

# A ROMANO-BRITISH POTTERY NEAR LITTLE CHESTER, DERBY TRIAL EXCAVATIONS IN 1966-7

By M. BRASSINGTON

THE site lies to the north-west of the Derby racecourse playing fields (SK 36133755) in a five-acre field at present cultivated by the Parks Department of Derby Corporation. The walled area of Little Chester is some 700 yards to the west, and the Roman road running from there in an easterly direction, which bends ESE. towards Sawley, is considered to cross the site. After the lifting of the potato crop, in the autumn of 1966, Mr. J. Potts and the writer collected from the surface a number of Romano-British potsherds mostly of flanged bowls and mortaria, all abraded. The mortaria consisted of both hooked and hammer-head types mostly from Hartshill — Mancetter potteries;<sup>1</sup> also recovered were three small samian sherds, one the fragment of a base with part of a potter's stamp GER[, probably FLAVIVS GERMANVS c. A.D. 80-110 (fig. 3, no. 3).<sup>2</sup> In October three test-holes, each 3 ft. square, were excavated in the area of the most prolific finds by Mr. J. Potts, Mr. K. Mann, Mr. A. E. Cook and the writer (fig. 1).

## *Square no. 1*

At a depth of 18 in. two compact deposits of coarse pottery were found, each lying in a slight depression in the natural fibrous clay. The smaller of the two groups lay on the eastern side and the larger on the western side; both were unsealed but the overlying subsoil was virtually devoid of sherds, and the deposits appeared to be uncontaminated by the material of later periods. The sherds consisted of a great variety of small fragments of various shapes and fabrics and large connecting pieces often forming a major part of a vessel. The larger deposit yielded black-burnished ware imitating samian forms and portions of two vessels with a green lead glaze on the outer and inner sides, one the base of a jar or flask, the other the nozzle of a lamp<sup>3</sup> (fig. 2, nos. 4, 5). Lying on the clay between the two groups were four small samian sherds, three of Flavian South Gaulish

<sup>1</sup> Identified by Mrs. K. F. Hartley.

<sup>2</sup> Identified by Mr. B. R. Hartley.

<sup>3</sup> Identified as Roman by Mr. J. G. Hurst.

manufacture (fig. 3, no. 2), and the fourth Hadrianic or Antonine, Central Gaulish in fabric<sup>4</sup> (fig. 3, no. 1). Square no. 1 was taken as the datum point of the site; square no. 2 was sited 32 ft. to the north and square no. 3, 32 ft. to the west.

#### *Square no. 2*

This test-hole proved to be barren apart from five abraded sherds found in the subsoil.

