

# NOTES FROM THE WESSEX ARCHAEOLOGICAL COMMITTEE

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## I. THE EXCAVATION OF A LATE BRONZE AGE SETTLEMENT AT FURZE PLATT, BERKSHIRE

### SUMMARY

In 1978 topsoil stripping prior to gravel extraction revealed features of Late Bronze Age date. Two round post-built structures were recorded as well as a scatter of pits, post holes and hearths.

### GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site (SU879837) lies at the edge of the gravel and the chalk, on the Boyn Hill Terrace of the Thames Valley. The settlement is situated on a fairly level plateau at a height of 40 metres O.D. The ground slopes down gently to the stream 650 metres in the east; to the west the ground rises sharply to a height of about 100 metres O.D., while to the south the plateau is defined by a dry valley. To the north gravel extraction has lowered the level of the land.

### LOCATION OF THE SITE

The Bronze Age features were noted by chance by Julian Richards during a routine check of the gravel pits in the area. There had been no previous archaeological fieldwork on the site and no features had been recorded from the air. One crop-mark in this area has been identified 600 metres south east of the site (Fig 1); pits containing Iron Age pottery were recorded when the site was developed (Reading Museum records). As demand for gravel at the time was high, extraction was progressing at a rapid rate and it was possible to spend only one weekend on the excavation.

### THE SITE

An area of c.180 m × 28 m was cleared with a D8 box scraper which, on the whole, left a clean surface in which the features showed clearly as soil marks. These did however lose their clarity when they dried out.

The overburden sealing the features consisted of up to 20 cm of plough soil. A relatively large number of worked flints were observed in the ploughsoil. These were not systematically gathered and a few stratified flints were recovered. This soil may represent the remnants of an occupation layer over the site which had been destroyed by years of ploughing. The density of features varies over the whole strip, but the main concentration occurs at the northern end where some features had already been lost without record through quarrying. In this area, too, some silty patches, which were not examined closely, may have obscured further features. The full extent of the site was not determined. While it was difficult to examine the area to the west where the topsoil was removed by the drag line, which produced a very irregular and messy surface, the density of features did appear to be diminishing. This

