'Given to the Ground'
A Viking Age Mass Grave on Ridgeway Hill, Weymouth

By Angela Boyle, David Score, Helen Webb & Louise Loe

This volume describes one of the most exciting and unexpected archaeological discoveries to have been made in Britain in recent years, that of a rare mass grave of executed Vikings on Ridgeway Hill, Dorset. The skeletons, around 50 in total, were predominantly of young adult males all of whom had been decapitated: heads had been deposited in a pile at the southern edge of the grave, while the beheaded bodies had been apparently thrown in with little care. Since their recovery experts have undertaken forensic studies of the bones and have applied cutting edge techniques to elicit the most information possible, in order to understand who the individuals were and what circumstances led to their demise. It reveals an extraordinary story of the discovery of what is arguably the most dramatic physical evidence for violence in early medieval Britain ever encountered by archaeologists.
Shadows in the Sand
Excavation of a Viking-Age cemetery at Cumwhitton

By Adam J. Parsons, Caroline Paterson, Christine Howard-Davis, Nick Johnson & Rachel M. Newman

In 2004, a Cumbrian metal detectorist, Peter Adams, found a brooch in the ploughsoil, near Cumwhitton in the Eden Valley. This was identified as a rare Viking oval brooch of ninth- or tenth-century date. These are almost always found in pairs, and in a burial context, and a second brooch was subsequently found. Given their rarity, this was clearly of national importance, so an evaluation was undertaken and a furnished grave was located. Several more artefacts of the same date, including part of a sword, were found in the surrounding ploughsoil by metal detecting during the evaluation, suggesting that there was a cemetery. A major excavation was then funded by English Heritage, as the site was under immediate threat from plough damage.

Six burials were found, dating to the early tenth century, but almost no skeletal material survived. The burials were richly furnished, with a wide range of artefacts, including swords, spearheads, spurs, knives, and numerous other objects. These were poorly preserved, but the careful excavation, conservation, and analysis has produced a wealth of information about their original appearance, manufacture, and use. A rare decorated drinking horn, seax with a silver-inlaid horn handle, a locking wooden box, and a unique group of copper alloy buckles and strap ends were especially notable.

This rare opportunity has allowed the study of a closely linked group of Viking burials, probably of a single family and seemingly of not more than two generations. It has highlighted both the similarities and differences between the graves, which might point to some individuality in the burial rites, and the diversity of the cultural origins of the objects that furnished them. Most importantly, this site has provided a tantalising glimpse of the cultural origins, beliefs, and status of these people and how they may have fitted in the volatile political landscape of tenth-century Cumbria.
‘Down to Weymouth town by Ridgeway’
Prehistoric, Roman and later sites along the Weymouth Relief Road

By Chris Hayden, David Score & Lisa Brown

The Weymouth Relief Road crosses an area of intricately varied geology and one of the richest and most important cultural landscapes in England, which preserves a wealth of archaeological and historical remains. Extensive fieldwork in advance of construction of the Weymouth Relief Road yielded evidence of Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age settlement and funerary activity, along with vestiges of Roman occupation.

The main sites were located at Ridgeway Hill, located on the edge of South Dorset Ridgeway, at the northern end of the scheme and at Southdown Ridge close to the southern end. At Ridgeway Hill a sequence of Neolithic pits was investigated, along with several groups of early Bronze Age inhumation and cremation burials in pits and cists. The burials were probably originally associated with barrows that belonged to the Ridgeway Hill group, one of the densest concentrations of Bronze Age round barrows in Britain. At Southdown Ridge a settlement that spanned the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age to the late Iron Age was discovered lying adjacent to a cross-ridge dyke and prehistoric field enclosures. The inhabitants engaged in shale-working activity as well as agriculture until the settlement was abandoned and converted to a cemetery in which the dead were buried in the distinctive south Dorset tradition, accompanied by grave goods, and later in the Roman tradition of coffined burial.