

From the *Transactions* of the  
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

**Romano-British Sites at Chestnuts Hill and Popes Hill, Forest of  
Dean**

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1956, Vol. 75, 199-202

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## ROMANO-BRITISH SITES AT CHESTNUTS HILL AND POPES HILL, FOREST OF DEAN

In 1953, when the East Dean Council was laying a main to supply water to the Popes Hill district, Roman pottery was unearthed at two points by the contractor, Mr C. Brain. Both occurrences were investigated by the archaeological section of the Forest of Dean Local History Society. The first occurrence was on the northern slope of Chestnuts Hill and was found when a spillway to the head tank was cut down the slope. At this point there occurs a rough semi-circular platform bounded on the downhill (northern) side by a slight retaining bank. When the spillway was cut across this platform a hut floor paved with large local flagstones measuring about 5 feet by 3 feet with some evidence of post holes was encountered. Numerous sherds of Roman pottery, including Samian ware, were dug up, especially towards the edge or lower part of the platform. One of these, a bead rim dish of pseudo-Samian ware, belongs to the 3-4 centuries. Below the hut floor there was much evidence of charcoal fires. Within the platform area there was also a circular depression which had the appearance of a filled up well. That this was the explanation was proved by its excavation by Dr H. Selby who followed it down through the Old Red Sandstone strata for 17 feet when water was reached. Some of the original stone revetting still remained in places. Portions of a glass wine flagon of about 1740-50, as well as a large mediaeval doubly cordoned jug or pitcher, green glazed inside, were recovered. Pieces of wood from deep in the well proved on examination at Kew to be maple (*Acer Campestre*) and ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*). The former, of which a good amount was recovered, was in a state of preservation similar to that of the wood found in the Roman well at Chew Stoke, Somerset.<sup>1</sup>

This site had been covered with oak forest until it was cut down in 1944. That woodland was planted about 1800 and there are no records of any previous afforestation. There is here

<sup>1</sup> *A.N.L.*, vol. v, pp. 98, 119, (1954).

evidence, in the hut floor, the platform or garden enclosing the well, and the pottery, of occupation, perhaps by shepherds or iron workers, covering a period stretching from Romano-British times to the mid-eighteenth century.

The other occurrence of Roman pottery was where the main passed on the south side of the Popes Hill Road—National Grid Sheet 32/61 at 2142/6830. Here the trench revealed a shallow depression with a well-marked black occupation layer. Numerous trenches were dug over and around this occupation layer which lay on a slope facing southwards. The top layers revealed evidence of recent occupation and of paths surfaced by stones through the area now more or less common land. At depths of about 1 foot and over, Roman pottery and iron slag in abundance were encountered. When the shallow depression occupation layer was cleared there was evidence of a hut dwelling of about 22 feet in length and 9 feet in width. This evidence consisted of some post holes (stone ringed), a slightly dished rammed earth floor, with a hearth ringed with stones at one side, and with much stiff red clay surrounding the periphery of the floor. Several pieces of daub were encountered so that probably the dwelling was formed of wattle and daub sides tapering to a ridge pole roof, while the bases of the sides were embanked in stiff red clay as a seal. No doubt the daub debris from the sides of the hut tended to enhance this occurrence of peripheral red clay. The entrance to this hut would appear to have been at the south-eastern corner for the ground here was surfaced with a pitching of flat stones.

About 18 feet to the west of the hut site and on somewhat higher ground a dished rectangular floor, roughly 3 feet by 2 feet of large stone slabs, was uncovered and on and around it, large quantities of iron slag. This slag was ubiquitous over the whole site but especially concentrated at this point. We therefore concluded that the slabs were the base of a furnace for the reduction of iron ore, and the abundance of stiff red clay around this spot would have supplied the material necessary for building the furnace upper parts. Probably the occurrence of a stratum of red clay here over O.R.S. shale was, along with the

proximity of forest trees to supply charcoal, a major factor in determining the location of an iron smelting furnace at this

