

RESCUE EXCAVATIONS ON BRONZE AGE SITES IN THE SOUTH WONSTON AREA

By RICHARD WHINNEY

ABSTRACT

Four small rescue and salvage excavations undertaken by the author for Winchester Archaeology Office, on sites of Bronze Age date in an area of chalk downland to the north of Winchester, are reported. In general, the excavations yielded only limited information, mainly because the sites had all been badly damaged by agricultural activities. The investigation of a round barrow, a linear ditch, a possible round house, and a ring ditch is described and they are also placed in their wider Bronze Age context.

INTRODUCTION

This short paper is a record of a number of small scale excavations on Bronze Age sites, carried out in advance of redevelopments in the vicinity of the village of South Wonston (SU 465 359), some 6.0km north of Winchester (Fig 1b). Three of the sites (Fig 1c, A, B and C) were investigated prior to their destruction by the construction of the new A34 Sutton Scotney and South Wonston by-pass in 1979 and 1980. The fourth site (Fig 1c, D) was hurriedly examined when it was unexpectedly revealed in August 1984 during site preparation works for the Amoco-Ultramar Stockbridge No. 1 oil-well adjacent to the B3420 Winchester-Andover road.

All of the sites were located on the chalk downlands to the north-west of Winchester (Fig 1b) in an area of intensive modern arable farming. They had all been substantially damaged and degraded by these activities over the years, and therefore the excavations were undertaken on rather poorly preserved sites. The report should be read with this consideration in mind.

BRONZE AGE BACKGROUND (Fig 1c)

The map shows the location of the known sites, monuments and find spots in the area which may be dated to the Bronze Age. They can be grouped under the following general headings:

- burial sites (barrows, ring ditches)(sites 1-18)
- field systems
- linear ditches (sites 19-22)
- metal finds (site 23)

From this general distribution, it can be seen the South Wonston area presents a fairly typical picture of Bronze Age landscapes as they are understood on the chalk downlands of Wessex. This is especially true in that the ubiquitous burial mounds and something of the once extensive field systems are present in the archaeological record, but there are no indications of the contemporary settlement sites which obviously must have existed (but see site C).

There are some eighteen burial mounds or ring ditches in the area, all of which have been in some way disturbed, damaged or ploughed down. Their overall distribution and location, and their generally poor state of preservation is entirely typical of such sites on much of the broad sweep of the central Hampshire chalklands. There is no indication of the flat 'urnfield' type of cemetery which has been found in other parts of Hampshire (Fasham & Whinney 1985, 9-10; Dacre & Ellison 1981).

The large block of Celtic field systems which occupy the low, poorly pronounced east-west ridge of higher ground is known only from soil-

