

Introduction

I have admired Dorothy Watson's pottery since I first used her lovely large mugs as a child. More recently, I began to gather up pieces from the back of family cupboards and start a small collection. However, my connection with The Bridge Pottery goes deeper than this. For it was my great grandfather, Colonel Arthur Barham of Hole Park in Kent, who befriended Dorothy and helped her set up in nearby Rolvenden in the 1930s. His papers about it are still in the family's possession. My grandparents and parents knew and supported her, and she made for my sister a charming christening mug.

Dorothy Watson started making pots one hundred years ago, joining a small band of studio potters who discarded the Victorian practice of hand painting manufactured items and instead created their own forms and designs. From the start, hers were bold and attractive as well as practical, and she innovated to ensure that they sold. In 1937, *The Times* described her work as "a connecting link between the purely utilitarian and the purely ornamental", a theme represented in her choice of a bridge as her pottery mark. Such was Dorothy's success, that towards the end of her forty years as a potter, she was simply unable to keep up with demand before she retired in 1961.





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Over time, The Bridge Pottery and Dorothy's achievements have been forgotten and few would now recognise her π pottery mark nor realise the history and struggles of the uncompromising woman who made these fine pieces. *Forty Year a Potter* is an attempt to open a window on Dorothy's life, to appreciate surviving pieces of Bridge pottery and to pay tribute to her most attractive legacy.

When contacting the vendor of a Bridge Pottery saucer for sale a few years ago, I did not realise that it would lead me to her family and to their fascinating collection of photographs, press articles and memorabilia about Dorothy. As luck would have it, her sister Ethel had taken photographs of many family events and left a visual record of the pottery in both Hampshire and Kent in her albums. Dorothy had also left records, describing her childhood and early life in letters to nephews, her wartime years in an unpublished diary, and an account of the Pottery for a sales pamphlet in the 1950s. The more I looked at these, as well as her body of work, the more I realised that her achievements were far greater than just her lovely wares. Dorothy's life had been a struggle to make her mark as a potter and to keep going as a single woman entrepreneur through the difficult decades of the 1920s, '30s, '40s and '50s when many contemporaries fell by the wayside. Dorothy was determined to succeed and did so. Her initiative gained wide attention and her wares, which were as much appreciated for their practicability as their attractiveness, were in constant demand. She adapted through the decades and the story that I have been able to tell is about determination and spirit, despite setbacks and sadness.

William Barham, September 2020