



Fig. 1: A general view of the excavation looking approximately west, with the ranging rods aligned north-south.

The former Goblin Works, Leatherhead: Saxons and Sinners

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IN 1927 A LARGE pit containing mutilated and dismembered bodies was discovered during the laying of a water main just within the grounds of the newly built Goblin Works, Ashted, near Leatherhead. It was suggested by Lowther, who observed the discovery, that the bones might be of Saxon date¹. His suggestion received some confirmation when in 1974 during further work in the grounds human bones and an early Saxon spearhead were

discovered². In 1983 it became clear that the site of the factory was likely to be redeveloped, and archaeological interest was obviously high. A trial excavation in 1984 proved disappointing, but soon afterwards preliminary works by the developers, Esso Petroleum Ltd., revealed further burials, and it was accordingly decided to open up the area which in September and October 1985 revealed a total of about 35 burials (Fig. 1)³. They can be divided into

1. A. W. G. Lowther 'Cartographical survey of the area: the Saxon period' *Proc Leatherhead District Local Hist Soc* 2 No. 3 (1954) 69-72.
2. Surrey County Council Antiquity No. 139.
3. The excavation work was generously financed by Crest Homes in 1984 and Esso Petroleum in 1985, and directed by the

author on behalf on the Conservation & Archaeology Section, Planning Department, Surrey County Council. Chris Watkins helped supervise the excavation, which was largely carried out by volunteer staff, in particular members of the Leatherhead & District Local History Society and the Mayford History Society.

