Unlocking the past: Collections and HER Enhancement
(Stage 3b)

Assessment and Updated Project Design for the Bredon hillfort (Worcestershire) archive – 1935-7 excavations by Thalassa Cruso Hencken

An Aggregate Levy Sustainability Fund project to realise the potential of local group and museum collections from the aggregate production areas of Worcestershire
(PNUM 4776 ASS)

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Part 1 Project summary

Bredon Hill hillfort is a major Iron Age monument in south Worcestershire, which overlooks part of the Severn valley, including the contemporary lowland settlement at Beckford, where large-scale excavation was undertaken in the 1960s-70s (final publication now in progress). This assessment of the archive of the 1935-7 hillfort excavations shows that it represents a significant research collection. Notably it includes the human bone and associated finds from the so-called 'massacre layer' inside the main gateway, where in situ *human remains of Iron Age date (minimum of 16 individuals) had been deposited in most unusual circumstances. The site also produced an assemblage of artefacts, significant both in range and quantity, and this part of the archive is in a very good state. Sadly no excavation records, besides some photographs, have so far come to light.*

Assessment suggests that the archive provides the potential to date the final, possibly dramatic, end of site occupation and, therefore, provides a rare terminus ante quem *for the finds. The quantity and quality of the finds, also suggests that with some limited re-appraisal and some specific detailed recording, this would be an even more important group for characterising the later prehistoric archaeology of the region. By improving the usefulness and effectiveness of the Bredon Hill collection for comparative studies, there would be a contribution to current research, including the Beckford publication, and to future research generally, including where sites are discovered during aggregates extraction throughout this part of the Severn valley.*

The analysis proposed here would considerably enhance the Worcestershire Historic Environment Record (HER) and support more effective and better targeted management and evaluation of aggregate production landscapes within the county. The proposed Stage 3b work will provide considerable long-term benefit to the aggregates industry thereby addressing the key ALSF aim of 'developing the capacity to manage aggregate extraction landscapes in the future'. A modern study of this important site would also make an important contribution to several regional and national research objectives (mainly for the Iron Age period).

This assessment is accompanied by an Updated Project Design for a programme of analysis (Stage 3b) for which further funding is requested from the English Heritage Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund (ALSF) programme. Both this assessment and UPD and the associated Collections assessment complement other English Heritage ALSF-funded projects, in particular the Worcestershire Aggregates Resource Assessment (PNUM 3966), Unlocking the Past: Outreach (PNUM 4747) and the Beckford Post-excavation project.

1. General introduction

Unlocking the Past is a project designed to 'unlock' the potential of local group and museum collections which derive from areas of the county which have been and will continue to be affected by aggregate extraction. It addresses a number of the shortfalls in the understanding of the archaeology of aggregate producing areas in the county which are currently being identified through another ALSF project, Archaeology and Aggregates in Worcestershire (PNUM 3966).

A Project Outline was submitted by Worcestershire Historic Environment and Archaeology Service (WHEAS) to English Heritage and a Project Design (Stage 1) was produced and approved (21 December 2005; ref 4776PD). A Stage 2 (Assessment) Project Design was finalised and approved in March 2005 (Agreement dated 15 March 2006).

The Assessment (Stage 2) has now been completed. This was originally envisaged to lead to the production of a single assessment report and an Updated Project Design (UPD), however, the results of Stage 2 have necessitated the division of the project output into two separate assessment reports and updated project designs (Stages 3 and 3b), of which this report constitutes Stage 3b.

The Assessment and Updated Project Design presented within this document (Stage 3b) covers the mid 1930's excavations at the major Iron Age hillfort on Bredon Hill which is located in an area which have been and will continue to be affected by aggregate extraction, whereas the Stage 3 project covers the majority of the local group and museum collections deriving from similarly affected areas of the county (Jacobs and Jackson 2006). The UPD presented here presents proposals, methods, costings and a timetable for the completion of a programme of further analysis. The work proposed would form Stage 3b of the project for which funding is requested from English Heritage though the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund. The programme of analysis has been designed with the hope it can be considered in a future round of the ALSF.

The project also complements an associated and ongoing ALSF project, Unlocking the Past: Outreach (PNUM 4747; Jacobs and Jackson 2006) which has been designed to communicate and make available these collections and results of former aggregates extraction projects to community groups, educational organisations, private researchers and other interested parties.

The Assessment and Updated Project Design presented here has been produced by the WHEAS Field Section in consultation with the County Archaeology Officer, HER Manager, local groups, the Worcestershire Museums Service, Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, members of the Beckford Project Team (Jan Wills and Jane Evans) and staff of English Heritage (Peter Busby, Helen Keeley and Kath Buxton).

1.1 Aggregates and archaeology in Worcestershire

Worcestershire has been subject to both soft and hard aggregate extraction over a long period of time with the two principal river valleys, the Severn and the Avon, and the limestone outcrops in the south-east of the county and at Bredon Hill forming the focus of these activities. Bredon Hill is, therefore, one of the central reference points in the landscape and with its surviving earthworks one of the main focuses of past settlement occupation within an area affected by aggregates extraction. The hillfort site is central to any survey and study of settlement activity across south Worcestershire including several main gravel quarries including the important site at Beckford (Wills forthcoming).

