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The ‘Lost’ Church of Bix Gibwyn: The Human Bone

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Contents

Officers and Committee of the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society	v
List of Colour Plates	vi
List of Abbreviations	vii
List of Contributors	viii
ARTICLES	
Romano-British Trackways in the Upper Thames Valley PAUL BOOTH	1
The ‘Lost’ Church of Bix Gibwyn STEPHEN MILESON and DAVID NICHOLLS	15
A City Parish in the English Civil War: St Aldate’s, Oxford, 1642–6 ROSEMARY KELLY	39
Henley’s Major Inns in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries BARBARA ALLISON	55
The Restoration of Berrick Salome Church LIAM TILLER	81
The Rhodes Building at Oriel, 1904–2011: Dynamite or Designate? EDWARD IMPEY	95
REPORTS	
Excavations at Tubney Wood Quarry, 2001–9 ANDREW SIMMONDS, HUGO ANDERSON-WHYMARK, and ANDREW NORTON	105
Prehistoric, Romano-British, and Anglo-Saxon Activity at Whitelands Farm, Bicester JON MARTIN	173
Excavations South of St Andrew’s Church, Letcombe Regis: Prehistoric, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and Saxo-Norman Activity DAVID GILBERT	241
NOTES	
Archaeological Work in Oxford, 2010 DAVID RADFORD	259
Archaeological Work in Oxfordshire, 2010 HUGH CODDINGTON and RICHARD ORAM	261
The Portable Antiquities Scheme in Oxfordshire, 2010 ANNI BYARD	264
A Roman Lead ‘Tank’ from Wigginton, North Oxfordshire PAUL BOOTH, ESTHER CAMERON, and BELINDA CRERAR	266

Possible Early Christian Enclosure and Deserted Medieval Settlement at Prescote, near Cropredy	273
STEPHEN WASS and REBECCA DEALTRY	
Flint House and Flint Cottage, Wallingford	280
DAVID E. PEDGLEY, with DAVID CLARK	
REVIEWS	
Kate Tiller and Giles Darkes (eds.), <i>An Historical Atlas of Oxfordshire</i>	287
MICHAEL HAVINDEN	
Andrew Hutt, Paul Goodenough, and Valerine Pyne, <i>Living in the Iron Age in and around Berkshire</i>	289
ALEX LANG	
Warwick Rodwell, <i>Dorchester Abbey, Oxfordshire: The Archaeology and Architecture of a Cathedral, Monastery and Parish Church</i>	290
JON CANNON	
Philip Page, Kate Atherton, and Alan Hardy with numerous other contributors, <i>Barentin's Manor: Excavations of the Moated Manor at Harding's Field, Chalgrove, Oxfordshire, 1976–9</i>	292
STEPHEN MILESON	
John Fox, <i>The King's Smuggler: Jane Whorwood, Secret Agent to Charles I</i>	294
FIONA YOUNGMAN	
John Banbury, Robert Edwards, and Elizabeth Poskitt (eds.), <i>Woodstock and the Royal Park: Nine Hundred Years of History</i> ; Patricia D. Crutch, <i>Close Families of Old Woodstock: The Story of Spittle House Close 1566–2000</i>	295
MARY HODGES	
Simon Townsend and Jeremy Gibson, <i>Banbury Past through Artists' Eyes</i>	296
JOHN STEANE	
Alan Rosevear, <i>Turnpike Roads to Banbury</i>	297
DORIAN GERHOLD	
Geoffrey Tyack, Simon Bradley, and Nikolaus Pevsner, <i>Berkshire</i>	298
WILLIAM WHYTE	
J.R.L. Allen, <i>Late Churches and Chapels in Berkshire: A Geological Perspective from the Late Eighteenth Century to the First World War</i>	299
DAVID CLARK	
Adam Sisman, <i>Hugh Trevor-Roper: The Biography</i>	301
PHILIP WALLER	
Marilyn Yurdan, <i>Oxfordshire Graves and Gravestones</i>	303
CARL BOARDMAN	
INDEX	305

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Colour Plates

- Plate 1. The narrow chancel arch and flanking niches of Bix Brand church in Bix Bottom (2011).
Photograph by Stephen Milesen. [Milesen and Nicholls, p. 17]
- Plate 2. Modern cottages at Old Chapel in Bix Bottom, looking south-east (2007). Photograph by Stephen Milesen. [Milesen and Nicholls, p. 19]
- Plate 3. The 2010 Keeper's Cottage excavation, looking south. Photograph by Stephen Milesen.
[Milesen and Nicholls, p. 22]
- Plate 4. The White Hart Inn, Henley. Photograph by author. [Allison, p. 71]
- Plate 5. Berrick Salome church tower, looking east. Photograph by author. [Tiller, p. 89]
- Plate 6. The interior of Berrick church, looking down from the gallery. Photograph by author.
[Tiller, p. 94]
- Plate 7. The Rhodes Building from the High Street. Photograph by Marcus Beale Architects.
[Impey, p. 95]
- Plate 8. Gold foil from Tubney Bronze-Age cremation burial 5353. [Simmonds p. 110]
- Plate 9. View of funerary enclosures 1677 and 1678, facing south-east. [Simmonds p. 117]
- Plate 10. Vaulted stone cellar discovered during recent work at The Queen's College, Oxford.
Photograph by Mark Vice, BGS Architects. [Radford, p. 259]
- Plate 11. View of the rectangular entrance chamber at the southern end of the Queen's cellar.
Photograph by Mark Vice, BGS Architects. [Radford, p. 259]
- Plate 12. Flint House (left) and Flint Cottage (right), 52 and 53 High Street, Wallingford.
Photograph by author. [Pedgley, p. 280]

Abbreviations

Abbreviated titles are used in each article after the first full citation. In addition, the following abbreviations are used throughout the volume:

BAR	British Archaeological Reports (Oxford, 1974–)
BAR BS	British Archaeological Reports, British Series
BAR IS	British Archaeological Reports, International Series
BL	British Library, London
Bodl.	Bodleian Library, Oxford
BRO	Berkshire Record Office
CBA	Council for British Archaeology
CBM	ceramic building material
EPE	England's Past for Everyone
EVE	estimated vessel equivalent
Fig./Figs.	figure/figures
f./ff.	folio/folios
HER	Historic Environment Record
HRO	Hertfordshire Record Office
IFA	Institute of Field Archaeologists
LRO	Lincolnshire Record Office
LRS	Lincoln Record Society
MedArch	<i>Medieval Archaeology</i> (London, 1958–)
MS	manuscript
n.	note
n.d.	no date
ns	new series
OBR	Oxfordshire Buildings Record
OCA	Oriel College Archives, Oxford
OD	Ordnance Datum
ODNB	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> (Oxford, 2004)
OHC	Oxfordshire History Centre (formerly Oxfordshire Record Office)
OHS	Oxford Historical Society
ORS	Oxfordshire Record Society
OS	Ordnance Survey
os	old/original series
OXCMS	Oxfordshire County Museums Service
r.	recto
RCHME	Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England)
SMidLA	<i>South Midlands Archaeology</i> (Oxford, 1983–) [formerly CBA Group 9 Newsletter]
SOAG	South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group
TNA: PRO	The National Archives, Public Record Office, Kew
TS	typescript
TVAS	Thames Valley Archaeological Services
TWHAS	The Wallingford Historical and Archaeological Society
v.	verso
VCH	<i>Victoria History of the Counties of England</i> (London, 1900–) [<i>Victoria County History</i>]
vol.	Volume
WAM	<i>Wiltshire Archaeology and Natural History Magazine</i>
WRO	Wiltshire Record Office

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The ‘Lost’ Church of Bix Gibwyn

STEPHEN MILESON and DAVID NICHOLLS

with contributions by TIMOTHY ASTIN, MATTHEW BERRY, PAUL BOOTH,
MAUREEN MELLOR, and ANNA WILLIAMS

SUMMARY

Recent research for the Victoria County History (VCH) highlighted the presence of a ‘lost’ medieval church in Bix, a Chilterns parish north-west of Henley-on-Thames. The building, formerly the parish church of Bix Gibwyn, was abandoned in the late sixteenth or seventeenth century and has left no standing remains. Archaeological investigation by the South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group (SOAG) and Reading University has confirmed its location in a close called ‘Old Chapel’ in Bix Bottom, in the north of the parish. The rediscovery of the site – which contains the foundations of a hitherto unknown Romano-British stone building – sheds new light on long-term changes in local communications, settlement, and economic conditions.

In the Middle Ages Bix Gibwyn church was a focus of religious and social life for a small rural community in the south Oxfordshire Chilterns. After the Reformation it was neglected, demolished, and finally all but forgotten. Its location has been a matter of speculation for over a hundred years,¹ but in 2007–10 its churchyard was identified through a combination of historical research and archaeological fieldwork. Confirmation of the church’s location in the remote Bix Bottom valley provides important evidence about the medieval settlement pattern in Bix, which was very different from the modern one, and offers an opportunity to reassess the development of settlement in the southern Chilterns more generally. The archaeological findings also supply new evidence about Roman activity in the area.

BIX AND ITS CHURCHES

Bix is a sparsely populated rural parish on the dip slope of the Chiltern hills in south-east Oxfordshire (Fig. 1).² It occupies an area of steep valleys, small fields, and extensive beech woods. Much of the parish remains inaccessible and remote, despite its proximity to Henley and the presence of a main road (the A4130) in the south. Limited modern development has taken place around an established pattern of small common- and road-side hamlets and a scatter of isolated farmhouses.

In the Middle Ages most of Bix was divided between two small manors established by 1066, which by the thirteenth century were known (after their lords) as Bix Brand and Bix Gibwyn.³ These manors, and a one-hide estate in the south called Bromsden, were probably detached from the large royal estate of Benson in the tenth or early eleventh century. The manors, each of 2½ hides, may at first have formed a single unit, and Bix was usually regarded as a single vill during

¹ Murray’s *Handbook for Travellers in Oxfordshire* (London, 1894), p. 5; C.E. Prior, ‘Dedication of Churches’, OAS Report (1907 for 1906), p. 19; E.A.G. Lamborn, ‘The Churches of Bix’, *Oxoniensia*, 1 (1936), pp. 134–5; HER, PRN 2080 (notes by Ann Cottingham and Ruth Gibson).

² This article deals with the ancient parish of Bix, as shown on the tithe map of the 1840s (Fig. 3, below), rather than the modern civil parish of Bix and Assendon. For a fuller history of the parish see S.A. Milesom, ‘Bix’, in S. Townley (ed.), *VCH Oxfordshire, 16: Henley and Environs* (London, 2011), pp. 196–230. For the development of the area more generally see Milesom, ‘Henley and the Chilterns’, *ibid.* pp. 1–18.

³ M. Gelling, *Place-Names of Oxfordshire*, English Place-Name Society, 23–4 (Cambridge, 1953–4), vol. 1, pp. 66–7.

