Interim report on salvage recording of a Neolithic/Beaker and Bronze Age settlement and landscape at Huntsmans Quarry, Kemerton 1994-6

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1. Summary

Archaeological fieldwork undertaken in advance of quarrying at Kemerton in south Worcestershire has revealed the most comprehensive evidence for late Neolithic/Beaker and Bronze Age settlement to have been identified in the region to date. Significant archaeological deposits covered an area in excess of 7ha (17 acres).

An important phase of Late Neolithic/Beaker activity included several posthole structures and pits and a ring-ditch. Most activity was of Late Bronze Age date and included extensive evidence of domestic settlement, associated trackways and co-axial field systems covering the entire area investigated. Large complexes of postholes and substantial pits or waterholes contained significant quantities of well preserved domestic debris. Preliminary analysis indicates that building plans and fencelines can be identified and that some phasing and zoning of the settlement will be possible.

The artefactual material represents the largest assemblage of Late Bronze Age domestic material to have been found in the Midlands to date, and the range of artefacts is unprecedented in the area, both in terms of type and quality for a settlement of this period.

Bone preservation was generally good and the size of the assemblage will allow detailed faunal and butchery pattern analysis. In addition, environmental assemblages from well dated contexts have provided a regionally unique opportunity to advance research into the agricultural economy and environment during this period.

2. Introduction

A programme of archaeological works was undertaken at Huntsmans Quarry, Kemerton, Hereford and Worcester between September 1994 and May 1996 in response to extension of an existing quarry (Fig 1). The work was carried out by the Field Section of Hereford and Worcester County Archaeological Service on behalf of Huntmans Quarries Limited.

Fieldwork commenced with a staged evaluation comprising geophysical survey, fieldwalking and trial trenching. This led to the definition of a core area of prehistoric settlement and indicated peripheral activity extending beyond it. The core area was excluded from quarrying and preserved *in situ* while salvage recording was undertaken in advance of quarrying across the remainder of the site. Extensive and significant deposits of Beaker through to Late Bronze Age date have been recorded throughout the salvage recording and have far exceeded the expectations of the evaluation programme.

Due to the extents and significance of the deposits, English Heritage have agreed to support a programme of post-excavation analysis which it is intended will lead to publication of the results from this nationally important site.

3. Location

The site includes parts of the parishes of Bredon and Kemerton and is centered on NGR SO 939 363. It lies 1km to the south of Bredon Hill, a massive Jurassic limestone outlier of the Cotswolds dominating the Vale of Evesham and Lower Avon Valley. The site itself is almost flat, with only a slight slope downwards to the south, west and east. A very gentle slope up to the north falls away slightly outside the quarry area before rising as the footslopes of Bredon Hill. The site was used as agricultural land before the present gravel extraction began.

4. Archaeological background

The site was originally identified and recorded on the County Sites and Monuments Record as a result of aerial photography, which revealed a cropmark of indeterminate form (taken by J Pickering, 1980; HWCM 15263). Further cropmarks in the vicinity have been identified over a number of seasons, although the photography has generally been aimed towards a better defined scheduled site to the south (HWCM 5098 and 5137). This latter group of cropmarks is interpreted as representing a number of Iron Age or Roman enclosures, a trackway and later ridge and furrow.

A number of archaeological sites in the vicinity have been investigated. An evaluation, only some 300m to the east of the quarry site, produced evidence of Anglo-Saxon domestic occupation including a *grübenhaus* (HWCM 20019; Fagan *et al* 1994). More extensive salvage excavation, at Aston Mill Quarry to the south, examined possible late Neolithic occupation, Bronze Age cremations and a ring ditch, middle Iron Age pits and enclosures, Roman ditches and another Anglo-Saxon *grübenhaus* (HWCM 2252 and 5141; Dinn and Evans 1990). Medieval ridge and furrow field systems are visible as faint earthworks and as cropmarks in a number of the surrounding fields.

The wider area of the Carrant Brook Valley contains a wealth of cropmark sites which include extensive field systems apparently of Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman date. Pit alignments and ring ditches have also been identified, though few of the cropmarks have been investigated on the ground. The slopes of Bredon Hill have produced many chance finds of prehistoric to Roman date indicating extensive occupation, much of it pre-dating the early Iron Age promontory fort of Kemerton Camp, partially excavated by Thalassa Cruso Hencken (Hencken 1938; HWCM 3943).

A Beaker period barrow lies on the slopes of Bredon Hill, within sight of the quarry (SO 953 398; HWCM 7324; Thomas 1965), while excavations at nearby Beckford have produced limited evidence of Bronze Age activity as well as extensive Iron Age activity around the base of Bredon Hill (James Dinn pers comm).

