

A BRONZE AGE ROUNDHOUSE AT READING GIRLS' SCHOOL

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SUMMARY

The Bronze Age roundhouse found on the sports field of Reading Girls' School, to the south of central Reading, is among several Bronze Age sites in the Kennet Valley, an area of southern England intensively occupied in prehistoric times. While the Reading Girls' School roundhouse shares architectural similarities with roundhouse structures at nearby settlements, it is spatially isolated from them. Further, the deliberate placement of a shattered pottery vessel in a posthole suggests early adoption of formal house closures recorded at some Middle Bronze Age sites, but more typical of sites dating to the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. The presence of ritual house closure deposits at an isolated roundhouse suggests some prehistoric peoples navigated the societal changes of the Bronze Age by rejecting certain conventions while adopting others.

INTRODUCTION

At the onset of the Middle Bronze Age settlement patterns reflected a shift away from a subsistence economy characterized by patterns of residential mobility toward those indicative of early agricultural pursuits (Brück 2000). In archaeological terms, sites dated to the Middle Bronze Age tend to be more ephemeral and broadly distributed across the landscape (Hey and Hind 2014). By the Late Bronze Age, enclosed roundhouse settlements and their concomitant field systems suggest an emerging reliance on resource intensification and agricultural practices (Hey and Hind 2014: 128).

The pace, incentives and processes that influenced and inspired Bronze Age peoples to transition from a mobile subsistence way of life to a more settled agricultural one are poorly understood. There is, however, an emerging consensus that the transition was neither uniform nor synchronous across time or space, but instead occurred gradually and at different times in different places (Lambrick *et al.* 2009). Traditionally archaeologists have presumed that the transition from subsistence economy to agriculture was motivated primarily by economics, where the intensification and maximisation of production was initiated in order to provide surplus needed to meet the demands of an increasingly hierarchical society (Rowlands 1980). More recent reconsiderations of the Bronze Age transition see the emergence of the Bronze Age enclosed settlement as a reflection of societal reconfiguration that saw smaller, more localized groups who, in the act of enclosing their settlement, stressed their individual identity as distinct from that of wider society (Brück 2000: 286).

These interests in the boundaries between the household and wider society are in turn reflected in the construction and layout of the roundhouse. Here interest in the construction and maintenance of elaborate porch structures mirror a preoccupation with concerns over identity maintenance (Brück 2000: 287). When considered in relation to its position relative to contemporaneous Middle to Late Bronze Age settlements, the Reading Girls' School site provides an opportunity to explore how prehistoric

peoples might have navigated this transitional period in one region of southern England.

We here report on the results of archaeological investigations at a Middle to Late Bronze Age settlement located in central Reading, Berkshire, England (Figure 1). A single roundhouse was recorded at the Reading Girls' School site. The roundhouse is architecturally similar to other Middle to Late Bronze Age roundhouses of southwest England. However, it is exceptional in two regards. First, relative to other Bronze Age sites where roundhouses appear spatially associated, often tightly clustered and surrounded by an enclosure, the Reading Girls' School roundhouse stands alone. The location of the roundhouse relative to other Bronze Age settlements suggests an element of purposeful isolation. Second, a posthole associated with a remodelled porch feature contained a significant deposit of fragmented pottery within which several sherds of a single vessel were carefully stacked and deliberately placed. This practice is among those considered precursors to the much more deliberate and structured Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age house abandonment patterns recorded at sites in other parts of Britain (Brück 1999; Webley 2007).

Various forms of roundhouse abandonment have been recorded at Middle Bronze Age sites in southern Britain (Webley 2007: 140). Practices include the whole or partial dismantling of the building, backfilling of postholes, and in some cases the 'deposition of artifactual materials in the form of . . . "selected" placed objects' (Webley 2007: 140). We conclude that the inhabitants of the Reading Girls' School roundhouse were using these ritual traditions. Purposeful placement of pottery sherds as foundation deposits during house maintenance or rebuilding are rare (Pope 2003). Such deposits appear associated with special structures used for particular reasons such as opening a new area for habitation (Pope 2003). Juxtaposed against the purposeful isolation of the roundhouse is the adherence to architectural and house life-cycle conventions of the Middle to Late Bronze Age. In adopting certain conventions whilst rejecting others, the Reading Girls' School site provides insight

into how one Bronze Age household navigated an era of societal change. A growing body of research suggests that the ritual practices such as those initiated by the inhabitants of the Reading Girls' School roundhouse represent functional ritual activities that blur the lines between domestic and ritual aspects of Bronze Age life (Chadwick 2012; Jones 2015).

READING GIRLS' SCHOOL SITE LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION

The Reading Girls' School site is located approximately 2.5km south of Reading's historic centre, and 1km east of the south east arm of the Kennet River, a west bank tributary of the Thames. The site is located on the Reading Girls' School sport

grounds, south of the existing school buildings. The sport field is gently sloping. The Reading Girls' School roundhouse was located on the high point of ground near the property centre. Whilst a stand-alone feature, seemingly isolated in the immediate landscape, the Reading Girls' School roundhouse was situated less than 2km downstream from an area of intensive Bronze Age settlement.

