

Excavations in the Witney Area 1974-5

By R. A. CHAMBERS

THE year ending November 1975 saw work beginning on three bypass routes in the Witney area, namely those for Hardwick, Ducklington and Witney itself (FIG. 1). Preliminary field walking and, later on, topsoil stripping, revealed late Iron Age and Romano-British settlements and late Romano-British and Saxon cemeteries.

The site at Hardwick was excavated by the Witney Archaeological Research Group directed by Mr. Geoff Williams and the report has been compiled jointly by Mr. Williams and myself. The writers would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Oxfordshire Highways Department (Western Region) for their permission to excavate and for their advice and assistance including the loan of equipment. Thanks are also due to the volunteers from the Witney area, and in particular Mrs. L. Armstrong.

The Curbridge site was excavated by the writer with the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit, helped by many volunteers to whom I am very grateful. I would like to thank both the Department of the Environment and the Amalgamated Roadstone Corporation for permission to excavate and for their helpfulness and cooperation throughout. I am especially grateful to Mr. Geoff Williams who has kept a continuous watch over the bypass and for his liaison with the contractors and DoE. Mr. James G. W. Wilson, whose land the bypass has divided, provided many facilities which greatly enhanced the success of the excavation and his neighbour provided much polythene sheeting. I am grateful to Miss Wendy Lee and to Mr. Geoff Williams for planning and recording during the excavation, and also to Mr. John Hazelden of the Soil Survey of England and Wales for his geological advice. Finally I would like to express my gratitude to Mrs. J. M. Chambers who typed the text.

The Ducklington site has already been published.¹ It was the only major site detected by fieldwork before road construction started, a pattern of recognition typical of such new road schemes.

The Witney bypass was the longest of the three roads, providing a transect from the low clay hills around South Leigh, across the broad flood plain of the River Windrush with its alluvial gravels and silts, and finally up into the brashy limestone soils of the Cotswolds (FIG. 2). The resulting distribution of sites and surface finds shown may still be incomplete (FIG. 1). FIG. 2 shows three separate areas totalling 3 km. where the topsoil was left *in situ*.

A major question at present is to what extent were the river gravels a preferred

¹ R. A. Chambers, 'A Romano-British Settlement Site and Seventh-century Burial, Ducklington, Oxon., 1974', *Oxoniensia*, XL (1975), 171-200.