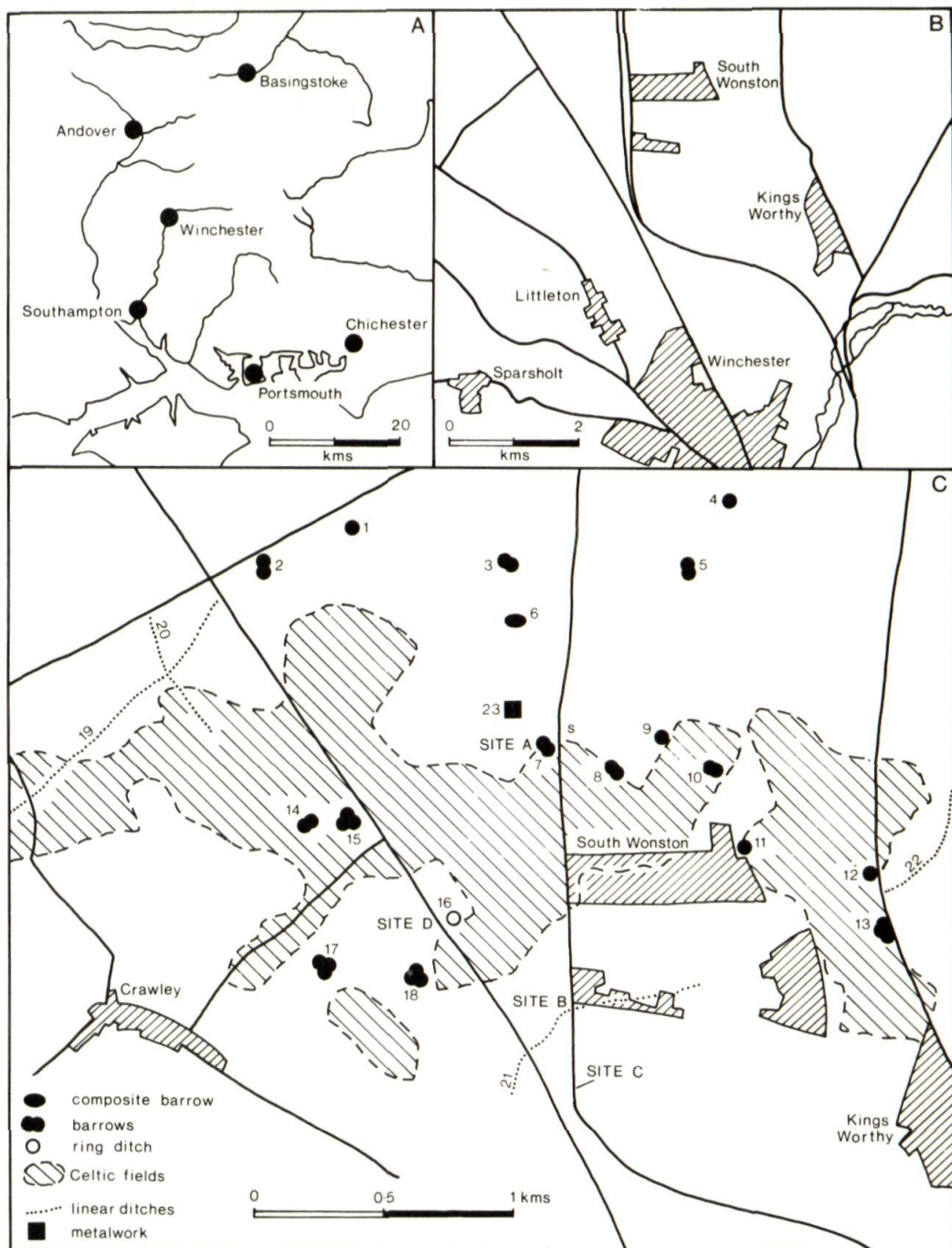


Fig 1. General location plans. A: Hampshire. B: Chalk downland north of Winchester. C: Bronze Age sites and find spots.

