A MIDDLE IRON AGE SETTLEMENT AT HILLTOP FARM, MELTON MOWBRAY

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with contributions from:
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Oxford Archaeology excavated a middle Iron Age settlement at Hilltop Farm, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire. An initial phase comprising a boundary ditch, with adjoining rectilinear enclosures, was superseded by a settlement situated within a square-ditched enclosure, which contained a sub-enclosure and evidence for a single roundhouse. Unusually, the enclosure had its entrance at the corner and was linked to a trackway by means of a short, ditched passageway. Evidence for the farming regime that was practised here was limited due to the small size of the animal bone and charred plant remains assemblages, but the community evidently cultivated both wheat and barley, and reared sheep/goats and cattle – with smaller numbers of horses and pigs. The excavation produced a moderately large pottery assemblage that belongs to the Scored Ware tradition, dated to the third to first centuries BC, and radiocarbon dates were obtained with ranges of 365–200 cal BC and 360–120 cal BC (at 95 per cent confidence). The latter date came from a human skull fragment that was recovered from the enclosure ditch, and which may be evidence for the deliberate manipulation and ultimate deposition of defleshed human remains within the settlement. Two quernstones placed at opposite corners of a subsidiary enclosure adjoining the trackway, one of them associated with a jar that was apparently smashed *in situ*, may also represent evidence for ritual deposition. A single pit of Roman or later date was also recorded.

INTRODUCTION

Oxford Archaeology (OA) excavated a middle Iron Age settlement in advance of a residential development within a former pasture field at Hilltop Farm, St Barthomolew's Way, at the north-western edge of Melton Mowbray (SK 7405 2105; Fig. 1). The settlement enclosure had originally been identified by a geophysical survey, and a trial-trench evaluation by University of Leicester Archaeological Services had confirmed its Iron Age date (Stratascan 2015; ULAS 2016a). The main phase of excavation was undertaken between August and October 2018, with the exception of a limited zone at the north-western corner of the area, which could not be stripped until the removal of overhead power lines in October 2019. The field was relatively flat, with a gentle slope down towards the south, from 125m above Ordnance Datum (aOD) at the site's northern boundary to a lowest elevation of 120m aOD. The underlying solid geology is mapped as mudstone of the Charmouth Formation, which is overlain by diamicton belonging to the Oadby Member.

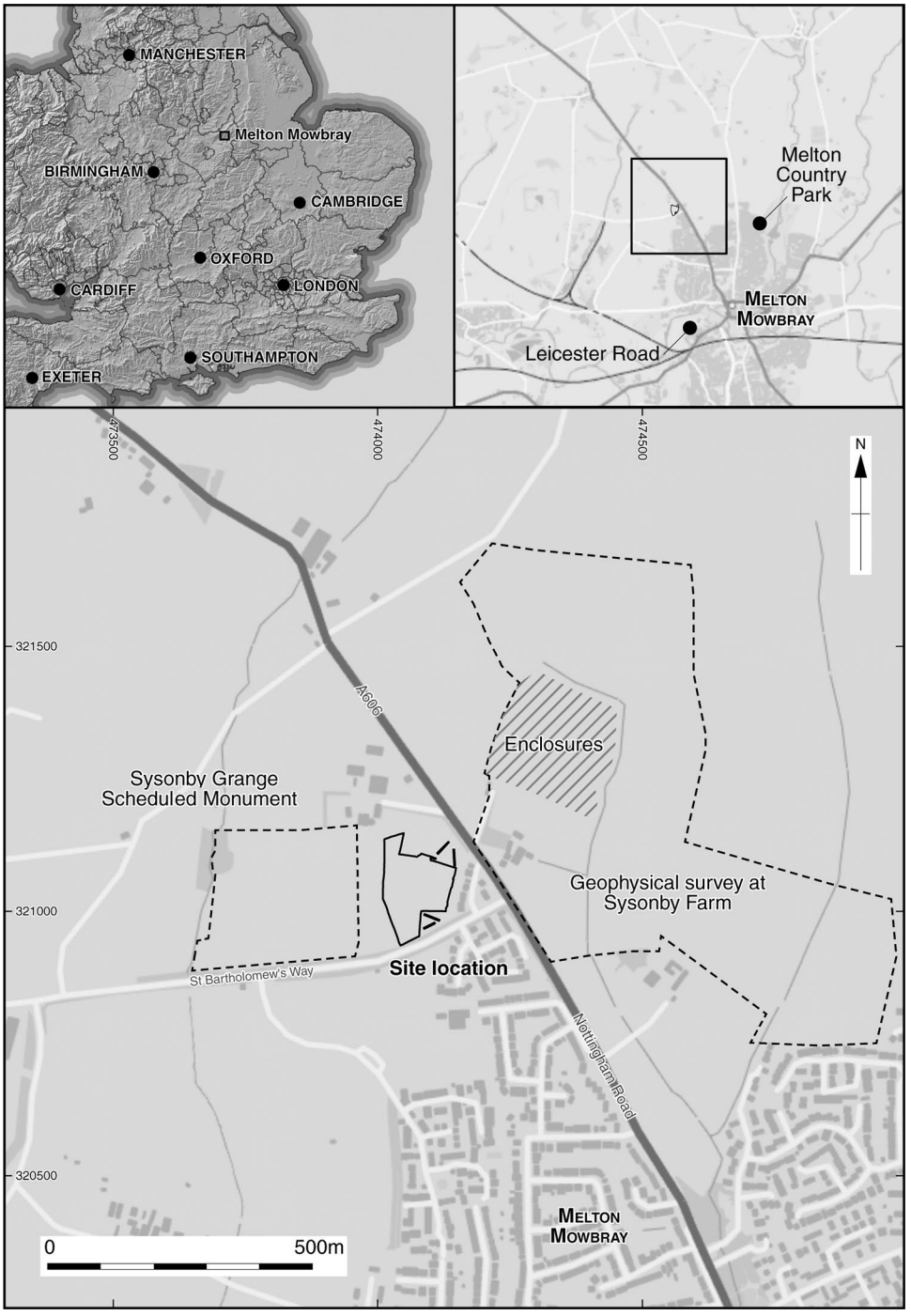

Fig. 1. Site location.

