

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF 'THE OLD CHURCHYARD', OLNEY

MARK COLLARD

An area at the north end of the town of Olney is known as 'The Old Churchyard' and human skeletons have been found on several occasions on the site. The evidence is discussed in light of an evaluation excavation of part of the area which produced a scatter of medieval pottery but no features of archaeological significance.

The parish church of St Peter and St Paul lies at the south end of the town of Olney close to the bridge over the River Ouse. At the opposite end of the town, where the High Street branches, is a triangular island between the Wellingborough and Yardley roads (Fig. 2), which has been known locally for many years as 'The Old Churchyard', and identified as the original site of the parish church (Storer 1860, 190; Wright 1893, 21; Osborn 1976, 19). This is not a recent tradition. A deed of the Castle Inn, which lies at the south end of the island, refers to a 'parcell of ground at the North end of the said towne [Olney] adjoining southward on the ground lying next the old Church Yard' in 1728 and, in 1731, the 'parcell of ground commonly called or known by the name of the old Churchyard' (deeds in possession of Manns Brewery, Northampton).

Until the recent past a large, ancient elm, known as 'The Churchyard Elm' and reputedly 600 years old, stood on the north-east corner of the triangle (Fig. 3).

The identification of this site as the Old Churchyard was reinforced in the nineteenth century: 'Human bones have been discovered here in great quantities, and, at least on one occasion, taken to the present Church-yard and there re-interred' (Storer 1860, 190-1). Examination of the Gough manuscripts provides further evidence. The skeletons found were 'lying east and west' (Gough MSS 33, 30), and a 'Mr. W. Soul says that many bones were dug up

when a house was built there, and that they were taken to Olney churchyard.' Further, complete skeletons were discovered during the construction of the Feoffee cottages in 1881 (Wright 1893, 23; Fig. 3) and in more recent years, during the laying of services at the rear of the cottages, further skeletons have been uncovered behind numbers 1, 3 and 5 and reburied (D. C. Mynard, G. Osborn, W. Colson, K. Field, pers. comm.).

The tradition that these bones were part of a churchyard has been reinforced by several pieces of circumstantial evidence. It is known that there certainly was a church in Olney in 1273 (VCH, 436), and it is likely that one existed well before that date. A beam was reputedly found during repairs to the church c. 1800 which was inscribed: 'This beam was laid by Ben Marriot and Michael Hinde, churchwardens, July 17th, 1718, and 700 years from its first building (1018),' (Osborn 1976, 19). The present church contains no work earlier than c. 1330 (RCHM, 228) and this has been adduced to prove that this building was a new foundation (VCH, 436).

There may, thus, have been an earlier church elsewhere, perhaps in 'The Old Churchyard'. A local legend tells that the present church was a replacement of a church that had fallen into disrepair. The site chosen, according to the legend, was a field called the Lordship Close near the river. Work began, and the foundations were laid. However, when the workmen

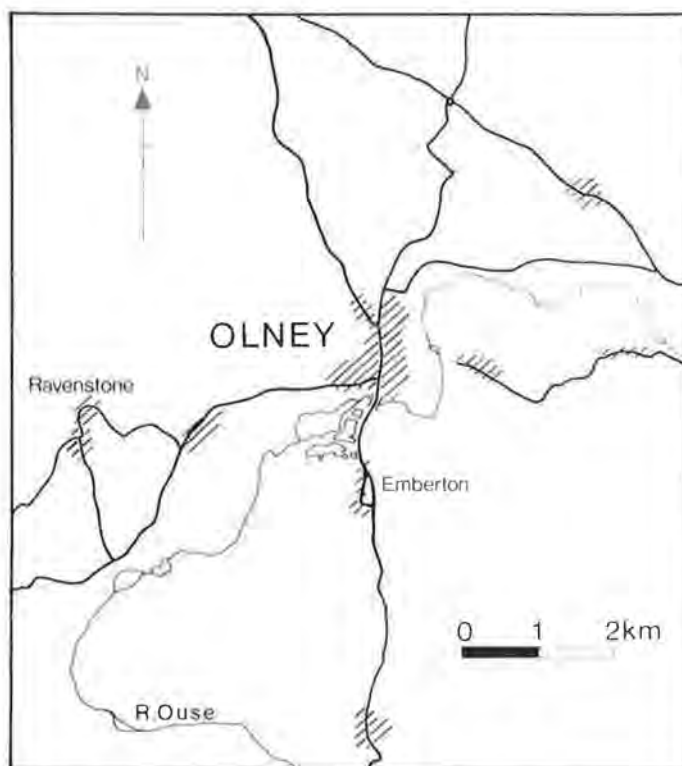


Fig. 1. Location of the town of Olney.

returned the following day they found the stones shifted into the adjoining field. They returned the stones to their original position, but the transportation was repeated; this time, however, the stones had been laid with skill and precision. It was decided it was the work of the Devil or divine guidance and the church was accordingly built on its present site (Wright 1893, 23-4). This type of legend occurs in many parts of the country (as Gough himself admitted, MSS 33, 33), and the details of the story are not relevant. However the notion of the relocation of the church is firmly placed in local folklore, and has passed into more reputable sources.

