

# Roman Burials around Dorchester-on-Thames

By MARY HARMAN, G. LAMBRICK, D. MILES and T. ROWLEY

## SUMMARY

*In 1972 a large cemetery was discovered in gravel quarrying near Queensford Farm, Dorchester, but only two weeks of salvage work was possible on the site. In August 1975, at Church Piece, Warborough, a tractor hauled a lead coffin to the surface and a small trial excavation was carried out. The opportunity is taken here to bring together the evidence for Dorchester's Roman cemeteries and the previously unpublished skeletal report for Queensford Farm.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

WE would like to thank Mr. and Mrs. J. P. D. Hayward and Mr. C. Duncan for their hospitality and co-operation during excavation at Church Piece ; David Fine, site supervisor ; and Wendy Lee who produced the drawings. We are also grateful to Mike Parrington who restored the lead coffin, and for his comments and advice on the manufacturing technique.

## INTRODUCTION

The archaeological evidence for Roman Dorchester has recently been summarized<sup>1</sup> so it is enough to say here that, until 1972, this small Roman town of about 5.5 hectares, at the confluence of the Thames and Thame, had produced remarkably little evidence for burials in the area outside its walls. Cemeteries are generally common in the immediate vicinity of Roman towns of all ranks from York, Cirencester or Verulamium down to Ancaster, which is comparable in size with Dorchester.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the exact lines of the roads from Dorchester (Fig. 1) we would expect to find cemeteries alongside them near the town. A Roman burial was found before 1711 south-west of the town accompanied by two pots and two glass vessels, with traces of other skeletons in the area.<sup>3</sup> Roman material occurs immediately south of the town where there also seems to be a considerable extra-mural settlement. Although no burials have been accurately dated, it is probable that an early Romano-British cemetery lies in the southern area. In 1874 and 1882 skeletons with Roman pottery were located during ditch digging in Meadowside

<sup>1</sup> T. Rowley, 'The Roman Towns of Oxfordshire', 115-18 in W. Rodwell and T. Rowley (eds.), *Small Towns of Roman Britain*, B.A.R. 15 (1975).

<sup>2</sup> The location of cemeteries around various towns is summarized in J. Wachter, *The Towns of Roman Britain* (1975) and W. Rodwell and T. Rowley (eds.), *The Small Towns of Roman Britain*, B.A.R. 15 (1975).

<sup>3</sup> *V.C.H. Oxon.*, I (1939), 293.

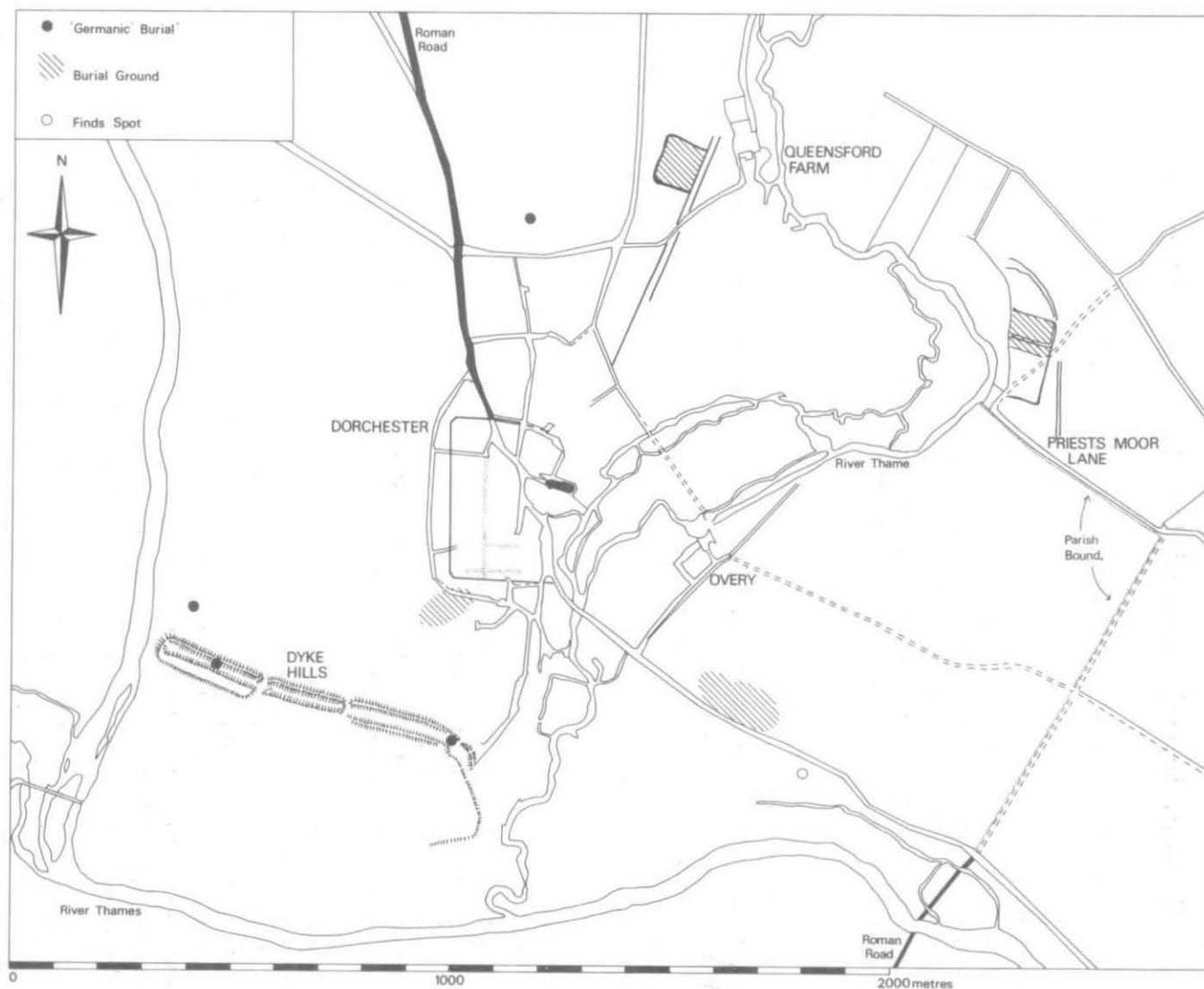


Fig. 1  
Roman burial sites around Dorchester-on-Thames.

