Excavation of a Bronze Age site at Mells Road, Vobster Cross, Mells, Somerset

Agata Socha-Paszkiewicz and Richard Tabor

Extracted from the Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society for 2020.

Volume 164, 292-99

Produced in Great Britain by Short Run Press, Exeter.

1SSN 0081-2056

have been noted above. A Middle-Later Bronze Age date for the Broome's Field enclosure suggests comparison to the form of an enclosure at Down Farm, Dorset. That settlement consisted of a three-sided ditch with an interior bank, encompassing a palisade within which were a number of buildings (Barrett *et al.* 1991, fig. 5.41). The area enclosed by the ditch at Broome's Field is broadly 40m by 20m, and the Down Farm example roughly 45m by 35m (Green 2000, 106, fig. 73). In the Down Farm case, excavation revealed that the ditch, with a matching internal bank, enclosed a pre-existing settlement comprising a series of post-built roundhouses and a long rectangular building (Green 2000, 106). The geophysical anomalies within the Broome's Field enclosure shown in Figs 2 and 3 would not be inconsistent with a similar arrangement. However at the Broome's Field enclosure, the evidence for a bank is not equivocal; initial silting appears to be from the exterior edge of the ditch. Nevertheless, truncation has removed all indication of a bank on either side, and the intervention covered an admittedly limited proportion of the enclosure ditch. The limited excavation also did not explore further the interior of the enclosure, but its form suggests that even if truncated, evidence of settlement may well be preserved within it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Mr Charles who originally drew attention to the potential of the area, the landowner Mr Broome, and everyone involved in the fieldwork, in particular Nigel Harvey. Figures were prepared by Mike Trevarthen and Liz Caldwell.

REFERENCES

Barrett, J., Bradley, R. J. and Green, M., 1991. *Landscape, Monuments and Society: the Prehistory of Cranborne Chase*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

British Geological Survey (BGS), 2015. *Geology of Britain Viewer*, www.bgs.ac.uk [accessed: December 2015].

Brück, J., 2006. 'Fragmentation, personhood and the social construction of technology in Middle and Late Bronze Age Britain', *Cambridge Archaeol. J.* 16:3, 297-315.

Caldwell, E., 2013. Broome Field, Misterton. Gradiometer survey 2013, SSARG unpubl. report GS1009a.

Cleal, R., 1991. 'The earlier prehistoric pottery', in N. Sharples, *Maiden Castle: Survey and Excavation and field survey 1985-6*, London: English Heritage, 171-85.

Green, M., 2000. *A landscape revealed: 10,000 years on a chalkland farm*, Stroud: Tempus.

Harding, P. and Bellamy, P., 1991. 'A comparison of the Early Neolithic and Middle-Late Bronze Age industries with application to the Loscombe colluvial deposits (W38)', in P. Woodward, *The South Dorset Ridgeway: Survey and Excavation 1977-84*, Dorchester: Dorset Nat. Hist. Archaeol. Soc. Mono. 8, 87-95.

National Soil Resources Institute (NSRI), 2015. *Soilscapes* http://www.landis.org.uk/soilscapes/ [accessed: December 2015].

Robertson-Mackay, R., 1987. 'The Neolithic Causewayed Enclosure at Staines, Surrey: Excavations 1961-63', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 53, 23-128.

Smith, I., 1981. 'The Neolithic Pottery', in R. Mercer, 'Excavations at Carn Brea, Illogan, Cornwall – a Neolithic fortified complex of the third millennium BC', *Cornish Archaeol.* 20, 161-79.

Tabor, R., 2008. *Cadbury Castle: The hillfort and landscapes*, Stroud: The History Press.

–, in prep. 'Mesolithic to Later Bronze Age: the worked flint and chert', in R. Tabor and C. Randall, *The South Cadbury Environs Project: The prehistoric landscapes*.

–, and Darvill, T., 2020. 'Prehistoric ceramics and associated radiocarbon dating from the hinterland of South Cadbury, Somerset, England. Part 1: Chronological framework and character of the Early Neolithic to late Bronze Age pottery', *SANH* 163, 1-30.

–, and Randall, C., 2018. 'Early Neolithic Pits at Cadbury Castle and an adjoining temporary occupation site at Milsom's Corner, South Cadbury', *SANH* 161, 1-48.

