

A PIT GROUP FROM BARTON VILLAGE, CHESHIRE,
AND AN UNPROVENANCED CURFEW FRAGMENT
IN THE GROSVENOR MUSEUM, CHESTER

by Janet A. Rutter

In June 1977 a pit containing medieval pottery and ironwork was discovered at Rose Farm, Barton village (SJ 44935425). It was revealed during landscaping to make a lawn adjoining the house, when a cut about 15cm down to the sandstone bedrock was made to insert a land drain extending along a new retaining wall. The cylindrically shaped pit was approximately 81.3cm in diameter and cut 76cm into bedrock. The topmost 25cm or so was filled with loam and beneath this was a compacted cinder layer. The iron rods described below were found in a vertical position projecting through the cinder layer, and the pottery underneath it. The pit was emptied by Mr. Blake, the contractor, and Mrs. Wadham of Rose Farm who supplied the dimensions of the feature, and brought the material to the Museum for identification.

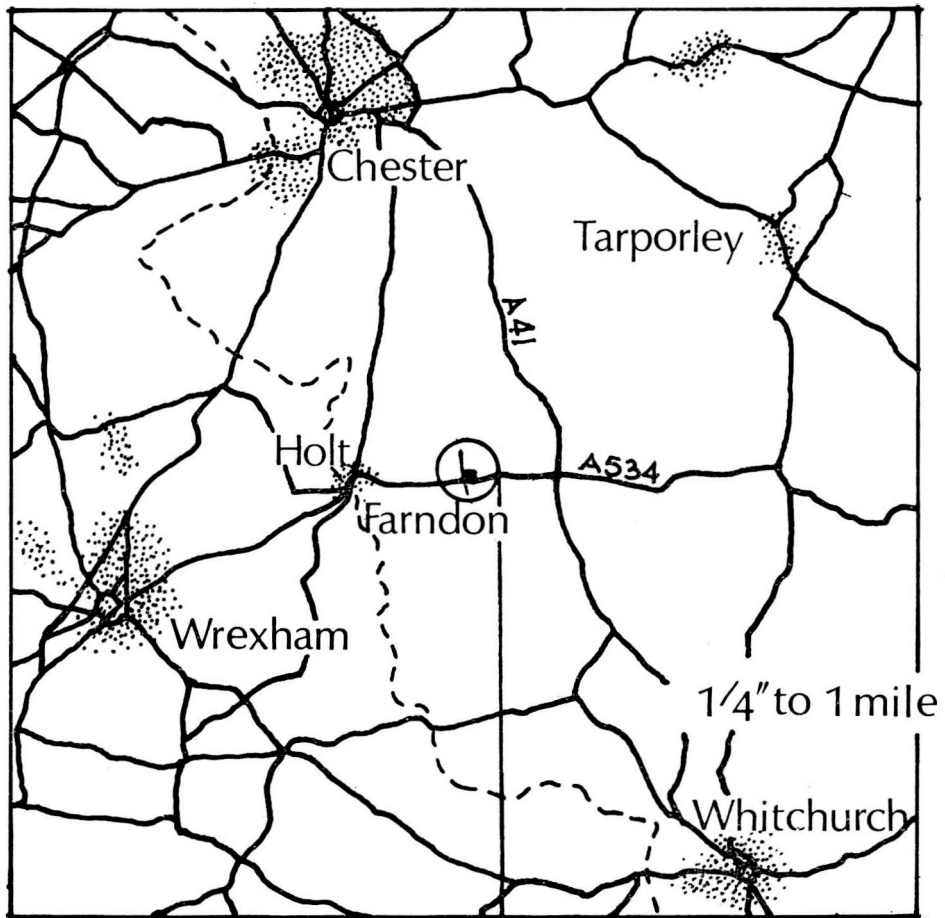
FINDS

Medieval Coarse Pottery

- 1 Part of the dome of a curfew or firecover, with the stubs of a central horizontal strap handle through which two air holes were cut; fabric C; very abraded exterior with only patches of the original surface and flecks of yellow glaze remaining. Flaking green glaze on the interior (fig. 2, 1).
- 2 Five body sherds from an ovoid jug; fabric C; green glazed exterior (not illustrated).
- 3 Two joining body sherds from a small jug; sandy white fabric 'Ewloe type ware' (fig. 2, 2).

Metalwork: Iron

- 4 Tool of unknown function; slightly bowed square shank, curved and shaped into a hook at one end, the other flattened with the beginning of a curve but broken (fig. 2, 3).
- 5 Tool of unknown function; square shank with one flattened and hooked end. A similar but more regularly shaped rod than no. 4 (fig. 2, 4).
- 6 ? Timber pin; square tapering shank (fig. 2, 5).
- 7 A strip, U shaped in section with part of one rivet in place. Similar strips with rivets from Southampton (Platt and Coleman-Smith, 1975, nos. 2002, 2003 and 2005) are described as mounts or banding from a chest (fig. 2, 6).
- 8 Three pieces of a strip, L shaped in section, also with a rivet in place (fig. 2, 7).



