Wilby Way, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire

Archaeological Excavation

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For
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GLOSSARY

ARCHAEOLOGY
For the purposes of this project, archaeology is taken to mean the study of past human societies through their material remains, from prehistoric times to the modern era. No rigid upper date limit has been set, but AD 1900 is used as a general cut-off point.

BRONZE AGE
Chronological division of the prehistoric period, which sees the introduction of copper and eventual widespread adoption of bronze weapons, implements, jewellery etc. In Britain it is dated between c2300 BC-700 BC.

CONTEXT
The simplest level of excavated archaeological data, i.e. a context could be the cut of a ditch (shown as [1]), or its fill (shown as (2)).

IRON AGE
The first period in which iron was the predominant metal. In Britain it is dated between c700 BC to the Roman conquest in AD 43.

MEDIEVAL
Taken here as the period from the Norman invasion in AD 1066 to approximately AD 1500.

NATURAL
Defined in archaeological terms this refers to the undisturbed natural geology of a site, e.g. Lower Lias clay, river terrace gravels etc.

NGR
National Grid Reference given from the Ordnance Survey Grid.

OD
Ordnance Datum; used to express a given height above mean sea level.

POT-SHERD
A fragment of a pottery vessel.
RIDGE AND FURROW
Remains of cultivation of medieval or later date forming a corrugated surface.

SETTLEMENT
An area of habitation, perhaps surrounded by associated closes, paddocks, approach ways and other features which together constitute a complex of earthworks or cropmarks distinct from fields.
SUMMARY

Between June and August 1998 Cotswold Archaelogical Trust (CAT) carried out an archaeological excavation on the north-eastern and south-eastern peripheries of a large Iron Age settlement situated immediately to the north-east of the A45 Wilby Way roundabout, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire. This work took place just to the south-east of a previous excavation carried out by CAT in 1997.

Several small curvilinear gullies and cremation burials were apparent which, although as yet undated, could be of Bronze Age date. However, the vast majority of the features found on the excavation proved to be of Iron Age date. Two north-west to south-east aligned parallel ditches and a fence line formed successive boundaries on the north-eastern periphery of the settlement. Several pits and postholes were apparent to the south-west of this boundary. The south-eastern ends of the boundary ditches were cut through by a complex of deep pits. These pits were in turn cut by the ditch of a large enclosure aligned north-west to south-east. Few features were found within this enclosure indicating that it may have defined an area of agricultural land. To the south-west of this enclosure was a series of pits which were in proximity to a large D-shaped enclosure excavated in 1979. However, the area to the south and east of the main Iron Age settlement was generally unsettled and perhaps used for agricultural purposes. A large medieval limestone quarry was also found.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 In April 1998 Cotswold Archaeological Trust was commissioned by David Wilson Homes to carry out an archaeological excavation in advance of residential development to the north-east of the A45 Wilby Way roundabout, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire (Fig. 1).

1.1.2 The excavation was in response to a planning condition placed upon the development by the Borough Council of Wellingborough. The work was also undertaken as part of the conditions of a Section 106 agreement for the preservation of nationally important archaeological remains, and the recording and publication of associated remains. It followed the excavation of part of an Iron Age settlement, prior to commercial and residential development, immediately to the north-west of the study area. The same project design, issued by Northamptonshire Heritage, was used for both excavations and it is intended to merge the results of both excavations into a single future publication report. This report briefly summarises the results of the second excavation.

1.1.3 The excavation was carried out in accordance with Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (PPG 16), and the ‘Policy and Guidance for Archaeological Fieldwork in Northamptonshire’ (1995).

1.2 The study area

1.2.1 The excavation was located on grazing land immediately to the north-east of the A45 Wilby Way roundabout, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire centred on NGR: SP 882660. Topographically the site lay between 85-89m OD.
1.2.2 The underlying geology of the site is mapped by the British Geological Survey as Inferior Oolite overlain by Boulder Clay and morainic drift.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The Iron Age settlement at Wilby Way was identified in the 1960's by aerial photography. As a result it was the subject of sporadic archaeological investigation, both in the 1970's and the early part of the 1990's. In 1979 rescue excavation of several roundhouses, and associated field boundaries dated to the middle Iron Age and a substantial D-shaped enclosure of late Iron Age date was undertaken in advance of the construction of the A45. This work identified the site as being of national importance, and resulted in the preservation in-situ of the core area of settlement.

