Excavations at the Churchill Hospital, 1973: Interim Report

By Christopher J. Young

SUMMARY. *A further 2,000 square metres were excavated. The main discoveries were of a possible first century potters' area, containing two kilns and a well, and of further working areas of the late third and fourth centuries, including possible buildings, pottery dryers and one kiln. It now seems likely that more than one workshop complex of each phase existed within the excavated area.*

INTRODUCTION

IN the summer of 1973 the third and final season of the present series of excavations on the Romano-British kiln site at the Churchill Hospital, Headington, was carried out for the Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee by the writer. The excavation was financed by the Ancient Monuments Division of the Department of the Environment.

Once again I would like to thank the staff of the Churchill Hospital and of the Regional Blood Transfusion Unit for their interest and willingness to help. In particular I owe much to Miss J. Langton-Lockton, Mr. T. Harvey and Mr. P. Barker of the Churchill and to Dr. I. Grant and Mr. P. Collins of the Blood Transfusion Unit. Mr. P. Fasham and Mrs. J. Young acted successively as assistant directors, Mrs. V. Winchester was surveyor and Miss R. McDonnell was finds assistant. I wish to thank all of them and also Mr. T. G. Hassall, Director of the Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee, whose continued assistance, advice and organisational ability made possible the smooth running of the excavation.

THE SITE

The site lies in the south-eastern corner of the Hospital grounds on a sloping plateau, bounded on south and east by the gorge of the Lye valley and surrounded to north and west by buildings. The natural soil is sand containing rafts of calcareous grit and overlying the Oxford Clay. In the southern, lower part of the plateau the quantity of calcareous grit increases greatly as does the visible clay content of the sand. The problem of the high water-table also increases greatly in these slightly lower areas of the site and many features were permanently waterlogged.

This site has long been known as a kiln site[1] of the important late Roman pottery industry of the Oxford area.[2] Earlier discoveries were made in 1953 and 1955.[3]

[1] *Berks, Bucks, Oxon Archaeol. J.*, IV (1898), 19.

[2] C. J. Young, 'The Pottery Industry of the Oxford Region', in A. P. Detsicas (ed.), *Current Research on Romano-British Coarse Pottery* (1973), 105–115. Referred to hereafter as *Pottery Industry*.

[3] 1953: *Oxoniensia*, XVII/XVIII (1952–3), 224–6; 1955: *Ibid.*, XX (1955), 90.

During 1971 and 1972 an area of *c.* 3,000 square metres was totally excavated and trial trenching of a larger part of the site was carried out. The trial trenching was not entirely successful as a means of revealing the often slight archaeological features.

The first two seasons of excavation uncovered a scatter of flints, including barbed-and-tanged arrowheads but found no features of definite pre-Roman date, a series of ditches, mainly containing material of the second century and probably dug as field boundaries, and parts of at least two potting establishments of late Roman date.[4]

The earliest of these functioned in the second half of the third century, and produced mortaria, some other white wares and orange jars and beakers. Structures belonging to this phase comprised four kilns, a circular workshop and ancillary structures on Site II and the northern part of Site I (see Fig. 1). A kiln apparently of the same date was found also on Site V.

A second phase, dating to the fourth century, comprised a group of structures on Sites III, IV and the southern part of Site II. These structures included two kilns, a building and ancillary features such as pottery dryers. This complex produced mortaria, parchment ware and some coarse wares of late Roman date. The absence of the specifically third century types found elsewhere on the site suggests a date in the fourth century as does the occurrence of a coin of Valens (A.D. 368–374) in one of the pottery tips. A kiln of the same date was found on Site VI but its distance from the main concentration of features suggested that it might belong to another complex.

