

Second Century A.D. Pottery from Sandy, Bedfordshire

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A long history of chance discoveries of Roman pottery and other objects at Sandy has combined with recent, limited rescue excavation and salvage recording to indicate the existence there of a dispersed rural settlement.¹ The precise nature of Roman habitation, which arose at the junctions between several roads, and was strung along their routes as they approached a gap or pass in the Greensand Ridge that had been previously guarded by a series of hillforts, is even now poorly understood, and its former relationships and possible interdependence with other sites nearby are largely unknown.²

A report to the Conservation Section of the county Planning Department by Mr A.E. Rollings in June 1981, that he had learned of the discovery of Roman pottery and excavated human remains at an unspecified building site in the modern town, was therefore received with interest, and visits were immediately made to those sites where development was taking place. The finds had been made on a housing estate lying to the east of St Neots Road, where the final phase of a major housing project being undertaken in Sandy by the Greater London Council was located. The site lies between one and one and a half kilometres, or approximately two-thirds of a mile, to the north of the focus of Roman settlement as revealed by previous discoveries, in an area of unknown archaeological importance where finds have not been recorded before.

The mechanical excavation of foundation-trenches for dwellings on the east side of Winchester Road by the corner of Engayne Road led to the discovery of Roman pottery, human bones and a small quantity of other finds within a small area, probably no greater than 500 sq m overall. Some finds, perhaps most of them as indicated by the number of pieces of pottery from single vessels which joined, occurred in the infillings of features which showed in the sides of the machine-dug trenches, and they were removed in the short interval between excavation and back-filling with concrete. At the time of the visit to check the discovery, the surrounding area had been disturbed and compressed by contractors' machinery and no

other features were visible. Mr J. Porter, Clerk of Works at the site, had retained the earlier finds, and he kindly made them available for study.³

The pottery forms a useful group, providing an indication of second century wares used in Sandy, and at the same time adds to the series of pottery, chiefly earlier and later forms, that has been published from the area.⁴ The decorated samian (*Fig 1, 1*) and a representative collection of sherds of the commonest coarse pottery fabrics have been returned to the finder. The remainder has been deposited in Bedford Museum, together with an accompanying catalogue and description of all the material that was found.⁵

THE POTTERY

*Samian*⁶

(a) Decorated⁷

- 1 *Mr Hedley Pengelly writes:* Form 30, two adjoining pieces, Central Gaulish. Ascribable to the work of the Donnaucus group and especially the anonymous potter X-13 : *cf. S & S.*, pl. 44, 513 (with the same ovolo); pl. 46, 541. The crouching beast appears to be the panther *D. 799 (= 0. 1518)*, though some of the detail was marred during removal from the mould. The identity of the seated figure is uncertain. Such bowls as this one were made at both Les Martres-de-Veyre and Lezoux under Trajan and Hadrian. The probable range is *c. A.D. 105-30*, judging by the fabric and finish.

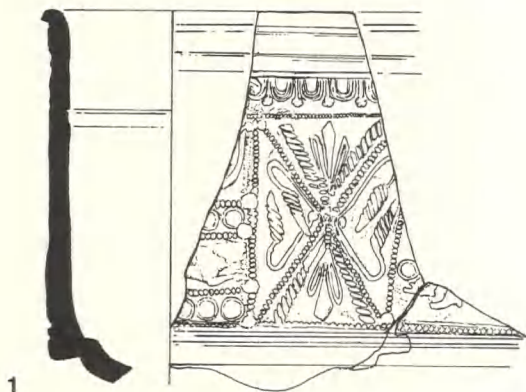
(*Fig 1, 1*)

(b) Plain

- 2 Form 18/31. Central Gaulish. Hadrianic-Antonine. (*Not illustrated*).
- 3 Form 31. Central Gaulish, with slightly crackled glaze. Mid-to-late-Antonine (*Not illustrated*).
- 4 Form 79. Central Gaulish. The stamp on the flat base is an illiterate one, not recorded previously, but almost certainly that of a Lezoux potter. Mid-to-late-Antonine. (*Fig 1, 2*)

Other pottery

Approximately three-quarters of the remainder of the pottery from the housing site comprised reduced, or grey wares, which can be separated into several groups on the basis of their fabrics.