Several sites of comparable date have been identified as a result of development on the fringes of Melton Mowbray (Fig. 1), including a group of enclosures revealed by a geophysical survey on the north side of Sysonby Farm, a little over 200m north-east of the site (ULAS 2014), and a Roman settlement with possible Iron Age origins that was excavated at Melton Country Park (Beamish 1990). Geophysical survey, trial-trenching and excavation on land off Leicester Road has identified a Beaker Period pit, extensive Iron Age settlement and a rectilinear enclosure of middle to late Roman date (ULAS 2016b; Allen and Champness this volume). Earthworks of the medieval Sysonby Grange, a farm that belonged to the Cistercian Abbey of Garendon, Loughborough, occupy the field immediately to the west of the site and are a Scheduled Monument (List Entry 1016317), but do not extend into the field where the excavation was undertaken.

This report presents the main results of the excavation. A full report, including detailed specialist data, is available through the OA Library at https://library.thehumanjourney.net/5780. The documentary and finds archive will be deposited with Leicestershire Museums under accession code X.A83.2018 and the digital archive will be deposited with the Archaeological Data Service.

EXCAVATION RESULTS

Three phases of activity were identified on the basis of stratigraphic relationships, spatial associations and dates provided by pottery and two radiocarbon determinations (Fig. 2). The first two phases, comprising a boundary ditch and rectilinear enclosures (Phase 1) superseded by an enclosed settlement (Phase 2), were both assigned to the middle Iron Age, while Phase 3, which consisted of a single pit, was of Roman or later date.

Phase 1 (Middle Iron Age)

The earliest features comprised a ditch (137) that followed an approximate east–west alignment across the site, with a rectilinear arrangement of ditched enclosures adjoining its north side in the north-western part of the site. The ditch extended for a distance of more than 130m and was 0.45–0.78m wide, but only 0.10–0.22m deep. A large group of pottery (98 sherds, 861g) from two vessels of middle Iron Age date (Fig. 4.1) was recovered from an intervention near the western end. Ditch 101 was similarly shallow and, with ditch 1018, enclosed two sides of a rectilinear area measuring 50m north–south and more than 25m east–west. Within the area thus enclosed was a smaller rectangular enclosure (310), *c.*15m from north to south, which likewise abutted the north side of ditch 137.

Phase 2 (Middle Iron Age)

Main enclosure 312

Ditch 137 was overlain by a roughly square enclosure that measured 75m × 70m. The enclosure appeared to have been constructed in two phases, since the east side

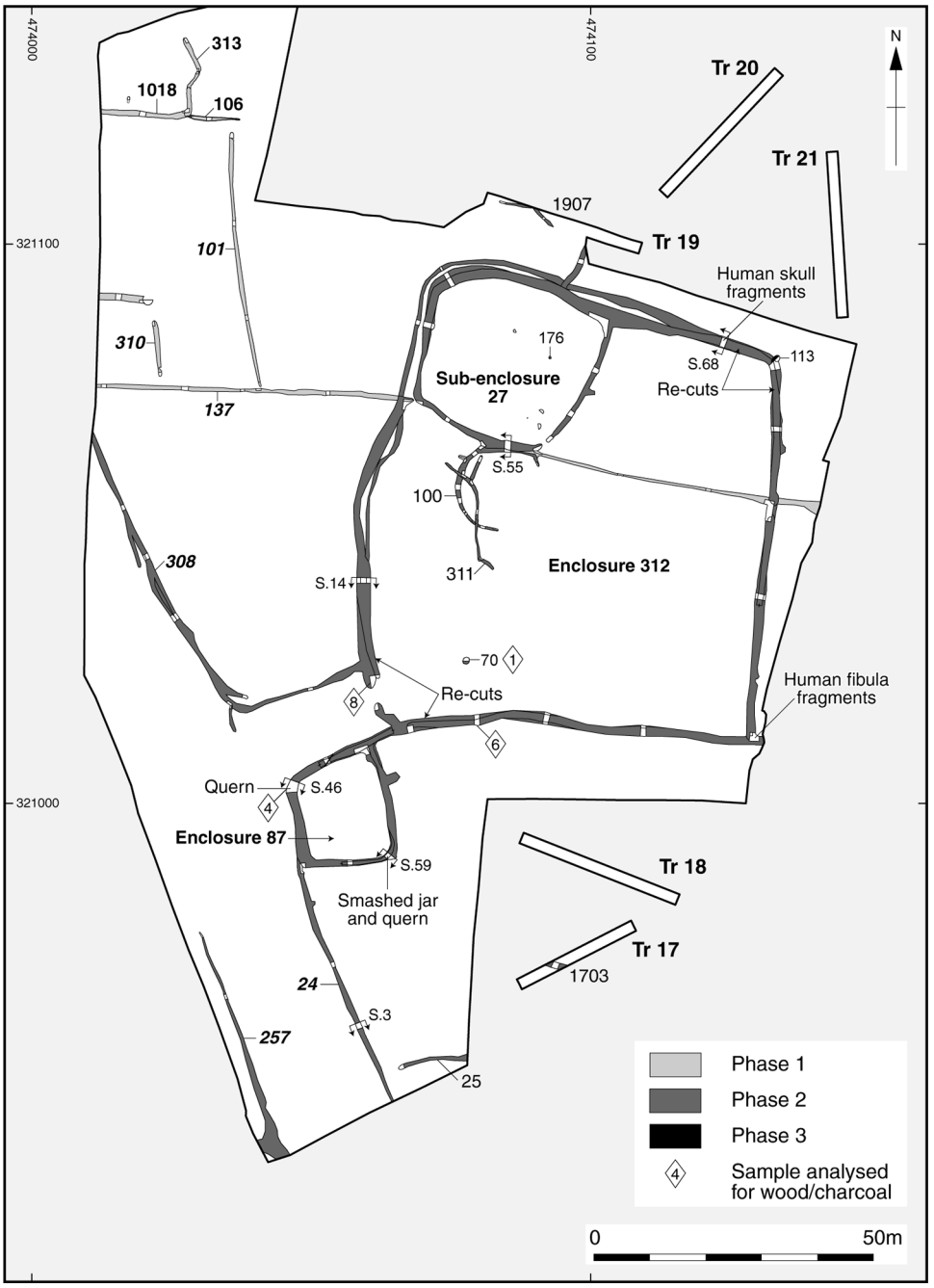

Fig. 2. Plan of all features.

