

# The Evaluation in 1971 and 1979 of an assart farmstead in Slape Copse, Glympton, Oxfordshire

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with contributions by R.A. CHAMBERS, J.P. COY, J.W. HAWKES and M. MELLOR

## SUMMARY

*Fieldwork and excavations in 1971 and 1979 demonstrated the existence of a medieval settlement, probably an assart farmstead. At least three separate buildings were identified. The main period of archaeological activity appears to have been in the 14th century.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The help of Mick Aston and James Bond, successively of the Oxfordshire County Museum, is warmly acknowledged, respectively for arranging the 1971 fieldwork and for general assistance in providing records for the post-excavation work and commenting on a draft version. Mr R.A. Chambers of the Oxford Archaeological Unit kindly let me have copies of his field records for the 1979 trenches, amended my interpretations of his records, and also commented on the draft text.

Bob Read of the Trust for Wessex Archaeology undertook the drawing work. Jennie Coy of the Faunal Remains Project, University of Southampton kindly examined the animal bone. John Hawkes of the Trust for Wessex Archaeology and Maureen Mellor of the Oxford Archaeological Unit commented on the pottery from the 1971 and 1979 excavations. Sally Fasham and Muriel Griffiths typed versions of the report. The excavation was funded by the Department of the Environment through the Oxfordshire County Museum, and the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission provided a grant to enable this report to be completed.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1971 the medieval assart farmstead site in Slape Copse, Glympton Parish (SP 4258 1950) was threatened by an improvement scheme to the A34 road. The writer was invited to evaluate the site on behalf of the Oxford City and County Museum (now Oxfordshire Museums Service) and the Department of the Environment (now English Heritage). The recommendation from the 1971 trial trenches was that complete excavation was necessary on the following grounds: (a) about two-thirds of the site would be destroyed (b) it was an assart farmstead, a type of settlement about which little was then known; (c) the remains were well-preserved, and provided an opportunity for the complete excavation of a small medieval settlement and to study the development of woodland farm buildings from the 13th century to possibly as late as the 19th century.

