

Notes and Field Reports

Middle Bronze Age longhouses at Heybridge, Maldon, Essex

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Abstract

During 2021 and 2022 Archaeology South-East investigated a development spanning c.76 ha at Westcombe Park, north of the towns of Heybridge and Maldon, east Essex. This article highlights the regionally significant remains that were recorded over nine excavation areas (totalling c.3.4 ha). These comprised early Neolithic pits, an enclosed Middle Bronze Age settlement, Late Bronze Age enclosed settlements, three Middle Iron Age settlements, Roman field systems and an isolated Saxo-Norman farmstead. Six Middle Bronze Age longhouses within an enclosed settlement are discussed in detail, highlighting their rarity and national significance.

Keywords: Bronze Age; structures; settlement

Settlement morphology in the Blackwater valley

The gravel terraces on which Westcombe Park is sited contain one of the largest cropmark complexes yet observed in Essex (Wallis and Waughman 1998, 1, figs 127–31), large swathes of which have been subject to extensive archaeological investigations throughout the past half-century in advance of gravel extraction and residential development (Figure 1). These combined datasets have formed the basis of several detailed accounts of the development and nature of this dynamic landscape (Wallis and Waughman 1998; Wilkinson et al. 2012).

The Westcombe Park remains provide an opportunity to enhance the study of settlement morphology in the region. They contribute a significant dataset to this large pre-existing body of evidence (Figure 1), with the combined result being an almost unbroken east/west transect along the gravel terraces on the north side of the lower Blackwater valley over c.5 km. They portray a thriving prehistoric landscape comprising dispersed but interconnected rural settlements, field systems, stock enclosures, wells, waterholes and droveways. The Middle Bronze Age enclosed settlement in Area D, in the south-eastern part of the site (Figure 2) provides the earliest evidence for the development of this landscape, previously accepted as having Late Bronze Age origins (Yates 2007, chapter 9), while the

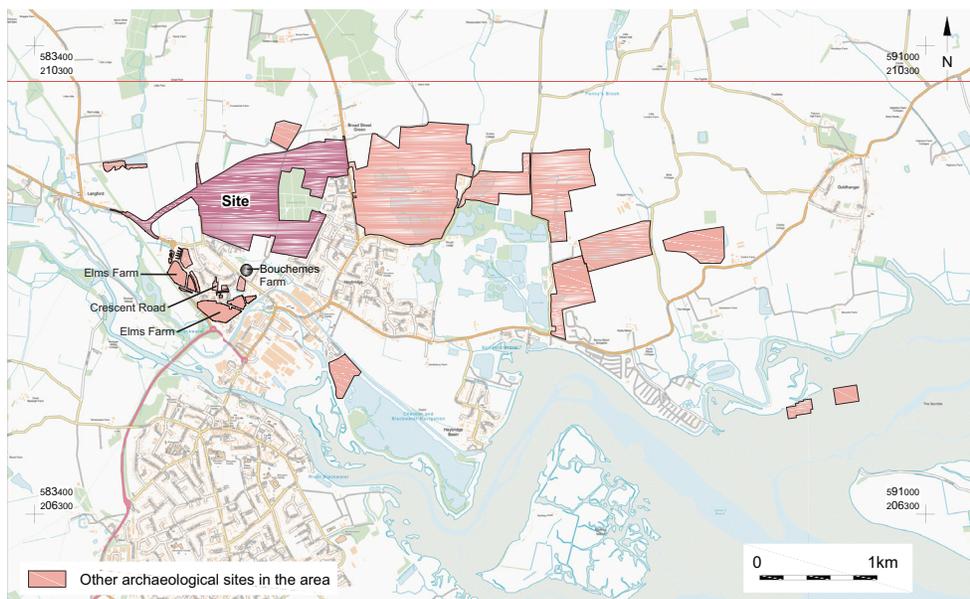


Figure 1 Site location with previous nearby excavation locations (Source: © Archaeology South-East)

abrupt cessation of evidence for occupation at the end of the Middle Iron Age bolsters the prevailing narrative – that the landscape became an agricultural hinterland peripheral to the developing Roman small town of Heybridge immediately south-west of Westcombe Park, excavated at the Elms Farm, Crescent Road, Bouchernes Farm and the Towers sites (Atkinson 2016; Atkinson and Preston 2015; Wickenden 1986; see Figure 1).

Full results of the investigation will be presented in a forthcoming Archaeology South-East (ASE) Spoilheap monograph, which will contextualise the multi-period remains in their landscape setting, using them to revisit and reassess previous narratives and interpretations.

The Middle Bronze Age longhouses

A rectangular ditched and fenced enclosure, exposed in Area D at Westcombe Park (Figure 2), contained six longhouses, pits, post-holes and ditches, which comprise the remains of various internal subdivisions and activities contemporary with the occupation of this large settlement. An associated fragmented pottery assemblage provided a broad Middle Bronze Age date (1500–1150 BC) for the remains, this date being refined by a radiocarbon date of 1400–1210 cal BC taken from preserved organic remains within the use-associated deposits contained inside a watering hole adjacent to the settlement.

