

Excavations near Lewknor, 1971-2

By P. J. FASHAM

INTRODUCTION

PRELIMINARY fieldwork by members of the M.40 Archaeological Research Group in the spring of 1971 produced a dense scatter of building stone, quern fragments and Romano-British pottery in an area north of Lewknor at SU 714985. Aerial photographs, taken by the National Monuments Record, revealed ditches and a rectangular enclosure, mainly in Field A to the south of the motorway. Trial excavations were undertaken by Max Davies and Bill Fowler in the spring and summer of 1971 (M.40, Sites 8, 10) (FIG. 1); the Group is very grateful to Mr. L. Graham, the farmer, for allowing these excavations on his land.

The full extent of the site was not appreciated until May 1972, when drainage ditches were cut along both sides of the motorway, revealing archaeological features extending for some 360 metres. Partial excavation of these features was undertaken by myself here and on two other sites on the motorway. Some fourteen days were spent on the main Lewknor site.

I should like to thank Mr. R. A. Chambers for his valuable contributions on the site, and Mr. C. J. Young for reporting on the finds from Lewknor (M.40, Site 11).

The main site (SU 717981), lay at the foot of the western escarpment of the Chilterns, on the upland river plateau, some 400 feet above sea level. The site lay in the transitional zone between the Upper Greensand and the Lower Chalk deposits, the bedrock being Upper Greensand as indicated by the presence of Malm stone.¹

THE TRIAL EXCAVATIONS²

Nethercote Lane I (M.40, Site 8) SU 713986

This was a 10 m. × 2 m. trench cut through a chalk bank 2 m. wide, which was perhaps an old field boundary. The trench also cut a trackway some 2.5 m. wide, with a flat surface, 15 cm. thick, compacted into chalk. The track showed signs of wear in the centre, indicating that it was infrequently used by wheeled traffic. The track probably led from a nearby Lodge on Nethercote Lane³ to Nethercote House, which stood some 500 metres to the west before its

¹ I am grateful to Mr. J. Hazelden, through Mr. R. A. Chambers, for information concerning the geology of the site.

² I am grateful to Mr. W. J. Fowler and Mr. M. Davies, respectively, for allowing me to publish a summary of their excavations based on their notes in the Oxford City and County Museum, Woodstock, Primary Record Numbers 5818-20.

³ Local information.

