

# A middle to late Iron Age open settlement near Milton Ernest, Bedfordshire

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with contributions by  
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## SUMMARY

*An excavation by Albion Archaeology in 2008 revealed the remains of a middle to late Iron Age open settlement north of Twinwoods Business Park, Milton Ernest. Ceramic evidence suggests that the settlement had a short lifespan. No further activity was identified until the Middle Ages, when the land was taken under ridge and furrow cultivation, and a trackway crossed the site. The first evidence of enclosure comes from the post-medieval period, with the identification of the boundary ditch that defined Mock Beggar Close, known from historical maps.*

## INTRODUCTION

In May 2008, Albion Archaeology evaluated (and subsequently excavated) a small area of land immediately north of Twinwoods Business Park, Milton Ernest (Fig. 1), on which a bio-fertiliser storage tank and associated bunding were due to be constructed. The site, centred at TL 0308 5692, lies at a height of 89m OD on a boulder clay plateau, overlooking the valley of the River Great Ouse to the south.

The excavated area lies within a landscape of rich archaeological potential, in a part of Bedfordshire that was intensively occupied during the Iron Age and the Roman period. Crop-mark enclosures that are likely to be of this date are visible to the north-east (HER 16583), whilst Iron Age pottery has been found to the north and north-west (HER 910 and HER 904 respectively). Some scatters of iron slag and burnt stone recorded to the north and west are also thought to be Iron Age in date, although most are more likely to be late Saxon or early medieval. Late Saxo-Norman activity has been identified immediately to the south, along with a series of undated field systems (Albion Archaeology 2004).

The results of the excavation are described below, and are illustrated in Figures 1, 2 and 5. During analysis, each feature (excluding modern ones and those of natural origin) was assigned to a Group (G); each Group contains a set of features

that are similar and contemporary. For clarity, modern features and land drains have been excluded from the all-features plan on Figure 1. Excavated segments are shown in white on Figures 2 and 5. Selected artefacts are illustrated on Figures 3 and 4; standard drawing conventions have been used for pottery, with vessels shown at one quarter size, external view on the right and internal view on the left. The pie diagram accompanying each illustration indicates the proportion of the vessel recovered.

## RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATION

### MIDDLE TO LATE IRON AGE SETTLEMENT (FIG. 2)

Most of the excavated features relate to an unenclosed middle to late Iron Age settlement (G1–G4). Nineteen pits, five post-holes, a ditch and a beam slot can be dated to this period, whilst the balance of probability suggests that four more undated post-holes within G4 were of the same date. Not all the remains were in use at the same time — there was a degree of intercutting between some of the pits, and two of them were stratigraphically earlier than ditch G2 — but they are likely to have been broadly contemporary with each other. The only possible exceptions are the two shallow pits in G1 — the pottery from the western pit was similar to that recovered from

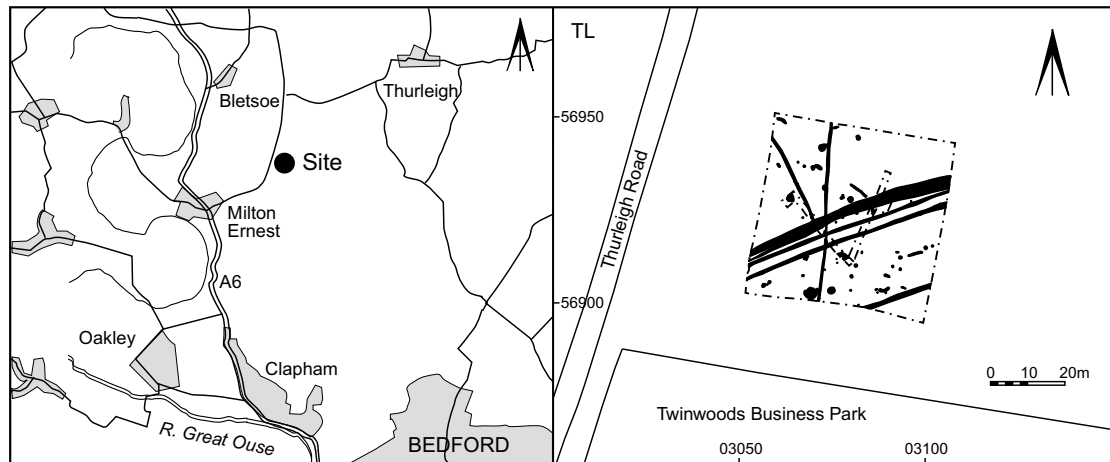


Figure 1: Site location plan showing all features

the rest of the site, but the pit produced an assemblage of worked flint that is broadly datable to the late Neolithic or early Bronze Age. The nine items comprise two primary flakes, two blades/bladelets, two denticulates (serrated flakes), an unfinished or damaged scraper, and the tips of two oblique or barbed and tanged arrowheads; two pieces of unworked burnt flint were also recovered. The quality of the workmanship is highly variable, ranging from crude to very fine.

