ROMAN BURIALS AT 40 CHURCH LANE, WEST WYCOMBE

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with contributions by SARAH INSKIP, PAUL BLINKHORN AND TORA HYLTON

After many years of speculation, excavation at 40 Church Lane, West Wycombe in July 2010 has confirmed that the human remains unearthed in the lane over the past decades had come from a Roman cemetery. A row of four graves was investigated and other human remains from a late medieval/early post-medieval ditch suggest that other graves have been disturbed in the past.

The size of the cemetery, which has been radiocarbon dated to the late Roman period, remains unknown, but it is likely to have been of limited extent, possibly by the side of a local road or track, serving a small rural community centred on a nearby villa or other minor settlement. There is currently very little evidence for a villa in this reach of the Wye Valley, although circumstantial evidence for Roman settlement in the area has been found in recent years in Wycombe Park and there are unproven claims that a Roman building, possibly a villa, lies beneath 'The Dormers', the house that stands on the site of the old manor.

INTRODUCTION

In July 2010, Northamptonshire Archaeology carried out an archaeological excavation and watching brief at a National Trust property at 40 Church Lane, West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, following the chance discovery of part of a human skull and other bone fragments during building work on the foundations of the cottage (NGR: SU 8301 9474; Fig. 1). Human bone had been discovered on previous occasions during building work in the lane, and it was commonly believed that there was a Roman or medieval cemetery on the site, or possibly a plague pit.

The building work was being carried out to prevent the reoccurrence of rising damp, caused by the accumulation of soil against the north wall of the cottage, and entailed the excavation of a c.1.0m wide trench and revetment wall around the north side of the building (Figs 2 and 3). It was during the excavation of this trench that the builders found the human remains.

Following the notification of the relevant authorities and a visit to the site by a police forensic team, Gary Marshall, National Trust archaeologist for the Thames and Solent Region, contacted Northamptonshire Archaeology and commissioned an archaeological investigation of the area to the north of the cottage and a watching brief during the excavation of a foundation trench for a new garden wall at the front of the property.

The principal aim of the project was to expose the graves from which these remains had come so that the human remains could be excavated and dated, either from artefacts or from radiocarbon dating of the bone. The subsidiary aim was to determine the date, sequence, extent and state of preservation of any other archaeological features or deposits within the area impacted by the building works.

This report has been abstracted from the client report (Carlyle 2010). The project archive will be deposited with Buckinghamshire County Museum and, in accordance with the terms of the burials licence, the human remains will be reinterred in the cemetery of St Lawrence's Church, West Wycombe, set within the Iron Age hillfort to the north.

TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

Church Lane runs northward and steeply uphill from High Street (A40). The excavation site, which covered an area of $c.15m^2$, was situated adjacent to

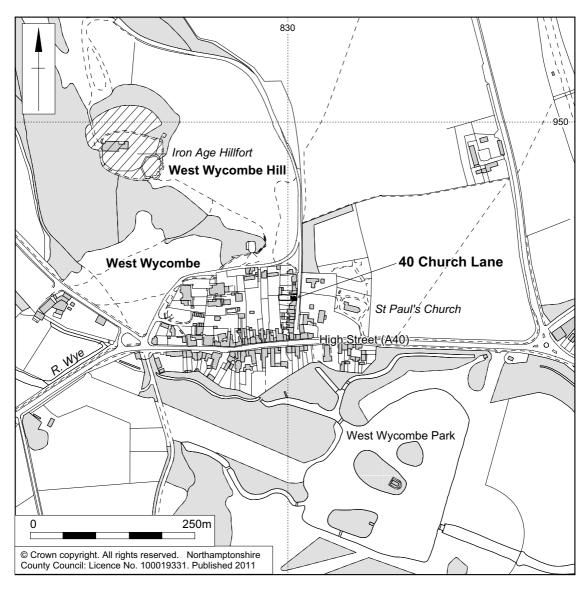


FIGURE 1 West Wycombe, showing Church Lane

the north wall of 40 Church Lane (Figs 2 and 3). Prior to building works commencing, the area was covered with a broad concrete path leading from the street to the rear of the property and it was separated from the neighbouring cottage by a wooden fence.

Topographically, the site lies on a steep southfacing slope overlooking the valley of the River Wye, at c.96m AOD. The underlying bedrock belongs to the late Cretaceous White Chalk Subgroup (BGS 1996).

HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Lying on a natural route through the Chiltern Hills, the area around West Wycombe has attracted settlement and activity since the prehistoric period and



FIGURE 2 View of 40 Church Lane, looking south-west, showing excavation site

reference to the Buckinghamshire Historic Environment Record has identified a number of archaeological sites and findspots nearby (Fig. 1).

In the Iron Age a multivallate hill fort, enclosing 1.1ha, was constructed on top of West Wycombe Hill and on the southern and northern slopes of the hill there are traces of Iron Age and Romano-British field systems. Metal detectorists have recovered c.30 late Iron Age coins from a field to the west of the hillfort and other coins and metalwork from adjoining fields, leading Farley (1995) to suggest that the hillfort may have been an important centre for trade or ritual activity in the area.

In the Roman period there may have been a road

passing down the Wye Valley from near the villa at The Rye, High Wycombe towards the Icknield Way to the west, although this has not been proven archaeologically. However, the likelihood of there having been a Roman road nearby is supported by the discovery in the 1970s of a Roman cemetery immediately to the east of the village (Farley and Wright 1979). This contained the remains of at least thirteen individuals, three of which had been buried in timber coffins, and their alignment suggested that they had been buried in a small cemetery by the side of a road. Initially radiocarbon dated to the 2nd century AD, subsequent recalibration dated the cemetery to the 4th century AD. Human remains are also reputed to have been



FIGURE 3 Site location on Church Lane

found during the construction of St Paul's church in the 1840s, with accounts claiming that a number of skeletons dating to the Roman period had been found in a number of randomly excavated graves and that they may have been the victims of a 'sanguinary encounter'.

The burials excavated in Church Lane lie c.100m to the west of the reported burials at St Paul's church. Previously, skeletons had been discovered during building work beneath the floor of the next house to the south, 41 Church Lane (at the time this was believed to be the body of an Italian gambler who had gone missing several years previously!), under the front steps of number 40 and at nearby Hill House (Hickman 1999). Until the current investigation, the date of the burials was uncertain and speculation had varied between them being the remains of victims of the Black Death or The Plague and the hastily buried remains of executed footpads.

There is no certain evidence for Roman settlement in West Wycombe, although there are unconfirmed claims that there may be a villa beneath 'The Dormers', the house that stands on the site of the old manor house. Recent dredging of the lake in West Wycombe Park led to the discovery of 237 Roman coins and five brooches (Marshall 2008).

The village of West Wycombe, which was purchased by the National Trust in 1929, contains many fine buildings, dating from the 16th to 19th centuries. Amongst these are the cottages in Church Lane, including number 40. The original cottage, now 40 and 41 Church Lane, was built in the 17th century as a single one-and-a-half storey timber-framed dwelling of four bays (National Trust building survey report, undated). It did not extend as far to the north as the modern building; the original north gable wall of the cottage is now the partition wall between the two properties. In the early 18th century the front and gable walls were cased in brick and in the mid 18th century (prior to 1767) the cottage was divided into two separate dwellings, with a single-bay brick extension being added on the northern side. In the late 18th century a single-storey lean-to was added to the rear of the south cottage; this was raised in height to one-anda-half storeys in the early 19th century. Further extensions were constructed in the late 19th and early 20th century, including the lean-to against the north gable wall that would have probably disturbed the Roman burials investigated by the

current project. The latest extension was a bathroom, built in the mid 20th century on the northwest corner of the north cottage.

Methodology

The overburden was removed by hand down to the uppermost archaeological horizon. Due to the limited working space, no spoil could be stacked on site so excavated soil was placed directly into the back of a truck and removed from the site. All spoil was scanned with a metal detector prior to removal.

Once the extent of the graves had been determined, the site was screened off from the public using black tarpaulins and wooden boards. The individual graves were excavated to expose the skeletal remains and they were planned at a scale of 1:10, photographed and recorded. The skeletons were lifted and placed in labelled bags and stored in cardboard finds boxes.

THE ROMAN BURIALS

To the north of the cottage and cut into the chalk bedrock was a row of four graves (burials 9, 12, 15 & 26), arranged side-by-side (Fig. 4). They were all aligned near north to south, with the heads at the northern end of the graves. The cutting of the builder's revetment trench and the foundation trench for the north wall of the cottage had truncated the lower halves of the burials, generally from the waist downwards (Fig. 5). The graves were filled with light brown clayey silt, with frequent fine to coarse chalk pebbles, the high chalk content indicating that this is excavated material from the cutting of the graves.

