

Excavations at Willington 1984

I — The Bronze Age

ANDREW PINDER

SUMMARY

During 1984 a double ring ditch was excavated in advance of gravel extraction at Willington in Bedfordshire. A circular ditch surrounded an inner ditch of irregular plan with a single causeway. No burial was found, and the monument had suffered heavy plough damage. The site was presumed to be a Bronze Age funerary monument, dug on the boundary between arable land and unploughed grassland.

INTRODUCTION

In January and May 1984 the Bedfordshire County Council's Archaeological Field Team undertook the rescue excavation of several crop mark sites at Willington, prior to gravel extraction. Four areas of interest were identified (a fifth site being found, on excavation, to be natural deposits) dating from the Bronze Age to the Roman period. This report is concerned with the excavation of a Bronze Age ring ditch, in Area 1.

The threatened area lay within an extensive distribution of crop mark sites to the east of Bedford (Fig 2), including several ring ditches (some multiple), some rectilinear features, possibly *cursus* and many ditches and enclosures. Over the years prehistoric and Roman finds have occasionally come to light and one ring ditch was excavated at Manor Farm, Willington, in 1962 by James Dyer, who interpreted it as a possible early Iron Age funerary structure. Two early prehistoric pierced stones were recovered from the area in the first quarter of this century, but have now disappeared, although Bedford Museum holds casts of them (Fig 1).

Medieval land use was common arable land with meadow along the edge of the river, the boundary apparently being on the same line as the modern field boundary. This pattern of land use continued until the 1960's when the area was planted with poplar trees. In the area excavated, the trees had been felled and the land returned to arable use.

An aerial photograph (Plate 1b), taken prior to

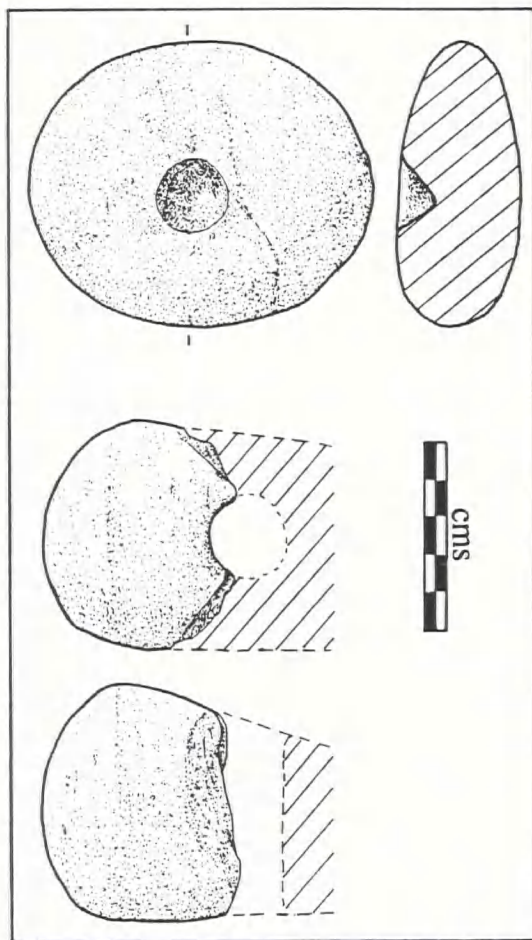


Fig 1 Prehistoric pierced stones from Willington

Scale: 1/2

tree planting, shows several features, notably a double ring ditch cut by the modern field boundary, a large double enclosure, some ditches and a small square enclosure. In addition, a natural bank of sand can be seen running diagonally across the field, shown by the light strip in the photograph.

