

Site Director's Report. 1974 Excavations.

Excavations this year were scheduled to be carried out in the South-West Quadrant of Dunstable for the local District Council but due to delay in clearing the site, work could only be commenced in the late Autumn. Excavation was therefore continued on the Friary Field, work commencing in early March with the continued permission and support of the owner, Mr. J. B. Stevens.

FRIARY FIELD

Area 1. The purpose of the excavations this year was three-fold. To examine a further section of the trench with the timber slots and establish if possible the date and purpose of this feature also its relationship to the cross-shaped holes that it borders.

Area 2. To excavate one of the cross features (Cross 53) producing a scatter plan of all the finds with their relationship to the stratigraphy of the in-fill.

Area 3. To investigate an area in the South-West part of the field where previous excavations indicate the site of a Roman cemetery. (Plan of field Fig. 1).

Area 1.

An area 33'0" (10.05 metres) by 30'0" (9.14 m) was cleared, leaving baulks longitudinally and across the features. This exposed the trench with its slots, the trench that borders the crosses and also the other features reported and illustrated in the Manshead Journal No. 21 (Page 20).

Previous excavations of this feature had shown parallel chalk banks along the outer boundary ditch and above the timber slots. In the section taken this year the chalk was found above the slots but only the slightest traces of it could be seen along the boundary ditch. Evidence for its past existence is shown as a bank of unweathered natural chalk following the course of the feature.

We have speculated in the past that these chalk banks always associated with heaps of pegged roof tile, were the rubble foundations of a timber building but having traced them now for more than 60'0" a more likely theory would be that they are the bases to tile capped cob walls, bordering a road to the Dominican Monastery.

The outer flat bottomed ditch that borders the cross-features showed an entry gap 3'0" wide and within the ditch ends was a mass of flints of Totternhoe stone. This was probably stone packing for gate posts. The infill of the ditch throughout the length showed a variable rounded dark loam, bordered by hard packed chalk.

Eight slots were found along the 30'0" section of trench, that in the past we have called the verandah trench. These were approximately 31" wide at the chalk surface, narrowing to 30" at the bottom and set approximately 24" into the chalk from the trench. Each could take timbers at least 20" square.

The bottom of each slot was 2" to 3" above the floor of the trench. Along the floor of the trench on each side was the impression of timber beams. Where the trench deviates slightly these floor beams follow the wall of the trench in straight lengths. These can be seen on the plan Fig. 2.

The fill between these floor beams was a dark loam covered by a layer of clean chalk. On both sides of the trench this chalk dipped above the position of the floor beams.

Above the chalk layer was loam capped by another layer of hard packed chalk (Section Fig. 2). Both of the latter infillings carried on into the timber slots, and in several places the layers of chalk stopped short of the inner wall of the trench leaving a 2" band of loam. This probably represents timber shoring on this side.

The upper layer of chalk had been partially removed by a later 'V' shaped ditch dug along the same line as the trench. This loam filled trench can also be seen in the Section Fig. 2.

Sealing the timber slots and following the same line was a 2" layer of loam capped by a bank of clean chalk. Within the chalk bank was a single post hole.

A silver washed coin of Carausius 287-293 A.D. (Colchester Mint) was found in the fill.

Summary.

In the past we have called the trench with the timber slots a verandah trench. This season's excavation has shown that it was undoubtedly built to contain a timber construction. Whether this was a verandah or a grand stand type of structure we cannot tell but the floor timbers suggest that during its lifetime it contained timber beams and was intended to remain an open structure allowing air to circulate around the timber so delaying their decay.

