

# EXCAVATIONS AT BALSDEAN CHAPEL, ROTTINGDEAN

BY N. E. S. NORRIS, F.S.A. AND E. F. HOCKINGS

## *The Date of the Chapel from Records*

THE chapel at Balsdean is named, together with the church of Rottingdean, as being among the early properties of the Priory of Saint Pancras at Lewes, and is mentioned in charters of about the middle of the twelfth century.

It occurs in the confirmation charter of the second William Earl Warenne,<sup>1</sup> which may be dated *c.* 1147,<sup>2</sup> as 'The church of Rottingedena and the chapel of Baldesdena' and also in a confirmation charter of Hilary, Bishop of Chichester of similar date (1147-69).<sup>3</sup> It is not, however, named in the list of properties confirmed by Archbishop Ralph of Canterbury in 1121, although the church of Rottingdean is mentioned.<sup>4</sup>

There is thus strong presumptive evidence from records alone that the chapel came into being between the dates of these documents, i.e. between 1121 and 1147. As will be seen later, pottery from a ditch beneath the foundations of, and therefore earlier than, the chapel, has been dated to the early part of the twelfth century. There would seem little doubt, therefore, that the building was erected shortly before 1147.

## *Subsequent History*

A charter of Seffrid II (Bishop of Chichester, 1180-1204), confirms certain gifts among which is the following: 'To the Vicar of Rottingdean a virgate of land which is of the fee of the church with the tithes of the same land and all obventions of the altars, as well of the parish church as of the Chapel of Baldesden.'<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *S.R.S.* xxxviii. 21.

<sup>2</sup> *P.R.O. Ancient Deeds*, A. 14280.

<sup>3</sup> *P.R.O. Ancient Deeds*, A. 464; and Round, *Ancient Charters*, No. 8 (Pipe Roll Soc., vol. x, p. 12).

<sup>4</sup> *S.R.S.* xl. xxiii.

<sup>5</sup> *S.N.Q.* II. 252.

In 1579 the Vicar of Rottingdean was required to hold a service four times a year in the chapel of the 'village' of Balsdean,<sup>1</sup> while the visitation report of Bishop Bowers in 1724, under the heading of Rottingdean, refers to a 'farm called Baseden in which there is an old chappel and chappel Yard and a small parcell of land leading up to the hill belonging as is said to the Vicar and called the Butt, but never enjoyed by the present vicar'.<sup>2</sup>

The earliest picture we have of the chapel is a wash drawing by James Lambert of about 1775 which shows the nave roofed with thatch, the ruined chancel walls projecting from the east end, and the round-headed chancel arch between them. In the north wall may be seen a single small window with a rounded head and an open doorway from which the stone dressings appear to have been removed (Fig. 1).

Hussey<sup>3</sup> states that an aged inhabitant informed him that the chapel was converted to the uses of the farm as a stable about 1780, though divine service had not been held there for centuries previously. At the time of the alteration of the chapel some of the surrounding ground was lowered, when interments were disturbed. Hussey also remarks, from his own observations, that the south wall appeared to have been rebuilt from the foundations at an early date, and that the thatched roof was supported by three tie-beams with king-posts and braces, all of sound oak. He thought that the slight attempt at ornament on the king-posts was of the Decorated period. On the north side he observed a low door, rather wide in proportion to its height, and seemingly flat-headed with a lintel, but, he says: 'It was closed so long ago that a minute examination of the interior of the wall . . . is required to enable one to ascertain its original form.'

E. H. W. Dunkin visited Balsdean in 1888<sup>4</sup> and found that the chapel was thatched and that the building had

<sup>1</sup> Add. MS. 39447, ff. 2 and 3.

<sup>2</sup> Church Inspection Books (1724), D.R.O. 44/T/26/3, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Hussey, *Notes on Churches of Kent, Sussex and Surrey* (1852), pp. 277-9.