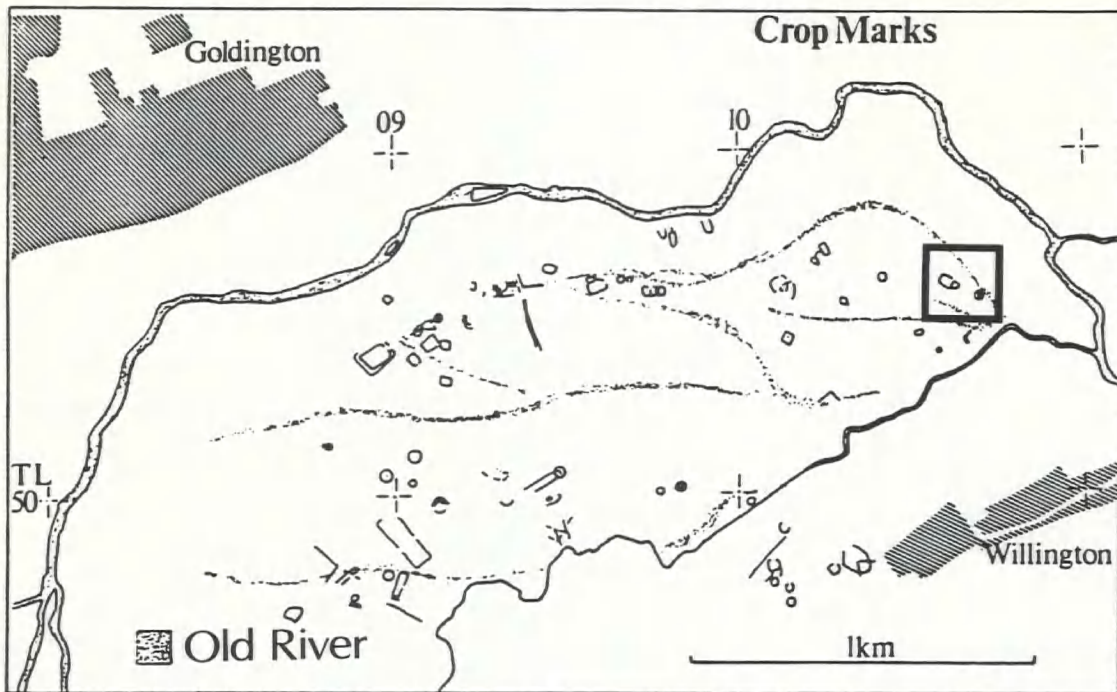


Fig 2 Crop Marks East of Bedford

The method of excavation on the ring ditch was to remove the topsoil by mechanical graders, and then excavate the overburden of old ploughsoil by hand.

NATURAL TOPOGRAPHY

The site lies on glacial sand and gravel between a loop of the Ouse and a small tributary river. The gravel surface was dissected by two former watercourses, probably representing late glacial or early post-glacial braiding of the Great Ouse, which would not have been active by the time Neolithic settlement took place in the area. The sand bank formed by river action, however, would have been noticeable and, even after modern ploughing, this natural bank existed as a barely visible ridge that can be seen from a contour survey (Fig 3) showing the ring ditch and river deposits superimposed. Overlying the gravel, within the area of study, was a varying thickness of dirty, gravelly loam; the remains of old ploughsoil. To the east of the field boundary ditch this layer was absent, the modern ploughsoil lying directly on top of what appeared to be dark grey alluvial deposits.

AREA I – THE RING DITCH

(1) INTRODUCTION

Crop marks showed a double ring ditch, the inner ditch having a break in its circumference to the north west (Plate 1b). A careful contour survey of the area (Fig 3) failed to detect any sign of earthworks, other than the natural ridge. The shaded area on Fig 3 represents pre-Bronze Age alluvium.

Immediately on removal of topsoil, the top of the sand ridge was revealed with the ring ditch cut into it and on either side of this the gravelly loam old ploughsoil. Subsoil was removed by hand and the surface of the ring ditches cleaned. The centre was directly in the middle of the sand ridge. To the east the ditches were cut through deposits from an old watercourse that ran north-west to south-east along the boundary. After initial cleaning, sections were cut through the ditches and features (Fig 4). Lastly, the whole central area was taken down about 10 cms into the sand and gravel, to look for any features that might have been hidden by surface disturbances.

