

A Late Romano-British Site at Wally Corner, Dorchester

By J. E. G. SUTTON

EARLY in 1960 a gravel-pit was opened three-quarters of a mile north of Dorchester south-west of the road-junction known as Wally Corner,¹ and between the Thame and the Roman road to Alchester.

When the stripping of topsoil began, ditches were revealed dug into the gravel and a considerable amount of late Romano-British pottery was found lying over and around them. Aerial photographs had previously revealed no significant features. The site was investigated in the Trinity Term of 1960 by members of the Oxford University Archaeological Society.² A complex of ditches and other features was planned and excavated, as they showed on the surface of the unweathered gravel after topsoil had been stripped by the contractor (FIG. 1).

THE DITCHES (FIGS. 1 and 2)

Most were between $2\frac{1}{2}$ and 5 ft. wide at gravel level. Ditch 10, however, was 9 to 10 ft. wide, and ditches 1 and 2 reached this width in places. Some of the ditches were dug only a few inches into the gravel or barely reached it, so that they left no trace in plan after stripping. For this reason several ditches on the plan fade out at one or both ends, while in cutting G (FIG. 2A) ditch 11 showed merely as a smudge in the loamy subsoil. Ditch 1 in cutting X and ditch 2 in cutting B (FIG. 2B and C) exceptionally reached a depth of almost 4 ft. below the unstripped ground surface, but in other cuttings both were found to be somewhat shallower. Most were roughly U-shaped. The nearest approach to a V-shape was seen in the re-digging of ditch 2 in cutting B, while the southern part of ditch 1 when re-dug was roughly flat-bottomed. Only ditches 1 and 2 were seen to have been re-dug.

Two sorts of filling were found in the ditches—a *brown loam*, often no darker than the surrounding subsoil, in which pot-sherds and other finds

¹ National Grid 41/582956. *Oxoniensia*, III (1938), FIG. 20, shows the relationship of the site to cropmarks seen from the air around Dorchester.

² Thanks are due to Amey's Aggregates Ltd. for permission to excavate, to the Ministry of Works for financial support, to the staff of the Ashmolean Museum for help during excavation and to Mr. J. W. Banks for help in identifying the animal bones. The Ministry of Works has made a substantial contribution towards the cost of publication.

