

AN EARLY PAGAN SAXON CEMETERY, NEAR SLIP END, ASHWELL

In the autumn of 1975 a small excavation at this site was directed by the writer for the North Hertfordshire Archaeological Society and the North Hertfordshire District Council. The excavation followed the disturbance of a grave by a farmworker who was 'looking for buried treasure'!

The site was known from aerial photographs as a rectangular enclosure, c.52m X c.34m, but nothing was known of its date or purpose. In the event, sections across the enclosure ditches did not produce any conclusive dating evidence. However, they were very shallow and had rapidly silted, and the burials excavated within the area enclosed by them were aligned in the same direction as the shorter enclosure arms. Thus, the ditches may have been dug to enclose the burials.

Two graves cut into the chalk sub-

soil were investigated. The first had already been disturbed by the farmworker but it was possible to recover enough sherds from an undisturbed part of the grave fill to date it as contemporary with the second grave. In addition, a small part of the inhumation was found *in situ*, and other details were gained by questioning the farmworker. The burial was of an adult, extended approximately east-west, with the head at the west end.

Between grave one and grave two was a contemporary ditch containing at one end the lower legs and feet of a human burial, and further along another human skeleton, articulated from the pelvis to the neck but with skull and legs absent. On the right hand of this inhumation was a bronze finger-ring.

The second grave contained in its upper fill a mass of largely disarticulated bones but there were no signs of later disturbance and it is possible that two of the bodies put in this grave were more or less decomposed at the time of burial. It is possible they had been re-interred from a nearby grave. A carefully buried skeleton lay extended on its back at the base of the grave (see cover photograph). A further two skulls, one of a child, were placed beneath the skulls of the two largely disarticulated skeletons. Thus, there were five skulls but apparently only three complete skeletons in this particular grave. The burials were aligned as in the first grave. Associated finds included a number of broken Romano-British vessels, and a few early pagan Saxon sherds, datable to the late 5th/early 6th centuries A.D.

G.R.B.

