

RECORDS OF BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

York

Bierton

BEING THE JOURNAL
OF THE ARCHITECTURAL AND
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY FOR THE
COUNTY OF BUCKINGHAM

Jgg86-Bierton Aylesbury

Edited by
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VOLUME 28, ^{IA} 32-39, ^{RB} 74-75, ^{Med} 92-94, ^{Prat} 113, ^{in Mass.} ^{Arch}
1986

Jones, G.G. 1986 The Animal Bones. In Allen, D., Excavations in Bierton, 1979: A Late Iron Age 'Belgic' settlement and evidence for a Roman villa and a twelfth to eighteenth century manorial complex. *Records of Buckinghamshire*, 28, IA 32-39, RB 74-75, med 92-94, pmed 113; Microfiche IA 28-29.
IA RB med pmed Bierton, Bucks IA 1411, RB 1615, med 670 ident.

BUCKS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY
CHURCH STREET, AYLESBURY

ISBN 0 949003 03 4

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GRANT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Society gratefully acknowledges a grant from the Bradwell Abbey Field Centre Trust towards the publication of 'Hardmead and its Deserted Village', by Paul Smith, in *Records* Vol. 27.

EXCAVATIONS IN BIERTON, 1979

A LATE IRON AGE 'BELGIC' SETTLEMENT AND EVIDENCE FOR A ROMAN VILLA AND A TWELFTH TO EIGHTEENTH CENTURY MANORIAL COMPLEX

DAVID ALLEN

With contributions by Denise Allen, Margharetha Dahl, Hal Dalwood, Geoffrey Dannell, Brenda Dickinson, Blanche Ellis, Stephen Greep, Andrew Jones, Gillian Jones, Martin Jones, David Knight, Nicholas Mayhew, Daphne Nash, Adrian Olivier, Yvonne Parminster and Valerie Rigby.

Excavations in the Vicarage Garden at Birtton, near Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire in 1975 and 1979 explored a 1,200 sq. m area of a multi-period site. With some earlier prehistoric activity, there was evidence of intensive Late Iron Age 'Belgic' occupation and, succeeding that, a Roman site, interpreted as a villa. Evidence suggested a strong degree of continuity, particularly in the agricultural system. The site was peripheral to an area of Early Saxon occupation, and from the twelfth to the eighteenth century it included buildings which formed part of a manorial complex.

INTRODUCTION

'The village lies on the road to Leighton Buzzard 1½ miles north east of Aylesbury. It extends about a mile along the road on elevated ground, most of the houses are of brick and tile, and in many cases they stand in small gardens, and the general aspect of the place is pleasing.' (Sheahan 1862, 92)

Birtton is a linear village on a low ridge some two kilometres north-east of Aylesbury (Fig. 1). At the time of writing it retains much of the rural charm noted by Sheahan, despite the inevitable increase of housing schemes in the area. The locality has produced numerous casual finds of prehistoric, Roman and medieval date over the years, and many of these have centred on the area of the Church and former Vicarage Garden (Fig. 1, c). In 1975 a plan was put forward to develop the latter for housing and the Buckinghamshire County Museum undertook a trial excavation which

proved the existence of intensive Iron Age occupation on the site, and recovered finds representing all subsequent periods of activity. The summer of 1979 was the final opportunity to examine more of the threatened area before development took place, and with Department of the Environment assistance the County Museum organised a fourteen-week excavation to investigate some 1,200 sq. m. More than 600 archaeological features were identified and examined, and more than 40,000 finds recovered.

This report describes the results of the excavation under six different period headings: Prehistoric, Late Iron Age ('Belgic'), Roman, Saxon, Medieval and Post-medieval. It also presents the results in synoptic form, for although the excavation demonstrated the intensive nature of the occupation over the past two millennia, it cannot be regarded as much

