

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



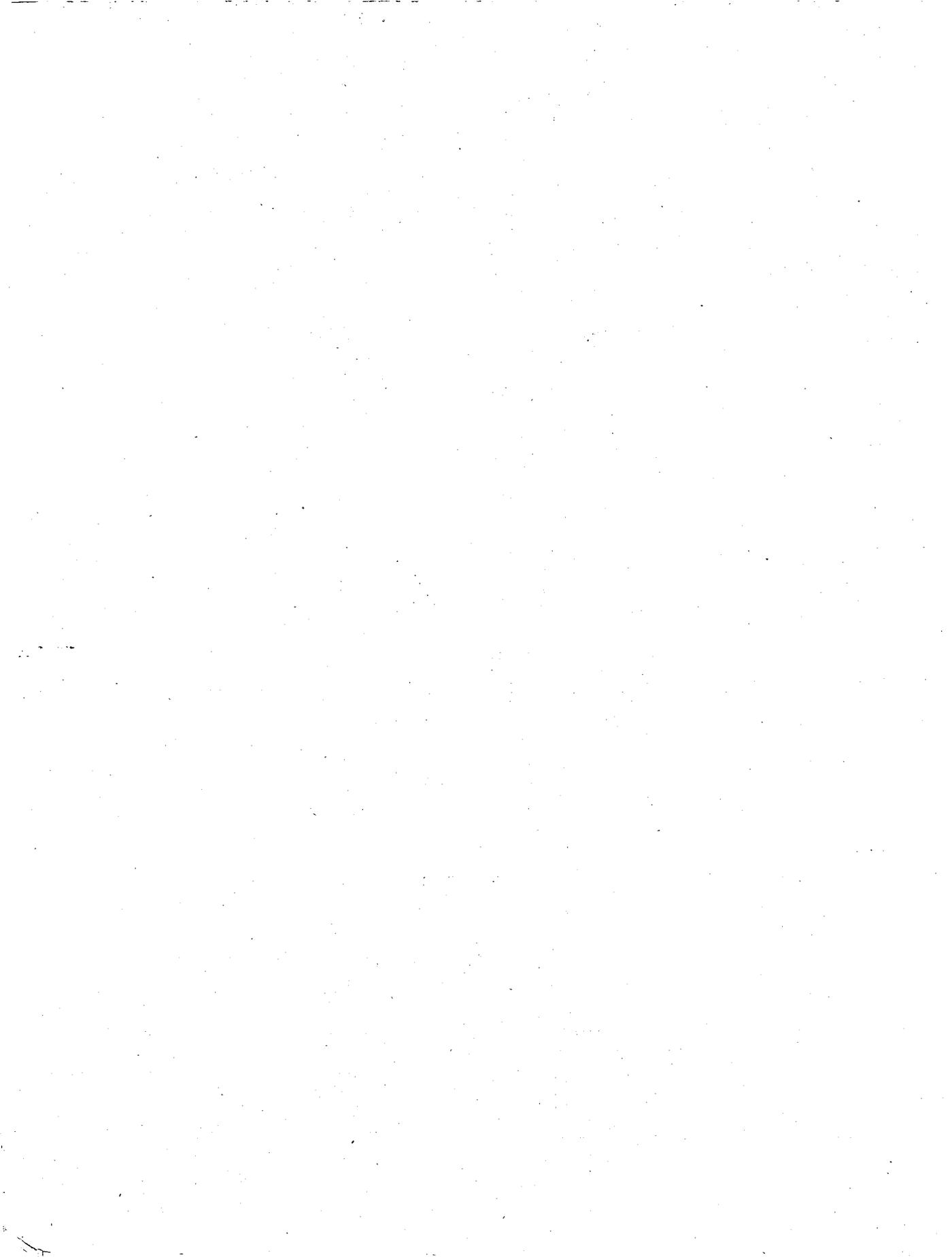
VOLUME L

JANUARY 1956 TO DECEMBER 1956

CAMBRIDGE
DEIGHTON BELL

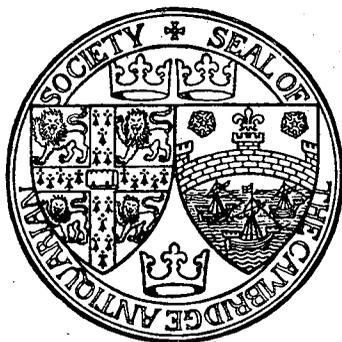
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A BELGIC AND ROMAN FARM AT WYBOSTON, BEDFORDSHIRE

