

Excavations at Willington, 1984

II Iron Age and Roman Periods

ANDREW PINDER

with a contribution from
Ann Stirland

This report concentrates on the excavation of features dating from the Iron Age and Roman period from Redlands gravel pit in Willington. The general topographical and archaeological context for the sites under discussion, and the aerial photograph showing them, is contained within the report *Excavations at Willington, 1984. I The Bronze Age*, in this journal.

THE IRON AGE

As stated in the above report, the site at Willington was divided up into five areas of archaeological interest. The Iron Age material was concentrated within area II: a large double enclosure to the north-west of the Bronze Age ring ditch. The site was excavated by the Bedfordshire County Council Planning Department Archaeology Field Team, with Mrs Terry Jackman as co-director.

Because of limited time and resources it was decided to strip and excavate an area that concentrated on the smaller, south-eastern enclosure and restrict work on the larger enclosure to a watching brief and limited excavation during the stripping by the quarry. A mechanical excavator stripped away the overburden of old ploughsoil and revealed the surface of the natural sand and gravel. Damage by tree roots was limited but roots had penetrated all the ditches and other features extensively. After clearing, a total of 138 post-holes, gullies, pits and ditches were excavated and recorded (Fig 1).

(i) THE DITCHES

Sections were taken through all the ditches and junctions of ditches and several interesting features were observed. The larger enclosure had a 'V' shaped ditch and near the entrance (14) it had been recut, the recut being done on the inside of the enclosure (Fig 2). The rest of the circumference had

only a single phase of digging and measured about 1.5m wide and 1m deep.

The smaller enclosure had a ditch of approximately the same size, although the length between the two enclosures (3) was noticeably smaller (Fig 3). The ditch at the entrance (11) had been recut twice and the ditch dividing the small enclosure, once. Unlike the larger enclosure the recuts had been done on the outside of the enclosure. Presumably this reflects both pressures on space within the small enclosure and also the differing function of the two enclosures. The one with an internal recut is likely to have had an external bank, the smaller enclosure is more likely to have had an internal hedge.

(ii) INTERNAL FEATURES

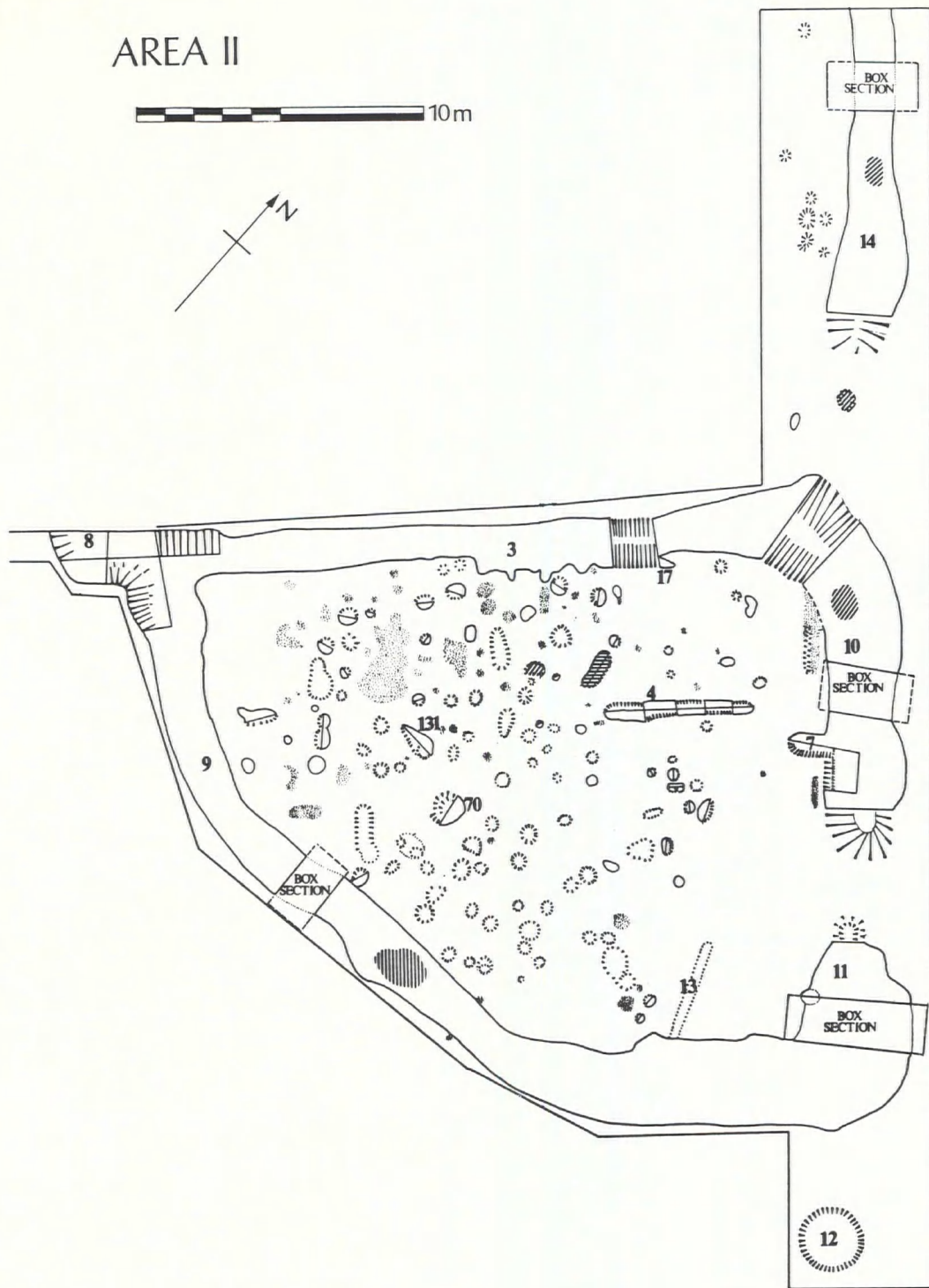
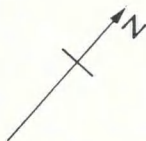
(a) *The Small Enclosure*

Over one hundred features were recognised within the small enclosure. The larger proportion of these consisted of post holes, with varying sizes (20 cms to 50 cms wide and between 10 and 40 cms deep) but generally 'V' shaped. There were no packing stones in any of the post holes and only one showed any evidence of a post pipe (Fig 4, 70). The plan and section of several of the post holes (eg Fig 4, 20) showed evidence of recutting but only in one case was it possible to differentiate the fills so as to discover the sequence of cutting (Fig 4, 128, 129). The fills of the post holes was similar to the ditches, varying between a sandy, grey loam and a yellow-brown, sandy loam. The distribution of the different fills reflected the varying natural and subsoil through which they were dug.

Of the considerable number of post holes found in the small enclosure only relatively few can be consigned to a particular structure. Three putative

AREA II

10m



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Fig 1 Area II: Plan

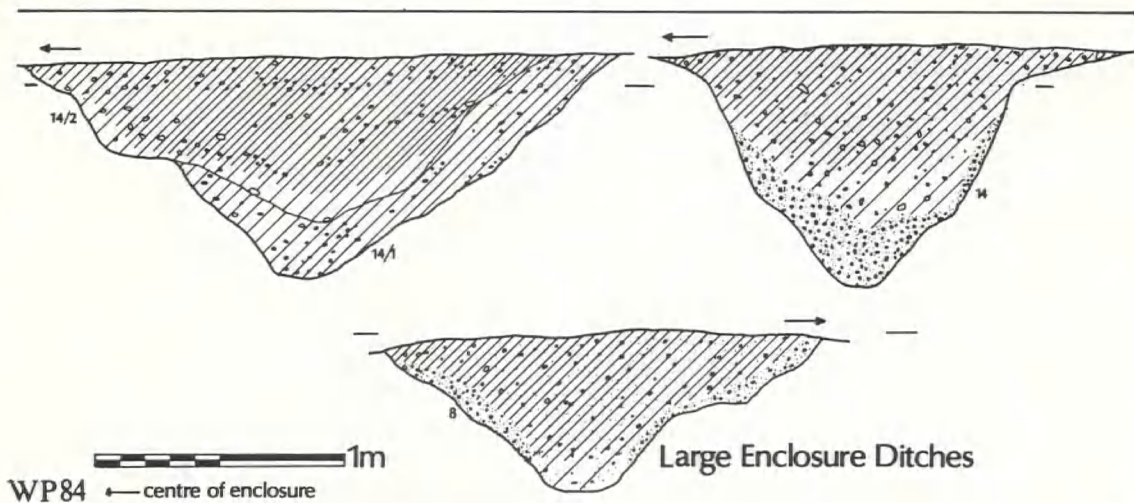


Fig 2 Area II: Large Enclosure Ditches

rings of post holes suggest three possible rebuilds of huts (Fig 5). Two were about 1.6 m in diameter with central posts. One of these huts (b) had a possible porch. The third, and earlier hut, had no central post and was only 12 m diameter. There was no evidence of any drip gullies so these 'huts' are merely the product of selecting groups of post holes and not too much credence should be put upon them.

