

A Roman Ditch in Dunstable Priory Meadow

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INTRODUCTION

In March 1970 a trench was dug across part of the Priory Meadow in Dunstable (TL 021219) to re-lay part of a main electricity supply cable. The site is that of the Augustinian Priory of St Peter, founded in 1132. The field is owned by Dunstable Corporation and is used as a public recreation area.

The trench was 5–6ft deep and about 5ft wide, cut in a NE/SW direction across part of the meadow just south-east of the remaining Priory Church. The excavation was found to cut through part of a burial ground – probably the monks' cemetery, and some building remains of the Priory period (1132 – c. 1540).

Underlying the site at a depth of about 5ft was the surface of the natural chalk, and dug into this was a substantial ditch, sealed by a layer of dark soil containing early Roman pottery. A partial section through the ditch was excavated, and some pottery recovered. The pottery is too small a group for precise dating, and there were no associated finds. However, from the presence of slaty-grey cooking pot fragments, of a type found at Camulodunum around A.D.65 and continuing into the second century, the 'native' style bowl, which while not closely paralleled is similar to vessels found at Colchester and St Albans, and the large storage jar fragments, likely also to be fairly early in date; also fragments of a mortarium of bead-and-roll type found in early contexts at Silchester and a fragment of a samian bowl, Dragendorf form 37, similar to vessels being made at Lezoux around A.D. 100 by COCATUS and his contemporaries, a date about the end of the first century – early second century would appear to be right for the sealing layer. The ditch itself was filled with hard compacted chalk, and two undistinguished fragments of coarse grey ware were the only finds.

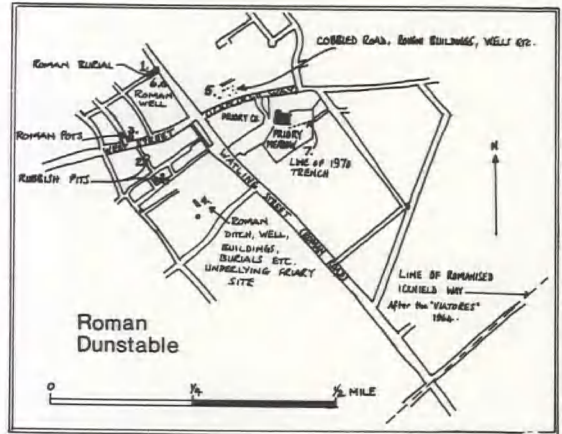


Fig 1 Roman Dunstable

The Ditch

The Ditch was 7ft 6in wide at the top and was excavated for a depth of 3ft below the level of the natural chalk. The sides sloped steeply and appeared to have suffered little erosion. The fill was mainly chalk, there being a greater proportion of loam in the upper part of the fill. The ditch had been encountered by the medieval Priory builders, who had dug out the softer loamy chalk and inserted a packing of flints and Totternhoe Stone blocks to carry a substantial wall which coincided with the ditch at this point.

Parallel to the ditch and about eight feet from it were two shallow trenches cut in the natural chalk. These contained only loam and clean sand, and there was no evidence of their date, although they occur well below the other medieval remains.

This is, as far as I know, the first find of Roman material in the South East Quadrant of Dunstable, within a short distance of the crossroads.

