

A REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS AT BURY FARM, AMERSHAM

CHESS VALLEY ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Observations during the cutting of a pipeline trench near Bury Farm, Amersham revealed a number of features, including the foundation trenches for two flint walls. Romano-British pottery and roof tiles were present in the contractor's spoil. Excavations carried out in the immediate area of the flint walls suggested that they were associated with a building dated to the second century AD, although the remains were sparse.

Introduction

On 23 January 1972, contractors cutting a pipeline trench for a sewer at a site near Bury Farm, Amersham exposed two flint filled foundation trenches. An opportunity later arose for the Chess Valley Archaeological and Historical Society (CVAHS) to conduct an exploratory excavation to see if evidence for any associated structure was present.

The excavation took place in March 1973, organised by the CVAHS with the help of sixth form students from the Chorleywood Field Studies Centre under the supervision of the Principal, Miss Ann Trotman.

Location and Geology

The site (SU 96709685) is on the flood plain of the River Misbourne, close to the south bank of that river and about 500 m east of Bury Farm (Fig. 1).

Roman finds abound in the area surrounding the site with reports of coin finds at Station Road (Branigan 1967), London Road Cemetery, and the recreation ground in Old Amersham. Further discoveries of Roman occupation have been made at Coleshill (Branigan 1967) and at Mantles Green Farm, the latter being investigated in excavations during 1983 and 1984 in advance of road construction (Yeoman 1984, 1985).

The Misbourne valley is cut through the chalk of the Chilterns, from the Vale of

Aylesbury at Wendover in the north-west, to the Thames Valley at Denham in the south-east. A variable deposit of coarse glacial gravel has built up over the valley floor, in places stained by ferruginous deposits, and here and there traces of finer bedded gravels. Directly on this gravel lies a fine chalky subsoil of fluvial origin that varies in depth from 0.3 to 2 m. At the excavation site the depth was 1.5 m. The topsoil over the site was brown in colour, with flints, and approximately 0.25 m deep.

The floodplain at the site is 120 m wide and the depression of an old river channel can just be seen running down the centre. From the south terrace the land rises steeply to Rodgers Wood and from the north terrace the rise is less steep up to the Amersham to London road. The floodplain is used as pasture.

The Pipeline

Fig. 2 shows the position and number of the features as they appeared in the pipeline trench section. Using a datum line running along the trench between the centre of manholes 100 and 101, the distances given are from the centre of each feature to the centre of manhole 100. The features recorded in the trench were as follows:

P.1. The only feature excavated, a circular pit 0.66 m in diameter and 0.35 m deep. The pipeline trench had cut through about one third of it. The fill was a black, fine-grained soil containing flints.