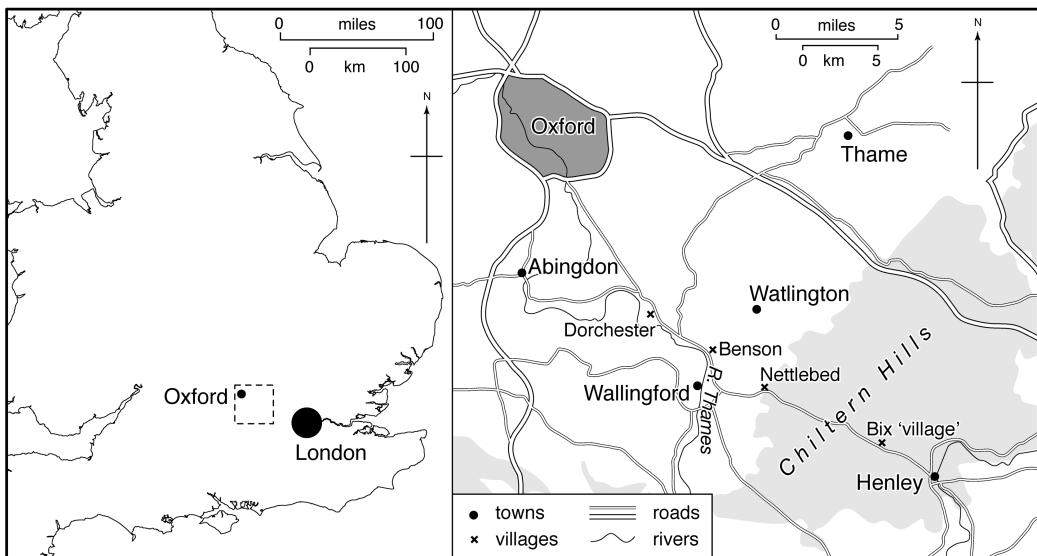


Fig. 1. The location of Bix.



Fig. 2. The ruins of Bix Brand church, looking south-west, 2009. This is a two-cell Romanesque structure with late-medieval and subsequent alterations. The nave may have been extended.

Photograph by Derek Kendal. © English Heritage. NMR, DP074742.

the Middle Ages. By c.1200 each manor had its own church and parish, though whether either church had been established before the Conquest is unknown. Architectural evidence suggests that the now ruined church of Bix Brand, also in Bix Bottom, dates from the early twelfth century (Fig. 2, and Plate 1).⁴ Bix Gibwyn church, located less than a kilometre to the south, at what was probably the northern end of Bix Gibwyn parish, was perhaps roughly contemporary.⁵

The precise internal boundaries of the two medieval parishes are unknown, but Bix Brand apparently lay to the north of Bix Gibwyn.⁶ In the later Middle Ages fields and woods belonging to Bix Brand manor appear to have been mainly in Bix Bottom and further north, while Bix Gibwyn manor included land in Bix Bottom and to the south and south-east (see Fig. 3).⁷ This distribution of territory may help explain the odd shape of the nineteenth-century parish, which perhaps resulted from the fact that the lands of Bix Brand stretched north-west up the dip slope from a centre near the church, and those of the more southerly Bix Gibwyn extended into the Nettlebed woods in the west.

The two churches had separate rectors in the early thirteenth century,⁸ both of whom may have resided, presumably ministering to the lords and tenants of the respective manors. However, for much of the Middle Ages Bix seems to have been served by a single incumbent. By the mid thirteenth century the churches were held in plurality.⁹ Dorchester abbey subsequently acquired the advowson of Bix Brand and appropriated the rectory in 1275,¹⁰ but no vicarage was instituted, and it is uncertain whether the abbey ever provided canons or chaplains to serve the cure.¹¹ Possibly the rectors of Bix Gibwyn (or their assistants) came to serve both churches: a single 'parson of Bix' was mentioned in 1403,¹² perhaps implying responsibility for both parishes. By 1489 the two parishes had been united,¹³ and thereafter until the early sixteenth century the abbots of Dorchester and the lords of Bix Gibwyn alternately presented rectors who, though nominally appointed to one or other church, actually served both.¹⁴

The formal amalgamation of the parishes probably represented the culmination of a long period of increasing interdependence, but it also reflected the changed demographic and economic circumstances of the late Middle Ages. The small population of about twenty households in 1086 (including at least eleven in Bix Brand) almost certainly increased in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but growth probably stalled in the difficult agrarian conditions of the early fourteenth century.¹⁵ Population was much reduced by subsequent bouts of plague – in the early fifteenth century there were less than ten households in Bix Brand and remaining tenants were amalgamating holdings and demolishing unwanted houses or converting them to agricultural use – and appears to have reached a low point in the mid fifteenth century.¹⁶ Bix Brand, though it was initially more

⁴ Personal observation, supported by information from John Blair and Paul Barnwell, 2010.

⁵ Bix Brand church was apparently dedicated to St Michael, which might suggest a superior and possibly earlier dedication than Bix Gibwyn's St James. However, the evidence for the dedications is late and slightly insecure: Milesen, 'Bix', p. 223.

⁶ J. Speed, *Oxon. Map* (1611).

⁷ PRO, SC2/197/11; *Catalogue of Ancient Deeds*, 6 vols. (London, 1890–1915), vol. 6, no. 6979; Stonor Estate Map (1725), photostat copy in Bodl. (E) c. 17:49 (91); ORO, Bix tithe award and map.

⁸ F.N. Davis (ed.), *Rotuli Roberti Grosseteste*, LRS, 11 (1914), pp. 450, 490.

⁹ F.N. Davis et al. (eds.), *Rotuli Ricardi Gravesend*, LRS, 20 (1925), pp. 217–18.

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 227–8.

¹¹ R.M.T. Hill (ed.), *The Rolls and Registers of Bishop Oliver Sutton*, V, LRS, 60 (1965), p. 134; LRO, Reg. III, f. 47; VCH *Oxon.* 2, pp. 87–8.

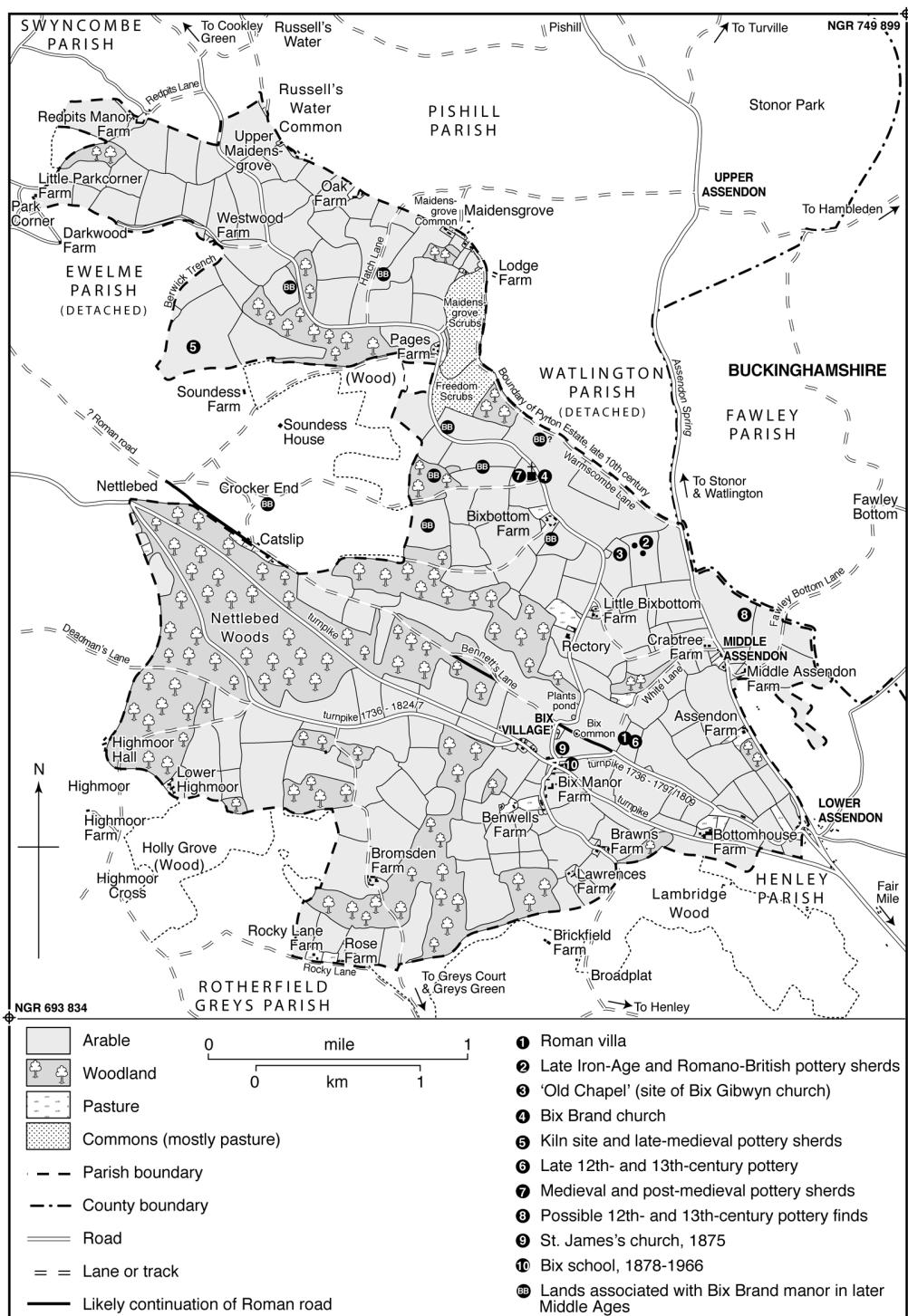
¹² PRO, SC2/197/11, m. 2.

¹³ *Calendar of Papal Registers* (London, 1893–1986), vol. 15, p. 252.

¹⁴ LRO, Reg. XXI, f. 82v.; Reg. XXII, f. 224; Reg. XXIII, f. 283; Reg. XXVII, ff. 176, 193.

¹⁵ Milesen, 'Bix', p. 210.

¹⁶ *Inquisitions and Assessments relating to Feudal Aids preserved in the Public Record Office*, 6 vols. (London, 1899–1920), vol. 4, p. 202; PRO, SC2/197/11.

