

# Two Fire-covers from Langstone Court, Monmouthshire

By G. C. DUNNING

*Sometime Inspector of Ancient Monuments, Department of the Environment*

IN 1964 Mr. Leslie Alcock excavated on the N. side of the castle mound at Langstone Court, 4 miles ENE. of Newport, Monmouthshire.<sup>1</sup> Among the finds of pottery are fragments of two pots of exceptional interest, which Mr. Alcock has kindly given permission to be published in advance of the full excavation report. These are identified as fire-covers, the first record of this type in Wales.

## FIRE-COVER I (FIG. 22, a)

The fabric is hard and light grey, and contains plentiful small stone grits, most of which are rounded grains of quartzite, but some are angular grits of dark colour. The surfaces are light red with grey patches, grading to grey towards the lower part; glaze is absent.

Several large pieces are present. The largest, composed of nine joined sherds, has apertures at two levels in the side and extends up to the angle at the top. A piece of base also carries the section up to the lower edge of an aperture. There is another, longer, piece of the base, also three sherds of the top which extend the profile further, and sundry sherds of the side and separate parts of the apertures and their canopies.

The assemblage is sufficient to achieve a reconstruction of the entire fire-cover, which is considered to be accurate in regard to its size, form and structural details. The larger piece of base, 15·3 cm. (6 in.) long, is enough to give a reliable curve because the cover is wheel-thrown. The outside diameter at the base is 61 cm. (24 in.), and the two pieces of base together give the profile to a height of over 7·6 cm. (3 in.). The slope of the upper part of the side is given by the rilling-marks on the inside of the largest piece, and its profile allows a diameter of about 25·4 cm. (10 in.) at the edge of the top. The vertical positions of the two tiers of apertures on the profile are therefore fixed; their spacing horizontally is given by one complete opening and parts of the openings at each side of it.

The base is slightly thickened on the outside, and it has two girth-grooves above at the junction with the side. The underneath of the base is slightly hollowed. In profile the side is conical, and the top has a well-defined angle and is slightly domed.

<sup>1</sup> *Med. Archaeol.*, ix (1965), 193. The excavations were undertaken on behalf of the Ministry of Public Building and Works.

The apertures in the side are about the same size in both tiers: 5.6 cm. ( $2\frac{1}{4}$  in.) wide and 3.2 cm. ( $1\frac{1}{4}$  in. high). They are semicircular in shape, curved along the top and straight along the lower edge. Each aperture is provided with a hood or canopy, which projects about 2.5 cm. to 3 cm. (1 to 1.2 in.) beyond the side at the top. At the sides of the apertures the canopies decrease to join the profile at the level of the lower edge of the aperture.

The spacing allows for twelve apertures in both tiers, assuming that the intervals between them were fairly uniform and that they extended all round the side. The drawing has been completed on this basis.

The top of the fire-cover has been reconstructed with a large strap-handle of the type normal on these objects. Mr. Alcock has kindly informed me that only one handle was found in the excavations; it is made in a brick-red fabric and is glazed, and so does not belong to either of the fire-covers. As restored, the total height of fire-cover 1 was about 31.7 cm. ( $12\frac{1}{2}$  in.).

Finally, the outside surface of the top is fire-blackened or smoke-stained. This might suggest that vent-holes were present in the top, as on several other fire-covers. However, the staining on the top can be explained as due to laminar flow of the smoke upwards from the apertures, causing the deposit of soot particles on the upper part of the fire-cover. The number of apertures in the side of the cover would seem to make vent-holes in the top unnecessary.

#### FIRE-COVER 2 (FIG. 22, *b*)

The other fire-cover is made of very hard, light grey fabric, with grits as in no. 1. The side of no. 2 is much thicker, 1 to 1.25 cm. (0.4 to 0.5 in.), instead of 0.25 to 0.9 cm. (0.3 to 0.35 in.) on no. 1. The inside surface is uniformly light grey, and the outside is mainly light grey with light red patches; it is also unglazed.

There is only one large piece of this fire-cover, which is given an approximate slope by the rilling-marks on the inside. The diameter at the base was about 41.2 cm. ( $16\frac{1}{4}$  in.). This base also is thickened on the outside, possibly by folding. The under side is slightly bevelled on the inner margin.

