

## EXPLORATORY EXCAVATIONS AT LITTLE CHESTER, DERBY

By M. BRASSINGTON

This report describes a series of exploratory excavations which took place prior to development work in the Little Chester area of Derby in 1968 and subsequent years. The locations of the excavations are shown in Fig. 1; site A, however, a section cut across the eastern defences of the Roman fort, is not included and will be dealt with in a later report. The excavations are described in the next section, and the major groups of finds are described in the succeeding section.

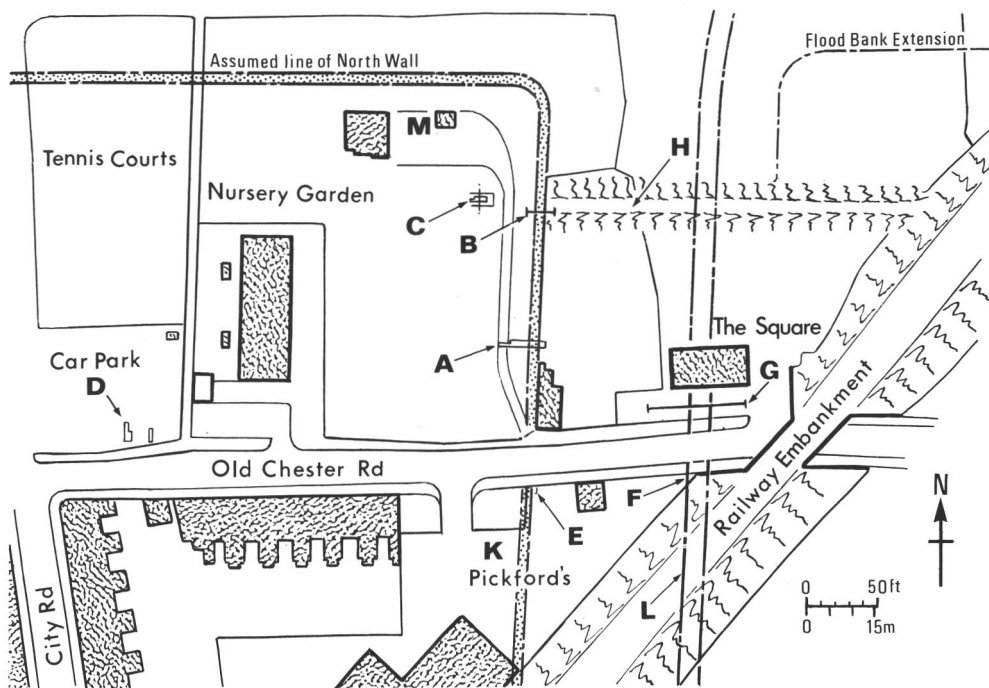


Fig. 1 Little Chester, Derby, in the period 1968-71, showing sites mentioned in the text.

### THE EXCAVATIONS

#### Site B: flood bank trench (H)

In May 1968 the construction of a flood bank was commenced, sited some 150 feet (46 metres) to the north of Old Chester Road. Aligned east-west, it connected the railway embankment with the eastern side of the Roman fort. A trench for the consolidated core of the bank was mechanically excavated, the end cutting into the eastern defences of the fort. The section revealed (Fig. 2) showed that the wall at this point had been

completely robbed away, but that the rampart behind it had survived to a height of nearly five feet (1.5 metres); no timber strapping was noted. There was no sign of the building platform which had been located at site A, but the base of the rampart was  $3\frac{1}{2}$  feet (1.06 metres) lower, indicating that the platform (which had been incorporated in the rampart) did not extend this far north. A small quantity of samian and coarse ware was recovered from the ground underlying the rampart (point X in Fig. 2). This sealed group, which antedates the defences, is consistent with the construction of the clay rampart in the early Antonine period.

