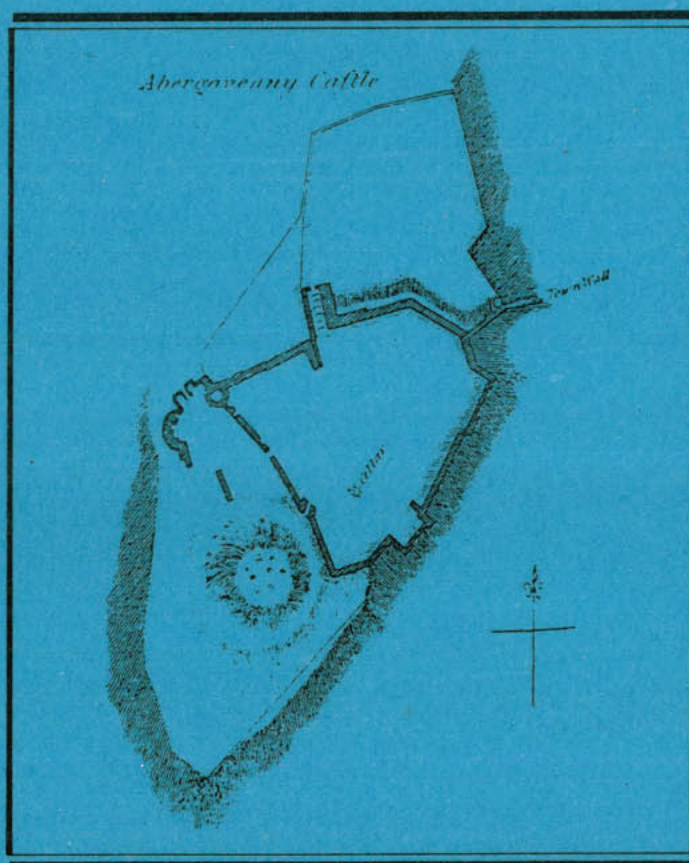


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EXCAVATIONS AT
THE SOUTH-EAST
TOWER OF
ABERGAVENNY
CASTLE
GWENT



The GLAMORGAN GWENT
ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST Ltd.

December 1990

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THE SOUTH-EAST
TOWER OF
ABERGAVENNY
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GWENT

C.N. MAYLAN

With a contribution by

S.H. SELL



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FRONT COVER

PLAN OF ABERGAVENNY CASTLE
BY T MORRICE
FROM COXE'S
'AN HISTORICAL TOUR THROUGH
MONMOUTHSHIRE' 1801

therefore was not methodical, although care was taken by the masons to retrieve as much material as possible.

HISTORY OF THE CASTLE

Construction of the castle was started by Hamelin de Ballon (Cathcart-King 1983 p.279) before A.D.1087 as a motte and bailey castle of timber and earth. The stone keep might have been added by A.D.1150 (Ralphs 1956 p.2) and most of the surviving stonework dates to the thirteenth century (Olding pers. comm). The walling of the town situated to the north-west of the castle was started in A.D 1241 (Turner 1971 p.201). There are questionable stories of short periods of capture by the Welsh in A.D.1172 (Cathcart-King 1983 p.279) and in 1182 (Thorpe (ed) 1978 p.111). The castle was taken by the English in 1215 and 1233 and was held against Glendower in 1404. The castle was garrisoned for the King during the Civil War and demolished on his orders in 1645 (Long (ed) 1859 p.212). The ruins of the castle became source of stone for the town until 1811, when the Marquis of Abergavenny constructed a shooting box on the site.

DESCRIPTION OF CASTLE

The castle is situated on a hill above the confluence of the Rivers Usk, Gavenny and Cybi. The motte was situated on the south-eastern end of the plateau with steep slopes to the east, south and west. The flat north side was defended by an outer bailey. The motte is now surmounted by a building constructed as a shooting box, but was described by Coxe in 1801 as:-

" a tumulus, environed by a trench, with the foundation of a building on the top; this was probably the keep or citadel" (Coxe 1801 p.172).

