

Excavations at Harrold Pit, Odell, 1974-1978

A Preliminary Report

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Three and a half years' continuous excavation in advance of gravel extraction at Hall Aggregates' Harrold Pit in the upper Gt. Ouse valley came to a close in March 1978.¹ The examination of an extensive and complex spread of cropmark features in the south-west corner of Odell parish, covering some 7-8 ha. and approximately centred at SP 956568, indicated intermittent human activity in the area over the past few millennia.²

PREHISTORIC FEATURES

Although the major phase of settlement and land-use at the site occurred from later Iron Age times onwards, various earlier features were noted. Of these, several shallow disturbances may be of neolithic origin while the survival of fragments of beaker pottery in later contexts denotes further activity at that time.

More tangible was an almost circular ditch enclosing an area approximately 12m by 10m : the ditch was probably originally continuous although later disturbances broke its circuit. Where its course survived, the ditch was roughly 1.5m wide and between 50 and 60cm deep from the base of the modern ploughsoil. It had been dug in an area where pockets of calcareous gravel occur and the distinctive upcast of white sandy gravel containing small lumps of chalk appears to have been mounded or, at the very least, banked close to the inner lip of the ditch. This material subsequently slipped into the open ditch where it reprecipitated to result in a very leached infilling. A similar fill was observed in a grave within the area defined by the ditch and implies contemporaneity or near-contemporaneity with it. It further suggests that the feature was designed as a funerary monument.

The grave, approximately 70cm wide, had been so disturbed by a 1st century A.D. ditch that only the upper part of the inhumation it had originally contained survived. There were no associated finds. However, fragments of two flint tanged and barbed arrowheads found in the infillings of adjacent later ditches presumably derive from the monument and suggest a Bronze Age date for its construction.

THE IRON AGE AND ROMAN FARMS

Most of the cropmark features related to a type of site which although known along the Great Ouse valley gravels and elsewhere in midland and eastern England has hitherto rarely been extensively examined.³

The Early Farm

A prolonged agricultural activity began at the site a generation or so before the Roman Conquest, perhaps as the result of so-called 'Belgic' expansion.⁴ Settlement was initially based on a sub-rectangular enclosure 40m wide which occupied the south-west corner of a large field unit. It contained two round houses, both of which were twice rebuilt. These structures were each between 10 and 12m in internal diameter and were defined by fairly evenly spaced post-pits and curving lengths of gully. Hearths survived in places while in one dwelling a large earthenware vessel had been set in a water-filled pit presumably to serve as a cold store.

At first the structures were enclosed by a timber palisade but this was subsequently replaced by a series of ditches. To the north and east, entrances opened into several large contiguous enclosures which formed an area of arable fields; smaller plots would also have been cultivated. Subdivisions within some of these suggest that they were grazed on occasion, but the main stockyards appear to have been to the west where a group of enclosures had their ditches interrupted in a way best suited to controlling and penning livestock. Animals would have been moved along ditched drove-ways and watered at ponds, disused quarry pits and other points. A series of wells showed considerable variety in their original designs and their infillings preserved a rich variety of organic remains. Preliminary analysis of the large but fragmented beetle fauna from the only deposit that has been studied in any detail so far, shows ground-living and leaf-feeding species to have been present in addition to water beetles.⁵ Among the various wooden objects which the waterlogged deposits of the wells and similar features had preserved is part of the share of a crook-ard type of

plough.⁶

Renewal of many of the well structures, particularly at enclosure entrances, combined with the frequent scouring of ditch bottoms and the periodic re-cutting of whole alignments, suggests that similar farming requirements arose each year. The provision and maintenance of such permanent ditched boundaries equally shows the farming practice of the area to have been already at a sophisticated level of organisation by the time of the Roman Conquest. With similar traces elsewhere, the indication is of an agriculture based upon a single-family unit engaged in a mixed cereal and pastoral economy.

