

# RECORD OF WITNEY



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WITNEY AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL AND  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER NO. 3, APRIL 1978

The Society is now well into its second year of life and has a considerable achievement. It has held a number of lecture meetings, being addressed by historians of note. It has organised several field expeditions, and its study groups have been gathering useful data for writing the history of Witney and the area around. It has taken publication very seriously and this third newsletter contains a number of articles by members which summarise work undertaken by groups and individuals so far. In addition the Oxfordshire County Museum, obviously impressed by so much interest shown in local history in the town, has put on a series of lectures during this winter entitled "Witney in the Past". Mr. C.J. Bond has kindly allowed us to print the text of his lecture "The Origins of Witney". The first part appears in this issue.

All this is highly satisfactory. What is needed now, as our treasurer reminded us in the last issue, is an increase in membership. Only by doubling our subscribing members can a Society like ours hope to grow in influence. Only by growing can it hope to survive. The danger our Society finds itself in is that it may be content to become a complacent clique, exclusive and inward-looking. More concerned with filling Langdale Hall than with increasing its numbers and seeking a larger meeting place. If it does not grow it will join the ranks of those many short-lived historical and antiquarian societies in our county in the past which, like day flies, had a brief but gay life before vanishing into oblivion. Please each one of you bring a new member to the next meeting.

If the Society does grow it can embark on the real task of local societies interested in rescuing the past from oblivion, the publication of original records, the resurrection of primary sources. Naturally this is costly, in terms of energy, printing expenses and paper. We need more members. Help the Society by recruiting those members in 1978.

We thank David Hall and Keith Lawrence for allowing members to write reports on their lectures. Trevor Cooper has again provided some excellent illustrations for our newsletter. Shirley Barnes, the County Archivist has kindly provided us with facilities for reproducing the drawings. Margaret Burnett has most efficiently typed and duplicated our copy.

Messrs Witney Press produced the cover which is a watercolour of Witney at the end of the 18th century, ascribed to Paul Sandby. It is reproduced by permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum; D 915-1904: Crown Copyright.

The Honorary Editor, John Steane, M.A. Oxon, F.S.A., Cogges Manor Farm, Church Lane, Witney, Oxfordshire, would be glad to receive material for the next number by the end of May, 1978.

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1758 SAT 1st APR - JACKSON'S OXFORD JOURNAL  
'Siamese twin type monster, born at Witney, recently brought to  
Chequer Inn Oxford for exhibition.\*

\*765 16th NOV - JACKSON'S OXFORD JOURNAL  
•On Tuesday and Wednesday last, the grand anniversary festival of  
the Hanketters was celebrated at Witney with the utmost magnificence  
at which were present most of the principle ladies and gentlemen  
of the neighbourhood to the number of near three hundred; and the  
whole was conducted with the utmost regularity and decorum.'

## THE ORIGINS OF WITNEY

Witney is basically a medieval town. There was certainly a settlement here in Saxon times, but there is no evidence that this had achieved urban status before the Norman Conquest. However, we cannot ignore the pre-medieval period. To understand the origins of the medieval town we must look back to Saxon, to Roman and even to Prehistoric times; and to look not only at the actual site of the town itself, but also at its surroundings. Witney did not suddenly appear in a vacuum, but was established in a landscape which may have been intensively used for many centuries.

In studying the origins of any town we have recourse to four main types of evidence:-

