

New Light on Roman Hook Norton

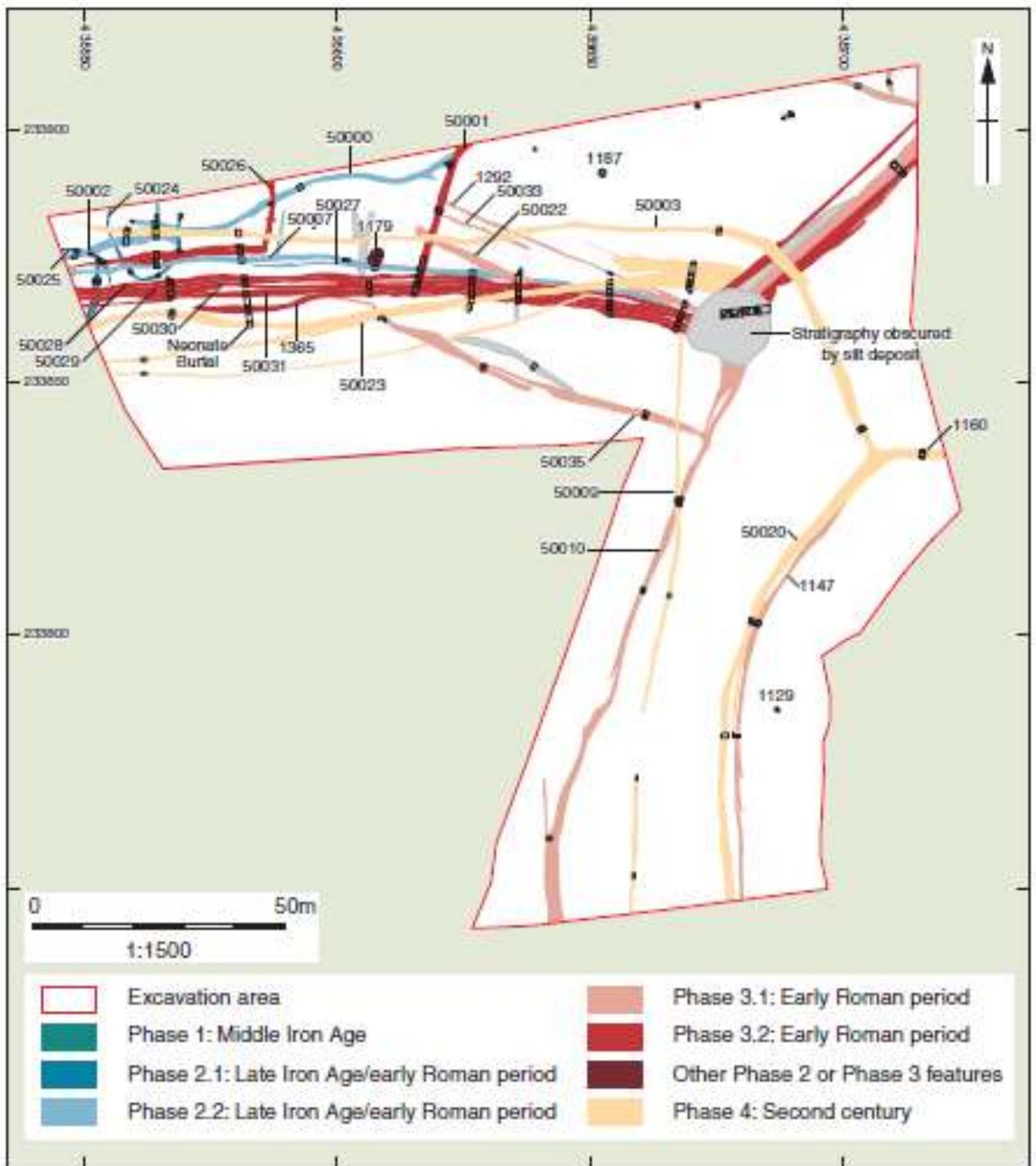
Opinions may vary on the desirability of new housing in Hook Norton, but it does advance our knowledge of the past. Nowadays, as part of the deal for any reasonable-size building activity, there has to be an agreement by the developers to carry out a site archaeological survey to determine if there are any significant remains in the ground that might be erased. When the new estate which was eventually called Scholar's Gate was built in the Sibford Road next to the village school, it proved no exception.

