

A Saxon Cemetery near the Village of Harwell, Berkshire

By JOAN R. KIRK AND KENNETH MARSHALL

DURING the month of September, 1955, an almost complete pot was brought into the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, by Mr. R. Gregory. The pot, which had a large hole in one side,¹ had been discovered by workmen during the excavation of a drainage trench leading to a septic tank in the garden of a bungalow which was being built for Mr. Gregory close to the village of Harwell.

This pot (PL. I, A) is of an early Saxon type and of an unusual design. It seemed likely that the pot was not a cremation urn but had constituted an offering in an inhumation grave, and Mr. Gregory's kind permission was obtained to explore the area by a series of trenches in the hope of finding this or other graves. The excavation was carried out on behalf of the Ashmolean Museum by Mr. and Mrs. K. Marshall in October 1955.²

THE SITE (FIGS. 7, 8)

The site (FIG. 7) is some two hundred yards to the south of the A 417 road (Wantage to Reading) and on the western side of a narrow track known as the Hollow Way which runs south from A 417 on to the downs. The main road, which lies almost at the foot of the slope of the downs and immediately above the village of Harwell, may be considered as traversing the geological boundary between the Cretaceous formations of the Lower Chalk on the southern side of the road and the Greensand on the northern side. Harwell is probably a very old settlement-site and, as its name suggests, is a spring line village.³ The ancient trackway, the Icknield Way, passes along the summit of the chalk downs a short distance to the south. The country to the north, which is for practical purposes a part of the Thames valley, is notable for a

¹ The pot has now been skilfully restored in the Ashmolean Museum laboratory.

² The excavators wish to express to Mr. Gregory their appreciation of his kindness and assistance in many ways, including the loan of his trailer caravan.

³ From Haranwyle—the stream by or coming from Horn Hill; E. Ekwall, *Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Oxford 1940), p. 213.

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considerable number of Saxon cemeteries, some of which contained many burials.⁴

As can be seen from the site plan (FIG. 8), the ground annexed to the new bungalow is almost triangular in shape, the bungalow itself being situated

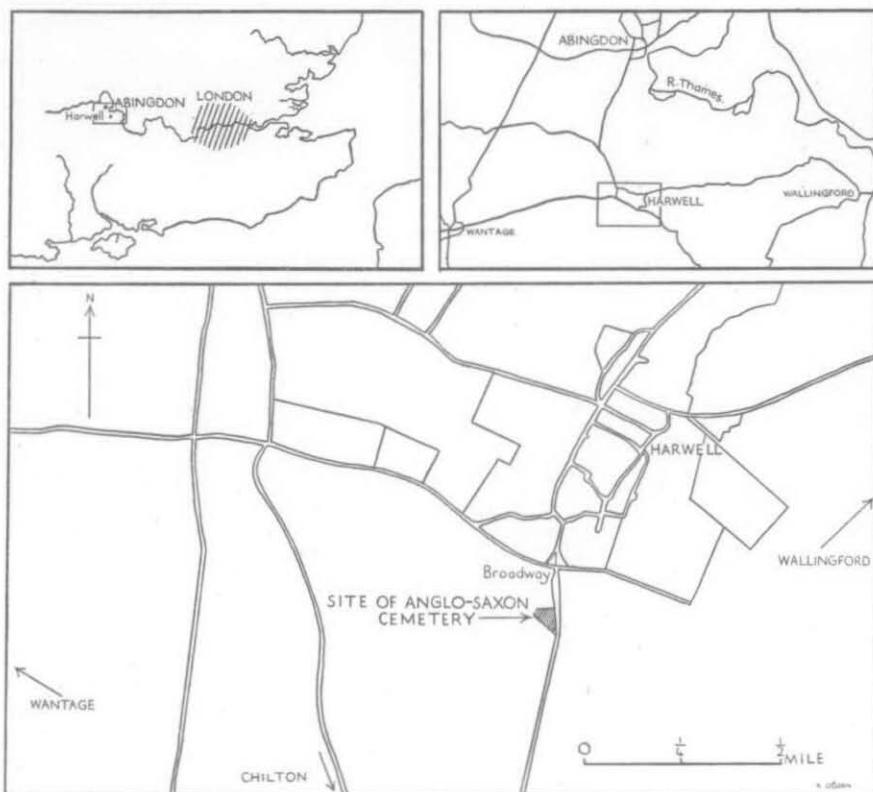


FIG. 7
HARWELL, BERKS.

Maps showing position of site of Anglo-Saxon Cemetery.

