

THE ROMAN POND AND DIPPING WELL AT ARMSLEY, GODSHILL, HAMPSHIRE

By JOHN MUSTY

IN her recent paper, 'Shafts, pits, wells – sanctuaries of the Belgic Britons?', Miss Anne Ross (Ross 1968) makes reference to the shallow well discovered at Armsley by the late Mr. H. S. W. Edwardes and published by him in 1927 (Edwardes 1927). Miss Ross includes Armsley in a list of approximately 60 sites in England and Scotland with structures in the form of pits or wells which, in her opinion, have a presumptively votive and ritual significance. It is not the intention of this Note to discuss the merits of this interpretation, but merely to extend the published record of the Armsley structure, beyond that given by Mr. Edwardes, in the light of the evidence from the re-excavation of the well and other structures by the writer in 1959–60 (On behalf of the Salisbury Museum Excavation Sub-Committee, now the Salisbury Museum Research Committee). No overall account of this work has been published to date, although Mr. Hugh Shortt has dealt in detail (Shortt 1960) with a Durotrigic coin hoard found on another part of the site during these excavations and the writer (Musty 1969) with a group of Romano-British glazed pottery.

Mr. Edwardes acquired the eight acre field known locally as Armsley (Nat. Grid Ref. SU 168162) and in 1919–20 built a house and laid out considerable areas of garden and an orchard. During these activities he encountered evidence for prehistoric and Roman occupation which he proceeded to investigate over the next 20 years. One of the features, the well, was revealed during the dry summer of 1925 when he sought an explanation for a damp patch in the garden.

In his paper Mr. Edwardes recorded that he found a well-defined, nearly circular pond about 14 ft in diameter, with a maximum depth of 7 ft. It lay on a south slope, its upper side being very steep but with a gentle slope on the lower side. After removal of black or grey mud below 1 ft 6 in of topsoil he came to water which he siphoned off. When we came to examine the feature we found it preserved as a pond and, with Mr. Edwardes's advice, emptied the water using the same siphon procedure (in the absence of pumping equipment) as he had used some thirty years earlier. We located the board and stakes mentioned by him in his report and discovered that the pond was spring-fed, water entering the wooden enclosure at the south-west and north-west corners although originally the flow would have been via the channel at the east side, the back end of which was revetted with a piece of rough timber. The inflow from the spring was at such a rate as to require continual bailing out; it also washed fine sand into the pond bottom.

The dipping well as re-excavated (Fig. 1) was found to have a timber lining on two sides. This consisted of 2 ft long oak planks which were $4\frac{1}{2}$ in wide and $1-1\frac{1}{2}$ in thick and held in position by 2 in diameter stakes some of which were only represented by stumps. Needless to say few objects (all of RB date) were recovered and practically all finds must

