

The Early Pits of the Jewry Wall Site, Leicester

by Paul Jarvis

INTRODUCTION

This article is concerned with a re-assessment of ten pits of the Jewry Wall site, excavated by Miss (later Dame) K. Kenyon between 1936 and 1939 and considered by her to be the earliest features on the site, dating to A.D. 35-50. The motivation for undertaking an examination of these pits by the author was a dissertation for a degree course at Nottingham University. However the present author had been interested in these features for some time, not only because they seem to be treated in a rather cursory manner in the excavation report, but also, because they cast some light upon the Pre-Roman settlement at Leicester; a topic of some interest.

EXCAVATION RECORDS

These pits featured quite prominently in the excavation records, being mentioned in the site notebooks and appearing on section drawings (re-produced as figs 1-9). No site plan of the pits was produced. Kenyon justified this omission on the grounds that: 'They were not completely cleared and their shape was not identified' (Kenyon 1948, 125). For the purposes of this study a plan has been produced (see Fig 1). The solid line indicates the location of sections containing pits; the size and shape of the pits are shown by dotted lines because they are estimates based on the assumption that the pit width in section equals its diameter.

DIFFICULTIES OF INTERPRETATION

There are several inconsistencies and problems with these pits. The most obvious is the absence of a pit 9. There is no mention of it in the site records, nor of pottery from it in the published report. The most reasonable explanation is that an error in site recording remained uncorrected, and entered the final report. A second difficulty is the location of pit 6. Kenyon in her published report describes 6 as being: 'Beneath the NE angle of room V' (Kenyon 1948, 129). However, the site records locate this pit in room III. The apparent conflict is explained when it is realised that V was the working number of the room in which the site records locate this pit; this room subsequently became III in the published report. Another difficulty concerns pit 4. Kenyon records in her site notes that pit 4 was composed of several small pits; while no mention was made of this in the published report. This is obviously an omission, its possible importance will be discussed later. Finally, the only indication of pit 12 is on section N-O plate XXXII, (Kenyon 1948). There is no record of pottery from this pit in the final report, nor any mention of pit 12 in the site records. However, pit 12 does bear a striking resemblance to pit 2, indicating, I believe, that they are one and the same.

DISTRIBUTION OF THE PITS

The plan in this article shows a possible concentration of pits in the north-east corner of