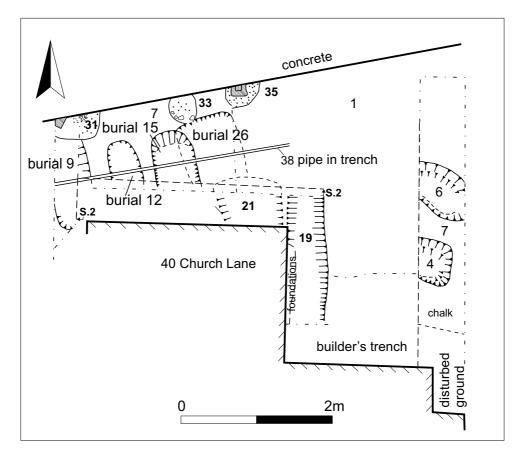


FIGURE 4 Plan of excavated trench

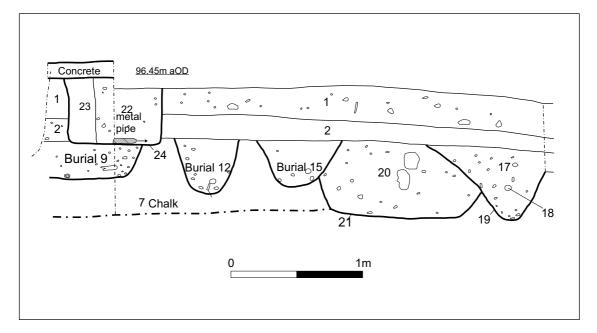


FIGURE 5 Section along edge of the builder's trench

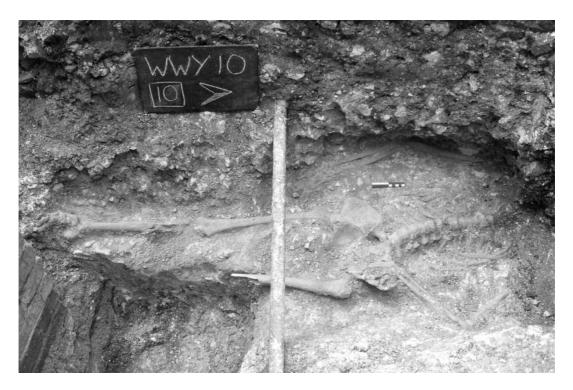


FIGURE 6 Burial 9, left leg cut by builder's trench, head to north

Burial 9 lay at the western end of the builder's trench, by the north-west corner of the cottage, in a grave slightly offset to the north from the rest of the row (Figs 4-6). The grave had near vertical sides and a flat base, 0.55m wide and 0.29m deep. The burial, lying extended and supine (on her back), was of a young female, c 1.60m tall. The skull and upper thorax had been truncated by a modern fencepost, 31, and most of the left leg had been removed by the builder's trench. The upper part of the fill of the grave had been disturbed by a modern pipe trench, 24.

Burial 12 lay to the east of burial 9. The grave was 0.42m wide and 0.42m deep. The burial was extended and prone (face down), and the lower half of the body and the lower arms had been removed by the builder's trench (Figs 4, 5 & 7). This was an older individual, probably male, *c*. 1.64m tall. There was extensive osteoarthritis in the cervical vertebra, and at least 12 teeth out of 24 observable teeth had been lost sometime prior to death. The remaining teeth were heavily worn, with all lower incisors worn down to the tooth cervix, and there was an abscess on a lower premolar and new bone growth may derive from a long term infection relating to the loss of upper molars.

Burial 15 was in a grave 0.56m wide by 0.34m deep, with its eastern edge cutting the fill of the grave containing burial 26. The burial had been placed in an extended, supine position, but was heavily truncated so that only the skull, thoracic region and parts of the upper arm survived (Figs 4, 5 and 8). This was an older individual of indeterminate sex, c.1.67m tall. He/she had worn and decayed teeth, several of which had been lost antemortem, and may have suffered from osteoporosis, which is unsurprising considering the advanced age of the individual. An abscess and remodelled new bone growth was probably related to the loss

of all but one of the upper molars sometime prior to death. A single hypoplastic band was visible on the canines. Part of an iron nail came from the grave fill.

