AN IRON AGE PIT AT HOLMEBRINK FARM, METHWOLD

by R.J. Silvester and J.P. Northover

The identification of pre-Roman metalworking debris is an unusual occurrence in Norfolk, particularly so when it is associated with contemporary domestic rubbish. The recovery of a small crucible from a pit close to Methwold's fen edge in the south-western part of the county thus merits a brief record.

The Site

In February 1988, D. and A. Wortley stripped topsoil and chalk from a rectangular patch of ground behind existing farm buildings at Holmebrink Farm, Methwold, in preparation for the construction of a new potato store. The ground was cleared by mechanical excavator to a depth of 0.8-0.9m and during the work a soil-filled disturbance was noted in the chalk bedrock (TL 7326 9522; Norfolk SMR no. 4790). David Wortley removed some pottery and bone from this feature and then contacted one of the writers (RJS) who was at the time fieldwalking the Methwold fen edge for the Norfolk Fenland Survey.

Excavation of the remaining deposits revealed the base of a roughly circular pit, 1.3m in diameter and 0.24m deep, implying an original depth of perhaps one metre. A layer of greasy grey and brown silt, 0.11m thick, coated the bottom of the pit, and the overlying fill consisted of dark brown loam with chalk lumps. Pottery, bone and fired clay were recovered from both layers, and a small crucible was found in the upper fill.

The only other features in the area of the new store were three shallow gullies running broadly parallel to each other. There was nothing to indicate that these might be contemporary with the pit, and their alignment, similar to the adjacent field boundary on the south, favours a function as more recent land divisions.

The Pottery and Fired Clay

Twenty-nine sherds of pottery were recovered by David Wortley and the writer, representing at least seven vessels. Four are illustrated here (Fig. 1):

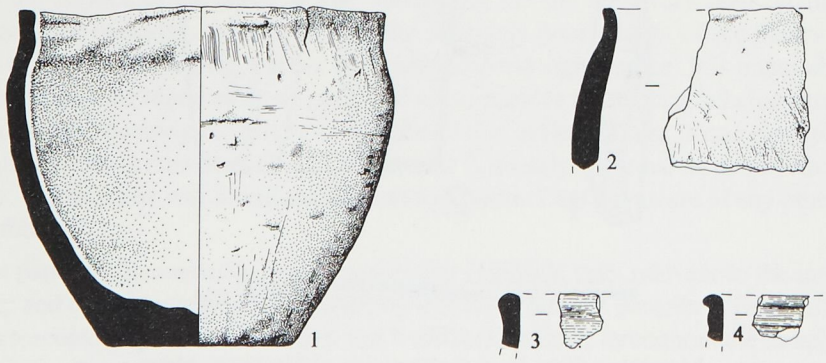

Fig. 1
Iron Age pottery from Holmebrink Farm, Methwold

1.1 Coarseware vessel with complete profile. Fabric tempered with quartz grits up to 2mm. Exterior roughly smoothed, showing vertical striations. Eight sherds.

1.2 Rim sherd, with rough finish and oxidised on both surfaces. Temper similar to no. 1.

1.3 Rim sherd, with high burnish on exterior. Fabric tempered with fine grits.

1.4 Rim sherd with two broad, shallow grooves; well-burnished exterior.

Nos 1-3 came from the greasy silt at the base of the pit, no. 4 from the upper loam. There were also several sherds in this upper layer with organic filler, probably vegetable matter, and David Wortley's excavation yielded the lower portion of a coarseware vessel with flint grits up to 8mm long in the fabric. A possible grain impression could be seen on this pot.

Five pieces of fired clay from the pit included a perforated fragment, probably from a loomweight.

