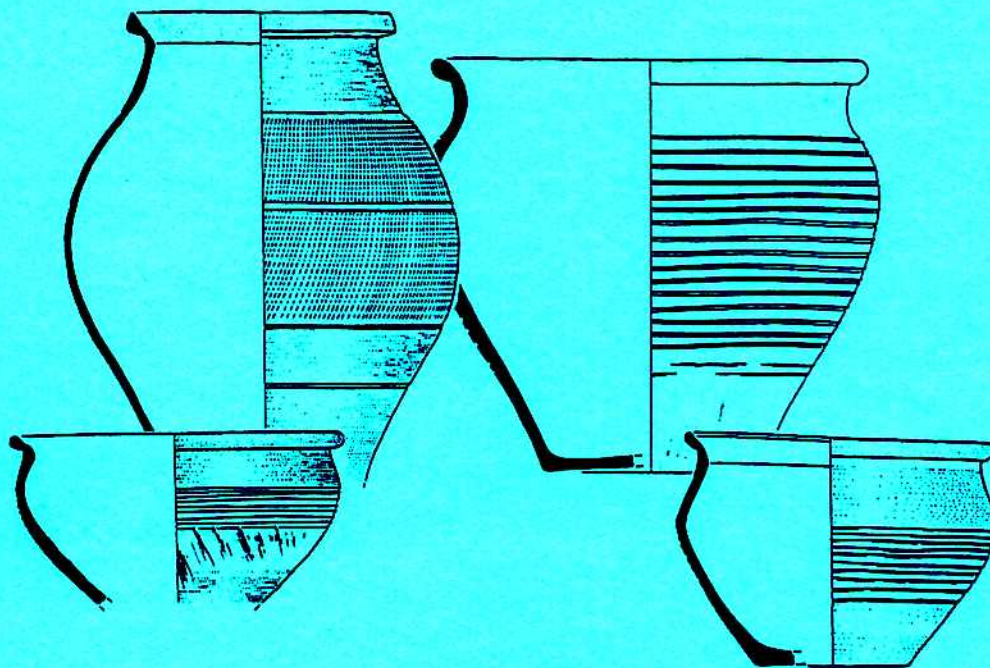




NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL



**The Investigation of a Late Iron Age Pit,
37/39, The Twitchell,
Baldock, Hertfordshire**

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**The Investigation of a
Late Iron Age Pit,
37/39, The Twitchell, Baldock,
Hertfordshire**

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Acknowledgements

It is with grateful thanks that the North Hertfordshire District Council Museums Field Archaeology Section is able to publicly acknowledge Mr. and Mrs. D Cordy firstly for alerting the archaeologists to their find and, secondly, for their enthusiastic support and that of their family and neighbours during the short period of archaeological investigation.

Late Iron Age pottery and animal bone was recovered from part of a chalk cut feature exposed in a hand dug foundation trench for a rear of house extension in 1996. The nature of the pottery deposit, composition and position within the ancient settlement, led to the possibility of the material being evidence for a ritual or ceremonial act.

Introduction

On Monday 9th September 1996, Mr. D Cordy, the owner of number 37, The Twitchell, Baldock, telephoned the NHDC Field Archaeology Section office saying that his wife thought that they had unearthed human bones in their back garden while excavating the foundation trench for an extension to their house. Mark Stevenson, one of the Council's archaeologists, immediately visited the site, establishing that the bone was animal. However, it was apparent that the trench had cut into a pit containing a significant quantity of pottery, including a number of fairly complete but shattered vessels, all apparently dating from the Late Iron Age, just before the Roman invasion of Britain in AD 43.

It was decided to hand excavate the remaining fill of the pit within the trench and to make a record of the sample acquired.

The following day, a soakaway was cut in the adjacent garden, revealing part of the same pit, which provided material for a further sample and also assisted in determining the form of the feature.

It was evident that the pit contained an important group of pottery vessels from a single context which would be worthy of study.

Background

The discovery of Roman pottery by Mr. Hart, the tenant farmer on Walls Field, east of the Clothall Road, in the early 1920s, led the then curator of Letchworth Museum, Percival Westell, to conduct several seasons of excavation at the southeastern end of the field from 1925 to 1930, where he came across a substantial Romano-British cemetery. The pottery cremation urns, associated pottery and glass vessels, together with other artifacts recovered from the hundreds of burials excavated, became part of the Letchworth Museum collection, where many are still on display. As a result of Westell's work, the existence of the ancient settlement at Baldock was established and Walls Field was later given legal protection as a Scheduled Ancient Monument from 1946 onwards.

Small-scale work continued in the early 1930s towards the other end of the field and also just beyond where houses were to be built in Grosvenor Road. There then followed a long period when no formal archaeological work was undertaken in Baldock, although casual discoveries were reported on occasion to Letchworth Museum. Then, in December 1967, a housing development in The Tene, so named from Roman burials revealed in 1947, disturbed an Iron Age 'Chieftain's' burial. This discovery was followed by several years, from January 1968 to summer 1972, of large-scale archaeological excavations by a team from the then Ministry of Public Building and Works, under the direction of Dr. Ian Stead. They observed and recorded building works in the area nearest to Pinnocks Lane and initiated exploratory trenching in the north of the development site. It was then that the second Romano-British cemetery for Baldock was confirmed by the discovery of skeletons in the footings for a group of bungalows in The Tene on the site of the 1947 burials. In 1969 Dr. Stead next conducted a programme of exploratory trenching across Upper Walls Common (now Clothall Common estate), in advance of proposed housing development, although house construction did not in fact commence until 1982! Clothall Road was also to be widened and so again archaeological trenching was undertaken, exposing sections of roads within the ancient settlement, boundary ditches, burials and other features. From 1970 to 1972, very large areas of the settlement were excavated both on Walls Field and Upper Walls Common.

From 1978 to 1994, teams of archaeologists from North Hertfordshire Museums, and involving volunteers from the North Hertfordshire Archaeological Society, led by Gil Burleigh, the Council's Keeper of Field Archaeology, continued excavations in Baldock, some small in scale, others very large indeed, each adding new information to what has now become a detailed picture of the Iron Age and Romanised settlement.

By 1993, about 14.66 acres (5.93 hectares), had been excavated and about 60.75 acres (24.6 hectares), surveyed by means of geophysics, so that the total area investigated was c.66.6 acres (26.97 hectares), possibly half of the entire settlement, making Baldock probably one of the most thoroughly investigated Romano-British settlements of its type.

