The 'Overdale' Kiln Site at Boar's Hill, near Oxford

By Eve HARRIS and CHRISTOPHER J. YOUNG

SUMMARY. Excavations in 1953 on the site of the previously known kiln site at Overdale, Boar's Hill, discovered two kilns, one of updraught and one of through-draught type, and an area from which clay had been dug. Both kilns produced grey wares, predominantly jars, dating to the first half of the second century. It is possible that this site may be connected with the kiln discovered 400 metres away in 1945.

THE EXCAVATIONS by EVE HARRIS

URING the course of 1952,1 the tenants of ' Overdale ', Boar's Hill brought to the Ashmolean Museum examples of the Roman pottery they were then finding in their garden. The quantity and variety of these sherds suggested that the area might well prove to be yet another of the kiln sites of the Oxford region, and by the kind permission of the Air Ministry² who owned the site, and of their tenants, Air Commodore and Mrs. Marsden, a small excavation was carried out in the summer of 1953.3

The site lies to the S.W. of Oxford, on the east side of the Wootton Road over Foxcombe Hill, and some four to five hundred yards south of the Boar's Hill turning (SU/495015).4 The Oxford area is well known to have been a centre of pottery manufacture during the Roman period, and although the majority of the previously noted kiln sites, such as Dorchester and Cowley, lie to the north of the Isis, one-in use between the first and fourth centuries A.D., was discovered on Boar's Hill in 19455 (FIG. I).

The area available for the 1953 excavation lay at the bottom of 'Overdale's' garden, and was restricted in size (FIG. 2). The two sons of the occupiers had previously carried out ' excavations ' of their own on the site, and their two holes, producing much pottery mixed with black, ashy earth, were filled in, and then served as a dump for the later work. Since the material from the boys' digging suggested that they might unwittingly have gone through some part of a kiln, the three trenches dug on the site were laid out with a view to obtaining a section of anything so destroyed, if this were at all possible.

4 Not 41/495015 as in Oxoniensia, XVII-XVIII (1952-3), 229.

5 Ibid., xm (1948), 32 ff.

Oxoniensia, xvn-xvni (1952-3), 229ff.
 Thanks are due to the Air Ministry for permission to excavate on their property, and for their kindness

in presenting all the material from the site to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. ³ The writer wishes to acknowledge her indebtedness to her parents, to Mrs. D. T-D. Clarke, Dr. D. B. Harden and Prof. C. F. C. Hawkes, to the late Dr. P. Corder and Miss M. V. Taylor, and to Dr. J. Haberl and her other friends in the O.U.A.S., all of whom contributed in various ways to the excavation as well as to Mr. C. J. Young who has made publication possible.





FIG. I Boars Hill, Oxford : Roman sites and chance finds.

TRENCH A. (FIGS. 2, 3) This trench produced no evidence of structures, but did reveal that the yellow clay overlying the gravel subsoil was heavily pitted, suggesting that it had been used as a source of building material for the kilns. In the sandy silt filling above the yellow clay were a number of pockets of white clay of a type suitable for making pottery, as well as a number of potsherds. The dearth of material,



Overdale, Boars Hill : Site Plan. Dashed line marks edge of area available for examination.

particularly at the northern end of the trench, might indicate that the pottery working area did not extend further in this direction.

TRENCH B. (FIGS. 2, 4; PLS. I, II, A) By extending this trench it was possible to recover the complete plan of a small circular kiln of updraught type.6 Its interest and significance lay in two features. First, some accident had caused the potter to leave the kiln still stacked with its load of pots, rather than emptied and discarded in favour of a new kiln elsewhere, as is usually the case. Second, the method of stacking directly upon the floor of the kiln showed that in this particular type the potter had not constructed a floor dividing the oven from the combustion chamber.7

The kiln had been dug into the yellow clay overlying the gravel subsoil, and was provided naturally with a suitable walling and base, without the introduction of outside materials. The circular oven was approximately 21 feet in diameter, with a flue, now incomplete but originally some 18 inches long, leading north-eastwards from the oven to the stokehole.

