



## Book Reviews

### **LONGBRIDGE DEVERILL COW DOWN. AN EARLY IRON AGE SETTLEMENT IN WEST WILTSHIRE BY SONIA CHADWICK HAWKES WITH CHRISTOPHER HAWKES. EDITED BY LISA BROWN**

*Oxford University School of Archaeology Monograph no 76. 2012. xx+301 pp, 137 illus, 71 tables, ISBN 978-1-905-905256, pb, £25*

This report represents the final publication of Longbridge Deverill Cow Down, an iconic 'Iron Age' settlement excavated by Sonia Chadwick Hawkes between 1956 and 1960, with the help of her husband Christopher Hawkes. The report has been a long time in production, it is 52 years since the excavations were completed, but that does not detract from the significance of this publication. The site retains an importance for a number of reasons; there are still very few settlements which have been so extensively excavated, the site was excavated prior to systematic destruction by modern agricultural activity and thus was better preserved than almost all the settlements recently excavated, the structural remains uncovered are dramatic, and though less exceptional than they were when originally exposed, are still exemplars of their type, and finally the associated ceramic assemblage is of exceptional size and significance and is published in detail.

The final editing of the report was undertaken by Lisa Brown, but the bulk of the report was written in the early 1990s by Sonia Chadwick Hawkes and it was only her untimely death in 1999 that stopped it being completed. The editorial approach adopted has been minimalist in order to preserve as much as possible of the views of the original excavator. Most of the text is relatively unaltered from the original reports, and the additions comprise linking text to cover missing reports, or short sections that outline recent discoveries and developments, particularly in relation to the ceramics. In places this minimalist approach seems misguided. The section on the ceramics is overly long and repetitive, and it appears, to this author that it would have benefitted from more ruthless editing and restructuring. For instance, the description and discussion of the fabrics comprises separate reports by different authors that are broken up within the larger pottery chapter. However, the most obvious problem is the lack of a final discussion which summarises the importance of the site and demonstrates how the site contributes to changing our understanding of the first millennium BC. There are discursive sections within the text that do this for certain aspects of the site, but it is still surprising that no overall discussion could be created that would have provided a fitting conclusion to the report.

The site comprises two enclosures which contain at least four substantial roundhouses, clusters of post holes, pits and hollows. The precise relationships of the different elements of the settlement are not unproblematic. The earliest Enclosure II is a large sub-rectangular enclosure; its west side is overlain by the straight east side of D-shaped Enclosure III which has a central entrance. It is possible that there never was a west side to Enclosure II, but this was obscured by the presence of Enclosure III and the limited amount of excavation. If this side was completely open then it makes it a very unusual enclosure. Enclosure III survived as an earthwork prior to recent ploughing and is unlikely to date to the Iron Age. It could be medieval or even a post medieval plantation enclosure. Enclosure I is a separate and largely unexplored enclosure to the north of the main site and confirms the recurrent pattern of these enclosures occurring in pairs.

An elongated roughly rectangular area was excavated at the centre of Enclosure II and an aligned but smaller area was excavated behind the entrance to Enclosure III. The former area revealed three large timber roundhouses (1, 2 and 4), a cluster of post holes which probably represents at least one other house, grain storage pits and several large 'working hollows'. House 3 lay in the separate area just inside the entrance to Enclosure III. Only a small proportion of the interior of the enclosures was excavated and it is impossible to know whether other houses are present. It is surprising that English Heritage did not commission a geophysical survey of the site, as contemporary geophysics should have the capability to identify substantial houses such as those present here and would also have shown the distribution of pits inside the enclosure. This might also have resolved the presence or absence of a west side to Enclosure II.

The stratigraphy and the ceramics enable the construction of a sequence for the different features which is of considerable importance. This sequence is only fully laid out in reference to the fabric analysis which is rather odd.

Phase 1 comprises Enclosure II and house 1. The pottery assemblage is characterised by short-rimmed furrowed bowls and tall 'situla' jars, made from the same fine micaceous fabric. Both bowls and jars could be haematite coated and the jars were often elaborately decorated. The date for this phase is suggested to be 10th/9th-7th centuries BC on the basis of the Potterne chronology (Lawson 2000).

Phase 2 comprises Enclosure II and house 2. The pottery assemblage has similar furrowed bowls but in contrast to phase 1, these bowls have elongated concave necks and the furrows can be quite narrow grooves. The jars are crudely made shouldered jars with decoration limited to finger tip impression on the rim and shoulder. They are radically different from the phase 1 jars and also contrast markedly with the bowls.

Phase 3 comprises house 3 which is associated with the earliest working hollow and some post hole clusters. The pottery assemblage is similar to phase 2 in comprising the same form of jars and bowls, but the bowls are differentiated from house 2 by being largely undecorated. The absence of scratch cordoned bowls, only one possible sherd was identified, has been argued to indicate that the end of this phase pre-dates the Early Iron Age (beginning in the early fifth century BC). However, I wonder if this site lies outside the distribution of scratch cordoned bowls? These distinctive bowls have a restricted distribution and cannot be seen as a universal presence in the Early Iron Age of southern England.

