REFINING SUFFOLK’S LATER PREHISTORIC CERAMIC SEQUENCE: IRON AGE POTTERY AND SETTLEMENT REMAINS AT MORLAND ROAD, IPSWICH

by MATTHEW BRUDENELL and SHANNON HOGAN

INTRODUCTION

THE CURRENCY AND absolute chronology of later prehistoric potting traditions in Suffolk are arguably less secure than for the neighbouring counties of Essex and Cambridgeshire. Although Suffolk now boasts a number of substantial pottery assemblages, largely as a consequence of developer-funded excavations in the past two decades, there is still a dearth of published, high-precision radiocarbon dates to help anchor the county’s ceramic sequence. These problems are particularly acute for the Iron Age, where there are currently fewer than five pottery-associated dates in print,1 most of which are low-resolution determinations based on unspecified charcoal. Responding to this need to refine the ceramic sequence, and publish more stratified groups of later prehistoric pottery generally from the region, this paper takes as its focus a well preserved but relatively modest-sized assemblage of pottery (430 sherds, 4.5kg) recovered from an Iron Age settlement site on land adjacent to Morland Road, Ipswich (IPS617, centred on TM 1790 4170). Excavated by the Cambridge Archaeological Unit in 2010 (on behalf of Orwell Housing Association Ltd), and summarised below, the limited exposures revealed a scattering of pits, post-holes, gullies and a single post-built roundhouse. Of greatest significance were a series of refuse-rich pits, yielding many partial vessel profiles, loomweight fragments and botanical remains. Two accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS) radiocarbon dates achieved for the site’s largest pit assemblages serve to secure the ceramic chronology, placing the bulk of pottery, and the pits groups themselves, firmly in the Middle Iron Age.

Setting and site summary
Located some 3km south-east from the historic centre of Ipswich, and occupying a prominent hilltop position overlooking the River Orwell (c. 400m to the west), the small development plot defining the main excavation area off Morland Road covered just 0.05ha (Figs 72–73). The site was formerly home to a tarmacked car park and council depot, with the underlying subsoils falling between 36.0 and 7.5m AOD, upon glaciofluvial drift deposits of sands and gravels. Although nothing but a thin ploughsoil/subsoil horizon survived beneath the concrete and hardcore levelling layers, mainly in the south of the site, most of the cut archaeological features had suffered only moderate truncation. Some areas of the site were pockmarked by modern disturbance and tree-throws, but on the whole, the preservation was surprisingly good considering the circumstances.

In view of the objectives of this paper, only a summary of the site’s sequence and its principal feature groups are provided, though for details of all the archaeological deposits the reader is referred to the assessment report.2 Of obvious concern in this context is the Iron Age archaeology, but mention should also be made of the series of shallow, parallel running Romano-British ditches in the north of the site (width range: 0.41–1.05m; depth range 0.05–0.48m), one of which (F.28) yielded fragments of pottery dated c. AD 50–70. Also worthy of mention is the beam slot located towards the centre of the excavation area (F.26),

presumably attesting to a small rectilinear structure. The date of this setting is uncertain, though its alignment sits awkwardly with the ditches to the north, perhaps implying a later post-Roman origin.
Whilst some ambiguity must also surround the phasing of the site’s other sterile pits and post-holes (numbering 41 in total), the character of their fills was in keeping with those more securely dated to the Iron Age on ceramic grounds (27 features). Broadly speaking, the features assigned to this period formed a scattered swathe of pits (17 features), post-holes (48) and short lengths of gully (four features), defining part of what appears to be an unenclosed settlement focus straddling the hilltop. Indeed, in terms of both general site morphology and location, the remains are entirely typical for the Iron Age in Suffolk.\(^1\) Obviously, in this instance, the occupation scatter extends beyond the boundaries of the excavation area itself, preventing any detailed discussion of site development, settlement scale, or potentially, any broader comments on socio-economic status (this also being curtailed by the poor preservation of the bone – only 18 assessable specimens recovered from three features: cow, sheep/goat, pig, and bird represented). That being said, some nuancing is possible on the basis of ceramic dating, and the spatial zoning of features.

