

The Archaeology of Bidford-on-Avon: the Anglo-Saxon Cemetery

Introduction to the pre-1971 burials and finds

Tania M. Dickinson

Introduction

‘The Archaeology of Bidford-on-Avon’ project (2013–19) was established under the direction of Sue Hirst and Tania Dickinson to complete publication of multi-period rescue excavations carried out between 1970 and 1994 in Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire. It has been funded by the Marc Fitch Trust Fund, the Royal Archaeological Institute and the Society for Medieval Archaeology, with support in kind from Historic England (formerly English Heritage). A significant component of these excavations was recovery, starting in 1971, of a minimum of 37 burials (and up to 12 part-skeletons) from the large early Anglo-Saxon cemetery at the western end of the village (site I), excavated in 1922–23 (Humphreys *et al.* 1923; 1925; Humphreys 1923; 1924; Brash and Young 1935). Six further burials were found some 50 m to the east (site VII), dated by radiocarbon analyses to the Roman and middle/late Anglo-Saxon periods. These burials comprise only about 10 per cent of the known total for the cemetery, and so to put them into a meaningful context a comprehensive re-examination of published and unpublished data pertaining to pre-1971 discoveries was undertaken.

The three documents deposited in this collection support and supplement data, analysis and discussion published in Hirst and Dickinson 2021 (sections 4 and 7.8) and it is recommended that they are consulted together. This introduction elaborates and complements the methodological critique presented in Hirst and Dickinson 2021 with a discussion of the pre-1971 source materials and the problems that they raise for constructing a new catalogue, an explanation of criteria and conventions used and a list of bibliographic references used in the documents in this collection. The principal text is a new catalogue of the pre-1971 burials and finds (<BidfordAScemetery_pre-1971catalogue.doc>). That is supplemented by a workbook containing four spreadsheets (for inhumations, cremations, spot finds and unstratified finds) that tabulate data from both the pre-1971 and the 1971–1990 burials and finds (<BidfordAScemetery_datasheets.xlsx>).

The sources of information

The Birmingham Archaeological Society’s researches of 1921–23 were published promptly, in two reports in *Archaeologia* (Humphreys *et al.* 1923; 1925), with some additional material included in summaries for the *Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society* (Humphreys 1923; 1924). The reports included general discussion, a cemetery plan which depicted numbered skeletons and other find spots, and two appendices: (I) on the physical anthropology, later elaborated by a detailed study of skulls (Brash and Young 1935); (II) a tabulation of graves by number, with summary details of age, sex and grave goods. Most subsequent scholars have relied solely on these reports, but while

good for their time, they are inadequate by modern standards. The discussions of burial practice and grave goods were highly selective and mostly without reference to individual grave numbers. Printing constraints seem to have led to the final published plan being incomplete, omitting g173–195 and g205–214 in the westernmost part of the site, the garden of the Mason’s Arms (forerunner of the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ public house, now the ‘New Saxon’). And many details of grave numbers, grave goods and skeletal orientation are impaired by inconsistencies or ambiguities, within and between the texts, appendices and plan.

To some extent these deficiencies have been remedied through a study of unpublished archives and the grave goods that were given to The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (SBT) in Stratford-upon-Avon, though both still present problems. The earliest unpublished source is John Humphreys’ ‘reporter’s’ notebook (Humphreys, *Notebook*), which contains handwritten notes on the excavation of g1a–g24 (11 May–8 June, 1922) together with other and later jottings about excavation administration, skeletal material and secondary sources. Unfortunately, its value as a primary source is compromised by its highly haphazard nature.

Much more systematic, but obviously secondary, is a bound volume compiled by Frederick Wellstood (Wellstood, *Record*), which contains pre-printed grave-forms, filled in during 1923 and 1924 in ink, with photographs and drawings pasted in. Some interpolations were added later in pencil, not all identifiable as Wellstood’s hand. Although still far from a full record, these forms provide many details omitted from, or obscured in, the publications, including descriptions of skeletal layout and unnumbered fragmentary finds. An abridged typescript version of Wellstood, *Record* (SBT DR 410/3) is evidently the precursor of the published appendix II tabulations of grave assemblages (Humphreys *et al.* 1923; 1925).

