

Saron Cemetery at Camerton, Somerset

BY DOM ETHELBERT HORNE, F.S.A.

ON the N. side of the main Fosse road to Bath, at about a mile from Radstock, is a lane that leads to Camerton. A short distance down this lane, on its W. side, is a large quarry of inferior oolite stone which has been worked for a number of years. The field at the back of this quarry contains the cemetery in question. In July 1926 the quarrymen were throwing down human bones in some quantity, together with the top soil, as they uncovered the stone, and it seemed probable from what one could learn that they had been encroaching on a cemetery in this way for some years. At the end of the month some explorations were made on the site to ascertain whether the graves continued or whether they had all been destroyed. Enough evidence was forthcoming to show that burials probably extended far into the field, and it was decided to ask the landowner's permission to excavate the site thoroughly in the following year.

The owner of the land, Sir Frank Beauchamp, Bart., having kindly given his consent, and the tenants, Messrs. Miles & Sons, generously affording every facility, on the 12th June 1928 the work was begun by cutting diagonal trenches, running from S.W., to N.E. 2 ft. wide and 3 ft. apart. Counting the preliminary trenches made at the first exploration of the site, eight trenches in all were cut, covering a surface of 50 ft. by 110 ft. Within this space some twenty-eight graves were found. For the most part they were made E. and W., and where the deviation from this appeared rather considerable it is probably not more than could be accounted for if the

direction for the grave was taken from the rising or setting sun at different times in the year (Plate XI). On account of the stony nature of the soil, most of the graves were shallow, 3 ft. being the deepest measured, and the majority were only slightly over 2 ft. It had been found impossible to dig the graves with any exactness, as the large stones in the earth prevented it, and hence the original outline of many of the openings was difficult to trace. In several instances the body had evidently been found after death had taken place, or else no attempt had been made to straighten the corpse before *rigor mortis* had made it impossible, for the posture of some of the skeletons plainly showed that the owners had been buried in the position in which they had died. In one case (28) the grave had been dug full size, but when the corpse arrived it was found that the contracted position of the legs made it necessary to cut away one side of the grave considerably, and to fill in much of the foot which was not used. In one instance only were two bodies buried in the same grave (24), and this had the appearance of being accidental.

All the bones in these graves, with scarcely an exception, were in a very bad state of preservation. As a rule, the skull was crushed flat and it was rare to find any of the large limb bones whole. The stony nature of the earth worked havoc with the skeletons, pushing the bones out of place or breaking them by its weight. The lime in the soil also helped in the work of disintegration, and in the case of the infant burials all the smaller bones had disappeared entirely. Hence it is next to impossible to give any accurate account of age, size or state of the individuals represented. Omitting the first four bodies which were partly destroyed by the quarrymen, the remaining twenty-five consisted of thirteen adults, three youths, and nine infants, as far as could be ascertained. In no case were any marks of violence apparent, and the skeletons gave the general impression of being those of somewhat undersized and ill-nourished persons, but how far this may be accounted for from the disintegrating nature of the soil, which made the bones lighter and smaller than they really were, it is difficult to tell.

One peculiarity in several of these burials should be noted.

Small grains of charcoal appeared to have been sprinkled over the corpse, and they were generally more plentiful about the head and shoulders. That they were thrown on the body after it was in the grave could be proved by the fact that no charcoal was found under the bones, or at the bottom of the grave. The presence of these black grains in the earth was often a sign, when digging, that we were just coming to a skeleton. It is possible that these 'ashes' were in some way connected with a burial service.

The finds brought to light during this excavation were very meagre. If, as is probable, this is a Christian cemetery but few ornaments would be buried with the bodies. Only in one case (5) were four glass beads and a gilt bracteate found. Reporting on the latter, Mr. Reginald Smith, F.S.A., says it 'has certainly a cruciform pattern with trefoil stamps which some might connect with the Trinity . . . the beads look seventh century also. . . . I think it a late feature for a *pagan* grave, and should place all in the seventh century'.

