

# Iron Age and Later Settlement to the West of All Saints Parish Church, Didcot, Oxon.

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## SUMMARY

*Between 1978 and 1982 excavations in advance of house building to the W. of the medieval parish church revealed a sequence of occupation beginning in the Bronze Age with a scatter of residual flintwork. Boundary ditches containing early Iron Age pottery represented at least three phases of enclosure. Traces of late Iron Age and Romano-British domestic debris indicated continuing adjacent occupation. The site was again occupied during the early Saxon period after which there was a break of perhaps four centuries until the creation of the manor of Didcot and construction of the parish church in the 12th century. The foundations of the pre-Victorian timber-framed rectory were partly uncovered but a construction date was not obtained. South of the previous rectory, brick-founded domestic buildings built askew of the alignment of either rectory are considered to have belonged to an early phase of the Victorian rectory (Fig. 1).*

*The early Iron Age remains are particularly important as settlement sites of this date are not common. The pottery report has therefore been reproduced in full at the end of this summary.*

## LOCATION AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The rectory and medieval parish church, some 60 m. to the ENE., stand 80 m. above sea level on a bluff of the Upper Greensand overlooking the Thames Valley.<sup>1</sup> To the E. of the parish church Romano-British remains were discovered during the construction of the new rectory,<sup>2</sup> at Blagrave Farm<sup>3</sup> and possibly from the churchyard.<sup>4</sup> Several burials have been found W. of the church.<sup>5</sup>

The excavations were limited to 10 trenches and one small area within the grounds of the existing Victorian rectory centred on SU 5195 9051. To the S. and SE. of the rectory the ground had been deeply disturbed from Victorian times (Fig. 2, trenches I-VI) but further E. two trenches (VII-VIII) yielded unweathered early Iron Age pottery sherds from undisturbed levels. The ground to the E. of the rectory was less deeply disturbed and the bottoms of a series of Iron Age features, chiefly intersecting ditches, survived in the irregular area excavated as trench IX. Ditch bottoms were rounded and up to 0.5 m. deep. The homogeneous ditch fillings were often identical in appearance, preventing the recognition of stratigraphic relationships at intersections both in plan and section. The western edge of

<sup>1</sup> Geological Survey of Great Britain, sheet 253 (solid).

<sup>2</sup> Pers. comm. Mrs J. Hall, in whose possession this material remains.

<sup>3</sup> R.A. Chambers, 'Didcot, Blagrave Farm', CBA Group 9, *Newsletter* x (1980), 174.

<sup>4</sup> *Newbury Weekly News*, 21 August 1930.

<sup>5</sup> *V.C.H. Berks.* iii (1923); *Newbury Weekly News*, 21 August 1930; Central Library (C.O.S.), Sites and Mons. Rec. PRN 2857 (NGR SU5196 9050); PRN 2858 (NGR SU5197 9046).



Fig. 1. Extract copied from the Didcot Enclosure Award map of 1840 which shows the pre-Victorian rectory still standing. Soon after this map was drawn the rectory was demolished and rebuilt. Following the construction of a new rectory to the E. of the church the Victorian rectory was converted into flats in 1982. The fishpond to the W. of the churchyard is on glebe land and presumably belonged to the pre-Victorian rectory.

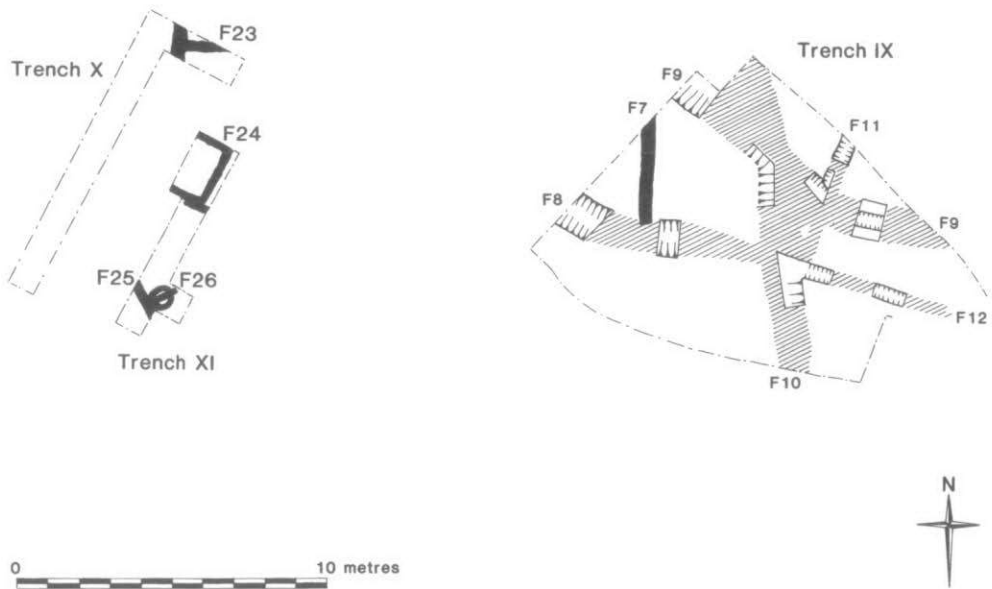


Fig. 2. The archaeological trenches.

trench IX had suffered less from modern disturbance and one ditch with its associated Iron Age soils passed beneath a Romano-British occupation spread.

