Appendix 2: Excavations at Varley Halls: A Summary

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Introduction

The excavations were undertaken by the Field Archaeology Unit in 1992 prior to the construction of new halls of residence for the University of Brighton (Greig 1997). The site, which is adjacent to the Brighton Bypass, is situated on a south-east-facing slope of the South Downs, on the northern outskirts of Brighton, centred around National Grid Reference TQ 3315 0892. The area investigated was approximately 80m × 60m, the ground surface of which sloped down from north-west to south-east, from approximately 90m above Ordnance Datum to approximately 80m AOD. The site location is shown in Figures 1.1C and 7.1.

The underlying geology is chalk, which in the excavated area was not overlain by Clay-with-Flints. The site had been plough-damaged, and truncation of the chalk proved to be quite severe, although in places a thin layer of colluvium survived immediately above the chalk.

The excavation revealed a Middle Bronze Age (MBA) settlement, plus at least one structure dated to the Later Bronze Age. Dating mainly relied on ceramic evidence, with some radiocarbon dates determined by the British Museum (see main excavation report for full details). The overall site plan is given in Figure 13.1.

Fig. 13.1 Varley Halls: Plan of the main excavated features.
Middle Bronze Age settlement

Four round-house platforms, created by terracing into the steeply sloping chalk, can be dated to the MBA. Structures within three of the four platforms are indicated by patterns of post-holes similar to other Bronze Age structures from Sussex, such as those at Iford Hill (Burstow and Holleyman 1957), New Barn Down (Curwen 1934) and, more recently, Black Patch (Drewett 1982b, Downsview (see Section 7) and Mile Oak (see Section 2). The arrangement is essentially a circle, elongated towards the entrance (Figs 13.2, 13.3 and 13.4).

Round-houses 1 and 2 each had two structural phases, represented by two arrangements of post-holes based around an entrance position common to both (Figs 13.2 and 13.3). The substantial difference in size indicates that these actually represent the complete replacement of one structure by another on the same site, rather than refurbishment of a single structure. In each example, the post-holes of Phase 1 were smaller than those of Phase 2, and their fills generally contained fewer large stone fragments. In both cases, the original round-houses were replaced by slightly larger ones, but apparently without enlarging the terraces, and maintaining approximately the original entrance position. This resulted in the pattern of the posts in both Phase 2 round-houses being noticeably asymmetrical in relation to the originals.

Stake-holes were distinguishable around the northern perimeter of both terraced platforms. These stake-holes would have contained the wattle-and-daub structure of the outer wall, although it is not possible to state whether they belong to Phase 1 or Phase 2; perhaps the same holes were reused for the latter. Stake-holes around the southern edge would have been removed by erosion. There are further stake-holes and possible stake-holes within the area of the round-house floor(s). These suggest the presence of internal divisions or small structures, although their arrangement and phasing is not clear.

Round-house 1 contained two relatively shallow clay-lined holes, either intercutting or, more likely, component parts of a single feature. The clay lining suggests storage of a liquid, but otherwise its interpretation is not certain.

Immediately adjacent to Round-house 2 was a smaller terraced area of similar shape, but different in that it contained no arrangement of post-holes. It is referred to as House 3 (Fig. 13.4). Burnt structural debris was found within it, probably from its superstructure. This debris consisted of a large quantity of daub with impressions of wattle and split timbers, associated with considerable amounts of charcoal dated by radiocarbon to the MBA (cal BC 1520–1270; BM-2936; 3130±50BP). The terrace may have contained a structure that did not use earth-fast posts, or alternatively these were outside the terrace and have been lost through truncation. The nature and purpose of such a structure is not easy to define. Some of the charcoal was from tree types (such as dogwood and maple) that are more likely to be used for firewood rather than structural elements. It is possible that it was a sheltered cooking area, with some of the burnt timber actually derived from cooking fires rather than a structure, although it is arguable whether...
such an activity would necessitate the construction of a fairly substantial terrace.

Post-holes immediately to the east of House 3 represented a four-post structure of unknown function, and uncertain date.

Round-house 4 (Fig. 13.4) was in a badly truncated terrace of the same basic shape as that of Round-houses 1 and 2. It consisted of an arrangement of holes, containing material likely to have been post-packing, which form part of the pattern of a structure similar to Round-houses 1 and 2. There was no evidence of stake-holes around the periphery of the terraced floor. It is possible this round-house may have been constructed with the upslope face of the terrace open to the round-house interior and rafters reaching to ground level; such construction was postulated at Black Patch by Drewett (1982b).

Other features interpreted as dating to this period were a single crouched inhumation with the head to the west (the dating confirmed by radiocarbon at 1300–910 cal BC (BM-2919; 2890±60BP)), the butt-end of a ditch which may have held a palisade (dating of a bone from the fill by radiocarbon gave a terminus post quem of 1430–1160 cal BC (BM-2917; 3050±50BP)), a fenceline indicated by a row of post-holes, and shallow linear features suggested to be severely truncated negative lynchets or field boundary ditches. A hollow was comparable to features interpreted elsewhere as ponds (although, as elsewhere, lacking any evidence of a waterproof lining). It was stratigraphically earlier than the fenceline, and it is possible that it was backfilled with spoil from the excavation of the terrace of Round-house 1, but this cannot be confirmed.
Late Bronze Age occupation

Some distance from the MBA building terraces, a larger terrace was only partially within the excavated area, but appeared to contain a structure the outer edge of which was marked by a line of stake-holes (Fig. 13.4). The internal features in that part available for excavation did not reveal a coherent plan. It is referred to as House 5, although its precise nature is not certain. The pottery was dated to the Late Bronze Age (LBA).

Various small holes of unknown function in the vicinity of House 5 are also likely to date to this period, including one nearly circular one which contained the fragmented greater part of an LBA carinated bowl.

Discussion

The MBA settlement displays characteristics common to other excavated settlement sites of this period, although situated on a much steeper slope than most. The agricultural economy, as evidenced by carbonised plant remains (wheat, barley and oats) and animal bones (cattle, sheep/goat and pig), also appears typical. A predominance of head and foot bones, parts generally considered less desirable for food, may represent waste from on-site butchery.

The pottery displayed a notable absence of fine wares. A radiocarbon date closely associated with pottery from House 3 provides a useful addition to the corpus of absolute dating evidence for the ceramics of this period. This is extensively discussed by Hamilton in the main excavation report, in the context of East Sussex generally.

Analysis of the wood charcoal from Round-house 3 suggested exploitation of both mature oak woodland and chalkland scrub. Land mollusc analysis indicated a variety of micro-environments within the site, which can in some instances be related to stratigraphic interpretations.

The most interesting object recovered was a fragment of a faience ornament. It was found in the colluvial upper fill of Round-house 1, and although of Bronze Age date cannot therefore be directly related to the occupation of the site. It was submitted to the British Museum for detailed scientific analysis, and revealed particularly high levels of copper and lead. The analysis suggests a non-British origin.

Features of uncertain date

The largely complete articulated skeleton of a cow was found in a pit close to the MBA settlement. It gave a radiocarbon date in the MBA to LBA transition (1060–830 cal BC; BM-2918; 2790±50BP).

A feature comparable in shape to the building terraces, but containing no internal features, was partially within the excavated area. It may be an unfinished round-house terrace, but contained no dating evidence.