

# EXCAVATION OF A BRONZE AGE SETTLEMENT AT SAVAGES WOOD, BRADLEY STOKE

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## INTRODUCTION

After an evaluation exercise on the development site known as Bradley Stoke Centre (Fig. 1) previously carried out by the author and A. Kidd (Erskine 1991), an area containing evidence of prehistoric activity was identified within an area to be developed as a superstore, car park and associated facilities by Carter Commercial Developments for Tesco Stores Limited.

As a result of a Planning condition applied by Northavon District Council, a full archaeological excavation of the area was carried out by Avon County Archaeological Unit under the general direction of the County Archaeological Officer, the late Jan Roberts, and supervised on site by the present writer

The excavation was wholly funded by Carter Commercial Developments, Tesco Stores Limited and Higgs and Hill.

An area of approximately 3500 sq. metres was stripped of topsoil by mechanical excavators to a depth of approximately 250mm, removing the previously disturbed ploughsoil and exposing the natural substrata, which divided almost equally between thin bedded lias limestone and associated clays, and archaeologically significant soil deposits. The areas stripped (Fig. 2) corresponded to the proposed development areas and were designated Areas B, C and D. The large gap between areas B and D was caused by the presence of a large hedge and ditch field boundary line which was assumed to have destroyed any underlying archaeology.

During the excavation structural evidence relating to prehistoric occupation and later activity on the site was recorded. The evidence consisted entirely of negative soil features and included several hundred postholes with some linear features. From this evidence four groups of features have been interpreted as including Round Houses, ditches and gullies, and a few larger pits (Fig. 2). There was one cremation burial which appeared to be associated with a rectangular structure, possibly a mortuary building, some small pits of unknown function containing Romano-British pottery, eight modern field drains and part of a rectangular, post-built structure, again of modern date.

Evidence of Romano-British occupation is widespread throughout Bradley Stoke, as evidenced by excavations (e.g. Donald 1992, and Russell 1990) and many metal detector finds and chance construction finds (Avon SMR passim), as, to a lesser extent is evidence of late Iron Age (Erskine, Great Meadow 1992). The evidence for activity of a similar date at Savages Wood was limited and will not be further discussed here.

Discussion of the modern features is also deferred to a

more detailed account. All details of the finds from more recent archaeological periods are available in the project archive, currently stored at Avon Archaeological Unit, 325 Fishponds Road, Bristol.

## STRUCTURAL EVIDENCE (Fig. 2)

The majority of the postholes, pits and other excavated features on the site were interpreted to be of prehistoric origin although many did not form any recognisable patterns which could be easily related to prehistoric structures. The main reason for this was the lack of significant vertical stratification, coupled with the paucity of finds to enable the closely packed arrays of similar features to be differentiated or phased.

However a total of eight structures (Fig. 2) were interpreted from the data, one of which, structure 1002, is undoubtedly of modern origin. The most clearly defined structures were the largest Round House (Structure 1001), a subrectangular structure (Structure 1004) and the modern rectangular structure (Structure 1002). Three possible further circular structures have been postulated in Areas C and D (Structures 1003, 1005 and 1006). There is also the small rectangular posthole grouping (Structure 1007) which was located adjacent to a cremation grave (Feature 532) in Area B. A further subrectangular structure, Structure 1008, which was only partially excavated has been suggested south of Structure 1004.

The analysis presented below is restricted to the discussion of features which appeared to represent elements of recognisable structures. Several pits which were recorded also appeared to be related to the prehistoric occupation. They may have been dug either for storage purposes or for the extraction of the underlying clay for use in the manufacture of pottery or for daub although insufficient evidence was recovered to be certain of their function. It is also possible to pair or match up many postholes of similar dimensions in order to tentatively interpret them as bases for hay drying racks or similar postbuilt structures (Gingell 1992).

