

# THE EXCAVATION OF AN IRON AGE CROPMARKED SITE AT FOXCOVERT FARM, ASTON-ON-TRENT 1994

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## INTRODUCTION

This report details the results of an archaeological excavation undertaken on the northern edge of a complex of cropmarked features near Aston-on-Trent in south Derbyshire in October 1994. The work was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in advance of construction of the A564(T) Derby Southern Bypass and was commissioned by Scott Wilson Kirkpatrick (Consulting Engineers) on behalf of the Highways Agency.

The site is located on a low ridge composed of gravel, Mercia Mudstone and boulder clay overlooking the confluence of the Rivers Trent and Derwent, approximately 1km to the north of Aston-on-Trent (Fig. 1; SK 417305). The excavation was undertaken in the northern area of a cropmarked complex on the lower, gravel part of the ridge, close to its interface with the alluvium of the flood plain (Fig. 2). The cropmarks suggest the presence of three, inter-related rectilinear enclosures. Two of the enclosures are incomplete; their eastern sides possibly masked by deposits of alluvium. The westernmost, and most complete of the enclosures, is approximately 50m across with a break in its ditch on the north side. It encloses a ring ditch, approximately 16m in diameter, and a hook-shaped feature, possibly representing another incomplete rectilinear enclosure.

The site was considered by the Trent and Peak Archaeological Trust in 1992 as part of the overall assessment of the potential archaeological impact of the Derby Southern Bypass (T&PAT 1992). It was thought that the cropmarks were likely to be of Iron Age or Romano-British date. However, only the northernmost extreme of this complex was threatened by the proposed road corridor. A resistivity survey in this threatened area, produced a series of east-west anomalies, probably ploughed-out medieval ridge and furrow, but failed to locate the recorded cropmarked features (Stratascan 1993).

