

Excavations at Wallingford, 1974

By T. J. WEARE

INTRODUCTION

THE site of the excavation (SU60858917) is located in the south-east corner of Wallingford, Oxfordshire, approximately 25 m. south of the supposed site of the church of St. Michael (FIG. 1). It is bounded on the north by New Road, on the east by Thames Street, on the south by houses on Cherwell Crescent and by a house called the Rectory on the west.

In 1972 planning permission was granted for the construction of two houses on the site. Rescue excavation was carried out between April and December 1974. The work was performed by members of the Wallingford Historical and Archaeological Society under the supervision of Miss P. A. E. Granados and Dr. T. J. Weare. Professional guidance and supervision through the course of the excavation were provided by Mr. T. G. Hassall of the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit. The detailed records, plans and finds of the excavation will be kept in the Oxfordshire County Council Dept. of Museum Services, Woodstock.

The geology of the site is uncomplicated. Wallingford lies wholly in the gravel terrace of the present flood plain of the river Thames.¹

An extensive study of the documentary evidence relating to Wallingford was published in the last century,² with a number of references relevant to the New Road site. Unfortunately the date of the founding of the church of St. Michael is not recorded. The earliest reference³ to this church is a parchment deed, in Latin, *temp.* Henry III, which refers to a property in the parish of St. Michael. The names of some of the incumbents of St. Michael's are recorded⁴ for the period 1330 to 1348. In 1374 the church was united to St. Peter's, Wallingford.⁵

The section of Thames Street bordering the site of the excavation is believed to have formed part of the original Saxon street plan.⁶ New Road was constructed in the late eighteenth century at the instance of Sir William Blackstone.⁷ The Ordnance Survey of 1877 shows the site as the garden of the 'Rectory'.

THE EXCAVATION

Excavation was restricted to the garden areas of the proposed development to avoid having to reinstate the ground. This effectively limited the investigation to two trenches, trench I (3 × 4 m.) in the north-east corner of the site, and trench II

¹ D. Benson and D. Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley: an archaeological survey of the river gravels* (1974).

² J. K. Hedges, *The History of Wallingford* (1881).

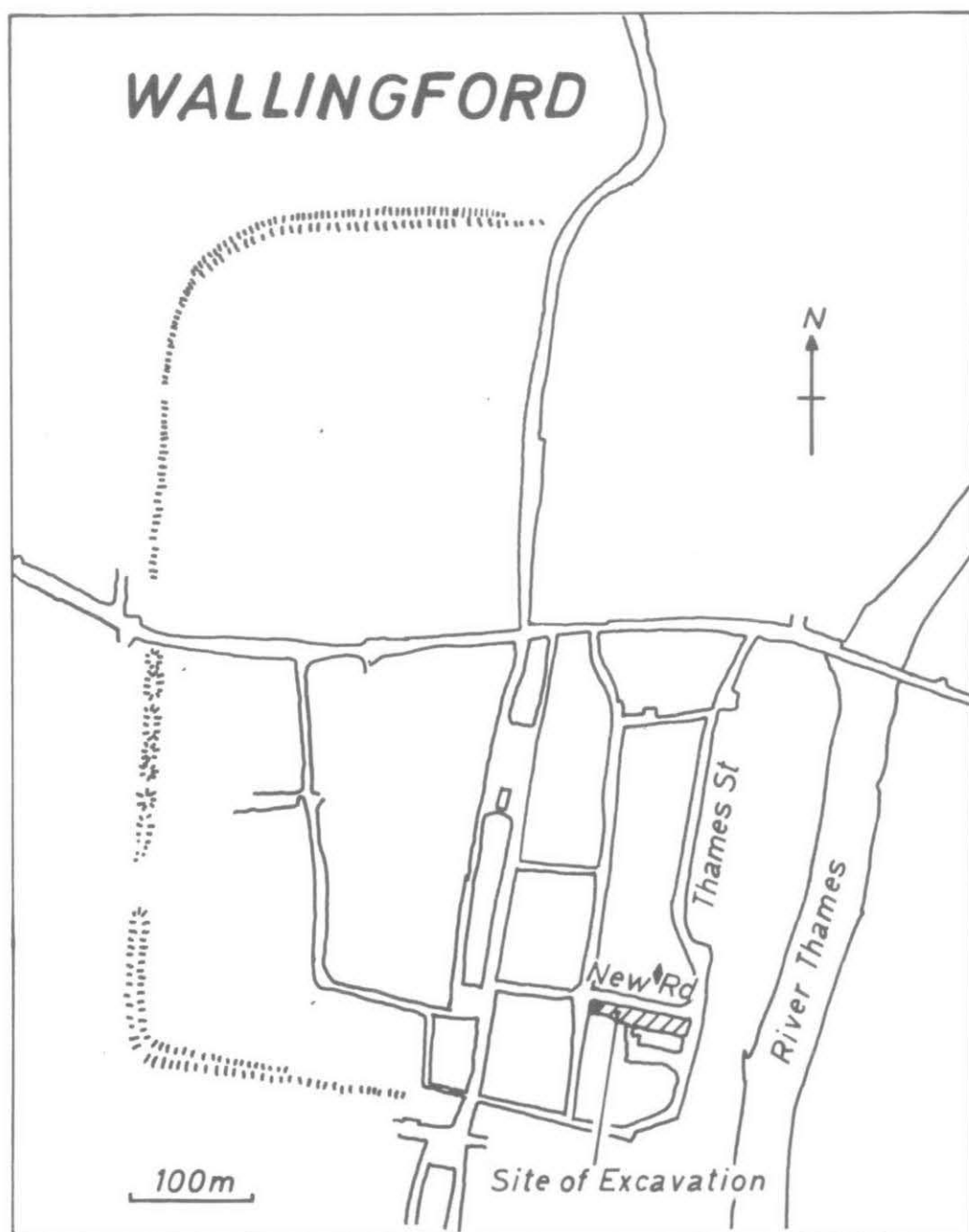
³ *Ibid.*, I, 344.

⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 415.

⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 412.

⁶ C. Simpson, *Wallingford. The Archaeological Implications of Development* (1973).

⁷ Hedges, *op. cit.* note 2, II, 413.



♦ *St Michael's Church (site of)*

FIG. 1
Location plan.

(3×4.5 m. initially, later extended) on the south side of the site. A system of metric coordination was used to record positions in plan. Levels recorded in both trenches were referred to the same datum, a fixed point outside the site. This datum was reduced to Ordnance Datum through a permanent bench mark.

To maintain as much control as possible each trench was divided into quadrants and excavation alternated between diagonal pairs of quadrants until a feature or layer was identified.

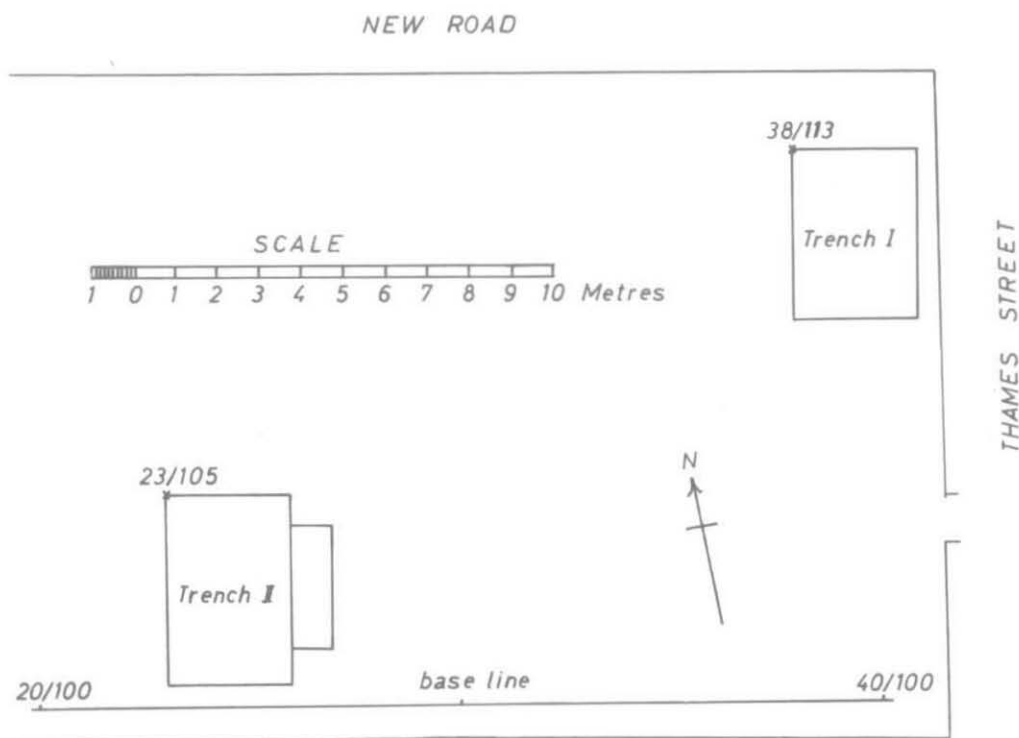


FIG. 2

Plan of site showing position of trenches, base line, etc.

Period 1: Pre-burial phase (?twelfth/thirteenth century A.D.)

Trench I. Two pits were found, each approximately 1.5 m. diameter, 1 m. deep (one = 26 on FIG. 3).

Trench II. A chalk, mortar and flint layer (230 in FIG. 4) in the south-west corner was cut by an articulated inhumation and by the Period 2 bell-pit described below.

Little can be said about the trench I pits, as they were in the north-east and south-west corners of the trench and could only be partly excavated. It is unlikely that they were rubbish pits because they contained very little debris, and they may have been dug to extract gravel. They pre-dated use of the site for burials as there were inhumations above them.

The layer of chalk etc. in trench II is thought to have been a spread of building debris although no evidence of footings or of a robber trench was found.