Piece,<sup>4</sup> alongside the probable line of the Roman road south-east of the town. This is close to the find-spot of the five well-known Dorchester silver spoons.<sup>5</sup> The only other evidence for earlier Roman burials is an early 3rd-century cremation south-east of the vicarage, to the east of the town.<sup>6</sup> This has led to discussion as to the location of the eastern boundary of Dorchester,<sup>7</sup> but no solution to this problem has yet been achieved.

The identification of the Queensford Mill and Church Piece cemeteries has clarified the cemetery problem for the later Roman period. Both seem to have been in use in the 4th century but not much earlier. If this is the case then we would expect the cemeteries of the 1st and 2nd centuries to be closer to the town, near the main road. Queensford and Church Piece lie 700 and 1100 m. respectively from the town. Queensford has a straight track leading to it from the north-eastern corner of the town and the cemetery enclosure is laid off to the west at right angles to it. The pattern is repeated at other sites such as the St. Pancras cemetery on Stone Street 600 m. north-east of Chichester, where a cemetery of 1.7 hectares was in use from the 1st to the 3rd centuries. Church Piece is both distant from Dorchester and, at present, inaccessible, lying on the opposite bank of the Thame, a situation similar to Verulamium's northern cemetery, across the river Ver. The present parish boundary is aligned on the Silchester road/river crossing (Fig. 1) and then runs at right angles, down Priests' Moor Lane, to a point adjacent to the southern side of the cemetery. The alignment of this parish boundary may well reflect an earlier Roman road line. Cropmarks indicate a trackway running north from Priests' Moor Lane alongside the cemetery and another at the northern end curving down to the Thame. These may have provided access to the burial ground and we could expect there to have been a crossing of the river in this area.

The best known late Roman burials around Dorchester are the Germanic graves from Dyke Hills and Minchin Recreation ground. There is no evidence for more extensive cemeteries in these areas, but Dyke Hills would have provided an obvious prominent feature in which to insert the graves of individuals belonging to a cultural minority in late Roman Dorchester.

## QUEENSFORD MILL CEMETERY

### INTRODUCTION

The site at Queensford Mill was excavated in 1972 and a report appeared the following year.<sup>8</sup>

The skeletal report does not reveal anything particularly unusual about the sample. There is a high mortality rate amongst young people, over 20% of the sample being under 16. There is some indication of death through child birth—grave 56A, for instance, would suggest death at child birth of both mother and

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>7</sup> M. Aston, 'The Roman Town Defences at Dorchester, an interim assessment', *C.B.A. Group 9 Newsletter*, 4 (1974).

<sup>8</sup> B. Durham and T. Rowley, 'A Cemetery Site at Queensford Mill, Dorchester', *Oxoniensia*, xxxvii (1972), 32-7.

infant—and this is supported by a high rate of death amongst young women. The absence of other neo-natal skeletons is not unusual as such corpses were usually disposed of on occupation sites. Only two of the inhumations appear to have suffered a violent death, one through being crushed, the other through blows to the head.

It is clear from the original excavation that the main concentration of graves is within the rectangular enclosure, although a number of inhumations was recovered from the area to the south of the cemetery boundary. Although there appear to be gaps within the distribution of graves within the enclosure, the overall distribution is relatively even, suggesting that the whole of the enclosure did ultimately contain graves. On this basis the original estimate of a total of 700 graves for the cemetery needs to be amended. The overall size of the cemetery is 23,000 square metres compared to an investigated area of approximately 3,000 square metres, which represents 13% of the area. Approximately 200 graves were identified within this area, giving a probable total for the whole enclosure of 1,500. Just under half of the investigated area was actually excavated, from which came 78 burials, representing only 6% of the total cemetery area. On this basis a total of 1,300 burials within the enclosure could be estimated. It is therefore fair to assume that the total of burials within the enclosure was in excess of 1,000 and probably between 1,300 and 1,500; this was an extensive late Romano-British cemetery.

Because almost the whole of the remainder of the cemetery was not investigated and has now been destroyed it is not possible to confirm whether the northern part was occupied. Only a very small section of the western corner of the enclosure remains extant, which by coincidence overlies the southern end of the Dorchester *cursus* and a ring ditch enclosure. It would be possible to test the occupation of the cemetery in this area by small-scale excavation.

The vast majority of the graves were aligned roughly east-west and within the area excavated there were no dramatic irregularities. A considerable number of the graves was aligned within discrete groups, indicating that they were marked at least for a time. The insertion of grave 172 next to 151 would indicate some family relationship and also suggested some surface marking of the graves, as do the post- and stake-holes found during the excavation.

The absence of dating evidence was commented upon in the original report, the size of sample being too small to enable any deduction about the length of cemetery use based on morphological grounds. Nevertheless the complete absence of grave goods, the alignments, and the early 5th-century carbon 14 date would suggest a late date for the cemetery, and its size suggests use over a long time, perhaps throughout the 4th into the early 5th century A.D.

#### THE HUMAN REMAINS. By MARY HARMAN<sup>8a</sup>

All the skeletons recovered were examined. The condition of the bones varied considerably, some individuals being excellently preserved while others are represented only by the major bones of the skeleton, badly eroded, or by small fragments. Often the con-

<sup>8a</sup> Financial restrictions prevented publication of the complete report on the skeletons, and the author did not see the summary printed here before it went to press. Details of the skeletal analyses are available from Oxon. C. C. Dept. of Museum Services, Woodstock (Editor).

dition of even a 'largely complete' skeleton is poor and the ribs, vertebrae and hands and feet are mostly decayed away.