5. Fieldwork methods

Topsoil stripping was undertaken largely with a 360^{o} tracked excavator. Selected small areas were hand cleaned wherever possible immediately following the stripping, however, for considerable areas of the site this proved to be unnecessary since the plant operators were highly efficient and produced a "finished surface" on which archaeological features were generally readily identifiable.

The entire stripped area, some 70,000m^2, was planned and whilst only a small proportion of features were excavated, the large area exposed, allied to the results from areas of higher sampling, allowed selection of "key" features. These were those few which either had stratigraphic relationships, or formed part of identifiable structures or

appeared to be artefactually rich. As a result a very high information and artefact recovery rate was achieved in relation to the minimal levels of resources available.

6. Results and discussion

Although it is evident that the “core area” identified does contain well preserved and stratified remains relating to Late Bronze Age settlement, much of the remainder of the site has been demonstrated to contain well preserved, extensive and similarly dated activity as well as earlier Late Neolithic/Beaker occupation; effectively the original "core" area appears to represent only one "core" within a much wider pattern of prehistoric settlement. In total 2525 features were identified of which approximately 10% were excavated.

6.1 The deposits

Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age
Although unstratified flint of Neolithic date was recovered, the earliest datable deposits were of Late Neolithic or Beaker date (2700-1700 BC) and appear largely to be focused towards the western end of the site. This activity was of a comparatively low density, represented by a ring-ditch (Plate 1) and several pits containing decorated Beaker pottery, flint and bone. Two or three buildings of sub-rectangular form in this area are also tentatively dated to this period (Plate 2),

These late Neolithic/Beaker period features are thought to relate to domestic activity, although one important feature of this date was the shallow ring-ditch on the northern edge of the site which presumably represents the remains of a ploughed out barrow. The proximity and intervisibility of round barrows to Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age settlement sites is well known (Drewett 1982) and the Beaker barrow on Bredon Hill would have been intervisible with this site as might have been that at Aston Mill, Kemerton (Dinn and Evans 1990).

Later Bronze Age
The majority of the features on site can be identified as of Later Bronze Age date (11th to 7th centuries BC). Numerous clusters of postholes appear to represent timber buildings of mainly circular or sub-circular form. These are thought to be primarily houses as many have domestic waste in close proximity to them. No domestic artefacts were found *in situ* within the buildings as floor levels had been truncated in all instances. Such structures have previously been identified on similar predominantly Late Bronze Age settlement sites such as at Reading Business Park, Berkshire (Moore and Jennings 1992) and at Shorncote Quarry, Gloucestershire (Hearne and Heaton 1994).

A number of large pits (Plate 3) occurred in association with these buildings and in several cases were apparently paired. The largest of these features measured 5.5m in diameter and was 3.3m deep. The lowest fills appeared to largely result from weathering of the sand and gravel sides. Several of the pits penetrated the sand and gravel, cutting into the clay below, and as a result the lower fills were waterlogged in a number of instances. These lower fills contained few artefacts though worked wood, animal bone, pottery and quantities of burnt stone were present along with well preserved organic remains. In contrast the upper fills included dumped deposits of burnt stone and heavily charcoal-flecked fills containing significant quantities of domestic debris. These are believed to have originated as waterholes but had subsequently been used for rubbish disposal. Similar sequences of fills have been identified in comparable features at other Late Bronze Age sites such as Shorncote Quarry (Hearne and Heaton

1994) and at Radley, Oxfordshire (Mudd 1995). The largest pit contained a worked timber in its base which strongly resembles the crude wooden ladder found in a similar position in a waterhole at Radley. The material assemblages within these pits will help to date the otherwise largely undated but associated posthole clusters and may provide evidence of several phases of occupation across the site within this broad period.

The posthole groups and pits clearly relate to settlement and are notable for the extensive area which they cover. This pattern of activity is believed to represent a shifting pattern of occupation across an area by a small community rather than contemporaneous activity, although this has yet to be demonstrated. It is also apparent that although the site was possibly divided into areas by fencelines, it was not apparently enclosed.

Some burials were also identified. The lower fill of the ring-ditch contained the remnants of a very poorly fired vessel associated with cremated bone which may represent a secondary cremation, of Later bronze Age date, inserted into the existing barrow. Two further cremations were recorded, one in a posthole and one in a small cremation pit. The date of these is uncertain, however, they appear consistent with Late Bronze burial practice where small cemetery clusters replace the visible and landscape dominating barrows and monuments of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (Parker Pearson 1993).

A series of shallow ditches forming a field system appear to originate in the later Bronze Age, the most distinctive feature of which was a pair of ditches forming a trackway running across the whole of the stripped area. This is paralleled by a cropmark trackway which ran across the previous area of gravel extraction. Further cropmarks suggest that comparable alignments extend well beyond the site. These double ditched drove or trackways and the associated field boundaries may be characterised as a co-axial system very similar to those investigated elsewhere, for instance at Fengate (Pryor 1991) and on Dartmoor (Fleming 1988). Such systems have been dated to the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age and have often been associated with settlements.

