

OAU NEWS

The Oxford Archaeological Unit Newsletter

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HOGARTH REVISITED: AN OXFORD COCKPIT

Balliol College decided to extend its annexe at Holywell Manor, a medieval manor house next to St Cross church, just outside the New College city walls in the middle of Oxford. It sounded like a small job, and Andy Parkinson undertook a watching brief on behalf of the OAU. As usual, things turned out to be more complicated than expected and three levels of wall were found, so the area of the proposed new kitchens was stripped.

The deepest of the three walls proved to be part of a circular structure, cut through by a stone well; to the W was another wall, straight and more substantial.

The structure was about 5 m in diameter, big enough for a small dovecote, and indeed there are illustrations of a dovecote at one corner of Holywell manor house in the 17th century. However, this was no simple wall, but a double one, with the only facing stonework looking inwards, forming the lining of the deep cavity between the two.

There are 17th-century references to rats in dovecotes, when builders were advised to make the foundations of stone. Was this an elaborate rat trap?

The College meanwhile was taking a close interest in the work, and reminded us of the cockpit which appears on plans after the dovecote had gone, but the cockpit illustrated by Malchair was much bigger, and octagonal.

Then light dawned; a fragment of wall set back 3 m from the circle was the right size and in the right place to be part of the outer wall, in which case the circular structure would have been the fighting stage which would have formed the centre of the building.

Hogarth shows vividly the sort of gathering that an 18th-century cock fight would have been, with the birds on a circular stage. The double wall



at Holywell immediately becomes explicable, because it is clear that to operate the fighting birds someone would need to move around in front of the audience without obscuring their view. The outer ring of stone could be the first stage of 'terracing' as in a football stadium, raising the spectators up to a viewing height.

Several surviving buildings are known or suspected to have been cockpits, and one of them has been rebuilt, with a reconstructed fighting stage, at the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagans. What was found at Holywell now survives only below the level of the new concrete floor of a kitchen extension, but the architects reported plans to preserve the well shaft under a slab in the kitchen.

Brian Durham



WALLY CORNER, BERINSFIELD

The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Wally Corner, Berinsfield, approximately 1 km N of Dorchester-on-Thames, was discovered by chance in August 1974. One of the Unit's archaeologists noticed in passing that human bones were being uncovered by gravel quarrying and told David Miles, now the Unit Director, who was then excavating Barton Court Farm, near Abingdon. David recognised the importance of the site and immediately

diverted the necessary resources for a three-week rescue excavation followed by a further two weeks' work in 1975. The work took place with assistance from the site owners, ARC, and one of the ancestors of English Heritage. After a number of delays, the report on the excavations is now complete.

The site's importance lies in the fact that it contains some of the earliest datable Saxon burials in the Upper Thames valley, and it is likely that these people were among the first generations of Saxon settlers to come to England.

Why they settled so close to Dorchester is one of the puzzles of early Anglo-Saxon archaeology. Three Germanic burials dating from the early 5th century have been found at Dorchester itself, and there may have been some relationship between the Romano-British inhabitants of the decaying town and the newcomers from the continent.

The earliest Anglo-Saxon burials at Wally Corner have

distinctive continental forms of brooches and spears, and probably date from the middle of the 5th century; the cemetery continued in use for about 150 years. Although many graves were probably destroyed by gravel quarrying before the cemetery was recognised, the excavations recovered a total of 104 graves and cremations, containing 118 burials of men, women and children.

As well as the Anglo-Saxon remains, excavation revealed a pit, which has been interpreted as the remains of a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age pond barrow; the well-known Dorchester Neolithic ceremonial sites are located approximately 1 km to the SE. During the Roman period, the site was part of a system of field enclosures in use from the later 1st century to the 4th century AD.

When the history of British archaeology in the 20th century comes to be written the story of how Wally Corner was excavated deserves at least a footnote. Those were



Group of graves from the E sector of the cemetery looking S. Grave 150 contained the burials of a 14-year-old girl and a 3-year-old child. Grave 149 (bottom centre) cut away the top half of grave 148, whose flexed legs can be seen to the left. At the feet of grave 129 (bottom right) is the burial of a sheep, not necessarily associated.

