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ROMAN BURIALS AT WELLING

By P. J. TESTER

RECORDED instances of the discovery of Romano-British antiquities in the area bordering Watling Street between Shooter's Hill and the crossing of the Cray are by no means numerous. It is particularly desirable, therefore, that available information regarding some of the few finds from this locality should be adequately recorded, and it is with this object in view that the following account has been compiled.

The former hamlet of Welling has lately lost its identity in the southward spread of suburban London. Less than a century ago it consisted of a group of unpretentious dwellings situated on either side of the main London-to-Dover highway which is generally believed to follow the approximate course of the Roman Watling Street.

F. C. J. Spurrell, in his account of "Dartford Antiquities" (*Arch. Cant.*, XVIII, 1889, p. 313) mentions briefly the finding hereabouts of a "row of cinerary pots full of bones" about fifty years previously, and the find-spot is shown on his accompanying map on the north side of the main road and at the eastern end of the hamlet. Spurrell also remarks that "two or three" of these vessels were then in the Canterbury Museum.

Mr. L. R. A. Grove has kindly drawn my attention to a vessel now in the Royal Museum, Canterbury. It contains burnt bones and a paper bearing the following account of its discovery :

This Urn and the contents were found in January 1842 in a field in the occupation of Stephen Tucker Esqr in the parish of East Wickham about 250 yards to the Northward of the Dover Road and at the Eastern end of the Hamlet of Welling. It was standing upright five feet from the surface. The soil a very compact gravel. The labourer brought it to his employer the instant he found it. Diligent search was made for a considerable space around the spot, but nothing else was found, except the adjoining fragment. In the next field Roman Coins are frequently found. In 1829 a similar Urn was found in the Parish of Bexley about 20 yards to the Southward of the Dover Road, and at the Western end of the Hamlet of Welling.

By referring to the records of St. Michael's Church, East Wickham, I have established the whereabouts of Stephen Tucker's field and the approximate position of the find-spot may be taken as N.G.I. 470759. This coincides very closely with the site shown on Spurrell's map and

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it is not unlikely that he was referring to this 1842 discovery, although he speaks of a "row of cinerary pots." His somewhat vague description and uncertainty as to the number of vessels suggests that he was not writing from personal observation. Certainly no other urns from Welling are at present in Canterbury Museum and the paper quoted above specifically mentions that the urn was not accompanied by other vessels.

Through the kindness of our member, Mr. Frank Jenkins, I am able to figure this vessel and present the following descriptive notes. The urn (Fig. 1) is of greyish ware and is so distorted in form that it might

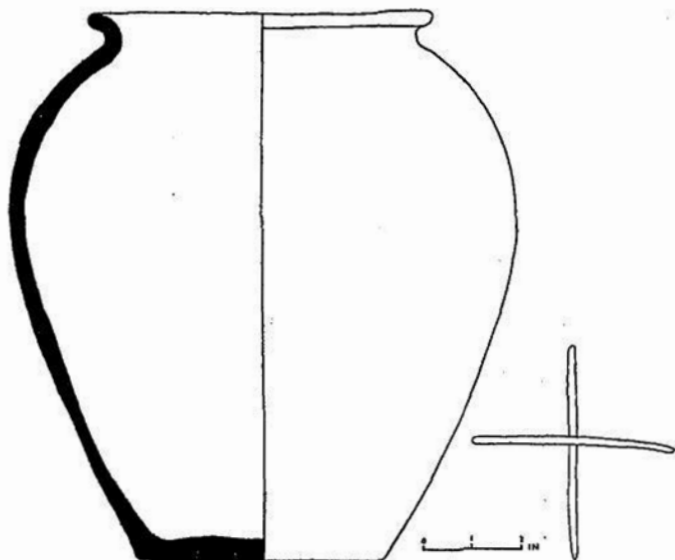


FIG. 1.—Roman urn found at Welling in 1842 and now in the Royal Museum at Canterbury. The cross occurs on the base of the vessel. ($\frac{1}{4}$)

possibly have been a waster. The mouth is oval and the accompanying drawing presents the best view of its elevation. On the base is a curious cross mark, impressed into the clay while the pot was in a green state, seemingly by pressing a smooth stick across the base. This may be the imprint of a support on which the vessel was placed at some stage in its manufacture. With regard to its age, Mr. Jenkins states that he has found a similar pot in a mid-second century context at Canterbury, though it is possible that this Welling example is earlier.

Other Roman burials came to light at Welling in 1938 when some houses on the south side of the main highway were being demolished preparatory to widening the thoroughfare.¹ Great changes have

¹ A brief notice of this discovery occurred in *Arch. Cant.*, L (1938), p. 147.

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recently overtaken this part of Welling, but I estimate the find-spot to have been about 200 yards N.W. of the "Guy Earl of Warwick" public house, or approximately N.G.I. 469758. The find was made below the floor of No. 8 Welling High Street where the greater part of two urns with a fragment of a third were found about 3 ft. deep. The upper parts of the more complete vessels were missing in both cases, due, it is supposed, to damage sustained when the foundations of the house were dug many years previously.

