

# An Iron Age Inhumation from Rushey Mead, Leicester

*by Richard Pollard*

*with contributions from Umberto Albarella, Simon Chapman and Angela Monckton*

Salvage excavation during construction work in Townsend Close, Rushey Mead in 1995 revealed a pit containing human remains and associated charred plant remains, sawn antler, and a range of ceramic artefacts. Pottery suggests a date in the Late Iron Age, though a range from the mid fifth/fourth century BC – first century AD is possible. The interment may be in the southern British 'Pit Burial' tradition, perhaps with elements derived from the south-eastern 'Aylesford-Swarling' cremation practice.

## Introduction and background

The Rushey Mead housing estate is situated to the north of Leicester, between Belgrave and Thurmaston (illus. 1) and lies in the floodplain of the River Soar, east of the river, with the Melton Brook on its south side. The burial site is located in the northern part of Rushey Mead, at SK 6086 0836, on a river gravel terrace (OS Geological Survey 1954, 1:63360, Sheet 156), at a height of approximately 52m OD. No archaeological observation is known to have taken place during the construction of the estate.

The site lies 320m east of the Fosse Way, now the A607 Melton Road, some 4.4 km (2.73 miles) down the road from Roman and medieval Leicester (illus. 1, Site 1). A substantial ring ditch, probably a Bronze Age barrow, has been recorded approximately 100m to the east (Pickering and Hartley 1985, 38, no.10; illus. 1, Site 9). Substantial parts of two 'Belgic' pots were found 1 km to the north-west (Liddle 1975-6; illus. 1, Site 3); these may represent a burial. Roman artefacts have been reported from several locations within a kilometre of the site. An Anglo-Saxon cemetery, and possibly an early Bronze Age cremation, were excavated *c.* 850m to the east (Williams 1983; illus. 1, Site 10).

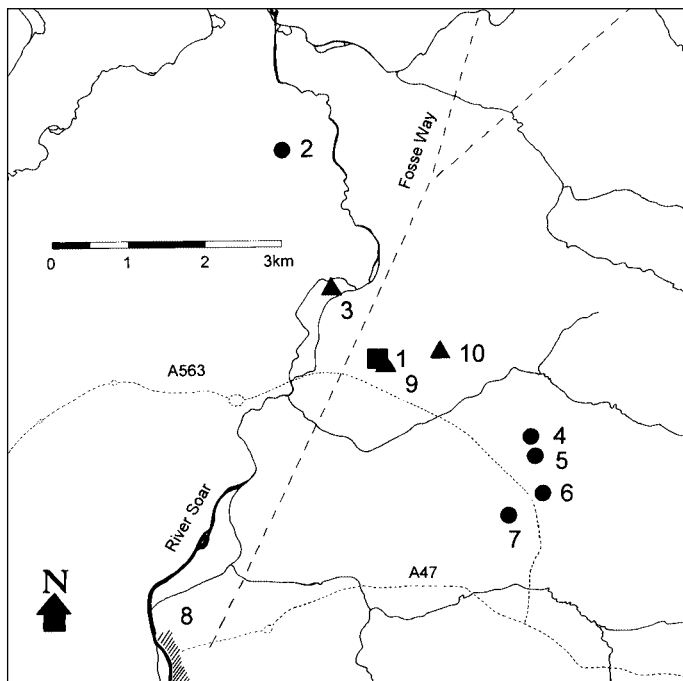
The Rushey Mead Iron Age burial thus has a multi period setting; the presence of Bronze Age, Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon burials within *c.*1 km is noteworthy, and might hint at a ritual landscape spanning 2500 years.

## The excavation

### *The burial (illus. 2-6).*

Excavation of foundation trenches by builders for an extension to a house in Townsend Close led to the discovery of human remains. Leicestershire County Council's Museums, Arts and Records Service (LMARS) Archaeology Section was called in by the police to investigate and a salvage excavation was subsequently undertaken by staff of the Section and of the University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS).

The excavation was complicated by tunnelling into the north-east section of Trench 1



