

The Destruction of the Dyke Hills, Dorchester-on-Thames

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SUMMARY

In the early 1870s a large section of the prehistoric earthwork known as Dyke Hills was levelled by the landowner, and human remains were found. The subsequent discovery, in 1874, of late Roman and Germanic artefacts with two burials has been much discussed, and very recently another late Roman burial has been found. Although no detailed records of a modern standard were made before or during the nineteenth-century destruction, sufficient contemporary notes, letters, newspaper reports and photographs survive to allow the human remains to be approximately located. The circumstances of the finds made in 1874 are considered in detail using the notes George Rolleston made at the time, and subsequent discoveries made during the Second World War are considered. Taken together, the evidence confirms that the earthwork had been used as a late Roman cemetery which may have been extensive and which may still contain important evidence relating to the period.

The destruction of a substantial section of the earthworks at Dyke Hills in the early 1870s, by a local farmer wishing to turn the land into productive arable, is well known for a number of reasons. It attracted the attention of Augustus Henry Lane Fox, later Lieutenant-General Pitt Rivers and the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments. It was the subject of a lively correspondence in the media of the day, and it might have been a factor in Sir John Lubbock's decision to start the long struggle for an Ancient Monuments Protection Act.¹ During the destruction, human remains were found and recorded.

The monument is probably even better known for the subsequent discovery in 1874 of a combination of late Roman and Germanic artefacts associated with two burials which have been debated ever since, perhaps not surprisingly given their potential as evidence for a critical period about which too little is known.²

In December 2009, local dog owners lost their dog down a rabbit burrow in the Hills. In attempting to retrieve it, they used a mechanical excavator to dig a hole. The monument is scheduled, the works were unauthorised, and they never found the dog, but they did find human remains which they showed to the author, an English Heritage Inspector of Ancient Monuments, when he went to discuss the matter with them. The area of the unauthorised works was subsequently archaeologically excavated, and finds were made which appear to be as important as those of the 1870s. These are discussed in detail elsewhere, but the finds made in the excavation show that this burial and one of the burials found in 1874, were *Waffengräber*, military burials of a type exceptional in a late Roman context in Britain.³

Given that importance, it seemed worthwhile to look again at the circumstances of the nineteenth-century destruction, the records of finds made then, the discovery of the

¹ M. Bowden, *Pitt Rivers: The Life and Archaeological Work of Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers* (1991), p. 76.

² J. Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (1994), pp. 5–6.

³ P. Booth, 'A Late Roman Military Burial from the Dyke Hills, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire', *Britannia*, 45 (2014), forthcoming.

late Roman and 'Germanic' artefacts, and other discoveries made subsequently. With the exception of some drawings made by Lane Fox, nothing was salvaged or recorded under anything approaching modern standards. Nevertheless, notes, photographs, letters and some archaeological finds survive, and this paper is the result of an attempt to reconstruct what happened from these different sources, and to place the *Waffengräber* in their wider context.

DYKE HILLS (Figs. 1 and 9)

The Dyke Hills lie south of the town of Dorchester-on-Thames in Oxfordshire. They consist of two parallel banks running approximately east–west. At the western end they almost meet the River Thames where it runs southwards past Dorchester. The river then swings sharply east along the foot of the Sinodun Hills, and is joined by the River Thame which itself flows southwards into the Thames. The Hills run eastwards towards the Thame, but actually swing to a south-easterly direction at the eastern end. Very broadly, the earthwork forms the northern



Fig. 1. Dyke Hills from the west, October 1996, © Crown copyright English Heritage.

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boundary to an area which is defined on the west and south by the Thames, and on the east by the Thame.

The crests of the two banks are typically 40 metres apart, with a ditch between and traces of a ditch on the north side of the north bank. At their best-preserved section they stand over 5 metres above the ground level between them. The main east–west stretch runs for about 730 metres from the western end. About 250 metres from that end it is cut obliquely by an access way running down towards Day's Lock on the Thames, currently a public right of way, and about 200 metres further east it is again cut through by an access way to some barns which formerly stood immediately south of the monument. These two access ways thus divide the main east–west stretch into a western section, a central section and an eastern section, and without any further information it is obvious to anyone visiting the site that the western and central sections are much lower than the eastern and were the subject of the destruction of the 1870s.

East of the eastern section the whole earthwork is aligned south-south-east, perhaps due to the need to follow the edge of the floodplain of the Thame rather than cut across it, and this Thame section is much less distinct than the three sections of the main stretch. At the very eastern end of the north bank of the eastern section a slight causeway runs almost west to join the east end of the south bank; from here to the end of the Thame section is roughly 175 metres and so the whole earthwork (in other words the western, central, east and Thame sections) is approximately 900 metres long. The earthworks sit on Flood Plain Terrace Deposits, with the alluvium of the Thames and Thame valley floor to the south and adjacent to the rivers.

The Dyke Hills are thought to be late Iron Age in date, and form the northern defences of a defended enclosure or 'oppidum'. In the area to the south enclosed by the rivers and the Hills are extensive cropmarks, suggesting the presence of pits and enclosures, in addition to what might be ring ditches, presumably of Bronze-Age date. Finds of coins here confirms occupation in the Iron Age.⁴ The area of visible cropmarks is largely confined to the extent of the Terrace Deposits.

The form prior to the main phase of destruction in the 1870s can be approximately reconstructed. William Stukeley made two drawings of the Dyke Hills, one in 1736 and the other in 1755.⁵ Neither are particularly informative; both look south with Wittenham Clumps evident in the background, and show the Hills as two parallel uninterrupted banks.

The original field survey for the Oxford sheet of the old series Ordnance Survey one inch map was carried out in 1811, and appears to show the earthwork as continuous, without the breaks between the west, centre and eastern sections. The breaks are shown on the Oxford sheet itself, published in 1830, and this might be taken as an indication of the date of their origin, but there were errors in the original survey and it cannot be relied upon. The depiction published in 1830 differs from the drawing of 1811 in other respects; it was clearly significantly corrected.⁶

A good illustration is given by an engraving by J. Skelton, published in 1823 and based on a painting by F. Mackenzie (Fig. 2).⁷ This shows the tower of Dorchester church quite

⁴ T. Allen, 'The Iron Age Background', in M. Henig and P. Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire* (2000), p. 22; J. Cook, 'Before the Roman Conquest', in J. Cook and T. Rowley (eds.) *Dorchester through the Ages* (1985), pp. 16–17. For the wider background in Dorchester, see also W.A. Morrison, *A Synthesis of Antiquarian Observation and Archaeological Excavation at Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire*, BAR BS, 491 (2009).

⁵ Bodleian, MS Top. Gen. b. 53, f. 20 (1736); Gough Maps 26, f. 42v., a and b (1755; b is the original drawing and a is a print).