Based on O.S. maps with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.

in the southern acute angle of the triangle. A drainage trench traversing a small area in the rear of the building (i.e. on its western side) led to a septic tank on the western boundary fence. The pot was found on the northern

⁴ Joan R. Kirk, 'Anglo-Saxon Cremation and Inhumation in the Upper Thames Valley in Pagan Times' in *Dark-Age Britain : Studies presented to E. T. Leeds*, ed. D. B. Harden (London, 1956), pp. 123 ff.

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side of the drainage trench near the tank. A number of bones had also been found, but had been put back into the trench when it was refilled.

Before excavation began, the garden (FIG. 9) was divided into squares with sides 10 feet long, the western wall of the bungalow, which runs almost exactly north to south, being used as a base line. The squares were lettered from south to north and numbered from east to west, so that each had a letter and a numeral.

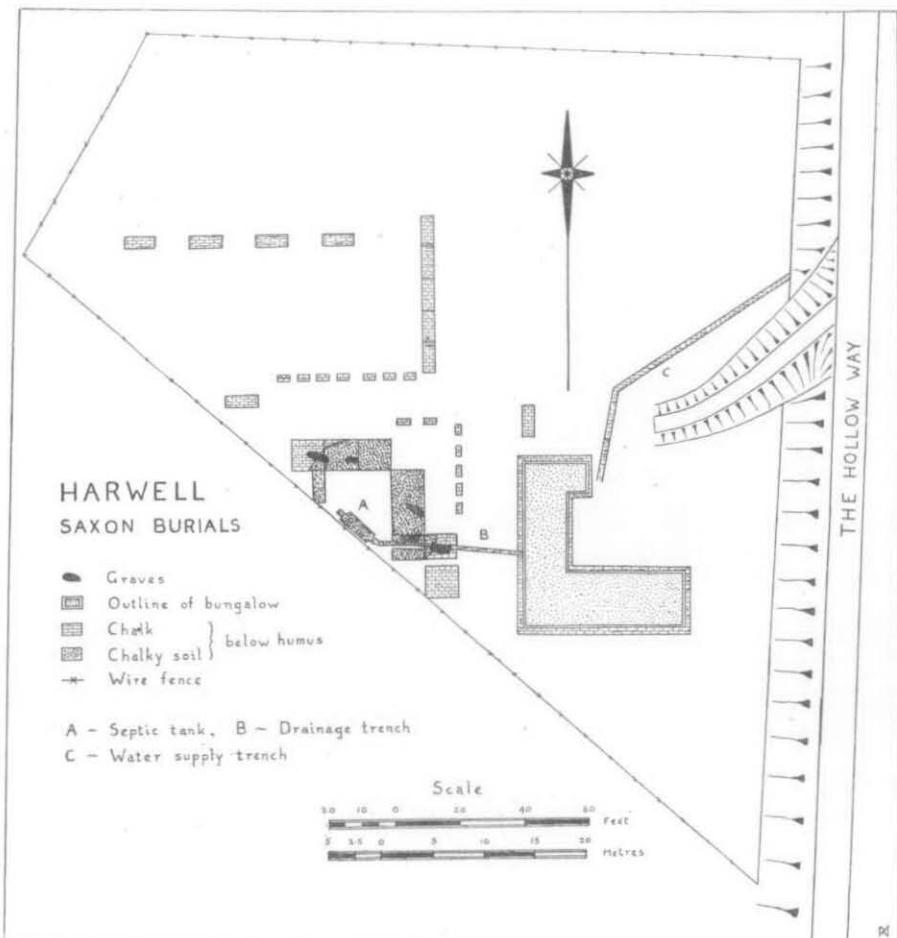


FIG. 8
HARWELL, BERKS.
Plan of site of Anglo-Saxon Cemetery.

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THE BURIALS (FIG. 9)

GRAVES I AND 2

The rubble filling of the drainage trench was cleared out down to the pipe, an average depth of 3 feet. A hole was immediately apparent in the side from which the pot had been removed, and 12 ft. to the east of this point