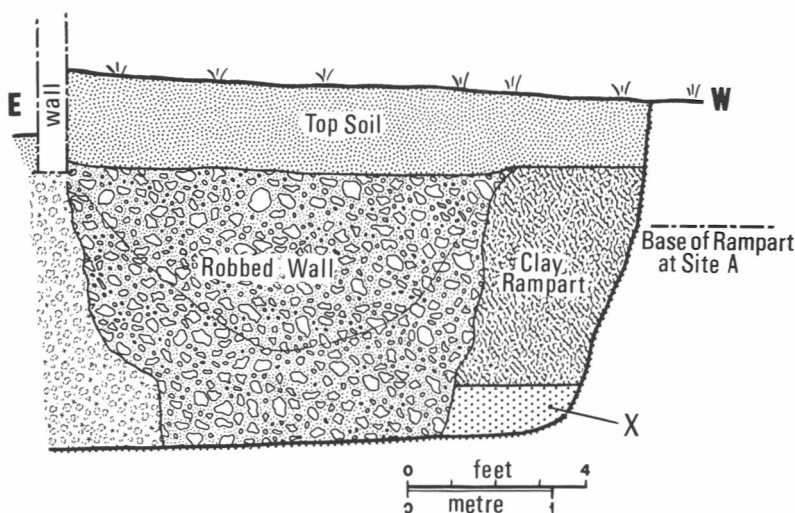


Fig. 2 Little Chester: section through eastern defences (Site B).

#### Sites K, E and F: Pickford's garage and Mottram's garden

Pickford's garage occupies the site of Manor House Farm (Site K). In 1968 the premises were enlarged by the acquisition of adjacent property to the east, extending the boundary up to the former Great Northern Railway line. The house on this land, 75 Old Chester Road, was occupied for many years by Thomas William Mottram and his widowed younger sister Catherine Coates until his death in 1927; the house was demolished on October 19th 1968 and the rubble spread over the garden to form a hard standing. Mr. Richard Morley, an employee of the company, obtained permission for two small exploratory excavations to be undertaken. These were carried out by members of the Archaeological Research Group under his direction.

An excavation at Site E (Fig. 3) revealed the fact that here the eastern defensive wall of the Roman fort had been entirely robbed away, with only the pitched stone foundation remaining. No trace of the east gate was found which, in all probability, lies under Old Chester Road immediately to the north. The full width of the pitched footing could not be ascertained because the Manor House Farm boundary wall overlay the western side. However, the width of the portion exposed measured 6 feet 6 inches (2 metres). The major portions of three flagons and a quantity of black burnished ware were found to the east of this footing. The site of the west gate of the fort had not yet been covered by the flood bank and the wall footings were still exposed after examination by Miss Rose Annable. The opportunity was therefore taken to measure the distance between the outer faces of the eastern and western walls of the fort: this was found to be 611 feet or 186.2 metres.

At Site F (Fig. 4) the western curb of Ryknield Street (the course of which is shown as

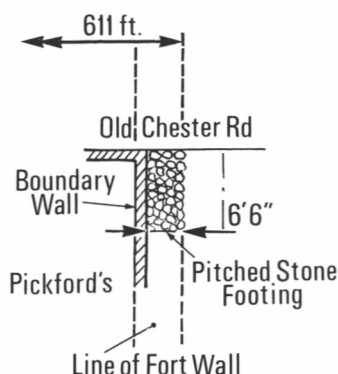


Fig. 3 Little Chester: pitched stone foundation of fort wall (Site E). North is at the top of the plan.

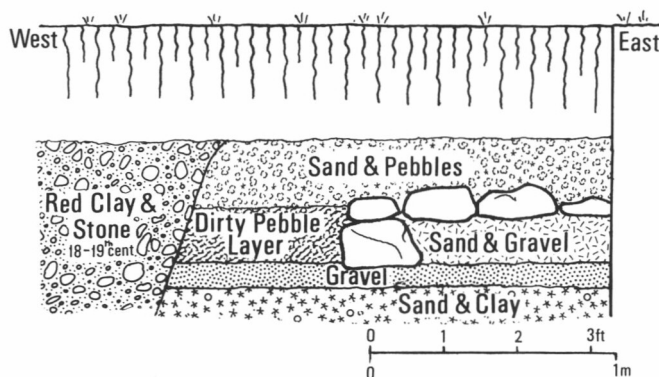


Fig. 4 Little Chester: curb of Ryknield Street (Site F).

