

# The Excavations at Seacourt, Berks., 1939

## an interim report

By R. L. S. BRUCE MITFORD

IN his lecture 'Current British Archaeology, a survey of aims and needs' published in the first annual report of the University of London Institute of Archaeology (1937), Mr. Christopher Hawkes, referring to a 'gap of full four centuries (of mediaeval history) which is a standing reproach to the good name of British excavators' said (*op. cit.*, p. 68):

'The admirable achievements of recent years in dealing with early medieval castles show . . . something of what could be done, and if we want to improve on these and carry still further the field archaeologist's contribution to medieval English history, we have only to consider the possibilities offered by the English village. . . . If the need for a firm limiting date be considered paramount, the start could be made from that great cleavage-line in our social history the Black Death. Villages abandoned then and never re-occupied are known in almost every county, and documentary evidence concerning them too; an archaeologist's picture of a 14th-century English peasant community would be a unique contribution to historians' knowledge of the Middle Ages, on the eve of the Revolt of 1381 and its far-reaching sequels in the structure of our rural life.'

Such a 14th-century community was the lost village of Seacourt in Berkshire. Whether or not its decline and subsequent disappearance were due to the Black Death we do not as yet know. No doubt the Black Death contributed. We do know however that by 1439 the village was ruined and the site deserted. An entry in the Lateran Regesta in the Vatican for the year 9 Eugenius IV (1439) quotes a petition of the Vicar of Seacourt, John Pigg, M.A., which states that 'the church itself of Seckworth (Seacourt) was collapsed, that the houses and inhabitations in the parish were uninhabited and exposed to ruin, with the exception of two only, and they distant from the said church and from one another, and that, with this exception, the said church had no parishioners.' The Pope upheld this petition and decreed that the church of Seacourt should be deemed without Cure. The fact that so far the fairly extensive excavations on the site have yielded no single trace of post-mediaeval or even very late mediaeval occupation bears out the reliability of this evidence. We thus have in Seacourt a village deserted, in ruins, and archaeologically sealed within a century of the Black Death.