## THE SUBRECTANGULAR DITCHED STRUCTURE (Boat shaped House) Structure 1400

The main elements of this structure appear to be two shallow, roughly parallel trenches forming the long sides of the building with seven or eight postholes forming an entrance at the southeastern end and a northern gable. Burnt clay fragments, possibly from wattle and daub walling were recovered from the majority of the excavated features, together with some pottery and flint fragments. Pennant

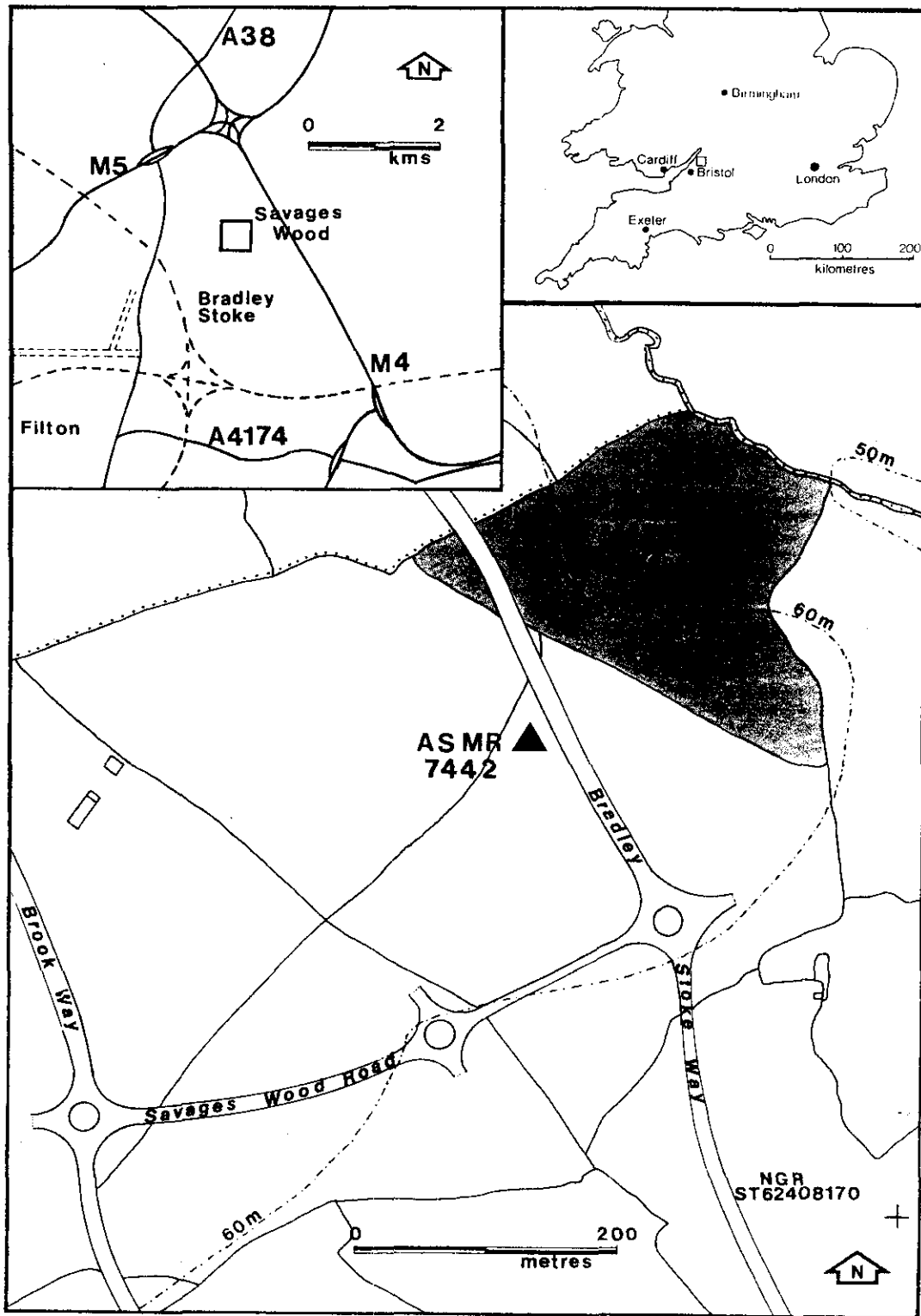
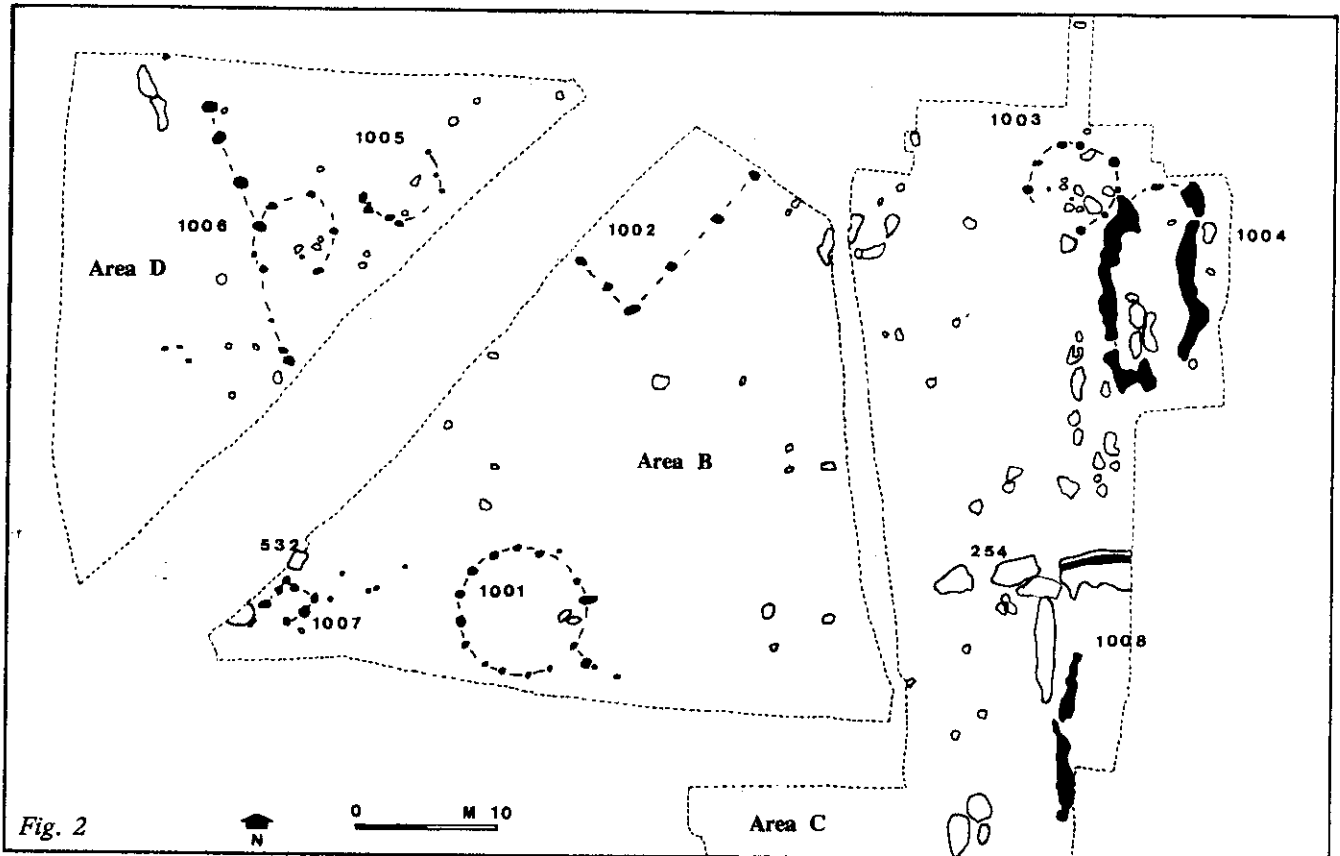