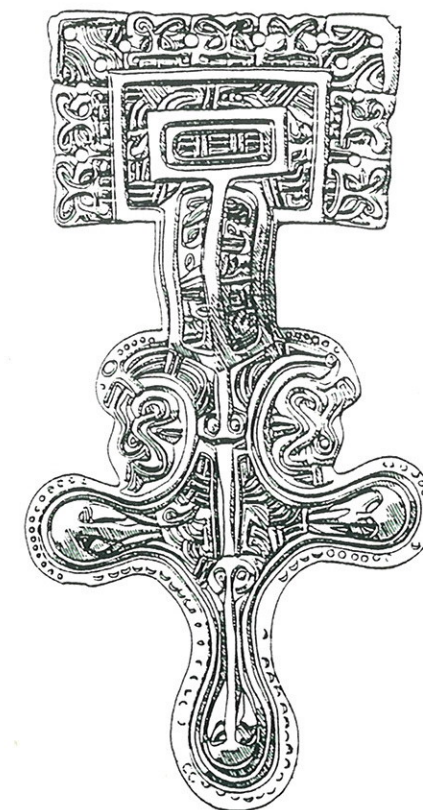


Grave 102: burial of a young woman aged 15-20, showing saucer brooches, great square-headed brooch (see drawing) and amber beads.

the heroic days of rescue archaeology, when a few dedicated individuals fought to save the remains of our past from the teeth of the bulldozer. These are the days of archaeology as a profession, of PPG16, SMRs and MAP2, when it would be as impossible for an Anglo-Saxon cemetery to be destroyed by accident as it would be unthinkable to use one site's funding to dig another. If standards and conditions have improved, it has only been after 20 years of struggle. Although if they are honest, the survivors will admit they enjoyed it.

The site is being published as part of the Unit's programme to clear backlog reports, funded by English Heritage. The Berinsfield volume, which will be part of the Thames Valley Landscapes series, will also contain a report on the Anglo-Saxon cemetery recently excavated at Didcot Power Station.

Anne Dodd and Ellen McAdam



CHURCH ARCHAEOLOGY

Churches have exemption from Listed Building control. However, it is the policy of the Oxford Diocese of the Church of England to follow best practice where the fabric and archaeology of its churches are concerned. As a result the OAU is often called upon to record the archaeology revealed by drains, heating systems and church extensions. Our latest discovery is the stone foundations of a previously unsuspected structure beneath Garsington Church. At the moment this looks like a narrower Anglo-Saxon predecessor of the present church.

David Miles



FREWIN HALL, OXFORD

Brasenose College hopes to develop the area around Frewin Hall on New Inn Hall Street, one of the most interesting parts of the historic core of Oxford, for extra student accommodation. The OAU is advising on the archaeological implications.

The site is bounded by two of the Anglo-Saxon *burh*'s original streets, just inside the northern defences. In the medieval period Frewin Hall was the site of an important

urban estate headquarters belonging to the wealthy burgess Geoffrey Fitz-Durand. John Blair's work on the cellar beneath Frewin Hall showed it to be one of the earliest surviving fragments of domestic architecture in Britain.

After 1430 the Austin Canons built St Mary's College on the site, much enhanced by the sponsorship of Cardinal Wolsey after 1518. In the mid-17th century the College chapel was demolished and its impressive hammer beam roof was re-erected over Brasenose College chapel.

David Miles



ASTHALL ROMAN SETTLEMENT

The OAU has been excavating in the southwestern side of the important Roman settlement of Asthall, some 3 miles E of Burford, which lies across the Roman road of Akeman Street between the towns of Cirencester and Alchester.

Excavation has concentrated on two areas. In the first of these the line of Akeman Street itself has been found, together with parts of a number of stone and timber buildings on the S side of the road. The narrow excavation (a strip no more than 8 m wide)

makes it extremely difficult to understand the buildings and none has a complete plan.

Nevertheless, a sequence of at least three construction phases can be seen in parts of the area. The earlier (stone?) buildings have more substantial foundations than the later ones and were succeeded (in at least one case) by a post-built structure, presumably of late Roman date.

The dates of the earliest buildings are not yet clear, but they probably belonged to the late 1st or 2nd century AD. Associated features include yard surfaces and a possible well.

Some 100m S of Akeman Street, towards the edge of the settlement, is a concentration of industrial features. These include parts of a number of hearths or furnaces associated with ironworking. Smelting as well as smithing may have occurred here, but this remains to be confirmed in examination of the structures and the associated slags.

Immediately to the S of this activity, within a substantial ditch which may have indicated the boundary of the settlement, is a group of burials which appear to form part of an organised cemetery rather than being random late Roman interments. At least a dozen burials seem to be present, and more may be recovered as work continues.

The transect is being excavated in advance of pipe-laying by Thames Water. The excavation, which should be complete by mid-December, is being funded entirely by Thames Water.

Paul Booth



CALLING ALL TEACHERS

The OAU would like to hear from anyone involved in education who is interested in using OAU News as a teaching aid or in developing educational materials based on the Unit's work. Phone Ellen McAdam on 0865 204 642.

OAU News is published three times a year. The subscription, which includes the Annual Report, is £5 *per annum*. Please make cheques payable to the Oxford Archaeological Unit.

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The OAU would like to wish all of its readers a Happy New Year