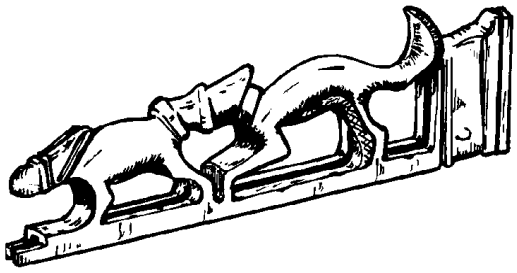
Ampthill & District Archaeological



& Local History Society

Rescue Excavation of Belgic/Early Roman Pits

TL 05173615

2011
Updated 2021

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www.adalhs.org.uk

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Summary

A group of possible Iron Age/Early Roman pits was suggested by crop marks adjacent to the Ampthill Bypass under construction, this was supported by aerial photographs taken by the author. A closer investigation of the area following the removal of the top soil by the contractor revealed two pits . They were excavated and shown to date between mid first century BC and mid first century AD with evidence for copper bronze and possible iron smelting. Residual late Bronze Age flints suggest an earlier occupation of the site. A Belgic cremation urn was found nearby.

Introduction

While the Society were carrying out a watching brief of the Ampthill Bypass in 1982 at a point where it crossed Ruxox Farm, vast quantities of soil were removed from the road foundation and from the north verge to give "a line of sight". This soil was later used to make up the road further to the east where the natural soil was normally very wet. In the mean time the soil was piled up giving vantage points to view the surrounding area. It was from here that variations in crop height and colour were noted in the adjacent fields suggesting archaeology beneath the surface. The field had been put down to wheat for the first time since WWII when the area was used for intensive market gardening.

The Society took the opportunity to hire an aircraft for aerial photography and this supported the suggestion of a cluster of pits. In addition the survey located and put into context a water pipeline that was laid in the early 60's. The excavations for the pipeline were not archaeologically observed but they turned up a considerable amount of archaeology some of which was picked up by the farmer Mr. J Course. (Fadden K. *Report on Romano British artefacts on the surface of Ruxox Farm* ADALHS web-site).



Photo. 1. Taller wheat patches emphasised by later ripening suggested under surface pits.



Photo. 2. Enhanced grass growth in corn stubble to North of bypass.

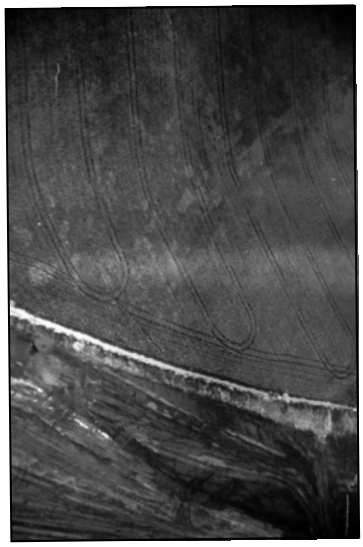


Photo. 3. Light patches showing up pits from the air.

First indication of archaeology in the area came from this view of a field of wheat (Photo. 1) and the grass in the oat stubble (Photo. 2). The first photographs was taken from the road spoil heap which can be seen in the bottom right hand corner of Photo. 3. From the air the features show as light patches. on the black & white photograph. The strong white line between the crop and the road foundations was the gravel filling of the french drain.



Photo. 4. Pit after excavation

The area around the soil heaps was badly churned up by the heavy duty scrapers but careful searching revealed an outline of a pit (Photo. 4.). This pit had some significant artefacts (Photos. 5-11) including a Belgic lid, burnished bowl and a fiance melon bead (probably Roman). Unusually some iron work survived, an almost complete sickle blade (Photo. 10) and an unidentified iron object (Photo. 12.) also in this photograph a sherd of pottery repaired with a ferrous rivet. Surprisingly the sherd survived without being split by expansion of the rivet which normally occurs in the rusting process.



Photo. 5. Pot lid with corded decoration.



Photo. 6. Burnished dish.



Photo. 7. Fiance melon bead outside.



Photo. 8. Fiance melon bead inside.



Photo. 9. Bowl.



Photo. 10. Sickle blade.



Photo. 11. Pot sherd with iron rivet & unidentified iron object.

A similar pit close by (Photo. 12) contained what appeared to be metallic slag, some worked flint and a Late Bronze Age barbed & tanged arrow head which had been subjected to intense heat (Photo. 13). This material was concentrated in a furnace pit one metre in diameter. The bottom of the pit showed evidence of a furnace lining. This can be clearly seen in the photograph. A stoke hole to the furnace completed the structure, the



Photo. 12. Bronze smelting furnace with stoke hole to the west.

furnace and stoke hole were aligned roughly east to west.

