

THE PIONEER BURIAL

A HIGH-STATUS ANGLIAN WARRIOR BURIAL FROM WOLLASTON NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

Ian Meadows

With contributions by

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Cover: The conserved helmet
Back cover: Artist's impression of the Pioneer helmet

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Contents

List of Figures	iii
Contributors	v
Acknowledgements	vii
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Project background	1
Archaeological background.....	4
Topography and geology.....	7
Chapter 2 Excavation	9
Burial location.....	9
The excavation methodology.....	9
The grave	9
The grave goods.....	11
Chapter 3 Artefacts.....	17
Overview.....	17
The helmet <i>by Ian Meadows</i>	17
The brow band	17
Nose to nape band	17
Lateral bands.....	24
External reinforcing ribs	24
The infill plates	25
The cheek guards	25
The eyebrows and nasal.....	26
The Boar crest	26
The helmet in the grave	26
Conservation report on the helmet <i>by Anthony Read</i>	26
Organic material associated with the helmet <i>by Jacqui Watson</i>	31
Hanging bowl <i>by Lloyd Laing</i>	32
Analysis of the hanging bowl <i>by Matthew Ponting</i>	33
Scientific examination	33
Microscopic examination	33
Chemical analysis	34
Discussion	34
The sword <i>by Ian Meadows</i>	36
Organic material associated with the sword <i>by Jacqui Watson</i>	36
Scabbard	36
Other artefacts.....	38
The knife, buckles, iron rods and clothing hook <i>by Ian Meadows</i>	38
The knife.....	38
The buckles	38
Buckle A (RA2)	38
Buckle C (RA3)	38
Buckle B (RA1)	39
The iron rods	39
The clothing hook.....	39
Conservation report on the buckles <i>by Alison Draper</i>	39
Introduction	39
Condition.....	39
Treatment.....	39
Descriptions	39
RA3, buckle C.....	39
RA2, buckle A.....	41
RA1, buckle B.....	41

RA1, side 2	41
RA4, described as miscellaneous fragments	41
RA4, A-F	41
RA4	41
RA5, described as plough deposits	42
RA5, individual fragments B-D (Fig 3.33).	42
Textiles remains possibly relating to bedding <i>by Penelope Walton-Rogers</i>	43
Introduction	43
Textile A	43
Textile B	43
Conclusion	45
Chapter 4 Human remains	47
Skeletal report <i>by Jenny Wakely with note on dental remains by J N James</i>	47
The skull	47
The legs	47
The dentition.....	47
Summary	47
Chapter 5 Discussion <i>by Rob Atkins and Ian Meadows</i>	49
Overview.....	49
The location of the Pioneer burial	49
Routeways in relation to the Pioneer burial.....	49
The River Nene and land boundaries.....	53
Burial time period	53
Wollaston in relation to Saxon administrative organisation	54
Nature of the grave	56
Barrow mound	56
The grave.....	57
Importance of the burial.....	58
Helmet.....	58
Hanging bowl	61
Pattern-welded sword.....	61
Pioneer burial and ‘Christianity’	62
Contemporary probable Christian burial comparisons.....	63
Conclusions.....	64
Bibliography	65

List of Figures

Figure 1.1. Location and sites in Northamptonshire mentioned in the text.....	1
Figure 1.2. The site and its environs with Roman road and cropmarks located.....	2
Figure 1.3. Areas to be excavated and protected areas within the site with Pioneer burial location recorded (after Kidd 1995)	3
Figure 1.4. Daily Mail article dated 23 April 1997	5
Figure 1.5. Article in Northampton Chronicle and Echo dated 23 April 1997	6
Figure 1.6. Helmet restored with Ian Meadows directly behind talking to colleagues (Greg Phillips, Graham Cadman, Vikki Pearson, Martin Ellison, Ian Meadows, Rob Atkins, Glenn Foard, Brenda Perryman, Jenny Ballinger and Ann Bond)	7
Figure 2.1. Plan of burial showing grave goods	10
Figure 2.2. view of the burial, looking south	11
Figure 2.3. Vertical view of sword, femurs and part of helmet	11
Figure 2.4. Remains of the skull, looking south	12
Figure 2.5. Hanging bowl, skull and cobble, looking south-west.....	12
Figure 2.6. Detail of sword grip and knife.....	13
Figure 2.7. Helmet from above.....	14
Figure 2.8. Helmet in ground from side.....	14
Figure 2.9. Helmet in cling film.....	15
Figure 2.10. Plaster being applied to helmet.....	15
Figure 2.11. Machine excavation trenches around the burial, looking north-west.....	15
Figure 3.1. The helmet, front.....	18
Figure 3.2. The helmet, right side, largely showing interior of left side	19
Figure 3.3. The helmet, rear	20
Figure 3.4. The helmet, left side.....	21
Figure 3.5. The conserved helmet	22
Figure 3.6. Views of the helmet following conservation	23
Figure 3.7. The helmet and its component parts	24
Figure 3.8. Helmet details	25
Figure 3.9. Helmet being X-rayed	26
Figure 3.10. X-ray of helmet	27
Figure 3.11. Helmet being cleaned.....	27
Figure 3.12. Interior of cheek guard after cleaning with pupae casts around central rivet.....	28
Figure 3.13. Nick Gore and George Jeavons inspect the helmet in Leicester	29
Figure 3.14. Unconserved boar crest.....	29
Figure 3.15. Detail of boar crest after cleaning	29
Figure 3.16. Helmet in CT scanner.....	30
Figure 3.17. Results examined on computer	30
Figure 3.18. Hanging bowl.....	32
Figure 3.19. The sword	37
Figure 3.20. The knife, buckles and clothing hook	38
Figure 3.21. X-radiograph of RA3 (buckle C).....	40
Figure 3.22. RA3 (buckle C), textile seen to left of black line	40

