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**Excavations at the Romano-British Villa in Barnsley Park,  
Cirencester, 1961-66**

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# Excavations at the Romano-British Villa in Barnsley Park, Cirencester, 1961-66

AN INTERIM REPORT

By GRAHAM WEBSTER

THIS Roman villa was discovered in 1950 by estate workers digging out a dog trapped in a rabbit-hole. A small excavation was carried out, uncovering two small rooms of a bath-house.<sup>1</sup> The site was then scheduled as an ancient monument and no further work done until 1961. My attention was drawn to the site by Mrs Helen O'Neil when I was looking for a villa on which to plan a long-term research project which could also be used for training purposes. It has exceeded all our expectations. Through the great kindness of the owners, first Lord Faringdon and later Mr Charles Henderson,<sup>2</sup> it has been possible to carry out the work year by year in pleasant parkland without having to back-fill.<sup>3</sup> The excavation began in 1961 and was continued in two-week seasons until 1964, but since 1965 this has been extended to three weeks and the student numbers have increased. It has been a joint project organised by the Extra-Mural Departments of the Universities of Birmingham and Bristol, partly as research and partly to give training in various aspects of excavation and field-work.<sup>4</sup> We are pleased to record our thanks for financial assistance to the British Academy, the Haverfield Trustees and Mr Jan Jurriaanse. The excavation began with an exploratory gridded traverse at 45° to the known line of the buildings. It soon became clear that to understand the complexities of the structures, and in the virtual absence of stratification, it was necessary to select complete buildings, or groups of buildings, for horizontal stripping and this method has

<sup>1</sup> *J.R.S.*, 41 (1951), p. 135.

<sup>2</sup> The owners have also generously agreed to donate all finds to the Corinium Museum.

<sup>3</sup> All structural features are carefully protected from the winter by means of plastic fertiliser bags, obtained from local farmers, and partly filled with earth and stones; these can be easily placed in position and removed each year.

<sup>4</sup> My assistant throughout has been Mr Harry Ross of Bristol University, and for the first five seasons valuable assistance was given by Mrs Helen O'Neil and many others have acted as technical assistants and supervisors, especially Mr Terry Fry, who has acted throughout as photographer and has also taken a film sequence of progress. The staff and students have been accommodated at Bledisloe Lodge, a hostel of the Royal Agricultural College, which has been admirable for the continuation of lectures and discussion in the evenings.

now been adopted in the two main areas. After only six seasons confined to a very small area of a large site, it is now possible to offer a tentative chronology:—

1. Over the whole of the area being investigated there are gullies, post-holes and hearths which appear to belong to timber phases. Finds of pottery, including samian, indicate that there was occupation of the site by the second half of the second century A.D.
2. The earliest stone buildings so far encountered are on the north-eastern edge of the excavation (FIG. 1). The date and function of these walls are not yet known but one wall had two small doors inserted when the bath-house was added on to it.
3. The small bath-house was rebuilt at least once and possibly twice. The extent of the original *caldarium* is not at present clear since the rectangular portion at the south-east end could have been an addition. But this was rebuilt, reducing it in size,<sup>1</sup> and an apsidal internal end formed. At the same time, the other end of the *caldarium* was extended. The bath-house had its own well (No. 2) and there is a fragment of the stone base of a water tank suitably placed for feeding the *testudo* over the flue. Coins from the debris in the abandoned rectangular addition date the main reconstruction to the period A.D. 330–335 or later.
4. The main building in the northern section of the excavation appears to include a yard enclosing the bath-house and its furnace area, a verandah with rooms at each end and possibly further rooms on the north-west side. It is not possible to explore this building fully, as an ash tree has disturbed the north-west end beyond reasonable recovery and beyond this there has been extensive stone robbing. However, the general plan gives the building the appearance of the so-called winged corridor house. In this case, however, the main area must have been an open yard since if the bath-house had remained in use during the early part of this phase it would have been difficult, and indeed undesirable, to have roofed this area. Parts of the building have domestic characteristics; one room (Room 5)<sup>2</sup> has a channelled hypocaust which had been inserted<sup>3</sup> and another (Room 29) a concrete floor with a moulding at its junction with the walls.

