

WINDMILL FIELD, HITCHAM: THE EARLY SAXON GRAVE AND A POSSIBLE SETTLEMENT

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Few Saxon domestic sites have been identified in Buckinghamshire. This note draws attention to a probable site that was discovered in the late nineteenth century during gravel extraction, and may relate to an inhumation of the same period.

In 1909 through the offices of A. H. Cocks and E. L. Reynolds, part of the collection of James Rutland, the excavator of the Taplow barrow, who died in 1907, was acquired for the County Museum (Cocks 1909, 320). Rutland, who lived at The Gables, Taplow and was Secretary of the Maidenhead and Taplow Field Club, collected over a wide area around Maidenhead and South Buckinghamshire.

The material in the Museum appears to have been poorly labelled when it was acquired and has had a chequered history since. A sub-part of the collection, accessioned in 1909 as 163.09, is of particular interest. It clearly contains some material of mixed provenance and various dates ranging from Belgic to Medieval, but among it is an original loose label marked 'GWR Pit Hitcham Oct 1888', and one specific bag contains the label 'Hitcham, pit dwelling May 1889'. All the material in the bag is Saxon in date and whilst it is possible that the contents reflect an earlier part-sort of the Rutland material by period, it does include one Saxon rim sherd with an original label attached reading 'Hitcham pit dwelling 10 feet Win Hill 1884'. A further bag contains a stamped Saxon piece with an original loose label 'Hitcham pit dwellings'. Taken together, this suggests that the Saxon pottery may be attributed to Hitcham with some degree of confidence.

In a paper read by Rutland to the Maidenhead and Taplow Field Club in October

1891, he described briefly his discoveries at Hitcham, 'where a short time since, during the excavations by the GWR Co., I had the opportunity to witness the removal of several circles containing food vessels, drinking cups and cinerary urns . . . In the same field, called Windmill Field . . . I obtained the fine neolithic (or new stone) axe with three others . . .' (Anon. 1891, 46). The material initially seems to have remained in Rutland's collection, since during the talk it was recorded that . . . 'On and near the platform were numerous objects of antiquarian interest, the bulk being from Mr. Rutland's well-stocked museum at Taplow'.

The discoveries at the pit were referred to a little more fully in VCH (Vol. I, 182, 204). Some of the objects from this prolific site, including Middle Bronze Age cremation urns, passed to the British Museum in 1902. Apart from prehistoric material the British Museum material also includes objects from a Saxon inhumation at 'Windmill Field, Hitcham, Bucks or a little south of this, in Cockleberry'.

Catherine East has kindly described the finds from the Early Saxon inhumation, which were purchased by the Friends of the British Museum in 1902, as follows:

Sword 1902, 12-16,2

Iron sword blade and tang. One shoulder of the blade damaged, the other straight. Pitted surface. Pattern welded. L. 87.7cm. The pattern welding shows 3 bands of continuous twist, a pattern which has been found on a

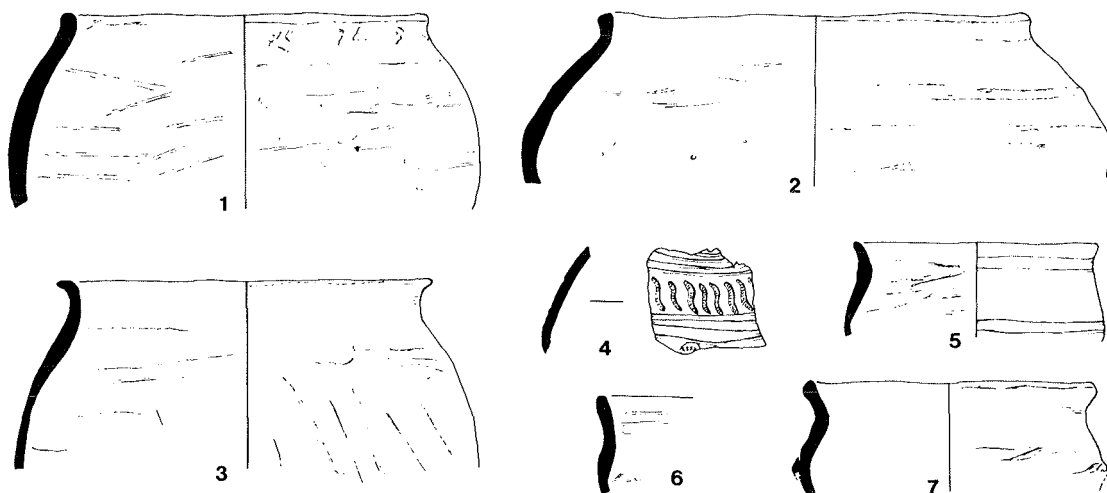


Fig. 1. Saxon pottery from Hitcham (1/4 scale).

number of British Museum Anglo-Saxon swords of both sixth and seventh-century date.

