

The King's Dyke Burials

by Adrian Challands

In March 1961 the Central Brick Company was removing topsoil and gravel at Funtham's Lane, King's Dyke, Whittlesey prior to working the underlying Oxford clay. The Company's foreman, the late Mr Peck, noticed that Roman pottery and human bones were being unearthed. He reported this to Mr Eric Standen who, together with the late Mr G. F. Dakin, directed a rescue excavation with the Peterborough Museum Society's Archaeological Field Section.

It soon became clear that the Section was dealing with an enigmatic group of eight burials which lay in three short rows in a restricted area (fig. 18).

Directly west of the grave-group there was a ditch, 2 metres wide, curving at its northern end north-eastwards to disappear into the excavated clay-pit face. Sections cut through the ditch and its dark brown and lighter brown loam filling revealed a flattened W-profile with a maximum depth of 0.75 metres. The ditch produced quantities of first- and second-century Romano-British pottery and an iron object, possibly a spearhead. At a depth of 0.6 metres a Roman coin came to light, probably bearing the head of the Emperor Trajan (A.D. 98-116). It was very badly worn — suggesting that it may well have been in circulation towards the end of the second century. Close to the bend in the ditch-line, another ditch 1.4 metres wide formed a junction with the north-south ditch to run off the site in a westerly direction. Whilst time would not permit detailed investigation, it appeared to be contemporary with the north-south ditch.

Two oval pits were located between the northern row of skeletons and the bend in the ditch. Pit 1 measured 2.75 metres on its wider axis and Pit 2 2 metres. Both pits contained first- to second-century pottery. Pit 2 also produced quantities of bone from domestic animals.

Although topsoil had been removed before the archaeological work commenced, the skeletons were still covered with from 30 to 45cm of soil (fig. 19). However, some had been damaged by the weight of the machine skimming the soil from above them; but none had been displaced from their burial place.

| skeleton no. | estimated age at death | height | burial position | other comments |
|--------------|------------------------|----------------|--|---|
| 1 | at least 25 | 5' 4½" (164cm) | Left arm extended, right arm folded across breast | <i>Entire skull missing. Evidence of decapitation before burial.</i> |
| 2 | late 20s or early 30s | 6' 8" (203cm) | Arms extended at sides, hands across pelvis | <i>Leg bones unusually long and thick. Cranium missing. Lower jaw lying on right shoulder. Small piece of iron with skeleton</i> |
| 3 | 35 to 40 | 5' 5¾" (167cm) | (Not noted) | <i>No signs of bone injury in life</i> |
| 4 | 30 to 33 | 5' 4" (163cm) | Face down, arms extended at sides | <i>Legs amputated 7.62cm below knees and buried laterally 10.16cm beyond cut</i> |
| 5 | 35 to 40 | 5' 8½" (174cm) | Arms extended at sides | <i>Evidence of heavy blow on left side of face</i> |
| 6 | at least 25 | 5' 5¼" (166cm) | (Not noted) | <i>Skull, upper body and feet missing (perhaps due to earth stripping), small portion of metal amongst ribs and 2.54cm dia. bronze ring near left femur</i> |
| 7 | not more than 20 | 5' 3¼" (161cm) | Arms extended at sides, head buried beside right leg | <i>Both feet missing</i> |
| 8 | adult | 5' 5¾" (167cm) | Right arm extended left arm across breast | <i>(None)</i> |

All the skeletons were north-south orientated, and the upper torsos of all, except skeleton 3, were northernmost. Mr D. F. Ellicott, who for many years studied bones found on archaeological sites, has made the following observations on the skeletons, all of which were of males.

Pottery fragments found among the skeletons suggest that the date of burial was not earlier than the early to mid second century. The orderly arrangement of the burials suggests either a burial ground with grave-markers or that the deceased were all buried within a short space of time. The mutilation of several of them before burial, the common male sex and the close age-range require explanation. By contrast a cemetery at Guilden Morden near Cambridge (used from the second century onwards) contained two burials with heads between their feet (*Journal of Roman Studies* LIX, 1969, 233); but the graves were randomly orientated and were of both sexes and various ages.

