

PREHISTORIC FEATURES AT FIELD FARM, SULHAMSTEAD: EXCAVATIONS IN 2000

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with a contribution by JANE TIMBY

SUMMARY

Evidence for prehistoric and later activity was uncovered during excavations prior to mineral extraction at Field Farm, Sulhamstead. Bronze Age remains comprised the base of a Middle Bronze Age vessel surviving within a shallow pit, and a ring ditch, which probably delineated the extent of a barrow. Such funerary monuments have been frequently identified on the plateau gravels of the Lower Kennet Valley. Prehistoric material was also recovered from two other pits on the site. Medieval activity was attested by a pit, the fill of which contained pottery and daub. Post-medieval material was recovered from a posthole and several ditches, and a number of other undated pits and postholes were present.

INTRODUCTION

The Lower Kennet Valley is an area rich in archaeological remains. Numerous prehistoric sites are known from the vicinity of Sulhamstead, including a number of funerary sites on the plateau gravels. Immediately to the east of the site, Late Bronze Age urn fragments were recovered from excavations at Meales Farm, Sulhamstead (Lobb *et al.* 1990: 59). A ring ditch (observed as a cropmark) lies 1km to the south of the site, and ten cremations, eight of which were interred in Bronze Age vessels, were found in 1985 at Shortheath Lane, 1km to the south-east of the site (Butterworth and Lobb 1992: 73, Fig. 1).

Evidence for prehistoric settlement is found more frequently in lower lying areas of the valley, such as at Field Farm, Burghfield (Fig. 1), and at Anslow's Cottages in the same parish (Butterworth and Lobb 1992: 173). Prehistoric funerary monuments, including ring ditches, barrows and cremations, have also been found on the valley floor, again at Field Farm, Burghfield, and at Small Mead Farm, further to the east in Burghfield parish, but evidence for prehistoric settlement on the plateau gravels is rare. The gravel terraces of the Kennet Valley therefore appear to have been a landscape rich in funerary activity in the Bronze Age, with settlement mainly located on the valley floor.

The identification from aerial photographs of possible cropmarks within the site was followed, in 1988, by field evaluation, which revealed several possible prehistoric features, although the evidence was rather inconclusive (TWA 1988). A watching brief was therefore undertaken during topsoil stripping prior to gravel extraction, with a contingency for excavation in the event of the discovery of significant archaeological remains.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Between November 1998 and March 2002, prehistoric, medieval and post-medieval features were recorded during an intermittent watching brief undertaken by Cotswold Archaeology (CA) at Field Farm, Sulhamstead, which lies 4km to the south-west of Reading (centre at NGR: SU 636 684; Figure 1).

The work was undertaken within a single field that extended to approximately 7ha. All observed prehistoric features were recorded during excavations undertaken in June 2000, following the identification of a ring ditch during the watching brief. The programme of work was carried out on behalf of Hanson Aggregates, in advance

of extraction of the underlying gravel, to satisfy a planning condition imposed on the development.

The site is located on the edge of a ridge of plateau gravel (IGS 1979). Prior to extraction the field sloped gently down from approximately 93m AOD along its southern boundary north-westwards towards the River Kennet.

METHOD

The topsoil and subsoil were removed by mechanical excavator under archaeological supervision to expose the top of natural gravels and the archaeological features cut into them. These features comprised pits, postholes, gullies and ditches. They were then hand-excavated (50% of each pit or posthole, and at least 5% of each linear feature) and written, drawn and photographic records were compiled.

Deposits within the features were assessed for their palaeoenvironmental potential and, where appropriate, samples were recovered for fine sieving. These included the entire contents of vessel (416) a sample from the ring ditch (375) and samples from two further pits (363 and 421).

The archive for this project will be deposited with the West Berkshire Heritage Service, Newbury, under accession no. NEBYM 1998.53.

RESULTS

The majority of archaeological features were located towards the higher end of the field, within 80m of the south-eastern boundary of the site (Fig. 2). All of the features had suffered from truncation, probably a result of medieval and later plough damage. To the north-west, a large area in the middle of the site had been truncated to such a degree that no archaeological features survived. Further to the north-west, a few irregular ditches, gullies and two postholes were recorded (not illustrated), but no finds were recovered from any of these features and they are not commented upon further.