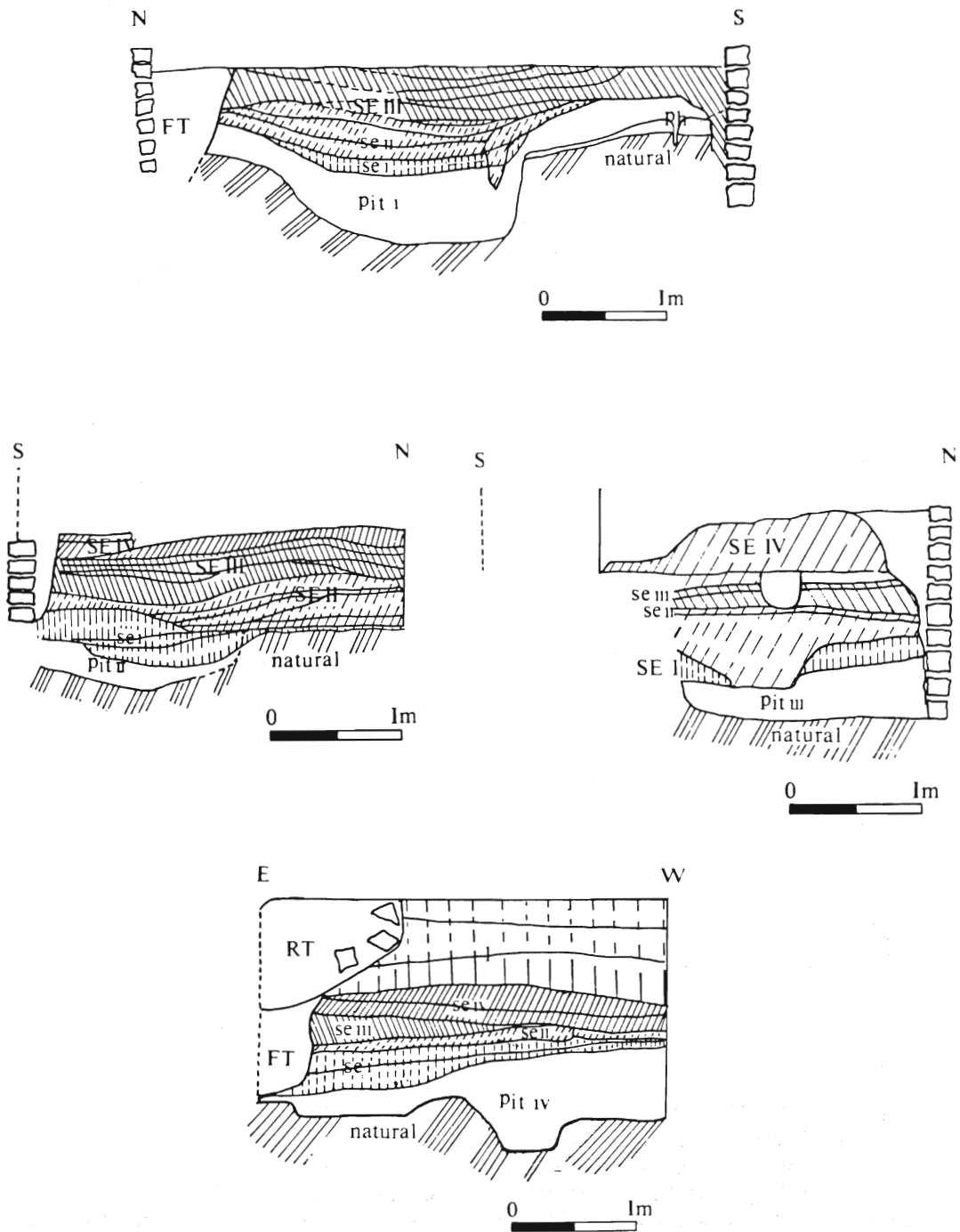


Fig. 2 Jewry Wall Site, pits i to iv

FUNCTIONS OF THE PITS

Only one pit has a sufficiently characteristic shape to suggest a possible function. This is pit 4, whose comparatively narrow width and great depth seems to indicate a post hole. Pit 4's structural function is perhaps confirmed by a possible timber slot to the east of the pit (see fig 3). This interpretation is of interest if one considers Kenyon's remark that pit 4 was composed of several small pits. It is far too speculative however to assign a structural function to all of these pits. Also of interest is the possible pit to the south of pit 8 (see fig 6). It is exceptionally long, around 4.2m, and comparatively shallow, less than 1m. There appears to the present author only two possible explanations for its shape; firstly, that it is a series of intercutting pits whose relationships to one another were unrecorded by Kenyon; secondly, that it is a sunken hut. Unfortunately there are major drawbacks with both these interpretations; Kenyon was a capable excavator, thus to suggest that she failed to record several important relationships is hard to credit. While sunken huts have not been recognised in this country in the Iron Age or Roman period. Kenyon provides some corroboration for the latter interpretation, recording in her site notes, 'Some hardened surfaces, poss hearths.' From this pit, but without more evidence the problem remains insoluble.

All of these pits were used ultimately for rubbish disposal, with Kenyon in her published report, stating: 'The filling of these pits consisted of organic matter.' (Kenyon 1948, 9).

