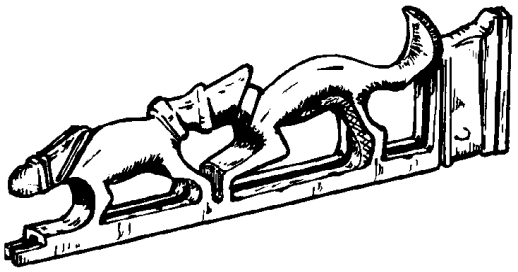
Ampthill & District Archaeological



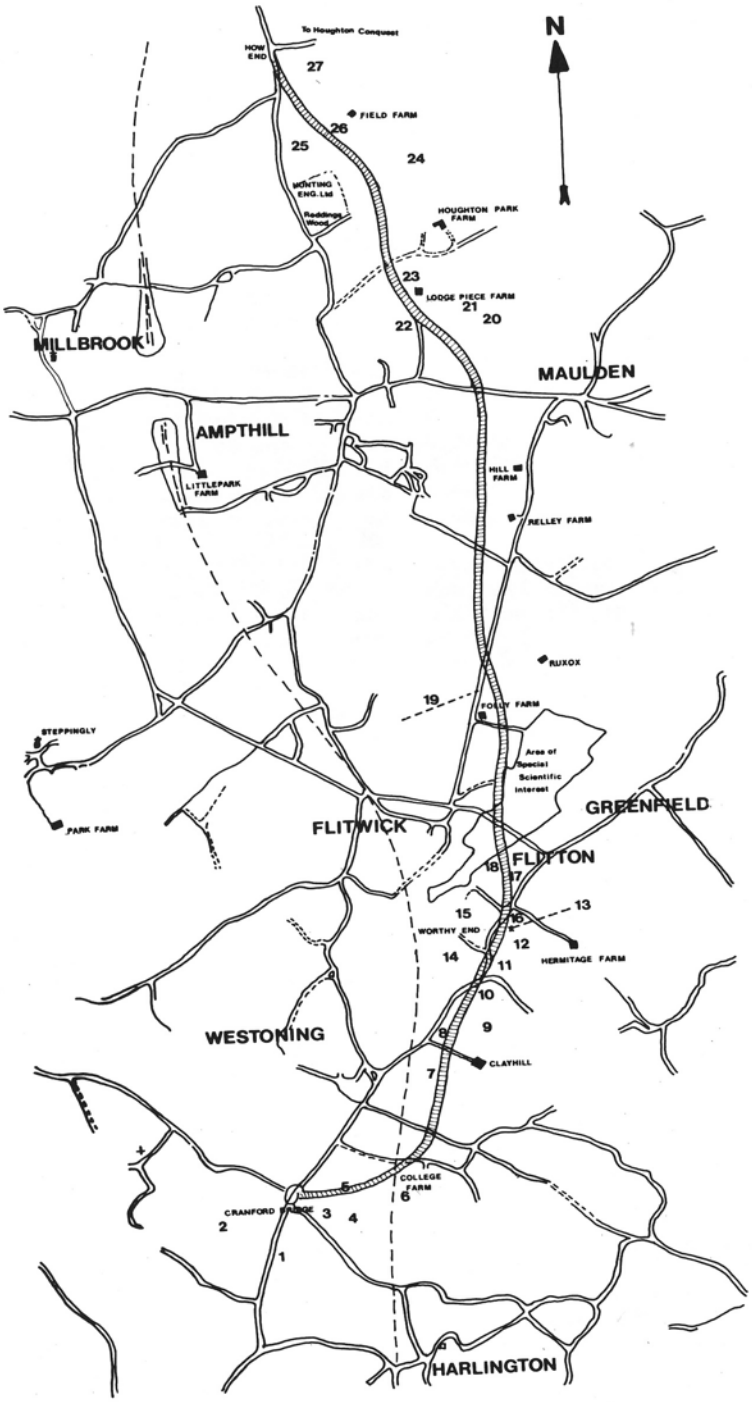
& Local History Society

An Overview of the Ampthill Bypass Archaeology 2011 Updated 2021

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An over view of the Society's results when investigating the Ampthill Bypass. 1982

It was in 1972 when the Society was informed of the proposed bypass for the town of Ampthill. The route ran roughly north south skirting the town on the east side. The Society responded with a major field walking exercise covering the full length of the proposed road covering approximately 500 metres width to allow for deviation. The field walking was supplemented by researching documents and viewing commercial aerial photographs from a number of sources. Private aerial surveys were also carried out by members from light aircraft owned by their friends. After the Society's survey was completed a change of plan was announced to the effect that the route had been changed to skirt the Town on the west side. As this would have affected the Ampthill Great Park the Society did not believe it would proceed and took no further action except to publish the list of potential sites found. *Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal Volume 10.* (Fadden 1975). The 27 significant finds on the abandoned route over 6 miles gave some indication of what could have been expected if the bypass had been built.