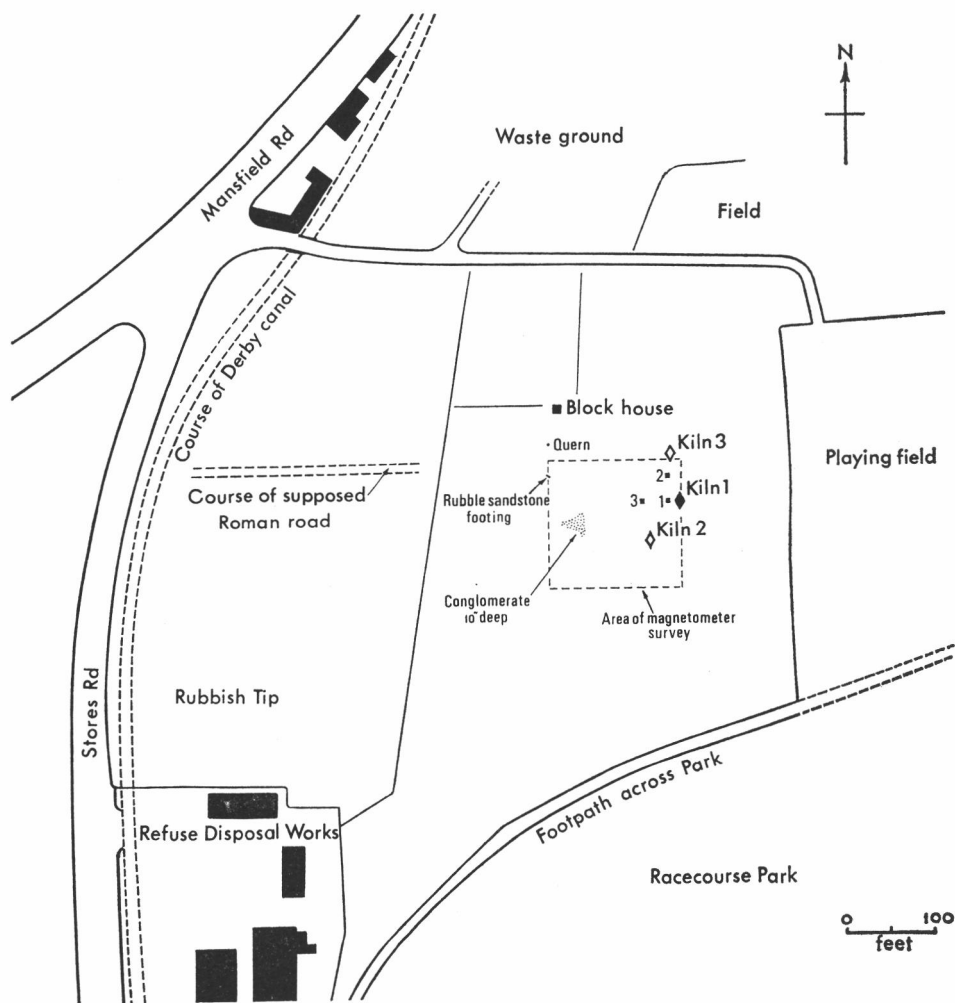


FIG. 1. Site of Romano-British pottery east of Little Chester, Derby.

<sup>4</sup> Identified by Dr. Grace Simpson.

*Square no. 3*

The subsoil again yielded only a few abraded sherds, but below this the earth was hard, dirty and gritty; this overlay a red clay layer some two inches thick. On the north-western corner a portion of a large wide-mouthed jar lay crushed into the surface of this clay; this proved to be a kiln waster (fig. 2, no. 20). Apart from the fragments embedded in its surface the red clay contained no artifacts, but it completely sealed a large coarse-pottery deposit covering the western half of the square. This pottery lay in a saucer-shaped depression in the fibrous natural sandy clay, at a depth of 2 ft. from the surface. The deposit was some 9 in. thick at the centre, tapering off at the edges and roughly oval in plan. The sherds were densely packed, and the filling round them was black and gritty containing only an occasional small animal bone. The great variety of the numerous small sherds was again a feature of the deposit, but by far the most interesting were several large sherds, some of unusual shape, fortunately many allowing the reconstruction of a complete section; a selection of these is illustrated (fig. 2, nos. 16-47). A fragment of plain samian was identified by Mr. B. R. Hartley as of Martes De Veyre fabric with a general date of *c.* A.D. 100-160, but probably *c.* A.D. 120-140. There was also one body sherd of a large vessel in grey fabric with a green lead glaze on the outer and inner sides identical to that found in square no. 1.

*The kilns*

In February 1967 it was learnt that the Parks Department intended to grass the site over and extend the playing fields. A magnetometer survey, carried out by Dr. P. Strange over an area 150 ft. square, indicated several areas of interest. A week later an exploratory excavation to check one of these readings was commenced; at a depth of 10 in. the lip of a kiln was uncovered 3 ft. 6 in. in diameter, some 15 ft. to the east of test-hole no. 1. Deposited in and around this kiln were numerous coarse-pottery sherds similar to those recovered from the test-holes. Lying on the kiln lip, near fragments of a fire-bar (fig. 3, no. 4), was a rustic-ware jar rim in a hard grey fabric with a dark grey surface (fig. 3, no. 5); several other similar sherds were found in the fill, two in a sandy orange fabric. Only four small sherds of samian were recovered and four flanged bowl rims similar to those in fig. 2, nos. 21-32. From the kiln and the overlying layer came seven sherds in a hard grey fabric with a green lead glaze on the outer and inner sides, one the beaded rim of a bowl some 8 in. in diameter (fig. 3, no. 7); the rest are body sherds of large and small vessels, ranging in thickness from  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. to  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. There is also a green glaze fragment of a base 2 in. in diameter in a soft cream fabric with a grey patch, which is presumably underfired (fig. 3, no. 8).

The overlying layer yielded seven brown colour-coated sherds, one a fragment of a castor-box lid. A one-piece bronze brooch (fig. 3, no. 6) was recovered from the kiln filling, and one foot to the south of the kiln at a depth of 13 in. was found a 3rd-century coin of Victorinus (RIC 114).

