

# **The Iron Age Settlement at Highworth Road, Shrivenham in Context. (Part 2)**

**Margaret Andrews May 2020**

So to the Highworth Road excavations. The final report on this is due soon and I don't propose to try to second guess what the results are. In essence as many who went to visit the dig or went to the talk afterwards will know, the findings were of a small mostly middle Iron Age settlement, consisting of roundhouses, extending along the ridgeline overlooking the present village position, which seems to extend into the Roman period. In addition Neil has some excellent aerial shots of the site as it was being dug.

But what does all of that mean? When was the Iron Age, and in particular the middle Iron Age? What are round houses? Who lived in such a settlement? Was this a site all on its own or was there other Iron Age activity in this area?

## **Dating**

In Southern Britain the Iron Age is generally taken to start around 700BC, and ends with the Roman invasion of 43AD. Iron working in the Near East had started about 1200BC but the technology took time to travel West. And as with the start of the Bronze Age, the people did not immediately throw out their existing tools and start using iron ones, the transition would have been gradual. Indeed many of the changes seen in Britain during the Iron Age started in the late Bronze Age somewhere around 1200BC. You may well hear archaeologists hedge their bets by talking about some features being "late Bronze Age/early Iron Age".

To be confusing you may also hear the terms Hallstatt and La Tène when talking about the Iron Age. These terms refer to artefact styles originating in those places in Europe, some of which turn up in Britain. Broadly Hallstatt starts in the later Bronze Age and extends through the early Iron Age while La Tène starts in the middle Iron Age and extends through the late Iron Age.

Finally you may hear that these people were Celts. There is huge argument about this. It certainly seems that at the time of the Roman invasion that the people of Britain spoke languages that were from the Celtic family, but the ethnographic term applies more to the peoples of central Europe. If you want to delve into the arguments Barry Cunliffe (emeritus Prof. of European Archaeology at Oxford has written extensively on the subject).

To give a rough division of the Iron Age

Early Iron Age c700-400BC

Middle Iron Age 400-100BC

Late Iron Age 100BC – 43AD - (but the period 50BC -43AD is often termed the "late pre-Roman Iron Age (LPRIA)

## Settlements and Round Houses

Forest clearance had accelerated throughout the late Bronze Age and it is now that people seem to stay put in one place more. Previously they seem to have tended to move around the landscape more, for example perhaps using summer and winter grazing. Settlements generally become more visible archaeologically.

The characteristic building of both the Bronze and Iron Ages is the round house. No-where in Southern Britain do we actually find a round house. Instead we find the ring that they create in the soil. This is usually a ditch. When we are lucky we find remnants of building materials such as daub and in waterlogged sites maybe the remnants of the wattle or roofing material. It is from these clues that we deduce what they look like.

I recommended visit if you happen to be in the area is Butser ancient farm in Hampshire on the A3 just North of Portsmouth. Here a variety of Iron Age round houses have been reconstructed

(<https://www.butserancientfarm.co.uk/>).

(<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c50c0077c93277e627b7374/t/5de52685e6b0e7013ac813d2/1575298696278/Butser-Ancient-Farm-Iron-Age-Area.pdf>)



