

Chapter 6: Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

In May 1991 the Oxford Archaeological Unit undertook an archaeological evaluation in Didcot Power Station, Oxon, on behalf of National Power (OAU 1991). This was in response to a proposal for further development within the area of the Power Station (NGR SU 505 920). Following the discovery of a single accompanied inhumation burial in one of the evaluation trenches, arrangements were made to commence excavation of the area. The aim of the excavation was to define the extent of burial activity within the limits of the proposed development.

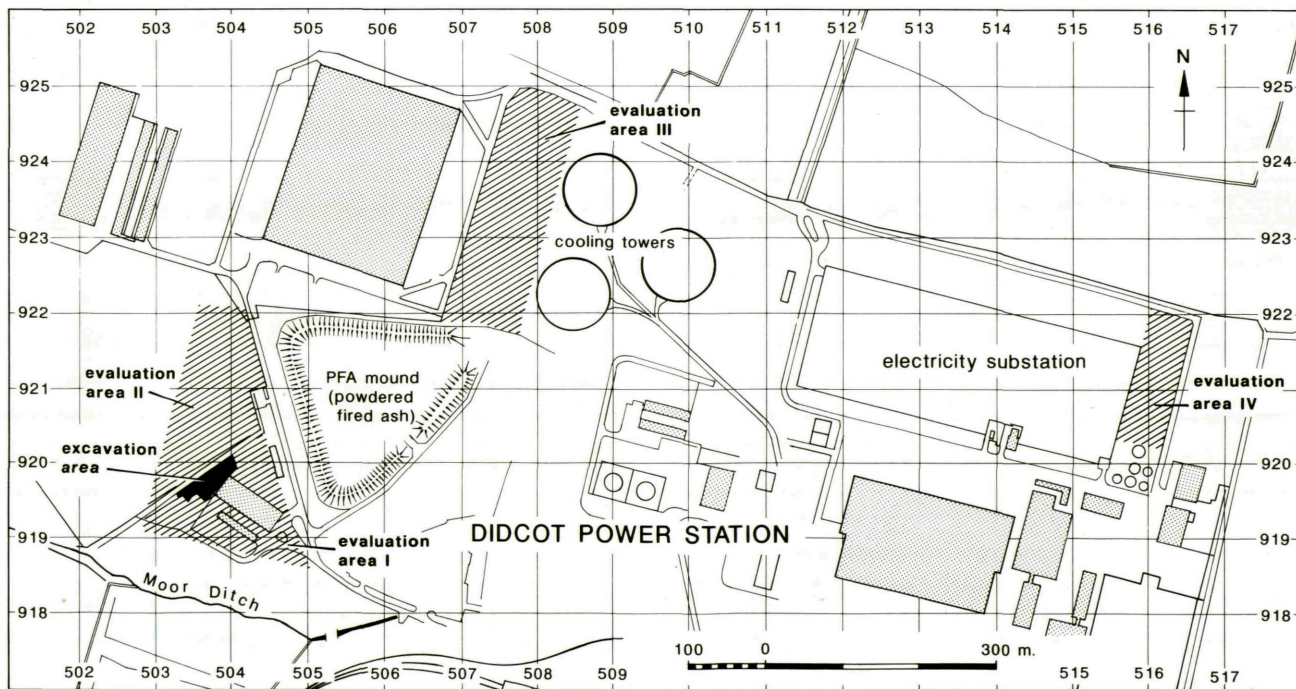
Excavation uncovered a number of Anglo-Saxon features including 17 inhumations and two sunken featured buildings (Fig. 89). Other remains included ditches, postholes and pits some of which could be assigned to the prehistoric or Roman period (see Chapter 7).

Although small numbers of burials are known to have been found in the immediate vicinity (see Archaeological Background below) the discovery of a cemetery was unexpected. It was assumed that the disturbance to the area caused by the presence of the Government Depot in the first half of the century, and latterly by the construction of the Power Station itself, would have destroyed, or at least caused substantial damage to, any archaeological deposits.