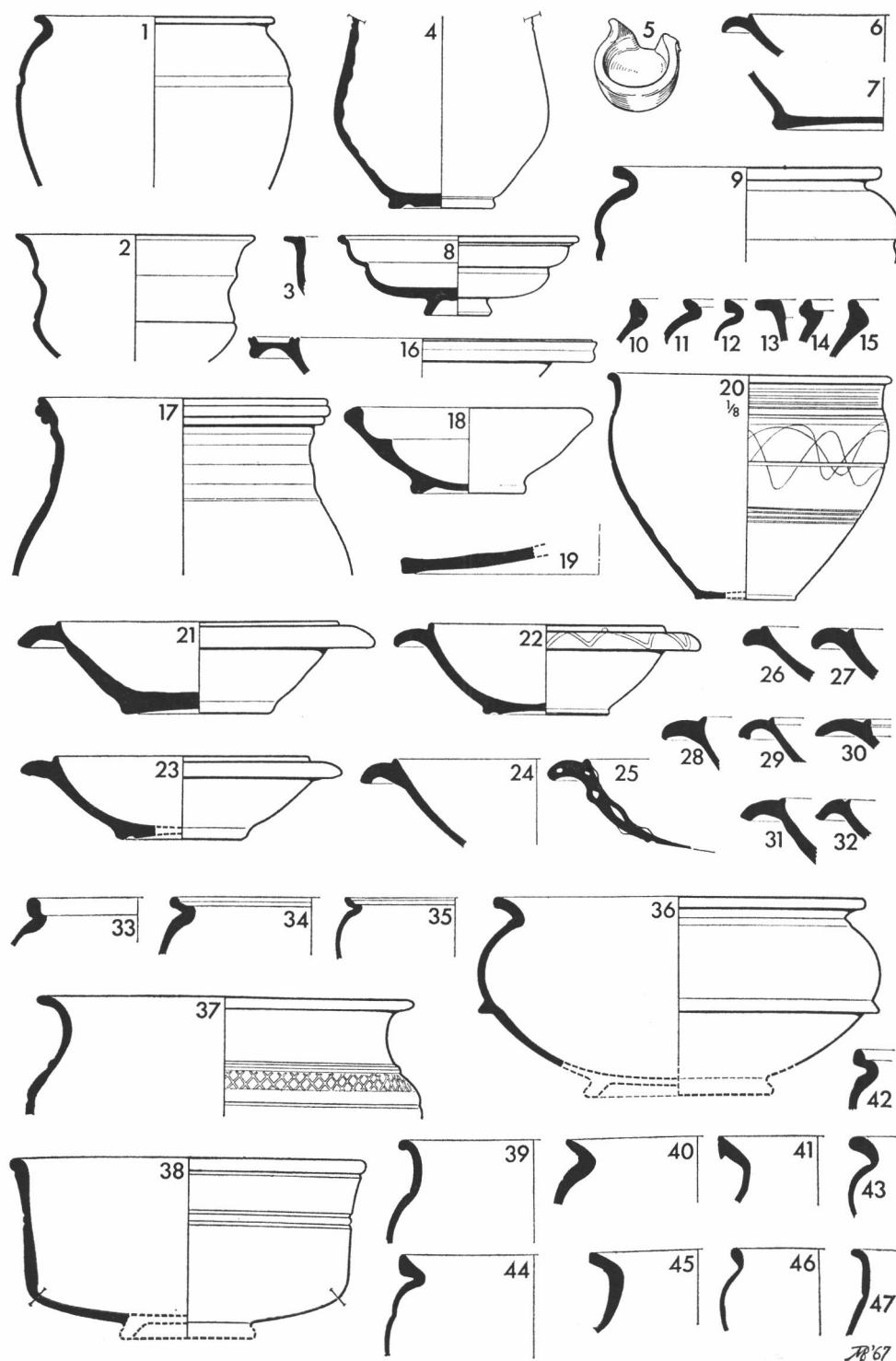


FIG. 2. Coarse pottery from test-holes 1 and 3 (4).

The existence of the kiln being proved, the object of the excavation was achieved. Digging was terminated at a depth of 15 in., and the site filled in. A full description must await the final report when this promising and apparently complete kiln is reopened.

On the second indicated kiln site, about 47 ft. to the south-west, an exploratory excavation revealed a 2-in. thick pebble layer one foot below the surface which contained Roman pottery. Below this layer was a filling containing pottery similar to that of kiln 1, part of a fire-bar and fragments of kiln wall, also rustic ware and small green glazed sherds.

The third probable kiln site, 56 ft. to the north of kiln 1, yielded rustic-ware sherds, grey-ware wasters and pieces of kiln wall.