Figure 3.23. RA3 (buckle C), other side, semi-circular piece of metal can be seen	40
Figure 3.24. X-radiograph of RA2 (buckle A).....	40
Figure 3.25. RA2 (buckle A), after cleaning, side 1	40
Figure 3.26. RA2 (buckle A), after cleaning, side 2	40
Figure 3.27. X-radiograph of RA1 (buckle B).....	41
Figure 3.28. RA1 (buckle B), side 1	41
Figure 3.29. RA1 (buckle B), side 2	41
Figure 3.30. RA4	41
Figure 3.31. RA5 A, X-radiograph of soil block	42
Figure 3.32. RA5 Group A from soil block (side with circular feature)	42
Figure 3.33. RA5, individual fragments B-E.....	43
Figure 3.34. Detail of textiles.....	43
Figure 3.35. Textiles.....	44
Figure 5.1. Helmet, hanging bowl and pattern-welded sword	50
Figure 5.2. Pioneer burial in its national setting with other Saxon (and Viking) helmets located	51
Figure 5.3. View along the line of the Roman road to the Pioneer burial, looking south-west.....	52
Figure 5.4. Artist's impression of the Pioneer helmet	59

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The original archaeological work was monitored by Sandy Kidd and Glenn Foard at Northamptonshire County Council. Ian Meadows was the project manager for Northamptonshire Archaeology with the fieldwork on the Pioneer burial carried out by Rob Atkins, Chris Jones and Joe Prentice. Steve Critchley metal detected the site and found the burial. Charlotte Walker of Northamptonshire HER kindly provided copious amounts of data through a search on Saxon burials, hanging bowls and swords recovered in the county. Chris Fern and Jenni Butterworth supplied information on the Staffordshire Hoard helmet fragments. Stephen Young and CLASP kindly provided details of the burials, including the sword burial, found during excavations at Whitehall Farm, Nether Heyford, Northamptonshire. Dr Chris Caple helpfully sent his *Medieval Archaeology* submission on the Yarm helmet which was especially useful. Daily Mail (Solo Syndication) and Northampton Chronicle and Echo have kindly allowed reproduction of their articles.

The Pioneer burial artefacts have been kept together and are on long term display at the Royal Armouries, Leeds.

Rob Atkins edited the client report (Meadows 2004) to publication. Proof reading has been carried out by Andy Chapman, Mark Holmes, Ian Meadows and Stephen Parry.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Project background

MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) formerly Northamptonshire Archaeology carried out excavations on behalf of Pioneer Aggregates UK, now part of Hanson UK at Wollaston Quarry, Northamptonshire. The site (Figs 1.1 and 1.2) lies 2km to the west of the small town of Wollaston just above a wide floodplain to the east of the River Nene. The area was known for the quality of the crop marks produced by the gravel soils that had been recorded by aerial photography and archaeological

excavations have occurred there for many years in advance of gravel extraction by various aggregate companies (RCHM 1979).

An archaeological evaluation in 1990 for Pioneer Aggregates took place between c1km to 2.5km to the north-east of the Pioneer helmet site on land to the north of Hardwater Road and comprised 122 trial trenches within eight fields (Fig 1.1; Jackson nd; Jackson 1991). This area was subsequently excavated between 1993 and 1996 and produced clusters of Neolithic pits. The entire

