

THE TICHBORNE DOWN ANGLO-SAXONS

by

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What happens to all the skeletons that the archeologists dig up? Most of us assume that they go on display in the local museums. But think for a moment: one 'dig' at King's Worthy provided nearly a hundred, and the total for the Winchester area must run into thousands. I wanted to find the whereabouts of the Saxon and Iron Age artifacts found in the grounds of Tichborne Down House (the Hospital) in 1948. A phone call to the Museum, and I was passed on to the Historic Resources Centre at Hyde Abbey in Winchester.

Here I found the answer to my question. Entering the upper floor of an old barn one sees a long passage. On each side a series of alley-ways gives access to wide, slatted shelving on which are tea-chest sized cardboard boxes. It resembles the 'Parts' store-room of a factory - not too fanciful a simile when one notices that the boxes are marked "SKULLS", "VERTEBRAE", "FEMURS", and so on. It is in fact a vast ossuary and is the last resting place of those of our ancestors whose burial places have been disturbed by builders, farmers and motorway engineers. Among them were Alresford's Anglo Saxons.

The reality was something of a disappointment. The index lists a head as having been accidentally destroyed, and another skull a few feet away. There were also those of one arm. There were no vertebrae or other bones. The only other find was a double-sided bone comb.

In a chalk filling beneath the Saxon finds an Iron Age pit revealed a weaving comb, two iron nails and a sawn-off antler tip. I was able to see the "site notes" of an experienced archeologist, Mr. F. Cottrill, who supervised the dig. He adds to the finds some pottery sherds (fragments) and "a femur, possibly of a horse". These are not in the Research Centre records, but the Archeological Newsletter Report mentions "an Iron Age Pottery Shard". A Report in the Hampshire Field Club mentions "human bones. Iron Age", which are not mentioned elsewhere. Perhaps they refer to the "Femur, possibly of a horse" in the site report. This is the full extent of the discoveries.

It will be seen that there are a number of discrepancies in the reports, which have given rise to misleading assumptions in Alresford histories. The single mention of "Roman pottery sherds" had led to the assumption of a long settlement on the site from Iron Age through Roman to Anglo Saxon times, and hence a Domesday settlement. It has also been described as a "Saxon Cemetery" when it appears at best to be merely one double burial. Much has also been made of the levelling stated as being for a "cricket pitch" (i.e. a small area), and that excavation of the whole field might reveal other burials. Although the levelling was so described it was in fact the making of a cricket field, and even a casual look at the field makes this clear. The whole area was dug over, and Alresford has been built up on three of its four sides - the remaining one is to be built on this year. The surrounding building operations disclosed no archeological finds.

A single Iron Age (600 B.C. - 0 B.C.) burial, and a single Saxon burial dated about 600 A.D. hardly substantiate the suggestion of "continuous settlement". If the pottery is Roman (though the archeological reports say Iron Age), this would span the time gap so far as "periods" are concerned, but the few artifacts found, hardly justify a suggested minimum of over 1,000 years of settlement to Domesday 1067. The Hampshire Chronicle of 1948 makes no mention of the discoveries further confirmation that they were not considered significant.

These appear to be casual burials rather than "residential". The site is a level slope at almost the highest point on Tichborne Down and overlooks the very ancient trackway which became the main

Winchester/Alton/London road until 1296, and is well known as "the Pilgrim's Way". It seems likely that this is merely the site of a casual burial of passing travellers.

SOURCES:

- F. Cottrill : "Site Report, 1948"
- H.F.C. Proceedings X Part 3, p. 235
- Hants Archeological Newsletter 3 June 1948
- "Hampshire Treasures" Vol I p.195 (HCC 1974)
- T. Schadla-Hall "Winchester Archeological Potential" Map 14 & 15
- Hampshire Chronicle 1948 issues.

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