

SITE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Excavations carried out on the Friary Field, Dunstable, 1969/1970

In the Manshead Journal No. 18, Spring 1968, we published the excavation of a single equal-arm cross, cut 2' 6" deep into the natural chalk. It had sheer sides and a flat bottom and was roughly 11' 0" across. We dated it to the late Roman period.

During the last two seasons' work this cross has led us to the excavation of a large timber building which overlies Romano-British occupation, and at the end of this season's work we are finding that there is a second building of similar construction with only 12' 0" separating it from the first.

Building 1.

This is 195' 0" long and 100' 0" wide and constructed throughout with timber.

It was built roughly east-west with its eastern end parallel to the modern Watling Street, which is 200 yards away and follows its original Roman line through the town of Dunstable.

The building has been found as substantial wall trenches with entrance causeways in the centres of each of the three sides so far excavated. The most remarkable feature, however, is the equal-arm crosses which fill the area between the walls and are similar to the single cross already described. These number 72 (only some of which have so far been excavated) arranged symmetrically in 12 rows of 6.

Across the centre of the building, stopping short of the north entrance, runs a trench, the southern half of which contains, in deepened and widened sections, a number of human skeletons, some of them mutilated.

The outer walls.

These were found as trenches cut into the natural chalk with sheer sides and flat bottom.

They are approximately 3' 0" wide and in certain sections oblique pick marks could be seen in the sides.

The depth into the chalk varied with each wall, due to the natural slope of the chalk, which falls slightly to the south. The north wall was sunk 20" deep and the south wall 10" into the chalk.

The filling of these trenches was a brown loam through the centre with

chalk packing along the sides (see Fig.2). This was more obvious in the deeper north wall and is consistent with the rotting of a rounded sleeper beam of more than 3' 0" diameter which had been packed with chalk. Within the chalk packing were a few flints and one ox rib bone.

At the north-east corner (see Fig.2) the north wall had a squared end one foot short of the east wall, which continued 2' 0" beyond the join point.

The south-east corner was similar, with the east wall continuing 2' 4" beyond the south wall, but here the two walls joined, with the south wall trench sunk 3" deeper into the chalk.

Neither of the other corners of the building has been found. The north-west corner is beyond the area available for excavation. In the area where the south-west corner of the building would be expected to lie, the underlying chalk falls away, so that any wall trenches were probably not deep enough to strike the chalk. Cuts were made by us in this area before the actual extent of the building was known, and need to be re-examined for evidence of the corner walls.

Entrances.

The main entrance to the building was probably in the east end, nearest the Watling Street. Here the wall trenches were interrupted in the middle to give a causewayed entrance gap 11' 6" wide.

In the north wall an entrance had been made in the middle giving an 8' 0" wide gap.

At both of these entrances the sleeper beams had squared ends but more excavation has to be carried out in both areas to determine if any other features are present. Inside the east entrance, set 5' 6" back from each end of the wall trench, were two substantial postholes, which may be connected with the building (see plan, Fig.1).

In the south wall the entrance was a 3' 6" wide footway door (see Fig.3). The trenches of the south wall had squared ends leaving a 2' 0" wide causeway. The loam fill representing the beams continued to the end of the trenches. There was evidence that door posts had been set into these each 1' 0" away from the end and packed with chalk to a level above the natural chalk. The centres of the two heaps of chalk packing were loose chalk, showing where the door posts had stood. With both posts the chalk penetrated into the underlying loam of the sleeper beam without going completely through it.

The Central Trench (Curtain Wall).

This trench had a flat bottom 18" wide and slightly sloping sides, and was dug into the natural chalk to the same depth as the outer walls. It was probably a sleeper beam trench dug to carry a curtain wall across the centre of the building.