L on Fig. 1) was located at a depth of 2 feet 3 inches (0.7 metres) below the ground level and 61 feet (18.5 metres) to the south of the newly-built flats on the northern side of Old Chester Road. This section confirmed the belief that Ryknield Street continued on a southward course, parallel with the eastern defences of the fort, and did not make a right-angled turn into the east gate to cross the Derwent by an assumed ford adjacent to the western gate. The crossing was obviously made south of the fort, presumably in the vicinity of the former Great Northern Railway bridge.

#### Site G

In April 1967, at the instigation of Mr. R. Marjoram on behalf of the Society, the Corporation agreed to excavate mechanically a trench 70 feet (21 metres) long in front of the newly-built flats in Old Chester Road (reported in the *Archaeological Newsletter* No. 8, April 1967). It was hoped to expose a section of Ryknield Street, but unfortunately the road at this point had been virtually destroyed by a massive trench packed alternately with layers of clay and large pebbles — presumably a building foundation of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Near the southwest corner of the flats, by the side of and parallel to Ryknield Street, a rectangular well was found; the upper portion had been cut away. It was lined with thin mudstone slabs standing on

edge. This well could not be cleared completely because of the wet weather and danger of collapse.

### Site C: cold frame site, 1970

In July 1970 a large permanent cold frame was under construction in the nursery garden. It was sited in the northeastern corner of the fort and permission to sample the area enclosed by the frame was obtained from officials of the Parks Department.

