Excavations of Late Bronze Age or Iron Age Date at Washingborough Fen

J. M. Coles, B. J. Orme, J. May and C. N. Moore

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1972 the South Delph, which runs parallel to the River Witham in Washingborough Fen, was cleaned out, re-cut and a new pumping station was built. The re-cutting exposed a number of earlier channels of the River Witham and close to the pumping station was a buried deposit containing pottery, wood and bone was uncovered. Mr. Swan of the Lincolnshire River Authority recovered an antler bridle cheekpiece of Late Bronze Age form which was brought to the Lincoln City and County Museum for identification. As a result of the site visit by C. N. Moore and J. Marjoram, and quantities of pottery and bone were recovered. This led to a trial excavation being conducted in March 1973 by B. J. Orme, and a further examination of the stratigraphy was made by J. M. Coles in August 1973. In the following report the section on the excavation was prepared by the two excavators, the pottery section by J. May and the section on the finds and their significance by C. N. Moore and J. May.

THE EXCAVATIONS

Three small areas were examined on the site, with the main purpose of determining stratigraphy and particularly the nature of the archaeological remains. One of the questions asked was whether or not this site represented an occupation in situ, and if so, whether or not it would repay a fuller investigation.

The stratigraphical details of the site as examined appear in the section drawings of one of the excavated areas (Fig. 2). The details were duplicated in the sections of the other two areas and they suggest that at least some of the archaeological deposits have been destroyed by drainage operations, and that some of what remains lies beneath the pumping station and perhaps beneath the flood bank of the Witham.

The sections suggest that pool peat formed during localised ponding conditions of the Witham or a tributary stream; the silty peat is of fine character and contains small rootlets, small damaged phragmites pieces, and no traces of human activity. Subsequently, freshwater infusions into this pool brought coarser materials of local clay mud, fragments of peat, broken shell and various debris from a neighbouring occupation or activity site; this is likely to represent a break-through into the still pool water during a normal erosion swing of the river, or a sudden flood (4). In either case, still water conditions soon developed again in an area of marsh with expanses of open waters. The deposits laid down during this phase are quite extensive in depth, and the overlying layers on the site today (3) are interpreted as being originally of this rushwater character subsequently altered by erosion, weathering and disturbances. The depth of these deposits below the surface is slight, and the penetration of modern roots quite considerable. Later drainage of erosion channels cut through the upper deposits (2) and the uppermost sands (1) lying at 1.9m O.D. represent further deposits by wind.

The maximum depth of the excavations was 1.75m in Trench 3, but the other sections were examined to depths suggesting that sterile deposits had been reached, and examined, and this was confirmed by Trench 3 where 60cm of sterile pool peat were examined. The total depth of this pool peat was not fully plumbed but it appeared by boring to be another 0.8m at least below the excavation level, i.e. 1.4m thickness minimum.

Various types of human debris were recovered from the deposits 3 and 4, and it is likely that the surface collected material originally came from this series. Although there had been much disturbance of the upper deposits, bringing modern intrusions into the upper silts, it is unlikely that these recent actions seriously disturbed the human content of the several deposits. The nature of the containing deposits, silt and peat, is not considered to be of a type that would allow much natural movement through weathering and plant growth alone. This would support the conclusion arising from the interpretation of the silt and peat, that initially a still water pool existed on the site, subsequently disturbed by a freshwater incursion bringing
with it a quantity of debris from an upstream activity area. This debris, bone, wood, and pottery fragments, settled rapidly and was incorporated in the grey silts with torn *phragmites*, rootlets and shell remains, consolidated by subsequent silting and reed growth in calmer waters. The size of pottery sherds, and bones as well, indicate an origin not too distant, and their orientation suggests an immediate source to the south-west. However, the ultimate source, the original occupation site from which such debris might have accumulated, is unknown. The possibility of these finds coming from deposits which may have been disturbed on a number of occasions, should not be excluded.

The material recovered from the surface and from the excavated areas must represent only a fraction of the original deposit, some of which is destroyed by drainage ditches or sealed beneath the pumping station and river bank.

The animal bone from the site consists of 113 pieces. The animals represented are cattle (dominant, 50%), sheep, pig, horse, dog, red deer, pike, swan, duck, goose, and human. The last was represented by a clavicle, a mandible, and a fibula.