EXCAVATION OF A BRONZE AGE SITE AT MELLS ROAD, VOBSTER CROSS, MELLS, SOMERSET

AGATA SOCHA-PASZKIEWICZ AND RICHARD TABOR

SUMMARY

Excavations in two small areas revealed a four- or six-post structure with associated pits and postholes, and two pits and a posthole cluster of Late Bronze Age date. Charcoal obtained from one of the pits produced a radiocarbon date of 1110-926 cal BC which correlates well with dates anticipated from the pottery assemblage.

INTRODUCTION

In October 2017, TVAS South West conducted an archaeological excavation at Mells Road, Vobster Cross,

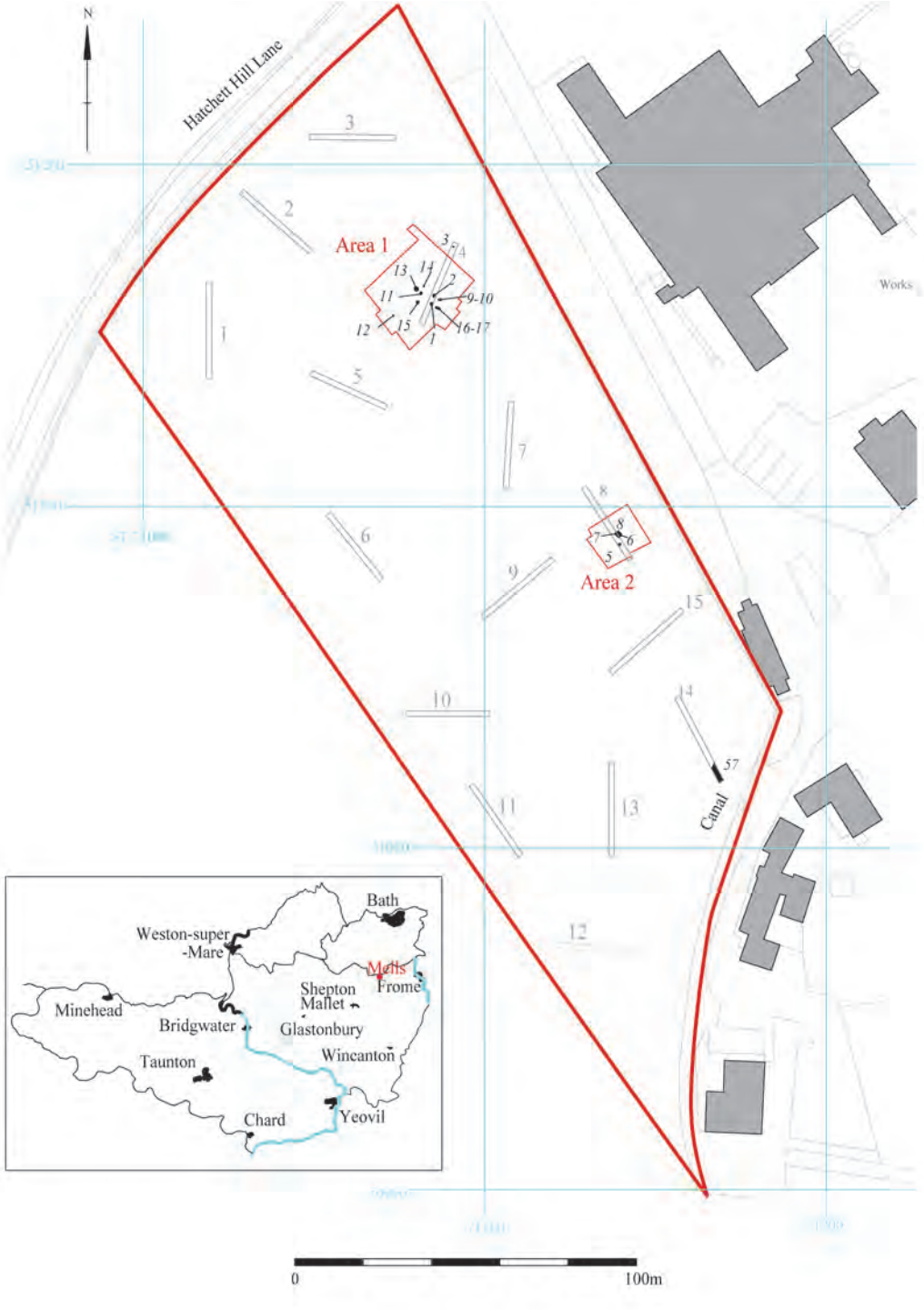

Fig. 1 Site location and excavation areas in relation to evaluation trenches

Mells, Somerset (ST 7109 5109*)* (Fig. 1), in advance of industrial development on the site. Planning permission was subject to a condition which required a programme of archaeological works, in accordance with the Department for Communities and Local Government's *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF 2012), and Mendip District Council's policies. A geophysical survey revealed little of obvious archaeological interest (Dawson 2017a), but trial trenching (Dawson 2017b) demonstrated the presence of Bronze Age features, and so two small areas within the 0.8ha site were targeted for further investigation.

The site is located 2.5km to the north-west of the village of Mells, between Radstock and Frome, set within a larger arable field, with a concrete manufacturing plant to the north and east and further arable land on all other sides. Hatchet Hill Lane marked the western edge of the field (Fig. 1). The land has a gradual slope down from the south-west to the east at approximately 134m above Ordnance Datum. The underlying geology is an Inferior Oolite group limestone (BGS 2000). Yellowish white limestone was observed on site, with a number of solution holes, caused by acid erosion of the limestone, filled by reddish brown clay.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The area has known archaeological sites of Iron Age, Roman and medieval dates, although there was nothing previously recorded for the site itself. Desk-based assessment (Bray 2017), geophysical (magnetometry) survey (Dawson 2017a) and trial trench evaluation (Dawson 2017b) had been undertaken for the site. The eastern end of the site was crossed by the late 18th-century Frome branch of the Dorset and Somerset Canal (backfilled in the 1950s). The geophysical survey identified anomalies associated with agricultural activity and the line of the canal, but no obviously archaeological anomalies.