Other factors which have contributed to the tradition of the 'Old Churchyard' include the existence of a spring called 'Chrysten' or 'Christian Well' which is probably the site of the modern pond (Fig. 3) in the field to the north of the town, called Home Close. The earliest

reference to the well is 1556 (VCH, 430). Further, there was a belief that this was the heart of the old town of Olney because of the discovery of 'Roads and Foundations' to the north (Gough MSS, 33, 29).

An application to develop Dartmouth Road Farm for housing (Fig. 3) gave an opportunity to investigate the truth of the tales of the 'Old Churchyard'. An evaluation excavation, funded by Trencherwood Homes plc, was conducted by Buckinghamshire County Museum under the direction of the writer in September and October 1988. The area investigated lay in open space in the southern part of the farm complex. Although constrained somewhat by standing buildings, an area of 125 m² was excavated (marked 1988 on Fig. 3), close to the northernmost Feoffee cottage. Despite high expectations the results were disappointing. The ground was largely undisturbed except for a number of post-holes, many of them undoubt-



Plate XXIV. Olney from the air. The 'Old Churchyard' site is near the apex of the triangle formed by the two roads.

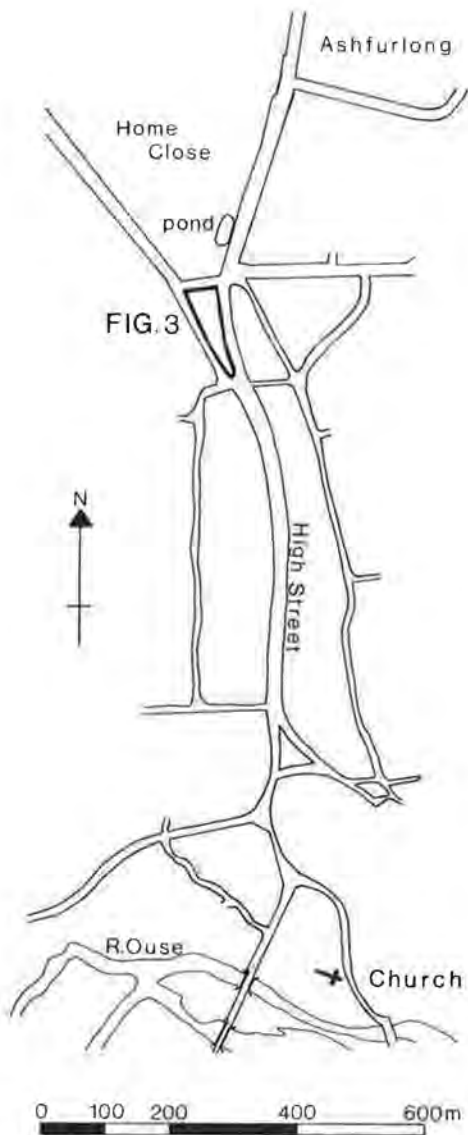


Fig. 2. The town of Olney.

edly modern in origin, associated with previous farm activity. 62 sherds of medieval pottery were recovered from the topsoil and from a handful of features, all similar in fabric and form to the 'Developed St Neots Wares' found at Olney Hyde ('A' Ware) and dated there from the mid twelfth to the late thirteenth century (Mynard 1984). No trace of human skeletal material or substantial structures were found.

Although disappointing in its outcome, the excavation did have a positive result—it established that the 'cemetery' which lies beneath the Feoffee cottages did not extend much, if at all, beyond the wall dividing the cottages from the farm.

That there were human skeletons on the site is indisputable. The question remains, to what do these skeletons relate? The identification of the site as 'The Old Churchyard' may be best seen as the rationalization of the discovery of human bones. The tradition of the moving church has become inexorably linked to this notion, if, indeed, the church was ever in another location. The belief that this, the Dartmouth Road area, was the heart of the old town is apparently based on the discovery of the road and foundations lying to the north of the present town. However, it seems most likely that these were parts of the extensive Roman settlement centred on Ashfurlong (Bucks County Museum CAS 1128–34 inclusive) (Fig. 2).

