Aylesbury Berryfields (AYLBER)

The Prehistoric Pottery

Introduction

A total of 1390 sherds of prehistoric pottery weighing 12295g was recovered from the site. The assemblage is generally very fragmented, with a high proportion of featureless fragments. Most of the material was recovered from ditch fills, contexts that typically produce small and abraded sherds, but even the Iron Age pit groups yielded only 10 or fewer sherds. The average sherd weight (ASW) overall is below 9g, and some 65% of sherds are highly abraded.

Nonetheless, there is sufficient distinctive pottery to indicate possibly continuous prehistoric activity from the early Bronze Age to the late Iron Age. The Bronze Age component is very small, and most sherds are not precisely dated due to a lack of diagnostic features. The Bronze Age ceramic signature is nonetheless confirmed by a few distinctive vessels, and by a concentration of material of this date in a single location on the site, focused on ring ditch 8028. There is arguably an early Iron Age component, but caution dictates against confidently asserting activity of this date because of a paucity of distinctive examples. Therefore, sherds of possible early Iron Age date are here designated early Iron Age – middle Iron Age. A similar overlapping of middle and late Iron Age stylistic features has necessitated the use of a broad middle Iron Age – late Iron Age category, but a clear majority of over half the total discussed here can be assigned to the middle Iron Age.

Methodology

Fabrics were identified with the aid of a hand lens and binocular microscope at 20x and 10x magnification, and classified using an alpha-numeric dominant inclusion code, further subdivided on size and frequency of the inclusions, following the recommended guidelines of the Prehistoric Ceramics Research Group (PCRG 2011; 2016). The pottery was recorded by in an Excel spreadsheet by context group, feature or deposit type, and feature group. All sherds were counted and weighed. The following characteristics were entered in separate fields where possible: fabric, form, surface treatment, decoration, degree of abrasion, and date. The precision of the dating was dependent on the condition of sherds and on diagnostic features. Degrees of abrasion are based on three broad categories: (3) high - surface survival minimum, breaks heavily eroded; (2) moderate - surface somewhat preserved but clearly worn; (1) fresh or slight wear.

Fabrics

Twenty fabrics within six ware groups were identified, indicating relatively wide variation of potting clay recipes, but within a narrow range of raw materials.

The calcareous (fossil shell and limestone) inclusions observed in some of the fabrics could have been procured from the local shell-rich Jurassic and Cretaceous clays that underlie the site, but Jurassic beds extend northwards into the Bedfordshire region, where shell-rich potting clays were heavily exploited during the Roman period. The presence of shell inclusions in Iron Age pottery does not, therefore, necessarily indicate Iron Age pottery production in the immediate locality, but it was not possible to distinguish local from non-local shelly fabrics within this small assemblage. Flint, a common temper utilised in pottery production from the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods in the region, could have been obtained a short distance to the east on the Chalk. Most of the clay matrices contain glauconite or other ferrous oxides, which occur naturally in Cretaceous Gault and Greensand clays, and which can also contain fossil shell debris. Therefore, the raw materials utilised in the production of the pottery could have been accessible close to the settlement, but more distant procurement cannot be ruled out. An exception is a substantial fragment of a Southwest Decorated bowl from ditch 1612, which was probably produced in the Mendip Hills region of Somerset, and an unusual lugged vessel in a fabric (F3) containing very finely crush flint, could also have been an import to the settlement.

Predominantly flint inclusions

F1 Coarse, ill-assorted calcined flint inclusions up to 5mm, typically 2mm – 3mm in a lightly sanded, slightly micaceous clay with sparse to moderate scatter of black ferrous pellets.

F2 Medium grade, well-assorted calcined flint inclusions >3mm in lightly sanded, slightly micaceous clay with varying abundance of red and black iron oxides

F3 Finely crushed calcined flint inclusions <2mm in a fine sandy fabric that fires to pale grey or orange.

F4 Finely crushed and graded calcined flint <2mm in medium grade quartz sand clay.