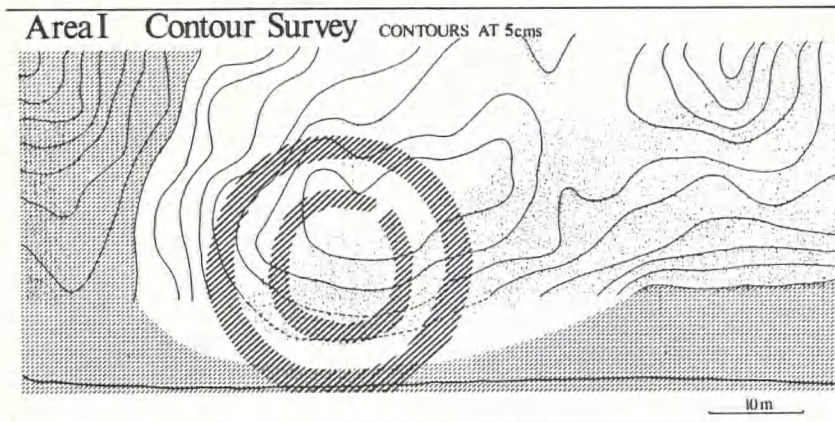


Fig 3 Area I: Contour Survey and Alluvium Deposits

THE DITCHES

The inner ditch (1) was 2.5 m wide by 80 cm deep and was broken by a narrow causeway, about 30 cm wide. There was no discernable evidence of re-cutting. Over most of its circumference the sections of the ditch displayed a normal pattern of silting (Fig 5, E and I). On the east side of the inner ditch, one section (Fig 5, F) displayed an unusual silting sequence. After a primary silt had developed, a mass of black, stone free, silty loam conjoined with a layer of dirty gravel was deposited in the ditch. These layers were possibly formed by a block of topsoil, together with its attached sub-soil falling into the ditch soon after completion. An analysis of this block of loam suggests that it derived from an area that had never been ploughed. Subsequently the partially filled up ditch appeared to be then recut and refilled with clean gravel. The western side of the ring ditch showed significant differences: it had been partially dug through ploughed soil (Fig 6). This suggests that the ring ditch was dug on the boundary between two areas of agricultural activity: ploughed land to the west, and unploughed grassland to the east.

The outer ditch was 2.5 m wide and about 1 m deep. It formed a complete circuit and had a normal silting pattern.

The ditches show contrasting plans. The inner ditch had external measurements of 19 m by about 16.5 m and the layout was not at all regular. It narrowed and diverted around feature 4, as if there once was a post standing prior to the laying out of the central area. The causeway in ditch 1 does not appear to be functional as it stands, especially when it is considered that there would then have been several extra centimetres of soil on top of the

natural. There was no evidence of recutting the ends of the ditch so it would appear that the causeway would not be very much wider than it appeared when excavated, probably no wider than about 50 cms and possibly less. Clearly, it would not have been a serviceable path for very long, dug as it was in sandy subsoil.

The outer ditch has an external diameter of about 30 m and was nearly regular. The deviation from the circular does not seem to be regular and a true circle can be made to cut through the ditch all round. The irregularity may either be just poor laying out, or could be accounted for by laying out from a central point on ground that was sloping away irregularly. The centre point of ditch 2 is 2.5 m to the west of the centre of ditch 1 so they are unlikely to have been laid out at the same time.

OTHER FEATURES

Two circular features, one in the central area (4) and the other just outside the 'causeway' (5) were found. The internal feature was 60 cm wide and 40 cm deep, without packing and with no finds of any sort. The fill was a brown, charcoal free loam. The external feature (5) was also find free, 60 cms in diameter and 30 cms deep. Both features were heavily disturbed by modern tree roots. No other features were identified, although the eastern third of the central area was heavily disturbed by ancient tree roots. Probably this root disturbance pre-dates the digging of the ring ditch.

FINDS

Finds were confined to the ditches and consist of pottery, flint and a small amount of animal bone fragments.

