

# Recent Excavations at the Grove Trading Estate, Dorchester 1987

The Wyvern Marlborough Site  
(Roman Cemetery Interim Report)



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RECENT EXCAVATIONS AT THE GROVE TRADING ESTATE, DORCHESTER 1987:  
THE WYVERN MARLBOROUGH SITE.

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#### Introduction

Proposals for development on part of the site of the extensive Late Roman cemetery at Poundbury (SY68559112) led to further rescue excavations on the area. Although the archaeology had been examined on a very large scale between 1964 and 1980 by Christopher Sparey Green, a number of burials remained unexcavated and these were the subject of the 1987 work. This report is a summary of the excavation results only; it is proposed that the detailed results will be incorporated within the volume on the whole of the cemetery which is in preparation by the Trust for Wessex Archaeology.

The area designated for development by Wyvern Marlborough Ltd covers the western half of Site E of the previous archaeological work (Green 1987, and TWA in prep.), as well as a narrow band of mostly unexplored land immediately to the north of that site (Fig. 1). The known archaeological remains included not only the large Late Roman cemetery but also a palimpsest of settlement features dating from the Neolithic to the post-Roman periods (c. 2500 BC to AD 600+). The work in 1987 concentrated solely on the cemetery remains, and only the burials that were in immediate danger of destruction from the development were excavated. Excavations centred on two main areas, one in the north-west of the development containing a group of 22 unexamined graves and the other in the south containing five unexcavated graves (Fig. 1, detailed

plans Figs. 2 and 3). Only one grave, 1242 on the eastern edge of the north-western group, was not located.

The remnant topsoil and accrued debris were removed by machine; all graves were then excavated using trowels. The two intersecting graves (1198 and 1199) were sectioned, the remainder dug in plan. Coffin nails were recorded three-dimensionally in order to maximise potential information on coffin construction. Soil samples were collected for lead analysis. Grave numbers allocated during Mr Sparey Green's excavations were retained, but grave fills and skeletons were recorded using the Trust's sequential context number system.

#### The Graves

The graves showed clearly in the chalk bedrock and were easily distinguishable from those excavated previously by the difference in the fills. All graves were sub-rectangular in plan, with steep sides and flat bases, except 1364 which was more rounded in plan and profile. They ranged in length from 0.95 to 2.27m, and in width from 0.48 to 0.93m. Depths varied from 0.12 to 1.2m, and the graves had apparently been levelled into the hillside. The original level of the natural chalk has been considerably reduced over the excavated area, as shown by graves 1197 and 1199 which extended into the woodland to the west. The reduction is presumably the result of the initial machine-clearance for the earlier excavations and subsequent weathering over the past 10 years. The graves at the north end of the site were generally shallower than those at the south, although grave 624 at the south end was also very slight in depth. There was no evidence for any form of gravestone or marker post.

The graves were filled with homogeneous grey-brown loam and mixed sub-angular chalk rubble. The deeper fills contained more semi-vacuous chalk rubble near the base with compacted clay-loam near the surface. Collapsed coffins were often marked by areas of loose chalky and flint rubble surrounded by iron nails. Three adjacent shallow graves (1202, 1203 and 1206) had partial linings of flints and building stone, surrounding the wooden coffins, which could suggest some form of cist burial, which Mr Sparey Green associates with the final phases of the cemetery (1982, 64). All the graves contained single burials apart from 1192, which contained two adult burials, one on top of the other (see below).

#### The Coffins

All the inhumations were buried in wooden coffins. In some cases, such as in graves 1185 and 1197, the coffin outline was preserved as a soil mark, and graves 1194 and 1230 also produced fragments of apparently dessicated wood. More usually, however, the evidence for wooden coffins was in the form of iron nails which frequently had mineralised wood adhering to them. The nails fall into two basic types, round-headed and diamond-headed, already well-documented from the Poundbury cemetery (Mills in preparation). The large diamond-headed nails in graves 1185, 1199 and 1230, together with the well-defined shadows, indicate the presence of at least some substantial coffins. Grave 1192 also produced an iron strap fitting from the coffin. The detailed plotting of the position of the nails within the graves and further study of the mineralised wood, identification of type and orientation of the grain for example, will

enable the construction techniques to be analysed. This work has not yet been carried out.