THE EXCAVATION

In 1972 work on Sites III, V and VI had shown evidence of pottery manufacturing activity to be distributed widely across the southern part of the site, and demonstrated that the trial trenching of this area had not been wholly successful in identifying archaeological features. It was decided therefore, as far as resources permitted, to open up the areas between Sites III, V and VI to establish the limits of the pottery manufactory. Accordingly two areas, Site VII between Sites V and VI and Site VIII joining up Sites III, IV and V, were excavated. The total area excavated was *c.* 2,000 square metres. The limits of excavation were determined to a certain extent by the necessity of avoiding roadways and the car parks of the Blood Transfusion Unit and by the existence of the emergency power cable which ran right across Site VII. Further problems were caused by the height of the water table in this part of the site which was aggravated by several periods of heavy rain-fall during the excavation. All features dug below the approximate level of the Roman surface were permanently waterlogged and extensive flooding occurred from time to time. The two areas excavated produced very different results and are considered separately below.

SITE VII (FIGS. 1, 2)

The depth of overburden on this site was somewhat greater than that encoun-

4 1971: C. J. Young, 'Excavations at the Churchill Hospital, 1971: Interim Report', *Oxoniensia*, XXXVII (1972), 10–31; 1972: C. J. Young, 'Excavations at the Churchill Hospital, 1972: Interim Report', *Ibid.*, XXXVIII (1973), 207–214. Referred to hereafter as *Churchill Hospital I* and *Churchill Hospital II* respectively.