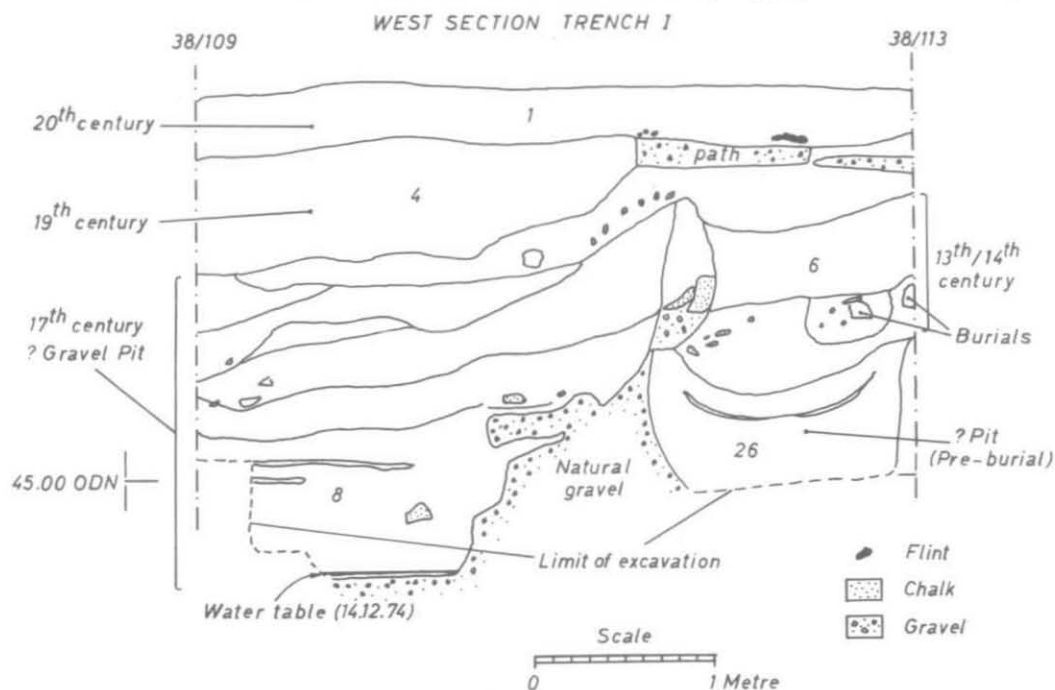


FIG. 3

West section of trench I.

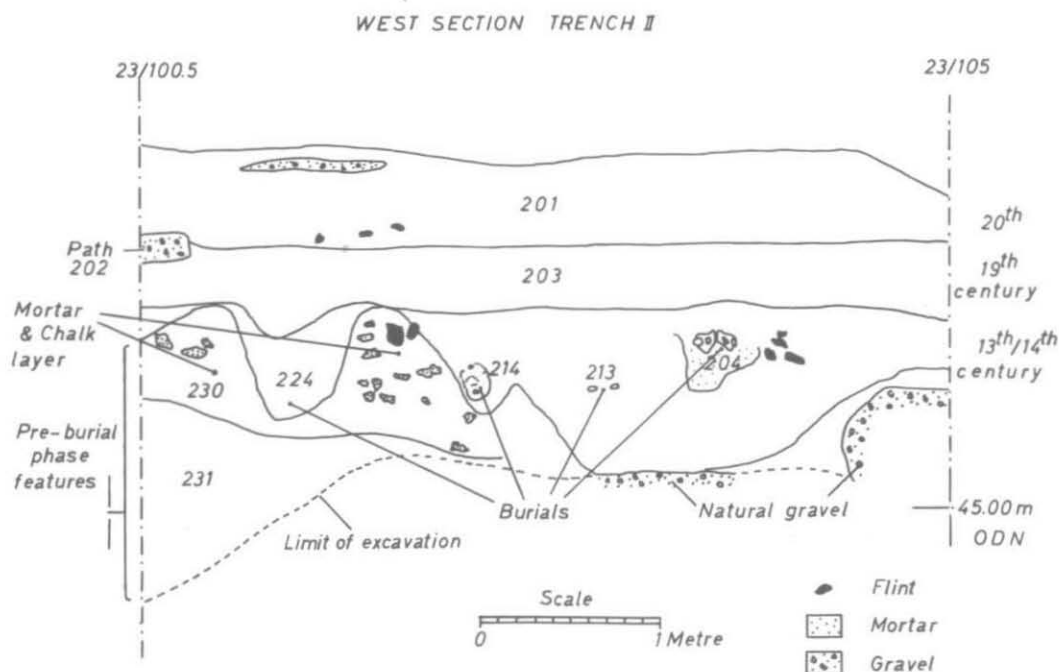


FIG. 4

West section of trench II.