Few Iron Age pottery groups have been recovered from south-west Norfolk. The most recently published, albeit from an old excavation, is that from beneath the Feltwell Roman villa, three kilometres to the south-west (Gurney 1986, 26). The Methwold vessels reveal some points of similarity with the Feltwell material: rounded shoulders and upright rims are the most obvious. Gurney has stressed the lack of local comparative material and has had to return to what Cunliffe (1968, 182) classed as a 'period of local development' in eastern England in the 3rd-2nd centuries BC to establish a suitable chronological niche for the Feltwell pottery. A similar date might be tentatively proposed for the Methwold vessels.

The Crucible by J.P. Northover

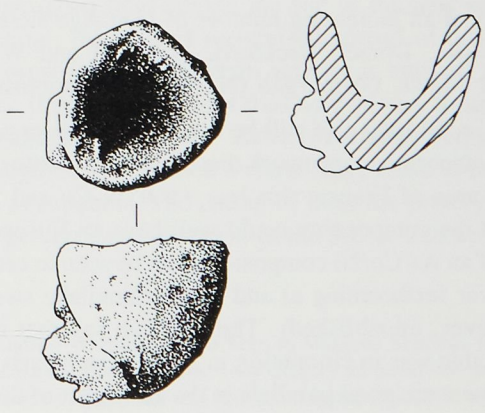

Fig. 2
Crucible from Holmebrink Farm, Methwold

The crucible is small and has a conoidal profile (Fig. 2); the rim is rounded in cross-section and the base slightly thickened. In plan the rim is sub-triangular in outline, one 'angle' being more acute than the others and suitable for a pouring lip. The exterior surface is largely vitrified and there is a large accretion of glassy material over the base. The interior is substantially coated with metallic and vitreous residues, corroded dark green.

Samples from two areas were examined under the optical microscope: the slaggy material adhering to the exterior and the green encrustation in the interior, the latter being analysed by electron probe analysis.

The sample from the slaggy mass comprised a glass matrix with some metal oxides (iron oxides) beginning to crystallise, and numerous angular quartz grains, presumably deriving from the crucible fabric. The glassy mass is the result of severe localised heating leading to the fusion of the crucible fabric and, possibly, reaction with fuel ash and detached fragments of hearth lining or tuyère. The location of the slaggy mass shows that the blast in the hearth was directed towards the base of the crucible rather than across the mouth as was the case with the triangular type of crucible, hitherto regarded as the most typical Iron Age form (Foster 1980). The glassy mass was not analysed.

The sample from the interior contained both unoxidised metal, albeit partly corroded, and fragments of fairly typical crucible residue. The alloy being melted was a medium tin unleaded bronze, typical of practice throughout the La Tène Iron Age (Northover 1988; Northover forthcoming b). The significant impurities are cobalt and nickel, both present at low levels in the metal but with cobalt heavily segregated to the slag. Assuming that the analysis is basically representative it can be placed in one of two groupings from a scheme designed to describe Iron Age impurity patterns (Northover forthcoming b): Group 1 — As, Co, Ni with Co >Ni; or Group 5 — As, Ni. Given the amount of cobalt segregated to the slag it is probable that the metal should be placed in Group 1.

Group 1 as a whole first appears in southern Britain in a number of La Tène I brooches and seems to disappear around the middle of the 1st century BC. Group 1 has been associated with a source in south-west England (Northover 1988). However, recent evidence from Danebury (Northover forthcoming a) suggests that Group 1 may conflate two different metals. Analyses with Co>Ni still have a distribution consistent with a south-western source and are associated with metalworking activity at an increasing number of Iron Age sites in southern and western England, *e.g.* Maiden Castle, Dorset; Beckford, Hereford and Worcester; Gravelly Guy, Oxfordshire; and Merthyr Mawr, Glamorgan (Northover, unpublished).