This feature with its slots extends approximately 3 m beyond

FRIARY FIELD DUNSTABLE 1974

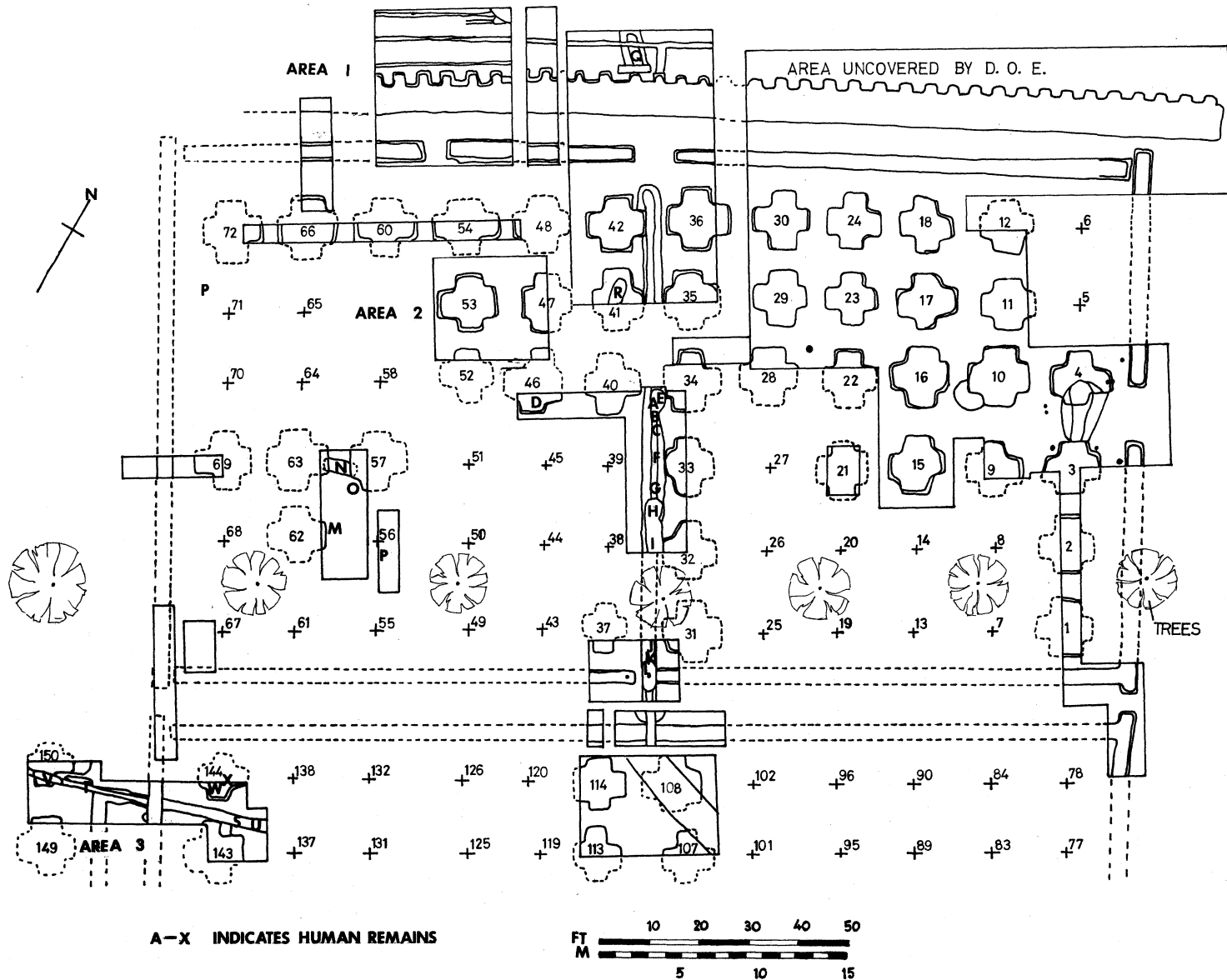


FIG 1

the eastern end of the cross feature and this season's work shows that it is parallel with the structure for at least 170' of the 200' length. The western end is unfortunately beneath a private putting green and cannot be excavated.

It is important to decide whether this verandah is part of the cross features. It has, in common with the latter, the technique of being built by eye rather than by the use of pegs and strings. The trench is not quite straight nor are the trench beams exactly aligned in a straight line. This observation is perhaps more important than the fact that it is parallel with the cross feature. All features in the field are at right angles to the Watling Street, the ditch that was dug through it, the rubble wall bases and the modern field boundary all follow this pattern. The cross structure was built by eye. No cross is exactly the same and the outer ditches stray slightly from direction. In the past we have postulated the theory that the crosses were dug to contain timber uprights that were supported by beams along each arm of the cross, the cross then being left open to allow air circulation. The evidence found this year of the timbers in the verandah trench suggest that this technique was certainly used for this structure.

The chalk layers penetrated into the timber slots but in other areas we have found that the chalk layer stopped short of the slot. This is consistent with some timbers being removed but others left in position when this structure was abandoned.

The evidence weighs heavily on the side of this structure being part of the cross feature. Its final destruction indicates that in places there was a deliberate removal of timbers but in some cases timbers were allowed to decay and rot in-situ.

This fact is important when we begin to seek a date. The finding of glazed potsherds deep in the trench shows that the structure belongs to the medieval period, but when and at what time, it is difficult to determine.

From the known history of Dunstable, the Augustinian Priory was founded by Henry I in the year 1132 and from this date Dunstable must have been a vigorous and active place with people requiring timber for heating, cooking and building. It does not seem feasible that at this time, or later, easily procurable timber would be allowed to stand and rot.

During earlier centuries the area of Dunstable, sited as it is on the crossing of two major roads, was a dangerous place to live and was so sparsely occupied that it does not get a mention in the Domesday Book. A large timber structure of this period could well stand and rot.

We also have the evidence of the two silver pennies of Henry I

struck in 1135 which sealed one of the crosses (Manshead Journal No. 21). When these were lost the crosses had been filled in. This could not have been much later than 1140 A.D., the time of expansion in Dunstable.

For dating purposes we are therefore left with the pottery. These are only very small fragments but the glazes suggest a 13th century date.

Here the problem rests. The structures suggest a date earlier than the 12th century, the pottery a date much later.

Purpose of the structures.

Here is a great feature, 200' long and 100' wide, with a large timber verandah or grandstand along one length. The cross features are bounded by a flat bottomed ditch dug presumably to carry sleeper beams of large tree trunks to hold massive walls of timber. They are interrupted to allow entrance. Two of the entrances are big enough for carts, two gated footways. Inside the walls are 72 cross excavations, each about 16' from centre to centre.

We have postulated the theory that it was a great building, but how do you reconstruct a building from this plan? Some of the crosses are deeper than others, suggesting a basilica type structure with upper storey carried on the deeper crosses. Followed to a conclusion it would be possible to reconstruct a building, but it would be an enormously expensive structure to make both in labour and materials. This season's work must put the finality to the building theory; for we have found that there are three of these structures.

