

The Excavation of Iron Age and Medieval Features at Glympton Park, Oxfordshire

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with a contribution by P. BOOTH

SUMMARY

An evaluation carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit in 1993 on the site of the proposed new estate office in the grounds of Glympton Park, near Woodstock, Oxfordshire (NGR SP 424218) revealed evidence of possible Romano-British activity and medieval buildings. Subsequent excavation in 1994 revealed evidence of Iron Age activity, plot boundary walls relating to the medieval village, the footings of post-medieval estate buildings and a recently demolished 19th-century building. In the event, the only evidence of Roman activity recovered in the excavation was a small quantity of residual pottery.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The site lies on the edge of a scarp above the River Glyme (c. 106 m. OD), immediately north of the 12th-century church, which is the only surviving building of the deserted medieval village of Glympton. The prominent position above the Glyme is one where prehistoric or Romano-British occupation might well be expected. The earliest documentary reference to the village appears in a charter dating to 1050 and certainly the settlement was well established by 1086 as it was assessed in Domesday at ten hides, and cultivated by 26 men.¹ The village was relocated to its present position in the 17th century to make way for parkland, leaving the 12th-century church in its original position.

NOTE

A detailed description of the excavated features and analysis of the associated artefacts can be found in the archive report which has been deposited with the County Sites and Monuments Record. The site archive has been deposited with the Oxfordshire County Museum Service (accession no. 1994.5).

¹ *Cod. Dipl.* ed. Kemble, iv, 285; *V.C.H. Oxon.* i, 427.

IRON AGE ACTIVITY

Iron Age activity was represented by a localised scatter of pits and postholes containing Iron Age pottery, located in the western part of the site (Fig. 1). Further features were assigned to the same period due to the very similar nature of their fills. A stone axe fragment was also present in one of the pits. A quantity of fired clay recovered from these features was probably indicative of broken oven structures rather than burnt wall daub. The spread and location of these features suggests that the Iron Age settlement is likely to extend south and west below the present-day walled garden.

MEDIÉVAL ACTIVITY

Medieval activity (Fig. 1) was represented by shallow limestone footings and an associated pit and postholes located in the south-eastern portion of the site as well as a scatter of pits and postholes in the western half of the excavated area. The footings, which comprised unworked limestone slabs bonded in a matrix of dark reddish brown clay, were within three shallow trenches. To the north, the footings were cut into the natural subsoil and cornbrash and overlain by a general post-medieval ground layer. No dating material was recovered from the excavated parts of the footings. The relationship between the three footings could not be determined due to the level of post-medieval disturbance. No extant surfaces relating to these walls were identified at any point, suggesting that the site was levelled after demolition prior to the construction of the post-medieval building.

A large sub-rectangular pit with stepped sides and a flat bottom was located in the angle formed by the wall footings. The lower fills of the pit produced pottery of 12th- and 13th-century date and a modest quantity of animal bone. Two intercutting stone-packed postholes were located on the north-west side of the pit, partly truncated by post-medieval activity (not on plan). Two postholes located either side of the pit may suggest that it was covered.

A large sub-rectangular quarry pit (123), located to the west of the medieval footings, was cut into an exposed ridge of cornbrash running across the site from north-west to south-east. It contained late 14th-century pottery.

A small assemblage of medieval pottery comprising 672 sherds was recovered. The material was predominantly of local origin and ranged in date from the late 11th to the 15th century with the exception of a small quantity of Saxo-Norman St. Neot's ware, including two examples of cooking pot rims. All these sherds were residual in medieval contexts but nonetheless are indicative of 10th- to late 11th-century occupation on the site.

POST-MEDIÉVAL ACTIVITY

Post-medieval activity was represented by the limestone rubble footings of a three-cell rectangular building in the south-eastern corner of the excavated area. The original structure comprised the western cell while the central and eastern cells represented later additions. Traces of wooden door jambs were embedded in the dividing walls and, although there were no surviving floor layers, a large brick-built cistern was present in the eastern cell of the building.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A middle Iron Age settlement was indicated by the presence of a localised group of pits and postholes although the limited number of features uncovered does not allow for any structural

