



# An Archaeological Watching Brief at Staxton Garage, Staxton, North Yorkshire.

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## ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Several archaeological excavations and watching briefs in and around the site of Staxton filling station have highlighted the archaeological importance of the area. The first discoveries were made on the garage site (Shepard 1938), but subsequent work concentrated on the sand pits to the east (Grainger's Pit) and south of the garage (fig. 9). Between 1936 and 1947 a considerable number of Anglian (5th - 7th century A.D.) burials were recovered from the sites, many accompanied by rich grave goods (Brewster 1958). However, it seems likely that much of this material and the records of the excavations have been lost (*ibid.*).

In the last 10 years both fragments (Stephens 1987) and more complete human remains have been found on the garage site.

Brewster also excavated a Romano-British site at Newham's Pit, c.200m east of Staxton garage. Anglian remains at the same site were interpreted as being contemporary with the burials that occurred at and around Staxton garage (Brewster 1960).

## METHOD

Ground work was conducted either by hand or by JCB using a toothless bucket where possible. Limited archaeological excavation was carried out by hand and a written, drawn and photographic record was compiled. A series of samples were taken for environmental analysis by the Environmental Archaeology Unit, University of York.

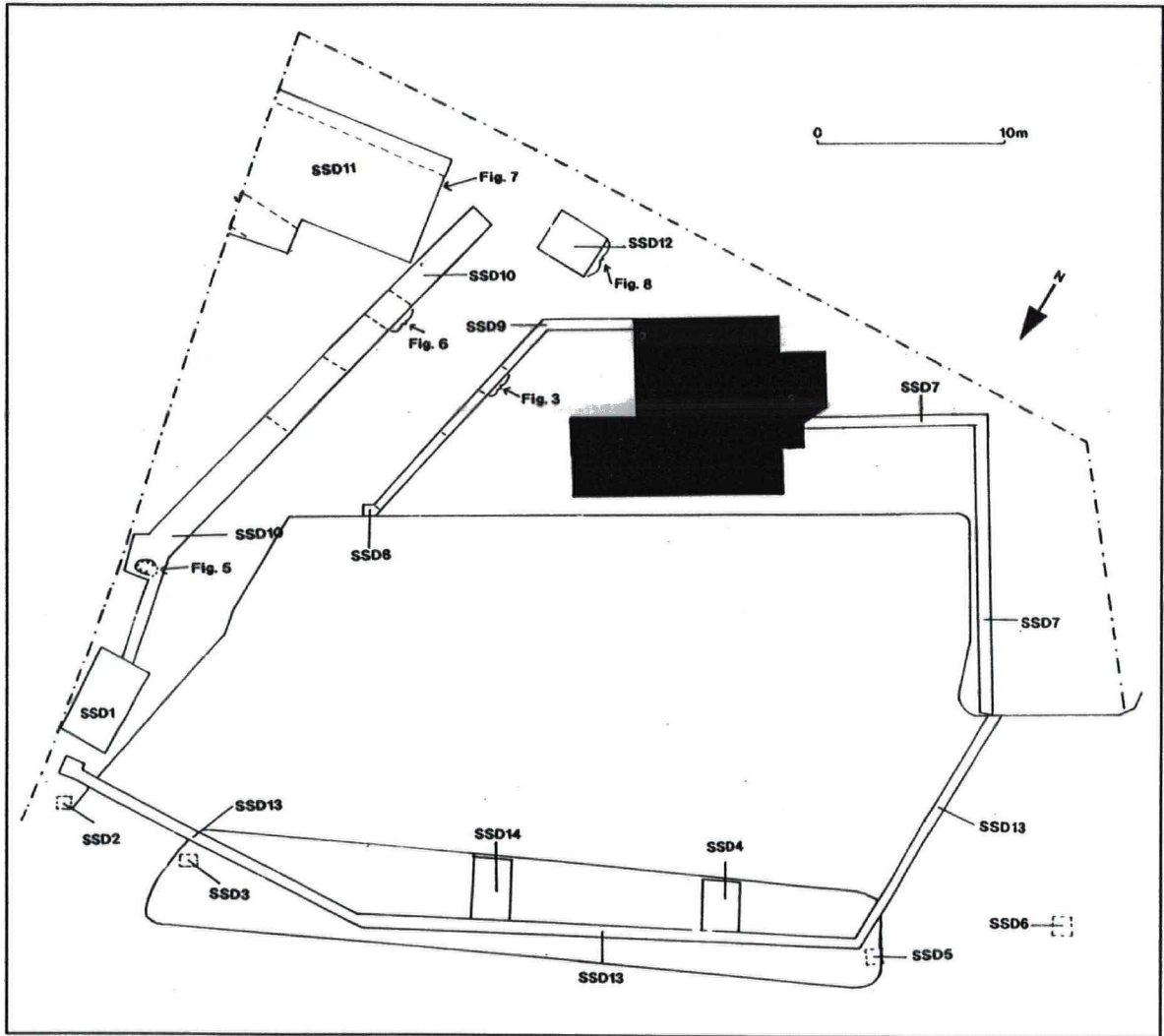


Figure 2.



## RESULTS

In all fourteen separate areas (Site Sub-Divisions or SSDs) were excavated, most in the form of trenches or small boxes for sign bases, tanks and drainage (Fig. 2). Of these fourteen areas only four, SSDs 9, 10, 11 and 12, produced archaeological features.