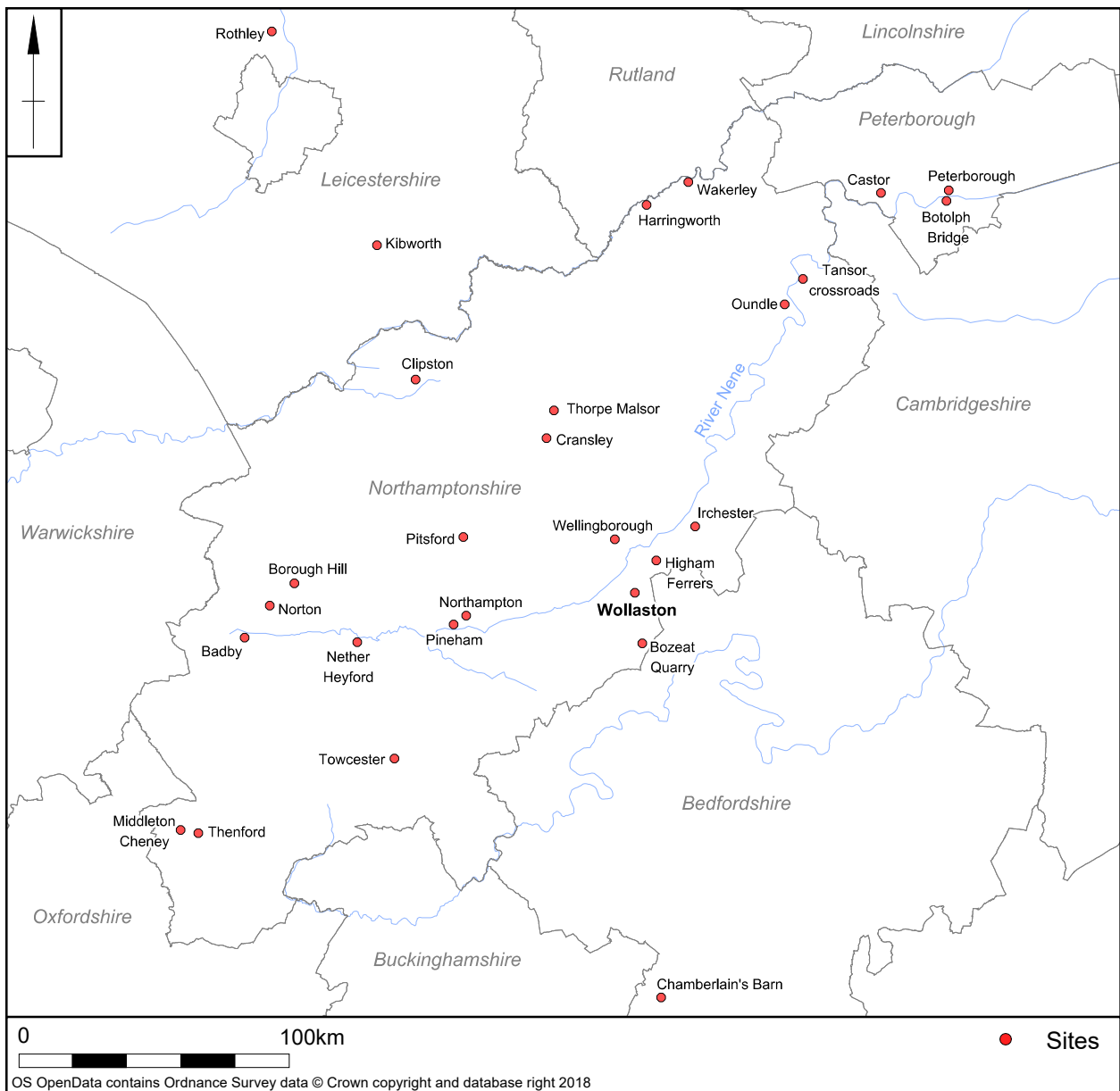


FIGURE 1.1. LOCATION AND SITES IN NORTHAMPTONSHIRE MENTIONED IN THE TEXT

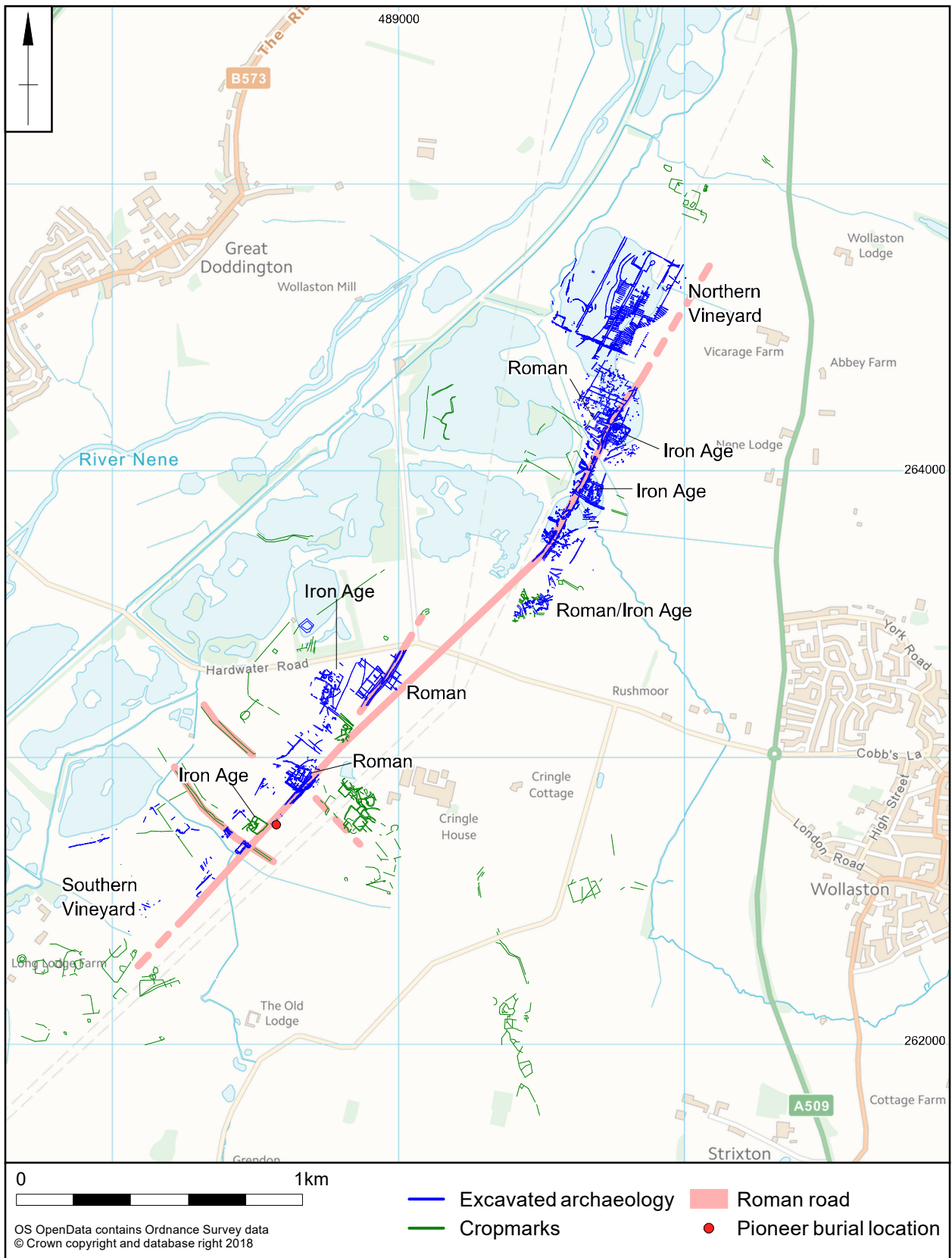


FIGURE 1.2. THE SITE AND ITS ENVIRONS WITH ROMAN ROAD AND CROPMARKS LOCATED

landscape was divided up by an extensive system of pit alignments in the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age. It was subsequently occupied by Iron Age to Roman farmsteads

in a linear alignment north-east to south-west along an Iron Age droveway that developed into a Roman road (Meadows 1994; Meadows and Atkins forthcoming; Fig

1.2). At the northern end of the quarry the first proven Roman vineyard from Roman Britain was discovered, comprising an extensive system of *pastinatio* trenches some of which were found to contain *vitis* pollen (Brown *et al* 2001).

Pioneer Aggregates decided to extend their quarry within land to the south-west of this original area and submitted a Planning Application (WP/94/439c) on land to the south of Hardwater Road. It was within this area where the Pioneer helmet was subsequently found. On the advice of Northamptonshire Heritage, an archaeological evaluation was undertaken prior to the determination of the planning application. The work conformed to an archaeological brief by Northamptonshire Heritage (Kidd 1994).

The new area comprised *c*71ha of arable land within the floodplain of the River Nene and an archaeological evaluation was carried out in two stages (Meadows 1995; Parry and Audouy 1995). The archaeological work found extensive activity similar to that found to the north comprising a system of linear boundaries demarked by pit alignments dating to the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age. This formed the basis for a co-axial system of boundaries in the middle and later Iron Age with most of the earlier boundaries continuing to

be respected in these later periods. The Iron Age land divisions were perpetuated after the Roman Conquest with, in several instances, Roman farmsteads simply being located adjacent to the Iron Age examples (Meadows 1995; Parry and Audouy 1995; Meadows and Atkins forthcoming).

This landscape was dominated by a significant routeway, which was a continuation of that excavated to the north (above). Its earliest phase had been defined by a pit alignment, which during the middle and later Iron Age became a droveway and following the Roman conquest became a road possibly linking the small towns at Irchester and Towcester. The Iron Age and Roman landscape demonstrated considerable levels of rural conservatism with regards the size and shape of land allotments. No early to middle Saxon remains were found in the evaluations but medieval and post-medieval ridge and furrow cultivation was uncovered.

As a result of the evaluations a recording action brief was provided by Northamptonshire Heritage (Kidd 1995; Fig 1.3). This figure attached to the Brief shows the thought processes after the evaluation stage of both Northamptonshire's Heritage and also the Pioneer Quarry by detailing what areas needed quarrying and thereby how much of the site should be excavated

