

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF A CROPMARK AT ODIHAM, HAMPSHIRE

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ABSTRACT

Excavations on the site of an exploratory oil borehole revealed archaeological features, some related to cropmarks, others not previously suspected. Two major periods of human activity were identified; firstly a series of linear ditches, a trapezoidal enclosure and a round house belong to the late Bronze Age or early Iron Age (about 750 BC); secondly part of the site was used as a burial plot, probably in the 4th century AD.

INTRODUCTION

Location and Geology

The site is located on the Upper Chalk 0.5 km south of Odiham town centre at about 120 m above sea-level on the east side of the main road to Alton, the A32 (SU 739504). The ground slopes away gently to the north, east and south, but continues to rise to the west. It is currently put to arable use and presents a soil profile of 0.2 m of chalky ploughsoil immediately overlying the bedrock with no intervening B or C soil horizons. A narrow band of the Reading Beds surfaces 1 km north of the site and has provided a source of clay, sand and gravel in the past (White 1909, 47).

Archaeological Background

Because extensive cropmarks (Fig 1) of presumed ancient and man-made origin had been observed at the site, the Hampshire County Council made archaeological investigation a condition of consent to an application for planning permission by North Sea Sun Oil Ltd for an exploratory oil borehole. The marks included a trapezoidal enclosure and a number of sinuous and branching lines emanating

from it. The proposal entailed the removal of the topsoil from an area of 1.5 ha in preparation for the construction of a borehole with its attendant rig, enclosure and access road. This provided an opportunity to investigate some of the peripheral features of the cropmark group.

Method

The investigation was carried out over a period of four weeks in October and November 1987. The cropmarks were not visible at the time, which necessitated plotting their estimated course from maps. The work fell into two phases; one week of excavation of selected areas ahead of the arrival of the main oil rig construction unit, followed by three weeks of observation and rescue archaeology as the topsoil was stripped from the remainder of the oil-rig enclosure and approach road.

During the first phase the topsoil was stripped by machine from the width of the access road in two places where the cropmarks had been estimated to cross the road and four strips each 2 m wide were removed from within the enclosure, again where the cropmarks were estimated to be. These strips (Trenches I to VI) were aligned from south to north. Further exploratory strips were indicated by higher Roman numerals, but eventually they were integrated and rationalised as follows:

- | | | |
|-----------|---|--|
| Trench I | - | The access road between the A32 and the corner of RAF Odiham. |
| Trench II | - | The access road between the corner of RAF Odiham and the borehole enclosure. |