<sup>1</sup> Six of the *pilae* columns remained in this area.

<sup>2</sup> These numbers were originally excavation areas but have gradually become defined by the structures as they have been revealed.

<sup>3</sup> The main flue had been cut into the wall and no allowance made for it in the original planning. It is assumed here that the whole of this building was of one build and that the butt-joints are merely the result of construction stages.

This period of building is dated by a coin of Constantius II (A.D. 337-341) found in the footings of the main yard wall on the south side, and lasted long enough for the channelled hypocaust to be altered and a limestone step in Room 13<sup>1</sup> to become hollowed with wear. To the south extended a large courtyard, only a small area of which has so far been explored but where there appears to be a succession of surfaces. These include a substantial area of pitched stones which may be associated with one of the main building phases. With this particular period is associated a well (No. 1) dated by a coin of Constantius II (c. A.D. 355) in the stone packing in the construction area near the top. This well was 3 feet in diameter and 24 feet 9 inches deep from the highest surviving part. The lowest 3 feet consisted of blue clay but the small amount of domestic and organic rubbish suggested that the well had, unlike the bath-house well, been cleaned out (see below p. 81).

5. A change took place which altered the function of the building. The channelled hypocaust was blocked and a new stone floor placed over the original concrete surface. There was no indication of the floor to Room 13 beyond the evidence of the step which shows that a floor must have existed but was removed; probably it was of sufficient quality, e.g. flagstone, to make re-use worthwhile. In Room 29 part of the concrete floor was badly patched with flat stones, the enclosed yard was covered with irregular paving which sealed the flue of the bath-house and the entrance to the yard was raised with a small area of pitched stones possibly to allow vehicles to have access.<sup>2</sup> Two squared stones in this paving were the capitals or bases of moulded pilasters showing that a building of some architectural pretension had been demolished at this stage.<sup>3</sup> The two smaller doors and those at the north-east side of the bath-house may have been blocked at this time.<sup>4</sup> At a later phase two walls were built across the enclosed yard blocking the main entrance. The bath-house itself may have been left standing, since its walls still rise above the paved level. This apparent change from domestic to increased agricultural use is dated by coins of the House of Valentinian (A.D. 364-375).

<sup>1</sup> The southern wall of this room was not built on its original pitched foundations but a change of plan caused the room to be two feet narrower. This room, the verandah and the wings may all be later than the main wall enclosing the yard. A coin of Constans (A.D. 341-346, S.F. 263) was found over the unused pitched foundations but below the mortar spread from the wall.

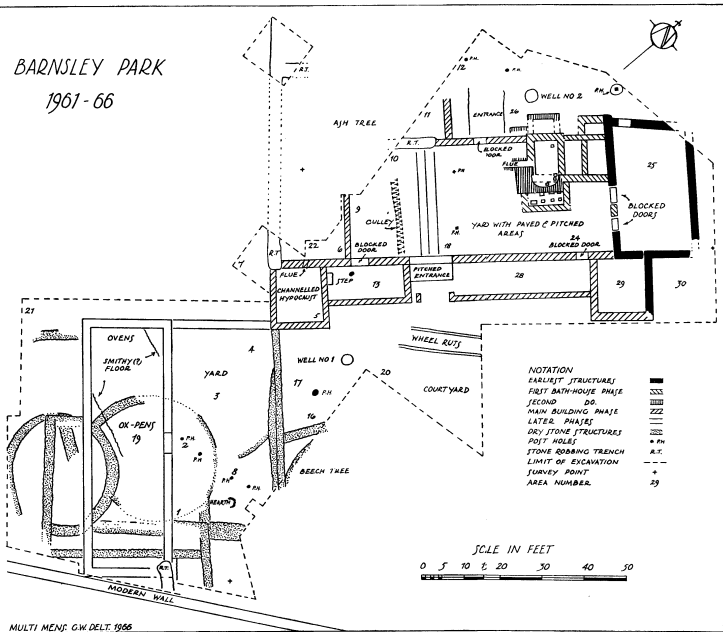
<sup>2</sup> The original entrance at the verandah wall was six feet three inches wide and was flanked by two small bases which may have supported columns.