- (1) The present landscape: The life of any modern town is constrained and restricted by relict features - buildings, property boundaries, streets, open spaces, even the very site of the town itself - which have been inherited from earlier periods of its history. These features often cause considerable inconvenience today: one thinks of the difficulties of accomodating the volume of modern traffic in narrow medieval streets, the way in which old buildings so often create blind spots, awkward corners and highway obstructions, the unsuitability of narrow 15th and 16th century frontages to the demands of modern chain stores, and the dereliction of the long gardens and yards behind so many town centre shops, no longer needed now that the building occupying the plot frontages are so often not permanently lived in. Yet still they persist, partly through inertia and partly because they possess certain qualities which we value despite their inconvenience. Until eventually such features are swept away by wholesale redevelopment, they can tell us much about the origins and historical development of a town.
- (2) Chance finds: The value of implements and objects left behind by our predecessors tends to vary in inverse proportion to their financial or artistic value. A single gold coin or a richly-ornamented brooch may have been picked up and lost several times during the course of its existence, and may have travelled far from its place of origin. Its value as historical evidence would, therefore, be relatively slight, unless it came from an identifiable archaeological context. On the other hand, if a handful of grubby sherds of neolithic pottery turned up in a Witney garden next week, this would be much more exciting, as this would be much more likely to be an indication of neolithic occupation nearby.
- (3) Archaeological excavation: Unassociated objects are still of relatively slight value; but if objects can be recovered under the controlled conditions of a proper archaeological excavation, they can be used to identify and date structures, which can provide a great deal more information. The problem here is that archaeological excavation is now a highly specialised and skilled process, requiring all sorts of scientific back-up facilities. It is therefore extremely expensive, if carried out on any adequate scale. It is a tragic irony of the 20th century that, at a time when more archaeological sites are being destroyed by modern development than ever before, the proportion of them which can be excavated and published to worthwhile standards continues to decrease. Only a minority of threatened sites can be examined, and this has to be carried out in relation to a strict scale of priorities. The opportunities for

excavation to enlarge our knowledge of the origins of Witney are, therefore, strictly limited. Very little work has taken place in the town centre itself, but there have been a number of important discoveries made in recent years in advance of the construction of the Witney, Ducklington and Hardwick bypasses.

- (4) Documentary evidence: Witney has a documented history beginning in the 2nd half of the 10th century; but it was already by then a well-established settlement, and the written sources tell us nothing of its beginnings. As time goes on the value of the documents continues to increase; but there remain many gaps during the early middle ages. There are, therefore, serious limitations to the contribution of documentary evidence to the present topic.

#### The Setting of Witney;

The physical site of Witney is one of the factors which gives the town its distinctive character even today. Three aspects of the site should be noted, in particular:-

(i) Its general location is at the foot of the Cotswold dip-slope, at exactly the point where the River Windrush leaves its constricted upper valley, incised through the oolitic limestones of the Cotswolds, to enter a much broader, open vale on the Oxford Clay. Like so many market towns, it was thus in a position to handle the produce of two very different types of country.

(ii) The actual town centre stands on a dry island of cornbrash breaking up through the damp alluvial flats of the Windrush valley: it is, in fact, completely surrounded by a great abandoned meander of the Windrush. Before the meadows were drained, this gave the site a considerable degree of natural protection. Even now, aerial photographs show how closely the configuration of the old meander is reflected in the shape of the roads and built-up area of the town.

(iii) On the Cogges side of the valley, a narrow tongue of Forest marble projects across the alluvium, forming the low spur on which Cogges church and manor-house stand. The valley floor is more constricted here than for some distance either upstream or downstream, and there is easy, flood-free access to what must, in early times, have been an important fording-point. The general alignment of the early east-west cross-valley route can be traced from Cogges Church Lane across to Crown Lane and on to Corn Street. This alignment seems to have been disrupted and reduced in importance at a later period, a suggestion which will be examined further below.

The physical advantages of a site do not, of their own accord generate a settlement. They have to be, firstly, recognised, and then exploited, by an individual or community whose requirements they happen to meet. As men's requirements change in time, so can the pattern of their settlements: a small walled town like Alchester can disappear after the 5th century so completely that there is now not a building on the site, while seven centuries later a complete new town like Woodstock can arise on an expanse of waste ground. So much emphasis today is placed upon the continuity of settlements and other features in the landscape, that it may be worth reminding ourselves that such major changes can still occur; and that even a site with such apparent physical advantages as Witney's was not automatically predestined as a settlement site for all time.

### Prehistoric Settlement:

We do not know whether Witney's meander core was occupied in prehistoric times. The evidence has been destroyed, or sealed, by the modern town. Although the distribution of chance finds suggests a degree of activity and movement in the area from a very early date, there are no significant concentrations of finds which might suggest a settlement site anywhere within the present built-up area.

