

## Excavations at Purwell Farm, Cassington

By G. J. DAWSON

A SMALL Early Iron Age settlement site at Cassington, revealed in gravel-digging, was excavated in 1961 by the Oxford University Archaeological Society.<sup>1</sup> It lay about 250 yards east of Purwell Farm (FIG. 1) at 320 ft. Ordnance Datum on a hill of Oxford clay capped by gravel of the Handborough Terrace of the Evenlode (National Grid: 42/445119). This gravel-patch was frequently settled in ancient times. Other excavations on the hill-top have revealed a Bronze Age burial,<sup>2</sup> Iron Age pits<sup>3</sup> and many remains of a Pagan Saxon village<sup>4</sup> and cemetery.<sup>5</sup>

The area excavated in 1961 contained 14 pits and 5 gullies (FIG. 2). The traces of settlement extended westward, where all features had been destroyed,<sup>6</sup> and eastward under untouched grassland, but no features were revealed to the north and south. Topsoil was stripped prior to gravel digging.

The settlement, probably occupied in the late 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C., judging by the pottery, does not appear to have been very large or rich, and was dependent on mixed farming: grain, cattle and pigs.

### THE PITS

The pits, a common feature of Early Iron Age sites in the Upper Thames valley, were flat-bottomed, from 3 to 7 feet in diameter, from 9 inches to 2 feet deep below the surface of the gravel. Some extended roughly in lines; none intersected. Nos. 4, 5 and 16 may have been originally intended as rubbish pits. The remainder were probably first used for storing parched grain and, when they became foul, filled to level the ground. Nos. 9, 10 and

<sup>1</sup> Thanks are expressed to Mr. John Brown for reporting the discovery of the site and for permission to excavate, and to the Ashmolean Museum for providing equipment. The excavation was supported financially by the Ministry of Works. I am grateful to Mr. D. Sturdy for advice during the excavation and preparation of the report, to Professor C. F. C. Hawkes and Dr. J. N. L. Myres for advice on the pottery, to Dr. D. F. Roberts for identifying the human bones, to Mr. J. Banks for identifying the animal bones and to Mr. J. Doran and other members of the Society who helped at the excavation. The Ministry of Works has made a substantial contribution towards the cost of publication.

<sup>2</sup> FIG. 1, no. 2. *Oxoniensia*, xxiv (1959), 98.

<sup>3</sup> FIG. 1, nos. 3-5, *Id.*, vii (1942), 64; xxiii (1958), 130; xxv (1960), 131.

<sup>4</sup> FIG. 1, nos. 6-9, *Id.*, xxiii (1958), 130.

<sup>5</sup> FIG. 1, no. 10, *Id.*, vii (1942), 62-7.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*, xxv (1960), 131.

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14 must have been filled with a fair amount of rubbish. The others contained mostly loam; No. 7 included gravel dug from a new pit. The fillings generally included small quantities of pottery and animal bones.

*Pit 1*: Partly cleared. No pottery. *Pit 2*: Very shallow, filled with brown loam. *Pit 3*: Pear-shaped, filled with blackish loam with lenses of sand and of grey loam at the eastern side. Possibly two pits intersecting.