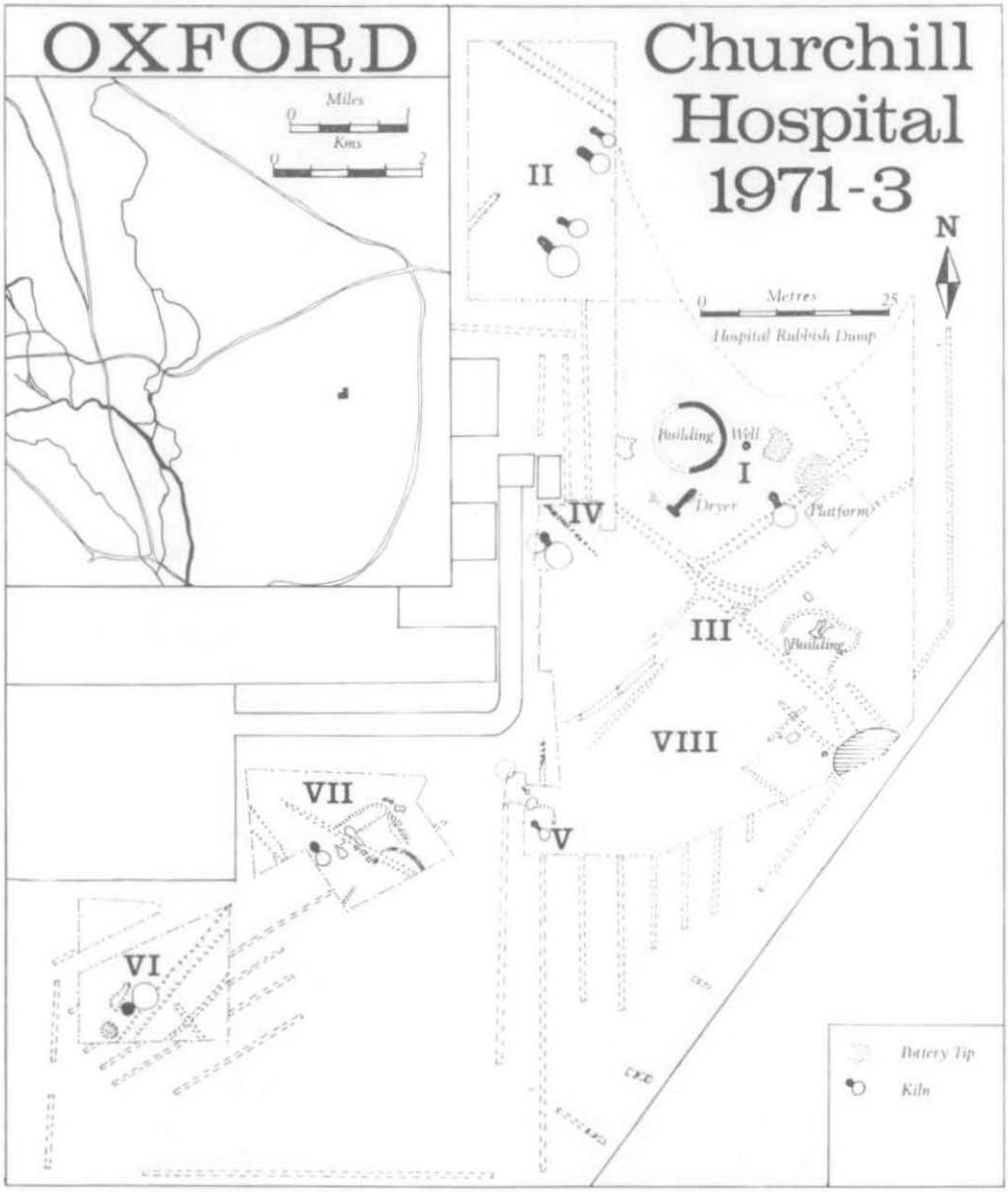

FIG. 1
Churchill Hospital : Site Plan.

tered elsewhere but it was clear that this was the result of systematic dumping of soil, building debris and other waste material in this general area during and after the Second World War. This was also noticed on Site VI and along the western edge of Site VIII. The principal effect of this has been to obscure the fact that a shallow

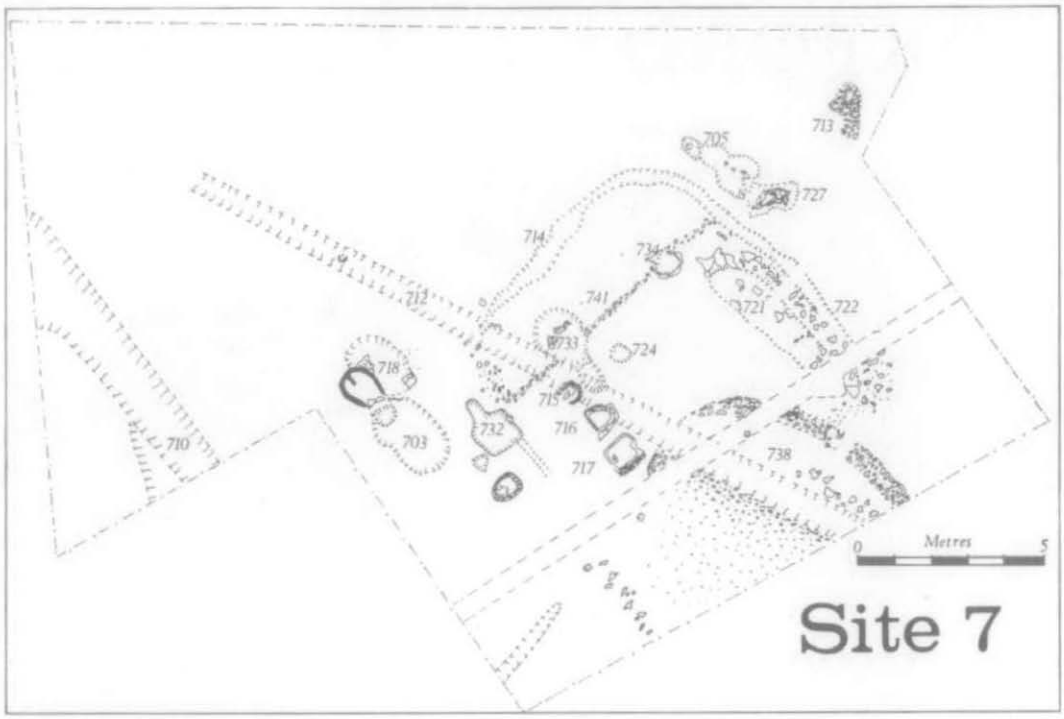

FIG. 2
Churchill Hospital : Plan of Site VII.

depression by the perimeter fence to the south of the excavated area originally ran much further to the north-west.

