

ANGLO-SAXON CEMETERY AT WINDMILL HILL, COTGRAVE



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Fourteen and a half centuries ago a group of people were climbing a hill in Cotgrave, carrying an open bier on which lay the body of a man. Aged about 25, he had been in his prime, a warrior and a leader. Now, he was to be buried on a hill top visible over a wide area, which would ensure his place in memory and enable his spirit to overlook his family and community.

At the summit, he was laid ceremoniously in a rectangular grave. The body was handed down to rest in a natural position of repose. His shield was put in, propped against the grave wall, and alongside him, his spear. A small pottery cup containing drink to refresh him in the next life was put by his head.

With the last farewells made, the grave was filled-in and a trench dug around it. The upcast from this trench was heaped up over

the grave to make a low mound. After a final ceremony, the group returned down the hill, leaving the warrior beneath his mound to the elements and the silence of the countryside.

How do we know this? Because in June 1984 archaeologists uncovered the skeleton lying in his grave with the remains of his shield and spear, encircled by a shallow ditch.

This is the story of the discovery and excavation of the Anglo-Saxon cemetery on Windmill Hill, Cotgrave of which this burial was part. Although the excavation is now finished, it will be some time before the full scientific report can be completed and published. In the meantime this is an outline of what was found. It is dedicated to the people of Cotgrave who have shown so much interest in the excavation — and asked so many questions!

Windmill Hill lies on the edge of Cotgrave village, 450 metres north of the church, adjacent to the restored tip of Cotgrave Colliery (SK 644357). It takes its name from the windmill which stood here from the Middle Ages, rebuilt a number of times until blown down early this century. The site of this windmill was excavated in 1976 by staff and pupils of Rushcliffe School.

In March 1983 the owners of the hill top found human bones as they began building work for a new house. They called the police, who asked for the advice of the County Council's Archaeologist. It rapidly became apparent that an Anglo-Saxon cemetery had been discovered.

This was the beginning of three seasons of excavation during which, thanks to the generosity of the site owners, some 612 sq. metres have been scientifically examined. This has involved over 11,000 man hours of hand digging by members of a Youth Training Scheme (in 1983 and 1984) and a Community Programme Team (in 1986), assisted by local volunteers.

87 burials have been found in the cemetery, 74 adults and 13 children. They date to the second half of the 6th Century A.D. and were all pagan Anglo-Saxons, as is shown by the burial rites.

The graves were dug into Keuper Marl, the rock of which the hill is made. Some burials were very shallow, the skeletons being just beneath the topsoil, some 25cm. deep. This is not because these burials were shallow originally but is due to the 6th Century ground level having been lowered by ploughing in the Middle Ages and later. It may be a surprise to some that the hill should have been ploughed — but it was, for in 1986 linear scratches in the top of the marl, made by plough-shares, could be seen!



Excavation involved removing the topsoil and then carefully cleaning the surface of the Keuper Marl. The outline of graves, ditches, pits and post-holes could then be seen as

patches of slightly darker or different textured soil. Since the graves were filled with the same marl which had been dug out of them, their definition often involved much delicate scraping! The filling of each grave was then dug out, inch by inch, the position of every stone and every change in the soil being noted until the skeleton was encountered.



Every bone of the skeleton and any objects buried with it were carefully exposed, leaving them in position. At this stage, the burial would be photographed and drawn to scale before being taken up, the component parts of the skeleton being labelled and every object numbered. Finally the grave itself would be measured in detail.

This skilled and time consuming work has shown that two main methods of burial were used. In one the bodies were laid on their backs in narrow graves with their legs straight. In the other, the graves were wide and the legs were bent. Two burials and a presumed third (beneath a large tree) were within oval ditched enclosures. The material from these ditches is assumed to have been mounded up over the burials and it was possible to see the sequence in which they were dug. The first was that which surrounded the grave of the man buried with his spear and shield, the only burial containing weapons which is known from the site.

Personal possessions were symbolic of status to Anglo-Saxon people and were often buried with their owners. The majority of burials from Windmill Hill had little, if anything, accompanying the skeleton. For these an iron knife or a belt with an iron buckle sufficed. Some graves were furnished with pottery vessels or joints of meat, presumably to provide food or drink in the after-life. A group of 10 women were more richly attired however, with bronze brooches on their shoulders, bead necklaces around



their necks and bronze sleeve-clasps (a type of cufflink) on their fore-arms. The position of these on the skeletons showed clearly that their owners had been buried fully clothed, as indeed were most, if not all, of the burials. There is direct evidence for clothing in the form of textile fragments in which the weave can be clearly seen, which are "fossilised" in the corrosion on many of the brooches.

