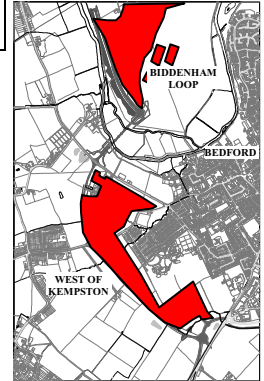




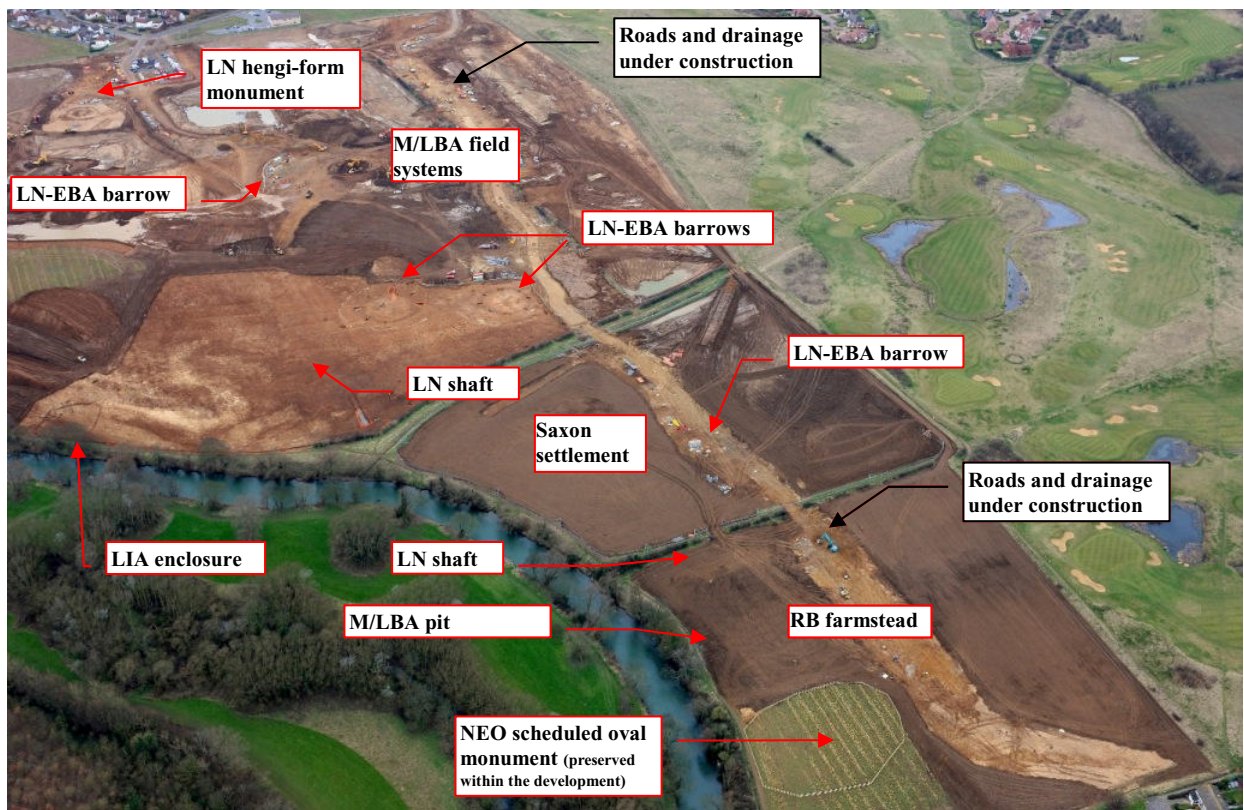
LAND WEST OF BEDFORD

Interim Archaeological Report 3

Over the last five months Albion Archaeology has undertaken extensive investigations within the Land West of Bedford development area on behalf of David Wilson Homes. We have overseen PJ Construction stripping c. 40ha on the Biddenham Loop and c. 3.5ha on Land West of Kempston. The archaeological remains discovered on the Biddenham Loop are highly significant, but have been investigated without any delay to the construction programme (which is now well underway). The archaeological evidence indicates fairly continuous human activity on the Biddenham Loop from the late Neolithic to the early-middle Saxon period, and on Land West of Kempston from the Romano-British period right up to the modern day.