Beneath this modern overburden was the normal plough soil which overlay over most of the site a layer of black earth containing much pottery and building debris, deriving from the underlying Roman features. These had been much damaged by ploughing as has happened elsewhere on the site. Their state of preservation had been worsened by the use of calcareous grit in their construction as this weathers very badly and in many places had decayed into a gritty orange stain which was difficult to excavate and almost impossible to define accurately. Certain features had been further damaged by post-medieval field drains and by a 1972 trial trench. For these reasons many features were exiguous and difficult to interpret.

The bulk of the Roman features was found in the eastern half of the site and they were certainly not all contemporary. In some cases this was shown clearly by stratigraphic relationships between features. Elsewhere it was necessary to rely on differences between the pottery assemblages present in the features and in certain cases the only guidance was provided by the topographical relationships between the various structures.

Preliminary examination of the finds shows two distinct ranges of pottery types present. This division is based mainly on the mortarium types and may need revision when a full and final analysis has been carried out.

One of these assemblages was typified by mortaria with a wide hooked flange.[5] Occasionally specimens with an angular, depressed hooked flange were also present.[6] Both types are third century ones and were found also in the late third century deposits of Sites I and II. The presence in the same deposits on Site VII of red colour-coat ware and of the typical mortarium type of the late third and fourth centuries suggests that here too the features dated to the second half of the third century.[7] The other group of features was typified by the normal range of late mortaria types of the Oxford industry.[8] Elsewhere on the site the presence of these typical late third and fourth century types and the absence of the third century types described above has indicated a fourth century date. A range of other wares was present in both assemblages. No wares new to the Churchill site were found.

The best preserved feature of the early phase was a kiln (F.703) of updraught type. The furnace chamber was *c.* 1·10 m. long and 0·95 m. wide, constructed of clay and had a tongue pedestal. There were no other floor supports, unlike the later kilns on Sites I, IV and VI but like the contemporary kilns on Sites II and V. The floor of the pottery chamber had been destroyed but fragments in the debris filling the kiln showed that it was of the permanent vent-holed type. The flue was very short and had originally been lined with pitched stone slabs and in the stokehole immediately in front of it was a hole 0·50 m. in diameter and 0·20 m. deep. This was filled with yellow sandy silt and the cleanness of the fill suggests that it may have been earlier than the kiln.

Adjoining the kiln was a large shallow pit (F.718), *c.* 2·0 m. long and 1·0 m. wide, of irregular shape because of an outcrop of calcareous grit. It contained early mortaria but its exact purpose is uncertain. Possibly it represents an attempt to construct the adjoining kiln which was rendered abortive by the rock outcrop. About 0·70 m. east of these two features was a square structure (F.732), *c.* 1·0 m. × 1·0 m. with an apparent stoke-hole running off to the north-west. The square end had been lined with pitched slabs of calcareous grit which had almost entirely decayed. This was probably a pottery dryer similar to those found elsewhere on the site.[9] This dryer overlay a pit 0·90 m. across and 0·35 m. deep and lined on the bottom and possibly on the sides with clay. Both these features contained pottery of the early phase.

Other features containing early pottery lay *c.* 8·5 m. north-east of those already described. F.705 was a shallow trefoil-shaped structure *c.* 1·5 m. long with traces of a stone lining. The two lobes at the south-east end were deeper than the third. The fill of the feature contained charcoal and fragments of burnt clay. It too was probably a pottery dryer. At its north-west end was a post-hole F.705/1 but it could not be shown whether this was earlier, later or of the same date as F.705. Next to F.705 to the south-east was a rectangular pit, F.727, *c.* 1·3 m. long and 0·9 m. wide, with traces of a lining of pitched slabs of calcareous grit. The centre of this feature was filled with white clay and lumps of stone. This structure was probably a clay chest similar to that found on Site III.[10]

[5] *Churchill Hospital I*, Fig. 5, nos. 1, 2. [6] *Idem*, Fig. 5, nos. 3, 8, 9.
[7] See *Pottery Industry*, 107, for discussion of the date of the introduction of Oxon red colour-coat ware.
[8] *Churchill Hospital I*, Fig. 5, nos. 15–17; Fig. 6, nos. 18–28.
[9] *Idem*, 15–16, 20; *Churchill Hospital II*, 211–2; see also below 7.
[10] *Churchill Hospital II*, 212.

