

LATER PREHISTORIC FEATURES AT MIDDLE WALLOP AIRFIELD

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ABSTRACT

Excavation at Middle Wallop Airfield uncovered features and finds indicating later prehistoric settlement, and two World War II trenches.

BACKGROUND

Between February and October 2003, Wessex Archaeology undertook a programme of archaeological fieldwork at the Army Air Corps' establishment at Middle Wallop Airfield, in advance of the construction of a Hardened Aircraft Landing System (HALS) and a Sloped Landing Area (SLA). The work, commissioned and funded by Defence Estates, comprised geophysical survey and trial trenching, followed by an excavation at the HALS site, centred on NGR 430900 138975.

The site lies immediately north-east of the village of Middle Wallop, within the Test Valley. The airfield occupies gently undulating ground, although the HALS is sited on flat ground. The underlying basal geology is Upper Chalk, and the site was under grass within the operational airfield. The site is less than 2 km west of the later prehistoric hillfort of Danebury, the surrounding area being rich in archaeological remains, including contemporary field systems and smaller outlying settlements. There are many barrows in the vicinity.

METHODOLOGY

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken at the SLA and the HALS. Geophysical survey

showed that the SLA was magnetically disturbed by modern debris, and two 25m trial trenches recorded modern disturbed topsoil above colluvium, with clay-with-flints at the base. No archaeological features were recorded. In the HALS, the geophysical survey found numerous small-scale anomalies of archaeological potential, although many were weak and did not form any clear pattern. Four trial trenches were dug, Trench 2 at the south-west revealing a number of archaeological features, one of which contained Late Bronze Age pottery (*c.* 1100–700 BC). An area measuring 25m by 50m around Trench 2 was subsequently stripped of topsoil and subsoil, and all archaeological features were planned, recorded and sample excavated.

RESULTS

The fieldwork revealed features of later prehistoric and modern date, although a series of parallel linear features recorded during the evaluation, interpreted as gullies, proved upon excavation to be large plough scars. The site had been truncated both by ploughing and by ground levelling during construction of the airfield, and many of the prehistoric features survived to only very shallow depths.

Later prehistoric

The later prehistoric features comprised a cluster of 13 small features in an area some 9m across, with a further group of three some 8m to the south. Although many were too shallow to be

sure of their function, most were probably postholes, three of them having possible packing stones, and a fourth having also a visible post-pipe. None of the features, however, formed any clearly recognisable structure.

A number of the features contained significant quantities of finds, including pottery, worked and burnt flint and animal bone, possibly indicating some other function, such as pits. The pottery was the only closely datable material recovered from the site. Although the assemblage included few diagnostic sherds (two small rim sherds and two base sherds), the flint-tempered fabrics, of varying degrees of coarseness, are characteristic of the post-Deverel-Rimbury ceramic tradition of the Late Bronze Age.

The worked flint comprised flakes and one broken blade, made using locally available chalk flint. Most pieces are patinated, although in relatively fresh condition with little edge damage. In the absence of tools or other diagnostic pieces, this small assemblage can only be broadly dated as Neolithic/Bronze Age.

Other finds included part of a fired clay spindlewhorl with impressed decoration around the girth, of prehistoric date, and a large, rounded pebble, possibly used as a hammerstone or rubber. The most common material was burnt flint, also probably of prehistoric date.

Modern

The excavation also revealed two hand-dug slit trenches relating to the Second World War (1939–45) defence of the airfield. They had been deliberately backfilled with barbed wire and other debris and were not excavated. The smaller trench, to the northeast, was 4.4m long with two

short offsets, and could have accommodated up to four men. The larger, more complex trench comprised two sections at a right angle, connected by a tunnel. Both sections, with a combined length of over 19m, extended to the north-west and south-west beyond the excavated area. Parts of the trench were lined with concrete sandbags, as was one of a pair of square bays, possibly a gun emplacement, near the eastern corner.

Conclusions

The later prehistoric features indicate Late Bronze Age activity on the site, the range of finds, comprising pottery, flint, animal bone, and the spindle whorl and stone rubber/hammerstone, combining to form an assemblage characteristic of domestic settlement activity.

The extent of the occupation site could not be determined as the limited distribution of features may be due to their localised survival within a larger settlement area, other features having been destroyed by the ploughing and ground levelling that had severely truncated the recorded features.

Some of the features could be associated to form arcs, representing possible roundhouses, or lines representing possible fence lines, but none was convincing. It is possible, however, that features that had been destroyed would have combined with those recorded to form such recognisable structures.

A more detailed report on the results of the fieldwork has been deposited with the Hampshire Archaeology and Historic Buildings Record, Winchester, and the National Monuments Record, Swindon.

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