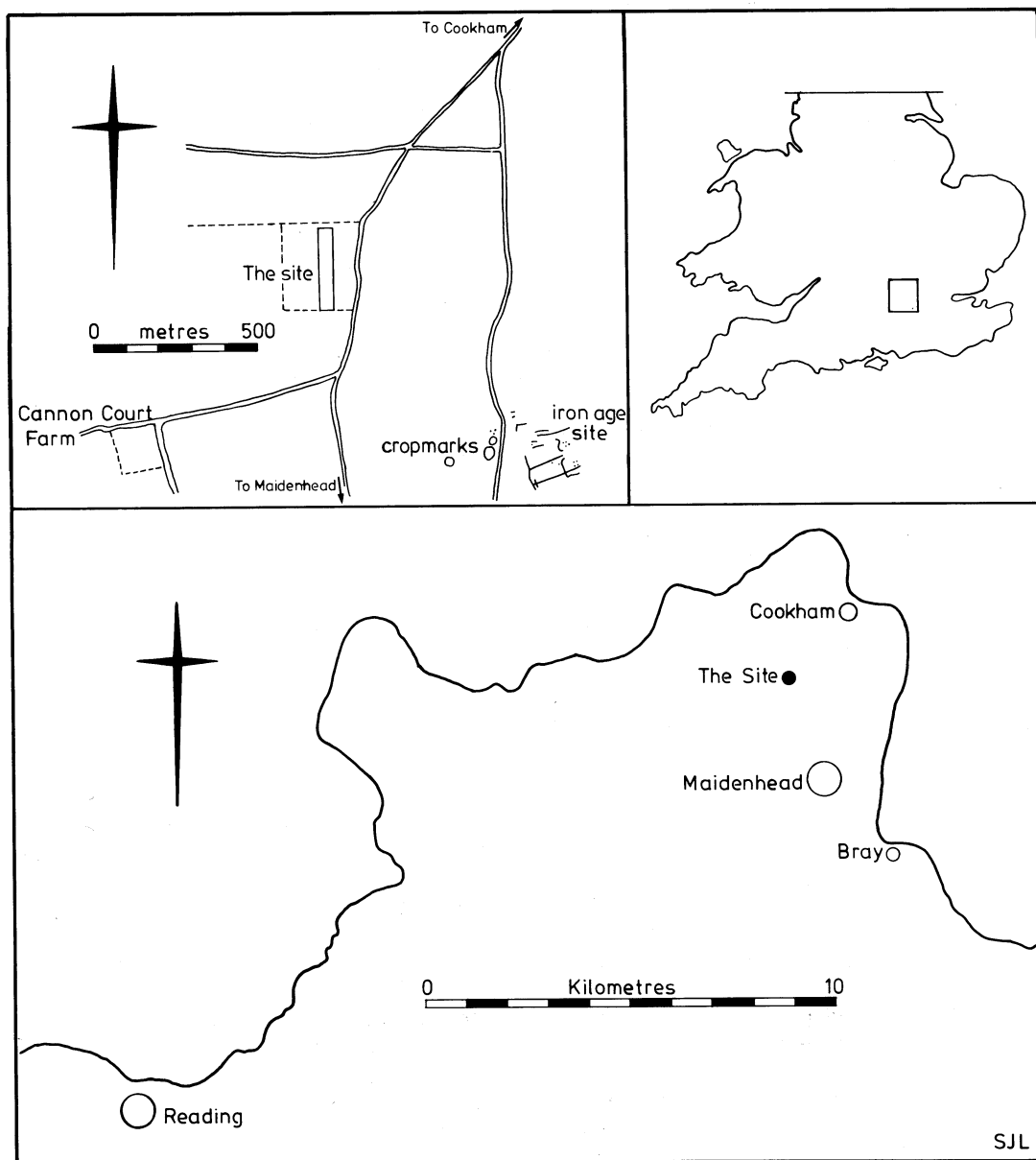


Fig. 1 The location of the site at Furze Platt

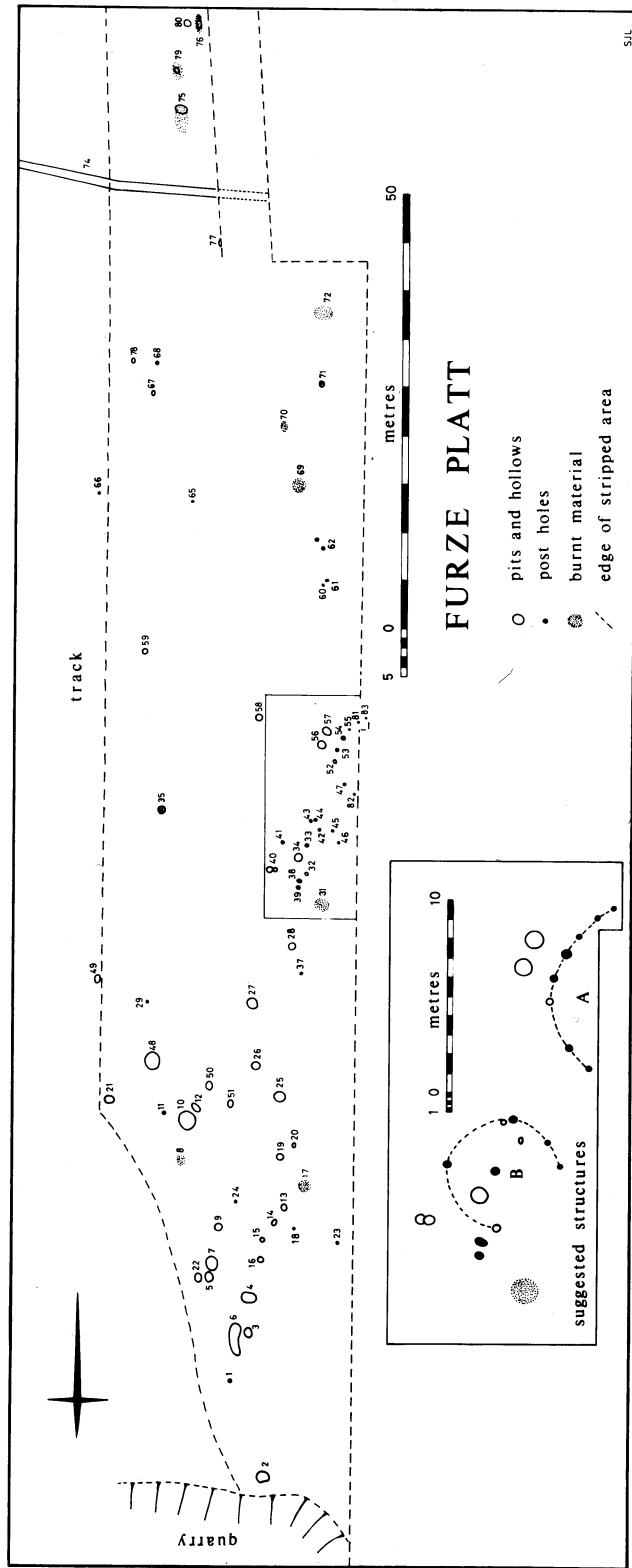


Fig. 2 Plan of the excavated features

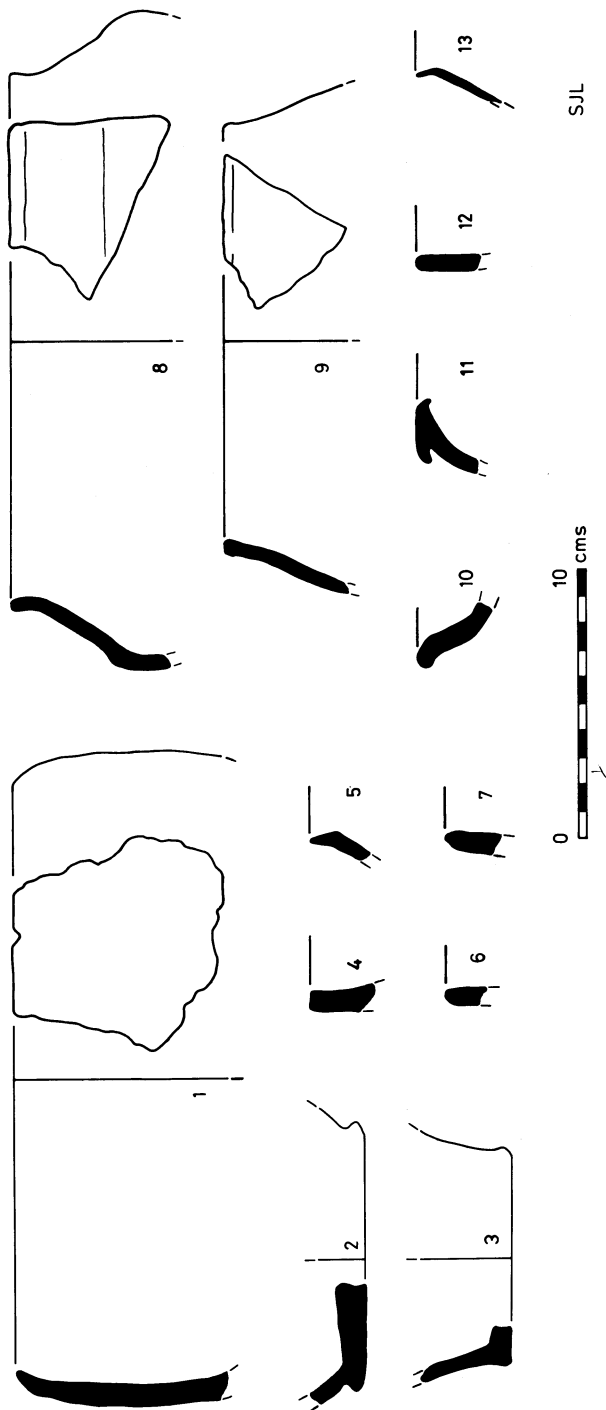


Fig. 3 Pottery from Furze Platt

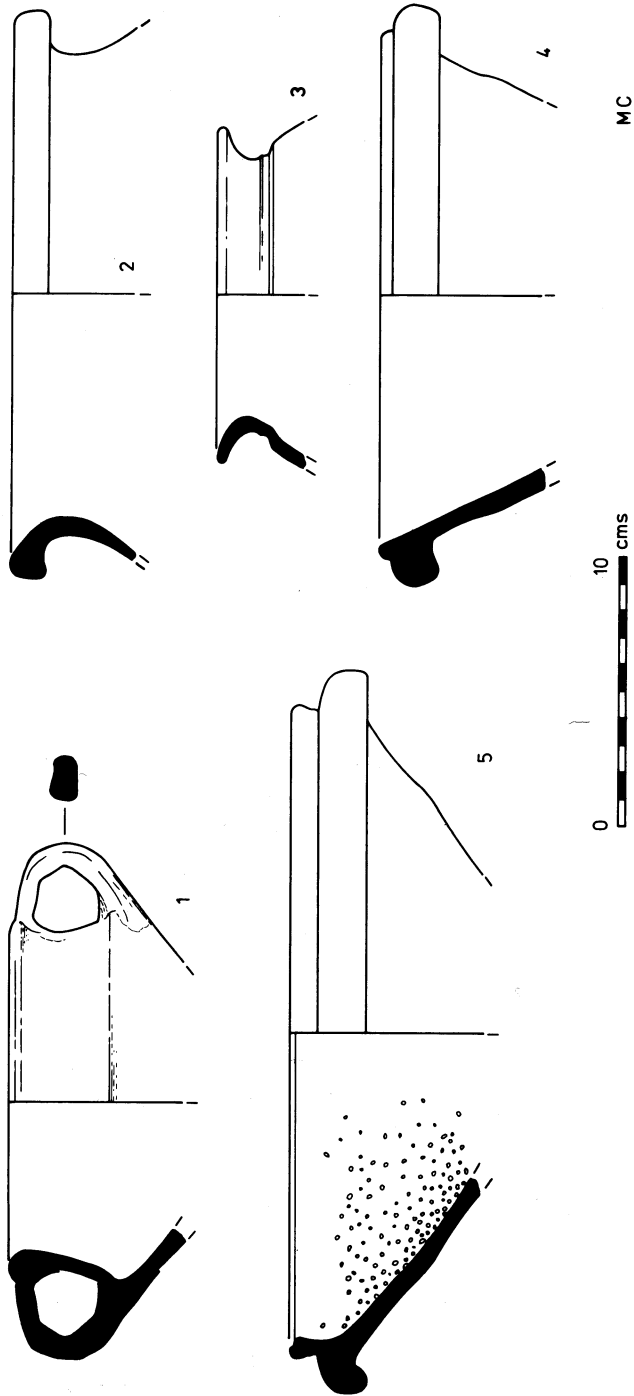


Fig. 4 Pottery from Beaumy's Castle and Cold Harbour Wood

suggested that the settlement did not extend far in this direction.

## THE EXCAVATED FEATURES

### *Post holes*

Thirty-five post holes were recorded. Most of these were fairly regular in plan with diameters ranging between 30 and 50 cm, while depths varied from 5 to 25 cm. One post hole (F54) was exceptionally deep (47 cm), but the reason for this is not obvious. None of the post holes showed signs of post packing and there was no indication that the posts had been removed or replaced. Most of the post holes clustered together in one area where two post-built structures may be represented (Fig. 2)

### *Structure A*

Eight post holes, about 1 metre apart, formed an arc about 8 metres in diameter at the edge of the stripped area. These post holes averaged 30 cm in diameter and were all of similar size, with the exception of two which were noticeably larger and deeper (F53 and F54). Opposite these larger post holes were two round hollows (80 cm in diameter) and it is suggested that these may have been post pits for substantial posts forming a porch structure over an entrance facing south-east. Such a porch would have been fairly large (about 2 metres<sup>2</sup>) but can be paralleled at other Late Bronze Age sites eg. Aldermaston Structure 1 (Bradley *et al* 1980). Not enough of the interior was exposed to be able to suggest any internal features. The area to the west was not investigated, but it is felt that these post holes can be fairly confidently interpreted as part of a round house, the rest of the circle lying under the unexposed area.

