



A Interim Summary Report on Excavations at Castle Hill, Wittenham Clumps.

Summer Season 13th July to 5th September 2003

Introduction

This report offers a summary of the archaeology examined in the first season of fieldwork and an initial interpretation of the results, prior to assessment and further analysis; the interpretation is, therefore, provisional. The excavation season ran for seven weeks from the 13th July to 31st August 2003; the excavation was extended by a further week in order to reinstate the excavation trenches.

Seven trenches were excavated in accordance with the project design, although Trench 7 was re-located adjacent to Trench 5 (and called Trench 5a) within the clump due to ecological concerns and a change in research priorities.

The archaeological summary is presented chronologically.

The earlier Prehistoric (Mesolithic 8000-4000 BC and Neolithic 4000-2400 BC)

Although no features of Mesolithic or Neolithic date were found, a small number of flint artefacts were recovered either from the topsoil or from later features. These include a Mesolithic microlith (part of a composite arrowhead, harpoon or saw), and a Neolithic leaf-shaped arrowhead (Pl. 1). The recovery of these flint artefacts shows that hunter-gatherers and early farmers visited Castle Hill during the Mesolithic and Neolithic respectively, although there are too few artefacts to judge whether this was for hunting, for gathering or for short-term habitation.



Plate 1 An early Neolithic leaf-shaped arrowhead.

The later Prehistoric (1000 BC - AD 43)

The first enclosure

After the Neolithic, the next phase of activity is of the late Bronze Age (c 10th century BC). A geophysical survey undertaken by English Heritage in 2000 identified a sub-circular enclosure enclosing approximately one hectare around the very top of the hill. Trenches 3, 4 and 6 were targeted to cross the enclosure ditch and Trench 5 was positioned to locate the northern side of the enclosure in the woodland, where it was not possible to undertake a geophysical survey. The excavation located the enclosure ditch in Trenches 3, 4 and 6, and tentatively in Trench 5a.

The ditch was U-profiled, but varied in size between the excavated trenches: in Trench 3 (cut 3017) it was over 5 m wide and 2.5 m deep (Pl. 2), in Trench 6 it was 4 m wide and was 1.7 m deep (Pl. 3), and a similar width in Trench 4. In Trench 3 only one potsherd, a few animal bones and a scatter of charcoal came from the bottom of the ditch (3082). Above this the northern (inner) side of the ditch was filled almost to the top by mixed chalk and clay lumps, suggesting that the material dug out of the ditch had been piled up to make a bank on the inside, which had later collapsed back into the ditch. None of the trenches however revealed any evidence for a revetment on the internal edge of the enclosure ditch to support the bank, which would explain why in places it collapsed. There may however have been an additional defence that did not penetrate the ground surface (such as a palisade on top of the bank).



Plate 2 The late Bronze Age enclosure ditch (3017) in Trench 3.



Plate 3 The late Bronze Age enclosure ditch (6007) in Trench 6.

Halfway up Trench 6 a dump of large sherds of a late Bronze Age globular jar with an applied, cabled, neck cordon (6031 - Pl. 4) was found, firmly dating the ditch to the Bronze Age. In Trench 5a the probable inner edge of the ditch (5018) was found within the trench but not excavated due to lack of time. The uppermost fill (5011) of possible ditch 5018 produced a fragment of igneous rock, possibly syenite, which may be part of a mould or quern rubber. The source of this material requires further investigation, but the closest igneous rocks are hundreds of kilometres away in Devon and Cornwall, implying long-distance contacts for the Bronze Age inhabitants.



Plate 4 A late Bronze Age globular jar (6031) in enclosure ditch 6007.

No pits or other features located in the excavated trenches were contemporary with the enclosure. In Trench 6 two postholes 2 m apart were found dug into the middle fills of the ditch that overlay the Late Bronze Age globular jar. These postholes lay on the inner side of the ditch, and may possibly represent a fence redefining part of the enclosure, though no such postholes were found in Trench 3. Within all the excavated trenches, the hollow left in the ditch top after it had largely silted up was filled with early Iron Age pottery and animal bone, contemporary with the larger hillfort.

The hillfort defences

The hilltop enclosure was considerably enlarged during the earlier Iron Age with the digging of the ditch and adjacent banks that still survive today. The excavations did not recover many finds either in the rampart or the bottom of the ditch to date when the hillfort defences were dug, but it is hoped that further analysis of the small number of finds recovered and scientific dating of bones and other remains will clarify this.

