

A BELGIC/ROMANO-BRITISH CEMETERY AT BLEDLOW-CUM-SAUNDERTON.

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The excavation of a small cemetery at Bledlow produced both cremations and inhumations. The cremations were associated with pottery vessels typical of a Belgic cultural context. The inhumations are less readily datable but appear to belong to the Romano-British period.

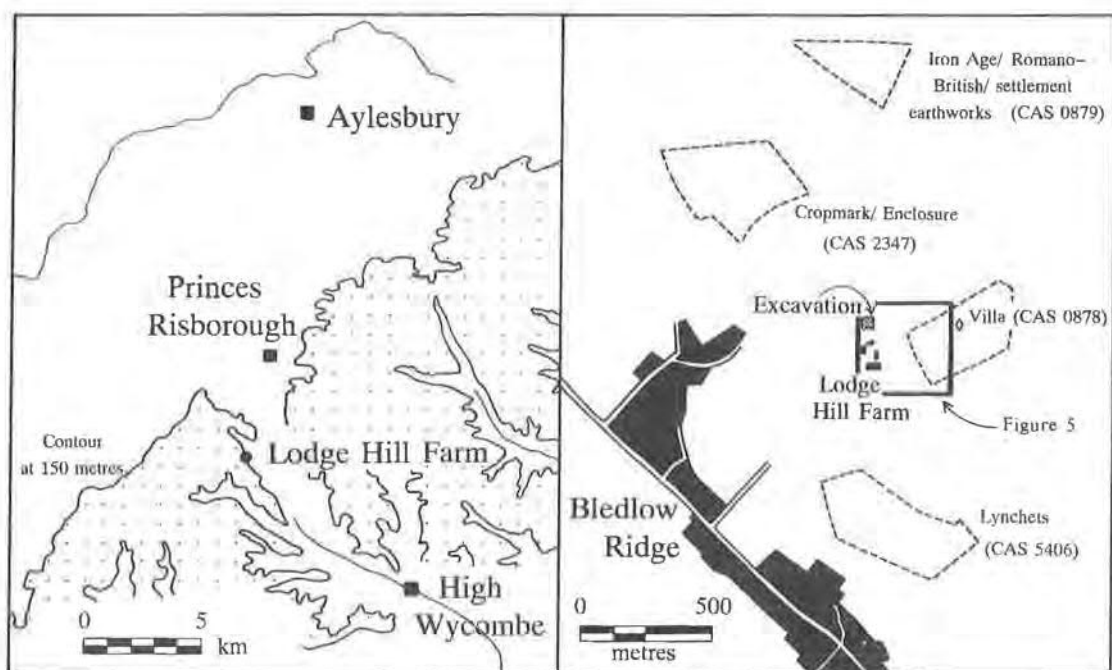


Fig. 1: Lodge Hill Farm cemetery, Bledlow: Site location.

In November 1987, excavations, being undertaken for a pond in Rye Close Field at Lodge Hill Farm, Bledlow, revealed human skeletal material. Museum staff were alerted by the contractor responsible for the find, and on arrival at the site noted a cremation pit close to the original discovery and were shown pottery which had been recovered

during an earlier part of the digging operation. The Coroner's Office had been informed and police were also present. Work was briefly halted to permit examination of these and other features visible in the chalk subsoil, and over the next two days Museum staff and County Museum Archaeological Group volunteers under the direction of Mark

Collard were able to record and plan all visible features, excavate all the graves, and sample the remaining features.

The site lies due north of Lodge Hill Farm on near level ground which slopes slightly west to east. Further west is a steep rise up to Bledlow Ridge (Figs 1 and 5). There are extensive views from the site to the north and east, with West Wycombe Church visible to the south east. A Roman villa (CAS 0878), discovered from the air by St Joseph (St Joseph 1965; Wilson 1974) and subsequently scheduled as an Ancient Monument, lies some 200–300m to the east.

Considerable disturbance had already been occasioned to the remains; of the inhumation originally discovered only the skull and legs remained in situ. This skeleton was removed by the police for “dating” to ensure that a recent crime was not involved.