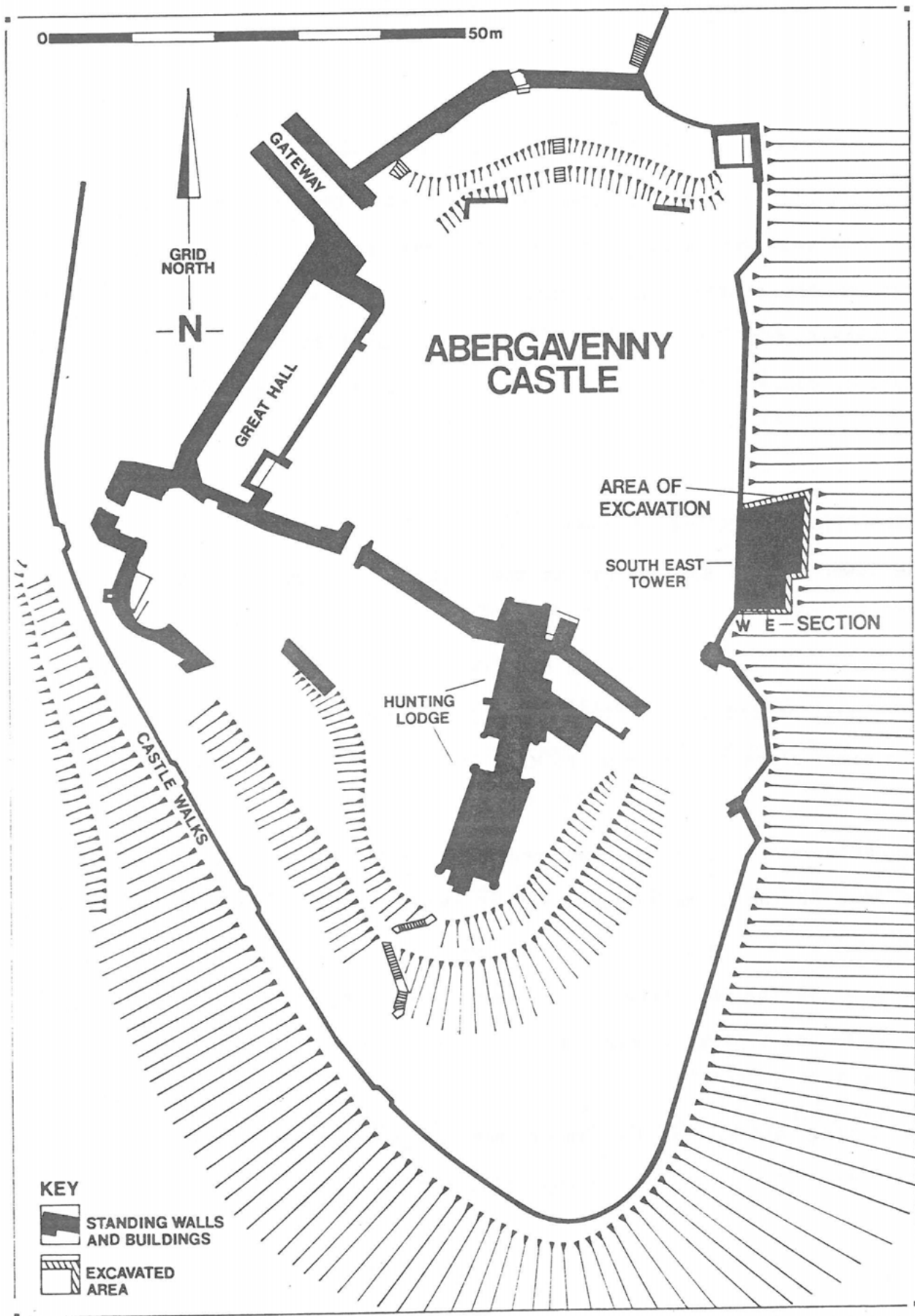


Fig 1: Plan of Abergavenny Castle

To the north-west of the motte are the remains of the outer court consisting of a polygonal tower, a round tower, the wall of the great hall and a gateway with a long barbican. The remaining walls continue around the edge of the plateau, acting now as a retaining wall. The walls on the south-east side of the castle are interrupted by an irregular shaped bastion, close to the line of the wall dividing the outer bailey from the motte.

DESCRIPTION OF SOUTH-EAST TOWER

The tower is the same height as the castle wall (some 6.2m high). A low wall on the south-western side is the only piece of superstructure surviving. At present there is no difference in ground height between the tower salient and the castle courtyard. The base of the tower is situated on a steep slope leading down to Mill Street.

