



<http://kentarchaeology.org.uk/research/archaeologia-cantiana/>

Kent Archaeological Society is a registered charity number 223382

© 2017 Kent Archaeological Society

A SALT-PANNING SITE AT FUNTON CREEK

A.P. DETSICAS, M.A., F.S.A.

THE SITE

The site at Funton Creek (Fig. 2, no. 1; N.G.R. TQ 883683), on the very edge of a narrow road skirting the marshes from Lower Halstow towards Kingsferry, was first noticed by Mr W.A. Knowles who was at the time participating in the excavations at the Eccles site. Erosion of the foreshore had exposed several pockets of burnt material and other debris, particularly at low tide, which required investigation. Accordingly, a small-scale rescue excavation was carried out in mid-August 1963, with the aim of recording the surviving evidence. I am grateful to those members of the Lower Medway Archaeological Research Group, and in particular Messrs. D. Bartram, I.J. Bissett, P. Dives and A.C. Harrison, B.A., F.S.A., who assisted in this work under very arduous conditions, and to Mr. E.R. Swain, for drawing the pottery.

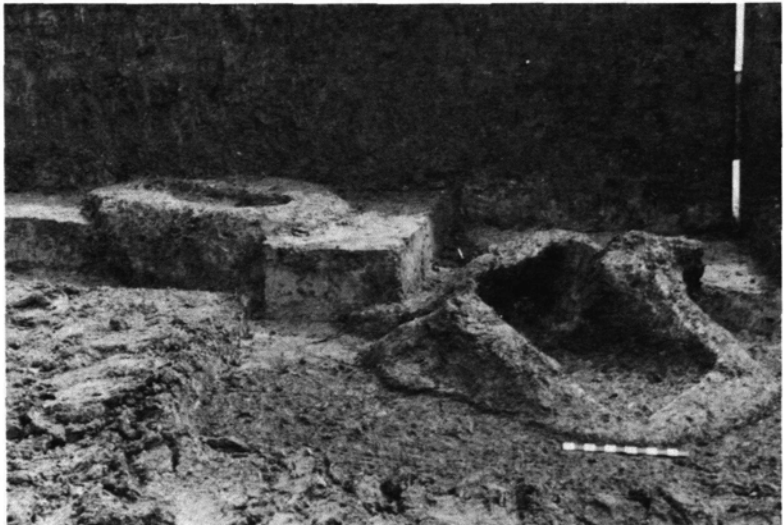
THE EXCAVATION

Initially, two small trenches were laid out slightly to south of the eroded shore-line (Fig. 1, A and B) and excavated to a depth varying from 5 to 6 ft. Trench A was found to contain alternating layers of brown sandy soil and grey clay deposited on yellow clay below which was exposed a thick layer of black ash resulting from the burning of wood; no other evidence was found within this trench. Trench B contained the same layers as Trench A but, at a depth of 2 ft. 6 in., an area of burnt clay was exposed, surrounded by layers of yellow and grey clay. Clearance of this burnt area provided evidence for a salt-pan (Fig. 1, no. 1; Plate I), which was partly obscured by the north face of the trench.

At low tide, further clearance was undertaken of the eroded



Funton Creek: Salt-pan in Trench B (Scale in inches).



Funton Creek: Salt-pans in Trench C (Scales in inches and feet).

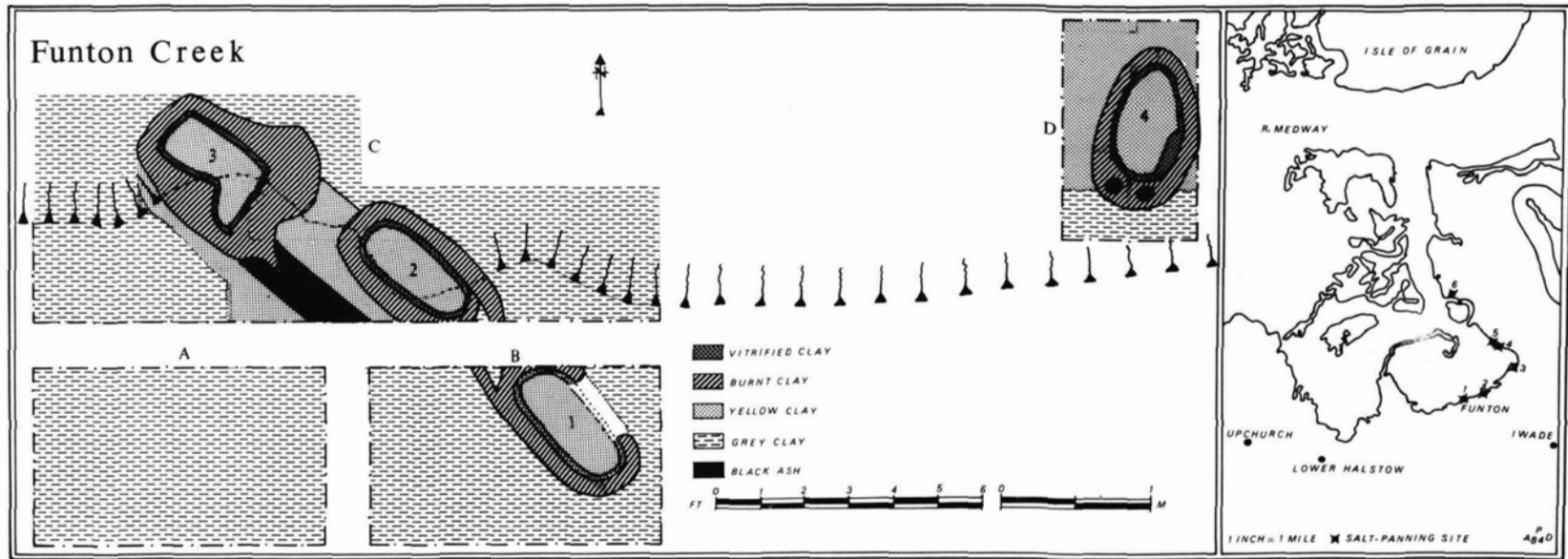


Fig. 1. Funton Creek: Site Plan.