LOCATION AND GEOLOGY (Figs. 1 and 84)

Didcot Power Station lies approximately 1.25 km to the NW of the town which is located on a ridge running E and W between the Thames Valley on the N and the Hagbourne Marshes on the S. The cemetery was located within a triangle of land known as Abbey Mills which is bounded by a car park to the NW, Stevens Road to the NE, and Moor Ditch to the S. It lies on the southern edge of the Second Gravel Terrace which has been extensively settled since the prehistoric period as attested by excavation, chance discovery and many cropmark sites (Benson and Miles 1974, 7). The natural geology of the area consists of sandy gravel mixed to varying degrees with clay. The excavated area lies on a gravel island within the NW area of the site. The clay, which was light grey with inclusions of eroded chalk fragments, is of Pleistocene age, contemporary with the gravel and it does not represent a more recent alluviation.

Figure 83
Location of evaluation trenches and area excavation



METHODOLOGY

The evaluation (Fig. 83)

Four areas were considered as potential sites for development (Fig. 83: Areas I–IV). No development proposals were forthcoming for Area II and therefore it was not evaluated. The remaining areas were investigated and a total of 23 trenches excavated (Area I: Trenches 1–7 and 20–21; Area III: Trenches 8–19; Area IV: Trenches 22–23). The evaluation took the form of machine-cut trenches, excavated down to the natural geology. They were sufficient in number and extent to give a 2% sample of the area under investigation, and were so spaced as to cover the area in an even fashion, within practical limits (OAU 1991). The inhumation (grave 4) was found in Trench 5, Area 1. It is conceivable that further graves within Area I were missed.

The excavation

An area of 2100 sq m was stripped using a JCB mechanical excavator and a concrete breaker where appropriate. The location of the excavation area was determined by the initial discovery of the inhumation in evaluation Trench 5 and its limits were defined by the extent of the proposed development. The absence of graves in all other evaluation trenches suggested that the extent of any surviving cemetery would be limited. Graves and other probable archaeological features were excavated by hand. In certain cases, most notably grave 12, it was decided to remove grave contents as soil blocks. It was believed that this would provide an opportunity for more detailed investigation and recording than would have been feasible in the field. Two soil blocks representing the 'skull' and 'body' were lifted. The poor condition of both human bone and objects merited this careful treatment. Parts of other bodies were also removed in this way: the pelvis of skeleton 11 was lifted in association with a number of fragile small finds including a chatelaine complex; the jaw of skeleton 7 was lifted as a soil block because the presence of a necklace was suspected and small fragile objects such as beads and pendants were expected.

All graves were planned at 1:10, except grave 4, planned at 1:20 during the evaluation phase, and grave 17, which was extremely disturbed and therefore also planned at 1:20. Extant grave profiles were drawn at 1:10. Where appropriate, details of grave groups were also drawn. Three dimensional co-ordinates were calculated for every object with the exception of those found in soil blocks. During excavation polaroid photographs were taken of all skeletons and objects in addition to black and white photographs and colour slides. Environmental samples were taken from SFB 38. A 1:200 plan showing the distribution and orientation of burials was produced as was an overall site plan at 1:50.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND
(Fig. 84)

