

A FOOD VESSEL FROM ABINGER HAMMER SURREY

BY

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ON 24 August 1960 our member Mr. P. E. G. Holtom made the rare and important discovery of a complete food vessel on his farm, Fulvenden Farm, Abinger Hammer. The site was a silage pit of the trench type, some 70–80 feet long by 16 feet wide, and about 2 ft. 6 in. deep at the sides, on a hill some 100 yards north of the farmhouse.¹ The soil is greensand. The silage pit runs roughly east–west close along a field boundary consisting of (from south to north) a bank, hedge and ditch.

Discovery

Mr. Holtom was walking through the pit, which has not been used for silage for many years, when he noticed a small piece of pottery (about an inch square) in the vertical sandy side of the pit on the field-boundary (north) side. He called his eldest son, and together they extracted, by careful and patient work, a complete food vessel lying in the soil obliquely with its mouth downwards.

The discovery was at once reported to the Guildford Museum, and through this the Society was informed; the site was visited by the writer (E.S.W.) within a few days. A notice appeared in the *Surrey Advertiser* on 27 August. The scooped hole from which the pot had been taken was still visible. No trace of a barrow, or features such as ditches, could be seen in the sides of the pit, or on the immediately surrounding land.

The pot was some 2 ft. 3 in. below the surface, to its lowest part. The bank reached its highest point some 9 feet from the edge of the pit, and on this side was 1 ft. 6 in. high. But the field surface beyond, reached 12 feet from the top of the bank, was 3 ft. 3 in. lower; that is, the field to the north, which has been frequently ploughed, is nearly two feet lower at this place than the edge of the pit in the field to the south. The fields slope equally steeply to the east, but the level of that on the north has clearly been differently affected by cultivation.

In fact, it appeared that, on the edges of the pit, up to 1 ft. 6 in. of the soil represented throw-up from the pit over the original soil. If this were so, it would mean that the food vessel was lying actually just below the true ground-level. It was for determination whether it had rested on the original (Bronze Age) soil-surface, or had been buried just below it.

¹ N.G.R. TQ 095465.

Later Investigations of the Site

On 10 August 1963 a resistivity survey was made of the ground round the find-site of the food vessel by Mr. A. J. Clark, F.S.A., and a small party, but with no positive result. The north face of the pit was also cleared back for 25 feet on each side of the pot-site, but no unusual features were seen. The west end of the pit had been partly back-filled, into an earlier trench, by Mr. Holtom when the present pit was cut, but this did not affect the food vessel site, which was in the area of the more recent pit.

The section of the pit-side, at the pot-site, was:—

present surface

6 inches yellow sand—natural thrown up from base of trench

9 inches greyish—pre-trench soil

6 inches small stony—(?) old surface (Food Vessel)

natural

The possibility that the pot was a secondary in the outer part of a barrow was not overlooked. Mr. Clark and the writer thought they could detect traces of a low mound lying north-west of the pot-site, with its centre some 43 feet from the pot, and, in the field to the north, a faint ditch curving round this mound. But tests, using the electrical resistivity meter, were inconclusive, and the question could not be followed up at the time. E.S.W.

In November 1964 Mr. N. P. Thompson, aided by members of the Society, re-examined the site in an attempt to determine whether the vessel had been buried, and if it had been associated with a barrow. The assumption was made that, as the vessel was recovered intact, it must have originally been protected and not left on the land surface. After seeing a photograph taken by Mr. Holtom showing fox cubs playing in the silage pit and the fox holes in the side of the pit, the chance of gaining further evidence seemed remote. As expected there was much disturbance, especially beneath the bank. (See Fig. 1.)

An area five feet east and west of the find-spot and one foot from the boundary fence to the edge of the silage pit was carefully excavated. The fence following the bank separating fields to the north and south is the parish boundary. The bank material consisted of grey sandy soil with a few lumps of iron-stone. There was no sign of plough soil. Owing to animal disturbance it was impossible to determine the level of the old land surface.

