

A Cemetery Site at Beacon Hill, near Lewknor

By R. A. CHAMBERS

INTRODUCTION*

IN May 1972 a county civil engineer reported that the mechanical excavation for a drainage ditch (D1, Fig. 1) on the north-eastern side of the motorway had disturbed several human skulls and associated bones. Upon inspection the site was identified as a previously unknown cemetery of uncertain date. The motorway contractors agreed to allow excavation and several weeks of intermittent rescue work was carried out on each of two areas, A and B. Unfortunately the full extent of the cemetery could not be revealed. Residual pottery within the grave fills showed that the excavated area was not in use before the second half of the 4th century A.D.

In this report all depths quoted are from the projected top soil surface.

The cemetery (SU 722972) was at the western foot of a promontory of the Chilterns known as Beacon Hill, half a mile from the present village of Lewknor. The cemetery straddles the present line of the Upper Icknield Way which here passes along a low chalk ridge some 520 ft. above sea level. To the north-west some 120 ft. below lies Lewknor on a flat upland river terrace. To the south-east the Chilterns rise steeply to about 850 ft. above sea level. Within this general area evidence of Romano-British and Saxon occupation has been excavated at a Saxon cemetery site (SU 71659715),¹ and at a Romano-British settlement (SU 717981, M.40, site 11).

The site lay on the Middle Chalk, here only 30-40 cm. below the topsoil surface. Because of its position on the crest of the low ridge that carries the Upper Icknield Way, the cemetery area would probably not have been subjected either to a heavy denudation or to a build-up of the topsoil depth over the last two millennia despite modern ploughing, so the grave depths quoted are probably almost as they were originally.

There was no evidence of boundary ditches for the cemetery to either the north or the west. There were no features definitely related to the cemetery that showed themselves as crop-marks from the air. Some unexplained, semi-linear markings did occur in the adjacent field to the south-west, and more a quarter of a mile away to the south.

The drainage ditch D1 revealed a large ditch or pit F2. This was 4.3 m. wide and was deeper than D1, which was only 1 m. deep. The fill was small chalk rubble mixed with a small amount of topsoil that in section contained no

* I am indebted to Mr. C. J. Young for examining the pottery, and to Mr. John Hazelden of the Soil Survey, England and Wales for geological advice. Also I would like to thank Mr. D. Laycock of the Department of Anatomy, Oxford University, for medical advice and Mrs. J. M. Chambers who typed out the text.

¹ *Oxoniensia*, XXIV (1959), 100-1.

