

The Excavation of a Ring-Ditch at North Stoke, Oxfordshire

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SUMMARY

This report describes the excavation of a Bronze-Age barrow ring-ditch. The flints recovered provide evidence for quarrying activities.

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INTRODUCTION

The site (SU 6108 8559) is located some 700 m. from the River Thames at a height of 50 m. O.D., on level Chiltern Outwash gravel. It lies towards the centre of a cropmark complex¹ which has been investigated on several previous occasions,² and near the south end of the North Stoke bank-barrow. The excavation was undertaken after the ring-ditch and other features were observed to be eroding into a disused quarry. It was hoped that this rescue work would produce dated artefactual and environmental evidence and enable comparisons to be made with material recovered during systematic fieldwalking in the North Stoke area.

DESCRIPTION OF EXCAVATIONS

An area of 107 square metres was excavated by hand, as shown in Fig. 1. Twenty-one per

¹ D. Benson and D. Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley: an Archaeological Survey of the River Gravels (1974)*.

² H. Case, 'The Linear Ditches and Southern Enclosure, North Stoke', in *Settlement Patterns in the Oxford Region: Excavations at the Abingdon Causewayed Enclosure and Other Sites*, eds. H.J. Case and A.W.R. Whittle, C.B.A. Research Rep. xlv (1983); E.T. Leeds, 'Round Barrows and Ring Ditches in Berkshire and Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia* 1 (1936), 7-23; H.W. Catling, 'A Beaker-Culture Barrow at North Stoke, Oxon', *Oxoniensia* xxiv (1953), 1-12.

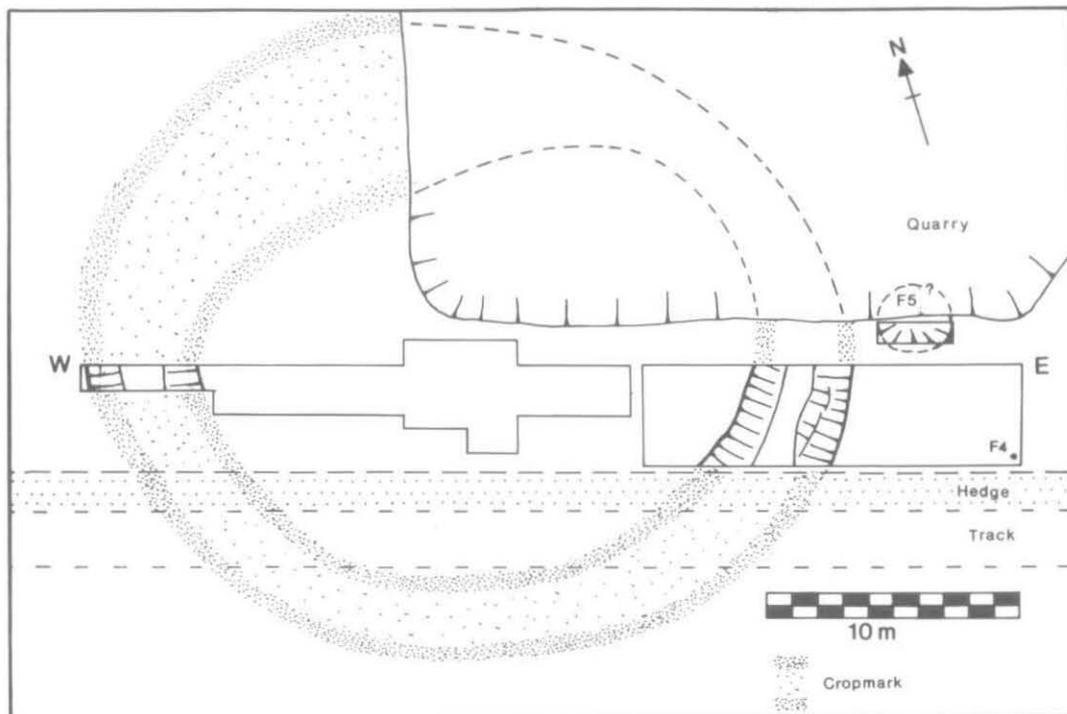


Fig. 1. Plan of trenches.

cent of the ring-ditch interior and 7 per cent of the ditch contents were examined. The excavation provided a single section traversing the whole monument, the single ring-ditch in both sections and a single external posthole. No other convincing archaeological features could be demonstrated. F5, revealed in the quarry face, failed to appear in the main trench; subsequent excavation identified it as the remnants of a large pit or ditch terminal containing a few human feet-bones, probably from a burial.³

Apart from the layers within the ditch and F5, little stratigraphy remained. A slight rise in the area enclosed by the ring-ditch suggested a mound, but no structure could be demonstrated. The ditch stratigraphy seems straightforward, with only minor variations between the two sections. Table 1 summarises the descriptions and interpretations of all layers.

