

# EXCAVATION OF A MULTI-PERIOD SITE AT LOWER ROAD, STOKE MANDEVILLE, 2017: SUMMARY RESULTS

## INTRODUCTION

In April and May 2017, following trial trenching in February 2016 (CA 2016) Cotswold Archaeology (CA) carried out an archaeological excavation in advance of residential development at the request of Triskelion Heritage and on behalf of Bloor Homes, at land west of Lower Road, Stoke Mandeville, Buckinghamshire (centred at NGR: SP 8260 1112; Fig. 1). The site was approximately 8ha in extent and located immediately west of Lower Road at the southern edge of Aylesbury, to the south-west of Stoke Mandeville Hospital. It has a level topography and lies at approximately 95m aOD. Prior to development the site comprised fields under arable cultivation, bounded to the north-west by a sports ground, sports club and houses, to the north-east by Lower Road and a business centre, and to the south-west by fields. The bedrock geology underlying the site comprises undifferentiated Cretaceous mudstone, siltstone and sandstone of the Gault Formation and Upper Greensand Formation (BGS 2017). No superficial deposits are mapped within the site.

The excavation area, situated in the northern part of the development site, comprised 1.02 ha and was focused on features identified during the evaluation, some of which had been dated to the Middle Iron Age through examination of pottery found in their fills. In addition to the excavation, a watching brief was maintained during December 2017 on two additional areas (Areas 2 and 3) during groundworks for the development (Fig. 1). These additional areas were targeted to investigate some undated but possibly Iron Age features recorded during the evaluation, and a potential continuation of Middle to Late Iron Age/Early Roman features recorded at the northern end of the excavation area. However, despite the proximity of one of these areas (Area 3) to features revealed during the excavation, on investigation they proved to be devoid of archaeological features.

Both the excavation and watching brief followed standard CA fieldwork procedures set out in project designs produced by CA (CA 2017a and 2017b) and agreed with Bucks County Council's Senior Archaeology Planning Officer. This report presents a summary of the excavation results: a detailed report is available to download via the Cotswold Archaeology website at <http://reports.cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk> (CA 2018: report number 17726). The archive will be deposited with Buckinghamshire County Museum (accession no. AYBCM: 2017.92).

## RESULTS

The dating evidence indicates that the majority of the recorded features can be attributed broadly to the later prehistoric and Roman periods, with individual features dating to the Middle Bronze Age and Roman periods and two roundhouse gullies dating to the Middle Iron Age.

The earliest phase of activity comprised two sections of ditch (C and L) located in the central part of the excavation area, which may have been part of a field boundary dating to the Middle Bronze Age, along with a cremation burial in a sub-circular pit (1076) measuring 0.85m in diameter located close to the north-eastern limit of excavation (Fig. 2). In addition to cremated human bone, radiocarbon dated to 1442–1277 cal. BC (95.4%; SUERC-75329), pit 1076 also contained seven sherds from a Middle Bronze Age Deverel-Rimbury bucket urn along with an intact flint flake, a hulled wheat grain and hazelnut fragments, and mollusc shells indicating an open environment.

Two penannular ditches representing roundhouses (Fig. 2) were situated at the south-eastern and north-western ends of the excavation area. Both had east-facing entrances defined by rounded ditch terminals, the fills of which contained Middle Iron Age pottery. Roundhouse A measured 11m in diameter and consisted of a single ditch,



FIGURE 1 SITE LOCATION

0.7m in width. The fill of the southern terminal produced some fragments of charcoal, which returned a radiocarbon date of 379–197 cal. BC (95.4%; SUERC-75328). The entrance of roundhouse A contained three small sub-circular pits or postholes approximately 0.45m in diameter, two of which were broadly aligned with the arc of the ditch and one of which was set approximately 1m forward from it, perhaps representing part of a porch. A fourth sub-circular pit measuring 0.41m in diameter was located inside the roundhouse, close to the inside edge of the southern side of the ditch. Roundhouse B was larger than its southern counterpart, measuring c.13m in diameter, with a penannular ditch 0.4m in width; it did not have any pits or postholes associated with its entrance and was devoid of securely associated internal features.

Cutting Middle Iron Age roundhouse B at the northern end of the excavation area was a group of linear boundary ditches on similar north-east/south-west or north-west/south-east alignments, representing at least three phases of sub-rectangular enclosures or fields. The ditches, which were shallow and had been heavily truncated by medieval and post-medieval ploughing, produced a relatively small assemblage of pottery dateable largely to the later prehistoric period, with the sole exception of five sherds of abraded sandy oxidised ware of Roman date from the fill of ditch I. The activity represented by these ditches seems to have post-dated the occupation of roundhouse B and the stratigraphic sequence, in combination with the dating evidence, suggests a Middle to Late Iron Age/Early Roman date. The final event in the sequence of activity at the northern end of the site is represented by a large waterhole (J), which cut boundary ditch H.