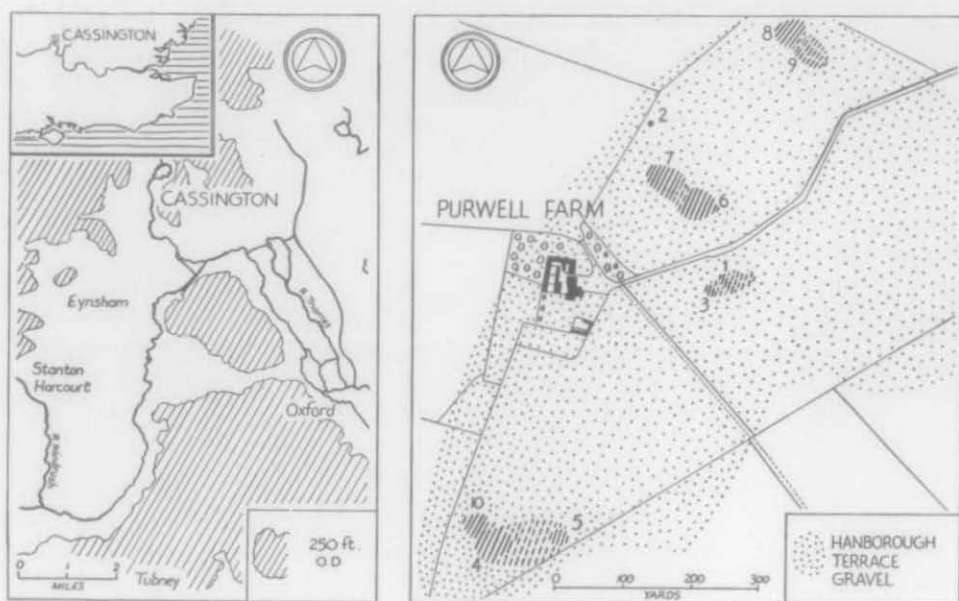


FIG. 1

Left: Cassington in its national and regional setting. Right: Plan of archaeological sites at Purwell Farm.

Based upon Ordnance Survey maps with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office. Crown copyright reserved.

*Pits 4 and 5*: About 2 foot deep and filled with blackish brown loam containing animal bones. *Pit 4* contained a human skeleton on its side in a crouched position. In *Pit 5* another skeleton was removed before the excavation and a third complete down to the waist was lying on its back with its arms by its sides.

*Pits 6 and 8*: Not excavated. *Pit 7*: Blackish-brown loam, almost barren of finds, with much gravel (Section, FIG. 2). *Pits 9 and 10*: Brown