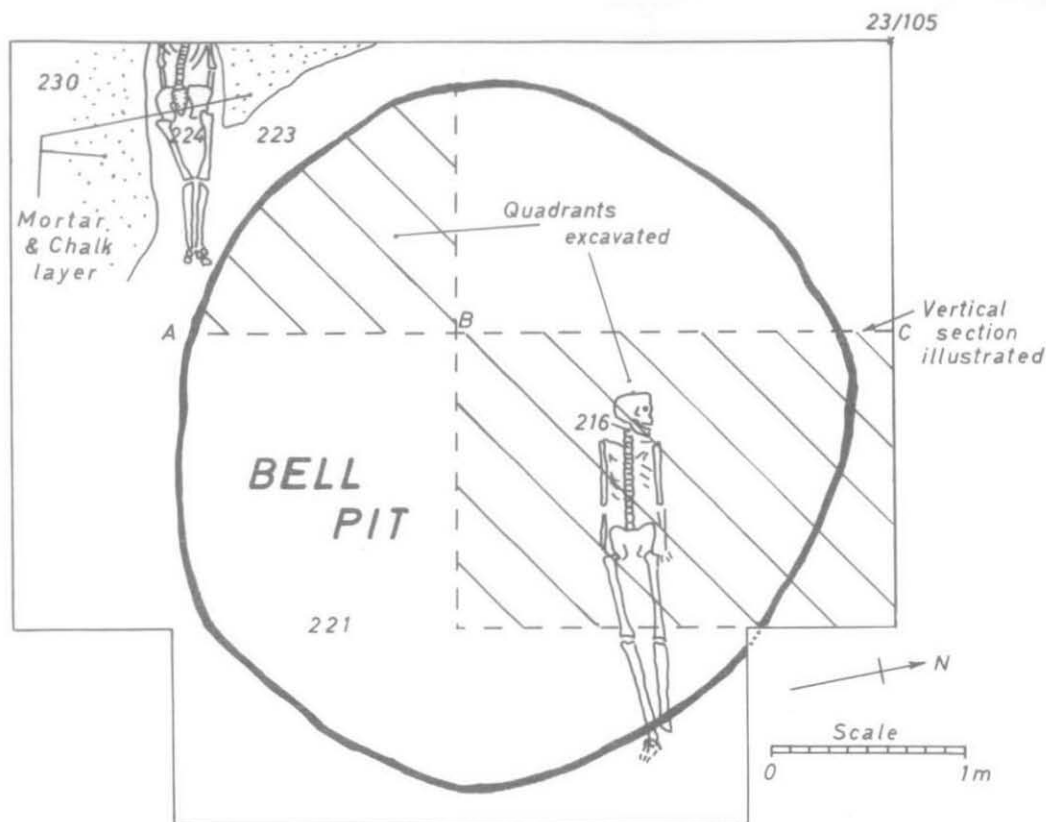


FIG. 5
Plan of bell-pit in trench II (later features not shown).

Period 2: Bell-pit (thirteenth/fourteenth century A.D.)

A basin-shaped pit was found in trench II, measuring 3.6 m. diameter at the top and 2.5 m. diameter at its base. Site restrictions meant that only its north-east and south-west quadrants could be excavated (Plan, FIG. 5; section, FIG. 6). It had a lining of blackened clay/soil all round, c. 8 cm. thick, in which were small fragments of reddened and brittle flint, suggesting intense heat. Parts of the clay had also been fired. The bottom of the pit was the natural gravel, but at the sides there was a further lining of soil, about 40 cm. thick.

The bottom layer of the pit fill consisted of large flints and a quantity of wood ash. Sherds of pottery and tile were found in the middle layers. The upper layers yielded a number of small pieces of copper or bronze.

The evidence of heating and the metal fragments strongly suggest a bell-pit. A detailed description of the process of casting a bell is given in the early medieval manuscript *De Diversis Artibus* by Theophilus the Monk.⁸ Several features of the pit fit this account.

⁸ Theophilus the Monk, *De Diversis Artibus*, from Nelson's Classic, trans. C. Dodwell, 150-8.

NORTH-SOUTH SECTION (A-C)
THROUGH THE BELL PIT

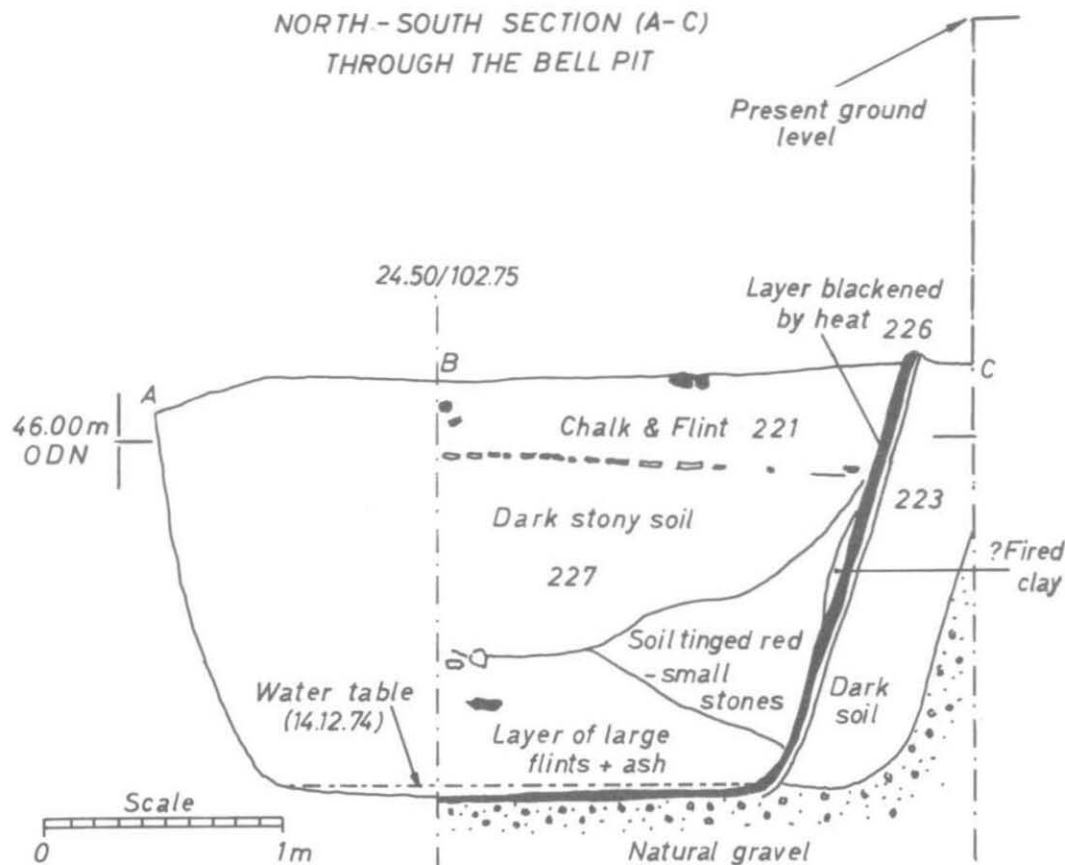


FIG. 6

North-south section through the bell-pit in trench II.