C. F. TEBBUTT, F.S.A.

EARLY in 1954 Dr St Joseph kindly sent me a number of air photographs of crop marks near St Neots. Among these were several of a site on the left bank of the Ouse in north Bedfordshire between Eaton Socon and Wyboston (1 in. National Grid 172571). It appeared to show, as outlined by ditches, a small farm holding of some eight plots, each roughly square or oblong in shape, covering about ten acres. Two areas, defined by ring ditches, suggested hut sites and some parallel ditches, forming corridors within the plots, looked like animal catching pens (Plate V).

On a visit to the field I found that nothing was to be seen on the surface, but I picked up a few Roman period sherds and part of a Roman bronze lock. The foreman of the adjacent gravel pit told me that almost immediately his machines were moving over to dig the site.

Application was at once made to Mr C. V. Ibbett, Managing Director of Messrs Welfords Ltd., for permission to make some preliminary excavations, and this was readily given. The foreman and the dragline navy drivers took the greatest interest in the excavations, and later when they were digging the ground gave me every possible facility, help and information.

Before gravel digging started it was found possible with the help of lads from the nearby Gaynes Hall Borstal Institution, with Mr Waddilove the Governor, to find, and cut sections across, several of the ditches shown on the air photographs. Although varying in depth from 3 to 6 ft., their filling, in section, followed a pattern later found to be the same in nearly all the ditches investigated. At the bottom was Belgic pottery in two layers, separated by about 6 in. of silt from flooding. Above the upper layer was a much thicker layer of silt, in the deepest ditch as much as 4 ft., and above this scattered sherds of Roman pottery (Fig. 2).

Very little excavation was possible before gravel digging started and its progress was rapid and continuous. All efforts were therefore concentrated on dating each ditch as it was uncovered, recording as many finds as possible before they were disturbed, and marking their position on a plan based on the air photographs. This plan (Fig. 1) is only approximately correct, as the photographs were all taken obliquely.

The area where human occupation showed the greatest density was on the east or river side, with the Belgic concentration around the ring sites to the north and the Roman on the south.



Wyboston: air photograph of site.

THE DITCH SILTING

Although the depth of silting, particularly that separating the Belgic and Roman periods, was so marked, there seemed no way to determine how long such a depth would take to accumulate. A farmer who had farmed the land for many years told me that only in 1947 had he ever known it to be flooded, but a flood of 1947