P.2. A small bowl-shaped depression 0.43 m

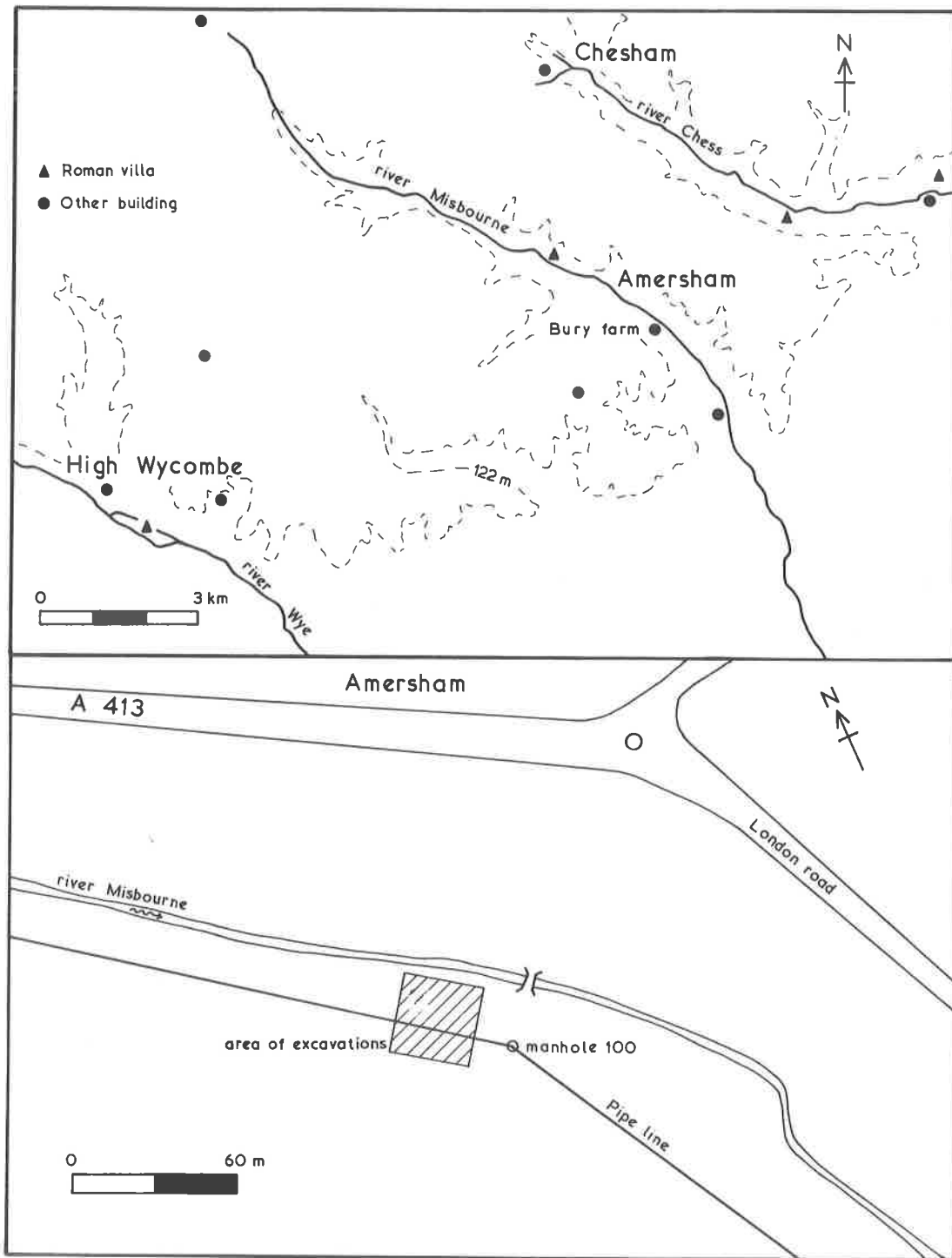


Fig. 1. Bury Farm: site location.