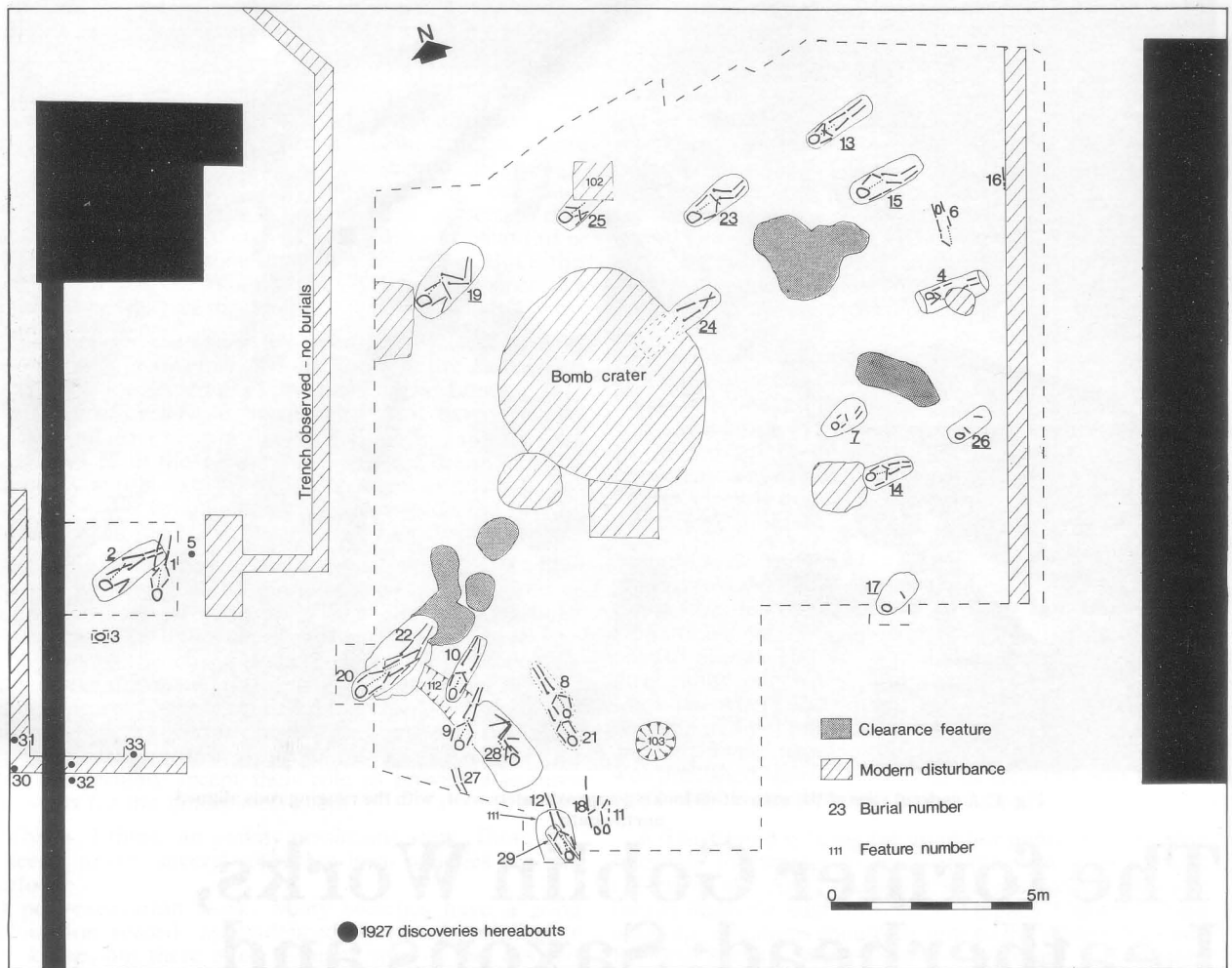


Fig. 2: Plan of the 1985 excavations. Certainly pagan burials have their numbers underlined.

two distinct groups: inhumations of normal early Saxon type and a number of execution victims.

The early Saxon burials were generally laid out east-west, which is the most frequent orientation for such inhumations, though the north-south alignment of S28 (Fig. 2) nevertheless finds plenty of parallels (compare, for example, Mitcham⁴). Their graves were well cut and penetrate solid chalk, and were, perhaps, originally some 0.8-0.9m (2ft 8in - 3ft)

below ground level. The graves must normally have been marked at the surface (perhaps simply by a slight mound after backfilling of the grave, though S4 (Fig. 3) was probably marked by head and tail boards) since they are fairly evenly spaced, though not apparently laid out in the even more orderly rows observed, for example, in the recently dis-

4. H. F. Bidder and J. Morris 'The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Mitcham' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 56 (1959) 51-131.

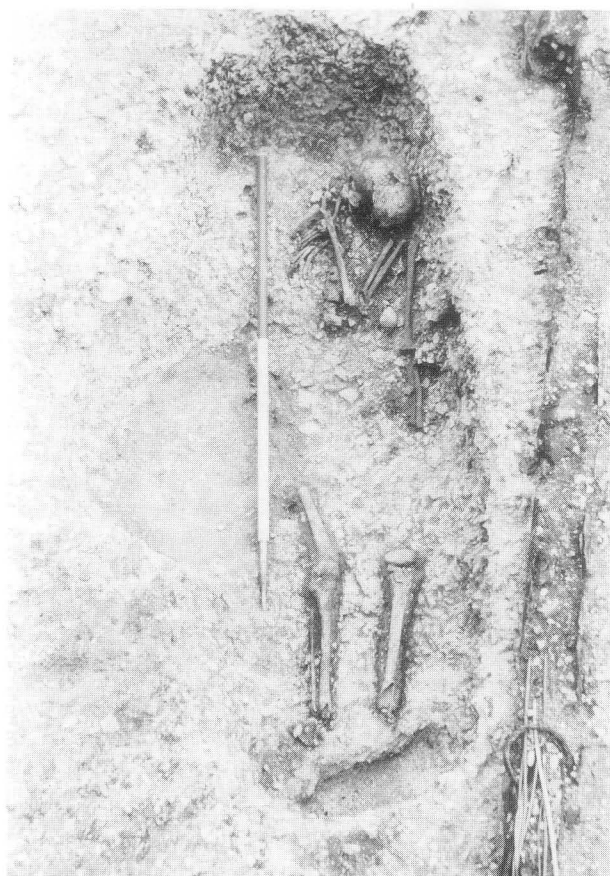


Fig. 3: Burial S4, showing the Panther cowrie near the left humerus with the bone comb perhaps just visible over the left ulna and radius. Near the feet an original slot for a 'tail board' may be seen: a comparable feature existed at the head end. The central part of the burial had been disturbed by a recent bore hole, marked by the circular depression under the lower part of the ranging rod.