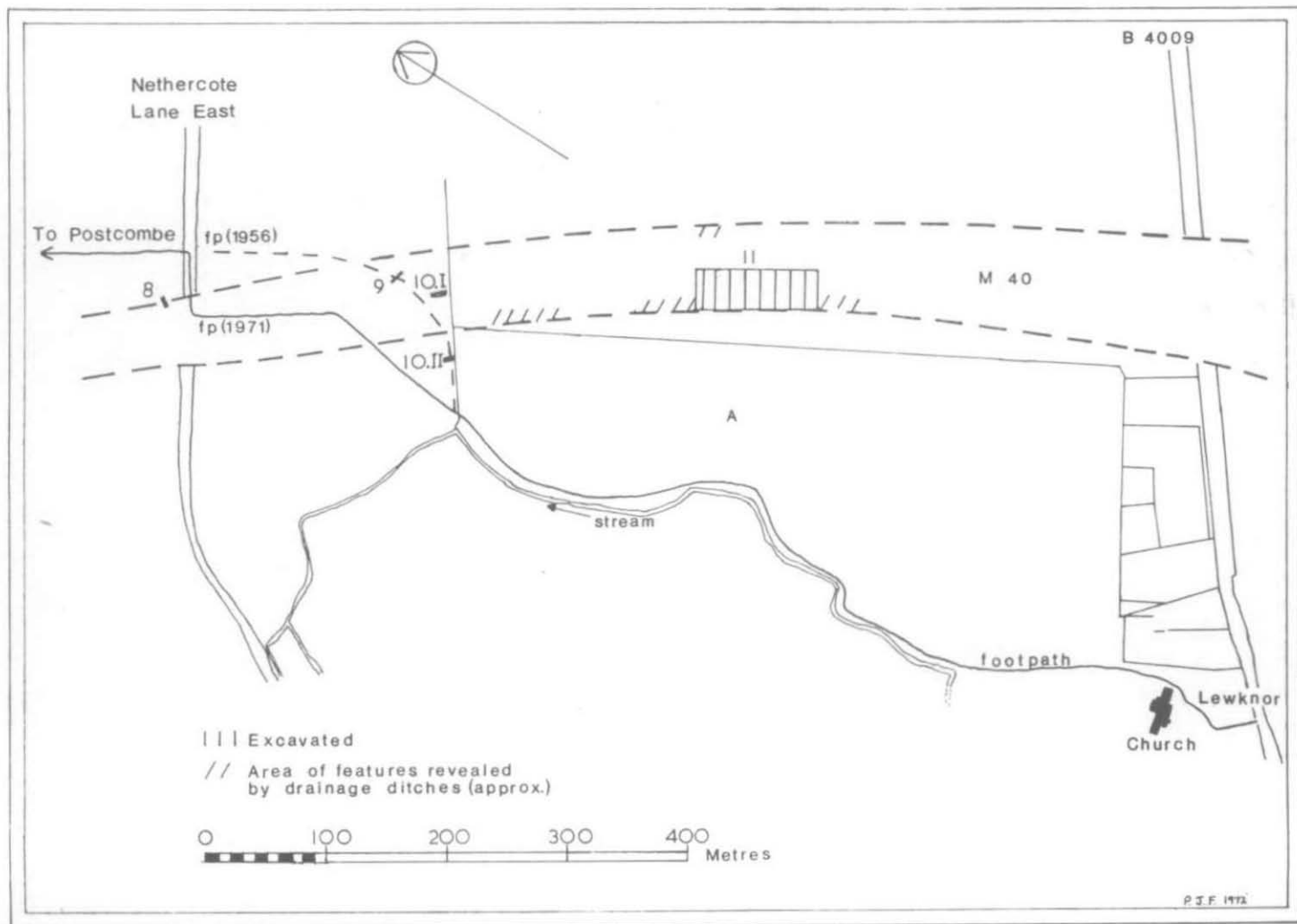


FIG. 1
The Lewknor Area

destruction by fire in 1871.⁴ The finds amounted to a handful of indeterminate Medieval and post-Medieval sherds, all in the topsoil.

Nethercote Lane II. (M.40, Site 10)

Two trenches, 10.I and 10.II, were cut into a former farm track, which rose about 1 m. above the surface of the field.

10.I (SU 71559834)

A trench, 8 m. \times 2 m., was excavated to a depth of 1.70 m., revealing five archaeological layers, including topsoil. The only feature was a gully running roughly north-south, 40 cm. wide and 25 cm. deep with almost vertical sides, filled with light finely-divided clay. A scatter of Romano-British and Medieval sherds was found, and the tanged blade of an iron knife of probably the 14th century. (FIG. 4, no. 36).

10.II (SU 71489830)

This trench, 8 m. \times 2 m., also had five layers, although not directly corresponding with those in Trench I. Two parallel gullies, some 4.55 m. apart, were located, on approximately the same alignment as the gully in Trench I. Only one gully was excavated, and this was 37 cm. deep at its maximum depth, and 20 cm. wide at the base with unequal sides stepped at the top.

The finds comprised Romano-British pottery, including three samian sherds, Medieval pottery, including one sherd of 12th century tripod pitcher, post-Medieval sherds and a small bronze 16th-17th century cowbell.

DISCUSSION

The gully in Trench I may be the bed of a former stream flowing from the Chiltern escarpment; the regular appearance of its sides suggests the possibility that it may have been improved at some time to provide a drainage channel.

The excavator allowed the suggestion that the gullies in Trench II may have marked Romano-British field boundaries with a trackway between them on a smooth, hard, marl surface.

Site 10 certainly indicated Romano-British activity in the area, subsequently proven,⁵ and also Medieval occupation not yet located.⁶

Nethercote Lane III (M.40, Site 9) SU 715984

The features revealed in the motorway drainage ditches included a road, and it was decided to investigate this, while waiting for plant to strip an area to the south, where the archaeological features appeared most dense.

The featureless dark brown plough-soil was mechanically stripped down to the top of the road surface. The road, slightly cambered, was 5 m. wide, sloping

⁴ *V.C.H. Oxon.*, viii, 99.

⁵ See below, p. 129.

⁶ There is a strong tradition in Lewknor that the village 'used to be' in Field A, which has the name 'England's'. Separate information placed a former church and a former castle there respectively.

sharply at its edges into drainage ditches on both sides. These ditches were very shallow, and indeed, invisible in places.

The road was constructed of a layer of medium-sized flint nodules, some broken. The flint presumably was carried down from the top of the Chilterns, where there are readily accessible deposits of clay with flints. The layer of flints, which was deeper in the centre than at the edges, was some 20-25 cm. thick. Although there were no visible signs of resurfacing work, the depth of the flint layer and the heavily worn upper surface might indicate that the road was repaired with flints from time to time. Wheel ruts were clearly visible running along the road, up to 15 cm. wide and the same in depth.

The definition of the ditches proved difficult, as they were filled with a grey soil, which was virtually the same as the naturally-deposited grey marly soil of the flood plain.

The finds from the ditches included several residual sherds of Romano-British pottery, as well as two fragments of clay pipe stem, ox shoes, a late Medieval sherd and one from a late 16th-early 17th century stoneware jug. This last sherd was the only one found lying next to the flints, suggesting that the road was in use around 1600, the ditches being completely silted up by the early 20th century, as indicated by a shotgun cartridge in the top levels.