⁶ Ordnance Surveyor's Drawing 157 (1811); Ordnance Survey os, One Inch, sheet 13, Oxford; notes to David and Charles Edition, published as sheet 70 (1969).

⁷ J. Skelton, *Engraved Illustrations of the Principle Antiquities of Oxfordshire* (1823), Dorchester Hundred, plate 6.



Fig. 2. Dyke Hills in the 1820s, from J. Skelton, *Engraved Illustrations of the Principal Antiquities of Oxfordshire* (1823), reproduced by permission of the Sackler Library, University of Oxford.

clearly and there are a number of other details which suggest this is accurate and reliable. The position with respect to the tower suggests a location for the artist at a point towards the west of the western section. Both breaks can be seen in the earthworks. The central ditch is shown as partly flooded and the 'causeway' which crosses the ditch between the central and eastern sections is visible. The western section is shown accurately as lying at a slight angle to the central section, and at the furthest end can be seen the isolated mound which still exists today at the east end of the eastern section. This is possibly the best representation available of the Dyke Hills before their partial destruction.

The graves which have been the subject of so much discussion since their discovery in the 1870s, and particularly since the publication of papers by Kirk and Leeds in the 1950s and Hawkes and Dunning in 1961, were those of a woman and a man, the former with part of a Germanic brooch and the latter with what has been considered to be a late Roman official belt.⁸ A key point which has been confirmed by the current research is that the main phase of destruction of the Hills, in 1870–1, was a distinct event in a different location from the discovery of these graves, which occurred in 1874 and was the result of some relatively isolated activity. There may also have been an earlier phase of destruction perhaps in the 1830s or 40s, and these various phases can be discussed separately.

⁸ Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire*, pp. 5–6. The most detailed discussions of the finds are in J.R. Kirk and E.T. Leeds, 'Three Early Saxon Graves from Dorchester, Oxon.', *Oxoniensia*, 17–18 (1952–3), pp. 63–76; S.C. Hawkes and G.C. Dunning, 'Soldiers and Settlers in Britain, Fourth to Fifth Century', *MedArch*, 5 (1961), pp. 1–70; S.C. Hawkes, 'The Early Saxon Period', in G. Briggs et al., *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (1986), pp. 69–70.

DESTRUCTION PRIOR TO 1870

Colonel Lane Fox read a paper to the Ethnological Society of London in June 1870, describing the destruction of the Dyke Hills which he had recently witnessed. He said then that a portion of the earthworks had been levelled by 'the former owner', but omitted to say who the former owner was.⁹ The owner in 1870, who was encountered by the colonel and who was destined to become the villain of the story, was a James Latham, listed as a farmer and landowner at Bishop's Court in 1864 and as a farmer in 1874.¹⁰ His predecessor was a Joseph Christopher Latham who is shown as the owner of the Dyke Hills in the Dorchester tithe award of 1847.¹¹ Possibly James was referring to this Joseph Christopher when he spoke to Lane Fox about the 'former' owner, but examination of the tithe award and plan shows that one field to the north of the western section of the Hills had encroached upon them at that date and that this field, called Roger's Close, was owned by a Joseph Wallis and was described as arable; most of the surrounding fields were in Latham's hands. Possibly James Latham had come to own this field by 1870, but in any case it is the most likely candidate for the location of a precursor to the destruction that followed.¹² If so, this suggests that the northern bank of the western section might have already been partly levelled prior to 1870.

At an earlier period, Richard Gough, writing in 1806, said that 'a skeleton, a mattock and part of a cross were once found at the West end of the South banks'.¹³

THE DESTRUCTION OF 1870-1

The destruction of 1870-1 was widely reported in the local and national press, and was regarded amongst the group around Lane Fox as a national scandal. Letters appeared in the *Saturday Review*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, *Jackson's Oxford Journal* and above all, *The Times*.¹⁴

They make entertaining reading. The liveliest is that published in the *Saturday Review* on 2 July 1870:

'... the harmless sheep is no foe to history; but it has lately occurred to the owner of the ground that a few shillings more of profit might be gained by turning pasture land into arable; and to such a sordid motive as this these precious antiquities are at this very moment being sacrificed.'

'It is really frightful to think that so many of our precious antiquities ... lie absolutely at the mercy of individual owners, who may happen to be liberal and intelligent, but who may also happen to be sordid and ignorant.'

One letter blamed Oxford academics for doing nothing, and asked what steps the 'learned societies' were taking to prevent the disaster, which drew a slightly pained response from the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society (OAHS) which was attempting to act at a local and national level.¹⁵

⁹ A.H. Lane Fox, 'On the Threatened Destruction of the British Earthworks near Dorchester, Oxfordshire', *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London*, 2:4 (1870), pp. 412-15.

¹⁰ *Post Office Directory of Berkshire and Oxfordshire* (1864); *Mercer and Crocker's Directory of Oxfordshire* (1874).

¹¹ Joseph Christopher Latham is listed in 1856 in the *Post Office Directory of Berkshire and Oxfordshire*.

¹² The field is numbered 779 in the award, and Joseph Wallis is both owner and occupier (OHC).

¹³ W. Camden, *Britannia*, translated and enlarged by Richard Gough, 2nd edn, vol. 2 (1806).

¹⁴ The letters I have been able to locate are: 'A Cheshire Parson', *The Times*, 21 May 1870; P.G. Medd and Maxwell-Lyte, *The Times*, 23 May 1870; 'Spero', 'Intended Destruction of the Dorchester "Dikes"', *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 23 May 1870; 'Englishman', 'The Roman Camp at Dorchester, Oxon.', *The Times*, 9 June 1870; article in the *Saturday Review*, 2 July 1870, quoted in J. Cook, 'Before the Roman Conquest' in Cook and Rowley (eds.), *Dorchester through the Ages*, pp. 18-20; 'A Late Assistant-Quartermaster General', 'Dorchester Dykes', *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 July 1870.

¹⁵ 'Spero'; Medd and Maxwell-Lyte; *OAHS Proceedings*, ns, 2 (1864-71), p. 224.