The primary silts (L5), together with the base of L4 (the latter most clearly observed beneath L7), can be regarded as the extent of the stabilised prehistoric phase of the site. L5 contained much struck flint and a single sherd of pottery, probably prehistoric, with a further sherd from L10/L14. Roman pottery only occurred in L4 and above, and thus provides a *terminus post quem* for the ploughing episode(s) evidenced by L7 and L13. L9 in the west section suggests that this ploughing activity was not necessarily continuous. A further ploughing episode (L8) can be seen to originate from the inner ditch lip in both sections, and may represent the levelling of the mound. The single posthole, F4, is undated and no association with the ring ditch can be demonstrated.

³ Identifications by H.H. Carter, Reading Museum.

TABLE 1

LAYER	DESCRIPTION	INTERPRETATION
5	Gravel, 5-10 cm. diameter in centre, 2 cm. towards sides. Brown sandy matrix. Some ironstone.	Primary ditch silts.
14	As for 5.	As for 5.
4	Orange/brown sandy loam with few stones.	Secondary/tertiary silts. Turfline?
7	Orange/brown sandy loam with many stones (5 cm.).	Ploughsoil slip from activity outside ring-ditch.
8	Orange/brown sandy silt with many small stones (1-2 cm.), occasionally larger.	Late ploughing episode inside ring ditch. Mound levelled?
15	As for 8.	As for 8.
2	Orange/brown sandy silt, few stones and some rare rounded chalk (1 cm.).	Final silting of ditch prior to modern land use. Turfline?
9, 10, 11	Orange/brown sandy loam with few stones.	As for 4.
12	Orange/brown sandy silt with many stones (5 cm.).	Ploughsoil slip from inside ring ditch? Mound slumping into ditch?
13	Orange/brown silt with many stones (5 cm.).	Ploughsoil slip from activity outside ring ditch.
3	Compact orange/brown sandy silt with many stones (2-5 cm.), occasionally larger.	Subsoil? periglacial deposit?
F4	Compact orange/brown sandy silt, stone-free except for occasional pebbles (1-2 cm.).	Small posthole.
F5		
7	Loose orange/brown sandy loam with many stones (5 cm.) and Manganese pan.	Grave fill?
6	Pale brown sandy silt with many stones (5 cm.).	Natural silting or grave fill.
5	Charcoal lens.	
4	Similar to 7 but lighter. Also charcoal lens.	Deliberate infilling.
3	Red/brown sandy loam with few stones.	Final silting of pit following settling of back-fill?
8	Similar to 4 except for occasional charcoal fleck.	Shallow scoop?

F5 was stratigraphically different from the ditch. L7 and L6 were originally interpreted as primary silts similar to those in the ditch, but the human bones from the parts of L7 disturbed by animals show that this layer at least must relate to the burial. Above this, L5 was a charcoal lens, sometimes occurring as streaks in plan. Immediately overlying L5, L4 filled the remainder of the pit; its homogenous nature indicates deliberate deposition. Possibly cut into L4 was a shallow scoop containing Beaker pottery, flint flakes and a little charcoal.

POTTERY (Fig. 3)

Sixteen sherds of pottery were recovered (and eight fragments of brick or tile from L4 spit 5). Thirteen sherds were prehistoric: eleven from F5 and two from the ring-ditch. Ten of the sherds from F5 were Beaker and came from L8. They consisted of a rim and body sherds, decorated with discontinuous square-sectioned grooves similar to a vessel from Stanton Harcourt (Oxon 28).⁴ It is probably a later rather than an earlier type, and would not normally be found in a burial context.⁵ The other sherd from F5 came from the base of the topsoil.

⁴ H. Case, 'Beaker Pottery from the Oxford Region 1939-1955', *Oxoniensia* xxi (1956), 1-21, Fig. 4.

⁵ H. Case pers. comm.