### SSD 9

Site Sub-Division 9 was a north-east – south-west trench excavated for the supply of services to a new air and water stand at SSD 7. The northern end of the trench was heavily disturbed for a distance of 5.1 metres. This disturbance comprised a greasy dark matrix with modern brick, tile and builders waste, assumed to be associated with the original garage.

A south-east by north-west aligned ditch (Context 9001) was uncovered in the southern part of the trench (Fig. 3). This was a steep sided feature with a V-shaped profile, 1.95m wide and 0.87m deep. The ditch cut into the natural sands and gravels. The upper reaches of the cut were more rounded possibly indicating erosion.

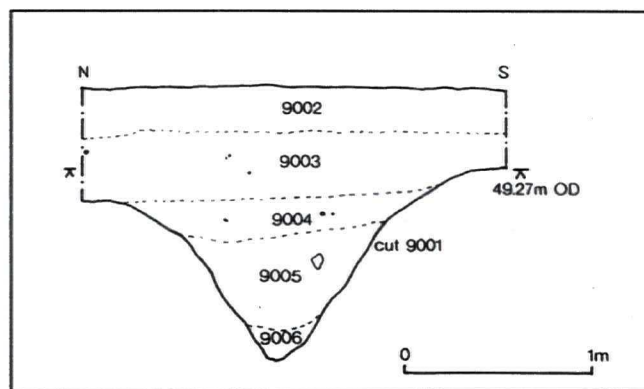


Figure 3.

Three fills were recorded in the ditch. The uppermost fill, Context 9004, was a fine dark sand which became more silty towards its base. Below this was Context 9005, a lighter and more gravelly sand, which rested on the primary fill, Context 9006. 9006 was a fine sandy matrix with up to 30% chalk gravel. It seems likely this was material deposited from the ditch sides.

Two finds were recovered from this ditch section, both in Context 9005. One was a worn piece of building material with mortar adhering and the other a small piece of abraded pot. Both are of probable medieval date.

### SSD 10

This area was a north-east by south-west aligned drainage trench cut between SSD 1 and SSD 12. In the northern part of the trench a crouched inhumation was uncovered by machine. Unfortunately this caused damage to the skull, left shoulder and humerus and the right hand of the burial.





Plate 1. View of Flints and Grave Fill (Context 10200 & 10211), facing East.



Plate 2. View of Skeleton and Grave Cut (Contexts 10201 & 10202), facing West.

Subsequently the remainder of the grave was uncovered, archaeologically excavated and recorded, and the skeleton removed.

