

A Roman Pottery Kiln at Sulehay near Yarwell

by John Hadman and Stephen Upex

In April 1974 Mr D. A. Harrison working for Stonehill Quarries, Yarwell, cut through a feature containing large quantities of broken pottery. The find was brought to the notice of the writers who were given permission to make a brief examination of the feature. The area in question was on a quarry edge (TL 060991), close to a point described by the Ordnance Survey as the 'site of a Roman Villa'.

It was immediately evident that a pottery kiln has been partially destroyed by quarrying. Spoil dragged back by the machine contained large quantities of black ash and pottery. Only a small part of the kiln wall remained *in situ* in the quarry face. The kiln was dug into loose shaley limestone which had protected it from plough damage. Lying 20cm beneath the surface of the topsoil, the kiln must have been almost intact before the quarrying operations. A mass of broken kiln furniture was associated with it. This comprised large pieces of firebars and oven-floor, together with large quantities of broken curved clay 'dome-plates', grey in colour, and quite different in character from the lining of the kiln. The clay plates were up to 2cm thick and included much vegetable matter, mainly grasses and straw.

The orientation of the kiln seemed to be east-west, with the stokehole facing east. The chamber itself had been pear-shaped, the narrow end forming the flue. The north-south internal diameter of the chamber was 1.05 metres and the average thickness of the kiln-lining was 5cm. The east-west diameter may be estimated at about 1.20 metres; but the machine-cut prevented accurate measurement of this.

The machine had left little evidence of the base of the chamber floor (*c.* 75cm deep); but there was a thin layer of black ash on the very edge of the chamber, left in the section. Under this was 3cm of the flooring of the kiln, which seemed to have been laid down in the same 'smear' of clay as the kiln walls; for there was no break between floor and kiln-lining. Backing both was a thin layer of unburnt clay resting against the limestone into which the kiln had been cut. There was no evidence of a pedestal of any kind, and it was difficult to see how the oven floor could have been supported by the walls of the kiln.

The kiln is in an area which has produced a wealth of Roman material of all kinds. Buildings and burials have often been reported after quarrying at Sulehay and Mr Harrison pointed out an extensive scatter of third

and fourth-century pottery. (TL 056984). A large Roman building was investigated by Oundle School at Yarwell in 1953, and Mr E. T. Artis and Mr G. F. Dakin record buildings and iron-working in Bedford Purlieus on the opposite side of the Roman road from Durobrivae to Kings Cliffe. Here also two small statues from a funerary monument were discovered in the mid nineteenth century.

The Pottery

by John Peter Wild

While it is notoriously difficult to prove that a group of vessels was fired in a specific kiln, in this case the link is highly probable, despite the modern disturbance to the site; for the Sulehay kiln has all the hallmarks of the reducing kilns at Stanground, excavated in 1965-67. The greatest interest, however, lies in the fact that the pottery forms a single group, probably from a single firing.

Up to 90% of the pottery was meant to be Nene Valley grey ware, fired in a reducing atmosphere. The fabric is fairly fine, with sparing grog temper. The colour-coated vessels (less than 8%) have a fabric which is, to the eye, identical. Two calcite-gritted jars (fig. 7, 6) may also belong to the group.

A fault which developed in the firing of the kiln left a high proportion of the vessels discoloured. Often the grey surface (neutral 5) is dappled with light brown (brown A6 or B5), giving the pot a smoked effect. The grey fabric, too, often has a brown-yellow core (brown-yellow A7). The colour-coated vessels are similarly spoiled. It seems likely that an unwanted draught through a crack caused partial oxidation.

Over 60% of the vessels found on the site are jars or cooking-pots. These can be divided into 'heavy, wide-mouthed, jars (fig. 7, 1,4), medium-mouthed jars (fig. 7, 5), and small jars. Most of them have simple everted rims and grooves at the base of the neck. The potter had two special lines in jars: lid-seated jars (fig. 7, 2,3) and jars with slashed cordons (fig. 7, 9). Both types have burnished external surfaces and are well finished. The next most numerous class is the chamfered pie-dish (about 24%) (fig. 7, 12). Most have flattened bead-rims or grooves beneath the