Most importantly, a complete plan is preserved, which has provided the basis for a new full cemetery plan (Hirst and Dickinson 2021, fig. 20). Mounted on wooden rollers and printed on linen paper at a scale of 1:48, it measures 1.65 m x 1.20 m (Wellstood, *Final Plan*). In addition, there are a number of drawings (SBT DR 410/5 and 410/12), photographic negatives (SBT DR 410/6 and 410/7/4) and prints (SBT DR 410/7/1–3 and 410/7/5), many, but not all, of which were used in the published reports and/or were pasted into Wellstood, *Record*.

The artefacts held by SBT have been studied first-hand by the author, selectively in 1980 and 2002 as part of research respectively on saucer brooches and animal-ornamented shields, and in totality in 2011 and 2013. Artefacts in the Worcester City Art Gallery and Museum have not been examined first hand, and the outline catalogue entries given here are derived from published sources and information supplied by the Curator of Archaeology and Natural History (Deborah Fox, pers. comm. June 2016).

The overall record for the 1920s finds is far from complete, however. Not all finds were retained after excavation. Over the years many others have been lost or become disassociated from their grave number. At an unknown date in the 20th century, an inventory of the material at SBT was

compiled on typed index cards, one set by grave number, the other by artefact type, largely relying for content on Wellstood, *Record*. These cards were subsequently used to record curatorial changes, most significantly in 2003–4, when a major overhaul of the collection was undertaken. Material then still on display at New Place Museum (Nash’s House) was combined with material in store at The Shakespeare Centre (but excluding the pottery and cremated bone, which in 2013 was still in Nash’s House). Partially conserved and repackaged, this collection was re-registered under a new prefix (SBT 2004-65/), but with individual identification numbers added according to the sequence of listings on the typed cards, regardless of whether the object in question was extant or missing. While this process brought some order to the collection, it introduced errors of its own (including duplicated numbers and misattributions), only some of which can now be rectified.

The human bones from 1921-23 were given to the Museum of Human and Dental Anatomy, University of Birmingham (later The Medical School Collection, and now held in the Material Culture Laboratory of the Department of Classics, Ancient History and Archaeology). They comprise 21 boxes of skulls and/or mandibles, which were catalogued in 2011 as part of an Australian repatriation project, and *c* 50 boxes of long and other bones (Professor Jonathan Reinerz, Dr Cressida Fforde and Dr Roger White, pers. comm. Dec 2014). The former are missing items, as well as hopelessly confused by dual numbering, and seem to overlap only partially with the material itemised by Brash and Young 1935; the latter lack any inventory. No attempt has been made to examine this material, and prospects for a fruitful re-analysis look poor.

Problems in constructing a new catalogue

Construction of a definitive inventory of the pre-1971 burials at Bidford is constrained by a number of factors.

Site conditions

The cemetery site had been disturbed long before the 1920s excavations began. The area was marginal to the village further east. In the high medieval period it was part of the open fields, later being used for a variety of activities, including allotments, orchards and the occasional disposal of animal carcasses, all of which had left a scatter of medieval and early modern material over the site and intrusively in grave fills. The cremation urns, buried more superficially than the inhumations, had been particularly badly disturbed (by ploughing?). The earliest discoveries (see g1874/1, g1876/1 and g1876/2) were probably the result of gravel quarrying in the north-west of the site. The cutting of an access road in 1921 (see Hirst and Dickinson 2021, fig. 20), from which only unstratified skulls and grave goods were salvaged, was the trigger for the formal excavations of 1922–23.