The sex of adult individuals was decided where possible from the general character of the skeleton: its size and the muscular attachments on the bones, and from the relevant features of the skull and the pelvic girdle, described by Brothwell.<sup>9</sup> The assessment of age is based on the degree of epiphyseal fusion and the state of tooth eruption and degree of tooth wear, using the criteria published by Brothwell, and the length of the long bone diaphyses of juveniles, using the chart prepared by Miss Powers.<sup>10</sup> The height of adults was calculated from the lengths of the limb bones, using the regression formulae of Trotter and Gleser, published in Brothwell.<sup>9</sup> Full descriptions will be deposited with the site records at the Oxfordshire Department of Museum Services, Woodstock. Where possible the presence of normal variations in the skeleton, such as metopism and wormian bones, and vertebral anomalies, was noted, as was evidence of disease or injury.

The remains of 75 people were recovered. This is a comparatively small number and any conclusions drawn from the group must be treated with caution.

TABLE I  
The distribution of skeletons according to age and sex

Sex	Age in years										Adult
	0	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40	45+	
♂					2	3	4	2		10	1
♀					6	3	6	1	1	8	4
?	1	6	4	5	1					2	2
Total	1	6	4	5	4	8	6	10	3	20	7

The number of skeletons distributed according to age and sex is shown in Table 1. 16 individuals died at an age of less than 15 years; of these one was an infant in utero or dying at or shortly after a premature birth (the circumstances of the excavation, a hasty rescue operation in poor conditions, make it impossible now to tell where the foetal bones lay), two died at about 18 and 21 months, and the rest are fairly regularly spaced throughout the age range. In a group of this size, more very young children might be expected, unless they were being buried in another part of the cemetery or elsewhere: there is good evidence that newborn infants and very young children were commonly buried close to the settlements, and the sample must therefore be considered as most probably incomplete at the lower end of the age range. Of the 59 people over 15 years of age at death, 22 were almost certainly male and 32 female. Adult deaths were greatest between 30 and 35 years of age, with a considerable number, nearly a third of the total, surviving for an unknown number of years beyond the age of 45. There is also a relatively large number of female deaths between the ages of 15 and 25, and grave 56 may suggest part of the reason for this; a higher mortality rate in young women at childbirth. It is of some interest that of the six women dying between the ages of 20 and 25, four were less than 5 ft. tall, including the occupant of grave 56.

The average height of 18 men was 5 ft. 6½ in. (169.7 cm.) and of 21 women was 5 ft. 2 in. (157.4 cm.). A large number of short women—eight between 4 ft. 10 in. and 5 ft.—is unusual.

Table 2 shows the incidence of caries, abscess and tooth loss in the number of teeth and tooth sockets seen, for different age groups. There is a considerable deterioration with increasing age, though dental health was better than it is in England today.

<sup>9</sup> D. R. Brothwell, *Digging up Bones* (1965), 47, 48, 60, 69, 102.

<sup>10</sup> Miss R. Powers, *Pers Comm.*

TABLE 2  
Incidence of caries, abscess and tooth loss in teeth and tooth sockets seen,  
arranged according to age groups

Age in years	Caries		Abscess		Loss	
20-30	6/251	2.2%	0/280	0%	6/296	2%
30-40	31/234	13.2%	16/278	5.8%	19/299	6.3%
over 40	33/179	18.4%	59/314	15.6%	168/470	35.7%

There is a high incidence of lambdoid wormians : in 16 individuals of 43 where it was possible to see if these were present. Other cranial anomalies were less frequent, as were those in the vertebral column ; there are 11 cases of coincidence of two anomalies in one skeleton.

Osteo-arthritis was not seen in any individual under 30 years of age, and was severe only in those more than 45 years old.

Few other pathological conditions were seen, though some people were particularly unfortunate. The person in grave 33 was very severely affected by osteo-arthritis, in the back and particularly the right shoulder ; while the left elbow was completely fixed at an angle of a little over 90°, probably the result of an injury. The young man in grave 35 had survived a number of fractures on his left side : to the clavicle, some ribs, and the lower leg : these may well have occurred on the same occasion. An older man in grave 150 had a healed fracture of the left fibula. The woman in grave 59 almost certainly died as a result of three blows from a blade penetrating the skull : these do not appear to be cuts of recent origin sustained during excavation.

#### *Acknowledgements*

I am grateful to Miss R. Powers of the British Museum (Natural History) for allowing me to use her chart of juvenile diaphysis lengths, to Miss T. Molleson of the same institution for radiographing the pathological bones, and to Dr. J. L. Price of Guildford for looking at the radiographs and commenting on the bones.

### CHURCH PIECE, Warborough

The cropmark site at Church Piece, Warborough lies 1100 m. west-north-west of Dorchester Abbey, on the gravel terrace immediately above the flood plain of the river Thame, at a height of 172 ft. O.D. The cropmark was first photographed by Major Allen but was recorded and published by Professor J. K. S. St. Joseph.<sup>11</sup> St. Joseph suggested that the regular rows of burials and structures clearly visible in his remarkable aerial photograph might indicate the site of a 'college of secular canons' founded in the 7th century, or even of the first cathedral of Dorchester. This interpretation was given some support by the suggestive field names, Church Piece and Priests' Moor,<sup>12</sup> and by the discovery of a stone coffin at SU 58969446 in 1780, although Taylor thought the coffin was Roman.<sup>13</sup> Recent fieldwalking and trial excavation suggests that the site dates to the late Roman period.

<sup>11</sup> J. K. S. St. Joseph (ed.), *The Uses of Air Photography* (1966), 112-13, Pl. 59.

<sup>12</sup> M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Oxfordshire* (1953), 138-9.

<sup>13</sup> *V.C.H. Oxon.*, I (1939), 344.