This track presumably linked Lewknor and Postcombe and its position is indicated on the ground by a slight linear track running north-west towards Postcombe. The two trenches of Site 10 were cut into this bank, but did not reveal any metallurgy. This absence of the track may be accounted for by the irregular state of the metallurgy as observed when motorway construction started. The right of way represented by the late Medieval track was preserved by a public footpath, which is marked on the 6 in. Ordnance Survey Map of 1956. Within the last five years, the line of the public right of way was moved some 50 m. to the west, and for most of its length it has now been ploughed down and shows only as a rise of a few centimetres above the general level of the field.

LEWK NOR (*M.40, Site 11*) SU 717981 (FIG. 2)

The main effort in the area was concentrated on the densest group of archaeological features as revealed by the drainage ditches.

In view of the short time available, it was decided to remove the topsoil mechanically. Careful examination showed that archaeological features did not become evident until the site was stripped to the natural greensand. Eventually some 800 square metres were stripped, and the archaeological features sectioned and recorded.

PREHISTORIC

The earliest occupation on the site was represented by a curving feature, F3 (FIG. 2). This was a shallow gully, 2 m. long, 40 cm. wide, and 10 cm. deep, filled with a dark brown loam. Finds in this feature included a few waste flint flakes, one of which had been utilized, perhaps as a knife. Two sherds of pottery were found of sandyish, pale red-brown fabric with large flint and

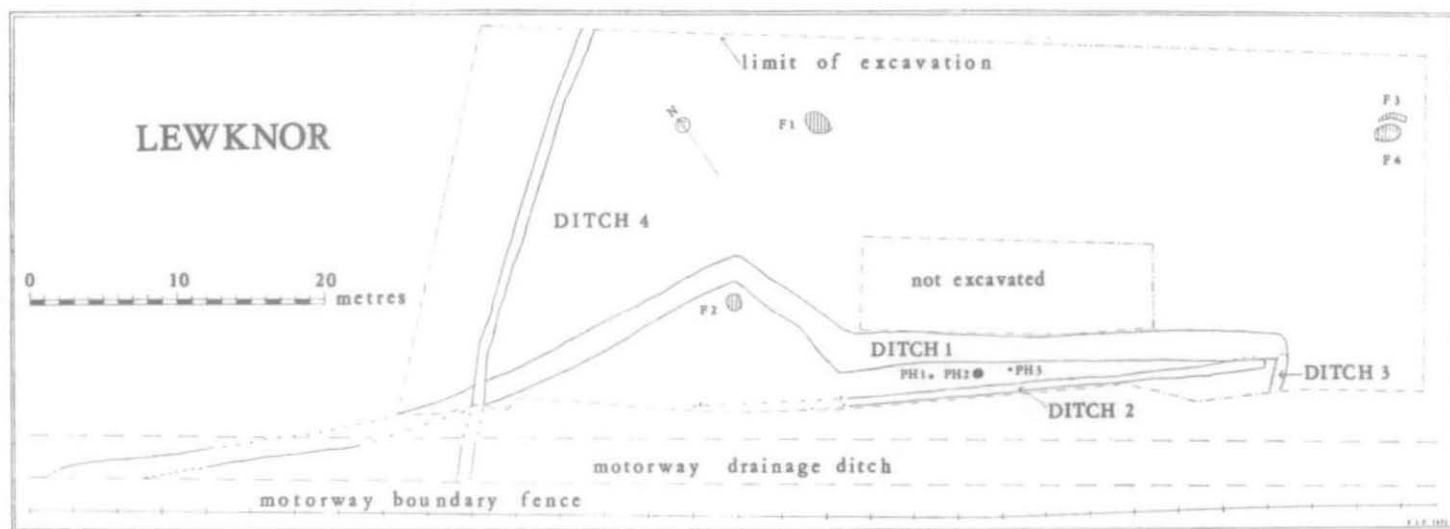


FIG. 2
Lewknor (Site 11). Plan of Features.

possibly limestone inclusions. The pottery can be ascribed to the second millennium B.C., perhaps to the Early Bronze Age.⁷

A second feature, F₄, may be associated with this period. It was an ovoid scoop, perhaps the bottom of a pit, lying alongside F₃, 40 cm. away, again filled with a dark brown loam, but with no artefacts. It was 1.80 m. long, 1.15 m. wide and 15 cm. deep. The south-west side sloped gently but the north-east side was almost vertical.