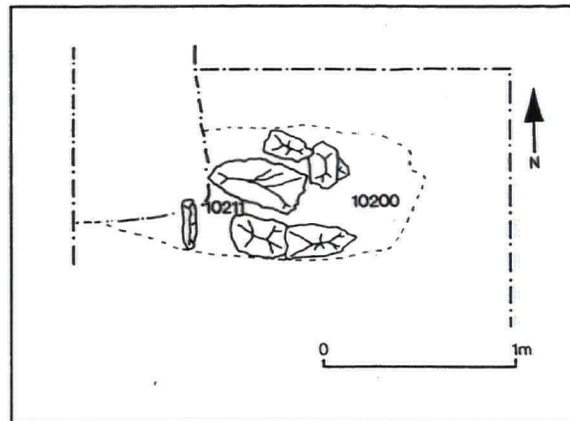


Figure 4.

The upper part of the grave fill, context 10211, contained a number of large flint boulders in a fine sand matrix. The upper surface of the boulders appears to have been weathered, being rough and broken compared to the smoother under-surface (Fig. 4, Pl. 1). This would appear to be a deliberate act rather than a chance placing; alternatively the weathering may have occurred in situ. Below Context 10211 was a friable, fine sand containing up to 30% chalk gravel and occasional pieces of natural flint (Context 10200). A single sherd of abraded medieval pottery, and a brick fragment were found in this grave fill. However, it is likely that the finds entered the grave due to animal and root disturbance.

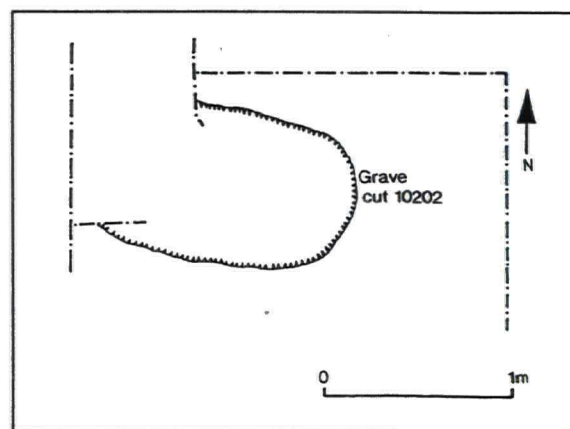


Figure 5.

The grave cut (Context 10202) was sub-oval, 1.5 metres long and 0.8 metres deep. The sides of the grave were steep and the base slightly rounded. The grave was just large enough to accommodate the tightly crouched burial, (Fig. 5, Pl. 2). The skeleton lay on its back, on a rough east - west alignment, and with the head resting on the lower western side of the grave, facing south. The right arm was doubled up, with the right hand in front of the face. The left arm was bent, with the left hand resting on the pelvis. The legs were tightly bent, and the left foot was absent. The area



suffered from animal burrowing and root disturbance, disguising the precise shape and dimensions of the grave cut; this disturbance may be linked to the absence of the skeleton's left foot.

To the south-west, beyond disturbance caused by the installation of a diesel tank in 1987 (Stephens, 1987), was an area of older disturbance. This was similar to the disturbance observed in SSD 9, that is a cut with very straight, crisp edges, and a dark, greasy fill.

Towards the end of the trench a ditch segment was revealed and recorded (Fig. 6). This ditch, Context 10209, is a continuation of Context 9001.

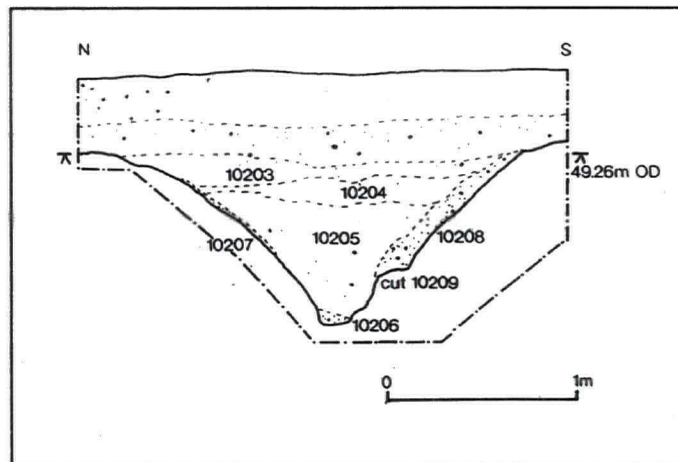


Figure 6.