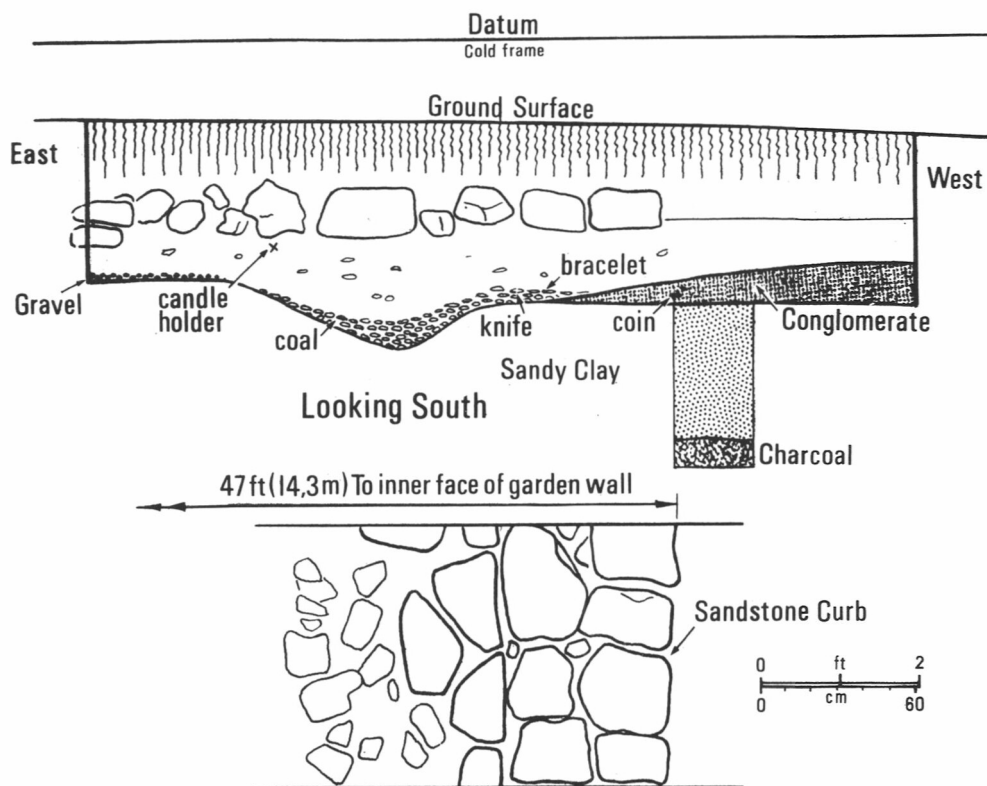


Fig. 5 Little Chester: section and plan of Site C.

A cutting 3 feet 3 inches (1 metre) wide and 10 feet (3 metres) long was made at the eastern end of the frame by Mr. P. J. Potts and the writer. The upper face of the concrete walling was utilized as the datum for the excavation (Fig. 5). A thick charcoal layer was encountered at a depth of 5 feet (1.5 metres) below datum, overlain by an 18 inches (0.46 metres) thick layer of sandy clay. Cut into this sandy clay was a V-shaped drainage ditch some 3 feet (0.91 metres) wide and 11 inches (0.28 metres) deep. It was aligned north-south and was partially filled with a dirty deposit of small pebbles amongst which was found a piece of poor quality coal (shale). To the east of this ditch was a thin layer of gravel and immediately to the west a compact mass of river gravel and pebbles, in which was embedded a corroded illegible coin assumed to be a third century radiate. This conglomerate had the appearance of a roadway and it was at first thought to be the eastern edge of the *Via Sagularis* — the road running round the inside of the rampart. Identification of this feature as the peripheral road is unlikely, however,

since its siting would indicate the existence of an open strip some 18 feet (5.5 metres) wide between it and the rampart. It would seem more probable that the thin layer of gravel on the eastern side of the drainage ditch represents the western edge of the *Via Sagularis* and that the conglomerate to the west is a hard-standing, or intervallum, associated with the fort buildings.

All the features described above had been covered over with a layer of soil containing flecks of charcoal, pottery, random stones, pieces of slate and a few animal bones. Some small flat stones were found standing on edge, thus indicating that the soil had been dumped and was not an accumulation. A platform of worn sandstones had been laid on the soil layer, 8 inches (0.20 metres) above the earlier road and ditch (Plate 1). This platform is most likely to be the western edge of a later *Via Sagularis*. Also at some later