Fig. 1

sandstone fragments (not native to the area) were recovered, especially from the possible entrance area. The overall dimensions of the structure were 14m x 7.25m, with an entrance area some 2m wide. No contemporary occupation deposits survived within the structure although the distribution of flint finds from the interior and immediate vicinity of the building indicates a concentration of flint use or working within and immediately outside the entrance area of the structure.

Only very small quantities of pottery were recovered from the ditches and postholes which formed the structure although their distribution appears to mirror that of the flint.

The morphology of the excavated ditches and postholes suggests that the structure was probably founded upon light posts set both in individual postholes and in lateral post trenches. In general the lateral trenches were rather eroded and irregular although this could possibly have been as a result of eaves-drips in later stages of the structure's use.



### SUBRECTANGULAR STRUCTURE 1008

A very similar structure of slightly larger dimensions, approximately 20m x at least 8m was located, but not fully excavated, to the south of Structure 1004. No distinctive occupation layers survived within its interior, although a large quantity of flint chips were located within and to the rear (North) of the structure.

The northern post trench or eaves-drip of the structure cut and therefore post-dated the fill of a shallow pit. Small quantities of prehistoric pottery and burnt clay, possibly daub, were recovered from the trenches.

### CIRCULAR STRUCTURE (Round House) 1001

This presumed dwelling consisted of a complex of 16 postholes forming a circle 10.5m in diameter at its maximum, with a postulated porch or entrance at its south east. There was no central post and no hearth or flooring surfaces survived. A central post would not have been essential for a structure of this size as radial posts fixed at the apex and ground-fast are quite stable. The presumed porch structure was indicated by larger postholes, possibly to provide greater rigidity. Parallels for the building have been recorded at Chalton and Thorney Down in Wessex and in California (Cunliffe 1993 and Chartkoff and Chartkoff 1984). The circular bronze age houses located at Brean Down (Bell 1990) and Bishops Canning (Gingell 1992) also provide close parallels.

Flints were extremely rare both within and adjacent to the Round House but 82 sherds of Bronze Age pottery (including examples of site fabric types 1 and 8 – See Pottery Report below) were recovered from eight of the sixteen postholes, mainly towards the rear (north-west) of

the dwelling where it is possible that rubbish could have accumulated. Pottery sherds (Fabric Type 1) dated to the Late Bronze Age, and identical to the inverted urn found in the closely adjacent cremation burial, predominated, but there were also sherds of earlier Early-Middle Bronze Age date including grog tempered wares. Burnt clay fragments were located in eight of the postholes and Pennant sandstone fragments in three.

### CIRCULAR STRUCTURE 1003

This possible structure measured approximately 6.5m in diameter, more akin to Bishops Canning House A (Gingell 1992) and consisted of eight postholes with a possible central posthole. A gap in the ring at the south west indicates the possible position of the entrance.

Pottery was recovered from the postholes at the back of the structure, assuming the entrance was to the south west. Flints were recovered only from the area of the entrance. A fragment of a Pennant sandstone saddle quern was recovered from a rear posthole, but there was no burnt clay evident.



Plate 1 Round House - Structure 1001

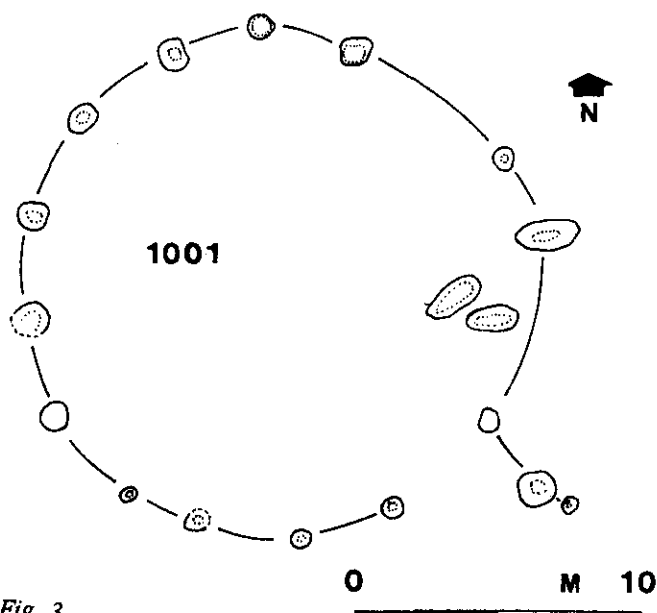


Fig. 3

This structure was interpreted as a small, conical structure, perhaps lightly constructed of branches and thatch.

#### CIRCULAR STRUCTURE 1005

This post built structure also measured approximately 6m in diameter, with an entrance either to the northwest or the southeast, with the latter more likely. Seven postholes survived with the addition of a possible central hearth. No floor or occupation deposits survived.

No flints were recovered from the vicinity of this structure, but pottery was recovered from one posthole and the hearth. Burnt pennant sandstone fragments were also recovered from the hearth which were interpreted as either part of the hearth construction or as possible pot boilers, being resistant to fire, unlike the soft lias limestone found naturally on this site.

