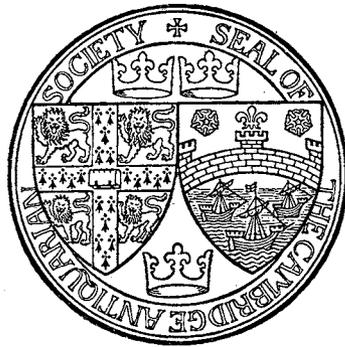


PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY



VOLUME XLIV

JANUARY 1950 TO DECEMBER 1950

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*Published for the Cambridge Antiquarian Society
by Bowes & Bowes Publishers Limited
Cambridge*

*Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge
(Brooke Crutchley, University Printer)*

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ROMAN PEWTER FROM THE 'OLD CROFT' RIVER AT WELNEY

T. C. LETHBRIDGE, M.A., F.S.A.

IN vol. xxxiii, p. 165, of the Society's *Proceedings* we summarized the known finds of late-Roman plate from the Fenland area. Since this note was written in 1933, additional discoveries continue to be made. The Mildenhall Treasure, apparently found at West Row, is only one very spectacular example out of many.

In 1942, Mr Clayton of Welney had occasion to rid himself of the stump of a tree. His farm is situated on the silt roddon of the Old Croft River.¹ He dug a hole 6 ft. deep in the peat, which has formed in the old river bed in the middle of the roddon, and tumbled the tree stump into it. Before doing so, however, he noticed a pewter bowl in the bottom of the hole and picked this out. Details of this bowl, which is a vertical-sided, plain vessel have already been published in our notes² and it is now in the Fitzwilliam Museum. Major Gordon Fowler, who had brought this bowl to the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology to be photographed and recorded, asked Mr Clayton to keep a lookout for further examples.

Four years later Mr Clayton buried another tree stump some 15 ft. away from the first. At the bottom of the hole he found a pewter jug. He informed Major Fowler of his discovery, but, before there was an opportunity of collecting the jug, Mr Clayton lent it to the Vicar of Welney. Shortly after this, an unknown man drove up to the Vicarage in a car, informed the Vicar that he had come to collect the jug for Major Fowler, and drove off with it. The identity of this man though unknown is suspected. Nothing has been seen of the jug since. This unfortunate incident should put us on our guard. Rapacious private collectors apparently still haunt the district. As far as we can judge, the jug was of the type shown in Plate VI of vol. xxxiii of our *Proceedings*.

The discovery of two pewter vessels in the bed of the river so close together made it clear that others might be expected in the vicinity. Mr Clayton was most willing to help us, and an attempt was made in 1948 to excavate the area between the two buried tree stumps. Petrol shortage, burst tyres and other unfortunate incidents prevented us taking advantage of the dry summer. The next year, however, we managed, with the help of Major Fowler and our member, Mr S. Hopkin, who provided labour and a motor pump, to dig out the intervening space. The season was, however, wet and the excavation apparently connected to the neighbouring dyke by a rat hole. Water came in faster than the pump could carry it away and I was not

¹ National grid reference 135/527947.

² *C.A.S. Proceedings*, vol. XLV, p. 79 and Plate XXVI.

able to make a proper plan and section of the work, but the diagram (Fig. 1) represents the section which was disclosed.

A depression on top of the roddon was filled with peaty soil. This presumably represents the final stage of the Old Croft River. At the bottom of this peat was a 2 in. layer of late Romano-British potsherds, ashes, daub from buildings, bones of oxen, sheep and geese, and fragments of baked clay cylinders, such as are commonly found in the fen area and whose use is unknown. They are some 8 in. long and 2 in.

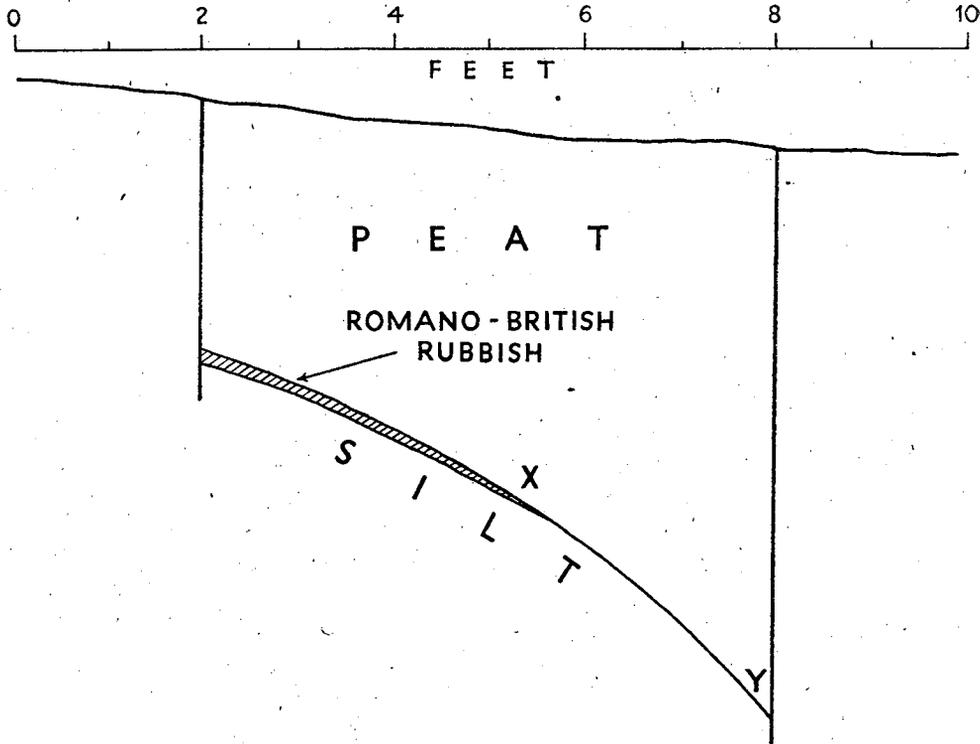


Fig. 1. Welney. Diagrammatic section to show position of finds of Roman pewter.

