very wide or even flat can be lifted from the wheel still attached to the bat without distortion; b) pots that require further attention can easily be recentred on the wheel, and c) I simply prefer the feel of wood rather than cold metal under my hands.

I make my own bats quickly and cheaply from top grade chipboard by the use of a small jigsaw. I cut them in a variety of diameters to allow for the making of wide, shallow dishes and plates.



Throw a thin, flat disc of clay onto the wheelhead and then scribe a series of concentric grooves with a tool. Slightly dampen the back of the bat, place it in position and thump it down.

Other items

You will need a workbench or table set close to your wheel. From here you can take your prepared clay balls as you need them. You will also require some wareboards to take your pots as you make them. A wareboard is nothing more than a plywood shelf that can be placed onto wall brackets or a shelving rack within arms' reach as you sit at your wheel. This shelf can be replaced with another when you have filled it with pots and removed it to the drying rack.

A towel near to you is a good idea. You will frequently need to dry your hands, for instance, as you lift your smaller pots from the wheel, and you will also need a bowl to hold your water. Lastly, you will need an overall or apron. Whatever you choose, buy it in nylon rather than in cotton. Cotton holds onto dust and can quickly become a health hazard. Nylon is much less prone to do this and is more easily wiped clean.

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