Archaeological sites in the Kennet valley attest to the longevity, variation and intensity of human use and occupation of the area (Hey and Hind 2014). Of those particularly relevant to the Reading Girls' School site are three nearby sites whose occupations straddle the period of time broadly acknowledged to mark the

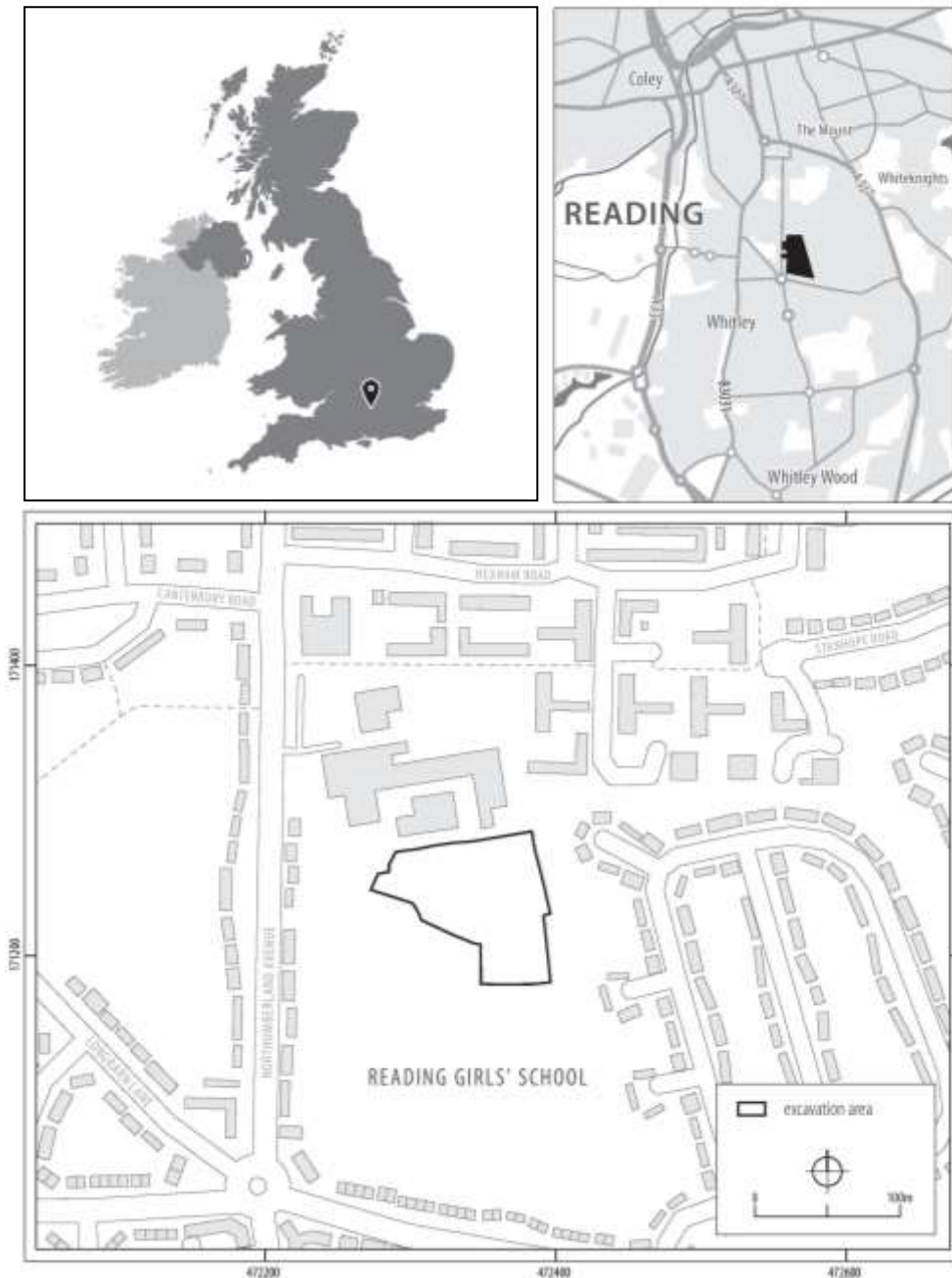


Figure 1. The location of Reading Girls' School site

transition from the Middle (c. 1500 to 1000 BC) to the Late Bronze Age (c. 1000 to 700 BC). These include the sites located during phases of excavation at the Reading Business Park (which includes the Green Park site), Moores Farm and Pingewood (Brossler *et al.* 2004 and 2013).

During the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age the Reading Business Park study area was used as 'shared meeting space for a dispersed farming community' (Brossler *et al.* 2004). By the Middle Bronze Age a series of field boundaries suggest more formal organization of the landscape. Other Middle Bronze Age features include pits and cremation burials. A single radiocarbon date from the charcoal associated with cremated remains found inside an inverted Deverel Rimbury bucket urn dates to the 1220-890 cal BC (Brossler *et al.* 2004, 120). This radiocarbon date postdates that derived from charcoal and Deverel Rimbury pottery sherds from one of the Reading Girls' School roundhouse postholes (3004). Though cremations associated with Deverel Rimbury pottery are present, there were no indications of settlement during the Middle Bronze Age. However, by the Late Bronze Age occupation and landscape use had intensified (Brossler *et al.* 2004: 131).