Four lengths of gully were excavated presumably these were drip gullies for structures as they held no structural elements (see Fig 4, 4 and 13), and were in contrast to the post holes by virtue of the fact that they contained pottery, suggesting they were left open for some time.

Only one definite pit was found within the small enclosure (7). The presence of large quantities of pot and bone from within it and the fact that it was cut into the side of the enclosure ditch suggest that it was intended as a rubbish or latrine pit.

(b) Large Enclosure

Features within the larger enclosure were less numerous, but only a relatively small area was excavated archaeologically, so no real comprehensive plan could be observed. A number of post holes and one pit were uncovered by mechanical stripping though none produced any finds.

(iii) EXTERNAL FEATURES (Fig 6)

Three pits were found to the SE of the smaller enclosure. All were regularly dug about 2 m in diameter and survived to between 40 and 60 cm

deep. Pits 1 and 2 were found by mechanical stripping and were emptied in rather hurried conditions; the third (12) was identified on the aerial photograph and was found and excavated archaeologically. This pit was partially clay lined. There was no carbonized grain from any of the pits, and although a few sherds of pottery and bits of bone were recovered there was little evidence to suggest that they were ever used for rubbish deposition. Presumably they were originally storage pits and possibly, as the natural soil is so permeable, they could have once been totally clay lined.

The aerial photograph shows a ditch running north-west to south-east to the north of the site. This ditch (137) consisted in its earlier form as a steep-sided cutting, surviving to about 50 cms deep. Silting had apparently occurred rapidly and the ditch was recut to the north-east, as a deeper (70 cm) and wider (1.6 m) shallower-sloping feature. This appears to have been fairly thoroughly cleaned out at some time, as there was no clean primary silt, as occurred in other ditches on the site.

To the east of this ditch were traces of another (138). This was far harder to define as it ran along the edge of the sand escarpment and was dug into old riverine deposits. The upper fill of this ditch was loamy gravel, which was replaced at the bottom of the feature by black silty clay, probably the result of intermittent flooding. It was into the upper fill of this ditch that the Roman cremation was found (see below). Running along the south-west edge of this ditch was a row of regularly spaced post holes, but as

