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**Three Roman Stone Coffin-burials from Wick, Gloucestershire**

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## NOTES

### THREE ROMAN STONE COFFIN-BURIALS FROM WICK, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Locations: Coffins 1 & 2 : Nat. Grid. Ref. ST 69367195  
Coffin 3 : ST 70157320

On 21 April 1955, two Roman coffins of Bath freestone were found during the cutting of a trench by a mechanical excavator in connection with a sewage scheme undertaken by the Chipping Sodbury R.D.C. Coffin 1 was almost destroyed by the excavator; coffin 2 was exposed in the side of the trench, and with the kind assistance of the contractors (Maynard Froud & Stevens, St. Stephen's Chambers, Baldwin Street, Bristol, 1) was excavated on 22 April.<sup>1</sup> It was subsequently removed to the grounds of Tracy Park, Wick, where it remains.

While this excavation was proceeding, it was learned that another coffin (3) was found some time previously in the garden of 24 Mendip View, Naishcombe Hill, Wick, where it remains.

#### COFFINS 1 AND 2

These coffins were found about 230 feet east of the River Boyd and nearly three-quarters of a mile almost due west of Coldharbour Farm.

The trench followed the crest of a slight made-up scarp above riverside terraces. It revealed chocolate-brown topsoil averaging 3 feet 6 inches in depth, separated from the Trias marl by a thin layer of yellow gravel: perhaps a terrace of the River Boyd.

<sup>1</sup> The work was undertaken by Messrs P. A. Rahtz, G. A. Brown, Dr H. Taylor, and L. V. Grinsell; Mr Mansbridge (representing the contractors) saved a great deal of time by arranging for the topsoil above the coffin to be removed by the mechanical excavator; Mr A. Ap Simon assisted on a later occasion.

The topsoil is slightly darker at its base, and is charcoal-flecked. It contained close to coffin 2 a few scraps of animal bone (unidentified), and 17 feet north of coffin 1 an indeterminate Roman potsherd at a depth of 3 feet 6 inches from the turf and 2 inches above the subsoil.<sup>1</sup> A spread of Lias was noted in the lower part of the topsoil mainly south of coffin No. 2 and 40–70 feet north of coffin No. 1—probably derived from the slopes to the east by cultivation.

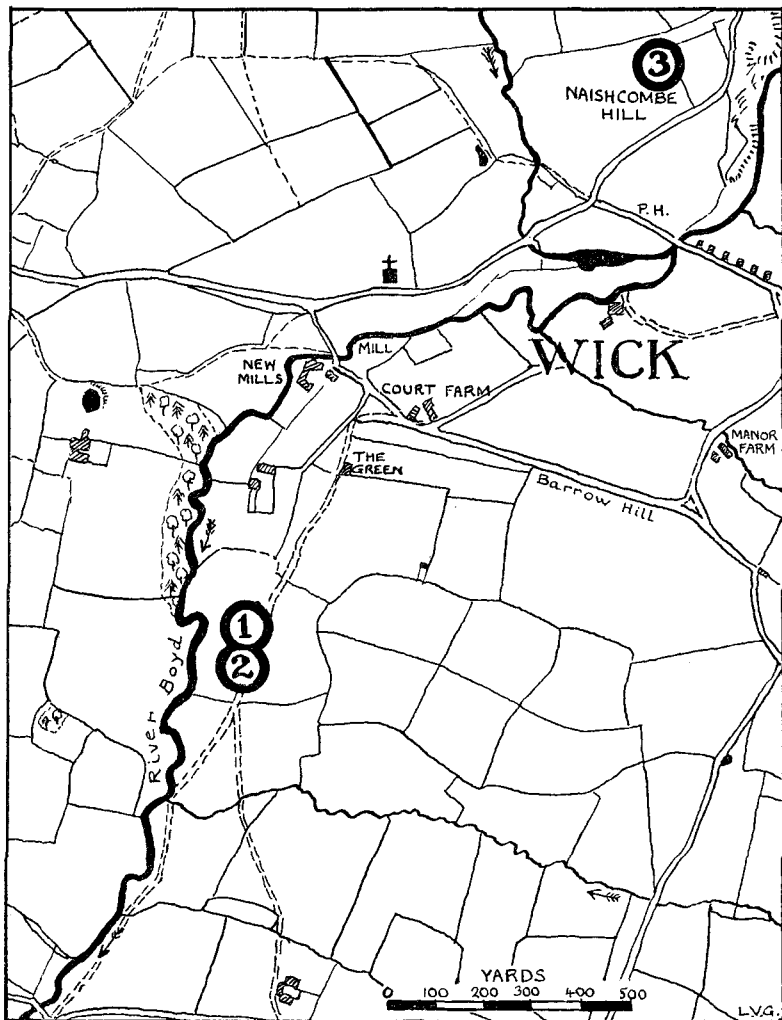
The position of the coffins in relation to the topsoil and subsoil is indicated in Appendix I. Coffin 1 was covered by a 4 inch layer of disturbed red clay which merged into the surrounding junction of topsoil and subsoil. The thick topsoil is homogeneous, but an E–W section (exposed when coffin 2 was uncovered) showed slight tip-lines of small stones. The scarp itself may be an old field boundary and there seems to have been a gradual accumulation of stony soil from the slope on the east side. It is uncertain when it began. The coffin pits could be distinguished only in the Trias marl subsoil.