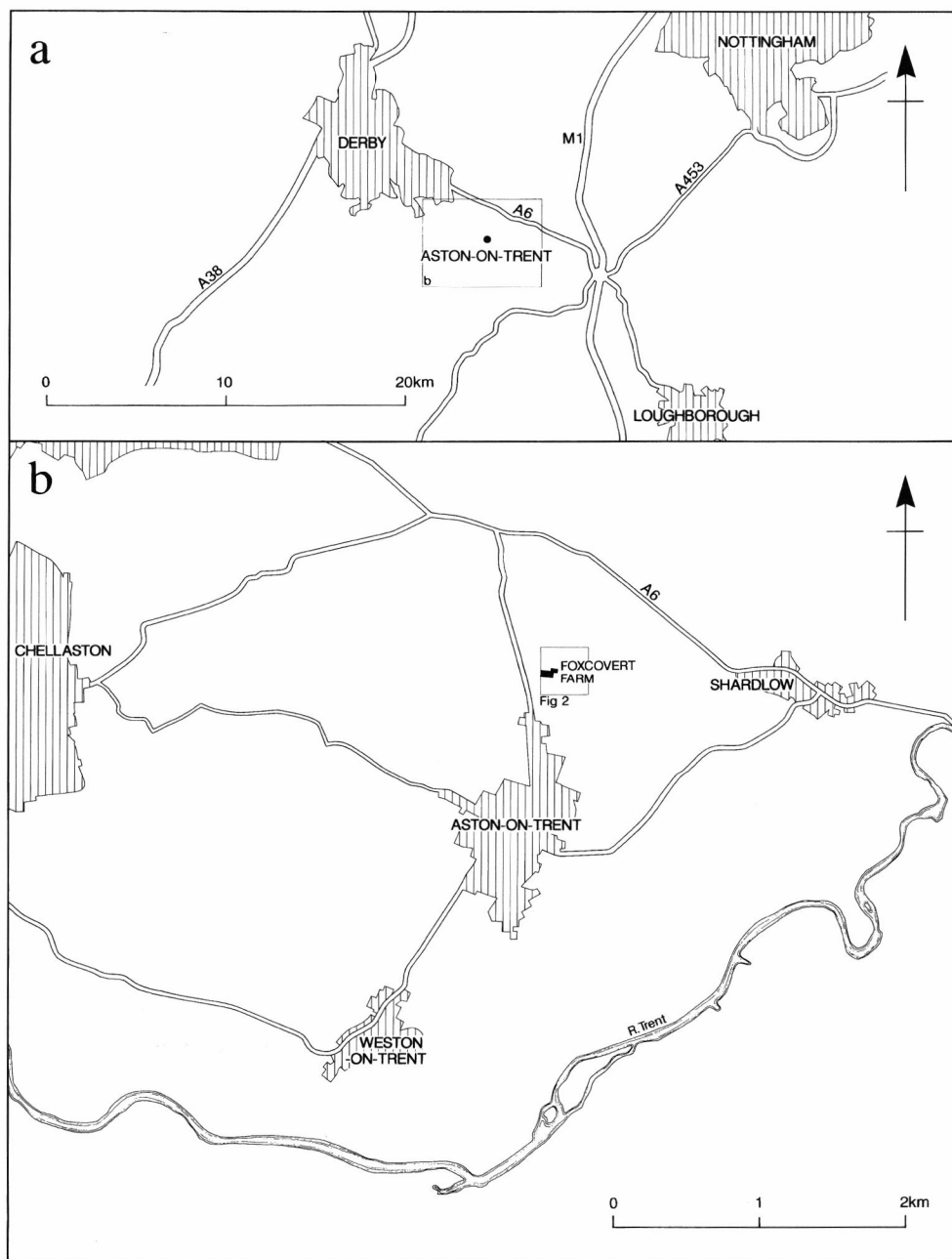


Fig. 1: Foxcovert Farm, Aston-on-Trent: Location of site.

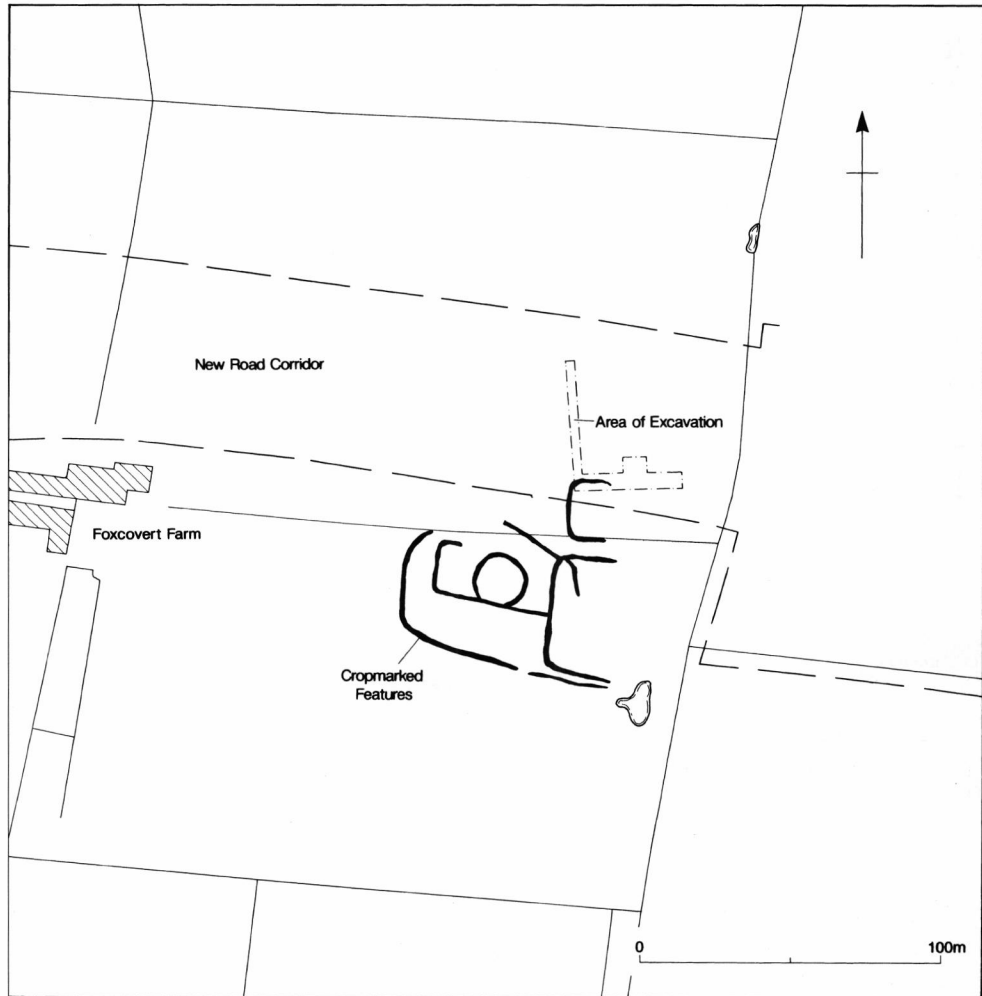


Fig. 2: Foxcovert Farm, Aston-on-Trent: Area of excavation and cropmark evidence.