<sup>3</sup> This is confirmed by several other decorated stone fragments from other parts of the site and the two wells.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the blocking stones are tufa voussoirs from the bath-house roof.

# BARNLSLEY PARK

1961-66



MULTI MENJ. G.W. DELT. 1966

Fig. 1. General Plan

*BARNESLEY PARK*  
*1961-66*

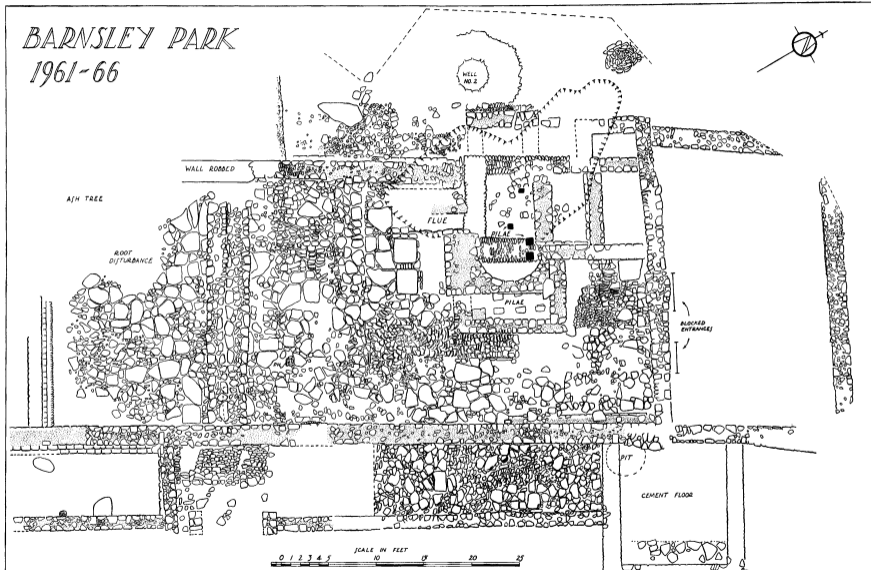


Fig. 2. Plan of bath-house and yard covered with large irregular paving slabs

*The south-west area*

With Phase 5 may also be associated the barn-like structure in the south-west area. This substantial building (57 feet by 17 feet internally) with its fine herringbone walling had its entrance on the south-east side and is dated by a coin of Gratian (A.D. 367-375) found in the clay trample associated with the barn construction or early occupation. Below the barn there is a sequence of structures with dry-stone walling of which at present three distinct phases can be seen. The intermediate of the three consists of a roughly circular building (c. 23 feet internal diameter) with a stone flagged floor on which the four pieces of querns were discovered, suggesting milling. Attached to this building is another circular structure extending to the south-east forming a figure of eight. All these structures appear at present to belong to the first half of the fourth century. Below the north-west end of the barn is a rectangular area of rough stone flooring much burnt, which in turn seals ashy deposits possibly connected with smithy work. From these levels come the two remarkable scythe-blades of unusual length, and a fine iron chisel (13 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches long).

6. It is difficult to estimate the length of this phase. The barn had two floors, and the yard to the south-east was later covered with very heavy stone pitching, the threshold of the door of the barn being raised to accommodate it. However, there was still a step down into the barn and a strip of stone ridge tiles was laid to ease the drop for carts. As will be noted from a brief account of the coins below, there is at present no dating aid for the fifth and sixth centuries, but it is difficult to imagine that these buildings did not continue in use until well into the fifth century.
7. There is no evidence of any violent end to the buildings. Some of them merely collapsed and it is interesting to note that only a small number of the nails found are bent in such a way as to suggest that they were extracted from timbers. But other areas, and in particular the enclosed yard, appear to have had stone deliberately packed over the last used surface, the whole building being levelled off to serve as a platform, presumably for stacks. Human activity at a later date is suggested by two pits, one in the verandah and the other in Room 29 which removed part of a wall. The bath-house was gutted for its tiles at a later stage, only the lowest level of *pilae* remaining. This could only have been done by people who knew there were tiles in the building, but the way the walls were damaged shows that at this time they no

longer had any structural significance. Both the wells were deliberately filled with building stones.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that the area was still in use but some substantial buildings had by then been demolished.

