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OBSERVATIONS AND EXCAVATIONS IN THE PINGEWOOD AREA – BRONZE AGE, ROMANO-BRITISH, AND MEDIEVAL FEATURES

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with illustrations by J Vallender

SUMMARY

An area of dense cropmarks on river gravels, centred on Pingewood, Berkshire, has been largely destroyed by the M4 and quarrying. A watching brief and limited excavation were carried out between 1979 and 1982. A ring-ditch, probably Bronze Age, was partially excavated, and evidence of prehistoric, Roman, and medieval landuse was recovered.

INTRODUCTION

The cropmark complex at Pingewood, 3km south of Reading, covers an extensive area of river gravels, about 1km long (Gates 1975, map 11); much of the archaeology has now been destroyed by the construction of the M4 and gravel quarrying. In 1977 and 1978 large-scale excavation was carried out at the west end of the complex (SU 688 694) (Johnston 1983–5). The remaining area to the south of the motorway and east of the excavated site was quarried away between 1979 and 1983. Following the completion of the excavations at the west end of the site, a watching brief was carried out for the Berkshire Archaeological Unit during topsoil stripping, as part of the agreed programme of archaeological work within the gravel quarry which included the 1977–8 excavations; in March 1982 small-scale excavation was carried out prior to site clearance and extraction in the east part of the cropmark complex (SU 698 693), as part of the Kennet valley survey (Fig 1). The results of these observations and investigations are described in this report.

THE WATCHING BRIEF

Topsoil and subsoil (to a depth of up to 0.65m) were stripped by two box scrapers down to the top of the gravel surface in approximately ten hectares to the east of the excavated area (Fig 1) in the summer of 1979. The five hectares to the east of Pingewood House and west of the railway (SU 693 693) were cleared subsequently. A watching brief was maintained during the earthmoving by a single observer (SJL) in order to record information relating to the excavated site. The machines worked rapidly and during long hours and it was not possible (nor would it have been of any advantage) to be present at all times of working. Because the purpose of the machining was to remove the overburden deposits in as short a time as possible, with the result that many features were not observed, the features recorded are very haphazard and sketchy and very few were examined; in all they clearly represent a very small sample of the archaeological features present. However, some general observations can be made which add to the interpretation of the use of the site.