The wood remains were generally small in size, but there were two worked pieces, one a birch point 10 cm long and roughly faceted, the other a point in oak split radially from the tree. Of 59 pieces identified, 23 were alder, 18 birch, with smaller amounts of hazel, oak and ash. The birch, alder and hazel would have grown on marshy terrain, but ash and oak may indicate stands of timber on the higher land at Washington borough itself.

THE POTTERY

Trench 2

Layer 1  6 Rim and shoulder of carinated bowl in fine hard ware, black in core. Outer surface buff above carination with worn and pitted surface; below the carination, the surface is black and smoother, with traces of burnish. Inner surface buff black. Finely-crushed shell (?) inclusions. Rim diameter and angle uncertain, but more likely open at mouth, as shown, than upright.

Not illustrated: body sherd from large coarse ware jar.

Layer 1  4 Base sherd in fairly fine, smooth ware, fired pale grey brown, with thin dark grey zone in core. Surface pitted by disintegration of filler. Some suggestion of pattern burnishing on base, but not certain enough to illustrate.

Not illustrated: two body sherds from coarse ware jars, both with sooty incrustations on inner surfaces.

Layer 5  4 Not illustrated: four body sherds from coarse ware jars. One joins with a sherd from Layer 4, and another could be from the same vessel.

UNSTRATIFIED POTTERY FOUND DURING EXCAVATIONS

Layer 6  8 Rim of jar in fairly soft, fine, black brown ware, with sparse filler up to 1.5mm across, of calcite, partly disintegrated.

Layer 10  9 Rim of small bowl in thin, fine, black or dark brown ware, with finely crushed filler, including mica (?). Marked internal bevel and slight undercut. Curve sufficient to be fairly sure of rim diameter.

Layer 10  7 Rim of jar in hard, fine, sandy black ware, with sparse, fine quartzite (?) inclusions. Rim top decorated by slashing, but broken away inside.

Layer 10  5 Not illustrated: six sherds from coarse ware jars; also a sherd of medieval green glazed jug handle.

UNSTRATIFIED POTTERY FOUND PRIOR TO EXCAVATION

Layer 5  8 Rim of thin walled jar in rough, soft, crumbling ware. Dark grey core and inner surface; buff outer surface. Shell disintegrated from most of outer and part of inner surface, leaving pitted appearance; remaining shell inclusions up to 8mm across.

Layer 9  12 Rim of large jar in rough, soft, crumbling ware; dark grey core, lighter grey inner, and grey buff outer surfaces. Profuse, large quartzite, flint and calcite inclusions up to 9mm across.

Layer 8  13 Body sherd from large jar, in coarse ware with black inner and brown buff outer surfaces. Profuse shell filler up to 5mm across. Two horizontal grooves, the upper one deeper.

Layer 8  14 Base sherd of jar in rough grey brown ware, with fairly sparse filler almost entirely disintegrated leaving pitted surfaces. Base slightly pinched out.
Fig. 3  Pottery from Washingborough Fen.
Base sherd of thick walled jar in rough, crumbling dark grey ware, buff grey on both inner and outer surfaces. Calcite filler up to 8mm across, also some flint or quartz and possible shell. Base pinched out. Not illustrated: one small rim and 13 body sherds from vessels generally comparable with the above.

The sherds are generally in an unabraded condition, and several instances of groups of sherds probably from one vessel, and even of two joining sherds (No. 5), argue against the pottery having been carried far by water action.

Of the 61 sherds, two can readily be identical as medieval and Romano-British. These present no stratigraphical problem, since one was a surface find and the other came from Layer 1 in Trench 1, which showed other signs of contamination. Twenty-two sherds were stratified in the apparently uncontaminated Layer 4, and these, together with the other 37 sherds from contaminated layers or surface, seem to form a homogeneous assemblage.