Two cremation cemeteries datable to the period A.D. 25-50 lay outside the homestead of the early farm. Within a narrow plot, roughly 10m by 5m, five circular pits each contained cremated human remains. Although subsequent earthworm activity had caused some of this material to become scattered throughout the infillings, a sufficient concentration remained in most of the pits to indicate that the cremated remains had previously been deposited fairly centrally on the clean bottoms of the excavated pits. The discovery of bronze brooches, themselves unburnt, with this material suggests that the comminuted bone was originally contained within fastened textile bags or leathern pouches. Pig bones were the evidence for food offerings, while other food and drink could have been contained in some of the twenty-eight pots found buried in the pits. However, a few of the vessels contained further cremated bone, perhaps representing the remains of some predeceased.

The other cemetery appears to have been earlier in date and covered an area of some 57 sq m. It comprised six urned cremations which had been shallowly buried upright in small circular pits. Three of these showed a deliberate placing of skull fragments either to one side of or directly beneath the containing vessel, whilst a small grave nearby contained only a human skull.

The human head was regarded as a symbol of divinity and other-worldly power and it figures prominently in Celtic cult practice.⁷ Closely allied to these superstitions was the veneration of sacred waters and wells and elsewhere at the site the severed head and neck of an adult woman had been carefully placed behind the woven framework of a late 1st century A.D. well. Several ordinary inhumations had been laid in disused quarry pits in addition to being interred in specially dug graves.⁸

The Roman Farms

Towards the end of the 1st century A.D., as the economic improvements of the early Roman period perhaps began to be felt, the homestead was transferred to a more open situation where it overlay the levelled ditches and other features of an earlier series of pens.

A sequence of circular and rectangular timber-framed buildings evidenced the longevity of occupation at the new site. However, while the absence of an enclosing palisade or ditch allowed more space for yards and ancillary structures, the main inhabited units probably only ever occupied a small plot of land which at any one time may not have been more than 250-300 sq. m. Within an area of just over 1,000 sq. m., houses were successively rebuilt and their positions often shifted, thereby occasioning several clearance and levelling operations. These, together with the replacement of individual timbers and the overlapping between the various rebuildings, made identification of the exact number of different structures and refurbishments difficult. Several individual buildings, mainly of circular design with diameters varying between 10m and about 14m, could however be distinguished.

The building sequence ended with the construction of a rectangular farmhouse containing several rooms. Its survival at a comparatively high level directly beneath the ploughsoil resulted in its plan being only recoverable where the increased soil cover of a headland and the ridges of later cultivation had protected it from the effects of pre-modern and recent ploughing. Its walls had formerly stood on broad gravel bases, although stone does not appear to have been a major feature of its design and construction.⁹ This late farmhouse occupied an area approximately 28m by 14m and was probably abandoned at the middle of the 4th century A.D.

To the south of the area which the successive farmhouses occupied, a yard contained two stonelined wells which had been dug down to the water table in the 2nd century A.D. Other ancillary features included a small circular hut, the exact purpose of which could not be demonstrated. In late Roman times, a drying kiln stood within an almost square enclosure, approximately 11m by 11.5m, roughly opposite two entrance gaps in its perimeter ditch. Four post-pads in a rectangular arrangement indicated that the feature had formerly been covered. The kiln was built of local limestone and had been sited on a slight rise with its oval stoking area at the lower end : together

with the slightly tapered effect provided by clay 'cheeks' at the flue mouth, this would have ensured a maximum draught. Its wide main flue bifurcated at a clay platform into side channels which were connected by a back flue, from which an exhaust or vent led into the open ditch of the contemporary enclosure. The date of the kiln is not entirely clear. Pottery buried at its abandonment dates to the 4th century A.D., but a structure such as this could have been in use throughout several generations, as earlier material from the re-cut perimeter ditch of the associated enclosure suggests. The kiln might reasonably have been used for a variety of activities requiring a warm drying heat rather than to have been restricted to one particular purpose.¹⁰

Throughout the period of its occupation, the later homestead site and its yard continued to be a central part of the surrounding field system. This preserved many elements of its early design, suggesting that the farming practice was essentially unchanged. Modification was often confined to an alteration in the design of an enclosure entrance or the shape of an individual small land unit. Among the smaller cultivated plots, two types of enclosure can be recognised: those covering between 250 and 700m², and larger ditched areas enclosing upwards of 1500m². Both forms could be contemporary although there may have been a preference for smaller enclosures at an earlier date. The larger arable fields seem always to have been integral to the farm and their ditches were frequently re-cut. In time live hedges could have become established, thereby perpetuating some of the field boundaries after the ditches themselves had finally filled. Such an interpretation would explain the limited evidence from the latest phases for linear features when compared to such other landscape features as quarry pits, wells and structures. Cut branches and twigs from the silting ditches might also indicate an incipient hedgerow management.