The function of these two features is uncertain, and as they lay, unfortunately, at the edge of the excavation, they may represent only a portion of the prehistoric occupation on the site. Nevertheless, they do indicate prehistoric activity in a position at the foot of the Chilterns, where little activity has been identified before.⁸

ROMANO-BRITISH

The main occupation on the site occurred in the Romano-British period. The centre of the complex lies undisturbed in Field A immediately south-west of the motor-way. This had been indicated by the aerial survey, the distribution of surface finds and by stone walls encountered during ploughing.

The features affected by the motorway appear to have been a series of boundary ditches on the eastern side of the settlement.

Ditch 2

This first ditch on the site was aligned north-west-south-east. It was filled with a medium brown clayey loam. This ditch was revealed for some 28 m., the western end fading out. The eastern was butt-ended, and it is quite likely that the western end may not have been dug originally into the bedrock. The pottery indicates a 2nd century date.

Ditch 3

Ditch 3 started some 60 cm. east of the end of Ditch 2, aligned at an angle of 80° to the latter ditch. It was dug 26-32 cm. into the natural bedrock with sloping sides and a flat bottom, 88 cm. wide at the top, and 32 cm. wide at the bottom, filled with a dark brown soil containing many chalk and greensand particles. Insufficient pottery was recovered to date Ditch 3 closely.

Ditch 1

Ditch 1, lying outside Ditch 2, was aligned east-west for some 49 m. before turning 90° to run north-south for 9 m. where it turned through 45° to run north-east-south-west for 39 m., cutting obliquely through the east end of Ditch 2 before joining Ditch 3 and turning a further 90°. It was cut into the natural bedrock to a depth varying between 35 and 60 cm. and varied in width in the bedrock between 1.3 and 1.6 m. It was filled with a dark brown loam containing many chalk and greensand particles, and quite large quantities of pottery

⁷ I am grateful to Mr. D. G. Benson for his comments on these finds.

⁸ C. Saunders, 'The Pre-Belgic Iron Age in the Central and Western Chilterns', *Arch. J.*, cxxviii (1971), 1-30.

and animal bone. The bulk of the pottery and all the coins were in the upper levels, and so this ditch was silted up by c. 340–350 A.D. The time of its construction cannot be dated.

There is no apparent purpose for the abrupt changes in alignment of this ditch, but in the corner formed by the first right-angled turn was an elliptical pit, F2, with straight sides and a flat bottom, filled with dark brown soil containing flint, chalk and greensand particles. It measured 1.20 m. \times 90 cm. and was 15–25 cm. deep. It contained a few animal bones and a few sherds of Romano-British pottery of indeterminate date.

Post-holes 1–3

Lying immediately inside Ditch 1 was a line of three post-holes. These post-holes may form either part of a timber building, or a revetment to an internal bank to Ditch 1. As these post-holes were limited to only a 6 m. length of Ditch 1, the possibility that they are from a timber building seems more reasonable.

Post-hole 1—Irregular shape, but roughly circular, diameter 17 cm., depth 2.5 cm. Filled with dark brown loam.

Post-hole 2—Bottom of circular post-hole, 60 cm. diameter, 12 cm. deep, filled with dark brown loam, containing many chalk and greensand particles.

Post-hole 3—Circular post-hole, 33 cm. diameter, 14 cm. deep, filled with dark brown loam and occasional chalk flecks.

Ditch 4

This ditch, cutting Ditch 1 in its lowest levels, ran approximately at right angles to all the other linear features on the site. A length of 31 m. was exposed. It had a round profile, and was cut into bedrock to a depth of 36–40 cm. and was 90 cm. wide at its highest excavated level. It was filled with a dark brown loam, containing many chalk and greensand particles. Little pottery was found, but it was of 4th century date.

F1

One other feature was examined. F1 lay apparently outside the enclosures. It was an elliptical pit, 1.40 m. \times 2 m., and 50 cm. deep, with sloping sides and a flat bottom. It was filled with dark brown loam with a very high density of chalk and greensand particles in the upper central fill. No finds were recovered. The date and function of this pit is unknown.

The old ground surface

An attempt was made in several places to identify the Roman ground surface, but ploughing and other disturbances made this impossible. All sections of this supposed old ground surface produced sherds of both Romano-British and post-Medieval pottery.

INTERPRETATION

The Romano-British settlement, as revealed by its boundary ditches, started in the 2nd century A.D. with its ditches being abandoned some time in the 4th century A.D., although this does not mean that the whole site was deserted then.

Ditch 2 represents the earliest boundary excavated. The crude similarity in size and shape of Ditches 2 and 3, and the fact that Ditch 1 cut both, suggests that Ditches 2 and 3 were contemporary, and formed the eastern corner of the original boundary, unless there was an earlier and smaller enclosure. The possibility that Ditch 3 was part of an inturned entrance was considered, and the area outside carefully examined for evidence of a track or further ditches, but there were no archaeological features in that area.

