Billingborough Bronze Age Settlement: An Interim Note

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SUMMARY
Although excavation is still in progress and interpretations are constantly changing, it was felt that a brief note on the investigation of this important site should be published.

Approximately half of a sub-rectangular enclosure has been excavated, the enclosure contained oval, circular and four post structures. At least four phases of occupation are postulated, beginning in the early or middle part of the Bronze Age. Sometime in the later Bronze Age the enclosure was abandoned and an extensive field system laid out. The final prehistoric occupants were engaged in saltmaking; this possibly follows a deterioration in climate and subsequent marine transgression.

THE EXCAVATION
The site is situated on the fen margin in the parish of Billingborough (NGR TF 126334). The settlement lies 4.6m above ordnance datum on coarse calcareous gravels. One kilometre to the west the gravels meet the edge of the limestone uplands and 700m east of the site the gravels disappear under a thick layer of marine alluvium. In 1972, a surface scatter of pottery covering 0.4 hectare was found during fieldwalking by members of the Car

Plate 1 The prominent feature in this view is the linear ditch, the site is in the top right hand corner (facing east).
Plate II  The square enclosure in the foreground is probably Romano-British and is overlying a field system boundary ditch. Ridge and furrow is visible centre-right. The mounded site and Car Dyke are visible centre-left (facing south-east).

Plate III  Taken from a higher altitude. The western enclosure ditch and the field system boundary ditches show clearly, the ring ditches may be hut circles (facing north). By kind permission of J. Pickering.
Dyke Research Group. The Car Dyke runs through Billingborough Fen 275m to the east of the excavation (Fig. 1); a short length of the Car Dyke is reused as the eastern side of a large medieval moat. Another surface scatter of Bronze Age pottery was found in 1974 east of the Car Dyke in the field 500m north-east of the moated site. Two round barrows are visible just to the north of Billingborough. In the parish of Dowsby, and some 3.2km south of Billingborough, there is a ploughed out barrow cemetery known as Hoc Hills.

An area of 280 square m was excavated in 1975 by the Car Dyke Research Group and this area was enlarged by the South Lincolnshire Archaeological Unit to 2280 square m in 1977. 30cm of topsoil was removed by mechanical excavators, which exposed the gravel subsoil, except where it had been cut into by animals, tree roots or archaeological features. It was not until the summer of 1977 that oblique air photographic coverage became available. (Plates I and II.) These photographs show a linear cropmark, probably a ditch, running west-east. The ditch has been traced from the limestone uplands west of Sempringham Abbey, down to the gravels of the fen margin. Along the length of the ditch there are enclosures and an extensive field system is visible, covering at least 9 hectares. Surface finds indicate that the square enclosure in the top left hand corner of the photograph (Plate III) probably dates to the Romano-British period, and overlies a field system boundary ditch.

The area currently under excavation is approximately one half of a sub-rectilinear enclosure (Fig. 2). This enclosure is cut by a later enclosure and a field system boundary ditch (Fig. 3). An early Bronze Age presence in
the area is suggested by the discovery of food vessel sherds and barbed and tanged arrowheads, all found in residual contexts.

The northern and eastern ditches of the enclosure have been excavated, the western ditch is visible as a cropmark; the southern ditch has yet to be located. A recut is visible in the northern ditch, the fill of which is identical to the fill of the field system boundary ditch, both in soil structure and pottery type. (Plate IV, Fig. 4b.) The recut and the field system boundary ditch run parallel across the site until the enclosure ditch turns through approximately 90°. At this point the recut is continued as a series of small ditches, they themselves recut several times (Plate V). The strip of land between the recut enclosure ditch and the field boundary ditch was probably used as a drove way, contemporary with the field system. There is no recut in the eastern enclosure ditch. A sequence of occupation can be suggested using the evidence of finds from the enclosure ditches. At least four phases can be recognised at this stage of the excavation.

Plate IV Section of enclosure ditch showing recut (facing east; the scale is in 50cm divisions).

Phase 3
The field system (Fig. 2) is probably contemporary with this phase. The pottery is not as abundant as that from the earlier phases and is of a completely different character, being fine shell-tempered vessels which are similar to those recovered from recent excavations at Maxey, Tallington and Washingborough. A late seventh or early sixth century BC date has been suggested for the Washingborough site. Of particular interest is a sherd (Fig. 7, 22) which has been decorated with incisions filled with white inlay. (Fig. 7, 22-25.)

Phase 4
The site was used in this phase for saltmaking, the remains of several hearths have been found. (Fig. 3)

Some of the structures within the enclosure can be related to the early phases. Structure A (Fig. 3) is an oval setting of postholes with at least one internal post. Some of the post holes show signs of post replacement, the entrance is probably on the eastern side. Other structural remains of this period are of the four post type. Structure B had been dismantled, all of the post holes showing signs of post extraction. The feature labelled 2 on the plan (Fig. 3) belongs to the later phases (Plate VI). It is probably a sunken floored hut with a post hole at each end (Fig. 4a). A near complete jar (Fig. 7, 18) was found within this hut; the hut and jar are possibly contemporary with each other. Structure C is still in the process of excavation and all that has so far been discovered is a foundation trench (Plate VII).

Plate V Field system boundary ditch and possible drove way (facing east; the scale is in 50cm divisions).

Phase 1
The vessels representing this phase are large coarse jars and 'urns', thick grog-filled vessels with finger-tip impressions decorating the bodies of the pots, which are stylistically similar to the Severel-Rimbury vessels of the south. A date in the middle or even early part of the Bronze Age is suggested. (Fig. 5, 1-5. Fig. 6, 6-7.)

