A PREHISTORIC AND SAXON SITE AT RISLIP FARM, SOULBURY.

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with contributions by
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Remains of five inhumations were discovered during quarrying. On the basis of loosely associated finds, including two iron knives and a bone comb, it is believed that these represent a small, badly damaged, early Saxon cemetery. A small quantity of later prehistoric material indicated some form of earlier activity, perhaps during the later Bronze Age/early Iron Age.

Introduction

The site at Rislip Farm, Soulbury, first came to attention during the summer of 1995, when human remains were noted by a member of the County Council Planning and Transportation Department's staff during the course of routine monitoring of quarrying operations. County Museum Archaeological Service Staff visited the site and recovered further pieces of human bone and artefacts from the spoil heap on the northern side of the quarry, where the topsoil had been stripped prior to quarrying of the underlying sand. The artefacts included Saxon material (pot sherds, two knives and bone comb fragments) and a small quantity of prehistoric pottery and flint. The quarry operator provided an excavator to undertake limited clearance of the area concerned under archaeological supervision; inspection of the surface of the unquarried sand revealed the presence of a small number of cut features, some of which were evidently graves (Fig. 2).

During the summer of 1996 the quarry operator agreed to fund the excavation of the skeletal material remaining *in situ*, together with archaeological monitoring of the stripping of topsoil from the adjacent area. As suspected, the remains had been considerably damaged by the quarrying operations. Parts of five extended inhumations were recovered, and a length of ditch was also investigated.

Location of the site (Fig 1)

The site, at SP 889 276, is near the top of a ridge, with a view down into the Ouzel Valley to the east; the land rises gently to the west towards the village of Soulbury. The site lies on glacial sand overlying Oxford Clay. The historic core of the village, where there are some well-defined medieval earthworks, is some 800m to the southwest. There are no other known archaeological sites in the immediate vicinity of Rislip Farm apart from a Romano-British site in the valley bottom about 1km away at Three Locks (Hearne 1991).

The site is in a typical location for a prehistoric or early Saxon cemetery.

The inhumations (Fig 3)

The depth of overlying topsoil (022) prior to stripping appears to have been in the order of *c.*0.35 – 0.50m. All the inhumations were fragmentary, with severe crushing and distortion, most of which is thought to have been occasioned by the passage of heavy plant over the burials immediately before the cemetery's discovery; however some disturbance from earlier agricultural activity may also have taken place. A further factor in the state of preservation was the several months exposure to the elements between discovery and excavation.