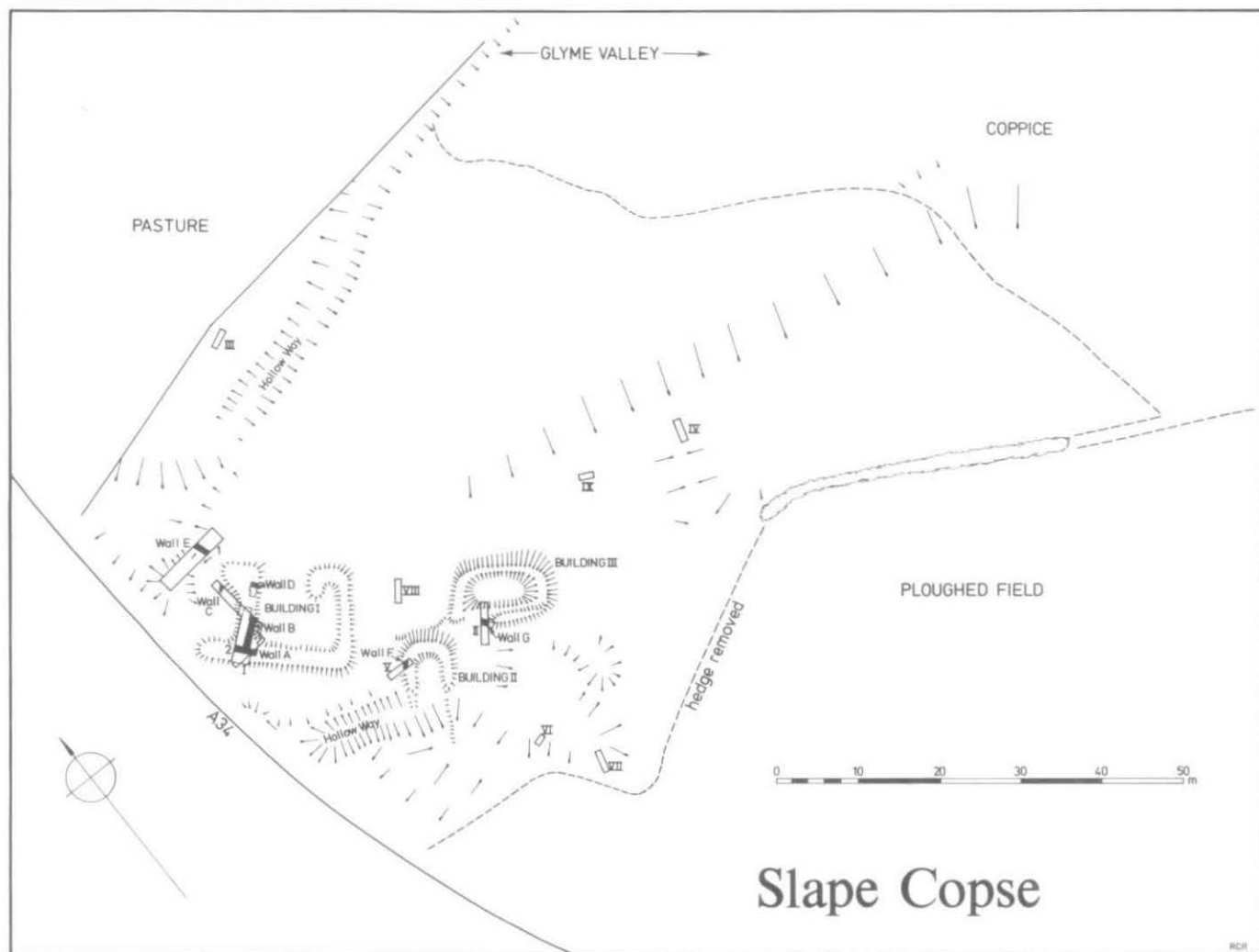


Fig. 1. Slape Copse. Plan showing earthworks and location of excavation trenches.

The road improvement did not materialize, and in 1979 the copse was clear-felled and the ground surface 'churned up' by machinery clearing the site.<sup>1</sup> The Oxford Archaeological Unit resurveyed the site and excavated nine small trenches, in order to determine the amount of damage the felling had created and how best to preserve the earthworks.<sup>2</sup> Mr R.A. Chambers directed the 1979 programme of work.

This short report is concerned primarily with the writer's excavation in March 1971, but does attempt to integrate Mr Chamber's work of 1979 and an earthwork survey carried out by Mr Clifford Reeves, one of the Oxford City and County Museum's volunteers. Mr Reeve's survey was completed in the autumn of 1971.

Only the area at the extreme north corner of the Copse, but including part of Building I, was available for excavation in 1971. The remainder of the site was densely wooded.

#### LOCATION

The site is on the west side of the Glyme valley in the parish of Glympton. It is on the brow of a north-facing slope bounded to the west by the A34. The valley side is quite steep, and the earthworks are concentrated on the top of the slope, apart from a hollow-way which runs up to the settlement from the valley below. The natural bedrock is oolitic limestone.

#### EARTHWORK SURVEY

The 1971 earthwork survey by Mr Reeves and the 1979 survey by the Oxford Archaeological Unit show some differences in detail and positioning of earthworks. This is not surprising, for in 1971 the site was densely wooded, but in 1979 it had been felled and tidied up by a machine. Nevertheless, it is possible to relate the two surveys and show the location of all the trenches against the main earthworks. The degree of correlation between the two pieces of fieldwork appears to be within 5 m. Trench 1 of the 1979 programme revealed the edge of one of the 1971 trenches.

The earthworks consisted of a hollow-way leading up from the valley bottom to the main concentration of earthwork platforms, which seemed to involve three buildings spread over about 45 m. Building I was represented by an earthwork with a spine about 30 m. long and 3 m. wide, with two parallel arms extending at right-angles to the north for about 9 m. The arms were 1-3 m. wide and about 11 m. apart. Building II survived as a U-shaped earthwork with the open side to the south. It was approximately 8 m. square. Building III was recognised as a rectangular platform about 13 m. by 9 m. with an apparent entrance in the west corner. A second possible hollow-way ran east-west on the south of Buildings II and III. The relationship between the possible second trackway and Building II was unclear.