No other features were definitely attributable to the early phase on grounds of their pottery content. One other feature can be shown to be earlier than the late phase structures. This was a somewhat enigmatic stone feature, F.741, cut by F.733, 734, 722 and 738. F.722, 733 and 738 all contained mortaria of the normal, late type only. F.741 consisted of a line of stones of decayed calcareous grit running north-east for *c.* 7 metres from just east of the probable dryer F.732. It then turned through a right-angle to the south-east. This stretch had been badly damaged by later features and by a 1972 trial trench. Many of the stones had decayed very badly and were present only as orange stains in the sand. It was clear though that the line ended in a stone scatter and that from this a shallow gully filled with grey silt ran parallel to the first alignment until its further course was obliterated by F.738.

There is no evidence of any fourth side of this feature except a slight gully running south from F.732/736, but there is nothing to link this with F.741 as it is different in character from the stone alignments and is outside the area they enclose.

The remains of this feature suggest some sort of three-sided structure, some 7 metres by 6 metres, with stone footings along two sides, a gully or wide timber slot on the third and open on the fourth. It is difficult to see how such slight footings could have supported a building of this size unless they were the base of some sill-built timber building. It is more likely, perhaps, that these are the remains of some enclosure fence. It is possible that a building could have occupied part of this area and it is unfortunate that neither stratigraphy nor content could definitely date the post-hole, F.724, which might have formed part of such a structure.

Across the mouth of feature F.741 lay a line of three stone-lined, rectangular chests, F.715–7. These are presumably more clay chests although only one, F.717, was filled with clay. 715 had a dense black fill and 716 one of grey silt. These contained insufficient pottery to be attributed on ceramic grounds to either phase but they are aligned on one axis of F.741 and 717 was so close to the definitely late 738 that it is difficult to see how the two could have existed at the same time. This would suggest that the three clay chests belonged to the early phase.

As has been stressed, the evidence for certain features is very scanty but it can be suggested that the structures discussed above form part of a recognizable workshop complex. Within a three-sided enclosure, perhaps with a building in part of it, lay three clay chests. Outside it to the south-west were a kiln and a pottery dryer, while on the other side of it were another dryer and a further clay chest. It is clear that the position was not static during the life of this presumed complex as the dryer, F.732, overlay the clay-lined feature, F.736, which was perhaps a water tank of some sort, and the clay chest, F.727, is so close to the dryer, F.705, that it would not have been possible to have used the two at the same time without ashes and dirt from the dryer contaminating the contents of the chest. It is conceivable that the two sequences may be connected and represent an attempt to locate all the heat-using processes together on one side of the complex by replacing the dryer F.705 by F.732 and perhaps to place a store of processed, clean clay as far as possible from the dirt produced by the kiln and the dryer.

Various features attributable to the later pottery assemblages were identified. These too had been badly damaged by later disturbance. The largest feature was a

stone structure, F.738, which lay partly outside the excavated area. That part of it which was examined was 5 metres by 6 metres and was constructed of calcareous grit, most of which was badly rotted. Around the edge of the feature was a gully or shallow foundation trench filled with stones which appeared to have been packed into it. Part of the north side of the structure had been destroyed by a 1972 trial trench and the whole western half was so badly decayed that the gully could not be traced in this area.

The interior of the feature was filled with the remains of cobbles or flags of calcareous grit so badly decayed that over much of it only an orange stain remained. This was worse in the western half than in the eastern half where parts were quite well preserved, particularly along the edge of the later, possibly post-Roman, ditch (F.712) cut into the structure, which may have improved conditions locally by providing some drainage. One post hole, F.735, containing late phase pottery lay on the northern edge of the structure. It had been badly damaged by the trial trench.