Map of the proposed north /south bypass with 27 surface find spots (ref BAJ 10 1975).

In 1980 The final route was published to run in an east west direction passing to the south of the town. The Society started again and repeated the procedures as before. On this occasion the field walking was followed by a constant watch on the road workings and minor excavations were carried out when time and resources permitted. As it was pre P.P.G. 16 there was no official watching brief or help available when rescue work would have been appropriate. The following is an overview of the work carried out, in many cases under pressure from the contractors. The individual sites shown are running west to east and not necessarily in the order they were found.

Site 1 Roman Ditches TL 02453791

This site was found towards the end of the road building phase when grass and weeds were growing in the infill of two ditches cut through by a roadside drainage ditch. When cleaned up the larger ditch had a 19th C drain pipe at the bottom almost certainly an intrusion in a much earlier ditch. The smaller ditch had a colour coated Romano British pot base at the bottom. Time restraints did not allow further excavation. Field walking before and after the discovery did not produce any Roman artefacts but a number of Mesolithic flints were found on the surface and a segment of a circular ridge in the field appeared to line up with the larger ditch.



Photo. 1. Profile of two ditches revealed by the contractors in a roadside ditch.



Photo. 2. Larger ditch with 19th C. Drain pipe.



Photo. 3. Smaller ditch with colour coated Romano British pot base pot base.

Site 2 Belgic Kilns TL 03023650

Some Belgic sherds (Late Iron Age) were found on this site while field walking in advance of the contractors. The first machine scrape by the contractors revealed signs of kilns and a rescue excavation was attempted. The Society was given just one week before the heavy earth moving equipment was brought in. The local Redborne Upper School provided some labour at the weekend (Photo. 4) and a small group of members worked throughout the week. The first day was fine and the remains of two bee hive type kilns were found approximately 6 feet in diameter. The clay base of the domes had baked in position and could be clearly identified. (Photo. 5). The rest of the week was hot interrupted by sudden torrential storms and the fine detail of the bee-hive domes was washed away. There were remains of at least six abandoned kilns of various sizes on the area exposed by the diggers, they were dug into the natural clay. Remarkably few wasters were found on the site and those were of mainly grey or light brown grog tempered coarse ware. A sample of the natural clay was retained and later successfully made into a pot showing similar characteristics



Photo. 4. Members of Society & Students on the first day.



Photo. 5. Baked base of bee-hive kiln

of grog tempering. Broken kiln bars were found and clay slabs used for bee-hive kiln sealing, baked and showing grass marks. (Photo. 6). Only one pot was found that could be reconstructed (Photo. 7).

When the road works resumed the pure clay of the hillside was cut through by the diggers to reduce the slope.



Photo. 6. Pot sherds sealing clay & kiln bar.



Photo. 7. Reconstructed pot.

(Photo. 8). At least two kilns can be seen in the profile. (Photo.9) shows a close up of one we were unable to excavate due to time restraints .



Photo. 8. Digger cut through hillside revealing more kilns.

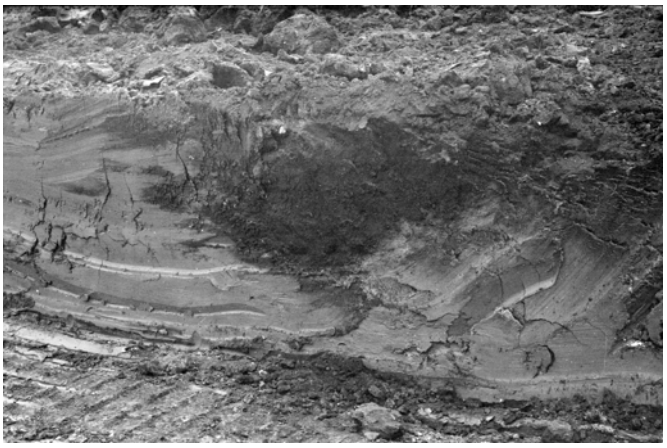


Photo. 9. Section through kiln cut by the contractors.