Mr. Horace Beck, F.S.A., who has examined the beads, reports: 'The blue green cylinder bead is exactly similar to one of the Castle Bytham beads, which are probably fifth or early sixth century. The pale green bead is in unusually fine condition, and suggests late Roman work. The yellow bead is made of glass which continued into Saxon times, but is usually corroded in late Saxon finds. . . . The dark blue annular bead is similar in shape and size . . . to blue beads . . . from a Roman hoard at Ichlingham.' . . . All the other finds were iron, and so rusted and encased that they were difficult to make out. In grave (8) an adult had near his left knee what appeared to be an iron dagger, and a youth in (19) held what was perhaps a spear. A female skeleton (14) had an iron bracelet on the left forearm, and three infants had each a small iron knife (9, 18, 27), the last number having also the remains of an iron buckle and probably also the sheath of the knife. The following are the details of each grave as noted at the time:

The first four graves were partly dug into by the quarrymen and I could only note: (1) child, few bones; (2) two adult tibia and fragments; (3) a child; (4) an adult skull.

Grave 5.

Length about 4 ft., width 2 ft., depth 2 ft. 4 in. Contained body of an infant. Only larger bones left and in very poor condition. Face turned to w. Beneath lower jaw a necklace composed of four glass beads. Beginning on the left, was a small blue glass bead, followed by a flat one of green glass; then a metal disc; next to it a large blue glass bead; and finally one of yellow paste. A flat bone or ivory fastening, about quarter of an inch square and an eighth in thickness, with a hole through it the flat way in which was a piece of silver wire, was found towards the back of the skull. Round each bead was a thin silver wire ring that did not appear to be attached to the bead, which was merely lying in its centre. Between the beads were many fragments of similar wire rings, and they probably connected the whole into a necklace. One other bead, saddle shaped, made of shell, half an inch long and five-sixteenths wide, was found by itself between the knees.

Grave 6.

This grave had its E. end quarried away. Contained the skeleton of a child perhaps about nine years of age. Length from top of skull to end of tibia, 3 ft. 9 in. A large flat stone had been placed under the head.

Grave 7.

Length 6 ft., width 2 ft. 6 in., depth 3 ft. Contained complete male skeleton 5 ft. in height. The man was probably of considerable age, as all teeth were gone from the lower jaw and their places filled.

Grave 8.

Length 7 ft., width indefinite, depth 3 ft. Contained skeleton of person about forty years of age. Skeleton fairly complete, but skull crushed in by weight of earth. By left knee, an iron dagger.

Grave 9.

Grave very indefinite, as it had been disturbed by a post hole. Depth 2 ft. 10 in. Skull of an infant, probably under five

years of age. At 10 in. from skull, in direction where left hand would be, an iron knife.

Grave 10.

Length 7 ft., width 2 ft. 6 in., depth 2 ft. 9 in. Skeleton of adult lying on back with both hands to left side and probably crossed at wrists, the right over the left. Body lay diagonally in grave, had head s.w., feet n.e. The legs were carefully crossed at the ankles right over left. Feet nearly perfect. Length from top of skull to end of tibia 5 ft. 6 in.

Grave 11.

This proved to be a stone coffin without a lid, and had every appearance of being a Roman burial. The coffin which was round ended at the head and square at the foot, was 5 ft. 9 in. in length. Width at shoulder 1 ft. 4½ in. ; at 3 ft. from foot, 1 ft. 2½ in. ; at foot, 9 in. Depth at head 8½ in. ; at foot 9 in. Thickness of walls 3 in., sometimes 2 in. Contained a female skeleton about thirty years of age, which must have been forced into the coffin, as the pelvis fitted it very tightly. The edge of the coffin was only a few inches below the surface, and it is probable that the stones forming the lid were removed when the field was under the plough, as they would have been in the way. The coffin itself was quite intact and was not discovered at the time, as it was completely silted up with earth that had forced its way through the joints of the covers. There was nothing in the coffin except the bones. This coffin has been presented by Sir Frank Beauchamp, Bart., to the County Museum at Taunton.

Grave 12.

Length 6 ft. 9 in., width 2 ft., depth 3 ft. Complete skeleton lying on back, 5 ft. 3 in. from top of skull to end of tibia. Bones particularly well preserved, teeth perfect. Adult male.

Grave 13.

Grave indefinite. Contained male skeleton. Right hand under chin, left arm and hand stretched out in a curve at some distance from trunk. Face turned to s.