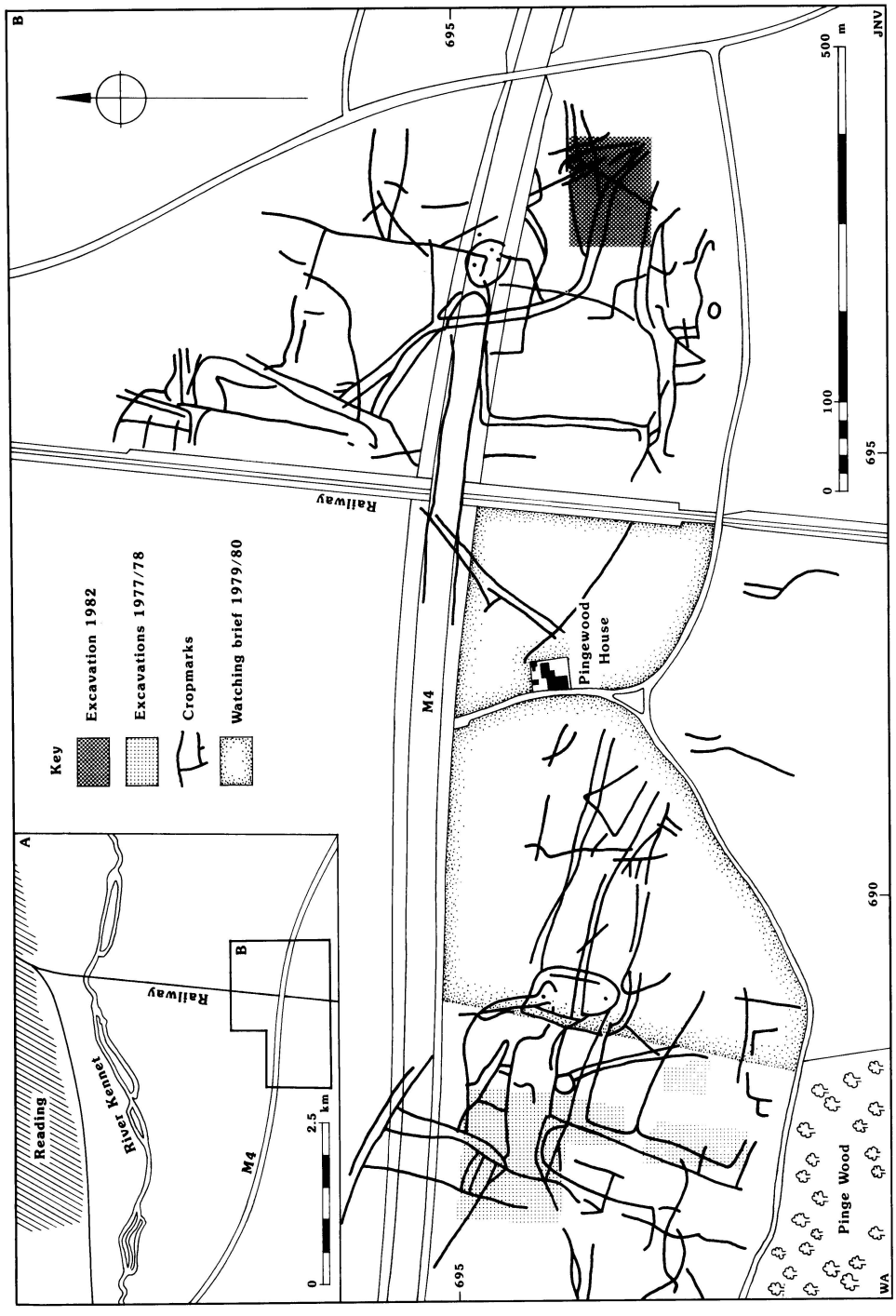

Figure 1 Pingewood: location of investigations

Plans and details of the features recorded can be found in the archive. No detailed analysis has been carried out on the finds: the pottery was scanned to provide information for dating purposes.

West of Pingewood House

Of the 94 features recorded in the area to the west of Pingewood House adjacent to the excavated site, only 47 were excavated or sampled in any way. Many other features produced finds from their uppermost fills. Pottery was recovered from 30 features and 11 finds spots. On the basis of the pottery these features have been divided into broad period phases and are discussed below under period headings. Many features produced no dating evidence.

Bronze Age features

Sixteen features were dated to the Bronze Age period. In addition, Bronze Age pottery was retrieved from seven finds spots and a sarsen saddle quern was recovered from the subsoil. Almost all features were pits, postholes, and shallow scoops of a similar nature to those recorded during the large-scale excavation (Johnston 1983–5, 19–22).

Features of this date can be seen to occur over the whole site, more than half of them being cut into the subsoil. It would be unwise to comment on the spatial patterning or significance of these features as they represent only a small sample (of unknown size) of what must have been a denser distribution, by comparison with the excavated Bronze Age site. The distribution indicates that the settlement was more extensive than was previously suggested. As the occupation in the excavated area has been interpreted as seasonal and of relatively short duration (Bowden 1983–5, 36), these features may indicate a shift in settlement perhaps at a different time to the recorded occupation; equally there may have been groups of huts and associated features existing at the same time covering a more extensive area, such as at Knight's Farm to the north-west (Bradley *et al* 1980) and the Reading Business Park site to the north (Oxford Archaeological Unit pers comm 1987).

Romano-British

Evidence for activity of this period in this area was minimal, consisting of a handful of pottery sherds. The lack of features and material suggests that the occupation was confined to the west, in the excavated area, and the land covered by the watching brief may have been used as pasture; the aerial photographs show traces of ditched field boundaries extending across this area of the site.