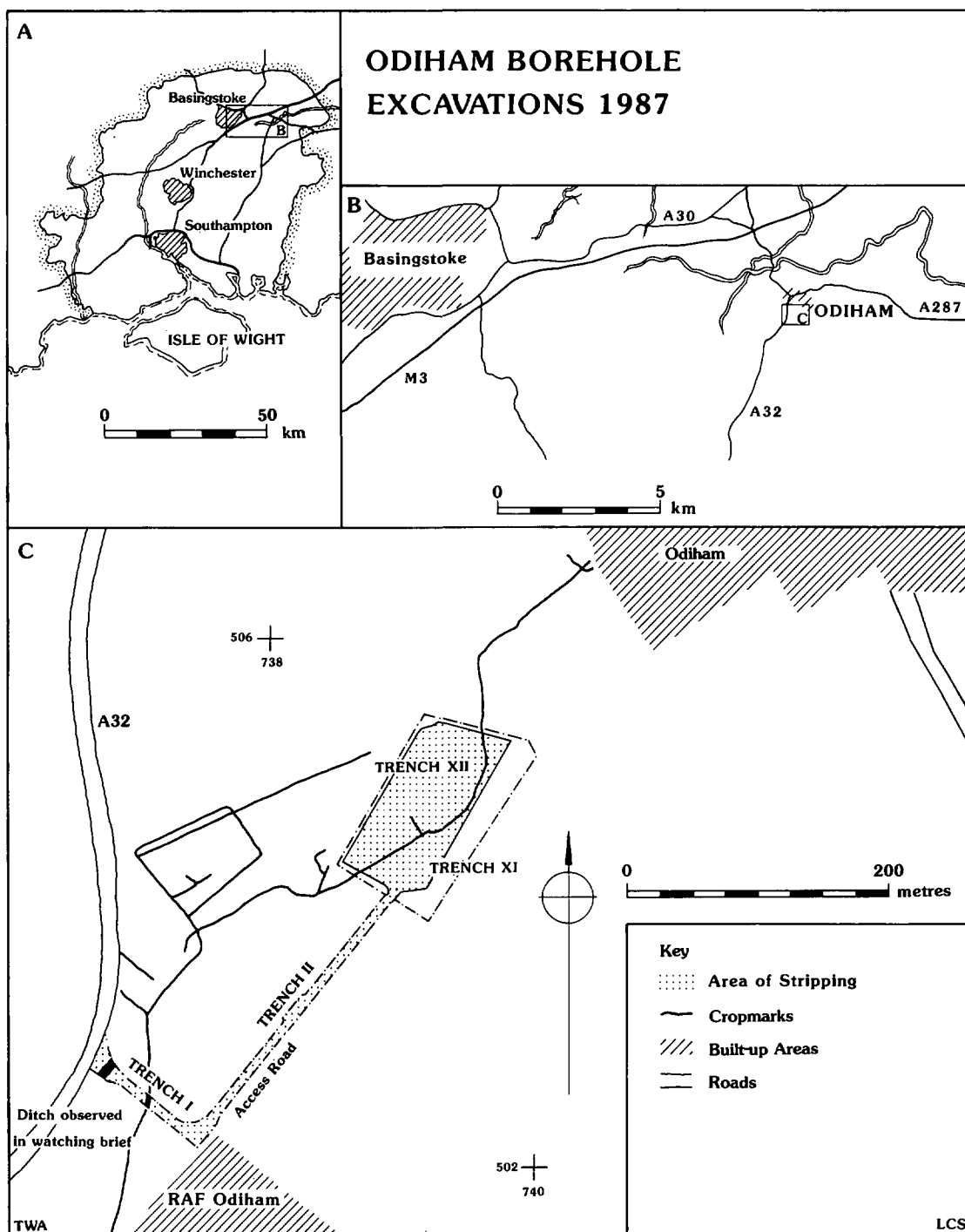


Fig 1. Site location plan.

- Trench XI – The borehole enclosure south of the borehole itself. This included Trenches III, IV, VII, XIII, IX and X.
- Trench XII – The northern part of the enclosure. This included Trenches V and VI.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES

The archaeological features fall naturally into two categories: the deeper ones, which had been anticipated as the cause of the cropmarks, and the shallower ones, which had no such effect. The cropmark-related features will be considered first.

Trench I

Ditch 2102

Crossing Trench I at about mid-way between the main road and the corner of RAF Odiham was a flat-bottomed ditch (2102) cut 0.9 m into the bedrock and 2.5 m wide at the top (see Fig 2). The sides sloped at an angle of 60° to the horizontal or rather less where they were eroded at the upper edge. The fill appeared to be the result of natural weathering and comprised a bright mid-brown slightly humic clayey silt (context 2101, the tertiary fill) overlying a very stony silty loam with highly degraded chalk pieces grading with depth to a vacuous rubble of medium to large chalk pieces (the undifferentiated primary and secondary fills, 2103). Sparsely scattered throughout, but more frequent towards the top were occasional flint flakes, burnt flint fragments and abraded potsherds. These finds in this frequency and condition imply a contemporary settlement but not immediately alongside.

Close to the junction of the access road with the A32 a broad feature (2110) some 4.5 m across was closely flanked by a narrow (0.75 m) one on either side (2120), (2130). These were not sectioned, but their failure to produce cropmarks argues against a depth comparable with either the ditches or the scoop. Only proximity and the similar appearance of the fill suggests that they are related to feature 2102.

Trench II

At the northern end of the access road a part of ditch 2201 was revealed. It differed from 2102 in having a rounded profile and being cut only 0.5 m into the chalk, consequently it contained far less of the typically vacuous primary fill. Although occasional flint debitage was recovered, no potsherds were found in this ditch. It turned west out of the trench, and continued north into Trench XI where it ran parallel with the broad shallow feature 2807.

Trenches XI and XII: The Borehole Enclosure Area

Ditch 2601

Running sinuously through the borehole enclosure (see Fig 2) was a very similar flat-bottomed ditch, 2601 – which incorporates 2301, 2401 and 2501 – also cut 0.9 m into the bedrock, about 0.8 m wide at the bottom and a little over 2 m wide at the top. The sides were not so steep, being inclined at about 45° to the horizontal and consequently they show less erosion of the upper margins. The fill was identical in all respects with that of feature 2102 above, and the nature of the finds was entirely comparable.

Feature 2807

The most prominent of a group of parallel and intersecting features was a long tapering ellipse with its greater axis running close to north-south (see Fig 2). In cross-section it was gently lenticular, 52 m long and about 4.5 m across at its widest point, yet it was only 1.3 m deep. The stratigraphy of the intersection with 2601 showed that this feature had been scooped out after the ditch had silted up. An horizon of struck flakes clearly marked the interface of the two features. Because of the shallowness of the scoop it contained no characteristic primary fill of degraded chalk pieces and the entire fill was identical in appearance to the tertiary layers of the deeper features. It differed though in the important respect of yielding no pottery. At the northern end of this 'scoop' lay a circle of postholes (3220, described below) centred less than 25 m from it. This alignment does not prove, but strongly suggests, that the features are contemporary.

