

Small Excavations in Abingdon 1973

By MICHAEL PARRINGTON

INTRODUCTION. *Two small rescue excavations took place in Abingdon in 1973 as well as various larger scale excavations. The locations of the two sites are shown on the plan of Abingdon where they are marked A and B (FIG. 1). On each site the solid black line indicated by an arrow marks the position of the drawn section.*

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the help given by the following during the two excavations and with the reports: in particular, Mr. T. Barrett, Messrs. John Spratley and Partners, Miss D. M. E. Pickering, Mr. Lindsay Parrington, Mr. Roger Thomas, Mr. Bob Wilson, Mr. Chris Balkwill, Miss Patricia Roberts, and Miss Maeve Fleischmann.

SITE A

A ROMAN DITCH TO THE REAR OF WEST SAINT HELEN STREET, ABINGDON

IN 1973, during a contractor's excavation for an electricity cable to the rear of West St. Helen St., SU/497968, what appeared to be a ditch was observed. The ditch was on an east-west alignment, and to the west of West St. Helen St. The top 40 cm. of the ditch had been removed by the contractor's excavation, but the remainder, a 70 cm. wide segment, was excavated archaeologically. The southern half of the ditch had been destroyed by modern cellar fill, but from the surviving portion, a total of 205 sherds was recovered. A further 47 sherds were recovered from the spoil heap.

A layer of gravel lay above the top fill of the ditch. Below it was a layer of greyish loam, the top fill of the ditch, which had been removed by the contractors (FIG. 2).

Layer 1 was a spread of charcoal, up to 15 cm. thick.

Layer 2 was composed of grey, silty loam with a few charcoal flecks.

Layer 3 was composed of brown, sandy silt and gravel.

Layer 4 was modern cellar fill.

THE POTTERY (FIG. 3)

1 Large high shouldered storage jar, grey sandy fabric, grey on inside, black burnished on outside. From layer 2. Sherds of the same vessel in layer 3. (Cf. Stanton Harcourt, *Oxoniensia*, VIII-IX (1943-4), Fig. 24, no. 4; and at Dorchester, *Archaeol. J.*, CXIX (1962), 132, Fig. 12, no. 24, where its date seems to be *c.* mid 1st century A.D.).

2 Large wide-necked storage jar, grey, sandy fabric with chalk and quartz inclusions, pinkish on inside, light grey on outside. From layer 2. Fragments of the same vessel in layer 3. (Cf. S. S. Frere, *Verulamium I* (1972), 271, Fig. 101, no. 83, where it is dated 55-60 A.D.).

