

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXVI

JANUARY 1975 TO DECEMBER 1976

IMRAY LAURIE NORIE AND WILSON

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EXCAVATIONS AT BURWELL, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

DAVID M. BROWNE

INTRODUCTION

The site investigated during October and November 1969 lies between Burwell village and the easterly margin of Burwell Fen in the north-east corner of the field immediately north of the village recreation ground and west of the 'Weirs' waterway. (NGR TL585676)

The land is now arable but was until recently meadowland. It has no marked relief features but slopes gently down towards the fen. A more detailed discussion of the pedology and geology of the site can be found below.

Attention was drawn to the site by the presentation to the University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of a hoard of late Roman bronze vessels which were generally in an excellent state of preservation. These vessels had been revealed during bulldozing in the field in preparation for its conversion from meadow to arable use some three years previously. Particularly intriguing was the report that the vessels had appeared during the removal of a mound and that during ploughing linear features were noticeable on the ground.

It was decided to conduct trial excavations in order to find out more about the circumstances of the deposition of the bowl hoard, and the nature of the 'buildings' reported.

The excavations lasted only five days and were terminated abruptly by the necessity to plough for winter wheat. When this report was written it was intended to continue the work but this since has proved impossible.

I would like to acknowledge the aid and encouragement of the following during the excavation: Mr and Mrs P. Smith (owners), Miss M. Cra'ster, Messrs R. Bishop, J. Boutelle, R. Chapman, Tony Gregory, Mr and Mrs R. Hill, Misses M. Parish (Mrs P. Callow), R. Scott, and C. Thair (Mrs D. M. Browne).

SUMMARY

No solution was obtained to the problem of the bowls' deposition. The possible existence of an artificial mound associated with them may be dismissed. If the bowls were concealed in a pit dug into the natural subsoil this eluded discovery. One further fragment of cauldron was obtained from the topsoil during the excavations.

The work revealed:

1. Evidence of Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age occupation but no associated habitation structures. Linear features tentatively interpreted as ancient ploughmarks may be related to this.

2. Two confirmed ditch systems, one probably Iron Age and the other Roman in date. At least four other systems may be present.
3. Pottery and building debris, evidence of the proximity of a Roman occupation site dating from the 2nd to the 4th centuries AD.

SITE GEOLOGY AND SOILS

Three major stratigraphic horizons are recognisable at the site. They are from the base: 1. chalk marl; 2. a grey 'clayey' stratum; 3. the modern topsoil.

Chalk marl forms the geological base.¹ Only the hard upper crust of this material was encountered six to ten inches from the surface. Characteristically, this formation is a soft grey calcareous marl containing some clay. The predominantly white coloration of its surface at this site probably results from limited leaching action by percolating ground-water.

The second horizon appears extensively throughout the site except where it has been disturbed by recent ploughing, which has penetrated in places into the chalk marl. It is light grey in coloration with a yellowish tint and highly calcareous. In vertical extent it varies between negligible and one inch. It lies conformably on the chalk marl and the line of division between the material and the topsoil marks the vertical limit of recent ploughing except where this has been carried into the chalk marl.

This material seems to be a soil horizon developed from the natural rock and belongs to the Major Soil group, rendzinas with gleying.²

The modern plough soil reaches a maximum depth of ten inches in the eastern part of the site, becoming shallower westwards towards the fen margin. It is light brown in colour, appearing darker towards its base with a greyish tint and is highly calcareous. It is a modification of the previously undisturbed rendzina brought about by recent agricultural activity.

There is reason to believe that agricultural utilisation of this land has been very restricted from late Roman times and that the second horizon is at least in part a remnant of the ancient land surfaces. Some Romano-British pottery was recorded from the upper level of the second horizon in the eastern section of the site, including a fourth century colour-coated piece, but its association is open to doubt.

¹ Chatwin, C. P. *East Anglia and Adjoining Areas*, British Regional Geology Institute of Geological Sciences, H.M.S.O., London, 1961, 28-32.

² Soil Survey of England and Wales, Sheet 188. Cambridge; Hey, R. W. and Perrin, R. M. S. *The Geology and Soils of Cambridgeshire*, Cambridge Natural History Society, 1969.