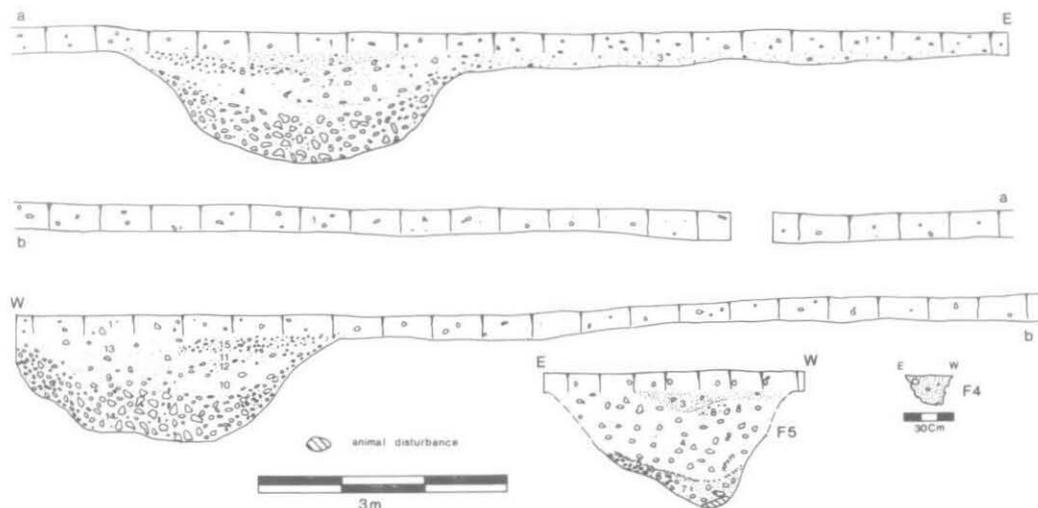


Fig. 2. Section W-E.

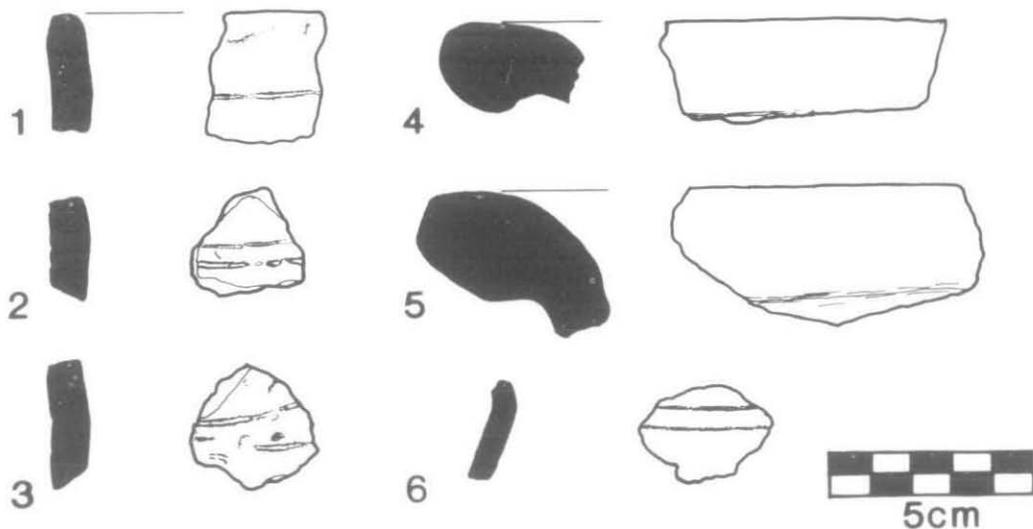


Fig. 3. 1-3: Beaker, L8, F5; 4: Roman storage vessel, L4; 5: Roman storage vessel, unstratified (L8); 6: Roman cooking vessel, L7/8.

The two sherds from the ring ditch were a body sherd from L5 spit 1, and a probable 'urn' fragment from L14 spit 1.

Three Roman sherds came from L4 and above in the ring-ditch, and consisted of two large storage-vessel rims and a neck sherd of a cooking-vessel of mid first- to mid second-century date.

FLINT

A total of 545 pieces of struck flint were recovered, including 37 rolled examples which are

probably of geological origin. Perhaps as many as seven flint types, defined on the basis of colour, texture, cortex and inclusions, were used, although 87 per cent of the material was of three types only. Nodules exceeding 15 cm. were not common; the quality of the material is variable, with many examples showing thermal fracture planes.

Cores

The seventeen cores, which consist of irregular flaked lumps, do not lend themselves to the use of subtle typological schemes such as that based on platform number. What is perhaps more relevant is to quantify the proportion of cores used to produce narrow flakes. The chronological significance of flake Length: Breadth ratios is now well-known, and should equally apply to the analysis of cores. At North Stoke, three examples were recovered which showed narrow flake scars (one scar per core), but in no way can these be described as 'blade cores'. The small but nevertheless persistent occurrence of narrow flakes in Later Neolithic and Bronze Age assemblages would presuppose narrow flake scars on some cores.

The degree of core use is variable, and ranges from examples from which only one flake has been removed to those which seem worked out. This variation can partly be explained by the erratic quality of the nodules, but is more likely to be due to the luxury of choice afforded by the relative abundance of raw material.

