

# **An Archaeological Resource Assessment of the Later Bronze and Iron Ages (First Millennium BC) in Lincolnshire**

*Steven Membery*

Note: For copyright reasons the figures are currently omitted from the web version of this paper. It is hoped to include them in future versions.

## **Introduction**

As with many parts of the country, Lincolnshire's Bronze Age has for many years, been dominated by the study of barrows, and metalwork. Our knowledge of the Iron Age was not much better, but it was not monuments to the dead (or the lack of them) which dominated, rather it was that Lincolnshire could not boast the massive hillforts of the south, or even some of its neighbouring counties. The lack of such monuments often seems to have overshadowed the county's own important and often unique Iron Age sites.

But very slowly this image of Lincolnshire in the Bronze and Iron Ages has been changing, due to research and rescue led surveys and excavations, and since the early nineties, development led projects have further enriched our knowledge of the later Prehistoric period.

As we shall no doubt hear in the other papers, any study of Lincolnshire's archaeology is complicated by its unique geography and geology, which, not surprisingly, appears to have had a major affect on where people chose to build their homes, their means of subsistence and even where they buried their dead.

## **The Bronze Age**

### **Burial.**

As already mentioned, there is a significant body of information about burial methods in the Bronze Age. Although many of Lincolnshire's round barrows have long since been ploughed away or destroyed by other means, enough have been and still are visible in the landscape or on aerial photographs, to have drawn the attention of both professional and amateur archaeologists. This visible presence, combined with many threats of destruction, has meant that many examples of this class of monument have been recorded.

Their distribution in the landscape shows some significant bias'. As pointed out by May in 1976 and still upheld by current distribution maps, there are concentrations of barrows in specific geographical areas. These are: Along the Wolds, in the same way as the Neolithic Long Barrows had dominated the area and on the dipslope of the wolds down to the coast. Also along the eastern flank of the Limestone ridge and the Ancholme and Witham river valleys, then down the southern fen edge and eastward along the Welland Valley. Why are they concentrated in these areas? Were they positioned to create the biggest visual impact on the surrounding landscape or were they situated in transitional or marginal zones or to define boundaries?

Certainly a position on the high ground of the wolds or the limestone ridge would make these monuments visible for many miles and on the lower ground of the fens and river valleys even the smallest of barrows would have had some visual impact. The barrow cemetery at Salmonby near Horncastle was situated so that it could be viewed from a nearby ancient trackway, and the barrow complex at Little Duke's farm, Deeping St. Nicholas forms part of: Quote: a much larger barrow cemetery running across the current course of the River Welland and is situated on the landward margin of the perceived earlier Bronze Age at the river/fen interface.(French 1994).

Aside from their distribution the main pattern to emerge from those excavations which have taken place, is that there appears to be little continuity of burial practise either within specific cemeteries or between the separate complexes.

At Salmonby at least one large or possibly two smaller barrow cemeteries were represented, with some of the barrows clustered together and others in dispersed linear formation. There was little or no continuity of contents, each one revealing major differences in the method of burial and in the types of grave good accompanying the dead.

A similar story occurred in the south of the county at Stroxton, south of Grantham. Here a cemetery of five barrows was excavated prior to destruction by gravel extraction. Each barrow was different. Some contained inhumations, others cremations. One barrow contained just one burial, whilst another had 18,

and as at other cemeteries a mixture of adults and juveniles were buried within these barrows, so age was obviously not a barrier.

A similar pattern of use can be seen at Deeping St. Nicholas, The main excavated barrow revealed a number of periods of use and rebuilding, the earliest burial was that of a child, later burials consisted of male and female inhumations and after extensive remodelling, cremations were added. Though with each new addition the position of the earlier burials was respected.

It seems that Bronze Age barrows were intermittently used over large periods of time through the first half of the second millennium BC, but this ceased before the end of the millennium.

As for who was buried in these barrows, we do not know how individuals were chosen for this privilege (if that is what it was) and what was the significance of cremation as opposed to inhumation and the differences in accompanying grave goods?

### **Cremation cemeteries.**

The other form of burial known from the Bronze Age was that of the flat cremation cemetery.

Excavations have taken place at cemeteries near Long Bennington, a site which lay on the river terrace projecting into the alluvium and peat of Bennington Fen (Allen 1987) and on two sites less than 300 metres apart in Old Somerby and Ropsley parishes. (Lane 1995). At the Long Bennington cemetery cremations were discovered in pottery which is described as broadly similar to Deverel-Rimbury ware, which could have been made locally. In the Ropsley and the Old Somerby cemeteries the cremations were contained in pottery which was found to be very similar to that being used on domestic sites.

Interestingly, in Ropsley parish, it was noted that those artefacts which may have been associated with funerary contexts were found in the west of the parish on the heavier soils of the boulder clay. Whilst the one known urn cemetery in the parish came from the junction of the clay and the limestone, therefore on marginal territory just like many of the barrows previously mentioned. Lane 1995.

