

Prehistoric Occupation, Burial and Roman Settlement and Kilns

The Excavations

Fieldwork in advance of mineral extraction at Plumley Wood Quarry, near Ringwood in Hampshire, has made a significant discovery. Site director Andy Taylor has unearthed a group of pottery kilns dating from the Roman period.

This is one of several sites revealed during the course of quarrying in the area, amongst them an important Late Palaeolithic site just to the south at Somerley. The long-term programme of work is being funded by Tarmac, following the requirements of the planning process under directions from Hampshire County Council's Senior Archaeologist.

The New Forest pottery industry

The New Forest has long been recognized as an important centre of pottery production in Roman Britain, its products being widely traded throughout the province. It is, however, a somewhat surprising location for such an industry, as there is little locally available clay suitable for potting. It appears that the supply of timber for fuel was more important than the lack of clay. The pottery produced here is distinctive for its shiny appearance, which seems to have been intended to imitate metallic vessels (silver or pewter); and even the shapes also seem to copy metal vessel shapes, such as the very typical indented beaker. The industry flourished in the later part of the Roman period, between around AD260 and 370. Previous kiln sites for New Forest ware have been found at Fordingbridge and Rockbourne, both to the north up the Avon valley.

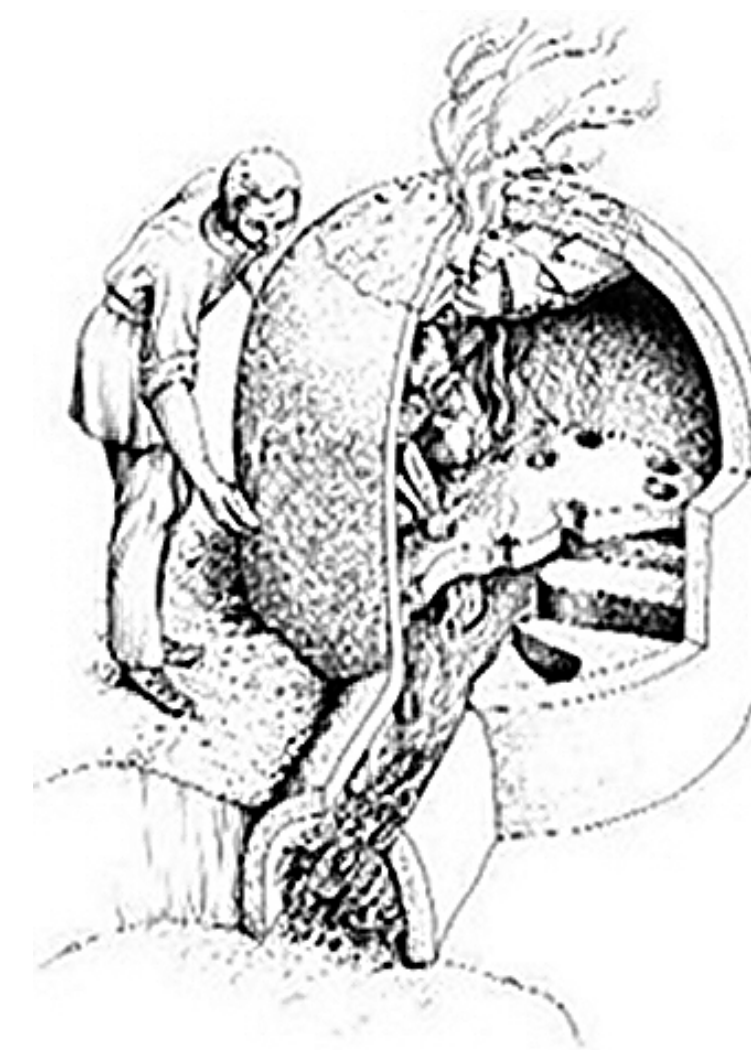


Right: typical late Roman New Forest indented beaker found during the excavations. (scale 10cm)

The opportunity to excavate a large area around the kiln sites is of particular importance as it will give us information about how the industry was organized. For example: how was the timber source was controlled, was natural forest timber harvested or were artificial plantations supplying the fuel? Was the work seasonal or were full-time specialists involved? Where did they live? All of these questions require the excavators to adopt a landscape approach to analysis, rather than focusing narrowly on the kilns, important as these are in themselves.

The Plumley finds

Four kilns have been identified so far in the Plumley excavations with there being another possible two which are yet to be investigated. The kilns consist of a simple pit, with a clay lining that would originally have extended as a dome over the top. A suspended floor, punctured with flues, divides the ware chamber above from the firebox below. Unfired pots would be stacked within the ware chamber and heat applied through a flue, which fires both the pots and the clay lining of the kiln itself (see below). To reach the high temperatures required to create the glossy finish of these wares, enormous amounts of fuel had to be burnt and the fires constantly tended. Once the firing process was complete, the dome had to be broken open to reach the finished pots, so in effect each kiln superstructure was only used once, although the same pit could be reused many times, each time leaving a layer of spent fuel and sometimes creating laminations within the clay lining that reveal the repetition of the processes. If a firing goes wrong, some pots will warp or not fire fully (see below), and even if the kilns had not been found, these 'wasters' would be a clear indication of the production process taking place on the site, since they cannot be sold, so they will always be discarded close to the kiln itself.



Left: Reconstruction drawing of a Roman pottery kiln similar to those found at Plumley. (Sue White)



Right: Beaker 'waster'. The warped and marked side can be clearly seen. (scale 10cm)

Also on the site are several other Roman features, including enclosures and a possible post-built building, presumably related to the pottery works. In addition, a Bronze Age round barrow (ring ditch) (below) was discovered along with a post-built roundhouse.

