

The Archaeology of the Charlbury to Arncott Gas Pipeline, Oxon, 1972.

By R. A. CHAMBERS

SUMMARY

In 1972 a new gas pipeline was laid between Charlbury and Arncott, near Bicester. Observation of the pipe trench between Charlbury (SP 36001830) and Sturdy's Castle (SP 46251925) provided many previously unknown archaeological sites, including a Romano-British villa at Sansom's Platt, Tackley. The intensity of newly discovered sites was comparable with the large numbers commonly experienced during motorway construction.¹

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THANKS are due both to the Southern Gas Board for permitting access to the pipe trench and to Don Benson, then keeper of the Field Department, Oxford City and County Museum, who, with Mick Aston, recorded the following material in 1972. Mrs. J. M. Chambers kindly typed the text.

INTRODUCTION

The pipeline cut through a typical Cotswold countryside of hills and dry valleys comprised mainly of Great Oolite limestone and Forest Marble, with the higher ground often capped by Cornbrash.² The formations exposed by the pipe trench varied greatly from solid or brashy limestone to impermeable clays. Throughout the limestone were ice wedge pseudomorphs filled with red clay. Convoluted periglacial subsoil structuring was common and for the most part easily distinguishable from archaeological features. Several red clay filled hollows were noted along the pipeline, some possibly the result of past tree clearance.³ In many fields ploughed out ridge and furrow showed itself as cropmarks within ripening corn, and furrow bases were often visible in section.

GAZETTEER OF SITES (Fig. 1)

Included at the end of each of the following descriptions are both the Ordnance Survey grid reference and the Oxfordshire County Museum Sites and Monuments Primary Record Number (P.R.N.). In the following descriptions it should be assumed that features remain undated unless otherwise stated. All depths quoted are from the subsoil surface, the topsoil having been removed before trenching began.

¹ E.g. D. A. Hinton and R. T. Rowley (eds.), 'Excavations on the Route of the M40', *Oxoniensia*, xxxix (1973), 2-5.

² O.S. Geology Map 236 (Witney Area).

³ For detailed information consult the field records P.R.N. 1263 (Wootton Wood), and also 4961, 4962, 4965, 4966, 4969, 4971, 4972.