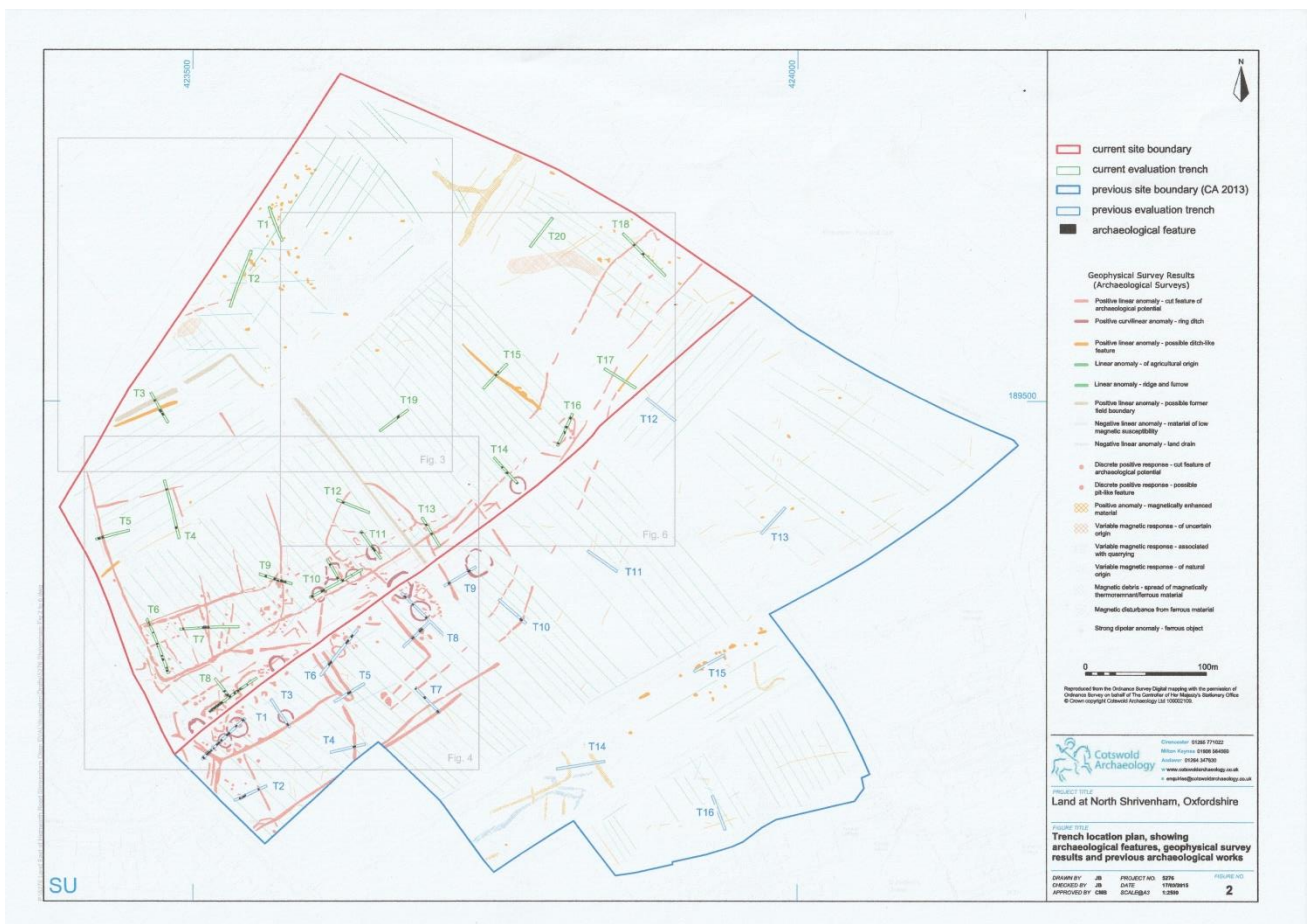
(Reconstruction by the National Museum of Wales)

As you will see the roof tends to come low to the ground, possibly even lower than this image. It is thought that the ring ditch we see archaeologically is the drip channel for this. These rings turn up as cropmarks

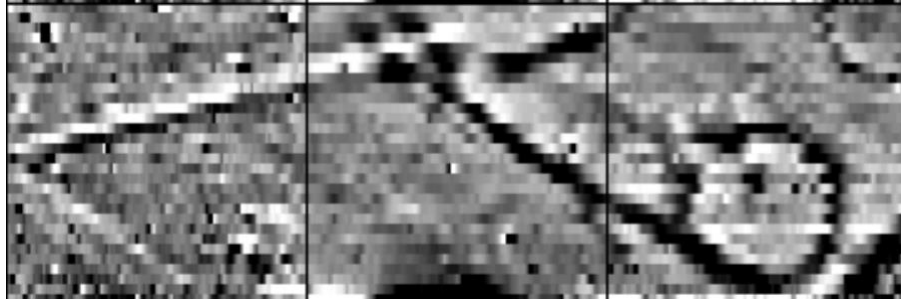


(<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/methods/airborne-remote-sensing/formation-of-cropmarks/>)

And as geophysical anomalies. Below is a drawing taken from the Cotswold Archaeology assessment of the Highworth Road site. As you can see there are various overlaid features, not just round houses but straight lines which are probably later field boundaries.



And as an aside I probably found some round houses on the development site on the other side of the Highworth Road between Sandy Land and the bypass when I did a geophysical survey in 2004 for my PhD!



And finally in excavations, which is what happened at Highworth Road

It is quite common to see ring ditches overlapping each other. As you can guess the building materials were not that durable. This means that from time to time a house would need rebuilding. If you have plenty of land it is easier to rebuild on clear land than use the old site. This means that settlement sites seem to move around. In the case of Highworth Road the settlement seems to drift Westwards along the ridge.

Occasionally quite large settlement sites are found but more often they are relatively small and extend over a period of time. This suggests that it was probably the settlement of one, possibly extended, family that owned this piece of land.

To stay with this theme it is also not unusual for there to be an apparent continuity of these sites onto the Roman period. The early Roman period is often not particularly visible but in the later centuries of Roman occupation (3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup>C AD) the settlement acquires more of the attributes of "Romanitas". It is generally thought that it is likely that ownership of the site continued from the Iron Age and that eventually the people took up Roman ways, rather than these being incomers taking over the land. It seems that there is no good reason to suggest that anything different happened at Highworth Road.

