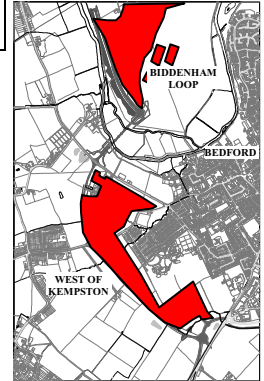




LAND WEST OF BEDFORD

Interim Archaeological Report 4

Over the last three months Albion Archaeology has continued to undertake extensive investigations within the Land West of Bedford development area on behalf of David Wilson Homes. In total, we have now overseen PJ Construction stripping c. 45ha on the Biddenham Loop and c. 5ha on Land West of Kempston. The archaeological remains discovered are highly significant, but have been investigated without any delay to the construction programme. The archaeological evidence indicates fairly continuous human activity on the Biddenham Loop from the late Neolithic to the early-middle Saxon period.



This interim report concentrates on the recently discovered evidence on the Biddenham Loop (see photo below) for middle Bronze Age field systems, late Bronze Age pit alignment and an unusual Romano-British burial.



Extent of archaeological investigations on the Biddenham Loop, from west with Bedford in background

MIDDLE BRONZE AGE

The middle Bronze Age represents a very significant period of British prehistory. It was a transitional period when the landscape changed from one dominated by monuments (see previous Interims) to one where land was divided up into parcels which ultimately became fields.

Up until now very little evidence for this period has been found in Bedfordshire. This is illustrated by the fact that only one feature of this date was found within the 19ha investigated as part of the adjacent Bovis development. Also, the recently

published *Resource Assessment* for the county mentions only one site where sporadic ditch lengths of this period existed.



Middle Bronze Age field ditches under investigation



FIELDS

The recent investigations on the Biddenham Loop have identified numerous lengths of ditches associated with fields of this period (see aerial photo on page 6).



Middle Bronze Age field ditches

Many of these respected the early Bronze Age barrows. This demonstrates that the latter were still visible in the landscape and were probably still revered and respected as sacred sites.

The ditches varied greatly in size; they had clearly not been established as a single system, but had developed over time. This is indicated by the number of times ditch lengths were redug or replaced.



Extremely narrow middle Bronze Age field ditches

The ditches contained small quantities of artefacts, including late Neolithic/early Bronze Age flint, along with later Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman pottery.

However, the relationship recently investigated between three ditches and the late Bronze Age pit alignment proves that

the ditches are earlier, and therefore belong to the middle Bronze Age.



MBA ditches are cut by the pit alignment

Relationship between the field ditches and the pit alignment

In addition, two of the ditches contained burials: one an inhumation and the other a sheep. These bones, as well as providing a wealth of specific information on the individual and animal, will provide excellent material for radiocarbon dating.



Sheep burial

Sheep burial being recorded

LARGE PITS

Approximately 15 large pits were located within the fields in the vicinity of the pit alignment. These were often oval in plan and c. 3m long by c. 2m wide and c. 1.9m deep.



Excavation of the lower fills of one of the large pits



These are similar to features, interpreted as water pits, found in Bronze Age fields elsewhere in the country. Unfortunately, those recently investigated contained very few artefacts and no waterlogged deposits at their base. However, it is hoped that the wet sieving of soil samples taken from the lower fills will produce bones of small animals that fell into the pit and became trapped. Radiocarbon dating of these bones should provide proof that they are contemporary with the fields.



Recording of the lower fills of one of the large pits. Note: soil samples to the left of the photograph

SUMMARY

The landscape changes on the Biddenham Loop may be part of what some writers have described as a “revolution” in the agrarian landscape during the middle Bronze Age. 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.

LATER BRONZE AGE

PIT ALIGNMENTS

The Biddenham Loop contains an extensive alignment of pits that extend from river to river, for 1km, giving the impression of “cutting off” the southern part of the Loop. One hundred and ten pits have now been investigated within the development area.



Pit alignment under investigation

The pits are generally sub-square in plan with steep sides and a flat base. They were often c. 2.5m long by c. 2m wide and c. 1.1m deep. They were regularly spaced with a gap of around 1m between each pit. Their consistency in form and dimensions suggests that they were part of a planned and co-ordinated project. The nature of the pit fills demonstrated that none of them had been redug and there was no evidence for an adjacent bank.