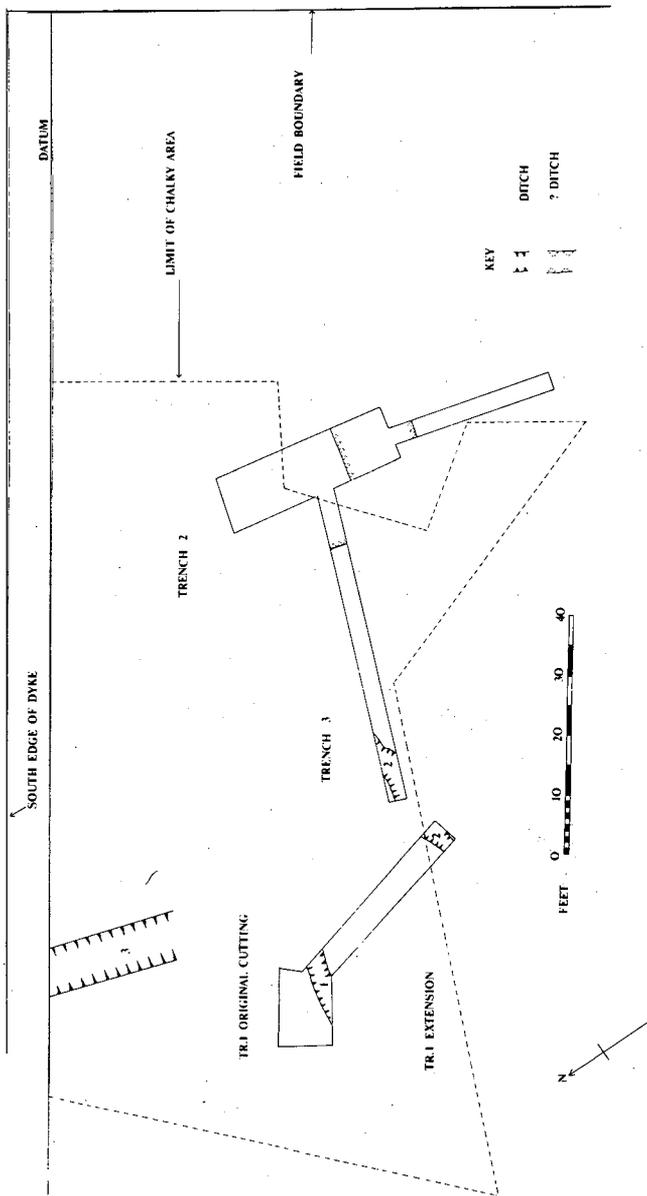


Fig. 1. Burwell: Plan of ditches and alignments.

THE EXCAVATIONS

The position of the trenches is shown on the plan Fig. 1. In trenches 2 and 3 excavation was confined to clearance of the topsoil and revelation of underlying features. In trench 1, ditches 1 and 2 were sectioned but only two feet and one foot respectively of their length was cleared. The two small gullies *a* and *b* were fully cleared. As these were filled with material of the same nature as the topsoil they are regarded as recent features, possibly associated with the stump of a wooden fence stake found embedded in the chalk marl between them. Horizon 2 material was partly cleared, particularly north of ditch one.

Ancient Ploughing Features?

In all trenches, narrow linear and curvilinear grooves were observed penetrating the very upper surface of the chalk marl. They were filled with the material of Horizon 2. The precise stratigraphical relationship of these features with Horizon 2 had been destroyed by modern ploughing.

The grooves were most noticeable in the southern part of trench 1. Here they range in width between an inch and $4\frac{1}{4}$ inches, the majority being between $1\frac{1}{2}$ and $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches. In depth they rarely exceed $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches. It is impossible to estimate how much these dimensions have been affected by plough destruction. In this sector they seem to run in two series of roughly parallel lines, one approximately at right angles to the other and in places actually crossing. Divergences from this pattern were also noted. The nature of their filling and their size suggest that these grooves are not associated with the modern agricultural activity, and they are cautiously interpreted as being the remains of ancient plough furrows.

Their relationship with ditches 1 and 2 is suggestive. They come up to within two or three inches of the upper fill of these ditches but were not noted continuing across. To the north of ditch 1 however identical features were again noted. It would seem that the ditches are cut through and post-date these grooves. If they are to be interpreted as ancient plough marks it is unlikely that either of the ditches is coeval with them, for the marks are too close to the upper ditch edge when turning the plough is considered.

The intimate temporal relationship of all the marks cannot as yet be established although in trench 1 this seems likely. Here, if ditch 1 is of Iron Age date, a pre-Roman date for the marks is probable. The fact that they have been remarkably well-preserved indicates the trivial amount of agricultural disturbance on the site since the Iron Age.

