



EASTCOTTS FLOOD COMPENSATION SCHEME

Preliminary summary report on archaeological investigations

Over the last 5 months Albion Archaeology has undertaken extensive investigations, overseen by CgMs Consulting on behalf of Southill Estates, in advance of flood compensation measures at Eastcotts to the east of Bedford. The investigations are now complete and the scheme is under construction by Barton Plant Ltd. In total, c. 16ha of land adjacent to the Elstow Brook has been stripped and investigated. This report presents a preliminary summary of the results prior to the commencement of the Assessment and Analysis/Publication stages of the project.



View from east of earthmoving halfway through the investigations

Overview

The presence of flint tools and flakes hints at human activity in the late Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age (up to 8000 years ago). However, the first substantive evidence for activity on the site dates to the early Iron Age (2700 years ago) when a major boundary was constructed. This was modified in the middle Iron Age and endured, in some form, into the Roman period. Despite the presence of this boundary only limited evidence for middle and late Iron Age activity was identified. In contrast, the area was intensively occupied in the Roman period (2000 years ago) when there were two settlements (one on each side of the Brook), fields and dispersed activity that included isolated burials. The settlement to the north of the Brook is interpreted as a planned rural village — a type that is rarely identified in Roman Britain. The only evidence for post-Roman settlement was an isolated early Saxon building to the south of the Brook. By the medieval period the area fell within the open field systems of the nearby townships of Harrowden and Cardington.



EARLIEST HUMAN ACTIVITY

The earliest evidence for human activity within the site comprises flint tools recovered from the ploughsoil or features of later date. Some of these are Mesolithic in date and are, therefore, likely to be associated with transient hunter-gather communities which no doubt exploited the Brook and its environs. Flint tools of Neolithic and early Bronze Age date were also recovered but no sub-surface features were found. This low level of evidence is surprising, given the presence of early prehistoric monuments to the north of the Bedford Southern Bypass.



Prehistoric flint arrow heads

MAJOR BOUNDARY

One of the most significant features of the pre-Roman landscape was a boundary that ultimately comprised three broadly parallel ditches. Cropmark evidence suggests that these extended for c. 900m from the Elstow Brook in the south to the River Great Ouse to the north.

Although parts of these boundaries had been previously investigated, the recent work has produced two significant new pieces of information about them:

1. Form- six pits were found during machining, below one of the ditches, in close proximity to the Brook. These predate the ditch by a few hundred years. However, it is uncertain if they comprised a formal pit alignment, or a more localised feature.

2. Dating- pottery suggests that the pit alignment may have been dug in the early Iron Age and that the ditches were dug a few hundred years later in the middle Iron Age.



Series of pits revealed after machining out ditch

MIDDLE IRON AGE

A small number of dispersed pits of this date were identified to the south of the Brook. Some are interpreted as storage pits but others were larger and may have been water holes. It is also possible that some of the isolated cremation burials date to this period. Radiocarbon dating will be the only way to confirm their date.



Recording of a large pit south of the Elstow Brook



LATE IRON AGE

Several foci of late Iron Age activity were identified.

South of the Brook:

- Enclosure near the Brook- although no buildings were identified, sufficient domestic debris was recovered to suggest that this was a settlement.
- Settlement- the quantity of late Iron Age pottery recovered from the Roman settlement in this area suggests that it originated in the pre-Conquest period.

North of the Brook:

- Unspecific- there is no evidence to suggest that a pre-Conquest settlement existed in this area. However, one ditched enclosure may have been used as an animal corral. It was later incorporated into the Roman settlement's enclosure system.

ROMANO-BRITISH

The settlement north of the brook

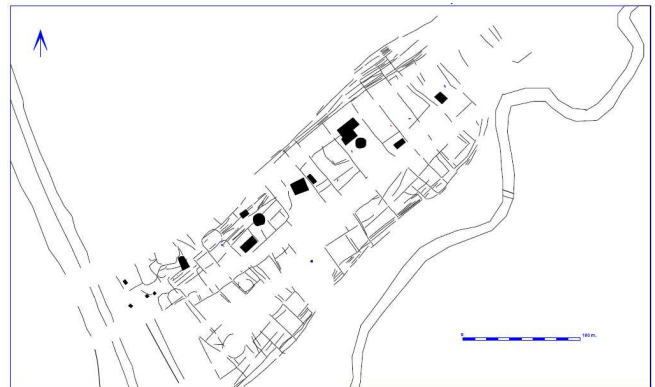
Chronological development

The finds recovered from the recent investigations indicate that this settlement originated in the early 2nd century AD. This is curious because the majority of Romano-British rural settlements in the vicinity have their origins prior to the Conquest, *e.g.* those at Marsh Leys, Biddenham Loop. However, it is possible that the creation of the settlement was in some way connected with the major reorganisation of the rural landscape seen on a number of farmsteads at this time, *e.g.* Marsh Leys, Biddenham Loop, Great Barford Bypass Site 8, Wavendon Gate (Milton Keynes), Haddon (Cambridgeshire).