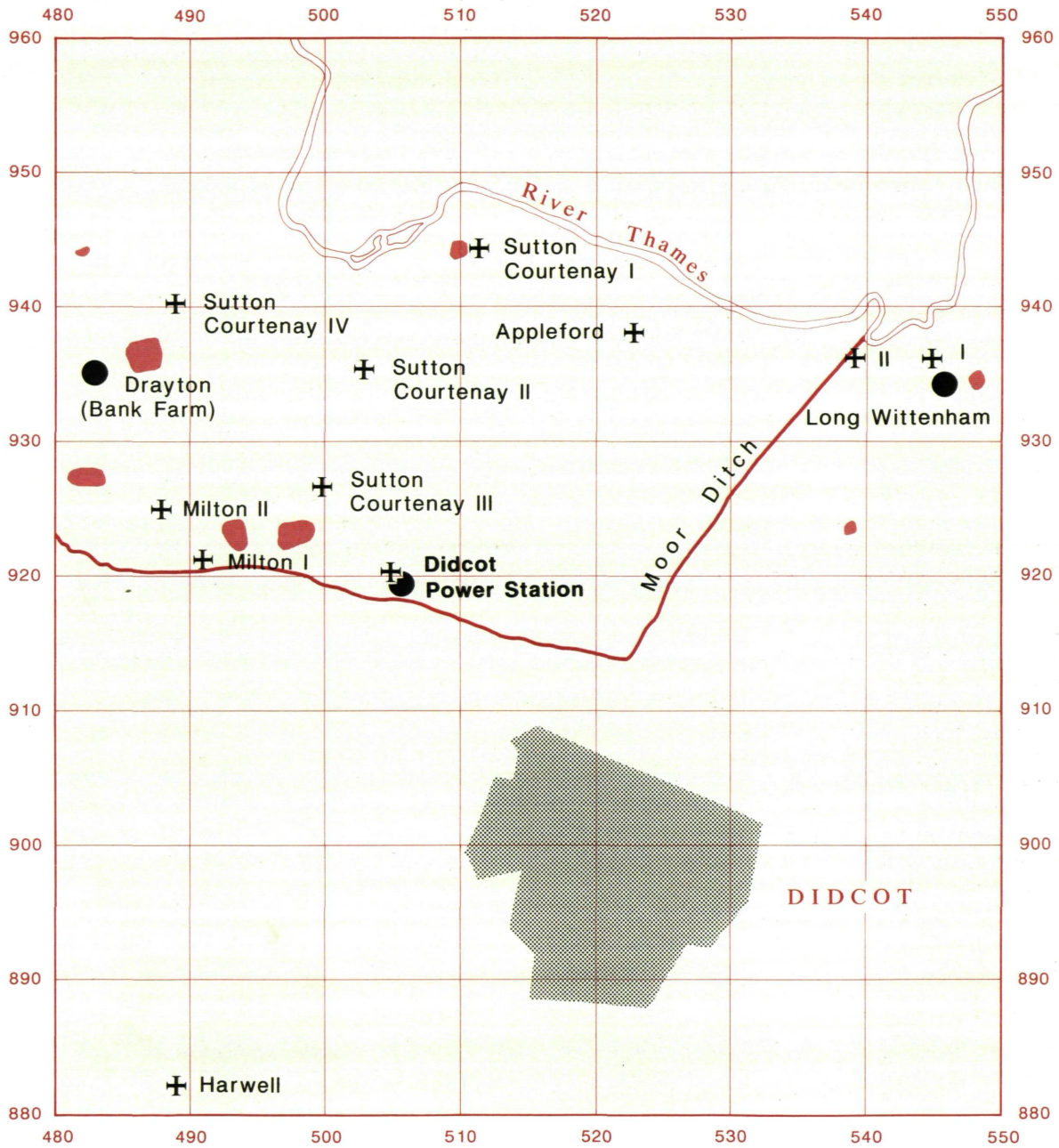
The concentration of cropmarks in the vicinity of the cemetery is extremely dense and has been well documented elsewhere (Benson and Miles 1974, 60–66, Maps 33–35). There are a number of sites which are of undoubted national importance, for example the Drayton Cursus (NGR SU 487 936); a number of features within this complex have been interpreted as SFBs. Additionally, a group of small oblong enclosures are probably Saxon timber buildings (Benson and Miles 1974, 62, Map 33). Hawkes argues that the largest structure in the complex which lies just over 1 km SE of Drayton village, appears to be a great hall measuring approximately 25 m in length and 8 m in width (Hawkes 1986, 88, Pl. 8c). Among the many other extant cropmark complexes late prehistoric, Roman and Anglo-Saxon features seem to be most evident and include house sites, enclosures, fields, pits and drove ways.