Despite the presence of nine post-holes, none of them could clearly be identified as the remains of a building. Whilst some may have been associated with insubstantial structures such as animal pens, others perhaps had a non-structural function such as tethering-posts for animals. It should also be noted that the identification of two or three of these features in the south-east corner of the site as post-holes is only tentative: they may have been natural in origin, in common with a number of other features across the site that appear to have been the result of either bioturbation or animal burrowing. The only structural feature that could clearly be identified was beam slot G3, which was 5.5m long, 0.45m wide and 0.1m deep (Fig. 2, e); it may have been associated with the two post-holes to the south-west, but the form and function of the structure of which it formed a part is otherwise unknown. A piece of daub with a partial wattle impression that was recovered from the northernmost segment of ditch G2 may have come from this structure, or from another one that lay beyond the excavated area.

The nineteen pits that were spread across the site varied considerably in size. Some were only

slightly larger than the post-holes (*e.g.* Fig. 2, f), whereas the largest, [335], was 3.6m long, 3.3m wide and up to 0.45m deep. The irregularity in plan and profile of [335] suggests that it was a quarry pit, whereas its neighbour [341], which was 2m long, 1.75m wide and 0.8m deep, had a much more regular shape. The two pits produced the majority of the finds from the site (66% of the Iron Age pottery assemblage by weight, with a similar proportion of animal bone, including fifty-nine burnt fragments), and seem to have been used as rubbish pits. Nearby pit [338], though much smaller, also produced a similar density of finds. Two incidences of pottery from a single vessel in the primary and secondary fills of [341] suggest fairly rapid infilling of the pit from a single deposit such as a midden. Pit [341] also yielded a large sandstone cobble hammerstone or pestle, and a smoothing/burnishing stone fashioned from fine-grained micaceous sandstone. The latter fits well into the palm of the hand, and has a worn flat surface and weathered underside; a comparable example was recovered from a middle Iron Age deposit at Great Barford (Shaffrey 2007, 279).

The main cluster of pits and post-holes in G4 was located further north, on either side of ditch G2. Although the original function of most of these features is uncertain, the nearly vertical sides and flat base of pit [321] suggest that it was used for storage (Fig. 2, d). A layer of charred material near its base may represent a lining that was burnt *in situ*. Burning was also evident in the two post-holes immediately west of pit [321], the southern one of which produced thirteen fragments of burnt bone. The northern one contained an incomplete