Taken together with the paper read by Lane Fox in June 1870, the early stages of the destruction can be approximately dated. The OAHS had been told by the Revd W. MacFarlane, vicar of Dorchester, that the Hills were being demolished in May 1870.¹⁶ 'A Cheshire Parson' wrote to *The Times* on 21 May, and made the observation that he saw two teams and a great number of men at work, and that he followed the plough, which suggests sufficient demolition must have taken place to allow an initial cultivation.¹⁷

Lane Fox read his paper to the Ethnological Society on 21 June 1870, and its publication was accompanied by some detailed figures indicating what was being done to the Hills (Fig. 3). In one long section, Lane Fox demonstrated that the top sections of the parallel banks were being removed and the material dumped into either the ditch in between or the smaller northern ditch. It is worth noting that if this procedure was followed along the whole length then it can be assumed that all of the finds made came from the crests of the banks; anything buried lower down should still be in situ. He had visited the site, obviously before 21 June when he gave his paper, and found that 200 yards of the 'left flank' (the western end) had been levelled. He spoke to James Latham, who promised him that no further levelling would take place for the present, but he would give no assurance that it would not be continued at a later date, as indeed it was. Two hundred yards of the left flank of the earthworks would not equate to the full 250 metre length of the western section, but it does suggest that most of it had been demolished by then.¹⁸ This is supported by a letter to *The Times* of 8 June, which stated that a third of the length of the Dyke Hills was ploughed up. The same writer also says that he believed they had already been sown; if this was with a cereal crop works must have started considerably earlier than May to prepare the ground.¹⁹

The above evidence relates to activities in 1870. For the following year, in the Ashmolean Museum archive there are three notebooks containing notes on Dyke Hills made by George Rolleston, at this time Professor of Anatomy and Physiology at Oxford and a close associate of Lane Fox.²⁰ One book is headed 'Notes on Mr A.H. Cocks collection from Dorchester Dykes' and a second appears to be additional material to the first. These two notebooks appear to contain Rolleston's notes some of which themselves seem to have been made from original notes provided to him by Alfred Heneage Cocks, better known for his excavations at Hambleden in Buckinghamshire in 1912. At the time of the destruction of the Hills Cocks was an undergraduate. Some of the notes appear to be observations on human remains that Rolleston actually had before him. Cocks seems to have visited the ongoing destruction of the Hills approximately weekly from 18 February to either 17 or 21 March 1871. Some of the notes record visits by Rolleston himself, on 29 March and 4 April, the latter in the company of Lane Fox, who he collected from Culham station. Two final visits were made by Cocks on 21 and 24 April. The apparent gap between his visits might correspond with the Easter vacation at Oxford, and the fact that Rolleston went instead suggests that the two men were coordinating what would now be termed an intermittent watching brief. On 8 April Cocks wrote to Rolleston (from London) congratulating him on apparently having stopped the destruction; perhaps the presence of Lane Fox on 4 April had drawn another assurance from Latham that work would cease, but it did not.

Rolleston's handwriting is difficult to decipher, and the notes seem to have been made slightly at random, usually consisting of a date and a description of what was found on that date. It is not possible to reconstruct exactly what was found on any particular day with certainty, but between them Cocks and Rolleston seem to have recorded the remains of at least 13 individuals. Where he gives a gender, Rolleston states that one was male and two

¹⁶ *OAHS Proceedings*.

¹⁷ 'A Cheshire Parson'.

¹⁸ Lane Fox, 'On the Threatened Destruction of the British Earthworks'.

¹⁹ 'Englishman'.

²⁰ Ashmolean Museum, GR/C/1/2.

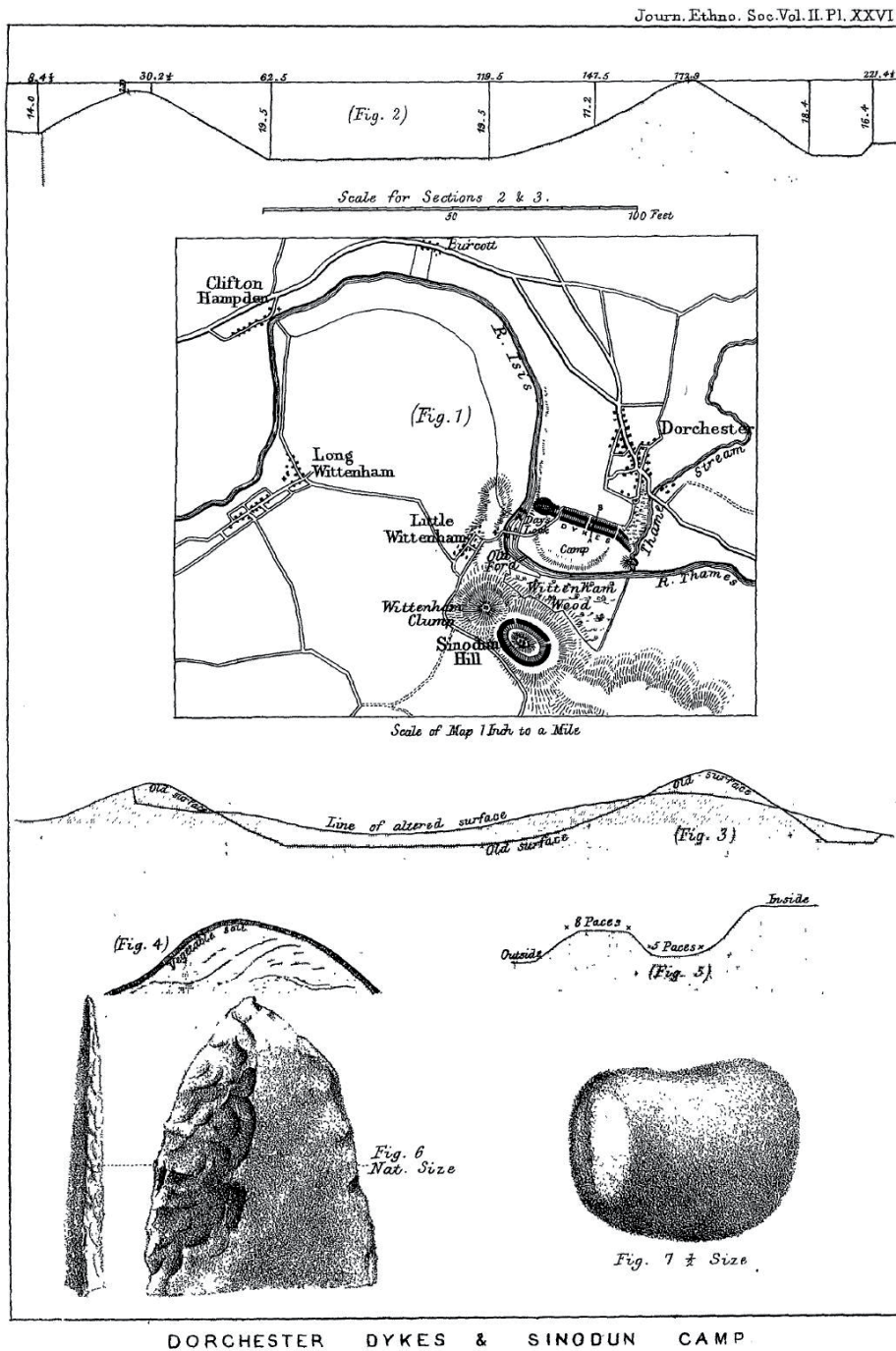


Fig. 3. Lane Fox's plans and sections of 1870, *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London*, 2:4.

were female. One was a child's skull on its own. Rolleston describes one as a 'very powerful man'. Some of Cocks's information came from the workmen, and was not reliable at all; one skeleton was 'reputed' to be nine feet tall and found in a sitting position, but neither Cocks nor Rolleston saw it.²¹

Where recorded, most of the burials were aligned east-west with the earthworks, which is not surprising. Some seem to have been deeply buried, which seems to contradict the evidence of Lane Fox's section. The 'very powerful man' is described as being four feet or more from the surface 'below the soil in the river silt'. This perhaps refers to the subsoil beneath the earthwork, but it is difficult to see how this level was reached when only the upper section of the earthwork was being demolished.

