

A Roman Cemetery and Trackway at Stanton Harcourt

By NEIL MCGAVIN

SUMMARY

A Roman cemetery and trackway were excavated near Stanton Harcourt. The trackway is traceable on aerial photographs as part of the Stanton Harcourt/Standlake cropmark complex. 35 graves of the cemetery were excavated, and produced coins, headless burials and a hobnail-boot burial. The cemetery was in use in the mid fourth century AD.

INTRODUCTION

The site, Fig 1, centred on SP 4157/0500, lies at the south west corner of the Stanton Harcourt cricket ground, about 500m. south of the village and 100m. west of the Stanton Harcourt/Standlake road. It lies at approximately 70m. above sea level on the gravels of the second and third Thames terraces, which here form a wide apron between the rivers Thames and Windrush. This apron carries an extensive crop-mark complex with sites of many periods from the neolithic onwards.¹ The underlying gravels are being quarried away, and the present site was excavated in advance of the quarrying.

The site was discovered in December 1977 when a bulldozer disturbed burials while stripping topsoil. During two week's preliminary work under Mr David Miles in January 1978, the site was cleared and assessed; and excavations by the author for the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit took place in March and April 1978.

The area stripped (Fig 2) was roughly triangular, and measured 40m. east-west by 60m. north-south. It was limited by spoil-heaps to the west and south and by the cricket ground to the east. Later, a further strip 10m. wide along the south side of the cricket ground and running eastward from the south end of the original area was topsoiled, but revealed no new features. The bulldozer had removed topsoil to a depth of 0.4-0.6m. and exposed the sand and gravels of the subsoil into which the archaeological features were cut. Ploughing or bulldozing had damaged the features; several of the graves were disturbed and one survived only as a stain in the ground. It seems likely that many of the shallower features were removed altogether. The area was shovel-scraped, gridded and planned at 1:200; individual grave cuts and features in the fill were planned individually at 1:10; the skeletons were recorded by vertical photography. Site recording was designed as an experiment in the use of a computerised recording system designed by Mr J. Jefferies for the English Central Excavation Unit.

Thanks are due to the Amey Roadstone Corporation for permission to excavate and for their help during the excavation; to the Manpower Services Commission for their assistance through the Jobs Creation Scheme, and to local volunteers who helped with the

¹ D. Benson and D. Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley, an Archaeological Survey of the River Gravels*, (O.A.U. Survey, 2), Fig 11.