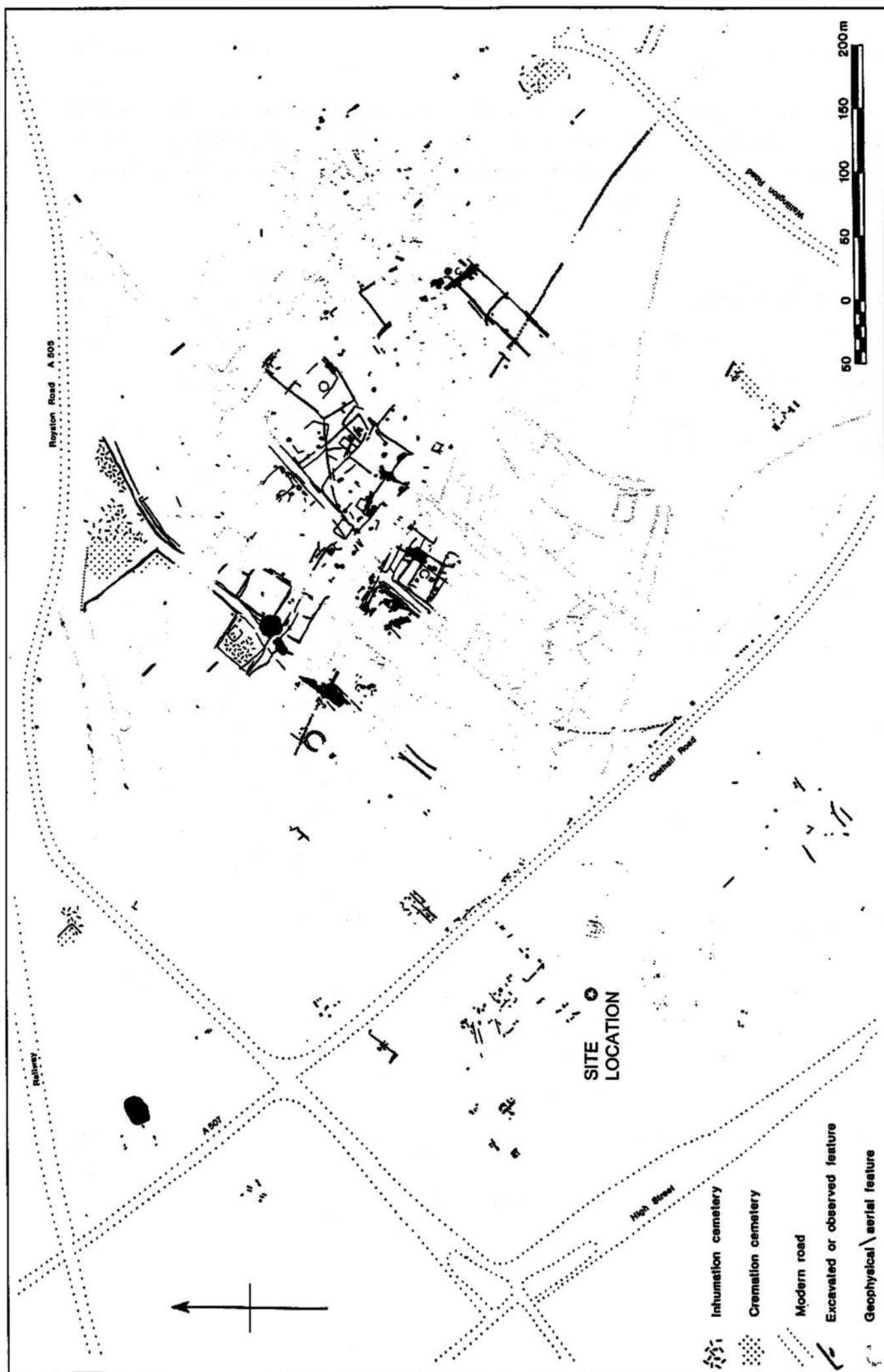
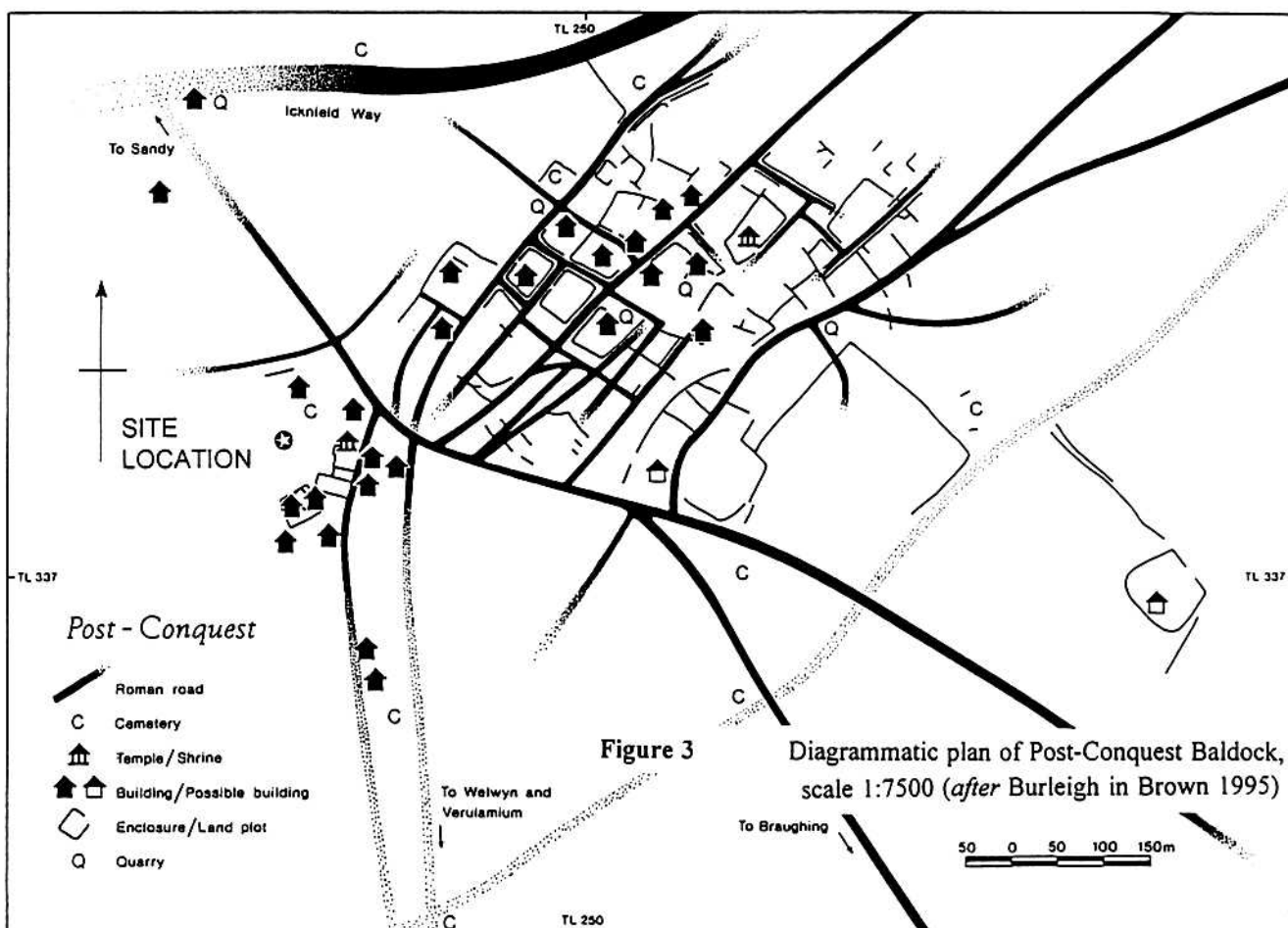