EXCAVATIONS AT THE MEDIAEVAL VILLAGE OF SEACOURT BERKS · 1939 ·

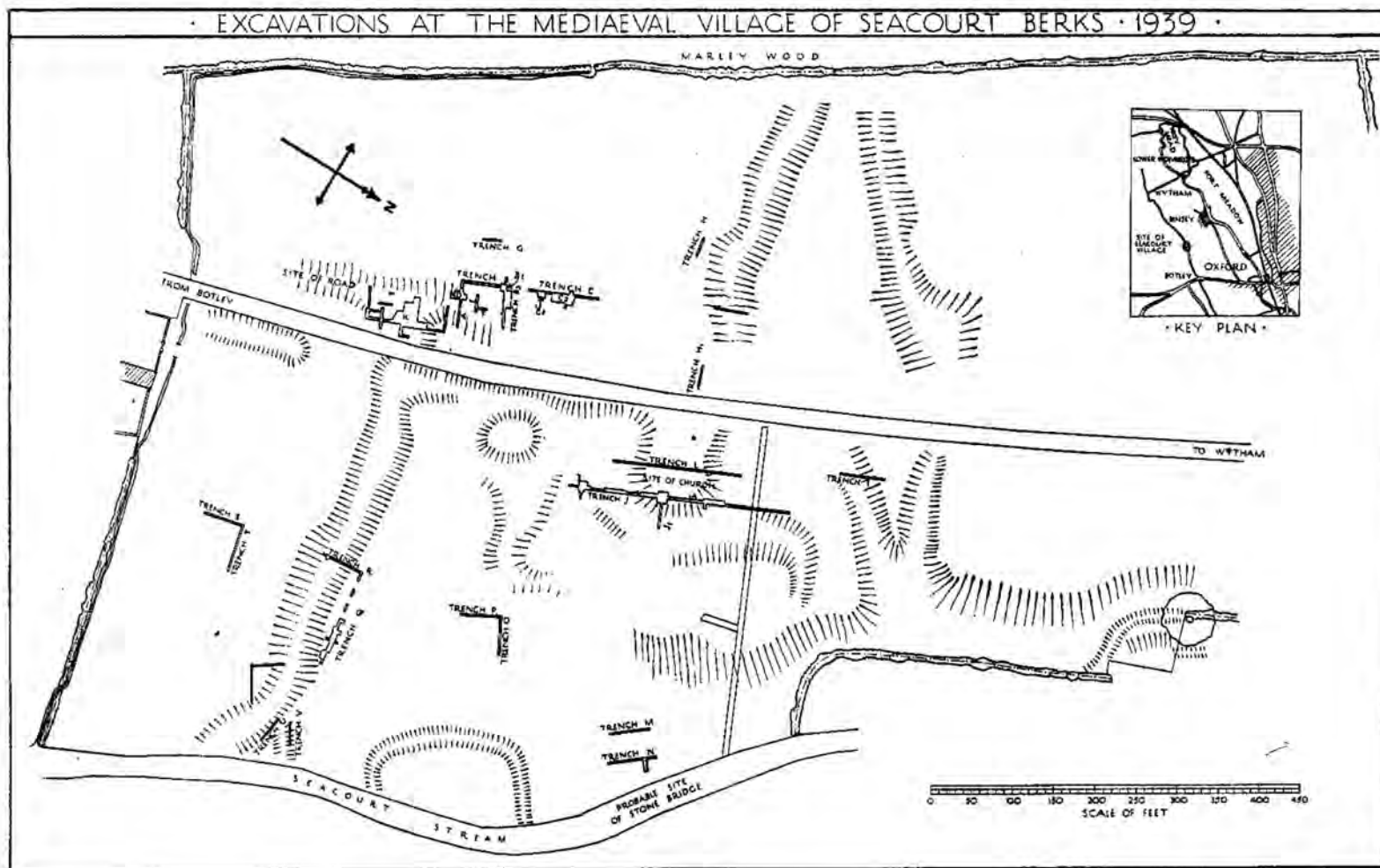


FIG. 7

PLAN OF THE SITE OF SEACOURT, BERKS.

The long unmarked trench and offset in the centre of the plan were dug in 1937-8; the remaining trenches were dug in 1939.

*Drawn by Mr. I. B. A. Turnbull from a draft plan surveyed by Mr. J. Wallace.*

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A preliminary report, in any case curtailed and superficial owing to the exigencies of war, is no place in which to go into the documentation of the site in detail. This can be found in the *Victoria History of the County of Berkshire* (IV, 421 ff.) and is summarised in the article by the Principal of St. Edmund Hall, which appeared in the *Oxford Magazine* of 27 April, 1939, p. 528.

It seems clear from the documentary evidence that the village was prosperous and important, partly as the terminus of a pilgrim's route to St. Margaret's well at Binsey, partly owing to its situation on what was at that time the main route into Oxford from Eynsham and the west.

As a dated site Seacourt promised to provide important evidence for specialists in connexion with the chronology of mediaeval pottery and small objects, but its excavation has an added significance. Ecclesiastical buildings and castles are by now a well-known class of antiquity. At Clarendon a mediaeval palace is in process of excavation. But at Seacourt, the first mediaeval village so far as I know to be excavated, the archaeologist's attention is turned for the first time to the other end of the social scale. The excavations thus initiate a fresh archaeological approach to the problems of mediaeval economic history, and that, too, with special reference to conditions at the end of the 14th century, when important changes were taking place in the status of the English peasantry.

