

AN EVALUATION AND RESCUE EXCAVATION AT THE WESTCROFT DISTRICT CENTRE, MILTON KEYNES, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE, 1993

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with contributions by

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The unexpected discovery of archaeological finds and deposits by metal detector users during groundworks for a superstore led to a hurried rescue excavation. This resulted in the discovery of a large nucleated pit group and outlying features, apparently mainly of Iron Age date. Late Neolithic, late Bronze Age, Roman, Saxon and Medieval pottery was also recovered. An area of the site that had not been reduced by the time the excavation was mounted was evaluated by machine-dug trenches but did not reveal additional deposits. A short note on the Saxon finds previously discovered in the area is included.

Introduction

In June 1993 Thames Valley Archaeological Services were asked by Buckinghamshire County Museum Service to carry out a rescue excavation of archaeological deposits on the construction site of a Safeway store at Westcroft District Centre, Milton Keynes (SP 8290 3465) (Fig. 1). Local metal detector users had brought to the attention of Mr and Mrs P. Woodfield and subsequently the County Archaeologist the presence of Saxon metalwork, pottery and subsoil features in areas due for mechanical excavation. The subsequent fieldwork comprised an evaluation trench in an undisturbed area, a rescue excavation in a topsoil-stripped area, and a general watching brief. These areas are indicated on Figure 1B.

The site lies on the south-western outskirts of Milton Keynes (Fig. 1, A) and occupies an area of c. 13 hectares. The ground is gently undulating, with a high point of c. 108m above Ordnance Datum to the west. The geology of the site is light-brown boulder clay overlying stiff blue-grey Oxford Clay. None of the excavated features were seen to penetrate the Oxford Clay.

The site code is WMK93 and the archive has been deposited with Buckinghamshire Museum Service (Accession Number 1996.98).

The Evaluation

Approximately 20% (2 ha) of the development area had not been stripped of topsoil by the time fieldwork was underway. This area (Fig. 1, B) was evaluated using a JCB-type machine fitted with a ditching bucket to dig eleven trenches, 1.6m wide and between 10m and 133m long; ie approximately 3% of the unstripped area. Fortunately, given the time constraints on this site, no significant discoveries were made in this area. Two sherds of Medieval pottery were found in Trenches 7 and 10, together with fragments of fired clay from Trench 4.

The Rescue Excavation

Introduction

A dense concentration of archaeological deposits with outlying features was recorded in the