The importance of these areas and the impact of extraction upon them has long been recognised. This has recently resulted in the design and ongoing implementation of an ALSF project, *Archaeology and Aggregates in Worcestershire* (PNUM 3966; due for completion in January/February 2006). This project is aimed at assessing the past and potential future impact of aggregate extraction in Worcestershire and strengthening the data and research frameworks that inform future management decisions relating to aggregates extraction. This is seen as being of particular importance in the absence of a current *Minerals Local Plan* (the implementation period of the last one issued having expired in 2003).

A number of matters are immediately evident from the work being undertaken within this project and from other initiatives within the County:

1. Both the Severn and Avon Valleys (and their tributaries) in Worcestershire have been and continue to be affected by the aggregates industry. This includes ongoing working of extant permissions (some with pre-PPG16 permissions and no archaeological provision as at Ripple in the Severn Valley); formal applications for both extension of existing quarries and establishment of new quarries (as at Strensham in the Avon Valley and Ryall North in the Severn Valley); and preliminary enquiries about potential future areas of extraction in both the Severn and Avon Valleys. These impact (or will continue to impact) on already affected landscapes as well as potentially previously unaffected areas. Although prediction of the location of the likely areas to be affected by future extraction proposals within the county is difficult due to the absence of a current Minerals Local Plan, discussions with planners and minerals operators with whom WHEAS regularly work suggest that there is no reason to believe that this pattern will radically alter in the near future.

2. Extensive programmes of archaeological fieldwork undertaken in association with former and ongoing aggregate extraction underpin much of our understanding of the archaeology of the County, especially for the prehistoric period;

3. It has not been possible within the funding constraints placed upon the projects giving rise to this material and upon local museums to make the results of these programmes of work available to anyone but professional archaeological audiences. In some cases the fieldwork was carried out many years ago and this another reason for site re-appraisal. Although most major excavations have been formally published (or are in the process of publication), a considerable body of important information remains solely available through grey literature or within regional journals which have limited circulation. For community groups, educational organisations, private researchers and other interested parties these results and material remain largely inaccessible and their educative value remains largely unfulfilled.

4. Lastly, partially through the importance of some of these sites (eg the visible earthworks a Bredon Hill hillfort), and through the nature of archaeology within landscapes affected by aggregate extraction (ie cropmarks, arable land use, etc), these areas have formed a focus for the work of early 20th century archaeologists, local groups and individuals. This work has resulted in the accumulation of considerable collections of material which have great potential to enhance our understanding of the archaeology of these areas. However, assessment, analysis and integration of results into the HER, modern research frameworks and museum collections has largely not been possible to date.

1.2 Scope

The current project was designed in the light of the observations made above. It aims to address issues relating to collections associated with the two principal aggregate production areas in Worcestershire (the Avon Valley/Vale of Evesham and the Severn Valley) which have not previously been studied and/or those warranting re-assessment (1.2.4 above; 2.2 below). The significance of the hillfort site at Bredon Hill coupled with the vintage reporting, given the advances in understanding since the 1930s, makes this an important candidate for new analysis.

Assessment, re-evaluation and collation has been undertaken (Section 2) and where appropriate subsequent analysis of these collections is now proposed (Stage 3b). If approved, Stage 3b work will lead to further HER enhancement and increased accessibility and quality of information thereby strengthening research and managements frameworks within aggregate extraction areas of Worcestershire (Section 3).

1.3 Aims of the project

This assessment report aims to establish if there is any potential for further investigation of the Bredon Hill hillfort archive with a view to improving the quality of data from the site, and to providing an up-to-date reference to the Bredon Hill assemblage in the forthcoming Beckford report (Wills

forthcoming), one output of the latter being a synthetic overview of this important later prehistoric and Roman landscape (Beckford UPD; August 2004; Version 2: Task 30). The synthesis of information from the Iron Age sites in this area has previously been identified as having a high potential to improve understanding (at a national level) of the relationship between Iron Age hillforts and river valley settlement landscapes (Haselgrove *et al* 2001, 11). Through re-assessment of the important Bredon hillfort assemblage this proposed project will, therefore, build on the conclusions of the recently published nearby hillfort at Conderton Camp report (also on Bredon Hill), and considerably support and enhance the output of the Beckford Project by providing an up-to-date understanding of the results from a major hillfort, consideration of which will otherwise rest on the 1938 published report.

The assessment has been carried out broadly in accordance with the principles of MAP2 (English Heritage 1991). An outline Updated Project Design is included for the completion of analysis and Historic Environment Record enhancement (Stage 3b), with select appropriate dissemination of the Bredon Hill hillfort collection.