Phase 4 comprises a scatter of isolated features that are argued to belong to the Early Iron Age hiatus. Activity is limited and probably peripheral to settlement elsewhere on the site, or in adjacent areas such as Enclosure 1.

Phase 5 comprises most of the grain storage pits and some of the post holes. One of these pits contained a developed saucepan pot (with a date range 3rd to 1st century BC), but most of the ceramics are early Middle Iron Age forms that are more likely to date to the fourth century BC.

An important feature of the site is that the houses and the pits largely belong to two separate periods and this raises the important issue of where people were living in the Middle Iron Age. The number of pits present suggests a significant number of people were living on the site and yet no obvious Middle Iron Age houses were identified; this seems likely to reflect the relatively flimsy nature of Middle Iron Age houses. Stake walled houses such as those identified at South Cadbury and Danebury had not been recognised when Longbridge was excavated and it is debatable that they would have survived even the minimal ploughing that took place over enclosure II.

The early houses are a consistent series. They are all represented by a principal structural ring of large post holes; house 1 had a diameter of 11 m, house 2 had a diameter of 12.8 m, house 3 had a diameter of 11.6 m, and house 4 had a diameter of 8 m. This makes these amongst the largest roundhouses known from southern England. These houses were exceptionally rare when the site was excavated but they are now relatively well documented and consistently dated to the first half of the first millennium BC (Sharples 2010). A recurrent feature of some of the Longbridge houses, and other large houses, is that they have been destroyed by fire and that large quantities of burnt ceramics have been collected together and packed into the main structural post holes with concentrations consistently focussed on the south side. In house 3 the concentrations are located close to a pair of substantial post holes that have persuasively been argued to represent a dresser or table, on which the ceramics might have been displayed.

The significance of the destruction of these houses by fire is problematic, and to a certain extent interest in the importance of this act has been enhanced by the increasing number of houses that have demonstrated this pattern (Webley 2007). Brown does draw attention to the literature on this material in a short interjection, but she does not extensively examine the topic. Two questions really need to be considered: what was the context of the fire? and what does the distribution of the pottery represent? The text raises two alternative hypotheses. On page 58 Hawkes points out that it would be a remarkable coincidence for all these houses to burn down accidentally and that funeral rituals often involve similar destructive acts. However, on page 105 she considered the fires to be largely accidental, and that placing of the ceramics essentially represents the tidying up of the site after the fire is finished and is therefore a direct representation of how the material was distributed in the house during its use. The latter view now seems untenable. It is much more likely that the fire represents a deliberate destruction of the house and therefore that the material associated with this destruction is probably deliberately selected and its placement a conscious act that served a specific purpose. These considerations have a considerable significance. House 3 has been used as a cornerstone in the argument on house cosmologies (for example Giles and Parker Pearson 1999); the distributions of material on the south side of the house have been argued to represent activity areas and this contrasts with the 'empty' areas on the north which thus creates a binary structure that has a wider significance. The deliberate placement of the deposits does not negate the argument for a binary structure, it indicates a consistent patterning which clearly has considerable significance in the Iron Age.

The structural evidence is substantial and also provides the opportunity to address the question of the architectural reconstruction of the houses. This issue was covered in detail in an earlier article (Hawkes 1994) and the arguments are reconsidered in this volume. Hawkes argues that there is a significant difference between houses 1 and 2 and house 3, with the earlier houses, 1 and 2, comprising single post rings which comprise the main roof support and the external wall, but I am unconvinced and would prefer to follow the generally accepted model that the inner structural ring of posts was surrounded by a less substantial ring of posts which marks the external wall of the house. It is also argued that though house 3 has a double ring of posts the inner ring is the exterior wall and this argument is based on the recovery of most of the daub from these post holes. However, as I have argued above the material placed in the post holes has been gathered specifically for deposition and will therefore not reflect its location during the use of the house. The visibility of the outer ring in houses 1, 2 and 4 seems to reflect directly the cultivation damage of the interior of Enclosure II noted earlier by Hawkes. Nevertheless, there does seem to be an increase in complexity in house 3 which might reflect an increasing confidence in the construction of these houses that develops over time.

It is also interesting to note that there is no evidence for a hearth in any of these houses and this is particularly surprising given the excellent preservation of house 3. This raises the issue of how these houses should be interpreted. The assumption in this report is that these houses are the

abodes of the 'landed gentry of his day' and his family and that they are used for feasting, which results in the large assemblage of high quality pottery. However, it might be necessary to review this perspective and consider these structures as large communal meeting places. The absence of a central hearth is certainly problematic as this would be the assumed focus for an important individual controlling feasting events. The recurrent shortage of prestige metalwork at any of these houses is also problematic particularly as metalwork is relatively common in the Late Bronze Age. The doorways are exceptionally large and impressive and would encourage large groups to make spectacular entrances. This is not the interpretation this author has favoured in the past but the evidence from Longbridge does make you think and that seems a fitting point on which to end this review.

## References

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Review received: May 2013

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