The bypass passed through the Redborne School playing field between the school and a tributary of the river flit.



Photo. 10. Bypass route pegged out in school field next to a tributary to the River Flit.

Site 3 18th Century Water Mill. TL 03023646

Resulting from a comment recorded in 1965 by a local man (*"Report on a 19th Century Watermill in Flitwick"*. ADALHS Web-site) the bank of the River Flit tributary close to Redborne School playing field was carefully searched and signs of brickwork were revealed. Mr. Scott 86 years old at the time of the recording, mentioned a watermill which he recalled, closing down when he was a small boy. This turned out to be a purpose built mill dated between 1793 -1881. It was cut into the side of a hill to make an effective mill pond. The unusual system for raising a head of water to turn the wheel and its control was recorded. During the construction of the bypass the stream was diverted to follow the road and the mill-site was virtually destroyed. (Photo. 11) shows the track of the 12 feet diameter water wheel.



Photo. 11. Track of water wheel .

Ruxox Farm.

It was known from the start that an East -West bypass would cross the archaeologically sensitive area of Ruxox farm. In the early stages of the road planning this Society was asked if we had any recommendations as to its route. We suggested that although it was not ideal the road should run close to the River Flit and avoid the higher ground. The route plan when published appeared to follow this advice, however in the event it soon became obvious that the area we wished to protect was to be cut through anyway. (Photo. 12) gives some idea of the area destroyed. The actual road is the lighter strip to the right of the photograph. When the planning decision was challenged the Society were told it was necessary for a "line of sight". The resulting earth movement was quite considerable involving very large heaps of spoil being moved several times It was from these that a number of photographs were taken.



Photo. 12. Aerial view looking east showing the area taken up by the "Line of sight" decision.



Photo. 13. Ground view looking west, the french drain can be seen to the right of the picture.

Site 4. TL 04913620 Possible Bath House Site

On the north side of the cleared area, a french drain was dug through the high ground. (Picked out on (Photo. 10) by the white line of gravel infill.) This contained a considerable amount of 2nd & 3rd century pottery. There was no time to take further action except to clean down the earth next to the french drain after the diggers were finished for the day, working while there was some daylight left. Early next morning, a Saturday, we were threatened by a gang of diggers sent to grade the slope. (Photos. 14 & 15) were taken immediately before the site was covered with no time to draw sections .



Photo. 14 Massive “Roman pit” 1 M away from french drain.



Photo. 15. Showing full extent of the “Roman pit”.

The infill of the feature which had been cut away by the contractors was dark red and was fairly consistent for its full width 9.7 M. (following the direction of the road) to a depth of 2 M.

Apart from some 2nd & 3rd century pottery the only artefact found in the section was one hypocaust box flue tile with typical scored surfaces. This suggests a bath house nearby.



Photo 16. Pottery from the trench for the french drain.



Photo. 17. Pottery fro the french drain.


Photo. 18 . Tiles from the french drain trench.


Photo. 19. Bones from the french drain trench.


Photo. 20. Pottery Pottery produced while cleaning up “Roman pit” section and immediate surrounding area.


Photo 21. Pottery from “Roman pit”.

Site 5. Belgic Pits & Possible Cemetery TL 05173615

This site was found while standing on a massive spoil dump looking north across the fields. The grass in the corn stubble (Photo. 22) had grown lush above the damp pits while the wheat in (Photo. 27) had grown taller


Photo. 22. Crop marks showing Belgic Pits.


