

# Romano-British Burials from Wroxton, Oxon. 1980

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with a contribution by M. HARMAN

## SUMMARY

*In 1979-80 the conversion of a barn into living accommodation led to the discovery and excavation of part of a Romano-British inhumation cemetery.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit is indebted to the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Anney, and their family for reporting the find and for their keen interest and help in excavating and recording the burials; and to the Department of the Environment for funding the project. Mr John Callow drew Fig. 1 and Miss Catherine Steane drew Figs. 2 and 3. Mrs. J.M. Chambers kindly typed the text.

## INTRODUCTION

Wroxton is a small village situated in the Cotswolds near the Gloucestershire border. The cemetery, centred N.G.R. SP 4150 4185, lies on the north side of the present village on a hill brow some 160 m. above sea-level. The cemetery lies on the Marlstone Rock Bed<sup>1</sup> which is referred to locally as ironstone. This hard brown ferruginous limestone lies directly beneath the topsoil.

## EXCAVATION<sup>2</sup>

In August 1979, the reduction in floor-level of a barn formerly belonging to Poplar's Farm<sup>3</sup> revealed a collection of disarticulated human bones from at least five individuals.<sup>4</sup> In 1980, reduction of the ground-surface at the rear of the barn by some 0.5 m. revealed three inhumation graves. Two each contained an adult, and the third contained two children (Fig. 1). The grave pits cut into the irregular surface of the

<sup>1</sup> W.J. Arkell, *The Geology of Oxford* (1947), 19.

<sup>2</sup> The excavation records and human bone have been deposited with the Oxfordshire County Council Department of Museum Services, Woodstock, under P.R.N. 11,870. The pottery and grave-goods have been retained by the site owner for the present.

<sup>3</sup> Pers. comm. Mr. Anney.

<sup>4</sup> Reported to the Banbury police, who contacted the Oxford Archaeological Unit.

