MIDDLE IRON AGE BUILDINGS AT WESTFIELD PRIMARY SCHOOL, CHALKSTONE WAY, HAVERHILL

by KIERON HEARD

INTRODUCTION

IN 2010 SUFFOLK County Council Archaeology Service (SCCAS) Field Team carried out a trial trench evaluation and subsequent open area excavation on the Westfield Primary School Replacement site (TL 6801 4593; Fig. 188). The most significant result of the fieldwork was the discovery of part of a Middle Iron Age settlement containing at least three circular timber buildings and associated features (Fig. 189). Full excavation of the truncated remains of the buildings revealed something of their various forms and methods of construction and produced large finds assemblages with related radiocarbon dates.

Compared with many other regions of lowland Britain there is a dearth of information about Iron Age settlement in East Anglia, particularly on the extensive clay uplands of central Suffolk and north Essex. This has been due largely to the difficulty of identifying archaeological sites on clay soils using aerial photography and to the relative lack of large-scale excavations in those same clayland areas.[1] As a result, there is a widely held view that Iron Age settlement in Suffolk was concentrated in areas of lighter soil – the Brecklands of the north-western part of the county and the Sandlings of the coastal plain, as well as on the alluvial soils and gravel terraces of the river valleys.[2]

Although an increase in fieldwork in the last 15–20 years (in response to large-scale housing developments and infrastructure schemes) has led to a greater appreciation of the extent of Iron Age settlement on the East Anglian clay, much of the evidence is available only within 'grey literature' reports and can be obscure. There has been a recent attempt to summarise the data as part of a revised research framework for the east of England but the most comprehensive account of Iron Age Suffolk remains that by Martin, published as long ago as 1999.[3]

Despite increased fieldwork in recent years it remains true to say that relatively few Iron Age buildings have been identified in Suffolk (compared with some other eastern counties) and the purpose of this paper is to highlight this aspect of the Westfield Primary School site while considering the Middle Iron Age settlement evidence in a wider geographical context. Further details about the site can be found in the analytical report[4] available on the Archaeology Data Service website at http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk

GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The settlement was located on an interfluvial ridge between two tributaries of the River Stour – the Stour Brook to the south, and an unnamed lesser stream to the north. The River Stour itself flows from north to south approximately 3km to the east of the site. The ridge runs north-west to south-east and has a maximum elevation within the site of approximately 97m OD. The underlying geology of the site was boulder clay of the Lowestoft Formation. This was overlain by heavy clay topsoil, with modern agriculture having removed any evidence that might have existed for natural soil profiles or former land surfaces.