The defences consisted of three main elements; a substantial ditch, a bank (the counter-scarp) on the outside edge of the ditch (Trench 1) and a rampart on the inside of the hillfort ditch (Trench 2). The ditch was constructed at a break of slope on the original ground surface. The ditch is 16 m wide and a maximum of 7.5 m deep from the original ground surface. It is 'V' shaped with sides dipping at 35° to 45° to a

small flat base 0.80 m wide (Pl. 5 and 6). The hillfort ditch appears to have been kept clean and free from rubble and silt during much of the Iron Age, as only 0.80 m of sediment built up before the Roman period. Only two sherds of Iron Age pottery were recovered from these lower fills.



Plate 5 The hillfort defensive ditch (1000) and counter-scarp, looking west.



Plate 6 The hillfort defences.

The majority of the material excavated from the ditch appears to have been used in the construction of the outer bank (known as the counter-scarp bank). On the edge of the ditch the counter-scarp bank survives *c* 1 m higher than the original, preserved, ground surface from which the ditch was cut. Its top is 5 m wide, and it slopes down on the outer side at an angle of *c* 30° to the fields below. Several fine silt layers possibly representing the formation of turf lines, each covered with a layer of chalk (layers 1025-29 and 1033-35), were observed within the structure of the bank, possibly indicating that the outer bank was repeatedly added to over a long period of time, probably when the ditch was cleaned out (Pl. 6).

The rampart survives 7 m wide and a maximum of 1.40 m high above the buried ground surface on which it was built. The core of the rampart is composed of a series of layers and dumps of chalk rubble, chalk silt and some clays. The rear of the

rampart is marked by a vertical-sided and flat-based trench (2040), 1.20 m wide and 0.50 m deep, which cuts the buried soil (group 2070). A series of rampart soil layers (group 2071) dip towards the interior of the hillfort (north), and some of these stop against a vertical edge at the back (north side) of trench 2040 (Pl. 7). This suggests that a timber wall or palisade (now completely decayed) may have stood here marking the original rear of the rampart, against which the rampart soils were piled.



Plate 7 The rampart facing NW, note the preserved soil level and the layers in the rampart's core.

No structures (palisade trenches or postholes) were located at the front of the rampart alongside the edge of the hillfort ditch. There were no traces of stone facing the rampart or fallen into the ditch, nor a palisade trench (though erosion of the ditch side could have removed this). The rampart may however have been supported by a wooden revetment consisting of posts at intervals, as only a narrow trench (1 m wide) was excavated through the rampart, and may have lain between postholes. The angle of tip of the rampart soils, which dip towards the interior even close to the edge of the ditch, does suggest that there was no gap between the ditch and the front of the rampart, and strengthens the case that there was some form of revetment at the front.

There is also evidence that the rampart was remodelled during the Iron Age. A probable palisade trench (2032), with a posthole (2065) at the base of the trench (2032) and a rectangular slot (2012) higher up, was excavated through the core of the original mound (group 2071). This suggests that a fence was added to heighten the rampart at some stage.

Inside the hillfort early Iron Age finds (700-400 BC) came from the top of the late Bronze Age enclosure ditch and from a single large pit (3006) at the top of Trench 3 (Pl. 8). The pit (3006) was 4 m in diameter and 0.70 m deep, and was filled with a large quantity of pottery, animal bones and charred material. The bones included a large number of juvenile sheep and wild boar bones with smaller numbers of cattle bones. The pottery included fragments of burnished hematite coated cups and bowls, one of which it was possible to reconstruct, part of a highly burnished black lid decorated with impressed dots filled with a white inlay and numerous larger coarse bowls decorated like pie-crust around the rim. Several bone tools including a pin were also found (Pl. 9). A preliminary scan of the charred plant remains from the pit indicates that the pit contained significant quantities of barley.



Plate 8 The large early Iron Age pit 3006 and the smaller middle Iron Age pits 3002 and 3004.



Plate 9 An early Iron Age decorated pottery lid and a bone pin from pit 3006.

A total of 15 smaller circular pits were excavated, three of which can be dated from the pottery to the middle Iron Age (400-0 BC). Until the pottery is examined further the rest can only be dated as broadly Iron Age. The middle Iron Age pits (3002, 3004 (see Pl. 8) and 3019) were all relatively shallow and those on the top of the hill (3002 and 3004) had probably been heavily truncated by repeated ploughing. Pit 3004

contained fragments of a swag-decorated globular bowl, animal bones, charred wheat and barley grains and fishbones. There were also spindle whorls used in spinning wool (Pl. 10). Pit 3019 (also Middle Iron Age) was the latest of a group of five inter-cutting pits; it is not yet known whether the others were Early or Middle Iron Age. A second group of three inter-cutting pits (3015, 3025 and 3057) was found immediately north of ditch 3017; none are currently dated.