In a letter from Cocks to Rolleston he refers to a mass of earth which had a dark stain running through it, and a large number of nails, and wonders if this might be evidence for a coffin.²² The presence of a coffin would suggest that this was part of a late Roman cemetery, most probably of the fourth century.²³ Two other burials also had nails, but the evidence that these related to a coffin is less reliable.²⁴

The notes provide considerable detail on what was found in 1871 and when it was found; what they lack is any indication of the location. Fortunately we do have two photographs of the activities of Mr Latham's workmen which provide information, if not the three dimensional recording that would be considered acceptable today. The English Heritage Archive at Swindon holds a negative taken by Henry Taunt which shows Dyke Hills looking westwards along the surviving eastern section (Fig. 4).²⁵ Oxfordshire County Council holds another negative which shows the eastern section in the opposite direction (Fig. 5).²⁶ The latter picture shows the last stages of the destruction of the central section, because only a few metres remain to be levelled to leave what survives today. These pictures are given the dates 1873 and 1872 respectively in the relevant catalogues, but these dates may only be approximate. The Bodleian Library holds, in its Special Collections, two prints which are evidently taken from the above negatives. The print which corresponds to the negative in the English Heritage Archive has the date 1871 written on it. The print which corresponds to the negative held by Oxfordshire County Council has no date.²⁷ Both were deposited with the Bodleian in the 1960s by the OAHs. Both photos look like they were taken in late winter or early spring and both feature what seems to be a sort of mobile thatched bothy, and it seems likely they were actually taken at the same time. The minutes of the meeting of the committee of the Society on 21 February 1871 record the decision that 'Mr Taunt the Photographer' should be approached to take some photographs of the Dyke Hills, as they were being rapidly destroyed. These photographs must be the result and must date from early 1871.²⁸

²¹ The definite individuals with the date found (in the order they are listed in the notes) are: No. 1, 21.03.71 (Reputed 9' tall); No. 2, 17.03.71 (very powerful man); No. 3, 11.03.71 (child's skull); No. 4, 04.03.71 (adult skull, and probably the female one in the Ashmolean Museum Oxford, AN1993.87); Nos. 5–7, 04.03.71 (three adult jaws, with a fourth belonging to No.4); No. 8, 21.04.71; No. 9, 24.04.71 (some nails); No. 10, 29.03.71 (woman's skull); No. 11, 04.04.71; Nos. 12 and 13, both 11.03.71, apparently found the same time as No. 3. There are also references to children's remains found on 04.03.71, but the notes are not clear, so these are not included here. Nos. 10 and 11 seem to have been found by Rolleston, the rest by Cocks.

²² Ashmolean Museum, GR/C/1/1, 17 March 1871.

²³ P. Booth, 'Late Roman Cemeteries in Oxfordshire: A Review', *Oxoniensia*, 66 (2001), pp. 13–42.

²⁴ The evidence for a coffin was with burial No. 2. No. 9 may have had nails, but these could have been hobnails from shoes. Either No. 12 or 13 had a large number of nails, but Rolleston seems to have had the information second hand.

²⁵ English Heritage Archives, CC73/01029.

²⁶ OHC, HT1262.

²⁷ Bodleian, Dep. a. 26, f. 76 corresponds to English Heritage Archives, CC73/01029; Dep. a. 26, f. 77 corresponds to OHC, HT1262. A third print is also dated 1871, but is taken from Wittenham Clumps and evidently later in the year (Dep. a. 26, f. 78).

²⁸ Bodleian, Dep. d. 521. It is worth noting that the Ashmolean Museum holds two other photos of the destruction, which are not labelled and which do not appear to be Taunt's. One shows a gang of labourers at



Fig. 4. Dyke Hills during the destruction of 1870–1, reproduced by permission of English Heritage.



Fig. 5. Dyke Hills during the destruction of 1870–1, Oxfordshire County Council, OHC.

The importance of the rather detailed discussion above of the date of two Victorian photographs is this. The Oxfordshire County Council photograph can be dated to 1871, and probably the early part of that year, with some confidence. It shows the final stages of the destruction of the central section of the Dyke Hills. The English Heritage Archive photograph, probably taken on the same day, confirms that the destruction of both the north and south banks of the central section had almost been completed. As the eastern section remains today this confirms that the destruction of the Hills was confined to the years 1870 and 1871.

In an article published in the journal *Land and Water*, the author states that he had visited the Dyke Hills on 25 February 1871 and that Latham had by then levelled 'more than half', which suggests he was well advanced in the destruction of the central section by then.²⁹ The notes made by Rolleston record activities from 18 February onwards, and so it is a reasonable surmise that they relate to finds made in this central section.

In addition to notes on the 1871 finds, the second notebook in the Ashmolean Museum contains one single page headed 'Note from Mr J.C. Clutterbuck as to skulls from Dorchester'. Clutterbuck was the vicar at Long Wittenham, and is known for his antiquarian interests. The notes record that a skull had been found in September 1870 and two more in December 1870, together with the lower jaw of a child. These were found after Lane Fox noted in June 1870 that the western 200 yards had been demolished, and assuming that they actually came from an area of ongoing destruction they have to have been found east of that, but whether they came from the east end of the western section, or the west end of the central section cannot be determined.

An 'urn' was also found by Clutterbuck, but he could not be sure it was associated with any particular burial. Rolleston thought it was of 'Saxon' manufacture and sought a second opinion from a J. Parkes who thought it could date from anywhere between the fourth and twelfth centuries.

