

A BELGIC OCCUPATION SITE AT KNOWL HILL, BERKS

L. J. OVER

The site was discovered in September 1969 by Mr H. Nutt, an employee of H. F. Warner Limited, Star Works, Knowl Hill, manufacturers of clay and concrete products. Whilst checking newly dug clay for race, he noticed a scatter of pottery on the working surface, together with signs of burning. On reporting it to the management, work in that area was temporarily halted pending an investigation, and the find was communicated to the writer by Mr Nutt. After surveying the site, permission to excavate was obtained, on the understanding that work was not held up for more than four weeks. Excavation commenced in September 1969 and took place over five weekends, after which time the site was destroyed.

Acknowledgements are due to Mr H. J. Davis, Director and Mr A. Wrigglesworth, Works Manager of H. F. Warner Limited for permission to excavate, and for their encouragement and co-operation; to Mr H. Nutt for his help and vigilance; to Mr T. M. D. Harvey, site photographer and Deputy Director; and to the members of the Maidenhead and District Archaeological and Historical Society who, together with other casual diggers, provided the necessary labour force.

THE EXCAVATIONS

The site was situated on the working face of a clay pit, just north of Star Works, Knowl Hill, very close to the border of Cookham and Wargrave parishes, and itself in Wargrave parish at map reference SU 817796. It occupied a south-east facing slope, the

majority of which had been removed during excavation of clay for brick-making. A preliminary survey of the area showed the site to be directly below the humus, and cut into an outcrop of London Clay. Below this were several feet of sand above Reading Beds, which are some 23 ft thick, resting on chalk. One of the drivers reported that whilst working, he had seen long trenches in the clay 'filled with humus and red brick material' which suggests that part of the complex had previously been destroyed.

During the course of the excavation five features were revealed which will be described separately. The layerage over the whole area was uniform and related to all features, although only two of the four can be regarded as occupation layers. The layerage was as follows:

1. Topsoil or Humus (depth 20 cm).
2. Natural London Clay with pebbles (average depth 25 cm). This overlay the main occupation layers and showed no sign of human disturbance, and can possibly be attributed to landslip.
3. Clay with some charcoal flecks and pottery (average depth 8 cm).
4. Clay, stained grey with heavy charcoal, and containing large quantities of pottery, clay blocks, flints and other debris (average depth 30 cm).

Feature A

The top of this feature had been destroyed by the mechanical excavator before archaeological excavation took place, and it was estimated that the remains of the feature

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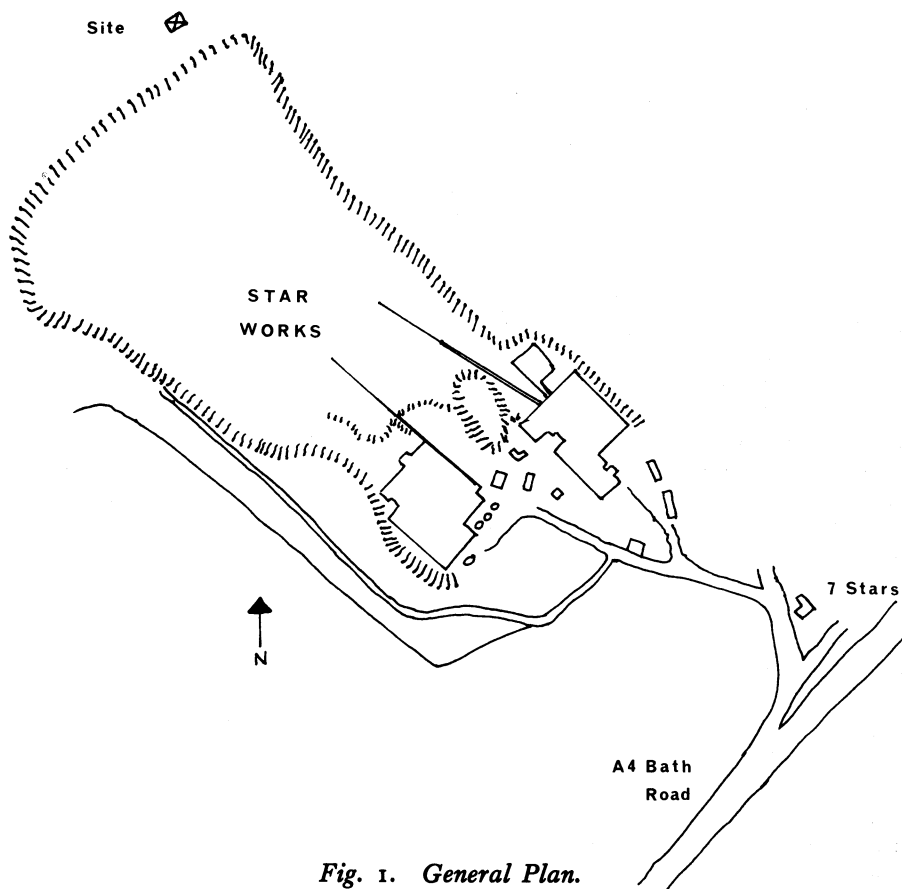