Predominantly quartz sand

Q1 Fine glauconitic sandy clay, may have rare small flint or fossil shell inclusions, occasional red iron oxides

Q2 Medium grade glauconitic sandy clay, may have rare small flint or fossil shell inclusions and red iron oxides

Q3 Fine glauconitic sand with powdery red and black iron oxides, may have rare detrital flint or fossil shell

Q4 Coarse grade rounded quartz sand with glauconite and rare fossil shell and detrital flint inclusions 2mm and smaller

Q5 – Southwest Decorated Ware. Medium grade rounded translucent quartz sand with black ferrous pellets and rare calcareous inclusions

Predominantly grog inclusions

G1 Lightly sanded slightly soapy clay with sparse fine orange and buff grog pieces, may have rare small calcined flint inclusions

G2 Medium grade quartz sand fabric with more coarsely crushed grog pieces than G1

G3 Soapy, lightly sanded clay with sparse red and grey grog and red oxides

Predominantly fossil shell inclusions

S1 Sparse to common finely crushed shell and rare limestone fragments in fine glauconitic sandy clay

S2 Glauconitic sandy clay with medium grade rounded quartz sand with rare inclusions of fossil shell

S3 Medium grade glauconitic sandy clay with red oxides, rare rounded detrital flint, and moderate abundance of fossil shell

S4 Relatively course fossil shell inclusions in a soapy fabric, with some quartz sand and black ferrous pellets

S5 Finely sanded, soapy clay with rare to moderate abundance of fossil shell up to 4mm, and sparse small pieces of dark grey grog

S6 Soapy lightly sanded slightly micaceous clay with sparse finely crushed fossil shell and common red oxides

Predominantly calcareous inclusions

C1 Rare ill-assorted fossil limestone pieces up to 3mm in a slightly soapy lightly sanded clay with rare oxides

Vesicular clays

V Fine sandy fabric with black ferrous pellets and corky appearance due to leaching of calcareous matter, probably fossil shell

Earlier prehistoric

A small collection of earlier prehistoric pottery, amounting to 202 sherds (1981g), represents 14% of the site total by sherd count. This assemblage is poorly-defined due to levels of fragmentation and a paucity of diagnostic sherds, but includes a definite middle Bronze Age component.

A few small sherds could be of Neolithic or early Bronze Age date, but are too small and worn to classify. A radiocarbon determination of 3796 – 3659 cal BC on carbonised nutshell from posthole 1637 indicates a Neolithic presence on the site, but the ceramic evidence is not definitive. A small shell-tempered sherd bears faint traces of impressed decoration (possibly cord) of a type found on middle and late Neolithic pottery and earlier Bronze Age pottery, but it was residual in Phase 2 ditch 1228 (Group 8100), and too small and abraded to accurately identify. A 7g sherd in fabric F1 from ditch 1579 has a small applied boss that is a common feature of middle Bronze Age vessels, but also occurs on Neolithic pottery. A probable oven of middle Iron Age date produced two very small undiagnostic sherds, one flint-tempered (2g), the other grog-tempered (1g). These cannot be further characterised and even be residual. A small group of small, heavily abraded earlier prehistoric sherds were residual in ditches 8034, 8097 and 8109, postholes 1197 and 1472, and waterhole 9204.

The most common Bronze Age pottery fabric is course flint-tempered ware F1, but some of the finer flint-tempered sherds and some grog-tempered and shell-tempered sherds are also tentatively assigned to this or a broad earlier prehistoric phase.

The F1 fabric group includes a small number of classifiable middle Bronze Age forms. A large flattened jar rim came from pit 1583 (Fig. xx, no. x), and ditch group 8029 [3217] produced a small group of sherds, including a jar with expanded rim and a body sherd rusticated with fingernail impressions (Fig. x, nos x and x). These correspond to large Deverel-Rimbury Bucket or Barrel 'Urn' forms, and a simple incurving rim from pit 2762 could belong to a Globular Urn. Three thick basal sherds from ditch 1081, 8104 [1582], and pit 2764 probably belong to similar vessels. The basal fragments from ditch 1081 were associated with Iron Age sherds, and therefore residual. Ditch groups 8104, 8108, 8109, 8110, 8117, and pits 2762, 2764, and 3152 contained body sherds in fabric F1 in small quantities which are probably also middle Bronze Age.