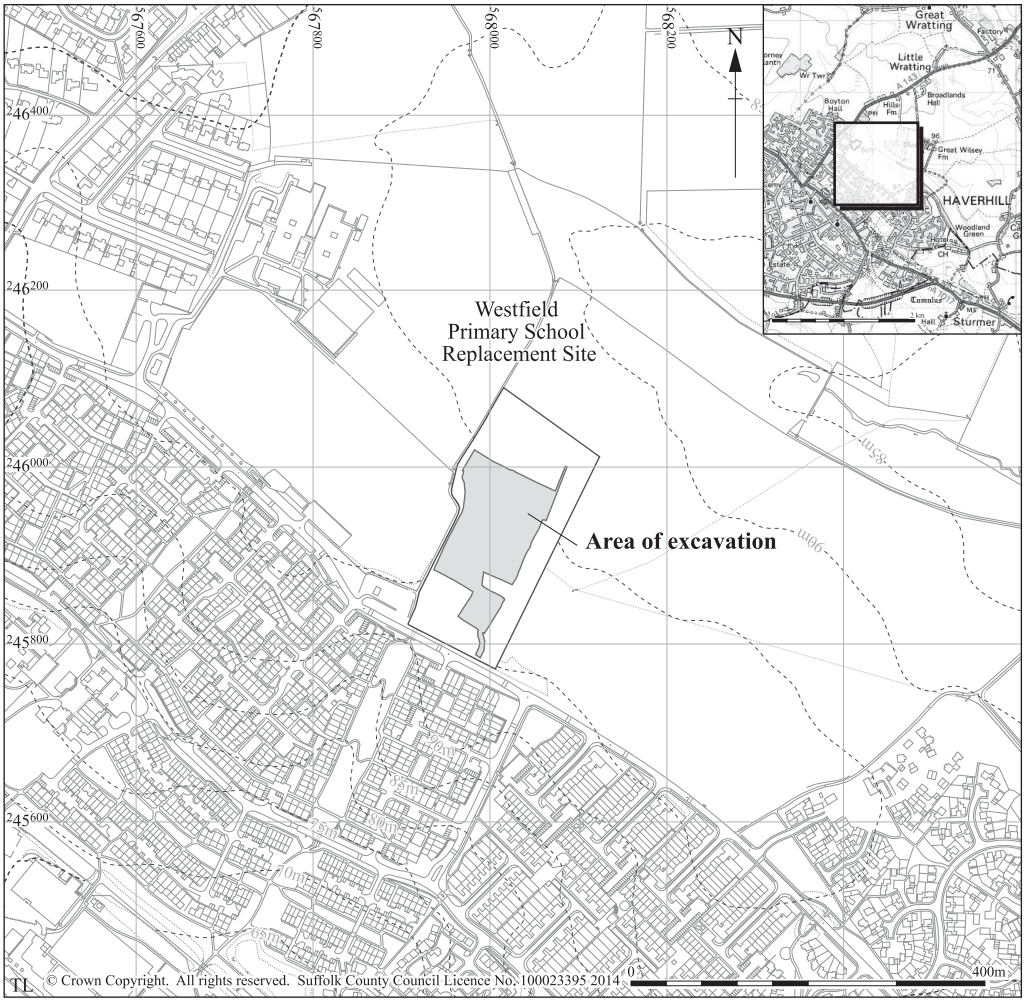

FIG. 188 – Site location.

ACTIVITY BEFORE THE MIDDLE IRON AGE

Small amounts of residual pottery and/or worked flints suggest that there was transitory use of the site during the earlier Neolithic (4000–3000 BC) and the later Neolithic/earlier Bronze Age (2600–1400 BC). In the later Bronze Age two un-urned cremations (Fig. 189) were buried near the crest of the ridge, about 4m apart, in what was probably a small, unenclosed and informal cemetery. The remains have provided radiocarbon dates of 1212–1007 cal. BC (2908 ± 29 BP; SUERC-47432) and 1209–1009 cal. BC (2905 ± 26 BP; SUERC-47433). These dates place the burials in the Middle to Late Bronze Age transition, which was a time when organised burial practices (such as cremations placed under barrows and in urn fields) were giving way to less formal rites and isolated burials, as seems to have been the case here.[5] There was no other evidence for later Bronze Age activity on the site.

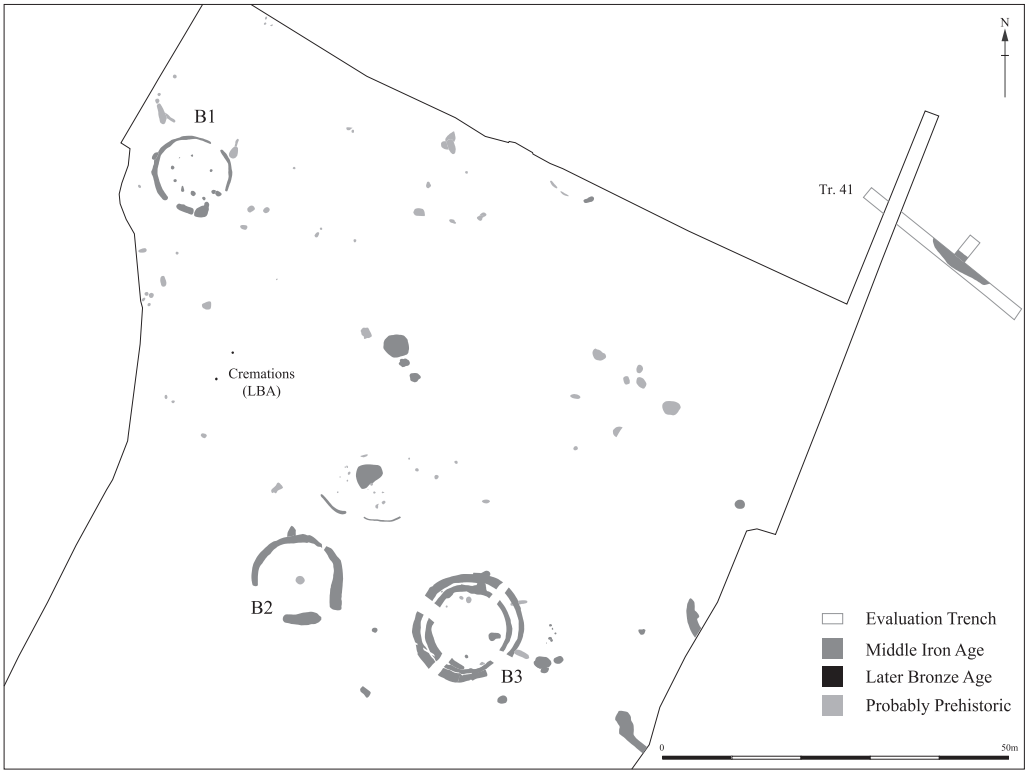

FIG. 189 – General plan of the Middle Iron Age settlement and earlier features.

