

A Cemetery Site at Queensford Mill, Dorchester

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IN February 1972, Amey Gravel Company reported to the Upper Thames Archaeological Committee that clearance of topsoil at their pit at Queensford Mill (SU 582949) prior to gravel extraction had exposed a number of human bones. Upon inspection the site was identified as a cemetery of uncertain date. The Gravel Company agreed to allow excavation and a fortnight's work on the site was possible. The excavations were sponsored by the Oxford City and County Museum and the Upper Thames Archaeological Committee.¹

The cemetery lay about 700 m. to the north-east of the Roman town defences of Dorchester, and just over 100 m. to the west of Queensford Mill Farm (FIG. 1). The site lies on a gravel terrace of the River Thame in an area of intense archaeological interest although no material had previously been recovered from the eastern side of the Dorchester to Drayton St. Leonard road. Many of the sites in the vicinity were discovered from the air by Major G. W. G. Allen,² and in recent years his photographs have been supplemented by those of the National Monuments Record. Several of these sites have been partially excavated prior to gravel extraction, including the nearby henge and cursus.³

Aerial photographs of the Queensford Mill area show that the graves lay within a large rectangular enclosure (approximately 110 m. × 120 m.). This enclosure lay at right angles to two parallel linear cropmarks (FIG. 2 and PL. V), with which it was apparently contemporary.⁴ There were no obvious markings within the enclosure, but in the field to the immediate south, which is itself now being destroyed, there is a considerable density of cropmarkings. The two linear cropmarks were aligned onto the north-eastern corner of Roman Dorchester in the south and to a point just above Queensford Mill in the north.

An area approximately 3,000 square metres was cleared to expose regular rectangular features cut into clean natural gravel. Nearly 200 graves were identified in the available area and seventy-eight of these were excavated (FIG. 3). Some graves had been disturbed by the mechanical excavator before the site was identified. Clearance of a larger area would have required mechanical assistance to remove the considerable depth of disturbed topsoil concealing the features. The whole site had an overburden of about 1 m. of buried plough soils. There was no stratification within this overburden. Well worn Roman sherds were found throughout the layer. It is obvious that all previous occupation levels had been destroyed by continuous ploughing and that only the very bottom of the graves and linear features had survived. Although some graves were sunk

¹ Thanks are due to Mrs. C. Simpson for drawing Fig. 3, Mr. M. A. Aston for drawing Figs. 1 and 2, and Mr. C. J. Young for his report on the pottery.

² Ashmolean Museum, Allen 448-460.

³ R. J. C. Atkinson, C. M. Piggott and N. K. Sandars, *Excavations at Dorchester, Oxon* (1951).

⁴ National Monuments Record SU 5894/15/56.