The north-east wall of the tower projects some 8.5m at an angle of 73° from the line of the south-eastern wall of the castle. Its external wall runs for some 9.5 m parallel to the castle wall, before it turns at right angles for some 2m. The wall then returns on to a parallel line to the castle wall for 4m before turning at right angles to rejoin the castle wall.

The facing blocks of the tower are large rectangular sandstone and conglomerate blocks built in rough, slightly inclined courses.

There are three major cracks in the structure; on the north-east wall some 3.5m away from the castle wall; on the external wall 3.5m away from the

south-west corner; and on the south-west wall 1.6m away from the castle wall. These cracks extend for the full height of the tower.

CARTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

The earliest plan of the castle, that has been traced so far, is a copy of 1806 by David Davies of Crickhowel, of a drawing by Benjamin Fallows from a "*map book of Henry, Earl of Abergavenny*" drawn in 1718. This is currently in Gwent County Record Office (MAN/A/2/0270). This does not show any of the masonry of the castle, but does indicate the position of the motte.

Two plans of the castle drawn by T.Morrice are included in Archdeacon Coxe's "*An Historical Tour Through Monmouthshire*" (1801) The first of these shows the castle in some detail. The south-eastern tower is depicted as a rectangular projection, possibly with buttresses at the corners. There is no indication of the irregular present day shape.

A photostat copy of a traced plan at the National Coal Board Estate Office at Blaenavon, drawn circa 1821 (G.C.R.O. D1348.47) shows the rectangular tower as above.

The Ordnance Survey plan of 1886 shows the present irregular plan and it would therefore appear that the shape of the tower was altered between 1821 and 1886.

ARTISTIC EVIDENCE

The only artistic representation of the south-eastern tower, so far traced, is by S.Hooper drawn in 1775 and published by Grose (Grose 1785 pl.2). The

tower is shown in the background and it is therefore difficult to interpret. However, it appears to be a low bastion, approximately the same height as at present. In the background there appears to be a taller tower, probably the eastern tower, although given the difficulty caused by the perspective, this tall structure could be the superstructure of the south-eastern tower.

THE EXCAVATIONS

The consolidation work on the north-east wall of the tower, consisted of the repointing of the masonry. The work on the south-eastern and south-western walls required underpinning of the foundations as well as repointing. In parts this led to partial demolition and rebuilding, which allowed study of the interior of the tower to be undertaken.

The excavation work can be divided into three parts: 1. the north-eastern part of the south-eastern wall; 2. the south-western part of the south-eastern wall; and 3. the south-western wall.

1. The underpinning trench of the north-eastern part of the south-eastern wall, was excavated in January 1990. This revealed that the foundations to the wall were minimal, and consisted of the wall resting on the natural soil (some 0.3m below the present ground surface). It was presumed that it had been constructed in a shallow trench, although this was not located. Material from the nineteenth century was found beneath the wall and it is therefore presumed that it was reconstructed during this period. The cartographic evidence would suggest that this work was carried out between 1821 and 1886.

2. The underpinning trench of the south-western part of the south-eastern wall, was excavated in March and April 1990. This revealed a post-medieval stone lined cess-pit butting to and using the tower wall as part of its structure. The foundations of the tower were slightly deeper (0.5m) than above, but still rested on natural soil, with no indication of formal foundations.

3. Work on the south-western wall commenced in November 1990. The demolition of part of the structure and the digging of the first part of the foundation trench, revealed a major constructional difference between this wall, and the other walls. When the latter had been partially demolished they had revealed a stone core. However, the demolition of the south-western wall revealed an earthen core at the north-western end. When