Fig. 1. General Plan.

occurred at 66 cm from the top of the humus. The base of the feature was oval in form and measured 90 cm by 33 cm. It consisted of a bowl of burnt red sandy/clay material reinforced with potsherds placed on edge.

At one end, four fragments of pierced clay blocks were recovered from the bonding, but were not structurally related. The feature was directly above the eastern end of linear feature B and cut into Layer 4. To the south of the feature a red hard clay area extended for a distance of 2 m.

The feature is possibly the base of an oven, and this is further suggested by finds of clay oven furniture in the infill of Feature B. Two similar ovens were found at Prae Wood, and are described by Sir Mortimer Wheeler

(Verulamium, 1936, 44 and pl. LXXXVI(a)) as being oval in plan with clay walls, the flooring being of clay reinforced with potsherds and containing fragments of pierced bricks, which he presumes were raised on fire bars to form a grid. At the end of each oven an extension of the burnt flooring indicated the position of a hob. Other ovens of this type have been found at Tilbury, Hengistbury and Maiden Castle, an example from the latter site being on display in Dorchester Museum, Dorset. It could, of course, be the base of a kiln.

Feature B

This was the main feature on the site and consisted of an irregular series of pits joined together in a linear fashion. The feature was

traced for some 17 m from east to west where it came to an abrupt end. At the eastern end it had undoubtedly continued but evidence of this had been destroyed by clay workings. Along its length, the width varied from 0.25 to 1.75 m and the deepest point recorded was 1.12 m below ground level. The feature was sectioned at a point where it was 2.00 m in width and was found to have sloping sides and a flat bottom. In other places, however, the bottom was irregular. The first 8 cm of the infill was clay stained grey with charcoal flecks (Layer 3) and it contained small quantities of very gritty pottery together with one wedge-shaped fire bar and some stones. The balance of the infill, which averaged 30 cm in depth, was clay stained grey with heavy charcoal (Layer 4), containing large quantities of coarse pottery, clay blocks, burnt and virgin flints, and two small fragments of bone together with some animal teeth. No metal objects were found.

All objects found were broken or incomplete and no materials found showed any structural relationship. The irregular shape of the feature and the nature of its content would indicate clay-pits, later backfilled, had been dug. To the west of the feature, the stratification as cut by the mechanical excavator suggested the existence of an old waterhole, probably contemporary with the site.

Feature C

This was a feature adjacent to the main site. It at first appeared to be a pit, but on investigation was found to be a pocket of natural grey clay which in places was stained with iron.

Feature D

At a distance of 18 m west of Feature B a small hearth was uncovered by the mechanical excavator. It measured 50 cm in diameter and consisted of burnt flint and charcoal with no other finds of a datable nature. Traces of other hearths were noted close by but were destroyed before actual measurements could be made. Feature D was dug into Layer 2 at a

depth of approximately 20 cm and was 10 cm in depth.

Feature E

This feature proved to be a pit situated at 25.70 m north-east of Feature B and was discovered two hours before it was completely destroyed. No accurate measurements could be established, but the layerage appeared similar to that of Feature B. A quantity of gritty pottery, stones and clay block fragments were recovered.

CONCLUSIONS

As previously mentioned, it is believed that a major proportion of the site had been destroyed prior to excavation, and reports of 'long trenches filled with humus and red brick material' would appear to indicate that at one time an extensive settlement existed there. The scanty remains found during the excavations may have been a cooking area situated at the perimeter of the settlement, although the virtual absence of animal bone may indicate a kiln area. A site with similar pottery at Priors Pit, Cookham, revealed an enclosure which was later used during the Romano-British Period (B.A.J. 1959, 123; B.A.J. 1960, 60).

