

THE EXCAVATION OF AN EARLY MEDIÉVAL SITE AT BUCKMINSTER, LEICESTERSHIRE

by

D. J. RUDKIN

SUMMARY

This report is of a rescue excavation carried out on an early medieval site at Buckminster, Leicestershire, conducted on behalf of the Grantham Archaeological Society, and, with the aid of a grant from the then Ministry of Public Building and Works (now the Department of the Environment).¹

The site lay in two parts, both of which produced building remains, and could be dated by the pottery to a period between the late eleventh century and the early fourteenth century. The site has now been completely destroyed by ironstone working.

The finds have been deposited in the Leicester Museum.

INTRODUCTION

The site, centred in M.R. S.K.882220, lies almost half-way between the villages of Buckminster and Sewstern, on flat open land around 500 *ft.* O.D. It was discovered by the author whilst field walking, and although it was a previously unrecorded site, signs of disturbance in the soil can be seen on air photographs (C.P.E./U.K./1932/1210 to /1212).

The pottery scatter suggested an early site, which was considered worthy of excavation, due to its imminent destruction by ironstone quarrying. Digging at weekends and evenings during the summer of 1967, in an endeavour to recover as much of the ground plan as possible before destruction, was only partly successful, due to limited time and labour, and to the rapidity of quarrying. The results, in consequence, reflect these conditions, tending to show isolated and often partially destroyed features, and thus making it difficult to assimilate them into one complete overall picture of the site. It has been considered by some that the site may possibly be that of a monastic grange, but this idea is based on very tenuous premisses. Local legend has long held that a monastery once stood on the site in question, which still retains the name "*The Grange*", but there is no mention of a monastic grange in any available records, nor for any other building that could be associated with this site. This may be due to its relatively early abandonment. Many religious houses certainly did have interests in the parishes of Buckminster and Sewstern, namely Croxton Abbey, Kirby Bellars Priory