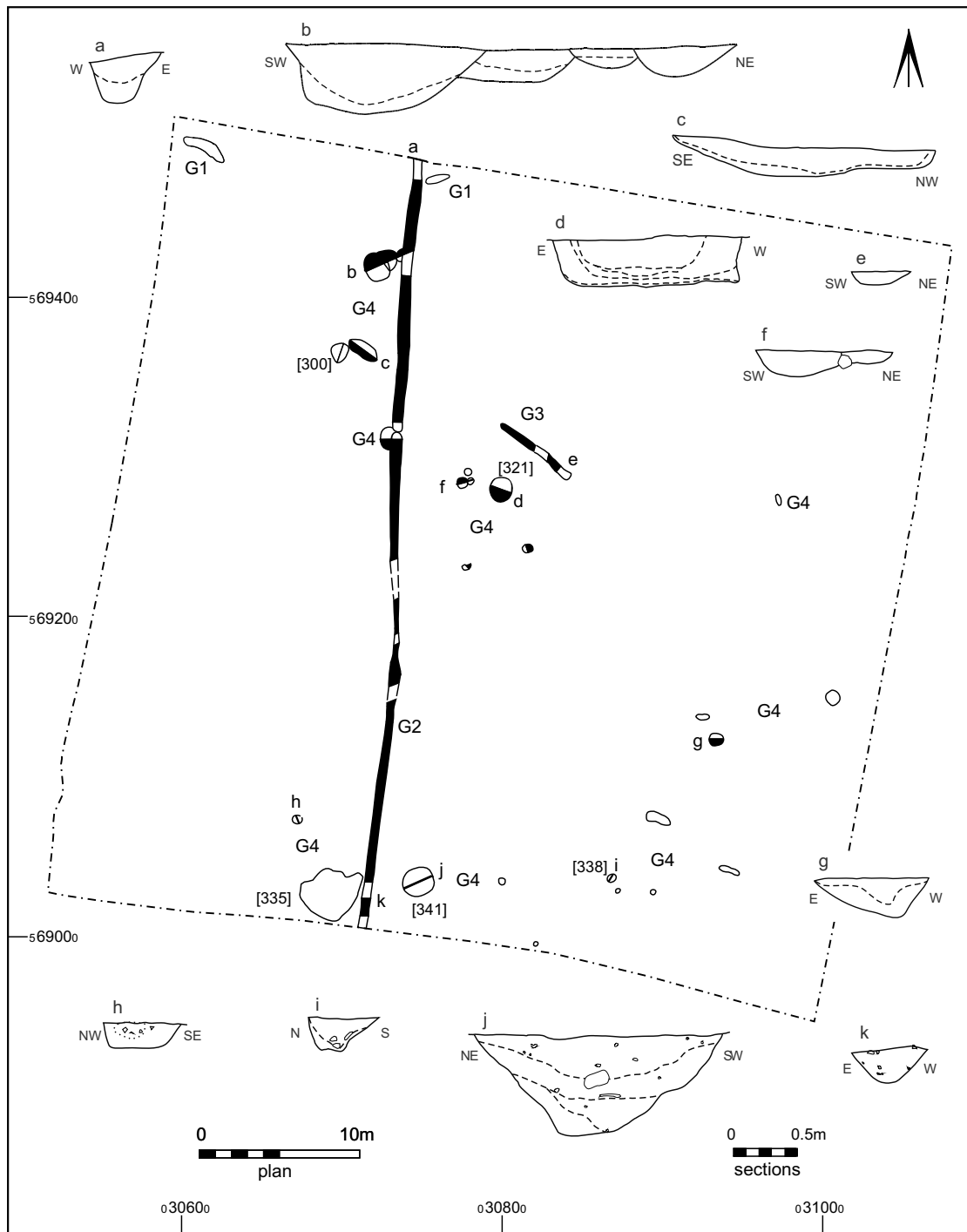


Figure 2: Plan of Iron Age settlement, with representative sections

ceramic triangular loom weight (Fig. 3), made in a coarse version of sand and calcareous fabric F30. The fragmentary condition of the object precludes reconstruction of its dimensions and weight. Triangular loom weights are found widely on Iron Age sites in south-east Britain after *c.* 500 BC (Elsdon and Barford 1996, 330), and were used in conjunction with the warp-weighted loom. There were also signs of burning in the pits to the west of ditch G2; little charcoal was recovered, but the reddened clay within the fills indicates the presence of intense heat. This may be material that was redeposited from a hearth, as pit [300] contained more than a dozen of the ‘pot-boiler’ stones that are so frequently found on domestic Iron Age sites.

It is unclear how ditch G2 relates to the rest of the Iron Age remains. It appears to have been stratigraphically later than at least two of the pits (although neither relationship was entirely certain), and it is unclear why what appears to have been a single settlement should have been divided in two by this boundary. Despite its central location within the settlement, the ditch produced just thirty-nine sherds (285g) of pottery (7% of the overall assemblage by weight) and very little animal bone. The poverty of its finds assemblage perhaps supports the idea that the ditch postdated the main period of the settlement, with any contemporary settlement activity either restricted to just one side of the ditch, or focussed in a different location outside the excavated area.

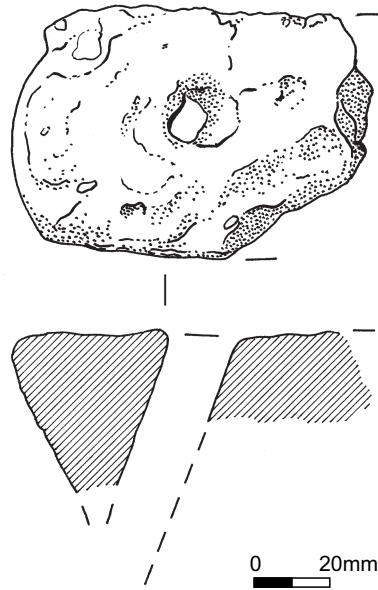


Figure 3: Ceramic loom weight from G4 post-hole

#### Pottery

Jackie Wells

Features relating to the Iron Age settlement produced 421 sherds (3.6kg), representing 249 vessels. The pottery generally survives in good condition, although vessels in shelly/calcareous fabrics have suffered post-depositional leaching

Fabric code	Common name	Reference
<b>Late Bronze Age/early Iron Age</b>		
F01C (1)	Flint and quartz	Wells 2009, 165
<b>Early to middle Iron Age</b>		
F03 (61)	Grog and sand	Parminter and Slowikowski 2004, 443
F04 (2)	Organic	Parminter and Slowikowski 2004, 443
F14 (119)	Fine mixed inclusions	Slowikowski 2000, 63
F15 (32)	Coarse mixed inclusions	Slowikowski 2000, 63
F16 (120)	Coarse shell	Parminter and Slowikowski 2004, 444
F17 (41)	Grog	Slowikowski 2000, 63
F18 (1)	Fine sand and shell	Wells 2009, 165
F19 (3)	Sand and organic	Parminter and Slowikowski 2004, 445
F22 (11)	Grog and organic	Slowikowski 2005, 103
F27 (3)	Shell and grog	Slowikowski 2000, 64
F28 (28)	Fine sand	Wells 2009, 165
F29 (6)	Coarse sand	Wells 2009, 166
F30 (4)	Sand and calcareous inclusions	Wells 2009, 166
F37 (2)	Calcareous mixed inclusions	Wells 2009, 166
<b>Late Iron Age ‘Belgic’</b>		
F06B (1)	Medium grog	Parminter and Slowikowski 2004, 443
F24 (3)	Buff shell	Parminter and Slowikowski 2004, 445

