

Barnet and District Record Society

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A ROMANO-BRITISH SITE  
AT  
POTTERS BAR - MIDDX.

An account of the excavations carried out at  
Parkfield during 1953-54 by  
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Bulletin

No. 9

1956

## A ROMANO-BRITISH SITE AT PARKFIELD POTTERS BAR, MIDDLESEX

1953-54

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**D**URING the autumn of 1950 the attention of the writer was directed to an artificial feature in the form of a small ledge or terrace in a field known as Parkfield at Potters Bar, O.S. Map Ref. Six in. Middx. I. N.E. Herts. XL N.E. Nat. Grid. Ref. 52/259012.

The field where the finds were made is on a gentle slope facing the N.W., the geology of which is London clay with a capping of pebble gravel at the summit.

The site was until a few years ago part of the Parkfield Estate, when it was acquired for the public by Potters Bar U.D.C.

The ledge or terrace is near the top of the slope, and a piece of Roman tile had been recovered from the turf line at about the centre of the terrace. Elsewhere in the field are several hollows especially noticeable when the grass is cut.

Nothing was done at the time, but the site was noted with a view to its future excavation.

The opportunity came when the Potters Bar U.D.C. began work in cutting a new path across the site to connect Byng Drive and the Great North Road. A trench, 5 feet wide and about 6 inches deep, was cut in which the path was to be laid. With the removal of the turf and humus a large quantity of tile debris was uncovered and in part removed.

Mr. G. W. Sturges, a nearby resident, noticed this tile and informed the writer, who visited the site and removed several fragments of the tile for later examination. Both roofing and hypocaust tile were represented, together with some coarse tesserae.

A meeting was arranged between the two historical societies which "administer" the area — the Barnet and District Record Society and the Edmonton Hundred Historical Society. At the meeting an excavation committee was formed, and it was agreed to ask permission from the Potters Bar U.D.C. to excavate the site.

This was readily given, and arrangements were accordingly made. The Council for British Archaeology, the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, and the North Middlesex Excavation Committee were informed of the discovery and of the plans for excavation.

Work was delayed while attempts were made to obtain an air photograph of the site. Unfortunately this was not possible due to administrative and financial difficulties.

On the 12th September work began. A grid of boxes was laid out over the site and a start made in removing the turf and clearing the boxes. Work proceeded very slowly owing to the lack of volunteers, and eventually the grid system was abandoned in favour of two trenches at right angles to one another across the length and breadth of the site. More brick and tile fragments were found, together with a few sherds of pottery. By this time, however, it was mid-December and heavy rains had flooded the trenches making the site unworkable. It was decided to stop work until the following year, and a short bulletin was issued covering the work to date.

On the 10th April, 1954, work was restarted and confined to one trench only, as there was still an acute shortage of volunteers.

Progress was slow, and before the work of excavation could continue it was necessary to cut a drainage trench some 50 feet long down the hill-side to release the water trapped in the trench. It was not until late June that the Roman levels were reached, when the walls of a brick-built flue were uncovered at a depth of 4 feet.

At the N.W. end of the flue a large ash pit was found, measuring 12 feet long and 8 feet wide, opposite the flue, astride the entrance of which were two brick piers. Tiles had been used to form a paved area 4 feet by 18 inches on the floor of the ash pit immediately in front of the flue.

Fragments of a First Century cooking pot were found on the tiles forming the floor.

Along the N.E. side of the ash pit four tegulae had been set on edge to form a neat symmetrical box. Smaller fragments had been used to reinforce the corners. The top of the box was on a level with the paving just mentioned. That it was open while the flue was in use was shown by the filling which was a mixture of ash and dirty clay, two pieces of tile suggesting a cover had been pushed into the filling. There was no definite bottom to the box, the ash/clay giving way to clean, undisturbed clay without any noticeable break.

A drain, consisting of box tiles set end to end, ran from the mouth of the flue across the floor of the ash pit and under an irregular tile platform at the rear of the ash pit. There was not time to trace the outlet end of this drain. The platform was constructed of overfired brick and tile wasters packed with clay, and was probably built to give easy access to the pit.