The predominant feature on the site was the irregular series of pits (Features B and E) containing debris. As these do not appear to have been dug in any organised manner, it can only be assumed that clay was excavated from the site and the resulting pits backfilled with rubbish. Two distinct layers were distinguished, which were later proved to be contemporary, when several sherds of a Hofheim type flagon were found at the top of Layer 3 and the bottom of Layer 4.

The debris from the pits comprised the coarse pottery previously discussed, large quantities of charcoal, various stones, some fragments of bone and teeth (6) and a selection of oven or kiln furniture. No metal objects were found. The stones consisted of both flint and pebbles, available locally in chalk and clay deposits. Some flints were dressed as if for constructional purposes and others were burnt

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presumably from use in hearths. The bone was in a rotted state, and unrecognisable, and the teeth distorted but may have been from a cow. Clay fire bars and pieces of pierced brick were also found in the debris are presumed to have been discarded from the oven or kiln on the site.

The oven (Feature A) which has similarities with ovens found at Prae Wood, appears to be freestanding and not within the confines of a hut as examples found at Maiden Castle. Its surround was of hard red clay which was impregnated with charcoal from the raked out ashes. Other features found include a hearth of burnt flints (Feature D), some partly destroyed hearths and traces of a waterhole. Features excavated probably indicate a kitchen complex adjacent to a living area, but it could be a small kiln.

The site can be firmly dated to the latter part of the Belgic period, on the pottery evidence. A date in the first century A.D. can be assigned to the Hofheim type flagon (no. 12), which appears on many sites. Two large storage jars of type CAM270B (nos. 1 and 42) one of which was bonded into the base of the oven, were dated from c. A.D. 10 at Camulodunum. Necked bowls nos. 37 and 38, a type which predominates and occurs on most sites in the Upper Thames Region, appear at Silchester in a pre-Claudian context and at Camulodunum from c. A.D. 10. The pedestalled tazza cup (no. 40) for which no exact parallel can be found, has a pedestal similar to form CAM218Ac(3) and as such can be dated from c. A.D. 10.

The ovens at Prae Wood can be dated to the first half of the first century A.D., together with the accessories. Pierced bricks have been found at a camp in Wallington, Surrey, Lidbury Camp, Wilts., Casterley Camp, Wilts. and Maiden Castle, all find spots which have a late pre-Roman date. Sir Mortimer Wheeler reports that Belgic brick was introduced into Belgic Verulamium at the end of the first century B.C. and the beginning of the first century A.D. as a constituent of the Italic complex to which butt-beakers belonged,

although strangely enough no butt-beakers appeared in the Knowl Hill assemblage.

From this evidence a tentative date of the first half of the first century A.D. or a little later can be assigned to the site, which would make it contemporary with the Belgic enclosure at Robin Hood's Arbour situated two miles away.

At Canhurst Farm, a few hundred yards away from the present site, a Romano-British aisled building, excavated in the 1930's, showed an occupation from c. A.D. 50 to c. A.D. 150 (B.A.J. 1932, 28; B.A.J. 1934, 75). An intrusive La Tène chape of early first century date was found during these excavations. The close proximity of this building suggests that it may be a continuation of the Knowl Hill Belgic settlement.

THE FINDS

Coarse Pottery

The pottery from all features on the site was found to be of a late Belgic assemblage. A large percentage of it was hand-made, very coarse, and tempered with flint and sand. The fabric varied from a very gritty surface to a smooth 'soapy' outside finish. The colours were all variations of red, black, grey and buff or combinations of one or more of these colours, brought about by uneven firing. A majority of the pots showed signs of soot, where they had been used for cooking. Decoration was confined to one or two horizontal grooves around the neck of some of the vessels. Types of vessels included native bowls, storage jars, and platters. Several of the bases were ringed, whilst others were of pedestal type. A majority of the vessels had bead rims. The neck and handle of a 'Hofheim' flagon (no. 12) was in fine white pipe clay. An identical flagon was found amongst the first century pottery at Chichester with two handles, although only one handle was found with the present example. A flagon of this type was found associated with a Belgic cremation burial at Burghfield, Berks. (B.A.J. 1958, 46)

A pedestalled tazza cup (no. 40) was found almost complete; but remains unparalleled.