Table 1: Ceramic Type Series

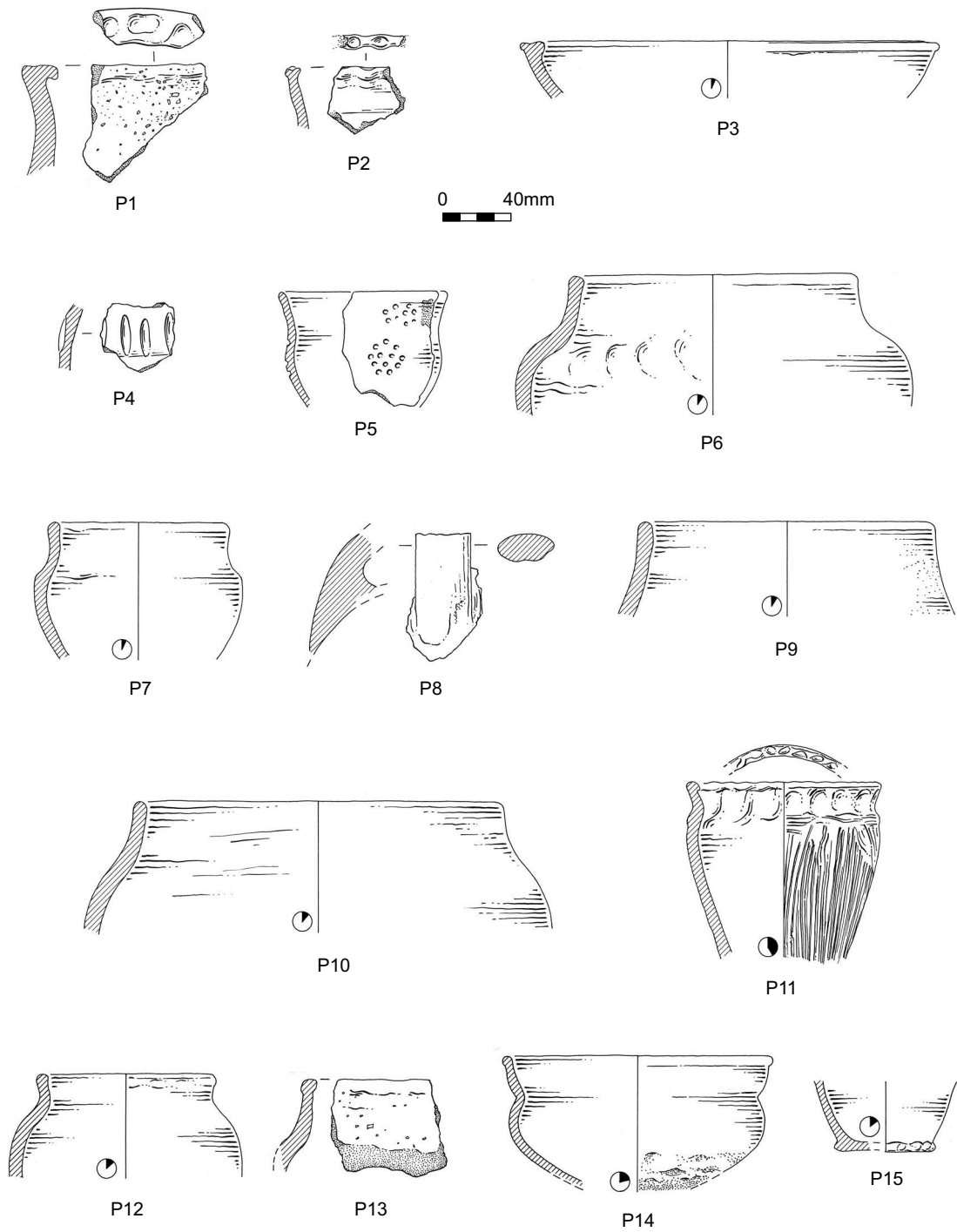


Figure 4: Selected pottery

Illust. No.	Group	Feature	Fabric type	Description
P1	2	240	F16	Rim with internal flange and finger-impressed decoration
P2	4	300	F16	Flat rim with finger-impressed decoration
P3	4	300	F16	Bowl with flanged rim
P4	4	321	F14	Body sherd with vertical linear decoration
P5	4	335	F03	Bowl with clustered circular stamped 'dimples'
P6	4	341	F14	Ovoid jar
P7	4	341	F14	Round-shouldered jar
P8	4	341	F03	Strap handle
P9	4	341	F14	Vessel with upright rounded rim
P10	4	341	F14	Ovoid (?) vessel
P11	4	341	F15	Scored jar with finger-impressed decoration
P12	4	341	F15	Round-shouldered vessel
P13	4	341	F16	Vessel with flat rim
P14	4	321	F14	Ovoid bowl
P15	4	335	F14	Base with finger-impressed decoration

