

## HAHG Newsletter. January 2020

The truly dismal weather and waterlogged land has prevented us from doing any serious field-work these last few months. In the meantime we have been planning for some Spring activity: more of which in later Newsletters.

One noteworthy item is the recent reports in the Oxford Mail that have added to our knowledge and scope of the Romano-British Pottery industry in the Between-Towns Road area of Cowley.

### **The Local Roman Pottery Industry.**

Although outside our present Horspath Parish focus, this Cowley kiln-field was a close neighbour of the kilns by Open Brasenose and those up on the Row Field (next to the modern reservoir) during the Roman occupation and is of interest to us.

Especially as there is good evidence to indicate that much (but not all) of the later Oxfordshire pottery industry had common standards: particularly in the dimensions of mortaria and domestic pot sizes.

This fact in turn implies some kind of overall business owner(s), or controller(s) involved in setting those standards, at least from about AD 250 onwards. It must have been a profitable family (?) business over many generations, hence one wonders where their headquarters (or perhaps villa) was located. The status display needs of the wealthy Romano-British would inevitably meant a luxury building: and lots of Roman bling! An interesting thought...

Thus there would have been connections between our Horspath kilns and other kilns in this area. Management issues apart, if only to access the north-south Roman road between Dorchester and Alchester (close to Wendlebury).

This north-south road, and the various traffic along it would have inevitably impacted the Horspath area, particularly if our ancient track leading off of the main Roman Rd towards Old Horsepath proves to be (at least) Roman in origin. The materials and manpower needed for firing a series of kilns; woodland management, transport and the supplies of clay alone should have left an impact on our landscape. We just need to find traces of that impact; settlements for workers particularly, and not too far from the kiln-fields..

Geoff has found a link showing the Roman road between Alchester and Dorchester to help readers understand its routing:-

[https://saxonhistory.co.uk/Location\\_Margary\\_Roman\\_Roads.php?ID=M160b&route=160b%20Alchester%20-%20Dorchester%20on%20Thames](https://saxonhistory.co.uk/Location_Margary_Roman_Roads.php?ID=M160b&route=160b%20Alchester%20-%20Dorchester%20on%20Thames)

Alchester itself with its early Roman Fort was the nearest large town along with Dorchester, slightly further away. Both would have had large market-places and many of their inhabitants would have frequently passed within yards of the Open Brasenose kilns *en route* to Dorchester and/or Alchester. And some may have inevitably strayed along our putative track towards what is now Old Horspath and beyond. Hence our interest in the "Blacklands" field along that track.

See links below for the recent excavations at Alchester (and especially the biography of one of the soldiers stationed there!) by the German scholar Eberhard Sauer:-

<https://www.ed.ac.uk/history-classics-archaeology/research/knowledge-exchange/heritage-museums/alchester>

<http://www.oxoniensia.org/volumes/2006/sauer.pdf>

A lengthy article on the Roman history of both towns is in the History On-Line version of the VCH, although somewhat dated now as it was written in 1939 and extensive excavations in both towns have been done since then:-

