

A ROMAN SITE AT POLHILLS FARM, ARLINGTON, 1969

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with a report on the pottery by *J. Holmes, F.S.A.*

INTRODUCTION

The removal of soil by machine in 1969 for a new reservoir at Arlington uncovered a number of archaeological features. A group on the west side of the river Cuckmere was examined in the limited time available to them by E. W. and H. G. Holden. Of these features a 4th-century pottery kiln, workshop, and a scatter of potsherds have been published (Holden 1979). This report deals with the other features of that site referred to in the 1979 article. That paper should be consulted for a site plan and description of the area.

EXCAVATION (Fig. 1)

It was estimated by the site engineer that at least 0.3 metre of topsoil and clay had been removed mechanically by the contractors. This left 18 patches of varying size showing as a greyish colour in the surrounding yellow-ochre Weald clay. There was also a sparse scatter of abraded sherds generally in the area. The grey patches represented holes which had been dug into the subsoil. During excavation the larger holes, with a definite shape and structure, were regarded as archaeological features and were numbered F.1 to F.8. Other holes were shallow depressions only; they were numbered C.1 to C.13. It appeared that most of the holes were the bottoms of truncated shallow pits, though one or two might have been the bases of post-holes; only F.2 and F.5 went down deeper into the subsoil. Every hole contained potsherds, while some had other objects. The grey colour of the clay, at first thought to have been caused

by fire, is more likely to have resulted from the accidental addition of ash and general dirt to the natural clay. Where intense heat had been applied (as in the kiln: see previous report) the clay had turned red or brown in colour.

The pottery falls into two distinct periods: an early period, late 1st- to 2nd-century, and a late period, mid 4th-century. The various features group into two sets according to whether they contained pottery of the early or the late period.

Early Features

F.2. This was well defined as a sub-rectangular area of dark clay in which nodules of chalk were visible. Excavation finally revealed a depression in the natural clay, 1.5 by 1.05 metres, the north end being curved in plan. The sides were 250–380 mm. deep and nearly vertical; the bottom sloped to the north and was covered with a layer of black ash 12–25 mm. thick. The other material in the filling consisted of grey clay (natural + ash), burnt (red or brown) and unburnt (yellow) clay, mixed with lumps of chalk, a few flints, pieces of a sandstone quern (Fig. 1) and a piece of Mayen or Niedermendig lava quern about 25 mm. thick (in fragments), two small pieces of a shale bangle, and potsherds in quantity, including a stamped Samian base and some fine ware. Also present were crushed mussel and limpet shells, fragments of animal bones (including sheep and cattle), some burnt and possibly with signs of butchering, two pieces of antler and some brick/tile. Chalk was more concentrated on the west and north sides (see Fig. 1).