BEACON HILL CEMETERY 1972

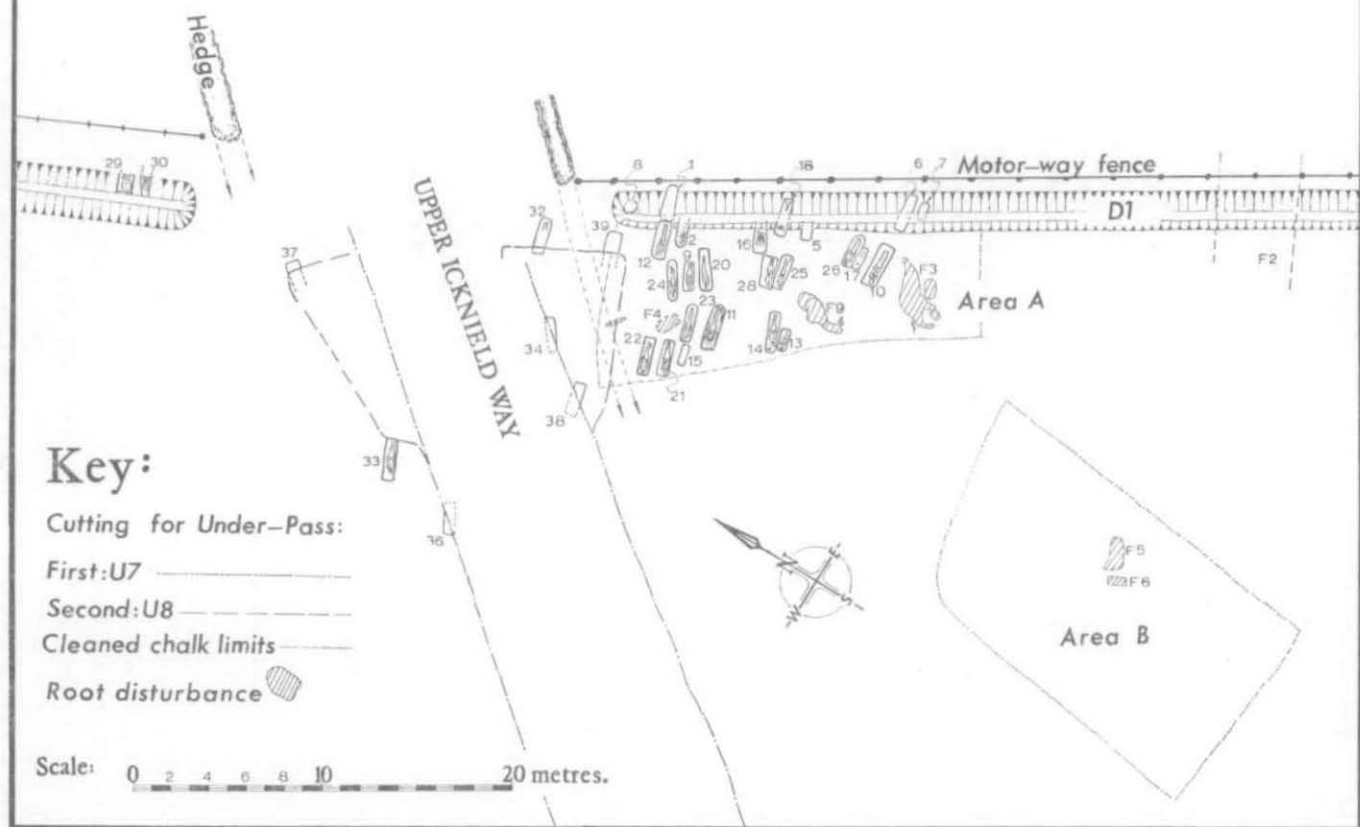


FIG. 1

archaeological material. The extent of this feature to the north-east or south-west of F2 remained unknown. It is important to note that it did not run through area B. The purpose of this feature is unknown and its association with the cemetery is uncertain. It is evident that it was back-filled soon after construction.

THE EXCAVATIONS

Two areas A and B which together totalled approximately 353 square metres, were mechanically cleared to the surface of the natural chalk, into which the lower part of each grave had been cut. This area had already been stripped of top soil by the contractors who had subsequently tipped large heaps of chalk rubble onto it, and this limited the area available for excavation.

Area A, of 150 sq. m., contained 25 graves and 4 major root disturbances, F3-4 and F9. As the fill of both grave and root disturbance in the natural chalk proved similar in appearance, F3-4 and F9 were each excavated in whole or part.

The present hedgerow along the north-east side of the Upper Icknield Way was also traced by its root marks within the cleaned chalk surface.

Area B, of approximately 200 sq. m., lay south of Area A. Apart from two root disturbances, F5 and F6, which were both excavated, there were no other features cut into the chalk.

The underpass cuttings (U7, U8) were excavated mechanically by the contractors, reducing the chance of identifying any burials lying within them. As graves 34, 36 and 38 were not recognized until afterwards it is possible that some unrecorded graves lay entirely within the bounds of U7. A later widening of the ends of the cutting (U8) revealed more graves, 32, 33, 37 and 39. Again unnoticed graves may have been obliterated.

The drainage ditch D1 north-west of the underpass disturbed only two adult graves, 29 and 30. Because of the sloping sides to D1 any adult or child graves would have only been partly destroyed and so it may be assumed that here at least, all the archaeological evidence relevant to the cemetery was still represented.

The grave index will be published in a future *Oxoniensia* pending a skeletal analysis. Only the unusual graves are described in detail.

Thirty-nine separate burials were recorded of which only 17, slightly less than half, lay entirely undisturbed.

Where a grave had been destroyed by modern interference, a single body is here assumed to have been originally deposited supine, in the grave bottom, with its head west. Of the 39 graves, 38 contained supine skeletons with the heads pointing westwards.

All the grave pits were rectangular, except Grave 8, which was circular; this was 1 m. deep by 0.9 m. in diameter, and contained an inverted crouch burial.

The grave pits varied in depth from Grave 9 at 0.48 m. to Grave 23 at 0.96 m. The rest were between 0.61 and 0.86 m. deep.

