

A Romano-British Pottery Kiln on Foxcombe Hill, Berks.

By FRANK WILLETT

EARLY in 1945 a Romano-British site was discovered on Foxcombe Hill, Berks., by Mr. O. Heaton who lived nearby.¹ He reported his finds to the Ashmolean Museum, and in Trinity Term, 1945, the site was excavated by the Oxford University Archaeological Society, under the direction of Mr. R. J. C. Atkinson. After excavation the site was filled in. The excavation was of a purely exploratory nature, but it succeeded in unearthing over a hundredweight of miscellaneous sherds (about three-quarters of which, restorable or datable pieces, were retained and recorded, and are now in the Ashmolean Museum), and a kiln of Grimes type A I i.,² but of irregular shape and crudely made. It chanced that the main trench lay directly above the furnace-chamber of the kiln. As time was short and the excavation only exploratory, most of the stoke-hole was not excavated. All that survived of the furnace-chamber was the pit which had contained it, the bottom of which had been dug into the waste-dump of an earlier kiln, not yet discovered. The floor of the furnace-chamber could be clearly seen in an uninterrupted layer of the dump stratification, which, however, had been considerably affected by burrowing animals.³

The length of the furnace chamber was 4 ft. 10 in. and its greatest width 1 ft. 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. The width of the entrance to the furnace-chamber was 1 ft. 3 in.

The back wall of the furnace-chamber was preserved to a greater height than the others, and curved outwards to improve the draught. The floor of the kiln was covered with a deep layer of ashes, from which many unburnt pieces of wood were recovered. The presence of unburnt wood seemed to indicate that the kiln collapsed while still in use, but such a conclusion is hardly compatible with the different kinds of ware found in it, and certainly not

¹ For a preliminary notice of this site see *Oxoniensia*, x (1945), 95. The National Grid reference is 42/49500125.

² *Cymmrodor*, xli (1930), 53 ff. This is the characteristic type of kiln in the Upper Thames Valley, and is a round or oval up-draught kiln, with the oven-floor supported on a tongue-like wall extending from the back to the centre of the furnace-chamber, in line with the fire-hole entrance.

³ To this cause may be attributed the discovery in the furnace-chamber of an undated piece of drain-pipe, 3.2 in. in diameter, with a bore of 1 in. diameter, apparently formed on a length of wood. It may be modern, and perhaps found its way to the site when at some time the bog a few yards further down the slope was being drained.

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with the fact that no complete or even nearly complete vessels could be reconstructed from the fragments. At the back (north-east) side of the furnace-chamber was the root of the tongue or wall of clay which had supported the pot-chamber (see FIG. 12). More of the tongue than is shown in the plan was found, but was destroyed when the site had to be left unattended overnight, incompletely excavated. Similarly the three stones shown in the plan