Grave 14.

Grave indefinite, depth 1 ft. 3 in. from surface. Skeleton of female 4 ft. 6 in. as lying. Length of femur $15\frac{5}{8}$ in. Skull central and resting between clavicles. Arms at sides. On left forearm about half-way down, an iron ring or bracelet nearly three inches in diameter. Five large stones were laid on the pelvis. It is possible they were used as weights to bend the body down as the grave was shallow.

Grave 15.

Total depth 1 ft. 11 in. ; to top of skull (crushed) 1 ft. 8 in. Skeleton of young adult 5 ft. 8 in. as lying. Length of femur $15\frac{1}{2}$ in. Skull resting on left shoulder, face to s.e. Arms at sides. Right straight, left bent so that hand was in centre of body.

Grave 16.

Depth of grave at head 2 ft. 3 in., at foot 1 ft. 10 in. Length of skeleton as lying 4 ft. 1 in. ; length of femur $15\frac{1}{2}$ in. Feet very slightly sunk in grave and on them a large stone had been placed, as probably without it they would have been above the surface. Skeleton in natural position with arms at sides. The skull was flattened with a large stone which rested on it and pushed the lower jaw considerably out of place. Fragments of charcoal round head and shoulders were plentiful. None under the body and hence it was probably sprinkled over it after it was in the grave.

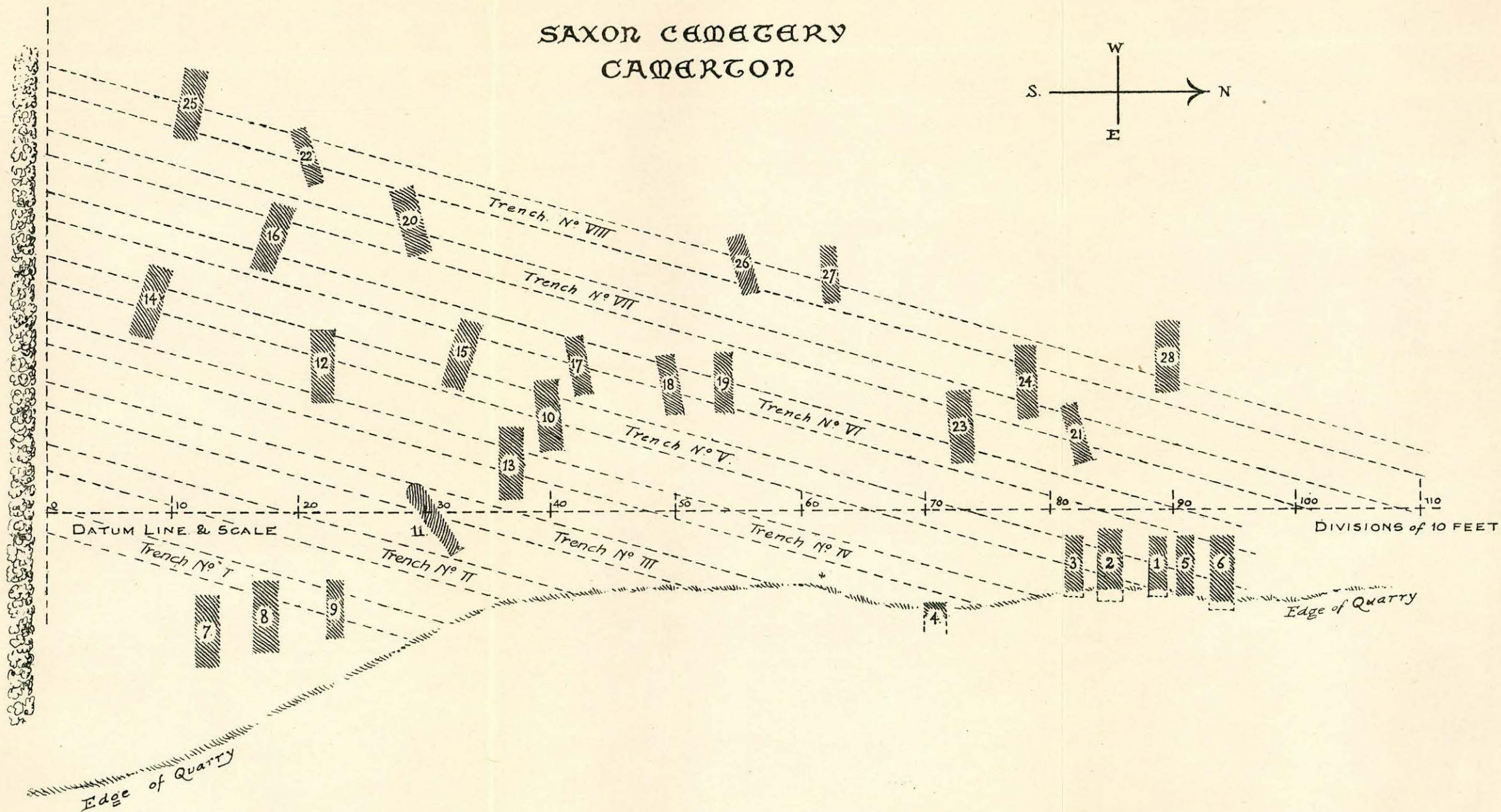
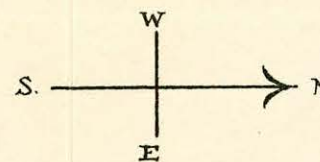
Grave 17.