Photo. 23. Crop marks in adjacent field.

above the damp pits and ripened later than the surrounding crop. An aircraft was hired by the Society to take photographs, taking advantage of the type of crop and the dry conditions. This was the first time for many years that the fields were cropped with corn. During and since WW II it has been an intensive market gardening

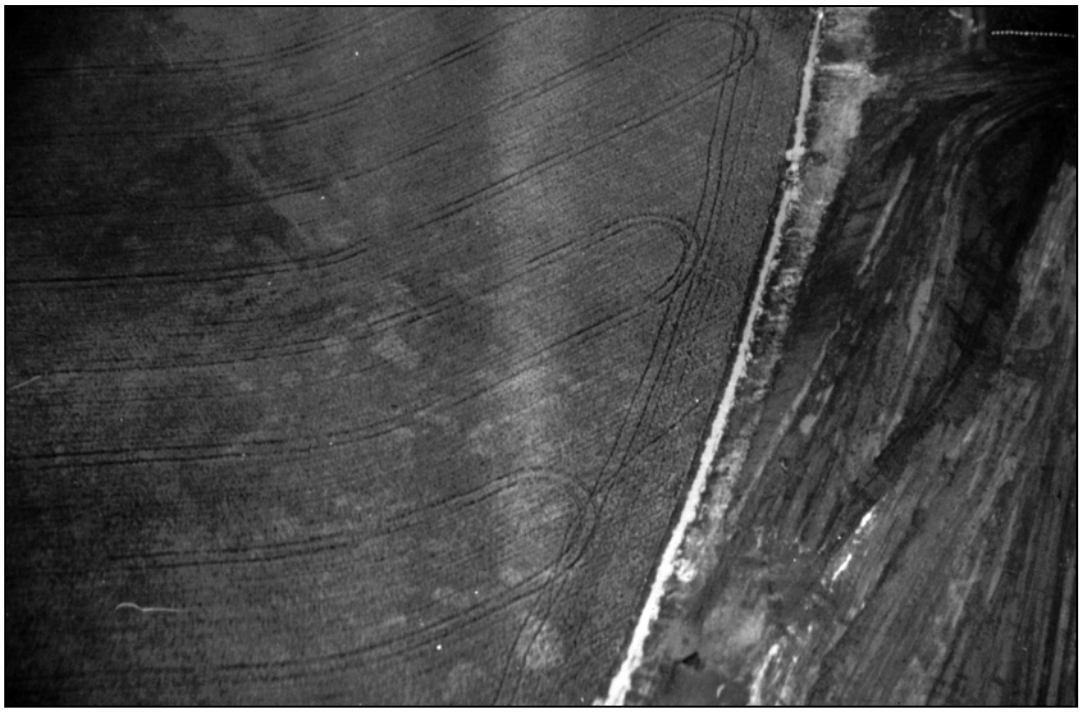


Photo. 24. Aerial detail taken at the time showing some of the probable pits.

area. (Photo. 24.) shows the pits - light grey in a cluster in the bottom half of the photograph. The spoil heap is at at the bottom of the picture to the right of the french drain, showing white, running from top to bottom of

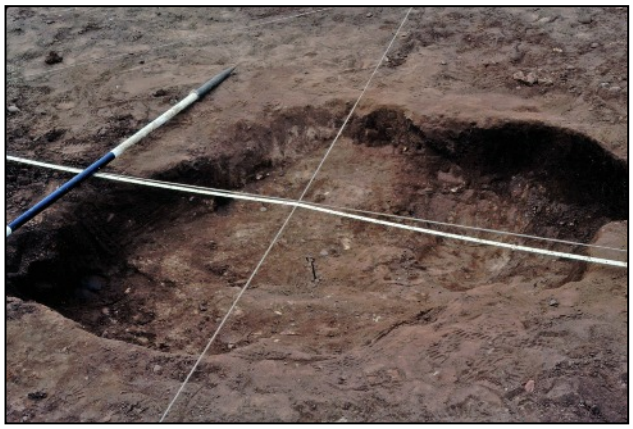


Photo. 25. Belgic pit 1.



Photo. 26. Belgic pit 2 showing intense burning near ranging pole.

photo.

Confirmation that the site was a collection of Belgic pits was found when the outline of a pit was found next to one of the massive spoil heaps. It had been run over by the giant diggers but a small excavation was possible. (*Rescue Excavation of Belgic/Early Roman Pits.* ADALHS web-site). The finds included Belgic & early Roman artefacts including a pot repaired with an iron rivet and an unknown iron object (Photo. 21), and a blue fiance melon bead (Photo. 22.). In an area showing signs of intense burning a Bronze Age barbed & tanged arrow head was found (Photo. 23) together with slag indicating copper smelting.



Photo. 27. Pot repaired with an iron rivet & an unidentified iron object.