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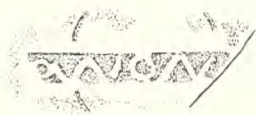


Figure 1 Samian pottery. Potter's stamp shown at actual size; decorated bowl reproduced at half full-size.

None of the individual wares, which had all been wheel-thrown, can be attributed to a known kiln site.

Grey Ware Fabric A

Over half of the proportion of grey ware at the site occurred in a soft, porous fabric which has the feel of fine sandpaper. Fine black inclusions, probably of iron-ore, are scattered throughout the clay matrix which also contains occasional grains of black and white quartz. Sometimes flecks of shell and lumps of limestone are present.

The colour varies from light blue-grey to light brown-grey at the surfaces, and is a light to dark blue-grey across the break.

Forms include necked and carinated bowls (Fig 2, 9-12) and a poppy-head beaker (Fig 2, 3).

Grey Ware Fabric B

Vessels made in a second fabric are characterised by their granular surfaces and sugary texture. The fabric is fairly hard and open-bodied with medium to coarse quartz inclusions.

The colour ranges from light grey to black at the outside, and from brown-grey through black to orange-brown on the inside.

At least six vessels occur, including bowls (eg., Fig 2, 13, 16), two jars (Fig 2, 4, 5), and a dish or lid (Fig 2, 20).

Grey Ware Fabric C

More varied than the pottery made in either of the previous fabrics, vessels in this group are consistent only in having a dense distribution of fine quartz with varying amounts of coarser inclusions within the clay matrix. An indication of the range of variation in fabric is included in the individual descriptions below.

A number of other grey ware fabrics were also present, chiefly represented by single pots or parts of vessels, and their fabrics are described in the appropriate catalogue entries which follow.

Included among the other wares at the site are a roughcast beaker with dark grey-brown colour-coat from the Nene Valley region (Fig 2, 1), and sherds from the walls of vessels made in white wares, in one instance in a pipe-clay fabric, and soft orange pastes (*not illustrated*). A small number of jars occur in shelly fabrics (eg., Fig 2, 6-7), although the amounts and sizes of the shell inclusions vary between individual pots.

Catalogue of pottery illustrated in Figure 2

- 1 Rough-cast beaker with cornice rim. Soft, abraded white ware with dark grey-brown colour-coat. From the Nene Valley region.
- 2 Jar. Soft, fairly open-bodied, reduced fabric with granular surfaces, containing a dense distribution of unevenly arranged quartz inclusions of various sizes and a sparse to moderate amount of fine red iron-ore. Brown-grey with orange-red core, perhaps originally slip-coated, Lattice decoration on exterior.
- 3 Poppy-head beaker. Grey Ware Fabric A. Light grey with slightly darker core.
- 4 Ovoid jar. Grey Ware Fabric B. Ext. : grey; break : blue-grey; int. : brown-grey to orange-brown.
- 5 Jar. Grey Ware Fabric B. Light brown-grey with darker core.
- 6 Jar. Moderately hard, rather close-bodied, shelly fabric with dense distribution of fine and medium sized pieces of shell within the clay matrix. Hand-built. Ext. : dark grey-brown; break : dark brown; int. : light to dark brown.
- 7 Jar or cooking-pot. Hard, close-bodied, shelly fabric densely packed with fine pieces of shell, and containing sparse inclusions of coarse shell and fine pieces of iron-ore. Hand-built. Ext. : dark brown to black; break: grey; int. : light orange to brown. Slightly sooted exterior.