<sup>4</sup> Dunkin MSS., Barbican House, Lewes, Notebook 106 (43).

suffered much alteration, part of the east and south walls having been rebuilt recently. He records that the Early English lancet in the north wall was splayed

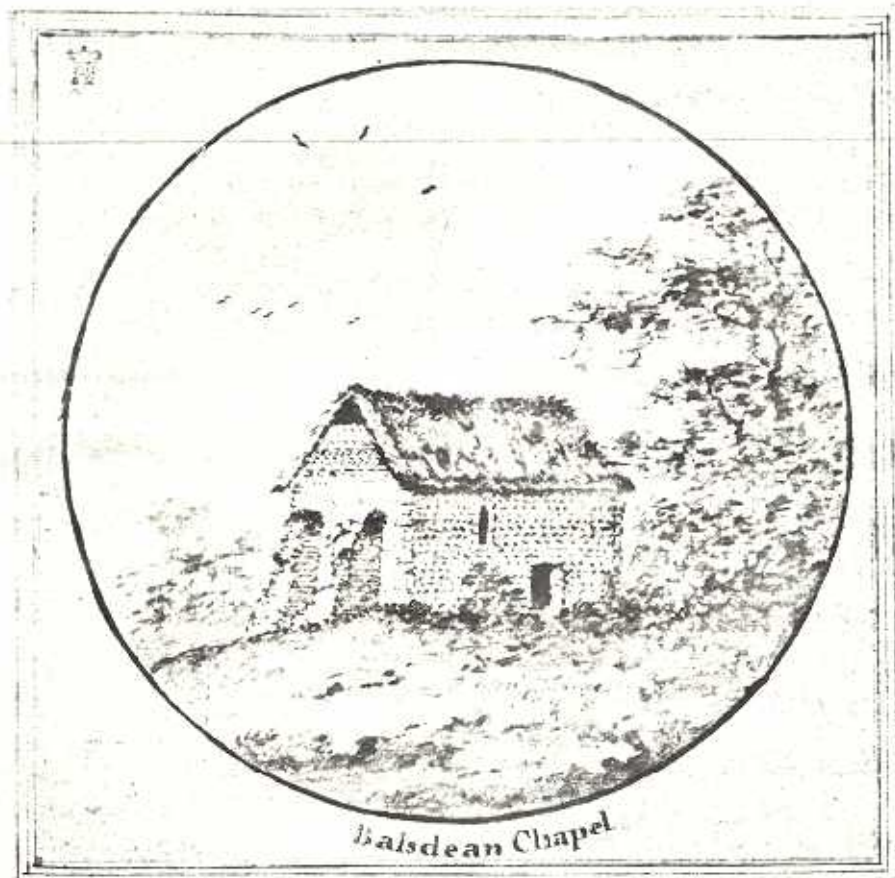


FIG. 1. VIEW OF BALSDEAN CHAPEL ABOUT 1775 BY JAMES LAMBERT. (Burrell Colln., British Museum.) Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum

internally and at the outer face measured  $31\frac{1}{2}$  in. by 9 in. It had been blocked with flintwork. The north doorway he found was  $36\frac{1}{2}$  in. wide and retained its stone quoins on the inside only. All traces of the shape of the top of the doorway had gone.

A plan of the chapel is given in the *Victoria County History of Sussex*<sup>1</sup> and shows the extent of the modern alterations and a conjectural outline of the destroyed chancel.

At the outbreak of the last war the chapel was still used as one of the buildings of Balsdean Farm. During the occupation of the South Downs by the military during the war, the chapel, the charming Georgian farm-house (built shortly before 1790),<sup>2</sup> and all the buildings at Balsdean and Norton Farms were destroyed. After 1945 the sites were cleared of rubble, and modern farm buildings erected in a different part of the valley.

The clearing of the rubble from the levelled foundations offered an excellent opportunity to carry out an excavation of a Norman chapel site, the principal object of the writers at the commencement of the work being to ascertain the ground-plan of the chancel. As will be seen in this report, work extended to the nave, producing some other features of interest.

#### *Acknowledgements*

The writers wish to express their thanks to the Brighton Corporation Waterworks and their tenant Mr. A. W. H. Dalgety for permission to carry out the excavation; and also to the Waterworks Engineer and his assistant, and to Mr. R. G. Hecks, the farm manager for much kind help and encouragement.