Medieval

Fifteen features were dated to the medieval period on pottery evidence, as well as three finds spots and a possible pond. These features include ditches, gullies, pits and scoops, and a timber-lined well. The well was approximately 5m-square with timber stakes set vertically across the east edge of the feature associated with a possible platform constructed of horizontal timbers. Some large flint nodules in the fill of the feature suggest that the lining may have included some flint walling. The original depth of the well was probably 1.20m; it was not possible to excavate and record this feature in detail.

Many of the features had organic lower fills indicating fairly wet conditions. These features were widely distributed but tended to be more clustered at the east edge of the field. Over 7kg of pottery (generally assigned to the twelfth/thirteenth century) were recovered; this contrasts with the apparent total lack from the excavated area.

East of Pingewood House

The aerial photographs of this area indicated a lower density of major features than in the fields both to the east and the west. The watching brief confirmed this and the lack of any observed features apart from the ditches of the trackway visible on the aerial photographs suggests that it was not an area of

occupation. Although the trackway was not dated at this point it is perhaps significant that it links the medieval features identified in the watching brief to the west of Pingewood House with an enclosure to the north where a concentration of early medieval pottery was found during surface collection (Dawson and Lobb 1986).

EXCAVATIONS 1982 (SU 6984 6934)

Hoveringham Gravels Ltd obtained planning permission to extend the quarry to the east of the railway and, with the approaching destruction of the archaeology in this area, several features visible on the aerial photographs were selected for excavation prior to topsoil removal. Because of the work schedule of the gravel company this work had to be carried out in February and March 1982, in advance of overburden removal. The funds available restricted the area that it was possible to examine; in addition, the very wet winter weather while on site, which clearly demonstrated the effects of winter flooding, severely restricted excavation at times when the site was under water.

The aerial photographs show a complex of intersecting trackways and ditches with a ring-ditch apparently at the junction of several field systems and it was this area which was selected for excavation. A D-shaped enclosure containing many pits, now destroyed by the motorway, was located in the centre of this complex, to the north of the area to be excavated.

Prior to excavation surface finds were collected, with the assistance of students from Reading University, using a 10m-grid. Finds were sparse but included 45 sherds of Romano-British pottery largely from hectare SU 6963 in the area of the ring-ditch. Two sherds of later Bronze Age and 16 sherds of medieval pottery were also found at the west end of the field.

Four trenches were excavated; Trench A at the junction of the trackway and other ditches, Trench B to investigate the ring-ditch and some of the adjacent ditches; two other small trenches (C and D) were cleared to investigate possible features visible on the aerial photographs but no features were identified. An average depth of 0.26m was machined off in all trenches to reveal the archaeological features. Feature dimensions are listed in Table 1.

Trench A

Four ditches were recorded cut into the gravel (Fig 2). Feature 20, a round-bottomed ditch with a stepped profile on the north side,

Table 1 Pingewood: 1982 excavations – feature dimensions

Feature	*Type*	*Width (m)*	*Depth (m)*	*Profile*
Trench A				
15	Ditch	1.3	0.39	Rounded
16	Ditch	1.3	0.29	Flat-bottomed
19	Ditch	1.4	0.55	V-shaped
20	Ditch	?	0.36	Rounded, stepped on north edge
Trench B				
18	Ditch	1.63	0.30	Rounded
26	Ditch	0.7	0.27	Rounded
35	Ditch	1.2	0.25	Rounded
37	Ditch	0.89	0.26	Rounded
42	Ditch	1.20?	0.30	Flat-bottomed
63	?Post	2.8 × 0.65	0.25	Assymetrical, stepped on north edge
65	?Post	0.24	0.10	Flat-bottomed