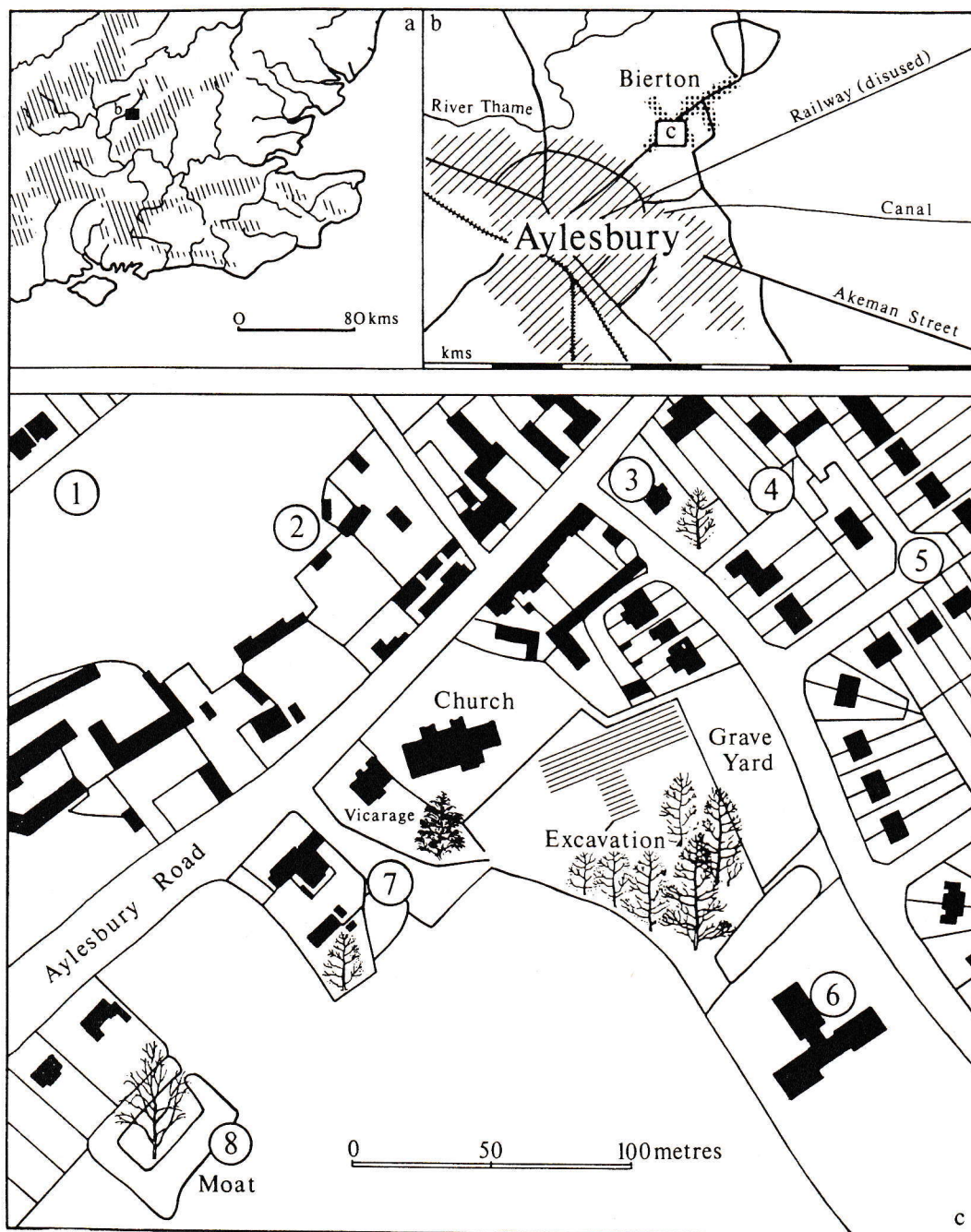


Fig. 1. Location maps. 1c:1-8, previous finds and sites of interest.

more than a sample. At all periods represented, the activity clearly spread well beyond the bounds of the Vicarage Garden. In addition, considerable disturbance took place during each period of occupation, which severely limited the inferences that could be drawn about the preceding phases. Thus, although a detailed Level III archive has been compiled for all features and classes of finds (AMB 1975), such detail only rarely finds its way into these pages. In particular, the writer has

omitted from the Level IV text all feature dimensions, and descriptions of fill, except where they have relevance to a certain point of argument. It is admitted that this is a subjective approach but one which is felt to be justified in the circumstances. The Level III archive, which contains all the missing detail, is housed at the Buckinghamshire County Museum (Aylesbury) as *pro forma* A4 sheets and can be consulted on application there (CAS 1044, finds accession no. BCM 606.1979).