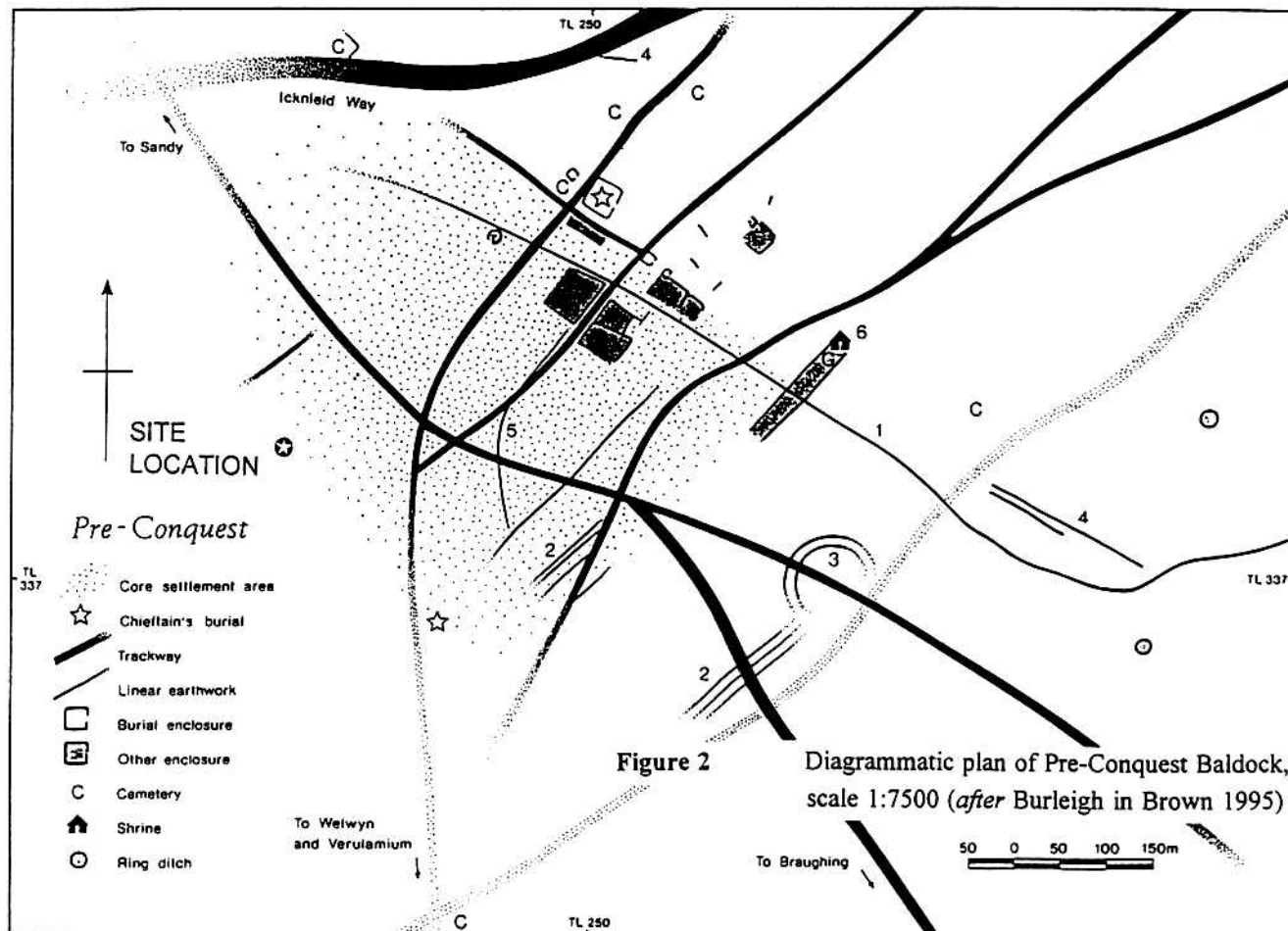