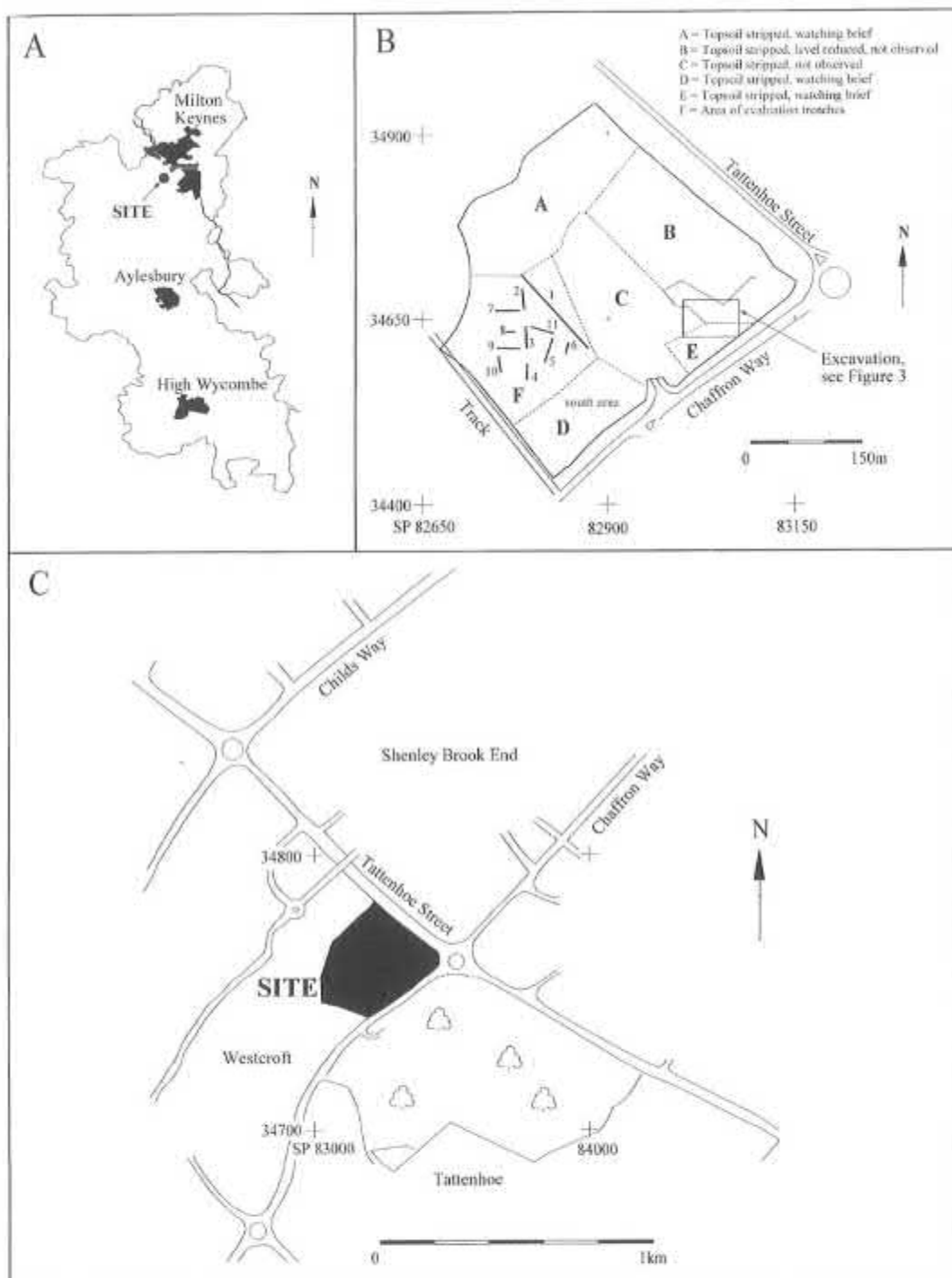


Fig. 1: (A) Location of Westeroft Centre, Milton Keynes (B) Plan of site, showing areas of evaluation, rescue excavation and watching brief (C) Location of site within Milton Keynes.