Fig. 3. Bix parish, c.1840, reproduced from *VCH Oxon.* 16. Copyright University of London.

populous, was perhaps worse affected by out-migration and already in 1377 was described as a member of Bix Gibwyn vill.¹⁷

Fewer parishioners and a lower level of arable farming activity must have reduced tithe income, making it more difficult to find incumbents or even chaplains for what were poor and remote churches. This was an area of mixed farming, but there is no indication that pastoral husbandry expanded sufficiently to make up for lost cereal tithes.¹⁸ In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the church of Bix Brand was worth only 10 marks (£6 13s. 4d.) a year, and Bix Gibwyn a mere £2, ranking them amongst the poorest churches in Henley deanery.¹⁹ But by 1489 they were said to be worth even less – no more than 10 marks combined.²⁰ At the same time, while earlier lords had sometimes resided at Bix, the main landowners from the fourteenth century, the Stonors, lived at nearby Stonor, where they had their own chapel.²¹ In such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that one of the churches eventually fell out of use. Indeed, this was a common end result of what could be regarded with hindsight as over-ambitious provision of local churches.²²

Nevertheless, the total abandonment of the poorer (and possibly less well built) church of Bix Gibwyn took some considerable time. This presumably reflected a continuing division of local loyalties between the two churches and a slight recovery of population in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century.²³ Both churches seem to have remained in use in 1526,²⁴ and were still standing in 1553.²⁵ However, the sale of one of two chalices belonging to the churches in 1552 may indicate that only one was in active use thereafter;²⁶ certainly from the late sixteenth century only a single church of Bix (or sometimes Bix Brand) was mentioned.²⁷ Two churchyards were recorded in 1602,²⁸ but by the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century Bix Gibwyn church had been demolished (Fig. 4).²⁹

THE ‘OLD CHAPEL’ SITE

The former churchyard enclosure, labelled ‘Old Chapel’ on an estate map of 1725 (Fig. 5),³⁰ is located on a bend in the road in the middle part of Bix Bottom (at SU 73108645), a dry, winding, narrow valley cut into the dip slope. The site is on the valley bottom (78 m OD) and sits in a kind of natural amphitheatre formed by a curving ridge of higher ground to the east, which rises to 150 m further north (Plate 2). On the northern side of the enclosure a track leads uphill towards the neighbouring Assendon valley. The geology at this point comprises chalk overlain by a tongue of Younger Coombe gravel which peters out just to the north-west.³¹ The soil is a stony loam, and

¹⁷ PRO, E179/161/41, no. 27 (recording a total of forty-five individuals aged over fourteen).

¹⁸ Milesen, ‘Bix’, pp. 210–11.

¹⁹ W.E. Lunt (ed.), *The Valuation of Norwich* (Oxford, 1926), p. 304; J. Caley et al. (eds.), *Taxatio Ecclesiastica Anglie et Wallie...circa AD 1291*, Record Commission (London, 1801), p. 45; CCR, 1392–6, p. 466; *Feudal Aids*, vol. 6, p. 372.

²⁰ *Calendar of Papal Registers*, vol. 15, p. 252.

²¹ VCH Oxon. 8, pp. 142–7, 154; Milesen, ‘Bix’, pp. 206–7; E. Noble, *The World of The Stonors. A Gentry Society* (Woodbridge, 2009), pp. 52–3, 75.

²² Cf. R. Morris, *Churches in the Landscape* (London, 1989), pp. 332–35; J. Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 392–3, 417–22.

²³ PRO, E179/161/195, rot. 4 and d. (recording thirteen poor taxpayers in Bix Brand in 1524, and nine wealthier ones in Bix Gibwyn).

²⁴ PRO, PROB 11/22: John Josopp of Henley (bequests to the churches of Bix Brand and Bix Gibwyn).

²⁵ R. Graham (ed.), *Chantry Certificates and Edwardian Inventories of Church Goods*, ORS, 1 (1919), p. 96, mentioning four bells ‘within the steeples’.

²⁶ Ibid. pp. 96, 118.

²⁷ e.g. ORO, MSS Wills Oxon. 185, f. 432; 21/3/44; 10/2/91.

²⁸ ORO, Archd. Papers, Oxon. b 40, f. 51.

²⁹ R. Morden, *Oxon. Map* (1695); Stonor Estate Map (1725); J. Ecton, *Thesaurus Rerum Ecclesiasticarum* (London, 1754), p. 357.

³⁰ Stonor Estate Map (1725).

³¹ Geological Survey Map of England and Wales, 1:50,000 (solid and drift), sheet 254 (1980 edn).



Fig. 4. Left: J. Speed, *Oxon. Map* (1611), based on C. Saxton, *Oxon. Map* (1574), showing Bix Gibwyn a little south-east of Bix Brand. Right: R. Morden, *Oxon. Map* (1695), based on Speed, shows a church at Bix Brand, but not at 'Beckes', south of the Henley road. Reproduced from maps in possession of John Leighfield.



Fig. 5. Detail from Stonor Estate Map (1725), the two church sites marked with circles, Old Chapel to the left; reproduced, with permission, from Bodleian Library (E) c. 17:49 (91), photostat copy.

surrounding fields are mainly arable, with permanent grass and woodland on the higher slopes (Fig. 6).

The churchyard seems to have been similar in size and shape to that surrounding Bix Brand church, just under 700 m north,³² though its exact medieval boundary is unknown. Part of the rector's glebe,³³ it was used as 'arable' in the 1840s,³⁴ perhaps then as later providing the incumbent with potatoes.³⁵ In 1899 the close was bought by a Henley butcher, Joseph Broad, who built two

³² OS Map 1:2500, Oxon. L 16 and LIII 4 (1879 edn).

³³ ORO, MS. Oxf. Dioc. Papers c 448, f. 15 (1805).

³⁴ ORO, tithe award and map.

³⁵ Letter from H. Watts to E.A.G. Lamborn (1936), preserved in Bodl. Per. G.A. Oxon. 4^o 674.



Fig. 6. Aerial photograph of Bix Bottom, looking north, 2007. 'Old Chapel' and the ruined church of Bix Brand further north (top) are marked by circles. The farm complex south of the ruined church is Valley Farm, formerly called Bix Bottom Farm.

small cottages close to the road before 1903.³⁶ These cottages were demolished and replaced with two new houses in the centre of the site in the early 1970s.³⁷

A previous investigation of the churchyard appears to have taken place in c.1900 when a local man dug up part of the site and claimed to have found the remains of a building and 'any amount of human bones'.³⁸ However, no detailed record seems to have been made of this discovery. Human remains were also found during construction of the present houses.³⁹

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY AND EXCAVATION

SOAG's archaeological investigation of the site was led by David Nicholls and undertaken in stages from 2008–10 (see Fig. 7). It included resistivity surveys, a radar survey, and evaluation trenching. All excavation was carried out by hand. The lowest deposit encountered was a layer of orange natural gravel. Above this was a layer of loamy clay with flints. The highest deposit was a thick layer of loamy topsoil with small flints. The topsoil and subsoil layers were often similar in character and both were highly disturbed.

Keeper's Cottage

A 4 m by 1 m trench was excavated in the back garden of Keeper's Cottage in 2008 (Fig. 7). The earliest feature encountered was a layer of decayed lime mortar. A sondage revealed that

³⁶ HER, PRN 2080 (notes by Ruth Gibson); OS Map 1:2500, Oxon. LIII 4 (1913 edn).

³⁷ Information from Maj.-Gen. Lord Alvingham, 2007.

³⁸ Letter from Watts (1936).

³⁹ Local information.

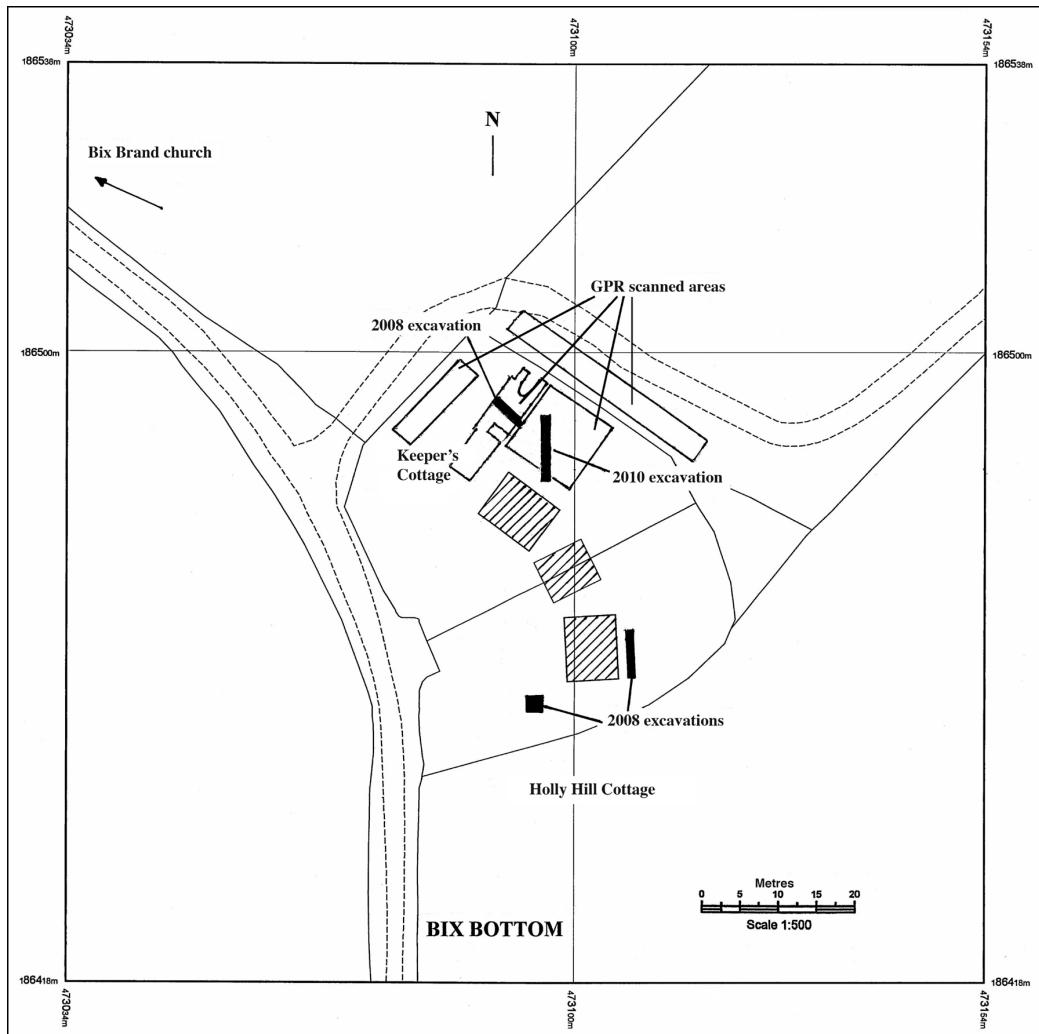


Fig. 7. Position of trenches and areas scanned by ground-penetrating radar.

this layer was c.0.4 m deep and overlaid the natural gravel (Fig. 8). Lying on top of this mortar were three partially exposed skeletons, arranged in west–east orientations. The burials had no associated grave goods and there was no indication of nails or other coffin fittings, though the feet of skeleton 1 were resting on a cleanly cut piece of Roman roof tile measuring 75 by 58 mm, most likely residual material from the site itself (Figs. 8 and 9).

Radiocarbon dating by the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit (ORAU) provided calibrated dates at the 95% confidence level (2 sigma) of 1172–1265 for skeleton 1 (with a 68.2% probability of burial between 1212 and 1258); 1053–1252 for skeleton 2 (with an 88.3% probability of burial between 1152 and 1226); and 1046–1224 for skeleton 3 (with a 76.6% probability of burial after 1148). Full information is given in Fig. 10.