Figure 1 Archaeological plan of ancient Baldock, scale 1:4000 (after Burleigh in Brown 1995)



The settlement

The ancient settlement of Baldock was situated on the northern edge of a chalk ridge which is the Chilterns to the west and to the east, the East Anglian Heights. Running along the northern face of this high ground is the Icknield Way, upon which the town is situated. Baldock grew at the junction between this ancient east to west route and possibly two other tracks, one that ran from Welwyn and Verulamium (St. Albans), and thus to Londinium, and the other linking Baldock to Braughing and Camulodunum (Colchester) beyond, before continu-

ing north from Baldock to Sandy, Godmanchester, Lincoln, and eventually Eboracum (York). The springs which are the source of the river Ivel were obviously also an attraction to human settlement.

The Romano-British settlement is classified as a 'small town', and of a type that was not enclosed by walls or ramparts during its later history.

The maximum area occupied by the Romano-British settlement was probably c.100-150 acres (40 to 60 hectares) by the 2nd century AD; contracting perhaps to as little as 70 acres (28 hectares) by the 4th century.

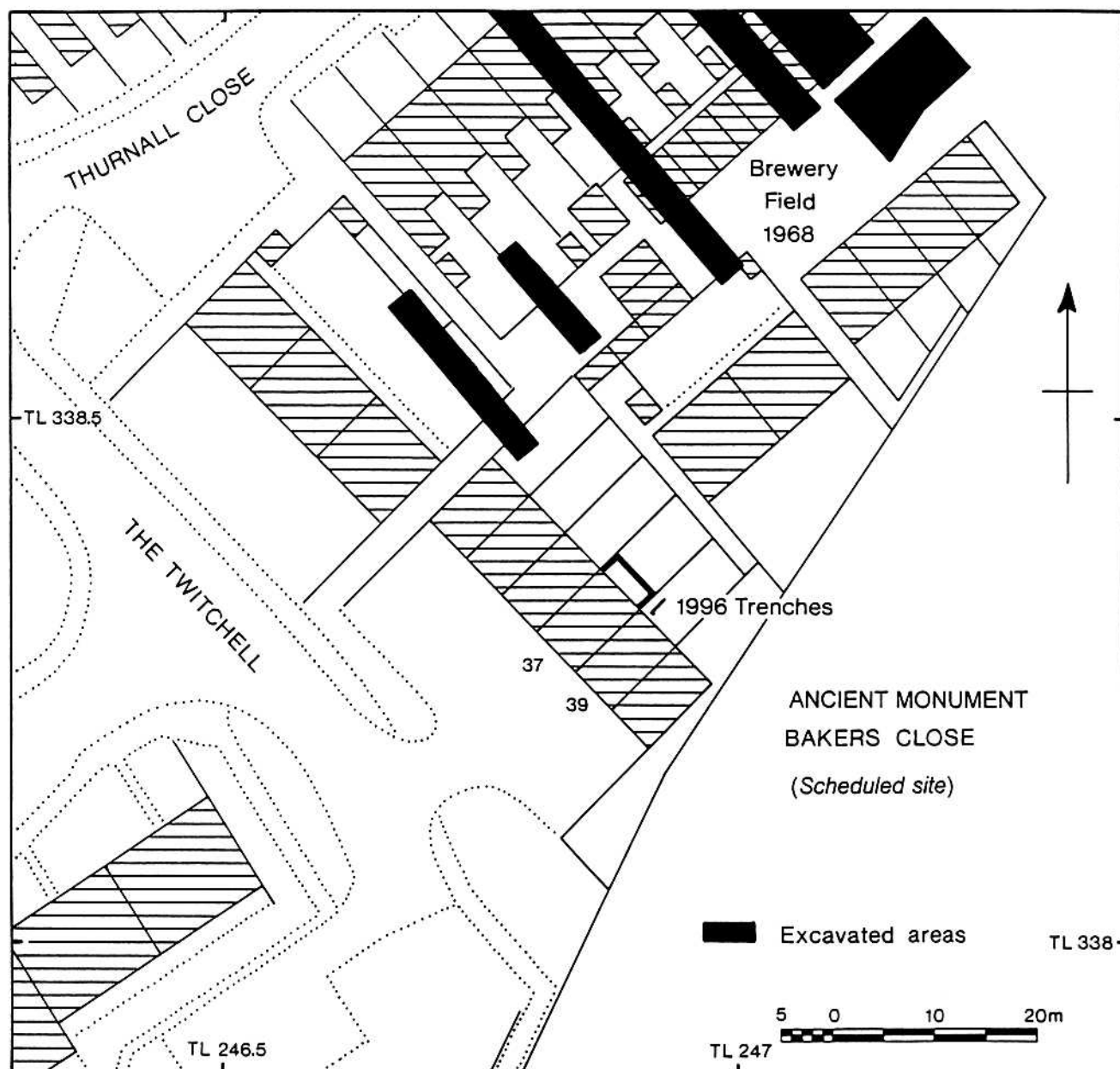


Figure 4 Localised Archaeological Environs plan, scale 1:625

Relationship of pit to settlement

The published plan of Baldock is reproduced here to enable the position of the feature in relation to the wider settlement to be clearly demonstrated. (Figure 1) The location is repeated on both of the diagrammatic plans for the Iron Age and Romano-British periods that show also the projected development of the town as currently understood. (Figures 2 and 3)

The detailed plans predominantly show pits and ditches, defining enclosures and roads within the settlement. Some of the enclosures would have penned livestock, others would be market gardening or for light industry, such as butchery, tanning, malting and brewing, smithing, etc., with others for domestic occupation, while some were used for religious and burial functions.

The housing in The Twitchell lies on an area which was known as Brewery Field since it was used for grazing the horses belonging to Pryor's/Simpson's Brewery in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The brewery stood on the High Street until its demolition in 1968. Brewery Field was the subject of an excavation in 1968 by the then curator of Letchworth Museum, John Moss-Eccardt. The excavation revealed a sequence of property boundaries on either side of a Roman road with flanking ditches within the area of the ancient settlement. In addition, part of the main road through Roman Baldock from Braughing to Sandy and beyond was exposed, running parallel to the present Clothall Road, beneath which was recorded a sequence of Iron Age rubbish pits.

To the immediate southeast of The Twitchell is a recreation field called Baker's Close. Following the discovery in 1982 on an aerial photograph of the masonry foundations of a Romano-Celtic temple and a winged house, the field was legally protected as a designated Scheduled Ancient Monument. Subsequent survey work between 1985 and 1995, particularly during the dry summers of 1990 and 1995, when the grass became extremely parched over buried stone walls and cobbled surfaces, revealed a great deal of additional information. New discoveries included buildings, walled enclosures, and a major road running through the field, connecting the Romanised line of the Icknield Way to the north, through the Hartsfield School area, with The Tene area and beyond to the southwest.

Research so far indicates that the field has never been ploughed, raising the possibility that some masonry foundations might survive to as much as about one metre in height. Baker's Close contains some of the best preserved Roman remains in the region, and it is a feature in which Baldock residents may take pride. Hopefully, they and the Local Authority, as landowner, will cherish and protect it for future generations.

The position of the pit falls between the southern extent of the Brewery Field excavation and Baker's Close, providing a further glimpse of the type of evidence that could be available from the legally protected site.

The Pit

Hand excavation of the pit fill within the foundation trench and the adjacent soakaway, indicated that the feature was sub-rectangular in plan, orientated north-south, and a minimum of 3.5m in length, c.1.5m wide and c.0.73m in depth from present day ground surface, with evidence to show that it was cut c.0.28m into the chalk. The level of evidence meant that an alternative interpretation could be that the feature was the end of a ditch, which may have defined an entrance to an enclosure, giving a possible explanation for the occurrence of relatively complete but shattered pottery vessels. The difficulty with such an interpretation would be the profile of the feature. The portion excavated indicated that it was steep sided with a broad flat base, in contrast to the common 'V'- or 'U'-shaped ditches.

The orientation of the feature placed it at right-angles to the road recorded in the Brewery Field excavations, to suggest that if it was not a boundary ditch of some description, then it was possibly a pit related to roadside occupation.

The sequence of layers within the pit, or stratification, could be best seen in the northeastern side of the trench. At the junction of the layers was a particular concentration of discarded pottery, below which, within the angle of the foundation trench, were planned three fairly complete pottery vessels recorded as A, B and C, of which B was inverted. Animal bone was also collected from the feature, predominantly from the primary fill and particularly from the southwestern portion. Additional bone was also recovered from the southwestern end of the soakaway.