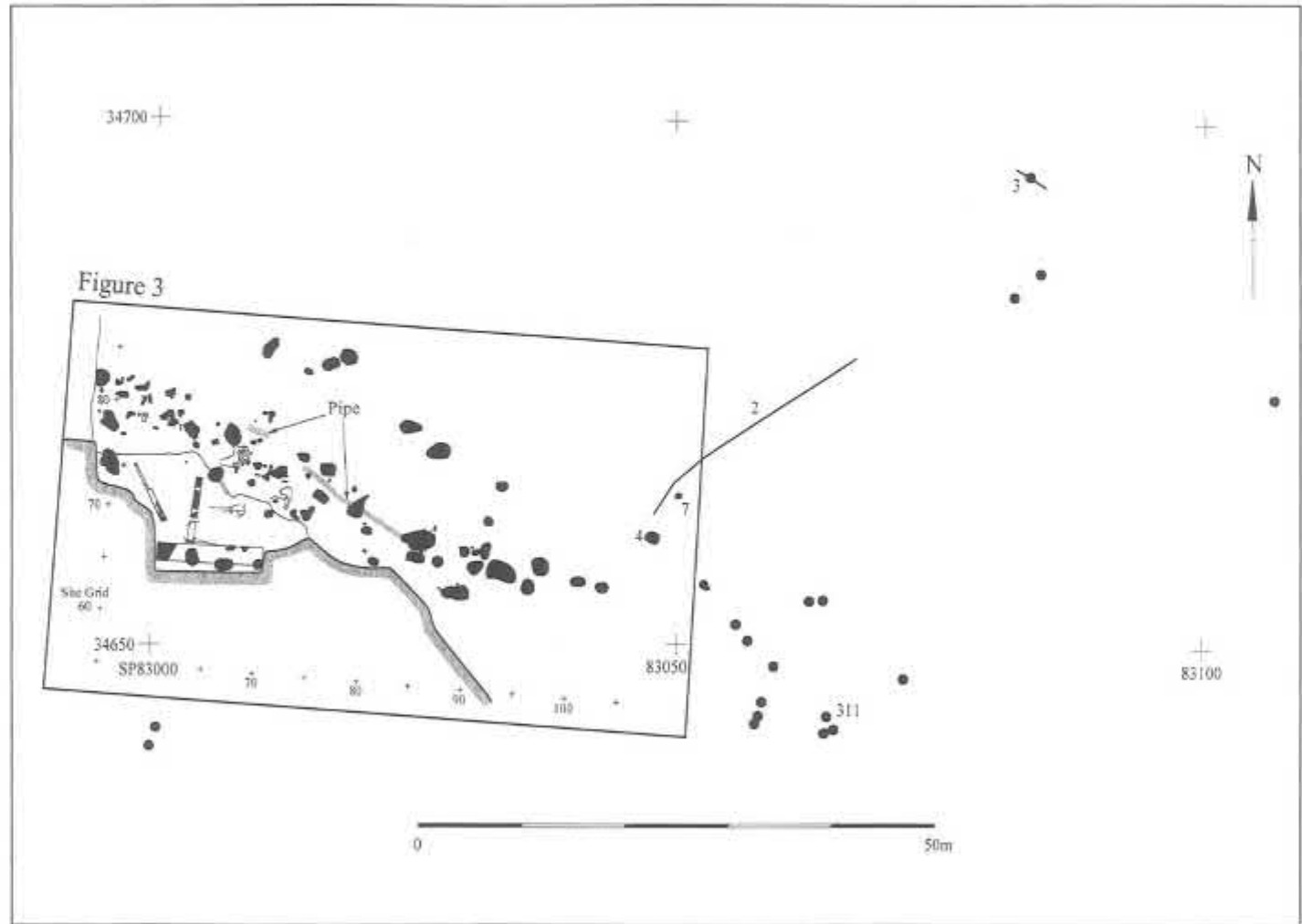


Fig. 2: Plan of excavated area and outlying features. Features outside the rectangle are not drawn to scale and only their approximate location is given.

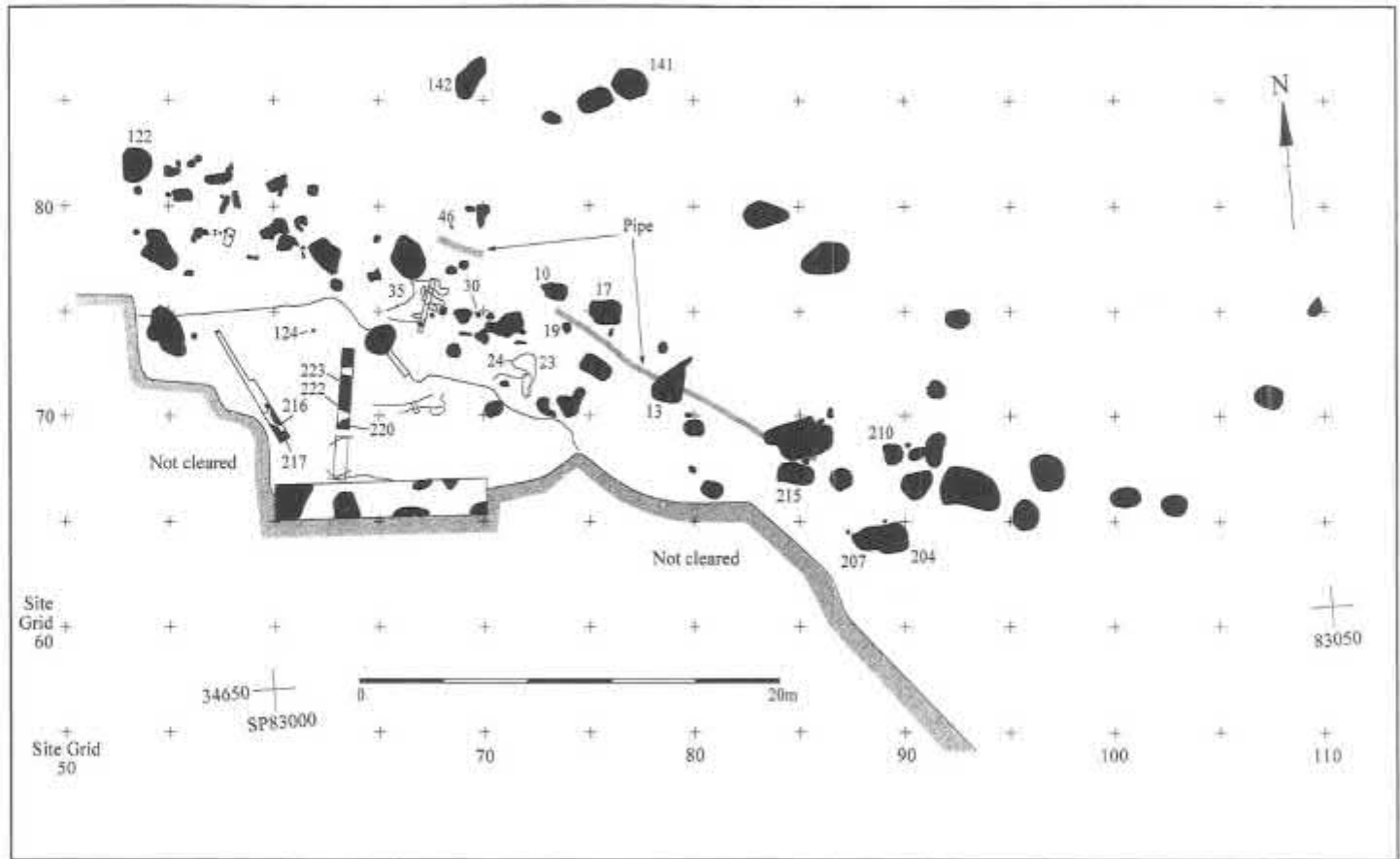


Fig. 3: Plan of the excavated area.

eastern part of the site (Figs. 2 and 3). Some 124 certain and probable subsoil features and several animal burrows were identified. This is clearly an underestimate of the number and range of deposits present. Few of the features, for example, would be confidently interpreted as postholes due to the extent of truncation and poor ground visibility.