The cemetery’s full extent could not be determined, and it is possible that it continued beyond the area affected by the pond excavation (Fig. 2).

In the description which follows context numbers are given in brackets.

The cemetery contained both inhumations and cremations. The inhumations were as follows:

- [1] Extended burial of an adult male, much disturbed by machine, orientated east-west with the head to the west. The grave was cut to a depth of 0.30m below the chalk surface.
- [2] Inhumation, apparently extended but much disturbed, of an adult female, with skull face down at the eastern end of the grave cut and a femur immediately next to it. Digits and a single rib were in the centre of the grave. Fragments of a bone comb, apparently of late Romano-British date, were found associated with this inhumation (Fig. 4,1).
- [3] Post-natal infant in very shallow grave cut. Little remained apart from long bones and a small skull fragment.
- [4] Child, extended, in grave 0.25m deep with head to west and hands across pelvis. Cranium

compressed almost flat and limb extremities in poor condition.

The cremations were as follows:

- [7] Cremation of a child in pot (Fig. 3,1), buried together with accessory vessel (Fig.3,2) in a pit c0.5m wide and 0.3m deep, located c0.5m north of inhumation no 2. Also associated with this cremation was an iron brooch (Fig. 4,2).
- [8] Probable cremation. This context consisted of a group of pots (Fig.3,3–6) whose contents had already been removed by the workmen. Some of these vessels had probably contained cremations, whilst the others would have been accessory vessels. A stone pendant (Fig. 4,3) and a glass bead (not illustrated) also appear to have been associated with this group.

The area of the burials was surrounded by a ditch (Fig. 2 [5 and 10]), cut into the chalk, which may originally have served to define the limits of the cemetery. Part of the profile had been machined away. Where best preserved, this feature was 1.30m wide and 0.38m deep. The primary fill was weathered chalk, while the upper fill consisted of brown loam with chalk lumps. A smaller gully [6] entered the outer edge of the ditch where it turned through an angle of around 110°; this feature contained a few fragments of adult limb bone, presumably derived from a disturbed inhumation. The footing of a second-century flagon (Fig. 3,7) was recovered from the upper fill of the ditch. A small pit [9], 1.2 × 0.9m, with a possible stakehole in its bottom, was situated by the southern edge of the area under examination, immediately west of the junction between features 5 and 6.

The Skeletal Remains

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There were four inhumations from this site, one cremation and a few fragments of adult limb bone from a separate context [6]. There were also some animal bones, a complete metatarsal from a young horse, with the distal epiphysis fusing (context 5/1), and a number of fragments from a cervical vertebra, also of a horse (context 5/8/1).