They are also indebted to Miss B. Crook, B.A., for researches into the early records of the chapel which have been embodied in the first section of this report, and to Mr. G. C. Dunning, F.S.A., for producing the very interesting report on the pottery and its implications.

#### *Description of the Excavations*

(a) *The foundation plan (Fig. 2).* The site of the chapel having been located with some difficulty, two cuttings were made to expose the western corners of the nave. These were found to have dressed greensand quoins,

<sup>1</sup> Vol. VII (1940), p. 233.

<sup>2</sup> *Sz. Weekly Advertiser*, 2 Aug. 1790, p. 2, col. 4.

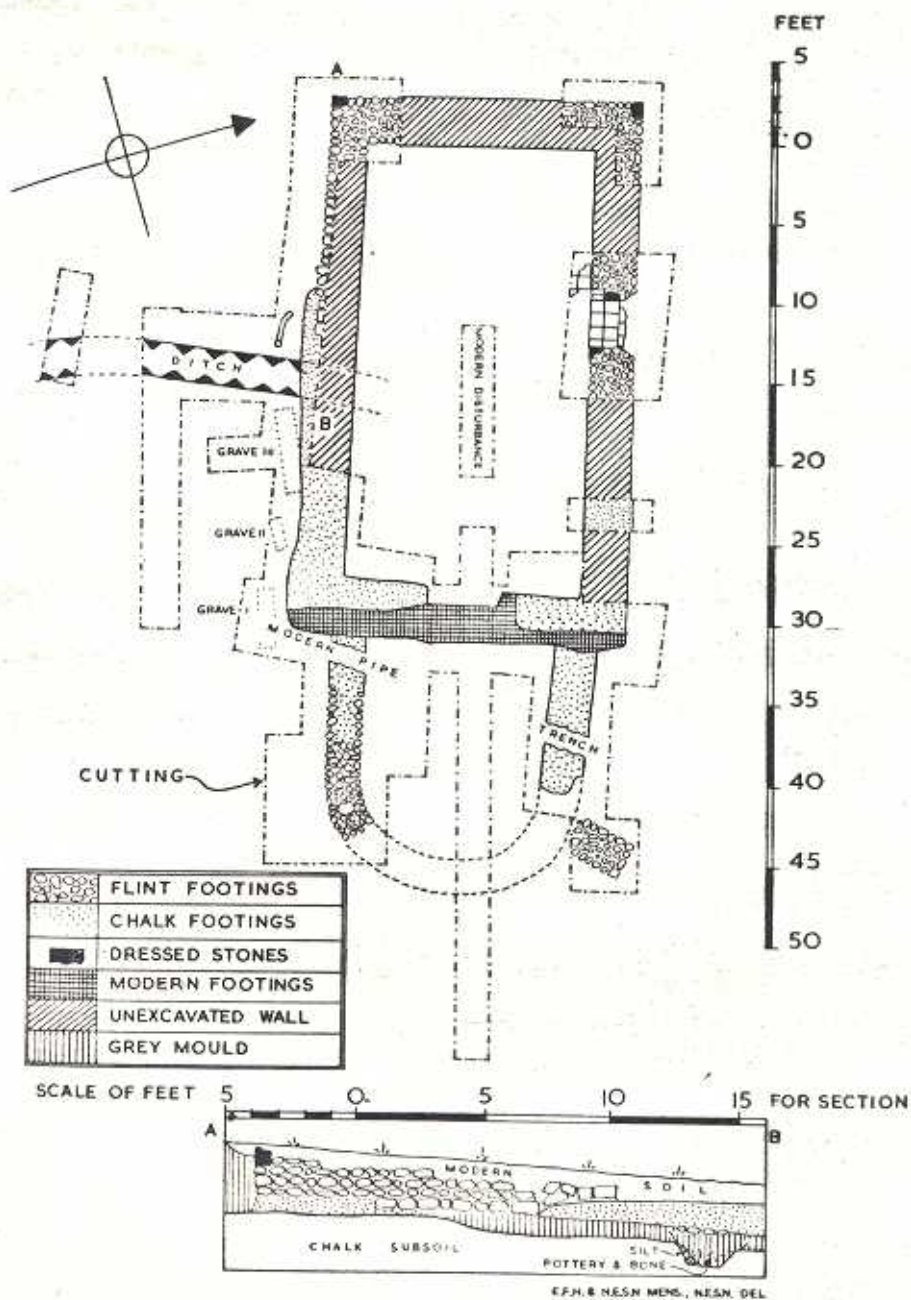


FIG. 2. GROUND PLAN OF BALSDEAN CHAPEL, AND SECTION AT OUTER FACE OF SOUTH WALL OF NAVE

and the footing of the walls at the west end was found to be of flints set in white mortar. The footings of the east wall were then exposed and found to have been extensively underpinned in recent times, although a