### *Structure B.*

A second less convincing structure can be suggested in this cluster, composed of a more dispersed arc of 5 post holes of similar

size. Two of these were only 5 cm deep and it is possible that other shallower post holes may have been destroyed by ploughing or in the removal of the overburden. This structure would have been about 5.80 metres in diameter. Just off the projected centre lay a post hole of similar size to the others and it is suggested that this may have held a roof support post. Within this ring of posts was a pit of uncertain function containing 3 sherds of pottery, charcoal and a few burnt flints. Furthermore, it may be worth noting that a feature interpreted as a hearth was located close to this structure 3 m to the north.

### *Other post structures.*

Three pairs of posts were noted. One pair (F38 and F39) were 45 cm apart and located just outside structure B. The other two (F60 and F61, F62 and F63) 45 cm and 60 cm apart respectively, were close together in an area apparently devoid of other features. There was no indication of the function of these pairs of posts although they are known at other sites. This apparent absence of associated features would seem to indicate they had a specific function and were not the remains of porches of round houses. This is further emphasised by their lack of common orientation, especially in not facing south-east.

### *Pits and hollows.*

Twenty-five pits and hollows were recorded. These formed a general cluster at the northern end of the stripped area away from the suggested structures. This group of features varies in size from very shallow hollows (12 cm in depth) to large deep pits (48 cm in depth). Many of them were fairly regular in plan, round or oval, but contained little to indicate function. The features nearest the structures did appear to contain more artefacts and may have been rubbish pits. Features 4, 48 and 77 were all very deep (48 - 127 cm), tending to be bigger and deeper and slightly undercut at the eastern end. The finds from these pits, including pot sherds,

burnt flint, some worked flint and charcoal, were not numerous. The function of these pits is unclear: some of the larger ones may have been for storage, although it was impossible to infer whether they were for grain, as there was no opportunity to sieve the contents of any of the pits. The density of material from the site as a whole was very low and it may be suggested therefore that those smaller bowl-shaped pits, which contained quantities of occupation debris, may have been rubbish pits. Some features appear to have silted up naturally. Only one pit (F40) showed any sign of recutting. In this case a shallow scoop appears to have been cut into by two small pits.

Features 6 and 10 were both shallow features, irregular in plan and section, and filled with silts. Both contained a few pot sherds, worked and burnt flints, while feature 10 also contained some fired clay. Interpretation of these features is difficult, but it is possible that they were quarries or even solution hollows.

#### *Wells.*

Features 9 and 22 were apparently very deep features with nearly vertical sides cut into gravel. Feature 9 was slightly undercut but this may have been the result of the sides collapsing in. Both were similar in size. Feature 9 was excavated to a depth of 60 cm and probing indicated a further depth of about 60 cm. Feature 22 was excavated to a depth of 45 cm but probing in this case was uninformative as it was impossible to differentiate between the gravel fill and the natural gravel. Both features became more clayey and wetter with depth and lenses of dark organic material were noted in feature 9. It is tempting to interpret these features as wells but, if they were, the sides must have been shored in some way as the natural gravel was very loose and prone to collapse, a fact which made excavation very difficult below a certain level. A pit interpreted as a well has been recorded also at Fengate (Pryor 1980).

#### *Hearths.*

Several large features (Fs 17, 31, 69, 70 and 72), almost circular in plan, were seen in section to be fairly shallow (25 cm). They were filled with a layer of dense burnt twigs, wood and burnt flints overlain by a layer of dense burnt flints. One of these pits (F 72) showed definite signs of burning *in situ*. These features contained no artefacts and may have been hearths or ovens. Several of the other features in this southern area contained varying quantities of burnt material and may have had related functions. Little can be said about the precise nature of this cluster of features, which is located at some distance from the domestic structures, but their grouping and distinctive fills hint at a common function related to a specific activity involving heating or burning, which was not carried out elsewhere on the site.