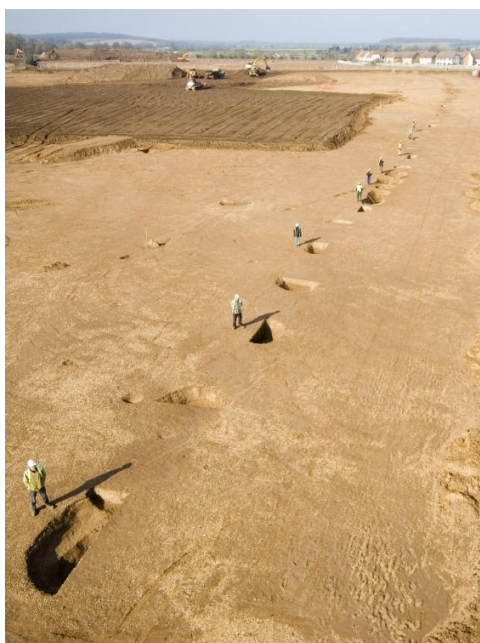


Excavation of the second half of a pit in the alignment

Small quantities of late Bronze Age/early Iron Age pottery have been recovered, along with larger quantities of early-middle Iron Age types. However, the majority of this material is derived from the secondary and tertiary fills. The best dating evidence for the pit alignment comes from the Bovis and Bedford



Western Bypass investigations where the alignment was truncated by early-middle Iron Age storage pits, demonstrating that it pre-dates this activity.



Main length of the pit alignment within the development

Although they would have been distinctive and durable markers, by their very nature, pit alignments clearly would not have been an effective physical barrier.

It is also possible that the very act of construction was their primary significance – a project that would have brought the whole community together. Their very nature suggests that they may have been symbolic, rather than actual physical boundaries. They may have been created in response to inter-community landscape disputes or perhaps marked the division between common rather than individual land holdings.

The latter may explain why a second pit alignment within the Biddenham Loop (see Interim 3) seems to reinforce an existing physical boundary because it was parallel to the river.

ROMANO-BRITISH

The Biddenham Loop continued to be intensively utilised in the Romano-British period. The Bovis and Bedford Western Bypass investigations have identified at

least four farmsteads all located in similar positions around the exterior of the Loop. They, like that investigated within the present development (see Interim 3), were all adjacent to but just above the floodplain.

TRACKWAY

Away from the floodplain, two parallel ditches were recently discovered. They were traced for over 500m on a roughly north-south alignment (see aerial photo on page 6). Both contained Roman pottery and clearly date to this period. Although no metallurgy survived, they are believed to have defined a major trackway on the Biddenham Loop.



Romano-British trackway defined by two parallel ditches

What is remarkable about the trackside ditches is that they appear to be aligned on elements of the middle Bronze Age fields, *e.g.* corners, water pits *etc.* This suggests that, although the trackway is on a completely different alignment to the earlier boundaries, the fields were still in existence and being utilised.

This probably explains why, despite there being several Romano-British farmsteads within the Loop, very few new boundaries were constructed. After all, why chop down and clear a completely good hedged boundary just to establish a new one on a different alignment?

UNUSUAL BURIAL

The excavation of what was thought to be a rectangular pit has turned out to be a particularly unusual type of Romano-British burial. It was found when one of the spoil heaps within the development was moved and the overburden removed. The sides of the pit had been subject to intense heat and the lower fill was



charcoal-rich and contained cremated human bone.



Rectangular pit under investigation

This pit has now been identified as a *bustum* burial. This fairly rare and unusual type of burial takes its name from the Latin for “pile of cremated bone”. These burials result from the cremation of the deceased on a pyre constructed over the pit itself, in contrast to the majority of cremations in Roman Britain where the body was burnt on a pyre away from the actual grave.

After combustion the cremated bone and pyre material falls, or is pushed, back into the pit which is then backfilled. Nearly a hundred iron nails were found within the pyre debris. They may have been used during the construction of the pyre or have been in wooden planks used as fuel in the pyre.