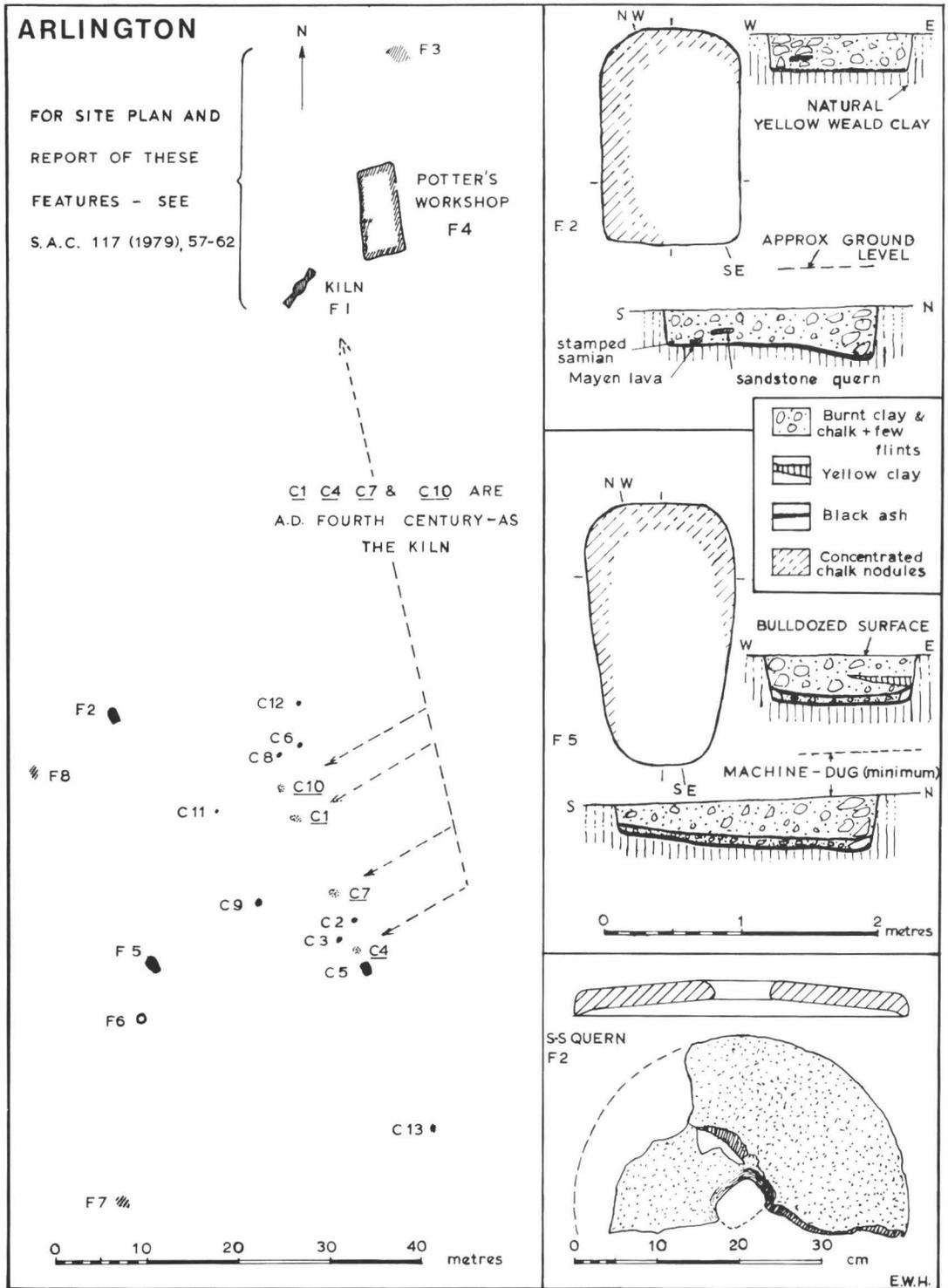


Fig. 1. Arlington. The excavated area; Features 2 and 5; topstone of a sandstone quern.

F.5. The plan (Fig. 1) shows that this is almost a repetition of F.2, except that it tapers towards the south-east end and there are two layers of ash at the bottom, separated by a thin layer of burnt clay and chalk rubble. The filling generally was the same as in F.2, with small quantities of oyster, winkle and mussel shells, sheep/cattle teeth, fragments of cattle bones (some burnt), potsherds and brick/tile. There were also fragments of a sandstone quern, but none of lava.

F.6 showed as a ring of grey clay in the natural soil c. 150 mm. wide, with an overall diameter of about a metre. Four small sherds were found in the grey clay; the latter did not exceed 12 mm. in thickness.

F.8 was a patch of dark grey clay 1.5 by 0.9 metres in plan with rounded ends, containing coarse sherds and an iron nailhead.

C.2 and C.3 were each patches of grey clay c. 0.22 metre in diameter and less than 12 mm. in depth. The former contained sherds and charcoal fragments; the latter, sherds, a piece of brick/tile and a partly burnt sheep/cattle tooth.

C.5 was a large patch of grey clay 1.5 by 0.45 metres, filling a very shallow depression. Sherds, burnt and unburnt flints, cinder, calcined bone and burnt clay were present.

C.9 was similar, but only 0.6 by 0.45 metre, and again shallow (max. 12 mm.). Finds were sherds, calcined bone, charcoal, a piece of burnt clay, fragments of iron nail, and a tiny piece of glass.

C.6, C.8, C.11 and C.12 were all small patches of grey clay, none having any realistic depth. All had potsherds, while C.6 and C.8 had tiny fragments of calcined bone, C.6 some burnt clay, and C.12 a fragment of an iron nail.

F.7 and C.13 proved to be no more than amorphous smears of dark clay, but with a few sherds, and C.13 had also a piece of burnt bone.

Late Features

C.1 was an oval patch of grey clay 1.5 by 0.45 metres and not more than 25–50 mm. thick. Coarse sherds abounded, plus six corroded iron

nails, a sliver of glass, and fragments of calcined bone (all bone being of animal origin).

C.4 was a smear of grey clay 150–230 mm. in diameter, with no depth; it contained a few coarse sherds and a fragment of brick/tile.

C.7 was an oval hollow 1.2 by 0.6 metres and 150 mm. deep in the centre; sherds found mainly round the edge of the depression, also two nails and an iron fragment. The clay was very dark, being impregnated with specks of charcoal.

