

Chapter 3: Iron Age Settlement (Phase 2)

by Alex Smith and Jeff Muir

INTRODUCTION

The Iron Age site was located *c* 200 m to the north of the Saxon settlement and *c* 370 m north-east of the Roman settlement on a natural slope (*c* 55 m OD) overlooking the Nene Valley to the west. (SP 95896958; Fig. 3.1; Pl. 3.1). In March 1991 a number of cropmarks, including a wide-ditched rectangular enclosure were investigated by trial trenching by the Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit (NAU). The investigation confirmed the existence of a middle to late Iron Age settlement consisting of a series of enclosures with associated ring gullies and other settlement features.

Enclosure 2 (NAU 1991, fig. 3), which was the largest of the enclosures, was recognised as belonging to a distinctive type of relatively small, defended enclosure common to the Northamptonshire area (Dix and Jackson 1989). In 1995 that enclosure was further investigated by Oxford Archaeology (OA) as part of a wider project designed to mitigate a proposed housing develop-

ment. The investigations confirmed both the middle to late Iron Age date and defended character of the enclosure. A further archaeological evaluation was undertaken by OA in 1997 on land lying between Station Road and Stanwick Road, to the east of the main Iron Age settlement (Fig. 3.1). One of these evaluation trenches revealed middle to late Iron Age pits and ditches, undoubtedly representing the eastern periphery of the settlement. A few further features of possible Iron Age date were revealed in the 2002-3 excavations of the Roman settlement.

THE EXCAVATION

The nature of the development on this part of the site (construction of a roundabout and access roads) led to the excavation of an unusual 'spur' shaped trench which took in approximately one third of the principal enclosure (253; Fig. 3.1; Pl. 3.2). This had been identified from the air and previously sampled by the Northamptonshire Archaeological Unit



Plate 3.1 Machine excavating a section in the Iron Age site looking north-west across the Nene Valley

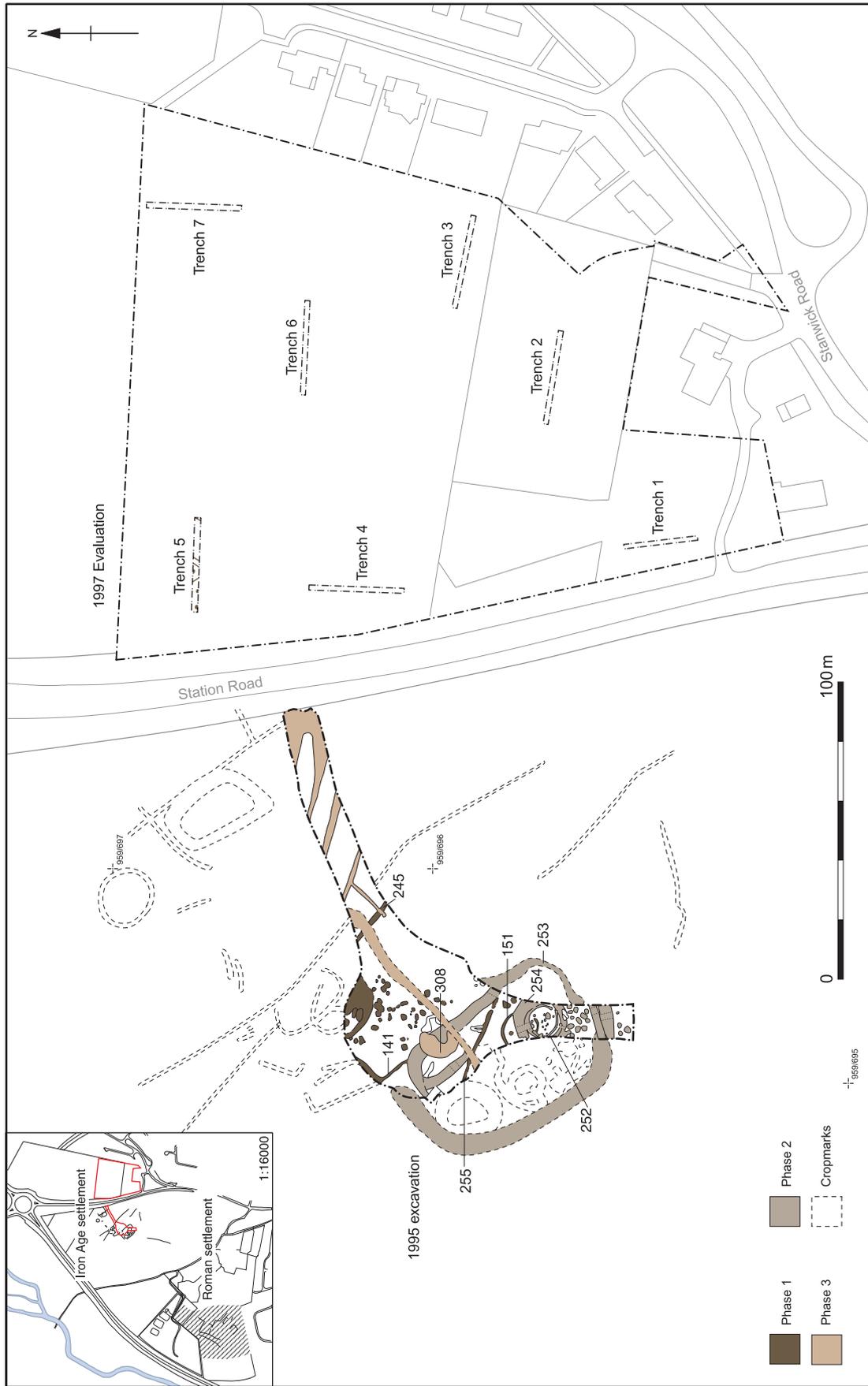


Fig. 3.1 Location of Iron Age settlement and evaluation area



Plate 3.2 Excavation of the Iron Age settlement looking north-west

(NAU 1991, enclosure 2; figs 3, 29 and 30). This allowed partial characterisation of both the enclosure ditch and its interior.