Ditch 2 was then abandoned and replaced on the outside by Ditch 1, while Ditch 3 was kept in use, representing a marginal expansion of the site. The more substantial nature of Ditch 1 may indicate a period of stability, with the possible construction of timber buildings immediately within the perimeter.

A second and more radical adjustment to the boundaries occurred in the 4th century with the construction of Ditch 4. It is impossible to say whether this represents an expansion or contraction. If the gullies in 10.II are Romano-British, they may be associated with the apparent 4th century reorganization.

DISCUSSION

At Lewknor prehistoric activity and a substantial Romano-British settlement, of indeterminate status, have been located. The 'farmstead' is apparently surrounded on its north, east and possibly south sides by boundary ditches, and on the west by a small fast-flowing stream, springing from the foot of the Chilterns, and providing an adequate water supply. The nucleus of the settlement seems to be in Field A.

Fortunately the motorway only clipped the extremities of the settlement, the buildings in Field A remaining relatively intact for future investigation at a more leisurely pace than was possible in May 1972. The possibility of Medieval occupation in the immediate vicinity must be borne in mind.

The finds were drawn by the writer except for Nos. 11, 12, 17, 19, 25 and 29, which were drawn by Melvyn Card. I should like to thank Philip and Patricia Twentyman for their help in the preparation of the finds' drawings; I should also like to thank Sallyann Brown for typing this report.

THE FINDS

By CHRISTOPHER J. YOUNG

ABBREVIATIONS

- Lockleys.* J. B. Ward-Perkins 'The Roman Villa at Lockleys, Welwyn', *Antiq. J.*, xviii (1938), 339-76.
Oxford Pottery. C. J. Young, 'The pottery industry of the Oxford region', in A. Detsicas (ed.), *Current Research in Romano-British Coarse Pottery* (1973), 105-15.

Park Street. H. E. O'Neil, 'The Roman Villa at Park Street, near St. Albans, Herts : Report on the Excavations of 1943-5', *Archaeol. J.*, cii (1945), 21-110.

Verulamium. S. S. Frere, *Verulamium Excavations*, I (1972).

In the following report the finds are described layer by layer, the coins, small finds and samian being followed by the coarse pottery. I am grateful to Dr. C. M. Kraay, Mr. W. J. Rodwell and Mrs. K. F. Hartley for commenting on the coins, samian and stamped mortarium respectively. The quotation of parallels has been kept to a minimum. Certain conventions have been adopted to standardize the description of pottery fabrics. In each case the texture of the ware is described first, followed by descriptions of the visible inclusions. Finally, the colours of the two surfaces and cross-section of each sherd are described separately, the following abbreviations being used : E exterior surface ; I interior surface ; Bk. cross-section.

Ditch 2

1. Soft, sandy, slightly micaceous, small white inclusions ; E, I dark grey, Bk. light grey.

It has not been possible to find close parallels for this form. It seems most likely that it is a copy of a late 2nd or early 3rd century mortarium.

2. Body sherd of poppy-head beaker ; soft, sandy, slightly micaceous, small white inclusions ; E, I, Bk. light grey. Second century *cf.* *Verulamium* nos. 428, 604, 837, 1047.

3. Hard, sandy, granular, slightly micaceous, white inclusions ; E, I light blue-grey, Bk. grey-black ; burnished on top of rim.

This group is rather small for positive dating of the filling of this feature but, such as it is, it suggests a date in the 2nd century. Some occupation of this period is attested also by the presence of residual sherds in Ditch 1 and by the stamped mortarium (see below).

Ditch 1

Coins. Four were found, of which one was illegible. The remainder are :

1. Constans ; Gloria Exercitus, two standards.
2. House of Constantine ; Gloria Exercitus, two standards.
3. House of Constantine ; Gloria Exercitus, one standard.

All three are below the normal size and are probably copies. They are not likely to date later than A.D. 340-50.

Samian

Dr. 38 ; Les Martres-de-Veyre ; Hadrianic.

Flake of Lezoux ware ; 2nd century A.D.

Mortaria

4. Sandy, micaceous, white inclusions ; E, I orange, Bk. red-orange with grey core, traces of white colour-coat ; multicoloured sparkling grit. Oxford kiln product. Not illustrated : sherd of red colour-coat mortarium. Oxford kiln product.

Colour-coated pottery

5. Hard, sandy, micaceous, white inclusions ; E, I orange, Bk. orange with grey core, red colour-coat. Oxford kiln product.
6. Fabric as last ; decorated with rosette stamps scattered over wall of vessel. Oxford kiln product.
7. Sherd of neck of bulbous beaker ; hard, sandy, micaceous ; E, I, Bk. orange, brown colour-coat on exterior ; graffito ID incised after firing. Oxford kiln product (see *Oxford Pottery*, Fig. 3, no. 25 for form).

