The Excavation of a Bronze Age Ditch at the Field Test Centre at Castrol Technology Centre, Pangbourne, Berkshire

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with contributions by Tess Durden and Steve Ford

SUMMARY

This paper describes the results of an archaeological excavation at the Castrol Field Test Centre in Pangbourne which is adjacent to the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Bozedown hillfort. One ditch was revealed in the course of the excavation; this feature appears to be of Late Bronze Age date and may represent part of an enclosure which was the precursor to the Iron Age hillfort.

INTRODUCTION

The excavation at the Field Test Centre was carried out by Thames Valley Archaeological Services following the results of an archaeological evaluation of the site which revealed a number of features.[1] The site is immediately adjacent to Bozedown Camp (Scheduled Ancient Monument Oxon. 190), and lies on a spur at the south western dipslope of the Chilterns overlooking the Thames Valley at 130 m. above OD. The local geology is Plateau Gravel overlying Chalk.[2]

The area excavated is located on the opposite side of the camp (Fig. 1) to the trial trench dug in an earlier excavation.[3] Bozedown Camp itself covers an area of some 28.5 hectares and is a large hilltop enclosure of Iron-Age date. A trench was dug across the rampart and ditch to the north-east in October 1953, producing Iron-Age pottery, a fragment of shale bracelet, medieval pottery and a 16th-century iron blade.[4] Its univallate defences are partly ploughed, as is the interior, and the rampart is best preserved in woods to the north-west, where the bank survives up to 2.1 m. above the interior of the enclosure. A possible counterscarp bank survives in places outside the ditch. The excavation area lies within 5 m. of the western perimeter of the enclosure ditch. In addition, the evaluation trenches opened in 1995

[1] L. Howell, 'Field test centre at Castrol Technology Centre, near Pangbourne, Oxfordshire. An archaeological evaluation,' Thames Valley Archaeological Services report 95/7 (1995), Reading.

[2] *British Geological Survey* sheet 268, 1:50 000.

[3] P. Wood, 'The Early Iron Age camp on Bozedown, Whitchurch, Oxon.' *Oxoniensia*, 19 (1954), 8–14.

[4] Op. cit. note 3.

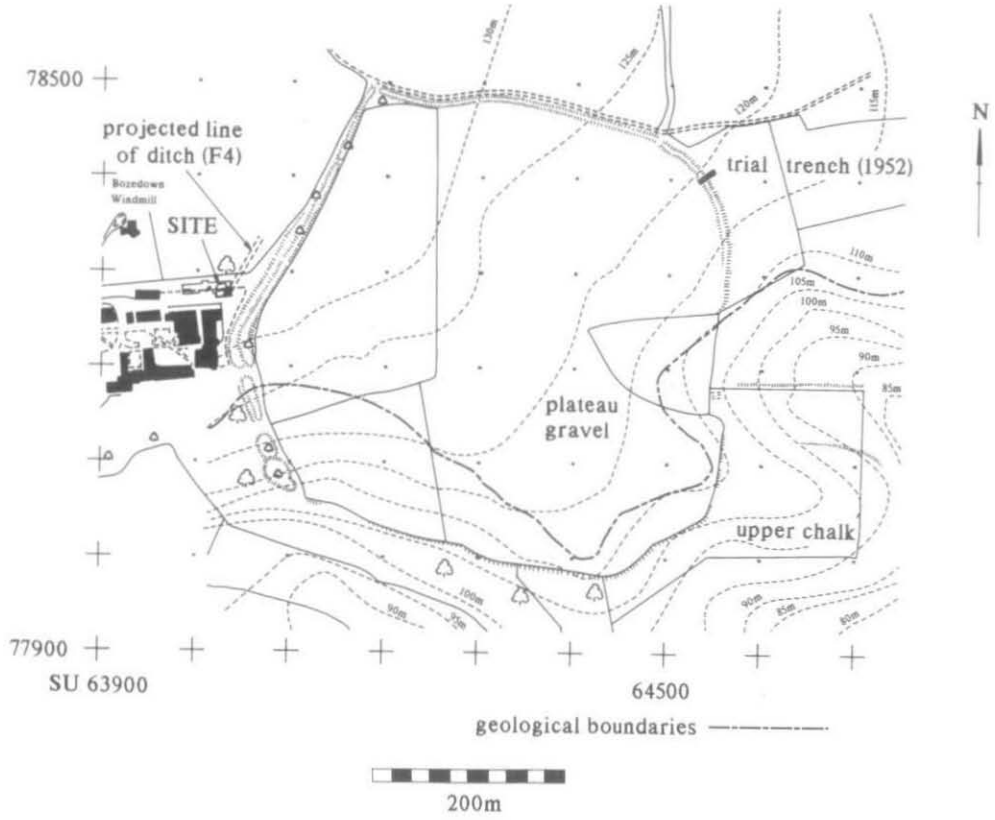

Fig. 1. Location.

revealed a possible ditch/pit at the eastern end of trench 1. Other nearby features were identified as possible post holes. These archaeological deposits beyond the edge of the hillfort were thought to reflect earlier use of the site or contemporary extra-mural activity.