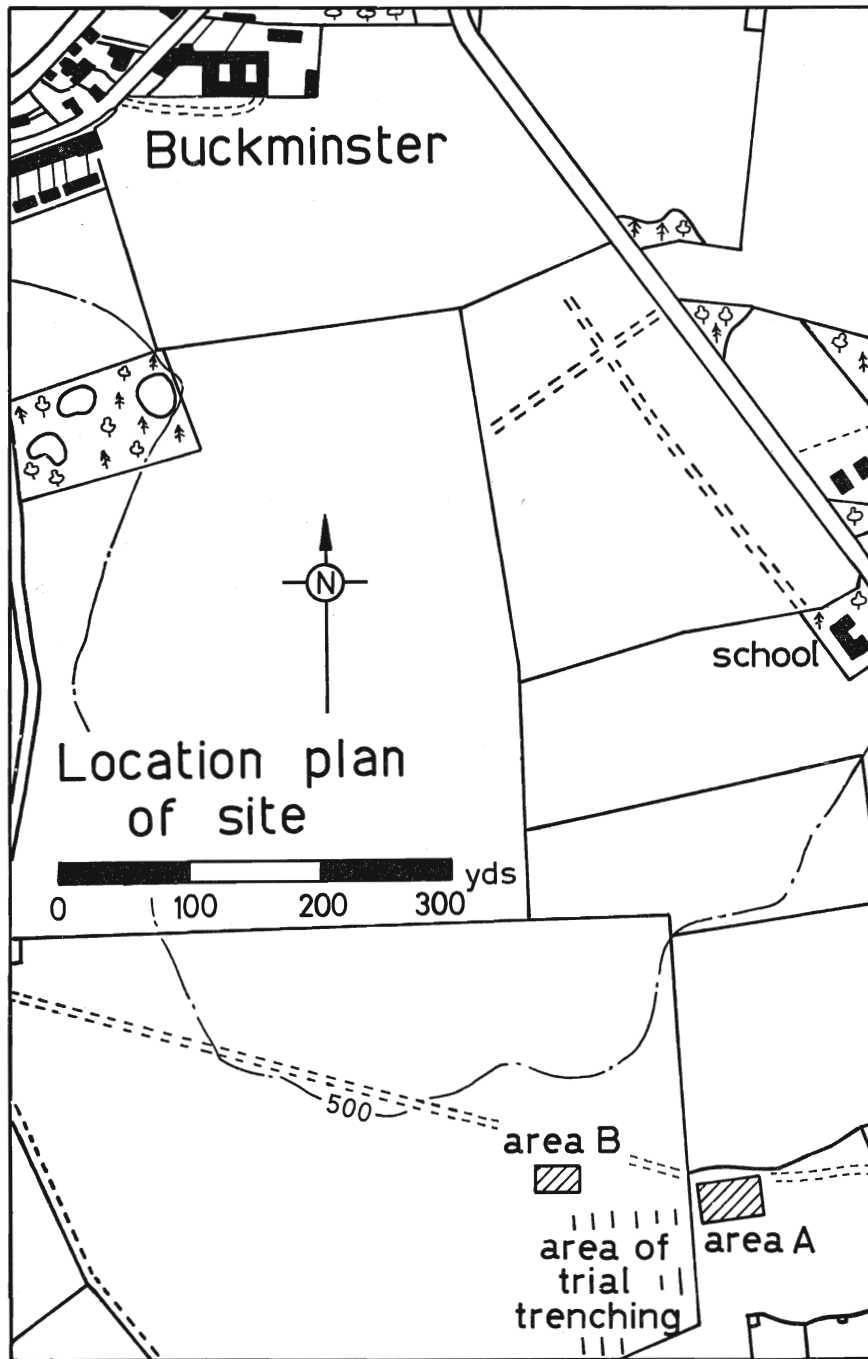


Fig. 1

and the Lincolnshire abbey of *Valle Dei*. The bishop of Lincoln held land in Buckminster parish according to the Domesday Survey of 1086, the Leicestershire Survey of 1124-9,² and also the early-thirteenth century book of Fees, but no details are given here or in the Hundred Rolls of 1275.³

In 1318-19 Sir Roger Beler granted to the Augustinian Canons at Kirkby Bellars the manor of Buckminster, and in 1363 the Priory was authorised to appropriate the church of Buckminster, which was acquired in an exchange with the Knights Hospitallers who had held the advowson of Buckminster since 1220.⁴ The pottery evidence suggests that the site was abandoned at the latest by the mid-fourteenth century. The reason for this abandonment was not apparent, although drainage on such heavy clay land must have always been as great a problem as it proved still to be during the excavations.

THE EXCAVATION

The location plan shows that the site falls into two parts (*fig. 1*), separated by a ditch running approximately north-south, some 25 ft. wide, and existing to a depth of 2 ft. 6 in. It was immediately to the east of this ditch that the excavation commenced, in June 1967, with the cutting of two exploratory trenches through the moated enclosure. This enclosure was approximately 80 ft. wide, and of an indeterminable length, due to the encroaching quarry face, but at least 100 ft. It was bounded on the three remaining sides by a ditch 10 ft. wide \times 1 ft. deep at the middle, and with an internal bank.

Trench I was cut from the east to the west side of the enclosure, but failed to reveal any sign of structures or post-holes. *Trench II* was cut through the southern bank and also produced little information, beyond a sheep's lower jaw and a few sherds of sandy ware. The lack of structures and any quantity of pottery would suggest that this was no more than a stock enclosure.

At the same time ironstone quarrying revealed part of a large building on the western part of the site, *Area B*, and work was transferred to this spot (*fig. 2*). The surface was stripped back from the latest quarry face to reveal the southern wall of a large building, remaining for a length of 34 ft., but robbed away at its western end (*plate 1*). The east wall survived for just over one foot, but the remainder had been quarried away. The walls were from 2 ft. 6 in. to 2 ft. 9 in. wide, with dressed limestone facing-blocks bonded in sand, and with a rubble core. There was a shallow foundation trench on the southern side, back-filled with ironstone rubble. The building may, at one time, have had an internal division of inferior construction, five feet from the destroyed western end. Associated with the remains of this building was a large quantity of fragmented split-stone roofing tiles and glazed-ridge tiles, suggesting that this was the form of roofing employed. It seems probable that the glazed finial (*fig. 6.1*) and roof cresting (*fig. 6.2*) found close by, also came from this same building. Ten feet south of the above wall was found a second wall, sub-parallel to the former, of poorer construction, namely undressed limestone and glacial boulders. It was 6 ft. long \times 2 ft. 3 in. wide. Ploughing had removed all other traces of the structure.