In addition to the possibly Late Iron Age/Early Roman field boundaries, evidence of Roman activity in the central southern part of the excavation area comprised a heavily truncated northeast/southwest-oriented ditch (K) measuring 30m in length, which extended beyond the limit of excavation to the north-east. The single fill of silty clay contained nine sherds of pottery dated broadly to the Roman period, a fragment of Roman brick, a fragment of worked flint flake and a single sheep/goat molar.

Northeast/southwest-orientated plough furrows representing ridge-and-furrow agriculture were recorded crossing the entirety of the excavation

area at intervals of approximately 7m. Surface finds of post-medieval clay tobacco pipes were recovered from several furrows and a fragment of post-medieval horseshoe was recovered from a ditch/furrow excavated in one of the evaluation trenches. Ceramic land drains of modern date had been inserted into all of the plough furrows, within narrow pipe-trenches.

## DISCUSSION

The Middle Bronze Age cremation burial of an adult individual deposited in or with a Deverel-Rimbury bucket urn, with a flint flake and some charred cereals that may originally have been placed on the pyre, was apparently isolated within a field or enclosure. This may have been partially defined by the broadly contemporary ditch to its north-west. It is possible that an entire individual was originally deposited in the grave with the cremation urn inverted over the bones. The base of the urn and possibly some of the human remains were then truncated and dispersed by later ploughing.

The two Middle Iron Age roundhouses were set some distance apart and were not necessarily contemporary with each other. Their form, which was defined by penannular ditches with east-facing entrances and, in the case of roundhouse A, a possible porch structure, suggests fairly substantial and permanent buildings. At 11m and 13m in diameter, both buildings were also fairly large for Middle Iron Age roundhouses. Roundhouse A contained an internal pit suggestive of food storage or cooking. Substantial assemblages of pottery from the penannular ditches, particularly the terminals, which include several sherds with carbonised food residues, is further suggestive of domestic activity, as is the small assemblage of charred remains of cereals, legumes, nuts and weed species indicative of an arable environment. This is complemented by the bones of cattle, sheep/goat, horse and dog, also from the ditch fills. All of this evidence suggests permanent though not large-scale settlement, and perhaps indicates expansion into an area which had previously been only lightly utilised in the Middle to Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. The occurrence of the Middle Iron Age settlement was perhaps connected to changes in the settlement pattern to the north, on the south bank of the river Thames within modern Aylesbury,