The stokehole, which was not cleared completely owing to the limited space available, was a small irregular depression in the natural yellow clay, approximately 31 to 4 feet in width, and some 12 to 15 inches deep, with fairly steep sides. As in

 ⁶ See P. Corder, Archaeol. J., OXIV (1959), 23, Pl. IV A.
 ⁷ The Hasseris kiln in Jutland (Denmark) bears a very close resemblance to Boar's Hill kiln B, having the pots set directly upon a stepped floor and the chimney in a removeable roof : Arne Bjorn, Exploring Fire and Clay, 57-66. This example is dated to A.D. 500, but is of a type in use from 200 B.C. (Schleswig) down to the 14th century (Uglerup, Denmark).



Overdale, Boars Hill : Trench A, section.



Overdale, Boars Hill : Kiln B, longitudinal section.

kiln C, the deepest part of the stokehole was by the flue, and the change in floor levels made a visible step up. It contained much ashy earth, intermingled with potsherds and a misshapen waster.

The flue and the oven had been cut into the yellow clay, and the former roofed also with the same material. The flue was semi-circular in section, 16 inches high at the centre, and 16 inches wide at the base. Its floor sloped upwards somewhat from the level of the stokehole to the base of the kiln, with a step up at the point where the flue hole entered the oven. This step, which was formed by a piece of oolitic limestone laid into the clay, had its highest point in the centre of the oven and curved slightly downwards to the walls. Like the rising flue passage, it would have aided the induction of hot air from the stokehole, through the oven, and out of its roof, and may have served to mark the edge of a firebox within the oven. The maximum depth of the kiln floor was some 3 feet 4 inches below the present ground level, and the walls, as excavated, stood 1 foot 5 inches high, and rose a little above the surrounding

Roman ground level. The marks of the potter's fingers were clearly visible where he had drawn up the kiln walls above the flue hole and smoothed the interior. The part of the oven wall above the flue hole appeared to be leaning slightly outwards, an impression heightened by the gaps between the pieces of burnt clay walling, which had been cracked as it was pressed out. Opposite this point, the kiln walls were broken down to a much lower level.

The appearance both of the interior of the kiln and flue, which showed signs of light burning only, and of the stokehole, which was smaller and sharper-sided, and contained relatively less ash and potsherd than the stokehole of kiln C, suggested that the kiln had seen comparatively limited use before its abandonment—if, indeed, it had been used more than the once. There was no apparent reason for this, beyond the fact that the majority of the pots still within were wasters, showing the type of fault caused by an error or other irregularity in the firing. It might therefore appear that the potter decided to reduce the kiln to ground level and leave it, because the existence of a natural layer of suitable clay made the digging of a new kiln an easier task than than that of clearing out the damaged one.

Apart from the pottery, which is dealt with below, fragments of the kiln roof were found inside the oven. These bore impressions of twigs and grass, an indication of the materials used to form the framework of the roof.⁸ A human skull was recovered from the soil by the fence, but without extending the excavation it was not possible to determine its date or eventual reference to the site.

TRENCH C. (FIGS. 2, 5; PL. II, B) The very black, pot-bearing earth from the larger of the two holes dug by the boys suggested that they might perhaps have touched the edge of a stokehole area. This was found in trench C, together with the oven of the associated kiln and the beginning of an alternative stokehole or chimney.

The stokehole was not fully cleared. Immediately in front of the flue entrance it sloped downwards into a depression some $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet across, but the floor level rose again along the flue.





8 Bjorn, op. cit., 57-61.

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The flue was roughly semi-circular in section, being approximately 15 inches wide and 22 inches high. Where it opened out into the stokehole, the walling had been reinforced by the inclusion of a number of oolitic stones.