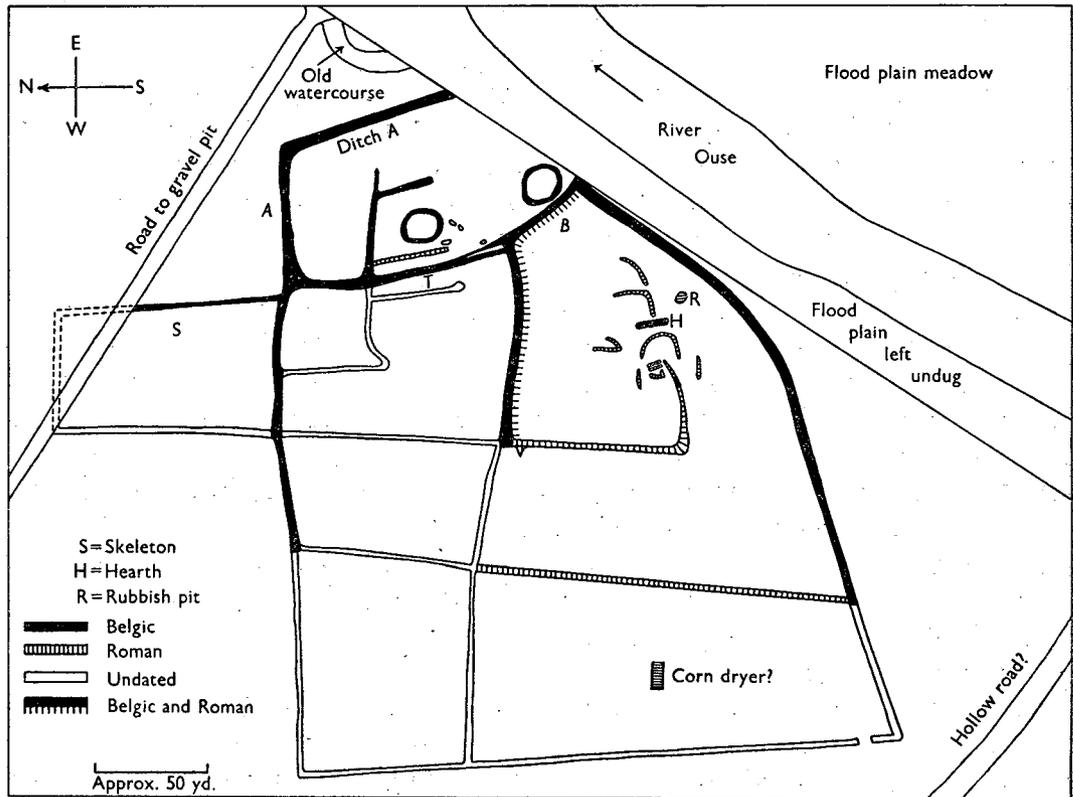


Fig. 1. A Belgic and Roman Farm, Wyboston, Bedfordshire.

magnitude, flowing over plough-land, could easily fill a ditch to the top with silt in a few days. On the other hand, successive smaller floods might take many years. Again, whether the surrounding land was grass or arable would make a great difference to the amount of silt deposited in one flood.

It is impossible, therefore, to say if the Belgic occupation came to an abrupt end because of an abnormal flood or if its abandonment was followed by such a flood or floods. It is only certain that one high flood did occur during the occupation but did not cause its abandonment.

THE DITCHES

As will be seen from the plan (Fig. 1), the main layout of the ditched enclosures is Belgic. Some ditches on the extreme west of the site are undated owing to the increasing scarcity of domestic rubbish as the distance from the habitation centres increased.

I would suggest that the original settlement was in the oblong space enclosed by the ditches *A*, *T* and *B*. This contains the two ring ditches which would seem to be hut sites. From this nucleus grew the other enclosures as part of a plan, but with an

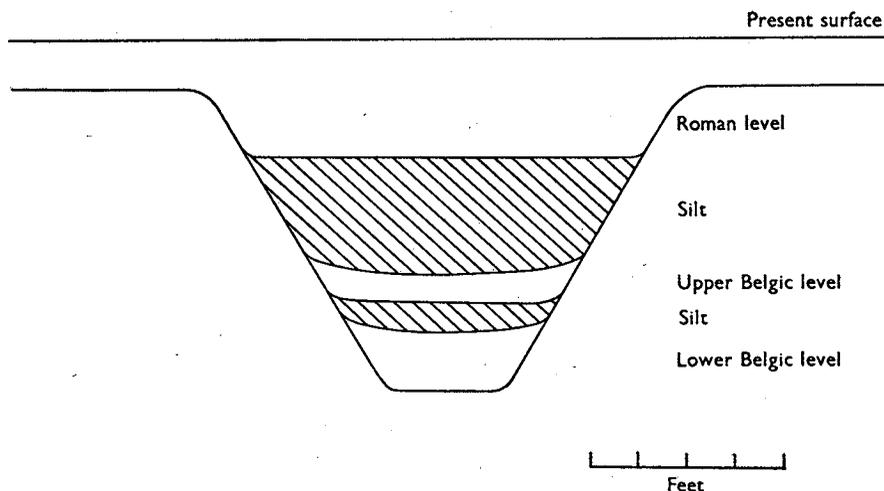


Fig. 2. Typical ditch section.

obvious later addition to the north. The south-east boundary was not reached by the gravel digging and may have been the river itself. The ditch *A* to its junction with ditch *T* was the deepest on the site, averaging an original depth of 6 ft. and width of 10 ft. at ground level, and had from 1 to 2 ft. of water in it during the summer. Ditches *T* and *B* only averaged 5 ft. in depth. The east end of ditch *B* was blocked with clay which seems to suggest a desire to keep water in this ditch system, which might then be compared with a medieval moat. It will be noted that there is a curious division of ditch *T*, at its junction with ditch *B*, into two branches which suggests an entrance with staggered approach bridges.

