EXCAVATIONS AT HAM HILL, 1991

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SUMMARY

An assessment excavation at the southern end of Ham Hill produced evidence for two Iron Age pits containing pottery probably dating to the 2nd century BC. The pits form a continuation westwards of those found in 1983, while further east two other trenches produced negative results, indicating a lack of occupation in this area during the Iron Age.

INTRODUCTION

Ham or Hamdon Hill is reputed to be the largest hillfort in Britain, and various excavations (mostly unpublished) have taken place on the site. The most recent former excavation was in 1983 (Smith 1991), the location of which is shown on Fig. 1. Ham Hill has been quarried since at least the medieval period, providing the distinctive Ham Hill stone (known locally as hamstone) used in many buildings in Somerset, and there are currently two active quarries. In March 1991 an assessment excavation was carried out for Montacute Estates Ltd in advance of a proposed extension to the quarry at the southern end of Ham Hill. Three trenches, with a total area of 180 m^2, were excavated (Fig. 1) in accordance with previously-agreed specifications and following the conditions of the Scheduled Monument Consent. One trench (trench A) produced evidence of two pits of Iron Age date, as well as one unstratified potsherd of Iron Age date and five pieces of unstratified flintwork of earlier date. No archaeological features were observed in the other two trenches (trenches B and C). Trench B produced two unstratified flint flakes of probable Neolithic/Bronze Age date and one unstratified potsherd of post-medieval date. Trench C produced three fragments of bone and an iron object, probably of post-medieval date.

The finds and the archive from this excavation have been deposited in the County Museum, Taunton (Acc. No. TTNCM 228/1991). Additional information on the excavation and the finds is contained in the archive (Adkins & Adkins 1991).

THE EXCAVATION

Three trenches, each 30 m long and 2 m wide, were cut by machine, and the archaeological features were excavated by hand. In trenches B and C, excavation continued until the surface of the underlying limestone or the sand bedrock were reached. In trench A, two pits were found (Fig. 2).

In trench A, Pit 1 was only partly exposed, the rest of the pit extending

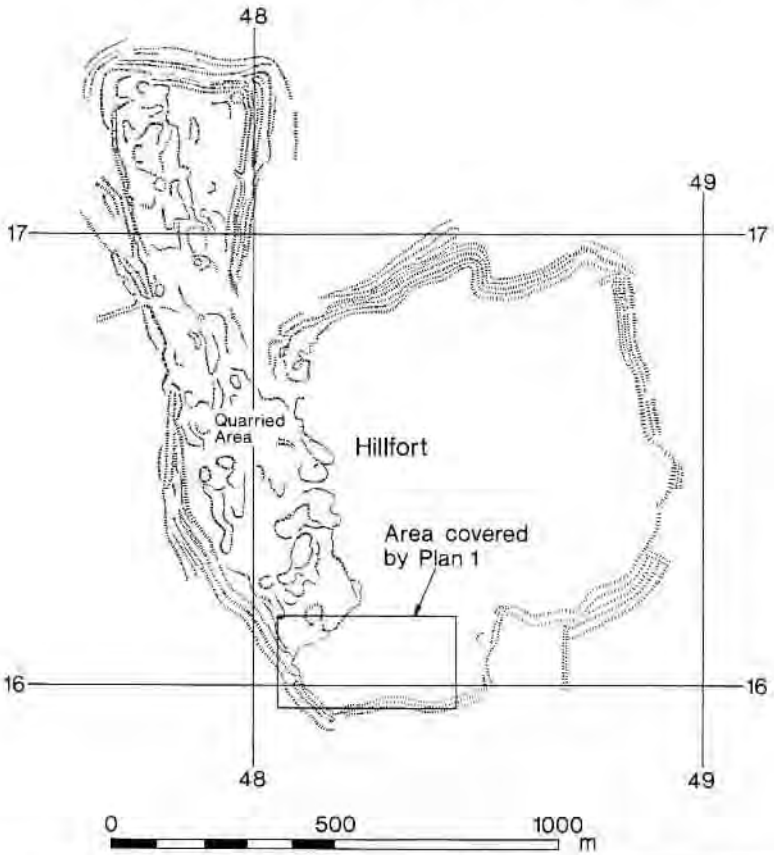

Fig. 1 Map and plan showing the position of the excavation trenches.