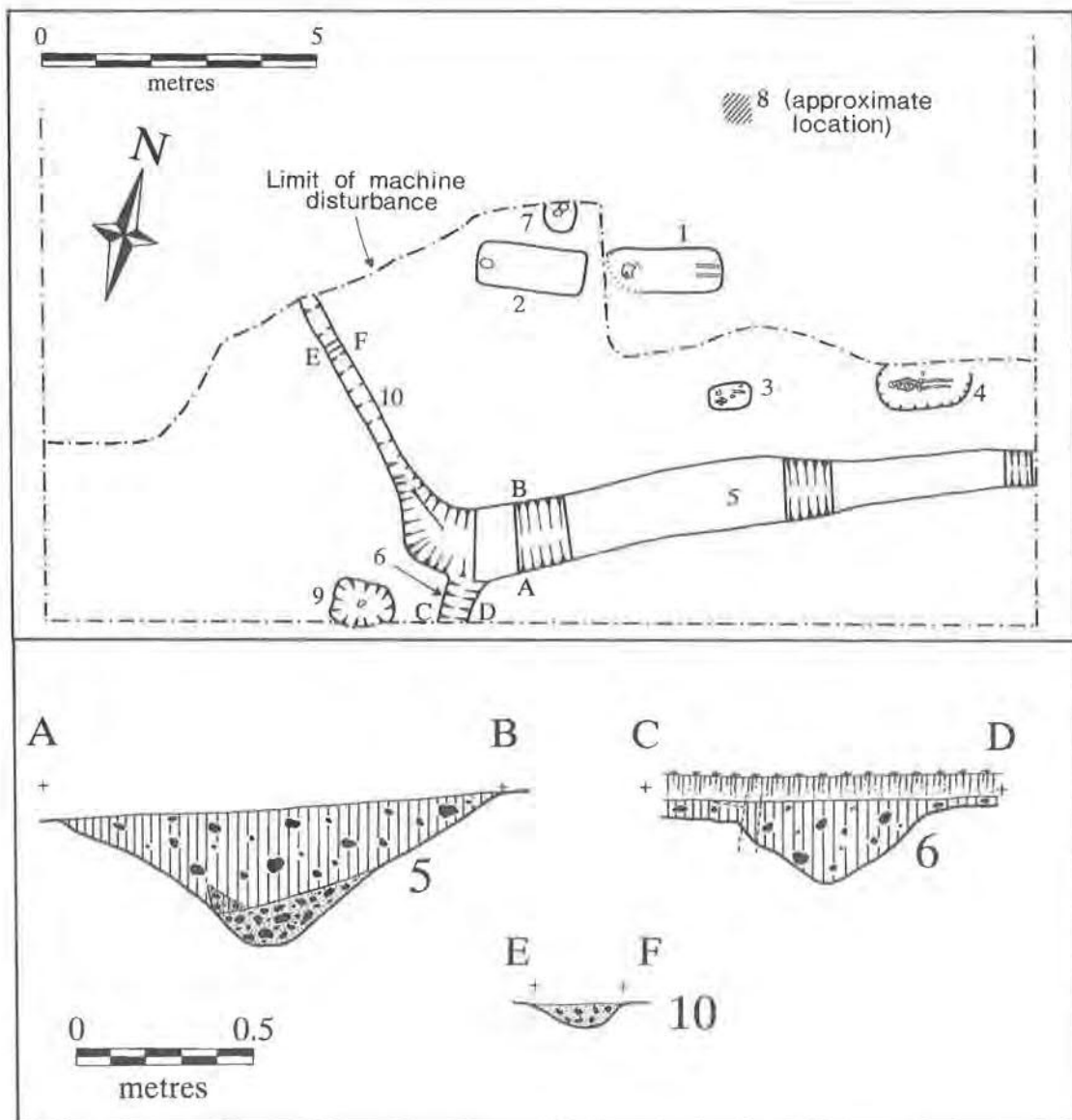


Fig. 2: Plan of features and representative sections.

Two of the inhumations were adults and two children. The adult skeletons were assigned an age and sex using standard anthropological techniques (for example, those described in Workshop of European Anthropologists, 1980). The children's skeletons were aged on the basis of tooth eruption but no attempt was made to sex them. In one case it was possible to make an estimate of height from the length of the long bones using equations published by Trotter (1970).

One of the adult skeletons was male and one female. Both were probably aged between 25 and 35 years at the time of death judging from the degree of tooth wear. One of the children was less than a year old at death, the other was aged between 4 and 6 years. A brief description of each of the skeletons is given below; the cremation is described separately.

The inhumations [contexts 1-4]

[1]. A substantial skeleton of a young male, aged between 25 and 35 years at death. There had been much *post mortem* damage to the bones and none had survived intact. Fragments of the skull and mandible were present. The mandible was interesting in showing the presence of a mandibular torus, much more marked on the right than on the left. This is a relatively common anatomical variant and is an outgrowth of dense bone on the lingual surface of the mandible.

