LATE PREHISTORIC PIT Alignments at money hill, Ashby-de-la-zouch

Andrew Simmonds and Carl Champness

with contributions from: Alex Davies, Denise Druce and Elizabeth Kennard

Oxford Archaeology excavated parts of two pit alignments, one of them a double alignment, at Money Hill, Ashby-de-la-Zouch. Pit alignments are notoriously difficult to date and the recovery of small quantities of Iron Age pottery from three of the pits is therefore particularly significant. A localised buried soil layer that contained a small quantity of worked flint of possible Neolithic date was also uncovered.

INTRODUCTION

The excavation was undertaken in advance of a large housing development on former fields on the north-eastern outskirts of Ashby-de-la-Zouch (Fig. 1; NGR SK 3621 1745). A geophysical survey and two phases of evaluation trenching had confirmed that the only archaeological features within the 42ha development site were a pair of pit alignments that had been originally identified from cropmark evidence, which crossed a proposed access road into the development from the A511 trunk road (GSB 2013; ULAS 2013; OA 2020). Two small excavation areas were excavated where the alignments crossed the road, on the upper part of a west-facing ridge that slopes gently down for c.700m to the Gilwiskaw Brook – a tributary of the River Mease.

This article is summarised from a detailed site report, including full specialist reports, which is available at the OA Library at https://library.oxfordarchaeology. com/5982/ and will be made available through the OASIS website. The project archive will be deposited with Leicestershire County Council Museums Service under accession code X.A86.2020.

NEOLITHIC BURIED SOIL

The only evidence for activity before the Iron Age was a thin buried soil (1057) that extended across an amorphous area of $c.9 \times 8$ m in the north-western part of Area B. Worked flint, comprising a flake, a blade and four pieces of irregular waste, were recovered from the surface of the layer and from hand excavation of a 1m-wide intervention across it. Three pieces of flint had been recovered from the layer during the evaluation stage, including a polished axe fragment that exhibited later removals representing either an aborted attempt to rework the axe after a breakage or, more

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Sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, Intermap, increment P Corp., GEBCO, USGS, FAO, NPS, NRCAN, GeoBase, IGN, Kadaster NL, Ordnance Survey, Esri Japan, METI

Fig. 1. Site location.

likely, due to the number of heavy flake scars – re-used as a flake core. A small quantity of worked flint that was recovered from the Iron Age pits in this excavation area is likely to be residual, derived from the buried soil layer; as may be a single fragment from a charred hazelnut shell recovered from a soil sample from fill 1005 of pit 1003, since these are a common find in Neolithic deposits where they no doubt represent a significant seasonal food source.

THE PIT ALIGNMENTS

The western alignment (1069) was investigated in Area A and double alignment 1070/1071 in Area B. The investigation has proved that both alignments extend further than was indicated by the cropmarks, which were only visible in the field adjacent to the north of the development area and extended for c.110m (Fig. 1). It is not unusual for pit alignments or parts thereof to be invisible to aerial photography, since the pits were typically allowed to silt up naturally, and consequently the fills are similar to the surrounding substrate and do not form distinct cropmarks. It is probably for the same reason that they were not detected by the geophysical survey.

Pit alignment 1069 (Fig. 2)

A total of nine features of the pit alignment were exposed within the excavation area, extending across Area A on a slightly ragged NW–SE orientation. The pits were typically 1.4–1.6m apart, with only occasional larger gaps up to 2.1m. An unusually large interval of 4.6m between pit 1045 and the adjacent unexcavated pit to the south-east was comfortably large enough to accommodate an additional pit, but none was present. Any feature within this gap with a depth comparable to the surviving pits would certainly not have been completely truncated away by ploughing, so it is likely that there was never a pit at this location.

The pits in this alignment were generally smaller and less rectangular than those in Area B, with a range of sub-circular and sub-square shapes. The smallest was pit 1042, with a diameter of 1.2m, and the largest (pit 1045) measured 1.6×1.3 m. Depths ranged from 0.34m (pit 1043) to 0.52m (pit 1061). The fills consistently comprised homogeneous deposits of light brown clay silt with only occasional gravel-sized stones and the odd fleck of charcoal, most likely derived from natural silting processes. Pit 1043 was the only pit from this alignment that produced pottery, comprising four sherds (7g) in a grog-tempered fabric from the upper fill (1052), and a sample of willow/poplar charcoal from the same fill returned a radiocarbon date range of 1505–1320 cal BC at 95 per cent confidence (UBA-44541, 3165 ± 35 BP).

Pit alignments 1070 and 1071 (Fig. 3)

Area B exposed the two rows of pits, which were 4.4–5.8m apart.