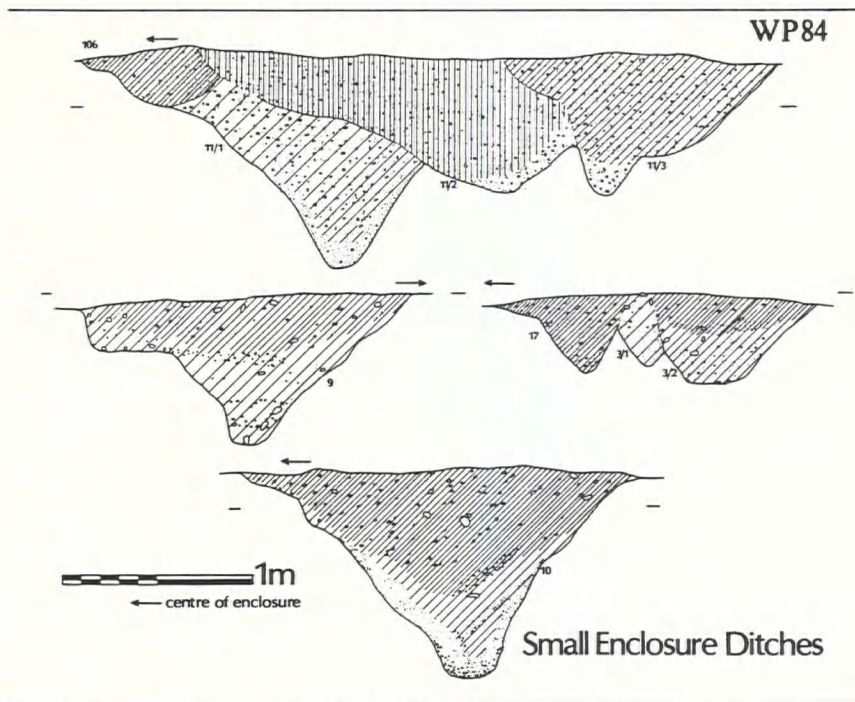


Fig 3 Area II: Small Enclosure Ditches

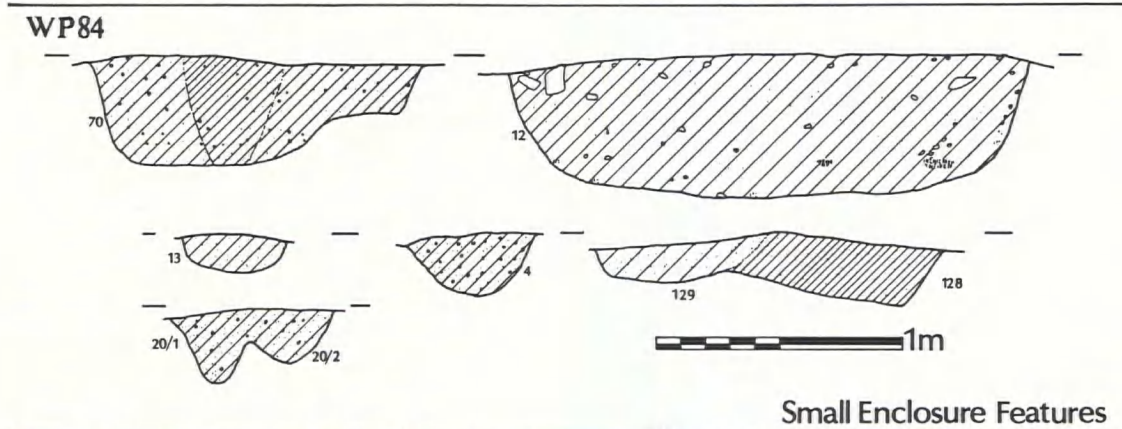


Fig 4 Area II: Sections of Small Enclosure Features

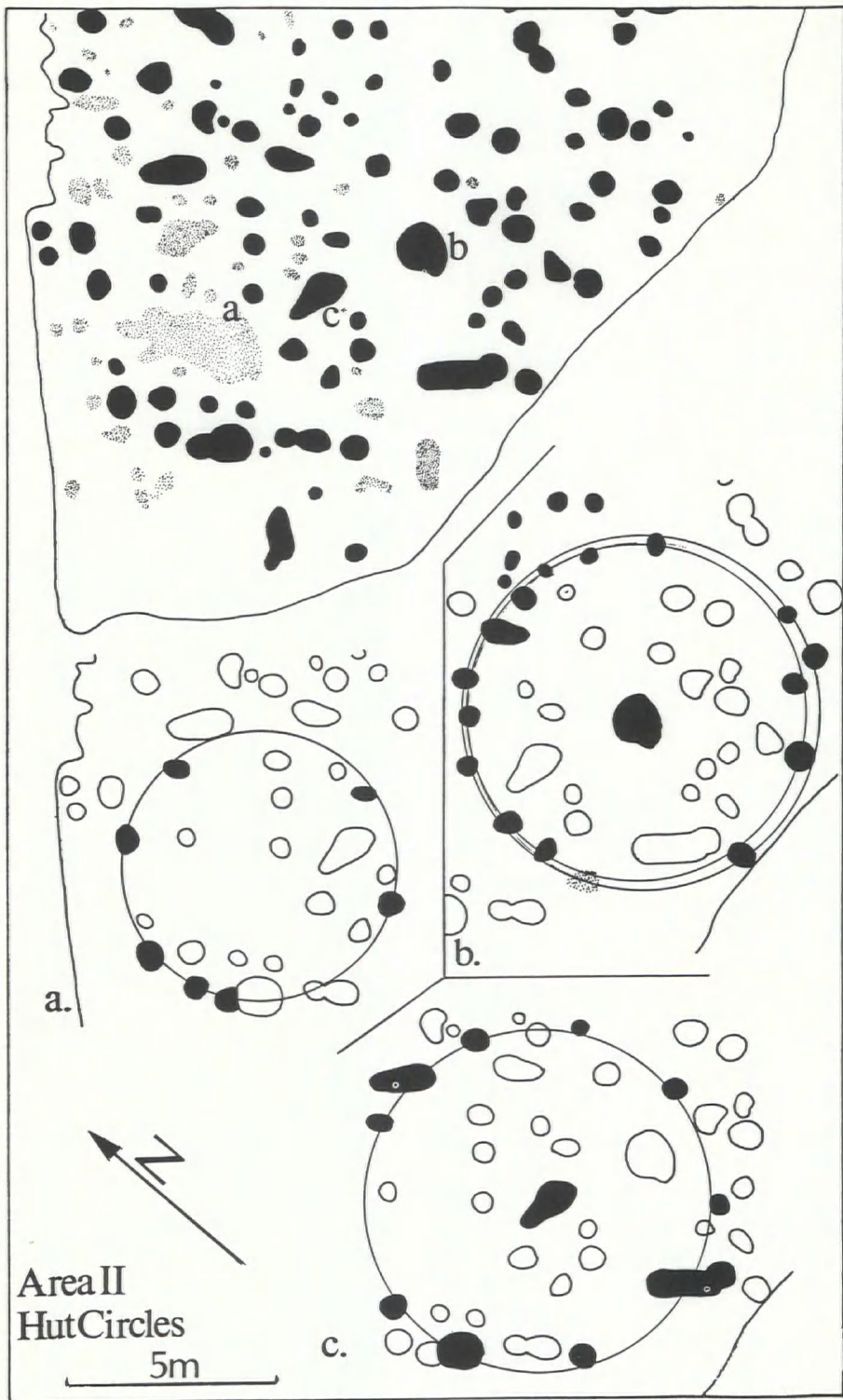


Fig 5 Area II: Hut Circles

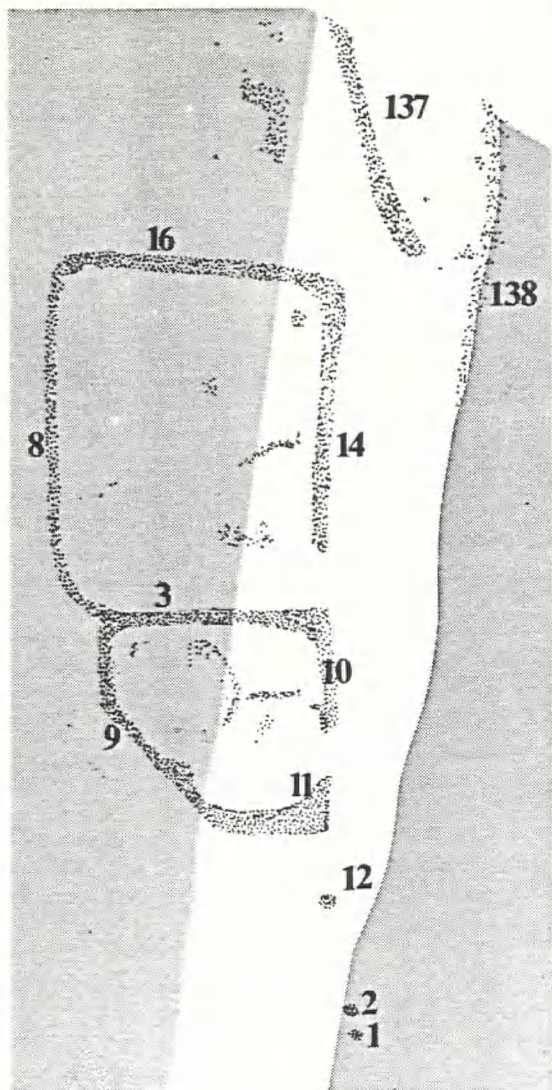


Fig 6 Area II: External Features

these were noticed during mechanical stripping by the quarry it was not possible to investigate them.

These two ditches and post holes would seem to be the remains of a trackway and fence line running up to the enclosure. It runs along the top of the sand ridge and possibly marks the natural division between good arable land to the west and marshy, intermittently flooded pasture to the east.

(iv) FINDS

Finds were confined to the ditches, pits and gullies: nothing was recovered from any of the post holes. Although there were at least three recognisable phases of the occupation, it was not possible in the majority of cases to ascribe finds to a particular phase. The pottery forms a homogenous group, so it has been treated as a single assemblage spanning a long period of time.

(a) Pottery

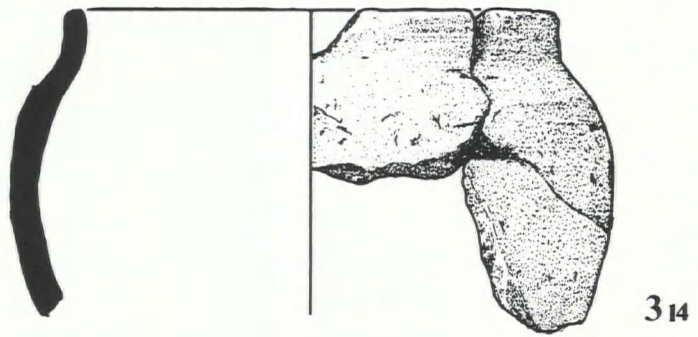
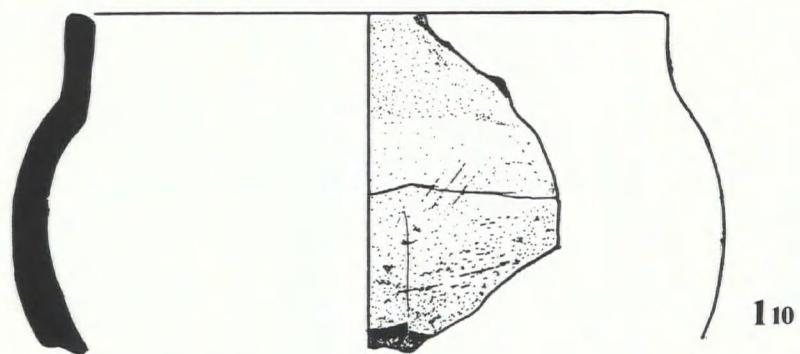
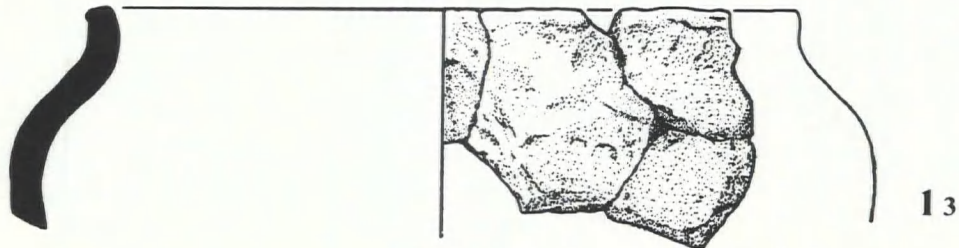
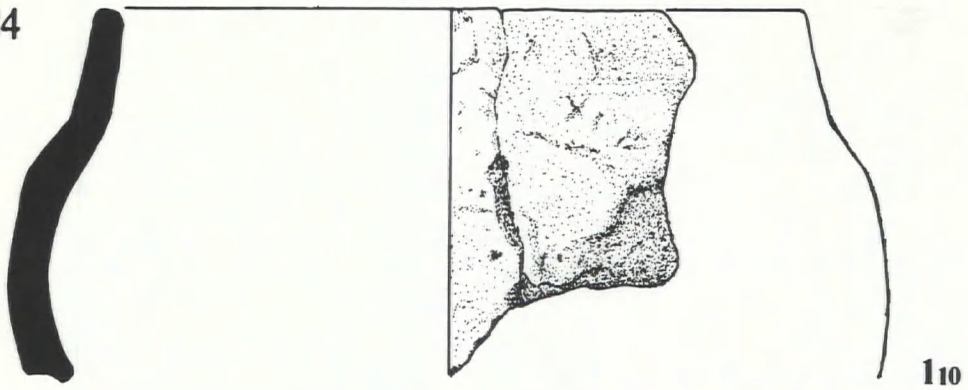
The pottery fabric is much as one would expect from an assemblage of this period. The majority of the pot is made with a clay containing some limestone or fossil shell. Within this basic matrix there are varying proportions of grog and organic matter, although it could be that these may be derived from the clay source, such as deposits exposed by river erosion. This fabric has been termed F1. F2 is a variant of F1 but contains much larger inclusions (up to 5 mm across). In addition there is a small group of pottery which is made of clay with a fairly uniform amount of small rounded quartz and grog fragments. The look and feel of this fabric (F3) suggests that the clay source may have been different from the others. All the pottery was hand made and the firing was, as might be expected, variable. F1 is generally rather soft with F2 fabrics, usually from the larger vessels, being on the whole harder and having a dark inner core and an outer surface that varied from pale beige to dark grey. F3 by contrast is a well fired hard fabric which has been uniformly reduced.

