

# An Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Blackhorse Road, Letchworth, Hertfordshire.

JOHN MOSS—ECCARDT

## SUMMARY

*Industrial development and subsequent rescue excavation produced a small Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Blackhorse Road, Letchworth, between 1958 and 1966. The finds, though few may be suggested as seventh century, a date which their paucity would help to substantiate. A distinctive burial with a spearhead embedded in the chest is discussed in detail, including a pathological report on the probable cause of death.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the course of industrial development and rescue excavations for Letchworth Museum and the then Ministry of Public Building and Works (now the Department of the Environment) at Blackhorse Road, Letchworth, during the years 1958-1966, nine human skeletons of probable Saxon date were discovered. The varying circumstances of discovery have led to incomplete information being available for this report.

Blackhorse Road is situated about one mile east of the centre of Letchworth (TL 233336). The centre of the site is a slight rise at 285ft (87m) above Ordnance Datum, which slopes to the south, east and west, with the traditional line of the Icknield Way to the south, now obstructed by factory buildings (fig 1). The plough soil gives way to solid chalk almost at once, with a depth seldom more than 12 in (305mm). The area from which the skeletons came is occupied by extensive archaeological features of the Neolithic, Iron Age and Roman periods. Graves I, II, III and IV were on the hill-top, while V - IX were roughly aligned to the south in the vicinity of the Icknield Way, (fig 1).

## THE BURIALS

*S I* Found by workmen during kerb-stone trench digging. The skeleton was extended on its back in a grave cut into the chalk lying ENE by WSW, with the head to the west and arms lying naturally by its sides. Grave 4ft 9in (1.477m) long, 2ft 6in (762

mm) wide, 2ft (610mm) deep, with rounded ends and the bones of the feet against the eastern end. Comparison of the grave's dimensions and the estimated stature of the individual, 5ft 7in (1.7mm), explains why the bones appear to be crammed into the hole. Fragments of an iron pin lay near the left ribs and animal bones high up in the grave fill.

*S II* 9in (228mm) distant from *S I*, destroyed by mechanical equipment. Skeleton at 16in (407mm) down, minus skull, lay extended on its back with the right hand resting on the right side of the pelvis, orientated WSW by ENE, head presumably at west. Small knife (fig 2.2) lay touching left pelvis and a fragment of eroded samian ware lay beneath the bones of the right foot.

*S III* Skeleton extended on its back, orientated WSW by ENE, head at western end and feet close to solid chalk wall. Grave round-ended, 6ft 10in (2.083m) long, 2ft 10in (863mm) wide, 1ft 7in (582mm) deep. No associated finds.

*S IV* Infant burial in drainage trench. Skeleton extended on back, left hand on left pelvis, right hand by right side, orientated WSW by ENE, head at western end. Grave 3ft (0.914m) long, 1ft 6in (457mm) wide, 2ft 8in (813mm) deep. Small iron knife (fig 2.3) on left pelvis with point touching upper part of femur.

*S V* Grave in builder's trench. Skeleton, extended on its back, with left arm at side and right arm bent with hand against pelvis; cranium and mandible were resting on vertebral column; right side of rib cage was higher up the grave than the left. Grave orientated WSW by ENE, 6ft (1.829m) long, 2ft (609mm) wide, 1ft 6in (457mm) deep. Fragment of Iron Age pottery on bottom of grave.

*S VI* Grave found at northern margin of Neolithic pit. Skeleton, extended, lying on its back, arms bent at elbows and hand resting on pelvis. Orientated

