

A Medieval Cistern from Churchill

By DAVID A. HINTON

WHILE digging foundations for new buildings at Churchill, Oxon., during 1967, Mr. Adam Brown discovered a quantity of pottery sherds and other objects. These were acquired by the Oxford City and County Museum, where one fairly complete vessel was restored (Accession Number 1056).¹

This vessel is the largest Medieval pot ever found in the Oxford region (FIG. 17); only burial urns of the Bronze Age (e.g. Ashmolean Museum 1912. 1139) are of comparable size. It is 55.5 cm. high, has a maximum diameter of 49 cm., with an internal diameter at the neck of 9 cm. The cubic capacity is about 70 litres, or 15½ gallons, almost exactly 2 bushels. The fabric is coarse, having much 'limestone detritus', and other impurities; the surfaces are pitted, giving a 'digestive biscuit' appearance. The exterior colour varies from brown to grey; the interior is grey, with a darker core.²

The pot was found about 18 in. below the modern ground surface, apparently on the edge of either Medieval wall foundations or enclosures; it was covered with two pieces of flat stone. Inside were an iron key, two links of an iron chain, and a rolled-up piece of lead (FIG. 18, 3, 4, 5). Other Medieval sherds, of various dates, and a very worn coin of Edward III (Acc. No. 1055), were scattered nearby. The iron was heavily corroded, but the key appears to be the very common Medieval Type VIIb:3 it cannot be closely dated, but the shape of the bow suggests 14th-15th century. The chain links and the lead are even less dateable.

The vessel was probably used for brewing ale, the bung-hole at the base allowing the liquor to be drained off without disturbing the sediment. An alternative use would be for cider,⁴ but there were few apples in the north-west Cotswolds. The ale brewed at Churchill would have been made from dredge,

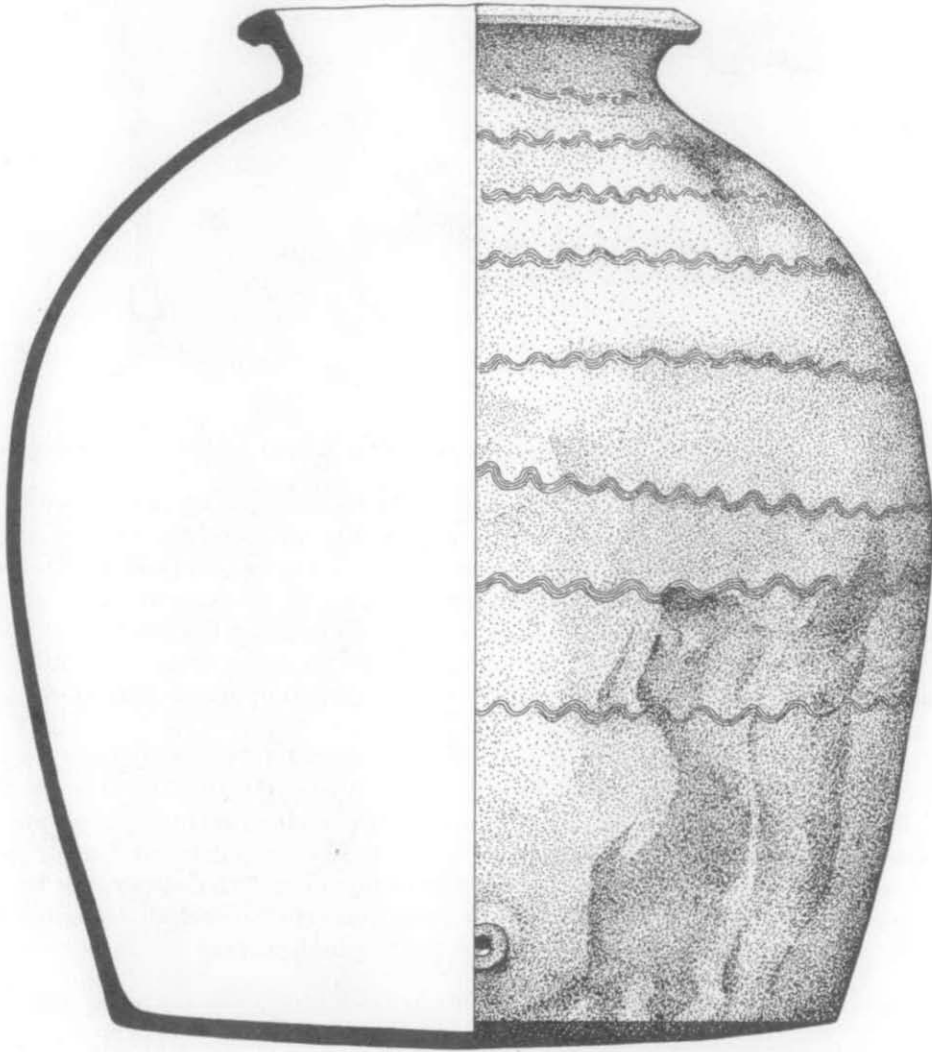
¹ The restoration was done by Mr. Brian Arthur, who also provided the information for this note. The objects in Figs. 17, 18 were drawn by Mrs. June Strong in Fig. 19 at the Ashmolean Museum by Mrs. M. Cottam.