Eighteen teeth were recovered, 3 canines, 6 premolars and 9 molars. Several teeth had been lost *ante mortem*, including 2 premolars and 2 molars, presumably as the result of dental disease or gum disease; none of the extant teeth had caries. Portions of the right scapula and clavicle were present as were midshaft portions of the right humerus and the left humerus, radius and ulna. The proximal part of the left femur, including the head with a normal articular surface and the greater part of the left ilium and ischial tuberosity were also present. Both tibias were broken but in each case, the proximal and distal articular surfaces were present and normal; the fibulas were represented by the distal ends. Few of the small bones of the hands had survived; only one middle and one distal phalanx. Rather more of the foot bones were present, including the calcaneum and talus on both sides, seven other tarsal bones and six metatarsals. Twelve vertebrae were present, the first, second and fourth cervical, the second and eighth to twelfth thoracic, and the first three lumbar. The lower three thoracic and all the lumbar vertebrae showed the presence of osteophytes and the fourth cervical showed signs of intervertebral disc disease.

It was possible to take measurements from the

skull, the right femur and the left tibia. From these the cranial, femoral and tibial indices were calculated and were 64.7, 84.8 and 63.2 respectively. (The measurements used to calculate these indices and their significance are described in Brothwell 1981).

[2]. A partial skeleton of a young female aged between 25 and 35 at death. The skull was present but extensively damaged and only three teeth, two incisors and one molar, were recovered. Fragments of the right scapula and clavicle were present and a small, proximal portion of the left ulna. There were twelve vertebrae, the fourth to seventh cervical and the first eight thoracic. Both femurs were intact but there were only a few fragments of the tibias. Few of the small bones of the hands or feet had survived. There was a single carpal bone (the right capitate), three metacarpals and nine phalanges (4 proximal, 3 middle and 2 distal). The right talus was present, two tarsals, one metatarsal and one first distal phalanx.

The scapula was interesting in showing the presence of an os acromial. This is a normal variant which results from the failure of fusion of two of the ossification centres of the acromion; the prevalence in the modern population is between 3 and 15% (Stirland 1984).

The two femurs were measured and the maximum lengths used to estimate the height (1.49m: about 4ft 11ins). The left and right femoral indices were 76.7 and 70.0 respectively.

[3]. All that remained of this skeleton were some skull fragments and some unidentifiable fragments of the long bones. It was clear that this was an infant burial and the morphology of the skull fragments

Table: 1

Number, weight and lengths of bone fragments from cremations

	<i>Skull</i>	<i>Long bones</i>	<i>Ribs</i>	<i>Vertebrae</i>	<i>Remainder</i>
Number of fragments	100	60	12	43	many hundreds
Weight (g)	100	50	15	40	160
Minimum/Maximum length (mm)	14-65	23-57	12-30	6-40	2-30
Tending to	largest	largest	smallest	largest	smallest

suggested an age at death of less than 1 year.

[4]. Incomplete skeleton of a child, which had suffered considerable *post mortem* damage. The skull and mandible were present with 18 deciduous teeth and 17 permanent tooth buds. Mid-shaft portions of all the major limb bones were present together with a few metacarpal shafts. Parts of the ilium were present from both sides and there were several rib and vertebral fragments; a small portion of the sacrum was also identified. None of the small bones of the feet had survived except the right talus.

From the pattern of tooth eruption it seemed that this child had died between the ages of 4 and 6.

The cremation [context 7]

A child, probably aged between 1 and 2 years at death. The bone was white and calcined and the total weight was approximately 365g. The bones were sorted into groups belonging to the skull, long bones, vertebrae and ribs; the majority however defied classification (see table 1). Two teeth were identified, a deciduous second molar and the bud of a permanent molar. The skull, rib and limb bone fragments tended to be rather larger than those of the vertebrae and were generally a good deal larger than the unidentified bone. This is, of course, to be expected, since it is the larger fragments which are most likely to be identifiable.

Pathology:

Only skeleton [1] showed any pathological change, having both dental and spinal disease. The tooth loss evident in this skeleton was presumably the result of primary tooth or gum disease, but Wells (1964, 218) has suggested that tooth loss in early skeletons may have been caused by the onset of scurvy, which is itself the result of vitamin C deficiency. Although it is likely that scurvy was relatively common in early populations, particularly during the winter months when supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables were not abundant, the disease leaves few stigmata on the bones which makes it difficult either to support or refute Wells' idea.

The spinal disease in this skeleton included the presence of osteophytes, intervertebral disc disease

and the presence of Schmorl's nodes on the tenth and eleventh thoracic and first lumbar vertebrae.