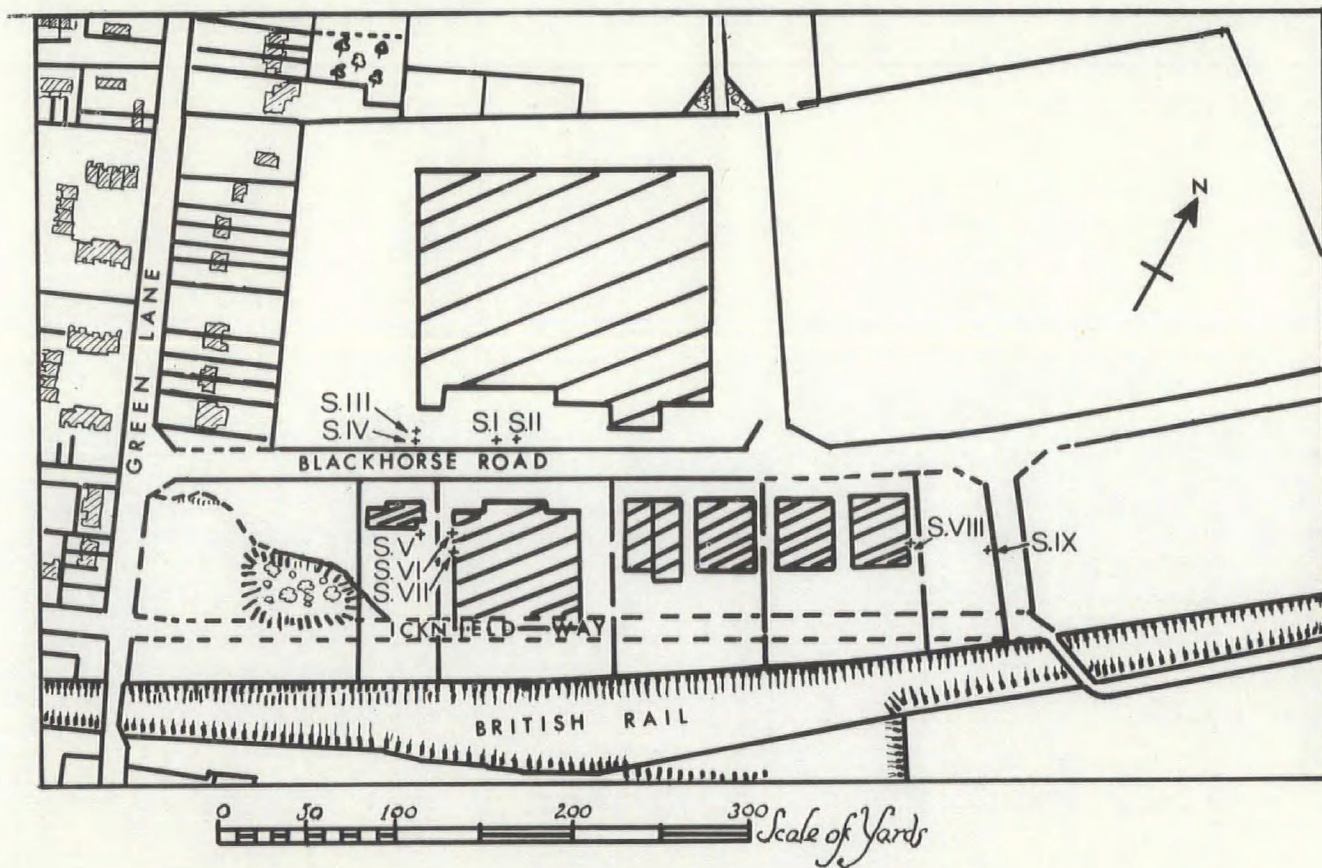


Fig 1 Blackhorse Road, Letchworth : site and location of burials.



WSW by ENE, head at western end, turned to the right; skull against rounded end of grave, foot bones well clear of eastern end of grave. Grave 7ft 3in (2.209m) long, 2ft (609mm) wide, 1ft 9in (533mm) deep. An iron spearhead (fig 2.1) lay just inside the chest cavity with its point downwards; this weapon appears to have been the cause of death (pl 1).

*S VII* Grave dug into Iron Age storage pit. Skeleton, extended, lying on its back, arms well clear of the sides, orientated WSW by ENE, head at western end. Grave 6ft 6in (1.981m) long, 2ft 6in (762mm) wide, 2ft (609mm) deep. Iron knife in crook of left arm. (pl 2)

*S VIII* Skeleton in builder's trench, no sign of grave. Skeleton, extended but with bones twisted so that right hand and wrist lay under the pelvis, left arm and leg missing. Orientated N by S, head to north facing east. No associated finds.

*SIX* Skeleton in shallow grave just outside Romano-British enclosure ditch. Bones in some disorder; knees bent, ankles crossed, arms cross with left hand on pelvis and right hand on left shoulder. Orientation N by S, with head to north facing east. No associated finds.

*SX* Part of cranium, given to Letchworth Museum, alleged to be from Blackhorse Road site, but it has not been possible to question the finder.

#### SKELETAL REMAINS

by D.R. Brothwell and C.B. Denston, respectively British Museum (National History) and Duckworth Laboratory, University of Cambridge.

*S I* Bones present: cranium without mandible, right half of pelvis, two femora, left tibia, left fibula. Condition of skull good, although there is some surface erosion.

Sex: male.

Age at death: middle age.

Stature: 5ft 7in (1.727m).

Dentition:

X X        / /    / /    / X X

8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

/ - tooth loss, socket present.

