

A ROMANO-BRITISH SITE AT MICKLEFIELD, HIGH WYCOMBE

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Over a number of years Romano-British sherds have been recovered from a garden in Melbourne Road, Micklefield, during gardening activities. It was also noticed that a garden fork met with considerable resistance after it had penetrated about 20 cm of garden soil. Since there are no previous records of Romano-British finds in the immediate vicinity it was decided to carry out exploratory excavations.

Location and Geology

The location of the site and of the excavations are given in figure 1.

The site (NGR SU 88989307) lies very near to the 75m contour and stands on a small plateau-like area overlooking the now dry river valley.

According to the drift geology map (Ordnance Survey, 1970 edition), the subsoil in the area of Melbourne Road consists of two basic types; soft white chalk with many flints and hard white chalk with few flints. From the map, the boundary between the two subsoil types cuts Melbourne Road at an angle, running roughly south-west to north-east, with the Romano-British site lying in the area of soft white chalk.

Excavations

The locations of the excavated areas are given in figure 1. The areas available for exploratory excavation were limited by the presence of trees, fruit bushes and garden shed. However, three areas were stripped by hand of their covering of garden soil, the largest of which was some 36 square metres in area.

Removal of the topsoil from the largest area revealed an area of packed flints with an irregular edge on two sides. Only one distinct feature was observed in this 'flint floor', and that was a shallow post, or stake, hole some 20 cm in diameter and 10 cm deep. It was surrounded by an incomplete ring of flints. A few sherds of Romano-British pottery were recovered from the immediate surface of the flint 'floor' and these included a piece of creamy-buff mortarium.

In order to try and learn more about the nature of the site two limited sections, each 1 m wide, were cut through the flint floor. Upon examination of the sections the 'floor' appeared to be about 15 cm thick and composed of closely packed flints interspersed with broken pieces of pottery and some earth. The broken pottery was mainly late first or early second century A.D. in date. A Dupondius of Trajan from the make-up of the floor also agrees closely with the pottery date. Occasional nails, metal scraps and animal bones were also present. A similar pattern of construction was observed in both sections.

Beneath the flint 'floor' there was a thin layer of brown soil, about 4 cm thick, containing small pieces of chalk. When this was cleared away to reveal the degraded natural