Several phases of excavation at the Green Park/Reading Business Park site revealed features and finds associated with an intensive Late Bronze Age occupation (Brossler *et al.* 2004). These included 6-, 4- and 2- post structures and at least 35 post-built roundhouses clustered in one or more enclosures. (Five roundhouses in Area 3000B, ten in adjacent area 3100, while in Area 5 of the RBP1 excavations, 20 circular buildings were identified.) Overlapping features suggest that construction occurred over time and that not all roundhouses were occupied concurrently (Brossler *et al.* 2004: 122).

Moores Farm, located approximately 1km south of the Green Park/Reading Business park site, was occupied during the Middle Bronze Age, but more intensively so during the Late Bronze Age. Middle Bronze Age artefacts and features include shallow pits and postholes, and sparsely distributed finds associated primarily with field boundaries and water holes (Brossler *et al.* 2013: 126). The site of Pingewood, located approximately 2km west of the Reading Business Park, and 5 km south west of the Reading Girls' School site, appears to have been a locus of Middle Bronze Age activity. Finds from Pingewood include over 10kg of Bronze Age pottery some of which was identified as Deverel Rimbury (Brossler *et al.* 2013: 126). Subsequent work at the site revealed a Late Bronze Age occupation (Lobb and Mills 1993; cf. Brossler *et al.* 2013: 126). Investigations at the nearby, adjacent sites of Knight's Farm and Field Farm revealed a major ring ditch cluster of Middle Bronze Age origin (Bradley *et al.*, 1980; Butterworth and Lobb 1992). The typical Middle Bronze Age settlement pattern consisting of clusters of roundhouses and associated structures set within an

enclosure does not appear in the Kennet River Valley until the later Bronze Age. Though postholes exist on Middle Bronze Age sites and indicate the presence of structures of some kind 'but as no clearly interpretable building plans survive these were probably quite lightly built' (Brossler *et al.* 2013: 127). Investigations of the Reading Girls' School roundhouse open up another possibility.

RESULTS OF INVESTIGATIONS AT THE READING GIRLS' SCHOOL SITE

Iron Age to Modern Features

The investigations at the Reading Girls' School showed the lands were used, at varying levels of intensity, from the Middle to Late Bronze Age, through the Iron Age, Romano-British, Post-Medieval periods, and into modern times (Headland Archaeology 2016). Late Iron Age and Romano-British features consisted of two ditches of probable agricultural origin and use, either as part of a field boundary or enclosure (Figure 2). Fill removed from slot excavations placed along ditch 2060 revealed a small number of pottery (5) sherds ranging in date from Early to Middle Iron Age and Romano-British eras, suggesting they were constructed at least as early as the Early Iron Age, but probably not before Timby 2015). The second ditch (3010) was situated east of ditch 2060, curving on an east-west alignment before turning north. Fill from the ditch included lithics and daub but no datable finds. However, the proximity and spatial association of ditch 3110 to ditch 2060 suggested it also dates from the Early to Middle Iron Age. Drainage ditches and alignments of rectangular and square postholes (n=29) suggested recent and more modern agricultural use of the subject lands (Figure 2).

The trial trenching and mitigation phases of the project revealed the isolated nature of the roundhouse, in the sense that there were no other structures found in the development area (Headland Archaeology 2015 and 2016). Whilst adjacent properties possibly contain further prehistoric features, the density of finds in nearby Middle to Late Bronze Age sites suggests that groups of roundhouses were tightly clustered, often within 5 to 10m of one another. No roundhouse deposits were found within a 25 to 50m radius of the Reading Girls' School roundhouse. This isolation is captured by Figure 3, showing the excavation crew working in the middle of the field. The depth and condition of roundhouse features combined with low impact of subsequent land alteration suggests that it is unlikely that additional roundhouse features, if once present, would have been lost as a result of differential preservation or taphonomic processes.

Bronze Age roundhouse and associated features

The Reading Girls' School roundhouse (Group 3031) was of ring beam type construction (Figure 4). An outer ring of eight, roughly evenly spaced (approximately 1.85m apart), broadly circular would structural posts defined the structural boundaries and