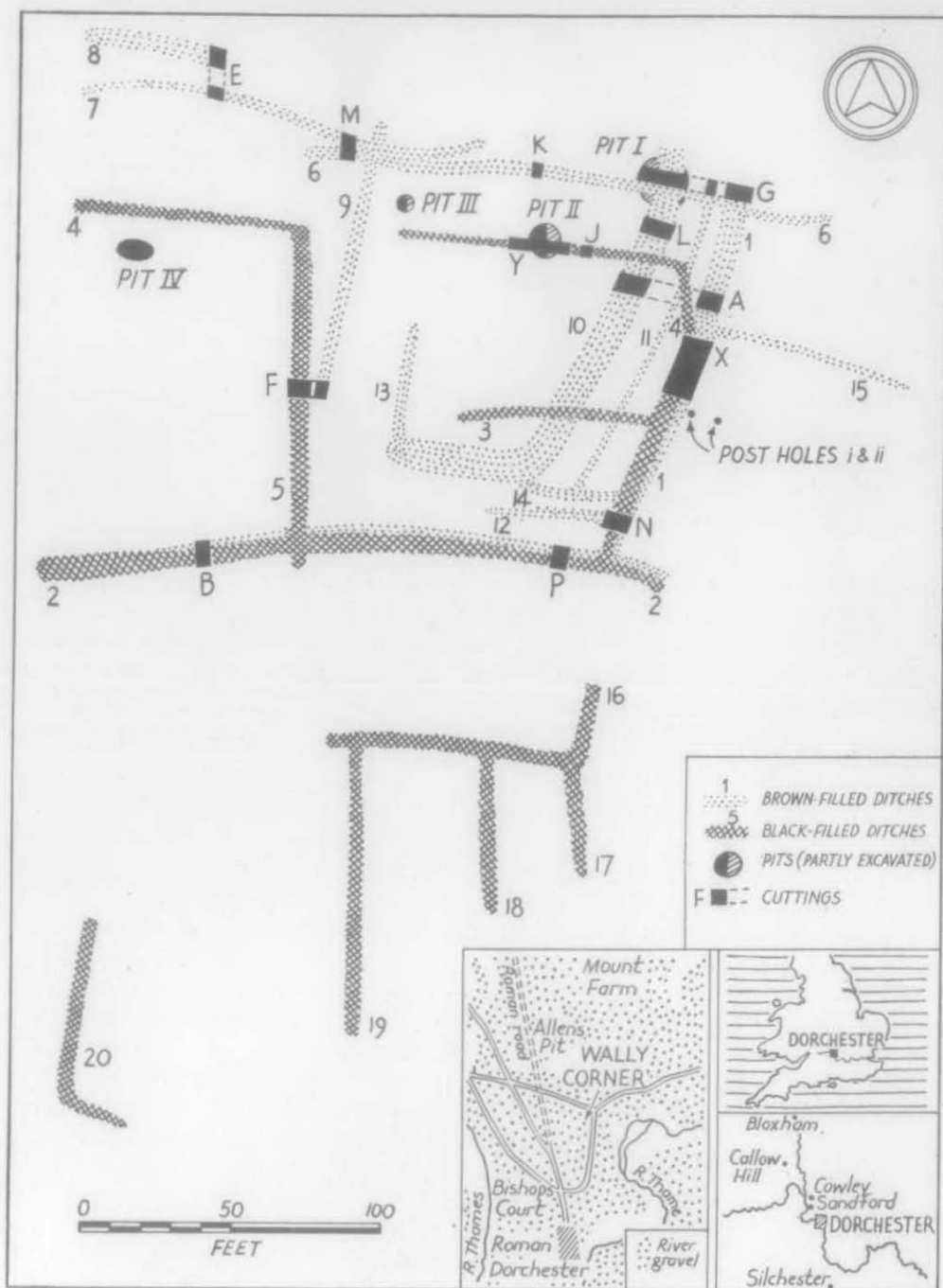


FIG. 1

Plan of Romano-British ditches and other features at Wally Corner, Dorchester.
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were on the whole few and small, suggesting chance scatter; and a *black* or *blackish organic filling* containing quantities of broken bone and large sherds, and no doubt the result of systematic dumping of rubbish and perishable kitchen refuse. Intersections showed that ditches with black filling were in all cases later than those with brown, while the two re-dug ditches showed black filling intrusive into brown (FIG. 2B, c). On the whole the black-filled ditches were the deeper and better dug.

The following ditches contained black filling—1 and 2 (the second digging in both cases), 3, 4, 5, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20. The second digging on the line of ditch 1 occurred only south of its junction with ditch 4, and was a continuous part of that ditch. At the northern end of cutting X (FIG. 2B), slightly to the north of the junction with ditch 4, ditch 1 showed however a shallow but very distinct black filling overlying brown. In cutting A this was found to be purely superficial, more obvious in plan than in section. It seems that ditch 1 was not entirely filled when ditch 4 was dug, and that its filling was completed by black organic material like that filling the later ditches.

POST-HOLES

Two post-holes were found 9 feet apart, close to ditch 1 at cutting X, where the thickest concentration of bone, pottery and nails occurred. Both had been twice dug; post-hole i at first 8 and later 17 in. into the gravel, post-hole ii 4 and 5 in., with the second fill containing two nails. They contained 4th century sherds and are thus contemporary with the complex of ditches but cannot be related to any particular lay-out.

THE PITS (FIGS. 1 and 2)

Pit I (FIG. 2A) could not be excavated completely. It was 6 ft. deep, and, despite the irregularity of its bottom, the filling did not suggest more than a single digging. Its sides must originally have been fairly straight.

The lower filling consisted of runs of gravel and sand, intercalated with a sticky, peaty substance, black in the lowest layers but higher up rather softer and greyer. This was doubtless derived from organic material deposited in the pit and preserved in this state through water-logging. Several pieces of wood up to 11 in. long and 2 in. thick were preserved in this peat. Miss A. C. Western kindly determined them as probably of poplar or willow. On the bottom lay the tibia of an ox, the skull of a horse with the back of the cranium broken in, and three lumps of limestone, showing no traces of either working or burning.

A few sherds, datable to the middle or later part of the 1st century A.D. were found in the upper and lower levels of the peat.