Preliminary trial trenches were dug in 1937 by the Oxford University Archaeological Society under the direction of Capt. C. Musgrave (*v. Oxoniensia*, II, 203), and in 1938 by members of the Oxford University Summer Camp for Unemployed at Eynsham, under the direction of Mr. S. A. Opie (*ibid.*, III, 168, 174 f.). These trenches, although they were in each instance filled in before they had been completely excavated, gave proof of the richness of the site in archaeological remains, especially pottery. Consequently, when it was learnt that the proposed Oxford Western By-pass road would cut across the site in its course from Botley to Wolvercote, a Seacourt excavation fund was opened in April, 1939, under the auspices of a special committee organised by the Principal of St. Edmund Hall (Mr. A. B. Emden), and further exploratory excavations, directed by the writer, took place for four weeks from 17 June to 15 July, 1939.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Committee wishes to record its gratitude to All Souls, Christ Church, Jesus, Magdalen, New, Oriel, Queen's, St. John's and Trinity Colleges, the Berkshire Archaeological Society, the Ashmolean Museum, and numerous private donors for generous contributions to the excavation fund, which totalled £117 7s. Gratitude is also due to the following who assisted in the excavations for the whole or some considerable part of the time: Mr. J. J. Leeming who recorded the sections; Mr. J. Wallace who surveyed the site and made the plan (FIG. 7); Miss Marie Cooper, Miss Margaret Davidson, Miss Ailsa Henderson, Mr. Stuart Rigold and Mr. I. Mackenzie of the University of St. Andrews; Mr. and Mrs. L. S. Harley; Mr. H. Bannister, Mr. R. J. Charleston, Mr. C. F. Day, Capt. C. Musgrave, Mr. Lawrence Stone and Mr. Richard Wade of Oxford, and Mr. Ian Threlfall of Cambridge. Various other voluntary helpers visited the site from time to time, and did useful work for which also the Committee is grateful. Particular thanks and congratulations are due to some 25 unemployed miners from South Wales and their undergraduate hosts, members of the Oxford University Summer Camp for Unemployed at Eynsham, who came over daily for a fortnight, worked with great energy, cheerfulness and success, and were responsible for the excavation of most of Trench J, in which the church was discovered. Much of the success of the season's work was due to their efforts.

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Mr. R. W. Ffennell, the owner of the Wytham Abbey estate, gave permission for the work to be undertaken on his land and took a helpful and generous interest in the work throughout. The present account of the work is necessarily incomplete and superficial as the writer was called up for military service on 5 August, shortly after excavations were finished, and it has not been possible to study the pottery and small finds or to draw out the sections.

The village to-day lies under pasture on the eastern slopes of Wytham Hill and on the Berkshire bank of the Seacourt stream, which here marks the county boundary. It lies on a loam and gravel terrace along which runs the modern Botley-Wytham road, the subsoil being a yellowish clay in the upper (western) field, gravel, sand and clay in the lower (eastern) field, bedrock or natural coming at an average depth of 3 feet. The remains of the village for the most part lie close to the surface.

### THE EXCAVATIONS

The air-photograph by Major G. W. G. Allen (PLATE VIII) clearly showed the line of the main mediaeval road of the village running alongside the modern road, and made it clear that the site extended into the upper field. Excavation was accordingly undertaken in both fields, the previous trial trenches having been confined to the lower field.

The mediaeval road was easily located, for its stone surfacing lay immediately below the turf-line at a depth of 4 ins. to 6 ins. The road was traced by soundings at intervals from end to end of its extent within the upper field, a distance of some 250 yards (FIG. 7). Some idea of the road itself may be had from the photograph, PLATE X, A. It was on the average 12 ft. in width, and was constructed of irregular lumps of field rubble on a bed or made-up platform of clay. There appeared to have been no systematic top dressing, but there was a surface accumulation of fine mud and small pebbles in places. Its structure is in fact identical with that of roads still in use in part of Wytham woods and at local farms and with that of the road leading to Wytham Mill. A well-preserved horse-shoe was found embedded in the structure of the road.

In the photograph, behind the road itself, is a line of white pegs marking the position of a ditch which lay on the east side of the road, running in the same general direction as the mediaeval road and between it and the modern road. The stratigraphy of this ditch was complicated, and it was not possible this season to excavate a complete confirmatory section through the road and ditch. The presence of the ditch, however, was established some 10 yards to the south in trench H, and it was clear from both trenches that the ditch underlay the edge of the road, and stood in a definite stratigraphical relationship to it.

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In trench A, the west edge of the ditch came up sharply on a much steeper gradient than on its east edge; here it just underlay the lip of the road, but it appeared to underlie the road more unequivocally in trench H. Pottery, glazed and unglazed, was recovered at various depths in the silting of the ditch.