DITCHES

(Positions and alignments, plan, fig. 1.)

Ditch 1 (Section, fig. 2)

A ditch dug into the natural chalk marl and probably through the second

BURWELL TRENCH 1 DITCH 1 EAST SECTION

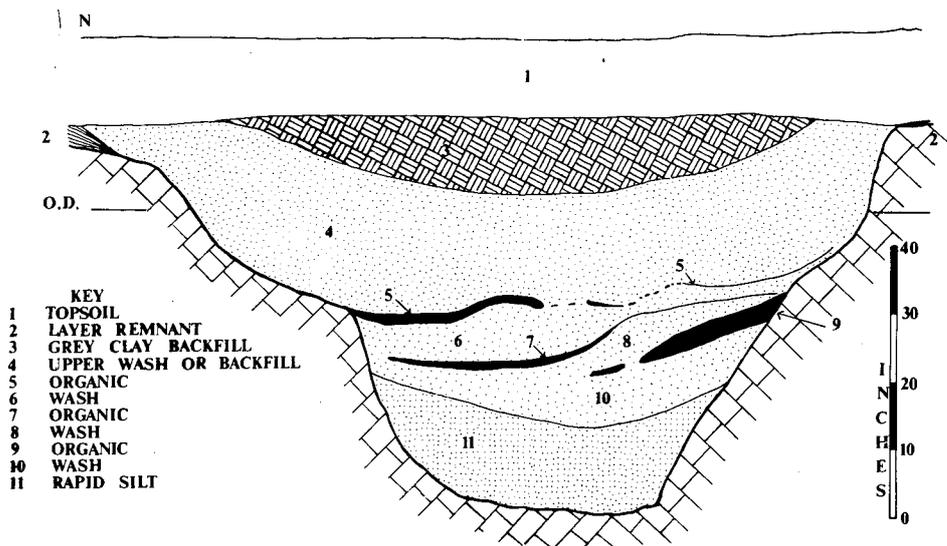


Fig. 2. Cross-section of Trench 1.

horizon, although ploughing to the upper level of the ditch obscured this relationship.

The excavated profile, much modified from the original by weathering, is an irregular, flattish-bottomed, V-shape. The maximum upper width is 3ft 9in to 4ft. The depth varies between 1ft 1in and 2ft 4in.

The filling alternates between relatively thick layers of chalky material probably derived from weathering of the ditch sides and bank(?), and thin layers of brown organic detritus which may represent periods of comparative stability in the development of the ditch fill profile.

An explanation of the section is as follows: layer 11 is a fine-textured highly calcareous clay-like material difficult to distinguish in coloration from the chalk marl. This 'rapid silt' probably represents the first season's weathering of the ditch profile. No remnants of any previously weathered material was found at the ditch bottom, as might be expected with even the most thorough maintenance and it is assumed that this is the silt accumulated immediately after the digging of the ditch. No evidence was gained of any attempt to remove this silt and it would seem likely that the ditch was poorly, if at all, maintained. From the relatively deep amount of rapid silt, it would seem likely that it accumulated mainly at a season when weathering by water agencies was particularly potent.

The division between layers 11 and 10 is not well-marked and 10 maybe

regarded as a continuum of 11, probably after a short period of relative stability. Layer 10 has a more heterogenous composition of chalky lumps in a grey clay-like matrix.

Layer 10 is overlain by the thin, dark brown, organic level 9. The accumulation of organic debris over wash material probably represents a period in the development of the ditch fill when weathering of the profile was at a minimum and the ditch bottom was colonised by plant and animal life under waterlogged conditions. Considerable quantities of molluscs were recovered from various levels. These have not yet been studied. Other palaeo-ecological samples were not taken as a further larger excavation was envisaged at the time.

Layers 8 and 6 are similar to 10 and 7 and 5 are similar to 9. The same processes of deposition are considered to have occurred in their respective cases.

The lower part of 4 is similar to 10, 8 and 6. However, the upper part of 4 and layer 3 are also characterised by their containing a quantity of flints and pottery distributed throughout. Certainly at this phase the ditch was being used as a dump for discarded material and it seems likely that the upper part of 4 and layer 3 represent material used in a deliberate filling of a ditch which was by this time too silted up to fulfill any useful function. Layer 3 is closely similar to the soil material of horizon 2 and may represent soil scraped from the surface and used as a fill. Alternatively, 4 may represent weathered material, 3 a development of a horizon 2-type soil profile in the remaining hollow of the ditch and the occurrence of artefacts a sporadic discarding.

