

# EXCAVATIONS AT WRIGHT'S MILL, CHESHAM, 1968

KEITH BRANIGAN and GRAHAM JONES

The site at Wright's Mill (SP 95750145) lies to the east of the private houses which front the east side of Church Street. At the time of writing the area is wasteland, awaiting the building of a relief road across it. The ground is level and low, and the excavated site lies only seventy metres north of the Bury brook. Previous discoveries on the site included over a hundred sherds of Romano-British pottery, and a similar quantity of medieval sherds.<sup>1</sup> These finds, and the location of the site close to the eighth-century nucleus of Chesham in Church Street, prompted the CVAHS to undertake emergency excavations here during the summer of 1968. These were directed by Graham Jones, and staffed by members of the CVAHS. Financial assistance was provided by the Ministry of the Environment and the CVAHS.

The delay in the publication of the report has been occasioned by Mr. Jones moving house and changing occupations, with the result that it has proved impossible to contact him and obtain a final report from him. The report published here is based on preliminary notes provided by Mr. Jones for the writing of a report, together with measurements and observations made by KB shortly after the excavations closed. The interpretation of the remains which is suggested here is that of KB.

## *The Excavations* (fig. 1)

When the site became available for excavation the Chesham Urban District Council readily granted permission for trial excavations in advance of road-works, and in April 1968 three small trenches were opened. These were each 2 m.  $\times$  1 m., and results in one of these were sufficiently encouraging for further excavations to have been undertaken during July and August of the same year. The other two trenches revealed complete disturbance by nineteenth-century tanning pits, and extensive disturbance over the whole of the south-western end of the site was indicated by other soundings. Excavations in the summer of 1968 were therefore confined to the north-east quarter of the area.

Four trenches, each 5 m.  $\times$  4 m., were opened in the north-east quarter, Trench 1 incorporating the successful trial trench of the April excavations. It was soon found, however, that trenches 2-4 were completely disturbed by further modern pits, and disturbances extended into the extreme southern edge of trench 1, and over a strip about 1 m. wide down the eastern side of this trench. In the event, therefore, excavations were concentrated entirely in trench 1.

<sup>1</sup> K. Branigan and M. Kirton, "A New Roman Site in Chesham," *Records*, XVII, 5 (1965), fig. 2; K. Branigan, "The Distribution and Development of Romano-British Occupation the Chess Valley", *Records*, XVIII, 2 (1967), 136-8.

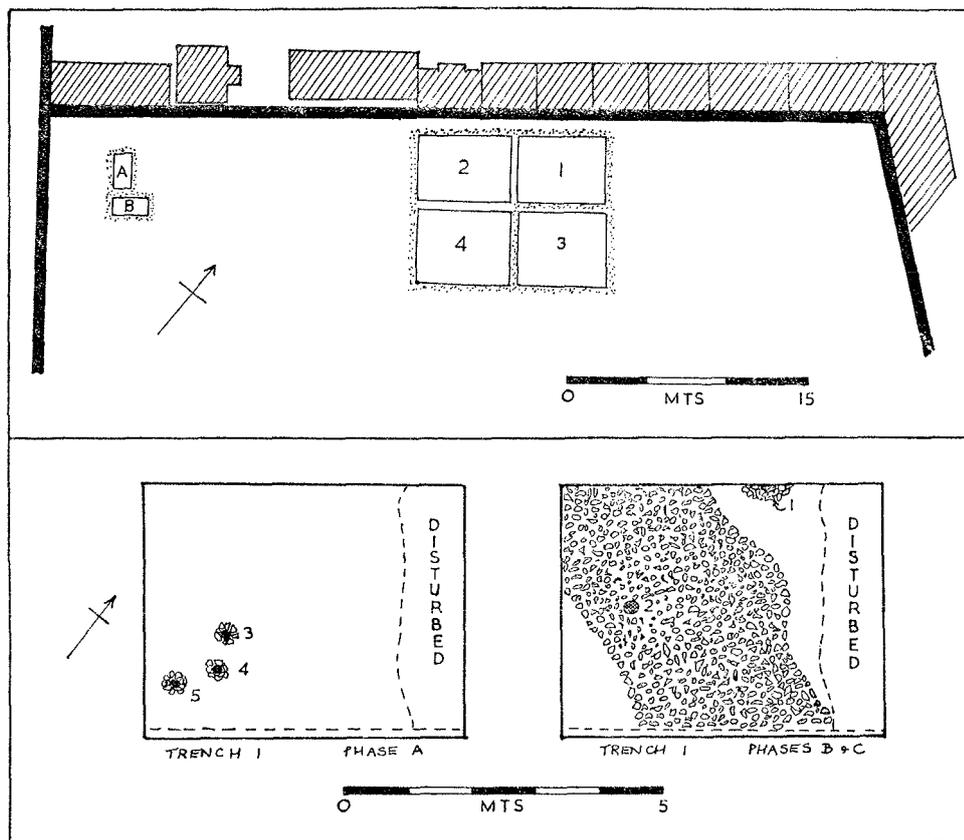


Fig. 1.

