

The Archaeological Excavation of Exeter Down, Stamford West, Lincolnshire

By Kate McLauchlan

Introduction

Wessex Archaeology conducted an archaeological excavation in 2017, on the land at Exeter Down, Stamford, Lincolnshire. The excavation was undertaken before a mixed-use development was constructed. Prior to the excavation an archaeological desk-based assessment, fieldwalking, geophysical survey and trial trenching was undertaken. This report implied the presence of Iron Age archaeological remains and the site was dated to the Early to Middle Iron Age (c5th to 2nd Century BCE).

There were two excavation areas: Area 1 and 2 (see Figure 1). Area 1 contained the remains of a sequence of three roundhouses, the latest of which was set within an enclosure defined by a ditch and probable internal bank. Area 2 contained industrialised features: two furnaces used for iron smelting and a group of pits. The ceramic and technological finds date this area also to the Early to Middle Iron Age.



Figure 1. OS Map of Exeter Down area displaying the location of the two excavation areas before development of the area.

The Archaeological Findings

1. Features

Overall, three roundhouses (ring gullies) were found at Stamford West, in Area 1, along with associated features; and Area 2 contained the industrial activity with a series of ore smelting features. An Iron Age roundhouse is a circular structure that uses, in Stamford's case, timber posts to form the structure and the roof.

Four phases (1, 2, 3 and 4) have been assigned to this site. The dating of the ranges was provided by radiocarbon dating and pottery sherds. Where some of the features are ambiguous to date to a phase they were assigned to two phases, i.e. Phase 1 / 2. Most of the phases were found in Area 1, in particular the settlement and Area 2 for the iron ore smelting. Phase 4 is post-occupation and seems to be an agricultural setting. Listed below are the phases and the sub-phase and what features were found. There are two plans below: Phase 1 and 2 (figure 2), and a Phase 3 and 4 in Figure 3.

Phase 1 (Early Iron Age; 5th Century BCE):

A roundhouse (ring gully 1), which was not enclosed, was identified in Area 1, along with a possible post-hole and pit outside of the roundhouse. Between roundhouse 1 and 2, three postholes were found and not able to associate them to either ring gully, however it is possible that they were like roundhouse 2 and were enclosing the ring gully.

Phase 1 / 2:

Between ring gullies 1 and 2, a series of features were found with little dating material so assigned to phase 1 and 2. One pit, part of a gully and eighteen postholes were excavated. The postholes were found to be in two groups: part of an external ring and a cluster.

Phase 2 (Early Iron Age; 6th to 4th Century BCE):

The building of a second roundhouse (ring gully 2), was found in Area 1, encircled by at least 19 postholes. Four postholes were found at the entrance and two others within the proximity of the structure.

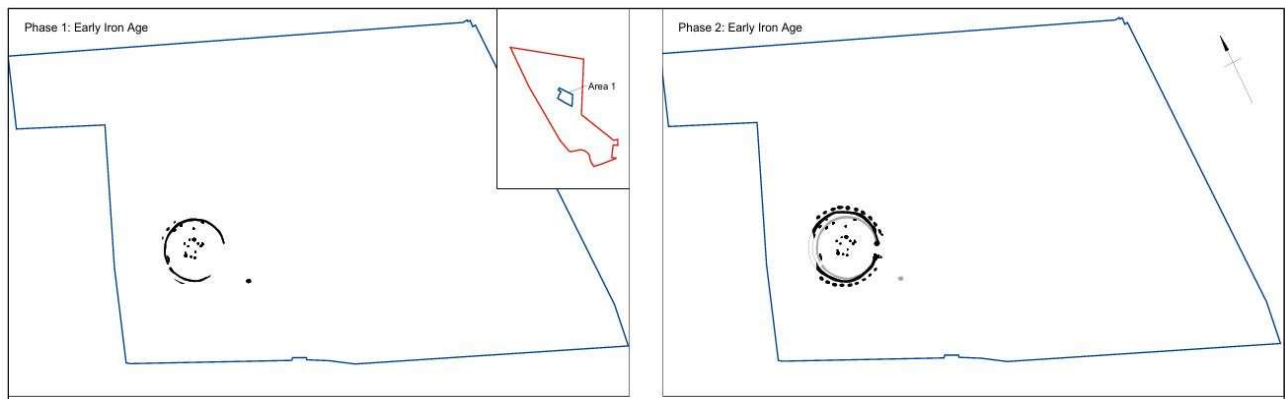


Figure 2. Phase 1 and 2 in Area 1 (Copyright Wessex Archaeology, 2017, p162).

