

Portbury Primary School

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Excavations by Andy Young and the Avon Archaeological Unit were carried out in 2004 and 2005 on the site of an extension to St Mary's Church of England Voluntary-aided Primary School in Portbury not far from the medieval parish church which is probably the site of an early medieval minster. Burials and other material had been found when the school was constructed in 1972 but not recorded. These were clearly part of a cemetery as the remains of a further 15 burials were found in the 2005 excavations. Within the cemetery was a pit or 'mass grave' containing three skeletons of young men, one with a sharp weapon trauma. It was assumed that these were later, perhaps post-Roman burials, inserted into a late-Roman cemetery. The post-excavation analysis stage of the project was not commissioned by the client and no radiocarbon dates were obtained at the time of excavation so it was decided to obtain dates for the three skeletons, and one from a burial in the 'main' cemetery, which it was assumed would be earlier and Roman. The results were as follows:

Burials in the pit

SUERC 30963 (GU 22219) 605-685AD at 95.4% probability

SUERC 30964 (GU 22220) 575-660AD at 95.4% probability

SUERC 30965 (GU 22221) 530-650AD at 95.4% probability

Burial in the cemetery

SUERC 30962 (GU 22218) 530-650AD at 93.8% probability

While Jackie McKinley was selecting bones for radiocarbon determination she noticed that a second skeleton from the pit also had evidence for a sharp weapon trauma. The results of this radiocarbon-dating are of great interest and importance. We appear to have a post-Roman 6th and 7th-century cemetery within which there is at least one special grave group. Because it is recently excavated to a high standard it would be possible to retrieve a lot more information, such as isotope analysis to see which area the people came from, than would normally be the case. It is also the only recent excavation of such a cemetery since work at Shepton Mallet by Peter Leach and the large excavation at Cannington by Philip Rahtz. From the radiocarbon dates, the people are likely to have been British, that is successors of Romano-Britons living in Somerset in the 4th and 5th centuries; they are not likely to be Anglo-Saxons in the 6th and 7th centuries this far to the west in England. The (at least) two sword wounds on two out of three of the young men buried in the pit perhaps suggest local conflict or, more romantically, fighting with incoming Saxons, Irish or whomsoever. At the time of writing there seems to be no source of funds to complete the study of what is clearly one of the most important sites in Somerset dating from the 'Arthurian' period.

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