Of all the human remains recovered during the 1870–1 destruction, only a small proportion seems to have survived to be located today. Specifically relating to Rolleston's and Cocks's activities, a female skull in the Ashmolean collection is labelled 'D. Dykes March 4 / 71' and corresponds to Rolleston's observations on it in the notes, and there are also a number of long bones.³⁰

The Oxford University Museum of Natural History holds the mandible of a child, possibly aged five or six, which is labelled with the name 'Dr Lyon' and the location 'Dorchester Dyke Hills' and the date 1870, and thus must relate to the first year's destruction.³¹ The Museum also holds a skull recorded as collected by Clutterbuck in September 1870; this is very probably the one that Rolleston himself recorded (in the second notebook) as having been found by Clutterbuck.³²

The Oxfordshire Museum holds two sets of remains. An upper and lower jaw probably belong to the same individual, probably male and aged 40–60 years.³³ Part of a skull and a lower jaw both belong to another individual who was male and older than about 50.³⁴ A tiny fragment of label carefully retained can be matched to that on this skull to give the name 'Rev. R. Patrick', and it is dated 8 June 1871. This latter skull and jaw is of interest because the date indicates it was collected after Rolleston and Cocks had stopped visiting the site in April 1871,

work on the destruction. The precise location is difficult to ascertain but appears to be the eastern end of the central section (Ashmolean Museum, Dorchester topographical file, box 4).

²⁹ 'Colossus', 'Destruction of the Roman Camp at Dorchester', *Land and Water*, 4 March 1871.

³⁰ This is likely to be No. 4 in note 21. It was apparently transferred about twenty years ago to the Ashmolean from the Buckinghamshire County Museum.

³¹ OUM, Reference No. 22061. This might be the lower jaw that Clutterbuck found, but the reference to a Dr Lyon is puzzling.

³² OUM, Reference No. 21907.

³³ Oxfordshire Museum, 1991–5–19.

³⁴ Ibid. 1991–5–20.

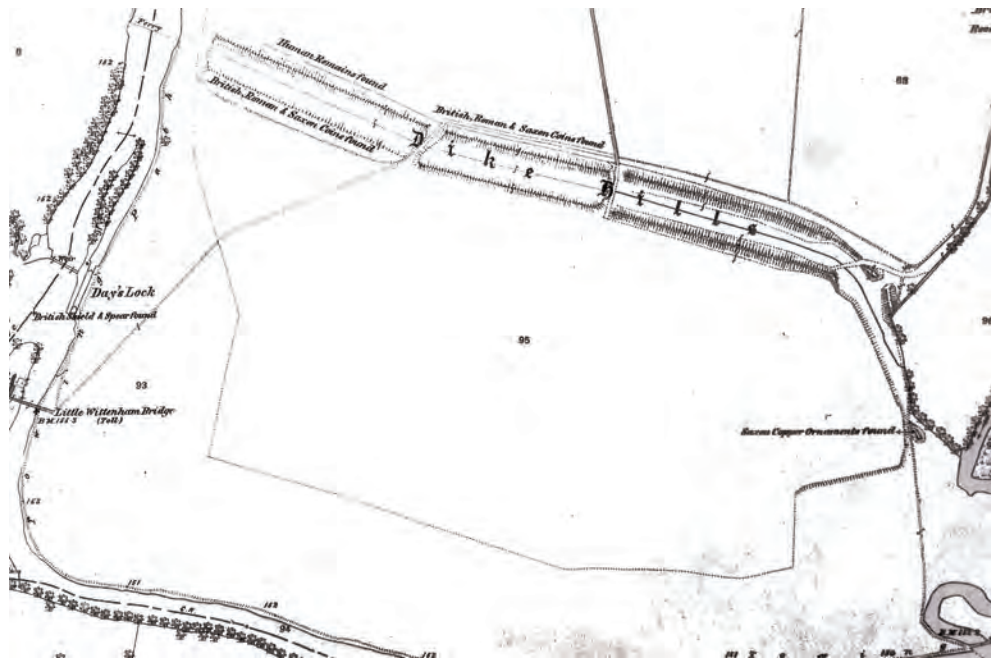


Fig. 6. First Edition Ordnance Survey 1:2500, Oxfordshire, 46:13, surveyed 1877.

and the fact that skull and jaw were collected together suggests they had only recently been disturbed, so presumably destruction was still progressing at that date, which must be later than that of Taunt's photographs.

The fate of at least one set of bones can be determined. E.T. Leeds evidently made attempts to track down human remains in the 1920s, when he wrote to Cocks. Cocks wrote back, apparently confirming that he had some skeletons in his possession, but that he had given some to Rolleston. He also suggested Leeds contact a man called William Garnett, who had assisted him in his undergraduate attempts to save the Dyke Hills. Leeds did this, and Garnett replied that he had no bones anymore, but that he recalled that a skeleton had been used in a practical joke on a tutor at Christ Church College who he thought was called Dodgson.³⁵

The first edition of the 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map was surveyed for this area in 1877, and thus not long after both the 1870–1 destruction and the finds of 1874 (Fig. 6).³⁶ The Hills are annotated with the script denoting 'Druidical or Saxon' antiquities (rather than Roman) and the words 'Human Remains found' are seen against the north bank of the western section: we have already seen that this section was probably already levelled before 1847. Against the north bank of the central section the annotation is 'British, Roman and Saxon Coins found'. Antiquity recording at this period is sometimes open to question, but the relatively short period which had elapsed since the destruction means that some weight can be given to the first edition annotations; the surveyors would have had no shortage of informed local opinion.

In summary, at least thirteen individuals recorded by Cocks and Rolleston in 1871 had been interred in the 200 metre length of the central section, and this is certainly a minimum. Three skulls and the mandible of a child were also found in 1870, possibly from the west section, and another skull and jaw came from the latest phase of destruction in 1871 and so

³⁵ Ashmolean Museum, Dorchester topographical file, box 4: Cocks to Leeds 5 January 1921 and Garnett to Leeds 17 August 1921.

³⁶ Sheet no. Oxon 46:13.

probably came from the central section. All of these must represent a small sample of all the human remains found at this time, and it can be assumed that many more were dug up and not collected or recorded.

The few finds salvaged from the destruction, particularly the suggestion of a coffin burial, at least suggest a late Roman date, but no more than that. The references to coins on the Ordnance Survey map and elsewhere, the 'Saxon' urn, and the whole context of the recording suggests that a great deal was lost that might otherwise have provided useful evidence.

THE ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Before turning to the finds made three years later, it is worth examining why Latham chose this particular time to outrage the small but vociferous archaeological community. It is easy to portray him as a villain, but there was no national legislation protecting monuments at all in 1870. John Lubbock introduced his National Monuments Preservation Bill into parliament in 1873, it went to a second reading seven times and only received Royal assent, as the much watered-down Ancient Monuments Protection Act, in 1882.³⁷ The opposition was intense and as Lubbock himself noted about one particular member of the House of Lords who was especially opposed, if an education at Eton and Oxford had left him with this attitude 'how can we be surprised that farmers and agricultural labourers are ready to destroy these ancient remains, if they can thereby make a few shillings?'³⁸

It may have been more than a few shillings that governed James Latham's calculations, when he decided to invest capital in what probably appeared to him as a major scheme of land reclamation. Joseph Christopher Latham was the owner of the Hills at the date of the Dorchester tithe award, and he held around 240 acres as freehold and leased considerably more in the parish. The tithe map shows that he owned most of the fields adjacent to the Hills (with the exception of Roger's Close, see above) and that every field he owned that was adjacent to the Hills was arable. The Flood Plain Terrace Deposits were evidently well suited to crop production, and only the alluvium of the valley floor flanking the Thame and the Thames was meadow. The Hills themselves are shown as pasture, as one might expect, and as an island in a sea of arable would have presented a management problem.