This interim report on the results is presented in chronological order and concentrates on remains that have been fully investigated.



BIDDENHAM LOOP: some of the most significant recent archaeological discoveries

KEY: NEO= Neolithic, LN=Late Neolithic, EBA= early Bronze Age, M/LBA= middle/late Bronze Age, LIA= late Iron Age, RB= Romano-British
(See page 6 for details of chronological periods)

NEOLITHIC

SHAFTS

Two deep pits have been recently discovered on the eastern side of the Loop. Their dimensions and form clearly distinguish them from the dispersed and clustered pits located elsewhere on the Loop (see previous Interims).

They were dug (almost vertically) through the gravel and into the underlying limestone c. 1.6m deep. The fills of both contained animal bone with one producing an antler from a large deer (more typical of the early Neolithic) and the other the horn of a probable auroch (a type of cattle which was largely extinct by the Bronze Age).



The nature of these pits and their unusual animal bone content indicate that they were dug and backfilled rapidly. They may have been dug part of a ceremony associated with the discovery of ground water or even to hold a large “totem” post.



Hand excavation of lower fills of a Neolithic shaft

DISPERSED & CLUSTERED PITS

Several isolated and one cluster of small pits have now been identified. Pits of this period are rare nationally and are often the only sub-surface evidence for settled communities at this time. They are hugely significant because they belong to the time when human society was changing from dependence on hunting and gathering to a more settled lifestyle, centred on farming.

As reported on in Interim Report 1 some of the pits contained *structured deposits* – *i.e.* not simply rubbish. The items within them were deliberately chosen, and possibly ritually broken, for deposition as an offering to the gods.

It is noteworthy that no small pits have yet been found adjacent to contemporary monuments. However, the two shafts are both within 70m of ring ditches. This may suggest the deliberate zoning of different types of activities within the landscape.

HENGI-FORM MONUMENT

The interpretation of this monument is based on its unusual shape, the absence of burials within the interior, the presence of unusual artefacts and the fact that it appears to have remained in use for a longer period of time than the barrows.

This monument (*see previous Interims*) 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.

EARLY BRONZE AGE

BARROWS

The Biddenham Loop is a well known prehistoric monument complex, containing over 30 barrows. The latter are the typical burial monument of the early Bronze Age, but some may originate in the late Neolithic. They comprise a mound or bank within the interior of a circular “ring” ditch.

To date five barrows have been investigated and all are slightly different in nature, dimensions and position/presence/type of burial (*see previous Interims*). This demonstrates that society was sufficiently structured at this time for individuals, or their relatives, to specify a particular monument type.



Two barrows under investigation while construction work is underway on adjacent, already investigated, land

The ditch surrounding some barrows had been redefined on a number of occasions (*see previous Interims*), indicating that the monument was long-lived. Reddigging of the ditch, presumably to redefine the mound or the monument, may have taken place on the anniversary of the death of the individual for whom it was created.

Other barrows had substantial ditches defining a large internal area.



Interestingly, the two largest ring ditches contained no evidence for burials. This may suggest that these were placed within the internal mound which has been removed by thousands of years of ploughing.



After the completion of hand excavation, the fills of all Bronze Age ring ditches have been machined out

FLAT GRAVES

In addition to burials associated with monuments, several isolated crouched inhumations have been found, including one recently found within the service corridor to the south of the Loop. These will require radiocarbon dating to determine if they are contemporary with the barrows. This again demonstrates that society was sufficiently structured at this time for there to be distinctions in burial practice between different individuals.