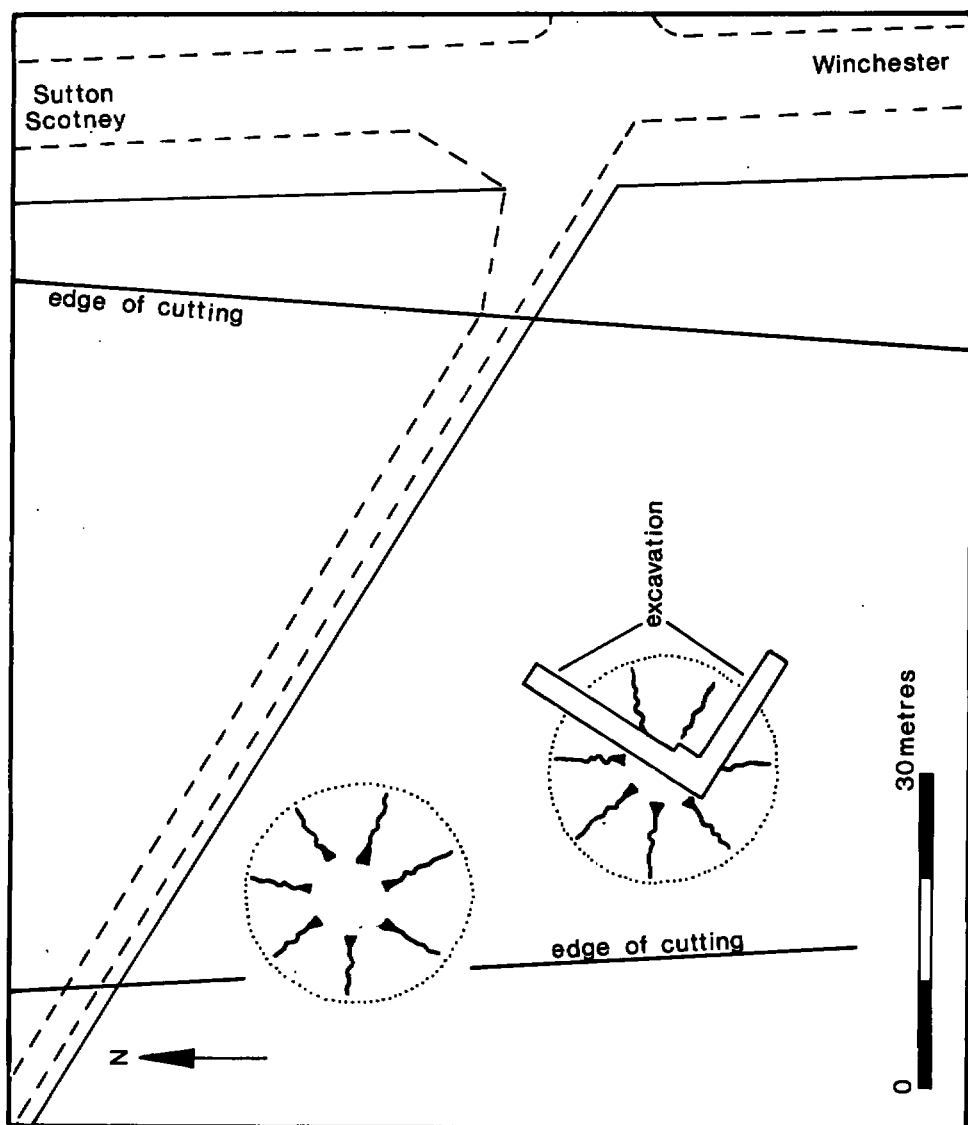


Fig 2. Site A, round barrow, Larkwhistle Farm. Plan of the barrows as they survived in 1979.

and crop-marks visible on aerial photographs. No upstanding earthworks survive. Although some of the details may be obscure, it is clear that the general position and extent of this large zone of fields is on the whole an accurate modern reflection of the later prehistoric landscape. There is no direct archaeological evidence for a Bronze Age date for this block of

fields – indeed parts of them are later in origin – but it seems likely that at least some parts of the system were laid out at this time (Bowen 1975b, 105–6).

The relationship between the Celtic field systems and the burial mounds is worthy of some consideration. Although not always the case, there are a number of instances of edges