The configuration of layer 4 in profile suggests the existence of a now obliterated bank, associated with the ditch, which sealed part of horizon 2.

The life-span of such a small ditch which seems to have received no maintenance and to have been subject to potent weathering was probably a decade at most. The function of the ditch is unknown.

Ditch 1: finds

(All finds are in the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology).

Layer 3 Backfilling of ditch?

(a) Pottery

1. Small body sherd of Beaker in grey, gritty fabric. Surface brown-orange. Decoration of four parallel, horizontal, cord-impressed lines.
2. Small rim sherd. From a Beaker? Fabric gritty and patchy orange to grey-brown in colour.
3. Two indeterminate sherds in dark, grey, gritty fabric with brown surfaces. Possibly from a Beaker.
4. Sherd in dark, grey fabric heavily tempered with chalk particles and grit. Brown surface. Probably Bronze Age.
5. Five body sherds, not demonstrably from the same vessel. Black, gritty grass-tempered fabric. One sherd has a brown surface. Handmade. These show close affinities to local Iron Age 'A' types.

Nos. 1 to 4 are all weathered.

(b) Flint

A brief summary is given of the lithic material. It was hoped that the projected full-scale excavation would provide additional data to enable the preparation of a more meaningful analysis.

1. Twenty-five flints ranging in size from 6.4×4.9 cms to 1.5 to 1.0 cms show signs of having been subjected to various intensities of heat, some by their coloration and all by fractured surfaces. Only four of these represent production waste. These pieces may have served as potboilers or have formed part of a hearth.

A total of forty unworked flints were deposited along with the industrial material.

2. Thirty-four flint flakes. Knapping waste. Twenty-nine have white patina. Five are unpatinated. Average size: length 2.5 cms, width 1.65 cms, thickness 0.66 cms.
3. Tang-and-barb arrowhead. Length 2.85 cms, width (maximum) 2.63 cms, thickness (maximum) 0.33 cms. Patchy thin white patina to the flint. Barb ends squared. Tang broken and missing. This type is well-known in Beaker associations.
4. Burnt flint. Fractured transversely in antiquity. Some fracturing of the dorsal surface through burning; otherwise fresh and unpatinated. Flake fracturing of the dorsal surface core. Triangular outline and longitudinal section. Length 4.1 cms, maximum breadth (towards fracture) 2.35 cms, maximum thickness 1.2 cms. No secondary working but utilisation scars along one edge of flake surface and opposite edge of dorsal surface. A flake re-used as a side-scraper.
5. Cortical flake. White patina. Roughly ovoid outline with maximum thickness medially. Length 3.2 cms, width 2.85 cms, thickness 2.25 cms. Flake scars in all directions bifacially. Utilisation scars along one edge. Probably waste from implement production used as side-scraper.
6. Black flint. Has suffered from mechanical and thermal fracturing. Unpatinated cortical nodule of irregular cuboid shape. Dimensions $3.2 \times 2.85 \times 2.25$ cms. Flakes have been detached crudely from all directions. Probably core waste.
7. Cortical flake. White patina. Roughly pear-shaped outline. Length 4.6 cms, maximum width 3.2 cms, maximum thickness at base 1.1 cms. A little irregular primary flaking on right lower dorsal surface. Irregular notched retouch on upper right edge of dorsal surface. Scraper.
8. Cortical nodule. White patina. Irregular cuboid shape. Dimensions $2.8 \times 2.0 \times 1.8$ cms. Flakes detached in all directions. Probably core waste.
9. Cortical flake. White patina. Oval outline with twisted section. Length 2.5 cms, width 1.8 cms, maximum thickness 0.5 cms. Probably utilisation scars along right edge of dorsal surface. Waste flake used as end and side scraper.

(c) Bone

1. Fragments of three mature cattle ribs.

*Layer 4. Wash and backfill into ditch***(a) Flint**

1. Eight burnt and heat fractured unworked flints. Comments as for similar material from layer 3.
2. Knapping waste. Four flakes with white patina. Comments as for layer 3, Flint, no. 2.

