SECTION FOURTEEN

Appendix 3: Excavations at Patcham Fawcett: A Summary

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Introduction

In 1993 and 1994, excavations were undertaken by the Field Archaeology Unit in advance of development at Patcham Fawcett School, Carden Avenue, Brighton. The area to the east of the former school is referred to as Site A, while Site B was situated within the grounds immediately west of the original buildings (Fig. 14.1). These two sites are located approximately half a kilometre to the south of the Brighton Bypass (Fig. 1.1).

Site A

Site A lies on a south-west-facing hillslope between the 90m OD and 101m OD contours (NGR TQ 317 090). It is situated in an area of chalk downland rich in funerary and settlement evidence dating to the prehistoric and Romano-British periods. A full-scale excavation of Site A was undertaken during May and June 1993 (Greatorex, forthcoming).

The stratigraphy across the site had been truncated. Consequently, little survived of the shallower features, while some cuts will have been destroyed completely. However, material was recovered in sufficient quantity to enable either a Middle Bronze Age (MBA) (c. fifteenth to early thirteenth century BC) or Late Bronze Age (LBA) (ninth to eighth century BC) date to be assigned to many of the excavated contexts. The Bronze Age activity was characterised by a series of pits, a large circular scoop, four-post structures, a fenceline, a hearth and three possible round-houses. Four Romano-British ditches and a large number of sub-rectangular post-holes dating to the twentieth century, were also recorded (Fig. 14.2).

A total of 87 modern cut features were assigned to eight separate paired and single post-hole alignments. These features may represent fences, animal pens or sheds.

Fig. 14.1 Patcham Fawcett: Trench plan in relation to the recently demolished school.
Nine sub-circular post-holes were found to form the remains of a post-ring (Round-house I). No dating evidence was recovered from the excavation of these features. However, they have been interpreted as the internal roof-supports of a Bronze Age round-house. The post-ring had a minimum diameter of 5.2m, while the largest surviving post-holes were positioned at the presumed back of the structure. No evidence was found for an external wall.

Four further post-holes were located in a semi-circular setting, approximately 20m west of Round-house I. It is possible that these features represent the internal roof-supports of a second Bronze Age round-house (Round-house II). The projected diameter of the post-ring was 4.6m. A large pit was found to cover most of the suggested floor space within Round-house II. This cut would therefore appear to be of later origin than the actual post-ring. The westernmost post-hole of the building was dissected by a linear feature dating to the first century AD. This ditch thus provides a *terminus ante quem* for the post-hole fill.

Three post-holes were recorded in a semi-circular setting, approximately 5m south-west of Round-house I. The evidence is extremely limited. However, these features may denote the truncated remains of a third Bronze Age round-house (Round-house III).

None of the possible round-houses found at Site A were set on extant platforms terraced into the hillslope. Due to the absence of any absolute dating evidence, it was impossible to determine if these buildings were contemporaneous.

Four probable four-post structures were located on the site. This type of feature is usually associated with above-ground grain storage. However, the size of the post-holes may suggest small-scale racks for curing hides or drying cereals and leaves.

An apparent fenceline comprising five, circular post-holes aligned approximately east to west was recorded in the southern part of the site. On other Bronze Age settlements excavated in Sussex, most notably Black Patch (Drewett 1982b), both individual buildings and ‘building clusters’ have been found within fenced enclosures. The short alignment on Site A may therefore be the only surviving section of a fence, demarking or surrounding one or more of the round-houses.

A number of unassigned and undated post-holes were also located. Some of these features may have belonged to other unidentifiable structures.

A total of 23 prehistoric pits were excavated. It proved possible to divide these into discrete categories defined by their surviving profiles. The large circular scoop and hearth are discussed separately. Eleven of the pits were characterised by a ‘basin-like’ profile with almost vertical sides and flatish bases. They occurred mainly in a wide band running approximately south-west to north-east across the site. The size and shape of these features suggests that they once functioned as storage pits. Six additional pits comprised shallow scoops with gently sloping concave sides and rounded bases. MBA pottery was recovered from two of these cuts. A group of four small pits with steeply sloping concave sides and rounded bases was discovered to the south-west of the site. The investigation of these features yielded both MBA and LBA pottery. The remaining two intercutting pits had a distinctive profile of fairly steep sides and roughly cut bases. A range of finds indicative of MBA rubbish disposal was retrieved from both of these features.
A large circular scoop with a diameter of approximately 6.5m and maximum depth of 0.56m was located. This LBA feature had an asymmetric shape that was deeper with a steeper profile on the downslope side. Bowl-shaped depressions have been recorded on other Bronze Age downland settlements in Sussex, including New Barn Down (Curwen 1934), Black Patch (Drewett 1982b) and Itford Hill (Burstow and Holleyman 1957) and Downsview (see Section 7). Traditionally these features have been interpreted as catchment ponds. However, it is difficult to envisage that the feature investigated at Site A would have performed this function, due to the porous nature of the chalk into which it was dug. Certainly, no evidence was found for either a lining or a rammed chalk base to the feature. No evidence was recovered to indicate that any agricultural or domestic activity such as cereal threshing or the storage of organics took place within the scoop. The absence of a fence around the feature also excludes its use for animal confinement. It is possible that this feature is a quarry, although there is no obvious reason why chalk would have been extracted from the site in the Bronze Age.