Dating proved to be difficult, despite the discovery of a bronze bangle at Old Somerby which was dated typologically to around the 14th-13th centuries BC, but no more secure date other than sometime in the 2nd Millennium BC has so far been proved for all three cemeteries.

### **Settlement.**

The number of known barrows is staggering in comparison to the paucity of strong evidence for settlement in the Bronze Age. The SMR distribution map, although maybe a little bleaker than the real picture due to the need to separate actual settlement from pottery scatters, (some of which may have been associated with burials) shows just three concentrations of settlement. A cluster in Ropsley parish, a line of sites down the southern fen edge and along the Welland Valley, and another at the southern foot of the Wolds on the northern fen edge. This last concentration of probable Bronze Age settlements were recognised from flint and pottery scatters found during the fenland survey. They were mainly situated along the fen margin, often on low, sandy ridges within the clays and may have been seasonally occupied (Lane 1993)

Of the southern fen edge and Welland valley sites, until recently the most extensive excavation of a Bronze Age settlement site was that at Billingborough under the direction of Peter Chowne in the mid 1970s. The excavation of a sub-rectangular enclosure discovered that there had been four phases of occupation on the site, beginning in the early to mid Bronze Age and abandoned in the Late Iron Age/Early Roman periods. During the Iron Age an extensive field system was laid out, believed to be in response to the marine transgression, after which the site was used for salt production. In its earlier phases, Billingborough was predominantly a dryland site involved in cereal production, four post structures were found, and the keeping of sheep and or goat for meat.

More recently the work carried out on one of the Welland Valley sites by APS at the Ennemix gravel extraction quarry east of Deeping St. James, has provided extensive evidence of Later Bronze Age settlement. Preliminary analysis of the pottery assemblage from this site having placed it within the earlier part of the 1st Millennium BC. The site had been covered by a layer of alluvium, c.50 cm deep, which had resulted in excellent preservation. Within a massive boundary ditch, the remains of structures including; post built roundhouses, four posterns and rectangular buildings were discovered. Floor layers and hearths had also survived along with large amounts of pottery. The settlement area was characterised by a layer of dark earth which was full of pottery and bone. The discovery of an enclosure, which formed an integral part of a much larger field system, implies that some form of stock management was also taking place. (Dymond and Mouraille pers comm.) The Post-excavation analysis of this site is ongoing, but it offers a rare and exciting chance to look at a large Later Bronze Age settlement site, which may be just one small section of a massive field system..

Away from the fen edge and the Welland valley, evidence for settlement is even patchier. The Ropsley Humby survey found over 250 find sites with pottery dating to the Bronze Age, but only one site was marked by a cropmark, despite the recent intensive work of the R.C.H.M. National Mapping Project. Most of the pottery came from the Middle Bronze Age period (1700-1200BC), Lane 1995, with only limited amounts dating to the EBA and none from the LBA (The absence of recognisable LBA activity other than metalwork finds is typical throughout the county, making the recent discoveries at Deeping St. James even more important.) The largest concentration of find sites came from the limestone heath in the northern part of the parish where Neolithic and EBA flints had also been concentrated.

In the north of the county, investigations of Bronze Age settlements is even rarer. Evidence for a crude wooden trackway, dated to the LBA by a number of Bronze artefacts, was found in a number of places within Brigg in the Ancholme Valley. These finds were mainly made in the last century or the earlier part of this one. But a wooden trackway does not make a settlement.

Evidence for a possible LBA site was found at Kirmond Le Mire in the Wolds, during the construction of a pipeline. Excavations through the High Street cut through the remains of a rectangular enclosure, the pottery recovered being similar to Deverel-Rimbury ware, indicating that the site may have been Later Bronze Age. (Field 1992)

By far the greatest evidence for human activity in Later Bronze Age Lincolnshire is metalwork. As discussed at great length by May in 1976, we do have high concentrations of Bronze Age metalwork finds from many parts of the county. The distribution map showing all Bronze Age metal finds recorded on the SMR indicates activity in many of the areas currently considered to be all but devoid of settlement, such as the river valleys of the Trent, Witham and Ancholme.

Inevitably, some of the metalwork comes from in and around the areas where cemeteries were situated, but amongst the other explanations for the presence of this metalwork is the possibility that it represents votive deposits in special watery places away from domestic sites. This may be the case for some of the finds, but the possibility that some of this metalwork also represents some form of settlement in the vicinity should not be discounted.