I have already indicated the typical pattern of filling in the ditches, and can only add that although pottery from the upper and lower Belgic levels was, when possible, kept carefully separate, no difference was discernible and most types found occurred in both levels. Included in the domestic rubbish were large numbers of animal bones including horse, ox, sheep and pig, but with the notable exception of any bird or fish bones, nor were there any oyster or mussel shells. Significantly no part of a quern was found. In the ditches near the rings were portions of crudely fired square floor tiles and some clay daub. No roof material was found and no nails.

In the extreme south-west corner of the enclosures will be noted a causeway over

the ditch which must indicate a gate, and beyond this a wide shallow undated trench which I suspect to be a hollow road.

In one of the ditches forming part of the enclosure extending north from ditch *A* was found the skeleton of a woman. Unfortunately the upper half had already been destroyed before I was able to examine it. The ditch was here 5 ft. 6 in. deep and the skeleton lay on its side 2 ft. 6 in. above the bottom. The knees were bent as far as was possible for them to go. The body had been thrown unceremoniously into the ditch among the domestic rubbish and then covered by the same material.

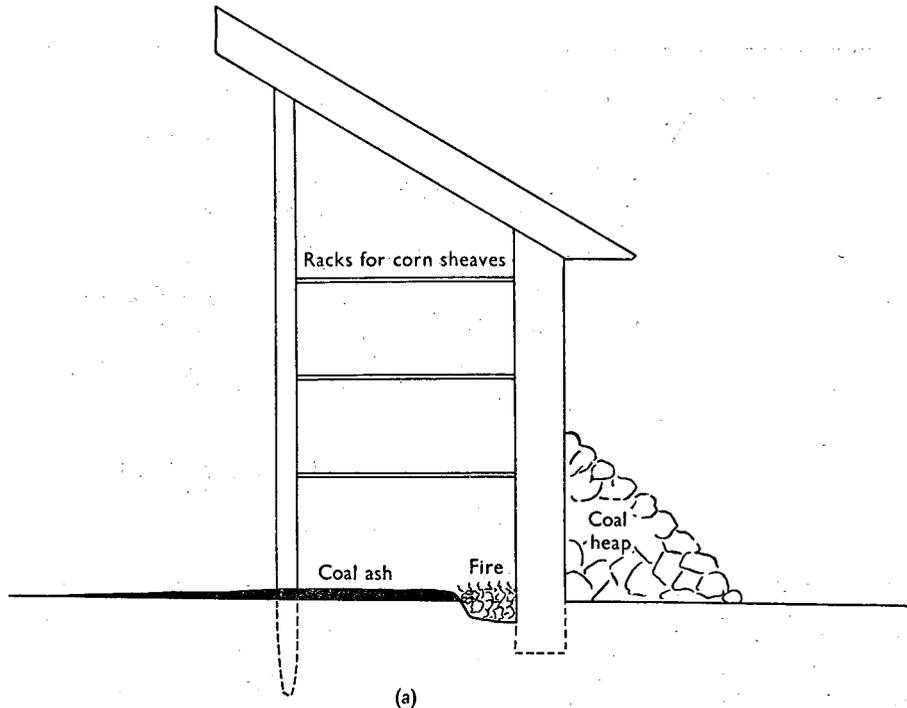


Fig. 3a. Suggested reconstruction of corn dryer, end section (north-east to south-west).