X - tooth loss ante-mortem.

Caries: none.

Abscesses: none.

Periodontal disease: none.

*S II* Duckworth Laboratory no. Eu. 1. 2. 413. Bones present: two femora, one tibia, one humerus, one radius, one clavicle, one scapula, two iliae of innominate bones, two phalanges, sixteen vertebrae. Sex: indeterminate.

Age at death: 12 years.

*S III* Duckworth Laboratory no. Eu. 1. 2. 414. Bones present: cranium, two femora, two fibula, two tibiae, two petallae, one innominate bone, three vertebrae, some foot bones.

Sex: male.

Age at death: approximately 50 years.

Stature: 5ft 7.5in (1.074m).

Dentition:

loss post-mortem: four incisors, second left pre-molar.

Loss ante-mortem: four molars.

Caries: none.

Periodontal disease: slight resorption of the alveolar border of the maxilla. Tooth rotation from the normal had taken place in six teeth.

Torus palatinus: slight degree.

General Pathology:

Disease: possible arthritis shown by lipping at rim of the bodies of twelfth thoracic, first and second lumbar vertebrae.

Other changes: three vascular grooves on the left tibia were noted.

*S IV* Duckworth Laboratory no. Eu. 1. 2. 415. Bones present: fragmentary cranium, portions of a femur, one humerus, one innominate bone, two clavicles.

Sex: indeterminate.

Age at death: 5 - 6 years.

Dentition: all deciduous teeth present at death.

Loss post-mortem: seven.

Caries: none.

*S V* Duckworth Laboratory no. Eu. 1. 2. 416. Bones present: a fragmentary cranium, a well-preserved mandible, remains of two femora, two tibiae, two humeri, two fibulae, two radii, two ulnae, two clavicles, two innominate bones, fragments of post cranial remains.

Sex: female.

Age at death: approximately 45 - 40 years.

Stature: 5ft 3in (1.613m) (?)

Dentition: loss ante-mortem of upper left third molar; loss post-mortem of upper left incisor.

Caries: a cavity on the mesial aspect of the neck of the crown of third molar of the mandible.



Periodontal disease: signs along alveolar borders of the maxilla and mandible, most evident in region of the lower molars. Tar-tar present on some teeth. Tooth rotation from normal and overbite when occluded.

General Pathology:

Disease: possible arthritis. Medium degrees of osteophylitic growth around the body of the sacrum, at the inferior border of the fifth lumbar vertebra, the fifth and sixth cervical vertebrae, and, to a lesser degree, one thoracic, possibly the third. Rest of the vertebrae were eroded post-mortem.

*S VI* Duckworth Laboratory no. Eu. 1. 2. 406  
Bones present: near complete skeleton, cranium fragmentary and distorted due to post-mortem earth pressure.

Sex: male.

Age at death: approximately 20 - 25 years.

Stature: 6ft 2-75in (1-885m).

Dentition: loss post-mortem of lower left third molar.

Attrition: very slight of the occlusal surfaces, first molars most worn.

Caries: possible cavity on the occlusal surface of lower right third molar.

Periodontal disease: slight degree along alveolar borders of the maxilla and mandible, especially in the lower molars. Overbite when occluded.

General Pathology:

Parietal notch bone: left. .

Osteoporosis: superior surface of left orbit, degree of pitting only slight.

Dr J.R.B. Williams, Consultant Pathologist, the Lister Hospital, Hitchin, provides the following observations on the probable cause of death:

It looks as if the point of the instrument lies in the right axilla, or just inside the chest cavity. Providing that this is so, the stab wound should have entered the pleura, possibly penetrated the lung, and in all probability divided the subclavian artery or vein. The posterior surface of this instrument would probably have involved the brachial plexus. Death would result from this injury and be due to haemorrhage from the divided vessels, or from collapse of the lung following entry of air. After experimenting a little it seems likely that this was a left-handed down stroke into the right side of the neck, possibly originally intended to enter the spine and, in fact, being misplaced slightly to the right. If the spear handle was short it would be easy to do this from a standing position but otherwise the subject would have to be leaning forward or lying prone.

*S VII* Duckworth Laboratory no. Eu. 1. 2. 407  
Bones present: near-complete skeleton.

Sex: male.

Age at death: approximately 30 - 35 years. Some conflict between the degree of sutural closure of the ecto-cranium suggests an age of 45 - 50 years, as does pubic symphysis, and the degree of attrition of the occlusal surfaces of the teeth which suggest 25 - 35 years. Some slight lipping on the borders of the bodies of the vertebrae and sacrum are in favour of the minimum age of 35 years.

