

Notes and News

SAMPLING A SAXON SETTLEMENT SITE: WRAYSBURY, BERKS. 1980 (Fig. 1)

This note is a 'practical' contribution to the discussion initiated by Mr K. Wade¹ and Dr T. C. Champion² regarding excavation strategies for Anglo-Saxon settlements. It describes the circumstances which prompted us to apply a sampling strategy to the excavation of a late Saxon settlement at Wraysbury, Berkshire, and the preliminary results obtained. This approach may be of general interest for two main reasons. Firstly, the strategy could be applicable to settlement sites of other periods, and, secondly, although it was designed to satisfy specific aims, the strategy had to operate under conditions which were far from ideal, for it was limited by the physical and financial constraints that are commonly experienced on other rescue excavations. Generally, we agree with many of the points discussed by Wade and Champion, and this should be regarded as an attempt to put into practice much of what they discuss and advocate. To our knowledge it was the first exercise in applying a sampling strategy to the excavation of a Saxon settlement site.

Wraysbury lies in the flood plain of the R. Thames in Berkshire, about 2 km SE. of the royal site at Old Windsor, which is on the opposite, W., bank of the river. The parish church, which is mentioned in Domesday, occupies a slight knoll and overlooks meadows which are liable to flood. The church and the manor house, a 17th-century timber-framed building, form an isolated group away from the modern settlement which is some 500 m to the NE.

The Surrey Archaeological Society undertook a resistivity survey in 1977 N. and W. of the church and the results suggested the existence of timber buildings. Excavations there between 1974 and 1980 by the Windsor and Wraysbury Archaeological Group produced a wide range of mid and late Saxon material. It was proposed to develop about one hectare immediately adjacent to the N. boundary of the churchyard, and in 1980 an excavation was carried out by the Wessex Archaeological Committee for the Department of the Environment.

The previous excavations had revealed a great depth of overburden overlying the natural sand and augering indicated that this extended over the threatened area. The finds demonstrated that this unusual depth of soil had accumulated since the 9th century and geologists who were consulted thought that it was probably the result of years of ploughing and other agricultural activities. There were indications that any structural evidence would only survive as features cut into the natural sand. Potentially, therefore, Wraysbury was in a state of preservation similar to sites on chalk downlands or river gravels: major structural details survived but continual ploughing had removed the site stratification to the extent that much of the material assemblage was contained in the plough soil. However, this overburden had at least provided the site with unusual protection against recent disturbance.

The orthodox archaeological response would have been to strip the overburden to reveal as large an area as possible in order to recover information about the structures, social organization and the development of the site. At Wraysbury this approach would have been neither justified nor appropriate. It would have been financially prohibitive; and while there is a premium, with stripping large areas, on seeing the whole area exposed at one level at one time, this would not have been possible at Wraysbury for various reasons, not least because the total extent of the Saxon settlement was not known. In addition the development area is