The circumstances of excavation were less than ideal, as planning permission for development had been granted before the introduction of PPG 16, and therefore funding for the project was very limited. Although features were revealed outside the enclosure, these financial constraints meant that the excavation had to concentrate almost exclusively on the enclosure itself and its internal features. The limited number of interventions coupled with a small and largely undiagnostic ceramic assemblage precluded the construction of detailed stratigraphic phasing over the majority of the site. A very broad scheme of phasing has been produced (see phasing – below) but relies heavily upon spatial considerations and should be considered more of an aid to description than a definite chronological guide.

Phasing

As is explained below (see Jackson), the chronology of the recovered pottery assemblage was insufficient to determine any site phasing. However, some stratigraphic relationships were recorded, and these plus the apparent distribution and organisation of the revealed features have enabled a plausible, if not archaeologically provable sequence of phasing to be determined.

Phase 1 (Figs 3.1-2)

Penannular gully 151

The earliest phase of activity was represented by a hut circle (151) defined by two partly revealed curvilinear gullies (151 and 132), both cut by later features. Both gullies were shallow and 'U' shaped in profile, averaging 0.35 m wide and 0.15 m deep, and contained silty clay fills with limestone fragments. Only the eastern terminus of the southern gully survived in the excavated area. Two possible pits (not excavated) were located within the area defined by these gullies, but there was no evidence of structural postholes or other internal features.

Ditch 255

A linear ditch (255) was identified approximately 4 m to the north of the hut circle, aligned WNW-ESE. It was up to 1.0 m wide and 0.23 m deep, and contained a similar fill to the gullies of 151. The line of the ditch may have been continued beyond its eastern terminus (147), indicating a 0.50 m wide gap or entrance. The ditch was on a different alignment to the enclosure ditch 253 and was cut by it. A small quantity of 2nd-century BC pottery and a few bone fragments were recovered from the sampled sections of this feature.

Enclosure 141 (Fig. 3.1)

A rectangular enclosure, defined by a shallow 'V'-shaped ditch (141) approximately 0.80 m deep, was partially revealed adjacent to the north-east side of

pond to a similarly shaped feature plotted from the aerial photographs. To the south of this arc was a scatter of oval or sub-circular pits, some of which were sample excavated. These are considered likely to have been contemporary with the enclosure only because their distribution appears to be confined within this feature. The pits showed similar characteristics in their fills and dimensions to those situated south of hut circle 252 (see below). Their purpose is equally as unclear, although two of the sampled pits produced small quantities of slag, which might suggest an industrial focus of activity within the enclosure.

Phase 2 (Figs 3.1-2)

Enclosure 253

Ditch 253 defined a sub-rectangular enclosure approximately 45 m wide by 70 m in length. The excavation exposed the north-east side of this enclosure (Pl. 3.3) along with a short length of its southern side (Pl. 3.4). Figure 3.1 indicates that there was a discrepancy of approximately 5 m NE-SW between the plotted position of the enclosure from aerial photographs and its actual location as determined from the excavation. Two of the three sampled sections indicated that the original ditch was recut at least once. It is clear that an early, 'V'-

shaped ditch of relatively modest proportions (1.4 m wide by 1.0 m deep) was replaced by a much more substantial ditch (3.0-3.5 m wide by 1.2-2.0 m deep) of a similar profile (Pl. 3.4).

Some of the variation in the size of the ditch is likely to have been a consequence of truncation caused by the medieval ridge and furrow ploughing. No evidence was found for an internal or external bank in the form of any indicative sloping of the ditch fills. A short length of ditch (204) of similar dimensions to 253 was revealed close to the northern corner of the enclosure. Its relationship to the enclosure ditch was uncertain, but as is argued below, it may have represented the inturned north side of an entrance just to the west of that corner. Otherwise, no interruptions to the line of the enclosure, which might indicate an entrance, were revealed. A slight concentration of finds, in the form of pottery and animal bone fragments, was noted in the sections dug in the northern corner of the enclosure, and particularly from the inturned ditch 204, possibly indicating more intensive activity in that area.

The penannular ditch (254)

Approximately 70% of a penannular ditch (254) was revealed close to the eastern end of enclosure 253. The original cut (217) defined a circular area approximately 11.4 m in diameter with an



Plate 3.3 Section across north-eastern side of Iron Age enclosure ditch 253 looking west



Plate 3.4 Section across southern side of Iron Age enclosure ditch 253 looking east

entrance in its north-western side marked by an unexcavated terminal (Pl. 3.5). Any opposing terminal lay outside of the excavated area making an estimation of the entrance width impossible. Ditch 217 was allowed to silt up almost entirely before it was re-cut by ditch 155, enclosing an area *c* 12 m in diameter. Both ditches had very similar dimensions (0.70-0.88 m deep by 2.20 m wide) and a wide V-shaped profile with a flat cleaning slot in the base. The dimensions of the ditches seem excessive for a simple drainage function and it is possible that the penannular ditches were originally intended to act as enclosures in their own right.