Table 2: Catalogue of illustrated pottery

and abrasion. Sherds are fairly small, with an average weight of 12g; however, a number of vessels are represented by more than single sherds, and the overall assemblage has a vessel to sherd ratio of 1:7. The pottery mainly comprises a range of fabric types (Table 1) and vessel forms datable to the middle to late Iron Age period, all of which are handmade. The type codes and common names in Table 1 are in accordance with the Bedfordshire Ceramic Type Series, maintained by Albion Archaeology; published references are noted. Bracketed numbers after each fabric code denote sherd numbers.

Although the assemblage is small, a wide range of fabric types occur. Vessels tempered with mixed and variable proportions of shell/grog/sand/organic inclusions (types F14 and F15) constitute 34% of the assemblage, those containing coarse fossil shell 28% (F16), quartz sand 22% (F03, F18, F19, F28, F29), grog 13% (F17, F22, F27), calcareous material 2% (F30, F37), and organic matter (F04) makes up the remainder. The composition of the assemblage is comparable with other middle to late Iron Age sites in Bedfordshire, which have yielded a highly variable range of pottery fabrics, based on the availability of raw materials, and emphasising the localised nature of pottery production (*cf.* McSloy 1999, 70; Webley 2007, 224).

Diagnostic vessel forms include ovoid and round-shouldered vessels with a range of round, beaded, flat, tapering, internally bevelled and flanged rims; and flat bases (classified after Knight 1984, 20–1). There is also a single strap handle. Vessels are generally well made, and none show evidence of modification or repair. Vessel wall

thicknesses vary between 5mm and 18mm, indicating a range of differently sized vessels — the smaller are likely to have been used for cooking and serving, and the larger for storage. Sooting and internal residues visible on a small proportion of the finer vessels confirm their use as 'kitchen' wares.

Decoration is rare, and comprises fingernail and fingertip impressions along vessel rims and around the neck and/or shoulder. Other surface treatment is represented by scoring, the latter invariably occurring on middle Iron Age vessels in Bedfordshire, although usually only representing a small proportion of a site assemblage. One vessel is decorated with clusters of circular, stamped 'dimples' (Fig. 4; P5), which may originally have been filled with a white calcareous inlay, for decorative effect (Knight 1984, 25).

#### *Animal Bone* Stephanie Vann

The Iron Age assemblage comprises 1,067 fragments, mostly from pits [335] and [341], of which 151 (14%) are identifiable (Table 3). The species present are cattle, sheep/goat, horse, pig, rodent and bird (most likely domestic fowl), with no evidence of fish remains. Whilst there are also no dog remains, the canid gnawing of several elements confirms their presence.

Tooth wear data from both cattle and sheep/goat mandibles show the presence of animals ranging from immature to adult. Both cattle mandibles still have the deciduous premolar present, which suggests that these animals were slaughtered before reaching full maturity, perhaps for their meat,

	Method of recovery	
	Hand-collected	Sieved
Cattle (Bos)	25	7
Sheep/Goat (Ovicaprid)	40	4
Horse (Equus)	1	
Pig (Sus)	8	4
Rodent	3	
Bird	1	
Large mammal	21	1
Medium mammal	36	
Unid.	367	549

Table 3: Number of fragments per species from Iron Age deposits

whereas one sheep/goat mandible shows advanced wear of a permanent molar, indicating an adult animal. Sheep were also reared for their secondary products such as wool, which may explain the presence of adult animals within the assemblage.

Epiphyseal fusion data also show a range of ages. An unfused distal humerus in pit [341] shows the presence of cattle no more than 12–18 months old (Reitz and Wing 1999, table 3.5), while an intermediate phalanx from pit [335] comes from a sheep/goat that was no more than 5–7 months old. In contrast, a sheep/goat's fused vertebral centrum from pit [341] attests to an animal that was at least 48–60 months old when it died. An unfused distal tibia and distal metatarsal from [335] are the only ageing evidence for pigs, revealing the presence of animals that were no more than 24–27 months old. The single bird bone, most likely from domestic fowl, also comes from an immature individual. Only limited data are available on chicken long-bone growth; however, osteometric analysis of immature chicken bones from the Romano-British ritual complex at Uley in Gloucestershire suggests that adult dimensions are not achieved before 15–20 weeks (Brothwell 1997, 331). The presence of the immature individual may indicate that domestic fowl were bred at the site.

#### MEDIEVAL AND POST-MEDIEVAL LANDSCAPE (FIG. 5)

Following abandonment of the Iron Age settlement, there is no evidence of further activity until the medieval period. An ENE–WSW alignment, followed by trackway G5, furrow G6 and enclosure ditch G7, was introduced to the landscape at that point.