Other analyses with Co = Ni may also still be assigned to this group but other origins must be regarded as possible. A decorative openwork disc found at Danebury in 1988 may be a direct import from the Marnian area of France; this has +0.05% Co and Ni and dates to La Tène I. If it is indeed an import the composition could well have an European origin. Similar early examples of this version of an As/Co/Ni composition can be seen in crucibles of *ceramic phases* 3-4 at Danebury (Northover forthcoming a) and in the Standlake sword and dagger scabbard from Oxfordshire (Northover, unpublished). Thus we can say that metal of the composition seen in the Methwold crucible was in circulation in Britain from early in La Tène I to the mid-first century BC and that there are good parallels in the early part of that timespan. It is possible that the metal had a British origin but, in contrast to metal with a higher cobalt content, a source elsewhere is plausible.

The slag fragments from inside the crucible are generally characterised by a glassy matrix containing a number of crystalline phases. The most prominent are those of tin oxide (cassiterite) and angular dendrites of an iron oxide. Melting bronze under oxidising conditions will tend to burn out iron that was in solution in the melt. Iron could also enter the slag from the crucible fabric. Less common in the slag are irregular rounded lumps of cuprite, some of which may be corroded copper. The slag structure is very typical of ancient crucible melting of bronze and requires no further comment.

We have seen that the bronze composition can be matched in other Iron Age contexts in Britain, but with a rather wide possible date range, while the slag is characteristic of many bronze melting slags. However, the typology of the crucible itself offers some further clues as to date. The classic crucible of the La Tène Iron Age in Britain is shallow and triangular in form and blown across its mouth so that the areas of heaviest vitrification are around the rim with considerable slagging at the level of the metal surface. The type is well illustrated in the publication of the Iron Age foundry site at Gussage All Saints, Dorset (Wainwright 1979). In remoter areas it persisted into the first century AD but in southern England had by then been replaced by other forms, mainly round bowls. The Methwold crucible matches none of these.

Recent excavations have now begun to show us what the crucibles of the earliest phases of the La Tène Iron Age were like. Examples have come from Danebury, as mentioned above, and from Llwyn Bryn-dinas, Powys (Musson *et al.* forthcoming). These crucibles are very much like that from Methwold in form and have been heated in exactly the same way with the accumulation of vitrified material on the base of the crucible. They differ from the Methwold crucible in being handled and they are also much larger. A crucible as small as that from Methwold, perhaps used for casting rings or brooches, could perhaps be more easily managed by holding the rim rather than a handle. The absence of a handle is not important in seeing these crucibles as offering good parallels, as the basic form is the same and, more importantly, the mode of use is the same. The most securely dated are those from Danebury where they can be placed in *ceramic phases 3-5*, dating to the earlier part of the La Tène period. The similar handled crucible found in an early context at Old Oswestry (Savory 1976, 76, No. 127.1) can also be placed in this group. The Methwold crucible shows that at this time the methods used for melting bronze were the same in Norfolk as they were in Hampshire and mid-Wales.

Conclusions

A careful search of the ploughed field edging the site of the new store on two sides failed to locate any Iron Age material, the nearest recognised spread of broadly contemporary debris being 880m to the north-west, although Roman activity is attested rather closer, about 170m to the north-east (Silvester 1991, 67). There is thus no evidence to suggest that the Holmebrink pit is anything other than an isolated feature. There is certainly nothing to point to an Iron Age settlement here, even though the location on a chalk ridge close to the fen edge would provide a suitable place for such occupation. The dating of both the pottery and the crucible remains tentative, but on present perceptions, an origin in the 3rd or 2nd century BC seems plausible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to David and Andrew Wortley for their help; to Margaret Mathews for drawing the finds; to Barbara Green for facilitating the study of the crucible; to the late Tony Gregory for his advice; and to the Department of Minerals, University of Oxford for the use of its equipment. The full report on the crucible is lodged with the Norfolk Museums Service, while all the finds have been retained by David Wortley at Methwold.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cunliffe, B.W. 1968 'Early pre-Roman Iron Age communities in eastern England', *Antiq. J.* 48.2, 175-191.

Foster, J. 1980 *The Iron Age Moulds from Gussage All Saints* British Museum Occ. Paper, 12 (London).