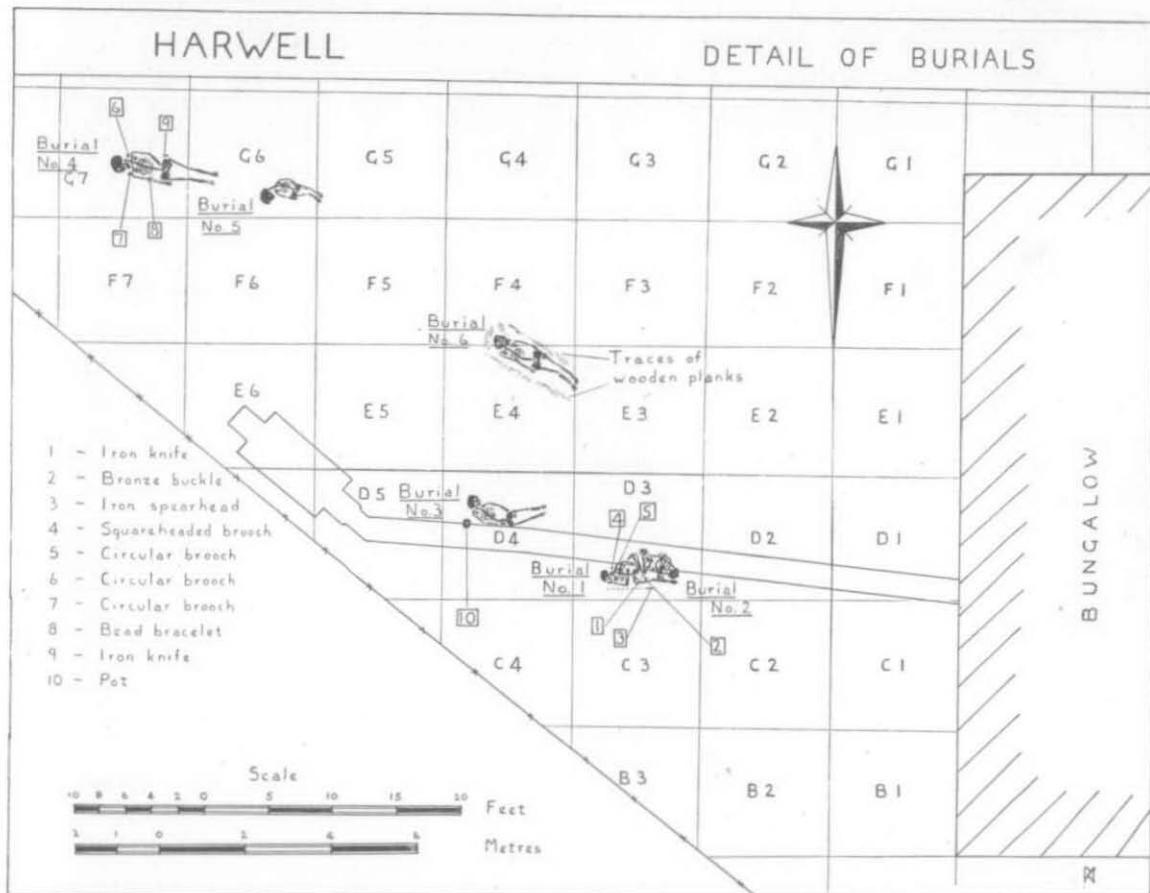


FIG. 9
HARWELL, BERKS.
Detailed plan showing position of graves in Anglo-Saxon Cemetery.

a human skeleton had been neatly bisected by the workmen, as could be seen from bones projecting on the southern side of the trench. Parts of a cranium, vertebrae and a sacrum were found in the loose builders' rubble with which

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the trench had been refilled. The remainder of the skull could be seen in the side of the cut some 2 ft. below the surface. On clearing the area above the bones which were still in position this burial was found to be lying in a grave cut from well-bedded chalk at its eastern end; but the western end had been sunk through a deposit of chalky earth. When the remains were uncovered they were found to be parts of two skeletons lying one above the other, the upper with its head to the east and the lower with its head to the west. The upper skeleton had been badly damaged when the drainage trench was cut, and only parts of the cranium, the left arm and shoulder and the knees remained in place, preserved because the body had been buried in a contracted position. No grave goods were associated with this burial (no. 2).

The lower burial in the first grave (no. 1) was lying on its back in an extended position and only the left arm and part of the feet had been disturbed by the cutting of the drainage trench. A number of finds were made in association with this skeleton and their relative positions are shown on the detailed plan of the graves (FIG. 9). In the earth immediately above the centre of the body were an iron knife and a small, bronze buckle. An iron javelin-head was also found, in a line with which, westwards, faint traces of wood were seen reaching downwards at an acute angle to the horizontal for a distance of $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet. A small gilt-bronze square-headed brooch was found above the left clavicle, and above the fourth cervical vertebra was a bronze applied-brooch. These two burials lay in the southern part of square D 3.