#### STRUCTURE 1006

This structure measured approximately 7m in diameter, consisting of some seven postholes and four interior posts. The entrance is presumed to be at the south, and the west side of the building appears to have been sheltered by a linear structure of six posts, possibly supporting a fence. A possible hearthpit containing burnt pennant sandstone fragments appears unlikely to be associated with this structure as it would have been placed at the entrance, but a fire in that position combined with the presence of a shelter fence does not rule this hypothesis out. No floor or occupation deposits survived and only two flint fragments and one sherd of prehistoric pottery were recovered from the structure.

#### CREMATION GRAVE – FEATURE 532

A pit, 1.6m x 1m, was excavated at the conclusion of the excavation and was found to contain a prehistoric urn of Late Bronze Age date in an inverted position, well sealed in clay below a layer of burnt clay, a large (900mm x 700mm) irregularly shaped slab of pennant sandstone and finally

another layer of heat-affected clay. The total depth of this deposit was approximately 800mm.

The cremation vessel had been badly compressed and crushed in on itself, but appeared to be complete. It has been identified as a Late Bronze Age form and fabric type. In addition, a possible ring of very small stake holes was also located to the south and east of this burial.

The contents of the burial were floated and sieved and some small fragments of cremated bone were recovered together with charcoal fragments, but no other grave goods.

On the basis of the pottery dates the Round House, the cremation burial and the rectangular structure (Structure 1007 below) appear to be of later Bronze Age date and broadly contemporary. The postholes containing similar mixes of residual Early and later Bronze Age pottery.

Cunliffe (Cunliffe 1993) notes that Late Bronze Age cremation burials were invariably without grave goods, in a variety of types of vessel and were sometimes marked with stone slabs or upright timbers.

#### RECTANGULAR STRUCTURE 1007

This structure, made up of six postholes, measured some 3.5m x 3m, and was aligned southwest northeast with the postulated entrance to the southwest. A possible north east gable end posthole contained two sherds of Bronze Age pottery.

As this structure is closely associated spatially with the cremation grave, it is suggested that it may represent the remains of a mortuary house or an exposure platform, predecessors to a possible multi-use barrow which has since been totally ploughed away. Late Bronze Age barrows were smaller than the earlier examples and would therefore be more at risk to even light cultivation.

The sophistication of the construction of the cremation burial though, especially considering the importation from a distance of a large and heavy sandstone slab, suggests that this may be the area of a flat cemetery.

#### PIT AND GULLY ALIGNMENT – STRUCTURE 254

Partially underlying the north end of the second rectangular structure (Structure 1008) was a shallow gully closely associated with three other pits, each approximately 2.5m long and 0.8m deep. This area of deep pits was unique on the site. Each was part sectioned and excavated and produced small quantities of flint flakes.

It was not possible to interpret this alignment other than to surmise that the pits could have been used to extract clay for pottery or daub manufacture. An alternative explanation is that they were used for food storage, but the lack of finds would appear to be against this.

#### MODERN RECTANGULAR STRUCTURE 1002

This structure, represented by six rectangular postholes aligned approximately parallel to the existing hedge, was a modern structure, with some recently rotted wood still surviving in the fills. It was interpreted as a possible decoy structure associated with the aircraft factory and World War II RAF field at Filton, and is not further considered in this report.

