



The Roman Ditch at Iheronbridge

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IN September 1933 the long drought at last presented an opportunity to examine the presumed ditch (page 52) and so to complete the section through the Watling Street, ditch and mound in the south-west corner of the Red House Croft (key plan, plate XLV, and section, plate XLVI). His Grace the Duke of Westminster granted permission and supplied the necessary labour.

A trench was opened thirty feet long and seven feet wide. In the upper levels down to three feet, humus and clay contained fragments of pottery, mostly of the second century, which included Samian forms Dr. 31, 33, 37, and 45. The last specimen of soft buff ware shows a groove on lower part of flange, has pale red glaze and came from the east end of trench where the berm was later found to have a width of only two feet.

At three feet from the surface black mud began to appear and was followed downwards until the bottom was reached at eleven feet three inches from the surface. The sides of the ditch were of red clay and what appeared to be the remains of a step were evident on the outer or western side. The profile was of the normal military type—a blunted V, the bottom having a width of nine inches. In the extreme bottom the mud contained well-preserved fragments of small boughs or twigs, while at three or four feet from the bottom were a number of pieces of sandstone rubble having an average diameter of about nine inches. The central portion of the mud had a bluish tinge, but this was probably not due to any admixture of blue-clay.

The dimensions of the ditch in Roman times were at least fifteen feet wide and nine feet deep.

In the mud of the ditch pottery sherds were found in the lower half only. At one foot six inches from the bottom were two rim fragments of a large jar (fig. 1), the diameter over rim exceeds ten inches, orange-buff with grey core, a re-curved rim and thickened lip, with slight ledge at base of neck and well-marked bulge—a type notoriously hard to date but perhaps not much later than the end of the first century. (Colchester Museum Report, 1928, page 47, no. 6879.27, plate xiv.) A few inches above was the outer part of the rim of a mortarium of red clay with quartz on rim, too imperfect for determination but resembling Wroxeter type 14. At two feet three inches was part of the rim of a battered amphora (fig. 2) and then a two-ribbed flagon handle in red clay and a side fragment of a grey cooking pot. At three feet four inches was a small fragment of the reeded rim of a hammer-head mortarium with reddish radial stripe on whitish clay and a small bit of Samian, soft ware with brownish glaze mostly wanting ? from flange of Dr. 38 or 35/36. At four feet from the bottom came another rim fragment of a reeded hammer-head mortarium of pipe clay (fig. 3), with black and brown grit on rim as well as on the interior. This type is characteristic of the first half of the third century. Just above was part of the blade with tang of a small iron knife. The only other find was an amorphous scrap of lead on the western lip of the ditch.

The existence in Roman times of a deep ditch at this point, only two feet in advance of the six foot wall foundation discovered in 1930, is now firmly established. Further it can hardly be doubted that it is part of the same ditch as was in 1930 proved to exist 250 yards northwards, since a similar depression in the clay filled with black mud was in the same year found at an intermediate point at the west end of the "long wall." It is a fairly safe inference that in the third century a large area, possibly of fourteen acres was defended by a stout wall and ditch.

What was found in the ditch accords closely with Mr. Petch's conclusions as to the limiting dates of the occupation of the site. The lowest potsherds belong to types probably

