

ROMAN WELLS AT LITTLE CHESTER

By M. BRASSINGTON

THIS report on the Roman wells discovered at various times in or near the Roman fort at Little Chester describes the re-excavation in 1967 of a stone-lined well discovered in 1929.

William Stukeley in the early 18th century made the following references to wells¹:

"Divers wells are found, some remaining, square, curbed with good stone."

"A square well in his (Mr. Hodgkin's) garden (Derwent House) 3 foot and a half one way and 4 another."

"In the pasture over against the house two square Roman wells were opened by a violent flood in Sir Simon Deggs' time; they were made of very broad flat stones, let into one another, and were paved at the bottom with bricks set edgeways, as they tell me."

The well discovered in the front vicarage garden in 1874² has now been covered over, but fortunately Mr. C. B. Sherwin made a plan of it in 1926.³ It was square in plan and constructed with mitred 4-in. thick slabs set one above another. The inside dimensions were 2 ft. 3 in. by 2 ft. 2 in.; from ground level to the well bottom the depth was 12 ft. 6 in. and 9 ft. 3 in. to the water level.

A well was discovered in 1929 by Mr. Howard Best while making a vegetable garden on land then belonging to the vicarage of St. Paul's (fig. 1). The Rev. John Burness recognized that it was similar in construction to the Roman well in the front garden of the vicarage. During the following weeks the well was excavated to a depth of 9 or 10 ft., when water prevented further progress: two human skulls and many animal bones were recovered together with a quantity of potsherds. The Rev. Burness left Derby in November 1929, but he retained one of the skulls and a fine brown colour-coated flask with white-painted decoration which he had assembled from sherds (now in the Derby Museum). Some time after his departure the well was filled in and the surrounding ground became uncultivated.

The well was again located by Mr. K. Mann, Mr. J. Potts and the writer in May 1967 and re-excavated in the following September. The debris of the previous excavation was first removed. The remaining undisturbed filling, which was below water level, was found to consist of dirty coarse sand, grit, lumps of sandstone, animal bones and a little pottery. Operations continued until clean gravel was reached at a depth of 12 ft.

¹ *Itinerarium Curiosum* and *Iter Boreale*.

² *D.A.J.*, VII (1885), 78.

³ C. B. Sherwin's plans in the Derby Reference Library.