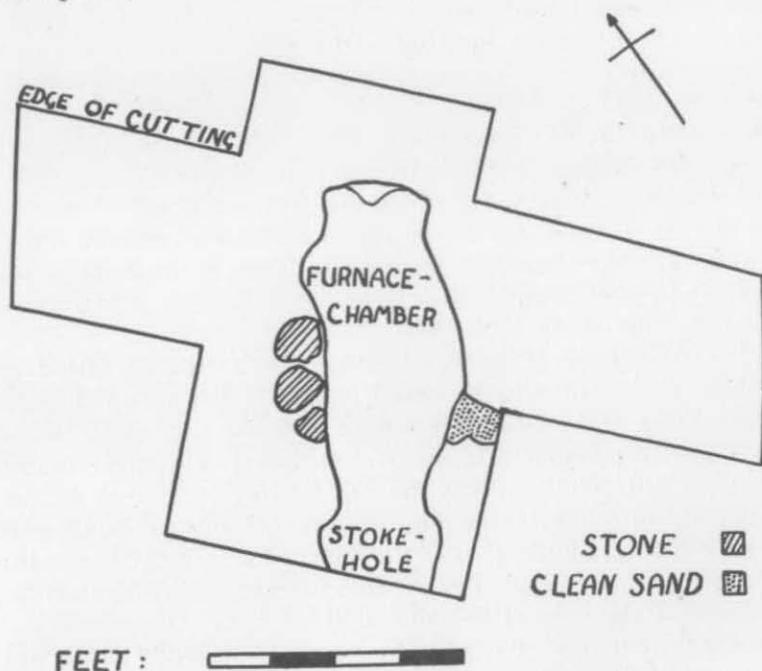


FIG. 12
FOXCOMBE HILL, BERKS.
Plan of the Romano-British pottery kiln

were removed overnight, and a fragment of a rim of red ware adhering to the back of the furnace-chamber. The shapes of the stones are therefore purely conjectural. They may have been used as at Cowley (*Oxoniensia*, VI, 11-12, fig. 3) as a buttress to strengthen the wall, or perhaps to form a ledge to support the floor of the pot-chamber, of which nothing whatever remained.

There were many sherds in both the furnace-chamber and such of the stoke-hole as was excavated. Both grey and red wares were found, as well as a few sherds of a coarse black ware, all of which were mixed with the debris

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of the dome. Most of the red wares seem to have been over-fired, and it may be that they had been used in the structure of the kiln, as pot-supports or as a lining for the walls. The debris of the dome consisted of fragments of half-baked clay, fired grey inside with impressions of smooth rods about half an inch in diameter, and blue on the outside with impressions of grass (see FIG. 13, A). Apparently a frame of reeds or of hazel twigs stripped of their bark was made, over which were laid, tilewise, small slabs of clay, separated by grass,⁴ so that they would not fuse together in firing, and would therefore not need breaking apart afterwards in order to take out the pottery, which might also be broken in the process.

There was a cavity on the south-easterly side of the furnace-chamber, filled with clean sand (FIG. 12). It was perhaps used to smother the fire in manufacturing the grey wares which this kiln produced.

The kiln was covered by a deep layer of formless red and blue lumps of clay, which might have been piled against the sides of the dome to strengthen it or to prevent loss of heat.⁴ They were not sufficiently baked to have been any part of the kiln nearer to the fire.

The irregular shape of the furnace-chamber is striking, and distinguishes this kiln from all the others in the upper Thames Valley. It is also very much smaller than those of the kilns at Sandford (8 ft. by 7 ft.), Rose Hill (5 ft. by 4 ft. 3 in.), and Dorchester (6 ft. by 4 ft.), although it is larger than the kilns at Headington (2 ft. 6 in. by 2 ft. 6 in.) and Cowley (3 ft. 10 in. by 2 ft.).⁵

As no coins or other datable objects have so far been found on the site, the pottery is the only indication of the date. The pottery found in the kiln consisted mainly of fragments of ollae, insufficiently well preserved to provide good evidence of the date of the kiln itself.

Of the other pottery found a few fragments are possibly of the 1st century, more probably of the 2nd, two of the 4th to 5th century period, and the rest are distributed over the intervening time. Assuming that all the pottery was produced on the spot, there seems to have been a small output during the 1st (?) and 2nd centuries A.D., more during the 2nd and 3rd centuries, whilst the greatest output was reached during the 3rd and 4th centuries, the maximum being reached during the 4th century. It seems probably that the site ceased production before A.D. 400.

Of all the kilns in this district, the Foxcombe Hill site is the only one proved by excavation to have existed on the south bank of the Thames (*cf.* footnote 5) though quite considerable surface finds of pottery have been made in various places on the same bank. For example, as long ago as 1866 surface

⁴ Compare *J.B.A.A.*, 1, 1; *V.C.H. Hunts.*, 1, 231-2; *V.C.H. Northants*, 1, 209.

⁵ For references, see *V.C.H. Oxon.*, 1, 303-6, and *Oxonensia*, vi, 9-21.

