AN ANGLO-SAXON CEMETERY AT BOURNE END, WOOBURN, BUCKS REINSTATED

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An Anglo-Saxon cemetery of seventh–eighth century date, discovered about 1905 at Bourne End but subsequently lost to the record, is described.

Introduction

The existence of a possible Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Bourne End was recorded before the second world war by the Ordnance Survey (OS Antiquity No. SU 88 NE 43) but its existence was subsequently not corroborated and pre-war Ordnance Survey records were destroyed during the same war. Owing to lack of firm evidence the site was subsequently omitted from OS period maps. Papers now in the possession of Angela and Tony Colmer show that the cemetery deserves reinstatement. They were compiled mainly during the thirties by Francis Colmer, the South Buckinghamshire writer and antiquary, and were kindly brought to the writer's attention by Angela Colmer.

The account which follows is based on two note-books of Colmer's (hereafter abbreviated *CN*) and on comments written on a painting by him (abbreviated *CP*), part of which is reproduced here as Pl. XIII. The painting is a black watercolour of iron objects from the site, with pencilled outlines indicating their reconstructed shape. One pen and three pencil drawings are on the same sheet. All sets of notes substantially overlap in content, and are not always decipherable. Francis Colmer had first hand experience of some finds which were given to him by Mr Jackson in August 1934, but prior to this were 'long preserved by Mr. Jackson' (*CN*).

In the transcription which follows indecipherable words are indicated by square brackets thus [ ], containing interpretation where relevant, unclear words by (?), and omitted text by . . .

Circumstances of Discovery

'The discovery was made, about 1905 on the site of Eghams Farm, Bourne End when digging was in progress for [ ] Jackson's mill. A number of skeletons were found in various places accompanied by weapons.' (*CP*)

'Many Saxon relics—swords, knives and other relics—were found on site of Egham's Farm and along the land now occupied by the railway line between the level crossing and Bourne End Station. Several iron objects including a bronze harness bell and a portion of a bronze band were found in 1905 at Egham's Farm where foundations were being excavated for Jacksons Mill. These represent only a small proportion of the finds then made. It is said that not far below the surface a number of skeletons were traced in various [ ] many packed closely together in no particular order and numerous weapons were found with them. The bodies were about two to three feet in the alluvial soil lying on the ballast which here reaches 8 feet or so in depth they appear to have been in an extended position but it is not clear whether there was any orientation or not. The writer was told that many of the bodies near the level crossing appeared to be in a contracted position . . .

The writer was unable (?) to see any of the human remains which had been scattered but it was said that the [ ] and skull were usually perfect.' (*CN*)

'Many weapons, iron spearheads, swords, knives etc. with some bronze objects, found on site of the railway line near level crossing Bourne

End. Many objects taken away by villagers and . . . Some found at Jacksons Mill, property of Mr. Jackson, given by Mr. Jackson to F. Colmer.' (*CN*)

The Finds

The description of the finds, which accompanies the painting and drawings, is reproduced below. Additional details provided by the notebook follow. The numbering is faint on the drawing (reproduced here as Pl. XIII) but the layout is as follows:

<div align="center">

4   7

2

1   5 8

3

6 9

</div>

The drawings of the iron objects are life size in the original illustration.

Iron Objects

C.P.
1. Spear Head with open socket − faint dorsal ridge on both sides. Keen cutting edge 21 inches in length. 2.2 ins at broadest point.
2. Sword blade with curved back − complete to end of tang . . . At point A there appears to be a [   ] band for inlay on both sides [   ] blade 11(¾?) inches.
3. Dagger with curved back 4"(?) [apparently 5½"]
4. Ditto blade 5¾" long.
5. Point of sword or dagger. It appears to have a portion of a chape of ivory or bone adhering to it, which shows traces of [   ]
6. Small knife, indentation on both sides under (?) dorsal ridge − seems to have been inlaid.
7. Head of javelin or small spear. Edged on both sides. 7" long.
8. Doubtful object. Possibly portion of handle.
9. Chisel (?) Appears to have [   ] cutting edge on one side. [   ] sharpening [   ] the end of the blade dished on one side [ ].

