

TROUBLESHOOTING KILN FIRING WITH CONE PACKS

BASIC CONE INFORMATION

PYROMETRIC CONES

Pyrometric cones are made of clay and other minerals and are precisely formulated to soften when fired in a kiln. They will bend over when they have absorbed a certain amount of heat. The amount of heat is related to both time and temperature. They mirror fairly accurately what goes on in ceramic body and so can be a more reliable guide to firing than a thermocouple instrument. Differing materials in the cones result in different firing temperatures. The cones you are likely to use in an L&L kiln are numbered from Cone 022 to Cone 10 (coldest to hottest). The number is imprinted on the cone. Usually clay and glaze comes with a recommended cone to fire to. A cone is a tall (about 2-1/2") pyramid made from specific damp-pressed ceramic materials. Each cone has a slight lean to it when placed on a flat surface. Be careful not to drop or expose to moisture your cones.

CONES MEASURE HEAT-WORK

Cones are not temperature measuring devices. They measure how much heat has been absorbed by the ware in the kiln, which is the result of the combination of time and temperature. A particular piece of clay needs a certain amount of time at a specific temperature to properly fire it, lower temperature if the time is longer, higher temperature if the time is shorter. An example of this would be if you added about a 20 minute hold to the maximum temperature of a cone 6 firing, you would be able to lower that final temperature by about 20°F. An hour hold time would mean a final temperature of about 40°F lower. A two hour hold time, about 60°F lower.

LARGE SELF SUPPORTING CONES

Although there are various types of cones available we recommend using the "self-supporting large cones". They have a built-in base that allows the cone to sit flat while always placing the pyramid part of it at the proper angle. The angle is there to ensure that the cone bends in the direction you want it to, and doesn't just slump and puddle.

CONES FOR DAWSON KILN SITTERS

There are "small cones" and "bars" available for use in kiln-sitters and in automatic shut-off devices. Small cones are shaped like standard cones but are only about 1" long. They are meant to melt in the kiln-sitter mechanism and activate the shut-off device. The "bars" make it easier for them to be placed properly in the mechanism, as the cones are tapered, and improper placement can result in a slight over-fire or under-fire of the ware. These cones should never be expected to mimic the results of standard or self-supporting cones unless they are used in the kiln-sitter. Gravity works differently on them because their physical size is smaller, and therefore they will melt at a considerably higher temperature than a large cone of the same cone number when they are placed side-by-side.

CONE PACKS

The best way to use the cones, especially if they are all you have to tell how hot your kiln is getting, is to use 'cone packs', or the three cone system. The three cones are placed in a line, aimed so that when they fall, they will fall in a line. The first cone to fall should be in the front of the three cone line. This cone should be one cone number lower than the one you wish to fire to. The target cone (the cone you wish to fire to) should be the next one to fall and should be in the middle. The last cone should be one cone number higher than the target cone. The first cone is to warn you that the firing is almost done. The target cone tells you when to turn off the kiln, and the last cone tells you if the kiln got hotter than you thought it did.

Picture of a "cone pack" (Courtesy of Orton). The ones in the back are before the firing and the ones in the front are after a perfect firing/ These are Self-Supporting Large Cones.



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USE CONES TO CONTROL ACCURACY IN AN AUTOMATIC KILN

We recommend checking the accuracy of your control and thermocouples every so often by placing at least one large cone (the target cone or cone number you are firing to) in the top, middle and bottom. Thermocouples will drift in their accuracy, but you can adjust the cone offset or thermocouple offset (or both) to compensate for this. You know how many degrees off the thermocouple reads at the end of the firing. Using a cone near the thermocouple and a “cone to temperature chart” will help to calibrate a thermocouple accurately. Remember though, cone temperatures are affected by their location in the kiln, the angle at which they are held, and the rate at which they are heated. Slight variations throughout the kiln should be expected.

CONE CHART

You can see a “cone to temperature” chart in the LOG, CONES, TIPS, CERAMIC PROCESS section of your manual. There is far more detailed information on this on the Orton web site (ortonceramics.com).

TROUBLESHOOTING FIRING PROBLEMS

Seems like the kiln is under-firing or over-firing slightly

1) On the next firing make up “cone packs”, one for each thermocouple. A cone pack is a set of three cones, standing in a line. The cone the firing should go to is called the target cone, and is in the middle. The one in front of it is one cone number lower, and the one behind it is one cone number higher. Pay attention to how you position the cones as they are designed to only fall in one particular direction if placed on a level surface. You do not want a lower-numbered cone stuck in the cone pack behind a higher-numbered cone because the lower-numbered one will fall first and might lean against or knock over the higher-numbered cone, which will compromise the accuracy of both cones.

2) Once the cone packs are positioned on shelves (or on a post lying on its side) and are visible through the peepholes, fire the kiln to the middle cone's number.

3) Near the end of the firing start watching the cone packs. Look for the first cone to fall over in each pack, not necessarily at the same time, but pretty close, probably in the middle zone first.

4) Now watch for the middle cone in each pack. Keep checking the DynaTrol display to be sure it does not say **CPLt**. The middle cone in each pack should start to fall at pretty much the same time in the top, middle and bottom of the kiln. When the tip of the cone touches the melted cone in front of it note the temperature readout on the display for that zone's thermocouple.

a) If the middle cones did not go down together then immediately note the differences in each thermocouple reading from the one thermocouple in the same zone as the first cone that went down. Later on, use the “thermocouple offset” feature to add or subtract degrees from each thermocouple accordingly. Use the differences between the thermocouple readings as a guide to know how much to offset each thermocouple.

b) If the three thermocouple temperatures are close enough to be reading the same thing (the middle cones did all go over at the same time), then the kiln should say **CPLt** right when the cone tips bend over and touch or just before it. If the kiln is still firing after this point, note how many degrees higher it goes before shutting itself off. Then use the “cone offset” feature to change the temperature equivalent of that cone. Subtract the same amount of degrees from the temperature equivalent that the kiln over-fired the cone by.

c) If the kiln shut itself off before bending the cones properly, you want to reprogram it and then re-start it as quickly as possible. Note the temperature at which the kiln shut down. Get from **CPLt** to **IdLE**, **tC 2**, current temperature by pressing either **START/STOP** or **ENTER**. Re-program the same program to one cone number higher, then re-start the firing. Do these steps quickly. Now watch the middle

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cones again and note at what temperature the cones properly bend. If they bent while you were programming then just offset the temperature by 5 or 6 degrees. Shut the kiln off once you note that temperature. Using the “cone offset” feature, add the difference of the two readings to that cone's temperature equivalent.

Note: From the factory, the settings that interpret temperature signals in the DynaTrol are hard-programmed; they will not change unless part of the microprocessor has been affected. There is a range of acceptability for the accuracy however and the cone offset feature exists to allow you to fine tune the kiln to particular sized loads. It is best to use all new thermocouples to properly tune the cone offset before individual thermocouples begin to drift. Even keeping one new thermocouple solely for calibrating the individual thermocouples will help to keep the kiln accurate.

CALIBRATING YOUR DYNATROL

This is also covered in the instruction sheet called *dynatrol-basic-operation.pdf* in the OPERATION section of your manual (if you have an automatic kiln).

MORE INFORMATION

Orton Ceramic Institute

See ortonceramics.com for lots of very helpful information on how to use cones and for many firing tips and great information on firing kilns. (ortonceramics.com)

You can see a “cone to temperature” chart in the LOG, CONES, TIPS, CERAMIC PROCESS section of your manual.