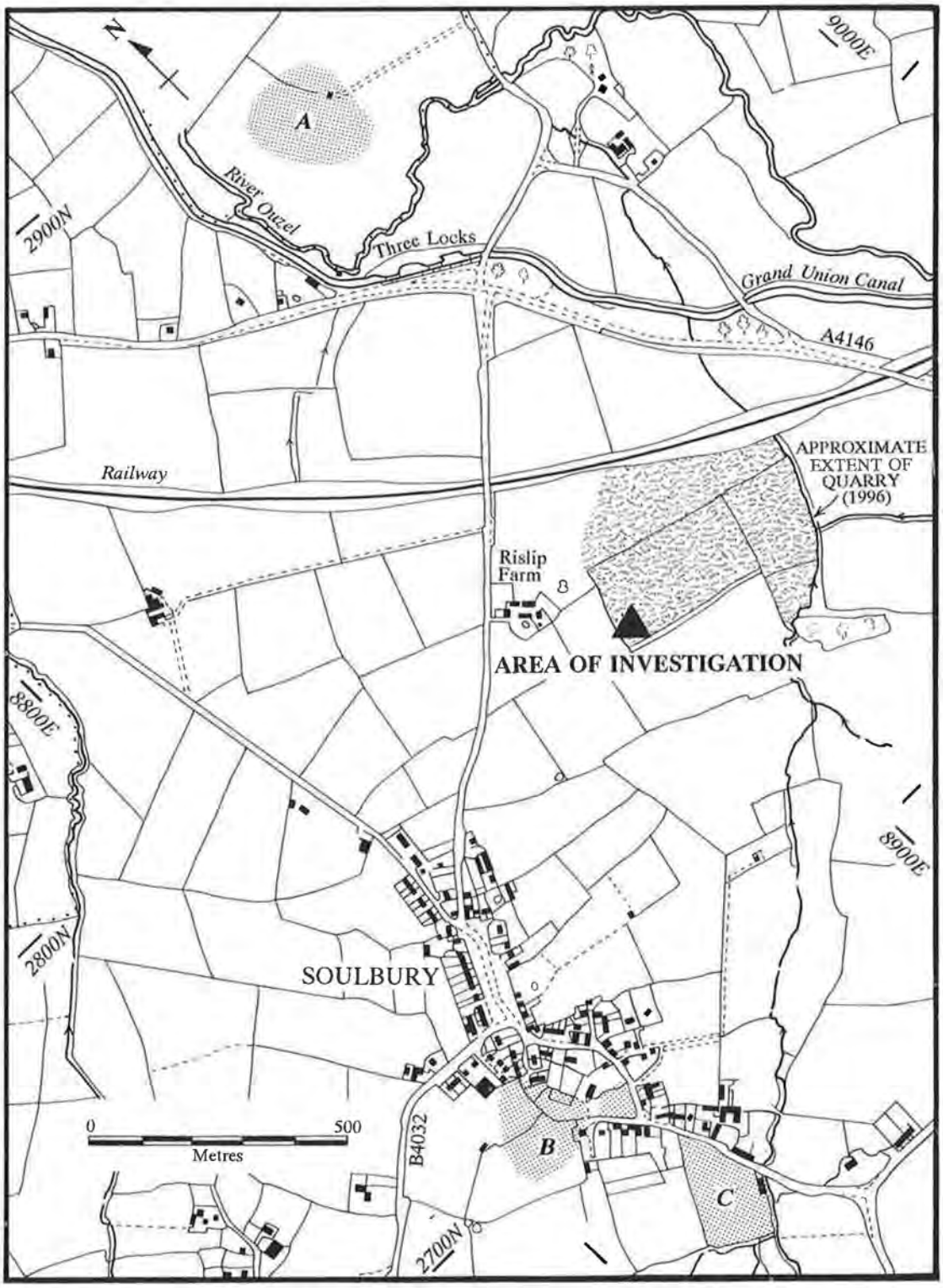

Fig. 1: Rislip Farm, Soulbury; Location plan. *A* – Three Locks Romano-British site; *B,C* – Soulbury medieval earthworks