was recorded as cutting the south side at the south-eastern corner. The south ditch, which appeared to continue beyond the south-eastern corner of the enclosure, may therefore have been a pre-existing boundary that was utilised in the construction of the enclosure. The enclosure ditch was up to 1.9m wide and 0.9m deep, and formed a single circuit that was complete except for the break that formed an entrance at the south-west corner (Fig. 3, Sections 14 and 68). Typically, only the lower fill of the original ditch survived later recutting. A single episode of recutting was recorded throughout the entire circuit and comprised a ditch that was significantly narrower, typically between 0.8–1.2m wide and no more than 0.4m deep. The recutting of the ditch was accompanied by a significant re-organisation of the enclosure, with sub-enclosure 27 being inserted into the north-western corner and the western boundary south of this being recut as a discrete ditch that was not physically joined to the rest of the circuit. The pottery recovered from the recut ditch included a notable group of 35 sherds from five vessels, recovered from the north side in an upper fill (250) that also contained two human parietal fragments from an older juvenile or adult individual, together with a significant quantity of animal bone including sheep, cattle, pig and horse – some of them certainly butchered and some burnt. The

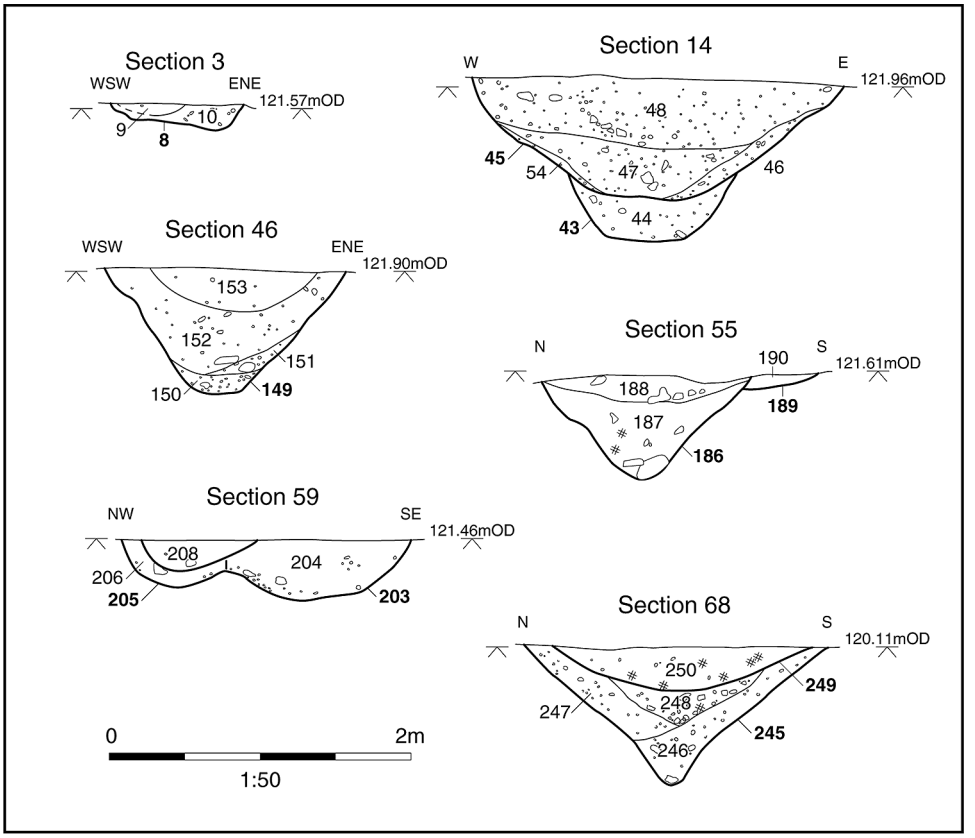

Fig. 3. Selected sections.

human skull fragment returned a radiocarbon date range of 360–120 cal BC (95 per cent confidence: SUERC-85194; 2170 bp ± 26). In addition to this, 16 fragments from a single human fibula were recovered from a soil sample collected from the south-eastern corner of the enclosure. The enclosure was accessed at the south-west corner via a ditched entrance passage that was 11.5m wide and extended for *c.*20m. At the inner end of the passageway the terminals of the enclosure ditches defined an entrance *c.*3m wide. Between the ditch terminals the natural boulder clay appeared noticeably worn and a slight hollow had formed.

Within the enclosure was a single penannular gully (100) that was probably part of the original layout of the enclosure, since it was cut by sub-enclosure 27, which was contemporary with the recutting of the enclosure ditch. The gully was sub-circular, with a diameter of *c.*13.7m, and was open on the east side, most likely as a result of truncation given its shallow depth at this point. No internal or other associated features were found, although it is probable that the ditch formed part of a roundhouse whose eastern extent, and therefore any entrance, did not survive.

Sub-enclosure 27

When the main enclosure ditch was recut, a small sub-square enclosure was inserted within the north-west corner, defined by a ditch that was integral to the recut ditch on the north side of the main enclosure. The sub-enclosure measured *c.*28m × 29m, and its ditch was steep-sided and varied from 0.66–1.64m in width and between 0.22m and 0.92m deep, cutting the northern extent of penannular gully 100 (Fig. 3, Section 55). There was a narrow gap, *c.*1.1m wide, on its south-east corner, allowing access from the main enclosure. The ditch was fairly rich in middle Iron Age pottery, animal bone and worked flint. Several small, very shallow circular pits were recorded within the sub-enclosure and may have been post-holes, although there were not enough to define any coherent building plans and only one (176) produced any artefactual material, comprising a single sherd of middle Iron Age pottery.

Other features within the enclosure

Few other features were identified within the main enclosure, although an irregular ditch (311), only 0.09m deep, cut across penannular gully 100 on an approximate north–south alignment. It had a spur ditch projecting from its north side (197) that apparently terminated *c.*2m south of enclosure 27 and appears to have been a later addition. A large pit (70), 1.24m in diameter and 0.3m deep, was located close to the entrance to the enclosure, and contained a large amount of animal bone and two charcoal-rich fills suggestive of deliberate deposition. Several small sherds of middle Iron Age pottery were also recovered from its lower fill.