Very little metalwork has come from either the chalk or limestone hills or the southern fens. Soil exhaustion leading to an abandonment of the higher ground, and marine flooding leading to a movement away from coastal sites, being the most common explanations for this. Along the southern fens very little evidence has been found for LBA/EIA settlement, not surprising considering the scale of the marine inundation here at that time. But human resourcefulness often weathered these problems and there is evidence for settlement away from the worst affected areas. In Bourne fen, Later Bronze Age / Early Iron Age pottery was found alongside other evidence of occupation including a hearth, fired clay fragments and daub, on a site close to the waterlogged zone.

Chowne (1980), has also commented on the distribution of LBA metalwork, noting the high number of finds in the peat fen between Lincoln and the River Sleä, particularly along the edge of this fen where the peat layer was thinner. He raised the possibility that much of this metalwork may have come from settlements, which were subsequently buried by peat growth.

Yet occasionally evidence for associated occupation is found. For example, the Later Bronze Age pottery and antler cheekpiece found at Washingborough during dredging of the Witham. Excavations carried out in 1973 by Ormes and Cole in the vicinity of these discoveries, found that the material probably came from layers of silt in a pool which may once have lain close to an occupation site. Bone, pottery and worked wood were found, with cattle making up one half of the bone, the rest being a mixture of domestic and wild animal, bird and fish. Both fine and coarse pottery was found, although both indicated a high level of skill in pottery making. The dates given for this site were c.8th/7th/6th century BC so at the very end of the Bronze Age, into the Early Iron Age.

## **The Iron Age**

Lincolnshire cannot boast the massive hillforts of the south, or even some of its neighbouring counties. The lack of such monuments often seems to have overshadowed the county's own important and often unique Iron Age sites. The paucity of evidence for, and large scale investigations of Bronze Age settlements in Lincolnshire is a problem which continues into the Iron Age. There is for instance a marked lack of evidence for any Iron Age activity within the northern fens, probable Iron Age Salterns from Wrangle parish being the only exceptions.

On the fen edge the problems caused by marine inundation in the Later Bronze Age probably continued to make large areas unsuitable for settlement. Yet recent excavation of one part of the Deeping's By-Pass has revealed the remains of Early Iron Age settlement in the Welland Valley on a gravel promontory which lies on slightly higher ground than the surrounding area, so potentially protected from flooding. Pottery from an enclosed area, which includes circular structures, has recently been identified as a type which represents the transition phase from the Early to Middle Iron Age (6th-5th centuries BC pers comm Elaine Morris). Although this site lies just over the modern county border, it represents an important discovery in terms of the Iron Age ceramic sequence in southern Lincolnshire and it shows that humans were living on these marginal areas in the Early Iron Age. Despite these recent discoveries, it is not until the Middle Iron Age that we have significant evidence of human activity within Lincolnshire. As we shall see, much of this information comes from salt production sites, but other Middle Iron Age sites have been investigated.

Amongst the best known of these was that found at the Castle Lime Pit at Ancaster Quarry in the 1960s and subsequently excavated by Nottingham University. These excavations revealed the presence of a Middle Iron Age settlement overlooking the Ancaster gap. The features discovered included roundhouses, complete with ovens and fireplaces. In common with other Iron Age sites across the country, the features uncovered were dominated by pits (75 in all). The fill of these pits included evidence for lime burning or quarrying for pure clay, whilst the vast majority contained what appeared to be domestic refuse. A number of bell shaped pits similar to those found on numerous southern sites were also found, indicating a degree of grain storage. Other evidence for arable production came in the form of two post structures (interpreted as drying racks for straw or hay,) Burnt wheat and barley grains were also found, along with a large number of saddle and rotary querns, unfinished examples indicating that they were probably manufacturing them on the site.

Bones of Cattle, sheep, pig and horse were all found on the site. The age of death of the sheep and cows indicates that they were kept for a mixture of meat and secondary products, including traction. The pottery discovered was the typical coarse, hand made scored ware which is commonly found on Iron Age sites in southern Lincolnshire.

In 1990, further Middle Iron Age occupation was found less than 8km away at Sleaford. The remains of a Iron Age enclosure defined by a series of inter-cutting post-holes was uncovered during an evaluation. The excavators believe that these postholes would have contained a set of upright timbers, forming a palisade, a system repeated to create internal divisions. The excavators have suggested that the end of the enclosure which was excavated may have been primarily used as a stock enclosure, or may even have had a ritual function. (Trimble 1990).

Some of the postholes contained animal bone, smithing slag and scored ware pottery confirming a Middle Iron Age date. Although no domestic features were found (in the form of dwellings), like at Ancaster, evidence for both arable production ( a possible four poster granary and a two poster drying rack ) and stock management was found.