On Fig. 1 the 1971 excavations are numbered Trenches 1 and 2, and the 1979 excavations are numbered I-IX.

#### THE EXCAVATIONS

*Building I.* The 1971 Trench 2 was located to investigate Building I. Trench 2 was initially a north-south cut

<sup>1</sup> Observations by R.A. Chambers, notes in Oxfordshire County Museum.

<sup>2</sup> R.A. Chambers 'Glympton, Slape Copse' in 'Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit Annual Report for 1979'; *C.B.A. Group 9 Newsletter*, x (1980), 175-7.

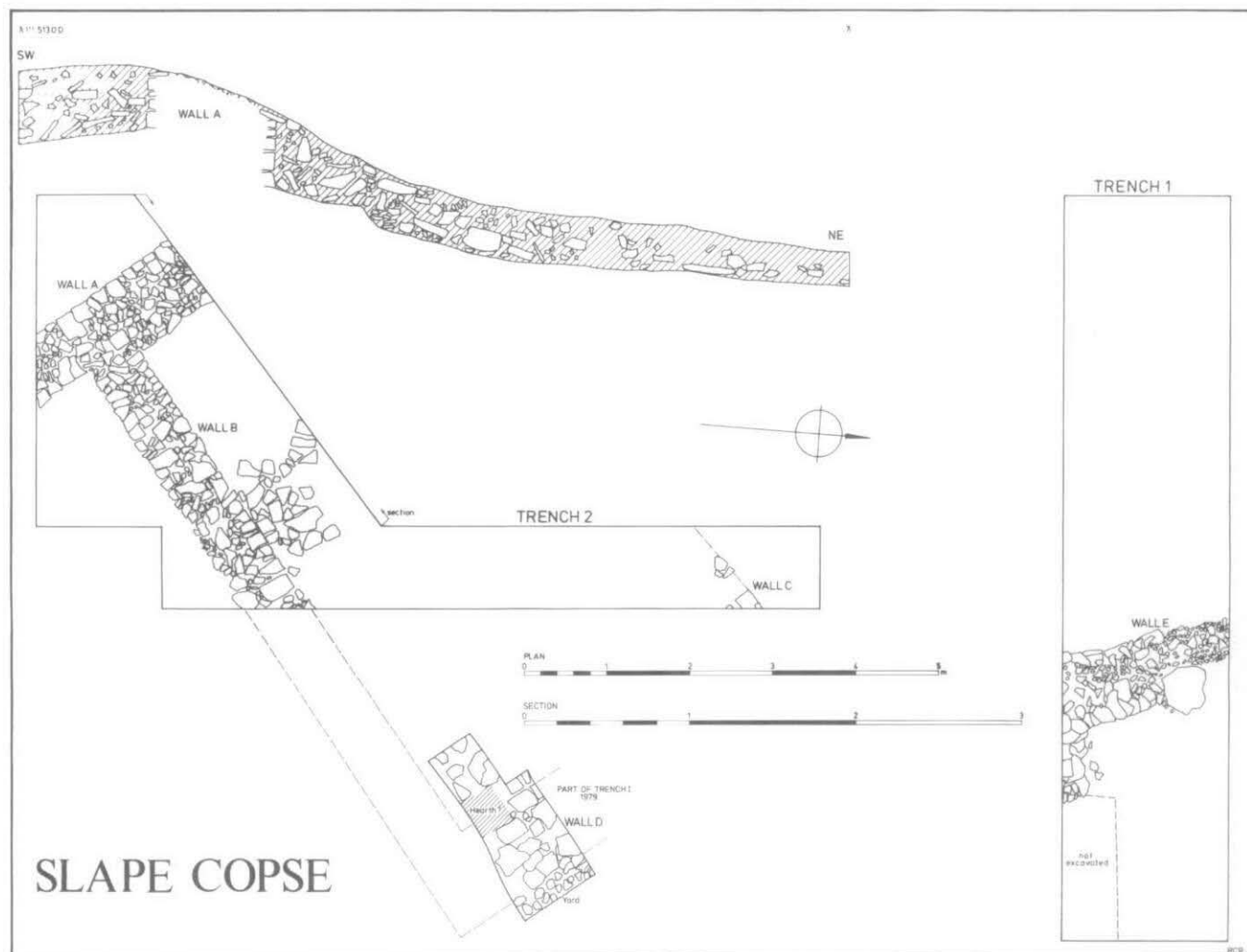


Fig. 2. Slape Copse. Plan and sections of parts of Building I as revealed in 1971.

measuring 8 m. by 1 m. with an extension added to the south-west. Three walls were recorded in the trench (Fig. 2).

Wall A, exposed for 2.5 m., was aligned east-west. It formed the southern side wall along the length of Building I. It was bonded into Wall B, which was the western arm of the parallel earthwork arms. Wall A was 0.8 m. wide north of its junction with Wall B, where six courses of unmortared limestone wall survived to a height of 0.5 m. South of the junction its width was reduced to 0.67 m., and its height to 0.4 m. and three courses.

Wall B, 0.6 m. wide, with a maximum height of 0.5 m. surviving in six courses at its bonded junction with Wall A. It ran uphill and was built with large basal blocks to facilitate its construction up the slope.

Wall C had been largely robbed away. It survived as a slight trace almost parallel to Wall B but some 3.6 m. to the north. It had probably been about 0.7 m. wide.

On the north side of Wall B a group of limestone slabs (L5) had been laid flat, probably as a floor. They lay over a light-brown soil, which was interpreted in 1971 as a possible pre-building ground surface (L6). It contained 14th-century pottery and seems to provide a *terminus post quem* for the structure.

The 1979 Trench I re-excavated Walls A and B and their junction, and indicated that Wall B was about 7 m. long. Wall D appeared to run parallel to Wall A and was 0.9 m. wide. Mr. Chambers recorded a hearth or oven floor in the north-west angle between the junction of Walls B and D, if both walls are projected. Mr Chambers described the area to the east of Wall D as a yard.