Penannular gully (252)

A shallow 'U' shaped sub-circular gully (252), averaging 0.45 m wide by 0.30 m deep was identified within the area enclosed by ditch 254. A small break in the line of the gully was noted in the south-east, probably defining an entrance, although this does not correspond with the break in the circuit of the penannular ditch, which lay to the north-west. It is possible that there was another entranceway in gully 252 at this location, and the location of both entrances may be suggested by the presence of two substantial postholes, (119 and 161) on the south-east and north-west sides of the gully circle respectively. Both features contained fragments of fired clay in their fills.

Within the area confined by the gully was a random scatter of 31 postholes and small pits, of which 12 were excavated. The postholes were all either sub-circular or oval in plan but varied considerably in dimensions (0.12-0.50 m deep by 0.32-0.65 m in diameter). Three of the features (166, 145, 188) were subcircular, steep-sided pits with vestiges of a clay lining and numerous limestone pieces showing signs of burning within their fills. These may have been boiling pits; however, as one of the pits (166) was situated approximately at the centre of the gully circle, and the other two were within 0.70 m of the gully itself, the possibility that these three features might in fact be stone-packed structural postholes would be an attractive one, if not for the difficulty of accounting for the apparent clay lining.

Other excavated features within the circle included a large, flat-bottomed pit (183) and a scatter of five small post or stakeholes, one of which (124) contained fragments of fired clay similar to those from postholes 119 and 161. One other feature, a shallow scoop (250), located close to the western side of the gully circle, is worthy of note. It contained an articulated sheep skeleton, but no dating material, so its association with the rest of the activity here is purely circumstantial.

Associated features

A scatter of oval or irregular pits lay to the south of the gully 252, extending south to the line of the



Plate 3.5 View across circular building 254 looking west over the Nene Valley

enclosure ditch (253). Further features of similar appearance were noted beyond the enclosure. A sample were excavated, and most displayed a shallow 'U' shaped profile, averaging 0.25 m in depth, and contained unremarkable silty clay and limestone fills, with small assemblages of pottery and bone fragments. Pit 115 was significantly different in that it cut the original phase of the penannular ditch 254, and contained lumps of blue clay within its fill.

The finds

The animal bone assemblage from the environs of the hut circle 252 was modest, although its distribution is worthy of note. A quantity of bone was recovered from a north-western section of the penannular ditch 254 and the adjacent posthole 161. The disposal of food waste in the ditches close to a doorway is a common characteristic of Iron Age dwellings, although as very few other sections were put through this ditch there is no way of telling whether it represents a genuine concentration of faunal remains.

Phase 3 (Fig. 3.1)

As has been mentioned above, the effects of medieval ridge-and-furrow ploughing were more evident in the northern part of the trench, and the bases of three furrows were identified. A large irregular spread of silty clay (308) overlay the northern part of the large enclosure 253 (see Fig. 3.2). The feature was not excavated, and although Iron Age pottery was recovered from its surface, this is most likely residual material, and it seems more probable that feature 308 is of medieval or even modern date. Finally a NE-SW gas main

trench was identified crossing the northern part of the excavated area.

Features from the 1997 evaluation

In 1997, an archaeological evaluation was carried out 60 metres to the east of the main site on land lying between Station Road and Stanwick Road. Seven evaluation trenches were excavated covering an area of 2.3 hectares (Fig. 3.1). The only trench to yield significant archaeology was Trench 5 where, in addition to several gullies and a substantial posthole at the eastern end of the trench, three pits of varying size were excavated (Fig. 3.3). A relatively large bone and pottery assemblage was recovered from the fill of pit 519, as well as a large quantity of heavily burnt limestone slabs and pebbles with frequent charred plant remains. An oval, steep-sided pit located 2.5 m to the east (517), of a type commonly found on the main Iron Age site excavated in 1995 (see above), yielded only a few pottery sherds and bones. The most substantial of the three pits (511) contained a thick square piece of unworked ironstone whose purpose remains unclear.

Three linear gullies ran across the centre of the trench, two (507 and 509) on a parallel SW-NE alignment, the third (514) perpendicular to the others. Both gullies 509 and 514 share broadly similar dimensions and may actually represent two sides of the same gully which form a corner. They contained very small quantities of Iron Age pottery. The posthole (505) and trench (503) located at the eastern end of Trench 5 were also aligned similarly to gullies 507 and 509, and suggested as Iron Age in date on this premise. The posthole was quite large and contained a fill of charred plant remains. The trench, possibly representing a beam slot, suggests