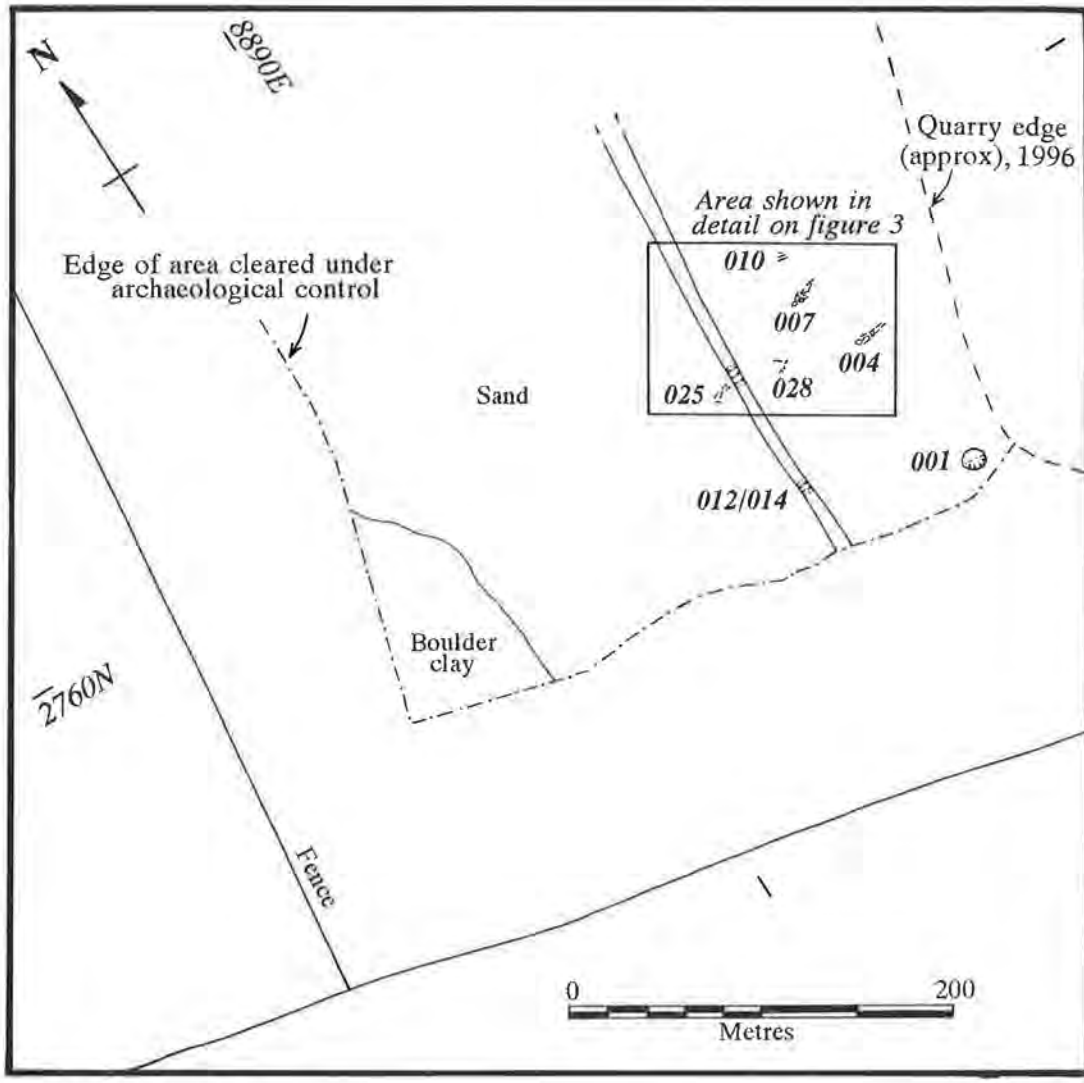

Fig. 2: Area of investigation

004: Orientated E–W with head to north; extended supine inhumation with arms close to body and hands over pelvis. Largely complete, but damaged. There were faint traces of a subrectangular cut (003), but the grave fill was virtually indistinguishable from the sand into which the grave was cut.

007: Orientated E–W with head to northwest; extended supine burial with right hand resting alongside femur. Incomplete. Grave cut (006) barely distinguishable.

010: Probably orientated approximately E–W. Consisted solely of the R arm (flexed) and a few rib fragments. No grave cut was visible.

025: Orientation uncertain, probably approximately E–W; Supine(?) inhumation, only legs and lower arms present, all very fragmentary; legs appeared to be slightly flexed. Fill and cut of grave indistinguishable.

028: Orientation possibly E–W; only lower legs present. Fill and cut of grave indistinguishable; it is difficult to be certain whether any of this inhumation was *in situ*.