Both coffins are on the same general alignment: about 5°W of the trench-line which was 20° E of Mag. N, and thus about 15° E of Mag. N (or 6° E. of True N). They are therefore both placed roughly N–S. Coffin 1 had the head at S., and coffin 2 had the head at N.

Coffin 1 was destroyed excepting for one side and bits of top and bottom left in the west side of the trench. The lid had apparently been in one piece. Some skeletal material was removed by the police before the arrival of the writers, but no sandal-nails or other objects were noted by either the contractors or the police. The bones were too fragmentary for identification of age and sex.

Coffin 2 was complete. The lid, in two parts, was cleaned, photographed and lifted, and covered an intact skeleton, the right side of the skull and upper ends of the pelvic bones being visible above the silt which had accumulated to about half the depth of the coffin. This silt consisted of three layers: a base

<sup>1</sup> Hard smooth orange-coloured fabric, 1 inch by 0.75 inch, by 0.25 inch thick.



Location of Roman Stone Coffin-burials

layer  $\frac{1}{4}$ – $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick, of yellowish-grey gritty material, a middle layer of laminated red clayey soil, and a top layer of red-brown laminated material.

The skeleton<sup>1</sup> lay on its back in the extended posture, its arms straight, and hands below hips. The skull faced E. The bones were somewhat disturbed, probably by worms and other burrowing animals. One of the wrist-bones was between the feet; one of the patellae was beside the right femur, the other between the femuri; the lower jaw was almost at the base of the coffin. The ankle-bones were covered and surrounded by the foot-bones.

Prof. J. M. Yoffey has kindly identified the skeleton as that of a young female about 5 feet 2 inches tall, aged about 20–25.

Among the foot-bones were 32 domed 'sandal-nails',<sup>2</sup> 16 'boot-protectors',<sup>3</sup> and a few indeterminate iron scraps, as well as an indeterminate Roman potsherd of brownish-black fabric with red-brown surface.

On the subsoil around the coffin was a distinct layer of trodden small stones, with larger pieces, including Lias, apparently used to support the ends and sides of the coffin.

The lid was in two parts: a roughly rectangular slab 2 feet 3 inches by 1 foot 9 inches over the head, and a longer slab 4 feet by 1 foot 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches, slightly bevelled towards the head end, over the remainder.

Coffin 3 was found some months previously in the garden of 24 Mendip View, Wick, about a mile to E.N.E. The tenant stated that it was lying 1 foot deep in disturbed ground, placed W–E (head to E)<sup>4</sup> filled with earth similar to the surrounding soil, and there was no skeleton in it. It is in two pieces and badly weathered and remains in the garden of 24 Mendip View. It was probably not found *in situ* and may well have been formerly used as a sheep trough.

