

Bedfordshire Archaeology, 1975-1976

Compiled by DAVID H. KENNETT

The summaries below are designed to serve as a guide to current fieldwork, excavations and museum research into the archaeology of Bedfordshire. Important isolated finds and museum acquisitions are also included. The present summaries are material submitted to the compiler by 1 March 1976. The compiler wishes to thank all those who have contributed notes to this section and hopes that future work and finds will be brought to his notice for inclusion in subsequent issues of the *Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal*.

BEDFORD: Newnham Marina TL 074494

Excavations were resumed by Angela Simco for Bedfordshire County Council, North Bedfordshire Borough Council and the Department of the Environment, in June 1975, on the Romano-British and prehistoric crop-mark site at Newnham, south-east of Bedford, in advance of gravel extraction.

Work continued on the area of the Roman courtyard, revealing a cobbled surface of at least 300 square metres which was renewed in places with cobble and limestone patching, and was in use from the 2nd to the 4th century. Several gullies and small ditches probably had a drainage function, though the profile of one suggested that it may have held a timber partition, perhaps serving as a stock-pen. Sealed beneath the courtyard surface were several Belgic features: a ditch, 2.5m wide, of at least three phases: two small parallel gullies; a pit 175cm in diameter and 70cm deep; and a timber structure at least 12m x 7m, one side being formed from a row of substantial stone-packed post-pits. The latest feature in this area was a post hole containing Saxon stamped ware, possibly related to two others at a stratigraphically comparable level, but no plan could be reconstructed.

A further area of 750 square metres, covering a section of the field system, was examined, showing a succession of land use in the prehistoric and Roman periods. Only two small Early Iron

Age ditches were located. Of the Belgic period there were two substantial ditches; the earlier had at least four phases; the later was a single phase ditch, 2.5m wide, continuing in an almost straight line for at least 50m. Both ditches contained rubbish deposits with substantial amounts of pottery. A row of large post-pits extended at right angles from the later ditch for at least 12m and may have been a palisade. The most numerous features were of the Roman period. The main Roman boundary ditch, appearing on aerial photographs as a rectangular enclosure with rounded corners, was sectioned in two places, and seems to have silted up naturally over a long period of time. A smaller Roman ditch, running roughly parallel with and 2m to 3m south of the later Belgic ditch showed continual re cutting. Successive layouts of small plots were revealed by sections of parallel gullies.

Work on this area will be completed in Autumn 1975, and a watching brief will be carried out as the extraction programme proceeds across the area of densest crop-marks.

FELMERSHAM Radwell TL 011588

Excavations were carried out by Peter Woodward for Bedfordshire County Council, Bedford District Council and the Department of the Environment on a ring-ditch site prior to gravel extraction.

The site, on pasture land, had been located in a small trial trench by David Hall and John Hutchings in 1973. Excavations in May and June 1975 were intended to sample and examine the ditch in more detail, and to complete a section across the centre of the ring ditch, drawing upon information gained from the five ring-ditches excavated at Roxton 1972-74.

The excavations at Radwell showed that the mound had been ploughed after the ditch had been almost totally filled. The old surface was not complete but there was enough of the buried soil remaining to show that there had been a central mound and berm, presumably formed

from the upcast of the ditch. The majority of the worked flint was found inside the ring-ditch on the ploughed-out mound material and on the inner side of the ring-ditch silting. A few sherds of Roman and Bronze Age pottery were also found in the ploughed-out mound material. The ring ditch had a consistent fill, not showing the characteristic silt layers from the silting of an open ditch. A jet toggle, a glass bead and a Bronze Age body sherd were found half-way down the ditch with a concentration of charcoal and a few animal bones, suggesting the broken up remains of a burial of early or middle Bronze Age date. The primary filling of the ring ditch was present on the inside top edge and on the sides only slightly, but was almost entirely absent at its base.

This evidence suggests a change of site usage from a fairly typical ring ditch burial barrow to some form of habitation area, when the burial or burials were disturbed, the ditch cleaned out and refilled whilst the area was in use for habitation. Its wider interpretation must ultimately be set within the context of the Roxton ring-ditch excavations, recent work on the Ouse valley sites by Ken Field and Stephen Green, and the current field-work programme being undertaken by Peter Woodward.

GENERAL SURVEY

Walking the route of the Southern Feeder Gas Pipe Line

The Ampthill and District Archaeological and Local History Society under the direction of Kevan Fadden have spent the 1975-76 winter season walking a section of the proposed route of the Southern Feeder gas pipe line between the M1 at Tingrith and the A6 at Haynes. This was an interesting section to walk as it crossed the alluvium of the Flit Valley, the Lower Greensand Ridge, the boulder clay of the Bedford levels and then back up the scarp face of the Greensand Ridge. In common with previous field walking exercises in the area, worked flints of the Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze age types were found on the Greensand. Odd areas of Medieval and Post Medieval pottery scatter were found on all soils, but predominated on the boulder clay of the Bedford levels. No finds are of sufficient significance to recommend excavation before the pipe line is laid, but they do show where a special watch should be kept while work progresses. In the long term the results of the field walking are helping to build up a picture of the archaeological remains in the area.