THE MIDDLE IRON AGE SETTLEMENT

Although the presence of a small amount of flint-tempered pottery hints at some activity on the site in the earlier Iron Age, permanent occupation seems to have begun in the Middle Iron Age (400/300–100 BC) when an unenclosed settlement was built along the crest of the ridge (Fig. 189). The settlement was represented archaeologically by the remains of at least three circular buildings (B1–B3; Fig. 190); other post-built structures of uncertain form; some pits (including a roasting pit filled with heated stones); and curvilinear ditches or gullies representing probable enclosures. The artefactual evidence (derived mainly from B2 and B3) includes a large pottery assemblage (2291 sherds weighing 14,315g), found in association with much smaller quantities of worked flints, fired clay fragments, loomweights, a spindle whorl and some worked antler fragments. A small and highly fragmented animal bone assemblage (dominated by cattle and sheep/goat) and a few charred cereal grains (including barley, wheat, possible spelt and possible einkorn or distorted emmer) provides fairly typical evidence from this period for stock rearing and cereal crop production.

Building 1 (B1)

The evidence for B1 consisted of a sub-circular arrangement of nine shallow post-holes (assuming two that were lost to ploughing), with another two post-holes to the south-east that might have been part of a projecting entrance porch (Fig. 190). The post-hole circle had a diameter of approximately 5.5m and the posts were spaced fairly evenly at intervals of