The larger urn (Fig. 2, No. 1) contained calcined bone fragments

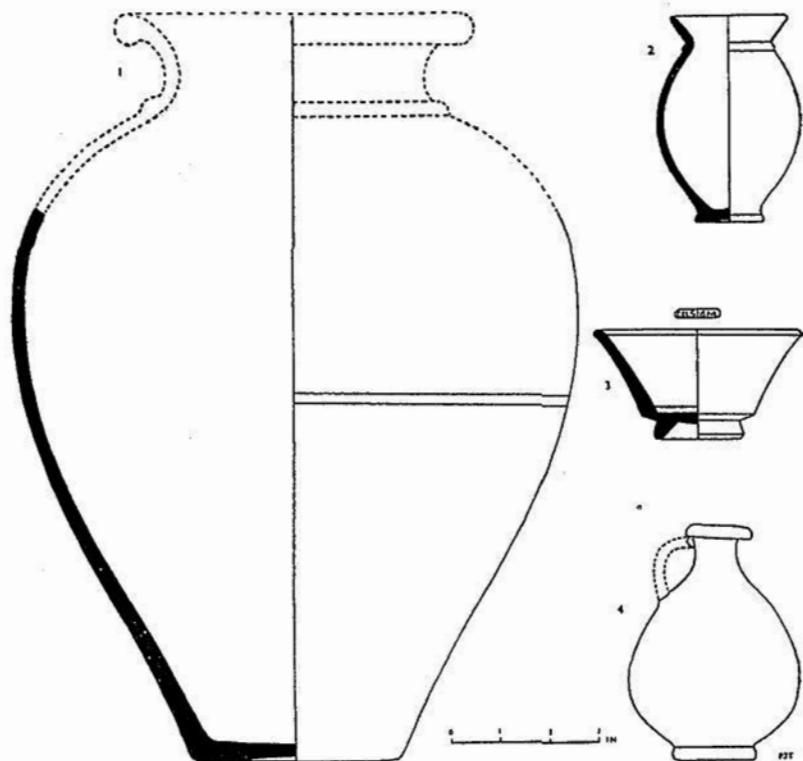


FIG. 2.—Roman urn and three associated vessels found on the south side of Welling High Street in 1938. The drawing of No. 4 is based on a photograph, the vessel itself being lost. (†)

to about half its original height, and upon these rested three small vessels, a handled flagon, a poppy-head beaker and a Samian ware cup, form 33, all standing on their bases and arranged at equal intervals against the inside of the urn.

The second urn is now lost together with the fragment of the third

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vessel and the flagon referred to above. The remaining vessels are in the custody of the Bexley Borough Librarian. Fortunately Plumstead Museum possesses photographs of the second urn and the flagon, and from these I have been able to describe the missing vessels. Only a fragment of the base of the third urn was recovered and no details worthy of record are preserved concerning it.¹

Apparently the second urn was similar to the one illustrated but smaller, being approximately 8 in. wide at the bulge.

The larger urn with its three associated vessels are figured herewith and these may be described as follows :

Fig. 2, No. 1. Urn of hard grey ware with polished band around body. The reconstruction of the missing neck and rim is entirely conjectural.

No. 2. Small poppy-head beaker with black polished surface. Numerous examples of this type of vessel accompanied burials in the Ospringe cemetery.²

No. 3. Samian cup, form 33, bearing the stamp CELSI M across the bottom of the bowl. Between the final letter of the potter's name and the M there occurs an ivy-leaf motif as shown in the illustration.³ Dr. Felix Oswald has kindly given his expert opinion that this vessel may be assigned to the period A.D. 120 to 125.

No. 4. This flagon is recorded as being of buff clay with a broken handle. It can no longer be traced and my drawing is based on a photograph in Plumstead Museum and reproduced here to the same scale as the other vessels.

Dartford Museum possesses a small platter of cream coloured ware said to have been found at Welling, but no other details are recorded. The diameter of the lip is 6 in. and it closely resembles an example from Canterbury figured in *Arch. Cant.*, XXXIX (1927), p. 51, No. 714, having the same pronounced step half-way down the inner side. It probably belongs to the first century.

It is interesting to note that the discoveries of 1829, 1842 and 1938, although not closely grouped, were distributed within a restricted area roughly coinciding with the extent of the hamlet of Welling. This tends to confirm the generally accepted view that the Roman road followed approximately the line of the existing highway upon which Welling is situated, and also suggests that Welling may have been the site of

¹ Possibly it had formed a cover to one of the other vessels as shown in the Ospringe Report, No. 365. See *Report on the Excavation of the Roman Cemetery at Ospringe, Kent* (1931), published by The Society of Antiquaries.

² See Ospringe Report referred to in preceding note.

³ Dr. Oswald states that this has no particular significance and that it occurs on several, form 33, for example, at Cirencester, Richborough, Wilderspool and York; and at Amiens, Bavai and Vienne. It appears on form 31 at Gloucester and Colchester and on form 18 at Richborough.

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a settlement in Roman times. We may infer an early Teutonic settlement here from the name, most likely derived from the O.E. *Wellingas* = "people by a stream or spring."¹ In this connection it is interesting to observe that a small stream at present flowing S.E. from Welling appears from the O.S. 6 in. map to originate near the junction of Welling High Street and Wickham Lane. The course of this stream was dammed in the eighteenth century to create an ornamental lake in Danson Park.

There is strong probability that the presence of a spring close to the important main highway would encourage settlement at this point in Roman times as it apparently did in later ages.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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¹ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-names* (1940), p. 481. Also, Wallenberg, J. K. (1934), *The Place-Names of Kent*, where it is suggested that the name is derived from the O.E. *w(i)ella*=well, spring.