

**BOB'S WOOD UPDATE August 2003**

*Summary*

*The current season of excavation on land adjacent to Bob's Wood in Hinchingsbrooke is the latest stage in a series of investigations of a highly significant archaeological site with which we have been undertaking since 1997. The current development covers roughly 8.5ha and archaeological remains have been identified across much of this area. Twigden Homes have commissioned us to excavate in advance of the development of this site for housing. Previous work on the site has indicated the presence of settlement related activity spanning the middle Iron Age to the 4th century AD. Throughout this period the hilltop was home to a small but relatively wealthy population, perhaps no more than an extended family of two to three generations.*

*In the early first century BC the hill would have been covered with large irregular shaped fields and the occasional roundhouse. During the late Iron Age a series of enclosures were incorporated into the existing field pattern, small and rounded at first but becoming more regular and rectangular with time. We think that these changes enabled the later prehistoric farmers to concentrate on an increasingly specialised agricultural regime. This regime was dominated by cattle breeding and rearing for their meat value. This specialisation seems to have reached its height around the time of the Claudian invasion. The site looks down upon Ermine Street which was built by the invading forces between 42-43AD. The availability of a surplus of meat 'on the hoof' combined with a ready market of hungry soldiers may have been the result of careful planning and negotiation prior to invasion rather than a happy coincidence. The local inhabitants seem to have been able to maintain their previously high living standards, using their wealth to purchase luxuries such as olive oil from Spain, wine from Italy and the latest tableware in the distinctive gallo-belgic style often referred to as the Aylesford – Swarling grouping.*

*In the later first century AD a more formalised settlement enclosure was integrated into the stock enclosures and the inhabitants moved out of their roundhouses and into a new aisled building. Wooden fences were used to sub divide parts of the pre-existing enclosures and we think that these farmers started to keep horses as well as cows. A small (family?) cemetery was laid out within the main enclosure opposite the aisled building at this time.*

*Another new house was built within the center of the settlement enclosure during the second century AD. This would have been a timber framed building and the traces of materials recovered during excavation indicate that this house had a stone built front porch, it was centrally heated and that its rooms were plastered and decorated with panels painted in red, white and green.*

*In the coming weeks we will be examining the origins of the middle Iron Age settlement and trying to tie the results of this new work with the excavation results from 1997.*

Date of Site:	c 2000BC	Late Neolithic/ Early Bronze Age
	c 300BC-100BC	Middle Iron Age
	100BC-50BC	Late Iron Age
	50BC-43AD	Late Pre Roman Iron Age
	43AD-410AD	Romano British Period
	410AD+	Romano British / Saxon transition

It is now more than 5 months since we began the current excavations at the Hinchingsbrooke site. In this time we have completed excavation of over 4 ha of the site and are currently engaged in the excavation of a further 2 ha.

Over the past five months we have been able to involve over 50 volunteers including A level and degree students, professionals and retired people from a wide range of backgrounds in this exciting and interesting project. We have begun advertising the open day which will be held on August Bank Holiday Monday and anticipate a record turnout – weather permitting!

Excavation has already revealed that middle Iron Age activity was far more extensive than previously realised, that boundaries defined in prehistory appear to persist into the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, iron working was repeatedly undertaken from the Iron Age until the end of occupation and that for the duration of occupation the inhabitants of the site enjoyed a higher than average standard of living commonly interpreted as an indication of above average social status.

Furthermore we have recovered the remains of some of the sites former inhabitants including one individual from the late Iron Age, cremated and buried on the highest point of the site and 15 individuals from the second century AD, cremated and buried with a range of Samian (imported French pottery) vessels. We have also found a complete horse buried with a puddingstone quern and four adults and three infant inhumations dateable to the third century AD. The adults within the third century burials all seem to be women three of whom were buried face down. One of these bodies was buried with a silver coin upon which a fragment of linen has been preserved, unchanged by the passage of nearly 2000 years.