Medieval Remains

At least 18 burials were recorded, buried at

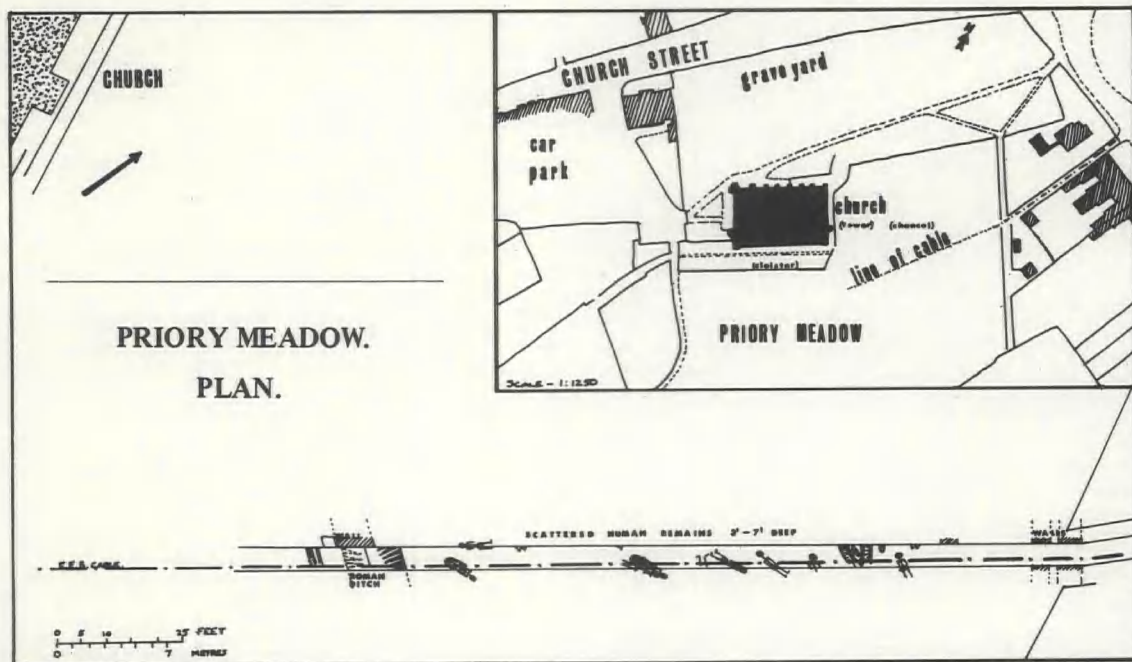


Fig 2 Location of cable and plan of ditch

various depths in the fine, greasy brown loam which covered part of the site to a depth of five feet. The bones were generally in very poor condition and had been badly mutilated by the trench-digger, but all appeared to be middle-aged-elderly male skeletons. The bones were collected for re-burial by the Coroner's Officer.

Substantial Totternhoe Stone walls were found, mostly with ashlar facings robbed away. These are marked on the plan, and whilst their exposure is too small to calculate their precise relationship to the original Priory at least one wall, that at the South West end of the trench which coincides with the Roman ditch, may be part of the foundations of the South Transept.

Other Roman Finds in the Centre of Dunstable

The major distribution of Roman finds in the centre of the town is shown on the map (fig 1). The Roman Burial at (1) was discovered by Worthington G. Smith in 1901, and the rubbish pits at (2) were also recorded by him. The Roman pots at (3) were found about 1960 by workmen building a new office block — these are now in Luton Museum.

The Roman ditches and well etc. at (4) were

excavated recently by local archaeologists, and the short length of cobbled road with poor houses either side at (5) was found during the construction of the North East Quadrant shopping centre in 1964-65.

The well at (6) on the sketch map was found in 1963 and contained a mixture of Roman and Medieval remains.

It will thus be apparent that the site of Dunstable was fairly well settled in Roman times. As re-development progresses more remains of the Roman period are certain to be revealed and the unexpected discovery of a ditch of possibly defensive proportions underlying the site of the Augustinian Priory must lead one to speculate that the settlement or 'posting station' of *Durocobrivae* listed by Antoninus at the crossing of the Watling Street and Icknield Way, was, in fact, on the site of the present town centre.

The Pottery (fig 4)

Pottery recovered from this site is now in Luton Museum.