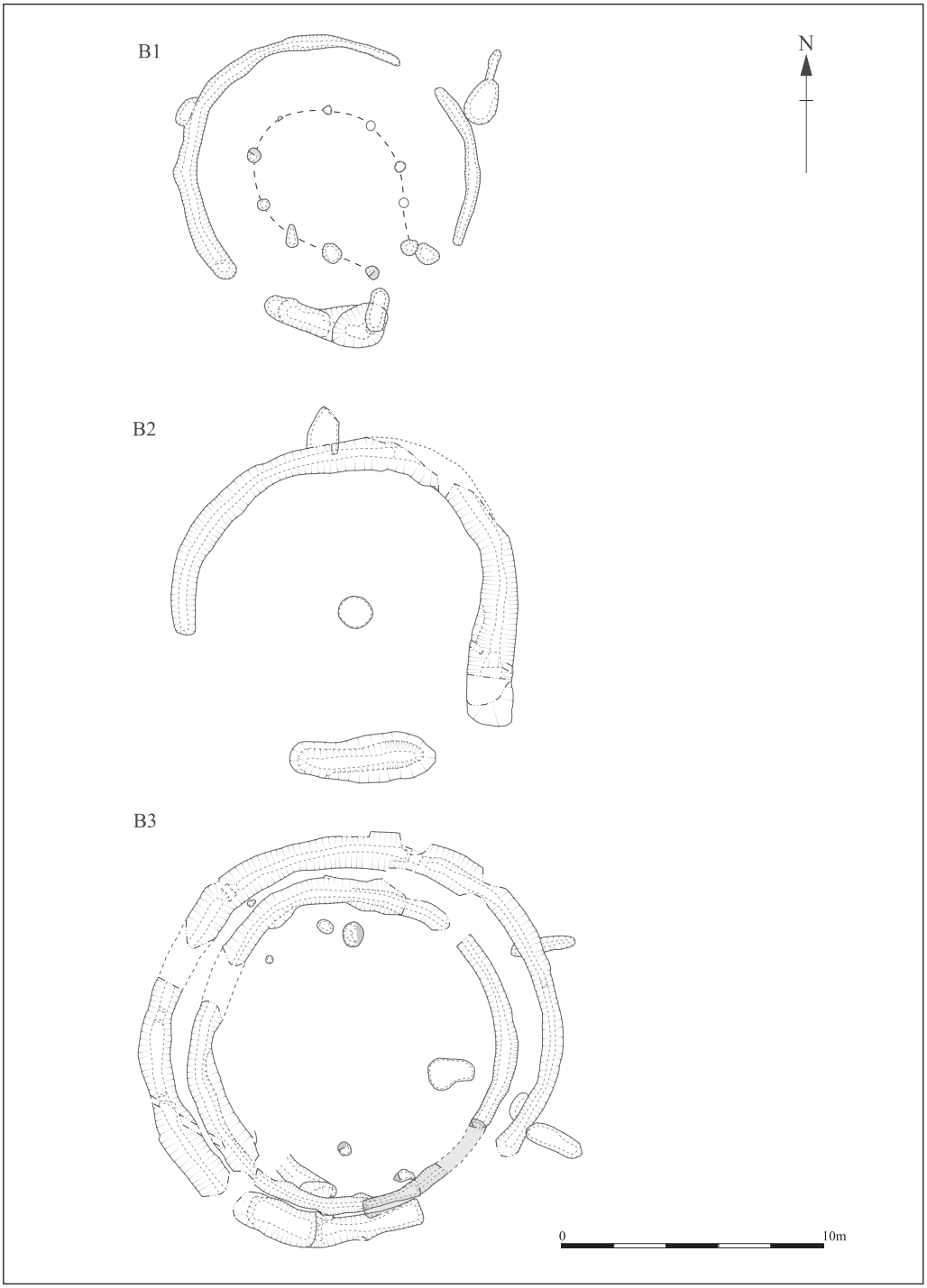

FIG. 190 – B1–3 Detailed building plans.

approximately 1.8m. It is assumed that these were the principal supports for the roof of the building, and that there was an outer wall of relatively slight construction and without earth-fast posts that had left no trace in the archaeological record. That being the case, a building with an overall diameter of approximately 8m–9m can be postulated. This would have been towards the smaller end of the range for Iron Age roundhouses in southern England as a whole, but probably fairly typical for buildings in the Eastern region.[6] The entrance porch was a characteristic feature of Iron Age roundhouses and was usually (as was probably the case here) oriented towards the south-east in order to maximise the natural light that could reach the interior of the building and to provide shelter from prevailing northerly or westerly winds.[7]

There was no evidence for activity within B1 (such as a hearth or the remains of internal surfaces or structures), although it is likely that these deposits (had they existed) would have been destroyed by ploughing. It is assumed that B1 was a dwelling, although other functions such as craft, industry or ritual cannot be discounted.

B1 was surrounded by a discontinuous ring ditch that was probably dug to collect water draining from the eaves of the roof (as well as surface run-off), rather than having a structural function. The ditch was generally less than 0.90m wide and 0.40m deep, with a flattened U-shaped profile. It was interrupted by two causeways, the widest of which (3.7m) was to the south-east and corresponded with the postulated entrance porch. The presence of a second causeway on the south–south-west side of the building suggests that B1 might have had more than one entrance; 'double entrance' roundhouses are known, and whereas most of the examples have opposing doorways there are some in which the second entrance was closer to one-third the distance around the circumference, as in this example.[8] An apparent break in the ditch to the north-east (1.65m wide) was almost certainly the result of modern truncation.

The short section of ditch between the two causeways was considerably wider and deeper (up to 1.60m wide x 0.90m deep) and was re-cut on at least one occasion; this suggests that it might have served an important function as a sump for collecting rainwater. Most of the finds from B1, including 33 sherds (159g) of pottery and 44 fragments (155g) of animal bone (mostly indeterminate mammal but including some cattle) came from this section of the ditch.

Building 2 (B2)

B2 was represented only by a discontinuous ring ditch; there were no post-holes to indicate the form of the building and a shallow pit at the centre of the enclosed area was undated and contained no material evidence (Fig. 190). The absence of post-holes within the area enclosed by the ditch is not unusual for Iron Age buildings, and suggests either that the evidence had not survived truncation by modern agriculture, or that the construction of the building was not dependant on deeply-set earth-fast posts. Alternatively, the material excavated from the ditch might have been mounded in the centre to make a raised building platform (for improved drainage), in which case any post-holes that were dug might not have penetrated as deep as the underlying boulder clay.

The B2 ring ditch was similar in form to that around B1, having two distinct elements – a long, C-shaped section open to the south, and a shorter, almost linear section partially blocking the open side of the 'C', resulting in two causeways of uneven widths to the south-west (6m) and south-east (1.8m). The ring ditch enclosed a sub-circular area of approximately 10.5m in diameter, which was similar to the building platform occupied by B1. The B2 ditch was more substantial that that around B1, being generally about 1m wide and 0.90m deep, with a V-shaped profile. Once again the shorter section of ditch to the south of the building was wider (up to 1.8m), although in this instance it was dug to the same depth as the rest of the ditch.