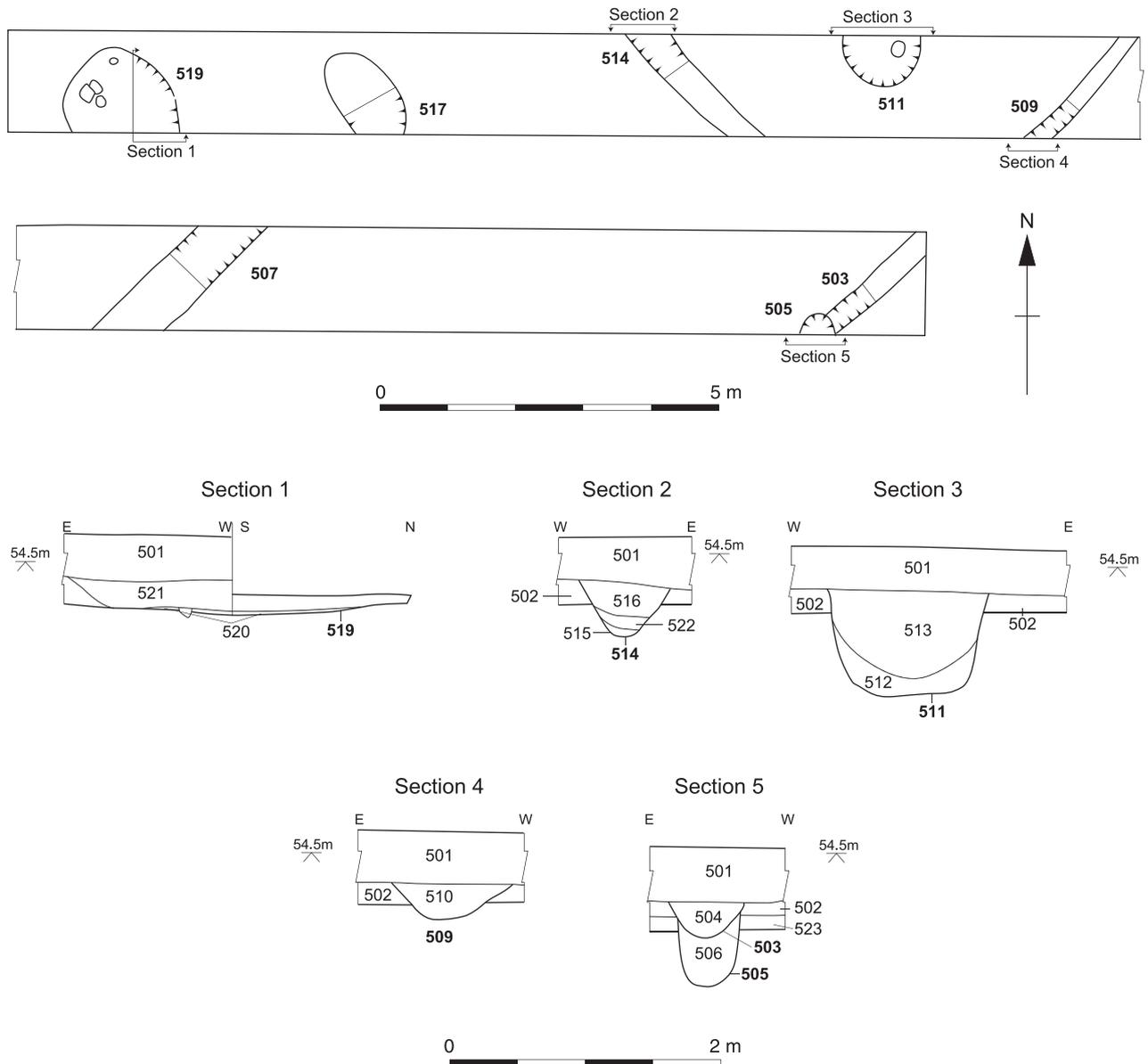


Fig. 3.3 Plan and sections of Iron Age features in Trench 5

the presence of a reasonably substantial structure, although caution must be exercised in this interpretation since very little of the feature was exposed during excavation.

THE IRON AGE POTTERY by Dennis Jackson

A total assemblage of 301 sherds (5949 g) of Iron Age pottery was found during the 1995 excavation and is described in this report. In addition another 300 tiny sherds were recovered, mostly during sieving, which were generally too small to use in the fabric analysis. A further 107 sherds of Iron Age pottery were recovered from the 1997 evaluation (see below).

Fabric

Shell is the dominant inclusion type in the pottery and is found in various amounts in the majority of the sherds. This is a common occurrence in most Iron Age ceramic assemblages from the Nene Valley, and north Northamptonshire, where outcrops of limestone and fossil shell widely occur. Ironstone, limestone, or organic traces occur in a number of sherds but each of these may have been present in the clay. There are no obvious inclusions in the pottery which are likely to be of non-local origin.

The quantity or density of shell can sometimes be

of chronological significance in Iron Age site assemblages from the region (eg Great Houghton, Northampton; Chapman 2001), but there appears to be no evidence of this amongst the relatively small assemblage from Higham Ferrers. There is no clear division between some fabric types described below and the quantities are therefore approximate:-

Fabric 1

Large shell inclusions up to 8 mm in diameter. The pottery is often laminated or friable. Sherds 15, weight 466 g.

Fabric 2

Shell fine and often associated with smooth dark wares. Sherds 117, weight 1708 g.

Fabric 3

Shell moderate in size and quantity. Sherds 135, weight 2465 g.

Fabric 4

Shell dense and possibly pounded. Merges with Fabric 1. Sherds 14, weight 244 g.

Fabric 5

Inclusions sparse or absent. Sherds 3, weight 70 g.

Fabric 6

Shell with ironstone or sandstone inclusions. Sherds 4, weight 292 g.

Fabric 7

Shell with large limestone inclusions. Sherds 8, weight 514 g.

Fabric 8

Grog added. Sherds 5, weight 190 g.

The majority of the sherds are in fabrics 2 and 3, which together account for 84% of the total (73% of the weight).

Forms

No complete profiles were recovered but jar and bowl forms can be recognised. Four sherds came from thick-walled vessels, including the illustrated rim sherd from context 168 (Fig. 3.4.7). These may have derived from large container jars perhaps used to bring produce to the site.

Rim sherds from other jars and bowls came from globular or slack sided vessels. There are three jars with rim diameters ranging from 240 mm to 300 mm and three bowls with diameters in the 140-160 mm range.

Hardness and surface finish

There are no soft wares in the assemblage and only a small number of sherds can be regarded as very hard. The finer wares are generally smooth faced and traces of burnishing have survived on some sherds. Examples with a sooted surface occur but are rare.