In addition to the elliptical scoop 2807, there were a number of smaller features, all on or very close to the same alignment. Towards the middle of the western side of the scoop was the northern end of the small ditch or gully, 2201, which had first been observed in Trench II. It was about 0.4 m wide

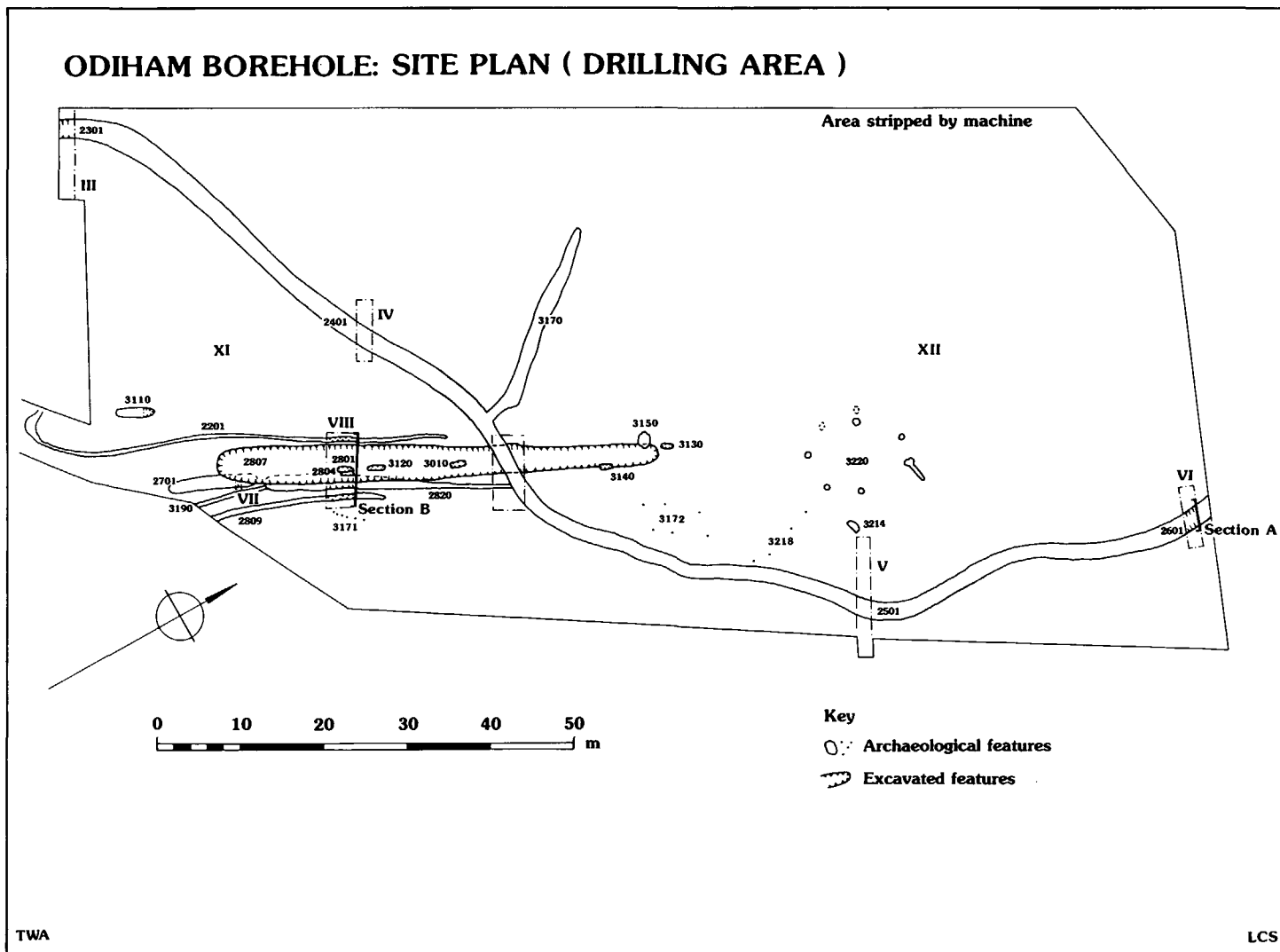


Fig 2. General site plan.

and 0.3 m deep for most of its length, and ran immediately alongside.