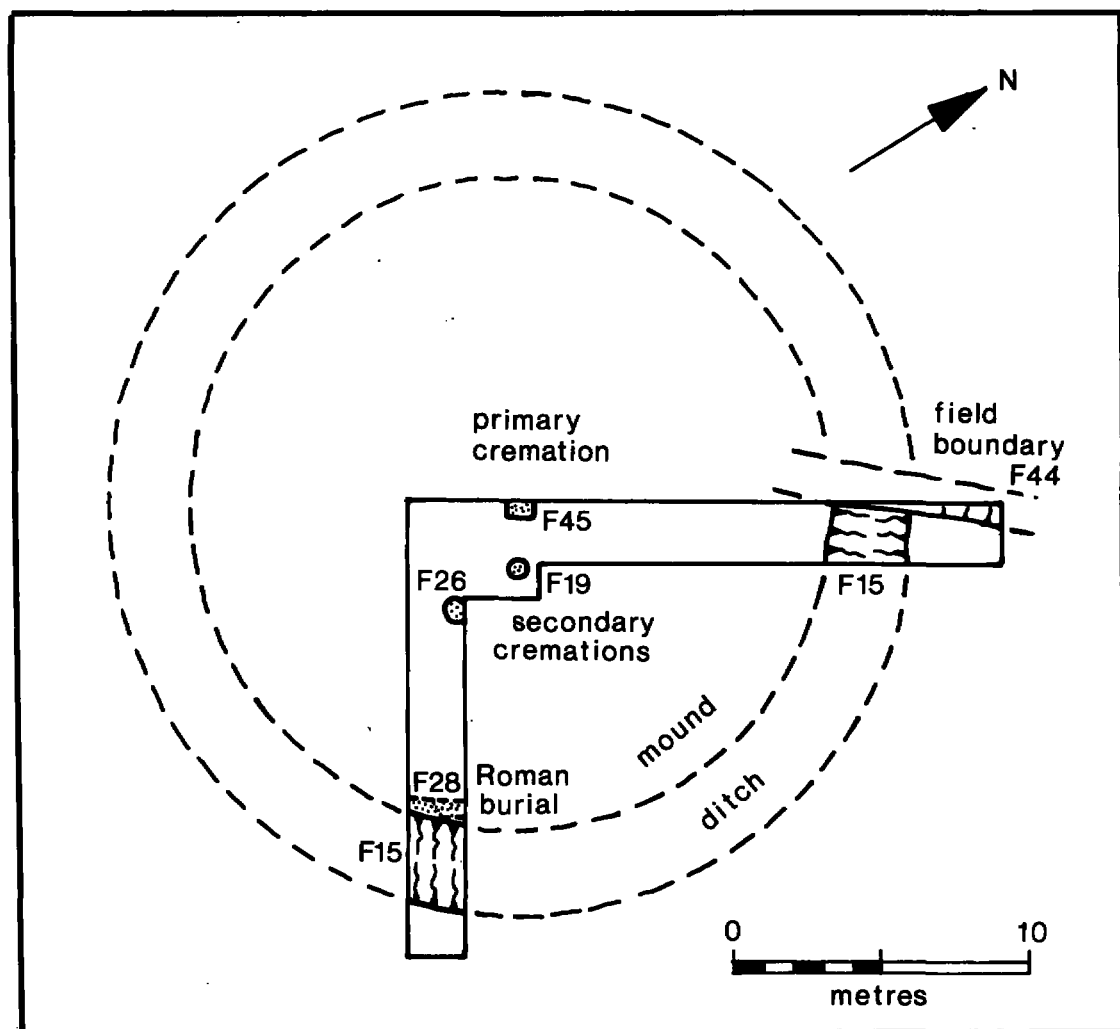


Fig 3. Site A, round barrow, Larkwhistle Farm. Plan of the excavated trenches, showing the main features located.

of the blocks of fields apparently coinciding quite closely with the position of barrows (Fig 1c, barrows 7-13, also ring ditch 16). It appears that either the field systems may have been laid out using the barrows as guides or indicators, or that the barrows were deliberately constructed at the edge of the arable farming land, in order to cause as little disturbance as possible.

There are similar difficulties with the origins, development and longevity of the

linear ditches as there are with the Celtic fields. Again, no direct evidence is available from the map area, but a middle Bronze Age origin, and a long period of use, perhaps into the Romano-British period, is attested elsewhere in Wessex (Bowen 1975a, 47, 51; Fasham & Whinney 1985, 12; Evans & Vaughan 1985).

Apart from the sites discussed in this paper, there is no direct dating evidence for any of the sites and monuments indicated on the map

(Fig 1c): However, there is some indirect evidence for an Early Bronze Age date for the composite barrow (site 6) (Fasham & Ross 1978; Fasham 1979), and for a Middle Bronze Age date for the small hoard of metal artefacts which was discovered close to Site A (site 23) (Hughes & Champion 1982).

SITE A, ROUND BARROW, LARK-WHISTLE FARM (Figs 2, 3)

In 1978, a survey of the route of the proposed new A34 Sutton Scotney and South Wonston by-pass identified a number of archaeological sites which would either be damaged or destroyed by the construction of the new dual carriageway and its side-roads. The majority of these sites were located from aerial photography as crop- and soil-marks only, but about 1.0km to the north-north-west of South Wonston (SU 459 369), very low mounds marked a small group of badly ploughed out round barrows, situated on a gentle south-east facing chalk downland slope (Fig 2).

When they were first recorded and measured in the late 1930s, they survived to a height of 0.60m as visible earthworks. At that time Grinsell identified a group of three, but only two were seen at the time of the 1978 road survey (Grinsell 1940, 352).

The Excavation

The best preserved barrow was examined by a limited excavation prior to its destruction. The main objective of the investigation was to learn something of the original construction and dimensions of the barrow, and to establish its chronology and history. To this end, members of the Winchester Archaeological Rescue Group (WARG) and local residents co-operated with the Winchester Archaeology Office over a period of three weeks in 1979 to open up a trench across the centre of the mound (Fig 3). The following account summarises the information recovered.

The barrow was originally some 20m in diameter, and had a probable height of 2 or 3m. It clearly had been badly eroded by vari-

ous agencies, mainly ploughing, to a surviving height of only 0.50m above the present general ground level. It was surrounded by a broad 'U'-shaped ditch (feature 15) which was 1.00m deep and 4.00m wide at the top. There was slight evidence for a narrow berm, about 0.50m wide, between the inner lip of the ditch and the main body of the mound.

The mound was composed, in the main, of a mixture of chalk rubble, loamy soil and flints. A small sherd of Collared Urn, dated to about 1500 BC, was recovered from this deposit. A deliberate flint capping had been built up over the central area of the mound, but this had been badly damaged by ploughing.

The barrow had been built over a central cremation burial, which had been set in a pit, some 0.40m square (feature 45). This burial had been robbed at some time in the past; all that remained were small fragments of cremated bones and charcoal. There were no ceramics.