Topography

The Vale of Aylesbury is an area of generally subdued relief, floored mainly by Gault and Kimmeridge clay, drained by the headwaters of the River Thame. In the vicinity of Bierton, however, this monotony is broken by a low ridge, discontinuously capped by Portlandian limestone which is part of an extensive, if irregular feature crossing the county in a south-west-northeast direction. This ridge, while not so important a thoroughfare as the Icknield Way, which runs at the foot of the Chiltern scarp, is the largest outcrop of Portland Beds

in England (Arkell 1947, 125) and has probably always been a natural routeway. It has produced evidence to suggest that it was an area favoured by early settlers, an attraction no doubt founded in its medium-textured soils, which are more suitable for arable farming than the adjacent claylands (Avery 1964, 188). In addition the limestone provided a source of building material (Sherlock 1922, 7) and this is evidenced at Bierton in the Roman period (see below), and in medieval and post-medieval times.

Historical Background

Finds

'I would also remark that the absence of nearly every object of archaeological interest in this parish is to be accounted for by the fact that, during the time of the Rev. Thomas Smith [1807-32] his son begged or bought up all he could find, and on removing after his father's death, carried all away.' (Lamborn 1859, 165)

Whether or not the collecting of Mr Smith's son removed important finds from Bierton is unknown, for nearly all discoveries made prior to his departure are unrecorded. The only exceptions are the 'many Roman and later coins . . . found in the Vicarage Garden and other places in the parish' (Sheahan 1862, 93) and a find made c.1830 in a field called Old Orchard Piece (Fig. 1c:1). This consisted of human skeletons (some clothed), horse skeletons, three halberds, a breastplate and coins. The find

apparently represents the remains of a Civil War burial pit and the bones were reinterred within a few days of their discovery. Some of the objects survived to be described in detail and exhibited to the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society (Lamborn 1859, 162) but have since disappeared.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw two important discoveries in the area. In 1861 eight skeletons were found in 'Mr. Bonham's pightle', a plot of land c.100 m northeast of the Church (Fig. 1c:3; CAS 1042). Horse bones were again present, and a rowel spur, but the inhumations were not readily datable. In the same locality, however, were 'the undoubted remains of a Romano-British interment' (Lamborn 1861, 290). This consisted of a circular feature, containing a large vessel of lead, c.0.50 m in diameter, which was surrounded at a distance of 1.0 m by a number

Objects of Worked Bone and Antler (Fig. 18)
S. Greep

1. Thick round disc c.46 mm diam. probably cut from an antler crown. The edges have been removed and smoothed. A small hole c.5 mm has been centrally drilled. This piece most likely served as a spindle-whorl. (0533)
2. Point manufactured from an ovicaprid metapodial, 75 mm long, complete. These are a common and well known form, although this example is quite short and the working surface has been cut at a much sharper angle than normal. Such points have been variously interpreted but are usually termed 'gouges' (e.g. Wheeler 1943, 303-6) or pin-beaters (Crowfoot 1945) for beating the weft into the warp in weaving. There are, however, many alternative suggestions as to their use (Greep forthcoming) and the wide variety of shapes and sizes probably indicates that they served a number of functions. (0621)
3. Distal end of an ovicaprid tibia, 70 mm long. A single irregular perforation has been made near the surviving epiphysis. This is most likely a point similar to no. 2 above, the working surface now being lost. (0510A)
4. Ovicaprid tibia, 98 mm long, broken. A rough latitudinal perforation has been made at the surviving, distal, end. The proximal end has been lost but would most likely have been made into a point as no. 2 above. These forms first appear in the Bronze Age, lasting well into the Roman period and later, but most are characteristic of the Iron Age. (0471)
5. Shaft of an ovicaprid tibia, 91 mm long. Both epiphyses are lost but the shaft displays a certain degree of artificial polish and might be compared with a small number of similarly 'worn and grooved' ovicaprid bones of Iron Age date from elsewhere (Wheeler 1943, 306, Pl. XXXVA, 4-5). (0623)
6. A sawn tip of red deer antler, 60 mm long. A waste product. (0510A)
7. A large piece of red deer antler, with beam and brow and bez tines all sawn, the saw leaving a 2 mm slot. A waste product. (0945)