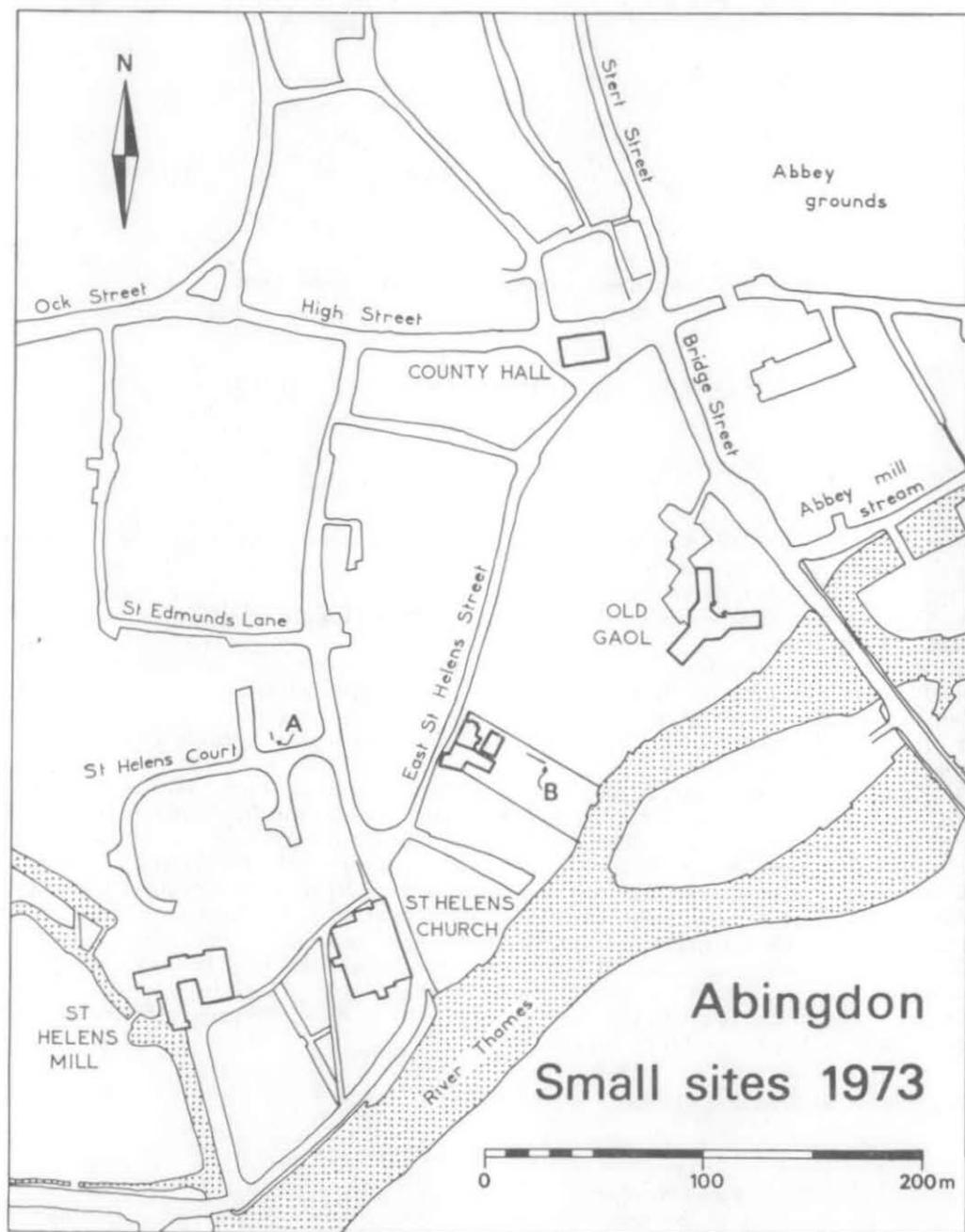
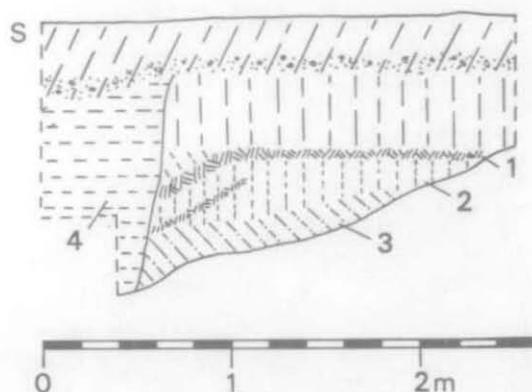


FIG. 1
Abingdon, Sites A and B.



West St Helen Street 1973

FIG. 2
Site A, Section.

3 Large narrow-necked storage jar with cordon on shoulder, grey, sandy fabric, grey on inside, black on outside with burnished decoration. From layer 2. (Cf. *Verulamium I* (1972), 272, Fig. 104, dated 60-75 A.D.).

4 Rim sherd in grey, sandy fabric with some quartz inclusions, black on inside and outside. From layer 2.

5 Rim sherd in grey, sandy fabric, grey on inside, black on outside. From layer 2.

6 Rim sherd in grey, sandy fabric with flint and quartz inclusions, grey on inside and outside, pimply surface texture. From layer 2.