The fabric of illustrated sherds is described on the drawings (Figs 7 and 8). The majority of vessels were simple jars or cooking pots, with short upright necks, rather ill-defined shoulders and straight or slightly rounded bodies. Bases were flat and rather thick. In addition to this basic form there are two different bowl forms (Fig 8): a simple bowl with a flattened rim, and a small bowl with an upright neck and a slightly flaring shoulder. Lastly there is a sherd from a straight-sided jar with no neck and thumb-nail impression along the rim. Three handles were found, one being grooved along its back, possibly as an aid to suspension.

All the decorated sherds have been illustrated, decoration being confined to thumb-nail impression along the rims and simple linear scoring of the body of the vessels.

The ceramic evidence is little use as a tool for dating. The early Iron Age in the Ouse Valley is characterised by an extreme conservatism in

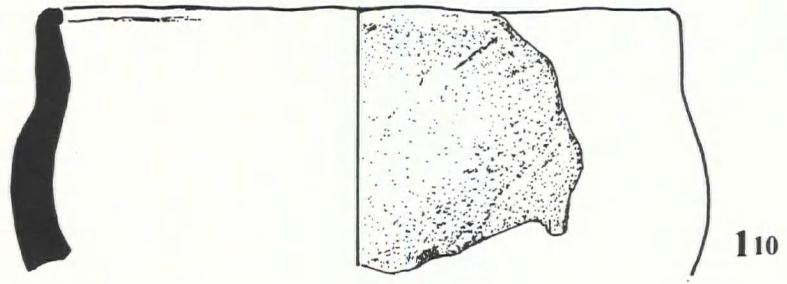
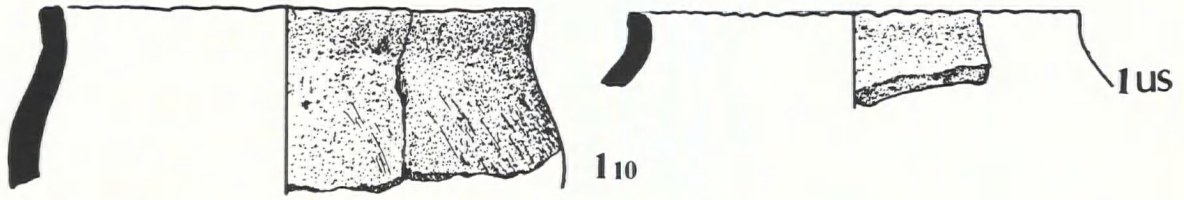
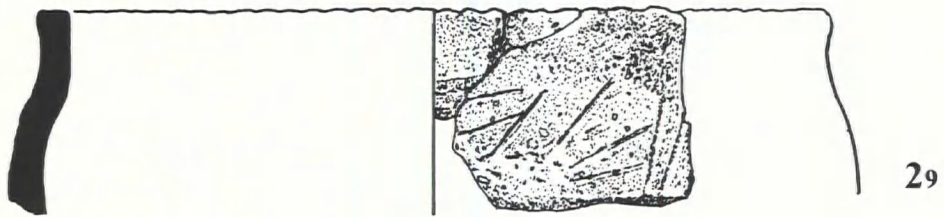
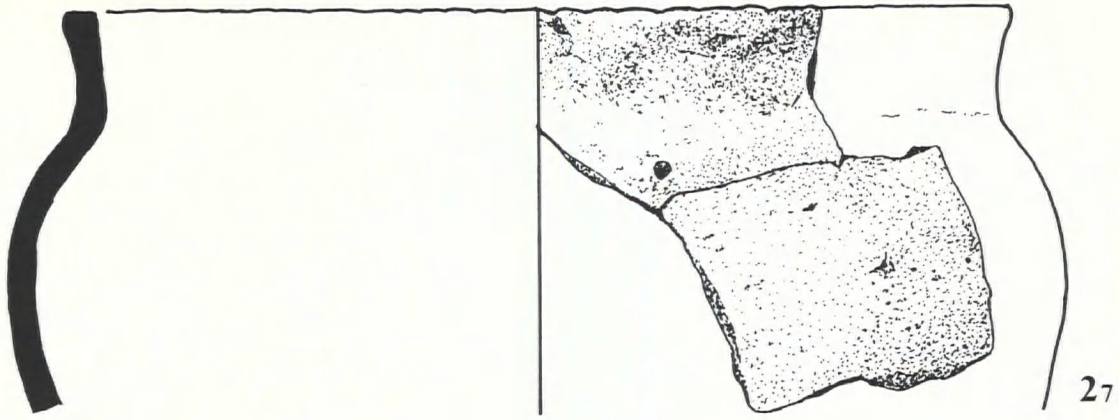
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2 Fabric
2 Feature

Fig 7 Area II: Pottery
Scale: 1/2





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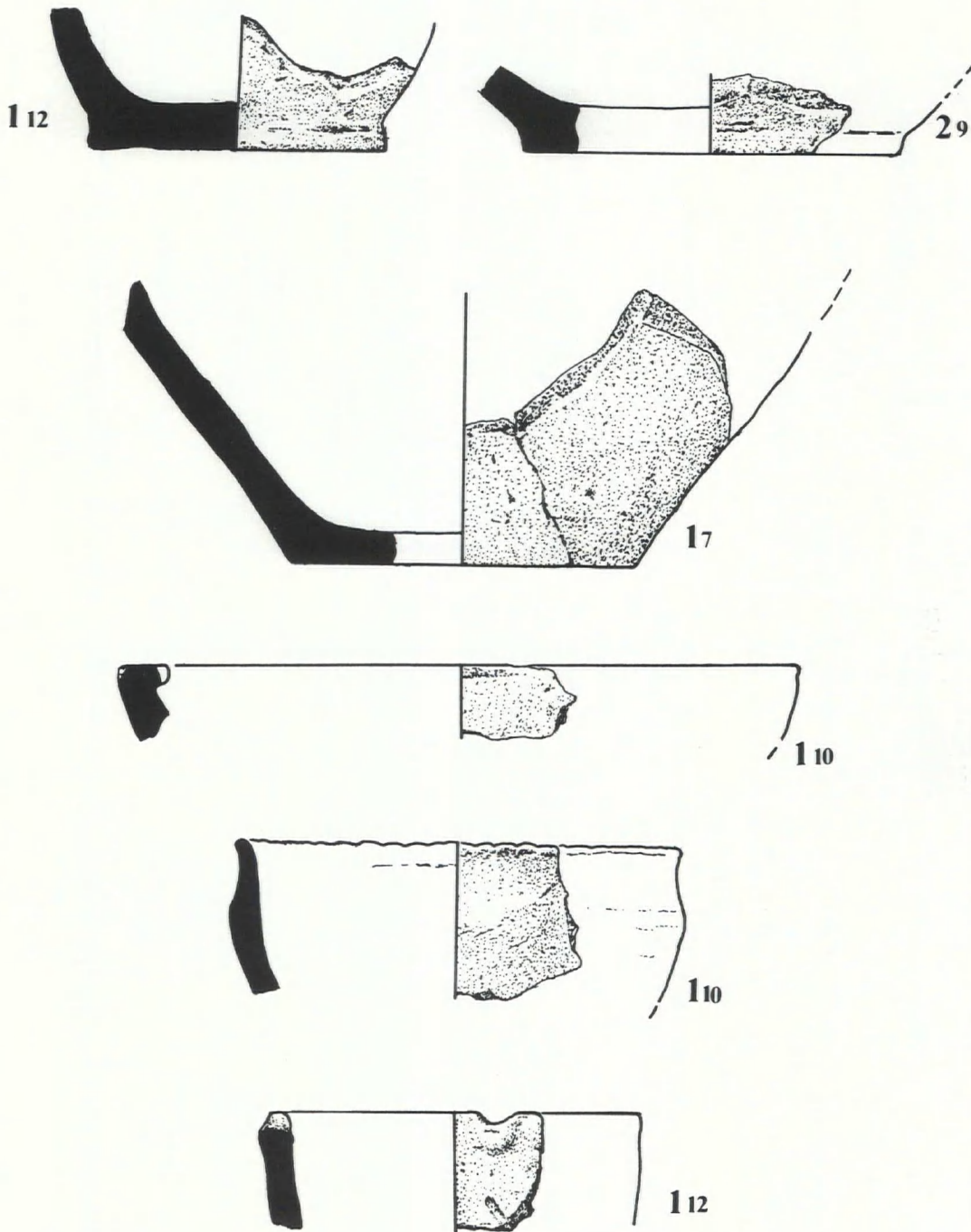
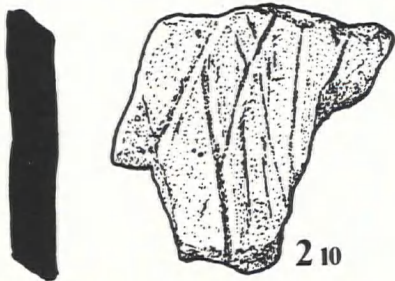
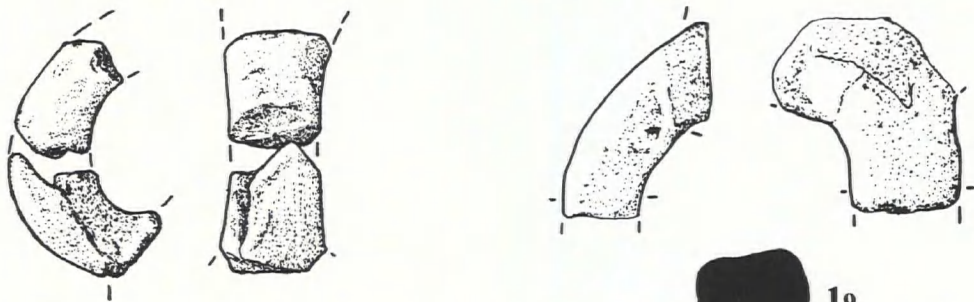
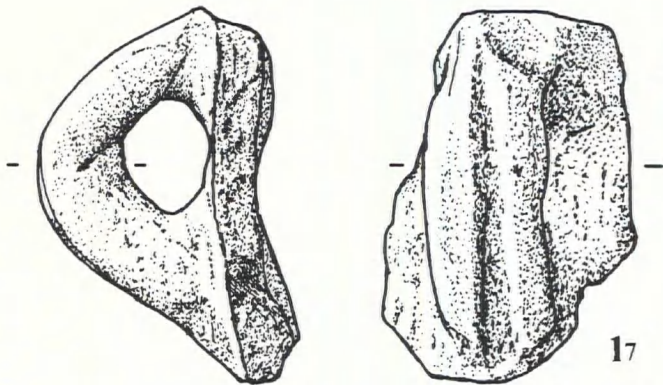