The evaluation trenching, however, revealed three pits and a posthole, two of which were of mid to late Bronze Age date and the other two presumed contemporary. Based on these results, the Somerset Senior Historic Environment Officer requested further archaeological work. Two areas around the identified features were therefore selected for excavation, with the general aims of advancing understanding of these features and any others nearby.

THE EXCAVATION

Area 1 targeted pits 1 and 2 from evaluation Trench 4, while Area 2 centred on pit 5 in Trench 8 (Fig. 1). The areas were mechanically stripped of topsoil and subsoil under archaeological supervision. Both areas were extended (Area A to 597 sq m, Area B to 188 sq m) to examine additional suspected features, but all of these turned out to be natural (solution hollows and tree throws). All of the archaeological features were fully excavated. A programme of sieving for environmental remains yielded only small unidentifiable fragments of charcoal and just one burnt weed seed (from pit 6).

Area 1 (Figs 2 and 4)

All of the features within Area 1 contained very similar fills of reddish grey brown, quite sterile silty clay (Fig. 2). Four (1, 9, 10 and 11) contained pottery of Late Bronze Age date which combined, with one surface find, amounted to 15 sherds, weighing just 22.5g in total.

Two postholes (11 and 15) and two pairs of postholes (9-10 and 16-17) were uncovered to the north-west and south-east of postholes 1 and 2. All were circular or near-circular and varied from 0.68–0.84m in diameter and from 0.23-0.33m deep. Postholes 1, 2, 11 and 15 appeared to form a roughly rectangular structure with external dimensions of 4.8m by 3.7m. It seems likely that two pairs of postholes, 9-10, and 16-17 were either a small ancillary structure or formed a partially offset lean-to. The pairings may be indicative of post replacement.

To the north-west of the four-post structure were pit 13 and posthole 14. Both were circular in plan: pit 13 was 1.20m in diameter and 0.30m deep; while posthole 14 was 0.22m in diameter and 0.20m deep. It was cut partially into a shallow irregular tree root hole. Further to the south-west, an isolated small pit/scoop (12) was 0.49m in diameter and just 0.13m deep.

Alternatively, the intercutting post pairs (8-10, 16-17) could be a porch for a roundhouse, facing SE which is the predominant orientation for such structures. Albeit of unusual design, the four-post arrangement could then represent a box-like principal structural component of a building to support a roof, with non-surviving stake, turf or wattlework walls surrounding them; or a construction using, for example, a non-earthfast timber base-plate. As yet another alternative, postholes 1, 2, 13 ,14 and 15 formed a slightly better circle, with a porch, which would have a diameter only just over 5m, and posthole 11 was internal (or unrelated).