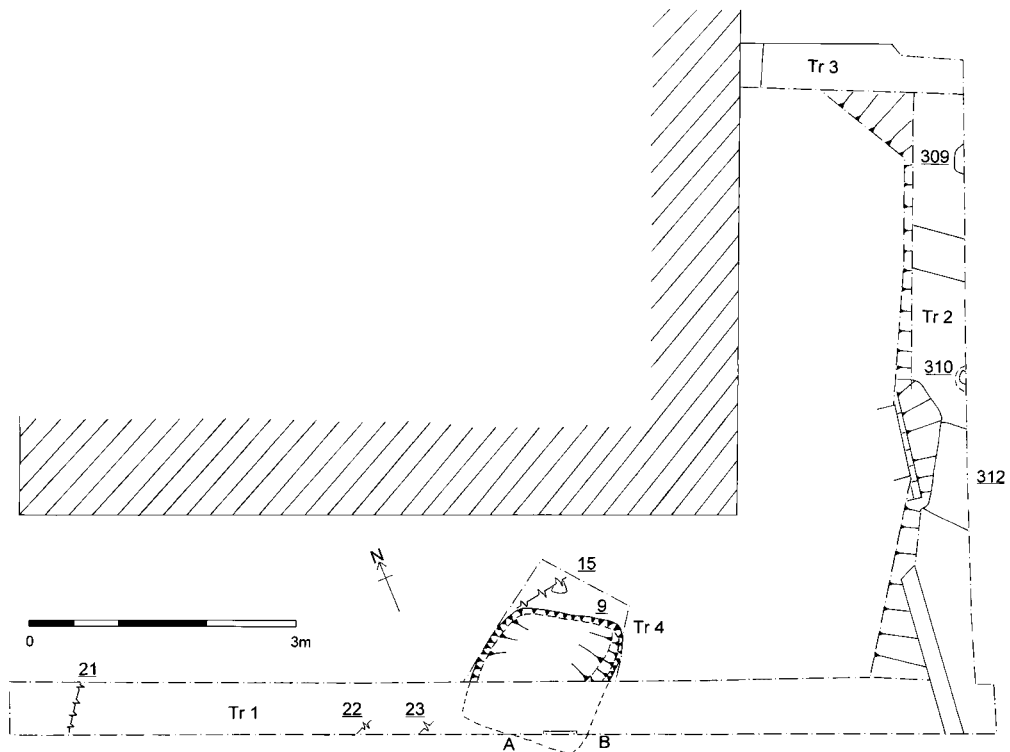
1. Location map showing selected sites (Iron Age except where specified):  
 1: Rushey Mead, Leicester; 2: Wanlip Fillingate/Sewage Treatment Works; 3: Thurmaston;  
 4-7: Humberstone Ward, Leicester (4: Humberstone Farm; 5: Quakesick Spinney; 6: Hamilton;  
 7: Elms Farm/Manor Farm); 8: Leicester, extent of Iron Age settlement;  
 9: Thurmaston, ring ditch, Bronze Age barrow?; 10: Thurmaston, possible Early Bronze Age cremation,  
 Anglo-Saxon cemetery. Circle: settlement; triangle: possible and certain burials.

by the builders, inevitably causing significant disturbance. The necessity of excavating the human remains within half a day meant that only cursory records of supervening deposits were made.

An offset (Trench 4) to Trench 1 was opened up, its location determined by the presence of a feature (not excavated), potentially part of the burial, running across the bottom of the trench. This offset was excavated from the top down. Time did not permit a detailed section drawing to be made prior to the opening of Trench 4; thicknesses of deposits are given below.

The uppermost deposits on the site were made ups and topsoil (16: illus. 6; 301), capped by a concrete drive. These deposits overlay loam, interpreted as a truncated soil remnant (14: illus. 6; 302). This loam could be seen in both Trenches 1 and 2, with the cuts for earthfast features in both north-east and south-west (illus. 6) sections of the former immediately beneath. Removal of the loam (14) in Trench 4 revealed a silty sand (1: 200mm thick). Below (1) was a layer of cobbles (2), all of which seemed fire affected, that is blackened and possibly cracked (illus.3). Some 25 cobbles, 100-200mm in size, and a single fired clay block (illus. 7.2) were recorded in plan. A second layer of silty sand (3) underlay (2). The maximum thickness of (3) was *c.* 100mm.

Context (4: *c.*100-200mm thick), below (3), was a mix of burnt clay/sand in a silty sand matrix. Finds included animal bone, and burnt fragments of antler which were



2. Site plan.

located close to the skull. (4) overlay the skeleton itself (6), and a second deposit of cobbles (7).

Removal of the cobbles permitted excavation of the surviving parts of the skeleton in the north-east part of the pit (illus. 4-5). The skeleton lay diagonally across the pit, crouched and with arms flexed. The head lay on its left side, and the torso was placed either on its left side or twisted so that the right side of the chest was uppermost. The skull, clavicle, scapulae, left(?) arm and much of the ribs and vertebrae remained *in situ*. The head was close to the south-east side of the pit, and the body appears to have had a south-east orientation. The bones recovered represented a single individual.

A small amount of charred cereal grain was collected during post-excavation processing of the skeletal material. A sherd of East Midlands Scored Ware with fresh breaks was recovered from the builders' 'tunnel', suggesting close association with the skeleton (illus. 7.3).

A further deposit of silty sand (5: c.100mm thick), with abundant charcoal and charred cereal grains, lay along the west side of the pit, below the level of (4), some 500-600mm below the top of the pit. Samples were taken for specialist analysis of the plant remains; these also contained a sherd of Scored Ware, further burnt antler fragments and bone fragments. (5) lay largely, if not entirely, to the west of the skeleton and cobbles (7), and was truncated by Trench 1. It may have been partly buried by (7), but it is not clear if