The area excavated, centred on site grid coordinates 60E/70N (Fig. 3), had been topsoil stripped but not quarried. It was cleaned under archaeological supervision using a machine fitted with a toothless bucket. Areas to the north had been partly quarried by a machine fitted with a toothed bucket, with an initial step down of c.0.3m. The original ground surface rose towards the north and west and therefore an increasing depth of excavation took place in order to provide the level surface of the reduced area. Areas to the east (eg east of grid line 95, Fig. 2) had been quarried, to some extent, repeatedly rutted by passing traffic and then levelled by bulldozer. The bedrock was particularly soft at the time of the fieldwork and the irregular shape of many features could be due to distortion caused by passing traffic.

The main concentration of deposits (Fig. 3) was planned at 1:40. Outlying features were located to the nearest metre and a record kept of their dimensions (Fig. 2). Half-sections or slots were dug across some features, with some sampled for carbonised plant remains (below). Time constraints meant that no drawings were made of these half-sections or slots but they were photographed. Soil descriptions were only taken of features which were sampled.

A recurrent aspect of the excavated features was the frequent presence of broken quartzite cobbles and other stone. One fragment of a quern made of lava from the Mayen region of Germany was recovered from pit 24. A representative selection of stone was retained (see stone report below). The presence of the quartzite cobbles appears to be unusual as these objects were not reported for other well-excavated sites in the region, such as at Pennyland and Hartigans (Williams 1993).

Of the subsoil features recorded the majority are thought to be pits, with a few ditches, a gully, possible postholes and charcoal patches.

Ditches

Two ditches were recorded (2 and 3); one certain and one probable (Fig. 2). Ditch 2 was not perfectly straight but could be seen for a minimum of 25m orientated north-east – south-west. It was cut c. 0.6m deep below the stripped surface and had a U-shaped profile. It contained a few scraps of bone and several sherds of Prehistoric pottery. There was insufficient information to determine if this was an enclosure ditch or a field boundary. Probable ditch 3 was orientated north-west – south-east but was only recorded in section. It was 1.2m deep with a U-shaped profile and produced a single sherd of Prehistoric pottery.

Gully

A single probable gully (222) was recorded at the base of a slot in the area of supervised cleaning (Fig. 3). It was 0.3m wide and ran in an east–west direction. It was not excavated.

Postholes

Ten features are tentatively identified as postholes but only one (124) was excavated. Several were in the truncated area, thus diminishing the validity of their interpretation. Posthole 124 was located in the area of supervised cleaning. It was 0.12m in diameter but only c. 0.04m deep. It had a very charcoally fill and might have been a small post burnt *in situ*.

Charcoal patches

Two charcoal patches (30 and 311) were observed. The first was 0.2m in diameter and comprised a low density of charcoal with no discolouration of the bedrock in the vicinity or any associated finds. It was located in a truncated area (Fig. 3), and it may be the base of a shallow feature. The second, 311, was a spread 0.4m × 0.9m (Fig. 2). It was neither cleaned nor examined and it could be a pit.

Pits

In the northern part of the rescue excavated area, which had been partly quarried, the larger features are clearly the bases of deep pits surviving to depths of c.0.2–0.3m. Comparison with the

untruncated areas shows that depths of 0.5m or more could have been removed by the quarrying. At other Iron Age and Saxon sites in the Milton Keynes area, such as Pennyland and Hartigans, pits more than 1m deep were not uncommon (Williams 1993). The features tend to be the typical flat-based or bowl-shaped, sometimes with undercut sides. The smaller features could be the last traces of shallower features. A great variety of feature shapes were recorded, but this is presumably exaggerated by truncation and distortion due to quarrying. Almost certainly, given the dense concentration of features, the upper edges of the features would have been intercutting, as observed in the supervised area. Some features were clearly shown to be animal burrows.

For the small area cleaned under archaeological supervision, centred on 65E/70N (Fig. 3), much of the surface comprised a homogeneous dark humic deposit of anthropogenic origin. Hand and machine-dug slots through these large spreads showed that they are best interpreted as a series of intercutting pits whose tops had merged to produce one large fill.

