

A ROMAN BURIAL FROM GREINTON

INTRODUCTION

An evaluation by trial trenching of a vacant plot for a residential development at Coate's Barn in the village of Greinton (NGR ST 41283636) was undertaken as a condition of planning consent by the author in December 1999. This revealed a small group of shallow features containing medieval and Romano-British pottery, cut into a lower layer containing only Roman pottery. As a consequence of these discoveries a further watching brief was required during excavations for the house foundations and service trenches in spring 2000. This process revealed additional features of medieval and post-medieval date, a Roman ditch and the top of a human skull near the base of one trench. As a consequence of the latter discovery it was recommended by the Development Control Archaeologist, Somerset County Council, that full excavation and removal of the remains be undertaken. This was achieved with the assistance of the building contractors on site and they were submitted for analysis and reporting. All the discoveries made at Coate's Barn were the subject of a more detailed report (Leach 2000) and the archive of finds and records are deposited with the Somerset County Museum (Accn no. TTNM: 100/2000). The human remains are the subject of a report by Dr Megan Brickley of the University of Birmingham.

DISCOVERIES

The site lies close to the centre of Greinton village, south-west of St Michael's church, within a plot originally belonging to Coate's Farm (Fig. 1). Geologically, it is founded upon Mercian Mudstone, a formation of red and grey-green marl, whose weathered surface was reached at the base of most excavations, up to 1m below the modern surface in places. The evaluation trench contained three straight segments of shallow and narrow ditches (F100, F105 and F106), a shallow posthole (F102), and part of a much deeper cut (F103) containing 19th and early 20th-century material. Excepting the latter, all contained small fragments of medieval coarse pottery and some more weathered Romano-British coarse wares, and were cut into a subsoil horizon containing charcoal and further sherds of Roman pottery. These were interpreted as the remains of medieval timber-framed structures – beam slots and postholes – cut into a Romano-British occupation horizon and themselves cut by a post-medieval ditch (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1 (above) Location plan

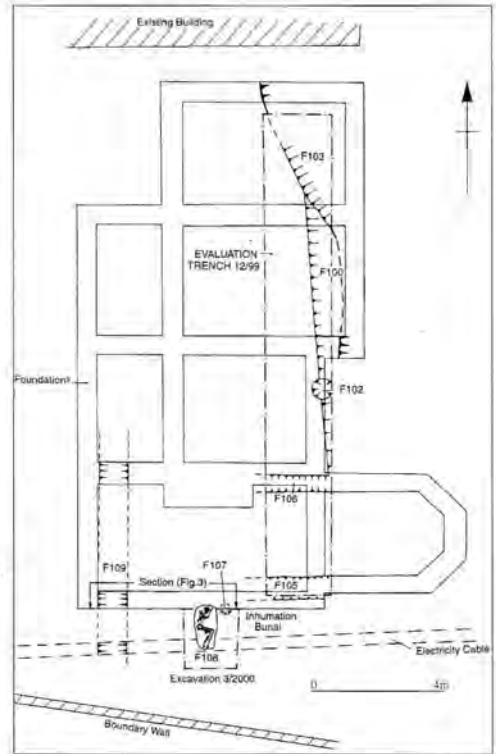


Fig. 2 (right) Main findings

Some of the features located in 1999 were traced into the later building foundation trenches, although the circumstances of their excavation were less favourable to the recovery of further remains. One additional group of archaeological features was, however, located towards the south-west corner of the development. Of these, the most substantial was over 6m of a north-south aligned ditch (F109), cut up to 0.6m deep and almost 1m wide, with a V-shaped profile (Fig. 3). This ditch could not be traced in the more northerly foundation trenches but continues south, where it was also intersected by an electricity supply cable trench. A few sherds of Dorset Black Burnished ware pottery from its fill could be of 2nd or 3rd-century manufacture.

