

Archaeological Surveys in Houghton Regis

Notes from talk by Mike Luke, Albion Archaeology, 3rd May 2023

The talk described findings from various open excavations from 2016 – 2019, including that published for HRN3206, which is part of the HRN1 housing development in Houghton Regis, adjacent the Farmstead and Lidl Supermarket. His talk described finds from the Mesolithic, Neolithic/Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman era to the Saxons.

Mesolithic (~9600 – 4000 BC)



Fig 1. Photograph of a late Mesolithic Pit

Four pits have been dated by radiocarbon determination to the late Mesolithic (Fig 1). Bones found in the pit originated from an Orox (Aurochs), which were not found in the British Isles after the Bronze Age but did continue to live on continental Europe for longer. The Orox is a wild Ox which became officially extinct in 1627.

There were, prior to this discovery only four other large Mesolithic pits found in England. 24 have now been found in Houghton Regis, including those found by MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) on adjacent land.

This is the largest concentration ever found in England and Wales, mostly clustered around channels and springs.

Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age (~3000 – 2600 BC)

Extensive field walking by the Manshead Group in the 1980s, discovered many finds but there was no evidence of concentration.

Three Ring-Ditch Monuments have been found. One in HRN3206, one on the line of the Woodside Bus Link Road (Fig 2), south of the Ouzel Brook and a third on the site of the new Houstone Academy.

These are possibly burial monuments – barrows.



Fig 2 Photograph of the monument found under the Woodside Link road

Middle to Late Bronze Age (~1600 – 1000 BC)



Fig 3 A Segmented Ringditch

During this time many ditches were dug (Fig 3). This was the start the development of the land scape we see today eg the delineation of fields. Hints of human burials, mostly cremations and roundhouses were found.

Early Iron Age (~1000 – 400 BC)

Very little evidence was found of settlement activity.

Late Iron Age/Early Roman (~100 BC – AD 100)

Roundhouses were found

Roman (~AD 100 – 400)

Field walking showed concentrations of finds around the Ouzel Brook and at Chalton. Three Farmsteads (see Fig 8 below for a reconstruction of a Farmstead) have so far been identified within the development area, but only HRN3206 has been subject to open area excavation.

HRN3206 showed lots of ditches (Fig 4) which are mostly Roman, with hints of roundhouses.



Fig 4 Aerial Photograph of HRN3206 showing many ditches

There is evidence of human Roman activity but very few human burials were found.

Finds included brooches (Fig 5), bracelets (Fig 6), coins and pottery sherds. One sherd had a Latin inscription.



Fig 5 Brooches



Fig 6 Bracelets

Seven drying ovens (Fig 7) were found suggesting intensive farming.



Fig 7 One of the drying ovens under archaeological investigation



Fig 8 Reconstruction of how the farmstead might have looked—by Cecily Marshall

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The Society has a book:

“A roman Farmstead and other Late Neolithic and Post-Medieval Land-use at Houghton Regis Bedfordshire” Monograph No 7 by Mike Luke and Jo Baker, which can be loaned out on request.

A further book, Monograph 11, will be published soon providing more archaeological results from other excavations. The following pages are summaries of Monographs 7 and 11, kindly supplied by Mike Luke of Albion Archaeology.

HOUGHTON REGIS NORTH

Summary from Albion Archaeology Monograph 7

Luke, M. and Barker, J., 2021: *A Roman Farmstead and other Late Neolithic to Post-medieval Land-use, at Houghton Regis, Bedfordshire: Site HRN3206*

This report describes the results of Albion Archaeology's open-area excavation at site HRN3206, undertaken in 2018 and 2019 within the housing-led development known as Houghton Regis North 1 (HRN1), on the north-east outskirts of Houghton Regis in Central Bedfordshire. It formed part of a wider programme of archaeological investigations commissioned by the developer, the Houghton Regis Development Consortium (HRDC). The site was centred on TL 0348/2540.