Photo. 28. Blue fiance melon bead.

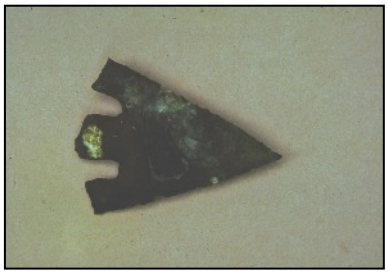


Photo. 29. Burnt Barbed & tanged arrowhead.



Photo. 30. The french drain runs into an open ditch.

Site 6 Belgic Cremation Pot. TL05263616

Looking east from the vantage point of the spoil heap, an open ditch replaces the french drain, 10 m beyond this point a "grey ellipse" appeared in the side of the "V" cut ditch. When cleaned it was found to be a cremation beaker neatly cut though by the digger. The pot was very friable and was sitting in clay baked hard by the sun.



Photo. 31. Cremation pot cut through by digger.



Photo. 32. Cremation pot firmly set in clay.

To retrieve the pot and contents it was necessary to use a pressurised water spray. This allowed the pot to be safely lifted, reconstructed and drawn.



Photo. 33. Reconstructed Belgic Girth Beaker.

The pot (*Rescue excavation of Belgic/Early Roman Pits.* ADALHS web-site) was a girth beaker and contained approximately 40 % of a human cremation plus an iron coil which may have been an "ox goad". It is unusual as the coil appeared to have fashioned from a tube as though to lighten the weight and there was no prodding point although it may have been cut away by the digger.



Photo. 34. Part of an iron coil, possible ox goad.

Finding a cremation in this area coupled with the crop marks shown in the photographs 22 - 24 gives credence to a suspected Belgic cemetery. A further cremation was produced when a second water pipe was laid across the bypass in 1990 (Dawson *Archaeology in the Bedford Region BAR 373*.) to the east of the cremation found by the Society. The first water pipe (Photo. 38.) was laid in the early 60's revealing considerable quantities of Romano British artefacts. (*Report on Romano British artefacts found on the surface of Ruxox Farm.* ADALHS web-site) The massive disturbance of soil in the area attracted many metal detectorists but very little was reported to the local museums and nothing was shown to Society members. One interesting object they missed was a bronze "Wheel of Taranis", a badge dedicated to the god "Taranis" or "Thunderer" made to fit in a leather jerkin or belt, (Photo. 37). This shows a bevel to attach the wheel to garment. (*Report on R.B. Artefacts found on the surface of Ruxox Farm.* ADALHS web-site.)



Photo. 35. Group of metal detectorists sweep the site.



Photo. 36. Wheel of Taranis.

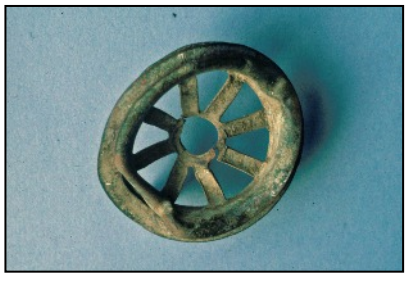


Photo. 37. Reverse view Wheel of Taranis showing bevel.

(Photo. 38) is an aerial shot taken at the time of the excavation clearly showing the route of the 1960's water pipe line, the light crop marks at the left hand lower quarter of the picture portrayed a Romano British industrial and cemetery area. This was part of a photo collection provided by this Society and used to obtain funding



Photo. 38. Crop mark showing the 1960's pipe line where it passes through a Romano British site and crosses the bypass route. The large spoil-heap can can be seen top right.

from Anglian Water Services Ltd. for an excavation prior to the instillation of a second pipeline (Dawson *Archaeology in the Bedford Region BAR 373*).

The aerial view of the Ampthill bypass (Photo. 39) has been annotated to show the location of the sites found by the Society during the planning and construction of the road. Large areas of archaeology were disturbed or destroyed by the activities but hopefully enough evidence has been recorded to assist future research. It should be stressed that all the work by the Society was carried out under rescue conditions in the members spare time.

Acknowledgements:

Photographs 1-38 were by the author.

The Society is very grateful for Photograph 39 from Google Earth.

Also to Bedfordshire County Council for providing maps of the route to assist with field walking.

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Photo. 39. Aerial View of The Ampthill Bypass