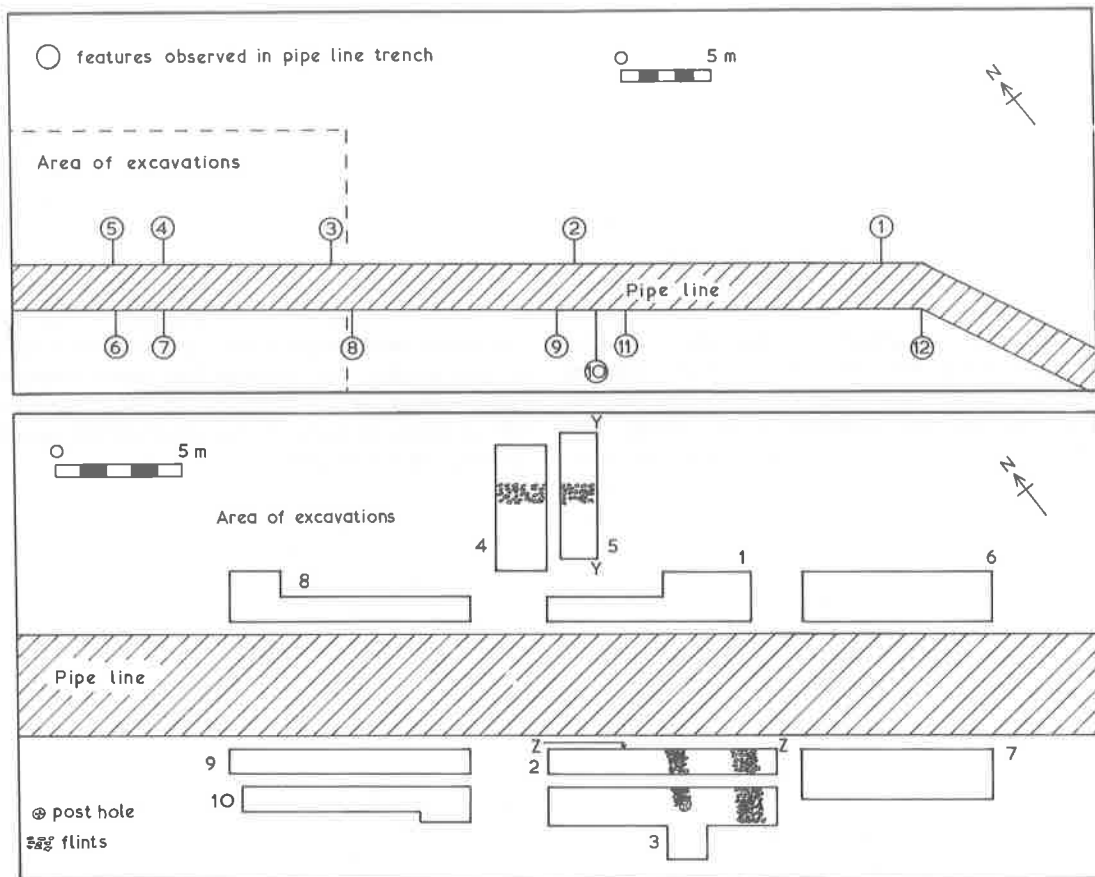


Fig. 2. Pipeline features and excavation.

across the top and 0.23 m deep. the fill was black, fine-grained soil with some flints.

P.3. A lens of a grey, silty deposit 2.54 m long and 0.15 m thick, within which was a black, clayey deposit 0.76 m long and 0.1 m thick containing burnt flint.

P.4. Foundation trench, 0.86 m wide and 0.25 m deep, filled with flints and black, fine-grained soil.

P.5. Foundation trench, 0.86 m wide and 0.25 m deep, filled with flints and black, fine-grained soil.

P.6. Continuation of feature P.5 in the opposite side of the pipeline trench.

P.7. Continuation of feature P.4.

P.8. A shallow, saucer-shaped depression,

1.82 m across, curving downward and inward, dropping steeply at the centre to a depth of 0.53 m. The fill, a black fine-grained soil, contained a sherd of samian pottery.

P.9. A small feature, 0.35 m deep. 0.28 m across the top and tapering down to a rounded bottom. The fill was a fine-grained, black soil with a few flints.

P.10. A square-shaped feature, 0.3 m across and 0.3 m deep. The fill was fine-grained, black soil with small pieces of burnt flint.

P.11. A square-shaped feature, 0.23 m across and 0.23 m deep. The fill was fine-grained, black soil with flints.

P.12. A feature at least 0.5 m wide (the rest was obscured by contractors' works). Its depth was

0.4 m and the fill was a fine-grained, black soil with a few flints. This feature was cut by a much larger feature 1.62 m across and 0.38 m deep. There was no detailed stratigraphy though there appeared to be some primary silting at the sides. The fill of the second feature was similar to the first, though it did contain an oyster shell and three sherds of fine, hard, light grey Romano-British pottery. A metacarpal of a male *Bos Primigenius* was also recovered.

The only features containing datable evidence were P.8 and P.12 which yielded sherds of Romano-British pottery. The soil fill in all the features appeared to be similar and differed from the natural top and sub-soils which were brown and chalky-white respectively. We infer that all features were contemporary and Romano-British in date.

A quantity of Romano-British pottery and Roman roof tile fragments were recovered from the contractors' spoil heaps.

The excavation

A grid of 5 m squares was laid out north and south of the pipeline trench. It started 30 m west of manhole 100 (see Fig. 2). Within this grid ten trenches (1 to 10) were opened. Four of the trenches contained features and the remaining six showed only disturbed soil conditions.

The features revealed in trenches 2 and 3 consisted of the remains of the foundation trenches of two walls, south of the pipeline, parallel to each other and 1.8 m apart. These two sections of wall corresponded to pipeline features 6 and 7. The southern termination of the eastern section of wall was not reached while the western wall ended with a large post-hole. North of the pipeline and running parallel with it a line of flints was uncovered resting on the stripped surface of brown soil and clearly not associated with the other two flint features.

The stratigraphy in trenches 2 and 3 was very similar and the section along trench 3 is illustrated in Fig 3.

Trenches 4 and 5 exhibited a similar

stratigraphy and the section at the end of trench 5 is also illustrated in Fig. 3.

The finds

One animal bone and two teeth were recovered from unstratified contexts during the excavation. There were a few pieces of iron and glass.

Although the pottery was obtained from two sources—observation of the pipeline trench and the subsequent excavation—it has been treated as one group. No attempt has been made to carry out a detailed study of the individual fabric types in view of the unstratified nature of most of the material.