Before we look further afield, before the Highworth Road find, occasional Iron Age finds have turned up in Shrivenham. For example a Dobunnic gold stater from the late pre Roman Iron Age was found in Shrivenham in the 1870s.



(this isn't the one but similar -

<https://en.numista.com/catalogue/photos/celtic-britain/31-original.jpg>)

## **Is Highworth Road Settlement Alone or Are We One of Many?**

In simple terms settlements in the Iron Age divide into those with a boundary enclosing them and those without. As far as we can see Shrivenham lacked an enclosure. As a rough rule of thumb unenclosed settlements predominate to the North and East in the Thames Valley while enclosed settlements predominate to the West in the Cotswolds and to the South on the Downs and into Wessex. The pottery evidence from our area suggests that we are in a boundary area between these types of settlement.

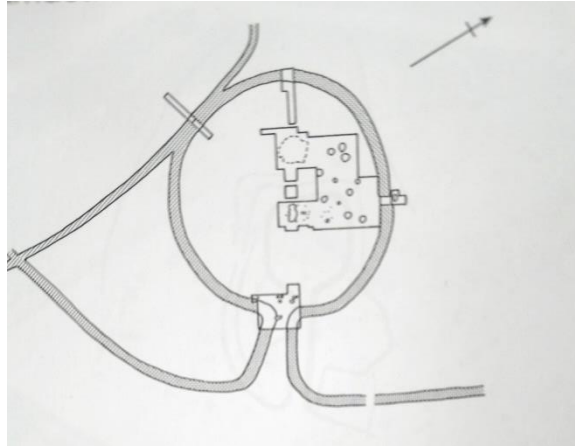
If we hop over the Tuckmill Brook to Watchfield and the excavations of the bypass (the Anglo-Saxon cemetery), the Defence Academy site and the site of the shops by the junction with the A420, we find more evidence of Iron Age settlement. This has been interpreted as an early to middle Iron Age enclosed settlement of about 2ha, which seems to have been abandoned around the 2ndC BC but then re-established in the late Iron Age with continuity into the early Roman period. The excavators suggested that it was a settlement of one family and its focus seemed to be pastoral, especially cattle.

Along the Corallian Ridge at Faringdon excavations for the developments along the Coxwell Road showed a sizable early Iron Age settlement. There is relatively little middle and late Iron Age evidence in the excavated area, perhaps they weren't there or perhaps they were in an unexcavated area. There is a truism in archaeology that absence of evidence isn't evidence of absence. However there is Roman evidence from the 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup>C AD. The exciting feature of the Iron Age here was the unusually large number of pits compared to dwellings. The excavation report suggested that this site was a locally important site in the early Iron Age, collecting in produce from a wide area. In other words it was a centre controlling a larger territory. To add to this interest the Roman occupation included a probable shrine structure.

These are not alone, in fact just about any development excavation, or other investigation in this area seems to have a good chance of throwing up Iron Age remains. Uffington: middle – late Iron Age; Great Coxwell – late Iron Age/Roman field system; Stanford in the Vale – early Iron Age enclosures; Hatford – Iron Age settlement; Blunsdon St Andrew; South Marston, Highworth, and so on.

But what of the Downs? There are a variety of these around here ranging from “banjo enclosures”(roughly circular enclosed sites with a long entrance channel – looking like a banjo), mostly on the Downs but also Groundwell Ridge. These are largely seen on air photos or “geophysics” surveys although the Groundwell Ridge one was excavated.

Below is an illustration of one from Hampshire (Bramdean )(from Cunliffe p 246)



The Iron Age enclosed settlements that we all recognise are the hillforts, of which we have quite a collection around us. Badbury Clump and Ringdale opposite it near Faringdon; Segsbury Camp above Kingston Lisle; Rams Hill, Uffington Castle and Hardwell Camp which I will return to; Alfred's Castle by Ashdown House; Liddington Castle overlooking junction 15 of the M4; and Blunston (did you realise that there was one there too?).

Of course hillforts come in various flavours and are a diverse collection of sites. Traditionally they are interpreted as defensive sites, indicative of ongoing warfare. If that was the case this area must have been near uninhabitable because of the strife! In fact the evidence from each site is very individual with current views ranging around ideas of places for display, meeting places, livestock and farm management and yes defensive in times of strife. The first hillforts appeared in the late Bronze Age, and range in date right through to the late pre Roman Iron Age, but not all were in use at the same time. Again don't forget this time frame is actually 1500 years!

Before coming to the obvious hillfort that overlooked our Shrivenham site it is worth having a look at a rather un-fort like hillfort; Alfred's Castle just by Ashdown House (accessible by walking across the woods from the House carpark – if it's open, otherwise walking down from the Ridgeway). It sits more in a bowl of the landscape than on a hilltop. This was my very first dig where I spent a mystified week excavating an Iron Age pit.





