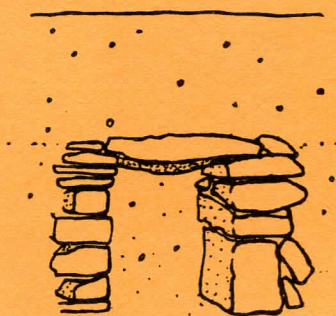




## **EXCAVATIONS IN ABINGDON**

**A Romano-British Cremation, an Inhumation,  
a Medieval Kiln, and Lead Weights  
at 56-86 The Vineyard, Abingdon, Oxon.**



by Bob Wilson, Geoff Egan, Mary Harman, Sarah Green,  
Maureen Mellor and Wendy Page.

**An Occasional Paper of the Abingdon Area  
Archaeological and Historical Society, 1984.**

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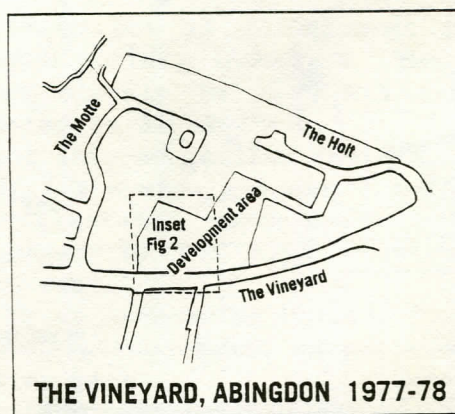


# A Romano-British Cremation, an Inhumation, a Medieval Kiln, and Lead Weights at 56-86 The Vineyard, Abingdon, Oxon.

by Bob Wilson  
with Mary Harman, Geoff Egan, Sarah Green  
and Maureen Mellor

The Vineyard is a street on the north side of the historic town of Abingdon, adjacent to land once owned by the medieval Abbey and probably used as a vineyard. The street was established as a large thoroughfare at least by 1184 A.D.<sup>1</sup> It crosses and descends the second terrace of the Thames river gravels which has provided copious Iron Age and Romano-British archaeological finds to the east at Barton Court Farm and west at the Ashville Trading Estate.

Fig 1. Location plan of the site.



In 1977 and 1978, the properties of No.'s 56-86 on the north side of The Vineyard were part of a building development initiated by the Vale of the White Horse Council to provide local housing (Fig. 1). Half of the street frontage was refurbished as a conservation project while the remainder of the buildings on the site were demolished, or had been previously, and were replaced by new houses.

**Recording** A large area of archaeological stratigraphy was disrupted by the building operations. Information and items of interest were recovered by

#### Footnote

1 J. Stevenson, Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon ii (1858), 331.



the Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society and by contractors and workmen;<sup>2</sup> but it was not possible to examine all of the construction trenches. Proper excavation and recording was hurried and confined to a few important features which were exposed. Feature locations are shown below.

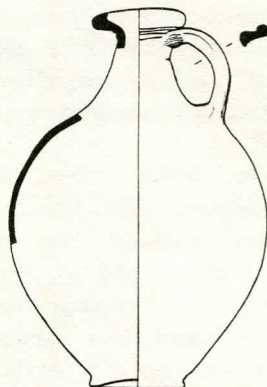
Fig 2. Site plan of the feature locations.



<sup>2</sup> The Society is obliged especially to the contracting firm of Joseph Driver and in particular to the site agent Mr J. Lansdowne, and to the project architect Mr Virgo of Spink, Edgington, and Hyne Co., Windsor. Excavation and writing up of the site was a leisuretime study, but professional assistance was given and interest expressed by T. Hassall, W. Page, M. Mellor, M. Harman, S. Green, G. Egan, R. Rattray, and G. & D. Miles, through the offices of the Oxfordshire Archaeology Unit, the Department of Urban Archaeology, London, and the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. The text was prepared for publication by R. D'Arcy, R. Wilson, and C. Brocklehurst. Publication was funded by the Society and R. Wilson. Grateful thanks are expressed to Society members and the Committee who helped to investigate the site and to J. Carter, G. Jones, and J. Smith who read the text.



Fig. 3 Romano British flagon associated with cremation.



