

# Excavations on the Site of a Late Bronze Age Settlement at Runnymede Bridge, Egham

DAVID LONGLEY

THE EXCAVATION, of which the following is a short report, was carried out for the DoE and the Surrey Archaeological Society as an extension of survey work on the Surrey Gravels.

## Discovery

The route of the M25, conceived as the South Orbital Motorway, cuts east-west across central Surrey before swinging north round the fringes of suburban London to cross the Thames at Runnymede Bridge. In the course of an archaeological survey of the motorway from 1972-5 Bernard Johnson located prehistoric pottery in a trial trench north east of the Glanty roundabout, Egham, alongside the A30 embankment. In the winter of 1975 a new floodway was excavated in this area to serve the M25 as its construction neared the Thames. While fieldwalking here David Barker of the Egham-by-Runnymede Historical Society discovered burnt flint and coarse pottery in the walls of the newly cut floodway. A further field inspection by Mr Barker and the present writer located an archaeological deposit at the base of the A30 embankment sealed by a metre's depth of alluvial material and modern rubble. A trial trench revealed that this deposit had not been disturbed by the construction of the embankment although the attendant floodway had removed the archaeological levels along its length (see Fig. 1 and profile).

## Excavation

The uncertain weather during the winter months entailed a postponement of heavy earthmoving on the motorway allowing us the opportunity of excavating a limited area in advance of further construction. Approximately 125 sq.m. were stripped by machine, the size of the excavation being restricted by the time available and the degree of modern disturbance. Work began in January and the site was vacated in mid March, 1976, on completion of the area initially stripped.

It became apparent very early on in the course of excavation that two separate areas could be defined. A sticky black deposit containing large quantities of domestic refuse represented a midden overlying all features in the north-eastern half of the site,

while a much lighter deposit containing pottery, bronze artefacts, bone and burnt flints defined the area of occupation over the south-western half (Fig. 3). Post holes were located cutting into the sterile sand underlying the site. It is conceivable that occupation was established originally over the entire area under excavation. Gradual encroachment by a water course—a channel of the river perhaps—may have eroded the evidence over the north-eastern half of the site, F92, a post-hole, surviving to a depth of only a few centimetres. It would seem, however, that occupation here prior to encroachment by the river was brief. Layer 2, a relatively clean silt, may represent this erosion and contained a few, but not many, bone and pottery fragments. The structure around F31 was burnt after a single phase of occupation and abandoned—possibly because of the increasing proximity of the water course. The collapsed structure had suffered partial erosion, particularly on the north side and possibly including the missing post-holes here before the midden (F24) was formed on top of it. This midden, while making a convenience of the river as a rubbish dump, may also have served as something of a barrier against inundation. Post-holes are more abundant over the rest of the site and suggest that some rebuilding took place. Due to the limited area under excavation and the relatively uncomplicated stratigraphy it was not possible to isolate the post-holes and plans of individual buildings although those post-holes around the burnt area (F31) may define a circular structure.

Apparently a problem from the outset, it seems that waterlogging of the entire site eventually caused its abandonment. A thin grey layer (10) represents washing over the occupation and midden deposits alike merging into a sterile brown deposit of alluvial material (11) which covers the site to a depth of 60cms. The turf line (12) is the 20th century land surface cut into at some points and overlain by the modern rubble make-up constituting the base of the embankment erected in the 1960s.

## Bronze, Bone, Pottery

The metalwork from Runnymede Bridge is characteristic of the late bronze age tradition in the