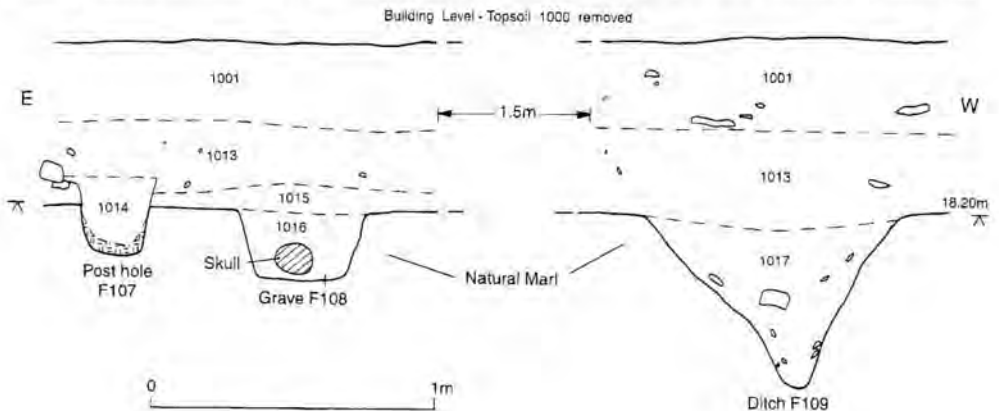


Fig. 3 Section

Less than 2m east of the ditch and similarly aligned was a sub-rectangular pit, F108, over 1m long, up to 0.6m wide and cut 0.4m into the natural marl. This was completely excavated and contained the well-preserved remains of an adult male aged between 26 and 45, buried on his left side in a crouched position (Fig. 4). The burial seems to have been unaccompanied, but the grave fill included a sheep's jawbone and a few scraps of Black Burnished pottery. A lens of mixed clay above and immediately around the grave cut and its fill may be the remnant of a mound which originally marked the position of the burial. Just to the east of the grave the overlying clay deposit was cut through by a suspected post hole (F107), 0.3m in diameter and 0.3m deep, with a clay-lined base. Several fragments of Lias limestone around its lip may have been packing stones but there were no other finds, and since it appeared to have been cut from a slightly higher level this could have been a medieval feature.

THE BURIAL Megan Brickley

AGE AND SEX

Analysis of the human bone recovered from F108 demonstrates that the remains were of a single individual, a male aged 26–45 years old at death. The sex of the individual was determined using the criteria set out in Buikstra and Ubelaker (1994). A number of skeletal elements were examined to determine the age at death, pubic symphysis (Brooks and Suchey 1990), auricular surface (Lovejoy *et al.* 1985) and rib phase (Iscan *et al.* 1984). Stature was estimated to be 161.5cm +/- 3.27cm (Trotter and Gleser 1970)

GENERAL CONDITION

The skeleton was virtually complete (> 75% present), the missing elements were predominantly the smaller bones of the hands and feet. Overall the bone was in excellent condition (Stage 1, Behrensmeyer 1978), most of the bones were complete and there was very little excavation/post excavation damage.

Pathology/trauma

The dental health of this individual was poor. Thirty teeth were present, three teeth had been lost ante-mortem but there was retention of one of the deciduous teeth. Six teeth were affected by dental caries and in two cases there was evidence of a related abscess. The deciduous tooth that had been retained was one of the teeth affected by caries and its presence had caused crowding of the teeth in the right maxilla. Dental calculus was present and was scored 'medium', but there was no evidence of alveolar resorption or hypoplastic defects.

Examination of the bones of the thorax revealed a slight asymmetry. For example, in the lumbar spine the right inferior articular processes were significantly shorter than those of the left side. In addition, the vertebral bodies were undeveloped on the left side and the left clavicle was found to be 12mm shorter than the right. It is probable that the individual had slight scoliosis (lateral curvature of the spine). The asymmetry of the thorax is probably related to a congenital defect and would not have had serious consequences for the individual.

Evidence of trauma was recorded in the bones of the lower left leg. The distal end of the lower left fibula was slightly swollen and irregular. There was also a short (7mm) spur of bone present on the tibia, adjacent to the changes on the fibula. The changes recorded on both bones were not 'active' and showed considerable healing and remodelling. The changes present were not consistent with a fracture, but could have been caused by severely twisting the ankle.