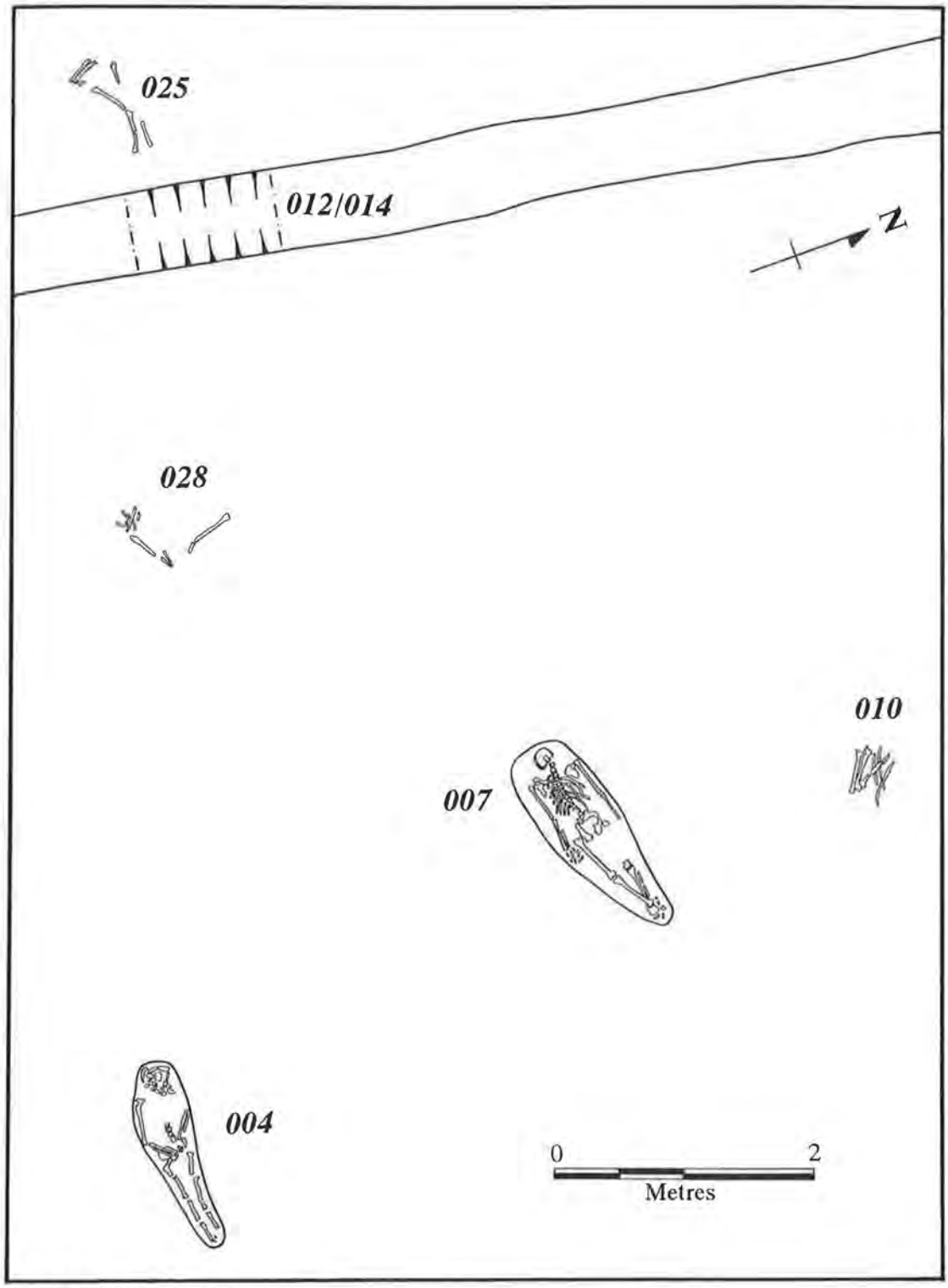

Fig. 3: Detailed plan of inhumations

Skeletal Pathology

by Dr Tony Waldron, Palaeopathology Study Group, Institute of Archaeology, University College London:

004: Fragmentary skeleton with much post-mortem damage and, in addition, the surface of the bones was poor, possibly as the result of disturbance. The skeleton was represented by fragments of the skull and left mandible, fragments of vertebrae and pelvis; by part of the right glenoid and by the ends of all three bones around the right elbow. There were mid-shaft fragments of the left ulna and radius and of both tibiae and the right fibula. Proximal fragments of both femurs were present together with fragments of the distal end of the right. Eleven teeth were present, 7 molars, 3 pre-molars and a single canine. Judging from the state of tooth wear, this individual was probably aged between 25 and 35 at the time of death.

007: A virtually complete skeleton lacking only the left clavicle, the head and most of the shaft of the left femur, with the left hand and foot; all the teeth with the exception of 2 pre-molars were missing. A left clavicle was found with the other bones but it clearly did not belong to this individual. There was considerable post mortem damage to the majority of the bones but it was possible to get a maximum length from the left humerus which was used to estimate the individual's height.

The pelvis was too badly damaged to use it for determining the sex of this individual but the left mastoid was robust, suggesting that this was a male skeleton; the measurements of the left humeral head (47mm) and the left glenoid (42mm) tended to confirm this impression. The skeleton was obviously that of an adult who had probably been at least 45 years of age at the time of his death, judging from the state of fusion of the cranial sutures. The height, using Trotter's equation for the maximum length of the humerus was 1.69±0.04m (5'6½") (Trotter 1970).