**Premedieval features and burials** Only one feature, F2, was definitely dated. It was the end of a shallow, round bottomed, east-west gully which contained a complete Romano-British flagon surrounded by burnt debris. A small soil sample was sieved and revealed cremated human bones. Mary Harman describes these as:-

*'a small quantity of burned bone, weighing 175g. The colour of the fragments varied from black through grey to white, indicating that calcination was incomplete. Many of the pieces were not recognisable, but there were four skull vault fragments, part of the head of a humerus or femur, some femoral and tibial shaft fragments and a tarsal. The bones are those of an adult. There is no evidence that more than one individual is represented.'*

The associated Romano-British pot is illustrated in Figure 3. Sarah Green assigns it to the Oxford pottery industry. The vessel is of a fine white ware, corresponds most closely to type W15 from Phase 4a at the Churchill Hospital, and is dated to 240-300 A.D.<sup>3</sup>

The cremation gully was cut into an earlier feature, F6, probably a ditch at least several metres long, 1.2 m wide and cut 0.4-0.6 m into the natural gravel. The feature was orientated north-south but only for a short distance as it was not located in the next construction trench. The southern end appeared to turn west.

At this point F6 was cut by an inhumation burial, F3, which was unearthed by the workmen. Continued excavation showed an east-west grave, 0.6 m wide and 0.5 m deep in the surviving part.

The torso of the skeleton, and particularly the pelvic region, lay on its back and on the northern slope of the grave. The head lay eastward and on the left side. The left arm was straight, the right was slightly flexed and the hand rested over the pelvic area. Unfortunately the orientation of the legs was not seen but the proximal end of the left femur was flexed at the joint and indicates that the legs were bent.

Mary Harman reports:-

*'The skeleton was in fairly good condition and was nearly complete. The relevant features of the skull and the pelvic girdle indicate that it is the skeleton of a man. Wear on the teeth suggests an age of between 30 and 35 years. The height, calculated from the total lengths of the femur and fibula using the regression formula of Trotter and Gleser as given by*

<sup>3</sup> C.J. Young, The Roman pottery industry of the Oxford region B.A.R. xliii (1977), 101, fig. 30; 102.



Brothwell,<sup>4</sup> was 5'4 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (164.3 cm). Dental health was reasonable, with caries in the last premolar and first molar on both sides of the upper jaw, but no abscessing and no tooth loss. There are signs that the back was slightly affected by osteo-arthritis on thoracic vertebrae 7, 8, 9 and 10 but no other evidence of injury or disease. The sacrum has six vertebrae instead of the usual five, an uncommon congenital anomaly.'

There were no finds with the skeleton and there was no useful stratigraphy but it is argued that this burial has an early date. Gravelly red-brown loam was packed around the bones of F3, and filled the earlier ditch F6, and an adjacent gully, F4, of indeterminate stratigraphy. Compared with the dark soil of nearby medieval features (F1 & F5 see later), the soil colour suggests that the grave F3, F4, & F6 are early features. Again, this time by comparison to medieval graves elsewhere in Abingdon,<sup>5</sup> a Christian and late burial is improbable because this one appeared to be of crouched type, and especially because the head lay to the east and not to the west. With the absence of grave goods also, a pagan Saxon date is probably excluded and a Roman or prehistoric one is more likely. Similarly, however, the absence of grave goods also tends to exclude an early prehistoric burial, but these two arguments are inconclusive ones. More positively the parallel alignment of cremation gully F2 and the grave F3 make it reasonable to accept that these features are approximately contemporary. Thus a Roman date is most probable.

Ditches and possible pits containing similar fills to F3, F4, & F6 were found on the western side and elsewhere on the property. Some ditches were redug along similar alignments and tended to run NE-SW or NW-SE and contrary to the orientation of medieval and post medieval property boundaries. cursory examination of the ditches revealed no finds. Nevertheless, the above observations, comparable ditch systems elsewhere on the gravels, and redeposited Romano-British sherds in late features on the site, suggests that the ditches were part of Romano-British or Iron Age enclosures.

**Medieval Kiln** Remnants of a medieval kiln or oven, F7, some 4m in length, were set in an elongate pit dug into the gravel and the fill of an earlier ditch, F8. The north western part was semicircular in shape, approximately 3 m wide, and containing grey brown soil (Fig. 4; F7A). An irregular platform of stones, probably disturbed by stone robbing, lay in the central length of the pit with the stones blackened (7C & also 7A) or reddened (7B) by burning. The south eastern end of the pit contained loose unscorched stones, a possible slot for a structural support (7D) and, in a lateral extension of the pit to the east, an archway of stones with traces of soot near the base (7E). This archway consisted of two short stone walls topped by a large stone slab at the level of the natural gravel and stood 0.55 m in height.

A layer of ashy soil lay above the structure (F10, see section in Fig. 4) but the central and southern fill of the pit was red brown in colour, even where stone robbing seemed to have occurred. The undisturbed fill surrounding the arch contained a scatter of sherds dated by Maureen Mellor to the late 12th to early 13th centuries while those of the later backfilling included several which suggested a slightly later date for the stone robbing.