3. Context (2), cobbles and fired clay block. Scale: 400mm (Photograph, BW)

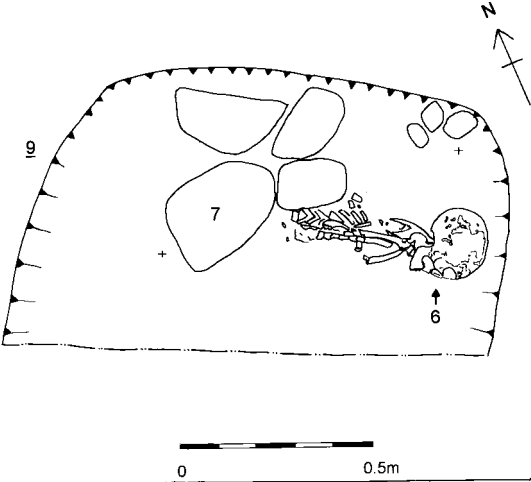
this would have been a depositional or post-depositional event. It is possible that (5) was partly removed to accommodate the body; no cut for the burial was observed but the circumstances of excavation were far from ideal.

The precise relationships between (5), (6) and (7) are uncertain. The large cobbles (7), up to 350 x 220 x 150mm in size, appeared to form a linear arrangement. Four large cobbles were planned (illus. 5); the builders removed several others, but these all seem to have come from the north part of the trench. The cobbles seemed to partly overlie the skeleton, but this could have resulted from decomposition of the body and the consolidation of the pit. The lowest deposit in the pit was a layer of sand (8: up to 300mm thick). A lens of charcoal, 20mm thick, lay within (8) at the north-west corner of the pit.

Contexts (1-8) were all interpreted as fills within the pit, cut number (9), which was at least 700mm deep and 1.4m wide on its north-west to south-east axis, with a sub-square plan (illus. 2, 5). Its sides were slightly concave to north-west and south-east, and its bottom was rounded. There are suggestions of an earlier feature cut by (9): 'fill' deposits (15) were recorded north of the north-east edge of (9). Two cobbles, one 180mm wide, were planned in (15). A second feature (cuts (22-23; illus. 2)), on an east-west axis may also have been cut by the burial pit.

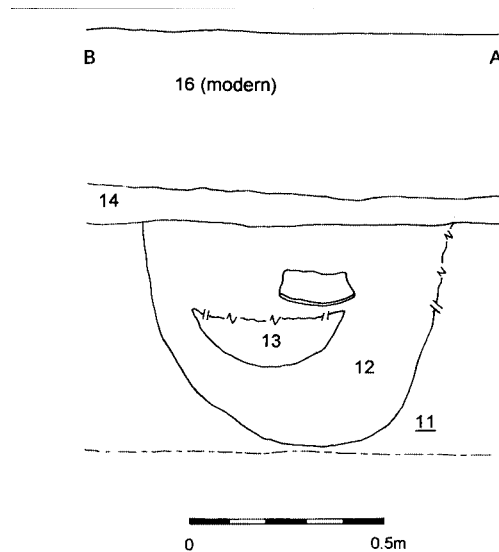


4. The skeleton *in situ* (6), and cobbles (7). (Photograph, BW)



5. Plan of skeleton (6) and cobbles (7).

The south-west section of Trench 1 (illus. 6), opposite (9), revealed a U-profile cut (11), below the loam (14). The general fill (12) was sandy silt. A concentration of charcoal (13) lay within this sandy silt, and a large sherd of Late Iron Age pottery (illus. 7.5) was present in the section above this. This feature, cut (11), would appear to be the south corner of the pit, cut (9). The charcoal (13) is not in line with the east edge of (5); it could be part of (3), or of (5) if the latter was spread around the north-west and south-west sides of the pit. The possibilities that (11) is a recut of (9), and the upper fill (12) with the pot is later than (2-7), cannot be ruled out.



6. Section A-B, Trench 1 (see illus. 2 for location).

The burial pit (9/11) would have been a sub square feature with corners more or less at the cardinal points of the compass. It was 1.4m wide (north-west to south-east) and c.1.5m long (north-east to south-west) (illus. 2). Securely stratified finds include the articulated skeleton (6), charred plant remains with one Scored Ware pottery sherd (5), a fired clay block (2) and fired clay fragments (3). The Late Iron Age sherd was high up in the general fill (12), suggesting that it is on a level with (1), i.e. a post-burial deposition. A number of other finds were handed in by the builders and police: these include nine sherds of two Scored Ware pots, six of which join the piece from the area of the skeleton (illus. 7.3-4), a complete triangular loomweight (illus. 7.1) and six fragments of the same type, and a collection of fired clay fragments.

#### Other features (*illus. 2*)

The burial pit was not the only feature visible, though it was the only one to produce finds. A straight-sided pit (cut 21) lay at the north-west end of Trench 1. A few fragments of burnt bone were found in the general area of (21), but were unstratified. Cuts (22) and (23) may represent a linear feature running diagonally across Trench 1.

Trench 2, to the rear of the house, also revealed a range of possible features below the loam (302), sealed by a sandy clay silt interpreted as a buried topsoil. These included a possible ditch cut (312), and post holes or tree holes (cuts 309, 310). Hartley (1989, 45) shows ridge and furrow in the immediate vicinity, if not on the site itself, but none of the linear features in Trenches 1 and 2 whose orientation could be determined match its north-north-east to south-south-west orientation.