Chronology

The chronology of the site is poorly understood. Relatively few of the features were dug and of these few produced datable sherds of pottery, never in large quantities and all very fragmentary except for a partly restorable vessel from pit 7 (see pottery report). The extent of residuality cannot begin to be accurately assessed. The pottery assemblage is also multi-period with late Neolithic, late Bronze Age, middle Iron Age, late Iron Age, Roman, Saxon, and Medieval material present. However, there are a number of pointers to suggest that the majority of features recorded belong to the middle to late Iron Age, with a few of Saxon date. The evidence for this is as follows:

- 1) Definite pre-Iron Age pottery comprises only single sherds of late Neolithic, late Bronze Age and late Bronze Age/Iron Age, along with two possible Bronze Age sherds.
- 2) Most of the pottery is thought to be either Iron Age, Iron Age/Saxon or Prehistoric, despite the inherent ambiguities of the chronology.

- 3) Late Iron Age/Roman sherds were small and abraded and few in number (four sherds).
- 4) No certain Saxon pottery was recovered from any excavated features but a *terminus post quem* of late Iron Age or Roman date has been established for some features.
- 5) The only stratified Medieval sherd was small and abraded. It came from the highest levels of a feature in the area stripped under supervision and is likely to be intrusive.
- 6) Large groups of deep pits, some with undercut sides, are typical of middle and late Iron Age sites both within the region and elsewhere, although the density of pits here is unusual. Pits are not common on sites of later date and in early Saxon times, where pits exist, dispersed low density occupation is most usual. This scenario is perhaps exemplified at Pennyland, Milton Keynes (Williams 1993, figs 5 and 25), although overall comparisons of settlement form between the two sites are lacking.

On this, admittedly slender, evidence the balance of probability would appear to suggest that the majority of features here are of Iron Age date with some of later, probably Saxon, date.

The Watching Brief

Various parts of the site were monitored during topsoil stripping (see Fig. 1, B). Conditions for the recognition of archaeological features were generally poor. The topsoil was removed by bulldozer and a machine fitted with a toothed bucket and went down only to the very top of the subsoil. A single sherd of possible Prehistoric pottery was recovered from the southern area and a piece of Iron Age/Saxon pot came from the northern part of the site (Fig. 4, 5).

The objects and subsoil deposits which led to the discovery of the site were observed in the north-east section of the site. These areas had been substantially reduced prior to the fieldwork described here.

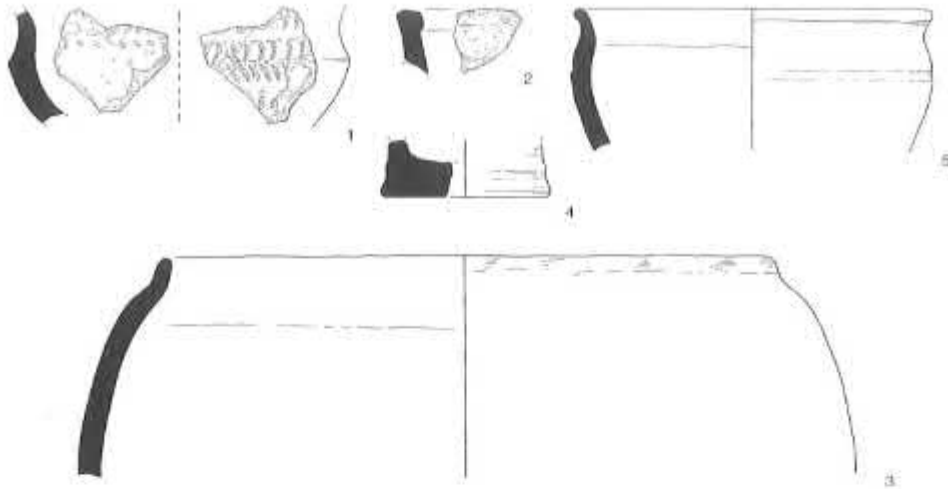


Fig. 4: Pottery: (1) Neolithic, Peterborough ware (?Mortlake style) from pit 17 (2) Later Bronze Age rim sherd from pit 35 (3) Mid-late Iron Age pottery from pit 7 (4) ?Iron Age pot base from pit 204 (5) Iron Age or Saxon globular urn found during the watching brief in the northern part of the site.