Stature: approximately 5ft 5-25in (1-758m).

Dentition: loss ante-mortem: two upper second molars.

Caries: cavities in the distal aspect of the crown of the upper second left molar, and in the mesial aspect of the crown of the upper third right molar.

Abscesses: in the maxilla where missing molars had been. Loss of bone caused perforations on buccal and lingual surfaces.

Periodontal disease: slight to medium degree of resorption of the alveolar borders, especially in the region of the upper molars.

Calculus: slight to medium degrees.

Overjet bite when occluded.

Parietal notch bones: unilateral, left side.

Torus palatinus: slight.

Tori mandibulares: bilateral, slight.

Disease: arthritis possibly indicated by very slight lipping along borders of the bodies of the sixth thoracic down to the fifth lumbar vertebrae, and the body of the sacrum.

*S VIII* Duckworth Laboratory no. Eu. 1. 2. 425.  
Bones present: a fragmentary cranium, a well-preserved mandible, fragmentary post-cranial remains.

Sex: male.

Age at death: 20 - 30 years.

Stature: approximately 5ft 7-5in (1-740m).

Dentition: loss post-mortem of upper first left molar.

Caries: none.

Abscesses: none.

Periodontal disease: none.

Calculus: slight.

General Pathology: marked degrees of platymeria and platycnemia featured on femur and tibia.

*S IX* Duckworth Laboratory no. Eu. 1. 2. 428.  
Fragmentary remains: cranium and mandible.

Sex: female.

Age at death: 40 - 45 years.

Stature: 5ft 8in (1-726m).

Dentition: loss ante-mortem: four molars.



Caries: neck caries in five maxillary molars. Periodontal disease: medium degree, resorption of alveolar borders.

*S X* Letchworth Museum.

Bones present: facial area of cranium and part of a mandible.

Sex: male.

Age at death: 25 - 35 years, mid-range possible age. Dentition: loss ante-mortem: upper right second and third molars.

Abscesses: sockets of second and third right molars, Socket of third left molar. Overbite when occluded.

The bones were mainly in a good state of preservation, although some of them had been eroded due to the nature of the soil in which they were buried. One cranium was grossly distorted through post-mortem earth pressure. The remains represented three males, one female and two immature individuals.

The statures of the adults were reconstructed by use of the tables based on the multiple regression formulae for whites of Trotter and Glesser (1952). These are :-

males : 5ft 7.5 in. (1.740m)

5ft 9.25in. (1.758m)

6ft 2.25in. (1.885m)

females : 5ft 3.5 in. (1.613m)

A recalculation of the means of 1066 long bones of male Anglo-Saxons measured by Munter (1936) made by J.C. Trevor, using the Trotter and Glesser formulae, gives a mean figure of 5ft 8.25in (1.732 m). It can be seen from this that two of these individuals were 1in and 6in taller and on 0.75 in shorter.

The measurements of the limb and skull bones were taken according to the techniques of Buxton and Morant (1933), Morant (1936) and Mukherjee, Rao and Trevor (1955 & 1948-50). The indices of the maximum glabello-occipital length and maximum biparietal breadth of the two male crania which could be measured were 78.4 and 75.5, the latter being about average and the former above average for Anglo-Saxon populations. All the femora of the adults exhibited excessive antero-posterior flattening in the region of the shaft just below the greater trochanter, a condition known as platymeria.

From what could be recorded it would seem that the dental health of these individuals was fairly good. Caries occurred in one tooth in each of two dentitions, in two teeth of a third and one in two others; in only one case was the carious cavity

large. Abscesses were noted in one upper dentition only and was a rather bad case, while varying degrees of periodontal disease were evident along alveolar borders of the dentition of four of the adults.

Lipping of the borders of the vertebral bodies of three individuals occurred, two to a slight degree, and one to a medium extent; the possible cause was osteo-arthritis.

The standard biometric measurements and fuller technical information is available for study in the archives of the Duckworth Laboratory of Physical Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

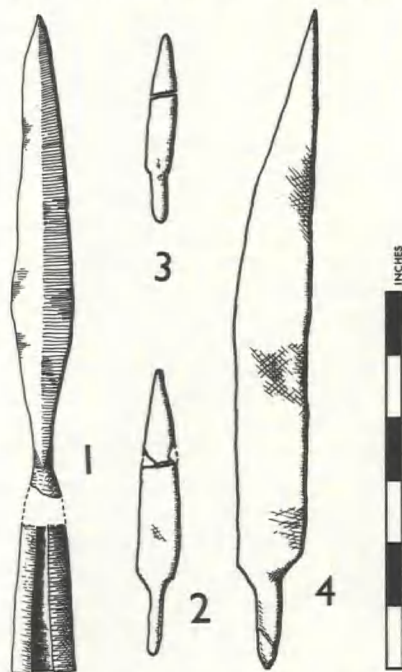


Fig 2 Blackhorse Road, Letchworth: Anglo-Saxon iron objects.