Additional information (*CN*)
1. A dorsal ridge is faintly visible on both sides.
2. . . . or scramasax

8. Possibly portion of handle or hanger
9. It may be a tool for sharpening a knife and was probably worn in the belt.

Copper-alloy Objects

Two finds are illustrated. One is a decorated cast bronze harness bell of well known late/post-medieval type, the other is 'part of a bronze band [   ] with 6 rows of punched dots [   ] perhaps round a spar or horn. It [   ] complete a circle about 1½" diameter?' (*CP*). The notebook states that it was in two pieces. It is almost certainly part of a thread-box (Pl. XIV).
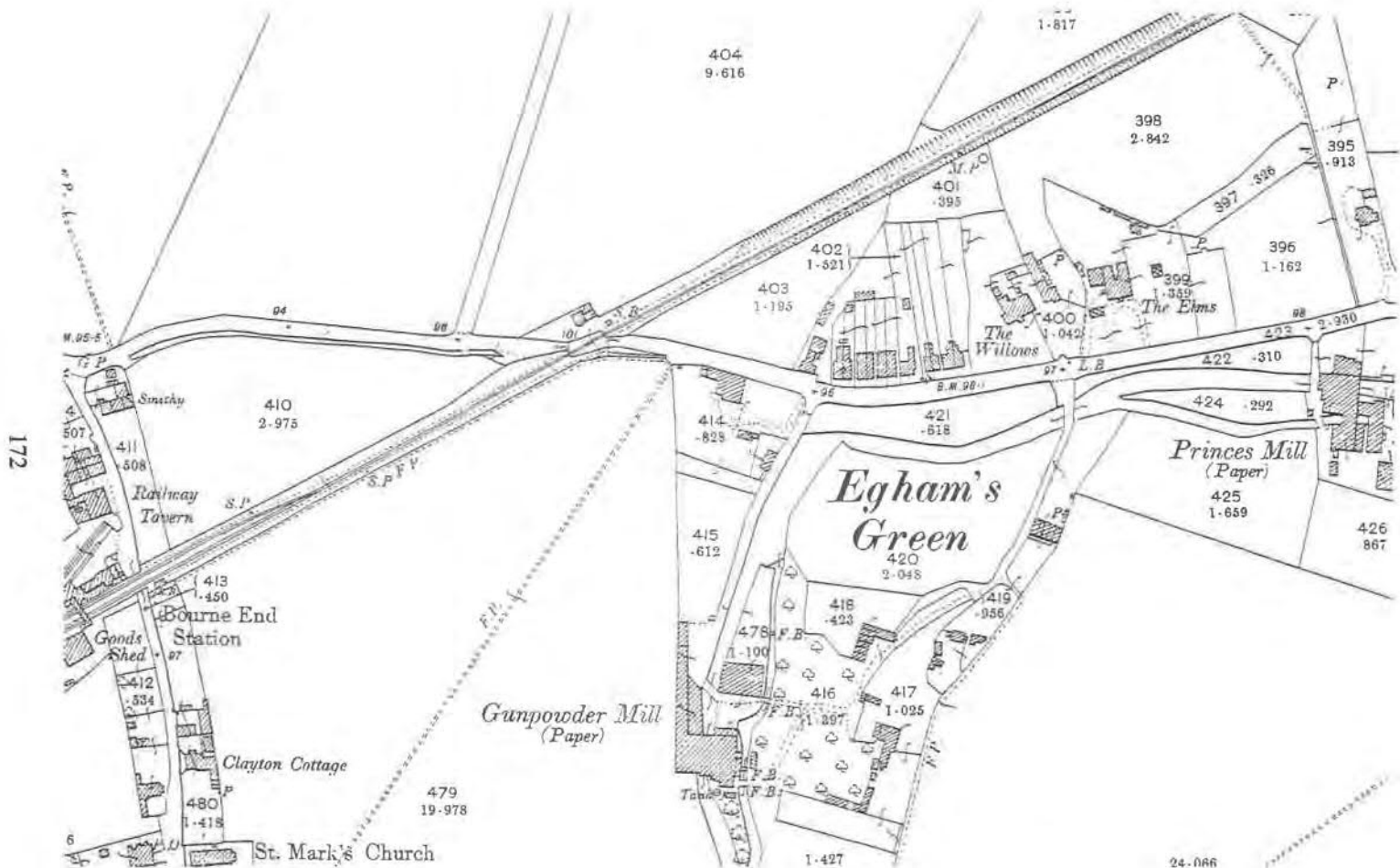
Discussion

The general area of the discovery is not in doubt, but the topographical features mentioned cover a large area. Bourne End station remains, although the railway line running NE from it no longer exists; it was closed in 1970 (Wheals 1983, 161) and has since been partly built over. The modern road from Cores End to Bourne End rises gently where it crosses the former level crossing. Egham Farm has not been certainly located but presumably merged into Mr Jackson's mill complex. The mill, which is shown on Jeffries map of 1770 as Peggs Mill, on the Enclosure Award of 1805 as Powder Mill, and later maps as Gunpowder Mill (Fig. 1), passed into the hands of John Jackson in 1867. His son F. Jackson seems to have greatly expanded the business (Wheals 1983, 71, 123, 154). Jackson's mill now remains as a few derelict buildings, largely demolished to make way for new industrial development.