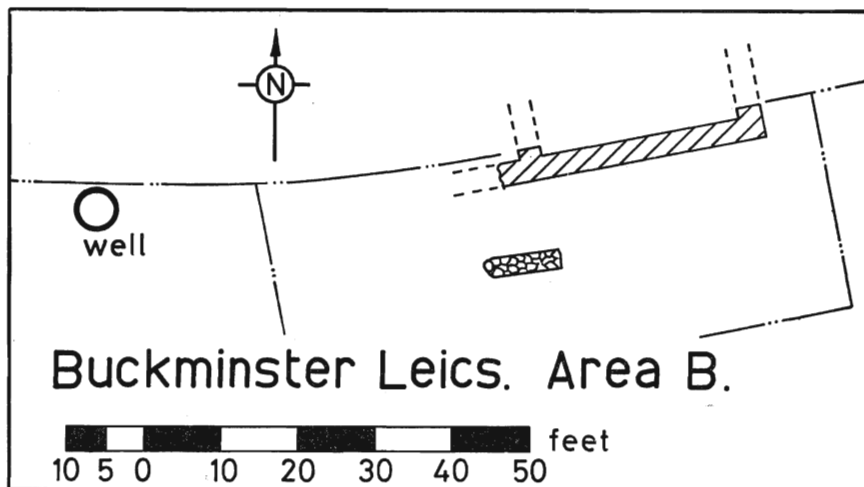


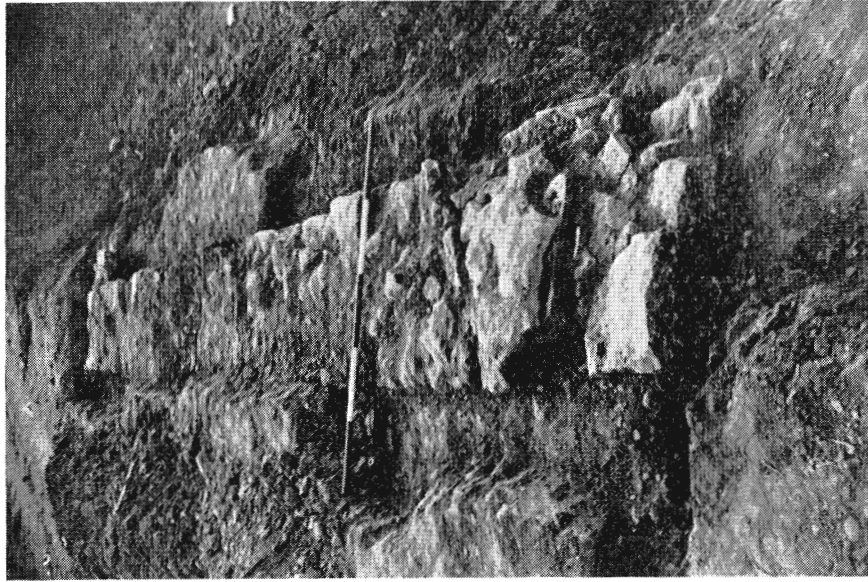
Fig. 2

Approximately 50 ft. due west of the above walls was found a well, 4 ft. 6 in. diameter and 6 ft. deep, substantially walled, with dressed limestone blocks for half its circumference (*plate 2*). The well was completely blocked with dressed limestone, glazed and split-stone roofing tiles, numerous thirteenth and fourteenth century decorated jug sherds and a small fragment of lead window glazing calm (*fig. 4.8*). The presence of the latter in the destruction rubble of the large building suggests that it may have had glazed windows. In the dark organic silt at the bottom of the well were found fourteen sherds of early Stamford ware. These were small body sherds of what appear to have been small, thin, walled cooking pots, both glazed and unglazed. These finds would suggest that the well was constructed early in the life of the site, and appears to have remained open until its abandonment and destruction.

At 150 ft. to the W.S.W. of the well was discovered an area of cobbling. This was made up of very large glacial boulders packed close together, over a rectangular area of approximately 20 ft. \times 15 ft. It would appear to be too coarse for internal flooring, and no sign was found of structures in the immediate vicinity. No pottery was found, possibly not surprisingly as the cobbling was only just below the present ground surface, and had been badly disturbed by continual annual ploughing, over the last twenty-seven years.

The new quarry face now revealed further structures in the eastern part of the site, *Area A* and work was again concentrated in this area (*fig. 3*). This produced the building complex shown in the top left corner of the *Area A* plan, from which it can be seen that an east-west wall 23 ft. long \times 2 ft. 6 in. wide ran into a rectangular area of rough limestone flooring at its eastern end. This in turn was bounded on its southern side by a more substantially built wall, as compared to the other rubble walls of this complex. Running south from this wall ran two parallel walls, the easternmost one having a square room 7 ft. \times 8 ft. joined on to its eastern side.

PLATE I



Buckminster, Leics. Southern wall of major building,
Area B, from the east.

PLATE 2



Buckminster, Leics. The well, Area B.

