Bronze Age and Early Iron Age Pottery from Pits at Barnetby Wold Farm

Peter Didsbury and Ken Steedman

Introduction

The pottery published here was recovered from several small pits excavated at Barnetby Wold Farm during April 1991 (Site code KRU 91; NGR TA 0879 0869). Extension of the main runway at Humberside Airport, Kirmington, had necessitated archaeological evaluation of land affected by the construction, and geophysical surveys had indicated archaeological features, apparently a series of ditched enclosures, on higher ground south of the airport. With much of the area of these features under threat due to landscaping for aircraft approach, excavations were undertaken by the Humberside Archaeology Unit. It soon became apparent, following the stripping of topsoil, that the geophysical survey had detected geological, rather than archaeological, features, though cleaning of the exposed surface of the underlying chalk did reveal cable slots connected with wartime use of the airfield, and the pits which are the subject of this report.

The landowner, Mr. G. Nicholls, has donated the finds from the excavation to Scunthorpe Museum, and the excavation archive will also be deposited there.

The Excavations

Ken Steedman

The excavated area was situated on gently sloping ground at a height of between 42m and 44m OD, overlooking the farm buildings of Barnetby Wold Farm, set in a shallow valley to the west, and flatter land occupied by the airport to the north (Fig. 1). The surface geology was predominantly broken chalk, though there was much evidence of periglacial action in the form of fissures and hollows filled with a compact dark brown sand and occasionally clay. All of the pits were directly below the plough-disturbed topsoil and cut into this surface. A number of flints, generally of late Neolithic character, though with a Bronze Age element, were collected from the topsoil and its interface with the subsoil. Naturally fractured flint fragments occurred in all the pit fills, though only one pit contained a struck flint.

Three discrete groups of pits were recorded, each several metres apart, discussed below as Groups A–C (Fig. 2 and 3). Samples were taken from the fills for examination of plant remains at the Environmental Archaeology Unit, University of York, though the results were disappointing, most of the seeds and fruits being modern intrusions. The Unit also identified the small amount of bone recovered (Hall and Nicholson 1991). There follows a brief description of the pits and their distribution.

Group A: This was the westernmost group and consisted of two pits. The largest, pit 19, was roughly circular in plan, with a diameter of 1.2m. It had steeply sloping sides, 0.33m deep, with a relatively flat base. Its fill (20) was a firm dark grey loamy sand with charcoal flecks and light grey motting throughout, and contained 11 sherds of pottery and 17 unidentifiable fragments of bone. Pit 21, 1.5m to the north, was also roughly circular though much smaller in size, having a diameter of only 0.5m and a depth of 0.21m. Its sides sloped gently to an irregular base. The fill (22) was similar to that of its neighbour, and also contained fragments of pottery.

Group B: Like Group A, there were two pits in this group. Pit 3 was largely removed by a machine trench cut to examine geological features, though a small part of its east side remained. It was at least 0.6m wide and 0.49m deep, with steeply sloping sides. A skim of chalk rubble (40) adhered to the side, though the cut was almost completely filled by a soft dark brown sandy silt (2) containing 4 sherds of pottery and decayed bone fragments of a large mammal. Its neighbour to the east was pit 33, a metre away. This was roughly oval in plan, 1.0m by 0.8m, with steep sides and an undulating base. The pit itself was 0.32m deep, but it overlay a glacial 'pipe', 0.15m in diameter and 0.50m deep, with a sandy fill which merged with the fill of the pit. This was a firm brown loamy sand (34) containing numerous pottery fragments and a broad, irregular struck flint flake of local chalk flint, of indeterminate date.

Fig. 1 Site location.
Fig. 2  Distribution of the pits, Groups A-C, Site grid and National Grid co-ordinates shown.

