

A ROMANO-BRITISH BURIAL AT PRINCES RISBOROUGH

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The discovery of a human burial during groundworks at Princes Risborough Upper School led to a small-scale excavation. The remains of three individuals were recovered: an infant and two neonates who had been buried within the terminus of a ditch and an adjacent pit. The area was sealed by a relatively thick deposit of Romano-British material, including pottery and animal bone. It is likely that this area represents the edge of nearby settlement.

Human bone was discovered during the construction of a new access road and coach turning circle at the Princes Risborough Upper School (NGR 481200 203000). The appropriate Home Office licence for the removal of the remains was obtained and provision was made for the excavation of the burial and any surrounding features that were to be affected by the road corridor within an area approximately 7 x 2m. Wessex Archaeology excavated a small trench (1 x 5m) and recovered the remains of at three individuals and several archaeological features (Fig. 1).

The Site is located on a low chalk spur projecting from the Chiltern scarp at the mouth of the Saunderton Gap. The access road was to run parallel to the lane now designated Upper Icknield Way. This is presumed to follow the route of the prehistoric trackway, also known as the Icknield Way or Ridgeway, which begins in East Anglia and runs south-west as far as Wiltshire. The exact date of the trackway is uncertain, but it was almost certainly in use by the later Neolithic period, around 2400 BC (Rackham 1986). The surrounding area is a known focus for prehistoric remains; a Neolithic crouched burial was discovered in 1983, 200m to the south-west of the school in Clifford Road, and the area around Risborough contains a number of barrows of Neolithic and Bronze Age date. Scheduled groups of these are recorded at Lodge Hill and Saunderton Station, to the south-west, and also at Whiteleaf Hill, approximately 1km to the north-east along the line of the Icknield Way (Macfarlane and Kingham 1997). Additional

prehistoric and Roman finds have been recorded at Risborough Cop to the east of the Site.

The potential for the recovery of archaeological remains at the school was therefore considered to be relatively high. However, an evaluation in advance of the construction of the access road revealed only one shallow, undated ditch (Wessex Archaeology 2002).

EXCAVATION

The burial lay on its back with legs flexed, and was positioned in the terminus of a ditch (011) aligned north-east to south-west and whose excavated dimensions were 5.00 x 0.44 x 0.20m. This ditch was cut by a circular pit 005 and, itself, cut two other possible pits, (016 and 102), neither of which were completely excavated. A further small pit (009) was discovered adjacent to, but not directly associated with, the ditch terminus. The layer sealing the ditch and pits containing abundant animal bone consisting of cattle, pig along with horse and sheep/goat. A watching brief on the adjacent area of works uncovered part of a second ditch, aligned north-west to south-east, which appeared to terminate within the area stripped for the road. This was probably a continuation of the ditch found in excavation.

Examination of the human bone showed that a minimum of three individuals was represented in the ditch terminal and filling of pit 005: two neonates and an infant. The main inhumation burial is that of an infant of 2–3 years (010), possibly