On the opposite or east side were four features which can be considered as two pairs. One of these predated the scoop and consisted of two lengths of ditch cut end-to-end and separated by a 1.5 m causeway. Both were flat-bottomed ditches with steep sides (65°–70° to the horizontal) but although 2701, the southern portion, had filled entirely naturally, 2820, the northern length, contained a dump (2824) of ash, charcoal, burnt flint and burnt chalk 0.1 m thick. This fire-derived layer was in turn overlain by a deposit of chalk rubble (2822) which was thick enough (0.25 m) to suggest the digging of another feature nearby on the western side. Therefore either 2820 predated feature 2201, or another feature lay in the area and was subsequently removed by the scoop.

A second pair of features, gullies 2809 and 3190 curved in towards the scoop from beyond the limit of excavation in the south-east. They were about 0.4 m deep and 1.0 m across and ran parallel with each other, about 1.5 m apart. The western gully merged with ditch 2820, but the fills were too similar to indicate their relative chronology. Again burnt flint and struck flakes were recovered but no pottery.

This lack of pottery from within the elliptical scoop or any of the features closely aligned with it is remarkable, but may result from the fact that none of these features was fully excavated by hand. The sub-trenches were generally limited to 1 m wide during the rescue work.

Feature 3170

Following the stripping of the topsoil, this feature was found to be 22 m long by 1.5 to 2 m wide and to run north-east from ditch 2601 as a spur. Its depth and profile are unknown since it was not practical to excavate a section. It was constricted at the junction with 2601 and curved southwards in a way which hinted at a relation to the narrow gully 2201, but since there was no trace in the bedrock chalk of a segment connecting these two lengthy features they were probably independent.

Postholes, Stakeholes and Indefinite Pits

In addition to the evident causes of the cropmarks a number of other features, many of which fell into recognisable groups, were revealed by the topsoil stripping. Predominant among these was 3220, the

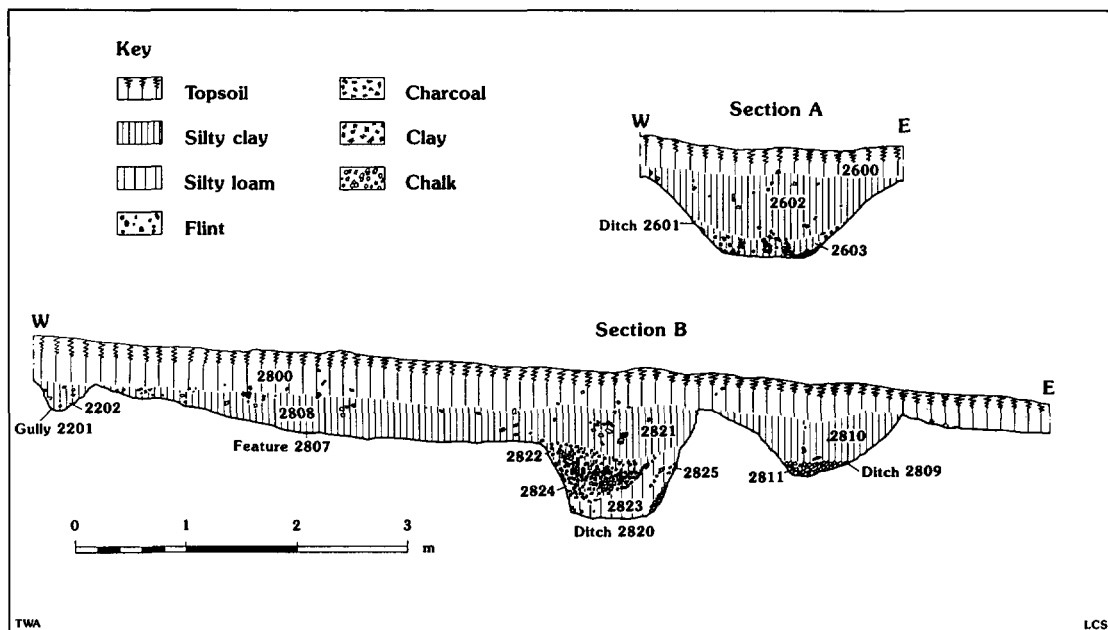


Fig 3. Sections.

previously mentioned circular set of postholes, each of which was about 0.8 m in diameter. Close examination of the group did however reveal a number of irregularities. The two easternmost holes barely cut the chalk and were rather indistinct, while an adjacent one of far greater depth and sharper outline lay 1 m inside the line of the circle; a recut posthole on the northern side had an unusual extension running from it for two metres to the east; and whereas the north-south diameter was 12 m, from east to west was only 10 m. The distance between adjacent postholes varied between 3 m and 6 m. Four metres to the east there was an outlying 'D'-shaped feature, 3214, with a long axis of almost 2 m, which yielded a few sherds of a pottery very similar to that from the postholes of the circle. Despite all these irregularities it is difficult not to see these features as representing the site of a former round-house. Although a long way out the 'D' may conceivably relate to an entrance on the eastern side.