Phase 2
Pottery assigned to this phase is comparable to Barrett's...
loomweights have been found, one is complete and one other is decorated with finger nail impressions. When stratified these occur in phases 1 and 2. Fire bars, wedges and pedestals have been discovered in the upper levels and represent phase 4 occupation.

**Metalwork**

A bronze awl or tracer is the only piece of Bronze Age metalwork that has been found. It is square in section at one end and round at the other; its length is 5.9cm.

**Flintwork**

The flint assemblage consists of scrapers, knives and flakes; only one core has been found. The general standard of flintwork is low, a lot of the implements are crude and hinge fractures are common. A decline in the standard of flintworking has been noted on other sites of this period. 13
Bone
Vast quantities of animal bone have been recovered. Provisional sorting of the bone shows a predominance of cattle. Sheep, goat, pig, red-deer and dog are represented; wet sieving has aided the recovery of small mammal and bird bones. Parts of a human skull have been found; these are worked in a way that suggests the manufacture of a vessel, and belong to phase 3 occupation. Other worked bone includes several awls, a perforated disc and an antler tine that may be an unfinished cheekpiece.

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FOOTNOTES
3 Observed by J. Pickering who kindly informed me of its location.
Book Reviews


The synthesis of archaeological information is an important part of our attempt to understand general patterns. It is, however, fraught with difficulties and particularly, as in this case, when the author is seeking to put forward his own thesis: 'I believe that the events leading up to the emergence of agriculture in various regions of the world demonstrate remarkable parallelism, and I believe that this parallelism not only permits but demands that some common underlying force or factor be found operating in all world regions, not necessarily to the exclusion of local variables but in conjunction with those variables. The major thrust of this book is to demonstrate the similarity of events in different world regions while at the same time demonstrating that these events are plausibly linked with population pressure.' (p. vii)

In the first three chapters Cohen outlines the arguments about the origins of agriculture and population pressure, and in the following three chapters examines more closely how these can be applied to the 'Old World' and the 'New World'. There are many anthropological examples of great interest to the archaeologist. The !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, for example, spend surprisingly little time collecting food, and only make use of a small range of the natural foods available to them. Clearly, not all primitive people fell subject to the desperate struggle that some archaeologists tend to assume. Likewise, the accounts of population controls and communications are aspects of prehistoric life about which we can only hope to find little or no archaeological evidence.

There are many statements with which one would like to take issue, such as shell-fish being 'low-prestige resources of last resort' (p. 79). But obviously in a book discussing world prehistory there is no room for detailed accounts of regions or even countries. One might feel that there is an undue weight given to the 'New World'; if more attention had been given to Europe (covered by Cohen in twenty-one pages) such generalisations as 'The most striking fact about early agriculture, however, is precisely that it is such a universal event' (p. 5) would have been considered more cautiously.

ENGLISH TOWNS IN TRANSITION 1500-1700 by Peter Clark and Paul Slack, 176pp., illus., Oxford University Press, 1976, £1.75 paper, £3.50 hard covers; THE EARLY MODERN TOWN A Reader edited with an Introduction by Peter Clark, viii + 332pp., Longman in association with the Open University Press, 1976, £3.10.

The authors of these two volumes are threatening to corner the market in general studies of the English town during the early modern period. Their enterprise began with an interesting volume of new essays entitled Crisis and Order in English Towns to which they made individual contributions in addition to a joint introduction of some sixteen thousand words plus copious footnotes. Now they have produced a further general study and Peter Clark has edited a volume of previously published articles and extracts from books which is intended primarily as an Open University reader.

The new joint publication seems to be aimed chiefly at the undergraduate market. It is a short, general study of some sixty thousand words which introduces readers to the findings of much recent research although it does not add substantially to their earlier analysis of town development, except in detail. Moreover the book's lack of footnotes reduces its value to scholars and a number of cryptic comments relating to economic change will confuse laymen. Local historians will benefit from the authors' attempt to establish a typology of towns to which they will be able to relate their own particular subject of enquiry.

Inevitably, in a work of synthesis, the authors are heavily dependent on the researches of others; thus the work of Sir Francis Hill has ensured that Lincoln appears in the index on eleven occasions, while Stamford features six times, Boston three times, and East Retford and Grimsby (despite the work of Edward Gillett) not at all. It is a pity that a number of outmoded ideas of an earlier generation of historians have crept into the text. Thus we are told that the sifting of the Dee 'encouraged the migration of Chester's trade to Liverpool'. The Dee was a difficult river but Chester remained the dominant partner until after the middle of the seventeenth century; thereafter Chester's trade continued to grow although at a much slower rate than that of Liverpool.

Peter Clark prefaces his book of readings with a valuable bibliographical survey of urban development in the American colonies and Europe, including the British Isles. The essays and extracts are well chosen and the volume will provide a useful tool for any college or university teacher running a course on urban history. However, it is a pity that the editor did not add a critical appraisal of the items he reproduces. J. F. Pound's article on the Norwich Freeman's roles assumes that they can be processed to give an accurate picture of the structure of the city's labour force; in fact the proportion of freemen in a particular trade is not necessarily a good indication of the proportion of the total population in that trade.

The overall impression left by these volumes under review, and especially by the joint venture, is one of disappointment. Both authors have a considerable commitment to urban history and both have made valuable contributions to the subject's development. Let us hope that in the future they can be persuaded to offer us the fruits of original research rather than continue to provide syntheses of what is fast becoming a well-known body of material.