## THE EXCAVATION

### **Aims and methodology**

The principal objective of the excavation was to clarify the extent, date and character of the archaeological deposits within the threatened area and to form a record of the chronological and morphological development of the site. The excavation also offered the potential for investigating the relationship between the archaeological remains and alluvial deposits (NUCL 1994, 9).

A single L-shaped trench was excavated within the threatened area. The eastern arm of this trench measured  $35 \times 5\text{m}$  and the northern arm  $45 \times 2\text{m}$ . The location of this trench was designed to examine the northernmost part of one of the possible rectilinear

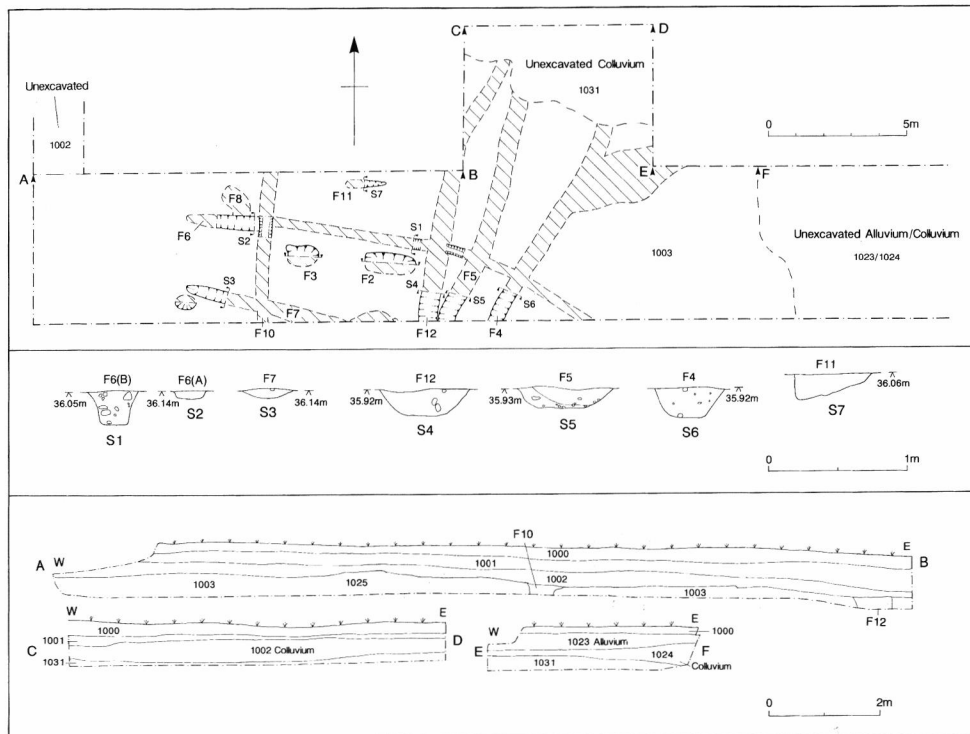


Fig. 3: Foxcovert Farm, Aston-on-Trent: Plan and section of central part of excavated area.

enclosures which extended into the area threatened by the new road corridor (Fig. 2). This feature appeared to 'disappear' under the alluvium to the east.

The ploughsoil (1000) within this area was removed by machine and the underlying deposits were manually cleaned in order to define any archaeological features or deposits which might be present. However, it soon became clear that a considerable masking deposit of what appeared to be colluvium (1001/1002) in the western part of the trench and alluvium (1023) in the eastern part was obscuring any potential archaeology. Consequently, further machining was undertaken to a depth of between 0.8 and 0.9m. At this level, numerous archaeological features cutting the silty sand subsoil (1003) were identified and sample excavated. A small extension on the northern side of the eastern arm was subsequently excavated in order to clarify the extent of several of these features.

## Results

The majority of the features took the form of narrow and shallow linear features in the central part of the eastern arm of the trench (Fig. 3). These included four north-south features (F4, F5, F10 and F12) and two east-west features (F6 and F7). The north-south features tended to be wider with broad U-shaped profiles, between 0.15 and 0.22m deep, and were filled by a reddish-brown, clayey sand. The two east-west features were

narrower with squarer profiles, up to 0.25m deep, and filled with a reddish-brown, silty sand. The relative chronological sequence of these features was not entirely clear due to the similarity in the fills, especially in the central area of the trench. However, the westernmost of the north-south features (F10) was clearly later than the two east-west features. A number of other smaller, irregular-shaped features were also recorded (F2, F3, F8, and F11).