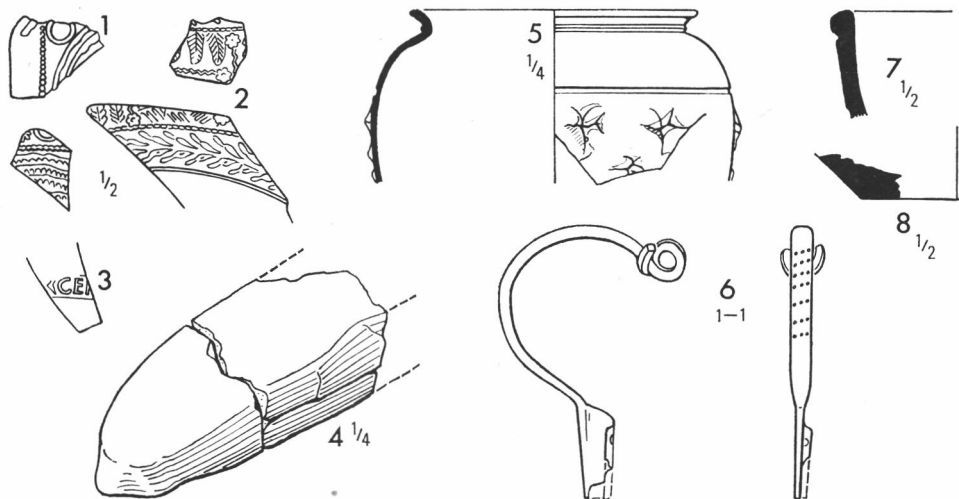


FIG. 3. Samian and other pottery, pieces of a fire-bar and a bronze brooch from test-hole 1 and kiln 1.

### *Other features*

An unsuccessful attempt was made to locate the road described by Smithard (*D.A.J.*, XXXV (1913), 131); in the attempt a complete base of a quern and the fragments of a second were found, also a possible rubble stone footing (fig. 1). An extensive stone layer some 9 in. below the surface was also discovered 100 ft. to the east of the kilns.

Later in the year when the topsoil lying to the south of the blockhouse was mechanically scraped away, a layer of sandstone rubble about 12 ft. wide was uncovered. A few feet to the north were several groups of sandstone, some of which were large cut blocks worn smooth but still showing tooling marks. The sherds associated with these stones were all Roman and of good quality; these consisted of a castor box, dark colour-coated beakers with barbotine decoration, mortaria of the reeded hammer-head type in cream fabric, plain samian forms 31, 33, 38, flanged conical bowls in polished grey ware and jars in Derbyshire and grey ware.

The general date of the pottery ranges from the late 2nd to the 4th century; the sandstone blocks are probably the remains of fairly substantial buildings presumably occupied during that period.

### *Dating evidence*

It would be premature at this stage to come to a definite conclusion as to the date of the kilns, but the presence of rustic ware indicates activity in the late 1st century and early 2nd century; the great variety of pottery suggests that they were filled with rubbish during the ensuing period and completely covered by the end of the 2nd century.

Test-holes nos. 1 and 3 did not contain any rustic ware. The samian sherd in the Martes De Veyre fabric and the imitated samian shapes suggest a date in the first half of the 2nd century for the sealing of this deposit.

## THE POTTERY

### *Rustic ware* (fig. 3, no. 5. Kiln 1)

This pottery of late 1st-early 2nd-century date has not previously been found in any quantity at Little Chester; few sherds are recorded, one in hard grey ware from the excavation directed by G. Webster (*D.A.J.*, LXXXI (1961), fig. 11, no. 13), and another in a soft sandy fabric from the Old People's Flats site, 1965. Llewellynn Jewitt illustrates a small jar of fine reddish-brown fabric  $3\frac{1}{2}$  in. high and  $3\frac{1}{2}$  in. across the mouth and decorated with three rows of nodular rustication; this was found filled with burnt bones outside the east rampart of the fort (*Intellectual Observer*, December 1867). This vessel undoubtedly contained a cremation and is similar to a small jar from North Hykeham, Lincs. (F. H. Thompson, *Ant. J.*, XXXVIII (1958), fig. 4, no. 3).

Rustic ware was recovered by S. O. Kay from Pentrich Camp in 1945 (*D.A.J.*, LXXXI (1961), 139).