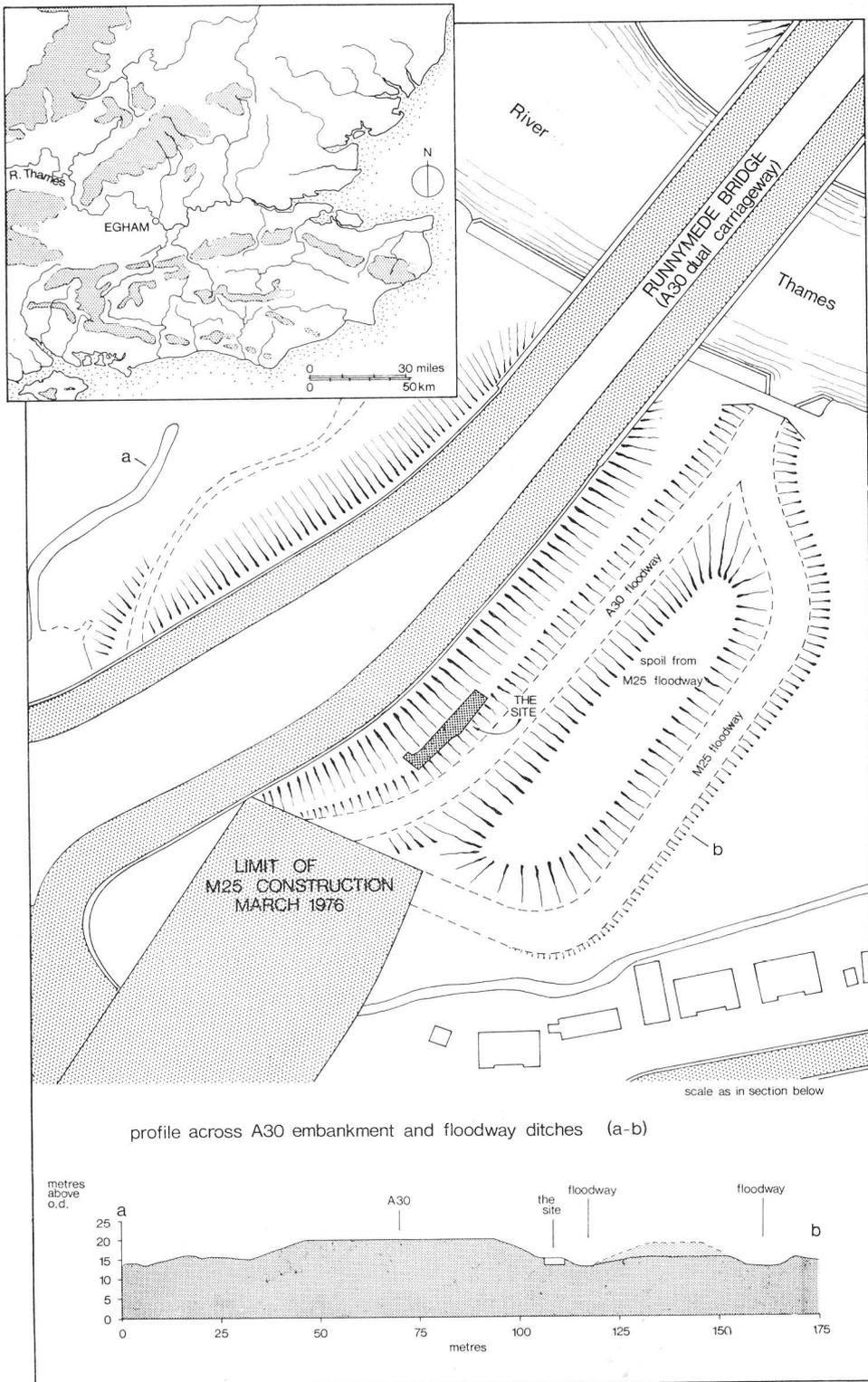
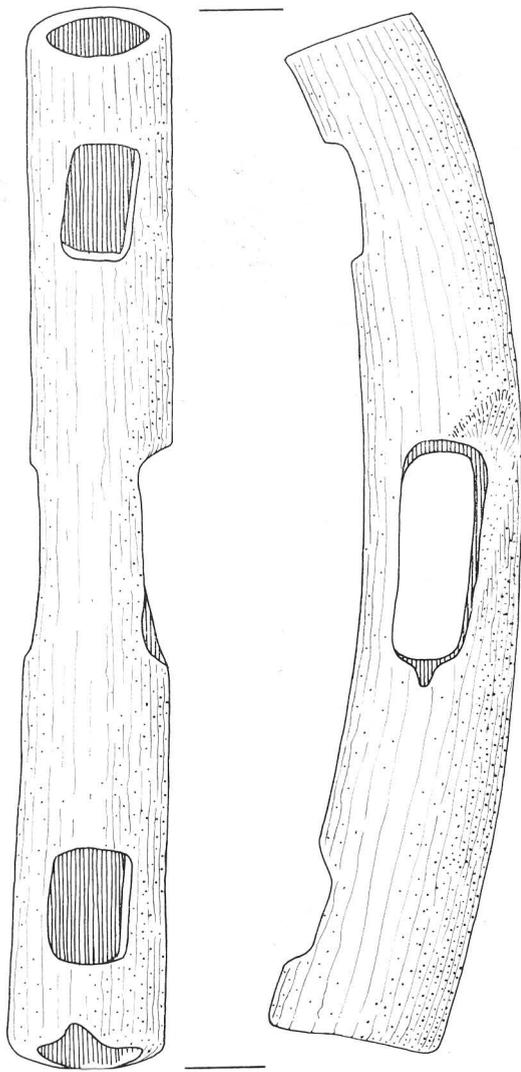
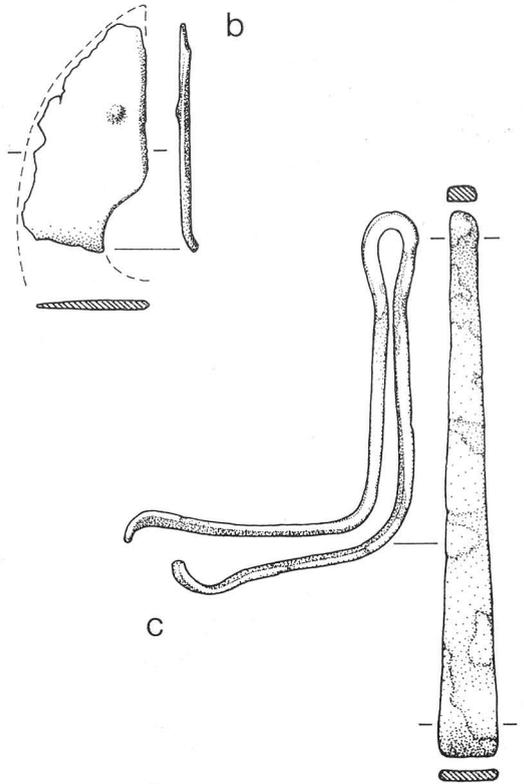