A shallow circular feature containing 408 pieces of fire-cracked flint weighing 5.8kg was also recorded. Similar features found at sites such as New Barn Down and Blackpatch, have been interpreted as cooking pits or hearths. Two 1.0m long linear slots and three post-holes were revealed in apparent association with the cut. These contexts may have served to support a windbreak or even a framework over the pit.

Two pairs of Romano-British ditches were discovered. These were separated by a distance of approximately 7.0m and ran down the hillside aligned north-west to south-east. The excavation of these features yielded first-century AD pottery and the upper segment of a Greensand rotary quern. It is possible that these ditches represent a series of redefined field boundaries. However, it can also be argued that they demark an eroded trackway or drove road. The presence in the area of 'several well-defined tracks' has been noted before (Yeates 1951: 379). Indeed, the investigations undertaken within the Eastwick valley recorded a number of similar trackways which may be associated with the ditches found on Site A.

Site B

In April 1994, an archaeological excavation was undertaken in the grounds to the west of Patcham Fawcett School (NGR TQ 314 090). The investigation was limited to an area of approximately 4250m square, located on a gentle south-facing incline between the 90m OD and 100m OD contour lines. This area was considered adequate to encompass all the prehistoric features recorded in two previous archaeological assessments.

An MBA date was assigned to the majority of excavated deposits. The Bronze Age activity was characterised by a series of post-holes and pits, two large circular scoops, a hearth, a ditch and two round-houses. (Fig. 14.3; Greatorex, forthcoming).

A slight terrace or platform made level from the hillslope was revealed during the excavation. This cutting contained post-hole settings indicative of a round-house (IV) (Fig. 14.4). At least 11 post-holes were found to form a semi-circular post-ring, with a projected diameter of approximately 6.5m. These post-holes were located in five distinct equidistant groups. This configuration indicates that the recorded post-ring comprised five main internal roof supports and that some of the cuts were replacements for original sockets. However, the chronological development of the structure was not ascertained. MBA pottery was retrieved from four of the post-holes. A quartzite whetstone was also recovered.

It is possible that the northernmost external wall of Round-house IV was located on the upper lip of the platform during at least one phase of construction. In fact,
the back of the terrace may have been utilised as part of the actual wall structure. The front of the roof was almost certainly supported on a low wall. Indeed, a double row of stake-holes found to encircle at least part of the post-ring, can be interpreted as a wattle and daub outer wall with a diameter of approximately 8.4m. The southern side of the building would have presented a potential element of structural weakness. However, lateral movement in this direction was minimised by a large south-east-facing porch, set in a series of paired post-holes. A third group of footings represents a separate sequential phase of porch construction.

Two small post-holes were located in the approximate centre of the building. However, these cuts are not interpreted as structural supports. They were in fact elements in a linear arrangement of internal features. A number of additional post-holes were found in the south-eastern sector of the building. It was not ascertained if these contexts were structural features or internal furnishings. A single sub-circular pit was also located within Round-house IV. The investigation of this probable storage pit yielded MBA pottery.

At Black Patch the position of the artefacts found on the round-house floors was recorded in detail. It was therefore possible to establish the specific activities that occurred in each structure. Unfortunately, such a level of analysis could not be applied to Round-house IV, as none of its original floor or occupation layers had survived. Even so, the evidence does indicate that food was being stored, prepared and cooked within the building.

A second Bronze Age round-house (V) was located on Site B. At least ten post-holes were found to form the remains of an internal post-ring with a diameter of approximately 5.9m. The spacing between the post-holes has not been examined, as some of the features appear to be replacements for original sockets. No evidence was found for an external wall. Eight post-holes were located clearly within the post-ring. These features are all best interpreted as internal furnishings. One of the two pits also recorded within Round-house V contained the articulated skeleton of a sheep. This feature may therefore represent a ritual aspect of later prehistoric downland settlement.