Later landuse
The most significant later activity was the creation of ridge and furrow within open fields across the whole of the area. All of the excavated features had been truncated by later agricultural activity.

6.2 **The pottery** (Ann Woodward)

A total of 4098 sherds weighing slightly over 33kg were recovered of which all but 31 sherds were of prehistoric date. Almost all of the prehistoric pottery was found in the fills of negative features (pits, postholes and ditches), so the assemblage is well provenanced. A total of 171 sherds were of Late Neolithic or Beaker date but the remainder can be dated to the Late Bronze Age.

The fabrics are mainly calcareous and inclusions are generally large, angular and ill-sorted. Varying mixtures of limestone and fossil shell are predominant, but a small quantity of fine sandy wares are also represented. Most of the pottery is unabraded, and many conjoins can be identified. A few sherds have been refired and present a light, vesicular appearance.

The majority of the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age material came from four pits, three of which were adjacent features. This material includes fragments from at least five decorated Beaker vessels, Beaker domestic ware, possible Fengate Ware and one possible sherd of Grooved Ware. The most diagnostic Beaker items belong to Case's (1977) Middle Style. Pottery of these periods is relatively rare in Worcestershire,

although similar fragmentary material has been found at Aston Mill, Kemerton (Dinn and Evans 1990) and Beckford.

The Late Bronze Age assemblage is large and displays a remarkable variety of forms and styles of decoration (Fig 2). Elements of post-Deverel-Rimbury plain wares and the subsequent decorated Late Bronze Age phases are apparent. A close parallel is afforded by the assemblage from Shorncote Quarry, Gloucestershire (Hearne and Heaton 1994), whilst individual aspects of the assemblage can be matched at sites such as Brean Down (Somerset; Bell 1990), Combe Hay (Avon; Price and Watts 1980), Roughground Farm (Gloucestershire; Allen *et al* 1993), Rams Hill (Oxfordshire; Bradley and Ellison 1975) and Wallingford (Oxfordshire; Thomas *et al* 1986), Aldermaston and Knights Farm (Berkshire; Bradley *et al* 1980), and Reading Business Park (Berkshire; Moore and Jennings 1992). A series of Late Bronze Age sites have been identified recently in the West Midlands. These include Park Farm, Barford (Ford and Woodward 1994), Wasperton (Woodward in prep) and Norton Lenchwick Bypass. Small groups have also been identified at Beckford (Dinn pers comm) and at Aston Mill, Kemerton (Dinn and Evans 1990) but this is the first major assemblage from Worcestershire. One diagnostic feature is of particular importance - the rows of perforations or part-perforations below the rim. These are more often found in Middle Bronze Age assemblages although they do occur on Late Bronze Age sites in the Middle to Lower Thames region (Longworth *et al* 1988, fig 19 and appendix 2).

Preliminary analysis of the occurrence of certain elements which are usually of later date has indicated that the assemblages in some areas may be later than those in others. These later elements include finger-tip decoration on shoulders or in neck concavities, the occurrence of incised geometric decoration and the incidence of finer sandy fabrics.

6.3 **Other finds** (Stephanie Ratkai)

An exceptionally large collection of loomweights, many complete or near complete were found. At least 30 loomweights were represented and a wide range of forms have been identified eg pyramidal, cylindrical, "doughnut shaped", conical and two triangular weights. Although loomweights have been commonly found on Late Bronze Age settlement sites, as at Reading Business park (Moore and Jennings 1992), this is an exceptional collection, not only regionally but nationally. Evidence from Middle to Late Bronze Age settlements suggests that textile production was a regular feature of life during this period (Parker Pearson 1993) and this large assemblage of loomweights would seem to reflect this situation. Here, they presumably reflect mainly woollen cloth production since sheep were well represented in the animal bone assemblage, however, linen production may also have occurred as has been recognised at comparable sites. The loomweights varied in form and size and this may reflect changing weaving traditions or production of different weights of textile. It is also interesting that no spindle whorls or weaving combs were recovered as might be expected on a site with many loomweights. The absence of spindle whorls has been noted at a number of sites in the Thames Valley where it has been suggested that they may have been manufactured from wood (Moore and Jennings 1992, 122). It is possible that the same may be true of weaving combs.

There were in the region of 200 ceramic mould fragments used for bronze casting. These came from two discrete areas of the site. The greatest single concentration (over 60 fragments) was from a single pit fill. Although the recognition of clay moulds on Bronze Age or Iron Age sites is no longer a rarity, this relatively large group, from a limited number of contexts, has the potential to contribute to our knowledge of bronze technology at this period. Further analysis of the mould fragments should determine what was being cast which in turn is likely to support dating provided by other artefact classes and radiocarbon dating.