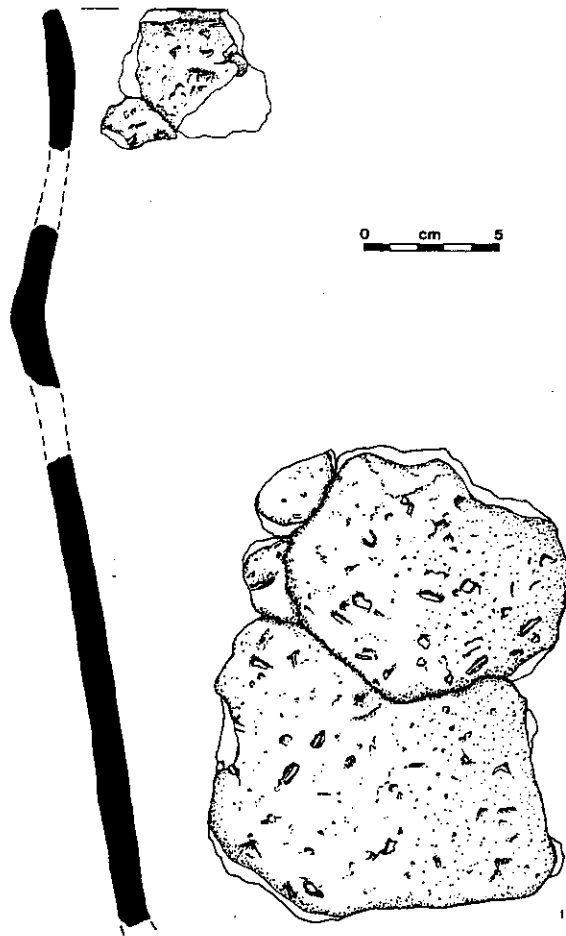
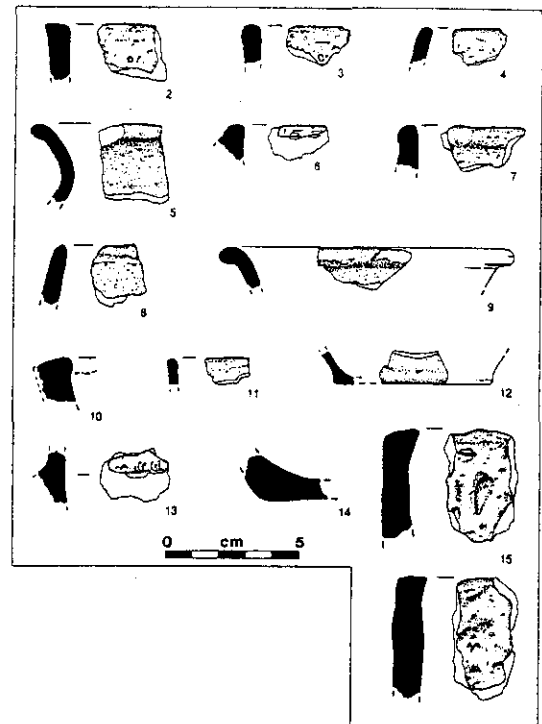


Fig. 4



- 1 Cremation urn - Feature 532; FT 1; M/Later Bronze Age
- 2 Rim sherd - Context 419; FT 8; E/Middle Bronze Age
- 3 Rim sherd - Context 423; FT 3; M/Later Bronze Age
- 4 Rim sherd - Context 399; FT 3; M/Later Bronze Age
- 5 Rim sherd from cookpot/storage vessel - Context 5018; Romano-British
- 6 Rim sherd - Context 339; FT 1; M/Later Bronze Age
- 7 Rim sherd - Context 390; FT12; Prehistoric, ?Bronze Age
- 8 Rim sherd - slightly inverted - Context 419; FT 2; Prehistoric, ?Bronze Age
- 9 Rim sherd from bowl - Context 5091; Romano-British
- 10 Rim sherd - Context 5152; FT 8; E/Middle Bronze Age
- 11 Rim sherd - Context 5160; FT 4; Romano-British
- 12 Rim sherd - Context 397; FT 9; Romano-British
- 13 Body sherd with decorated cordon or ridge - FT11; Prehistoric, ?Bronze Age
- 14 Base sherd - Context 176; FT 9; Romano-British
- 15 Rim sherds - Context 390; FT 8; E/Middle Bronze Age

## SUMMARY FINDS REPORTS

### THE POTTERY (Fig. 4)

by Elaine Morris

The pottery was assessed by Elaine Morris after fabric descriptions by Andrew Young. The assemblage includes a number of Early-Middle Bronze Age pottery fabrics (Fabric Types 8 and 14). Fabrics similar to Fabric Type 8 have been used in the manufacture of Trevisker-type thick-walled urns and Deverill-Rimbury urns, but this is only a provisional identification.

The assemblage also contains sherds with distinctive traits of later Bronze Age pottery, the use of calcareous inclusions as temper (Fabric Type 1). This includes the large shouldered cremation urn.

Only one Bronze age sherd was decorated (with a raised cordon). This was of Fabric Type 11 and supports a later Bronze Age date for the majority of the pottery assemblage.

Pottery recovered from the same area closely adjacent to structure 1008 during the previous evaluation exercise (Erskine 1991) was examined by Dr Anne Woodward and nine sherds were identified as probably Early to Middle Bronze Age date. One sherd was decorated with faint fingertip impressions with parallels from Brean Down, Somerset and Bevans Quarry, Temple Guiting, Gloucestershire among others to confirm this provisional dating.