1. A cordoned bowl with smoothed sub-triangular decoration between the cordons. A well-fired slightly gritty brown ware, slightly

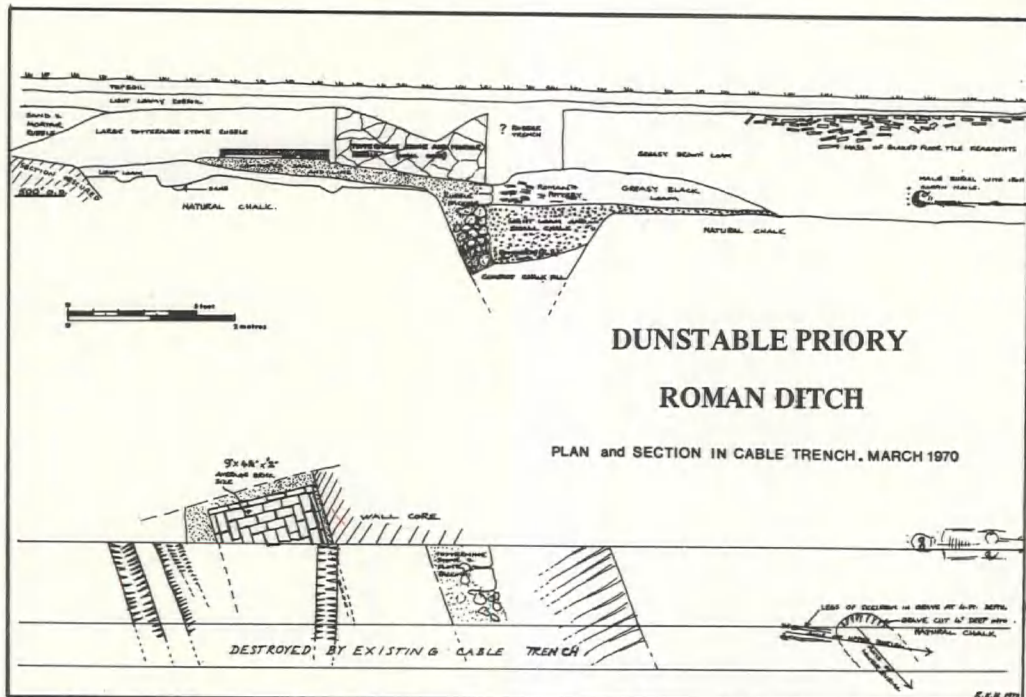


Fig 3 Plan and Section in Cable Trench, March 1970

burnished just below rim.

I have found no precise parallel for this vessel, but it is very similar to 'native' vessels from Colchester (*Camulodunum*,¹ fig 49, 50, pl. LXXV) and *Verulamium*,² fig 31 esp. no. 35, dated 120-160, but of superior fabric.

2. A jar of hard, black, slightly gritty fabric which occurs again in type 8, and a fair proportion of the sample of sherds recovered was of a similar fabric. Parallel in shape but not fabric is form 262 (*Camulodunum*, LXXX 111) and *Verulamium* fig 34 type 58 for a native example of this type.
3. A rim of hard, slaty-grey ware of a distinctive form found at Colchester in this fabric (*Camulodunum*, pl. LXXXIII type 266 and 271 where the ware gets better and more slaty as time goes on. Recorded as continuing into the second century, and if fragment 3a, 'poppy-beaker' is in fact part of this pot (the fabric is identical) then an early second century date may be attributed to this piece (*Verulamium*, 197 'poppy-beakers').
4. A cooking-pot of hard black paste, slightly gritty, showing red inside where broken.
5. Very similar surface appearance to types 2 and 8 (of type 266A etc. *Camulodunum*, pl. LXXXIII).
6. Hard-fired, brownish black slightly gritty ware, (see *Camulodunum*, pl. LXXXIII type 166B etc.).
7. A hard slaty-grey ware with slightly sandy surface, pot unlike type 3 in colour. Of the same basic type (*Camulodunum*, pl. LXXX-III).
8. A fine jar of buff, hard ware, slightly gritty but with very smooth surface texture.
9. Hard black paste as type 3. See *Verulamium*, 196 type 66 for similar ornament (A.D. 110-40) derived from a Belgian type.
10. Hard-fired sandy white 'bead and roll' type mortar, found at Silchester³ in an early context and paralleled at Shakenoak⁴ by type 172, dated c. 110-160 A.D. and *Verulamium* fig 31 no. 38 but both these are of orange-buff ware and *Camulodunum*, fig 53 no. 33 (type 192).
11. Fragment of a high-domed lid of coarse brown buff paste, very hard fired.