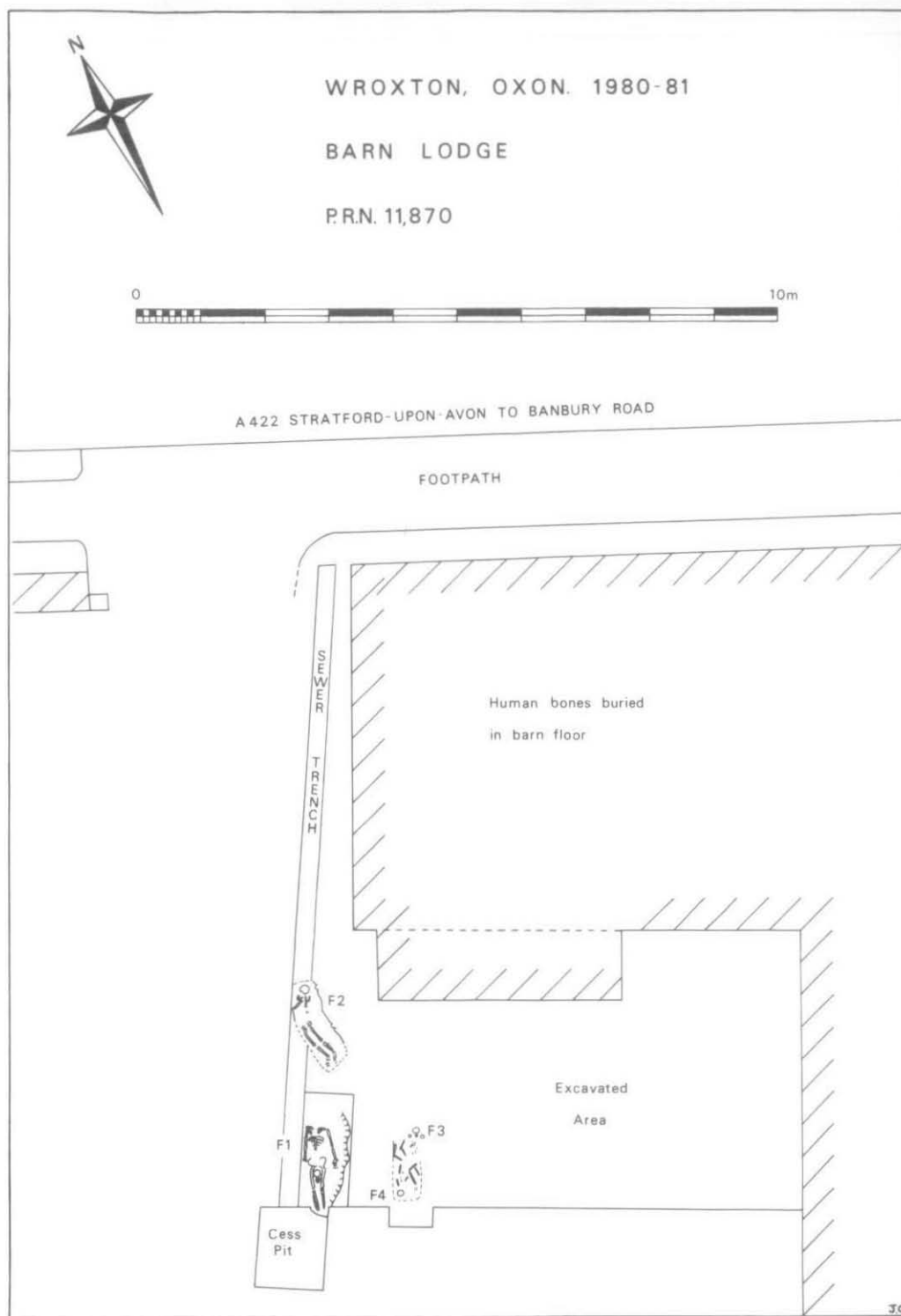


Fig. 1. The cemetery.

ironstone some 0.5 m. below the modern ground surface. In plan the grave pits were rectangular, with rounded corners and level bottoms. The graves had been backfilled with their own spoil, which was indistinguishable from the undisturbed topsoil.

Occasional finds of human bone were made throughout the topsoil. This suggested other shallow graves since obliterated by topsoil disturbance sometime during the last 1600 years. Also in the topsoil were twelve sherds of Romano-British pottery, none of which need be any earlier than the 2nd half of the 1st century A.D.

#### THE GRAVES

The preservation of the skeletal remains varied. Where possible the long-bones were measured before a skeleton was lifted. Each skeleton was drawn, photographed, described and marked on a site plan.

The first grave excavated, F1, contained a decapitated female skeleton with the skull placed between the thighs. A second grave, F2, contained a prone adult. The third grave contained two children, F3 and F4, laid head to toe. Burials F1 and F3-4 wore personal ornaments. No other grave goods were found. There was no evidence for coffins.

#### GRAVE INVENTORY (Fig. 2)

This short inventory lists the archaeological details of each grave in the order described below. The human bone report is given in the next section. The orientation of each burial has been expressed as a compass-bearing taken along the longitudinal axis of the skeleton. This is followed by the direction in which the head lay. If known, the age, sex, grave-pit depth and description follow.

F1. 37°; NE; 30-35 years; female; 0.6 m. Supine, decapitated, skull placed between the thighs face down, skullcap to the north. Arms by sides, legs straight and together. The occupant was buried with a plain, cast copper alloy bracelet around each forearm and a twisted copper alloy wire bangle round the left ankle. Several fragments of human bone in the grave fill appear to belong to earlier, disturbed burials.

F2. 7°; N; 20-25? years; male; 0.6 m. Body laid on its right-hand side, almost prone, facing west. Right arm beneath chest. The forearm propped vertically against the west side of the grave. Shoulder joint out of place, probably as a result of the collapse of the skeleton following body decay. Left forearm bent back over waist. Lower spine and ribs decayed. Legs straight and together.