Sometime after the primary cremation and

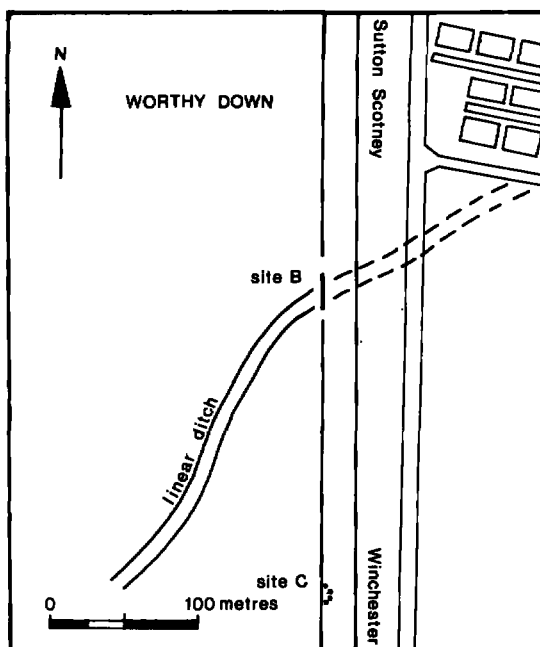


Fig 4. Sites B and C, linear ditch and round house, Worthy Down. Location plan.

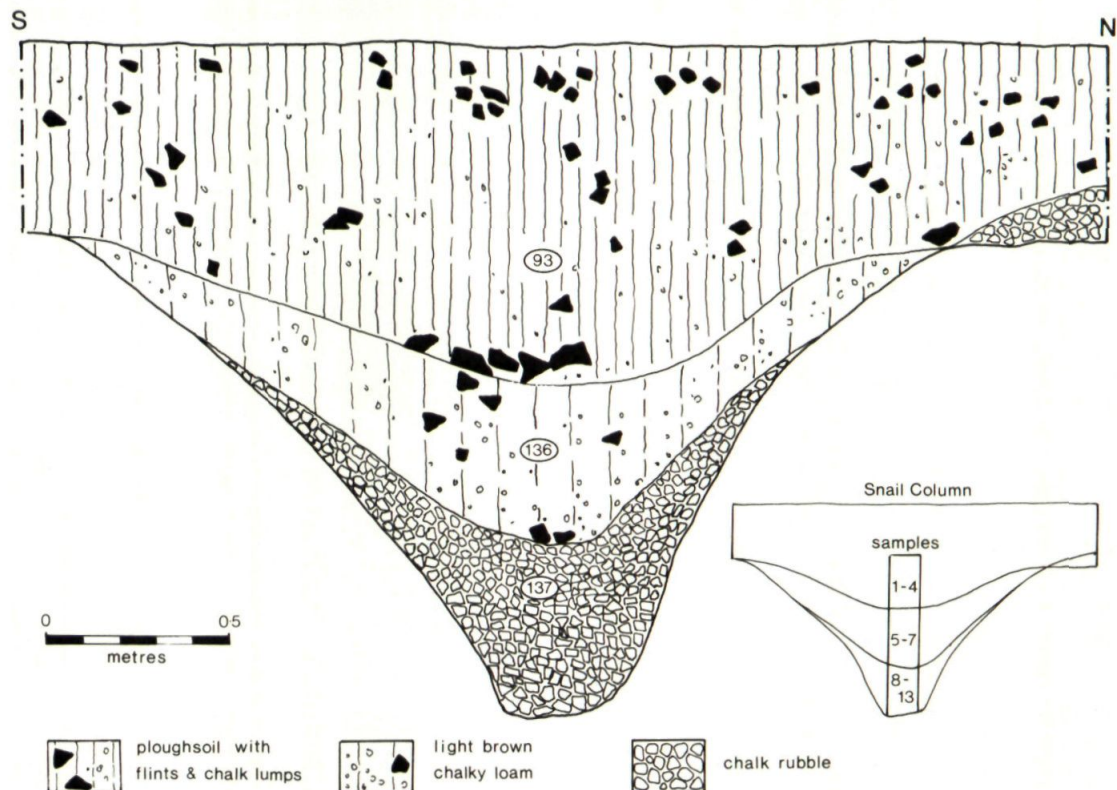


Fig 5. Site B, linear ditch, Worthy Down. Section through the excavated ditch, showing the position of the snail column.

the construction of the mound over it, but still within the Bronze Age, two secondary cremation burials were inserted into the central area of the barrow (features 19, 26). However, these were both badly disturbed by animal activity, and little of them survived, save a few cremated bone fragments and charcoal.