The first few thousand years of human activity in the Witney area are largely represented by a catalogue of chance finds, few of which are exactly provenanced. Perhaps the oldest object ever found in Witney is a perforated stone mace-head, now in the Pitt-Rivers Museum: this type of implement is not always closely dateable, but it may well be of mesolithic origin. Its precise find-spot is not recorded. The neolithic period is also represented at present only by a single find: an opaque, pearly grey unpolished chipped flint axe, dated to c.3000 B.C., found on the south-west side of the town in 1958 beside Eama's Dyke, in the floor of the abandoned river meander. The meander channel has also produced one important Late Bronze Age find, a bronze sword discovered at a depth of 3 metres immediately south of Corn Street and east of Eama's Dyke: this is now in the Ashmolean Museum.

There are further Bronze Age finds recorded from the nearby countryside, which may suggest an intensification of activity in the area during this period. A bronze palstave from Newland, on the Cogges side of the Windrush, is now in the British Museum. A Beaker burial is recorded from a small gravel-pit near the Hardwick crossroads, 2 1/2 miles to the south-east of the town. Surface scatters of waste flint flakes and cores of Neolithic and Bronze Age date have been collected, sometimes in considerable quantities, from Minster Lovell, Leafield, Eynsham and other surrounding parishes.

The earliest clearly identifiable features surviving in the present landscape probably date from the Bronze Age. The lower slopes of the Cotswolds to the north of the town still contain a number of round barrows, including a cemetery of at least five barrows between Crawley and Leafield. On the lower ground of the Windrush valley and the Oxford clay vale, most of the barrows have been ploughed flat for many centuries; but under favourable conditions they can still be seen from the air in the form of crop-marks. There are great dangers in attempting to interpret the patterns seen on aerial photographs without excavation. At least some of the ring-ditches and circular crop-marks so often assumed to represent ploughed-out round barrows, subsequently turn out to represent either archaeological features of different date, or, on occasions, are completely modern phenomena such as the sites of wartime searchlight batteries, or tethered goat! However, there are several examples around Witney which, from available evidence, look genuine enough. A group of four circles north of Northfield Farm, Woodgreen, and a group of three half a mile south-east of Springhill Farm, Cogges, may represent small barrow cemeteries on the east side of the Windrush. There are also isolated examples immediately north of Curbridge and west of Ducklington. As we progress down the Windrush beyond Hardwick to the extensive gravel terraces around Standlake and Stanton Harcourt, the number of ring-ditches, and, indeed, of all other types of crop-marks, increases enormously. This is, to a large extent, because it is the permeable gravel soils which most frequently produce conditions likely to reveal such sites in the crop, and not, necessarily, that the gravel soils were especially attractive to early settlers. Our distribution

maps of prehistoric settlement in Oxfordshire are at present grossly overbalanced in favour of the gravels, simply due to the ready availability of information from them.

In contrast to the relative frequency of Bronze Age cemeteries and barrows, evidence for Bronze Age settlements related to them is very sparse. In the Iron Age the reverse is the case: far more settlements than cemeteries have been recognised. Although there is a hill fort 2 1/2 miles east of Witney in Eynsham Hall Park, no particularly early Iron Age material has been recorded from nearer the town itself. The later part of the pre-Roman Iron Age, however, has much more to offer. An earthwork between Witney and New Yatt, called Grim's Ditch, may be part of an extensive system of linear dykes centred further to the north-east. This system has been dated to the first half of the 1st century A.D., the late pre-Roman Iron Age, but its function is not yet fully understood. It appears to be related to the large fortified lowland sites known as 'oppida' which were built by the late Iron Age Belgic peoples, and it could conceivably be a western bastion of the Catuvellauni, the most powerful Belgic tribe in the south-east, built during their westward penetration into Dabunnic territory. The total area enclosed is estimated at some 22 square miles, and must have included extensive tracts of woodland and open ground; no major Belgic settlement area has yet been found within it.