The southern side of the next square to the west, D 4, was then trenched. No trace of bedded chalk was found in this excavation, which was barren to a depth of 6 ft. The chalk detritus found in this cutting can only be considered as a natural deposit, probably formed in some manner by the solution of the parent rock. Although the Greensand boundary lies very close, it seems unlikely that there is any structural relationship between it and this deposit. It will be observed from the site plan (FIG. 8) that the 'dissolved' chalk is found in a rough circle corresponding with the area of the burials, all of which are partly or entirely within its bounds. It would appear that advantage was taken of the easier working conditions afforded by this area when graves had to be dug. Deposits of the so-called chroritic marls are found above the Lower Chalk on the Berkshire Downs, having been formed by the dissolution of the chalk, and it seems likely that this condition exists at this particular site. The excavation made for the septic tank, which was continued to a depth of 9 ft., was entirely in unbedded marl down to 7 ft., at which point it passed into well-bedded chalk containing typical fossils.

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GRAVE 3

The northern part of square D 4 was next cleared, since it was in the builders' trench passing through this square that the pot was found. It was discovered that the pot had been located beside the right shoulder of a skeleton which lay on its back in an extended position with the head to the west. The lower ribs were set aslant to the rest of the body, which is why this burial had been largely undisturbed by the builders. The grave yielded no further finds.

GRAVE 4

Linear trenches broken by baulks were then cut from north to south and from east to west across the garden area where it was not obscured by spoil heaps from the foundations of the bungalow or by newly cultivated land. In square G 7 a fourth skeleton was discovered, lying supine and extended and more than 6 ft. long, on a roughly east-west axis like the others and with its head to the west. Bronze disc-brooches were found above each clavicle, and at the lower end of the right humerus were 15 glass beads, two small hollow bronze tubes and a bronze clip (?). When reassembled these were seen to form a small bracelet. A small iron knife lay beside the left pelvic bone.

GRAVE 5

The clearing of the previous burial entailed trenching into the adjacent square to the east, G 6, and during this work an immature and badly decayed skeleton was uncovered. It was only possible to save fragments of the cranium, vertebrae and long bones and no grave goods of any kind were found. The remains again lay from east to west with the head to the west in an extended supine position.

GRAVE 6

The last burial found was in the north-east corner of square E 4. Its position was similar to those of nos. 4 and 5, but it lay on an axis from north-west to south-east. Traces of wooden planks were uncovered, extending almost the whole length of the body at either side and on a level with the highest part of the skeleton, and also underneath the head and shoulders and running across beyond the top of the skull. The wood was very much decayed, but the traces showed that it belonged to a very coarse-grained species. It seems likely that this burial was made in some form of coffin or at least that the body was laid on and surrounded by planking. There were no traces

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above the skeleton to suggest that it had been covered by a wooden lid. No grave goods were found.

It is thought possible that there may be one more burial in the area of square E 5, which was left untrenched because it was covered by a very large pile of broken chalk, the cost of removing which would have been prohibitive. It may be possible to examine this small area at a later date when the building is complete and the spoil has been removed. There may also be further burials in the field to the west of Mr. Gregory's garden.

All the burials were found at a small depth below the surface, the deepest, no. 4, being $3\frac{1}{2}$ ft. and the shallowest, nos. 1 and 2, being $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft. At all other points where trenching was carried out, away from the area of the marl deposit, natural bedded chalk was reached at depths of 2 ft. or less.

THE FINDS⁵

GRAVE I (PL. I, B, C; FIG. 10, a-e)

- a. *Knife*, iron ; the blade with flat back curving in towards point, the cutting edge somewhat concave ; pointed tang. L. $4\frac{3}{4}$ in.
- b. *Javelin-head* or *spear-head*, iron ; short blade, quadrangular in section, joining without a break the circular open socket ; remains of original surface visible in places. L. $6\frac{1}{6}$ in.

This weapon is unusual in shape for an Anglo-Saxon spear-head, and, in fact, resembles more closely a Roman *pilum*. The nearest parallel so far discovered was found in the late fourth-century cemetery at Furfooz, Belgium (J. Nenquin, *La Nécropole de Furfooz* (Brugge 1953), fig. 18, J. 15). Another, rather similar, but with binding round the junction of blade and socket, was found at Charnay in Burgundy (H. Baudot, 'Sépultures des Barbares en Bourgogne', *Commission des Antiquités du Département de la Côte d'Or*, V (1857-60), pl. ii, no. 10) and both suggest that the Harwell piece should be early in date. Other objects from the same grave, however, would imply that it may not be earlier than the sixth century.

- c. *Buckle*, tinned bronze ; oval loop ; flat rectangular plate, doubled over, with iron rivets, one of which remains, in the outer corners ; iron pin. L. $\frac{6}{8}$ in., W. of plate $\frac{7}{16}$ in., L. of loop $\frac{3}{4}$ in.