Cutting across the northern side of the mound a large 'V'-shaped ditch (feature 44), 0.75m deep and about 4.00m wide, ran in a general north-east to south-west direction. Although there was no dating evidence, it seems that this ditch was probably related to one of the extensive Celtic field systems in the vicinity.

There was no further activity until the Romano-British period, when an inhumation burial was placed on the lip of the ditch on the

eastern side of the barrow (feature 28). Associated pottery indicates a date in the 2nd or 3rd centuries AD.

The excavations revealed little of further significance apart from a steady overall erosion and denudation of the mound over the centuries, and a consequent silting-up of the surrounding ditch. These processes had obviously been accelerated in the more recent past by modern cultivation techniques.

Summary

To summarize, the small-scale excavations, carried out prior to the destruction of the barrow in 1980, revealed the remains of what was probably a typical bowl barrow, although the possible presence of a narrow berm sug-

gests that it might have been a bell barrow. The primary cremation had been robbed, hence dating evidence was non-existent. However, a sherd of Collared Urn from the body of the mound might indicate a date around 1500 BC, in the Middle Bronze Age. Two secondary cremations were inserted into the barrow at a later stage in the Bronze Age.

Later activities included the inhumation of a body into the partially silted up ditch of the barrow in the Romano-British period, and the cutting of a large ditch which was probably part of a larger enclosure or field complex.

SITE B, LINEAR DITCH, WORTHY DOWN (Figs 4, 5)

A linear ditch or so-called ranch boundary runs in a roughly NE-SW direction across Worthy Down (centre SU 458 346) (Fig 4). Although it is marked as an upstanding earthwork on Ordnance Survey maps and plans, and is also protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (HBMC No. 162), the majority of it is now ploughed out, with the exception of a short length towards the north-east end. Aerial photography enables the original course to be plotted with some certainty in both directions. Indeed, it was recorded by Crawford in the late twenties (1928, plan).

During the construction work for the A34 Sutton Scotney and South Wonston by-pass in 1980, it was possible to locate and examine the remains of this archaeological feature, at a point where it had already been ploughed down (SU 460 348).

A section against the west side of the carriageway works was archaeologically examined and recorded (Fig 5). This work revealed that the ditch was essentially 'V'-shaped, with steep convex sides, sloping to a flat bottom 0.25m wide. It was 1.3m deep and 2.45m wide at the top. To the north, the associated bank, composed mainly of chalk rubble upcast from the ditch, was extremely spread by ploughing, so that it was only 0.50m high, and had a width

of 11.80m. It proved impossible to estimate its original dimensions.

A small piece of pottery was recovered from the upper fill of the ditch. This has been identified as possibly belonging to the Bronze Age but it is clear from its position in the ditch fill that it does not provide a true picture of the date of construction.

The Environment

A soil column was taken from the centre of the ditch, and the matrix examined for the presence of snails. The following summary is taken from the full report, which is reproduced as Appendix 1 in microfiche.

Samples 1-4. Few snail remains within the matrices of these samples. Those that did occur indicated an open grassland environment, perhaps with slight tree cover.

Samples 5-7. Large increase in the size of the snail assemblage, and a significant increase in the numbers of shade-prefering species

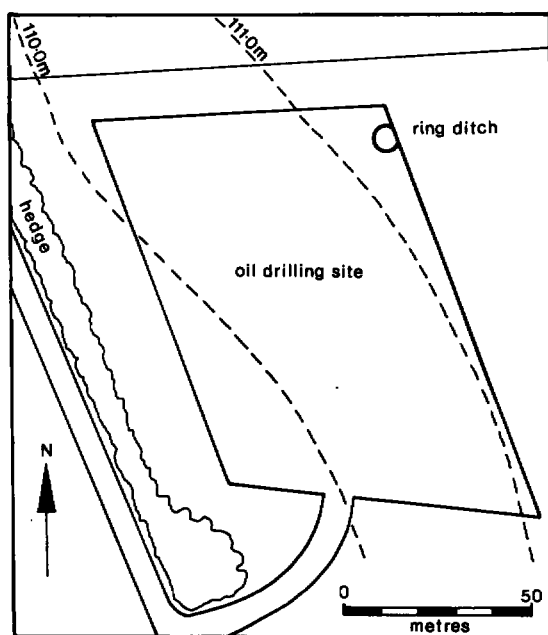


Fig 6. Site D, ring ditch, Larkwhistle Farm. Location plan showing the position of the ring ditch in relation to the oil drilling site.