F3 and F4. 32° and 212°; NE (F3), SW (F4); both c. 6 yrs; 0.4 m. Two children laid head to toe in the same grave. F3 was supine, skull crushed and fragmentary, facing upwards. Arms, torso and pelvis absent through decay, legs partly decayed and bent up to the child's right. A single cast copper alloy bracelet in the position of the left upper arm and a shale bracelet in the position of the right upper arm. The bracelets may have been worn round the upper arms or round the wrist of the child, whose arms were tightly crossed, as suggested in the interpretive drawing. (Fig. 2). F4 was laid supine, the skull facing west. Badly decayed, left arm over stomach, legs bent up with left knee resting against the west side of the grave pit.

#### INTERPRETATION, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The three excavated inhumation graves represent part of a cemetery of unknown size. Five adult inhumations appear to have been disturbed during the construction of the barn in the 18th or 19th century. Fragments of human bone within the topsoil and the fill of grave F1 suggest further graves disturbed by later burials. Shallow graves may have been destroyed by agricultural operations prior to the building of the barn. The Romano-British pottery sherds in the topsoil suggest an adjacent occupation site.

In common with other rural Romano-British cemeteries, the Wroxton burials

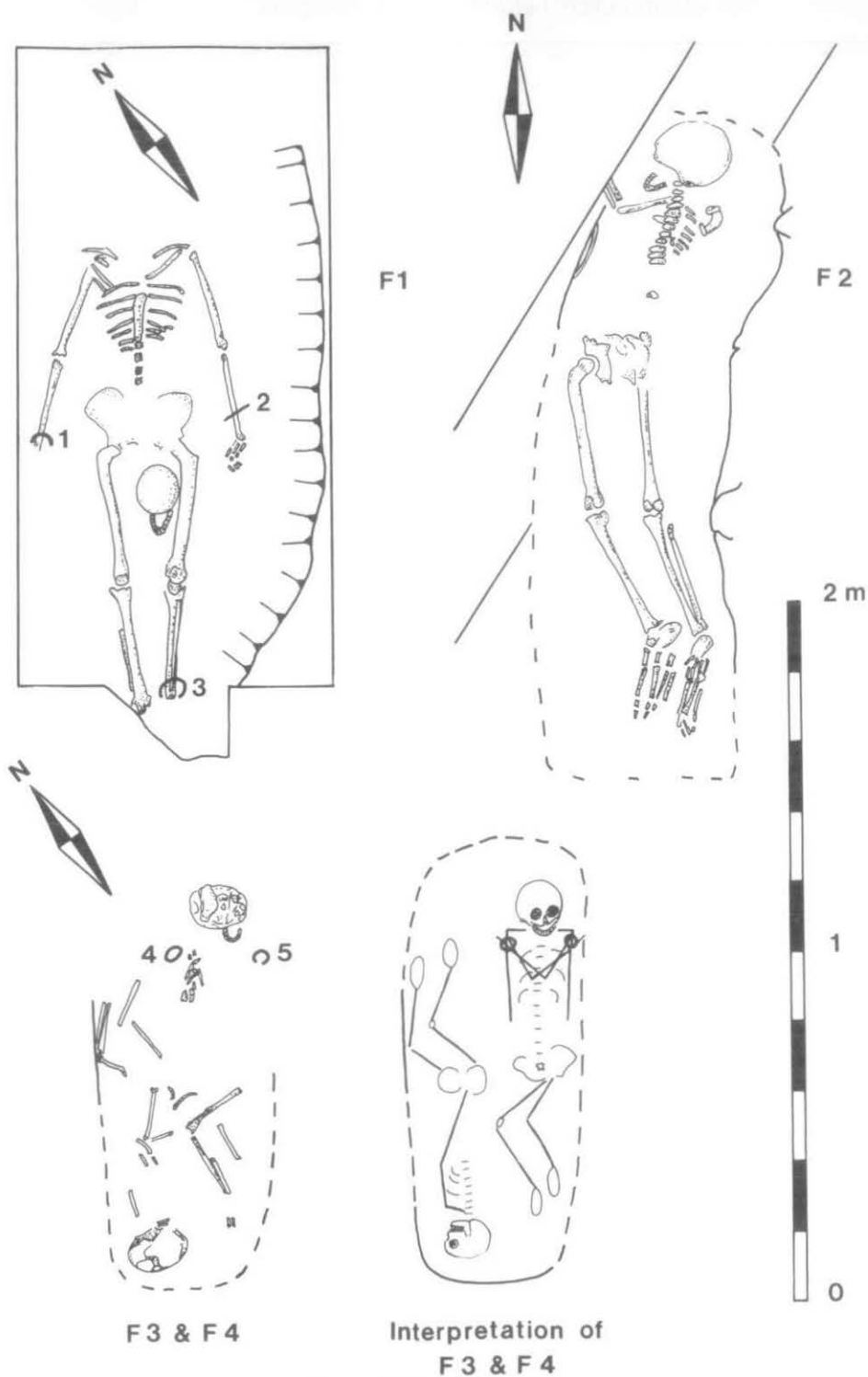


Fig. 2. Burials F2, F3 and F4.

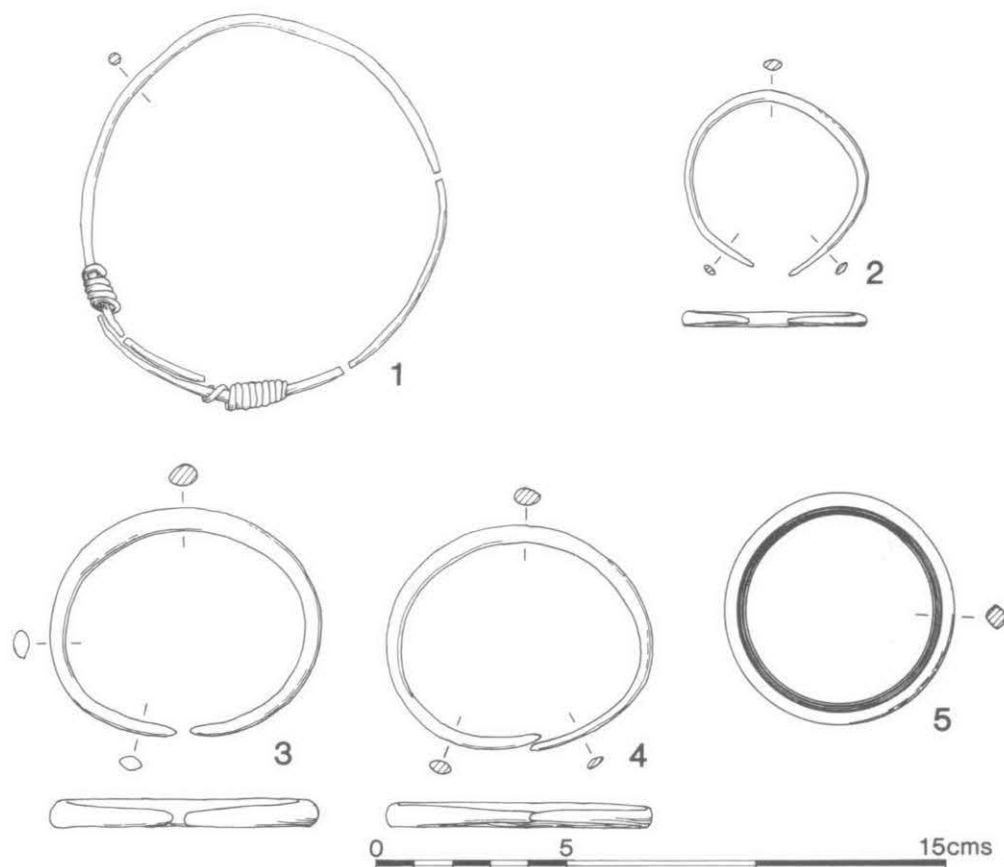


Fig. 3. The personal ornaments. Nos. 1-4 copper alloy and no. 5 shale.