Fig. 1

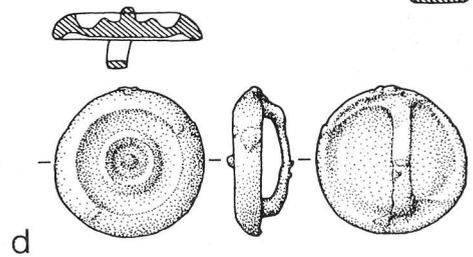


a

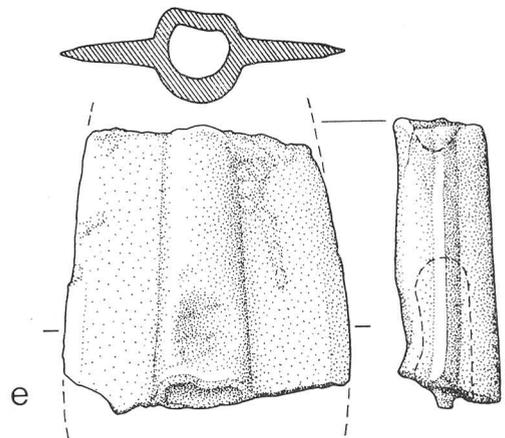


b

c



d



e

Fig. 2

south-east. Small tools and decorative attachments proliferate both in south-east England and north-west France. They often occur alongside a wide range of socketed axe types, the widespread Ewart Park sword and the distinctive Carp's Tongue sword and generally in hoards or as stray finds. Settlement associations are rare. The only item of weaponry at Runnymede Bridge was a spearhead fragment. Tools, however, are represented by a small chisel-ended punch, a socketed knife, a second socketed implement — possibly a hammer — and a possible tanged pommel. The domestic character of the Runnymede Bridge group is demonstrated by a number of personal items including vase-headed and nail-headed pins, rings and a probable wire bracelet. Two pairs of tweezers and a fragment of a possible bifid razor may have had a cosmetic function (Fig. 2b and c). The razor seems to have been similar to the ones found at Llangwyllog, Anglesey and Heathery Burn, County Durham. In addition to the razor and a mass of other material the Heathery Burn deposit included a number of cart fittings and horse harness attachments. Harness mounts and other "horsey" paraphernalia are significant additions to the metalwork range of this period appearing widely on the continent and, to a more limited degree, in British contexts of which Heathery Burn is one of the earliest. At Runnymede Bridge these novelties are represented by a circular bronze attachment with concentric ribbing (Fig. 2d), paralleled in the important hoard of harness fittings from Parc-y-meirch, Clwyd and again in identical examples from the previously mentioned Llangwyllog hoard. Two antler cheek pieces from different bridle sets attest further the use of horses either for traction or riding and at least two horses from the site had attained a considerable age (25-30 years) indicating that they were valued and well looked after (Fig. 2a). Two hemispherical "buttons" may also be associated with horse gear. A number of identical buttons were recorded at Court Saint Etienne, Belgium, in the last century — a site which has produced a quantity of "horsey" material — while 120 examples were found at Staple Howe, Yorkshire, in an assemblage which is in many respects of a similar character to that from Runnymede Bridge. A number of bronze droplets and other items of casting debris were found indicating that bronze was worked on the site although unfortunately no moulds were recognized.