According to Theophilus the basic steps in the process were as follows:

- (1) construct the bell mould
- (2) dig the pit
- (3) lay a foundation of stones in the base of the pit
- (4) back fill the pit
- (5) place the bell mould over the centre of the pit and re-excavate the pit, thereby lowering the mould on to the foundation
- (6) construct a kiln around the mould and fire it
- (7) when firing is complete quickly remove the kiln surround and fill the space between the mould and the pit wall with earth to support the mould
- (8) raise the cast bell by reversing the steps in 5.

The fact that the pit was first dug (in the natural gravel) and then back filled to lower the mould explains the thickness of earth between the natural gravel (the original pit) and the darkened pit lining (the re-excavated pit)—see FIG. 6. The layer of large flints found in the bottom presumably formed the foundation on which the bell mould rested. The lining of the pit was blackened by the heat from the kiln. No trace of the kiln or bell mould was found. According to Theophilus⁸ both would have been removed completely from the pit before the mould was broken to release the bell.

38/113

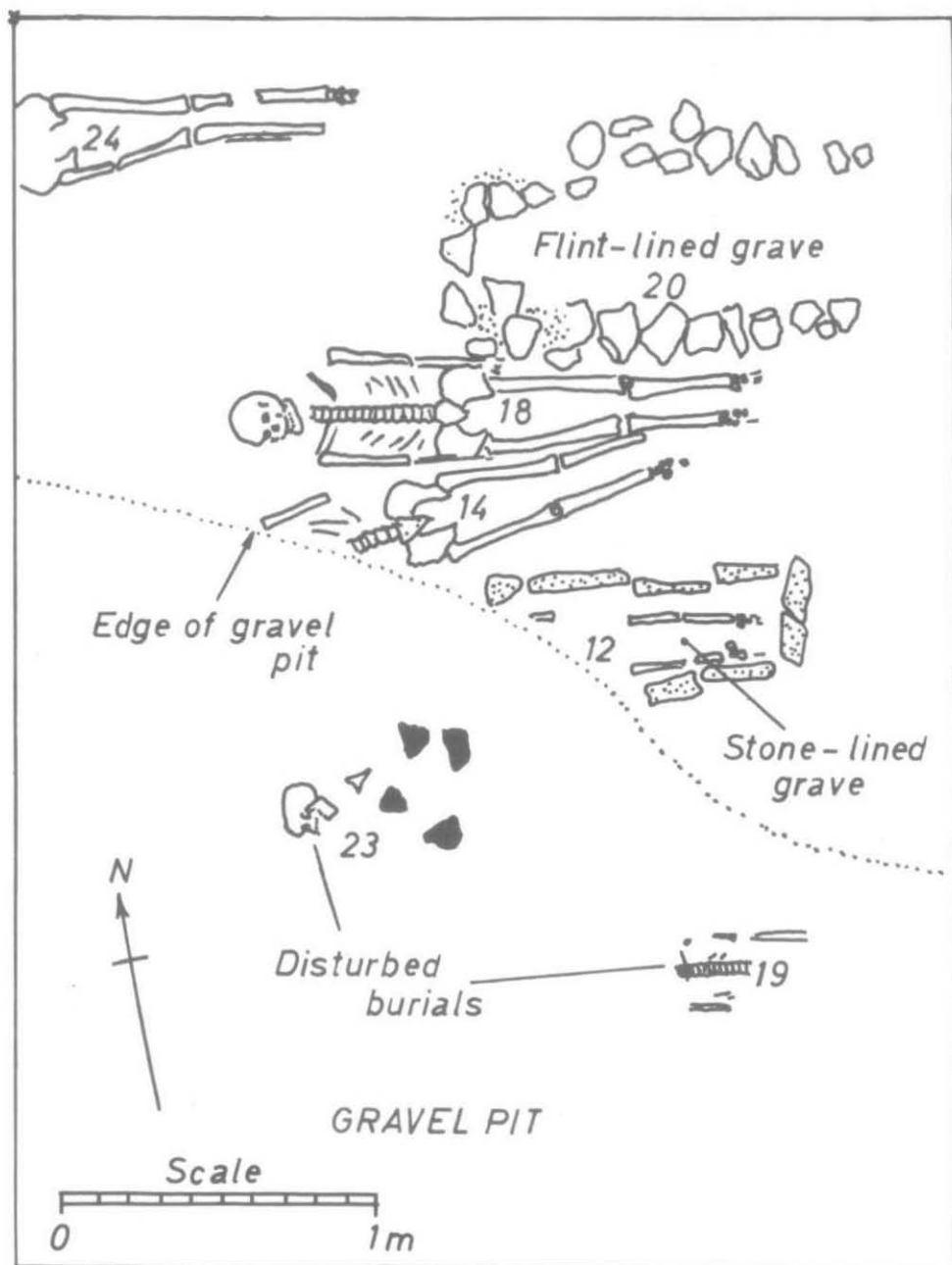


FIG. 7

Plan of trench I showing the gravel pit and stone-lined graves (later features not shown).

Period 3: Burials (thirteenth–fourteenth century A.D.)

Evidence was found of approximately 35 inhumations, all aligned east–west and nearly all disturbed, usually by later burials. In trench I, one grave was lined with large flints, another lined and capped with chalk blocks, the latter being largely cut away by a later pit (12 on FIG. 7).