The floor of the ash pit was choked with ash to a depth of 6 inches, above which was a layer of dirty clay mixed with tile fragments. Behind the platform was a scatter of tesserae and tile chips, the tesserae were large and roughly cut. The rest of the filling was of clay with broken tiles.

Leading off to the S.E. was the flue constructed of unmortared bricks. From the ash pit to a point 6 feet along its length it was built of complete bricks in eight courses standing to a height of 18 inches. The walls leaned rather than were corbelled inwards, having a width of 24 inches at the bottom and 17 inches at the top. The rest of the flue was of lighter construction with upright sides, many of the upper bricks cracked

and fused together by heat. The width of this section was 14 inches and at the far end widened out to 24 inches, where it was blocked by a transverse wall.

The floor of the flue was of baked clay, 1 or 2 inches thick, and sloped upwards from the ash pit end. The clay below the floor and behind the walls was stained by heat to a depth of 8 or 9 inches. Like the ash pit, the flue was choked with ash for its entire length. No traces of vents for the release of hot air and gases were found, nor any post holes or remains of a building to contain the flue. Part of the wall was dug away to ascertain if any earlier structures or secondary work existed, but natural clay was met with immediately behind the wall. The upper part of the flue had been destroyed and the area levelled off with clay and tile débris. From this clay three pieces of roller patterned hypocaust tile were recovered.

At the S.E. end of the flue, where it was blocked by the transverse wall, the clay rose steeply and was carpeted with a thick layer of sooty ash. Further up the hill and at right angles to the flue was a shallow gully, 2 feet wide and 1 foot deep, filled with large fragments of tile wasters. Between this gully and the flue was a pit filled with ash and minute pieces of burnt tile.

In a section cut through the filling of this pit the tip lines of ash could be clearly seen.

### Conclusions

In view of the large numbers of tile wasters it is clear that the site was connected with the brick and tile industry in Roman times. There is, however, some doubt as to the function of the furnace as a whole. Two alternatives suggest themselves.

One is that it was a drying floor representing a stage in the manufacture of bricks and tiles, the drying of the material to a sufficient hardness to allow easier handling and stacking in kilns prior to their final firing, the material being placed on a grid over the flue. Also by driving off the excess moisture by this method there would be less chance of distortion during the firing in a closed kiln and a reduction in the numbers of wasters produced, which was often considerable. The other possibility is that the flue is the remains of the kiln itself, although it is difficult to see where the oven was placed, unless it was built directly over the flue. As has been noted, the upper levels had been destroyed, and it was impossible to see if this was the case.

The Parkfield furnace may be compared with those found at the following sites: Langton, Yorks (Langton, pp. 56-7); Elstree, Middx. (T.L.M.A.S. XIII, p. 229); Stamford Bridge, Yorks (Y.A.J., 1955, p. 552). In particular, reference is made to the Roman tile kiln at Wykehurst Farm, Surrey (Surrey Arch. Coll. XLV, pp. 74-96).

The products of the site appear to have been bricks, roofing tiles — tegulae and imbrices — and perhaps box flue tiles, although these usually required a much larger type of kiln such as were found at Ashstead, Surrey. All the hypocaust tiles had a wavy combed design. There was, however, one example of a voussoir tile with a roller patterned design. Tesserae also seem to have been cut on the site.

The furnace was abandoned at the end of the First Century A.D., as shown by the late First Century bowl from the floor of the ash pit. This date is confirmed by the roller patterned tile from the clay over the flue, dated to the late First or early Second Century A.D. One of the reasons for the flue being abandoned was probably due to its exposed position on the hillside, ideal to catch the prevailing winds but liable to flooding with even a light rain. The drain of box tiles was an attempt to keep the site free of water, as in the tile kiln at Wykehurst Farm.

The function of the tile box or cist set in the floor of the ash pit is difficult to interpret. Similar boxes are known from other sites and usually contain a cremated burial. Several such boxes are displayed in the Colchester Museum.