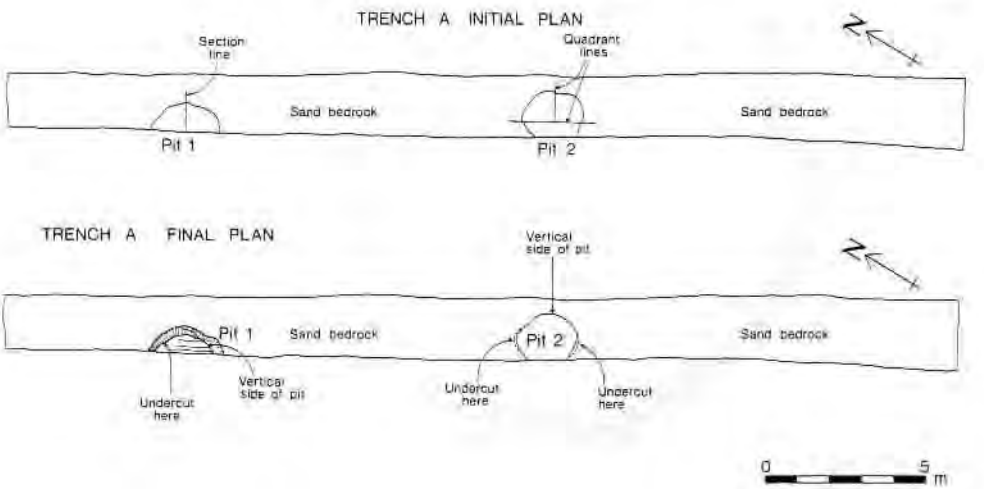

Fig. 2 Initial plan of trench A, showing Pits 1 and 2 before excavation, and final plan showing the pits after excavation.

westwards beyond the trench. It had a minimum diameter of 2.3 m and a minimum depth of 0.85 m. Towards the bottom of the excavated part of the pit, the sharply sloping sides appeared undercut, possibly through use or weathering. As less than half of the pit was within the trench, excavation was terminated at a depth of 1.5 m below the present ground surface. Much bone was observed in the unexcavated fill below this level. The finds from Pit 1 included 8 (0.28 kg) slingstones, 99 pieces (0.49 kg) of bone, 50 pieces (4.74 kg) of burnt hamstone, 1 flint flake, 4 fragments (1.15 kg) of a rotary quernstone, and 16 (0.07 kg) potsherds.

Most of Pit 2 was within trench A, but it partly extended westwards beyond the trench. It had a maximum diameter of 1.9 m and a minimum depth of 1.15 m. It had near-vertical sides, partly undercut in places, possibly through use or weathering. The upper part of the pit was cut through natural subsoil and the lower part through natural hamstone. The excavation of the pit was terminated at a depth of 1.6 m below the present ground surface, although a probe indicated that it continued for a depth of at least 1.3 m. The unexcavated fill was observed to contain quantities of finds, primarily slingstones and bones. The finds from Pit 2 were more numerous than from Pit 1, and included 622 (26.96 kg) slingstones, 2 (0.08 kg) possible slingstones, 396 pieces (1.9 kg) of bone, 30 pieces (3.44 kg) of burnt hamstone, 2 iron objects, a bronze spherical object, daub, worked flint, and 90 (0.95 kg) potsherds.

Finds

Pottery

108 potsherds (1.04 kg) were found, of which 16 were from Pit 1 and 90 from Pit 2, all Iron Age in date. An unstratified Iron Age sherd came from trench A and an unstratified post-medieval sherd from trench B. The diagnostic pottery was decorated with incised Glastonbury-style motifs (Fig. 3), dating to the 2nd century BC at Ham Hill (Morris 1987; Smith 1991). The remaining pottery appears to be of

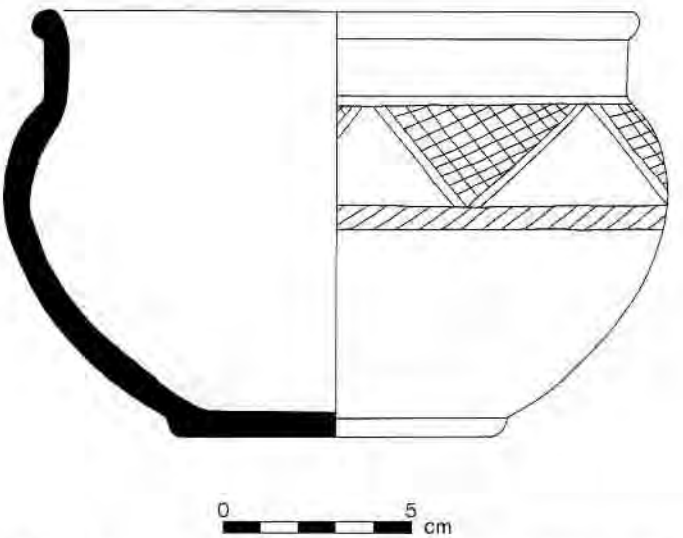

Fig. 3 Iron Age pottery bowl with incised Glastonbury-style motifs, from Pit 2.

a similar date. The types and fabrics of pottery found in Pits 1 and 2 are broadly similar, implying that the pits may have been contemporary. No adjoining sherds between Pits 1 and 2 were found, but the amount of pottery from Pit 1 was rather small. The pottery includes sandy fabrics with abundant inclusions, shell-tempered fabrics and friable vesicular fabrics, and was all hand-made.

Baked Clay
6 fragments (0.007 kg) of baked clay, possibly daub or loomweight, came from Pit 2.

Slingstones
630 slingstones (27.24 kg) were found, of which 8 were from Pit 1 and 622 from Pit 2. The pebbles selected for the slingstones are mostly oval in shape, and are approximately 50 mm in length, with some smaller and larger ones. The pebbles are mainly quartzites, with some sandstones and occasional flint. They were probably deliberately selected and brought to the site from further afield.