LOCATION
PLAN

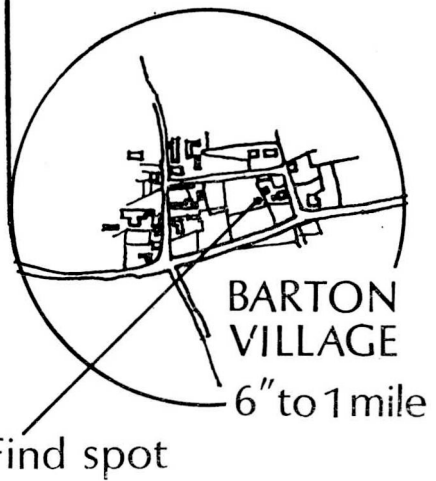


Fig. 1

Miscellanea

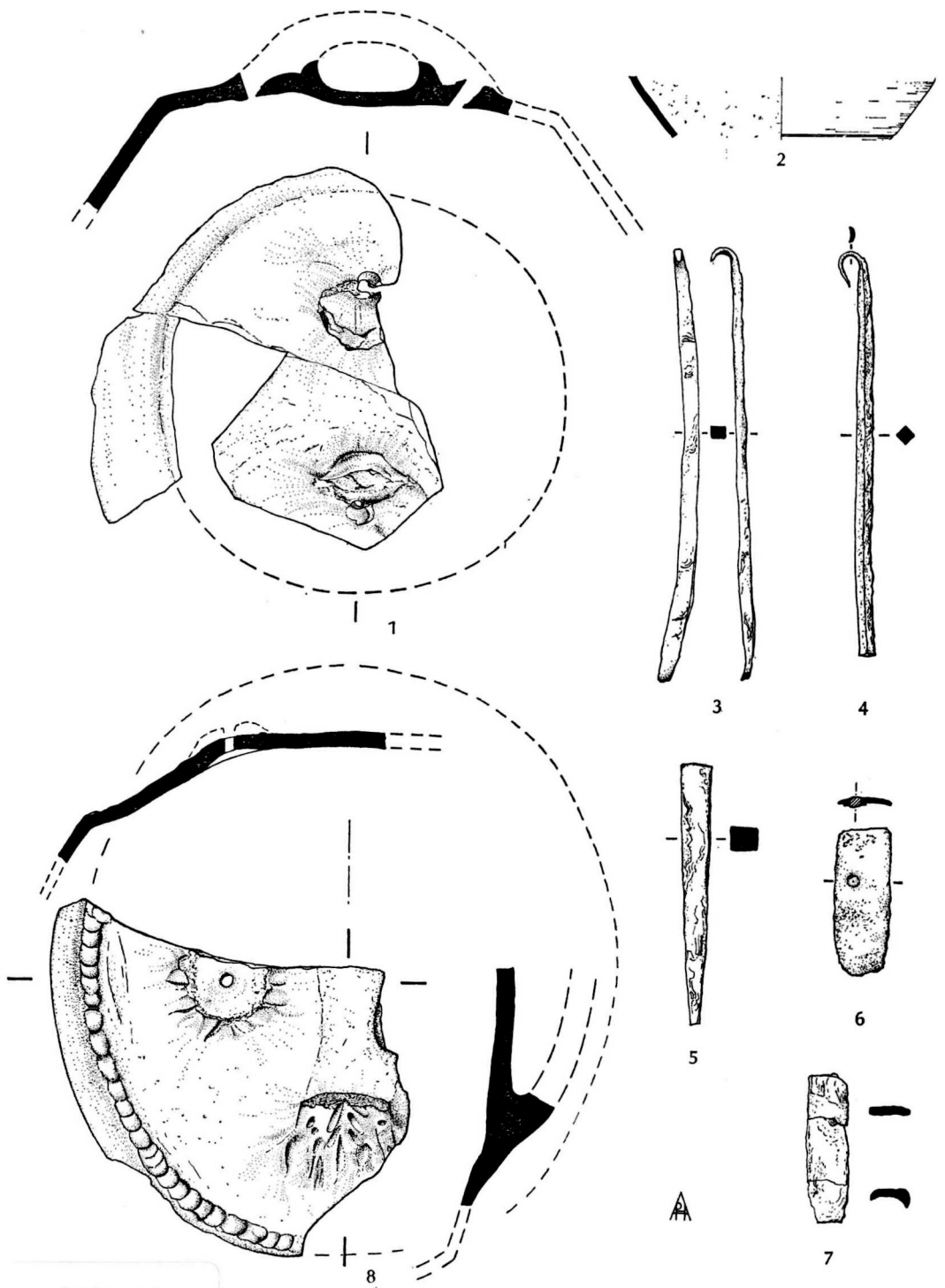
Several pieces of coal and irregular lumps of sandstone were also recovered from the pit.

