



# 40 POTS

## ALEX FLETT

Summerhall, Edinburgh 11th March – 2<sup>nd</sup> June  
2023.

Demarco Foundation Corridor.

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Left: Firing pots with cow dung in the Kalahari, Oct. 22. Pots are fired outdoor learned from two old ladies (Ma Tsixha and Ma Kantse) in the Kalahari. These ladies are the last who use this traditional firing with cow dung. Unfortunately I could not use cow dung in Scotland as cows and what they eat is different. However, I discovered that I could get the same level of even heat from Peat. I have managed to fire pots outside in a Scottish winter. The pots contain earth from the lands of the signatories of the Declaration of Arbroath. The 40 pots are small and all kinds of heights and widths. Left : Marea Tsixha in K'Ang. Lower left: Alex Flett, Kobamelo Kantse, Tshego Tomeletso (translator) in Makalamabedi



Above. Photos from the Kalahari, October 2022



## The Kalahari earth firing method.

The pots are fired using a method of outdoor firing which I learned from two old ladies in the Kalahari (I was there in October 22). These ladies are the last two who can do this traditional firing using cow dung. Unfortunately I could not use that here in Scotland as the cows are different and what they eat is different. However, I discovered that I could get the same level of even heat from Peat. Using this I have managed to fire pots outside in a Scottish winter. I managed to protect the pits of fire against wind. The pots are small and all kinds of heights and widths. There was no way that I could match the old ladies of the Kalahari as they have been building pots without a wheel for decades. Building up a pot to any height without a wheel is very difficult unless you are used to it. The clay I could access here is very different as well. The clay used in the Kalahari is much more malleable like plasticine and stretches but better I did not know whether I could make the system work, particularly the firing, but the system I organised has worked well using concrete slabs to protect against the wind and keeping the area free of rain and general wet. In the Kalahari I found only two people who could still use the traditional method of creating pots. It took several days of hunting over 1000 Kilometres to find them.

The construction to exhibit the pots is approx 5ft high 8 ft wide (in two 4ft sections) and 1 ft deep. Into this are placed forty pots, each filled with soil from the former lands of the forty people who signed the Declaration of Arbroath.  
[https://www.historyfiles.co.uk/FeaturesBritain/Medieval\\_TextArbroath01.htm](https://www.historyfiles.co.uk/FeaturesBritain/Medieval_TextArbroath01.htm)

## How 40 POTS came about

I have wanted to create a work which connects Botswana and Scotland ever since a workshop I ran in that country in 2009. There was an old lady in the workshop who came out of the Kalahari and I needed two translators to speak to her. I was telling her the standard stories about Scotland as she wanted to know about the country. While doing this I happened to mention that Scottish monarchs were Kings of Scots, not Kings of Scotland. They were Kings of the people. She brightened up and said that it was just like her tribe. The Chief was Chief of the people not of the village or the land. Those belonged to the people. I have never built anything with ceramics. And when I heard from a former student of Durban University of Technology (I was a regular visitor to that college), that the tradition of earth, cow dung, pot firing was dying out, in the Kalahari, I had the idea of creating 40 POTS. At one time every village used to have someone who could use this traditional form of creativity. But why use a clay pot when you can get a plastic bucket from a store? The method of creating is unique, but because I do not have the skills of the ladies in the Kalahari I felt that making a load of pots in Scotland would not be enough. I had used soil before (see Bannog bags, Smith Collection, Stirling) so I decided to fill the pots with soil but from the lands of the 40 people who signed the Declaration of Independence. I had my means of connecting the two countries. However, I wondered if I really could fire pots in the ground in a Scottish winter. But it worked although nothing like the level of craft displayed by my two Botswanan teachers.



This concrete box has been packed with soil and sand and used as the means of digging a hole and firing the pots. It is protected from the wind by a copse of trees and from the rain by glass sheets. These are removed when firing.





Tshego Tomeletso helping Marea Tsixha get the clay ready. Pots can be built quite high by hand but it takes years of practise. Marea's daughter has been under training for years to learn the craft. Tshego, an art teacher in Gaborone who has acted as my translator and assistant is hoping to pick up enough information to teach her pupils how to create these earth pots as the method of building and firing is now only known by two old ladies of whom Ma Tsixha is one.



The consistency of the clay is like plasticine.