C.10 was a smaller, roughly oval area 0.6 by 0.45 metre, of grey clay, with a depth of 25–50 mm. There were coarse and fine sherds, a piece of an iron nail and a fragment of brick/tile.

DISCUSSION

The removal of soil before the site was discovered prevents firm conclusions being drawn, especially as in many of the features only the bottom few millimetres remained.

Early Features

These seem to group into a rough pattern: F.2 with F.8 and holes C.6, C.8, C.11 and C.12; F.5 with F.6 and holes C.2, C.3, C.5 and C.9. F.7 and C.13 then look like all that remains of another of these patterns, the rest being bulldozed away.

The principal features are F.2 and F.5. Their exact use is unknown, but the presence of so much burnt material and ash in both suggests some process involving fire. In the kiln report it was stated that they may have been used for cooking (Holden 1979, 57), but a hole in the ground at least 0.6 metre deep for domestic cooking now seems improbable. The concentration of chalk suggests possibly a low screen wall along one side and end. Such a wall, if plastered with clay, as seems probable, would withstand fire (cf. a medieval lime-kiln of this construction that withstood intense heat: Holden 1980, 272–5). In the absence of local stone, chalk evidently was considered important

enough to be conveyed from the South Downs, some 4 km. to the south. The remains of food in the holes may be traces of meals eaten nearby but not cooked there. Perhaps we should see F.2 and F.5 as the stokeholes or ash-pits of ovens built above ground.

The C.1-13, F.5, F.7, and F.8 features were so slight that no satisfactory explanation of their various purposes can be offered. The ring of grey clay, F.6, likewise defies a rational explanation.

Late Features

The hole C.4 might be the base of a post-hole and the others may be the bottoms of depressions that had been used as rubbish pits. It cannot now be determined if they had any connection with the kiln to the north, even though the pottery is contemporary.

THE POTTERY (by J. Holmes)

Introduction

The pottery excavated on Polhills Farm, Arlington, in 1969 was found in a series of holes which had been dug into the clay subsoil of the site. Whatever had been the original purpose of these holes, they had all been filled up with domestic rubbish which contained not only the pottery but also other refuse, such as burnt bone, oyster shell, iron nails, and broken pieces of querns, as well as charcoal and burnt clay which were no doubt the debris of domestic fires or ovens.

The pottery was all found in fragments. Some large pieces and a few almost whole pots had originally been thrown in amongst the rubbish but the heavy earth-moving machinery which was used to clear the topsoil had crushed everything into pieces. The task of assembling the pieces was undertaken by Miss J. Biggar, who also made some preliminary drawings so that the pottery could be studied. After study, 38 pots have been selected and redrawn for publication; the rest is too fragmentary for the forms of the vessels to be determined.

The pottery was of two periods, indicating two periods of use of the site. Features F.2, F.5, F.6, F.7 and F.8 and the holes C.2, C.3, C.5, C.6, C.8, C.9, C.11, C.12 and C.13 contained pottery of the late 1st/2nd century. The holes C.1, C.4, C.7 and C.10 contained pottery of the 4th century together with a small residue of fragments from the earlier period.

Much of the pottery from the earlier period consisted of native wares made locally in East Sussex. The pots were handmade, though they must have been finished on some kind of turntable. C. M. Green (1977, 152-78) has aptly named this kind of pottery 'East Sussex ware'. It was made by individual potters for the numerous agricultural settlements of the late Iron Age and Roman periods which are distributed throughout the downland of East Sussex. This pottery was fired in a simple type of surface kiln which is rarely found because it leaves only a burnt patch in the ground to mark its site. The pottery was nevertheless well made and served its purpose so well that the folk of East Sussex had no need to buy their domestic pottery from any outside Roman source. All the rest of the pottery from the earlier period at Arlington consists of thoroughly Roman, wheel-thrown wares, imported mostly from the Continent. This is remarkable because it is only occasionally that a piece of Samian dish or a fragment of Roman beaker has been found on the downland farms.

The 4th-century pottery found in the holes of the later period tells a different story. It came mostly from the Romano-British pottery industries of the Alice Holt/Farnham region and the Nene valley; none was of local make, for there was never any large-scale pottery industry in Sussex, but a few pieces must have come from the Continent.