Decoration and scoring

Three rim sherds (out of 28) have fingertip or fingernail decoration on the top of the rims, and one unstratified sherd has curvilinear decoration on the body. In addition there are 21 sherds (7% of the total) with clearly defined scoring on the body which may be either decorative or functional. The percentage of scored ware is average for sites of this period in the Upper Nene Valley.

Discussion of the chronology

The rim forms and probably the assemblage as a whole appears to fit into the IA2 phase defined by Knight (1984). Locally this conforms to the pre-'Belgic' middle Iron Age period dating from around the mid 3rd century BC until the late 1st century BC, or early 1st century AD.

Most of the contexts in the excavated area contain too little diagnostic pottery to assist with the phasing of individual features. There are short stubby rims from pit contexts to the north-east of the main enclosure which are typical of the later middle Iron Age period at Weekley, Northants (Jackson and Dix 1986/7), whilst sherds from globular vessels which have slightly longer neck forms were found within ditch 204. This context yielded an above average amount of pottery, including fine wares, and is likely to date to the 2nd century BC.

The amount of pottery recovered from the penannular ditch (254) and possible roundhouse site (252) is small but contains no material that is likely to date to the later middle Iron Age (1st century BC). The pottery from the enclosure ditch (253) and the pits to the south can be paralleled in many assemblages dating to the 2nd or early 1st centuries BC.

Catalogue of the illustrated pottery (Fig. 3.4)

1. Context 101. Wide mouthed bowl? Trace of burnishing on the shoulder. Red/buff outer face and grey core. Fabric 2.
2. Context 109. Jar? Coarse ware with uneven surface. Black externally and brown core. Fabric 3 with sparse larger inclusions.
3. Context 168 (6). Jar or bowl. Fine dark ware. Fabric 2.
4. Context 168 (7). Bowl. Fine dark ware with evidence of external burnishing. Fabric 2.
5. Context 168 (8). Bowl? Dark grey to brown ware. Fabric 3 but with some laminated and larger shell.
6. Context 168 (1). Large jar with flat-topped rim. Weathered externally. Dark grey ware. Inclusions include ironstone and some grog. Fabric 6.
7. Context 168 (2) Jar. Outer face orange/brown: Core grey. Fabric 8.
8. Context 301. Coarse ware jar. Some sooting externally. Grey/brown ware. Fabric 3.
9. Context 300. Jar. Face uneven. Brown ware. Fabric 3
10. Context 306. Large jar. Uneven, bumpy outer face. Brown externally with grey core. Some large inclusions of shell and limestone. Fabric 7.