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Two graves, 28 and 34, each contained a single short-bladed iron knife (FIG. 2). The condition of these graves when found made it impossible to

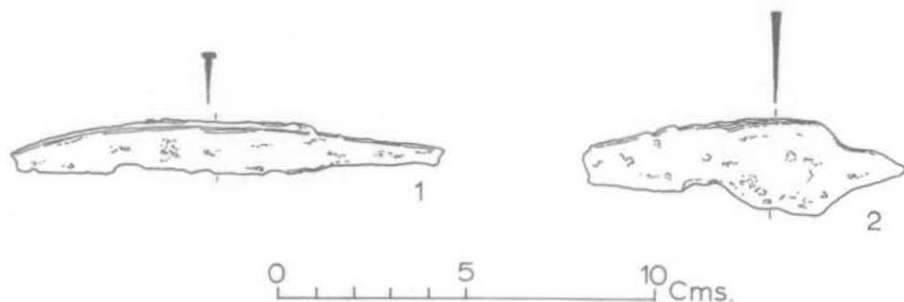


FIG. 2

- (1) Knife with pointed tang and a runnel decorating either side of the blade, just below the top edge. From Grave 34.
 (2) Knife with pointed tang and apparently plain blade. From Grave 28. ($\frac{1}{2}$).

establish whether the knives were burial goods or residual. There were no other associated finds from any of the graves. Metal coffin fittings, if present, should have been clearly visible.

Orientation (all bearings to the nearest 5°)

Most of the graves lay along an approximate west-east axis although there was considerable variation within the area excavated. Only Grave 37 lay in alignment to the Upper Icknield Way at 32°, the majority (64%) lay between 50° and 65°. The graves which lay furthest south-east from the Way were the only graves with a true W.-E. orientation.

Most of the identifiable graves can be grouped into five distinct rows :

(a)	26	17	10	
(b)	24	9	20	
(c)	23	11	14	13
(d)	22	21	15	
(e)	29	30		

Each group was laid out in a short row, at right angles to their common grave orientation. Only row (a) lay truly W.-E. Figure 1 shows that not every grave was laid as part of a row, accepting the limitations of the excavated area. It was noted that the grave density thinned southwards, as it tended to do at the late Romano-British cemetery at Queensford Mill.²

Upper Icknield Way

It should be noted that the present line of the Upper Icknield Way passed through the cemetery. Where this happened the graves closest to the Way were nearest in alignment to it. The further the graves were from the Way, the nearer they approached to a true W.-E. alignment. This indicates that the Way

² *Oxoniensis*, xxxvii (1972), 33-8.

may have caused some mis-alignment to the sense of direction of the grave digger. The graves, except 37, were clearly not purposely aligned with the Way.

Unusual graves

Grave 33 contained a female adult and an infant, probably new-born, suggesting death during child-birth. The adult lay W.S.W.-E.N.E. with the baby W.-E. across the left breast. Two fragments of plain adult human bone, the 2nd metacarpale of the right hand and a possible human rib fragment were found, the former lying close behind the skull cap, the latter laying 20 cm. west of the neck. They appeared to be residual.

Animal teeth

An ox tooth (Gr. 11), a horse tooth (Gr. 33), and two sheep teeth (Gr. 16) were recorded as residual finds within the fills of the graves. They were plain and unworked.

Re-used graves

Various pelvic and other adult bones were found to the west end of the upper fill of Grave 31. These were the disturbed remains of Grave 11. Arm and leg bones lay E.-W. along the north and south sides, and an adult skull to the very east end. All of these bones appeared to belong to a single skeleton. Below these reinterred bones lay a later skeleton. The rectangular grave pit was 0.65 m. deep and orientated approximately W.S.W.-E.N.E. The undisturbed skeleton of Grave 31 lay complete and supine, with the hands over the pelvic region and its legs straight.

Grave 5 was a child's skeleton, laid supine and orientated W.-E. The northern side of the grave was then cut by Grave 19. The whole was then cut by D1 leaving only the child's left leg bones and patella.

Grave 19 contained a supine adult whose rectangular grave pit lay 0.45 m. deep and orientated W.S.W.-E.N.E.

Grave 35 originally contained a supine adult within a rectangular grave pit 0.75 m. deep and orientated W.S.W.-E.N.E. The lower 1.90 m. length of the grave was emptied and re-used for the later Grave 14 which on disturbing the skeleton of Grave 35 had left only the skull *in situ*. All that remained of the disturbed bones from Grave 35 were some small fragments within the fill of Grave 14, not purposely reinterred.

THE POTTERY

By CHRISTOPHER J. YOUNG

ABBREVIATIONS

- Dorchester.* S. S. Frere, 'Excavations at Dorchester-on-Thames, 1962', *Archaeol. J.*, CXIX (1962), 114-49.
Durrington Walls. G. J. Wainwright, 'The Excavation of Prehistoric and Romano-British settlements near Durrington Walls, Wiltshire, 1970', *Wiltshire Archaeol. Natur. Hist. Mag.*, LXVI (1971), 76-128.