Directly to the south of this complex lay two superimposed rectangular buildings. The earliest was approximately 15 ft. wide and at least 35 ft. long; (*plate 3*) its eastern end had been cut away by the ditch of the previously-mentioned stock enclosure. Although time did not allow a full investigation of the full northward and eastward extent of these walls, it seems probable they were connected in some way to the above-mentioned complex. The later of the two rectangular buildings, which was also 15 ft. wide, but only 30 ft. long, was built on top of its predecessor, but on a slightly different alignment. This factor may well have caused its early collapse, as the lowest course showed severe sinking and buckling, which would have thrown the western wall inwards.

To the south-west of these buildings was found another rectangular structure, 9 ft. \times 15 ft., the walls being well-constructed of dressed limestone with a foundation layer of a double row of boulders 1 ft. 8 in. wide. There was a doorway 2 ft. 5 in. wide in the western end of the southern wall (*plate 4*).

Iron nails were found associated with all the buildings in *Area A*, but no roofing tile was apparent, suggesting a roof of timber and thatch. Certainly the rubble walls would have been unable to support more than a light super-structure.

Finally a series of north-south trenches was cut mechanically across the area to the south of *Area B*, after the barley crop had been cut. This revealed traces of rubble walls and areas of cobbling, and what may well have been a stone base for a timber upright. A piece of copper sheet *approx.* 7 in. \times 4 in. and with a flanged edge was also found associated with some of the cobbling. The area had been badly disturbed by deep ploughing, but would probably have produced some form of ground plan if the winter had not set in, and, by early 1968, the whole site been destroyed. Although the trenching did not produce any definite building-plan, it did, at least, show that there was a very wide area of building on the site. It is also interesting to note that the majority of the sherds in the surface collection made in this area were of Stamford ware, suggesting that this may well have been the nuclear area of the site. It is unfortunate that this area was inaccessible until the very end of the excavation.

THE POTTERY

The site produced 16.6 lb. of sherds, made up of Stamford wares, Shelley wares and early Sandy Medieval wares, both glazed and unglazed. There was also a small percentage of Roman and Post-Medieval strays.

STAMFORD WARE: (17% by weight)

This is represented by fragments of the typical handled pitcher, in a hard thin cream fabric, with external body glazing and knife trimming around the sagging base. Bowl sherds with thumb-impressed rims were also found in the same fine fabric. The cooking pots and jars appear less well made, and are in a coarser, more sandy fabric, varying from buff to blue grey, black

and pink, presumably dependent upon the kiln atmosphere on firing. The cooking-pot rim forms are everted and moulded, and some carry decoration in the form of diamond notch rouletting, which is also seen, in one instance, on the shoulder of a pot. Some of the rim diameters are quite small, from 5 *in.* to 6 *in.* possibly suggesting earlier, possibly eleventh-century material. At least two sherds of developed Stamford ware are present producing a date of late eleventh or early-twelfth century.⁵

SHELLY WARE: (13% by weight)

The majority of the sherds in this ware are from cooking pots, with a few bowl and jug fragments.

The fabric is similar for almost all of the material, namely a grey or brown core with light brown or orange brown surfaces. Some sherds do have a fire blackened outer surface. There is a wide range in the size of the shell grit, from very small to fairly large, where it has not been either leached or burnt out.

Two or three sherds have the typical soapy surface texture characteristic of the early St. Neots late-Saxon tradition. Where rims appear in this fabric they are seen to be of quite large diameter and simply everted, suggesting that they are not earlier than the twelfth century.⁶

There are examples of more elaborately-moulded everted rims, which are of a fabric containing additional sand temper, again suggesting a twelfth or thirteenth-century date.

Two sherds of a Lyvden-ware jug were also found. These were in the typical corky fabric, where the fine crushed shell grit had been leached out. It also bore a typical decoration, of vertically applied strips and a thin yellowy-green glaze.⁷

SANDY MEDIEVAL WARES: (66% by weight)

For convenience of description the sandy ware sherds can be divided into 5 fabric groups, each with its own variants.

1. Fine soft sandy ware with a blue-grey core and a grey-brown to orange-buff surface, mainly on both sides but often on the outside only, presumably due to the stacking of the pots during firing. The jug is a predominant form, but some cooking pots and bowls are represented, the former and latter bearing a yellow-green glaze and the former a dark olive-green glaze. These coarse local jugs are likely to be of thirteenth-century date.
2. Hard, fine gritted light grey fabric, occasionally with an internal cream "slip", and bearing either a dark olive-green or a lustrous apple-green glaze. Jug forms only.
3. Hard gritty, dark grey fabric, with either a dark olive-green glaze or a dull yellow-green glaze decorated with applied vertical strips. The jug is the predominant form. Late thirteenth-early fourteenth century.
4. Hard, off-white fabric with a high content of fine grit. Glazed on the outside, with a dark olive-green glaze. Jug forms only. Similar to Coventry material *c.* late thirteenth-early fourteenth century.