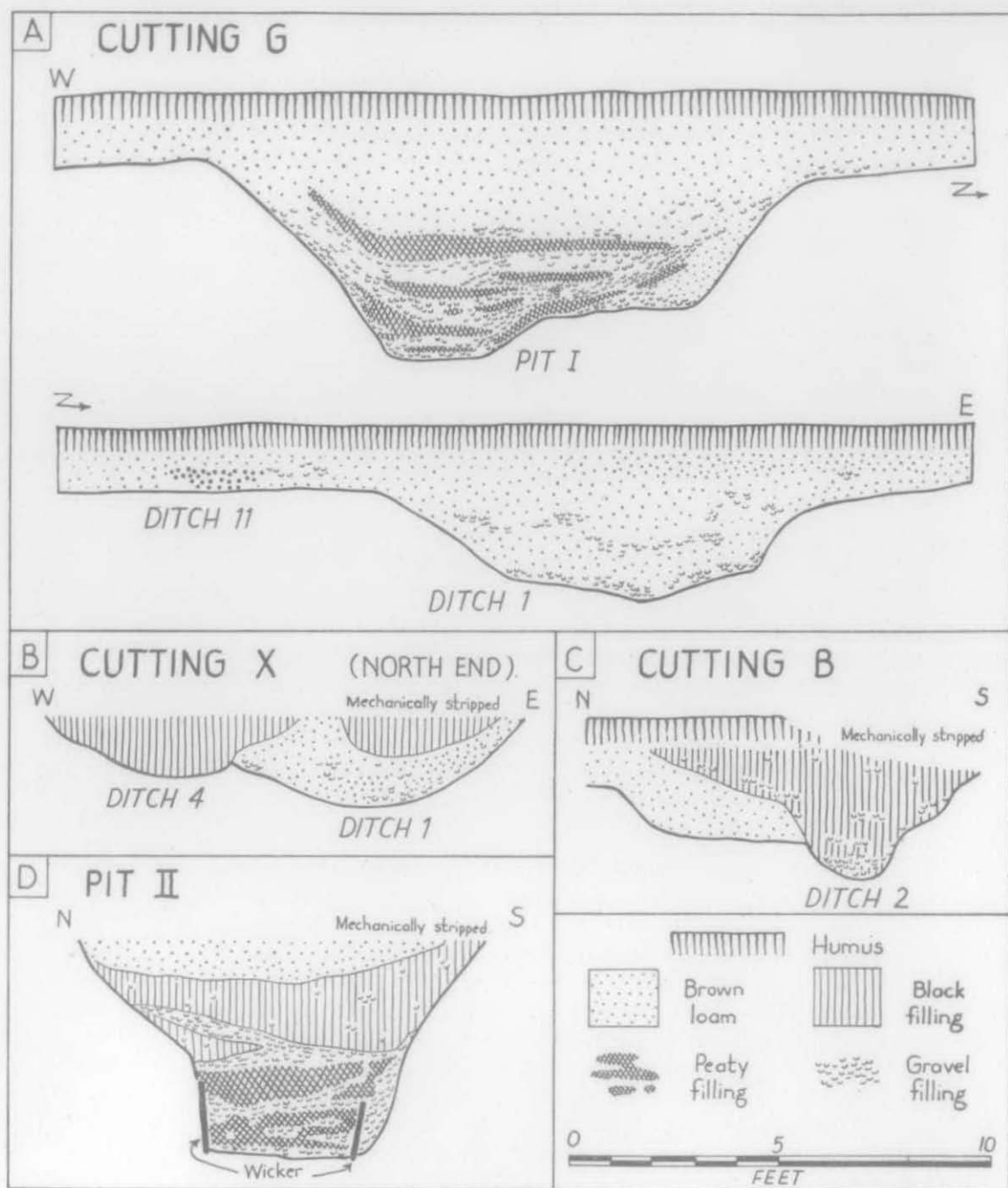


FIG. 2
Sections through Romano-British pits and gullies at Wally Corner, Dorchester.

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Above the peat the filling was brown loam with occasionally a little gravel, but otherwise indistinguishable from the surrounding subsoil and the filling of ditches 6 and 10 which traversed the pit. 4th century sherds occurred in this filling as in both ditches.

Pit II (FIG. 2D) was about $6\frac{1}{2}$ ft. deep from ground-surface. Its bottom was flat. In the lower part its diameter was little more than 4 ft. and it had fairly vertical sides.