The Handmade East Sussex Wares (Fig. 2, nos. 1-16)

Lids

1. Lid of tall, conical form, in dark-grey ware with a smooth surface, decorated with a pattern of thumbnail markings. (F.2)
3. Hollow knob of a lid in coarse grey ware with much flint grit. It is evidently handmade, for the knob is not truly

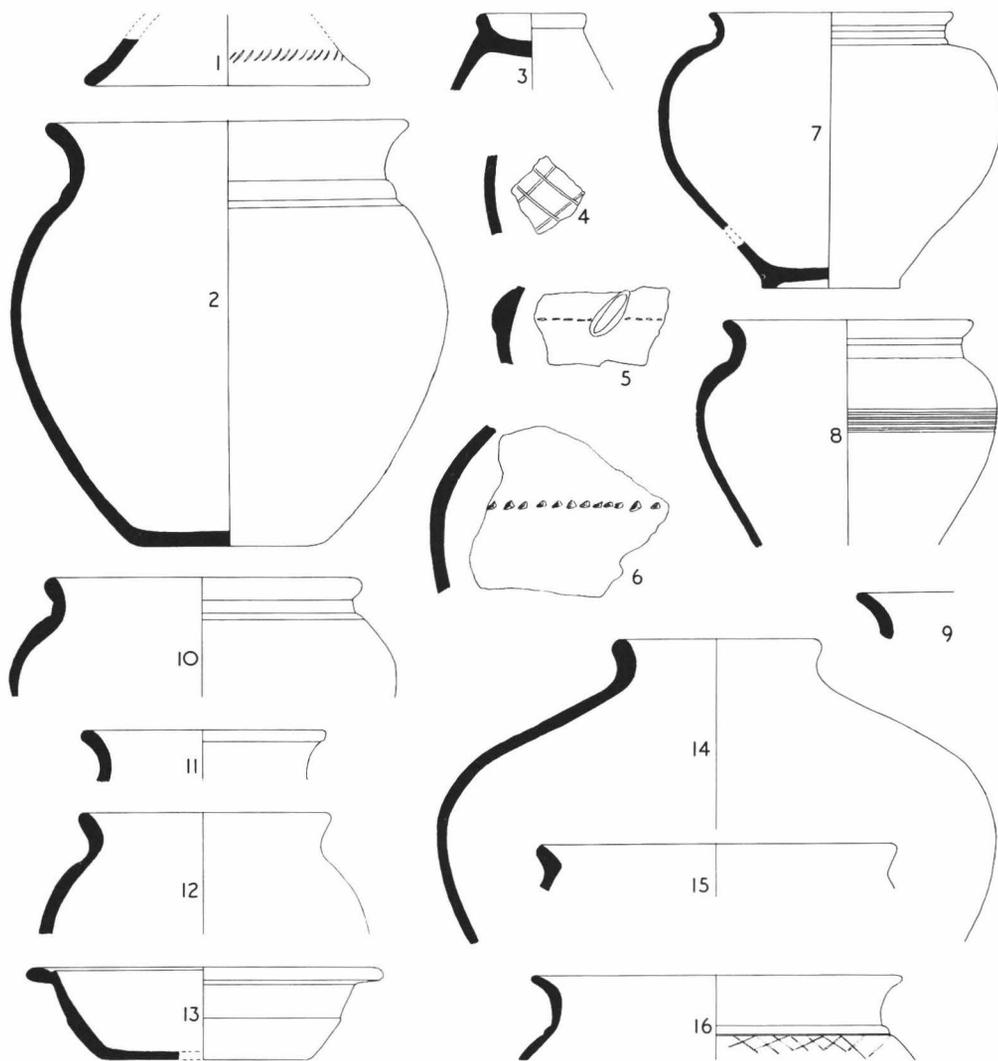


Fig. 2. Arlington pottery ($\times \frac{1}{4}$). Handmade East Sussex wares.

circular. The surface is burnished black all over the outside. (C.11)

Lids of this form have been found several times amongst East Sussex wares. The hollow knob is often so marked that the lid reversed forms a pedestal bowl; two examples similar to the Arlington knob, from Charleston Brow and Newhaven, Castle Hill, were identified in the original pottery reports as pedestal vessels of Belgic type. Rim pieces undoubtedly from lids came from Sedlescombe and from Newhaven. Similar types of lid have been found in the Belgic areas, at Camulodunum, at Swarling and in Hertfordshire, but there is no reason to suppose that the Sussex lids are Belgic. They are the normal type of lid made by the non-Belgic folk of East Sussex.