THE RING DITCHES

Although one can hardly doubt that these were hut sites, their excavation proved disappointing in exactly determining their purpose. In each case the ditch was about 2 ft. deep by 2 ft. wide and the enclosed space had a diameter of approximately 40 ft. No trace of a floor, hearth, or any building or post-hole was found within the circle, although, as stated above, floor tiles and daub were present in nearby ditches. The filling of the ring ditches was singular by the scarcity of domestic rubbish it contained in contrast with the nearby enclosure ditches. Just enough pottery was found in them to confirm their Belgic origin. This could only mean that the huts were inhabited by people of clean and tidy habits. The only notable finds, a bronze brooch (Fig. 5, 2) and a perforated oven brick were both from the north ring.

THE ROMAN PERIOD

As stated above, the domestic occupation of the Roman period occurred mainly on the south or south-west side of the site.

Of all the pottery of this period collected from rubbish pits, ditches, or scattered surface finds, none can be dated earlier than the second century.¹ Therefore there would seem to have been a minimum gap of sixty years between the end of the Belgic and the beginning of the Roman occupation.

These later settlers dug very few extra ditches, but those they did dig seem to fit in with the Belgic layout of the enclosures. The Belgic ditches would then be nearly filled to the top with silt, although still discernible, and the Roman people did not clean them out. One of the two short lengths of ditch that end in the air was proved to be Roman and by implication the other is also. These may be animal-catching pens.

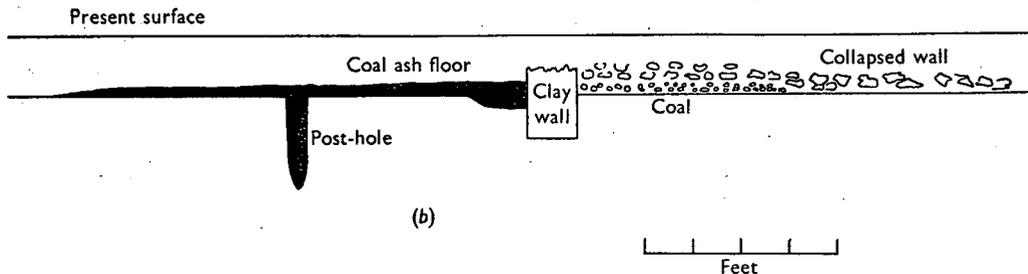


Fig. 3*b*. Actual section found.

In the Roman domestic occupation area were large patches of black ash and burnt gravel, and in nearby ditches and pits were pottery, metal slag, clay daub, wall plaster, iron nails, and both Collyweston and clay roof tiles. This material exemplified the difference between Belgic and Roman building methods; tiles, wall plaster and nails being quite absent in the former building area. The large number of oyster shells in the Roman levels showed a difference also in feeding habits.

ROMAN CORN DRIERS?

In about the middle of the extreme south-west enclosure were two structures thought to be corn driers (Fig. 3). It has also been suggested that they were used for some form of metal work, but no signs of metal or metal slag were found near them, whereas 150 yards to the north was an area where metal slag and an iron metal ladle were found.

Unfortunately only one of these structures could be examined before it was destroyed. Even this one had a small part of one end dug away before I saw it and the other end was under a roadway in use at the time. It was a long narrow verandah-like building, 4 ft. 6 in. wide and at least 20 ft. long, with a north-west-south-east

¹ A stamped mortarium is described in Appendix II.

axis, and the open side facing south-west. On the north-east side was a clay wall 1 ft. thick and, although its original height was of course unknown, it spread 9 ft. from its base when it finally crumbled and fell away from the building. The front was open with posts (represented by post-holes) set about 1 ft. apart to support the roof. In the absence of tiles I assume the roof to have been of thatch. Along the foot of the clay wall, inside the building, was a narrow shallow trench quite filled by black ash. This ash had also spread, and been levelled, across the whole floor and more thinly outside the open front. Amongst it were several sherds of Roman pottery. The clay wall still stood a few inches high and on the inside was burnt red from the fire in the trench. If this building was indeed used for corn drying it perhaps contained tiers of racks where sheaves could be dried by sun, wind or artificial heat.¹

Perhaps the most interesting fact about the building was that the fuel used in it was coal. Coal ash lay all over the floor and a layer of small lumps of unburnt coal, the remains of a heap stored at the back of the clay wall, had been sealed by the collapsed wall material. Samples of this coal were submitted to the National Coal Board who kindly offered to examine it. From their tests (see Appendix below) it is reasonably certain that it is not of east or west Midland origin but from a probable source in Northumberland or Durham.