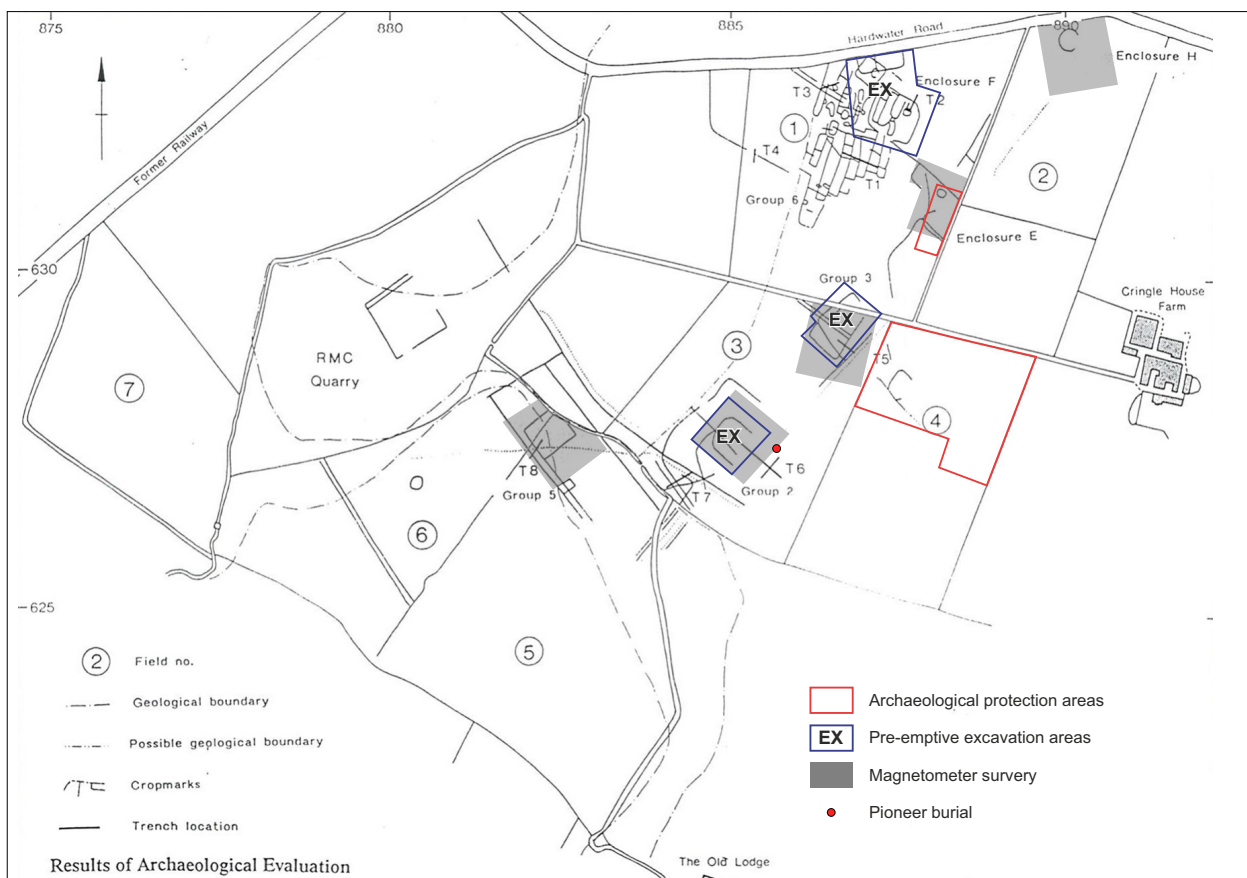


FIGURE 1.3. AREAS TO BE EXCAVATED AND PROTECTED AREAS WITHIN THE SITE WITH PIONEER BURIAL LOCATION RECORDED (AFTER KIDD 1995)

as well as protected areas. This Brief outlined the justification for further investigation, recording and publication of the archaeological remains. The brief stipulated; “pre-emptive excavation of three Iron Age/Roman settlements and a combination of targeted small scale excavation ahead of topsoil stripping, an intensive watching brief during stripping, salvage excavation following stripping and environmental sampling to investigate the coaxial field system and other significant remains.”

The areas recorded to be excavated or protected in the Brief (Fig 1.3) was not fixed and was more of an initial plan which changed after rethinking by the Pioneer Quarry on what and where they proposed to extract. The actual archaeological areas excavated are recorded in Figure 1.2. In addition, more geophysical work was undertaken in the quarry than had been originally envisaged (Meadows and Atkins forthcoming).

The Brief stated that an appropriate level of investigation should take place within all parts of the site which were subject to topsoil stripping. It stated that there had to be a watching brief and contingency with 160 person days allocated for salvage recording if any unidentified remains of county or national importance were revealed within the site (Kidd 1995, section 2.5).

During the subsequent archaeological work the Iron Age and Roman settlement sites were excavated and the results showed a considerable continuity of landscape. The farmsteads with their related field systems (as well as the earlier pit alignments) respected the floodplain and were all located at the limit of medieval alluviation perhaps suggesting the extent of the flooding.

Only very limited evidence of post Roman activity was recovered in the main excavation areas, comprising two separate fragments of Saxon brooches (recovered by metal detection) and two small collections of pottery. The pottery was recovered within 500m of the Pioneer burial; one comprised a surface scatter and the other from a small amorphous feature. Because of the paucity of evidence the floodplain was thought to have been marginal in the post-Roman period.

Steve Critchley routinely carried out systematic metal detector surveying throughout the project across all the excavation and topsoil stripped areas. As the area had been farmed for many years ferrous signals were not generally investigated as they proved to be mostly horseshoes, undiagnostic nails or other modern detritus. However, in March 1997, during the survey of part of the quarry he located and uncovered a Saxon copper alloy hanging bowl and a single millefiori decorated mount. Further ferrous signals were noted in association with these pieces and exploratory excavation was carried out on what proved to be the Anglian grave.

