



Provisional summary report on the archaeological investigations at Marston Park, Marston Moretaine, Bedfordshire

Between June and October 2010 Albion Archaeology undertook archaeological investigations on behalf of O&H Properties Ltd in advance of housing development on two areas of land adjacent to the Elstow Brook (a tributary of the River Great Ouse). The investigations were undertaken in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation approved by the Local Planning Authority and a licence for lifting human remains issued by the Ministry of Justice. The site was occupied from the early Iron Age through to the later Romano-British period. The continuous settlement during these periods of the same piece of land is rarely found in Bedfordshire where there is usually a disjunction between Romano-British and middle Iron Age settlements.

This report presents a summary of the results, based on the recently completed contextual hierarchy. It has been written prior to any detailed work on the artefacts or ecofacts so should be treated as provisional.



View of the archaeological investigations from NW (September 2010)

BACKGROUND

The site was first recognised as having archaeological potential during examination of aerial photographs in the earlier stages of planning for the development. A number of enclosure/boundary ditches were visible as cropmarks and some of these were initially interpreted as forming a 'banjo' enclosure (a type of middle to late Iron Age site rarely found in the Bedfordshire region).

Evaluation, consisting of a geophysical survey and trial trenching, was carried out in 2003 by Albion Archaeology and while the results confirmed the

general distribution pattern of archaeological remains, they also allowed a revised interpretation of the detailed morphology of the site.

The main phases of occupation on the site appeared to be dated from the later Iron Age (late pre-Belgic and Belgic) and Romano-British periods. The occupation was characterised by a series of ditched enclosures, with domestic habitation evinced by a roundhouse with central hearth. However, the combined results of the earlier non-intrusive work, the geophysical survey and trial excavation cast doubt on the previous identification of the cropmarks as a 'banjo' enclosure.



AREAS OF EXCAVATION

Two areas, on opposite sides of the Elstow Brook, were subject to archaeological open area excavation. These can be summarised as follows:

Area 1 (5.2ha): in the centre-west of the development area



Aerial view of Area 1 (September 2010)

Area 2 (0.5ha): in the south of the development area, on the site of the proposed southern access road and new bridge over the Elstow Brook



Aerial view of Area 2 (July 2010)

LATE BRONZE AGE-EARLY IRON AGE)

The earliest firm evidence for human activity was found within Area 2 (south of the Elstow Brook). It comprised two post-built structures which contained late Bronze Age-early Iron Age pottery

EARLY-MIDDLE IRON AGE (EMIA)

The earliest firm evidence for substantial settlement probably dates to the early Iron Age and was found in Area 1. It comprised two roundhouses (15m and

8m in diameter), two gullies and a pit. The buildings were defined by circular gullies. A gap in the gully around the larger roundhouse indicates that it had a SE-facing doorway. It also featured internal pits and postholes. The gully around the smaller roundhouse featured three gaps, although presumably only one of these represents a doorway. The settlement was unenclosed and became the focus of all subsequent activity.

By the middle-late Iron Age the settlement was bounded by a sub-oval enclosure and covered an area of c. 3ha. It was defined by a deep ditch with entrances to the south and south-east. Evidence for three roundhouses, internal and external fields/paddocks and the remains of stock control features was recovered.



The roundhouses may have looked a bit like this

The roundhouses were located in the southern part of the enclosure, between the southern and south-eastern entrances. They were 12–15m in diameter and had between two and four rebuilds. They produced hand-made and 'Belgic' pottery (over 600 sherds weighing 11.5kg). All three contained internal post-holes and pits. The westernmost roundhouse was the best preserved example. It contained a central, clay-built hearth structure capable of supporting a brazier and a four-post structure surrounding the hearth. Its entrance shifted from south-east to east, then back to south-east again during its lifespan.

Approximately 25m to the east of the enclosure were the truncated remains of a pair of parallel curvilinear ditches. These were spaced c. 5m apart and followed the curve of the main enclosure. It is possible that they represent some form of stock control system and may have defined the eastern boundary of the settlement. A similar, concentric ditch system dating to the MIA, was excavated at Mingies Ditch in Oxfordshire.

LATE IRON AGE (LIA)

The settlement during this period continued to use the EMIA enclosure, although this was extended by the addition of extra enclosures. The overall appearance was of a concentric, cellular enclosure.

Occupation evidence, in the form of two roundhouses shifted slightly to the south-west, nearer to the southern entrance.

The EMIA stock control ditches were replaced by a single deep ditch, connected to the main enclosure by a short length of ditch. Two large ditches also appeared to the south of the enclosure, forming stock control systems and subsidiary enclosures. They also may have redrawn the southern limits of the settlement. It is likely, given the alluvium forming within them in later phases, that they may also have doubled as drainage ditches and/or 'flood' defences.



One of the large ditches being investigated

Towards the end of this period a 'D-shaped' enclosure was constructed to the west of the large ditches. The enclosure was also characterised by deep ditches. Its north-west entrance was unusual because it comprised parallel ditches suggestive of a stock control function. Topographical survey indicates the enclosure ditches defined an area of higher ground.

The 'D-shaped' enclosure was designed to maximise use of the higher ground, suggesting that conditions within the surrounding land had become wetter. This is supported by the presence of alluvial deposits within the EMIA enclosure ditches.