Fig 8 Area II: Pottery
Scale: 1/2





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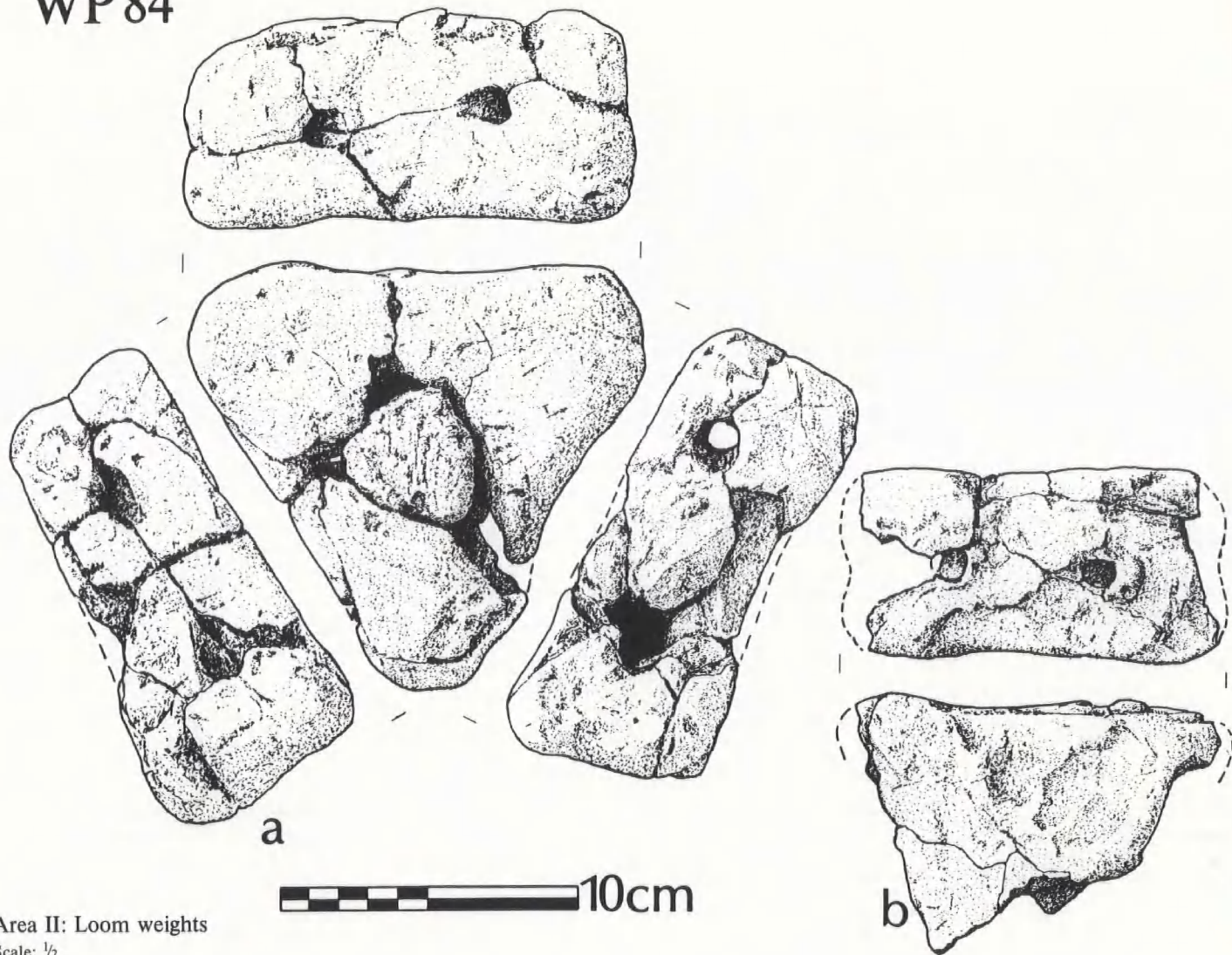


Fig 9 Area II: Loom weights
Scale: $\frac{1}{2}$

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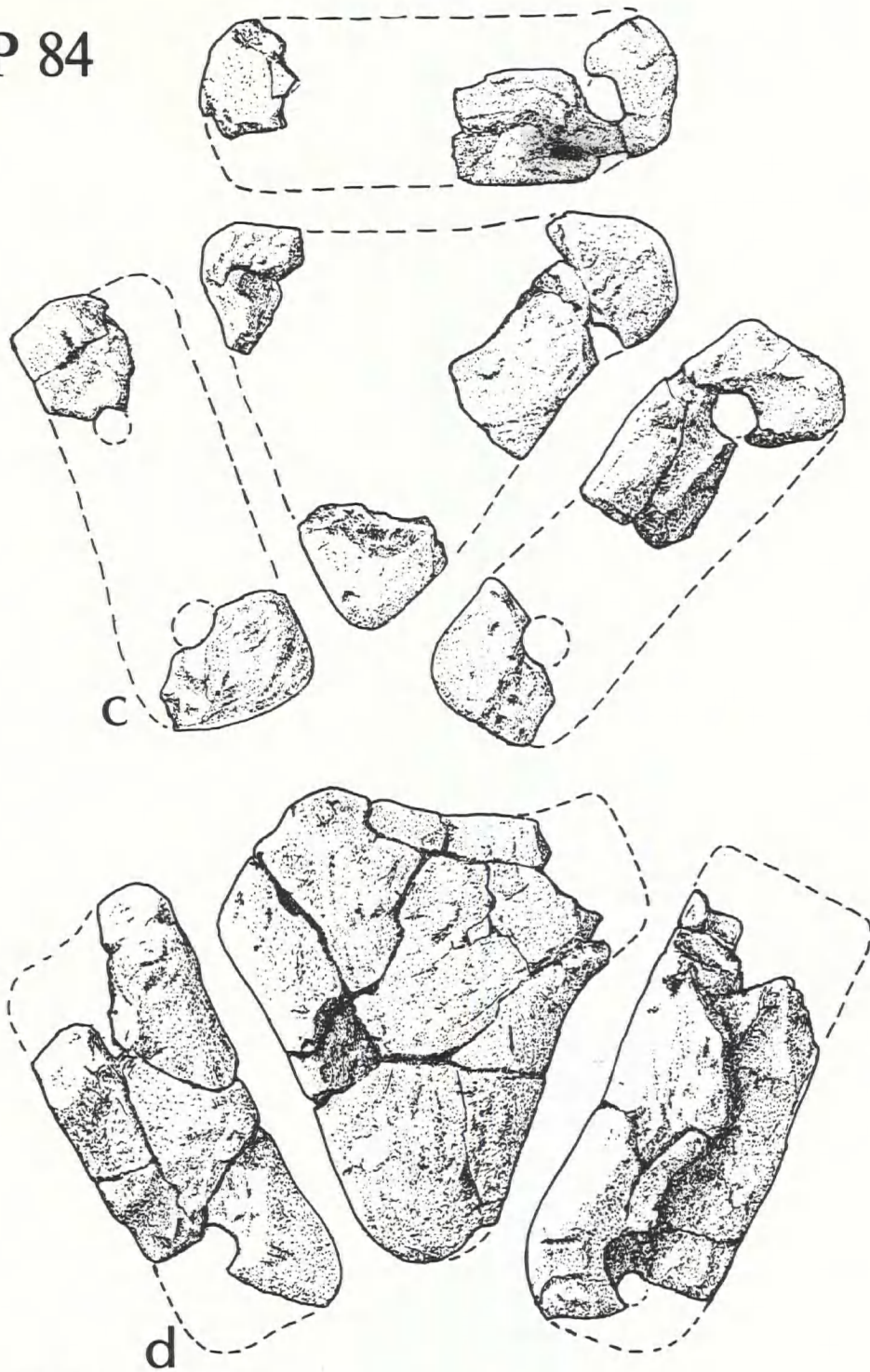