An 8 m by 1 m trench was excavated a little to the south-east in 2010 (Fig. 7; Plate 3). This was positioned at right angles to the axis of a possible building identified by a radar survey carried out

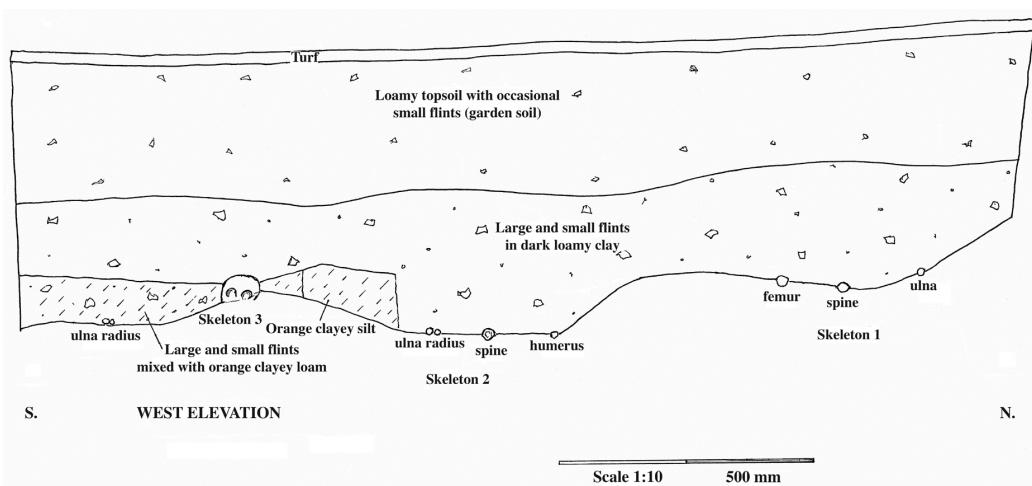
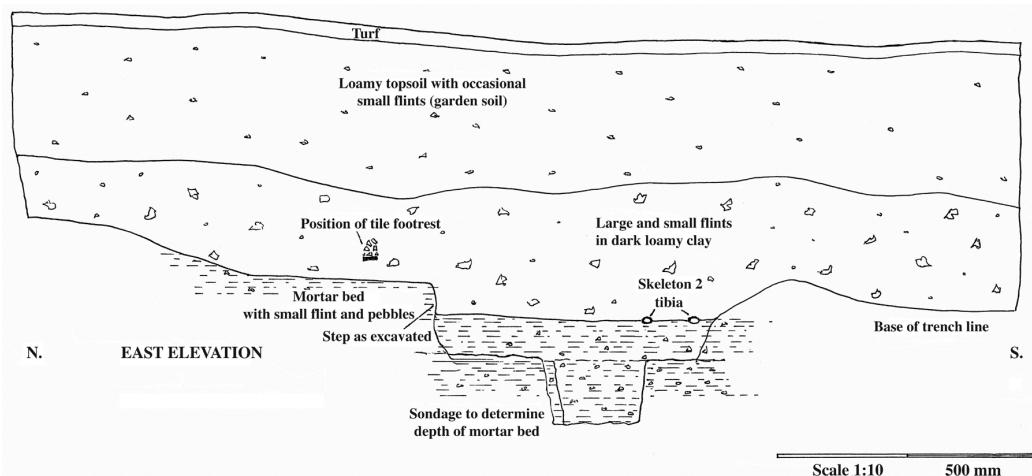


Fig. 8. Keeper's Cottage: 2008 trench sections (east and west elevations).

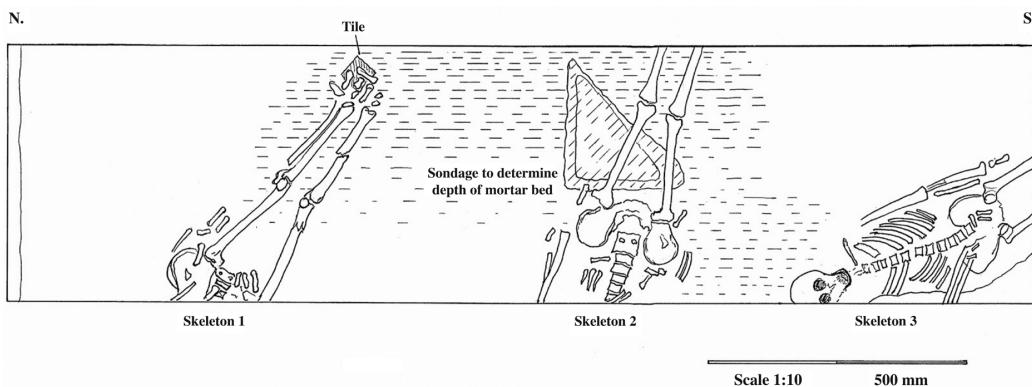


Fig. 9. Keeper's Cottage: 2008 trench plan.

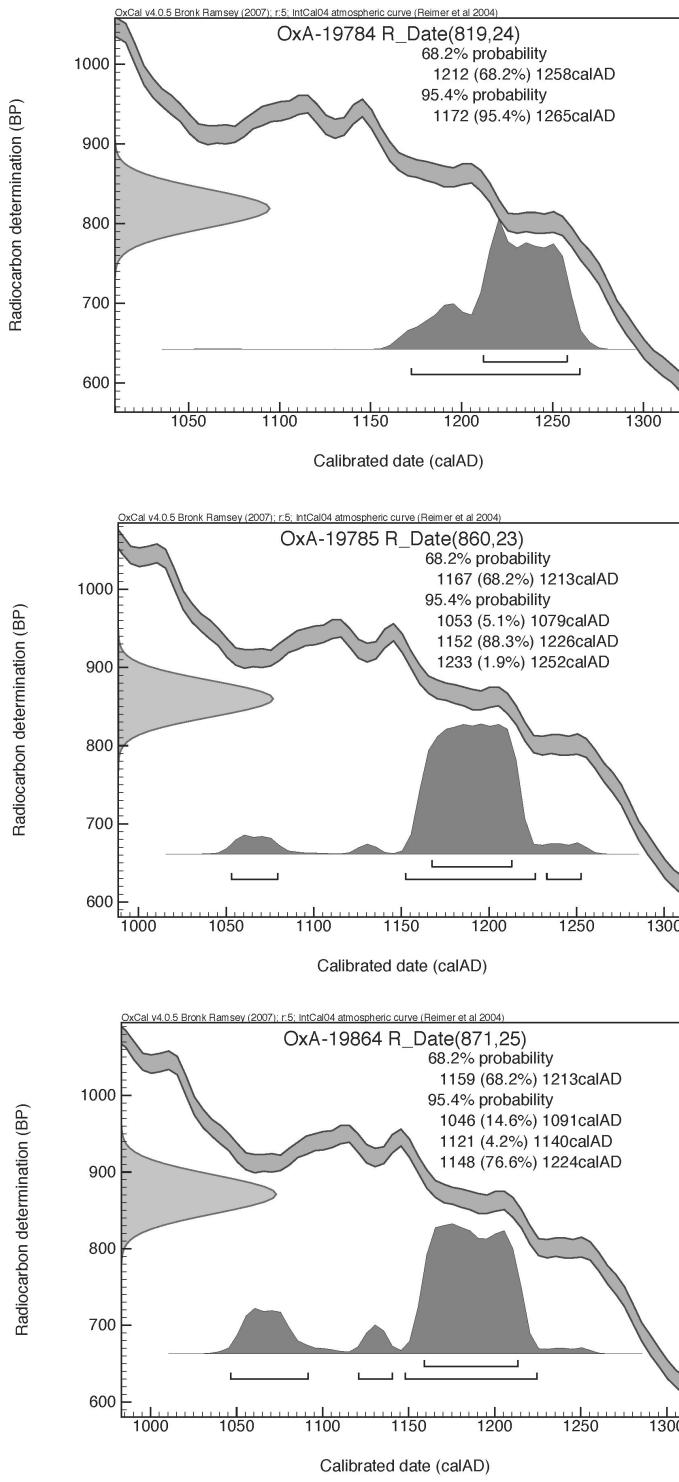


Fig. 10. Radiocarbon dating results for skeletons
1 (OxA-19784),
2 (OxA-19785), and
3 (OxA-19864), 2008.

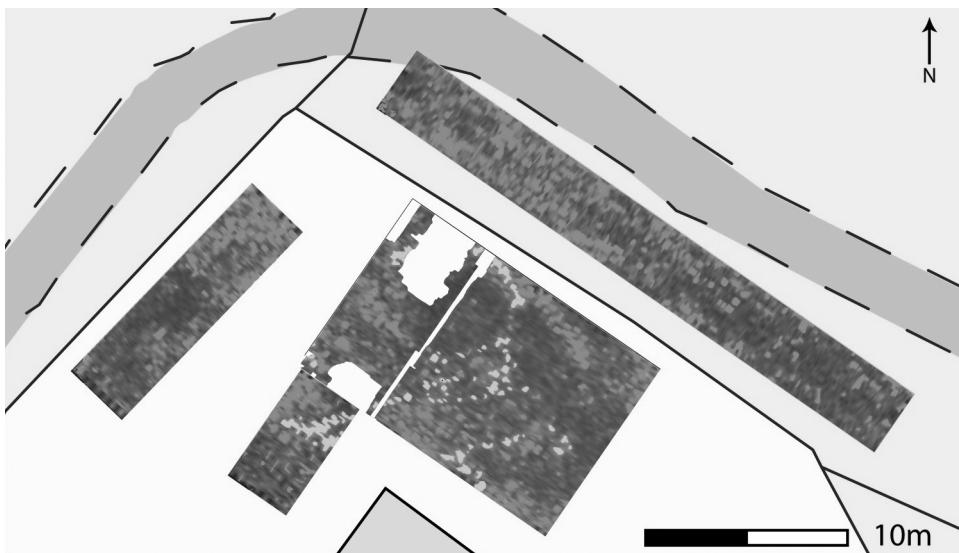


Fig. 11. Interpreted GPR slice at 36 nanoseconds (approximately 2 m depth). The light grey pixels show the strongest reflections, interpreted as foundations of a structure. The mid grey pixels result in part from the extensive mortar encountered in the two trenches and suggest that the foundations are part of a larger building complex.

by Reading University student Matthew Berry, with help from his supervisor, Timothy Astin. The data produced by this survey suggested the presence of foundations including a structure aligned from south-west to north-east, and measuring c.14 m by 5 m, with a possible annex at the eastern end of the north wall (see Fig. 11). This structure may have been part of a larger building.

