A LATE BRONZE AGE/EARLIEST IRON AGE SETTLEMENT ON BATHAMPTON DOWN, BATH

Background

Bathampton Down, close to the City of Bath, is a rich archaeological palimpsest (Whitaker 2000; Beaton 2003; Thomas 2008). In 1965 Wainwright excavated the southern ditch and rampart of the extensive earthworks and concluded that it was an early Iron Age stock enclosure (Wainwright 1967). One of the factors he considered in attempting to date the enclosure was a collection of potsherds found just over 0.5km away. These had been discovered in 1949 by Mr J.R.T. Colley behind his house and identified by the British Museum as All Cannings Cross style.

The Revd John Skinner of Camerton frequently visited the Down in the early 19th century, dug into most of the round barrows and other earthworks, and recorded his findings in detail. In 1821 he had been excavating a barrow and wrote in his journal 'we descended the hill, a little beyond, where I had previously noticed the earth to be exceedingly dark … we found the black mould at least three feet in depth, abounding in fragments of coarse British pottery' (Skinner MS 33669, 201). He documented the site location on a map and sketched some of the pottery. This location appears to correspond to the area where Colley had dug a trench. It is situated in an overgrown wood, owned by the National Trust (NT), on the west side of Bathampton Down and overlooking the centre of Bath (Fig. 1).

Trial excavation and geophysical survey

An archaeological research agreement was obtained from the NT, and Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society (BACAS) carried out a trial excavation at the presumed Colley site in October 2008. Three test pits were excavated and more than 370 finds were recovered, mostly dating to the 19th century, but there was no prehistoric pottery.

In March 2010 Iron Age potsherds were discovered on top of the spoil heaps of a large badger sett concealed in deep undergrowth in the wood. The sett was about 55m north of the trial excavation site, and had at least seven large spoil heaps, some with patches of very dark or black soil. A terraced area in the wood about 75m long and 10–20m wide was cleared by the NT, and a geophysical survey was undertaken in November