The size of the areas under investigation combined with the quality of the surviving remains is such that at this early stage in the project it is possible to draw these strands together to present a tentative outline highlighting some of the key themes concerning the development of the site. This will change as we add to our understanding through further excavation. I hope to be able to expand on some aspects of the broader implications of our discoveries within the next update.

*In brief the story so far goes that.....*

Between 200 and 50BC boundary ditches are opened on the hilltop and the associated settlement was located within the north western corner of the site. My current impression is that many of the ditches from this period defined a series of irregular shaped fields linked by a series of droveways and tracks. The majority of this activity appeared to take place in the later Iron Age and really starts to get going by around 100BC. The fields and tracks seem to be laid out to enable the control of livestock. Cattle were the predominant species being recovered through excavation although sheep are present in significant numbers too. Dogs, horses and pigs were also living on site at this time.

The infill sequence in some of these ditches indicated that maintenance was interrupted and they began to silt up becoming overgrown before sudden and widespread iron production began. It would appear that people were bringing iron rich stone to the hilltop not only from nearby fields but from up to 20km to the west the surrounding fields. Is this preparation for conflict? Whatever the impetus for this activity it would appear that the inhabitants prevailed as the basic layout of the site as envisioned during the middle Iron Age was continually restated by successive generations well into the later Romano-British period.

During the late Iron Age a series of large enclosures were incorporated into the existing field pattern, small and rounded at first but becoming more regular and rectangular with time. Their layout suggests that the more effective control livestock was the initial reason for these modifications but as time went by segregation for controlled breeding (probably of cattle) was introduced. We have excavated the traces of 11 roundhouses which were built at intervals throughout the late Iron Age. Only the drainage gullies which collected water from the eaves have survived. A large pit from the period contained a complete dog skeleton and what we are currently calling the dog's dinner – the burnt remains of a 2000 year old meal. We will be trying to recover the recipe!

By the late first century the large enclosures had silted up but were still maintained for drainage purposes. Big enclosures gave way to paddocks, fences and an aisled building were put up and cisterns were dug to store water. The family? Moved out of the roundhouses and into the new rectangular building. A selection of well used cooking pots and kitchenware were recovered from the bottom corner of the enclosure. A considerable number of horses were almost certainly being kept on site at this time, one of which was buried with a puddingstone quern at the time that the paddocks went out of use. The fence builders were cremated and buried within the corner of a paddock opposite their home along with a range of samian vessels. These pots had been imported from Lezoux in France and ranged in date from the end of the first century to the first half of the second century AD. One of the latest vessels so far identified was made at the Factory of the potter Borrilli who was known to have worked between 150 and 175AD.

The late second - third century saw the return of big ditched enclosures.

Another new house was built within the centre of the settlement enclosure during the second century AD. This would have been a timber framed building and the traces of materials recovered during excavation indicate that this house had a stone built front porch, that it was centrally heated and its rooms were plastered and decorated with

panels painted in red, white and green. The cemetery continued to be used at this time although there had been a change in burial practice from cremation to inhumation. The burials were all women or infants some of whom had been interred with grave goods including bracelets, a fine bead necklace and a coin that again indicate a fairly wealthy population on site. All but one of the adults were buried face down which might indicate a shared set of beliefs amongst the female population, perhaps a local underworld cult.

A large pond and other large features designed to aid drainage and water management were incorporated into the enclosure system at this time.

The fourth century and beyond.

Tying down the latest phases of activity on the site has proved quite difficult so far and we will probably have to wait until the post excavation phase of this project to get a clearer idea of the site at this time. We have excavated a number of small enclosures and truncated field boundaries containing late fourth century pottery, we have a number of the tiny late Roman coins but we do not seem to have any buildings from the period.

The last evidence of activity on site was associated with the establishment of a smithy where scrap iron was recycled. Whilst this recalls the earliest origins of the settlement this time no subsequent activity occurred and the site appears to have been abandoned as Britain moved deeper into the dark ages.