The 1971 Trench I was in the relatively flat and apparently open area to the north of Building I. The trench was aligned east-west and measured 9 m. by 2 m. It contained one wall. Wall E, 0.7 m. wide, was of drystone construction with limestone slabs facing the exterior surfaces and surrounding a rubble-filled core. It survived to a maximum of three courses, standing 0.2 m. high. The north end had been robbed away. Walls D and E are on a similar alignment but do not seem to be the same wall.

Taking the excavation and earthwork evidence together, Building I was about 30 m. long and 7 m. wide, with oolitic limestone footings for a presumed timber superstructure. There were at least two rooms and one hearth. To the east was a yard, and to the north a further yard with a boundary (Wall E) or an extension to the building.

*Building II.* This was investigated by Trench V in 1979. Trench V, 3.6 m. by 0.75 m., revealed Wall F to be aligned north-south and about 0.95 m. wide. It was constructed of coursed limestone rubble facing with a clay-bonded rubble core, and may have survived to a height of 0.25 m. Wall F formed the west arm of the U-shaped earthwork; Mr. Chambers recorded a yard surface outside the structure.

*Building III.* Trench II in 1979, 5.3 m. by 0.7 m., located Wall G on the south side of Building III. The drystone wall survived two courses high, was 0.7 m. wide, and lay over a pit of indeterminate shape and date. It was noted that very little domestic pottery or bone was found in this trench.

## OTHER FEATURES

Trench III revealed a deposit 0.25 m. thick which Mr. Chambers recorded as 'mid-brown clayey-loam with much pottery and some animal bone.' It must be assumed that the settlement extended to the north of the hollow-way running up from the valley bottom. Geophysical survey in the adjacent field to the north did not reveal any evidence for occupation.