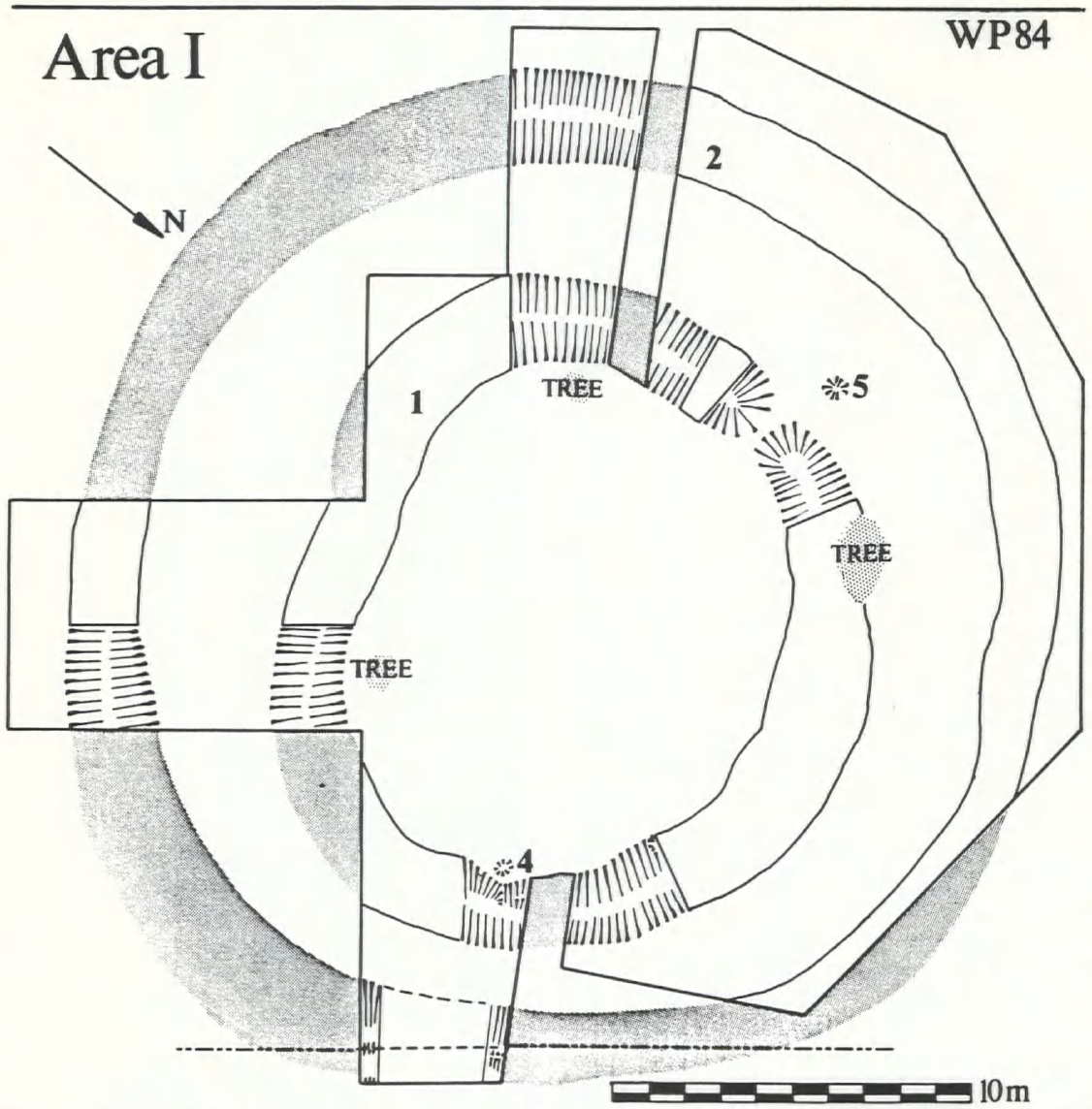


Fig 4a Area I: Plan

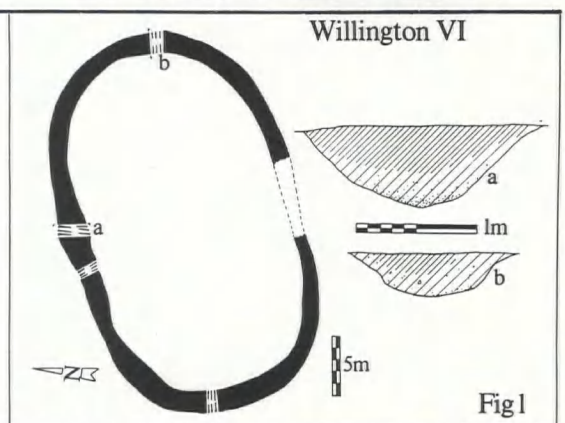


Fig 4b Area VI: Plan

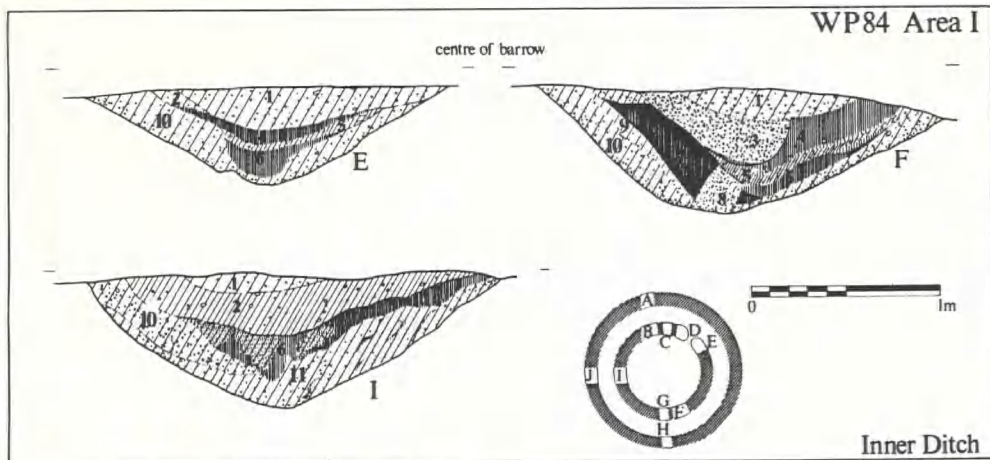


Fig 5 Area I: Ditch Sections

Twenty-two sherds of pottery were found, mainly in the upper fills of the ditches. Most of them were tiny, less than finger nail size. There was only one rim sherd (Fig 7, a) and none of the pieces showed any decoration or diagnostic features which could be used to date them. Most sherds contained small flint grits within the fabrics and several had the vassicular appearance of leached or burnt out shell or organic material. The pottery appears to be early prehistoric rather than derived from the Iron Age site to the north, and the quantity and condition of it is consistent with normal ploughland scatter.

Flints were scattered throughout the ditch fills. Eleven struck flakes and one possible core were found, although there was a large amount of natural flint on the site, and most of the flakes could have been accidentally struck. There are two utilised flakes (Fig 7, b and c). The first (b) is struck from dark grey flint and shows a regular flaking along both sides of one edge, and could have been utilised as a scraper. The other (c) is a regularly struck blade with several parallel scars on one face and some small flakes along the one sharp side, presumably from utilisation. A core (Fig 7, d) of burnt flint with a thick white patina shows a number of parallel scars of blades. The lithic material does not suggest any large scale manufacture of tools on the site so, presumably, any contemporary occupation was set at some distance from the ring ditch.

DISCUSSION

There are no remains of any mound or bank, or linking stratigraphy between the two ditches. It is therefore not possible to be sure of the exact relationship

of the various features with each other. There are a number of possible interpretations of the site, the two ditches could either be contemporary or widely separated in time. The contrasting plans of the ditches would appear to reflect contrasting functions: the inner ditch was probably merely a quarry for a central mound, but the outer and more carefully dug one may have been more of an important feature in its own right. There is no evidence which precludes the ditches being contemporary or separated from each other by a short period of time. If this is so, the three phases of construction demonstrated by the excavation could be interpreted as being stages in the building of a single monument rather than a reuse and enlargement of the site, as could be the case at Radwell (published in this volume).