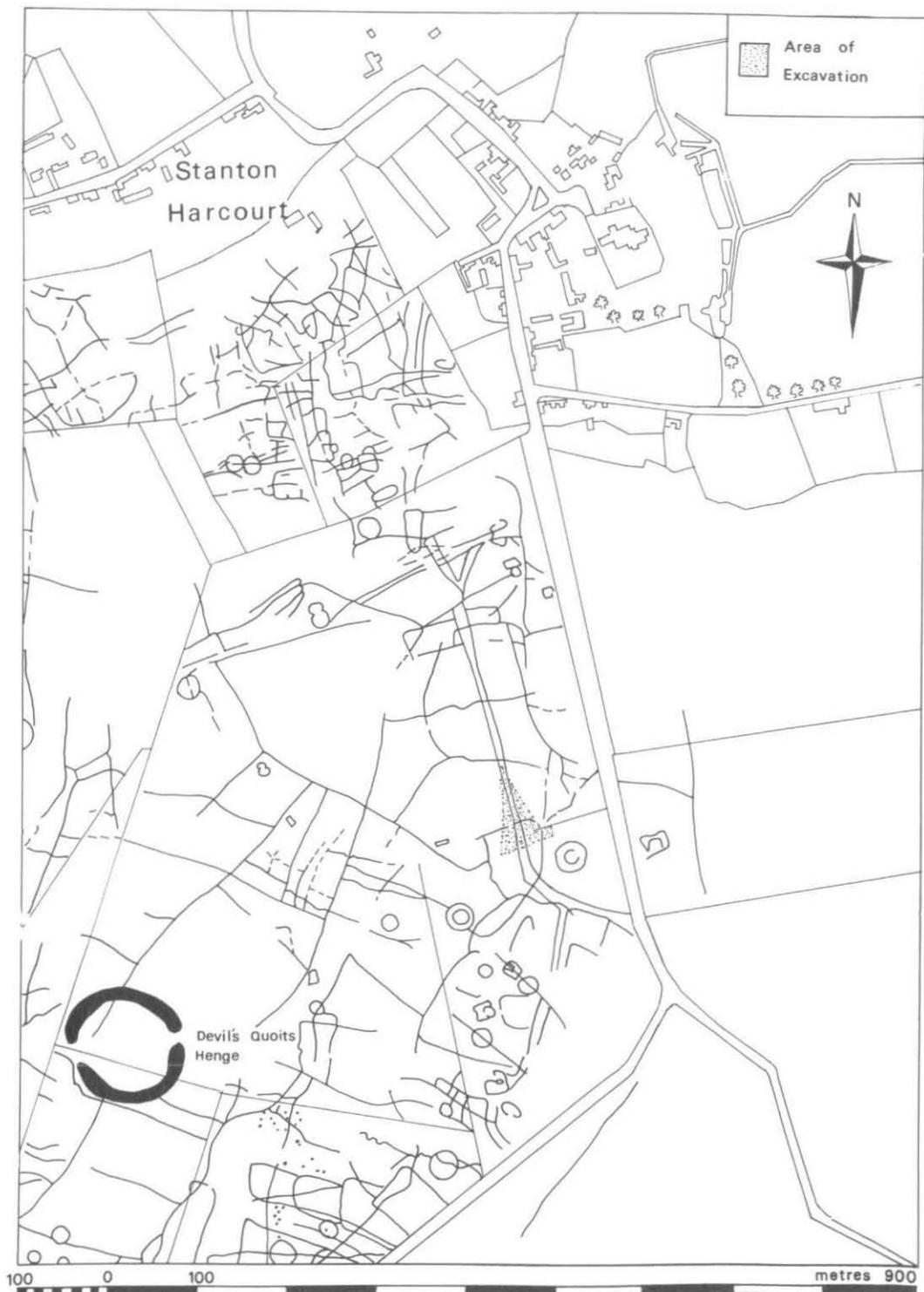


Figure 1: Excavation in Relation to Surrounding Cropmarks.

work. The finds and detailed records will be lodged with the Oxfordshire County Council Department of Museum Services, Woodstock, Oxfordshire.

GAZETTEER OF FEATURES (SEE FIGS. 2 AND 4)

- 39: Ditch; N-S; better preserved to N.; width 1.2-2m.; depth 0.25-0.57m.; profile asymmetrical. Upper fill: dark red strong clayey loam with some gravel; lower fill: dark red gravelly loam. Cut by 56.
- 56: Ditch; E-W; 1.2m. broad x 0.3m. deep; a recut 0.15m. deep produced button SF 10. Cuts 39, 105, 117. Fill: fine red gravel.
- 80: ? Posthole; 0.75m. N-S x 0.65m. E-W x 0.5m. deep. Cut down onto bed of grey concretion; no trace of post-pipe or packing. Fill: dark red loam and gravel.
- 81: ? Posthole; 0.5m. diameter x 0.1m. deep; cut down onto grey concretion; no trace of post-pipe or packing. Fill: dark red strong gravelly loam.
- 105: Ditch; N-S; damaged, and in places surviving only as a stain; parallel to 39 and 6m. to the W; width up to 1m.; depth up to 0.2m. Fill: fine red gravel.
- 109: Linear depression; E-W; 2.5m. x 0.5m. x 0.15m. deep; bottom irregular; damaged. Fill: dark red gravelly loam.
- 111: Linear depression; N-S from E end of 109; 4.8m. x 0.4m. x 0.1m. deep; irregular circular depression at NE corner; damaged; cut by 56. Fill: dark red gravelly loam.
- 121: Land drain; NE-SW; 6m. x 0.3m. x 0.05m. deep. Fragments of yellow ceramic fluted pipe.
- 122: ? Posthole; 0.47m. diameter x 0.27m. deep; no trace of post-pipe or packing. Fill: dark red strong loam.
- A-H: Irregular patches of gravelly brown loam up to 3.5m. diameter x 0.3m. deep; cut by graves and ditches; no finds.

THE CEMETERY:

The cemetery lay east of Ditch 39; no graves were recovered to the west of the ditch. Thirty four graves were identified of which 33 were excavated (the remaining one surviving only as a stain). Thirty four skeletons were recovered; two, an infant and an adult, from Grave 60. The limits of the cemetery were probably reached at the north and the south east; elsewhere the cemetery continued under the limits of the stripped area — the cricket ground to the east and the spoil-heap to the south. The southern spoil-heap was removed after the excavation had been completed, and a further grave was identified but not excavated to the south.

The graves were orientated north-south, and laid out in irregular east-west rows, of which eleven can be identified. The majority of skeletons lay head-to-north (for the decapitated burials, the direction of the shoulders is counted), but eight graves lay head-to-south. Most of the skeletons were supine, but three lay face-down, and others showed varying degrees of slumping to one side. Three skeletons were found, each with a group of three coins; a further three had had the head cut off and placed near the feet. Fifteen graves contained iron nails; four contained stains of organic material, suggesting the presence of a coffin.

GAZETTEER OF SELECTED GRAVES

- F2: *Grave*: sub-rectangular, flat-bottomed. 2.25 x 0.8m. x 0.24m. deep. Orientation due south. *Skeleton 4*: adult female; supine; head south, against south end of grave; R. arm by side, L. arm crossed over stomach. *Fill 3*: strong dark red gravelly loam, contained 3 coins, small finds 1, 2 and 3, south of L. shoulder and level with skull; also three nails, — ? coffin nails; one over feet, remainder near pelvis.
- F14: *Grave*: sub-rectangular, hollowed bottom; 2.2 x 0.95m. x 0.5m. deep; orientation 355 degrees. *Skeleton 16*: adult male; head north; lying on left side near E side of grave. *Fill 15*: loam over gravel; contains 7 lumps of grey concretion packed near walls of grave at base; 1 ?coffin nail; 1 sherd abraded pottery well up in fill; 3 coins, small finds 4, 5 and 6 below L. forearm, in the fill. Scatter of hobnails less than 10 mm. diameter immediately W of feet; half of lower jaw of young sheep or goat, central to long axis of grave at S end and flat against grave floor. See fig 3.