ARMSLEY ROMAN POND. Timber facing to dipping well

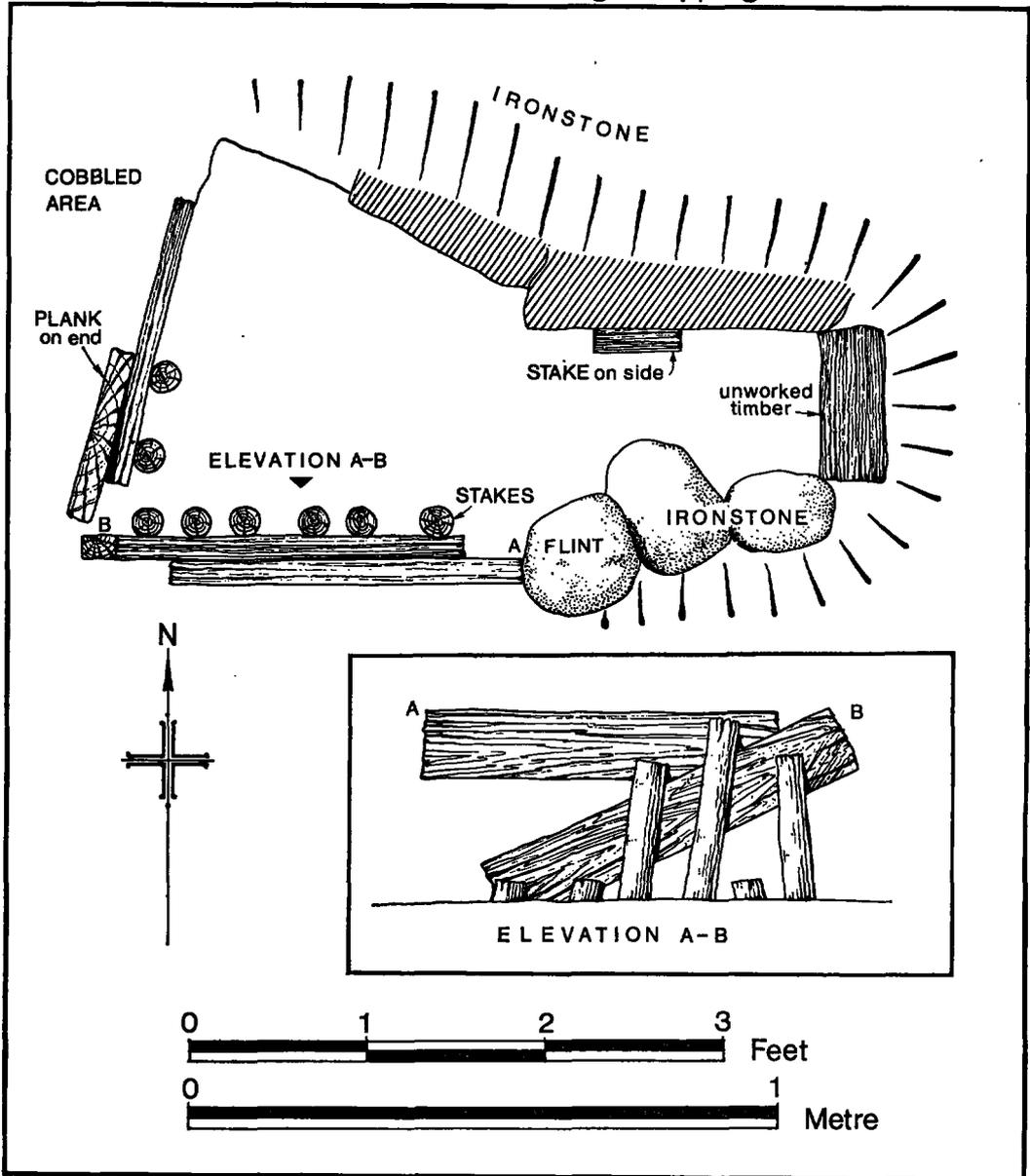


Fig 1.

have been removed by Mr. Edwardes during his first excavation. (Those mentioned by him in the report of his excavation as coming specifically from the well comprise many bones, including a horse skull, two thumb pots and a carved wooden head. Miss Ross has assumed that all the finds listed in his report came from the well site, but this would not have been so as he had been conducting excavations at various points in his garden before turning his attention to the well and the finds list is an outline catalogue of what he had found at all of these, including those from the well.)

Thirty feet south of the pond, Mr. Edwardes showed us the site of another well (diameter 9 ft). This was not re-investigated but it is presumably of a similar depth to that of the pond and fed by the same water source.

Thus Armsley presents the strange situation of a settlement established on the banks of, and in the angle between, two rivers (the Avon and the Millersford brook) and yet it had been found necessary to sink two shallow wells. This puzzled us at the time but if we are to see such features as, in the words of Miss Ross, 'the cult spots of some lesser Iron Age landlord and his dependants', then possibly the digging of wells at Armsley is more readily explicable. However, once dug such wells would have served as a source of water for everyday use (unless such use was prohibited for cult reasons) and indeed, as Mr. ApSimon has recently pointed out to me, would provide a source of pure water at the times when the rivers were in flood and thus carrying unwholesome water. Thus it may not be necessary to invoke cult or votive reasons for the digging of the Armsley wells, though the horse skull and wooden figure are strongly suggestive of such connections.

The earliest settlement was on the terrace above the Millersford brook. Here mesolithic folk are represented by a flint industry of similar date to that of Downton, on another Avon terrace some 3 miles further up-stream, excavated by Mr. E. S. Higgs (Higgs 1959) who also kindly examined some of the Armsley flints and made the comparison. There is also a hint (pottery) of late Bronze Age occupation but the floruit of the occupation is in the Durotrigic and RB periods. Apart from pottery, the Durotriges are represented by the small hoard of coins which Mr. Hugh Shortt has dated to 50 BC. There are also 20 coins recorded from the RB occupation and these are distributed as follows: AD 77-134, 5 coins; AD 260-383, 14 coins; there is also one very worn coin that might be attributed to the intervening period (AD 134-260). No substantial building was located, either by ourselves or Mr. Edwardes, and building remains were restricted to pebble floors and settings of post-holes the latter containing iron slag used as packing. As I have suggested elsewhere (Musty 1969) Armsley in the RB period is to be seen as a small industrial settlement concerned with iron smelting and other metallurgical activities and also possibly serving as a base for travelling tinkers.

Acknowledgement

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