FIG. 3. FOUNDATIONS OF SOUTH WALL OF APSIDAL CHANCEL, FROM THE EAST

(Block lent by *Sussex County Magazine*)

break in the original chalk footings showed the position of the chancel arch. Allowing an offset of 9 in. beyond the face of the jamb of the arch, they indicate a chancel arch about 7 ft. wide.

The footings of the north wall of the chancel were of chalk exactly similar to those of the east wall of the nave (and to the eastern half of the nave side walls) and had a marked inclination southwards from the axis of the nave. Nine feet from their junction with the nave these footings came to the surface, owing to the slope

of the hill, and were lost. The footing of a flint buttress, placed deeper than the wall, was met with just beyond this point and its position suggested a curving wall rather than a square corner. Confirmation of this occurred when the footing of the south chancel wall was uncovered, when it was found that the footings, on which remained one course of flint walling, curved to form part of an apsidal end to the chancel (Fig. 3).

A cutting was then driven along the outer face of the south wall of the nave (see section *AB* on Fig 2) and the wide chalk footings were found to give place to flint footings about two-thirds of the distance along the wall. The reason seems to have been that the western end of the nave is built on solid natural chalk, while the east end is on made-up ground, and therefore needed a wide 'floating' of rammed chalk to prevent subsidence. A difference in the build and materials of the base of the wall at a point opposite the door in the north wall suggested that a south door may once have existed.

The foundations of the blocked north doorway were next uncovered, and some of the blocking was found in position. The removal of the latter revealed the tiled floor of the doorway (Fig. 4) which appeared to be a continuation of a floor of similar materials covering the nave, a small piece of this being visible in the illustration. The tiles measured 9 in. square and were  $2\frac{1}{2}$  in. thick. They were of coarse friable red ware with a semi-vitrified glaze on the upper surface, and may be dated to the sixteenth century. One original greensand quoin remained on the inner east side of the doorway, the corresponding one on the west side being replaced by a quoin of Tudor bricks. All traces of the outer quoins had vanished, as had been noted by Dunkin in 1888.

(b) *The graves.* During the making of the cutting along the outer face of the south wall of the nave three burials were uncovered. All three had been interred in an extended position with feet towards the east and without coffins. Graves I and II were of children aged about 5 or 6 years, and Grave III contained the bones