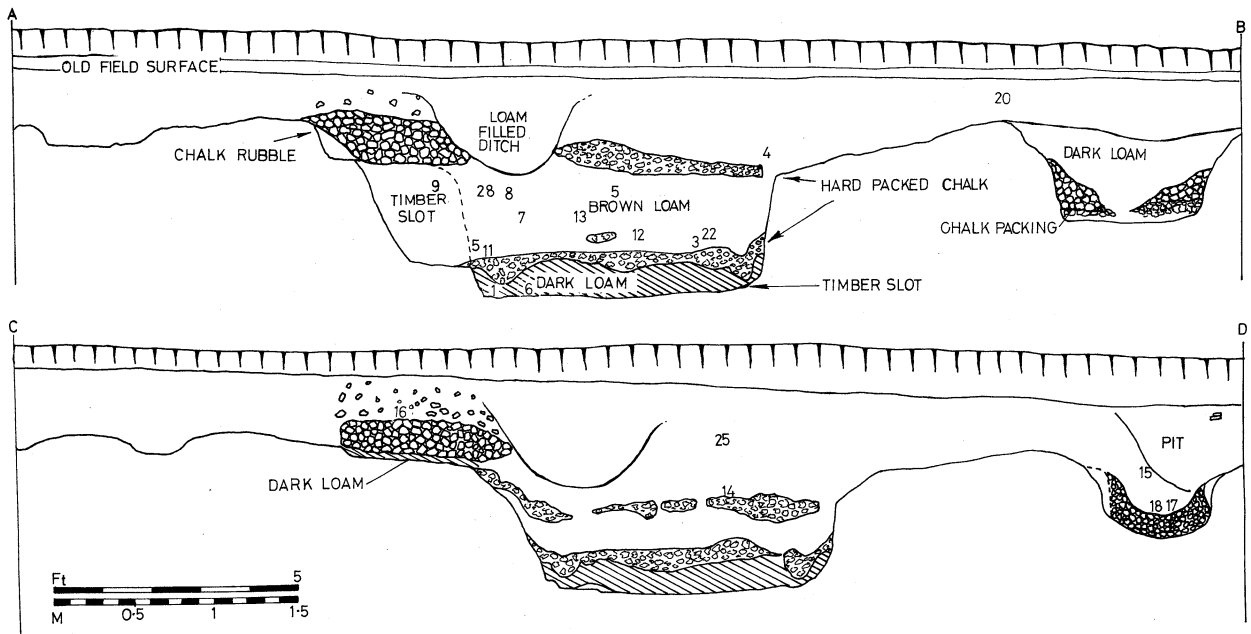
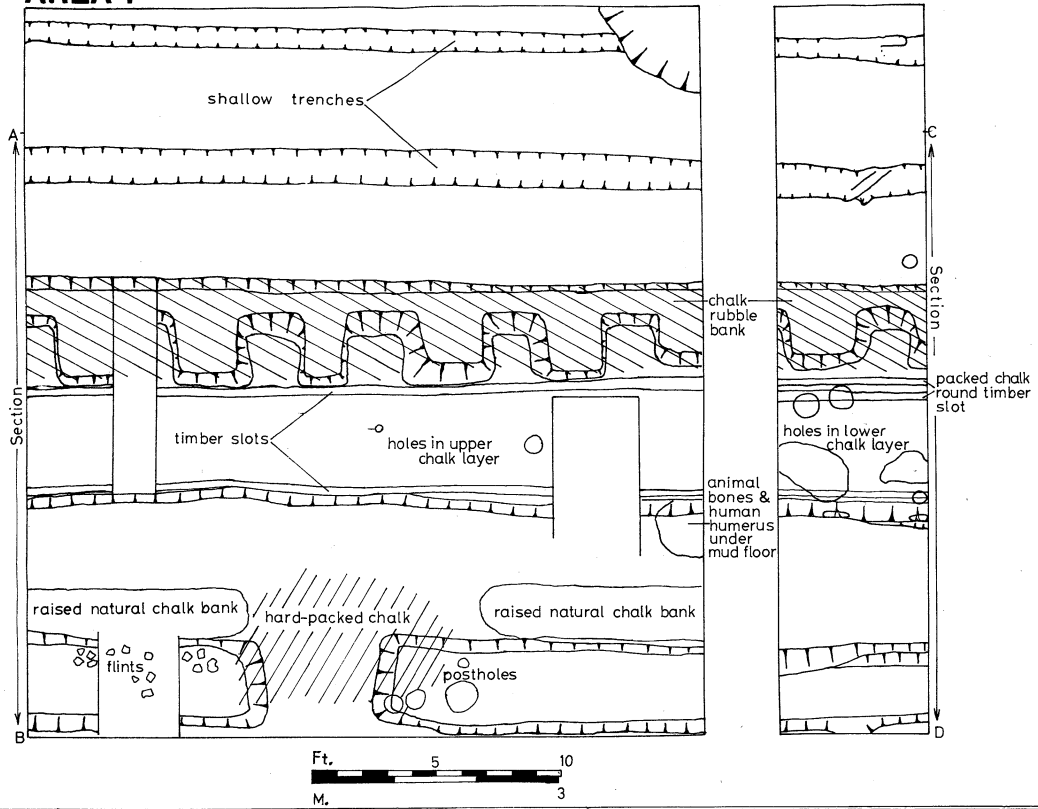
The other theory postulated is that this was a garden. This is even more difficult to see than the building. Gardeners are known faddists but what kind of garden requires a large fence surround and a grandstand along one side. How do we explain that some crosses were swept out when first dug, allowing no chalk to remain in them, whilst others contained chalk from eroded sides or even chalk thrown into them when they were dug.

Do vineyards require massive posts and a great timber wall around to keep out the winds?

Is it possible that before Dunstable's written history a great cathedral was to have been built here and what we have been excavating is the scaffolding and the foundations for a vast building project? Was the grandstand overlooking a jousting field - Dunstable was notorious for its tournaments. Perhaps the 1975 season may help to answer some of these questions.

FIG 2

AREA 1



Area 2.

An area 27'0" (8.22 m) by 20'0" (6.10 m) was cleared to expose completely Cross 53. The area included approximately half of Cross 47 and the arms of Crosses 46 and 52.

All of the area was cleared by hand and a detailed examination was made of all finds and their exact location plotted.

The turf and underlying humus is about 10" deep lying on a layer of crushed tile and small stone containing debris that includes a Rose Farthing of Charles I and clay pipe fragments which can be dated to the late 16th century onwards. Below this level clay pipes do not occur and the soil is comparatively free of all finds. The natural chalk is approximately 18" below the turf.

Excavation of the crosses commenced when the area had been cleared to the natural chalk level.

The sections and plan show the distribution of postsherds Fig. 3.

Analysis of Cross 53. By Barry Horne.

The area around the cross was cleared by hand to the natural chalk before a detailed excavation of the fill was commenced.

The cross was divided into quadrants by 12" wide baulks and each quadrant was carefully excavated layer by layer.

The position of each find with a brief description was noted throughout the fill.

The finds numbered 670 and included Roman and Medieval potsherds, flints, iron slag, animal bone fragments, tile and a Roman Barbarous Radiate coin with no legend. The most significant finds are the Medieval potsherds. The distribution of these can determine the date of the feature.