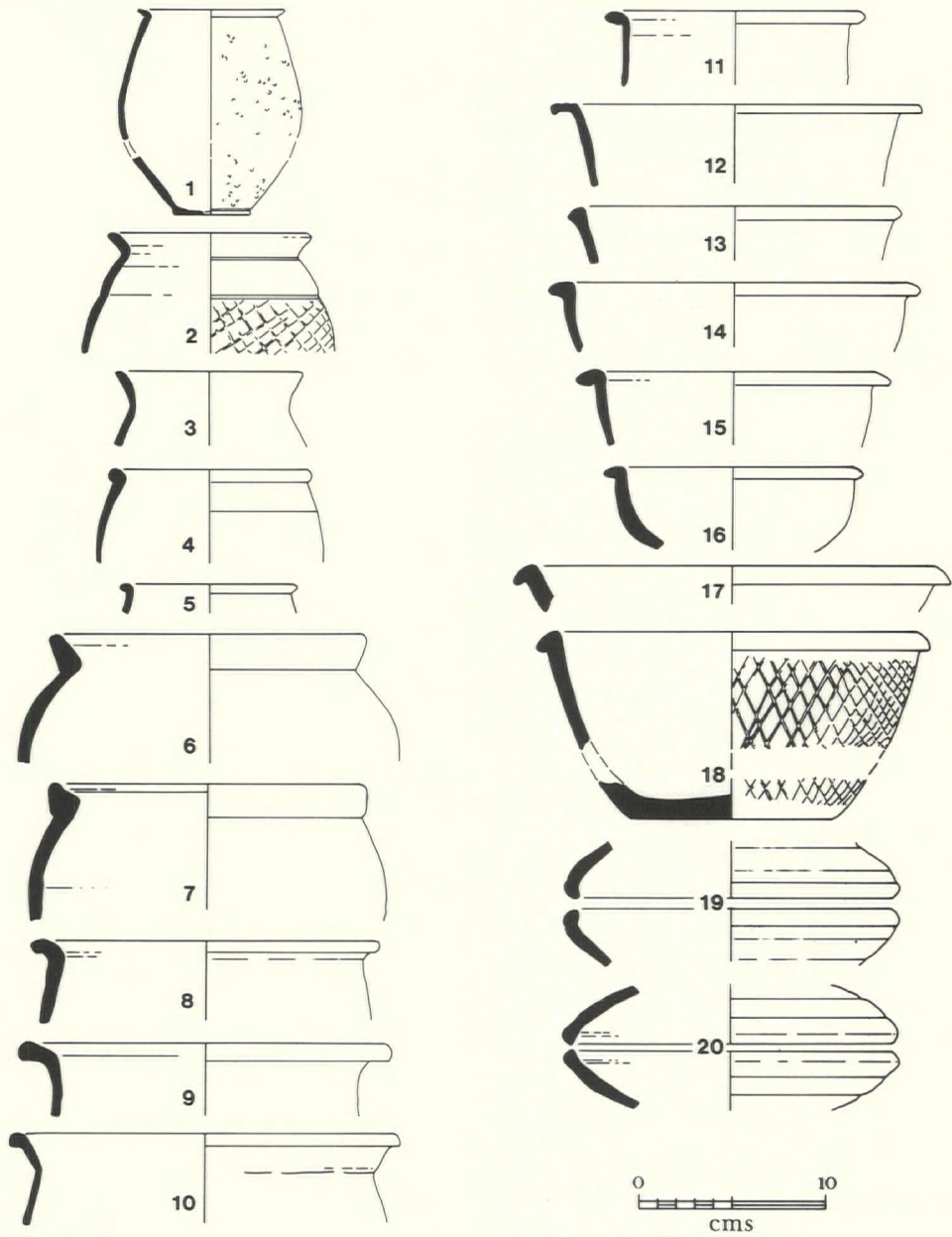


Figure 2 Other pottery. (Scale $\frac{1}{4}$)