Lewknor. P. J. Fasham, 'Excavations near Lewknor, 1971-2', this volume.

Oxford Pottery. C. J. Young, 'The Pottery Industry of the Oxford Region', in A. Detsicas (ed.), *Current Research in Romano-British Coarse Pottery* (1973), 105-15.

Roman Colchester. M. R. Hull, *Roman Colchester* (1958).

V.C.H. Oxon. *Victoria County History of Oxfordshire*, 1 (1939).

All the pottery from the Beacon Hill site is in small sherds and none was deliberately deposited in the graves. The principal purpose of this report is to illustrate the types of pottery in use in this area in the 4th century. As the presence of any particular sherd in any particular grave is fortuitous and as all the pottery seems to be of about the same date it has not been thought necessary to divide the material into its individual grave groups in this report, which rather is presented as a type series of the wares and forms present. The conventions used in the descriptions of the sherds are explained elsewhere in this volume (*Lewknor*, p. 131).

FIG. 3 :

1. Mortarium rim ; hard, sandy, much visible sand ; E, I, Bk. off-white, patchy orange wash on interior and on top of rim ; multicoloured sparkling grit. Oxford kiln product. Grave 18

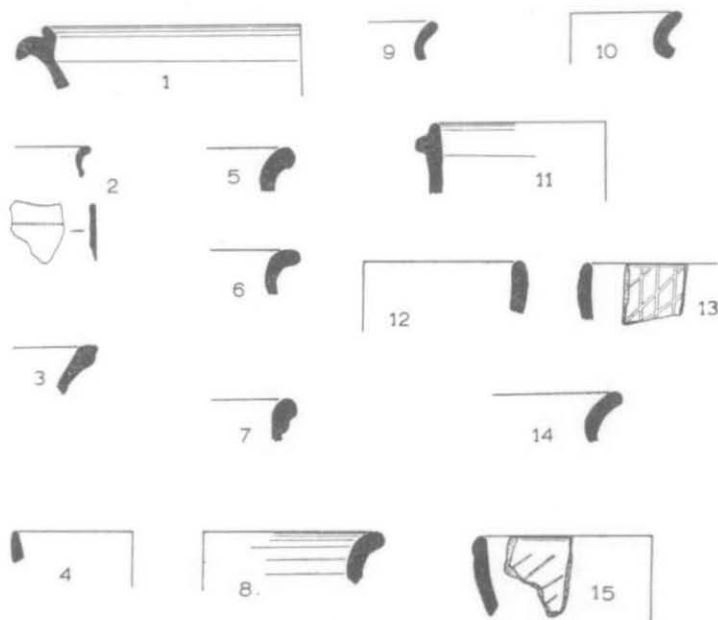


FIG. 3
Beacon Hill (Site 12). Pottery. (1).

2. Rim sherd and body sherd of cylindrical beaker ; sandy, micaceous ; E, I, Bk. orange, red colour coat on exterior and on rim interior, traces of white painted decoration. An uncommon product of the Oxford kilns. Others have been found at Culham (*V.C.H. Oxon.*, PL. XVIII B), Dorchester (*Dorchester* no. 226), and Colchester (*Roman Colchester* type 334). Grave 10

3. Imitation parchment ware bowl ; sandy, micaceous, small white inclusions ; E, I buff-orange, Bk. orange with buff-grey core. Originally this would have had

a white colour-coat. These vessels were produced in the southern group of Oxford kilns in competition with the normal parchment ware produced at sites such as the Churchill Hospital (*Durrington Walls*, Fig. 22, R.12, *Oxford Pottery*, 105). Grave 33

Not illustrated: body sherds of red colour-coat ware imitation Dr. 38's and of white colour-coat mortaria. Oxford kiln products (*cf. Oxford Pottery*, Fig. 4, 30, Fig. 2, 12).

4. Straight-sided bowl; hard, sandy; E, I, Bk. white, black colour-coat. Nene valley product Grave 26

Not illustrated: two body sherds, probably both from 'Castor' boxes. Nene valley products.