Trackway

Ditches 24 and 308, which defined the entrance to enclosure 312, splayed outward at their south-western end to form a linear boundary aligned north-west to south-east. Ditch 257, which was parallel to the south-west, may have been contemporary with this boundary and defined a trackway *c.*19m wide. The ditches were generally very shallow and often poorly defined, with widths varying from 0.5–1.65m with depths of 0.13–0.36m (Fig. 3, Section 3). Ditch 257 was particularly insubstantial

and survived to maximum dimensions of only 0.25m wide and 0.04m deep, and the apparent terminus at its north end is probably the result of later truncation. There was some evidence for a recut of ditch 308, and later truncation may have removed similar evidence elsewhere.

Enclosure 87

Situated within the junction of the trackway and the entranceway into the main enclosure was a small sub-rectangular enclosure, measuring 18.6m × 15m. It was formed by a ditch 1.2–1.5m wide that had a concave profile and was up to 0.68m deep (Fig. 3, Sections 46 and 59). There was no apparent entrance into the enclosure. A jar that appeared to have been broken *in situ* was recovered from its south-east corner (Fig. 4.2). Charred residue adhering to the outside of the vessel, underneath the rim, was radiocarbon dated to 365–200 cal BC (95 per cent confidence: SUERC-85193; 2213 ± 20). A complete lower stone from a rotary quern was recovered from a middle fill (152) of the opposite, north-western corner of the enclosure (Fig. 5.1). The unusual character of these deposits compared to the small and fragmented assemblages from elsewhere on the site, and the apparently deliberate choice of location, suggests that both may have been deliberately placed.

The enclosure ditch was recut on at least one occasion on its north, south and east sides, forming a slightly smaller feature. No evidence for a recut was found along its west side, although it is possible that the single surviving phase of ditch on this side was in fact the recut and had completely truncated the original ditch. Part of the upper stone from a beehive quern, which had been re-used as a hone (Fig. 5.2), was recovered from the south-east corner of the recut ditch (208; Fig. 3, Section 59). This second quernstone was located directly above the smashed jar within the original cut of the ditch and may likewise have been deliberately placed.

Other boundary ditches

There was some evidence for other boundaries defined by ditches around the main enclosure, perhaps representing associated fields and paddocks. Ditch 1907 appears to form part of a possible small sub-rectangular enclosure abutting the north side of enclosure 312. Its relationship with the main enclosure was not established by excavation, but in plan it appeared to post-date the original enclosure ditch, and it was therefore possibly contemporary with the recutting of the enclosure and the construction of sub-enclosure 27.

Shallow, east–west ditch 25 was aligned perpendicular to the trackway, south of the main enclosure. The terminal at its west end lay *c.*2.8m from trackway ditch 24, suggesting that it was laid out respecting the trackway and that the two formed part of a contemporary arrangement. A second more substantial ditch (1703), 0.85m wide and 0.35m deep, was recorded further east within Evaluation Trench 17, but lay on a more irregular north-west to south-east alignment and did not extend into the main excavation area. Both ditches contained middle Iron Age pottery, the latter also containing a small quantity of fired clay, probably from an oven or hearth structure.

Phase 3 (Roman or later)

Oval pit 113 cut the north-east corner of enclosure 312, and measured 1.98m wide and 0.48m deep. It contained frequent large fragments of stone and a single sherd of Samian ware pottery dated to AD 120–150. The sherd was highly abraded, which could suggest that it is residual and the pit of later date.

POTTERY

Alex Davies

The excavation produced 439 sherds of predominantly middle Iron Age pottery weighing 3,110g. The assemblage belongs to the Scored Ware (Breedon-Ancaster) tradition, which predominantly dates to the middle Iron Age, beginning probably in the fourth or possibly even the fifth century BC (Elsdon 1996, 2; Knight 2002, 134). A single sherd of Samian ware and a single nineteenth-century sherd were the only other pottery recovered.

Some 59 sherds were decorated by scoring, encompassing six of the nine fabrics identified. Shell was the predominant inclusion in the majority of the fabrics, accounting for 71 per cent of the sherds and 77 per cent of the pottery by weight, with quartz sand, quartzite, grog and chalk present in smaller quantities. This dominance of shell temper concords with the general pattern for Scored Ware in the county, wherein the western and central parts are dominated by granite with sand, and the eastern part by shell (Percival 2012, 85). Comparison of the fabrics with other sites in the locality is consistent with a middle/late Iron Age date, although fabrics cannot be easily used to refine the date within this period.

Only a single vessel, from the recut of the main enclosure ditch, has clear late Iron Age characteristics. The remaining forms all find parallels at Manor Farm and Elms Farm, Humberstone, and at Hallam Fields, all *c.*18km south-west of the site (Charles *et al.* 2000; Thomas 2008; Speed 2009). Manor Farm and Hallam Fields have suites of modelled radiocarbon dates, with activity at Hallam Fields beginning 450–220 cal BC and ending 360–130 cal BC (95 per cent confidence; Hamilton 2009); probably starting 410–270 cal BC and ending 290–180 cal BC (68 per cent confidence). Manor Farm has a longer, slightly later focus, beginning 520–260 cal BC and ending 40 cal BC–cal AD 110 (95 per cent confidence; Hamilton 2008); probably starting 440–320 cal BC and ending 40 cal BC–al AD 20 (68 per cent confidence). However, only two of the 13 radiocarbon dates could date after 50 BC, suggesting that the majority of the activity pre-dates the mid-first century BC. Unlike Manor Farm and Hallam Fields, the assemblage entirely lacks vessels with pronounced shoulders that are influenced by the preceding early Iron Age traditions. Instead, all the recognisable forms are either round-bodied or slack-shouldered. This finds close parallel with the phase 2–3 assemblage from Enderby (Elsdon 1992), and the 'coarse' pottery from ceramic phase 1 from Weekley (Jackson and Dix 1986–87, 73–7). This phase at Weekley preceded the advent of 'Belgic' pottery at the site and was associated with five radiocarbon dates overlapping in the first century BC to early first century AD (*ibid.*, 49), although these dates should be treated with caution (Knight 2002, 132).

