

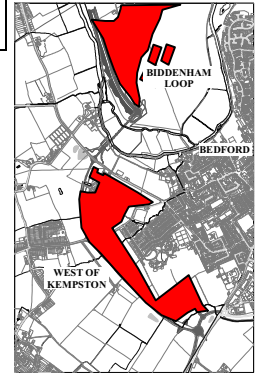


LAND WEST OF BEDFORD

Interim Archaeological Report 1

Over the last 3 weeks Albion Archaeology have overseen PJ Construction stripping c. 3.2 ha of the site, which to date has revealed a number of small, but highly significant, late Neolithic pits and two probably contemporary monuments. Two of the four anticipated monuments,

L56 and L300, identified by the Bovis non-intrusive evaluation in the 1990s have disappeared. However, as if by way of compensation, the two remaining ones, L42 and L63, which it had been thought were barrows have proved to be more complex than was envisaged and one may even be a hengi-form monument.



LATE NEOLITHIC PITS

As anybody who has seen these features will know, they are fairly inauspicious looking things – isolated small pits that look much like the other blobs in the natural geology (see photograph below).



However, we now had a handful of these features, which probably date to the late Neolithic (4,000 years ago). This means they belong to the time when human society was changing from dependence on hunting and gathering, to a more settled lifestyle, centred around farming.

Pits of this period are rare nationally and are often the only sub-surface evidence for settled communities. A small number of contemporary pits within the Bovis investigations contained unusual artefactual and ecofactual assemblages. For example, one contained nearly 1,400 hazelnut shells;

another contained 258 struck flints, two deliberately smashed Beaker pots and a large number of bones from wild animals and fish.

The pits within the present investigation contained part of a polished flint axe, two long narrow flint flakes and fragments of Peterborough pottery from different vessels. These, like those within the Bovis investigations, probably represent *structured deposits* – i.e. they are not rubbish pits. The items within them were deliberately chosen, and possibly ritually broken, for deposition as an offering to the gods. This is especially true of the pottery which was a relatively rare commodity at this time. Finding fragments from different vessels is, therefore, significant. They may have been family heirlooms or ancestral property, perhaps broken as part of an important ceremony associated with a specific event, e.g. wedding, harvest, moving on etc. The missing pieces, not deposited in the pit, may have been shared amongst a wider kinship group.

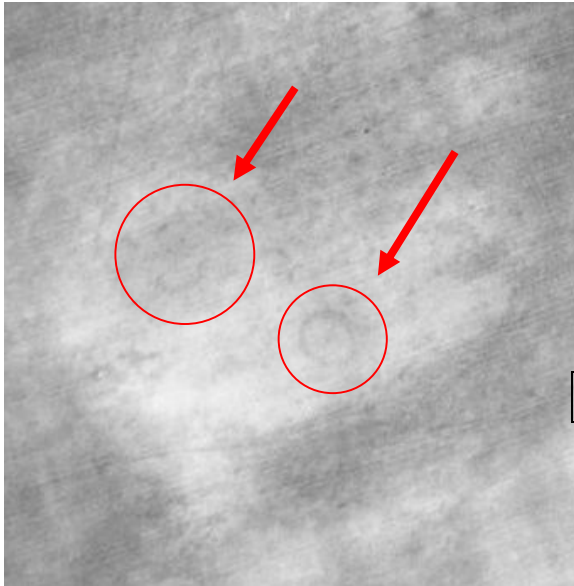
DISAPPEARING BARROWS

The Biddenham Loop is a well known prehistoric monument complex containing over 30 monuments. However, within a week of earthmoving commencing we had managed to lose two of them.

This is because like most quasi-sciences, archaeology is only as good as the evidence. A lot of that available for the Biddenham



Loop is based on non-intrusive surveys, *i.e.* cropmarks visible on aerial photographs (see **photograph below**) and anomalies identified by geophysical survey.



Both techniques can produce spectacular results which accurately reflect underlying archaeological remains. However, as in the case of the two supposed prehistoric monuments examined last week they can sometimes turn out to be misleading periglacial variations in the sands and gravels.

BARROWS?