All of the pottery is hand made. Both fine and coarse wares are present, and although such a distinction is inevitably subjective, the proportion of the former to the latter might be taken as 16 sherds to 43, or about 26%. The finest of the wares are very distinctive. They are black or dark grey, well levigated, and have smooth or burnished surfaces and little or no obvious filler. Several body sherds have extremely slight curvature, suggesting relatively large vessels; yet for these, wall thicknesses may be as little as 3–4mm. The fine wares were evidently of exceptional quality; they are superior to the best pottery of the earlier Bronze Age collared urn or Deverel-Rimbury traditions, and compare with the best turned pottery of the latest phases of the Lincolnshire Iron Age at such sites as Dragonby, Sleaford and Ancaster. In contrast, the coarse pottery is particularly rough, soft and crumbling, although several sherds, evidently from large jars, nevertheless are relatively thin walled (5mm). There is a variety of filler, with calcite occurring frequently, and flint, quartzite and shell less commonly. No. 9 is the only sherd with obvious micaceous inclusions. Without further analysis, the relative incidence of the inclusions cannot properly be given, since in many sherds they are virtually indeterminable by eye, or have been eroded from the surfaces. But it might be supposed that the high frequency of calcite, particularly among the coarser wares, reflects the site’s proximity to the Lincolnshire limestone region, and suggests a local origin for much of the pottery. The other inclusions could also have been obtained locally, for even flint was widely distributed in the Lincoln area as a result of glacial action upon the chalk Wolds to the east.

Several of the Washingborough sherds are remarkably similar in fabric to the pottery from Brigg in the Anholme valley, twenty-three miles to the north. The Brigg pottery has been dated by formal comparison and by its stratigraphical position at the pollen zone VIIb-VIII transition to the late Bronze Age or earliest Iron Age. The Washingborough pottery contains few diagnostic features for reliable formal comparisons to be made, although two vessels are of particular interest.

The bowl No. 6 (if correctly angled), has some similarity with the angular bowls, well known in eastern England and the upper Thames valley, which characterise an early phase of La Tène Iron Age. The latter vessels are often more markedly tripartite, and in profile more upright or bent. Among them, however, are a few bowls not far removed in profile from the Washingborough vessel. Only slightly more vertical sided are the bowls from Darmstaden and West Harling. The closest parallel, however, comes from the recent excavations by W. G. Simpson at Maxey, in the Welland valley 40 miles south-east of Washingborough. Here in a pit was found an open-mouthed carinated bowl, together with other fine and coarse wares which, although reddish in colour rather than grey or black, generally resemble the Washingborough pottery, and could well be of similar date. In the nearer parts of Europe, the form is difficult to parallel, although the open-mouthed bowl is generally more characteristic of Urnfield and Hallstatt contexts than early La Tène.

The second vessel which invites comment is the straight sided bowl or cover, No. 9. This form is common in Urnfield and Hallstatt contexts in northern France, appearing, for example, at Chalons-sur-Marne and Mt. Lassois. It is present in earliest La Tène contexts, as at Chassey, Marne. Very few examples are recorded in Britain, but the form occurs without bevel once at West Harling and as a larger bowl at Chinnor.

One other unusual feature is worth noting. The form of the base, No. 7, in which the outer side of a shallow footing continues the line of the lower wall of the vessel, is different from the normal kind of Iron Age footring base, which is slightly splayed. We owe to Dennis Britton the observation that a similar form of base is to be found on sheet bronze buckets of the late Bronze Age, but with so little of the form of this vessel surviving, the analogy can be carried no further.

It is clear that no great weight should be placed on the evidence of such a small assemblage as that from Washingborough, particularly since little comparable material has yet been found in eastern England. But it might be suggested that the pottery is Late Bronze Age, and represents an horizon prior to the La Tène-related phases of West Harling and Darmstaden.

**THE FINDS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE**

Fig. 4. Antler cheekpiece from Washingborough Fen.
The most interesting object from the site is the antler cheekpiece, the discovery of which had led to the site being located. The cheekpiece has already been published, 13 and it has been included in a recent study. 14 Britnell records six other cheekpieces from the British Isles, and the Washington cheekpiece is possibly the finest example of the series, and the only one with incised herringbone decoration. As this decoration would have been visible, and only occurs on one side, it is assumed that it came from the left hand side of the bridge. Britnell 14 concluded on the evidence available to him that the Washington cheekpiece typifies a class of artefact produced during the late 6th and 7th centuries B.C. and is representative of one of the many new forms of horse trapping that were being introduced into Britain from the Continent at this time. In addition to Britnell's study, Nenquin 15 has surveyed the continental evidence in connection with the discovery of a slightly different form of antler cheekpiece from Eke, Belgium.