covered cemetery at Tadworth⁵. The bodies were found in either a supine or a 'foetal' position, though there is considerable variation in the position of the head, arms and legs. In some cases the competence of the gravediggers may be doubted; the position of S23 (Fig. 2) seems to be the result of an over small grave, while S15 (Fig. 4) had his feet squashed against the end of the grave, but a gap of some

5. S. Nelson *pers. comm.*; Surrey Archaeol Soc Bulletin no. 217 (1987).

6. A full study of the human bone has not, as yet, been prepared, and comments of this type must therefore be regarded as provisional.

7. See, for example, the data collected by A. Meaney *A gazetteer of early Anglo-Saxon burial sites* (1964).

8. I am grateful to M. E. Hutchinson of the Ancient Monuments Laboratory for identification of the cowrie shell and shell beads (A. M. Lab. report No. 16/87). For the Saxon use of amulets see A. Meaney *Anglo-Saxon amulets and curio stones* Brit Archaeol Reps 96 (1981).

120mm (5in) at the head end. S19 (Fig. 2) is curious in that this very tall man (perhaps 6ft 4in - 1.93m⁶) was laid out in a 'foetal' position, although the grave was dug large enough to accommodate an extended burial.

A number of the burials had grave-goods buried with them, though the absence of objects in some of the pagan burials is a normal feature of Saxon cemeteries⁷. Three of the burials – S15 (Fig. 4), S24 (Fig. 2) and the 1974 discovery – were accompanied by socketed iron spearheads, while a number of others were accompanied by iron knives. A more unusual find accompanied the female burial S4 (Fig. 3), which had, in addition to a double-sided bone comb, a Panther Cowrie shell with it. The type is localised to the Red Sea and is a remarkable illustration of the distance which an object valued purely for its amuletic properties (conceivably as a charm against 'the evil eye') might travel⁸. These properties may also explain the manufacture of three small beads from a Panther Cowrie, which formed part of a necklace worn by a 6 or 7 year old child. The necklace included also two amethysts and two



Fig. 4: Burial S15, showing the long socketed iron spearhead aligned with the right hand side of the body.



Fig. 5: Location of the excavations, showing the now demolished Goblin Works. The shaded areas in 'B' show built-up land. The numbers in 'B' are Surrey County Council Antiquity Numbers: 119, 120, 123 and 145 represent various discoveries related to the Hawks Hill burial ground (see *op cit* fn 17), and the Watersmeet cemetery (*op cit* fn 18).

glass beads, one of which, of red polka dots on a blue background, may have been manufactured in the Rhineland⁹. Some of the bodies were evidently clothed, as the presence of belt-buckles makes clear, and it seems certain that this was true of some or all of the other pagan burials, but that the materials were entirely organic and have decayed completely. It also seems very likely that wooden or leather artefacts were originally present. The most convincing indication of this is the way in which the hands of S19, S25 and S28 (Fig. 2) were in each case placed as if to grasp a wooden staff. A total of 14 burials from the Goblin Works cemetery may be classified as in the pagan Saxon tradition. This small number should encourage caution in generalisation, the more so as the limits of the cemetery cannot be said to be certainly defined in any direction, and its original size and extent are entirely guesswork. The number of finds with the burials is very few and none of them is closely dateable, though a late 6th or 7th century date would best fit all the evidence.

