IRON AGE SETTLEMENT AT CRANBORNE AVENUE, WESTCROFT, MILTON KEYNES

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A Late Iron Age farm, represented by a ring gully, a small enclosure and a series of pits, was excavated during a watching brief at Cranborne Avenue, Westcroft, Milton Keynes, Bucks. The pottery assemblage suggests occupation from around 100BC to AD 50. The excavated animal bones were predominantly of cattle and sheep.

INTRODUCTION

An archaeological watching brief was carried out by Thames Valley Archaeological Services during March and April 2002, observing infrastructure works at Westcroft, Milton Keynes (SP8260 3430) (Fig. 1), on behalf of English Partnerships. The site code is WMK 02/12. The archive is presently held at Thames Valley Archaeological Services and will be deposited with Buckinghamshire County Museum Services with accession code AYBCM:2002.58.

The site is located on the Oxford Clay, west of the deserted medieval village of Tattenhoe. Previous evaluations to the eastern side of the V1 road (Snelshall Street) had uncovered minor medieval activity at SP8288 3378 (site TMK01/24; Taylor 2001). Rescue work in 1993 at the Westcroft Centre (site WMK93, Fig. 1), on the northern boundary of the area examined, had uncovered a large nucleated pit group and outlying features, mainly of middle Iron Age date but including finds of late Neolithic, late Bronze Age, Roman, Saxon and medieval dates (Ford 2000). Geophysical survey carried out in 1997, which included a part of the current site, indicated several features of potential archaeological origin (AI 1997), leading to the requirement for a watching brief.

RESULTS

Observations of the stripping of topsoil from the majority of the site revealed little of interest, however, one small area on Cranborne Avenue, centred on SP 8253 3454, produced a concentration of features (Fig. 2). This area was re-stripped under close archaeological supervision, and the features excavated. A clear stratigraphic sequence was established through the entire series of features.

The Enclosure (101)

This enclosure ditch had an irregular penannular shape, enclosing an area with a diameter of almost 16m, but its full extent is not known, as, although slot 6 may have been a terminal, it is possible it continued out of the site to the east. Seven excavated slots showed considerable variation in dimensions. The profile was always U-shaped but narrower (*c.* 1m) at the eastern end, (particularly through slots 5 and 6) and up to 2m wide to the west (Fig. 3). Depth varied between 0.34m and 0.54m. The fill was consistently a mottled grey-brown silty clay with occasional to frequent charcoal, and occasional chalk flecks. At the margin of the excavated area, where it may have been terminating in any case, the enclosure ditch was cut by a pit (7)(Fig. 3). At the western end it was partly overlain by a ring gully (104). It is uncertain where the enclosure terminal lay beyond slot (41) as this area was difficult to interpret, as it contained a group of intercutting pits and the terminal of ring gully 104. Animal bone and pottery were found throughout the enclosure ditch, but only in tiny quantities; the possible terminals (6 and 41) produced the greatest concentrations.

Ring gully (104)

This ring gully had two opposed entrances, at the north-west and south-east, and had an internal diameter of 10m. Nine slots were excavated across it. The south-eastern terminal (12) had been recut or extended by gully (102). The gully was shallow and V-shaped to a depth of 0.11m–0.23m, deepening at slot 25 (where it cut ditch 101) to 0.3m.