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finds of pottery were reported on Sunningwell plain adjoining Bruncombe Wood.⁶ These fragments were continually being ploughed up, but there was no trace of a kiln. Pottery has also been found elsewhere on Foxcombe Hill,⁷ in Bagley Wood, and at Radley, and Mr. J. N. L. Myres reports the discovery of Romano-British smother-kiln wasters in soil deposited on his land when excavations were being made for the foundations of the American cold-store at Kennington. A black patch in the soil, 100 yds. north-east of Rye Hill barn, on the edge of the hill overlooking Bayworth, in and about which were quantities of broken pottery, mostly grey smother-kiln wares, may be our site or one associated with it.⁸

It may reasonably be inferred from these finds that there was a fairly large pottery-producing organization on the south bank of the Thames in Roman times, similar to the one shown by excavation to have existed on the north bank.

The Foxcombe Hill kiln is not placed conveniently near to any well-attested Roman road, although it is very close to a possible one which runs from Frilford to Bessels Leigh, and from there in a straight line, marked by field-boundaries, which passes between Hurst Hill and Boars Hill.⁹ The Foxcombe Hill site is in any case close to the habitation site on the edge of Bagley Wood, 600 yds. away, and to two at Radley, which are known only as crop-marks, and by casual finds of sherds during ploughing, and may have supplied them along tracks or footpaths. The materials from the Bagley Wood, Hinksey,¹⁰ site are in the Ashmolean Museum, but very few of them have any similarity to the kinds of ware so far found on the Foxcombe Hill site, perhaps because the Bagley Wood site was abandoned in the 2nd century before our kiln appears to have been producing much, or perhaps because the finds made in these trial excavations are not necessarily a fully typical cross-section of the products of the whole site.

THE POTTERY (FIG. 13)

1. Thin vessel of grey ware with applied barbotine dots to form a lozenge pattern. 1st to 2nd centuries.

Cf. Wroxeter Report, II (1913), pl. xv, no. 13.

2. Rim fragment in light grey clay. The thumb indentation of the flanged rim appears to be an Early Iron Age survival.

⁶ *Arch. Journ.*, xxiii, 73.

⁷ Two carinated beakers of grey ware (*cf.* R. G. Collingwood, *The Archaeology of Roman Britain*, fig. 58, 83) in the Ashmolean Museum (nos. Pr. 379, 380) are said to have been found in 1892 in a grave on Foxcombe Hill, close to and on the Oxford side of the present Boar's Hill Hotel. This site would be about 450 yds. north-west of the site of the kiln here described. No. Pr. 379 is a waster pot with a crack in the rim.

⁸ *B.B.O.J.*, IV, 44.

⁹ *V.C.H. Berks.*, I, 209.

¹⁰ *J.B.A.A.*, xxxvi (1930), 360-391.

