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A FOOD VESSEL BURIAL FROM WELL HOUSE FARM, NEWTON, NORTHUMBERLAND

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ON THE 16th March 1980 Mr. K. J. Richardson of Well House Farm, Newton uncovered a cist grave when his tractor displaced a large stone in a field to the north of the farm. He and his helpers emptied the cist and recovered two Food Vessels, one in fragments. News of the discovery reached Newcastle University three days later,¹ and a visit was made to the site on 20th March. I am grateful to Mr. Richardson for permission to examine the cist and the finds, and to Mr. Colm O'Brien for his assistance with the excavation. I would also like to thank Mary Hurrell and Margaret Finch who kindly drew the finds. Apart from the smaller Food Vessel, which Mr. Richardson has retained in his possession for the time being, the finds are in the Museum of Antiquities (accession number 1980.2).

The site lies just above the 152 m (500 ft) contour, close to the crest of a low ridge, and about 250 m north-west of Well House Farm, at NZ 0404 6676. From this point there is a good all-round view over gently undulating farmland which stretches south to the river Tyne 5 km distant, and north beyond Hadrian's Wall which runs within 2 km of the site. The partly ploughed-out hillfort at Shildonhill is less than 1 km to the north-west (fig. 1). The location fits in with the general pattern of Food Vessel burials in Northumberland which shows a heavy concentration on lower ground and in the main river valleys.²

The cist was oriented north-east to south-west. It measured 1.10 m by 0.70 m (maximum) internally, and was 0.65 m deep on average. It had been constructed within a steep-sided pit cut into the sandstone bedrock which is heavily fractured and friable at this point. The south-east side was formed by a massive tabular block of sandstone up to 0.35 m thick, supported in place by small chock-stones inserted under its lower edge. Flattened boulders propped against it formed the ends of the cist, and two more the north-west side. These latter could only be accommodated in the pit by overlapping them at an angle, so giving the cist a D-shaped plan (fig. 1). The smaller of the two was tilted against, and supported by, the larger, more northerly stone. Boulders had been used to make good the gaps at the corners caused by variations in the height and shape of the slabs. Others had been placed round the top of the cist on the north-west side to raise the level and provide a firm seat for the capstone. The side slabs and the boulders were all of carboniferous sandstone of a type which outcrops in the south of Northumberland and in Durham. Their size and shape is consistent with an origin in the local drift deposits. The capstone