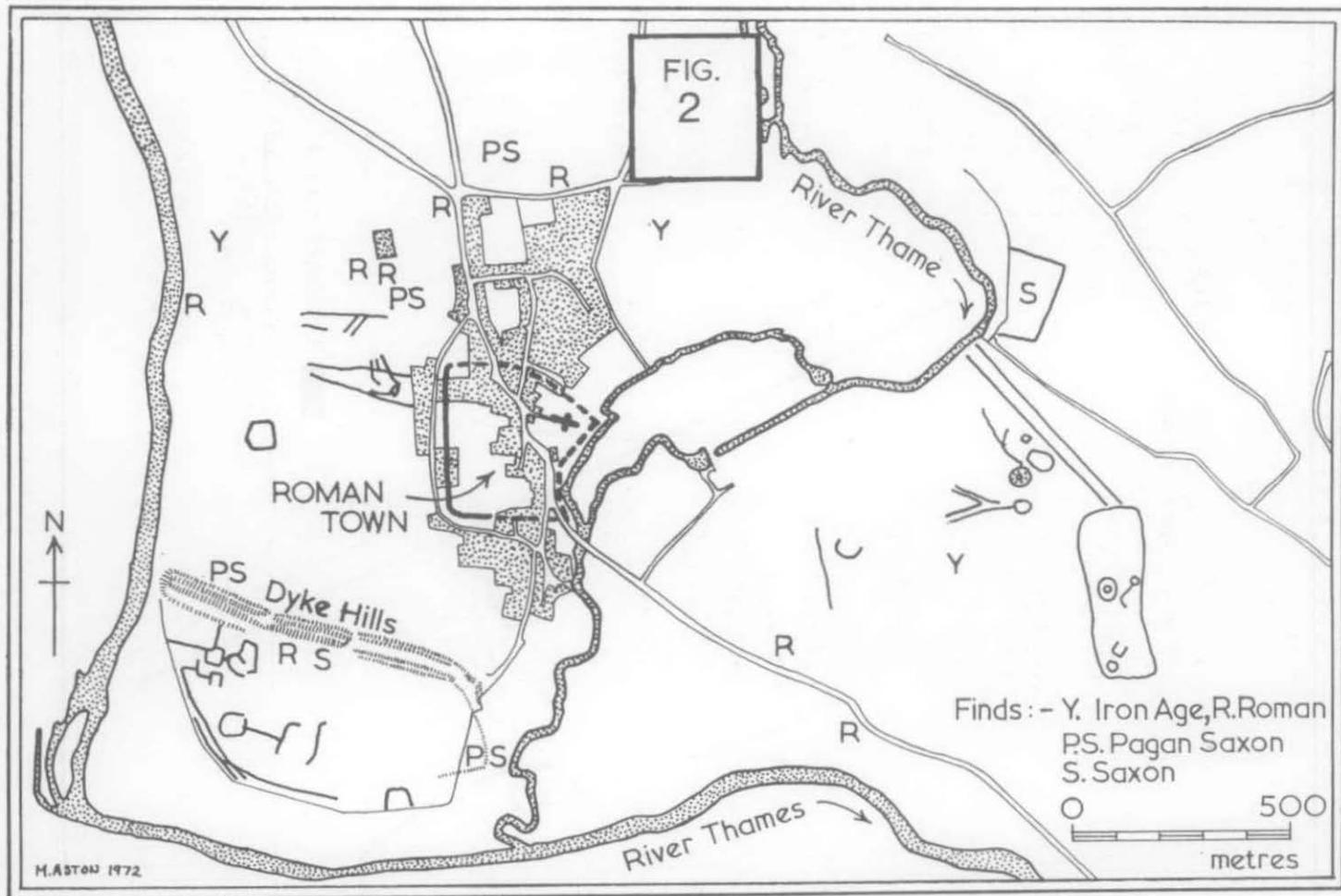


FIG. 1

Archaeological Sites in the Dorchester region. The eastern town defences of Roman Dorchester are speculative.