Given that no structural features, such as post-holes or beam slots, were found within the enclosed area, the excavators considered the possibility that the ring ditch was not a drainage

feature but a 'wall trench' for a row of upright posts or planks. However, despite comprehensive excavation there was no evidence for timbers (such as post pipes or packing material within the ditch fills, or post settings in the base of the feature) and this, combined with the profile and dimensions of the cut, make it most likely that (as with B1) the ring ditch was dug for drainage around the outside of the building.

The ditch contained a domestic finds assemblage that included significant amounts of pottery (373 sherds, 1787g) and animal bone (601 fragments, 1378g) with much smaller quantities of fired clay, worked flint and heat-altered stone. 88.5% (by both number and weight) of the pottery came from the short section of ditch on the south side of B2. By contrast fragments of animal bone were more widely distributed, with 70% by number (78.5% by weight) of the bone being retrieved from the longer section of ditch where it was concentrated towards the eastern terminus. There were no 'placed' deposits indicative of ritual activity.

A charred grain with morphology resembling that of spelt (*T.spelta* L.) and three grains with the morphology of free-threshing type wheat (*T.aestivum*) were found in an upper fill of the longer ditch. A charcoal fragment from a primary fill of the same ditch has provided a radiocarbon date of 408–211 cal. BC (2296 ± 34 BP; SUERC-49150).

Building 3 (B3)

The evidence for B3 consisted of two almost concentric, penannular ditches (Figs 190 and 191). These were abutting (perhaps intercutting) to the south (Fig. 192) and had a maximum separation of 1.2m to the north. At the point where they were contiguous the ditches appeared to share a common upper fill; this suggests that they were at least partially open at the same time. This 'double ditch' arrangement was unusual and has few (if any) known parallels from the Iron Age in the East Anglian region. It is conceivable that the ditches represented a sequence of two buildings of different sizes on the same plot, although this is unlikely since it suggests a degree of longevity for the settlement that is not demonstrated elsewhere on the site. Of course, the possibility that reconstruction of a building on the same plot might have been linked to ceremonial/ritual practices must not be dismissed.

The circular area enclosed by the inner ditch had a diameter of 10.6m, making it roughly the same size as the areas occupied by B1 and B2. Unlike the other two buildings, B3 had only one causewayed entrance, approximately 3m wide and oriented south-east.

There were no obvious structural remains, and no conclusive evidence for contemporary occupation within the enclosed area was found. A shallow pit near the entrance causeway contained numerous fragments of fired clay (thought to have been demolished walling) and charcoal, and lesser amounts of pottery, animal bone and heat-altered flint. A poorly preserved grain of possible barley from the pit has provided a radiocarbon date of 366–114 cal. BC (2173 ± 34 BP; SUERC-49155). This date extends slightly later than others derived from the B3 ring ditches (which all terminate around 200 cal. BC), suggesting that the pit might have postdated the main period of use of the building.

The inner ditch was up to 0.8m wide and 0.95m deep, with a steep-sided, V-shaped profile. It was particularly deep and narrow to the south of the entrance causeway and because of this it was interpreted during the excavation as a wall trench. However, the nature of its fills (which are suggestive of gradual accumulation) and the absence of obvious post pipes or post settings suggest otherwise. The ditch produced a large assemblage of finds that included 362 sherds (5462g) of pottery with an average sherd weight of 15g, and 838 fragments (4932g) of animal bone, with most of this material coming from the terminus to the north of the entrance causeway (168 sherds/3233g of pottery and 168 fragments/1568g of bone). This particular group of pottery (which has a relatively large average sherd weight of 19g) contains rims from eleven vessels, all in a sandy fabric and including gold mica-tempered sherds from distinctive,