DISCUSSION

The preservation of such a group of metalwork and pottery is very useful. These groups are rarely recovered; either poor conditions in the soil prevent the survival of metalwork in a condition which would allow identification or preservation, or, as is often the case in Chester, interference by later deposits results in the mixing of finds and the loss of a closed group (cf. Strickland, 1977). However, this deposit is unusually rich, well preserved and apparently uncontaminated. The variety of items recovered would not be out of place in an entirely industrial context, such as a smithy or small workshop, but the jug fragments and curfew as well as the cinder and coal could as easily be domestic refuse, indicating perhaps a farm or croft as the source. In addition, as all the pottery is incomplete and the metalwork presumably scrap, this collection of items was perhaps gathered together in a short space of time to help fill a pit which had a prior function. A rough estimate of the date of the deposit is suggested by that of the pottery. Fabric C is a sandy pink and grey ware, or as in the case of the jug sherds above (no. 2), completely reduced, with variably sized rounded red inclusions, close in appearance to products of the late thirteenth to fourteenth century Ashton kiln (Rutter, 1977a) and often highly decorated. The one fragment from the body of a small jug in white ware is the same as some waster material recently found in Ewloe near Buckley, Clwyd, and is therefore called 'Ewloe type ware' (cf. Davey, 1976, 27-8, site 18, and Davey & Harrison, 1977). This pottery has been dated to the fourteenth or fifteenth century and comprises a range of hard, mainly gritty white or pink and some red wares, green or brown glazed, or quite commonly, as in this case, unglazed. These types of coarse ware are also two of the commonest found in Chester and parallels can be drawn between these finds and some from a pit group on the Old Market Hall site (Petch, 1968 and 1971) dated to the fourteenth century. The 'Ewloe type ware' jug fragment is comparable to the upper part of a small overfired squat bottle shaped vessel, almost certainly from the Old Market Hall site, and the curfew and jug from Barton have a counterpart in the fragment of a decorated jug in that pit group (Rutter, 1977b, nos. 11 and 17 respectively).

The Unprovenanced Curfew Fragment (fig. 2, 8)

This fragment of a curfew, or firecover, now in the Museum collection (Acc. no. 27. M. 1976) can be assumed to have a local provenance, if not actually found within the city, as it is in the same common local fabric, though harder fired than the Barton cover. The dome would appear to have been slightly oval, but this may be accounted for by some local distortion of the rim of the dome as curfews were



Scale : x 1/4

Fig. 2

usually thrown as large bowls. The unevenness and smeared finger marks on the interior probably occurred during the fixing of the handle, the cutting and decoration of the air hole and the decorative edging strip and the subsequent handling of the interior. It does not indicate that the cover was hand built. The elaborate decoration of this cover probably included two spigot like air holes, built up with extra clay and thumbbed, one either side of the handle, of which only part of one hole survives, as well as the applied thumbbed strip around the edge of the dome. The handle is stabbed in a herringbone pattern. The cover is also glazed on the exterior a good glossy green, except where the handle shielded the top of the dome, and there is a thin spattering of glaze on the interior, which also shows patches of discolouration by fire.

The interior of the dome on the Barton cover shows similar signs of handling beneath the handle attachments, but more of the skirt exists on this fragment, showing the throwing marks. The appearance of the exterior of this cover contrasts with that of the unprovenanced fragment. There is little that could be called decorative apart from the attachments of the handle which are rather spatular in form, similar to the lobed attachments of some jug handles, and a collar like rim around one air hole. There is also a marked difference in the glazes of the two covers. That which remains largely on the interior of the Barton curfew has flaked and corroded badly, while the exterior is very abraded and only spots of glaze survive.

'Curfew' is derived from the French *couvre feu*. They were used to cover open hearths in order to keep the fire alight overnight and to lessen the fire risk while the household slept (cf. Hurst, 1963, 135-8). The majority of curfews have been dated to the thirteenth century, and although they have been found in most parts of the country, actual numbers of curfews are still quite small, which is why it was felt that a note of this kind on these two fragments was warranted. Certainly compared to the quantities of medieval jugs and cooking pots, the curfew remains an uncommon find.

The most common type of ventilation on these covers is like that on the one from Barton where the two air holes are pierced through, or near to, the attachments of the handle although variations occur such as a single air hole in the top beneath the handle (Platt and Coleman-Smith, 1975, vol. 2, 75-6, no. 344) and a type related to louvres having a number of hooded apertures around the sides (Dunning, 1972). The type of ventilation on the unprovenanced cover is rather different again; as suggested above, there were probably two similarly decorated holes and these and the thumbing around the stub of the handle closely resemble the decorative thumbbed frill around the spouts of some later thirteenth to fourteenth century jugs found locally (e.g. Thompson, 1975, 211-221, fig. 38, nos. 6 and 7; fig. 39, nos. 21 and 22; and fig 42, nos. 76 and 79). How much emphasis can be placed on the spigot like appearance of the existing air hole is difficult to say, but when complete it must have looked very like the spigot or bung hole on some storage vessels of the later medieval period.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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