5. Very hard, grey-brown fabric, with or without a dark grey core. Rough, gritty surface. Cooking-pot form only.

ROMAN AND POST MEDIEVAL WARES: (4% by weight)

The Roman pottery is made up of six sherds of coarse grey ware and two sherds of Castor ware. Considering that a number of Roman tile fragments were also found, it is possible there was a Roman site in the area.

The post medieval sherds comprise mainly hard purple fifteenth-century wares, including a hard gritty purple fabric with a bubbly surface of a type found at Humberstone earthwork.⁸ Due to the small number of these later sherds, their presence would appear to be due to manuring rather than continued occupation of the site.

Unfortunately, except for the Stamford ware sherds in the well silt, none of the pottery was stratified. As not many early medieval sites in this area have been excavated, it was thought that there was value in our illustrating a selection of typical fabrics and forms from the site.

DESCRIPTION OF POTTERY ILLUSTRATED:

Note—figure in brackets at end of each description gives per cent of total rim or base remaining.

Figure 4 STAMFORD WARES

- 4.1 Everted and upturned rim from a small cooking pot. Fine sandy, creamy-grey fabric with reduced black extremities. (25)
- 4.2 Small sherd from the shoulder of a cooking pot. Fine hard fabric ranging from buff inside to grey outside. Decorated with a single band of 'diamond' notch rouletting as in a cooking pot from Stamford Castle.⁹
- 4.3 Everted squared rim of a jar or small cooking pot. Fine sandy black fabric, very heavily fired. (20)
- 4.4 Rim of jar or pitcher. Fine off-white to grey fabric. (15)
- 4.5 Rim of jar or pitcher. Fine off-white to grey fabric. (10)
- 4.6 Rim of jar. Buff to blue-grey fabric. (13)
- 4.7 Flat everted, flanged bowl rim with diamond notch rouletting, Sandy fabric, dark blue-grey core, through off-white to a pinkish-buff surface. *cf.* diamond notch rouletted bowls from Alstoe Mount, Rutland.¹⁰ This may be a local copy of Stamford Ware.
- 4.8 Rim of bowl with applied thumb band along the top. Fine off-white fabric with traces of a pale yellow-green glaze. As example from Stamford School.¹¹
- 4.9 Sherd from the sagging base of a bowl, with a fillet in the internal angle. Fine, hard fabric varying from off-white to black. (10)
- 4.10 Four sherds from a spouted pitcher, comprising fragments of spout, handle, body and sagging base, the latter showing the characteristic Stamford ware knife trimming. All of a thin hard cream fabric. Both handle and spout sherds show traces of a pale yellow-green glaze, but this does not appear on either the body or the base sherds, suggesting glaze down to the shoulder line only.