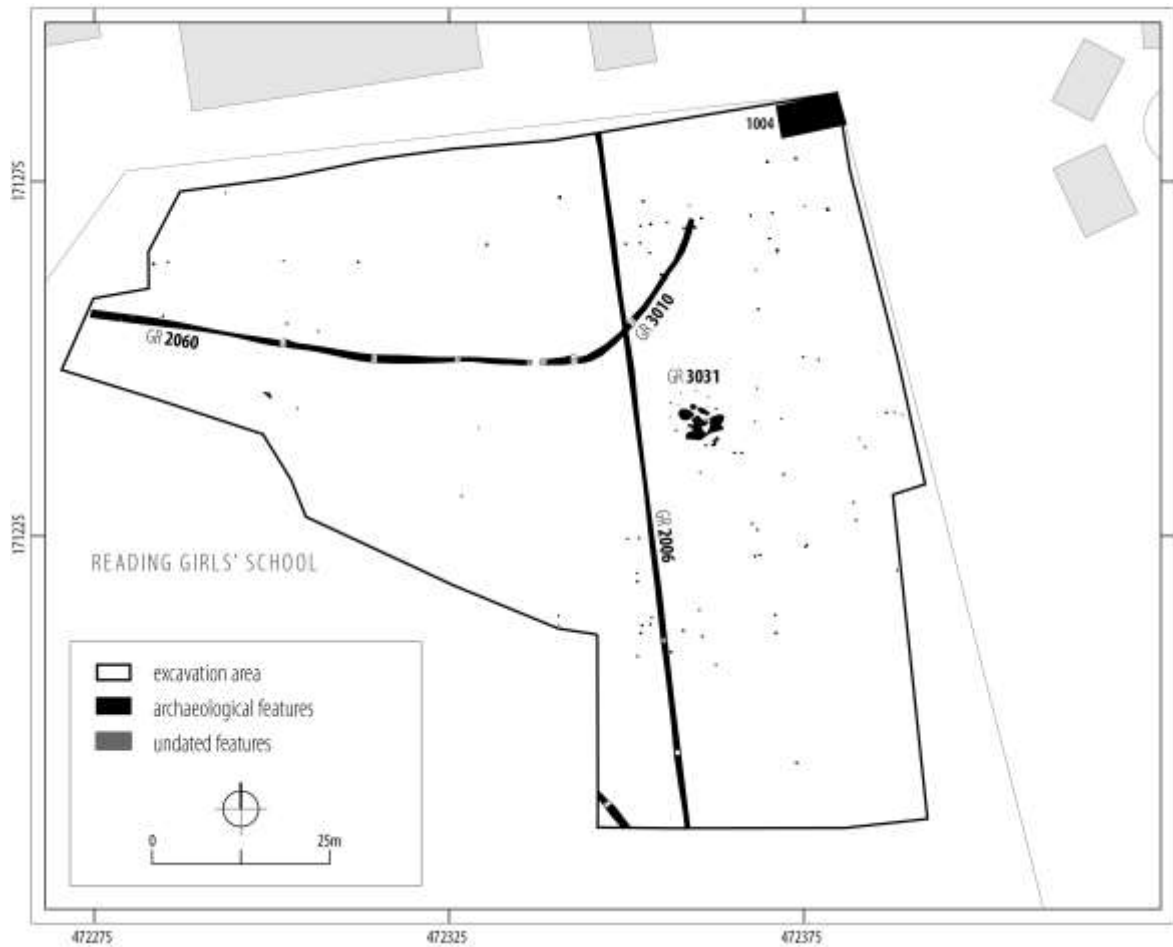


Figure 2. Archaeological features with Middle Bronze Age roundhouse shown as GR3031



Figure 3. Roundhouse excavation in progress showing relative isolation of the structure

have acted as roof supports. Architectural analyses of Bronze Age roundhouses suggest that at an average of 1.8m apart, the structural posts were too widely spaced to support *in situ* wattling (Pope 2003: 189). It is probable that the walls were constructed of a combination of turf and suspended wattle hurdles, covered in daub (Pope 2003: 190). The use of daub was more likely in areas with natural clay deposits (Pope 2003: 190). In some roundhouses, the outer walls of the building were set back from the structural posts by as much as 1m, or to align with the outer posts of the porch structure (Brossler *et al.* 2004: 19; Pope 2003). Therefore, the internal floor of the Reading Girls' School roundhouse could have ranged from 6.6m to 8.6m in diameter.

The individual structural postholes ranged from 0.16m to 0.30m in diameter, and 0.06m to 0.16m deep. With the exception of structural posts 3010 and 3023, and porch postholes 3004 and 3007, posthole fill consisted of mid grey-orange sandy clay and most contained daub fragments. Pottery was found in several of the structural postholes, including a Late Bronze Age fragment in posthole 3115.

Within the roundhouse interior six smaller stakeholes formed a semi-circular arrangement creating an internal arc that curved from the south-west to the

north-west. These stakes ranged from 0.08m to 0.14m in diameter and 0.05m to 0.15m deep. The inner posts mirrored the arrangement of external structural posts except to the west of the group, where their absence suggest truncation, possibly by the re-working or fixing of the porch area.

Two internal surfaces were present: layer 3052 consisted of a patchy deposit of mid brown-grey silty sandy clay measuring 6.3m south-east to north-west and 4.9m south-west to north-east. Possible trampling was indicated by a random distribution of items compacted into the deposit, particularly at the interface with underlying geological deposits. The layer extended slightly beyond the exterior posts that supported the entrance and porch structure, but within the possible range of the interior boundaries of the structure as represented by the maximum extent of the outer walls. Finds recovered from layer 3052 included seven fragments of daub (representing the wattle and daub structure), nine fragments of CBM, industrial waste, a Roman hobnail, 22 pieces of flint debitage and 16 pieces of prehistoric pottery.