Part of the foundations or wall-footings of two buildings or groups of buildings was uncovered in trenches B and C (plan, FIG. 7), west of the road, and contiguous to it. These were evidently constructed in relation to the road. The area in which they lay was littered with heaps and spreads of rubble, and as the wall-footings themselves were very loosely constructed and poorly built, it was at times very difficult to distinguish the actual masonry. This technical difficulty was a feature of the excavation of the domestic buildings or farm buildings as distinct from the church and its related structures, throughout. In trench B, however, the clearly defined rectangular end of a building was eventually uncovered, with wall-footings rather over 2 ft. in width (PLATE IX, A). Inside it, at a slightly lower depth than the surviving top of the exterior wall-footings, were two rectangular corners of masonry or paving, lying back to back, which could not be traced outside the line of the main walls. Their relation to the main structure is as yet obscure. Outside the walls, to the west, were rich deposits of pottery, chiefly, apparently, of the 13th century, and small objects (nails, knives, a gilt bronze mounting, two jettons, etc.). In trench C, a right-angled corner of paving or flooring was exposed, edged with large shaped or straight-edged pieces of limestone rubble, the interior being floored, crazy-pavement fashion, with flattish pieces of field rubble trodden level. A fragment of similar flooring was found immediately to the west of the building in trench B just described, and a similar paved interior floor was also found in the domestic building in the lower field (p. 36).

Elsewhere in trench C a peculiar arrangement of walls was revealed. Two parallel lines of wall-footings about 3 ft. 6 ins. apart and 25 ft. long were joined together by a cross wall at what was apparently their northern end, and had a third wall radiating out from them in a northerly direction. The footings of this third wall ran across a small ditch which must have antedated the wall. This ditch was rich in pottery and contained the restorable fragments of several large vessels, including a pitcher with thumb-pressed base and a very large flat dish, both of which came from immediately beneath the wall-footings, thus giving a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the building. Throughout this length of trench C a good deal of pottery and some small objects were excavated from below the débris of the collapsed walls, and the pottery, when it is possible to study it, should give an indication of the period at which the building fell into disuse. In fact, insubstantial and heavily damaged and robbed though these buildings were, they were all surrounded by rich pottery deposits,



and a further season, in which they could be completely excavated, should yield not only complete ground-plans but also the terminal dates of the structures.

The wall-footings of all the buildings associated with domestic remains (pottery, charcoal from fires, animal bones, and small objects such as knives, nails, metal fittings, buckles, brooches, etc.) were not taken down to bedrock, but lay directly on the soft soil at a depth of some 18 ins. This, and the absence of mortar remains and of any kind of binding suggest loosely-built and inferior dry stone structures. The foundations of the church (p. 37) by contrast were well mortared and well preserved and rested on bedrock gravel.

The remaining chief find of interest in the upper field was a large, roughly cobbled area, opening out from the road on its east side, just south of trench A (see the plan, FIG. 7). Most of an area of 40 ft. by 30 ft. was exposed (PLATE IX, D) but soundings suggested that the total area was some 70 ft. by 40 ft. The area was roughly and loosely paved with unshaped lumps of field-rubble and with kidney stones. A few fragments of mediaeval pottery were picked off the surface, and at the north edge a pit or ditch fairly rich in pottery, which, when followed out, may lead under the paved area, was partially excavated. In the photograph a modern field drain can be seen running obliquely in a straight line across the paved area. The insertion of such drains, which were encountered everywhere, added considerably to the mutilation of the site and to the difficulty of interpretation.

