Bronze Age swords of the Ballintober type found at Mixnams Pit, Thorpe, Surrey

In 1964 the writer was shown a bronze sword which had been recovered some years previously from the gravel workings at Mixnams Pit at an approximate location of TQ 040 696. The sword was part of a miscellany of objects including a group VI polished stone axe, a large spearhead of the leaf-shaped basal looped type, the lower stone of a Lower Greensand rotary quern, an elephas primigenius tusk and a small collection of Roman sherds which had been recovered at various times by the Surrey Sand and Gravel Company during their exploitation of the gravel deposit. The finds were retained by Mr and Mrs P Ottaway to whom the writer is indebted for their kind invitation to examine them.

The sword is 46.8 cm long and measures 3.3 cm at its widest point (fig 2:1). Sometime during its recent history it appears to have been chemically cleaned. When examined all patina had apparently been removed and the sword had assumed a dull brass-like appearance. When found the extreme tip of the sword was upturned by damage in antiquity. The tip had since been fractured in two places and skilfully repaired. The cross section of the sword is lozenge shaped with rounded mid section. A slight step parallel to the edge may be traced along the upper portion of the blade. A weak arris can be traced along the hilt and tang of the weapon. The hilt tang is perforated by four rivet holes.

The Ballintober sword together with those from Lambeth and Chelsea are the type-objects upon which the classification of British hilt tang swords is currently based (Burgess 1974, 205–7, 318 ff). The large concentration of hilt tang swords in the Thames valley and in northern Ireland (Burgess 1968 11 fig 7) seems to be generally accepted as a local response to early Urnfield contact (Burgess 1974, 205–7). Various features of the Thorpe sword make it an incipient member of the Ballintober class. The arris on the hilt, the stepped blade, the leaf-shaped outline and the V shaped hilt are all notably weak. These features suggest that the Thorpe piece may belong to a typologically early stage of British hilt tang sword production. It may have been in contemporary use with Urnfield swords of the Rixheim Monza type which seem to have influenced British sword production in the 11th century BC (Burgess 1974, 318).

The Thorpe sword may be added to a growing number of finds of Bronze Age metalwork which are now known to have been dispersed over the years from Mixnams Pit. These finds comprise the large leaf-shaped basal looped spearhead, now lost, a second sword of the Ballintober class (CM: 0.6/c), a shield of the Nipperweise type (Needham 1979) and possibly a rapier, a side-looped spearhead and a basal-looped spearhead which are now in the Picton Museum, Ontario (Needham 1977). It is not known whether any of these objects were associated in any other way than perhaps their mode of deposition. There seems little doubt that the Nipperweise shield was recovered from the grey silt of a buried channel and it is not improbable that the other Bronze Age finds were recovered on the various occasions when the meandering course of this channel was encountered by the gravel extractor. The current course of the Thames at Penton Hook still assumes a classic oxbow pattern and it may not be unreasonable to suggest that the items were deposited along the bed of the active river in