Underlying layer 3052, and confined to the immediate vicinity of the entrance and interior of the structure, was a mottled blue-grey slightly sandy clay layer, 3092. It is possible the deposit represents another

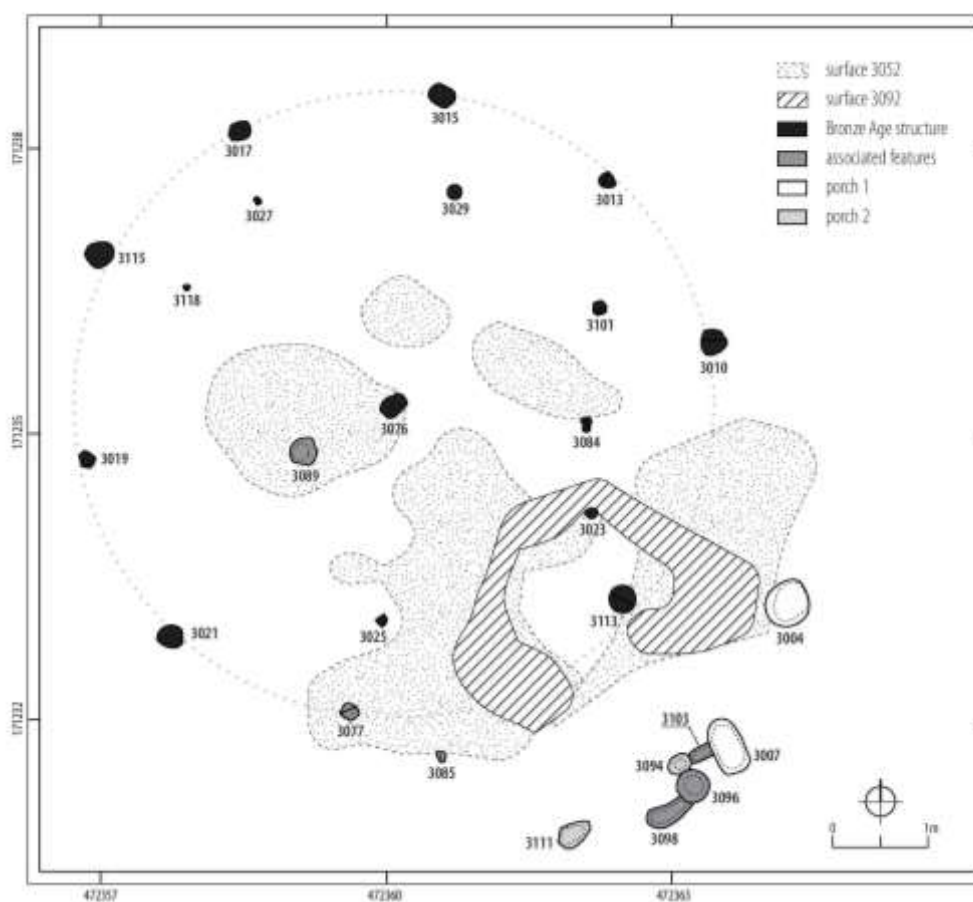


Figure 4. Roundhouse GR3031 with porched entrance in the south east

element of the internal floor surface of the structure; its compact nature a result of trampling associated with footfall near the entrance-way. An alternate theory suggests the layer represents an earlier living floor associated with occupation during construction and use of the original porch structure.

Two phases of porch construction were present. The second, later porch represented a reconfiguration and repositioning of the original roundhouse entrance. The first phase of porch building and use was indicated by the presence of two postholes supporting the south-south-east facing entrance-way (3094 and 3111). The fill excavated from postholes 3094 and 3111 was consistent with that recovered from the majority of external and internal structural post and stakeholes.

The porch was later reconfigured to face in a slightly more easterly direction as represented by the positioning of postholes 3004 and 3007. Postholes 3004 and 3007 were larger than those used to support the earlier doorway. In addition, upper fill deposits in those same postholes were charcoal and pottery. The fill was much darker and of a different character than the fill excavated from postholes that defined the structural ring of the building and internal arc. A single external posthole 3010 and a single internal stakehole 3023 exhibited similar dark charcoal-laden soil profiles.

While recovered from virtually all features associated with the roundhouse, the focus of cultural material found relative to the structure was towards the south-east and the porch structures. The prehistoric pottery assemblage numbers 536 sherds (2.581kg). The majority of this (124 sherds, 2.064kg, 80% of the prehistoric pottery assemblage by weight) derived from one posthole (3004) (Mullin 2018). This posthole supported the easternmost corner of the second porch structure.

A concentration of pottery rim and wall fragments was recovered from this posthole (Figure 5). Three of the wall sherds were found stacked and deliberately placed in the posthole. The sherds were thick walled,

in an oxidized fabric containing crushed flint. Analysis of the sherds and associated t-shaped rim fragments suggested that they were part of a single substantial vessel. A single decorated sherd carries a 'horizontal applied cordon with two diagonal slashes' (Mullen 2018), a 'slashed' type of decoration consistent with the Deverel Rimbury pottery tradition of the Middle Bronze Age. Although the decoration on the vessel from 3004 was not identical, vessels similarly decorated with applied horizontal cordons were recovered from Green Park in small amounts (Brossler *et al.* 2004: fig. 4.7).

Other Features

Three small pits (3096, 3098 and 3103) were recorded in proximity to the entrance. They varied in size (0.4-0.6m x 0.13-0.36m by 0.08-0.24m in depth) and contained fill consisting of a mottled mid grey-brown and orange-brown silty clay. The cuts displayed no evidence of *in situ* burning. Consequently, the heat-affected soil and charcoal flecks found in these deposits suggest dumping of fire raking deposits derived from another nearby locale. Daub, flint debitage and prehistoric pottery were recovered from the fills of these pits.