In the lower field a third domestic building was located and partly excavated. It lies on the north edge or bank of the chief depression (PLATE VIII) in the southern half of the lower field, the wall excavated lying parallel with the depression. A trench put across the depression failed to locate any metalling to suggest that it might have carried a path or road, but struck a wall on the opposite or southern bank, overlying a pit containing quantities of charcoal. This wall apparently indicates yet another building on the opposite side of the depression. The alignment of these buildings in relation to this depression shows it to be a mediaeval feature, perhaps an open ditch, stream bed, or unpaved track. At the base of the oolite which caps the Wytham hills springs gush out on all sides. Several such may well have intersected the village and this depression may have carried one. On the north bank of the depression (PLATE X, B) 50 ft. of comparatively well constructed wall was exposed, with a roughly paved floor opening out to the south. On this floor were two areas where the paving was burnt red and blackened with charcoal. One hearth consisted of a deposit, some 3 ins. to 4 ins. thick, of burnt red earth and charcoal containing a few fragments of cooking pottery. Further fragments of mediaeval pottery, some glazed, were collected from the surface of the paving, and underneath the west end of the wall a pit was excavated. It contained, besides

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charcoal and bones, fragments of a great number of basins of coarse, soft, gritty ware with shallow sides and a variety of types of incurving rims. Part of a similar type of dish was found on the site of the Bodleian extension.<sup>1</sup> This building was the best preserved of the domestic buildings located; it is securely dated by stratified pottery, and is aligned on one of the surface features of the site.

The chief success of the work of 1939 was the location of the church. It will be recalled that the church was described in 1439 as collapsed, and that then the only two inhabited buildings in the village were a long distance from the church and from one another.

The position of the church is shown on the plan and can be recognised on the air-photograph (PLATE VIII). Only the foundations of the walls survive, but as these are well constructed, well preserved and solidly bedded on the gravel the recovery of a complete plan should be only a matter of time. The church was apparently quite small. It had an apse at the east end, and an extension or side chapel of some kind to the north; it was roofed with stone slates, it had stained glass in the windows, and there were burials under the chancel floor. PLATE IX, B shows the foundation courses of the north wall. Curiously, though the eastern end of the mound, which can be seen in the air-photograph in line with and on the near side of the big horse-shoe shaped depression, is rounded in a semi-circle, the apse of the church lies eccentrically to the rounded end of the mound. Close against the north wall of the church in trench J (PLATE X, C) was discovered a skeleton with knees flexed outwards, identified by Captain C. Musgrave as that of a child of seven. This lay in turn over the knees and hips of a skeleton of a woman, but as the two were separated by a layer of earth, 4 ins. of earth separating the skull of the child from the woman's skeleton, the two burials were apparently not contemporaneous. Disposed around the adult skeleton was a number of iron coffin nails, with fragments of oak rusted to their heads, one of which can be seen *in situ* at the point of the trowel in PLATE X, C. No traces of fabric of any kind, or of wood other than that rusted to the nail-heads, were found.

Also in trench J, but some 4 ft. to the south of these skeletons, was a second pair of burials. The bones of a primary male burial had been bundled aside without ceremony and a second male skeleton, that of an elderly cripple, inserted in the same grave (PLATE X, D). The spinal cord of the latter was in a diseased condition, the vertebrae in the upper part of the spine being fused together and the whole backbone lined with bony excrescences. The spine curved forward in the shoulders and neck, the knees were bent up and the knee-joints excessively

<sup>1</sup>Cp. *Oxoniensis*, IV, 128, fig. 27, 1, and references to other parallels *ad loc.*

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swollen, and the bones of the hand and the left foot were diseased, the phalanges being withered to sharp points at their extremities. Mr. G. R. Girdlestone (late Nuffield Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery), who saw the skeleton *in situ*, said that the man must have suffered from acute rheumatoid arthritis, and that the condition of the phalanges was consistent with a suggestion that the man might have been a leper. If so, his burial in a place of honour in the church requires some explaining.

PLATE IX, B, shows the area in which the four burials were discovered excavated to bedrock-gravel. To the right are the foundation courses of the north wall. The section shows alternate mud and mortar layers stratified upon a one-time surface level, the sequence of mortar layers perhaps indicating progress in the construction of the church in successive seasons, punctuated by winters of structural inactivity. There was no trace of any floor, or even of the original floor-level. The rubble layer below the modern turf-line consists of collapsed material from the walls and roof, including stone slates and stained glass. It is remarkable that there was no trace of any flooring of any kind, and apart from the deeply buried foundation-courses, very little trace of the walls. Floor slabs (if any) and good stone must have been extensively robbed and the rubble widely scattered. That the church was more than razed to the ground is clear from the fact that to find the wall-footings it was necessary to excavate to a depth of 18 ins., whereas the surviving tops of the paths, roads, and walls of domestic buildings were much closer to the surface.