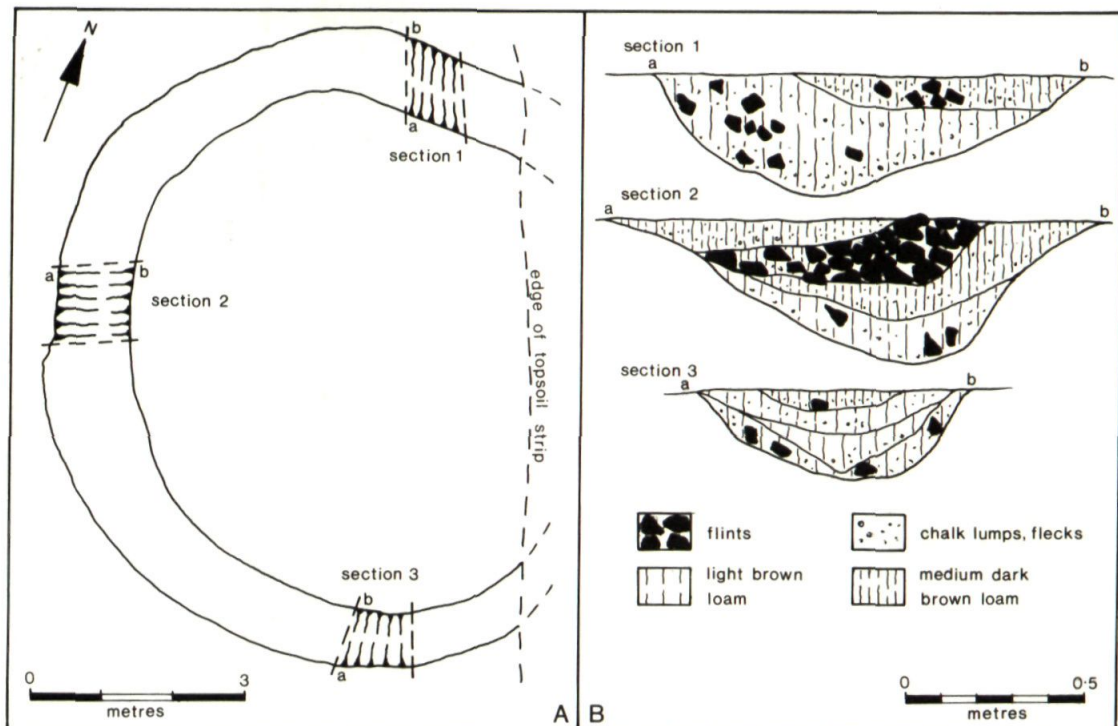


Fig 7. Site D, ring ditch, Larkwhistle Farm. A: Plan of the ring ditch. B: Sections through the ring ditch.

with catholic tastes in habitat. *Trichia hispada* is notable in that it is to be considered as found thriving in areas of human activity.

Samples 8–13. Progressive decline in all species, with shade-prefering species tailing off before those with little preference of habitat.

In the main this evidence is self-explanatory, but it is worth emphasising the presence of the synanthropic snail *Trichia hispada*, in the central fill of the ditch, as indicating human activity in the immediate area. This is especially important when viewed in the light of Site C (below).

SITE C, ROUND HOUSE, WORTHY DOWN (Fig 4)

About 200m south of the linear ditch, topsoil stripping exposed a group of post-holes set in

a semi-circle. Unfortunately, the group was destroyed without investigation, and is only recorded in a photograph.

It therefore follows that any interpretation of these features is fraught with uncertainty. Suffice it to say that the semi-circle of post-holes probably represented the remains of a circular round house of prehistoric date. Thus by analogy with other local sites, these remains are likely to have been Middle Bronze Age in date (Fasham & Whinney 1985, 7–8) or just possibly Iron Age (Fasham 1985, 11–15).

SITE D, RING DITCH, LARKWHISTLE FARM (Figs 6–8)

In August 1984, an area of approximately 0.8ha was stripped of topsoil, prior to the installation of an exploratory oil-well near Larkwhistle Farm (SU 451 356), some 5.5km north-west of Winchester. Previous exami-



Fig 8. Site D, ring ditch, Larkwhistle Farm. The ring ditch, after topsoil stripping by contractors.

nation of aerial photographs and consultation of the local sites and monuments record indicated minimal archaeological remains in the immediate area. Therefore, the discovery of a circular feature, a ring ditch, in the north-east corner of the site was unexpected (Fig 6).

The Excavation

The willing co-operation of the contractors on site allowed investigation of this feature. It was planned and photographed, and three sections cut across it. It was not possible to record the complete plan of the circle as part of it lay beyond the edge of the stripped area. However, it was clear that it had a diameter of 9.0m (Figs 7A, 8).