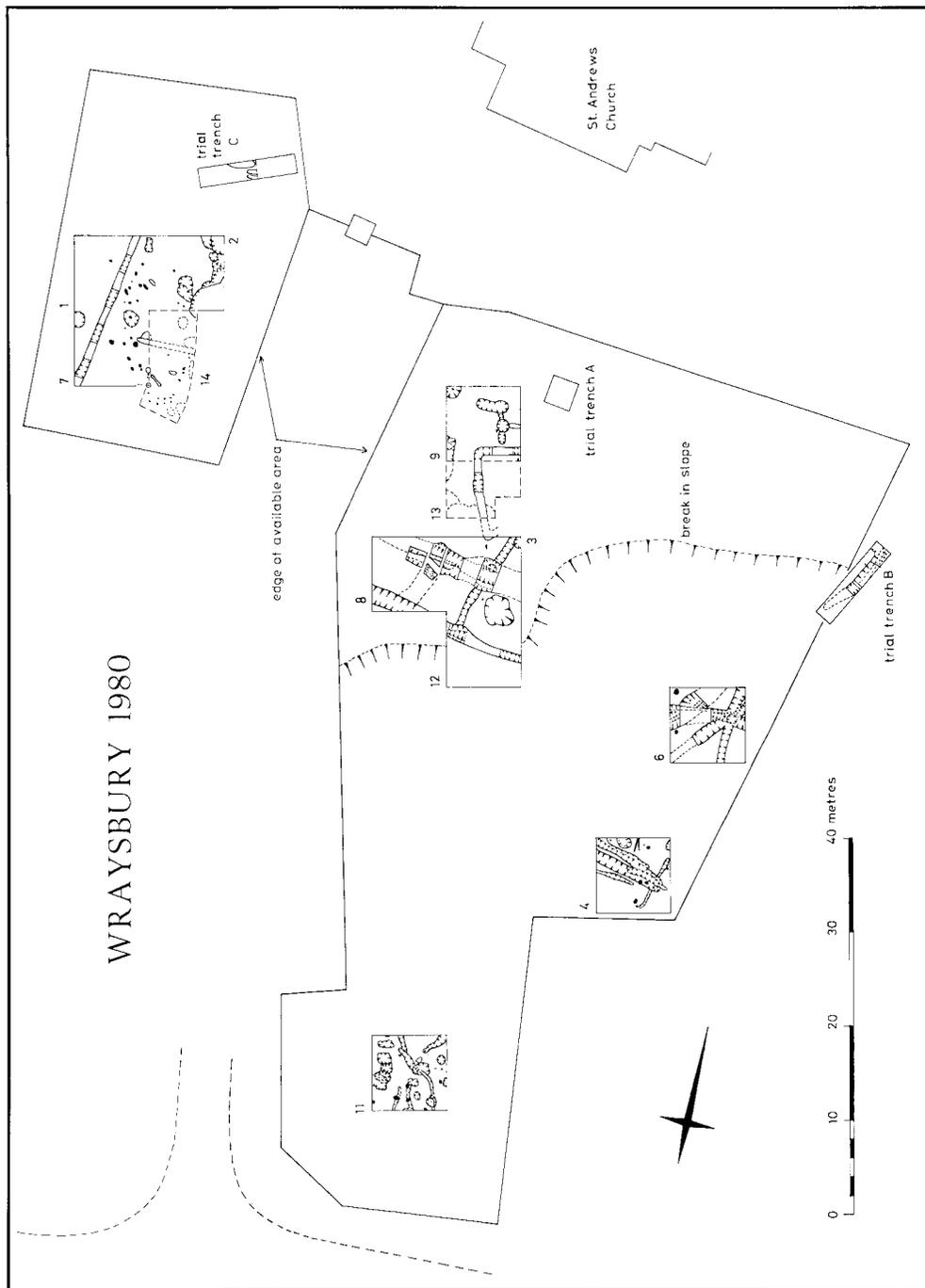


FIG. 1
WRAYSBURY, Berks. Site plan

surrounded by built-up areas and established buildings, and even a 'probabilistic' sample geared to the recovery of structural evidence could not have provided an idea of the total 'population'.

To justify area excavation as a strategy a definite indication is required that substantial structures are present. There was no such guarantee at Wraysbury. It proved impossible to obtain any worthwhile results from geophysical survey owing to interference from the dumps of modern metal rubbish on the site. Although augering had suggested the existence of one substantial negative feature on the site, there was no certainty that total removal of overburden would produce anything more than fragments of structures, which would clearly not satisfy the aims of this particular approach.

In Wessex recent excavations of two Saxon settlements, at Chalton³ and Cowdery's Down⁴ (both in Hampshire) have produced plentiful data concerning the structures, spatial arrangement and social organization of Saxon settlements. However, in so far as it is possible to separate specific types of evidence, the post-depositional histories of these sites have deprived us of the data to reconstruct other aspects of settlement such as subsistence economy, technology and trade. At Wraysbury there appeared to be the potential to recover precisely that type of information which is lacking from other sites. The primary aim of the excavation was therefore the recovery of artefacts and ecofacts which may be used to discuss the economy of a rural Saxon settlement. The recovery of structural evidence was only a secondary consideration.