#### *The ditch.*

The ditch (F74) running across the southern end of the site appeared to be a modern drainage ditch. The settlement was probably unenclosed.

## THE FINDS

#### *Pottery.*

A total of 280 sherds (2300 g) of pottery was recovered from the site. About 87% of this consists of coarse flint-gritted ware while the remainder is characterised by finer and sandier fabrics. Some finger-smearing on the coarse-ware vessels (Fig 3,1) was evident and some of the finer vessels (Fig 3, 8, 9 and 13) had been slightly burnished. The few vessel types present have been illustrated and come from the following contexts: feature 28: 1-5; feature 6: 4; feature 80: 7; feature 47: 8; feature 71: 9 and 13; feature 59: 10; feature 53: 11; feature 54: 12. Sherd nos. 5, 8, 9, 12 and 13 were all of the finer sandy fabric while the rest were of a coarse flint-gritted ware.

Such a small assemblage does not justify extended discussion. Most of the vessel types can be found in the pottery groups from Aldermaston and Knights Farm (Bradley *et al* 1980) suggesting a date of around the 9th century B.C. The shallow bowl (Fig 3, 10) has no parallel in the Kennet Valley assemblages but a similar bowl is known at the Late Bronze Age settlement at Beedon Manor Farm (Richards forthcoming). The T-shaped rim (Fig 3, 11) is rather unusual in this collection and the closest parallels are from the Upper Thames (Harding 1972, Plate 44). Harding associates these forms with cauldrons which, following the Hawkes and Smith chronology, would place the Furze Platt rim no earlier than the second half of the 6th century B.C. (Harding 1972, 76-8). However, O'Connor has recently proposed the backdating of cauldrons and suggests a long lifespan from about the 10th to the 7th centuries B.C. (O'Connor 1980, 192). Therefore, if these T-rims are derived from cauldrons, as Harding suggests, and accepting the revised dating for cauldrons, the suggested 9th-century dating for the pottery from this site could easily encompass the T-rim.

#### *Flint.*

Fifty-four flakes, as well as four cores and 100 grams of shatter-pieces, were recovered from stratified contexts. Only four pieces had been retouched, including one pebble which had been retouched to form a rough scraper. Of the 121 unstratified pieces which were collected, 24 were implements or had been retouched. A combination of gravel and chalk flint were used, both of which would have been easily accessible locally.

#### *Fired clay:*

70 g of fired clay was recovered from the top of feature 5 and one small fragment from feature 16. None of this could be definitely identified.

## DISCUSSION

It is clear that the settlement at Furze Platt was short-lived with probably only one phase of settlement represented. The pottery suggests a date in the 8th or 9th century B.C. The layout of the site appears to have been planned and organised with specific activity areas and can thus be compared to the settlement at Aldermaston in the Kennet valley, where the spatial pattern of the features hints at a planned arrangement.

The location of the settlement would have been ideal in the context of a mixed economy with easy access to the lower terraces and flood plain of the Thames, which would have been suitable for both grazing and arable farming. However, the evidence was too indeterminate to indicate the exact economic nature of the settlement. The low density of pits in the excavated area, which can be compared with sub-site III at Knights Farm (Bradley *et al* 1980), contrasts with other sites where cereal growing is thought to predominate. No animal bones were found on the site but this is probably due to the acidity of the soil.