Early Anglo-Saxon features and settlements are a particularly important aspect of the archaeology of this area. The excavated settlement at Sutton Courtenay (Leeds 1923, 1927, 1947) and the cemeteries at Milton are well-known (Meaney 1964, 49; Dickinson 1976, 183). The latter site produced a pair of gold and garnet composite brooches (Avent 1975, Pl. 74), one of which is in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford and the other is held by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. A cropmark complex adjacent to the 7th-century Milton II cemetery and centred on NGR SU 484 928 includes rectilinear enclosures and SFBs (Benson and Miles 1974, 60). The complex centred on SU 496 923 (SAM Oxon No 250) includes rectilinear boundary ditches and enclosures, pits and a scatter of possible SFBs (Benson and Miles 1974, 62).

Excavation mainly in the 19th century has uncovered traces of numerous cemeteries, including Appleford, Milton I (NGR SU 491 921), Long Wittenham I (NGR SU 545 936), Long Wittenham II (NGR *c* SU 539 936) and Sutton Courtenay I (Meaney 1964, 49, 52–54).

EARLIER DISCOVERIES

A number of earlier discoveries have been recorded in the area of the Power Station. A Saxon burial was discovered immediately NW of the excavated site at SU 4999 9266 (PRN 2665). Burials which may be of Saxon date were discovered at SU 5032 9352 (PRN 2844) to the N of the Power Station and at SU 539 924 to the E. The latter were found during salvage at a quarry site in the late 19th century and again in the 1930s. An Anglo-Saxon cemetery and a possible Romano-British cremation cemetery at SU 510 944, again to the N of the Power Station, were reported during gravel quarrying in 1943. A fine late Roman dagger was



- Settlement
- ⊕ Cemetery
- Cropmarks

Figure 84 Cropmarks and archaeological sites in the immediate vicinity of the cemetery

reported by Ure from the 'area of Didcot Power Station' (Böhme 1974, 128, Paragraphs 3 and 4) and this may indicate burials of the late 4th century in the adjacent area. A spearhead was recovered at the S end of the Ballast Pit close to Moor Ditch (AM 1943.64).

Approximately five inhumations were discovered in 1928 during the construction of railway sidings although their precise location is not known. They were associated with a considerable quantity of Roman pottery dating to the 2nd and 3rd centuries (Walker 1930, 50; PRN 2833). Shortly after this discovery a second group of inhumations was uncovered alongside Moor Ditch. This group is said to have been associated with 2nd century Roman pottery and the skeletons were said to be facing west (JRS 1944, 83). In 1933 two bronze bowls were found within the Depot (Underhill 1938, 27). A plaque believed until 1955 to record the findspot of the bowls was located at NGR SU 5059 9190. In fact it recorded the discovery of the above mentioned Roman burials. The bowls were recently misidentified as Roman (Miles 1976). They are actually examples of Frankish *Perlrandsbecken* which date to the 5th and 6th centuries AD (Rutter and Cook forthcoming). It is likely that these objects originally accompanied inhumations.

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

The cemetery lies within the parish of Sutton Courtenay. The name Sutton means South Farm and it has been suggested that it almost certainly refers to the position of the early Saxon settlement in relation to Abingdon and its Abbey (Gelling 1976, 424). The vill of Sutton was given to Abingdon Abbey by King Ine soon after the commencement of his rule as leader of the West Saxons in AD 688, and was retained until AD 807 when the community surrendered the vill as part of an exchange with Cenwulf, King of the Mercians (Stevenson 1858, i, 14, 21–23). Sutton Courtenay became known by its present name sometime in the 12th century when Henry II granted the manor to Reginald de Courtenay, one of his bodyguard (Stevenson 1858, ii, 274).

Moor Ditch which lies immediately to the S of the cemetery is referred to in an Abingdon charter (c AD 895) by which Alfred gives King Deormod 5 hides at Appleford in exchange for land at Horn Down (BSC 581: Gelling 1976, 750): 'the old ditch which lies between Willington and Appleford'. It is noteworthy that the bounds described do in fact correspond with the present day extent of Appleford. Moor Ditch in part forms the parish boundaries of Appleford, Long Wittenham, Sutton Courtenay and Didcot, and cuts across Milton and Harwell.