This individual had suffered during life from disease of the left shoulder and from spinal disease. The left shoulder showed signs of rotor cuff disease with new bone present around the head of the humerus and the margin of the glenoid. New bone was also present on the insertion of the subscapularis muscle, and around and on the floor of the bicipital groove. These findings all suggest that the tendons of the muscles around the shoulder joint had been chronically inflamed. There was evidence of osteoarthritis affecting the right facet joint of the third cervical vertebra and there was degenerative disc disease present between the 11th and 12th thoracic vertebrae. Many of the thoracic and lumbar vertebrae had marginal osteophyte present but this would have been unlikely to have caused any symptoms during life, being part of the 'normal' process of ageing. Finally, there was a small spur of bone in the mid-shaft of the left humerus at the point of insertion of the deltoid muscle and the muscle insertion itself was very deep. It is possible that this reflects constant, energetic use of the left arm, and the spur may have been the result of a tear in the muscle.

010. This was a very fragmentary adult skeleton represented only by the glenoid of the left scapula, the left humerus (except the head), radius and ulna and some rib fragments.

Interestingly, this individual also has signs of rotor cuff disease. The glenoid had a rim of new bone around it and there was new bone on the subscapularis insertion and around the bicipital groove. Unfortunately the head of the humerus was extremely thin which raises the possibility that this individual had severe restriction of movement of the left arm because of the pain from the shoulder and this had led to some degree of disuse atrophy.

Catalogue of disarticulated bone

(* = unstratified context; from spoil heap or quarry surface)

002 (fill of pit 001) 1 × unid. long bone frag; 1 × cattle-sized vertebral frag.

013 (fill of ditch 012) 3 × cattle-sized frags

016* 8 × unid. long bone frags

017* 1 × lower incisor, well-worn; 2 × unid. frags

018* L radius and ulna (prob. pair); L scapula and clavicle, 3 × metacarpals, 3 × cervical, 1 × thoracic and 3 × lumbar vertebrae with other frags; 6 × skull frags, 12 × rib frags, 1 × pelvis frag. 1 × lower premolar much worn. Mandible with ante-mortem loss of all molars and R 2nd pre-molar; all other teeth lost post-mortem.

019* Unid. Frags

020* 2 × rib frags; 3 × unid. frags

021* L mastoid and petrous temporal bone, prob. ♀ .1 × middle phalanx of hand; 1 × frag thoracic vertebra. Animal rib frags, possibly from cat.

025 (inhumation: see above) Many frags unid. long bones

028 (inhumation: see above) 1 × frag R proximal ulna and R distal humerus. Many tiny long bone frags with a few larger pieces from unid. long bones.

U/s* L mandible with canine, pre-molars and 3rd molar present; 1st and 2nd molars lost during life, also remains of abscess cavity. Skull frags, mid-shaft and distal frags of L humerus; 2 × metacarpals; 1 × unid. long bone frag.

Other features (Fig 2):

Two other features were recorded. These were:

Pit 001, to S of burials; oval, shallow, relatively straight sides and slightly concave base, *c.*1.00 × 1.12m × 0.22m deep. Fill (002) consisted of silty coarse sand with a very small quantity of charcoal. No datable finds

Ditch 012/014, orientated approximately N–S; moderate to steep sides and concave to flat base. 27m length exposed. 0.46m to 0.52m wide × <0.26m deep. Filled with slightly silty to clayey sand, with occasional flint gravel and ferruginous limestone frags. No datable finds

The finds

The Flints
by M Farley

All the struck flints from this small assemblage (22 flints) came from surface collection (context 021). Most are in a fairly good quality flint which appears, judging by the matrix firmly adhering to one unstruck piece, to be derived from the sand on which the site rests. Thirteen retain some cortex. All, apart from two, are fairly crudely struck, probably with a hard hammer and the majority are broad indicating either a later prehistoric date (Bronze Age) or manufacture of a specific tool type. Included amongst them is one blade, possibly utilised and probably of earlier date, and a core trimming flake from a double-platform core. None are illustrated.

The material includes one piece of burnt flint conglomerate and a single piece of burnt flint.

The free-draining sand on which the site is based, together with the prominent local topography, make this a location on which one would expect an occasional prehistoric presence.