Trackway G5 comprised two outer ditches (up to 1m wide and 0.4m deep) that were 3.5–5m

apart, with a slight trampled hollow in the middle that was caused by the passage of people and animals. What appeared to be very ephemeral wheel ruts were observed during the evaluation, but no further sign of them was subsequently detected.

The date of the trackway is problematic. Its ditches produced seventeen sherds of pottery (122g) representing fifteen vessels, which range from late Bronze Age/early Iron Age to late medieval in date. All but two of the sherds are Iron Age, and it is possible that this is the date of the trackway; however, the stratigraphic relationship between the northern trackway ditch and two of the Iron Age post-holes was very distinct, suggesting a greater temporal separation. For this reason, and because of its similarity in alignment with furrow G6 and post-medieval ditch G7, the trackway is more likely to be contemporary with the late medieval pottery sherd that was recovered from it — the Iron Age pottery probably derived from the settlement features through which the trackway ditches were dug. The Bedfordshire Historic Environment Record's pre-enclosure map suggests that the trackway followed the boundary between Upper Field to the south, and Tree Field / Wigney Field to the north, leading down into Milton Ernest to the south-west (Fig. 6).

Ditch G7, which was up to 2.6m wide and 0.9m deep, is shown by the pre-enclosure map to have defined the southern limit of an area of land referred to as Mock Beggar Close (Fig. 6). Although it cut the northern ditch of the trackway, this need not imply that the trackway was no longer in use; it is more likely that the course of the trackway became more clearly defined where it ran along the edge of the close. Perpendicular to G7 was a smaller ditch, which may have formed a subdivision within the close. A large amount of post-medieval tile recovered from an adjacent pit suggests that an outbuilding used to exist nearby.

## DISCUSSION

### CHARACTER OF THE IRON AGE SETTLEMENT

The homogeneity of the pottery assemblage recovered from the Iron Age settlement suggests that the site enjoyed a relatively short period of occupation. However, the exact date at which the site was occupied is difficult to pinpoint, due to imprecision in the ceramic dating sequence for the

