

OAU NEWS

March 1991

FOUL PLAY AT YARNTON ?

The body of a young Anglo-Saxon woman who may have met a violent end has been found in a ditch at Yarnton. The body was lying face down with the legs bent up behind the back. The body of an infant was found in the same ditch. Police are anxious to contact anyone who was in the Yarnton area in the 7th century AD.

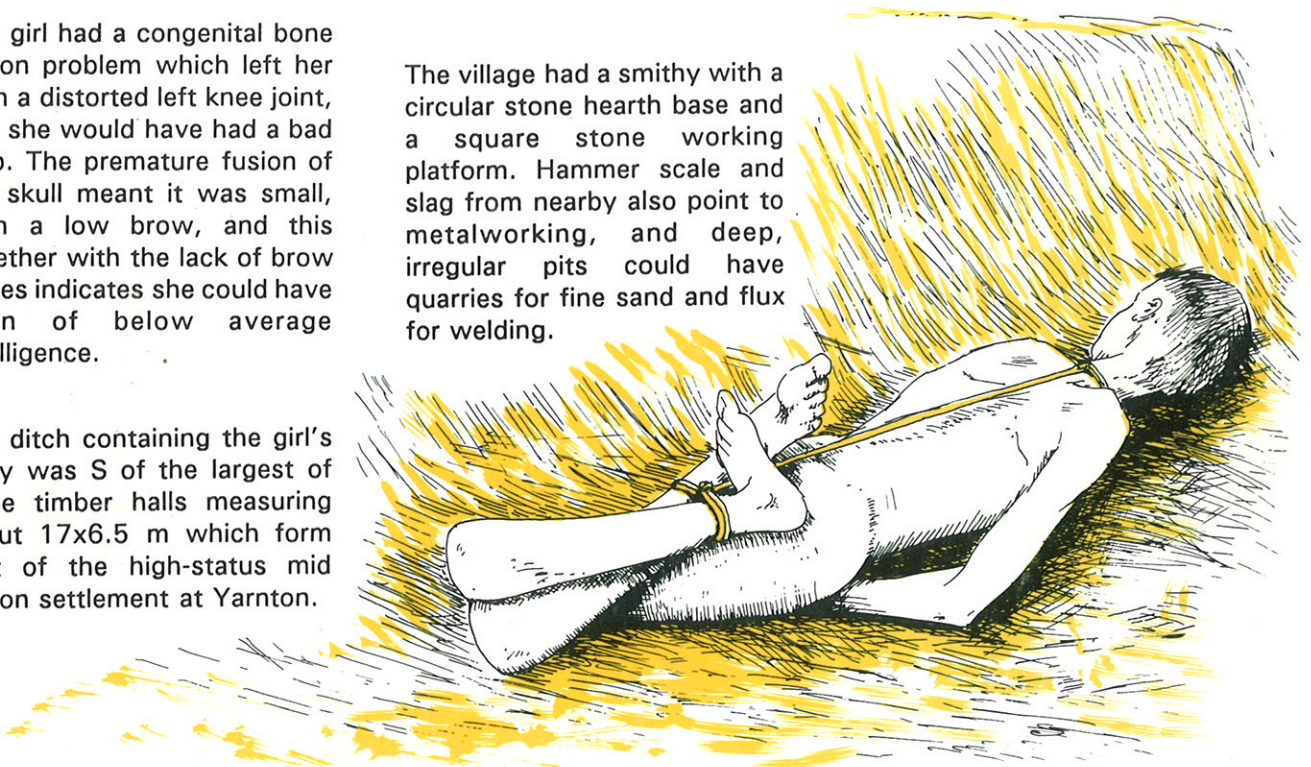
The girl had a congenital bone fusion problem which left her with a distorted left knee joint, and she would have had a bad limp. The premature fusion of the skull meant it was small, with a low brow, and this together with the lack of brow ridges indicates she could have been of below average intelligence.

The ditch containing the girl's body was S of the largest of three timber halls measuring about 17x6.5 m which form part of the high-status mid Saxon settlement at Yarnton.

Smaller timber buildings and 12 sunken featured buildings (SFBs) have been found, all in the SW of the area. SFBs are a common feature on Anglo-Saxon sites, consisting of rectangular pits containing two or more posts which may have supported suspended floors and gable roofs, with low side walls of timber and wattles. They may have been used as workrooms.

The village had a smithy with a circular stone hearth base and a square stone working platform. Hammer scale and slag from nearby also point to metalworking, and deep, irregular pits could have quarries for fine sand and flux for welding.

The Saxon settlement is next to the Iron Age and Romano-British village excavated last year, and the Saxon cemetery destroyed by the 19th-century railway and gravel workings to the N probably belonged to it. It forms part of a gradual drift eastwards over the centuries towards the site of the present village of Yarnton.



