

Excavations at Elstree, Middlesex, 1974-6

STEPHEN CASTLE
MICHAEL HAMMERSON

IN 1974 PROPOSALS were announced to develop a large open space on the south-west side of Elstree village, Middlesex, between Schubert Road and Beethoven Road (TQ 177952), at the top of Elstree Hill South, situated at about 450 ft. (c. 138m) above sea level. In view of this threat, excavation was considered necessary for several reasons.

(1) The site is bounded on the east by Watling Street (Elstree Hill South), and therefore traces of the Roman road or its western roadside ditch might be found.

(2) The Roman pottery kilns at Brockley Hill¹ are 1200m to the south, on Watling Street, and those at Radlett, Herts.² are approximately 4800m to the north-west and about 400m west of Watling Street. In addition, Roman pottery³ and a Roman tile-kiln⁴ have been found 520m to the north of the site, in Elstree itself. The prospect was that further evidence of Roman occupation might be found.

(3) The hypothesised junction of the Viatores' Route 169⁵ with Watling Street (Viatores' route 1d) occurred approximately midway along the site's Elstree Hill South frontage.

(4) Charters of c.1176 and 1253, recording a chapel of St. Bartholomew at Elstree, imply that it was situated on the Middlesex side of the Village, apparently on the west side of Watling Street. The last mention of the Chapel was in 1327⁶.

Limited excavation by hand along the eastern edge of the site revealed none of the hoped-for evidence outlined above. The only features noted were two parallel ditches, barely two metres apart and surviving to a depth of c.0.35m, at the south-east corner of the site. Their bases were c.0.65m below ground level, cutting c.0.15m into the natural grey-brown pebbly clay. They contained quantities of charcoal and 13th century sherds of Hertfordshire gray wares.

Somewhat more extensive machine-dug trenches produced little more positive evidence. In the north-east corner of the site a shallow depression was ex-

cavated, 5m wide and c.0.40m deep, with a subsidiary pit-like feature beneath it, c.1m wide and a further 0.70m deep. Both cut the natural pebbly clays; the lower feature was filled with mixed grey and orange clay, and contained two Roman sherds — a grey 'poppy-head' beaker sherd of early 2nd century type, and the rim of a Verulamium-region type ring-necked flagon, probably of similar date. The shallow depression above it contained orange clay; it yielded a number of 13th century grey ware sherds and a quantity of Roman tiles, undoubtedly derived from the tile kiln to the north and used during the medieval period. The purpose of these features is not known, and indeed it is not certain whether they are contemporary, or whether the lower pit is in fact Roman and cut by the feature above it.

A long machine trench failed to reveal any trace of the Viatores' route 169. The route of the road at this point is projected through the site on the basis of an 'agger' visible in the grounds of Home Farm c.300m north-west along the projected route. This is shown on the O.S. 6" map (1st edn., 1871) as a field boundary, and an investigation of the feature would now obviously be desirable in view of the negative evidence from the present site.

The excavation gave no definite evidence of Roman occupation on the site, nor was any light thrown on the location of the chapel of St. Bartholomew — not the slightest trace was noted of any feature that could be connected with such a structure, whether of stone or timber. In addition, modern disturbance from public utilities (gas, electricity) had removed any trace of Roman Watling street or its roadside ditch, had they impinged onto the site.

The cooking pot

In May, 1976 a trench was cut by a bulldozer along the eastern edge of the field. The trench, which was cut immediately alongside the west pavement of Elstree Hill South, removed a layer of pebbly brown sandy soil, apparently former ploughsoil, containing Roman tile fragments, a few 1st-2nd century coarse-

2nd century bead-rimmed vessel in Brockley Hill ware; now in St. Nicholas' Parish Church.