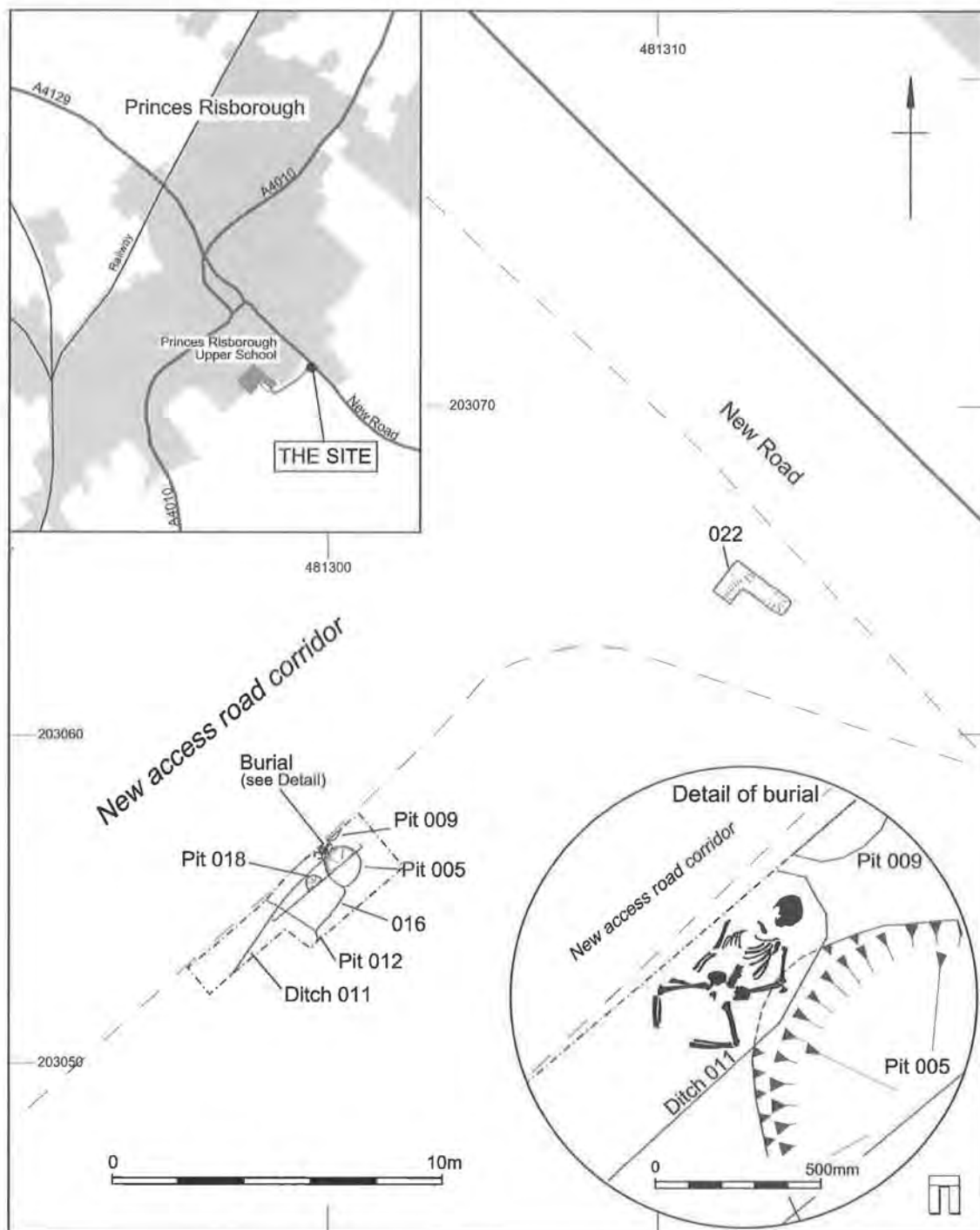


FIGURE 1 Princes Risborough Upper School: location plan.



FIGURE 2 Burial (010) during excavation.

male, of which over 80% of the skeleton survives. Several fragments of neonatal bone were recovered from the skull area of the burial. These may represent the remains of an earlier burial that was disturbed by the insertion of the infant or, since several fragments of animal bone were also recovered from the context, the neonatal remains may already have been disarticulated. Bone from pit 005 includes parts of both the right and left lower limb of an unburnt neonatal skeleton, though neither side comprised a 'complete' set of relevant bones. The pit was only half-sectioned and it is possible that the rest of an articulated skeleton remains unexcavated. However, most of the bones are represented by fragments showing old breaks which may argue against that possibility and it is not clear whether this pit was actually dug as a grave or the bones were simply placed conveniently into it.

The infant skeleton had some interesting pathology, of which the most significant are mentioned

here (full details are in archive). The sagittal suture (the 'join' between the main plates of the skull) was prematurely fused over 38mm (craniostosis: Fig. 3). This is a relatively rare skeletal anomaly that can result in remodelling of the normal skull shape (Ortner and Putschar 1985, 352–5). There were no evident changes in this case suggesting the suture fusion and death of the individual were not far removed. The condition is not necessarily life threatening in itself but may lead to other problems such as epilepsy (note by Briggs and Poole in McKinley 1999).