Fig. 3  Detail plans of the pits, Groups A-C.
Group C: The four pits of this group fell into two pairs of more closely adjacent features. Pit 25 was sub-rectangular or oval in plan, measuring 0.6m by 0.4m, with a bowl-like profile and a depth of 0.15m. It was filled with a firm brown sand with flecks of charcoal and burnt clay, five pottery sherds and a single unidentified bone fragment (26). Pit 23, just to the east, was more irregular in shape, measuring 0.6m by 0.6m. It had steep sides and a stepped base, deeper to the south, reaching a depth of 0.35m. It contained a firm grey brown sand with charcoal flecks, burnt clay and a few fragments of charred hazelnut shell (24). Some 2m to the east were the remaining pits. Pit 38 was roughly triangular, 0.53m by 0.4m and 0.23m deep, with generally steep sides and a flat base, and was filled with a soft dark brown sandy loam with occasional charcoal flecks (39). Its neighbour, pit 36, was sub-rectangular or oval, measuring 0.84m by 0.7m. Steep sides led to an irregular base at a depth of c.0.3m, which lay over four circular, probably geological, fissures in the chalk. The fill was a soft dark brown or black silt, with occasional charcoal flecks (37).

The Pottery
Peter Didbury

The excavated features yielded 102 sherds of pottery, weighing 602g. With the exception of an unidentifiable fragment of oxidised ware weighing 1g, residual in the fill of a cable slot, all the pottery was recovered from the pits. This is discussed in detail below. Sherds were also collected on an haphazard basis from the subsoil of all the stripped areas, and from the field surface. It is sufficient here to note that a range of prehistoric (perhaps Earlier Bronze Age to late Iron Age), Romano-British and medieval to modern material, indicates activity of various kinds on site from the second millennium BC to the present day.

In the discussion which follows, the condition of groups of sherds has been assessed on the six point scale used by Val Rigby in her recording of the material from West Heslerton, North Yorkshire (Rigby 1986, 141). For the reader’s convenience, this is as follows: A, all sherds from a pot; B, complete profiles; C, several sherds from the same pots; D, sherds over 40mm x 40mm; E, sherds between 40mm x 40mm and 20mm x 20mm; F, sherds less than 20mm x 20mm.

A descriptive catalogue for pottery from each pit group is followed by a discussion of comparative material and dating. Because of its later date, the material from Group A is considered after that from Groups B and C.

Group B

Pit 33 contained 77 sherds of pottery, weighing 384g, and representing an estimated number of 2 vessels. All but 5 sherds, weighing 16g, appeared to belong to vessel 34.1, of which several joining sherds were present. The average condition of the assemblage is assessed at C/D, reflecting some dispersal of the material before its final deposition in this feature. Sherd surfaces and fractures are relatively unworn, however, and a stratified period on the surface between breakage and deposition seems most unlikely. Average sherd weight for the assemblage as a whole is 4.98g; it should be noted, however, that this low value is distorted by the fact that almost half the sherds in the group are small ‘scrap’ of condition F, and that the average weight of the joining sherds from which 34.1 has been drawn is 10.78g. The vessel is shown as two overlapping groups of sherds in Fig. 4, and the top view of the rim is composed from those and four otherwise unidentified sherds, one of which is vessel 2.1.

Pit 3 yielded 4 sherds of pottery, weighing 10g, and representing two vessels; vessel 2.1 consists of a single rim fragment which has a physical join with 34.1.