THE BELGIC POTTERY

For the purpose of dating the earthworks it is perhaps sufficient to say that all the pottery appears to come within the range of Type B from Verulamium, dated by Sir Mortimer Wheeler A.D. 5-43.² It is not proposed here to describe and illustrate all the very large number of fragments found. They have been deposited at the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge, and are available for study there. Some examples of interest appear in Fig. 4, 1-6, and the main types are briefly described below.

Native Wares

The commonest vessel was the olla (Fig. 4, 5), made of clay mixed with chalk and shell grit and burnt to any shade between black and brick red. It was probably made locally as similar vessels made of this material, but usually of inferior workmanship, were used throughout the Roman and Saxon periods in this area. The Belgic ollae are distinctive in having a decided inside lip to receive a lid. These were probably of wood as no pottery lids were found. Most ollae are quite plain, but a few have faint horizontal combing and others deeply incised grooves round the shoulder. One example has a hole pierced below the rim to enable a string to be threaded for suspension.

¹ This building would seem to have many features in common with the Faroe *sodnhús* (barley drying kiln) where heads of corn are dried on racks over a peat fire in a depression in the floor. Williamson, *The Atlantic Islands* (1948), p. 206.

² *Report of Research Committee of Society of Antiquaries*, vol. xi.

This does not seem to have been a common type at Verulamium, but was plentiful at the Felmersham Belgic site higher up the Ouse.¹

Other common types are grey ware jars, both cordoned and with incised grooves below the neck (Fig. 4, 1, 6) and grey ware corn jars with bright red slip. There are also many sherds of small grooved bowls paralleled in the Snailwell burial² (Fig. 4, 2, 3).