As in pit I the lower fill consisted of the same sticky peat, interspersed with gravel slip. Built against or close to the sides and standing 15 to 20 in. up from the bottom were the remains of a wicker lining, possibly of hazel, according to Miss A. Western. It was not a container, for it had no bottom: the uprights, $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 in. thick and spaced about 8 in. apart, had been pressed into the undisturbed gravel floor. The horizontal wickers were mostly less than $\frac{1}{2}$ in. thick, tightly packed about 30 to the foot and entwined round the uprights to make quite a strong lining. It had not been daubed. Clearly it had originally stood higher, perhaps to the top of the pit, and what was preserved was doubtless the part that had been generally below the water-table, which has here apparently altered little since Roman times. Presumably a ready-made length of wicker had been taken down and fixed round the side of the pit; in which case the unexcavated half contained the join.

Wicker linings to pits have more often been conjectured than found, though in storage-pits at Mount Caburn and Woodcuts Pitt-Rivers found wattle impressions in daub which may have belonged to collapsed linings.³ Bersu presumed that the classic Iron Age storage-pits at Little Woodbury had leather or basket containers.⁴ However, the pit in question was clearly not for grain-storage and the wickerwork was in no way intended to be damp-proof but merely to hold the insecure gravel sides—a purpose which the section shows to have been only partially successful.

Pottery from the peaty layers was 4th century in date. The pit was probably contemporary with some of the brown-filled ditches. It was obsolete some time before the settlement reached its end, for ditch 4 had been laid out to cross its southern side, and the black filling of the ditch containing much pottery and bone had been spread across the half-filled pit. Above this filling was brown loam, showing that the pit was still partly open when the site was deserted.

Pit III (FIG. 1), was 4 ft. in diameter at the surface of the gravel and 2 ft. deep, with sloping sides and rounded bottom. It contained a black organic filling, stiffer near the top than the peat in the other pits, but sandier, lighter

³ *Arch.*, XLVI (1881), 481; Pitt-Rivers, *Excavations in Cranborne Chase*, I (1887), 13 and 147-8.

⁴ *PPS.*, VI (1940), 60.

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and wetter lower down. Some small 4th century sherds were found near the top.

Pit IV (FIG. 1). This pit was described by workmen. Judging by the hollow left after its black filling had been removed, it was elliptical in plan about 12 ft. by 6, and dug 3 to 4 ft. into the gravel. Two or possibly more large pieces of wood about 4 ft. long were excavated by the workmen.

CONCLUSIONS

Though the boundaries of the complex of ditches are in no direction clear it appears that the larger part of the site was brought to light. To the south a large area later stripped of topsoil was barren of features and finds, showing that the ditches could not have extended much further than the plan shows. The northern boundary is more uncertain but later investigation makes it improbable that much lay to the north of pit I. The westward extent of the site remains wholly unknown, since at the time of writing no further stripping has taken place in this direction. Eastwards the site is most satisfactorily determined, although the terminations of ditches 2, 15 and 6 could not be established. But no other features were revealed in the gravel in this direction save 300 ft. to the east of cutting X, where the workmen reported the discovery of some further ditches from which they salvaged sherds similar to the bulk of those from the rest of the site. But the relationship of these ditches to those on the plan could not be decided.

Even were it more complete it would be difficult to disentangle from the plan of the ditches much of a sensible system. The overall picture is not dissimilar from that of the Iron Age and early Romano-British site at Mount Farm,⁵ a mile away to the north; and at both sites it would be absurd to assume that all the ditches were in use at the same time. Roughly parallel ditches, like 10, 11 and 1, may well have superseded each other as they silted up in turn. But only ditches 1 and 2 were seen to have been dug twice.

The northern group of black-filled ditches appears to represent a system of enclosures, including a roughly square area bounded by ditches 4, 1, 2 and 5. There was no entrance-gap, unless it were in ditch 4 where it became too shallow to show in the gravel. Ditch 3 could not be investigated and remains anomalous. The pottery from these ditches, with its large proportion of red-coated wares and flanged mortaria, should belong to the 4th century A.D.

Ditches 16 to 20 must be part of another system of small enclosures to the south. Though it was only possible to plot what remained of these before their destruction, a number of 4th century sherds were collected from over

⁵ *Oxoniensia*, II (1937), 12-40.

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and around them, and the sections of ditches 17 and 18 were revealed by the mechanical excavator, showing them to be dug about 18 in. into the gravel. Their shapes, filling and finds suggested that they were contemporary with the black-filled ditches to the north, but no connection was obvious on the ground. There was no sign of any ditch adjoining the southern side of ditch 2 as far as it was traceable, while ditch 5 after crossing ditch 2 quickly came to a butt-end which defies explanation.