A number of fragments of Iron Age pottery, baked clay fragments and flint were recovered from the fills of these various features. One of the irregular shaped features (F8) contained a fragment of quernstone and another (F2) contained a sherd of Cheshire Briquetage.

The archaeological features were sealed by deposits of dark brown, silty sand (1031, 1002 and 1001) up to 0.5m deep. It seems likely that these are deposits of colluvium washed downslope probably from the area of the main cropmarked complex. Several fragments of Iron Age pottery and a fragment of Cheshire Briquetage were recovered from this material. In the eastern part of the trench these possible colluvial soils were sealed by a deposit of reddish-brown, silty clay up to 0.3m deep (1023), possibly alluvium from overbank flooding. The underlying colluvium in this area (1024) contained more clay suggesting a degree of mixing with the alluvium.

## THE FINDS

### **The Iron Age Pottery** by Ann Woodward

A total of 59 sherds, weighing 722g, was recovered. The pottery was on the whole unabraded and sherd size, average weight 12.2g, was high. The majority (95%) of the pottery derived from stratified contexts.

The largest sherds came from the ditches, three from the earlier east-west features and 36 from the drainage features running north-south, and from the irregular-shaped pits. The average sherd weight for all these was 14g. The colluvium produced only seven sherds, and these were much smaller (average weight 2g). The earlier east-west ditches contained no diagnostic sherds, but the fabrics were of Iron Age type. The main concentration of large sherds came from the north-south ditch F5, where the majority came from the lower portion of a single vessel (Fig. 4:6).

Of the five fabric types initially distinguished, one (Fabric 4) relates to the baked clay items which are described separately by Elaine Morris, and two others were found to be similar when analysed petrologically (Fabrics 2 and 5). Full descriptions of the fabrics are provided by David Williams in the site archive, and may be summarised as follows:-

Fabric 1: micaceous sand filler and ferrous inclusions (red iron oxides).

Fabric 2/5: sand, slightly micaceous, grog (or clay pellets), occasional sandstone and flint.

Fabric 3: hard sandy fabric with some mica and sandstone.

All these fabrics were made from clays which could have been derived locally from a Keuper Marl source.

The ditch fillings produced diagnostic sherds which displayed incurving simple rims, a rim with internal bevel and a flat-topped rim. Base angles were simple or with a slightly protruding foot and decoration was represented by two wall sherds embellished with

deep scoring. One of the pits (F2) contained a further base angle with protruding foot and an everted rim profile. Although few diagnostic sherds were present, it seems that the most common vessel form in use was a simple barrel-shaped jar of ovoid profile, with incurved or everted rim.

#### *Illustrated sherds*

1. Rim sherd with internal bevel, probably from a shouldered jar. Fabric 2. From gully (F4).
2. Base angle with slightly protruding foot. Fabric 2. From gully (F4).
3. Simple incurving rim sherd. Fabric 1. From gully (F5).
4. Tapered rim sherd with flattened top. Fabric 1. From gully (F5).
5. Two non-joining wall sherds with deep, widely spaced scoring. Fabric 1. From gully (F5).
6. Simple base and base angle. Fabric 1. From gully (F5).
7. Simple incurving rim sherd from a barrel-shaped jar. Fabric 3. From gully (F10).
8. Base angle with a markedly protruding foot. Fabric 3. From pit (F2).
9. Simple, everted rim from a round-bodied jar. Fabric 1. From pit (F2).
10. Simple base angle. Fabric 3. From gully (F10).

In addition, there were two simple base angle sherds, not illustrated, from the colluvium (1002) and unstratified respectively.

Geographically, the Foxcovert Farm sites lies between the Iron Age sites of the Peak District and the cropmarked sites which are so common in the lower Trent Valley, the lowlands of Leicestershire and the Nene valley. In the Peak District, most of the pottery is of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age tradition, as at Mam Tor (Coombs and Thompson 1979) and Roystone Grange (Thomas 1991), although a later barrel jar with incurved rim is known from Brassington Common (Radley and Radford 1969, fig.1:2). All these vessels display very varied fabrics, all of which could have been made from local deposits.