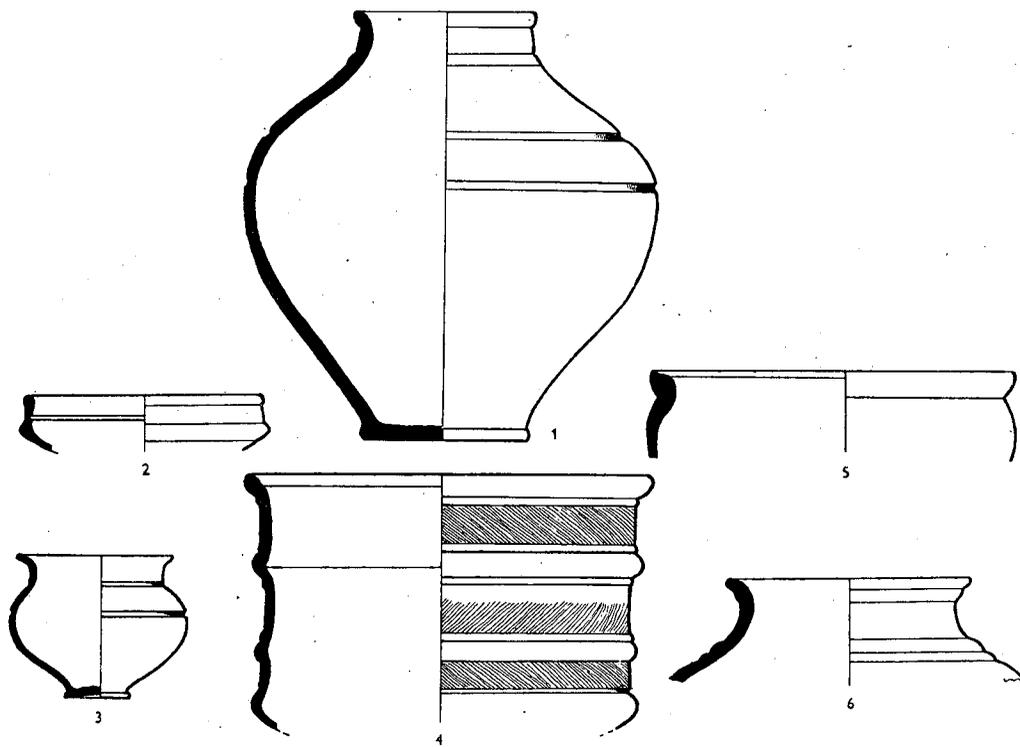


Fig. 4. Specimens of Belgic pottery from Wyboston. 1, Grey ware, wheel-turned cordoned jar, 1/4. 2, Grey ware, bell-shaped cup, imported, 1/4. 3, Light grey gritted ware, wheel-turned grooved bowl, native, 1/4. 4, Red outside, grey inside, wheel-turned, imported tazza, 1/4. 5, Hand-made olla of local brown shelly paste, 1/4. 6, Light red-brown shell grit paste cordoned jar, native, 1/4.

Imported Wares

Wares thought to have been imported include sherds of *terra nigra* platters, Arretine bowls, and an amphora. Butt beakers of coarse grey ware with hatched ornament may have been native, but those of fine hard grey ware with red or yellow slip and rouletted finger nail impressions are almost certainly imported. They can again be compared with one from Snailwell.³

One striking vessel is a very large grey ware tazza with bright red slip and ornamented with diagonal hatching (see Fig. 4, 4). Several sherds have a design of burnished lozenge-shaped marks, and one flat piece, probably part of a base, is

¹ *Antiq. J.* vol. XXIX, p. 57.

² *Proc. C.A.S.* vol. XLVII (1954), p. 34, no. 53, 19.

³ *Proc. C.A.S.* vol. XLVII (1954), p. 34, no. 53, 14B.

marked on both sides with concentric circles crossed at intervals by radial lines resembling the face of a grandfather clock.

One *terra nigra* base has a ring foot and another an omphalos.

MISCELLANEOUS OBJECTS OF THE BELGIC PERIOD

Sling Bolt

A biconical clay sling bolt was found near the bottom of ditch *A*. Although common at the Glastonbury Lake Village, this type is rare in eastern England.¹

Oven Brick

Part of a pierced clay oven brick, as found at Verulamium, came from the northern ring ditch.

Floor tiles

A number of very fragmentary and badly fired bricks or floor tiles came from the bottom of ditch *A*. They are about an inch thick, but of uncertain size or shape. Similar tiles were found at Verulamium.

Bronze Brooch (Fig. 5)

The small bronze brooch from the northern ring ditch is of a type that at present I have been unable to parallel in this country. It could be classed as a La Tène III type.

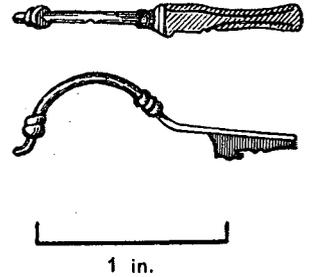


Fig. 5. Small bronze brooch, Belgic hut-site, Wyboston. (Exact parallel unknown.)

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

We have here, as revealed by air photography, almost the complete layout of huts and enclosed fields of a farm of Belgic pioneers near the northern limit of their frontier at the time of the Claudian conquest.

The economy practised seems to have been mainly pastoral with a few acres of enclosed land, ditched and fenced against the domestic cattle roaming outside, and perhaps providing shelter and safety for them in the winter. The position chosen for the settlement was next the river but above normal floods, and nearby fords would enable the cattle to be easily driven across to the extensive water meadows on the other side.

The actual living area was surrounded by a wet ditch like the medieval manor and from this a planned pattern of small enclosures was laid out. The vicinity of the huts was kept clean and domestic rubbish deposited at a distance.

In the extensive Roman period settlements lower down the Ouse, from Godmanchester to St Ives, Belgic pottery has been found in small quantities at the lowest

¹ Mr Lethbridge tells me he found one at the Lord's Bridge Belgic site.

levels, but in the numerous Roman fen villages it is rare or absent. It would seem that Belgic penetration from the south had just reached the southern fen edge at the Claudian conquest, but had been established in north Bedfordshire for a decade or so. It is, therefore, all the more surprising to find that the well-known pattern of the Roman fen village—small square ditched enclosures attached to domestic sites—appears to have had its origin in the pre-Claudian Belgic farm.