7 Rim sherd in grey fabric, fired red on inside, red highly burnished (haematite?) coating on outside. From layer 1.

8 Rim sherd in grey, sandy fabric, grey on inside and outside. From layer 2.

On the evidence of the forms for which we have found parallels, the pottery recovered from the ditch would seem to have been deposited in the third quarter of the 1st century A.D. The 8 forms illustrated are the only rims stratified within the ditch. Other rims were recovered from the contractor's spoil heap, but whilst they are similar in fabric and date, they will not be considered here. The fabrics fall into two main groups: grey, sandy wares, and vessels with quartz, flint, or chalk inclusions. The grey sandy wares are represented by at least 8 vessels, one of which had a red (haematite?) coating. At least 5 vessels are represented in the group which has inclusions. Three body sherds of Butt Beaker, representing 2 vessels, were also present in the ditch. The absence of samian may be taken as confirmation of the early date of the ditch.

THE ANIMAL BONE by BOB WILSON

Table of Animal Bone Proportions

Layer Number	1	2	3	Total
cow	1	4	—	5
sheep/goat	4	9	—	13
pig	—	1	—	1

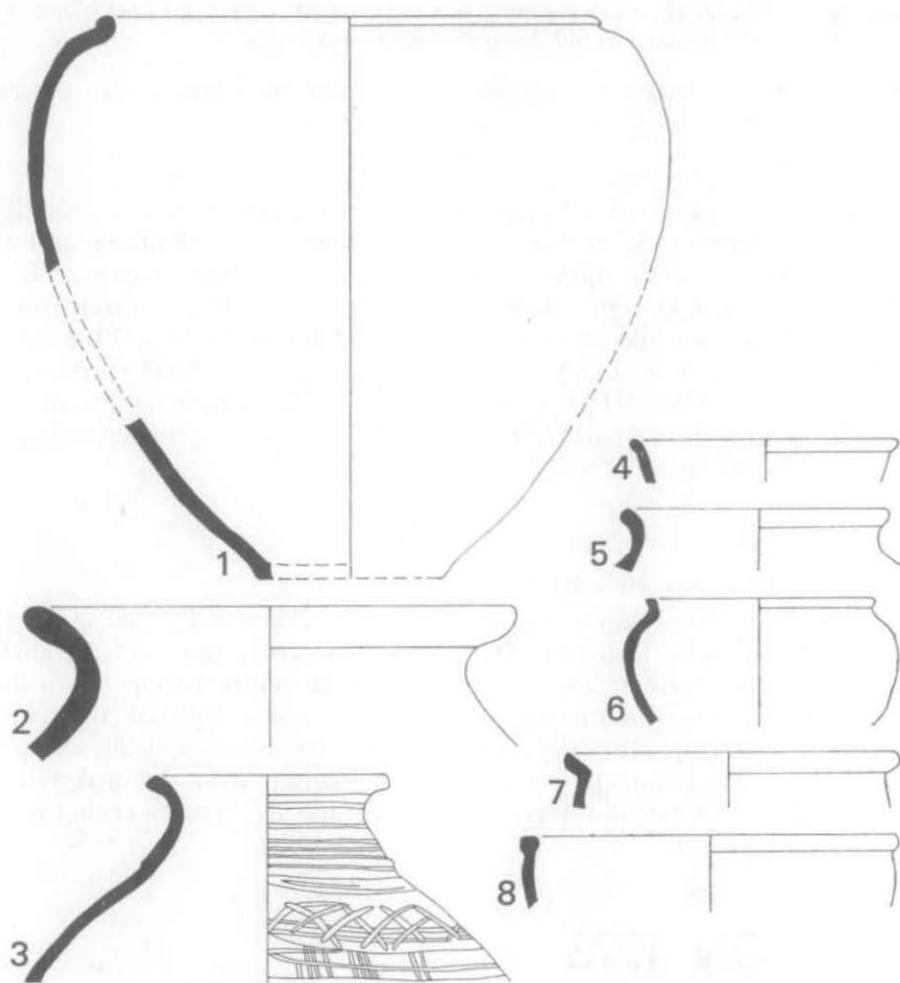


FIG. 3
Site A, Roman Pottery. (4).

Although only a small quantity of bone was recovered from the ditch, it can provide some information about livestock. Thirteen of the bones were sheep and goat, five were cow long bone fragments, and one was a pig mandible fragment. Nearly all of the bones were chopped or otherwise broken. One was dog-gnawed.