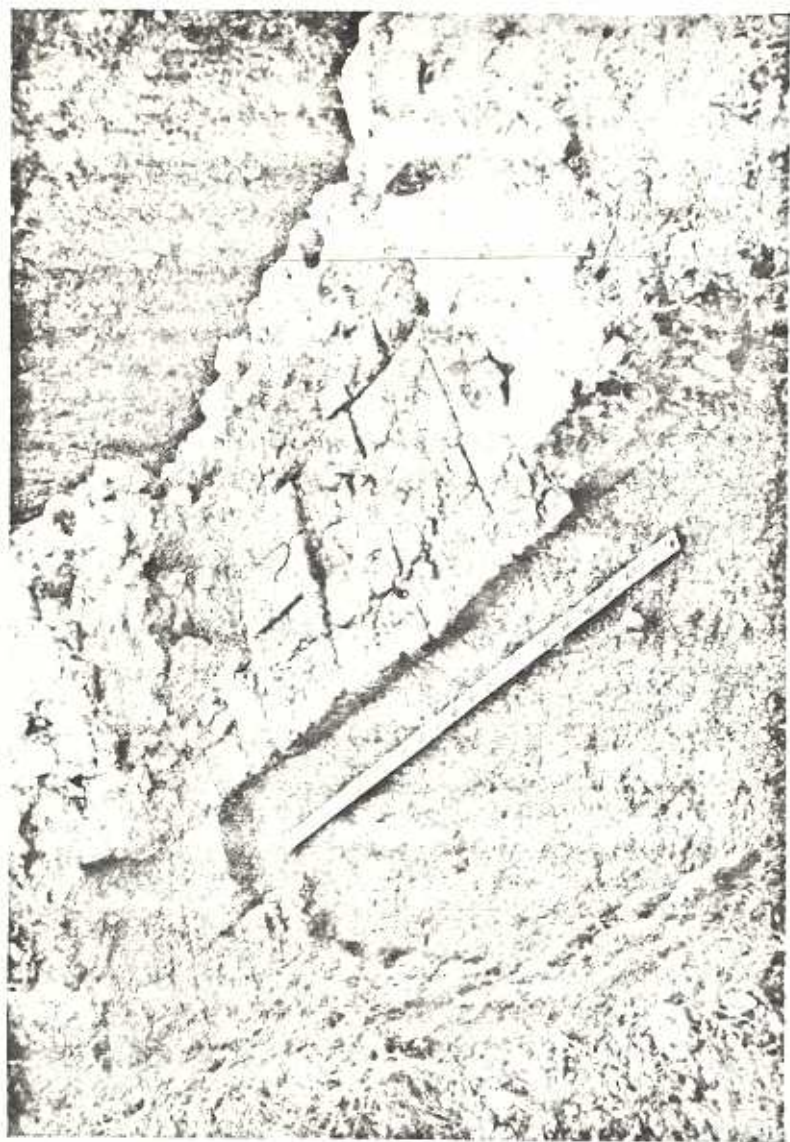


FIG. 4. FOUNDATIONS AND TILED FLOOR OF NORTH DOORWAY

EXCAVATIONS AT BALSDEAN CHAPEL, ROTTINGDEAN 61  
of a male adult aged about 40. No objects were found  
with the bones.

An axial cutting through the chancel and eastern part  
of the nave revealed no graves inside the chapel.

(c) *The Norman ditch.* About half-way along the

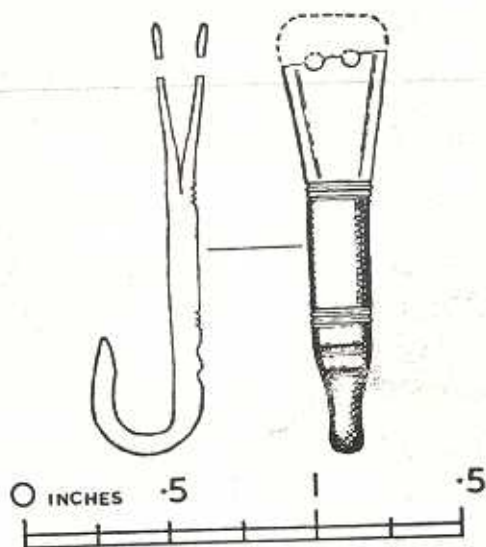


FIG. 5. BOOK-CLASP OR BELT-HOOK, FROM  
FILLING OF 12TH-CENTURY DITCH

south wall of the nave a ditch was found roughly at  
right angles to the wall and running under it. This ditch  
had become filled, and the filling consolidated, before  
the erection of the wall which passed over it, although  
the presence of a layer of flints under the footing and  
over the ditch shows that the builders were aware of a  
soil disturbance at this point (see section *AB* on Fig. 2).  
In the lower filling of this ditch were a number of sherds  
of Norman pottery which have been dated by Mr. G. C.  
Dunning to the early part of the twelfth century (see  
Pottery Report), and in the upper filling occurred a  
small latten object which may be a book clasp or belt  
hook (Fig. 5).