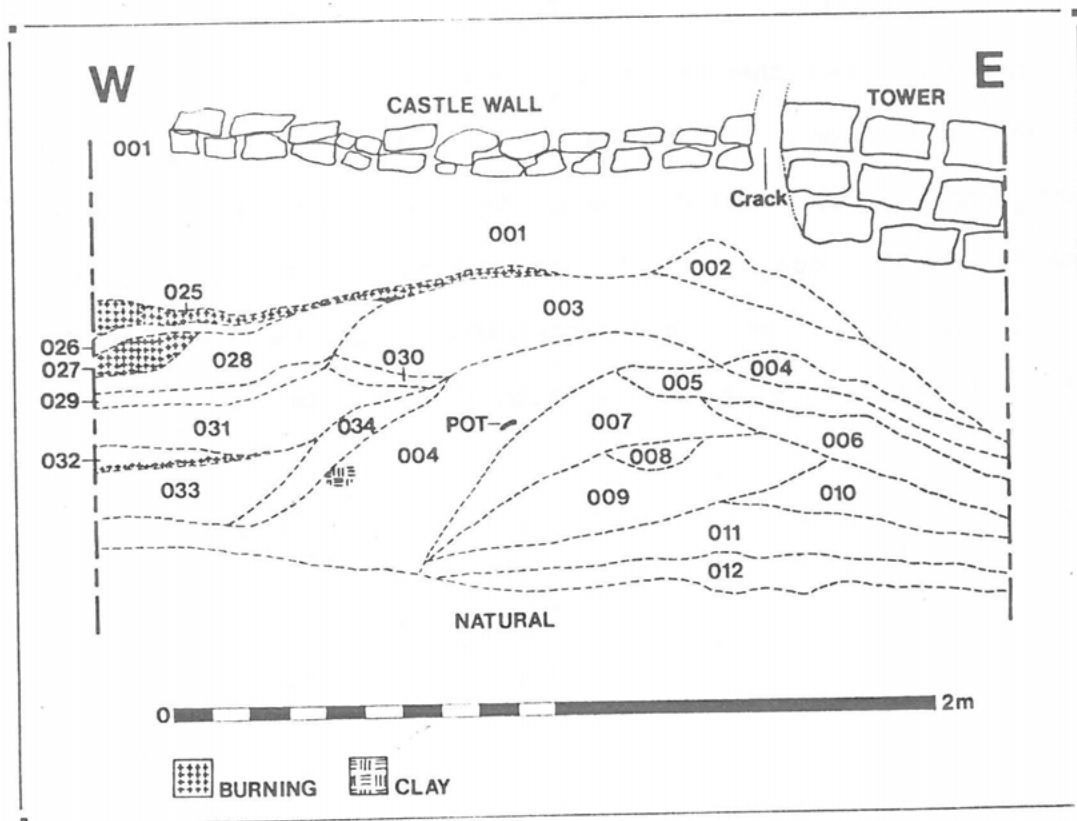


Fig 2: Section of south-west wall of south-east tower - Abergavenny Castle

the earthen core was cleaned it became apparent that the material had been tipped into position. This did not appear to form the core to a tower but a free-standing bank. Further work revealed that the stone core to the tower started towards the south-east of the wall, and a major crack had occurred at the intersection between the earthen and stone cores.

The earthen bank stood some 0.9m high and contained residual material in the form of Roman pottery, given the bank's topographical position at the top of a steep slope, it could have been a defensive rampart, possibly part of the early Norman Castle. When the stonework above the bank was examined it became apparent that this had been constructed at a different period to the rest of the stone core. It is believed that this might have been the curtain wall to the later stone castle, which if this hypothesis is correct, then the construction of the tower must have been later than the 13th century A.D. when the castle was re-built in stone. It would also appear that the line of the south-eastern wall of the castle, south-west of the tower, has been altered. This might have been the result of an earth slip down the steep slope of the hillside, or by the deliberate excavation of the hill, possibly to improve the position of the new tower, so that it could give enfilading fire to any attack on the inner bailey.

CONCLUSIONS

The presence of the Roman pottery in the earthen bank, suggests that it is part of the earth and timber motte and bailey castle built before A.D. 1087. The stone wall surmounting it, therefore is the castle wall built in the thirteenth century. Given that the tower is built after this date, its actual period of construction is difficult to ascertain, without any dateable artifacts from its core. The "naive" style of a long rectangular tower would normally suggest that it was of very early construction, not of the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries when castle design became very sophisticated. However, the position of the tower dominating the main road from Usk and Raglan might give a clue to the date of its construction. The castle and town of Abergavenny were refortified by the Royalists during the English Civil War (Bradney 1906 p.149), illustrated by the gun emplacement found on the western wall of the town (Ashmore 1973 p.105). The most likely threat to the castle would have been along the road from Raglan (an attack was made from this direction in 1646 when the town was held by Parliament (Bradney 1906 p.158), and a bastion for emplacing cannon is a possible use for the tower, especially if it did not have any superstructure. Although most civil war bastions were constructed using earth, the required position of this bastion, on a steep slope might have necessitated the use of stone. The hasty construction would account for the lack of foundations, and the later cracks caused as the building settled, and slipped off the edge of the underlying earth bank. The nineteenth century additions to the tower's north-eastern corner would therefore be remedial work, attempting to correct these problems.