STANTON HARCOURT

Cricket Ground 1978

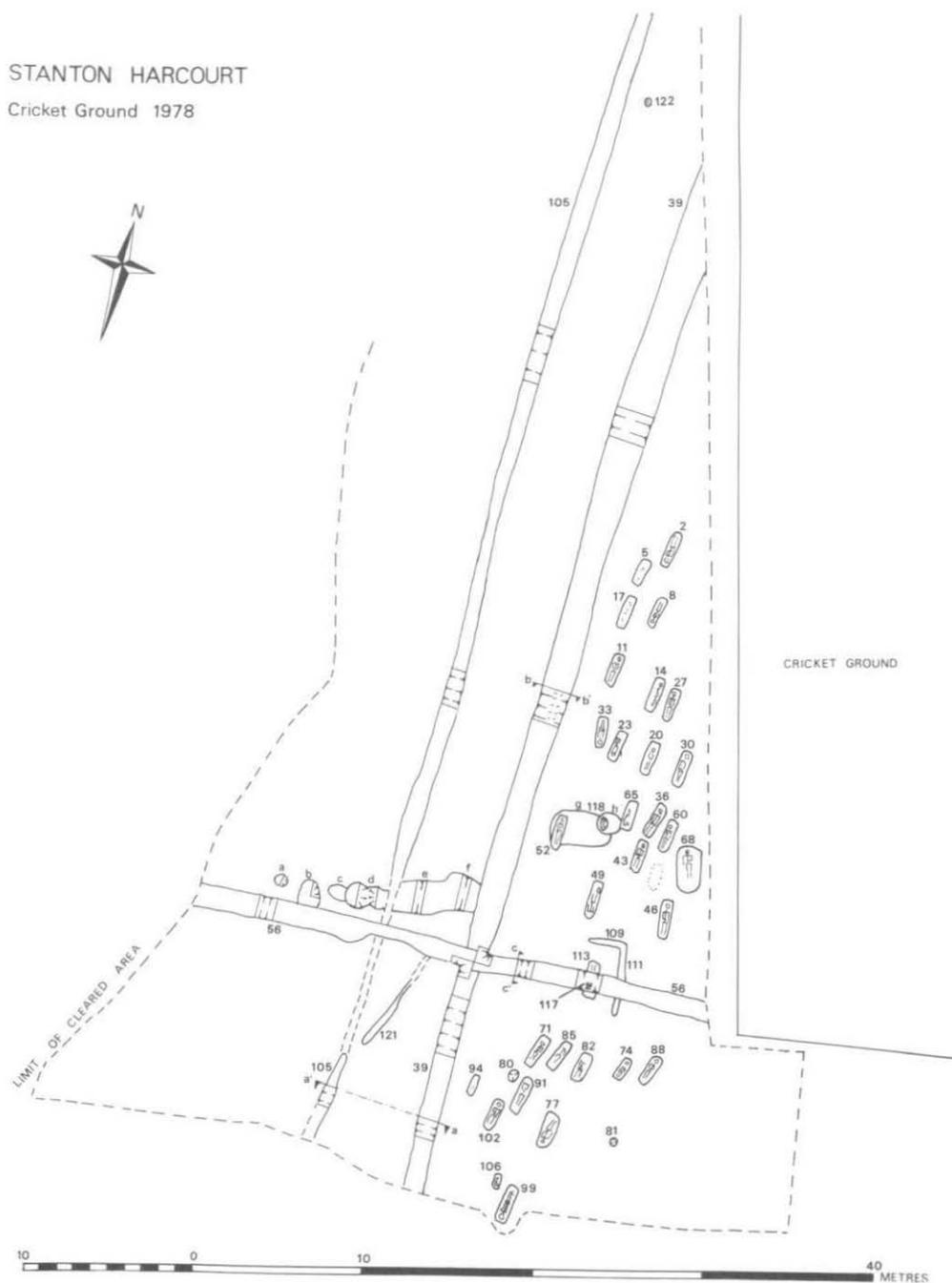


Figure 2: Plan of the Excavation.