The base however was of Camulodunum type 210(b) and as such closely datable. Two necked bowls (nos. 37 and 38) were similar to a type that predominates in the upper Thames and occurs on most sites in that region. Parallels were sought at Silchester, Verulamium, Camulodunum and Bagendon. The pottery from the local site at Robins Hood Arbour did not compare but the selection was scanty. There were similarities with Belgic ware excavated at Priors Pit, Cookham in 1958 which to date remains unpublished.

The total of sherds found was as follows:

Feature	A	B	B	E
Layer	4	3	4	3
Rims	4	21	122	4
Bases	2	8	37	2
Decorated body sherds	—	—	27	—
Other body sherds	219	107	777	13

Feature A

- (Fig. 3, no. 11). Large Storage Jar with hooked rim. Grey paste fired red and black with flat base 18 cm in diameter. 169 pieces as CAM270B. Dated first half first century A.D.
- (Fig. 2, no. 18). Base of small jar in 14 pieces. Buff paste fired buff and black, with internal horizontal ridges.

Feature B

Layer 3

- 3-6 Platters of buff paste fired buff and black. Very coarse with heavy grit tempering slight horizontal groove around edge of rim. Estimated diameter 24 cm.
7. Rim of small jar with two horizontal grooves. Black rim diameter 12 cm.
8. Base of small jar. Sandy surface fired red and black. Base diameter 10 cm.
9. Same as number 8. Might be part of same base.
10. Base of jar or dish. Grey and grit tempered. Very crude. Base diameter 8 cm.
11. Base of jar or beaker. Fine gauge, sandy in black and buff.

Layer 3 and 4

12. (pl. 3). Hofheim type flagon in fine white pipe clay, with undercut rim and two rings around the neck. One complete handle was found but it is possible that there were originally two. As CAM161A with slightly different base. This type of jug is known mainly in the first half of the first century A.D.

Layer 4

13. (Fig. 2, no. 1). Cooking Pot with bead rim. Fired black and grey with soapy surface and heavy grit tempering.
14. (Fig. 2, no. 2). Jar fired buff on outside and grey on the inside. Rough surface. Rim diameter 14 cm.
15. (Fig. 2, no. 3). Jar fired black and grey with soapy surface. Rim diameter 16 cm.
16. (Fig. 2, no. 4). Cooking Pot with bead rim fired black and grey with soapy surface. Rim diameter 24 cm.
17. (Fig. 2, no. 5). Jar with bead rim, fired buff with rough surface, grit tempered, rim diameter 18 cm.
18. (Fig. 2, no. 6). Jar fired red, with rough surface.
19. (Fig. 2, no. 7). Jar fired black and buff with soapy surface, grit tempered. Similar to example found at Verulamium in Claudian deposit. (VER. Fig. 34, no. 57. p. 194).
20. (Fig. 2, no. 8). Jar with bead rim fired black with rough surface.
21. (Fig. 2, no. 9). Small jar fired red with soapy surface.
22. (Fig. 2, no. 10). Small jar with slight rim fired red with soapy surface.
23. (Fig. 2, no. 11). Jar fired grey and black with soapy surface. Rim diameter 14 cm.
24. (Fig. 2, no. 12). Jar fired red and black with soapy surface. Rim diameter 16 cm.
25. (Fig. 2, no. 13). Jar fired grey with rough surface. Rim diameter 24 cm.
26. (Fig. 2, no. 14). Jar with bead rim fired red with sandy surface. Horizontal groove running parallel 1 cm. below rim. Rim diameter 24 cm.
27. (Fig. 2, no. 15). Jar fired grey with black soapy slip. Rim diameter 24 cm.