At the southern corner of the site, the base of a vessel was uncovered entirely filling a shallow pit (415), which was 0.3m in width and 0.1m deep (Fig. 2). Both pit and vessel had been greatly truncated. The vessel (417) was bulk-lifted and taken to CA's offices for detailed excavation. The entire contents of the vessel (416) were collected and processing yielded a substantial quantity of

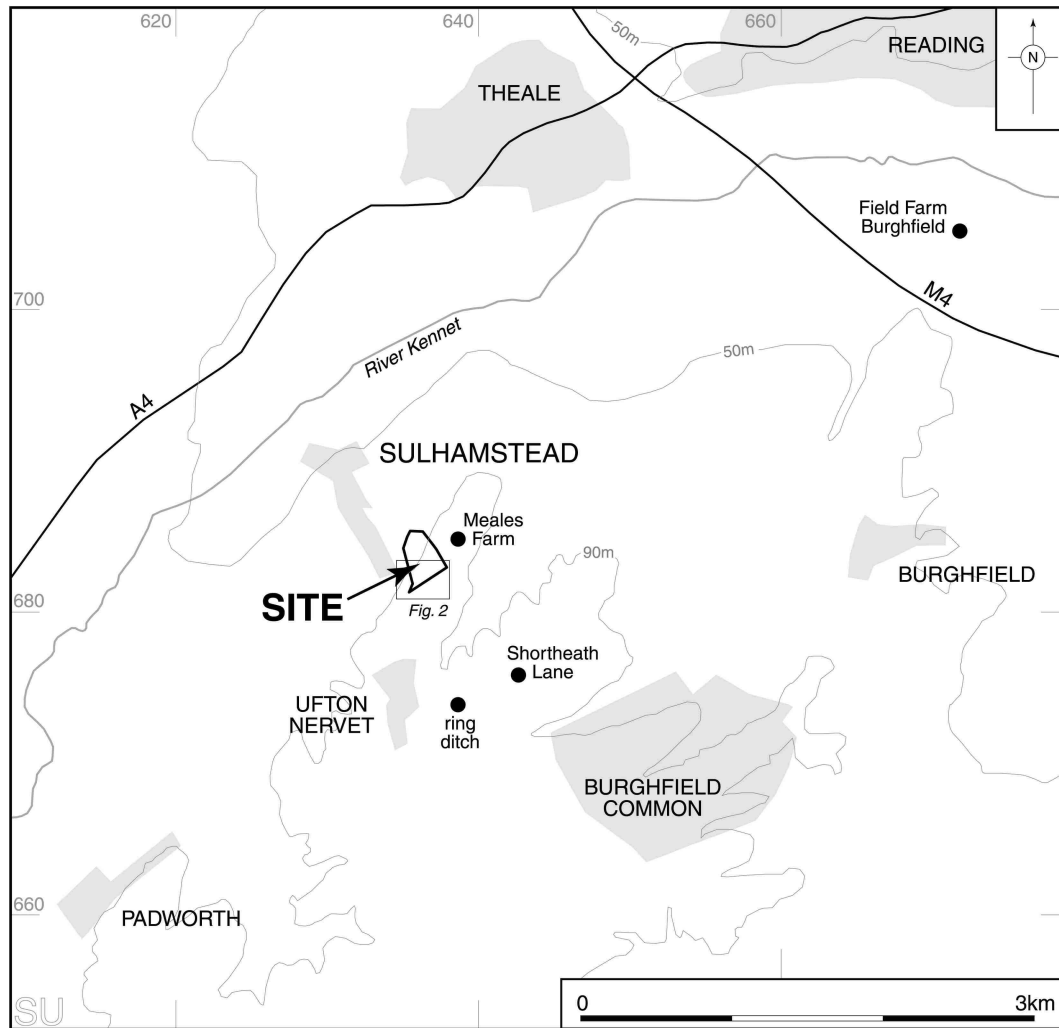


Figure 1: Location Plan

charcoal but no cremated bone. The vessel is of a handmade, coarse flint-tempered fabric with thick walls suggestive of an urn, and probably dates to the Middle Bronze Age (Fig. 4). Sixty metres to the north-east of the vessel find spot was an irregular ring ditch, between 7.5m and 9m in diameter (Figs. 2 and 3), defined by a ditch between 0.6m and 1.4m wide and with an irregular but generally V-shaped profile surviving to a depth of up to 0.41 m. Excavation of the ditch yielded five pieces of burnt flint and some crumbs of fired clay, and only one crumb of pottery was recovered from the sieved sample. The potsherd is thought to be broadly contemporary with the Middle Bronze Age vessel (see above). The ring ditch had been subsequently cut by subcircular pit 421 (Figs. 2 and 3), from which one small sherd of probable Bronze Age pottery was also recovered