Whatever the function of Grim's Ditch, the future site of Witney lay outside the area enclosed by it. There is, however, clear evidence of smaller-scale Belgic activity closer to the town site. Immediately to the north-west of Curbridge is a sub-rectangular crop-mark enclosure approached by a long driveway defined by ditches. The Witney bypass just missed this, so it has not been excavated; but it closely resembles some of the so-called 'banjo' enclosures of Wessex, where examples have been dated by excavation to the late pre-Roman Iron Age. A probable hut circle with pits and ditches discovered during construction of the Hardwick bypass in 1974 produced Belgic-type pottery. On the Ducklington bypass several Belgic sherds were found in association with a pit and a series of ditches, probably part of a much more extensive site. On the Witney bypass pottery found near Spring Hill, Cogges, suggested a late Iron Age settlement on the low step just above the Windrush flood plain. More recently excavation has been taking place at a circular Iron Age enclosure at Mingies Ditch, Hardwick, but as yet this has produced no recognisably Belgic pottery.

The only evidence from within the town itself is a couple of late Iron Age coins, neither exactly provenanced: a gold stater inscribed with the name of Bodvoc, a ruler of the Dobunni immediately before the Roman invasion; and a silver coin of Epaticcus, ruler of the Atrebatas of Berkshire and Hampshire, c.A.D. 25-35. Another silver Dubunnic coin has come more recently from the Ducklington bypass.

There is little doubt that the distribution of Iron Age sites around Witney as known at present is still very incomplete. Apart from aerial photography and chance discoveries, there is not at present much hope of filling in the gaps. The friable nature of much Iron Age pottery means that it stands less chance of surviving in ploughsoil, and so sites of this period are less likely than Roman or Medieval sites to be located by systematic field-walking.



## Roman Settlement:

One of the major Roman roads of southern Britain, the Akeman Street, passes three miles to the north-west of Witney on its way from St. Albans to Cirencester. No doubt a number of local service roads originally linked up with this, and we can probably identify one of these in the dead straight lengths of road, track and hedgerow followed by parish boundaries for some 2 1/2 miles from Gigley Farm along St. John's Lane towards Leafield. The minor Roman roads of the area were not necessarily, however, all quite so distinctive, and they may be very difficult to identify on the ground.

The largest Romano-British settlements near Witney are both close to the Akeman Street, 3 1/2 miles to the north at Wilcote and 4 miles to the west at Asthsl. Neither has any evidence for defences, but we are probably justified in thinking of these as large villages, if not small towns.

When we turn to rural settlement, we perhaps think first of all of villas. There is a very important group of Roman villas to the north-east of Witney, within the area more or less delimited by the Grim's Ditch earthworks, including North Leigh, Fawler, Stonesfield, Ditchley and several others.

The nearest villa to Witney, at Shakenoak, 2 1/2 miles to the north-east, is of especial interest, since it has been examined in some detail in recent years. The site lies in a shallow valley draining north-eastwards to the Evenlode. The first major building was a house on the north side of the stream built during the second half of the 1st century. The rising prosperity of the villa, based on expanding agriculture, is reflected by its growth in size and comfort. It had fairly elaborately painted walls and by the late 2nd century was perhaps as large and lavish in style as any in Oxfordshire, with the exception of North Leigh. Early in the 2nd century an agricultural building had been erected on the south side of the stream. In the mid 3rd century there was a major reorganisation, when this was converted to a small, well-appointed dwelling house complete with baths. Much of the original dwelling was then demolished.

The economy of Shakenoak cannot be considered here in detail. Carbonised grains of spelt wheat have been found, together with the bones of horses, cattle, sheep and pigs, and a large number of oyster shells. A fishpond was made when the villa expanded south of the stream in the early 2nd century. While there is no evidence for a reduction in the level of agricultural activity or a decline in living standards in the 4th century, Shakenoak clearly did not experience the enormous expansion of some of the neighbouring villas during this period. It has been plausibly suggested that the Shakenoak estate might have been absorbed by its richer neighbour at North Leigh, which was undergoing particularly spectacular growth at this time.

