

An Inhumation Cemetery at Castle Hill, Little Wittenham, Oxon., 1984-5

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with a contribution by M. HARMAN

SUMMARY

Remains of four inhumation burials were revealed by ploughing at the foot of the outer rampart of the Iron Age hillfort at Castle Hill, Little Wittenham. Subsequent excavation suggested that the burials belonged to the later Roman or Anglo-Saxon period.¹

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Oxford Archaeological Unit is grateful to the landowner, Mrs. B. Kelaart, for permission to excavate. The excavation was supervised jointly by the writer and John Moore, with labour supplied through the Manpower Services Commission. Fig. 1 was drawn by S. Pressey. The writer is grateful to Miss M. Harman for her report on the human bones.

INTRODUCTION

The hillfort, known locally as Sinodun Hill Camp, lies on an outlying knoll of the chalk ridge to the south of the Thames. At about 107 m. above sea level, the fort occupies a dominant position in an area which has been intensively settled since the Iron Age. Both Romano-British and early Saxon material has been recovered from the interior of the hillfort and from several other find-spots in the locality.²

In December 1984, the Oxford Archaeological Unit received a report that human remains had been brought to the surface by ploughing in the field immediately to the east of the hillfort at Castle Hill, Little Wittenham (Fig. 1).³ To the east of the outer rampart the land slopes steeply downhill, and here repeated ploughing had cut a terrace into the hillside. The bank on the east side of the footpath was a part of this terrace (Fig. 2). An estimated 0.8-0.9 m. of soil had originally covered burial F3, but the latest autumn ploughing had cut through the skeleton itself. The same ploughing had brought bone to the surface from three other burials F4, F8 and F9.

¹ The finds and site records have been deposited with the Oxfordshire County Museum under Accession Number 85.196 and P.R.N. 13,698.

² H. Wade and N. McGavin, 'Castle Hill, Wittenham Clumps', *Arch. Jnl.* cxxxv (1978), 289-91.

³ The remains were noted by Mr B. Wilson, who reported them to the Oxford Archaeological Unit.

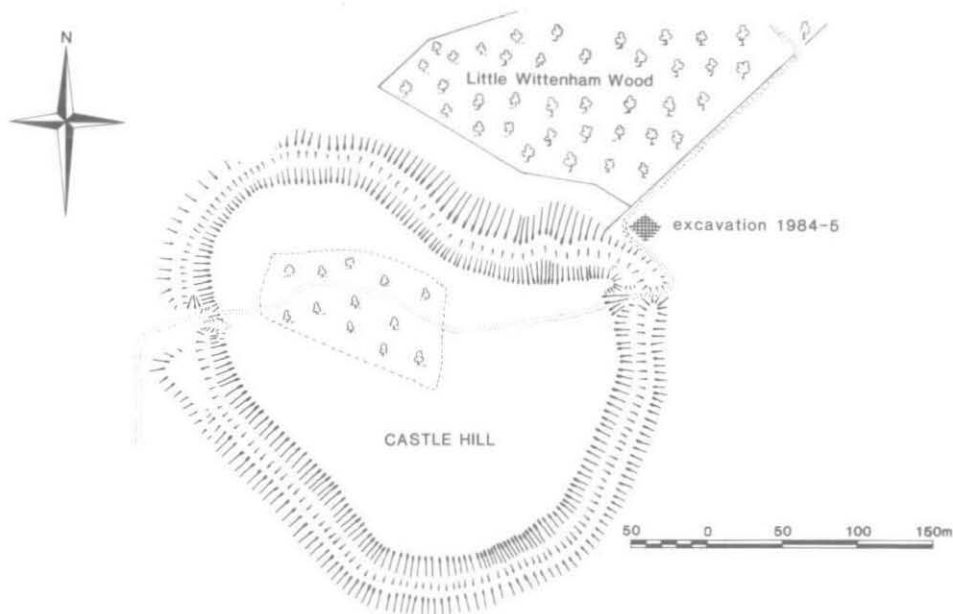


Fig. 1. The location of the cemetery at Castle Hill, Little Wittenham.