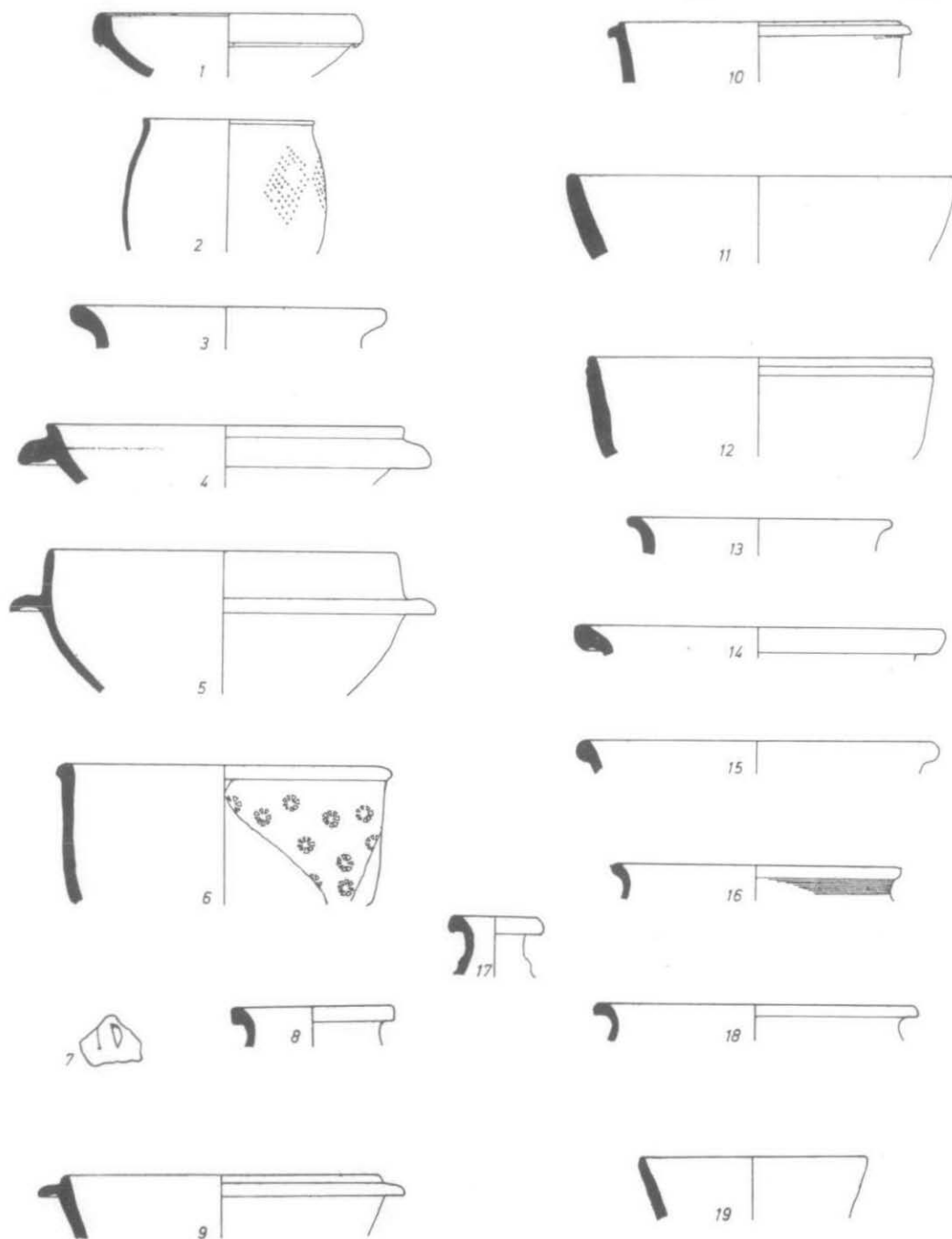


FIG. 3

Romano-British Pottery from Lewknor (Site 11). 1-3 from Ditch 2, 4-19 from Ditch 1. (†).

Not illustrated : Sherds of imitation Dr. 31, imitation Dr. 36, painted wall-sided bowls, bulbous beakers decorated with barbotine or paint ; all Oxford kiln products ; two sherds of white ware with dark brown colour-coat ; Nene valley kiln products.

White wares

8. Hard, sandy ; E, I, Bk. cream ; rim blackened on top and exterior. Oxford kiln product.

Not illustrated : sherds of bowls in parchment ware. Oxford kiln product (see *Oxford Pottery*, Fig. 3, 21 for form).

Burnished black wares

9. Hard, sandy, some mica, many white inclusions, a few fragments of grog ; E, I, Bk. black ; burnished with burnished lines on exterior.