Fig. 2. Salt-panning Sites at Funton Creek/Bedlam's Bottom.
(Crown Copyright reserved.)

SALT-PANNING AT FUNTON CREEK

shore-line (Fig. 1, C), which was cut back to within 1 ft. of the north faces of Trenches A and B. As a result, two more salt-pans (Fig. 1, nos. 2 and 3; Plate II) were exposed and recorded, north-west of and in line with the first salt-pan. A fourth salt-pan (Fig. 1, no. 4) was recorded below the shore line at a distance of 13 ft. east of the main site (Fig. 1, D); this salt-pan was aligned to north.

Essentially, all these salt-pans were of about the same size (approximately 2 ft. 6 in. long, internally), nos. 1 and 2 being practically identical in size and trough-like, no. 4 more oval-shaped; no. 3, which was rather larger and survived deeper than the rest, was an odd shape, probably due to soil movement and compression. However, all four salt-pans had been scooped up from the surrounding clay, which formed their walls and bottom, and filled with brine before they were heated by a wood fire, the evidence for which survived in the surrounding layers of grey clay and black ash. The heat generated by this fire had penetrated through the walls of the salt-pans and rendered their yellow clay into a bright brick-red colour; the inner surface of each salt-pan had a narrow strip of vitrified clay, which would have made the salt-pan additionally impervious. Salt crystals would have formed on the walls and bottom of the salt-pan following the gradual evaporation of the brine it contained. As no pottery bars (*briquetage*), evaporating vessels or any other structural evidence was found inside any one of these four salt-pans, in the debris directly associated with them or nearby, it is clear that the method described above is certain to have been used.

DATING

In common with other marsh sites, the coarse pottery found in Trenches A-D and their immediate vicinity represents a mixture of

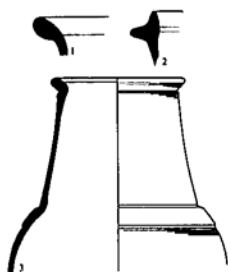


Fig. 3. Coarse pottery (Scale: 1).

earlier and later sherds from different contexts; it cannot, therefore, in general be considered as at all securely stratified and used for the dating of these salt-pans. No coins or other dateable artifacts were found. However, two coarse ware sherds, both from BB2 vessels, one of which was flanged, were found 'stratified' within pan no. 2 (Fig. 3, no. 1) and pan no. 4 (Fig. 3, no. 2), and a third sherd (Fig. 3, no. 3) from a colour-coated beaker was recovered at a comparable depth as the other two; these three sherds together suggest use of these salt-pans at least during the third century A.D.

DISCUSSION

The production of salt in antiquity by precipitation of salt crystals on heated *briquetage* or by evaporation inside heated pans is well attested.¹ Apart from the well-known Red Hills sites on the Essex coast, several salt-panning sites are known on the north foreshore of the Thames and the Medway. These Kentish sites stretch on a broad belt from Charlton in the west to Eastchurch in the east where the presence of *briquetage* suggests a salt-panning site rather than a small farmstead.³ Recently, another salt-panning site was recorded at Funton Marsh,⁴ less than 400 yds, to east of the present site (Fig. 2, no. 2) and other such sites fringing the marsh are also known (Fig. 2, nos. 3-6); undoubtedly, many more of these insubstantial and ephemeral sites either have been lost in the course of changes in the water-level or await recording and publication in the Medway marshes and on the Thames foreshore to east and west of the Medway.

The Funton salt-pans clearly relied on fire for the evaporation of the brine they contained and fit well with Pliny's description of salt extraction in Gaul and Germany, '*ardentibus lignis aquam salsam infundunt.*' Though the dating of these salt-panning sites will, in the circumstances of the foreshore, remain insecurely established, it is nonetheless very likely, on the basis of the pottery found on marsh sites, that the production of salt from brine began during the late Iron Age, if not earlier, and continued on north Kentish sites at least into the third century A.D.

¹ Tacitus, *Annals*, xiii, lvii; Pliny, *Natural History*, xxi, 7.

² VCH (Kent), iii, 1932, 129.

³ Cliffe: *Arch. Cant.*, lxxx (1965), 278; lxxxiii (1968), 272-3; Shorne: *Arch. Cant.*, lxxv (1970), 185; Cooling: *Arch. Cant.*, xlii (1930-), xlvi; High Halstow: *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxiv (1969), 255-7; Hoo: *Arch. Cant.*, xxxi (1915), 280; lxxx (1965), 273; Iwade: *Arch. Cant.*, lxxx (1965), 273; Lower Halstow: *Arch. Cant.*, lxx (1965), 260-5.

⁴ A. Miles, 'Funton Marsh, Romano-British Salt Panning Site', *Arch. Cant.*, lxxx (1965), 260-5.