The earliest feature encountered was a solid flint and mortar mass at the north end of the trench with a bottom depth of 2 m (where natural gravel was exposed). This deeply buried masonry comprised a uniform mix of heavy flint, well-mixed lime mortar, and pebble stones, and seems to have been part of a partially robbed-out wall foundation (Fig. 12). Lighter masonry and mortar at a shallower depth extended south. Restricted depth-probing mid-trench confirmed that the mortar bed was reasonably consistent, comprising a matrix of flints and large pebbles. Its thickness was not determined. No masonry was uncovered in the southern half of the trench, but the mortar spread continued, very level and consistent in texture to the east, and slightly more irregular to the west. A probe at the extreme south end of the trench to a depth of 1.5 m revealed disturbance from backfilling after the burial of skeleton 15 (see below), but very little mortar.

At the top of the mortar and light masonry at c.1 m depth were fifteen partially exposed skeletons, buried close together in rows. Skeleton 15 was c.0.4 m deeper, probably because of an absence of mortar at the south end of the trench (Fig. 12). The central area of the trench contained a concentration of burials. Skeletons 1, 2, and 3 were very close together, and the cranium of skeleton 10 was at the feet of skeleton 13. Skeleton 8 was rather isolated at the northern end of the trench, 1.25 m from skeleton 7. The bodies were buried in accurate west-east alignments, except skeletons 1 and 2, which were slightly misaligned (see Fig. 13). The usual difficulty in identifying individual grave cuts in a long-used outdoor burial ground was compounded by the nature of the bottom layer of fill over the bodies, but cuts were detected for burials 7 and 8, terminating where they met masonry.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ For the general problem see W. Rodwell, *The Archaeology of the English Church. The Study of Historic Churches and Churchyards* (London, 1981), p. 157.

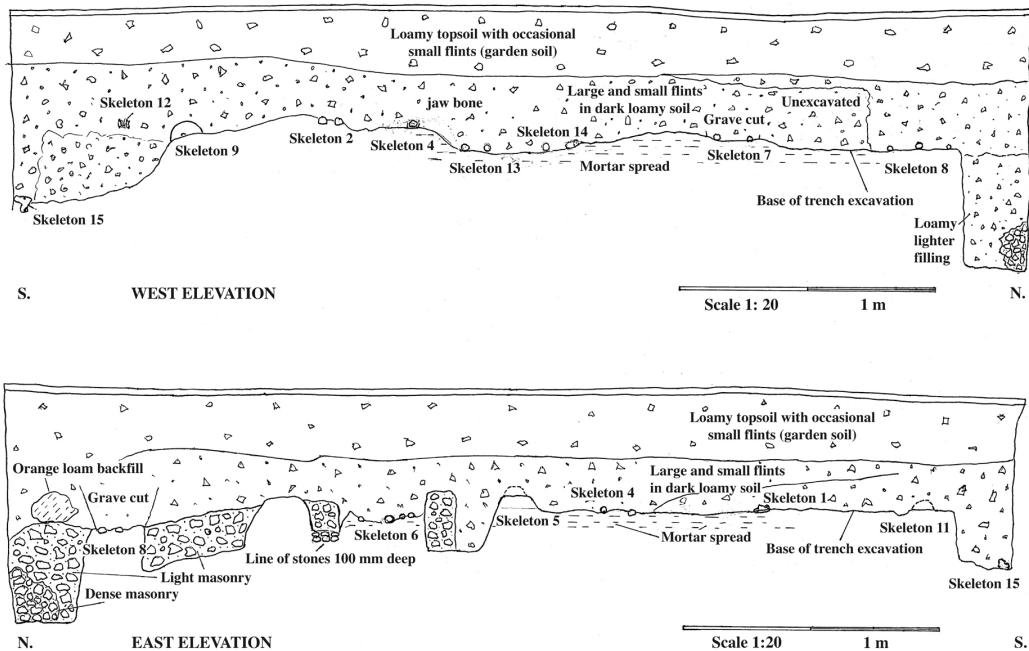


Fig. 12. Keeper's Cottage: 2010 trench sections (east and west elevations).

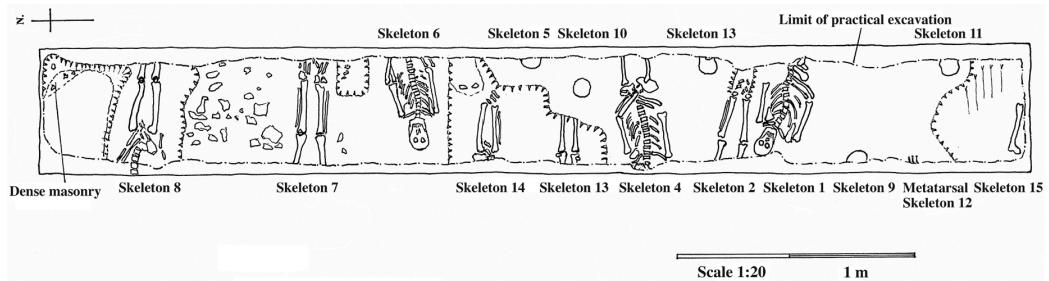


Fig. 13. Keeper's Cottage: 2010 trench plan.

Skeleton 8 was dated by the ORAU at the 95% confidence level (2 sigma) to 1043–1215 (with a 59% probability of burial between 1118 and 1215). Skeleton 6, further south, was dated to 1051–1253 (with an 88% chance of burial between 1152 and 1253). Skeleton 1 was significantly later, with a burial date of 1490–1645 (and a 74% probability of burial before 1603). Full information is given in Fig. 14.

Holly Hill Cottage

A 6 m by 1 m trench at the rear of Holly Hill Cottage (Fig. 7) was dug to a maximum depth of 1.2 m. At c.1 m or shallower heavily worked black garden soil with large flint nodules gave way to a layer of orange flinty gravel. At the south end a heavy stone with a hole or lug was found in flinty soil at 0.9 m. It was thought that this unusual stone may have been deliberately brought to

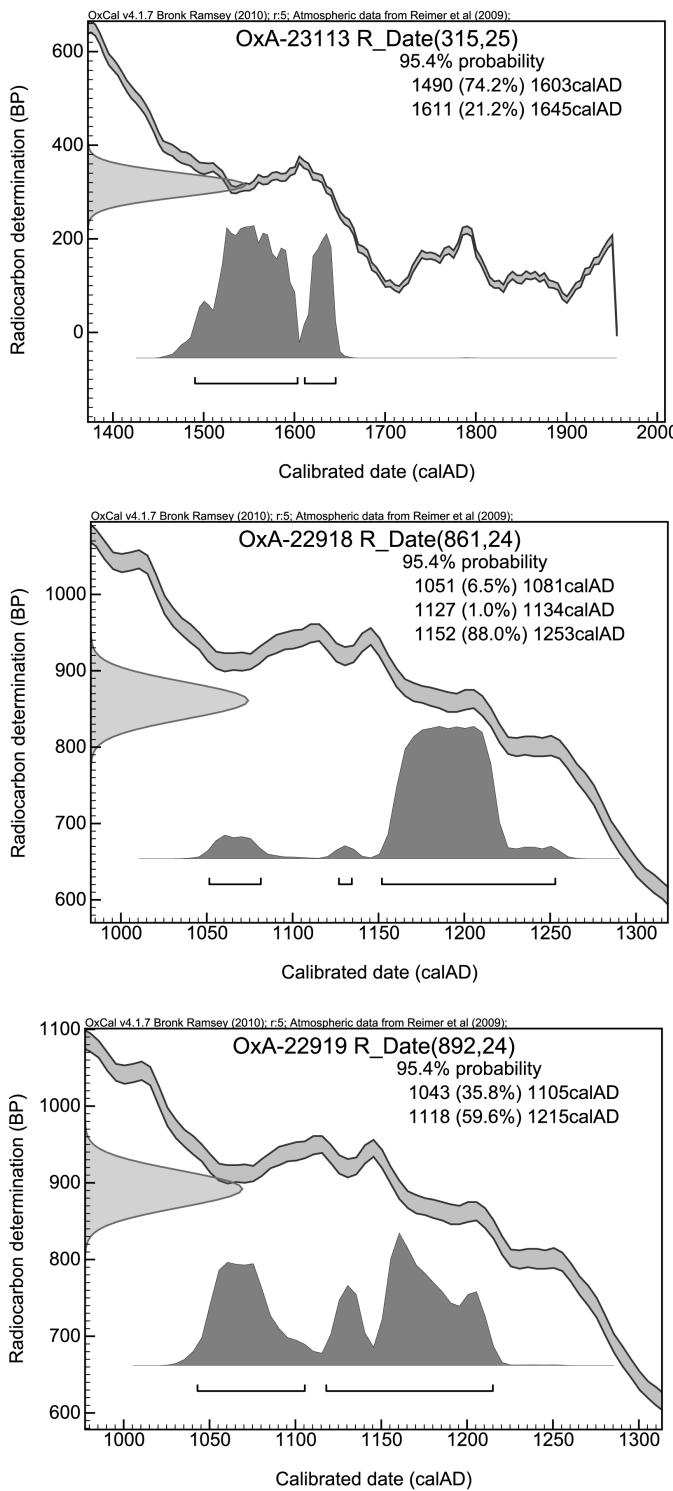


Fig. 14. Radiocarbon dating results for skeletons
1 (OxA-23113),
6 (OxA-22918), and
8 (OxA-22919), 2010.

the site, possibly for use as a loom weight. A 2 m by 2 m grid in the front garden was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.3 m, where natural gravel was reached.

ROMAN POTTERY by PAUL BOOTH

Some sixty-four sherds (807 g) of Roman pottery were recovered during the various excavations. Since almost none of these was meaningfully stratified they have been treated as a single group, and recorded using codes in the Oxford Archaeology system for later prehistoric and Roman pottery. The pottery was in reasonably good condition, but some sherds were moderately abraded and in the case of some of the sandy reduced wares it is not absolutely certain that they were of Roman rather than medieval date. The principal characteristics of the assemblage (including fabric descriptions) are summarised here. More detail can be found in the project archive.

The fabrics present are listed and quantified below:

Table 1. Fabric quantification (Roman pottery)

Fabric code	Summary description	No. sherds	Weight(g)	Vessel types (rims)
F50	Red-brown colour-coated ware, source uncertain	1	22	
F51	Oxfordshire red-brown colour-coated ware	11	156	Dish (Young 1977, C49)
M22	Oxfordshire white mortarium fabric	1	33	
M41	Oxfordshire red colour-coated mortarium fabric	1	13	Mortarium (Young 1977, C97)
W10	Fine sandy white fabrics	1	12	
O10	Fine oxidised fabrics	2	6	
O20	Sandy oxidised fabrics	1	2	
O30	Medium sandy oxidised fabrics	2	23	Dish/bowl?
R10	Fine reduced fabrics	5	18	Jar/bowl
R20	Coarse sand-tempered reduced fabrics	6	88	Jar
R30	Medium sandy reduced fabrics	29	318	Jar (x4)
R50	Black-surfaced sandy reduced fabric	1	1	
R90	Coarse grog-tempered reduced fabrics	1	100	Storage jar
B11	Black-burnished ware (BB1)	2	15	Straight-sided dish
Total		64	807	

Many of the sherds may have been products of the Oxford industry, but the oxidised and reduced coarse ware fabrics are insufficiently distinctive for this to be certain, and it is possible that at least some of these derived from more local, unknown sources. The only sherds certainly not from fairly local sources are the two fragments of south-east Dorset black-burnished ware, fabric B11. The fine and specialist wares (colour-coated wares, mortaria, and white wares) are all Oxford products, with the possible exception of a beaker base sherd assigned to the general code F50, which could have been an Oxford fabric but is not completely typical. The coarse ware fabrics do not require detailed comment.