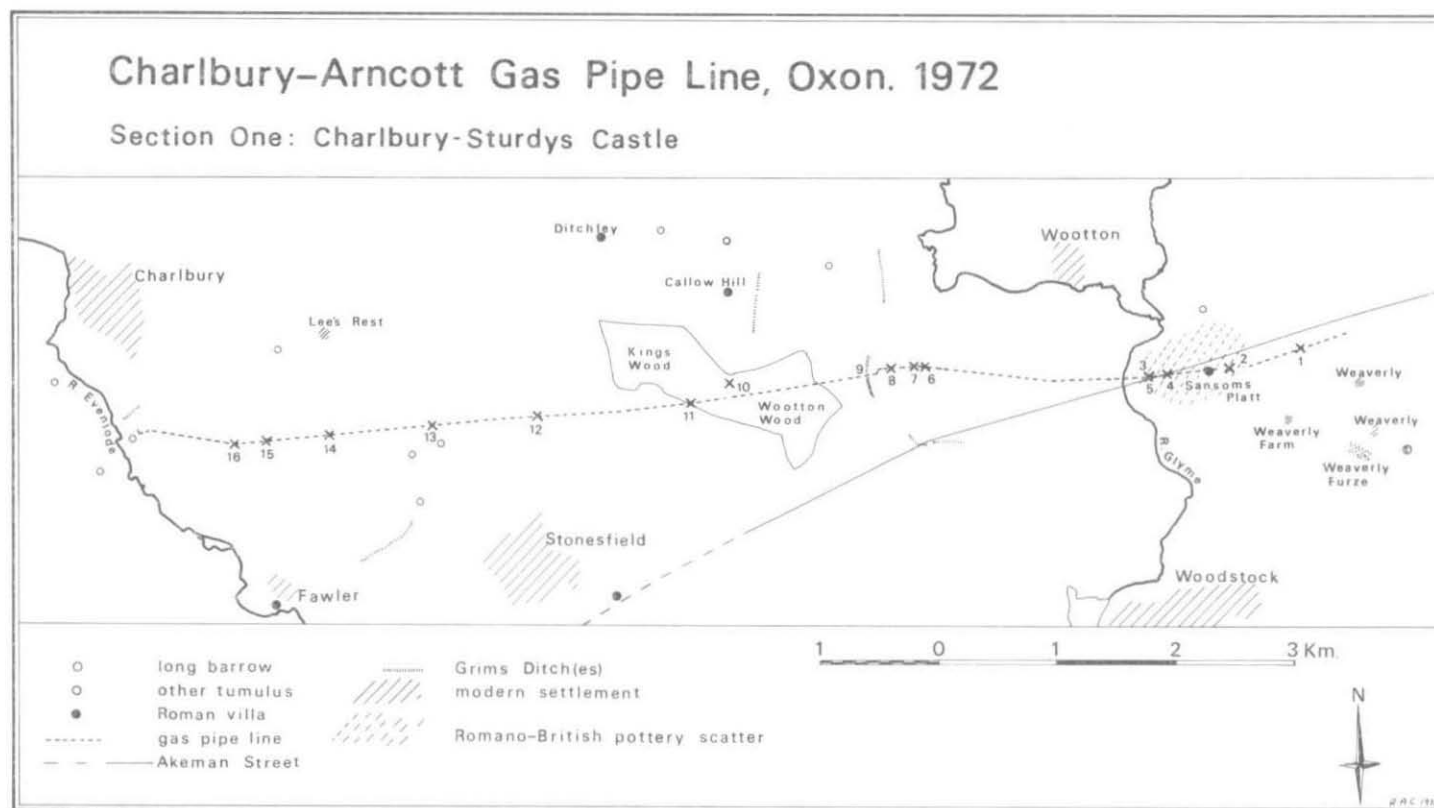


Fig. 1
Distribution of sites and find spots from Charlbury to Sturdy's Castle.