It is reasonable to assume that the furnace of late 1st Century BC - early 1st Century AD was built on land inhabited during the Late Bronze Age and the arrow head and worked flints were intrusions. Human presence in the Bronze Age is recorded (see BAJ Vol 5. Fadden *Ruxox Farm, Maulden The Prehistoric Finds).*

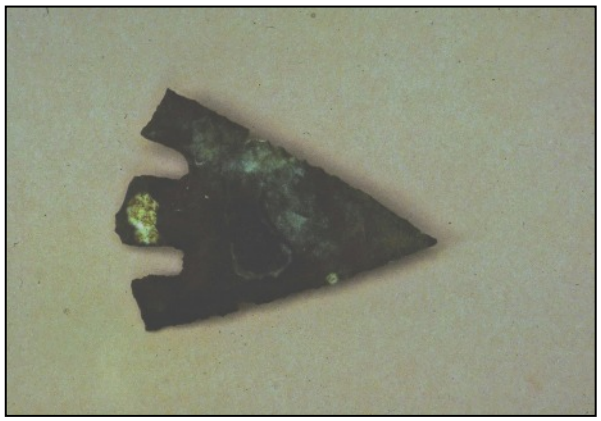


Photo. 13. Late Bronze Age Barbed and Tanged Arrow Head, showing signs of burning.

The report below is from the British Museum Research Laboratory,

Report on the Examination of Metallurgical Debris from Iron Age Site in Bedfordshire. (Department of Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities).
INTRODUCTION
Eleven representative fragments of possible metallurgical debris from an Iron Age site in Ampthill, Bedfordshire, were examined by X-ray fluorescence spectrometry (XRF) to determine the type of metal being processed. Samples from four fragments were also examined by optical emission spectroscopy (OES) which is a more sensitive technique than XRF.

Results

Lab. Number	*Metals Detected by XRF*	*Other Metals Detected by OES*
21469 X	*Cu,Sn,Pb,tr.As,tr.Sb,Fe*	*tr,Ag,tr.Mn*
21470 P	*Fe*	*tr.Cu,tr.Mn*
21471 Y	*Fe*	*tr.Cu,tr.Mn*
21472 W	*Fe*	*tr.Cu,tr.Mn*
21473 U	*Fe,Mn,tr.Pb*	_
21474 S	*Fe,Mn,tr.Pb*	_
21475 Q	*Fe*	_
21476 Z	*Fe,Mn*	_
21477 X	*Fe,tr.Mn*	_
21478 V	*Fe,Mn*	_
21479 T	*Fe,Mn*	_

(tr. Trace, "-" not analysed)

Conclusions
Eleven fragments from Ampthill were examined by XRF, four of which were also examined by OES. Fragment 21469 X had green copper- alloy corrosion products adhering to its inner surface. Copper, tin and lead were detected in substantial amounts, with traces of arsenic, antimony, silver, iron and manganese also present, again suggesting association with leaded bronze production.
Three fragments, 21471 Y, 21472 W and 21477 X were found to be very high in iron, with traces of manganese, and had the appearance of furnace slag. The remaining seven fragments were of vitrified clay, with a moderate amount of iron detectable. There was no evidence of the fragments having been fired at a particularly high temperature or under particular reducing conditions. Their appearance and degree of vitrification was consistent with the fragments coming from a clay lining of a hearth or a furnace bottom. Two fragments, 21473 U and 21474 S had slight traces of lead present, though its significance is uncertain.
DR Hook
MS Tate

R.L. File No. 5001
6th December 1983.

An extract from a letter written by Valery Rigby (Research Assistant) at the British Museum Department of Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities dated 3rd January 1984.

"*Herewith a copy of the report from the Research Laboratory on the various samples of slag and kiln lining. As we thought there is clay lining or furnace bottom from iron working.*
The slag is from both bronze and iron working so there seems no reason to quarrel with the date provided by the pottery of late 1st century B.C. to mid 1st century A.D. High lead -bronzes are known to be typical of the Late Bronze Age and Roman periods however there is now evidence from analysing brooches for the use of leaded bronzes in the late Iron Age in North Herts. (which could not be much closer)".