The sequence of construction would have started by inserting two posts which were the means of defining an area. A mound would then have been thrown up over this area, the earth being derived from a rough quarry ditch (1). The central mound was then encompassed by an outer, carefully laid out, ditch (2). The spoil from this second ditch could have been piled onto the central mound. In this case the combined volume of the two ditches would have produced a heap about 3 m high. Alternatively the spoil could have been used to form an external bank. The inner ditch causeway could either be a means of getting spoil from the outer ditch onto the mound, or just a random break in what was a very irregular ditch.

There is no evidence for function. The monument's prominent position on an upstanding ridge

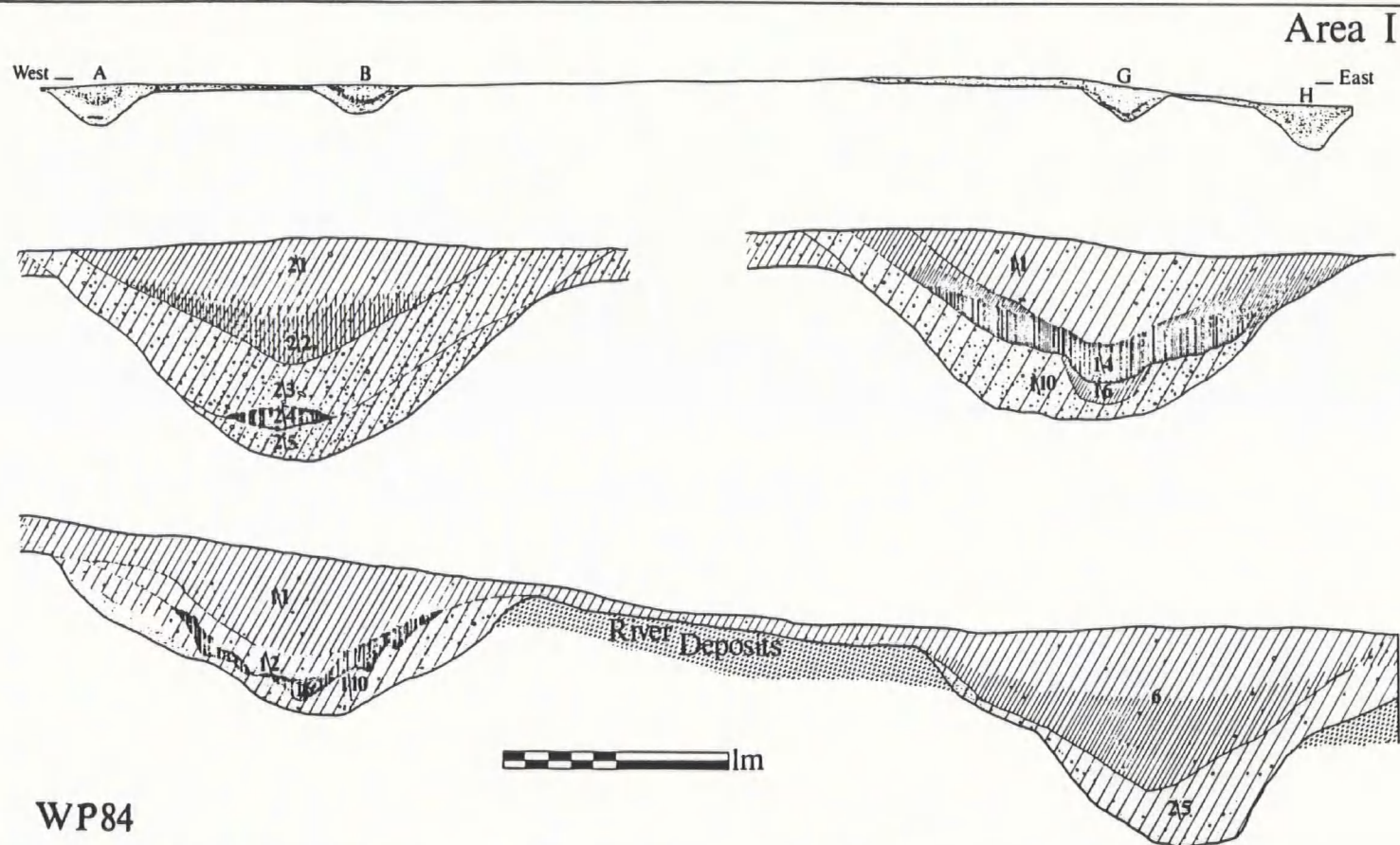


Fig 6 Area I: Ditch Sections

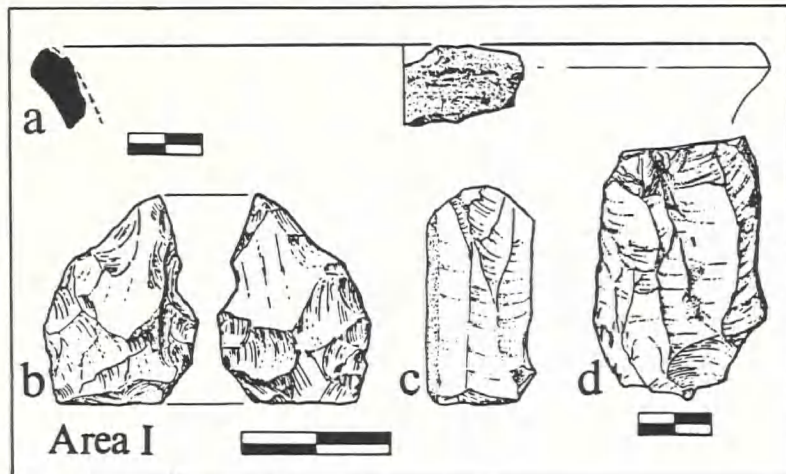


Fig 7 Finds

Scales: a and d $\frac{1}{2}$; b and c full size

of sand would make it particularly vulnerable to plough damage, and any central inhumation or cremation would have been long since destroyed. The lack of any later prehistoric pottery in the upper fills of the ditch in a fairly heavily occupied area, suggest an early date for the destruction of the monument.

As has been discussed above, the double ring ditch at Radwell is not immediately comparable to Willington; a better parallel is perhaps ring ditch 16 from Harrold (Eagles and Evison 1970), which contained a crouched inhumation. Any definitive discussion about the date and function of these monuments must wait until a better preserved example can be investigated, though P. Woodward (this volume) has put forward some useful observations.

APPENDIX

A Crop Mark Site at Willington