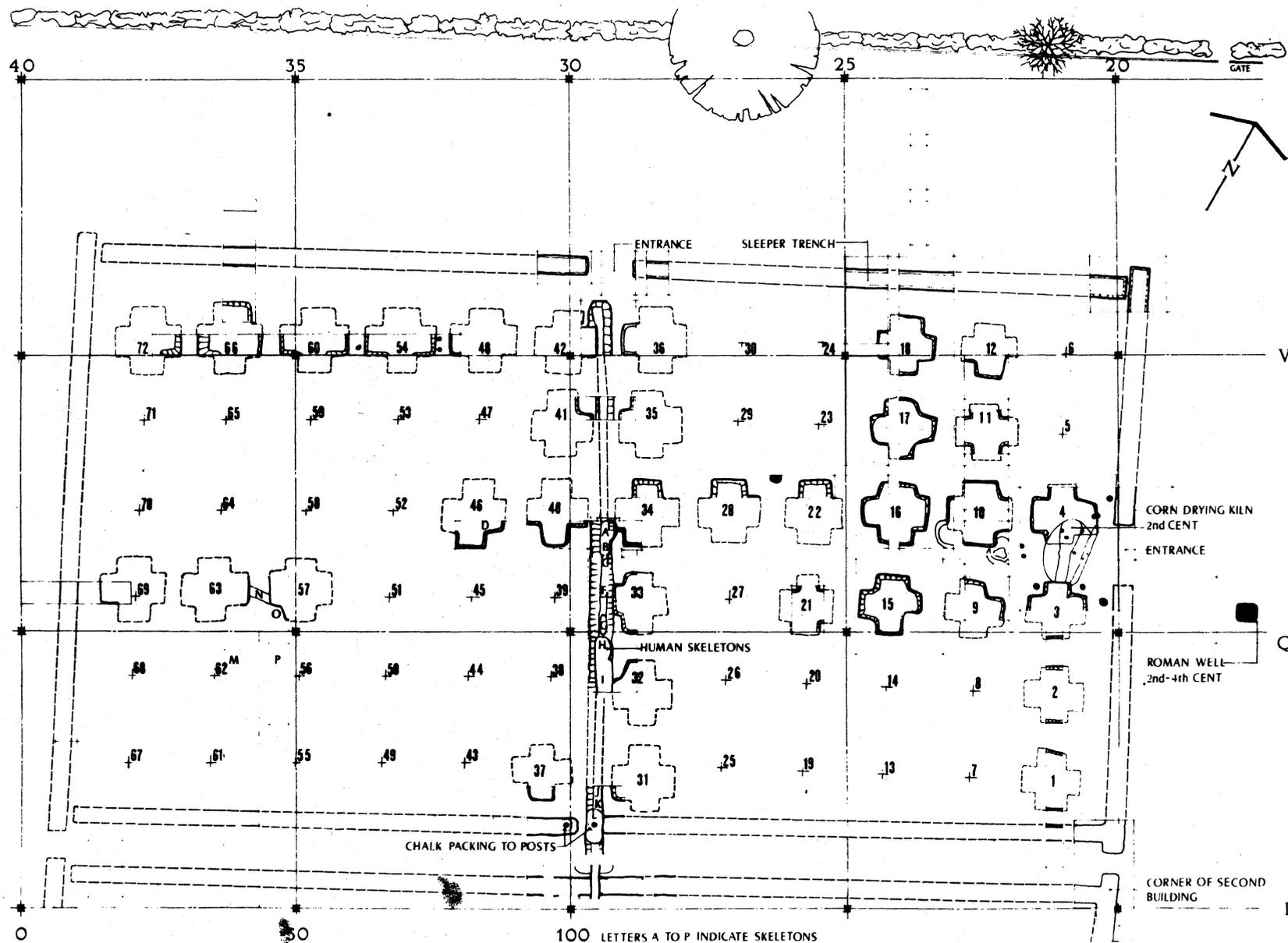


Fig 1

FEET 0 50 100

LETTERS A TO P INDICATE SKELETONS

THE MANSHEAD ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF DUNSTABLE.

JMB

(see Fig.1). The end of the trench was squared like the outer wall trenches and it ended 5' 0" away from the entrance, allowing a 5' 0" wide entrance causeway into the western half of the building and a 7' 0" wide entrance into the eastern half.

At the southern end it continued up to and through the outer wall, joining the wall at the east side of the entrance (see Fig.3). This allowed entry by the southern door into the west half of the building only.

Human burials had been made in the trench before any wall was placed there, but as some skeletons had been disturbed by later interments, the bodies must have been buried at two separate times with an interval of years between.

This suggests that there was a re-building or removal of the central wall some time after its original erection.

At least six burials had been made before the first period of building. Later, six new burials had been made in the same trench. These are marked alphabetically on the plan.....

Period 1 skeletons	-	B.	C.	D.	E.	H.	L.
Period 2 skeletons	-	A.	F.	G.	I.	J.	K.

The curtain wall trench continued through the southern outer wall into the second building of similar construction discovered at the end of this season. Further excavation is required in this area.

The Cross Structures.