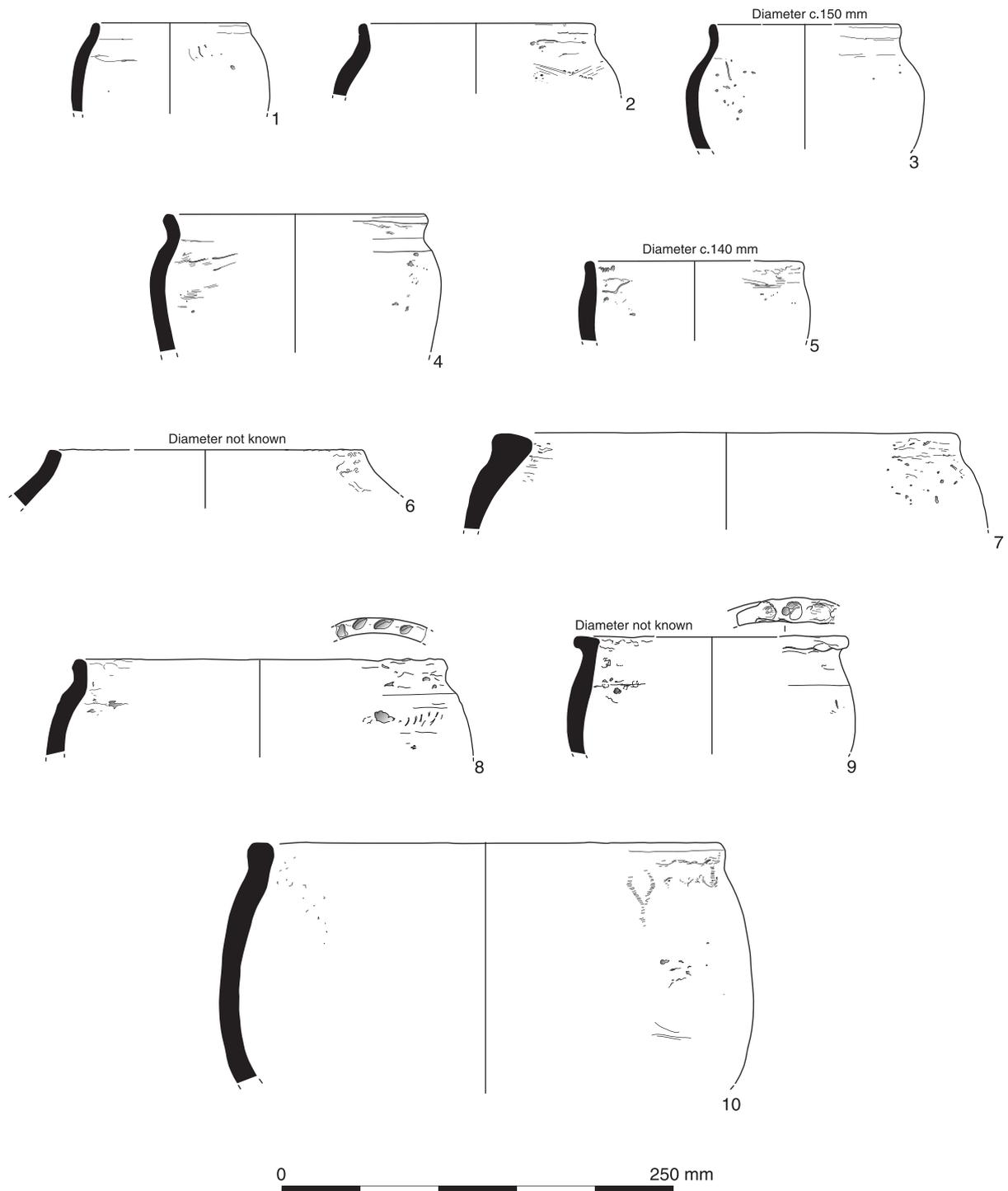


Fig. 3.4 Iron Age pottery

Pottery from the 1997 excavation by Alistair Barclay

A total of 107 sherds of Iron Age pottery was recovered from Trench 5, most deriving from the upper fill (521) of Pit 519 (Fig. 3.3, Section 1). The entire assemblage, with the exception of a few amorphous fragments, was manufactured from fine shell-tempered fabrics, a common occurrence on Iron Age

sites in Northamptonshire. Decoration was almost totally absent, although a small number of sherds have simple shallow linear decoration and/or scored lines. The date range for the assemblage is likely to be late-middle to late (pre-Belgic) Iron Age (150-50 BC), contemporaneous with the pottery from the Iron Age site located to the west (see above).

ANIMAL BONE by *Umberto Albarella*

The limited number of bones recovered from pits and ditches on the Iron Age site belonged almost exclusively to domestic animals, with sheep/goat bones predominating. Cattle were also present, although in markedly lower numbers than those from Saxon contexts in the settlement to the south. The level of bone fragmentation corresponds with assemblages derived from butchery and kitchen refuse. There is little zooarchaeological evidence that the community was one of high social status, although any conclusions drawn from such a small assemblage must be regarded as tentative.

A small assemblage of bone was recovered from the 1997 evaluation area further east (Trench 5), with over 70% deriving from Pit 521. The larger pieces in contexts 516 and 521 showed evidence of butchery, and a small number from 521 had been burnt. The presence of sheep/goat in the assemblage was in keeping with the predominance of sheep/goat over other domestic species from the main enclosure area.

CHARRED PLANT REMAINS by *Lisa Moffett*

Seven samples were taken from the Iron Age pits and ditch fills, and all but one of these produced some plant remains, mainly fragments of wheat and barley with a few weed seeds. Contexts 207 and 205, the middle and upper fills respectively of the same ditch (204), produced only unidentifiable cereal remains. To the north of the enclosure ditch (235) a pit (156) produced a few grains of wheat and barley and a couple of weed seeds. A pit from within the roundhouse produced no remains at all, other than some wood charcoal (de Moulins 1996).

Three samples were considered to have sufficient material to be worth further analysis. These samples were from the fill of a pit to the south of the roundhouse (110) and fills from two different phases of the circular ditch around the roundhouse (254). The three samples were fully analysed (see Table 3.1). The results suggest fairly similar material, although the pit sample had rather more grain and less chaff than the ditch samples. Chaff remains of glume wheat, grains of wheat and barley, and a number of weeds were present in all the analysed samples. The glume wheat is likely to have been mainly spelt (*Triticum spelta*), although only a few spelt remains could be identified with certainty, due to poor preservation and the fact that there is considerable morphological overlap between spelt and emmer (*Triticum dicoccum*). Poor preservation also limited the identification of the barley, though some of the grains were clearly hulled, and a single, rather battered, rachis fragment suggested the presence of 6-row barley.

There is virtually no evidence for the products from the early stages of crop processing (eg threshing and winnowing) which would suggest the likelihood that the crops were grown near the site. Small-size chaff such as glume bases, weed

seeds smaller than cereal grains, and the cleaned grains themselves, would all be derived from later stages of crop processing (see Hillman 1981). Evidence for crop processing is not very clear in fact, as the ratios between glumes and grains suggest either that the chaff by-product of spelt processing became mixed with cleaned grains, or that the material represents whole unprocessed spikelets. The two ditch fill samples do have a somewhat larger amount of glume bases than grains and this suggests that at least some of the material was derived from a fine sieving chaff by-product (Hillman 1981 stage 12). The somewhat lower ratio of glumes to grains in the pit sample as compared to the other two analysed samples could derive from a different set of activities but could also be accounted for by a hotter or more aerobic fire, since glume bases survive charring less well than grains. The fairly low density of items in the samples (about 4-5 items per litre) does not suggest that large amounts of cereal waste were being burned and disposed of, but with only seven samples taken from this phase it is clearly impossible to generalise.

Most of the other plants represented are species of disturbed ground which could have grown in many types of disturbed habitats such as waste ground, trackway verges and gardens, but in this case are highly likely to have been growing as arable weeds. Plants such as fat hen (*Chenopodium album* type) and henbane (*Hyocyamus niger*) are generally found in nitrogen-rich soils. This, however, does not prove that the soil in the crop fields was nitrogen-rich, as these plants could have been introduced into the field as a result of manuring from old dung or compost heaps where these plants were growing.

Most of the weed species are annuals, such as fat hen, redshank (*Persicaria maculosa*), knotgrass (*Polygonum aviculare*), black bindweed (*Fallopia convolvulus*), field gromwell (*Lithospermum arvense*), field madder (*Sherardia arvensis*) and scentless mayweed (*Tripleurospermum cf. inodorum*). There are, however a few perennial weeds such as dock (*Rumex* sp.) and ribwort plantain (*Plantago lanceolata* type), suggesting that cultivation practices allowed some of the perennials to survive. There were no segetals of Mediterranean origin such as corncockle (*Agrostemma githago*) and cornflower (*Centaurea cyanus*), which are sometimes found on late Iron Age/early Roman sites (eg Lambrick and Robinson 1979) though they become much more abundant later.