With these aims and constraints in mind a three-stage sampling strategy was devised.

Stage 1

Three 'judgement' holes were excavated to check the survival of those classes of evidence which were necessary to justify our approach. One trench (B) was located where the overburden had apparently been removed, to check the survival of the archaeological data. The other two were in areas where augering had suggested that occupation material existed. It was intended that the trial excavations should enable us to calculate the size of the sampling fraction which would provide an acceptable range and quantity of material. Initially it was decided that a 5% sample was necessary, but sieving this quantity of soil proved very time consuming and, following discussions with the Wessex Faunal Remains Project, it was decided that a 2% sample would suffice.

The results of Stage 1 were sufficiently encouraging to justify a more extensive excavation of the site. The pottery range suggested a limited period of occupation from the early 9th to the 11th century, so that the material recovered from the plough soil would presumably reflect the economy of the late Saxon settlement. Furthermore, the survival of deeply-cut features suggested that the secondary aim of the excavation would be at least partially fulfilled.

Stage 2

The choice of the size of the sampling unit was influenced by two conflicting needs. As the main aim of the excavation was to recover a proportion of the material from all parts of the site it would have been most efficient to have a large number of small sampling units. However, there was also the possibility of finding structures and it was decided that such evidence could not be ignored. We therefore had to use a sufficiently large sampling unit to avoid the possibility of a quadrat falling within a structure and failing to reveal its existence. A search through published plans of late Saxon buildings suggested that 8 m quadrats would be sufficiently large to prevent such an occurrence. Sampling the site by transects, as opposed to quadrats, was also considered, but this would have involved excavating a much greater area.⁵ It was decided that ten 8 m quadrats would be the maximum area that could be excavated within the available time and financial constraints. This provided a 20% sample of the available area. Ten squares were chosen randomly, although there were obvious

constraints such as standing buildings and mature trees. Furthermore it was decided that this sample should be 'stratified' to take account of the decreased potential of those areas where some of the overburden had already been removed; eight of the quadrats were placed in the areas of highest potential while the remaining two were located in the quarried area. This stratification proved unnecessary as structural features in these two trenches were found to be as well preserved as elsewhere on the site.

The sequence of excavation for each quadrat was as follows. The topsoil was excavated by machine (a J.C.B.) without being sampled. The overburden was removed by J.C.B. in 30 cm spits and a 2% sample and an 8 litre bulk sample were taken from each spit. Between each spit the surface was cleaned in case positive features still survived, but none were encountered. All the 2% samples were dry sieved through a 4 mm mesh and the fills of negative features through a 1 mm mesh. The wet weather during much of the excavation meant that these samples had to be wet sieved. It was intended that 100% of the fills of the (hand-excavated) negative features would be sieved but it was soon realized that this would be impossible and a 25% or, in some cases, a 12½% sample was taken. Bulk samples were also taken as a control on the environmental data.

Stage 3

In order to satisfy the secondary aim of the excavation, i.e. the recovery of structures, a third stage in the excavation strategy was devised which would allow extensions of those quadrats where it seemed likely that plans of structures would be retrieved. Two such extensions were made. In these areas the overburden was not sampled nor were all contexts excavated.

Results

The strategy had some shortcomings which, with experience, could be overcome. Firstly, in terms of programme design, no consideration was given to the 'boundary effect' in choosing the quadrats to excavate: this meant that the periphery of the site remained unexamined because partial squares were ignored. Secondly, the sampling programme as such caused few difficulties but the necessity of continually moving from one quadrat to another put a severe strain on the recording team. More serious problems were caused by the linked sieving programme as an enormous backlog built up, and much time was spent on completing the sieving after the excavation had finished. These problems could have been alleviated by better facilities on site, such as good lighting, running water and more experienced sorters. Experience in fact showed that a smaller sample from each feature would have been sufficient.