This is an Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund Programme (ASLF)-funded assessment which is intended to address the key ALSF aim of:

> 'developing the capacity to manage aggregate extraction landscapes in the future'
>
> ·'delivering to public and professional audiences the full benefits of knowledge gained through past work in aggregates extraction areas'

and will be of benefit to both the aggregates industry and other developers. Overall the assessment and UPD is intended to considerably strengthen the HER and research framework for later prehistoric settlement and landscapes in the Avon valley/Vale of Evesham region of the Severn valley, an area which has been and continues to be one of the principal aggregate extraction areas of the County. Through the increased understanding of these settlements and landscapes, improved management decisions and mitigation strategies can be delivered to the aggregates industry.

In brief the strategic project aims identified by Jackson *et al* (2006) and relevant to this project are as follows:

A1. to improve understanding of the range and character of the archaeological resource within aggregate extraction landscapes in Worcestershire (for instance through assessing and analysing previously unstudied surface assemblages and other unpublished material it will be possible to support understanding of the range and nature of material assemblages in use or distributions of settlement and other activities within the landscape);

A3. to refine information relating to known sites (for example dating of known cropmarks by linking them to surface assemblages or through examination of collections which have either not previously been studied in detail or which warrant re-assessment in the light of knowledge gain since their original examination);

A4. to enhance the Worcestershire HER, archaeological frameworks (aggregate specific, local, regional and national) and museum collections (by ensuring that those collections of unstudied material or those warranting re-assessment are examined, made accessible and analysed to allow information from them to be accessioned onto the HER and used in the development of archaeological frameworks);

A6. to strengthen the baseline information and frameworks against which archaeological management decisions are made in relation to aggregate extraction planning applications in Worcestershire (by enhancing the HER – see also below); and

A7. to improve the accuracy, output and efficiency of assessment/evaluation and mitigation strategies commissioned by the aggregates industry in response to planning requirements (though the enhancement of the HER and the development of a better overall understanding of the nature of the resource in aggregate production areas).

A8. to contribute to other ALSF initiatives such as the Beckford Project and address areas identified for future research within the recently produced regional framework for the West Midlands (with which Service staff are familiar as WHEAS has been a major contributor).

The Project is also relevant to the Beckford project (Beckford UPD 2004) as it supports a better understanding of the archaeology of the Beckford region and therefore contributes to:

'… the Beckford Project, one output of which will be a synthetic overview of this important later prehistoric and Roman landscape (Beckford UPD; August 2004; Version 2: Task 30).

Lastly, liaison with local groups and museums during the project, assessment and analysis of these collections and the resultant improved understanding of the archaeological resource has the potential to contribute to two other ALSF projects:

- The Beckford Project;
- Unlocking the Past: Outreach.

1.4 Research frameworks

This assessment is intended to contribute to the developing regional west Midlands research 2002 draft framework objectives for Worcestershire where aggregate areas have a particularly significant role as follows (Hurst 2002):

Objective 3: … There is clearly a need for much more scientific dating, specifically radiocarbon dating, especially given some of the difficulties/gaps that seem to exist in the pottery sequence. These should be AMS dates using the methods described by Hazelgrove *et al* (2001, 4-5). All opportunities to establish scientific dates must be maximised, as these can help to refine data from other sites, and so place the whole regional structure on a sounder footing. This is especially crucial for the purposes of refining pottery trends.

Objective 4: More human burials should be dated scientifically rather than relying on typological criteria for dating ...

Objective 5: … it would be useful for any prehistoric, and even Roman pottery assemblages, to be carefully studied by ceramic specialists.

1.5 Objectives

The following outcomes were intended within the currnet stage of the project (referenced as cited in Jackson *et al* 2006) – other outcomes not listed here are more relevant to the wider museum collections project also forming part of the PNUM 4776 PD:

O1. All collections fully processed, marked, sorted and properly packaged by individual site;

O2. Project Database ordered by site (each with unique HER reference, activity type, location, basic quantification, spot date and link to documentary source material);

O5. Material identified with potential to support outreach initiatives and specifically (if approved) the associated project *Unlocking the Past: Outreach*;

O6. Assessment report;

O7. Updated Project Design for Stage 3.

Looking forward to a Stage 3b, more specifically, through assessment, re-evaluation, collation and (where appropriate) subsequent analysis and HER accessioning of the Bredon hillfort collection, the project will achieve a number of objectives which will allow it to address the aims described above (Section 1.3).

OB1. Enhance the baseline information held within the Historic Environment Record for aggregate production areas. This will be achieved primarily through the refining of information and accessioning onto the HER;

OB2. Strengthen research frameworks. This will be achieved by improving the overall understanding of the range and character of the archaeological resource within aggregate production areas;

OB3. Make available through the HER the information from this major collection to both public and professional audiences;

OB4. Enable the site collection to be curated and managed more effectively by local museums and thus be more accessible for archaeological research and non-professional audiences. This will result from the proper assessment, quantification, marking, bagging, and boxing of material and also from linking them to paper and other relevant records, where available.

These objectives address ALSF Objective 2 and specifically the theme of 'research to enhance understanding of the scale and character of the historic environment in aggregate producing areas in order to provide the baseline information necessary for effective future management'.

The overall project outcome will THEN thereby address two of the core objectives of the ALSF:

· 'developing the capacity to manage aggregate extraction landscapes in the future';

and through the HER:

· 'delivering to public and professional audiences the full benefits of knowledge gained through past work in aggregates extraction areas'.

