

## **Preliminary report on the archaeological investigation of a Romano-British cemetery at Burton Latimer, Northamptonshire**

*Over the last month Albion Archaeology has undertaken archaeological investigations of a Romano-British cemetery on the outskirts of Burton Latimer. Work has been overseen by CgMs Consulting on behalf of David Wilson Homes (South Midlands) in advance of housing development. The investigations have been undertaken in accordance with a WSI approved by the LPA and a licence for lifting human remains issued by the the Ministry of Justice. This report presents a preliminary summary of results and it should be stressed that it has been written prior to any analysis of the records, human bone or finds which will reveal significant details about the inhabitants, their health, lifestyle and cause of death.*



*Archaeological investigation of two graves within the cemetery with other fully excavated graves visible (note the Burton Wold wind turbines in the background)*

### **BACKGROUND**

David Wilson Homes (South Midlands) were granted planning permission for residential development on the outskirts of Burton Latimer, with a condition requiring excavation of the Romano-British farmstead within the site.

The farmstead had been located by archaeological evaluation (geophysical survey and trenching), undertaken as part of the planning process.

No human burials were found during the evaluation. However, small numbers of burials are commonly found on rural settlements in Roman Britain.

### **THE CEMETERY**

A total of 30 burials were present in the cemetery. All except one were located within one of the farmstead's more peripheral ditched enclosures. The graves were positioned adjacent and parallel to the ditches, suggesting that they were contemporary with the enclosure, the

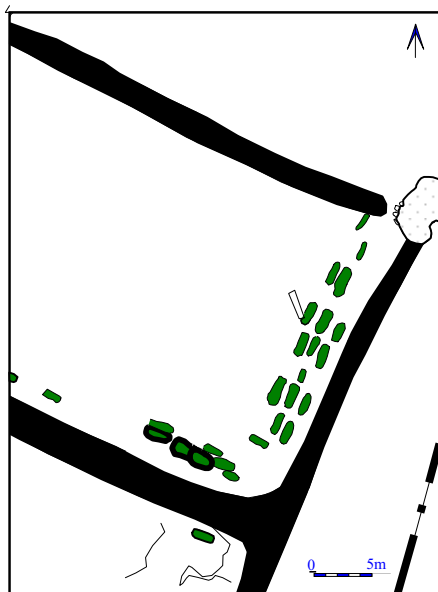
remainder of which seemed to be just open space.



*Two graves under investigation*

### Date of use

Provisional identification of finds from the graves suggests that the cemetery was in use during the late 3rd/early 4th centuries AD.



*Plan of the cemetery (thick black lines = multiple burials)*

### The graves

All the graves were neatly dug and arranged in approximate rows with no more than three graves adjacent to each other. They had been dug to variable depths and at least three contained multiple burials (see below).

### Burial position

In the majority of the graves the body had been laid out straight on its back with legs extended (a position termed “supine” by archaeologists). The arms were crossed on the front in various attitudes. This was the typical burial position within Roman Britain.



*One of the many supine burials*

There were, however, single examples of alternative body positions — crouched, body laid on its side and prone (on its front). It is not clear if these different positions had any special significance.



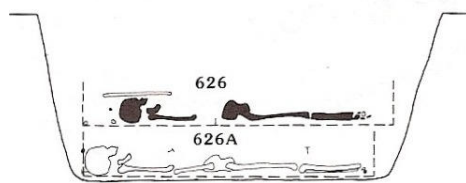
*Only one of the burials was in a crouched position*

### Graves with multiple burials

Three definite examples of multiple burials placed at different times in the same grave plot were identified. The overall spacing of the graves and the absence of intercutting suggest that there was no real pressure on

space in the cemetery. Therefore, the occurrence of grave plots with multiple burials on a rural site like Burton Latimer is significant, especially as this practice is more common in urban cemeteries in Roman Britain or in the post-Roman period.

For obvious reasons the graves are referred to as “double-” and “triple-deckers”. It is presumed that they represent the later burial within the same grave of a relative and this may be confirmed when analysis of the bone is undertaken. In the case of the triple-decker the grave was exceptionally deep, suggesting that the three people buried died simultaneously..



*An example of a double-decker from Poundbury, Dorset*

### Decapitations

Two bodies had been decapitated with the head placed between the lower legs in one instance and to the side of the lower leg in the other.

Although fairly rare, such burial practice is known in Roman Britain. Only analysis of the bone will reveal whether beheading was the cause of death - but it is more likely that the heads were removed as a ritual act after death.. The position of the body and the presence of grave goods tend to suggest that these people were not criminals. However, an understanding of the reasons for such occurrences remains elusive. Some heads may have been removed after death to “prevent the dead walking” or as part of religious rites indicating respect for the head as the seat of the soul.



*One of the two decapitation burials under investigation*

### Coffins and grave linings

Several of the graves produced evidence for coffins or protection of the body by some other means, e.g. a timber cover, supported on stone blocks placed around the head and feet. Evidence for coffins was found in the form of coffin nails, coffin fittings, the position of the body and grave shape.



*An example of stone lining*

### Grave goods

Three main types of grave goods were found in the graves: pottery vessels, coins and animal remains. These are usually interpreted as offerings to the gods or as things the individual might need, either in the afterlife or during the journey to it.



*Some of the pottery recovered from graves*



*One of the pottery vessels placed in a grave*

Two graves contained coins. These are a good example of objects likely to be needed for the journey to the world of the dead (Charon's fee). One of the graves is intriguing because three coins were found at its base on carbonised wood. This grave was one of the triple-deckers and the presence of three coins suggests that the occupants died and therefore journeyed to the afterlife simultaneously.



*Coin attached to carbonised wood found at base of grave*

Several graves contained pottery vessels (which presumably originally held either food or drink) and one grave contained animal bone. These offerings could have been for the individual's use in the afterlife or for the gods.



*The remains of two pottery vessels placed near the feet*

Most of the pottery vessels had been placed intact by the body. However, within several graves they appear to have been deliberately smashed and placed in different places within the grave. This was presumably part of the funerary rite.

#### WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The fieldwork is only the first stage of the investigations. It will be followed by office-based study, in which all the records, finds and human remains will be catalogued and analysed by specialists in universities and museums across the country. Ultimately an article summarising the results will be published in the county journal

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