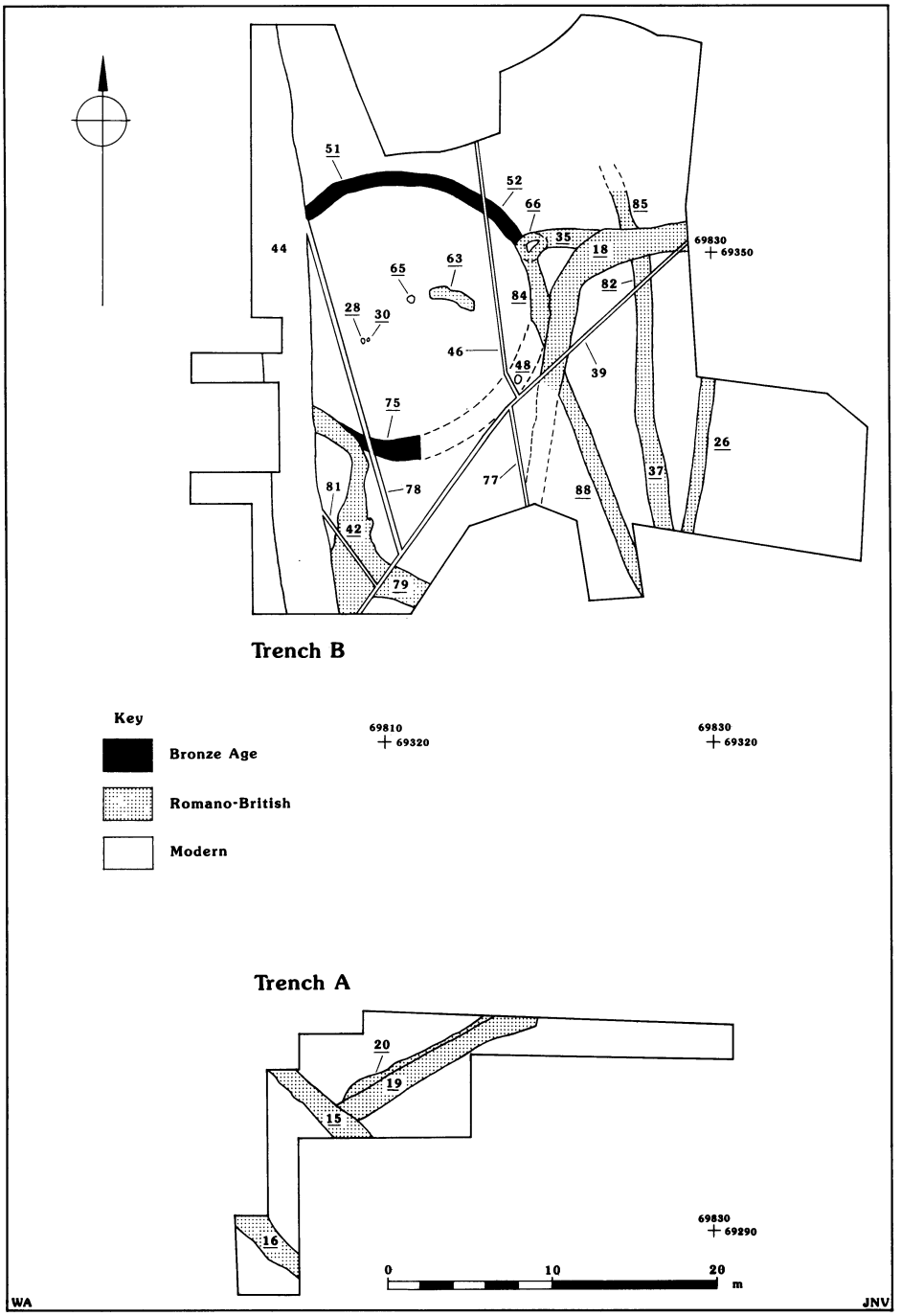

Figure 2 Pingewood: 1982 excavations. Plan of all features

was replaced by a V-shaped ditch (19). Neither feature produced many finds although ditch 20 did contain one small sherd of Romano-British pottery. Features 15 and 16 appeared to be the ditches defining the trackway visible on the aerial photographs. The ditches were 6.50m apart and ditch 15 was certainly later than ditch 19. All the ditches were filled with silty deposits resulting from natural silting; very few finds were recovered. The four sherds of pottery (one from ditch 20 and three from ditch 16) were probably of first century AD date.