Rim sherds from eleven vessels are listed in the table above. Most of the coarse ware rims were insufficiently large to allow identification of types beyond broad classes such as jar or bowl, and in some cases were so small that they could only be assigned to even less specific groups such as jar/bowl or bowl/dish. Unsurprisingly, therefore, none of these vessels was chronologically diagnostic. Overall, the group is of later Roman character. The Oxford colour-coated wares are

by definition dated later than c.AD 240,⁴¹ and the specific types present (C49, plus the mortarium C97 and a bowl (C51) with an incomplete rim) all have the broad AD 240–400 range. The white ware mortarium sherd also had an incomplete rim and cannot be assigned to a specific type, but is likewise dated after AD 240. The black-burnished ware dish form dates from the end of the second century onwards. All that can be said of the less diagnostic coarse ware rims is that they are not inconsistent with a third- to fourth-century date range, but that the overall span of activity represented by this pottery might have been from the second century onwards. The assemblage is unfortunately too small for further inferences about its character, for example about the type of site from which it might have originated, to be meaningful.

POST-ROMAN POTTERY by MAUREEN MELLOR

Some forty-two sherds (423 g) of post-Roman pottery were recovered during the excavations (one Anglo-Saxon, thirty-five medieval, and six post-medieval). These have been treated as a single group, as none were meaningfully stratified, and were recorded using codes from published nearby excavations, whose type series are held by Oxford Archaeology.

The fabrics present are listed and quantified below:

Table 2. Fabric quantification (post-Roman pottery)

Fabric code	Summary description	No. sherds	Weight (g)	Vessel types
SX	source uncertain	1	14	Urn, burnished, combed decoration
Local medieval coarse wares:				
Henley 03		16	187	Jars, some evidence of sooting externally; bowl some combed decoration
Henley 31		4	33	Jars, jugs, mottled green glaze
Chalgrove 41, OX162		5	48	Jars, jugs, decayed glaze
NE3 Soundess Farm kiln;		3+?1	43	Strap handle
Chalgrove 60				
V coarse sandy		1	14	
Miscellaneous		4	11+	
Regional imports:				
Surrey WHW		1	5	Jug, dark green glaze
WHW		1	19	?Lid
Post-medieval coarse ware & industrial ware				
REW		4	40	Teapot; glaze
WHEW		1	5	
Total		42	423	

The lone Anglo-Saxon sherd is from a decorated urn and may date to the second half of the sixth century. No late Anglo-Saxon sherds were noted (late Anglo-Saxon sequences are known from Wallingford). The bulk of the pottery is of later twelfth- to sixteenth-century date. The medieval sherds are from vessels that reflect everyday life in the south-east of the county, with the

⁴¹ C.J. Young, *The Roman Pottery Industry of the Oxford Region*, BAR, 43 (1977), pp. 123–4.

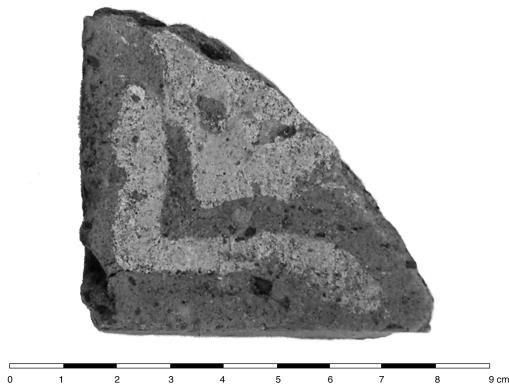


Fig. 15. Fragment of decorated floor tile from the 2010 excavation.

exception of a white ware lid, a style that is unparalleled in south-east Oxfordshire or Surrey.⁴² Most products appear to be derived from a local production centre that served Henley from at least the later twelfth century, when the town was founded.⁴³ It is clear that some better-off inhabitants had colourful glazed jugs as well as coarse wares used in cooking and for storage. A few medieval coarse ware sherds with vertical combed decoration were noted. This style of decoration was originally identified on the line of the M40 and is dubbed M40 ware,⁴⁴ but it is also present in small quantities in Reading. A few later vessels of the seventeenth to nineteenth century were represented.

CERAMIC BUILDING MATERIAL

Eighty-one fragments of CBM were recovered, weighing 2.98 kg. The bulk comprised flat rectangular roof tile, though almost all pieces were highly abraded and no complete examples were seen. The great majority of this unglazed, pale red, sandy material is medieval; two pieces are Roman, and a few are post-medieval.⁴⁵ Four pieces of medieval glazed white encaustic decorated floor tile were found in the highly disturbed subsoil in the 2010 Keeper's Cottage trench (Fig. 15). The tile is of the 'printed' type produced in Penn (Bucks.) in the fourteenth century, and the site is well within the core distribution area of Penn tiles.⁴⁶ However, the small surviving part of the pattern on the largest piece is rather crude and does not appear to match any of the Penn (or other) designs published by Haberly or Hohler.⁴⁷ Possibly it was manufactured locally: potters were active in Henley in the later thirteenth and early fourteenth century, and neighbouring Nettlebed was a brick, tile and pottery production centre.⁴⁸

⁴² Information from John Cotter.

⁴³ Mellor et al., 'Pottery in the Oxford Region', pp. 88, 170; L. Whittingham, 'Post-Roman Pottery', in C. Moloney et al., 'Excavations and Building Survey at Bell Street, Henley-on-Thames, 1993–1994', *Oxoniensia*, 62 (1997), pp. 122–4.

⁴⁴ D. Hinton, 'M40 Ware', in T. Rowley et al., 'The Archaeology of the M40', *Oxoniensia*, 38 (1973), pp. 181–3.

⁴⁵ Information from John Cotter and Paul Booth.

⁴⁶ L. Keen, 'Windsor Castle and the Penn Tile Industry', in L. Keen and E. Scarff, *Windsor. Medieval Archaeology, Art and Architecture of the Thames Valley*, British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions, 25 (Leeds, 2002), pp. 228–31, esp. p. 229 (fig. 9); M. Green, 'Medieval Tile Industry at Penn', *Records of Buckinghamshire*, 45 (2005), pp. 130–2.

⁴⁷ L. Haberly, *Mediaeval English Pavingtiles* (Oxford, 1937); C. Hohler, 'Medieval Pavingtiles in Buckinghamshire', *Records of Buckinghamshire*, 14 (1941–6), pp. 1–49, 99–132.

⁴⁸ M. Mellor et al., 'A Synthesis of Middle and Late Saxon, Medieval and Early Post-Medieval Pottery in the Oxford Region', *Oxoniensia*, 59 (1994), pp. 32, 33, 88; HER, DRF 414. For a late-medieval pottery kiln in the north-west of Bix parish itself, close to Nettlebed, see Fig. 3, above, and HER, PRN, 13514, 13159. Cf. P. Page et al., *Barentin's Manor. Excavations of the Moated Manor at Harding's Field, Chalgrove, Oxfordshire, 1976–9*, Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph, 24 (2005), 113–14.

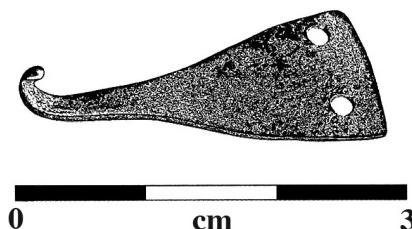


Fig. 16. Hooked tag from the 2008 Keeper's Cottage excavation.

METAL FIND

A small, plain, copper alloy hooked tag was found in the subsoil layer (at 0.65 m depth) in the 2008 Keeper's Cottage trench (Fig. 16). These sorts of fastening tags were used from the Anglo-Saxon period to the end of the Middle Ages and undecorated examples are very hard to date, but this one resembles tenth- and eleventh-century tags found in Winchester (Hants.).⁴⁹

CHARCOAL AND SLAG

Small amounts of charcoal and slag were found in the 2008 Keeper's Cottage trench. However, these may have been deposited relatively recently since modern intrusions, including two small pieces of melted plastic, were found even at the deeper excavated levels.

THE HUMAN BONE by ANNA WILLIAMS

Analysis of the skeletons was carried out *in situ*, although the os coxae and other elements were lifted and cleaned to facilitate determination of the sex, age at death, and stature of the individuals.⁵⁰ Three partially exposed skeletons were examined in 2008, and a further seven in 2010. All were in good condition. Other skeletons were insufficiently exposed for any examination to be carried out. Only three skulls could be examined: those of skeleton 3 (2008) and skeletons 1 and 6 (2010). Given these circumstances, the findings are necessarily preliminary, and fuller and more precise conclusions would be reached from laboratory analysis. The information given below (Table 3) summarizes fuller notes deposited in the site archive.

It would be unwise to draw strong conclusions about the wider population based on the evidence provided by this extremely small sample of individuals, but as a group the skeletons presented some interesting characteristics. No infant or juvenile burials were found and there was no evidence of trauma. The stature estimates indicate that all of these people were taller than the medieval average (about 1.71 m for men and 1.59 m for women).⁵¹ Many of the skeletons exhibited robust muscle attachments of their humerae, where the deltoid muscle attaches, indicative of active lifestyles that included heavy lifting or manual labour. There was also some evidence of arthritis in three of the skeletons, which likewise suggests that the individuals were engaged in strenuous activity, causing active degeneration of their spinal columns. These features would be expected in a population mainly engaged in farming. Bone characteristics indicate that some local

⁴⁹ D.A. Hinton, 'Hooked Tags', in M. Biddle et al., *Object and Economy in Medieval Winchester*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1990), vol. 2, pp. 548–52, esp. fig. 148, nos. 1409, 1411, and 1413.

⁵⁰ The main publications used in the analysis were: W.M. Bass, *Human Osteology: A Laboratory and Field Manual* (Missouri Archaeological Society, 1995); J.E. Buikstra and D.H. Ubelaker, *Standards for Data Collection from Human Skeletal Remains*, Arkansas Archaeological Survey Research Series, 44 (1994); J. Schwartz, *Skeleton Keys: An Introduction to Human Skeletal Morphology, Development and Analysis* (Oxford, 1995).

⁵¹ M. Prestwich, *Plantagenet England, 1225–1360* (Oxford, 2005), p. 9.