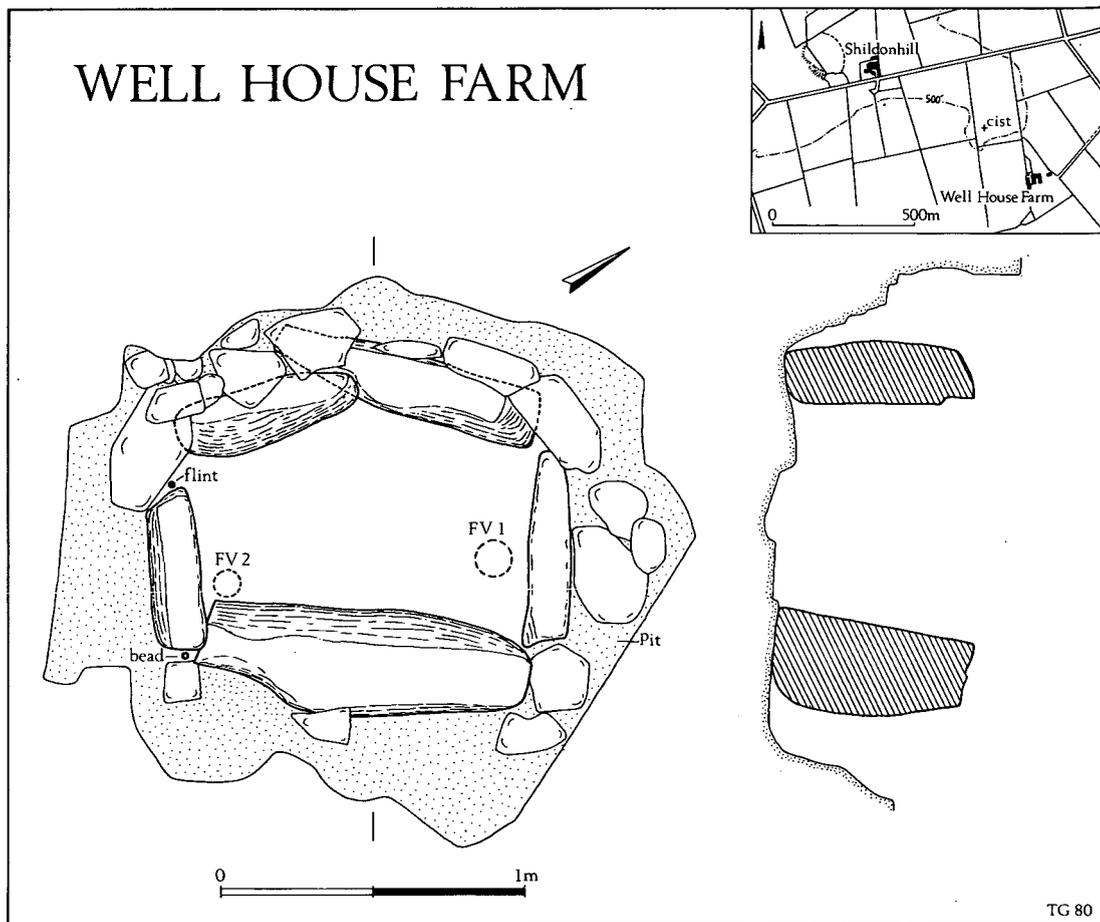


Fig. 1.

had been broken up and carted away before the site could be examined but enough fragments remained to show that it too was of carboniferous sandstone, in this case a ganisteroid variety which also occurs locally.³

Mr. Richardson reported that when the cist was discovered it was filled to a depth of about 0.20 m with loose rock fragments and sand. Under the circumstances it is impossible to say how much of this material may have been deliberately put into the cist before it was sealed in order to provide a level surface on which to place a burial. Although all the fill was examined only a few additional fragments of the broken Food Vessel and some small pieces of charcoal were found in it. There was no trace of bone, cremated or otherwise, though even if an inhumation had been present it would very likely have been completely dissolved in the prevailing acid soil conditions. Certainly the cist was large enough to have taken a contracted burial.

The positions in which the Food Vessels were found, at opposite ends of the grave, were pointed out by Mr. Richardson and have been marked on the plan accordingly (fig. 1).

The space between the cist and the pit walls was filled with a loose mixture of boulders, angular rock fragments and clean sand, amongst which voids were plentiful. All this outer packing was excavated by hand. Boulders were found to have been wedged in between the cist and the pit walls to support the cist slabs which were otherwise only delicately balanced. They were particularly concentrated around the north-west, north-east and south-west sides, though not more than two or three small ones were found behind the large south-east slab which, unlike the rest, remained stable even after the outer packing had been removed. Apart from these boulders the remainder of the packing consisted of spoil resulting from the initial excavation of the construction pit. It was clear that only a small proportion of it had been used for backfilling but there was no evidence to show if the rest had been used to build a covering mound. In the packing on the south-east side rodent burrows were plentiful and were associated with pockets of modern plant debris.

Small fragments of wood charcoal were scattered throughout the packing. There had certainly never been a fire in the grave pit itself, though one of the boulders