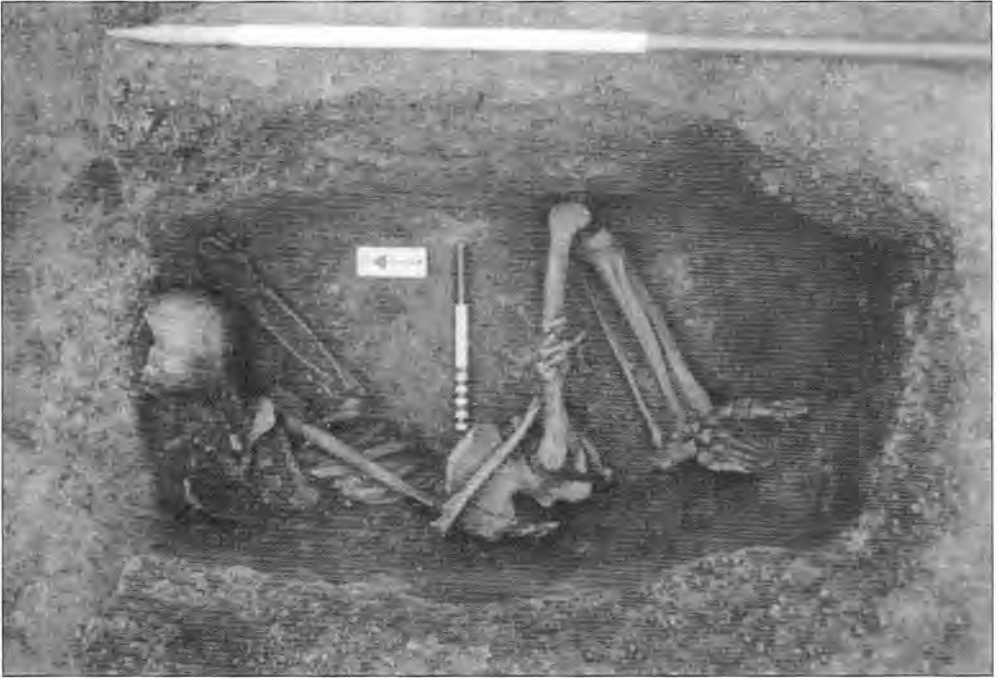


Fig. 4 The burial

CONTEXT

The discovery of a Romano-British inhumation burial at Coate's Barn, close to what was probably a contemporary ditched boundary, is a strong indication of a settlement of that period on the site of the present-day village. The burial itself, of a mature adult male, is somewhat unusual in its posture, though not unknown in late Roman cemeteries – there are examples from Ilchester (Leach 1982) or at Bradley Hill (Leech 1981) in Somerset. Extended burial was the norm, but the significance of this crouched posture is unknown. In this case the body was laid on its left side in a 'sleeping' position and fitted tightly into the grave with the head bent forward. There was no evidence for clothing, ornaments or fittings, or for other objects placed with the body, although the jawbone of a sheep found lying within the grave fill could represent a deliberate offering. By analogy this man is likely to have been buried in the later 3rd or 4th century, his orientation suggesting a pagan rite.

No other graves were found or are known in the locality, but the presence of others and perhaps a small cemetery here is a strong possibility. Traces of what could be mound material above the grave suggest that its position was marked on the surface, although the posthole adjacent to its head seems to have no connection with it. The burial appears to be located behind a well-defined boundary ditch, the space between it and the ditch possibly representing the site of an accompanying bank or hedge. Such features were commonly employed as reference points for the layout of late Roman cemeteries, as is well illustrated by burials within Ilchester's southern suburbs (Leach 1982). This, and the residual Roman pottery from medieval features to the north-east, is strongly indicative of an adjacent contemporary settlement.

This is the first evidence for such remains within the parish of Greinton but conforms well to a growing body of evidence for the correspondence of the medieval settlement pattern in Somerset

with a well-developed Romano-British antecedent. This is exemplified above all by the neighbouring parish of Shapwick, where recent intensive field survey has amply demonstrated both the intensity and wealth of that inheritance (Aston and Gerrard 1999). The status of the Greinton settlement is unknown, although a modest farm or agriculturally based hamlet is most likely.

The medieval remains on this site are almost certainly evidence for some of the timber-framed cottages or other buildings at the core of the village from at least the 12th century. Although few traces now remain within the modern boundaries of the village, a series of plots could have been set out here at right angles to the main road, and containing some of the dwellings of the medieval villagers that faced onto it. Like Shapwick, where there is strong evidence for a planned and centralised village (Aston and Gerrard 1999), Greinton belonged to Glastonbury Abbey, and a similar process may have been instituted here, quite possibly before the Conquest. This could account for the two sharp turns in the course of the present main A361 road through the village. Whether or not the medieval village layout was in any way influenced by the site and alignment of the preceding Romano-British settlement cannot yet be determined, but there are undoubtedly further remains and perhaps other inhabitants to find beneath Greinton.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Mrs Susan Burrett, owner of the site, and to the contractor Adrian Howe and his team for their interest and assistance during all phases of the site works; thanks also to Steven Membury, Somerset County Council, for advice and monitoring.

REFERENCES

- Aston, M., and Gerrard, C., 1999. 'Unique Traditional and Charming', The Shapwick Project, Somerset', *Antiq J* 79, 1–58.
- Behrensmeyer, A. K., 1978. 'Taphonomic and ecological information from bone weathering', *Palaebiology* 4, 150–62.
- Brooks, M., and Suchey, J.M., 1990. 'Skeletal age determination based on the OS Pubis: A comparison of the Acsadi-Nemeskeri & Suchy-Brooks methods', *Human Evolution* 5, 227–38.
- Buikstra J.E., and Ubelaker, D.H., (eds) 1994. *Standards for Data Collection from Human Skeletal Remains. Proceedings of a Seminar at the Field Museum of Natural History*, Arkansas Archaeological Survey Research Seminar Series 44.
- Iscan, M.Y., Loth, S.R., and Wright, R.K., 1984. 'Age estimation from the rib by phase analysis: white males', *J Forensic Sci* 29, 1094–104.
- Leach, P.J., 1982. *Ilchester Volume 1, Excavations 1974–5*, Bristol.
- Leach, P.J., 2000. *Coate's Barn, Greinton: An Archaeological Watching Brief*, unpub report, Somerset County Sites and Monuments Record.
- Leech, R.H., 1981. 'The Excavation of a Romano-British farmstead and cemetery on Bradley Hill, Somerton, Somerset', *Britannia* 12, 177–252.
- Lovejoy, C.O., Meindl, R.S., Pryzbeck, T.R., and Mensforth, R.P., 1985. 'Chronological metamorphosis of the auricular surface of the ilium: A new method for the determination of adult skeletal age at death', *American J Physical Anthropol* 68, 15–28.
- Trotter, M., and Gleser, G.C., 1970. 'Estimation of stature from intact limb bones', in T.D. Stewart (ed), *Personal Identification in Mass Disasters*, Washington DC, Smithsonian Institution, 71–8.