Bone survived well and a number of implements were recovered in good condition. Most numerous were the pointed "awls" made from the metapodial bones of sheep. One example had a worked hole near the blunt end and may have been used for some threading purpose such as netting. The two

antler cheek pieces have already been mentioned. An incomplete example has a good parallel at Old England, Brentford, while a second is closer to the Heathery Burn cheek pieces, squared off at the ends and with slots rather than worked holes accommodating the harness (Fig. 2a). This example, though complete, shows signs of considerable wear and may have been discarded for this reason. A third antler artefact, of uncertain function, can only be described as a "toggle." A finely worked bone pin with a spatulate end is complete while a number of other bone and antler fragments were lost or discarded in the process of manufacture.

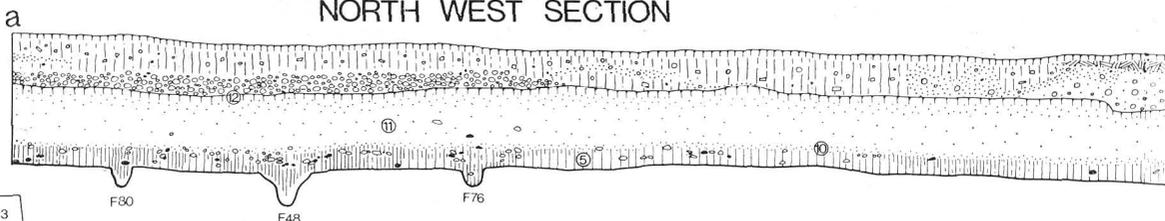
Fragments of baked clay and pottery loom weights were found as were pottery spindle whorls. Lignite bracelets and amber beads provided an element of personal decoration to augment the bronzes.

Quantities of pottery were recovered from all parts of the site. The midden deposit was particularly rich in pottery, bone and metalwork. Forms include jars with high rounded shoulders and inverted or concave necks in addition to a number exhibiting a marked eversion of the rim. Bipartite bowls in a finer fabric occur with tall concave necks above well defined carinations. Finger tipping on the rim and shoulder, and on one occasion on an applied cordon, is a feature of the coarser vessels. The majority of sherds from the site are in fabrics gritted with flints ranging in grade from the fine grits of many of the bipartite bowls to the coarse thick grits of the large jars. In contrast, a fine, virtually gritless, dark fabric is reserved for the more highly decorated vessels. Incised, hatched triangles with white inlay and combed wavy lines are features of this decoration (Fig. 4, 3). One of the most interesting sherds from the site is a small bowl or cup with a thinned rim expanding into a horned lug or handle (Fig. 4, 7). The fabric is hard, grey and gritted with small-medium flints, smoothed on both faces. The possibility exists that this is an import from the continent. Its context on the site rules out the question of a loss from a modern collection — a solution sometimes offered to account for the occurrence of continental material in dubious British contexts.