Possible ground disturbances which might account for the discoveries include:

(a) Construction of the railway line. This is implied in one of Colmer's accounts. The line was constructed 1852−4 (Wheals 1983, 113), long before the earliest cited discovery date. If there was however a discovery at this time it might account for the implied distinction between objects found on Jackson's land and others presumably not on his land.

(b) Digging of foundation *for* Mr Jackson's mill and *at* Jackson's Mill. This clearly was first hand information from the mill's owner. The

Fig. 1. Part of the 1:2,500 Ordnance Survey Map revised 1897 showing Jackson's Mill (shown as Gunpowder Mill, Eghams Green, and the level crossing. The footpath is now Furlong Road.
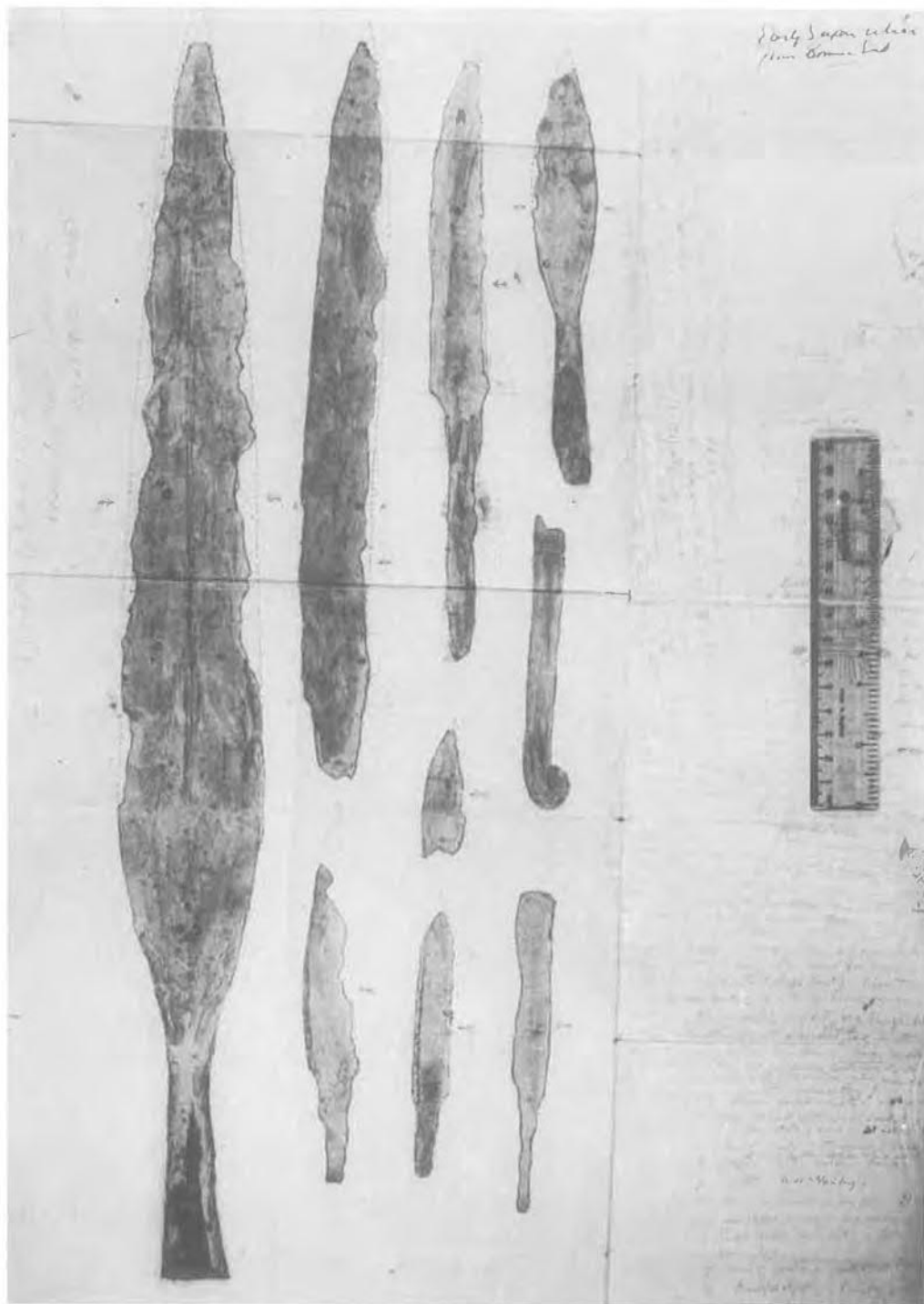
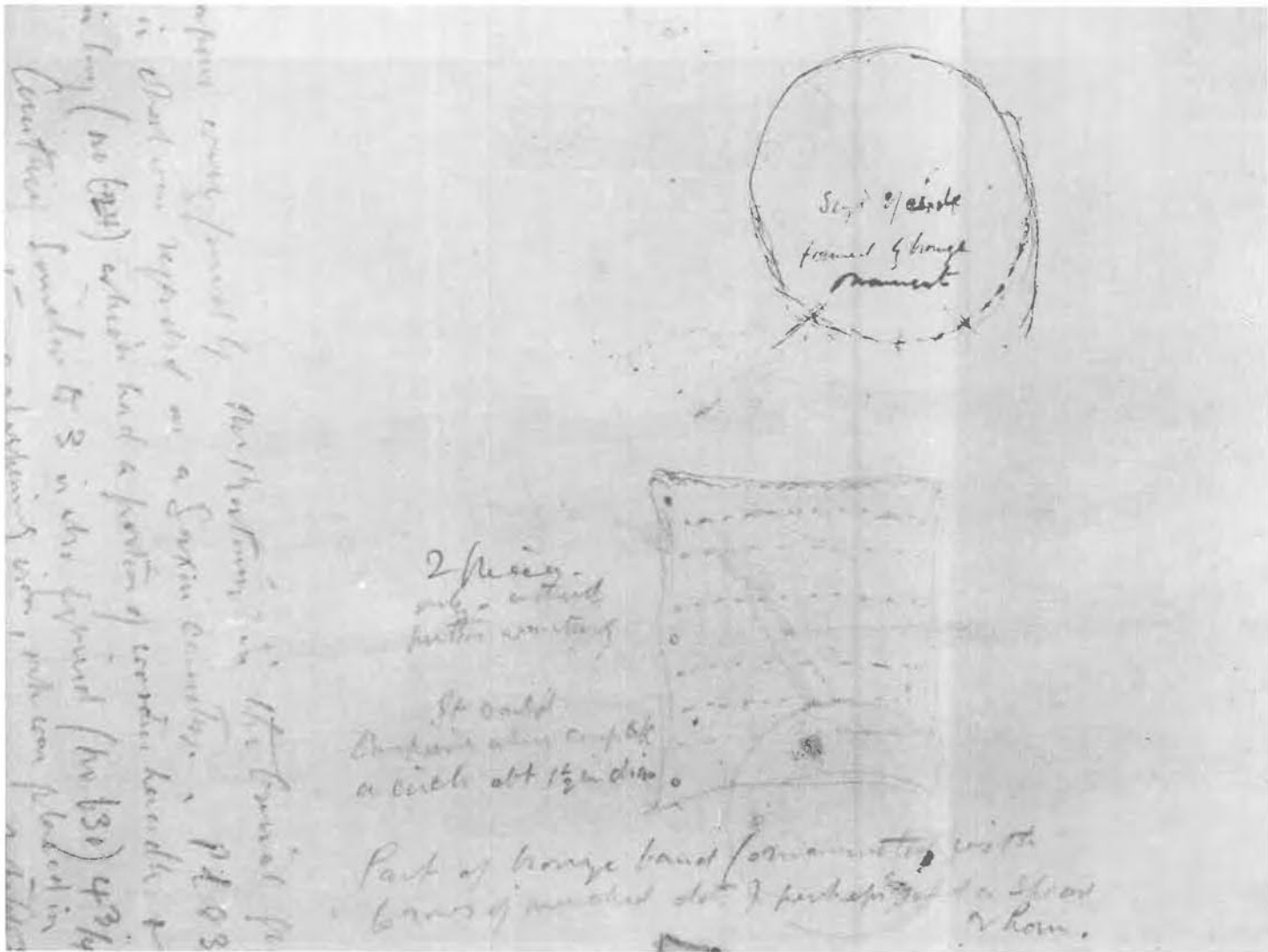Plate XIII. Finds from the Bourne End Anglo-Saxon cemetery (Colmer mss).