Finds of the Iron Ages A and B are rare in the whole of Huntingdonshire and the Fens and it would seem likely that after the Roman conquest this sparsely populated area was heavily colonized by people of Belgic origin who laid out their settlements in traditional fashion. The settlement of these empty lands may well have been officially organized if we accept the theory that the area was an Imperial Estate.

The Wyboston farm did not survive the troubles of the Roman conquest and remained deserted for at least sixty years.

The re-occupation of the farm, after this long lapse, was apparently again by people of Belgic origin who used the old layout of enclosures with few alterations. They were, however, satisfied by shallow ditches and needed no wet moat round their superior timber-framed, tiled and plastered houses.

It seems evident that they, in contrast to the Belgic pioneers, were part of a national economic system. From their doorstep navigation was open to the sea, and some export, almost certainly corn, was shipped away in barges whose return loads included coal and oysters.

It is easy to imagine that the abandonment of the Car Dyke inland route to the north, at the close of the second century,¹ coincided with a safe coastwise passage from the Wash to north-east ports.² Corn, well dried to prevent deterioration in ships' holds, would be transhipped from barge to keel at a Wash port. Some economic expert had perhaps worked out that it was cheaper to employ men digging coal in Northumberland or Durham to ballast south bound vessels, and provide fuel for corn drying, etc., than to take men away from corn growing in the south to cut, cart and split firewood, or dig peat.

All finds from the excavations have been placed in the University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge.

Besides the names of those mentioned in the text I would add my grateful thanks to Mr W. Key for help in digging, to Mr B. R. Hartley for dating Roman pottery, and to Mr T. C. Lethbridge, M.A., F.S.A., who besides contributing drawings gave much good advice, the Air Ministry for permission to publish their photograph, and the National Coal Board Scientific Department for their analysis of the coal.

¹ Clark, 'Report on Excavations on the Cambridgeshire Car Dyke', *Antiq. J.* vol. xxix, pp. 145-63.

² There has been speculation as to whether the course of the river from Littleport to Southery was not cut at this time.

APPENDIX I

Copy of report on coal submitted to Mr J. O'N. Millott, Chief Coal Survey Officer, National Coal Board, N.-W. Division, Scientific Department, Chester.

COAL FROM ROMAN CORN DRYING SHED

We have now carried out some further tests on the small samples of coal you left with me. As a result of these we can be reasonably certain that the coal is not of west or east midlands origin. My suggestion in my letter to you of 6 October that it probably came from the north-east of Warwickshire no longer holds. Taking into account the fact that the coal has been at or near the surface for a matter of 2000 years its present rank is far too high for an original east or west midlands source. We feel that its most probable source is the Northumberland or Durham coal-fields and the data are not inconsistent with an origin from the Harvey seam of Durham or its equivalent in Northumberland, the Beaumont seam, the latter being most probable.

I am sorry that we cannot go further than this and I am sure that you will realize the difficulty of this type of detective work on a few fragments of coal.

APPENDIX II

MORTAR STAMP FROM WYBOSTON

On a hooked-rim mortarium resembling the work of Vorolas and Crico of South Carlton (Lincs.).¹ The core of the fabric is grey and the surface of the vessel pinkish, but this is probably due to later burning in an oxidizing atmosphere. The grit is sparse and of white and grey.

The stamp is in two lines:

?) DIACUS

F?) II(C)IT

The second line should almost certainly be restored as FIICIT (for FECIT, as often) in which case the first line giving the potter's name in the nominative is probably incomplete. The number of the letters to be restored is doubtful as no certain parallel is known, though there is an incomplete retrograde stamp from Colchester² which reads DIA. . . .

It is hazardous in the extreme to date second-century mortaria on rim form alone, but the similarities to the work of the South Carlton potters could be taken to support an Antonine date of manufacture (c. A.D. 160-90).

K. F. HARTLEY

¹ *Antiq. J.* vol. xxiv, p. 135.

² *Colchester Museum Report* (1931), p. 25.

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