Pits are one of the major features excavated at Iron Age sites. One has to allow for the erosion of soil layers in interpreting depth but some can be quite deep. The purposes in digging them can be very varied but probably very commonly, storage. Experiments have demonstrated that grain can be stored well in pits, and these are often the very large ones. Of course as they went out of use they were excellent rubbish tips. This waste can be a rich source of information about the people. Routine rubbish such as pot sherds, bones from food waste burnt grains and slag from metal working all turn up in pit fills. More curiously are the apparently specially deposited items. Things like parts of an animal, a goats head, a horses forelimb for example may be found apparently carefully placed at the bottom of pits. While a full human skeleton is an unusual find, human parts are less unusual finds in pits, again seemingly carefully placed in the bottom of the pit. These are the sorts of thing that are encompassed by that favourite archaeological explanation of “ritual”

The banks and ditches of the hill-forts may be immediately evident but at Alfred’s Castle a contemporary outer ditch can be seen in the crop marks looping to the North, its bank now well ploughed out.



*This photo was taken after the crop had been harvested but when the crop was growing the line was very evident from the rampart of the hillfort*



*On excavation it proved to be a ditch that has been maintained by being recut and was at its deepest 2m into the chalk!*

The dating of Alfred's Castle is mainly middle Iron Age which puts it in the same phase as the recent Shrivenham excavations. Interestingly, although there are the remains of a Roman building in the centre of the hillfort there seems to be a gap in occupation or use with little evidence of the late Iron Age. It is interpreted as essentially a farming settlement.

The Uffington site is more of a "proper" hillfort, but it should probably be seen in the context of its surroundings. Just along the Ridgeway is the Neolithic long barrow of Wayland's Smithy. Although it is badly eroded there was also a long barrow on the sloped under the hillfort ramparts. Just along the Ridgeway in the other direction is Rams Hill hillfort. This originally dates from the late Bronze Age and extends into the early Iron Age but then it seems to have declined as the first incarnation of Uffington Castle was built during the early Iron Age. Uffington was then refashioned in the middle Iron Age to what we see now. This is much closer to what on the Wessex chalk is known as a "developed hillfort" but the Berkshire Downs seem to have its own local variations. There is very little evidence that Uffington was ever occupied for any length of time. It seems to have been a central meeting place. An obvious supposition is that there was some "ritual" significance to the site given the one monument that I haven't mentioned yet. This is of course the Uffington White Horse, which would have been very visible to our Shrivenham residents. This has been dated to the late Bronze Age, around 900BC. Nan Pratt gave an excellent talk about it last year.



## Conclusions

So to answer the question were we alone – definitely not, indeed Shrivenham settlement would have been in the shadow of one of the most spectacular prehistoric sites in Britain.

A final question – is this the precursor of Shrivenham. Certainly a lovely idea and in the sense that the middle Iron Age people occupied a site very close to that which came to be Shrivenham in the early medieval period yes. But it is difficult to establish real continuity. Settlement sites in the prehistoric period tended to “wander” about the landscape. Dwellings were built of highly perishable materials and would periodically need to have been rebuilt. Without constraints of enclosure or planning regulators it would have been easier to build on new ground rather than clear the old (even today developers prefer a greenfield to brownfield site). In Shrivenham we can see the settlement drift along the ridgeline until in the Roman period stone buildings were erected over the Highworth Road. Even here, there is a chronological break, missing the later Iron Age. Does this mean that there was no settlement here then or that it was elsewhere or have we just missed it? Similarly we have a gap between the end of the Roman period and the establishment of the present village, probably of several hundred years when we have no idea about local settlement in Shrivenham. Still I like the idea that these were early Shrivenham-ites.

The preliminary reports are available for Highworth Road but I haven't yet seen the final report.

There are some excellent air photos by Neil of the dig in the Centre archive.

I have used some images from other sources:

Cunliffe B. (2005) *Iron Age Communities in Britain* (4<sup>th</sup> Edn) Routledge

Cotswold Archaeology (2015) *Land at North Shrivenham, Archaeological Evaluation*, Archaeology Data Service

And if you want to read about Watchfield and Faringdon excavations:

Heawood et al (2004) *Iron Age and Roman activity at Watchfield Triangle*. Oxoniensia

Cook et al (2004) *Excavations of an Iron Age site at Coxwell Road Faringdon*. Oxoniensia

Birkbeck (2001) *Excavations at Watchfield, Shrivenham Oxfordshire 1998*. Oxoniensia

As mentioned in part 1 the Oxford Archaeology series of books “The Thames Through Time” is excellent general reading about our region.