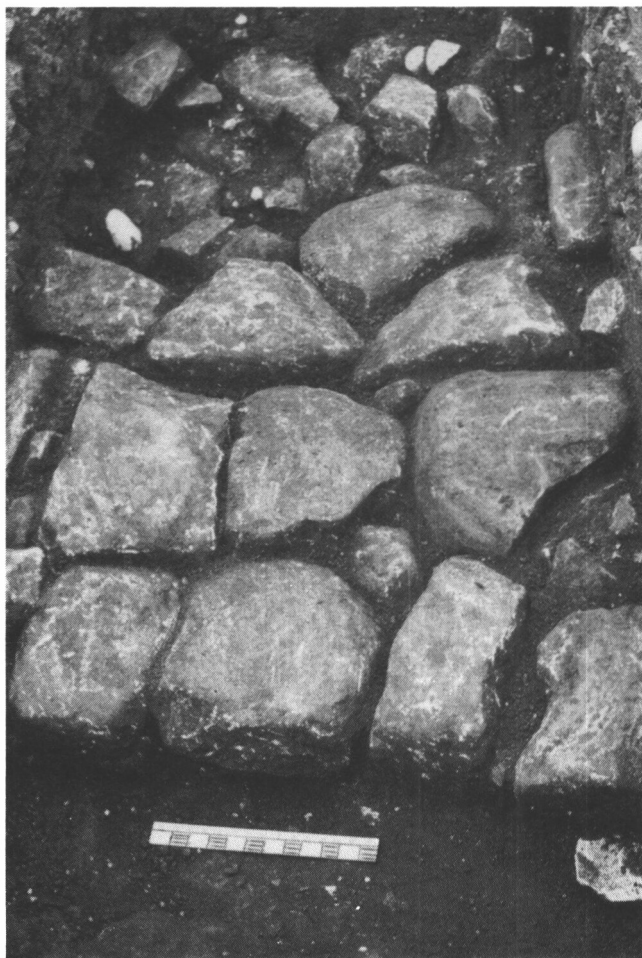


Plate 1 Little Chester: stone platform at Site C, looking east. Scale in inches.

date the width of the road was increased by two additional rows of curb stones. The soil above the road was similar to that found below it and some Oxfordshire ware sherds were found lying on, or immediately above, the road surface. (The finds are described in the next section.)

**Site M: nursery garden (July, 1970)**

Part of a clay platform was uncovered in the nursery garden when the ground was levelled between a garage and 'Lathams', a Victorian house used as a mess room, which was demolished in 1976. Cut into the clay was a series of slots in close proximity to each other and orientated in a north-south direction. This platform is sited on the line of the northern rampart and is therefore unlikely to be the foundation of a timber granary.

**Site D: car park**

The site of the gateway into the Principia is assumed by the writer to lie at Site D on the south side of the car park. Permission was obtained in July 1971 for Mr. P. J. Potts, Mr. R. J. Salt and the writer to carry out an exploratory excavation before this area was covered over by the rockery and shrubbery which now form the southern boundary of the car park.

A trench, 12 feet (3.6 metres) long by 2 feet (0.6 metres) wide (later increased to 5 feet (1.5 metres) wide at the southern end), was dug 6 feet (1.8 metres) to the north of the railing which then divided the car park from Old Chester Road, and 38 feet (11.5 metres) to the west of the eastern boundary of the car park (Fig. 6). Since Sherwin's excavations in 1926, the level of the car park has been raised 2 feet (0.6 metres) by the

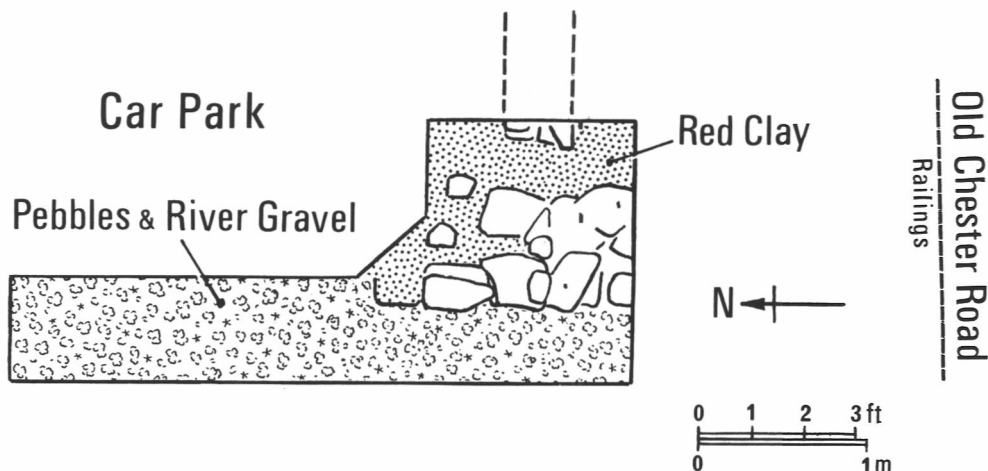


Fig. 6 Little Chester: Principia gateway? (Site D).