4 D.R. Brothwell, Digging up bones (1963), 102.

5 M. Parrington, 'Salvage excavations on the site of the lay cemetery of Abingdon Abbey' *Oxoniensia* xii (1976) 86-89; M. Harman & R. Wilson, 'A medieval graveyard beside Faringdon Road, Abingdon', *Oxoniensia* xlvii (1981), 56-61.



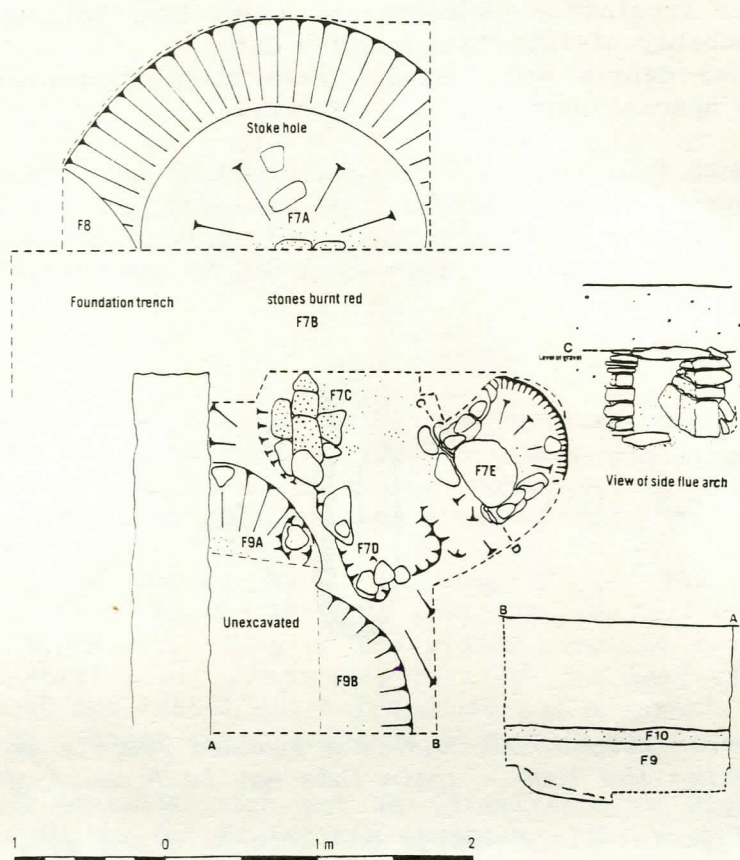


Fig 4. Plan of medieval kiln, Section A-B, and side view of stone arch C-D.

Clearly the area of burning was restricted to the north western stonework and pit end. With the grey soil, this evidence indicates that fires were lit at the stone entrance to the kiln while the pit remained open to the prevailing wind and allowed the fire to be stoked with fuel. The ashes would be raked out later thereby darkening the ground; subsequently to be redeposited in this stoking pit.

The stone archway probably functioned as a terminal flue for the smoke but the presence of a chimney above ground level, and whether the kiln occurred inside a building, is not known. Presumably, the fire heated a floor or surface above the flue, or possibly heated objects placed within an enlarged central chamber.

From the filling of F7, a further fragment of calcined human bone was identified; the anterior portion of an adult mandible with the alveolus broken away. Despite the burning of fires in the kiln it is most probable that the mandible fragment is a redeposited part of a cremation like that, and possibly part, of F2.



**Other medieval and later features** Two shallow pits, F9A and 9B, lying near the kiln had no discernable stratigraphic relationship to it but their fills contained grey brown earth similar to that in the stokehole.

Two other small medieval deposits in shallow pits F1 and F5 were found near the street frontage. F5 contained seven lead objects associated with five sherds probably of 12th-13th century date.

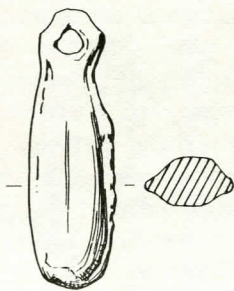
Post medieval debris and features were common especially of Victorian rubbish but no special note was made of this.

Leaden objects from Feature 5 are described by Geoff Egan:-

1) *Lentoid weight, rounded profile on one side and three facets on the other; at one end is a loop for suspension, which is at an angle to the main axis of the object, though this asymmetry may be the result of damage.*  
Weight 121.17g.

Fig 5. Lead object 1.

