



Bedford Western Bypass

Preliminary summary of results

(Albion Report 07/89)

Note. location plan at end of document

Site 1

(Adjacent to Great Denham, Biddenham Loop: TL 0158 4860)

Approximately 3.1ha of open area excavation was undertaken between March and May 2007 on the Biddenham Loop adjacent to the Bovis investigations¹. The Biddenham Loop is an area of intense past activity from the Neolithic through the Bronze Age, Iron Ages and Romano-British period. The results can be summarised as follows:

Late Neolithic and early Bronze Age: a moderate lithic artefact assemblage comprising struck flint of possible Neolithic and early Bronze Age date was recovered. Also, probably of this period, was a segmented ditched monument. This had not been located by geophysical survey and was situated on the western edge of the road corridor. Five inhumations were placed at the base of the ditch, each in a crouched posture. Although the interior was devoid of clearly contemporary features, four animal burials were found within *c.* 10m of the monument.

Middle Bronze Age: evidence for a possible field system of this period was identified on the basis of two lengthy ditches which were stratigraphically earlier than the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age pit alignment.

Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age: approximately 20 pits of the pit alignment identified within the Bovis investigations to the east¹ were situated within the road corridor. These were different from those excavated to the east in that they had slightly smaller dimensions. The latter is likely to be because the hard limestone occurs below the gravel at a depth of *c.* 0.6m. Their fills contained only small quantities of domestic debris. Three inhumations were found in the vicinity of the pit alignment but these contained no grave goods so it is uncertain at this stage if they belong to this period. These may have been associated with an earlier ditch which may have been dug as a 'marker' feature for the pits to follow.

Early-middle Iron Age: a farmstead of this period was identified on the east side of the road corridor. It comprised at least one roundhouse, a small ditched enclosure and over thirty steep-sided and flat-bottomed pits interpreted as serving a storage function. This farmstead was similar to other contemporary ones found in the Bovis investigations¹ in that it was unenclosed. To the north of the farmstead within the road corridor was an area containing dispersed evidence for activity which extended over *c.*

¹ Luke, M. forthcoming, *Life in The Loop: Investigations of a prehistoric and Romano-British landscape* East Anglian Archaeology Monograph



1ha. It appeared to be contemporary and was dominated by small pits and postholes. In addition, this area contained a number of storage sized pits, cremation burials and a small roundhouse. None of these features had been located by geophysical survey

Romano-British: the only evidence for activity in this period was a small number of ditches containing Romano-British pottery. It is likely that these are part of the extensive field system known to extend across the Biddenham Loop in this period.

Early-middle Saxon: a single Sunken Featured Building was identified. This contained early-middle Saxon pottery and animal bone. Although it was found in the vicinity of dispersed pits and postholes, these did not contain any datable artefacts so it is unclear if they are contemporary.

Medieval: a series of parallel furrows indicating that this area was arable fields at this time.

Post-medieval: extensive and large pits were found in the south-west part of the excavation area. These represent quarries probably for gravel, but also for the limestone that out crops adjacent to the river in this part of the Biddenham Loop.

Site 2

(Adjacent to Great Denham, Biddenham Loop: TL 0170 4830)

Approximately 4.1ha of strip & map was undertaken between January and March 2007 on the Biddenham Loop. The results can be summarised as follows:

Late Neolithic and early Bronze Age: a large number of postholes and small pits were located in this area mainly in the southern half of the investigation area close to the eastern limit of the road corridor. Several of these contained Grooved ware and Beaker pottery, along with struck flints and charred plant material. These clearly indicate the location of settlement although their location does not coincide with the flint artefact concentrations found in the ploughsoil. Based on the distribution of the subsurface features several settlement foci were present but they may not have all been occupied at the same time. Similar, although less extensive, settlement foci have been found elsewhere within the Biddenham Loop during the Bovis investigations¹.

Early-middle Saxon: a single Sunken Featured Building was identified. This contained a small quantity of contemporary pottery and was found close to the eastern limit of the road corridor. Although it was found in the vicinity of dispersed pits and postholes, these did not contain any datable artefacts so it is unclear if they are contemporary.

Post-medieval: extensive and large pits were found in the north-west part of the investigation area. Like those on Site 1 these were clearly quarries dug adjacent to the River Great Ouse.