suggest a lack of overall cemetery organisation.<sup>5</sup> The personal ornaments accompanying burials F1, F3 and F4 suggest that they were buried during the second half of the 4th century.<sup>6</sup>

There is insufficient evidence to comment on whether the custom of burial with personal ornaments was as common in the Wroxton area as it was elsewhere in Britain, although within the extensively excavated cemeteries at Cirencester the only burial found wearing personal ornaments was a child of about 3 years old.<sup>7</sup> There were no ornaments in burials excavated at Bloxham,<sup>8</sup> 6 km. to the south-east, or at Curbridge,<sup>9</sup> 34 km. to the south. The variations in burial custom may reflect variations in closed,

<sup>5</sup> R.A. Chambers, 'Two Radio-Carbon Dates from the Romano-British Cemetery and Settlement at Curbridge, Oxon.', *Oxoniensia*, xlii (1978), 252.

<sup>6</sup> G. Clarke, 'The Roman Cemetery at Lankhills', *Winchester Studies*, 3. ii (1979), 169.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 169. Also Alan McWhirr, L. Viner and C. Walls, *Romano-British Cemeteries at Cirencester* (1982), 81 and Fig. 43c.

<sup>8</sup> W.F.J. Knight, 'A Romano-British site at Bloxham, Oxon.' *Oxoniensia*, iii (1938), 41-56.

<sup>9</sup> R.A. Chambers, 'A Romano-British Settlement at Curbridge', *Oxoniensia*, xli (1976), 45.

strongly traditional local communities. At Wroxton the similarity of the personal ornaments found on the female F1 and the child F3 suggest a possible relationship. These ornaments may reflect the burial custom of a particular family rather than of the whole community. Decapitated and prone burials are found in both rural and urban extra-mural Roman period cemeteries.<sup>10</sup> One or both practices have been recognised at every late Roman period cemetery so far excavated in north-west Oxfordshire.<sup>11</sup> Less is known about sites south of the Thames and east of the Thames-Cherwell valley, where regional differences may occur. However, such burials have been found at Abingdon,<sup>12</sup> Dorchester<sup>13</sup> and Radley.<sup>14</sup> The discovery of the Wroxton decapitated female is particularly valuable. The majority of more than 140 decapitated burials so far excavated in Britain have no grave-goods. Some decapitated burials of this period are accompanied by grave-goods<sup>15</sup> including that at Curbridge,<sup>16</sup> and some at least had been placed in coffins,<sup>17</sup> as at Stanton Harcourt.<sup>18</sup> Whether or not decapitation was the cause of death, individuals so treated appear to have retained the right to an otherwise outwardly normal burial. However, whether the personal ornaments worn by the occupant of grave F1 at Wroxton can be defined as grave-goods, in the accepted sense of items purposely placed in the grave for the use of the deceased in the underworld, is arguable.

#### THE PERSONAL ORNAMENTS – COPPER ALLOY AND SHALE (Fig. 3)

Copper-alloy bracelets have never been the subject of a comprehensive published study, although recently Giles Clarke has gone some way to remedy this.<sup>19</sup> None of the Wroxton ornaments is closely dateable. Bracelets similar to Nos. 1 and 5 below have been found elsewhere in 4th-century graves.<sup>20</sup> Bracelets 2, 3 and 4 are very similar and all may have been from the same smith.