The coffin in grave 964 (Fig. 3) appeared to have been packed with gypsum, a rite observed not infrequently in the previous excavations.

### The Inhumations

The 26 skeletons recovered were all well-preserved except for those in graves 964 and 1194. The skeleton in grave 1340 was incomplete owing to disturbance from tree roots and that in grave 251 was unfortunately damaged by the machine-cleaning, as the grave was shallower than anticipated. Grave 250, which was extremely shallow, contained no skeleton, and was possibly robbed in antiquity.

Most of the burials were those of adults, though an infant was buried in grave 624 and a child in grave 1150. Generally the burials were extended with heads to the west and arms laid by the sides or across the pelvis. The burial in grave 1364, however, was laid in a sleeping position with head to the east, the hands together in front of the face and the legs drawn up towards the chest. Burials of this type form a very small proportion of the Late Roman ones at Poundbury. Two other burials deserve mention: the skeleton in grave 1201 was visibly foreshortened apparently because the body had been forced into a coffin which was too small for it; and grave 1192 contained two burials, both adults. The legs of the upper skeleton had been amputated above the knees, the arms, clavicles and scapulae were absent and the skull may have been severed from the body at the third vertebra. The lower skeleton appeared to be intact.

Detailed examination of the skeletal material has not yet been carried out, but will clarify the observations on the upper burial in grave 1192, as well as providing information on age, sex, nutrition and disease for the population.

#### Gravegoods and Other Finds

Most of the burials were unaccompanied by gravegoods, although a double-sided bone comb decorated with an incised ring-and-dot motif was found near the skull of the burial in grave 1194, together with an iron pin at the throat (Fig. 2); and a coin had been placed in the mouth of the burial in grave 1197. Approximately 8% of the burials in the Late Roman cemetery excavated by Mr Sparey Green were accompanied by goods, including combs and coins, so the finds in 1987 were not unusual.

A small number of finds were recovered from the fills of the graves, including residual prehistoric flint flakes, fragments of Late Iron Age and Roman pottery and animal bone from the earlier settlements on the site. These finds have been listed in the site archive.

#### References

- Green, C.J. Sparey, 1982, 'The Cemetery of a Romano-British Community at Poundbury, Dorchester, Dorset', in Pearce, S.M., The Early Church in Western Britain and Ireland, Brit. Archaeol. Rept. 102 (Oxford).

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preparation  
TWA in preparation, Excavations at Poundbury 1964-1980  
Volume II: The Cemeteries.

### Acknowledgements

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# Summary of Grave and Burial Data

Grave	Dimensions (L x W x D m)	Alignment (east of north)	Wood Coffin	Head At	Approx. Age.
251	1.6, 0.55, 0.28.	99'	*	West	Adult
624	0.95, 0.48, 0.12.	110'	*	West	Infant
627	2, 0.64, 1.2.	113'	*	West	Adult
634	2.4, 0.64, 0.6.	113'	*	West	Adult
964	2.15, 0.8, 0.6.	118'	*	West	Adult
965	2.05, 0.85, 0.6.	117'	*	West	Adult
1136	2.05, 0.83, 0.24.	106'	*	West	Adult
1150	1.9, 0.7, 0.21.	93'	*	West	Child
1185	2.45, 0.75, 0.51.	107'	*	West	Adult
1186	2, 0.64, 0.33.	100'	*	West	Adult
1192	2.35, 0.7, 0.31.	104'	*	West	2 Adults
1194	2.05, 0.8, 0.51.	107'	*	West	Adult
1195	2.25, 0.68, 0.81	104'	*	West	Adult
1196	2.3, 0.69, 0.75.	98'	*	West	Adult
1197	2.25, 0.68, 0.37.	112'	*	West	Adult
1198	2.18, 0.68, 0.41.	109'	*	West	Adult
1199	2.41, 0.8, 0.78.	113'	*	West	Adult
1201	1.83, 0.52, 0.3.	107'	*	West	Adult
1202	2.15, 0.75, 0.17.	110'	*	West	Adult
1203	2, 0.72, 0.37.	115'	*	West	Adult
1204	1.7, 0.57, 0.38.	120'	*	West	Adult
1206	2.1, 0.7, 0.31.	110'	*	West	Adult
1230	2.47, 0.93, 0.24.	110'	*	West	Adult
1340	1.78, 0.75, 0.18.	107'	No	West	Adult
1364	2, ?, 0.35.	110'	*	East	Adult