### Interpretation of the burial

The presence of human remains associated with Middle-Late Iron Age artefacts in a subsquare feature much larger than that required for interment finds parallels in the 'Pit Burial' tradition. This practice has been recorded almost entirely south-east of a line from the Wash to the mouth of the River Severn (Whimster 1981, 167). Examples are known from Northamptonshire (*ibid.*, 8) but this is the first comparable record for Leicestershire (Beamish 1998, 29-30). The characteristics of this practice have been summarised by Wait (1995, 492; see also Whimster 1981, 191-2, Group 1).

'Pit Burial' inhumations are often placed in disused storage pits (e.g. Danebury (Walker 1984); Stanton Harcourt Gravelly Guy (Wait 1995, 494-5)). The fact that the Rushey Mead pit is larger than necessary for the body does not imply that it was originally a storage pit. Monckton has concluded that on balance the charred grain from (5) is unlikely to have been stored and burnt *in situ*, noting that charred cereals have been found with Iron Age burials, as at Danebury (Cunliffe 1986). She puts forward alternative interpretations, that the grain could have been burnt accidentally during food preparation or deliberately because it was spoiled. Whimster observes that burial 'frequently took place in [pits] that were already half-filled with general occupational debris' (1981, 10), which could be represented by the sand layer (8). Nevertheless, it has to be recognised that the pit (9/11) might have been dug specifically to accept the burial. That being so, there is still the possibility that (9/11) is a recut of an earlier feature (15), whose function and form are completely unknown.

Setting aside the issue of the history of the pit itself, the Rushey Mead burial exhibits many other characteristics of Pit Burials. The disposition of the body itself conforms to the norms of the tradition (Whimster 1981, 11). The layers of cobbles (7, and perhaps also 2) over the body find parallels at Danebury (Cunliffe 1995, 100), and would have had the effect of weighting it down, perhaps in order to restrain wayward spirits (Aldhouse Green 1998, 9). There has been much speculation as to whether Pit Burials represent ritual killings (Wait 1995, 495; see also Cunliffe 1995, 100-105; Aldhouse Green 1998; Walker 1984, 461-3 *inter alia*). It is reasonably certain that the Rushey Mead body was articulated when buried and, whatever else had befallen it, it had not been beheaded.

Whimster's data show that, in the Pit Burial tradition, accompaniment by formal grave goods was rare, though artefact fragments and animal bone associated with pit fillings are more common (*ibid.*, 14). Given that the context of much of the Rushey Mead artefactual assemblage is unknown, it is possible that Rushey Mead fits this pattern, too. The range of items found in the pit has much more in common with this tradition than it does with the grave goods of the south-eastern 'Aylesford-Swarling' cremation practice, southern grave inhumations, or other rites defined in East Yorkshire, south Dorset, or the far south-west (*ibid.*).

The fire damage exhibited by the Rushey Mead finds assemblage *might* be consistent with combustion in a hearth or pyre, using the cobbles and ceramics as the lining and the

organic material as the fuel. The circumstances of deposition of the charred plant remains are however uncertain; it might have occurred before, or at the time of, the burial. The pit itself clearly did not contain such a fire, or if it did, it was subsequently cleaned by enlargement, thereby removing any traces of burnt edges. Were all these items, together or separately, burned deliberately, and if so, was this part of the burial rite, or of a tidying-up process?. Also, do any or all of them bear any relationship to the lifestyle of the man whose grave pit they share? Grave goods which might be categorised as 'craft' related appear to be extremely uncommon, to judge from Whimster's data (1981). If the 'rubbish' in the Rushey Mead pit does reflect the man's occupation, then it would appear to lack parallels outside of the Pit Burial tradition, and to be comparable to few within it (*ibid.*).

The practice of destroying the grave goods before refilling the grave pit has been recorded in rich cremation burials of the 'Aylesford-Swarling' tradition (Cunliffe 1995, 68); a Late Iron Age 'Belgic' style bowl associated with a cremation at Market Harborough was thought to have been fired after breaking (LMFST 1976-7). The Scored Ware vessel sherds (illus. 7.3-4) exhibit old as well as fresh breaks, but these could have resulted from post depositional crushing rather than ritual action. A near complete Scored Ware jar was associated with a cremation on the Middle Iron Age site at Wanlip Fillingate (Marsden 1998, illus.27.39). Cremation appears to have been rare within Corieltauvian lands prior to the Roman Conquest (Beamish 1998, 28-30; Charles *et al* 2000, 159; Pelling 2000; Whimster 1981), though finds of substantially intact 'Belgic' pottery vessels such as at Thurmaston (Liddle 1975-6) and Frisby-on-the-Wreake (LMFSU 1977-8) should be considered as indicators of cremation sites.

The conventional interpretation of fragmentary material such as that recovered from the Rushey Mead site is that it is normal rubbish; this has however been challenged by Hill, who suggests ritual disposal as an alternative interpretation (1995; cf. Walker 1984, 443). Ripper (1998, 7-9) has suggested that Iron Age pottery and a loomweight may have been deliberately deposited in a pit near Wanlip Sewage Treatment Works. The Wanlip Fillingate site yielded five such 'structured deposits' (Beamish 1998, 40-1; Marsden 1998, 54).