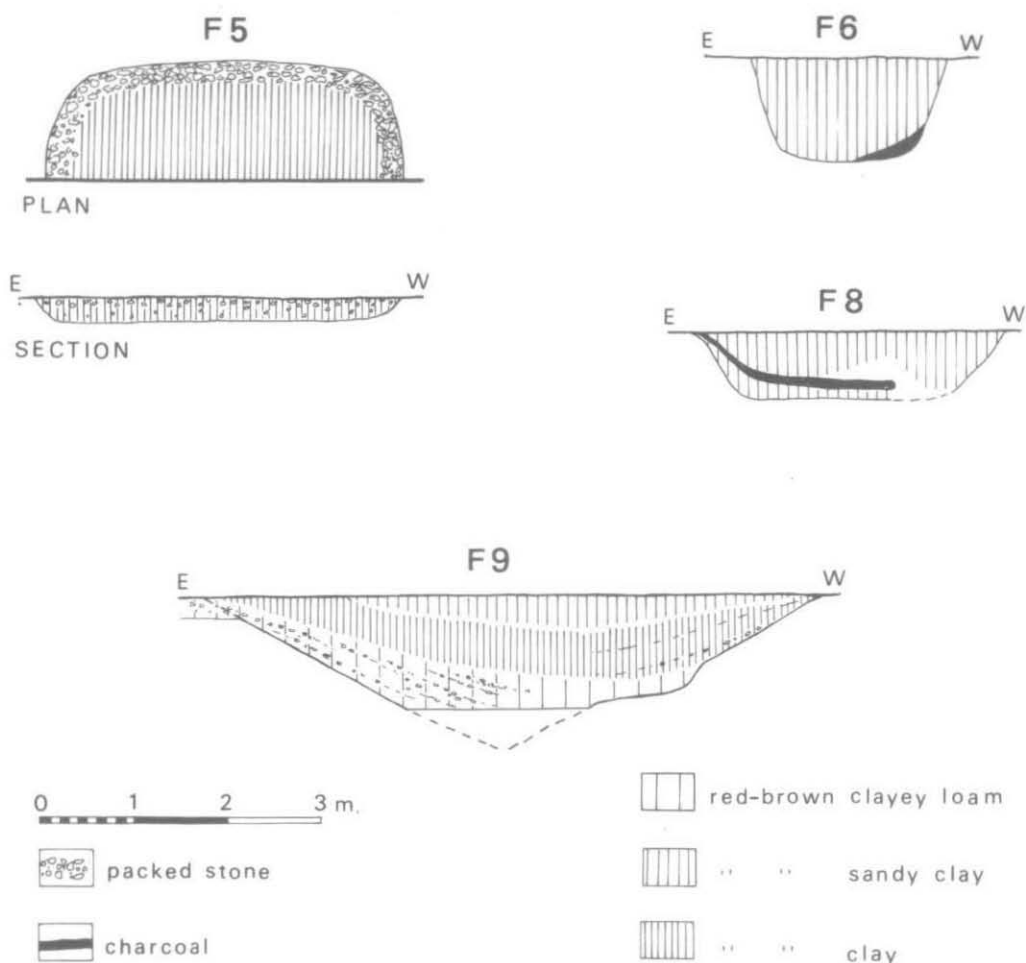


Fig. 2
Sections and plans.

(1) Double ditch and 2 pits with burnt material. Medieval pottery from topsoil. SP 45871912. P.R.N. 5547.

Immediately to the south and east of this field are two farms and two areas of land all of which bear the name of Weaverley, a deserted medieval hamlet which lies somewhere in the locality.⁴ The pits lay in a south-west facing hollow that also contained an overgrown, boggy area suggesting a former spring and these features plus several crop-marks⁵ may belong to the deserted hamlet.

(2) Romano-British site at Sansom's Platt, Tackley. SP 452189. P.R.N. 1263. See detailed report below.

(3) 2 pits containing Romano-British pottery. SP 45031890. P.R.N. 5551.

⁴ K. J. Allison, M. W. Beresford and J. G. Hurst, *Deserted Villages of Oxfordshire* (1965), 45.

⁵ Observed by the late Mrs. Wickham Steed. Pers. Comm., Mick Aston.

- (4) Akeman Street (line of Roman Road). There was little evidence for a metalled surface or side ditches. SP 44701887. P.R.N. 8921.
- (5) Grubenhäus,⁶ 3.5 m. wide × 0.24 m. deep. Excavation on the north side of the pipe trench showed it to be roughly rectangular in plan with rough stone packing some 0.2 m. wide around the edges (Fig. 2). The fill comprised 2 layers of dark brown loam with fragments of samian ware, glass, late Romano-British wares and early Saxon shell gritted and grass tempered pottery. SP 44581887. P.R.N. 5548 and 5549.
- (6) Pit, 2.1 m. × 1.1 m. deep containing charcoal, animal bone and Romano-British pottery (Fig. 2). SP 42651893. P.R.N. 5550.
- (7) Beneath the present road (B4437) there exists an earlier, narrower, stone metalling c. 0.15 m. thick, probably laid down after this road was turnpiked in 1800. SP 42591890. P.R.N. 4973.
- (8) Pit, 2 m. × 0.7 m. deep, reddish brown pebbly clay and charcoal fill, much burnt daub and scraps of bone (Fig. 2). SP 42371890. P.R.N. 4970.
- (9) Grim's Ditch. Sectioned almost to the bottom. Its profile suggests that it may have been recut once (Fig. 2). SP 42181882. P.R.N. 4716 and 8910.7
- (10) Ditch 2 m. wide × 0.5 m. deep, bounded by banks on either side. Eastern boundary of Wootton Wood. SP 41721877. P.R.N. 4968.
- (11) Elaborate set of earthworks suggesting a ditched and banked enclosure on the western boundary of Wootton Wood. SP 40701859. P.R.N. 4967.
- (12) Lightly metalled terraced trackway. Old road from Stonesfield to Chipping Norton. SP 39371847. P.R.N. 4964.
- (13) Limestone slabs capping stone lined gully. Probably post-medieval drain. SP 38481839. P.R.N. 4963.
- (14) An overgrown hollow way bounded by a low bank on either side. Old track between Fawler and Ditchley. SP 37601832. P.R.N. 4959.
- (15) This field had previously produced a number of flint implements. Nothing observed in the pipe trench. Centred SP 371183.
- (16) Old track from Stonesfield to Charlbury, lightly metalled with shallow side ditches. SP 36821824. P.R.N. 4960.