Pottery by Jane Timby

A moderately small collection of pottery amounting to some 380 sherds (c. 3400gms) was submitted for comment. The condition of the assemblage ranged from moderately well-preserved sherds with, in a few cases, several pieces joining or coming from the same vessel, to fairly poor abraded fragments. The sherds have been loosely divided into the following fabrics:

Description of fabrics

- Fabric 1: Moderately soft ware with sparse visible inclusions of rounded quartz sand, iron and limestone.
- Fabric 2: Moderately soft ware with a sparse scatter of rounded, medium quartz grains.
- Fabric 3: Sandy wares a) medium b) coarse.
- Fabric 4: Finely micaceous clay with sparse to moderate temper of coarse angular calcined flint.
- Fabric 5: Moderately hard ware with common frequency of rounded, angular and sub-angular quartz fragments, quartzite, biotite mica and feldspar.
- Fabric 6: Moderately soft ware with scatter fine-medium rounded quartz, sparse organic and rounded flint gravel.

- Fabric 7: Sandy ware with sparse to moderate frequency of quartz sandstone, rare flint gravel.
- Fabric 8: Sandy ware with dark grey clay pellets/ argillaceous inclusions/ iron. Sparse organic matter.
- Fabric 9: Sandy ware with sparse organic temper.
- Fabric 10: Used for wares containing limestone or angular voids left from dissolved limestone. Some fabrics also contain rare fine flint and/or ferruginous compounds.
- Fabric 11: Moderately soft ware with sparse frequency of grog/clay pellets.
- Fabric 12: Fine textured sandy ware, slightly micaceous with sparse organic tempering.
- Fabric 13: Moderately soft ware with dark grey-black argillaceous inclusions.
- Fabric 14: Smooth soapy clay with a scatter of large rounded grains of quartz and quartzite. Sparse organic material.
- Fabric 15: Smooth soapy fabric with voids (from limestone?).
- Fabric 16: Fossil shell tempered, a) sparse b) common frequency.
- Fabric 17: Moderately soft fine textured fabric with a common frequency of organic tempering/voids.

Fabric 18: Coarse, ill-sorted angular calcined flint and quartzite within a fine paste.

Discussion

The assemblage is multi-period, that is to say, it contains material dating from the later Neolithic through to the Medieval period and, for this reason, some difficulty was encountered dating individual pieces. Where a date could be assigned based on a characteristic feature such as decoration or form, the fabric was frequently unique to that sherd and not replicated amongst the unfeatured sherds. In particular, diagnostic sherds could be identified dating to the later Neolithic, later Bronze Age, later Iron Age, Roman and Medieval periods.

It was suggested that, in view of finds made in the vicinity, the site might also have had some Saxon occupation and that pottery of this date might also be present. Most of the sherds were from handmade vessels and a variety of fabric types were present. Although there were a number of pieces which could in theory be either prehistoric or Saxon, there were no typologically clear-cut examples of the latter. With the exception of pit 7, most of the contexts yielded only one or two sherds, thus eliminating the possibility of looking at associations. Therefore, in order to refine the report produced here, it would be necessary to make a fuller study than has been possible of discrete collections of comparative material, of both prehistoric and early Saxon date, from elsewhere in the locality to establish the precise nature of the fabrics to be found for each cultural phase. Published pottery from the nearby multi-period sites at Pennyland and Hartigans, Milton Keynes (Williams 1993) shows sandy ware fabrics to occur in both periods. The prehistoric sherds from these sites tend to be dominated by coarse and finer shell-tempered ware (Knight 1993, 221), a fabric not particularly marked in the Westcroft assemblage but represented by sherds from pits 204, 220 and 223. The Saxon sherds from Pennyland and Hartigans appear to show a more diverse range of fabrics including some which may find analogy with the Westcroft sherds, notably granitic inclusions and limestone-based clays (Blinkhorn 1993, 246ff). However, in the absence of clearly diagnostic sherds there must remain some doubt in

distinguishing between the prehistoric and Saxon wares from Westcroft.

The earliest datable material present is a sherd decorated with twisted-cord herringbone from a bowl in Peterborough ware (?Mortlake style) from pit 17, dating to the later Neolithic period (Fig. 4, 1). This has a calcined flint temper with an orange-brown coloured fabric. Other diagnostic prehistoric sherds include a vertical rim probably from a later Bronze Age urn, from pit 35 (Fig. 4, 2). This has a dark blackish-brown fabric containing a coarse calcined flint temper. Pits 216/217 contained a body sherd from a cordoned, necked bowl, in a sandy ware, probably dating to the later Iron Age. A substantial part of a large plain jar with a slightly beaded everted rim from pit 7 associated with a finger-grooved sherd likely to date to the mid-late Iron Age (Fig. 4, 3). A single fragment of possible briquetage (salt container) also came from this feature. Odd sherds of Roman and Medieval date can also be distinguished. A stray find of a small globular urn in a dense sandy ware, was also recovered from the site (Fig. 4, 5). This vessel may be Saxon, although typologically it could equally be of Iron Age date. The fabric of this vessel is considerably harder and more compact than most of the unfeatured sherds from the features excavated. This suggests that they are perhaps more likely to be of Iron Age rather than Saxon date. The presence of sparse organic tempering in several of the sherds cannot by itself be taken as indicative of Saxon date, although this is a typical early Saxon trait, since it was frequently used as a minor additive in mid-late Iron Age pottery found in Oxfordshire.