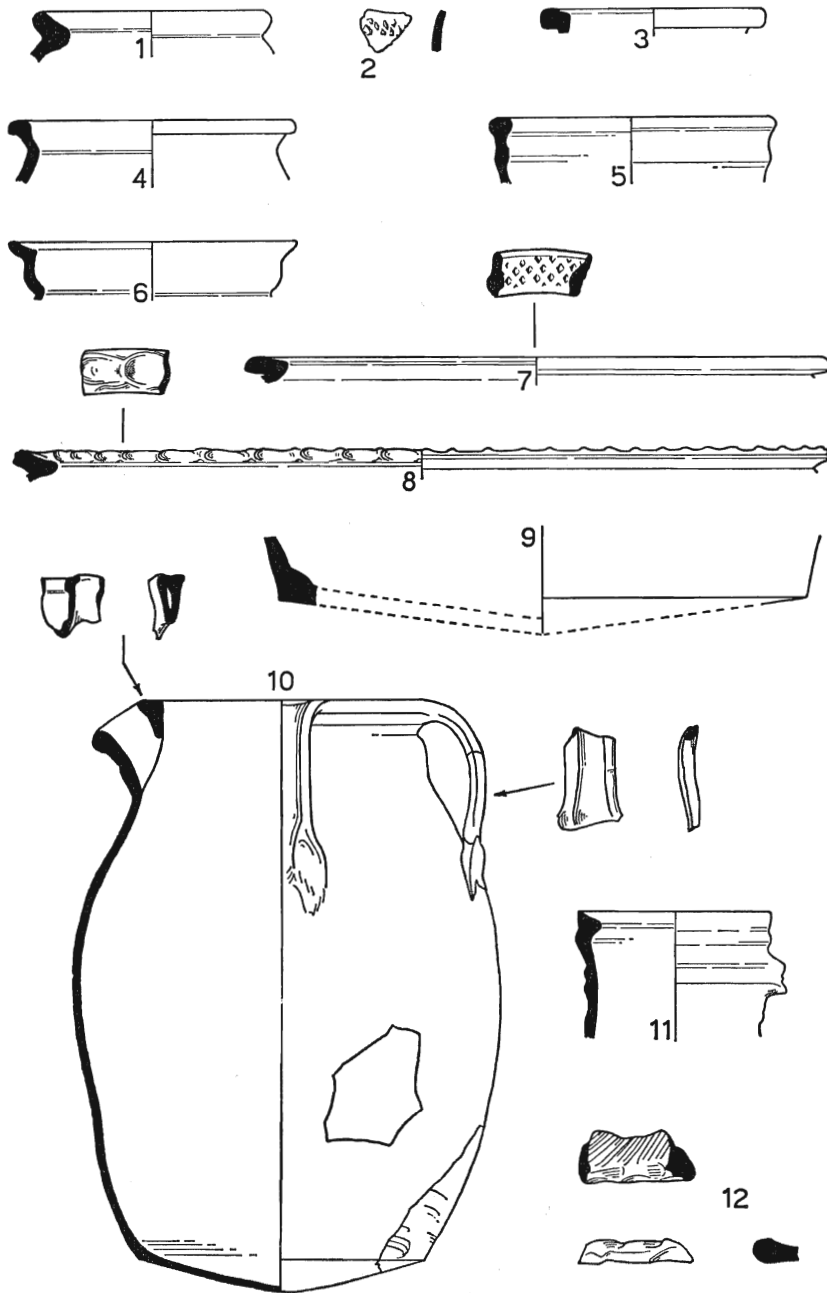


Fig. 4 Buckminster, Leics. Stamford Wares. Scale 1:4

- Reconstruction has been based on a spouted pitcher from Ingoldsby, now in Grantham Museum. (Acc. No. D/N 3369).
- 4.11 Rim and neck sherds of a jug with a strap handle and horizontal channeling below a thickened rim. A blue-grey sandy fabric with a creamy-pink slip and glazed on the outside with a dark olive-green glaze. Of similar form to a jug from Stamford School.¹²
- 4.12 Fragment of a jug strap handle with intermittent combing down the side ridge, diagonal or criss-cross combing along the central channel, and knife slashing along the outer edge. Fine grey-white fabric with a mottled dark and light olive-green glaze. Developed Stamford ware, late twelfth-early thirteenth century. As from Broad Street, Stamford.¹³

Figure 5. SHELLY WARES AND SANDY MEDIEVAL WARES

- 5.1 Slightly everted and thickened rim of a cooking pot. Porous fabric with shell grit leached out. Chocolate-brown core with red-brown, smooth soapy surface in St. Neots tradition. (6)
- 5.2 Everted cooking pot rim. Porous fabric with shell grit leached out. Grey-brown core with red-brown smooth soapy surface. Thumbing along upper edge of rim. (10)
- 5.3 Fragment of an externally thickened bowl rim. Porous fabric with grit leached out. Dark grey core with dark brown surface. Slightly soapy surface. (6)
- 5.4 Sherd of a squared everted rim of a coarse Lyvden ware cooking pot. Light grey core with purple-grey surface. Rough shelly fabric. (10)
- 5.5 Sherd from an angular everted cooking pot rim. Rough shelly fabric, black core with red-brown surface. (15)
- 5.6 Square everted rim of a cooking pot. Fabric with shell and sand grits, producing a harsh gritty surface. Black core with pinkish brown surface. Late-thirteenth century type. (25)
- 5.7 Sharply everted rim of a cooking pot. Very hard grey-brown fabric with black core. Rough gritty surface. (10)
- 5.8 Everted and upturned cooking pot rim. Sandy fabric with a dark grey core and orange-buff surface. (10)
- 5.9 Rim and neck sherd of a jug. Rod handle pressed on with fore-finger and thumb impressions, and a third finger impression on the inside of the neck behind the area of pressure. A very sandy orange fabric with a thin mottled light and dark green glaze on the outside. (25)
- 5.10 Two sherds from a Nottingham ware jug, with a strap handle, attached to the neck by a thumb impression on the line of the central channel of the handle. A blue-grey gritty fabric with pinkish-buff surface and with thick dull, olive-green glaze. (20)
- 5.11 Fragment of a jug strap handle with thumb impressions on either side of a central groove. Sandy fabric with a blue-grey core and orange surface. A yellow-green glaze has been splashed onto the outer side of the handle only.
- 5.12 Collared rim of a jug. Hard gritty fabric with a blue-grey core and buff surface. Retains traces of a dull olive-green glaze on outside. (8)