Catalogue

Vessel 34.1/2.1 (Fig. 4) A large urn of simple, possibly barbed or带给-shaped profile, rim diameter 370mm. The rim itself is recessed 3mm at its inner edge, the section, though irregularities in manufacture convey the suggestion of a slight external beak in some parts of the rim, and an internal lip in others. A horizontal row of vertically oriented fingernail impressions, placed 10-12mm apart (centre to centre), occurs 80mm below the rim. Several of these impressions have been abraded or enlarged by use and/or weathering, but must originally have presented a decorative scheme of neatly executed crescents. The top of the rim itself is decorated with further nail impressions spaced 3-4mm apart, forming a continuous line towards the mouth. There are suggestions on some of the rim sherds that a pointed tool may also have been used to prick the top of the rim. Such impressions may have been interspersed with the nail marks in an irregular fashion. The fabric is soft, very thin and a moderately vesicular ware, dark coloured except for its largely oxidised exterior. Core colour is very dark grey to black (7.5YR 3/0-2/0), and the exterior below the rim is very dark grey (7YR 5/1) for a depth of up to c.55mm in places. The remainder of the exterior is a rather uniform reddish yellow (7.5YR 7/6). Abundant ill-sorted voids occur in the size-range c.0.5-0.7mm. A very small minority of these may result from the leaching of crushed shell inclusions, and there is certainly a large proportion which could have resulted from burnt-out vegetable material such as char. There was no trace whatsoever of estern calcareous filler. The only surviving solid material added to what may have been a fairly fine original clay is moderately abundant pellets of grog in the 2-4mm range. These display clearly as light red (2.5YR 6/8) in oxidised areas, and rather less obviously, as reddish brown (5YR 5/3) in darker ones. There is no clear evidence for the precise construction method employed, though there are slight indications of at least one coil junction. Surfaces are lumpy and irregular in many places, and wall thickness varies from c.8mm.

Vessel 34.2 (not illustrated) Represented by 5 small sherds (condition F) weighing 16g, all between 8-10mm thick. They include a rim fragment of simple rectangular section. The fabric is soft and ater, and in general terms is of similar type to that of vessel 34.1; it is, however, rather more finely vesicular, with moderately abundant voids almost entirely below 2mm. Once again, some voids give the distinct impression of resulting from burnt out vegetable temper, and no trace of calcareous matter could be detected. Moderate amounts of grog up to c.2mm are red (2.5YR 5/6) or light reddish brown (5YR 6/4). Unlike vessel 34.1, the paste also contains sparse amounts of sub-rounded white quartz up to c.0.5mm, with grains present in all sherd. The body of the pot is dark grey (7YR 4/1) and its oxidised exterior surface light yellowish brown (10YR 6/4).

Vessel 2.2 (not illustrated) Represented by 3 body sherds in a similar soft, vesicular fabric to the rest of the material in Group B, though it retains fairly abundant calcareous temper, apparently predominantly shell, but with some chalk possibly also represented.

Discussion

While general considerations of fabric, form, and decorative technique are probably sufficient to assign vessel 34.1/2.1 to the Earlier Bronze Age, the current state of knowledge of pottery of this period in the East Midlands scarcely allows a firmer assessment of date. Grog tempering, the use of finger-nail and fingertip decoration in horizontal bands, and general simplicity of rim and body shape are all characteristic of the pottery from the flat cemeteries at Coneygre Farm, Nottinghamshire, and Pasture Lodge Farm, Lincolnshire (Allen, Hayman and Wheeler 1987). Although there are no radio-carbon determinations from these sites, Allen et al. conclude that similar material from Billingborough Fen, Lincolnshire, and the Newark Road sub-site, Fengate, is associated with radio-carbon dates that suggest it should be placed in the second millennium BC (op. cit., 217). They envisage the pottery from the two East Midlands cemeteries as belonging to a regional grouping of Bronze Age pottery ‘characterised by the plain forms and simple decoration displayed’ and which is ‘broadly comparable with the Deverel-Rimbury ware from other Bronze Age cemeteries and settlements’ (op. cit., 212, 211). It may constitute, in other words, what Gibson (1986, 53) designates a ‘local equivalent, as opposed to local style(s), of D everel-Rimbury pottery’. The Coneygre Farm and Pasture Lodge Farm pots are preponderantly bucket-shaped, though barrel-like profiles perhaps more akin to that of the vessel under discussion are certainly represented.