SAXON AND LATER ACTIVITY

There is a break in the settlement history of the site from the mid- to late-4th century A.D. until the middle Saxon period when renewed activity led to five timber-lined wells being opened. While each occupied a large circular pit which had been dug to between 0.5 and 1m below the level of the then contemporary water table and most were sited upon relatively clay-free gravel, the details of their construction varied. Two of the wells each

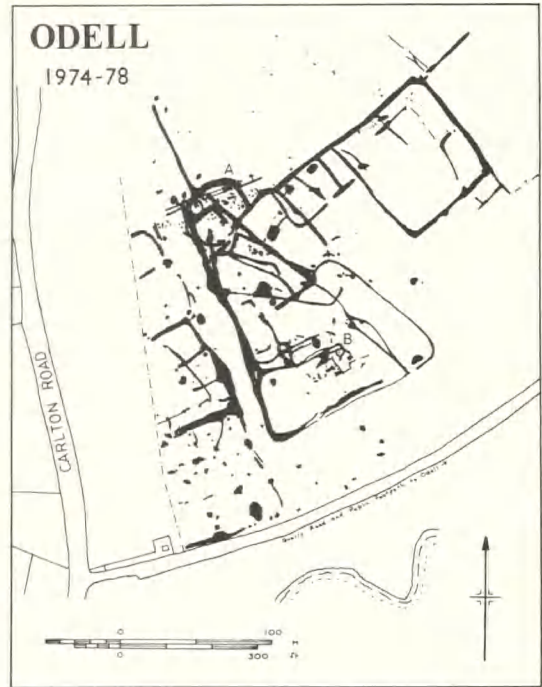


Fig 1 Excavated features at Harrold Pit, Odell. The main arable areas of the late Iron Age and Roman farms lay to the north and east of the successive homesteads (A, B) while the distinctive stockyards occupied the west with the river Ouse and associated meadows on the south continuing beyond the lower border of the illustration.

Drawing by Joe Prentice

contained an oval framework of small branches and twigs woven around a series of short uprights which had been either driven into the underlying gravel or were resting on the slope of the pit sides. The material used in their construction was mainly hazel with some oak and other woods. The wattle lining of one lay to the side of a platform of re-used planks and had a woven osier basket suspended from it by braces of small twigs. The basket was roughly circular, a little under 80cm in diameter, and perhaps had originally been between 60 and 65cm tall. Repairs to its weave and the complete absence of its bottom suggest that it was re-used in the well, presumably to act as a kind of filter. A further example of basketry was found in a third well where renewal of the partly collapsed original lining incorporated a specially

woven oval frame, 82cm by 70cm and 15-18cm deep. Of the other two wells of this period, one contained various timbers mainly of oak and hawthorn which had sometimes been split radially and laid as a square around four uprights, while the other comprised little more than a series of vertical timbers lining a water-hole into which a roughly made ladder of rung width 40-45 cm descended.

Radiocarbon measurements of material used in the well constructions suggest that the features were opened in the 7th-8th centuries A.D.¹¹. The pottery of the period comprised hand-made forms in a hard black gritty fabric.

