

Iron Age Pottery from Mowsbury Camp, Ravensden, near Bedford

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Mowsbury or Mossbury Camp is a hillfort in the parish of Ravensden (TL 066532) some two and a half miles to the north east of Bedford. It is sited above steeply inclined natural slopes to the south and south west and commands fine views across the River Ouse valley. The nature and ground plan of the surviving earthworks suggest two main periods of constructional activity. Within a level enclosure encompassed by a now almost weathered and reduced rampart lies a moated complex. Excavations to be directed by the writer on behalf of Bedford Town Council and Museum and the Department of the Environment, Summer 1971, will no doubt show that the enclosure was fortified during the early Iron Age whilst the moated complex, not to be considered in the forthcoming work, is typical of many medieval sites.

From recent study in the field, supported by additional evidence from aerial photography,¹ the existence of a large, hitherto unrecorded ditch has been established lying outside the weathered rampart. Modern ploughing over this ditch has cut into the surviving remains of the rampart and has produced an abundant scatter of intensely burnt clay fragments bearing impressions of timber. Repeated cultivation has resulted in the accumulation of an encircling band of orange-red coloured plough soil around the earthworks. It is particularly noticeable on the south and south west aspects of the site. Rabbit scrapings also throw up such burnt material from the body of the rampart. It is very likely that this material originated from a revetted facing in front of the rampart destroyed by fire. There have been no scientific excavations of the earthworks although from diggings by various individuals within the confines of the earthworks collections of pottery have been made. A group of pottery recovered from clearance of some of the ditches sometime before 1920 was examined by T.D.Pryce and attributed to pre-Roman and Roman periods. Recent study of pottery in the possession of Mr E. G. Crouch, Cleat Hill Farm, Ravensden, extends the range of occupation with examples typical of the early Iron Age and Medieval periods.

The pottery sherds (Fig 3 Nos. 1, 2 and 3) illustrated are from the collection obtained by Mr Crouch and the late Mr W. Allen and are noteworthy since they are most probably from the earliest occupat-

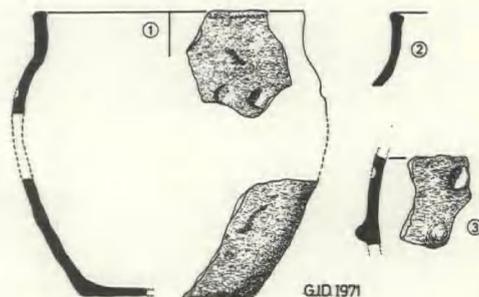


Fig 3 Pottery from Mowsbury Camp.

ions of this site in the Iron Age. A fairly large number of body sherds in the same fabric were also in the group.

The Pottery (Fig 3 Nos. 1-3)

- 1 Situlate jar. Rim and base sherds from same vessel. Carefully made and finished. Surfaces very smooth but slightly uneven contour in places. The fabric is of fairly uniform thickness throughout the vessel. Overall outer-surface colour is biscuit but variable with dark brown and black patches. Inner-surface dark brown/black; core is black. Temper is unevenly distributed but shows no signs of being burnt-out during firing. Surfaces are of minimum thickness and do not contrast with the core. The profile is rather squat and globular, the shoulder fairly pronounced and the base slightly concave. A tall neck, very slightly flaired, carries a flattened T-shaped rim. Decoration on the shoulder and which was probably repetitive, consists of finger-tip impressions, lacking signs of the nail, applied with left hand. The indentations raised the inner-surface of the vessel. Rim diameter is 5.5in (143mm). Base diameter is 3.5in (90mm).
- 2 Rim sherd from Situlate jar. T-rim pinched-in, not squashed. Outer-surface variable dark-red, brown and black; inner-surface bright red; core is grey/black. Surfaces 1mm in thickness and contrast with core. Not as well made as (1) above. Uneven surface. High percentage of temper. Rim diameter 4.5in (115mm).