Jars

2. Whole jar in slightly gritty dark-grey ware, with a smoothed, almost black surface. The rim is curved and there is a cordon at the junction of neck and body. (F.2)

9. Rim fragment of a jar in hard grey ware; the surface is smooth, with a soapy feel. Probably from a jar similar to no.2. (C.5)

11. Rim fragment of a small jar in hard grey ware with a soapy feel. The curved rim is similar to no. 9 (C.5)

12. Small jar with a thick curved rim, in hard coarse brownish-red ware with a grey surface. (C.5)

16. Rim of a jar in grey ware with a smoothed surface. It has a curved rim like no. 2 and a cordon at the junction of neck and body. It is decorated with a lattice pattern on the shoulder. (C.5)

14. Large portion of a vessel with a narrow neck and a wide

body, handmade in dark-grey ware with a burnished surface. Its form is similar to that of the well-known Asham pots but it is even wider, with a high shoulder; the rim is plain with no cordon below it. Similar vessels have been found along with Asham types at both Newhaven and Horsted Keynes; the Newhaven vessel was found in a group of pottery which has been dated to A.D. 60-80. (C.6)

Bowls

7. Many joining pieces of a high-shouldered bowl in grey ware with grit in it. The neck is corrugated and the vessel has a well-made foot-ring. (F.2)

8. Rim and side of a bowl in hard dark-grey ware. Handmade, with a burnished surface and burnished lines encircling the body. (F.5)

10. Rim of a bowl in grey gritty ware. It has a high, rounded shoulder and a short neck. (F.2)

15. Rim sherd of a wide-mouthed bowl in dark-grey ware; the surface is burnished and has a soapy feel. The ware is similar to that of no. 14. (C.13)

Decorated pieces

4. Sherd of grey East Sussex ware with lattice decoration of burnished lines. (F.5)

5. Fragment of a jar decorated with a pimple and a faint line of indentations. The ware is handmade and dark-grey in colour. This distinctive decoration occurs on a narrow-mouthed pot from Seaford illustrated by Curwen (1954, pl. XXVII, 7) and described as 'South-eastern B derivative with raised pimples'. (F.5)

6. Piece of a large bowl, handmade in hard grey ware with black grit. The body is decorated with a line of stab-marks and there is a faint pattern of burnished lines below the stab-marks. The sherd comes from a vessel like the urn from Balmer illustrated by Curwen (1954, pl. XXVII, 5). (F.2)

Dishes

13. Dish of dark-grey ware, handmade in similar fabric to no. 8. The surface is burnished all over, both inside and outside, and has a lattice pattern of burnished lines across the underside of the base. (B.5)

The dish was not a form of vessel which was used by the native Iron Age people before the Roman conquest; the dish, the flagon and the mortarium were all forms introduced by the Romans. Dishes found on the downland settlements have usually been acquired from the Roman world but sometimes the native potter would copy a Roman dish in local ware. The Arlington dish seems to be an imitation in East Sussex ware of a type which was made in kilns in the Alice Holt forest in the late 1st/early 2nd century. The dishes were marketed mainly in Surrey but some reached Sussex, by way of Stane Street, and have been found at Alfordean, Chichester and Fishbourne. No Alice Holt dishes have yet been found east of Stane Street but another rim in East Sussex ware to match the Arlington dish was found at Newhaven.

Pottery (not drawn)

Many more pieces of pottery in East Sussex ware were found in every feature and hole belonging to the early period.

The Imported Wares (Fig. 3, nos. 17-27)

17. Upper part of a pear-shaped jar. It is in a hard sandy ware with a pinkish core and a grey surface. This form of jar was in common use in Chichester in the late 1st/early 2nd century. Many whole jars have been found there used as burial urns in the cemetery, and rims from such jars have been found in the Roman town. These jars must have been made in quantity at some kiln site outside the town which has not been discovered. The pinkish colour of the ware is distinctive, which makes it probable that the Arlington jar came from Chichester. (F.2)

18. Rim sherd of a small jar in hard coarse grey ware. It has a simple curved rim, slightly beaded. This type of jar was common at Fishbourne, made in grey, sandy ware and found in late 1st/2nd-century contexts. The Arlington piece thus probably came from a kiln near Chichester. (C.5)

19. Rim of a beaker in thin hard grey ware; there is a cordon below the rim. This seems to be the rim of a poppy-head beaker of the first half of the 2nd century. This is a purely Roman type which was common throughout south-east Britain, but no kilns in Sussex made these beakers. The Arlington beaker was either brought from Chichester or came from the Continent. (C.5)

20. An almost whole beaker, restored from fragments, in thin light-grey ware. It is an indented beaker with six indentations and it has a small, well-moulded base. With it was the lower half of a similar, smaller beaker with seven indentations (not drawn).