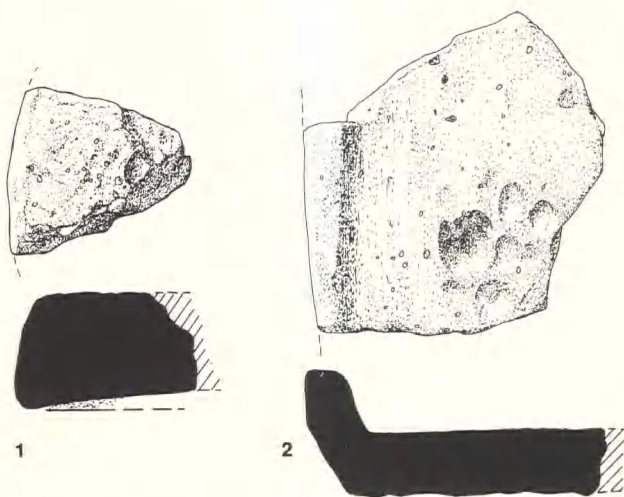


Figure 3 Other finds. (Scale $\frac{1}{3}$)

- 8 Jar. Hard, reduced fabric with granular surfaces, containing a dense distribution of medium-sized quartz grains, with occasional coarser pieces, and a sparse to moderate amount of coarse red quartz within the clay matrix. Fine red iron-ore is also present, as well as occasional flecks of shell and small lumps of limestone. Light grey-brown to charcoal-grey throughout.
- 9 Necked bowl. Grey Ware Fabric A. Light blue-grey with dark grey core.
- 10 Necked bowl. Grey Ware Fabric A. Grey with blue-grey core.
- 11 Carinated bowl. Grey Ware Fabric A. Light brown-grey with blue-grey core.
- 12 Carinated bowl. Grey Ware Fabric A. Light brown-grey, darker blotched on the inside, with a grey core.
- 13 Carinated bowl. Grey Ware Fabric B, containing pellets of red iron-ore. Brown-grey, darker at the outside, with blue-grey inner core sandwiched between dark brown-grey.
- 14 Wide-mouthed bowl. Grey Ware Fabric C, containing a dense concentration of fine quartz grains with some medium-sized pieces and fine flecks of red iron-ore. Ext. : dark grey to black; break : light grey-brown; int. : grey.
- 15 Wide-mouthed bowl. Grey Ware Fabric C, similar to the preceding item. Grey with blue-grey core.
- 16 Wide-mouthed bowl. Grey Ware Fabric B. Grey with light grey core.
- 17 Bowl. Hard, reduced fabric with a rough surface and slightly open body containing a sparse occurrence of medium and large sized pellets of red iron-ore. Light grey-brown to charcoal-grey throughout.
- 18 Deep-sided bowl. Soft, close-bodied, reduced ware with sandy, micaceous surfaces, containing occasional medium sized quartz grains and pieces of red iron-ore within the clay matrix. Black with red core. Lattice decoration on the outside.
- 19 Dish or lid, the form being equally suitable for either use. Grey Ware Fabric A. Grey with a grey inner core sandwiched between dark grey.
- 20 As last. Grey Ware Fabric B. Black with dark grey inner core sandwiched between orange. Burnished line on inside rim or lip.

OTHER FINDS

Fig 3, 1 Fragment of upper quern or millstone with flat top, dressed with regularly pecked pits, and a conical grinding surface. The original diameter cannot be ascertained due to the smallness of the fragment, although the outer edge is preserved and is approximately 50 mm tall. Of Old Red Sandstone from the Welsh Borders region.

Not illustrated : A piece of burnt Millstone Grit, obtained from the Pennine region, presumably formed part of another quern.

Fig 3, 2 Fragment of *tegula*, or roof-tile, with a squared flange. The slightly soft, orange, rather gritty fabric contains pieces of shell, ironstone and limestone. The imprint of a dog's or fox's paw is preserved in the upper surface with a second, perhaps related print partly superimposed upon it.

Not illustrated : A small quantity of oyster shells and animal bones were also found. Human remains included skull fragments, teeth and other parts of the skeleton.