Round-house V was not set on a surviving platform or terrace cut into the hillslope. No external roof-supports, porch footings or occupation layers were revealed. Both of the round-houses located on Site B have been dated to the MBA. These buildings may therefore represent a contemporaneous ‘building cluster’.

A total of 16 sub-circular prehistoric pits were excavated across Site B. The two large scoops and the possible hearth are discussed separately. Six of the pits were characterised by gently sloping concave sides and rounded bases. Another five pits had a ‘basin-like’ profile with very steep sides and a flatish base. One of these features produced a mixed assemblage of MBA and Iron Age pottery. This is the only significant evidence for Iron Age activity recorded during the excavation. A cluster of three distinctive intercutting pits was also revealed in the south-west area of the site. These features had fairly steep sides and irregular bases.

No definitive interpretation of the pits described above can be offered. Although ‘pits are the characteristic archaeological phenomena always associated with storage’ (Fowler 1983: 180). The features recorded on Site B appear too shallow for the stockpiling of grain. Of course the excavation of a pit may often fail to ascertain its original function. This is because many features were used finally for rubbish disposal. Some of the pits investigated on Site B did contain a range of finds indicative of domestic waste. Unfortunately, such evidence can reveal ‘little about why the pit was originally dug’ (Fowler 1983: 185).

Two further pits were recorded during the excavation. The first of these had been dug specifically to accommodate...
an almost complete MBA pot. A relatively large number of charred cereal seeds, including hulled barley, emmer or spelt wheat and oats were recovered from this vessel. The second pit was also dated to the MBA. It contained an immature cattle skeleton.

A four-post structure measuring approximately 2.0m by 0.9m was located during the excavation. The rectangular arrangement of four, sub-circular post-holes is thought to represent a strong wooden granary ‘raised off the ground on piles to protect the contents from rodents and allow full air circulation’ (Reynolds 1987: 37). Two of the post-holes contained MBA pottery.

The investigation also revealed two large circular features with similar characteristics to the scoop found on Site A. The first of these cuts was 9.3m in diameter with a maximum depth of 0.68m. The second scoop had a recorded diameter of approximately 5.0m and a depth of 0.68m. The interpretation of this type of feature has been discussed briefly above.

A shallow, sub-circular cut with concave sides and a flatter base was located in the south-eastern corner of the site. This probable ‘cooking pit’ or hearth contained 5,007 pieces of fire-cracked flint with a total weight of 183.03 kg. A linear feature dating to the MBA was discovered. This roughly cut gully or ditch was aligned approximately east to west. It had an average width of 0.35m and depth of only 0.11m. Without the augmentation of a bank or fence, the ditch is obviously too small to have been used for defence or the enclosure/exclusion of animals. However, it is possible to argue that this feature demarcated a discrete social or economic unit within the wider settlement complex.

Seventy-five unassigned sub-circular post-holes and five unattributed large post-holes/small pits were recorded during the excavation. Many of the post-holes will have belonged to unidentified structures such as raised granaries, racks and palisades.

An archaeological watching-brief was maintained on groundworks associated with the development of Site B. During this work a Romano-British ditch was discovered to run down the hillside aligned roughly north to south (Fig. 14.1). The pottery recovered from this possible field boundary has been dated to the mid-third to fourth century AD.

Discussion

The main phase of occupation at Site B was assigned to the MBA. However, at Site A, it is possible to argue for the existence of two distinct settlement phases dating to the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. Unfortunately, the exact duration of prehistoric activity is difficult to ascertain. The absence of in situ round-house floors and definite fenced enclosures means that it is impossible to determine either the precise functions of the buildings or the social organisation of the site. However, some evidence for the assimilation of ritual activity into Bronze Age daily life was recorded in the form of animal interments. Ritual is well documented throughout prehistory. For example, the LBA waterlogged site discovered recently at Shinewater Park, Eastbourne, has yielded artefacts which were apparently deposited ritually (Greatorex 1998, 2002).

The Romano-British remains discovered at Patcham are indicative of a nearby settlement of that date. This theory is supported by the apparent signs of Late Iron Age and Romano-British occupation recorded in 1956 and subsequently buried under the school buildings (Holleyman and Yeates 1960: 138–43). Together with the 1963 discovery of a Romano-British inhumation, the archaeological record establishes the use of the downhill ridge at Patcham in the Iron Age and Romano-British periods.

The importance of that region of the South Downs therefore has been confirmed.

Section 14 – APPENDIX 3: EXCAVATIONS AT PATCHAM FAWCETT