### *The evidence of the coins*

The 242 coins (excluding the seven which are illegible) found on the villa have been classified in the main mint production periods between A.D. 260 and 402<sup>2</sup> and comparison made in diagrammatic form with the finds from Corinium<sup>3</sup> and the villa at Witcombe.<sup>4</sup> Some interesting results emerge but any conclusions must be tempered by

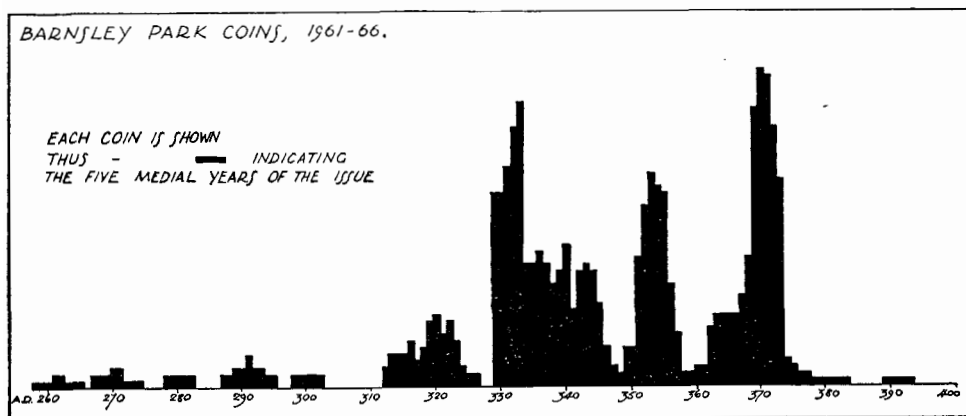


Fig. 3

the thought that so far few of the lower levels of the Barnsley Park villa have been explored and only a small area has been excavated. The intensity of occupation in the late third century appears to be far less than in the town and at Witcombe which may suggest that at this period, as in the preceding ones, the farm was on a modest scale. It is in the fourth century, and especially the period 330-375, that one sees the prosperity of the villa at its height. The dramatic fall in the number of coins of the House of Valentinian is closely

<sup>1</sup> Including stone troughs and decorated roof finials. Well No. 2 had six feet of dark sludge in the bottom which when sieved produced much organic material, some pieces of worked wood and leather.

<sup>2</sup> This classification first suggested by Mrs Alison Ravetz (*Num. Chron.*, 7th ser., 4 (1964), p. 201) has found acceptance among numismatists.

<sup>3</sup> The Corinium coins have been identified and listed by Professor Donald Atkinson and his catalogue will shortly be published. I am indebted to Mr Richard Reece for extracting the totals for me.

<sup>4</sup> I am most grateful to Mr Ernest Greenfield who has been excavating this site for the Ministry of Public Building and Works, for allowing me to go through his coins.

ROMANO-BRITISH VILLA, BARNSELY PARK, CIRENCESTER, 1961-66

paralleled in the town and this is clearly due to changes at the mints. It does not mean that occupation on the site of the villa ceased. There are two coins which were minted after 380 and these indicate some activity but there is no corresponding flood of Theodosian issues. Their absence in the villa, as at Witcombe, indicates that people using coins on a large scale were no longer present, but the life of the villa does not come to an end. The archaeological evidence is emphatically against this idea. It may be a watershed in the history of the villa,