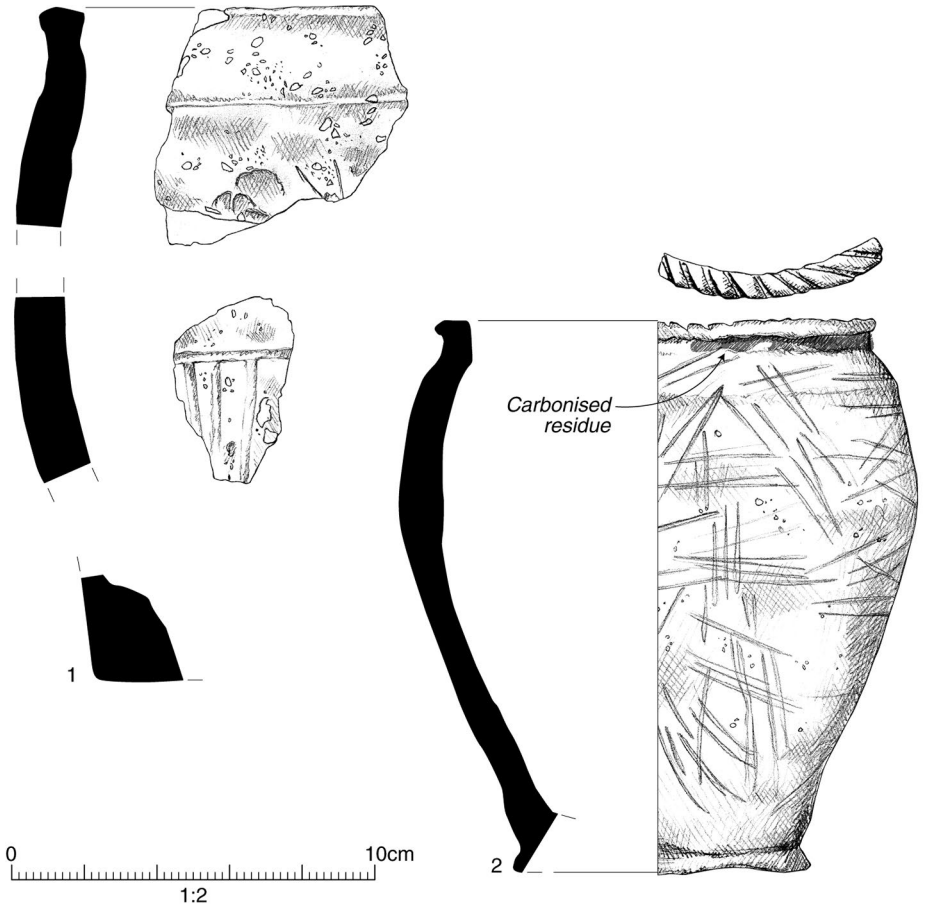

Fig. 4. Middle Iron Age pottery: 1. Scored Ware jar with slack shoulder and short upright neck with light random all-over scoring, from Phase 1 ditch 137; 2. Round-bodied Scored Ware jar with diagonal slashes across rim, from Phase 2 enclosure ditch 87.

Overall, the assemblage appears to predominantly date in the mid–late part of the middle Iron Age and possibly into the late Iron Age. This equates to somewhere in the third or second centuries BC, possibly continuing as late as the first century BC, and accords with the later part of the ranges of the two radiocarbon dates.

OTHER FINDS

Ruth Shaffrey, Michael Donnelly and Cynthia Poole

The complete lower quern and half an upper quern, recovered from opposing corners of the ditch of enclosure 87, are beehive querns of typical Hunsbury form. The lower stone has steep, conical sides with a flat grinding surface (Fig. 5.1), while the upper stone has steep sides with a cup-shaped hopper and a rectangular handle

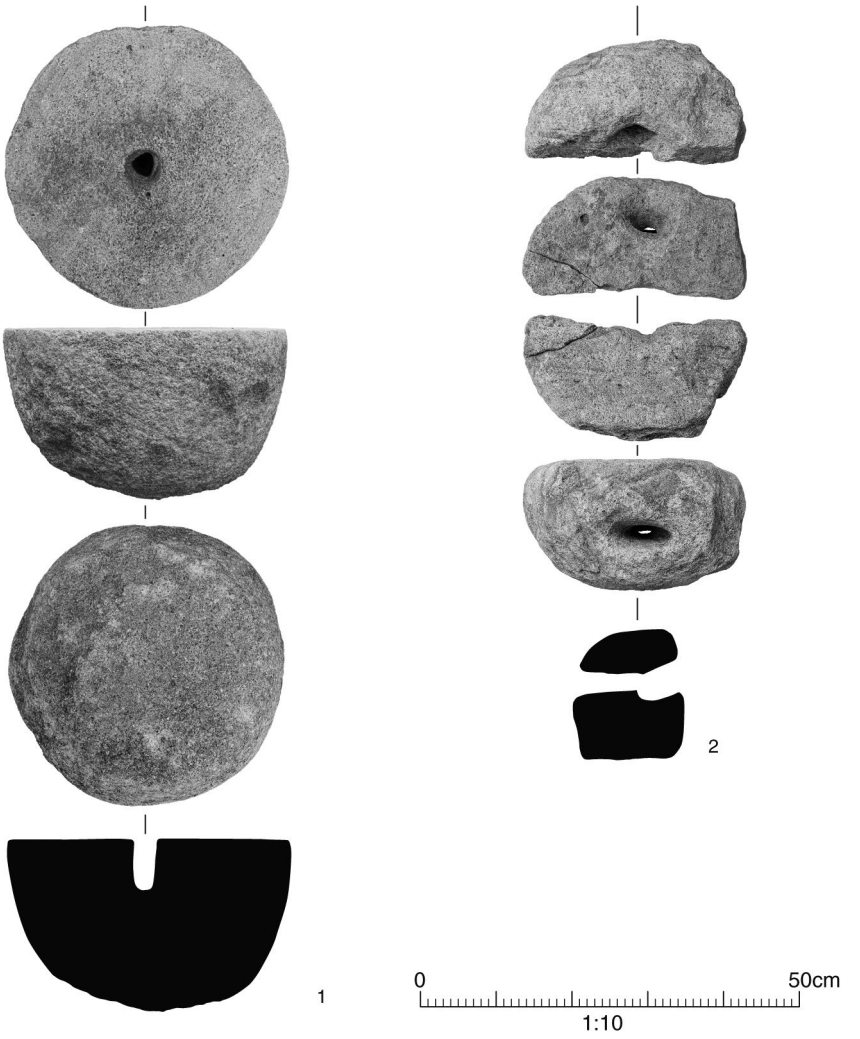

Fig. 5. Rotary querns from enclosure 87: 1. Lower quernstone, from the north-west corner of the enclosure; 2. Upper stone from a beehive quern, from the south-east corner.

socket that pierces the hopper (Fig. 5.2). The lower stone was made from coarse-grained Millstone Grit whilst the upper stone is made from a coarse sandstone – probably the same material.