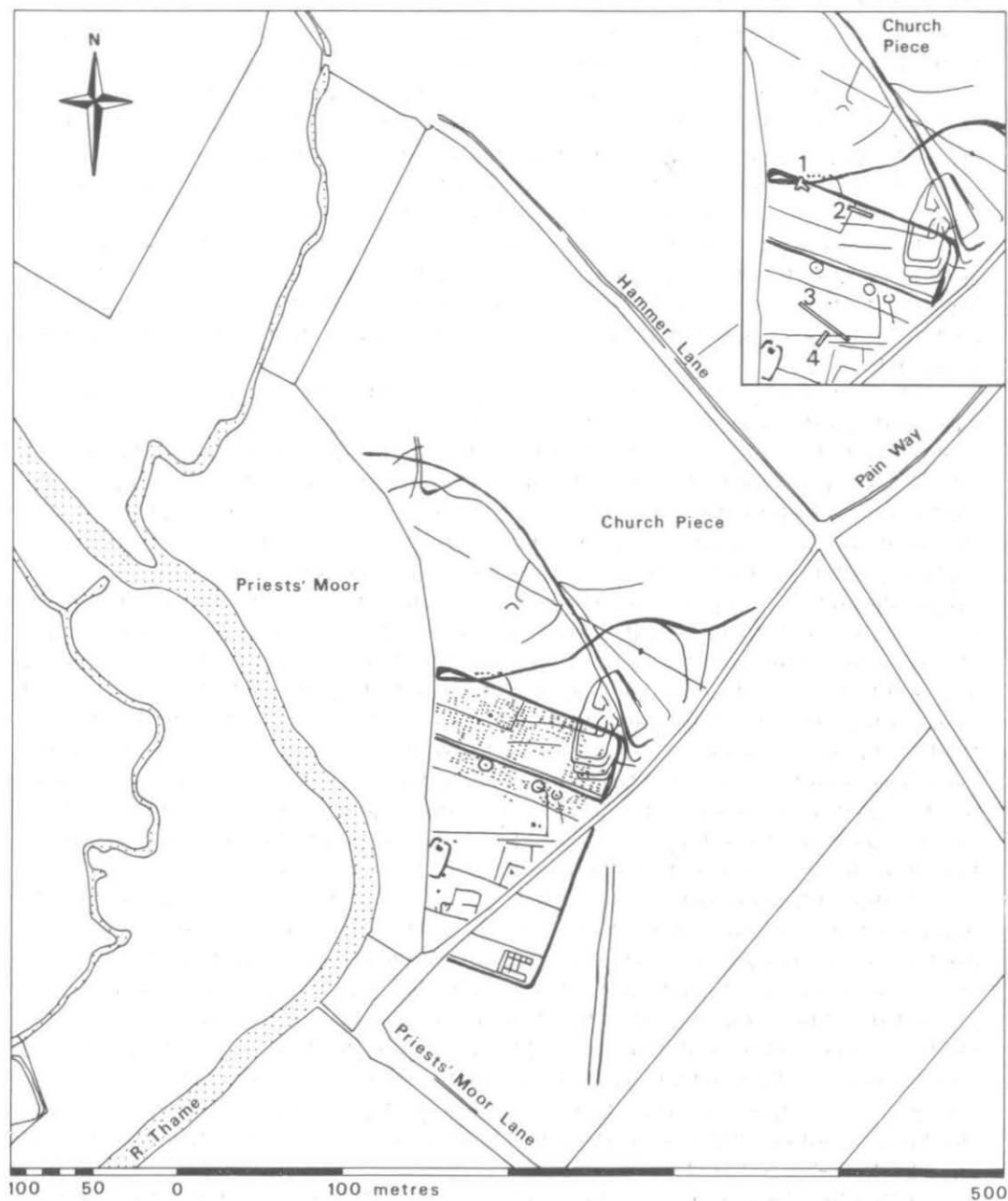


Fig. 2

Warborough, Church Piece cropmark plan. Inset : detail of cropmark and position of trenches.



## THE CROPMARKS (Fig. 2)

The cropmarks have been briefly described in a recent survey of the Thames Valley<sup>14</sup> but no attempt was made at interpretation. The plan illustrated here has been produced from a number of aerial photographs taken by Professor St. Joseph using the three-point system<sup>15</sup> supplemented by field surveying. The lack of precise points visible on both the low oblique photographs and maps hinders the production of an accurate plan. No attempt has been made to plot precisely the large number of graves visible at the northern end of the site.

The cropmark complex is a complicated one. A subdivided rectangular enclosure provides the main focus, but around this are networks of tracks and ditches which are only visible at the margins of the aerial photographs. The main enclosure is surrounded by further cropmark traces which cannot be plotted accurately.

The subrectangular enclosure is approximately 160 m. long (north-north-east/south-south-west) by 125 m. broad (2 hectares). The west side, which is not visible, probably runs under the field boundary of Priests' Moor where the ground falls away quite markedly onto the floodplain of the river Thame. The main enclosure is subdivided by at least five or six internal ditches. The ditch bounding the northern part is wider than elsewhere. It shows signs of re-cutting and may replace a slighter ditch visible on the south and east sides. This northern area (approximately 125 × 45 m., 0.56 hectares) is densely packed with marks which trial excavation has confirmed represent graves. It is not possible to give a precise estimate of the total number of graves but between 500 and 1,000 seems a reasonable figure. The graves appear to be regularly laid out in lines, orientated east-south-east/west-north-west, which is the same orientation as Dorchester Abbey. Within the main cemetery area are several subsidiary enclosures, one in the north-west corner and a series of sub-rectangular ditches, perhaps replacing one another in the north-east corner. It appears that the cemetery has spread beyond its original southern boundary into the enclosure beyond and possibly a new cemetery boundary has been created giving a total area of 0.7 hectares.

Within this supposed annexe of the cemetery are three circles. They vary in diameter between approximately 8 and 12 m. It is uncertain whether these ring ditches are contemporary with the cemetery. There are central marks in all of them consistent with burials and other burials on an east/west axis seem to cluster around the sides. On the other hand their size is compatible with prehistoric hut circles or even rather small barrows. The most westerly ring seems to be cut by the large cemetery ditch which suggests an earlier date for that particular circular feature. That there are several phases of occupation on the site is apparent from the large number of linear marks which cut across one another both inside and outside the principal enclosure.