Flakes

A total of 162 intact unpatinated flakes from the primary ditch silts (L5, sp. 1 and sp. 2) were measured, primarily to recover chronological information. The attributes measured were length, breadth, thickness, type of end fracture, amount of remaining cortex and bulb angle.⁶ The Length and Breadth measurements show that Narrow flakes (L:B ratio $\geq 5:2$) account for only 1 per cent of the total, and Broad flakes (L:B $\leq 1:1$) 43 per cent. As with the cores this contrasts strongly with the proportions typical of Mesolithic and Earlier Neolithic assemblages and is more-or-less typical of Later Neolithic and Bronze Age assemblages in Southern England.⁷

The other four measured attributes have recently been shown to vary from the Later Neolithic to the Bronze Age.⁸ These variations reveal chronological trends, some more statistically significant than others, which can be used to assist in distinguishing these assemblages. The North Stoke assemblage seems to be characteristic of the Bronze Age.

The effect of different circumstances of deposition (quarrying, domestic use, etc.) on the formation of lithic assemblages is not yet known, and the reasons for the above trends are not understood. It has, however, been observed that for North Stoke and three other assemblages from round barrows, the high proportion of cortical flakes may indicate 'extractive' sites.

Implements

Eight implements were recovered: two scrapers, four irregularly retouched flakes, a

⁶ Method as in A. Saville, 'On the Measurement of Struck Flakes and Flake Tools', *Lithic Studies Society Newsletter* 1 (1980), 16-20.

⁷ M.W. Pitts, 'Towards an Understanding of Flint Industries in Post-Glacial England', *Bulletin of the Institute of Archaeology, University of London* xv (1978), 179-197.

⁸ S. Ford, R.J. Bradley, J. Hawkes and P. Fisher, 'Flint Working in the Metal Age' forthcoming.

notched flake and a possible hammerstone. Apart from one scraper, no other item has been sufficiently modified to show conclusively whether the retouch was intentional or due to accidental 'natural' causes.

Microwear Analysis

Fifteen items from L5, sp. 1 and sp. 2 (6.4 per cent of all flint from this layer) were examined to determine if any had been sufficiently heavily used to produce microscopic wear patterns.⁹ The pieces selected for study were those most likely to have seen heavy use, such as easy-to-hold flakes with regular non-cortical edges. In only one instance (a scraper) were traces observed that might be attributed to use, and even this is more likely to be due to post-depositional stone damage. The lack of microwear traces does not prove non-use of particular items; on the other hand unused or little-used flints are what would be expected on an extractive site.

Discussion

From the lithic considerations, it seems likely that the assemblage most contemporary with the construction of the ring ditch is Bronze Age. The presence of patinated and perhaps rolled flakes shows that earlier material is also represented.

It may be suggested that this assemblage represents the by-products of quarrying. The high proportion of cortical flakes and the lack of microwear traces support this proposition, while it is hard to think of any other reason why a non-domestic monument should produce so many flints. In an environment where flint sources were not as widely available as they are now (after exposure by modern cultivation), material produced during construction of the monument could have been particularly attractive.

It is not known what products were removed from the site. Although refitting experiments were unsuccessful, the presence of a high percentage of cortical flakes and worked-down cores shows that both trimmed nodules and flake blanks may have been removed.

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this excavation, to recover datable artefactual and environmental evidence, has only been partly satisfied. No diagnostic pottery or C14 date was obtained, but the flint assemblage seems likely to be Bronze Age. Since these flints were probably in a primary context, the ring-ditch itself, which represents the remains of a burial monument, may probably be assigned to the Bronze Age. If the above argument is valid, the assemblage is especially interesting as a by-product of quarrying activities.

The ditch stratigraphy suggests that once the monument had become stable, it was set in grassland. Not until Roman or later times did ploughing occur close to the edge of the ditch. On one interpretation, the ditch silting of the Beaker ring-ditch 80 m. to the north-east may result from the same ploughing episode.¹⁰

Feature 5 is best regarded as the remnants of an inhumation grave for which the Beaker sherds from L8 provide a *terminus ante quem*. A charcoal sample from L5, suitable for

⁹ Analysis undertaken by J. Dumont.

¹⁰ H. Case in Catling op. cit. note 2.

C14 dating, has been deposited with the site archive in case the need arises for an absolute date for this feature.

Finally, the monument may have continued as a recognisable mound until after the Roman period. It is crossed by a parish boundary hedge, and it is well known that barrows sometimes served as reference points in Saxon and later land boundaries.

A fuller version of this report, including specialist reports and details of the flint report, has been deposited with the archive and finds in the Ashmolean Museum (Department of Antiquities).