Trenches IV and VI did not reveal any recognizable archaeological features, but sherds of medieval pottery were recovered from the clay subsoil above natural bedrock. Trench VII did not reveal any archaeological deposits, while limestone demolition rubble was found beneath the topsoil in Trench VIII.

Trench IX investigated the centre of a geophysical anomaly measuring 5-7 m. across. The feature was at least 0.9 m. deep and contained building rubble, animal bone and medieval pottery.

## THE POTTERY FROM THE 1971 EXCAVATIONS by JOHN HAWKES

The comparatively small quantity of pottery precludes any detailed analysis; on the basis of a restricted range of forms and fabrics a date in the second half of the 14th century can be suggested, although there are some evident post-medieval intrusions.

Four fabrics were identified:

Fabric 1 - Abundant or very abundant fine-coarse limestone inclusions. Evidently wheel-thrown and sparse glazed. Oxford Group 1B.<sup>3</sup> The description closely matches Oxford BB = Gloucester 44 = Banbury 5, but might be a Wychwood type.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> R. Haldon and M. Mellor, 'Late Saxon and Medieval Pottery' in B. Durham, 'Archaeological Investigations in St Aldates, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, xlii (1977), 83-203.

<sup>4</sup> M. Mellor 'Medieval Pottery from the Wychwood', *Oxoniensia*, xlvii (1982), 133-6.