The internal uprights for the building were apparently contained in open postholes cut into the natural chalk as equal-arm crosses. These were sited at approximately 15' 5" centres and measured approximately 11' 5" across, giving six across the building and twelve along the length, a total of 72 posts.

The arms of each cross were between 2' 0" and 3' 0" long and 5' 0" and 6' 0" wide.

This variation shows that each cross had been dug without the use of a mechanical measure; the common factor being the cross shape and a deliberately planned flat floor.

The depth into the natural chalk also showed some variation but the similarity of most of the depths suggests that a near standard upright had been used. (The average depth was 2' 0" into the natural chalk).

The exceptions to this rule were the two crosses Nos. 40 and 41 adjoining the curtain wall. These were only half the depth of adjacent crosses.

The sides of the crosses were almost sheer showing no signs of wear. Weathering by frost occurred on a line of five crosses on the western half of the building. - Crosses 48, 54, 60, 66, and 72 only.

The chalk from this frosting survived within the fill.

The original excavation of the crosses involved the removal of many tons of chalk but none of this had been replaced in the crosses which were found by the modern excavators filled with light loam.

The filling of each cross contained very little occupational debris and many of them had apparently been re-excavated to be used as cesspits during the 17th century.

The cesspit diggers had cut into crosses 17 and 18 and the adjoining solid chalk. They quickly discovered as did the modern excavators that the soft filling and therefore easy digging occurred at regular intervals and subsequent pits were excavated into the cross-shaped features without disturbing the chalk sides of the crosses. Evidence for this activity survived in pieces of salt glaze wares and fragments of pegged tile.* Crosses Nos. 3 and 4 were cut into a Romano-British corn drying kiln which was sealed by two silver coins. A Dupondius: Divus Antoninus (Antoninus Pius) Commemorative issue c.161 AD., and a mint condition Denarius of Julia Domna - period 193 - 211 (B.M.C. No. 65).

Cross No. 3 just clipped the end of the kiln but Cross No. 4 cut well into it. Three postholes with stone packing extended from the floor level of the cross into the soft fill.

Cross No. 10 cut into a 3rd century hearth.

Crosses Nos. 56 and 62 were excavated through the sunken hollow of a Romano-British hut or working place of the 3rd/4th century which itself contained later burials, apparently Roman.

Many small fragments of Romano-British pottery were found within the filling, all of which could have been intrusions when the building was abandoned.

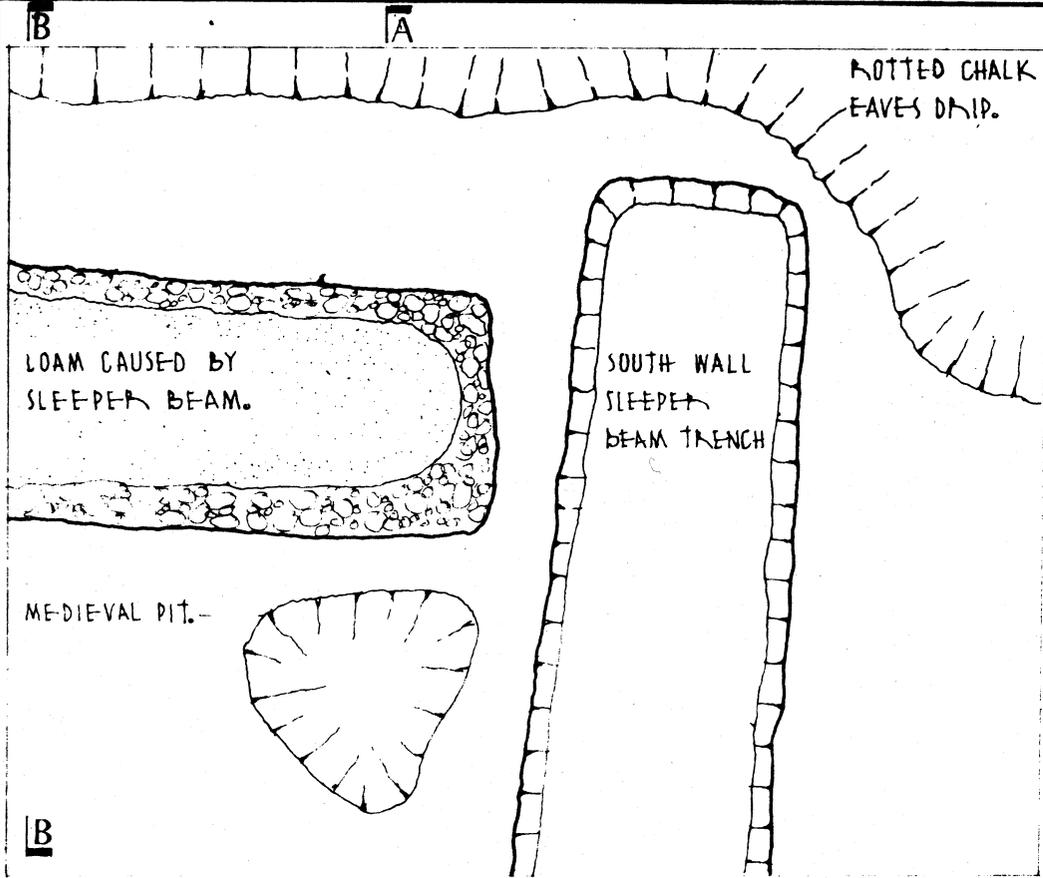
Coins.

