

## BEAKER PITS AND IRON AGE SETTLEMENT AT WARREN HILL, SAXMUNDHAM, SUFFOLK

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THIS NOTE DISCUSSES EVIDENCE for Bronze Age and Iron Age activity revealed during recent excavations of extensive remains of early Saxon settlement at Warren Hill, Saxmundham (TM 388 634; Fig. 70).<sup>1</sup> Investigations at the site were undertaken by Oxford Archaeology East in response to a proposed residential development of an area of some 6ha of agricultural land on the eastern side of the River Fromus, and comprised several phases of geophysical survey, evaluation trenching and excavation.<sup>2</sup> Previous investigations at Church Hill, immediately adjacent to the site, had revealed significant evidence for Early Bronze Age activity in the form of several clusters of pits and buried soils/'occupation layers' associated with Beaker pottery.<sup>3</sup>

The majority of the prehistoric features encountered during the fieldwork were investigated in the larger of two areas of excavation (Area 2) and comprised a cluster of Early Bronze Age pits associated with Beaker pottery, a single Late Bronze Age pit and a series of Middle Iron Age features including two roundhouse ring-gullies and associated pits and post-holes (Fig. 71). Outside of this main area of excavation, two isolated pits containing small quantities of Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age pottery were recovered during evaluation trenching and from excavation Area 1, whilst further Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age pottery came from colluvial deposits and subsoil layers encountered during trial trenching to the north of Area 1.

The group of twenty-five Early Bronze Age pits and post-holes in Area 2 formed a loose cluster covering an area measuring 18m by 6m, with no clear evidence for any structure or formal patterning in their layout. The features varied significantly in size; between 0.27m and 1.75m in diameter and from 0.2m to over 0.6m in depth, with the vast majority filled by single deposits of dark grey-brown silty sands. Nineteen sherds of Beaker pottery (305g), 130 struck flints and 100g of burnt flint were recovered from features making up the pit cluster. One feature in particular, pit 375, was notable for containing a large proportion of these finds including seventy-eight worked flints and five sherds (169g) of pottery (Fig. 72). Despite extensive sampling, charred plant remains were sparse, but included three barley grains and occasional fragments of hazelnut shell: a charred barley grain was radiocarbon dated to 2200–2030 cal. BC at 95% confidence (3723±29 BP; SUERC-67551).

Beaker pottery from the pit cluster comprises a mixture of large well-preserved sherds and smaller abraded pieces representing a maximum of nine vessels, including both robust rusticated Beaker and fine comb-impressed forms. The worked flint assemblage is dominated by flake-based waste, representing all stages of core reduction, together with eight retouched tools, predominantly scrapers, and several unretouched flakes showing clear traces of utilisation. Both the pottery and flint assemblages clearly represent small samples of material drawn from larger bodies of refuse, presumably deriving from surface midden deposits.<sup>4</sup>

In general terms, the pits and their associated artefact assemblages are entirely typical of other Beaker associated pit sites in the region, including localities in south-east Suffolk, perhaps most notably at Sutton Hoo.<sup>5</sup> The combined evidence from the Church Hill excavations and the results of the fieldwork discussed here suggest that Early Bronze Age settlement in this part of the Fromus Valley may have been fairly extensive, although the extent to which this may relate to punctuated episodes of relatively brief occupation or a pattern of shifting but essentially