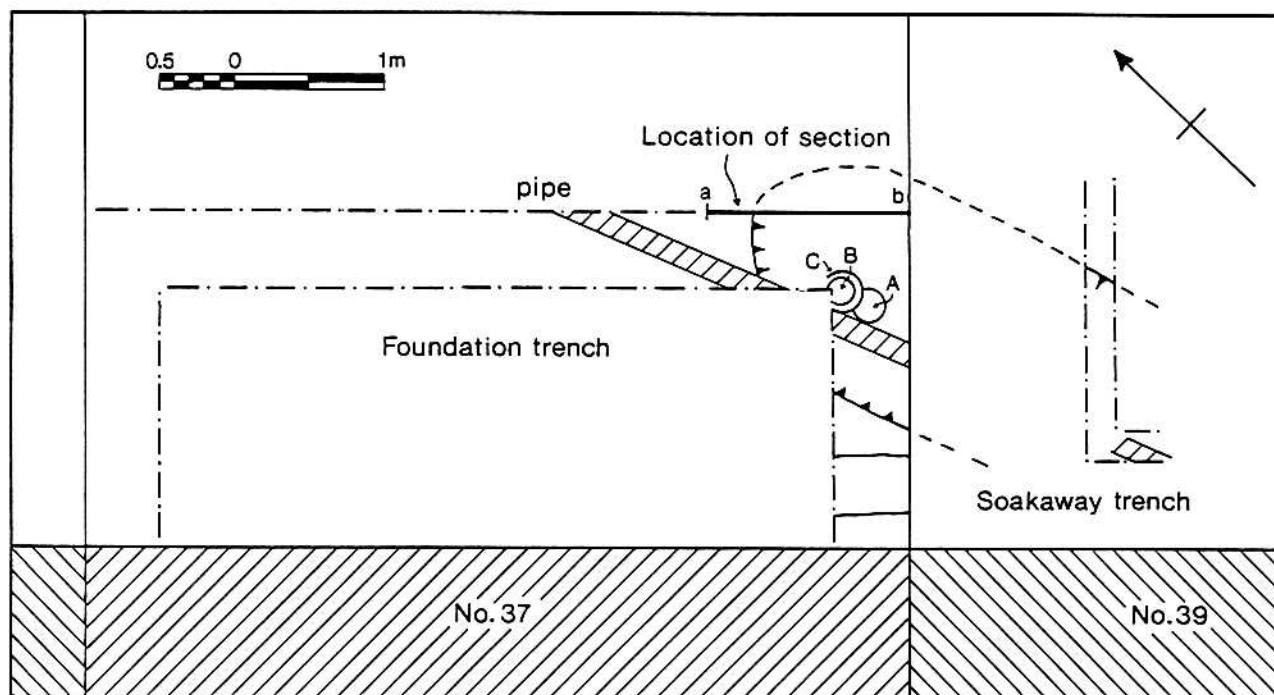
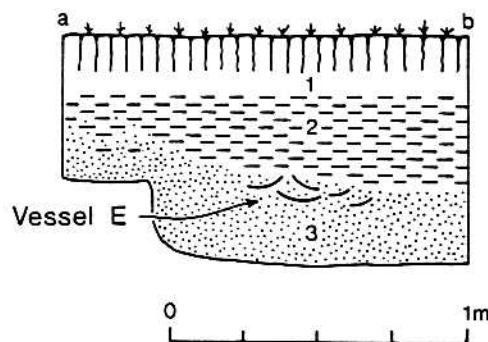


Figure 5 Trench plan and section, plan scale 1:50; section scale 1:25

Pottery

7.759 kgs of pottery was recovered from the foundation and soakaway trenches, related to the underlying feature, of which 5.73 kgs (73.8%), was identified by fabric. The remaining material was fragmentary and would have produced no additional useful information for the effort that would have been required.

Only a small portion of the feature was accessible for excavation, therefore all material collected can only be regarded as a sample with limitations upon interpretation.

The majority of pottery recovered was related to either the horizon between the two layers within the feature, or below.

A primary interest was the identification of near complete vessels within the assemblage.

Vessel B was inverted over vessel C that had vessel A against its southeastern side. The remaining vessels were recovered from the lower fill or at the horizon with the later layer as was the case with vessels G and F. Handle, I, was recovered south of the main cluster in the primary layer.

Dating

A feature can only be dated by its contents and the projected dates for features that it cuts or is cut by. Dating some items may be impossible beyond suggesting the Romano-British period, while other objects, by combining stylistic developments in combination with other known dated contexts can be quite closely dated. Brooches, for example, can often give a narrow date range, while coins of known precise dates can only give date of manufacture, not deposition. Dating pottery is often a difficult task, with a range of factors that individually can change the projected date for the feature, not least the calculation of the period of use

before discard, whether through accidental damage or deliberate intent. Often, archaeologists are in the habit of considering earlier peoples to have been a throw away society, like ourselves. However, this was often not the case. As now, certain items would have held special meaning, possibly being handed down from generation to generation before becoming part of an archaeological deposit. On occasion even when pottery has been broken it has been repaired with lead staples. Pottery could therefore survive in circulation for several decades beyond the ending of production. Therefore the suggested date for individual items by specialists has to be tempered when endeavouring to determine the likely date range over which the material accumulated within the feature.