Provenance of the Slingstones, by Dr D.P. Jefferson
The shape of the pebbles, compared to those of the local beaches, suggests that these stones came from the coast. The composition of the assemblage is between that of the Budleigh Salterton Pebble beds, which contain quartzites/sandstones, and Chesil Beach, which is reported to contain appreciable quantities of flint. This direct comparison with modern beach assemblages should be treated with caution, though, since the position of the coastline and the hydrology of the coastal waters during the Iron Age are unknown, and it is quite possible that Chesil Beach did not exist. However, it is reasonable to suggest that during the Iron Age pebbles matching those found at Ham Hill could have been collected from beaches between Bridport and Weymouth.

Quernstone
1 large fragment and 3 small fragments (1.15 kg) of an upper rotary quernstone of sandstone were found in Pit 1, almost certainly from a hard sandstone horizon in the Abbotsbury Ironstone which outcrops near the coast around the village of Abbotsbury (Dr D.P. Jefferson, *pers. comm.*).

Flint and Chert
12 pieces (0.11 kg) of flint and chert were found. 2 pieces were unworked, 2 pieces were of Mesolithic date, and the remainder were of late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age date. Unstratified in trench A were a core and a microlith of Mesolithic date, a struck flake, a side and end scraper, and a broken scraper fragment. Two struck flakes were unstratified in trench B. A damaged struck flake was from Pit 1, and two unworked fragments, a struck flake and a broken thumbnail scraper were from Pit 2.

Burnt Hamstone
80 pieces (8.18 kg) of burnt, reddened Ham Hill stone (hamstone) were found, of which 50 pieces were from Pit 1 and 30 pieces from Pit 2. Much burnt stone could not be recorded as it was too decayed.

Iron Ore
2 pieces (0.04 kg) of iron ore were from Pit 2.

Other Stone Artefacts, by Dr D.P. Jefferson
2 (0.08 kg) possible slingstones were found in the lower excavated fills of Pit 2. One dark greenish-grey oval piece of sandstone, possibly from the Abbotsbury Ironstone/Sandsfoot Grit sequence, was tentatively identified as a slingstone. However, it is relatively small, being only 30 mm × 26 mm × 16 mm. Although generally rough, one side appears unnaturally smooth and may have been flattened by a rubbing motion. A piece of calcareous tufa was also provisionally identified as a slingstone. However, the material is relatively weak, only two-thirds the weight of an equivalent quartz pebble, and since it would have had to be transported to the site, it would seem an unlikely choice for a slingstone. Moreover, tufa is relatively rare. The stone is almost circular, with a diameter of about 47 mm, and roughly oval in crosss-section, its maximum thickness being about 26 mm. There is slight polishing on one side, although this may not be significant, the material being very soft.

It is interesting to note that the slingstones, the quernstone, the iron ore and the tufa could all have been obtained from within a 3 km radius of the 5 m thick iron-ore deposit at Abbotsbury.

Bones
3 pieces (0.08 kg) of bone were unstratified and 495 pieces (2.40 kg) were from stratified contexts, of which 99 pieces were from Pit 1 and 396 pieces from Pit 2. The bones were in a generally friable state, and were primarily of cattle, horse and sheep.

Metal
In Pit 2 were found an iron shaft, 76 mm in length, possibly a nail or a small implement; a small flat piece of iron; and a spherical broken lump of bronze, flattened at both ends and with a groove down one edge, height 14 mm, diameter 17 mm (0.01 kg). A small iron axehead, probably post-medieval in date, was unstratified in trench C.

Conclusions

The assessment excavation was of a small size but nevertheless produced additional evidence on the nature and dating of the occupation of Ham Hill, still imprecisely understood owing to the unpublished state of most of the previous excavations. Finds of unstratified worked flint and chert indicate activity on the site during the Mesolithic and late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age.

Trench A provided evidence of two pits of Iron Age date with near-vertical or undercut sides. In both pit fills, no distinct layers could be discerned. The pits were probably originally constructed for use as storage pits, but later appear to have been deliberately filled in during a single process, possibly for the disposal of domestic refuse, as well as quantities of slingstones. Adjoining potsherds were found throughout the pit fills (such as one bowl from Pit 2; Fig. 3). Darker areas indicated the presence of charcoal, and burnt hamstone was also present. Analysis of similar pit fills excavated in 1983 (Smith 1991) showed that carbonised cereal grain, chaff and weed seeds were present. The finds associated with the pits were consistently Iron Age in date, apart from the worked flint and chert which are derived from earlier activity on the site during the Mesolithic and late Neolithic/ Early Bronze Age. The evidence of the pottery implies that the two Iron Age pits may have been contemporary, probably dating to the 2nd century BC.

The two pits appear to indicate a continuation westwards of pits and a house found in 1983 (Smith 1991). They indicate domestic activity in, and probably occupation of, this part of the site during the later Iron Age. No indications of occupation of Iron Age or other date were observed in trenches B and C. These two trenches indicate a lack of occupation in this area of the site, again confirming the results of the 1983 excavation (Smith 1991).

Acknowledgements

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