The Medieval sherds can be roughly divided into two groups.

- (A) Small miscellaneous coarse body sherds.
- (B) Identifiable rims and glazed wares.

The sherds in Group (A) are not included in the analysis as they could not be distinguished with absolute certainty from coarse grey wares of the Roman period.

In Group (B) there was a total of 33 sherds. The positions of these were plotted both horizontally and vertically. Also plotted are 48 identifiable Romano-British sherds.

Reference to Fig. 3 shows that the Medieval material is distributed throughout the fill, extending to the floor of the cross. Although later holes may have been dug into this feature the distribution evidence appears to show with some certainty that this feature belongs to the Medieval period.

(Editor's Note:- Sections in the chalk soil around Dunstable are very difficult to read probably due to the leaching into the soil of any chalk content. Later holes had certainly been dug into the cross fill. These can be seen in the sections perhaps more by inference than by reading the layers in the soil. It should be noted that the people who drew these sections found it practically impossible to determine definite lines of stratum. If the cross had been deliberately filled following its excavation, one could expect to see well defined tip lines. These were not there. What interpretation can we make from a fill that is described as "brown loam with pockets of dried peas". How did this accumulate - rapidly or slowly? Despite the most careful excavation and endless discussion on site about the sections we are no nearer the solution of how the crosses were originally filled.)

Area 3.

An exploratory trench was taken in this area which was later widened at both ends to expose a narrow ditch that was found running obliquely along the trench.

This ditch ('A' on the plan Fig. 4) was approximately 30" wide at natural chalk level and 20" deep. It contained four human skeletons and the remains of two horses. The fill of the ditch was mainly small chalk containing a scatter of Romano-British sherds.

Skeleton 'U' was that of a small man approximately 30 years old at the time of death. He was buried lying on his left side. The ditch bottom had been deepened by approximately 6" to contain the body.

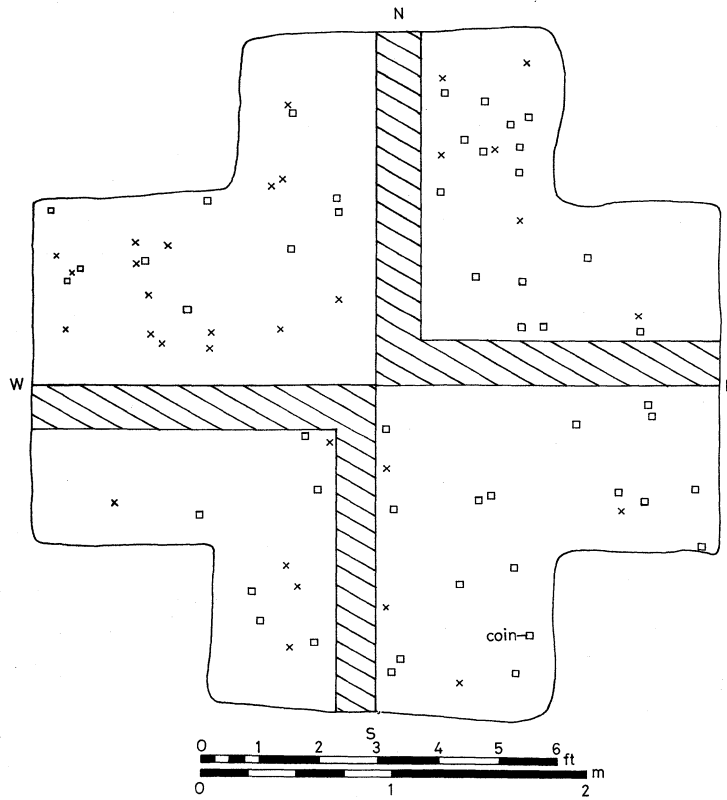
Skeleton 'S' was a male aged approximately 30 years. This body had been placed in the ditch after body 'U', the skull lying above the fill of small chalk that covered the feet of 'U'.

The remains of 'S' had been disturbed at a later date when the horse 1 had been buried.

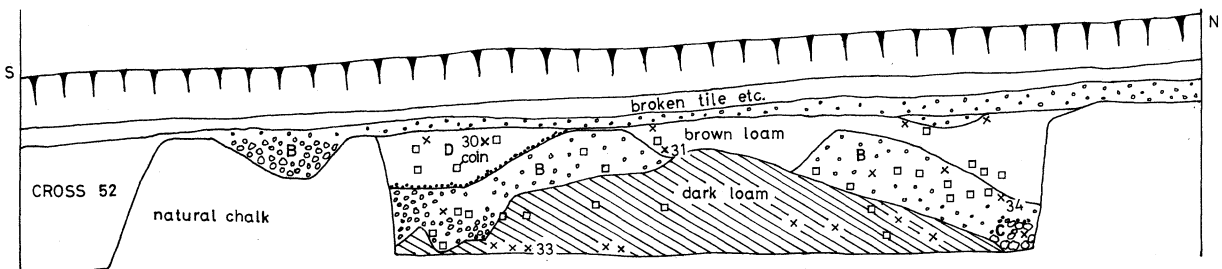
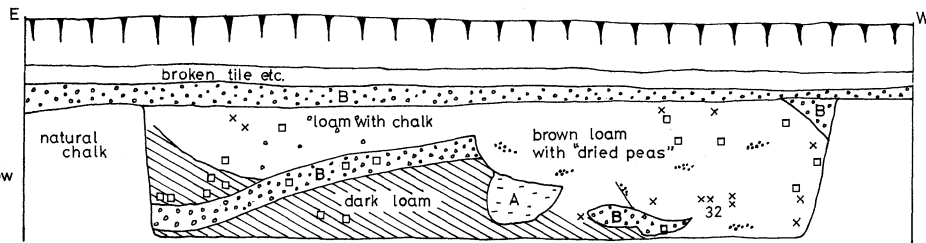
To take the carcass of the horse the ditch had been re-excavated and widened. This activity had removed skeleton 'S' from the pelvic bones to the feet at a time before the body had completely decomposed. The articulated bones of the lower left leg were found below the horses neck but the remainder of the skeleton, as dis-articulated bones, was found in the chalk fill above the horse.