The Samian Pottery

by Anthony C. King

with a note on the stamp by Brenda Dickinson

All the sherds in the assemblage are of late date, with the possible exceptions of 2 and 17. Of most interest are the decorated sherd, no. 2, from a smaller vessel than is usual for this type, and sherd no. 23 which is a probable imitation a samian fabric. The collection is, otherwise, typical of the late second or early third centuries and consists essentially of plain forms with Dr. 31 predominating.

Catalogue

The abbreviation Dr. indicates the form as defined by Dragendorf. CG and EG stand for Central and East Gaulish respectively. Sherd numbers 1 and 2 are illustrated in Figure 4.

1. Dr. 31 centre of base (CG). There is a stamp centrally placed across the umbo which reads [S]ATURNINI, i.e. die 8c of Saturninus II (Leeds index). Saturninus II worked at Lezoux and there is an example of this stamp from the kilns there. There is no particularly good dating evidence for it but its general site record (which includes forts in north Britain reoccupied c.AD 160, Pudding Pan Rock and the Wroxeter forum destruction) and his use of Dr. 31R, 79R and 80 suggest a date c.AD 165-200.
2. Wall sherd. Probable Dr. 72 but of small type (CG). Incised, or cut glass decoration in the form of a horizontal band of oblique lines and part of a leaf or flower Wheel marks visible in interior. Late 2nd-early 3rd century.
3. Dr. 64 (CG). The very edge of an obliquely placed stamp is present just below the rim. Chocolate brown gloss. Early 2nd century.