Shield Boss 1902, 12-16, 3

Iron boss with low, flat curved cone. Iron apical disc (now broken) on substantial cylindrical neck. Cone overhangs shallow side wall; broad flange. 1 flange rivet survives to full length (1.05cm protruding below). Probably originally 5 rivets in all, but others not visible and no radiograph available. The surviving rivet has a flat, tinned (or silvered) head, 1.84cm diam. Diameter of boss 16.3cm.

Knife 1902, 12-16, 5

Iron knife blade and broken tang, the blade much damaged and flaking. Overall length 11.0cm. Length of blade 9.93cm. Width of blade 1.82cm.

Shield Grip 1902, 12-16, 4

Incomplete iron grip in two pieces. Edges upturned. Fragments of wood strip survive between the upturned edges. Length of fragments 4.6cm, 4.2cm.

An early sixth-century date is suggested for the grave group, based on the shape of the shield boss.

The Saxon pottery at the County Museum, apparently from the GWR pit, is illustrated on Fig. 1. It is all hand-made and in dark reduced fabric, except for nos. 4 and 6 which are slightly lighter, and can briefly be described as follows.

1. Traces of thumbing at rim. Burnished in part ext. and scraped int. Fabric with fine quartz grits, some vegetable matter.

2. Roughly burnished ext. and scrapped int. Fine quartz grits, rounded clear milky white.
3. Roughly burnished ext. Fabric as 2.
4. Stamped sherd, burnished lines above and below stamp. Fine quartz and flint grits.

T. Briscoe writes of the stamp:

'The sherd from Hitcham is most interesting, because of the unusual stamp. This is a segmented "S", right facing, of 13 negative segments measuring 9x16mm, which puts it in the category of large-sized stamps. Of this (Briscoe-H2ai) type, I have only 11 other examples in the Archive, two of which come from the Aylesbury area of Bucks. I have two examples from Mucking, one from Riseley, Kent, and one from Worth Park, Hants. The rest come from eastern England. The die used to make the stamp would have been specially made for this purpose.

The left-facing "S" (Briscoe type H2aii) is commoner, there are 20 examples in the Archive, one from Croydon, Surrey, 4 from Mucking and 2 from Worth Park, Hants. The remaining stamps of this type come from all over the country, but each site rarely has more than one example. By far the greatest number come from Mucking, and there seems to be a concentration of this type of motif in the Thames Valley area. Because of the small sample, it is not possible to suggest a pot form, but the decorative scheme may belong to Myres type II.1 or II.6.'

5. Burnished ext., with deeper burnished lines. Clear hint of ring-building in section. Fabric as 3.
6. Fine quartz and flint grit.
7. Part of small boss remaining, burnished ext. and int. Fabric as 3.

Although the pots could have been accessory vessels to a Saxon inhumation, or could have

come from a separate cremation cemetery, or even from a mixed cemetery, on balance these possibilities seem less probable than that the vessels had a domestic origin. Rutland's reference to 'cinerary urns' seems most likely to have referred to the bulkier Bronze Age vessels now in the British Museum. Moreover there is a strong tradition of Saxon inhumation, rather than of cremation, in this part of the Middle Thames, for example at Aston and Cookham (Meaney 1964), at Bourne End (Farley 1987), and of course at Taplow itself. Finally there is the use of the words 'pit dwelling' on the label attached to one of the sherds, which might be interpreted as a Saxon house site of the kind commonly referred to as *grubenhäuser* or 'sunken-feature buildings'. On balance the evidence suggests that it was a settlement, which was destroyed during gravel digging, with an associated cemetery, of sixth to seventh-century date. If this is correct, both would have been broadly contemporary with the Taplow burial, 1.8km to the north-west.

The general location of the gravel extraction is clear. Windmill Field is shown on the Inclosure Award map of Hitcham of 1779 (BRO: IR 133R) bounded by the Bath Road on the south, the Hitcham road on the west, and the Taplow road on the north. The south-western corner of the field contains the parish gravel pit. By 1843 a map of the parish (BRO:

PR 102A/28/IR) shows the railway bisecting the field, the GWR yard lying west of Hitcham Road and a note that the southern part of Windmill field was owned by Richard Webster. A pencil annotation reads 'sold to GWR'. The 1875 Ordnance Survey 1:2,500 shows the pit in this sector to have expanded substantially. GWR eventually extracted gravel over large areas in West Field, west of the Hitcham road and north of the railway line. There is insufficient map evidence readily available to determine exactly which areas GWR were working when Rutland made his discoveries, although further documentary research might be profitable; however the reference to 'Win' (Windmill) Hill on one sherd, does make it reasonably probable that the area adjacent to the parish gravel pit was the area of Rutland's discoveries. The issue has potential future significance since much of the 1779 'Windmill Field' north of the line lies today under a small industrial estate sited on ground higher than the surrounding area. Although it is possible that this is remade ground, it is *just* possible that the land has not been disturbed and that further evidence may yet remain beneath it.

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