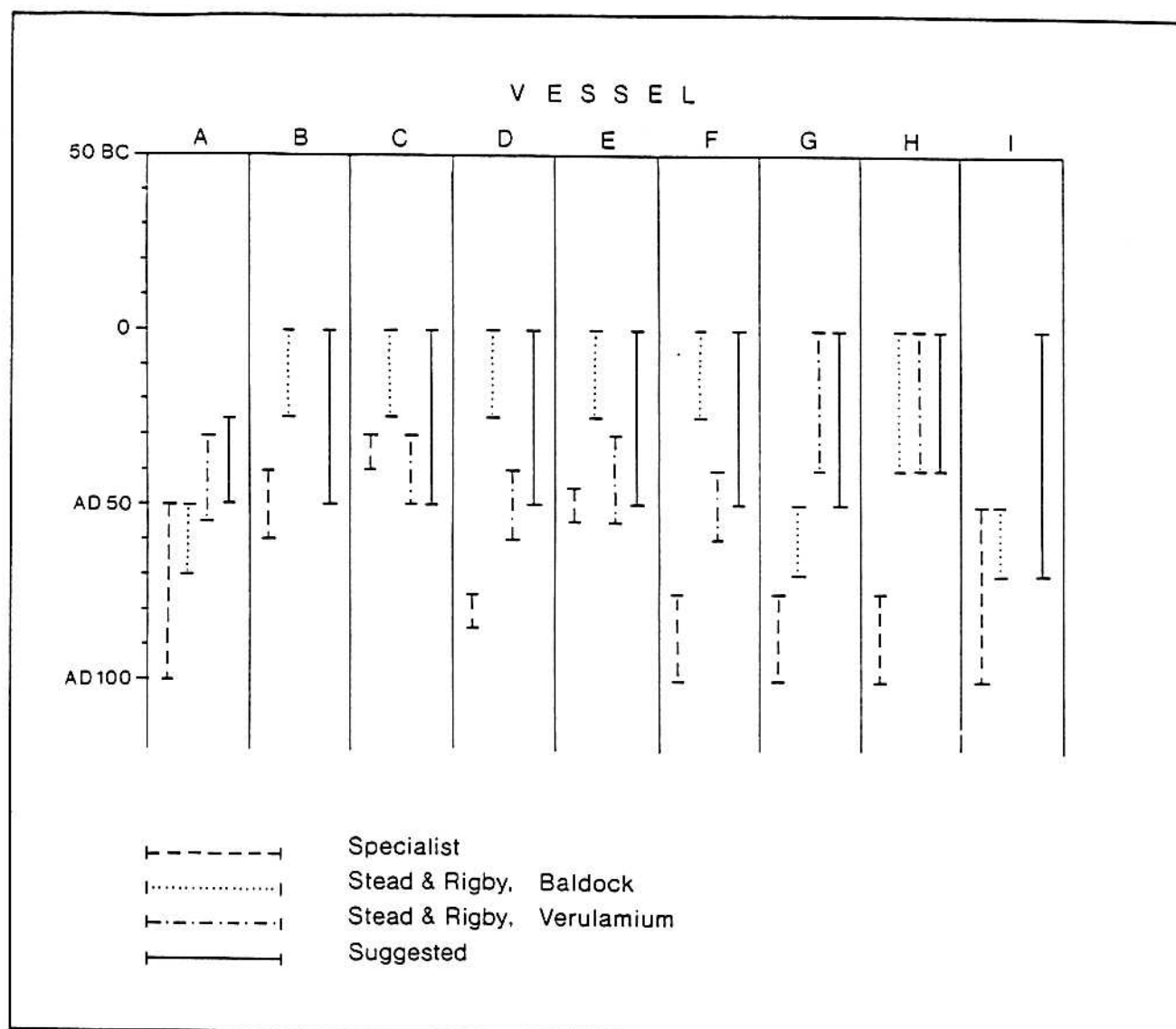


Chart 1 'Complete' pottery vessel date ranges

In suggesting dates for the pottery, Jane Read consulted Helen Ashworth's fabric series for North Hertfordshire, together with the in-depth analysis by Valery Rigby of the pottery from Stead's Baldock excavations, published in 1986. However, the author of the publication subsequently produced a second publication (1989), but for an excavation at Verulamium (St Albans), where many of the vessels paralleled in the Baldock volume, have invariably had their dates revised either way by c.20-30 years.

The above chart illustrates the difference in projected dates for each vessel alongside the suggested dating by the author (JR).

It can be seen from the table that the date spans suggested can vary considerably or occasionally, such as vessels C, H and E correlate almost exactly. The suggested span per vessel is mostly 50 years but possibly on occasion only 25 years.

Collectively the assemblage suggests a date between 0 and AD 50, with handle I having a suggested span predating both the specialist and the example cited in the Report on Baldock by Stead and Rigby. The fabric, whether 6 or 7 is for the period AD 0-50, with the form paralleled in the report on the excavations conducted at Colchester (Camulodunum), confirming that the distinctive pottery was exclusively pre AD50. The report was published in 1947 and a lot of reassessment, research and new excavations has blurred such definitive statements regarding precise dating. However the general thrust holds for a date in the first half of the first century AD.

The date for the pit derived from the pottery analysis is suggested to occur c.20 years after the possible earliest production date for the pottery, but before the Conquest, after which the inclusion of Roman imports would have been expected. This provides a probable date for the deposition of the pottery in the pit of c.AD 25-40.

Animal Bone

A quantity of fragmented animal bone was collected with the pottery, representing a number of species, suggesting that this material was simply deposited as part of the back-filling of the pit; unlike the pottery, it did not seem to be a ritual deposit, although this possibility cannot be ruled out entirely. It had been hoped that a specialist would have been able to make a preliminary examination of the material, hence the delay in producing this report, but this has not proved possible.

Conclusions

Recorded from the excavations between 1968-72 were 226 features containing complete or shattered but 'present' pottery vessels, of which only 19 were for the period up to AD50. Of the 19 features identified, only 2 were pits, with the remainder being either ditches or gullies. Figures are not available for subsequent excavations but there is no reason to suppose the ratios would be significantly altered. Therefore to have 7 'complete' vessels from one feature and for it to be of the pre-Conquest period is archaeologically significant.

The possible sub rectangular pit was 1.5 metres wide and at least 3.5 metres long. Given such dimensions, the sample from the foundation trench and adjacent soakaway represents a maximum of c.29%. Statistically a working minimum would be 20%, therefore the recovered material represents a valid sample. If the feature was significantly longer, the relevance of the sample would diminish to a point where it would not be viable. It is, however, unlikely that the pit would have exceeded a length of 5.05m, based on known pit forms from the excavation work conducted in Baldock.

The fine wares represented by the group are indicative of the sophistication of some Late Iron Age peoples, with fine ware, particularly that imported from Gaul(France), being 'expensive' and 'out of the reach' of the major part of the population. The range of forms occurring in the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age, points to an expansion of possible vessel functions and elaborate ritual involving the sharing and distribution of food and drink at the social level. The fact that apparently 'complete' vessels are then discarded in the way observed may never be satisfactorily explained. However, the proximity of the site to a temple within the scheduled area of Baker's Close, may provide a clue as to who had access to this special, possibly highly restricted, area of the settlement. What is clear is that the deposit was deliberate, with the main vessels being included at or about the same time. It is likely that the vessels may have been carefully placed in the pit after they had been used in a communal or family ritual ceremony or feast, or alternatively at the end of their usage in a series of such events, maybe during a period of some years. By burying the vessels, they were ritually 'killed' and could not be used again.

The importance of the information recovered is proof that even very small scale building work can provide a great deal of archaeological information which could so easily pass unnoticed and unrecorded. In this case, we are grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Cordy for bringing their discovery to our attention.

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Appendices

i

Soil Descriptions

section layer 1: Modern subsoil.

layer 2: Light to mid grey brown compact silt clay containing 5% chalk lumps c.10mm.

layer 3: Mid to dark brown grey compact silt loam containing 1% chalk lumps c.5mm.