A certain degree of comparison, if not a close parallel, is also afforded by material from the Bronze Age barrow at
Stainsby, on the south of the Lincolnshire Wolds, east of Horncastle (May 1976, 77-79). The nine urns containing cremation burials from this barrow are, moreover, considered by Allen et al. to be of 'similar type' to those from Coneygre Farm and Pasture Lodge Farm. The four pots from the barrow which are illustrated by May (op. cit., 79, Fig. 43) all exhibit slightly convex profiles, while one of them (Urn 5) displays more specific characteristics of the Barnetby Wold Farm vessel, i.e. a similar row of encircling fingernail or fingertip impressions on the body of the pot (perhaps echoing the position of the lower edge of the collar on collared urns), and a line of possible fingernail impressions around the internally bevelled rim. The urn is, however, decoratively more complex than that from Barnetby Wold Farm, having, in addition to the elements described above, a second row of finger decoration on the outside of the slightly beaded rim. These rows enclose a zone of incised chevrons. Urn 5, on the other hand, though of almost identical size and shape, is completely undecorated. Two faience beads in association with a further urn from the barrow may indicate a date for the pottery in the early or middle centuries of the second millennium BC.

There is no appreciable difference in sherd condition between the three vessels from this pit group, though those from 34.2 and 2.2 have clearly been subject to a much greater degree of dispersal. How closely contemporaneous the vessels may be cannot be ascertained, but there seems little reason to doubt, in light of the above description, that they belong at least to the same ceramic tradition.

**Group C**

Of the four small pits in Group C, only Pit 25 contained any pottery, five sherd weighing 49g. Vessel 26.1 comprises a rim sherd of condition E, with two associated fragments, one joining, of condition F. Vessel 26.2 is a base sherd and vessel 26.3 is a small wall sherd of condition F, weighing 2g.

**Catalogue**

**Vessel 26.1 (Fig. 4)** The sherd are from the rim of a large vessel, rim diameter c.213mm. The edge of the rim is rather battered and it is by no means certain that the orientation depicted in the drawing is more than approximately correct. The wall of the pot is 12mm thick at its lowest surviving point, thinning to 9mm at the point where a well defined internal bevel begins. A decorative zone of incised decoration immediately below the rim on the exterior appears to consist of a chevron between parallel horizontal lines. The fabric is difficult to describe as no readily identifiable inclusions are present. The paste is relatively soft and rather dense, and, although there are moderately numerous voids between 0.25 and 1.0mm, it cannot justifiably be described as vesicular. The presence of one or more irregularly shaped light brown particles in the 1-2mm range is noted, but these are softer than the clay matrix and may be naturally occurring pellets within the clay source, rather than deliberately added. Dark angular inclusions c.0.2mm also occur, some of which are faintly magnetic. The core of the pot is very dark grey to black (7.5YR 3/0-2/0), the interior surface brown (7.5YR 5/2), and the exterior reddish yellow (7.5YR 6/6). The sherd is bone c.54/4 towards the rim. The interior surface is cracked and crazed, perhaps revealing insufficient attention to clay preparation before firing.

**Vessel 26.2 (Fig. 4)** The sherd is from the basal angle of a large flat-bottomed vessel, basal diameter c.185mm. Wall and base are fairly uniformly 10-11mm thick. The fabric is soft and rather dense and the main tempering agent appears to be moderately abundant pink sand (7.5YR 7/4-7.5YR 7/4) to light brown (7.5YR 6/4) to grey up to 3mm. Moderate small voids generally less than 1mm also occur, and there are moderate to abundant sub-rounded inclusions of sub-rounded quartz to c.0.5mm. The sherd has an applied all-over rim of c.3mm thick in the white of the same wall which varies from reddish yellow (7.5YR 7/8) to red (2.5YR 5/8), the remainder of the body being black (7.5YR 2/0). Decommissioning between the two zones is crisp.

**Vessel 26.3 (not illustrated)** The fabric of this small body sherd is almost identical to that of vessel 34.2 (see above).

**Discussion**

Dating of vessel 26.1 is made difficult by the condition of the sherd and by the problems noted above. The fabric can certainly be accommodated, in general terms, within an Earlier Bronze Age ceramic tradition, while the form and size of the vessel might possibly allow comparison with an urn such as that containing a cremation burial from the barrow at Beacon Hill, Cleethorpes (May 1976, Fig. 45, no. 1). This is undecorated, but it may be noted that a parallel and chemically similar motif to the one under discussion occurs on one of the vessels from the Stainsby barrow already alluded to (May 1976, Fig. 43, Urn 8). The design is also, however, not uncommon on Iron Age pottery from the region (e.g. Elsdon 1989, Fig. 8, nos. 2 – from Dragonby).