Eight coins were found within the filling of the crosses.

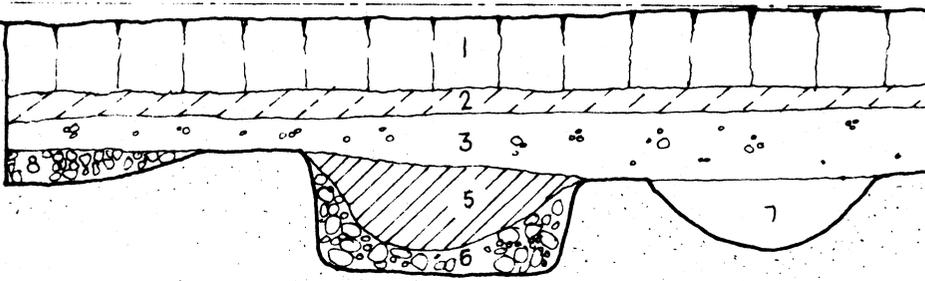
Cross No. 10.	1 LICINIUS I.	304-24.
15.	2 MINIMS.	
18.	1 HADRIAN.	Dupondius 117-138.
40.	1 TETRICUS.	270-73.
54.	1 FAUSTINA.	Issue after death 141 AD.
28.	2 Barb Imitations.	

* Reported in Manshead Journal No. 19, Spring 1969.

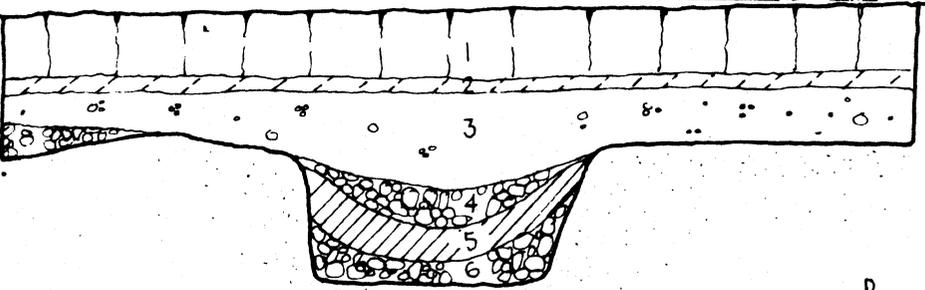
PLAN AND SECTIONS N.E. CORNER OF BUILDING



PLAN



SECTION A A



SECTION B B

- 1. TURF.
- 2. CLAY PIPE LAYER.
- 3. SUBSOIL WITH CHALK TILE & MED. DEBRIS.
- 4. SMALL CHALK.
- 5. DARK LOAM (BEAM).
- 6. COMPACTED CHALK.
- 7. PIT. 17TH CENT.
- 8. ROTTED CHALK - EAVES DRIP.

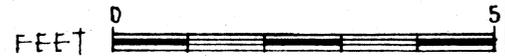


fig 2

Human Remains in Crosses.

- Cross No. 11. Human femur in loam fill.
40. Part of human skull and two femurs on chalk floor of cross.
63. Skull of skeleton N disturbed during original digging of cross and replaced on floor of cross.

Human Remains in Central Trench (see Figs.3 and 4).

These remains have not yet been fully studied and a report in greater detail will be made at a later date.

PERIOD 1.

Skeleton B.

Adult male skeleton with ivory osteoma of left frontal region. Lying extended along trench with head to the north in a depression cut into the bottom of the ditch.

The skeleton had been disturbed when skeleton A had been placed immediately above it. During this disturbance the top of the skull had been thrown by the side of the new body and the left arm was also removed.