The assemblage of 39 struck flints includes a very minor early prehistoric component, one fine-backed knife of early Bronze Age or late Neolithic date, and flake debitage typical of later prehistoric knapping. The latter material included several very squat forms that were hard-hammer struck, with simple plain or cortical platforms that are very typical of middle–late Bronze Age or later industries. These flakes could be Iron Age in date, but identifying such industries is contentious and

Iron Age knapping is usually assigned to the early part of the period rather than the middle Iron Age (Saville 1981; Humphreys and Young 1999; McLaren 2008).

The small assemblage of 37 fragments (170g) of fired clay was poorly preserved but included fragments very likely derived from triangular perforated bricks, which are the commonest portable fired clay items at this period, as well as three fragments (53g) from ditch 1007 that had interwoven wattle impressions.

ANIMAL BONE

Ian Smith

The animal bone assemblage, mostly recovered from Phase 2 features, comprises 2,632 hand-collected fragments and 663 fragments from sieved samples, and is dominated by the remains of domesticated stock, principally sheep/goat, cattle, horse and pig. The assemblage, in common with several other Iron Age assemblages from the region, is notable for the marked differences in the frequencies of cattle versus sheep according to the method of quantification, and whether the hand-collected or sieved data is used. Specifically, the minimum number of individuals (MNI) indicates that numbers of sheep/goat and cattle were more or less equal, with the latter perhaps slightly more numerous, whereas when quantified by the number of identified specimens (NISP) there are roughly twice as many sheep/goat as cattle. Arguably the real ratio probably falls somewhere between the two figures (Reitz and Wing 1999, 202), but the amalgamation of different methods is problematic. There is very little evidence that can be used to construct age profiles for the domestic stock, and this limits what can be projected regarding animal husbandry and the agricultural economy, although limited tooth fusion evidence for the cattle might tentatively suggest that a proportion of cattle were only killed once they had reached prime meat-bearing age. There are 42 butchered or possibly butchered parts, including cattle and sheep/goat, as well as cattle metapodial parts that may have been heated prior to splitting for the extraction of marrow.

Antler from red deer was recovered from sub-enclosure 27, but the fragments may relate to very few (perhaps even a single) shed antler. The brow tine is worked, apparently rather crudely, with multiple encircling incisions 30–50mm from the burr. Debris from antler working is an occasional find on Iron Age sites in the region, including a single large deposit of red deer antler within an enclosure ditch at Humberstone (Browning 2008, 66), and a complete shed red deer antler and cut antler tines that were recovered from late Iron Age pits on a settlement site at Earls Barton (Deighton 2005, 23).

HUMAN BONE

Lauren McIntyre

Human remains were recovered from two locations within the main enclosure ditch, comprising fragments of skull from the northern side of the enclosure and 16 pieces from an unsided fibula from a soil sample taken at the south-eastern corner. The

skull fragments comprise two pieces from the same unsided parietal bone, separated by a clearly post-mortem break. They are of a size and thickness consistent with those of an older juvenile or adult. The larger parietal fragment exhibits a shallow, oval-shaped depressed lesion measuring *c.*11.2mm long, 3.9mm wide and less than 1mm deep, which may represent an old, well-healed depressed cranial fracture. Such fractures are often the result of high-velocity impact by a small object, which may or may not fully penetrate the skull (Galloway and Wedel 1999, 136–9). The fibula fragments are robust, with the size and thickness consistent with those of an adult.

CHARRED PLANT REMAINS AND WOOD CHARCOAL

Julia Meen

Fourteen bulk sediment samples were taken during the course of the excavation. Charred plant remains were limited to grains of wheat and barley in several samples, but the grain density was never greater than one grain per litre of processed sediment and often far less, suggesting these remains derive from background activity. However, charcoal was present in all samples and four samples from the main enclosure ditch, subsidiary enclosure 87 and pit 70 were selected for full analysis (Fig. 2). The results suggest that they represent discrete deposits including concentrations of field maple charcoal, mixed oak and willow charcoal, and two instances of hawthorn/blackthorn/cherry charcoal – possibly pointing to a deliberate selection of different fuelwood for different purposes.

DISCUSSION

The remains pertain almost exclusively to an episode of settlement and agricultural activity during the middle Iron Age, the only evidence for earlier activity comprising a small quantity of worked flint that occurred as residual material in later features and in the subsoil, including pieces of Mesolithic/early Neolithic and late Neolithic/early Bronze Age date.

The middle Iron Age activity comprised two distinct phases of activity that appear to have been of distinctly different character, although they were evidently not far separated in time, since the pottery was to all intents and purposes identical.

The Phase 1 boundaries

In contrast to the enclosed settlement of Phase 2, the Phase 1 features are likely to be agricultural boundaries. Ditch 137, which extended across the width of the excavation area and to east and west beyond, was evidently a significant feature of the landscape; it is significant that subsidiary boundaries were present only on the north side, suggesting that it may have functioned as a boundary between areas in different use or in different tenure. There was no definite evidence regarding the function of the enclosures that adjoined its northern side, and despite the presence of a deposit of sherds from two vessels in ditch 137, assemblages of pottery and animal bone were generally small and characteristic of incidental inclusion, rather

than proximity to domestic activity or deliberate disposal of refuse. Nevertheless, the enclosures clearly did not lie in isolation and a settlement of some form associated with them is likely to be situated somewhere close by. The absence of features to the south of ditch 137 may indicate this was an area of open ground, perhaps used as pasture.

The Phase 2 settlement

The enclosed settlement that succeeded the earlier boundaries in Phase 2 is characteristic of the small farmsteads that formed the most common element of the landscape of lowland Britain during the middle Iron Age, although unenclosed examples also occur. Due to their size and the range and quantity of facilities with which they are equipped, they are typically, and not unreasonably, interpreted as the farms of discrete family groups. The recovery of refuse in the form of pottery and animal bone (some of it butchered), and the presence of a penannular gully that most likely represents the location of a roundhouse, leave little doubt regarding the domestic character of the occupation within the enclosure at Hilltop Farm. Despite the evident change in land use, however, the enclosure appears to perpetuate the broadly east-west alignment of the earlier boundaries, and so was most likely incorporated into the existing landscape rather than representing a total break; in particular, the way that sub-enclosure 37 seems to respect the course of ditch 137 may suggest it was still visible as a topographical feature in the later restructuring of the enclosure.