Trench B

The ring-ditch

The ring-ditch was approximately 15.25m in diameter and appeared to have been located on a natural rise (of up to 0.20m) in the gravel, about 38.20m OD. Two lengths of the ring-ditch were located and recorded (51/52 and 75). The width varied between 0.76m and 0.90m and the depth was a maximum of 0.43m although it was not possible to complete the excavation of some features because of the high water table. The edges of the ditch on the south (75) and east sides were notably more difficult to define than the north side because the upper fill had been considerably spread by ploughing; the east side may have been destroyed by ditch 84. A round feature (48) was planned on the line of the ditch although it was not excavated. It is possible that there was no ditch in this area suggesting that the feature may have been pennanular, although, given the difficulties of identifying the ditch elsewhere on the site, it is possible that the ditch was simply not recognised. The west side had been destroyed by a land drain (44) and truncated by ditch 42.

The primary fill was a dark grey silt, while the upper fill was more mixed and contained burnt flint, gravel, and charcoal flecks. Interspersed throughout the fill were lenses of gravel perhaps resulting from ploughing or other disturbances in the area. Finds were recovered from the upper fills only and included 12 sherds of pottery of Romano-British date, small quantities of daub, and a few fragments of animal bone.

The interior of the ring-ditch

The layers within the ring-ditch consisted of a series of sandy silty spreads overlying the gravel. They formed no distinct pattern but contained Romano-British pottery together with burnt flint, small quantities of daub and a fragment of a loomweight, three pieces of iron slag, and animal bone. Features 28 and 30 were thought to have been root holes because of their irregular profile and stone-free fill.

Slightly to the east of the centre of the ring-ditch were the only two archaeological features recorded in the ring-ditch interior. Feature 63 was a slightly curving linear feature filled with silty deposits containing burnt flint and a sherd of Romano-British pottery. Feature 65 was a round, flat-bottomed feature filled with a sandy silt and occasional large flint nodules.

Later features

Several ditches were defined in the trench and two main alignments can be suggested. Feature dimensions are listed in Table 1.

On the east side of the ring-ditch, ditch 84 may be part of the ring-ditch but could equally be part of a linear feature on a north-west/south-east alignment; the unexcavated linear feature 88 may be a continuation of this ditch. Ditch 35 joined ditch 84 at right angles. Both were truncated by ditch 18. Filled with a grey brown sandy clay and gravel layer, the only finds were one unidentifiable iron fragment and four sherds of Romano-British pottery.

At the junction of ditches 84 and 35, apparently cutting the ring-ditch was a ring of dark brown sandy silt surrounding a patch of gravel (66) which, on excavation, appears to be a small ring-ditch 1.4m in diameter with a ditch 0.50m wide and more than 0.20m deep. No finds were recovered. Similar small

ring-ditches were recorded in the region at Knight's Farm (Bradley *et al* 1980, 262). However, because of the problems of the high water level, this feature may be the result of recuts to ditches 35 and 84, or possibly a sump for drainage.

Ditch 85/82/37, although more irregular, ran roughly in the same direction as ditch 84/88. Sections 82 and 85 were unexcavated but section 37 contained nearly 1kg of Romano-British pottery as well as small quantities of burnt flint and animal bone. Ditch 42 was similarly irregular and on the same axis to ditch 37, about 17m to the west. This ditch ran north–south turning a corner where it appeared to cut through the ring-ditch (75). There were no finds recovered from the excavated section.

Feature 18, later than all these features, was a wide, shallow, curving ditch on a slightly different, north-east/south-west, alignment. There were no finds from the primary fill of this feature. Ditch 26 was roughly parallel, about 9m to the east and produced two sherds of Romano-British pottery from the upper fill. All the ditches were filled predominantly with sandy silt with small quantities of gravel.

The whole area was truncated by a modern herringbone system of land drains reflecting the poor drainage of the area.

THE POTTERY by J M Mills

The pottery assemblage consists of 346 sherds (3067g). This was analysed using the standard Trust for Wessex Archaeology pottery recording system. Fabrics were identified on the basis of macroscopic inclusion using a hand lens (×4 magnification). Full details of the analyses can be found in the archive.