Sheep and Goats :

Most interesting were three skull pieces, which correspond to features described by Boessneck,¹ which distinguish sheep from goats. Skull differences in the fronto-parietal and parieto-occipital sutures indicated that there were two goats and one sheep represented. The other bones could not be differentiated, although two ossified ulna fragments had a size difference, indicating the variable nature of the sheep/goat population.

From the eight sheep bone fragments of determinable age, there was a minimum of

¹ J. Boessneck, 'Osteological Differences between Sheep and Goat', *Science in Archaeology* (1969), Fig. 45, p. 332.

three animals. One died before reaching one year, and two at three and a half years of age. It is possible that two-year old sheep were also represented.

Cow :

At least two individuals were represented. One cow tibia indicated an animal of at least three and a half years of age.

Discussion

From the small segment of ditch available for excavation, it appeared to be aligned at right angles to West Saint Helen St. A Roman ditch of similar date was excavated during the excavation on the east side of West Saint Helen St. in 1972. This too was aligned at right angles to the line of the street. From this small amount of evidence, it could be inferred that West Saint Helen St. existed as a street or trackway in the early Roman period. Layer 3 appeared to be the primary silting of the ditch. Several sherds from layer 3 joined on to sherds from layer 2, which may indicate that only a short period of time elapsed between the primary silting of the ditch and the deposition of layer 2.

SITE B

EXCAVATIONS AT 32 EAST SAINT HELEN STREET, ABINGDON

In July 1973, observation of the mechanical excavation of a swimming pool in the garden of 32 East St. Helen St., SU/498968, was carried out. The ground level was lowered by one metre at the west end of the pool, and by two metres at the east end of the pool. After the mechanical excavation was completed, the remaining stratigraphy on the east side of the pool was excavated archaeologically down to the natural gravel. The complete northern section resulting from the mechanical and archaeological excavations was drawn and photographed. The layers in the section are described below (FIG. 4).

ABINGDON 1973 32 EAST ST HELEN STREET

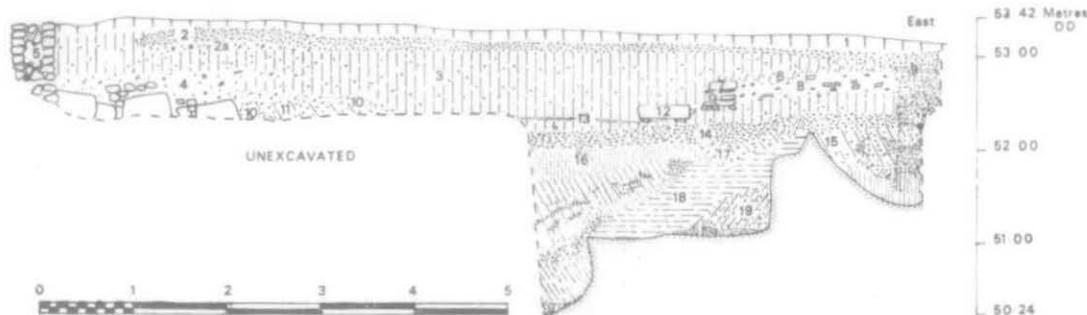


FIG. 4
Site B, Section.

- 1 Grey-black garden soil.
- 2 Clean gravel.
- 2a Rubble layer, tile, stone, mortar, and charcoal.
- 3 Black, loamy soil.
- 4 Rubble layer, probably the same as layer 2a above, but containing large stones.
- 5 Stone wall in regular mortared courses.
- 6 Brown mortar layer.
- 7 Wall foundation, small rubble and some larger stones mortared together. The foundations also contained fragments of post-medieval tile.
- 8 Rubble layer containing small stones, tile fragments, and mortar.
- 9 Large modern pit with many lenses of grey soil and gravel.
- 10 Brown mortar layer.
- 11 Grey mortar layer.
- 12 Wall of dressed limestone levelled by inserting flat limestone slabs under each corner.
- 13 Thin band of yellow clay.
- 14 Layer of compacted gravel.
- 15 Medieval pit fill, top layers of grey-black soil and gravel.
- 16 Medieval pit fill, top layers of green, cassy soil, grey-black soil and gravel.
- 17 Gravelly soil with charcoal flecks.
- 18 Medieval pit fill, grey-black soil.
- 19 Roman pit fill, greeny-brown soil and gravel.
- 20 Robber trench, rubble and mortar fill.