SITE 2 : ROMANO-BRITISH VILLA AT SANSOM'S PLATT, TACKLEY

The trench section provided material from a Romano-British settlement dating from the 1st century A.D. Villa buildings in local limestone, some of which were dated to beyond the middle of the 3rd century were also recorded. Prior to this discovery in 1972, the surrounding fields were well known for their Romano-British surface finds.⁸

The Sansom's Platt villa is sited at the junction between the parishes of Tackley, Wootton and Hensington Without. The greater part of the villa buildings lie to the east of the present road (B4027) from Bletchington to Wootton, some 95 m. above sea level. As a result of the villa's location in a broad, shallow, dry valley the settlement remains are now sealed by a deep accumulation of plough soil. Water is easily obtained from wells into the underlying limestone.⁹

⁶ Crop marks suggested the presence of other grubenhäuser close by.

⁷ For a summary of these prehistoric boundaries see D. Fine, 'An Excavation of the North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch at North Leigh', *Oxoniensia*, xli (1976), 12-13.

⁸ P.R.N. 1263, 2319, 2744, 3358 and 5152.

⁹ I am grateful to John Hazelden of the Soil Survey of England and Wales for this information.

THE TRENCH SECTION (Fig. 3)

Pre-villa features

F1 Hard brown clay interpreted as a pre-settlement buried soil.

F2 & 3 Ditches. Shell gritted pottery in F2.

F4 Soil sealing ditches F2 and 3. Charcoal and pottery.

F5 Soil with much domestic refuse. Sealing F4.

F6 Firmly packed pebbles and limestone. Above F5.

F7 Soil with domestic refuse upon which walls F15, F16, F17 and associated floors were constructed.

F8 Hard packed stone cobble apparently in use both before and after the construction of wall F10.

Villa features

F9, 10 & 11 Mortared limestone walls upon herringbone pattern pitched stone foundations. Wall 10 was especially well preserved, standing to 5 courses in places although the other two walls had been robbed of their best stone and appeared as rubble cores.

F12 Pitched limestone floor.

F13 Soil accumulation over floor F12.

F14 Layer of mortar debris above which lay destruction rubble also containing wall plaster, many iron nails and limestone roofing slates.

F15, 16 & 17 Mortared limestone walls laid on packed rubble foundations. The exterior walls F15 and F17 were more substantial at 0.7 m.-0.75 m. wide than the internal cross-wall F12 at 0.6 m. and which appeared to contain a doorway.

F18 & 19 Exterior cobbled surfaces laid up against walls F15 & 17.

F20 Post Pit? At the western limit of the cobbled layer F18.

F21 Pit with grey-ware pottery.

F22 Mortared stone wall, apparently continuing into the south section as a robber trench.