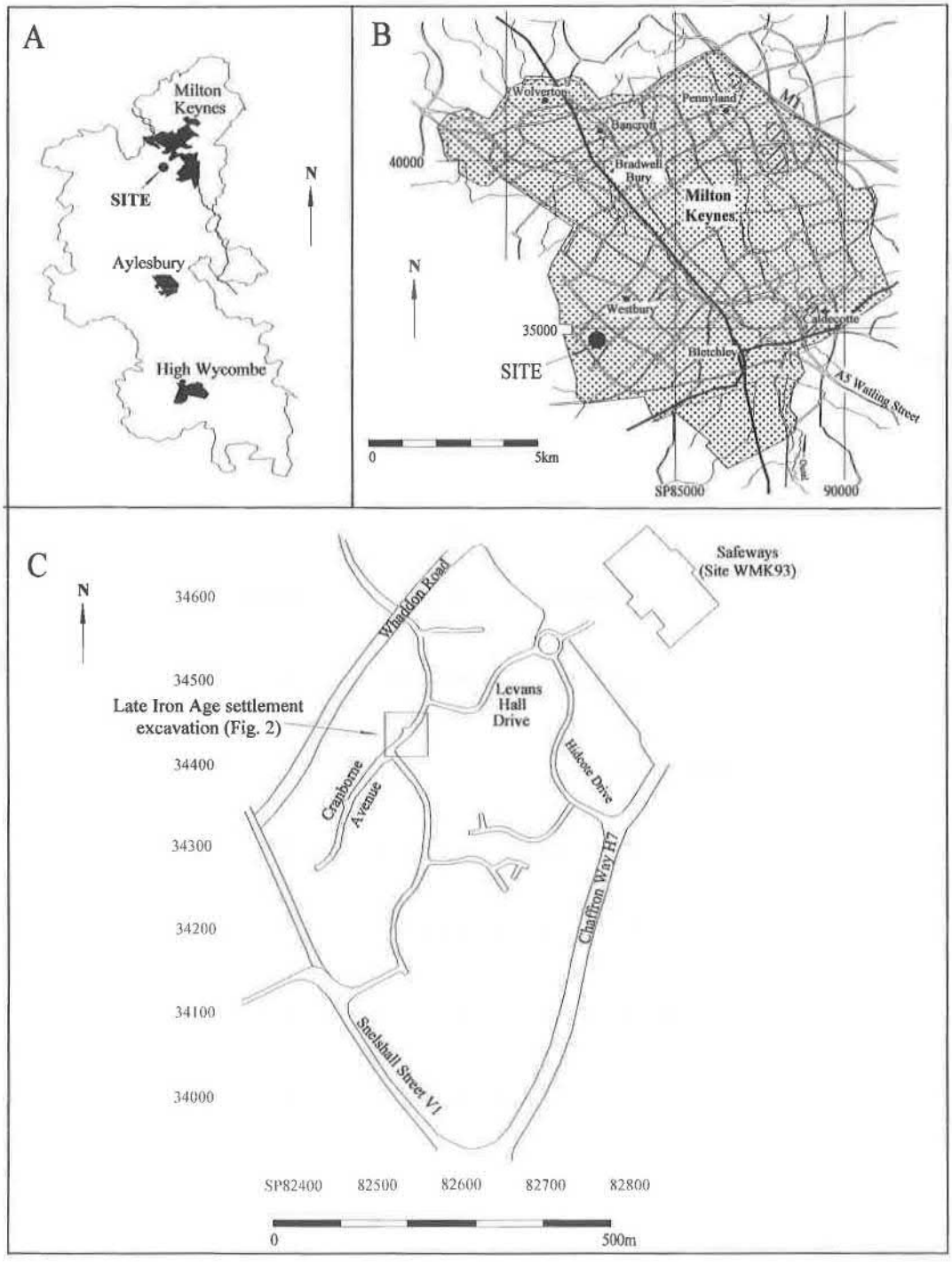

FIGURE 1 Location of site: A within Buckinghamshire: B: within Milton Keynes (showing other sites mentioned in text): C: within Westcroft.