Area 2 (Figs 2-4)

Two pits (6 and 7) and a post pad (8) were identified to add to pit 5 found during the evaluation. Pit 5 was 0.5m in diameter and 0.22m deep. Its dark brown silty clay fill (56) contained three sherds of pottery and a tiny scrap of unidentifiable animal bone (the only bone from the site). Pits 6 and 7 lay adjacent to one another (Fig. 3), were trapezoidal in plan and with flat but uneven bases. Pit 6 was 1.6m by 1.2m and 0.25m deep; pit 7 was 2.2m by 1.2m

Fig. 2 Plans of Areas 1 and 2 (not in correct relative positions) showing distribution of pottery

Fig. 3 Pits 6 and 7, looking north-east: scales 2m, 0.2m and 0.1m

and just 0.07m deep (Fig. 4). The relationship between the two pits was unclear as both appeared to be filled by same deposit of greyish red brown silty clay, although in pit 6 this contained visibly more charcoal. Pits 6 and 7 contained 107 Late Bronze Age pottery sherds, 93 of which came from pit 6. The date of this feature was confirmed by a radiocarbon date on charcoal of 1110-926 cal BC (UBA-36550).

A possible circular post pad (8) just to the north-east of pit 7 was 0.18m in diameter and 0.05m deep but contained no artefacts.

FINDS

Prehistoric pottery

Richard Tabor

The combined prehistoric pottery assemblage from the evaluation and excavation comprised a total of 124 sherds weighing 290g with a very low mean weight of 2.3g (Table 1). Four fabrics were identified, two of which, S1 and mG1, were represented entirely by formless sherds. It is possible that the differences between fabrics L1 and V1 may be accounted for entirely by taphonomic variation with local conditions of deposit 58 in pit 6 being hostile to calcareous inclusions. L1 showed little or no loss of inclusions and breaks were often fresh; there were no visible inclusions in V1 and surface and breaks were very weathered.

L1 (coarse) Moderately hard grey fabric with buff orange to grey surfaces including abundant poorly-sorted fine (<1mm) to sparse coarse (<8mm) sub-angular shelly limestone, sparsely as fossil shell plate.

V1 (medium) Moderately soft grey, silty, corky, vesicular fabric with buff orange to dark grey exterior and dark grey to buff brown interior surfaces. Prolific voids varying from fine (<1mm) to coarse (<6mm) sub-rounded to sub-angular voids, some of which are clearly of curved shell impressions.

S1 (medium) Poorly-fired grey brown fabric with buff orange exterior including sparse to moderate fine (<1mm) and rare coarse (<3) sub-angular reddish brown iron oxides.

mG1 (medium) Moderately soft buff pink to grey, sparsely micaceous silty fabric with buff pink surfaces including poorly sorted moderate medium to coarse (<5) sub-angular reddish brown fine (<1mm) iron oxides.

Sherds in fabric L1 were generally of a wall-thickness range of between 7-8mm but with outliers of 5mm and 10mm. Sherds in V1 were consistently within a wall-thickness range of 6-7mm with the exception of one lower wall or basal sherd which was 8mm thick.

Feature sherds were exclusive to pit 6, all in fabric V1. All were too small to ascertain their forms with certainty. The single definite rim was of simple rounded form, possibly upright and from a neutral bowl. A second rim was