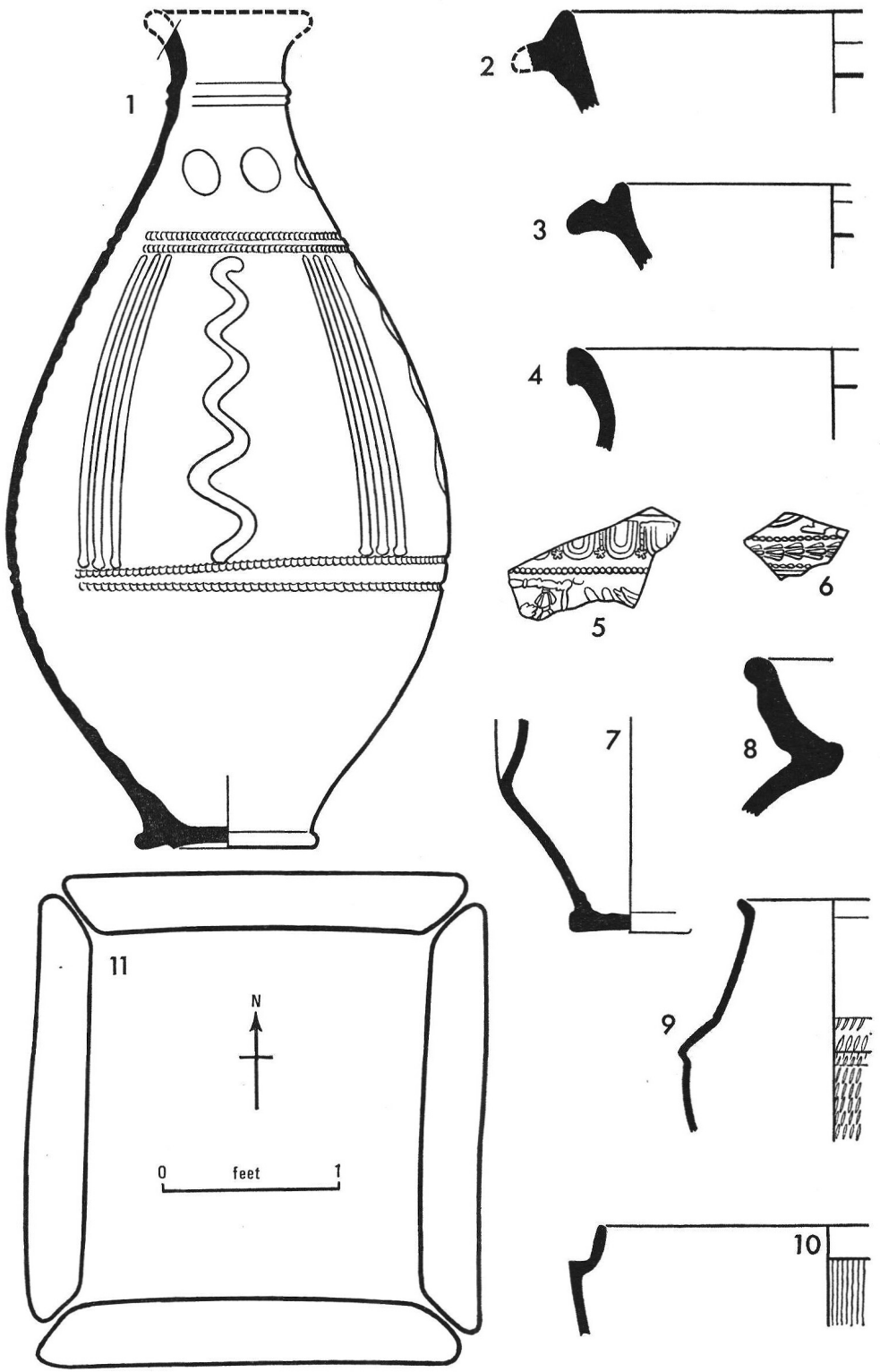


FIG. 1. Pottery from the re-excavated well (1/2) and plan of the well.

from the surface, at which depth the excavation was terminated, mainly because a 3-in. bore mechanical pump was unable to lower the water level.

The lining of the well consisted of sandstone slabs 3-4 in. thick, some of them over 3 ft. deep, others less than 2 ft., standing on end one above another. The vertical edges of these slabs were roughly mitred and fitted together to form a quadangular shaft; the inside dimensions at the well-head were 2 ft. 1 in. by 1 ft. 11 in. The water level was some 8 ft. below the present ground level; at this depth one of the slabs on the north side had fractured, presumably in ancient times, and a third of it had fallen away. The slab opposite was not held by its mitred edges, and these two slabs had to be held in place by two screw jacks.

THE FINDS

Coins

1. A denarius of Severus Alexander, silver on a base core, *R.I.C.*, 160 (A.D. 222-228). In excellent condition.
2. A sestertius of Hadrian, very worn, obverse: Leareate bust right, reverse: figure standing left, no legend visible.

Pottery (fig. 1)

With the exception of no. 1 which was retained by the Rev. Burness, nos. 2-5 are from the refill of the previous excavation.

1. Dark brown colour-coated flask in an orange fabric with white-painted vertical and wavy line decoration, four bands of rouletting (Colchester form 283, chiefly 4th century).
2. Flanged bowl, grey fabric *c.* A.D. 350-400.
3. Dark brown colour-coated flanged bowl, off-white fabric *c.* A.D. 350-400.
4. Jar in black calcite grited fabric.
5. Form 37. *Lezoux*. This is undoubtedly the work of Austrus. The ovolo, astragali and double festoon with leafy outer part match precisely with stamped sherds and moulds from the Lignonne site at *Lezoux*, found in context of *c.* A.D. 125-145. (cf. also *C.G.P.*, pl. 95, 19.)⁴

From the undisturbed filling, below 10 ft. from the surface.

6. Form 37 (slightly burnt). South Gaulish with zonal decoration of *c.* A.D. 90-110.⁴
7. Narrow-mouthed indented brown colour-coated beaker 3rd-4th century.
8. Derbyshire ware, lid seating, orange fabric, *c.* A.D. 150-400.
9. Narrow-mouthed brown colour-coated rouletted beaker, orange fabric. 3rd-4th century.
10. Brown colour-coated castor box. 3rd-4th century.

Not illustrated

Samian forms 31 and 38. Small fragments of colour-coated sherds, several of them with white painted decoration, 3rd-4th century.

Leather

Two pieces of a leather sole which had been heavily studded, the heel portion virtually complete.⁵

⁴ Samian pottery identified by Mr. B. R. Hartley.