#### SSD11

This 6 by 12 metre area was stripped to a depth of 0.7 metres on the site of the new soak-away. It was thought that this area might lie on the northern edge of the Anglian cemetery and that the numerous (deep) construction trenches required to build the soak-away would damage any burials in the area.

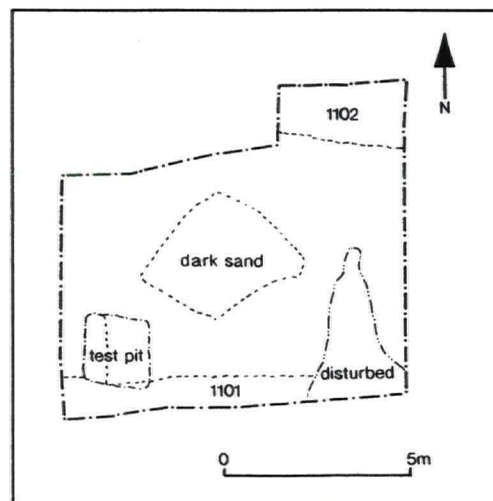


Figure 7.

No burials were found on SSD11 but two converging ditches were uncovered on the northern and southern edges of the area (Fig. 7). Feature 1102, in the north east of the area, proved to be a

continuation of cuts 9001 and 10209. Fragments of medieval pottery were recovered from this context, the upper and latest fill of the ditch. This ditch would appear to run on a south-east to north-west alignment.

Feature 1101 was a continuous dark brown silty sandy loam running along the southern edge of SSD11. At first Feature 1101 was thought to be the fill of a construction trench serving the present septic tank; however, it later became clear that 1101 was the continuation of a large ditch, Context 1209, found in SSD 12. The pipe trench was dug into the fills of this ditch.

### SSD 12

In SSD 12, the digging of a pit for the new septic tank revealed a segment of a large ditch (Context 1209; Fig. 8) in excess of 1.9 metres wide and 1.45 metres deep. This ditch contained three major fills and a small feature, possibly a post hole, on its northern side.

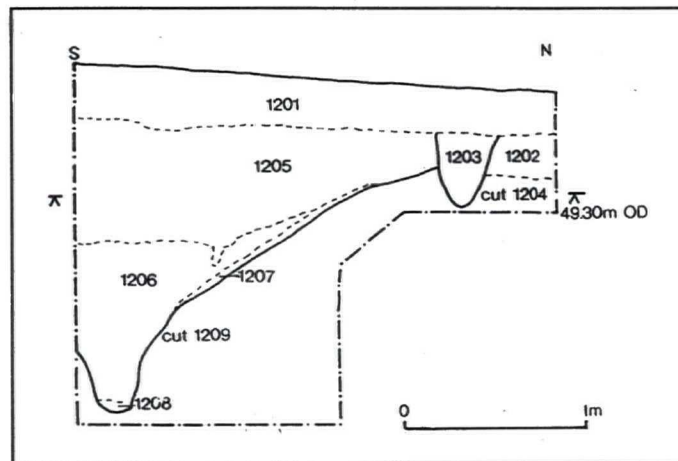


Figure 8.

Context 1205 was the latest fill of the ditch but was not readily distinguishable from the subsoil. However, the smooth texture of Context 1205 proved sufficiently different to isolate it from the earlier fills of the feature and the top soil.

A series of very thin but distinct sand and slightly thicker silty lenses with an overall depth of 0.89 metres made up Context 1206; close observation of this fill revealed the presence of a large number of such lenses. The occurrence of silty and sandy lenses would suggest that the ditch was open for some time allowing the build up of both wind and water-borne deposits. An incident of side-slip is illustrated by Context 1207, a sand and gravel layer lying under Context 1205 and intruding into Context 1206.

The primary fill of this ditch was Context 1208, which occurred in the base of the ditch. It was a dark brown sandy silt with occasional small pieces of chalk gravel, measuring 0.2 metres wide by 0.08 metres deep. It was similar to some of the lenses in 1206.