Bustum burial being recorded

Three pottery vessels were found within the pit: two carefully placed after the pyre had burnt out; and a third in 16 pieces. The latter had been deliberately smashed as part of the cremation and burial ceremony. Although it is broken, the

pieces can be fitted together again to make a whole vessel.

The two intact vessels comprised a large locally manufactured jar and a smaller beaker imported from the Nene Valley. Both can be dated to the 4th century indicating when the burial occurred.



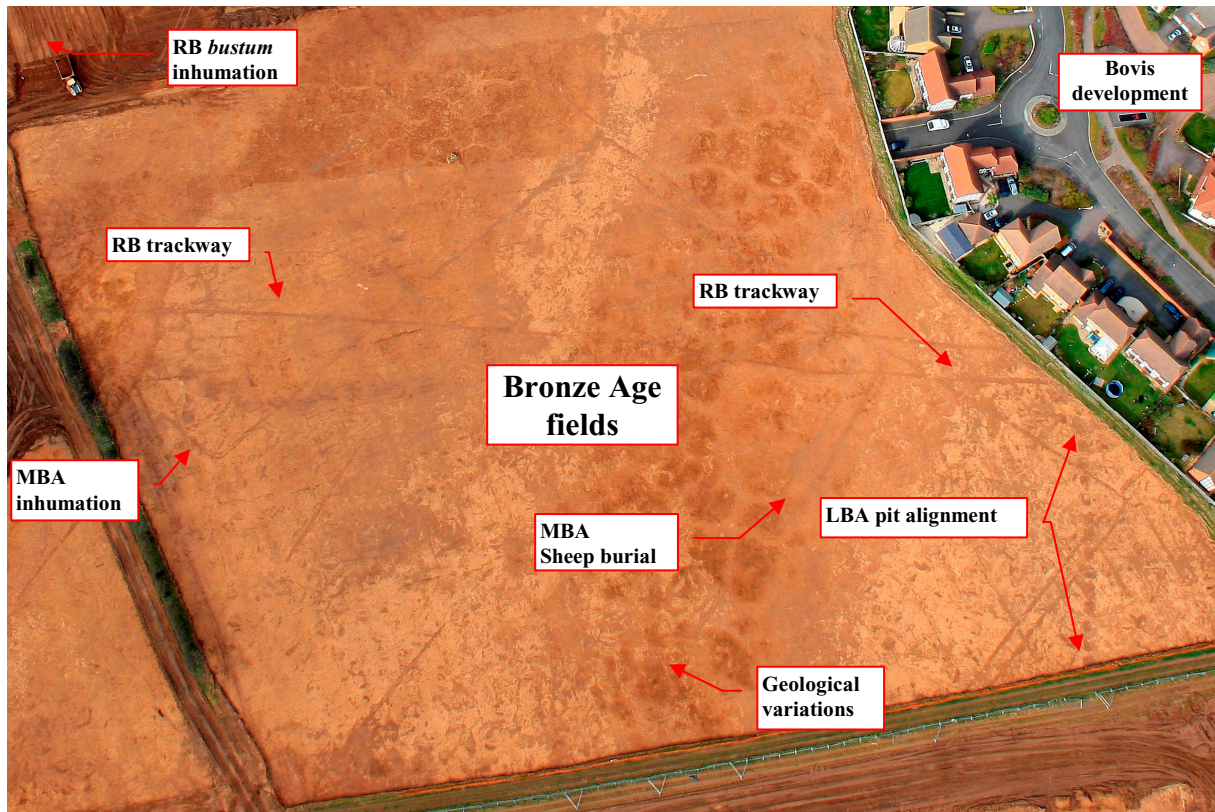
Intact pottery vessels within the bustum burial

The jar contained cremated human bone. It is uncertain at this stage if these remains are from the same individual as those in the base of the pit. Its discovery does indicate that some sorting of the pyre debris took place. The size and nature of the cremated bone, which includes several whole vertebrae, indicates that the cremation process had not been very effective.

The *bustum* burial is a significant discovery because this practice is comparatively rare in England and is often considered to have continental origins.

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BIDDENHAM LOOP: Part of the middle Bronze Age fields and later activity

KEY: MBA= middle Bronze Age, LBA= late Bronze Age, RB= Romano-British
(See below for details of chronological periods)

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!!