The burial was announced widely within the media. This started with a press conference chaired by Professor Rosemary Cramp and Ian Meadows which resulted in a slew of publicity from 23rd April 1997 with television including Blue Peter recording the event as well as articles in national (Fig 1.4) and local newspapers (Fig 1.5). A half page cartoon by Chris Riddell was published in the Observer on 27th April 1997 which depicted the Prime Minister John Major placed in a grave with his ‘grave goods’ including a traffic cone and Margaret Thatcher’s handbag which was used as his pillow. The importance of the Pioneer burial may be seen in that it has its own extensive Wikipedia page which can be found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pioneer_Helmet (accessed 25 May 2018).

The Pioneer burial artefacts were analysed and reported on by specialists. The items were conserved with the helmet fragments reassembled and placed in a fixed display (Fig 1.6).

The Pioneer burial artefacts were on temporary display in several museums including Northampton Borough’s Central Museum and the New Walk Museum, Leicester before being loaned by Messrs Gammage and Minney to the British Museum (registration number AL. 226). These artefacts have subsequently been held on long term loan at the Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds. Replicas of the helmet have been made including by Tim Noyes of Heron Armoury (heronarmoury.co.uk). An initial replica was also made by Chris Smith of the Royal Armouries.

Interim reports were published in *Current Archaeology* (Meadows 1997) and *Northamptonshire Archaeology* journal (Meadows 1997). The client report was produced for the archaeological work to satisfy the planning requirements (Meadows 2004). This present publication has used the specialists’ reports from the 2004 client report and these have not been updated. Any recent relevant discoveries since then will therefore not have been taken into account. In contrast this publication has progressed the 2004 client report in terms of textual information and illustrations in all the other areas from the background, excavation and especially the discussion.

Archaeological background

Prehistoric ceremonial and burial complexes have been found c1km to the south of the Pioneer burial. Here a Neolithic mortuary house, twelve Bronze Age round barrows and a possible long enclosure ceremonial monument as well as some pits containing four Bronze Age urns were excavated at Grendon Pit between 1974 and 1980 (Gibson and McCormick 1985; Jackson 1995).

Iron Age and Roman settlement sites have been recorded across the parish (RCHM 1979, 179-180). A Roman villa had been recorded c1.5km to the east of the location of the

Daily Mail, Wednesday, April 23, 1997

A SAXON PRINCE'S TREASURES FOUND IN QUARRY

THE WARRIOR PRINCE...

SWORD:
3ft long, intricately forged from strands of iron

SCABBARD:
Wood with a wool lining which oiled the blade

HELMET:
Wild boar figure was symbol of Germanic brother and sister gods of war and fertility. Denoted warrior strength

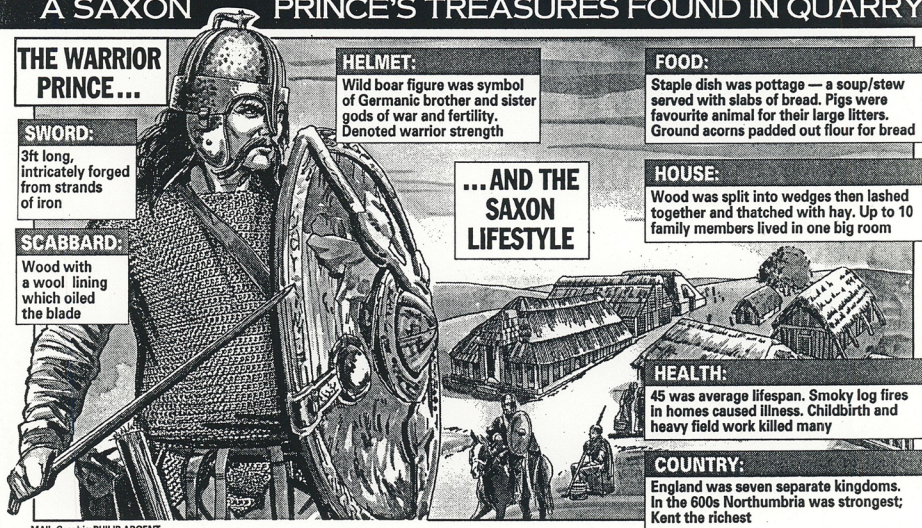
FOOD:
Staple dish was pottage — a soup/stew served with slabs of bread. Pigs were favourite animal for their large litters. Ground acorns padded out flour for bread

... AND THE SAXON LIFESTYLE

HOUSE:
Wood was split into wedges then lashed together and thatched with hay. Up to 10 family members lived in one big room

HEALTH:
45 was average lifespan. Smoky log fires in homes caused illness. Childbirth and heavy field work killed many

COUNTRY:
England was seven separate kingdoms. In the 600s Northumbria was strongest; Kent the richest



MAIL Graphic: PHILIP ARGENT

Rusted remains of a warrior's glory

By DAVID DERBYSHIRE
Science Correspondent

CORRODED, crumbling and caked in mud, they looked worthless — just bits of junk. But they turned out to be the trappings of a proud warrior prince living at the very dawn of England.