A silted-up drainage ditch one foot wide, running parallel to the silage pit and cut into the subsoil, was traced. This ditch ran approximately two feet from the edge of the silage pit and it was in the area between the two that the vessel was found.

A stratum of consolidated chipped iron-stone and sand about three feet wide, visible in the south section of the silage pit, ran north under the bank. This hard layer had been avoided by the foxes. According to the earlier investigation the find-spot of the vessel would be just east of this undisturbed stratum and the top edge of

the vessel a little below the top of this solid subsoil. This would confirm that the vessel was buried beneath the old land surface.

Except for a couple of flint flakes there were no finds. There was a fair scatter of flint flakes of Bronze Age character to be found on the surface of the field to the north, including a fabricator. This suggests contemporary occupation nearby.

A section was cut along the edge of the pit, parallel to the boundary fence, 25 feet east and west of the excavated area. There was no evidence of a mound or ditch. A further resistivity survey undertaken by Mr. A. J. Clark again confirmed that there was no evidence of a mound or ditch in any direction.

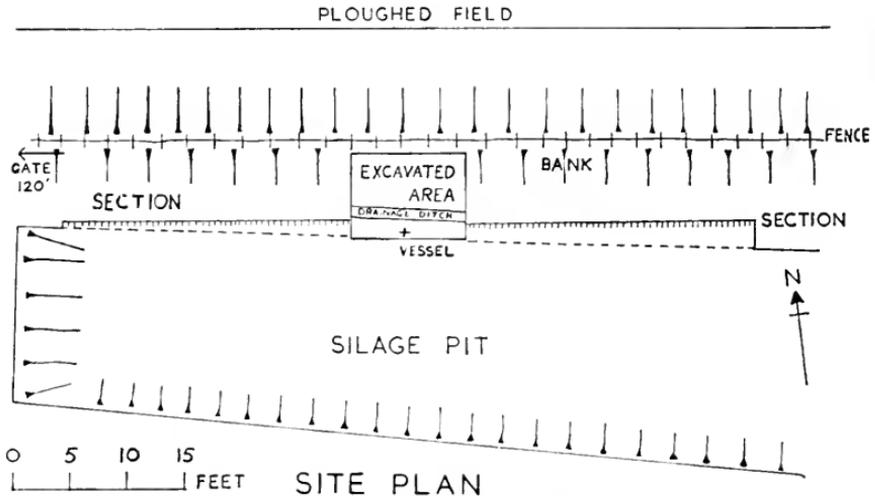


FIG. 1.—FOOD VESSEL FROM ABINGER HAMMER. SITE PLAN.

An interesting feature of the site is the bank running along the parish boundary. As mentioned earlier, at the excavated site the field to the north is lower than the field to the south, but further down the hill the reverse is the case. Time did not allow cutting a complete cross-section through the bank nor the investigation of a possible trackway visible lower down the hill. Obviously further investigation is required, but this is unlikely to take much further the problems raised by the food vessel itself. N.P.T.

The Food Vessel

This is a very fine example of the Southern type, broadly associated with the early part of the Wessex culture (see below).

The pot is hard and well-fired, with walls less than a quarter-inch thick. It is orange-brown in colour, a condition which may well have been accentuated by its prolonged burial in the sand. The surface is smoothed inside and out, the outside being slightly burnished. The paste is tempered with small, many almost microscopic, grains of sand, most of which are very probably due to their natural presence