The soil conditions encountered by excavators were thus varied and difficult. In the west (the garden of the Mason’s Arms), along the eastern edge and variously across the centre and in the south, trenches were taken down to the gravel surface at depths of *c* 3 feet 6 inches (1.07 m) to 5 feet (1.52

m) before inhumations were encountered. Digging was abandoned altogether on the eastern side where the soil overburden reached 6 feet (1.83 m) in depth (Humphreys *et al.* 1925, 271), and in the west because of disturbed soil (west of a line roughly from g153 to g168). At the northern end of the Mason's Arms garden, an 18 inch (0.46 m) deep soil overburden was thought to have been re-deposited in the 19th century when a Victorian gravel pit was in use (Wellstood, *Record*, g210). The excavators also noted how skeletal preservation varied: pockets of clay within the gravel, which otherwise favoured good preservation, were held especially responsible for severe degradation of bone (Humphreys *et al.* 1923, 93).

Excavation methods

Besides the challenging soil conditions, excavation methods were not conducive to a full recovery of burials, despite the excavators' claim to have taken great care (Humphreys *et al.* 1923, 92–3). Wellstood's technique was to cut long trenches, 7 feet (2.13 m) wide, the workmen moving forwards at the exposed face, and stopping whenever a skeleton, structure or find was encountered. These trenches were cut without intervening baulks, in parallel though not necessarily consecutively, forming blocks on slightly differing alignments. Digging clearly stopped well short of the property boundaries (walls and fences) which defined the excavated areas. Grave cuts were not recognised. All in all, it is probable that many burials would have been missed, obscured or damaged in the process of excavation. An insight into site practice comes from comparing the published photographs for g5, g50 and g79 which were trimmed of their background (Humphreys *et al.* 1923, figs. 2–4) with their originals in Wellstood, *Record*, where *ad hoc* soil dumps and general messiness is all too evident.

Recording systems

It is not known to what extent Wellstood drew the skeletal layouts on the burial plan in the field or reconstructed them afterwards from notes, sketches and measured co-ordinates. Certainly, records of the earliest burials (g1a–g15), before standardised trenches and proper base lines were instituted, are particularly defective. Moreover, base lines and fixed points were moved as the excavation progressed, but not all those mentioned in Wellstood, *Record*, were marked onto Wellstood, *Final Plan*: A' and Ω from the central eastern trenches and I and M in relation to spot find 108A are missing; the locations of two trial trenches cut on 18 August, 1922, between the discovery of g108 and g109, are obscure.

Grave numbering

A particular problem with the recording is that the published numbers, 1 to 214, are not a simple count of burials. Some numbers belong to grave goods and others to stray finds, not all of which are early Anglo-Saxon in date. In some cases, especially at the start of the excavation, a single burial was defined by composite numbers (e.g. 6–9); in other cases, burials and finds were described, but not

allocated a number at all. In a few cases, Wellstood interpolated finds by adding a lower-case letter suffix: for example, the very first grave excavated, on 11 May, 1922, became 1a, because for some reason Wellstood started his numbering sequence with the second grave actually excavated (in Humphreys, *Notebook*, p. 1r, g1a is numbered g1, g1 is g2, and g2 is g3; Humphreys' and Wellstood's numbering came into alignment from g10 onwards). Brash and Young (1935, appendices I–IV), however, used – without explanation – various types of suffix (lower-case letters, lower-case Roman numerals and, in one case, a subscript number). In some cases these seem simply to discriminate a mandible from its skull (e.g. 50i/50, 147i/147, 178i/178), but in other cases they represent separate individuals (definitely F1, 6a, 56i and 56 ii; probably 50ii: *ibid.*, 380). Yet other cases are quite ambiguous: mandible 2 was listed as female (Brash and Young 1935, appendix IV), skull and mandible 2a and mandible 3 as male (*ibid.*, appendices I and III; Humphreys *et al.* 1923, 111, listed 2 as male), yet Wellstood's g2 and g3 were cremations and Brash and Young studied only inhumations. The confusion cannot be explained by the difference between Wellstood's and Humphreys' numbering for these early graves, and is further confounded by a later entry in Humphreys, *Notebook*, which lists the skull and mandible from g1a as 'No. 2 B A'!