A possible explanation is that the burials too were associated with the Roman settlement. Another possibility is that they may well be Late Saxon or medieval. (It seems certain there was a nucleated settlement at Olney by or soon after 979 (Baines 1979, 181), although this is as yet unproven archaeologically) and that this area was the site of the original church of Olney. The question remains unanswered, with the facts still obscured by the half-truths and fictions of local folklore. The problems faced are succinctly described by William Cowper, Olney's poet, in his 'Progress of Error'.

... Points to inscriptions, wheresoe'er they tread,
Such as being legible were never read,
But being cankered now and quite worn out
Craze antiquarian brains with endless doubt.

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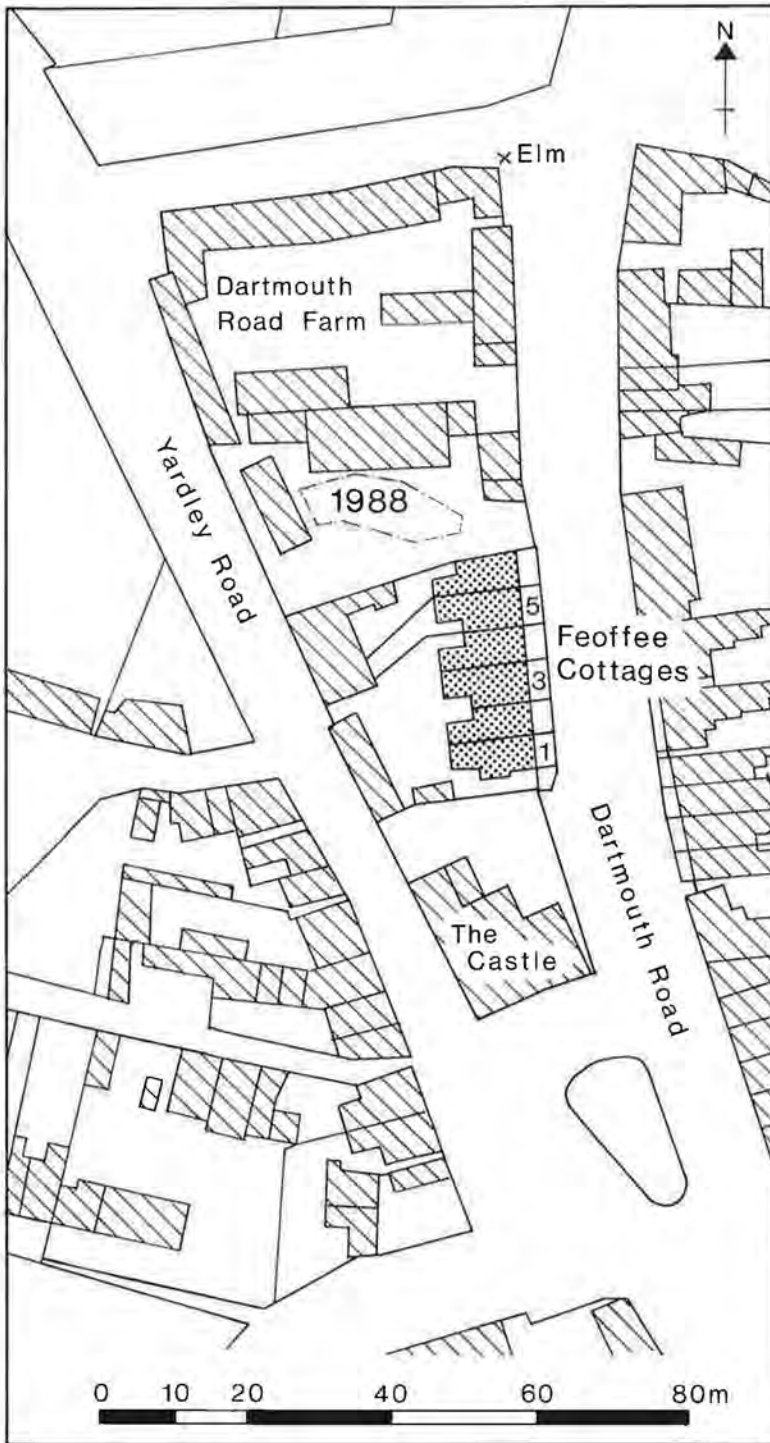


Fig. 3. Location of 1988 excavation and buildings mentioned in the text.

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