Osteophytes are outgrowths of new bone from around the margins of the vertebral body and are a ubiquitous finding in skeletal material, becoming more common with increasing age. While they may be found as a concomitant of some other spinal disease, they are often present as isolated findings and in such cases are a usual feature of the ageing process. Intervertebral disc disease is also extremely common in skeletons and is found most usually in the cervical and lumbar regions. It can be taken as evidence of some degeneration in the intervertebral discs but is unlikely to be associated with clinical symptoms unless new bone growth is provoked which impinges on the nerves as they pass out between the vertebrae. There is no evidence of this in the present case.

Schmorl's nodes are caused by herniations of the central part of the intervertebral disc which then produce an indentation in the superior or inferior surface of the vertebral body which is the lesion found in the skeleton. They seem infrequently to cause symptoms and are found with great regularity, especially in the lower thoracic and lumbar regions.

The finds

A) Pottery (Fig. 3, 1-7)

All the Belgic pottery (nos 1-6) is in a soft grogged fabric (cf Bierton fabric 1; Knight 1986) with surfaces which (where they survive) are soapy smooth and burnished. The vessels appear to have been hand-made but finished on a wheel. The colour of the fabric core is generally dark grey with surfaces ranging from black to orange-brown.

Context 7 (1, cremation vessel; 2, accessory vessel):

- 1) High-shouldered slightly ovoid jar, lacking rim and part of neck, with cordon at shoulder. Hand-made(?) footring base. Apparently turned, or at any rate finished on a wheel. Ext. surface rough (quite heavily weathered) though soapy smooth where burnished. Int. rough, with grooves. Ext. colour ranges from

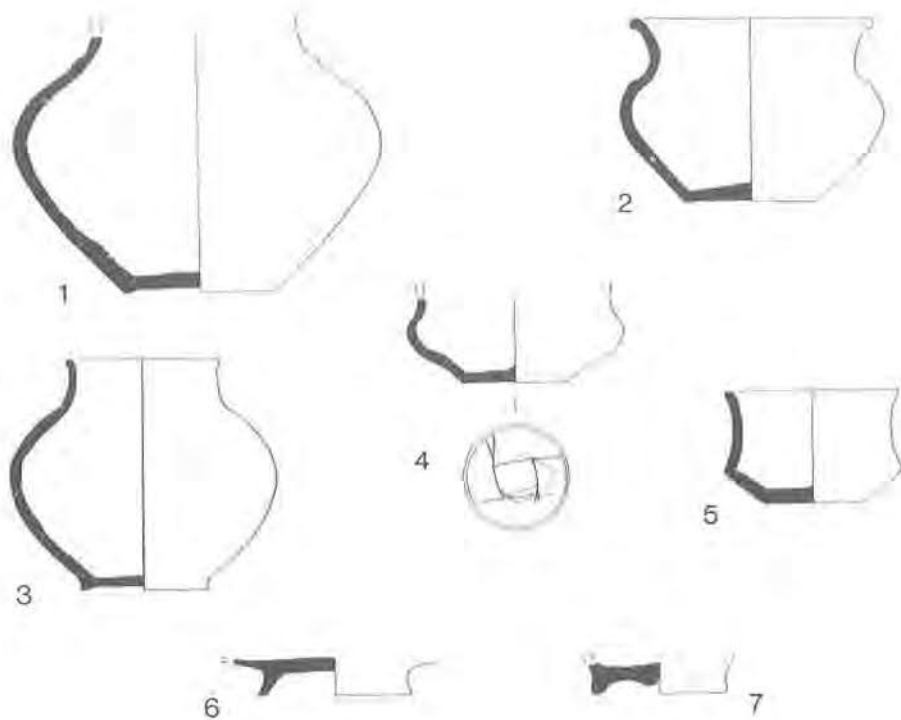


Fig. 3: Pottery (Scale 1:4).

black through grey to orange-brown, int. from light to dark grey.

Thompson (1982) describes this as a basic and long-lived Belgic form ranging in date from the later first century BC to the mid first century AD.