**Figures 1-3.**

# Wyvern Marlborough, Poundbury 1987

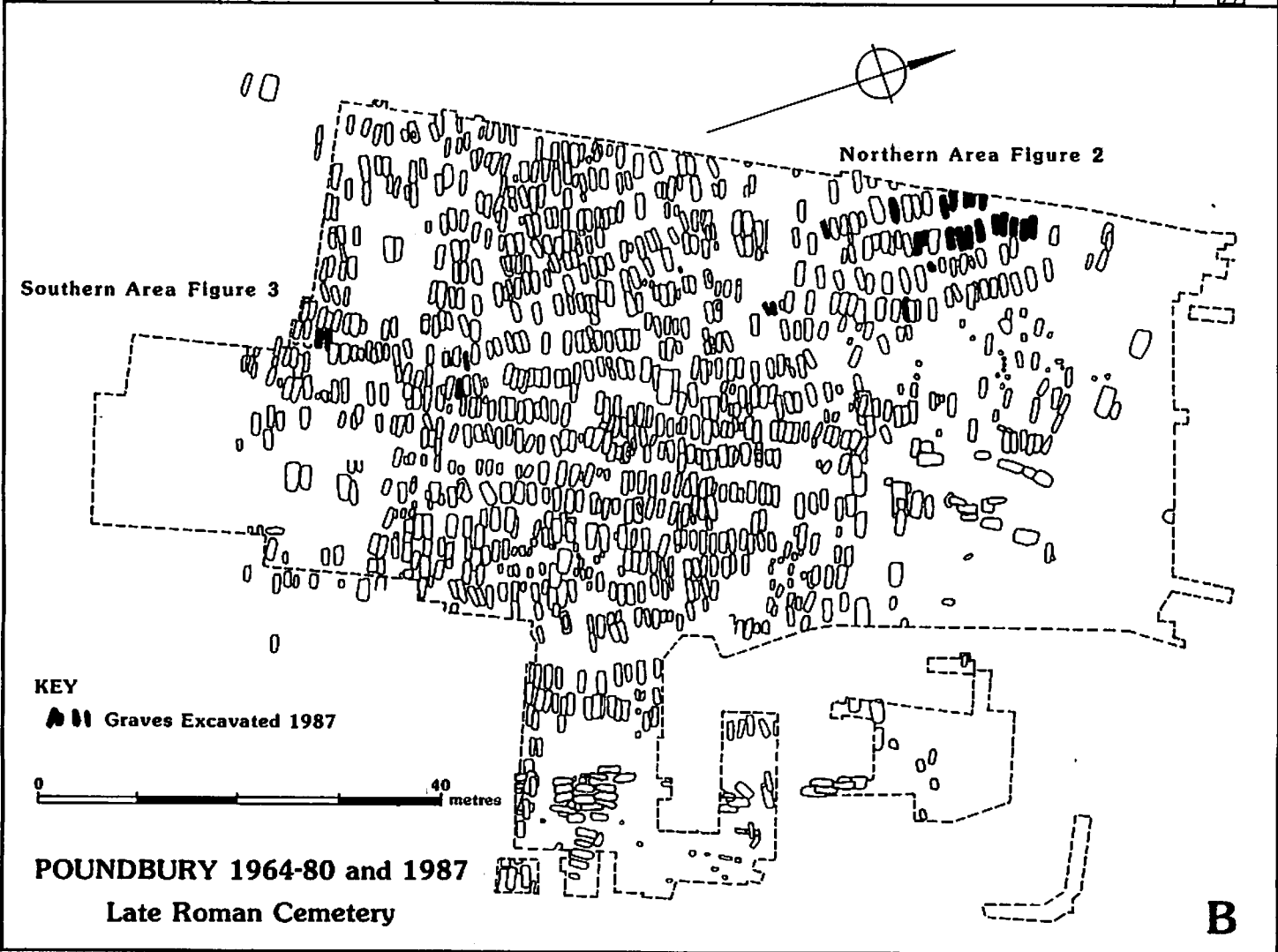