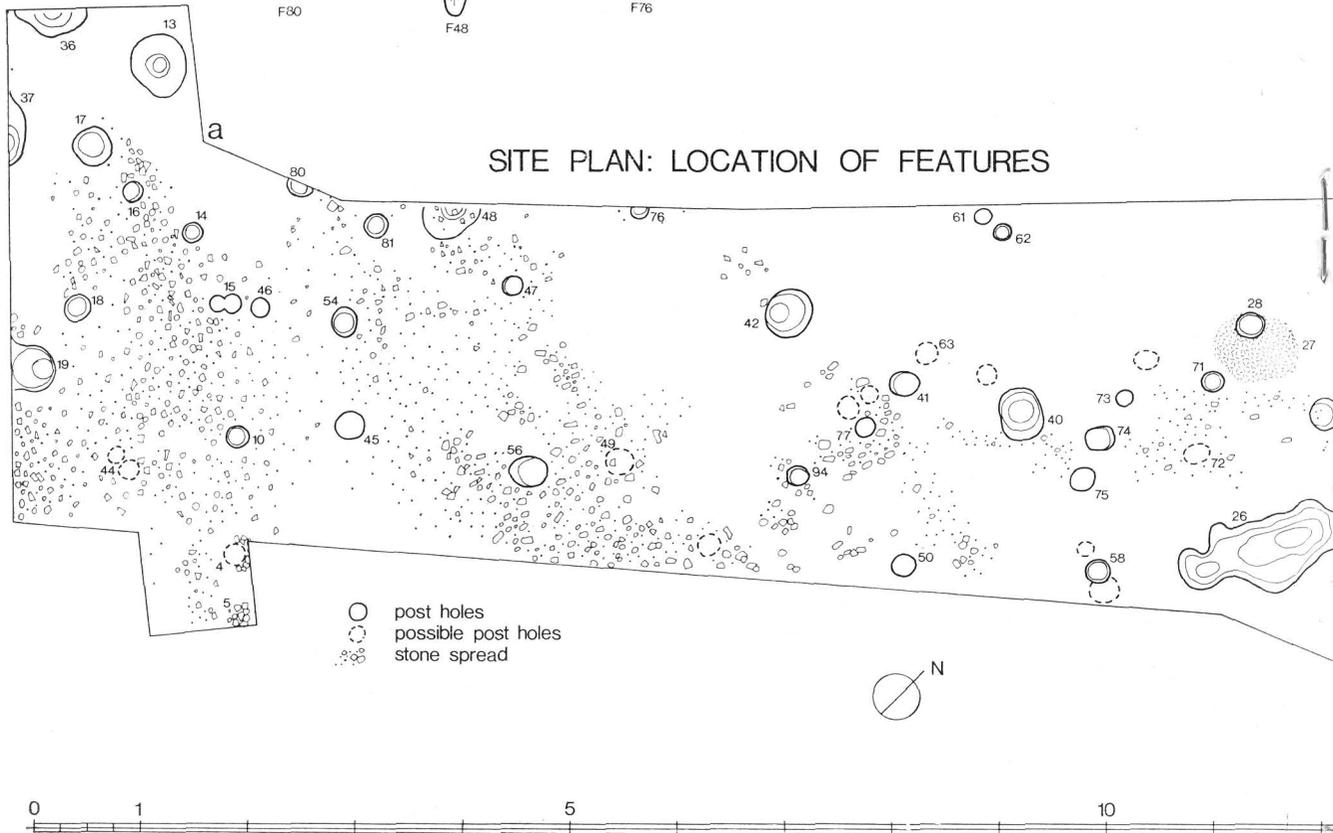
The recovery of a large contemporary assemblage in a wide range of forms was particularly satisfying. The pottery of this period is not well known and dating has had to rely mainly on typological considerations. The association, therefore, of the pottery with recognizable bronzes and the possibility of carbon 14 determinations is of importance. This was a period when new ideas were being brought to pottery production and the results stand in marked