⁵ Similar to the leather sole found at Melandra Castle. *D.A.J.*, LXXXIII (1963), pl. II, no. 1.

Nails

Five iron nails, square in section the largest $2\frac{1}{4}$ in. long, all tapering to a point and having splayed out heads.

Human bones

No further human bones were recovered, and this gives added interest to the two skulls recovered during the previous excavation. The skull retained by the Rev. Burness was loaned for a time to Mr. J. W. Allen, who states that it was in good condition with all the teeth intact. The base had, however, been sheared away, and he was in no doubt that it was the skull of a young man who had been beheaded.

Animal bones

All bones recovered were black in colour and many were obtained from the refill of the previous excavation. Mr. Donald Bramwell has identified the following animals:

1. A young ox of the Chillingham type.
2. A young sheep or goat.
3. A fowl with diseased bones.
4. Two dogs, one medium-sized, the other a large old dog with worn teeth and a damaged paw.
5. A pig.
6. A pony, some 13 hands high.
7. A red deer stag.
8. Several frogs.
9. A mouse.⁶

Most of the above animals were represented by only a few bones, in the case of the pig only one, but there were numerous bones of the old dog and this suggests that the whole carcass had been thrown into the well.

Seeds

The seeds listed below suggesting arable or waste land were recovered from the lower filling by filtering the water pump outlet. Identified by Mr. R. C. Alvey.

	<i>Seeds</i>
Rumex crispus	84
Sambucus nigra. L.	43
Rununculus sp.	7
Raphanus raphanistrum. L.	1
Corylus avellana. L.	8
Galeopsis tetrahit. L.	60
Conium maculatum. L.	54
Atriplex hastata. L.	44
Polygonum convolvulus. L.	1
Stellaria media. L.	9
Chenopodium album. L.	6
Thlaspi arvense. L.	1
Papaver sp.	2
Rubus fruticosus. L.	1
Cardus nutan. L.	5
	Curled dock.
	Elder.
	Buttercup.
	Wild radish.
	Hazel.
	Hemp nettle.
	Hemlock.
	Orache.
	Black bindweed.
	Chickweed.
	Fat hen.
	Penny-cress
	Poppy.
	Bramble.
	Musk thistle.

⁶ Identified by Mr. R. C. Alvey.

Dating evidence and conclusions

It is apparent that the construction of the well is similar to those previously discovered. There is only one potsherd of the 1st century, and the 2nd century is represented only by a worn coin of the reign of Hadrian and a few sherds of samian pottery. There was considerable activity during the Antonine period in the fort and in the civil settlement along the roads outside, and it is possible that the well was constructed at this time. It is orientated north-south and is therefore in alignment with the fort walls, but this may have little significance.

A silvered coin of the reign of Severus Alexander in excellent condition, which must have been lost soon after issue A.D. 233-235, is firm evidence of the existence of the well at that date. The bulk of the pottery is of the 3rd and 4th centuries, the surface of the slabs forming the sides of the well are worn smooth, indicating use over a long period.

Presumably in the second half of the 4th century the well fell into disuse. The two human skulls that were found in association with the colour-coated flask (fig. 1, no. 1), were among the first objects recovered during the 1929 excavation and therefore must have been among the last things thrown into the well during the Roman period.

Acknowledgements

The writer is grateful to the Rev. John Burness for supplying details of the previous excavation. Thanks are also due to Mr. J. May, who was kind enough to read this report in draft; to Mr. R. C. Alvey for treating the leather sole; to Derby Corporation Highways Department who kindly loaned a mechanical pump and screw jacks through the good offices of Mr. R. G. Hughes; and to the Parks and Allotments Department for allowing access to the site.

A POSSIBLE ROMANO-BRITISH KILN, NEAR MILFORD

By M. BRASSINGTON

IN November 1938 Mr. C. B. Sherwin recovered a number of Romano-British potsherds from an area 40-50 yds. square during the remaking of the no. 6 green on the Chevin golf course near Milford, (SK 346451).¹

Mr. Sherwin noted that, situated in the natural yellow clay, was a quantity of charcoal contained within a 4 ft. diameter ring of blackened clay; the surrounding clay was burnt red and appeared to peter out at a depth of 2 ft. Pottery collected at the site was examined by Professor

¹ The site is on the south side of the trackway, on top of the Chevin ridge. See *D.A.J.*, LXXXII (1962), 23, fig. 2.