The fabric type, colouration and shape of the basal sherd 26.2 are all consistent with its having derived from a collared urn. If this is so, its basal diameter would put it among the larger vessels of that class. The identification can clearly be more than tentative but coupled with the similarity in fabric of vessels 26.3 and 34.2, it may serve to indicate a broad degree of contemporaneity between the pits of Groups B and C.

**Group A**

The bulk of the pottery came from pit 19. This feature contained 11 sherd, weighing 143g, and representing an estimated number of 8 vessels. A single vessel (20.1) constitutes the greater part of the assemblage, consisting of 3 joining sherd weighing 93g. This vessel was lying approximately half-way up the fill of the pit and it seems probable that it originally entered the feature as a single sherd measuring c.90mm by 120mm. The remaining material, all of which was found at roughly the same level or above, is much smaller (condition E/F), and has an average sherd weight of 6.25g.

**Catalogue**

**Vessel 20.1 (Fig. 5)** The sherds derive from the upper portion of a large medium-sized vessel of sharply angular profile, rim diameter c.360mm. A long, slender, sharply everted rim is decorated with neat, closely set slash marks along its leading edge, with the appearance of having been produced by a sharp, bladed tool. Two further encircling rows of decoration occur, one immediately below the rim and the other on the shortened carination. Each of these rows is made up of vertically oriented finger-tipping, each unit of the design consisting of a neat circular depression flanked by a raised crescent of clay. The organisation and execution of the decoration shows a rather high degree of care and attention, which is also evident in other aspects of the pot's manufacture (see below). The vessel is impressively thin-walled for a hand-built product, being never more than 6mm thick, and as little as 4mm in places. Having said this, the surfaces are slightly lumpy and irregular, betraying in places the marks of the potter's fingers. The fabric is fairly hard, only just scratchable by the fingernail. Moderate to abundant finely crushed angular white flint in the 0.5-3.0mm range is set in a fairly fine, well prepared matrix containing only sparse small w/o. This tempering is throughout the faces of the pot, resulting in a speckled appearance, especially against the darker background of the upper part of the exterior. The relatively well sorted inclusion reveals that attention to the pot's manufacture extended to the careful selection and production of tempering material. Sharp, light-coloured inclusions in a similar size range to that of the flint also occur, and are possibly natural constituents of the clay, rather than deliberately added. Core colour is generally very pale brown (10YR 7/3), but the interior surface, and the lower part of the exterior from just above the carination, are reddish yellow (7.5YR 6/6) with patches of light reed (2.5YR 6/6). Areas of post-depositional discolouration also occur on the interior. The upper part of the exterior and inside of the rim are reddish grey (5YR 5/2). **Vessel 20.2 (Fig. 5)** Rim sherd in a fine sand-tempered fabric with dark grey (10YR 4/1) core and surfaces, and strong brown (7.5YR 5/6) margins. **Vessel 20.3 (not illustrated)** Coarse sherd with extant calcareous filler. **Vessel 20.4 (not illustrated)** Finely vesicular sherd which may even be wheel-thrown. **Vessels 20.5-20.8 (not illustrated)** Sherd in soapy vesicular fabrics similar to the pottery from the pits of Groups B and C. **Vessels 22.1-22.3 (not illustrated)** Four sherds of condition F, weighing 20g, representing 3 vessels. All are in coarse vesicular fabrics.

**Discussion**

Vessel 20.1 is exceptionally interesting, and of a type which has not, as far as the present writer is aware, previously been reported from Lincolnshire, though various aspects of form, fabric and decoration combine to suggest that it should be
Fig. 4  Illustrated vessels from Groups B and C. Scale 1:2.
allocated to the middle of the first half of the first millennium BC or somewhat earlier. Large pots with everted/flaring rims and sharply angular profiles, decorated on the carination and rim with various forms of finger decoration, cabling and slashing, typify assemblages of the eighth and seventh centuries BC from Staple Howe and West Heslerton, North Yorkshire (Brewster 1963, Rigby 1986), but belong to a ceramic tradition which appears to have begun in the Ewart Park phase of the Later Bronze Age (Longley 1980, 71-74). A date from the later ninth century BC is therefore possible for this type of pottery.