² For a full description of pottery of this type, see E. M. Jope, 'The 12th century Castle at Ascott Doilly', *Antiq. Journ.*, xxxix (1959), 244-6.

³ *London Museum Medieval Catalogue*, London 1940, 141-3.

⁴ J. M. Steane, 'Excavations at Lyveden, 1965-7', *Journal of the Northampton Museums and Art Gallery*, 2 (Dec. 1967), 24.

A MEDIEVAL CISTERN FROM CHURCHILL



1

FIG. 17

Medieval Cistern from Churchill, Oxon. Scale 1 : 4.



FIG. 18
Metal objects found inside the Cistern. Scale 1 : 2.

a mixed crop of barley and oats.⁵ A cistern like this has not been found before; less porous casks in wood and metal were probably in more general use, and with these more accurate control of the volume of liquor was possible. This was important, the price of ale per gallon being set by assize.⁶ Furthermore, 'tolsester', a payment in cash or ale, had to be made to the Lord of the Manor whenever brewing took place.⁷ In villages, most villeins brewed occasionally,⁸ and vast quantities were drunk, so a cistern in a cheap material, made locally, is not surprising.

Nor is it really surprising that a complete cistern of this size has not been recorded before. The closest parallels are with vessels called storage jars;⁹ without a complete base, it would not be possible to tell if one of these were not a cistern. Sherds from such pots, which usually have applied thumbed strips, are common in the Oxford region.¹⁰ Most of them are 13th century, but they can be found earlier.¹¹ Another type of storage jar is no more than a magnified cooking-pot—some of them were certainly dual-purpose.¹² In Oxford,

⁵ T. H. Lloyd, 'The Deserted Oxfordshire Village of Brookend', *Oxoniensia*, xxix/xxx (1964-5), 119.

⁶ e.g. In 1251 it was 1d. for 2 gallons in towns, 1d. for 4 gallons in the country. *V.C.H. Oxon*, II, 259.

⁷ P. D. A. Harvey, *A Medieval Oxfordshire Village*, Oxford 1965, 145.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁹ G. C. Dunning, 'A Thirteenth Century Stirrup and Storage Jar from Rabley Heath, Herts.', *Antiq. Journ.*, xix (1939), 305-12.

¹⁰ e.g. At Seacourt (*Oxoniensia*, xxvi-xxvii (1961-2), 149), in Oxford (*Oxoniensia*, xxiii (1958), 69, 71), and at Ascott Doilly (Jope, *op. cit.*, note 2, 243).

¹¹ e.g. At Ascott Doilly.

¹² J. G. Hurst, 'The Kitchen Area of Northolt Manor', *Med. Arch.*, v (1961), 267.