Certainly, at a basic level, a distinction can be drawn between the northern, higher end of the excavation area, where a series of the site’s largest pits were located, and the southern, lower slopes characterised by clusters of post-holes and small pits. In the case of the latter, it is possible to identify at least one structure amidst the post-hole scatter: a c. 7m in diameter post-built roundhouse with south-east facing porch structure (Fig. 73A). Defined by a group of ten surviving post-holes (diameter range: 0.25–0.57m; depth range: 0.10–24m), the form of the
Table 1 – Principal finds from the site’s larger pits

structure is reminiscent of buildings dating to the earlier rather than later first millennium BC, with the closest published parallel from Suffolk being the Early Iron Age roundhouse at Barham. Although finds were not forthcoming from the Morland Road example, it is not inconceivable that this building also had its origins in the earlier Iron Age, since non-residual sherds in Early Iron Age-type fabrics (essentially burnt flint-and-sand tempered wares) were recovered from several adjacent features, including post-holes F.14 and F.18, and pits F.1 and F.32.

The rest of the site’s pottery and diagnostic artefacts, however, were unequivocally Middle Iron Age: the most substantial finds assemblages deriving from the larger pits perched on the higher contours, some 10m north of the main post-hole scatter. These six features (F.24, F.35, F.37, F.38, F.51 and F.58) were broadly oval in plan, displaying dark charcoal-rich fills, the contents of which are summarised in Table 1. Notable from pits F.24 and F.38 (Fig. 74) is the range of charred cereal grains (barley, emmer/spelt wheat, and more unusually free threshing wheat and rye), wild seeds, and arable weed species. These hint at a diverse arable economy, with the presence of common spikerush and true sedge seeds suggesting some cultivation of seasonally damp land and/or the collection of wetland plant resources. At a more general level – and notwithstanding caveats about differential feature preservation – it seems likely that the primary function of the northern pits was storage, whereas the settings in the south were mainly structure-related.

THE POTTERY

The excavations yielded 430 sherds (5483g) of pottery, with a mean sherd weight (MSW) of 12.8g. The material was recovered from a total of 33 features, with the largest assemblages deriving from four pits in the northern half of the site: F.24, F.38, F.51 and F.58. Each contained over 500g of Middle Iron Age pottery, and together they account for 59% of sherds in the overall assemblage, or 76% of the material by weight. In total 400 sherds of Middle Iron Age type-pottery were recovered from Morland Road, with 21 of the remaining fragments dating to the Early Iron Age (287g – mainly from the southern half of the site), and nine to the early Roman period (77g, all from ditch F.28). This report focuses on the Middle Iron Age component, but provides a quantified characterisation of the whole assemblage, fully recorded following the recommendations of the Prehistoric Ceramic Research Group.
**Fabrics and vessel forms**

Six principal fabric types were distinguished macroscopically (Table 2). These may be subdivided further on the basis of inclusion density, but in the absence of a petrological analysis, a simple series was deemed appropriate for this report. In general, most of the sherds (95% by weight) contained a mix of quartz sand, chopped vegetable matter and/or mica in their matrix (fabrics Q, QVE and QM) – subtle shifts in the balance of these ‘ingredients’ giving rise to the spectrum of fabric variability. The only clearly unassociated fabric types were FQ and FQVE, distinguished by their inclusions of crushed burnt flint. These sherds are thought to be of Early Iron Age origin, c. 600–350 BC, with non-residual sherds deriving from pit F.1, post-holes F.14 and F.18, and pit/post-hole F.32.

Overall, fabric type QVE dominated the assemblage, accounting for 66% of the pottery, followed by fabric Q with 19% – both typical of Middle Iron Age assemblages from Suffolk and neighbouring counties. The remaining 15% of the pottery was shared amongst fabric types QM (9%), FQ (4%), FQVE (1%) and QI (<1%). In each instance the clays and tempering agents could have been obtained from the local landscape within a kilometre of the site. Flints and sands were readily available from the site’s own subsoils, whilst suitable potting clays could have been extracted from the River Orwell’s foreshore. This does not preclude the possibility that some vessels were acquired from further afield. Indeed, the character of the quartz grains in some FQ and Q sherds is remarkably similar to those observed at the Early Iron Age site off Whitehouse Road, Ipswich (IPS247), c. 7km to the north-west.
Quartz sand fabrics (Q): Sparse to common quartz sand. Some sherds contain coarse rounded and sub-rounded quartz grains (mainly 1–2 mm in size, with some up to 4 mm), rare mica, and/or very rare linear voids from burnt-out vegetable matter.

Quartz sand and mica fabrics (QM): Sparse to common quartz sand and moderate mica. Fabric may also contain rare rounded and sub-rounded quartz grains (mainly <1.5 mm) and/or very rare linear voids from burnt-out vegetable matter.

Crushed quartz and quartz sand fabric (QI): Sparse to moderate fine or coarsely crushed angular quartz (<2.5 mm), and moderate quartz sand. Fabric may contain rare mica and rare voids from burnt-out vegetable matter, normally appearing at the vessel surface.