Pottery assigned a broadly Bronze Age date was recovered as small, undiagnostic body sherds in flint-tempered and grog-tempered fabrics from ditch groups 1612, 3108, 3219, 3217, ditch segments

1118, 1120, 1519, 1566, 3763 and stakehole 1517. Ring ditch SG 8028 produced 35g of body sherds in fabric F1, but no distinctive fragments.

Iron Age

The dominant Iron Age assemblage of 1147 sherds (10070g) arguably spans the early to late Iron Ages, but diagnostic sherds amounting to only 41 rim fragments, 14 bases, and 11 decorated sherds meant that overall fewer than 30 individual Iron Age vessels were recorded, and some of these with limited precision due to small sherd size.

The bulk of the assemblage is apparently middle Iron Age, but identification of pottery of this date is problematic in the Buckinghamshire and surrounding Oxfordshire and Bedfordshire regions, partly due to a rarity of associated dateable finds, especially metalwork. It is also difficult to distinguish from pottery of the earlier period as some early Iron Age fabrics seem to have continued into the middle Iron Age at Berryfields, as Slowikowski (2008) found also to be the case at the Aston Clinton Site (Masefield 2008). A similar lack of chronological distinction in fabrics has been noted at other regional Iron Age sites, including Bancroft (Knight 1994, 383). However, the use of coarse flint-tempered fabrics was abandoned in the middle Iron Age at Coldharbour Farm (Farley and Smith 1997), and only fabrics with rarer and finer flint temper have been included for consideration as middle Iron Age in the current assemblage.

Rounded vessel forms in glauconitic sandy fabrics dominate the middle Iron Age assemblage, and a small group of more developed, somewhat 'Belgicised' forms in the same fabrics have been regarded as belonging to the transitional stage between the middle Iron Age and late Iron Age.

Early Iron Age – middle Iron Age

Some 80 sherds weighing 651g have been dated to the early Iron Age – middle Iron Age. This material was recovered from ditch groups 8093 (1731); 8104 (1088, 1351, 1396, 1453); 8105 (1385, 1437); 8113 (1529); and ditches 1296, 1392, 1579 and 1585. Postholes 1374 and 1424 also yielded a few sherds each. A relatively wide range of fabrics is represented within this small collection – flint-tempered fabric F2; sandy wares Q1, Q2, Q4; shelly wares S1 – S4, and a single vesicular sherd (V1). Diversity of fabrics is a common feature of many early Iron Age assemblages. This diversity predates a trend in southern Britain towards standardisation of ceramic production as the middle Iron Age progressed and as a preference for sandy fabrics and sinuous forms emerged.

Amongst the few diagnostic sherds are a carinated bowl of early Iron Age style in fabric F2 from posthole 1424, and two carinated fragments in fabric Q2 from ditch 8105 (1385) and ditch 8133 (1529). Fingertip or fingernail impressions are common devices on late Bronze Age and early Iron

Age pottery, and there are three Iron Age examples from Berryfields. Two fingertipped rims, both in fabric Q2, were recovered - a bowl sherd from ditch 8104 (1088), and a shouldered jar rim from ditch 8093 (1731). Fingernail impressions feature on a small body sherd in Q2 from ditch 1296. Similar pottery has been dated to the early Iron Age at the Aston Clinton Bypass (Slowakowski 2008). Notably, however, finger-impressed pottery persisted well into the middle Iron Age in the middle Thames Valley region, and so is not a clear indicator of date.

Two unusual decorated body sherds in oxidised sandy glauconitic fabric Q2 unique to this assemblage may be of early Iron Age date (Fig. xx, nos x and x). A 22g oxidised sherd from ditch group 8104 (1453) is decorated with poorly-executed overlapping lightly incised or scratched chevrons infilled with white inlay. This treatment resembles All Cannings Cross type decoration (Cunnington 1923; Barrett and McOmish 2006), dated to *c* 800-700 BC, and may be stylistically related, but also bears similarities to the scratched ornamentation seen on the slightly later (600 – 400 BC) 'Chinnor-Wandlebury' and related style pottery (Cunliffe 2005, 97-8; Slowakowski). A small body sherd from same context may be haematite-coated, also a common early Iron Age treatment, but it is too abraded to be certain. The second decorated sherd, weighing only 9g), is decorated with a deeply incised linear grid-like pattern, which resembles some decoration. It was recovered from Phase 2 ditch 8093 (1728). However, caution must be exercised in the interpretation of these small decorated fragments, as they share characteristics of pottery of other traditions.