A further 21 features were interpreted as either pits or possible postholes, most of which were undated, several of which were medieval or later, and only one of which (posthole 370) yielded prehistoric pottery. The location of posthole 370 on a possible circular alignment with several other undated features (Fig. 2) seems to have been a chance occurrence, with no

regularity of form or fill between features or in their distribution. No other significant groupings of possible postholes or pits were apparent, including three pits or possible postholes with charcoal rich fills (331, 344 and 362). Several of the larger, more irregular pits were probably tree-throw pits. Medieval potsherds and daub were recovered from the upper fill of pit 363, suggesting medieval structures were once present in the vicinity.

The ditches and gullies all yielded post-medieval material except ditch A, which was undated but also probably post-medieval (Fig. 2). In one of the excavated sections, ditch A had truncated an earlier feature, possibly another ditch, also undated but with near vertical sides and a flat base (not illustrated)

THE POTTERY

Jane Timby

A small collection of *c.* 249 sherds of pottery was recovered from the site. Most of these came from one vessel (416) of Bronze Age date from pit 415. The remaining 15 sherds were extremely degraded but appear to include further earlier prehistoric material and some pieces of medieval origin.

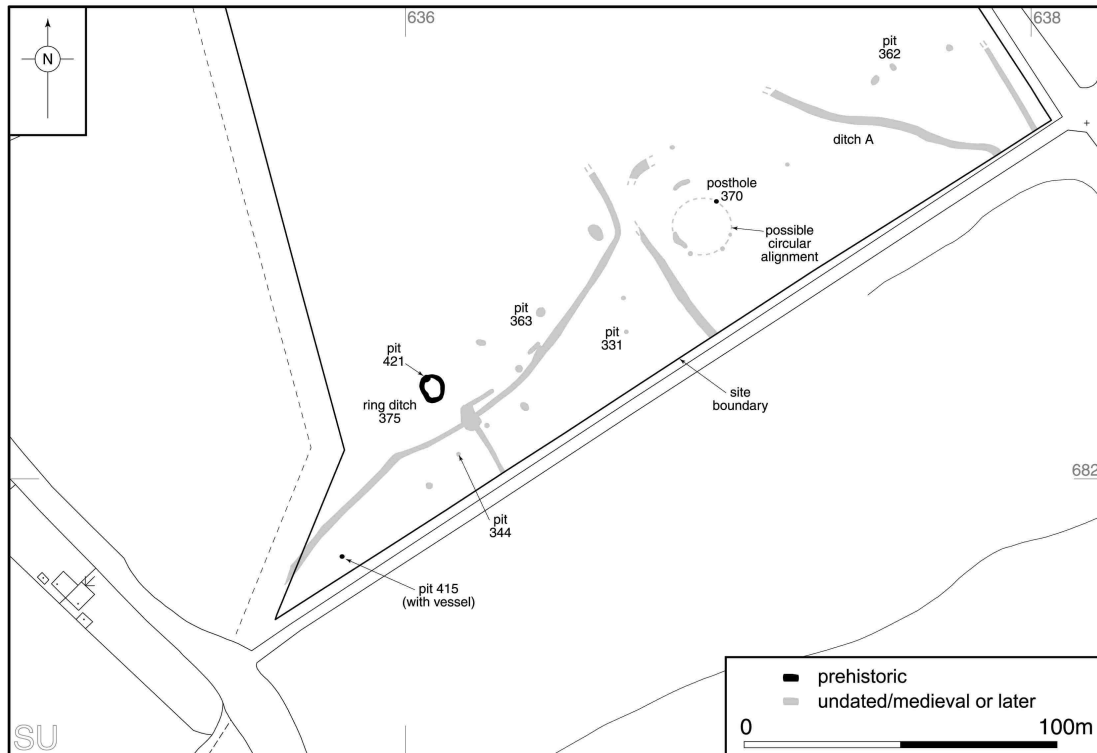


Figure 2: Site and Features

Prehistoric

Some 234 sherds (weighing 2.7kg) representing a single vessel (417) were recovered from pit 415. The sherds are in a very friable condition and include a number of crumbs. All the sherds derive from the base of a large handmade flat-bottomed vessel suggestive of a bucket urn (Fig. 4).