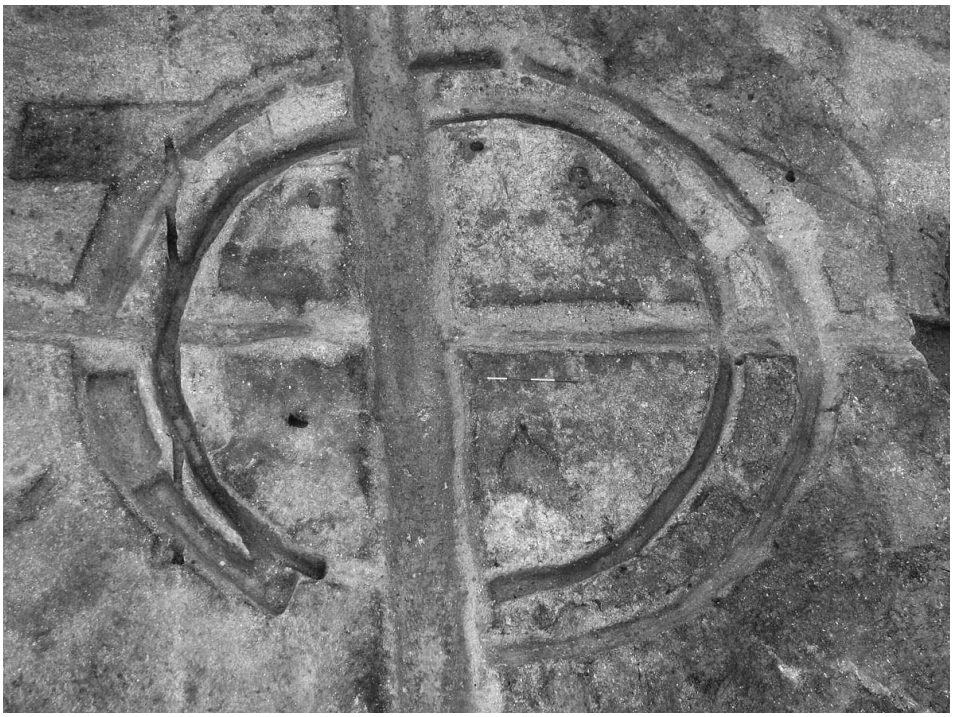

FIG. 191 – Elevated view of B3 from the SE (2m scale)
(*photo: Derek Ashman of Higher View Aerial Photography Ltd*).

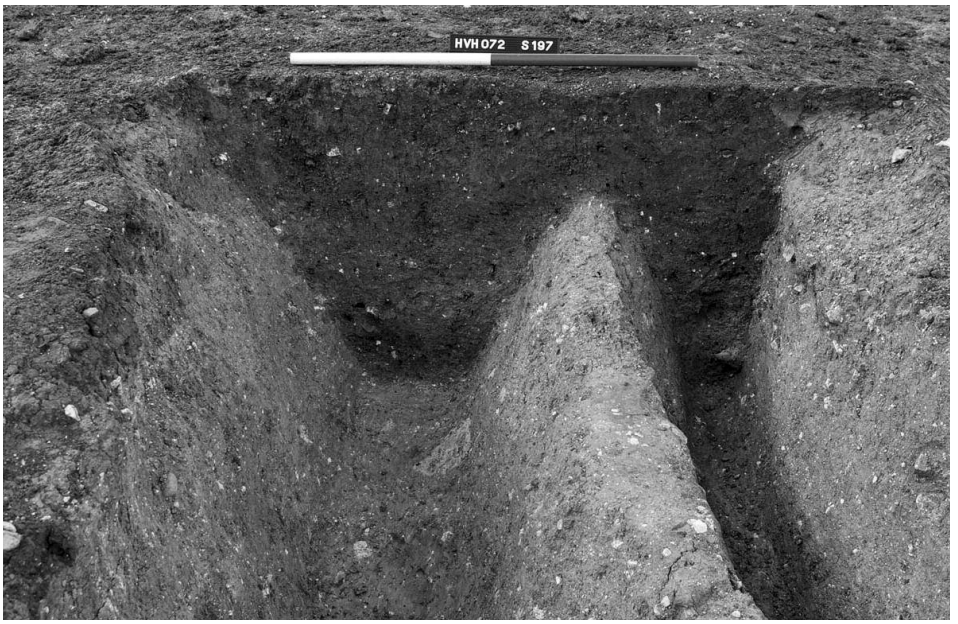

FIG. 192 – B3 ring ditches in section, outer ditch on the left (1m scale) (*photo: author*).

sparkly vessels. A charcoal fragment from one of the fills in the same terminus has provided a radiocarbon date of 381–201 cal. BC (2216 ± 34 BP; SUERC-49152). This concentration of finds goes against the trend for Iron Age roundhouses (as well as enclosures and Late Iron Age shrines) in which material was concentrated to the right of the entrance, as seen from within the building or enclosed space.[9]

The outer ditch enclosed an oval area of approximately 13.3m north-west–south-east x 14.0m south-west–north-east. It was up to 1.75m wide and its profile varied from almost V-shaped to U-shaped with a broad base. The ditch had a surviving depth of up to 0.95m but was much shallower in places, notably towards the terminus to the north of the causeway where it was only 0.45m deep. There were several low ridges in the base of the ditch dividing it into sections, and neighbouring sections were sometimes dug to different depths. This suggests that the ditch might originally have been dug as a series of disconnected arcing segments that were later modified to form a continuous feature. There is no obvious practical purpose for this, raising the possibility of some symbolic/ritual significance.