The date of the burial relies upon the interpretation of the pottery, and of the stratification. A date range from the mid fifth century BC to the first half of the first century AD has been proposed for Scored Ware in the Soar Valley (Elsdon 1992a, Marsden 1998). The form and decoration of the small jar (illus. 7.3) place it in this tradition, as does the sherd from (5). However, the decoration on a third vessel fragment (illus. 7.4) would be equally at home alongside 'Belgic' fine wares, as in Leicester (Pollard 1994). This sherd could have been discarded as late as the third quarter of the first century AD. The jar fragment from (12) (illus. 7.5) is unlikely to be earlier than the late first century BC: the double ledge on the inside of the rim is not a Scored Ware form, but one associated with 'Belgic' coarse ware (e.g. Clamp 1985, Fig. 32.25 in calcite gritted ware, LMARS fabric CG3A; Pollard 1994, Fig. 53.52 in grog tempered GT1; Kenyon 1948, Figs. 39.8, 40.14), thought to have been adopted in Leicester no earlier than this time (Pollard 1994, 74). However, the fabric, with igneous rock inclusions, is in the Scored Ware rather than 'Belgic' coarse ware tradition; suggesting a date earlier than *c.* AD 50. Unfortunately, this piece cannot be used to provide an unquestionably late date for the burial itself.



## Conclusion

The human burial at Rushey Mead, Leicester, presents several problems of interpretation. There are aspects which conform to the southern British 'Pit Burial' tradition: the range of items in the pit has much more in common with assemblages found in southern English Pit Burials than it does with those of the south-eastern 'Aylesford-Swarling' tradition or other identified rites.

The burial probably took place within the Late Iron Age, *c.* 50 BC-AD 50, on pottery evidence, accepting the ledge rim jar as contemporary; a wider, Middle-Late Iron Age date, as early as the fourth or fifth century BC, is a possibility if this piece is from a later deposit. The narrower date range opens up the possibility of a hybridisation of the Pit Burial inhumation and Aylesford-Swarling cremation rites. The small Scored Ware jar or beaker could have been part of a 'special deposit' of 'ritual rubbish'; however, given the lack of accurate contextual information, it could also have been buried intact as an accompanying vessel, a custom present in the Aylesford-Swarling, though not in the Pit Burial, tradition. Incidences of Scored Ware as grave furniture are rare, but this may have more to do with the paucity of recorded Iron Age burials in the East Midlands than with its being viewed by contemporary society as particularly 'unsuitable' for the purpose.

The cobbles, artefacts, and charred deposits of grain and antler, as well as the pot, might also have been casually buried, or represent a 'structured deposit'. The repeated incidence of burning might, or might not, also reflect ritual. The social status of the dead man is unclear, though the artefacts in the pit indicate some association with a farming and textile producing community also engaged in antler-working. The circumstances of the excavation rendered it inevitable that the results should pose more questions than the records can answer. Nevertheless the discovery of a Middle or Late Iron Age burial represents an important contribution to the growth in understanding of the period in Leicestershire that has arisen from the examination of a number of sites in the Soar Valley and elsewhere.

## THE FINDS

Note. Full reports are housed with the Site Archive (Chapman 1996, Monckton 2000, Pollard 1998); limitations of space preclude their publication here.

### The human remains

*Simon Chapman (report written in 1996)*

The Rushey Mead skeleton represented the remains of an adult male in his 40's or 50's. This individual was relatively short (1.66m) in comparison to most specimens of this period, thus it could be suggested, albeit cautiously, that there may have been a period of nutritional stress during the period of growth of this individual. That the bones of this person were of overall light and smooth appearance, with understated muscle attachments, further suggests that this person was of fairly light build.

The general health of this individual was reasonably good; there was no evidence of bone fracture nor degenerative change due to the onset of arthropathy. The only pathological condition that had permanently marked the bone was of a fairly severe pulmonary infection, which it is suggested (due to osteoblastic reaction on the proximal ribs) led to an extended period of 'bed-rest'.

The dentition of this individual was of fairly poor appearance. The loss of several

molar teeth led to over-eruption and malocclusion of some teeth and encrustation with calculus of others. Although one carious lesion was found to be present it remains unclear as to the fate of the seven teeth that had been lost in life.

As to the cause of death, little can be certain. That the pulmonary infection was survived is however clear, since the lesions of the ribs had fully healed. That this man had reached a reasonable age for this period of history does however seem likely, and thus his death may have simply been a statistic of the natural mortality of the time.