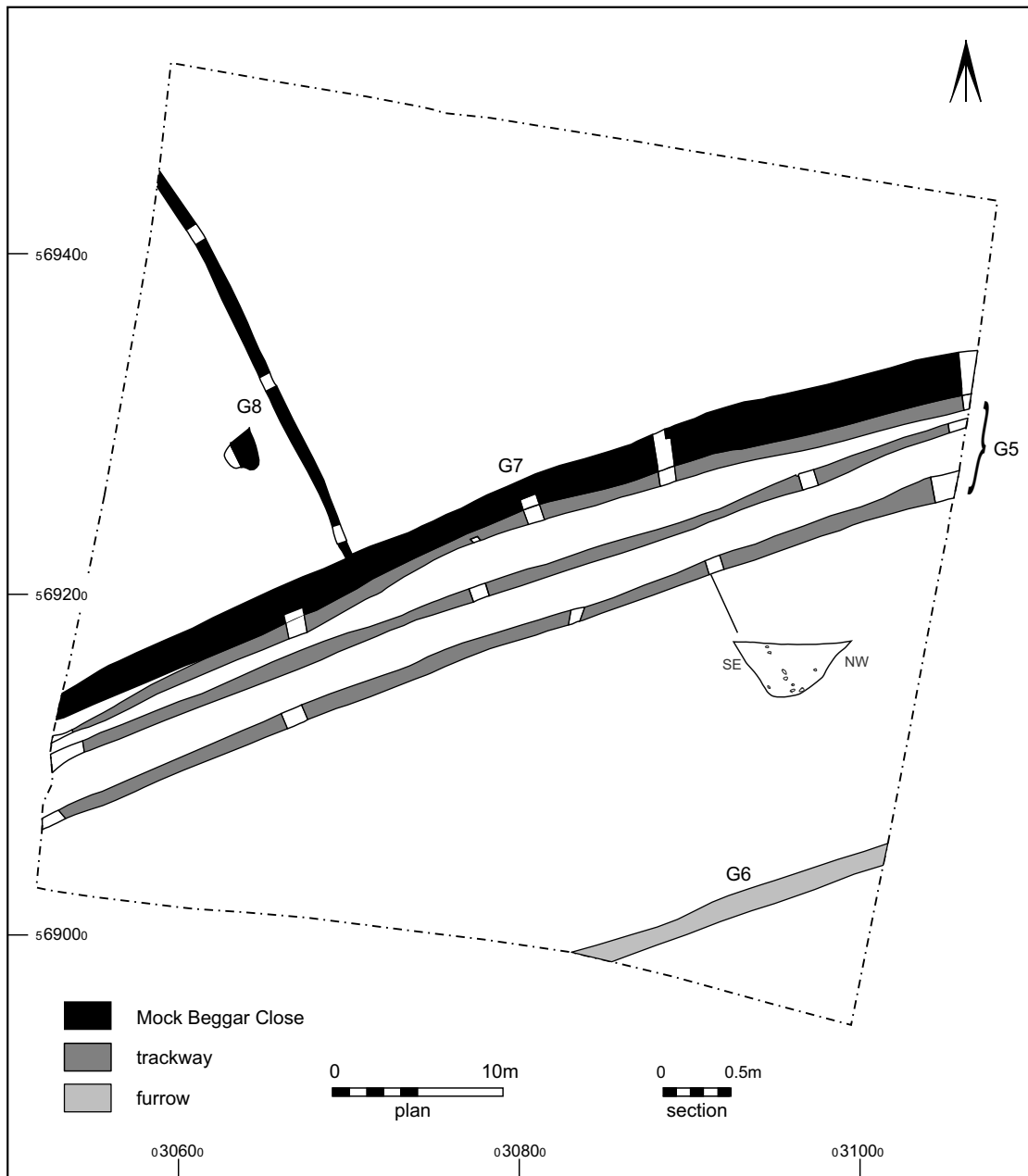


Figure 5: Plan of medieval and post-medieval remains

middle to late Iron Age. Pottery production in Bedfordshire during this period was primarily a localised practice, with fabrics usually dependent on the composition of the local clay (Webley 2007, 224); ceramic dating alone is consequently unable to refine the date beyond the period of

*c.* 400–150 BC. The unenclosed nature of the settlement suggests a date nearer the beginning of this period, yet new settlements of this type continued to appear throughout the middle Iron Age (Dawson 2007, 64), and an early date cannot be assumed.





industrial activity, but this may have been carried out on a domestic level. The degree of burning evident in the pits and post-holes to the west of the beam slot makes it clear that a considerable amount of heat was generated at times, but the source of this burnt material, all of which was redeposited, is unknown. It is more likely, however, to have derived from a domestic hearth than from an industrial structure such as a kiln — the burnt animal bone and the ‘pot-boilers’ are suggestive of domestic activity, although it is equally possible that the clay extracted from quarry pit [335] was intended for the manufacture of pottery. Even if people did not dwell within the excavated area, the volume of domestic debris that was recovered makes it probable that they at least lived within close proximity.

The faunal evidence suggests that the people who used the site were involved in breeding animals, with bones recovered from immature cattle and sheep/goats, along with the remains of a young domestic fowl — the assemblage generally tends towards younger rather than older animals. The site may have been used by pastoralists who were only present in this area on a seasonal basis; the negligible volume of charred plant remains that were recovered gives no indication that crops were being grown or processed nearby, though this may simply be the result of poor preservation. The intercutting nature of some of the pits implies that the site was occupied for several seasons, at least. The size of the finds assemblage, however, suggests more than occasional use by a few people on a seasonal basis. The volume of pottery compares well with that recovered from broadly contemporary sites (*e.g.* Timby *et al.* 2007, 22–4; Abrams and Ingham 2008, 20–33), some of which were occupied for several generations. Most of the material, however, came from pits [335] and [341], and may not be a straightforward indicator of the duration or intensity of occupation; the derivation of cultural material from Iron Age features is often linked to examples of structured deposition, and these are considered below.

#### *Ritual activity*

The concept of deliberate deposition in relation to ritual activities is a widely discussed topic in pre-historic archaeology, and one that it is tempting to invoke as a catch-all explanation of anomalies that are not otherwise easily explicable (Haselgrove *et al.* 2001, 18–9). However, the volume of finds within several of the features on this site suggests

the deliberate deposition of these items, as does the type of feature from which some of the artefacts were recovered.

Most of the pottery and animal bone came from pits [335] and [341] at the southern edge of the site, along with a hammerstone or pestle and a smoothing/burnishing stone from the latter. The distribution of pottery within the lower fills of [341] suggests rapid infilling, probably from a nearby midden; such burial of domestic refuse may have been done to encourage fertility (Parker Pearson 1996, 125–7). Pit [335] was probably a quarry pit, and the ritual burial of domestic debris within quarry pits, in order to give thanks for the material extracted from them, has been suggested elsewhere (Abrams and Ingham 2008, 33).

The assemblage of nine pieces of worked flint from the western pit in G1 is surely also an instance of structured deposition, particularly in view of the absence of worked flint from elsewhere on the site. The late Neolithic or early Bronze Age character of the material, with several broken pieces, suggests that this might have been a set of tools that had been handed down through generations. Its deposition may signify that the old tools had been replaced by new ones, but were valued too highly just to be thrown away, or it may be symbolic of a shift away from the hunting of animals — the capacity to breed animals, as demonstrated by the immature examples in the faunal assemblage, may have reduced or negated previous reliance on wild species.