The terrace itself suggests a level working area where the bricks and tiles could be made. Trial holes were dug over the rest of the terrace, but apart from a scatter of tile fragments nothing was found. The necessary ingredient of water was obtainable from a small stream running beside the site. Although this stream is now often dry, this is due to its diversion in modern times of most of its source into nearby lakes and road drains.

The nearby city of Verulamium would have provided a market for the products, which raises the question of the road which served the site. Although no traces of a road or track have been found, one must have existed, and the suggestion has been made that the present Ridgeway Road is on the line of an early trackway.

This theory has often been put forward, but the only reason is because the road follows the highest land elevation, and is where one might expect a track to run. Needless to say, this is insufficient evidence in itself, but from Potters Bar the road runs to Enfield where there is a camp believed to be of Belgic date, and where traces of a small Roman settlement have been found.

The line is then continued to a ford crossing the Lea into Essex.

In the other direction certain field boundaries and alignments suggest the continuation of this (and it must be emphasised, hypothetical) road to St. Albans.

Until the full extent of the site is known its purpose must remain an open question, for if this is an isolated kiln it is more likely to have been built for a specific site much nearer than Verulamium. Since work at the site has been completed further discoveries have been made half a mile to the N.E., where Council houses are now (1956) being built.

During the digging of trenches for foundations and drains, etc., fragments of tiles were found, together with quantities of oyster shells. This may well be the site supplied by the kiln(s) at Parkfield, but again it may represent the site of further kilns. A careful watch is being kept on this site and any new discoveries will be the subject of a further report.

The Parkfield site is interesting in its relationship to the Roman roads and other Roman sites. It is situated in the centre of a triangle formed by the Ermine Street, Watling Street, and the Roman road from Verulamium to the Ermine Street above Hertford.

Few traces of the Roman occupation have been found in this area, and those known are along or close to the Roman roads. An exception are the four Fourth Century Roman coins from Trent Park, Enfield, and now in the Barnet Museum.

The geology is London clay for the larger part of the area, capped in places with pebble gravel, and which in earlier times supported damp oakwood forest with an interlacing undergrowth of hazel, thorn, holly, and bramble. This type of land was not cleared and developed for general settlement until Saxon times, but the need for raw material and fuel would prove the exception for a pottery kiln or, as in this case, a brick works. That the clay of the district is suitable for brickmaking is shown by the fact that until comparatively recent times brickmaking was the main industry of Potters Bar.

So much for the work to date. It was hoped to excavate elsewhere in the field, especially the numerous hollows and traces of a ditch lower down the slope. This was not possible, first due to the lack of volunteers and then the illness of the director.

It is uncertain whether or not any further work will be carried out at the site.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

Arch. ... ..	Archæologia.
Langton ... ..	P. Corder ... J. L. Kirk
Richborough I, II, & III	J. P. Bushe-Fox
	First, Second, and Third Reports on the Roman Fort at Richborough.
	Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries, Nos. VI, VII, & X.
Surrey Arch. Coll. ... ..	Surrey Archæological Collections.
T.L.M.A.S. ... ..	Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archæological Society.
Verulamium .. ..	R. E. M. Wheeler
	Verulamium. A Belgic and two Roman Cities. Report of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries, No. XI.
Y.A.J. ... ..	Yorkshire Archæological Journal.

#### THE FINDS

##### Pottery

(1) Wide-mouthed bowl of dark gritty ware. This is a late First Century development of a common Belgic form. Cf. Verulamium, p. 151. Fig 9, 1. Richborough III, 265, 75 - 100 A.D. From the floor of the ash pit (A. 2, 3).

(2) Orange-brown fabric of uncertain diameter. From the floor of the ash pit (A. 2, 3).

(3) Tile-red fabric, blue core. Diameter approximately 14 inches. Compare with Richborough II, 143, and Richborough I, 67-69. From the clay filling over the flue (A. 2, 1).

(4) Small fragment of grey ware with decoration of vertical incised lines. From floor of the ash pit (A. 2, 3).