Photo. 14. General view of the bypass under construction in the Ruxox area. The straight line crop mark running diagonally across the field is the result of a water pipe line laid in the early 1960's. The pumping station can be seen at the top of the photograph. (roughly north). The spoil heaps generated by the contractors and stored for later use can be seen on what was to become the verge of the road.



Photo. 15. Looking east where the water pipeline crossed the road workings and the french drain turned into an open ditch. The "V" section ditch was cut with one pass of the heavy equipment.

Cremation TL 05173615

To the east of the area where the pipeline crosses the road (Photo. 15) the french drain runs into an open ditch. Three metres along the ditch the digger cleanly cut through a Belgic girth beaker containing a cremation. (Photo. 16).

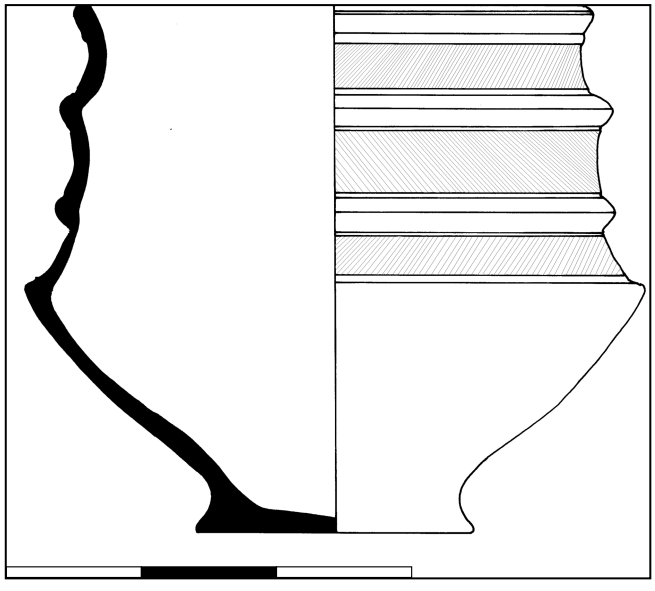
When found the soil round the beaker was baked hard in the sun and the beaker walls were very thin and friable. It was eventually lifted in a block after cutting through the soil with pressured water and carefully cleaned on a bench. Fortunately there was sufficient of the beaker left to reconstruct the shape. (Photo. 17 & Drwg. 1).



Photo. 16. Belgic cremation cut through by digger.



Photo. 17. Reconstructed beaker.



Drwg. 1. Scale drawing of girth beaker showing fine decoration.



Photo. 18. Iron coil, possible ox goad.

Approximately 40 % of an adult cremation remained in the beaker following the cut by the digger also an iron coil, (Photo. 18) this has been compared with ox -goads found in Iron Age cremations from elsewhere but is unusual as it appears to have been made from a tube. If it had a prodding point then it must have been cut off by the digger. The pottery was black grog tempered with a reddish brown surface of a type believed to have been developed to make native copies of Gallo - Belgic forms. The pot walls were very fine and were finished with a template, the decoration comprised of fine scratches between the ridges. This type of pot has been found at Prea Wood St Albans, Bletchley and Ellesborough. (Thompson 1982)

Cremation Report from T. Jackman - Albion Archaeology, Bedford.

Ruxox Cremation. T. Jackman.

The cremated remains were first wet sieved through a 5.6 mm mesh and allowed to dry for a week. They were then sieved again using graduated meshes of 5.6 mm, 2 mm, and 1 mm. Each sample was weighed except for larger identified fragments which were weighed in their anatomical groups. Only a small proportion of the total individual was recovered, the total weight is 308 g. The sample is mostly white although one or two unidentified pieces are blue/black in colour and were probably furthest away from the source of the fire. The fragments are cracked transversely and longitudinal. And some are twisted and distorted.

Identifiable pieces include fragments of skull, phalanx and long bone.

Conclusions

Evidence from the aerial photographs together with the small rescue excavations give some indication of the extent of the Belgic / Roman presence in this area. The crop marks suggest many pits, one we know was constructed for industrial purposes i.e. smelting and another had domestic artefacts. In addition we have a cremation beaker complete with a probable ox goad suggesting cattle were farmed in the area. Time and labour restraints did not allow excavation outside the road construction envelope. An excavation by Albion Archaeology in 1990 in advance of a second pipeline revealed a second cremation close by but no details are available (Dawson 2004).

Acknowledgements.

All photographs were taken by the author.

The Society are grateful for the help of:

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Albion archaeology, Bedford

British Museum Department of Prehistoric & Romano British Antiquities.

British Museum Services.

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