The brown-filled ditches do not submit readily to interpretation. Where dateable by pottery they do not appear much earlier than the black-filled ditches. Most of the small Samian sherds were found in brown filling, especially in the earlier filling of ditch 1, but the coarse pottery showed no variation except that red-coated forms were rather less common in brown filling; the beakers also deserve notice.

A few pieces of brick, several of tile, some of them lugged, and a number of nails were found in the ditches, but the only features on the plan that could belong to a structure were two post-holes.

Pit II can be most satisfactorily explained as a water-hole, for which there were doubtless numerous domestic and farmyard needs. Perhaps pit I, though of different date, served the same purpose. Despite their larger size, the pieces of wood found in it could have been part of a similar wicker lining. An analogy with the puddling-holes found nearby at Allen's Pit, Dorchester,⁶ would hardly be valid. Pit III was probably a rubbish-pit.

At Mount Farm⁷ the practice of pit-digging appears to have died out before the Roman Conquest. Also at another site of similar type, of the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D., at the Vicarage Field at Stanton Harcourt⁸ the shallow pits found were interpreted as rubbish-pits, though storage-pits abounded on the adjacent Iron Age A site, known as Beard Mill.⁹

The pottery types at Wally Corner suggest activity of a short duration, perhaps half a century or less, but the quantity of sherds found by selective excavation indicates the occupation-debris of more than a single family. Clearly the small enclosures within the ditches, whatever their purpose, formed only a very small part of the land the community utilized. We should imagine fields, pastures and perhaps meadows by the Thame covering a much wider area. No local late Romano-British site resembling the palimpsest of ditches at Wally Corner is at present published, but there is no reason to regard it as unique.

⁶ *Oxoniensia*, I (1936), 90-2.

⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁸ *Oxoniensia*, XX (1955), 1-28.

⁹ *Oxoniensia*, XVI (1951), 5-22.

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THE POTTERY

The following abbreviations are used for references given in this section.

Bloxham: *Oxoniensia*, III (1938), 41-56.

Callow Hill: *Oxoniensia*, XXII (1957), 11-53.

Cowley: *Oxoniensia*, VI (1941), 9-21.

Dorchester kilns (Allen's Pit): *Oxoniensia*, I (1936), 81-94; and unpublished pottery in the Ashmolean Museum.

Haltern: Loeschke, *Keramische Funde in Haltern*, 1909.

Leicester (Jewry Wall Site): Kenyon, *Report of Research Committee of Soc. of Antiquaries*, xv (1948).

New Forest (Ashley Rails, et al.): Sumner, *Excavations in New Forest Roman Pottery Sites*, 1927.

Richborough, I, II: Bushe-Fox, *Reports of Research Committee of Soc. of Antiquaries*, VI (1926); VII (1928).

Sandford: *Arch.*, LXXII (1922), 225-42.

Silchester: May, *The Pottery found at Silchester*, 1916.

Woodyates: *Arch. J.*, CIV (1947), 75.

EARLY ROMANO-BRITISH—PIT I, PEATY LAYERS. (FIG. 3, NOS. 1-3)

9 sherds, all of well-fired hard grey ware. No. 1 and two others are of rough texture, the others very smooth. No. 2 recalls high-shouldered Belgic forms; No. 3 may resemble *Haltern* 46, or if without a handle belong to a vessel like *Haltern* 30.

A date for these sherds is indicated in the 1st century A.D. a little after the Roman Conquest.

LATE ROMANO-BRITISH—THE REST OF THE SITE. (FIG. 3, NOS. 4-47)

The rest of the pottery is all late Romano-British, and, as the range of types does not vary appreciably between different layers and different cuttings, can be treated together. The most distinctive types are the mortaria, all flanged or straight-sided, and the red-coated vessels, especially the imitation Samian bowls, well known from local sites, the Dorchester kilns providing striking parallels. These should belong to the 4th century, probably its middle or later part, as at Richborough, the New Forest kilns and elsewhere.¹⁰ Some well-known forms are recorded here without illustrations or references.