INTERPRETATION

Layer 1 was very modern garden soil. Layer 2 was also fairly modern, probably associated with the building and demolition work that had been taking place on the site recently. Layer 2a was probably a sub-layer of 2. Layer 3 was garden soil of an earlier date than 1. Layers 4, 10, and 11 were probably destruction material associated with wall 5. Wall 5 was just outside the limits of the swimming pool and it was possible to trace its length for 5.40 metres south of our section. Wall 5 was on a similar alignment to the end wall of 30 East St. Helen St., and examination of the junction of the two walls indicated that they might be contemporary. Layers 6 and 8 seemed to be destruction material associated with wall 7. Wall 7 was on a north-south alignment and was observed to run all the way across the trench before it was removed by mechanical excavation. Layer 9 was a modern pit, cut through layers 8 and 15, and sealed by layer 2. Wall 12 was adjacent to wall 7, and possibly a replacement or vice-versa. The large stone shown in the section was removed after the section was drawn, and foundations of a similar nature to wall 7 were observed behind it. Layer 13 may have been the remains of a construction level associated with wall 7 or 12. Layer 14 was a thick layer of gravel and is probably the lane for which there is some documentary evidence in the area (see below). Layer 15 was probably a medieval pit, sealed by layer 14. Layer 17 was probably sinkage into the fill of medieval pit 18. Layer 16 was also a medieval pit, and layer 19 was a pit of Roman date. Layer 20 was an east-west robber trench.

THE POTTERY

The only stratified pottery recovered on the site was a rim sherd of a straight-sided post-medieval vessel from layer 8, various medieval and Roman sherds from pits 16 and 18, and 64 Roman sherds from pit 19. The sherd from layer 8 is probably of 18th century date, but none of the medieval pottery is suitable for close dating of the medieval pits.

Pit 16 contained 6 pottery sherds, one of which was a rim, and 9 tile sherds. It may perhaps be assigned a date in the 14th century. Pit 18 contained 7 sherds of medieval pottery, one of which was a rim, and another a handle sherd. It may be given a date similar to pit 16, but it is stratigraphically earlier. As well as a small amount of Roman pottery, pit 18 contained a body sherd of grass-tempered pottery in a hard, black fabric.

Roman pottery from Pit 19 (FIG. 5)

- 1 Large wide-mouthed storage jar in coarse buff fabric with quartz inclusions, pinky buff on inside and outside.
- 2 Wide-mouthed storage jar in hard grey fabric, grey on inside, dark grey and burnished on outside (cf. *Verulamium I* (1972), 309, Fig. 117, no. 610, dated 135-150 A.D.).
- 3 Rim sherd in hard grey fabric, orange colour coat inside and outside, mica dusted on outside. Continental import (cf. *Verulamium I* (1972), 275, Fig. 103, no. 127, dated 60-75 A.D.).
- 4 Rim sherd in hard dark grey fabric, dark grey on inside and outside. (Cf. *Shakenoak II*, 78, Fig. 30, no. 214, dated 125-160 A.D.).
- 5 Rim sherd in pinky buff fabric, pink on inside and outside (cf. *Dorchester, Archaeol. J.*, cxix (1962), 82, Fig. 15, no. 82, dated early 2nd century).
- 6 Rim sherd in pink fabric with grey core, grey metallic finish on inside and outside (cf. *Verulamium I* (1972), 293, Fig. 111, no. 389, dated c. 105 A.D.).
- 7 Rim sherd of flagon, light grey fabric, fired buff on inside and outside (cf. *Verulamium I* (1972), 293, Fig. 111, no. 410, dated 105-115 A.D.).
- 8 Rim sherd in fine grey fabric, grey on inside, grey-brown on outside, burnished outside (cf. *Dorchester, Archaeol. J.*, cxix (1962), 138, Fig. 16, no. 152, dated mid 2nd century).
- 9 Folded rim sherd in pink fabric with grey core, grey-brown inside and outside (cf. *Shakenoak I*, 69, Fig. 22, no. 111, dated 120-180 A.D. Also *Jewry Wall*, Fig. 25, no. 7 and 8, where not found after 160 A.D.).