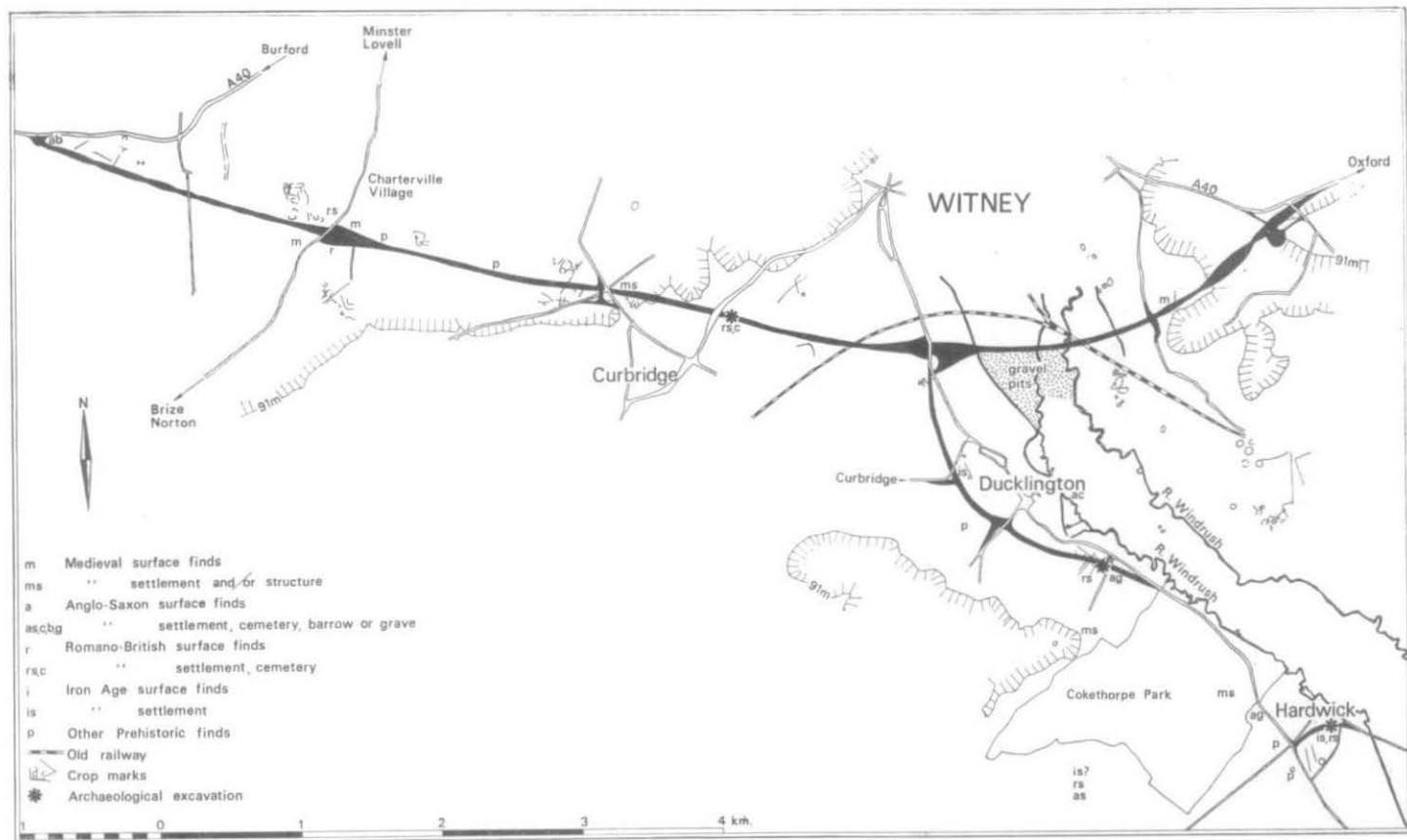


FIG. I

The Ducklington, Hardwick and Witney Bypasses. Based on 6 in. O.S. map.

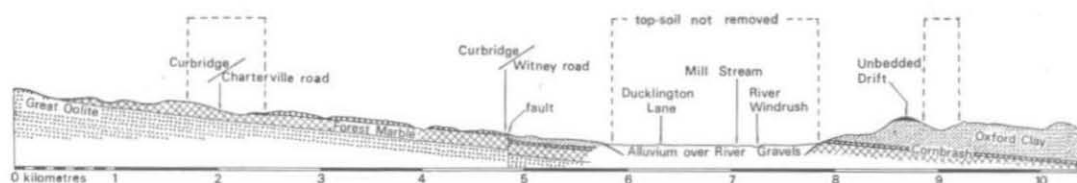


FIG. 2

Geological Profile of the Witney Bypass. Vertical scale $\times 10$.

settlement area² in prehistoric and early historical times. Unfortunately the bypass illustrated the difficulty of locating evidence of man's past activity with equal success on areas of different geology and land use.

Possibly the earliest material recovered comprised several surface finds of flint flakes, scrapers and arrow heads in a field just west of some extensive cropmarks to the N.W. of present-day Curbridge.

The distribution of Iron Age settlements is undoubtedly incomplete, caused especially by the friable nature of much Iron Age pottery and, through weathering, the consequent paucity of surface finds. All the Iron Age pottery recovered was revealed during earthmoving operations. Late Iron Age settlements were detected both east of the River Windrush on a low step above the flood plain at the foot of Spring Hill (shown capped with unbedded drift on FIG. 2), and also west of the river. A group of crop marks³ including a possible 'banjo' type enclosure similar to the rectangular Upper Cranbourne type associated with the later Iron Age from several dated and published examples in Wessex,⁴ lay N.W. of Curbridge. Several linear cropmarks, and one semi-circular, on the Oxford Clay N.E. of Curbridge, were later shown to be more extensive when several features were found in a newly cut roadside ditch. Further west three groups of cropmarks on Cornbrash by Charterville village were associated with a small scatter of Romano-British and medieval pottery. At the western end of the bypass several less definite linear cropmarks occurred by the Anglo-Saxon round barrow at Asthall.

Unlike some observations on the M5, the removal of hedged field boundaries was not particularly rewarding. The only boundary of any clear antiquity was the Colwell Brook which today forms the parish boundary. Grundy cited the Colwell Brook in a late Anglo-Saxon charter for Ducklington *c.* A.D. 958 as a boundary to land over which Eanulf had rights.⁵ The same Colwell Brook (meaning Charcoal Brook) appears to be mentioned again in a copy of a charter for Witney and surrounding lands *c.* A.D. 969.⁶ It was apparently respected by the Romano-British settlement at Curbridge, and there are cropmarks 0.5 km. to the east of it. There is a possibility that the Brook was a pre-Saxon boundary, perhaps as old as some of

² D. Miles, 'The View from the Gravel Pits: Case Study 2' in T. Rowley and M. Breakwell (eds.), *Planning and the Historical Environment* (1975), 90.

³ Large scale aerial photographs kindly made available for study by the Department of the Environment.

⁴ B. T. Perry, 'Some Recent Discoveries in Hampshire', C.B.A. Research Report 7, ed. Charles Thomas, *Rural Settlement in Roman Britain* (1966), 39-42.

⁵ G. B. Grundy, 'Saxon Oxfordshire Charters and Ancient Highways', *Oxfordshire Record Society*, xv (1933), 32, part 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 79, part 23.

the nearby cropmarks which often contain pre-Roman Iron Age material. This is not surprising since it is also a geological boundary, between well-drained Head and Oxford Clay.

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