Twenty fabrics were identified, all of which are of Romano-British date. Approximately 86% (2646g) of the assemblage is represented by three fabric types.

Fabric 1 Irregularly fired, coarse, flint-gritted fabric identified as Silchester ware (*c* 41%). The eight featured sherds include bead rims, all wheel-finished, and a large flaring rim from a jar. The base sherds appear to be handmade with roughly wiped internal and external surfaces and gritty bases, similar in appearance to later Bronze Age sherds in the area (Bradley *et al* 1980, 268). One sherd has small patches of external burnish surviving below the rim. The rim forms and the fabric suggest a first century AD date (Manning 1974, fig 12, 2, and fig 15, 51 and 62). The difficulty in distinguishing between Silchester ware and flint-tempered later Bronze Age fabrics has been noted previously (Cowell *et al* 1977, 26), and it is possible that some of the body sherds and base sherds may be of Bronze Age date.

Fabric 5 Soft, buff-coloured fabric with white mica, clay pellets, sparse crushed flint, and rounded quartz inclusions (*c* 30%). This fabric is associated exclusively with necked and cordoned jars of the first century AD and was found in ditch 37 only. The cordon at the base of the neck was formed by parallel grooves and can be compared with forms at Ufton Nervet (Manning 1974, fig 12, 4) and at Aldermaston (Cowell *et al* 1977, fig 29, 37).

Fabric 6 Soft, slightly soapy fabric with common small voids, red iron oxide, rare crushed flint, and rounded quartz inclusions (*c* 15%). Forms include three bag-bodied jars with simple bead rims, and a strainer base.

The remaining fabrics account for less than 12% of the total (30 sherds, 311g). Other forms identified include one bowl base, one possible colour-coated bowl rim, and a flanged dish or bowl rim of third/fourth century date (Cunliffe 1971, 165–6) in a hard fired, reduced sandy fabric with external burnishing below the flange, from a layer which seals the ring-ditch deposits.

Distribution

Only five sherds (33g) were recovered from Trench A, from ditches 16 and 20. In Trench B the pottery distribution was equally divided between the silty layers from the interior of the ring-ditch and from the ditch fills,

including the upper levels of the ring-ditch. The pottery from the ditch fills is similar in date (first century AD) to that from the interior of the ring-ditch.

DISCUSSION

The ring-ditch is of a similar size to other monuments of this type in the region (Bradley and Richards 1979–80) and, despite the lack of dating evidence from this site, it is suggested that it was probably a funerary monument of Bronze Age date, occupying slightly higher ground than the surrounding less well drained land.

The gravel knoll occupied by the ring-ditch again appeared to provide the focus for activity in the first/second century AD. The range and quantity of the material suggests occupation but the nature of this is not clear. No structural features were identified although this is in keeping with the excavated site, approximately 1km to the west, where the evidence for structures was equally ephemeral, possibly due to seasonal occupation (Bowden 1983–5, 47). The location of this activity apparently at the corners of several fields is perhaps unusual, although it is possible that the fields may be later than the occupation. The D-shaped enclosure to the north may have formed the focus of the occupation in this part of the landscape with peripheral activity on the gravel knoll at this site. Ditches of the same date were identified to the north of the D-shaped enclosure and also about 400m to the north-east of this site (Dawson and Lobb 1986) and the features identified in this small excavation clearly form part of an extensive system of settlement and associated agricultural enclosures which are as yet not completely understood.

The trackway ditches excavated in Trench B are the latest features recorded on the site cutting across earlier ditches which are presumed to form part of the field system referred to above. The dating of the trackway was not clearly identified in the excavation and a later Roman or post-Roman date seem likely. The morphology and orientation is different to the main axis of fields and trackways apparently of first/second century date in this area. Furthermore, it clearly cuts across a rectangular enclosure apparently associated with the D-shaped enclosure joining another trackway which was identified during the watching brief and suggested as being of probable medieval date (Fig 1).

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The finds and records will be deposited with Reading Museum.

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