The Iron Age Animal Bones
G. G. Jones

A total of c.12,000 bones were collected during the excavation. Some 2,500 were from well-stratified first-century B.C./A.D. pre-Roman features (ditches, gullies and pits). The animal bone report deals chiefly with this material, an interesting group, since few animal bone samples of this date have yet been studied. Animal bones from Roman, medieval and post-medieval features are discussed in the relevant sections of the report. I acknowledge with thanks the help of Dr G. Cowles of the British Museum (Natural History) Ornithology Section and of Mr R. Wilson and Mr I. Hull of Oxford University Museum.

Table 1 summarises the material from the Late Iron Age features.

Table 1. Late Iron Age species present.

	Cattle	Sheep	Pig	Horse	Other sp.
BN	445 31%	607 43%	304 22%	22 2%	33 3%
MN	31 21%	64 44%	29 20%	8 5%	22 14%
Horn core	8	17	-	-	Deer 5
Skull	30	43	39	6	Dog 8
Jaw	70	97	66	-	Cat 1
Tooth	79	62	35	5	Hare 2
Vertebrae	10	23	4	-	
Scapula	40	29	21	2	Fowl 6
Humerus	19	38	14	-	Goose 2
Radius/ulna	44	60	15	-	Duck 5
Pelvis	26	16	9	1	Raven 3
Femur	15	31	10	-	
Tibia (fibula)	14	83	13	1	Frog/ toad 2
Carpal/tars.	32	13	18	-	
Metapodial	33	81	46	4	
Phalanx	25	14	14	3	

Total number of bones = 1411

Note: BN = number of bones; MN = minimum number of individuals.

Materials and Method

Bone preservation was fairly good; root marks and small pits were common on the bone, though it was hard and strong.

The minimum number of individuals for each species was obtained from the most commonly occurring skeletal element, for each main feature, with due regard to evidence of age, and then by addition. Small features were grouped together; there were 18 such main and grouped small features.

The Iron Age bone was mostly from ditches. There was sufficient stratification on the site to put some of these into sequence, but only in a tentative fashion. In the three ditch samples with more than 100 bones, sheep account for nearly half the bone numbers (Table 2). The sample from the phase 4 ditch showed a decrease in cattle and increase in pig. The same sample also produced a greater range of other species, plus all the bird bones. It may be that in