Lastly, the assessment and analysis of this collection and the resultant improved understanding of the archaeological resource has the potential to contribute to two other ALSF projects:

· The Beckford Project;

· Unlocking the Past: Outreach.

2. Assessment report

2.1 Background to the site

Large-scale excavation was undertaken by Thalassa Cruso Hencken at Bredon Hill hillfort in 1935-7, and located significant archaeological deposits dating to the Iron Age period. The excavation was undertaken as a series of three summer seasons.

Bredon Hill is well known today as an area rich in archaeological remains, as in the past this was a densely settled landscape (Thomas 2005, 3). The hill itself has also been the subject of numerous quarrying activities most of which remain of unknown date and extent. There have been a number of archaeological interventions immediately around the hill in more recent times, usually as a result of aggregates extraction, and Iron Age remains have come to light. The most notable as a result of a major campaign of excavation at Beckford south of the hill in the 1960s-70s in the face of gravel extraction; and these now form the focus of a significant publication effort (Wills forthcoming). Sites of all periods are to be found in the vicinity (eg Bronze Age, Jackson *et al* forthcoming), as well as a second Iron Age settlement site on the hill itself known as Conderton Camp (conventionally taken to be another hillfort; recently published by Thomas 2005), situated on a spur to the east (excavated 1958-9).

Hillforts are conventionally interpreted as centres controlling territory and so Bredon Hill hillfort would typically have had an impact far beyond its immediate area. As a result it seems reasonable to suggest that the site is relevant to the overall later prehistoric history of the surrounding area, including where aggregates are to be found in the surrounding river valleys. This makes the site of significance to the Beckford Iron Age settlement, where excavation has revealed the complex remains of roundhouses, enclosures and pit groups, associated with large quantities of domestic finds (Wills forthcoming).

2.2 Methods

Fieldwork

The 1935-7 excavations comprised a series of trenches with some trench extensions where features of interest were encountered. The final season concentrated on the entrance to the inner defences where a 'massacre layer' was excavated. Overall only about 1% (0.1ha) of the hillfort area (*c*10ha) was excavated.

State of the archive

In general the finds archive is in quite a good state with much of the material intact though with some muddling of pottery between bags. Small finds (metal objects etc) are also in a reasonable state given the era of the excavation; there are some finds with labels missing and some loose labels. Excavation records are entirely missing and despite some tentative efforts to contact descendents of Thalassa Hencken and to check with the Overbury Estate (Mr Robert Holland Martin) no final account of the fate of the site records can be given at present.

Artefact recovery and processing

Most of the pottery has been washed, and marked, and metalwork and other delicate materials have been carefully packaged and stored in appropriate ways in accordance with *First Aid for Finds* (Watkinson 1987); all the metalwork is in a stable state, though no conservation notes were made available, the conservation judging by the method used having been done some decades ago (Vanessa Fell pers comm.). Artefacts that are quantified and reported here comprise all surviving finds from the 1935-7 excavations, except for the human bone which has been temporarily retained by Birmingham City Museum (8 boxes – unavailable at the time of assessment due to still being unpacked after transit to the new archive store).

All artefacts have been examined and broadly dated to period. This date has been used to confirm the broad date of phases defined in the site stratigraphic sequence published in the 1938 report (see below).

No environmental sampling was carried out, though some identifications of wood species from charcoal are noted in the 1938 report. Similarly there are broad references to animal species in the 1938 report, and now only a small amount of hand-collected bone is retained in the present archive, but more animal bone (not yet assessed as it was unavailable- see above) is listed as being with the human bone (Smith 1995).

2.3 Structural remains

Quantification of site records

The NMR holds a photographic archive of excavation shots (NMR ref 629615 – 33 photos). No other field records are known to survive, and this has been confirmed through contact with the Overbury Estate which sponsored the original excavation (R Holland Martin pers comm.), and with the Hencken family (now resident in Boston, USA), though there remains the possibility that records have been deposited with an institution that has yet to be identified.

The published report (Hencken 1938) is quite detailed for its time and is clearly in the mould of a Richborough or Maiden Castle excavation report, with the excavator aiming at a definitive detailed report by the standards of the day. However the reporting does not allow for any easy link between the report and the surviving archive, as the original site records and any post-excavation records appear to be missing which makes it very difficult indeed to reconstruct this link. Having said that there is a fair amount of information about the context of the finds recorded on the finds bags which may in itself be useful.

Assessment suggests that there is no need to question the 1938 broad site dating as the summary assessment of the finds shows that 99% of the assemblage is of Iron Age date.

The site was recorded by digging long trenches (mainly across the defences) or 'Wheeler' box-trenches (eg entrance to the inner defences), and the location of the trenches is shown in Hencken (1938) plate III (reproduced here as Figure 1). The finds were recorded three-dimensionally within each trench rather than being assigned to a 'context' as understood today as a stratigraphic unit. Finds including sherds could be individually numbered, presumably so that they could be planned and their likely layer identified with reference to an adjacent section. Otherwise finds were allocated to general areas such as 'to rear of the inner rampart'.