Burial 26 lay at the eastern end of the excavated row in a grave 0.82m wide by 0.44m deep. The burial was placed in an extended, prone position, and was a young adult male, c.1.79m tall (Figs 4 & 9). The legs and hands had been removed by the end of another possible grave, 21, and also the builder's trench. An iron nail was recovered from the fill.

The possible grave, 21, was almost entirely truncated by the builder's trench and the north wall of the cottage (Figs 4 and 5). It cut the southern end of the grave containing burial 26 and was cut by the grave containing burial 15, indicating that the feature also dates to the later Roman period, and the steep-sided flat bottomed pit was similar in form to the grave containing burial 26.

A length of rib from burial 12 was submitted for radiocarbon dating by Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS). This has dated the burial to the late Roman period, the mid 3rd to early 5th centuries (AD 240–420 at 95% confidence: Table 1).

LATE 15TH/16TH-CENTURY DITCHES AND PITS

On the east side of the cottage a ditch, 19, had been largely truncated by the builder's revetment trench (Fig. 4). It was the fragments of human skull recovered from this ditch that first alerted the builders to the presence of human remains. The ditch had a V-shaped profile, c.1.0m wide by 0.54m deep (Fig. 5). It extended beneath the cottage to the south and into the neighbouring property to the north, running parallel to Church Lane. The fill of mid greyish-brown slightly clayey silt, 17, with

| Laboratory and sample number | Context | Sample details | C13/C12 N15/N14 | Conventional Radiocarbon Age BP | Cal AD 68% confidence 95% confidence |
|------------------------------------|-----------|------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Beta-285988 WWY/B3 | Burial 12 | Human bone (rib) | -20.1 +9.2 | 1710+/-40 | 260-300 & 310-390 240-420 |

TABLE 1 The radiocarbon determination

Laboratory: Beta Analytic, Miami, Florida, USA

Calibration: INTCAL04 Radiocarbon Age Calibration

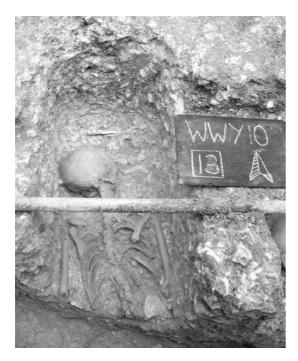


FIGURE 7 Burial 12, lying prone (face down), head to north



FIGURE 8 Burial 15, head to north

frequent sub-angular chalk pebbles, contained the fragmented, disarticulated remains of at least two human skeletons. Sherds of Roman and late medieval pottery recovered from the ditch suggest that it dates to the late 15th century or slightly later.

At the front of the property and extending from the north-east corner of the cottage, the builders dug a foundation trench, under archaeological supervision, for a new front wall. It was excavated to the chalk bedrock, 7, a depth of up to 0.6m below the existing ground surface. Within the foundation trench and cut into the chalk were two subrectangular pits, 4 and 6, with steep to vertical sides and flat bases (Fig. 4). Pit 4 was 0.58m long by 0.42m wide by 0.46m deep, and pit 6 was slightly larger. Both had fills of light brown silty clay with frequent chalk pebbles and occasional flint nodules, and they appeared to have been backfilled shortly after they were dug. Pit 4 contained a sherd of 'Tudor Green' pottery, suggesting that they probably date to the late 15th or early 16th century and are broadly contemporary with ditch 19.

MODERN FEATURES AND DEPOSITS

Overlying the Roman and late medieval features was a layer of subsoil, 2, mid greyish-brown slightly clayey silt containing flint pebbles, chalk flecks and fragments of roof tile. This deposit was up to 0.2m thick where it had accumulated against the wall of the cottage, thinning to 0.1m thick at the boundary with the adjacent property to the north (Fig. 5).

Overlying the subsoil was a layer of garden soil, 1, approximately 0.3m thick, of dry, friable mid brownish-grey organic silt, which contained brick and tile fragments, nodules of flint, animal bone, sherds of 18th- and 19th-century pottery and fragments of bottle glass. Part of a rowel-spur, possibly dating to the medieval period, was also recovered from this layer.

Cut into the top of the garden soil at the boundary between the two properties were two postholes, 31 and 35, *c*.0.6m in diameter and 0.6m deep, which still held the rotted remains of timber posts. They were spaced *c*.2m apart, and are all that remains of a modern timber fence (Fig. 4). Posthole 31 had truncated the skull and shoulders of Burial 9; and part of the skull was recovered from the fill. A third posthole, 33, possibly part of an earlier fence, lay 0.5m to the west of posthole 35.