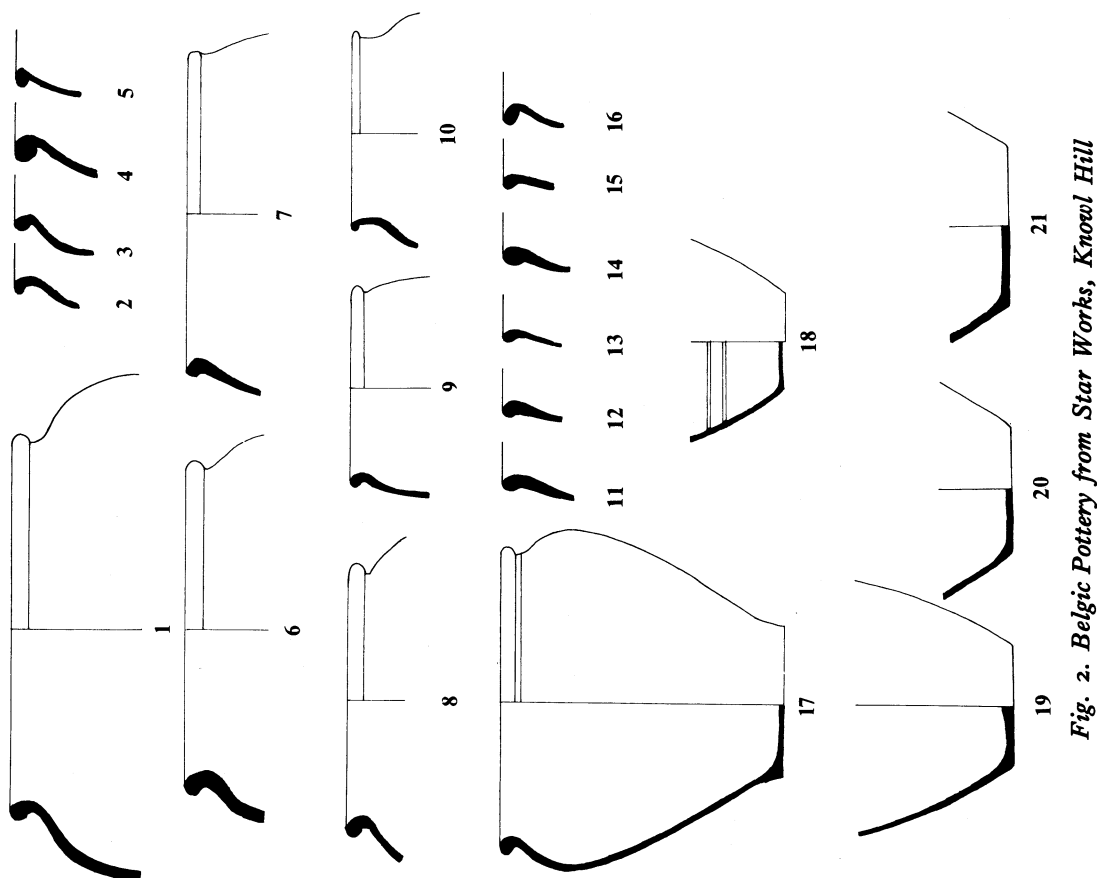


Fig. 2. Belgic Pottery from Star Works, Knowl Hill

28. (Fig. 2, no. 16). Jar fired black with sandy surface. Rim diameter 16 cm.
29. (Fig. 2, no. 17). Jar with bead rim fired black and red with soapy surface.
30. (Fig. 2, no. 19). Jar with flat base fired red with sandy surface.
31. (Fig. 2, no. 20). Base of jar in grey and buff. Sandy surface.
32. (Fig. 3, no. 1). Jar with beaker type rim in hard grey sandy ware. Has similarities with Silchester 13/116 and CAM120. Dating A.D. 1-50.
33. (Fig. 3, no. 2). Jar with beaker type rim in hard grey sandy ware. Flat base.
34. (Fig. 3, no. 3). Jar with beaker type rim in buff and black with sandy surface.
35. (Fig. 3, no. 4). Jar with beaker type rim in hard red ware.
36. (Fig. 3, no. 5). Small jar in hard grey ware with horizontal grooving. Rim diameter 10 cm.
37. (Fig. 3, no. 6). Necked bowl fired grey with orange-brown slip and horizontal grooving. Has similarities with Silchester 14/156 and 14/157 which date to the Claudian or earlier. At Verulamium a similar pot Fig. 9, no. 1 p. 151 did not survive the Claudian invasion.
38. (Fig. 3, no. 7). Necked bowl of sandy black material, with bulge between cordon and shoulder. Similar to CAM218Ac(3). Dating first century A.D.