LEIGHTON BUZZARD Grove Priory

Excavations commenced in 1973 and 1974 by Mrs Evelyn Baker for Bedfordshire County Council and the Department of the Environment were continued in 1975 by Humphrey Woods and Dominic Powlesland on this alien priory of the order of Fontevault (mid twelfth – early fifteenth centuries), to be destroyed by sand quarrying.

Humphrey Woods exposed a large structure in what is tentatively identified as the main claustral area. It measured 12m by 6.8m and was pierced by doors on the west, north and south. A range of buildings returned north and south from this structure, though only a small part of the range lay within the limit of excavation. A porch protected the western entrance. The structure itself had been robbed to its footings except along a short length of its eastern wall. The footings were of pitched carstone whose style suggests a date in the late twelfth or early thirteenth centuries. A layer of destruction debris sealed the structure and from this large quantities of glazed roof tile, including decorated finials, clunch mouldings and painted window glass were recovered. These indicate that the building must have been very elaborate when standing, and of first importance in the priory.

The range was of secondary build to this structure. To the south it survived intact to within a few cms of the present ground surface, but to the north was damaged. An outstanding small find in one of the rooms to the north was a lead *bulla* of Pope Alexander IV (1254-61).

Dominic Powlesland commenced the excavation of an area about 20m by 22m, south-east of the other trench, and several phases of timber and stone structures were recognised: the former included post holes and slots probably predating the first stone buildings of the priory.

The area chiefly contained a rectangular robber trench, over a metre in width, for a building on an east-west axis, with internal dimensions of about 12m by 4.4m. To the west of this building was a range of rooms represented by dwarf walls, only partly lying within the area excavated. There was a small lean-to structure against the south side of the main building, containing two thirteenth century stone coffins.

The main building in this area, unlike the others excavated to the north-west, continued in use after the dissolution of the priory, presumably in the early fifteenth century. Alterations including the insertion of a large fireplace may suggest conversion to a farmhouse, which, on coin evidence,

remained in use until at least 1700.

ODELL SP 956567

The gravels of the Ouse valley around the north Bedfordshire villages of Harrold and Odell have been favoured for human settlement and activity since at least the third millennium B.C., and several discoveries relating to the ancient settlement pattern of the area have been made during quarrying over the last 25 years. The present quarry, operated by Hall Aggregates (Eastern Counties) Ltd., is currently extending across the site of an early settlement which is being excavated by Brian Dix for Bedfordshire County Council, Bedford District Council and the Department of the Environment. The objective is to recover a near complete plan of the settlement by total excavation: the willing co-operation of both local and regional quarry staff has been invaluable in this process, which is likely to continue until at least 1977.

The results so far obtained suggest that the main occupation of the site began towards the end of the Iron Age, although traces of earlier activity, including a possible funerary monument of the second millennium, have been noted. At some time in the period between 50BC and the middle of the first century AD a farm was established and its territories defined by a series of ditches. The living accommodation within this settlement has at present only been partially investigated but would seem to have comprised several circular timber-framed huts of which curving 'eaves-drip' gullies and the holes dug to hold the upright posts survive. Similar construction persisted into the Roman period, later in the first century AD, and from this time onwards, various modifications were made to the farm layout. New ditches were dug whilst existing ones that had filled were often re-dug on slightly shifted alignments. Grouped strip or long fields were laid out and might have been used for winter grazing, and for the cultivation of root and fodder crops as well as cereals. Gravel was extracted from large, roughly circular, quarry pits, and wells were dug. The fill of the latter preserved organic materials such as wood, grass, snail and insect remains, which should provide environmental and agricultural usage evidence.

Two small cremation cemeteries dating to the first half of the first century AD have been discovered, one containing six urned cremations shallowly buried upright in small circular pits, the

other comprising five larger pits, each containing the cremated remains of at least one individual scattered over the bottom, with associated food remains and whole pots. Several inhumations of a slightly later date have also been found.

The present available evidence suggests that Roman activity on the site continued until perhaps the mid-fourth century AD, after which there is a break in the archaeological record until the Saxon period. Two timber-lined wells of sixth or seventh century AD date have been recovered. Both were set in specially dug circular pits, but were dissimilar in design. One was of simple construction, comprising a roughly square timber framework laid around four oak uprights, whilst the other was formed by enclosing a wicker basket within an oval framework of withies woven around short stakes, with a 'platform' of re-used planks for access to one side. To date, no associated settlement remains have been found.

