



## Book Reviews

### **THE SELHURST PARK PROJECT: MIDDLE BARN, SELHURSTPARK FARM, EARTHAM, WEST SUSSEX 2005–2008 BY GEORGE ANELAY**

*Oxbow Books, Oxford. 2019. 139pp, 84 B&W figures, 43 tables, pb, ISBN 978-78925-116-6, £40.00*

This volume, following the standard, traditional format of Oxbow monographs, presents the work of George Anelay and the Volunteer Archaeology Projects Trust on the site at Middle Barn, Selhurstpark, West Sussex, carried out between 2005 and 2008. The site itself lies upon a spur of land projecting into a small valley, flanked either side by Halnaker Hill and Long Down, upon the chalk of the South Downs. The site is not far from the line of Roman Stane Street, which crosses the valley on its way towards Chichester, 7.5 km to the south-west. The valley emerges onto the Sussex coastal plain some 2 km to the south of the site.

Aerial photographs of the mid-1970s and mid-1990s established the presence of a site of interest with remains of lynchets, field systems, a 'banjo' (northern) enclosure and sub-rectangular (southern) enclosures identified, located within a larger cropmark, presumably a substantial ditched enclosure.

The excavations began in 2005 as part of a community involvement project undertaken by Chichester District Council. Three seasons of fieldwork were undertaken, which involved the stripping and exploration of both the northern and southern enclosures. Excavation was largely carried out by public volunteers under direction and supervision. In 2006 and 2010 geophysical survey of the site was also undertaken, which largely aligned with the crop mark evidence, produced some evidence for internal features and some evidence for continuation of features beyond the main enclosure complexes identified. The Volunteer Archaeology Project Trust, established in 2008, raised funds for the last season of excavation and post-excavation work including the publication of this volume.

The report follows a traditional structure and unfortunately only contains black and white site photographs and plans, despite some colour printing used in the specialist reports. Chapters 1 and 2 provide a relatively brief but comprehensive background to the project, set-up, methodology and results of the geophysics survey.

The structural sequence outlined in Chapter 3 is detailed and presents the excavated archaeological evidence for each enclosure in turn. The northern enclosure, upon excavation, transpired not to be a 'banjo' but instead D-shaped enclosure, with only limited evidence for a structure within the interior as the area had been badly effected by natural processes, making it difficult to identify true archaeological features. The surviving, recorded postholes form no obvious structural plan and the function of the enclosure is unclear. The sub-rectangular enclosures of the southern complex evidenced the challenges of the location and underlying geology. Although the enclosures were orientated to maximise the topographical location and aid the drainage of the site, given the presence of impermeable clay capping of the chalk across the site, the sequence of ditch development in one corner of the southern enclosure (sub-enclosure A) is interpreted as a reflection of, and reaction to only partial success, with the corner eventually abandoned. There is better evidence for a structure within the sub-enclosure A, through the survival of a semi-circular hut platform with a gully cut into the outer edge. It is not certain whether the gully was originally a complete circle, nor whether it functioned as a drainage gully or wall footing and with no associated post- or stakeholes identified, this structure contributes little to our current understanding of Middle Iron Age architecture.

This chapter is heavily illustrated with plans, photographs and sections. It is a shame that more was not made of these sections in terms of presenting the interpretation, as the text describes the sequence of fills as related to its construction/use and disuse (in two phases, the first potentially more purposeful than the latter). To see this interpretation visually presented on some of the sections would have been a useful aid. It may also have assisted in the identification of recuts, which seem to be present (at least in sections A, I, K, L and possibly D) whereas the text states that there was no evidence for the ditch having been re-cut or even cleaned out. The sections would suggest that some fills were truncated probably due to at least partial, ditch cleaning/clearing.

These minor issues aside the addition of this site is, as the back cover blurb notes, of importance and significance not because of its fairly limited and typical structural remains but due to the artefact and environmental assemblages, particularly those from three large pits interpreted as containing structured deposits relating to Iron Age feasting or other special events such as harvest. The significance of these pits is more thoroughly explored in Chapter 6 where 'Behaviour and Beliefs' are discussed with an integrated consideration of each pits assemblage. Given the significance of these features, this integrated discussion could have been more extensive and seems relatively light on bibliographic references, given the body of relevant published literature on the nature and interpretation of structured deposits.