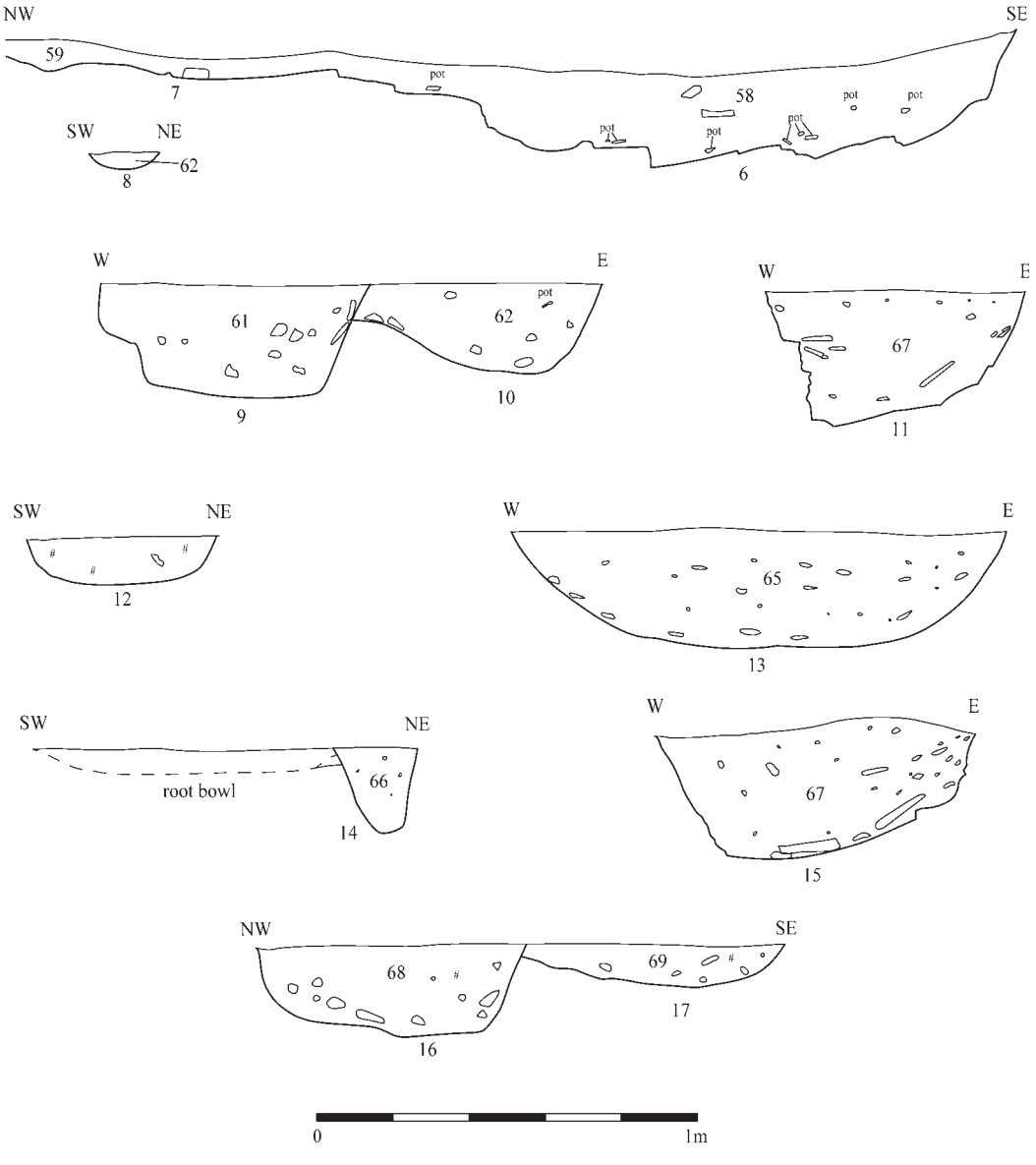

Fig. 4 Sections

TABLE 1 DISTRIBUTION OF POTTERY FABRICS BY SHERD COUNT AND WEIGHT (IN GRAMS) BY CONTEXT

		L1		V1		S1		mG1		Totals	
cut	deposit	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt
Area 1	surface	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	5	1	5
1	52	3	33	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	33
5	56	1	2	-	-	2	6	-	-	3	8
6	58	-	-	93	185	-	-	-	-	93	185
7	59	9	44	5	2	-	-	-	-	14	46
9	61	5	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	4
10	62	2	7	2	0.5	-	-	-	-	4	7.5
14	66	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
Totals		21	91	100	188	2	6	1	5	124	290

badly abraded but appeared to be upright with a bead-like profile from a closed bowl. A third sherd may either have been a badly eroded base-angle or from an incurved rounded rim with inward expansion or thickening. Two further sherds appeared to be from a lower wall or curved base.