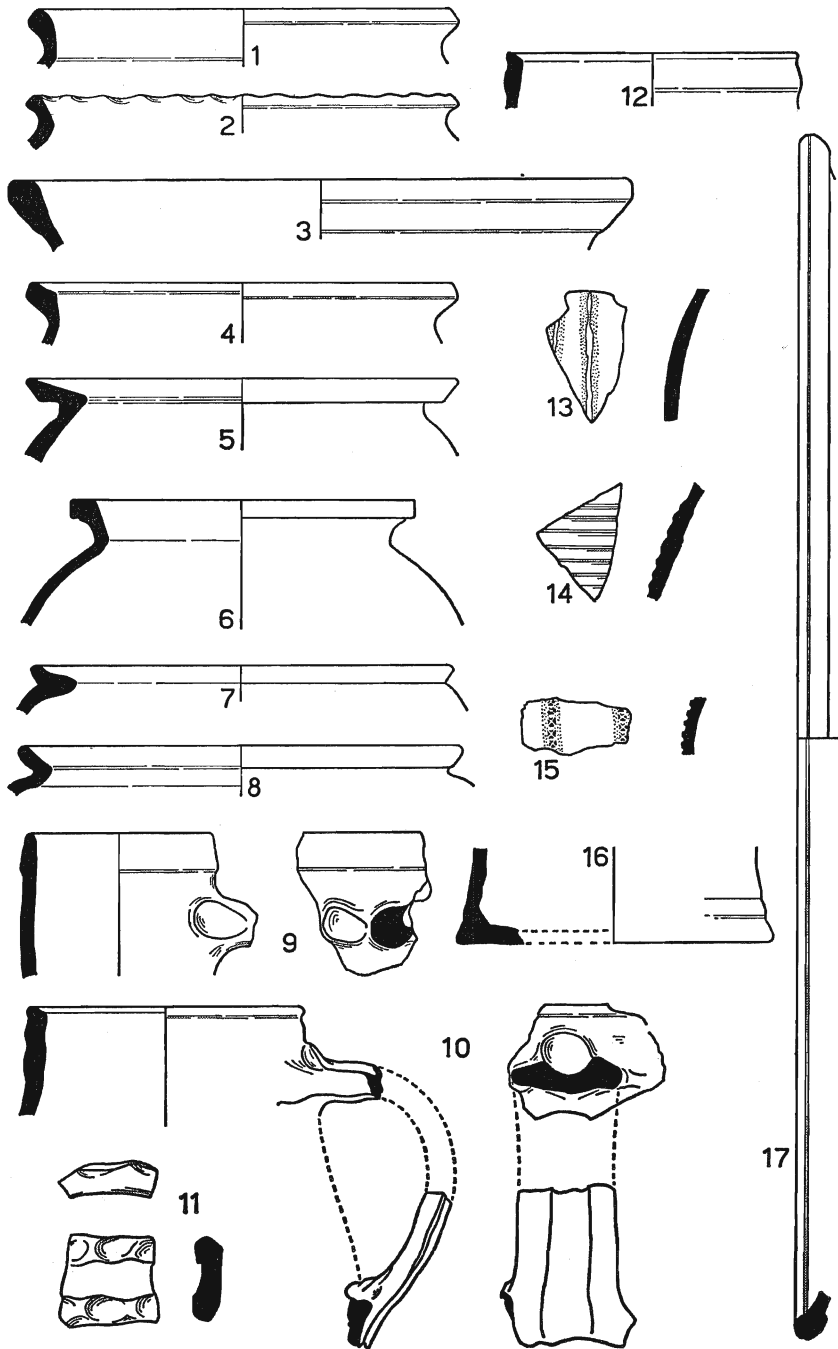


Fig. 5. Buckminster, Leics. Shelly Wares and Sandy Medieval Wares. Scale 1:4

- 5.13 Body sherd of a Lyvden ware jug. Corky fabric with a grey core and red-buff surfaces. Decorated with applied strips, over which the glaze has fired pale yellow, but has fired a darker green over the rest of the body.⁷
- 5.14 Body sherd of a glazed jug with horizontal channelling. Sandy fabric, grading from white on the outside, through blue-grey, to buff on the inside. Dark olive-green glaze on outside.
- 5.15 Body sherd of a decorated jug. Dark blue-grey fabric. Applied vertical strips with tooling, forming small pyramids, separated by horizontal round based depressions. Lustrous purple-brown glaze along applied strips and dark yellow-green between.
- 5.16 Sherd from the expanded base of a coarse, semi-glazed jug. Coarse gritty fabric with blue-grey core and pinkish-buff surfaces. (10)
- 5.17 Rim fragment of a pancheon *c.* 25 *in.* diameter. Hard, gritty fabric including some shell grit. Black core with orange surface. Inside glazed with a dull yellow-green glaze. (2)