METHOD

An area of approximately 300 sq. m. was stripped of topsoil and, in places, concrete and overburden, and possible archaeological features were noted and marked as the topsoil was being removed. Three-quarters of the stripped area was then hand cleaned and all possible/probable archaeological features were investigated. Samples were taken for the recovery of carbonised botanical remains by flotation.

RESULTS

The topsoil stripping relocated evaluation trench 1 which crossed the area together with feature F4 which had been located in the trench. The excavation revealed more of F4 and confirmed that it was a medium-sized ditch running north-east to south-west across the length of the site on the eastern side. This follows the same alignment as the ditch of defensive proportions around Bozedown camp.

F4 was 3.20 m. wide at the top and 1.40 m. deep, U-shaped with clear stratigraphy (7-8 layers) (Fig. 2). Two metre-wide slots (slot A and slot B) were hand-excavated across the ditch, while at the far north-east end of the site a small segment of the ditch was excavated by machine, but this proved too deep to investigate safely. In all slightly more than 20% of the ditch was excavated.

Five sherds of Bronze-Age pottery were recovered from four layers (52, 56, 57, and 59); two sherds were from the primary fill (57). A flint flake was also found in layer (60). Of most interest in the stratigraphy was a layer containing much charcoal and burnt flint (54, 61). It would appear that this layer had been deliberately dumped in the partially silted-up ditch.

It had been suggested from the evaluation that there was evidence of a ploughed out counterscarp bank.[5] This would seem plausible as just to the east of the ditch a ridge of gravel was noted, from which a fair depth of subsoil up to about 0.30 m. thick spread westwards over the ditch gradually thinning out across site until it was non-existent. This layer was stripped in spits to observe whether there were any features cut into it, but none were revealed.

There was also evidence of possible ploughing or some other activity in the form of strip marks in the middle of the site, but there was no means of dating these features. In the evaluation some possible post holes were noted, but it seems likely that what was revealed were the ends of these strip marks.

FINDS

Pottery by STEVE FORD

A small group of pottery comprising five sherds was recovered during excavation of the ditch. The hand-made sherds were mainly small, quite poorly fired, and had reduced interior surfaces and cores. One sherd retained carbonised residues on the interior surface. No closely diagnostic pieces were recovered, but the fabrics and manufacture would be consistent with later Bronze-Age/Early Iron-Age ceramics in the region.

Catalogue

Slot A	
Context 52	Sherd (6 gm.) medium density ill-sorted calcined flint with grits up to 2 mm.
Context 56	Fragment (1 gm.) medium calcined flint with grits up to 2 mm.
Context 57	Sherd (1 gm.) sparse ill-sorted calcined flint with grits up to 1 mm.
	Sherd (2 gm.) medium density ill-sorted calcined flint with grits up to 3 mm.
Slot B	
Context 59	Sherd (12 gm.) sparse ill-sorted calcined flint with grits up to 2 mm., with ocherous inclusions up to 2 mm. Carbonised residues remaining.

Worked flint by TESS DURDEN

One struck flake of indeterminate Prehistoric date was recovered from F4 (60) slot B.

CONCLUSION by LUCY HOWELL and TESS DURDEN

The excavation revealed one feature, F4, a ditch running north-east to south-west following the alignment of the hillfort perimeter. The pottery from this feature dates to the Late Bronze

[5] Howell, op. cit. note 1.