A honeycomb pattern of bone observed within the orbital vaults (eye sockets) indicates severe iron deficiency anaemia (Roberts and Manchester 1997, 165–71), and there is some indication of infection to the periosteal membrane covering the bones of both tibiae. Such infection may be introduced by a number of mechanisms including being spread via the blood stream from foci elsewhere in the body or (commonly the case with tibiae) localised stress

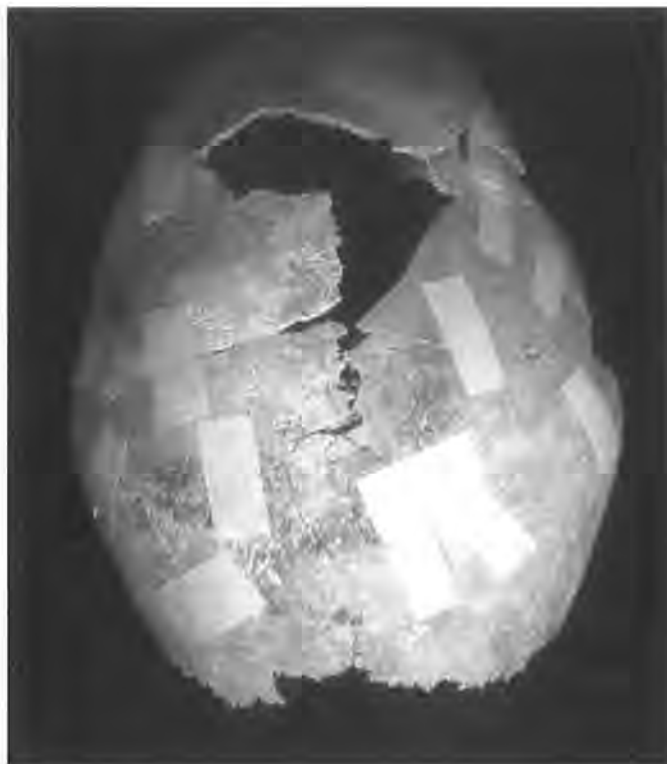


FIGURE 3 Premature fusion of sagittal suture in infant burial (010).

and soft tissue damage (Roberts and Manchester 1997, 129–30).

Pottery recovered from the excavated features and the sealing layer was mixed, but of predominantly late Romano-British date (later 3rd–4th century AD). Sherds from at least eight vessels were noted with most numerous pieces from a shell-tempered jar with a slightly everted rim and a relatively long neck. The other vessels are represented by body and base sherds from a thick-walled grog-tempered storage jar, at least two grey coarseware jars, a red slipped ware bowl and brown slipped ware beakers from the Oxfordshire kilns. The remainder of the assemblage consists of grey coarsewares probably from a variety of relatively local sources and an off-white sandy sherd with rouletted decoration. This latter sherd is also likely to be from the Oxford kilns. Only a small proportion of the 311 fragments (22%) of animal bone could be identified to species, mainly because of the large proportion of rib and vertebral fragments present: cattle were most common (46), followed

by sheep/goat (10), pig (7) and horse (6). Four bones showed evidence of gnawing and only one bore signs of butchery. The lack of butchery marks and the presence of complete long bones and vertebrae suggest a low intensity of carcass use. Seven bone fragments were carbonised, suggesting cooking of some meat on the bone. Meat and non-meat bearing bones were present; no trade or particular industrial activity was inferred and the assemblage seems to represent general domestic waste.

Other finds included ceramic building material of probable Romano-British date, including conjoining *tegula* fragments, and peg-tiles; a few fragments of stone including a possible tile; late Roman pottery; and some later material including five sherds of 12th–13th century sandy coarsewares and four of glazed red earthenwares of 18th or 19th century date. A broken piece, semi-prismatic in shape, of British agate or quartzite may have been deliberately worked but is of unknown date and function.

CONCLUSION

Despite only a very small area being examined, considerable archaeological activity was recorded. The size of the area limits our ability to interpret the archaeological remains but the combination of intercutting pits and a ditch, domestic refuse and the burial of neonates suggests that this is the periphery of a small late Romano-British farmstead. Neonates and young infants were commonly excluded from Romano-British cemeteries (Wells 1982; Philpott 1991, 97–101; Molleson 1993), often being buried on the periphery of settlement areas. The infant falls outside the age range generally included within such deposits and may indicate that a more formal cemetery lies nearby.

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