1.3.2 In the spring of 1997 Cotswold Archaeological Trust carried out an extensive programme of staged archaeological excavation and recording of approximately 1.5 hectares on the north-western periphery of this extensive Iron Age settlement (Fig. 2, archaeological zones A-E and G). This work followed on from a desk-based assessment, aerial photographic transcription, geophysical survey and field evaluation, all undertaken by CAT during 1996. The site was characterised by a series of unenclosed and enclosed settlements, ranging in date from the early to late Iron Age. In addition an undated inhumation was also discovered.

1.3.3 Early-middle Iron Age features were largely confined to the western part of the excavation area with a possible stock enclosure and a settlement to the east. The settlement comprised four roundhouses, a possible granary, pits, gullies and postholes. A pit, located within Roundhouse 1, contained burnt grain processing debris suggesting the roundhouse may have been a working area. In addition an animal skull had been placed upside down in the base of the drip-gully terminal, presumably placed as a ritual deposit and perhaps indicating the importance of grain to the community. The large quantity of pottery recovered from the gully defining Roundhouse 3 may indicate that it
was an area of more domestic occupation, whilst a bone tool recovered from
the gully of Roundhouse 2 may indicate a use associated with craft-based
activities.

1.3.4 Several intercutting pits, interpreted as clay quarries, were identified
immediately to the east of this settlement area. A further possible clay pit was
also identified at the very eastern end of the site. A large quantity of pottery
(115 sherds) recovered from this pit suggests further domestic activity dated
to the early to mid Iron Age may be located to the east of the excavation area.

1.3.5 In the middle to late Iron Age settlement shifted to the east. There was some
slight overlapping with the previous settlement area, with Roundhouse 1
replaced by a small multi-phased enclosure with opposing entrances on the
north and south sides. After rapid backfilling the enclosure ditches appeared
to have been recut several times. There were no internal features associated
with these enclosures to indicate their purpose. However the ditches were
covered by a dark soil, from which 45 sherds of a mid to late Iron Age
cremation urn were recovered suggesting the area had some ritual/funerary
importance.

1.3.6 Located 30m to the north was a series of enclosures. Several phases of
activity could be identified, all of which were dated to the middle to late Iron
Age. At least seven roundhouses, which exhibited several phases of
construction, were recorded. The boundary ditches enclosing this area also
showed evidence of change to layout overtime, and is perhaps suggestive of
stock control and corralling. It is possible that this evidence is a reflection of
seasonal occupation, perhaps with the ritual/funerary monument also serving
as a territory marker.

1.3.7 Late Iron Age occupation comprised three enclosures, a clay quarry and an
isolated storage pit. Another enclosure cut through the ritual/funerary
monument, whilst respecting its layout and maintaining the southern entrance.
Environmental evidence suggests this deep ditched enclosure contained
permanent water, and is likely to have been connected to a nearby watercourse or pond. It was contained within a large rectilinear enclosure, measuring 36m E-W by 38m N-S where revealed by excavation. A further enclosure, with a western entrance, lay to the east. Towards the western edge of the excavation area an isolated pit was recorded, from which 41 sherds of late Iron Age pottery was recovered.

1.3.8 Initial assessment of the overall pottery assemblage suggests the site was long-lived, with occupation throughout the Iron Age. Whilst there are sites which produce either early-middle or middle late Iron Age assemblages, there are few with the apparent longevity of this one, in Northamptonshire. Therefore the material appears virtually unique amongst the published pottery assemblages of the period within the county (P. Blinkhorn, pers. comm.).