FIG 3

AREA 2 CROSS 53



- A brown loam with flecks of charcoal
- B small chalk and loam
- C loose chalk capped by finer chalk
- D chalky loam with line of "dried peas" below
- Roman sherd
- x Mediaeval sherd



The ditch had again been widened to take the carcass of horse 2. No signs of injury were found on either horse.

The hindquarters of horse 2 had been removed when Ditch 'C' was dug.

Skeleton 'T' was that of an adult female. Within the grave fill was an open ended bronze ring.

Skeleton 'V' was a male aged approximately 18-20 years. The ditch had been deepened 3" to contain the body. The frontal part of the skull had been destroyed by later activity.

Other Features.

Parts of five cross-shaped features were exposed during the excavations. Cross No. 144 which, with Cross No. 143, belongs to building 2*, was partially excavated. It was dug 24" deep into the natural chalk and the lower fill was a lump chalk piled up into the centre of the cross. The remainder of the fill was a dark loam. Within the chalk fill were the scattered bones that included skull fragments from at least two human skeletons. Other human bones can be seen in the section of that part of the cross not yet excavated.

Cross No. 143 was exposed as dark loam extending lower than the natural chalk. This is yet to be excavated.

Bordering these crosses is a square-sided ditch (Ditch B) that is probably the western boundary ditch of building 2. This has a flat bottom, sheer sides and was infilled with brown loam. This ditch cut through a small loam filled pit (Feature B) that contained no finds.

Crosses Nos. 149 and 150 are part of building 3, another feature similar to buildings 1 and 2.

Cross No. 150 was sunk 4" deep into the natural chalk and was dug over the burial trench and skeleton V. It was this later activity that had removed the frontal part of the skull.

The north arm of Cross No. 149 was shown in the excavation. This proved to be filled with dark loam and is much deeper than Cross No. 150. A depth of 16" was reached before the excavation was abandoned for the season.

Ditch 'C' is apparently the eastern wall of building 3 and follows the pattern of the ditches surrounding these features, having sheer sides and a flat floor. When this ditch was originally dug, the excavators had removed the hind part of the skeleton of horse 2. One of the canon bones of the horse had

(* For identification purposes only, these great features containing the crosses are referred to as Buildings 1, 2 and 3).

been thrown into the completed ditch which was filled with a brown loam.

The rectangular pit A had been dug over Cross No. 143 and part of the grave of horse 1. When this pit was made the right femur of the horse had been removed and thrown into the pit which had a floor of packed chalk and roof tile. The date and purpose of this pit is unknown but the tile and a few fragments of glazed pottery suggest that it was probably dug during the 16th century.

The pit was only partially excavated and will be completed when the excavation is extended.

Report of the human remains. Dr. V. Jones.

Skeletons S, T, U and V.

Skeleton S.

Age 30+

Sex Male

Stature (Humerus) 172.603 cm (5'2")

Dentition	8765 missing a/m	6 malinserted, 78 missing a/m
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alveolar caries 7

6 missing a/m

56 missing a/m

Skeleton T.

Age adult

Sex Female (pelvis)

Path nil

Stature 160.141 cm (5'3")

Skeleton U.

Age 30+

Sex Male (pelvis)

Dentition	678 missing a/m	678 missing p/m
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8 Buccal alveolar caries

8 alveolar caries

Pathology. Early O.A. in lumbar spine

Stature 165.492 (5'5")

Skeleton V.

Age 18-20

Sex Male (pelvis)

Stature 174.2 cm (5'9")