Evaluation of the HRN1 development area and the Woodside Link gave an initial broad overview of the archaeological landscape, identifying heritage assets dating from the Mesolithic period to the modern day. The excavation within HRN3206 produced evidence for activity spanning the late Neolithic to the post-medieval periods; the majority of it relates to a Romano-British farmstead, which is now the most extensively investigated example in this part of Bedfordshire.

The earliest remains comprised a ring-ditch monument and isolated unurned cremation burial. Both are presumed to date to the late Neolithic/early Bronze Age (Phase 2). The ring-ditch is of particular interest because it comprised an earlier, smaller ring-ditch, which was completely encircled by a later ring-ditch and buried under an associated mound.

During the middle-late Bronze Age (Phase 3) a field system was established over the northern part of the excavation area. Two of its constituent ditches intersected at the ring-ditch monument, which was thus deliberately incorporated by the inhabitants into the new landscape of fields and not simply forgotten or ignored. Contemporary with and to the south of the field system was a dispersed spread of post-built structures, pits, postholes and eight burials. The latter comprised one inhumation and seven cremation burials. Potentially early Iron Age (Phase 4) settlement is represented by eight possible roundhouses.

During the late Iron Age/early Roman period (Phase 5) an enclosed farmstead was established in the northern half of the excavation area, in the same location as the middle-late Bronze Age (Phase 3) field system and away from the earlier settlements.

In the mid-late 1st century AD a new farmstead was established, c. 150m south of the late Iron Age/early Roman one. The new farmstead represents an abrupt change in the development of the landscape because it was established on previously unoccupied land and its alignment did not respect the pre-existing boundaries to the north. Deliberate planning is clear in the farmstead's original layout, with a trackway and adjacent enclosures to the north and south. The layout was substantially modified on three occasions, resulting in a gradual expansion northwards away from the trackway, which went out of use towards the end of the farmstead's life. The farmstead varied in size from c. 1.5ha to 2.1ha, although it may have extended beyond the development area to the west. The pottery and coin assemblages suggest that occupation continued to the end of the 4th century and probably into the early 5th century. Evidence for domestic activity, e.g. buildings, structures, water-pits, quarry pits and postholes, was identified. Of note is the possible evidence for two roundhouses, up to 13 rectangular buildings, and up to four different types of drying oven.

The location of the late Iron Age/Roman farmsteads on low-lying land near the Houghton and Ouzel Brooks would have been ideal for a mixed farming economy and this is supported by the artefactual and ecofactual evidence. Although the finds assemblage was large, including 92 coins, it is comparable to other farmsteads excavated elsewhere in Bedfordshire. However, a small number of the objects stand out from the normal profile one might expect on a rural farmstead, e.g. those associated with the military, with literacy, and with religion, in particular a small stone sculpture. The latter is a rare and exceptional find, which may have originally stood against a wall in a rural shrine.

In the medieval period (Phase 7) the excavation area and the land between the Houghton and Ouzel Brooks as a whole was under arable cultivation. During the post-medieval period a field system was established in the same location as the medieval fields.

Mike Luke

May 2023

HOUGHTON REGIS NORTH

Summary from Albion Archaeology Monograph 11

Luke, M. and Shottliff, D, forthcoming (2023): *Seven millennia of landscape evolution at Houghton Regis: Sites HRN3205, HRN3455/6/7, HRN3486 and Woodside Link*

This publication presents the results of a selection of Albion Archaeology investigations undertaken between 2015 and 2019 in advance of construction of the Woodside Link and the housing-led development known as Houghton Regis North 1 (HRN1), on the north-east outskirts of Houghton Regis in Central Bedfordshire. The investigations produced evidence for human activity spanning the late Mesolithic through to the modern period; the medieval and post-medieval periods are not covered in this monograph. The combined publication of these projects is only a means of presenting similar chronological and spatial evidence; it is not an attempt at an overall synthesis – not least because other projects in the HRN1 development area are still underway or are yet to be commissioned. Nonetheless, the summary below provides a brief overview.