Gurney, D. 1986 *Settlement, Religion and Industry on the Roman Fen-Edge, Norfolk* E. Anglian Archaeol. 31 (East Dereham, Norfolk).

Musson, C., Britnell, W.J., Northover, P.J. and Salter, C.J. forthcoming 'Excavations and metal-working at Llwyn Bryn-dinas hillfort, Llangedwyn, Clwyd'.

Northover, J.P. 1988 'Aspects of Iron Age bronze metallurgy', in Cunliffe, B.W. *Mount Batten, Plymouth, a Prehistoric and Roman Port* Oxford University Committee for Archaeology Monographs, 26 (Oxford), 85-87.

Northover, J.P. forthcoming a 'Iron Age metalwork and metallurgy', in Cunliffe, B.W. *Danebury, an Iron Age Hillfort in Hampshire, Vol. 5. The Excavations 1979-1988; The Finds* Oxford University Committee for Archaeology Monograph (Oxford).

Northover, J.P. forthcoming b 'Bronze Age metalwork and metallurgy', in Sharples N. *The Excavations at Maiden Castle, 1985-6* English Heritage Monographs (London).

Savory, H.N. 1976 *Guide Catalogue of the Early Iron Age Collections* National Museum of Wales (Cardiff).

Silvester, R.J. 1991 *The Wissey Embayment and the Fen Causeway, Norfolk*, E. Anglian Archaeol. 52 (East Dereham, Norfolk).

Wainwright, G. 1979 *Gussage All Saints: an Iron Age Settlement in Dorset* (London).

THE FRING COIN HOARD

by Amanda Chadburn and David Gurney

Introduction (Fig. 1)

This report describes the discovery, excavation and interpretation of a partially-dispersed hoard of 153 silver Iron Age coins of the Iceni tribe, found at Fring in west Norfolk in March 1990. At the request of the finder and landowner, the precise provenance will not be published, but *bona fide* researchers may request further details if required from the Norfolk Archaeological Unit. In the Norfolk Sites and Monuments Record the coin hoard is Site 25758.

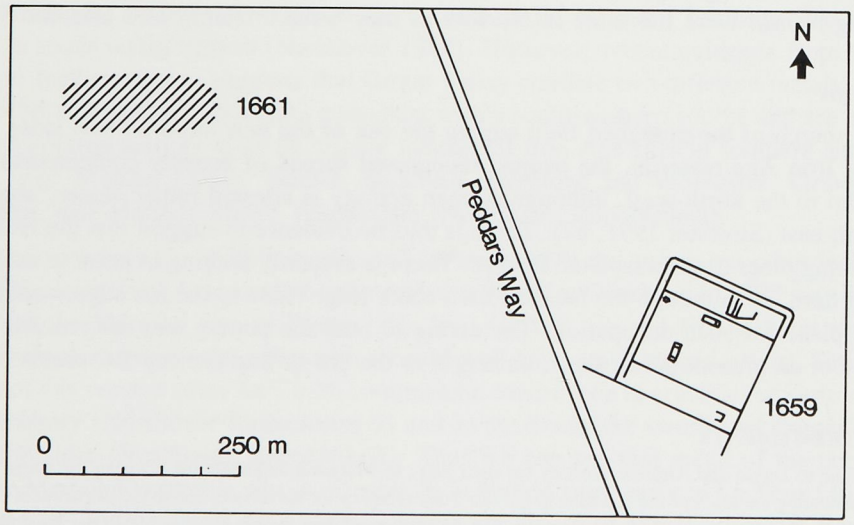

Fig. 1
Sites in the area where the hoard was recovered. The precise location of the hoard is *not* shown.
Scale 1:10,000

The coin hoard was found on a slope at *c.*30 m OD overlooking the valley floor (*c.*25 m OD), along which runs a small stream fed from a spring in Fring village which feeds the Heacham River. The adjacent higher ground rises to some 60 m OD to the north and south of this area. The drift geology is chalky boulder clay, overlying Cretaceous chalk. The area is Grade 3 agricultural land.