The oven, like that of the circular kiln in trench B, had been dug into the natural clay, and was of the horizontal-draught9 or two-flued type,10 the pots being stacked directly upon the floor of the oven and not in a chamber above. No solid line of walling was found at the eastern end of the kiln, which appeared in fact to open out into another stokehole or chimney. This contained a rather less blackened earth than the first stokehole, as well as a considerable quantity of soot, but it was not possible to examine it further.¹¹ In form the oven resembles the Farnham kilns,¹² though the floor was not in this case laid level, but had a ridge with slightly bump-like ends running down the centre, presumably to act as a ventilation channel or as a partial firebox. The closest parallel is at Hamstead Marshall, Berks., where a twoflued kiln had been modified after use by the addition of such a ridge.¹³ Other two-flued kilns, varying in date from the first to the fourth century, have been found in Bedforshire, Dorset, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Surrey and Wiltshire.¹⁴ The ridge was formed of oolitic limestone set into the clay. None of the walling or roof remained in situ above the natural clay level, but the many slabs of fired clay bearing grass and twig imprints found within the oven indicated that the roof, consisting of a framework of twigs sealed with grass and clay, had been made afresh for each firing. The clay of this kiln and the limestone ridge were much more heavily burnt than in the case of the stacked one, suggesting that it had been used several times, and the fairly solid filling of odd sherds, ashy earth, and roofing fragments would then represent the gradual levelling up of a disused hole with the site's rubbish.

THE FINDS by CHRISTOPHER J. YOUNG

NON-CERAMIC FINDS

One coin, a third bronze of Valentinian I (364-375) was found. Its exact provenance is unknown.

THE POTTERY

The following abbreviations are used in this section :

Camulodunum C. F. C. Hawkes, M. R. Hull, Camulodunum (1947).

Churchill Hospital C. J. Young, 'Excavations at the Churchill Hospital, 1971 : Interim Report', Oxoniensia, XXXVII (1972), 10-31.

9 See P. Corder, Archaeol. J., CXIV (1959), 24—but not Pl. IV A.
¹⁰ A. P. Detsicas (ed.), *Current Research in Romano-British Coarse Pottery*, (1973), 149.
¹¹ This opening could be the entrance to a chimney or to a secondary fireplace. A kiln of third century date from Glostrup, Denmark had two stokeholes and a chimney. The main stokehole faced south, west and the chimney, leading off as at Overdale before turning vertically, was to the north-east of the oven. As at Hasseris and Overdale the pots were stacked directly onto the base of the kiln : Bjorn *op. cit.*, 71. Bjorn's experiments (*op. cit.*, 70) show that 'horizontal firing' ' with a chimney at the end of the exhaust flue' is perfectly reacted.

exhaust fue' is perfectly feasible.
¹³ Surrey Archaeol. Coll., 11 (1949), 29-56.
¹³ Archaeol. News Letter, vi, no. 10 (1961), 285.
¹⁴ Bedfordshire : Harrold, fourth century, Britannia, п (1971), 267 ; пп (1972), 327 ; Dorset : Ower, R.C.H.M. Dorset, п, pt. 3 (1970), 597; Hampshire : Alice Holt Forest, probably second century, Surrey Archaeol. Coll., 1x (1963), 19-36 ; Hertfordshire : Much Hadham, Herts. Archaeol. Club Newsletter, no. 2 (March 1968) ; Surrey : Snailslynch, near Farnham, perhaps third century, Antiq. J., vin (1928), 48-53 ; Wiltshire : Savernake, late first century, Wilts. Archaeol. Mag., Lvm (1963) ; White Hills, Swindon (unpublished, information from Mr. S. Anderson) Mr. S. Anderson).

Dorchester S. S. Frere, 'Excavations at Dorchester-on-Thames, 1962', Archaeol. J., CXIX (1962), 114-149.

Gillam J. P. Gillam, Types of Roman Coarse Pottery Vessels in Northern Britain (1968).

Harding D. W. Harding, The Iron Age in the Upper Thames Basin (1972).

Shakenoak II A. C. C. Brodribb, A. R. Hands, D. R. Walker, Excavations at Shakenoak II (1971).

Shakenoak IV A. C. C. Brodribb, A. R. Hands, D. R. Walker, Excavations at Shakenoak IV (1973).

Verulamium S. S. Frere, Verulamium Excavations 1 (1972).

Stratified pottery was recovered from all three trenches. The principal deposits are obviously those associated with the two kilns and material from trenches B and C is published in detail. The pottery from site A and the unstratified pottery add little further information and are not discussed here. Within trenches B and C the pottery from each kiln and each stokehole has been studied separately and the pottery from the layers above each kiln has been studied as one group. A small quantity of intrusive material occurred in layer 1 of each trench but this was easily recognizable as the fabric and types produced at this site are distinctive and were evenly distributed through all layers.