Table 3. Summary of osteological findings

Skeleton	Sex	Age (years)	Stature (ave. cm)	Comments
Skeleton 1 (2008)	Indeterminate	50–59	174	Possible signs of early arthritis
Skeleton 2 (2008)	Male	17–19	175	
Skeleton 3 (2008)	Female	21–29	170	Majority of molars and pre-molars worn down to the dentine. Two dental abscesses
Skeleton 1 (2010)	Male	50+	178	Severe mandibular abscess. Most mandibular teeth lost ante-mortem. Possible scoliosis of the spine and signs of arthritis.
Skeleton 4 (2010)	Male	16	173	
Skeleton 6 (2010)	Male	Mature adult	182	Signs of early stage arthritis.
Skeleton 7 (2010)	Male	Mature adult	173	
Skeleton 8 (2010)	Female	40–44	165	
Skeleton 14 (2010)	Unknown	Mature adult	175	
Skeleton 15 (2010)	Female	Mature adult	167	

people lived into their fifties and beyond, the kind of life expectancy probably associated with lords or substantial tenants rather than poor cottagers.⁵²

ANALYSIS OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDINGS

The small scale of the excavation imposed serious limits on what could be discovered, but larger area excavation was impossible because of limited resources, the current domestic use of the site, and the desire not to disturb too many burials. The presence of rows of medieval burials confirmed that this is the site of Bix's second medieval church. The discovery of pieces of decorated floor tile suggests that the building itself may have been fairly close to the 2010 excavation. However, for several reasons the structural remains uncovered do not seem to be those of the church, which may well have been in the centre of the enclosure, under the modern houses.⁵³

By far the most likely scenario suggested by the evidence is medieval re-use of a Roman site. The density and spacing of the burials suggests graveyard rows laid out across the foundations of an earlier building. That this building had been demolished before the creation of the graveyard in the eleventh or twelfth century (or possibly slightly earlier) is shown by the fact that skeletons 1, 9, 11, and 15 in the 2010 trench lie above strong reflections seen in the radar survey which are interpreted as wall foundations (illustrated in Fig. 11). It is very unlikely that there was a large Anglo-Saxon stone church or other building in this remote location, and, in any case, the thick mortar layers and significant quantity of Roman pottery suggest a Roman site. None of the pottery was found in a securely stratified context, but two pieces of Roman ware were in the disturbed

⁵² R. Smith, 'Human Resources', in G. Astill and A. Grant, *The Countryside of Medieval England* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 203–4.

⁵³ Radar surveying of the rest of the site might be useful, though the front half has been much disturbed and includes the foundations of the first cottages and modern service pipes.

bottom fill of light masonry immediately adjacent to the dense masonry at the north end of the 2010 trench. The character of the building remains uncertain, but its solid construction and the wide spread of mortar, extending over 6 m between the 2008 and 2010 excavations, perhaps suggests that it was part of a villa complex.

The construction of medieval churches on Roman sites was fairly widespread, including in rural areas, and has sometimes been seen as representing the continued use or re-establishment of a locus of religious activity or social authority (or both).⁵⁴ At present, too little is known about the use of this site in the Roman or Anglo-Saxon periods to determine whether either factor was applicable here.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS

The Development of Settlement in the Parish

The main implications of the findings are for medieval and later settlement, but they have also added to our very patchy understanding of Iron-Age and Roman settlement in the area. The only previously identified Roman settlement in Bix is the small third- to fourth-century corridor villa east of Bix Common (at SU 7330 8527), c.1.2 km south of 'Old Chapel', which perhaps replaced an earlier building.⁵⁵ The structure found in 'Old Chapel' and associated pottery indicates that there was also settlement further up the dip slope by the later Roman period. The character of this settlement is uncertain, though the substantial foundations suggest a villa complex rather than a simple farmstead. The discovery of a ditch and pits containing late Iron-Age and mainly early Roman pottery, burnt flint flakes, charcoal, teeth, and fragments of bone c.250 m east of 'Old Chapel' (at SU 7336 8646, 7328 8652, and 7329 8651) in the 1980s (see Fig. 3, above) suggests settlement of long duration, or perhaps several phases of nearby occupation, possibly of varied character.⁵⁶ Much more remains to be discovered about the extent and location of Iron-Age and Romano-British settlement in the area, particularly about humble farmsteads rather than villas, but these finds suggest that further discoveries can be anticipated high up in the hills.

Little is known about early medieval settlement, except that there seems to have been some regeneration of woodland and reduction of farming in the locality after the fourth century.⁵⁷ It would be unwise to assume that this part of the Chilterns was totally abandoned in the post-Roman period, but place-name evidence and later territorial links suggest that in the seventh and eighth centuries the southern Chilterns was predominantly used as a seasonal grazing ground by pastoralists coming over the scarp from the lowlands in the north.⁵⁸ Possibly dispersed farmsteads had been established by the eighth century (or earlier); certainly the local landscape was closely organised and occupied by the tenth century,⁵⁹ and Domesday confirms the presence of small local populations in the eleventh. At present the only earlier medieval archaeological finds from within the parish (apart from the single early Anglo-Saxon sherd at Old Chapel) come from the Roman

⁵⁴ W. Rodwell, 'Churches in the Landscape: Aspects of Topography and Planning', M.L. Faull (ed.), *Studies in Late Anglo-Saxon Settlement* (Oxford, 1984), p. 12; T. Bell, *The Religious Reuse of Roman Structures in Early Medieval England*, BAR BS, 390 (2005).

⁵⁵ D. Nicholls, 'The Romano-British Building at Bix, Henley-on-Thames', *SOAG Bulletin*, 61 (2006), pp. 16–26.

⁵⁶ HER, PRN 13515, 13516.

⁵⁷ Milesom, 'Henley and the Chilterns', p. 4.

⁵⁸ L.W. Hepple and A.M. Doggett, *The Chilterns*, 2nd edn (Chichester, 1994), pp. 51–8; J. Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (Stroud, 1994), pp. 25–7. The presence of '-feld' place-names (e.g. Binfield, Rotherfield, Nuffield) suggests intercommingling in a border region: R. Jones and M. Page, *Medieval Villages in an English Landscape: Beginnings and Ends* (Macclesfield, 2006), p. 225.

⁵⁹ M. Hammond, 'The Anglo-Saxon Estate of Readanora and the Manor of Pyrton, Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, 63 (1998), pp. 29–30; M. Gelling, *Early Charters of the Thames Valley* (Leicester, 1979), p. 260; Gelling, *Place-Names of Oxfordshire*, vol. 1, pp. 84–5.

villa site near Bix Common: a post-Roman flint platform (with no associated artefacts), and two later-Saxon (probably late ninth- or early tenth-century) shallow burials.⁶⁰

The establishment of the Bix Brand, Bix Gibwyn and (probably) Bromsden estates before the mid eleventh century presumably involved the creation of separate estate centres,⁶¹ possibly close to existing areas of settlement. The precise locations of the Brand and Gibwyn manor houses are unknown, but probably they were near their associated medieval churches, which were almost certainly built by late Anglo-Saxon or Norman lords of the respective estates.⁶² Bromsden was presumably located somewhere near Bromsden Farm, and the estate here seemingly included several households in the fourteenth century.⁶³

Several other areas of settlement can be identified by the later Middle Ages, though it is unclear when they were first established. The hamlet south-west of Bix Common (apparently an irregular common field, rather than common waste) and close to the Henley road was well established by the seventeenth century,⁶⁴ and was probably of medieval origin. A dense scatter of late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century pottery found in a field off the old Bix Hill road,⁶⁵ near the Roman villa site, may mark an abandoned farmstead near this hamlet (Fig. 3). By the fifteenth century (and probably earlier) there was some settlement in the lower part of the Assendon valley, on the eastern fringe of the parish.⁶⁶ In addition, there were probably other little clusters of settlement on the parish boundary around Maidensgrove common (formerly 'Minigrove') in the far north-east,⁶⁷ and near Highmoor common (in Rotherfield Greys) in the south-west.⁶⁸ Isolated sixteenth-century farmhouses close to the parish boundary at Redpits and Pages in the north (the latter possibly late fifteenth century) and Rocky Lane in the south may have replaced medieval predecessors. It is likely that some of these settlements were created through secondary colonisation and woodland clearance in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but this cannot yet be demonstrated.

Such high levels of dispersal reflected the area's broken topography and mixed agricultural and woodland resources, its early enclosure, and the presence in the Middle Ages of a number of through routes to and from Henley, which attracted linear and green-side settlements. These routes included the Roman road through the south, broadly followed by the modern main road, which was almost certainly the main route from Oxford and Dorchester to Henley.⁶⁹ But there were alternative routes to and from the vale, including the Anglo-Saxon one up the Assendon valley which connected with the Knightsbridge Lane towards Oxford,⁷⁰ and the road through Bix Bottom to Cookley Green, which was apparently of greater importance in the Middle Ages than later. The Bix Bottom road was called a 'royal highway' in 1392 and 1480, but by then it seems to have been partly choked by vegetation.⁷¹ It remained a minor through route until stopped up at Pages Farm in the late twentieth century.⁷²

⁶⁰ Nicholls, 'Romano-British Building', p. 20.

⁶¹ Above, pp. 15–17.

⁶² Both manor houses seem to have been abandoned in the later Middle Ages: *Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous* (London, 1916–), vol. 5, pp. 35–6.

⁶³ C.T. Flower et al. (eds.), *Curia Regis Rolls* (London, 1922–), vol. 11, no. 2628; H.E. Salter (ed.), *Feet of Fines for Oxfordshire, 1195–1291*, ORS, 12 (1930), p. 235; PRO, SC6/1248/14 (farm servants, 1336–7).

⁶⁴ R. Morden, *Oxon. Map* (1695); Stonor Estate Map (1725).

⁶⁵ Mellor et al., 'Pottery in the Oxford Region', p. 170.

⁶⁶ PRO, SC2/197/11, m. 3d; ibid. C1/311/45; ORO MS Wills Oxon. 184, f. 363. There is one surviving late-medieval farmhouse (Middle Assendon Farm).

⁶⁷ ORO, MS Wills Oxon. 178, f. 170v. (1543). In the early eighteenth century cottagers living here paid a few pence a year for 'encroachments' on the manorial waste: ORO, Vor. II/i/1.

⁶⁸ M. Page, 'Rotherfield Greys', in *VCH Oxon.* 16, p. 273.

⁶⁹ R. Peberdy, 'Late Medieval Communications', in K. Tiller and G. Darkes (eds.), *An Historical Atlas of Oxfordshire*, ORS, 67 (2010), pp. 50–1.

⁷⁰ Hammond, 'The Anglo-Saxon Estate of Readanora', pp. 26, 42; *VCH Oxon.* 8, p. 139.

⁷¹ PRO, SC2/197/11 mm. 1d., 2.

⁷² ORO, CC3/4/C11/164; OS Map, 1:25000, sheet 171 (1999 edn).