In addition to the pottery, there were several fragments of fired clay. Of particular note are three fragments from pit 10 which may be from a loomweight, although the exact form of this cannot be determined.

Struck Flint by Steve Ford

Six prehistoric struck flints were recorded. Only two of the pieces can be more specifically dated. Two blades (narrow flakes), one of which was large and possibly crested, are likely to be of Mesolithic date.

Stone

by David Williams

Milton Keynes lies in an area dominated by Jurassic formations, with Cretaceous deposits some 20km to the west and slightly further away to the south (Geological Survey 1" map of England sheets 202 and 203).

Catalogue of worked or utilised stone

1) Pit 4, west part of section

Pebble of ?burnt quartzite with a flat surface, possibly used as a rubber. Dimensions: length 107mm; width 86mm; thickness 65mm. Weight 862gms.

2) Pit 7

Small segment of a ?quernstone in a dark grey medium-grained sandstone containing quartz and micaceous grits. Pennant Sandstone from the Bristol and South Wales region. Dimensions: length 125mm; width 75mm; thickness 51mm. Weight: 682gms.

3) Pit 10

Fragment of a quartzite pebble with a flattish surface, possibly used as a rubber. Dimensions: length 88mm; width 82mm; thickness 57mm. Weight 736gms.

4) Pit 13

Small fragment of a ?honestone of a dark grey fine-grained sandstone. ?Cretaceous. Dimensions: length 52mm; width 48mm; thickness 30mm. Weight 138gms.

5) By Pit 19

Fragment of a flat piece of quernstone in a grey, fairly coarse vesicular lava in which some dark phenocrysts of pyroxene can be seen. Mayen lava from Eifel Hills of Germany, a region that was well known in both the Roman and Saxon periods as a production centre for quernstones (Peacock 1980). Dimensions: length 121mm; width 83mm; thickness 20mm. Weight 369gms.

6) ?Pit 24

Several small irregular fragments of Mayen lava. Weight 297gms.

7) Pit 207

Fragment of a quartzite pebble with a flattish surface, possibly used as a rubber. Weight 273gms.

Animal Bone

by Kevin Rielly

Fifteen animal bones were recovered from a total of ten features. Only three features (3, 4 and 204) produced more than one bone. However, it is noticeable that, with the exception of ditch 3, the features with bone were situated in a central position, i.e. between pit 17 and ditch 2. It would seem that neither feature concentration, feature depth (the majority were truncated), nor the method(s) of excavation in a given area can explain this apparent localised distribution.

Any interpretation of the bone data is clearly dependent upon the ability to define the pre-exca-vation assemblage. This in turn is dependent upon adequate recovery. Unfortunately, the less than optimal excavation conditions will undoubtedly have affected recovery by increasing fragmentation and imposing a size limit, i.e. a bias towards larger fragments. A large proportion of the assemblage was composed of more than one piece. Eleven out of the fifteen fragments showed fresh breakage and eight were greater than or equal to 25% complete. There is evidence for some pre-deposition damage. Two bones had been gnawed and three were eroded. However, twelve display an excellent surface condition indicating that most were buried soon after deposition.

The species represented include cattle (eight bones), horse (1 bone), sheep/goat (3 bones) and fox (1 bone). One of the ovicaprid bones was clearly identified as sheep. The cattle bones include both meat-rich and meat-poor skeletal parts showing, at the least, that this area was used as a general dumping ground. It is interesting that the single horse bone (a humerus) is complete. This may represent the remains of an uneaten carcass. A certain level of fragmentation would be expected in an animal, especially if that animal was cattle size or larger, which had been used for its meat. Palpable evidence for such use is shown by cut marks found on a cattle radius.

Each of the three domestic species is fairly typical in size for the period. The available measurements were well within the size ranges described from Hamwih (Bourdillon and Coy 1980) and from the Saxon levels at the local site of Pennyland

(Holmes 1993). Height estimates are limited to the horse humerus. This animal had an approximate withers height of 1.4m (14 hands), about the size of a New Forest pony.

Charred Plant Remains

by John Letts

Ten features (13, 17, 23, 43, 46, 122, 141, 142, 210 and 215) and two doubtful features (105 and 109) were sampled for charred plant remains. All, except that from pit 17 (101), were 20 litres in volume. The samples were floated and sieved through a 25 micron mesh by the excavator.

Only a single feature, pit 146, produced plant remains other than wood charcoal: one example each of indeterminate cereal, *Triticum aestivum* (bread wheat) cf. *aestivum*, and cf. *Avena* sp. (wild/cultivated oat). The presence of the single (probable) grain of bread wheat may indicate a post-Roman date for this feature.