Probable Bronze Age inhumation

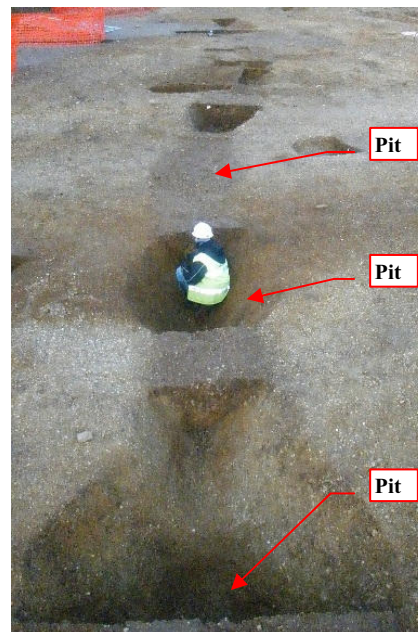
MID-LATE BRONZE AGE

PIT ALIGNMENTS

It has been known for years that the Biddenham Loop contains an extensive alignment of pits which extends from river to river for 1km giving the impression of “cutting off” the southern part of the Loop. However, a second and completely unexpected pit alignment has now been found (see photo).

Only a short length of the new pit alignment was within the development area. It was situated c. 10m from the present river and appeared to be parallel to it. Therefore, unlike the better known pit alignment, it would appear to have been located to reinforce an existing natural boundary. It was also different from the other one within the Loop because it had been replaced by a ditch. It was only after the latter was removed by machine that the pit alignment was fully exposed.

Pit alignments are unusual because, although they appear to function as boundaries, they would not by their very nature, *i.e.* pits rather than a single ditch, have been an effective physical barrier.



Pit alignment which had been re-dug as a boundary ditch

The more extensive pit alignment is currently under investigation and will, therefore, be the subject of a later Interim.

FIELD SYSTEMS

Numerous lengths of ditches, which are clearly part of prehistoric fields systems, have been identified across the Loop.

They appear to respect the early Bronze Age barrows. Their ditches have only produced small quantities of artefacts, including late Neolithic/early Bronze Age flint, along with later Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman pottery. However, a



middle-later Bronze Age date is most likely for the creation of the field system.

Regionally, few land-divisions of this period have been recognised, although they are becoming more common especially in the Middle-Upper Thames valley. The changes on the Biddenham Loop may be part of what some writers have even described as a “revolution” in the agrarian landscape at this time.



Middle-late Bronze Age field ditches

The establishment of fields represents a dramatic change from the earlier periods, when the landscape was open and dominated by burial and ritual monuments. Although dramatic, this change did not include the wholesale erasure of the previous landscape because the earlier monuments were incorporated into the new system.

ROMANO-BRITISH

FARMSTEAD

A farmstead was investigated adjacent to the present river to the northeast of the development area. It comprised an extensive rectangular system of ditched enclosures and was, therefore, comparable to others investigated within the Bovis development. Like them, although some of the ditches were redug, there were not major changes to the layout. Also, like them, no definite evidence for roundhouses or rectangular buildings was identified.

The major difference with the contemporary farmsteads within the Bovis development was the absence of evidence

for a late Iron Age creation date, *i.e.* prior to the Roman Conquest.

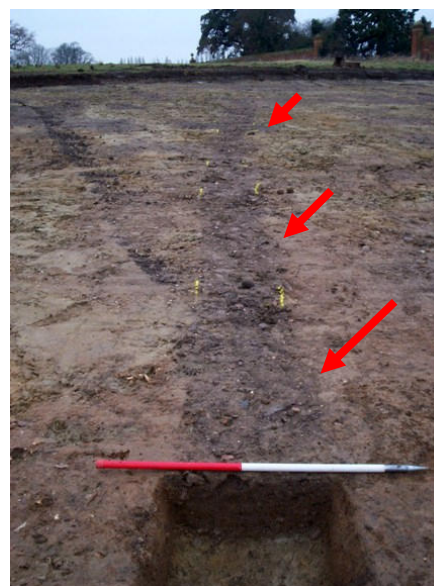


Enclosure system of the Romano-British farmstead

Although caution should always be applied when trying to determine the “status” of the inhabitants of such farmsteads, the impression from the evidence recovered is that they were not particularly wealthy. Although a few dumps of clearly imported pottery from the continent were recovered, the majority of the pottery assemblage is characterised by domestic and utilitarian types and forms of locally made coarsewares.

BEDDING TRENCHES

A system of parallel trenches has been identified adjacent to The Bury on Land West of Kempston. They are consistently 4.5m apart, *c.* 0.8m wide with steep sides and an uneven base.