Indented beakers were introduced into Britain in the 1st century, probably from the Rhineland potteries. They were afterwards made in Britain and remained in fashion throughout the Roman period. The later beakers of the 3rd and 4th centuries were all made in colour-coated or red ware; the fine, light-grey ware and the tall elegant form of these Arlington beakers suggest an earlier date in the 1st or 2nd century. Indented beakers were made in the Colchester kilns, but nothing made there is at all like the Arlington beakers, nor are any other British kilns known which could have supplied them. These must have been brought into Sussex from the Continent. (F.2)

21. Rim of a mortarium, form Gillam 239, in smooth creamy-buff ware. It has a little brown grit on the interior surface and a little grit on the exterior of the rim. This indicates a date in the late 1st century and a Continental origin. (F.5)

22. Piece of a reeded-rim bowl in hard grey ware with a smooth brown surface. The clay is filled with grit which does not appear to be either flint or sand. The vessel is wheel-thrown and has been expertly made. There is no real parallel for it amongst Roman pottery made in Britain. The piece does not belong to Sussex and it must have been brought in, probably from the Continent. (F.2)

23. Dish of hard coarse sandy brown ware with a dark-grey surface. Several pieces, making about a quarter of the dish. It is wheel-thrown and undecorated. The form is common in the 2nd century. (C.5)

24. Imitation of a Gallo-Belgic dish. This rim fragment is too small to obtain from it either the true diameter of the dish or the exact angle of the side. Its date could be the end of the 1st century or later. (F.5)

25. Rim fragment of a flanged bowl in hard red ware with a smooth brownish-red surface. A 2nd-century type. (F.2)

26. Rim of a bowl in hard grey ware with a sandy surface. The vessel is wheel-thrown and well made and is not likely to have been made by a potter working in Britain. (F.5)

27. This seems to be the early form of flanged bowl, roughly imitating the Samian form Ritterling 12. It is in smooth hard dark-grey ware. The type is not common in the south and there are no dated examples from our region, but it has been found on Roman sites such as Leicester or Wroxeter, dated to the beginning of the 2nd century. The Arlington rim fragment is wheel-thrown and skilfully made and is not likely to be the product of a potter working in Britain. (F.5)

Samian ware (not drawn)

A large piece of rim, side and base of a Samian mortarium, form Dr. 45. A late 2nd-century type, probably from the Lezoux potteries. (F.2) Two worn Samian rims, both from bowls of form Dr. 31, late 2nd-century. (F.5) Two fragments of worn Samian ware, one from a cup, form Dr. 27, the other from a cup, form Dr. 33. (C.2) Base of a bowl of