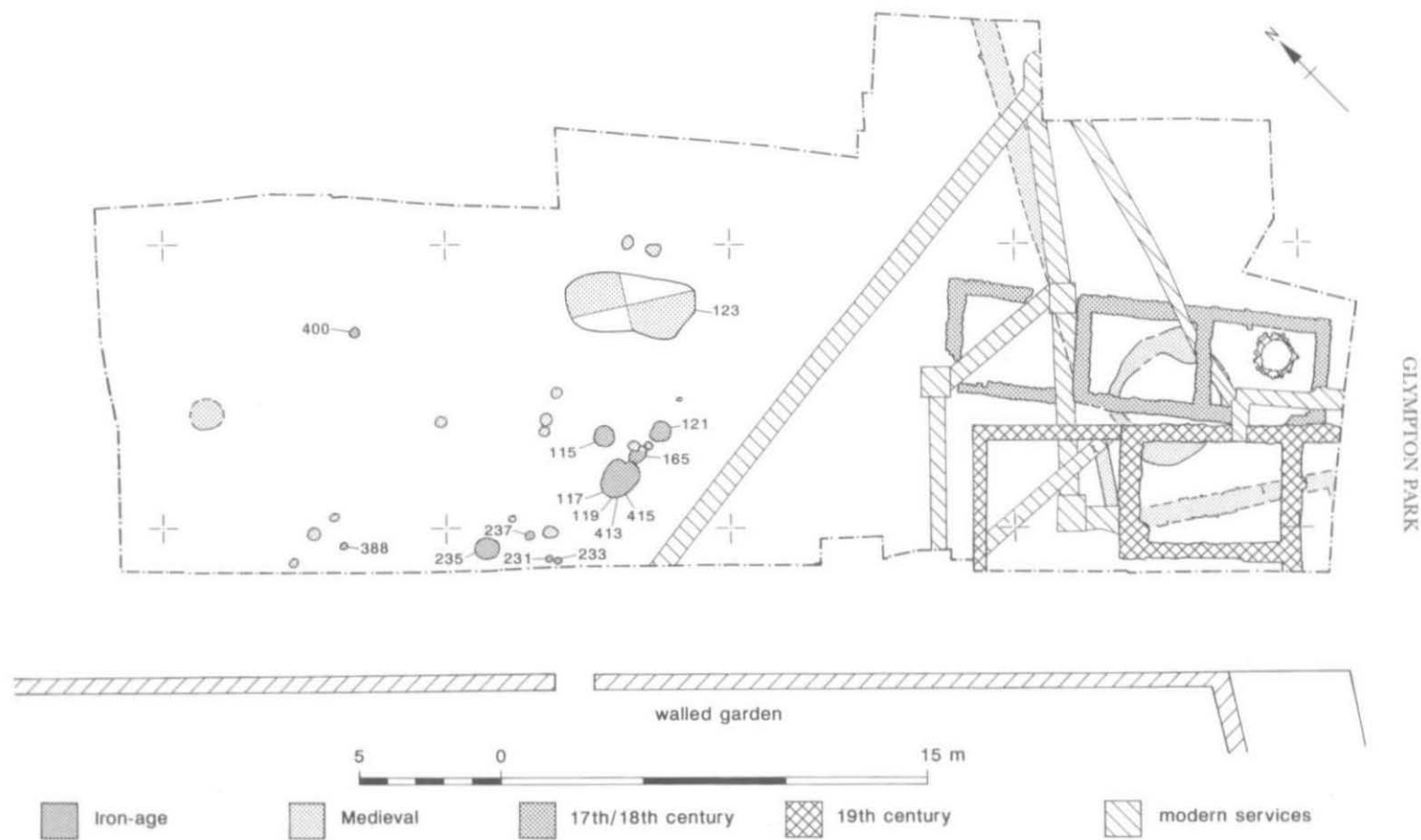


Fig. 1. Glympton Park: Plan of excavated features.

interpretation. The small size of the area uncovered, along with the lack of ecofactual and environmental evidence, prevents any interpretation of the nature of the occupation.

The Iron Age features clustered towards the north-west side of the site. Although later post-medieval and modern activity has disturbed the deposits in the eastern half of the site, the lack of residual Iron Age pottery in that area suggests that the main settlement lies to the west of the excavated area. This would place the main area of occupation beneath the walled garden of the estate.