DESCRIPTION OF OTHER FINDS ILLUSTRATED:

Figure 6. ROOF FURNITURE AND METALWORK.

- 6.1 Hollow knob finial 2.25 *in.* diameter. Coarse grey fabric with fine crushed shell grit. Dark yellow-green glaze. From ridge-tile or louver *cf.* finials on the louver from Gt. Easton, Essex.¹⁴
- 6.2 Ribbed roof cresting on a ridge-tile having an internal radius of *c.* 2 *in.* Coarse grey fabric with bright orange inside surface. Very coarse grit. Dark yellow-green glaze on outside.
- 6.3 Fragment of split stone roofing tile, with hole for nail or wooden peg. Buff, fine grained fissile sandstone.
- 6.4 Half an iron horseshoe, the complete shoe having had eight elongated nail holes. There is no turned up calkin, instead the end of the shoe is thickened into a wedge shape.
- 6.5 Triangular iron object. May be either a fragment of a thick iron knife blade or the end of a broken hinge plate.
- 6.6 A rectangular section iron bar, bent in two mutually perpendicular planes, suggesting some form of hook or broken handle.
- 6.7 Example of a series of 10 iron nails. These vary in size from 1 *in.* to 3½ *in.* long, with both square and rectangular shanks and heads. In one 3 *in.* long specimen the shank thickens to ¾ *in.* × ⅜ *in.* just below a slightly expanded head; a 1¼ *in.* long specimen has a virtually cubic head similar to that from Martinthorpe, Rutland.¹⁵
- 6.8 Small fragment of lead window glazing calm with distorted leaves, but possibly designed to hold glass from ⅓-⅜ *in.* thick.
- 6.9 Broken copper ring, 1 *in.* diameter × ⅛ *in.* gauge.

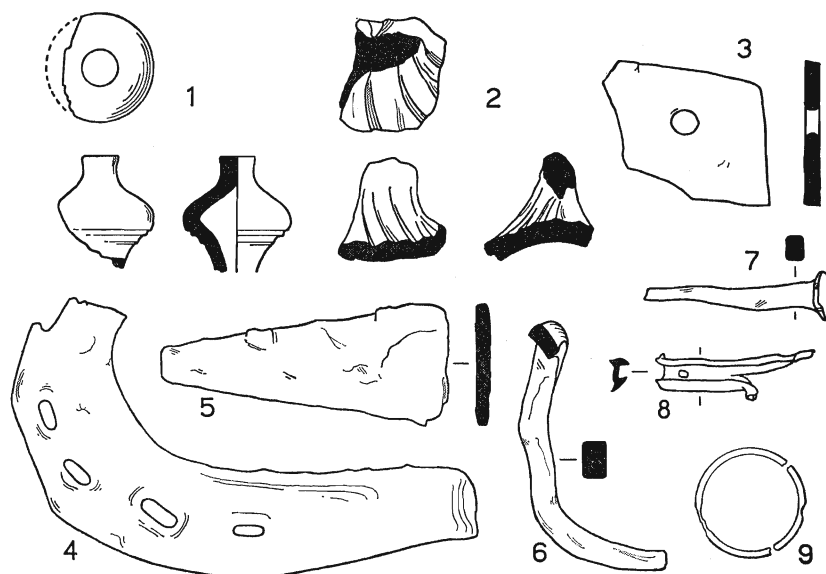


Fig. 6. Buckminster, Leics. Roof Furniture and Metalwork. Scale 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3, 1:4, remainder 1:2.

NOTES

1. Thanks are due and given to all who made this excavation possible; especially to Mr. J. B. Whitwell and Mr. J. G. Hurst and especially the latter for kindly examining the pottery and providing useful information about it; to Buckminster Trust Estate, the owners of the land; Mr. R. L. Black and Mr. S. Exton, the tenant farmers in whose fields the site lay; and to Stewarts & Lloyds Minerals Limited; finally to the then Ministry of Public Building and Works for a grant towards the cost of the excavation and publication.
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