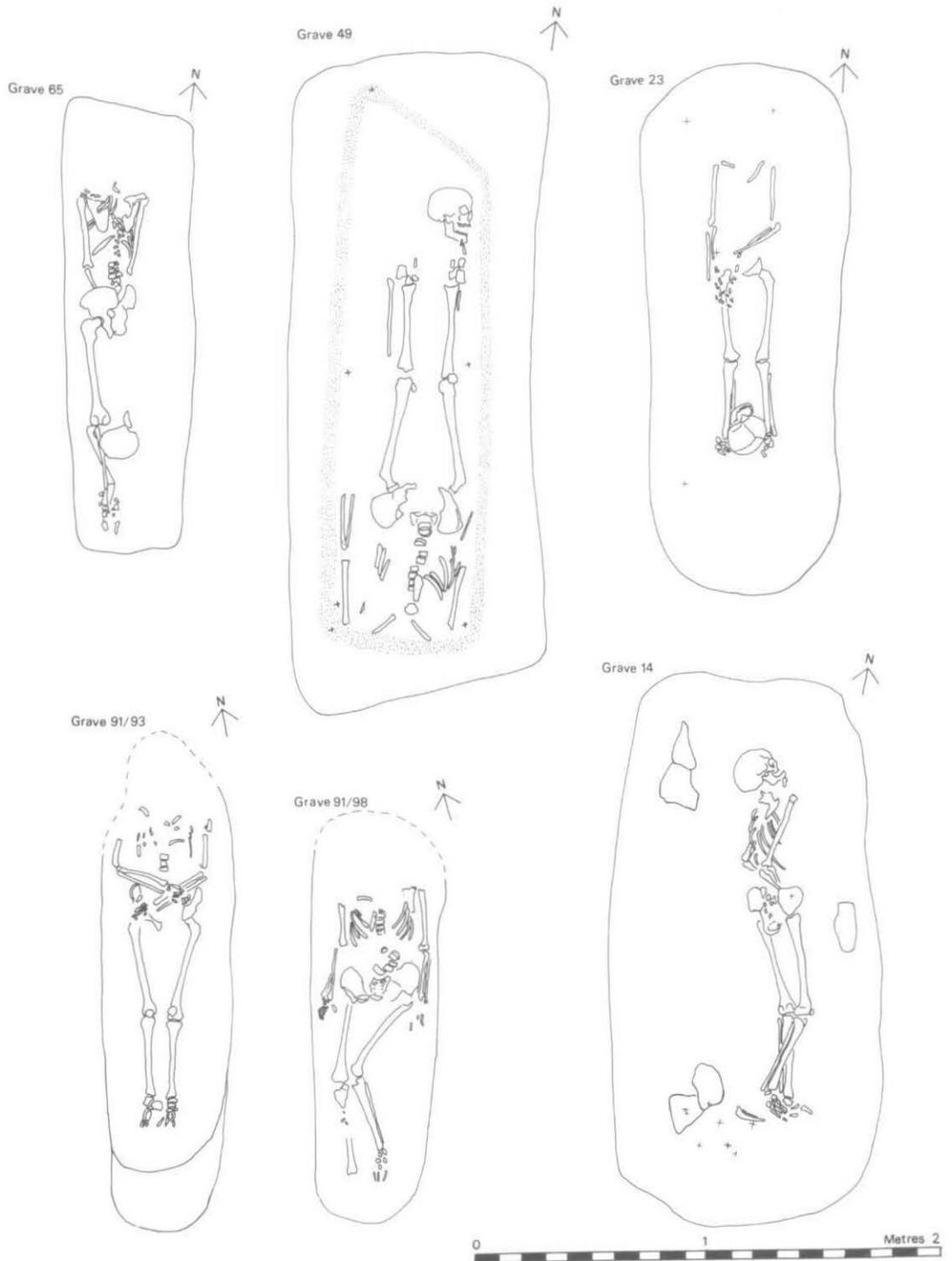


Figure 3: Plan of selected graves. Crosses mark the position of Coffin nails; a coffin stain is stippled.

- F23: *Grave*: sub-rectangular, tapered slightly to north, flat-bottomed. 2.25 x 0.8m. x 0.15m. deep. *Skeleton 25*: adult female, poorly preserved. Skull removed and placed between the feet, face towards the body. *Fill 24*: strong brown gravelly clay loam; 4 ?coffin nails. See fig 3.
- F36: *Grave*: Irregular rectangle 2.06 x 0.68m. x 0.31m. deep. Sloping bottom; orientation 300 degrees. *Skeleton 38*: adult male; head north; supine; hands folded over pelvis. 3 coins in fill: SF 7 and 8 in region of chest, above skeleton; 9 below skull. *Fill 37*: strong brown gravelly clay loam; 3 ?coffin nail fragments.
- F49: *Grave*: squashed rectangle, tapering to N; sloping bottom; 2.7 x 1.05m. x 0.5m. deep; orientation 350 degrees. *Skeleton 51*: adult male; shoulders south; supine, arms by sides; skull removed and placed N of R foot; face E. *Fill 50*: Mixed strong brown clay loam and gravel; coffin stain identified at 15 cm. above grave bottom; coffin nails at NW, SW and SE corners, and at mid points of long sides; nail corrosion shows marks of wood fibre. See fig 3.
- F65: *Grave*: rectangular, tapered to S; sloping bottom; 1.9m. x 0.55m. x 0.2m. deep. Orientation 355 degrees. *Skeleton 67*: shoulders N; prone, extended; skull removed and placed E of shins. *Fill 66*: Dark red strong clayey loam. See fig 3.
- F91: Two graves superimposed:
Grave 91/93: Sub-rectangular, N end removed by bulldozer; [1.9] x 0.55m. x [0.1]m. deep. Orientation 10 degrees. *Skeleton 93*: adult ? female; supine; head N; skull removed by bulldozer, arms crossed over abdomen. *Fill 92*: dark red strong gravelly loam. Layer of pea-grit separated upper grave (F91/93) from lower (F91/98).
Grave F91/98: parallel-sided, round-ended, flat-bottomed. [1.8] x [0.55]m. x 0.2m. deep. *Skeleton 98*: supine; adult ? female; head N; arms by sides; legs slightly bent; skull lifted in error with F93; poorly preserved. *Fill 97*: dark red strong gravelly loam. See fig 3.
- F113: *Grave*: cut by ditch 56; sub-rectangular; tapered to S; flat bottomed; 2.28 x 0.75m. x 0.25m. deep; orientation 350 degrees. *Skeleton 115*: supine, head S; feet, shins, and distal R femur fragment remaining; other bones removed by cutting of Ditch 56. *Fill 114*: dark red strong gravelly loam; coffin nails clustered at four corners of rectangle.
- F117: Recess in bottom of 56 below Grave 113; 0.7m. E-W x 0.4m. N-S x 0.15m. deep; contained 2 skulls and other human bones.