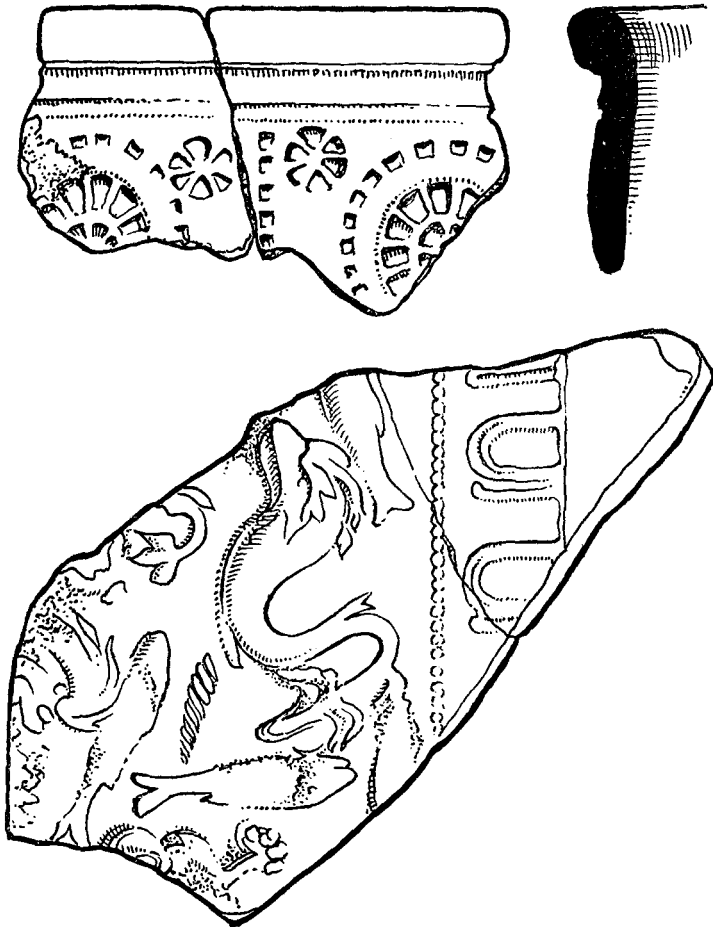


Fig. 1. (Scale  $\frac{1}{2}$ )

spot. A spring in which Roman sherds were found occurs lower down the slope and this could have supplied the necessary water for washing the iron slag and puddling the red clay. Scowl

holes on the Cinderford ridge at no great distance away show that the Romans mined ore in the neighbourhood.

The iron slag from the site is of the usual Roman type containing a large proportion of unreduced iron ore. Some pieces were found that showed magnetic properties due to the presence of cast iron produced by allowing too high a temperature to occur in the furnace. Numerous 'core' pieces occurred in which there is a central hole through a length of slag giving a pipe-like effect. These pieces arose from the use of wooden rods to probe or stir up the mass of molten slag in the furnace. When withdrawn these remain as a casing of slag around the burnt-out wood core. A similar phenomenon would probably occur at the holes into the furnace for the nozzles of the crude bellows used to produce the draught, and several large diameter 'cores' found may represent 'core formation' at such points. Several pieces of red clay partially baked furnace walls were recovered with pieces of slag still adhering to them.

The pottery found points to an occupation from at least the second century to the end of the Roman period. Besides the common black, grey and terra-cotta jars, dishes, pots and jugs, there was Samian ware (one piece illustrated, FIG 1, of the Antonine period, shows fish and dolphin motives), Caistor ware, colour coated ware with white barbotine or slip decoration (cf. New Forest, Ashley Rails, PLATE VIII, No. 12).<sup>1</sup> Others with hatched bands, as well as late pseudo-Samian dishes were present.

Mortaria both in white Salopian and red pseudo-Samian ware occurred. Wine flagons as at New Forest (Ashley Rails, PLATE XXIV, No. 1) and distinctive wheel-stamped buff ware (illustrated FIG. 2.) cf. New Forest (Armsley, PLATE XXV)<sup>1</sup> were found. The occurrence of iron nails, some very large, shoe nails, glass fragments and much charcoal as well as a Bronze age thumb scraper must also be recorded.

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<sup>1</sup> Heywood Summer, 'Excavations in New Forest Roman Pottery Sites', 1927.