The principal remains within Area 2 (south of the Elstow Brook) were those of a cremation and inhumation cemetery. These comprised four urned (including an unusual double burial contained within two separate urns in the same grave) and two un-

urned cremation burials. The graves contained between 4 and 8 accessory pottery vessels (all of LIA-RB date). These remains are similar to those identified within the cremation cemetery at Beancroft Road, c. 1km to the north. Two poorly preserved, undated inhumation burials were also associated with the cremation cemetery.



Investigation of one of the cremation burials

EARLY ROMANO-BRITISH (ERB)

This period is characterised by the beginnings of a shift in the focus of settlement towards the north-western part of Area 1. The IA concentric enclosure system fell largely into disuse, although it probably survived in the landscape as an earthwork.

The partial remains of a NE-SW aligned rectilinear 'ladder' enclosure system were identified at the north-west edge of Area 1. A small number of post-built structures were identified and may represent rectangular buildings. In addition, a large quantity of finds was recovered, including a millstone.



A nearly complete millstone

Adjacent to the ‘ladder’ system were a number of large fields and the boundaries of one connected with the earlier ‘D-shaped’ enclosure, demonstrating that they both existed at the same time. A number of drainage ditches were dug into the southern side of the enclosure, possibly in an attempt to drain the interior towards lower ground to the south.

The earlier southern drainage/‘flood’ ditches appear to have largely filled up with alluvium. They may only have been partially active with the deeper sections developing into ponds, probably as a consequence of flooding and/or animal use. Several ditched field systems also appear in this area, possibly to exploit seasonal flooding events.

A number of the ditches to the west appear to have drained into large pits or ponds. These are likely to have originated as clay extraction pits which were later used to channel or store water. One of these was over 3m deep and contained the remains of access steps made of stone and re-used timber.



Steps into one of the large pits

A small cemetery, comprising two urned cremation burials and an inhumation were also encountered in the central part of Area 1. Two further, isolated cremation burials were also identified, one urned, the other un-urned.

LATER ROMANO-BRITISH (RB)

The ‘D-shaped’ enclosure was superseded by a sequence of new enclosures shifting gradually towards the north-west.

The interior of the main enclosure contained remains associated with settlement activity. These included numerous pits and internal divisions and a deep square-shaped cistern.



Square shaped cistern

The earliest phases of the cistern produced the remains of two leather shoes and a number of waterlogged structural timbers. Pottery dates suggest it is likely to have been in use into the 3rd and 4th centuries.



Leather shoes

Within Area 2 (south of the Elstow Brook) c. 100m north-east of the late Iron Age cremation cemetery were a series of ditches and a large, square-shaped pit. These remains are associated with a settlement first identified by the investigations undertaken in advance of the construction of the access road for the Marston Vale Millennium Country Park. The ditches were perpendicular to the brook, suggesting they were used to drain water into it. The pit contained pottery from the LIA to the 4th century, indicating it had been filled with settlement material built up over several centuries.

EARLY SAXON

The only firm evidence for settlement during the Saxon period was found within Area 2 (south of the Elstow Brook). It comprised the remains of two sunken-featured buildings (SFBs) and several areas



of pitting. These produced only small amounts of early Saxon pottery.

These remains represent the northern edge of a Saxon settlement previously encountered during excavation associated with the Millennium Country Park.

POST-ROMAN CULTIVATION

The upper deposits of a RB quarry pit/pond contained the remains of a medieval cistern bung, indicating that silting of the Roman settlement site continued for hundreds of years after its abandonment. The remains of parallel, NW-SE aligned furrows demonstrate the land was brought under cultivation during this time. In the southern part of the site, the remains of a NE-SE aligned medieval plough headland were also encountered. This followed the alignment of Iron Age enclosure ditches.

The remains of ditched boundaries shown on the 1841 Marston Tithe map were identified. Some of these followed the alignment of the medieval headland.

FINDS

A huge quantity of pottery was recovered from the investigations including 29kg of Iron Age, 190kg of Roman and 0.15kg of Saxon material. Most of it was locally made coarse ware (grey ware and shelly). A small quantity of Roman-period regional imports was present, including fine wares from Hertfordshire, the Nene Valley and Oxfordshire, along with samian from Gaul. There are fragments from at least two glass vessels.

Metal artefacts include brooches (7), rings (2), coins (13), bone combs (2), leather shoes (5), hobnails, nails, loomweights (4), quernstones (10), millstones (2), weights (2), whetstones (7), a possible iron chisel and a large quantity of miscellaneous iron work. The latter will require x-rays and expert analysis before they reveal more information.

The presence of quernstones and millstone fragments attests to crop processing. A large quantity of animal bone (165kg) was recovered, dominated by cattle and sheep. These, along with charred plant remains that will be recovered from soil samples, will provide more details on animal husbandry and the arable regime of each settlement and how it changed over time.



A small selection of the finds recovered from the site

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The work on site has been completed to the satisfaction of Central Bedfordshire Council's Planning Archaeologists. It has, therefore, been handed back to developer.

However, this is only the beginning of office-based study. All the records and finds need to be catalogued and computerised before they are analysed by different specialists in universities and museums across the country. Ultimately the site will be published as a monograph. With the landowner's permission the finds will be deposited with Bedford Museum.

Thus, although there will be nothing left to see on site, anyone who wants to know more will be able to read about the site and examine the finds.

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