The specialist reports in Chapters 4 and 5 present the details of these important assemblages. The reports are well-researched and well-illustrated by recognised specialists in their respective fields. The assemblages are all welcome additions to the Sussex datasets in general. The pottery assemblage in particular, has a Mid-/Late Iron Age component, important as this is a period not well understood at present. The composition of the assemblage indicates overlap of stylistic pottery zones and links between the hillforts of Surrey and Middle Iron Age Sussex, patterns that have been previously suggested and to which this material adds further weight. For the Roman period, the pottery assemblage is also a useful addition with evidence for the Late Iron Age to early Roman development of vessel forms and styles and for the development of local pottery industries and how these relate to each other, particularly relationships between the Southern Atrebatian tradition and the Rowlands Castle and Arun Valley industries.

The recovery of sample material with high integrity suitable for radiocarbon dating is a further major strength of this site's assemblage and adds considerably to the dataset of radiocarbon dates from this region, which traditionally have been lacking, the coastal plain in particular often suffering from poor survival of environmental material of sufficient integrity to produce high quality dating. The material for this dating comes from the animal bone and charred plant remains also deposited in the pits, often in large quantities, distinct Animal Bone Groups (ABGs) and unusual composition or features (eg, the inclusion of wild animals, immature cereal grains, less common species, and unusual butchery).

As such the faunal and macrobotanical assemblages are also important components of the interpretation of the structured pit deposits as feasting events. The animal bone assemblage is well preserved and comprises multiple domestic animals that must have produced a large quantity of meat, indicative of a single event, feeding a 'full community' of people, as well as exotic or rare species signalling a special or high status event. Other evidence such as butchery suggesting presentation and display of the meat and wild and domestic animals with skinning marks indicating the production of skins and pelts, perhaps for gifts or exchange. The macrobotanical assemblage possibly has the first example of insect boring holes on cereal from a pre-Roman context as well as more general information on subsistence regimes in the Iron Age and Roman period at the site, showing an unusual dominance of emmer, not paralleled on contemporary sites in Sussex to date. These interpretations add significant depth to current understanding of social and political dynamics in the Sussex region during the Mid/Late Iron Age.

The registered finds and other artefact assemblages are not large but include some interesting finds including fragments from an early Roman helmet cheekpiece, and a selection of horse-

associated metalwork (bridle bit, harness ring, terret ring, harness pendant) as well as more typical assemblages of quernstones, five chalk weights and a hone stone.

The evidence for structured pit deposits at Selhurst Park Farm fits with the broader pattern already established for West Sussex and increasingly for East Sussex too, with settlement or domestic activity frequently characterised by storage pits with purposeful or structured deposits of artefacts and ecofacts (Hamilton 2003; Doherty & Greatorex 2016; Dawkes in prep).

These structured pit deposits are characterised by the repeated inclusion of quernstones, wild animal bones, large quantities of clean and processed charred cereal grains, and complete domestic objects such as loomweights and occasionally metalwork including tools and agricultural implements. As at Selhurstpark Farm, the intention behind these deposits is increasingly interpreted as related to special events such as harvest, community feasts, or to make offerings in relation to soil fertility and the production of agricultural surplus.

It is interesting to note that, amongst the coins recovered by metal-detectorists in the same field, are two Iron Age Continental gold staters, a type that was also found unstratified on another Mid/Late Iron Age site in East Sussex with a series of pits containing assemblages interpreted as structured or special deposits (Doherty & Greatorex 2016). The relationship between this coin type and sites with structured pit assemblages would clearly benefit from more research, and it is increasingly the case that a regional synthesis of such features would now be possible and a likely fruitful research area.

Iron Age and Roman archaeology on the Sussex coastal plain has increased exponentially through developer-funded projects since the 1990s but work on the Downs has been more restricted, with unsurprisingly little large-scale development, particularly within the now designated South Downs National Park. This makes the publication of Selhurstpark Farm all the more important. It also emphasises the importance of investigating sites through archaeological excavation to confirm or refute interpretations based on aerial photography – the inclusion of Selhurstpark Farm as another example of a Wessex-type banjo enclosure (Hamilton 2003; Holgate 1986) and interpretations based on this must now be re-considered given the newly published excavated data presented in this volume.

In conclusion, this volume is a welcome and useful addition to the research of Iron Age and Roman settlement and society on the Sussex Downs and adjacent Coastal Plain. It is also a testament to the high standard of work achieved by those involved with the project, which comprised both professional and volunteer archaeologists and a reminder that such collaborations can bring great benefits to the advancement of archaeological research.

## References

Dawkes, G. in prep, *Living between the Downs and marsh: excavations at Pocock's Field, Eastbourne. East Sussex, ASE/SpoilHeap monograph*

Doherty, A. & Greatorex, C. 2016. *Excavations on St Anne's Hill: a middle/late Iron Age site and Anglo-Saxon cemetery at St Anne's Road, Eastbourne. East Sussex, ASE/SpoilHeap monograph 11*

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Review submitted: July 2019

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