Caked chalky mud in the shape of a shoe-sole was found under the toes of the right foot.

Pieces of a straight-sided grey Roman dish were found near the feet and below the pelvis of this skeleton.

Skeleton C.

Pair of adult feet only. These were lying on the bottom of the trench and the body had originally been lying above the position of skeleton B. The remainder of skeleton C was possibly removed when body A was later interred, or more probably during the burial of B, which latter would imply three periods of burial at this point.

Skeletons D and E.

Only parts of these skeletons were found in the chalk fill that had covered skeleton A. Portions of skulls showed that one had been an adult and the other a young person in his early teens. Some of these bones may have belonged to skeleton C.

Skeleton H.

Adult male lying in deepened section of trench in extended position, feet to the south. This male had been beheaded and his head with five vertebrae attached had been put by his feet. The top part of this skull and the right tibia had been removed when the later body, I, had been buried partially over H. A bone pin was found at the left side of the waist.

Skeleton L.

Adult female. Lying extended in deepened section of ditch with head to the north.

This body had been beheaded and the head placed between the femurs. Both legs had been chopped off by several blows just above the knees. The legs had been placed alongside the body, with the feet opposite the place where the head would have been. The right leg was on the right side and left leg on the left side of the body.

PERIOD 2.

Skeleton A.

Adult female skeleton of advanced years. There was marked under-development of the lower limbs and thickening and increased muscular markings on the humeri. The legs were found in flexion. These findings suggest that the person suffered a paraplegia from an early age either as a result of a birth injury or polio. There was extensive osteo-arthritis of spine which may have come on earlier than normal due to the extra strain of the person dragging herself along by her hands.

This body had been placed immediately on top of skeleton B with the head to the north.

Skeleton F.

Adult male, lying in extended position in deepened section of the trench with head to the north. The skull protruded above the deepened section.

Skeleton G.

Adolescent female, 15-20 years old, lying in deepened section of trench with head to the south. The knees were raised and resting against the side of the trench above the deepened section.

Grave Goods.

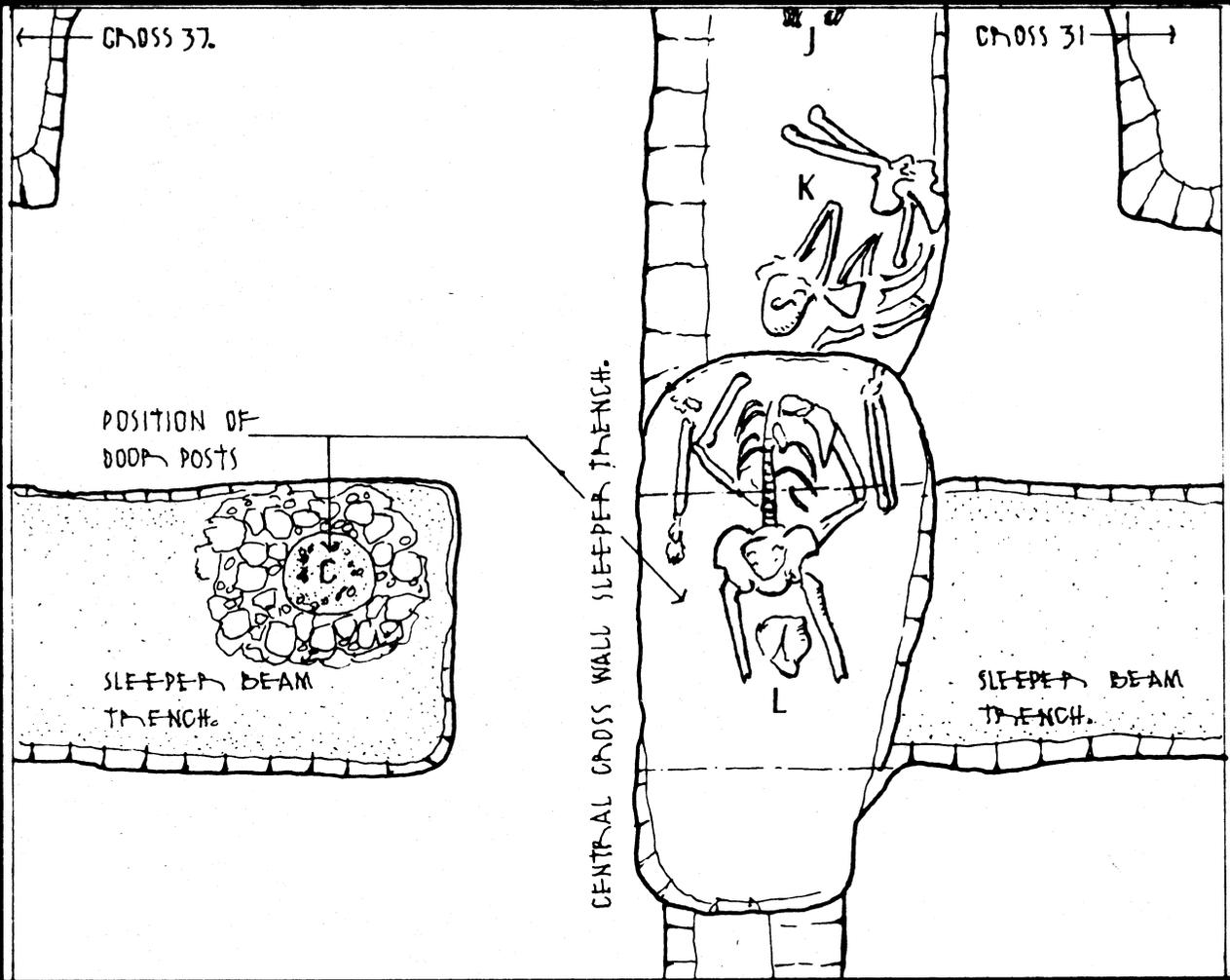
On this skeleton were found the following pieces of jewellery.....