The apparent lack of artefact material from the site contrasts with the wealth of domestic material from the floodplain gravels, such as the Kennet Valley sites, and suggests a low status and poor economy for the site. A further contrast can be drawn between the impoverished material assemblage from this site and the high-status metalwork from the Thames in this area, notably at Bray only 5 km to the south-east. Indeed, flint appears to have been preferred as a raw material, even though bronze would have been readily available. This appears to have been the case at several other sites located usually well away from the rivers and in areas considered peripheral to the main area of occupation (Bradley 1980). Rams Hill (Bradley and Ellison 1975), Beedon Manor Farm (Richards forthcoming) (both on the Berkshire Downs) and Weston Wood, Surrey (Harding 1964) all show similar characteristics. This problem has already



been discussed by Barrett and Bradley (1980) and the settlement at Furze Platt may best be seen as part of a pattern of colonisation and intensification of activity on the poorer soils in this area during the later Bronze Age.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Summerleaze Gravel Company kindly allowed us time to carry out a brief excavation on the site and thanks must be given to those members of the Maidenhead Archaeological Society who turned out at very short notice to help. Richard Bradley provided useful advice about the site and the date of the pottery, for which I am most grateful. The salvage excavation was financed by the Department of the Environment, through the Berkshire Archaeological Trust Ltd. The finds and archive have been deposited in Reading Museum.

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## II. OBSERVATIONS ON THE SWALLOWFIELD BY-PASS (A33)

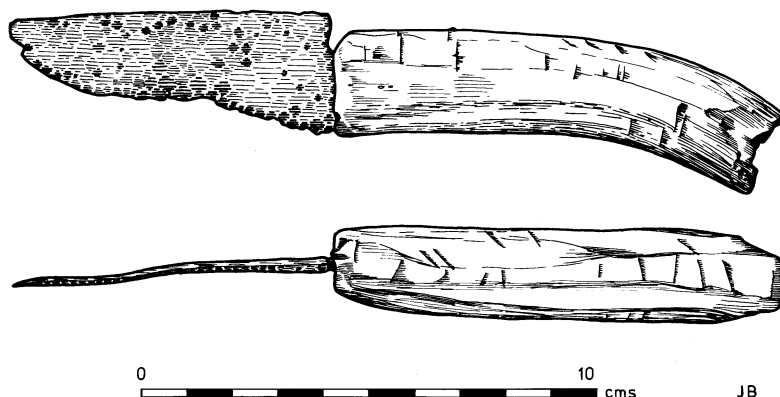
In 1978, during construction of the Swallowfield by-pass, Roman material was collected from two sites about 2 km apart at Beaumys Castle (SU711647) and Cold Harbour Wood (SU718628). The latter site is located on the course of the Roman road from Silchester to London, Margary's 4a, (1955, 76-81) 7.5 km east of the Roman town. Neither site was systematically excavated or recorded in detail and the material recovered must be considered essentially as unstratified. The pottery from both sites showed many similarities and has been discussed together.

### BEAUMYS CASTLE

The route of the by-pass skirted around the edge of Beaumys Castle, which is a medieval moated site. It was for this reason that this particular area was closely watched.

The site is immediately adjacent to the River Loddon and the moat is fed by a channel diverting water from a small loop of the river. It was at the eastern corner of the site, where there is an outlet from the moat leading back to the river, that the Roman material was found when the northern bank was being excavated to provide the footings for a new bridge over the river. The land rises steeply from the river on both the north and south sides.

A small section through the deposits was cleaned and consisted of shallow layers of gravel and sand and clay overlying peat (at a depth of 2.40 m) and sealed by a deep layer of clay (1.30 m). The finds came from all the gravel layers and include pottery of 3rd/4th-century date, tiles, iron slag, charcoal, some very small pieces of leather, animal bones, burnt flints, an iron knife hafted in bone (part of a red deer bone roughly shaped and



*Fig. 5 Iron knife hafted in bone from Beaumy's Castle*

smoothed) (Fig 5). Several wooden stakes with pointed ends were found but did not appear to form part of any structure.

David Holyoak, of the Geography Department, University of Reading, kindly inspected the section and took some molluscan samples for analysis. I am grateful to him for providing the following comments. Mollusca were examined from the gravels containing the Roman material, the overlying silty clay and the underlying peat layers. The peat and clay produced mollusca that were mostly of aquatic species indicating a large river with varied aquatic habits. The gravels containing Roman material produced few shells but were sufficient to show that the fauna of a large river was involved. The clay layer produced a Zone VIII pollen spectrum and contained a few fruits and seeds suggesting cultivation. The peat produced a Zone VIIb pollen spectrum. It seems most likely that the gravels and Roman material were 'dumped' by the river during a flood, although anthropogenic causes cannot be definitely ruled out.