Two other Bronze Age features were recorded near the roundhouse. 15m to the east was a circular posthole (3043) measuring 0.28m diameter and 0.16m deep. The cut was filled with a dark black-grey silty clay (3048) from which another large collection (n=129, 364g) of Middle Bronze Age pottery sherds were recovered. To the south-west of group 3031 two postholes (2039 and 2041) were recorded. The postholes measured 0.26 x 0.21 x 0.11m and 0.24 x 0.14 x 0.06m respectively and were filled with mottled orange and grey slightly sandy clays (2038 and 2040). Fill from posthole 2039 contained crumbs of a fabric (F2) consistent with Late Bronze Age pottery.

Radiocarbon Age and Context

Two radiocarbon assays were carried out on charcoal derived from samples of fill from postholes 3010 and 3004. Both postholes shared similar soil profiles that differed from the majority of the Reading Girls' School roundhouse post and stake holes insofar as

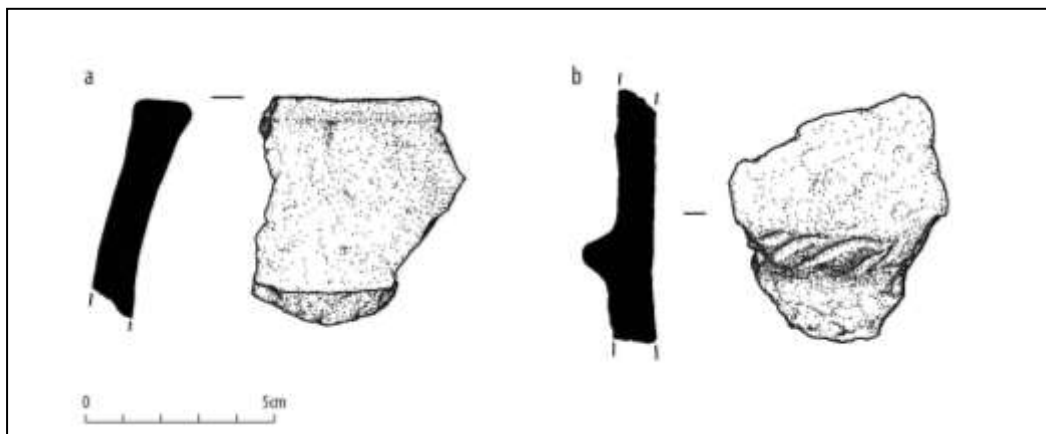


Figure 5. Middle Bronze Age rim and decorated body sherd from entrance porch posthole 3004

they contained considerable amounts of charcoal. The sample from posthole 3004 yielded a date coinciding with Middle Bronze Age occupation at the nearby Green Park/Reading Business park site, but that predated the Late Bronze Age roundhouse features there (Table 1). The second date from posthole 3010 was within the date range of Late Bronze Age occupation of the Green Park/Reading Business Park roundhouses. The presence of Deverel Rimbury and Late Bronze Age plainware at Pingewood suggests a similar span of occupation at that site (Brossler *et al.* 2004: 125).

ROUNDHOUSE INTERPRETATION

The surviving features towards the south and east of the roundhouse, most of which were associated with the second phase of porch construction, were noticeably richer in charcoal, and the deposits were generally darker and homogeneous than the fill found in the majority of other structural features. Surface 3052 extended beyond the structural posts of the roundhouse. This difference in posthole fill and extent of surface 3052 may be related to clearing of material towards the entrance-way during occupation of the structure. The ingress of material into postholes through general occupation has been demonstrated through experimental reconstructions and is entirely random at times (Reynolds 1993). The porch and associated entrance-way to the roundhouse were rebuilt at least twice. Postholes 3094 and 3111 defined the earliest entrance-way to the building, which faced south-south-east. Postholes 3004 and 3007 supported the second, slightly more south-easterly facing porch.

Pottery typologies and radiocarbon dates suggest an initial Middle Bronze Age phase of house construction and occupation (*c.* 1416-1265 cal BC) followed by Late Bronze Age use of the site, but not of the roundhouse itself. Occupation and reconfiguration of the porch structure took place during the Middle Bronze Age. The deposit of sherds in porch posthole 3004 represented either the ritual closing of the house upon abandonment, or the foundation deposits of the second porch. The large pottery sherds were found at

the interface of the lower organic brown deposits and the upper charcoal laden deposits suggesting that they were placed as foundation deposits. If the pottery sherds were deposited as ritual or structural support for the second porch, the collapse of the second porch itself would have marked the termination of occupation and the end of the house's 'life'.

The Late Bronze Age use of the site took place in and around the roundhouse but there are no indications that later occupations included rebuilding and reoccupation of the roundhouse itself. Sherds of fragmentary Late Bronze Age plainware were thinly scattered across the site. The largest concentration of sherds (17 sherds) was found in the roundhouse trample deposit, while other pottery crumbs were found in the fill from porch posthole 3111, structural posthole 3115, outlying postholes 2039 and 2038 and in the large ditch (2060). A radiocarbon date from fill excavated from the upper deposits of roundhouse posthole 3010 confirms the Late Bronze Age presence in the area as would be expected.

Experimental archaeology complimented by the results of dendrochronology and decay analyses suggest that the maximum lifespan of a circular structure was in the region of 60 years (Reynolds 1993; Pope 2003: 341). A porch construction represented the weakest part of a structure and was likely to require repair after as little as eight years (Reynolds 1993).