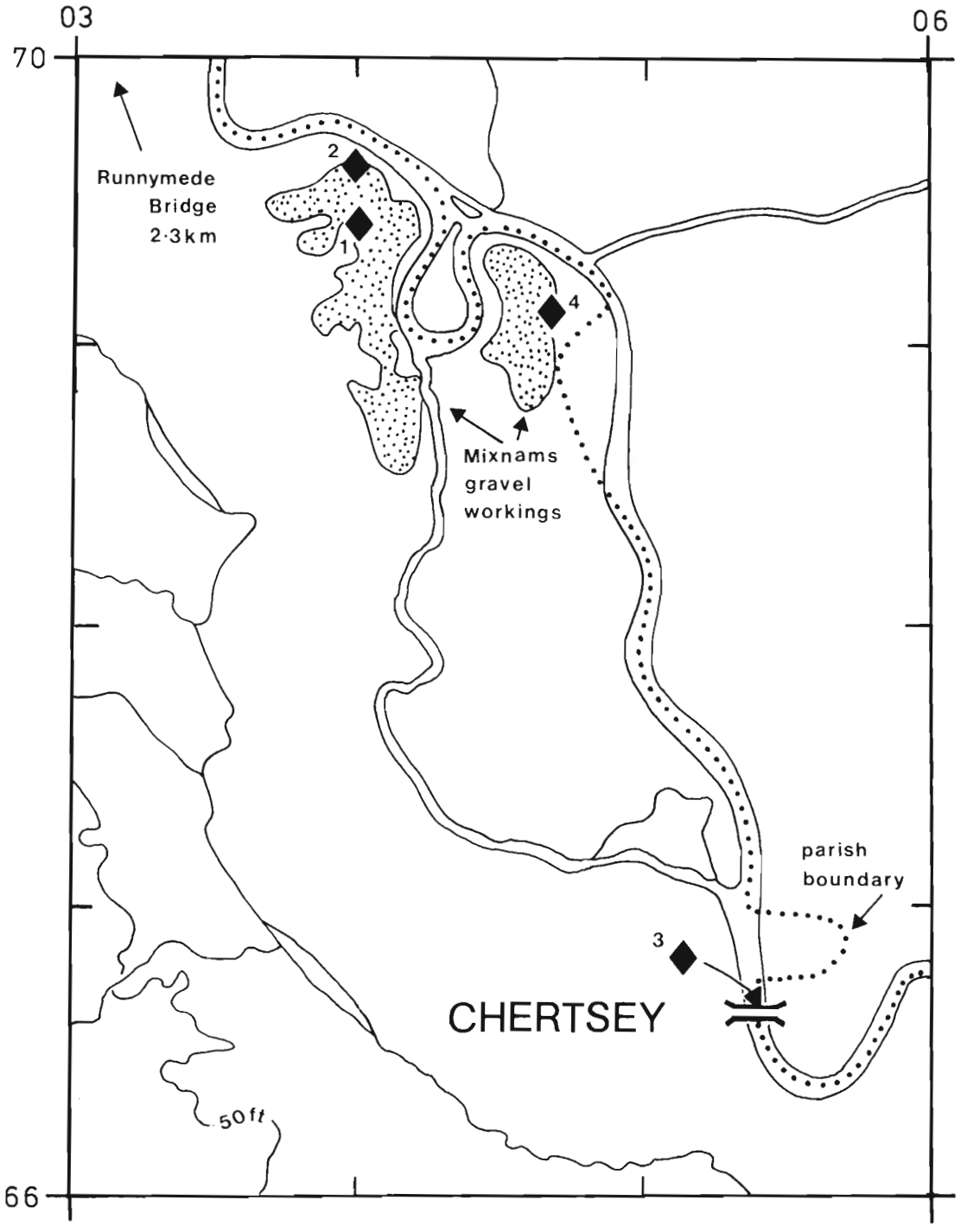

Fig 1 Sword finds from the Thames gravels in the Chertsey area.