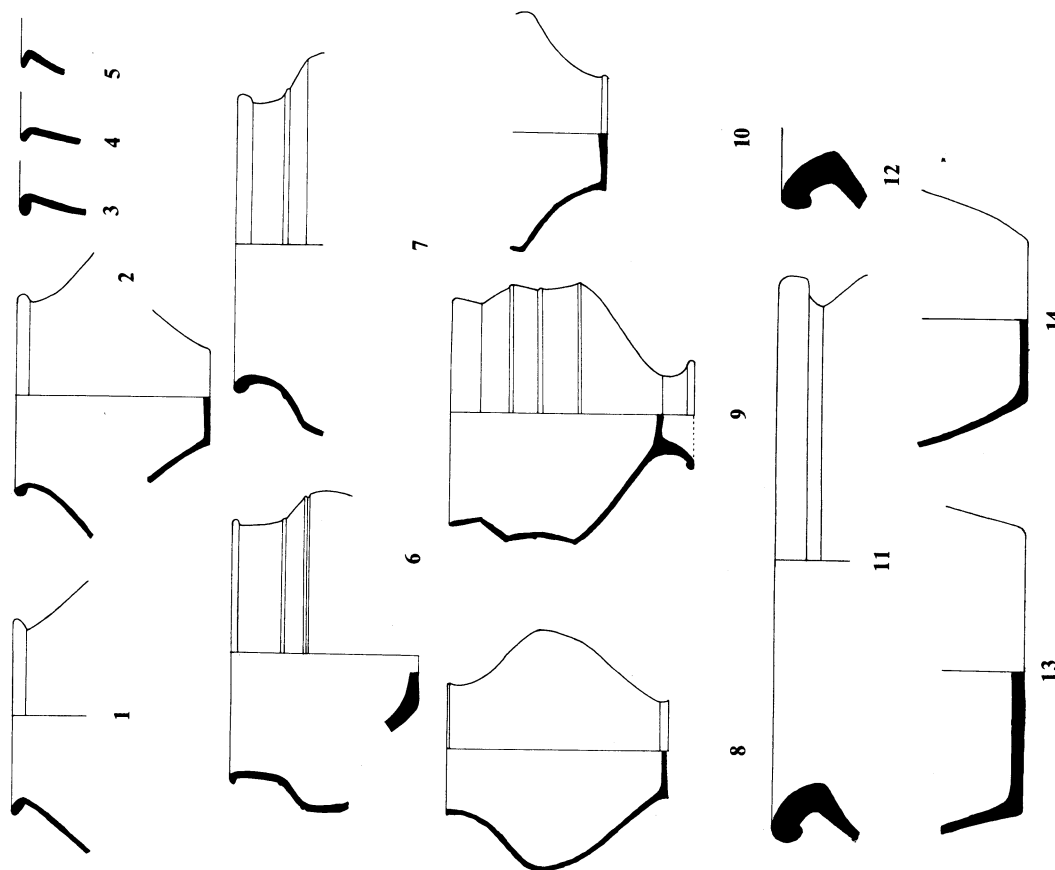


Fig. 3. Belgic Pottery from Star Works, Knowl Hill

39. (Fig. 3, no. 8). Rimless jar in orange-buff fine sandy ware. Very bulbous with flat base. The nearest parallel found was Silchester 13/97 for which a date of not later than A.D. 150 was given.
40. (Fig. 3, no. 9). Pedestalled tazza cup fired red and decorated with horizontal bands. No exact parallel has been found but it has similarities with CAM Form 210 especially the pedestal of CAM Form 210(b). Dating first half first century A.D.
41. (Fig. 3, no. 10). Base of carinated jar in grey ware with black slip. Sandy surface.
42. (Fig. 3, no. 12). Large storage jar with hooked rim fired red with flat base, diameter 14 cm. Estimated rim diameter 42 cm. CAM Form 270(b). Dating A.D. 10-48.
43. (Fig. 3, no. 13). Large storage jar as no. 42 but red and black with soapy surface. Rim diameter 57 cm.
44. (Fig. 3, no. 14). Base of storage jar in red-buff ware with soapy surface.
45. Jar with flat base in grey sandy ware. Base 8 cm.
46. Jar with bead rim and black soapy surface. Diameter of rim not determined.
47. Rim of platter with black soapy surface. Heavily grit tempered with a horizontal groove running parallel to rim.
48. Rim of small jar in hard grey sandy ware. Diameter of rim 12 cm.
49. Rim of shouldered jar in hard red ware. Wheel made. Diameter of rim 16 cm.
50. Pot impression in clay with two fragments showing it to be grey hard ware.