Could the King's Dyke men have been casualties of battle or capital punishment? What battle could have caused such casualties? The dating of the interments rules out the Boudiccan uprising — but it would fit nicely with native opposition to Roman engineers draining the Fens! That may well explain the Roman *gladius* found close by (*Journal of Roman Studies* LVI, 1966, pl. IX, 5). A more recent parallel during the seventeenth century was local opposition to Dutch drainage engineers.

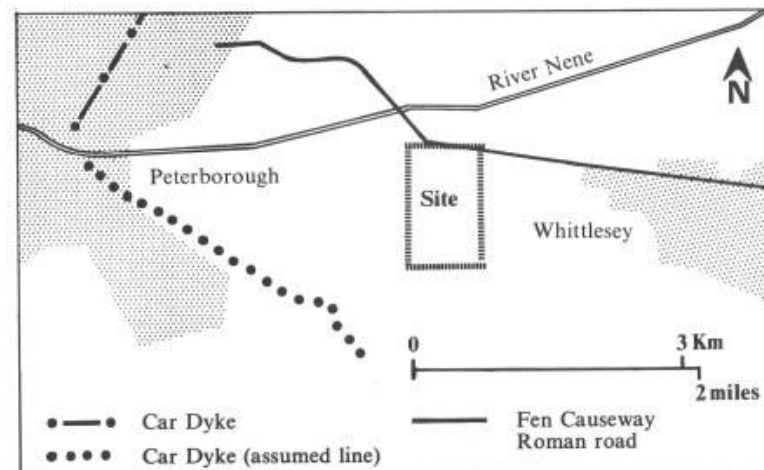


Fig 18a General location plan

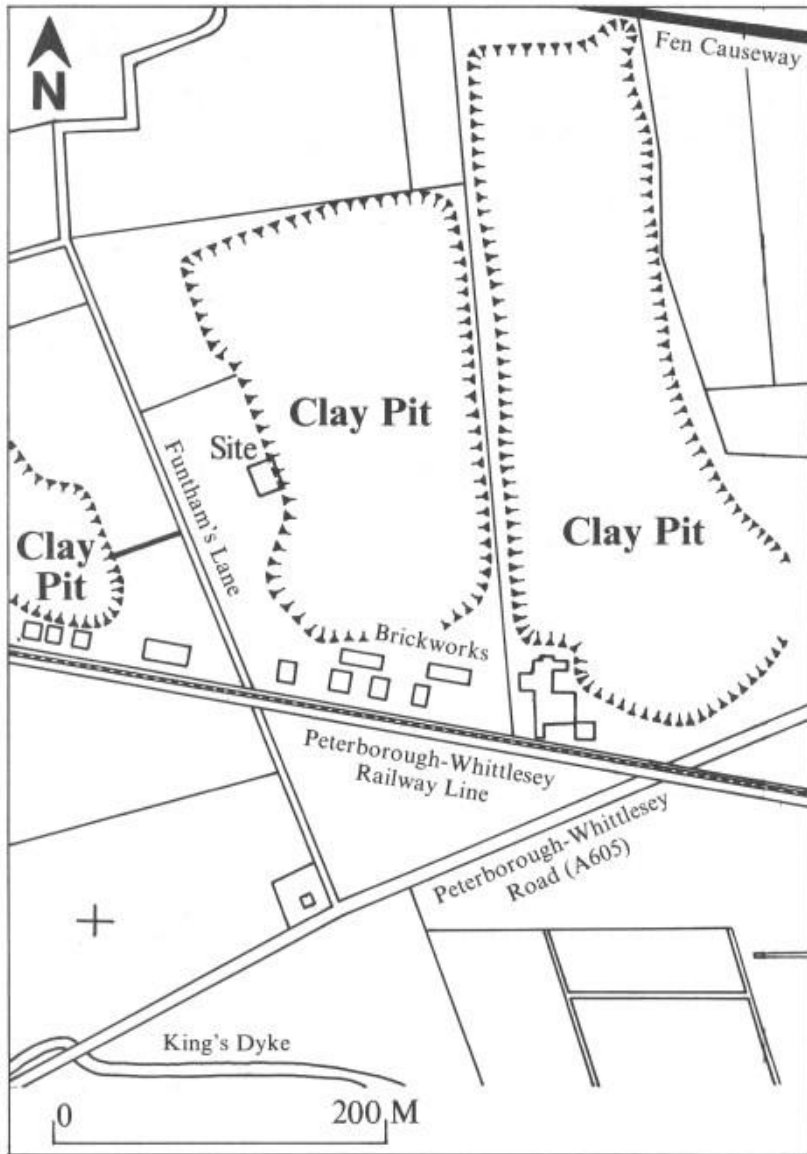


Fig 18b Detailed location plan

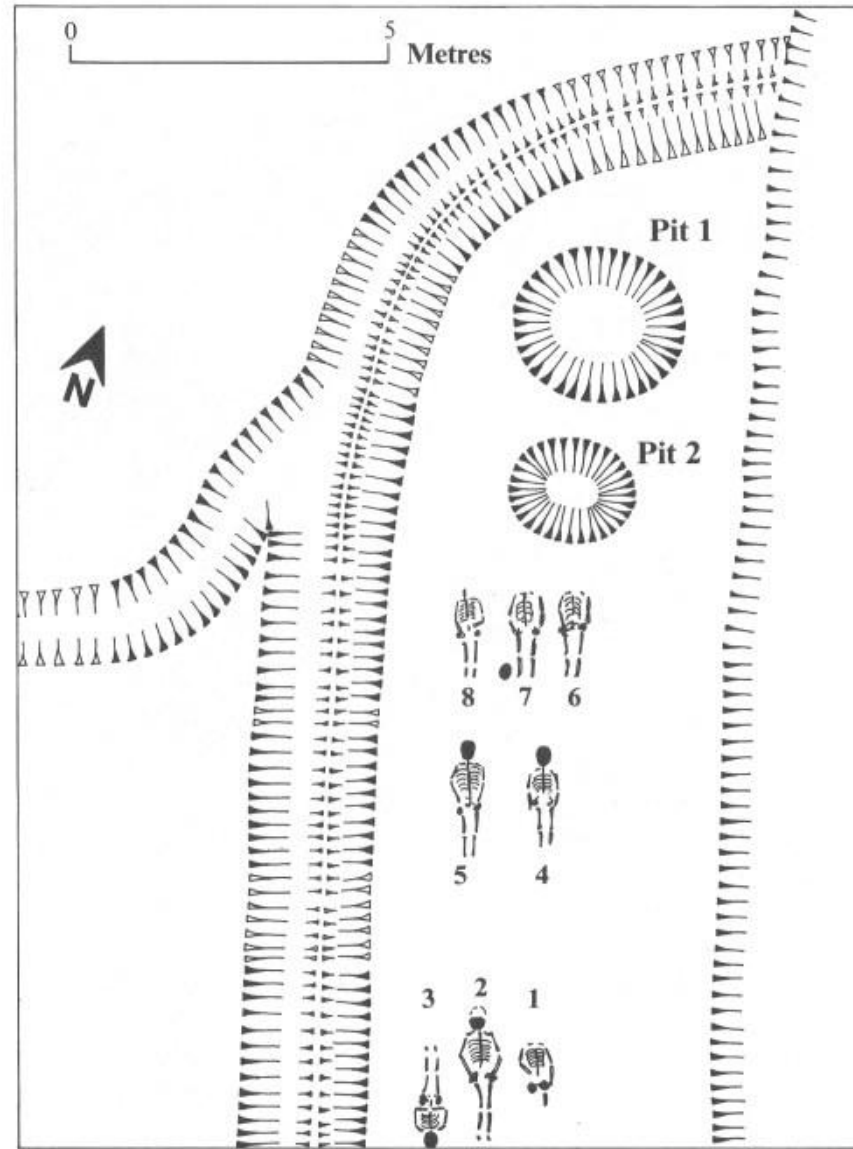


Fig 18c Site plan of the King's Dyke burials