Necklace of 61 small blue glass beads (each about 3 to 5 mm across).

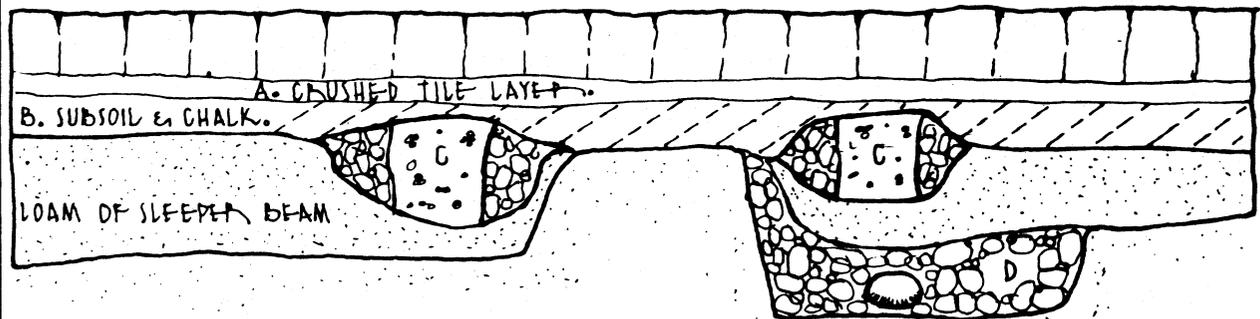
Three bracelets on left forearm....

1. Open-ended flattened bronze with tapered, overlapping ends. Decorated with small notches around the edge.
2. Three strands of twisted bronze wire with one strand extended at each end to make a double hook catch.
3. Similar to above, but containing one strand of iron and having small knob terminals. Some fabric had survived attached to this bracelet, preserved by iron oxide impregnation.

PLAN OF SOUTHERN ENTRANCE and SKELETONS



SECTION ACROSS SOUTH WALL ENTRANCE SHEWING DOOR POSTS



- C. DOOR POSTS. PACKED CHALK WITH LOOSE CHALK IN CENTRES.
- D. CHALK COVERING SKELETON L IN DEEPENED CENTRAL WALL TRENCH.

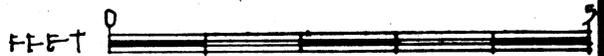


fig 3

J.M.B.