1.4 Methodology

1.4. The excavation was sub-divided into three areas (Fig. 2, Areas F, J and K). Areas J and K were the subject of a programme of full excavation and Area F a strip and record strategy. Areas J and K had previously been used as a dumping ground for the spoil from the 1997 excavations and this material, and the upper part of the topsoil, were removed using a D8 and box scraper. The remaining topsoil and subsoil was then removed by a 360° tracked mechanical excavator equipped with a toothless ditching bucket, also under archaeological supervision. In Area F the D8 and box scraper were also used to strip the upper part of the topsoil. The remaining topsoil and subsoil were then also removed by a 360° tracked mechanical excavator.

1.4.1 Area J was excavated first followed by Area K. Finally, after an assessment of the archaeological remains in Area F all significant features here were also sampled by hand excavation.

1.4.2 All artefacts were recovered and processed in accordance with the CAT Finds Recording Manual (1994). It is proposed to examine these artefacts in
conjunction with those from the excavation carried out to the north-west of the study area. However, for the purposes of this report the ceramics were assessed by Paul Blinkhorn and Dennis Jackson, in accordance with the Northamptonshire Ceramic Type Series, and the animal bone was assessed by Mark Maltby. Human bone from several cremations and a solitary inhumation will be analysed, in conjunction with human remains from the earlier excavation, by Dr. Jacqueline McKinley.

1.4.3 Environmental sampling and assessment was undertaken in accordance with the CAT Environmental Sampling Manual (1994). A total of 61 samples were taken from the site, including the cremations and the inhumation. Those samples taken from features such as ditches and pits will be examined by Dr. Keith Wilkinson and it is also proposed to analyse these findings in conjunction with the samples taken from the earlier excavation.

1.4.4 The excavation was monitored by Mr. Sandy Kidd of Northamptonshire Heritage.

2. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

2.1 Bronze Age

2.1.1 Three pits containing human cremations were identified. One of these pits [3371] was particularly large measuring 1m x 0.8m across and 0.3m deep. Approximately 3m to the north-east was a smaller pit [3326] which contained another cremation. No surrounding feature such as a ring ditch of a barrow was identified but it is possible that the large pit is the major burial and the smaller one a satellite cremation. If so, these burials are probably of Bronze Age date. A further isolated cremation [5043] was found along the north-eastern edge of the study area (Fig. 3).
2.1.2 At the north-western end of the site were several small curvilinear gullies and pits, the fills of which were much lighter than those of the Iron Age features found on the rest of the excavations. The function and date of these features is not known but it is possible that they belong to a period of activity predating the Iron Age and may even be associated with the cremations.

2.2 *Iron Age*

*Boundary ditches*

2.2.1 Two north-west to south-east aligned ditches [3240] and [3382], approximately 3m apart, were apparent for a length of approximately 55m. Both had been recut several times. These ditches had previously been detected by a geophysical survey carried out in 1997, and were then thought to represent a trackway. However, this is now considered unlikely as pottery of middle Iron Age date was recovered from the outermost ditch [3382] and pottery of late Iron Age date was recovered from the innermost ditch [3240]. In addition, ditch [3240] curved at its north-western end to cut ditch [3382], and the latter also contained postholes for a fence or palisade. Indeed, it is now considered more likely that these ditches, along with a fence line [3538] defined by several postholes, formed successive boundaries on the north-eastern periphery of the Iron Age settlement (Fig. 3).

2.2.2 To the south-west of these boundaries were several postholes which formed no discernible pattern. Indeed it is possible that some of these are associated with the possible Bronze Age cremations. A large complex of inter-cutting pits [3539], together with individual pits, were also found. The function of the pit complex, which produced sherds of early Iron Age and middle Iron Age pottery, is uncertain. It cannot have been used for the disposal of rubbish as the pits contained relatively few finds, and there were not enough limestone outcrops in this part of the site for them to have served as quarries.
2.2.3 To the north-east of the boundary ditches were a few pits and postholes which formed no discernible pattern. This area appears to have been relatively unsettled and was perhaps used for agricultural purposes apart from a few small pits, which were probably dug for sand extraction.