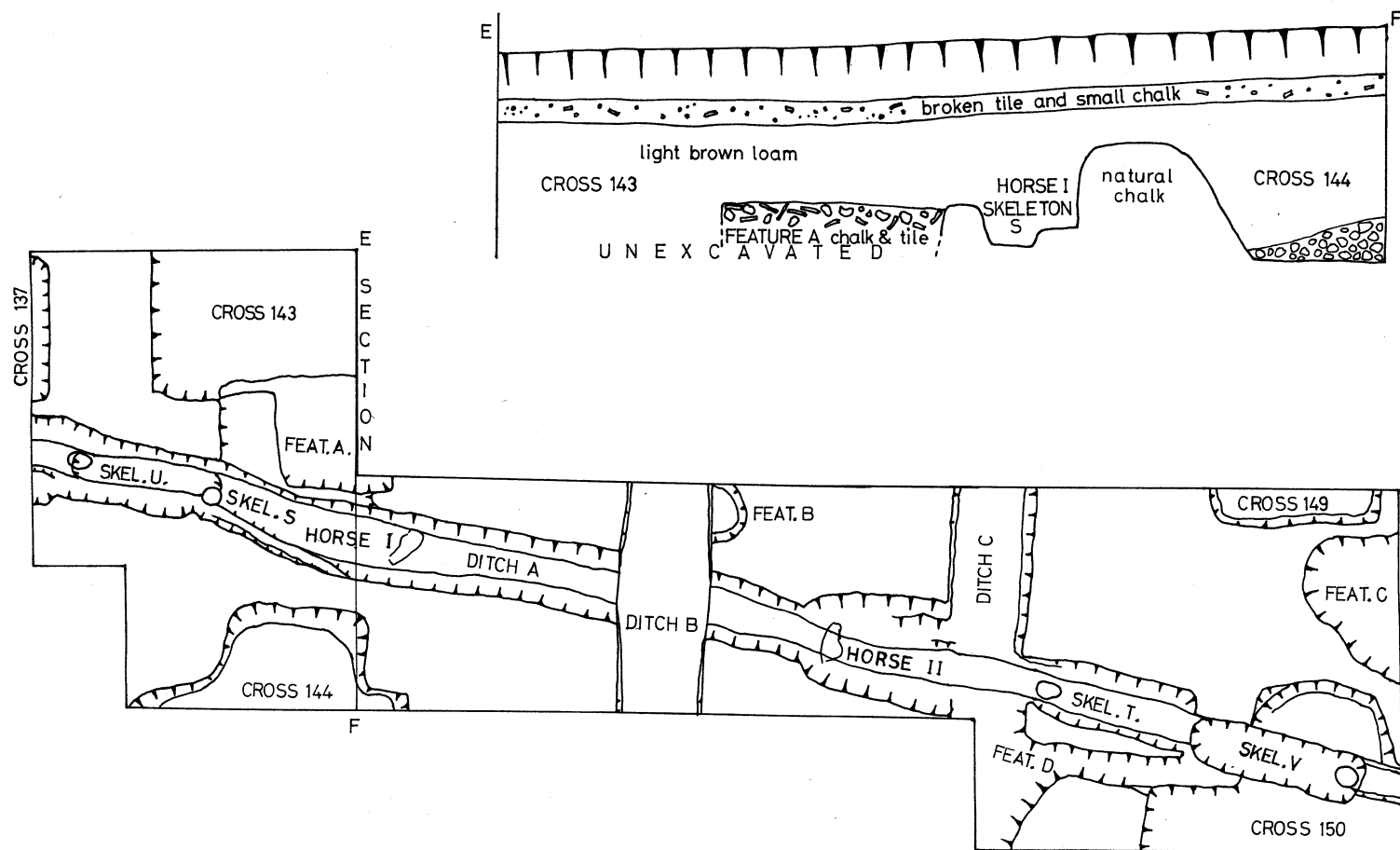


FIG 4

Fig. 4.

- Skeleton U. Male aged about 30 years, lying on left side in deepened section of trench.
- Skeleton S. Male aged about 30 years, lying on back. Skull 12" higher in ditch above the feet of Skeleton U. Lower part of skeleton removed when Horse 1 was buried. The disturbed bones were put back when horse was buried.
- Horse 1. Skeleton of horse. The ditch had been slightly widened to take the horse.
- Horse 2. Skeleton of horse. Hind part of horse removed when Ditch C was dug.
- Skeleton T. Adult female. Buried lying on back.
- Skeleton V. Male aged approximately 18 to 20 years. Lying extended on back.
- Crosses Nos. 143 and 144 are part of structure 2. Cross 144 contained the disarticulated bones of two human skeletons.
- Ditch B. Outer trench of structure 2.
- Ditch C. Outer trench of structure 3.
- Feature A. Rectangular pit cut into Cross 143.
- Feature B. Small loan filled pit cut out by Ditch B.
- Feature C. Hollow in chalk. Bottom of a later pit.
- Feature D. Narrow trench cut out by Ditch C.
- Cross 149. Deep cross, part of structure 3.
- Cross 150. Shallow cross sunk only 4" deep into the natural chalk. Part of structure 3.

SUMMARY.

Roman Period

The burial trench is very similar to the burial trench that crosses the field north-south, with its human skeletons, some in the ditch fill and others in deepened parts of the ditch. This area was excavated because we believed from previous skeletons found in this corner of the field that here was a Roman cemetery. The 1974 excavation has shown this belief to be correct but too few finds, other than the bones, have yet been made to summarise or even guess at a date. It is hoped to extend the dig in this part of the field during the 1975 season, when it is hoped that more skeletons will be found which will give pattern and date to the cemetery.