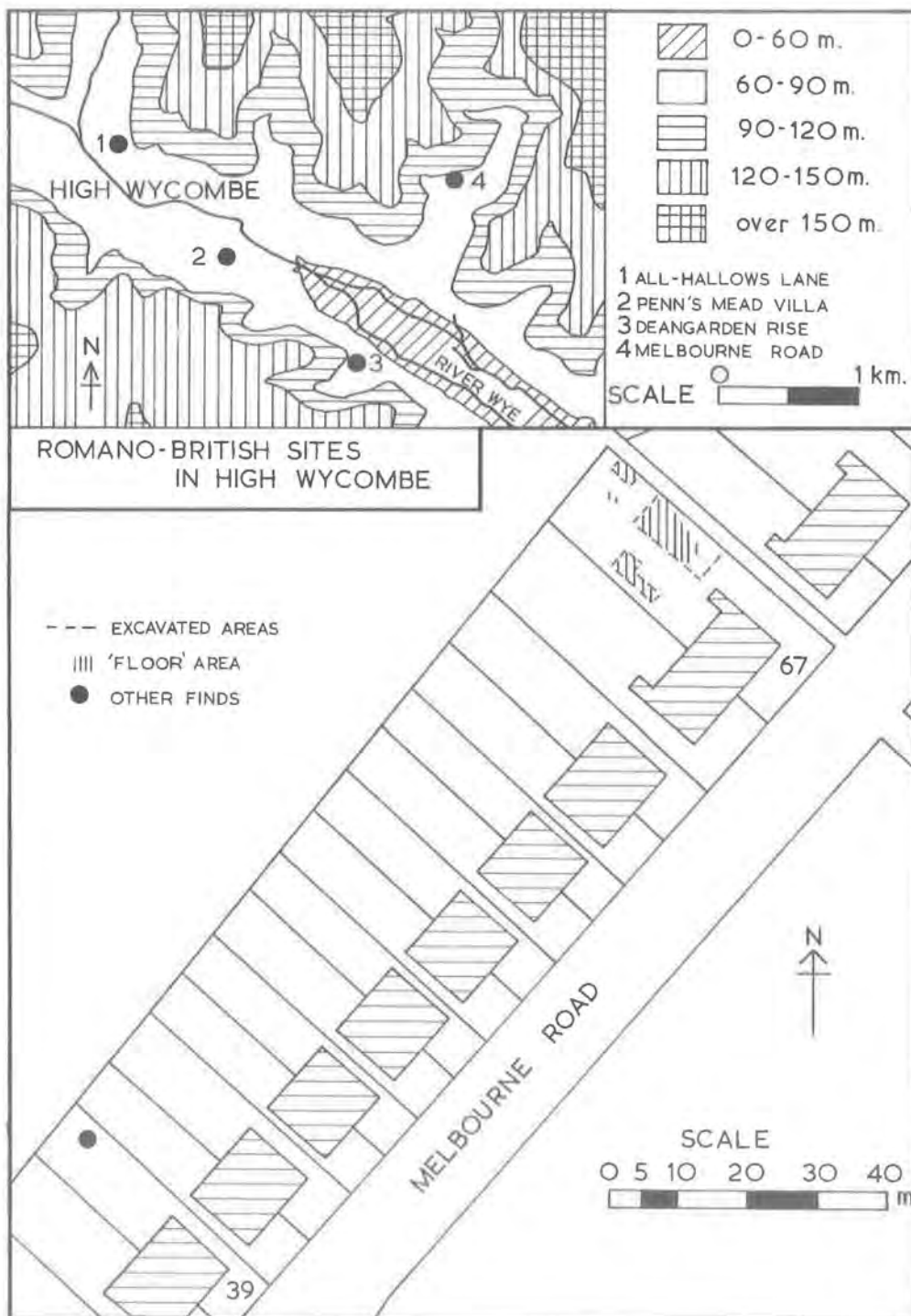


Figure 1. Romano-British site at Micklefield, High Wycombe

surface, narrow lines of brown soil were observed. These lines were spaced about 30 to 40 cm apart and ran in two directions, roughly at right angles to one another. When the soil was cleared out the remaining grooves were shown to be 8 to 10 cm wide at the top, roughly V-shaped in profile, and up to 7 cm deep. Occasional scraps of pottery were recovered from the brown soil but the pieces were far too small to be precisely identified. At present the most likely explanation is that the soil lines are the remnants of cultivation marks made by some form of agricultural implement (plough?). Undoubtedly they precede the flint floor but no evidence is available for their date.

Although not discovered as the result of deliberate excavation, it is convenient at this point to mention the finds from another garden in Melbourne Road, some 100 m south-west of the excavated area (see figure 1). The finds consist of several sherds of pottery and a coin. The pottery, although in a much abraded condition, appears to be contemporary with that recovered from the excavations and includes one rim of a form dateable to the second century A.D. The coin, however, is a *Follis* of Constantine I and in excellent condition. It was dated to 307 A.D. some two hundred years later than the coin above.

Discussion

The earliest features on the excavated site were the cultivation marks in the chalk surface which remain undated. The chalk in the area does not yield readily to attempts at cultivation, so it is likely that a heavy tool caused these marks and, therefore, a date within the late pre-Roman or early Roman Iron Age would seem the most probable.

The flint 'floor' can be reasonably dated to the early part of the second century A.D. on the evidence of both the pottery and the coin of Trajan. The purpose of the 'floor' was not determinable without further large scale and detailed investigation, but a number of hypotheses are possible. The 'floor' may represent no more than rubbish from a nearby building but the relatively even thickness and composition suggests that it was deliberately laid. In addition the probable area is in excess of some 225 square metres, which is a large area for rubbish to be spread over evenly. One possibility could be that the 'floor' represents the yard or the hard standing for an undiscovered building, probably wooden. The relationship of this site to others in the High Wycombe area (see figure 1) poses several interesting questions.

The most substantial Romano-British site in the High Wycombe area is that of the villa and detached bath-house on Penns Mead (site number 2 in figure 1). As the result of excavation in 1955, Hartley considered that the villa was laid out in the period A.D. 150 – 170 and that it survived until at least the middle of the fourth century. On present evidence the Penns Mead villa would appear to have been established some thirty to fifty years after the site at Micklefield. Comparison of the pottery forms and fabrics from the two sites shows that they are dissimilar, supporting the separate establishment dates.

Can we then at Micklefield see the first Romanized settlement in High Wycombe, later moving to a larger, more substantial site in the main valley with the expansion of the Roman life-style in the area? Alternatively, we may be observing the establishment of a central villa with dependant farmsteads within easy reach. Certainly the latter explanation could account for the lack of evidence for agricultural activity at the villa (e.g. absence of corn drying kilns). It could also account for the fourth century coin at Micklefield, but not for the absence of third century pottery forms and fabrics.

Interpretation of the relationship between the Penns Mead villa and the Micklefield site is further complicated by the presence of another Romano-British site nearby (site number 3, figure 1). At Deangarden Rise, Romano-British sherds of a late first – early second century date were recovered, suggesting that the site was contemporary with Micklefield and probably earlier than Penns Mead.