On the northern lip of the ditch a small, 0.29 x 0.38 metre, tapering feature (Context 1204) with a mixed sand and sandy silt fill (Context 1203) would appear to be a post hole. From its stratigraphic relationship it appears to be latter than the upper fill of the ditch. No similar feature was observed on the opposite section.

## DISCUSSION

Brewster's sketch plan of the Anglian burials at Staxton (Fig. 9) indicates an east-west ditch marking the northern boundary of the cemetery. The ditch appears to be a few metres inside the garage's southern boundary. It is highly likely that the ditch (Context 1209) with its continuation (Feature 1101) in SSD 11 is Brewster's ditch.

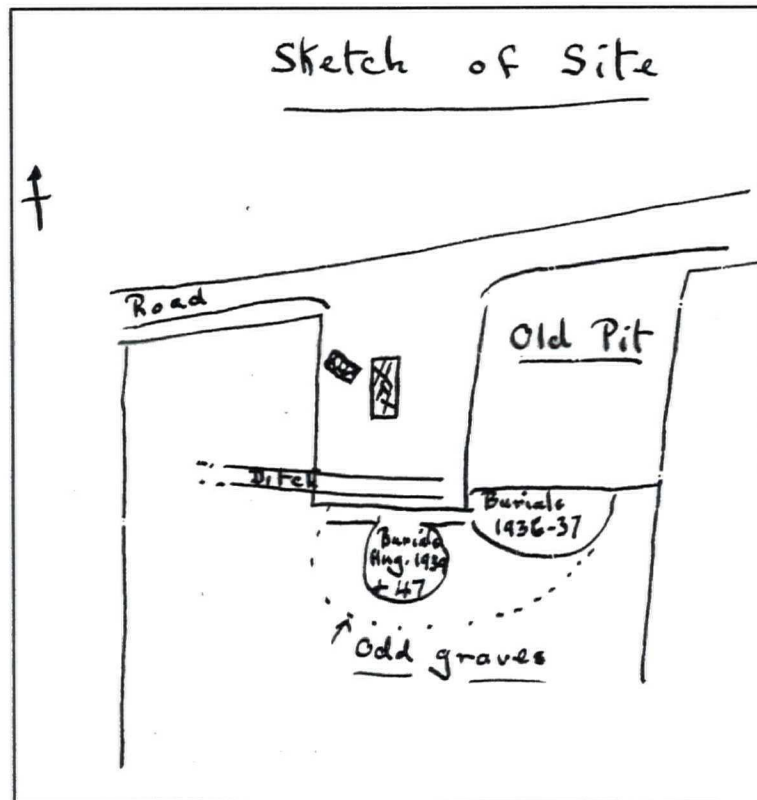


Figure 9.

If the ditch recorded by Brewster and observed during the present Watching Brief was indeed a functioning boundary during the 5th to 7th centuries, the presence of a second ditch (recorded as Contexts 9001, 10209 and Feature 1102) to its north may point towards its importance in the ancient landscape, perhaps even indicating continuity in landscape divisions over a long period. Work at the Heselton Parish Project (12 km to the west of Staxton) has shown continuity in east - west boundaries through the Prehistoric, Roman and early Medieval periods (Powlesland 1983). The lack of datable finds from the Staxton ditches, save medieval material from the upper levels, inhibits any conclusions which can be drawn.

However, it can be suggested that the two ditches are not contemporary. The difference in scale between the two may also suggest differing functions. The larger ditch, Context 1209, measuring an estimated 3.5 to 4 metres wide by 1.45 metres deep, represents a much greater commitment and use of resources than Context 9001, with dimensions of 1.95 by 0.87 metres. The converging courses of the ditches may also point to differing dates of construction and purpose.



The absence of burials on SSD11 would seem to vindicate Brewster's conclusions. However, this watching brief and others before it have recovered (undated?) human remains from the garage site, ie, north of Brewster's boundary. Shepard indicates that the first Anglian discoveries were made during the construction of a petrol storage tank (Shepard 1938); this was presumably on the garage, rather than sand pit side of the boundary.

It seems unlikely that there is a satisfactory answer to these problems in the field, ie. the definition of the Anglian cemetery and the dating and establishment of the relationship between the two ditches.