3 Body sherd. Similar fabric to (1) above, but probably not from the same vessel. Has single finger-tip impression below which is a well-formed 'boss'. It is not known whether this 'boss' constituted part of a repetitive decoration around the vessel or a devolved handle present as a decorative feature.

Discussion and Conclusions

Considered as a group the pottery is all hand-made and the sherds are similar in terms of fabric, degree of tempering and surface and core colouration. They admit to differences in the degree of manufacturing skill. The fabric which does not readily yield to abrasion is reasonably well fired but the preponderance of dark cores and variable surface colours ranging from pale biscuit through shades of red and brown to grey and black indicate poor temperature control during manufacture and also that the bodies of the pots were not totally oxidised. A considerably high percentage of tempering in the form of finely crushed mollusc was incorporated, suggesting that the clays used suffered dehydration and shrinkage on firing thus causing breakage. An uneven distribution of tempering within the clay denotes deliberate inclusion but poor puddling.

The restored vessel (fig 3 No. 1) is the situlate jar which occurs in early Iron Age contexts. At Rainsborough Hillfort, Northants,² the type is dated to the 4th-2nd centuries B C and at Hunsbury Hill Fort, Northants,³ vessels both with and without finger tip impressions are placed in the period 600-400 B C. In Bedfordshire, examples from Puddlehill, Dunstable⁴ are circa 350-300 B C. Whilst Iron Age parallels for the raised 'boss' (fig 3.3) have been noted at Fengate, Peterborough⁵ and elsewhere^{6,7} this feature also frequently occurs on vessels from the middle and late Bronze Age both in England and Europe. Protruding knobs are

present on a small late Bronze Age vessel (1000-800 B C) from Goring, Sussex⁸ and from the same period there is an example on a sherd from Mildenhall Fen (Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology Cambridge). In Europe, four vessels (Copper Age) with knobs were recovered from a grave group at Tisza-Polgar, Hungary. Middle Bronze Age vessels (Bronze Age II) from Füzesabony and Tószeg, Hungary, carry knobs (Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge). Protruding knobs would facilitate handling of vessels whilst two of the four knobs on the Füzesabony example are perforated presumably for suspension of the vessel.

The Mowsbury specimen together with those other Iron Age examples illustrate the persistence of late Bronze Age pottery traditions during the lengthy transition period to the early years of the Iron Age.

Although these sherds hint at the early historical associations for Mowsbury Camp their precise cultural and historical context can only be determined from stratified parallels which at present are lacking for this site.

I thank Mr E.G. Crouch for kindly allowing me to examine these sherds.

NOTES

- 1 Aerofilms Ltd., Boreham Wood, Herts. (Plate Serial No R10 7456).
- 2 M Avery, J E G Sutton and J W Banks. 'Rainsborough, Northants, England: Excavations 1961-5'. *P P S* 33, 1967, 207-306.
- 3 C I Fell. 'The Hunsbury Hill Fort, Northants' *Arch J* 93, 1963, 57-100.
- 4 C L Matthews, 'Ancient Dunstable' Manshead Arch. Soc., *M D but about 1963*.
- 5 C Hawkes and C I Fell. An Early Iron Age Site at Fengate, Peterborough. *Arch J* (1943).
- 6 C C Hawkes, J N L Myers and C E Stevens, *St Catherine's Hill, Winchester, P Hants F C*, 9, 1930.
- 7 M E Cunnington *All Cannings Cross* (1920).
- 8 A E Wilson, *A Guide to the Bronze Age Collections*, [Worthing Museum Publications 2]

Romano-British pottery kiln site near Elstow

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During preparation of a celery trench (Spring 1970) at South Bedford Allotment Association Gardens, Mile Road, Bedford, (TL 058477) a further pottery kiln (Kiln VI) was discovered. The kiln, of mid 1st century A D origin and updraught

construction, was the sixth excavated at this site. Whilst stratification of contents within the stoke hole was largely destroyed by the celery trench the structure of the furnace and flue was well preserved with the pedestal type centre column (removed to