Whatever the relationship of the sites in the High Wycombe area it is clear that Romano-British activity was more intense than has been previously realised.

The Pottery (Figure 2)

The pottery fabrics from the site fall into four main categories with the majority of the sherds being of the first fabric type. In order of decreasing numbers of sherds, the fabric types may be described as:

I. A sparsely gritted soft fabric with a 'soapy' feel; often the grits have become detached from the sherds leaving a pock-marked surface. Colour brown to black. About half of the sherds from the site are contained in this category.

II. A soft fabric, slightly harder than (I) containing crushed calcined flint as a filler. Colour generally brown or reddish-brown.

III. Hard grey fabric with slightly gritty feel but with little grit filler. Some sherds from this fabric had a creamy colour.

IV. A soft, 'dusty' fabric without grit filler, buff to orange in colour.

Simple bead rims predominate in the pottery group with six examples of plain rimmed bowls (e.g. 2 – 4, fig.2). The rim forms display some similarity to late Iron Age forms with occasional closer similarity to Belgic forms (e.g. 10 and 11, fig.2). The rim forms from Melbourne Road are not generally represented in the material from the Penns Mead villa which are more typical of second century Romano-British pottery. Of the bases, numbers 23 – 25 were most similar to Romano-British forms.

Decoration on the sherds was very sparse and consisted of either parallel lines running horizontally or combined with a 'chevron-like' decoration as illustrated in figure 2, 26.

Colour coated and samian pottery was represented by only three small abraded sherds which were insufficient for identification. Mortaria were represented by two sherds, one in a light buff fabric and the other in a harder fabric, dark grey-black on the outside and buff coloured on the inside. The first mortarium sherd contained only brown shiny grits whilst the second contained both brown and white grits.

One other unusual fabric worthy of note, was represented by about six body sherds. The colour was black on the exterior and brown on the interior and the clay had been very heavily gritted with calcined flint. The concentration of grit was heavier than Iron Age pottery fabrics from Buckinghamshire and gave the sherds a feel more akin to flint than pottery.

- (1) Small jar in a hard, gritty fabric (III), sandy/cream colour with some blackened areas on the outside.