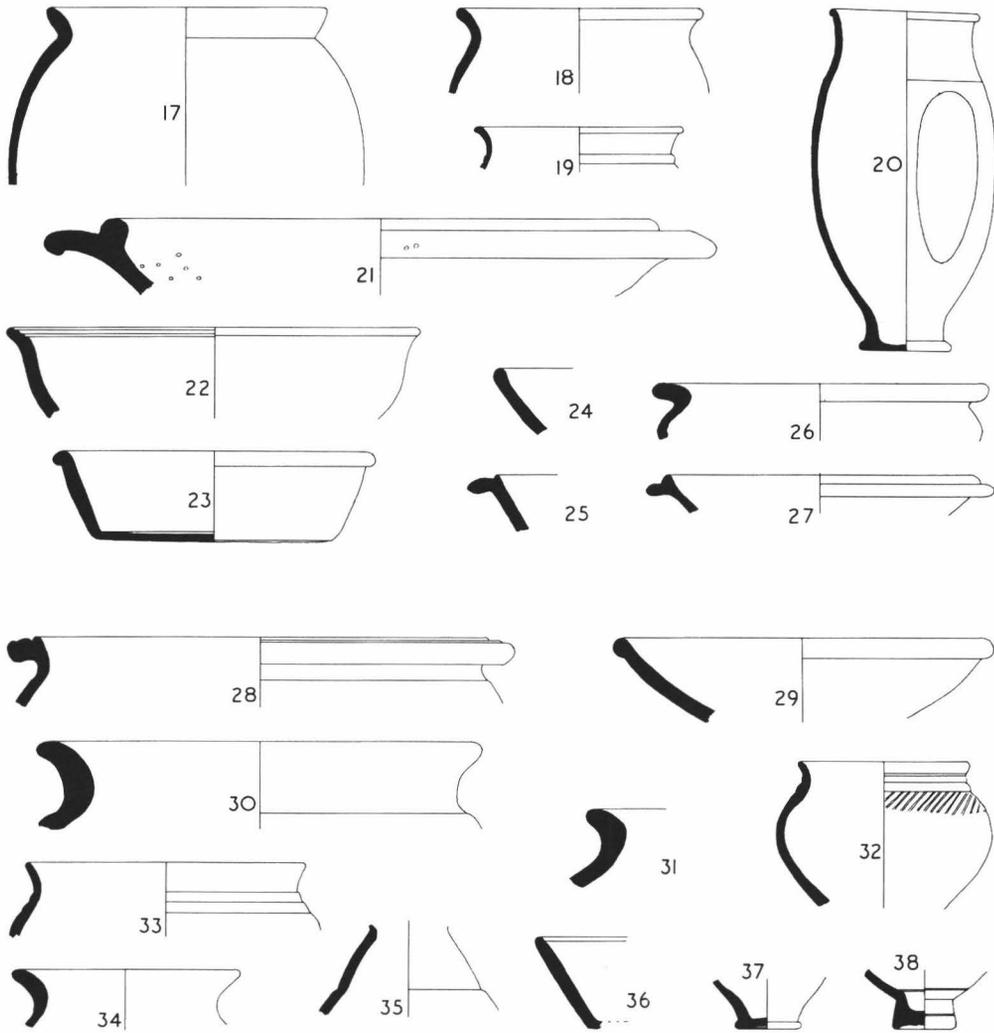


Fig. 3. Arlington pottery ($\times \frac{1}{4}$). Nos. 17-27, imported wares; nos. 28-38, 4th-century pottery.

form Dr. 31 bearing the potter's stamp MATERNINVS; Lezoux ware, late 2nd-century. (F.2)

Pottery (not drawn)

Five joining pieces of a mortarium like no. 21 but in a more sandy ware; brown grit. (F.5) Two pieces of amphora of large diameter, in pinkish buff ware. (F.5) Many more fragments of Roman wares were found along with the East Sussex wares in every feature and hole belonging to the early period.

The 4th-Century Pottery (Fig. 3, nos. 28-38)

Jars

28. Rim of a wide-mouthed jar, pale grey in colour, almost certainly from the Snailsynch kiln near Farnham in Surrey. Mid 4th-century. (C.1)

30. Heavy rim of a large storage jar in hard pale-grey ware

with a darker smoothed surface. Similar jars were being made in the Overwey kiln in the Farnham region in the mid 4th century. (C.1)

31. Heavy rim of a large storage jar, similar to no. 30 in both form and ware. (C.4)

34. Rim fragment from a jar in smooth brown ware, with a little black grit. Coated with grey slip. Similar vessels were being made at the Overwey kiln in the Farnham region in the later 4th century. (C.4)

Bowls

29. Rim of a bowl in sandy brick-red ware, with a grey core. These bowls, imitating the Samian form Dr. 31, are dated to the 4th century. (C.10)

32. Rim and side of a small bowl in black ware, with a burnished surface outside and within the rim. This appears to be a drinking vessel for the table, not a cooking pot. A

similar vessel found at Verulamium was dated to A.D. 360-70. (C.7)

33. Rim of a bowl in smooth hard grey ware. A well made vessel with corrugations on the shoulder. A similar piece was found at West Blatchington amongst pottery of the 3rd or 4th century. (C.7)

Beakers

37. Base of a colour-coated beaker, in a hard pale-pink fabric with a brown surface, coated with grey slip. It is probably 4th-century pottery from the Nene valley (i.e. Castor ware). The upper part of the vessel could have been any of several possible shapes and decorations. (C.10)

38. Base of a beaker in brick-red ware. This is the remnant of a *black* Rhenish-ware beaker, as is shown by the traces of black slip still surviving in the angle between foot and body and on the underside of the foot. The piece has been expertly made and is likely to have been imported to Britain from the Rhineland, although close imitations were made in the Nene valley potteries. Its date is 3rd- or 4th-century. The upper part of the pot could have been any of several possible forms and decorations. (C.7)

Dishes

36. Side of a plain dish, of uncertain diameter, in hard black ware. This is a 4th-century form and ware. (C.7)

Flagon

35. Piece of the neck and shoulder of a flagon in hard sandy ware, pale cream in colour. The fabric is full of tiny particles of flint grit. (C.1)

Pottery (not drawn)

All the holes C.1, C.4, C.7 and C.10 contained rims and other pieces which could be recognized as from jars and beakers of various 4th-century types. There were also many scraps of pottery too small to have any meaning. Some of these were recognizably of East Sussex ware and a few red pieces might have been Samian fragments with no glaze left on them.