Site 3

(Southern end of Biddenham Loop: TL 0192 4797)

Approximately 1.6ha of open area excavation was undertaken between January and February 2006 towards the south of the Biddenham Loop. The majority of the features were located in the eastern half of the excavation area. The site was situated towards the periphery of a Romano-British farmstead known from non-intrusive survey outside the road corridor. The results can be summarised as follows:

Prehistoric: A small lithic artefact assemblage comprising stuck flint of possible Neolithic and early Bronze Age date was recovered from later features.

Early-middle Iron Age: a cluster of steep-sided and flat-bottomed pits were identified that contained early-middle Iron Age pottery. The pits are interpreted as storage pits because of their similarities with similar features on contemporary farmsteads found within the Bovis investigations¹. These pits are therefore presumed to be associated with an unenclosed farmstead for which no other evidence survives.

Late Iron Age-early Romano-British: a new farmstead was established c. 30m to the east of the early-middle Iron Age one. This included a rectilinear enclosure and an area of associated unenclosed activity, but it clearly continued beyond the limits of the road corridor.

Early Romano-British: the earlier farmstead continued in use and some of its earlier boundaries were incorporated into a more extensive enclosure system. Geophysical survey has indicated that this extended over 2.5ha to the east of the road corridor. Evidence for contemporary activity within the excavation area comprised enclosure ditches, pits and an inhumation burial. These produced moderate quantities of domestic debris including pottery, ceramic building material, animal bone and oyster shells.

Romano-British: Although a number of the earlier boundaries were redug and replaced, the earlier enclosure layout continued in use throughout this period. Again, the farmstead clearly extended well beyond the excavation area. Two of the enclosures within the road corridor contained inhumations suggestive of two discrete cemeteries. A total of 29 inhumations and two cremations were identified. The majority of the skeletons were extended and the head of one was repositioned between the feet. Sufficient nails were recovered from five graves to suggest the presence of a coffin. Several contained grave goods which included shoes, glass and ceramic vessels, a glass bead necklace (over 200 beads), copper bracelets, earrings and a bronze finger ring.

In addition, a pottery kiln was identified; its stokehole utilised an infilled enclosure ditch. The kiln has been provisionally dated to the 4th century on the basis of archaeomagnetic analysis.



Site 5

(In-between Cemetery Road and River Great Ouse: TL 0163 4768)

Comprised c. 1.1ha of open area excavation undertaken between January and May 2006. It was located within the extensive Romano-British settlement centred on Kempston Church End² on the opposite side of the River Great Ouse to Site 3. The results can be summarised as follows:

Prehistoric: a small lithic artefact assemblage was recovered of probable Neolithic and early Bronze Age date. All the material was residual in later features.

Late Iron Age/early Romano British: the earliest firm evidence for activity was pre-Conquest in date. It comprised a NE-SW trackway with two adjacent enclosures and some unenclosed activity. There is a suggestion of a second perpendicular routeway, based on the alignment of some of the enclosure ditches. The main domestic area of the settlement at this time is believed to have been located several hundred metres to the NW.

Romano-British: the first firm evidence for domestic activity within this part of the settlement was during the 1st/2nd centuries and this continued throughout this period. A metalled NW-SE roadway with side ditches was constructed. Previous investigations have demonstrated that this roadway continued northwards for over 450m and was the focus of the settlement. The roadside ditches were redug and the metalling resurfaced on a number of occasions. It appears to have continued in use throughout the life of the settlement.

Domestic activity within ditched enclosures was principally located adjacent to the roadway. The shape of the excavation area meant that the enclosures on the west side of the roadway were examined in detail but those to the east, nearer the river, were only partially visible. In addition, the depth at which the features/deposits occurred to the east of the roadway meant that these were preserved *in situ* and not fully excavated.

The domestic enclosures west of the roadway were all defined by ditches behind which were small enclosures/fields. The layout of the enclosures changed over time but the earlier boundaries were often incorporated in some way into the later ones. The domestic enclosures contained evidence for timber and stone buildings, stone-lined wells, isolated pits and postholes. At least twenty-five large cess pits, dating from the 2nd century onwards, were located towards the rear of the domestic enclosures. Some exhibited evidence for revetment and it is clear that not all were contemporary.

Early-middle Saxon: limited evidence was recovered to suggest that part of the settlement was occupied during this period. The roadway was encroached upon and may not have continued in use. A post-settlement, dark layer sealed the features within part of the excavation area and this was in turn sealed by alluvial flood deposits.