<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol1/pp281-303>

### **New finds relating to the Oxfordshire Roman Pottery Industry.**

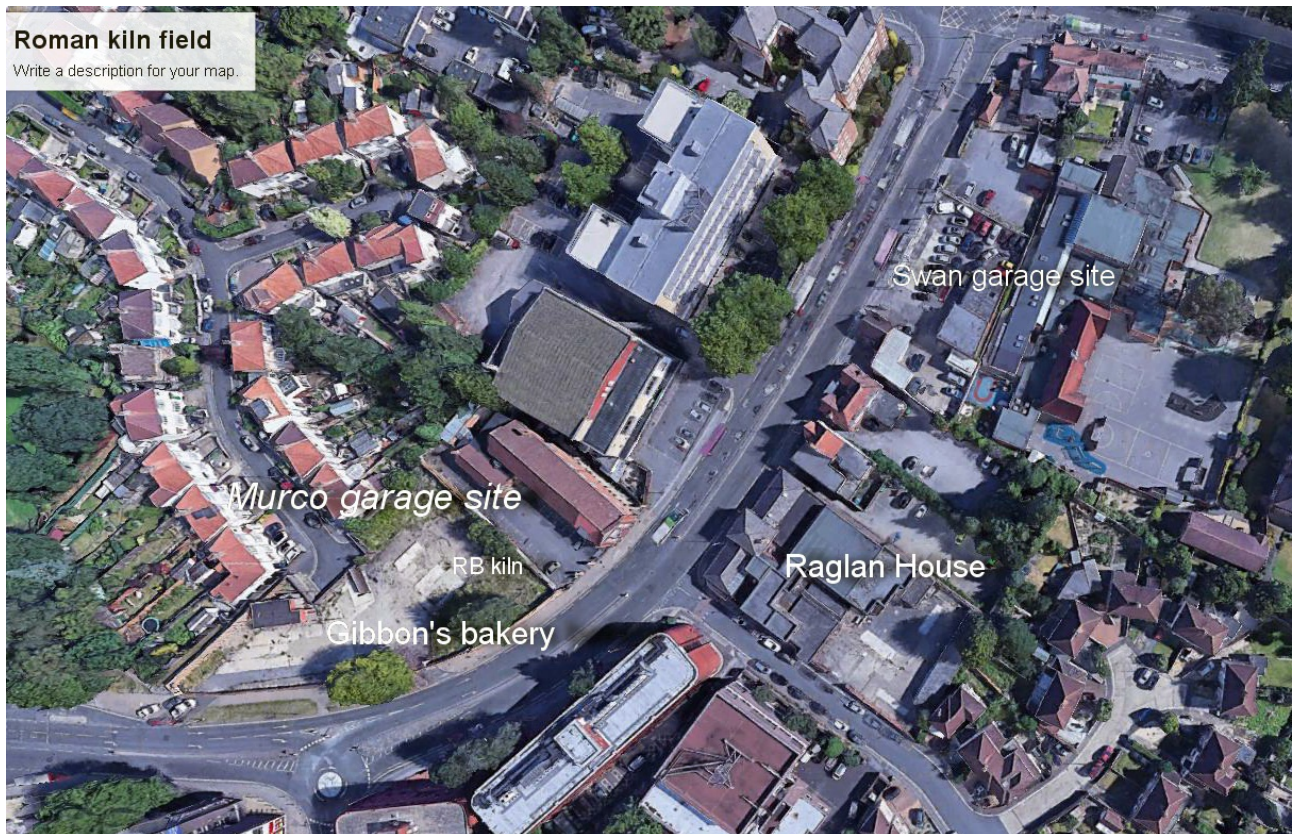
The 2019 Oxford Mail article links are below:-

<https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/17395730.roman-pottery-found-cowley-towns-road-student-flats/>

<https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/18061664.roman-pottery-found-former-cowley-petrol-station-site/>

As an aside, this latter site is interesting as it contains the foundations of the

well-known Gibbon's family bakery which was demolished in the building of Cowley Centre. Cath Riley (née Gibbons) is a Horspath resident and HAHG member. She remembers the demolition and the family upset that accompanied it!



*Google Earth cover of latest finds from St Lukes Road*

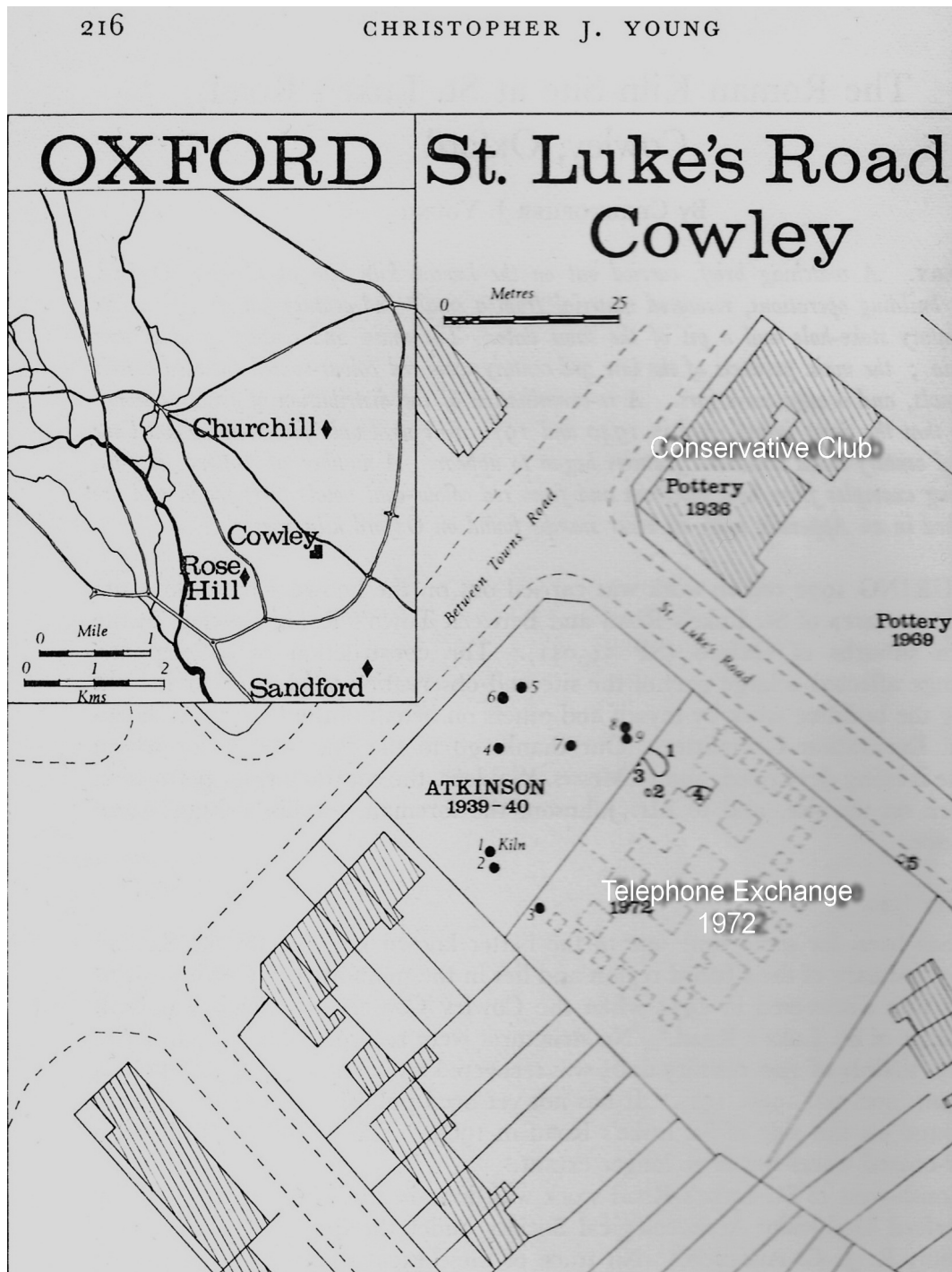
Previous evidence for Roman activity in this area was first noted in 1936 by Prof Atkinson when quantities of 2nd century pottery and waster fragments were discovered during construction of the Cowley Conservative Club.