Depth of grave 2 ft. 3 in. Skeleton of child about twelve. Length as lying 4 ft. 0 in. Head turned over and lying on right shoulder. Right arm slightly bent and fingers on head of femur. Left arm at side on left thigh. Legs straight. Length of femur $12\frac{1}{8}$ in.

Grave 18.

Depth of grave 2 ft. 3 in. Skeleton of child of from six to eight years of age. First molar teeth not cut. Length as lying 3 ft. 6 in. Head turned over on left shoulder facing n.w.

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Lower jaw twisted round to right shoulder through weight of stones on it. Arms straight and close to body. Left leg crossed over right just below knee. An iron dagger or knife with point downwards lay on left side of body. The tang on a level with and 4 in. S.E. of left elbow. Knife slanted slightly across body, and hence might have been in a belt.

Grave 19.

Depth of grave at head 2 ft. 0 in. ; at foot 1 ft. 11 in. Skeleton of a youth between sixteen and eighteen (?). Length as lying 4 ft. 6 in. Length of femur 12 in. Head turned over facing S.E. Both arms bent at elbows and forearms crossed straight across body, left forearm being above right. An iron weapon $6\frac{3}{8}$ in. long was lying on left clavicle, touching left side of jaw, the point being close to and on a level with left ear. The tang nearly on middle of chest. If it had had a wooden shaft it would have crossed diagonally from left shoulder to right ankle. The shaft would have been held by the two hands, and this would account for the position of the arms. The left ankle rested on right.

Grave 20.

Depth of grave 2 ft. 2 in. Skeleton of a male about thirty years of age. Length of skeleton as lying 5 ft. 3 in. Length of femur $16\frac{1}{2}$ in. Head turned over to right side, facing S. Right arm bent at elbow and forearm across body, hand resting on left side of pelvis, with fingers doubled in and closed. Left arm straight by side, hand flat and left thumb touching left femur. Legs straight, ankles close together, feet turned outwards. Skeleton better preserved than most of the others.

Grave 21.

Depth of grave at head 2 ft. 3 in. ; at foot 2 ft. 0 in. Skeleton of child from five to seven years of age. Length of skeleton as lying about 3 ft. 5 in. ; length of femur $10\frac{3}{4}$ in. But little of this skeleton remained—a heap of teeth where the skull had been, and only the larger limb bones. There were traces of charcoal in the grave.

Grave 22.

Depth of grave 2 ft. 6 in. Bones of an infant. Small portion of a skull, pelvis, femur (2). Left tibia bent across right, humerus. No other bones. Length of body as lying, about 1 ft. 6 in. An oval, flat stone about two inches thick and a foot square had been placed on the body.

Grave 23.