#### Descriptions (Fig. 3)

1. Copper-alloy wire ankle bracelet with an expandable fastening 9.2 cm. diam. The hammered wire varies in thickness with a flattened cross section in places. From Grave F1.
2. Copper-alloy bracelet with butt-ended terminals. No decoration. Circular, 4.3 cm. overall diameter. From Grave F3.
3. Copper-alloy bracelet similar to No. 2 but oval, 7.2 cm. by 6.1 cm. From Grave F1.
4. Copper-alloy bracelet similar to No. 2 but oval, 7.0 cm. by 5.9 cm. From Grave F1.
5. Shale bracelet, triangular cross section. Turning marks visible around the inside. Internal diameter 4.8 cm. From Grave F4.

At Lankhills, all but two of the ten bracelets were found in child graves and of a size suitable for children.

<sup>10</sup> M. Harman, T.I. Molleson and J.L. Price, 'Burials, Bodies and Beheadings in Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries', *Bull. Br. Mus. Nat. Hist. (Geol.)*, xxxv part 3 (October 1981), 145–88.

<sup>11</sup> N. McGavin, 'A Roman Cemetery and Trackway at Stanton Harcourt', *Oxoniensia*, xlv (1980), 112–23; Knight, op.cit. note 8, 41–56; Chambers, op.cit. note 9, 38–55. For Cassington, Oxon. see 'Notes and News' *Oxoniensia*, i (1936) 201; ii (1937), 201; iii (1938), 164–5; xv (1950), 104–10; and the excavation note books of E.T. Leeds in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

<sup>12</sup> M. Parrington, *The Excavation of an Iron Age Settlement, Bronze Age ring-ditches and Roman features at Ashville Trading Estate, Abingdon (Oxfordshire) 1974–6* (1978), 25.

<sup>13</sup> A single prone inhumation discovered within the cemetery at Queensford Farm, Dorchester-on-Thames in 1981 (*Oxoniensia* forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup> R.J.C. Atkinson, 'Excavations in Barrow Hills Field, Radley Berks.', *Oxoniensia*, xvii (1952), 32–35.

<sup>15</sup> Harman et al. op.cit. note 10, 184–8.

<sup>16</sup> Chambers, op.cit. note 9, 38–55.

<sup>17</sup> Harman et al. op. cit. note 10, 184–8.

<sup>18</sup> N McGavin, 'A Roman Cemetery and Trackway at Stanton Harcourt', *Oxoniensia*, xlv (1980), 112–123.

<sup>19</sup> Clark op.cit. note 6, 301–13.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 302–3, types B1c and C1a.

THE POTTERY<sup>21</sup>

All twelve sherds were found in the topsoil. Excepting the samian sherd the wares cannot be closely dated. However, none need be any earlier than the second half of the 1st century A.D. The unabraded nature of some of the sherds suggests that they had laid undisturbed at the base of the topsoil. The number of fragments present suggests an adjacent occupation site.

## THE HUMAN REMAINS By MARY HARMAN

Most of the bones were in poor condition: fragmentary and badly decayed in parts.

The sex of the adult remains was assessed where possible from the conformation of the skull and the pelvic girdle, and the size of the bones. The age of adults was determined from the degree of wear on the teeth, and the age of children from the state of tooth eruption and of epiphyseal fusion, using the charts published by Brothwell (1965, 59, 60, 69) and the length of the diaphyses, using the chart drawn by Miss R. Powers (pers. comm.). Height was calculated from the formulae of Trotter and Gleser.<sup>22</sup>

In the following notes on the skeletons, details of dental condition are given using the formula below:

	Upper	Jaw		Key
Right	8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	Left	/ Loss post mortem
side	8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	side	X Loss ante mortem
	Lower	Jaw		C Caries
				A Abscess
				N Not developed
				O Erupting
				- Jaw missing

Deciduous dentition is represented by lower-case letters.