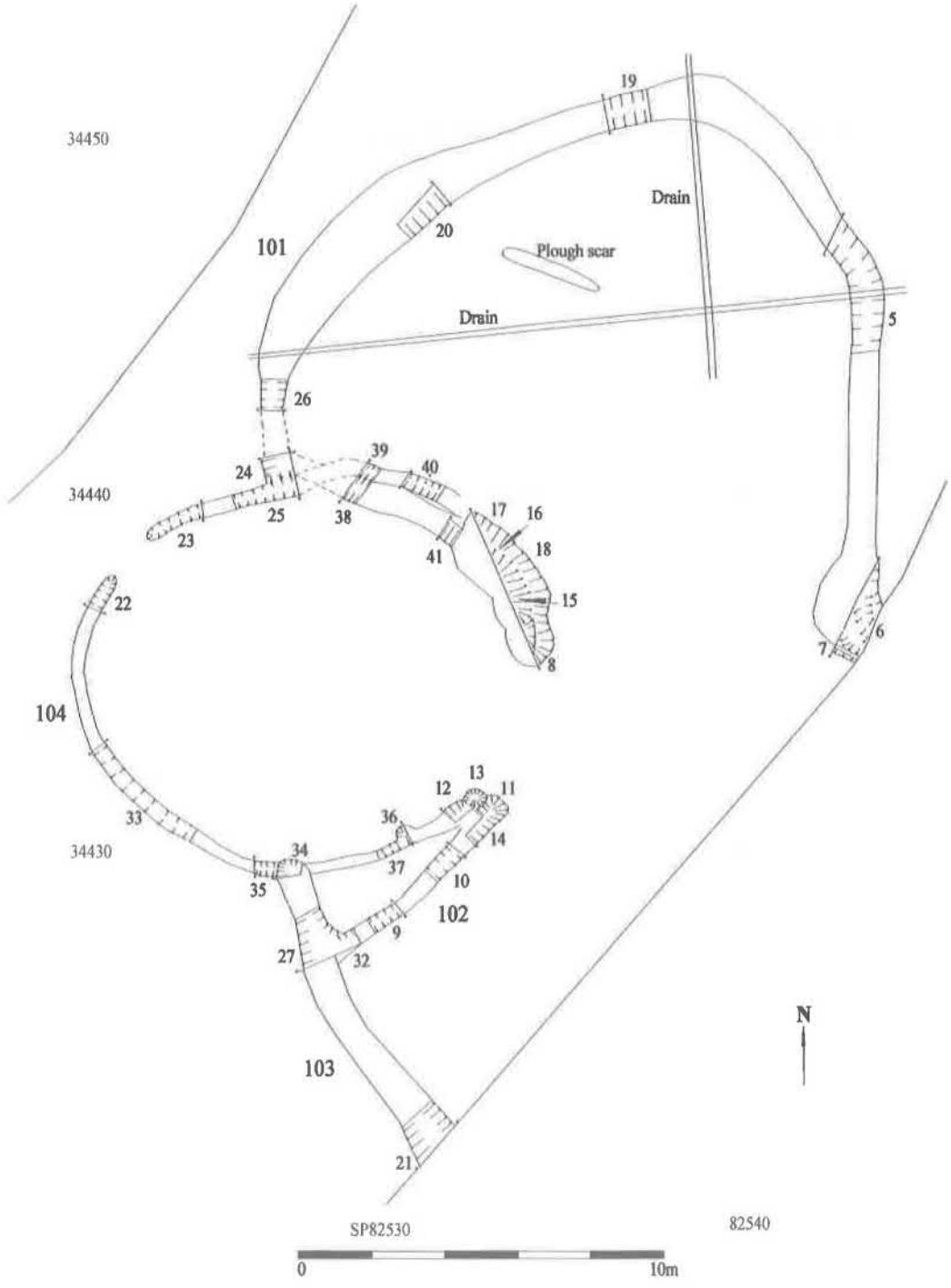

FIGURE 2 Cranborne Avenue, Westcroft, Milton Keynes. Plan of excavated features.