F23, 24 & 25 Pit group on valley side 70 m. east of recorded villa buildings (Fig. 3). The pipeline cut a rectilinear stone-lined pit F24, 1.4 m. x 1.8 m., x 1.25 m. deep. This pit lay between 2 irregular pits of comparable size. The lower filling of F24 suggested a cess pit and there were signs that the contents had been cleaned out at least once. Pit F23 possessed a similar fill. Both the irregular pits F23 and F25 contained remains of inhumation burials in their upper fills. All three pits had Romano-British pottery in primary positions. SP 45301890. P.R.N. 5731.

Rooms C and D The northern corner of Room C stood several courses high with internal wall plaster *in situ* (Fig. 4) showing traces of red decoration on a white background. The lower mortar floor was contemporary with the construction of the building and its decorated wall plaster. The southern section showed that this floor had been damaged by a pit. In consequence the floor level had been raised 0.1 m. and relaid in concrete, surfaced with 3-4 mm. of *opus signinum*, the decorated plasterwork being retained and a fillet, also in *opus signinum*, added to complete the re-flooring.

INTERPRETATION AND CONCLUSIONS

Surface finds have been recorded from this site over a long period beginning in 1894 with pottery sherds, a fibula and 27 coins found in a stone-lined pit close to Sansom's Farm. On several occasions since then 1st-4th-century Romano-British

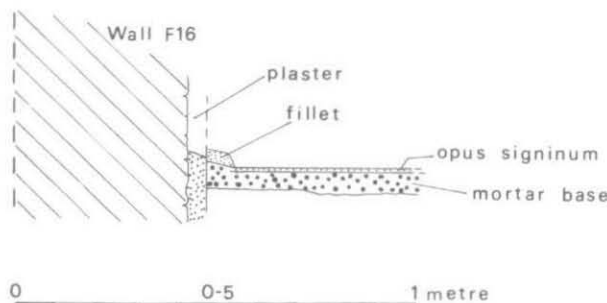


Fig. 4

Detail of the plaster work in Room C of the Romano-British villa at Sansom's Platt.

material has come to light from a wide area—some of which has been erroneously attributed to the present site rather than to a nearby Romano-British farm complex discovered by aerial photography to the south near Beech Hill Clump, Hensington, where coins and pottery have also been recovered.¹⁰

Of the pre-villa features ditch F2 contained material from the 1st and possibly early 2nd centuries A.D. and deposits F4–8 (Fig. 3) provided similarly dated domestic debris. There was insufficient evidence to date closely the construction of that part of the villa cut by the pipe trench. However, pottery associated with Room D (wall F17) and a fragment from a colour-coated pottery bowl imitating a samian form (Drag. 33) which was found embedded within wall F15 of Room C showed this portion of the villa to have been built after the middle of the 3rd century A.D.

Evidence for internal wall decoration in Rooms A and B was provided by fragments of painted plaster within the destruction layers, whilst red and white painted plaster still adhered to the walls in Rooms C and D. The layer of packed stone (F18) which terminated in the section by post-hole F20 may represent a rough verandah. Variation in the style of construction of the footings of Rooms A–B and C–D demonstrated two separate phases of building, but which came first and which was the extension could not be determined from the section alone. The only evidence of roofing material also came from the debris (F14) in Rooms A and B where a quantity of iron nails and limestone slates was recovered, one slate with the nail still in position. Fragments of box flue tile hinted at the existence of a hypocaust system.

Gradual decay seems to have set in to Rooms A and B sometime in the 4th century, when soil (Fig. 3, F13) began to accumulate over their floors, perhaps pointing to their use as out-houses towards the end. Finally the walls were systematically demolished and quarried away as the robber trenches for walls F8 and 10 showed, although the date of this final destruction is not known. The two burials in pits F23 and F25, 70 m. west of the villa buildings are dated to the late Roman period from the pottery within the pits.