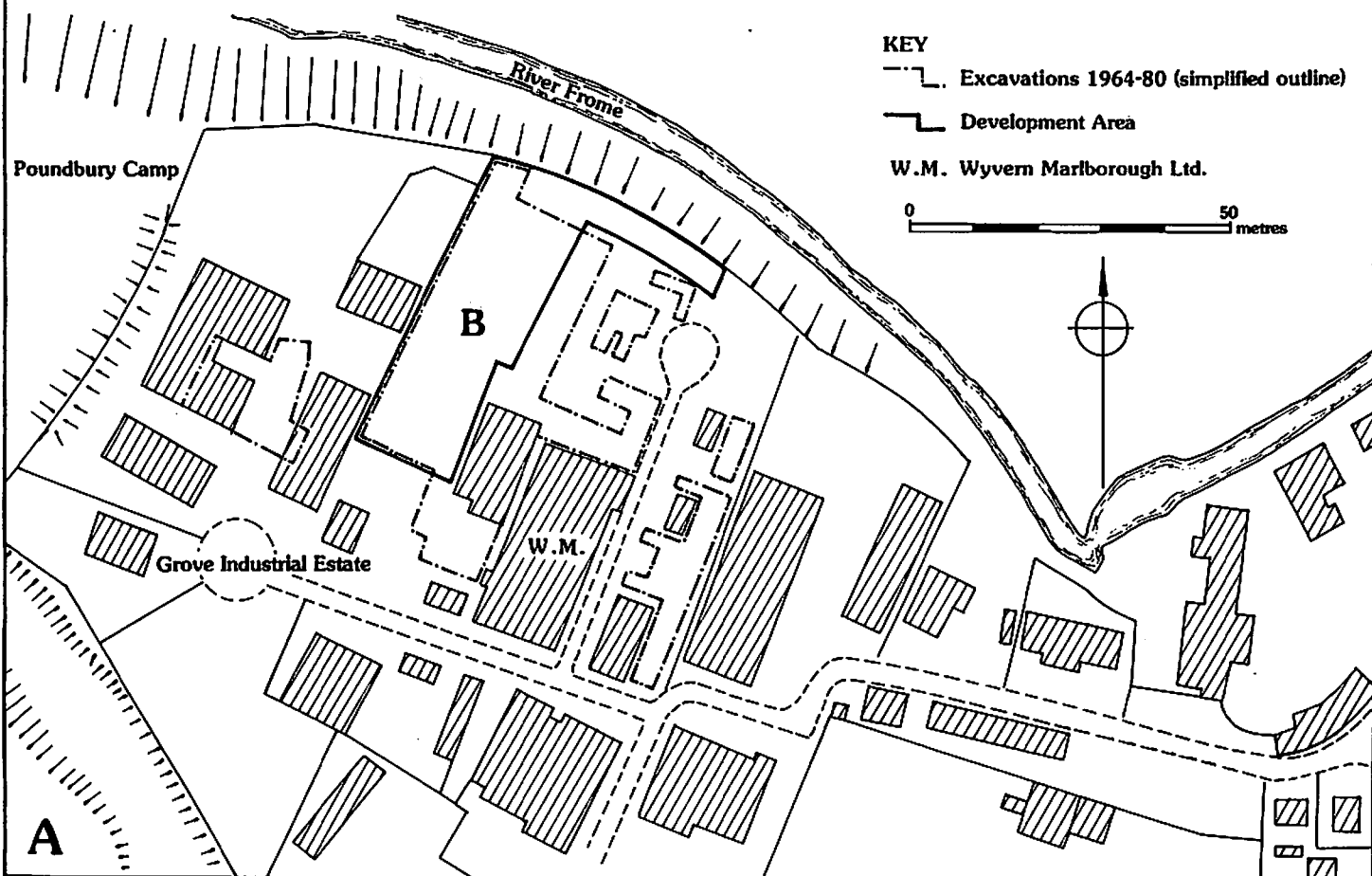
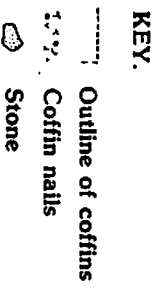


Figure 1- Location.