Of more direct relevance to the Washington ford find are the two recently discovered antler cheekpieces from an excavation near Runnymede Bridge, Egham, Surrey. 16 This site produced pottery which may be comparable to the Washington finds, and bronze work which Longley 17 now considers to be in the 9th century B.C. Longley has also suggested to one of us that two distinct types of cheekpiece can be identified, both of which are represented at Egham. One type, with the tip of the antler tine cut away, is also known from Bledlow and Heathery Burn and may have been influenced by the Anglo-Saxons; while the Washington, Ham Hill and Sion Reach cheekpieces with transverse pinholes may be Hallstatt C1 in character (cf. the pin holes in the bronze cheekpieces from Llyn Fawr). 18

It is hard to reconcile the conventional dating of the Washington ford pottery and the cheekpiece with a radiocarbon date of 303 ± 70 (9-1163) 19 obtained from a fragment of timber from Layer 6 in Trench 1. It is impossible to assess the age of the wood when buried, and old timber could cause the date of the deposit to seem too high when corrected to accord with the 5730±100 b.c. of C14. The date becomes 370 ± 70 or 440-330 b.c. at one standard deviation and 510-230 b.c. at two standard deviations. Calibrated by the most recent dendrochronological conversion table, 20 the range of two standard deviations becomes 640-170 b.c.

No reliance should be placed on a single radio-carbon date. The date would appear to go back to a century later than would be expected on the calibrated date at two standard deviations. It is also low in comparison with the radiocarbon dates from apparently similar deposits at Brigg. 21 One of these 602 ± 120 (9-77) was obtained from wood from the surface of a peat layer in the vicinity of a trackway, near which were found a late Bronze Age spearhead, a nail-headed pin, and the above-mentioned fragments of Hallstatt-related pottery. 22 However, this discrepancy between accepted pottery dating and radiocarbon dates is not limited to Lincolnshire. Similarly inconsistent dates have also been noted at Weston Wood, Surrey, Longbridge Deverill Crowdown, Wiltshire (NPL 104-109) and Staple Howe, Yorkshire (BSM 63); all of which should be closely contemporary to Washington.

Washington and the adjacent areas have been notable for the number of prehistoric finds that have been made, many of which could be contemporary with the excavated site. About 250 yards to the west of the excavations mesolithic flints were recovered in 1972 from the top of sands which were cut by the delph. Also a number of interesting Neolithic axes come from the adjacent Heighington Fen. 23 It is the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age which have produced the most outstanding and prolific finds. In 1787 parts of the River Witham were dredged and in 1825 the river was channelized below the Stamp End locks at Lincoln. The 1826 discoveries seem to have come from the Witham in the immediate vicinity of Washington. These included the Witham Shield in the British Museum, 24 the Hallstatt D1a sword, now in Alnwick Castle Museum, 25 and an exceptionally fine post-Roman hanging bowl with Celtic decoration, which is now lost. 26 About 1830 Washington Fen was enclosed and a bronze socketed axe mould and a hoard of socketed axes were discovered in the formation of a dyke for dividing some allotments of these lands. 27 Other hoards containing similar axes to those produced by the mould have been found in the adjacent parishes of Branstow and Fiskerton. 28 Slightly later in the 1830s, when the Great Northern Railway was built alongside the River Witham a hoard of three swords, now lost, of the “Wilburton” type were found. 29 Another “Wilburton” sword from the Sibthorp family, who owned much of Washington parish, came to light in 1972 and may be one of the missing swords. 30 Alternatively this sword may have been found in 1826. Also in 1852, almost three miles due east of the excavation a dug-out canoe was found, 31 which has now been dated to the Late Bronze Age (9-78, 834±100 b.c.).

A possible reason for this concentration of discoveries might be that Washington Fen was the main fording point of the River Witham in prehistoric times. Phillips 22 noted the possibility of a trackway running along the counterscarp of the Lincolnshire Edge and this would have passed through Washington. 33 Indeed such a ford could have continued in use in the early phase of the Roman Conquest until the Romans built a bridge at Lincoln. Evidence for this is suggested by the recent re-identification of an early Roman legionary bronze skillet at Sheffield Museum which can now be shown to have been found in 1906 in the River Witham at Fiskerton, and very close to the excavated site at Washington.