There were three groups of stakeholes. Two of these may be described as lines, while the third group was scattered. All three lay close to and just east of the scoop and round-house but neither their date nor purpose could be determined.

At the northern tip of the scoop, just intersecting it from the western side, was a shallow irregular feature (3150) about 3 m by 2 m which had been backfilled with chalk rubble. The only artefact it contained was a flint nodule with a battered end. This showed that it had been used as a hammer-stone, and gave some grounds for taking the feature to be contemporary with the ditches and scoop rather than the graves.

Feature 3110

A slightly cigar-shaped feature, 5 m long up to 1.2 m wide. The sides were vertical and had not been eroded, the bottom flat. The fill (3111) was distinguishable from the ploughsoil only by the frequent chalk inclusions. It was homogeneous throughout its depth and presented no layers of silting. Only the northern tip was excavated, during which time it was thought to be of modern origin – a view which was corroborated by a local informant who remembered the digging of slit trenches in the vicinity during the Second World War.

THE BURIALS

Six graves were found each with a single interment. All of the graves were sub-

rectangular with flat bottoms and more or less vertical sides. They were cut into the natural chalk at intervals of several metres in a north-south line which closely follows that of the long scoop (Fig 2). None contained a coffin or indisputable evidence of one, nor any votive items. Except where otherwise indicated all of the deceased had been laid to rest in the supine extended position with the hands over the pelvis or upper thighs. Three were buried with hobnailed footwear (501, 503 and 505). With only one exception the head was at the northern end of the grave.

Stratigraphically they are later than the fill of the scoop, and in style they are Roman. Their grouping suggests a single period, but neither the order of the burials nor the elapsed time between the first and the last can be determined except that grave 2801 is later than grave 2804. The choice of the location may have been on account of the easier digging offered by the greater depth of soil – if this could have been observed.

The graves themselves being unremarkable (Fig 4), the burials are described by skeleton number (501 to 506) and followed by some general comments. The detailed skeletal report by Dr Charlotte Roberts is included in the archive.

Burial 501 (Grave 2801)

The well-preserved skeleton of an elderly male, height 1.77 m. Many of the vertebrae are fused as a result of Forestier's disease (diffuse idiopathic skeletal hyperostosis), a condition of unknown cause which is linked to obesity and diabetes in modern populations. There was very severe degenerative joint disease of the hips.

Fragments of long bone were encountered in the grave fill. They had the cross-section of a large ungulate metapodial rather than that of a human tibia (see burial 502) and, being far more decayed than the human bones alongside, are considered to have been accidentally incorporated.

Burial 502 (Grave 2804)

The well-preserved skeleton of 35 to 45 year old male, height 1.70 m, laid in the normal position