The three sections indicated a shallow, broad-bottomed ditch, which varied in depth between 0.25m and 0.90m. Most of the upper levels of the ditch had been lost through ploughing and stripping; however, it seems likely that it may have originally been about

1.0m deep. The surviving width of the ditch was equally variable, from 0.80m to 1.30m; again a greater original width was obvious (Fig 7B).

Apart from establishing the surviving dimensions of the ditch, sections 1 and 3 were otherwise generally uninformative. By contrast, section 2 was rather better preserved. Here, a deposit of large flints included one or two utilised flakes, and also yielded three sherds of pottery. It appeared that this flint material and pottery may have come from the interior of the ring, perhaps from a small mound, although it must be said that there was no trace of a flint cairn or other mound, or indeed of any other activity in this central area.

The utilised flint flakes were undiagnostic, but the pottery was more useful. It consisted of three thick-walled sherds (12.00mm) which were heavily tempered with calcined flint. These originated from a bucket-urn, typical of those belonging to the Deverel-Rimbury

ceramic tradition of the Middle Bronze Age, and thus may be dated to c. 1700–1400 BC.

CONCLUSIONS

From the foregoing short account, it is evident that the examination of the four sites prior to their destruction has added only a few details to our overall comprehension of the Bronze Age in a small area north of Winchester. In all likelihood, none of them would have been investigated had they not been under threat of destruction, and viewed in this light the information recovered is of value. If nothing else, it provides some additional concrete data, which contribute to a better understanding of the Bronze Age in Hampshire.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work on Site A was expedited by the kind-operation and assistance of Mr E Critchley, the

estate manager of Four Counties Farms. The excavation was carried out by members of Winchester Archaeological Rescue Group (WARG).

The examination of Sites B and C was carried out with the co-operation of the South-Eastern Road Construction Unit, and the main road contractors Tarmac Ltd. Again WARG members assisted in all aspects of the investigation.

Site D was examined with the on-site assistance of Amoco (UK) Ltd, their project manager Mr W Fisher, their agents John Lawrence Partners, and the main contractor Rocon Ltd. Royston Clark gave expert assistance to the author during the investigation.

Charlotte Matthews kindly examined and commented on the fragments of pottery, John Bradfield supervised the collection and processing of the soil samples and excavated the section across Site B. Penelope Heywood identified and commented on the snail assemblages.

REFERENCES

- Bowen, H C 1975a Pattern and interpretation: a view of the Wessex landscape from Neolithic to Roman times, in Fowler, P J (ed) *Recent Work in Rural Archaeology*, Bradford on Avon.
- 1975b Air photography and the development of the landscape in central parts of southern England, in Wilson, D R (ed) *Aerial Reconnaissance for Archaeology* (CBA Res Rep 12) 103–18.
- Crawford, O G S 1928 *Air Survey and Archaeology* (Ordnance Survey Professional Papers, New Series 7), Chessington.
- Dacre, M & Ellison, A 1981, A Bronze Age urn cemetery at Kimpton, Hampshire *Proc Prehist Soc* 47 147–203.
- Evans, J G & Vaughan, M P 1985 An investigation into the environment and archaeology of the Wessex linear ditch system *Antiq J* 65 11–38.
- Fasham, P J 1979 The excavation of a triple barrow in Micheldever Wood, Hants, *Proc Hampsh Field Club Archaeol Soc* 35 5–40.
- 1985 *The prehistoric settlement of Winnall Down, Winchester* (HFC Monograph 2), Winchester.
- & Ross, J M 1978 A Bronze Age flint industry from a barrow site in Micheldever Wood, Hampshire *Proc Prehist Soc* 44 47–67.
- & Whinney, R 1985 *Roads to the Past – the prehistoric site at Easton Lane, Winchester*, Winchester.
- Grinsell, L V 1940 Hampshire Barrows, Part III – a list of Hampshire bowl barrows *Proc Hampsh Field Club Archaeol Soc* 14 346–65.
- Heywood, P 1982 *A study of land snails from two multi-period sites on the chalk downland of Hampshire as evidence of their contemporary environments*, unpubl undergraduate dissertation, University of Leicester.
- Hughes, M & Champion, T 1982 A Middle Bronze Age ornament hoard from South Wonston, Hampshire *Proc Prehist Soc* 48 487–9.

Author: Richard Whinney, Winchester Archaeology Office, Historic Resources Centre, 75 Hyde Street, Winchester SO23 7DW

© Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society