

In the first of a new series looking at the stories behind special artifacts in Oxfordshire's museums, Christine Bloxham looks at a bowl surrounded by mystery

Bowled over

It will probably never be possible to solve the mysteries surrounding this exquisite Anglo-Saxon glass bowl — found in a richly furnished princely burial, surrounded by what were possibly human sacrifices. It was found in 1847 during building alterations for Bishop Wilberforce's Palace, Cuddesdon, and was not properly excavated or recorded.

The bowl disappeared and it was rediscovered by Jocelyn Morris, then Curator of Warwick Museum, who spotted it on the mantelpiece of a local landowner, filled with primroses. She recognised it from a 19th-century engraving by Akerman, and it was subsequently sold and placed on loan to the Ashmolean Museum, where it can be seen in the Anglo-Saxon gallery, surrounded by other glass pieces from the Roman era.

The burial was described in the *Archaeological Journal* (Volume IV, pp157-9, 1847) which recorded the discovery of "several human skeletons at the depth of between two and three feet from the surface. On further examination it was found that the skeletons were arranged in a circle, their heads outwards, lying on their faces with their legs crossed... Near them were found several highly-curious and interesting objects..."

These ritual burials have parallels with Sutton Hoo (the richest Saxon royal burial site in the country), suggesting human sacrifice, and if so a ruler of importance. The objects, now lost apart from the bowl, consisted of two decayed swords (or possibly a sword and a seax), a bronze bucket, two blue glass bowls, a fragment of gilt-bronze set with

The Cuddesdon Bowl Ashmolean Museum



garnets (which has been interpreted as a bird's head and may have been an ornamental plaque for a shield or possibly a musical instrument), and a late medieval ring.

Tania Dickinson studied the burial, and excavated the site in 1970, discovering the remains of at least four bodies — an adult male and female, another female of about 20 and a child aged between eight and puberty — which are probably some of the skeletons discovered in 1847.

The Cuddesdon Bowl is royal blue, translucent when held to the light, and its surface is now iridescent. The rim and base are worn, indicating extensive use before burial. It is

decorated with a thin trail of ten horizontal lines round the upper half and 13 vertical loops on the lower half. Its shape is unique and it is of English manufacture, probably made in Kent. The missing bowl was squat with a collared neck with three thick applied glass trails pinched to form two rows of lozenge shaped cells, similar to one from the second ship burial at Sutton Hoo.

The bronze bucket was nine inches (22.8cm) high, decorated with engraved horizontal lines. The rim was repaired in antiquity. It was made in the Middle East between the fourth and sixth centuries AD and is unique in Europe. It may have contained the cremated ashes of the principal burial.

Tania Dickinson suggested the grave, which has parallels with other Anglo-Saxon burials, was that of a local prince or sub-king, buried c.600, which had perhaps been robbed in antiquity, as one would normally expect more personal jewellery.

We can give him no name, but he was possibly from the Gewisse who ruled the West Saxons, or perhaps, because of the Kentish objects, an exiled noble from Kent. The Cuddesdon place name may indicate the West Saxon dynasty which included many men with 'Cuth' as an element of their names, such as Cuthred and Cuthwulf. The story is full of suppositions, because there are so few hard facts, but the bowl gives us a tantalising glimpse into Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire.

Further information can be found in Tania M Dickinson, *Cuddesdon and Dorchester-on-Thames*, British Archaeological Reports No. 1, 1974. ■