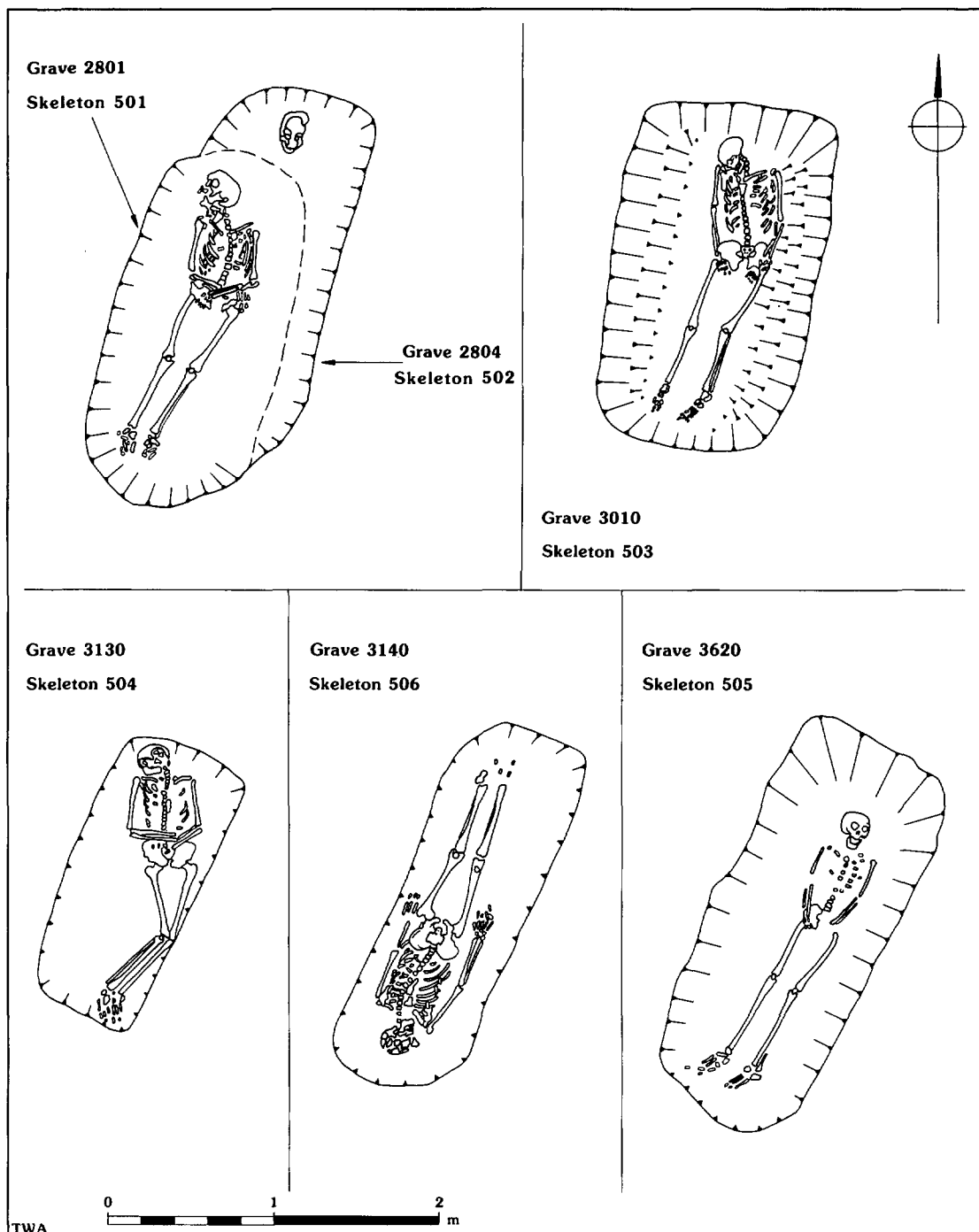


Fig 4. Grave plans.

though with the left arm by the side. The grave being a little too small for the body, the head was propped against the end. The right clavicle showed a fracture which had healed with considerable shortening of the bone. The left tibia had suffered periostitis (an infection by an unknown agent). The absence of the right tibia can be attributed to disturbance during the digging of the grave of burial 501 and shows that sufficient time had elapsed between the two interments for the body of burial 502 to have become de-fleshed.

Burial 503 (Grave 3010)

A well-preserved 25 to 35 year old male skeleton, height 1.71 m, in a stepped grave. Although the skeleton was laid out in the normal extended position it did not lie quite in the bottom of the grave, but was propped awkwardly against the north and east sides in a manner which suggested that *rigor mortis* had set in before burial. Although the youngest member of the population, four teeth had already been lost, six were carious and two abscessed. Calculus was considerable and periodontal disease moderate. The nose had been broken and healed again during life.

Burial 504 (Grave 3130)

A less well-preserved skeleton of an elderly male. The legs were flexed and the body lay diagonally within a small grave of 1.7 m by 0.6 m. The impression was that the deceased had been squashed into a grave of insufficient size. Both tibiae had suffered periostitis.

Burial 505 (Grave 3620)

The poorly-preserved skeleton of a middle-aged or elderly female, height 1.61 m, laid in the normal extended position. There was *cribra orbitalia* of both eye sockets (a condition which results from iron deficiency in childhood), and an ivory osteoma of the frontal bone.

Burial 506 (Grave 3140)

The fairly well-preserved skeleton of middle-aged or elderly male. This burial was the only one with the head at the south rather than the north. The hands lay by the side. Periostitis of the left tibia was extensive.

General Comments

All of the skeletons showed degenerative joint disease of the spine and other parts of the body, primarily the hips, hands and wrists. This pattern is consistent with ageing and hard manual labour. The rate of ante-mortem tooth loss was high, as was the presence and extent of caries, calculus, and the alveolar recession which is indicative of persistent periodontal disease. Oral hygiene was clearly poor, and not surprisingly there were several apical abscesses in the population. The condition of the teeth did not however indicate poor nutrition, but the diet was probably high in fermentable carbohydrates.

THE FINDS

The Metal Objects

Copper Alloy

S.F. 2: A fragment of a pin measuring 20 mm long by 2 mm in diameter. Probably of modern provenance (Context 3111).

Iron

Hobnails

Around the feet of three of the inhumations were fused and corroded masses of small (10–20 mm) iron objects. They were neither X-rayed nor counted, but were identified as hobnails on the basis of their size and location.

S.F. 1: Group of hobnails from burial 501. Left and right were not distinguishable (Context 2804).

S.F. 3: Group of hobnails from around the right foot of burial 503 (Context 3011).