- 2) High-shouldered, wide mouthed bowl with flared neck and rounded rim, and flat base. Possibly wheel-finished. Ext. surface, though rough where worn, is soapy smooth where the burnished surface survives; int. surface rough, with finger-nail marks. Ext. black with an orange-grey worn patch; int. orange to grey-brown, dark grey core.

Dating is similar to no (1) above (Thompson *op cit*)

Context 8; group of cremation/accessory vessels (3–6):

- 3) Globular vessel with upright, slightly flared neck, narrow mouth and beaded/rounded rim. Slight groove at shoulder, and a very slight footring base. Hand-made, but possibly wheel finished. Ext. soapy smooth, slipped and burnished with rough worn patches; int. smooth on rim and neck where the burnishing continues, but otherwise rough, chipped and worn, with finger grooves. Ext. ranges from black to orange grey-brown, int. orange grey-brown, light grey core.

Thompson notes a long date range for the form at Braughing and Prae Wood, from the last quarter of the first century BC to the conquest period.

- 4) Small angular/rounded vessel, with a hint of carination. Grooved cordon around a footring base. Base has incised graffiti, possibly a potter's mark. (cf Bierter; (Knight in Allen 1986) for a similar but more neatly executed square mark on the base of a native version of a Gallo-Belgic cup, apparently in a similar fabric.) Hand made, possibly wheel finished. Ext. soapy smooth where burnished, elsewhere rough and worn; int. rough with grooves and finger-nail marks. Ext. and int. both range from grey to orange brown. Dark grey core.

(cf Thompson p369, for the general type of plain carinated cup).

- 5) Small angular cup with low carinated shoulder, high slightly flaring neck, everted rounded rim and flat base. Hand made, possibly wheel finished. Soapy smooth, slip burnished ext.; int. smooth with burnish continuing on the rim and neck and finger-nail marks. Black with grey brown and dark grey patches and a grey core.

The type is dated to the first half of the first century AD.

- 6) Pedestal footing base; possibly handmade but certainly finished on a wheel. Black/dark grey surfaces, grey core.

From context 5; secondary fill of ditch:

- 7) Flagon footing, in a sandy hard fabric, with rough exterior. The base has a small hole bored in it. Int. rough with whirl marks. Ext. worn

white slip colour coat, int. cream-white to buff.

At Verulamium (Wilson, in Frere 1984) the type is dated to the mid second century AD.

B) Other finds (Fig. 4, 1-3)

1. Bone comb fragment, badly eroded and fractured, from a double-sided, probably composite, comb. 55mm long (the approximate width of the comb when complete) and 17mm wide. The outer teeth are considerably wider than the inner ones. The teeth on the more damaged side appear to have been finer than those on the other. There are traces of discolouration (from a rivet?) around what appears to have been a central perforation. The poor condition is due to its having been burnt, although its condition and context suggest that it was not burnt in the midst of a pyre.

Double-sided composite combs first appear during the third century AD (MacGregor 1985). This artefact therefore has important implications for the overall dating of the cemetery. (SF200, associated with inhumation, context 2).

2. Iron brooch of Colchester type, corroded and broken. (SF201, from cremation, context 7).
3. Quartzite pendant amulet, of sub-circular shape (diameter 37.5mm minimum to 40.5mm maximum). This is thinner (3mm), (and more worn?), at the top than at the bottom where the maximum thickness is 9.5mm. There is some surface corrosion; the surface seems almost