DATING EVIDENCE

The three groups of coins recovered have been examined by the Heberden Coin Room of the Ashmolean Museum and assigned to the middle of the fourth century AD. Pottery recovered from the fills of the graves and from the fill of Ditch 39, although fragmentary, appears to be consistent with this date. A button SF 10 from the recut of Ditch 56 appears to be of 19th century date.

DISCUSSION

Little can be deduced from the scattered postholes and isolated features. The two gullies 109 and 111 meeting at right-angles might have formed part of a structure, but there is no evidence to suggest what form or purpose the structure might have had, or to prove that it was connected with the cemetery or trackway. The gullies and trackway ditches were all cut by Ditch 56. Ditch 56 therefore originated in a later phase, and the presence of the button SF 10 suggests that it was in use in recent times. The Recess 117 at the bottom of the ditch contained two skulls and other human bones; the ditch had evidently been cut through burials, the major bones being collected and reburied in a charnel pit.

The cemetery is clearly associated with ditches 39 and 105, the lateral ditches of a north-south trackway. The road-surface had not survived, but the ditches can be traced on aerial photographs² for 250m. to the north and for 150m. to the south of the site (see fig 1). To the south, the track bends to the south-east and throws off a southern spur in

² See Major G.W.G. Allen's Photographs at the Field Department, Oxfordshire Department of Museum Services; SP 4105/H, SP 4105/I, SP 4104/AA.

an area of densely-packed, superimposed cropmarks. The marks are too complex to allow identification of field-systems or settlements which can definitely be associated with the trackway system, and the settlement which the cemetery served therefore remains unidentified. No material of this period is recorded for the locality in the sites and monuments record.

The siting of the cemetery beside a trackway is similar to the Queensford Mill cemetery,³ an urban cemetery serving the Roman town of Dorchester. The internal arrangement of the cemetery with its east-west rows of well-spaced regularly-orientated graves is again similar to Queensford Mill, and contrasts with the scattered pattern of rural burial at Owslebury, Hants.⁴ However a close parallel can be found in the rural cemetery at Barrow Hills Field, Radley, Berks.⁵ As at the Radley Cemetery (and unlike the Queensford Mill cemetery) no trace of a boundary ditch has survived, although a light fence or hedge may have been used.

Few of the graves had non-perishable grave-goods, and the time-span of the burials is difficult to assess. From the dating of the coin groups the cemetery was clearly in use in the middle of the fourth century AD, and some of the burial practices are characteristic of this period.

The burials were extended inhumations in graves orientated within 15 degrees of magnetic north. Sixteen of the graves produced evidence of coffins, in the form of nails or silhouettes of rotted wood. Since preservation was variable and several graves were too damaged to yield evidence, the proportion of coffin burials may have been higher. Two graves showed good details of the coffin construction.

The preference was for the body to be placed on its back with the head to the north; but skeletons face-down (3 graves) slumped on one side (4 graves) or heading the "wrong" way (8 graves) suggest carelessness in placing the body in the grave.

The practice of decapitation (Graves 23, 49, 65) has wide-spread parallels in the Roman period (locally, cf Curbridge, Radley) and the presence of hobnails is also paralleled locally at Curbridge. In Grave 14, the group of three coins was found with traces of a dark fibrous substance; at Radley, a grave produced a group of nine coins "sewn up in a piece of coarse linen cloth", and dated to around 330 AD. The coins in Graves 2 and 36 were scattered in the fill. Also, in Grave 14, the placing of half the lower jaw of a young sheep or goat flat on the bottom of the grave, on the long axis of the grave and at right-angles to it near the feet, is unlikely to have been accidental. Apart from two residual sherds from grave fills, no pottery was found with the burials.

Other than Graves 91/93 and 91/98, no graves intersected. This would suggest either the use of grave markers, or a short cemetery-life in which the grave fills remained visible as mounds. Grave 91/93 was cut down precisely into grave 91/98, and on an identical alignment, although some 0.25m. to the north. A layer of pea-grit separating the two burials indicated compaction of the lower while the upper was still fresh either because the lower grave had settled before the plot was re-used or because the cutting of the upper grave led to trampling of the fill of the lower. It is therefore difficult to say how far the two burials were separated in time in the absence of grave goods. The exact superimposition suggests deliberate re-use of a grave, whether for a furtive burial, or because the two individuals were in some way related.