Adjoining the cemetery to the south is a series of enclosures defined by slighter ditches. On the west, hard against the Priests' Moor hedge, a subrectangular

<sup>14</sup> D. Benson and D. Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley: an archaeological survey of the river gravels* (1974), 69, Map 36.

<sup>15</sup> This simple method of plotting is described in G. C. Dickinson, *Maps and Air Photographs* (1969), 268-72.



enclosure can be seen (Fig. 2) with an entrance in the short northern side, the crop-mark expanding at the ditch terminals as if for a heavy door or gate posts. This feature is approximately 20 m. long and 12 m. wide, with curving sides on its long axis. In the south-east corner of the principal enclosure crop-marking indicates the presence of a tripartite building with internal divisions. Ten rooms, with wings in the east and a rear corridor on the west side, are faintly visible in the aerial photograph. If this was a stone building then it has probably been robbed, because otherwise it would not produce dark 'negative' cropmarks; it is further discussed below.

Outside the large enclosure are many marks both bold and faint. To the north an irregular trackway runs approximately 250 m. from the edge of the floodplain, where it is splayed, to the north-east corner of the cemetery. The western ditch of the trackway is much wider than the eastern, and seems to be recut. This may represent a track to the cemetery from the floodplain/grazing land or from a crossing of the Thame. The lane cuts across or is cut by several ditches of different phases, and where it meets the corner of the cemetery the marks become extremely complicated. There may be an entrance into the cemetery at this point although there is no gap in the main ditch itself. To the east of the principal enclosure faint parallel lines might indicate two further trackways approaching from the south, the direction of Priests' Moor Lane. Butting onto these are a series of rectangular and sub-rectangular enclosures.

#### THE EXCAVATION

The excavation consisted of four trenches: Trench 1 where a lead coffin had been pulled up by the subsoiler in an area of thin subsoil over the natural gravel; Trench 2 across the line of the subsoiling in an area of thick subsoil; Trenches 3 and 4 south of Trench 2 (Fig. 2). The objectives were to assess the damage caused by subsoiling, and the threat of cultivation generally, and to obtain some information as to the nature and date of the cemetery.

The field had been subsoiled with a twin legged subsoiler set to work at 18–20 in. at 4 ft. centres (see Fig. 3). Below the top plough soil (chisel ploughed to 15 cm.) was a pan of ploughsoil consisting of a hard packed layer of dense compressed loam, which had necessitated the subsoiling.<sup>16</sup> This operation had been done north-south (across the line of the graves) about a month before the excavation of Trenches 1 and 2 took place. It only partially broke up the pan. The disturbance consisted of lines of broken-up loose soil 52 to 56 cm. deep with a 'V'-shaped profile 5 cm. wide at the bottom expanding to 40 cm. at the top. In Trench 2 these penetrated the clayey loam subsoil (L10), which was up to 60–70 cm. deep; in Trench 1 it was only 30–35 cm. deep and the subsoiler had penetrated the sandy/silty gravel below.

The burials varied in depth: the deepest (F14) in Trench 2 was dug 30 cm. into the gravel and flint natural, and was protected by 24 cm. of soil between the top of the skull and the bottom of the subsoiling; but burial 11 was laid

<sup>16</sup> G. Lambrick, *Archaeology and Agriculture* (1977), 7–9.