South-west of the Windrush is a further group of Romano-British settlements and farmsteads less materially wealthy than Shakenoak. At least one example, on the line of the Hardwick bypass, seems to represent a native Iron Age settlement which continued in occupation right through to the late 3rd or early 4th century. On the Witney bypass at Curbridge the ditches, pits and occupation spreads of another Romano-British settlement were discovered. In this case there was no evidence of pre-Roman occupation, the pottery sequence beginning in the later 1st or early 2nd century and continuing to the 4th century. An interesting

sidelight; on this site is that on the 1840 tithe map the field in which it lies is called Long Miskin, A 'miskin' is a dunghill; is it conceivable that we have here a reflection of the middens of the Roman settlement?

A rather more elaborate Roman settlement, not occupied before the mid 2nd century, was examined before the construction of the Ducklington by-pass at Red Lodge. This had been previously known from aerial photographs which showed a driveway defined by ditches, with rectangular enclosures on either side. Excavation revealed evidence of substantial buildings, including limestone roofing tile and fragments of tegulae and box tile, which may represent a villa site. It was occupied at least to the mid 4th century.

The evidence from Witney itself is again extremely sparse. The 18th century antiquary, Thomas Hearne, records in his diary in 1709 that he had seen some Roman coins from Witney. There is also an old record of several urns, described as of Upchurch ware, from Cage Hill, Northfield Farm, Witney; and, more recently, a thin scatter of Romano-British pottery has been ploughed up not far from the find-spot of these urns. There is, however, no evidence at present to suggest any significant occupation during the Roman period on the site of the later town centre.

#### Late Roman and Sub-Roman period

During the later 4th century part of the Curbridge settlement was abandoned and its site used as a late Roman cemetery. The total size of this is not known, but 19 graves have been excavated. Their orientation is very variable, but there seems some preference for a north-south alignment. Three of the graves contained decapitated inhumations, with the skull laid near the feet, a common late Roman and Anglo-Saxon practice. The grave of one adult woman included two infant burials. No grave goods were present, except for several sets of hobnails. There was no evidence for coffins, although one burial seems to have had its hands and feet either tied or closely bound in a shroud.

A similar situation seems to have occurred at Hardwick, where the burial of a child and two adults was discovered on an abandoned part of the settlement there.

The general picture of the end of Roman occupation in Britain nowadays is that it finished with a whimper rather than a bang. With the withdrawal of central government at the beginning of the 5th century, the Roman towns and farmsteads underwent a slow, protracted decline. The number which actually went up in flames under traditionally bloodthirsty Anglo-Saxon assaults are apparently very much in a minority. At Shakenoak occupation continued at least until 430, but the place was clearly in decline in its final stages, with its inhabitants reduced to living in a single room at one end of the building, the remainder becoming a roofless shell used as a rubbish dump.

The evidence of late bronze buckle plates and other equipment at Shakenoak suggests the presence of a military, possibly barbarian mercenary element there in the 5th century. Possibly the owner of the North Leigh estate was stationing small forces in his outlying farmsteads for defensive purposes, A late 4th century buckle plate from Red Lodge also suggests a military presence there during the final phases of occupation.

## Early Saxon Period

The first appearance of the Anglo-Saxons in West Oxfordshire may well have taken the form of the recruitment of barbarian mercenaries by local landowners. In the later 5th and 6th centuries the initial trickle became a flood as fresh incursions of Germanic peoples increased; a considerable sub-Roman population almost certainly survived, however.

The early Saxon settlers are recognised most readily from their cemeteries, which are often rich in grave-goods. At Yelford, 2 1/2 miles south of Witney, in 1857, 26 inhumations were excavated from a gravel pit by Stephen Stone, all neatly arranged in rows, with iron knives, keys, rings, bronze strips, bone combs and discs, and amber and glass beads. Near Ducklington church two more burials, possibly part of a larger cemetery, were found during gravel-digging in 1860: grave-goods including gold and silver pendants, a silver wire ring, glass beads and a bone comb dated these to the 7th century. A further three 7th-century burials were found during the Ducklington bypass excavations at Red Lodge in 1974; grave-goods here included a gold-mounted beaver-tooth pendant, a necklace with silver, glass and shell beads, a bone spindle-whorl and thread-picker and some punch decorated bronze strips of uncertain purpose. An isolated single burial which was probably Saxon was reported from Cokethorpe in 1859.