Although Staple Howe and West Heslerton afford decorative parallels for the vessel under discussion, there are marked differences in both fabric and formal types. The dominant fabric at both sites is coarse, and heavily tempered with crushed calcareous filler (crystalline calcite and/or chalk); in addition, the vessels, which are mainly bowl forms, have thicker walls, up to twice the thickness of those of the vessel from Barnerby Wold Farm.
Within Lincolnshire itself, small assemblages of pottery which may be of this period are known from Washingborough and Brigg (May 1976, 109-114 and Figs. 61 and 62), but contain no close parallels for this vessel. Everted rims, thin potting, and some plastic decoration are all in evidence, but fabrics are once again coarse and vessels tend to have globular profiles. May (op. cit., 111-112) suggests a date in the eighth to sixth centuries BC for the Washingborough site, while metalwork from Brigg, though only loosely associated with the pottery, is of Late Bronze Age types.

Finally, pottery from Epperstone, near Nottingham, may afford a somewhat closer parallel, for one of the large, sharp shouldered, thin-walled pots from the site (Challis and Harding 1975, Fig. 9, no. 5), though undecorated, shows quite a degree of similarity in form to that from Barneby Wold Farm. Challis and Harding (op. cit., 189) saw such vessels as exhibiting “diffuse Hallstatt traits”, but they should now be related to the longer-lived ceramic tradition referred to above. Such forms may, of course, have continued well into the first millennium BC.

As will be apparent, the major questions attending this vessel concern its relative position in the ceramic sequence of Later Bronze Age to early Iron Age Lincolnshire. Unfortunately, however, this is impossible to determine in the light of current knowledge. It is hoped that further material will be discovered with associations that will allow a clearer understanding of its date.

The rest of the pottery from pit 19 is clearly distinguished from vessel 20.1 by its small size, though there is no appreciable difference in the amount of wear exhibited. Some (20.5-20.8) may have been residual in the area when the feature was dug, while two of the three remaining sherds are similar to some later Iron Age fabrics in the region. The presence of these sherds is sufficiently accounted for if we assume that they entered into the feature during the process of its truncation. The only rim-sherd present (vessel 20.2) comes from near the top of the fill and is also probably best considered as a later intrusion. No close parallels however may be offered. It is also probable that the small number of sherds in pit 21 had long been residual when they entered that feature.

Conclusions
Ken Steedman and Peter Didsbury

It is possible that some of these pits represent the positions of structural elements of buildings, Group C, in particular, comprising pits of an appropriate size, but there was no pattern in their distribution to suggest the plan of any building. Structures employing only occasional roof supports could conceivably be indicated however, if it is assumed that the evidence for ground-based or shallowly founded walls had been removed by later ploughing. The clustering of the pits would certainly be compatible with individual occupation nuclei, even if the pits were actually inside or adjacent to buildings, rather than forming part of their construction. An area of some 3000m² was stripped in the immediate vicinity of the pits without the discovery of similar features, which might imply either a low settlement density or that most features had totally disappeared into the ploughsoil. The proposed date of the pottery, which would allow an interval of as much as a millennium between the digging of the pits of Groups B and C, and those of Group A, implies widely separated phases of settlement activity on this part of the site. The generally low sherd size and sherd-to-vessel ratios apparent in these assemblages must surely indicate that the primary rubbish deposits of the social group(s) in question had originally lain elsewhere, perhaps middens later dispersed by the plough, though the small number of late Neolithic or Bronze Age flints recovered during topsoil stripping or field-walking nearby seem insufficient to suggest that an extensive and/or closely adjacent settlement has merely been ploughed away.

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