THE FINDS by S.H. SELL

Two groups of material were submitted, one a general collection (001) and the other from the bank of the medieval castle (004)

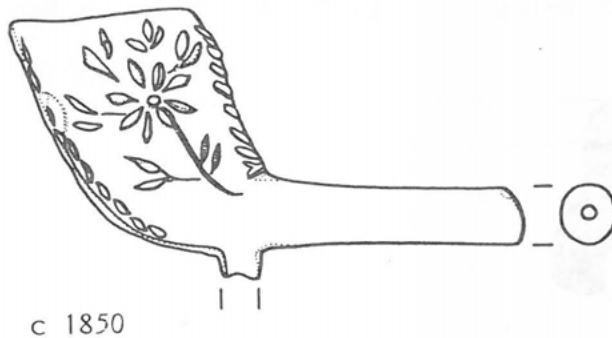
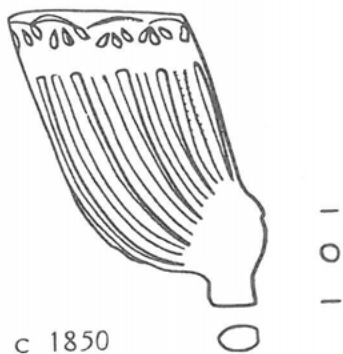
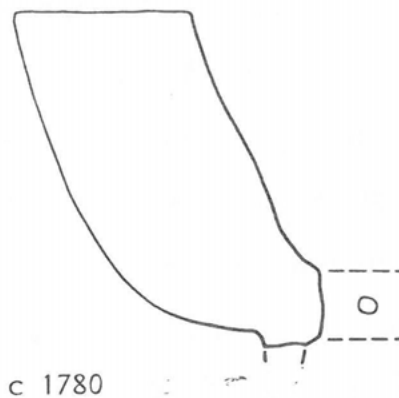
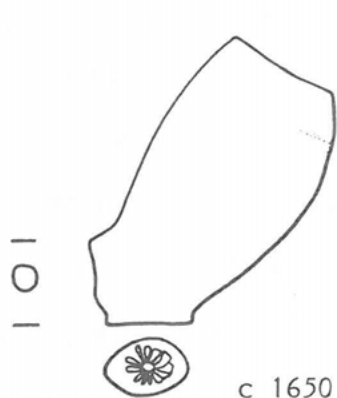
A. (001) This group originated from a number of locations, including a cesspit, but was unfortunately insufficiently well-provenanced to be regarded as other than general clearance. Much of it appears to date to the 18th century, which may indicate the date of the cesspit. There was a smaller amount of later material. The bulk of the dateable finds were ceramic; these included a number of "local" plainwares with red fabrics, among them a chamber-pot, and a much smaller quantity of gravel-tempered wares from the industries of North Devon, which were exported by the boatload from the ports of Bideford, and Barnstaple during the 17th and 18th centuries, to South Wales, Ireland and North America. Part of a large jug was noted among this group. Also present were a number of vessels with buff or pink bodies, with white or red slip; both flat and hollow-wares were represented, and the fabrics together with combed or slipped decoration on the white slipped pieces indicate an origin in the Bristol area. A date in the first half of the 18th century would not be inappropriate. Fragments of hand-painted white earthenwares are reminiscent of the early Cambrian painted wares, and probably have a similar date, towards the end of the 18th century, perhaps earlier. The creamwares and underglaze blue transfer-printed wares may also date to this period, but tin-glazed ("Delft") earthenwares and Staffordshire stonewares were almost entirely absent, contrary to expectations of an 18th century assemblage. Other transfer-printed earthenwares may belong, with fragments of

lustrewares to the early 19th century and the ceramics end with stonewares and semi-porcelains of the early-mid Victorian period.