Summary

In the absence of any later material from the backfill of the ditch an Early Iron Age date is proposed for this stage of its profile development. It seems reasonable that the original cutting of the ditch be assigned to the same date bracket as there seems to be no break in the continuity of profile development which, it is suggested above, was of fairly short duration. The inclusion of Beaker-type material as rubbish survival is suggestive of earlier occupation on the site, structural evidence of which was not detected in this limited excavation. It is tempting to speculate that the plough-marks? identified may relate to this earlier phase as they seem to pre-date ditch 1.

It is possible that two separate flint industries are represented in the fill, if the presence of a majority of white patinated pieces and a small number of unpatinated ones is considered significant. If this be the case the patinated examples (which include the arrowhead) most probably represent rubbish survivals from the suggested earlier occupation, whilst the unpatinated may be more closely contemporary with the lifespan of the ditch.

The flint tools noted from the topsoil add weight to this idea of an earlier Late Neolithic-Bronze Age occupation.

Ditch 2

A ditch dug into the chalk marl. Its precise relationship to horizon 2 has been obscured. The profile is approximately U-shaped except where weathering has created a sloping of the originally fairly vertical sides. The upper width varies between 2ft 6in and 4ft. The original width was probably about 2ft. The depth as far as ascertained is approximately 2ft.

The filling of this ditch was remarkably homogenous, consisting of a relatively hard-packed, grey, clay-like matrix containing scattered lumps of chalky material which were larger and more common towards the base. Lines of differentially weathered material such as observed in ditch 1 were absent. The profile however shows signs of having suffered weathering. This ditch seems to have been subjected to thorough maintenance before being backfilled with material probably derived from the surrounding surface.

No useful statement on the ditch's lifespan and function can be ventured.

Ditch 2: Finds

(a) Pottery

The fill contained Iron Age 'A' type rubbish survivals and a possibly Bronze Age piece but also six scraps of Romano-British pottery. None are closely dateable, but orange sandy sherds with burnished surfaces may be of second or third century date.

(b) Flint

1. Four burnt or heat-fractured natural flints. Comments as for Ditch 1, layer 3, Flint 1. One burnt flake. Knapping waste.
2. Ten flakes. Knapping waste. Nine with white patina. One unpatinated (burnt: see above). Comments as for ditch 1, layer 3, Flint 2.
3. Fragments of blade. Black flint. Thick white patina. Length 1.75cms, width (maximum) 1.65cms, maximum thickness 0.45cms. Utilisation scars along both edges of the flake surface. Used as scraper.

(c) Miscellaneous

1. Small green glass bead. Oval shape. Total diameters 0.6×0.62 cms. Perforation ovoid and roughly central with diameters 0.2×0.8 cms. Slightly trapezoidal in longitudinal section, maximum thickness 0.4cm. Probably Roman.
2. Fragments of red daub; piece of coal; fragment of oyster shell.

(d) Bone

1. Coracoid process of human scapula. Left side. Adult.
2. Cattle bones: complete metatarsal of short-statured adult; two rib fragments; fragment of mandible with deciduous pre-molar 1 intact; fragment of base of skull of adult. This piece judging from its glossy worn surface seems to have been utilised as a rubbing instrument.
3. Pig bones: deciduous lower premolar 3; permanent lower premolar 2.
4. Sheep bones: head of first phalange of small individual; fragment of long bone, sheep-size.

Summary

This ditch is considered on the basis of the limited weathering of its profile, to have had a relatively short life-span before its backfilling. The material from the fill suggests a date from the middle of the Roman period. The presence of pottery and flint rubbish of earlier periods reinforces certain of the points expressed with regard to ditch 1.

*Other Ditches?**Other Ditches?*

Another four possible ditches may be noted. This tentative assignation in the case of 4, 5 and 6 is based solely on the partial isolation of linear extents of grey clayey material which from surface indications resemble the appearance of the upper levels of ditches 1 and 2.

Ditch ? 3 was noticed when the field was ploughed subsequent to the excavations. It appeared as a clearly definable linear extent of some twenty feet long by eight feet wide. The material was grey clay and brown topsoil with a very limited chalky admixture. The grey clayey material resembled that of the filling of ditches 1 and 2.

Finds

The material designated as ditch ? 6 yielded during preliminary scraping five

Romano-British sherds including a late fourth century colour-coated plain-rimmed dish (cp. Gillam type 335)⁴.

Romano-British Material from the Topsoil

1. Pottery

All the Romano-British pottery collected on the site, excepting the few sherds found in association with stratified levels, came from an area concentrated around trench 2 and extending towards the north-east corner of the field. The scatter declined sharply in frequency to the west and south of its focus and coincided with that of the Roman building material. Its location is taken to indicate the presence of Roman structural and habitation remains in close proximity to the north-east corner of the field.