The charred plant remains

*Angela Monckton (2000)*

### *Introduction*

Iron Age settlement sites from Leicestershire and Rutland have shown the cereals exploited but have produced mainly small numbers of remains. Late Iron Age sites include Enderby which produced only a few grains of wheat and barley and Tixover which produced a low concentration of chaff of spelt and emmer, with cereal grains and weed seeds in a rubbish deposit from a ditch (Monckton 1995). The Iron Age site at Normanton le Heath (Monckton 1994) produced few remains but extended the range of cereals to include bread wheat type grains. Middle to Late Iron Age contexts at Kirby Muxloe produced a very low concentration scatter of remains of spelt with a little emmer and barley, dominated by grains, with similar results from Enderby II from roundhouse contexts (Monckton 1995, 2000). The Middle Iron Age site at Wanlip (Monckton 1998) also produced a scatter of remains, with a few more productive samples from pits with samples dominated by grains or weed seeds but with spelt as the most common cereal. More productive Iron Age samples have been found at Humberstone (Pelling 2000) with well preserved spelt grains dated by radiocarbon.

### *Summary*

Samples from context (5) contained abundant charred cereal grains many of which were well preserved and the vast majority were of a form consistent with spelt wheat which was identified as the most abundant cereal from chaff fragments. A small number of grains of emmer and of bread wheat type were also found which compares with wheat from Gamston, Nottinghamshire (Moffett 1991). When found this deposit confirmed the use of a high proportion of spelt in this area in the Late Iron Age as at other sites in the Midlands (Greig 1991).

The high percentage of grains together with the low ratios to glumes and weed seeds (Table 1) showed that this was cleaned prime grain product (van der Veen 1992) which would only need final hand sorting before use (Hillman 1981). Because there were no signs of burning in the pit it was concluded that the grain had been burnt elsewhere before it was deposited in the pit. Other arguments against this being grain stored in the pit are that spelt is thought to have been stored in the chaff as spikelets (Hillman 1981) and, although there are a few spikelets present here, most of the chaff has been removed, also the remains differ from other attested storage pit deposits (Jones 1984). This together with the location in the Soar Valley makes underground storage unlikely, few storage pits being known from the region because of unsuitable ground conditions and the high water table on the alluvial flood plains (Knight 1984, 100-117).

Charred cereals are often found on occupation sites because they come into contact

Table 1: Charred Plant Macrofossils from a Late Iron Age pit (context 5) at Rushey Mead, Leicester

Sample No. Context (5)	1.1 Top	1.2 Top	2.1 Base	2.2 Base	
<b>GRAINS</b>					
<i>Triticum cf dicoccum</i>	19	7	-	3	Emmer
<i>Triticum cf spelta</i>	375	149	96	79	Spelt
<i>Triticum cf aestivum</i>	11	7	3	3	Bread wheat type
<i>Triticum spelta</i> L.	124	74	47	69	Spelt
<i>Triticum spelta</i> (grain in sf)	10	6	2	4	Spelt
<i>Triticum dicoccum/spelta</i>	19	34	196	96	Emmer/Spelt
<i>Triticum</i> sp. (germinated)	4	1	-	-	Wheat
<i>Triticum</i> sp. (tail grains)	12	8	5	5	Wheat
Cereal indet.	137	93	62	75	Cereal
<i>Hordeum vulgare</i> L.	2	-	-	3	Barley
<i>Avena</i> sp.	19	10	-	2	Oat
Cereal embryos	-	4	-	1	Cereal
<b>CHAFF</b>					
<i>Triticum cf dicoccum</i> (gl)	-	1	-	-	Emmer
<i>Triticum spelta</i> L. (sf)	38	15	5	4	Spelt
<i>Triticum spelta</i> L. (gl)	83	36	11	10	Spelt
<i>Triticum cf spelta</i> (gl)	27	12	1	1	Spelt
<i>T. dicoccum/spelta</i> (sf)	19	31	26	15	Emmer/Spelt
<i>T. dicoccum/spelta</i> (gl)	28	60	62	29	Emmer/Spelt
<i>Triticum dicoccum/spelta</i> rachis	8	4	3	2	Wheat
<i>Hordeum vulgare</i> L. rachis	1	-	-	1	Barley
Culm node large	-	-	1	-	Cereal stem
<b>SEEDS</b>					
<i>Chenopodium album</i> L.	2	9	7	8	Fat-hen
<i>Chenopodium</i> sp	1	2	1	2	Goosefoot
<i>Atriplex</i> sp	-	2	-	-	Orache
<i>Persicaria</i> sp	1	1	-	-	Persicaria
<i>Polygonum aviculare</i> L.	-	1	1	1	Knotgrass
<i>Medicago</i> type	-	1	-	5	Medick type
<i>Veronica hederifolia</i> L.	-	1	-	-	Ivy-leaved speedwell
<i>Danthonia decumbens</i> (L.) DC.	1	1	-	1	Heath grass
<i>Bromus hordeaceus/secalinus</i>	31	33	13	8	Brome grass
Poaceae large	20	17	7	13	Grasses
Poaceae small	3	2	-	1	Grasses
Indetermined seeds	1	3	1	2	Seeds
TOTAL	997	625	550	346	(Items)
Vol sample	8	8	9	10	(Litres)
Vol flot	180	110	64	60	(mls) 25% sorted
Items/litre	499	312	245	185	(Items/litre)
<b>PROPORTIONS OF REMAINS</b>					
GRAINS	68	57	70	73	%
GLUMES	25	31	24	17	%
SEEDS	8	13	6	10	%
<b>RATIOS OF REMAINS</b>					
Glumes : Wheat grains	0.38	0.48	0.34	0.24	
Seeds : Total grains	0.11	0.24	0.08	0.02	