Quartz sand and vegetable tempered fabrics (QVE): Sparse to common quartz sand and sparse to common linear voids from burnt-out vegetable matter. Voids are visible on the sherd surface and/or the sherd section. Some sherds contain rare rounded and sub-rounded quartz grains (mainly <1.5 mm) and/or rare mica flecks.

Burnt flint, sand and vegetable tempered fabrics (FQVE): Sparse to moderate fine to medium crush burnt flint (<2 mm), sparse to moderate voids from burnt-out vegetable matter, and moderate to common quartz sand.

Burnt flint and quartz sand fabrics (FQ): Sparse to common fine to coarse burnt flint (up to 4 mm), with moderate quartz sand. Some sherds contain coarse sub-rounded quartz grains (mainly 2–3 mm).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>MNV</th>
<th>MNV burnished</th>
<th>No./wt. (g) shers</th>
<th>Rim diameter range (cm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Slack shouldered jar with a short upright neck and rim</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21/395</td>
<td>10-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jar with a pronounced rounded shouldered and short off-set upright neck. Constricted mouth</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2/53</td>
<td>18-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Slack shouldered jar with outwardly flared neck</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4/74</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Jar with a marked almost angular shouldered and out turned neck</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1/20</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>S-profile bowl or squat jar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2/37</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Globular or ovoid bowl/squat jar with no distinct neck zone, but a clearly defined rim</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9/584</td>
<td>11-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Straight sided or slightly convex walled jar with no distinct neck zone</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>23/729</td>
<td>21-28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misc.</td>
<td>Bipartite jar with short in-turned neck</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1/28</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>63/1920</td>
<td>10-28cm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 3 – Quantification of vessel forms. The lettered form series relates to that developed by J.D. Hill which is widely employed in northern East Anglia. The descriptions are a simplified version of those fully published by Hill and Horne (174) and Hill and Braddock (155–56). MNV = minimum number of vessels.
Based on the total number of different rims and bases identified, the assemblage is estimated to include a minimum of 60 different vessels (47 different rims, 12 different bases and one complete profile). Most displayed squared-topped rims with expanded, rounded, or lipped exteriors, whilst the majority of bases had simple flattened feet. In total, 28 vessels were sufficiently intact to allow form ascription; all of Middle Iron Age origin. These included a total of 63 sherds (1920g), representing 15% of the assemblage by count or 35% by weight. The identifiable forms comprised a variety of slack- and round-shouldered jars, and a series of slightly globular bowls/squat jars (Table 3 and Fig. 75). As is typical of Middle Iron Age assemblages in East Anglia, slack-shouldered jars of Form A dominate the group. These are always found in a range of sizes, and seem to have fulfilled a variety of cooking and serving functions.

Forms B, D and J are closely related, as are the slightly globular pots of Form L, which are normally of small size. The burnished vessels in Form L and F are more bowl-like in profile, and possibly functioned as table-wares. The presence of carbonized residues also indicates that some pots were used for cooking. These survived on 13 sherds (703g), relating to a maximum of ten vessels – food cruts from two of which were successfully sampled for radiocarbon dating (see below).

Surface treatment and decoration

Surface treatment ranged from rough wiping through to careful burnishing and polishing. The burnished/polished sherds constitute the ‘fineware’ component, and comprise vessels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Laboratory Code</th>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Radiocarbon Age (BP)</th>
<th>Calibrated Date (68.2%)</th>
<th>(% confidence) 95.4%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SUERC-40149</td>
<td>F.24</td>
<td>Carbonised pot residue (internal)</td>
<td>2210 +/- 30</td>
<td>360–200 BC</td>
<td>380–200 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUERC-40150</td>
<td>F.38</td>
<td>Carbonised pot residue (internal)</td>
<td>2250 +/- 35</td>
<td>390–230 BC</td>
<td>400–200 BC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 4 – Radiocarbon dating results.
potentially capable of holding liquids and beverages. In total 51 sherds (599g) were burnished representing 12% of the assemblage by sherd count or 11% by weight. Most vessels finished in this manner had been fired in a reducing atmosphere to produce a deep, even black or dark grey colour. On the whole, this finish tended to be reserved for vessels made with fine sandy clays and sparse inclusions, particular sherds in fabric QM, and forms F and L.