Fortunately the site seems to have been occupied mainly in a single period (Iron Age) and the large features (ramparts and ditches) provided the main framework of a straight-forward structural sequence. Typically for the period the excavation focussed on the defences, and as a broad sequence it was contended that an inner rampart and ditch was later extended by the additional strengthening of an additional outer circuit. There is no reason to dispute this broad picture of site development, as the similarity of the finds both under and in the inner rampart, and in the associated structures behind the rampart, can all convincingly be taken to demonstrate that these are fairly contemporary, especially as the finds associated with the outer defences also seem to be similar in character. Overall dating of 100-50BC (Hencken 1938, 92) for the inception of the hillfort is, however, now in need of some revision. A date more in the region of 5th-2nd century BC is more likely to be accurate, and radiocarbon dating of the Beckford pottery (including residues) is keenly awaited for refining dating within the region.

One particularly high value that attaches to this hillfort assemblage is that no mechanical plant was used in first stripping the site, and that finds were kept from the hand-digging of the overburden. This potentially constitutes a far higher rate of recovery than in a modern excavation.

Potential for analysis (site structures)

Further analysis

In the absence of original site records there is relatively little that can be revisited as regards detailed site analysis and interpretation. However, the descriptive accounts on the main finds bags still indicate clearly the main collection zones and it would be possible to characterise the site finds in more detail if the pottery for instance was re-examined for each trench. A broad quantitative and qualitative comparison would also be possible with the adjacent hillfort known as Conderton Camp (Thomas 2005), and with nearby lowland settlement at Beckford (Wills forthcoming).

Some re-appraisal of individual feature interpretations may also be possible in the light of modern standards (eg see Slag below).

2.4 Finds

16 Boxes of finds (including 8 boxes of human bone)

material	period	count	weight(g)
bone	-	22	-
bone/antler obj	IA	20	-
briquetage	IA	79	1247
ceramic objects	IA	2	-
copper alloy	IA	46	-
fuel ash slag	IA	0	2400
fired clay	IA	3	30
ironwork	?	1	-
ironwork	IA	61	-
pot	?	5	10
pot	IA	3826	33085
pot	Roman	2	46
pot	?Anglo-Saxon	95	686
stone objects	IA	5	-
worked flint	IA	1	-

Table 1 Quantification of finds by material (omitting human bone and weighs oft non-ceramic finds)

year	count	Weight (g)
Not known	149	591
1935	1347	11884
1936	1650	14098
1937	1022	10931

Table 2 Quantification of finds by year of excavation (weight omitting non-ceramic finds)

Pottery

The pottery (3928 sherds) is generally in good condition with intact surfaces. Much of it is carefully marked. However there is some mixing of 'contexts' probably because the paper bags have burst in several instances – the mixing is indicated because the pottery is so well marked. Almost all the pottery is of Iron Age date and much of it is middle Iron Age, and includes a relatively high proportion of stamped and linear-tool decorated rim sherds. The principal fabrics are the main regional fabrics in this part of Worcestershire, namely Malvernian and Palaeozoic limestone tempered wares. However, these wares were not identified until the mid 1960s-70s and the Bredon Hill report does not have any overall or phase quantifications, and the fabric descriptions are typical of their time making reference

to their 'gritty' character, sometimes with a perceptive note of 'stone grits'. Morris (1983) covers an overall fabric quantification for regional fabrics from the site.

The 1938 report does present the pottery by identifying groups associated with major structural elements of the site sequence – the descriptions of these structural elements may be somewhat vague and broad-brush by modern standards but they do seem to be soundly based on a well-informed reading of the stratigraphy. Accordingly the published pottery and other finds from the site do still represent very useful (often large) groups, though there is little useful differentiation of fabric to accompany the illustrated forms, and to relate to the various key areas of the site. A useful assemblage of more **local wares** is also present but was not identified in the published report which was particularly focussed on the decorated, and especially 'duck stamped', wares, and speculation about the origins of the latter. The non-local wares are reasonably well illustrated in the 1938 publication (eg published drawings of 27 decorated rims).

Likewise Droitwich salt container, more commonly referred to as briquetage, has only been recognised from the 1970s, and was previously assigned to the category of miscellaneous fired clay. The incidence of this material across the region has been comprehensively studied by Elaine Morris (1983), and her overall survey of sites included Bredon Hill, where she recorded 72 sherds (1.053kg). Hencken (1938) may well have alluded to this material without knowing what it was, as there is a reference to 'rough unspecialised flower-pot' (Hencken 1938, 37).

A group of 95 sherds (A^3 31) possibly from a single hand-made grass-tempered pot is in an entirely different fabric which is generally more typical of early-mid Saxon pottery, though then it is often a more minor component of a larger assemblage (eg 1% at Droitwich; Lentowicz 1997). This type of Saxon fabric was not found at Aston Mill (Dinn and Evans 1990, 37), nor apparently in the Anglo-Saxon cemeteries at Beckford (Evison and Hill 1996, 22). Judging from the number of Bredon Hill sherds, this pot may well have been fairly *in situ* when found, however this material was not mentioned in the published report.