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FOOTNOTES
3 B. Cantifé, "Early Pre-Roman Iron Age Communities in Eastern England," Antiquaries Journal, Vol. 48, 1968, p. 22, Fig. 2.
4 J. G. D. Clark and C. I. Fell, "The Early Iron Age Site at Mickleham Hill, West Harling, Norfolk, and its Pottery," Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society, Vol. 19, 1953, p. 75, Fig. 15.
5 J. May (forthcoming) in monograph by W. G. Simpson.
Book Reviews


This account of Elizabeth Wordsworth, written for the centenary of the oldest women’s college in Oxford, could not be more appropriately titled. She was indifferent to the ideas which inspired Emily Davison and Anne Clough at Cambridge yet she was a woman of great learning, skilled in languages both ancient and modern and with a powerful brain which made her an invaluable helper of her father, the bishop of Lincoln, in his commentary on the Bible. She had in her own home that world of learning which most women could never have except through membership of a university. *Almost sans le savoir et sans le vouloir* she extended to other women the priceless opportunity of entry to that world.

This book should be read not only by those interested in the history of women in the University but by all, especially Lincolnshire people, interested in the life of a bishop and his family at Riseholme, near Lincoln, in the nineteenth century. After his death Elizabeth herself had a house in Pottergate until 1899, shared with her sister Susan and near her youngest sister, Dora, wife of the Chancellor E. T. Leake. Dora, according to a story related to the reviewer by the widow of Sub-dean Jeudwine, was, as a young wife and mother, forced against her will by Elizabeth to wear a cap at an earlier age than she considered reasonable: Elizabeth herself had “assumed a cap” when she was appointed Principal in 1878.

Her preference would have been for the continuance of a very small group of students in her charge but she had the excellent faculty of recognising that changes must come and applying her great gifts to ensuring the appropriate expansion: she was bold to begin building when the more cautious were against it but her casualness in business affairs, which once resulted in the students having to pay fees twice, was occasionally disconcerting. She was, however, as the Hall grew, most ably aided by Mrs. Bertha Johnson and Mrs. Charlotte Tonbyee.

Her comments on questions of the day are full of sound sense and she had a delightful (and delighted) interest in the world, in people, books and travel. She wrote poems, novels and plays of varying quality. The last, which on occasion had a topical flavour, were performed by the students. She had an immense circle of friends, men and women, including the formidable Master of Balliol, Jowett, and writers of very different works. One of these was Charlotte Yonge and this biography has solved for some who have been puzzled by it the source of Angela Underwood’s surprising song in the *Pillars of the House*: Miss Yonge said she was not in the way of hearing such songs and Elizabeth supplied one she had heard among child patients in a hospital in Nottinham.

In addition to her virtual creation of Lady Margaret Hall she founded from her own resources a new Hall for students for whom the fees of the older foundation (£75 a year) were too great. In 1886 St. Hugh’s Hall was opened for four students with Annie Moberley, daughter of the bishop of Salisbury, chosen by Elizabeth, as principal: this foundation continued to grow until in 1916 it moved to its present large site. It is evidence of Elizabeth’s wisdom that at no time did she take part in its running except as a member of Council.

In 1909 she retired and spent the rest of her life in Oxford. In October 1920 she was the first woman to receive the degree of M.A. honoris causa, after the University had admitted women to degrees in that year. In 1928 the year of the Golden Jubilee of L.M.H. she received the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Civil Law and a few days later, the insignia of a Dame of the Order of the British Empire from the then Duchess of York at the college Jubilee garden party. Few people can have had a happier old age: her sight was failing but her mind was perfectly clear when she died on St. Andrew’s Day, 1932.

Mrs. Battiscombe was not the first to work on the life of the founder of the college. In 1940 Miss Evelyn Jameson, student, tutor and Vice-Principal, had collected materials and had written the first two chapters of a biography, covering her childhood and the period of her life until her father was consecrated bishop of Lincoln in February 1869: these chapters have been printed as an Appendix in the present volume. This has all the distinction which one associates with Mrs. Battiscombe’s biographies and Elizabeth Wordsworth has been fortunate in that both members of the college who have recorded her life have presented her as a living, remarkable and charming personality.

KATHLEEN MAJOR LINCOLN