Constructing the new catalogue: structure, data criteria and conventions

The catalogue of pre-1971 burials and finds (<BidfordAScemetery_pre-1971catalogue.docx>) presents the material according to year of discovery, separating entries into six sections: section 1 for pre-1921; section 2 for 1921; sections 3–5 for 1922–23 and section 6 for post-1923.

As far as possible, the burial and find numbers for 1921–23 are those used by Wellstood, *Record* and Brash and Young (1935), that is upper-case letters for 1921 and arabic numerals for 1922–23. Wherever Wellstood or Brash and Young used a suffix to designate a second burial, body or find, it has been rendered here as a lower-case letter (e.g. g1a, gFa), regardless of the original format (see above). Burials or finds which can be identified in the sources and/or from extant artefacts, but were not given a number by Wellstood, have been given one based on the immediately preceding grave/find number plus an upper-case letter suffix: for example, three fragmentary urns found near g208 are given the numbers 208A, 208B and 208C, while the spot find of a 17th-century bell is 208D; two fragmentary cremation urns stored together as g41 become 41A and 41B. Numbers in square brackets are spot finds from 1922–23 of non-Anglo-Saxon or uncertain date. The graves found before 1921–23 and in 1949 have been allocated simple numbers prefaced with their year of discovery.

Information on the graves and skeletons is drawn from the published sources and also especially from Wellstood, *Record*, but these are referenced only if specifically additional or alternative evidence is involved. Grave orientation is taken from Wellstood, *Final Plan*.

The 1921–23 grave goods are identified by their SBT registration number, with the laboratory numbers used in 2003–4 given only where those are the sole form of identification. A few of the pots retain yet older numbers, but since several of these are the same (viz. 1921–25), they have little value.

Lower-case Roman numerals have been assigned to unstratified and disassociated finds. Prefixes distinguish objects in the Winnington Ingram collection (WI) from those in SBT, with the latter further distinguished by year of discovery. Find numbers for 1921 objects are those in use at SBT. Subsidiary letters are authorial.

The find descriptions are based, wherever possible, on first-hand examination, but references are given to some secondary publications that have featured the Bidford material, in particular for the pottery. Pottery stamps are identified by their current Briscoe (n.d.) classification; bead types and numbers of beads which are underlined have been taken from Brugmann 2004, Table 11.

For a detailed explanation of the categorisation and coding used in the spreadsheets, see the associated metadata file.

Bibliography for the Introduction and Pre-1971 Catalogue

Unpublished Sources in The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon Avon

Humphreys, *Notebook*. 'Notes on the excavations at Bidford on Avon Warwickshire, Anglo Saxon remains, by John Humphreys, May 1922', SBT DR 410/4, no date

Wellstood, *Record*. 'A record of the excavations carried out on the site of the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Bidford-on-Avon Warwickshire in 1922–1923 by John Humphreys, J. W. Ryland, F. C. Wellstood, E.A.B. Barnard, Thomas G. Barnett, compiled by F. C. Wellstood', SBT DR410/1, no date

Wellstood, *Final Plan*. 'Plan of the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire, excavated during the summers of 1922 and 1923, surveyed by Frederick C. Wellstood, F.S.A.', SBT DR410/15, no date

Published Sources

Baldwin Brown, G. 1915. *The Arts in Early England*, Vols. 3–4 (London: John Murray)

Bayliss, A., Hines, J., Høilund Nielsen, K., McCormac, G. and Scull, C. 2013. *Anglo-Saxon Graves and Grave-goods of the 6th and 7th Centuries AD: a Chronological Framework* (Society for Medieval Archaeology: London)