Middle Iron Age

A total of 885 sherds (7215g) – over 70% by weight of the site total – are middle Iron Age in style. Most of this pottery was recovered as small sherds (ASW 8g) from enclosure ditch groups 1612, 8093, 8104, 8105, 8106, 8107, 8109, 8113, and 8117. Ditch 1296 (fills 1297 and 1298) was particularly prolific, yielding 142 sherds weighing 2042g, a group that included fragments of four bases and two ovoid jars. Smaller quantities of pottery were recovered from other isolated ditch segments.

Pits 1153, 1220, 1394, 1454, 1531, 1533, 1537, 1583, 2855, and 2935 yielded middle Iron Age pottery in generally very small collections of fewer than ten sherds, and postholes 1418, 1424, 1519, 1654 and 2963 also contained a few fragments. Fragments of an ovoid jar came from spread 1617.

The middle Iron Age fabric range is noticeably more restricted than for the proposed early Iron Age assemblage, with a full 727 sherds, representing 83% of the middle Iron Age total, in glauconitic sandy wares Q1 – Q4, mostly Q2. These fabrics are probably petrologically related, and any variations may be a result of clay preparation and the relative fineness of added sand.

The range and number of classifiable forms is quite restricted, and all diagnostic sherds were recovered from ditch fills rather than more secure pit contexts. The material was recovered from fills of ditches 1451, 1296, 8093, 8105 and 8106, and spread 1617. Two simple hemispherical bowls were identified (Fig. x, nos x – x), one in fabric Q2 from ditch 1612, the other in shelly ware S1 from pit 1537. Six bead rim ovoid or S-profile jars (Fig. x, nos x – x) are in sandy fabrics (Q), but there are three examples of this form in shelly fabrics S1 and S4. A smoothed or burnished surface finish is a common feature of these rounded forms. There is a single possible example of a straight-sided jar ('saucepan pot') in fabric S2 from ditch 8104 (1396). A small round-bodied vessel with at least two small perforated lugs (Fig. x, no. x) from pit 1584 is unique within the assemblage, and is also only one of two sherds in fabric F3. It may have been an import.

Part of a Southwestern Decorated Ware (traditionally known as Glastonbury Ware) bowl was recovered in three fragments from ditch 1612 (1613) (Fig. x, no. x). A radiocarbon date of 524 – 388 BC from Carn Euny has been obtained for the inception of this tradition, but the decoration on the Aylesbury example is of a developed type, probably dating from *c* 250 BC or somewhat later. Southwestern Decorated pottery comes in a variety of fabrics and it is difficult to establish the components of a given example without petrological analysis. However, the dominance of abundant subangular quartz grains and fragments of probable sandstone suggest the Aylesbury vessel is Peacock's Group 2 (sandstone fabric), with a likely origin in the Old Red Sandstone region of the Mendip Hills (Peacock 1969). As such, this vessel was clearly an import to the site. This ditch fill produced a relatively large assemblage of 67 sherds (776g), including a hemispherical bowl in fabric Q2 (Fig. x, no. x).

Middle Iron Age - Late Iron Age

A small group of 150 sherds weighing 2162g have been dated as middle Iron Age – late Iron Age on the basis of vessel form and/or treatment. This group includes a slightly wider range of fabrics than seen in the middle Iron Age assemblage, with an increase in shell-tempered wares (S1, S4 – S6), but excludes grog-tempered wares, which were a late 1st century BC/AD development and are discussed by Biddulph (xxx). Varieties of sandy wares continue to dominate at almost 70%. In the case of body sherds, the distinction between the later Iron Age and middle Iron Age sandy pottery groups is rather vague, but in terms of form, there is a clear indication of a developmental trend toward vessels with higher, more pronounced shoulders and more clearly defined rims. A necked bowl from ditch 8104 (1396) in fabric Q2 is a distinctive late Iron Age form, probably of late 2nd century/early 1st century BC date.