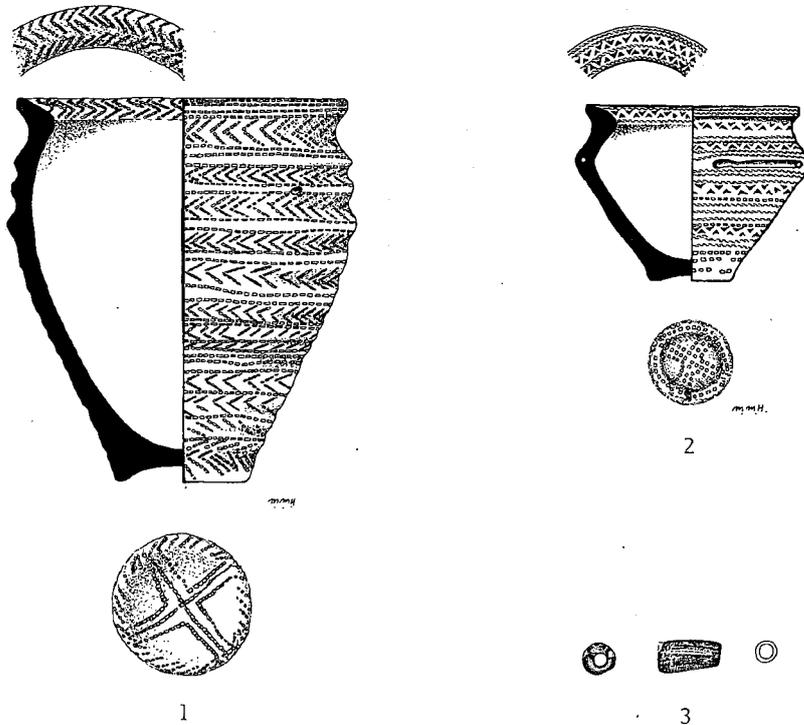


Fig. 2. Food vessels 1 and 2 ($\frac{1}{3}$); Bead 3 ($\frac{1}{2}$).

was slightly reddened by burning, and it is presumed that the charcoal derives from some domestic or ritual activity that took place in the immediate vicinity. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary it can be regarded as contemporary with the burial. A sample obtained from areas not affected by rodent burrows gave a radiocarbon determination of 1685 ± 120 b.c. (GU 1340).

Two small finds were also recovered from the packing. The first was a fusiform bead of jet or shale (fig. 2.3) found just outside the south corner of the cist, in the angle made by the side and end slabs, and about 0.10 m above the estimated level of the fill in the cist. It measures 1.2 cm long and has a flattened facet on one side. The broadest end has been chipped in antiquity.⁴ The only other find was an unretouched flake of grey flint, 2.2 cm long by 2.9 cm broad, which was lodged between stones close to the top of the cist in the west corner.

The large Food Vessel (fig. 2.1) was broken into many fragments when it was taken from the cist and has been restored. It is a tall, vase-shaped vessel with a relatively slack profile and two grooves (separating three ridges) on the shoulder which merge into a series of slight corrugations on the lower part of the body.⁵ The surface is buff to orange in colour and smooth textured. The whole surface and the internal bevel of the rim is decorated with a carefully executed herringbone pattern arranged in encircling horizontal bands, separated and sometimes split by parallel lines. The base is slightly concave and decorated with a cruciform pattern. All the decoration has been carried out with a toothed comb. It is difficult to be certain about the number of the teeth on the comb, but it seems that two different instruments may have been used, one with four teeth and one with five.

The second vessel is a miniature Yorkshire vase standing only 7 cm high, with a single narrow groove on the shoulder interrupted by four stops (fig. 2.2). As on the first vessel, decoration covers the whole surface, the internal bevel of the rim and extends on to the base. Again there are encircling bands of horizontal decoration, this time comprising dentate triangles and parallel lines executed with a spatula, a twisted cord and a toothed comb. As before the base is slightly concave and has a cruciform pattern of comb-stamped lines impressed on it. The comb decoration once more seems to have been carried out with two stamps, one of which probably had four teeth. An unusual feature is a superficial patch covering approximately a quarter of the outer surface of the vessel and extending from the shoulder to the base. It had evidently been applied in the interval between decoration and firing, presumably to make good an area of damage. At any rate the repair was imperfect for the pattern on it does not quite match that on the rest of the vessel; the horizontal lines do not meet perfectly across the join and the twisted cord element has been omitted completely. Furthermore in one place a small piece of the patch has come away revealing the hollow cast of a grain of bread wheat (*Triticum aestivum* s.l.).⁶

Although relatively uncommon it is by no means unknown for two Food Vessels to be found together in the same grave. Leaving aside old or uncertain records⁷ there are two recent instances in Northumberland where this was certainly the case. At Longridge Towers, near Berwick, two vessels, a bipartite vase and a bowl-like form, were found in the same cist,⁸ as were a tripartite vase and a bowl fragment

at Dour Hill, Byrness.⁹ In the latter instance it seems that a double interment was involved. Food Vessels with decoration on the base are relatively rare,¹⁰ and the strikingly similar patterns on the two vessels in this case raise the possibility that they may even have been made by the same hand.