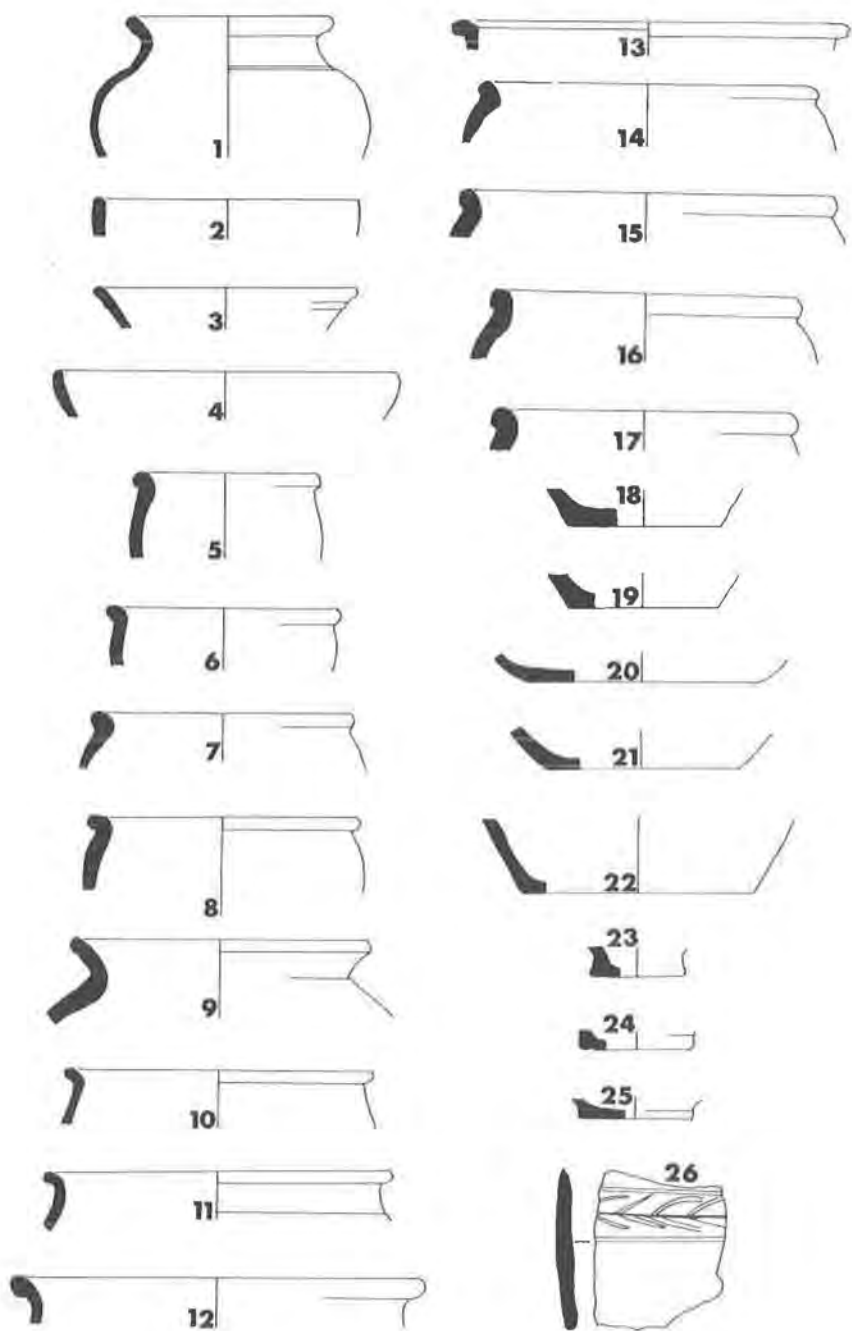


Figure 2. Romano-British pottery from Micklefield (¼).

- (2) Small bowl with a plain rim. Black, gritty fabric (II) with the inclusion of crushed calcined flint.
- (3) Small bowl in a soft soapy fabric (I). Black ext., brown int.
- (4) Bowl with plain rim. Soapy fabric (I), black ext., dark brown int.
- (5) Small pot in a hard, slightly gritty fabric (II), dark brown.
- (6) Small pot with straight sides. Black coloured slightly gritty fabric (II).
- (7) Small pot in soapy fabric (I), black with dark grey/brown core.
- (8) Small pot in soapy fabric (I), with the inclusion of a little grit; black.
- (9) Large pot with outswept rim. Soapy fabric (I), with occasional grit. Black ext. with a red core and dark grey internal colour.
- (10) Thin walled pot in a hard fabric (II), little grit. Black with red core.
- (11) Thin walled pot of form similar to (10), but in a soft fabric (IV), colour orange.
- (12) Large pot in a hard, gritty fabric (III), dark grey with a creamy/buff coloured slip.
- (13) Large bowl in a soft fabric (II), occasional grit, colour brown.
- (14) Large pot with simple rim. Fabric slightly gritty, (II), black ext. with a red core.
- (15) Large pot, black with red core. Hard gritty fabric with the inclusion of crushed calcined flint (II).
- (16) Large pot in soapy fabric (I). Black ext.; int., creamy/grey.
- (17) Pot in a hard gritty fabric (II). Red ext. with a red core and int.
- (18) Base in a hard gritty fabric (II). Both int. and ext. surfaces covered with red and black patches of colour.
- (19) Base in soapy fabric (I), black ext. and brown int.
- (20) Base in a hard, dark grey fabric with some fine grits (III).
- (21) Base in a hard, gritty fabric (II), core colour black with an orange coating on the surfaces.
- (22) Base in a soapy fabric with a few black grits (I). Black colour to the bottom of the base otherwise dark brown. Another piece of the same base was recovered but was slightly thicker than the piece used for illustration.
- (23) Small base in a soapy fabric (I), patchy red and black with grey core.
- (24) Dark grey base in a soft fabric (similar to II). Circular groove cut into underneath of base.
- (25) Base in a hard, gritty fabric (III), creamy colour. This base was very similar in fabric and colour to the jar illustrated, number 1.
- (26) Light grey fabric with the inclusion of some grit. (III).

The following sherds are not illustrated but are worthy of note:

- (27) Three body sherds in a soft, soapy fabric (I), black in colour and having similar decoration to (26).

- (28) Body sherd in a grey, gritty fabric (III), decorated with parallel lines running horizontally.
- (29) Bowl in a hard fabric (II) with thin section. Brown ext. colour and decorated with parallel lines running horizontally.
- (30) Mortarium sherd in a creamy/buff fabric with dark and light brown grits. This fabric is similar to sherds recovered from the excavaion of the Penns Mead villa.
- (31) Small samian bowl, thin section and delicate rim but insufficient for full identification.

Small finds

(a) Metal

- (1) Tip of iron knife.
- (2) Nails with square body section and large circular head, iron. Four examples found.
- (3) Iron nails with rectangular body section and small head. Two examples found.

(b) Coins

- (1) Dupondius of Trajan. Cos VI, rev. Felicitas. RIC 626.
- (2) Follis of Constantine I. Rev. Constantine, Stg 1 with 2 standards.