The most reasonable interpretation of the cemetery, despite the limitations of the evidence, is that it was a fairly small burial ground, serving a community of, at most, a few families. No direct evidence for the site of their settlement has been uncovered and argument can only proceed by analogy. The most important fact is the presence of the parish boundary between Ashted (on the north side) and Leatherhead running along the old path of Green Lane/Ermine Way (Fig. 5B). A large literature¹⁰ is developing around the relationship between parish boundaries and Saxon cemeteries, with the consensus of opinion tending to the view that, at least from the 6th century, cemeteries were sited with some frequency on the edges of well-defined estates (manors) whose limits were fossilised and preserved in the medieval ecclesiastical parishes. The problem which remains to be resolved is whether the settlements which the cemeteries served were located beside them on the boundaries, or, as the medieval villages frequently were, in a more central position to the estate, or even whether the cemetery served a number of dispersed settlements within the estate. In fact, there is very little evidence for contiguous settlements for the cemeteries sited on boundaries, though few have been sufficiently



Fig. 6: Burial S6, showing this shallow burial badly damaged but obviously decapitated, with the head replaced between the legs.

well explored for certainty. Where settlement and cemetery are found together, as at Mucking¹¹ or Bishopstone¹², they seem to belong to the earliest phase of Saxon settlement; conversely, settlements such as Chalton¹³, which are not earlier than the 6th century, do not seem to have adjacent cemeteries. The suggestion, then, is that a practice of locating cemeteries on boundaries away from occupation areas began after the earliest Saxon settlements had been established. This emphasis on the boundary might indicate a growing concern for the maintenance of territorial rights, or alternatively suggest that the boundaries were then newly established¹⁴. So far as the Goblin Works site is concerned, the implication is that the associated settlement(s) lies at some distance within Ashted Parish. Only one

9. I owe this suggestion to Mark Reeve, to whom I am grateful for this and other discussion of the bead necklace.

10. E.g. D. Bonney 'Pagan Saxon burials and boundaries in Wiltshire' *Wilts Archaeol Natur Hist Mag* 61 (1966) 25-30; C. J. Arnold & P. Wardle 'Early medieval settlement patterns in England' *Medieval Archaeol* 25 (1981) 145-9; A. Goodier 'The formation of boundaries in Anglo-Saxon England: a statistical study' *Medieval Archaeol* 28 (1984) 1-21.

11. M. U. Jones & W. J. Jones 'Crop-mark sites at Mucking, Essex, England' in R. Bruce-Mitford (ed) *Recent archaeological excavations in Europe* (1975) 133-87.

12. M. Bell 'Excavations at Bishopstone' *Sussex Archaeol Collect* 115 (1977).

13. T. C. Champion 'Chalton' *Current Archaeol* no. 59 (1977) 364-9.

14. The alternative is not, however, one which I favour (see the ensuing paragraph), and I prefer to follow those who see a pre-Saxon origin for such estates (e.g. O. Rackham *The History of the Countryside*, 1985). Certainly, as explained above, the relative infrequency of burials on boundaries in the 5th century, *pace* Goodier *op cit* fn 10, tells us nothing about whether these boundaries existed at that date.

archaeological find is relevant to this, the discovery by Lowther¹⁵ of part of the rim of an urn and an iron knife, both of early Saxon date, on the site of the Roman bath house at the Ashted Villa.

This association, pregnant with possibilities, brings us to the final question with regard to the Goblin Works cemetery. How does it fit into the pattern of Saxon settlement in Surrey? This may be simply summarised as one of 5th century sites – Mitcham, Beddington and Croydon – being confined to a limited area in the north and east of the county with a spread along the dip-slope of the North Downs (but apparently not beyond) during the 6th century¹⁶. The Goblin Works site forms part of a notable concentration of burials in this area of the North Downs, including the nearby cemeteries at Hawks Hill¹⁷ and Watersmeet¹⁸ (Fig. 5). This should probably be interpreted as newcomers fitting into or taking over an existing pattern of settlement, which would give significance to the association of Saxon finds and Roman villa at Ashted.