Within the Trent Valley, the inhabitants of the local Derbyshire site at Willington were producing a pottery tradition (Assemblage II) which displays many similarities to the Foxcovert Farm sherds (Elsdon in Wheeler 1979). Forms held in common are barrel jars with flat rims, protruding feet, scored surface treatment and the absence of finger-impressed ornament. Similar assemblages are also known from Holme Pierrepont, and from Fisherwick, Staffordshire (Smith 1979). In Nottinghamshire, the site at Gamston has produced a similar combination of ovoid barrel jars, often with flat rims and scored surface treatment, and also one with an internally bevelled rim (Knight 1992, fig. 18:20). The everted rim from one of the pits at Foxcovert Farm (Fig. 4:9) is more similar to the 'bead' rims of Gamstone Group 3 and Form V at Willington. At Enderby, Leicestershire (Clay 1992) the combination of protruding foot (Form 1), flat rim (Form 2), everted simple rim (Forms 1 and 3), and scored ware (Form 4 especially) is again repeated, although barrel-shaped jars are not represented here.

Such assemblages have been dated to a long period starting in the late 4th century BC and lasting through to some time in the 1st century AD. At Enderby there were no fine wares present, in spite of the site's proximity, and probable contact with, the pre-cursor of Leicester. However, at Gamston, fabric analysis and stylistic considerations have