Fig 10 Area II: Loom weights
Scale: 1/2

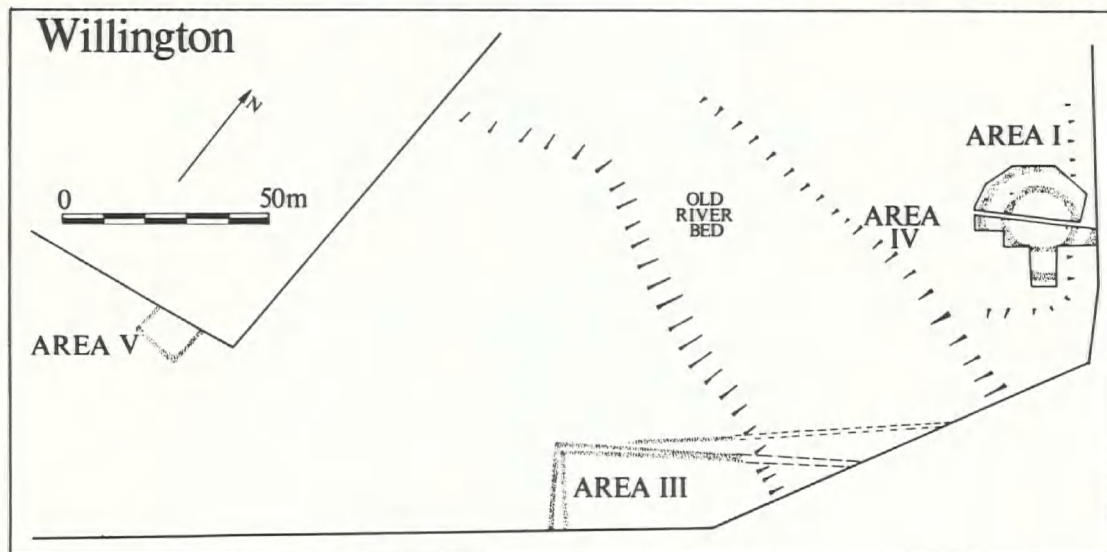


Fig 11 Roman Features: all areas

ceramic forms, and without the presence of well made, decorated pottery, no date can be ascribed to the assemblage.

(b) *Baked Clay*

Four loom weights (Figs 9 and 10) were found. These are made of an F1 fabric with a few large flint grits (up to 8 mm long), firing is poor with the middle of the weights being almost completely unfired in places. Three of the weights have the usual three suspension holes, the fourth has only the lower suspension hole, the upper two being replaced by narrow grooves. Although quite large and heavy, they fall into the range of sizes for loom weights rather than that weights (of the same form but larger). Again these artefacts are not very useful for dating as they seem to occur throughout the early Iron Age and into the later Iron Age (*cf* the excavations at Odell).

(c) *Animal Bone*

The animal bone has not been studied by a specialist, but preliminary identification suggests that the majority of the bone was bovine, with horse as the next most prevalent and only a few sheep bones present.

(v) *DISCUSSION*

The site appears to have been conceived as a single entity. The evidence from the junctions to ditches is, with all the recutting, confused but does not suggest that either of the enclosures was dug as a self-contained unit. The smaller enclosure shows considerably heavier occupation than the larger, and the differences of ditch and bank construction suggest different functions. The simplest interpretations would be a stock enclosure with a smaller enclosure for domestic buildings. Thus in the large enclosure the internal ditch is to keep animals in, the small enclosure has an external ditch to keep them out. A trackway funnelled in towards the entrance is an aid to animal driving.

The whole complex was built on the edge of the dry arable land, with wetter, presumably permanent pasture to the east. The three cuts of the ditch mirror the three possible rebuilds of the huts, and it could be that this represents two total refurbishments of the site. If this was the case, the site would have to be temporarily abandoned, or at least the centre of occupation moved elsewhere. It is of course possible that the occupation of the site was purely seasonal, with a degree of transhumance. If this were so the site would be only fully occupied from the harvest time, through the winter up to spring, the animals being taken away to summer pastures after the planting of corn.

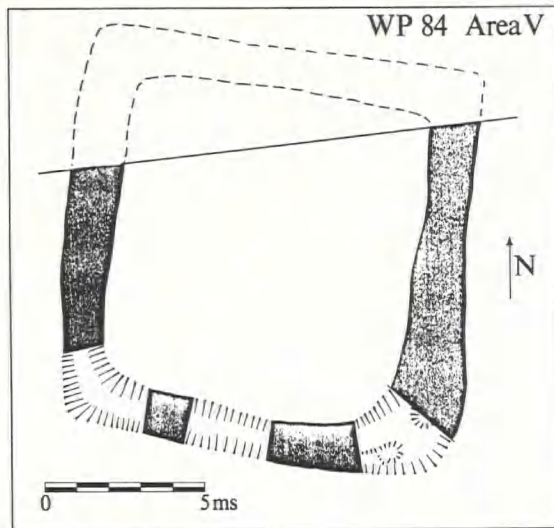


Fig 12 Area V: Plan

THE ROMAN PERIOD

The Roman period is represented by two areas (Fig 11), numbers V and III and by a few stray finds.

(i) AREA V

The small square enclosure with sides 13 m long was recognised on the aerial photographs, and turned up unexpectedly in the excavation of a trackway for quarry machinery. The ditch, or gully (Fig 12) was continuous and produced early Roman pottery. The feature was, for the majority of its circumference, only about 30 cm deep and only showed a single phase of digging. It had a homogenous fill with no evidence of post settings or other structural elements. The south-east corner (Fig 13) however has a more complex section which possibly shows recuts.

Finds were mainly pottery (Fig 14) and were quite prolific considering the small area of ditches dug. The illustrated finds are as follows:

Fig 14

(a) Large jar. Fabric contains a large amount of shell and few large flint grits, up to 5 mm long. The outer surfaces have a corky texture and are a pale buff colour; the core is dark grey. Other sherds in the same fabric have a grey patchy surface and appear to have been hand made.

- (b) Small jar. Wheel made in clay which has a large quantity of small rounded quartz grits (about .2-.3 mm diameter). Fired to a uniform dark grey on the rim, with the body of the vessel being a pale buff colour.
- (c) A small bowl. Probably hand made in a clay with a few small quartz grits and leached out limestone or shell fragments. It is reduced to a dark grey throughout.
- (d) Jar. The fabric contains grey and red grog, leached out shell or limestone and occasional flint grits. The inner surface is pale buff coloured, the outer surface and core a dark grey.
- (e) Decorated rim. Hand made in a clay with a lot of medium and large limestone grits. The outside is pale, pinkish brown and the core is black. The sherd is decorated on both sides with chevron designs executed in string impressions. This sherd is presumably a residual find, possibly dating from the Bronze Age.
- (f) Jar base in same fabric as "d", probably wheel made.
- (g) Small base made in grey ware with some medium sized quartz pieces and some very fine black grits.
- (h) Fragment of a pedestal base. The fabric contains dense fine quartz grits. The core is grey, the outer surface is pale buff coloured but has been blackened over most of the surface. The central hole is probably original, to facilitate the uniform drying and firing of the vessel.

Not illustrated is a fragment of pottery in a white fabric with a red-brown colour coat.