(half actual size)



2) *Another similar weight, but having a rounded profile on both sides, and (as found) lacking the loop - again this may be because of damage.* Weight 111.92g.  
*Both were cast in two-piece moulds and both have the ends somewhat blunted by knocks.*

A number of broadly similar objects, sometimes in groups, have been found in urban contexts dated to the 13th to 16th centuries.<sup>6</sup> Several examples are decorated with linear patterns or dots. They have been variously interpreted as fishing weights, plumb bobs, and, from the possible association with leather or vellum processing, as weights to stretch these materials. The apparent absence of precise parallels from the River Thames in London, where different types of fishing weights have been found in some numbers, may argue against the first interpretation,<sup>7</sup> while the multiple finds make the second improbable; the decoration on some examples is not irreconcilable with the mundane function of any of these suggestions. If all these objects were made to serve the same purpose, at present the last explanation seems on balance the most plausible, though the associations of further examples may provide a clearer indication.

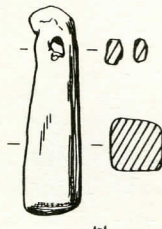
6 C. Mahany et al., 'Excavations in Stamford, Lincolnshire, 1963-69', Soc. for Medieval Archaeology Monograph ix (1982), 53 fig. 28 & 55 nos. 14-21; J. Collis, Winchester excavations II 1949-60 (1978) 56 fig. 24, 4; H. Clarke & A. Carter, 'Excavations in King's Lynn 1963-70', Soc. for Medieval Archaeology Monograph vii (1977), 291; T. Tatton-Brown, 'Excavations at the Custom House site, City of London 1973', Trans. London and Middx. Arch. Soc. xxv (1974), 194 & 196, fig. 40 no. 177; R.H. Jones, 'Medieval Houses at Flaxengate, Lincoln', The Archaeology of Lincoln xi 1 (1980) 18, fig. 16; D. Brinklow, 'Walmgate Interim: Bulletin of the York Archaeological Trust vi, 1 (1979), 31. Also personal communication on Brook Street site, Winchester, from Suzanne Keene.

7 Discussion with Ed. Jarzembowski.



3) Elongated pyramid form having an irregular hole centrally near the tapering end (Fig. 6). Probably hammered into shape. Weight 78.75g. Somewhat worn. Possibly a net weight. The form is paralleled by examples found in the Thames in London in private collections and by modern fishing weights.

Fig. 6 Lead object 3.  
(half actual size)



4) Three small cast loops and fragments of a fourth. Each has a break along one side, indicating that they were part of one or more larger objects. Some continental pilgrim badges have similar loops for attachment,<sup>8</sup> though the limited broken area on the present examples implies that the original object here might be rather less robust than most of the religious souvenirs.

5) Irregular molten runnel.

**General discussion** Apart from the dated cremation, the nearby inhumation and the calcined human fragment from the medieval kiln are likely to be of Romano-British burials. No other early occupation can be shown definitely, while redeposited Romano-British sherds were found in medieval and post-medieval features. In addition, the last two periods must be excluded from consideration because Christian burial customs should have been obvious from the skeleton; there is no historical documentation of burials here; and because local medieval cemeteries are closely associated with churches, chapels, the Abbey, or at least with land once owned by the church, none of which is demonstrated for the site.

Besides these few burials, the nature of the Roman and possible prehistoric occupation is uncertain. Small enclosures, possibly rectangular fields, appear delineated by the ditches. Presence of the cremation, a few redeposited grey ware sherds and their absence from the ditches could suggest any settlement activity was slight and late rather than early Roman although further sherds have been found at the rear of the property.

The alignments of the early ditches are different both to the orientation of the street and to the post-medieval property boundaries. This evidence suggests one or two realignments of Romano-British or subsequent organisation of land.

As the street borders the precinct of the medieval Abbey, The Vineyard appears constructed in later Saxon or early medieval times and over rode the Roman or post Roman agricultural use of land. Since the recent properties do not run at right angles to the street, the observed reorientation of land therefore appears partial and conservative, and perhaps was still restricted by traditional practices of holding land for example, in small lots.

By the 12th to 13th century period, however, the use of land changed as the domestic or trade occupation in the town expanded as is shown by the occurrence of the rubbish pits, the construction of the kiln and the use or smelting and casting of lead objects. Of the last possibility, no trace of metal working in the kiln was recognised. Ceramic 'wasters' were not found and the structure was not shaped like other pottery kilns. Nor did the kiln have a close packed stone base like domestic ovens elsewhere. A function as a drying or malting floor is possible.

8 B.W. Spencer, 'Medieval Pilgrim Badges' in *Rotterdam Papers*, ed. J.G.N. Renaud (1968) 138.