One find, a small bronze buckle, appeared to be associated with a burial. It was found near the left shoulder of an articulated inhumation in trench II. No positive dating of any of the burials has been made. On the assumption that the graveyard is that of the church of St. Michael, the burials are probably thirteenth or fourteenth century.

Period 4: Gravel/rubbish pit in trench I (seventeenth century A.D.)

The southern half of trench I was cut through by a large pit, 1.5 to 2.0 m. deep into the natural gravel (FIGS. 3 and 7). A general depression in the present ground surface south of trench I suggests that the pit extends well beyond the southern limit of the trench. It would seem almost certain that the pit was dug originally to extract gravel. Access would have been directly from Thames Street.

The various layers in the fill of the pit indicate that it was subsequently used as a rubbish pit or tip. A number of clay pipe bowls and stems were found in these layers, some late seventeenth century in style. This is the only firm dating evidence found in the gravel pit.

Period 5: Garden path and rubbish pit (eighteenth to twentieth century A.D.)

There was a rubbish pit which cut through a burial in trench II, and a gravel surfaced garden path passing through both trenches. The path is shown in the Ordnance Survey of 1877. The rubbish pit, approximately 1 m. square and 1 m. deep, contained about 30 Kg. of glass and china. A small gold ring (probably an ear-ring) hall-marked Birmingham early twentieth century, was found at the very bottom of the pit.

CONCLUSIONS

Limited activity on the site before its use for burials is shown by the two pits in trench I, and the mortar/flint layer in trench II. The pits were apparently not filled with rubbish, and are therefore comparable to the tenth/eleventh-century features excavated recently at another of King Alfred's 'de novo' burhs, Wareham, Dorset.⁹ It is not to be expected that intense occupation would be found so far from the main street in the first stages of the town's history.

The site presumably already belonged to a church when the large pit was dug to cast the bell (or bells). Thereafter it was a graveyard, probably to serve St. Michael's nearby, at least until that church was amalgamated with St. Peter's in 1374. It may have been memories of its use as hallowed ground that restricted its subsequent development, or it may simply be that its later history was typical of Wallingford's physical decay.

THE FINDS

THE POTTERY. By R. DIXON, I. GARDINER, and T. J. WEARE (FIGS. 8, 9)

Trench II presented the most clearly stratified material with a relatively undisturbed burial phase (period 3) and the backfill of the bell pit (period 2) yielding approximately 350 sherds each. The pottery recovered from trench I will not be discussed here; a

⁹ Ex. inf. the Editor. To be published in *Proc. Dorset N.H. and A.S.*, xcix (1977).

complete description and analysis of pottery from both trenches can be found with the detailed records.¹⁰

The majority of wares were medieval, predominantly local and principally of a sandy fabric (92%). The following method of classification devised by Maureen Mellor of the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit, was adopted. The pottery was examined visually and classified according to the type of inclusion into three broad groups, I: limestone, II: flint and III: sand or no grains. The pottery was further divided according to the size, shape and abundance of the inclusions. In all, twenty-two distinct fabric types were identified. A careful comparison has been made with a fabric type series derived from material excavated at Wallingford Castle,¹¹ 98% of the sherds being of fabric types found there. Of the sandy wares, 90% fell more or less equally into three similar fabric types. Few imports were found, a footring of Pingsdorf type ware (No. 61)¹² and a glazed body sherd of a probable Aardenberg-type,¹³ being notable exceptions. The local sandy ware was occasionally thinly glazed and/or decorated with a white slip (e.g. Nos. 13, 18, 42, 47, 48),¹⁴ rectangular rouletting (No. 20)¹⁵ or combing (Nos. 14 and 50). Incised linear decoration (No. 19) and triangular stabblings were common to handles (Nos. 18 and 49). A number of cooking-pot rims were decorated with thumbing (Nos. 6, 26, 31, 40, 52). Most of the rim forms from sandy wares were simple and not well developed; several of the flinty wares resemble rim forms from neighbouring sites; Nos. 35 and 36 are similar to Group B flinty wares at Tetsworth,¹⁶ and No. 65 (Group II) resembles a rim sherd from Seacourt.¹⁷ Three different forms of tripod pitcher feet were found; Nos. 43 and 45 can be paralleled with types from Reading Abbey.¹⁸ An unusual sherd (No. 21) is believed to have been part of a curfew handle.¹⁹ The hole and blackening of the interior surface support this interpretation. The only profile recovered was that of a shallow dish (No. 17), the interior surface of which was glazed. Two examples of applied rouletted alternating red and white strips were found (No. 60).²⁰

The 'painted' or white slip wares paralleled with pottery from Abingdon, Oxford and Reading Abbey are particularly interesting. These wares represent some 4% of the total wares recovered from late twelfth to early fourteenth-century deposits at Oxford.²¹ The higher proportion of these wares from this site and from mid thirteenth-century contexts at Reading Abbey as compared with Oxford suggest that these wares originate to the south of Oxford, closer to Wallingford and Reading. The dating of the pottery is difficult, as well stratified deposits from Wallingford are as yet unknown. However, by analogy with other sites in the region, the pottery from the backfill of the bell pit (period 2) was thought to date to the late twelfth century while the majority of wares from the burial phase (period

¹⁰ See above, second paragraph.

¹¹ R. D. Carr, *Excavations at Wallingford Castle, 1972* (forthcoming). The details of this pottery, recorded by Maureen Mellor, will be lodged with the Oxfordshire County Council Department of Museum Services.