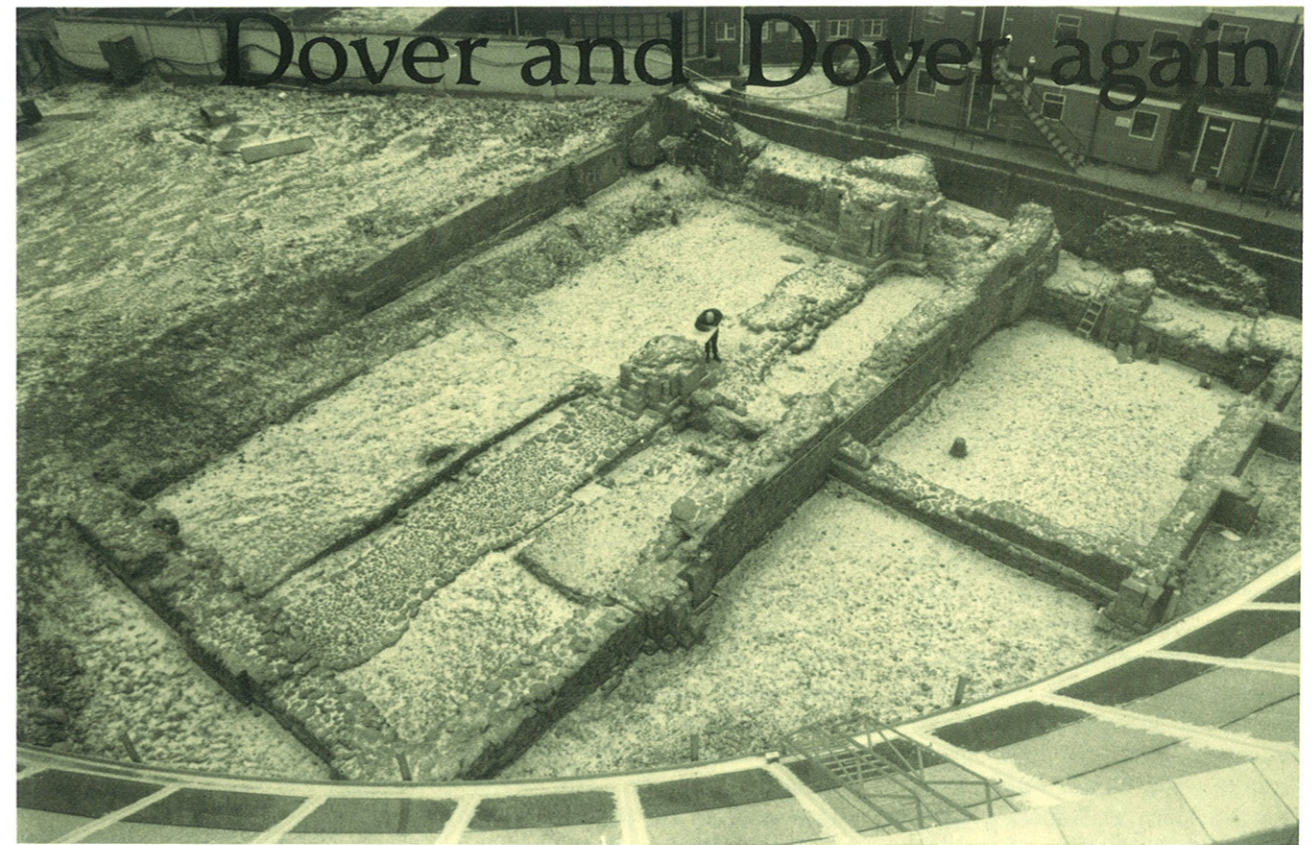
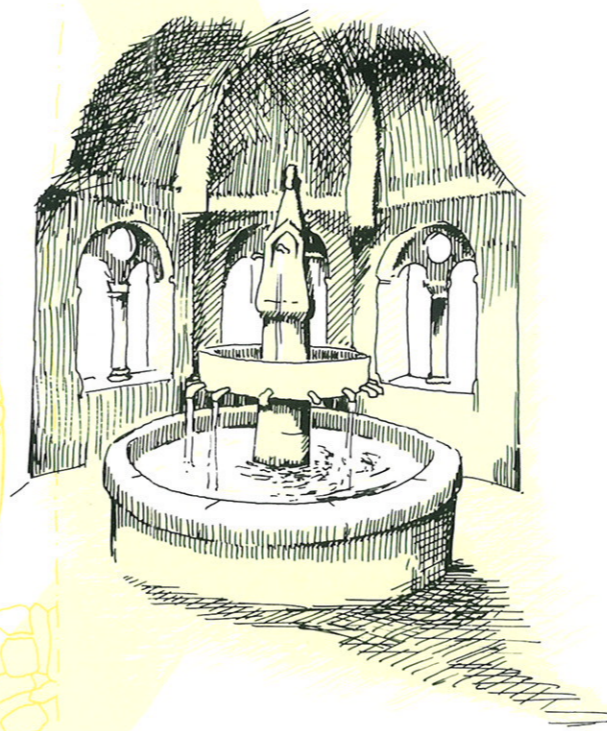
CLEANLINESS AND GODLINESS AT EYNSHAM ABBEY

Excavations at Eynsham Abbey keep on turning up the unexpected. In the SW corner of the cloister garth we found the Norman equivalent of the wash-hand basin. The structures or 'lavers' consisted of a circular support for a large basin surrounded by a concentric enclosure wall. The monks washed their hands in the lavers before going to eat, and their position shows that the building to the S of the cloister must have been the refectory.