The assemblage also included 21 decorated sherds (797g) relating to a maximum of 14 vessels, none of which was burnished. The repertoire was restricted to fingertip/nail treatments (nine sherds, 674g), tool impressing (one sherd, 2g), scoring (eight sherds, 77g), and the moulding of cordons on a Roman vessel (three sherds, 41g). With the exception of one sherd (26g), all the fingertip/nail impressions were found on rim-tops, and were associated with forms A, D, L and P jars/bowls, with rim diameters of 11–24cm (five different vessels with decorated rim-tops).

Date, assemblage affinities and key ceramic groups
The pottery from Morland Road constitutes a fairly modest sized prehistoric assemblage, albeit one in which a number of partial vessel profiles can be reconstructed. Elsewhere in eastern England, this group might not have attracted such attention, or been deemed worthy of publication in its own right. Yet since few Iron Age assemblages have made it to print in Suffolk, this becomes a valuable and much needed addition to the county corpus. Indeed, its significance is enhanced further by the fact that two high-precision AMS radiocarbon dates have been obtained for the pottery. These not only serve to anchor the dating of the site’s key feature assemblages, but help in the processes of securing an absolute chronology for Suffolk’s later prehistoric ceramic sequence.

On conventional grounds of typo-chronology, the vast majority of the site’s prehistoric pottery can be given a general Middle/later Iron Age date, c. 350–50 BC, with the group finding parallels with pottery from Barnham, Burgh, Spong Hill and West Stow. However, the two radiocarbon determinations from pit F.24 and F.38 refine the dating resolution, placing the bulk of the assemblage in the earlier part of the Middle Iron Age, prior to the second century BC (Table 4 and Fig. 76). Given the importance of these dates, both assemblages will be briefly described, along with the site’s two other key groups from pit F.51 and F.58.

The largest single assemblage derived from F.24, which yielded 125 sherds (2109g). Based on the total number of different rims and bases present, the pit is estimated to have contained sherds from a minimum of 29 separate pots, all in varying states of fragmentation and abrasion. Most were represented by small, partially abraded sherds, mixed amongst the occasional large piece, including 19 refitting fragments. The deposit was therefore characterised by a mixed ceramic refuse, with sherds from different pots displaying diverse post-breakage histories. In overall composition this was quite similar to the assemblage from pit F.51 (67 sherds, 714g), the only major distinction being the size of the groups and the number of vessels represented (ten in total). Smaller still was the group from pit F.58, which comprised only 16 sherds (517g), most of which belonged to the lower walls and base of a single unburnished jar.

The assemblage from pit F.38 (37 sherds, 834g) was also dominated by fragments of a single vessel, but in this instance the pot was in a near complete state. This was found toward the base of the pit, in an upturned position (Fig. 74). On these grounds it is tempting to view this as a formal/structured deposit. However, the question of what logic guided this act is more difficult to discern. On the one hand, complete pots are fairly unusual in Middle Iron Age contexts, suggesting the vessel may have been specially selected and careful placed. On the other, detailed inspection reveals that the vessel was functionally redundant, after what appears to be a failed attempt to repair an old crack in the lower wall – the two repair holes
being clearly visible. It may therefore be the case that this pot was simply regarded as refuse, and was discarded in a less considered manner alongside other ceramic fragments (whose composition was similar to that from F.24 and F.51).

Ultimately the status of this deposit is somewhat ambiguous, so various interpretations might be forwarded. By contrast, the ceramic compositions in the surrounding pits appear to constitute a generalised pottery-rich detritus, presumably relating to more routine refuse management practices (albeit ones informed by specific cultural attitudes towards rubbish). That being the case, it is notable that no refitting sherds were identified between these major pit deposits, despite their close proximity and an intensive search for cross-joins. This may be a small detail, but it is one that offers clues to the nature/temporality of depositional practice on the site. Crucially, it implies that ceramic refuse was not being pooled for long periods on a single common midden source prior to interment. If this was the case, then we would anticipate cross-feature joins, as acts of deposition would have drawn upon the same mixed source of detritus, with sherds from the same vessels entering different pits. As such, the absence of these connections implies that refuse was managed rather differently, perhaps with localised accumulations being generated and deposited on a more regular basis. Of course, our understating of these dynamics is extremely hazy, but it is clear that the practices responsible for the formation of these pit deposits were different to those reconstructed for other materials at prehistoric sites including Kilverstone, Norfolk, or Broom, Bedfordshire.8

DISCUSSION

With so little of the Iron Age settlement exposed at Morland Road, it difficult to draw any firm conclusions about the character of the site or its long term history. Based on the evidence at hand, however, it seems likely that the settlement was unenclosed, comprising a loosely agglomerated swathe of pits, post-holes and gullies. The patterning of these features is equally hard to interpret, although the complete plan of a post-built roundhouse was discernible at the southern, lower end of the site. This was uncovered amidst a scatter of other post settings, some presumably relating to further structures in this zone. Clearly, not all of these features were contemporary, as several intercut. In this instance, then, it seems probable that several different episodes of activity, and/or phases or structural reworking are represented. Such a suggestion finds support from the pottery from the area, which includes both Early and Middle Iron Age-type wares (the latter dominating). A degree of time depth is therefore implied, and on morphological grounds alone it seems wise to place the roundhouse towards the beginning of the settlement sequence, some time in the Early Iron Age, c. 600–350 BC.