Occupation of the Reading Girls' School roundhouse may have been year-round, but it is possible that the rebuilding of the porch may relate to periodic maintenance indicative of seasonal occupation of the structure. Regardless of whether occupation was seasonal or year-round, there is little doubt that the roundhouse was curated and maintained over at least one generation. Brück (1999: 146) suggests that one in five Middle Bronze Age houses was repaired but only 1 in 15 was rebuilt. She also suggests that the number of repair events is directly related to the longevity of occupation (Brück 1999). That is, the more maintenance a house exhibits, the more it is

Site Ref	Context Ref/desc.	Sample Ref	Material	Radiocarbon Age (BP)	Age (cal BC) 2 σ .
Reading Girls' School	3012 / Basal fill of PH 3010	3006	Charcoal	2888 ± 29	1131-979
Reading Girls' School	3006/ Basal fill PH 3004	3002	Charcoal	3080 ± 29	1416-1265
Green/Reading Bus Park*	1160/Area 3000B	Cremation	Charcoal	2857±60	1220-890
Green/Reading Bus Park*	1695/Area 3000B	Fill of pit 1518	Animal Bone	2859±58	1220-890

* See Brossler *et al.* 2004: 133

Table 1. Radiocarbon dates from Reading Girls' School and Green Park/Reading Business Park sites

likely to have been occupied beyond a single generation (Brück 1999: 146).

The restriction of episodes of house maintenance to the repair and reconfiguration of the porch structure, and the presence of the stacked pottery sherds in posthole 3004 suggests the Reading Girls' School roundhouse was probably occupied for a single generation after which it was formally closed, or simply abandoned, and never reoccupied. Though probably part of the structured house closing, the pottery sherds in posthole 3004 could have been deposited in support of construction of the second porch. While ritual deposits made prior to or during construction have been recorded at some sites they are rare, occurring only in certain houses (Pope 2003: 382).

The pottery from posthole 3004 suggests that whoever deposited the vessel purposefully broke and deliberately stacked pieces of it in a posthole associated with the reconfiguration of the house entrance (Mullin 2018). Similar practices have been noted in other Middle Bronze Age houses, and in much larger houses dating to the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age (Mullin 2018; Webley 2007).

Mullin, in his pottery report (Mullin 2018), points towards a number of cases where similar practices have been identified. He refers to the work of Webley (2007) who, when looking at the inside of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age roundhouses, notes significant concentrations of burnt pottery located within the porch postholes at Longbridge Deverill House 3. Burnt flint and pottery were also concentrated on the south side and porch of roundhouse 1128 at Dunston Park, Thatcham, Berkshire, where some postholes contained up to 1.5kg of pottery (though much of this was of small sherds size, abraded and did not conjoin) (Fitzpatrick *et al.* 1995). Pottery, daub and burnt flint were recovered from the porch and south side of a building at Houghton Down, Hampshire (Cunliffe and Poole 2000), while at Broom, Bedfordshire, two pits cut into Structure 5 were filled with sherds of at least 15 vessels, many of which appeared to have been freshly broken (Mortimer and McFadyen 1999; Mullin 2018)).

Roundhouses are typically associated with external pit and posthole features with grain storage or processing functions, such as was the case at the Green Park site (Brossler *et al.* 2004: 28). The Reading Girls' School assemblage adheres to this general pattern. The single roundhouse is associated with a small number of pit and postholes that show house residents were engaged in subsistence practices typical of the era. However, the Reading Girls' School site exhibited low feature densities when compared with those recorded at the enclosed roundhouse settlements at nearby Green Park.

Why all alone? Interpretation of a Middle Bronze Age isolated roundhouse

The isolated nature of the Reading Girls' School roundhouse is the focus of this discussion. Isolated roundhouses, though rare, do occur at Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age sites in southern Britain (Webley 2007: 133). Examples include roundhouses recorded at Bancroft (Bucks.), Broom (Beds.), Broomfield (Essex), Dunston Park (Berks.), Houghton Down (Hants.), Pimperne (Dorset), and three successively occupied houses from Longbridge Deverill Cow Down (Wilts.) (Webley 2007: 133). In addition to their spatial isolation, these roundhouses exhibit ring beam construction and artefact deposition patterns similar to those recorded at the Reading Girls' School site.

While sharing these very general characteristics, in many other respects the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age isolated roundhouses discussed in Webley (2007) differ significantly from the Middle Bronze Age Reading Girls' School roundhouse. For example, of the nine roundhouses included in Webley's discussion, all were larger, most considerably so, than the Girls' School roundhouse, averaging 11 to 18 metres in diameter (Webley 2007: 133). Several had wider and taller, possibly monumental, porch structures. Also, all contained unusual architectural features such as paired internal postholes. Artefact concentrations were associated with the right side of the dwelling; a distributional pattern Webley (2007: 133) argues is associated almost exclusively with similar roundhouses of the period

Webley (2007: 139) concludes that within the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age isolated monumental roundhouses material was deliberately deposited as part of 'structured', possibly ritualized, house abandonment. The first phase of abandonment entailed the partial or total destruction of the house, probably by deliberate burning (Webley 2007: 140). In some instances, posts on the left hand side of the house were pulled or dug out, while those on the right hand side of the entrance were left intact. Finally, postholes along the right hand side of the building were packed with artefacts, in some cases large conjoining pottery fragments, suggesting deposition of a set of vessels. Structured abandonment rituals are recorded for roundhouses dating to the Middle Bronze Age in southern England (Brück 1999; 2001), suggesting an earlier origin to the practices recorded in the sites summarized by Webley (2007). However, on the Middle Bronze Age sites the left-right patterning of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age sites is absent (Webley 2007: 139).