Surface scatters of pottery combined with fragmentary structural evidence to indicate that any associated settlement traces had been largely lost to the plough. However, a *grubenhaus* with main axis almost 4.5m long was identified while a 7th century cemetery and possible hut sites were discovered during previous quarrying in the vicinity.¹²

Apart from a metalled road of an uncertain but ? Roman date, all the later features at the site related to agricultural use.¹³

NOTES

- 1 The excavation was undertaken as part of a programme of such work carried out in the county by the Planning Department of Bedfordshire County Council in conjunction with district councils and the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate of the Department of the Environment. It was made possible through the exemplary co-operation of the landowner and quarrier, Hall Aggregates (Eastern Counties) Ltd., a part of the RMC Group of Companies. Unfortunately, space does not allow adequate recognition of the contributions to the results made by those numerous individuals who undertook work of special skill and responsibility: but it is to them and to all the other people associated with the project that the highest praise and thanks are due.
- 2 The site was discovered from the air and photographed by Professor J.K. St. Joseph of Cambridge University: see R.C.H.M., *A Matter of Time* (HMSO, London, 1960), 53. It should be seen as part of the ancient settlement pattern of the area, for which cf. B.N. Eagles & Vera I. Evison, 'Excavations at Harrold, Bedfordshire, 1951-53', *Bedfordshire Archaeol J*, 5 (1970), 17-55. Relevant air photographs and summaries of previous knowledge of the site are contained in the county Sites & Monuments Record at PRN 543.

- 3 Cf. the partial investigation of such sites as Wyboston (*Proc Cambridge Antiq Soc*, 50 (1957), 75-84), Bedford (*Bedfordshire Archaeol J*, 7 (1972), 81-2), Elstow (*CBA Group 9 Newsletter*, 7 (1977), 18; *Bedfordshire Archaeol J*, 12 (1977), 27-54), Bromham (*Bedfordshire Archaeol J*, 8 (1973), 23-66), Radwell (*ibid.*, 67-91), and Emberton (*Rec Buckinghamshire*, 19.4 (1975), 387-8) — all comparable sites along the upper and middle Gt. Ouse.
- 4 The earliest pottery from the site recalls many of the forms and styles of finish, as well as some of the decorative elements of the vessels known from the central 'Belgic' areas and with its use of 'grog' must belong to the same tradition. Subsequent ceramic developments, for which additional evidence has been obtained at other sites, are a further indication that the area was greatly influenced by so-called 'Belgic' trade and expansion from the close of the 1st century B.C. on. For further details see *A Summary of the Romano-British Pottery Seminar held at Hardingstone on 4th June 1977* (Northants CC, 1978), 10-11. Cf. also, *Bedfordshire Archaeol J*, 8 (1973), 5-22; *Rec Buckinghamshire*, 19.4 (1975), 373-421.
- 5 The deposit came from a pond within a small enclosure to the east of the early homestead site. Whilst dung beetles of the genera *Aphodius* and *Onthophagus* indicate herbivorous mammals in the vicinity, their relatively low numbers would suggest that the feature was not situated immediately adjacent to a grazing or stalling area. Information and identifications by Miss M.A. Girling, DOE Ancient Monuments Laboratory.
- 6 Cf. P.V. Glob, *Ard og Plov i Nordens Oldtid* (Universitetsforlaget, Aarhus, 1951), 14 ff., 'Krog-arde'.
- 7 Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (RKP, London, 1967), 94-140; 140-9. See also the same authoress, 'Shafts, pits, wells — sanctuaries of the Belgic Britons?', in J.M. Coles and D.D.A. Simpson, eds., *Studies in Ancient Europe* (Leicester, 1968), 255-85.
- 8 Other burials were found during previous quarrying on land between the site of recent excavation and the River Great Ouse, *Bedfordshire Times and Standard*, 13 April 1956.
- 9 Despite this, the later farmhouse was probably as comfortable and spacious as many of the contemporary lower-scale 'villa' dwellings.
- 10 Earlier drying kilns were also recorded. They were small and key-hole-shaped.
- 11 They include dates of ad 720 ± 70 (HAR-1038) and ad 710 ± 80 (HAR-1427). Two earlier dates were obtained for materials re-used in the well constructions (HAR-1428, HAR-1838). Publication in *Radiocarbon*, forthcoming.
- 12 See *Bedfordshire Archaeol J*, 5 (1970), 38-50.
- 13 Paper first submitted May 1978 and subsequently revised to incorporate the results of research to the end of 1978. Full publication is anticipated for 1981.

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