By contrast, the standout features in the northern half of the site were the series of oval pits, whose form and larger dimensions suggest that they originally served a storage role. In all cases, these pits were backfilled with dark, artefact-rich soils; their finds inventories including a mix of Middle Iron Age pottery, loomweight fragments, animal bones, pieces of structural daub or oven lining, and charred cereals. Such material compositions are characteristic of a generalised occupation ‘refuse’, implying that domestic waste was drawn from contexts such as surface middens. Some of these acts of deposition were no doubt conducted in response to practical considerations, such as the need sometimes to remove spent materials from the surface of occupation. However, the inversion of the semi-complete pot in pit F.38 is unquestionably enigmatic, and though the vessel may have been functionally redundant when deposited, its apparent ‘placement’ invites us to view this act as something more overtly expressive or symbolic.

On a wider note, the artefacts themselves attest to a range of activities that are typical of the region’s Iron Age farmsteads – evidence of food preparation and consumption, weaving, crop processing and animal husbandry – in short, the residues of an agrarian economy.
Lacking are metal finds, objects of personal adornment, or other artefacts which might invoke a sense of the occupants’ social standing. This need not imply that the settlement was a lowly farmstead, though, since it is doubtful whether ‘status’ can be inferred in such a straightforward way from the archaeological record. In fact, artefact repertoires appear to be remarkably uniform across all types of site in the Middle Iron Age in East Anglia, with Morland Road being no exception.

Typical also is the unenclosed nature of the occupation. Open settlements akin to Morland Road have long been recognised as a characteristic feature of the Iron Age in Suffolk and Norfolk, though it is now clear that enclosures of varying magnitude also form part of the settlement geography (e.g. Burgh, Foxhall and Days Road, Capel St Mary). However, the nature of the relationship between these different types of site is far from understood. Some form of social/settlement hierarchy might well be envisaged, but it is equally likely there is a chronological dimension, with enclosures potentially appearing later in the Iron Age sequence. Similar trends are certainly evident elsewhere in eastern England and the east Midlands, though whether or not these patterns are relevant to Suffolk remains to be seen. Clearly, dating will be critical to answering this question, particularly the radiocarbon dating of pottery assemblages, since these are the artefacts most commonly relied upon for phasing.

Superficially, Middle Iron Age potting traditions seem to change relatively little over the course of the mid fourth to first century BC, meaning that ceramics (at present) are quite a blunt typo-chronological instrument. But if truth be told, there have been few attempts to examine the possibility of change by tracing subtle variations, especially within the larger assemblages recently unearthed. Further refinement may therefore be possible, especially if dates are routinely obtained for key groups. The Morland Road determinations are important in this respect, for they serve to identify a group of earlier Middle Iron Age pottery which unequivocally predates the second century BC. The lower limits of the dating bracket also help to clarify the chronological endpoint of the region’s Early Iron Age ceramic traditions, which now seem not to extend beyond the early to mid fourth century BC. Combined, this places Suffolk’s Iron Age ceramic sequence on a much firmer footing, though further programmes of dating will still be required to properly secure the chronological framework.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1 Martin 1999, 62, 82; Tabor 2014, 186–95.
2 Hogan 2011.
4 Martin 1993, 27, Fig. 15.
5 Rye was introduced during the first millennium BC, but is only found sporadically in Iron Age contexts in Southern Britain. For further discussion see Cunliffe 2005, 410; and Jones 1996, 33.
6 Hill and Braddock 2006, 169–75.
7 Barnham: Martin 1993, 14–16, particularly Fig. 10, nos. 11–18; Burgh: Martin 1988, 38–39, particularly Figs. 19–20, nos. 1–28; Spong Hill: Gregory 1995, 90–94; West Stow: Martin 1989, 65–68; West 1989, 60–65, particularly Fig. 46.
8 Kilverstone: Garrow et al. 2006; Broom: Brudenell and Cooper 2008.
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