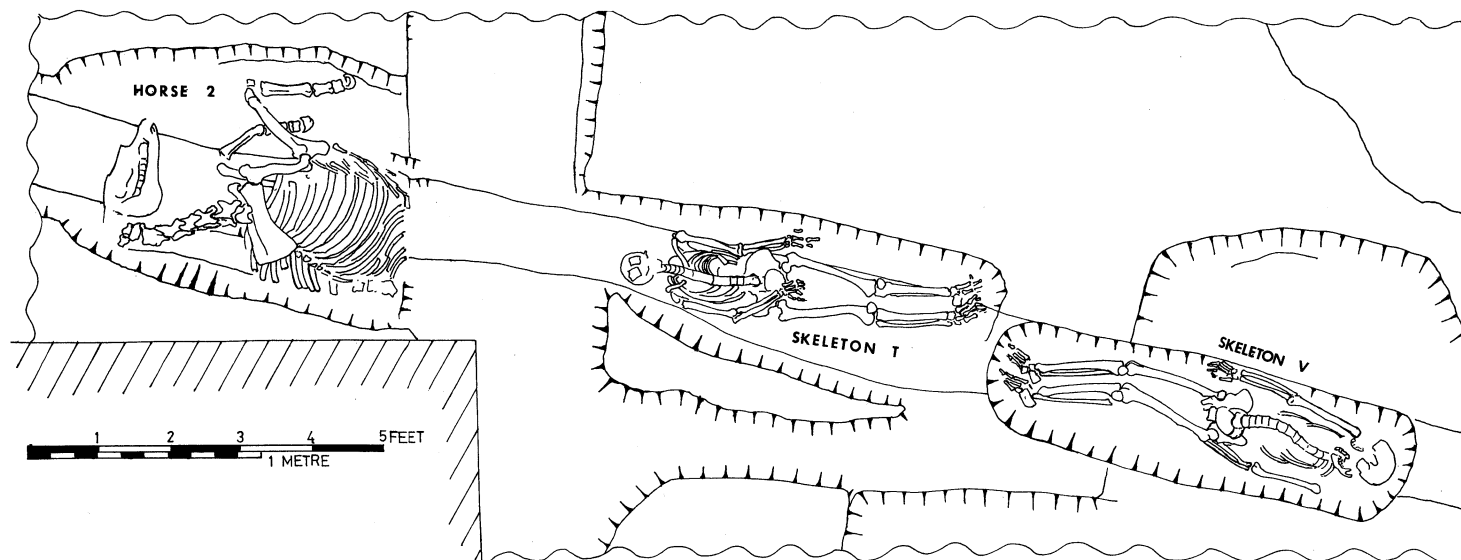
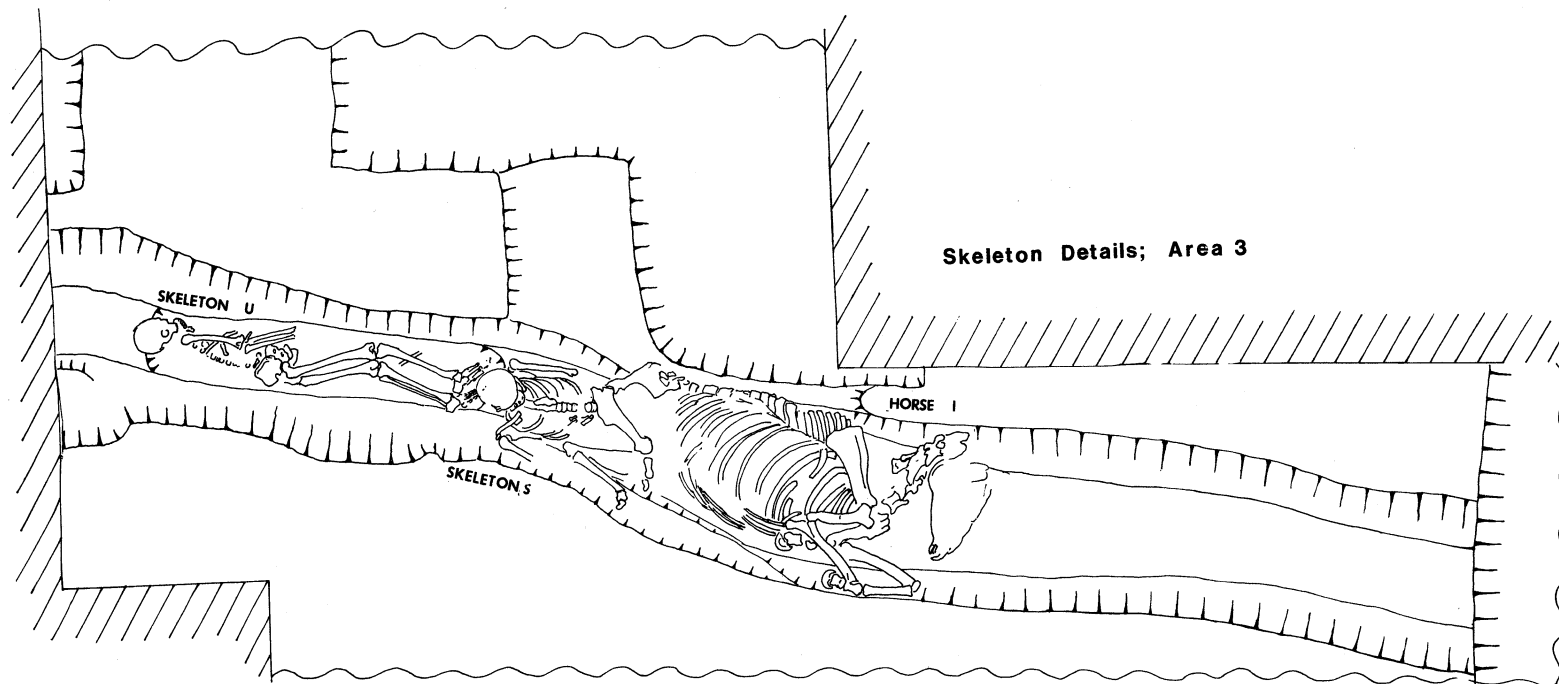
Some of the burials already found have been interred in coffins, other just dumped into the ditch and yet others have been mutilated before burial. This type of cemetery is not unknown. The excavations by Pitt-Rivers at Woodcuts, Rotherly and Woodgates showed methods of burial with bodies sometimes mutilated and buried in ditches or in the tops of pits and yet others receiving orderly burial. Even a horse was found in a ditch at Woodyates.

We would like to know when the burials on the Friary Field took place. Was it early or late in the Roman occupation - Christian or Pagan period? What class of people - servants or slaves? Was the head waiter buried in a box and the kitchen maid just dumped in a ditch. Did the lady with her head and legs hacked off pinch the household silver?

It is doubtful if further excavation can answer all of these questions but we might be able to provide an approximate date for the burials.

Medieval Period

A surprising discovery this year has been the excavation of an outer ditch and crosses of what would appear to be another of the great cross structures. We are labelling this, for convenience, Building 3 and hope that during the 1975 season more of this area will be excavated when a clearer picture should emerge. This find would seem to eliminate the building theory for the structures which although rather negative is an advance towards solving the problem they have posed.