Unearthed alongside his remains in a 1,400-year-old grave the sword, helmet and bronze bowl are now being hailed as the most important archaeological find of the decade.

'This is the armour of one of our first war leaders, and it will enable us to increase our know-how of those fascinating times,' explained Rosemary Cramp, Professor of Archaeology at Durham University.

The find is the culmination of 18 months' work at a Northamptonshire gravel pit. The location is being kept secret for fear of vandals and treasure seekers.

Iron Age and Roman remains had already been found on the site when county council archaeologists scanning with metal detectors located the burial just eight inches below ground, alongside a disused Roman road.

The iron helmet, with a distinctive nose guard and crescent-shaped cheek guards, had been placed alongside the body.

It is only the fourth from Saxon times to be unearthed in Britain, and there is only one other in the world decorated with a wild boar, the ancient symbol of warrior strength.

The boar was a sign of Freyr and Freyja, the Germanic brother and sister gods of war

and fertility, used to ward off bad luck.

The intricate 3ft long sword, forged from thin strands of iron, was also placed to one side of the body. Traces of a wooden scabbard and its woolen lining were found nearby.

The hanging bowl, eight inches in diameter and decorated with coloured glass, is one of only 100 ever to be found in Britain. Used for washing or cooking, it is another indicator of royalty, and was placed next to the prince's head.

Little of the skeleton survived, although from its teeth the experts deduced that the

man had died in middle age. The skull's position suggested the head had been placed on a pillow.

Senior project officer Ian Meadows, who 18 months ago found the remains of an 18-acre Roman vineyard just a mile away from the grave, said the prince was buried between 600 and 650. It was a time of great change.

'This was the creation of England,' he explained. 'We don't find many rich burials, and this was somebody of some importance.'

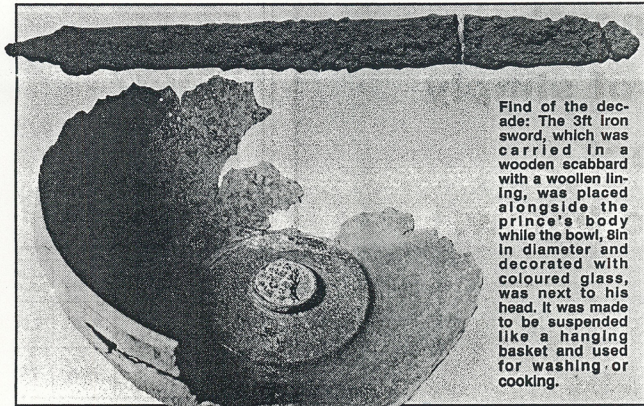
'For people like ourselves, who are quite used to

spending long periods on back-breaking excavations with little to show for our efforts, to find an Anglo-Saxon helmet of this significance within such a relatively short period of time was a huge reward.'

The three helmets previously found were in Suffolk — at Sutton Hoo — York and Derbyshire. It is thought helmets were widely worn. Why they are so rare now is one of the great debates within archaeology and it is hoped the latest find will shed light on the mystery.

It has been taken to Leicester City Museum to be restored by conservator Anthony Read, who said: 'This is what archaeologists dream of — it is probably the highlight of my career. It is of international importance — a wonderful, wonderful find.'

After preservation work taking around two months, the treasures will go on display. Pioneer Aggregates, the company meeting the cost of conservation, hopes a permanent home will be found for them in Northamptonshire. Officials from the British Museum are to examine them on Friday.



Find of the decade: The 3ft iron sword, which was carried in a wooden scabbard with a woolen lining, was placed alongside the prince's body while the bowl, 8in in diameter and decorated with coloured glass, was next to his head. It was made to be suspended like a hanging basket and used for washing or cooking.

When life was short and hard

A WARRIOR prince of the seventh century was responsible for maintaining order in a small region of farming villages. His sword and helmet set him apart from ordinary soldiers. While attack from neighbouring regions was a constant danger, there was

also the risk from wolves, bears and wild boar which roamed the thick forests. Anglo Saxons lived in timber halls thatched with hay. They were mostly farmers, growing cereals and tending cows, pigs and sheep in woodland clearings. Food was cooked over open fires in the centre of

their homes. Life was short, 45 was seen as a good age. Speaking a form of early Old English, the people still lived off the remains of Roman occupation. Even skills like glass-making were lost in the Dark Ages and education was limited to the monks and aristocracy.

FIGURE 1.4. DAILY MAIL ARTICLE DATED 23 APRIL 1997

Discovery is set to make headlines all around the world

Home fit for our prince

HAIL Prince Bert, slayer of Stanwick, ravager of Raunds and pillager of Podington.

Archaeologists have dug up the body and most precious possessions of an Anglo Saxon nobleman at a gravel works in the Nene Valley.

The ferocious figure would have stalked the county about 1,400 years ago in the middle of the Dark Ages.

Experts from all over Britain are being called in to piece together how Bert, or more likely Sigberht, would have lived.

Leading Anglo Saxon authority Prof Rosemary Cramp, from Durham University, said: "He was a nobleman and the boar insignia on his helmet could mean he was prince."