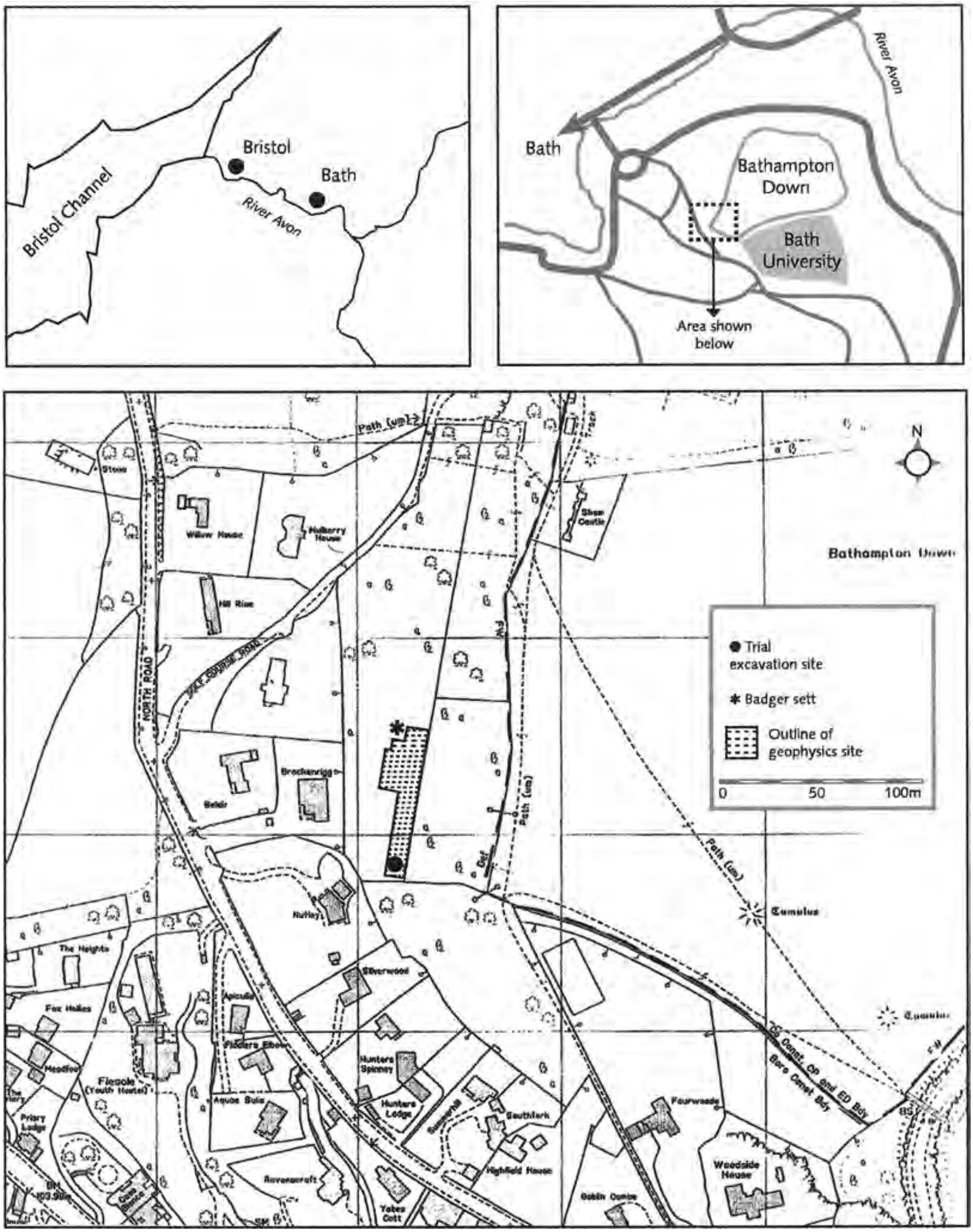

Fig. 1 Site location map showing the area of geophysical surveying, the trial excavation site and the badger sett © Crown Copyright and database right. © OS licence number 100051516

2010 by BACAS members. A twin-probe resistance survey was carried out using a Geoscan RM15D and a magnetometer survey was carried out using a Bartington 601-2 dual fluxgate gradiometer.

The resistance findings were of wall tumble along the south and east edges, and retaining wall footings to the west at the break of slope. In the north of the area what appears to be a rectangular building continues beyond the plot, apparently set at an angle to the grid and to the contour (Fig. 2). The magnetometry results were of a series of probable postholes and/or pits, forming a rectangular pattern extending across the terrace at about the same angle as the building described above. These postholes extend across the area of lowest resistance, and suggest some form of timber structure associated with the building. The southern two grids were of no value as the area appeared to be heavily contaminated magnetically.

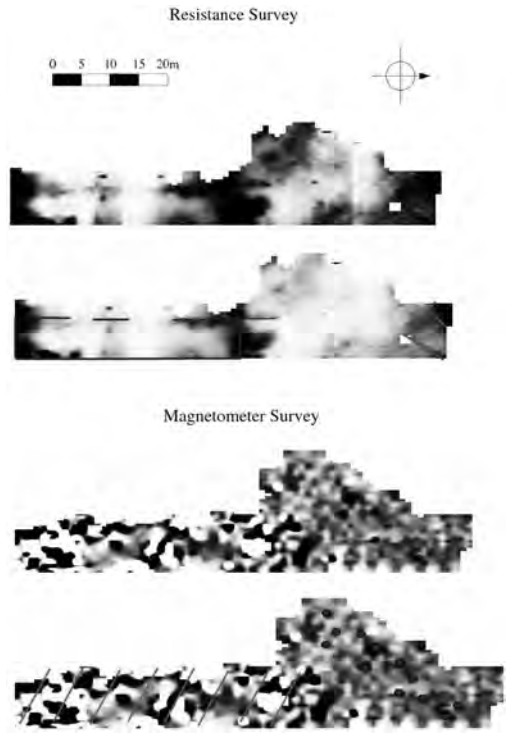

Fig. 2 Results of the geophysical survey with an interpretation given below each survey image

The pottery by Lisa Brown

Some 68 sherds of pottery weighing 2312g were recovered. The pottery is in notably good condition, the sherds exhibiting mostly fresh and unabraded surfaces. The average sherd weight of 32g is very high for a later prehistoric assemblage. Also considered here, but not examined, is the small group of pottery found by J.R.T. Colley (Thomas 2008, 51) and referred to by Wainwright (1967), and the sherds illustrated by Skinner (British Library MS 33669; Thomas 2008, 53).