Most of this later pottery came from ditch group 8104 (1396) and 8108 (1368), and ditch 1651, but there were examples in ditch groups 8047and 8093 also.

Discussion

The prehistoric pottery assemblage from Berryfields is small, fragmentary, and generally lacking diagnostic features. It provides sufficient evidence, however, to demonstrate activity on the site during the middle Bronze Age and the middle Iron Age, with suggestions of an earlier prehistoric (Neolithic or early Bronze Age) presence, and the possibility of continuous occupation throughout the Iron Age.

Although the Bronze Age 'ceramic signature' is quite faint, there were sufficient diagnostic pieces to confirm a middle Bronze Age presence, and most of the Bronze Age pottery, whether residual or not, was largely restricted to a small area of the site focused around ring ditch 8028 and linear ditch 8029, a location where Iron Age pottery was largely absent. Most of the diagnostic Bronze Age sherds are fragments of large Deverel-Rimbury style vessels, none of which appear to be associated with funerary activity.

The Iron Age pottery, typically for the region, lacks chronological precision, partly due to the endurance of some early Iron Age ceramic fabrics and decorative motifs well into the middle Iron Age. A few distinctive forms, including a necked bowl and high-shouldered bead rim vessels, indicate a progression from simple rounded forms of the earlier stage of the middle Iron Age, to a more developed range of vessels influenced by continental styles during the last stages of the middle Iron Age.

A typical feature of middle Bronze Age and Iron Age settlements is the deliberate deposition of pottery vessels or vessel parts in pits, waterholes, and ditch terminals. It is possible that some of the large middle Bronze Age fragments were deliberately placed, for example much of a large base in pit 2764, but there are no clear Iron Age examples of this activity at Berryfields. Special deposits in boundary ditches are admittedly uncommon, and the Berryfields site is no exception. Arguably, the substantial fragment of a Southwestern decorated bowl from ditch 1612 may have been treated with some attention, perhaps curated for a time. Deliberate deposits even of distinctive pottery and hig status objects are not particularly common in the middle Thames region (Lambrick 2014, 153) and the Berryfields pit groups are typically composed of a few small, abraded sherds, with no noteworthy features. It is not surprising, therefore that there is no evidence of anything other than fortuitous inclusion in naturally eroded fills.

.

***Catalogue** [To number when it is clear how many Magda can draw in the allotted time]*

Flattened simple rim of middle Bronze Age jar. Fabric F1. Pit 1583 ctx 1584

Expanded rim of Deverel-Rimbury type middle Bronze Age jar. Fabric F1. Ditch 8029 [3217] ctx 3218

Body sherd of middle Bronze Age vessel with fingernail impressed decoration. Fabric F1. Ditch 8029 [3217] ctx 3218

Crudely made bowl with fingertip decorated rim. Early – middle Iron Age. Fabric Q2. Ditch 8104 [1088] ctx 1089

Body sherd decorated with fine incised diagonal linear pattern with white inlay. Fabric Q2. May be early Iron Age All Cannings Cross copy, or devolved Chinnor-Wandlebury type bowl. Ditch 8104 [1453] ctx 1470

Small sherd with deeply incised linear decoration. Fabric Q2. ? Early Iron Age. Ditch 8093 [1728] Ctx 1730

Jar with upstanding rim with fingertip decoration. Fabric Q2. Early – middle Iron Age. Ditch 8093 [1731] ctx 1733

Ovoid jar with beaded rim. Fabric S1. Middle Iron Age. Ditch 8093 [1097] ctx 1098

Hemispherical bowl. Fabric Q1, burnished. Middle – late Iron Age. Ditch 8093 [1097] ctx 1098

Ovoid jar with elongated rim. Fabric S4. Middle Iron Age. Ditch 8105 [1353] ctx 1354

Ovoid jar with simple rim. Fabric Q1, smoothed. Middle Iron Age. Ditch 8106 [1441] ctx 1442