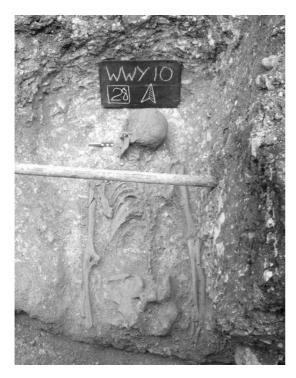


FIGURE 9 Burial 26, lying prone, head to north

Prior to the building works, the garden soil had been covered with a layer of concrete that had formed a wide path on the north side of the cottage, providing access to the garden and rear door of the building. The concrete was c.0.12m thick and had a weathered surface, suggesting that it had been put down in the mid 20th century, if not earlier.

THE ROMAN AND MEDIEVAL POTTERY by Paul Blinkhorn

The Romano-British pottery comprised two sherds, 7g, of local greyware (2nd-4th centuries, Fabric 28: Milton Keynes Archaeological Unit Roman typeseries (Marney 1989).

The medieval pottery comprised: a sherd, 6g, of Brill/Boarstall ware (1200–?1600, Fabric MS9: Milton Keynes Archaeological Unit type-series; Mynard and Zeepvat 1992 & Zeepvat *et al* 1994) from ditch 18, which also produced the Roman pottery; and a sherd, 5g, of Tudor Green type (15th to early 17th centuries; Fabric TLMS17) from pit 4. The Brill sherd is in a late medieval fabric, which suggests that both the potteryproducing features were of 15th- to early 16thcentury date.

METAL OBJECTS by Tora Hylton

From grave earth associated with Burials 15 and 26 two iron nails, incomplete and complete, were recovered, both encrusted in chalk rich corrosion deposits. These were probably introduced during the backfilling of the graves. The complete nail is a Manning Type 1b, *c*.80mm long (1985, fig. 32).

Part of a rowel-spur was recovered from garden soil. The terminals of the arms, the rowel and most of the rowel-box are missing, making it difficult to date accurately, but stylistically this spur may be of late medieval /early post-medieval date.

DISCUSSION

Roman burial practices by Sarah Inskip

One of the most interesting aspects of the Church Lane skeletons, and indeed Roman burial as a whole, is that there is such a wide range of burial types and locations (Cleary 2000). At Church Lane, two of the burials were prone (face down) and two were supine (on their backs). Prone burials are relatively common in the Roman period, occurring as isolated individual graves as well as in organised cemeteries. A systematic study of prone burials has shown that although they are rarer than supine extended and crouched burials (Philpott 1991, 72), they can sometimes make up a substantial percentage of burials within a cemetery, e.g. 12% at Kempston (Boylston et al 2000) and 8.8% at Cirencester (Philpott 1991); prone burials become increasingly more common in the 4th century AD.

Boylston *et al* (2000) suggest that prone burials are a way of marking out people as different to the rest of the population. Philpott (1991) suggests that prone burials may have been used for criminals or to prevent the dead from walking. It is difficult to assume that the burials at Church Lane represent deviants in some way, particularly as they appear to have been buried in the same way as the supine burials, just facing downwards. There is no evidence for binding or decapitation. It is however interesting to note that the two other local inhumation cemeteries contained no prone burials.

Burial orientation varies in the Roman period. It has been suggested that east to west inhumations may represent Christian graves and north to south, pagan (Philpott 1991). The burial orientation at the three inhumation cemeteries at West Wycombe and High Wycombe were individually uniform but varied between sites. The burials at Church Lane were north to south, while at Sands they were north-west to south-east and at Portway they were east-west. Without secure dating, it is not possible to speculate whether or not the variation in burial orientation is related to conversion to Christianity. Further to this, Hope (1999, 60) comments that the evidence we would need to suggest this is not forthcoming from the graves and that actually there might have been no distinction in how pagans and Christians were buried.

A second possible explanation is provided by Farley and Wright (1978), with the relationship between Roman burials and roads. The north-west to south-east orientation of the Sands burials is explained by their location next to a possible Roman road running between High Wycombe and West Wycombe. They derive this argument from the analysis of differently orientated burials at Lynch Farm, where graves were orientated east to west or north to south, depending on where they were situated in relation to a particular field (Farley and Wright 1978, 87). It is thought that the Roman road running from High Wycombe to West Wycombe turns north to meet Icknield Way after High Wycombe (Chiltern Archaeology online). If this theory is correct, the burials at West Wycombe could be parallel to the road as it turns towards the Oxford area, and as such are orientated near north to south. This idea is further reinforced by the fact that the burials at Portway Drive are east to west, which would also be parallel to the road.