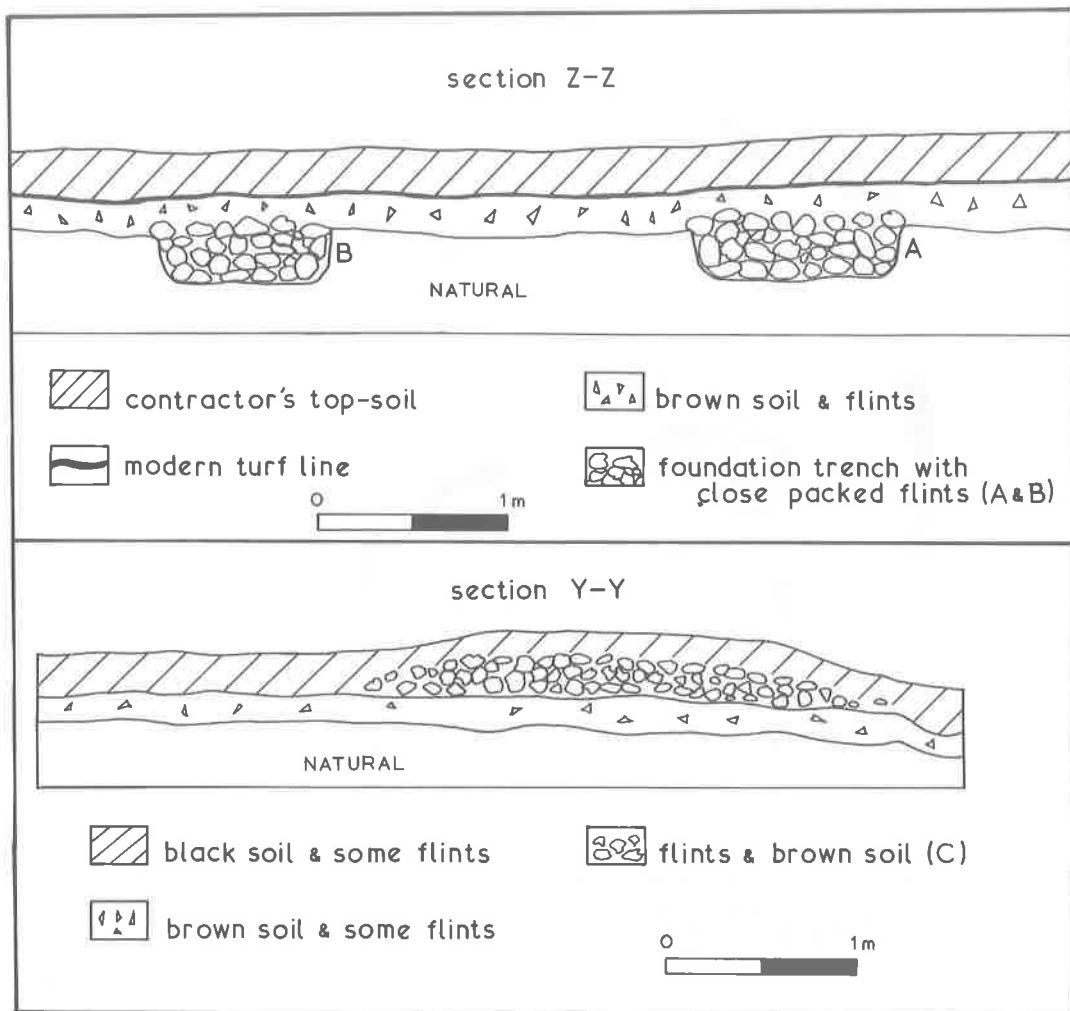


Fig. 3. Excavation sections.

4. Dr. 31 wall sherd. CG. Slightly burnt.
5. Dr. 31 base. CG. Slightly burnt and finger marks in slip near footing.
- 6 & 7. Dr. 31 bases. CG.
- 8 & 9. Dr. 31 rims. CG.
10. Dr. 31 base. CG.
- 11 & 12. Dr. 31 wall sherds. CG. Micaceous fabric.
13. Dr. 31. Very small base fragment. CG.
14. Dr. 31/32, base fragment. CG. Sandy fabric with chalk specks.
15. Dr. 32 base, consisting of 6 fitting sherds. Probably EG. Finger marks in slip near footing.
17. Dr. 35/36 rim. Probably CG. Good shiny gloss. Possibly early 2nd century.
18. Dr. 45 wall sherd. CG. Very worn grits and rubbed gloss.
19. Dr. 46 rim. CG. Micaceous fabric.
20. Dr. 46 rim. CG. Sandy fabric with chalk specks.
21. Flat base of Dr. 32 or 46 type. CG. Micaceous fabric.
22. Unknown form. Wall sherd. CG. Micaceous fabric.
23. Unknown form. Wall sherd. Grey, sandy fabric with a sharply distinguished oxidised periphery. Dull dark red gloss inside and out. This is most likely to be a good quality imitation of a genuine samian fabric.

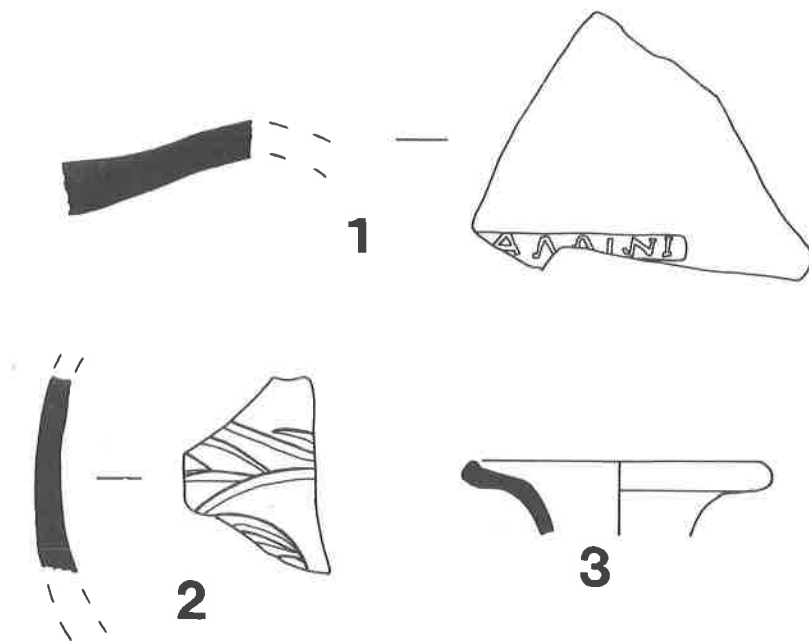


Fig. 4. Samian and glass (scale 1:2).

The Coarse Pottery

by Pauline and Stanley Cauvain

Both fabrics and forms are typical of local Romano-British pottery of the mid-second to mid-third centuries AD. There are many similarities between the pottery forms and fabrics recovered from Bury Farm and those from Latimer (Branigan 1971), also dated to the same period.

A total of 523 sherds were recovered and details of the forms represented appear below:

<i>Form</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>% of total</i>
Jar rims	78	15
Bowl rims	36	7
Mortaria	4	1
Beakers	2	-
Cups	1	-
Lids	2	-
Handle	1	-
Bases	53	10
Body sherds	346	66

Only about 2% of sherds were decorated.