Ovoid jar. Fabric Q2, smoothed. Middle Iron Age. Ditch [1451] ctx 1471

Ovoid jar with slightly elongated everted rim. Fabric S1, smoothed. Middle Iron Age. Pit 1537 ctx 1536

Rounded jar/bowl with dual small perforated lugs. Fabric F3. Middle iron Age?. Pit 1583 ctx 1584

Round-bodied bowl. Fabric Q2, roughly smoothed. Middle Iron Age. Ditch1612 ctx 1613

Long-neck jar. Fabric S6, smoothed. Probably middle Iron Age. Ditch 8093 [1719] ctx 1721

Bead rim jar. Fabric Q1. Middle Iron Age. Spread 1617

Rim of straight-sided jar (saucepan pot). Fabric S2. Middle Iron Age. Ditch 8104 [1396] ctx 1399

Southwestern Decorated bowl ('Glastonbury ware'). Fabric Q5. Ditch 1612 ctx 1613.

Low pedestal base. Fabric Q2, burnished. Middle – late Iron Age. Ditch 1612 ctx 1613

High shouldered bead rim jar. Fabric Q2, smoothed. Middle- late Iron Age. Ditch 1651 ctx 1652

High shouldered bead rim jar. Fabric Q1, burnished. Middle – late Iron Age. Ditch 1651 ctx 1652

Ovoid jar with handle. Fabric S1, smoothed. Late Iron Age. Ditch 8093 [1137] ctx 1139

Necked bowl. Fabric Q2, smoothed. Late Iron Age. Ditch 8104 [1396] ctx 1399

References

Barrett, J and McOmish, D, 2009 The Early Iron Age in southern Britain: recent work at All Cannings Cross, Stanton St Bernard and East Chissenbury, Wiltshire. In Rouliere-Lambert, M-J Daubigney, A, Milcent, P-Y and Talon, M (eds) *De l'age du Bronze a l'age du Fer en France et en Europe occidentale (Xe-VIIe siecele a. J-C). La Moyenne vallee du Rhone aux ages du fer.* Dijon: Revue archaeologie de l'Est, 565-575

Farley, M E, Nash, D and White, R F, 1981 A late Iron Age and Roman site at Walton Court, Aylesbury, *Rec Buckinghamshire* **23**, 51-75

Farley, M E and Smith, N, 1997 The pottery, in J Parkhouse and D Bonner 1997, 116 - 19

Hey, G and Hind, J, 2014 *Solent-Thames Research Framework for the Historic Environment Resource Assessments and Research Agendas*, Oxford Wessex Archaeology

Knight, D, 1994 Late Bronze Age and Iron Age pottery, in R J Williams and R J Zeepvat, *Bancroft: the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age Settlement and Roman Temple-Mausoleum*, Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society Monograph, 7, 381-98

Lambrick, G, 2014 The later Bronze Age and Iron Age: research agenda, in Hey and Hind 2014, 149-153

Masefield, R, 2008 *Prehistoric and later settlement and landscape from Chiltern Scarp to Aylesbury Vale: the archaeology of the Aston Clinton bypass, Buckinghamshire*, BAR Brit Ser 473, Oxford

Parkhouse, J and Bonner, D, 1997 Investigations at the prehistoric site at Coldharbour Farm, Aylesbury in 1996, *Rec Buckinghamshire 39*. Vol 39, 73-139

PCRG, 2011 *The study of later prehistoric pottery: General policies and guidelines for analysis and publications*, Occas. Paper No. **1** and No. **2**, 3 edn, revised 2011, Prehistoric Ceramic Research Group

PCRG, SGRP, MPRG, 2016 *A standard for pottery studies in archaeology*, Prehistoric Ceramics Research Group. Study Group for Roman Pottery, Medieval Pottery Research Group

Peacock, D P S, 1969 A contribution to the study of Glastonbury Ware from south-west Britain, *Antiq J* **49**, 41 – 61

Slowikowski, A M, 2008 The pottery from the Aston Clinton bypass, in R Masefield, *Prehistoric and later settlement and landscape from Chiltern Scarp to Aylesbury Vale: the archaeology of the Aston Clinton bypass, Buckinghamshire*, BAR Brit Ser **473**, Oxford 2008, 78-118