(d) *Prehistoric finds on the site.* A little to the west

of the ditch in the south wall cutting a short crooked gully ending in a small cylindrical post hole was found. In the filling of these features, together with charcoal and animal bone, occurred the following:

1. A large rim sherd of a bucket urn (rim diam. approx. 8 in.) of dark grey flint-gritted ware, vertically finger-striated on the outside surface, of Late Bronze Age Class B.2.<sup>1</sup>

2. A sherd of a barrel pot with applied finger-impressed raised band, of coarse red flint-gritted ware of Late Bronze Age Class A.1.<sup>2</sup>

A long cutting, 2 ft. wide was made longitudinally through the axis of the chapel down to natural chalk. This showed that the chapel had been built at its east end on about 2 ft. 6 in. of made-up soil, which had all the characteristic of a field lynchet. About a dozen sherds from this lynchet soil included two of an Early Bronze Age beaker, five of a thong-impressed Middle Bronze Age collared urn, and several pieces of pottery of the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age.

During the cutting of a trench to the south of the chapel and at the level of natural soil a fine example of a Beaker (Early Bronze Age) type arrowhead was found. It is quite heavily patinated and so probably found its way here in the lynchet soil.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wilson and Burstow, 'Evolution of Sussex Iron Age Pottery', *S.A.C.* LXXXVII. 82.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> *S.N.Q.* XIII. 112-13.

## REPORT ON POTTERY FROM DITCH UNDER BALSDEAN CHAPEL

BY G. C. DUNNING, F.S.A.

THE excavations at Balsdean Chapel have shown that the site was occupied prior to the building of the chapel. The ditch passing underneath the south wall of the nave had silted up before the wall was built across the filling; the wall had not sunk at all into the ditch, showing that sufficient time had past for the filling to consolidate. These observations are valuable evidence for an interval of time between the cutting of the ditch and the building of the chapel. The chapel is known to have been in existence about 1147, and it is reasonable to infer that it was erected early in the second quarter of the twelfth century. The lower filling of the ditch contained pottery, which belongs to the period of occupation of the site before the ditch was allowed to silt up, and the initial occupation is therefore dated with some confidence to the first quarter of the twelfth century.

The pottery, on the other hand, is consistent in technique and fabric, suggesting that it covers a relatively short time. Fortunately, two sites in East Sussex have provided pottery that is well dated, one early and the other late in the Norman period. The date given to the Balsdean pottery on the stratigraphical evidence falls between these two. The three finds may therefore be used to illustrate the evolution of pottery in East Sussex throughout the Norman period, and enable the date given to the Balsdean pottery to be confirmed independently.

The series begins at Pevensey Castle, where in 1936 Mr. F. Cottrill excavated a number of pits inside the north wall of the Roman Fort and also near the East Gate. The pits were cut through the Roman levels and were covered by a deep accumulation of soil containing medieval pottery. The pits therefore belong to the earliest medieval occupation on the site. Sherds of the same

ware as the cooking-pots in the pits were also found in the lowest filling of a ditch dug as an outwork to the West Gate, which is associated with other additions made in the late eleventh century to the Roman Fort to make it the outer bailey at the Norman castle. A

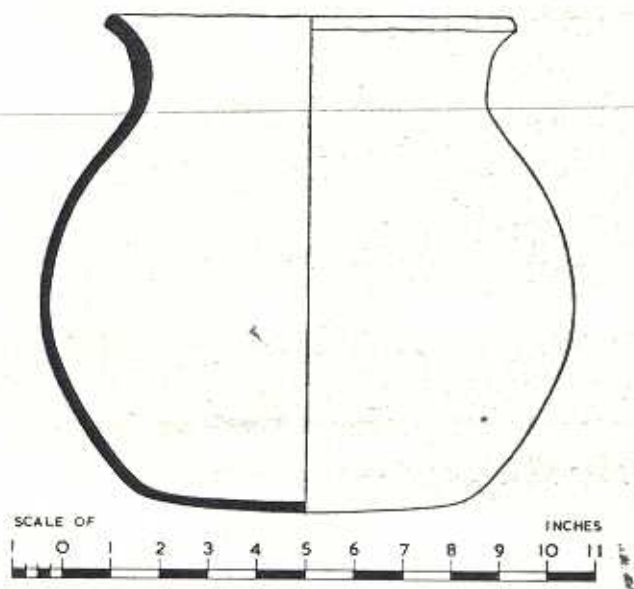


FIG. 6. VESSEL FOUND AT PEVENSEY CASTLE IN 1936, FROM pit 18. Late 11th-century

good historical context is thus provided for this pottery, and it may be ascribed with confidence to the last thirty years of the eleventh century.