Two further instances of structured deposition were recorded in the focal area of the site, to the west of beam slot G3 (Fig. 2). More than a dozen ‘pot-boiler’ stones were recovered from pit [300], and part of a loom weight was found in a nearby post-hole. The burial of the stones may simply have had a utilitarian function: the people who occupied the site on a seasonal basis were moving on, and wished to leave them somewhere safe for use when they returned the following year, rather than taking the stones with them. The insertion of the broken loom weight into a post-hole, however, has very different connotations: the post would have to have been removed before it could be inserted, suggesting closure or abandonment rather than an intention to return. Perhaps the level of burning in this part of the site relates not to the settlement’s use, but to its destruction — did the deposition of the loom weight constitute the final act prior to abandonment of the site?

#### IRON AGE SETTLEMENT ON THE NORTH BEDFORDSHIRE CLAYS

Despite the explosion of information regarding settlement in the clay areas of eastern Bedfordshire and western Cambridgeshire following an aerial photographic survey in 1996 (Palmer 2007), relatively little is still known about the claylands of north Bedfordshire. This area has been subject to less development than the rest of the county, and has therefore seen little of the development-led fieldwork that has revolutionised our understanding of southern and central Bedfordshire in the past 15–20 years. The site near Milton Ernest therefore makes an important contribution to our understanding of the archaeological landscape in north Bedfordshire, both in demonstrating the presence of Iron Age settlement away from the river valleys and in shedding light on the early colonisation of the clays.

The number of settlements in Bedfordshire began to grow in the early Iron Age (Timby *et al.* 2007, 409). However, the settlements from that period that have so far been identified are primarily located on gravel terraces, or at least on boulder clay that overlies permeable solid geology. Milton Ernest, however, is located on a band of boulder clay where settlement densities do not seem to have risen until the middle Iron Age (*cf.* Timby *et al.* 2007; Abrams and Ingham 2008), perhaps due to the tendency towards heavy, waterlogged soils caused by the underlying geology. Some ephemeral remains that were excavated nearby at Yarl's Wood, Clapham have been postulated as the remains of earlier settlement (Luke 2004), but the evidence for this is doubtful (Mike Luke pers. comm.).

Although numerous middle Iron Age sites are known from the nearby Great Ouse Valley, there are few contemporary sites on the neighbouring claylands, and certainly few open settlements, with which the site near Milton Ernest can be compared. The closest example is High Barns Road (Site 2) on the route of the Great Barford bypass (Timby *et al.* 2007, 22–4), which contained an unenclosed concentration of pits, post-holes and gullies next to a contemporary enclosure. The presence of at least one building is inferred, though only one very small, post-built structure could be identified. A similar distribution of artefacts was observed, with most of the assemblage coming from a relatively small number of deposits.

The paucity of Iron Age open settlements in north Bedfordshire is at least partly due to the

difficulties involved in detecting them. Despite the success of the 1996 survey, settlements are still more difficult to detect in areas of clay geology than on many other types, and open settlements are much harder to identify from crop-marks than enclosed ones (Bryant 2000, 14). The lack of linear elements makes them harder to detect, even by trial trenching (Hey and Lacey 2001, 30–1); indeed, the trenches at Milton Ernest managed to miss all of the Iron Age pits and post-holes (Fig. 1), identifying only ditch G2, which may essentially have been unrelated to the settlement. A variety of survey techniques were employed as part of the Raunds Area Survey, yet served more to highlight the likely presence of Iron Age open settlements than to identify them (Parry 2006, 61; 65).

Judging by the evidence elsewhere in Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire and Cambridgeshire, it is reasonable to propose that settlement densities on the north Bedfordshire clays are significantly higher than is currently apparent. Although the land may not have been an ideal location for settlement, due primarily to the impermeability of the underlying geology, excavations elsewhere have shown that settlements do exist in reasonable numbers on the clay, particularly in the later Iron Age and the Roman period. Many of the undated crop-marks known in north Bedfordshire may relate to Iron Age sites; open settlements, however, are much more difficult to detect without the benefit of open-area excavations such as this.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Albion Archaeology would like to thank Paul Goakes of Robinson & Hall LLP, who commissioned the archaeological work on behalf of Biogen (UK) Ltd. The collaborative support of Lesley-Ann Mather and Martin Oake (Bedfordshire County Council's Archaeological Officers), who monitored the project and commented on this article, is also acknowledged.

Joe Abrams was the Project Manager for Albion Archaeology; David Ingham was the Project Officer. All Albion projects are under the overall management of Drew Shotliff, who also gave invaluable advice and support during every stage of the project. Fieldwork was supervised by Lennard Anderson and Adam Lodoen, with excavation and subsequent finds processing carried out by Gary Manning, Gyorgy Nemes, Anna Rebisz-Niziolek, Slawomir Utrata, Jennifer White

and Adam Williams. Soil samples were processed and scanned by Sharon Gerber-Parfitt. Analysis of the pottery and other artefacts was undertaken by Jackie Wells, whilst the animal bone was analysed by Stephanie Vann of the University of Leicester Archaeology Service. Illustrations are by Cecily Marshall.

This article was edited for publication by Drew Shotliff. The project archive can be found at Bedford Museum under accession number 2008:53.

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