The Illustrated Pottery (fig. 5)

The number in parentheses is the trench number. P = Pipeline find.

1. Plain jar rim in soft, sandy fabric, colour brown/grey. (9).
2. Jar in hard, grey fabric. (2).
3. Jar in hard, brown/grey fabric. (2).
4. Jar in hard fabric with gritty texture, colour brown. (9).
5. Jar in hard, grey fabric. (3).
6. Jar in hard, grey fabric. (6).
7. Jar with flattened rim. Hard fabric, brown/grey colour. (7).
8. Jar in hard fabric with gritty texture. Pinky/buff colour. (P).
9. Large-diameter jar in hard fabric. Red/buff colour (8).
10. Jar in hard fabric with gritty texture, brown colour. (2).
11. Jar in hard fabric with gritty texture, grey colour. (3).
12. Jar in hard fabric, dark grey colour. (2).
13. Jar with recess in rim, hard fabric, light brown in colour. (10).
14. Small bowl. Soft fabric, grey/brown colour. (3).
15. Bowl in hard fabric, red/black colour. (3).
16. Bowl in hard fabric with gritty texture, red/brown colour. (8).

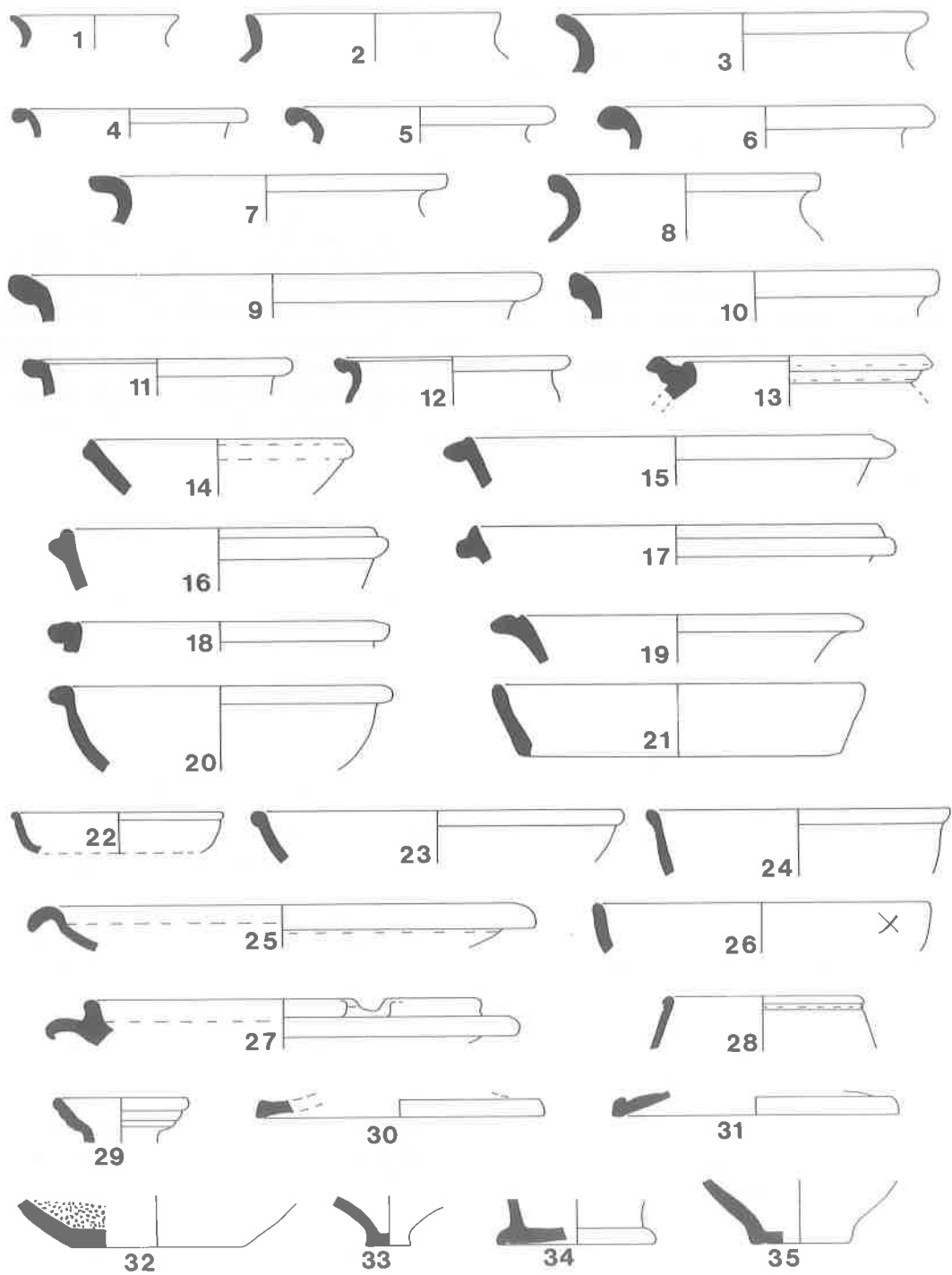


Fig. 5. The coarse pottery (scale 1:4).

17. Flanged bowl in hard fabric, brown/grey colour. (P).
18. Reeded rim bowl in hard fabric with gritty texture. Buff colour. This type was common at Verulamium in the early to middle 2nd century AD. (2).
19. Bowl in hard fabric, brown/black colour. (9).
20. Bowl in hard fabric, brown/grey colour. (2).
21. Pie dish in hard, grey coloured fabric. (9).
22. Small, red colour-coat bowl. (P).
23. Bowl in soft fabric, buff colour with grey core. (2).
24. Bowl in soft, red coloured fabric. (8).
25. Bowl with drooping rim. Soft, red coloured fabric. (2).
26. Open bowl in hard, brown coloured fabric. Crudely marked cross on exterior. (10).
27. Mortarium in hard, creamy coloured fabric. Probably Oxford Ware. (P).
28. Bulbous beaker in soft, pinky buff fabric. This form was common in the 3rd century AD. (4).
29. Flagon rim typical of Hadrianic Period. Hard fabric with gritty texture, brown/black colour. (1).
30. Lid in hard fabric with gritty texture, buff coloured. (8).
31. Lid in hard fabric, buff colour. (P).
32. Base of mortarium in hard, buff coloured fabric. Grits red and pinky-white in colour. (P).
33. Base of poppy beaker. Soft fabric, brown/buff colour. (9).
34. Base of jar in soft, grey coloured fabric. (3).
35. Base of jar in hard, red/buff coloured fabric. (P).
36. Spout in soft fabric. Orange/red colour. (2) (Illustrated in Fig. 6.6)

Metalwork and other small finds (Fig.6)

1. Iron knife blade. (10).