Beyond these practical difficulties of everyday management James Latham, presumably Joseph's son, found himself in a particular set of economic circumstances. He was selling into what was already a national market, and the price of wheat had risen nationally from about 1864 to 1868, around which time Latham may well have first decided to bring the Hills into cultivation, and in 1868 a severe drought had caused dispersal sales and reduced the price of livestock.³⁹ The economic logic may well have been inescapable, whether or not the national papers described him as 'sordid and ignorant', and academics turned up to bother him about it. As it happens, cereal prices collapsed from about 1875 onwards as grain began to be imported from North and South America, and the survival of the eastern section of the Hills to full height might in itself be a monument to a beneficial result of early globalisation.⁴⁰

THE FINDS OF 1874

Henry Taunt's photograph of a late winter scene in 1871 discussed above recorded the last stages of the major phase of destruction by James Latham. As already noted, there are three

³⁷ A.D. Saunders, 'A Century of Ancient Monuments Legislation 1882–1982', *Antiquaries Journal*, 63:1 (1983), p. 11.

³⁸ J. Lubbock, 'On the Preservation of our Ancient National Monuments', *The Nineteenth Century*, 1 (1877), p. 264.

³⁹ J.M. Stratton, *Agricultural Records AD 220–1977* (1978), pp. 113–16.

⁴⁰ P.J. Perry (ed.) *British Agriculture 1875–1914* (1973), p. xiv.

notebooks in the Ashmolean Museum containing Rolleston's notes on the Hills; two relate to the events of 1870–1, but the third contains a detailed discussion of events which took place three years later, in March 1874. This was when the important late Roman and 'Germanic' finds were made. Although the importance of these finds had been recognised previously, it was an article by Kirk and Leeds in 1953 that provided the first publication of them, and there followed a further discussion by Hawkes and Dunning in 1961.⁴¹ As noted above, the two burials were those of a woman who had part of a Germanic brooch, which might suggest she was of continental origin, although she also wore a Romano-British belt, and that of a man, wearing a late Roman official belt.⁴² The original interpretation by Kirk and Leeds, that the burials were those of Anglo-Saxon immigrants and that the man was serving in the Roman army in the last years of Roman Britain, was an attractive one, but doubt has been cast upon it.⁴³ Some of that doubt lies in the circumstances of the original finds, and in the hope of contributing some useful background to this debate, without venturing too far beyond the author's understanding of it, the transcription of Rolleston's own notes is included in the appendix.

From those notes, and from other letters in the archive the following can be deduced. On 22 March 1874 Revd. MacFarlane, wrote to Rolleston about activities at the Hills that he might find interesting, and the letter was accompanied by some of the famous finds themselves, and led Rolleston to visit the site for himself three days later. In the letter MacFarlane described the location as the 'End barrow nearest the Thame stream at the Dyke Hills'. The first edition Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map shows a suitable candidate for this 'end barrow' at the southern end of the Thame section of the Hills (at the eastern extremity of the whole earthwork), and indeed that feature is annotated 'Saxon Copper Ornaments found' (Fig. 6).⁴⁴

The 'end barrow' no longer exists, and the ground where it stood is now fairly level. The second edition Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map was published in 1899, and shows it as still extant with the same notation, but this was a revision rather than being based on a resurvey, as was the edition of 1912 which also shows the feature and notation. The loss is unfortunate, because there remains the possibility that this was really a barrow, rather than simply a remnant of the Hills.⁴⁵

The actual reason for the finds being made is less clear. In his letter of 22 March, MacFarlane's handwriting is a little illegible at the crucial point, and the sentence appears to say 'they have been digging it down to [?] win the earth and found two skeletons'. Rolleston's account largely speaks for itself; two pages seem to be of approximately contemporary notes and the third is an attempt at a more coherent summary of what was evidently very much a salvage exercise. He made every attempt to match the right find with the right burial and this is illustrated in his treatment of a bone perforated disc which was apparently a sword bead.⁴⁶ He was convinced it was a spindle whorl and could not therefore have been found with the male burial. He seems to have asked MacFarlane to track down the original finder, one of Latham's workers called James Wheeler, and interrogate him. He did so, but Wheeler stood by his story and confirmed the find was made with the male burial.⁴⁷

It seems that Rolleston arrived in time to excavate part of the second burial to be located, that of the man, and that the woman's remains had already been excavated. He describes the male burial as being aligned south-south-east to north-north-west with the feet to the north, and the female skeleton was 'only 4' distant from it'. A letter to Rolleston accompanying some of the finds refers to the female burial being 'nearest the river', but unhelpfully does not

⁴¹ See note 8, above.

⁴² M. Henig and P. Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire* (2000), p. 196; Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire*, p. 5.

⁴³ See, for example, A.S. Esmonde Cleary, *The Ending of Roman Britain* (1989), pp. 55–6.

⁴⁴ Ashmolean Museum, GR/C/1/1 (letter in Rolleston Archive, 22 March 1874).

⁴⁵ I am grateful to David Wilkinson for making this suggestion.

⁴⁶ V.I. Evison, 'Sword Rings and Beads', *Archaeologia*, 105 (1975), pp. 309–10.