EXCAVATION

Within the area where the bone fragments had appeared the ploughsoil was removed by hand. This stripping revealed some 60 square metres of undisturbed subsoil which was cleaned and examined for archaeological features. Traces of four graves were found, of which F3 and F9 only survived beneath the bank beyond the limit of the ploughed field. Two further graves, F4 and F8, had been damaged in previous years and in both cases only a few fragments of bone remained undisturbed. It was only possible to trace the approximate outlines of the grave-pits for F3 and F9 in the light grey, chalky subsoil. The other grave-pits were no longer discernible. None of the graves contained any evidence of coffins, nor were there any dateable artifacts. The preservation was generally very poor and the bone was soft.

THE GRAVES

- F3. Subrectangular grave-pit estimated at originally 0.8-0.9 m. deep. Extended prone female adult inhumation, head to S.W. Face downwards, upper arms by sides, forearms folded across body beneath stomach. Legs cut off by plough, some bones recovered.
- F4. Adult inhumation, head to the west, fragments of left side of skull, shoulder and upper arms remained.
- F8. Skull and limb bone fragments from the topsoil and surface of the subsoil.
- F9. Subrectangular grave-pit. Extended supine male adult, head to west. Face upwards, upper arms by sides, forearms crossed over stomach. Legs ploughed away.

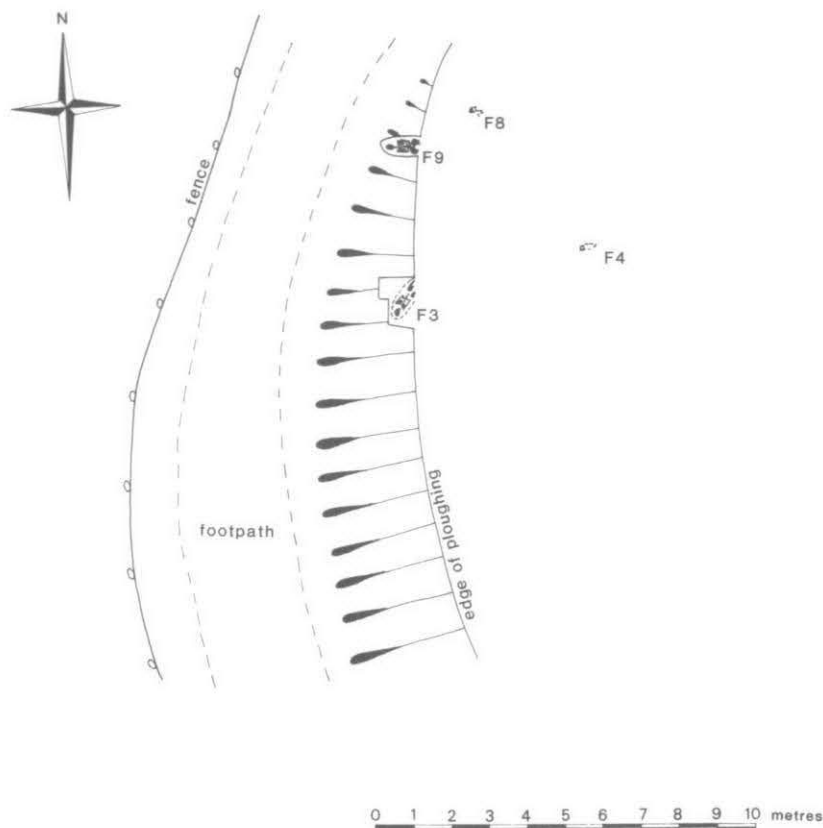


Fig. 2. The excavated remains.

THE HUMAN REMAINS by M. HARMAN

The remains of the four skeletons were in a fair state of preservation, the surface of the bones being eroded, and all the bones badly broken. In the following notes, the sex of each skeleton was decided where possible from the criteria described by Ferembach, Schwidetzky and Stloukal.⁴ Age was assessed from tooth wear using the chart published by Miles.⁵

- F3. Skeleton nearly complete, missing hands and feet. Female, aged 30-35 years. Dental health excellent, all teeth present at death, though the upper left canine was not fully erupted.
- F4. Skull, few thoracic fragments of shoulder and upper arms. Adult aged 20-25 years, dentition incomplete, but one upper molar is carious while one lower molar was lost before death, and the upper right canine is unerupted and impacted.
- F8. Skull and limb bone fragments. Possibly female, aged 17-21 years. Only seven teeth present, mostly loose: the third molars were erupting, and the upper left canine unerupted and impacted.
- F9. Skeleton nearly complete above mid thighs. Male, aged 20-25 years. Dental health good, all teeth

⁴ D. Ferembach, I. Schwidetzky and M. Stloukal, 'Recommendations for Age and Sex Diagnoses of Skeletons', *Journal of Human Evolution*, ix (1980), 517-549.