The Roman burials

The arrangement of the graves in the small part of the cemetery available for investigation appears to indicate that the graves were laid out in a row, and the fairly regular spacing of the burials suggests that the graves were marked in some way. However, further graves over a wider area would have to be investigated to determine if it was a 'managed' cemetery, of the type described by Thomas (1981), or whether the four graves are perhaps a kin grouping and form a cluster in a cemetery with a less regular layout, a character that is more typical of rural Roman cemeteries. Despite their relative proximity, the haphazard character of the alleged Roman graves at St Paul's suggests that there are two distinct burial grounds in West Wycombe, not including the cemetery investigated by Farley and Wright (1979) to the west of the town. Future archaeological investigation of groundworks in Church Lane could add considerably to our understanding of the Roman cemetery and its relationship with Roman settlement and activity in the area.

The alignment of the graves at near north to south may have been dictated by a pre-existing boundary, such as a track or field boundary, or by religious custom. The possible identification of pagan or Christian burials from grave alignment has been widely discussed (see above), but is fairly inconclusive, particularly in relation to small rural cemeteries. There were no grave goods accompanying the burials and there was no evidence for wooden coffins or any form of grave lining; the two nails recovered were probably shovelled into the graves with the backfill. It is likely that the individuals were buried in shrouds.

The possibility of there having been a Roman road in the Wye valley at West Wycombe has been forwarded by Head (1974), although as he admits, there is no archaeological evidence for this and the claim is largely based on circumstantial evidence and the writings of a local historian (Harman 1934). However, such a natural route through the Chilterns at this point, and the presence of a hill fort, suggests that there may have been a longestablished track down the Wye valley in the Roman period, with sidetracks branching off to higher ground on the valley slopes. It is therefore not inconceivable that the Roman cemetery at Church Lane was positioned by the side of a small track leading up towards the top of Wycombe Hill.

The radiocarbon date obtained from one of the burials places the cemetery between the mid 3rd to early 5th centuries, which covers the expected date range for Roman inhumation cemeteries. Prior to this, cremation of the body and burial of the cremated bone, often with grave goods, was the preferred burial rite. This trend towards inhumation was prevalent over much of the Roman Empire, probably beginning in Rome in the 2nd century AD and then radiating out across the provinces, to become the principal burial rite by the mid 3rd

century. This transition has been linked to the spread of Christianity, and to a certain extent this may be the case, but as Petts (2003) has suggested, it is more likely to have been linked to the increasing social and political power and influence of the Church after the Edict of Milan in AD313 than to the requirements of any particular religious practice. Indeed, contemporary Christian religious texts make little mention of burial rites and it is likely that, at least initially, Christians adopted the same burial rites as pagans; it is only later in the 4th century that there appears to have been an increasing Christianization of burial practices, evident at the larger urban 'managed', cemeteries such as Poundbury, Dorset and Ashton, Northamptonshire.

15th-/early 16th-century features and later deposits

The late medieval/early post-medieval ditch was probably a drainage ditch along the western side of Church Lane. The cutting of this ditch disturbed at least two Roman graves and the disinterred bones eventually found their way into the ditch, along with two abraded sherds of Roman greyware and a sherd of 15th-/early 16th-century Brill/Boarstall ware. At this time, the area to the west of this stretch of Church Lane was probably fields, with development to the north of High Street coming later, in the 17th century. The two pits by the side of the road date to the same period; they appear to have been backfilled shortly after they were excavated.

Following the building of the cottages in Church Lane in the 17th century, and the subsequent additions over the next three hundred years, a layer of dark garden soil gradually accumulated to the north of the cottages. This overlay a layer of mineralised soil (subsoil) that sealed the Roman graves. In the late 19th/early 20th century a single-storey extension was built on the north side of the cottage, the foundation trench for which probably truncated the southern ends of the Roman graves and may have entirely destroyed a fifth grave, only a small part of which survived in the builder's trench excavated for the current remedial building works. The insertion of a water pipe and the erection of a timber fence also caused damage to the Roman burials, with fragments of human skull being found in the packing of one of the fence postholes.

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