Other ceramic

There was only a very small assemblage of fired clay, and this is not worth any further analysis.

Metalwork

The 'massacre layer'

The metalwork assemblage (about 100 objects) from this site is exceptional for the region, mainly because of the finds from the 'massacre layer'. This relates to the apparently intact aftermath of a skirmish/battle where the bodies have been buried more or less where they fell, probably by slighting the ramparts of the hillfort (Hencken 1938). Clearly the hillfort was then abandoned as a fortification at this point as the bodies had lain in the roadway which provide the entrance to the fort, which is where they were found. There were associated weapons and fragments of binding that represent parts of shields and many smaller items of personal decoration such as finger rings. There were also pieces of horse furniture indicating that mounted riders had formed part of the action, if this interpretation of the deposit is accepted.

An alternative interpretation has been proposed by Smith (1995) who has focussed on the human bone collection and concluded that these may represent an excarnation site. Its survival is attributed to the collapse of the fortifications, thereby ensuring the potentially unique survival of an excarnation site in the process of being used. This study identified the remains of at least 16 individuals and concluded: '… male majority present … in late twenties to forties. The pathology consists chiefly of domestic injuries and degenerative disorders and no signs of violent trauma as T C Hencken suggested. … The remains are too mixed to suggest bodies collapsing in the gateway, to lie where they fell, unless they have been heavily scavenged.'

Other metalwork

Conservation has been reasonably successful; the iron objects are still recognisable (probably stripped, then graphite and wax coated), and a quick comparison between the 1938 report and the

actual objects reveals that they have not significantly deteriorated; the copper alloy, in particular, is usually in very good condition having not deteriorated at all. Some of the metalwork has lost its labelling, though the labelling still exists, and so the two want marrying up again. No radiography seems to have been generally undertaken of the ironwork or copper alloy (Vanessa Fell pers comm), and would still be worthwhile, especially as it would also, in addition to the investigative purpose, provide a long-term record in the event that the objects are damaged or otherwise lost through natural decay.

Metallographic sampling of some of the metalwork (hammers) has more recently been undertaken by Vanessa Fell (1993). This produced valuable data contributing to the national dataset for Iron Age tools (approx 400 artefacts analysed), including showing that some of the Bredon tools were quench-hardened, a technique infrequently found in the Iron Age, and perhaps tending to confirm that there was common and sophisticated craft tradition in the manufacture of some hammers.

The Bredon assemblage stands comparison with other hillforts for the amount of iron objects. For instance iron finds are quite common at Danebury in Hampshire (Cunliffe 1984) where there has been large-scale excavation. Given the potentially special circumstances of the deposition of much of the Bredon ironwork it is not really possible to make any straight-forward comparison with the nearby lowland site of Beckford (Wills forthcoming). Here similar items of shield binding and an occasional spearhead were also recovered, clearly in much smaller quantities despite the much larger excavation area.

There are some indications that iron finds were common within the hillfort as well, as there are a number of iron bars which could be pieces of the narrow spit-shaped currency bars which are typical of this area. A find of a hoard of currency bars has occurred elsewhere on the site in 1959 (Birmingham Museum note; uncorroborated).

Slag

One feature in particular produced a large amount of fuel ash slag and though this was interpreted as from bronze working there were no associated crucibles or moulds.

Stone

A small amount of burnt stone and a small worked flint were found. The former is typical of sites of this period and is usually interpreted as evidence for cooking. The latter is the only evidence that the hilltop was associated with any earlier activity, and perhaps conforms with the background scatter identified at Conderton Camp (Bellamy 2005, 117).

2.5 Environmental remains

8 boxes human skeletal material

General

Human bone was the largest and most significant component of the environmental assemblage. Other environmental material was negligible and there was only a little animal bone and some small wood samples.

Human bone

16 (min) skeletons

The human bone was unavailable at the time of assessment due to still being unpacked after transit to new Birmingham Archaeological Archive store.

The assemblage of Iron Age human skeletal material is by far the largest of its period in the region – a minimum of 16 individuals were present. Human remains from this period are generally rare in this

region, and the nearest comparison is at Beckford where about 35 individuals of Iron Age date were recorded as burials across a much larger area (J Wills pers comm.). The context of the Bredon bodies is also exceptional as it apparently relates to a particular event at the hillfort. Referred to as the 'massacre layer' by Hencken (1938) the bodies were taken to represent the aftermath of a battle, but consideration should also be given to whether a funerary ritual is represented instead (Smith 1995). This controversy should be addressed in any new analysis.

The assemblage has recently formed the basis of a postgraduate MA dissertation and has been recorded to a relatively modern standard (Smith 1995). The author of this report has not yet been traced and so it is unknown whether the research can be included in any further analysis of the archive and publication.

Absolute dating of several of these human bones would provide an important date relating to a dramatic episode in the history of this site as well as (potentially) for the surrounding region, as well providing a date for the end of the hillfort occupation and thereby a date for comparison with radiocarbon dates from Croft Ambrey (Stanford 1974) and Midsummer Hill (Stanford 1981).