Three deposits of cremated bone each representing a single adolescent or adult were Romano-British or earlier.

The position of the timber-framed rectory demolished in 1851 was confirmed by 0.6 m.-wide rammed chalk wall-footings in trenches X and IX. Neither these footings nor the associated clay floor in trench IX could be dated. The outline of the building on the 1840 Enclosure Award map (Fig. 1) suggests a Wealden-style building with wings flanking an open hall. Later, another bay and wing appear to have been added to the E., and foundations in trench X suggest the original wings were extended southwards. Post-medieval brick foundations immediately beneath the topsoil in trench XI included an oven or copper base. Although absent by 1914 these buildings are most likely to belong to an early phase of the 1851 rectory.<sup>6</sup>

## THE IRON AGE POTTERY

### *Introduction*

The assemblage from this site represented ceramic material from five periods; Iron Age, Romano-British, early Anglo-Saxon, medieval and post-medieval; only the Iron Age pottery is reported here. A full finds report has been included with the archive.<sup>7</sup> The total number of sherds from any one period was small and most of the pottery was unstratified. The Iron Age pottery was of special importance as early to mid Iron Age sites are rarely encountered. The Roman-period and medieval wares mirror published examples from other sites and none deserved publication.

### *Unstratified Pottery*

Out of nearly 1,000 unstratified pottery sherds from the site, a minimum of 763 were Iron Age, 69 were Romano-British, 9 were early Anglo-Saxon, 39 medieval and 82 were post-medieval. The remainder could not be dated.

### *Late Bronze and Iron Age Pottery*

Of the 4.275 kg. of Iron Age pottery recovered from the site, 2.94 kg. could not be associated with any particular feature.

The assemblage as a whole contained several distinctively early forms and fabrics. Assessed together with three fragments of Deverel-Rimbury type, heavily flint-gritted fabric, they suggest that occupation may have begun in the transitional period at the end of the Bronze Age and continued until the mid Iron Age. The presence of occasional later Iron-Age and Romano-British sherds indicates continuing adjacent occupation which may occasionally have spread on to the site.

<sup>6</sup> B.F. Lingham and M.J. Hall, *The Changing Face of Didcot* (1977), no. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Central Library (C.O.S.), Sites and Mons. Rec. PRN 12,696 and accession number 86.189.