¹² G. C. Dunning *et al.*, 'Anglo-Saxon Pottery: A symposium', *Medieval Archaeology*, III (1959), Fig. 28, Nos. 8-13.

¹³ Similar sherds were identified by J. G. Hurst and F. Verhaeghe, from Wallingford Castle.

¹⁴ M. Parrington and C. Balkwill, 'Excavations at Broad Street', *Oxoniensia*, XL (1975), Fig. 29, No. 67. Abingdon Fabric A includes Wallingford fabrics with white slip; M. Biddle, 'Medieval Village of Seacourt', *Oxoniensia*, XXVI/XXVII (1961/2), Fig. 19, No. 7; C. F. Slade, 'Excavation at Reading Abbey', *Berkshire Archaeol. J.*, LXVI (1973), Fig. 11, Nos. 3-7, and 12; B. Durham, '79-80 St. Aldates', (this volume), Fabric AG.

¹⁵ L. R. A. Grove, 'Norman Pottery from Wallingford Market Place', *Berkshire Archaeol. J.*, L (1938), Fig. 1, No. 1.

¹⁶ M. Robinson, 'Excavations at Copt Hay, Tetsworth, Oxon.', *Oxoniensia*, XXXVIII (1973), Fig. 19, Nos. 54 and 62, dated as early thirteenth century.

¹⁷ Biddle, *op. cit.* note 14, Fig. 22, No. 10, dated early thirteenth century.

¹⁸ Slade, *op. cit.* note 14, Fig. 13, Nos. 40 and 49, dated the first half of the thirteenth century.

¹⁹ R. M. Huggins, 'Pottery', in P. J. Huggins, 'Excavations at Waltham Abbey', *Medieval Archaeology*, XX (1976), Fig. 37, No. 32.

²⁰ Biddle, *op. cit.* note 14, Fig. 25, No. 1, probably mid-late thirteenth century.

²¹ Durham, *op. cit.* note 14 (Phases 8 and 9).

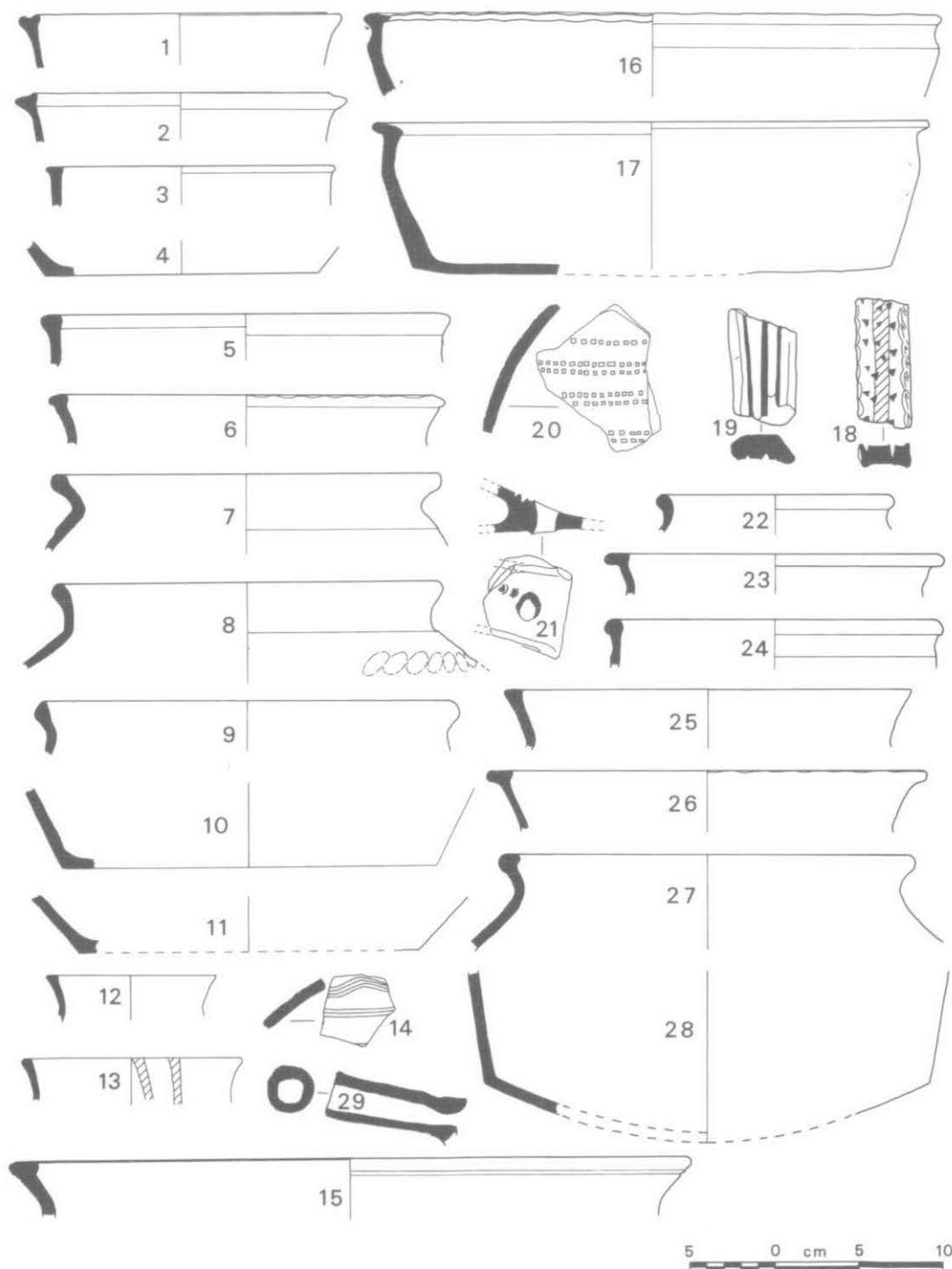


FIG. 8

Nos. 1-29 Group III fabric, period 2. Scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