² Dawson, M, 2004 *Archaeology of the Bedford Region*, BAR British Ser. 373, 152-228.



Medieval: the site was within a strip field associated with Kempston Church End. The presence of arable fields at this time is indicated by a system of parallel furrows which only survived in the NE half of the excavation area. A period of flooding, post-dating the furrows, is indicated by a significant depth of alluvial silts.

SITE 6

(Adjacent to Cemetery Road, Kempston: TL 1560 4750)

0.1ha strip & map was undertaken in February 2006. The results can be summarised as follows:

Romano-British: boundary ditch and small pits probably associated with activity on the periphery of the extensive settlement centred on Kempston Church End²

Medieval: a curvilinear ditch which contain a small quantity of domestic debris of this period.

Post-medieval: a large pit probably serving a quarry function possibly associated with the construction of Cemetery Road.

SITE 7

(Adjacent to Cemetery Road, Kempston: TL 1442 4759)

1.2ha strip & map was undertaken between December 2005 and February 2006. The results can be summarised as follows:

Late Neolithic and early Bronze Age: a small lithic artefact assemblage comprising struck flint of possible Neolithic and early Bronze Age date was recovered within later features. In addition, a ditch was located on the edge of the excavation which contained Beaker pottery and may have been part of a ring ditch monument.

Late Iron Age: a ditch, several small pits and gravel surface were identified. These were dispersed across the excavation area with no obvious focus. Buried topsoil and subsoils of this period were sealed below later colluvium.

Romano-British: several ditches and a small number of isolated features including pits and an inhumation. These appear to be located on the periphery of the extensive settlement centred on Kempston Church End²

Saxo-Norman: a single ditch of this date was located.

Medieval: a gravel trackway c. 3.1m wide was identified and is believed to originate in this period. It continued beyond the road corridor and was situated in the vicinity



of the Saxo-Norman ditch and may therefore have been in use at an earlier date. A series of furrows were identified which indicate this land was utilised for arable cultivation.

Post-medieval: the trackway mentioned above continued to function into this period. In addition, a number of large pits were dug adjacent to it probably to extract gravel.

Site 8

(Adjacent to The Bury, Kempston: TL 0147 4739)

Approximately 1.3ha open area excavation was undertaken between August and October 2006. It was situated 150m from Site 5 and 70m from Site 7. The results can be summarised as follows:

Neolithic and early Bronze Age: a small lithic artefact assemblage comprising struck flint of possible Neolithic and early Bronze Age date was recovered within later features.

Romano-British: evidence for two areas of activity was identified. The first, nearest to the Kempston Church End settlement, comprised a square arrangement of a gully and a nearby unurned cremation burial. The square feature has provisionally been interpreted as a shrine or mausoleum. A second area of activity was defined by shallow, parallel ditches which are presumed to be associated with some kind of cultivation.

Saxo-Norman: initially, activity in this period comprised field system defined by ditched boundaries and included an integral trackway. Subsequently, a settlement was established within part of the field system. This comprised two small ditched enclosures; one of which contained a possible rectangular building, along with pits and postholes. These continued beyond the road corridor.

Early medieval: two areas of settlement were identified separated by a metalled trackway with side ditches. Both appeared to continue beyond the road corridor. The area to the south was the continuation of the earlier settlement, although the original enclosure ditches were replaced. A new enclosure was established and this contained a post-built building and several cess pits. A second area of settlement to the north of the trackway was only partially located within the excavation area but also appeared to contain a number of buildings within ditched enclosures. To the west of this area was an enclosure which contained a sub-circular pond *c.* 30m in diameter and 1.2m deep; it is interpreted as a fish pond. To the north of this was a series of parallel furrows indicating that that arable fields existed to the north of the settlement.

Late medieval: by this period, settlement is believed to have shifted to the east of the road corridor. The northern area of early medieval settlement was replaced by a number of enclosure ditches which contained the original pond and a second sub-rectangular one *c.* 70m by 30m. The two appear to have been linked by a ditch which may have served as an overflow channel.



Post-medieval: the ponds were eventually infilled, partially with rubble probably associated with the new 'mansion' building known to have been constructed in the early 18th century to the east of the road corridor. New field boundary ditches and a trackway were established in this period. Part of one of the fields contained tree planting holes suggestive of the presence of an orchard.