Ceramic Material
by M Farley

There were only 23 sherds from the site of which 6 were from stratified contexts. None were wheel-thrown; none were considered worth illustrating. All sherds were fairly small apart from one large unstratified piece of a Saxon vessel which might either have come from a destroyed cremation urn or be an indication (in addition to the pit) of local settlement.

Unstratified Prehistoric: 7 sherds with angular flint grit, a fabric locally fairly typical of a later Bronze Age – early Iron Age date. (021)

Saxon:

Pit 001: 1 rim simple everted, fine quartz and other grits; 2 sherds red quartz grits with sparse veg.; 2 sherds veg.tempered, one with surface wiping (context 002). There is nothing diagnostic in this group, which might belong anywhere in a late early-Saxon to early mid-Saxon date range.

Grave 003: 1 sherd veg. tempered (005).

Unstratified Saxon: 1 large sherd ? basal rounded, and 3 from same vessel, veg. temper and quartz and other fine sandy inclusions (all 017); 1 small jar rim, everted, veg. tempered; 4 veg.tempered with occ. quartz grits. and one misc sandy (021 and u/s).

Medieval or later:

Ditch 012/014: 1 piece roof tile in sandy fabric, probably peghole tile. (context 013).

Other items (Fig 4):

Iron knives. Two iron knives of Saxon date were retrieved from the spoil heap with the aid of a metal detector.

1. Evison type 5 (angled back and straight cutting edge; Evison 1987). The Dover examples of this type appear to be C7. L 148.4mm; W max 29.5mm. U/s.
2. Probably Evison type 1, C5–C7. L 117.4mm; W (max: base of blade) 18.2mm. U/s.
3. Bone comb. Three fragments of bone comb were recovered from the spoil-heap and a fourth from the surface of the site. It is possible that all were from the same comb. Two fragments were stained by iron on the central rib, suggesting that they had come from a small composite double-sided comb typical of the early Saxon period; unfortunately no connecting plates were found and it is impossible to characterise the items more closely.
4. Lead weight. Thick, roughly circular lead weight, slightly thicker at the edges, with remnant of iron