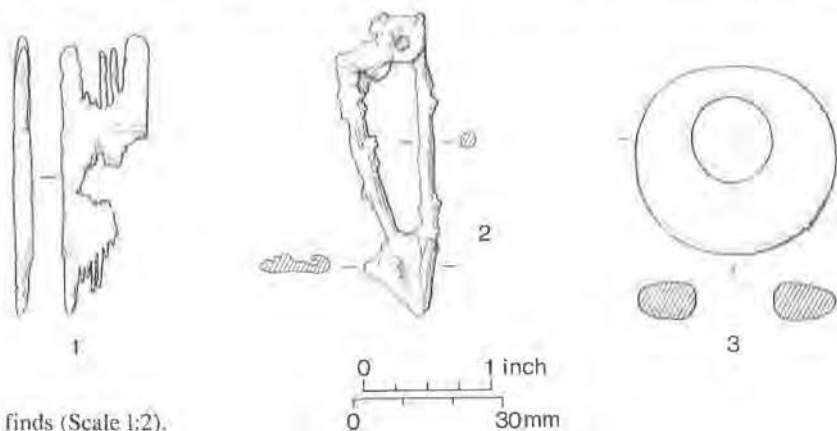


Fig. 4: Small finds (Scale 1:2).

certain to have been polished and the pendant would have been semitranslucent. No close parallels have been found for this item. An annular flint pebble from a Belgic cemetery at Watlington (Case 1958) appears to have been formed by largely natural means, and retained perhaps as an *objet trouvé* with chthonic connotations, but the Bledlow piece has quite clearly been deliberately manufactured. (SF207, associated with cremation group, context 8).

4. Flint flake, grey, no cortex or retouching, 26.5mm long. Intrusive find. (SF204, from secondary fill of ditch, context 5; not illustrated).
5. Glass fragment, burnt, probably from a bead. Dark "Venetian" blue. No distinguishable traces of either surface or aperture have survived cremation. (SF 203, associated with cremation group, context 8; not illustrated).

Discussion

Dating

The pottery associated with the cremations was all in the Belgic tradition and may probably be dated to the period from the final years of the first century BC to shortly after the Roman conquest.

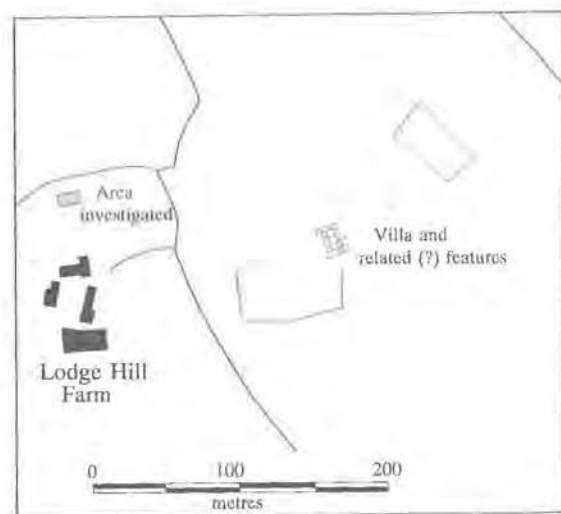


Fig. 5: Lodge Hill Farm, Bledlow: cemetery location in relation to other sites in the immediate vicinity.

The absence of butt beakers and their derivatives is probably of no significance given the small size of the assemblage; elsewhere these vessels went out of use with the conquest (cf King Harry Lane, Verulamium; Stead and Rigby 1989).

The inhumations are harder to date. Only No 2 had any apparently associated finds, and that consisted of a bone comb which is probably to be dated to later in the Roman period. By inference the other inhumations might also be later Roman in date. However the degree of disturbance of this inhumation means that it would be imprudent to date any of the other inhumations by means of the comb, which may well be intrusive, and the inhumations may belong to the early Romano-British period. It is also possible that the differentiation between inhumation and cremation may not be chronological but a reflection of status or personal taste. Nevertheless, if the individuals within the cemetery belonged to a group which was closely related by familial or social ties it might be suspected that the two different rites would not be in use together for very long. On the basis of this assumption we refer to two phases (one demonstrably Belgic, the other undated but provisionally assigned to the first or second century AD) in the following discussion.

The only dateable find from the ditch was a second-century sherd; it is difficult to be certain of the chronological relationship between this ditch and the use of the cemetery. The balance of probability however must be that there was continuity of use of the cemetery which apparently spanned a change in the style of funerary rites.

Context

Several sites are known in the environs of the cemetery. The villa lying east of the site is recorded from air photographs; it is of corridor type, and is apparently located within a small *enceinte*, which in turn appears to be incorporated in the northeast corner of an enclosure measuring c100 × 65m. Other linear features, possibly representing boundaries, are visible in the environs of the villa, although they are not certainly contemporary with it.