Plate 10 Two broken chalk spindle whorls for spinning wool, recovered from middle Iron Age pits.

Human remains were present in three of the Iron Age pits; 3019, 3152 and 6022. Pit 3019 contained the skeleton of a newborn infant (3020) within a dark soil rich in charcoal, pottery and animal bones. The neighbouring pit 3152 contained a sequence of three burials. At the base of pit 3152 a very large adult male was buried in a crouched or foetal position (3160) with a deposit of charred grain (3163) at his feet and two small pieces of animal bone, possibly representing an offering, under the left arm (Pl. 11). The burial was covered by a layer of clean soil, and after this the partially articulated remains of a adult female were interred (3143) (Pl. 12). Four sections of the skeleton (3143) were found: the left femur and pelvis, the left tibia, the sacrum and lower spine and a medial section of the spine and ribs. Cut marks were present at the distal end of the femur and proximal end of the tibia, indicating some chopping up of the skeleton, although it is possible that the body had also decayed, perhaps through excarnation for a time, before part of it was buried in the pit. An animal skull was buried in association with this skeleton and a sheep/goat skull was present slightly higher in the backfill covering the part-skeleton.

Similarities in the backfill may indicate that both burials were placed in the pit and covered with soil in one event. Although part-burials are not uncommon in the Iron Age, it is unusual to find both formal burials and part-burials in one pit, raising interesting speculations about the fate of the female buried above the complete male. The uppermost two surviving fills of pit 3152 appear to represent natural silting over some time, though within one of these a newborn infant (3042) was buried, perhaps showing that the pit's previous use for burial was still remembered (Pl. 13).



Plate 11 A crouched burial of an adult male (skeleton. 3160) buried at the base of Iron Age pit 3152, note the charred grain placed at his feet as an offering.



Plate 12 The partially articulated remains of an adult female (skeleton. 3143) buried in pit 3152.



Plate 13 The burial of a newborn infant (skeleton 3042) in the upper fills of pit 3152.

The third pit containing human bone was found in Trench 6. Pit 6022 was truncated by a large medieval pit 6011, and only half of the original pit survived, but from its single fill (6023) adult human bones including fragments of a femur, tibia, skull and several finger bones were recovered.

Another probably Iron Age burial, this time placed in a shallow grave, was found south of the pits in Trench 3. This was again in a crouched or foetal position, and was an adult female, but most of her head had been disturbed and destroyed by ploughing. The body was tightly crouched, and must have been bound into this position. The excavations have therefore recovered evidence of a wide range of burial practices among the prehistoric people of Castle Hill.

Finds and features dating from the late Iron Age (0 BC-50 AD) were absent from the excavated areas, perhaps indicating that the hillfort was abandoned at this time. This was when the valley fort at Dyke Hills just across the Thames was constructed, and there may have been a population shift to this new centre.

Roman (AD 43-410)

A significant quantity of Roman features and finds were discovered in the excavations. Most of these dated after AD 250, but in the hillfort's defensive ditch a deposit of human and animal bone comprising the spine of a dog (1014), sheep bones and a collection of disarticulated human bone (1013), including a mandible, several vertebrae and a collar bone, was found together with limestone lumps, tile and 1st century AD Roman pottery (Pl. 14)



Plate 14 Dis-articulated human bone and a dogs spine in Roman layers within the hillfort's defensive ditch.

In Trench 2, behind the rampart, two pits containing small quantities of Roman pottery were found (2020 and 2064). Overlying the pits were a series of dumped soils and occupation debris up to one metre thick and extending some four metres back from the rear of the rampart (2017, 2008, 3076=2006 and 2004). Indeed, these layers even spread over the top of the rampart creating a false 'crest' at the edge of the hillfort. The deposits in the dump included large sherds of late Roman (c 4th century) pottery, some from largely complete but broken vessels, glass, abundant animal bones, ironwork and a few coins. Furthermore, behind the rampart a more extensive

soil level (3150/3123) containing Roman finds was preserved. All this suggests rubbish dumping or middening from a settlement within the hillfort.