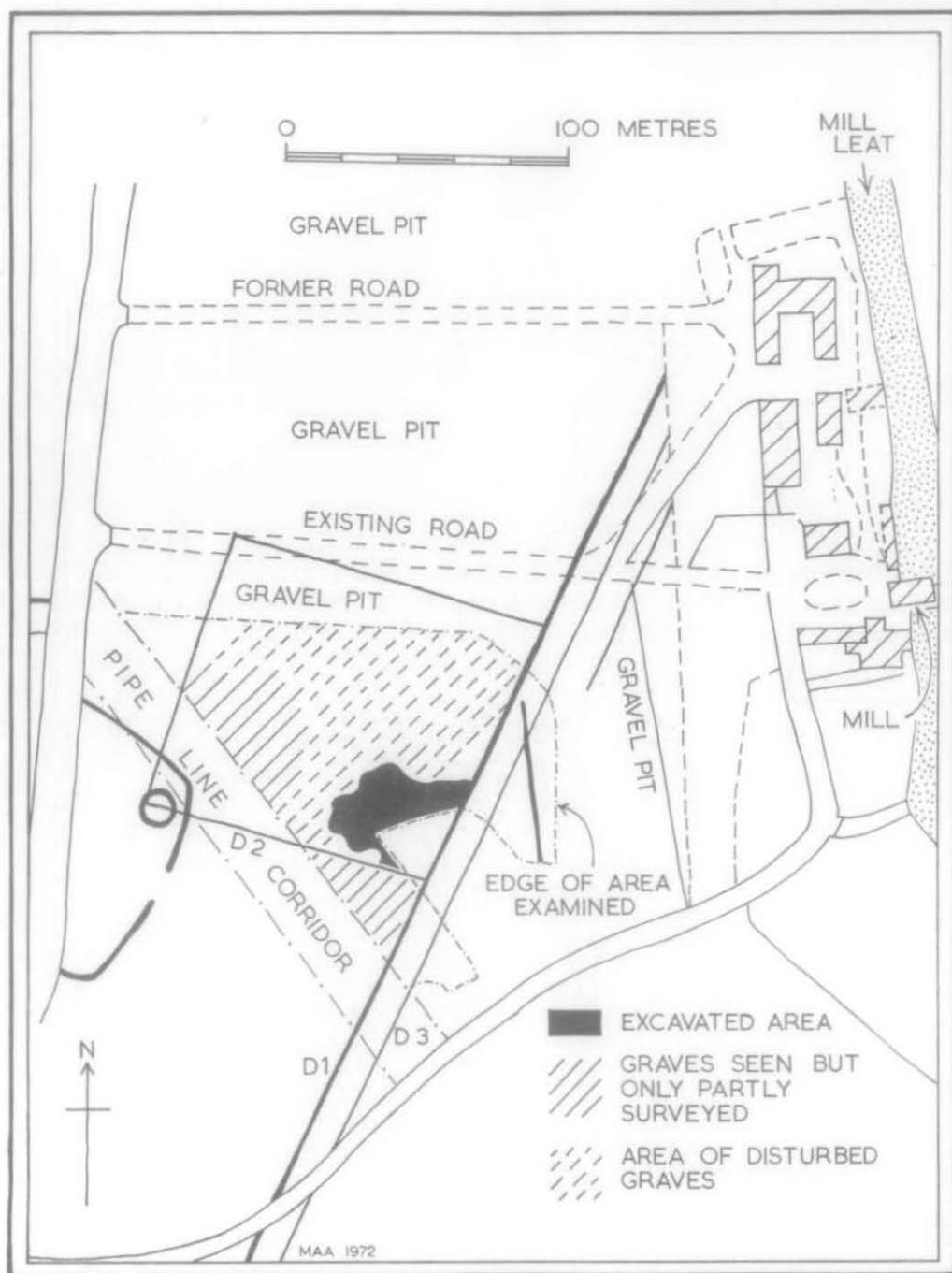


FIG. 2

well into the subsoil, many were very near the surface of the gravel and others had been disturbed by ploughing in the past.

The site had a large number of well spaced graves in regular groups and rows, mostly within an enclosure of ditches. The eastern boundary was D₁, the broader of two parallel ditches (about 4 metres apart); no graves were found between these ditches or to the east of them. The graves closest to this boundary (F.105-7) seemed to be aligned at right angles to it, contrasting with the truer E.W. alignment of the majority. The southern boundary of the graveyard appeared to be the ditch D₂ leading west from D₁ although several graves (F.181-4) were seen outside this. Although this area was not completely cleared the density of graves thinned appreciably towards the west in this region. The cemetery seemed to be limited on this side by a ditch which was clear enough on the aerial photographs, but of which only a vestige was found in the cleared gravel. The northern boundary has been entirely quarried away and was plotted exclusively from aerial photographs.

A further ditch, not part of the enclosure, intersected with D₂ from a south-easterly direction and stopped just short of D₁, with a shallow slot continuing the line up to D₁. It appeared to have been in existence and open when D₂ was cut up to it but not through it.

The excavated area represented only about one-eighth of the whole cemetery. On the assumption that the cemetery was full, it must have contained a total of well over 700 graves.

A detailed description of the graves and inventory of the finds will be published in due course when a skeletal analysis is available. Most of the graves lay along a rough east-west axis, although there was considerable variation even within the area investigated. All the heads were pointing westwards. The graves had been laid out in north-south rows. This indicates that they had been marked in some way, as it seems highly unlikely that the cemetery was laid out all at the same time. Some graves (F.15, 25 and 173) had a series of discontinuous stake holes around them, which could represent a fence or marking posts of some kind. Also graves F.13 and F.14, apparently belonging to a child who was buried secondarily to its mother, suggests that the graves may originally have been marked.

Twenty-seven of the graves investigated (35%) had associated finds, exclusively coffin nails and fittings. Most graves had only one or two nails, but F.35 had nine nails spread around the skeleton of an adult male. Three nails were also found on the surface of F.154 which was not excavated, and nails were recovered from graves which had been disturbed by the mechanical excavator. Fragments of red roofing tile were recovered from the fill of graves F.11 and F.15.

DATING EVIDENCE

No definite dating evidence was found on the site. A few sherds of residual Romano-British pottery were found in the disturbed topsoil and sherds of 3rd century Romano-British pottery were found in Section 1 across D₁. This would suggest that the linear features are late or post Roman in date. Their regularity