The small quantity of 4th-century pottery suggests that the Eastcotts settlement had been abandoned at least by the middle of the 4th century.

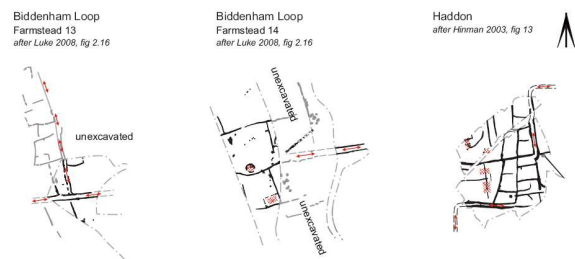
Settlement extent and type

The Eastcotts settlement is now known to extend over *c.* 4ha. Its western limit is formed by the Iron Age triple ditched boundary. The absence of a late Iron Age precursor, the regular layout of its constituent enclosures and the lack of activity beyond the boundaries suggest that it is a planned village. This is a significant discovery because such settlements in the Roman countryside are rarely identified away from major roads.



Simplified plan of the Eastcotts settlement

The settlement is more extensive than farmsteads such as Marsh Leys and Biddenham Loop, which are believed to have been occupied by a single extended family.



Typical Romano-British farmsteads

Settlement components

The settlement comprises a series of NW-SE ditched enclosures, which were partially investigated within the Bypass corridor. A series of roughly parallel gullies and ditches form the NW and SE major boundaries of the settlement. These may represent cart ruts or hedges. All the boundary ditches had been redug on a number of occasions.



A number of rectangular and round buildings were identified within the Bypass investigations. Their distribution suggests that the NW part of each enclosure was the focus of domestic activity.

A number of large and deep pits were discovered — typically on the periphery of the settlement. They are interpreted as water holes. The lower deposits within some of these pits were waterlogged and, because of this, they will provide the best information on the local environment and economy of the settlement. In addition, a number of leather shoe fragments and a timber plank were preserved and recovered.



Well preserved timber plank in lower part of Roman pit

Agriculture

The position of the Eastcotts settlement in the vicinity of the Elstow Brook, like Marsh Leys upstream, would have been a good topographical location for a mixed farming economy. Charred and waterlogged cereals along with the good animal bone assemblage should provide an indication of the nature of farming regime. The presence of quernstones also attests to crop processing.

A possible ‘threshing floor’ was tentatively identified within the recent investigations and a drying oven for crop processing was found on the Bypass investigations.



Archaeological recording of possible threshing floor

Craft activities

In terms of non-agricultural activities there was significant evidence from the settlement for *iron smithing* and *pottery* manufacture. More meagre evidence for bronze, textile, wood and bone working have been found.

Iron smithing- The recent investigations produced *c.* 10kg of ferrous smithing slag; the Bypass investigations produced at least twice as much again. This material was only found in two adjacent enclosures, suggesting this specialist activity was undertaken by specific individuals or households rather than by the whole community. Smithing is known to have taken place on a small number of rural settlements in the vicinity, *e.g.* Marsh Leys and Kempston Church End, but is absent from others, *e.g.* Biddenham Loop, Luton Road Wilstead, Great Barford Bypass.

Pottery production- The recent investigations have produced over 250 fragments of kiln bars. These sausage-shaped, fired clay objects were used to support pots while they were fired in kilns.



A selection of kiln bars



This material was concentrated in a single enclosure suggesting that potting was also a specialist activity. Pottery kilns were found on the Bypass and Southern Orbital Sewer investigations. The presence of numerous kilns on the southern fringes of Bedford has been interpreted by some as evidence for industrial scale production.

Ritual and burial

In total, five human burials were found within the settlement — two inhumations and two cremation burials. In addition, five inhumations and two cremation burials were found on the Bypass investigations.