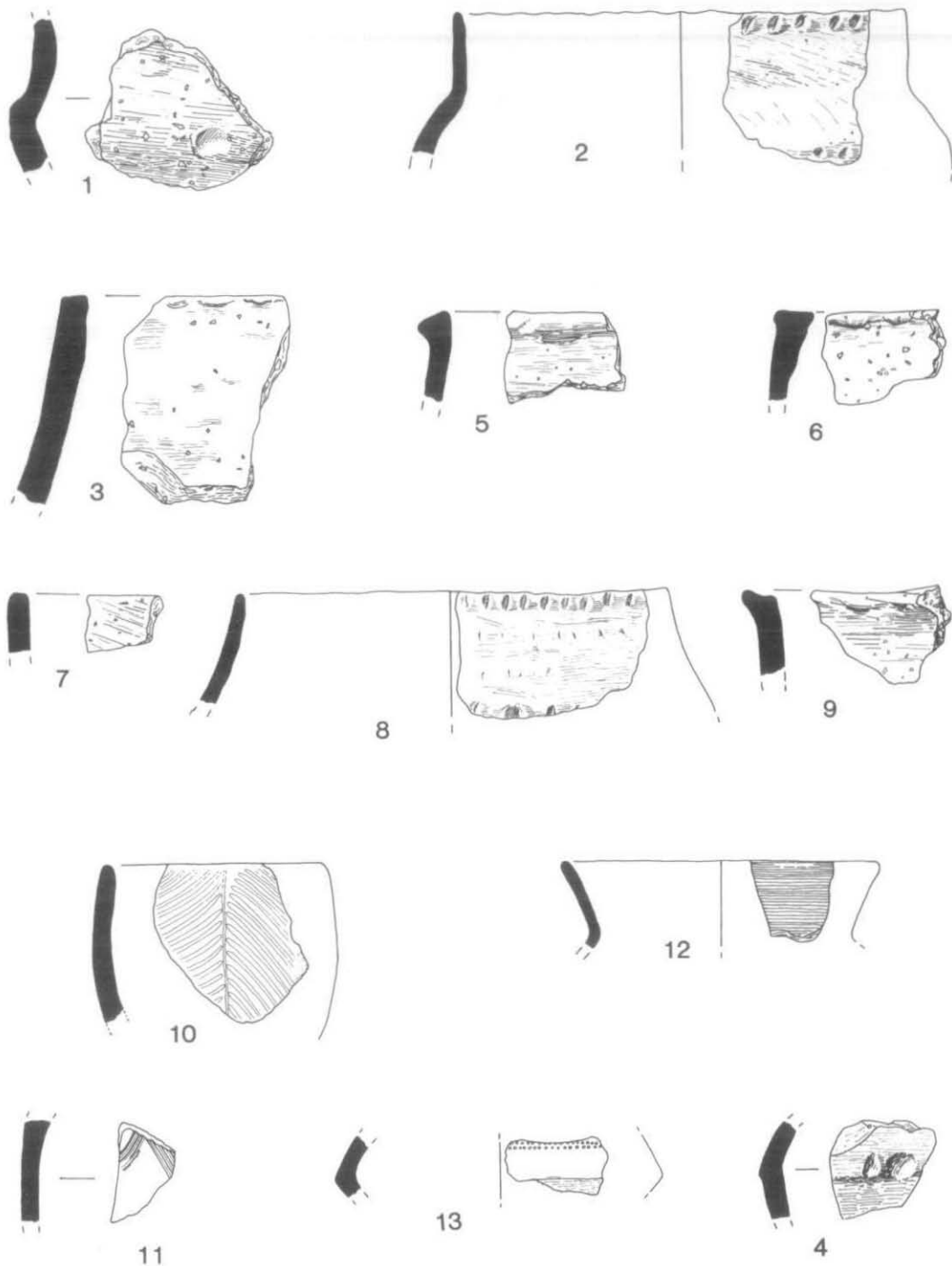


Fig. 3. Iron Age pottery (1/3 nat.).

Most of the Iron-Age wares were coarse and undiagnostic. Ditches F8-12 yielded small assemblages with insufficient distinctive forms to establish close dates for individual features.

The distinctive fabrics and forms present occurred as small sherds and there were no complete profiles. The pottery reflected the regional pattern established from previous excavations, notably at Blewburton Hill and Wittenham Clumps.

No detailed form and fabric analysis has been undertaken here and such work would be more appropriate as part of a detailed regional study.

Several of the rim forms are reminiscent of the later Bronze-Age bucket urn, particularly nos. 1, 2 and 3 below (Fig. 3), although the fingertip decoration is typically Iron-Age.<sup>8</sup> The pottery 'cauldron' in a very coarse, shell-gritted fabric and with a characteristic heavily expanded rim with pronounced outward flange<sup>9</sup> is also present with fingertip decoration similar to examples from Blewburton Hill and Wittenham Clumps. Occasional chalk grits suggest manufacture on the chalk rather than on-site production. The distinctive haematite-coated bowls are also present (no. 10), and incised geometric decoration almost certainly derived from techniques current in Wessex in the 5th-6th centuries is represented by no. 11. The rim (no. 12) and shoulder (no. 13) are characteristic of the sharply angular shouldered vessels and sometimes tall, outward flaring rims of the early Iron Age (no. 10).

There is a lack of distinctive later Iron-Age wares, with the exception of the occasional fragment of high-shouldered necked bowl and a single body sherd of hard buff fabric butt beaker of the last quarter of the 1st century B.C. or the first quarter of the 1st century A.D.

#### *Descriptions (Figure 3)*

None of the sherds illustrated was wheel-made.

1. Slack-shouldered sherd from coarse jar, fingertip decoration. Coarse temper including shell inclusions up to 9 mm. Unstratified.
2. Rim and shoulder of large, angular jar with fingertip impressions along carination and rim. Sandy fabric. Unstratified.
3. Rim of large jar with faintly impressed fingertip decoration around exterior rim. Sandy fabric with coarse shell inclusions up to 6 mm. Unstratified.
4. Jar with slack shoulder with fingertip decoration. Sandy, slightly micaceous fabric. Trench IX, F9.
5. Inward sloping rim with finger-impressed outer lip. Sandy fabric with shell inclusions up to 5 mm. Trench VI, unstratified.
6. Inward sloping rim. Coarse temper including shell up to 5 mm. Unstratified.
7. Probably globular jar rim. Sandy fabric with some fine shell tempering up to 2 mm. Trench XII, unstratified.
8. Shouldered jar with inturned rim. Sandy, micaceous fabric. Fingertip decoration around outer lip of rim and along shoulder. Trench X, unstratified.
9. Slightly everted rim with weak finger- and thumb-pinched rim decoration. Sandy fabric with shell inclusions up to 6 mm. Trench IX, F9.
10. Straight-sided vessel, possibly a bowl with lightly burnished reddish-brown haematite slip on both interior and exterior. Lightly incised chevron decoration. Sandy fabric. Trench VI, unstratified.
11. Body sherd with combed swag decoration. Fine hard sandy uniform fabric with mid-grey surfaces and reddish-grey core. Unstratified.

<sup>8</sup> D.W. Harding, *The Iron Age in the Upper Thames Basin* (1972), 74.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 75 and pl. 44.

12. Everted rim from angular bowl, exterior burnished. Finely sanded, uniform, black fabric. Unstratified.
13. Shoulder from angular bowl, exterior burnished. Two lines of rouletted? dot decoration above shoulder. Uniform fine sandy black fabric with occasional small shell inclusions up to 2 mm., smooth dark grey surfaces. Unstratified.

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