A total of 368 fragments of worked flint were recovered, mostly from discrete feature fills widely distributed across the site. Particular concentrations of material were present in a number of the substantial pit fills. These have largely been dated (by ceramics) to the Late Bronze Age, though one is of Late Neolithic or Beaker date. The assemblage itself contains few diagnostic items, however, where present, the dating of these appears to be consistent with that of the ceramics. Some earlier residual material is also present, including a small quantity of Mesolithic material and two potentially Palaeolithic items.

Other finds included two bone pins, two fragments of shale armlets and a single amber or cornelian bead which provide evidence of craft, production and trading links beyond a regional level.

6.3.1 **The environment** (Elizabeth Pearson)

A variety of environmental remains were recovered including large and small animal bone, molluscs, insect, charred cereal, and waterlogged plant remains. Preliminary analysis has demonstrated that there are well-preserved assemblages of animal bone, charred and waterlogged plant remains and pollen surviving in a small number of samples. Generally, however, environmental remains were sparsely scattered across the site, but this is frequently the case for early prehistoric sites and these remains are of considerable significance.

Almost all of the animal bone was recovered from the fills of discrete negative features (mostly pits) and so the assemblage is well provenanced. Although, in comparison with assemblages from later sites, this is a relatively small sample (some 2000 fragments), animal bone assemblages from sites of Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age through to Late Bronze Age are rare, especially from occupation sites such as this. The bone assemblage appears to be dominated by the remains of domesticated animals, the majority of which were cattle, followed by sheep or goat, pig (pig being present as a significantly high proportion for this species) and a small number of horse bones. The number of pig bones may be a reflection of a relatively important element of woodland in the environment, and this supports the evidence from the pollen assessment.

Generally it is noticeable that the main meat-bearing parts (limb, vertebrae and ribs) are well represented, suggesting that much of the bone derives from food remains rather than butchery waste. A significant number of butchered, ageable and measurable remains have been noted. These are rare in assemblages from occupation sites of this date and analysis will contribute significantly to our understanding of Late Bronze Age animal husbandry. Although there a predominance of domestic animals, it is also evident that there was some reliance on hunted game, with both red and roe deer present.

Charred plant remains, including cereal grains, weed seeds and cereal chaff (glume bases), were present in sparse concentrations in a number of samples and one relatively rich grain assemblage has been identified. Although the frequent occurrence of some cereal crops throughout the Neolithic and Bronze Age is recognised, the relative importance of cereal cultivation compared to wild food collection or pastoral farming is still unclear. Although little evidence has been acquired of the food products consumed during this period, it is becoming increasingly accepted that, during the earlier part of this period, collected plant food was an important component of the diet in combination with farmed cereals, providing a muesli-like plant diet. The hypothesis that there was a transition during the Bronze Age between small-scale collection and consumption of a range of cultivars and non-cultivars to large-scale agricultural "industry" producing copious waste (Palmer and Jones 1991) is worth examining at Kemerton where the extent to which the agricultural system had been developed is obviously of interest.

Deposits were waterlogged at the base of three Late Bronze Age pits, two of which have been studied to date. One of these produced well preserved organic remains including abundant twig, stem and leaf fragments, thorns and seeds. Twig fragments and seeds of shrub or woodland species are notably dominant. Other species indicate an element of grassland or herbaceous undergrowth of woodland and possibly cultivated land. Many large fragments of wood were present in the other sample.

Pollen was well preserved and present in good quantity in the one sample which has so far been examined from a Late Bronze Age pit. Two other pollen samples from similarly dated features are considered to have similar potential. The herb pollen is dominated by grasses (Poaceae), various composites (Lactucae), plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*) and both red and white clovers (*Trifolium repens* and *pratense*), which suggest an open landscape with plenty of grassland, probably grazed. There is a fairly substantial cereal pollen component, suggesting cereal growing or processing near the site. The single grain of flax (*Linum usitatissimum*) is a rarity, for flax distributes extremely small amounts of pollen. This site could even have been used for flax retting. Pollen from wetland and aquatic plants is present in modest amounts and a range of taxa, suggesting that this site was not a large wet area. Tree and shrub pollen suggests that, although the landscape around the site appears to have been substantially cleared of woodland, woods and scrub existed in the vicinity.

7. Conclusions

The site provides an almost unprecedented opportunity for the study of Bronze Age settlement and economy in the region. The site will also contribute to the continuing development of an understanding of the character and distribution of such extensive Late Bronze Age settlements nationally. In addition the evidence of Late Neolithic/Beaker occupation provides a rare opportunity for the study of this period for the County.

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Captions

Figure 1: Location of site

Figure 2: Bronze Age pottery

Plate 1: Ring-ditch

Plate 2: Possible Late Neolithic/Beaker building

Plate 3: Late Bronze Age pit

Plate 4: View across the excavations