The interpretation of this feature presents problems. The well-preserved curved sector of the gully originally suggested that this might be another circular building[11] but further examination showed this not to be so. The structure is similar to the stone platform found in 1971 on Site I,[12] although it was not covered with blue clay and potsherds as that one had been. Its irregular shape makes it difficult to interpret as a building and it is perhaps more likely that it was another platform, for a storage or working area, rather than a building, though this possibility cannot be ruled out.

To the north of F.738 a large area was enclosed by a shallow gully, F.714/722, which had in places cut into and destroyed the remains of the early phase structure. This gully could have supported a fence or merely acted as a drain around the edge of the area it enclosed. No trace of any gully of this period was found on the west side.

In the area between the gully and the stone platform or building there were three features containing late phase pottery. Of these one, F.733, was a dryer with sub-rectangular drying area *c.* 1·40 m. by 1·35 m. The stokehole was 0·9 m. long. No traces of the edging stones remained but a few flat stones lay on the base of the dryer.

The second structure, F.721, was sausage-shaped, being 3·75 m. long and 1·00 m. across at its widest point. Some pitched stones survived along its edges. At its widest end was a scatter of large flat stones which overlay this feature and extended north-east from it in the plough-damaged levels. Despite the lack of evidence of burning in it, it seems likely that this was another dryer of the sausage-shaped type of which one, smaller, example was found in 1972.[13]

The third feature was a clay-packed post-hole, F.734. Two similar post-holes, F.704 and F.713, were found respectively south-west and north-east of the enclosed area. Both contained late period pottery. It was not possible to discover of what structures these were part.

The late phase features seem to have been part of a workshop complex, perhaps

[11] *Churchill Hospital I*, 12–15.
[12] *Idem*, 16.
[13] *Churchill Hospital II*, 212.

similar in layout to the earlier one with an enclosed area containing plant and edged on one side by a possible building or platform. It is possible that excavation of a wider area might have elucidated this further but time and resources did not permit this.

A further feature of the later period was identified in the western part of the site. This was a deep recent ditch turning in the excavated area and perhaps enclosing an area to the south-west although the ditch was not picked up in Site VI in 1972 unless it had changed character completely. It had been hoped also that the large early Roman ditch found on Site VI[14] would run across this part of the site but it could not be found and must have turned or stopped in the space between Sites VI and VII.

SITE VIII (FIGS. 1, 3)

The main reason for opening up this large area was to establish to what extent the areas between Sites I, III, IV and V had been used by the potters. In particular it was thought that the eastern part of Site VIII might contain further features belonging to the workshop complex found on Site III,[15] and that further details of the early Roman field system would be found.

The western half of the site produced only one pit of the pottery manufacturing period and parts of three ditches belonging to the field system. It was not possible to follow these for their whole course as they were badly damaged by ploughing. Where they did exist they were often difficult to trace as they were silted with almost clean natural soil. The closeness of the three parallel ditches suggests that it was necessary to re-establish the field boundary by re-digging the ditch.

In the eastern part of the site the main trunk ditch of the field system was traced, but not totally excavated, as far as the edge of a large modern disturbance in the south-east corner of the site. Little further information concerning the Roman field system was recovered.

Only a small number of features attributable to the late Roman period were found. The gully running east from the building on Site III could not be traced further as it had been completely ploughed out. A pair of stone-lined post-holes was found in this area and must have had something to do with this structure. Further south a late Roman pit, F.825, and a drainage ditch, F.805, were found. The sparseness of the features suggests that this area was on the very edge of the workshop complex.

The most important discovery in this area was of a totally unexpected group of features containing pottery paralleled in the Belgic levels at Dorchester-on-Thames[16] and apparently continuing through most of the first century A.D. This group consisted of two ditches and a number of features mainly in the area enclosed by the ditches. Ditch F.808 ran north-west from the edge of the excavation for *c.* 7 metres, terminating in a butt-end. At right angles to this was another ditch, F.818, *c.* 7 metres long. Between F.808 and F.818 was a gap of about 4 metres. Both ditches were narrow and shallow and could have formed part of an enclosure boundary. Within the area they enclosed was a stone-lined well flanked by one large and two

[14] *Idem*, 213.
[15] *Idem*, 211–3.
[16] S. S. Frere, 'Excavations at Dorchester-on-Thames, 1962,' *Archaeol. J.*, CXIX (1962), 114–149.