The fabric, mid-brown in colour, contains a sparse scatter of coarse calcined flint, up to 5mm in size and finer giving a hackley fracture. The base has a diameter of 280mm and a wall thickness of 17mm. These dimensions also suggest it was an urn. Both the form and the fabric are quite typical of the Deverel-Rimbury tradition in the Kennet and Middle Thames Valleys and it is likely that the vessel dates to the Middle Bronze Age. Without further diagnostic material there is little that can be said about the overall style of the urn. Similar coarse flint-tempered urns of Middle Bronze Age date are well documented from the region and examples can be cited from Risley Farm, Swallowfield (Lobb and Morris 1993), Brimpton (Lobb 1990), Wraysbury (Astill and Lobb 1989), Reading (Smith and Barnes 1997) and Bray (Barnes and Cleal 1995). Coarse flint-tempered sherds have also been recorded from Meales Farm, Sulhamstead (Fig. 1), but these are probably of Late Bronze Age date (Lobb *et al.* 1990: 59).

An abraded crumb containing a calcined flint temper was retrieved from soil samples taken from ring ditch 375. Little can be said of this other than it is likely to be contemporary with the urn. Similarly a thick-walled bodysherd, weighing just 9g with a coarse flint temper, came from pit 421, which is again probably Bronze Age in date. Posthole 370 produced a very small sherd, black in colour with a reddish-brown core. The fabric is mixed

in nature containing quartz sand, grog, organic matter and rare flint. Other than prehistoric it is difficult to date such a small isolated piece.

Medieval

Eight small sherds weighing 17g were recovered from pit 363. These are relatively thin-walled and have a sandy fabric with gravel flint. Soil samples from this feature produced a further two sherds of the same ware, a small wheel-made grey sandy sherd, eight rounded crumbs and a large fragment of daub.

DISCUSSION

Two Middle Bronze Age features commonly associated with funerary practices were located on the site: a buried urn (with a charcoal-rich fill) and a ring ditch. The context of the urn, upright and alone within a purpose-dug pit, would usually be indicative of a Bronze Age cremation burial. The absence of any associated cremated bone may have been due to heavy truncation (assuming the urn was complete when buried) and the undoubted acidic condition of the soil overlying the plateau gravels, although the surviving ceramic would have afforded a degree of protection. Alternatively, the urn could have been buried without any cremated bone within and still represent the burial of an individual even if no remains of the body were present. For example, an Early Bronze Age internment of a Beaker was found at Thames Valley Park, Reading, with an assemblage of artefacts usually found in a funerary context and, although no evidence of human remains was found, it was concluded that this was likely to have represented the internment of an individual (Barnes *et al.* 1997). It is worth noting that such urn burials have also been found in apparently domestic contexts, for example at Reading Business Park, where the base of an urn was found set