# RUNNYMEDE BRIDGE 1976

## NORTH WEST SECTION



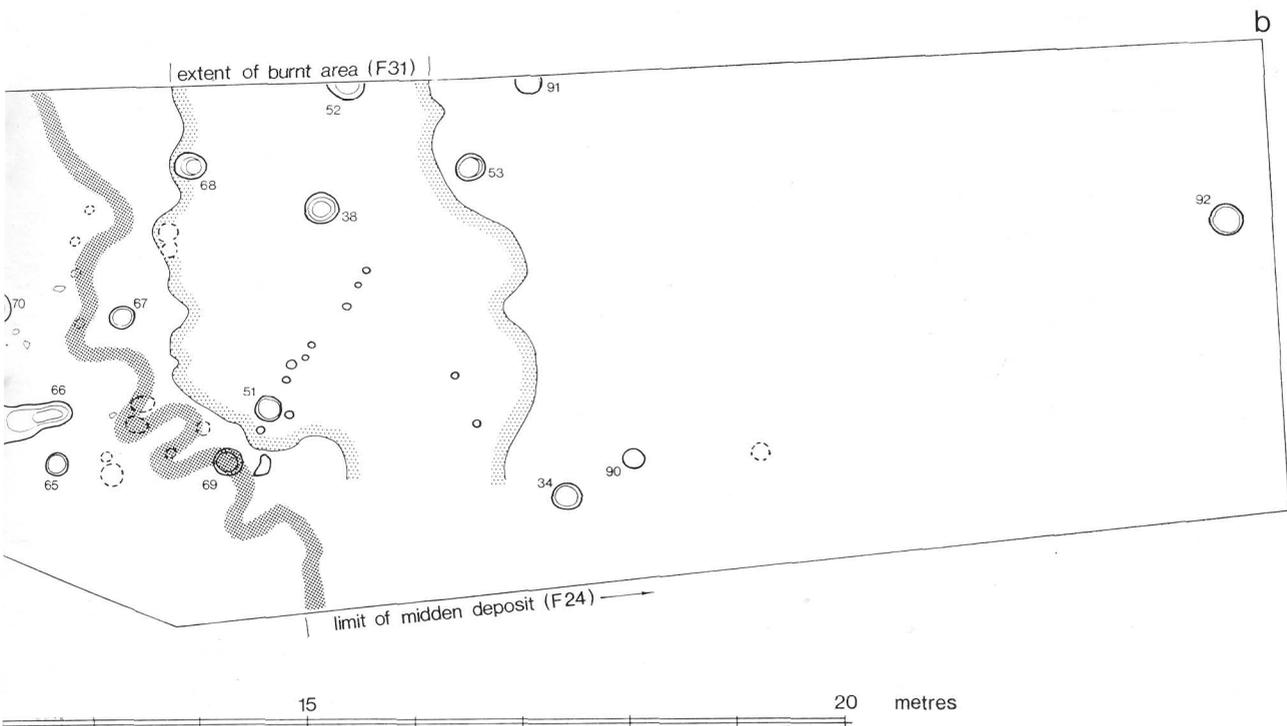
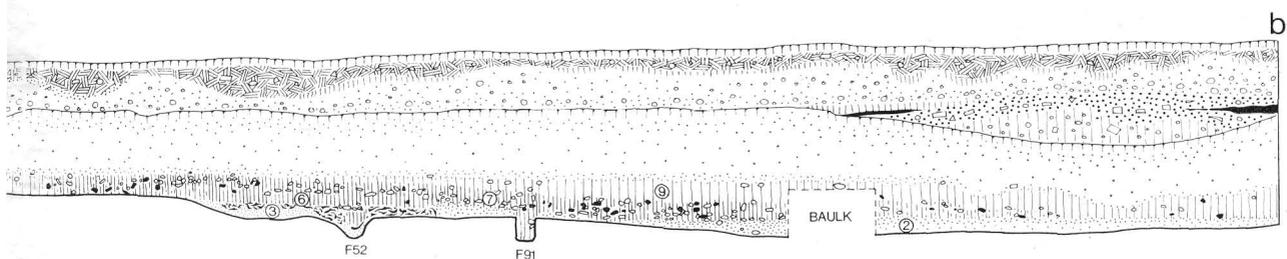
## SITE PLAN: LOCATION OF FEATURES



contrast to the conservatism of the preceding centuries. The time is not yet ripe for the drawing of any firm conclusions on the precise dating or the mechanics of these innovations although John Barrett (in the Ram's Hill pottery report, *BAR 19*) has drawn attention to the possibilities. The picture is, however, now becoming clearer.

The Runnymede Bridge pottery preserves features such as finger tipping on the rim and shoulder and on applied neck cordons, incised decoration in geometric shapes and certain smoothly curving profiles that can be traced in late Urnfield contexts on the continent and perhaps to a greater

extent in the ensuing Hallstatt C phase. These comparisons have been noted on other British sites: in particular, Staple Howe, Scarborough, Old England and, more recently, South Cadbury where in each case Hallstatt C personal items have been found. Direct immigration has sometimes been suggested but in fact the situation is more complex. Most of the Hallstatt metalwork in Britain is of a martial character and is almost entirely without settlement associations. On the other hand Hallstatt razors are virtually alone in their occurrence on settlement sites and seem to represent an entirely different phenomenon. That is, the swords may



represent raiding parties, and the coastal and riverine distribution tends to confirm this, whereas the razors, it has been suggested, are a novelty item of trade. Reference has been made to the similarities in the metalworking traditions of south-east England and north-west France in the Ewart Park phase and it is not impossible to imagine the same forces that promoted this unity leading to common developments in pottery. This being the case, there is no need to postulate Hallstatt incursions to account for new techniques and new forms.