5. Jar; sandy, heavily tempered with calcite grit; E black, I red, Bk. black. This type of vessel, probably manufactured in the Midlands, was widely traded in central Britain in the second half of the 4th century (*Lewknor*, nos. 14-16). Grave 18

6. Jar; sandy, micaceous, white inclusions; E, I light grey, Bk. dark grey. Grave 15

7. Jar; hard, sandy, granular, micaceous; E, I, Bk. grey. Grave 11

8. Jar; hard, sandy, granular, micaceous, white inclusions; E, I dark grey, Bk. thin red skin with thick grey core. Grave 11

9. Jar; hard, sandy, granular, micaceous, white inclusions; E, I grey, Bk. red with thick grey core; burnished on top of rim. Grave 29

10. Jar; hard, sandy, micaceous, white inclusion; E, I dark blue-grey, Bk. red with dark blue-grey core. Grave 29

11. Flanged dish; hard, sandy, micaceous, much visible sparkling sand; E, I light grey, Bk. orange with thick grey core. Grave 33

12. Straight-sided dish; texture and inclusions as last; E, I grey, Bk. orange with grey core. Grave 11

13. Straight-sided bowl; texture and inclusions as last; E dirty black, I dirty buff, Bk. buff off-white; interior lattice decoration of black slip. Grave 11

14. Jar; sandy, micaceous, white inclusions and grog; E dirty buff-orange, I grey, Bk. orange. Grave 10

15. Straight-sided bowl; sandy, granular, many white inclusions; E, I black, Bk. dark red; burnished lattice on interior wall. Grave 31

The range of forms in this assemblage can be taken as typical of the 4th century. As it is likely that many if not all of the sherds were discarded long before they found their way into the graves, it can only be said that those containing pottery are 4th century or later.

As at Lewknor the fine wares, except for a few sherds from the Nene valley, came from the Oxford kilns. It is interesting however that the coarse wares found at Lewknor and at Beacon Hill are not identical. In particular the coarsest ware found here (nos. 11-13) did not occur at the former. This emphasizes the very localized distribution of many of the small potteries that produced only coarse wares.

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, DATE AND CHARACTER

The unusual graves

Of the three graves 11, 5 and 35 that were cut by later graves, 31, 19 and 14 respectively, only 19 appears as an accidental disturbance, Graves 11 and 35 having both been disturbed on purpose.

That Grave 11 had been completely and carefully emptied out was shown by the grave length being unnecessarily long for the new corpse. The majority of the graves were to a closer corpse/grave length ratio. The disturbed bones had been purposely reinterred in the grave backfill. This indicates either a family relationship between the two corpses or that it was easier to empty out a previous grave rather than to dig a new one. It is evident that, although the flesh from

Grave 11 had been given time to rot before being disturbed, the grave position was easily located.

Grave 35 must also have remained distinguishable though here the disturbed bones had not been reinterred.

In Grave 21 an adult body appears to have been forced into a grave too short for it. The head from Grave 16 was missing and may have been placed in the lower half of the grave, as occurs in some Saxon burials. The lower half was destroyed unobserved.

In Grave 8 the body was in an inverted crouched position. The survival of such a custom is doubtful, and the reason for the break in uniformity may be that less work was involved in digging the pit for such a burial.

Dating

No definite dating evidence was found during the excavation except that the cemetery was not started until at least the mid-4th century. The two iron knives (FIG. 2) were uninformative.

Local occupation centres

Archaeological research has shown that there was both Roman and Saxon occupation within the area. Thus a date attained by comparison with other cemeteries must be considered.

The graves at Beacon Hill displayed a noticeable lack of order in orientation and in spacing. The shortness of the rows is indicative of poorly marked graves. Most of the graves displayed an orderly, careful but plain burial rite without grave goods.

This cemetery can be compared with the late Romano-British cemetery at Queensford Mill³ which probably served nearby Dorchester. There a similar physical burial rite was followed, although the cemetery layout was more ordered and displayed longer rows. However, the Queensford Mill site had none of the abnormal burials found at Beacon Hill.

Beacon Hill has fewer comparisons with the early Christian parts of Saxon cemeteries because of the total lack of everyday ornaments. On the other hand, such burials often displayed less care than pagan burials, though burials aligned in the approved Christian W-E direction are found in a great many indubitably pagan cemeteries.

Thus, with the lack of grave ornaments, and the exclusive presence of Roman residual pottery, a late or immediately post-Roman date is suggested. If so, the cemetery perhaps served the Romano-British settlement at SU 717981 (M.40, site 11), but the quantity of residual pottery discovered within the fill of each grave suggests that a small settlement existed somewhere closer at hand.

A radio carbon date has not yet been obtained from the bone.

If this was a late or immediately post-Roman cemetery, it perhaps indicates continuity of settlement in this area, Saxon occupation being attested by the Knapp Hill⁴ and Adwell Cop cemeteries.

³ *Oxoniensia*, xxxvii (1972), 32-37.

⁴ *Oxoniensia*, xxiv (1959), 100-1.