One of the Romano-British bedding trenches



These trenches were filled with dark soils containing a moderate quantity of domestic debris, mainly pottery, animal bone and occasional metal objects, including nails, a bronze bracelet and an iron knife. It is presumed that this material derives from middens on a nearby settlement and was brought to the trenches as compost.

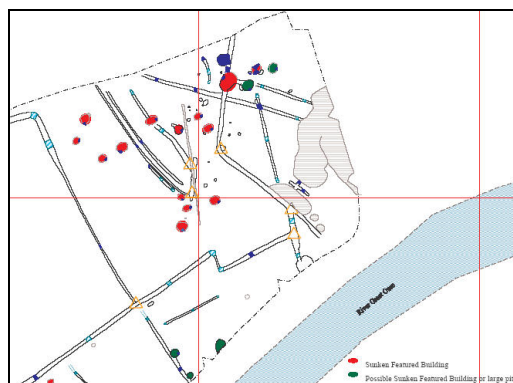
Similar trenches from elsewhere have been interpreted as part of vineyards, although fruit hedges is another possibility.

EARLY- MIDDLE SAXON

SETTLEMENT

No evidence for early-middle Saxon activity in any shape or form was found within the adjacent Bovis development.

However, an unexpected settlement of this period was located on land adjacent to the Romano-British farmstead described above. The settlement was established within one of the Romano-British fields. It comprised sixteen sunken-featured buildings (SFBs) with an additional two in more isolated locations nearer the river.



The evidence for each building comprised a sub-rectangular pit, which, on excavation was often shallow, with steep sides and a flat base, associated with a number of postholes for timber uprights.

The majority of the SFBs contained large quantities of Saxon pottery, animal bone and other artefacts. The latter include bone combs, spindle whorls and iron pins.



Controlled metal detecting of a Saxon building

For decades the purpose of the sunken “pit-like” area has been debated. It has often been interpreted as a cellar. However, a recent English Heritage-sponsored study has suggested that it is more likely to be a void beneath a suspended timber floor. The void would have created a dry environment for storage above and allowed the free circulation of air beneath the planks of the floor.



Two-post SFB after 75% hand excavation

The buildings often had single central postholes on the short sides of the sunken area, although other variables were found.



Six-post SFB after 100% hand excavation

Further unexpected evidence for activity during this period has been revealed adjacent to The Bury on Land West of Kempston. Although no buildings were identified a number of pits containing



similar pottery to that within the Biddenham settlement have been found.

SAXO-NORMAN

SETTLEMENT PERIPHERY

The majority of the archaeological remains on Land West of Kempston date to the Saxo-Norman and medieval periods – there is no similar evidence from the Biddenham Loop.

The remains were concentrated in one or two areas adjacent to the present Bury. They mainly comprise small pits and postholes, although two ovens were located. The function of these is uncertain, although crop drying seems most likely as they are not domestic in nature nor associated with industrial residues.



Probable Saxo-Norman drying oven



Early medieval pit under excavation with The Bury in the background

POST-MEDIEVAL

TRACKWAY

A cambered gravel trackway with side ditches has been located. Although the main track surface is clearly post-medieval in date earlier surfaces have been located and it is possible that the trackway originated in the medieval period.



Post-medieval trackway with The Bury in the background

MEDIEVAL

SETTLEMENT PERIPHERY

A small number of pits and postholes of this period have been located. The main significance of peripheral Saxo-Norman and medieval activity adjacent to The Bury is that the latter is considered to be one of the manorial settlements within Kempston.

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CHRONOLOGICAL PERIODS USED IN THIS INTERIM

These are simply handy shorthand for a specific chronological range.

Late Neolithic	3,000-2,600 BC	Up to 5,000 years ago
Early Bronze Age	2,600-1,600 BC	Up to 4,600 years ago
Middle/late Bronze Age	1,600-700 BC	Up to 3,600 years ago
Iron Age	700 BC-AD 43	Up to 2,700 years ago
Romano-British	AD 43-410	Up to 2,000 years ago
Early-middle Saxon	AD 410-800	Up to 1,600 years ago
Saxo-Norman	AD 800-1066	Up to 1,200 years ago
Medieval	AD 1066-1500	Up to 1,000 years ago

NOTE. The date ranges are approximate and not absolute. They are often disputed between different archaeologists!!