Over 90 per cent of the pottery is of five types only and to avoid needless duplication it is illustrated and discussed as a type series, the stratigraphic distribution being shown in table I (Appendix) and the relative quantities of the different types being given in Fig. 6. Dated parallels are quoted as far as possible from local contexts and it has not been considered necessary to quote exhaustive parallels of minor typological differentiations as these often reflect only the whim of the individual potter. This is shown extremely clearly by the pots from the partially loaded Kiln B.

The fabric used by the Overdale potters is hard fired, sandy, containing white inclusions, sometimes up to 3 mm. in length, and micaceous. The exterior surface is sometimes burnished. The colour is normally grey but misfired examples can be red or buff or have a red or buff core.

Type 1: Narrow-necked jar with out-turned rim, cordoned at base of neck and grooved on the shoulder. The complete examples are rilled on the lower body. The type is derived from the common Belgic narrow-necked jar which continued through much of the Roman period (*Dorchester*, no. 18; *Camulodunum*, type 232).



FIG. 6

Overdale, Boars Hill : histogram of quantities of pottery types, Sites B and C.



FIG. 7 Overdale, Boars Hill : coarse pottery (1).

FIG. 7 :

1, 2. Kiln B. 3, 4. Kiln C.

5. Kiln C, flue and second stokehole.

6. Trench C, other layers.

Type 2: Wide-mouthed necked jar, grooved on girth and frequently burnished on neck and shoulder. The complete examples show evidence of turning on the lower part of the body. The type is derived from a Belgic type common in the Upper Thames valley (Harding, Plates 69-72; Dorchester, nos. 4-6, 17, 39-40) and continued until the end of the Roman period with various modifications (cf. Shakenoak IV, nos. 577-601, c. A.D. 365-390). The specimens from Kiln B (nos. 7-11) are all much smaller than those from Kiln C and form a separate group. A few examples of the larger variety were found in the upper layers of trench B.

7-11. Kiln B.

12. Trench B, other layers.

FIG. 8 :

Kiln C.
 Trench C, other layers.

Type 3 : Wide-mouthed necked jar with marked carination at shoulder. Two variants of this occurred, one with a break in the profile at the base of the neck (nos. 15-18), the other with a smooth curve down to the shoulder (no. 19). It is a variant of type 2 and again derives from the Belgic period (Dorchester, nos. 5, 11; Tiberio-Claudian). It does not seem to have survived long after the middle of the second century (Verulamium, nos. 60, pre-A.D. 60; 155, 162, c. A.D. 60-75; 384-5, c. A.D. 105; 441, 443-445, c. A.D. 105-130; 606, 612, c. A.D. 130-150 ; Shakenoak IV, no. 425, c. A.D. 120-200).

15. Kiln B ; decorated on shoulder with combed decoration.

16. Trench B, other layers.

17, 18. Kiln C, second stokehole and flue.

19. Trench C, other layers.

Type 4: ' Cooking-pot' jar with no neck and out-turned rim. This is the most common type on the site and derives from a pre-Roman prototype common in the Oxford region (Dorchester, nos. 2, 19, 21-23; Tiberio-Claudian). As with the other jar types it continued in use throughout the Roman period (cf. Churchill Hospital, nos. 40, 43; fourth century). Three variants of the form occurred at Overdale : (a) with a rounded rim (nos. 20–22), (b) with a square-cut rim (nos. 23–26), (c) with latticed decoration incised or burnished on the body (no. 27). These have no chronological significance as all occurred in the load of Kiln B.

20-27. Kiln B.

Type 5: Jar with everted rim with down-turned tip. The body is decorated with a burnished lattice. The type is an obvious copy of black-burnished jars (cf. Gillam, type 130, c. A.D. 140-180 ; type 138, c. A.D. 180-250). This type did not occur at all in trench B. Black-burnished ware had appeared in the Oxford region certainly by the middle of the second century (Shakenoak II, nos. 152-162, 186, 188) and was rapidly copied by the local potters.

