

A Medieval Graveyard beside Faringdon Road, Abingdon

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The site is at the junction of Faringdon and Spring Roads, Abingdon (grid ref: SU489 975) on the way to Shippon and overlies gravels of the second terrace. In July 1977, during trenching by a JCB machine for foundations of a new house, 'Corian', human bones were unearthed and reported. Eleven graves were partially destroyed by trenching and few useful remains were salvaged. Permission to recover dating evidence and further skeletal remains was given by the landowner and builder Mr. B. Mullord, but work did not begin until a convenient stage in the building programme.

Digging by the Abingdon Archaeological and Historical Society took place in December 1977 and January 1978. The area excavated was that of the driveway and garage of the new house, where skeletons had been located and were likely to be disturbed by construction. (Fig. 1a and b). Bones were recovered from 13 graves, but only 5 burials were complete, and even these had been damaged by house-building operations above them. More graves were uncovered along the line of a proposed pipe-trench, but several were not excavated as they were not threatened by pipe-laying. Three more graves were disturbed and largely destroyed during construction of the property boundary-wall in October 1978. Bones, said to be human, were discovered, but not reported, during building at the adjacent 'Gable House' in the early 1950s.

Sections of the foundation-trenches on the west side of the house indicated a steep-sided cutting or cuttings *c.* 2m. deep, which were interpreted as the edges of a backfilled gravel pit (Fig. 1a). In sections of the eastern extension of the pipe trench, numerous large stones, some apparently roughly dressed, were found on a base level 0.6m.–0.7m. below the ground surface, which sloped down slightly towards the excavation. At one point the largest stones indicated the base of a north-south wall with a minimum width of 0.6m. but subsidiary stones, possibly fallen, extended this to 2m. Other stones were scattered east of it for at least 4m.

Fig. 2 is a plan of the known graves. Broken lines are the inferred edges of graves; graves F1, F2, F4, F6, F10, F16–F18, F20 and F22–F25 have doubtful alignments, and F6 was not shown definitely to be a grave although it contained some foot bones. Solid grave outlines are those which cut the underlying gravel but graves F1 and F2 also cut the gravel. Topsoil-stripping made it difficult to measure the depths of graves below the contemporary land surfaces, but they probably originally varied from 0.5m. to 1m. in depth.

¹ Bob Wilson wrote the general archaeology and discussion Mary Harman reports on the human remains. Post-medieval documentation was supplemented by Jaqueline Smith and John Carter. John Blair examined the document cited by Preston as evidence of Trinity Chapel. Assistance in excavation and in preparing the report was generously given by G. Moores, S. Raven, W. Skellington and other members of the Abingdon Archaeological and Historical Society and by W. Page. We are grateful to Mr. and Mrs. B. Mullord for permission to excavate and for their hospitality.