Plate XIV. Thread box from the Bourne End Anglo-Saxon cemetery (Colmer mss).

early twentieth century was the beginning of a phase of substantial expansion for the mill.

(c) The construction of houses on either side of Furlong Road to the west of the mill. Although not specifically mentioned, houses at the southern end of this road, on the northern side, have date plaques of 1905–6. Prior to this the road is shown as a footpath on OS maps. Discoveries during housing development would fit the general topographical clues Colmer gives, but seem less likely than the second option.

It does seem likely, despite the slight vagueness of location, that there were at least two discoveries, indicating a substantial cemetery.

The illustrations and description of the finds show that Colmer was correct in his interpretation of the cemetery as Anglo-Saxon. The iron objects which formed the principal part of the find are datable within the range sixth–eighth century AD, making it one of a distinct group of 'late' Anglo-Saxon cemeteries.

The two spearheads, nos. 1 and 7, are both broadly 'leaf-shaped', 1 having a split socket and 7 probably so, and fall into Swanton's series C group (Swanton 1973). No. 1 is of a type which emerges in the sixth century but certainly runs on into the eighth century (Evison 1978, 337; Harrold, Beds, provides a good parallel). No. 7 is a type which appears earlier but also has a long life.

No. 2, the sword blade with a curved back would now be described as a *seax*, a weapon likely to accompany the burial of a person of some status. Seax are characteristic of graves of seventh-century date in England (Meaney and Hawkes 1970, 43) but the form continues in use into the late Saxon period. The groove at the back could have held inlay; however many do not (Evison 1961, 229). The knives, nos. 3–6, again are not closely datable, although they are common enough grave goods in cemeteries of this period. No. 6 with a curved back had an 'inlay' groove, as possibly did no. 3, suggesting a relationship to the seax type although too small to be formally so included. (Professor Evison comments that an alternative explanation to

inlay might be a back joined to the blade by a zig-zag weld.) No. 9, a doubtful knife, may be one of a class of spatulate objects with rectangular-section blades whose function is uncertain (Hirst 1985, 88–9) but which appear to be characteristic of graves of the seventh century (Hawkes 1970, 44 and 1973, 199). No. 8 does not accord with any known Saxon find and may be a stray.

One of the copper-alloy objects as mentioned previously is a medieval or later harness bell. The copper-alloy band however is almost certainly from a thread box, a class of object that, it has been suggested, are 'type fossils of the seventh century' (Hawkes 1973, 196–8). Their character and distribution have recently been fully discussed by Evison (1987, 106–8). Very many such boxes are decorated with patterns composed of punched dots (e.g. Mortimer 1905, pl. 84).

The Site in its Context

It has been reasonably proposed that the Wye valley always formed a naturally attractive routeway into, and through, the Chilterns (Head 1974); equally its confluence with the Thames would be expected to provide a natural focus both for settlement and cemetery. Recent study of Anglo-Saxon settlement sites increasingly suggests that they rarely lie far from their cemeteries, and the converse is true. No direct settlement evidence of Saxon date is yet known at Bourne End, but such evidence is far less likely to come to notice as a casual discovery than is the discovery of a cemetery. The area was certainly significant in the late Roman period since a cemetery containing lead coffin burials was discovered a few hundred metres to the north during housing development in 1949. On the Berkshire side of the river at least two Saxon period cemeteries are known, and recently a saucer brooch has been discovered in the Hedsor area, although the topography of the latter find suggests it may have been a casual loss rather than having come from a cemetery. All of this evidence hints that substantial Early Saxon settlement remains undiscovered, providing the level of population which within a century or less was to encourage the foundation of an early church at Cookham (Gelling 1979, 25), and in the early tenth century the construction of a

defence at *Sceaftsege*, a little downstream by Hedsor Wharf (Brooks 1964).

Finally it is worth mentioning that although the place name Bourne End has good medieval antecedents (EPNS Bucks, 198) the name *Bone End* is also recorded in the neighbourhood. It is not suggested that this is anything but folk etymology, but it may nevertheless preserve the tradition of a discovery. Unfortunately however this encouraging name, which appears both on Jefferies map of 1783 and amongst Enclosure Award properties, lies some way towards Hedsor. It is shown in a detached portion of Hedsor on the Hedsor Tithe map, the location of the detached portion being best seen on the Wooburn Enclosure Award. It may reflect practice of a trade rather than earlier discovery of further burials; however the name does provide one further tantalising element in consideration of the area.

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