The earliest evidence for human activity (within HRN3486) comprised at least 12 large pits that were radiocarbon-dated to the late Mesolithic. Their discovery was unexpected and is highly significant, given the rarity of features of this period – they represent the largest group of late Mesolithic large pits found to date in England. They were dug, presumably deliberately, adjacent to palaeochannels, which may have been created by seasonal springs or run-off from the higher ground near the source of the Ouzel Brook. Such a location would probably have been highly significant to the hunter-gatherer communities in the area. The pits became the focus for repeated returns and interventions (i.e. filling and recutting) over hundreds and possibly thousands of years. It is interesting that the only early Neolithic pits – much smaller in size – so far identified within HRN1 were also located in this area.

A monument of probable late Neolithic/early Bronze Age date was found adjacent to the present course of the Houghton Brook within the WSL investigations. It comprised an earlier, smaller ring-ditch, which was completely enclosed by a later ring-ditch. A very similar monument, also not firmly dated, was found at nearby HRN3206 (Luke and Barker 2021). Two contemporary pairs of pits were found c.80m north-east of the monument on the other side of the brook (also within the WSL investigations).

All the investigation areas produced evidence for far more extensive activity in the middle Bronze Age to the early Iron Age. It took the form of field/enclosure systems, activity foci (usually indicated by clusters of small pits but also by occasional post-built structures), extensive boundaries (including segmented ditches), post alignments, and a single isolated inhumation. The dating evidence was often limited to a small amount of fairly undiagnostic pottery and a small number of radiocarbon dates. However, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that much of this activity originated in the middle Bronze Age, a period characterised by both an increasing population and societal change. Contemporary remains within HRN3206 included a field system, dispersed activity foci, cremation burials and an inhumation. There is lack of evidence for middle Iron Age activity within the investigation areas, which is also reflected in a general absence of such remains within HRN1 as a whole; however, settlements of this date were found within the A5–M1 Link Road investigations (Brown 2020).

The late Iron Age/early Roman period also sees extensive evidence for activity, including farmsteads within HRN3455 and HRN3457, and others that lay outside the investigation areas (e.g. in HRN3206). Within HRN3205, a small cremation cemetery (comprising 13 graves) was deliberately located adjacent to a trackway; it was associated with an (unexcavated) farmstead to the south.

Three Roman settlements are known within HRN1; to date only that within HRN3206 has been subject to extensive investigation (Luke and Barker 2021). The largest, extending over c.5.5ha, straddles the Ouzel Brook and, as reported in this monograph, has been investigated by geophysical survey, trial trenching and a narrow service trench that traversed it (HRN3455). The combined evidence, including that from an amateur excavation in the 1980s, suggests that the settlement contains at least one substantial building with a hypocaust and a tiled roof. One of the most significant finds from HRN3455 was a sherd of pottery with ink-written graffiti. The third settlement lies at the south end of HRN1 and has only been subject to geophysical survey and trial trenching. However, its northern environs were investigated within the HRN3205 and WSL investigations, revealing two trackways, next to one of which were three crop-processing areas. These contained five drying ovens (two well-preserved), a crop-processing building and a plank-lined pit.

There was extensive evidence for Roman field/enclosure systems and trackways, some of which may have originated in the middle Bronze Age. These were largely devoid of evidence for activity with the exception of occasional isolated structures and one possible burial. Within HRN3457, adjacent to the present course of the Ouzel Brook, enclosures that were established in the late Iron Age appear to have been modified in the Roman period and continued in use, albeit for livestock management rather than settlement. In addition to the fields, which are presumed to be associated with mixed arable/pastoral farming, a block of bedding trenches within HRN3456 represents an area of horticulture.

The only firm evidence for early Anglo-Saxon activity were two isolated sunken-featured buildings (one within HRN3205 and one within HRN3457). Their presence reflects a wider pattern of small-scale and dispersed occupation, often in the vicinity of sites that were in use in the Roman period, with the main contemporary settlements probably underlying modern Houghton Regis and nearby villages.

Mike Luke

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