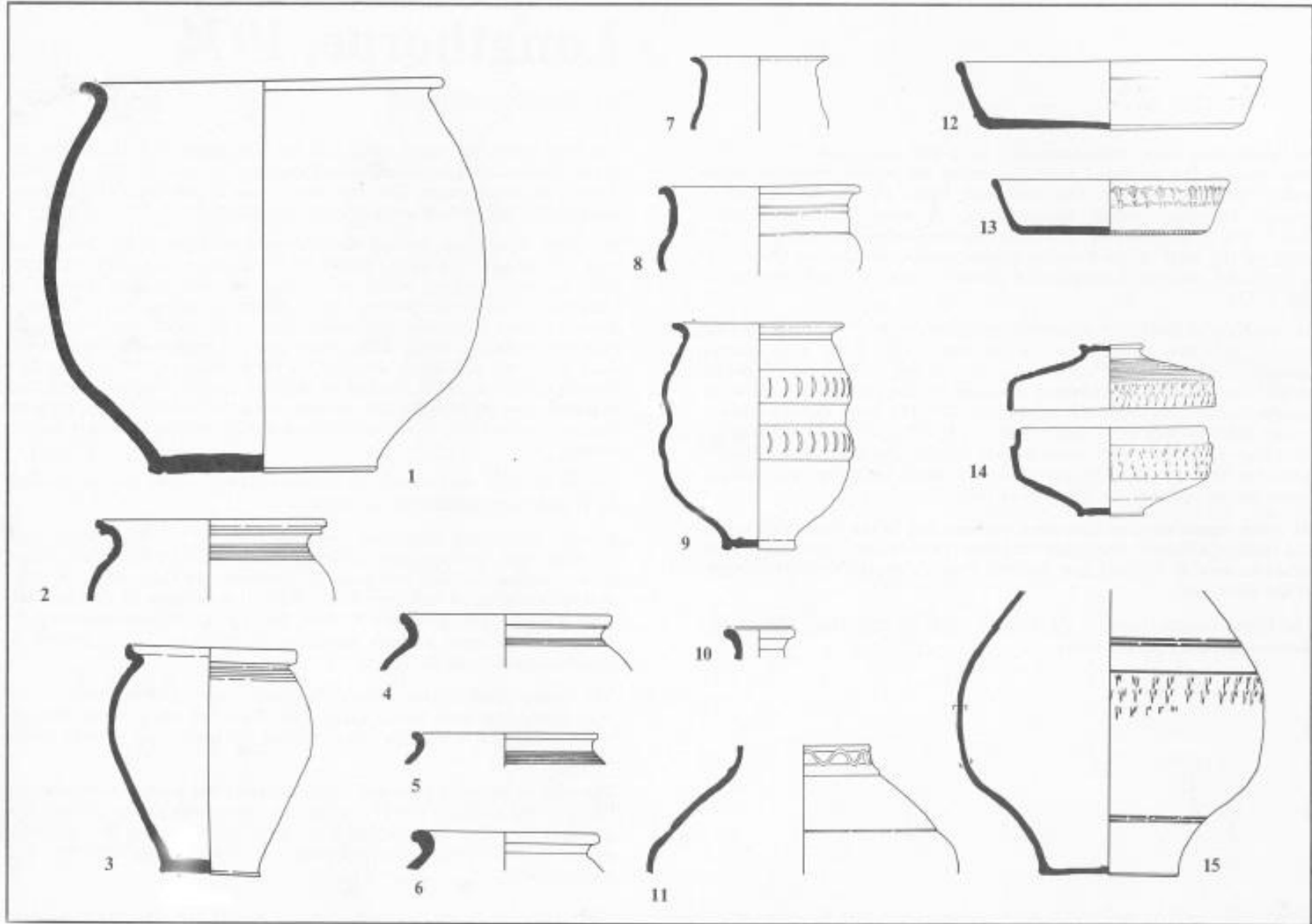


Fig 7 Selected vessels from the Roman pottery kiln at Sulehay, near Yarwell

rim externally; some have burnished wavy-line decoration. The potter also made a few carinated bowls — unless the sherds represent high-necked jars (fig. 7, 7,8). The grey-ware flasks (fig. 7, 10,11) and a strainer are two further limited lines. A single rouletted flagon (fig. 7, 15), 5 'Castor box' lids and 3 corresponding bases (fig. 7, 14) make up the total of black colour-coated vessels. In addition there is a curious and unusual colour-coated pie-dish with rouletted decoration (fig. 7, 13).

The problem of dating the pottery remains. Jars with lid seats and slashed cordons have been loosely dated in the Nene Valley to the early second century. The high-necked vessels (fig. 7, 7,8) are reminiscent of Belgic forms. The undercut or flattened bead-rim of the pie-dishes is hard to parallel before c.A.D.100, easy after c.A.D.120. The Nene Valley's colour-coated industry may not begin before c.A.D.140, and so the association of colour-coated and grey wares here is crucial. Our neat, small, Castor boxes are an early type. On this evidence it seems likely that the Sulehay potter was in business just before A.D.150.

No other second-century kilns have yet been dug in the Nene Valley. We had always assumed that they lie near Durobrivae; but clearly the industrial area of Sulehay and Bedford Purlieus should now claim more of our attention.

The fabric colours refer to the *Colour Chart* of the Study Group for Romano-British Coarse Pottery.