Despite the “disappearance” of two barrows, two others are present and are currently being investigated. Barrows are the typical burial monument of the late Neolithic and early Bronze Age. They comprise a mound or bank within the interior of a circular “ring” ditch. Attempts have been made to classify them into different types (bowl, bell, disc, saucer, pond *etc.*) However, the majority of barrows in the country only survive as a sub-surface ring ditch, making classification difficult.

The ditch surrounding L42 was redefined on a number of occasions indicating that the monument was long-lived. Redigging of the ditch, presumably to redefine the mound or the monument, may have taken place at the

anniversary of the death of the individual for whom it was created. The segmented nature of the recutting could imply that different family groups were allocated different lengths of the ditch.

To date, only five pieces of flint, all the by-products of tool manufacture, have been found in the ditches. These are hard hammer struck, suggesting a date in the late Neolithic-early Bronze Age.

At the time of writing a possible central grave has been identified and is currently under investigation.

HENGI-FORM MONUMENT

The other barrow has turned out to be much more complex than first anticipated by non-intrusive survey. Its ditches were substantial (see **photograph below**) and were redug on a number of occasions. A substantial bank or mound would have lain within the interior, accessed *via* a west-facing gap in the ditch. This monument was clearly a focus of ritual activity for several hundred years. Although two undated burials were found to the north of the ditch, no burials have yet been found within its interior.



Again only a small number of struck flints – eight in total – have been recovered. These include a scraper (for dressing animal hides), which like the flakes, was made with a hard hammer and is, therefore, probably late Neolithic-early Bronze Age in date.



This monument is located in the centre of the Loop, suggesting that it was deliberately built in this important position as a focus for the community's ceremonial events. No doubt, these would have been associated with drinking, singing, dancing and feasting – the small quantities of wood charcoal in the ditches may derive from cooking fires. The location of its entrance on the west side may have been designed to catch the rays of the setting sun.

In summary, this ring ditch may have been associated with ceremonial activities and therefore can be classed as a hengi-form rather than simply a funerary monument.

FINDS TRAY

STRUCK FLINT

The most important recent discovery to date is a fragment of a polished flint axe, found in one of the late Neolithic pits. Ground /polished axes of this date are rare in Bedfordshire.

The grinding and polishing of a flint axe was a laborious process. The surface had to be continuously worked either with a hand-held stone or against an *in situ* piece of rock. Water was used as a coolant. Loose sand may have been used as a medium to speed up the process but it would still have taken a long time to manufacture an axe – smaller examples may have taken up to five hours, larger ones as much as 40 hours.

Axes of this date were often made out of rock found hundreds of miles from Bedfordshire. They were traded/exchanged as precious objects. It is, therefore, curious that the example from one of the pits was manufactured from poor quality, imperfect flint. There is even a small portion of cortex remaining on the polished fragment. This would have made the axe quite susceptible to shattering. However, it may in fact have been a “token” item, manufactured not for actual use but for show, display and perhaps ritual deposition in the pit.

POTTERY

All the pottery found so far during the investigations comes from the pits; it is late Neolithic to early Bronze Age in date. At this time, pottery was hand-made by the community or family that needed it. It would have closely reflected the traditions of a specific group of people and would have been “special” to them.

The recovered fragments are in the Mortlake style of the Peterborough Ware tradition, named after the site near Peterborough where this type of pottery was first discovered.

The vessels are round-bottomed bowls with exaggerated rims, which provide a platform for a variety of decorative techniques – impressions made with whipped cord, twisted cord, fingertips and fingernails.

This type of pottery is fairly rare, both regionally and nationally, and therefore its discovery is highly significant.