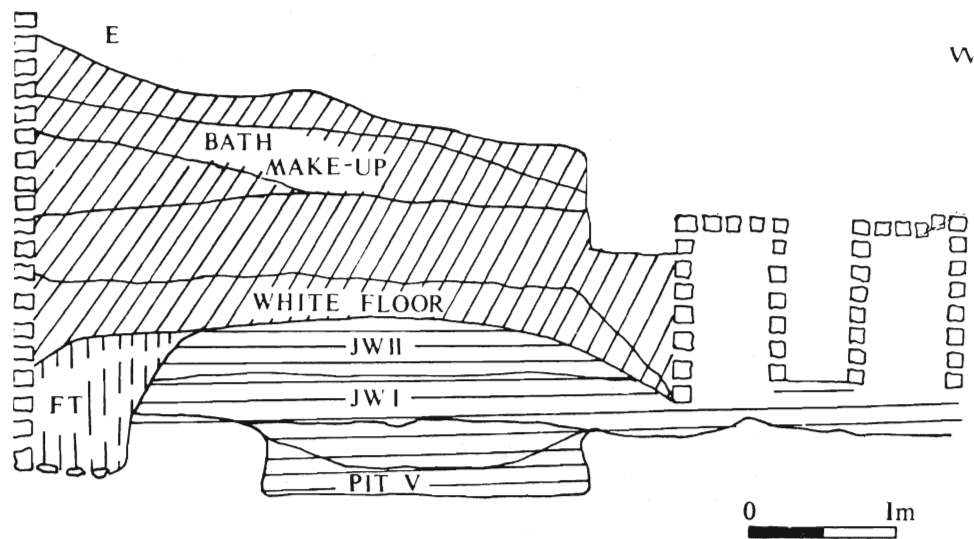


Fig. 3 Jewry Wall pit v

FEATURES CONTEMPORARY WITH THE PITS

The only feature that could possibly be contemporary with the pits was a hearth recorded on an original site plan and appearing on plate IVa in Kenyon 1948. Its location is given by an h on the plan in this article (fig 1). The dating of this hearth is questionable, based solely on Kenyon's caption to the plate, 'Earliest occupation pits and fire place'. Its location close to pit 4, with its possible structural functions, is worthy of note; but to state that these features are linked is improbable.