Number of collected sherds: 330.

These are divided into the following broad fabric categories:

Colour-coated wares of various fabrics, 63.

Shell and calcite-gritted wares, 24.

Grey wares produced in poorly oxidising kilns. Varying degrees of sandiness of texture and hardness. Commonest local fabric. Considerable continuity from Iron Age traditions particularly in first two centuries A.D.

In this category: 100.

Orange wares. General category covering range of oxidised fired wares, probably of relatively local manufacture. Colours from brick red through to orange-brown. Sandy textures. Generally medium hard. Some with light slips. A cursory survey suggests that such oxidised fired wares were not manufactured in any quantity in the region until the later second century and more prominently in the third century into the fourth: 116.

Miscellaneous fabrics: 27.

Predominant forms within fabric categories (where recognisable):

Colour-coated – bowls, flanged bowls, jars.

Calcite-gritted – jars of various sizes.

Grey wares – jars of various sizes.

Orange wares – jars.

Dating:

The total collection ranges in date from the later first century or early second century to the later fourth century. Recognisable forms are limited and a number of these have yielded no secure regional parallels. The broad division of the total into date ranges must be regarded as tentative.

Division based on recognisable forms (90):

1. Late first-second century: 2 or possibly 3 sherds. (Grey fabric).
2. Second century (mainly Antonine): 20 sherds or 21 (Grey fabric, 2 orange)
3. Third century: 10 sherds possibly 16. (10 orange, 2 grey, 2 miscellaneous, 1 colour-coat, 1 calcite-gritted).

⁴ Gillam, J. P. *Types of Roman Coarse Pottery Vessels in Northern Britain*, 2nd ed. Newcastle, 1968, 33 and fig. 33, no. 335.

4. Fourth century. 47 possibly 54. (23 calcite gritted, 17 colour-coated, 5 grey, 4 miscellaneous, 5 orange).

Assimilation of the rest of the sherds accurately into these date ranges is difficult. All the grey wares excepting three sherds, which may be later, fit well into a late first-second century context on the basis of comparison with the datable sherds and other local groups (Godmanchester, Arbury). The orange wares are more problematical and probably have a range from late second century to fourth. However if the hypothesis concerning their manufacture noted above be correct, the bulk of the sample may fall in the third century. The indeterminate fragments of colour-coated wares recovered seem in the main to be fourth century in type but a number could well be earlier. Most of the miscellaneous fabrics seem to be best placed in a later Roman time bracket. It should be noted that within the fourth-century bracket some mid-late colour-coated bowl forms were recognised.

The pottery seems to indicate fairly continuous Roman occupation from the second century to the latter part of the fourth close to the area of excavation. The relative abundance of this material holds out the hope that future excavations will be possible to locate the site and isolate in deposits contemporaneous groups of pottery, so adding to the meagre knowledge that exists at present of the regional ceramic sequence.

2. Building and Other Materials

These include: roofing tile; box flue-tile; indeterminate tile fragments; small piece of painted wall-plaster, pigment pinky-orange; paving slab fragments (not certainly Roman); fragment of saddle quern of grey sandstone (3.3cms thick). Fragment of hard-baked clay object with a high sand grain content and scattered larger particles of flint and stone; slightly curved along its long axis; possibly used as a quern. 3.1cms. thick; oyster shell; nails; glass fragment (not certainly Roman).

Non-Roman Material from the Topsoil

Various flint implements and industrial waste-products were recovered from the topsoil. Many of these would not seem out of place in late Neolithic and Bronze Age contexts. These are briefly listed:

White patina:

1. Seven waste flakes. Two burnt.
2. Two narrow blades. One with utilisation scars along one edge of dorsal surface.
3. Small, ovoid, bifacial core.
4. Thumbnail scraper on a flake. Scale-flaked surface.
5. Carinated scraper on a thick flake.

Unpatinated:

1. Two waste cortical flakes. Black and honey coloured flint.
2. Cortical fragment of core. Black flint.
3. Cortical flake. Honey-coloured flint. Notched on edge of flake surface with utilisation scars along same edge on dorsal surface.
4. Semicircular end-scraper on cortical flake. Blue and brown flint.
5. Flake. Dorsal surface severely crushed. Probably hammerstone.

Pottery:

1. One Iron Age sherd.
2. Nine sherds of post-Medieval pottery.

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