Key. (gl) = glume base, (sf) = spikelet fork. Totals are from 25% of both flot and residue.

with fire during their processing. Spelt, like emmer, is a hulled wheat which requires parching and pounding to remove the grains from the chaff before use, this could be done in batches as required and it is possible that this batch of grain was accidentally burnt near the end of processing for consumption. It is however possible that the grain was burnt deliberately for some other reason such as being spoiled, although such evidence may not always be apparent in charred material. The relationship of this deposit with the skeleton was uncertain but as burnt antler and bone were found in these samples as well as in the layer above the skeleton it seems likely that the charred grain is part of the backfill of the pit. Charred cereals have been found with Iron Age burials as at Danebury (Cunliffe 1986) and the cereals here may be associated with the burial, however it is possible that the charred grain is simply rubbish incorporated into the fill of the pit.

If the late Iron Age date suggested by the pottery is accurate this well-sealed deposit provides evidence of the high proportion of spelt in use at this time. A very small amount of barley was also present. The deposit is unusual in being the only survival of a large group of grains from the prehistoric or Roman periods known from the county at present.

#### The vertebrate remains

*Umberto Albarella (January 1997)*

A dozen antler fragments were found in context (4). Although they could come from either fallow deer (*Dama dama*) or from red deer (*Cervus elephus*), they almost certainly belong to the latter species, as there is no evidence of the introduction of the fallow deer in Britain before Roman times. All fragments are burnt and two of them bear clear saw marks. The irregularity of the sawn surfaces suggest that a poor quality tool had been used. This small assemblage also included a sheep tooth and tibia fragment. The tibia was also burnt.

A further fragment of burnt antler with the same type of saw marks was found in the sample from context (5) together with a second antler fragment, a few indeterminate bone fragments and some mouse-sized mammal bone fragments which may be intrusive.

#### The ceramic objects

*Richard Pollard (December 1998)*

##### *Loomweights* (illus. 7.1)

One complete triangular loomweight, and six fragments of at least one other, were recovered, unstratified. The former has been burned on one face, leading to oxidation along one edge, and reduction on the face itself, the latter resulting in crumbling of the body. The fabric is very coarse sandy. The fragments are also partly reduced, and in the same basic fabric as the complete piece. This is the characteristic form of Iron Age loomweights in Britain. Recent finds from Leicestershire include examples from Enderby (Clay 1992, Fig. 30.7), Wanlip (Ripper 1998) and Desford (Browning 1998).

##### *Fired clay fragments* (illus. 7.2)

The layer of burnt cobbles (2) included a large fragment of a clay block. Two joining fragments were recorded in section prior to excavation of Trench 4, and certainly lay above (7) and the burial. Thirteen similar fragments were recovered from (3).

The largest fragment, (illus. 7.2) is rectilinear in shape. The joining pieces give minimum dimensions of 196mm long x 125mm thick x 118mm wide. A groove runs the length of the block. This has a minimum diameter of 20mm, flaring at the end to

65mm. It is not known whether it ran the full length of the block or whether it was open above or formed a perforation enclosed within the block. The groove is roughly formed, in contrast with the smooth bore of the loomweights' holes. There is no obvious sign of wear, but the relatively soft, sandy fabric might simply have crumbled away if subjected to abrasion. The groove might even have been unintentional, although the flaring end suggests otherwise.

The clay is very coarse sandy, oxidised and friable, though undoubtedly fired, not simply sun-dried. One long side has been refired in a reducing atmosphere, leading to crumbling of the fabric.

The fired clay artefacts from Dragonby were divided into several categories, including daub, oven remains, slabs, and loomweights (Barford 1996; May 1996, 327-343). The Rushey Mead block does not find close parallels in any of these. The fabric would seem too friable to withstand prolonged exposure, which would rule out use as 'thatch weights' (cf. Elsdon and Barford 1996, 332). An industrial function seems a possibility, perhaps as kiln furniture. The flared groove or perforation might simply have facilitated the block's even firing, if it was pre-fired. A variety of portable pedestals has been recorded in late Iron Age to first century AD contexts in the East Midlands, although none of those described by Swan (1984, 59-62) quite matches the Rushey Mead block. The flaring recess in the end of the latter might have accommodated a fire bar with a hooked end, examples of which are known from the mid first century onwards in Northamptonshire and elsewhere (*ibid.*, 64). Weighed against the pedestal theory must be the lack of a 'foot' end, without which the block, stood upright, would be somewhat unstable; Nene Valley examples generally are expanded at both ends.

#### *Pottery* (illus. 7.3-5)

(illus. 7.3). East Midlands Scored Ware. 7 joining sherds, unstratified. The vessel is coil built, with a partly sooted exterior leading to localised reduction. The fabric is LMARS SW1 (Pollard 1994, 73) broadly comparable to ULAS Q1 (Marsden 1998, 45). The closest parallel at Enderby is Form 1 (Elsdon 1992b; e.g. nos.19, 29). The scored decoration is shallow (*ibid.*, Decoration Type 2).