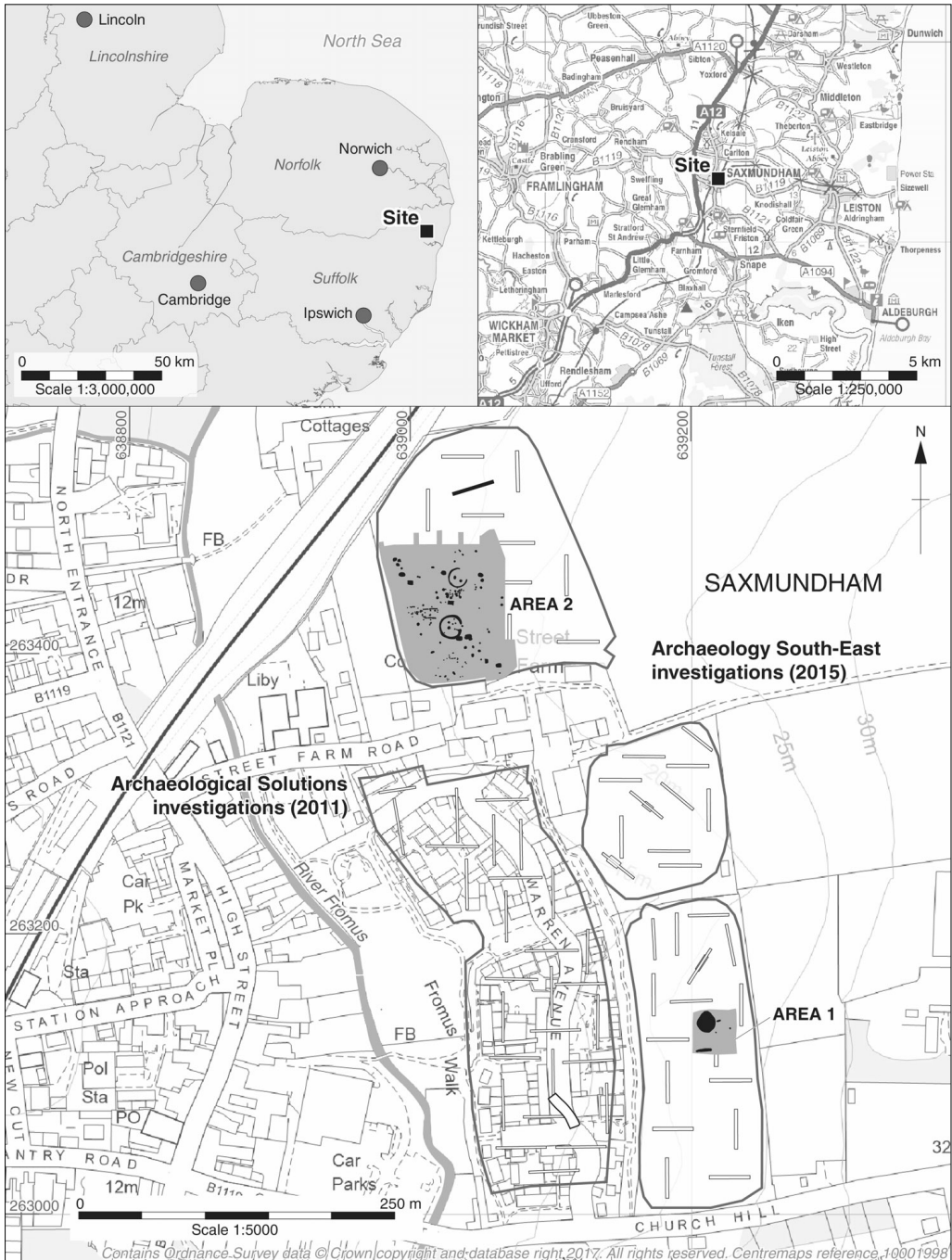


FIG. 70 – Site location showing earlier phases of investigation at the site and the two main areas excavated by Oxford Archaeology East in 2015/16 (Areas 1 and 2).



FIG. 71 – Phased plan of prehistoric features in Area 2, with inset plan of Pit Group 1.

sedentary occupation is unclear.<sup>6</sup> Reliable dates for 'domestic' Beaker activity in Eastern England remain rare and in this context the radiocarbon date from pit 375 is an important addition to the regional dataset and falls comfortably into the date range for non-funerary Beaker in England, as recently discussed and modelled by Frances Healy.<sup>7</sup>

Following this phase of Beaker activity, there is no clear evidence for later Early or Middle Bronze Age activity at the site, although a single small pit in Area 2 contained thirteen sherds (173g) of Late Bronze Age pottery belonging to the Post Deverel-Rimbury Plainware tradition. Middle Iron Age settlement was represented by the traces of two roundhouses, both defined by penannular gullies with associated pits and post-holes. The ring-gully of Roundhouse 1 measured 14m in diameter, with a 4m wide entrance on its eastern side, and contained a dark artefact-rich upper fill which produced seventy-eight sherds of pottery (1501g), a small quantity of animal bone (374g), thirteen worked flints and 3374g of fired clay, including fragments of five triangular loom weights. Carbonised residues were identified on several of the pottery sherds from this deposit, but attempts to radiocarbon date them failed. Nine post-holes or small pits and two larger pits were associated with Roundhouse 1 and produced a total of fifty-one sherds of Middle Iron Age pottery (485g) together with occasional worked flints (the majority thought to be residual) and fragments of animal bone (16g).