Eight pits of the western alignment (1070) were exposed. One pit (130017) had been excavated in Trench 130 of the 2002 evaluation and three (1003, 1028 and 1035) were excavated during the excavation. They varied in shape from sub-



Fig. 2. Excavation Area A, plan and sections.



Fig. 3. Excavation Area B, plan and sections.

rectangular to almost circular and were generally 1.5–2.0m across. The intervals between pits were similar in length to the pits themselves, ranging from 0.87m to 1.67m.

Pits 1003 and 1028 comprised a pair of similar features, 1.5–1.6m across with conical profiles, with a suggestion of a socket at the base. There was no indication that the latter element held the base of a post, however; no evidence was observed for postpipes and the fills were clearly continuous across the width of both pits. Pit 1003 was the deeper at 0.82m, and pit 1028 was 0.60m deep. The only artefactual material from these pits was a small quantity of pottery from pit 1003, including a sherd from the bottom fill (1008) and small scraps from the upper fills (1004, 1005).

Pits 1035 and 130017 had wider, squatter profiles with broad, slightly concave bases, and were slightly smaller than the other two pits. Pit 1035 measured 1.5×1.0 m and only 0.42m deep, and pit 130017 measured 1.7m across and 0.60m deep.

Pit alignment 1071

Seven pits of the eastern alignment (1071) lay wholly within the excavated area and part of an eighth was exposed at the south-eastern baulk. One pit (130004) had been excavated during the evaluation and three (1009, 1015 and 1023) were investigated during the excavation. The alignment, or at least the part within the excavation area, was rather straighter than alignment 1070, but their orientations were parallel. Unlike the other rows, the intervals between pits were smaller than the widths of the pits, ranging from 1.1m to 1.6m.

The pits were significantly more substantial than those in the other rows, measuring 2.4×2.1 m to 2.6×2.6 m. Pit 1009 was the deepest at 1.1m and had a similar conical profile to pits 1003 and 1028 in row 1070, as did pit 130004, which was 1.0m deep. Pits 1015 and 1023, with depths of 0.7m and 0.47m respectively, had wider, more open profiles. The only artefactual material was a single sherd (3g) of pottery from middle fill 130007 of pit 130004, and a single piece of (presumably residual) worked flint from each of pits 1009, 1023 and 1028.

DISCUSSION

Pit alignments like those at Money Hill comprise a rather enigmatic type of feature that is characteristic of the East Midlands and Yorkshire Wolds, as well as eastern Scotland and the Welsh Marches, but is largely absent from much of the UK (Thomas 2003, 79; Rylatt and Bevan 2007, 220). As a class of monument they have attracted considerable discussion, largely due to the apparent incongruity between their linearity, which suggests a function as a boundary, and their discontinuous form, which would not provide a functioning barrier to movement of people or livestock. Attempts to resolve this contradiction have tended to argue either that the pits represent the surviving element of an originally more effective barrier, perhaps reinforced by an accompanying fence or bank, or that they had a more symbolic or ritual role; however, as at Money Hill the evidence from the pits typically indicates that they were open features rather than post-holes (Barber 1985, 151; Rylatt and Bevan 2007, 220), and evidence for a bank is rare, an example at Gardom's

Edge, Derbyshire comprising only a discrete mound 0.15m high beside each pit (Mellor 2007, 22), and the postulated ritual function is typically left undefined (see Rylatt and Bevan 2007 for an exception). Of course, in practice a boundary does not necessarily have to present an insuperable barrier to movement in order to be respected, and indeed it is not difficult to envisage boundaries that were intended to be traversed; for example, between parts of the landscape that were in different use or that were subject to different rights of access.

The investigation has proved that both alignments extend further than was indicated by the cropmarks, which were only visible in the field adjacent to the north of the development area and extended for c.110m. The western alignment 1069 can now be demonstrated to extend for at least 230m, taken from the northwest end of the cropmark to the excavation area, and alignment 1070/7071 for at least 180m, although both evidently continue to the south-east beyond the excavation area. These lengths are comparable to Pit Alignment 2 at Eye Kettleby, Melton Mowbray, which was at least 200m long (Finn 2011, 85), but are dwarfed by the arrangement at Wollaston in the Nene Valley, Northamptonshire, where a co-axial system of pit alignments covered an area of c.2.5km (Meadows 1995; 1996). The single western pit alignment 1069 appears from the cropmark evidence to be reasonably straight, whereas the eastern double alignment 1070/1071 is a little more sinuous in nature, but there is no reason why they should not have been in contemporary use, – as demonstrated by the example of Wollaston. The alignments diverged as they extended down the slope and were c.150m apart at the point where they were crossed by the excavation areas. There was no evidence to determine whether double alignment 1070/1071 was constructed in this double form from the outset or whether it represents successive iterations of a single alignment, although the cropmark evidence indicates that both follow the same curved alignment suggesting that if they were not strictly contemporary the earlier alignment must have still been visible when the later one was laid out. A similar double alignment excavated at Oakham Bypass likewise comprised a row of larger pits and a row of smaller ones (Mellor 2007, 22).