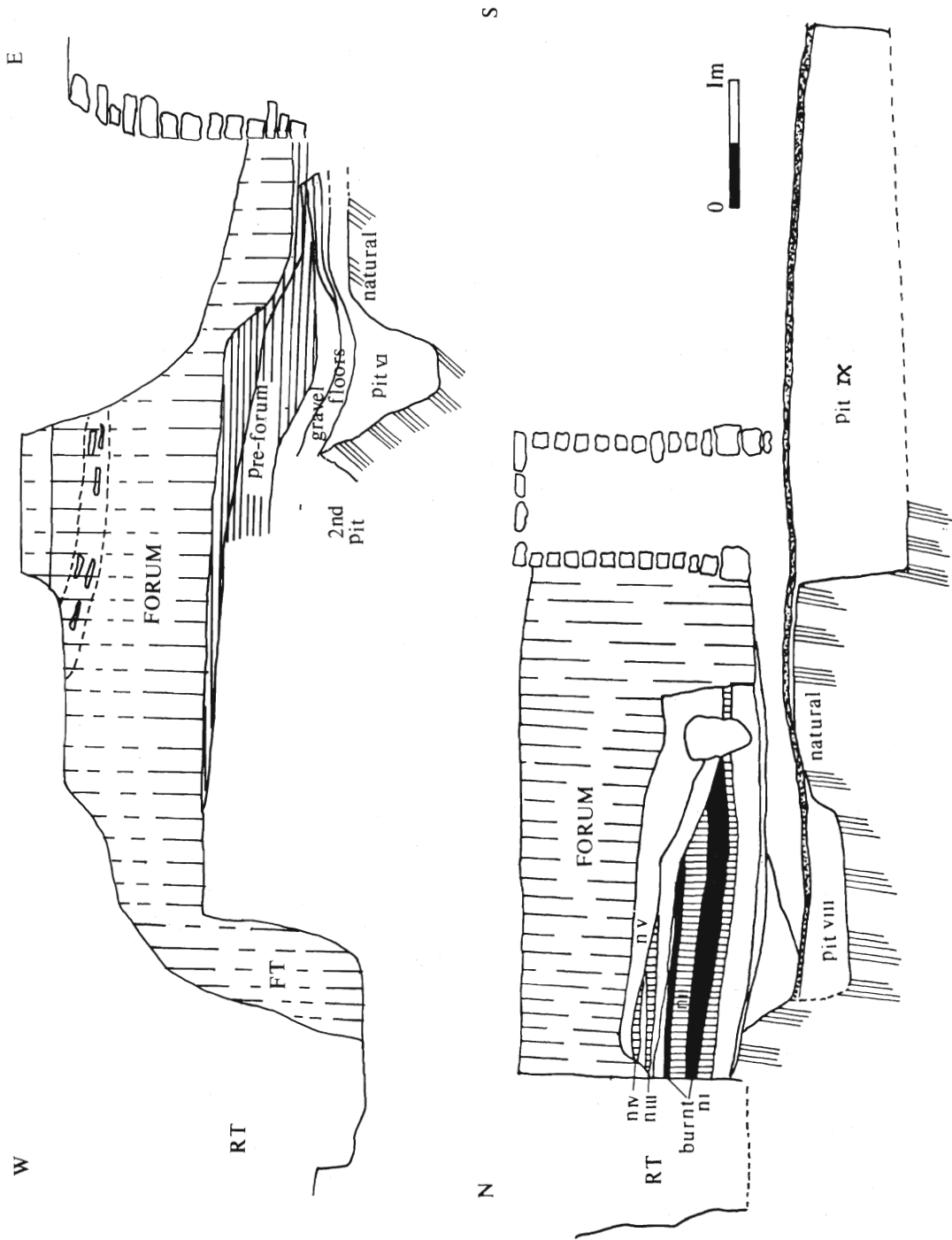


Fig. 4 Jewry Wall, pits vi, viii and ix

POTTERY FROM THE PITS

A summary of the most important findings from a study of the pottery from these pits has been published (Jarvis 1985), however, the articles short length meant an exclusion of some important detail, published here for the first time. Also subsequent to its publication an examination of Gallo-Belgic wares from all of the Jewry Wall site was completed. This corroborated many of the conclusions drawn in the summary. The pottery will be considered in this article in two ways; firstly, for dating the pits and; secondly, as indicators of the origin and status of Iron Age Leicester.

PIT DATING

An analysis of the pottery from the pits by Miss V. Rigby of the British Museum revealed a greater range of dates than the ones Kenyon eventually decided upon, with a range of pottery from the first century B.C. to the 70's A.D. It was also possible to see, accepting anomalies caused by residual and intrusive material, two phases of pits. An early group, pit 2, 5 and pit 4, or at least some of the pits called 4, and a later group consisting of pit 1, 6 and 7, with pits 3, 8, 10 and 11 being impossible to date because of small and/or contradictory pottery assemblages. (The evidence for these phases is in the appendix 1). Putting absolute dates on these phases is obviously very important, however there are so few well dated contexts in Leicester for most of the pottery types present in these pits, most notably, in the case of the early phase, the Gallo-Belgic wares, that dates have to be applied from south eastern British sites (where there is the greatest amount of these wares in Britain and where it is generally assumed they entered this country from abroad). This would establish a *terminus post quem* date for Gallo-Belgic wares in Leicester. The dates for the phases would then be: A.D. 25 or later for the early phase—dating solely on the Gallo-Belgic wares, and Post Conquest for the later — dating on Gallo-Belgic wares and some Roman pottery types. There is sufficient Roman ware in the later phase to prove beyond doubt a Post-Conquest date, thus the early date is the only questionable one. Miss Rigby contends that Gallo-Belgic wares share contemporary, or near contemporary, dates on south east sites and Leicester