Probably Kentish in origin.

⁵ The finds have been presented to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, by Mr. Gregory (nos. A.M. 1955. 464-472).

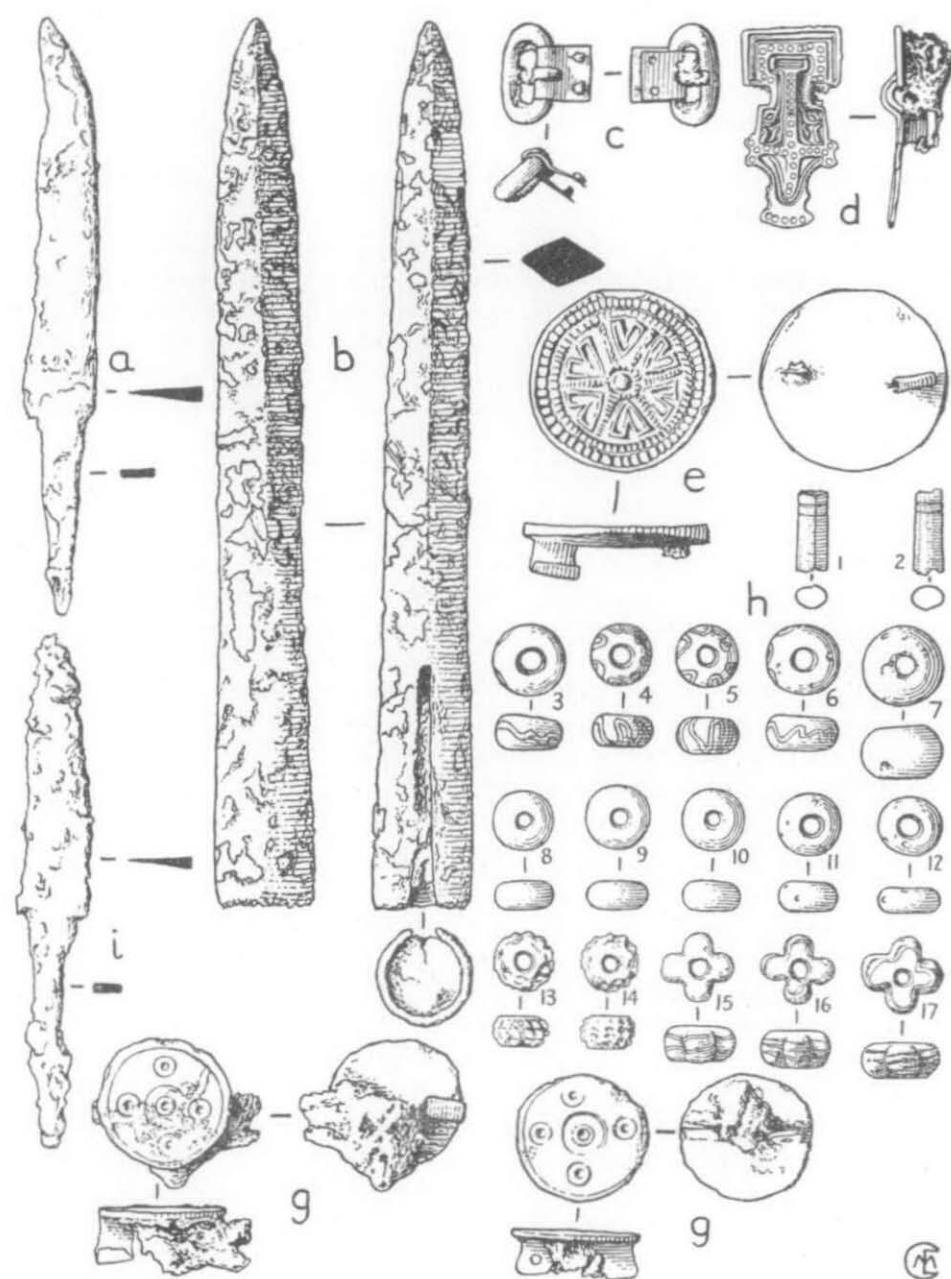


FIG. 10
HARWELL, BERKS.
Objects from graves 1 (a-e) and 4 (g-i).
Scale : $\frac{1}{2}$

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- d. Brooch, gilt-bronze ; square-headed, with cruciform foot ; animal ornament on upper side of arms of cross ; convex foot-plate ; head-plate, cross and foot-plate decorated with tiny stamped circles ; remains of iron pin, much corroded. L. $1\frac{9}{16}$ in.