2. Iron chisel or wedge. (10).
3. Iron object with small hole in circular end. (7).
4. Unidentified iron object. (4).
5. Pierced gaming counter made from hard pottery, grey/brown in colour. (3).
7. Tile with keying mark scored on surface. (P).

Glass

by Denise Allen

1. Piece of Roman Prismatic bottle of a type common in the 1st and 2nd century AD. (8). (Not illustrated.)
2. Piece of Roman Prismatic bottle. (2). (Not illustrated.)
3. Roman flask or jug rim, any date from 1st to 4th century AD. (10). Fig. 4.3.

Discussion and conclusions

In attempting to draw a conclusion we are faced with a complete lack of stratigraphical

evidence. All the ancient soil horizons had been removed from the vicinity of the pipeline and the remaining features were all cut into natural. The brown soil with flints represents a modern spread or accumulation. Only four pottery sherds were stratified in the features of the pipeline trench but these were all undecorated body sherds. One, a samian sherd came from P.8 and the other three from P.12; the fabric of the latter is similar to Branigan's TF9 from Latimer (Branigan 1971) and allows a tentative attribution of a late second-/early third-century date. The remaining features in the pipeline trench contained nothing datable. A black, fine-grained soil fill was common to all and it may be inferred that all the features were contemporaneous.

Features A and B in excavation trenches 2 and 3 were foundation trenches aligned on the same axis as features 4 and 5 in the pipeline trench. It seems reasonable that they could have supported the same walls but their respective methods of construction were different. This might indicate an extension of the walls or their reconstruction during a later phase. The evidence is too slight to infer which was the earliest construction phase.

Feature C, in excavation trenches 4 and 5, sealed a brown soil which contained a few sherds of pottery; this feature was not contemporary with the other flint features.

It is unlikely that any building which the sparse remains represent is earlier than the middle of the second century AD since the stone buildings are not known before this time in the Chess and Misbourne valleys. The mid-second century date is supported by the pottery evidence. The nature of any structures remains unclear though it is tempting, but highly speculative, to see the construction as an outer corridor similar to corridor 25 at Latimer (Branigan 1971).