Animal bone

7 bags (Smith 1995)

Animal bone was mainly with the human bone which has not yet been fully assessed (see above). Given the good preservation of limestone inclusions in the pottery and the survival of much human bone, it was unlikely that ground conditions would have been hostile to animal bone preservation.

2.6 Potential for analysis

Stratigraphy

Though no formal site record survives, a list of the main 'contexts', as recorded on the finds bags, would provide a broad framework for the site and for any further more specific analysis (see below). A series of 33 excavation site photos have now been located at the NMR and should be examined in due course.

Finds archive

A basic inventory is presently lacking due to the age of the excavation and would be useful for generally managing this collection in future. It should be in a format useful to the systems used by the Birmingham Museums Service, so that it could also serve as part of the accession record for this important collection.

The assemblage still has the potential to generally inform our understanding of the archaeology of the latter, as it is spectacular in terms of the quantity and condition of its ceramics and in the wide range of other associated finds many of which were associated with the 'massacre layer' event.

Pottery

Clearly this is an important Iron Age assemblage for the region and being largely of middle Iron Age date (*c* 4th-2nd century BC) without residual material from other periods, and largely undisturbed by later activity, it still retains much of its significance.

Modern analysis in the region has benefited greatly from the revolution in fabric definition that took place in the 1960s-70s, the west Midlands being one of the regions that is best placed for this type of analysis to be really effective; the prehistoric fabrics contain rock inclusions, and the region is on the edge of the maximum ice extent in the Ice Age and so rock detritus has not been spread huge distances by glacial action. This has made it possible to identify production centres in this part of the west Midlands without specific archaeological evidence for precise production spots. Major regional Iron Age pottery industries, such as Malvernian and Palaeozoic limestone tempered wares, have

now been distinguished, and their products consistently recorded across the region for several decades.

The current state of the pottery record is that Morris (1983) has made a quantified record of the Bredon Hill pottery assemblage, but only with reference to these regional fabrics, and then only as an overall site quantification, and there is no corresponding record of the more local wares. Given the very large quantity of decorated pottery from the site the publication (Hencken 1938) only recorded the larger sherds and so some decorative motifs were not published – over 50 decorative motifs were not illustrated as a result. There is also no modern fabric identification for the published motifs. The widespread occurrence of these wares across the region means that study of the larger assemblages is particularly useful for future site reporting, as this assemblage has many positive features such as forms represented by large sherds, and many rims and good examples of decorative motifs, as well as the association with a large collection of human bone (the 'massacre' layer) and so the potential for radiocarbon dating to provide a tight date for a major group.

There is, therefore, room to improve the pottery record in such a way that it could be made more useful for comparative purposes with other sites, including those from aggregate areas. This would contribute to further characterising the pottery of the region generally.

Metalwork

In the light of analysis of the currency bars undertaken in the course of the Beckford project and the analysis (hammerheads) already undertaken by Fell (1993) the metallographic and compositional investigation of a sample of the Bredon Hill currency bars (if the identification is confirmed) – and possibly other tools - would further supplement the data already gathered, and further characterise a specific product closely connected with the lower Severn valley (Cunliffe 1978). Therefore, further metallographic analysis may be useful but depends on the quality of the metal that survives under the conservation coating, which would only become apparent from the radiographs (Vanessa Fell pers comm). Radiography would also provide a record of this important assemblage, and may also reveal other details.

Apart for the obvious archaeological significance of the site the 'massacre layer' represents potentially the single most dramatic event that can assigned to the later prehistoric period in this region, and the wealth of associated finds (see also above), including many items of metalwork (both weapons and personal items), means there is much potential for providing a graphic account through artistic reconstruction in order to capture the interest of the public and to encourage a wider appreciation of the period. Finding archaeological evidence for such an event is highly unusual, and, however it is interpreted, this event is important for any appreciation of later prehistoric life in the wider region, including at settlements across aggregates areas in the lower parts of the Severn valley.

Environmental

Human skeletons

The human bone assemblage is of great significance as it represents the single largest assemblage of its type in the region. The circumstances of deposition are also controversial, and do not seem to conform with any of the categories of deposition identified at Danbury (Walker 1984). The existing human bone report (MA dissertation by Smith 1995) identifies little in the way of traumatic injuries, and so casts doubt on the 'massacre' idea. However, there is still circumstantial evidence of the 'massacre' from the presence of associated artefacts, especially spearheads.

This material requires some re-assessment, as there have developments in this field, for instance when differentiating between true peri-mortem fracturing and dry bone fracturing, and the consequent ramifications of differentiating between the two for interpreting funerary rituals, more specifically cannibalism (G Western pers comm.).

C14 dating

The assemblage provides a rare opportunity to date a significant event, and it is proposed that C14 dating of four separate skeletons from the 'massacre layer' should be undertaken, which would provide a more accurate date through the application of Bayesian statistics.