Discussion

The site at Polhills Farm, Arlington, was certainly not an agricultural settlement. It is situated well north of the chalk downland, on the Weald clay at the edge of the Wealden forest. Its nature cannot now be deduced from its layout, for that has gone, removed by the contractor's machinery. Only the very considerable amount of pottery has survived to tell us something about what was happening there.

Much of the pottery was found in the two features F.2 and F.5. Their contents were similar, consisting largely of the handmade East Sussex wares but mixed with a quantity of wheel-thrown Roman wares. This mixture of native and Roman wares occurred in all the other features and holes belonging to the early period of use of the site. This is something very different from the occasional appearance of a Roman dish or beaker on the native downland farms. It can only mean that two peoples, native

and Roman, were working together in close association on this site.

The native people came from the downland farms, for some of their pottery is strikingly characteristic of the localities from which they had come. The wide-bodied pots like no. 14 seem to have been made only in an area within a few miles of Asham. The distinctive pimple decoration of no. 5 is characteristic of a potter working in the vicinity of Seaford. The bowl with stab-marks, no. 6, is characteristic of the potter who supplied Balmer.

The Roman people evidently came from Gaul into Britain, bringing their chattels with them. Apart from two jars which might have come from Roman Chichester, all the beakers, bowls, dishes and mortaria are Continental pottery from the Roman world across the Channel.

The layout or ground-plan of the Polhills Farm site has gone but a shadowy kind of structure can be discerned in the plan of the holes and features which have survived. The two (perhaps three) patterns which E. Holden has described might represent two (or three) clusters of huts, each cluster with its own oven. If indeed these supposed ovens do indicate the cooking areas, then the kitchen middens would be close by; this would account for the mass of domestic rubbish, the accumulation of a century or more, which had been filled into the features F.2 and F.5 when the site was cleared up somewhere about the end of the 2nd century.

We can only guess at the enterprise in which the two peoples who lived here were jointly engaged. It was not iron that was being sought. There were ironworking sites in this part of the Weald but they were further north on the Tunbridge Wells sand and the Wadhurst clay where iron ore was to be found. At Arlington, on the Weald clay, it would have been oak timber that was being extracted from the forest.

The meaning of the 4th-century pottery which was found in the four holes C.1, C.4, C.7 and C.10 is less easy to understand. It is nearly all Romano-British pottery, apparently made

mostly in the Alice Holt/Farnham region. Some of the same kind of pottery was also being made locally, in the kiln to which reference has been made in the description of the site. It is possible that the potter who worked here was supplying pottery to sites in East Sussex, but the most obvious market for his wares, and the object of his establishing a workshop and kiln here, must surely have been the great Saxon Shore fort at Pevensey. The fort is thought to have been built about A.D. 350 which is, as nearly as can be judged, the date of the Arlington pottery.

It must be significant that the Roman site at Arlington lies close to a river, for timber has to be transported to where it is wanted; to ship it down the river to Cuckmere Haven, whence it could go by sea along the coast or across to Gaul, would be an obvious course. There can be little doubt about the river being navigable in Roman times right up to the Arlington site. The sea-level off the Sussex coast was lower then and the rivers ran deeper. The alluvial flats through which the Cuckmere now meanders so spectacularly were formerly an estuary, which has silted up behind the shingle bank at the river mouth only in historic times.

The Polhills Farm site was not an isolated one. There was a much more extensive site on the other side of the river, which was discovered and destroyed during the construction of the new reservoir. It may be some time yet before the details of what was found there can be gathered together and discussed, but it is already known that there were two periods of

activity on the site. Pottery of the 1st/2nd century came from an area down near the river, where there could well have been a quayside for river traffic. Since timber in large sizes would be needed for building ships, it is at least possible, although it could not now be proved, that one of the activities of this riverside site was ship-building. Fourth-century pottery came from a series of sites spread over at least 500 metres of the hillside above the river. This activity in the 4th century must, like the pottery kiln, have had something to do with the Saxon Shore fort at Pevensey.

It is tantalizing that so much has been lost by the destruction of these Roman sites at Arlington, yet they would never have been found at all if the new reservoir had not been constructed here. All that we now have is the pottery, which tells us something of intense Roman activity in the middle of what has sometimes been thought of as a backward, un-Romanized part of Sussex.

Acknowledgements

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Note

The finds and site records have been deposited in Barbican House Museum, Lewes.

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