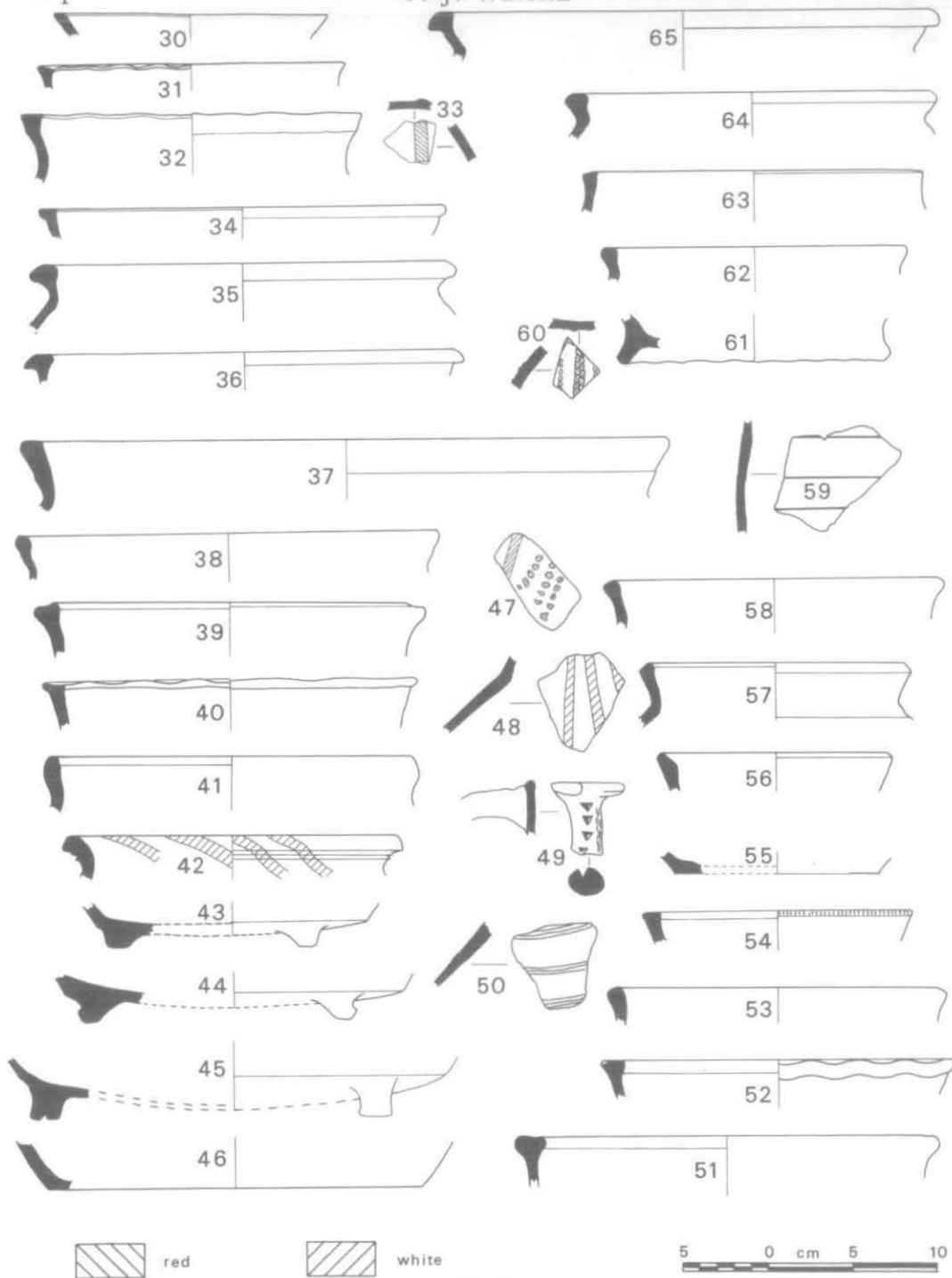


FIG. 9

Nos. 30-34 Group III fabric, period 2; 35, 36 Group II fabric, period 2; Nos. 37-62 Group III fabric, period 3; Nos. 63-65 Group II, period 3. Scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

3) were dated to the early thirteenth century with a few notable exceptions (Nos. 33 (Aardenberg-type), 49 and 60) which range in date from the mid-thirteenth to mid-fourteenth century.

THE SMALL FINDS

Some of the metal objects found included a bronze buckle (2×3 cm.), a lead weight ($4 \times 1.5 \times 0.5$ cm.) and an iron arrow head (4 cm. long) from trench II, period 3, and numerous deposits of mineralised copper, iron slag, iron nails, and a bronze coin (not identified but thought to be Roman) from trench II, period 2.

Other objects found include a chalk spindle whorl (3.2 cm. diameter) from trench II, period 1, and two worked bone needles from trench II, period 2.

The Society thanks the Department of the Environment for a publication grant for this paper.