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Pottery Fabric Descriptions

The fabric series for Colchester, produced in the 1940s, was developed by Val Rigby between 1968 and 1972 for the processing of over two tons of pottery recovered during Dr. Stead's excavation programme at Baldock. In the period 1985-89, the series was both extended and then revised by Helen Ashworth for processing another two tons plus of pottery recovered from Gil Burleigh's excavation programme. The identification of the fabric of a vessel, when combined with its form, is a powerful tool in dating the object and, by association, the possible date of the context from which the object was recovered. What follows is an extract from the current fabric list of the types present in the assemblage. The analytical study of the pottery from this pit has been undertaken by Jane Read, using the earlier works of Hawkes and Hull, Rigby and Ashworth. Where the text of the present report refers to 'pottery specialist', this means Jane Read.

- | | |
|----------|--|
| Fabric 2 | <p>Sandy-textured, heavily tempered with grog; also some organic inclusions. Grey or brown core - though colour can vary from buff to black - with grey or brown surfaces. Bonfire-fired, but often with short period of oxidation. Handmade and wheel-thrown vessels. 'Fine' wares and combed 'cooking-pots'. Source: Locally made, probably some from the Hadham area.</p> <p><i>Date:</i> Mid first century BC to mid first century AD.</p> |
| Fabric 3 | <p>Sandy textured matrix, tempered with coarse quartz sand, some grog, organic, flint or shell inclusions, some pebble-sized. Usually oxidised to orange or orange-brown surfaces with blue or grey core. Usually handmade and bonfire-fired. Colours range from red to grey. Mostly cooking pots.</p> <p><i>Date:</i> Late Pre-Roman Iron Age.</p> |
| Fabric 4 | <p>Shelly wares: Sandy-textured matrix heavily tempered with shell, up to 5mm in length. Early vessels were bonfire-fired, surfaces oxidised when fuel spent; orange-red in first century AD; yellowish-buff or light orange in second century; later pots variegated pink/grey. Shell temper suggests source in Lias clays of Lower Jurassic. Handmade and wheel thrown. Basic cooking pots, storage jars, dishes and bowls. Early versions had several sources. From the mid-second century on they became increasingly standardised</p> <p><i>Source:</i> Perhaps a single large-scale regional production.</p> <p><i>Date:</i> First to fourth century AD.</p> |
| Fabric 5 | <p>Yellow-buff fine wares: Fine sandy, micaceous wares with incidental grog and organic grits and natural grey pellets. Often with dark grey or blue core and oxidised orange-buff surfaces. Can be totally reduced. Used for wheel thrown copies of imported fine table wares e.g. girth and butt beakers and platters.</p> <p><i>Source:</i> Similarities with Fabric 11 suggest the Much Hadham area as the source.</p> <p><i>Date:</i> Mid to late first century AD.</p> |

- Fabric 6 Fine white sandy wares: fairly iron-free clay matrix, tempered with fine quartz sand. Occasional grog grits and clay pellets. Wheel thrown, usually white, sometimes with smoky grey or mauve haze over exterior, or with pink tones. The grog inclusions streak the surfaces with a burnished finish. Used for butt beakers - Camulodunum Form 113.
- Source:* Northern Gaul?
- Date:* early to mid first century AD.
- Fabric 7 Fine white pipeclay wares: Fine-grained iron-free white clay with occasional grog grits or iron pellets, well levigated. Also less pure, creamier-coloured version. Used for large flagons, Camulodunum Forms 140, 161 and 163.
- Source:* Northern Gaul.
- Date:* early to mid first century AD.
- Fabric 8 Gritty-textured grog-tempered wares: Sandy matrix with coarse sand tempering with additional grog temper and occasional translucent brown quartz grits. Usually fired grey or brown, frequently with a very dark grey core; also some lighter red-brown versions. Handmade or handmade/wheel finished vessels.
- Source:* Locally made.
- Date:* Mid to late first century AD.
- Fabric 11 Fine sand-tempered grey wares: Even textured fine sand tempered micaceous ware. Usually self-coloured grey or blue-grey, more rarely grey-black or orange. One version fired to produce dark sooty finish, similar to Black Burnished ware from Dorset (not present). Also various slips used to produce different colours.
- A with thin white slip on exterior only.
- B with dark blue micaceous slip over exterior.
- C with grey black slip over whole vessel.
- Used for wheel-thrown vessels, but not cooking pots. The most common Romano-British ware.
- Source:* Probably local, from the Much Hadham area.
- Date:* In use from the late first to fourth century AD.
- Fabric 12 Coarse sand-tempered grey and red wares: Coarser version of Fabric 11. Fine micaceous sand matrix, heavily tempered with coarse sand grits and occasionally with grog grits. Sometimes has white slip on the exterior. Usually self-coloured grey or blue-grey, more rarely orange. Cooking pots.
- Source:* Locally made, perhaps from the Much Hadham area.
- Date:* Late first to fourth century AD.
- Fabric TN Terra Nigra: Gallo-Belgic ware (black pottery), ranges from iron-free to iron-rich matrix and sandy texture to fine-grained and smooth with varying quantities of grog grits with colour varying from bluish-white to dark blue-grey. Generally the larger the vessel the lighter the matrix and the sandier the texture.
- Source:* Gaul.
- Date:* c.15 BC-AD 55.