SKELETONS IN TIMBER BUILDING

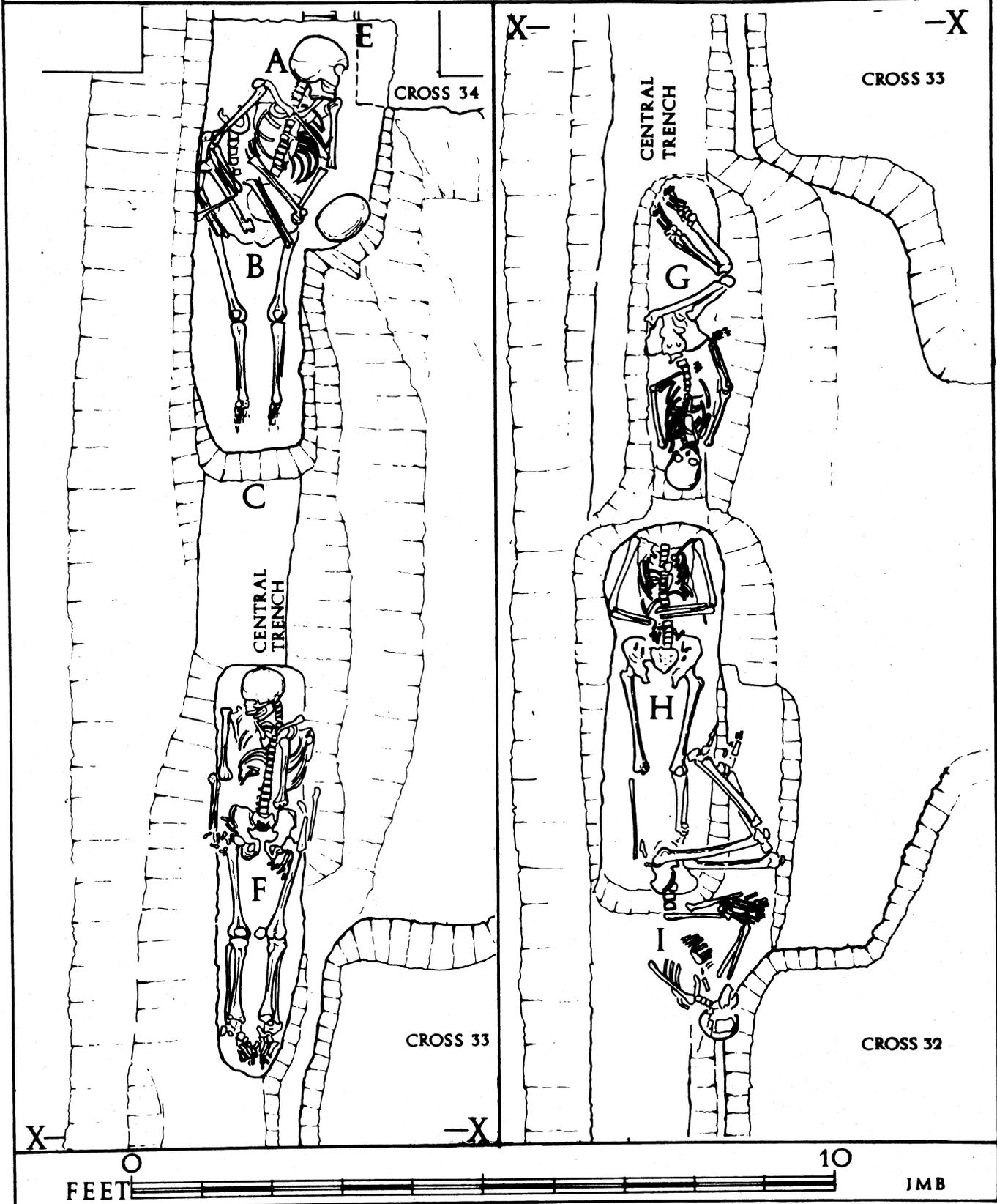


fig 4

Three finger rings....

1. Small plain bronze ring on the little finger of the left hand (fourth finger).
2. Bronze ring with stone setting, probably glass, on the third finger of the left hand.
3. Badly eroded iron ring below ring 2 on the same finger.

Skeleton I.

Adolescent male 15-20 years, lying on right side in contracted position. Left arm across body, the elbow raised 3" above the upper ribs and 2" inches higher than the skull (in all about 7" above the floor of the grave). Right hand at neck. The skull protruded into cross No. 32. The upper frontal part of the skull was damaged.

Skeleton J.

Pair of feet to the south, protruding from baulk. This skeleton not yet excavated.

Skeleton K.

Skeletal remains not yet studied - probably female. Lying on floor of trench in contracted position on left side with head to the south. The left arm twisted under the body, right hand over face. Lower legs missing.

DISCUSSION.

No parallel has yet been found for a building in timber that shows the technique used at Dunstable.

A reconstruction of a building with a 100' 0" roof span is difficult to visualise and it has been suggested that this is a walled garden rather than a roofed structure, the crosses being loam-filled holes to take trees or even posts for vines. If this is an orchard, then why the massive boundary walls and why the enormous amount of work in digging equal-arm cross shapes with flat floors and vertical sides, and why two such orchards, each with huge walls, only 12' 0" apart?