Early Saxon settlements, such as the loose-knit scatter of post-built and sunken-floored huts excavated at New Wintles at Eynsham, have so far proved elusive in the Witney area. They must surely exist in association with the known cemeteries, but only Yelford has so far produced any hint of an accompanying settlement.

The most comprehensive evidence of changes in the early Saxon period has come from Shakenoak, where there is considerable evidence for Saxon occupation north of the stream between the 5th and 8th centuries. Iron-smelting was amongst the activities taking place here, but the main basis of the Saxon economy seems to have been sheep-farming, much more important than it had been in Roman times. There is evidence for wool-carding, spinning and weaving at Shakenoak, which perhaps fore-shadows the textile industry of later medieval Witney. At least nine burials in the ruins of the Roman buildings are probably part of the cemetery for this Saxon settlement, although they are not firmly dated.

Perhaps the most interesting information of all from Shakenoak is the ecological evidence, which gives a fascinating glimpse of the changes in the countryside around Witney. The Roman landscape had been one of grassland, scrub and parkland, with considerable areas of arable cultivation on the villa estates. In the Anglo-Saxon period we have evidence of considerable reduction in the area under cultivation, an increase in pastoral farming, increasing flooding in the valley bottoms due to neglect of drainage, and extensive return of scrub and regenerating ash, birch and beech wood. An area which had been perhaps the richest and most thoroughly settled and cultivated parts of the county during the four centuries of Roman occupation was in the process of regressing to form the heart of the medieval Forest of Wychwood, which was to become such an important factor in the later life of Witney.

### Late Saxon Witney

Somewhere around the 7th or 8th centuries there seems to be a period of major upheaval in the settlement pattern. Evidence is fairly widespread throughout midland and southern England, although the reasons

are as yet imperfectly understood. In Oxfordshire some of the early Saxon settlements like New Wintles and Shakenoak were abandoned, while we get evidence for the first time of the appearance of our present villages. Curbridge is documented by 956, Ducklington in 958, and Witney itself has appeared by 969.

The oldest feature of Witney to survive is its name. Various attempts have been made to interpret its meaning. One suggestion links it with early forms of the name of the River Windrush. Another suggestion, put forward by Monk in 1894, is that it signified a place where the Witan, the Saxon royal council, met. This idea, though probably erroneous, would seem harmless enough; but it has unfortunately been taken up by a recent account which, unwittingly using a circular argument, quite positively asserts that the Witan did meet here. There is no shred of evidence for this. The most likely interpretation of the name is that it means the 'island of Witta', a Saxon landowner whose name also appears in a charter boundary landmark called Wittan more, or Witta's Marsh. The island referred to is, of course, the meander core on which the town centre lies.

We know nothing of the shape or extent of late Saxon Witney, although it was important enough to have acquired a mint by the mid-11th century. Ordnance Survey maps published before the last war admittedly show quite clearly the course of what is labelled as a 'Saxon Rampart', following the inner edge of the meander core from Lowell Place round the inside of Emma's Dyke, to the south of The Crofts, passing immediately south of St. Mary's churchyard and Mount House. Details of this feature were first published by Giles in 1852, who obtained his information from 'a zealous native antiquary', Mr. Langford. Unfortunately it has proved archaeologically elusive. Sections cut across its line by the Southern Electricity Board in 1959 and the development of the new housing estate west of The Crofts failed to reveal any sign of a rampart or ditch.

JAMES BOND

1775 WED 7th JUNE - JACKSON'S OXFORD JOURNAL

Ploughman and two horses struck dead by lightening in Curbridge Field: boy and other horses unhurt.

1759 THUR 9th AUG - JACKSON'S OXFORD JOURNAL

John Roberts, labourer of Curbridge, eloped from wife and family. Reward for his apprehension offered by parish officers, Thomas Lankshaw and Thomas Wright.

1771 TUES 5th OCT - JOURNAL OF JOHN WESLEY

I went on to Witney. I am surprised at the plainness and artlessness of this people. Who would imagine that they lived within 10, yea 50, miles of Oxford?

Bodleian. MS Top Oxon d.215