Structurally, the original medieval village is indicated by the remains of three related, stone-built walls in the eastern part of the site. The layout and topographical position may suggest a boundary wall, extending from the edge of the scarp and defining a plot orientated north-south.

The function of the post-medieval building is unclear, although it is shown on the First Edition Ordnance Survey Map, suggesting that its demolition took place in the late 19th century, presumably to make way for the most recent structure.

APPENDIX: THE IRON AGE POTTERY by P. BOOTH (Fig. 2)

Introduction and methodology

Some 96 sherds of Iron Age pottery, weighing 2159 g., were recovered, much of it from a single vessel. The assemblage, probably of middle Iron Age date, was not analyzed in great detail owing to its small size, but is of some interest because of the relative scarcity of comparable material in the area to the north of the River Thames. The pottery was scanned quite briefly and characteristics of fabric (identified using a binocular microscope at $\times 20$ magnification), vessel form and decoration (where present) were noted. These details are contained in the project archive. Quantification of fabrics was by sherd count and weight. Vessel numbers were based on a count of rim sherds.

Context and condition

The material came from the small cluster of Iron Age features, with the great majority (over 91% by weight) from a single pit, 115, (fill 114). Much of the latter was from one vessel, which accounted for c. 69% of all sherds and c. 80% of the total weight of pottery from the site. The sherds were in moderate condition; surfaces were reasonably well-preserved, to the extent that burnishing would probably have survived had it been present. The average sherd weight from groups other than context 114 was almost 15 g., indicating that the pottery was not very badly broken up. Nevertheless it is clear that there was some disturbance of Iron Age features, since the group from pit 117 (fill 116) contained an intrusive medieval sherd. Conversely, however, no residual Iron Age sherds were noted in medieval contexts.

Fabrics and surface treatment

The notation of fabrics was in terms of their two principal inclusion types (e.g. A – quartz sand; S – shell) with a numeric indicator of coarseness (on a scale of 1 – very fine to 5 – very coarse). All the sherds were in variants of a single basic fabric, in which the principal tempering agent was coarse, fossil shell (inclusion type T), presumably derived from locally available limestone. This occurred in conjunction with small rounded calcareous grits (C) or quartz sand (A), or sometimes with no other discernible inclusions (N). Sparse mica was a further component in some but not all sherds. Voids apparent in both surfaces and fractures of a few sherds were almost certainly caused by the leaching out of shell. The breakdown of fabrics by sherd count and weight was as follows: Fabric TA5. 2 sherds, 21 g. Fabric TC5. 81 sherds, 1999 g. Fabric TN5. 10 sherds, 89 g. Fabric TN4. 3 sherds, 50 g.

Firing of all fabrics was irregular, with oxidised and unoxidised patches apparent both internally and externally on some sherds and particularly evident on vessel No. 3, of which relatively large parts survived. Surface treatment was generally confined to rudimentary wiping and smoothing. The latter was most apparent in one large sherd of fabric TN4, where noticeably more care was taken to ensure smooth surfaces and an even sherd thickness (6–7 mm.) than in other fabrics, which were generally used for thicker-walled vessels. There was no clear evidence that even this sherd

had been burnished, however. Roughly vertical wiping was apparent on a number of sherds. In some cases this produced an impression almost of incised lines, reminiscent and perhaps imitative of the scored decoration found further east and north.² While it is not certain that a deliberate decorative effect was being sought here, this is likely (see below).

Vessel forms

Only four (possibly five) different vessels were represented by rim sherds. All were simple forms, three being roughly barrel-shaped with very slight definition of the base of the rim and the fourth having a simple squared rim with no definition of a neck of any kind. None of these forms is particularly diagnostic of date, though all can be paralleled in Middle Iron Age assemblages in the region.

Illustrated vessels (Fig. 2)

1. Fabric TC5, unevenly fired but generally dark brown to black. The form, apparently almost vertical sided in the upper parts, is uncertain because insufficient of the rim survives to allow the angle to be judged with confidence. Slight indications of vertical scratching/scoring. Pit fill 114.
2. Fabric TC5, irregularly fired both internally and externally. Simple roughly barrel-shaped jar with upright rim and flat base. Irregular, roughly vertical scratching/scoring. Pit fill 114.
3. Fabric TA5, oxidised (red-brown) interior and exterior with dark grey-brown core. The quartz sand inclusions are very sparse. Simple jar form. Pit fill 114.
4. Fabric TA5, dark greyish-brown to black. Fairly fine despite inclusion size and more sandy than No. 3, though shell inclusions are still dominant. Simple jar form as No. 3. Pit fill 116.

Discussion

The principal question relating to the assemblage is that of its date, upon which considerations of fabric, form and decoration all have a bearing.

The fabric of all the sherds is broadly similar and presumably indicates a relatively local origin for the pottery, since the principal inclusions could be readily derived from locally available materials. At Rollright, shelly limestone and other shelly wares, thought to be derived from local Jurassic limestone, accounted for 80% of all the Iron Age pottery.³ In the Upper Thames Valley to the south of Glympton shell-tempered fabrics are particularly characteristic of the early Iron Age. This is demonstrated both amongst published material and in large unpublished assemblages such as those from Yarnton (Worton Rectory Farm) and Gravelly Guy, Stanton Harcourt. The extent to which such fabrics continued in use in the middle Iron Age, during which time sand-tempered fabrics became dominant, is still uncertain, however, as it is unclear whether or not middle Iron Age occurrences of shell-tempered fabrics are residual. Such occurrences can be shown to decline steadily during the middle Iron Age at some sites,⁴ though at Farmoor the distinction between shell-tempering-dominated fabrics in the early Iron Age and other fabrics in the middle Iron Age was more clear cut.⁵ Shell-tempered fabrics were effectively absent from later middle Iron Age assemblages such as that at Watkins Farm, Northmoor.⁶

² S.M. Elsdon, 'East Midlands Scored Ware', *Trans. Leicestershire Archaeol. and Hist. Soc.* 66 (1992), 83–91.

³ G. Lambrick, *The Rollright Stones: Megalithic Monuments and Settlement in the Prehistoric Landscape* (English Heritage Archaeol. Rep. 6, 1988), 93.

⁴ G. Lambrick, 'Pitfalls and Possibilities in Iron Age Pottery Studies – Experiences in the Upper Thames Valley', in B. Cunliffe and D. Miles, *Aspects of the Iron Age in Central Southern Britain* (Oxford University Committee for Archaeol. Monograph 2, 1984), 165–6.

⁵ G. Lambrick, 'The Iron Age Pottery', in G. Lambrick and M. Robinson, *Iron Age and Roman Riverside Settlements at Farmoor, Oxfordshire* (CBA Res. Rep. 32, 1979), 37–9.

⁶ T. G. Allen, *An Iron Age and Romano-British Enclosed Settlement at Watkins Farm, Northmoor, Oxon.* (Thames Valley Landscapes, The Windrush Valley vol. 1, Oxford University Committee for Archaeol. 32, 1990).

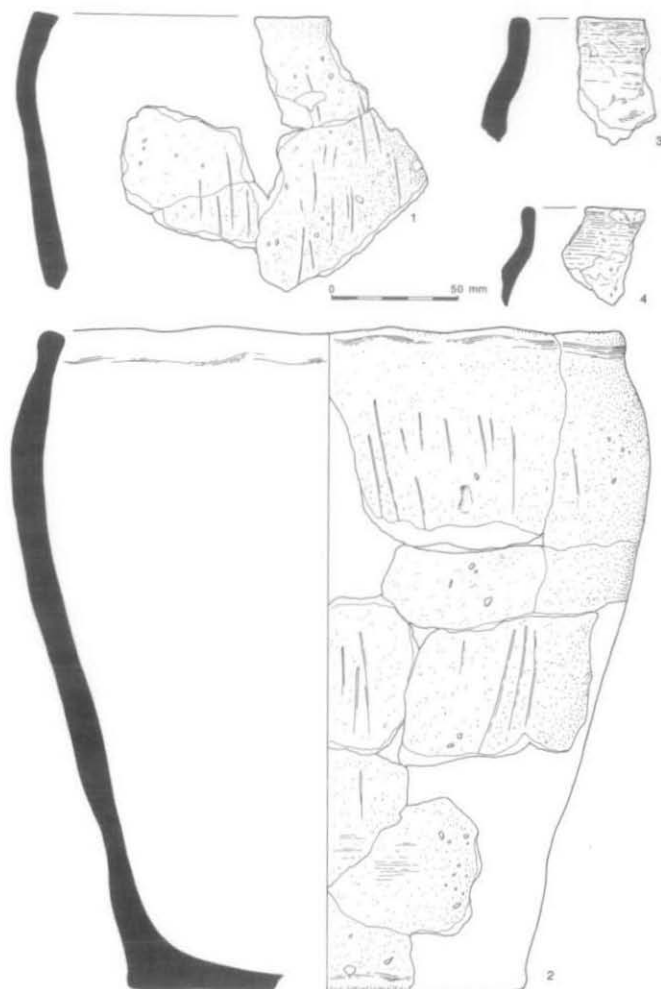


Fig. 2. Glympton Park: Iron Age pottery from contexts 114 (2.1-3) and 116 (2.4).

To the north of the Thames Valley, however, two variations from this pattern can be observed. Firstly, shell-tempered fabrics differ from those within the valley in a more extensive use of fossil shell. Secondly, they appear to have continued in use well into the middle Iron Age, though the paucity of adequately recorded assemblages in north Oxfordshire makes this difficult to judge. The evidence is most clear at Rollright, where a largely middle Iron Age assemblage was dominated by shell and shelly-limestone fabrics,⁷ and to a lesser extent at Madmarston, where the published data do not allow the importance of shell-tempering in the middle Iron Age to be assessed, though it was clearly present.⁸ A parallel situation

⁷ Lambrick, *op. cit.* note 3, 94-5.

⁸ P.J. Fowler, 'Excavations at Madmarston Camp, Swalcliffe', *Oxoniensia*, xxv (1961), 34.

to that observed in Oxfordshire seems to have prevailed in Warwickshire. Here, while middle Iron Age assemblages in the Avon valley were again dominated by sand-tempered fabrics, the middle as well as the early Iron Age pottery from Nadbury Camp on the Cotswold fringe was largely shell-tempered.⁹

As indicated above, the vessel forms present are not particularly diagnostic of date, but all would be acceptable in a middle Iron Age context. The absence of characteristic shouldered pieces of early Iron Age date, such as occurred at Chastleton,¹⁰ and of the angled forms which dominated some other early Iron Age assemblages in the region, for example Long Wittenham and Allen's Pit, Dorchester,¹¹ may be significant. Similarly, the absence of fingertip decoration, so typical of the early Iron Age, may also be a chronological indicator. In both cases, however, argument from negative evidence in such a small assemblage, while suggestive, cannot be conclusive. A further chronological indicator may be the presence of possible rudimentary 'scored' decoration on two of the four illustrated vessels. While not as clearly defined as in the central area of its distribution north and east of Oxfordshire, it is most likely that the Glympton sherds indicate a local attempt at this technique. Parallel examples in the region come from Rollright¹² and Madmarston, where the technique was more common in one group¹³ and a further possible example is known from South Parks Road, Oxford.¹⁴ In its 'core' area the technique is consistently of middle Iron Age (4th-1st century BC) date.¹⁵ Together the evidence indicates a settlement site of middle Iron Age date, using a limited repertoire of forms in a fabric tradition apparently widespread in the upland region of north Oxfordshire but which contrasted with that seen in the contemporary Upper Thames Valley. The social significance of this distinction, if any, remains to be explored.

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⁹ C. McArthur, 'Excavations at Nadbury Camp, Warwickshire, SP 390482', *Trans. Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeol. Soc.* 95 (1990), 14.

¹⁰ E.T. Leeds, 'Chastleton Camp, Oxfordshire, a Hillfort of the Early Iron Age', *Antiq. Jnl.* xi (1931), 394; D.W. Harding, *The Iron Age in the Upper Thames Basin* (1972), 151, pl. 43.

¹¹ Harding, *op. cit.* 155-8, pls. 50-4.

¹² Lambrick, *op. cit.* note 3, 95.

¹³ Fowler, *op. cit.* 27, 34.

¹⁴ P. Booth, 'Iron Age and Roman Pottery', in A. Parkinson et al. 'The Excavation of Two Bronze Age Barrows, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, lxi (1996) 51-4.

¹⁵ Elsdon, *op. cit.* note 2, 89.