The knowledge that sieving was taking place had an unfortunate effect on the diggers. There was a tendency, despite admonition, to refrain from recovering artefacts from the material to be sieved, with the result that important finds were not recognized as such until the residues were processed. This inhibited the feed-back mechanism which is so important for continuous re-evaluation of tactics on a site. Many of these difficulties illustrate the need for an excavation team with a structure that is different from those used on more orthodox excavations. There is less need for a large group of excavators, and instead a proportionately greater number of experienced sorters, sievers and a slightly augmented recording team.

As a result of this excavation strategy we can claim to have recovered a representative sample of the data which will enable a reconstruction of the economy of the threatened part of this Saxon rural settlement. We regard this as a considerable advance in the study of this type of settlement in Wessex. The results exceeded our expectations for it will also be possible to chart the development of the economy of this settlement through the different phases of its occupation. Each conventionally-recognized phase has well-preserved assemblages of animal and fish bone as well as carbonized cereal grains and a wide range of pottery types. In

addition it may be possible to indicate activity areas as there were localized concentrations of particular classes of material such as iron slag.

The secondary aim of the excavation, to obtain structural evidence, was also realized. A series of ditched enclosures connected to a droveway and parts of the plans of two structures, one of beam slot construction, the other a later post-built building, were recovered. An unexpected discovery was that neither of these structures was occupied for the entire duration of the settlement. Indeed each group of quadrats produced artefacts of a different date so that it appears that the nucleus of the settlement had shifted slightly over the period of occupation. This illustrates the capability of a sampling strategy to demonstrate that a settlement is multi-phased, which might not have been possible using any other strategy short of total stripping.

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¹ K. Wade, 'Whither Anglo-Saxon settlement archaeology?', 87-92 in T. Rowley (ed.), *Anglo Saxon Settlement and Landscape* (Brit. Archaeol. Repts., Brit. Ser., 6, Oxford, 1974).

² T. C. Champion, 'Strategies for sampling a Saxon settlement: a retrospective view of Chalton', 207-25 in J. F. Cherry, C. Gamble and S. Shennan (eds.), *Sampling in Contemporary British Archaeology* (Brit. Archaeol. Repts., Brit. Ser., 50, Oxford, 1978).

³ T. C. Champion, 'Chalton', *Current Archaeology*, 59 (1977), 364-69.

⁴ M. Millet, *Excavations at Cowdery's Down, Basingstoke*. Interim Report, and 1980 Supplement (Planning Dept., Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, 1980 and 1981).

⁵ Champion, *op. cit.* in note 2, 220-22.

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A 7th-CENTURY ANGLO-SAXON GOLD PENDANT FROM GLENTHAM, LINCS. (Pl. IV, A)

In May 1979 a gold pendant was found at Grange Farm, Glentham, Lincs. by the farmer, Mr George Cooper. It was brought to the City and County Museum in Lincoln to be identified and was in October 1979 the subject of a Treasure Trove Inquest.¹ It was subsequently purchased by the Museum and given the accession number 24.80.

Description

The pendant (Pl. IV, A) is drop-shaped, with a loop for suspension and has two garnets set one above the other in collars of sheet gold: the overall height is 23 mm, greatest width 14 mm. The weight is 2.275 g.

The back is of gold sheet which is folded over at the top to form a corrugated suspension loop. The edges are defined by two strands of gold wire, the outer one twisted and the inner beaded. On the centre line are two sub-triangular garnets, the upper *en cabochon* and the lower cut flat — this one has been cracked at some stage. Each garnet is set in a collar of thin sheet gold which is secured by a plain gold wire twisted together and tightened at the top. Around the base of each setting is a ribbed gold wire while the space between this and the edge is filled in with an untidy pattern of filigree spirals and loops, also in ribbed wire.²

The Site

The pendant was found on the surface of the plough soil on a site which has produced evidence of substantial Roman occupation, and in 1977 a small-long brooch of Åberg's group I and of 5th-century date was also found here,³ while a cruciform brooch of Åberg's