From the remainder of the coarse pottery, representative examples have been selected to illustrate the variety of forms found, in view of their association with the late mortaria and red-coated wares. None of the less distinctive forms is out of place in a 4th century context, but some of them, if found in other places without these associations, might be ascribed earlier dates. This only stresses that, despite the greater accumulation of material as readers of *Oxoniensia* will be aware, the complaints of the excavators of the Dorchester defences on the difficulties of dating local Romano-British pottery¹¹ are still largely unsatisfied, because of lack both of sufficient stratified material and of a comprehensive study of that from local kilns and occupation sites. The pottery from the kilns, pudding-holes, rubbish-dump and surrounding area at Allen's Pit, $\frac{3}{4}$ mile to the north-west of Wally Corner is of special interest. Only a small part has been adequately dealt with in print.¹²

¹⁰ *Ant. J.*, XVIII (1938), 113-28.

¹¹ *Oxoniensia*, II (1937), 53-4.

¹² *Oxoniensia*, I (1936), 81-94; *id.*, III (1938), 165-7.

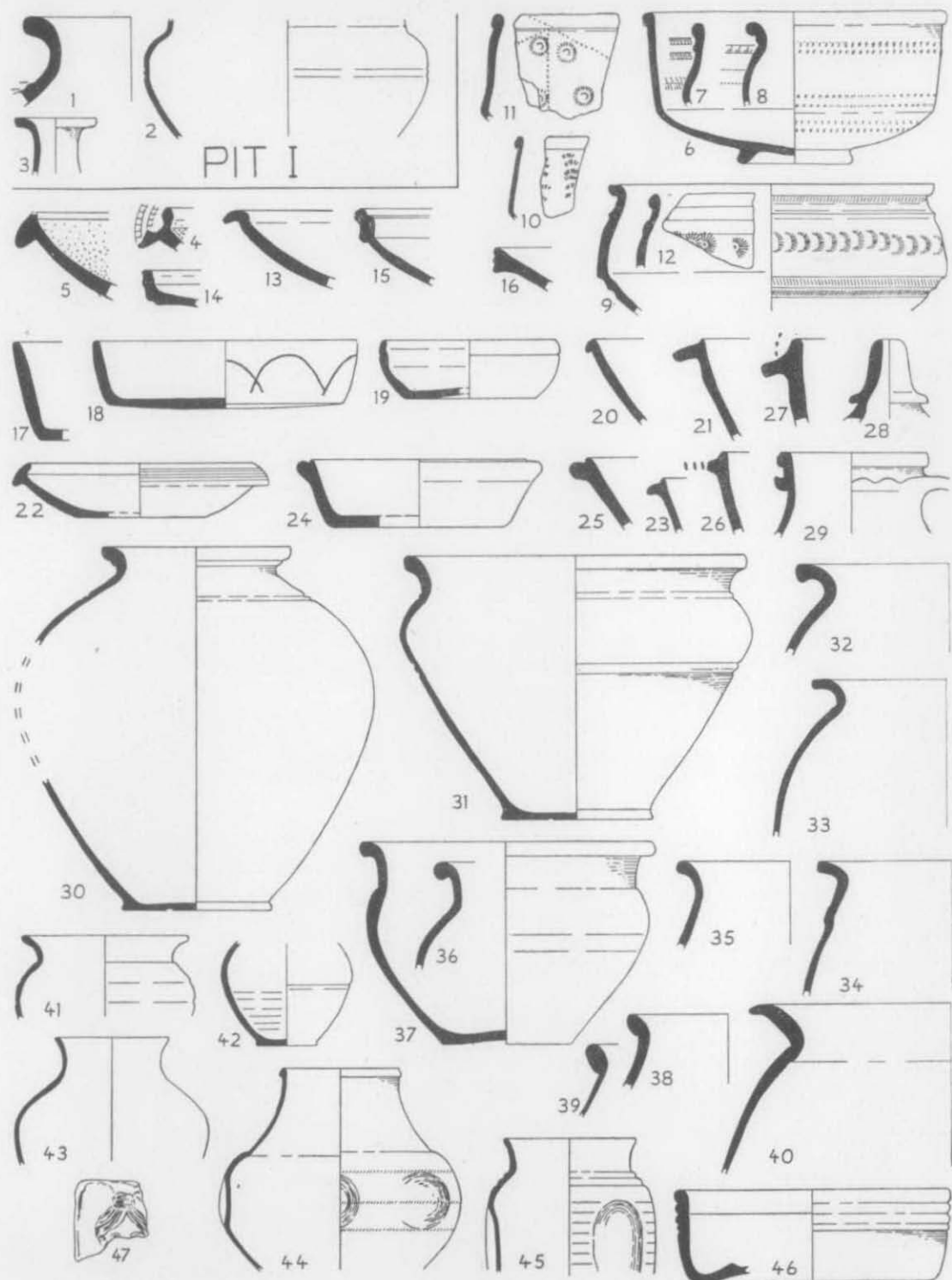


FIG. 3
Pottery. Scale: $\frac{1}{4}$.