(5) Base of large storage jar, coarse, light-grey fabric. From the floor of the ash pit (A. 2, 3).

### Roller Patterned Hypocaust Tile

Three pieces of roller patterned tile were found and submitted to Mr. A. W. G. Lowther, F.S.A., who reports that they are "... from a tile patterned with Die No. 32 of my published series. Also, like all the other fragments bearing this pattern, they are pieces of voussoir-shaped box tile, patterned on all four sides." He also notes that "... three applications of the roller die were needed to cover the face of the tile. All the tiles which I have examined have (of the type) been patterned thus and not lengthwise."

#### Die No. 32

(Rosette and diamond pattern)

- (1) Boxmoor, Herts, 1851, Villa. (Arch. XXXV, 56.)
- (2) Beckley, Oxon., 1873, Villa. (Ashmolean Museum, unpublished.)
- (3) Canterbury, Kent, 1948-53, Town. (Being published.)
- (4) Great Chesterford, 1948, Town. (Reports by Major Brinson.)
- (5) Potters Bar, 1953-54, Kiln.
- (6) Ridgewell, 1796, Villa. (Arch. XIV, pl. xiii, 2.)
- (7) Hartlip, Kent, 1848, Villa. (Collectanea Antiqua, ii, pl. viii.)

From the evidence of previous finds, a late First or early Second Century date has been established for this group of tiles.

This date is confirmed by the finds at Parkfield.

### Clay Tobacco Pipes

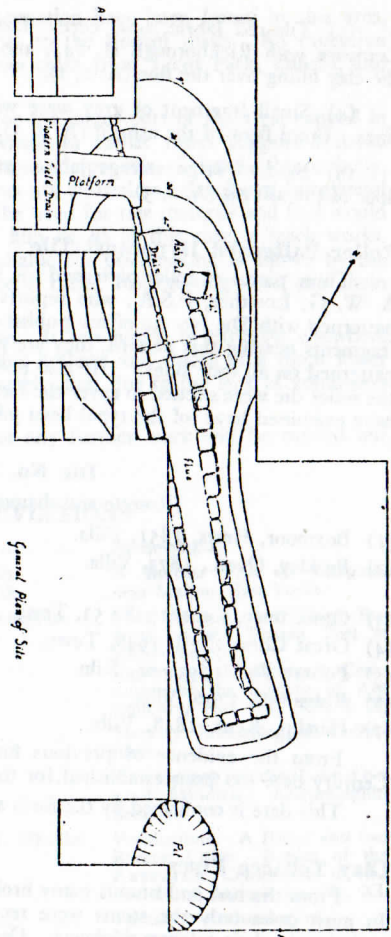
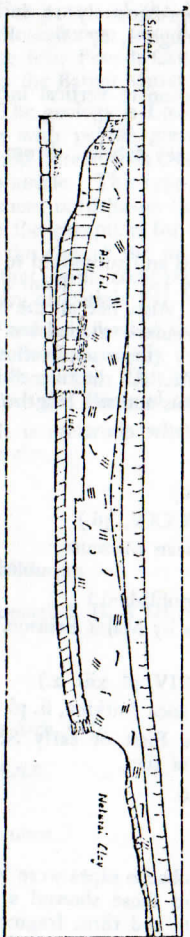
From the turf and humus many broken clay tobacco pipes were found. In most cases only the stems were recovered and these showed a great variation in their relative thickness. One complete and three fragmentary bowls were found. From the same level, but not in association with the pipes, was a George III halfpenny, 1760-1820.

(1) Circa 1710-1780. Cf. Oswald, *Archæological News Letter*, Vol. III, 10, p. 157, type 9b. No initials (A. 2, 1).

(2) As above. Maker's initials indecipherable (A. 2, 1).

(3) Lighter version of (1) and (2) with longer spur. Initials "I.S." on spur (A. 2, 1).

(4) As above with initials "?A.S." on spur (A. 2, 1).



- 1. Home
- 2. Soil
- 3. Clay's Soil
- 4. Ditch City
- 5. Ash
- 6. Platform

505