FIG. 9 :

28. Kiln C, second stokehole and flue.

Type 6: Large globular beaker with upstanding or slightly everted rim, grooved on shoulder, derived from Gallo-Belgic type (cf. Camulodunum, type 108), and current in the first and second centuries (Dorchester, no. 75, c. A.D. 80-115; Verulamium, no. 262, c. A.D. 75-105; 629, c. A.D. 130-150; 861 c. A.D. 150-155/160). It was found only in Site C. 29. Trench C, other layers.

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FIG. 8 Overdale, Boars Hill : coarse pottery $(\frac{1}{4})$.

Type 7 : Small globular beaker with everted rim, similar to last (cf. Verulamium, nos. 263, c. A.D. 75-105 ; 585, c. A.D. 150-155/160). One only from Site C. 30. Trench C, other layers.

Type δ : Bag beaker with out-turned rim. One example only from Site B (cf. Dorchester, nos. 149, 154, c. A.D. 180-185 ; Verulamium, no. 582, c. A.D. 130-150).

31. Trench B, other layers.

Type 9 : Straight-sided bowl with out-turned rim and chamfered base. (Dorchester, no. 127, c. A.D. 135-160; Shakenoak II, no. 168, c. A.D. 140; Verulamium, no. 489, c. A.D. 105-130). Found on Site B only.

32. Trench B, other layers.

Type 10 : Bowl with out-turned rim and curved side. The example from Site B falls into a class of its own (Dorchester, no. 90, c. A.D. 80-115; Shakenoak II, no. 242, c. A.D. 160-250). Those from Site C have a rather more upright side and a triangular rim (Dorchester, no. 111, c. A.D. 135-145; 141, c. A.D. 160-185; 183, c. A.D. 180-185).

32. Trench B, other layers.

33, 34. Trench C, other layers.

Type 11 : Carinated bowl with out-turned rim (cf. Shakenoak II, nos. 171, c. A.D. 140; 205, pre-c. A.D. 150 ; 245, c. A.D. 160-250). Found only on Site C.

35-37. Site C, other layers.

Type 12: Bowl derived from Gallo-Belgic pedestal beaker, Camulodunum, type 76A (cf. Dorchester, no. 102, c. A.D. 135-145). All examples from Kiln B or stokehole thereof. 38. Kiln B and stokehole.

Type 13 : Straight-sided bowl with corrugated upper wall. Found on Site B only. 39. Trench B, other layers.

Type 14 : Straight-sided bowl with bead rim (Dorchester, nos. 161-2, pre-c. A.D. 185). One example only from Site B.

40. Trench B, other layers.

Type 15 : Necked bowl (Shakenoak IV, no. 496, c. A.D. 120-180 ; Verulamium, no. 320, c. A.D. 75-105).

41. Trench B, other layers.

Type 16: Straight-sided bowl copying samian form Dr. 33. Found on Site C only.

42. Trench C, other layers.

Type 17 : Shallow bowl with internally thickened rim. Not closely dateable. Found on Site Bonly.

43. Trench B, other layers.Type 18 : Lids. Site C only. Not closely dateable.

44, 45. Trench C, other layers. Miscellaneous sherds in non-kiln fabrics: These sherds formed a very low proportion of the total quantity of material, but do provide some external cross-checking of the dating of the occupation of the site. They included sherds of butt-beakers, globular beakers, and an Oxfordshire red colour-coat Dr. 38, suggesting occupation from the first to fourth centuries. The unstratified material from the 1953 excavations also contains Oxfordshire red colour-coat ware and other late Roman material such as flanged pie dishes.

The pottery found in 1953 is of interest both for the general light it sheds on this little known aspect of the pottery industry of the Oxford region and, in particular, for the fact that Kiln B was partially loaded when found, although it had obviously been disturbed The remains of the load (PL. I) show clearly that the pots had been stacked in antiquity. for firing upside down, one upon another. The wide range of minor variations within the major types of an absolutely contemporary group demonstrates clearly that such minor variations are totally useless for dating purposes, and must reflect only the work of different potters or even of one potter endeavouring to relieve the monotony of producing endless identical pots.

Dating of the pottery from the two kilns is necessarily inexact since the major types produced all have very long lives and those types which can be closely dated are represented by one or two sherds only. It is clear though that all the types present were current in the

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second century and that some (e.g. type 3) were not in use much after the middle of that century. This suggests that both kilns can be dated to the first half of the second century. The presence of the imitation black-burnished ware jar, type 5, in Kiln C and its absence from Kiln B suggests that Kiln B may have been in operation earlier than Kiln C, before the appearance of black-burnished ware in the area in the second quarter of the second century.