The reason behind the different burial rituals and the variation in the quantity and quality of the grave goods can only be speculated upon, particularly as the detailed comparison of one grave to another has yet to be done. Status is probably involved in mound building and rich female burials; different dates or family groups may be reflected in the differing attitudes of bodies and shapes of graves. But what is to be made of the burial of a woman and an adolescent in the same grave beneath nearly a hundredweight of large stones? Small stones placed in the sides of graves are not unusual in this cemetery, nor are occasional larger ones placed over or around the body — but what crime, hate, fear, sickness or desire to protect lay behind the placing of so much stone over these corpses?

Most burials were carried out with some care and, presumably, respect. An exception

appears to have been that of a tall man placed face down, in the re-excavated grave of a woman, squashed into a pit which was too small for him. Was this slap-dash work on the part of the grave-diggers or a calculated gesture of insult?

Such circumstances are capable of being interpreted in a number of ways and archaeology alone can not say which is the more correct. But there is little doubt about the tragedy which lay behind the grave which contained the skeleton of a man with a child laid along his legs, its head on his hip. Buried at the same time and presumably related, one must have died within a short time of the other, probably struck down by sickness.



Graves were not the only features discovered in the excavation. A number of pits of Anglo-Saxon date, containing small pieces of

burnt clay and occasional small fragments of pottery and human bone, were also revealed. Most of these appeared to be earlier than the burials as some graves cut through pits.

Their contents suggest that they were dug and filled as part of the rituals involved in sanctifying the cemetery or in the actual burial procedure. Other features, post-holes,

ditches, ploughing marks are testimony to the later land use of the site, particularly over the last 400 years.

In 1986 it became apparent that 20th Century archaeologists were not the first to make discoveries on the hill top. At some time in the late 19th Century somebody had come across a burial whilst digging one of a series of post-holes. They had gathered up the bones and put them in a wooden box, along with bones from another burial which they had found. The box was then buried at the bottom of a four foot deep hole, where its perished remains were discovered and carefully excavated in the last season of work.

The Anglo-Saxon burials, with their jewellery, pots, iron knives and skeletons, are testimony not only to contemporary burial practice but also to the life of their community. Where did these people live? We do not know.

One thing is clear, that the place-name "Cotgrave" does not reflect the presence of the cemetery. Despite appearances, the "grave" element in the name has nothing to do with graves or burials, but comes from the Anglo-Saxon word for a grove or coppice. The "Cot" prefix derives from a person's name "Cotta". Hence Cotgrave means "Cotta's grove (or coppice)". At what point this name was applied to the present village is uncertain. Early on, but not necessarily as early as the 6th Century A.D., the date of the cemetery, Cotgrave may have been a name applied to the general area and there may have been no village, settlement being in scattered farms. The development of the village may not have begun until much later, in the 9th or 10th, or even the 11th centuries.

The cemetery on Windmill Hill may thus have served a large family group, living on a farm somewhere in the vicinity, perhaps on the site of the present village, or it may have been used by a number of families coming from a wider area. Which view is to be favoured will depend on the full analysis of the results of the excavation.

The detailed work on those results has now begun. It involves the cleaning and repairing of bones, many broken or crushed by the pressure of the soil on top of them, (not to mention stones!). Each skeleton has to be examined in detail to assess the sex, age and stature of the person represented and to look for evidence of the effects of diet and disease. Every object has to be carefully cleaned, photographed and drawn to scale, to enable proper publication, and studied to discover how it was made and used. Close examination of "fossilised textile remains will reveal the types of fabric used for clothing.

Even the soil from some graves will be searched for pollen grains which may tell of the flora around the site in Anglo-Saxon times. Each grave will be compared with the others in terms of depth, length, breadth, orientation, the attitude of the skeleton it contained and the number and quality of the object with the burial. From this will come such deductions as are possible about the burial rituals, the length of use of the cemetery and the society of the people it served. And finally the evidence from this site must be compared with that from other cemeteries in Nottinghamshire and the East Midlands, in order to put it into its local and regional context.

This work, some of it needing to be done by specialists, will take some years. But when it is completed it will be possible to write the full report on the site and amplify this outline. From what is known of Anglo-Saxon society it appears to have been important to them that their exploits and achievements should be remembered. After 1400 years the excavation on Windmill Hill has given to this Anglo-Saxon community their place in the history of Cotgrave and Nottinghamshire.



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