The late Saxon Abbey at Eynsham is turning out to be much more complicated than expected. So far, excavation has uncovered the SW side of the cloister, a range of rooms on the cloister's W side and the refectory where the Saxon monks took their meals.

Long before even the Saxon minster was thought of there was Bronze Age occupation of the site. We have now found several pits, postholes and gullies inside a massive ditched enclosure.

Part of the stone-flagged floor of the W cloister walk has also been found - up till now we thought it had been robbed for building stone by Eynsham's thrifty inhabitants after Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. Their excessive diligence means that very little of the Abbey's original stonework survives, and we have to piece together the plan from robber trenches.



Chris Lyons, Site Supervisor, making the final touches to scale drawings of St Martin-le-Grand, Dover.

January and February saw a team from the OAU back in Dover to carry out the final phase of archaeological work before the White Cliffs Experience opens. Two sites, first excavated in the 1970s by the Kent Archaeological Rescue Unit, were cleared, cleaned and recorded. A programme of conservation will follow. The photographs show how both the Norman church of St Martin-le-Grand and the Roman forts site are overlooked by specially constructed viewing galleries. These galleries are one of the most exciting features of the Experience - a heritage centre and museum complex - which will be opened on May 1st by Princess Anne.

In the foreground is part of the east Gatehouse of the 2nd-century Classis Britannica fort, overlain by a semicircular bastion of the 3rd-century Saxon Shore fort. The viewing gallery curves round the site, while Dover Castle can be seen in the background.



From Oxenford to Folly Bridge



Oxford owes its importance - and name - to its position at a crossing point of the Thames. British Telecom's new tunnel in St Aldates provided a chance to explore the archaeology of the Oxen Ford.

How many drivers in the nose-to-tail rush hour traffic realise that the 19th-century Folly Bridge incorporates road arches belonging to the oldest - and one of the longest - medieval bridges in northern Europe? This is the great bridge - the *Grand Pont* - built by the Norman Robert d'Oilly, with massive arches stretching away to the S over the marshy ground.

Excavation at the Crown Court site in the early 70s revealed a paved river bed which was probably a late Saxon version of the Oxen Ford. Timbers from beneath the road may have belonged to a wooden bridge of the same period.

How did Saxon travellers keep their feet dry as they crossed the swampy floodplain towards the bridge? Part of the answer was found in 1971 with traces of a great clay causeway. This massive piece of civil engineering dated the reign of Offa, King of Mercia from 757-796.

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BT's decision to put in a telecommunications duct at the junction of Thames St and St Aldates provided the OAU with a golden opportunity to look for something similar on the Berkshire side of the Saxon channel, N of the present course of the river.

The results have been spectacular. A new section across the stone causeway is differently constructed from the one seen before - at this point it was on dry(ish) land rather than in the river. Underneath are timbers which probably belong to the timber bridge, driven through a bank of clay which may be more of the Offa causeway. Below this is the alluvial clay paved with stone of what used to be thought a natural channel. This could belong to the Offa period or earlier, but with two fords one on top of the other it is not easy to say which is which.

The date of the earliest bridge in England, the most important link in early medieval England's communications system, will be of more than local interest. This is where modern dating techniques will come into their own. Tree ring dating of the timbers could establish whether this is a Saxon bridge - otherwise they must belong to the construction work on the Norman bridge.

Radiocarbon (C^{14}) dating of the early ford levels is another possibility. The accelerator laboratory at Oxford University could produce broad dates from the very small amounts of carbon in these deposits.

New Publications

The OAU's archaeological survey *Historic Dover: an archaeological implications survey of the town* by David R P Wilkinson was published in March by Dover District Council. Price £4.95.

Tim Allen's recent report *An Iron Age and Romano-British enclosed settlement at Watkins Farm, Northmoor, Oxon.* is published by Oxbow Books, Park End Place, Oxford OX1 1HN. Price £12.

This is the first volume of the Unit's Thames Valley landscapes series, undertaken jointly with English Heritage and the Oxford University Committee for Archaeology.

The new *Oxoniensia* (1989) contains the final report on excavations by the OAU and its predecessor in St Ebbe's, begun by the youthful Tom Hassall when the Westgate Centre was still a sinister twinkle in a planner's eye.



Work in progress: December 1990 - March 1991

Field officer **Graham Keevill**
1990

Reading, Hartley Court Farm
assessment

Reading, Hop Kiln Farm fieldwalking
1991

Eynsham, continuing excavation
Abingdon, assessment followed by
excavation

Reading, assessment

Culworth, assessment

Highdown Wood, Sussex,
environmental assessment

Field officer **Gill Hey**

Tubney New Plantation, Mesolithic flint
scatter (with Mark Roberts)

Yarnton, Worton Rectory Farm,
continuing excavation

Field officer **Dave Wilkinson**

Excavations in Dover

Supervisor **Greg Campbell**

BT tunnel, St Aldates