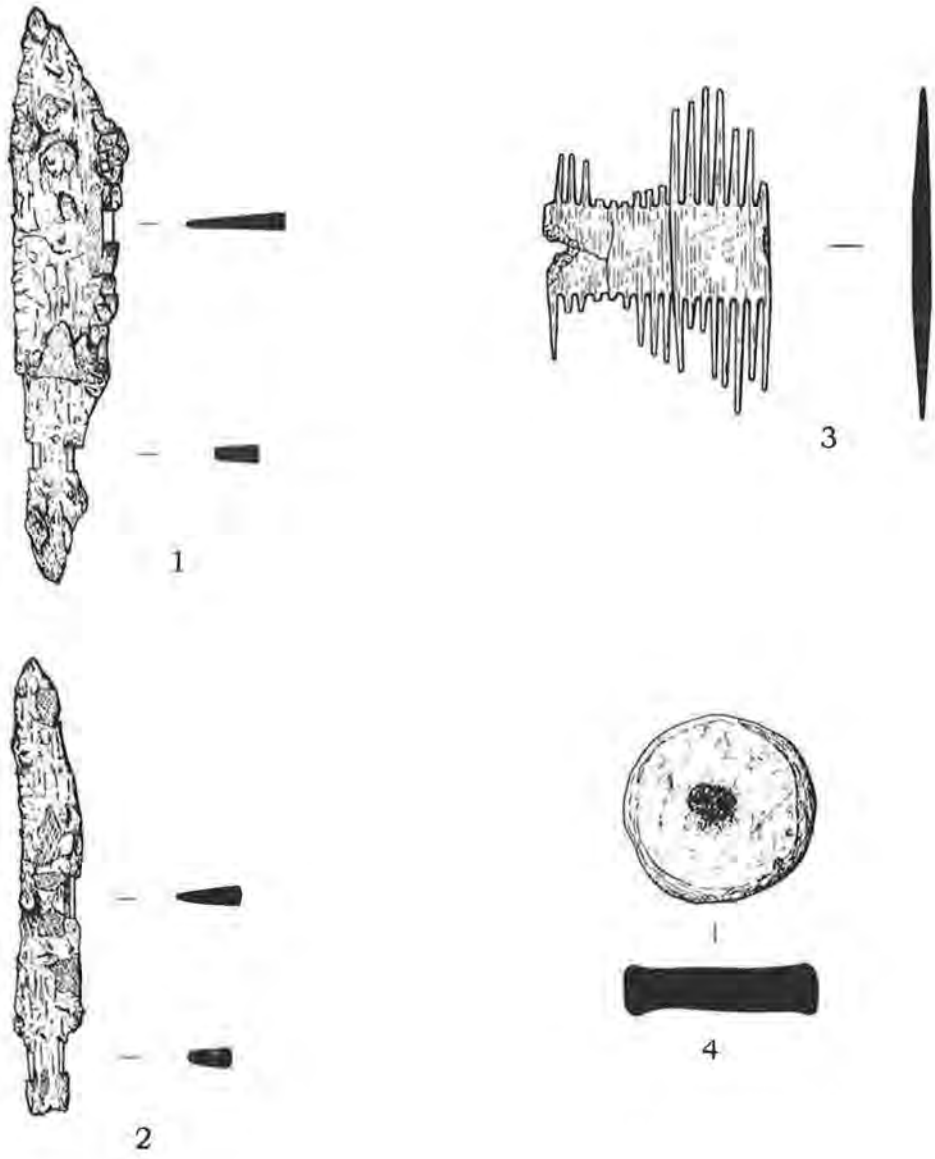

Fig. 4: 1,2: Iron Knives (1:2); 3: bone comb (1:1); 4: lead weight (1:2)

attachment on one side (a trace of iron on the opposite face suggests that the iron went right through the weight). The iron fitting may indicate a hanging weight rather than a pan weight. The weight of the item is approximately one gram below that of the half-pound avoirdupois, the avoirdupois pound having been introduced in the late thirteenth century (Biddle 1990); this weight may be considerably later. Diam 48mm; T 13mm; Wt 225.6g . U/s.

Discussion

It is unfortunate that the site had been so severely damaged before it came to archaeological

attention, although the extent of damage is not surprising, given the circumstances of the site's discovery.

The presence of the small quantity of prehistoric material is of interest, despite the absence of any prehistoric features. There is sufficient material to suggest that there was an episode of later prehistoric activity (such as a Bronze Age barrow on the crest of the ridge), evidence for which has been subsequently eroded, leaving only a scatter of "winnowed" artefacts.

The full extent of the cemetery is not known; it is probable that further burials had been removed in their entirety, but it is thought unlikely that the cemetery had been extensive.

No evidence had survived for the burial rites. There were no indications that burial had taken place in coffins, and the position of the limbs close to the body in the only instance of relatively complete preservation (no 004) seems to indicate shroud burial.

It is probably safe to assume that most, perhaps all, of the artefacts discovered on the spoilheap represent grave goods; certainly none of the items recovered would be out of place in a funerary complex. One of the knives may be dated to the seventh century; other than this the items are chronologically undiagnostic. It is likely therefore that the cemetery was in use for a relatively brief period around the seventh century, but greater precision is impossible. The location of the cemetery on the crest of a ridge is typical of the period, although the site is some distance from the parish boundary. Furthermore, there are instances of early Saxon cemeteries sited on or near the foci of earlier funerary activity, which may be the case here, if the prehistoric material is derived from a barrow on the hill crest. The date and function of the ditch which crossed the site is unknown, but it appears to be later than the cemetery, through which it cuts.

The apparently small size of the cemetery appears to be consistent with others in the region, such as Westbury, where seven individuals had been buried in the late seventh or early eighth century (Ivens, Busby and Shepherd 1995, 71–74) and Bottledump Corner, Tattenhoe, also seventh century (Parkhouse and Smith 1994) where five individuals (possibly part of a larger group) were investigated. These cemeteries were possibly the burial grounds of small family groups. The nearest cemeteries, however, are the pair situated some 4km to the east at Chamberlain's Barn, Leighton Buzzard (Hyslop 1963), which are rather larger (19 burials in cemetery 1, dated to the late sixth or early seventh century; 68 in cemetery 2, dated to the seventh century and possibly replacing Cemetery 1). Although no very large cemeteries have yet been discovered in Buckinghamshire, there is evidence for a wide range of cemetery sizes.

Archive

The site archive is held at the County Museum, ref CAS 6112; Accession no AYBCM 1996.72.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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