⁵ A.E.W. Miles, 'Assessment of the Age of a Population of Anglo-Saxons from their Dentitions', *Proceedings of the Royal Society for Medicine*, lv (1962), 881-6.

present at death, three third molars show caries on the occlusal surface, probably due to faults in the enamel: probably the result of poor diet when the crowns were developing.

There is little that can be said about this group. Generally their teeth were in good condition, though none of them was of any great age. Maleruption or non-eruption of the canines is not very uncommon, but it is noticeable that three of these people share this feature and there is a possibility that they might be related. There is nothing about the person in grave F3 to suggest why she should have been buried prone.

INTERPRETATION, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSIONS

The presence of human remains reputed to have been found on the north and west sides of Castle Hill suggests that the periphery of this redundant hillfort became a focus for burial in the later Roman and early Anglo-Saxon periods.⁶ As with the present burials no dateable artifacts appear to have been found. The burial rites, in as much as they survived, are common to both late Roman and early Anglo-Saxon England.

It is impossible to estimate the original number of burials deposited at the foot of the ramparts to the east of the hillfort. Excavation has shown that if the cemetery extended downhill, the burials would almost certainly have been destroyed by ploughing. Although no remains were seen to the south-east of the present find-spot, a number may exist beneath the footpath to the south-west and north-west, and the cemetery may extend into Little Wittenham Wood.

Major prehistoric monuments often remained as prominent features in later landscapes, and their earthworks appear to have provided vacant ground suitable for burial. Local instances which emphasise the early Anglo-Saxon predilection for such burial practices include Harborough Bank in Lower Heyford;⁷ Shipton Barrow near Shipton-under-Wychwood;⁸ Barrow Hills, Radley;⁹ Stanton Harcourt;¹⁰ and Dyke Hills, Dorchester, which is less than one kilometre to the north of Castle Hill.¹¹ However, at each find-spot some of the burials possessed dateable grave-goods.

The ubiquitous nature of the burial rites and the absence of grave-goods accompanying those graves around the periphery of the Little Wittenham hillfort suggests that these burial groups need represent no more than short-lived peasant burial grounds. As such, they may also be compared with the scattered groups and isolated burials that commonly occur around the periphery of rural Romano-British settlements, clearly demonstrated at Owslebury and more recently at Radley.¹²

Generally it is not clear whether the majority of people were buried beside prehistoric earthworks for purely practical reasons or whether spiritual reasons bore an influence, as a group of graves radiating from the prehistoric barrow at Rushton, Northants. might suggest. The precise reasons for such burials will never be known, since there is no record of the mythology and traditions that may have developed around many such earthwork remains.

⁶ Hearne reported that human remains had been found on Castle Hill: Oxfordshire County Museum, P.R.N. 3156-7.

⁷ *V.C.H. Oxon.* i, 354-5. The dating of the majority of these burials is not secure.

⁸ R.A. Chambers, 'A Secondary Burial on Shipton Barrow, Oxon., 1976' *Oxoniensia*, xliii (1978), 253-5.

⁹ Excavated by the author in 1985 for the Oxford Archaeological Unit.

¹⁰ *Oxoniensia*, x (1945), 33-41

¹¹ *V.C.H. Oxon.* i, 350.

¹² R. Bradley, R.A. Chambers and C.E. Halpin, *Barrow Hills, Radley, 1983-4: an Interim Report* (1984), 24. A general account of rural burial practice is given in: J. Collis, 'Owslebury (Hants.) and the Problems of Burials on Rural settlements', in R. Reece (ed.), *Burial in the Roman World* (C.B.A. Research Rep. 22, 1977).