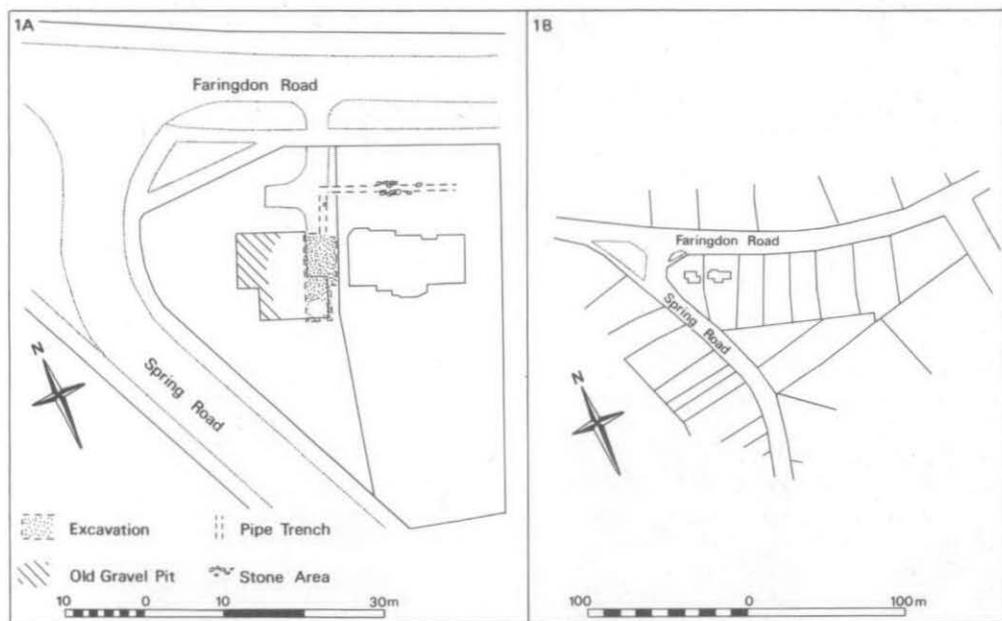


Fig. 1 Location map of graveyard excavation in Faringdon Road, Abingdon.

There were at least 19 adult and 3 child burials. All were generally aligned west-east with the heads to the west. All burials lay on their backs, their arms usually straight alongside the body, the legs usually straight, and the feet together. The skulls faced upwards or to either side. Exceptions to this general disposition can be seen in F14 and F15 and in F12 (Fig. 2) where the tilting of a grave-stone has displaced a leg. The burials lacked grave goods and the only sign of elaboration was the presence of flat stones in four graves. Child burials F13 and F19 had single stones over the head and lower legs, F1 had a large flat stone over the head and F12 a small flat stone on the sternum and single upright stones on both sides of the head and outside of the knees. The almost invariable keeping of the foot bones together suggests that the corpses were wrapped in shrouds and had no coffins when buried.

There was no definite evidence that any grave was cut through another. F2 may have overlaid F4 without disturbing it. The same is true of graves F7 – F11 which were relatively shallow and abutted deeper burials F12 – F17. Some graves, e.g. F11, largely lacking skull bones, appeared to have been disturbed before the recent housebuilding, but the only good evidence of this was a rubbish pit, F21, which cut F10 and was said to contain willow-pattern china.

Only two other sherds of pottery were found. One of these appears to be late Saxon and is residual or contemporary with the burial in F8. The other sherd is of the 12th or 13th century and came from a scatter of small stones to the north of the excavated graves.²

A radio-carbon test of bones from F7, stratigraphically a later burial, provided a date of A.D. 1200±80 years (Table 1).

² The pottery was dated by M. Mellor. All finds are in Oxfordshire County Museum storage.