Acknowledgements

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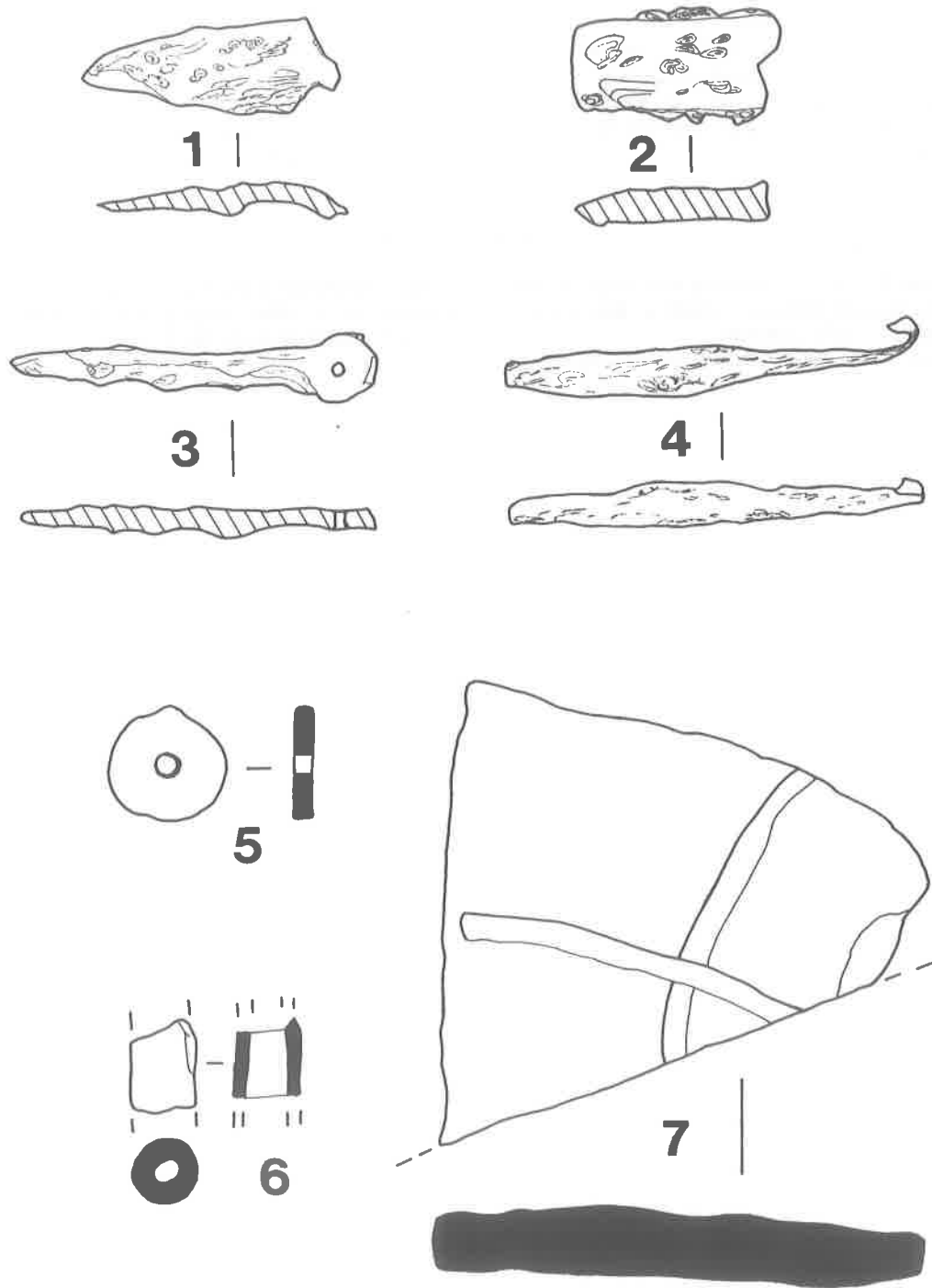


Fig. 6. The metalwork and other finds (scale 1:2).

and for his assistance in back-filling the trenches. The excavation was directed by Mr D. W. Humphreys, who also observed and recorded the contractors' excavations. The drawings were executed by Pauline and Stanley Cauvain.

Identification of the bone was carried out by Juliet Jewell of the British Museum (Natural History).

The finds and original notes are deposited with the County Museum, Aylesbury.

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