³ B. Durham and T. Rowley, 'A Cemetery Site at Queensford Mill, Dorchester', *Oxoniensia*, xxxvii (1972), 32-7.

⁴ J. Collis, 'Owslebury (Hants) and the Problems of Burial in the Roman World', *Burial in the Roman World*, ed. R. Reece (CBA Research Report, 22), 26-34.

⁵ R.J.C. Atkinson, 'Excavation in Barrow Hills Field, Radley, Berks', *Oxoniensia*, xvii/xviii (1952 and 1953), 34.

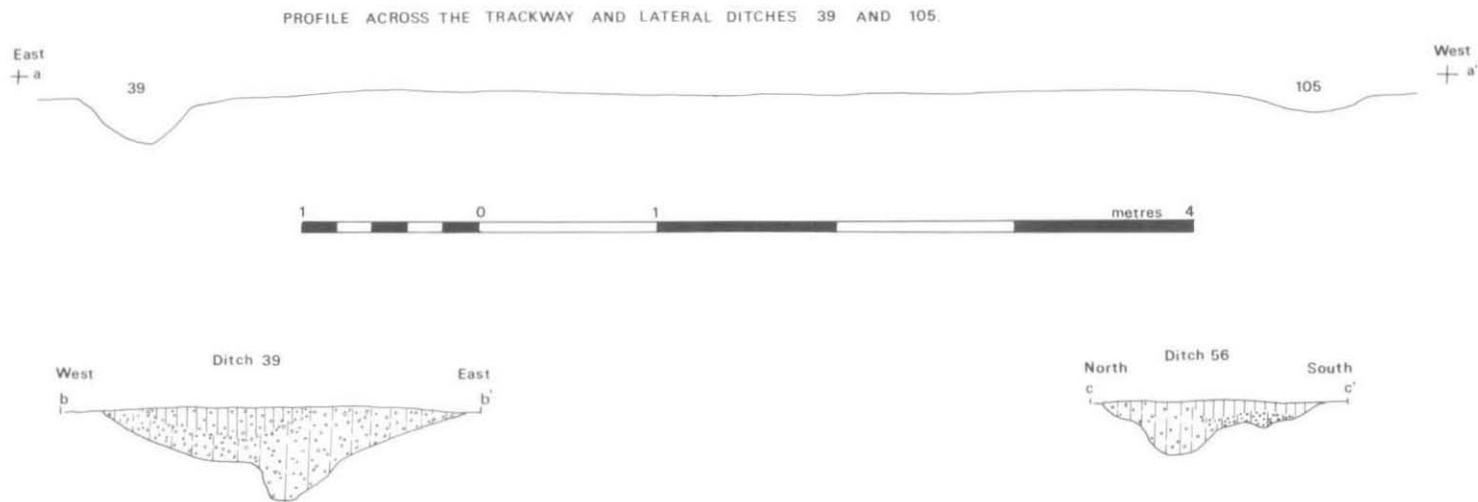


Figure 4: The Trackway Profile and Ditch sections.

THE FINDS

THE POTTERY By ROBIN P. SYMONDS

Nine sherds of pottery were examined. All of these exhibit characteristics typical of the oxidized and reduced wares from the Romano-British kilns at Oxford. The only diagnostic sherd is a base from layer 41 (part of ditch 39 & slot 40, and above layer 42). This is probably an example of Young's type no. R53 which he describes as follows:

'Straight-sided bowl with flat base, decorated with grooves or burnishing. This type . . . is typologically related to a black-burnished form found in the region, for example at Shakenoak, from the late second century onwards. It seems however, to have achieved real popularity only in the late Roman period and the kiln finds of the type are all of this period, where dateable by context. It is possible, in fact, that it was produced locally only in the late Roman period. 240-400 plus'.⁶

The base in question was wheel-turned, and therefore not genuine BB1. Other parallels are at Kingston Bagpuize⁷ and Curbridge.⁸

THE COINS

In each of three graves there were three coins. Daphne Nash of the Heberden Coin Room, Ashmolean Museum has examined these coins and reports as follows:

Grave F2: Small finds 1-3: small local imitations of Falling Horseman type, 360's or a little later.

Grave F14: Small find 4: *Urbs Romana* (Wolf and Twins), 330-335; small finds 5 and 6: *Gloria Exercitus* (1 standard), 335-337. The mint marks of all three coins are illegible.

Grave F36: Small finds 7 and 9: small local imitations of Falling Horseman type, 360's or a little later; small find 8: perhaps the same as 7 and 9.

The Falling Horseman imitations are all of the same type and all have the obverse facing right with the exception of small find 1 whose obverse faces left. The reverse of small finds 2 and 7 are almost from identical dies and seem certain to be from the same workshop or artist. Although the mint marks of small finds 4-6 are illegible they seem to be normal coins of their type.