The excavation also revealed three large rectangular features: 4009 in Trench 4 and 3157 and 3067 in Trench 3. None were fully excavated. Pit 4009 was rectangular, 2.90 m by 2 m and 1 m deep (Pl. 15). The surviving sides were vertical and the base was flat, and the fills included spills of chalk and silty deposits. Finds from pit 4009 included small fragments of Roman pottery, a Roman coin and the spur from a cockerel. Pit 3067 was similar to pit 4009, but considerably larger, measuring 8 m by at least 3 m, and was cut over 1.2 m into the natural chalk (Pl. 16). Its upper sides were sloping, probably from weathering over some time, and it cut several Iron Age pits on its north and west sides. The fills contained comparatively few finds.



Plate 15 A rectangular Roman pit (4009) in Trench 4.



Plate 16 A large Roman quarry (3067) in Trench 3.

In layer 3055 (a middle fill of pit 3067) fragments of human bone were recovered including pieces of skull, vertebra and a patella; these bones may have slipped in from one of the truncated Iron Age pits, or may have been discarded as Roman rubbish. The third square pit (3157) was situated alongside pit 3067, but was smaller (as shown on the geophysical plot) and was not dug to the bottom. The upper fill (3161) of pit 3157 did however produce a human cranium (SF 3072), and at the north end (numbered 3155) an extended human burial lying south-north (3163). The right arm, vertebra and part of the pelvis were uncovered, the rest of the skeleton lay outside the excavation.

The function of these features is unclear, ranging from quarries to cellared buildings. One intriguing idea is that they may have acted as water tanks, provided they were lined, collecting water from spring lines that occur when water percolating through the chalk meets a band of clay. There is such a band just uphill of the pit.

Further uphill a shallow grave 3010 was cut into the upper fills of Iron Age pit 3015, and contained the extended burial of an adult male (3012), again with head to the south. The grave was very shallow and had been truncated by ploughing, removing the skull and much of the lower mandible. The burial was accompanied by fragments of two or three pottery vessels placed over the pelvis, these again had been badly damaged by ploughing (Pl. 17). Both formal and rather more haphazard disposal of human remains in the Roman period seems to be indicated from the discoveries.



Plate 17 A Roman burial of an adult male (skeleton 3012) in Trench 3.

Medieval

No Saxon objects have been found, but Medieval activity is represented by two pits and clusters of pottery from colluvial layers, that is soils washed down the hill from further up the slope, especially after rain. Pit 4003 in Trench 4, was square in plan and contained a layer of black soil and charcoal at the base of the feature, which contained sheep bones, numerous fishbones found by sieving and a large sherd of 12th century Wallingford ware pottery. The deposit also produced an iron spoon bit auger (Pl. 18), used for woodworking, and it is possible that the pit was originally used as a saw pit.

The second medieval pit (6011) was a large sub-circular pit in Trench 6, which was filled with dark charcoal-rich deposits containing animal bone, a few pieces of ironwork and a sherd of 13th century pottery. This pit may have been dug as a chalk quarry and then used for refuse disposal. Above the Roman soils just behind the rampart one of the upper colluvial layers (3075) in Trench 3 contained much medieval pottery, including numerous fragments of at least one large vessel.



Plate 18 A Medieval spoon bit auger from pit 4003 in Trench 4.

The presence of two large pits and the quantity of pottery from colluvial layers suggests a possible settlement. We know that the hilltop was used as arable fields by the time Leland visited in AD 1560, but the pits suggest that this did not begin until after the 13th century. Furthermore, the pottery in the colluvial layers is relatively fresh and may indicate that ploughing leading to soil creep began soon after the sherds were deposited.

Post medieval

The parallel ridges and hollows running north-south across the clump have been dug through and appear to be planting ridges dug when the clump was planted in the post medieval period. In Trench 6 these ridges and furrows cut the fills of the medieval pit 6011, and also a ploughsoil that overlies the pit. The ridges and hollows also stop just inside the boundary ditch around the clumps (5016), indicating that they are contemporary.

Outside the clump the marks of recent cultivation are clearly visible cutting across the chalk and the archaeological features. Pillars of surviving chalk in the trench edges show that at least 150 mm of the natural chalk on the hilltop has been removed by the plough and washed downhill by rain and gravity. The shallowness of some of the Iron Age pits suggests that erosion of the chalk through ploughing has probably reduced the level by at least twice as much. What survives is therefore only the deeper features; postholes may have been present, but have been removed by the plough.