Careful investigation of a Roman skeleton

Other possible evidence for ritual activity comprised the small number of complete and partial animal skeletons. More speculative are the small number of particularly large or unusual deposits of artefacts. Some of these may have been part of rituals associated with the abandonment of the settlement.

Finds

A huge quantity of pottery was recovered from the settlement (c. 90kg).



A small selection of pottery found during the investigations

The majority was locally made grey wares and shelly wares. Regional imports, e.g. from Oxfordshire, Hadham, Verulamium, the Nene Valley; and continental imports, e.g. samian ware from Gaul, were present.

A surprisingly small number of metal artefacts were recovered, including coins (2), brooches (7), a ring, knives (2), timber nails (17) and hob nails (15). All were in poor condition. In addition, single examples of antler, bone, jet, leather and wooden objects were found.



The sole of a Roman leather shoe

Status and Romanisation

Provisional quantification indicates that the recent investigations have produced a slightly higher percentage of regional and continental pottery imports than many rural settlements in the vicinity. In addition, a higher than normal quantity of glass vessels were present. Although this could be used to indicate that the occupants of the settlement were of higher status than those in the nearby farmsteads, the situation is never particularly clear-cut. For example the occupants of one farmstead at Marsh Leys had miniature dogs, access to walnuts and oysters and appeared to cultivate ornamental box hedges, all suggestive of a status higher than that apparently indicated by the artefactual and structural evidence from the farmstead.

To some extent, the evidence often used for ‘status’ is inextricably linked to the occupants’ adoption of Roman culture and this may not necessarily be directly linked to their ‘status’. The Eastcotts evidence can only contribute to this debate once it has been fully quantified and analysed.



The settlement south of the brook

The extent of the settlement south of the Brook was known from cropmark evidence. Its location was taken into account during the design of the flood attenuation scheme, so that the majority of it was preserved beneath a spoil bund. It extended over c. 1.2ha and comprised a series of enclosures associated with trackways.

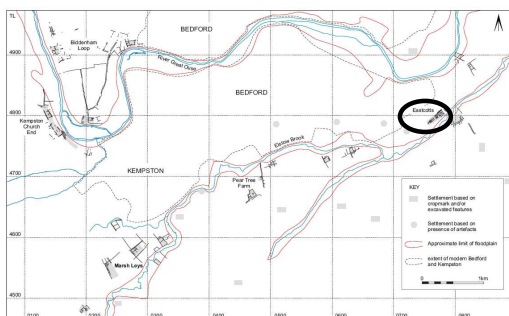
Its northern periphery was investigated. This contained a series of ditches, small and large pits, postholes and cremation burials. These features produced 8kg of pottery, quantities of animal bone and, among the other finds, iron slag. In contrast to the settlement to the north of the Brook, the latter appeared to be derived from smelting rather than smithing. Also unlike the settlement to the north, late Iron Age pottery indicates that this settlement was established prior to the Roman Conquest.

The environs of both settlements

The extensive nature of the recent investigations has enabled the wider landscape of the settlements to be examined. To the south of the Brook, trackways, fields, discrete activity areas and isolated burials were identified. The situation is different to the north of the Brook where very little contemporary activity was identified away from the settlement.

Roman settlement patterns along the Elstow Brook

The settlements investigated within the recent investigations are part of a string of contemporary sites, c. 0.5km apart, in similar topographical locations on either side of the Elstow Brook.



The distribution of settlements in the area

Of these, the Eastcotts settlement north of the Brook is unique. It is the largest and the only one to have originated as a planned village in the early 2nd century AD.

Investigations at Marsh Leys to the west have demonstrated that adjacent farmsteads can be quite different in terms of activities undertaken and the “status” of the occupants. Further analysis will clarify the distinctiveness of the Eastcotts settlement and shed light on the development, economic basis and environment of the landscape and occupants of the Elstow Brook environs during the Roman period.

EARLY SAXON

Although both Roman settlements produced small quantities of early Saxon pottery, there was insufficient to suggest that occupation in these areas continued into this period. However, a small contemporary settlement was found c. 200m to the north and a single sunken-featured building was identified close to the southern edge of the recent investigations. It produced a large quantity of early Saxon pottery.



Early Saxon sunken-featured building under excavation

MEDIEVAL

By the medieval period the area was part of the open field systems of the nearby townships of Harrowden and Cardington. This was indicated by the presence of parallel linear sub-surface feature known as furrows.

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