Roundhouse 2 was defined by a ring-gully measuring 12m in diameter with a broad, 9m wide, entrance to the north-east. No artefact-rich deposits analogous to that from Roundhouse 1 were encountered, and the feature produced a total of just eight sherds (45g) of Middle Iron Age pottery. Two pits in the interior of the structure produced assemblages of twenty-five sherds (261g) and eighteen sherds (177g) of Middle Iron Age pottery.

Aside from the roundhouses a total of eleven Middle Iron Age pits were revealed across Area 2, with two possible pairs of pits in the eastern part of the area, a cluster of four pits in the north-east corner of the excavations and three pits to the north of Roundhouse 2. The pits measured between 0.8m and 2.4m in diameter and varied in depth between 0.2m and 0.6m and all contained single fills of dark silty sands. Whilst the majority of the pits contained few finds, yielding occasional sherds of Middle Iron Age pottery and fragmentary animal bone, the three pits to the north of Roundhouse 2 produced more substantial assemblages, including a total of thirty-two sherds of pottery (481g) and quantities of fired clay including a fragment of triangular loom weight.

The Middle Iron Age pottery forms a typical plain ware assemblage, dominated by slack-shouldered jars, globular bowls and tub-shaped vessels with a relatively high proportion of burnished wares and three decorated sherds belonging to a single late La Tène-style vessel (Fig. 72). The assemblage can be readily compared to broadly contemporary assemblages from elsewhere in the county, including published groups from Days Road, Capel St Mary; Morland Road, Ipswich; Barnham; Burgh and West Stow.<sup>8</sup> The presence of the decorated vessel, the high frequency of burnishing and representation of certain vessel forms hints at a relatively 'late' date for the assemblage, perhaps during the second or early first century BC. The faunal assemblage from Middle Iron Age contexts was small with only twenty identified specimens, including cattle, sheep/goat and pig. Charred plant remains were similarly sparse but included a single barley grain and legume fragment, alongside several unidentified cereal grains and a single fragment of hazelnut shell.

In broad terms, the morphology of the Middle Iron Age settlement at Warren Hill can be regarded as fairly typical of the period in Suffolk. Sites of this date are commonly unenclosed, and often comprise relatively light scatters of pits and dispersed structural remains.<sup>9</sup> Not all, however, seem to contain ring-gully defined roundhouses, even when excavations have been extensive.<sup>10</sup> This absence of round buildings on many sites is probably more apparent than real, for without the penannular gullies, Iron Age roundhouses are virtually invisible in the