10. Fabric as last ; burnished.

11. Texture and inclusions as last ; E, I black, Bk. reddish brown ; burnished.

12. Texture and inclusions as last ; E, I buffish grey, Bk. reddish brown ; slight burnishing on exterior.

13. Fabric as 11.

Not illustrated : jar sherd with burnished lattice decoration.

Calcite gritted ware

14. Hard, heavily tempered with calcite ; E, I, Bk. grey.

15. As last.

16. As last ; horizontal rilling on neck.

These are examples of the mass-produced calcite gritted ware widely traded in a broad band across the middle of Britain, and apparently manufactured at sites in the Midlands. One kiln is known at Harrold, Beds.⁹

Other reduced wares

17. Sandy, micaceous, some grits ; E, I, Bk. grey ; burnished on exterior and on top of rim.

18. Sandy, micaceous ; E, I grey, Bk. buff-grey with light grey core

19. Sandy, micaceous ; E, I dark grey, Bk. buff-grey ; burnished.

20. Hard, sandy, granular, slightly micaceous, many small and some large white inclusions (probably of chalk), some dark grey inclusions ; E, I light grey, Bk. blue-grey ; exterior and top of rim burnished, zone of burnished decoration on shoulder. Probably 2nd century (*cf. Verulamium*, nos. 435, 610).

21. Fabric as last ; burnished on top of rim.

22. Fabric as last.

23. Fabric as last.

24. Fabric as last ; exterior burnished with incised chevron ornament.

25. Hard, sandy, granular ; E, I dark grey, Bk. light grey-buff,

Nos. 20-25 represent the largest group of any particular fabric from this deposit.

This ware was obviously made over a long period since only 20 is likely to be residual.

26. Very hard, sandy, granular, much visible sand, mica, white inclusions, quartz lumps ; E, I grey, Bk. red with thick grey core.

27. Fabric as last.

Not illustrated : jar shed with slashed shoulder cordon, fabric as 27.

28. Hard, sandy, granular, micaceous, many white inclusions ; E blotchy dark grey, I dark grey, Bk. reddish-brown with grey core.

29. Hard, sandy, granular, micaceous, many white and black inclusions ; E Black, I blotchy grey and black, Bk. red with thick grey core.

⁹ Information kindly given by Mr. A. E. Brown.