A MEDIEVAL CISTERN FROM CHURCHILL

examples came from the mid-13th century Well 1 at the New Bodleian,¹³ and from unstratified layers at the Clarendon Hotel, and Queen's College.¹⁴ The fabric and rims of these are very similar to the Churchill example, and provide the best evidence for dating it.¹⁵

Less useful for dating purposes is the bung-hole; an interesting assortment of these was found at the Lyveden, Northants, kiln.¹⁶ There is a very broken example from Whittington, Glos., which has on the inside a thin wash of opaque green glaze, such as is found on late 12th-13th century pottery west of Oxford.¹⁷ An example in a coarse shelly fabric from Radcliffe Square, Oxford (A.M. 1968.1442), is shown in FIG. 19, and there are others from Seacourt,¹⁸ and the Clarendon Hotel, Oxford.¹⁹ Bung-holes in small, Late Medieval vessels are also well-known.²⁰



FIG. 19
Bung-hole from Radcliffe Square, Oxford. Scale 1 : 2.

The decoration, of combed wavy lines, is not good dating evidence either. In Oxford, the common unglazed 12th century pitchers have it,²¹ but it hardly appears again until late in the 13th century,²² and then not in quite the same form. West of Oxford, in Wiltshire and Gloucestershire, it went on throughout the 13th century.²³ Coarse fabrics also continued in use for a very long period, at least in rural districts.²⁴

¹³ R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, *Oxoniensia*, iv (1939), 99, and Fig. 23, A (A.M. 1968. 219).

¹⁴ D. Sturdy, *Oxoniensia*, xxiv (1959), 22 and Fig. 8, 1-4 (A.M. 1968. 1264, 5).

¹⁵ Similar rims came from Seacourt, on smaller 13th century vessels (e.g. *Oxoniensia*, xxvi-xxvii (1961-2), Fig. 22, 3). Equally significant is their lack among the 12th century material published from Ascott Doilly (Jope, op. cit., note 2): only Fig. 9, D8 and D10 are really comparable.

¹⁶ Steane, op. cit., note 4, 24 and Fig. 8.

¹⁷ Jope, op. cit., note 2, 259.

¹⁸ *Oxoniensia*, xxvi-xxvii (1961-2), Fig. 27, 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xxiii (1958), Fig. 13, Z. 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, xxiv (1959), Fig. 14, 3, 4.

²¹ e.g. *Oxoniensia*, iv (1939), Pit G, I, pp. 114-15 (A.M. 1968. 1135), and Pl. X, I (A.M. 1869. 15).

²² *Ibid.*, Well 9, 2, p. 105, and Fig. 24, J (A.M. 1938. 1264).

²³ e.g. at Selsley Common, Glos. *Trans. Bristol and Glos. A.S.*, lxxviii (1949), 32.

²⁴ e.g. at Seacourt, *Oxoniensia*, xxvi-xxvii (1961-2), 134.

DAVID A. HINTON

The most probable date for the cistern is late 12th–13th century; at least all the features are consistent with this. On the other hand, a rural potter's conservatism might make it much later, contemporary with the key found in it. How did this association arise? From its position, it would seem that the pot was deliberately placed in the ground, with the objects inside. Some kind of house foundation ceremony seems possible; two large pitchers found at the New Bodleian²⁵ were ascribed to this practice, and the very large bowl (A.M. 1873.23) from under the chancel of the church at Woodperry, Oxon., seems to be another example of the rite. There may have been no objection to the use of an old vessel; but this is speculation, and it is better to end with the reflexion that this cistern is an archaeological reminder of agrarian history. The Cotswolds in the Middle Ages were not inhabited exclusively by sheep, but supported a balanced arable economy, of which brewing was an important aspect.

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²⁵ *Oxoniensia*, IV (1939), 125–6, Fig. 26, A, C and Pl. XIII, 1–2 (A.M. 1937. 443, 5).