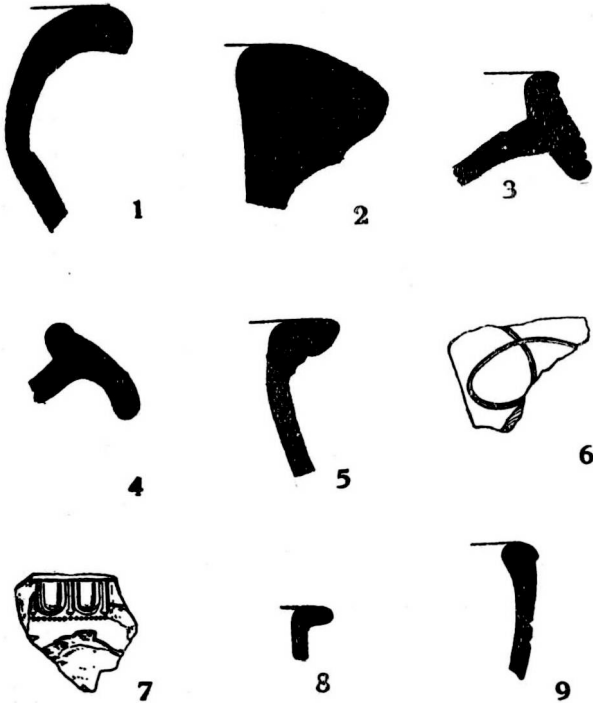
not much later than 100 A.D.; the highest are of the first half of the third century. To claim a first century date for the ditch is obviously inadmissible on the scanty evidence at present available and must await the results of further excavation. One may however point out quite tentatively that the very narrow berm suggests that the builders of the wall were cramped for room by the pre-existence of a mound and ditch. Again a very long period would probably be needed for a nine foot ditch to become filled with vegetable silt. A Roman military ditch was normally dry and in the present instance drainage into the river at the two extremities would present no serious difficulty. The process of silting would only begin when the defences were neglected. If we assume for a moment that the ditch was first dug in the Flavian period and remained open until the wall was robbed in the middle ages, the sequence and arrangement of the pottery-finds would be satisfactorily accounted for. The upper half of the ditch would take three times as long as the lower half to become full of silt and no sherds whatever were found in it. If the third century mortaria got in, as seems likely, in the third century, the ditch had already been filled to the depth of four feet and the silting of the upper half was subsequent to the Roman occupation of the site. In that case the early pottery near the bottom is not a later intrusion, difficult to explain on a site where first century ware is such a rarity, but it is possible that the first fortification of the site, perhaps without permanent occupation, dates from the troubled times when the XXth Legion first settled in Deva. The outcrop of sandstone in the river bank at the mid-point of the chord whose arc is the ditch suggests a ford at that point. To control the river crossing at the nearest point to the fortress, where the Dee narrows, a tête-de-pont or bridge-head was highly advantageous for the defence of the fortress. It would also secure the line of communications southwards along the Watling Street. A close parallel is provided by the similar Roman bridge-head two miles outside the fortress of Carnuntum, where the XIVth Legion had its headquarters on the Danube.

The almost complete absence in the ditch of second century pottery, which largely predominates both on the site generally, and in the immediate vicinity of the ditch, no doubt presents a difficulty. However it is conceivable that the ditch at this point had been filled in during the industrial occupation of the second century, or alternatively the second century deposits may have been removed when the ditch was partially cleared out, though not to its original depth, during the reconstruction in the early third century.

THE CLAY LAYER.

In March, 1931, a trench 25 feet long, was cut in order to test the theory that the clay layer or capping over the eastern side of the mass burial was in some way related to the wall whose remains had been found during the preliminary digging at three points to the east of the skeletons. The wall ran north and south along the western face of the mound and was distant from the eastern edge of the clay capping by about one yard. It seemed possible that the clay layer was either part of the upcast of the ditch dug for the insertion of the wall foundation or else remains of the puddled clay used instead of mortar in the construction of the wall. The new trench was cut 38 yards south of the "long wall" and ran east and west as shown on the key-plan. At the eastern end of the trench the remains of a wall were reached at a depth of three feet and to the west a stiff clay layer packed with rubble and gravel extended for at least ten feet at a depth of five inches. Its thickness varied from nine inches at its eastern edge to seven inches at its western limit. The rubble and gravel carried on westward throughout the trench with occasional patches of clay an inch or two deeper than to the east. At nine feet from the west end an architectural fragment lay five inches below the surface, a squared block of sandstone, one foot nine inches, by eight inches by seven inches, chamfered on one angle and tooled on the face which lay downwards. Another large stone, three feet by one foot five inches by one foot three inches, was nine inches down at three feet

from the west end. Many smaller squared stones were found throughout, especially below the clay layer. Pottery finds were frequent in the black soil below the rubble, and below the clay layer boulder clay was reached at three feet one inch. No finds were made at the west end, which lay above the line of presumed ditch. Tile and amphora fragments were numerous. Charcoal, coal, window and bottle-glass, slag and lava of mill-stone were found. There were also several objects of iron.



