

Early Residents Reveal Their Secrets

An archaeological dig at Bicester's Roman Catholic Church made exciting discoveries that may rewrite the history of the town, as Peter Chivers explains

It's an eerie feeling to come face to face or should I say face to skull with a local resident who lived in Bicester fourteen hundred years ago. That's exactly what happened when skeletons recovered from the recent archaeological dig at the Roman Catholic Church went on display for a short time in February.

With a name like Bicester, the town might easily be mistaken as having a Roman origin. Not so, although a substantial Roman town was located at Aichester, a mile to the southeast of present day Bicester. When the Romans left Britain in 410 A.D., the residents that remained found the drier situation offered at the site of the present town more to their liking than the damp Aichester that bordered the Osmoor wetlands. It was the Saxons therefore, who were responsible for founding the present town.

Little was known about the early settlement of Bicester until archaeological excavations, undertaken towards the end of 1999, at Saxon Court off Chapel Street, uncovered evidence of Saxon dwellings well over a thousand years old. The site was confirmed as being part of the early town. It was known that by the ninth century the settlement had a Christian Minster Church that also looked after the affairs of neighbouring churches surrounding villages. It was no surprise therefore that a number of Saxon graves were uncovered when, 10 years ago, a car park was constructed at the Roman Catholic Church. At the time it was not possible to study the excavation site and the graves were reburied



beneath the car park. Recent building work at the Church of the Immaculate Conception has provided archaeologists with a fresh chance to re-examine the Saxon cemetery in greater detail, and the early residents of Bicester have begun to reveal their secrets! The remains of twelve graves were uncovered during the present excavations. These were part of an ordered cemetery

laid out on an east to west alignment, denoting a Christian influence at the site. This was a common practice in later Saxon times but to find such an early example is extremely surprising. The burials were in various states of preservation and there was a lack of grave goods, apart from a number of pottery pieces. Future scientific analysis of the skeletons using carbon dating,

isotope and nitrogen analysis will provide additional information about the date of the burials, the diet that the residents in the settlement survived on and where the earliest settlers originated from. Results obtained from the carbon dating of samples indicate that the remains are much earlier than originally thought and date back to 600 - 650 A.D. This pre-dates the original Saxon Minster Church and calls into question the view that the settlement was founded by St. Birinus, the seventh century Bishop of Dorchester! The new evidence seems sure to add to the knowledge we have about the initial development of the town.

It is hoped the remains will be displayed again at the Bicester Local History Society Heritage Exhibition taking place at the Methodist Church Hall on 21 May. Later, they will be returned to the Catholic Church to be interred in the newly opened Memorial Garden, respecting the original burial rites these early residents were accorded.