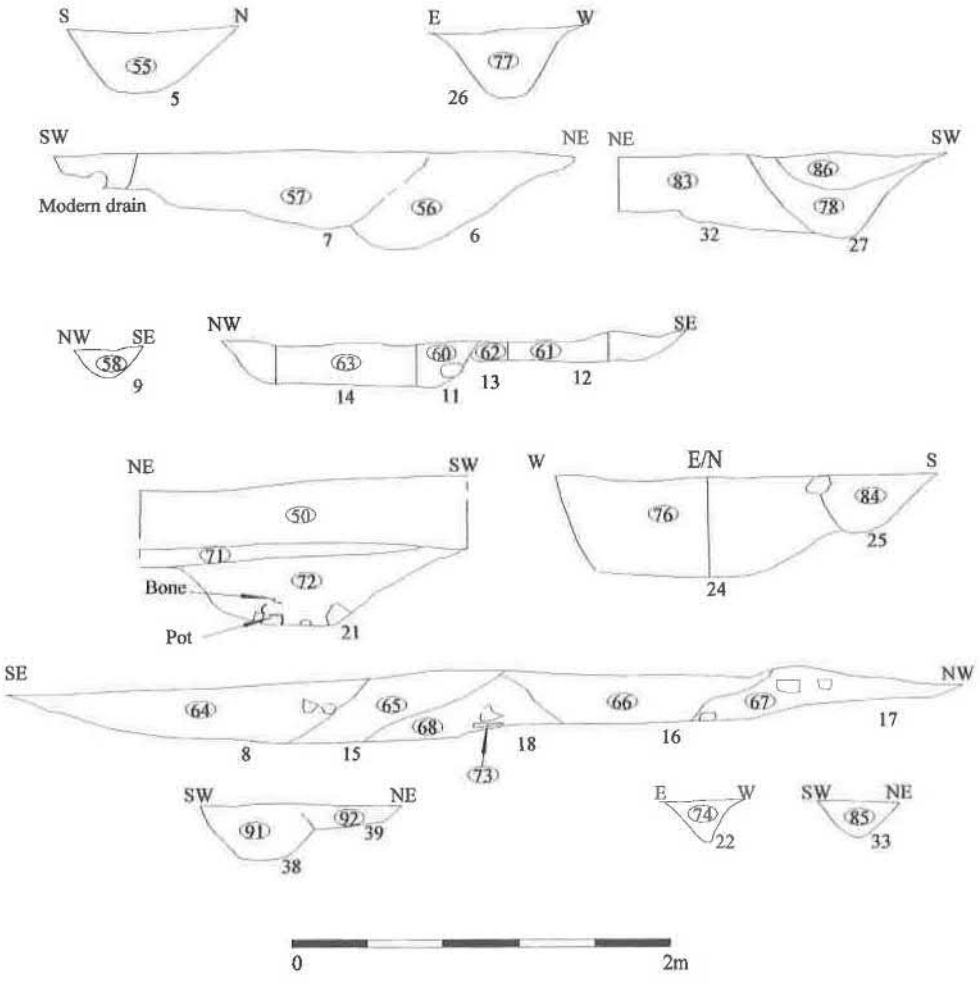

FIGURE 3 Cranborne Avenue, Westcroft, Milton Keynes. Selected sections.

The width varied only very slightly between 0.3m and 0.36m. The fill from the terminal (23) was dark grey-brown silty clay with frequent charcoal, pottery and bone. The fill in the western part of the gully (22, 33, 35) was orange brown with less pottery than elsewhere around its circuit. The ring gully was cut by the north terminal of ditch (103).

Gully (102)

This short length of gully may be a partially surviving recut of ring gully (104), or an extension to it. The gully was U-shaped throughout, 0.3m wide and 0.13m deep, increasing to 0.26m where it was cut by ditch (103), possibly suggesting that it terminated here. The fill was dark grey-brown silty clay with frequent charcoal flecks and abundant pottery and animal bone.

Ditch (103)

This ditch terminated at, and cut, ring gully (104), and also cut gully (102). It extended beyond the excavation area to the south-east. It was relatively

deep (0.48m) with a U-shaped base and steep sides. The fill was dark grey-brown silty clay with moderate amounts of charcoal. It produced almost 40% of the site's pottery (see Table 1).

Pits

Five pits were identified. Pit (7) cut enclosure (101); it had gently sloping sides with a flat base and a brown silty-clay fill with occasional charcoal. Pits (8), (15), (16) and (18) were a series of intercutting features that had destroyed the original NE terminal of ring gully (104) (Fig. 3). Pit 18 was the earliest; it was cut by pits 15 and 16 leaving no indication of its original extent. The base was flat and the fill a mottled yellow-brown silty clay. Within this feature there was a discrete area of pottery and darker, grey fill (73), overlying a complete cow mandible, possibly representing a deliberately structured deposit. Pit (16) was cut by pit (15) and in turn cut pit 18 and feature (17) which was possibly the terminal of enclosure (101). It had a flat base with steep sides, and a fill of light brown silty clay. Pit (15) had only one steep side visible in section, being cut by pit (8). The fill was light blue-grey silt clay with frequent charcoal. Pit (8) was the latest of the series with a slight slope on one side and rising steeply to the north-west. The fill was dark grey silty clay with very frequent charcoal and pottery. The late date attributed to the pottery (Table 1) tallies with the stratigraphic evidence.

Post holes

Two small shallow features (13 and 36) may be the remains of post holes. Their association with the ring gully may indicate a structural function.

Finds

Pottery by Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprised 475 sherds with a total weight of 3797g. The estimated vessel equivalent (EVE) by summation of surviving rimsherd circumference was 2.91. The range of pottery types present suggests that there was occupation at the site from the end of the middle Iron Age until the immediate pre-Roman period, perhaps 100BC – AD50, although the small size and fragmentary nature of the assemblage makes more precise dating difficult.

The following fabrics were noted:

F1. Sandy, sparse limestone. Hand-built. Sparse to moderate sub-angular limestone up to 1mm, most below 0.5mm. Sparse to moderate organic voids. Rare sub-rounded quartz up to 0.5mm, rare angular white flint up to 1mm, red ironstone up to 1mm. Sandy texture. 448 sherds, 3064g, EVE = 2.53.

F2. Fine sandy ware. Dark grey to black fabric; few visible inclusions other than very fine mica, sandy texture. 10 sherds, 129g, EVE = 0.07.