Most of the weeds are plants of well-drained soils. There are, however, a few plants of wetter soils. Spikerush (*Eleocharis palustris/uniglumis*), requires seasonal flooding. Many, though not all, of the sedges (*Carex* spp), grow on damp or wet ground, as does blinks (*Montia fontana* ssp. *chondrosperma*) (Stace 1997). Such conditions are not well suited for growing cereals, yet spikerush in particular is often found in Iron Age (and Roman) charred

Table 3.1: Charred plant remains from the Iron Age settlement

Context no.	109	154	221	
Sample no.	40	44	46	
Description	pit	ditch upper fill	ditch fill	
Date	150-50BC	150-50BC	150-50BC	
Sample size (litres)	40	40	40	
Flot size (mls)	50	40	40	
Amount analysed (%)	100	100	100	
Items per litre	4	4	5	
Crop species				
<i>Triticum</i> cf. <i>dicoccum</i> Schübl glume bases	-	-	1	? emmer
<i>Triticum dicoccum/spelta</i> rachises	-	-	2	emmer/spelt
<i>Triticum dicoccum/spelta</i> glume bases	26	58	63	emmer/spelt
<i>Triticum spelta</i> L glume bases	4	4	5	spelt
<i>Triticum</i> sp	19	7	11	wheat
<i>Triticum</i> sp germinated	1	-	-	wheat, sprouted
<i>Hordeum vulgare</i> L cf 6-row rachises	-	1	-	? 6-row barley
<i>Hordeum vulgare</i> L hulled	2	-	5	hulled barley
<i>Hordeum vulgare</i> L indet	10	5	9	barley
Cereal indet	41	28	35	cereal
Cereal/large Poaceae culm bases	-	-	2	cereal/large grass
Wild species				
<i>Papaver</i> cf <i>dubium</i> L	-	-	1	? long-headed poppy
<i>Corylus avellana</i> L nutshell frags	1	-	-	hazel
<i>Chenopodium album</i> type	13	1	5	fat hen
<i>Montia fontana</i> ssp <i>chondrosperma</i> (Fenzl) Walters	-	1	2	blinks
<i>Stellaria</i> sp	-	-	1	chickweed
<i>Silene</i> cf <i>latifolia</i>	-	1	-	white campion
cf <i>Silene</i> sp	-	-	1	? campion
<i>Persicaria maculosa</i> Gray	-	1	-	redshank
<i>Polygonum aviculare</i> L	-	-	2	knotgrass
<i>Fallopia convolvulus</i> (L) A Love	-	1	-	black-bindweed
<i>Rumex</i> sp	3	1	6	dock
<i>Vicia/Lathyrus</i>	3	3	9	vetch/tare/vetchling
<i>Melilotus/Medicago</i> /large <i>Trifolium</i>	2	4	8	melilot/medick/clover
<i>Lotus</i> /small <i>Trifolium</i>	-	3	6	bird's foot trefoil/clover
<i>Hyoscyamus niger</i> L	1	1	4	henbane
<i>Lithospermum arvense</i> L	2	13	-	field gromwell
<i>Plantago lanceolata</i> type	2	1	1	ribwort plantain
<i>Euphrasia/Odontites</i>	-	-	2	eyebright/red bartsia
<i>Sherardia arvensis</i> L	1	-	-	field madder
<i>Galium</i> sp	3	2	1	bedstraw
<i>Tripleurospermum</i> cf <i>inodorum</i> (L) Schultz-Bip	1	-	1	? scentless mayweed
Asteraceae indet	-	1	-	daisy family
<i>Eleocharis palustris/uniglumis</i>	1	1	1	spikerush
<i>Carex</i> sp(p)	1	1	2	sedge(s)
<i>Avena</i> sp. awns	-	1	-	oat awn
cf <i>Avena</i> sp	-	-	1	? oat
<i>Bromus hordeaceus/secalinus</i>	1	2	-	soft/rye brome
cf <i>Phleum</i>	-	-	1	? timothy
Poaceae indet.	11	11	8	unidentified grasses
tuber fragment	1	-	-	unidentified tuber
unidentified fragments	-	6	7	unidentified seeds & other
chaff	30 (20%)	63 (40%)	73 (36%)	
grain	73 (49%)	40 (25%)	60 (30%)	
weeds	43 (29%)	50 (31%)	63 (31%)	
other	2 (1%)	6 (4%)	7 (3%)	
total items	148	159	203	

cereal assemblages, suggesting that these conditions were common, possibly in poorly drained patches in the fields or perhaps in wet ditches at the field edges.

Overall, the Iron Age material appears broadly similar to middle Iron Age plant remains on other small to medium sized settlement sites in the East Midlands such as Wanlip, Leics. (Monckton 1998) and Gamston, Notts. (Moffett 1992). Little work has been done, however, on regional or other patterns in Iron Age sites with the exception of van der Veen's (1992) work in the north. In many areas, including the East Midlands, the published data are still insufficient to carry out such a study.