For such a group reliance is usually placed on the clay pipes for dating, but four out of a total of six bowls or bowl fragments belong to the middle of the 19th century; their over-ornamental styles are in sharp contrast to those of the other diagnostic pipes, one a polished bowl with radial stamp from the Broseley industry dating to c.1650 and the other a "Regency" type of c.1780, tall, plain and elegant. One early 18th century wine-bottle was noted; the remaining sherds belong to more cylindrical 19th century types,

CLAY PIPES

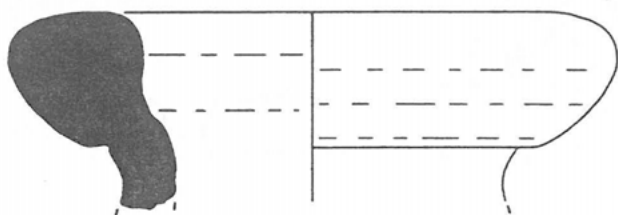
Scale 1:1



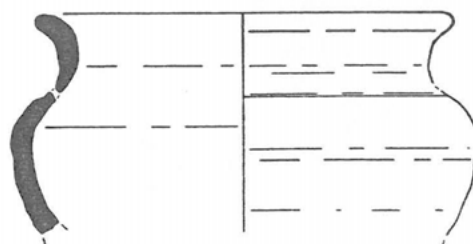
and there was one slender ?medicine bottle in clear glass of more modern date. The ironwork from this group was largely poorly-preserved and undiagnostic, but did include the blade of a billhook and a comparatively modern ?forging tool. The bone handle of a fork and two small "blazer" buttons may be of 19th century date; a third copper alloy disc was too badly corroded for certain identification. The group is completed by two fragments of stone rooftile which may well be contemporary with a fragment from a ceramic rooftile of post-medieval date, and a few pieces of bone and shell - cow, sheep and oyster are represented.

B. The second group (004) consisted of fragments from two vessels of the Roman period, both of which can be dated to the second half of the 1st century AD. The first was a rimsherd from an amphora (a large non-returnable container for wines, olives and other foodstuffs) of Dressel Type 20 (Peacock and Williams Class 25), a globular southern Spanish form for the transport of olive-oil, which is frequently encountered on Roman sites in South Wales e.g. at Loughor and elsewhere at Abergavenny. The other, which had been badly fragmented, was a small high-shouldered jar in south-western slipped BB1 (black-burnished ware, a type of coarse pottery produced initially for the military in Roman Britain). This fabric type is well-known in Exeter but has only recently been recognised on Roman sites in South Wales, e.g. at Neath, (Evans in Marvell: forthcoming).

ROMAN POTTERY

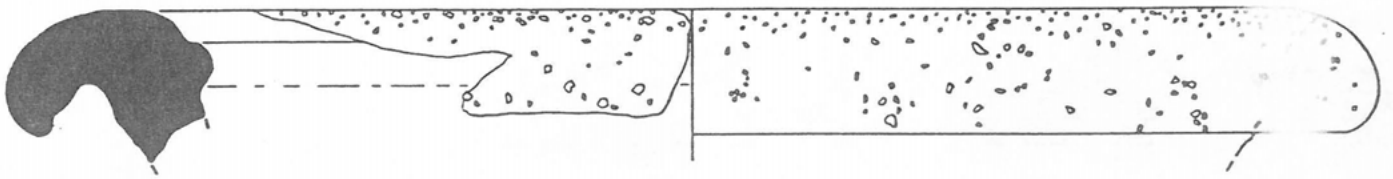


Amphora - scale 1:2



Black-burnished jar - scale 1:2

An earlier stray find from Abergavenny Castle may be included with this group; it is the flanged rim of a mortarium (mixing bowl) of a type which probably originates in North Gaul (Hartley in Britnell; Caersws Fabric 7). The body is cream, largely untempered, with flint and quartz "trituration" (grinding) grits liberally scattered over flange and body alike. Another example from Abergavenny (Evans in Wardle forthcoming) is dated to 55 - 85 AD.



Mortarium - scale 1:2

I am grateful to David Evans and Gill Evans for their comments on the Roman material and clay pipes respectively

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