Fifty-three other sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from the pit. Many of them were of similar fabric to the illustrated rims and were obviously part of the same vessels. It was not possible to restore any of the rims, probably because the pit was so much disturbed by the medieval pits and the mechanical excavation. The group of pottery in the pit can be dated from the early 2nd century to c. 175 A.D. Number 3 is residual and is included in the group because of its interest as an imported sherd and its early date.

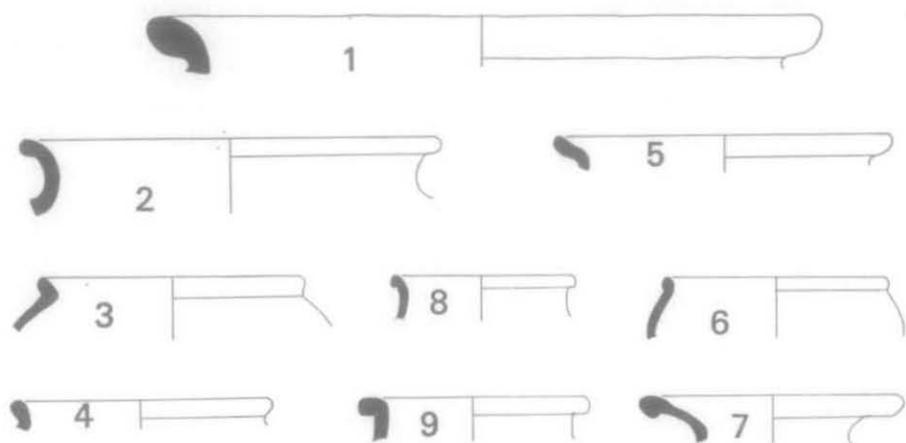


FIG. 5
Site B, Roman Pottery. (±).

THE ANIMAL BONES by BOB WILSON

Table of Animal Bone Proportions

Layer number	Roman		Medieval		Total
	19	16	18		
cow	4	3	3		10
sheep/goat	7	6	1		14
pig	1	—	1		2
oyster	—	1	—		1

The bone samples from the swimming pool are too small to permit generalization. Twenty-seven bones were identifiable. With the exception of a cow calcaneum from layer 16, all bones had been chopped or otherwise fragmented. Layer 19 included two different sheep jaw fragments, indicating one animal up to two and a half years old, and one over two years old at death. Layer 16 had mainly lower limb bones of sheep (5), and cow (3). At least two sheep are represented, one up to a year old, and one over a year old. Layer 18 included one sheep, at least 18 months old.

DOCUMENTARY AND ARCHITECTURAL EVIDENCE

The earliest documentary reference to East St. Helen St. occurs in a Christ Hospital deed of about 1250. In 1436 a William Dyer was in possession of 34 East St. Helen St., which probably included the property now known as 32 East St. Helen St. On 26 October in that year, William Dyer made out a deed² of gift of all his properties, including 34 East St. Helen St., to the Fraternity of the Holy Cross. He reserved to himself 'a certain upper chamber overlooking the lane with a chimney in the house of John of Ely, next to the tenement of the kitchener of the Monastery of Abingdon, together with a free entry and egress as often as I shall please and also to the stable and to the hay barn opposite my said chamber with hay from Pudmore'.

The lane referred to in the deed would seem to have run along the south side of 30 East St. Helen St., and could perhaps be identified with layer 14. There is also some architectural evidence for the existence of this lane. In the south wall of 30 East St. Helen St. there is a gap of some four feet between the front part of the house built in the early 18th century and the east wing of the house, thought to have been built in the medieval period. The south wall of the 18th century house incorporates some earlier work which may also be medieval. It seems likely that the gap, now bricked up, may have been a medieval alley to which access was gained by the lane, layer 14. In the post-medieval period it seems likely that the area to the rear of 32 and 34 East St. Helen St. was used for minor industrial purposes. In 1669 the house was occupied by a dyer, and by a maltster in 1681.