In early 2017, Oxford Archaeology conducted a short site survey of the proposed ground. Almost inevitably in Britain, they found something. Not a lot, some drove-way ditches, and a small amount of pottery. So far, so normal, but they also found human remains. Two skeletons, one buried in a stone-lined coffin, a 36-45 year old female who had her head removed and placed between her knees. This is relatively unusual, but not unprecedented. The survey got signed off, the site was handed over to the builders. The heavy machinery moved in.

However, after several weeks the heavy machinery stopped work and was removed from site. Your average developer is not prone to do this, so why would they do that? The archaeologists return.

Now it's a non-trivial exploration; they're onsite for four months, from November 2017 to February 2018. What on earth could they have found to justify such a delay to the development? They found buildings, another seven sets of human remains plus two cremations, over 1,000 pieces of pottery, animal bones – cattle, sheep, goats, pig, horse, dog, chicken, hare, mole, and vole. Not something that just be ignored. It turns out that people may have been living there for 700 years from the mid-Iron Age to the late Roman period.¹

¹ Andrew Simmonds and John Boothroyd, "Roman Occupation and Burials at Sibford Road, Hook Norton", *Oxoniensia*, vol. 86 (2021), pages 243-292, which is available online to subscribers to the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society.



The Sibford Road Settlement

The Sibford Road runs north up the left hand edge of the map, and the Redlands dairy farm lies to the north.

The present entrance to the Scholars Gate estate is just to the south of the main finds

Courtesy of Oxford Archaeology

The Sibford Road Settlement



Analysis of the remains indicate that the site may have had five phases, ranging from the mid-Iron Age (380 BC) to the late Roman era (300 AD). As ever, there is little surviving Iron Age evidence (because iron rusts away in the earth!), whereas the most active period seems to have been the last one, in the late Roman era. From this period come the surviving buildings (as in the above photo), most of the human remains, and even a corn-dryer (as in the photo on the right), indicating large-scale domestic or even small-scale commercial grain processing activity.

The style of pottery indicates that the settlement wasn't high-status, a higher percentage of jars as opposed to bowls being apparently a key indicator. The site became more important in the last phase of its life; this is where most of buildings date from, it's the period from which the corn-



[Photos by courtesy of Oxford Archaeology](#)

dryer dates. One of the buildings may even have had a window. The buildings indicate possible use as storage facilities and/or housing of livestock. There are indications of meat smoking, possibly indicating preparations for transport to market. Some of the animal bones are of quite small dogs, so they may have been pets.

The seven burials are male and female, ranging in age from a neonatal, an adolescent, and adults ranging in age from 26 to 45 years (pretty standard age for Iron Age/Roman Britain). They ranged in height between 159 and 169 cm (5' 2" to 5' 6") although one of them was strapping 175 cm (5' 9"). They all had poor dental health, having lost between three and eight teeth each. Three of them may have been related. There were also two cremation burials. A total of nine individuals.

One person from the first dig and one from the second dig were buried in stone-lined coffins and were both decapitated burials (see the photo on the right). It isn't certain why this process was done, whether they were criminals being punished (apparently you can't get into the afterlife without your head!) or whether there is some other ceremonial purpose. This makes them quite unusual: they only account for only 5% of total ancient burials.



Courtesy: Oxford Archaeology

What does this mean for the history of Hook Norton?