Text figures (†).

Pottery, mainly of second century types, from the lower levels included Samian Forms Dr. 18/31, 37 (with heavy bead), 45 (fluted side fragment) and 31, and Ludowici Sb. The Dr. 18/31 bore an imperfect stamp **IM** There

was also a small fragment of rouletted Caistor ware, and another with metallic lustre; a mortarium rim of early second century form in pipe-clay (fig. 4), and an imitation of Dr. 27 in fine red ware. Lastly a side portion of a globular beaker in whitish clay, ? egg shell ware, rouletted above and below three girth grooves, and a rough-cast fragment in brown ware.

From the top spit came numerous fragments of a cup Dr. 27 (small) beside the chamfered stone above described, a flat rim of a brown bowl with buff slip (fig. 5), and third century cooking pots (fig. 6).

From the clay layer itself came the following:—

- (1) Dr. 37 good ware, brown glaze. Neat ovolo, tongue attached right, and ending in a dot. Below blurred bead row head of lioness charging left (fig. 7). Déch. 795: **ADVOCISVS, MAPILLIVS**. (? Not later than 160 A.D.)
- (2) Rim, brown ware, small beaker (fig. 8), Holt 196.
- (3) Side fragment of pink-buff bowl.
- (4) Pie-dish, grey, poor ware.
- (5) Olla, small, grey, showing groove below rim (wanting).
- (6) Fragment of bottle, white slip.

The excavation was successful in so far as it gave an affirmative answer to the question put. It seems to be fairly certain that the clay layer runs parallel to the wall for at least 100 feet. The potsherds found in it are not demonstrably later than those underneath. It is possible that they were in the clay before it was spread out where it now is. Quite likely it is the upcast of the ditch dug to receive the footings of the wall and may even be the puddled clay of the early rampart.

Numerous fragments of roofers of micaceous sand-stone were found in the trench. These together with the other finds suggest that throughout the second century some building stood on the site, but was demolished before the wall was built or the clay layer laid down. The two large stones found so near the surface were probably left behind when the wall was robbed, but may have had a history older

than the wall. They are further evidence that somewhere near in the second century stood a building of architectural pretensions.

DISCOVERIES DURING TRIAL DIGGING.

Among the large number of sherds and other objects discovered during trial digging elsewhere on this site, it may be well to place on record the following found in 1930.

POTTERS' MARKS.

(a) *Samian Ware.*

1. **ALBVC** [I]. Dr. 37. Lezoux. Hadrian-Antonine.
2. **CELSIANI.M.** Dr. 33. Central or East Gaul. Second century.
3. **[DIV]ICA[TVS]**. Dr. 18/31. Lezoux. Hadrian-Antonine.
4. **LIT[TERA]**. Dr. 33. ? East Gaul. Antonine.
5. **SEVERI.** Dr. 27. La Graufesenque. 60-80 A.D.
6. Uncertain **MARCELLINI.** Dr. 33. Rheinzabern.

(b) *Amphora.*

7. **F.P.M.**, as at Wilderspool, 1870. From lowest levels. ? First century.

GRAFFITI.

Coarse Ware.

1. **BEBI.** Owner's name "Baebius" scratched on rim of pie-dish of grey ware. IIIrd or IVth century.
2. . . . **INVS** or . . . **ERIVS** in cursive letters on double-roll rim of fine red ware dish. Ante cocturam. First half of second century.

ERRATUM.

By a printer's error the section of hemispherical bowl described at the top of page 55 was omitted from Plate XXI. This is here illustrated (fig. 9).