The six longhouses were lozenge-shaped, with rounded ends and, where preservation was sufficient (B1–3 and B5), a single internal central row of structural posts, presumed to be roof supports, defined a two-aisle form. Figure 3 shows plans of Buildings 2 and 3 (B2 and B3). Building 2 was the most substantial and complete of the longhouses at Westcombe Park. It comprised 57 postholes and measured 22.39 m long by 5.60 m wide, with a floor

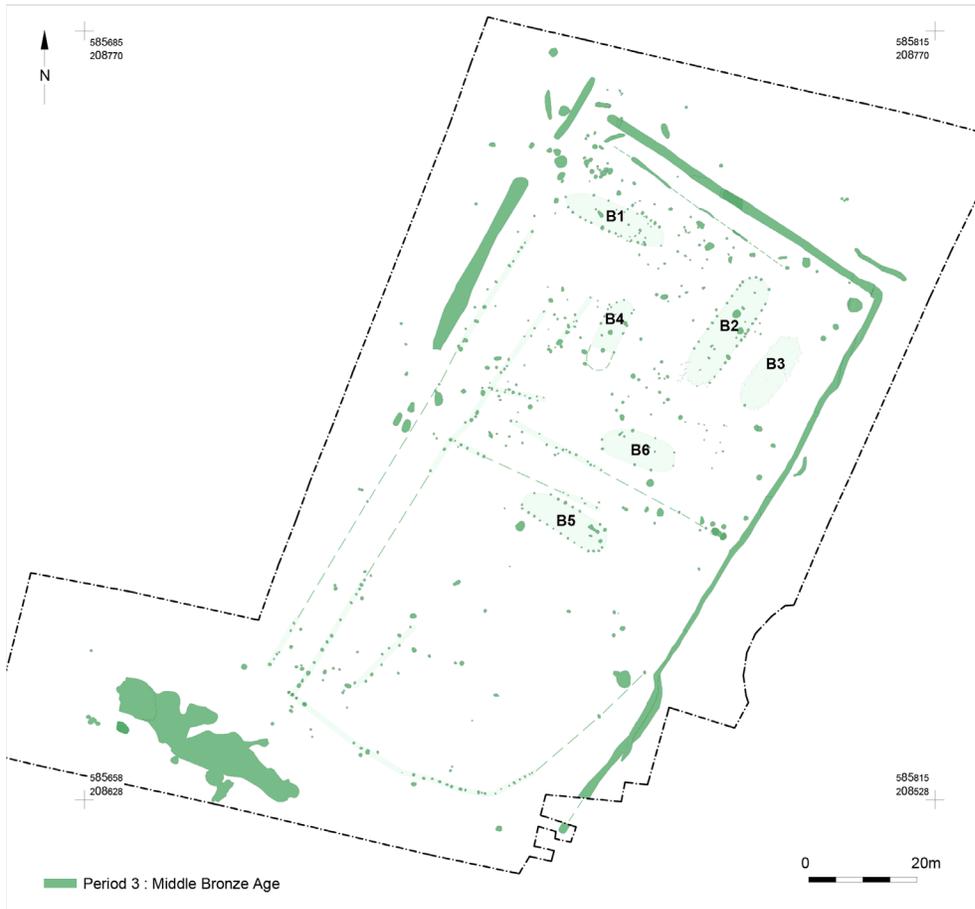


Figure 2 The Middle Bronze Age settlement (Source: © Archaeology South-East)

area of c.115 m². The smallest, Building 6 (B6), was 10.50 m long by c.4 m wide, covering an area of at least 38 m². While the precise function of these buildings is unclear, they are considered to have had an at least partially, if not wholly, domestic purpose.

The Westcombe Park longhouses represent an exceptionally rare building type in the British Bronze Age. A study comparing the characteristics of 1,085 Bronze Age structures on sites in Britain, dated c.2400–800 cal BC, found that the most common building type during the period was the roundhouse; 193 of the studied structures were quadrilateral (Caswell 2020, 20). Sixty-one of these were rectangular, although only 16 were securely dated to the Middle Bronze Age; the remaining 45 being Late Bronze Age. The majority of these quadrilateral buildings were four-post structures and do not constitute close parallels to the Westcombe Park longhouses. Only two sites in Britain exhibit directly contemporary parallels. A single Middle Bronze Age longhouse at Down Farm, Dorset, was of similar size, only with squared ends (Barrett et al. 1991, 198–200). Excavation at Redwick, on the intertidal mud flats of the Severn Estuary in Wales, exposed the remains of five longhouses (Bell 2013, 24–48). The building remains here were generally fairly incomplete, but where preservation was sufficient, they appeared to have rounded ends.