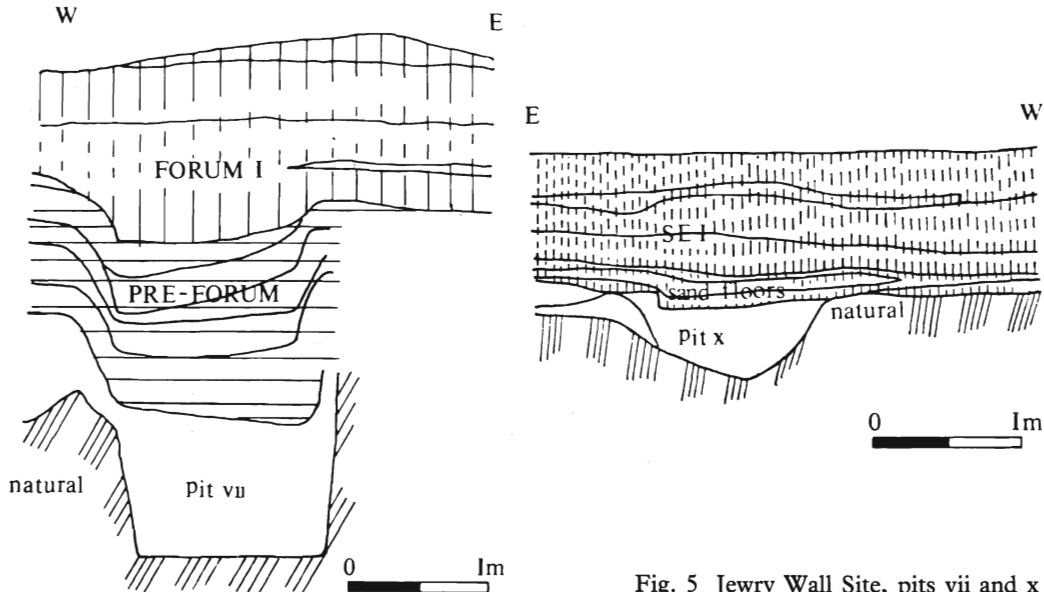


Fig. 5 Jewry Wall Site, pits vii and x

and cites reasons for this belief: firstly, that Leicester and the south east are geographically close; secondly, that the early trade in Gallo-Belgic wares was of very dynamic and expansive nature. It is also of interest to note that pre-conquest Gallo-Belgic assemblages are being discovered outside the south-east, most recently at The Ditches, North Cerney near Bagendon, which in terms of distance from the south east rivals Leicester (Dr J.R. Timby *Pers. comm.*). This has interesting interpretations. It could mean a much more extensive trade in Gallo-Belgic wares than was previously suspected between the North, or at least the Midlands, and the South East; or Gallo-Belgic wares being imported at points of entry outside the south east. Unfortunately until more evidence is accumulated this remains speculation.

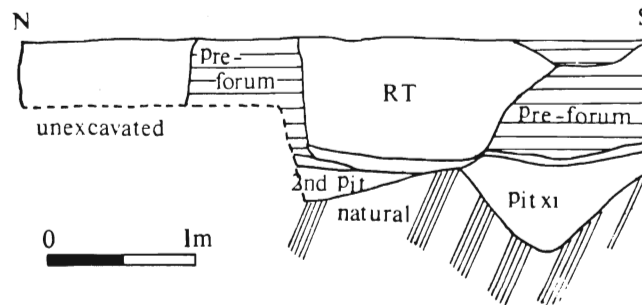


Fig. 6 Pit xi

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR LEICESTER

There is still much conjecture concerning the origin of Leicester, some writers still willing to believe a Post-Conquest foundation date (as for example Webster 1966, 42). Most recently it has been proposed that Leicester originated in the first century B.C. and rose to be of considerable status by the Roman Conquest (Liddle 1982, 26). The pottery from Jewry Wall confirms this view of Iron Age Leicester. The Earliest pottery is of probable first century B.C. date, coarsely wheel thrown or hand made, and shell tempered. By A.D. 25 Leicester was of sufficient status to attract Gallo-Belgic wares of quite exotic forms: five Cam 53s of A.D. 15-25 date; two Cam 113s, both pre-A.D. 25; four examples of mica-dusted Terra Nigra, possibly of 10 B.C.-A.D. 10 date; and two examples of Terra Rubra of unknown form but late Augustan date. Contemporary with, or slightly later than, this group were Gallo-Belgic copies, all of probably local manufacture. This indicates a market not only for Gallo-Belgic ware but also their copies. Worthy of note is an *amphorae* from pit 4 (Kenyon 1948, 134, Fig 36, no 31) recently identified as a Dressel 2-4 of Catalonian origin, manufactured from the late Augustan to the Trajanic period and probably the first unequivocal example of this type from a pre-Roman context in Britain (A. Fitzpatrick, *Pers. Comm.*).

The period from A.D. 25 to the Roman Conquest seems poorly represented at Jewry Wall, with none of the expected intermediate Gallo-Belgic forms, such as Cam 8, 14, 56 nor other recognizable pottery of this period. Post conquest forms are however, well represented. It was felt necessary to investigate whether this reflected the situation on the Jewry Wall site or just in the features chosen for reassessment. All contexts on the Jewry Wall site were considered and the Gallo-Belgic wares studied. Gallo-Belgic wares were chosen because they were felt to be the most diagnostic. This analysis produced none of the intermediate wares but added to the number of early and post-conquest forms. It appears therefore that there was a break in occupation or in the supply of Gallo-Belgic wares

on this site from A.D. 25 to the Roman Conquest, although it is not known if this reflects the situation in Leicester as a whole.