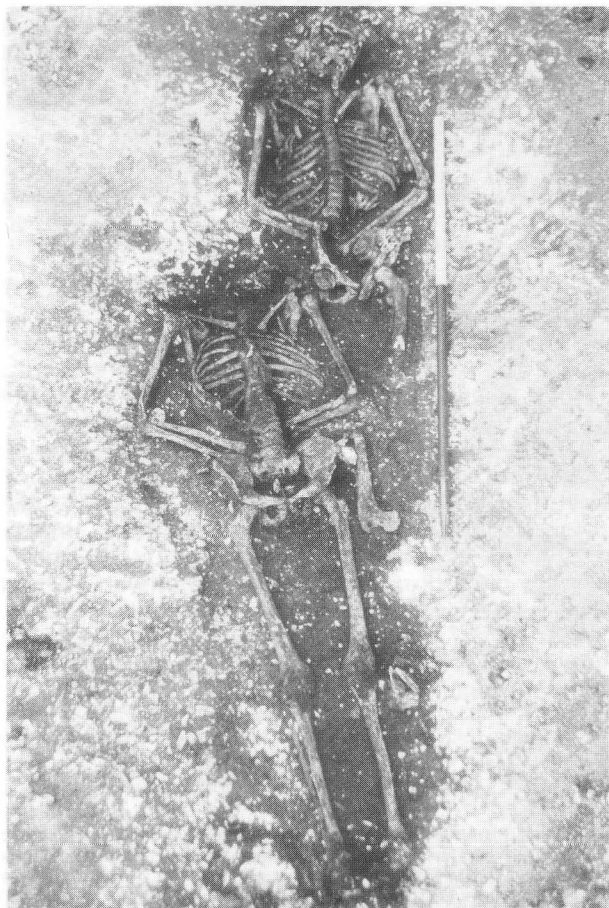


Fig. 7: Burial S8 is shown cut through S21, both skeletons with their hands crossed under the back.

The execution site

There is a very marked contrast between the pagan burials just discussed and the second group, which must represent execution victims. The latter were much less consistent in orientation, though they tended to a north-south axis, and they were buried either on top of or just penetrating solid chalk, at an original depth of 0.5m (1ft 8in) or less. They seem to have been unmarked at the surface since there are several cases of later burials disturbing earlier ones. In general these interments were made in a casual and careless fashion, which, at the extreme of prone (face-down) burial, found in at least two instances, may indicate deliberate dishonouring of the dead. More important was the clear evidence for execution in a number of cases, such as S6 (Fig. 6) who had been decapitated, or S8 and S21 (Fig. 7) with their hands tied behind their backs, no doubt as a preparation for hanging¹⁹. There was no evidence of grave goods, and it seems likely that these people were stripped of their clothing before burial.

All of the probable execution victims, except for

15. *Op cit* fn 2.
16. R. Poulton 'Saxon Surrey' in J. Bird & D. G. Bird (eds) *The Archaeology of Surrey to AD 1540* (forthcoming, Surrey Archaeol Soc).
17. R. A. Smith 'Recent and former discoveries at Hawks Hill' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 20 (1907) 119-28.
18. A. R. Cotton 'Saxon discoveries at Fetcham' *Antiq J* 13 (1933) 48-51, and Surrey County Council Antiquity No. 147.
19. See fn 6.
20. A. W. G. Lowther 'Ashted and its history: III Saxons, Danes and Normans (410-1066 AD)' *Proc Leatherhead District Local Hist Soc* 1 No. 5 (1951) 24. The battle referred to was that recorded by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* at Aclea in 851, which he considered to be Ockley, Surrey, but the early forms of that place-name are decisively against that interpretation – J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer & F. M. Stenton *The place-names of Surrey* English Place-name Society 11 (1934) 276.
21. Compare the similar pits at Stockbridge Down: N. Gray 'Excavations on Stockbridge Down 1935-6' *Proc Hants Field Club Archaeol Soc* 13 (1937) 247-59.
22. I have been considerably aided in preparing the following paragraphs by access to unpublished research by D. G. Bird and D. Hill.
23. A. W. G. Lowther 'The Saxon cemetery at Guildown' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 39 (1931) 1-50.
24. *Op cit* fn 21.
25. R. H. M. Dolley 'The Stockbridge Down find of Anglo-Saxon coins' *Brit Num J* 28 (1957) 283-7.
26. For some Hampshire examples and a valuable discussion of the problem of 'heathen burial-places' see F. Aldsworth 'Droxford Anglo-Saxon cemetery, Soberton, Hampshire, *Proc Hants Field Club Archaeol Soc* 35 (1979) 93-182, especially 174-9.
27. *Op cit* fn 26.
28. See *op cit* fn 21, 257-8 (including the suggestion that some executions may have taken place under the Norman Forest Laws) and A. J. Robertson *The laws of the Kings of England from Edmund to Henry I* (1925).