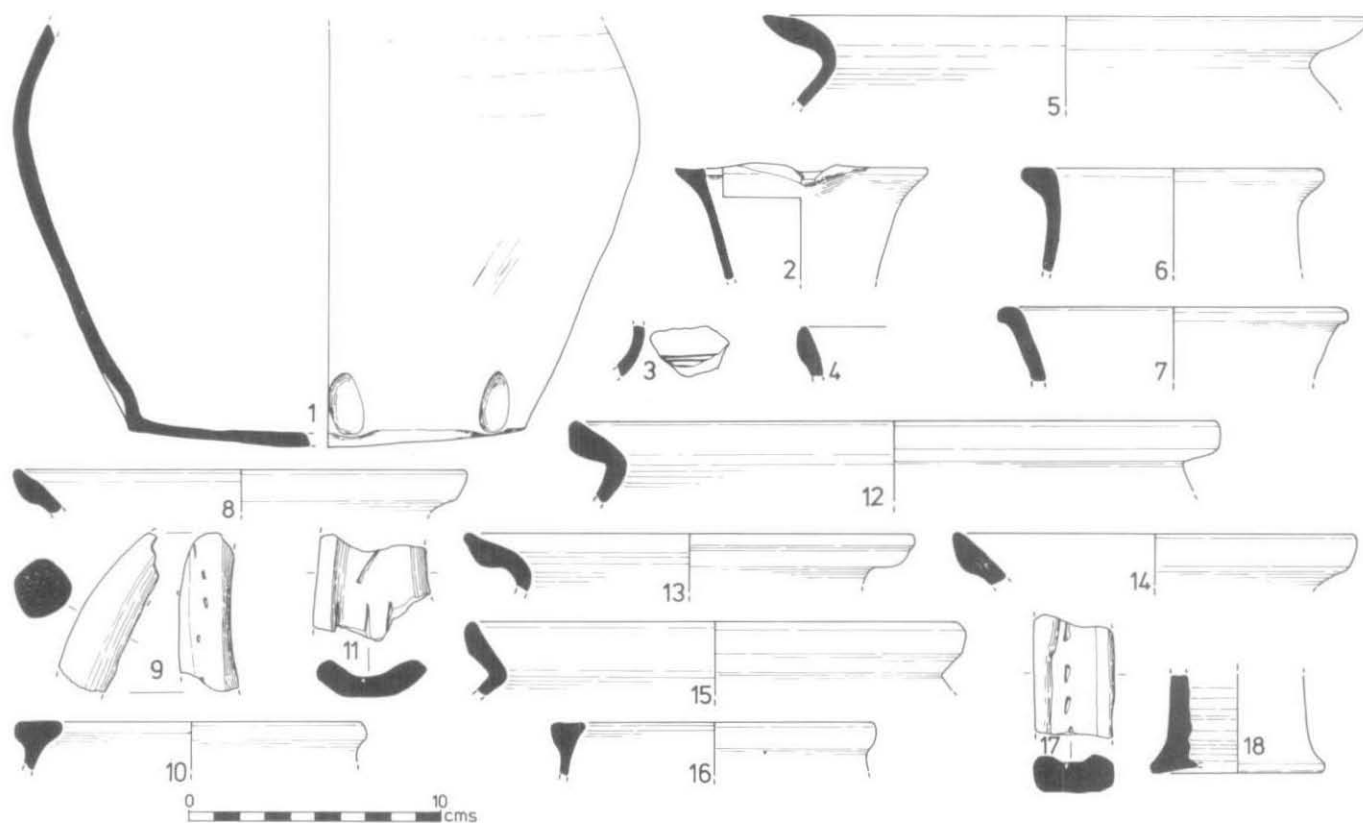


Fig. 3. Slape Copse. The Pottery.

- 1, Base of globular pitcher, Tr 2/Context 6, Fab.1;  
 2, Rim (? same vessel as 1), Tr 2/6, Fab.1;  
 3, Rilled sherd, Tr 2/6, Fab. 1; 4, Rim, Tr 2/6 Fab. 2;  
 5, Rim, Tr 1/4, Fab. 1; 6, Rim, Tr 1/4, Fab. 2;  
 7, Rim, Tr 1/4, Fab. 1; 8, Rim, Tr 1/4, Fab. 2;

- 9, Stabbed rod handle, Tr 1/4, Fab. 3; 10, Rim, Tr 2/2, Fab. 1;  
 11, Slashed strap handle, Tr 1/3, Fab. 1; 12, Rim, Tr 1/3, Fab. 2;  
 13, Rim, Tr 1/3, Fab. 2; 14, Rim, Tr 1/3, Fab. 2;  
 15, Rim, Tr 1/3, Fab. 2; 16, Rim, Tr 1/3, Fab. 3;  
 17, Stabbed Strap handle, Tr 1/3, Fab. 3; 18, Base, Tr 1/3, Fab. 3.

- Fabric 2 – Similar to Fabric 1 but externally reduced; the fabric is coarser and less well sorted. Other inclusions include flint (rare), clay pellets and red oxide. Another possible Wychwood type.<sup>5</sup>
- Fabric 3 – Abundant fine sands, wheel-thrown and glazed or sparse glazed. Brill or Brill type.
- Fabric 4 – Abundant fine sands, usually wheel-thrown. Invariably reduced. Miscellaneous medieval sandy ware.

The quantities of each fabric by context are shown in Table 1; the archive also contains details of weight and number by sherd type, diameter and percentage present.

TABLE 1

FABRICS =		1		2		3		4		TOTAL	
		No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt
Trench 1	(2)	–	–	4	20	–	–	–	–	4	20
	(3)	22	140	6	110	28	260	–	–	56	510
	(4)	100	320	27	125	9	60	10	20	146	525
Trench 1 Sub-Total		122	460	37	255	37	320	10	20	206	1045
Trench 2	(1)	9	20	20	95	11	40	–	–	40	155
	(2)	4	25	–	–	–	–	–	–	4	25
	(6)	63	595	9	20	–	–	–	–	72	615
Trench 2 Sub-Total		76	640	29	115	11	40	–	–	116	795
TOTAL		198	1100	66	370	48	360	10	20	322	1840

#### THE POTTERY FROM THE 1979 EXCAVATION identified by MAUREEN MELLOR

Medieval pottery was recovered from Trenches I, II, III, IV, VI, VIII and IX. Each assemblage contained fabrics belonging to Oxford Group IB which ranges in date from the 13th to the 15th century. Many of the fabrics from this group belong to a Wychwood tradition.<sup>6</sup> Five sherds of sandy ware from Trench III were possibly Oxford AW. Trench I included some highly decorated Brill pottery of the second half of the 13th or early 14th century. The small assemblages could not provide a close dating for the earlier site stratigraphy.