dumping of first clay, then ash. Beneath this ballast was a 16 inches (0.40 metres) layer of disturbed soil, containing modern and medieval pottery, which overlay the Roman levels. Immediately below this disturbed overburden, the foundations of a wall composed of gritstones set in red clay were located at the southern end of the trench. The portion exposed was 5 feet (1.5 metres) long and continued an unknown distance southwards. To the west of this wall and continuing the full length of the trench was a hard-packed conglomerate of river gravel. This wall and conglomerate could be the remains of the eastern side of the gateway that gave access to the courtyard of the Principia. To the east of this presumed gate stones were uncovered which, despite the fact that they did not butt up to the gateway, were assumed to be the foundation of the southern courtyard wall. A trench 12 feet (3.6 metres) to the east of this point was dug to check the alignment of the presumed wall — but only a U-shaped depression was found on the assumed line, thus suggesting that if a wall had existed it had been robbed

of stone. Sherds of painted colour-coated ware and a fragment of samian were recovered from the disturbed filling of the depression. Medieval pottery lay immediately over the stone footings and rubbish pits of that period had in places penetrated the conglomerate of the presumed access road.

### THE PRINCIPAL FINDS

#### Site B: flood bank trench

##### *Pottery antedating the clay rampart*

1. South Gaulish samian sherds (identified by Dr. Grace Simpson)
    - a. Form 15/17. A scrap from the inside of the rim. Presumably Flavian.
    - b. Scrap, slightly burnt. It is very thick, which suggests that it is from a large form 18 of the Flavian period. The slip is smooth, which also suggests that it is South Gaulish.
    - c. Scrap, South Gaulish fabric.
  2. Central Gaulish samian sherds (identified by Dr. Grace Simpson)
    - d. Form 37. Sherd with rosette (damaged) and beaded borders. It is micaceous Lezoux fabric. Could be Hadrianic. Possibly ACAVNISSA'S rosette (Stanfield and Simpson, 1958: 159, Fig. 21 No. 6).
    - e. Curle 15, cf. Oswald and Pryce (1920) Plate LVI, but no example there has the moulding on the carination as on this sherd, which looks like an early example of the form made at Lezoux; micaceous and underfired, with an orange slip. Probably Hadrianic.
    - f. Form 18/31. Probably Lezoux fabric, Hadrianic-Antonine.
    - g. Form 27 with flattened upper curve. This is the latest type of form 27 and is found on Hadrianic and Antonine sites (including the Antonine Wall). The fabric is micaceous and this together with the glossy slip probably indicates manufacture at Lezoux.
    - h. Three scraps in Central Gaulish fabric.
  3. Coarse ware
    - k. Fragments from three flagons, one a rim in a hard orange fabric with a pinkish-white slip.
    - l. Rim of a lid-seating calcite-gritted jar.
    - m. Black-burnished cooking pot rim. (BB1).
    - n. Base of a hard grey ware jar with a dark lead grey surface. Probably a local product.
    - p. Brown colour-coated body sherd from a small beaker. Orange fabric.
- The pottery was deposited in Derby Museum, January 29th 1977; accession No. 619-77.

##### *Coin find (unstratified)*

A sestertius of Domitian was found on the site of the flood bank one metre from the outer face of the fort wall (Mattingly *et al.*, 1923-1967: No. 396, Plate 76.7).

Obs: IMP CAES DOMIT AVG GEM COS (XIII CENS PER PP)

**Site C: cold frame site, 1970 (Fig. 7)***Pottery overlying the stone platform*

(Type references and dating of the Oxfordshire ware pottery are based on Young, 1977.)

1. Colour-coated dish, 9 inches (23cm) in diameter, with orange-brown colour-coat, pinkish fabric and a cream coloured core.