This is a well-known Kentish type, its closest parallel being one from Chatham Lines, Kent, Tumulus II, in the Ashmolean Museum (Cat. 1836, p. 128, 203b). E. T. Leeds in *Early Anglo-Saxon Art and Archaeology*, p. 52, stated that the type is essentially a product of the Kentish school, and that such brooches are recognized concomitants of early sixth century Kentish graves. From Leeds's plate (*op. cit.*, pl. xv) it is clear that while some brooches were exported direct from Kent, inferior local copies were also being made. The Harwell brooch, while probably too rough to be an export, is at least very much closer to the originals than others from the upper Thames valley. The four examples from Chatham Lines, Harwell, Abingdon and Brighthampton (pl. I, c) seem to show the deterioration in style as the type moves further away from the source.

- e. Brooch, bronze ; 'applied' type, without rim ; flat back-plate with pin-catch (pin missing) ; thin bronze applied disc (restored into position), with embossed decoration of a 6-pointed star with heart-shaped motives between the arms ; milled border. D. $1\frac{3}{8}$ in.

This shows no sign of having had a separate rim soldered to the back-plate, and is not, therefore, a typical Saxon applied brooch. The back-plate, moreover, is flat, whereas for the majority of the applied brooches it is curved to the shape of a saucer-brooch. The flat applied brooch goes back to Roman times (cf. *Oxoniensia*, xvii/xviii (1952-53), 57 f.) and appears in Saxon graves of the fourth century (F. Roeder, *Die Sachsischen Schälenfibeln der Völkerwanderungszeit*, Göttinger Beiträge zur deutschen Kulturgeschichte, 1927). A pair without rims, but with curved back-plates, were found in an early grave at Dorchester, Oxon. (*Oxoniensia*, xvii/xviii, 69 ff.).

The design of this brooch, however, is most closely paralleled by that on an applied brooch from the sixth-century cemetery at Guildown, near Guildford, Surrey (*Surrey Archaeol. Collections*, xxxix (1931), pl. xii, 2b). Leeds places the pattern on this brooch at the end of a series of designs springing from a simple floriated cross, and dates it to the sixth century (*Antiquaries Journal*, xiii (1933), 247-8, pl. xxxvi, i). It seems, therefore, that, despite its lack of rim and its flat back-plate, this specimen is unlikely to be much earlier than the sixth century.

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GRAVE 3 (PL. I, A ; FIG. II, no. 1)

f. Pot,⁶ hard grey ware ; a round-bellied *Buckelurne* with well-moulded rim and hollow pedestal base ; four strong neck-lines above a raised slashed collar, below which are eight hollow bosses separated by groups of vertical lines. The bosses are alternately plain and surmounted with applied slashed strips forming a circle round the boss with a cross over it. Above the plain bosses and adjacent vertical lines is a somewhat irregular line of stamps (an eleven-point star in circle) and the decorated zone is bounded below by a single horizontal line. H. 6½ in.

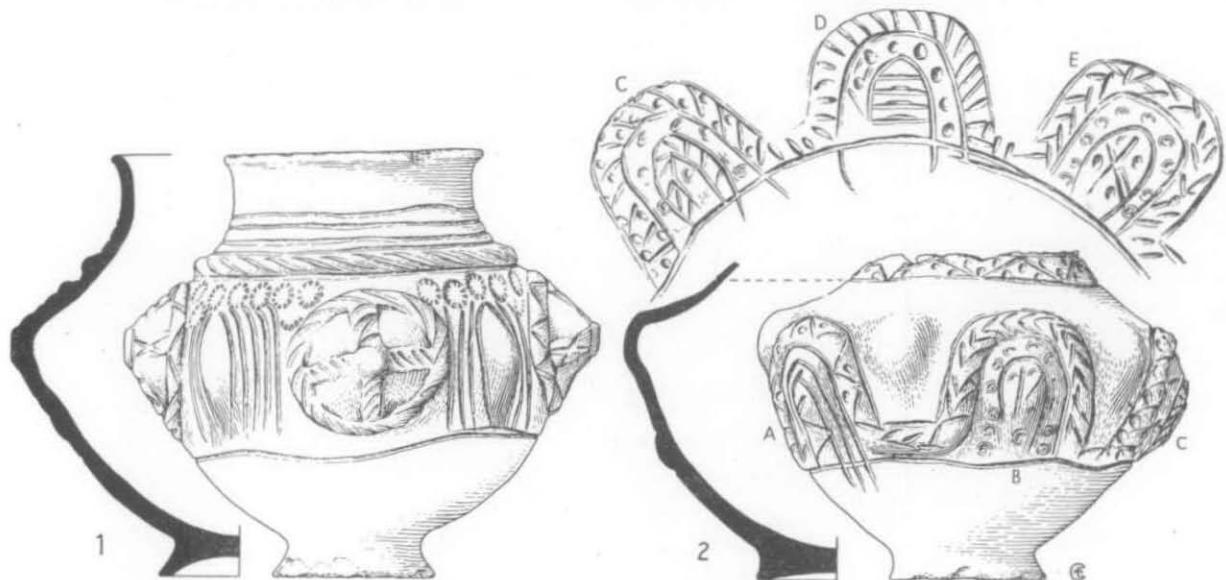


FIG. II
DECORATED ANGLO-SAXON POTS.