SITE 9

(Adjacent to Bell Farm, Kempston: TL 1862 4649)

Approximately 1.2ha strip & map was undertaken between November and December 2005. It contained a number of ditches, gullies, pits and postholes. However, although these predated medieval furrows they did not contain reliable artefactual dating evidence. The results can be summarised as follows:

Neolithic and early Bronze Age: a small lithic artefact assemblage comprising struck flint of possible Neolithic and early Bronze Age date was recovered from several features and the topsoil.

Romano-British: a series of shallow, parallel gullies was identified which are presumed to be bedding trenches associated with some kind of cultivation.

Medieval: a series of parallel furrows indicating that this area was cultivated.

SITE 10

(In-between Bell Farm and A421, Kempston: TL 2007 4621)

Approximately 1.2ha strip & map was undertaken between September and October 2005. The results can be summarised as follows:

Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age: a major boundary ditch over 160m long, c. 2m wide and 0.8m deep was located. It continued beyond the road corridor in both directions. With the exception of one deposit it only contained relatively small quantities of domestic debris. However, it was securely dated by the discovery of over 30 sherds of late Bronze Age/early Iron Age pottery in one excavated segment. In the vicinity of this were two large waterpits and a posthole alignment. These, along with a scatter of other small pits and postholes, are presumed to be part of a contemporary settlement. The dispersed distribution and nature of the features was similar to a contemporary settlement discovered during the Bovis investigation on the Biddenham Loop¹.

Romano-British: eight parallel trenches containing early Romano-British pottery were located. They continued beyond the road corridor. All were regularly spaced at



c. 5.5m intervals, over c. 50m long, c. 0.8m wide and ended in square terminals. All the trenches had similar steep-sided profiles with flat bases. Comparable features have been identified at Cranfield, Beds.³, Wollaston, Northants.⁴ and Caldecote, Cambs.⁵ where they have been interpreted as bedding trenches and at Wollaston it was suggested these were part of a vineyard. At the time of the Bypass investigations the nearest known Roman settlement, interpreted as farmsteads, were located c. 650m to the south at Marsh Leys⁶. However, the periphery of a closer settlement was identified on the northern edge of Site 11 (see below).

Post-medieval: two trackways were identified and comprised compacted redposited gravel but not side ditches. Wheel ruts were identified underneath the gravel suggesting that these areas had been routeways before they were metalled. One of the trackways clearly continued to the east of the road corridor. Historical maps suggest that this was a more major trackway known as “the portway”.

SITE 11

(Adjacent to A421, Kempston: TL 2502 4620)

Approximately 2.6ha strip & map was undertaken between October and December 2005. It was located c. 450m to the east of Site 10. The results can be summarised as follows:

Neolithic and early Bronze Age: a small lithic artefact assemblage comprising struck flint of possible Neolithic and early Bronze Age date was recovered within later features. In addition, a number of tree-throw holes were located which were earlier than the Romano-British ditches and may therefore date to this period.

Late Iron Age-early Romano-British: enclosure ditches were located at the northern edge of the excavation. They were of a sufficient size and contained sufficient pottery of this period to indicate that they were associated with a farmstead the majority of which would be situated to the north east of the road corridor. This is the first evidence for such a settlement.

Romano-British: an extensive field system that incorporated two trackways was identified. This continued to the north beyond the road corridor. It was dated to this period on the basis on a small amount of pottery and its alignment with boundary elements of one of the Romano-British farmstead at Marsh Leys Farm, 400m to the south-east. Dispersed evidence for activity foci (characterised by concentrations of postholes and small pits) although largely undated, respected the field boundaries so are believed to be of this period.

³ Albion, 2005, *Home Farm, Cranfield archaeological field evaluation* (unpub report 05/37)

⁴ Meadows, I, 1996, ‘Wollaston: The Nene Valley, a British Moselle?’, *Current Archaeology* 150

⁵ Kenney, S, 2001, *Iron Age Settlement and Roman Vineyard on land off Hall Drive, Caldecote: An Archaeological Evaluation*, (unpub AFU report 200)

⁶ *Britannia* 33 (2002), 313



Later Romano-British: the original field system amended with the addition of new ditches creating smaller fields. One of the trackways appears to have gone out of use because part of it was used as a gravel quarry.

Medieval: a series of parallel furrows indicating that this area was cultivated.

NOTE. Sites 4 & 12 are to be undertaken as “watching briefs” during construction work. This has not started yet.

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