#### The Settlement and its date

The settlement at Runnymede Bridge was estab-

lished on the south bank of the River Thames. It is likely that the river determined the location of the site and, in time, was the cause of its abandonment. A postulated climatic deterioration around the 7th century BC may have brought floods to the area. Despite the large number of artefacts that occur in hoards of the late bronze age, metalwork from settlement sites is generally scarce. Runnymede Bridge must, therefore, be considered a comparatively rich site and the horse gear and the horses themselves, presumably prestigious possessions, must reflect this. No doubt trade along the river contributed to its prosperity. In addition to the horses

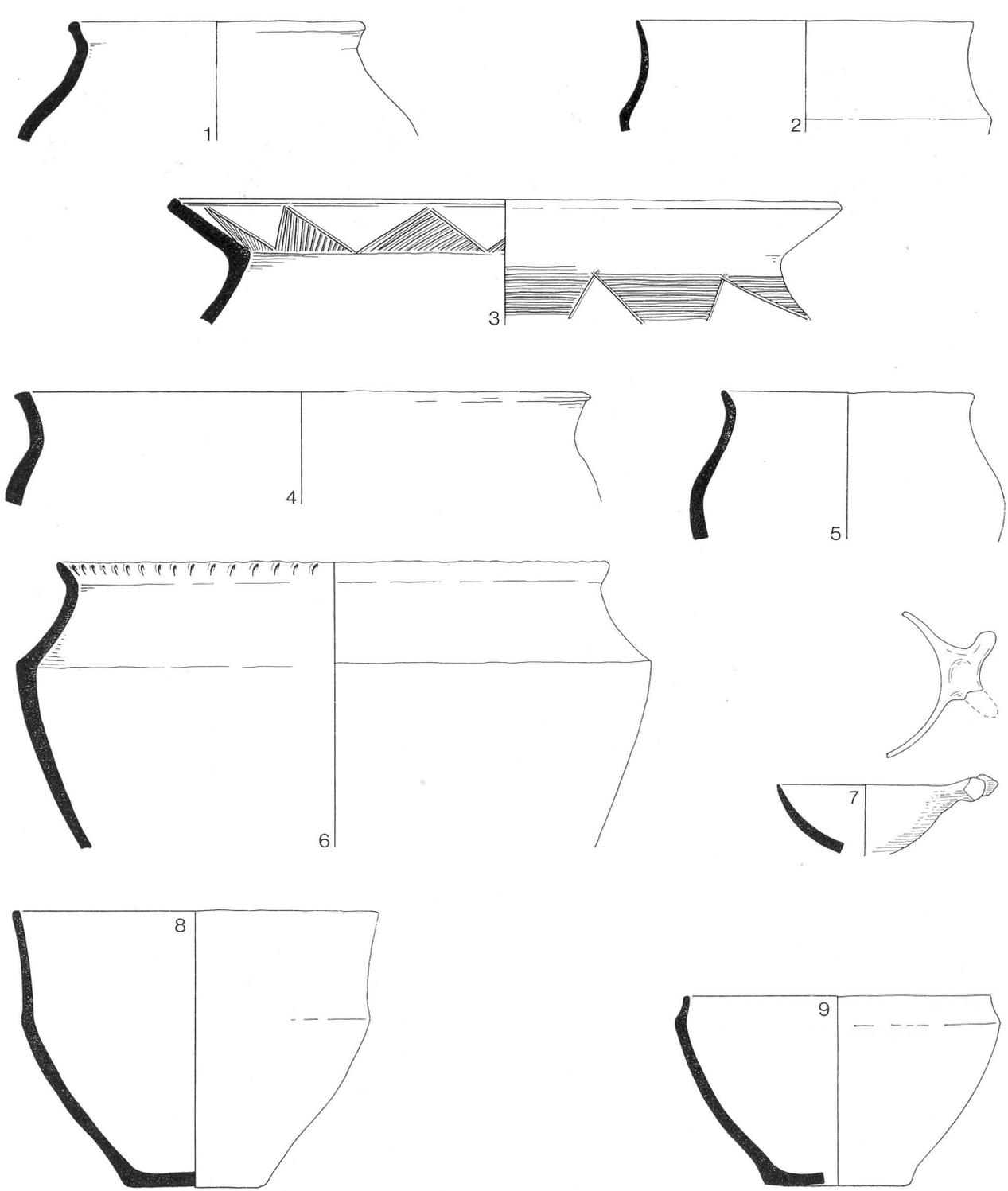


Fig. 4 0 5 20  
cms

already mentioned, cattle, pigs, sheep and goats were reared. Geese were taken from the river and fish, too may have been caught although it is unclear whether the skull of a solitary pike from layer (2) was a victim of this activity or whether it perished in its natural environment. Wild boar and red deer were hunted. A dog was present on the site and may have been responsible for gnawing the ends of the human long bones which were found in that condition scattered over the site. The implications are that the dead, or at least some dead people, were disposed of unceremoniously on the rubbish heap. Bronze working has been noted, no doubt much of the pottery was produced locally and the spindle whorls and loom weights attest to the spinning of yarn and the weaving of cloth.

Approximately fifteen miles further down the river a similar settlement must have existed at Old England, Brentford. Here the material is unstratified and of many periods. Nevertheless it will be useful to consider the Old England evidence as a first step in assessing the date of the Runnymede Bridge site. The antler cheek piece from Old England is a very good parallel to one of the Runnymede Bridge examples while socketed knives, tweezers and early razors occur at both sites. While much of the Old England material can be assigned to the Ewart Park and preceding metalwork phases some Hallstatt C items are present and may have found their way to the site in the second half of the 7th century BC. The Runnymede Bridge material displays no obvious Hallstatt characteristics although its situation would allow it to receive new trends in their earliest stages. This does seem to imply that occupation may have been curtailed before the Hallstatt C material had begun to arrive in the Thames Basin somewhere around the mid 7th century.