1 S. Castle, "Roman Pottery from Brockley Hill, Middlesex", *Trans. LAMAS* 27 (1976) 206-27.

2 W. Page, "A Romano-British Pottery lately found at Radlett, Herts", *Proc. Soc. Ant. London*, 2 Ser. 17 (1897-99).

3 S. Castle, in *Herts Archaeol* 5 (forthcoming). Jar, found 1904, behind Mr. Hunt's shop; late 1st—early

4 Helen O'Neil, "Roman Tile Kiln at Elstree, Herts." *Trans. LAMAS* 10 (1951).

5 The Viatores, *Roman Road in the South-East Midlands*, 1964, 201-10, 405.

6 Rev. Eales, *Lecture on the History of Elstree*, 1922.

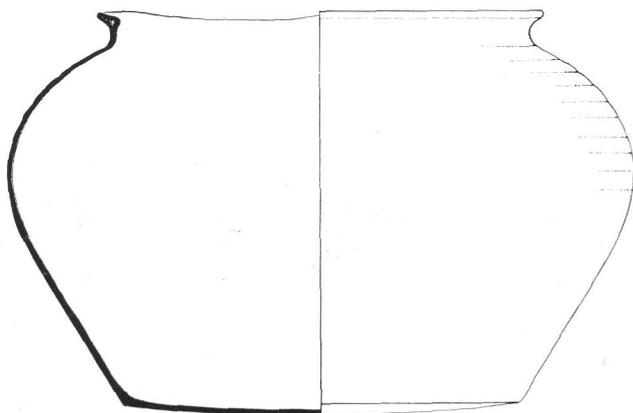


Fig. 1: Elstree Hill South:
Medieval cooking pot found in 1976. (4)

ware sherds and quantities of medieval pottery.

Considerable quantities of sherds of a medieval cooking pot (Fig. 1) were recovered from the spoil-heaps of the trench at the south-east corner of the field⁷. A pit-like feature, cut into the natural sandy-gravel-with-clay, was disclosed and partially excavated. Its grey silt with charcoal⁸ infill contained Roman tile fragments, including wasters and a few sherds of medieval coarse pottery. The cooking-pot sherds were derived from the layer of pebbly brown sandy soil.

Description

A cooking pot with sagging base and flat-topped rim in gritty orange ware with bluish-grey core and abundant grey, white, red and black flint, and quartz inclusions. Part of the rim is badly distorted and the fabric overfired to bluish-grey and buff in places. However, the presence of black soot on the exterior of the lower-half of the vessel, indicates that it was used.

- 7 The cooking-pot is now housed in the Museum of London.
- 8 Mrs. A. Locker has identified the charcoal as follows: *Quercus sp.* (Oak), 64 fragments; *Fagus sylvatica* (Beech), 20 fragments; *Crataegus sp.* (Hawthorne), 3 fragments; *Corylus sp.* (Hazel), 1 fragment.
- 9 D. F. Renn, *Potters and Kilns in Medieval Hertfordshire*, Hitchin, 1964, 8-9, AR4 and D. F. Renn, "A Medieval Industrial Site at Barne", *Barnet and District Record Society Bulletin* 12 (June 1960) Vessel No. 5. Cooking-pot, apparently a waster and said to be of 13th century date, from garden of Dyke Cottage, Kings Rd., Arkley, Barnet (TQ 233 964).
- 10 M. Biddle, "Medieval Pottery from Elstree", *St. Albans Architect. & Archaeol. Soc. Trans.* (1961) 65-9 and Fig. 2, Nos. 5, 9 and 10. Pottery found in May 1950 during road widening operations on Barnet Lane, to south-west of Abbotsbury. It is suggested that this pottery dates from the second half of the 13th century. Sherds in grey, brick-red and brown paste—some apparently from underfired vessels. Possibility of a kiln site nearby.

Discussion

The vessel is similar in form to cooking-pots from Arkley, Hertfordshire, 1959⁹ and Barnet Lane, Elstree, Hertfordshire, 1950¹⁰, which have been dated to the 13th century, though a date in the 13th or 14th centuries is perhaps more appropriate for this pot.

These investigations unfortunately left more questions unanswered than answered, and leave scope for future research elsewhere in Elstree when the opportunity arises. It might also, in passing, be noted that the May 1976 machine-trench was cut by local residents in response to occupation of the site by gypsies. The writers believe that other "earthworks" of this kind have been dug in the north and west London areas. It is amusing to speculate on the interpretation which might be given by archaeologists of a future age to a series of 20th-century anti-nomad defensive ditches around London!

Acknowledgement must be made of the grant made by the London & Middlesex Archaeological Society covering the cost of machine hire. Thanks are due to members of the Inner London Archaeological Unit and to S. Henderson, Esq., for their help during the 1974-5 excavations conducted at week-ends by M. J. Hammerson, and also to members of the Stanmore and Harrow Historical Society who helped the writers with observation and excavation work when the bulldozer trench was cut.



ORPHEUS BOOKS

13 North Road, Berkhamsted,
Herts.
Tel. (04427) 3647.

second-hand and antiquarian books
on archaeology, occultism, mysticism
and related subjects.

WRITE FOR CATALOGUE
OR SEND WANTED LIST

We are also happy to buy books