Brash, J. C. and Young, M. 1935. 'The Bidford-on-Avon skulls', in J. C. Brash, D. Layard and M. Young, 'The Anglo-Saxon skulls from Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire and Burwell, Cambridgeshire, with a comparison of their principal characters and those of the Anglo-Saxon skulls in London museums', *Biometrika* 27, 373–87 and pls. I–IV

Briscoe, D. n.d. *Archive of Anglo-Saxon Pottery Stamps*,
<<http://www.aasps.org.uk/Classification.html>> (accessed Jan 2014)

Brugmann, B. 2004. *Glass Beads from Anglo-Saxon Graves*, Archaeology Data Service, doi:10.5284/1000232 <<https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archsearch/record?titleId=967783>> (accessed Mar 2021)

- Cook, J. M. 2004. *Early Anglo-Saxon Buckets*, ed. by B. Brugmann, Oxford University School of Archaeology Monograph 60 (Oxford: Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford)
- Dickinson, T. M. 1976. 'The Early Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries of the Upper Thames Region, and their bearing on the History of Wessex, AD 400–700', unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford
- Dickinson, T. M. and Härke, H. 1992. *Early Anglo-Saxon Shields*, *Archaeologia* 112 (London: Society of Antiquaries of London)
- Dickinson, T. M. 2005. 'Symbols of protection: the significance of animal-ornamented shields in Early Anglo-Saxon England', *Medieval Archaeology* 49, 109–164
- Evison, V. I. 1965. *The Fifth-century Invasions South of the Thames* (London: The Athlone Press)
- French, K.M. 2014. 'Interspecies cremations in a pagan world: from worldview to local practice', unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, New York University, NY
- Härke, H. 1992. *Angelsächsische Waffengräber des 5. bis 7. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne: Dr Rudolf Habelt)
- Hines, J. 1993. *Clasps Hektespenner Agraffen* (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien)
- Hines, J. 1997. *A New Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Great Square-headed Brooches* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press)
- Hirst, S. and Dickinson, T. 2021. 'The archaeology of Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire: rescue excavations 1970–1994', *Transactions Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society*, 123, 1–211
- Humphreys, J. 1923. 'Excavations of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire, in 1922 and 1923: Part I, The work in 1922', *Transactions Birmingham Archaeological Society*, 49, 16–25
- Humphreys, J. 1924. 'Excavations of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire, in 1922 and 1923: Part II, The work in 1923', *Transactions Birmingham Archaeological Society*, 50, 32–5
- Humphreys, J., Ryland, J. W., Barnard, E. A. B., Wellstood, F. C. and Barnett, T. G. 1923. 'An Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire', *Archaeologia* 73, 89–116
- Humphreys, J., Ryland, J. W., Wellstood, F. C., Barnard, E. A. B., and Barnett, T. G. 1925. 'An Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire: second report on the excavations', *Archaeologia* 74, 271–88
- Leeds, E. T. 1912. 'The distribution of the Anglo-Saxon saucer brooch in relation to the Battle of Bedford, AD 571', *Archaeologia* 63, 159–202
- Marzinzik, S. 2003. *Early Anglo-Saxon Belt Buckles (late 5th to early 8th centuries A.D.): their Classification and Context*, BAR British Series, 357 (Oxford: Hadrian Books Ltd)

Myres, J. N. L. 1977. *A Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Pottery of the Pagan Period* (Cambridge: CUP)

Penn, K. and Brugmann, B. 2007. *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Inhumation Burial: Morning Thorpe, Spong Hill, Bergh Apton and Westgarth Gardens*, East Anglian Archaeology, 119 (Gressenhall: Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service)

Ross, S. 1991. 'Dress Pins from Anglo-Saxon England: their Production and Typo-chronological Development', unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford

Smith, R. 1901. 'Anglo-Saxon remains', in J. W. Willis-Bund and H. A. Doubleday, *The Victoria History of the County of Worcester*, Vol. 1, 223–33 (London : Archibald Constable)

Speake, G. 1980. *Anglo-Saxon Animal Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)