Crouched inhumation is not common in the Anglian period, but a small percentage of burials do take this form (Hirst 1985). Throughout the prehistoric period crouched inhumation is a common and recurrent form of burial. Late Neolithic / Early Bronze Age burials have been recorded in the vicinity of the site (Stead 1960), which makes it possible that the inhumation revealed during the present Watching Brief is of prehistoric date. However, the specialist report on the skeleton suggests that the burial is more likely to be Anglian (Appendix 3).

The upper flint boulder fill of the grave, context 10211, points to some form of marker being placed over the grave. Weathering of the stone would appear to have taken place in situ, resulting in their rough upper surfaces. This would also suggest that this level at which the stones were deposited was near the ancient ground surface. Alternatively, the weathered flint may have been placed in the grave, weathered side up for reasons connected with the particular burial rite adopted for this inhumation. It should be stated that no other large pieces of flint were found during work on the site, and hence a degree of effort must have been expended to bring the stones onto the site.

Further research into the fate of the artifacts and the written, drawn and photographic records from earlier fieldwork at the site would place the findings of the present Watching Brief in their broader perspective, but unfortunately this lies outside the scope of the present report.

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## APPENDIX 1.

### Context Listing.

Context	Description
9001	Ditch cut.
9002	Deposit/Topsoil – 10YR3/3, friable medium sand.
9003	Deposit/Subsoil – 7.5YR4/4, friable medium sand with chalk gravel.
9004	Fill of 9001 – 10YR4/4, friable fine sand.
9005	Fill of 9001 – 10YR5/6, friable medium sand.
9006	Fill of 9001 – 10YR6/8, friable fine sand with chalk gravel & flint.
10200	Fill of 10202 – 10YR4/4, friable silty sandy loam with occasional chalk gravel.
10201	Skeleton.
10202	Grave cut.
10203	Fill of 10209 – 10YR4/4, friable fine sand with chalk gravel & flint.
10204	Fill of 10209 – 10YR4/3, friable fine sand.
10205	Fill of 10209 – 10YR5/6, friable medium sand with chalk gravel & flint.
10206	Fill of 10209 – 10YR6/8, friable fine sand with chalk gravel & flint.
10207	Fill of 10209 – 10YR6/8, friable medium sand with chalk gravel & flint.
10208	Fill of 10209 – 10YR6/8, friable medium sand with chalk gravel & flint.
10209	Ditch cut.
10210	Deposit/Topsoil – 10YR3/6, friable medium sand.
10211	Deposit – flint boulders.
1101	Feature/Ditch (unexcavated).
1102	Feature/Ditch (unexcavated).
1201	Deposit/Topsoil – 10YR4/2, friable sandy silty loam.
1202	Deposit/Subsoil – 10YR5/6, friable sand with chalk gravel.
1203	Fill of 1204 – 7.5YR4/2 & 10YR6/6, moderate sand with occasional stone.
1204	Posthole? cut.
1205	Fill of 1209 – 10YR4/3, friable sandy silt with occasional stone.
1206	Fill of 1209 – 10YR6/6, friable sand.
1207	Fill of 1209 – 10YR6/4, friable sand with chalk gravel.
1208	Fill of 1209 – 10YR4/3, friable sandy silt with occasional stone.
1209	Ditch cut.
1301	Deposit/Fill? – 10YR3/2, sticky coarse sand.

## APPENDIX 2

### Finds Catalogue

Area/Context	Description
SSD 1	Human Ribs? 1 worked flint core? 1 body sherd
SSD 7	1 animal bone fragment
SSD 9	2 body sherds of gritty ware
9000	1 fragment of calcite gritted ware 1 brick fragment
9002	1 body sherd of Humber ware
9005	1 brick fragment 1 body sherd ?fabric
SSD10	
10200	1 brick fragment 1 body sherd of Staxton ware
SSD 11	
1101	1 brick fragment 2 fragments of pottery
1102	1 body sherd of Humber ware 1 brick fragment
SSD12	
1205	5 animal bone fragments
SSD 13	1 handle fragment of Humber ware



## APPENDIX 3

### **A report on the Human Skeleton recovered from an Archaeological Watching Brief at Staxton, North Yorkshire.**

**Dr. Keith Dobney and Prof. Don Brothwell**

The articulated remains of a single human inhumation was uncovered during redevelopment of a garage at Staxton, North Yorkshire. The skeleton was excavated and submitted to the Environmental Archaeology Unit (EAU) for further analysis.