CONCLUSION

The fabrics and forms of the coarse pottery here reported on are consistent with a second century A.D. date, and several of the types, for example, *Fig 2, 6-7, 14-15, 17, and 19-20*, are paralleled by

finds from excavation at the Roman villa at Newnham, near Bedford, ten kilometres, or a little more than six miles, to the west, where they date from the period around the middle of the century.⁸ Similar forms also occurred in contemporary deposits at Verulamium,⁹ and examples of the distinctive soft grey ware fabric which is 'peppered' with black inclusions (Grey Ware Fabric A) have been noted amongst pottery found at Odell in the upper Great Ouse valley.¹⁰ Vessels in that fabric occurred there with samian pottery dating from Trajanic/Hadrianic to Antonine times, with some pieces not earlier than A.D. 160.¹¹ The same general dating, probably extending to no later than c. A.D. 175, is implied for the Sandy finds by the associated fine wares, among which the rough-cast beaker from the Nene Valley, *fig 2, 1*, has the delicately moulded cornice rim of early examples of the type.¹²

The discovery of human skeletal remains with the pottery could indicate the existence of a cemetery, but the association between the two classes of material is uncertain, and oyster shells, animal bones, tile and broken quernstones, perhaps representing domestic rubbish, were also found. It is unfortunate that the features in which the material was found could not be adequately explored prior to further construction, and the extent of the area which they covered remains unknown. The remainder of the housing site was checked for the presence of other archaeological features with negative result, and previous building in the area had not apparently disturbed any other remains. It is possible that further discoveries will be made on land to the north if it is developed in the future, perhaps then providing an indication of the relationship between the site of the recent finds

and the main area of Roman settlement to the south.¹³

NOTES

- 1 David E. Johnston, 'The Roman Settlement at Sandy, Bedfordshire', *Bedfordshire Archaeol J* 9 (1974), 35-54.
- 2 Cf. Brian Dix, 'The Romano-British farmstead at Odell and its setting: some reflections on the Roman landscape of the south-east Midlands', *Landscape History* 3, 17-26, especially 21.
- 3 We are grateful to both Mr Porter and Mr K. Ward, Site Agent, Pumfrey Construction Ltd., for allowing us access to the site and for making over the finds.
- 4 Johnston, *op. cit.* (note 1), 48-51, fig 14.
- 5 Museum Accession No. 1981/1. Isabelle Plan drew the coarse pottery, and Andrew Pinder illustrated the samian and other finds.
- 6 We are grateful to Hedley Pengelly for specialist advice regarding identifications and for providing the description of the fragment of decorated bowl. Miss Brenda Dickinson, University of Leeds, kindly commented on the potter's stamp.
- 7 The following abbreviations are used :
 - D. Figure-type in J. Dechelette, *Les Vases ceramiques ornes de la Gaule romaine; II* (Paris 1904)
 - O. Figure-type in F. Oswald, *Index of Figure-Types on Terra Sigillata* (Liverpool, 1936-7).
 - S & S. J.A. Stanfield & Grace Simpson, *Central Gaulish Potters* (London, 1958).
- 8 Unpublished results from analysis by Pat Aird.
- 9 Cf. S. Frere, *Verulamium Excavations; I* (Rep Res Comm Soc Antiq London No. XXVIII, Oxford, 1972), figs 122-25, 127-29.
- 10 Brian Dix, 'Excavations at Harrold Pit, Odell, 1974-1978: a preliminary report', *Bedfordshire Archaeol J* 14 (1980), 15-18.
- 11 See further, Brian Dix, *Excavation at Harrold Pit, Odell, Bedfordshire, 1974-1978*, forthcoming.
- 12 Cf. M.D. Howe, J.R. Perrin & D.F. Mackreth, *Roman Pottery from the Nene Valley: A guide* (Peterborough City Mus Occasional Paper No.2, 1981), 8.
- 13 Paper written July 1981.

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