THE NATURE OF THE IRON AGE SETTLEMENT

The Iron Age settlement at Higham Ferrers is one of a growing number of sites with relatively small, heavily defended, rectangular enclosures that have been excavated within Northamptonshire in the past few decades (Jackson 1975; Knight 1984, 191-2; Jackson and Dix 1986-87; Dix and Jackson 1989; Atkins *et al.* 2001; Kidd 2004). Though similar types of enclosure have been recognised elsewhere (eg Jobey 1962; Marshall 1991), the apparent concentration in the Midlands appears to be genuine and could be used to argue for increasingly fragmented social conditions towards the later Iron Age. Whether the appearance of such heavily defended homesteads was a response to specifically localised conditions or a symptom of wider political instability is uncertain. There are, however, certain local examples of enclosed and unenclosed settlements existing in close proximity, such as at Mawsley New Village near Kettering, dated to the 4th-1st century BC (Hull and Preston 2002). This may suggest that defining status was also a key factor in the creation of such dominant boundaries (see Hingley 1990).

As with many other Iron Age settlements in the region (eg Great Houghton, Chapman 2001; Ecton, Atkins *et al.* 2001; Great Doddington, Thomas and Enright 2003), the main enclosure at Kings Meadow did not stand in isolation but appears to have been part of a loose group of smaller enclosures and associated linear boundaries which were revealed by aerial photographs. Unfortunately no stratigraphic link was established between the enclosure and the surrounding cropmark features but they have been confirmed as broadly contemporaneous by previous trial trenching (NAU 1991). In addition the 1997 evaluation to the east revealed the presence of pits, gullies, and probable posthole structures of Iron Age date indicating the extent of the overall settlement in this area. The limits of this outlying occupation may also be more extensive than previously expected, as the location of Iron Age features discovered during the laying of a gas pipeline lay some 100 m to the north of the evaluation area (OAU 1997).

Although clearly of defensive character (at least

in part), the main site was also ideally situated to exploit a variety of different ecological zones including the lush grass-lands of the Nene floodplain to the north and the drier limestone uplands to the south-east. Such ecological diversity would have naturally lent itself to the establishment of a successful mixed farming regime and it is probable that the enclosure's primary function was that of an agricultural holding. Evidence for such an economy was recovered in the form of animal bones, in particular of sheep and cattle, and from cereal grains which were found in a number of features across the site including pits and the penannular ditch around Structure 252 (see above). Although the presence of charred grains of barley and wheat does not prove that arable farming was being practised by the occupants of the enclosure there is no reason to believe that the cereal at the site was being specially imported.

Evidence of craft production was very limited, consisting of a largely unremarkable pottery assemblage, a small amount of slag and a single bone gouge. There was nothing within the pottery assemblage which indicated inclusions of a non-local origin (see Jackson, above) and although there was no evidence of actual production, all of the pottery could have been produced at or near to the Kings Meadow site.

The slag was recovered from two of the pits to the north of Enclosure 253, but as the quantities were very small it was considered that further analysis was unlikely to produce information of significance. As the only evidence of metalworking on the site, it is interesting to note the slag was found outside the enclosure, and well away from what might be assumed to be the principal domestic dwelling (Structure 252). The bone gouge recovered from ditch 204 is of a type which is quite common on Iron Age sites. Although its precise function is not known, such objects may have been used in textile production or in leatherworking (Kate Atherton pers. comm.).

Beyond the suggestion of small scale pottery production, limited metalworking and the possibility that textiles or leather may have been worked on the site, it is impossible to add further detail to the picture of craft production. This lack of information is particularly unfortunate given that the most developed form of the enclosure at Kings Meadow was an impressive undertaking of defensive proportions. The implication for the status of the occupants is interesting and a fuller finds assemblage would have helped to guide interpretation.

The modest pottery assemblage from the site indicated an overall date range of *c* 3rd to 1st century BC, similar (though perhaps slightly later in origin) to that of other Iron Age sites in the region such as Mawsley New Village (Hull and Preston 2002), Great Doddington (Thomas and Enright 2003) and Ecton (Atkins *et al.* 2001). As with Higham Ferrers, most of these sites appear to have been abandoned or relocated at some point in the 1st century BC (see

Chapter 7). However, a farmstead just to the east of Higham Ferrers (c 1.5 km south-east of the present site) did show a continuous sequence of shifting occupation from the middle Iron Age through to the later 2nd century AD, with Iron Age ring gullies being replaced in the 1st century AD by a system of rectangular agricultural back plots (Mudd 2004; OA 2004a). An Iron Age agricultural stock enclosure was also revealed (*ibid.*).

The limited excavation confirmed that within the c 3rd- to 1st-century BC timeframe there were at least two main phases of activity in the Iron Age settlement. Other sub-enclosures clearly existed within the main enclosure, probably representing additional domestic structures, although how many structures were contemporary remain unknown and estimation of the size of the resident population is impossible. Nevertheless, the re-cutting and deepening of the enclosure ditch in a secondary phase suggests that the occupants could muster a considerable workforce either through co-operation or compulsion. What prompted the re-development can only be guessed at but a period of political

instability is one possibility. Although no evidence of an internal bank was found it is difficult to imagine why such a massive ditch was required if not to produce spoil for a rampart. At other similarly defended sites in the area arguments for an internal bank have rested largely on an absence of features immediately behind the enclosure ditch (Dix and Jackson 1989, 162). No such 'blank zone' existed at Kings Meadow but it is quite possible that earlier features were buried by the new rampart.

The enclosure is perhaps best viewed as a defended farmstead, the visually impressive home of a locally important family group. In times of peace the enclosure and its occupants may have acted as the social focus of a small agricultural community, but in times of crisis would have been capable of providing short term refuge for a limited number of people and livestock.

The interpretation of the Iron Age site has through necessity been both brief and unspecific. Had fuller excavation been possible it may have facilitated a greater understanding of regional economic and social interaction during the Iron Age.