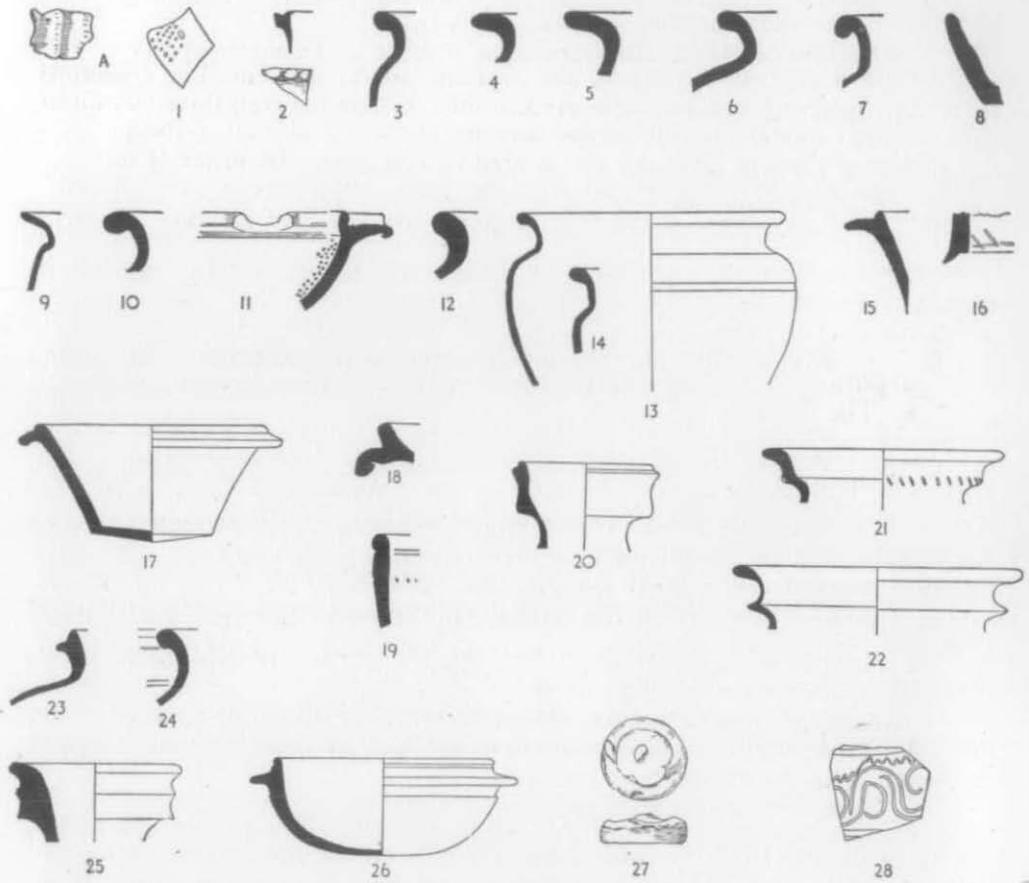


FIG. 13
 FOXCOMBE HILL, BERKS.
 Coarse pottery from the Romano-British kiln
 Sc. $\frac{1}{4}$

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3. Rim of olla in grey ware, diameter $7\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Cf. *Richborough Report*, I (1926), pl. XXI, no. 14. 1st century.
4. Lightish grey fragment of rim of an olla. Diameter $4\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Cf. *Oxoniensia*, II, 55, fig. 15, no. 5; *Richborough Report*, II (1928), pl. XXXI, no. 153. 1st to 2nd centuries. Cf. also no. 5 below.
5. Fragment of rim of olla in red ware, overfired. Diameter $7\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Cf. *Ant. Journ.*, VII, 178, fig. 9, no. 2. Early 2nd to 3rd centuries. *Oxoniensia*, II, 55, fig. 15, nos. 5 and 42. Our piece is intermediate between these two forms, both of which are dated to the 1st and 2nd centuries. Cf. also no. 4 above.
6. From the kiln itself, this rim is fired pinkish grey. Diameter $5\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Cf. *Oxoniensia*, II, 55, fig. 15, no. 16; *Ant. Journ.*, XII, pl. XIV, no. 20. Early.
7. There are several of this type in grey ware, two fired pinkish. Diameter 8 in.
Cf. *Oxoniensia*, I, 98, fig. 19, no. 4; *ibid.*, II, 55, fig. 15, no. 34. 2nd to 3rd centuries.
8. Side of a dish in grey ware with black colour-coating.
Cf. *Oxoniensia*, III, 48, fig. 12, no. 14. 2nd to 3rd centuries. *Ant. Journ.*, XVII, 399-400, fig. 2, type 2. 4th century. *Richborough Report*, I (1926), pl. XXVIII, no. 106. 4th century.
9. Rim fragment of bowl in grey ware. Diameter $4\frac{3}{4}$ in.
Cf. *Oxoniensia*, III, 48, fig. 12, no. 39; *Archaeologia*, LXXII, 238, fig. 7, no. 55. 3rd to 4th centuries.
10. There are several sherds of this type, mostly grey. Diameters vary between $7\frac{3}{4}$ in. and 9 in.
Cf. *Oxoniensia*, I, 101, fig. 20, no. 19. 3rd to 4th centuries.
11. Spout of a mortarium, $8\frac{1}{2}$ in. in diameter, in white ware, interior studded with grit.
Cf. *Oxoniensia*, VI, fig. 5, no. 70; *ibid.*, IV, fig. 11, no. 36; *Wroxeter Report* (1913), I, fig. 20, no. 146. 3rd to 4th centuries.
12. Rim fragment of an olla in fawnish-grey ware. Diameter $8\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Cf. *Wroxeter Report*, II (1914), pl. XXVIII, no. 83; *Richborough Report*, III (1932), pl. XL, no. 333. 4th century.
13. Pink ware, diameter $5\frac{1}{2}$ in., and 14. Grey ware, diameter 6 in.
Cf. *Richborough Report*, I (1926), pl. XXVIII, no. 116. Mid-4th century. May, *The Pottery found at Silchester* (1916), pl. LI, no. 79. 4th to 5th centuries.
15. Rim of a dish in dark grey ware, coated black, diameter 10 in. It has a pattern of two merging incisions which are so rough as to be most probably accidental.
Cf. *Oxoniensia*, IV, 43, fig. 11, no. 18; Corder, *The Roman Pottery at Crambeck* (1928), pl. I, nos. 2 and 4. 4th century.
16. Fragment of a misshapen straight-sided mortarium in white clay, decorated.
Cf. *Archaeologia*, LXXII, 235, fig. 6, no. 35, and fig. 2, no. 14. 4th century.
17. A very common pie-dish form with parallels from the end of the 1st to the 4th centuries. This piece is in fawnish-grey clay, with black colour-coating. Diameter $5\frac{1}{2}$ in. Note the misshapen base which causes the pot to wobble and accounts for its being a 'waster'.