Phase 3 (Early to Middle Iron Age; 4th to 3rd Century BCE):

A third roundhouse (ring gully 3) and its associated postholes, enclosure ditch and recut ditch were excavated in Area 1. Whilst in Area 2, there were 41 pit features, two postholes, two gullies, a ditch and two metalworking furnaces. Thereby suggesting industrial activity began in this phase.

Phase 4 (Middle to Late Iron Age; 2nd Century BCE):

Two ditches and four pits were found in Area 1. These features were indicative of agriculture now happening here.

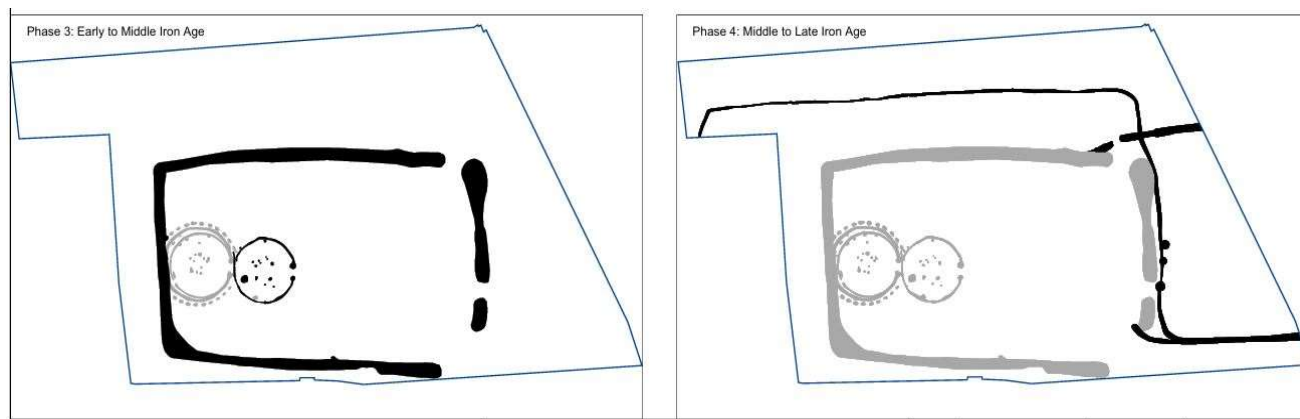


Figure 3. Phase 3 and 4 in Area 1 (Copyright Wessex Archaeology, 2017, p162).

Unphased Features:

Ten pits were found and excavated in Area 1 and were not able to be assigned to a phase or if they were Iron Age due to the lack of dating material.

Post-medieval Features:

Natural water courses were found with clay tobacco pipe and pottery that dates to the Post-Medieval period.

2. Archaeological Artefacts

Ceramic:

Early to Middle Iron Age pottery, typical to this region, was found. Unfortunately, the report had no photographs of the pot sherds, but there was a selection of drawings of the profile and markings (see figure 4). Some Scored Ware was also found; an East Midland pottery produced during the Middle Iron Age, possibly later.