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For southern and central England as a whole the situation is better; the material from the Jewry Wall site at Leicester, though distant from Dorchester, is particularly useful for reference.

The pottery, from Wally Corner together with the other finds, has been presented to the Ashmolean Museum (AM: 1962. 295-303).

In addition to Samian pottery and mortaria three main types of coarse pottery were found: *Colour coated*, *grey* and *shelly*.

Colour-coated: Save for the occasional buff-coloured beaker or dish, red colour-coats were applied to red or bright orange-red bodies, normally fired grey in the middle. This compares well with colour-coated wares from the kilns at Allen's Pit and elsewhere in the Oxford Region, in contrast to those from Ashley Rails in the New Forest which have normally buff or cream-coloured bodies. The red coats are mostly of poor quality, and if not entirely worn off, generally adhered to the excavators' hands. Occasionally the coat had been fired dark grey.

The *grey wares* were mostly hard and well-fired, often of a rather coarse, but rarely gritty, texture, unpleasant to handle. The surface had sometimes been fired buff or dull red. An occasional slight kink in the rim or inflation caused by an air-hole suggest that some should be classed as 'seconds', though probably not 'wasters'.

Shelly ware (cf. *Silchester*, 177 ff.; *Callow Hill*, 46-7): Sherds containing a high proportion of pounded shell were common. They were black inside with surfaces fired black, grey, brown or red. This ware is very crumbly and the sherds are mostly small. None appears to have been hand-made. The commonest forms were jars with everted rims. Sharp angles and elaborate rims could not be executed in this ware, but one better fired example has a beaded rim (cf. *Bloxham*, FIG. 2, 19), and the flanged dish (no. 27) is notable. A few sherds of this ware occurred at the Dorchester kilns, but were not necessarily made there.

These wares generally merit the description *micaceous*, but this is rarely an excessively marked feature, except in some of the red-coated vessels.

DESCRIPTION OF FORMS

SAMIAN

10 small sherds were found, among which it was possible to recognize forms 36, 37 and perhaps 31. The surfaces as well as a faint trace of decoration on a sherd of form 37 are all of poor quality. The two sherds of form 36, though fired red throughout, can by their coats be paralleled by some of the better red-coated imitations and may well be of native manufacture.

MORTARIA

Straight-sided, red-coated, imitation Samian 45. Common.

Flanged, white ware or red ware with white slip. Numerous examples; the former are commoner. The latter have mostly lost their slips. Flanges vary from the gently down-curved to the rolled-over and the square. Cf. *Cowley*, FIG. 5, nos. 62-79, which cover this range of shapes.

Flanged, red-coated. One example, with elaborately moulded rim and flange (no. 4).

Knobbed rim, white ware. One example (no. 5). Perhaps a cross between the flanged and straight-sided. Cf. *Cowley*, FIG. 5, no. 90; or for a closer parallel *Wood-yates*, FIG. 16, c.

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The Dorchester kilns produced red-coated mortaria, both straight-sided and exotically flanged, like no. 4. A rim of a flanged example in red ware with a white slip is among the pottery from one of the kilns, and the occasional sherd of white mortarium was found in the surrounding area, but both these types are definitely rare from thereabouts.

RED-COATED BOWLS

Imitation Samian 36. Several examples with the flanges slightly raised and in one case an upturned tip. Cf. *New Forest*, PL. VII, nos. 1 and 3. No traces of decoration preserved.

Imitation Samian 37, nos. 6-12. A variety of shapes with rouletted or rosette decorations. Cf. *Richborough*, I, PL. XXX; *New Forest*, *passim*; *Silchester*, PL. LVII. Rosette decoration did not occur at the Dorchester kilns.

Imitation Samian 38. Very common examples. Diameters vary from $4\frac{1}{2}$ to 9 in. Rims all unbeaded, and flanges fairly high. In one case only have traces of barbotine decoration on the flange survived.