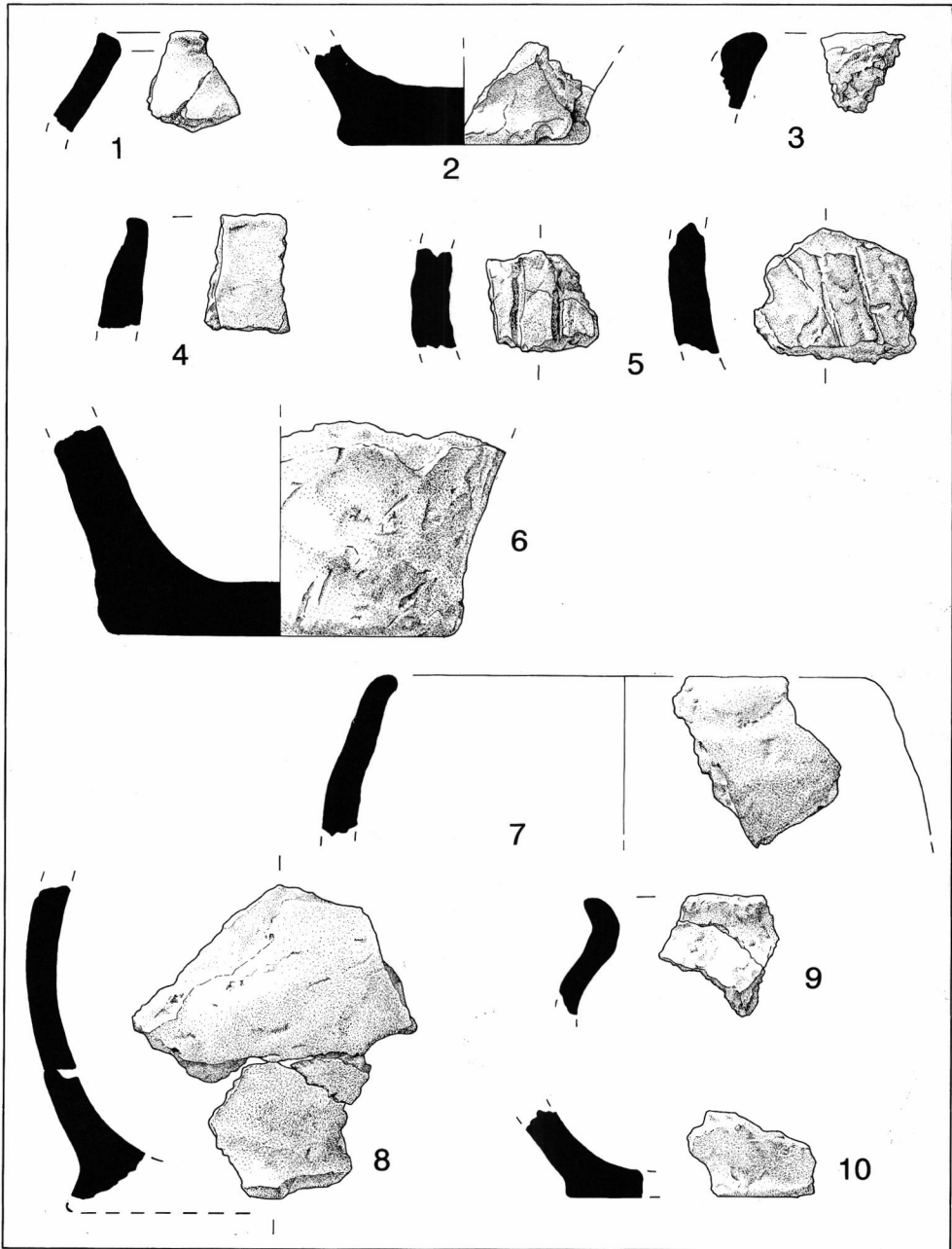


Fig. 4: Foxcovert Farm, Aston-on-Trent: The Iron Age pottery. Scale 1:2.

demonstrated extensive trade links both with the Peak District (querns), Charnwood Forest (querns and pottery) and Lincolnshire (decorated pottery) (Knight 1992). The contrasts existing between different types of Iron Age settlement is further highlighted by the distributions of La Tène decorated pottery of the Nene Valley and scored ware (Elsdon 1992b). In the Nene Valley these distributions overlap, but in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire, scored ware occurs alone. In the Nene Valley, scored ware was put out of use by wheelmade wares of Belgic inspiration, but in the Trent Valley it appears to continue in use up to, and maybe beyond, the conquest period. Within such a rural and apparently underdeveloped milieu, the Foxcovert Farm ceramic assemblage provides an appropriately generalised addition to the corpus of Iron Age pottery in the Trent Valley.

### Other ceramic materials by Elaine Morris

A total of 27 fragments (272g) of ceramic material was examined (Table 1). Two were identifiable fragments of Cheshire Briquetage. The remaining material consisted of

Context/ Feature	Number of Fragments	Weight of Fragments	Fabric	Description
1002	2	9	FCFT 1	joining pieces; one smoothed surface; ox/ext, unox/int.
1002	1	4	Stoney VCP	flake-8mm thickness extant
1002	1	4	FCFT 1	one smoothed surface; ox/ext. zone, unox/interior zone
F2	1	9	Stoney VCP	rim; oxidised throughout; classic folded over edge to rim
F2	1	6	FCFT 1	oxidised throughout; swirls of unwedged clay visible; wedge-shaped tool impressions along one edge
F3	6	5	FCFT 1	tiny, irregularly-shaped fragments; oxidised throughout
F4	1	2	FCFT 3	oxidised on smoothed surface; ?isotropic grey core zone
F4	1	37	FCFT 2	unoxidised; similar to next entry; amorphous shape
F4	3	25	FCFT 2	unoxidised; similar to entry above; amorphous shape
F5	1	57	FCFT 1	curved, edge piece with two surfaces smoothed; 26-35mm thick oxidised on all sides at curved edge end, becoming unoxidised away from that edge; one side roughly smoothed
F5	3	7	FCFT 1	one surface which is oxidised; rest unoxidised
F5	1	27	FCFT 1	one surface, ox/throughout with patch of unoxidised
F5	1	3	FCFT 1	amorphous shape; oxidised throughout
U/S	2	63	FCFT 1	two surfaces, one rough, one fingered: 12-36mm thick; prefiring perforation through thickness; c. 26mm diam.; irregularly fired throughout; joining pieces
U/S	2	14	FCFT 1	joining pieces; one surface; oxidised throughout
TOTALS	27	272		

Table 1: Foxcovert Farm, Aston-on-Trent: fired clay materials and Cheshire briquetage sherds.

fragments of baked clay. Three of these were identified as likely to come from one or more baking ovens.

### Cheshire Briquetage

A total of two sherds (13g) was identified of a very specific type of ceramic container used at a Cheshire brine springs source to dry and transport salt during the later



prehistoric period. This material is known as Cheshire Stony VCP or Briquetage (Morris 1985). One is a rim sherd which is similar to the variety of types recovered from the Iron Age sites at Collfryn in Powys (Britnell 1989, fig. 26, plate 20) and Fisherwick in Staffordshire (Morris 1979, fig. 14), while the other is a partial section or flake from a body sherd.