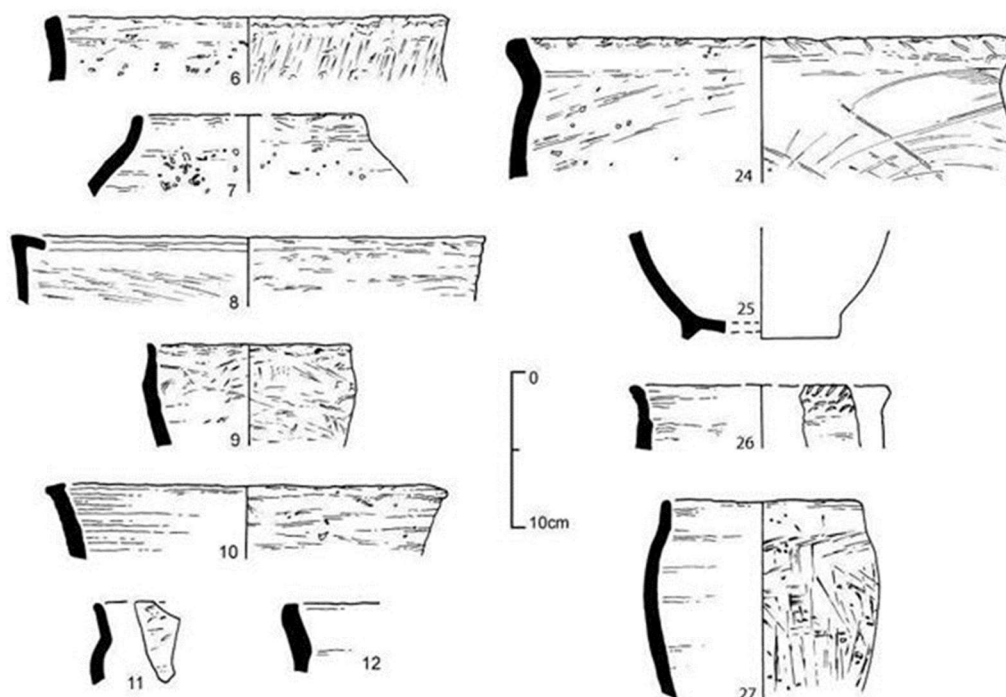


Figure 4. Illustrations of some the pottery found (Copyright Wessex Archaeology, 2017, p178).

With regards to the iron smelting, the ceramic remains were in relation to the furnaces, dating to the Early to Middle Iron Age. The technological evidence infers that iron smelting was the main activity and this technology was at its early stages. The furnaces were not well preserved and were possibly the bowl type (figure 5).



Figure 5. Furnace 2074; Area 2 (Copyright Wessex Archaeology, 2017, p182)

Animal Bone:

A large assemblage of remains were discovered in Phases 1 to 4. These consisted of domesticated cattle, sheep/goat, pig, horse and dog. In Phase 1 there were small amount found of cattle, sheep/goat and pig. Then in Phase 3, there was a large increase in domesticated animals (when the site was at its most prolific) and included the horse and the dog. A small number of other animals remains were also found, again in Phase 3: the woodpigeon, fox, red and roe deer.

Other Finds:

Some metalworking debris (mostly slag, some fired clay, stone and flint), a fragment of human skull (in a ditch in Area 2), a part of a clay pipe and a piece of ceramic building material.

Environmental:

Charred plant matter consisted of barley, emmer and spelt wheat and some weed species indicative of the surrounding area (hedgerows, meadows and woodland).

Conclusion

This site was an Early to Middle Iron Age settlement that undertook iron smelting in Phase 3. Figure 6 gives an example of what a roundhouse may have looked like. Phase 3 was when the site peaked; evidenced by the features, and the greater amount of animal remains, agriculture, and ceramic finds. The small-scale iron production (smelting) was used for local usage, based on the type of furnace they used; a bowl type furnace. Radiocarbon dates indicates the occupation of the site had started by the 5th century BCE and lasted for about two centuries, ending by the early 2nd century BCE; the Early to Middle Iron Age. By 2nd Century BCE the site seemed to stop being used as a settlement and iron production, and focused on agriculture. As to why, this is unknown. Site preservation was satisfactory and

yielded some informative. Unfortunately, there was extensive plough damage and poor soil conditions at this site. Despite this, the preservation was satisfactory and enlightened us as to what happened here, in a local, and to some degree regional, context of Iron Age settlements and their farming practices, and iron technology.



Figure 6. Copyright Chiltern Open Air Museum 2017. An example of what an Iron Age roundhouse may look like.
(<https://www.coam.org.uk/buildings/iron-age-roundhouse>).

For further information about this site, and the Wessex Archaeology paper, please go to: <https://www.wessexarch.co.uk/our-work/exeter-down-stamford>. The link to the paper is at the bottom of the page under Downloads.

Glossary

Bowl-type furnace – one of the earliest types of furnace used for smelting. A basic round external wall and a deep crucible chamber inside.

Radiocarbon dating – a scientific method used to date the carbon component of organic matter (e.g. bone, charcoal and wood) found by measuring the rate of decay of the radioactive carbon-14 isotope.

Ring Gully - a ring ditch that is a trench of circular or penannular plan, cut into bedrock that encloses the roundhouse.

Roundhouse – the main type of domestic housing used in Britain. Dating from 800BCE (Iron Age) to the Roman Conquest. It was a circular house that had post-holes or stone for the walls, wattle and daub insulation and a thatched roof.

Scored Ware – pottery that was used between c300BCE and the Roman Conquest. They have deep cut marks on the exterior wall of the pottery. Primarily used as functional ware.

Slag – waste material from iron smelting.

Wattle and Daub – wattle is woven strips of wood, and the daub would be a mud-type paste to seal the wall.

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Figure 6 is reproduced by kind permission of *Chiltern Open Air Museum*.

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