Subsequent excavations in 1940 recorded a wide range of further evidence. A pottery assemblage of over 15,000 sherds was recovered indicating a gradual increase in production activity from the late 1st century and reaching a peak in the late 2nd century. Production appeared to continue on site to a lesser extent until the late 4th century. Some evidence of human occupation was also recorded at this site, indicated by a rough stone floor with a fragment of a ceramic 'cheesepress' thereon.

The St Luke's Road site was partially investigated in 1972 by Chris Young during building works for the telephone exchange. A small quantity of 2nd century pottery, similar to that recovered from the 1939 excavations, was also recorded in a pottery waster tip. A subsequent watching brief along Between Towns Road in 1981-2 produced further evidence of activity from the 2nd to

4th century including one probable 2nd century kiln, one probable 3rd century kiln and two other possible sites.

The pottery assemblage dating to this period includes numerous examples of stamped mortaria bearing the mark of *Vossullus*. The second phase of activity dated to the 3rd-4th century and comprised two stoke holes, a flue, a kiln, several ditches, a pottery dryer, a waster dump, and five puddling tables.



*Map of earlier sites from Chris Young's 1973 article in Oxonensia: Vol 38 1973*

To the south-west (beneath the present Raglan House), a second stoke hole was recorded, indicating yet another kiln.

Thus the latest evidence from St Lukes/Between Towns Road suggests a progressive southwards expansion or migration of the pottery industry area in the late 3rd to 4th century.

## **The Oxfordshire Pottery Industry**

To put these sites in context for our HAHG readers, the following is a highly abridged extract from an Oxford City Council report entitled:-

*“OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESOURCE ASSESSMENT- 2011 ROMAN ”  
Compiled by Ruth Beckley and David Radford Version: 28/1/2012 See:-*

[https://www.oxford.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/1622/roman\\_oxford\\_43 - 410 ad.pdf](https://www.oxford.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/1622/roman_oxford_43_-_410_ad.pdf)

The overall report itself is well worth downloading as it gives an up-to-date view of archaeology across the county for all archaeological periods. A truly wonderful resource for local history researchers:-

**“The local Roman pottery industry is orientated on the Dorchester to Alchester road and encompasses an area of production that stretches on a north-south alignment from the southern fringes of Otmoor as far as Dorchester, and on an east-west alignment for almost five kilometres.**

**A summary of the known pottery industry was produced in 1977 by Young providing an overview of the distribution and setting of the industry as well as a detailed gazetteer of Oxford wares. The volume was updated and republished in 2000 . Young notes at least 30 kilns in the region, the majority of which were located in the Oxford LAA.”**

**“The broad trajectory of the industry is outlined below:**

- 1st century AD: first evidence of coarse table ware production at the Churchill hospital site (fine grey and oxidised wares).**
- Late 1st century AD: limited fine ware production is recorded in the**

AbingdonDorchester area including the earliest evidence of white firing clays for mortaria and flagons.