⁴⁷ Ashmolean Museum, GR/C/1/1 (letter from MacFarlane to Rolleston, 30 March 1874).

indicate which river, the Thame or the Thames. If it was the Thame, which is much closer, the woman was lying to the east of the man and possibly alongside him; if it was the Thames she was to the south.⁴⁸

The account of bones being dug up and thrown into ditches, and finds being bought from the workmen, does suggest less than ideal recording conditions, but Rolleston and his associates made the best of a bad job, as they had in 1871, and without them we would not have the finds at all. The bones themselves seem to have subsequently disappeared.⁴⁹

LATER FINDS

Despite having featured in the debate which led to the first Ancient Monuments Act, Dyke Hills was only included on the schedule in 1934. At some point before 1940 barns were erected just south of the eastern end of the central section. In 1968 the monument was resurveyed for the National Grid edition Ordnance Survey map and the 'Antiquity Model', the resurvey based on the preceding County Series 1:2500 map, records that a small section had been destroyed by a silo erected there.⁵⁰ In June 1940 the line of the General Headquarters Red Line, part of the extensive system of fixed fortifications known as Ironside's Line, was surveyed. Two type FW3/28A pillboxes were constructed, one at the western end of the Dyke Hills, and one at the eastern end of the eastern section, each designed to contain a two-pounder anti-tank gun, a machine-gun and riflemen, and they remain there today. All work on the line was halted by an order of 8 August, except for the completion of projects already started, which presumably included these two pill boxes.⁵¹

On 7 August, B.H. St. J. O'Neil, then an Assistant Inspector of Ancient Monuments, visited Dyke Hills with D.B. Harden, Assistant Keeper of Antiquities at the Ashmolean Museum, and found that four trenches of various depths and lengths had been dug for gun emplacements 'in the crest of the highest part of the earthworks'. He found portions of a skull in the clerk of works' hut, and learnt that many more pieces had been found.⁵² These four trenches must be in addition to the pillboxes. In *Oxoniensia*, volume 5, published in 1940, Harden noted that a burial had been found 'in the top of the northern mound of the Dyke Hills close to its middle point', but it is not clear whether this was the result of the visit in August.⁵³

In *Oxoniensia* for 1943–4, it was said that Sergeant Warren G. Steel of the U.S. Army Air Force had reported the presence of a skeleton in the side of a disused slit trench near the western end of the eastern section.⁵⁴ Sergeant Steel was probably with the 22nd Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron who had arrived at the airfield at Mount Farm in June 1943, and the slit trench concerned can be located with some accuracy.⁵⁵ A photograph exists in the Ashmolean Museum which shows three American servicemen (one of them a sergeant) excavating a burial, while a fourth person, possibly E.T. Leeds, looks on.⁵⁶ The slit trench concerned is still identifiable on the ground (Figs. 7 and 8). As Harden notes, it is at the western end of the eastern section in the north bank, and a very similar feature lies at the eastern end of the south bank. A vertical aerial photograph taken in December 1943 indicates that a third trench lay at the western end of the south bank, and it might be inferred that the

⁴⁸ Ibid. (letter from William Cozens to Rolleston, March 28 1874).

⁴⁹ I am grateful to Alison Roberts of the Ashmolean Museum in particular for trying to find them.

⁵⁰ English Heritage Archives, 1218352, OS SU59SE3. The barns are shown on an undated Allen aerial photograph: *ibid.* SU5793/5; Major Allen died in 1940.

⁵¹ C. Alexander, *Ironside's Line* (1999).

⁵² English Heritage file, reference AA60745/2, pt 1.

⁵³ Harden, 'Notes and News', pp. 163–4.

⁵⁴ E.T. Leeds and R.J.C. Atkinson, 'Archaeological Notes', *Oxoniensia*, 8–9 (1943–4), p. 196.

⁵⁵ R.J. Brooks, *Oxfordshire Airfields in the Second World War* (2001), p. 154.

⁵⁶ Ashmolean, Dorchester topographical file, box 4.



Fig. 7. American servicemen excavating at Dyke Hills in 1943, with E.T. Leeds observing, by permission of the Ashmolean Museum.



Fig. 8. The same location in 2010 (author).

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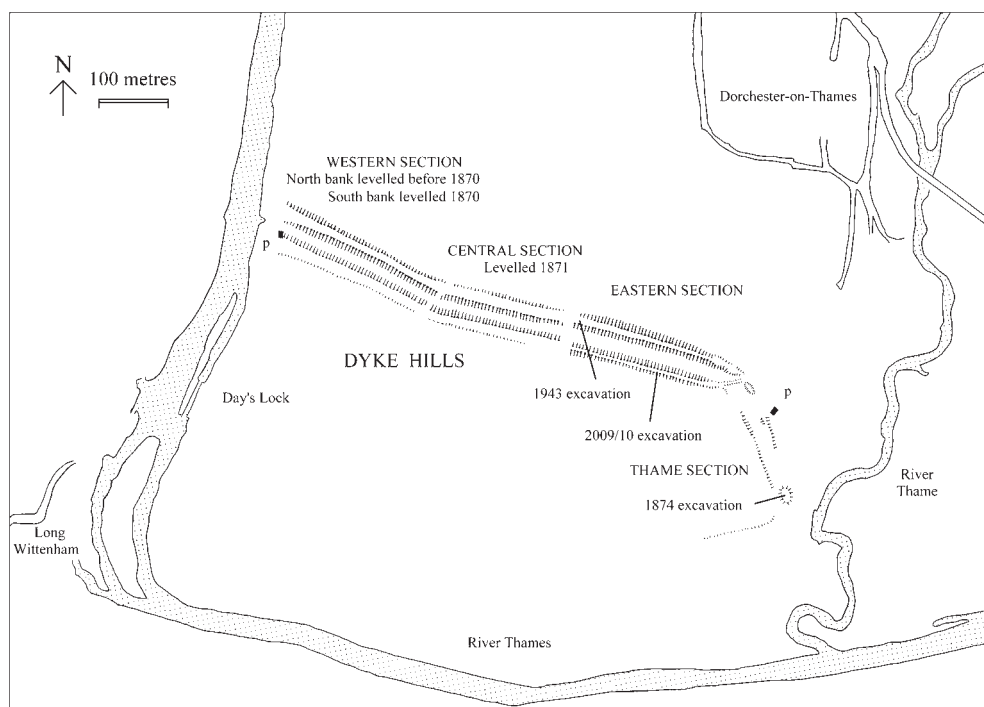


Fig. 9. Location of known activities at Dyke Hills, with approximate dates (P = pillbox).

pattern was completed by a fourth at the eastern end of the north bank, and that these were the four trenches referred to by O' Neil in August 1940.⁵⁷

The Antiquity Model mentioned above also shows that a section of earthwork adjacent to the eastern pillbox had been removed (Fig. 9), but this does not appear on a pre-war photograph taken by Allen, so blame cannot be ascribed to the War Department.⁵⁸

In more recent times occasional fragments of bone have been found where rabbits are active, but these are impossible to record systematically.

CONCLUSION

The destruction of the western and central sections of the Dyke Hills in 1870–1 was rightly considered a great loss at the time, whatever the landowner's economic justification. Even worse, recording during the destruction was not carried out to anything like modern standards, and the evidential value of the monument was clearly reduced. Nevertheless, some recording did take place then, and in 1874, and again in the 1940s.

What is evident is that wherever disturbance of the Dyke Hills has taken place human remains have usually been found. In the western section there were possibly slightly fewer remains, but, as noted above, the northern bank there might have been destroyed at an earlier period and Cocks and Rolleston do not seem to have been present when the remaining part was destroyed in 1870 so this might simply be a function of the level of recording. The central section which they did observe yielded at least thirteen individuals as an absolute minimum

⁵⁷ English Heritage Archives, US/7PH/GP/LOC94.