Catalogue of skeletons

## 1 ♀ 30-35 years

Present: largely complete but very fragmentary

A	C C
- 7 6 / 4 3 2 1	/ 2 3 / 5 6 7 8
N 7 / / / / /	/ / / / X X 7 N
A A	A A

Comment: The cervical vertebrae have not survived so no cuts were observed, but there is a slice missing from the inferior margin of the left ramus of the mandible; the straight edge suggests that the cut severing the head also slashed through the left side of the mandible, but because of the poor preservation this must remain a probability. Similar cuts, associated with decapitation, have been observed at Cassington and Stanton Harcourt (Harman, Molleson and Price, forthcoming).

There may be some bony growth on the articular facets of the arches of the lower thoracic vertebrae, and both knees are severely affected by degenerative disease: though the articular surfaces are in fragments, there is eburnation on the lateral condyles of the femora, and correspondingly severe eburnation on the patellae, exposing the cancellous bone; there is extra bony growth on the edges of the lateral condyles, and small areas of eburnation on the lateral condyles of the right femur and tibia.

Three skull fragments from a neonatal infant were found with this skeleton accompanying the burial, or disturbed fragments from an earlier burial.

## 2 ♂ 20-25 years 5ft. 6¾ins. (1.69 m.)

Present: virtually complete, missing left humerus.

8 7 6 5 4 / / /	/ / / 4 5 6 7 8
8 7 6 5 4 3 / /	/ / / 4 5 6 7 8

<sup>21</sup> A full description may be found in the archive P.R.N. 11, 870. The pottery has been retained by the owner.

<sup>22</sup> D.R. Brothwell, *Digging up Bones* (1965), 102.

## 3 ? 5-6 years

Present: parts skull, mandible, long bone shaft fragments.

0 00 00 00  
 6 e d c 2 1 1 2 c d e 6 7  
 6 e d c 2 1 1 2 c d e 6  
 0 00 00 0

## 4 ? c. 6 years

Present: skull fragments, teeth, several long bone shaft fragments. Incomplete dentition represented by loose deciduous and permanent teeth.

## Unstratified bone.

A quantity of bones retrieved before the excavation took place comprised the remains of at least five individuals and included the following bones or fragments of bones:

Skull: parts three occipitals, part frontal, two left temporal bones, two right temporal bones, other fragments.

Two pairs of jaws: 17-20 years and 30-35 years. Three loose teeth.

Vertebrae: two thoracic, three cervical.

Scapula: part right.

Humerus: one left, three right.

Radius: left, right, four shaft fragments.

Ulna: three left, two right, three shaft fragments.

Metacarpal: two.

Pelvis: four left, three right (including one neonatal ilium).

Femur: two left, three right.

Tibia: two left, two right, one shaft fragment.

Fibula: eight shaft fragments.

Astragalus: two right.

Calcaneus: two left, two right.

Metatarsal: twelve.

These represent at least four adults, possibly two males and two females, one aged between 17 and 20 years, and one aged between 30 and 35 years. There is also one bone from a neonatal infant. These unstratified bones include three joined cervical vertebrae; parts of the arches and bodies of the third, fourth and fifth, or the fourth, fifth and sixth, joined at the apex of the arch and laterally on the left side.

This group, containing as it does both decapitated and prone burials, is comparable with the nearby cemetery at Bloxham and, further to the south, the cemeteries at Abingdon, Cassington, Curbridge, Radley and Stanton Harcourt, where these burial practices also occurred. Decapitation and prone burial in these and other cemeteries in lowland England have recently been discussed in a recently-published paper.<sup>23</sup> The curious position of the two children, laid head to foot beside each other in the same grave, has a parallel at the Derby Racecourse cemetery site, where two adults, a male and a female, were buried in similar circumstances.<sup>24</sup>

*The Society is grateful to the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for a grant towards the publication of this paper*

<sup>23</sup> Harman et al., op.cit. note 10, 145-88.

<sup>24</sup> Wheeler, forthcoming.