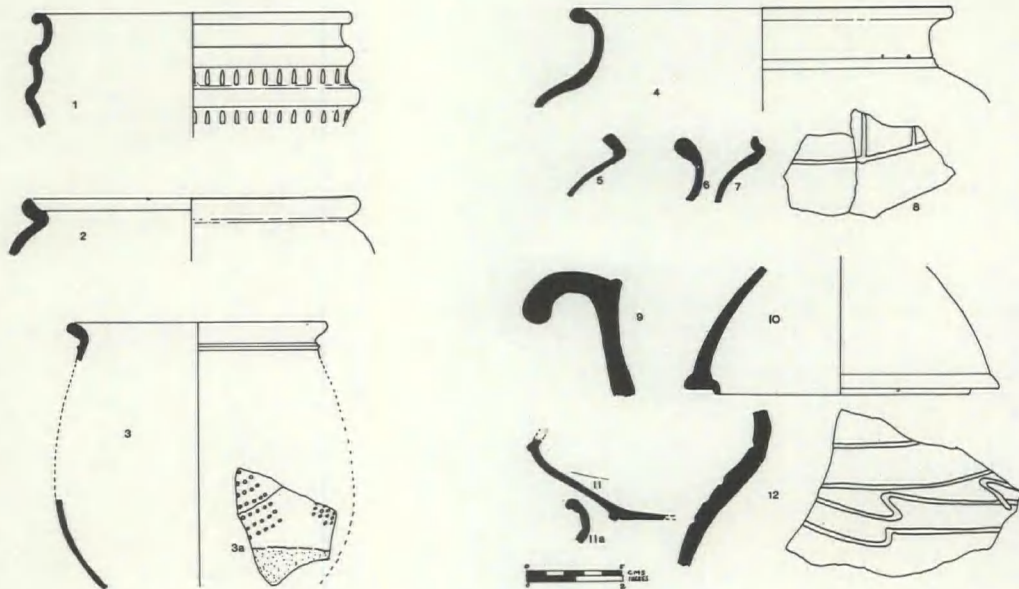


Fig 4 Pottery from Roman Ditch at Dunstable

11. A carinated bowl of hard black paste, not burnished, with a slight cordon on the carination and a turned foot-ring. 11A is a similar fabric but burnished below the rim. It is possible that these fragments are from the same vessel.
12. A fragment of a coarse heavy jar decorated with shallow wavy indentations. The fabric is coarse, red-buff and shell-gritted.

Samian Ware

Four vessels of samian ware were identified, three of which were represented by small rim fragments. These include one sherd each of

Dragendorf form 15/17 (platter)
 Dragendorf form 33 (conical cup)
 and one plain small bead rim.

The fourth vessel was represented by four

sherds forming part of the base of a Dragendorf form 37 bowl, of a type being made at Lezoux around A.D.100 by potters such as COCATUS and his contemporaries. The surface is a matt red and the vessel has been poorly finished.⁵

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Luton Museum wishes to acknowledge the co-operation of Dunstable Corporation in the recording of this site.

NOTES

- 1 C F C Hawkes and M R. Hull, *Camulodunum*, 1947, herein cited as *Camulodunum*.
- 2 R E M and T V Wheeler, *Verulamium, A Belgic and two Roman cities* 1936, herein cited as *Verulamium*.
- 3 T May, *The Roman Pottery at Silchester*, 1916.
- 4 A C Brodrick, A R Hands, D R Walker, *Excavations at Shakenoak II*, 1971.
- 5 J A Stanfield and G Simpson, *Central Gaulish Potters*, 1958, 11-12 and pl 167, 5 and 6.

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