The status of the Sansom's Platt villa at any one period remains unclear. The buildings to which rooms A, B, C and D belong, suggest the edge of a yard. The further extensive occupation deposits and walling west of this suggests a scattered overall building layout as seen in some other villas such as Shakenoak¹¹ 9 km. to the south-west. Sansom's Platt does not possess the substantial boundary ditch and the enclosed rectangular layout found at Ditchley,¹² 6 km. to the north-west, or at Hensington¹³ only 0.5 km. to the south. As with Ditchley, the Hensington villa was probably a working farm with substantial stone buildings but the status of the Sansom's Platt villa remains, from that point of view, an unknown quantity.

THE FINDS

Accepting the very limited nature of the archaeology of this site at present, the finds section has been kept as brief as possible. None of the finds have been illustrated.

¹⁰ *V.C.H. Oxon.*, I (1939), 310.

¹¹ A. C. C. Brodribb, A. R. Hands and D. R. Walker, *Excavations at Shakenoak*, IV (1973), 12, Fig. 3.

¹² *V.C.H. Oxon.*, I (1939), 311.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 310.

THE HUMAN BONES. By MARY HARMAN

All the bones were in good condition, though some were broken. The age of the individuals was assessed from the state of epiphyseal fusion and the degree of wear on the teeth, and the sex from the size of the bones and features of the skull and pelvic girdle. Height was calculated from the regression formulae of Trotter and Gleser.¹⁴ There were the remains of at least two skeletons:

1. (F23) A young man aged between 17 and 22 years, 5 ft. 8½ in. (173.4 cm.) tall. Three teeth were lost post-mortem and the third molars were still erupting; there were no caries and no dental abscesses, and wear on the surface was light. There was slight periostitis on the distal halves of the shafts of both radii and ulnae. Most of the skeleton above the knees was present.
2. (F25) Fragments from this feature probably belong to one individual, a young man aged between 17 and 25 years, with metopism. Parts of the skull, six cervical vertebrae, and part of the left humerus and right innominate were found.

WORKED BONE

Plain round bone pin missing its point, the butt end slightly chamfered and plain. Found above the inhumation burial in pit F23.

IRON

From the debris F14 came a quantity of nails, apparently roofing nails found in association with limestone slates. Also an unidentified iron strip and a plain right-angled hook or vertical hinge pivot.

BRONZE

Unstratified. A nail cleaner, 44 mm. long, 3 mm. wide at flat end with a scored wide lattice decoration. Also an unidentified fragment from F8.

BRONZE COINS

From the topsoil: Copy of *Agrippa* coin of Lugdunum (RIC 32). Mid 1st century; worn.

From a fall of soil and mortar make-up for the floor levels in Room C: (1) *Constantius II*. Mint of Lugdunum L.R.B.C. ii 252, A.D. 353–60; little wear. (2) *Constans*. ¼ bronze coin; rev. VICTORIAE DD AVGG Q NIV; Two Victories A.D. 341–6; worn. (3) *Constantine I*. Mint of Ticinum. R.I.C. vii 163–5. A.D. 321–2; unworn.

THE POTTERY

Grey wares formed a large proportion of the pottery recovered and amongst these only a few displayed datable characteristics, especially a grey ware bead rim storage jar of a type previously found at Alchester.¹⁵ Also present were products of the Oxford kilns, mainly dating from the second half of the 3rd century and included white ware mortaria, parchment ware bowls and red colour-coated bowls, flagons and beakers. Shell gitted fabrics were present mainly in the 1st- or early 2nd-century ditch F2 accompanied by grey wares. All this pottery was in fragmented form and there were no complete vessels nor any large groups. Much of the datable pottery could be paralleled elsewhere with previously published material. In view of this and the nature of the site none of the pottery has been published here. However, Dr. C. J. Young commented on a couple of small pottery sherds as being of a type possibly from the Northampton area.¹⁶ As yet comparatively little is known of Northamptonshire pottery.

A Department of the Environment publication grant for this paper is gratefully acknowledged.

¹⁴ D. R. Brothwell, *Digging up Bones* (1965), 60, 69, 102.

¹⁵ C. J. Young, pers. comm.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*