#### ANIMAL BONE identified by JENNY COY

Only the animal bone from 1971 has been examined. The collection is small, and thus only a basic identification has been done. All bones are fragmentary.

Trench 1, Layer 3. Horse – foot bone; pig – pelvis; sheep – radius, sheep/goat – mandible.

Trench 1, Layer 4. Horse – 2 × lower teeth, cranial fragment; cattle – cervical vertebrae; large mammal – vertebrae and pelvis; sheep – humerus; sheep/goat – ribs and tibia.

Trench 2, Layer 2. Sheep – radius of immature animal; sheep/goat – rib; large mammal – femur.

#### DISCUSSION

The two programmes of work have revealed that the settlement at Slape Copse seems to have possessed at least three buildings with limestone footings. It is impossible to say whether these buildings were directly contemporary, but it is interesting to note that all three may have been constructed over earlier deposits. Wall B in Building I was perhaps constructed over a 14th-century soil; Building II may just have impinged on a sunken track. Building III was over an earlier pit. The settlement seems to have been more

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

extensive than the earthworks suggest, with domestic debris from Trench III on the north side of the main hollow-way and building rubble possibly filling an old quarry hole in the vicinity of Trench IX.

There is a surprising volume of documentary material available for this site, and much of it has been recently summarized in the *Victoria County History*<sup>7</sup> and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Various collections of notes and summaries of documentary material are held by the Oxfordshire Museums Service at Woodstock. In brief, Slape is known to be established by c. 1220 when Ralph de Clinton and his son Ralph granted four tenants' yardlands to Lettice de Saucey. The archaeological evidence does not disagree with such a date, although there are no features of the early 13th century. Some of the stratigraphy observed in Mr. Chamber's trenches indicates that there may have been activity earlier than the 14th-century buildings. The *Victoria County History*<sup>9</sup> suggests the site was largely depopulated in the 14th century, and there seems to be no substantial archaeological evidence for major occupation of the site after the 15th century. The only source for possible occupation into the 19th century is a local memory recorded by Mrs. Wickham Steed, who says that 'the last John Slape, or Jack Slape, died some time probably in the first half of the 19th century'; when she went to Wootton in 1947 she was told by a middle-aged woman that 'there used to be people who could remember the old gentleman well' and that when Sir Charles Ponsonby (born 1879) was a boy the old gardener had told him about 'Old Jack Slape' and could remember him. Mrs Wickham Steed also records that the remains of his garden were said to be still visible in c.1900.<sup>10</sup>

Several inhabitants 'of Slape' are recorded in Forest Pleas of the 13th century either as wrongdoers or as pledges and Dr. Schumer believes that Slape was a hamlet of some size.<sup>11</sup> The surviving earthworks with only three buildings do not seem to be a sufficiently large base for the number of references to Slape. It is possible that there were buildings constructed wholly of timber which would not leave any evidence as earthworks. It seems likely that the settlement straddled the A34, but no evidence for a medieval settlement survives on the west side of the A34, which has largely been quarried.

The finds, records and all other papers are deposited in the Oxfordshire County Museum at Woodstock under their reference P.R.N. 4500.

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

<sup>7</sup> *V.C.H. Oxon.* xi, 120-130.

<sup>8</sup> B. Schumer, *The Evolution of Wychwood to 1400: Pioneers, Frontiers and Forests* (Leic. Univ. Dept of Eng. Local Hist. Occasional Papers 3rd Ser. No. 6, 1984), 39.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> MSS of Mrs. V. Wickham Steed, Oxfordshire Sites and Monuments Record P.R.N. 4500, Oxfordshire Museum Services, Woodstock.

<sup>11</sup> Correspondence from B. Schumer in Oxfordshire County Museum.