- (i) A fragment of the upperstone of the beehive quernstone, made out of red brown Hertfordshire pudding-stone.

Other finds included two flint flakes and a quantity of oyster shell.

Area V can be dated from the finds which are probably first century AD; its function though is rather more problematic. There were no internal features or any structural elements within the ditch, yet the ditch is rather too feeble to form a stock enclosure. The finds suggest some sort of domestic occupation and it could be seen as a drainage gully around a square building which has left no archaeological trace.

(ii) AREA III

Area III contained a series of Roman ditches (Fig 15) which form a field boundary (Fig 11). The section shows a ditch that has been recut 4 times along the north-south length. The east-west length

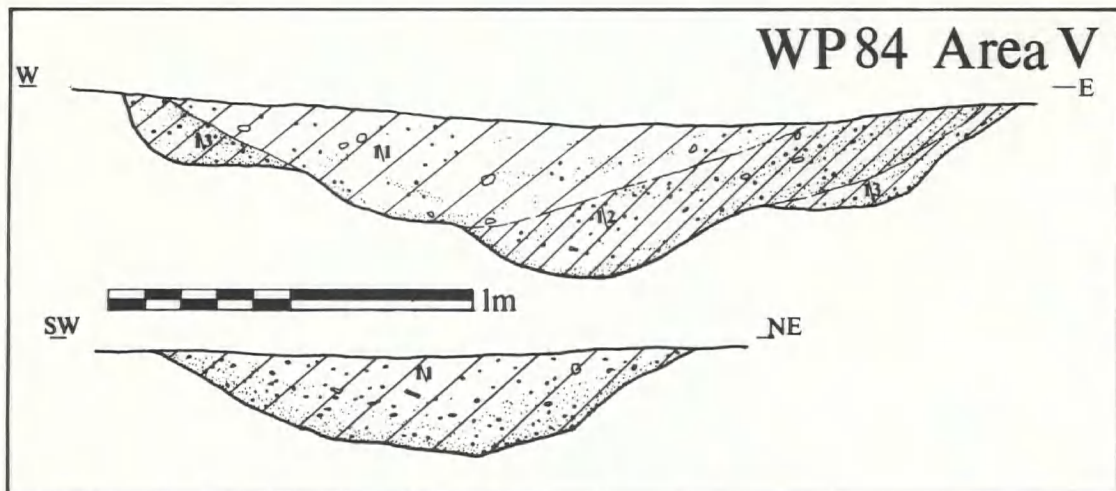


Fig 13 Area V: Sections

of the ditch was largely destroyed by mechanical stripping and only three phases of ditch could be identified. The finds (Fig 16) are as follows:

Ditch 2

(d) a sample base in a clay with a large amount of shell, probably hand made.

Ditch 4

(e, f, i, j, k, m) a series of vessels, wheel-turned, and all made in a very shelly fabric. They have oxidised surfaces and a grey core.

(l) made in a fabric with large flint and limestone grits, patchy brown surfaces and a grey core.

(n) grey-coloured vessel with a large amount of fine quartz grits.

(g, h) grey ware with white limestone grits.

In addition two samian vessels were found (Dr. 27 and Dr. 33).

Ditch 5

(a) The base of a vessel in grey ware with small white limestone grits. The broken edge of this vessel has been carefully smoothed to form a small bowl.

(b) A base in a grey ware with a large quantity of fine quartz grit and some large flint fragments. Again the vessel has been reused by grinding the broken edge smooth to form a small platter.

(c) A finely made jar in a fabric with large amounts of fine quartz grit and possibly leached out limestone. It is black on the outside and reduced on the inner surface.

The pottery suggests of a date of late first or early second century AD for ditch 4. Although no firm conclusions should be drawn from such a small collection of pottery such as this, it is interesting to note that the earlier ditch has some good quality pottery whilst the later one has produced some carefully reused broken vessels. This might reflect a decline of agriculture wealth in the area.

(iii) *OTHER FINDS*

As described above, a Roman cremation was found in the upper layer of the trackway ditch in Area II. The cremation was contained in a pot (Fig 17b) made in a soft pottery with grog and small flint grits, together with two other pots. One was well made in a hard fabric with grog and small grits (Fig 17a) the other, a much smaller pot made in a soft fabric with

Area V

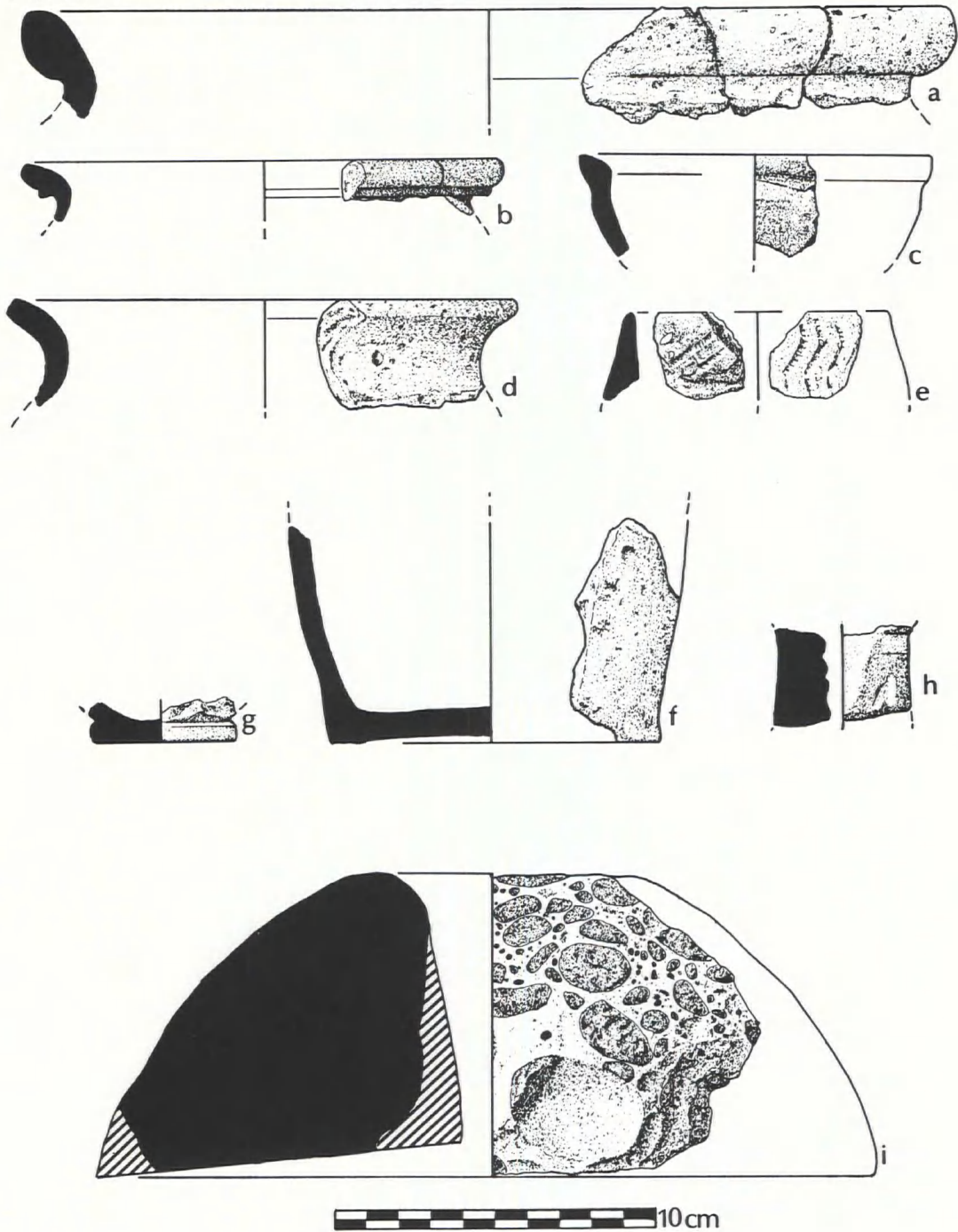


Fig 14 Area V: Finds
Scale: 1/2

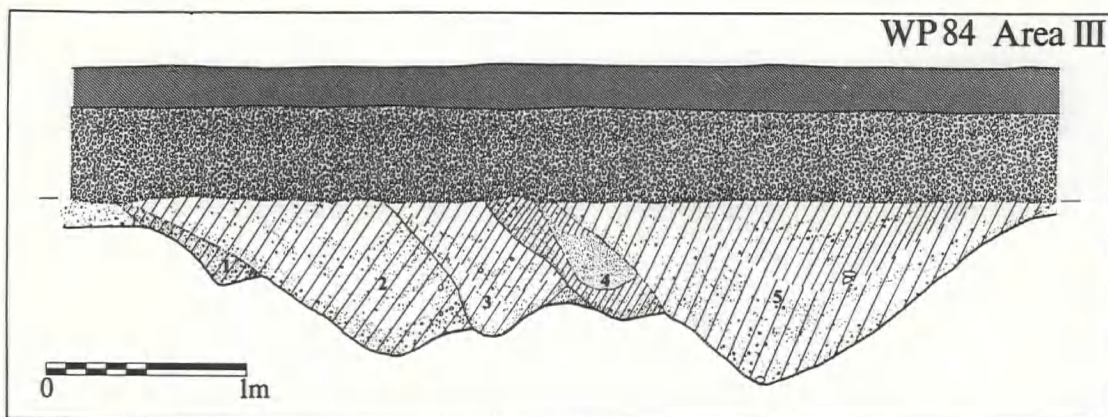


Fig 15 Area III: Section

grog and limestone grit, was too damaged to retrieve a profile. All the pots had been truncated by ploughing.