Evidence for the farming regime that was practised here was limited due to the small size of the animal bone and charred plant remains assemblages, the latter represented by only a small number of charred grains, often in a poor state of preservation, but the community evidently cultivated both wheat and barley, and reared sheep/goat and cattle with smaller numbers of horses and pigs. Much attention has been paid to the relative proportions of the different domestic species on Iron Age settlements and to the relative importance of arable and livestock farming, which may have varied according to geography, elevation and local tradition (Monckton 1995; Willis 2006), but the limitations of the evidence preclude any detailed conclusions regarding the farming regime at Hilltop Farm. The paucity of charred crop remains may simply indicate that crops were processed in a way that resulted in only very limited accidental burning, or that such debris was disposed of elsewhere, rather than representing a genuine absence of crop-processing activity (Monckton 1995, 35); indeed, the quernstones from enclosure 87 provide compelling evidence that crops were processed at the settlement and may indicate that processing was specifically associated with this enclosure.

The middle Iron Age date of the occupation is indicated by the ceramic assemblage, which is dominated by Scored Ware sherds, and by radiocarbon dates of 365–200 cal BC from a burnt residue on a pot sherd and 360–120 cal BC from a fragment of human skull (both 95 per cent confidence). Only a single sherd with clear late Iron Age characteristics was found, and this came from an appropriately late context in the fill of the recut of the main enclosure ditch. This combination

of evidence suggests that occupation of the Phase 2 enclosure was most likely concentrated within the third or second centuries BC, possibly continuing as late as the first century BC but certainly no later. It may therefore have been broadly contemporary with activity recorded *c.*400m to the east, where evaluation trenching uncovered a pit and a ditch that contained middle Iron Age pottery, although the absence of scoring from these sherds may indicate a slightly earlier date (ULAS 2014). The trenching, although extensive and undertaken as part of the same investigation, did not include the complex of enclosures identified by geophysical survey north of Sysonby Farm, which has the appearance of a late Iron Age/Roman settlement but has not been dated by artefactual evidence. Further east again, Scored Ware pottery was recovered from two post-holes at Melton Country Park, as well as from Roman features (Beamish 1990, 5). A pit at the latter site was also recorded as containing pottery of possible Iron Age date, albeit of unspecified type, and a penannular gully that was recorded in plan during a watching brief may also be Iron Age. A further settlement of possible contemporary date has been identified from cropmark evidence at Framlands Farm, a little over 1km north-east of the site, comprising conjoined rectangular and D-shaped enclosures (Pickering and Hartley 1985, 44–5).

Exposure of the entire area of the settlement enclosure at Hilltop Farm has allowed a complete plan to be established, although few internal features were present, indicating that shallower features had probably been removed by historic ploughing. The enclosure is quite regular, albeit with a slightly circuitous western side, and almost square. This shape is not atypical and enclosures of this date vary widely in plan from curvilinear to rectangular, although Speed's survey of Iron Age enclosures in Leicestershire and Northamptonshire indicated that the Leicestershire examples were more inclined to be curvilinear or D-shaped (Speed 2010, 37). Other elements of the settlement, including the roundhouse, sub-enclosure and possible evidence from post-holes for post-built structures, are also characteristic of this type of settlement and can be readily paralleled elsewhere. Indeed, the essence of such enclosures appears to be that while individual settlements often had many aspects in common, detailed analysis tends to emphasise the uniqueness of each site, albeit composed from a finite range of individual elements, which perhaps reflects the distinct identity or varying agricultural strategies of the resident community.

No internal features within gully 100 survived to provide an indication of the character of the structure, and it is not possible to be certain whether it was the only such building within the enclosure or whether others have been lost to truncation; while settlements with a lone roundhouse are the most common arrangement, perhaps representing a single-family unit, additional roundhouses are also widespread. The roundhouse was perhaps no longer used when the enclosure ditch was recut and sub-enclosure 27 was constructed, since the ditch of the sub-enclosure cut gully 100, although if the gully was a drainage feature around the house rather than a trench for the footings it is possible that the building continued without the gully. It is possible that the role of the roundhouse as the domestic focus was transferred to a structure within the sub-enclosure, although only a few sporadic post-holes survived here, and the common absence of convincing evidence for buildings within such sub-

enclosures on settlements in Leicestershire and Northamptonshire may indicate that they fulfilled some other function. The insertion of the sub-enclosure represents a significant alteration to the arrangement of the settlement, and was clearly intended to provide a means of segregating the domestic occupation or other activities within it from those in the rest of the settlement. Such sub-enclosures are a not uncommon feature and may have served a range of roles, interpretations of instances elsewhere including animal pens, food storage areas, ritual space or, in individual instances, a metalworking area, and the location of a tower or gatehouse (Speed 2010, 49). The rest of the enclosure was undoubtedly fully utilised, but no evidence has survived for further internal divisions or for the function of specific areas, and truncation is surely a factor in this. However, the complete absence of evidence for pits, even in the form of truncated bases, suggests that there were no substantial pits within the enclosure. This is unusual, since pits are almost ubiquitous on Iron Age settlements, and some at least were used for storage of grain. It is possible that for some reason ground conditions rendered this impractical at Hilltop Farm and that above-ground storage was preferred instead.

The association of the settlement enclosure with a ditched trackway is unusual for this period, as is the location of the entrance at a corner rather than in one of the sides. The enclosure and trackway certainly appear to have been conceived as a single integrated plan, and this may be key to understanding the site. Both attributes may perhaps best be explained in relation to the movement of livestock, the entrance being designed to funnel animals through the gate, and the trackway providing a means of driving them along a defined and enclosed routeway without impeding on the adjacent landscape. Ditches 25, 1907 and the eastward continuation of the ditch defining the southern corner of the main enclosure beyond the edge of the excavation, presumably represent boundaries that defined paddocks or fields surrounding the settlement – suggesting that the immediate landscape was enclosed for agricultural purposes, and that loose or uncontrolled livestock would be unwelcome. The ditched passageway by which the enclosure was entered is somewhat reminiscent of the banjo enclosures of the chalklands of southern Britain. Although typically a southern phenomenon, a few sites of ostensibly similar form have been identified elsewhere, including a group of about 20 that have been recognised in West and South Yorkshire from cropmark evidence (Roberts 2010, 30, 33).