**Poundbury 1987.**



**Figure 2- The Northern Area.**

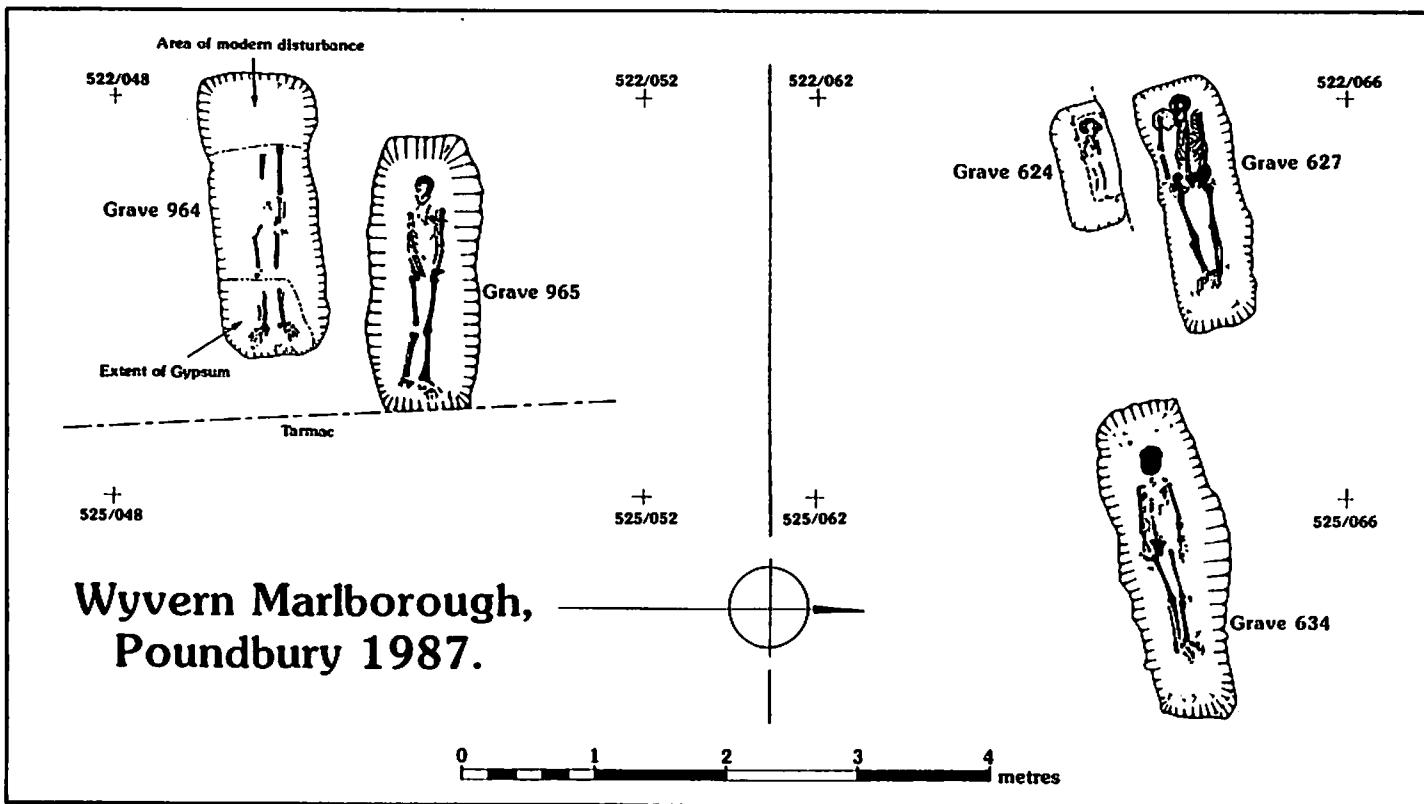


Figure 3- The Southern Area.



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