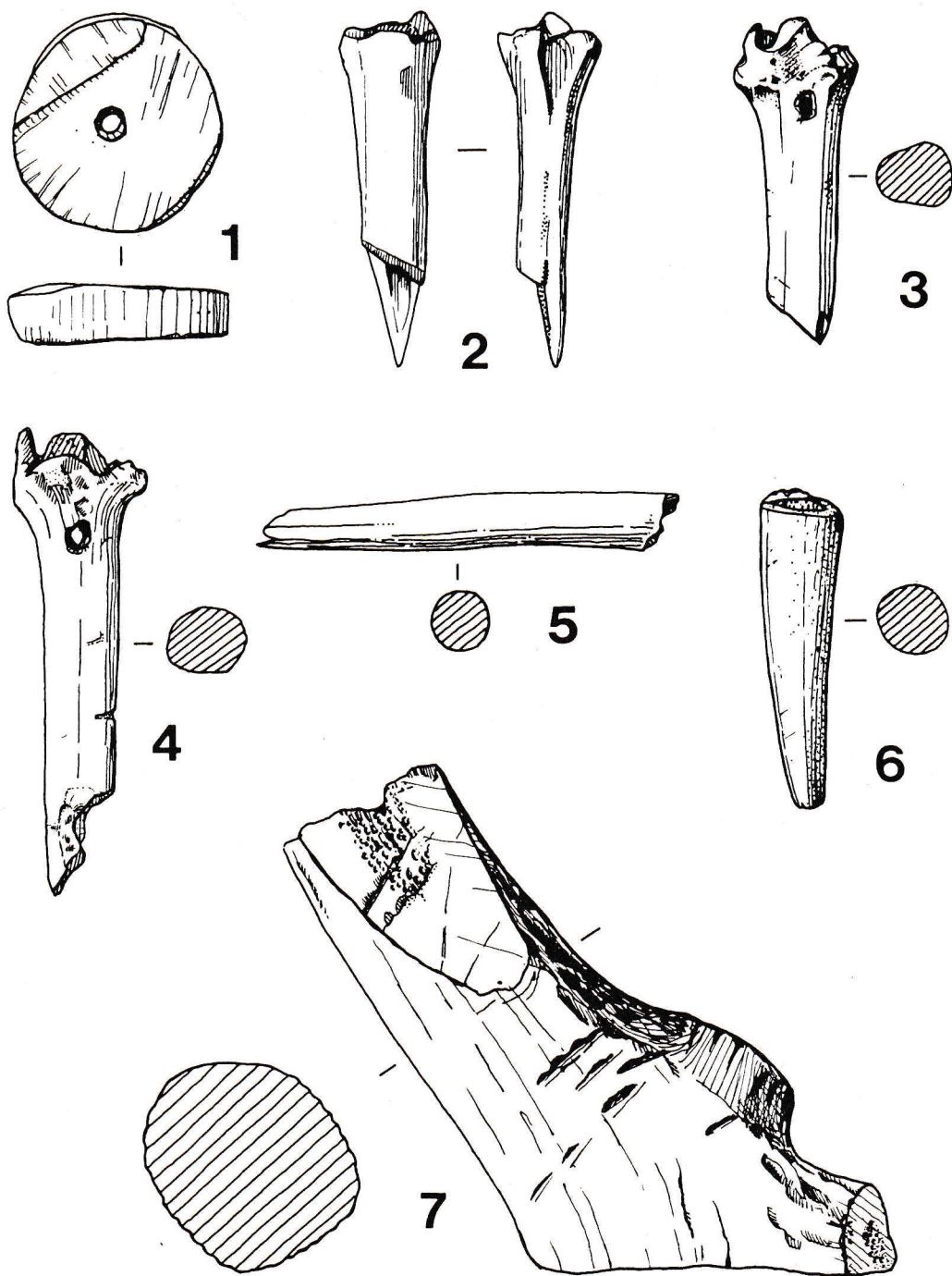


Fig. 18. Late Iron Age worked bone and antler. (Scale 2:3)

Table 2. Analysis of the animal bone content of the main features.

	Phase	N	Percentage		Pig	Other Species
			Cattle	Sheep		
Ditch 0621	2	137	37	43	19	<1 dog
Ditch/pits 0615, 17, 24, 25	2/3	163	34	48	18	<1 horse, hare
Ditches 0459, 78	2-4	142	42	37	13	8 horse, dog, duck
House gully 0511, 31, 0609, 22	4	59	24	55	21	<1 deer
Ditch 0460, 0510, 0610	4	459	24	47	23	6 horse, dog, deer, hare, frog, fowl, goose, duck, raven
Combined pits/postholes		111	45	28	22	5 deer, goose

this particular ditch, conditions for survival of bone were good, and that the decrease in cattle and increase in pig reflects better survival of bone, not a change in numbers of each species buried. Recent work by Maltby (1981, 165) and Wilson (1978) has demonstrated the amount of variation that can occur within a site. The pits, some of which were certainly postholes, contained an untypical bone sample, half the bones being of cattle.

Evidence of bone working was found. The bone objects are described elsewhere (p. 32); unfinished or waste pieces were also recovered from the ditch deposits, and these included bones of sheep and cattle, and red deer antler.

Cattle

Bone from all parts of the skeleton was found. The anatomical analysis (Table 1) shows jaw bones and teeth to be the commonest finds. Scapulae were represented, but chiefly by fragments. Tibiae were under-represented considering the density of this bone; three distal tibiae fragments were found against eleven astragali. Variation could be accounted for by the small size of the sample, and by differences in durability and recovery.