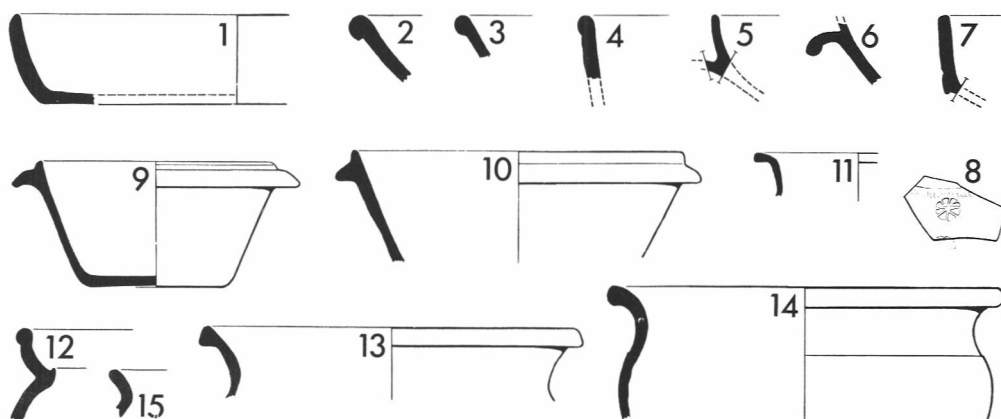


Fig. 7 Little Chester: late Roman pottery from Site C, overlying (1-7) and underlying (8-15) the stone platform. Details of the individual sherds are given in the text. Scale  $\frac{1}{4}$ .

2. Colour-coated dish rim, 8 inches (20cm) in diameter, with orange-brown colour-coat and hard whitish fabric.
3. Colour-coated dish rim with orange-brown colour-coat, hard whitish fabric and white painted decoration on the outer side.
4. Oxfordshire ware straight-sided bowl, 8 inches (20cm) in diameter, with brown colour-coat, fawn coloured fabric, grey core and rouletted decoration. Type C55, c. AD 240-400.
5. Oxfordshire ware bowl, 8 inches (20cm) in diameter, with a red colour-coat and hard orange micaceous fabric. Imitating samian form 38. Type C51, c. AD 240-400.
6. Oxfordshire ware bowl, with an abraded dark reddish-brown colour-coat and hard orange fabric. Imitating samian form 38. Type C51, c. AD 240-400.
7. Oxfordshire ware mortarium rim with an abraded red colour-coat, pinkish fabric and light grey core. Type C97, c. AD 240-400.

Not illustrated in Fig. 7:

- a. Colour-coated beaker sherds.
- b. Mortarium rim in a hard white fabric with orange-brown hatched decoration on the rim.
- c. Two fragments of samian form 37, a rim and a 'free-style' body sherd.

*Pottery found below the stone platform*

8. A body sherd from a globular beaker with a reddish-brown colour-coat, orange



fabric with a light grey core. Rouletted and rosette-stamped decoration. This sherd was found immediately under the stone platform, probably intrusive. Type C30 c. AD 340-400(+).

9. Straight-sided flanged bowl with a dark brown metallic colour-coat, hard off-white fabric.
10. Straight-sided flanged bowl in a hard grey fabric with a partly burnished lead grey surface.
11. Jar rim in a hard grey fabric with a partly burnished lead-coloured surface.
12. Derbyshire ware lid-seating jar rim with a sooty external surface and a whitish sediment on the inner side. (Many Derbyshire ware jars have been found at Little Chester with distorted rims — presumably these were sold as 'seconds' and utilised as cooking pots.)
13. Bowl rim in a hard grey fabric.
14. S-profile bowl in a hard grey fabric.
15. Black-burnished cooking pot rim (BB1). From sandy clay below the 'hard-standing'.

Not illustrated:

- d. Mortarium body sherd in a hard light cream fabric with small dark brown grits.
- e. Mortarium body sherd in a hard cream fabric with orange-brown colour-coat and black grits. Unworn.
- f. Mortarium base in a cream fabric with reddish-brown and black grits. Well worn down, with a hole in the bottom plugged with lead.
- g. Fragments of at least nine colour-coated beakers, mostly rouletted, but one with white scroll barbotine decoration.
- h. Fragment of BB1 ware cooking pot rim, sooted.
- i. Fragment of a samian dish.
- j. Two small gritted body sherds — one in a fawn coloured fabric with a black surface, the other with a rilled surface.
- k. Body sherds from three large vessels — two grey in colour, one of which is polished; the third is in an orange fabric.