Artefact concentrations and surfaces at the Girls' School roundhouse were distributed in a more typical fashion to both right and left on either side of the

doorway (Allen *et al.* 1984: 90; Webley 2007: 133). Finally, with two exceptions (Bancroft and Broom, dated to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age and Late Bronze Age respectively) occupation and abandonment of the remaining seven of the houses discussed by Webley dated to the early Iron Age or later (Webley 2007: 133, Table 1). In contrast, radiocarbon dates and pottery typology show that the Reading Girls' School roundhouse was constructed and abandoned earlier, during the Middle Bronze Age.

The isolated monumental houses of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age summarized by Webley (2007) may represent homes of an elite or venues for communal activities, serving as points of assembly for ritual purposes (Webley 2007: 140). The Reading Girls' school roundhouse is isolated but not monumental in size. It appears to have been ritually 'closed' but in the manner observed in other Middle Bronze Age houses, and not in the more prescriptive manner suggested by left-right deposits of later Late Bronze Age/Early Iron age house closures. The reasons for the isolated placement of the Reading Girls' School roundhouse may be in response to the societal changes occurring during the Early to Middle Bronze Age, rather than as an early expression of the emergence of a social elite.

As many have suggested, the Bronze Age was an era of transition. As Early Bronze Age society 'scaled down', smaller household groups, comprised of a nuclear or small extended family, replaced the larger corporate group structures typical of Early Bronze Age society (Brück 2000). As these larger groups fragmented, and allegiances frayed, it would have been increasingly difficult to maintain the resource access necessary to facilitate mobile subsistence strategies. Thus, Middle Bronze Age people became dependent upon smaller, more localised landscapes, which in turn required a change in subsistence strategies (Brück 2000: 288).

As settlement shifted from large scale to small-scale communities, and co-resident groups replaced settlement based on broad kinship networks of the Early Bronze Age, the roundhouse became the architectural representation of the unit central to societal reproduction – the household group (Brück 2000: 288). Within the household group, the use of a standardized house form became one way in which people could, in a time of societal change, structure both time and space. Brück posits that deposits placed at significant points in space, such as roundhouse entrances, were made at critical moments in the lifecycle of the house or its inhabitants thus providing further anchors in time and space for the household group (Brück 2000: 289). Chadwick (2012) cautions against interpreting placed deposits, such as the stacked pottery at the Reading Girls' School roundhouse, as the outcome of strictly ritual activities. Instead, Chadwick (2012: 283) proposes these and other acts may represent 'a continuum of practices from formal and ritualized events through to small-

scale, informal acts undertaken on a routine basis'.

The occupants of the Reading Girls' School roundhouse appear to have adhered to Middle Bronze Age rituals of house abandonment, but if the pottery stacked in posthole 3004 was placed there during construction as a sort of ritual 'foundation' deposit, it could have an even more nuanced meaning. As suggested by Pope (2003: 382), 'Ritual deposition prior to or during construction exists but is not common. The fact that so few structures reveal these deposits suggest that they were only made in certain structures and under certain circumstances, for example, when a household is established in new lands.' Conversely if characterised as an act of informal everyday ritual practice, the stacking of pottery might be interpreted as the inhabitant's efforts to maintain connection with a broader cultural tradition even as they sought physical isolation from their neighbours.

While broad trends of societal change are visible in the wide arc of Bronze Age prehistory, Brück (2000: 291) cautions against generalizations that obscure the ways in which individual peoples and groups may have responded. That is, despite their desire to create household group-based identities in new lands, the reality of implementing and maintaining such independence may have been difficult or even undesirable for some. Pre-existing kinship and exchange networks may have continued to function at the level of individual, household and community. In contrast, the notion of co-residency may have been challenged. That is, it is possible that in the search for new identity as a separate household, some chose an isolated existence. Thus 'although cultural ideals may have existed, in practice the developmental cycle of each household group depended on a particular set of social and material circumstances as well as on household members' commitment to communal tradition' (Brück 1999: 145).

CONCLUSION

The Reading Girls' School roundhouse sits in 'splendid isolation' on a hillside not too far from the River Kennet, yet within easy distance of roughly contemporaneous, and in the case of the Late Bronze Age, densely occupied settlements at Green Park, Moores Farm and Pingewood. Its occupation and abandonment predates the Late Bronze Age settlements at nearby sites, but not excessively so. Given its placement relative to nearby settlements, it may represent an example of one household's early effort to establish or maintain an identity distinct and separate from nearby, possibly related, family groups as they too established new ways of living together on the landscape. Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, it could represent one family's bid to claim a 'new' area of land and suite of concomitant resources.

Despite the anomaly of physical placement, the roundhouse is of standard construction. The porch reconfiguration, including the deposition of selected deliberately placed objects, is mirrored in similarly

aged roundhouses, and suggests some adherence to architectural and ritual convention. By adhering to some and rejecting other societal conventions, the Reading Girls' School roundhouse serves as one example of how individuals and, in this case, household groups, might have exercised personal or household agency during the Middle to Late Bronze Age transition.

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