"He appears to have died when middle-aged, so he had probably become a war leader by fighting many bloody battles in his youth."

Bert would have grown up in a village, possibly by the River Nene, living in a wooden long house with a thatched roof.

As an aristocrat he would have learned how to fight with a spear and sword from an early age. He would have honed his skills hunting wild

The discovery of the remains of a Saxon nobleman at a county gravel works has the world of archaeology in a frenzy. **DAVID TOMNEY** investigates...

boar, deer, bear and wolf in the forests that covered the county in 600.

As he grew older he would carve out a name for himself leading bands of men into war against rival tribes.

After a hard day of hunting and fighting Bert would have come home to his wives - he was allowed more than one - and many children.

A goat, sheep, or part of a cow would be thrown into the long hut's cauldron and his band would drink beer, mead or wine.

Prof Cramp said: "The prince would have led a very war-like lifestyle. Even when he died his sword was buried with him to prepare him for a similar existence in the after life."



Discovery stuns time team

THE bones and a priceless helmet, sword and bronze bowl were discovered by an amateur metal detection enthusiast at a gravel works in the Nene Valley.

The enthusiast, who doesn't want to be identified, had been working closely with an eight-strong team of experts from the county council's archaeology unit.

The location of the grave is being kept a secret but is on private land worked by London-based Pioneer Aggregates.

Ian Meadows, who led the county's archaeology team, said: "It is the most exciting discovery in my 20-year career, a really amazing find."

"It should help us to learn an awful lot about a very

little-known period of British history."

Leading Anglo Saxon expert Prof Rosemary Cramp said: "The helmet particularly makes this a discovery of international importance."

"This is only the second helmet with a boar motif found in the world today from this period."

X-ray clue to secret of noble life

It was an X-ray which first showed the outline of a wild boar on the top of the rusting remains of the Dark Ages helmet. It sent a shiver of excitement through

archaeologist Ian Meadows and Leicester Museum conservator Rolly Read.

The boar is a symbol often associated with royalty, a potent lucky charm, and a representa-

tion of the boar-like formation used by Anglo-Saxon armies in battle.

The sword marks him out as a war leader. Experts will minutely examine the remains over the next 12 months.

FIGURE 1.5. ARTICLE IN NORTHAMPTON CHRONICLE AND ECHO DATED 23 APRIL 1997

Pioneer burial with a bathhouse and other features found during work for the Wollaston bypass (Chapman and Jackson 1992). This project also found an early Saxon site including a Sunken Featured Building (SFB) dating to the late 6th to early 7th century (*ibid*).

In the parish there was a single probable middle Saxon site immediately to the south-west of the then limits of Wollaston village and this was 2km to the east of the Pioneer burial (*ibid*, 180). Within the village occupation evidence dating from the 5th to the 14th centuries has been found at Dando Close (Sammelmann and Ashworth 2004). Four other sites in the village which produced middle Saxon pottery were at the churchyard, Beacon Hill, Priory Road estate, and the paddock behind Cromwell House in London Road (Hall 1977, 17).

Wollaston was recorded as Wilavestone in the Domesday Book which derives from Wulflāf's farm, v. tun (Gover

et al 1975, 197). Wulflaf was a personal Old English name possibly representing the settlement's founder (Hall 1977, 21). Wollaston had two manors in 1066, Bury Manor which had five hides and was held by four thegns under Edward the Confessor and Hall Manor, about a quarter of the parish, which had been held by Stric in the same period (*ibid*, 47-49).

The Pioneer burial was found at Wollaston's southern parish boundary with Strixton parish, within c50m of a medieval feature called *Longhedge* (Hall 1977, fig 1). Longhedge had probably been planted when Strixton was taken out of Wollaston parish in the 12th century (*ibid*, 23). This boundary had still been maintained in the fields at the time of the excavation of the Pioneer burial.

It was also directly to the east of the land area called *Ryholme* which had anciently been partly ploughed and partly meadow, and surrounded by brooks. The burial



FIGURE 1.6. HELMET RESTORED WITH IAN MEADOWS DIRECTLY BEHIND TALKING TO COLLEAGUES (GREG PHILLIPS, GRAHAM CADMAN, VIKKI PEARSON, MARTIN ELLISON, IAN MEADOWS, ROB ATKINS, GLENN FOARD, BRENDA PERRYMAN, JENNY BALLINGER AND ANN BOND)

was to the east of one of these brooks called Swallow Brooke.

In the medieval period Wollaston had a three-field system which was recorded in 1370 (Hall 1977, 138), with the Pioneer helmet located in the Nether Field, and was in a furlong recorded as part of Forty Acres in 1774 (*ibid*, fig 4 and table 32), but prior to this was seemingly unnamed in records dating from after *c*1430 to 1774.

Topography and geology

The Pioneer site lay on an area of just above the broad flat river floodplain at about 46m OD, less than 1km to the south-east of the present River Nene, about 100m above the edge of medieval alluvial cover (Fig 1.1; NGR SP 8855 6275). The geology within the site was a light brown sandy silt with small quantities of gravel.