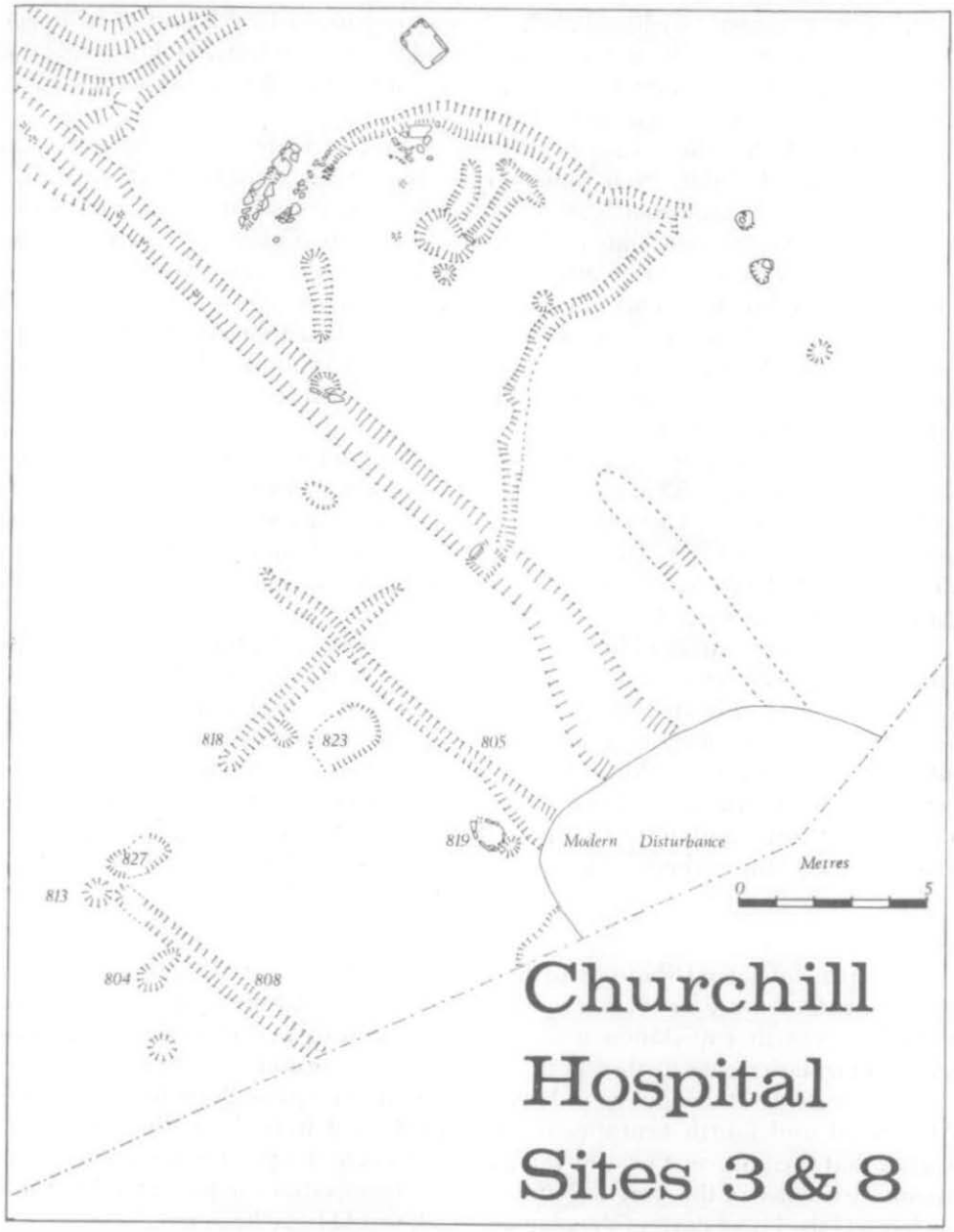

FIG. 3
Churchill Hospital : Plan of Site VIII.