<sup>1</sup> Examined by Dr H. Taylor, and removed to Bristol University by assistants of Prof. J. M. Yoffey.

<sup>2</sup> Each about  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch long and with head  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch diameter.

<sup>3</sup> Each oval-headed, with double prong; heads 0.9 inch by 0.4 inch; prongs 0.5 inch long.

<sup>4</sup> Confirmed by Mrs Read, 37 Naishcombe Hill, Wick.

## CONCLUSIONS

All three coffins belong to Willmore's type C (resembling a bath, with rounded head and squared foot), many of which have already been found in the neighbourhood of Bath. Some are asymmetrical, as is our coffin 2. They are of Bath freestone, and although it is difficult to be precise concerning the location of the Roman stone quarries in the Bath region, proximity to the Fosse Way supports the claim of Mr T. S. Cotterell in 1905 that the old quarries between the Fosse Way and Bloomfield Crescent (NGR ST 740628) were worked in Roman times. Heavy objects such as pigs of lead and Roman coffins would, wherever possible, have been transported along Roman roads or rivers, and the Fosse Way might well have combined with the Bristol Avon and its tributary the River Boyd, and other tributaries, to distribute these coffins to the several places where they have been found.

When did this happen? Until about A.D. 150, cremation was the usual method of interment in Roman Britain. Then the practice of inhumation gradually came into favour, and Mr G.C. Dunning considers<sup>1</sup> that interments with sandal-nails are unlikely to be earlier than c. A.D. 250. A date between A.D. 250 and 350 seems most likely for coffin 2, and there is no other dating evidence for the others.

## REFERENCES

Roman Coffins in Gloucestershire were classified in an important article by Eng. Capt. H. H. Willmore in *Trans B.G.A.S.*, LXI (1939), 135-77. A useful note on those of Somerset, by F. W. Jefferies and W. A. Seaby, appeared in *Proc. Som. A. & N.H.S.*, xcv (1950), 106-11, and it may here be mentioned that those in Wiltshire are described in *V.C.H. Wiltshire*, I, Part 1, 1957, under the following parishes: Bradford-on-Avon (4), Colerne (2), Corsham, Erlestoke, Fonthill Bishop, Fovant, Latton, Laverstock, North Wraxall, Purton, and Teffont. The sites of the Roman stone quarries in the Bath area were discussed by T. S. Cotterell in *The Antiquary*, xli (1905), 87-92.

<sup>1</sup> Verbal information.

## APPENDIX I

STRATIGRAPHY OF COFFINS I AND 2	Coffin 1		Coffin 2	
	ft.	in.	ft.	in.
Distance of base of coffin below present turf-line .. .. .	5	0	4	6
Distance of base of coffin below junction of topsoil with subsoil .. ..	1	6	1	2
Distance of top of lid above junction of topsoil with subsoil .. ..	0	2½	0	8½
Depth of topsoil .. .. .	3	4	3	4

## APPENDIX II

## DIMENSIONS OF THE STONE COFFINS FROM WICK

	No. 1		No. 2		No. 3	
	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.
Length: external ..	6	3½ (left)*	5	10	4	4½
internal ..	5	4½ (left)*	5	4	3	1
Width: external (head)	Unknown		1	11	1	6
" (foot)	"		1	0	0	11
internal (head)	"		1	4½	1	3
" (foot)	"		0	7	0	6
Depth: external ..	1	4	1	7 (head)	1	0
" ..			1	4 (foot)		
internal ..	0	10	0	9 (max)	0	9 (max)
					0	7 (min)
Thickness (head) ..	0	4	0	3	0	2½
(foot) ..	0	7	0	?	0	2
(side) ..	0	2½ (av.)	0	3	0	1½
(base) ..	0	6	0	?	0	4 (max)
					0	2½ (min)
(lid) ..	0	4	0	5	missing?	

*N.B.* \* It is estimated that No. 1 would have been originally about 6 inches longer both externally and internally.