The post-medieval period presents some interesting problems. Wall 7 was parallel and at right angles to a butt joint in the wall dividing the gardens of 30 and 32 East St. Helen St. This garden wall has timber lacing in it, which seems unlikely for a garden wall. Wall 5, as stated above, could be contemporary with the east

² *Christ Hospital Deed*, no. 561.

wall of 30 East St. Helen St. A row of brick built potting sheds was superimposed upon wall 5 until they were demolished recently, but it seems unlikely that the primary function of such a substantial foundation would be for potting sheds. The robber trench of another wall, 20, was observed in the east and west sections of the trench. It may be that 5, 7, and 20, together with the standing garden wall, form part of a post-medieval building associated with the post-medieval industrial activity mentioned above. The east wing of 30 East St. Helen St. is thought to have been added in the 17th century, which fits in with the documented occupation of the house by minor industrialists in that period. The dimensions of the room would have been *c.* 7 metres east-west, 8 metres north-south.

CONCLUSION

This small excavation demonstrates that valuable information can be gained from even very minor disturbances of the soil of Abingdon. The Roman pottery will be useful for interpreting the chronology of Roman ceramics in the Abingdon area. It is unfortunate that no worthwhile medieval pottery was recovered from the excavation, but large quantities of medieval pottery have been recovered from other sites in the town, and the study of these will eventually yield a sequence and typology for the medieval period.

TWO HUMAN SKELETONS FROM CLEVELANDS, ABINGDON

In October 1973 two skeletons were unearthed on a building site at Cleveland, Abingdon, SU/50229809. The two skeletons had been uncovered by mechanical excavation and were in a rather fragmentary condition. Workmen on the site had removed all the bones from the shallow graves in which they were buried. The graves were cut into the natural gravel to a depth of circa 25 cm., and were on a north-south alignment. No pottery was associated with the burials, and although the top-soil had been levelled and very much disturbed by construction trenches, only one sherd of pottery was found on the site. This was of post-medieval, *c.* 18th century date.

Mr. H. H. Carter of Reading Museum has been kind enough to examine the bones, and his notes on them and their possible dating are set out below. (Mr. Carter has identified and measured the bones. This information is not published here, but the bones and this detailed information are stored at 10 Broad Street, Abingdon.)

NOTES ON THE SKELETAL MATERIAL by H. H. CARTER

Skeleton I is that of an old man (60 ± 10 years). All the molars and incisors in the lower jaw had been lost before death, as a result of periodontal disease (not by decay). As no complete long bones were recovered it is impossible to assess his height, but he may have been an inch or two shorter than Skeleton II. Skeleton II is that of a man in middle age (45 ± 5 years), 168 cm. (5 ft. 6 ins.) tall, robust and muscular but suffering from arthritis. At some time he had broken his right arm; the ulna shows this clearly and there are faint indications of it in the radius; in any case the degree of displacement of the ulna would suggest that the radius had been involved, as an intact radius acts as a splint, preventing

displacement. The arthritis affected his great toes and the lower part of his back. Like Skeleton I he had lost teeth (but not quite so many) from periodontal disease, and in addition he had slight caries in three of his teeth and an abscess at the root of one incisor.

Dating

The following features suggest an early (pre-medieval) date :

- 1 prevalence of periodontal disease rather than caries as a cause of tooth loss. Rapid tooth wear.
- 2 absence of overbite (in fact both skulls show slight prognathism).
- 3 estimated length of the radius in Skeleton I, about 245 mm., is long in proportion to the leg bones.
- 4 skull form as measured by cephalic index and basibregmatic height is close to Bronze Age groups and next closest to Iron Age ; this is in no way reliable unless large samples are measured, but is mentioned here as being suggestive.
- 5 N/S alignment of the bodies. On anatomical characters alone I would say that Iron Age was a fair guess, with Pre-Christian Saxon as second choice.
- 6 Low collagen content, about 27% of original amount, but I have no dated Abingdon material for comparison, and results vary greatly from one locality to another. On the basis of similar soils elsewhere this figure would suggest Iron Age to Roman.

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