To the south of the burial area and outside the south wall of the church, the foundations of a small structure about 4 ft. square were uncovered (PLATE IX, C). The masonry was the best encountered on the site. The wall-footings, very solidly built, were taken down to a depth of 2 ft. into the natural gravel, 4 ft. 10 ins. below the modern surface, and were backed up against the natural gravel. The walls stood to a maximum height of 2 ft., and appeared to be slightly corbelled inwards, suggesting a sort of beehive structure. The trodden gravel floor, originally reached by a flight of narrow steps, was slightly concave, and localised in the centre was a layer of greyish silt or deposit containing traces of charcoal. The purpose of this well constructed little structure, apparently connected with the church and totally free from domestic refuse or remains, is obscure. It appeared to be too shallow to have served as a well.

Layers charged with rubble to the north of the north wall of the church suggested that there was here a chapel or extension of some kind, but no wall-foundations were encountered. Further wall-foundations were found in a second trench, L, across the body of the church and parallel with trench J, but their disposition did not appear to agree with those in trench J and so provided further indication of an asymmetrical alignment of the church within the mound.



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The wall-footings were deep in the gravel and of massive construction, and one wall overlay a pit, unfortunately devoid of pottery.

To the south of the church a flattish area of ground is probably the site of the graveyard, but no digging has yet been attempted here. Well-dated mediaeval skeletons are rare finds. In his 'Anthropology of Mediaeval Oxford' (*Oxoniensia*, II, 118 ff.) the late Dr. Dudley Buxton pointed out that 'so far, all our mediaeval bones, except the very small group from Faringdon Clump, come from urban areas.' The discovery of a dated mediaeval cemetery belonging to a village community, such as Seacourt was, would therefore be of paramount importance, more especially if the burials could be assigned to more than one chronological group.

In general the area south of the church mound and on its southern slopes proved to have features which distinguish it from the church and the domestic buildings. Judging from the finds in trenches J and L, this part of the site is full of early pits; one underlay the main wall of the church, others the floor of the church, and others again apparently the area of the church precincts. Yet the area seems, on the whole, devoid of domestic remains, such as bones, pottery, charcoal, and the like, for the fillings of the pits are mostly sterile. Pebbled surfaces overlying these pits are also a feature of this part of trench J. Some 50 ft. south of the church, a length of such pebbling was exposed to a width of 4 ft. and a length of at least 25 ft. Whether this was artificial or not was never finally decided. It consisted of a single poorly-defined layer of pebbles and kidney stones just below the turf-line. Similar kidney stones were used sporadically in the surfacing of the courtyard in the upper field, and to the north of the church a similar surface, here apparently a path, was uncovered (p. 40). From the surface of the pebbling south of the church a number of small fragments of mediaeval pottery was collected, and the fact that it overlay a ditch and several pits showed that it was not an undisturbed geological feature. Furthermore it appeared to terminate at a narrow, loosely—but plentifully—mortared line of rubble and stones 15 ins. wide, which ran obliquely across the trench, approximately parallel with the axis of the church. This line of rubble and mortar was too shallow and too insubstantial to have carried a superstructure. It may have been a low boundary wall delimiting the precincts of the church.

Further to the south there was a pit sunk to a depth of about 10 ft. in a pocket of pure sand, the sides being undercut at the bottom. The filling was uniform and sterile. This pit may have been dug by the church-builders to obtain ingredients for mortar.

At the south end of trench J was more rough pebbling mingled with a few lumps of field rubble. An area of about 10 ft. by 12 ft. was uncovered, but its limits were not reached. A few fragments of mediaeval pottery were recovered

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from the floor surface, which showed traces of burning in places and contained a hearth. The floor also overlay three small pits, one of which was excavated, and some stratified deposits. These pebble seams, whether they are *bona fide* mediaeval features or merely a layer of drift from the ruins of the village, are a marked feature of this part of the site.