The pottery can be very broadly dated on stylistic attributes to the 10th–6th centuries BC, and resembles that from All Cannings Cross (Cunnington 1923). Specific elements of the combined Bathampton Down collection, however, suggest that what has so far been recovered belongs to the end of this date range, perhaps, but not necessarily, restricted to the 7th–6th centuries BC.

No petrological study has been undertaken but the fabrics reflect the local solid geology of the Bath region. Four fabrics were recognised:

SM (57 sherds, 82% by weight) fine clay with predominantly fossil shell inclusions.

OSM (5 sherds, 13% by weight) fine clay incorporating oolites and rare fossil shell.

QSM (3 sherds, 3% by weight) predominantly quartz sand with sparse fossil shell.

QCM (3 sherds, 3% by weight) predominantly quartz sand and limestone.

Despite the excellent overall condition and large sherd size no complete profiles were recovered. Several fragments belonged to flaring and everted rim vessels that are unfortunately fractured at the juncture with the neck or shoulder, precluding precise form classification. However, sufficient numbers of distinctive sherds were recovered to allow the identification of a small variety of forms. These include tripartite, carinated and biconical bowls and jars, a single furrowed bowl and simple undecorated vessels with inturning rims. Several sherds are decorated, either with finger-impression or incised motifs. Simple undecorated coarseware jars are represented in this assemblage by large, flat body sherds with brushed or wiped surfaces.

The furrowed bowl has no rim so it is not possible to determine whether this was a bipartite type, dated 8th–7th century BC or a long-necked version, produced into the 6th century BC (Gingell *et al*. 2000, 150). However, a long-necked furrowed bowl was found by Colley (Wainwright 1967, 48; Cunliffe 2005, fig. A:9). A jar fragment with incised decoration and a carinated wide-mouth jar or large bowl with everted rim and fingertipped, angular shoulder allow only a very broad date range of

10th–6th centuries BC to be proposed. Two simple cup-shaped vessels with incurving rims have broad parallels at All Cannings Cross (eg Cunnington 1923, pl. 28, 18) and Potterne (Gingell *et al*., 2000, Cup Type 80) where they are dated to the 7th century BC. These, however, represent a very general category of simple vessels with plain rims that originated in the late Bronze Age, referred to by Barrett (1980) as 'Plain Ware', and are not particularly well-dated.

The pottery from Bathampton Down fits comfortably within the late Bronze Age/earliest Iron Age stylistic ceramic tradition of the Wessex region, recognised in the 1920s at the type site of All Cannings Cross (Cunnington 1923). Some of the vessels have Plain Ware affinities, but, as there is no stratigraphic framework for the site, a clear ceramic sequence cannot be offered.

Discussion

The geophysical survey suggests a number of large postholes and possible pits, close to the badger sett. The 0.5m resolution of the magnetometry does not allow accurate measurements of the size of the postholes, but they were presumably from roundhouses. There is also the intriguing possibility of a rectangular structure. The extent and character of the settlement, whether it was open or enclosed, remains unknown as the geophysical survey was so restricted. The finding of potsherds on dark soil is very suggestive that badgers had been digging into primary occupation deposits, possibly pits, ditches or a midden. The latter is also suggested by Skinner's description of 'black mould' three feet deep.

The pottery assemblage dates to the range 10th–6th century BC, probably restricted to the 7th–6th centuries BC. However precise dating has been precluded by the lack of a stratigraphic sequence and the small size of the assemblage. The site is about 0.5km from the large hilltop enclosure on the Down and close to an extensive 'Celtic' field system. Large hilltop enclosures of this type are thought to have originated in the earliest Iron Age (Cunliffe 2005, 378) so it seems likely that the occupants of the settlement were contemporaneous with this enclosure.

Evidence of late Bronze Age/early Iron Age non-hillfort settlement is rare on the Cotswold limestone (Moore 2007, 262), so the findings presented here, though somewhat meagre, add to our information about this important period.

Acknowledgements

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