The vast majority of production was concentrated on the jar types 1–5. If jar body sherds not attributable to a specific type are included, over 96% of the pottery comes from jars. Bowls were obviously produced in very small quantities. It is clear that the potters using these two kilns were continuing in the general late Iron Age tradition of the Upper Thames valley with a little influence from new types showing in the copying of blackburnished ware (type 5) and of samian forms (type 16). This conservative tendency is of course to be expected in an area already possessing before the Conquest a coarse ware tradition adequate in quality and quantity. The only improvement was the introduction of new firing techniques resulting in a higher standard of fabric.

Any consideration of the general significance of the pottery from the 1953 excavations must bear in mind that this was only a small sample of what was probably a large industry. Chance finds, such as the burials found on the site of the Boars Hill Hotel in 1892,¹⁵ suggest that an area of occupation extended for some distance along the top of the ridge. The numerous finds of pottery in the 300 metre gap between the two known kiln sites suggest that both may be part of a much larger complex and it is necessary to take these finds into account when considering the overall period of activity on the site. Fourth century types were found in 1947¹⁶ and the pottery found in 1952 included a third century mortarium,¹⁷ supporting the evidence of the only coin and some of the unstratified pottery found in 1953 that occupation continued until towards the end of the Roman period.

The evidence is not sufficient to show whether or not pottery manufacture continued as long as this and this point could only be decided by further excavation. At present all that can be said is that Kilns B and C are certainly second century, and that the evidence from the 1947 kiln is inconclusive, though the principal product seems to have been cookingpots similar to our type 4. It seems certain though that this group of kilns never rivalled those on the Oxfordshire bank as producers of fine wares and must have existed merely to fulfil local demands for coarse wares.

15 Oxoniensia, xvII-xvIII (1952-3), 229-30.

16 Ibid., XIII (1948), Fig. 13.

17 Ibid., xvII-xvIII (1952-3), Fig. 48, 11.

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	Type I: Rims		Type 2 : Rims		Type 3 : Rims	,	Type 4a Rims	Type 4b Rims	4a & b Body sherds	4c Rims	4c Body sherds	Tvpe 5 Rims	2	Jar sherds, type uncertain	Type 6	Type 7	Type 8	Type 9	Type 10	Type 11	Type 12	Type 13	Type 14	Type 15	Type 16	Type 17	Type 18	Misc. non-kiln pottery
Trench B, kiln	2	6	II	12	-	-	14	17	18	I	I	-	-	213	-	_	-		-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Trench B, stokehole	3	3	5	3	-	2	4	15	8	-	-	-	-	113	-	-	-	-	-	-	I	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Trench B, other layers	6	12	20	6	I	2	10	27	12	-	-	-	-	295	_		1	5	I	-	-	2	I	2	-	I	-	II
Trench C, kiln	7	6	8	2	-	-	3	8	-	-	-	I	2	25	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Trench C, stokehole I	I	I	8	-	-	I	3	4	-	-	-	2	2	7	-	-		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Trench C, stokehole II and flue	2	6	6	5	2	2	4	7	-	-	-	4	22	75	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	_	-	-	-	-
Trench C, other layers	17	2	130	14	20	4	68	118	3	-	-	II	4	61	14	1	-	-	6	3	-	-	-	-	2	-	2	2
Total, site B	11	21	36	21	I	4	28	69	38	I	I	-	-	621	-	-	I	5	1	-	3	2	I	2	-	I	-	II
Total, site C	27	15	152	21	22	7	78	137	3	-	-	18	36	108	14	1	-	-	6	3	-		-	_	2	-	2	2
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THE 'OVERDALE' KILN SITE AT BOAR'S HILL APPENDIX

Table 1



Overdale, Boars Hill : Kiln B, partially loaded.

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Ph.: J. Clarke



A. Overdale, Boars Hill : Kiln B, general view.



B. Overdale, Boars Hill : Kiln C, view of furnace chamber and flue arch.

Phh.: J. Clarke

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