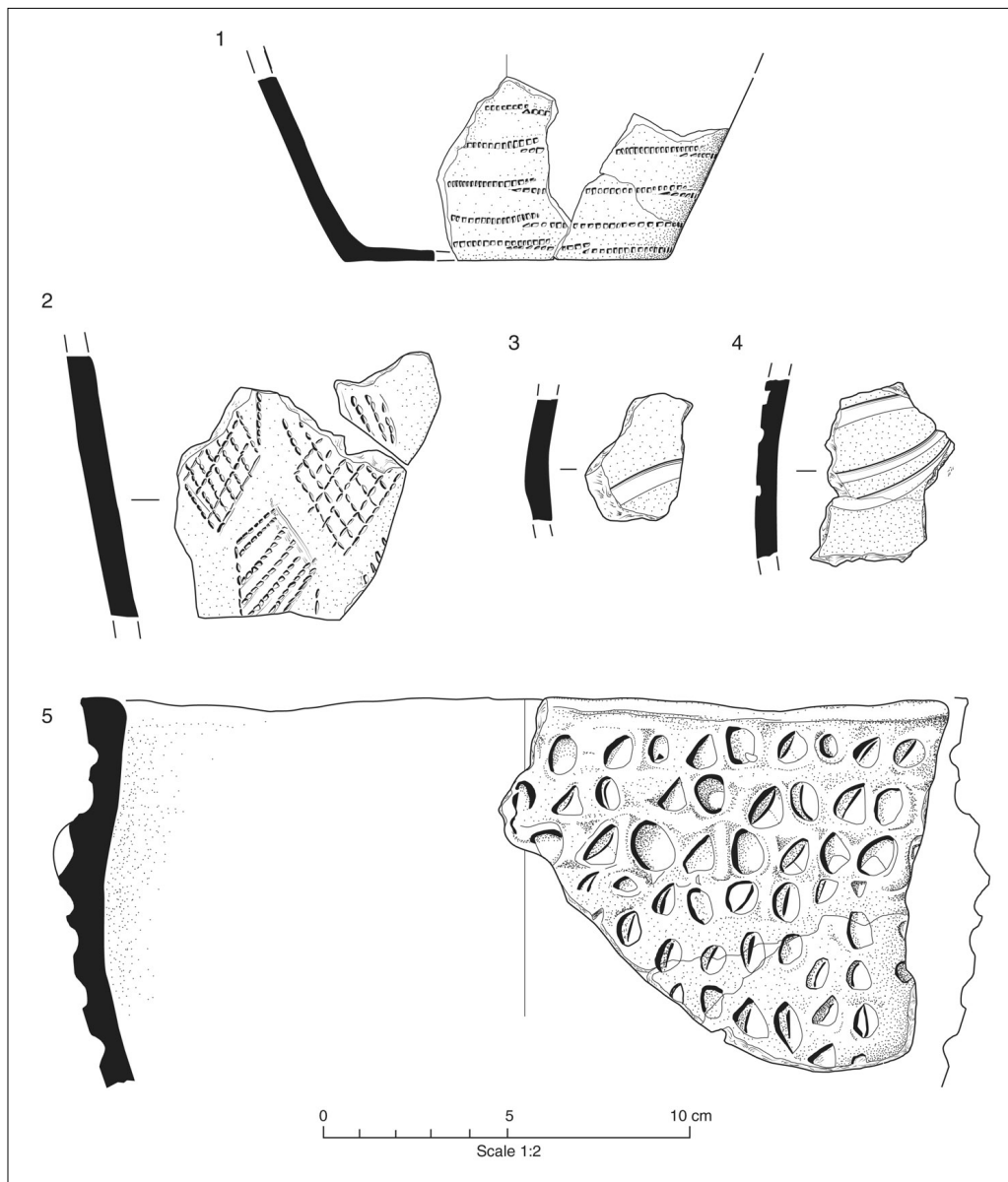


FIG. 72 – Prehistoric pottery. Nos. 1-2, comb impressed Beaker (Pit Group 1); nos. 3-4, late La Tène-style decorated Middle Iron Age sherds; no. 5, rusticated Beaker (Pit Group 1).

archaeological record as few have internal post-holes or other earth-fast architectural fixtures beyond porch/doorways settings.

The Warren Hill roundhouses are no exception, which may partly explain why comparatively few have been recorded in Suffolk to date.<sup>11</sup> It also begs the question as to whether ring-gullies are the hallmark of a particular kind of roundhouse architectural tradition that was differentially adopted as the vernacular by Iron Age communities in

Suffolk. The further excavation, analysis and publication of Iron Age house plans will be the key to addressing this issue. The excavations at Warren Hill are therefore important for revealing two complete roundhouse plans within a small Middle Iron Age farmstead-type occupation. These examples not only further the understanding of Iron Age domestic architecture in the county, but help to cast additional light on the wider form, character and variability of open settlement in Suffolk.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Clarke 2017.
- 2 Clarke 2016; Dyson 2015; Fry and Roseveare 2014; King 2015.
- 3 Newton 2013.
- 4 Cf. Garrow 2006, 137–38.
- 5 Hummler 2005.
- 6 Cf. Whittle 1997; Bruck 1999.
- 7 Healy 2012.
- 8 Days Road: Tabor 2014, 190–95; Morland Road: Brudenell and Hogan 2014, 214–15; Barnham: Martin 1993, 14–16, particularly fig. 10, nos 11–18; Burgh: Martin 1988, 38–39, particularly figs 19–20, nos 1–28; West Stow: Martin 1989, 65–68; West 1989, 60–65, particularly fig. 46.
- 9 Brudenell and Hogan 2014, 217; Martin 1988, 68; 1993, 56; 1999, 51.
- 10 See e.g. excavation at Ingham Quarry, Fornham St Genevieve: Newton and Mustchin 2015.
- 11 See Heard 2016 for discussion.

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