The pottery from the pits at Pevensey Castle consists of globular cooking-pots with everted rims on a short neck; the bases are slightly sagging with rounded basal angle. The pots are hand-made and the ware is coarse black or dark grey with a free admixture of flint and soft white grit, probably pounded shell. Fig. 6 is one of the larger of these cooking-pots, found in Pit 18. The rim has an outward slope, but others are simply rounded or have a slight beading outside.

At the other end of the Norman series is a cooking-pot from The Caburn. This was found on a hearth contem-

porary with Rampart 4, which constitutes the final heightening of the rampart of the Iron Age hill-fort and its defence by timber structures, perhaps as an adulterine castle in the civil wars of Stephen's reign.<sup>1</sup> The cooking-pot (Fig. 7) has close analogies both in shape and ware with pottery from other castle-sites

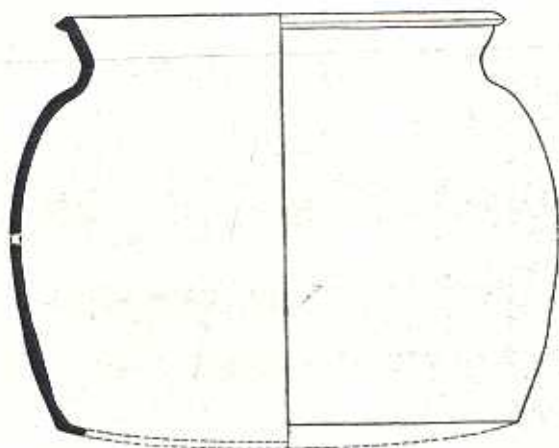


FIG. 7. COOKING-POT FROM NORMAN HEARTH ON THE CABURN: mid-12th century

almost certainly adulterine in south-east England, and it may therefore be accepted as representative of the pottery of the mid-twelfth century in East Sussex. Comparison of Figs. 6 and 7 demonstrates the changes effected between the late eleventh century and the mid-twelfth century. The adoption of the potter's wheel has enabled the bag-like shape to be filled out, thus enlarging the capacity of the vessel without increase in size. A noticeable technical improvement is seen in the base. Instead of the rounded basal angle this is now sharply defined. The reason is that the wheel-turned pots were thrown upside down, with the rim on the wheel. The sagging base was added separately afterwards; the lower edge of the body and the circumference of the base formed a bevelled join which was carefully smoothed over by hand and sometimes finished by

<sup>1</sup> S.A.C. LXXIX. 183; LXXX 209, Fig. IX.

trimming with a knife.<sup>1</sup> The rim of the Caburn pot has a well-defined outward slope, producing an external flange with a sharp angle. This is one of the most characteristic and widespread rim-sections of the twelfth century, and it is in marked contrast to the simple rims of the pots from Pevensey Castle. A slight change is noticeable in the paste. The earlier pots are of coarse laminated ware and the surface has a tendency to flake off. The backing is a free admixture of pounded flint and soft white grit which speckles the surface. The later pottery is better levigated and closer in texture, though the backing is much the same. The surface is usually light red or brown instead of grey, probably owing to free access of air in the firing.

The Balsdean pottery is very fragmentary, but there are rims of four cooking-pots and sherds of two other types (Fig. 8). The cooking-pot rims form a series intermediate between the simple Pevensey type and the flanged Caburn type. Nos. 1 and 2 are closest to the Pevensey form, while No. 3 has reached the stage of the Caburn pot and on No. 4 the outward slope has become vertical. The ware is consistently light grey with a free admixture of finely pounded flint, and only one pot, No. 3, has the laminated texture of the Pevensey series. The surface colours vary from dark grey to light brown or red. The other pots from Balsdean are No. 5, a rim apparently from a lid, and No. 6, a large shallow bowl or dish. Lids are by no means common in the twelfth century, but one is recorded from Exeter.<sup>2</sup> Dishes are frequent on twelfth-century sites, and in southern England parallels may be quoted from the upper occupation level at Sand Tun, West Hythe (in the British Museum), from recent excavations at Chichester,<sup>3</sup> and from the Isle of Wight.