In November 1985, a large crop mark site was investigated prior to destruction by gravel excavation. The site lay about 220 m south-east of the double ring ditch (Area I) and can be seen on Plate 1b of *Willington I, The Bronze Age*, in this journal. The entire site had to be cleared, recorded and sectioned in two hours, so the excavation was far from complete.

The site was initially thought to be a ring ditch

which had been extended to the west. On stripping it proved to be an irregularly cut ditch enclosing an oval area 28 m by 16 m with the long axis running roughly east-west (Fig 4b). The ditches were of a single phase and showed no evidence of recutting or cleaning in the four sections dug. There were no internal features and no finds from the site.

The absence of finds in an area so intensively settled from the iron age suggests an early prehistoric date for the digging and silting up of the ditches. The lack of any of the normal domestic detritus suggests that this was not an occupation site, and the lack of a break in the ditches would make it difficult to interpret it is an enclosure for agricultural use. The function of the site cannot, on the meagre evidence collected, be postulated.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my co-director, Joe Prentice, and the staff funded by the Manpower Services Commission for their work on the excavation. I am grateful to Miss Angela Simco for conducting pre-excavation research, and for the help given prior to the excavation. Mark Robinson commented on the environmental evidence from the site. Special thanks are due to Redlands Quarry Limited for permission to excavate and the practical help given during excavation. The project was grant aided by English Heritage.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Eagles, B.N. and Evison, V.I., 1970; 'Excavation at Harrold, Bedfordshire 1951-1953'; *Beds Arch J*, 5, 1970, 17-55.

The Bedfordshire Archaeological Council is indebted to the Historic Monuments and Buildings Commission for a grant towards the costs of this paper.