S.F. 4: Group of hobnails from around the left foot of burial 503 (Context 3011).

S.F. 6: Group of hobnails from around the feet of burial 505. Left and right were not distinguishable (Context 3121).

Nail

S.F. 7: A single hand-made nail, flat headed and square in section, was found in the grave of burial 505 close to an iron object known to

have been "planted" (details in the archive). It was much less corroded than the hobnails and may not be authentic.

The Pottery

A small collection of pottery (60 sherds; 595g) was recovered. The majority were abraded body sherds and no vessels were reconstructable. All of the pottery was hand-made.

The generally coarse tempering and the decorative motif of fingertip impressions imply a Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age date of manufacture (Hawkes 1985). Technical details of the sherds are shown on Table 1.

The Fabrics

All contain poorly sorted, rounded quartz grains

measuring up to 3 mm long, and were it not for the absence of this material from the presumed daub and loomweight, quartz grains would have been taken to be a naturally occurring component of the local clays and not interpreted as a temper. All of the other fabric types reflect variations in the relative proportions of quartz, burnt flint, and iron or manganese ores present and in the degree of vesicularity.

Flint-tempered fabrics (Group F)

There are four fabrics characterised by a temper of burnt flint in addition to the universal quartz inclusions:-

F1. The flint though present is rare as are small pieces of chalk or calcite and even smaller voids can also be seen. The firing is irregular.

F2. This fabric contains more flint than F1, larger

Table 1. Pottery from Odiham Borehole site

Context	Fabric Type	Code	Sherd Type	No	Weight (gms)	Thickness (mm)	Surface Treatment	Decoration	Decoration Position	Residue	Featured Sherd No
Ditch											
2012											
2101	F1	900	Body	1	6	7	1	-	-	-	-
2101	F4	900	Body	2	15	8-10	2,1	-	-	-	-
2103	F3	900	Body	12	216	12-13	2	-	-	Limescale	-
2103	F4	104	Rim	1	5	8	2,1	-	-	-	6
2103	F4	900	Body	2	2	7	1	-	-	-	-
Ditch											
2301											
2302	Q1	201	Base	1	11	>10	-	-	-	-	1
2302	F1	801	Body	3	30	7-8	1	Fingertip	Shoulder	-	5
2302	F1	900	Body	8	114	7-8	1	-	-	-	-
2302	Q2	101	Rim	1	16	8-10	2	Fingertip	Rim	Limescale	2
2302	Q2	102	Rim	1	1	6-7	-	-	-	-	3
2302	Q2	900	Body	8	20	6-8	2	-	-	-	-
2302	S1	900	Body	1	14	8-10	-	-	-	-	-
2302	F4	900	Body	2	13	10	2,1	-	-	-	-
2303	F1	900	Body	4	9	8	1	-	-	-	-
2303	Q2	900	Body	2	5	9	2	-	-	-	-
2303	S1	103	Rim	1	21	7-9	-	-	-	-	-
2602	F4	900	Body	2	9	9	2,1	-	-	-	-
Posthole											
3211	F1	900	Body	1	3	6	1	-	-	-	-
3211	F2	900	Body	3	37	10-12	2	-	-	-	-
3211	F4	900	Body	1	11	7-8	2,1	-	-	-	-
3211	Q3	900	Body	2	6	9	2	-	-	-	-
Modern											
3111*	Q3	900	Body	1	1	13	2	-	-	-	-

All of the fabrics are soft, sandy to very sandy and hackly with a hint of lamination.

pieces of chalk or calcite, and the same frequency of voids. Additionally there are moderate small (0–2 mm) inclusions of a non-reactive dark red stone. The sherds are among the thickest recovered and come from one context only. They are fired grey throughout.

F3. Very similar to F2 but with rather less quartz and burnt flint and noticeably larger (0–6 mm) dark red inclusions. Fired bright red throughout.

F4. Similar to F2 with scarcer dark red inclusions and no chalk. Oxidised only on the outer surface.

Sand-tempered Fabrics (Group Q)

Two of the following three fabric types contain both quartz and burnt flint, but the quartz predominates over the flint.

Q1. The quartz is moderate, but the burnt flint, dark red inclusions and the voids are all rare or sparse. The most characteristic feature of this type is that the clay appears to be poorly wedged. There is one sherd only, a thick base angle with an oxidised outer surface.

Q2. This type contains no burnt flint, only common quartz grains and rare to sparse dark red inclusions and voids. The firing is incomplete with colours varying from dark red to dark brown.

Q3. Quartz grains, burnt flint and the dark red inclusions are all present but sparse. Voids are common. Oxidised throughout.

Shell-tempered Fabrics (Group S)

S1 is the only immediately distinctive fabric. It contains a large amount of fossil(?) shell in pieces measuring up to 15 mm.