X = position of small bowl (see fig. 2).

Y = estimated position of earlier finds.

in diameter. I interpret this layer as rubbish from buildings which once stood on the silt roddon, and which had been shovelled into the reeds bordering the stream. Beneath this well-defined layer was the roddon silt sloping rapidly towards the present dyke.

Roman pottery fragments occurred in this silt. It was difficult, however, to study their occurrence and stratigraphy with water swirling round one's feet and sucking off one's seaboots. In the layer of rubbish and on the silt, lay a small pewter bowl (Fig. 2). When found, it had been folded back on itself on the line which I have shown in the drawing. This bowl had been cut in half with a pair of strong shears.

It is now clear what had happened to the pewter. The silver treasures of Traprain and Balline¹ were cut up in just this manner. We may confidently assume that the Romano-British buildings on the bank of the roddon were sacked by raiders, who found the pewter and mistook it for silver. They were in process of cutting it up for

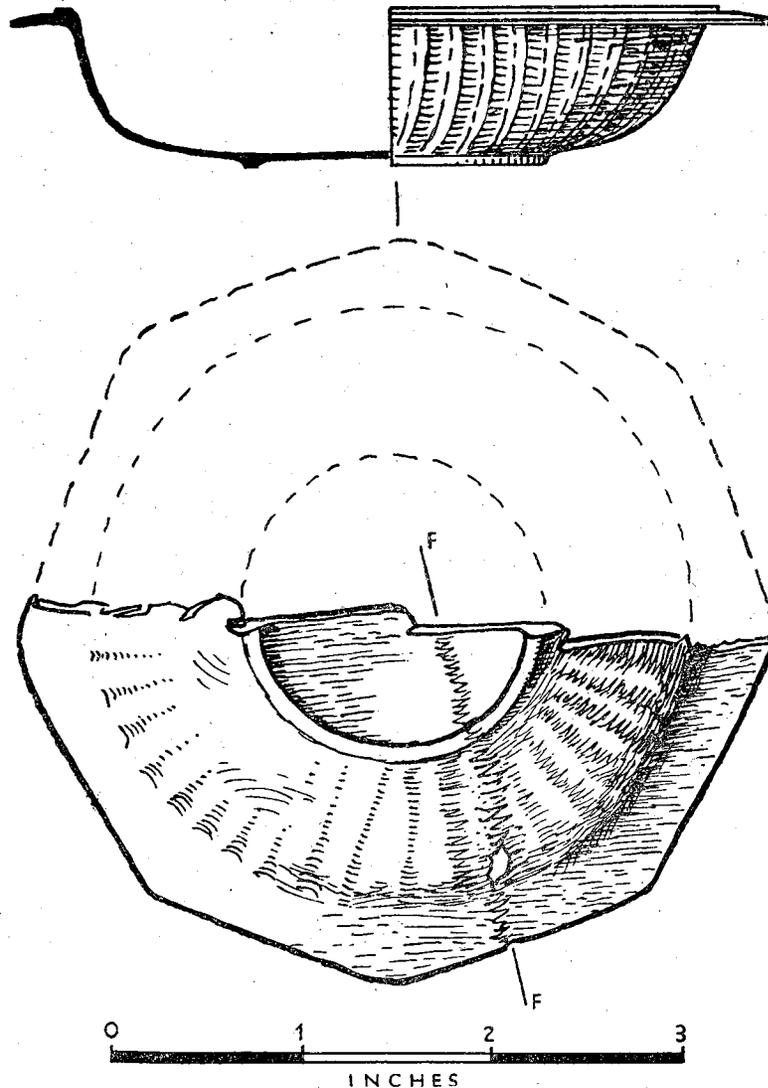


Fig. 2. Welney. Pewter bowl, cut in half and folded up along line F-F.

sharing out among themselves when somebody recognized that the metal was pewter and not silver. It was then all thrown into the river in disgust.

How many of our local finds were treated in the same manner it is impossible to say, but some at any rate appear to have been deliberately concealed by their real owners.

¹ Curle, *The Treasure of Traprain*; S. O'Riordain, *Proc. Royal Irish Academy*, vol. LI C, No. 3.

It seems improbable that the raiders can have been Picts, for they were presumably coming up the Old Croft River from Wisbech by boat. The Welney pewter therefore is probably our first piece of direct evidence of a Saxon raid.

Such pottery as is easily identifiable belongs to the late style of painted vessels. A large excavation on this site with coffer dams and a powerful pump might be expected to yield valuable evidence of the final stage of Romano-British occupation in the Fens.

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