Depth of grave at head 2 ft. 1 in. ; at foot 2 ft. 3 in. Skeleton of a male about twenty-five. Length as lying 5 ft. 3 in. Length of femur $17\frac{1}{4}$ in. Head slightly inclined to right, arms straight down by sides, hands palm downwards, thumbs touching femurs. Legs straight, ankles nearly touching. Skull badly crushed and teeth perfect without any signs of decay, but somewhat worn down. Bones well preserved. A layer of medium sized flat stones were packed close together above the skeleton.

Grave 24.

Depth of grave at head 2 ft. 3 in. ; at foot 2 ft. 0 in. Length of skeleton as lying 5 ft. 3 in. ; length of femur $18\frac{1}{2}$ in. Skull turned right over and lying on left side, facing N. Body lying chest downwards, right arm doubled so that hand was under the chin, left arm doubled across back so that forearm rested on pelvis. Right leg crossed back of left, just below knee. Both tibia close together, right slightly higher than left. Ankles touching. This grave contained the scattered bones of a second skeleton. In making the grave for the above body, this grave was opened and the bones thrown out. After the second body was buried, a slight covering of earth was put above it, and then the bones of the primary burial were thrown in anyhow. All the larger bones and the lower jaw were in the middle of the grave, the skull and a tibia were at the head. The tibia was lying diagonally across the face of the second burial, and the skull rested on the skull below. All the smaller bones of the feet of the primary burial were in place 7 in. E. of the feet of the second skeleton and were not disturbed when the second burial took place. Length of femur $19\frac{1}{4}$ in., being the longest measured.

Grave 25.

Depth of grave at head 2 ft. 4 in. ; at foot 2 ft. 3 in. Skeleton of a fairly old man. Teeth much worn and sutures of skull closed up. Length as lying 5 ft. 1 in. ; length of femur $16\frac{1}{4}$ in. Head turned towards right shoulder, arms straight at sides, hands flat on pelvis. Legs straight and nearly touching. Feet very perfect, toes much bent backwards as if the grave was not long enough. Traces of fine charcoal in this grave.

Grave 26.

Depth of grave at head 2 ft. 3 in. ; at foot 2 ft. 7 in. Skeleton of quite a young child, of from five to seven. Nearly all the bones had perished. Length as lying 3 ft. 6 in. Length of femur $9\frac{5}{8}$ in. Head slightly to left, both arms close to the body and straight. Legs straight and ankles touching. Left foot turned outwards, right straight. Fine charcoal round the body.

Grave 27.

Depth of grave at head 2 ft. 0 in. ; at foot 2 ft. 2 in. Skeleton of child, length as lying 3 ft. 6 in. Length of femur $8\frac{7}{8}$ in. Head central, right arm slightly bent at elbow, forearm resting on right side of pelvis. Left arm straight and close to side. Legs straight. All smaller bones had perished. An iron knife, four inches in length, lay on the side of the left arm point upwards and almost touching the left elbow. An iron buckle lay in centre of body, in line with middle of knife. A few fragments of thin iron plate lay near the point of knife, on other side of elbow, and may have been a sheath. Fine charcoal among the bones.

Grave 28.

Depth at head 1 ft. 9 in., and same at foot. Probably the skeleton of a youth of about sixteen. Length of skeleton as contracted 3 ft. 9 in. Length of femur $16\frac{1}{8}$ in. Head turned to left with chin resting on left clavicle. Right arm bent at elbow and forearm across body with hand just below left elbow. Left arm bent at elbow and passed diagonally across body so that the hand rested on right shoulder, palm downwards. Both knees drawn up, the left being a little higher than the right.

Left heel was touching upper part of right femur. Both feet pointing downwards. Skull thin and sutures not closed. Face narrow, mouth closed, upper teeth hanging over lower. Teeth good and not worn down. Pubic bones an inch apart.

An ordinary grave had been dug for this body, but owing to the contraction of the knees it would not go into it. The *n.* side was therefore widened for the purpose. The grave was about 2 feet longer than the skeleton.

All the above bodies were moved from their graves and re-buried at a safe distance from the edge of the quarry, so that they might not be disturbed again by the quarrymen. The digging throughout the exploration of the site was carried out by W. Young with his usual care and thoroughness. As in all probability this cemetery extends some way further into the field, it is hoped to continue working at the site next year if funds allow.

It is a great pleasure to record the help and advice that has been given me throughout this excavation by Dr. Arthur Bulleid, F.S.A.