Preservation of the material is poor to fair, with what appears to be extensive chemical erosion and root etching apparent over the entire skeleton. Most of the long-bone diaphyses are badly damaged or missing.

The greater part of the skeleton was present, although the metatarsals and phalanges of the left foot were missing along with most of the phalanges from the right foot. The left parietal bone of the skull and the proximal half of the left humerus were also not represented. The appearance of numerous fresh breaks from both of these relatively robust elements indicates probable breakage and loss during excavation.

#### **Sex**

A number of corroborative criteria indicate that these remains are probably that of a female. This assumption is on the basis of a moderately wide sciatic notch, a well developed preauricular sulcus, moderate sized mastoid processes and a moderate dental arch. The long bones also appear to represent a relatively gracile individual.

#### **Age**

Age was assessed on the basis of tooth eruption, occlusal wear, cranial suture fusion and appearance of the pubic symphysis. It was clear from the appendicular skeleton and teeth that the remains represented an adult. All long bone epiphyses were fused and third molars erupted. Patterns of occlusal wear in the teeth suggest an age between 25-35 years, and the unfused nature of the cranial sutures and the appearance of the pubic symphysis implies a fairly young adult.

#### **Pathology**

A number of abnormalities were noted on the skeleton and teeth of the individual. These included an apparent crush fracture of the 4th and 5th cervical and 4th lumbar vertebral centra, almost certainly the result of a fall of some kind. The neural spine of the 4th cervical vertebra was also apparently fractured during the same episode, resulting in a broken neck. However, much remodelling has taken place indicating the individual survived the injury for some considerable time. Lateral and

anterior thickening of almost all the thoracic centra indicates the presence of a functional scoliosis (twisted spine) which would have affected the quality of life to some degree.

A marked protrusion of the occipital region of the skull (Bathrocephaly) was also noted in this specimen. Although little is known of the aetiology of this condition, it is thought to be congenital in origin, perhaps the result of birth trauma.

Evidence of dental pathology was also particularly apparent. Dental caries was particularly severe in this individual and affected all molars at their cervical region (i.e. at the cemento-enamel junction). In contrast severe dental calculus (tartar) deposits were noted on all incisors on both buccal and lingual aspects. The deposits were also probably deposited on their occlusal surfaces, perhaps indicating that a period of illness, prior to death, had facilitated calculus deposition through loss of normal mastication (i.e. loss of appetite and failure to eat).

Interestingly, both lower third molars have been lost antemortem, since their partially resorbed sockets are still evident. The upper third molars are also absent and again appear to have been lost antemortem, although the alveolar bone has almost completely remodelled. Periodontal disease appears to have been somewhat advanced in this individual, a condition usually associated with advanced age. This is perhaps further evidence of a general poor degree of health for some time prior to death.

#### **A possible date for the Staxton individual**

Although no grave goods, which could provide a secure date, were found associated with this individual, the known presence of both Beaker and Anglian inhumations in the area provide a framework within which to work. Several skeletal characteristics, however, also provide additional general clues.

The overall shape of the skull suggest an individual to be somewhat brachycephalic (long-headed), a racial affinity not usually associated with prehistoric populations.

The presence of severe dental caries also implies a post-Roman date, since this condition appears to be relatively rare in prehistoric samples.

#### **Implications**

A single poorly dated skeleton is of little intrinsic or statistical value in providing information about past populations and, as a result has been dealt with and recorded in a relatively superficial way. However, the possibility that this represents a larger cemetery must be borne in mind when any future development of this area is planned. Whether of Beaker or Anglian date, it would represent an extremely important assemblage from periods which are extremely poorly represented both regionally and nationally.



## APPENDIX 4

### **Bulk Samples taken from Staxton watching brief**

Of five bulk samples, wet sieved by EAU, all proved to be almost completely sterile. There were few biological remains present in any, although some additional fragments of human bone were recovered.