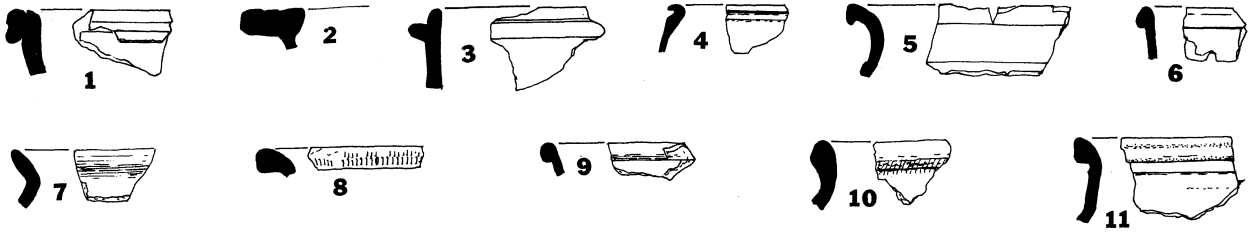
Skeleton Details; Area 3

FIG 5

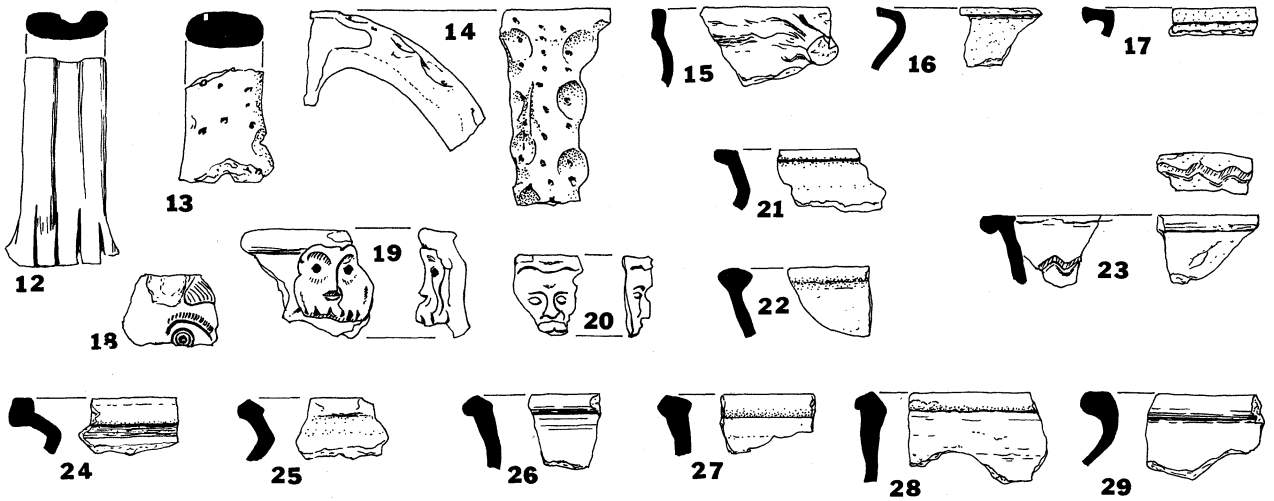
FIG6

SHERDS FROM AREA 1

Roman 1-11

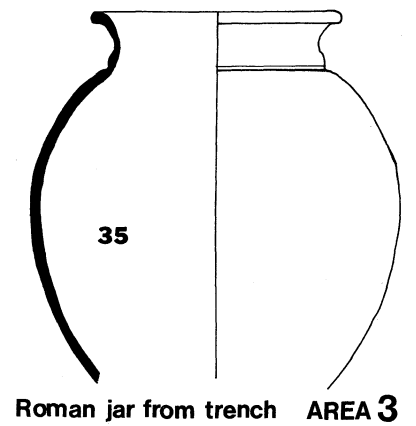
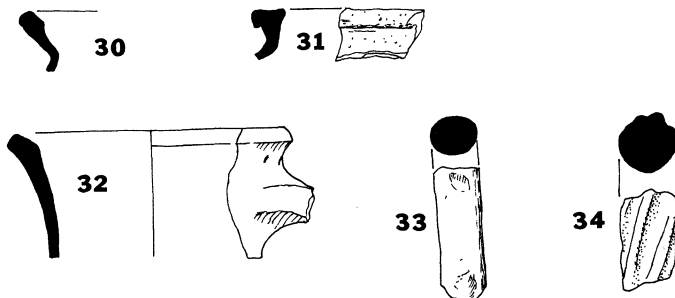


Medieval 12-29



SHERDS FROM AREA 2

Medieval 30-34



Scale 1:4

Friary Field. Pottery Illustrations. Fig. 6.

Area 1. Roman sherds 1 to 11 inclusive.

- No. 1. Rim of parchment ware (Oxford Kilns). Fired pink with red paint decoration on top of rim.
- No. 2. Reeded rim. Grey paste, fired pink.
- No. 3. Flanged bowl. Grey paste with pink/white slip.
- No. 4. Rim of small beaker. Grey paste, fired red.
- No. 5. Sandy grey paste. Fired red.
- No. 6. Fine bowl in pink paste, with red slip.
- No. 7. Vessel in hard grey ware with black slip.
- No. 8. Rim fragment, fired light red. Rouletting on outside of rim.
- No. 9. Small bowl, grey paste fired red. Red colour coated.
- No. 10. Shell gritted black ware. Soapy fabric.
- No. 11. Light red ware. Sandy paste.

Medieval sherds 12 to 29 inclusive.

- No. 12. Flagon handle. Grey paste fired red. Brown/yellow glaze. Deep slash marks at base of handle.
- No. 13. Handle with pierced decoration. Grey paste, fired brown. Very sandy fabric.
- No. 14. As 13 but handle decorated with finger impressions and stab marks.
- No. 15. Rim of very crudely made jug. Slashed handle. Fired grey from grey paste.
- No. 16. Hard sandy grey ware.
- No. 17. Sandy fabric. Grey paste fired red.
- No. 18. Part of face mask showing eye and hair. Light green glaze.
- No. 19. Face masks in green glaze. Marks on the inside
- No. 20. of 20 indicate that a piece of clay on the back of the mask had been pushed through a hole in the pot.
- No. 21. Hard sandy grey ware. This was found in a post hole dug through the lower layer of chalk.
- No. 22. Hard sandy grey ware.
- No. 23. Grey paste fired red. Decorated with wavy line on top of rim and below rim on inside of pot.

- 61-
- No. 24. Grey paste fired red.
 - No. 25. Hard sandy ware. Fired light grey. Soot on rim.
 - No. 26.
 - No. 27. Hard light grey wares.
 - No. 28.
 - No. 29. Sandy grey paste, fired reddish brown.

Cross No. 53.

- No. 30. Hard sandy ware. Fired black.
- No. 31. Bowl in hard sandy grey ware.
- No. 32. Rim of jug with slashed handle. Yellow glaze.
- No. 33. Plain round handle. Green glaze.
- No. 34. Jug handle in white ware. Spiral decoration on exterior.

Burial Trench. Area 3.

- No. 35. Vessel found in fragments along the ditch.
Burnished grey ware.