### RADIO CARBON DATES

No deposits were recovered at Savages Wood which were suitable for radiocarbon dating, but a very similar site excavated by Adrian Parry at nearby Webbs Farm (ASMR 8723) some 1km to the south east (Parry 1992), produced evidence of similar prehistoric activity in association with pottery, flints and pennant sandstone fragments, usually burnt. Radiocarbon dates obtained from samples on that site (C14 references AA-10328 (AMS/183) and AA-10329 (AMS/184)) were 1014-849 bc and 1387-1000 bc at 1 sigma confidence rating, calibrated.

### THE FLINT

192 flint fragments were recovered from the site with nine from the evaluation exercise. The evaluation flints were reported on earlier (Russett in Erskine 1991). When examined by Vince Russett and Peter Woodward they included an A1 type core, possibly dating from the Mesolithic to Early Neolithic period and a petit tranchet derivative arrowhead of the Neolithic to Bronze Age overlap.

Of the total from this excavation, only 35 were identified by Vince Russett as other than damage, waste or trimming debris. Twenty one fragments had formed parts of utilised blades, three of knives and six of scrapers. There were also two arrowheads, one core fragment and one small piece of a polished axe. Some items had a possible Neolithic date, but most were typologically indistinct.

This information, taken with the previous identification of cores and arrowheads as possibly dating from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic-Bronze Age overlap, indicates no more than the fact that human activity on this site may have established well before the Bronze Age settlement.

A distribution analysis was undertaken on the finds from the site, although it should be noted that the evidence from that study is based upon a very small number of artefacts. The distribution appears to associate the earlier pottery and the majority of the flint items with the subrectangular buildings to the east of the site, Structures 1004 and 1008. The later pottery is concentrated in the vicinity of the round houses and the cremation burial to the west of the site, where very little flint was found.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL SAMPLES

Very large samples for environmental analysis were taken from all securely stratified deposits. A representative sample of the material was floated on a Siraf Flotation tank and the residues were submitted to Vanessa Straker of Bristol University for identification.

Unfortunately, the results were entirely negative. Either because of the nature of the original occupation or the state of preservation of the excavated deposits, no significant information was obtained.

#### BONE REPORT

Geraldine Barber of the University of Bristol Department of Medicine, Rheumatology Unit reported on the bone finds as follows.

Fifty-seven contexts contained 356 bone fragments, but all were in a poor fragmentary condition. None could be measured. 64 were identifiable of which 13 were identified only as mammal tooth fragments. Four species were identified. In order of frequency they were cow, sheep/goat, pig and horse.

14.4% of the unidentifiable fragments were burnt, but none of the identifiable bones were burnt.

The assemblage is considered to be a primary deposit of food production remains. All aged fragments appear to be from adult animals. The context with the greatest number of bones, 39 (9.1%) was the small pit 435.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The Bradley Stoke District Centre site produced well documented evidence of a Bronze Age settlement consisting primarily of a circular postbuilt house of not very substantial construction. Closely associated were many other similar postholes and small pits which are interpreted to represent similar buildings of varying phases and rebuilds or other utilitarian agricultural structures.

The cremation burial, carried out in a sophisticated ritual manner was of an identical date.

Other trench and post built timber structures were identified closely adjacent. The dating of these structures remains tentative due to the paucity of pottery from the area and it is possible that they represent the remains of an earlier phase of settlement on the site. If the rectangular structures were contemporary with the main phase of Bronze Age settlement on the site then their shape and the concentration of flint finds associated with them may in fact reflect some functional preference, perhaps an area for flint working or other agricultural activity as opposed to a dwelling.

Evidence of Bronze Age settlement is rare in Avon. Pits containing Bronze Age material reflecting occupation have been recorded at Chew Park, Ben Bridge and Combe Hay (Aston and Iles 1987). This paucity of evidence for occupation contrasts with the abundance of bronze age hoards and of course the large number of barrows which are recorded in the county. Clearly part of the contrast lies in the fact that while hoards and barrows are relatively robust or easily detected and noted, the extremely tenuous remains of a settlement, which was possibly of a seasonal or transhumant nature, are very difficult to detect. More importantly perhaps is that we are not yet looking in the places where such settlement is more likely to have been sited, for example in river valleys, and where the remains of occupation are more likely to be better preserved.

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