This very diagnostic material has been found on sites dating from the later Bronze Age, including Beeston Castle, Cheshire (Royle and Woodward 1993) and the Wrekin hillfort, Shropshire (Morris 1984), to the latest pre-Roman Iron Age, as at Collfryn. There is no evidence which indicates any change in form of this industrial ceramic material during this later prehistoric period, and there is currently no reason to doubt that the material also may have been in use during the earliest Roman period (Britnell 1989, 124). Similar salt drying containers were produced and used at Droitwich in Worcestershire during the first and second centuries AD (Woodiwiss 1992) but the use of such containers to transport salt from that source has not been identified. The transportation of salt in ceramic containers, therefore, may well prove to be a purely prehistoric activity.

The distribution of Cheshire Stony VCP Briquetage containers is considerable (Morris 1985, figs. 9–10; 1994, fig.; 4A). The publication of recent excavations has shown that this trade extended eastwards quite significantly along the River Trent and its tributaries with small quantities of the material being found at Gamston in Nottinghamshire (Knight 1992) and at Enderby (Elsdon 1991, 11; 1992a, 41) and Normanton-le-Heath (Elsdon 1994, 37–8) in Leicestershire. In addition, recent reassessment of the Breedon-on-the-Hill collections (Kenyon 1950; Wachter 1964) by this author has discovered numerous sherds of Stony VCP in the collection. Therefore, the recovery of two sherds from Foxcovert Farm is a useful addition to this wide distribution of such an important type of ceramic traded for its contents, salt.

### *Baked Clay Materials*

There are three similar fabrics amongst these pieces, but only three from different contexts (Table 1) can be identified to form.

#### Fabrics

FCFT 1: a common to very common amount (20–30% concentration) of rounded to subrounded quartz sand measuring < 0.8mm across with the majority of grains < 0.5mm and very rare examples up to 2.0mm, rare to sparse amounts (1–7%) of dark red iron oxides measuring up to 4mm across and rare (1–2%) rounded siltstones, < 3mm in a micaceous clay matrix; used to make oven plates.

FCFT 2: the same quartz sand component and clay matrix as for FCFT 1 with the additional presence of rare pieces of patinated, subrounded detritus flint, < 10mm across; a single rounded, quartzose sandstone 0.8mm, was also identified.

FCFT 3: a slightly, micaceous clay matrix containing a moderate to common amount (15–20%) of rounded iron oxides measuring < 4mm across.

Form — Three pieces, all in fabric FCFT 1, can be identified as likely to have originated from one or more baking ovens. One is from the thick, rounded edge of a cover or plate, while two joining pieces come from the area surrounding the prefiring perforation of a plate. These oven daubs are becoming more commonly recognised

amongst the general quantities of baked clay fragments from Iron Age settlements since the publication of several reconstructed examples found at Danebury (Poole 1984, figs. 4:76–78).

### The Flint by Rob Young and Lynne Bevan

Nineteen pieces of flint were recovered with a total weight of *c.* 290gms (Table 2).

Context/ Feature	Interpretation	Number	Colour	Description
Unstratified	–	5	grey	4 flakes; 1 irregular chunk
1002/1002	colluvium	9	grey	1 core; 2 core frags.; 3 flakes; 3 natural frags.
1003	'natural'	2	grey	2 flakes
F6	Iron Age gully	1	white	1 abraded chip
F10	Iron Age gully	1	grey	1 secondary flake
F12	Iron Age gully	1	brown	1 flake with blade-like scars on dorsal face. Traces of utilisation.
TOTAL		19		

Table 2: Foxcovert Farm, Aston-on-Trent: flint.

Overall there are no chronologically diagnostic pieces in this collection of flint and it is possible that the majority of the material is residual. The fourteen pieces from the topsoil and colluvium deposits have probably been redeposited from contexts up slope of the site. The material from the gullies is also likely to be in secondary contexts. However, the freshness of the utilised flake from one of the gullies (F12) might indicate that it had not been in circulation for long before it was incorporated into the gully fill.

### Worked stone

A small quern fragment measuring 140 × 90 × 49mm. It has a smoothed and slightly concave grinding surface which is fairly typical of saddle querns. Manufactured from a very coarse, feldspathic, pink millstone grit with quartz grains up to 5mm in size and with some feldspar appearing fresh and unaltered (R. Ixer *pers. comm.*). The grinding surface is coarser grained (coarse grained sandstone) than the non-grinding surface (fine sandstone/sandstone). The raw material may have been obtained from a source in eastern Derbyshire. The quern fragment was recovered from the fill of one of the pits (F8).