The above remarks suffice to show that the Balsdean pottery falls readily into place between that from Pevensey and The Caburn, though in type and technique the

<sup>1</sup> The process is made clear by a study of wasters and rejects found in excavations at the Saxon town of Thetford.

<sup>2</sup> *Antiq. Journ.* xxxi. 182: Figs. 1, 15.

<sup>3</sup> *S.A.C.* xci.

affinities are closer with the later material. In other words, the development of the rims which are recognized as normal by the mid-twelfth century was already taking place soon after the beginning of the twelfth century.

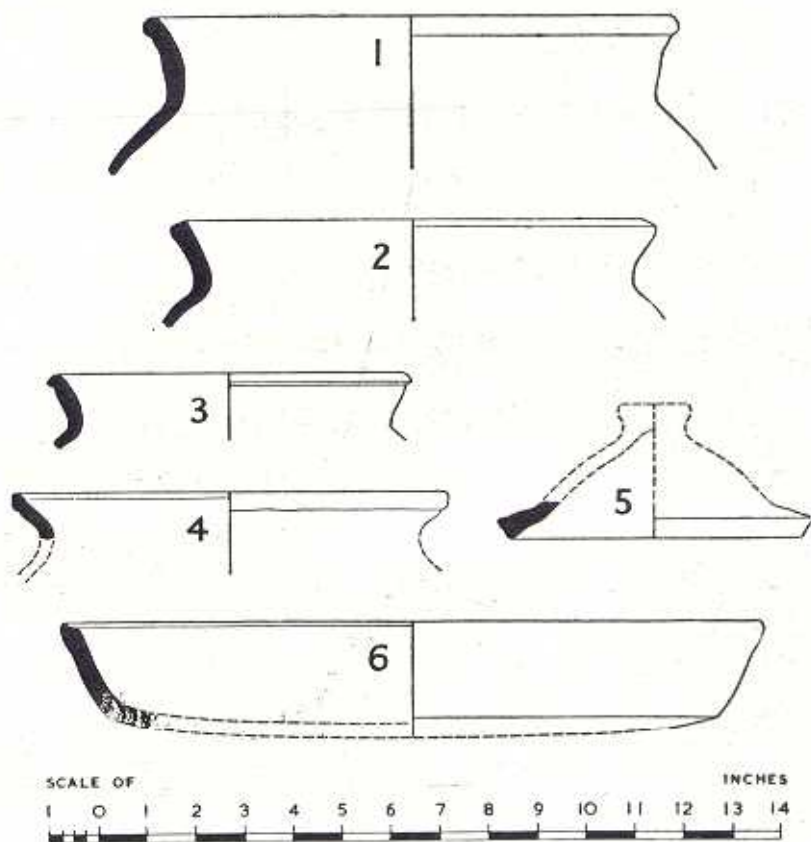


FIG. 8. POTTERY FROM EARLY 12th-CENTURY DITCH UNDER BALSDEAN CHAPEL

### FIG. 8

1. Upper part of large cooking-pot of light grey ware with much fine flint grit, light brown surface with reddish tones. Rim rounded, on tall neck.
2. Rim of cooking-pot of hard light grey ware with much fine flint grit, dark grey surface with brown tones. The rim has an outward slope on top.
3. Rim of small cooking-pot of laminated grey ware with much

68 EXCAVATIONS AT BALSDEAN CHAPEL, ROTTINGDEAN

fine flint grit, dark grey surface. The rim has an outward slope and a sharp outer edge to the flange.

4. Rim of cooking-pot of grey ware with much fine flint grit, light brown uneven surface. Rim rounded on top with vertical margin outside.
5. Rim of coarse dark grey ware with much fine flint grit, grey surface with red tones outside, light red inside. The slope is approximately as shown, and since the diameter is too small for a cooking-pot, the rim is restored as a lid.
6. Rim and site of large shallow bowl of grey ware with much fine flint-grit, light red surface discoloured grey outside. The rim has an internal hollow bevel, and the base is sagging.