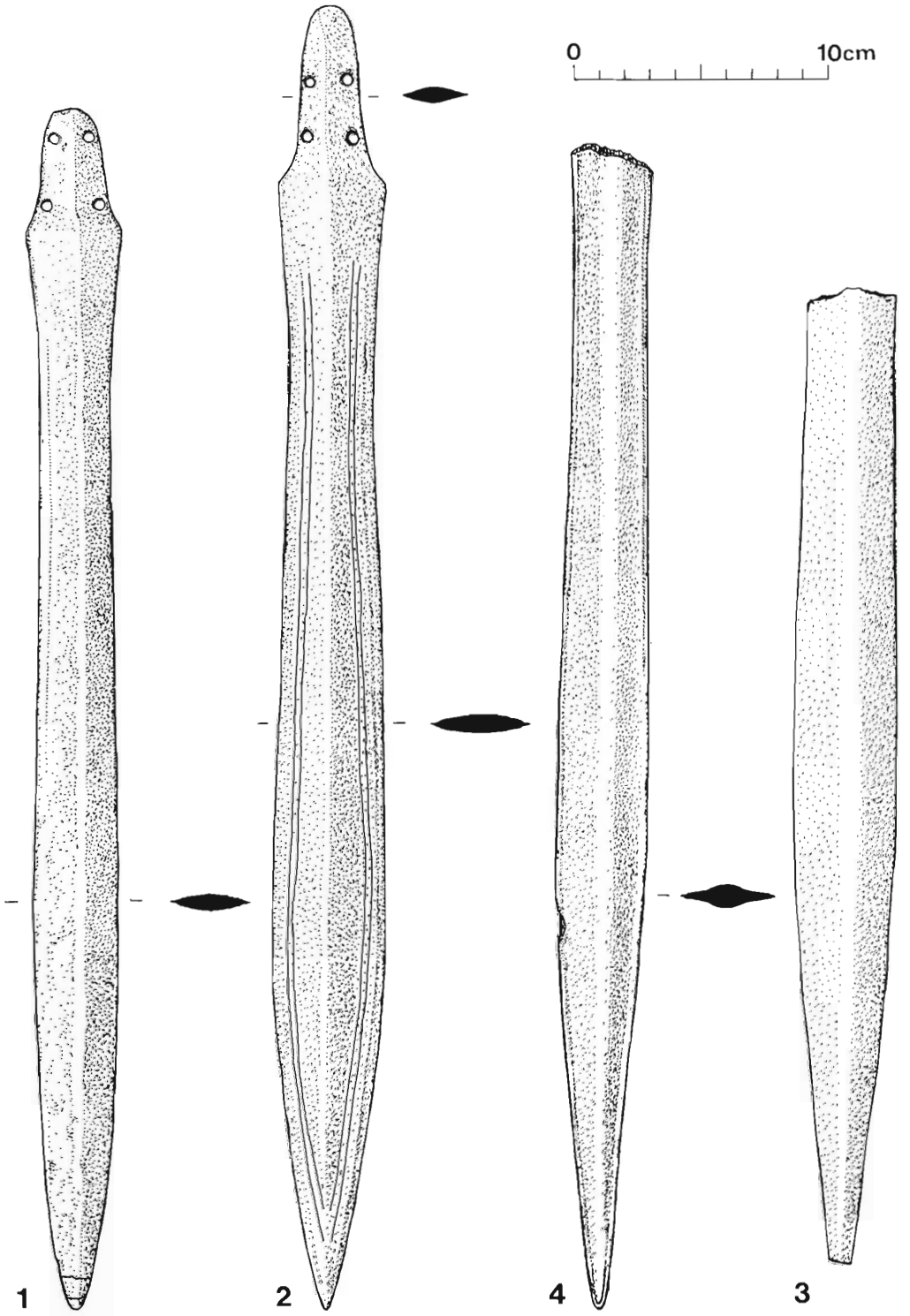

Fig 2 Swords from the Mixnams area.
1,2 & 4 Gravel workings at Mixnams.
3 The Thames at Chertsey Bridge.

Bronze Age times. Later changes in the course of the mature river are indicated by the parish boundary (fig 1).

The votive implications for the high percentage of Middle and Late Bronze Age weapons from 'wet provenances' such as the Fenland edges and the Thames at London (Trump 1968, 216, 221–2) provide an attractive explanation of the Thorpe finds. The Gardner collection found 5.8 km SE of Mixnams in the bed of the river Wey at Weybridge and the "dozens of bronze weapons" said to have been found near it are an appropriate example of a local Middle Bronze Age riverine votive deposit (Gardner 1911, 49–50, pl V). As Needham observes, the users of the Nipperweise shields appear to have been particularly attracted towards depositing their possessions in riverine environments and it is interesting to note that the only two British find spots are confined to middle reaches of the Thames (Needham 1979, 127–8). An inventory of rapiers and Ballintober swords (Trump 1962, 95–102) also reveals a notable number of finds from the middle reaches below Taplow. The question of votive deposition versus casual loss of riverbed bronzes in this part of the Thames has recently been revived by Longley and Needham. In their interim account of the Late Bronze Age riverside settlement at Runnymede Bridge the possibility of an entrepôt market for river-borne goods has been considered (Longley and Needham 1979). The Mixnams swords together with further Bronze Age finds recorded from the flood plain gravel by Longley (1976) may belong to an early phase of the hinterland activities which have been postulated for this site.

There are three other finds from Mixnams and its neighbourhood which bring the total number of swords from this area of the Thames flood plain to four. The second sword (CM: 0.6/c) (fig 2:2) was found in the vicinity of the Nipperweise shield at Mixnams Pit (TQ 040 695) during the 1960s and is a further example of the Ballintober type. This sword is 50.7 cm in length and shows a hilt tang which is perforated by four rivet holes. The hilt tang and blade display a well marked arris. The blade of the weapon is marked by a pair of parallel grooves which follow each edge of the blade and terminate before reaching the hilt. The leaf-shaped outline of the blade is more pronounced than that of the sword under discussion and the general appearance is that of a typologically improved weapon. A third sword (GMAG: 2299A) (fig 2:3) also found in the bed of the Thames has been recovered 2.5 km south of Mixnams at Chertsey Bridge TQ 054 666 (Phillips 1967, 64). It comprises the lower part of a leaf-shaped blade which resembles the first find from Mixnams. The illustration has been prepared from a photograph in Chertsey Museum.

Finally a similar portion of a leaf-shaped bronze sword (CM: D.215) (fig 2:4) has been recovered prior to 1971 in the Mixnams gravelworking at TQ 0473 6918. This example too seems likely to have been deposited in the former bed of the Thames.

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The accession numbers of finds housed in Chertsey Museum are prefixed CM. The accession number for the Chertsey Bridge sword is prefixed GMAG for the Guernsey Museum and Art Gallery (Lukis Collection).

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