The profile of the side, present to a height of nearly 12.7 cm. (5 in.), is curved and slopes inwards more markedly than on fire-cover 1; it does not reach up to the angle of the top. As restored in the drawing, the diameter of the top was about 25.4 cm. (10 in.), and the total height about 19.7 cm. ( $7\frac{3}{4}$  in.), including the handle.

The fragment has the left margin of an aperture, which slopes upwards and outwards. At the lower end of the opening is a small part of the return edge. The margin has a flange worked to a thin edge by the fingers, which projects nearly 1.25 cm. ( $\frac{1}{2}$  in.) beyond the side.

It seems clear that the aperture was wedge-shaped, wider at the top than at the base, but its widths at both ends cannot be determined precisely. However, the side of the fire-cover is present for 4.4 cm. ( $1\frac{3}{4}$  in.) to the left of the upper end of the opening, and this enables the width at the top of the apertures and their spacing to be estimated within limits.

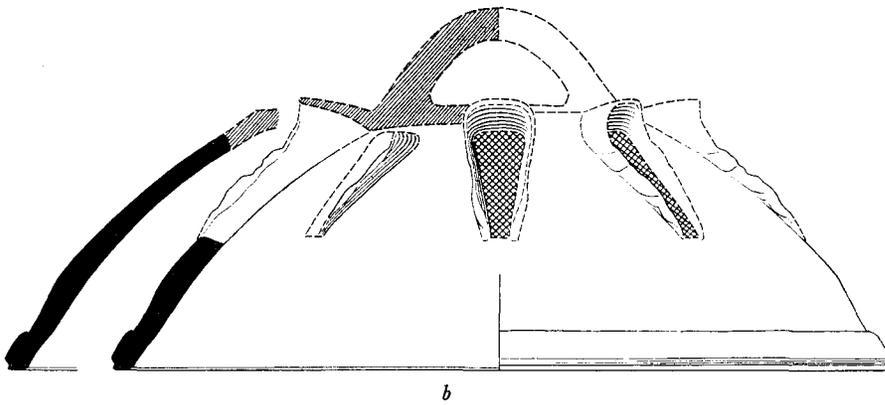
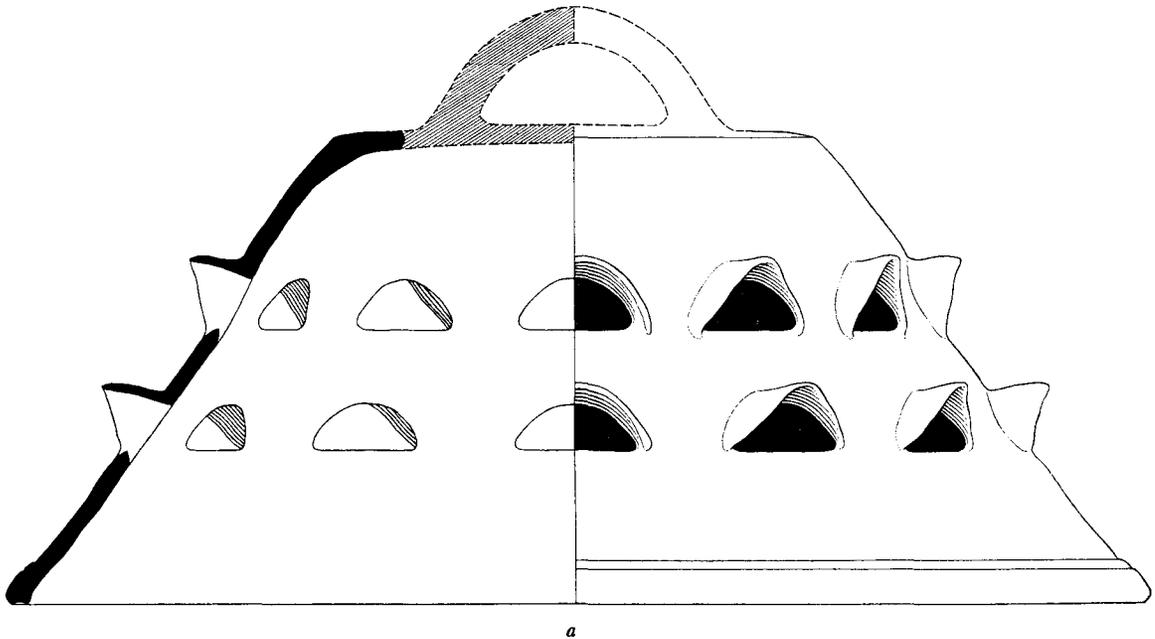