Reference has been made to the pottery from the settlements at Scarborough and Staple Howe. While neither group, taken as a whole is closely comparable to that from Runnymede Bridge certain similarities are apparent and when the metalwork and other small finds are considered it becomes clear that we are dealing with a broadly similar tradition at all three sites. Small tanged and socketed tools are common to all, the nail-headed pins from Scarborough find a parallel at Runnymede Bridge as do the rare hemispherical "buttons" and the bronze tweezers from Staple Howe, while most other items fit comfortably within the Ewart Park phase. A significant feature, however, is the appearance of Hallstatt C razors at Staple Howe and a Hallstatt

bracelet unassociated, but probably contemporary with the settlement, at Scarborough. Again the lack of Hallstatt material at Runnymede Bridge might indicate that occupation here could predate that at Scarborough and Staple Howe.

While similar ideas may have been current in the pottery of Runnymede Bridge and the sites mentioned above, the similarity is even more marked in the pottery from the hill fort at Ivinghoe Beacon, Bucks., although Ivinghoe lacks the range of finer decorated wares present at Runnymede Bridge. Here again the same bronze working tradition is represented, the tweezers, domed stud and bifid razor in particular, finding parallels at Runnymede Bridge. This metalwork group was originally dated 8th/7th century by Britton and, with the concept of bronze age hillforts gaining respectability, the pottery may be re-dated accordingly.

This is not the place for too detailed a discussion of dating and its implications. From the very limited number of associations referred to above, however, the following possibilities may be considered. Firstly, all contain items of metalwork which are considered to be consistent with the Ewart Park phase (dated by Burgess to the 8th/7th centuries). Secondly, it is evident that Hallstatt C material can occur alongside the native items (perhaps from around 650 BC onwards) but does not necessarily do so. The occurrence, therefore, of a range of new pottery forms on settlement sites is dateable broadly within the period 8th century-7th century BC and on the one hand reflects continental developments and on the other parallels the proliferation of a wide range of bronzes, especially, and significantly, tools, during this period. While stressing that only a small area of the site was sampled and that conclusions based on negative evidence must be approached with caution, a settlement at Runnymede Bridge in the late 8th century or, more probably, the early 7th would accommodate the metalwork and is not inconsistent with the evidence of similar pottery from other sites.

Grateful thanks are due to all those who took part in the excavation and in the subsequent processing of the material. Their contributions will be acknowledged in the full publication of the site. For the present report Mrs Geraldine Done provided information on the animal and human bones, Vicki Lloyd drew the pottery figures and Stuart Needham provided illustrations and commented on the metalwork.