THE HUMAN REMAINS By MARY HARMAN

The preservation of the bones varied a little: some skeletons were in excellent condition, while others were quite sound but very fragmentary, and some were partially decayed, the vertebrae and ribs of these particularly being scantily represented.

The sex of adult individuals was decided where possible from the relevant features of the skull and pelvic girdle and from the size and ruggedness of the skeleton as a whole. The age of individuals has been assessed from the state of epiphyseal fusion and of tooth eruption, and the degree of tooth wear, based on the criteria given by Brothwell⁹ and from the length of the diaphyses in the case of juveniles, using the chart prepared by Miss R. Powers. The height of adults has been calculated where possible from the lengths of the long bones, using the formulae of Trotter and Gleser.¹⁰ The state of dental health is indicated by showing the incidence of caries, abscess and ante mortem tooth loss. Where possible the presence of normal variations in the skeleton, such as metopism, wormian bones and vertebral anomalies, has been noted, and in the tables both these and any evidence of disease or injury are listed.

The table shows that the numbers of males and of females were equal, and that the number of children found is exceptionally small. Few people survived into old age. The average height of nine men was 5ft. 7½ins. (1.717m.) and of ten women was 5ft. 3ins. (1.602m.). Dental health deteriorated with increasing age.

There does not appear to be any connection between the individuals who had been decapitated, or those buried in the prone position. One skeleton, 67, has a cut into the anterior surface of the third cervical vertebra, and the lower margin of the right side of the mandible; these cuts are almost certainly connected with the decapitation. There is no evidence as to whether this took place after death or was the cause of it.

⁶ C.J. Young, *Oxfordshire Roman Pottery*, (B.A.R., 43), 222.

⁷ M. Parrington, 'Roman Finds and Animal Bones from Kingston Hill Farm, Kingston Bagpuize', *Oxoniensia*, xli (1976), 65-9.

⁸ R.A. Chambers, personal communication.

⁹ D.R. Brothwell, *Digging up Bones*, (London, 1965), 59, 60, 69.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

TABLE I
BURIALS FROM STANTON HARCOURT

Grave Number	Sex	Age	Height	Caries	Abscess	Loss	Vertebral osteo-arthritis	Lambdoid wormians	Coins	Prone	Decapitations	Orientation	Coffin Nails	Other Comments
2	4	♀	30-35	5'6'' 1.677m.	03/19	03/30	00/30	X	1	X		S	X	Six lumbar vertebrae
5	7		14-18					-				N		
8	10	♀	17-22	5'3'' 1.602m.	01/26	00/28	00/27		2			S	X	
11	13	♀	20-25		03/22	00/21	01/31					N		
14	16	♂	40+	5'6'' 1.681m.	00/03	04/07	24/32	X	2	X		N	X	Fractured ribs and radius. Osteo-arthritis in arms.
17	19	♂	20-25		01/04	00/03	00/04					N?		
20	22	♀	20-25		03/16	03/18	05/27		5+			N	X	Metopic
23	25	♀	20-25	5'1½'' 1.562m.	01/25	00/23	00/31		1		X	N	X	Impacted upper left canine
27	29	♂	40+	5'6'' 1.679m.	02/28	04/29	00/29	X	0			N		Six lumbar vertebrae Osteo-arthritis in right hip.
30	32	♀	45+	5'7¼'' 1.712m.	05/13	05/19	12/32	X	0	X		N		Osteo-arthritis in both hips.
33	35	♀	30+	5'3¼'' 1.608m.	05/10	05/24	06/30	X	0	X		S		
36	38	♂	30-40	5'6¾'' 1.698m.	10/27	04/30	02/32	X	3	X		N	X	Metopic. Osteo-arthritis in joints. Hole in sternum.
43	45	♀	18-23	5'4¼'' 1.635m.	00/30	00/32	00/32		0			N		
46	48	♂	40+	5'8¼'' 1.735m.	00/03	05/11	05/16	X	2+			N	X	Fractured left clavicle.
49	51	♂	25-30	5'7¾'' 1.720m.	01/30	00/32	00/32		2		X	S	X	Hole in sternum.
52	54	♀	25-30	5'5¾'' 1.672m.	04/18	06/30	01/29		6			N	X	Impacted upper right canine.
60	62	♀	20-25	4'10'' 1.476m.	03/32	00/32	00/32		3+			N		Metopic. Buried with 64
60	64	neonatal										N		Buried with 62.
65	67	♂	25-30	5'8'' 1.725m.	05/21	01/27	01/28	X	-	X	X	N	X	Fractured left tibia and fibula. Osteo-arthritis in right hip.
68	70	♂	25-30	5'8'' 1.732m.	02/28	02/30	03/32	X	0			N	X	Lesion on lumbar vertebra.
71	73	♀	25-30	5'2'' 1.579m.	02/21	00/32	00/32	X	1			N	X	