# EXCAVATIONS AT CASSINGTON

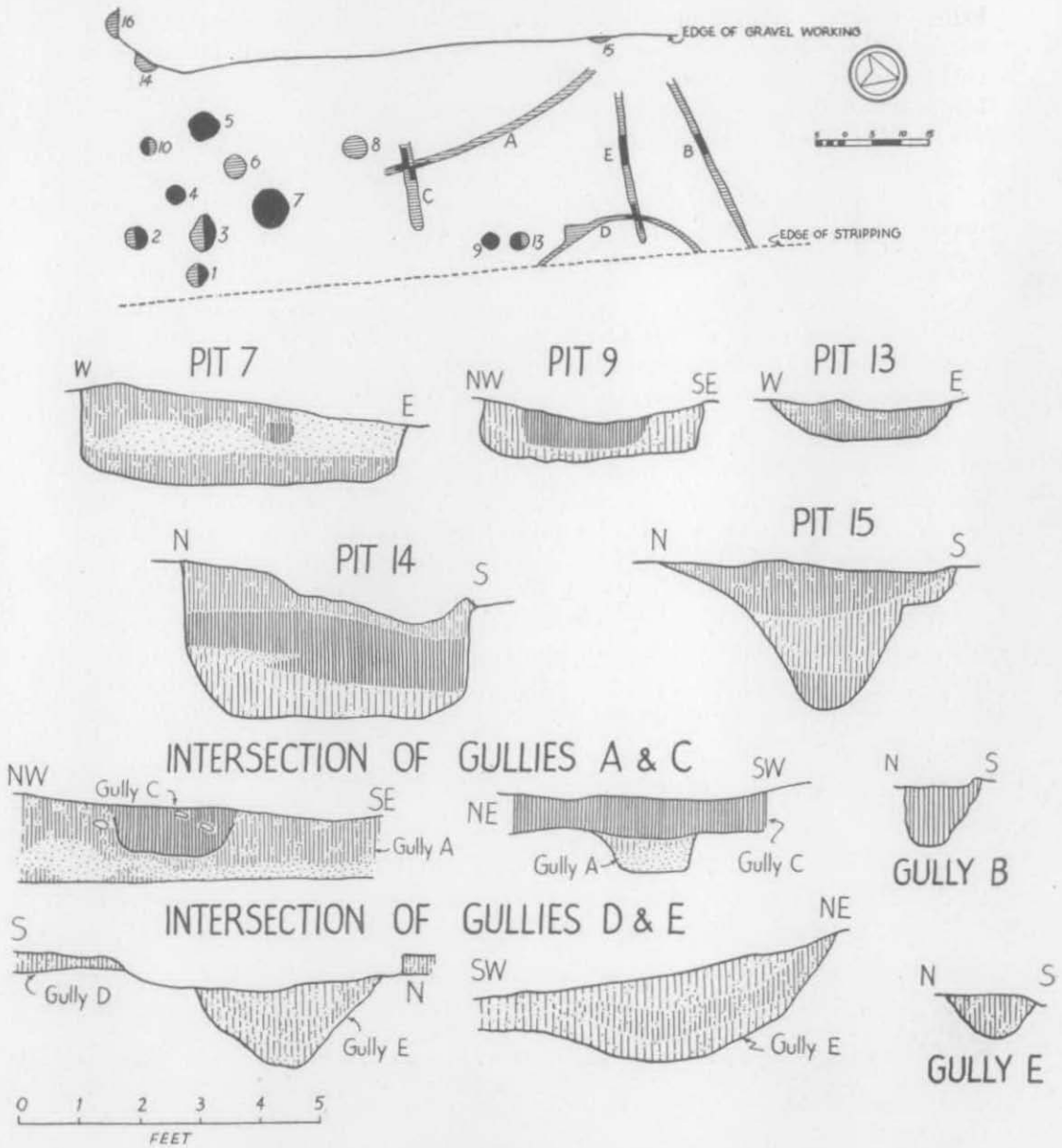


FIG. 2

Above: Plan of area excavated (Scale of feet). Below: Sections of pits and gullies.

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loam under a layer of blackish-brown loam with much charcoal (Section, FIG. 2). *Pits 11* and *12*: Natural features. *Pit 13*: Very shallow and filled with blackish-brown loam (Section, FIG. 2). *Pit 14*: Layers of blackish-brown, brown and reddish brown loam with animal bones (Section, FIG. 2). *Pit 15*: Perhaps a soakaway connected with the gullies A, B and E, V-shaped in section (Section, FIG. 2). *Pit 16*: Filled with blackish-brown loam containing domestic rubbish, except for a layer of clean gravel near the bottom, perhaps intended to obviate the smell of the filling.

### THE GULLIES

The gullies too were of the usual local types, and may represent drainage ditches or perhaps boundary marks. Some were filled with layers of loam and some with gravel and sand. They contained a little pottery and bone fragments, most abundantly at the junction of A and C.

*Gully A* was flat bottomed, about 1 ft. 6 in. wide and 1 ft. 3 in. deep, filled with blackish-brown loam, with a layer of sand near the bottom (Section, FIG. 2). *Gully B*, was shallow and V-shaped in section (Section, FIG. 2). *Gully C*, flat bottomed, about 2 ft. wide and 9 in. deep, was shown to be later than A (Section, FIG. 2). *Gully D*, less than 1 ft. wide, only a few inches deep, and with a flat bottom, was possibly the ditch of a small hut-enclosure,<sup>7</sup> but no traces of occupation were found within the exposed portion of the enclosure. *Gully E* was V-shaped in section and about 9 in. deep but ended in a depression 1 ft. 6 in. deep astride *Gully D*. The relationship between the two gullies could not be determined, as too much material had been removed in stripping topsoil (Section, FIG. 2).

### THE FINDS

#### POTTERY (FIG. 3)

Fragments of cooking-jars and bowls, found mostly in the pits, were characteristic of the Iron Age wares of the district of Southern Second A to Southern Second B.<sup>8</sup> They were normally blackened by smoke on the exterior.

The following publications are quoted in this section :

BRADFORD, J. S. P., 'An Early Iron Age site at Allen's pit, Dorchester', *Oxoniensia*, VII (1942), 36-60.

WILLIAMS, A., 'Excavations at Beard Mill, Stanton Harcourt, Oxon, 1944', *Oxoniensia*, XVI (1951), 5-22.

RICHARDSON, K. M. and YOUNG, A., 'An Iron Age A site on the Chilterns', *Ant. J.*, XXXI (1951), 132-148.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Id.*, XVI (1951), 7, FIG 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ant.*, XXXIII (1959), 179-181.