In this context, it seems likely that Bix Bottom was one of the most significant areas of early settlement in the parish. Given the highly dispersed character of local settlement, the churches in the valley would not have formed part of any substantial nucleation,⁷³ but they probably served as loose focal points for scattered roadside settlement, and pottery finds and the tentative identification of ridge and furrow and a headland near Bix Brand church indicate medieval cultivation.⁷⁴ In the eleventh to fourteenth centuries there were probably at least as many farmsteads and cottages in Bix Bottom as in the adjacent Assendon valley or up near Bix Common and further south, where soils are generally poorer.⁷⁵

The decline of the Bix Bottom road in the late Middle Ages presumably reflected and reinforced shifts in settlement. These shifts were perhaps related to the early stages of a long-term concentration of traffic through the south of the parish. A market was established at Henley in the late twelfth century and by the end of the thirteenth century the town had become the key trans-shipment point for trade between the Upper Thames and London.⁷⁶ This almost certainly increased the volume of traffic from the vale to Henley, some of which would earlier have been diverted to Wallingford or other local markets. The growing importance of the Dorchester–Henley road is suggested by the apparent spread of settlement in Benson from an early centre by the church to a point near the Henley road by c.1300, over 500 m east.⁷⁷

In Bix the probable southward drift became more clear-cut as population rose in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁷⁸ By this time traffic along the Oxford–Henley road (turnpiked in 1736) was increasing substantially as Henley grew as a social and trading centre. Surviving seventeenth- and eighteenth-century houses are found mainly near this road, south of Bix Common and in the Assendon valley to the south-east, especially in Lower Assendon (nearest Henley).⁷⁹ In the nineteenth century the hamlet by Bix Common became generally known as Bix ‘village’,⁸⁰ its predominance enhanced by the building of a new church and a school there in the 1870s, when the surviving medieval church in Bix Bottom was finally abandoned.⁸¹ Limited subsequent development took place almost exclusively in the south and south-east of the parish.⁸²

In summary, it seems that the modern concentration of houses in the south of the parish is a result of the decline of settlement in Bix Bottom in the later Middle Ages and a gradual shift in emphasis towards the south which was consolidated in the centuries that followed. A good deal remains to be discovered, and a more detailed and accurate picture of the long-term development of local settlement and farming could probably be achieved by wider geophysical surveying, fieldwalking, test pitting, and excavation.⁸³

⁷³ C.J. Bond, ‘Medieval Oxfordshire Villages and their Topography: A Preliminary Discussion’, in D. Hooke (ed.), *Medieval Villages. A Review of Current Work*, Oxford University Committee for Archaeology Monograph, 5 (1985), p. 117. Cf. C. Lewis, P. Mitchell-Fox, and C. Dyer, *Village, Hamlet and Field* (Macclesfield, 2001), p. 110.

⁷⁴ HER, PRN 968 and Bix parish file.

⁷⁵ Geol. Survey Map 1:50,000 (solid and drift), sheet 254 (1980 edn); B.W. Peace, ‘A Study of Current Farming Contrasts and their Relation to Human Settlement in the Parish of Bix in Oxfordshire’, dissertation towards Uni. London Diploma in Geography (1965), pp. 12–13.

⁷⁶ B.M.S. Campbell et al., *A Medieval Capital and its Grain Supply: Agrarian Production and Distribution in the London Region c.1300*, Hist. Geog. Research Series, 30 (1993), pp. 47–9.

⁷⁷ Bond, ‘Medieval Oxfordshire Villages’, p. 109.

⁷⁸ There may have been twenty or thirty households in the 1660s, and about sixty or seventy in the late eighteenth century: M.M.B. Weinstock (ed.), *Hearth Tax Returns for Oxfordshire, 1665*, ORS, 21 (1940), pp. 13–14; ORO, MS Oxf. Dioc. b. 37, ff. 17–19.

⁷⁹ Milesor, ‘Bix’, pp. 204–5.

⁸⁰ e.g. ORO, MS Oxf. Dioc. d 568, f. 41 (1805); *Post-Office Directory Oxon.* (1847 edn).

⁸¹ J. Sherwood and N. Pevsner, *Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (London, 1974), p. 457; PRO, ED21/14379.

⁸² OS Map 1:1250 (1998 edn).

⁸³ Cf. R. Jones, ‘Signatures in the Soil: The Use of Pottery in Manure Scatters in the Identification of Medieval Arable Farming Regimes’, *Archaeological Journal*, 161 (2004), pp. 159–88; C. Lewis, ‘New Avenues for the Investigation of Currently Occupied Medieval Rural Settlement – Preliminary Observations from the Higher Education Field Academy’, *Medieval Archaeology*, 51 (2007), pp. 131–61.

Changing Settlement in the South-West Chilterns

The findings in Bix have implications for understanding the character and development of medieval settlement in the wider Chilterns region, an important area of mainly dispersed settlement in the south-east of England, stretching some 80 km from Goring in the south-west to Hitchin (Herts.) in the north-east.⁸⁴ Interpretation of the landscape, society and economy of areas of dispersed settlement, which dominate the western and south-eastern parts of England, has developed considerably in the last thirty years.⁸⁵ As a result, it has become clear that dispersed settlements and their territories were affected by demographic and economic changes in the Middle Ages and later as well as nucleated villages and their large open fields.⁸⁶ But just as social and economic organization differed in dispersed areas, so too did the consequences of the long period of declining population, amalgamation of holdings, changed lord-tenant relations and increasing focus on pastoral husbandry which characterized the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Village desertion and shrinkage in areas of predominantly nucleated settlement like the south Oxfordshire clay vale north of the Chilterns is a well-recognized phenomenon, but on the south Chilterns dip slope there were few if any nucleated settlements to be deserted.⁸⁷ Here as in other woodland landscapes at least some farmsteads and hamlets survived even where there was drastic population reduction.⁸⁸ Previous studies of the Chilterns region have rightly recognized the less dramatic and less easily identifiable nature of the changes in a region of limited nucleation, but in doing so they may have sometimes underplayed them, including in the south-western part of the region where there was probably the highest level of settlement dispersal (except on the flat plain of the Thames valley in the far south).⁸⁹

Bix provides a clear example of declining population in the late Middle Ages and a shift in settlement which became pronounced when population recovered from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, but it was far from unique. Harpsden, just south of Henley, offers a striking parallel. Here the relatively populous riverside vill (and parish) of Bolney seems to have declined before the fourteenth century, and further population losses in Harpsden and Bolney in the late Middle Ages led to the abandonment of Bolney church and the merger of the parish with Harpsden in the 1450s.⁹⁰ Just west of Henley, a small rural settlement at Badgemore Green seems to have been largely abandoned by the end of the Middle Ages or soon after, along with its medieval manor house (which was later replaced by an eighteenth-century mansion).⁹¹ Further north, next to

⁸⁴ Hepple and Doggett, *The Chilterns*; D. Roden, 'Field Systems of the Chiltern Hills and their Environs', in A.R.H. Baker and R.A. Butlin (eds.), *Studies of Field Systems in the British Isles* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 325–76.

⁸⁵ From a large and growing literature see e.g. C.C. Taylor, *Village and Farmstead. A History of Rural Settlement in England* (London, 1983); C. Dyer, 'Dispersed Settlements in Medieval England: A Case Study of Pendock, Worcestershire', *Medieval Archaeology*, 34 (1990), pp. 97–121; M. Aston et al. (eds.), *The Rural Settlements of Medieval England* (Oxford, 1989); B.K. Roberts and S. Wrathmell, 'Dispersed Settlement in England: A National View', in P. Everson and T. Williamson (eds.), *The Archaeology of Landscape* (Manchester, 1998), pp. 95–116; idem, *An Atlas of Rural Settlement in England* (2000); C. Lewis, P. Mitchell-Fox, and C. Dyer, *Village, Hamlet and Field* (Macclesfield, 2001); S. Rippon, *Beyond the Medieval Village. The Diversification of Landscape Character in Southern Britain* (Oxford, 2008).

⁸⁶ See, for example, Dyer, 'Dispersed Settlements in Medieval England'.

⁸⁷ Milesen, 'Deserted and Shrunken Settlements', in Tiller and Darkes, *Historical Atlas of Oxfordshire*, pp. 56–7.

⁸⁸ C. Dyer, 'Woodlands and Wood-Pasture in Western England', in J. Thirsk (ed.), *Rural England. An Illustrated History of the Landscape* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 112–15.

⁸⁹ D. Roden, 'Changing Settlement in the Chiltern Hills before 1850', *Folk Life*, 8 (1970), pp. 68 ('two centuries of recession left surprisingly little imprint on the settlement pattern'), 70 ('south-west [of the Wye valley]...the present mosaic is, over wide areas, basically the same as it was seven centuries ago'); Hepple and Doggett, *The Chilterns*, pp. 103–4.

⁹⁰ The patrons, Humphrey Forster of Harpsden and Richard Drayton of Bolney, claimed that the poverty of the two churches made it impossible to find chaplains and that both had been vacant for years: LRO, Reg. XX, ff. 45v.–46r. See further *VCH Oxon.* 16, p. 259.

⁹¹ Bodl. MS. Ch. Oxon. 3019, 3026c (Badgemore Green, 1425); Badgemore Estate Map (1788), Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. a. 3; *VCH Oxon.* 16, p. 184.

Bix, the hamlet of Warmscombe, in a detached upland part of Watlington parish, declined in size and by the sixteenth century was no longer taxed separately.⁹² Other hamlets in the upland area of Watlington also shrank, including Syresfield, which ceased to have its own tithing group.⁹³ In other nearby places changes seem less clear cut, but in Nettlebed, Rotherfield Greys, and Rotherfield Peppard there also appears to have been some depopulation and abandonment of individual houses and areas of settlement in the late Middle Ages.⁹⁴ Across the area there was some concentration of settlement close to Henley by the eighteenth century (or, in more distant parishes, closer to the main roads to the town), which was greatly strengthened thereafter.

At present much about the development of medieval and early post-medieval settlement in the south-west Chilterns remains uncertain, partly because much less archaeological investigation has taken place here than in the Thames valley. The work in Bix suggests that this is an area which will repay further archaeological and historical research into the long-term development of local settlement and its relationship with social and economic structures and the decisions made by generations of local inhabitants. Such research is likely to be especially valuable where it examines the links between the Chiltern uplands and settlements in the vale to the north, including early estate centres such as Benson, and the significance of changing patterns of demand from London and the role of Henley and other local towns as trans-shipment points for goods transported to and from London by river and road.

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⁹² VCH Oxon. 8, pp. 210, 226, 228.

⁹³ Ibid. pp. 214, 216.

⁹⁴ PRO, SC2/197/60; I.S. Leadam (ed.), *The Domesday of Inclosures*, 2 vols. (London, 1897), vol. 1, p. 382; VCH Oxon. forthcoming (Nettlebed).



Plate 1. The narrow chancel arch and flanking niches of Bix Brand church in Bix Bottom (2011).
Photograph by Stephen Milesen. [Milesen and Nicholls, p. 17]



Plate 2. Modern cottages at Old Chapel in Bix Bottom, looking south-east (2007).
Photograph by Stephen Milesen. [Milesen and Nicholls, p. 19]



Plate 3. The 2010 Keeper's Cottage excavation, looking south.
Photograph by Stephen Milesen. [Milesen and Nicholls, p. 22]