FIG. 22

POTTERY FIRE-COVERS FROM LANGSTONE COURT, MONMOUTHSHIRE

*a.* Fire-cover 1 (p. 57 f.); *b.* Fire-cover 2 (pp. 58, 60). Sc.  $\frac{1}{4}$

Probably there were not more than eight apertures, again assuming that all were about the same in size and shape. In that case the openings were about 8·8 cm. ( $3\frac{1}{2}$  in.) high, and about 3·2 cm. ( $1\frac{1}{4}$  in.) wide across the top. In the drawing the side flanges have been continued round the top as a canopy projecting about 3·2 cm. ( $1\frac{1}{4}$  in.), based on comparison with those on fire-cover 1.

## DISCUSSION

As stated above, the fire-covers from Langstone Court are the first of this type from Wales. The location in SE. Wales may well be significant, since this region was very susceptible to influences and styles, as well as trade in medieval pottery, from the neighbouring regions of England.<sup>2</sup> Fire-covers in pottery are now well-recognized, and known from several sites in southern England, the midlands and the north. The dating appears to range throughout the 13th century, to which period the examples from Langstone Court may be assigned, though possibly this type was present already in the late 12th century. The initial discussion on fire-covers is by J. G. Hurst, in the first report on the deserted medieval village of Hangleton.<sup>3</sup> Since then, more fire-covers are published from Winchester,<sup>4</sup> from the pottery-kilns at Laverstock, near Salisbury,<sup>5</sup> and from Sharnbrook, Beds.<sup>6</sup>

In size and shape the Langstone Court fire-covers conform with those found in England. They differ, however, in the nature and position of the vents. On English examples, small vent-holes in the top, not in the side, are usual, though on one cover, from Winchester, there is a single, larger hole centrally in the top, beneath the handle. The exceptional features present on both of the Langstone Court fire-covers are the apertures in the side and their canopies, for which as yet there are no certain parallels on this type elsewhere. The only analogies for them are the apertures with canopies on louvers, the largest and most complex form of medieval roof-fitting in pottery.<sup>7</sup> On louvers the apertures may be circular, oval or triangular, and the canopies may be across the top only of the opening, or extend down both its sides. The apertures are arranged in tiers or zones, varying from one to four in number. The correspondence between the apertures on louvers and those on the two fire-covers is thus exact in every respect.

The apertures on the Langstone Court fire-covers thus introduce a new element on this type, derived from louvers. The latter structural fittings of the medieval house were designed for ventilation, reduction of the risk of fire from sparks, and the removal of smoke from the room. The second of these factors gave rise to the invention of the fire-cover, with the additional factor of the need to keep the fire or embers on the hearth alight during the night, under conditions

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the comments by J. M. Lewis on 'Some medieval pottery from Cardiff', *Trans. Cardiff Naturalists Soc.*, xciii (1964-6), 40-5.

<sup>3</sup> *Sussex Archaeol. Coll.*, ci (1963), 135-8, with references to other examples.

<sup>4</sup> Barry Cunliffe, *Winchester Excavations 1949-1960*, I (1964), 126, fig. 45, nos. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> *Archaeologia*, cii (1969), 135, fig. 23, no. 195.

<sup>6</sup> *Beds. Archaeol. J.*, v (1970), 124, fig. 4.

<sup>7</sup> For descriptions of louvers see G. C. Dunning in *Trans. Thoroton Soc. of Notts.*, LXVI (1962), 20-3; *Med. Archaeol.*, x (1966), 74-80; and *Antiq. J.*, LII (1972), p. 347-9.

of safety. The occurrence of apertures in the side of fire-covers is thus not really surprising, in view of their similarity in function to louvers. In conclusion, it is worth pointing out that in the case of fragments of pottery with small apertures and canopies, it will now be more difficult to decide to which type they belonged.

*NOTE*

*The Society is much indebted to the Department of the Environment for a grant towards the cost of publishing this paper.*