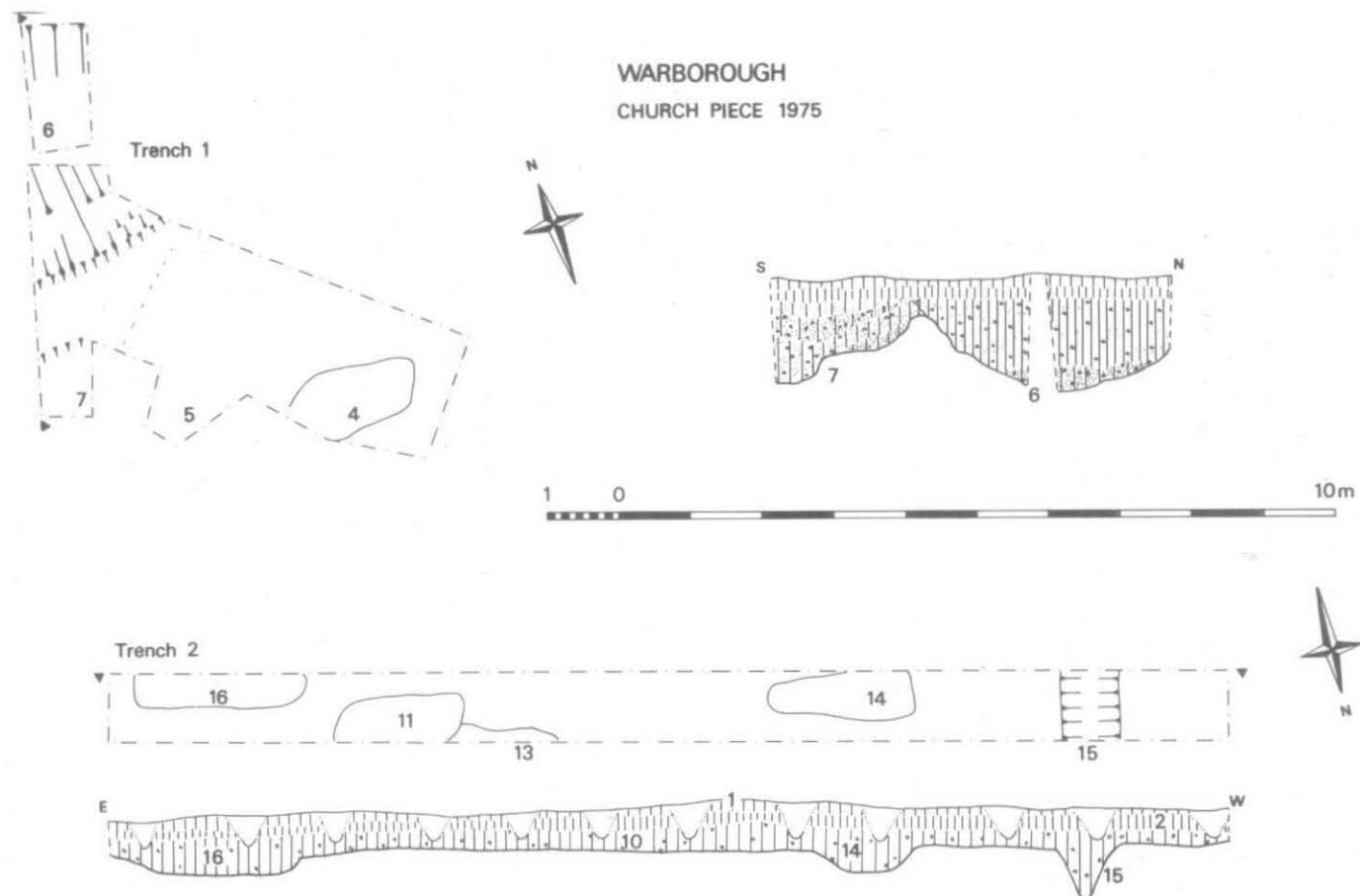


Fig. 3  
Warborough, Church Piece. 1975 excavations, Trenches 1 and 2.

on top of the natural flint and gravel where the subsoil was somewhat thinner. The feet of the burial had been thoroughly disturbed, the chest had been missed only by 2 cm. and the top of the skull was 10 cm. above the bottom of the subsoiling though it happened to have been missed by the tines.

In Trench 1, in the area of thin subsoil, the burials were much shallower. The lead coffin (F3) had been badly bent and one end had been sliced off by the subsoiler, although its grave (F4) was dug 25 cm. into the natural sand/gravel. The only other burial in Trench 1 (F5) had been disturbed and lacked both legs and half the pelvis. A subsoiling groove crossed below the remains of the pelvis and may partly have been the cause of the disturbance. The top of the skull had been sliced off, probably by deep mouldboard ploughing. The remains were only 20 cm. below ground level, well above the bottom of the sub-soiling disturbances. In this area the subsoiling penetrated well into the natural silty sand and gravel. This trench is more representative of the site as a whole judging from the air photograph: the band of deep subsoil on which Trench 2 was sited shows up as covering only about one quarter of the main cemetery enclosure. At each end of Trench 2 the soil cover was only 40–50 cm. as opposed to the maximum of 70 cm. in the middle. The disturbance of the feet of burial 11 and the narrow miss for the rest of it suggests that even here the site would be at risk of being seriously damaged if subsoiling were continued, especially as it would normally be done alternating the direction each time. Subsoiling along the alignment of graves would obviously be an even more serious threat.

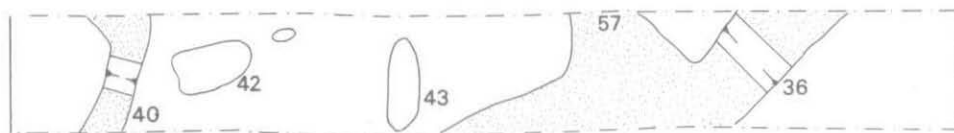
In Trenches 3 and 4 excavated about three months later, it was very much more difficult to detect the subsoiling disturbance since the soil had to a large extent settled to form a firm (though not so compact) structure. Had it not been known that subsoiling had taken place, it might well not have been noticed. The subsoil was again thinner, but no skeletons were found and little additional detailed information was therefore gained.

The threat of ploughing is not as serious as that of subsoiling. Deep ploughing for potatoes has already been carried out and may have caused some damage in the past, which might recur if such deep ploughing were repeated. Shallow cultivation, however, is likely not to be damaging since the site is on very level ground and serious erosion is unlikely to occur. The possibility of some erosion, however, makes it desirable that any cultivation should be kept well above the lowest levels already disturbed, and should be as shallow as possible. This policy has very considerably now been adopted for the field by the farmer.

Apart from the lead coffin and its skeleton (F3), four other burials were found and the edge of a sixth grave identified. One burial (F16) was seriously disturbed in antiquity. The skeletons were all of adults, with one possible exception, two being male, two female. They were examined *in situ*.<sup>8a</sup> All except F16 were extended, aligned east-west, and contained no grave goods or other dating evidence. One grave (F11) contained an ox mandible and five coffin nails.

Several ditches were excavated. In Trench 2, a steep-sided, narrow (80 cm.) but quite deep (80 cm.) ditch (F15) was picked up at the top of the layer of flinty subsoil (L10) covering the natural gravel (Fig. 3). It ran north-south across the

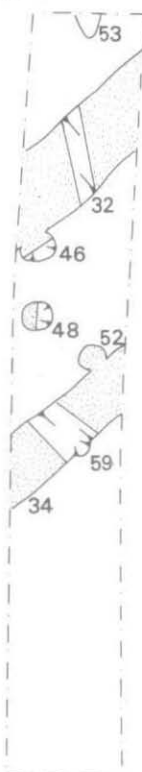
line of the trench. In Trench 1 a section was cut across the main enclosure ditch of the cemetery (F6), which was 4.2 m. wide and 1.8 m. deep below ground surface. It was filled with dark brown sticky loam. Finds from it consisted largely of 4th-century Roman pottery but included some possibly 1st- to 2nd-century pottery. This ditch cut an earlier one (F7) filled with light brown gravelly



Trench 3



Trench 4



WARBOROUGH  
CHURCH PIECE 1975

Fig. 4

Warborough, Church Piece. 1975 excavations, Trenches 3 and 4.

loam and gravel, apparently up-cast from the later ditch. No dating evidence for it was found. Both these ditches were easily distinguished on the air photograph.

In Trenches 3 and 4 a few small gullies were found (F32, F34, F36, F40), all filled with medium brown silty loam, often with a flinty layer at the bottom, probably resulting from initial weathering of the flinty gravel into which the gullies were cut (Fig. 4). A few possible post-holes (F46, F48, F55, F58 and F59) and a small number of mortary patches (L42, L43, and L52) suggested traces of buildings but no definite structure was found. No good dating evidence was found for any of these features.