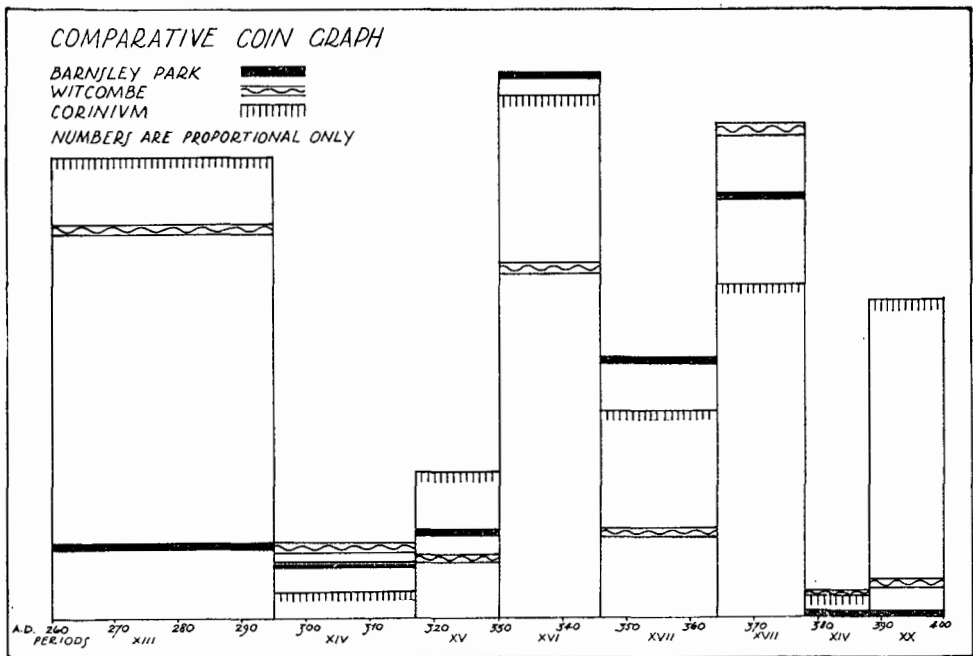


Fig. 4

but the evidence indicates a loss of domestic occupation in favour of much increased production. The pattern shown by the Barnsley Park coins is almost identical to that for Chedworth.<sup>1</sup> The evidence for the continuation of life of a less sophisticated kind is seen only as fragments which can be illustrated from two other Gloucestershire villas. Both produced examples of well-constructed hearths inside the house clearly belonging to a much later period. That at Keynsham was built of flat tiles but there was a two inch layer of black earth between the hearth

<sup>1</sup> *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, 78 (1959), pp. 162-165.

and the tessellated floor of the house<sup>1</sup> showing that there had been much use of the floor and an accumulation of filth before the hearth was put down. Similarly a substantial hearth was noted in Room 7 at Whittington Court by Mrs O'Neil.<sup>2</sup> Often these traces have been associated with squatters, but the hearths seem to be too substantial for casual roaming bands. It seems more likely that they reflect a period when the glories of the old house had been forgotten but the peasants toiled on at their work on the land and lived in the patched-up parts of the farm buildings which survived. The archaeological evidence for this is at present very thin since only their hearths and cemeteries have been found.<sup>3</sup> In the absence of coins and pottery one must await refinements to the C.14 method of dating or possibly some other scientific means, before being able to assess just how long the peasants continued to live on these villa sites.

### *The villa establishment and its field system*

The parkland in which the excavation is taking place has not been subjected to intensive ploughing and there are clear indications of other buildings. The buildings already uncovered obviously extend towards the east and there is confirmation from a geo-physical survey that a building of some size occupies the modern corner of this area and stretches into the field to the east. It is possible that this may be the main house. To the north-west is a further enclosure about 75 yards square bounded by ranges of buildings and with a rectangular building in the centre. The most northerly range of this extends south-westwards for at least two hundred yards and there appears to be a further and larger enclosure on the south-western side of the present excavation. Clearly then the latter covers only a very small area of the total establishment and poses some difficult problems in planning what is intended to be a thorough long-term examination of the villa.

In the fields beyond this are traces of field banks aligned to the villa buildings. It is a rare enough event to find a Celtic field system in the Cotswolds, but it is even more unusual to be able to associate such a system with a villa. A start was made in 1965 by Mr Peter Fowler on a survey of these fields and the prospects of recovering upwards of a hundred acres of fields seem very favourable. Further intensive survey work is required with small-scale excavations at critical points.

<sup>1</sup> *Arch.*, 75 for 1924-25 (1926), p. 124.

<sup>2</sup> *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, 71 for 1952 (1953), p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> There are quite a few cases of burials in Roman villas, the graves being excavated in floors and walls of buildings which by then had been reduced and their existence forgotten (see Llantwit Major, *Arch. Camb.*, 102 (1953), pp. 102-103, and Norton Disney, *Arch. J.*, 17 (1937), p. 153.