*Pit complex*

2.2.4 The south-eastern ends of the boundary ditches had been cut by a linear complex of several pits. One of these pits [3185], which contained a small pottery assemblage of possible late Iron Age date, also produced an unusually large number of horse bone fragments.

*Enclosure*

2.2.5 The pit complex had in turn been cut by a linear ditch [3210], much of which lay underneath the backfill of a medieval quarry and a plough furrow. A horse skull, presumably placed as a ritual deposit, was found within the fill of this ditch. The ditch itself formed the north-western arm of a large north-west-south-east aligned enclosure which continued to the south-east beyond the excavation area. A small gully [5056] ran parallel to this enclosure on its south-western side. However, relatively few features were found within this enclosure apart from a few stakeholes. This indicates that the area defined by the enclosure was relatively unsettled and probably defined an area of agricultural land.

2.2.6 To the north-east of this enclosure there were few archaeological features apart from a pit complex dug for the extraction of sand, cremation [5043] and a few small pits. To the south-west of this enclosure there were a few pits but occupation here was also relatively sparse.
2.3 Medieval

2.3.1 Several shallow furrows, indicative of medieval ridge and furrow ploughing traversed the site. A large medieval limestone quarry [3034], which produced 5 sherds of 13th-15th century pottery, was also found.

3. THE FINDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL EVIDENCE

3.1 The pottery

3.1.1 A total of 305 Iron Age and 7 post-Roman potsherds was recovered from the excavation. These will be fully assessed as a group with the large pottery assemblage recovered from the previous excavation. However, for the purposes of this report all were assigned fabric types and spot-dated by Paul Blinkhorn and Dennis Jackson.

3.1.2 As in the 1997 excavations virtually the full range of decorative techniques employed by the Iron Age potters of the region was noted. Fingertipped (early-middle Iron Age), scored (late early to late middle Iron Age) and La Tene curvilinear (late Iron Age) decorated sherds were found on the site.

3.2 Animal bone

3.2.1 A total of 1380 animal bone fragments were recovered from the excavation and these will be analysed as a group with the bones from the earlier excavations. A similar range of species to the earlier excavations has been identified. However, horse bones were found in unusually large numbers compared to the 1997 excavations, indicating significant spatial variations in species representation in different areas of the Iron Age settlement.
3.3 *Human bone*

3.3.1 The bone from the cremation burials will be analysed in conjunction with the human remains recovered from the previous excavation.

3.4 *Other finds*

3.4.1 A small quantity of slag was recovered from the excavation, possibly indicating that metalworking was being carried out within the vicinity. In addition 10 struck flints and 2 pieces of worked bone were also recovered. These will be studied in conjunction with similar material from the 1997 excavation.

3.5 *Environmental evidence*

3.5.1 A total of 61 samples were taken during the excavations. The cremation burials were 100% sampled and 10 litre samples taken from the fills of some pits and ditches. The residues from these samples will be analysed in conjunction with the samples taken from the 1997 excavation.

4. **DISCUSSION**

4.1 The excavation has provided the first evidence on the possible use of the site for cremation burial during the Bronze Age. The relationship of these burials with the curvilinear gullies and pits identified to the north-west is not known, as the latter produced no dating evidence. However, it is possible that these too may represent a period of occupation which pre-dates the Iron Age.

4.2 The excavation has also provided evidence for a major boundary along the north-eastern part of the settlement and extensive pit digging. Evidence for spatial variation in animal species representation in different areas of the Iron
Age settlement and for a small amount of industrial activity was also found. However, beyond the boundary ditches occupation was relatively slight, perhaps indicating that the area around the settlement was used as agricultural land and for quarrying.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Cotswold Archaeological Trust would like to thank Mr. John Childs and Craig Murphy of David Wilson Homes for their assistance throughout the project. The excavation was monitored by Mr. Sandy Kidd of Northamptonshire Heritage. The report illustrations were prepared by Peter Moore.
Fig. 1  Location plan
Fig. 3  Plan of all archaeological features