Skulls:

Parts of the skulls of three cattle were recovered, all from one layer (1416), a shallow

gully forming part of a rectangular enclosure (Fig. 8). The horn cores had been chopped at the base to remove the horn sheath. Measurements of the horn cores are given on microfiche (fiche p. 28, E2). The skulls were adult but not aged. Skull shape has been described and classified by Grigson (1976) on modern cattle, although little work has been published applying the method to archaeological material. Using Grigson's method, on skull 1 the frontal profile from the front showed a 'slight boss' and from above shows a 'low and double curve'; the horn direction was straight out. Skull 2 was almost certainly a cow; the frontal profile from above showed a slight boss and from the front a high single or double arch; the horn curved forward, with some torsion (Armitage and Clutton-Brock 1976). Skull 3 had a frontal profile similar to skull 2, with the horn core curving forward and down. More complete skulls, from Ashville (Wilson 1978), are of similar form. These shapes are found in various modern breeds including the 'old' breeds (e.g. Shetland, Welsh and Chillingham) and excluding the Longhorn.

Cattle jaws were grouped into six age stages (Table 3), defined in Bourdillon and Coy (1980). The figures show the minimum number of individuals at each stage, with data from maxillae and loose lower deciduous third pre-molars and third molars given in brackets, e.g. in stage 1 no mandibles were present but there

were four maxillae (two of them a pair) with the first molar unerupted. From the total of twenty individuals, 55% died when dentally mature (stages 5 and 6), with the earlier stages about equally represented. One stage 6 mandible was

from a very old beast (numerical value 56, method of Grant, 1975). Long bone data show the sum of elements represented. The two sets of data both show the slaughter or natural death of some cattle in their first or second year.

Table 3. Cattle age data.

Jaws		Long bones	U	Y	F
1 birth - M ₁ in wear	0(+3)	d humerus, p radius, phal 1 and 2	5	3	19
2 birth - M ₂ in wear	1(+1)	(which fuse at 1-1½ y, modern figures)			
3 birth - M ₃ in wear	2	d metacarpal, d tibia	1	1	4
(2-3 y, modern)		(1-1½ y)			
4 M ₃ in partial wear	9(+1)	p femur, calcaneum, p tibia			
5 M ₃ in full wear	4(+4)	d radius (3-4 y)	6	1	6
6 M ₃ in heavy wear	2(+1)				

M₁ - first molar; d - distal; p - proximal; phal - phalanx; U - unfused; Y - partly fused / fusion line clearly visible; F - fused. In addition there were 5 calf bones (minimum number 3).

The number of measurable bones was small, but some indication of the size of the Iron Age cattle can be suggested. Two metacarpals, a radius and a metatarsal give shoulder heights of 0.98, 1.12, 1.09 and 1.17 m (method of Kiese-walter in von den Driesch and Boessneck 1974); the range of size is as great as that quoted by Wilson (1978) for Iron Age sites in southern England. The usefulness of other measurements is restricted by lack of published data and by differences in the methods used by various workers. The mean measurements on the radius (Bp), astragalus and metatarsal (fiche p. 28, E2) are greater than at Roman Cowbridge and Exeter (Jones, G. forthcoming a; Maltby 1979), both of which were unaffected by the increase in the size of cattle in the Romano-British period. They are comparable with measurements from Roman Billingsgate, London (Armitage 1980).

Evidence for butchery practices was not recorded in great detail. Rather few marks were found, 7 per cent only of cattle bones bearing chopmarks and 3 per cent showing finer marks, probably from a knife. As a general observation, the identified bones and also the cattle-sized ribs were less chopped and in larger pieces (ribs often more than 15 cm long) than at Roman Cowbridge or Saxon Thetford (Jones, G. 1984). This is not thought to be a recovery

bias as, for a hand-dug site, some very small fragments were recovered. The bones were chopped sufficiently to reach the marrow.

The scapulae recovered did not show a general butchery pattern, some having the spine chopped off and some not, some having chop marks on the head and some not, and one bearing a hole in the middle of the blade, probably made when the bone was fresh. One might argue that such variation indicates lack of specialisation in the butchery process.

Three first phalanges had a hole in the distal end. Associated scratches and opposing dents make it most likely that this is the work of dogs.

Variation and Pathology:

Two cases of dental variation were observed, both of the lower third molar; in one the fifth cusp was absent and in another it was reduced to a small lip at the occlusal surface (wear stage g, method of Grant, 1975). Nine lower third molars were normal. Absence of the second premolar was not observed (sample size, 8).

Part of a skull was found which had an oval opening, measuring 6.5 × 3.3 mm into the frontal sinus, in the anterior part of the lacrimal bone near the orbit. The bone in the area of