(1) Harwell, Berks., grave 3 ; (2) Oseney, Oxford (Ash. Mus.).
Scale : $\frac{1}{2}$

Although in form, fabric and decoration this pot clearly belongs to the class of elaborate bossed urns characteristic of Saxon ceramics in the fifth century, both on the continent and in this country, it has several unusual features, and nothing exactly like it is on record. It seems to combine elements derived from several sources. Plain bosses with adjacent groups of vertical lines are characteristic of Anglian shoulder-boss pottery

⁶ We are much indebted to Mr. J. N. L. Myres for providing these detailed comments on this pot.

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in the early stages of the panel style, but in this instance the panels are not left blank, but are filled with large circular bosses carrying elaborate slashed decoration on applied strips. This feature, together with the stamped ornament and the well-moulded foot, links it more closely with the Saxon *Buckelurnen* of Plettke's types A7b and A7β (A. Plettke, *Ursprung und Ausbreitung der Angeln und Sachsen* (1921), pp. 46-7) whose home is in the Elbe-Weser region. But it is not easy to parallel anywhere the use of applied strips forming a cross over the bosses. Circular bosses are not infrequently surmounted by groups of crossed lines in continental Saxon pottery. Published examples can be quoted from the Galgenberg near Cuxhaven (K. Waller, *Der Galgenberg bei Cuxhaven*, (1938), pl. xxi, 2),



FIG. 12
MAP SHOWING DISTRIBUTION OF ENGLISH
BUCKELURNEN WITH FEET.
(After *Antiquaries J.*, xxxiv (1954), p. 202, fig. 1, with additions.)

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and from Brinkum near Bremen (E. Grohne, *Mahndorf*, (1953), p. 102, fig. 34 (a)), and there was also an instance from Westerwanna among the urns from that cemetery formerly at Bremen. English examples have been noted at Girton, Cambridge (*Antiquity*, xi (1937), 392, pl. ii). But in none of these is the cross formed of raised strips.

This urn is also an interesting addition to the recently published list of English *Buckelurnen* with feet (FIG. 12).⁷ That list showed a distribution running from Norfolk and Suffolk through Cambridge and Bedfordshire to the Thames at Oseney. The addition of Harwell carries the range of the type a little further to the south of the upper Thames valley than was previously known. Its nearest neighbour, the Oseney urn (FIG. 11, no. 2),⁸ is in fact in several respects the most similar to it, the two being closely alike both in shape and size. They have a basic similarity of design in the use both of alternating plain and decorated bosses and of raised slashed strips. On the Oseney urn, however, the strips are not used to make a cross-in-circle on the boss itself, but rather a continuous meander round the pot forming arches over the decorated bosses and loops under the plain ones. Another similarity between the two urns is the rather unusual use of a single horizontal line to demarcate the lower edge of the decorated zone. It is clear that they are closely related and both may be dated with confidence in the second half of the fifth century A.D.

GRAVE 4 (PL. I, B ; FIG. 10, g-i)

- g. *Pair of disc-brooches*, bronze ; flat, with decoration of stamped bull's-eye circlets ; very corroded remains of iron pins. D. 1 in.

A normal type, especially in west Saxon areas.

- h. *String of beads*, comprising : (1, 2), cylindrical bronze ; (3-6), black glass with running zigzag white thread ; (7), large blue glass ; (8-10), plain green glass ; (11, 12), opaque red glass ; (13-14), faience with little knobs all over ; (15-17), 1 green and 2 red-and-white glass with 4 lobes ; also 1 fragmentary blue glass, and a circular piece of bronze, rectangular in section, possibly a clip, as suggested on p. 27.

Glass beads with four lobes similar in shape and technique to nos. 15-17 were found at Abingdon, Berks., with two early cruciform brooches (*Oxoniensia*, vii (1942), 102, pl. viii, c), dated to the end of the fifth century. Similar beads with six or more lobes are known from various cemeteries. The tubular bronze beads resemble similar, but larger, objects found

⁷ J. N. L. Myres in *Antiq. J.*, xxxiv (1954), 201-8. The fine urn from Luton, Beds. (*Antiq. J.*, viii (1928), pl. xxvii, 1) was accidentally omitted from the list and the map in that article.