⁵⁸ Ibid. SU5793/5.

from a length of about 200 metres of the earthwork. If this density was similar along whole of the western, central and eastern sections (about 730 metres in total) then one might expect around fifty burials, and probably many more. What dating evidence there is suggests that Dyke Hills was used as a late Roman cemetery. The two late Roman military burials, found in 1874 and 2009, were found at the eastern end of it and no similar burials were recorded elsewhere. Whether this reflects a real relationship of the military burials with the rest of the cemetery remains to be seen; only further archaeological work could confirm it. What is clear is that the *Waffengräber* were not isolated phenomena, but lay within, or in one part of, a much larger cemetery.

Quite aside from its prehistoric origins, and despite a battering at the hands of nineteenth-century farmers and twentieth-century military, this monument obviously retains significance as a late Roman cemetery which may well contain further evidence relating to a critical period in English history.

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I would like to thank the staff of the Department of Special Collections and the Sackler Library, University of Oxford, of Oxfordshire County Council's Oxfordshire History Centre, and of English Heritage Archives. In particular I would like to thank Alison Roberts of the Ashmolean Museum, Malgosia Nowak-Kemp of the Oxford University Museum, Chris Ferguson of Oxfordshire County Council and Simon Mays of English Heritage for dealing with my various enquiries about bits of bone. Paul Booth, Roger Thomas and David Wilkinson all offered extremely useful comments on the text.

APPENDIX: GEORGE ROLLESTON'S NOTES ON THE FINDS MADE IN 1874 [doubtful spellings and editorial additions in square brackets]

*Dorchester Dykes*⁵⁹

March 25 1874

The Rev. W C Macfarlane having sent over to me a very fine Bronze Buckle, a number of straight bars fitted with rivets and a number of earring like pendants also of bronze together with a circular shaped bone disc telling me as per letter annexed that they had been found in a [trench] dug in the Dyke or rather to an outlying fragment of the Dykes abutting on a meadow next the Thame river, I drove over with Marmaduke Grickett Esq. to try to recover the bones.

It appeared that a youth of the name of Cherrill had found these bronze ornaments in relation with a skeleton buried in a shallow grave in this outlying fragment of the Dykes, the head being at the S.S.E and the feet at the N.N.W. the knees apparently being bent. I took out the lower ends of both femora and the fibulae but the upper end of one femur had been taken out before I came and a hole had been dug down to the feet, and much other disturbance and reburial in several spots had taken place also. When the youth Cherrill came to this [trench] the skull had already been removed but the stupid men who removed the head did not find the bronze ornaments though they had found and secreted or disposed of two bronze ornaments with another skeleton found only 4' distant from it. What Cherrill called the "Big Buckle" was found on the shoulder according to him, the 'Earrings' were found by the thighs and the long bars with rivets were found among the ribs.

⁵⁹ Ashmolean Museum, GR/C/1/2, f. 1.

P II DORCHESTER DYKES MARCH 25 1874⁶⁰

From Cherrill's account compared with that of another man Wheeler living in one of the cottages on your left hand as you go up from the lower end of the Dykes to Dorchester, it also appeared that Wheeler had come both before and after him and after one occasion had found one rivetted bronze bar and after another a circular bone disc. This latter article he gave to A. A. Harris Esq a surgeon in Dorchester who also has in his possession the lower jaw of the skull belonging to this [trench] which is reported and I should say truly as having been of enormous size. In a hole close by the skull had been buried together with the skull of the other body found close by by the orders of the foreman of Mr Latham. The fragments we recovered, learning whilst so doing that Cherrill had repeatedly uncovered the skull to show it to people. Some of the long bones and the pelvis were recovered from a neighbouring field and from a ditch into which severally they had been thrown by the aid of a man who came up out of a boat and who had been engaged in the reburings. There are two sets of bones one of enormous size and belonging to the skeleton partly which I exhumed and with which the relics already described were found, the other of more moderate size which I think were first to be found.

With this the first to be found were found two bronze ornaments one a harp shaped fibula purchased by me for a shilling from one of the workmen who was present the other in the hands of Mr Cousins having been purchased by him from a harelipped man [Grecian]

P iii⁶¹

Dorchester Dykes

March 25 1874

There is a good deal of confusion in the set of Bronze articles under this head and a good deal to be expected. The bone centrally perforated article cannot⁶² [?] be anything but a spindle whorl, but it is reported by the man Wheeler that it was found with the larger of the two skeletons which was undoubtedly a man's skeleton. How male and female relationship was distinguished as the "spear half" or the "spindle half" (cf Akerman Pagan Saxondom p. 48 n. (interlined '+73') *Codex Diplom Aevi Saxonici* ii 116).⁶³ Is it possible that this is what Kemble speaks of as an implement of Bone or horn, disks [?disk] tesserae perhaps or draughtsmen (interlined 'Horae Ferales p. 229').⁶⁴

It⁶⁵ is unfortunate that the large buckle was reported as having been found on the shoulder as some of the Bronze Buckles in Engelhardt pl 11 are said to belong to a leather belt.

The⁶⁶ smaller buckle, the saucer shaped fibula, the jews harp shaped fibula, and the spindle whorl I should ascribe to the woman whose skull however shews her to have been a large and powerful person. I have labelled this Dorchester i 25.3.74.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Ibid. f. 2.⁶¹ Ibid. f. 3.⁶² Greek α in margin.⁶³ [J.Y. Akerman, *Remains of Pagan Saxondom* (1855); J.M. Kemble (ed.), *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici*, vol. 2 (1840).]⁶⁴ [R.G. Latham and A.W. Franks, *Horae Ferales* (1863), p. 229.]⁶⁵ β in margin.⁶⁶ γ in margin.⁶⁷ A note at the end of the note book states that the two skulls were actually labelled incorrectly, as i and ii 25.4.74.

The⁶⁸ large buckle, the 12 bars with rivets, the cylinder (cf Saxon Obsequies xv 2d) with lateral lamina, the 3 ear ring like pendants, one clasp like the pendants only with a clasp instead of a ring, a sliding catch of bronze and 3 pieces of iron I should ascribe to the man and have labelled (Dorchester ii 25.3.74).⁶⁹ The iron knife appears with its part which attached the handle to have been 5" 7/10 and to have been much like (interlined 'there is another piece of iron besides the knife') a knife as the ones figured fig 6 and 7. pl. xxvi of *Horae Ferales* and stated to have been "straight one edged swords or knives 21 1/4 and 27" long. The stature of the owner with a tibia of 16" was 6'.

⁶⁸ δ in margin.

⁶⁹ [R.C. Neville, *Saxon Obsequies* (1852).]

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