F3. Grog-tempered. Sparse to moderate reddish-brown sub-rounded grog up to 2mm; sparse to moderate sub-rounded quartz up to 0.5mm, rare calcareous material up to 0.5mm. 7 sherds, 377g, EVE = 0.

F4: Limestone. Moderate to dense sub-angular limestone fragments up to 2mm. 7 sherds, 139g, EVE = 0.14.

F10. 'Belgic'. Wheel-thrown. Fine grey fabric with dense, black, sub-angular grog up to 0.5mm; rare limestone up to 2mm, sparse sub-rounded quartz up to 0.5mm. Marney fabric 46a, 1st century AD (Marney 1989, 190). 3 sherds, 88g, EVE = 0.17.

The pottery occurrence by number and weight of sherds per context by fabric type is shown in Table 1. Each date should be regarded as a *terminus post quem*.

One of the most notable features of the Iron Age pottery from this site is the lack of shell-tempered wares. Such fabrics were commonplace at the Iron Age site at Pennyland in Milton Keynes, where they represented around 85% of the assemblage by weight (Knight 1993, fig. 87). A sandy fabric with rare limestone, similar to fabric 1 at this site, made up the rest of the Pennyland assemblage.

The range of fabrics at Cranborne Avenue, and their frequency, have closer affinities with the assemblage from Bancroft villa in Milton Keynes. Shelly wares were noted there, but only comprised around 35% of the assemblage by weight (Knight 1994, fig. 199). The main fabric was a sandy ware with sparse limestone and other material, again similar to fabric 1 at this site. At Bancroft, such pottery made up around 50% of the assemblage (Knight 1994). Bancroft also produced fine sandy wares and grog-tempered wares which are similar to fabrics 2 and 3 from this site. These comprised

TABLE 1 Pottery occurrence by number and weight (in g) of sherds per context by fabric type

			F1		F2		F3		F4		F10		
F	*Cntxt*	*Group*	*No*	*Wt*	*No*	*Wt*	*No*	*Wt*	*No*	*Wt*	*No*	*Wt*	*DATE*
5	55	101	5	10									IA?
6	56	101	17	87	1	3							IA
7	57		12	87									IA
8	64		64	603	6	60					2	69	1stC AD
9	58	102	8	15			1	11					IA?
10	59	102	34	147									IA
11	60	102	2	273			1	46					LMIA?
12	61	104	2	18			1	98					IA
13	62		1	33									IA?
14	63	102	14	71	1	9							IA
15	65		14	114	1	55	3	210	3	104			1stC BC -1stC AD
16	66		10	25					1	20			IA?
17	67		13	54									IA?
18	68		49	251			1	12					IA
18	73		14	154									IA
20	70	101	1	7									IA?
21	71	103	6	24									IA?
21	72	103	57	286									IA
22	74	104	7	21									IA?
23	75	104	1	4									IA?
24	76	101	2	31									IA?
25	84	104	15	37									IA?
26	77	101	1	1									IA?
27	78	103	120	790	1	2					1	19	1stC AD
32	83	102	10	46					3	15			LMIA??
33	85	104	1	7									IA?
34	87	103	13	40									LMIA?
35	88	104	3	14									LMIA??
40	93	104	3	8									IA?
41	94	101	12	46									IA?
	Total		511	3304	10	129	7	377	7	139	3	88	

around 15% and 4% of the Bancroft assemblage respectively. It is perhaps significant that Bancroft, unlike Pennyland, had a phase of occupation spanning the late Iron Age to early Roman period.

There is no evidence for any early Iron Age occupation at Cranborne Avenue, as with the earlier work at Westcroft (Ford, 2000). Carinated bowls, the ceramic 'type-fossil' for the period in the region, are entirely absent, as are vessels with fingertipped shoulders, another form which is characteristic of the early Iron Age. The small size of the assemblage coupled with the fragmentary nature of a large portion of it means that form identification is somewhat limited, but the overwhelming majority of those sherds from which any form information can be gleaned suggests that most vessels were fairly small and squat with perfunctory upright rims and a rounded body profile. Such 'Ovoid' vessels were the commonest form at Bancroft (Knight 1994, fig. 200) and the second most common at Pennyland (Knight 1993, 221). Such vessels can only be dated broadly to the Iron Age.