To the north of the church what was apparently a pebbled path was uncovered in the bottom of the depression running east and west from the road to the end of the horseshoe-shaped depression. The centre of this path had been dug up for the insertion of a modern field-drain along the line of the depression, and a few lumps of field rubble brought to its surface. On the northern bank of the depression was a stretch of massive stones 9 ft. wide, with what appeared to be a post-hole near its southern edge. The trial trench of 1938 showed that this pan of stone, the interpretation of which must remain obscure for the time being, runs from the lip of the horseshoe-shaped depression right back to the road, a distance of some 120 feet. As, however, that trench was only 4 ft. wide, it failed to locate either edge of the pan.

A considerable number of exploratory trenches were struck in other parts of the site, and these located some masonry and provided useful negative evidence.

## CONCLUSION

Although the site proved difficult to excavate and interpret owing to the extensive robbing of its stonework and the mutilation caused by the insertion of field drains, it seems clear that scientific excavation can in time produce a coherent archaeological picture and that the first season's results amply justify further work on the site. It should be possible to recover complete ground plans of domestic buildings and of the church, and details of the architecture and domestic system with which to reconstruct the physical environment of the mediaeval peasant. Moreover, as the site abounds in stratified deposits of pottery and small finds, all the buildings located should be datable. There are also many surface features still unexplored, notably a ditched rectangular enclosure on the bank of the stream, now covered with willows but visible on the air-photograph.

But, as a dated site, Seacourt cannot help yielding results to justify excavation quite apart from the architectural and skeletal remains. The dating of mediaeval small objects, brooches, ornaments, buckles, fittings of various kinds, shears, horseshoes, nails, etc., is notoriously vague. Any types from Seacourt can be accepted with certainty as not later than the first quarter of the 15th century; and as almost all those so far found have been associated with pottery

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or found in stratified deposits they can be even more closely dated. As far as pottery itself is concerned, Seacourt, it is clear from the first season's work, promises results of first-rate importance. With the exception of an important group from Bodiam Castle<sup>1</sup>, very little dated pottery from the 14th and 15th centuries has yet been published, while no dated pottery is known for the last three-quarters of the 14th century. Fortunately, enough is known in Oxford of the local mediaeval pottery to make it possible to separate from the rich pottery deposits at Seacourt all the pottery up to *c.* 1325. The remaining pottery will be attributable to the following 100 years and should be capable of more detailed typological subdivision within those limits, thus providing dated material to cover for the first time the chief gap in our knowledge of later mediaeval pottery.

<sup>1</sup> *Sussex Arch. Coll.*, LXXVI, 222-30.

W.

N.

PLATE VIII  
E.



AIR-VIEW OF THE SITE OF THE MEDIAEVAL VILLAGE OF SEACOURT, BERKS.

The village (pp. 31 ff.) extended from the copse on the high ground on the W. to the bank of the Seacourt stream on the E.  
The mediaeval road may be seen as a depression running W. of and parallel to the modern road.

*Ph. G. W. G. Allen*





A



B



C



D

# SEACOURT, BERKS.

- A. Corner of wall-foundations of domestic building in trench B (p. 35), W. of the mediaeval road.
- B. Site of the two graves (p. 37) within the church ; on the right, the foundation-courses of the N. wall (p. 38) ; behind, section through the church floor, with layer of collapsed debris above (p. 38).
- C. Foundations of small square structure (p. 38) outside S. wall of church.
- D. Cobbled area S. of trench A (p. 36), E. of the mediaeval road.

*Phh. A, C., R. B. Wade      B, D., D. B. Harden.*



PLATE X



A



B



C



D

SEACOURT, BERKS.

- A. Section across the mediaeval road (p. 34).  
 B. Section across domestic building found in trench Q (p. 36) on the low ground near the stream ; note pit in foreground underlying the wall.  
 C. Skeletons of a child and of a woman in a grave inside the N. wall of the church (p. 37).  
 D. Skeletons of two men, one a cripple, in a grave within the church (p. 37 f.).

*Phh.* A., L. S. Harley. B, D., R. B. Wade. C., Capt C. Musgrave.