QUEENSFORD MILL. DORCHESTER

PLAN OF CEMETERY

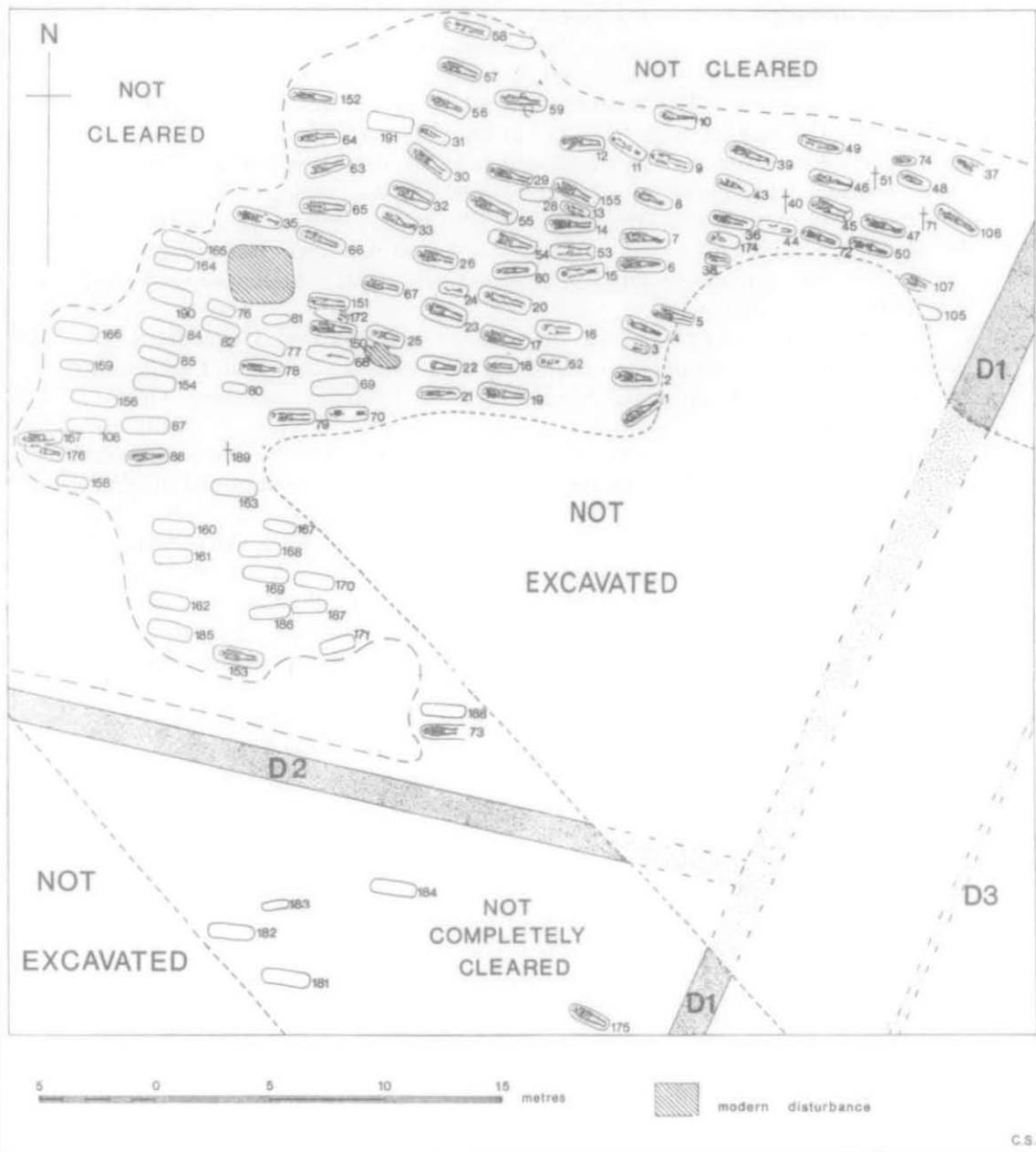


FIG. 3

A CEMETERY SITE AT QUEENSFORD MILL, DORCHESTER 37

and apparent alignment on Roman Dorchester would tend to support this view. Purely on topographical grounds the cemetery could be dated as 4-6th century A.D. Additionally a radio-carbon date of 420 ± 100 years A.D. has been obtained from bone samples.⁵

Against this view must be taken the total absence of grave goods and the relatively orderly east-west arrangement of the cemetery. On balance, however, it seems probable that the cemetery is late or immediately post Roman.

POTTERY (FIG. 4)

All the pottery submitted was Romano-British. Most of it was sherds too small to be dateable but all the sherds which could be dated were from the late 3rd or 4th centuries A.D. All the pottery came from the fill of D.I.

- (1) Shallow bowl of Oxford red colour-coated ware. Form hitherto unknown among Oxford products.



FIG. 4

Queensford Mill. Pottery Nos. 1 and 2 (±).

- (2) Body sherd from a rosette stamped necked bowl in Oxford red colour-coated ware. C.f. Frere, 'Excavations at Dorchester-on-Thames', *Arch. J.*, CXIX (1961), 114-49, Fig. 18, nos. 215, 218, 221-2, 224-5, for form.

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⁵ Kindly analysed by A.E.R.E., Harwell.

PLATE V



Air View of Cropmarks at Queensford Mill, Dorchester ; Cemetery site in centre. SU 5894/15/56.

Ph. National Monuments Record