Conclusions

Unfortunately, the hurried fieldwork produced a biased record with far too few details with which adequately to sum up the nature of the archaeological deposits present. Those parts of the site subject to most investigation appear to have been mainly used in Prehistoric times. Mesolithic and later flintwork and late Neolithic, Bronze Age and later Bronze Age pottery were found but without any identified subsoil features. This material adds to the known findspots for the city in an area for which only a few isolated Bronze Age finds have previously been recorded (Zeepvat 1992, fig 3). The late Neolithic pottery is a particularly uncommon find. However, the bulk of the finds and subsoil features appear to be of Iron Age date.

The density of features present for the most thoroughly investigated area indicates clearly that there was a major occupation site here. This density is such that: either a large site or a long-lived site existed, but the limited chronological information that is available is insufficient to distinguish between these two interpretations. It has been argued above that the majority of features are of Iron

Age date (middle-late) but some at least are Roman or later. It is also clear that the features recorded occupied only part of the settlement area. The metal detector users who first drew attention to the site observed subsoil features to the north, and a lower density of features was recorded to the south-east of the main cluster of deposits (Fig. 2). These features probably reflect the presence of several occupation sites scattered across the development area. For the zone around the main concentration of features it is likely that areas used for habitation have not been located as the features here largely, if not wholly, comprised pits, many of which would have been intercutting.

Few data were recovered to provide information on the economy and environment of the site. Despite a sampling programme to recover charred plant remains, disappointingly few grains were recovered. Similarly, although faunal remains were well preserved, the sample recovered was too small to be of much use other than to show the presence of most of the usual domesticated species.

The presence of two ditches recorded in the south-east area (2 and 3) raises the possibility of an enclosed settlement being present. However, the limited extent of their investigation prohibited a clear assessment of their function. An enclosure function cannot be ruled out but it does not appear likely that such an enclosure was located to the north of these ditches.

Sites such as Pennyland and Hartigans, Milton Keynes (Williams 1993), or Twywell, Northants (Jackson 1975) have shown dense and long-lived Iron Age occupation sites characterised by the presence of small enclosures, ring gullies, ditched droveways, paddocks, etc, with groups of pits, four-post structures and other posthole structures in close proximity. Within a few kilometres of the Westcroft excavations, the results of work at two sites with Iron Age deposits are shortly to be published and the details are not yet available. However, the site at Furzton consisted of at least three stock enclosures and at Westbury by Shenley there was a ditched field system with nearby occupation (Williams 1993, 214). According to Knight (1984, 197) most late Bronze Age and Iron Age settlements in the region are enclosed. It is noteworthy,

therefore, that at Westcroft small enclosures or ring gullies were not recognised in the most thoroughly investigated areas. Although the biased nature of this recording action has to be borne in mind, Westcroft may indicate another variation of Iron Age settlement in the region.

A background note

Michael Farley

In 1991 the Milton Keynes Archaeological Unit ceased to carry out fieldwork prior to its anticipated closure in 1994. It proved impossible to provide a satisfactory replacement; however, the County Museum's Archaeological Service took on some of the subsequent emergency recording before itself being wound down in 1998 as a consequence of cuts to the museum service. Against this background discoveries were being made in November 1990 by metal detectorists during the construction of the V2 road east of the future site of the Westcroft Centre, some of which were recorded by MKAU and some by Paul and Charmian Woodfield. When in 1993 the Westcroft Centre's construction commenced, by Safeway on CNT land, no archaeological provision was in place. Immediately earthmoving started a number of further discoveries were made by detectorists, some of which were reported to the Woodfields who drew and recorded them. Ultimately, after considerable negotiations over access and funding, The Commission for New Towns kindly agreed to fund

the watching brief reported here, through the County Museum Archaeological Service.

During the two phases of earthmoving a number of significant discoveries of metal objects of mid-late Saxon date were reported by Gordon Heritage, R. Colliass, Andy Smith, George Foster and Peter Essen and others. Several other detectorists are thought not to have reported their finds. Reported finds include: at least five strap ends, five pins with either faceted or ball heads, a silver finger ring with four niello panels containing animal ornament, part of a stirrup mount and a silver penny of the St Edmund memorial series (North 481 moneyer ADALBERC). One strap end is in the County Museum (1993.155.2). The finds suggest a Saxon settlement of eighth century date. Under the circumstances the fieldwork reported here was unable to greatly elucidate what remained of the site, whose focus may have lain to the east.

The limited archive for these events is with the Milton Keynes Sites and Monuments Record (CASS 6187). The writer is grateful to Mr and Mrs Woodfield for information.

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