Moore (2012) has argued that banjo enclosures in the Cotswolds were high-status sites, but there is nothing at Hilltop Farm to indicate that it differed in status from other contemporary settlements in the region, and the similarity in form with the southern sites may represent no more than a common adaptation to facilitate the management of livestock. A better parallel may be provided by the settlement excavated at Airfield Farm, Market Harborough, where a droveway passed alongside a sub-square ditched enclosure that was accessed from it via a corner entrance (Clarke and Chapman 2008). The Airfield Farm enclosure, dated by radiocarbon to the mid-third to second century, was also similar in having evidence for a single roundhouse, a sub-enclosure and a paucity of pits or evidence for crop processing, which led the excavator to suggest that the site was probably not self-sufficient and may have been utilised seasonally in relation to the livestock element of a wider

landscape of mixed farming. The enclosure complex recorded by geophysical survey at Sysonby Farm, 200m north of the Hilltop Farm enclosure, may represent a similar arrangement, comprising a series of circular and rectilinear enclosures focused on a trackway aligned north-west to south-east, although in the absence of excavation the date and contemporaneity of these features are uncertain. Elsewhere in Northamptonshire the National Mapping Project has recorded cropmark sites of supposed late prehistoric or Roman date which appear to comprise enclosures with funnel-shaped entrances and/or associated with trackways at Bozeat, Cranford, Evenley, Castle Ashby, Brafield on the Green, Irchester and Sulgrave (Deegan 2008, 108; figs 6.16 and 6.18). Sites like the Hilltop Farm enclosure may, therefore, have been a common element of the Iron Age landscape, possibly with a specialised function related to livestock management.

Ritual and funerary activity

In addition to their role in crop processing, the quernstones recovered from the ditch of enclosure 87 provide evidence for the spiritual life of the community. It has long been appreciated that deliberate deposition of objects was a regular, although infrequent, event representing some form of religious propitiation (Cunliffe 1992; Hill 1995; Speed 2010, 35–6), and there is good reason to interpret the placing of the quernstones in this context. The choice of an enclosure ditch for the placing of the querns represents a location that was clearly considered to be suitable for votive offerings, perhaps due to the liminal character of such boundaries – ditches were the receptacle in 58 per cent of the sites with structured deposits identified within the central belt by the Roman Rural Settlement Project (Smith *et al*. 2018, 130). Such deposits are commonly found at significant locations such as the ditch terminals (Rees 2008, 70), and the placement of these objects within the opposite corners of enclosure 87 would certainly be consistent with this practice, although this need not imply that the enclosure had a specifically religious function.

Deposits of quernstones interpreted as deliberate offerings have been recorded as Wanlip (Beamish 1998), and a 'placed' quernstone was found at the centre of a supposed ritual structure at Crick (Woodward and Hughes 2007), while quernstones found in pits at Ancaster Quarry, Lincolnshire (May 1976, 136) and Hunsbury hillfort, Northamptonshire may have a similar origin. The significance of quernstones in such practices may derive from their importance in transforming corn into flour, which has given them an association with death, regeneration and new life in many past and contemporary cultures (Peacock 2013, 166). The location of a jar, apparently smashed *in situ*, directly beneath quernstone SF 2, is unlikely to be coincidence, and presumably represents a similar deliberate deposition. Pottery is a more common element of structured deposits than are quernstones, as for example at Elms Farm, Humberstone, where pottery groups almost invariably occur at or by the terminals of roundhouse gullies (Charles *et al.* 2000, illus. 42). A particularly close parallel to the circumstance at Hilltop Farm is provided by Pit 7 at Burrough Hill, within which two complete beehive querns and a Scored Ware jar were buried together (Taylor *et al*. 2012, 73–4). The relationship between the jar in the original

ditch cut of enclosure 87 and the quernstone in the recut indicates that the objects were involved in depositional rites that occurred periodically over some length of time.

It is less certain whether the skull fragments in the upper fill of the ditch of the main enclosure and the fibula fragments from the south-eastern corner of the same enclosure represent deliberate deposition as part of funerary rites, or are merely incidental inclusions. Evidence for formal inhumation or cremation burials of this period is rare, and the recovery of disarticulated human bone at settlement sites has led to the suggestion that in place of burials as we would understand them, the predominant rite may have involved defleshing the corpse through excarnation or interim burial, after which the disarticulated bones may have been deposited or retained for further commemoration (Carr and Knüsel 1997; Harding 2016). Skull fragments were certainly commonly singled out for special treatment, as exemplified by a frontal bone from near Bingham, Nottinghamshire, radiocarbon dated to 95 cal BC–25 cal AD, which exhibited cutmarks suggestive of defleshing (Cooke and Mudd 2014, 443–4), and pieces from Billingborough, Lincolnshire and Hunsbury, Northamptonshire that were cut and pierced, perhaps for use as bowls or to be suspended as amulets (Bayley 2001), and a skull with a perforated vault from Hunsbury, Northamptonshire, that may have been used in a similar way (Parry 1982, 96). There was no evidence that the fragment at Hilltop Farm had been deliberately modified, although it is nevertheless possible that it was circulated in commemorative rites or placed deliberately within the ditch. The radiocarbon date obtained for the bone was essentially identical to the date from the burnt residue on a sherd from enclosure ditch 87, and so provides no definite evidence that the bone had been conserved for any period of time before it was deposited in the ditch, although the wide date range, which spans the mid-fourth century to the late second century at the 95 per cent confidence range, leaves this possibility open. Skull fragments were recovered from ditches at Elms Farm, Humberstone in a similar circumstance to those at Bartholomew's Way, although whether they had been deliberately placed was similarly uncertain (Charles *et al.* 2000, 159).

After the settlement

The single sherd of Samian ware recovered from a pit that cut the infilled enclosure ditch provides evidence for activity in the vicinity during the second century AD, although the character of the activity is unknown. Indeed, it is uncertain whether the pit itself was of Roman date or whether it is more recent, since the sherd was highly abraded and could be a residual inclusion – the pot may have been originally introduced to the site during manuring, perhaps associated with the settlement north of Sysonby Farm, and only subsequently incorporated into the pit fill. The condition of the enclosure during the Roman period can only be speculated upon; the pottery within the enclosure ditches was entirely Iron Age in character and it is evident that the ditches silted up completely during this period, but it is possible that the associated banks still remained as visible earthworks and this may have attracted opportunistic exploitation by Roman farmers.

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