small post-holes. Other features were all much closer to the ditches and included a sub-rectangular pit, F.823, a small circular pit cut by F.818, a shallow oval depression, F.813, at the end of F.808, and two oven-shaped features F.804 and

F.827. F.804 opened out into F.808. It was 1·5 m. in length and at its deepest point was 0·2 m. deep. It contained much evidence of burning in its fill. F.827 was 1·75 m. long and 0·3 m. deep. Traces of a lining of fired red clay remained and there was much burnt material in the fill.

It is possible that these features were just ovens but it seems more likely that they were small, simple kilns, even though no wasters were found. Such small kilns constructed entirely on the surface or only slightly sunken are now being recognized increasingly as the earliest kilns in Roman Britain. It is assumed that their superstructures would have been of turf and there is some evidence that they used prefabricated, portable, fired-clay kiln furniture.[17] No trace of this was found but this has been the case elsewhere[18] and it must be remembered that much of this complex may lie outside the excavated area. Two similar kilns, with their kiln furniture, were found at Hanborough in 1959.[19] The pottery from these kilns was very similar to that from the Churchill features.

If these structures are kilns, the group of first century features seem to be part of a potters' complex. This would not be out of place in the early development of the Oxford industry. The site at Hanborough has already been mentioned and there is some evidence of a kiln, associated with wasters of similar date at Cassington.[20] Wasters in early levels at Dorchester show that there too some kilns were in production by the Flavian period.

These widely scattered kiln sites must represent the adoption of new technology —the kiln—by existing producers, as vessel types changed little. Fabrics also seem to have changed only insofar as they were fired at a higher temperature. The connection between these first century sites and the later established pottery industry is obscure as with the exception of Dorchester, all the sites lie outside the area in which it operated during the second century. There does not seem on the Churchill site to have been any continuing tradition of potting between the possible kilns of the first century and the undoubted workshops of the late third century.

CONCLUSIONS

The principal contributions to knowledge of the Churchill site made by the 1973 excavations were the discovery of the probable first century potters' area, and the finding of further workshop areas of the main potting period on Site VII. Little further information was forthcoming concerning the second century field system.

With regard to the main period of use of the site the sparse distribution of features of the third and fourth centuries on Site VIII, and indeed on Site VI in 1972, suggests that these were at or near the boundaries of activity. Only on Site VII was extensive evidence of this period found. This suggests that the potters did not make much use of the lower parts of the plateau which would have been wet.

The 1973 work confirmed the existence of two phases of pottery production, typified by their products, but strengthened the case for a more complex interpreta-

[17] *Cf.* J. P. Wild, 'Longthorpe : an essay in continuity', *Durobrivae*, I (1973), 7–11 ; D. R. Wilson, 'Roman Britain in 1971', Britannia, III (1972), 322–5.

[18] J. P. Wild, *op. cit.*

[19] *Oxoniensia*, XXV (1960), 133 ; information from Mr. D. Sturdy to whom I am most grateful.

[20] *Oxoniensia*, XIII (1949), 66 ; pottery in the Ashmolean Museum.

tion of events within those phases. It is difficult to see how all the features could have belonged to the same workshop and it would seem possible that the normal arrangement consisted of one or two buildings with ancillary structures and kilns close by. In the late third century, for example, one such complex existed in the northern part of the site and another in the area of Site VII. A similar situation probably existed in the fourth century. It is not yet clear though whether these small complexes existed contemporaneously or consecutively within each phase. It is possible that this may become clearer after a full analysis of the pottery has been carried out and it will be discussed more fully in the final report, which is in preparation.

The Society thanks the Department of the Environment for a grant for the publication of this article.