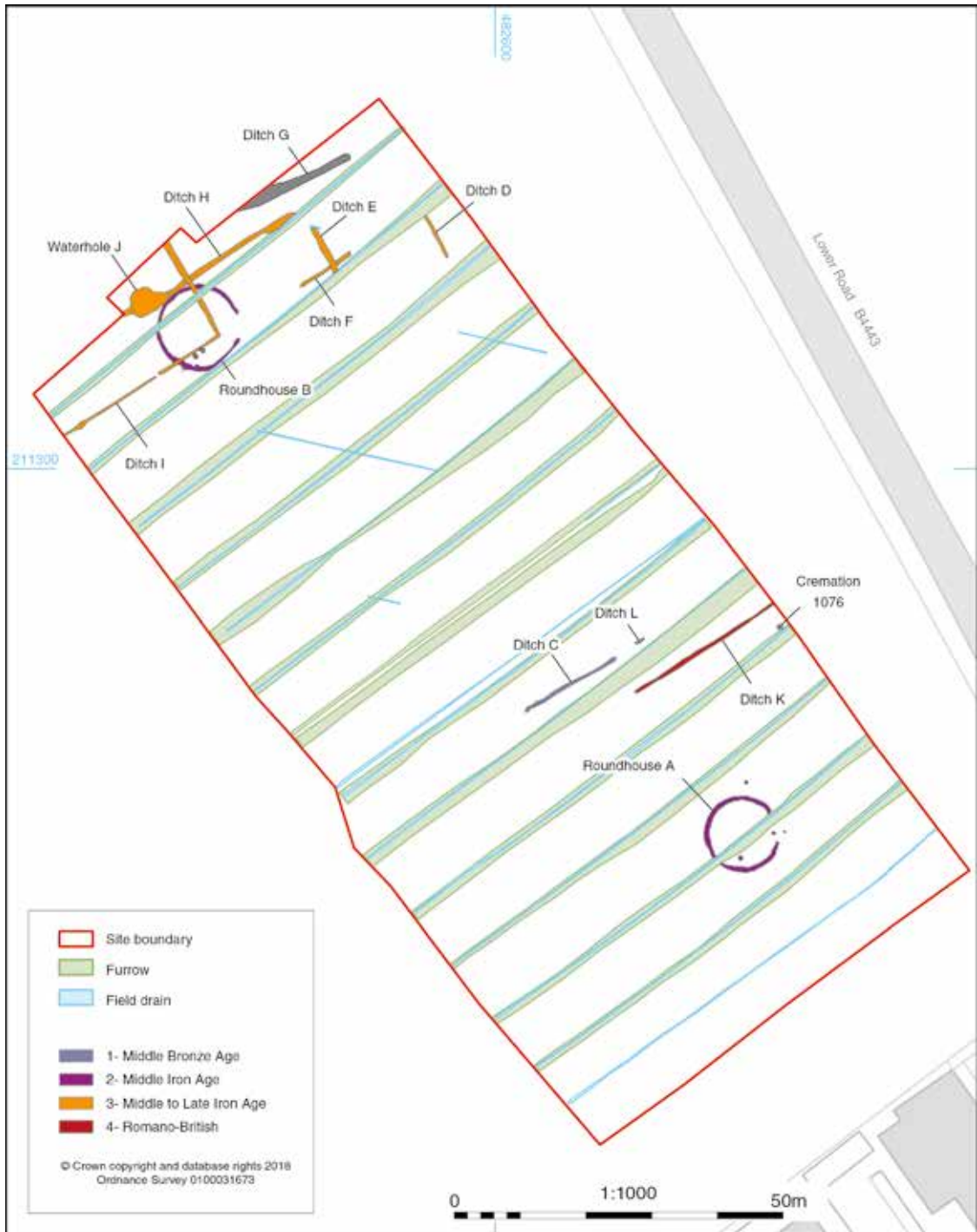


FIGURE 2 Excavation plan

where a much larger Early and Middle Iron Age settlement at Coldharbour Farm (Parkerhouse & Bonner 1997) expanded in the Middle Iron Age.

A small field system cutting roundhouse B and seemingly dating to the Middle to Late Iron Age/Early Roman period showed at least three phases of remodelling during its life. This activity probably represents agriculture rather than settlement, although later prehistoric pottery from the fills of the field system ditches suggests that the settlement to which they belonged was not very far away. The presence of a waterhole cutting one of the enclosure ditches demonstrates a pastoral component to the agricultural regime. All of this points to a mixed agricultural regime in an environment with easy access to abundant woodland. The presence of a small-scale Roman field boundary, ditch K, also indicates agricultural activity, presumably originally incorporating a group of fields or small enclosures, although the surviving evidence had been heavily truncated by medieval ridge-and-furrow agriculture. Medieval/post-medieval ridge and furrow across the entire site demonstrated that by the medieval period the area, which probably lay within the parish of Stoke Mandeville (MM 2018) was under cereal cultivation, probably by inhabitants of the village of the same name, which lay to the south-east. This represents a shift in land-use from a later prehistoric and Roman landscape with evidence of less intensive cultivation and suggests that the landscape had become much less marginal in terms of economic exploitation.

*Peter Banks, Daniel Stansbie  
and Andrew Whelan*

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CA would like to thank Bloor Homes for funding the excavation and post excavation reporting, and Gerry Wait of Triskelion Heritage for his advice during the project. Fieldwork was undertaken

by Andrew Whelan, assisted by Eilidh Barr, Molly Clyne, Mark Davies, Kim Devereux-West, Mathieu Ferron, Luis Gomes, Izabela Jurkiewicz and Rebecca Pritchard. The excavation report upon which this summary is based was written by Daniel Stansbie and Andrew Whelan. The ceramic building material, clay tobacco pipe, fired clay, lithics, and pottery finds reports were prepared by Jacky Sommerville, the human bone report was written by Sharon Clough. The illustrations were prepared by Esther Escudero and Charlotte Patman and checked by Dan Bashford. The archive has been compiled and prepared for deposition by Emily Evans. The fieldwork was managed for CA by Mark Hewson and the post-excavation was managed by Daniel Stansbie.

#### REFERENCES

- British Geological Survey 2017 <http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html> (Accessed 9 November 2017)
- Cotswold Archaeology 2016 *Lower Road, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire: Archaeological Evaluation*, Cotswold Archaeology Report no. **16099**
- Cotswold Archaeology 2017a *Lower Road, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire: Written Scheme of Investigation for an archaeological strip, map and sample excavation and archaeological watching brief*
- Cotswold Archaeology 2017b *Lower Road, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire: Written Scheme of Investigation for an archaeological watching brief*
- Cotswold Archaeology 2018 *Land West of Lower Road, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire: Excavation report*. Cotswold Archaeology Report no. **17726**
- Magic Map 2018 <http://www.natureonthemap.naturalengland.org.uk/magicmap.aspx> (Accessed 17 April 2018)
- Parkhouse J & Bonner D 1997 Investigations at the prehistoric site at Coldharbour Farm, Aylesbury in 1996, *Recs Bucks* **39**, 73–139