

Area L – LIA & Roman pottery summary

By Edward Biddulph

Introduction – Pottery was recovered from 420 contexts, weighing 415,144g. The area's chronological trends may be summarised as follows:

- ❑ The earliest activity dates to the end of the 1st century BC or the start of the 1st century AD.
- ❑ Activity peaks during the second half of the 1st century AD, tailing off sharply into the 2nd century.
- ❑ Picking up at the end of the 2nd century, activity remains at a low, but constant level until the later 3rd, when it increases.
- ❑ The second half of the 4th century represents something of a high point in the level of occupation, which possibly continues into the 5th century.

Ditches & boundaries – Area L comprised few ditches. Boundary ditch L51 dates nicely to the LIA, as does ditch L52. Pit 14362 might date to the late 1st century BC, based on the presence of handmade grog-tempered pottery with a small amount of imported ware. Ditch terminals L31 and L32 are late Roman in date, probably late 4th century+. Segments 20751 and 20754 (L32) contained pottery dating up to the mid 4th century, although it could well date later.

Pits & wells – The earliest pits date to the late Iron Age. Pit 14207, for example, was cut during the late 1st century BC and the early 1st century AD. The pottery from groups L12 and L13 have a uniform late Iron Age date (probably AD rather than BC), except from 20258 in the latter. Its upper fills contained a small amount of Roman pottery, dating the final stages of in-filling to the earliest Roman period. Group L14 pits safely date to the second half of the 1st century, including 20213, which probably dates to the early part of the range. The pottery evidence from this feature, which underlies a number of L13 pits, may suggest that the pits from this group also date to the very early Roman period. Generally there is too much grog-tempered pottery from L13 to be dismissed as residual. A late Iron Age date is given to the pottery from pits 14533, 14835 and 20067 in L39. They also contained not insignificant amounts of cbm. However, 14533 yielded almost 10kg of grog-tempered and Gallo-Belgic wares, and 20067 produced 3kg, making it unlikely that their dates extend into the Roman period. Area L contained at least two wells. Well 14984 (L47) seems to have fallen out of use during the late 2nd and early 3rd century. Its upper fills yielded 4th century pottery and it is a possibility it resumed accumulating material after a long gap, or that the pottery derives from the late 4th century+ well 14529 (L48).

Kilns & hearths – Kiln 14858 and its associated pits (L45) are among the later features in the area. The kiln, which appears to have had a fairly short life, is likely to have been in use from the late 3rd century, probably falling out of use sometime during the first half of the 4th century. The kiln contained over 10kg of pottery, including 3kg of sandy grey ware, much of which, I suspect, represents waste material, as evidenced by the presence of hard-fired spalled and burnt sherds. With these criteria in mind, one is able to pick out products. The repertoire includes bead and flanged dishes (B6), straight sided dishes (B1), necked jars (G24), and bowl-jars (E5). These were produced in a slightly flinty grey fabric. It is possible that black-surfaced ware was also produced, as some sherds are in a similar condition to the grey ware. The kilns from area N, although typologically similar to this one, seem have been in use a little earlier. Kiln 10906 fell into disuse during the second half of the 3rd century, while 11423

was out of use by the late 3rd. None contained obvious waste material. The hearths produced pottery of two distinct dates. Group L64 hearths consistently dated to the late Iron Age or very early Roman period. The two features from L65 that contained pottery dated to the late 4th century. Although this seems to show the main peaks of area occupation, as many features contained no pottery and could not be closely dated.

Structures – Post-holes, perhaps, remain the better indicator of main periods of occupation. Many could be dated no closer than to the Roman period. However, those that were dated principally fell within the late Iron Age or late Roman period. Most of the late Roman post-holes belong to rectangular structure L22 and associated group L23. A notable aspect of these post-holes is that they consistently contained pottery. It has been suggested that this implies that the posts were deliberately packed with such material when the structure was built, or that the voids were backfilled when the posts were removed during its demolition. This view is supported by the pottery from 20468, comprising large pieces of a Hadham face-mask flagon. It is unlikely that the vessel accidentally found its way into the feature. Indeed, as it was a lone vessel and in fairly good condition, some care may have been taken over its deposition. Unfortunately, the pottery cannot place the backfilling to the construction or the destruction of the building. Assemblages are too small to include, or be able to detect, residual material. However, the regular presence of fabrics such as Oxford and late shell-tempered wares strongly suggest that either took place in the late 4th century.

The pottery – Some of the largest assemblages came from pits, and appear to represent ordinary domestic rubbish, with the possible exception of 20008, which contained eleven complete or near complete vessels. While their deposition may have been for a ritualistic reason, the majority of vessels are incomplete. However, some pieces join others in pit 20010, which together complete some vessels. If a ritual is represented, the pottery was probably spread between two features. There were also a lot of miscellaneous sherds, suggesting that at least some of the pottery might have been deposited as ordinary rubbish. As usual, locally made reduced coarse ware pottery predominated. However, some wares made their first appearances at Elms Farm, such as a white slipped oxidised ware from North Kent, probably dating to the first half of the 2nd century, and central Gaulish colour coated ware. This is the almost pure white fabric, which is Flavian to Hadrianic in date. Interestingly, so far there is only one other example. This is from area G and in a yellow/buff-brown fabric with hairpin decoration (Greene 1979, 43). Gallo-Belgic pottery was present in greater quantity than in area H, but less than was present in area N. In addition it was frequently abraded and broken. Its appearance may be largely residual or that, as suggested, that there was a low level of occupation from the late 1st century BC, until the mid 1st century AD (after the main period of Gallo-Belgic importation).

Quantified groups – Sixteen contexts were selected for quantification by eves, reflecting main chronological trends. These are: **14204, 14341, 14528, 14564, 14591, 14613, 14635, 14743, 14861, 14948, 20009, 20011, 20013, 20031, 20180 and 20196**. Nine groups were worthy of publication.

Further thoughts on [20008]: There are probably fewer sherd-links with [20010]/(20011) than previously supposed. Only one vessel (so far) can be more-or-less reconstructed. However, it's likely that the loose sherds in (20009) and (20011) belong to a handful of vessels only. Re-examination of the complete and near-complete vessels from (20009) has generated some (hopefully) useful ideas. The vessel with the hole in its base and two holes in the side was placed upside down in the pit. In addition, the photograph seems to show that it was covered

with spoil before more vessels were placed in the pit. These factors suggest that the pot was placed deliberately and with care. Of course, inversion of vessels is well-attested as a burial practice. In some cases, vessels have covered the calcined bone, and have been perforated, perhaps allowing the spirit or essence of the deceased to escape. No bone was found under our perforated vessel, although the absence of bone does not mean necessarily that no cremation is represented. The rims of at least five vessels have been chipped or have had larger pieces removed. While I cannot claim with certainty that this was caused deliberately, it remains a possibility. Removing pieces from funerary vessels is also well-attested (e.g. at Great Dunmow). In some cases, the pieces have been placed alongside the vessels from which they came. In short, I think that the vessels in [20008] were placed deliberately, perhaps even as part of a ritual. What's more, the vessels share similarities to vessels from cremation burials. It's also possible that the feature had been disturbed, perhaps by the cutting of pits. This may account for some joining sherds.