Although undated, the villa plan would not be inappropriate in a second or even late first-century

context. Recovery of Belgic pottery from the Hambleton and Saunderton villas (Cocks 1921; Ashcroft 1940; Brannigan 1969) demonstrates the continued occupation of some "Belgic" sites after the conquest, and the plan as revealed by aerial photography may reflect only part of the structural history of the site. It is possible therefore that there was occupation on the villa site during the first (Belgic) phase of the cemetery and highly probable that there was occupation there during the second (inhumation) phase of the cemetery.

Some 700m to the north, on Lodge Hill, are the ill-defined earthworks of an enclosed settlement (CAS 0879; Fig. 1). This was cursorily examined by means of a ditch section in 1939 (Head 1955); the finds from this work showed that the primary fill of the enclosure was probably Belgic in date, although unstratified surface finds (principally from mole-hills) suggested occupation extending from the Early Iron Age to the Romano-British period. The ditch finds are dated by Head (*op. cit.*) to the first half of the first century AD on the basis of parallels at Prae Wood, Verulamium, and the Lodge Hill settlement is therefore likely to be contemporary with the Belgic phase of the Bledlow cemetery.

Additionally there is a series of undated (but presumably prehistoric) enclosures (CAS 2347) visible as cropmarks some 450m to the northwest, whilst some 500m to the south a series of lynchets is visible on air photographs taken by the RAF (CAS 5406).

The full extent of the Bledlow cemetery is unknown, and it is difficult to provide much in the way of analysis. There is nothing that appears to be exceptional in terms of rite or grave goods for either phase. As has recently been pointed out (Lavender 1991), the relatively small size is a feature of Late Iron Age burials of the Aylesford-Swarling type, and large cemeteries of the size of King Harry Lane, St Albans (Stead and Rigby 1989) are atypical. As noted above, the ditch around the Bledlow burials is difficult to date and need not be associated with the Belgic phase of the cemetery's use, or even related to the cemetery at all. Enclosure ditches around Belgic cemeteries have not often been noted, though they occur at Owslebury, Hampshire (Collis 1968), Baldock, Hertfordshire (Stead and Rigby

1986), Maldon, Essex (Lavender 1991), and Ward's Coombe, Buckinghamshire.

Taking the distribution of Belgic cemeteries as a whole, it is worth noting that the location is towards the fringes of fully Belgic cemeteries (Whimster 1977; 1981). The only other Belgic cemetery which has been examined in the Buckinghamshire Chilterns is that at Ward's Coombe, Ivinghoe (Dunnett 1972), although the single burial at Dorton (Farley 1983) clearly belongs to a Belgic (or more strictly a Welwyn) tradition. In addition there is the nineteenth-century description of what appears to have been a Belgic amphora burial at Aston Clinton (CL 1872, 147; Whimster 1981, 358), as well as an apparently isolated Belgic cremation recorded at Northchurch during construction of the A41 Tring bypass (unpublished; CAS 1978), and a single burial examined at Watlington, Oxfordshire (Case 1958). The individuals represented by the Lodge Hill Farm burials presumably inhabited one or more of the sites referred to above; whether other members of the community were interred here or elsewhere is a matter of conjecture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The County Museum is grateful to the site owner, Mr Alvin Lindley, for permitting the disruption of his earthmoving to enable the archaeological investigation to take place. As always, County Museum Archaeological Group volunteers gave freely of their time and enthusiasm. Mr Simon Smithson also provided valuable assistance. The location plans and site plan were drawn up by Mr Ivor Westmore whilst on an in-service training placement. Mike Farley kindly commented upon an earlier draft of the report, but is not responsible for any imperfections which remain.

ARCHIVE AND FINDS DEPOSITION.

The site archive is lodged with the County Museum Sites and Monuments Record (CAS 5634). The finds are in the possession of the landowner, Mr Lindley, except for the skeletal material which has been donated to the County Museum (accession no 1992.1).

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