The crosses were probably dug to allow tie beams to hold timber uprights in open postholes after posts in an original building had rotted. So far no marks in the chalk of the walls or floors of the crosses have been found to suggest the position of any struts or beams.

The evidence from the central part of the structure, where interments have been made in the trench of at least two separate periods, suggests that there were two periods of construction in this building. The central trench must have been dug before the first bodies were buried; the crosses are later than the trench, because several of them cut into its fill, namely

Nos. 32, 33, 34, and 42.

From cross 32 comes evidence that the cross was dug not very long after Skeleton I (of the second period) was buried in the trench. During the digging of this cross the head of Skeleton I was exposed, perhaps in a cavity beneath a beam. Later this head, still articulated, slumped into the cavity of the cross. If the body had already decomposed when the cross-diggers struck the skull in the position in which it was found by the modern excavators it would have been completely smashed; but in fact only one piece of cranium was found detached, lying on the floor of the cross, where it could have fallen at a later time, when the cross was still open. We assume therefore that the body had been buried not very long before the cross was dug; also that the crosses were left open and not filled in during the lifetime of the building.

It is suggested then, that during a re-building of the structure more bodies had been buried in the trench and probably a new and lighter beam put in. This had been packed firmly into place with clean chalk. After this the crosses had been dug, some of them into the chalk packing of the beam.

A top portion of a skull and two femurs were found on the chalk floor of cross 40 and a femur in cross 11. These may have been from skeletons disturbed during re-building, either by the removal of the original central wall or by the burial of new bodies.

There is clear evidence, then, that the crosses and the second period burials are near contemporary. The crosses are also shown to be later features than the original curtain wall trench, probably replacing uprights that had been set in conventional postholes.

The re-building may have been an extension to an original building, but the positioning of the curtain wall at the northern entrance makes this unlikely and it would appear that the building was this size from its inception.

It is difficult to imagine why such a massive central wall was required. It cannot have been a simple partition but must have had some structural significance and been designed to carry a lot of weight.

We do not yet know what relation this wall had to the second building. The Period 1 trench continued through into the next building, but insufficient work had been carried out on the second building to establish what happened during the re-building operation.

The sleeper beams in the side walls and curtain wall were obviously large tree trunks untrimmed on the underside. The rounded shape of the beam could be plainly seen in the filling of the ditch.

The outer wall trenches were neatly cut with flat floors and sheer

sides still showing the original pick marks, but these and the curtain wall were not exactly straight. They had been marked out by eye rather than along a laid line. The curtain wall has a well-defined bend in the centre. The builders probably laid the tree trunks along the line and then cut the ditch to contain them, trimming them in situ.

These large beams were required to carry walls that would take the massive weight and outward thrust of the roof. Since these walls would carry most of the weight of the roof it is highly improbable that all the six large uprights across the building were taken up to the truss beams. Two of them only would be required for the purpose. The use of six uprights suggests that the design was intended to carry the weight of an upper floor.

If the second cross in from each wall carried the truss beams and the others an upper floor, this would give a central hall over 45' 0" wide and 100' 0" long in each half of the building, with side aisles 28' 0" wide.

The lower part of this building would not be wasted and most probably had a boarded floor. The evidence for this is the sharp edges to the cross excavations which showed no signs of wear. The natural chalk in this area is rather soft and erodes and shatters underfoot very easily. No shattered chalk was apparent in the cross fillings, which suggests that a boarded lower floor was in use.

An upper floor suggests stairs at the entrances. These have not yet been found and more work has to be carried out in these areas.

No sign of masonry or nails was found.

Dating the Building.

The building cuts out a Roman kiln, sealed by coins of the 3rd century, and a hearth of the 3rd century. Within the fill of the crosses were coins of the 4th century, including two small minims.

The lack of pottery in the structure makes a date within the Romano-British period very improbable and also allows us to conjecture that it is not later than the 11th century.

We cannot entirely dismiss the suggestion that the site is connected with the Dominican Friary, founded in 1253, whose buildings stood between it and the Watling Street. Medieval pottery, however, which is abundant on the Friary site and frequent in the topsoil above the building under discussion, is almost entirely absent from the filling of the crosses or the wall trenches.

If we accept a monastic date, then we have to dismiss the curtain wall with its human burials as having no connection with the other features found.