One of the favoured activities of archaeologists, probably only second behind digging trenches, is arguing in the pub afterwards about what the finds really mean. So, it isn't absolutely clear what the Sibford Road discoveries tell us about the history of settlement in Hook Norton that's new.

To start with, we do already know a certain amount about Hook Norton in the Iron Age and Roman times. There was no separate settlement identifiable by its own name, but there is evidence of people living in the area. Most of it indicates small scattered rural settlement, probably by much the same people beforehand as in Roman times.²

The Roman finds are rather more numerous, especially in the northern part of Hook Norton village. These included a bronze brooch that dates from the first half of the 2nd century AD and is now in the Ashmolean's collections.³ In the same field, located approximately 300m south-west of the site, a pot containing two human skulls along with an iron finger ring, believed to date to the 4th century AD, and a bronze scarifier were also found. Approximately 700m to the south of the site, a Roman inhumation burial was found in the garden of a cottage. Several Roman coins have also been found within the village, including a denarius of Claudius and coins of Valerian, Postumus, Claudius II, Maximius Constantine I, Constantine II, and Magnus Maximus. (Some of these names could apply to more than one emperor, but together they mainly span the periods 253-274 A.D., 306-340 and 383-388). A hoard of about thirty coins, including one of Julian the Apostate (361-363 A.D.), was found at Duckpool Farm in the 1930s, and other coins were discovered in the garden of Talbot House near the church.

These finds suggest a degree of wealth in the area, which is confirmed by discoveries on three farms. Percy Hackling, who in retirement became an inveterate wormer-out of important local historical finds, carried out significant private digs at two sites west of the village. These included clusters of pottery which he had authenticated by experts in Oxford, who dated them at, respectively, 100-300 and 200-400 A.D. These included hypocaust tiles, suggesting underfloor heating. More recently, a local metal detectorist, the late Stuart Willis, found innumerable objects at Nill Farm that he had professionally identified through the Oxfordshire Museums Service as Romano-British. One of the authenticators wrote on his notes on

² For this and subsequent paragraphs, see "Ancient Britons and Romans" in this section of the website.

³ E. Thurlow Leeds, ["A Romano-Celtic brooch of the second century found at Hook Norton,"] *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, second series, vol. 23 (March 1911), pages 406-407.

Hackling's finds, "= villa?" However, we must await a proper archaeological investigation before we can claim a Hooky villa.⁴

So what does Sibford Road add? Does it mean that there was a big Roman settlement like a village or a villa there? Probably not. The evidence is fairly convincing of there being a low-status farmstead there in early Roman times that grew in size to be a larger farmstead with perhaps even small to medium-scale commercial grain processing capability. After all, you probably don't go to the effort of building a corn-dryer to just process your own crop.

Does it mean that this farmstead was a central part of a much wider Roman community? Maybe. It could have been an outlying farm as part of an as yet undiscovered wider community. It could have been a stopping place on the way from one Roman community to another. Without substantial further evidence, we just don't know. But the existence of this reasonably large Roman farmstead suggests that there was some sort of settlement in and around Hooky in some periods between 1,200 to 500 years before the founding of the Anglo-Saxon village. That's pretty exciting.



It is especially intriguing that so many of the discoveries listed above fall in roughly a line from Nill Farm in the north-east of the parish down toward the south-west to the group of finds indicated on the map above. It looks awfully like they cluster on a rough line parallel to and just south of the ridge road from Oatley Hill to Tadmarton Heath. Was there a Roman road or track here? Some of the names

⁴ See Percy Hackling's Notes, in the Village Museum.

given to Hooky fields in the Middle Ages included the word “strete”, which meant that there was evidence of a Roman road in that particular field; several of those fields lie just west of the belt of finds on the map. The recent finds on the new Scholar’s Gate estate were made just south of this line, which may just suggest that that there might be even more evidence of Roman settlement to be discovered between the two roads running north to the two Sibfords, in the area north of The Bourne. We live in exciting times!

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