The outer ditch produced 288 sherds (2053g) of pottery with an average sherd weight of 7g – significantly smaller than the average weight of fragments from the inner ditch and suggesting a different method of disposal for this material. There are rim sherds from sixteen vessels. All the pottery is in sandy fabrics, some with gold mica inclusions that might have been from the same vessels found in the inner ditch; it seems likely that the sherds from both ditches are from a largely contemporary group of vessels. 75% by number and 83% by weight of the pottery from the outer ditch came from upper fills representing secondary use or disuse of the ditch, with the largest concentration (58% by number and weight) in the terminus of the ditch to the south of the entrance causeway, *contra* the distribution of finds in the inner ditch. The outer ditch produced 855 fragments (5105g) of animal bone, most of which also came from its upper fills. Other notable finds were a complete loomweight and fragments of two or three others. A charred cereal grain from the outer ditch has provided a radiocarbon date of 381–196 cal. BC (2207 ± 34 BP; SUERC-49153) and a charcoal fragment has been radiocarbon dated to 392–206 cal. BC (2245 ± 34 BP; SUERC-49154).

The B3 entrance causeway was eventually blocked by a shallow, curving ditch that ran between the termini of the inner ditch, partially truncating that ditch on either side. This did not occur until the inner ditch had become almost entirely backfilled, and it seems likely that this action had ritual significance, perhaps as an act of closure when B3 was abandoned.

The finds assemblage associated with B3 was of a domestic nature and the building is likely to have been a dwelling. However, it was sufficiently unusual in form to raise the possibility that it had a more specialised, sacred/ritual function. There is much uncertainty about the nature of Iron Age temples and shrines and their interpretation has often hinged on form (usually rectangular as opposed to the 'typical' Iron Age building with a circular plan), associated ritual deposition, proximity to existing ritual sites or monuments, and the subsequent use of the same site for religious purposes during the Roman period.[10] Most of the candidate sites therefore have very little in common with any of the buildings on the Westfield Primary School site. However, one possible Iron Age shrine (building HAD IV) found at Haddenham in Cambridgeshire did at least have some similarities of form to B3, notably in its two concentric and contiguous penannular ditches with a narrow south-eastern entrance causeway.[11]

CHARACTERISING THE SETTLEMENT

Radiocarbon dates suggest that the settlement was occupied during the period 400–200 BC, placing it firmly in the Middle Iron Age. Although there was clearly some use of the site in the Bronze Age, and the presence of some shell- and flint-tempered pottery hints at earlier Iron

Age activity, there is no evidence to suggest that the Middle Iron Age occupation was anything other than a *de novo* settlement. In this respect Westfield Primary School has parallels with other Suffolk sites such as Days Road, Capel St Mary, where there was an apparent hiatus between a period of Late Bronze Age occupation and the construction in the Middle Iron Age of an enclosed and fairly extensive settlement.[12] These new foundations can be contrasted with other sites such as Churchfields Road, Chilton, where there seems to have been continuity of settlement from the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age into the Middle Iron Age.[13]

There is little evidence for contemporary occupation in the surrounding area, with only a handful of Iron Age settlement sites having been found within a 4km radius, and these mostly belonging to the Late Iron Age/Romano-British period. They are concentrated on the clay soils of the higher ground overlooking the Stour Brook, although this apparent distribution probably reflects the areas that have become available for large-scale excavation or archaeological monitoring in recent years. The lower slopes where lighter soils have formed on river terrace gravels, and which were possibly more attractive to early settlers, are covered by Haverhill town centre, where only small-scale excavations and watching briefs have taken place.

The Westfield Primary School settlement clearly extended beyond the limits of excavation to the east, but the lack of evidence from neighbouring excavations suggests that it did not continue to the west.[14] The settlement was not enclosed by a bank and ditch and was therefore apparently of the 'open' type that was most common in Suffolk, contrasting with the more widespread use of enclosed sites in other East Anglian counties.[15] Enclosed settlements are known in Suffolk, with the aforementioned Days Road and Churchfields Road sites being good examples, but they were not the norm. The prevalence of unenclosed sites in Iron Age Suffolk might partly explain why relatively few clayland settlements have been recognised from the air.