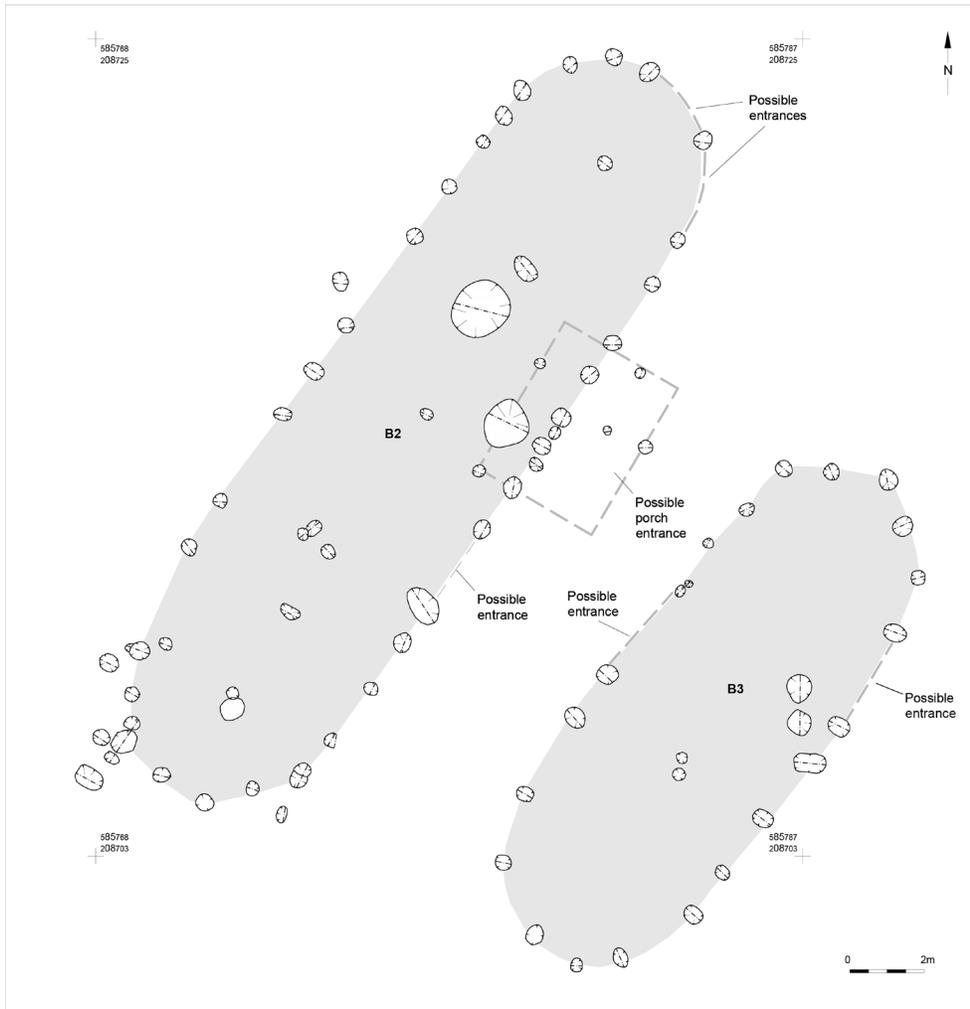


Figure 3 Buildings 2 and 3 (B2 and B3) (Source: © Archaeology South-East)

The longhouse is a widespread building form in northern Europe from c.1500 BC (Bradley et al. 2015, 192–3) and they are posited to evidence a continental influence in this part of the British Bronze Age. Many parallels exist on the continent, in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia. Of these, the most directly comparable to the Westcombe Park building form are the two-aisled longhouses of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age in Denmark (Sparrevohn et al. 2019) and the Netherlands (Arnoldussen 2008; Arnoldussen and Fokkens 2008). While not directly contemporary, it is worth noting that there is some contention regarding the date of these buildings (Nielsen 2019, 10), with some producing Middle Bronze Age radiocarbon dates. In the Middle Bronze Age of northern continental Europe, three-aisled long houses proliferate. These structures share an overall shape in plan and range of sizes with those excavated at Westcombe Park, but their construction is fairly distinct; two internal rows of roof-bearing posts are common in place of the one row evident at Westcombe Park.

While the precise origin of the architectural influences of the Westcombe Park longhouses is, as such, unclear, it should also be considered that these similar architectural practices may have developed unilaterally on either side of the North Sea (and in the Severn Estuary). It seems more likely, however, that these evident similarities attest to links between the continental mainland and Essex of the sort that have previously been established for other parts of Britain and the south-east (Yates 2012, 26).

Further evidence from Westcombe Park of similar cultural identities between the Middle Bronze Age occupants of the Backwater valley and the continent will be considered in the upcoming Spoilheap monograph. The evidence for their involvement in northern European long-distance trade networks will also be explored, as will the impact of this involvement on local architectural and cultural traditions.

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Research ethics statement

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Consent for publication statement

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Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this article.

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