## EXCAVATIONS AT CASSINGTON

1. Hard dark grey gritty ware. Pit 2. WILLIAMS, FIG. 8, no. 4.
2. Red ware of soft soapy texture. Pit 7. BRADFORD, FIG. 13, no. 53 (Hatford, Berks.).
3. Red ware of soft soapy texture. Pit 9. BRADFORD, FIG. 12, no. 8 (Eynsham, Oxon.).
4. Hard gritty red ware. Pit 9. BRADFORD, FIG. 13, no. 61 (Tubney, Berks.).
5. Hard red ware. Pit 9. BRADFORD, FIG. 13, no. 47 (Bullington Green, Oxon.).
6. Red ware of soft soapy texture. Pit 5.
7. Hard grey ware. Unstratified. WILLIAMS, FIG. 10, no. 28.
8. Soft soapy grey ware ; white accretion on interior. Pit 4. BRADFORD, FIG. 13, no. 51 (Cassington, Oxon.).
9. Soft soapy ware. Pit 10. WILLIAMS, FIG. 10, no. 29.
10. Hard red ware with brown surface on exterior. Pit 4.
11. Red ware of soft soapy texture. Pit 5. BRADFORD, FIG. 13, no. 12 (Stanton Harcourt, Oxon.).
12. Handle of hard gritty black ware. Pit 3.
13. Hard smooth black ware with incised and stabbed decoration and well burnished surface. Pit 5. RICHARDSON and YOUNG, FIG. 7 (Chinnor, Bucks.).

Three pieces of burnt daub, one with an impression of a wattle, were also found.

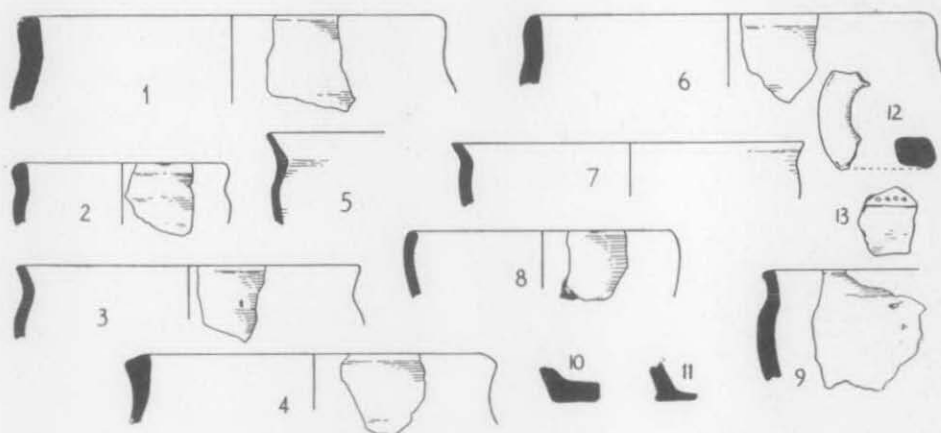


FIG. 3  
Early Iron Age pottery from Purwell Farm. Scale:  $\frac{1}{4}$ .

### HUMAN BONES

Report by Dr. D. F. B. Roberts, Dept. of Human Anatomy

*Pit 4:* While there are a few animal bones mixed in with this group, most of the remains are human, relating to a single individual. The individual was a male, adult, probably in his middle thirties, of slight build. Stature was of the order of

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5 ft. 5 in. to 5 ft. 6 in. Measurements were as follows: Maximum length of right femur: 45.3 cm., oblique length of right femur: 44.8 cm.; maximum length of the left humerus: 32.0 cm.; skull length: 178 mm.; breadth: 131 mm.; minimum frontal breadth: 98 mm.

*Found before excavation:* This single individual is represented only by fragments in very poor condition. He was an adult male, remarkable by pronounced platymeria.

*Pit 5:* Again the remains of this single individual are fragmentary. He was an adult male, of much more robust build than either specimens 1 or 2.

### ANIMAL BONES

Report by Mr. J. W. Banks

*Pit 1:* Vertebrae of mature pig. *Pit 2:* Tooth of ox, jaw of pig. *Pit 5:* Long bones of ox, jaw of immature pig, jaw of mature sheep or goat, partial skeleton of immature sheep or goat. *Pit 7:* Tooth of ox, jaw of immature sheep or goat. *Pit 9:* Long bones of ox, scapula of immature pig. *Pit 10:* Horn-core of ox. *Pit 14:* Long bone, carpels and vertebrae of ox, jaw of horse. *Gully A:* Long bones of ox.