Scored ware, which is commonly found on middle to late Iron Age sites in the south-east midlands, particularly Northamptonshire, is rare at this site, with just six sherds (154g) being noted. At Bancroft, which seems to have been a predominately early site, only seven scored sherds, all from a single vessel, were noted. Generally, such pottery is rare in the Milton Keynes area (Knight 1993, 238), but is more common to the north and east of the city, especially in Northamptonshire. The practice of scoring is thought to have lasted from the 5th/4th to 1st centuries BC.

Very little decorated pottery was noted, although

a number of vessels had fingernail impressions incised into the tops of the rims. Such decoration was noted on vessels from Pennyland and Bancroft, although Knight amalgamated them with fingertip decoration, a technique entirely absent from this group, and more characteristic of the early-middle Iron Age. Fingernail rim decoration does not appear to be particularly chronologically diagnostic. A single sherd with curvilinear decoration was noted, in context 65. Such decoration is characteristic of the late Iron Age, dating to within the period 1st century BC to mid-1st century AD, and occurs in relatively large quantities in Northamptonshire (Jackson and Dix 1987). It is scarce in the Milton Keynes region. A single sherd was noted at Pennyland. The presence of the wheel-thrown Belgic wares indicates that occupation lasted into the 1st century AD.

From the weight of the evidence, it would appear that occupation at this site lasted from the end of the middle Iron Age until the immediate pre-Roman period, suggesting a span of *c* 100BC – AD50, although it is possible that occupation may have begun earlier.

Fired Clay by Sian Anthony
A total of 23 pieces (58g) of fired clay, possibly daub, were found, with no concentration of the material. They were all of similar consistency; a light brown clay mix with occasional organic inclusions and a sandy texture. None retained any surface detail.

Animal Bone by Sian Anthony
A total of 443 pieces of animal bone were recovered. There seems to be no particular concentration, with most features producing some bone. The majority are highly fragmented and poorly preserved. From the Iron Age features, 33% were identified as cattle, with many complete mandibles with *in situ* teeth. Cattle and cattle-sized bones represent a total of 53%. Bones identified as sheep/goat comprise only 18%, but with the addition of the sheep/goat-sized fragments, the figure rises to 41% leaving a similar proportion of sheep to cattle for this site. The lack of other bones, particularly pig and wild animals, may suggest that the local environment was not heavily wooded. Other species are only represented by a vole-sized fragment of radius and two small dog-sized pieces of bone. A cow-sized limb bone had one chop mark.

Flint by Steve Ford
Two prehistoric struck flints were recovered (from pit 8 and gully terminal 11), both were in fresh condition although neither was chronologically distinctive. A third piece, from ditch slot 5, was a natural frost-shattered flake but with two slight rolled and stained removals on the dorsal surface. It is possibly of Palaeolithic date.

Conclusion

The evidence points to a small unenclosed Late Iron Age farm site, the ring gully being a drainage gully to a roundhouse. The lack of internal structures points to a building tradition without the need for earthfast foundations, such as the turf construction suggested for the roundhouses at Pennyland (Williams 1993). The small amount of fired clay found, which might be daub, may indicate the presence of wattling somewhere on the site, not necessarily used in the main building. The pottery shows the ring gully and the enclosure to be of similar date, although they are unlikely to have been in use together, as the infilled enclosure was overlain by the ring gully (104). Similarly, gully (102) which may also have been a partial ring gully, could indicate the presence of a replacement for the structure represented by ring gully (104). Finally, ditch (103) cut both ring gullies; its pottery appears to be later than the rest of the assemblage, but this may be as much to do with the greater quantity present, allowing more positive identification, as fabric f1 still strongly predominated (Table 1).

The earlier irregular enclosure (101) is interpreted as a stock enclosure. Although the ring gully (104) cut the infilled enclosure ditch, the two features do not appear to be very far apart in time.

Table 2 Animal bone species represented

	Cattle	*Cattle-size*	*Sheep/goat*	*Sheep/goat-size*	*Small dog size*	*Vole-size*	*Unidentified*	*Total*
Total	148	89	79	102	2	1	22	443
Percentage	33	20	18	23	<1	<1	5	100

The enclosure may have continued in use after its ditch had silted up. A combination of hut and enclosure is common to this period and this area. However, the lack of a surrounding settlement enclosure ditch is less usual (Knight 1984, 197). The site may be part of a larger complex, given the concentration of what were apparently Iron Age pits discovered only some 400m to the north-east (Ford, 2000), where again there was no real evidence for enclosure. The perceived bias towards enclosed sites may be due to the poor visibility of ephemeral subsoil features and only intensive field-work such as that carried out here will lead to the discovery of more of this type of site.

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