A site in Leicester that has produced fine wares of similar dates to the Jewry Wall examples is Blackfriars. These wares include Rheims white ware beakers of 10 B.C.-10 A.D. date, mica dusted Terra Nigra, Cam 113s and an early local form of Terra Rubra. The excavator believes that this material reached Leicester a considerable time after its manufacture. Ascribing a general, first half of the first century A.D., date for the period of Leicester's growth in importance (Clay and Mellor 1985, 30). It is a view I do not ascribe to for the reasons given above though because of the limited amount of evidence this remains a point of debate. Another debateable point is the actual size of the pre-Roman settlement at Leicester. The highly industrial and urban nature of present day Leicester precludes large scale excavation. However a plot has been made of all excavations within the city producing pre-Roman Iron Age pottery (Clay and Mellor 1985, 31, fig 29). This provides convincing evidence for an Iron Age settlement of at least 13 hectares, but if this represents a nucleated site or settlement is unknown.

CONCLUSION

The re-assessment of pottery from these pits adds further credibility to the view of Leicester originating in the first century B.C. and being of comparatively high status before the Roman Conquest; possibly by the first two decades A.D.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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APPENDIX 1

Pit 1

This produced a pottery group of 53 extant sherds of which 16 are dateable: 5 samian, giving a Claudian-Neronian date; 8 Gallo-Belgic, 3 late Augustan, 1 post conquest, 3 pre or post conquest, 1 early; 1 Gallo-Belgic copy belonging to the first half of the first century A.D.; 2 coarseware both dated to the first half of the first century A.D. It is probable that this pit is of post conquest date.

Pit 2

This has a pottery group of 12 sherds of which 4 are dateable; 2 Gallo-Belgic both pre-A.D. 25; 2 coarseware one of probable first century B.C. date and the other wrongly attributed to pit 4 (Kenyon 1948, fig 36 no 22) and of second century A.D. date. If one ignores the latter as intrusive this would indicate an early, pre A.D. 25, date for this pit.

Pit 3

This has a pottery group of 15 extant sherds of which 3 are dateable; 1 Gallo-Belgic sherd of early, possibly pre A.D. 25 date; 2 coarseware, 1 of second century A.D. date and the other of first half of the first century A.D. date. If one ignores the second century sherd as intrusive, it means one must date this pit on two sherds. It is probably best not to assign a date to this pit.

Pit 4

This has a pottery group of 91 extant sherds of which 17 are dateable; 9 Gallo-Belgic, 5 late Augustan, 2 pre-Conquest and 2 post-Conquest; 1 nearly complete imitation butt beaker of pre-Conquest date (composed of sherds from pit 4 and pit 5); 1 coarseware vessel dated to the first half of the first century A.D. 4 coarseware sherds of probable first century B.C. date; 1 ring necked flagon of post Conquest date; 1 amphorae dated to the first half of the first century A.D. Collectively the pottery would seem to indicate an early, pre A.D. 25 date, with the later material being intrusive. However it should be noted that Kenyon records that: 'This pit includes a rather higher proportion of Roman ware than the others and may therefore go down rather later.' (Kenyon site notes). This material was not located by the present author.

Pit 5

This produced 32 extant sherds of which 6 are dateable, all Gallo-Belgic wares; 2 late Augustan, 2 early probably pre A.D. 25 and 2 post Conquest. This group, and including the sherds of the imitation butt beaker shared between pit 4 and 5, would seem to indicate a similar date to pit 4, that is, pre A.D. 25.

Pit 6

This produced 7 extant sherds of which 3 are dateable; 1 samian sherd of Claudian date; 2 Terra Negra sherds of Claudian Neronian date. This pit seems unquestionably post Conquest.

Pit 7

This produced 26 extant sherds of which 8 are dateable; 6 samian of Claudian date; 1 imitation Gallo-Belgic sherd dated to A.D. 50 to A.D. 70; 1 Roman sherd of first century A.D. date. Also from this pit is a brooch of Flavian date. This pit appears post Conquest.

Pit 8

This has 2 extant sherds both dateable; 1 a Gallo-Belgic copy no later than A.D. 50; the other, a coarseware sherd dated to the first half of the first century A.D. Attempting to date this pit with such a small number of sherds and of such wide date range is impossible.

Pit 10

This has 1 extant sherd, which is a Gallo-Belgic copy of probable post conquest date. To date a pit on such limited evidence is highly speculative.

Pit 11

This has 5 extant sherds of which 4 are dateable; 1 coarseware sherd of probable first century B.C. date; 1 Gallo-Belgic sherd probably pre A.D. 25; 1 imitation Gallo-Belgic sherd and 1 flagon, both both post conquest. The dating of this pit with such a small and contradictory assemblage is of limited value.