No. 13. Diam. 9 in. Unusual form. *Richborough*, I, PL. XXVII, no. 104, has a more beaded lip. No. 14. Diam. 11 ins. Probably an imitation of Samian 15. No. 15. Diam. $11\frac{1}{2}$ in. Platter, or possibly a lid. Fairly similar are *Dorchester kilns*, FIG. 15, no. 8; *Richborough*, II, PL. XXXII, no. 174; *Sandford*, FIG. 1, no. 5; *Leicester*, FIG. 56, no. 29—the last one and perhaps two for shape only. A connection has been suggested with Samian 79 (Walters). No. 16. Diam. 11 in. Cf. *Dorchester kilns*, FIG. 15, no. 16—'a somewhat unusual form'. The sherd is of coarser texture than most red wares, and has entirely lost its colour-coat, if it ever had one.

STRAIGHT-SIDED, BEADED, PIE AND FLANGED DISHES, NOS. 17-27

The illustrations show the variety of forms found. The wares vary considerably, but most are black, hard grey or pale red. Some of the first, including no. 18, are slightly burnished. No. 26 is red-coated and no. 27 in shelly ware. No. 22 in black ware is somewhat unusual. The rest can easily be paralleled on late Romano-British sites. Cf., in particular, *Leicester*, FIGS. 19 and 20.

JUGS AND FLAGONS, NOS. 28-9

A number of small pieces, in all but two cases unsuitable for illustration. No. 28 is unusually narrow and pointed, but not far removed from *Cowley*, FIG. 5, no. 34; and *New Forest*, PL. XXXIV, no. 2. It may not have possessed a handle. There are also some small sherds of ring-necked flagons, probably similar to *Cowley*, FIG. 4, no. 19. Most, including the two illustrated, are red-coated, but there are a few grey examples, one very similar to no. 29.

JARS, NOS. 30-40

No two exactly alike, the illustrations show the variety. Most are in grey-black ware. Some, in particular no. 39 and others like it with pressed-down rims, are fired red, while no. 40, a large rough-surfaced cavetto-rim jar, is rusty-red with a grey body. No. 37 is unusual, being red-coated. The material collected from the area of the Dorchester kilns has good parallels for this range of forms.

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BEAKERS, NOS. 41-5

Nos. 41-43 are dull buff, 44 bright buff with red slip, 45 grey. A few wall-sherds were found with herring-bone rouletting. Nos. 43 and 45 are both from the earlier fill of ditch 1. Cf. *Leicester*, FIG. 26, nos. 34 and 35—poppy-head beakers from early 4th century levels.

CHEESE-PRESS (?), no. 46

Base unfortunately incomplete. Red-coated. A few very small perforated sherds in red-coated ware, probably belonging to cheese-presses or strainers, were also found.

AMPHORAE

Only a few fragments. Rims splayed out or turned down.

DECORATED SHERDS (other than already mentioned)

Barbotine. A few small sherds of thin red ware with coats fired black, and bearing white or pinky-white lines and circles *en barbotine*:—perhaps describable as *Castor ware*.

Scales. One small sherd, red-coated. Very similar to *Cowley*, FIG. 5, no. 40.

Woman's head, no. 47. Part of, in red ware with worn black coat. Probably applied to a jug.

OTHER ARTIFACTS

(All associated with late Romano-British pottery)

GLASS

3 small green fragments found in black fill of ditch 1 in cutting X.

IRON

35 *Nails*. Mostly fragmentary. Lengths of up to $3\frac{1}{2}$ in., tapering, with square sections. Heads flat, up to $\frac{3}{8}$ in. across. *Bolt* (?), $3\frac{1}{2}$ in. long, but broken at one end. Other end rounded off without head. Diam. $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Several small, unidentifiable flat pieces.

ANIMAL REMAINS

Apart from the ox tibia and the horse skull found in pit 1, the bone is all dated by the pottery to late Romano-British times. The quantity was considerable, but much of it had been broken for cooking, rendering it unidentifiable and almost useless for study. However, the following species were identified in descending order of frequency: short-horned ox, horse, sheep or goat, pig, dog. A total of 29 oyster shells was also found.

The remains reflect meat eaten rather than livestock kept. Furthermore, remains of horse and ox are liable to figure more strongly in relation to those of sheep than the actual numbers of animals may have justified, since horses and oxen were most likely kept closer to the settlement, perhaps within the ditched enclosures. The osteological evidence suggests arable or possibly dairy-farming, with some sheep-rearing.