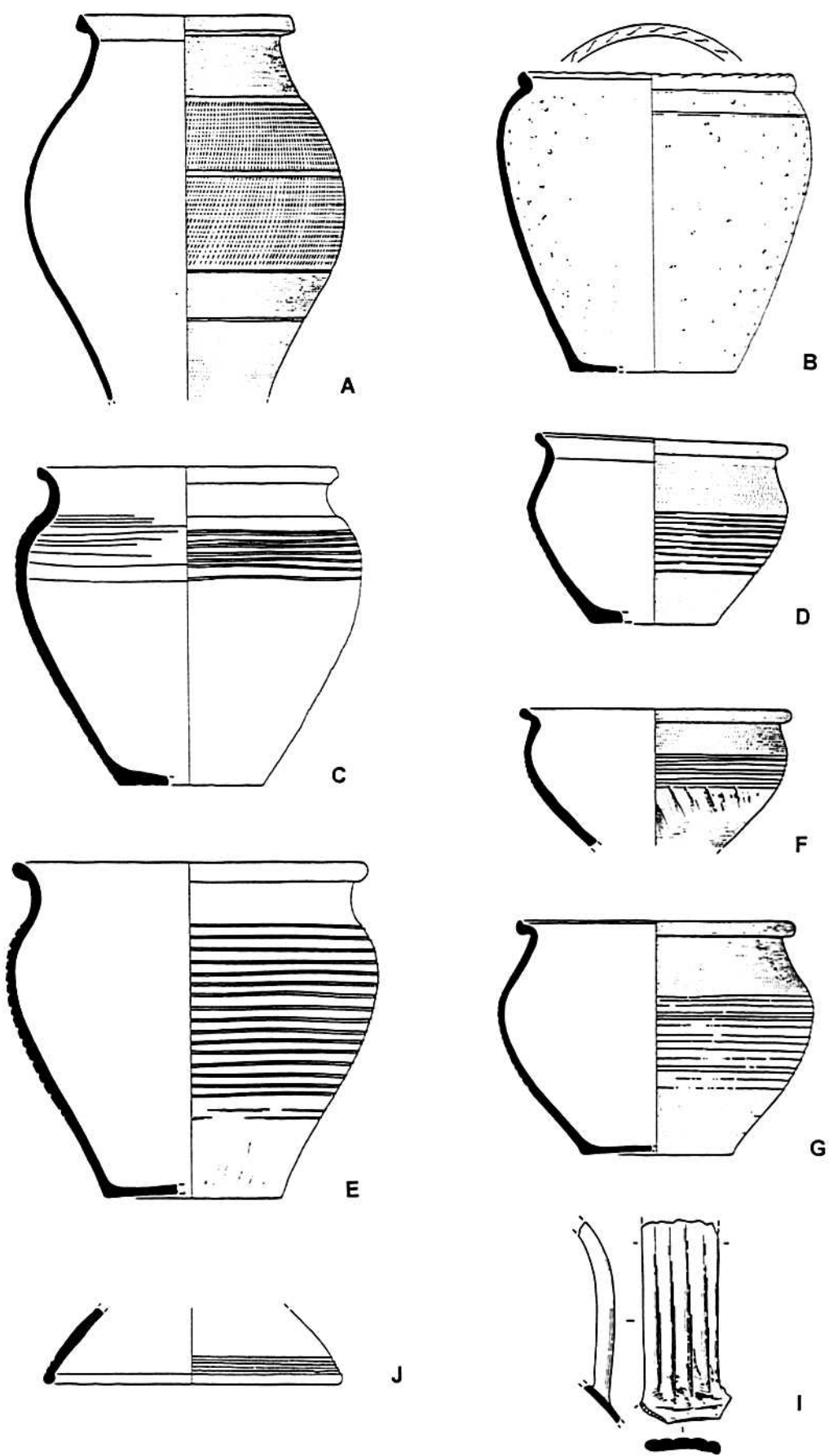


Figure 6 Pottery reconstructions, scale 1:4

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Individual Pottery Descriptions - the main vessels recovered from the pit

vessel A	Fabric 2:	About 50% complete. Butt beaker. Grog-tempered, soot discoloured indicating use. Burnished above and below band of near vertical combing. Also burnished inside rim. S&R no.184. <i>Date:</i> Mid - late first century AD.
vessel B	Fabric 4:	About 90% complete. Lid-seated jar. Rim has slashed decoration. Vessel well used suggested by extensive sooting. Damage half way up vessel wall may be deliberate. S&R no.222. <i>Date:</i> Mid first century AD.
vessel C	Fabric 2:	About 50% complete. Jar with everted rim. Common form occurring throughout the Roman period but this vessel is pre-Roman conquest in date. S&R no.125. <i>Date:</i> c.AD30-40.
vessel D	Fabric 8:	About 70% complete. Bowl-jar. Well sooted both inside and out, again indicating considerable use. Bands of burnishing on exterior. S&R no.216. <i>Date:</i> c.AD80.
vessel E	Fabric 2:	About 50% complete. Rilled jar with everted rim. Heavily spalled interior resulting either from use or from acidic soil action. Finger marks visible on exterior near base where surface has been smoothed. S&R no.125, Thompson C7-1. <i>Date:</i> Mid first century AD.
vessel F	Fabric 8:	About 30% complete. Well used, indicated by the smoke discolouration both inside and out. Finger marks present on exterior. Burnished above band of rilling and also near base. S&R no.216. <i>Date:</i> Late 1st century AD.
vessel G	Fabric 8:	About 25% complete. The body of the vessel is possibly hand made and wheel finished but the rim is definitely wheel made. Burnished above and below wide band of rilling. S&R no.244. <i>Date:</i> Late first century AD.
vessel H	Fabric 8:	Rim only, c.60%, extending to top of shoulder rilling in places. Jar with everted rim. Spalled inside caused either by use or by action from acidic soil. S&R no.125. <i>Date:</i> Late 1st century AD. <i>Not illustrated</i>
vessel I	Fabric 6/7:	Handle from large flagon. Finger mark where surface has been smoothed. Camulodunum type. <i>Date:</i> Mid to late first century AD.
vessel J	Fabric 8:	About 5% complete. Lid. S&R no.198 closest parallel. <i>Date:</i> Late first century AD.

iv

*Pottery weights*a weights by fabric

fabric:	2	3140gms	(includes vessels: A=700, C=1005, C=930)
	3	14	
	4	1001	(includes vessel: B=985)
	5	2	
	6/7	105	(includes vessel: I=105)
	7	2	
	8	1423	(includes vessel: D=520, F=185, G=415, H=160, J=30)
	11	3	
	?12	12	
	TN	12	
		5730 gms	

b counts and weights of unsorted sherds

	Rim	Base	Body: <i>plain</i>	<i>decor.</i>	Total weight
Soakaway trench:					
<i>pit fill</i>	2	1	24	13	487
Main trench:					
? <i>NE edge of pit</i>	4	3	13	2	202
<i>SE end of pit</i>	3	2	9	4	230
<i>E end of pit, upper fill</i>	1	-	2	3	55
<i>E-W trench, upper fill</i>	2	2	25	14	470
<i>N end, pit fill</i>	-	1	2	2	45
<i>lower fill below vessel B</i>	1	-	-	2	115
<i>upper fill above vessel C</i>	1	1	5	-	70
<i>S end, lower fill</i>	5	1	21	10	355
					2029 gms

v

*Animal Bone*general weights (unwashed)

	<i>weight</i>
Upper fill from E-W trench - general.	1110
From furthest extremity of pit - ?NE side.	150
Lower fill, S end of trench.	235
Main pit fill, N end.	15
Soakaway trench - pit fill.	520
Main pit fill, SE end.	310
	2340 gms

vi

Metalwork

Upper fill from E-W trench - general.

1 iron nail

Lower fill, S end of trench.

1 iron nail

vii

Charcoal

Upper fill, above vessel C.

6 gms

viii

Daub

Daub was present but small and fragmented when handled