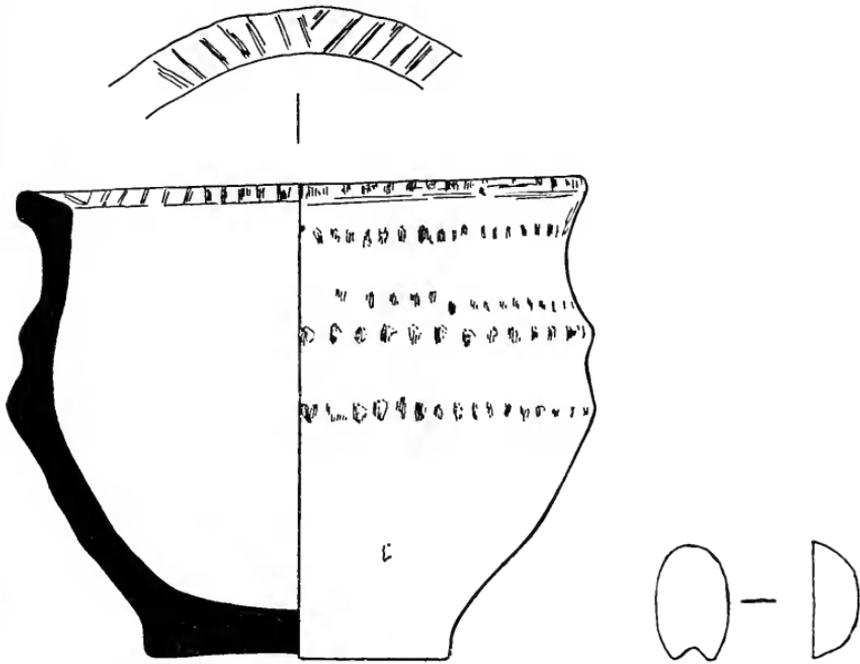


FIG. 2.—*Left*: FOOD VESSEL FROM ABINGER HAMMER. ($\frac{1}{2}$.)

Right: IMPRESSION OF DECORATION ON FOOD VESSEL. ($\frac{5}{8}$.)

in the clay from which the pot was made.² Mr. F. Holling, of Guildford Museum, who kindly examined the pot, points out its similarity, in general appearance and surface, to the beaker from Titsey.³

The pot is 4.5 inches high; its diameter is 5.3 inches at the mouth (outside), and 4.3 inches inside; 5.5 inches at the widest girth, and 2.75 inches at the base. The rim is flat, and about 0.5 inches wide; it is ornamented with close-set oblique slashes. Below the rim the pot is decorated with five horizontal rows of oval upright impressions (5 mm. by 3 mm.). One row is round the edge of the rim, the others at distances of 0.75, 1, 1.5 and 2 inches below this; the two lower rows are each on a slight ridge which encircles the widest part of the pot. Below these ridges the pot is plain, and tapers off sharply to a pronounced foot. The base is flat, with no foot-ring (Fig. 2 and Plate I(a)).

The decorative impressions seem to have been made by pressing the end of a bone into the paste when soft. Mr. Holling has taken a wax impression of the marks (which are all alike), and Fig. 2 shows

² The Late Bronze Age pottery from Weston Wood, Albury, similarly contains sand, found naturally in the weathering layer of the gault clay from which it appears to have been made.

³ *Surrey A.C.*, XXXV (1924), 4, and Plate I(a). This is a wide-mouthed necked beaker which may well be broadly contemporary with the Abinger Hammer Food Vessel.

the front and side view of these. Attempts have been made to identify the bird or animal which could have supplied the bone, but without success. The field of choice is very wide indeed, and little work has as yet been done on this. If a bird is responsible, migrants as well as native species need to be taken into account, and the angle at which the jab was made affects the shape of the imprint. The most that can be said is that the jabs were probably made with the end of a leg-bone of a bird the size of a blackbird, or perhaps pigeon.⁴ A precise identification would be of interest, in connection not only with the distribution of the bird in question, but of a possible food species and even of folklore.

Analysis of the Contents of the Pot

The pot was, as has been stated, taken up entire, and its contents (soil) were not removed by Mr. Holtom. This enabled it to be emptied under controlled conditions at the University of London Institute of Archaeology by Mr. H. W. M. Hodges, who reported it to be archaeologically sterile. The fabric of the pot was then impregnated with plastic to preserve it, and the few small breakages made good.

The soil contents, together with a sample of soil from outside the pot at the same level, were taken over by Dr. I. W. Cornwall, of the same Institute. He reported that phosphate (as P_2O_5) was extremely low in both samples—10 mgs./100 gms. dry soil and 8.75 mgs. respectively. The small difference is probably of no significance. Had there been bone or food remains one could have expected anything from 10 to 100 times as much phosphate inside as outside the pot, for the pot would have held up percolation enough to prevent total extraction of phosphate even in an acid soil. The conclusion must be that the pot was empty when abandoned. This, of course, is not at all inconsistent with the absence of a barrow or inhumation.