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Cf. *Richborough Report*, I (1926), pl. xxix, no. 121; May, *Catalogue of the Roman Pottery in the Colchester Museum* (1930), pl. LVII, no. 256; *Oxoniensia*, VI, 17, fig. 4, no. 13; *Ant. Journ.*, xvii, 398-400, fig. 2, type 1.

18. Rim of a mortarium in cream coloured clay. Diameter 13 in.

Cf. *Oxoniensia*, VI, 19, fig. 5, no. 69; *ibid.*, IV, 43, fig. 11, no. 37; *Wroxeter Report*, I (1913), 80, fig. 20, no. 154. 3rd and 4th centuries.

19. The lower row of decoration on this rim is of impressed ovals, the upper a continuous incised line. The ware is pinkish red with traces of black in the incisions.

Cf. *Ant. Journ.*, xvii, 399-400, fig. 2, type 2a. 4th century. *Oxoniensia*, IV, 60, fig. 13, no. 9. Late, perhaps 5th century.

Pots without parallel but of interesting form :

20. Neck of a flagon, 3 in. in diameter, fired red. Nearest parallel is in *Camulodunum Report* (1947), pl. LXVIII, no. 185.

21. Grey ware with sloping incisions. Diameter 5 in.

22. Grey ware. Diameter 6 in.

23. There are many rims of this type in grey and red. A more sophisticated rim than those illustrated by : *Oxoniensia*, II, 55, fig. 15, no. 9; and Corder, *op. cit.*, pl. VII, no. 194.

24. Rim of an olla in dark grey ware. Diameter 8 in.

25. Neck of a flagon in grey ware, diameter $3\frac{1}{2}$ in. It bears some similarity to *Camulodunum Report* (1947), pl. LXVIII, no. 185A (var.).

26. A very pleasing dish (or lid?) in light grey ware, the inner surface being colour-coated in light fawn. Diameter $5\frac{1}{2}$ in.

27. A small pedestal in grey pottery. The bottom surface is flat.

28. The only patterns on the pots on the site (except no. 1 above) were incised, mostly in straight lines, or simple rough zigzags. The pattern on this piece (from the kiln itself) is rather more developed. The zigzag is quite faint.

NOTE

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