Grave	Number	Sex	Age	Height	Caries	Abscess	Loss	Vertebral osteo-arthritis	Lambdoid wormians	Coins	Prone	Decapitations	Orientation	Coffin Nails	Other Comments
74	76	♀	40+		04/06	00/08	16/24	X	0				N		
77	79	♂	25-30	5'6¼'' 1.684m.	00/29	00/29	00/29		1				S		
82	84	♀	Adult					X	-				N		
85	87	♂	25-30		01/22	00/16	00/22		-				N		
88	90	♀	30-35	4'11'' 1.502m.	06/22	05/28	02/28		-				N		Upper canines impacted
91	93	♂?	Adult					X	-				N		Overlies 98 in same grave
91	98	♂?	40+		02/05	03/08	04/12	X	-				N		Osteo-arthritis on elbows. Underlies 93 in same grave
94	96		Adult										N?		
99	101	♂	30-35	5'10¾'' 1.799m.	05/23	07/30	02/30	X	-				S		Osteo-arthritis in left hip
102	104	♂	40+		02/02	01/07	09/16	X	1+				N	X	Osteo-arthritis on right humerus.
106	108		c.6mths						-				S		
113	115	♀?	Adult						-				S	X	Burial disturbed, possibly part redeposited in 117
in56	117		35+		00/05	00/08	05/13		0						
in56	117	♂?	25-30		00/03	02/27	05/32		4						Disturbed and redeposited burials.
118	120		c.1½						-				N	X	

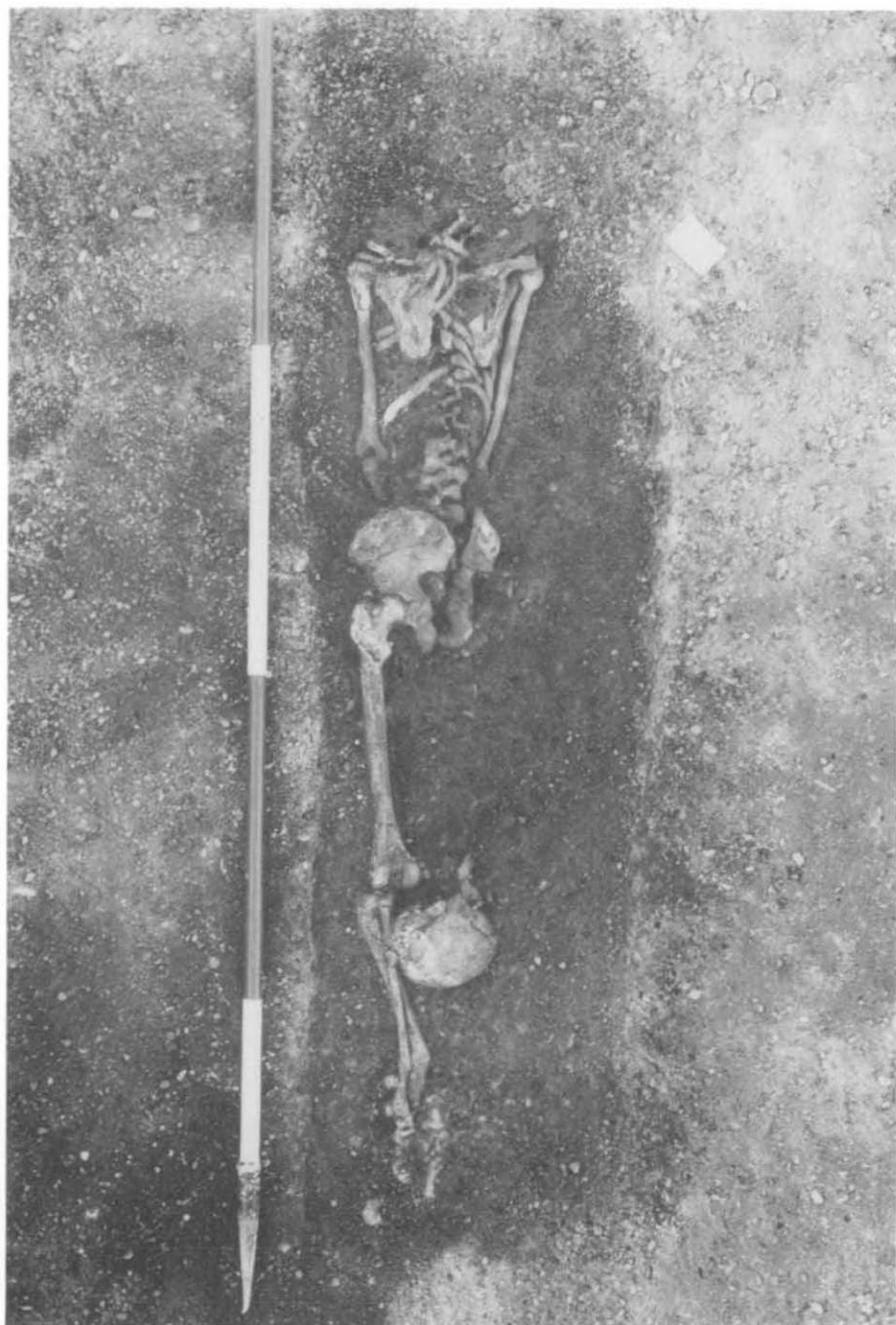


Plate 1: Grave 65, skeleton 67 showing fracture of the left tibia and fibula.