#### COLD HARBOUR WOOD

Attention was drawn to this site by its suggestive name and by the fact that the Roman

Road from Silchester to London is thought to cross this area, running along the county boundary, which passes close to the Cold Harbour Wood.

While digging drainage ditches at the sides of the road, three negative features were observed. Because of the weather it was impossible to record these sections in detail. Furthermore, it was not possible to recover a plan of features at this site, as the road surface was built up at this point and there was no initial clearance. The pits contained quantities of pottery, tile and slag and one large feature contained a dense burnt layer. Roman pottery was found in a pit about 300 m to the west where a slip road was constructed and may provide further confirmation of the course of the Roman road.

#### *The Pottery:* by Mark Corney

A total of 466 sherds of pottery were collected from both sites: 365 from Cold Harbour Wood and 101 from Beaumy's Castle. In addition two sherds of post-medieval pottery were found at Cold Harbour Wood. Six fabrics were identified; 1-4 were present at both sites and 5-6 at Cold Harbour Wood only.

1. Sandy micaceous oxidised ware with red colour coat. Oxford region. (Young 1977, 123).

2. Hard off-white sandy ware — confined to mortaria of the Oxford region. (Young 1977, 56).
3. Sandy grey ware — colour ranging from pale to dark grey, some sherds with off-white or dark grey slip typical of the Alice Holt/Farnham potteries. (Millet 1979, 121).
4. Hand-made, ranging from pale orange to dark brown in colour, tempered with coarse grits and occasional grog.
5. Fine off-white ware with a slate grey to dark grey/brown colour coat. Probably Nene Valley.
6. Dirty yellow to off-white ware, containing small translucent quartz grits. Some body sherds with rilling. Probably from the Overwey (Tilford) Kilns (Millet 1979, 121).

Table 1 summarises the correlation of fabric with forms from both sites.

The two groups contain fabrics and forms typical of later Roman assemblages. The jars (Fig 4, 2 and 3) and the flanged bowls (Fig 4, 14) represent some of the commonest forms

of the period c. 250-400 AD. The Oxford Mortaria are represented by Young types C97 or C98 in fabric 1 (both sites) and M22 in Fabric 2, Fig 4, 5 (Beaumont's Castle only). Both types are dated by Young to c. 240-400 AD. Other forms in Fabric 1 include hemispherical bowls type C45 c. 270-400 AD (both sites) and small sherds with traces of white paint decoration which Young suggests becomes common from c. 325 AD. (Beaumont's Castle only). Many sherds in Fabric 3 retain traces of an off-white or dark grey slip, a practice which becomes common from c. 270 AD. The two-handled bowl, probably with a pedestal foot, in Fabric 3 (Fig 4, 1) from Coldharbour Wood is a type which occurs at the Lankhills cemetery and Portchester, where it is dated to c. 330-370 AD (Fulford 1975, type 92 and 1979).

Given the circumstances of recovery and the long time span for the use of some of the forms such as flanged bowls, it is possible to suggest only a wide chronological date range, c. 250-400 AD, for the material recovered from both sites.

TABLE 1

FABRIC	BODY SHERDS	BASES	RIMS			TOTAL
			FLANGE cf Fig-No4	JARS cf Fig-Nos 2-3	OTHER TYPES (incl mortaria)	
<i>Coldharbour Wood</i>						
1	13	2	—	—	4	19
2	1	—	—	—	—	1
3	209	16	11	45	9	290
4	11	—	—	—	—	11
5	2	1	—	—	1	4
6	24	8	—	6	—	38
					TOTAL	363
<i>Beaumont's Castle</i>						
1	9	—	—	—	2	11
2	—	—	—	—	2	2
3	63	9	4	8	1	85
4	3	—	—	—	—	3
					TOTAL	101

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