

REVIEWS

BROUGHTON, MILTON KEYNES, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE: THE EVOLUTION OF A SOUTH MIDLANDS LANDSCAPE.

by Atkins R, Popescu E, Rees G & Stansbie D.

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This publication bears comparison with similar published accounts of large-scale work in Milton Keynes carried out by the former Milton Keynes Archaeological Unit and published as BAS Monographs. All of the investigations carried out here during 2006–9, and the publication, were funded by developers and required by the Milton Keynes Archaeological Officer, although the important latter element receives (as is not unusual) little acknowledgement! The area investigated lies south of the M1 and north of Broughton Brook, a tributary of the Ouzel, and was bisected by the A1530. The whole extended over nearly three kilometres.

At various stages, fieldwalking, geophysical survey and evaluation trenching had identified twelve areas requiring investigation. The published excavation plans show that (inevitably) plenty of ‘archaeology’ (however defined) extended into areas which were not subject to investigation. Nevertheless, bearing in mind that virtually nothing was known about the area previously, the results are both worthwhile and surprising, demonstrating once again that later prehistoric and Romano-British utilisation of what was to become Buckinghamshire was far more extensive than could ever have been anticipated a few decades ago. The report is presented in time sequence (Periods 1-9: Mesolithic to post-medieval).

The sector north of the A1539 (Brooklands) was excavated by Oxford Archaeology South (OAS) and the southern area (Broughton Manor Farm) by Oxford Archaeology East (OAE). The complexity of preparing a publication of this nature should not be underestimated and there

are also challenges for the reader; for example there are Areas 1 and 2 in both sectors, distinguished by the prefixes OAE or OAS. Despite the best efforts of the editor and authors, who often provide accompanying thumbnail location plans on figures as well as clear captions and labelling, navigating the twelve separate excavated areas is a little wearing. The writer resorted to photocopying the principal plan (fig. 1.8) as a guide, and before looking at the details of OAE Areas 1 and 2 an ice-pack is also advised!

Evidence for utilisation of the land during early prehistory (roughly the Mesolithic through to the Middle Bronze Age) proved sparse, but sediments excavated from a waterhole of the latter period preserved significant environmental evidence, rare for this period in Buckinghamshire. It showed that the surrounding area was grazed open-grassland supporting cattle, sheep/goat and pig, whose manure would have provided useful meals for the dung beetles that were also identified.

The first substantial settlement evidence, unfortunately bisected by the Salford road, is dated to the Middle Iron Age (roughly 400–100 BC). A large curvilinear ditch (Areas 6 and 8) would have enclosed an area of over a hectare, within which nineteen circular house-gullies were recorded. Nearly all had the usual south to south-eastern entrance; not all were in use at the same time. As is unfortunately common, ploughing had removed evidence for walls or internal structural detail; the gullies would have caught rain from a conical roof. A little later, at the south-east end of the site (Area 10) a slightly irregular pit-alignment (a boundary feature of which several have come to light in Buckinghamshire in recent years), not closely dated here, may have influenced the location of an adjacent field.

The chronology of settlements of early to middle Iron Age date is generally very dependent on ceramic dating: it is not until late in the Iron Age, when continental influences become evident in the pottery and brooches relatively common, that dating to decades becomes possible. For the

latter the writers have settled on the terms 'Late Iron Age (100/50 BC –AD 10) and Late pre-Roman Iron Age/Conquest (c.10 BC–AD 80), providing a slight overlap for this important phase. Much of the site's settlement evidence falls within these time bands. The most sequentially complex of the areas investigated, thought to be the principal settlement, was in OAE Area 1 (Broughton). Understanding the authors' narrative here would have been assisted considerably by inclusion of a phase plan covering the whole of this area. The settlement contained several phases of rectangular enclosures, round houses (of which a 14m diameter house seemed to be an early focus), four-post structures, field systems, trackways, and water holes. It seems to have flourished in the later first-century BC into the mid first century AD, but continued with some re-planning as a farmstead until c.AD 300, by which time the principal house was a (poorly preserved) rectangular building with stone footings, nearby a stone-lined well. To the south, nearer Broughton Brook was a separate, farmstead, possibly subsidiary to the main one, but with a shorter lifespan. A pottery kiln producing mainly grog-tempered wares and dated to the mid first century AD was found at the main settlement with waste dumps possibly indicating up to four further kilns. Finally, well to the north-west in the 'Brooklands' Area 1, was a third settlement also of Late Iron Age date with enclosures and storage pits.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the investigations was the discovery of a considerable number of late Iron Age to early Roman cremation burials spanning the period c.AD 10–150, the largest group known from Buckinghamshire (for which the report helpfully includes a full catalogue). Three cremation groups were clustered within the fields and enclosures of the principal settlement noted above, one group being contained within part of an existing field that had been specifically partitioned off by a boundary ditch. In all, a total of forty-four cremation pits (including dispersed burials) were found around this settlement. Another group of six cremations was found at the Brooklands settlement, but a full assessment here was unfortunately hindered by illegal metal-detecting activity. Most of the burials contained ceramic vessels, including samian, but also other distinctive imported Gallic ceramic, unusual for the county. Several burials contained

brooches and a few had deliberately included animal bone, mainly pig. The report includes many colour illustrations of grave groups, detailed catalogues, a useful analysis of other burials in the region, and in conclusion suggests close links with the culture of the expanding Colchester-based *Catuvellauni*.

An ongoing theme of historical interest is the relationship (if any) between early-middle Saxon occupation and villages subsequently recorded in Domesday. Opportunities to excavate large areas within existing settlements to inform this debate are of course rare, although continuity of site has been demonstrated for a few settlements in Buckinghamshire such as Wolverton, Walton near Aylesbury, and possibly Wing. Excavation of the areas covered by this report lying between Broughton and Moulsoe villages obviously could not solve this problem directly, but indirectly it is helpful. Despite intensive later Iron Age-early Roman occupation here, it is clear that the area had limited appeal for settlement after the fourth century AD. At the north-western (Brooklands) end of the site, three possible and one certain early Saxon sunken-featured buildings were recorded, but dispersed over two-hundred metres. One contained much pottery of fifth-sixth century date (including a unique copy of a Roman-period mixing bowl), as well as other finds. The area was loosely associated with pit groups and waterholes. However, this small-scale early-Saxon settlement had no temporal precursor nor a successor. At the south-eastern end of the excavated area, hints of continuity of land use following the late Roman period were indicated by small amounts of early-Saxon sherds from hollows and pits, much in secondary fills. In the same area was an undated rectangular post-structure, possibly a 'hall', and very small quantities of mid-Saxon pottery from the same general area. After a gap of perhaps three to four hundred years, medieval ditches and a stone-lined well were found in adjoining excavated areas near to Broughton village, and probably on the margins of that settlement.

In summary, no evidence was found for long-term continuity between the late-Roman period and the eleventh century in any of the areas excavated. In considering relationships during these centuries the reader has to refer to a modern map (fig. 1.1) from which it can be deduced (although not stated in the text) that the fifth-sixth century

area of settlement lay in Moulsoe parish, not Broughton. A pre-Milton Keynes development map with parish boundaries would certainly have been helpful.

In conclusion, this is a very significant well-written report which deserves wide circulation and will be referenced for years to come. The authors are to be congratulated in pulling this complicated series of investigations and specialist reports together. They include frequent

helpful references to comparable investigations in adjoining counties. That said, the arrangement of the book by individual excavation area and then by period, means that the book is difficult to navigate and this reviewer would have much preferred an area-by-area description with a brief conclusion, followed by one substantial overall period synthesis.

Mike Farley