Discussion

The Abinger Hammer Food Vessel is an important addition to the short list of Southern food vessels, although in the absence of associations it can only serve to extend geographically, rather than culturally, the area of their distribution.

Its closest analogy, although this is far from typical of the class, is the food vessel from Fargo Plantation (Wilts).⁵ This has five rows of bird-bone impressions, like Abinger Hammer, but three, not two, raised ridges. It has a foot-ring. Its paste is almost gritless, and is well-smoothed. It was found in a Class II henge, in a grave not covered by a mound, associated with necked beakers. In view of the posteriority, in its northern homelands, of the food vessel as against the beaker, this is unusual, but the association was accepted by

⁴ Compare Plate I, and II, 5, of Liddell, Dorothy M., 'New Light on an Old Problem,' *Antiquity*, III (1929), 283, which, however, do not seem to be identical with ours.

⁵ *W.A.M.* XLVII (1938), 357.

Childe,⁶ and it is now clear that the long-necked beaker overlaps into the Wessex period.⁷

The Southern food vessel has been recognised as a substratum element in the Wessex culture.⁸ These vessels are still, however, rare, but have now been found from Cornwall to East Anglia; that is, over the whole zone of influence of the Wessex culture. The most recent list is that by Ashbee,⁹ occasioned by his excavation of a food vessel in the bell-barrow at Bishop's Waltham, Hants. Several more have come to light since then, and Dr. Isobel Smith is preparing a fresh classified list.¹⁰

The overwhelming majority of Southern food vessels come from barrows;¹¹ but then isolated pots, apparently just buried in the ground, like the Abinger Hammer example, are rare in any case.

Food vessels are very rare in Surrey. As it happens, both the other examples known—from Dippenhall and Seale¹²—were also casual finds, with no trace of barrows. The Seale pot is a neat vessel with panels of vertical and horizontal lines, and two ridges. The Dippenhall pot is crude and somewhat anomalous, with cord maggots and pits, and one ridge. It has a decidedly strong late ('secondary') neolithic strain in its ancestry, and can perhaps be set rather on one side in the present context.¹³ It is very probably earlier than Seale or Abinger Hammer.

The Abinger Hammer pot is a very useful addition to the growing body of evidence for a fully-organised province or outlier of the Wessex culture in Surrey. The centre of this may have been the important chieftain's tomb, the bell-barrow in Deerleap Wood, Wotton, with its whetstone;¹⁴ at least this barrow implies the presence of a chief and of a reasonably large population. The other Surrey barrows of the Wessex culture are the triple barrow at Elstead, the bell-barrows at Horsell (two) and Wisley,¹⁵ and a bell-disc barrow at Worplesdon.¹⁶ Overhanging rim or collared urns come from Reigate, Cobham, Kingston (two, one with a 'grape cup' in its mouth), Walton, Weybridge and Henley Grove (Guildford).¹⁷ There are also a few, probably contemporary, bronzes: two complete and

⁶ Childe, V. G., *Prehistoric Communities of the British Isles* (1940), 119.

⁷ Devizes Museum *Catalogue of the Neolithic and Bronze Age Collections* (1964), 20.

⁸ Piggott, S., 'The Early Bronze Age in Wessex,' *P.P.S.* (1938), 82.

⁹ *P.P.S.*, XXIII (1957), 165.

¹⁰ Information kindly communicated by her.

¹¹ This is reinforced by unpublished information kindly given me by Mr. H. de S. Shortt, F.S.A. (Salisbury Museum), and Mr. R. N. R. Peers (Dorchester Museum).

¹² *Preh. Farnh.*, 161.

¹³ See *Surrey A.C.*, LII (1952), 26.

¹⁴ Corcoran, J. X. W. P., in *Surrey A.C.*, LX (1963), lff.