Miniature or accessory vessels are occasionally found with Food Vessel burials, as seems to have been the case, for example, at Murton Farm, Berwick, where a Yorkshire vase was probably accompanied by a miniature also of vase form.¹¹ Another miniature Yorkshire vase with four perforated stops was found with one of a number of burials, including ones with Food Vessels, under a cairn at South Charlton near Alnwick in the early part of this century.¹² Associations between Food Vessels and jet beads or jet spacer-plate necklaces are numerous and well established, and their chronological significance has been discussed elsewhere.¹³ Attention has also been drawn to the frequency with which fusiform jet beads have been found with Food Vessels and inhumations in Scottish cist graves.¹⁴ In this respect the Well House burial is part of a familiar pattern.

The impression of a grain of bread wheat on the miniature vessel is of interest, for although this cereal has been recorded in Neolithic and Early Bronze age contexts in the south¹⁵ comparative material from the north has been lacking. Bearing in mind the dangers inherent in interpreting cereal impressions on pottery¹⁶ there would seem to be no reason why this crop could not be grown on the boulder clays of the Tyne valley if clearance and cultivation had begun in the area by that time.

The carbon date for the Well House Farm cist is comparable with dates obtained for other Food Vessels¹⁷ and indicates that the burial took place somewhere between 1445 and 1925 b.c. (at two standard deviations). Of the various different Food Vessel typologies which have been offered all recognize a basic distinction between vase and bowl forms,¹⁸ though associations of the type noted at Dour Hill suggest that both main types were at least partly contemporary. A considerable degree of chronological overlap is likewise indicated by the available radiocarbon dates which would be consistent with a floruit for the class as a whole in the period 1400 to 1700 b.c.

NOTES

¹ I would like to thank Mrs. B. Charlton for informing me of this find.

² Gibson, A. M. "Bronze Age Pottery in the North-East of England" (1978) *BAR*, 56, p. 2.

³ I am grateful to Dr. J. M. Jones of the Geology Dept., Newcastle University, for identifying the rock types, and to Dr. A. G. Lunn of the Adult Education Dept. for his opinion on their origin.

⁴ See Morrison, A. "A Bronze Age Burial Site near South Mound, Renfrewshire" (1979), *Glasgow Arch. Journ.*, 6, p. 34-7 for some possible implications of wear on fusiform beads.

⁵ Cf. "Beaker Food Vessels" in Scotland in

Simpson, D. D. A. "Food Vessels in South-West Scotland" (1965), *TDGNHAS*, 3rd ser., XLII, p. 35-7.

⁶ I am grateful to Mrs. Alison Donaldson of Durham University for this identification.

⁷ Gibson, A. M., *op. cit.*, p. 34-5 for some examples in the north-east.

⁸ Jobey, G., *TAASDN* (1968), N.S., I, p. 103.

⁹ Jobey, G., *AA*⁵, V (1977), p. 206.

¹⁰ As noted by Greenwell, W. *British Barrows* 1877, p. 92.

¹¹ Jobey, G. (1968), *op. cit.*, p. 105.

¹² *AA*³, XIV (1917), p. 129-30.

¹³ Simpson, D. D. A., "Food Vessels: associations and chronology" in J. M. Coles and D. D. A. Simpson (eds.) *Studies in Ancient Europe* (1968), p. 197, including examples from Kyloe and High Cocklaw in Northumberland.

¹⁴ Morrison, A., *op. cit.*, p. 37-9.

¹⁵ E.g. Godwin, Sir H. *The History of the British Flora*, 2nd ed., (1975), p. 413.

¹⁶ See Dennell, R. W. "Prehistoric crop cultivation in Southern England: a reconsideration" (1976), *Ant. J.*, 56, p. 11-13.

¹⁷ For recent date lists see Burgess, C. "The

Bronze Age" in C. Renfrew (ed.) *British Prehistory* (1974), pp. 168 and 227-8; Gibson, A. M., *op. cit.*, p. 45; especially Earl's Farm Down, Wilts. (1640 ± 90 b.c., NPL 75), Aberdour Road, Dunfermline (1631 ± 40 b.c., SRR 292), and Ballynagilly, co. Tyrone (1640 ± 60 b.c., UB 198).

¹⁸ E.g. Simpson, D. D. A. (1968), *op. cit.*; Burgess, C. (1974) *op. cit.*; Megaw, J. V. S. and D. D. A. Simpson *Introduction to British Prehistory* (1979), p. 230-37; Burgess, C. *The Age of Stonehenge* (1980), p. 86-9; and Gibson, A. M., *op. cit.*

Since this article was written Mr. Richardson has generously donated the second Food Vessel to the Museum of Antiquities, where it has been entered under the same number as the other finds.