S6, were found in the south-west part of the excavated area (Fig. 2), where a number of other burials, lacking clear evidence for their mode of death, are more likely to belong to this phase of the site's use than the pagan one. Lowther's discovery of mutilated and dismembered bodies was in the same general area. He interpreted his discovery as representing the massacre of Danes fleeing from a battle²⁰, but it is evident from the incidence of intercutting burials of this phase that interment took place on more than one occasion. Stratigraphically some of the execution victims are later than some pagan burials, but how much later is difficult to say. The one possible indication on the site of a date for the execution victims was the recovery of two sherds of Saxo-Norman pottery from feature 103 (Fig. 2), if it is accepted that it represents the hole dug for a gallows tree²¹.

A better guide to the probable date of the site is to be found by comparison with similar sites excavated elsewhere²². One of the best examples of this type of site is that excavated at Guildown²³. The location of the site is closely similar to that at the Goblin Works: both occupy elevated positions on the North Downs overlooking a medieval town situated where a river cuts through the Downs (Leatherhead by the Mole, and Guildford by the Wey, respectively). More importantly, the Guildown site produced evidence of an early Saxon cemetery overlain by a large execution cemetery.

The excavator (Lowther, again) was inclined to ascribe the majority of the bodies to a reputed massacre of 1036, but was aware that more than one occasion of burial was involved: most pertinently one burial was found with a coin of 1043. This type of evidence is matched at another execution site at Stockbridge Down²⁴, Hampshire, where an armpit purse produced coinage whose latest date of use is put at 1065²⁵. This is not the place to attempt an exhaustive review of the known execution sites²⁶, and it will be sufficient to say that wherever dating evidence is forthcoming, it belongs to the late Saxon or early Norman period, and it therefore seems highly likely that the Goblin Works site belongs to the same era.

It has, furthermore, been pointed out by Aldsworth²⁷ that such sites, like the present one, seem to be deliberately sited on boundaries. Clearly, therefore, the edge of a territory was thought to be the appropriate place for the execution and burial of criminals condemned to death by the increasingly ferocious late Saxon laws²⁸. In these circumstances it may be largely coincidence, occasioned by preference for the same type of site, which leads commonly, but not exclusively, to the re-use of pagan Saxon sites for this purpose, rather than any lingering notion of the inherent appropriateness of a pagan burial ground for criminals who, by definition, were outside the Christian faith.

Excavations & Post-Excavation Work

City, by Museum of London, Department of Urban Archaeology. A series of long term excavations. Enquiries to DUA, Museum of London, London Wall, EC2Y 5HN (01-600 3699).

Croydon & District, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collection of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Mrs Muriel Shaw, 28 Lismore Road, South Croydon, CR2 7QA (01-688 2720).

Greater London (except north-east and south-east London), by Museum of London, Department of Greater London Archaeology. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to DGLA, Museum of London (01-600 3699 x241).

Local enquiries to:

North London: 3-7 Ray Street, London EC1R 3DJ (01-837 8363).
South-west London: St. Luke's House, Sandycombe Road, Kew, Surrey (01-940 5989).

Southwark and Lambeth: Port Medical Centre, English Grounds, Morgans Lane, London SE1 2HT (01-407 1989 or 1258).

West London: 273A Brentford High Street, Brentford, Middlesex (01-560 3880).

Hammersmith & Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from Fulham Palace. Tuesdays, 7.45 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham

Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, SW6 (01-731 4498).

Kingston, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Marion Shipley, Kingston Heritage Centre, Fairfield Road, Kingston (01-546 5386).

North-east London, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, E15 4LZ (01-534 4545).

Surrey, by Surrey Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to David Bird, County Archaeological Officer, Planning Department, County Hall, Kingston, Surrey (01-541 8911).

Vauxhall Pottery, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society. Processing of excavated material continues three nights a week. Enquiries to S.L.A.S., c/o Cuming Museum, 155 Walworth Road, SE17 (01-703 3324).

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