The arrangements of many pit alignments have been observed to relate to the natural topography (for example, running parallel or perpendicular to a watercourse (Pollard 1996) or relating to a watershed (Wigley 2007, 123-4)), and it may therefore be significant that the alignments at Money Hill ran parallel to the Gilwiskaw Brook, 700m to the west, and that they descend the hillside from a notable promontory that projects from the main ridge that runs from north-west to south-east between Burton and Coalville (Fig. 1). The cropmark of western alignment 1069 ends at the spur of the promontory and that of alignment 1070/1071 ends at the top of the promontory c.100m further east, and the alignments extend at right angles from it. It is possible that the promontory was a significant feature in the contemporary landscape and thus became an important focus when landscape divisions were constructed. The paucity of contemporary artefactual and environmental material indicates that there was no domestic occupation close to the pits, although they may be contemporary with the settlement excavated c.400m to the north near Old Parks House, which produced similar pottery (Jones and Dingwall 2002). The small quantity of charcoal from the pit fills was probably incorporated incidentally from wind-blown material

and the surrounding ground surface, but provides some evidence for the local availability of oak, ash and hazel wood, with alder and willow/poplar probably derived from the wetter areas at the foot of the hill.

Pit alignments are notoriously difficult to date since their function did not typically entail the deposition of datable artefacts, and they were usually located away from areas of domestic settlement and hence did not accumulate any associated refuse. Consequently, artefactual material within the pit fills may include earlier material that was incorporated incidentally, as exemplified by the alignment at Oakham Bypass, where the single unabraded sherd of early Iron Age pottery that provided a *terminus post quem* for the features was outnumbered by sherds of Beaker and Collared Urn recovered from other pits (Mellor 2007, 21-2). The possibility that some of the pits in Area B at Money Hill included earlier material derived from the Neolithic buried soil has been discussed above, and the incompatibility of the radiocarbon date from pit 1043 with the dating evidence provided by the pottery may best be explained by the dated material similarly being a residual inclusion. Given the difficulty in dating such alignments, the sherds from pits 1003 and 1043, and from pit 130007 of the 2020 evaluation, provide significant evidence for the date of the alignments at Money Hill and for features of this type in the wider region; the sherds were scrappy and did not include any decorated examples that might help refine the date range, but most were in a fabric that corresponds to the description of fabric Q1A at Gamston, Nottinghamshire (Knight 1992, 40, 42; 2002, 140), and fabric GNMV at South of Old Parks House, c.400m north of Money Hill (Hancock 2002; Hancock and Williams 2002), which were ascribed to the Scored Ware tradition and is essentially a middle Iron Age phenomenon, although it has been dated by some to continue into the late Iron Age (Elsdon 1992a; Knight 2002, 134). The absence of scored decoration on the limited assemblage of small sherds from Money Hill does not preclude it from being Scored Ware and a middle Iron Age date would be perfectly acceptable, but in the absence of definite diagnostic traits it can only be dated broadly to the Iron Age.

Other alignments in the region have generally been dated to the late Bronze Age or Iron Age. The Iron Age sherd from the alignment at Oakham Bypass, discussed above, indicates that it may be of similar date, while the alignment at Eye Kettleby has been dated to the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age, between 1410–1310 cal BC and *c*.1000–800 BC (Finn 2011, 106), and an alignment at Ibstock was earlier than a cremation burial radiocarbon dated to cal AD 0–130 that was interred in the top of one of the pits (Clarke 2013). In the surrounding counties the extensive arrangement of pit alignments at Wollaston, produced only a single sherd, dated to the early Iron Age (Meadows 1995, 44), an alignment at Sandy Lane, Northampton produced middle Iron Age pottery from the upper fills and was cut by a trackway of middle to late Iron Age date (Garland *et al.* 2019), and two pits in an alignment at St Ives, Cambridgeshire were radiocarbon-dated to 800–650 or 550–150 cal BC and 780–400 cal BC (Pollard 1996, 100).

The longevity of the alignments is difficult to ascertain, other than that none of the pits exhibited evidence for recutting and they had evidently been left to silt up gradually. Pit alignments sometimes represent the first stage of late prehistoric land division, as at Eye Kettleby, where the alignment was subsequently recut as a ditched boundary (Finn 2011, 87), and at Kilverton, Nottinghamshire, where it established a boundary that was respected by a later sub-rectangular field (Rylatt and Bevan 2007, 227), but at Money Hill there was no evidence for any features that succeeded the alignment once the pits had silted up.

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