OUSE VALLEY RING DITCHES

Peter Woodward is embarking upon a study of Bronze Age settlement along the Ouse valley in Bedfordshire, arising from his work with Alison Taylor at Roxton, and at Radwell, and from work recently published by Stephen Green and Ken Field (*Archaeological Journal* 131, 1974). The survey work is being carried out within the rescue context for Bedfordshire County Council, Bedford District Council and the Department of the Environment.

The Roxton ring-ditches were large diameter barrows with shallow mounds, sometimes with berms and/or outer banks and with wide deep ditches. They dated from the Bronze Age period and had been constructed for burial purposes. They were located on the site of earlier habitation. Flint knapping probably continued on the site during the Bronze Age after primary use as a burial ground, but with no intensive habitation. Iron Age peoples used the field for agricultural purposes but did not attempt to fill in the ditches, though the whole site was ploughed out by the end of the Roman period. The shallow earthwork of the residual ditch was still used for cremations and inhumations in this period. Excavations of ring-ditches in the upper Ouse valley at Milton Keynes by Stephen Green have similarly demonstrated that they were burial structures of early to middle Bronze Age date, and were generally associated with habitations of an earlier or contemporary date. Reuse of the site in the middle Bronze Age

was also demonstrated.

A regular aerial survey of the river valley by Ken Field has given some information on distribution. The ring-ditches tend to cluster at intervals along the Ouse valley, and, sometimes, as at Roxton, appear as discrete organised groups. Extensive complexes only occur at Cople and Cardington in Bedfordshire. Ring-ditch crop marks occur mainly on the gravels next to the river, and sometimes on the cornbrash above the river plain. They also generally occur with other types of cropmark: further analysis of this matter is necessary.

It is hoped that the projected survey campaign will include continued and regular aerial photography, and a resistivity survey of pasture land immediately adjacent to isolated ring-ditches, in order to ascertain whether or not they are parts of larger groupings. It is hoped to carry out a survey of this nature at Radwell. There will also be a fieldwalking programme to locate flint scatters and concentrations on selected areas along the Ouse valley, in order to obtain a distribution pattern for the Neolithic and Bronze Age, to be superimposed upon the pattern produced by aerial photography. Flints, like ring-ditches, are being taken as indicators of habitation.

Fieldwalking will be concentrated upon three main kinds of land; the pin-pointed ring-ditches sites, selected blank areas on the Ouse valley gravels, and a sample cross-section across the river valley on to the surrounding uplands. It is hoped that some kind of quantitative result will be obtained from subsequent analysis of the material.

The excavation programme will largely be determined by the incidence of destruction threats, but it is hoped at least to sample ring-ditch sites. The information from this large scale investigation should allow a more selected and rational approach to excavation in the future.

It is hoped that this combination of survey and excavation will help to establish part of a general archaeological landscape for the Bronze Age in Bedfordshire. It might show how the ring ditches relate to earlier and contemporary habitation of this period, and could demonstrate whether such habitation is only associated with ring-ditches and the river gravels. It could produce a more definite pattern for Bronze Age settlement in the Ouse valley, by relating the excavation results and field-

walking results to a general distribution pattern arising from aerial photography. It may be possible to relate ring-ditch structures to barrow structures of other areas, and to organise the period of ring-ditch construction through a matrix of radio-carbon dates. Further evidence could be gained for Bronze Age burial ritual in the lowland context, and for environmental conditions during the period of ring-ditch construction.

WILSTEAD By-Pass TL 057442-064430 (approx)

Wilstead by-pass, constructed during the autumn of 1974 and 1975, takes the A6 from Luton to Bedford around the eastern edge of the village of Wilstead. The line of the road passed through no known features of archaeological importance apart from ridge-and-furrow, which was recorded prior to construction works commencing. A watching brief on preliminary grading works was carried out by Peter Woodward for Bedfordshire County Council.

During construction, pitched stone foundations of limestone were found at the northern end of the by-pass near Duck End (TL 05764411). Some sherds of local medieval and post-medieval pottery (fourteenth and nineteenth centuries) lead window came, glass and an iron catch were found in association with the footings. Although grading for the road had disturbed all occupation levels, the finds and the plan form indicated a projecting chimney to a house.

On the enclosure map of 1804 there is no building mentioned for this piece of land, which was part of an old enclosure known as Nortons Closes. At enclosure, Nortons Closes were exchanged by Samuel Whitbread: an examination of Whitbread documents in the Bedfordshire County Record Office allowed the tracing of a likely descent. A house seems to have been built on Nortons Closes between 1639 (when no house is mentioned) and 1648, when closes with cottage in which George Warner was living were settled upon his grandson of the same name. It was still standing in 1696, but was probably demolished by 1725 (when a toft is mentioned), and was definitely demolished by the time of enclosure in 1804.

It seems probable that the foundations excavated belonged to some period of this house's construction.