Surface Treatment

Many sherds received no finish following the shaping of the vessel. Otherwise only the following types were observed:

1. A smoothing of the internal surface only.
2. A smoothing of both surfaces.

Decoration

The only type found comprised finger-tip impression (type 1 in the table), either around the top of the rim or the shoulder of the vessel. The decoration is standard for the early Iron Age.

General comments

This assemblage is too small and scattered to give any reliable information regarding the uses to which pottery was put within the community – with one exception. Some of the sherds, especially the

thicker ones, (F3 and Q2) retained a thin (less than 1 mm) layer of a soft buff residue on their inner surface. This residue reacts with dilute acid and is interpreted as limescale resulting from the evaporation of water. Although no sooting was noticed on the outside of the sherds, cooking is a simple explanation.

The pottery has not been examined in fine enough detail to determine its source, but there is no reason to doubt that it was locally made. The Reading Beds surface only one kilometre to the north and contain a great variety of clays, sands and gravels, and beds of fossilised oysters (for shell tempering) can be encountered at the lower boundary of this stratum (White 1909, 42). Layers of fossil shellfish have also been discovered within the Upper Chalk 15 kms to the south-west (*op cit*, 16).

Fired Clay

Two types of fired clay were recovered, neither in any quantity and both from ditch fill 2302.

Daub?

Seven irregularly fired pieces weighing only 17 g contained no inclusions and were poorly wedged. The absence of wattle impressions prevents their certain identification as daub, though this possibility cannot be discounted.

Loomweight?

By contrast two larger pieces weighing 28 g present a fabric which has been wedged, and a surface which has been shaped and evenly fired. Rather too thick for vessels they may represent two corners of a triangular ceramic loomweight (cf Danebury type 1, Cunliffe 1984). The fabric is free from macroscopic inclusions.

Flint

The assemblage comprises one egg-shaped hammerstone, 375 g, and 129 struck flakes, 4491 g. There were no recognisable tool forms nor any obviously utilised flakes. Much of the material came from ditch fills and only the scatter designated context 2902 appeared to be *in situ*. These flakes lay in the bottom of the long scoop 2807 at the interface with ditch fill 2911 in a narrow but definite band. Their noticeable horizontal orientation is suggestive of a knapping floor, yet the lack of spalls and small fragments shows that no fine working or retouching took place at the same time. It should be

remarked that small pieces were encountered nowhere else on the site either.

Burnt flint

Seventy pieces, weighing 3710 g, all of which can be described as fragments or small nodules, were recovered, mostly from ditch fills. There were no signs of knapping on any of the pieces.

DISCUSSION

On sites where features are widely dispersed, naturally filled, and truncated by agricultural erosion, and where artefacts are scarce, the chronological sequence and identification of individual contemporary elements is always problematical. At Odiham Borehole however, sufficient artefact and typological material exists to suggest at least two major periods of human activity, previous to the current practice of farming. The duration of neither is certain and the paucity of artefacts and domestic features appears to suggest that the intensity of occupation was never high in the immediate area. But many of the more ephemeral and above ground features will of course have been removed by centuries of arable farming, which could produce a biased picture.

The site was apparently first frequented at the end of the Bronze Age or beginning of the Iron Age, *i.e.* about 750 BC. At this time a series of linear ditches were constructed, and since these appear to emanate from the trapezoidal cropmark enclosure to the north-west, it seems reasonable to suggest that the enclosure may also be of this date. It is likely that the main focus of occupation at this period lay within the enclosure, and that the associated linear ditches acted as field boundaries, probably for stock control.

The round-house is broadly contemporary with the linear ditches, and may have been located within its own small enclosure, if some of the ditches and gullies to the south-west are contemporary. The exact sequence is impossible to extract, but the 'boundary' perpetuated by these gullies and the long scoop (2820) could imply a lengthy usage in the later prehistoric period.

Most of the other smaller individual features cannot be dated, but it is more than likely they are of later prehistoric date.

After the Early Iron Age there apparently followed a long period of abandonment, or more probably a period in which landuse was primarily arable. This lasted until the area of scoop 2820 was utilized for a burial plot in the Late Roman period, probably the 4th century AD. The spot may have been chosen because it was still an extant topographic feature such as a boundary or lynchet, or possibly because of the greater depth of soil within it.

There is no evidence for the contemporary Roman settlement from which the burials came. The nearest known 1st to 4th century settlement (which produced two inhumations when it was investigated in 1937 by Miss Dorothy Liddell) is situated about one kilometre to the west (Morris 1986). It is more likely though that other, as yet undiscovered, settlements existed nearby, and that the people buried at the site of Odiham Borehole lived at one of those.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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