### METALWORK

1. (fig 2.1) Iron spearhead, found lodged in the chest of S VI; split socket type, with wood in the socket (not identifiable). Length 10.5in (267mm), maximum width 1in (25mm). This spearhead may be assigned to the type illustrated by Wheeler (1935, pl 12. 6, 7, 8) as being of the middle and late Saxon periods.

2. (fig 2.2) Iron knife, found on the pelvis of S II. Length 4.5in (114mm), width 0.4in (10mm).

3. (fig 2.3) Iron knife, found on pelvis of S IV. Length 3in (76mm) width 0.9in (22mm). Such

knives are common in burials of the Anglo-Saxon and many examples occur on the Icknield Way, as for example at Luton (Austin, 1928, pl 35, 1-13), Puddlehill with the remains of an iron ring, probably the means of its suspension from the belt (Matthews, 1962b, 48), and Marina Drive (Matthews, 1962a).

4. (fig 2.4) Iron knife or scramasax, found with S VII. Length 10.5in (267mm), width 1.1in (28mm). This larger knife, or scramasax, appears to fall within the group Wheeler (1935, fig. 48) calls type II. Such knives, possibly Scandinavian in origin, are common on the Icknield Way; they have been found in the cemeteries near Dunstable, and may be dated to the sixth and seventh centuries.

## DISCUSSION

The site plan (fig 1) shows that burials I-VII form a group, separated by a considerable distance from burials VIII and IX. The former are all orientated WSW by ENE, with heads to the west, while the latter are laid N by S. The main group are skeletons fairly carefully disposed in chalk-cut graves. The objects of iron found with them are of frequently found types in Anglo-Saxon graves, and may be dated to the sixth and seventh centuries. Skeletons VIII and IX, on the other hand, are without dateable objects at all, and have been disposed of in a somewhat casual fashion near a fourth century ditch. The position of the bones strongly suggests that the hands and feet were tied before the bodies were placed in shallow graves.

The individuals of the main group — two middle-aged males, a middle-aged female, two mature males and two children, — do not suggest the cemetery of a large settlement, nor occupation of any length of time. Skeleton VI is of interest because of its stature and mode of burial: a substantial grave in which the body was laid with some care, suggesting that the burial is not of an outsider but one of a member of the group, slain near the site. Had this

not been so, the spear would probably have fallen from the body and not remained in situ.

The circumstances relating to this cemetery must remain unknown through lack of evidence. It is simply another Icknield Way discovery in an area where Saxon Burials are to be expected. The major excavation programme for the Department of the Environment, currently being undertaken, under the direction of Dr I.M. Stead, at near-by Baldock could well bring to light further information concerning this period and so help to place the Anglo-Saxon burials at Blackhorse Road in a wider context.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Austin W., 1928, 'A Saxon Cemetery at Luton, Beds'. *Ant J* 8, 1928, 177-192.  
Buxton L.H. and Morant G.M., 1933, *J Anthropol Inst* 63, 1933, 19-47.  
Matthews C.L., 1962a, 'The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Marina Drive, Dunstable' *Beds Arch J* 1, 1962, 25-47.  
Matthews C.L., 1962b, 'Saxon Remains on Puddlehill, Dunstable'. *Beds Arch J* 1, 1962, 48-57.  
Morant G.M., 1936 *Biometrika* 28, 1936, 84-122.  
Mukherjee R. *et al*, 1955, *The Ancient Inhabitants of Jebel Moya*.  
Munter A.H., 1936, *Biometrika* 28, 1936, 258-194.  
Trotter M. and Gleser G.C., *Amer T Phys Anthropol* 10, 1952, 463-541.  
Wheeler R.E.M., 1935, *London and the Saxons*.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to D.R. Brothwell and C.B. Denston for their help over the skeletal remains and their report on the skeletons. Dr J.R.B. Williams, was kind enough to provide a pathological report on S VI, and I am grateful for his help. The material finds from the site are in Letchworth Museum, together with the site records.

*The Bedfordshire Archaeological Council is indebted to the Department of the Environment for a grant towards the costs of this paper.*