Although only part of this settlement has been excavated, it seems to have been fairly typical for the region, consisting of a handful of scattered buildings serving one or two families, rather than a more developed 'proto village' such as the sites at Little Waltham and Lodge Farm, St Osyth in Essex.[16]

The economic basis of the settlement is reasonably well defined. The pottery assemblage (dominated by cooking and storage vessels) is of a domestic nature and has many parallels with broadly contemporary assemblages from the Middle Iron Age settlements at Little Waltham and Lodge Farm, and at Liberty Village, Eriswell, in north Suffolk.[17] The worked flint assemblage consists mainly of irregular flakes typical of the poor quality knapping associated with the later prehistoric period.[18] Other craft activities are represented by slight evidence for textile production (loomweights and a spindle whorl) and probable antler working. The artefacts and associated evidence for cereal production and stock rearing provide an overall picture of life in the settlement that is similar to that from most other Iron Age sites in the region. The 'four-post' structures (usually interpreted as raised granaries) recorded on many Bronze Age and Iron Age settlement sites were not recognised at Westfield Primary School. It is possible that storage structures of this type were not required if the inhabitants were more reliant on a pastoral economy. Alternatively the evidence for 'four-post' structures might not have survived because their method of construction and inherent stability meant that they required shallower post settings than other types of building, as has been recorded elsewhere.[19]

Iron Age buildings are not as well represented in Suffolk as they are in some other parts of East Anglia such as Cambridgeshire and Essex. In 1999 only thirteen definite examples were known and since then although a reasonable number have been discovered few if any have been published outside of 'grey literature' reports.[20] Where buildings have been recorded they display many of the characteristics of the 'typical' Iron Age roundhouse found elsewhere in

lowland Britain – one or more circles of post-holes (sometimes with projecting entrance porches), and/or penannular ring ditches that are variously interpreted as wall trenches or drainage features. In the case of the latter, often no distinction is made between eroded gullies produced by water draining from the roof (true 'eaves-drip gullies') and ditches dug purposefully as part of a water management system.

Martin suggests a chronology of roundhouse types in which wall-trench construction was favoured in the Middle Iron Age, with post-built houses being prevalent in the earlier and later periods;[21] however, this idea was based on a fairly limited corpus of buildings and has not been tested in the light of subsequent discoveries or with the benefit of the increased application of radiocarbon dating that has occurred in the last decade. Furthermore, the interpretation of ring ditches as either structural or drainage features can be problematic, particularly when they have been truncated by ploughing.

The Westfield Primary School settlement had examples of buildings with shallow (B1) and deep (B2 & B3) ring ditches and the comprehensive excavation of these features makes their interpretation as drainage features (rather than wall trenches) reasonably secure. Less certain are the reasons why such different approaches were taken to tackling the same problem in three apparently contemporary structures. This might have been a reflection of differing building functions, or a response to localised variations in soil permeability or slope that required particular water management solutions. However, it is also possible that the ring ditches might have had additional (less prosaic) functions concerned with the definition of space or the control of movement through that space, or as a way of displaying household status or identity.

Roundhouses are generally interpreted as dwellings (albeit with additional craft/industrial functions), and this is reasonable even in the absence of supporting artefactual or environmental evidence. However, the 'double ditch' configuration for B3, combined with the unusual segmented form and subsequent modification of the outer ditch and the 'closure' of the inner ditch, were sufficiently uncommon to hint at something more than a purely utilitarian function for that building. This is reinforced by its similarity to the postulated shrine at Haddenham, although the lack of clear evidence for ritual and the domestic nature of the associated finds assemblage might suggest otherwise. It is hoped that publication of the Middle Iron Age buildings at the Westfield Primary School site will help to promote further discussion of later prehistoric roundhouse form and function in the East Anglian region.

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NOTES

1 Bryant 2000, 14.
2 Martin 1999, 51.
3 Medlycott 2011, 22–32; Martin 1999.
4 Heard 2014.
5 Champion 2009, 143.

6 Cunliffe 2005, 269–71; Evans *et al*. 2013, 244, Fig. 5.48.
7 Harding 2009, 39.
8 Harding 2009, 81.
9 Woodyard and Hughes 2007, 201.
10 Cunliffe 2005, 561–66; Harding 2009, 219–30.
11 Evans and Hodder 2006, 77–95.
12 Tabor 2014, 177–206.
13 Abbott 1998; Craven, in prep.
14 Heard 2010a; Heard 2010b.
15 Martin 1999, 49; Dr Matthew Brudenell, pers. comm.
16 Drury 1978; Germany 2007.
17 Percival 2010.
18 Humphrey 2007, 145.
19 Heard 2013, 38.
20 Martin 1999, 63; Dr Matthew Brudenell, pers. comm.
21 Martin 1999, 93.

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