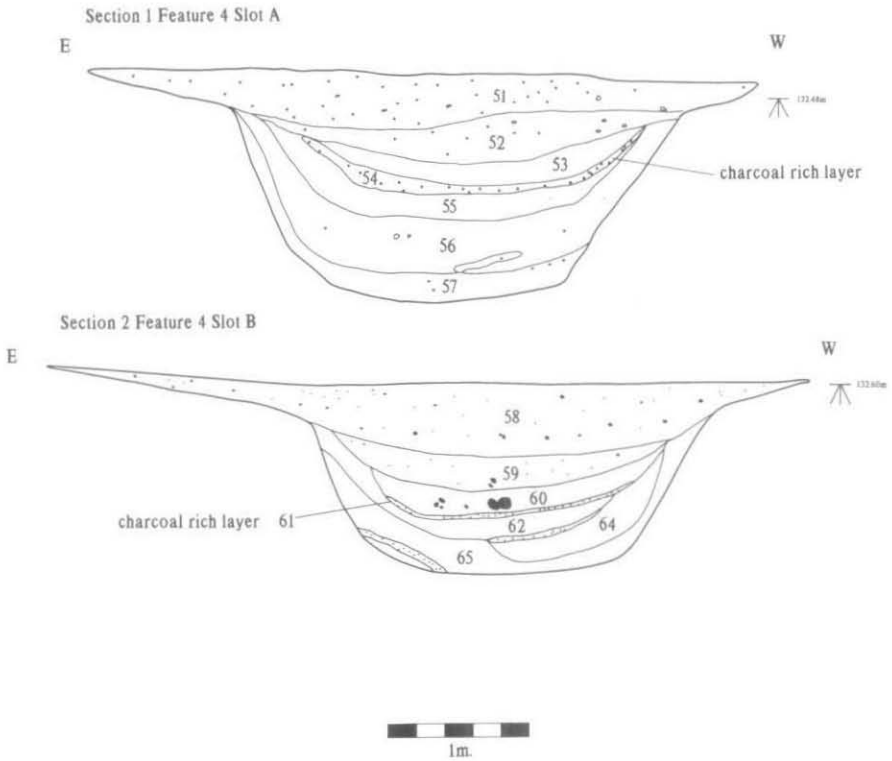

Fig. 2. Sections.

Age–Early Iron Age. The small-scale nature of this excavation and the paucity of the finds, with two of the sherds coming from the primary silts, means that the results have to be treated with some caution, but it does appear plausible that this feature is of Bronze-Age date. Its nature, size and location would fit an interpretation that this is a hilltop enclosure and, in common with several others in the region and beyond, it may be a precursor of the Iron Age hillfort. Similar sites include Rams Hill and Uffington castle, Oxon.,[6] Ivinghoe Beacon, Bucks.,[7] and Mam Tor, Derbyshire.[8] Recent carbon dates obtained from Rams Hill confirm a Middle-Late Bronze Age date for the enclosure.[9]

If the deposits at Bozedown are indicative of a precursor to the hillfort, then the burnt deposit in F4 may represent removal of earlier structures in preparation for the construction of the hillfort.

There are several theories relating to the function of these hilltop Bronze-Age enclosures. It has been suggested that, especially when associated with linear earthworks, they represent elements of a pastoral economy.[10] The development of enclosures of defensive proportions in the Early Iron Age (hillforts) may be a response to increased warfare,[11] or social changes relating to the centralisation of agricultural practices and storage of foodstuffs. The increasing size and ostentation of the hillforts may also be related to status or territoriality,[12] or possibly even a link between food production and ritual.[13]

A similar sequence of events involving the development of a Bronze-Age hilltop enclosure into a hillfort may be represented at Bozedown, although the necessarily limited excavations here did not allow this idea to be explored in detail.

Acknowledgement

The evaluation and excavation carried out by Thames Valley Archaeological Services were funded by Castrol International. The finds and archive have been deposited with Oxfordshire County Museum Service (Acc. no. 1996.43).

[6] R.J. Bradley and A. Ellison, *Rams Hill: a Bronze Age defended enclosure and its landscape* (British Archaeological Reports 19, 1975).

[7] M.A. Cotton and S.S. Frere, 'Ivinghoe Beacon excavations 1963–65', *Rec. Bucks.*, 18 (1968), 187–260.

[8] D.G. Coombs and F.H. Thompson, 'Excavation of the hill fort of Mam Tor, Derbyshire, 1965–69', *Derbyshire Archaeol. J.* 99 (1979), 7–51.

[9] S. Needham and J. Ambers, 'Redating Rams Hill and reconsidering Bronze Age enclosure', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 60 (1994), 225–43.

[10] R. Bradley, R. Entwistle and F. Raymond, *Prehistoric land divisions on Salisbury Plain. The work of the Wessex linear ditches project* (1994).

[11] R.J. Bradley, *The Social Foundations of Prehistoric Britain* (1984).

[12] B. Cunliffe, 'Before Hillforts', *Oxford. J. Archaeol.* 9 (1990), 323–36.

[13] Bradley et al., op. cit. note 10.