### Charred plant remains

A total of eight samples were collected from the linear gullies. Very little charred material was seen. Four of the samples contained small quantities of grain and wood charcoal. However, the amount was too small to interpret.

## DISCUSSION

The excavation results have successfully helped clarify the character and date of the archaeological deposits at Foxcovert Farm. However, it seems likely that they are located

away from the main focus of activity. The cropmarks suggest that this is located slightly upslope to the south-east. Although the pottery recovered from the excavation suggests a broad date range from the late 4th century BC to the 1st Century AD, the possibility of earlier activity is suggested by the residual flintwork recovered. This may be related to the circular cropmarked feature to the south-west of the excavated area. The size of this feature, 16m in diameter, would seem to be too large for a roundhouse but would fall within the size range that might be expected for a ditch surrounding a ploughed down Bronze Age round barrow. By contrast, it seems likely that the rectilinear enclosures relate to a later period of activity. The pottery and features recorded during the excavation suggest that this might have been a small Iron Age farmstead.

There is considerable evidence for the Iron Age exploitation of the landscape around Foxcovert Farm. Numerous cropmarks of quadrilateral enclosures and field boundaries have been recorded in the Trent Valley (Whimster 1989). Where they have been investigated they are frequently found to be of late prehistoric date, for example at Fisherwick in south Staffordshire (Smith 1979), Swarkestone (Losco-Bradley 1993) and Aston (May 1970) in south Derbyshire; Gamston (Knight 1992) and Holme Pierrepont (O'Brien 1979) in Nottinghamshire and Enderby in Leicestershire (Clay 1992). These sites generally consist of rectilinear enclosures, occasionally containing internal structures suggestive of dwellings. Some at least are probable farmsteads while others might have been used as stock enclosures. Elsewhere in the valley, unenclosed late prehistoric settlements consisting of round houses and field systems have been recorded. Two examples have been excavated near Willington, Derbyshire (Wheeler 1979 and Hughes and Jones forthcoming). Where there is evidence for multiple phasing at these sites, the suggestion is that there is a change from open settlement to enclosed phases (e.g. at Holme Pierrepont and Gamston). The developing picture of the later occupation of the Trent Valley is one of scattered farmsteads or small nucleated settlements in a rural, agricultural landscape. The results from Foxcovert Farm have made a contribution to the overall understanding of this landscape. Of particular note is the likely effect of large-scale land clearance for agriculture associated with these settlements. The effect of such clearance will have led to an increase in the deposition of finer material within the area of the river valley as a result of overbank flooding (alluviation) and the movement of sediments downslope (colluviation) (Knight and Howard 1994, 128). Although the origins of these processes may lie in the Neolithic and Bronze Age, the evidence of alluviation and colluviation sealing Iron Age features at Foxcovert Farm provides further support that landscape clearance was having a significant effect by the later prehistoric period.

The individual features excavated at the site are difficult to interpret and none appeared to correspond precisely with the position of the cropmark on the aerial photograph. However, it seems possible that the four north-south features are naturally formed drainage gullies originating in the main core of the archaeological activity. The squarer profiles of the two east-west features suggest that they may have held structures and it is tempting to suggest that they were the foundation trenches for palisades or fences, either demarcating the northern limits of the occupation area or part of a series of garden plots or paddocks on the edge of the settlement. The profile and dimensions of these gullies are not unlike a series of linear features demarcating a rectilinear boundary system at Gamston (Knight 1992, Phase 3).

It is difficult to provide a more specific interpretation of the main focus of the site based on the excavated features which are clearly on the periphery of the settlement. The finds from the various pits and gullies suggest the presence of a number of activities taking place within the settlement. The fragment of quern and the fragments of baking ovens suggest the presence of small scale domestic activities such as the processing of grain and cooking and the Cheshire Briquetage indicates that the settlement at Foxcovert Farm was at least partially integrated into the regional trade network. Similar evidence has been recorded at Gamston (Knight 1992, 84–85). It seems likely that the River Trent itself provided the principal means of transport for this regional trade; a suggestion supported by the discovery of three dugout canoes of possible Iron Age date at Holme Pierrepont (MacCormick *et al.* 1968). However, the absence of fine wares in the assemblage is not uncommon among settlements of this period from the Trent Valley suggesting that the settlement forms part of the relatively undeveloped rural landscape. It has been pointed out that this stands in contrast to the large nucleated Iron Age settlements which have been identified in Lincolnshire (Knight 1992, 85).

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