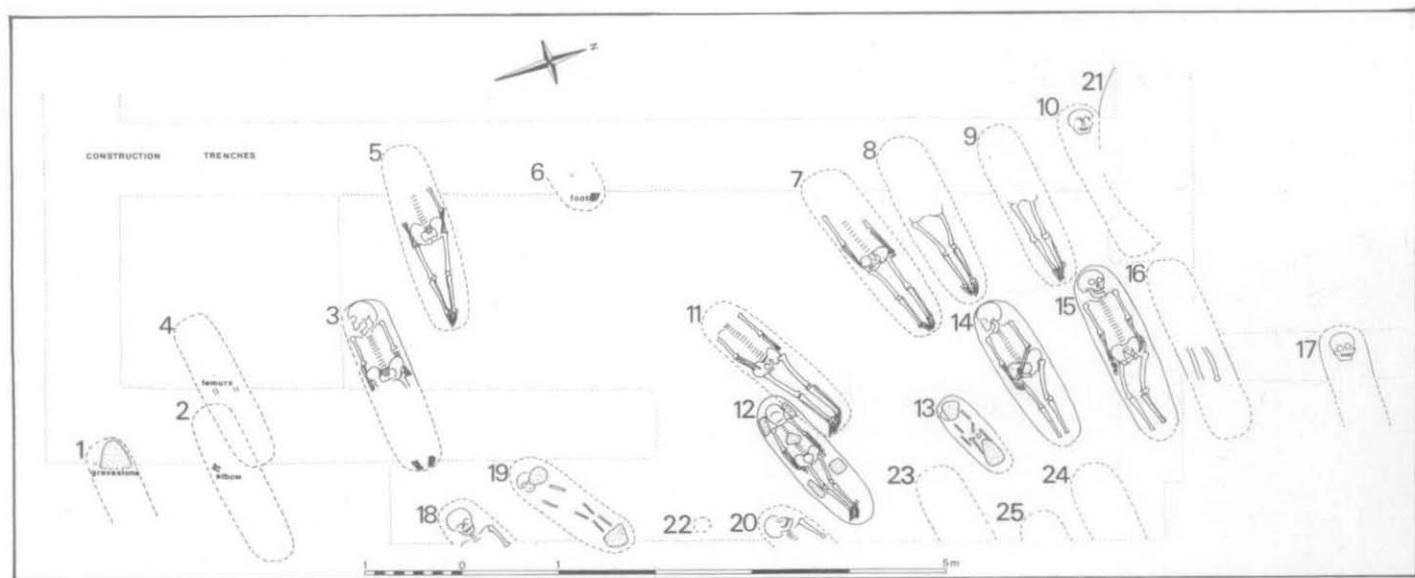


Fig. 2 Plan of excavated graves in Faringdon Road, Abingdon.

TABLE I
Skeletal Information

Grave No.	Sex	Age	Height	caries	Teeth abscess	loss	Comments
3	♂	45+		09/23	05/27	02/28	
5	?	Adult					Osteo-arthritis in R elbow
7	♂	20-25	5'7½" 171.4cm				Radio-carbon date: Har-3474 750±80 (1950) = 1200 A.D. Fractured R. fibula
8	♂	Adult	5'5" 165.6cm				
9	?	16-20					
10	♂?	25-30		07/14	01/20	02/22	1 lambdoid wormian
11	♂	25+	5'7½" 171.8cm				Osteo-arthritis on lumbar vertebrae
12	♀	40+	5'2½" 158.8cm	01/02	05/08	12/19	Osteo-arthritis on nearly all vertebrae, R elbow, joints of thumbs with hands, and slightly in both ankles. Four lambdoid wormians
13	?	1½-2		00/17	00/19		At least three lambdoid wormians
14	♀	25-30	4'9"?" 145.0cm	05/27	03/27	05/32	Slightly deformed legs
15	♀?	25-30		00/24	02/26	02/28	Sacralised sixth lumbar vertebra. Third lumbar vertebra has cleft neural arch
18	?	30-35		01/21	03/26	06/29	
19	?	8-9		02/21	00/24	00/10	At least three lambdoid wormians
20	?	40+		01/12	11/23	06/28	Osteo-arthritis on some vertebrae. Three lambdoid wormians
22	?	2-3					
1-6 ^a	?	30-35		02/12	04/16	00/16	Five lambdoid wormians
	?	Adult					
	?	1-3 months					
7-10 ^b	♂	Adult					Three lambdoid wormians
	?	Adult					
	?	35-40		00/15	01/16	00/16	
	?	25+		02/10	00/13	01/14	
23-24 ^c	♀?	18-23					Sixth lumbar vertebra
	?	Adult					

Notes

a Parts of at least three people; some bones may belong to graves 3 or 5

b Two skulls and two mandibles, some postcranial bones which belong to any of the individuals in graves 7-10, but cannot definitely be assigned to a particular one.

c Mixed bones salvaged from graves 23 or 24.

THE HUMAN REMAINS

As the plan of the graves shows, many of the skeletons were incomplete, having been cut by foundation-trenches. Some bones were salvaged from the trench material, but these could not often be assigned to a particular grave, only to a group of graves. The preservation of the bones was good, but many of them were broken and some were very fragmentary.

The sex of adult individuals was decided from the relevant features of the skull and pelvic girdle and the size and ruggedness of the bones. Age has been assessed from the state of tooth eruption and degree of tooth wear, and from the state of epiphysial fusion, based on the criteria published by Brothwell³, and also from the length of diaphyses in juveniles, using the chart made by Miss R. Powers. Height has been calculated, where possible, from the total length of the long bones of adults, using the formulae of Trotter and Gleser⁴. In Table 1 a general picture of dental health is given by showing the incidence of caries, abscesses, and ante mortem tooth loss. Evidence of injury or disease, and any unusual feature such as wormian bones are also noted.