The crushed fossil shell reflects the local oolitic limestone geology, similar fabrics occurring routinely in Early Neolithic, Late Bronze Age and Iron Age pottery over much of Somerset. The largest assemblages are from the south and west of the county but a sparse collection from a chambered tomb at nearby Fromefield House, Frome, featured inclusions of oolitic shelly limestone, albeit mixed with flint (Vatcher and Vatcher 1973, 22). At Brean Down, on the western extreme of the Mendips, limestone occurred in earlier Bronze Age pottery but peaked in the Middle Bronze Age (Williams and Woodward 1990, tab. 7). However, the thickness of the limestone sherds of 6mm to 8mm is thinner than is typical of Middle Bronze Age coarse pottery. It should be noted also that during the Late Bronze Age calcite was often added to limestone mixtures and that it is lacking here. At Dibble's Farm, Christon, south-east of Weston-Super-Mare, fossil shell fabrics were given an extremely broad date range of 1st millennium BC but a date significantly after 800BC seems most likely for sherds in fabric L1 (Morris 1989, 29-41, tab 3). The predominance of finer shell inclusions is suggestive of an Earlier Middle to Middle Iron Age date. The marked weathering of sherds in V1 may be due simply to a significantly longer period of deposition and the generally thinner walls coupled with the curvature of two lower wall/basal sherds would allow attribution to Early Neolithic bowl pottery. However, should the possible third rim sherd have been a base angle the pottery would necessarily be of later date and the Late Bronze Age radiocarbon date would be perfectly acceptable.

The sandy and grog tempered fabrics may be fired clay, rather than pottery. Similar material has been noted by the author in later Bronze Age cylindrical loomweights from Sigwells on different geology in south-east Somerset.

Radiocarbon dating

A sample of unidentified charcoal from pit 6 (58) was submitted to the Chrono radiocarbon dating laboratory at the Queen's University of Belfast for AMS dating. The result was calibrated using Calib rev 7.0 with data from INTCAL 13 (Reimer *et al.* 2013) and detailed in Table 2, where the probability is expressed as relative area under the curve at 2-sigma (95.4% confidence). The sample produced a result considered reliable and the date lies well within the range anticipated for the context.

CONCLUSION

Dating evidence from Area 1 was modest and although the pottery is assigned a Late Bronze Age date no featured sherds were present for confirmation. However such sherds were recovered from pit 6 in Area 2, which allowed for much more confident dating to the Late Bronze Age. This dating was confirmed by a radiocarbon date of 1110-926 cal BC on charcoal from pit 6. Other than pottery, the only artefacts recovered were two flints: a flake from topsoil in evaluation Trench 4 and a core also from topsoil in Trench 8. Although it cannot be much more than speculation, it is suggested that all of the excavated features were contemporary.

Four-post structures of similar scale have been

TABLE 2 RADIOCARBON DATE

Lab Id	Material	Feature	F14C	Radiocarbon Age	cal BC	Probability
UBA-36550	Charcoal	Pit 6 (58)	0.7014±0.0026	2849 ± 30	1110-926	100%

interpreted conventionally as granaries and fodder ricks, for example during the Middle to Late Iron Age at Danebury, Hampshire (Cunliffe 1995, 27, fig. 11) and are widely recognized on sites of that period. They were almost the only feature type in the interior of the Middle Iron Age 'marsh-fort' at Sutton Common in South Yorkshire (Van de Noort *et al*. 2007). However, similar structures are also identified in the Late Bronze Age. Two well dated Late Bronze Age four-post structures from a pottery production site at Sherborne, Dorset, were interpreted as 'small roofed structures with raised floors which may have been used for storing foodstuffs or other commodities, or for stacking pots before or after firing' (Best and Woodward 2011, 209, 252, fig. 3). At Cadbury Castle, Somerset, numerous rectangular structures ranged widely in date from Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age to the mid-1st century AD (Barrett *et al.* 2000, 173-4, figs 77-80). The functional interpretation was given as storage predominantly, but a suggested sequence of shrines from the earliest period to the latest has received critical attention (Barrett *et al.* 2000, 291; Downes 1997). Four-post structures can also be found in relative isolation as demonstrated on large area quarry site excavations, as at Roundhouse Farm, Wiltshire (Cass *et al*. 2015, fig. 14, structure 6174).

However, the alternative interpretation preferred here is that the site is an occupation site. The nature of the structure on Area 1 suggests that rather than being a storage facility, it was a dwelling, albeit of uncommon (and admittedly, uncertain) form. The small number of features and limited size may indicate it was occupied for only a short time, but if the conjoining 'porch' postholes reflect replacements and are not a design feature, then some time depth is implied.