### *Test-hole 1*

#### Deposit 1 (fig. 2)

1. Jar in grey fabric.
2. Bell-mouthed Gallo-Belgic type beaker in grey fabric.
3. Bowl rim, orange surface with a soft grey core.

#### Deposit 2

4. Jar, hard grey reduced fabric with green lead glaze on the outer and inner sides. (cf. G. Webster, "Excavations at Little Chester", *D.A.J.*, LXXXI (1961), fig. 11, no. 33, and "Excavations on the Roman site at Rocester, Staffordshire, 1961", *North Staffordshire Journal of Field Studies*, II, 1962, fig. 3, no. 5).
5. Apparently the nozzle of a lamp,<sup>5</sup> this unusual sherd is in the same hard grey fabric as no. 4, with green lead glaze on the outer and inner sides.
6. Flanged bowl in orange sandy textured fabric with traces of white paint on rim.
7. Base, in light coloured fabric with grey core, sandy textured dark grey surface.

<sup>5</sup> A green glazed lamp in helmet form, made at Cologne, is illustrated on plate C, Donald M. Bailey, *Greek and Roman pottery lamps*, British Museum. I am indebted to Mr. R. G. Hughes for this reference.

8. Imitation of samian form 27 in black-burnished ware, pinkish fabric with a soft grey core.
9. Jar in hard light grey fabric, tending to orange on inner side.
10. Jar rim, orange fabric, darkened outer surface.
11. Jar rim, grey fabric with orange surface.
12. Jar rim, grey fabric with sandy textured dark grey surface.
13. Bowl rim, hard grey fabric with dark fawn surface.
14. Jar with lid seating rim, light orange fabric.
15. Jar rim, in calcite gritted soft orange fabric.

### *Test-hole 3*

16. Bowl with an unusual flange, smooth burnished orange fabric, slightly burnt.
17. Jar with unusual rim, fawn coloured fabric with pink core and rough surface, slightly burnt.
18. Imitation of form 27, coarse grogged orange fabric with grey core, slightly burnt. (Mr. J. P. Gillam considers this to be a mould.)
19. Lid, grey fabric with rough dark grey surface sooty on underside.
20. Portion of a large wide-mouthed jar in orange fabric with grey core, horizontal lines round the neck and wavy lines crossing a girth groove. The vessel was distorted and cracked during firing. This is proved by the orange colouring of the fabric round major cracks which contrast with greyish inner side; also there are adjoining fragments which are burnt a dark brown.
21. Flanged bowl in orange fabric, differing from the other bowls of this type in the base and coarse fabric.
- 22-32. Flanged bowls, mostly in a smooth orange fabric sometimes with a grey core, but nos. 29 and 32 are completely grey. No. 25 is a badly blistered waster, and no. 27 is soft and underfired. There are remains of white paint on nos. 22 and 24. Some of the sherds show signs of burning.

This type of bowl has been found in the Derbyshire ware kilns at Hazelwood and Holbrook (S. O. Kay, *D.A.J.*, LXXXII (1962), figs. 12 and 13), Little Chester and Rocester (G. Webster, *Staffs. Journal of Field Studies*, II, 1962, fig. 3, no. 24). Also a recent find on the reservoir site near the Roman road to Sawley.

- 33-35. Jars with lid seating rims. The surface texture is similar to that of the finer type of Derbyshire ware, but the orange fabric is not as hard. A base in similar fabric but of typical Derbyshire ware shape and carrying the characteristic whorl mark is not illustrated (Kay, *D.A.J.*, LXXXII (1962), 29).
36. Bowl imitating samian form 44, hard light grey fabric with dark grey core and roughish dark grey surface. Not illustrated is a similar body sherd in orange fabric with a dark grey core (Webster, *D.A.J.*, LXXXI (1961), fig. 11, no. 37).
37. Large jar, grey fabric with cord and lattice decoration.
38. Bowl reminiscent of samian form 37, grey fabric with burnished black surface (Webster, *D.A.J.*, LXXXI (1961), fig. 11, no. 38).
39. Bowl rim in grey fabric.
40. Bowl, in hard dark grey fabric and orange surface. One fracture is completely orange in colour and this sherd must be considered to have cracked during firing.
41. Jar rim in grey fabric.
42. Jar with lid seating rim, orange fabric.
43. Bowl in grey fabric with light orange surface.
44. Jar in light fabric, corrugated body, dark grey surface with large fawn patches.
45. Narrow mouthed jar rim in orange fabric.
46. Jar rim in grey fabric.
47. Jar rim in grey fabric.

*Acknowledgements*

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