¹⁵ Grinsell, L. V., in *Surrey A.C.*, XL (1932), 58, 61, 59. The Wisley barrow covered a cremation, but no grave-goods are recorded from any of them, except Wotton.

¹⁶ *Surrey A.C.*, XLII (1934), 49. This contained a cremation; bucket urns also found were probably secondary.

¹⁷ *Surrey A.C.*, XXXV (1924), 6. Many of these are with cremations, but not all are under barrows.

parts of five flat axes, none dated by association. These come from 'West Surrey,' Albury, Farncombe (two),¹⁸ Busbridge,¹⁹ Walton Heath,²⁰ and a doubtful piece from Carshalton.²¹

That the population was a settled one, and that the barrows were not merely erected by the chieftains' own followers on their death away from home, is indicated by, at least, the widely-distributed pots at Seale, Dippenhall (but the Wessex date of this is perhaps questionable) and Abinger Hammer. To these it may be justifiable to add, with all caution (on the indications mentioned above, and on the evidence from Fargo Plantation), the necked beaker from Titsey quite apart from the urns mentioned above.

It will be noticed that these sites and finds are mostly scattered in a line along the greensand belt, with outliers on the Bagshot sand. The greensand may thus be taken as the way of approach from Wessex as well as the main area of settlement. It could well have been a trade-route also.

At least the presence of the Wessex culture in Surrey, and perhaps a separate unit of it, is now clear. It now remains to hope that more evidence will come to light. E.S.W.

Summary

A Southern food vessel was found in 1960 in a silage trench at Abinger Hammer. It had no associations, and the reason for its deposit could not be recovered. But it adds to the growing evidence for a strong Wessex settlement of Surrey.

Acknowledgements

A warm tribute should be paid to Mr. Holtom, not only for his keen observation and recognition of the unusual, but also for his ready and patient co-operation throughout the somewhat protracted investigation of his important find. He has deposited the food vessel on loan in Guildford Museum. The photograph for Plate 1(a) was taken by Mr. Thomas A. Wilkie, F.R.P.S., and is reproduced by kind permission. We are very grateful to Mr. Hodges and Dr. Cornwall for their work on the pot.

¹⁸ Charterhouse Museum, numbers 157-1957, 158-1957, 167-1955 and 169-1957. The last-mentioned was published by Whimster, D. C., *Archæology of Surrey* (1931), 72, Fig. 13a; the last two are referred to in Mr. E. E. Harrison's note in *Surrey A.C.*, LXI (1964), 100.

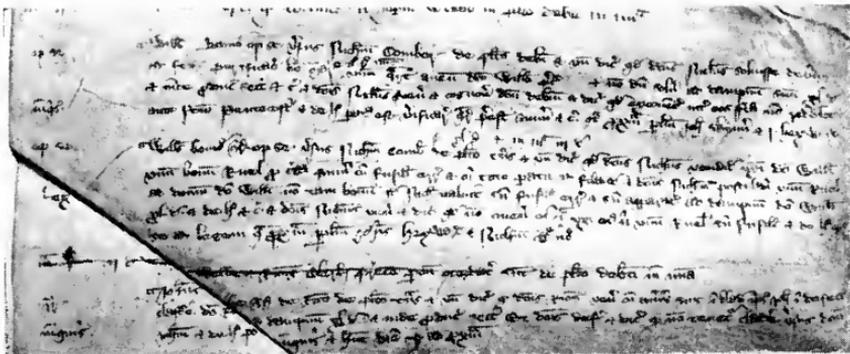
¹⁹ Guildford Museum No. G830; described as from Cranleigh in *Surrey A.C.*, XLII (1934), 135.

²⁰ In the possession of Mr. L. W. Carpenter; *Surrey A.C.*, LVII (1960), 111.

²¹ *Surrey A.C.*, XLIX (1946), 67. I am grateful to Miss Winifred Phillips for the information and references for all these axes.



(a) FOOD VESSEL FROM ABINGER HAMMER.



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(b) MANOR OF OXTED. ENTRY RELATING TO SPINNING WHEEL.