The cluster of features in Area 2 is more difficult to interpret and whilst they are considered to reflect an area of contemporary activity well away from the main house, the distance (some 75m) means there is no certainty that they need be closely related in time.

The archaeological deposits discovered, although of limited extent, nevertheless take on extra significance in being the first such deposits recorded for this period in the area, and with a secure radiocarbon date closely associated with the ceramic assemblage.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work was commissioned by Mr Daniel Bray of Ecus Limited on behalf of CPM Group which funded the project throughout, including the cost of this publication. Mr Steven Membery, Senior Historic Environment Officer for Somerset, monitored the work on behalf of Mendip District Council. The fieldwork was undertaken by Agata Socha-Paszkiewicz and Nicholas Dawson, who also prepared the figures. The archive will be deposited with Somerset Heritage Service in due course with accession number TTNCM76/2017.

REFERENCES

Barrett, J. C., Freeman, P. and Woodward, A., 2000. *Cadbury Castle Somerset: The later prehistoric and early historic archaeology*, London: English Heritage Archaeol. Rep. 20.

Best, J. and Woodward, A., 2011. 'Late Bronze Age Pottery Production: Evidence from a 12th-11th century cal BC settlement at Tinney's Lane, Sherborne, Dorset, *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 78, 207-61.

BGS, 2000, *British Geological Survey*, 1:50,000, Sheet 281, Keyworth: Solid and Drift Edition.

Bray, D., 2017. Mells Road Works, Vobster Cross, Somerset: Historic Environment Desk-Based Assessment, Basingstoke: ECUS Ltd unpubl. Rep. 9508.

Cass, S., Ford, S., Lewis, J., Taylor, A., Wallis, S. and Weale, A., 2015. *Archaeological Excavations at Roundhouse Farm, Marston Meysey, Wiltshire,* Reading: TVAS Mono. 20.

Cunliffe, B., 1995. *Danebury: An Iron Age hillfort in Hampshire. Volume 6: A hillfort community in perspective*, York: C.B.A. Res. Rep. 102.

Dawson, N., 2017a. Land at Mells Road, Vobster Cross, Mells, Somerset: geophysical survey (magnetic), TVAS unpubl. Rep. 17/106, Taunton.

–, 2017b. Land at Mells Road, Vobster Cross, Mells, Somerset, Archaeological Evaluation, TVAS unpubl. Rep. 17/106b, Taunton.

Downes, J., 1997. 'The shrine at Cadbury Castle: belief enshrined', in A. Gwilt and C. Haselgrove, *Reconstructing Iron Age Societies: New approaches to the British Iron Age,* Oxford: Oxbow Mono. 71, 145-52.

NPPF, 2012. *National Planning Policy Framework,* Dept Communities and Local Govt, London.

Morris, E., 1989. 'The Iron Age Occupation at Dibble's Farm, Christon', *SANH* 132, 23-81.

Reimer, P. J., Bard, E., Bayliss, A., Beck, J. W., Blackwell, P. G., Bronk Ramsey, C., Buck, C. E., Cheng H., Edwards, R. L., Friedrich, M., Grootes, P. M., Guilderson T. P., Haflidason, H., Hajdas, I., Hatté, C., Heaton, T. J., Hogg, A. G., Hughen, K. A., Kaiser, K. F., Kromer, B., Manning, S. W., Niu, M., Reimer, R. W., Richards, D. A., Scott, E. M., Southon, J. R., Turney, C. S. M. and van der Plicht, J., 2013. 'IntCal13 and MARINE13 radiocarbon age calibration curves 0–50000 years cal BP', *Radiocarbon* 55:4, 1869-87.

van de Noort, R., Chapman, H. P. and Collis, J. R., 2007. *Sutton Common: the excavation of an Iron Age 'marsh-fort'*, York: C.B.A. Res. Rep. 154.

Vatcher, F. and Vatcher, H., 1973. 'Trial Excavations on the site of a megalithic tomb at Fromefield, Somerset', *SANH* 117, 19-32.

Williams, D. and Woodward, A., 1990. 'Fabrics', in M. Bell, *Brean Down: Excavations 1983-1987,* London: English Heritage Archaeol. Rep. 15, 121-4.