#### THE LEAD COFFIN

The lead coffin was hauled to the surface by a twin legged subsoiler and was consequently badly damaged. Most of the coffin was retrieved and restored as far as possible, though part of the base was badly corroded.

The coffin is of a simple shoe-box type (Fig. 5). A single sheet of sand-cast lead was bent into an open-ended box 1.80 m. long. The coffin is widest at the head (0.45 m.) and tapers down to the foot (0.39 m.). The box is 0.27 m. deep at the head end and 0.24 m. at the foot. The walls are 5 to 10 mm. thick. The thickness of the lead would prevent all but the simplest working. At the head end a rectangular plate was slotted in to fit the space almost exactly. Molten lead was poured down the inside angles to strengthen the corners and fill in the slight gaps between the coffin sides and the end panel. The laminations visible in these corner wedges show that the lead was poured in a little at a time and allowed to solidify. This material has not been analysed but it appears to be lead rather than solder.

At the foot end a relatively larger plate was used and bent around the walls of the coffin so that there is an overlap of 3-4 cm. Again molten lead was poured in to strengthen the inside corners.

The coffin lid was also made from a single sheet of lead with the edges turned over to form a lip about 8 cm. deep. The corners were clipped and the ends turned back over the side lips to form cleats. The bare metal edges of the lid and the box were hammered to smooth and strengthen them.

The method of manufacture seems to be as simple as possible with no elaboration. The technique is similar to that employed in a coffin from Margidunum, of about the same date.<sup>17</sup> Lead casting and working is described by Toynbee<sup>18</sup> though she concentrates on elaborately decorated coffins. Plain lead coffins such as the Warborough example were sometimes placed within elaborate stone sarcophagi or inside more elaborate wooden containers. There was no evidence for either of these at Warborough, where it seems the plain lead coffin was placed in a shallow grave.

#### THE POTTERY

The cemetery enclosure ditch (F6) produced a small quantity of pottery in its upper fill (L1). This material indicates that the ditch filled up in or after the 4th century A.D., but there is so little that conclusions must be tentative. It includes 6 sherds of red colour-coated Oxford ware, 2 being from a rouletted bowl; 2 sherds of shell-gritted pottery of a type common in the 4th century; 2 grey ware rims of late Romano-British form; and 3 sherds of 1st-century A.D. native type.

The sherds in the plough soil were mainly late Romano-British types.

<sup>17</sup> M. Todd, 'The Roman Settlement at Margidunum: The excavation of 1966-8', *Trans. Thoroton Soc. of Notts.*, LXXIII (1969), 7-104.

<sup>18</sup> J. Toynbee, *Art in Britain under the Romans* (1964), 345-53.

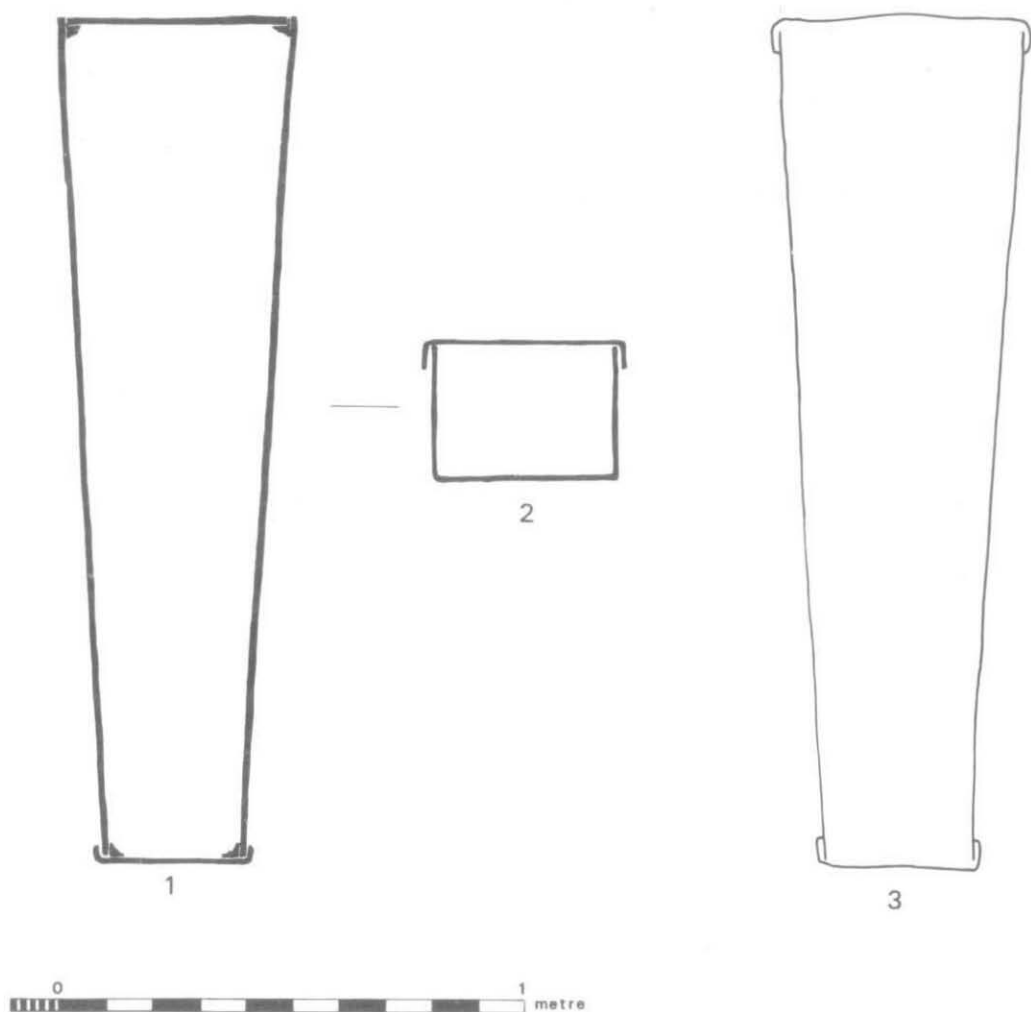


Fig. 5

Warborough. Schematic drawing of lead coffin. 1 : Box ; 2 : Section ; 3 : Lid.

### INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

Fieldwalking on the site produced much pottery, dating from the 1st century A.D. but with a predominance of late Romano-British wares. Only Church Piece itself was under cultivation but over the southern area of the field a concentration of building debris, stone, plaster, tesserae and particularly red tile, indicated the presence of a Romano-British building. A faint rectangle with a central partition was visible in the cropmarks in this area, and might represent the structure itself. In the south-east corner of the site it has been suggested above that a more complex

tripartite building can be seen. In 1766<sup>19</sup> buildings were located in approximately this area of Boywere Furlong and recorded as 64 ft. long (east-west) and 60 ft. 6 in. wide (north-south). 'Foundations of old walls' in Church Piece itself were not precisely located but confirm the results of modern field walking.

Trial excavation showed that the wide cemetery ditch was utilized in the late Roman period. It seems that although there is earlier occupation on the site, the principal features belong to the late 3rd or 4th, and possibly 5th centuries A.D. We are not in a position to say for how long the cemetery was in use, although the large number of burials would suggest some considerable time. The graves are in regular ranks, with little obvious disturbance and probably therefore had markers of some sort. The cemetery may have expanded beyond its first obviously crowded area into the southern enclosure, which seems still to have had room for a few more occupants when abandoned. The three ring-ditches may well pre-date the cemetery, but the possibility that they represent mausolea should not be ruled out.<sup>20</sup>

It is particularly interesting to find buildings in association with a cemetery. We do not know that they are precisely contemporary with the burials but the layout of the site as indicated by the cropmark evidence certainly suggests a close relationship. The tripartite plan of the south-eastern structure is familiar at a number of villas, notably, within Oxfordshire, at Ditchley. Whether this building functioned as a villa or was connected with the organization of the cemetery is a matter still for speculation. At Llantwit Major, Glamorgan and Banwell, Somerset, cemeteries have been found in association with 'villas', although possibly post-dating them.<sup>21</sup>

It seems likely that the two cemeteries at Queensford Mill and Church Piece are associated with the small Roman town at Dorchester-on-Thames and contain most of the burials of the last century of Roman occupation. The Queensford cemetery enclosure (110 × 120 m.) covers 1.3 ha. and that at Church Piece (125 × 55 m.) 0.7 ha. If both cemeteries were fully utilized then there may be in the region of 2,500 burials over approximately 150 years. These figures are obviously speculative but if they represent something approaching the total number of burials in late Roman Dorchester, then they indicate a local population of perhaps about 500 people.<sup>22</sup>

The admittedly flimsy dating evidence suggests that both cemeteries were in use through the 4th and in the early 5th centuries. The burials are aligned as

<sup>19</sup> '[In] the Year 1766 March and April Thos. Beisley and Willm. Wickens Dug up some old Foundation Walls in Boywere furlong by Prissmoor Lane in the Lower field of Warborough in the County of Oxford, which Ground Platt was measured by Edwd. Beaper, Clerk, and the North and South Sides wall was 64 Feet long, being the longest that way. And the East and West Sides Measures 60 foot 6 inches, in Length (or width) this being the Shortest Side. And there was also at the Same time a Stone Coffin with Dry bones in, and other Carcasses found in Church Piece, and Foundations of old walls, and a Small flower Pot found in the Coffin by order of Mr Benjamin Bisley (or Beisley) was Buried again. These Memorials was Dug up when the Revd. Doctor Francis Randolph was Minister at Warborough, and Edward Beaper Parish Clerk at that time.'

Recorded in *Berks, Bucks & Oxon Arch Journal*, xiv (1908), 94-5.

<sup>20</sup> The late Romano-British and Saxon cemetery at Cannington, Somerset contained a circular trench for a stone-built mausoleum or shrine with a single grave in the centre; see P. A. Rahtz, 'Sub-Roman cemeteries in Somerset', in M. W. Barley and R. P. C. Hanson (eds.), *Christianity in Britain, 300-700* (1968), 193-5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>22</sup> The average age of death is taken to be 30 years: see C. Wells, *Bones, Bodies and Disease* (1964), 179, Fig. 39.



close to west-east as Dorchester Abbey itself. The excavated skeletons lay prone with their heads to the west and there was a complete absence of grave goods in both cemeteries. The fact that several hundred burials at both sites were so uniformly arranged does not necessarily demonstrate the Christianity of the cemetery occupants; they may simply conform to a late Roman fashion. The religious affiliations of the inhabitants of 4th- and 5th-century Dorchester remains one of the outstanding questions in the history of the Upper Thames region. There is no positive evidence in the form of inscriptions, symbols or architecture to indicate the presence of Christianity in late Roman Dorchester, although the historical background of the period provides no major obstacle to such a belief. By the 380s Theodosius had established Christianity as the state religion and Dorchester, at a junction of routeways, was open to new influences.

It may be significant that contemporary rural cemeteries display completely different characteristics; at Radley<sup>23</sup> for example burials were placed with their heads to the north; at Stanton Harcourt<sup>24</sup> similarly oriented burials included coins, while some skeletons were decapitated. Even if Christianity penetrated Oxfordshire's small urban communities, evidently a stratum of *pagani* remained in the countryside.

Dorchester's archaeology has suffered so much in recent years that it is fortunate that the Church Piece cemetery will be preserved for the immediate future at least. The site obviously holds a great deal of information about the burial practices, religion and demography of Roman Dorchester and the nature of its continuity into the post-Roman period.

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<sup>23</sup> R. J. C. Atkinson, 'Excavations in Barrow Hills Field, Radley, Berks, 1944-5', *Oxoniensia*, xviii (1953), 66-81.

<sup>24</sup> Excavations in 1978 by Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit.