

An Early Iron Age Site at Wytham Hill, near Cumnor, Oxon

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SUMMARY

An upland early Iron Age settlement was located by fieldwalking, and a trial excavation revealed the presence of subsurface features and the preservation of faunal remains. Much of the pottery is identical to that from the contemporary lowland Farmoor settlement, suggesting a relationship between the two sites.

INTRODUCTION

The fieldwalking section of the Oxford University Archaeological Society, in their work on the parish survey of Cumnor, located a scatter of early Iron Age pottery on Tilbury Farm near the edge of Wytham Wood.¹ This was the first site of such a date to be found in the parish survey, and being away from the river gravels clearly represented a different type of site from those recently excavated in the Upper Thames valley.² It was decided that a trial excavation, combined with systematic fieldwalking, would both allow assessment of the degree of plough damage, and illuminate the site's extent and a little of its character.³

THE SITE

Wytham Hill is an isolated mass of higher ground set within a loop of the River Thames. In contrast to much of the surrounding area it has quite steep slopes, and from about the 400 foot contour or above there is a very good view of the river valley. The solid geology is Corallian limestone, but this is covered by glacial clays and gravels. The land is not of

¹ It was later discovered that the field lay just within Wytham parish, but the name Cumnor 1978 had by then been used on the finds we so labelled.

² Such as Barton Court Farm, Farmoor and Hardwick. For a survey of work in the region, with full references for individual sites, see R. Hingley and D. Miles, 'Aspects of Iron Age Settlement in the Upper Thames Valley', in *Aspects of the Iron Age in Central Southern England*, eds. B. Cunliffe and D. Miles (Oxf. Univ. Committee for Archaeol. Monograph 2, 1984), 52-71.

³ I would like to thank the University Chest, who own the land, and the University Land Agent, Mr. Brookes, for permission to excavate and for providing access through Wytham Wood. The tenant farmer, Mr. Barnett, was most generous in allowing the society to excavate in his newly-sown field, and showed great interest in the work, giving every encouragement. The Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit provided transport to and from the site. Mr. G. Lambrick discussed the report and gave much useful information about the Farmoor settlement. I would also like to express my thanks to all the O.U.A.S. members who helped on the excavation and the processing of finds, and Brenda Mason who organised the field survey. The full site records and finds have been deposited with the Oxfordshire County Council Department of Museum Services, Woodstock.

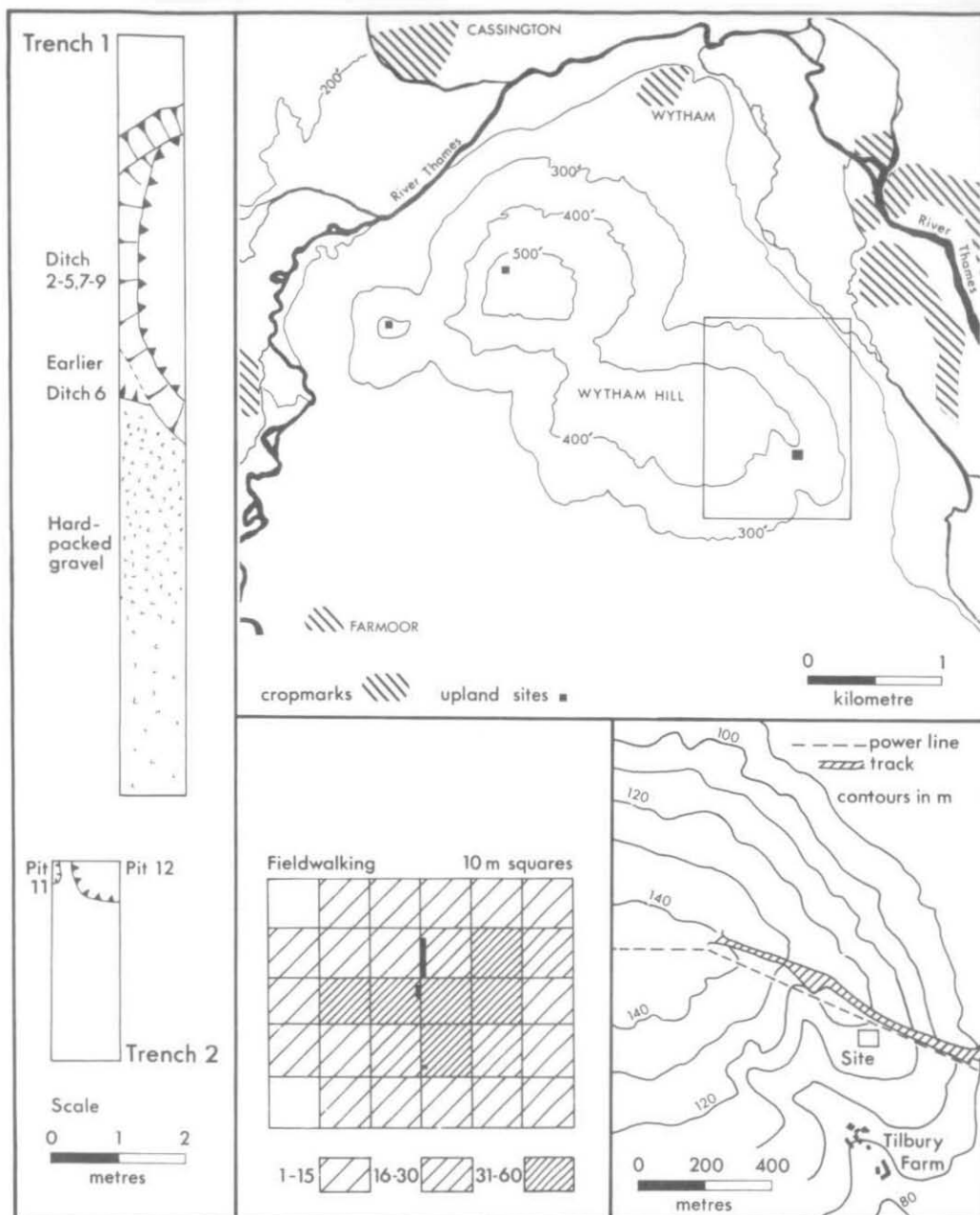


Fig. 1. Location map and site plan.

good quality, which is probably why much of the higher areas and northern slopes are still wooded. Some areas, including the site, are ploughed, but no cropmarks of this or any other site are known.

The site is located in the southern lee of the hill, about 100 m. from Wytham Wood, at SP 4805 0705. It is set in a little terrace, probably natural, sunk into the hillside, with the land sloping slowly away to the south, slightly up to the west to an outcrop of Corallian limestone, and down to a small but steep-sided valley to the east, beyond which the land gradually rises towards a low east-west ridge which forms the southern part of Wytham Hill. Two different subsoils occur on the site, a greyish white clay forming the steep slope to the north, and orange gravel, sometimes in an orange clay matrix, covering the rest of the area. The topsoil over the site and surrounding field was full of large pebbles, in average 10 to 15 cm. in diameter.

THE EXCAVATION

Trench 1, aligned north-south, was positioned to extend from near the foot of the steep slope to the north of the terrace towards the densest part of the pottery scatter. It was 1 m. wide and originally 10 m. long, but was later extended to 11.3 m. to include the whole of the ditch which was encountered at its northern end. The trench was entirely hand-excavated, and some soil was sieved with a $\frac{1}{4}$ " mesh to determine loss of finds. Surprisingly, only very small sherds were missed in the trench and thus recovered in the sieve, and the proportions of the pottery fabrics were the same as the main sample.

The ditch was the largest and most important feature excavated on the site. It was some 5 m. wide, but was not the same depth on both sides of the trench, being only 2.4 m. on the west and 3.2 m. on the east (Fig. 2). In plan, the edges of the ditch can be seen to be converging towards the west, and it seems likely that Trench 1 has cut through the ditch near a terminal which would lie just to the west. The feature has been interpreted as a ditch, but it must be admitted that it could be a large pit, quarry or pond. Both resistivity readings and borings with an auger produced inconclusive results concerning the continuation of the feature to the east. The resistivity survey covered an area to the east of the excavation, with three long lines of readings at 1 m. intervals, using the Wenner configuration. Two lines ran parallel with the excavation trenches, and a third ran down the slope in the hope of transecting the ditch if it ran along the contours. Over the same area augering to a depth of 30 cm. was carried out, but both methods produced no clear results. This might be due to a complex series of features, variations in topsoil depth or the presence of fill similar to natural gravel in features. For example, the thick orange gravel (L7) in the ditch found in Trench 1 could easily have masked it from the resistivity survey or have implied natural subsoil in augering.⁴

The ditch was roughly U-shaped in section, with a well-defined flat bottom. Onto this was dumped soft grey loam (L9) overlain on the northern side by a slump of orange gravel washed in from the side of the ditch. On top of this was dumped grey loam with ash (L8). This was followed by a clean orange gravel (L7), shallow to the west of the trench but thick to the east, which represents a considerable filling of the ditch. Overlying the gravel was a soft grey sandy loam with charcoal and pebbles (L5) which reached up to the south lip of the ditch but was thinner on the northern side, indicating that tipping was mainly from the south. This is consistent with the detailed field collection which shows the area immediately south of the ditch to have been the most intensively occupied. A further deposit (L4) of clean orange gravel with clayey sand was then laid down; this contained within it slips of greyish white clay which had washed in from the north where this clay overlay the natural gravel subsoil and formed the steep back to the terrace. This, like other gravel layers, contained few finds, and represents a second phase when eroded material was filling the ditch; the clay wash clearly indicates natural infill rather than human dumping. A third phase of tipping was indicated by L3 of black clayey loam with charcoal and pebbles, mainly in the centre of the ditch which was by this time very much reduced in size. When this ceased there was only a very light depression where the ditch had been, and this was filled naturally by a clayey grey-brown layer (L2) similar to the topsoil. L2 and occupation layers L3, L5 and L8 contained much pottery and some bone.

The ditch seems to have cut an earlier feature, represented solely by L6. Only part of one edge remains, to the south of and on a different alignment from the edge of the ditch, but the evidence did not show whether L6

⁴ A Martin-Clark resistivity meter was kindly lent by the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art, Oxford; lists of readings are deposited with the records.

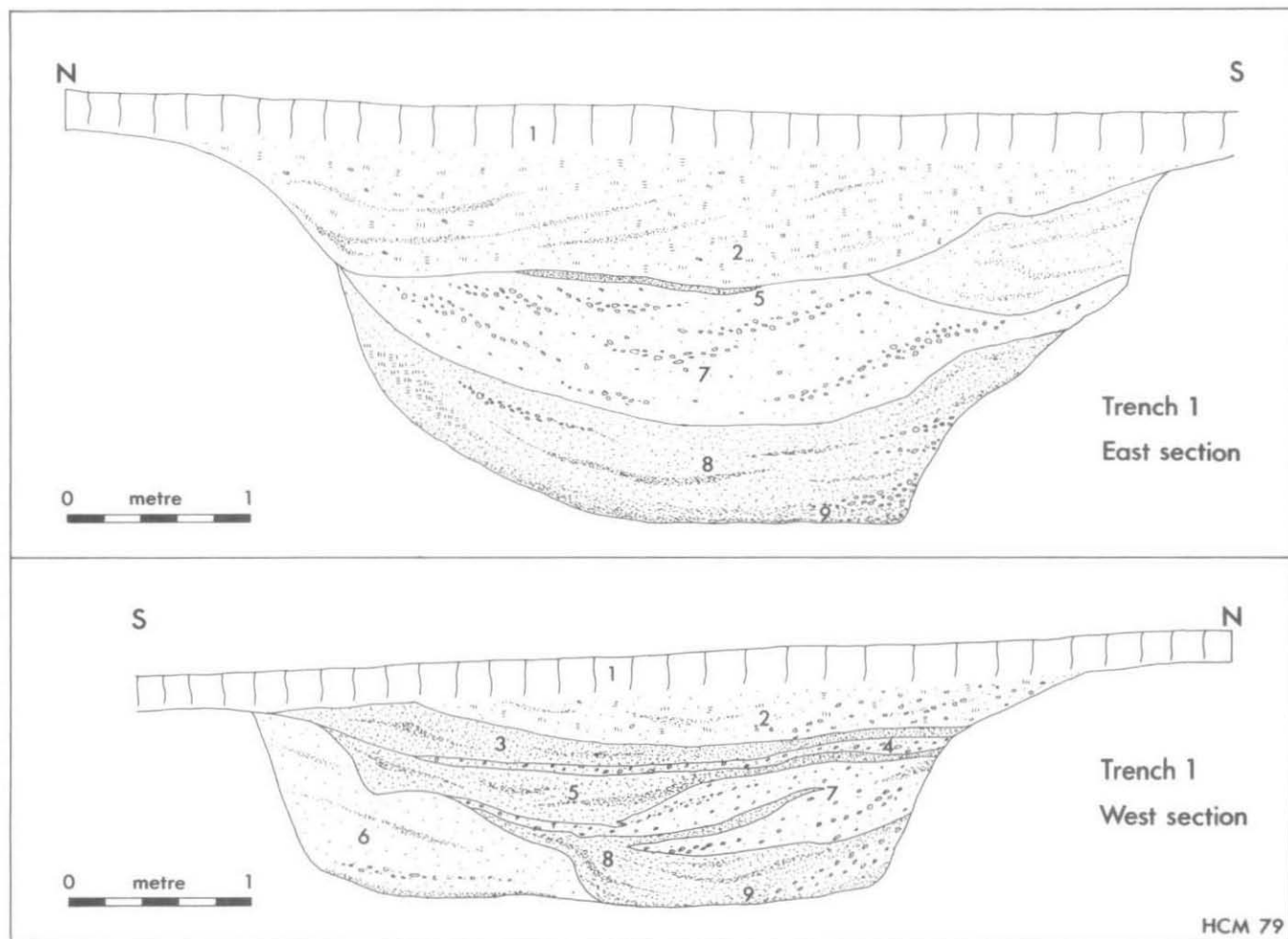


Fig. 2. Sections of Trench 1 showing the ditch fills.

was the fill of a ditch or a pit. The fill was mainly greenish-brown sandy material, although darker loam with pebbles was noted near the bottom of what was left of the feature.

To the south of the main ditch the orange gravel subsoil was packed very hard for a distance of 5 m., the rest of the trench having noticeably softer subsoil. The hard-packed gravel could have been a path, but if so it should have been dirtier than the normal subsoil, which was not the case. Another more likely interpretation is that the harder area represents the base of a bank constructed with the gravel cast up from the ditch. There was no rise in the surviving gravel to support this, but much of the gravel fill should have slumped back into the ditch forming L2, L4 and L7, and ploughing could have removed any other remnants. The interpretation of the hard gravel as the base of the bank assumes that the large feature was a ditch. In shape and size the feature is unlike the pits at Farmoor. It might be a quarry, in which case the hard gravel area could indicate the spoil heap, but it is very unlikely that it is a pond as there is no evidence of silt collecting in the bottom. Hence a ditch still seems the most likely interpretation. The three layers with considerable amounts of occupation material can be interpreted as tip lines, with the gravel and clay layers indicating natural slumping and wash into the ditch.

A second trench was opened after the field survey had been completed, to test an area nearer the centre of the densest scatter. This was to see whether differences in the pottery density on the surface merely indicated differential destruction of deposits by erosion and ploughing, or whether it really reflected the size and character of the site. Also, no small features such as post holes or gullies had been located in Trench 1, and it was feared that ploughing might have removed such traces. Even more pottery and bone was found in the topsoil of Trench 2 (L10) than had been the case in Trench 1 (L1). Cut into the subsoil were two features, both at the northern end of the trench. L11 was a small, shallow bowl-shaped hollow with a gully running into it from the north. Most of the feature clearly lay outside the trench, and it could not be interpreted. The other feature was a pit or large posthole, 40 cm. deep, with vertical sides and a flat bottom. The fill (L12) had several tip-lines of black and grey sandy loam and contained a considerable quantity of pottery and bone. This included the upper half of a cow's skull upside-down at the bottom of the pit, right by the southern edge. These features clearly indicate that the archaeological deposits are not totally destroyed, and indeed in Trench 2 there was a slight indication that some layers may be preserved above the subsoil.

THE FIELD SURVEY

The area was gridded out in 10 m. squares aligned parallel with Trench 1, which was being excavated whilst the survey was conducted. Each square was walked by four to six people in two 'runs', each representing a 5 m. by 10 m. strip. All pottery, bone, metal or stone objects were collected, even if clearly modern. There was surprisingly little post-Iron Age material, and this was true also for the topsoil layers (L1 and L10) in the excavations. This may imply that the area has until recently been pasture. All pottery and bone fragments of any size were probably collected, although the notable absence of flint may, as with the excavated material, reflect more a lack of experience in recognising worked flint in the field than its real absence. Nevertheless, the pottery clearly shows the minimum area covered by the site, which seems to extend 40 m. east-west by 30 m. north-south. There is a noticeable fall-off in sherd counts away from the central area, most of the squares in the 1-15 category having very few sherds.

THE FINDS

Pottery

A total of 474 sherds were found in the excavation, and the great majority (over 84 per cent) were of Fabric S (see below). This fabric was one where quantities of shale filler were present. The size of the shell particles, their shape, and the frequency of such inclusions varied greatly, but with only 474 sherds from a small excavation more detailed categorisation would be of dubious value. Fabric S also contained some quartz and soft, brick-red sub-rounded ochreous inclusions. Fabric Q consisted of other Iron Age wares, more sandy in feel and usually with quartz inclusions. A total of 74 Fabric Q sherds were found. Of these 53 were of Fabric Qi, a variable ware containing small pieces of quartz and often soft, brick-red sub-rounded ochreous inclusions; Fabric Qii was a distinctive, very sandy ware with many medium-sized quartz fragments, but only 7 body sherds were found, all small and abraded; Fabric Qiii was recognisable by the small and medium pieces of quartz and occasional pebbles up to 0.6 cm diameter. Fabric Qiv, rarely found, had occasional large rounded pebbles and some small quartz fragments. It is interesting to note (Table 1) that all the layers have roughly the same proportion of Fabrics S and Q, and no difference could be seen in forms or decoration.

The vast majority of sherds were undiagnostic except for fabric and firing. Fabric S pots tended to be equally common reduced or oxidised, but Fabric Q was more often oxidized, though there were many

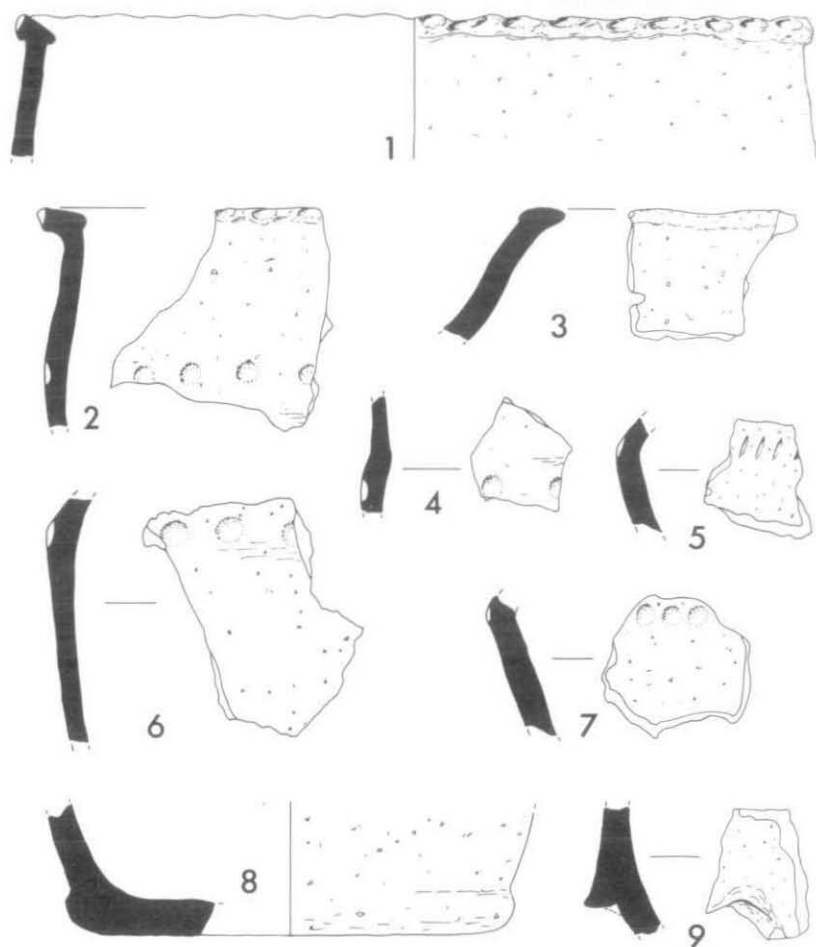


Fig. 3. Early Iron Age pottery. Scale 1:3.

exceptions to this. Some surface treatment such as combing, smoothing or burnishing could be recognised. All fabrics had some vegetable filler, and from the evidence on some of the base sherds (e.g. No. 8), pots must have been stood on vegetable matter whilst drying. Decoration was found with incised slashed lines or thumb impressions on the rim (Nos. 1, 2). Carinations or shoulders were also decorated, with circular impressions formed by the finger (Nos. 2, 4, 6, 7), or incised lines (vertical, at a slight angle, or horizontal) made either with a stick or fingernail (Nos. 5, 24). Some very shallow vertical incised lines on body sherds may have been caused by combing or accidental marking in the final shaping of the pot.

A number of rim and vessel forms were recognisable at Wytham Hill. Rims with expansion internally and externally – the T-shaped form – are diagnostically early Iron Age. They occur at several sites in the Upper Thames area, such as Stanton Harcourt⁵ and Mount Farm, Dorchester.⁶ No. 3 from Wytham merely expands internally at an angle. Rims (Nos. 1, 2) which expand outwards with thumb impressed decoration can be paralleled at Mount Farm, Dorchester⁷ and Wittenham Clumps, Berks;⁸ Wytham No. 2 also has finger

⁵ Ann Hamlin, 'Early Iron Age Sites at Stanton Harcourt', *Oxoniensia*, xxxi (1966), Figs. 6 and 7.

⁶ J.N.L. Myres, 'A Prehistoric and Roman Site at Mount Farm, Dorchester', *Oxoniensia*, ii (1937), Fig. 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Fig. 7.

⁸ P. P. Rhodes, 'Prehistoric and Roman Site, Wittenham Clumps, Berks', *Oxoniensia*, xiii (1948), Fig. 9.

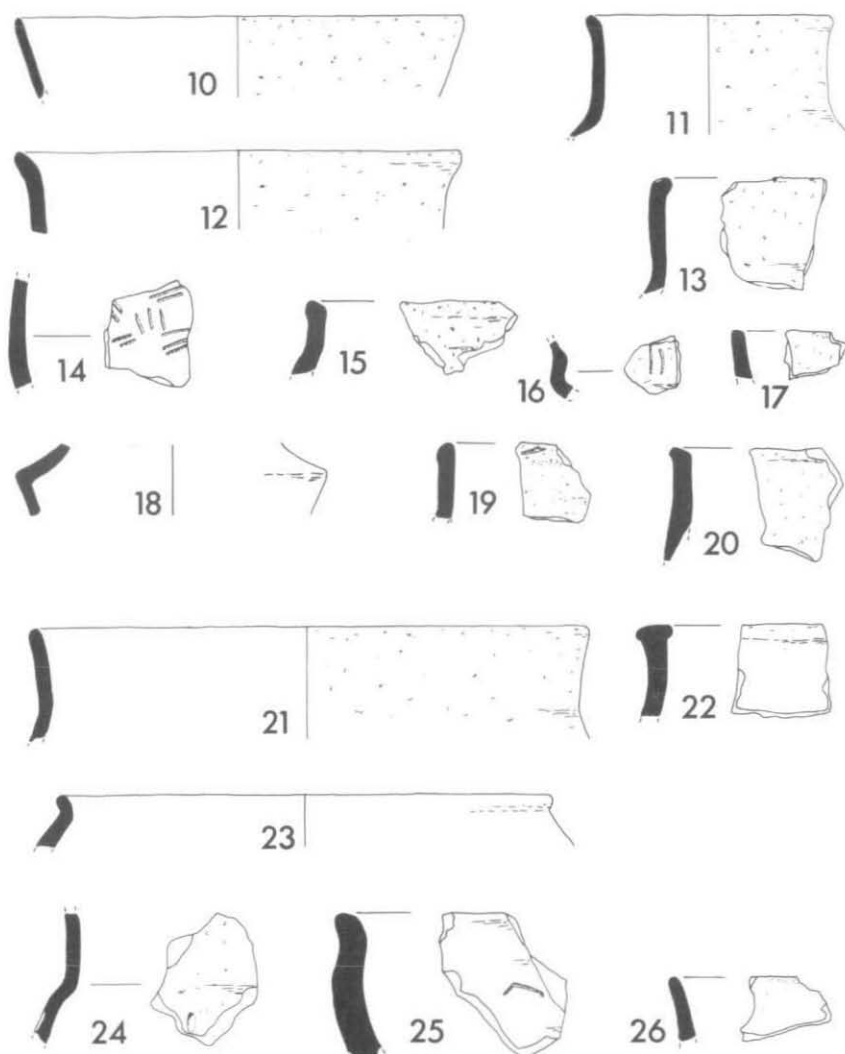


Fig. 4. Early Iron Age pottery. Scale 1:3.

impressions on the shoulder. Finger impressions and slashes are early features, though thickened rims can be later; the use of these techniques can be paralleled at the nearby open site of Farmoor.⁹ There were also simple rims that could have come from a variety of vessel forms. Another diagnostically early pottery form present at Wytham is the carinated bowl (Nos. 16, 18). Where possible, the illustrated sherds have been compared with the Ashville form series which is the most complete and up to date in the area.¹⁰

The most notable and significant feature of the Wytham pottery, however, is the similarity of the fabrics

⁹ G. Lambrick and M. Robinson, *Iron Age and Roman Riverside Settlements at Farmoor, Oxfordshire* (CBA Res. Rep. 32, 1979).

¹⁰ M. Parrington, *The Excavation of an Iron Age Settlement, Bronze Age Ring-Ditches and Roman Features at Ashville Trading Estate, Abingdon (Oxfordshire) 1974-76* (CBA Res. Rep. 28, 1978), especially C. D. de Roche, 'The Iron Age Pottery', 40-74.

with those excavated at Farmoor, particularly Wytham Fabric S and Farmoor Fabrics B and DB.¹¹ The proportions of shelly wares in the Farmoor deposits are also similar to those from Wytham.¹² I am grateful to Mr. G. Lambrick for bringing this to my notice and discussing the matter with me. Some of the material must come from the same source, but until more pottery is obtained from more certainly interpreted contexts at Wytham, detailed comparison is not possible.¹³

The pottery recovered from fieldwalking is similar in character to that from the excavation and only two of these unstratified sherds are described below. The pottery numbers relate to the illustrations.

- 1 Vessel with T-shaped rim, thumb-impressed decoration with finger impressions on the external edge. Fabric S with large shell fragments. Joining sherds from L5 and L8. Ashville type A3.
- 2 Globular vessel with T-shaped rim, thumb-impressed decoration with finger impressions on the external edge, and medium spaced finger-tip impressions on the slack shoulder. Fabric S with large shell fragments. L5. Ashville type A2 or A3.
- 3 Inward-sloping rim, slightly expanded externally as well as internally. Fabric S with much vegetable matter. L10. Possibly Ashville type A1.
- 4 Slack shoulder with widely spaced finger-tip impressions. Fabric S slightly blackened. L10. Ashville type B1.
- 5 Shoulder of angular vessel decorated on the carination with almost vertical finger-nail impressions. Fabric S with medium shell fragments. L1. Ashville type C1.
- 6 Slack shoulder with finger-tip impressions. Fabric S with medium shell. L12. Ashville type B1.
- 7 Shoulder of angular vessel decorated on the carination with small, closely spaced finger-tip impressions. Fabric S with much of the shell leached out. L2. Ashville type C1.
- 8 Flat base. Fabric S with many shell fragments, smoothed around the exterior, with many seed and chaff impressions on the underside of the base. L8.
- 9 Part of a lug handle, applied to the exterior of the vessel. Fabric S with much shell. L10.
- 10 Rounded, slightly flaring rim. Fabric S with medium shell, smoothed on the exterior and interior. L12. Ashville type C2.
- 11 Vessel with rounded shoulder and upright neck. Fabric S with a few small and medium shell fragments. Smoothed and slightly burnished exterior. L5. Similar to Ashville vessel 105 in form.
- 12 Rim with slight external lip. Fabric S with small fragments of shell. L10.
- 13 Vessel with slightly inturned rim and upright neck. Fabric S with large shell fragments. L1.
- 14 Body sherd with incised decoration in groups of three parallel lines, similar to a design from Yarnton.¹⁴ Fabric S with a little small shell, smoothed on exterior and interior. Fieldwalking.
- 15 Slightly squared rim of globular vessel. Fabric S with much large shell. L8. Ashville type DO.
- 16 Shallow angular bowl with vertical finger-nail incised decoration just above the carination. Fabric S with large shell fragments. Fieldwalking square B. Ashville type C2.
- 17 Flat-topped rim. Fabric S with smoothed exterior. L10.
- 18 Angular bowl with sharp shoulder. Fabric S with very small fragments of shell, smoothed exterior and interior above the carination. L1. Ashville type C2.
- 19 Slightly swollen rim. Fabric S with medium shell fragments and some chaff temper. L5.
- 20 Slightly squared rim on upright neck. Fabric S with medium shell fragments. Wiped exterior and smoothed interior. L8.
- 21 Flaring rim of slightly angular vessel. Fabric Qi with smoothed interior and exterior. L12. Ashville type CO.
- 22 T-shaped rim. Fabric Qi with smoothed exterior and part of interior. L1. Ashville type A3.
- 23 Globular vessel with rounded rim. Fabric Qi with some tooling on the exterior, interior slightly smoothed. L2. Ashville type DO.
- 24 Slack-shouldered jar with vertical neck and narrow vertical finger impressions on the shoulder. Fabric Qi with slightly smoothed exterior and interior.
- 25 Globular vessel with slightly everted rim. Fabric Qiv with chaff on exterior. Both interior and exterior smoothed. Ashville type DO.
- 26 Slightly everted rim. Fabric Qi with smoothed interior and highly burnished exterior, with a cream-brown colour.

¹¹ G. Lambrick, 'The Iron Age Pottery', in Lambrick and Robinson, *Farmoor*, 35-45.

¹² Farmoor data obtained from *Ibid.* Fig. 20.

¹³ For discussion of the problems of interpreting pottery assemblages in the region, see G. Lambrick, 'Pitfalls and Possibilities in Iron Age Pottery Studies - Experiences in the Upper Thames Valley', in Cunliffe and Miles, *Aspects of the Iron Age*, 162-77.

¹⁴ J. Bradford, 'An Early Iron Age Site at Allen's Pit, Dorchester', *Oxoniensia*, vii (1942), Fig. 12 No. 48.

Flint

Two waste flakes were found, a small blue patinated one from L2 and a larger unpatinated one from L7.

Slag

Small fragments of greenish slag, one with a glossy surface, were found in the topsoil (L1 and L10) in both trenches, and one was found in the late ditch filling (L2).

Iron

Several small iron fragments, including a nail, were found in the topsoil (L1) of Trench 1. An iron nail also came from L3. It was 6 cm. long, bent, with the point broken, square in cross-section and with a flat oval head protruding on one side only. From the same layer also came a fragment of an iron ring about 2 cm. in diameter, about three-quarters of it surviving.

Bone by BOB WILSON

Bones and teeth from an Early Iron Age ditch, and pit L12, were mostly small unidentifiable fragments in a good state of preservation. 22 per cent of 217 bones were identified (see Table 2). A cattle cranium at the base of the pit (L12) was chopped through the occipital condyles to sever it from the backbone, and cuts at the base of the horn cores indicate skin removal. A cattle mandible with all incisor teeth alveoli infilled with bone growth indicates an aged animal. There is a female pelvis. Most bones in the pit had not obvious significance, although the cranium is a possible ritual deposit.

A minimum of four sheep, two pigs and one cattlebeast are represented in the sample. Sheep and pig bones, including lamb and piglet, are relatively abundant, and seem typical of better preserved deposits such as those adjacent to house sites. The deposit may confirm a suggestion that Iron Age sheep are more abundant at sites on higher ground,¹⁵ although deposits at Hardwick, Oxon¹⁶ provide contrary evidence.

CONCLUSIONS

The limited nature of the work at Wytham precludes a lengthy discussion of the site, but a number of important issues can be considered. The field survey indicates that the site covers at least 1000 sq. m., and the finds from the topsoil and the excavated features suggest occupation mainly within the early Iron Age, with possibly some middle Iron Age use of the site. It is not clear whether the site was open or enclosed, and much hinges on the interpretation of the feature called a ditch in the report. Augering and resistivity surveys did not trace its line, which might be taken to suggest that it was merely a pit. However, it was certainly a much larger feature than the contemporary pits at Farmoor.¹⁷

The dating of the site on typological grounds is secure. Forms such as the T-shaped rims and finger-impressed decoration can be paralleled at many sites in the Upper Thames Valley. Also diagnostically early are the angular forms of vessel. There are particularly close parallels in fabric with Farmoor. Fabric S at Wytham is comparable on visual inspection with those of fabric types B and DB at Farmoor,¹⁸ and many of the forms and decorative techniques are similar. There may be some middle Iron Age settlement, or at least occupation up to the very end of the early Iron Age; globular vessels Nos. 23 and 25 appear later than the other diagnostic sherds in the assemblage.

¹⁵ R. Wilson, in M. Parrington, *Ashville*, 136.

¹⁶ R. Wilson, 'Sampling Bone Densities at Mingies Ditch', in J. F. Cherry, C. Gamble and S. Shennan, *Sampling in Contemporary British Archaeology* (B.A.R. Brit. Ser. 50, 1978), 355-361.

¹⁷ G. Lambrick in Lambrick and Robinson, *Farmoor*, 18-19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

The small excavation at Wytham produced 474 early Iron Age sherds; in contrast, the much more extensive Farmoor excavation produced only 1275 sherds of this date. No structural features could be related to the early Iron Age at Farmoor – only pits were found scattered over an area of about 8,000 sq. m. The amount of activity at the two sites could be considered similar, although different in character, and it may be that this is more dense at Wytham because the site was enclosed.

The close similarity of pottery, and the complementary locations of the upland Wytham site and the lowland Farmoor one suggest that both are part of the same economic system. The lack of carbonized grain at Farmoor suggested a possibly pastoral economy,¹⁹ and the poor-quality soils on Wytham Hill would probably not have been selected for agriculture. Valley floor to valley side or hill-top movements may have been common in the Iron Age: finds on Beacon Hill and the northern part of Wytham Hill to the north-west of the Wytham site suggest sites similar in character and perhaps related to other lowland cropmark sites along the head of the river Thames. Other upland sites include Hinksey Hill,²⁰ and a number on the Corrallian ridge, such as Frilford.²¹

TABLE 1

<i>Wytham</i>		<i>Fabrics</i>			<i>Farmoor</i> ¹²		<i>Fabrics</i>		
Layer	No S	%S	No Q	%Q	Pit No	No B & DB	% B & DB	No other	% other
1	84	80.8	20	19.2	1013	18	82	4	18
2	124	91.2	12	8.8	1015	46	74	16	26
3	42	87.5	4	12.5	1037	71	85	13	15
4	8	66.7	4	33.3	1039	10	62	6	38
5	28	77.8	8	22.2	1040	24	79	6	21
6	2	100.0	0	0.0	1056	26	96	1	4
7	4	57.1	3	42.9	1057	16	88	2	12
8	30	90.9	3	9.1	1062	12	71	5	29
9	1	100.0	0	0.0					
10	134	96.4	5	3.6					
11	2	66.7	1	33.3					
12	41	74.5	14	25.5					

TABLE 2
Identifiable Bones

	pit F12	ditch	total	%
cattle	6	6	12	26.7
sheep	10	16	26	57.8
pig	1	6	7	15.6
antler (? red deer)	1	1	2	nc
total	18	29	47	

¹⁹ Ibid., 65.²⁰ J. N. L. Myres, 'A Prehistoric Settlement on Hinksey Hill, near Oxford', *Jnl. Brit. Archaeol. Assoc.* xxxvi (1930), 360–90.²¹ J.S.P. Bradford and R.G. Goodchild, 'Excavations at Frilford, Berkshire, 1937–8', *Oxoniensia*, iv (1939), 1–70.