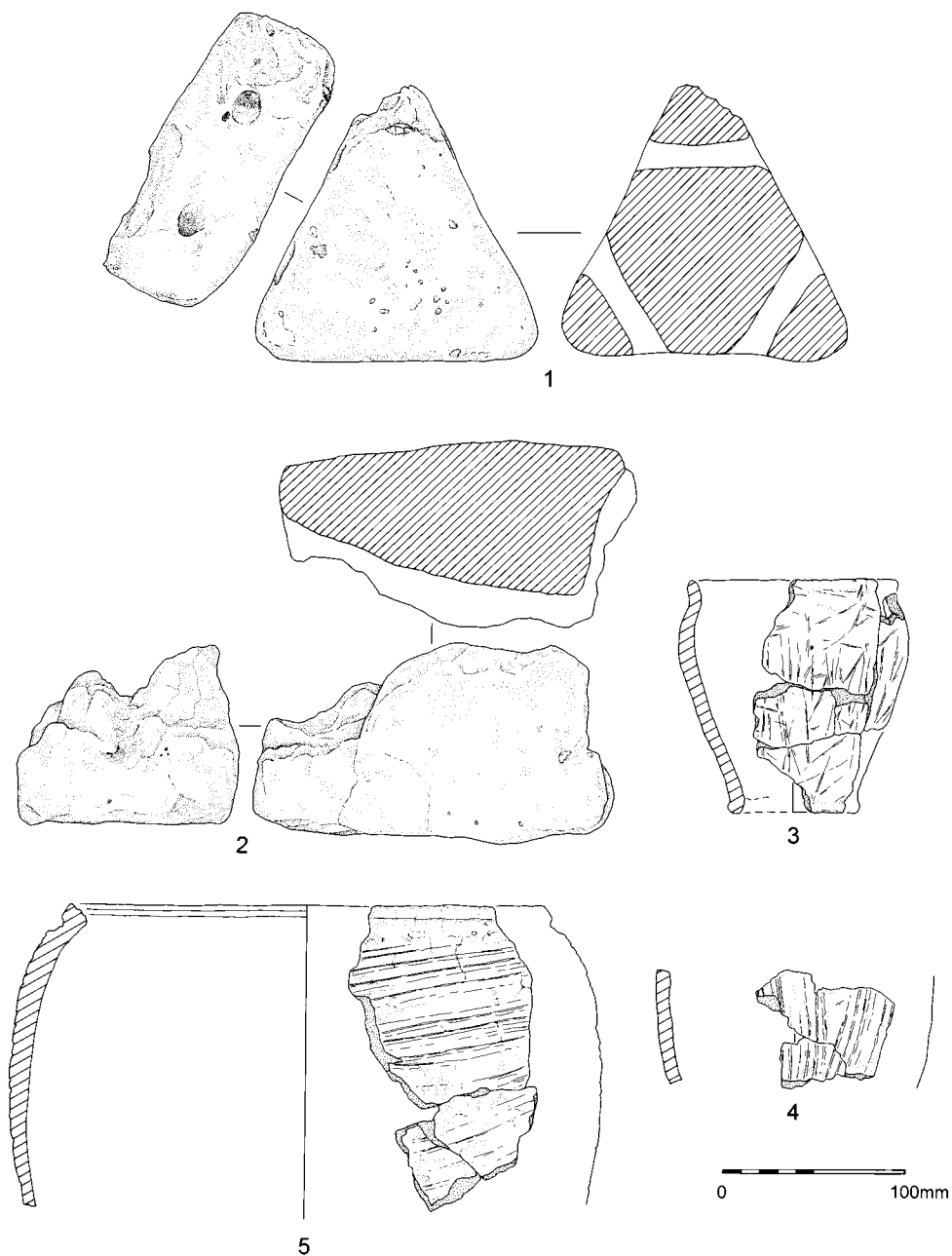
(illus. 7.4) Scored Ware? 3 joining sherds, unstratified. LMARS SW1 (c.f. ULAS Q1). Reduced; the scoring is deep and confined to vertical or oblique strokes. Probably coil built.

Not illustrated. Scored Ware. 1 sherd from coarse fraction extracted from charred plant remains sample taken from (5). Fabric cf. ULAS Q2 (Marsden 1998, 45). Cross hatch scoring.

(illus. 7.5) 'Belgic'/Scored Ware hybrid style. 2 sherds from (12). Fabric is LMARS MC4 (Pollard 1994, 73), comparable to ULAS RQ1 (Marsden 1998, 45). Pink buff, but with localised reduction of exterior and core leaving only the internal margin and surface oxidised. This reduction is along a sherd break, though it is unclear whether it took place before or after breakage.

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7. The Ceramic Finds. Scale  $\frac{1}{4}$ .

ULAS: illus. 5), to all of whom a debt of gratitude is owed. The project was managed by the author. The finds and archive are with LCMS, accession number L.A101.1995.

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