*Metal and bone objects (Fig. 8)*

- A. Iron knife blade 4.9 inches (12.4cm) long including the tang. Found in a vertical position with the point uppermost, the iron ferrule of the handle was still in place. Markings on the tang suggest that the handle was made of wood. (cf. Manning, 1976: Fig. 22.127)
- B. Iron tool 4.2 inches (10.6cm) long including the tang — the square-section shaft has the end formed into a small hook, possibly for textile working.
- C. Candle holder fabricated from an iron disc 3 inches (7.62cm) in diameter and

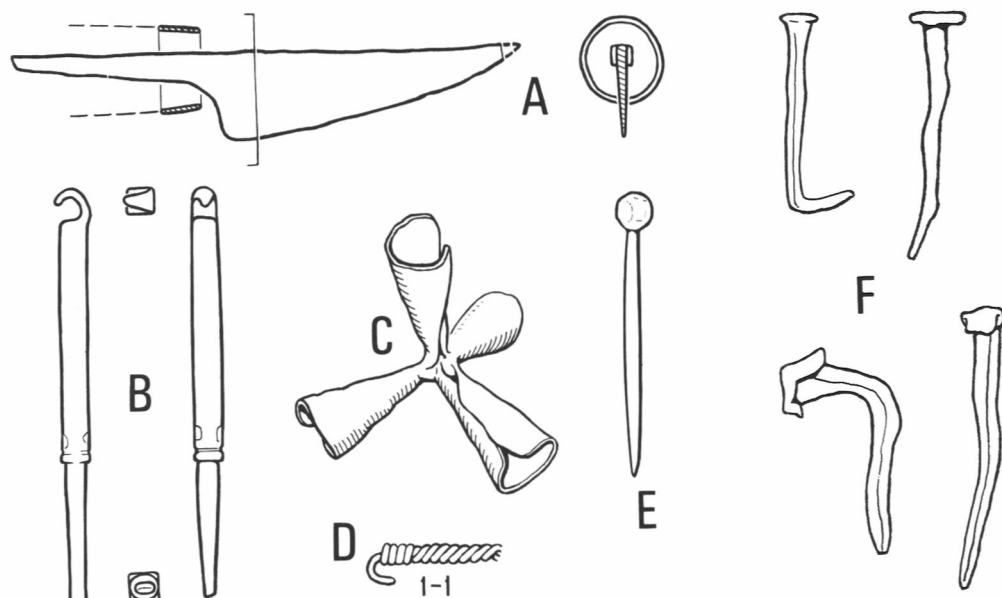


Fig. 8 Little Chester: metal and bone objects from Site C. A. iron knife blade; B. iron tool; C. iron candle holder; D. bronze wire bracelet. E. bone pin; F. iron nails. Full details are given in the text. Scale  $\frac{1}{2}$ .

0.06 inches (0.15cm) thick. The disc had been cut into quadrants still joined at the centre which were formed into four cones, their axes being turned at approximately  $109^\circ$  to each other. Any one of these cones could hold a candle — the other three becoming tripodal legs. cf. Ward (1911) Fig. 61 C, 'Caltrop' candlestick from Caerwent.

D. Fragments of a bracelet formed from braided bronze wire, approximately 2.25 inches (5.7cm) in diameter.

E. Bone pin, 2.85 inches (7.1cm) long.

F. Iron nails, square in section and some  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches long (6.3cm), one bent at right angles. (cf. Manning, 1976: Figs. 25, 26.)

#### Other finds

A fragment of roofing tile; part of the body of a box flue tile; and an iron chain link oval in section —  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches (3.8cm) long, 1 inch (2.5cm) wide and  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch (3.1mm) thick.

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