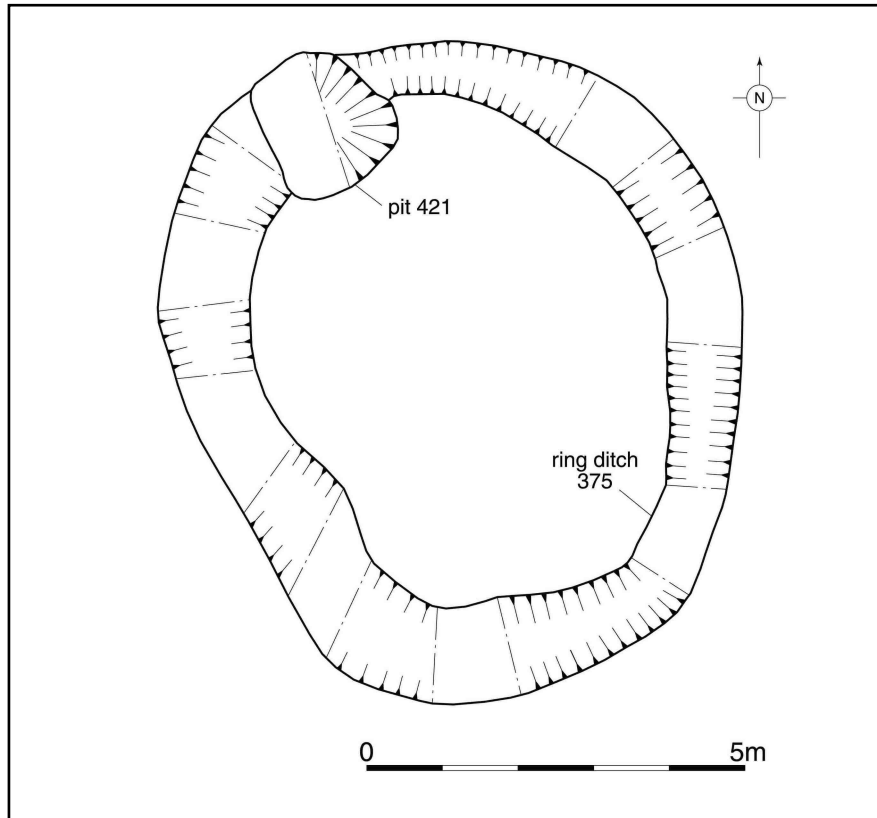


Figure 3: The ring ditch

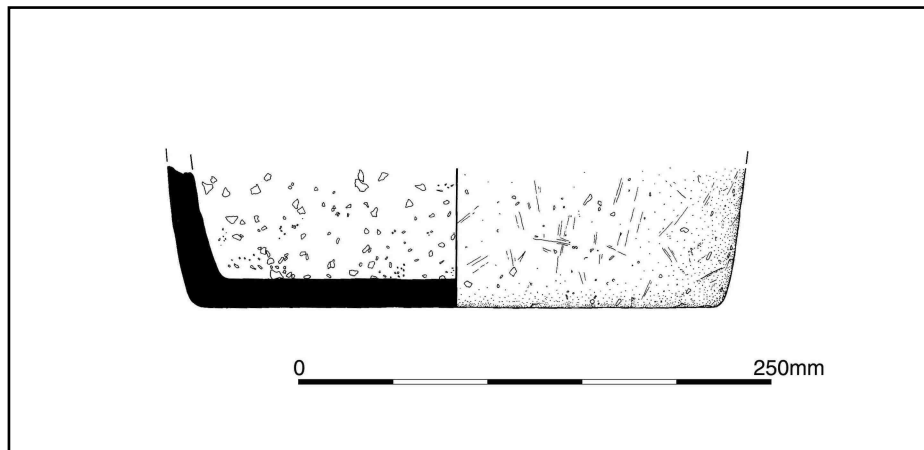


Figure 4: Base of Bronze Age vessel (417) (1:4)

into a shallow pit just within the wall line of a roundhouse. The urn is thought to have been used for grain storage, and ultimately was used for the disposal of rubbish (Moore and Jennings 1992: 28). However, the lack of other features in the vicinity of the vessel interment suggests that it was probably a funerary deposit. Internments of cremations in urns dating to the Middle Bronze Age have been found in the vicinity of the site at Shortheath Lane, Sulhamstead, and Field Farm, Burghfield (Fig. 1). It is possible, if unlikely, that some or all of the undated small pits containing quantities of charcoal in their fills (pits 331, 344 and 362) represent unurned cremation burials where the bone has not survived.

Ring ditches, which often mark the location of ditched barrows, were another common feature of Bronze Age funerary practices, and the tiny fragment of pottery from the fill of ring ditch 375 suggests that this feature was also of Bronze Age date. No features survived within the ring ditch, where a centrally placed interment is sometimes found. Ring ditches associated with cremation burials were also recorded nearby at Field Farm, Burghfield (Lobb and Rose 1996: 76).

Pit 421, which cut through the infilled ring ditch, also contained a small potsherd of probable Bronze Age date. This could indicate a Bronze Age date for this feature (although the potsherd could equally be residual) and, by extension, any number of the undated pits and possible postholes could possibly represent prehistoric activity at the site associated with the ring ditch and vessel inhumation.

CONCLUSIONS

The presence of the remains of a Bronze Age ring ditch and urn burial at Field Farm, Sulhamstead, is far from unexpected given the location of the site within a landscape rich in prehistoric sites. In the absence of surviving cremated bone it is possible, although unlikely, that the urn was buried in a domestic context, although no other evidence of prehistoric domestic activity was forthcoming. Given the location of the site on the plateau gravels, and the nearby remains of a Bronze Age ring ditch, it is far more likely that both ring ditch and urn burial represent further evidence of Bronze Age funerary activity in the Lower Kennet valley area.

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