Radiocarbon dating is not particularly straightforward for the first millennium BC, and it is necessary to initially use the ceramic assessment as a way of gauging the most appropriate C14 dating strategy (A Bayliss pers comm.). This would conventionally suggest (see above) a 3rd-1st century BC date for the 'massacre layer' and so the most effective strategy should be to go for 12 AMS dates to be on the safe side based on the following recommendation:

> 400–200 BC – 8 x AMS or 6 x high-precision dates; 200–100 BC – 12 x AMS could tell you within 150 years or within 75 years; 50 BC–50 AD – 10 x high-precision should tell you to within a century or less. (A Bayliss pers comm.).

Such a strategy would also conserve the bone collection for the future whereas high precison dating would have totally used large and more complete bones. Replicates of the same bone of different individuals (eg 6 left femora) should be selected to ensure that a range of individuals are sampled (A Bayliss pers comm.).

Animal bone

Probably of little potential for further analysis but it is still necessary to assess the animal bone (scan) with a view to producing a rapid qualitative and quantitative record highlighting any unusual features.

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5. Abbreviations

WSM Numbers prefixed with 'WSM' are the primary reference numbers used by the Worcestershire County Sites and Monuments Record.

WCRO Worcestershire County Records Office.

NMR National Monuments Record.

SMR Sites and Monuments Record.

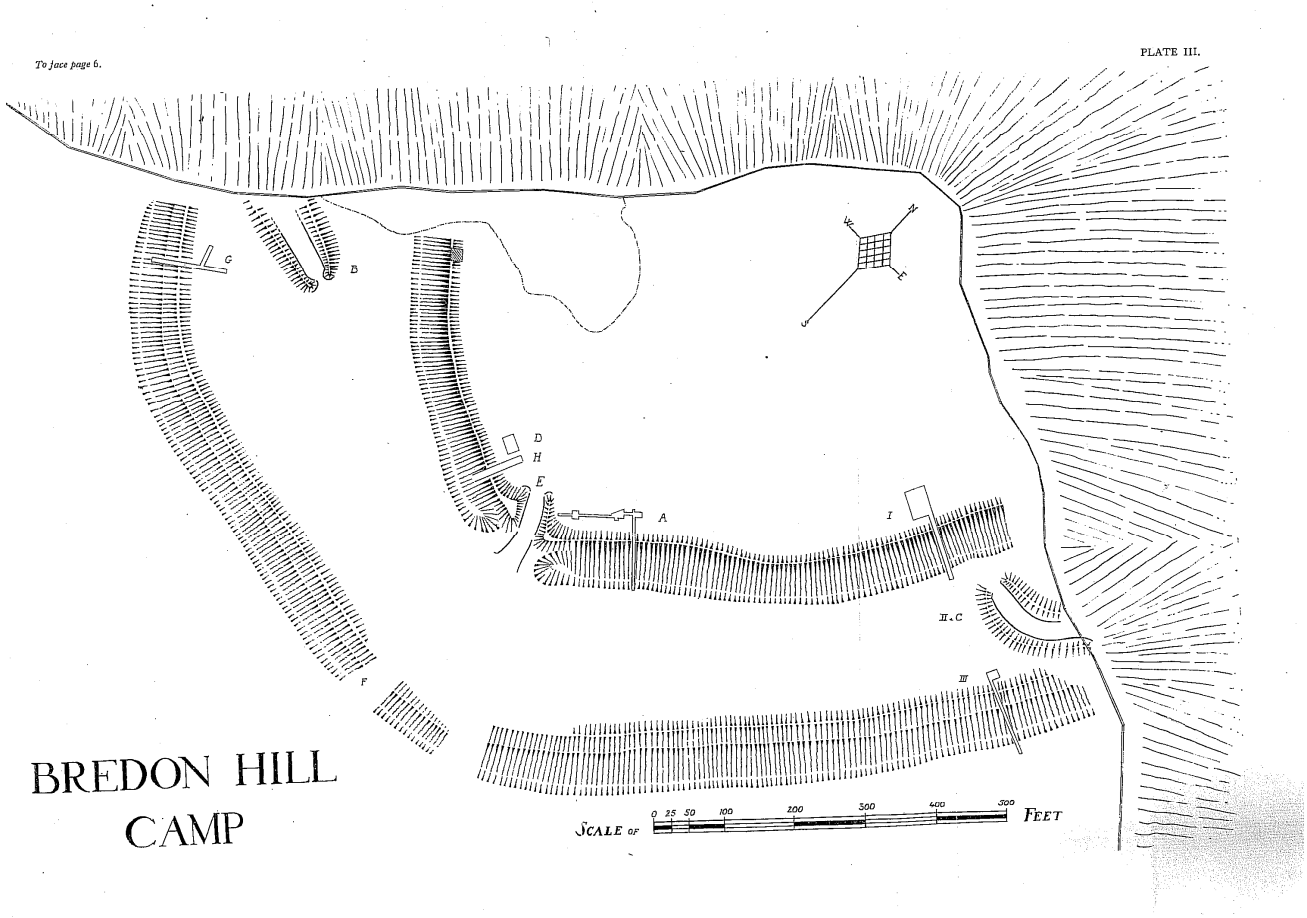

Figure 1 Plan of 1935-7 excavations on Bredon Hill (Hencken 1938)