## THE WELLS

*Well No. 1* belonged to the courtyard and presumably served the domestic needs when the main building was constructed in the middle of the fourth century. A coin, a copy of an issue of Constantius II, *c.* A.D. 355 (S.F. 285), was found in the construction lining of the well. The life of the well was between *c.* A.D. 360 and 380. The total depth from the reduced top, i.e. from about the yard level, was 24 feet 9 inches. The filling to a depth of 21 feet was a deliberate packing of building stones.<sup>1</sup> The final 3 feet 9 inches was clean, light brown silt which included very little organic matter or domestic rubbish. The conclusion is that either the well was little used and carefully protected, or that it had been cleaned out regularly. When found the depth of water was about 8 feet. This was pumped out and the rate of infill was found to be about 18 inches for every 24 hours. After the well had been emptied it was sealed over and left until the next season's work. When opened up again the following year (after the winter of 1964-65) it was found to have 12 feet of water in it.

The internal diameter was 3 feet and its construction trench at the top had been 15 feet in diameter. Although it had been carefully constructed, there were some serious bulges in the wall which made excavation hazardous. To counter this a system was devised of vertical planks held in position by a series of iron hoops, specially made to fit the well, with screws which, when tightened, pressed the hoops outwards against the planks and thus made a most effective shoring.

*Well No. 2*, the same size as No. 1 but more oval in shape, seems to be associated with the bath-house, but as the deliberate filling had the same character as that in No. 1 it can be presumed that it was carried out at the same time. The life of No. 2 may have been longer since the bath-house was functioning in the first half of the fourth century, but it is not yet known when it was constructed. No. 2 differed very much from No. 1 in the character of the lowest 10 feet of filling, which consisted of odorous black mud containing a great deal of small branches, twigs and other organic matter. This was all carefully sorted, but in this report only the pottery and insect remains have been considered. Details of the shaped wood, leather, animal remains and organic material will appear in a subsequent report. Clearly in this case no attempt was made to keep the well cleaned and it may have been left in a disused state when the bath-house was dismantled and the building turned to agricultural use. This would account for the large accumulation of rubbish before the shaft was

<sup>1</sup> The shaped stones, which included parts of a roof finial, will be the subject of a later report.