⁸ *V.C.H. Oxon.*, i, pl. xxviii, e, and *Antiq. J.*, xxxiv (1954), 207, fig. 3, 3.

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'intermingled with beads' at Fairford, Glos. (W. M. Wylie, *Fairford Graves* (1851), p. 16, pl. ix).

- i. *Knife*, iron; similar in shape to (a) in Grave 1, but in bad condition; broken above point; long tang. L. 4 in.

CONCLUSIONS

In general this would appear to be the burial-ground of a small group of people who were living in the area at the end of the fifth and on into the sixth century. They had some connexion with Kent, as proved by the small square-headed brooch and the little buckle, but no more so than is found in other Saxon cemeteries of the upper Thames valley. Although it is not certain whether all the graves have been found, the present number is up to the average for a group situated away from a river.⁹

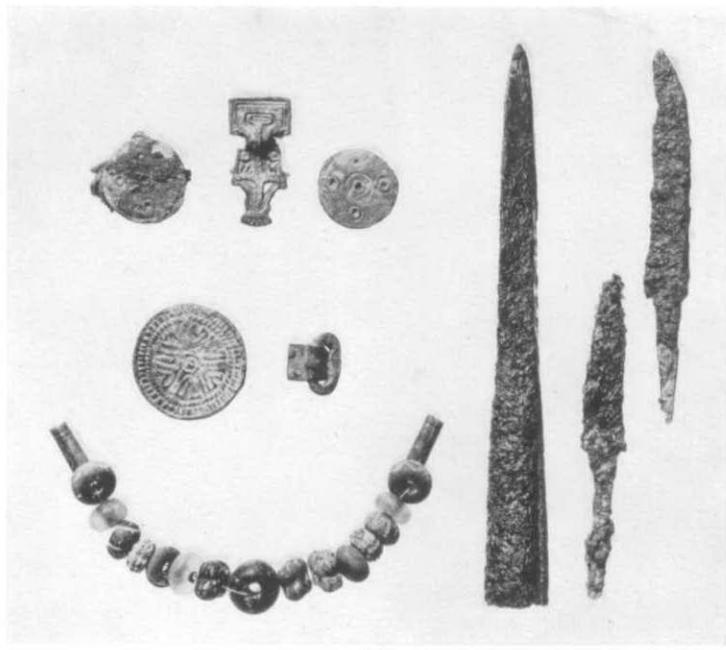
⁹ See J. R. Kirk, *op. cit.* in note 4, fig. 24.



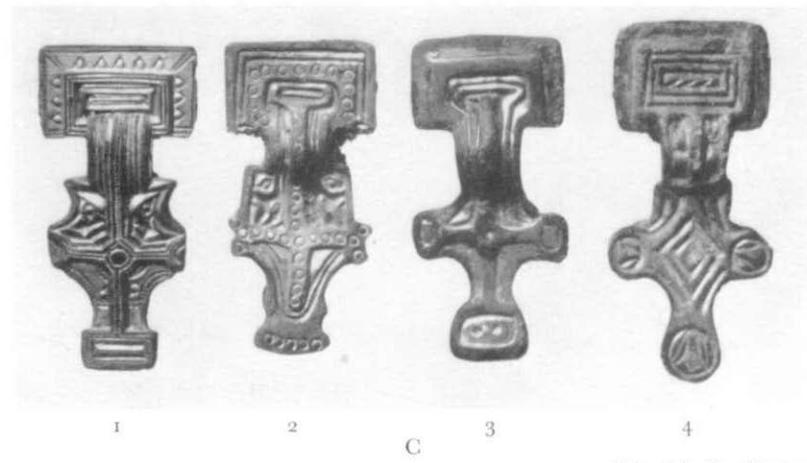
A. HARWELL, BERKS., urn from grave 3.
Scale : $\frac{1}{3}$

B. HARWELL, BERKS., objects from graves 1 and 4.
Scale : $\frac{2}{3}$

C. SMALL SQUARE-HEADED BROOCHES :
1. Chatham Lines, Kent ; 2. Harwell, Berks. ;
3. Abingdon, Berks. ; 4. Brighthampton, Oxon.
(all in the Ashmolean Museum).
Scale : $\frac{1}{3}$



B



C

Phh.: Ashmolean Museum

KIRK AND MARSHALL, SAXON CEMETERY AT HARWELL