EARTHMOVING PROGRESS

The machines from PJ Construction, overseen by Albion, have worked in the following areas on the Biddenham Loop (**see plans**):

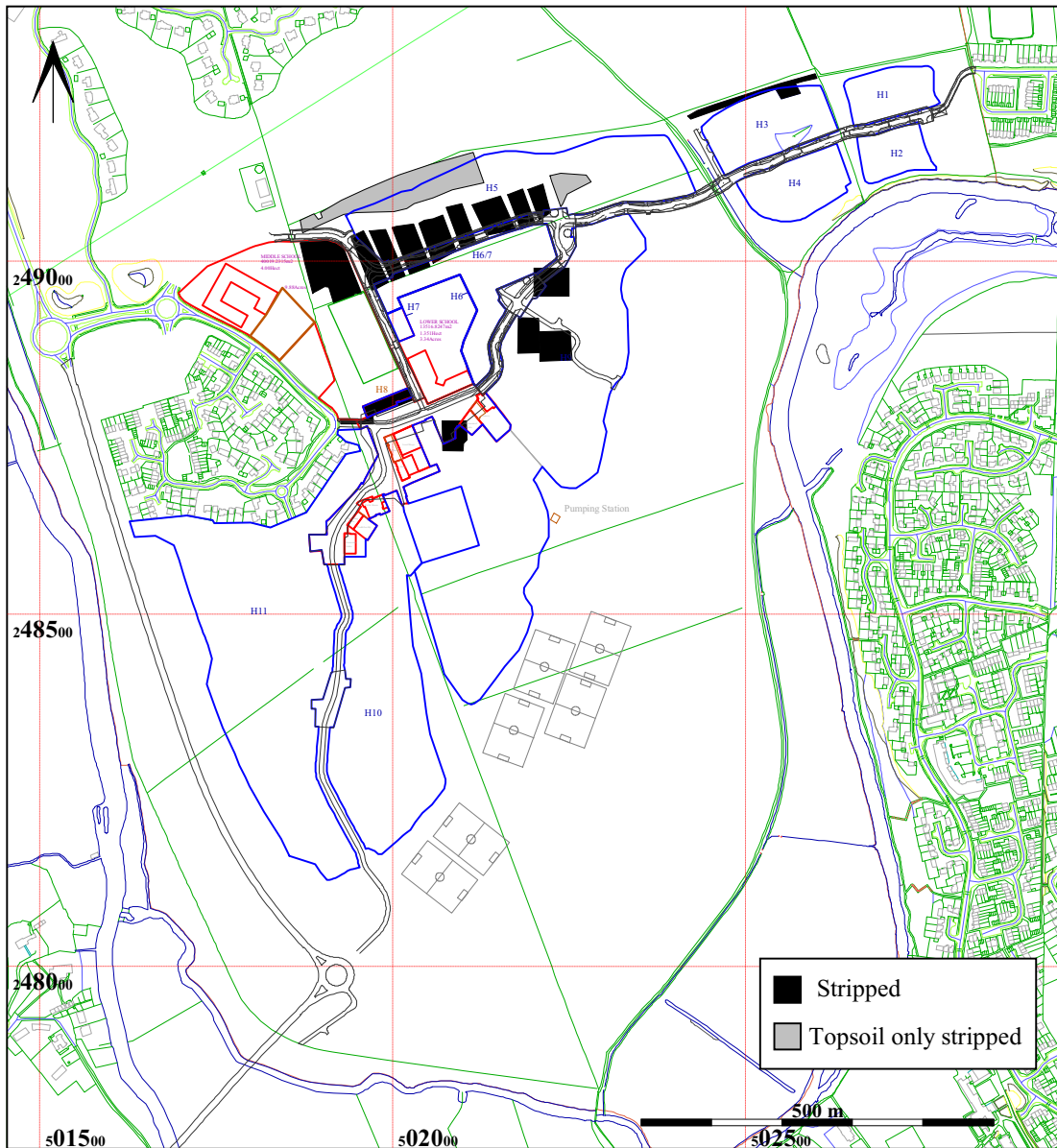
- Compound within H8.
- Four prehistoric monuments within H9. (Where the two monuments have disappeared, the County Archaeological Officer has released the areas for subsoil storage.)
- The southwestern quarter of H5. (The western part of this area has been released by the County Archaeological Officer and is therefore also available for subsoil storage.)
- The northern part of H3 has just commenced.

In addition, earthmoving has just commenced on Land west of Kempston.

Mike Luke
Albion Archaeology
St Mary's Church
Bedford
MK42 0AS

☎: 01234 294004
Fax: 01234 294008
e-mail: m.luke@albion-arch.com

(31/10/07)



Earthmoving and archaeological progress on Biddenham Loop (31/10/07)