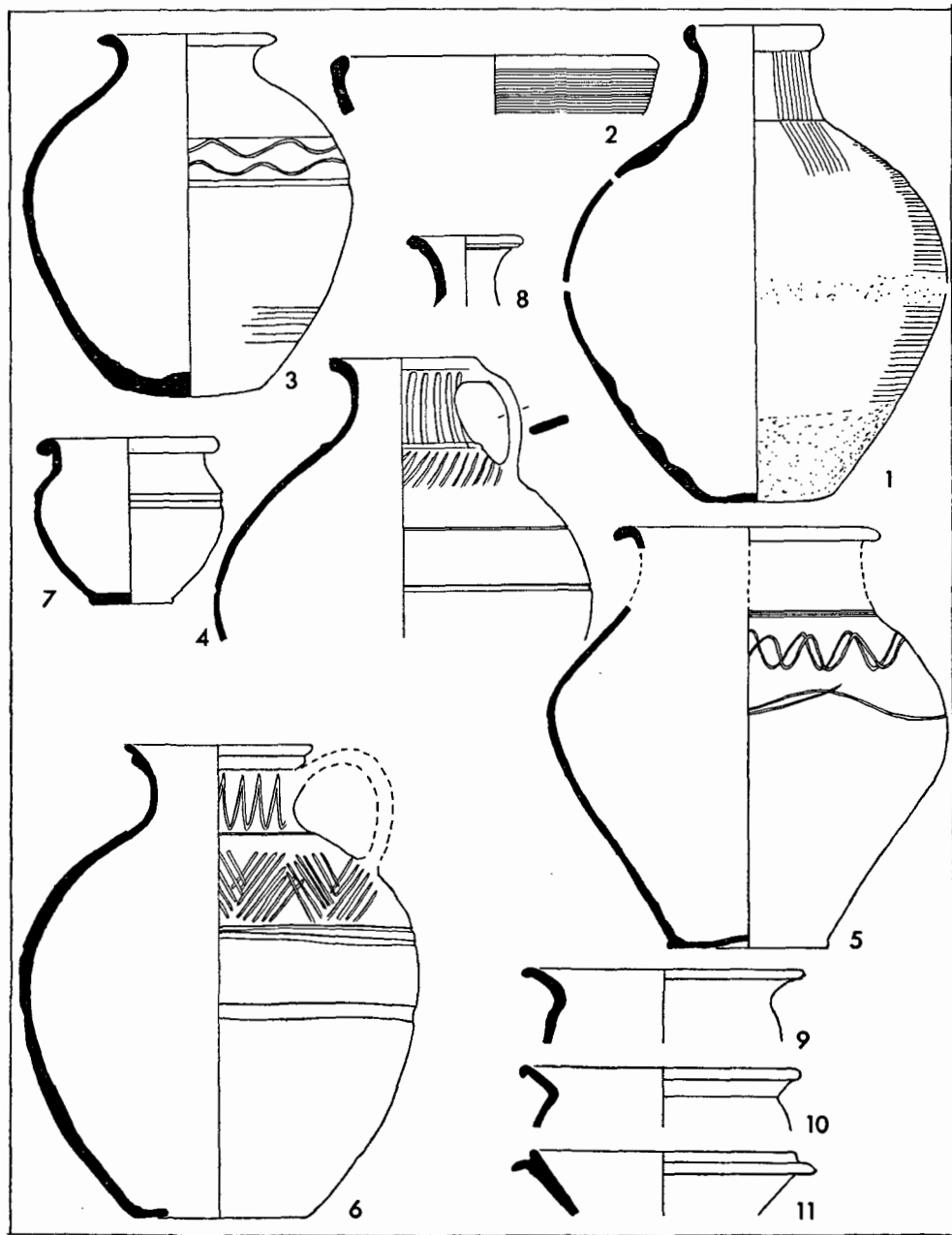


Fig. 5. Pottery from the wells. (4)

finally filled in with building stones as in the case of No. 1. But here again there was a difference. Since it was not a yard area to be continued in use, the top was merely roughly levelled off and in much later times when the filling had sunk slightly, the uppermost ten feet became a rabbit burrow, as demonstrated by their bones in this layer. Water was encountered at 15 feet 4 inches. The structure of the well was in excellent condition and no shoring was required.

*Pottery from the wells*<sup>1</sup> (FIG. 5)

All the pottery illustrated was recovered from the lowest levels of the two wells, except No. 7, and must have fallen in during the time when the wells were in use. No close parallels are offered since so little is at present known about the pottery of this area, but the jars bear a distinct family resemblance in form to the New Forest examples.<sup>2</sup> Some of the jars were evidently lowered into the wells and had become detached from the rope.

**Well No. 1**

1. A jar with a slight lid seating in a black ware, partly burnished, especially on neck and shoulder.
2. A bowl or dish with slightly inturned lip, in hard grey, somewhat gritty ware with well marked rilling.

**Well No. 2**

3. A jar in black ware containing mica, with a band of two wavy lines.
4. A handled jar in a light grey ware, with vertical grooves on the neck and inclined grooves on the shoulder separated by a cordon.
5. A jar in a light red ware with grey to black surfaces, with bands of wavy lines.
6. A handled jar with a moulded rim in grey ware decorated with a zig-zag line on the neck and groups of overlapping inclined lines on the shoulder.
7. This small vessel was found intact with the building rubble. A small jar in dark grey ware.
8. A delicately moulded flagon rim in light orange ware, with a reddish brown colour coat on the outer surface.
9. 10 and 11. These are probably local black burnished wares. The fabric is coarse with quartz grains. 9 and 10 are of the cooking pot type, No. 10 having an unusual undercut rim. No. 11 is a bead and flanged bowl, the surface of which has been left in a rough state (i.e. unburnished).

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Miss V. Singer for drawing most of this pottery.

<sup>2</sup> Heywood Sumner, *Excavations in New Forest Roman Pottery Sites*, 1927.