Here, four levels were identified:

1. Rich, black top soil with broken china and pieces of brick and flint. Depth 0.1 m.
2. Below top soil, across the whole trench, a 0.4 m. thick deposit of dark grey, clayey soil containing a considerable amount of pottery, both medieval and modern.
3. Sealed by this level, and stretching diagonally across the trench from the north-west corner to the centre of the southern side, was a layer of compacted flints. These were smallish lumps of flint, evenly deposited and forming a hard, reasonably level area, but only about 8 cm. thick. Cut through this flint surface was a post-hole (2), taking a post about 12.5 cm. in diameter. At the bottom of the hole, the base of a wooden post was found in situ. On the northern edge of the trench, 2.5 m. north of this post-hole, a second (1) was found of similar size and also with the base of the post preserved. Post-hole 1 produced nineteenth-century sherds, and these two post-holes may both be attributed to this period.
4. Below the flints of level 3, and extending beyond them to the edges of the trench except along the eastern and extreme southern edge of the trench

where modern disturbance had taken place, there was a level of fine yellow-brown clay. This was only 5-6 cm. thick, and merged into the yellow alluvial clay which is natural on the site. This level appears to be the trampled and used surface of the natural, but no proper deposit was found sealed between it and the flints. On this surface, and sealed by the flints, there was a scatter of medieval pottery, and into the clay there were cut three post-holes (3-5). Two of these were sealed by the flints, the other was situated just to the south-west of the edge of the flint area. All three took posts of about 10 cm. diameter, and were well packed around with flints. No trace of the posts remained in these holes. From post-hole 3 came a short piece of clay pipe stem, but this may have been intrusive, connected with the cutting of post-hole 2 which cut through the flints immediately adjacent to post-hole 3. The discovery of only medieval pottery below the flints is probably a more reliable indication of the date of both the post-holes 3-5 and the flint layer itself.

#### *The Finds*

The only stratified finds recorded were pottery sherds. These were examined by both writers; they were also seen by C. N. Gowing at the County Museum, Aylesbury, and a member of staff at Birmingham City Museum. All are agreed that pottery from level 4 is exclusively of medieval date, and probably 13th to 14th-century, and that level 2 contained similar pottery mixed with 16th to 20th-century material. No sherds of Romano-British type were found.

The sherd material from level 4 may be briefly described, as a sealed group. The pottery was mainly wheel-made but there were a few sherds of hand-made fabrics. The fabrics were well-fired, but varied in colour from dark brown and grey to reddish-brown and buff. Filler material included chalk, flint and quartzite. The only shapes which could be recognised were shallow bowls and jars with constricted necks and everted rims. Decoration was restricted to horizontal grooves on the shoulder and belly of the pots, and on one bowl to a finger-impressed cordon around the rim. The present whereabouts of the pottery is unknown, apart from a small selection of material (mainly from level 2) in the safe keeping of the CVAHS.

#### *Discussion*

The absence of any Romano-British pottery from the north-east quarter of the Wright's Mill site suggests that we have here defined the limits of the Romano-British occupation site centred on Dawes Close.<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly there is nothing in the ceramic finds to suggest any occupation of the site before the 13th century A.D., at the earliest.

The features discovered in excavation suggest a sequence of three phases. Phase A is represented by three post-holes and the pottery sealed beneath the flints. The association of the post-holes and the pottery is unproven, but the absence of anything other than 13th-14th century pottery beneath the flints suggests that the post-holes probably belong with the sherds. The posts were

<sup>2</sup> Branigan and Kirton, *op. cit.*

small, and they are closely situated to each other. In view of the protection offered by the overlying flints we can assume that we have not lost other posts here, except perhaps if there were another similar group to the west of those excavated (outside the excavated area). These posts seem likely to represent some light, ephemeral structure and certainly not part of a building of any kind.

Phase B, represented by the flint spread is more difficult to date. The overlying material and the date of the post-hole which cuts the flints, would allow a date as late as the nineteenth century. However, the absence of any post-medieval pottery below the flints is certainly a safer indication of date, and it seems likely that the flints represent a medieval feature of some kind. This may well have had a deposit of 13th to 14th-century material on it originally, which later disturbances have mixed with modern remains in level 2.

The purpose of the flint surface is not clear. It is wide enough for it to be a roadway, but there are no traces of the wheel-ruts or drainage arrangements one might have expected if it has been intended as a roadway. As a base for a building it might be expected to yield traces of the superstructure, in the form of associated post-holes or timber slots, and of a floor deposit. On balance, however, a building with walls supported on sleeper-beams laid on the flint base, seems the most plausible of the interpretations which can be put forward. If the building were used for storage the amount of material which would accumulate on the floor might well be small, and soon incorporated in the overlying level of soil. Phase C, represented by post-holes 1 and 2, is firmly dated to the nineteenth century and presumably is a fence associated with the tannery which stood here at that time.

The simple sequence demonstrated by the excavation is disappointing. There were hopes that excavations in this area would throw some light not only on the medieval occupation of this part of Chesham, but possibly on the pre-conquest occupation too. In fact, it seems that this particular piece of land was never occupied by anything more important than a timber outbuilding, and that evidence for the early occupation of Chesham must be sought nearer to Church Street and probably on somewhat higher and drier ground.