The cremation itself was studied by Ann Stirland whose report appears below.

(iv) *DISCUSSION*

The evidence from the Roman period is fragmentary. Apart from showing that there was general occupation and farming in the area very little else can be said. Further work at Willington in the next few years, it is hoped, will throw some light on the nature and extent of the land use under the Romans.

APPENDIX I

WILLINGTON II; CREMATED HUMAN BONE

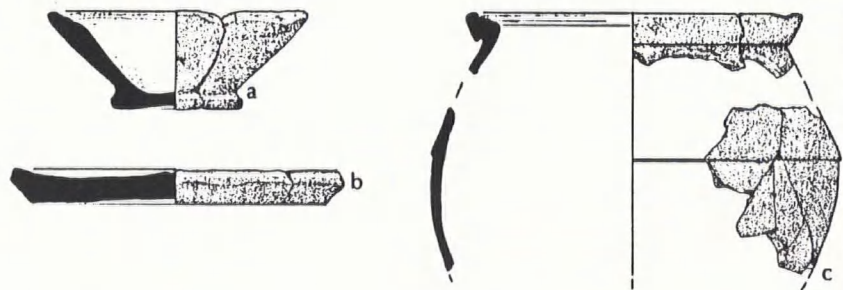
Ann Stirland

Investigation of this cremation was somewhat impeded by the nature of the soil matrix in which the fragments of bone were embedded. This was both hard and heavy and had accreted the bone together in a completely erratic manner. When attempts were made to remove the fragments of bone from this matrix, the fragments proved very

friable and most broke on attempted removal. Consequently, as much bone was removed as possible, and enough to give a reasonable amount of data.

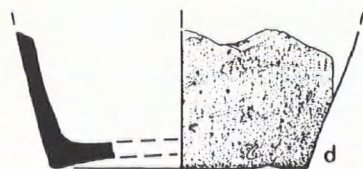
The surviving bone represents the incomplete remains of a probable adult. One surviving tooth root and a finger phalanx are both fused, both suggesting the presence of an adult. Neither further ageing, nor the sexing of this individual are possible. The degree of cracking and calcination of most of the bone suggests burning at a high temperature. The presence of some fragments of blue bone, however, suggest a lower temperature was achieved in some areas. Some parts of the body may have been well away from the fire. In the case of tooth roots and the cancellous bone in the femoral head, it is easy to imagine that these areas would be protected from intense heat, since they are embedded in bone or flesh. Some of the blue bone, however, is possibly from ribs, and this is more difficult to explain, since this area would be very exposed to any fire. A considerable amount of the bone is still contained in the soil matrix, and so it is not possible to obtain a weight for this cremation. The fragments are consistently small and, while it is tempting to suggest post-burning breakage, it must be remembered that the fragments are very friable. A lot of post-burial breakage may well have occurred.

Area III

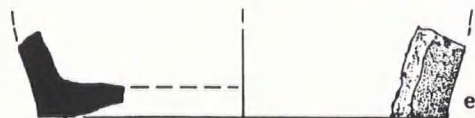


Ditch 5

Ditch 2



Ditch 4



Ditch 4

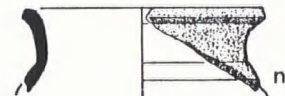
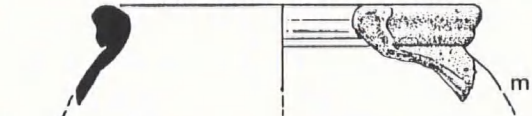
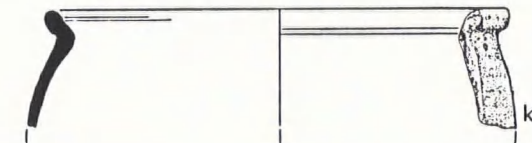
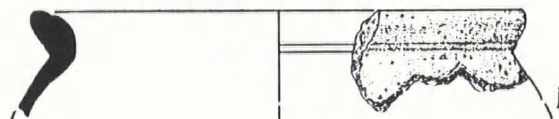
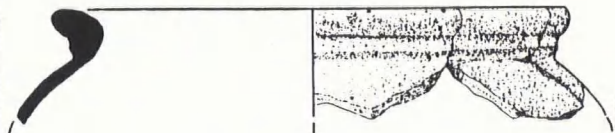


Fig 16 Area III: Finds
Scale: 1/2

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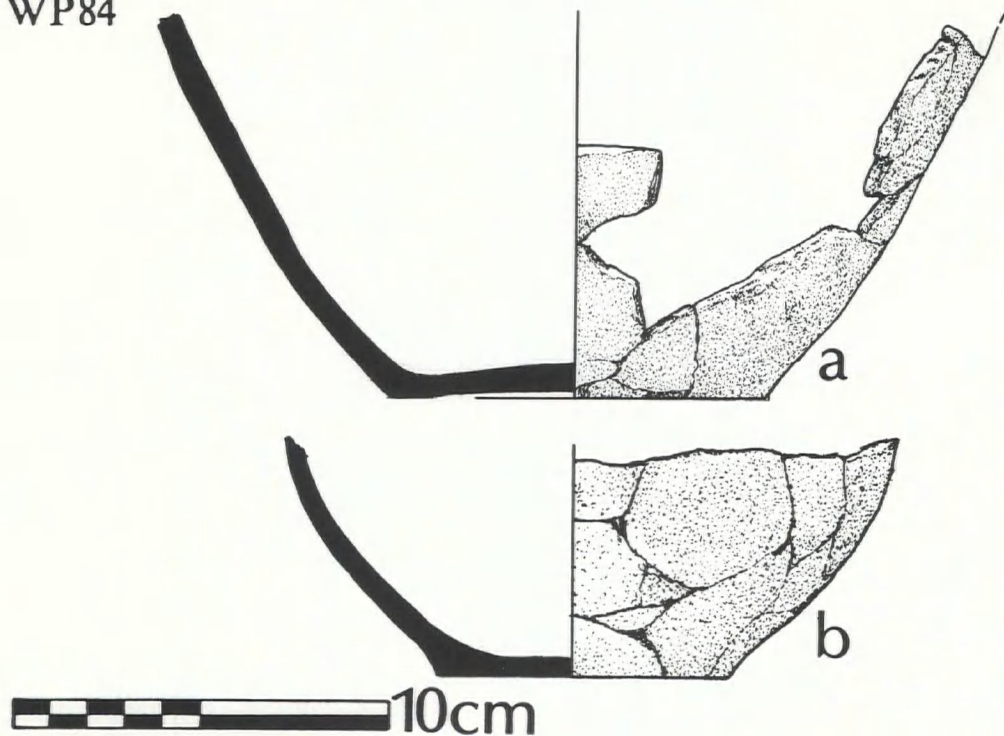


Fig 17 Roman Cremation Vessels

Scale: $\frac{1}{2}$

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Credit for the excavation of Area II must largely lie with Mrs Terry Jackman who co-directed the site. Thanks too must be given to Mrs Evelyn Baker for help and advice during the excavation, and to Gordon Smith and Richard Ransome for work on site. Excavation and post-excavation work was made possible by a grant from the HBMC. We were considerably helped by Redlands Quarries who gave us permission to excavate the sites.

Thanks are also due to the staff of a Manpower Services

Commission rescue archaeology project for help on the excavation, especially Joe Prentice who supervised the excavation of the Roman sites. Angela Simco was responsible, as on The Willington I, for the pre-excavation research, and Ann Stirland for the report on the cremation. Lastly I must thank Mrs Nicola Clarke, and inmates of HM Prison, Bedford for the identification of the animal bone from Area II.

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