As might be expected, several of the older individuals had osteoarthritis in the vertebral column, and the people in graves 5 and 12 also suffered from it in the right elbow, the woman in grave 12 having it in the hands as well. There is one healed fracture, of the mid-shaft of the right fibula of the man in grave 8. Several people had lambdoid wormians, and a more usual anomaly occurs in the skeletons from graves 15 and 24, a sixth lumbar vertebra, which in the former is joined with the sacrum. This skeleton also exhibited a rare feature; a cleft neural arch on the third lumbar vertebra. The gap between the two parts of the arch is very narrow, and it is doubtful whether the individual would have been aware of this abnormal feature, which is probably a failure of the two halves of the arch to fuse during growth.

The woman in grave 14 was extremely short, and had slightly deformed bones in the lower limbs. The femoral shafts are bowed laterally, and are also flattened antero-posteriorly, so that they have an oval rather than a round section. The tibia appears normal in most respects, but it is slightly squashed obliquely, so that the section is again abnormal and the sinuous line, which normally formed the anterior of the shaft, instead curves round onto the medial aspect of the bones towards the proximal end. The relative length of the limb bones appears to be normal, but it is possible that it is not, and the calculation of height should be treated with caution.

DISCUSSION

The excavation and the previous record of bones show a cemetery of some size and duration. Skeletons of children and men and women of varied age indicate a graveyard of ordinary people from the area of Shippon or Abingdon. They appear to have been buried by Christian burial practice with west-east orientation of graves, probable shroud burial, and lack of grave goods. As shown by the radio-carbon date and the loosely associated sherds, burials almost certainly took place in the 12th and 13th centuries and perhaps earlier.

Certainly a post-medieval graveyard is not documented and is highly unlikely. During the 19th century the property was part of a two acre triangle of land called Trinity Pieces or Trinity Chapel at the edge of a common field called Town Furlong⁵. This land was owned by Abingdon Borough and leased in small lots from the 16th century to the 19th. Gravel workings are mentioned, confirming the interpretation of the deep west side features, and are probably connected with periodic repairs to Borough roads⁶.

These gravel pits lay beside, or occupied, a tiny one rod wedge of land once known as Trinity Close which marked the boundary of the Borough. Another property subdivision of one acre of land is specifically called Trinity Chapel and, from mention of the gravel pits, probably lay adjacent to Trinity Close and included the former graveyard.

³ D. R. Brothwell, *Digging up Bones* (1965), 59, 60, 69.

⁴ *Ibid.* 102.

⁵ St. Helen's parish records, Tithe Maps *c.* 1833 and 1842.

⁶ Borough Minute Book kept at Stratton Lodge, Abingdon. Data collected by Mrs. J. Smith; B. Challenor, *Selections from the records of the Borough of Abingdon* (1898), 168, 188.

Trinity Close was owned by Abingdon Abbey⁷. The date of the graveyard, the name of Trinity Chapel, and the later acquisition of the two acres by the Borough, suggest that the Abbey owned all this land during the medieval period. It has been proposed that a Trinity Chapel existed on the site⁸ but this has not been confirmed, and the only one known is the 13th-century and later chapel of the Holy Trinity in the precinct of Abingdon Abbey. Nevertheless, excavation where the large stones were found could test whether a chapel was associated with the graveyard.

Lack of documentary evidence suggests that the closure of the graveyard was relatively early. Burials had almost certainly ceased by the 1390s when two corpses from Shippon were carried past the site for burial in Abingdon⁹. A reorganisation of parish graveyards, including the closure of this one, may be indicated by the ordination of the Vicarage of St. Helen's Church and the establishment of the Abbot of Abingdon's right to all mortuaries in the parish in 1284¹⁰. Thus new aspects of Abbey history, and unsuspected evidence of the former settlement pattern in the locality, are revealed by the discovery of this early medieval and possibly Saxon cemetery.

⁷ B. Challenor, *op. cit.* 3, 30.

⁸ A.E. Preston, *The Church and Parish of St. Nicholas, Abingdon* (1929), 10.

⁹ A.E. Preston, *Christ's Hospital, Abingdon* (1929 edition), 10.

¹⁰ J. Townsend, *A History of Abingdon* (1910, reprinted 1970), 64-6.