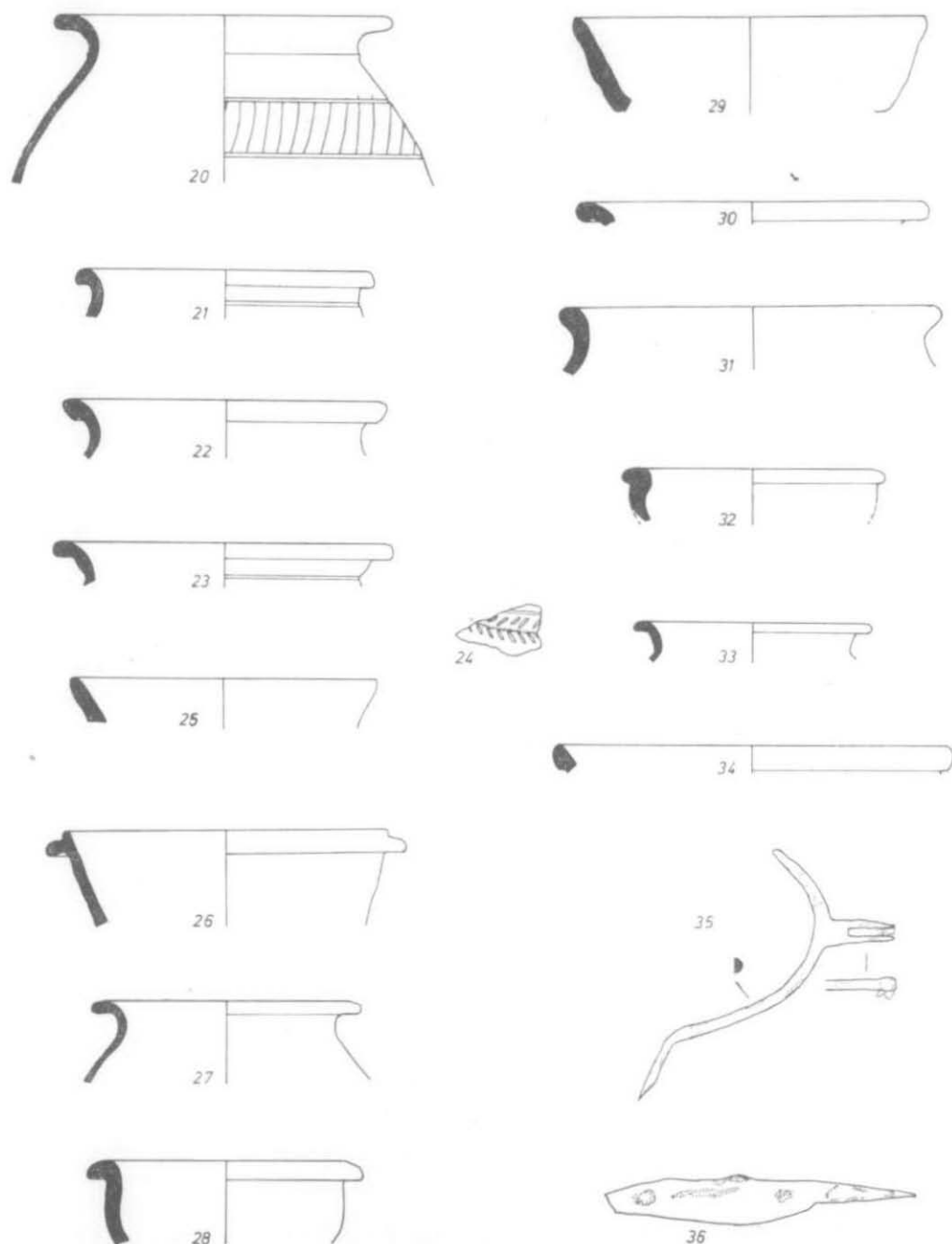


FIG. 4

Romano-British Pottery from Lewknor (Site 11). 20-33 from Ditch 1, 34 from Ditch 4 ($\frac{1}{2}$). Two iron objects, 35 and 36, from Sites 11 and 10 respectively ($\frac{1}{2}$).

30. Fabric as last.

31. Hard, sandy, granular, micaceous, white inclusions ; E, I grey, Bk. grey with thick red core.

32. Sandy, micaceous, white inclusions ; E, I black, Bk. dull red. This sherd has been badly eroded.

Miscellaneous sherds

33. Sandy, micaceous ; E, I greyish-orange, Bk. orange with grey core.

Not illustrated : body sherds of storage jars, mainly in a sandy ware heavily tempered with flint, quartzite, chalk, mica and visible sand, but also a few in a very hard sandy ware with white inclusions, mica and grog.

Building material

Fragments of roofing tiles were found in this deposit.

The main interest of this deposit lies in the light that it sheds on the types of pottery in use in this area in the 4th century, since no stratified deposits from this part of the south-western Chilterns have been published. The importance of the group is further increased since the three coins allow it to be dated more closely within the 4th century, suggesting a date of deposition about the middle of the century.

Most of the pottery is also of this date apart from a few obviously residual sherds, such as the samian and no. 20. As might be expected in the mid 4th century, the bulk of the fine wares was supplied from the Oxford kilns, apart from a couple of sherds from the Nene valley. The Oxford wares are all typical of the products of that industry. On the other hand most of the coarse wares do not seem to be products of the Oxford kilns, despite their closeness. This suggests that a more local manufacturing source remains to be found and emphasizes yet again the small scale of most potteries producing only coarse grey wares. The only coarse ware in the group which came from further afield than Oxford is the calcite gritted ware. This achieved a considerable distribution, extending from Wales to East Anglia in the second half of the 4th century A.D. Its appearance in this deposit adds further evidence to that from *Park Street*, Fig. 18, 31-3, and *Lockleys*, Fig. 12, 1, that this wide trading pattern was already being attained by the middle of the century.

Ditch 4

Fragment of bronze wire.

34. Sandy, heavily tempered with calcite ; E black, I red, Bk. black.

Not illustrated : sherds of 4th century wares, similar to those from Ditch 1.

Fragments of tile were found in this deposit.

Ditch 3

Not illustrated : Base of jar, fabric as no. 32. Roman.

Pit F2

Not illustrated : sherds of grey ware jars. Roman.

Old Ground Surface

Not illustrated : sherds of Roman wares, post-Medieval sherds.

Unstratified

Coin of House of Constantine ; Gloria Exercitus, two standards. Probably a copy.

Mortarium fragment (FIG. 5). By MRS. K. F. HARTLEY

In fine cream fabric with thick pink core and smooth cream surfaces. Two stamps, impressed close together, clearly read GEMINUS. No other stamp of this



FIG. 5

Mortar stamp, unstratified. Found in fieldwalking at Lewknor. (†).

potter is known. The fabric cannot be assigned to a precise source, but it is certainly a Midland one, and the mortarium is likely to be of 2nd century date.

IRON OBJECTS. By P. J. FASHAM

35. Rowel spur with badly eroded rowel, only two points remaining. Short shank on same alignment as body. Probably 17th or 18th century. From the topsoil of Site 11.

36. Knife with pointed tang, separated from blade by slight shoulders. Probably 13th or 14th century.¹⁰ From Site 10.

¹⁰ See M. Biddle, 'Medieval Village of Seacourt', *Oxoniensia*, xxvi-xxvii (1961-2), 172.