- **2nd century AD: 100-180.** Fine table wares were mainly imported during this period, whereas specialised vessels such as mortaria and flagons were made in the province. The local industry expanded, notably at Littlemore, Cowley and Rose Hill, producing utilitarian reduced wares and also mortaria, flagons in white ware, a range of table ware forms in white and oxidised wares, and also bows and beakers in reduced ware. The mortaria were often stamped. The distribution was mostly local except for mortaria which achieved a distribution extending into the Severn Valley as well as eastwards down the Thames.
- **Late 2nd- mid-3rd century AD:** This was a period of decline for pottery industries generally, however local production survived with some kiln complexes going out of use (Littlemore, Ashurst Clinic) and some new sites established (Blackbird Leys and possibly Littlemore Mount Pleasant). The stamping of mortaria ceased, a pattern seen throughout Roman Britain.
- **Mid-late 3rd century AD:** major changes to the Oxford pottery industry with the introduction of the large scale production of red and brown colour coated fine ware replacing the dwindling supply of imported Samian wares and the increased use of potters stamps (*the majority of them "nonsense stamps" as the potters were illiterate: CJP*) until the end of the century. It was clear that from AD250 the Oxford industry was one of the major pottery producers of Roman Britain, on a par with other major industries such as the New Forest, the Nene Valley or Mancetter/Hartshill.
- **Colour-coated wares in the Oxford tradition appear to have been made elsewhere in the province, e.g. at Harston near Cambridge, perhaps by Oxford potters who had migrated.**
- **By the end of the century new sites primarily concerned with the production of mortaria and white oxidised wares were active at the Churchill, the Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre, Oxford School and Open Brasenose. Open Brasenose, Cowley and Rose Hill were also involved in colour-coated ware production. (CJP bold)**
- **During this period there was an expansion in the range of fine wares being produced. A distinctive new range of mortaria was introduced. At the Churchill a range of white-ware flagons and oxidised beakers**

and jars were made. By the mid-3rd century introduction of white slip and white ware fabrics (so-called parchment wares) can be demonstrated by exports to London and Richborough. Although these wares were widely distributed across southern Britain, the earlier oxidised and reduced (grey) coarse wares never extended beyond regional markets.

- A significant development was the introduction of red and brown colour-coated ware by c.270.

- Late 3rd century AD: the range of white mortaria was simplified; thereafter the character of production did not change significantly during the 4th century. The distribution of Oxford wares achieved greater density and extent during this period, in the south west, south Midlands and East Anglia.

- Oxfordshire production came to an end about AD400. The character and speed of the industry's decline is not well understood.

**A noticeable feature of the late Roman industry is the consistency of products across a wide area suggesting a level of centralised commercial control.”**

*(As previously mentioned, this would imply a high status owner or controller(s) and perhaps an equally high-status villa: which is perhaps yet to be discovered... Unless the villas at Headington Wick or Wheatley fulfilled that function? My own view is that this is unlikely and a more central site should be sought.(CJP)*

*(NB: Another (shorter) overview of the Oxfordshire pottery industry is provided in:- Booth et al. "Thames through Time: The Archaeology of the gravel terraces of the Upper and Middle Thames": The Early Historical Period. Oxford Archaeology Monograph 27. Oxford: Oxford Archaeology. 2007. CJP.)*

## Old Horspath

One recent discovery by Sally's son David, is an excellent photograph of the old track as it reaches Old Horspath. It has been a real problem to get good photos of that track. Fine weather and a low sun angle reveal all:-



A further recent development re Old Horspath is our use of DEFRA's LIDAR coverage of our area. For an explanation of LIDAR see:-

<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/methods/airborne-remote-sensing/lidar/>

Geoff Roynon and myself (with help from Simon Underdown) have been playing with this new imaging system. Geoff recovered a LIDAR map of Old Horspath and distributed it within our group. Eagled-eyed Martin Harris then spotted a curious enclosure-like feature on the map; *right where we believe Old Horspath church might have been...* When weather conditions improve we will (with Denis Walker's permission of course) try to examine ground features there and report back.

The current resolution of LIDAR cover is fairly crude but we are promised higher resolution cover in 2020/21 so better archaeological details may well emerge.



Do please let us know if you have any questions about any of the above: we'll do our very best to answer them.

*Sally and Chris January 1st 2020*