Other than these two sites it seems that very little large scale investigation has taken place on primarily domestic Middle Iron Age sites, particularly in the north of the county. One site in Grimsby (Wheelsby Avenue) did yield evidence for possible Middle Iron Age settlement. Found under a significant Late Iron Age site (which will be mentioned again later) an earlier phase of settlement consisted of two roundhouse gullies and possible four poster granaries within an enclosure ditch. Amongst the artefacts discovered were fragments of rotary quern and pottery which had been made from the local clays, yet were said to have affinities to vessels from the Arras culture cemeteries of East Yorkshire. This has caused doubts to be raised about the date of this material, especially due to the lack of scored ware. Yet Grimsby lies far closer to the region of the Arras Culture than it does to Sleaford and Ancaster, It seems logical therefore that it would have taken its influences from closer communities.

## **Salt**

By far the most prolific ceramic evidence for human activity in Lincolnshire's Middle Iron Age comes from salt production sites. As early as the middle of the last century briquetage was being discovered along the coast in the Ingoldmells area after strong winds had uncovered salt production sites. The distribution map of saltern sites not surprisingly shows concentrations close to the coastal marshes and on fen edge sites. One concentration runs down the edge of, and well into the southern fens, the biggest concentration being in the parish of Cowbit, where sites yielding both briquetage and domestic pottery were recorded during the fenland survey. Three major groups of site were identified by spreads

of briquetage and scored ware pottery, distinctly MIA in style, although LIA and Roman pottery was also discovered, indicating a continuation of the industry throughout this period. One of the Cowbit sites investigated by the Fenland Management Project has provided a C14 date of 180-80BC for the second phase of saltmaking.

Similar sites containing evidence for domestic settlement and probable salt production were also found in Langtoft fen and at Frognall near Market Deeping. This last site, like that at Cowbit, seemed to span a period dating from the MIA into the Roman period. Also found were the remains of what may have been part of a weir, wharf or bridge which was surrounded by deposits of animal bone, some of which had been butchered. Much of the material found was well stratified in a waterlogged palaeochannel, and a sequence of radiocarbon dates is currently being prepared that should tell us much about the development of scored ware pottery. The channel also contained an early La Tene II iron brooch with a date around the 3rd century BC. (Lane pers. comm.)

Although there is abundant evidence of salt production in the southern fens, only Wrangle parish has produced evidence for the industry in the northern fens, although problems with dating both the pottery and the briquetage has made it difficult to securely date the Saltern sites. The most northern and possibly one of the earliest of all the salterns was that found in Tetney parish. Believed to be mainly an industrial rather than domestic in nature, the site has been dated to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age.

### **Hillforts.**

Not to be forgotten at this point are the so called Lincolnshire hillforts. A number of these monuments have been noted: Honnington Camp near Ancaster, Round Hills Ingoldsby, Borough Banks Old Somerby, Careby Camp near Bourne and in the north of the county Yarborough Camp near Kirmington. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, none of these monuments can be compared to the perceived image of an Iron Age hillfort, in fact, a quick comparison of location, shape and size shows that there is little that these monuments have in common with each other. Apart from a few stray finds from in and around them there is still no secure dating for any of them.

### **Territorial Boundaries?**

Another class of monument known of, but currently far from understood are the ditches and pit alignments which have been recognised as a result of Aerial Photography. Single, double and triple ditches have been recorded covering large parts of the county. As mentioned in the previous paper, some of these may represent earlier linear monuments with a similar function to the Cursus. The limited fieldwork which has so far taken place on these alignments has failed to provide definite dates. Only Lindsey Archaeological Services work at Brauncewell Limestone Quarry have given an indication of a possible Late Iron Age date for the triple linear ditch on this site. Those which are believed to date to the later prehistoric period are currently classed as some form of massive territorial boundary. As part of the National Mapping Programme, the RCHM(E) have been plotting these alignments and studying their distribution. Hopefully, when completed, this project will be able to throw further light on the subject.

### **The Late Iron Age.**

This period is naturally dominated by discoveries at two sites, Dragonby and Old Sleaford. Both appear to have revealed extensive evidence for high status LIA settlement, raising the possibility that they may fall into the class of Oppida. They are probably best characterised by their pottery which has been extensively described and discussed by Sheila Elsdon in two recent publications, *Old Sleaford Revealed* and the Dragonby excavation reports. Old Sleaford is also significant for having the largest deposit of Iron Age coin -pellet moulds in Europe. Elsdon 1997.

But Old Sleaford and Dragonby are not the only sites to have yielded Late Iron Age remains, and equally important at this stage we should not forget those areas where there appears to have been little if any LIA settlement or activity. Most notable of these areas are the fens, where there is a marked absence of the styles of pottery normally associated with the Lincolnshire LIA, such as those types

found at Old Sleaford, Dragonby and the LIA site at Ancaster. Yet as pointed out in a number of publications by Tom Lane, many of the Middle Iron Age fenland sites were visibly re-occupied in the Roman period! Was there really a period of abandonment in the Late Iron Age?

Across the rest of the county LIA sites are most often represented by metal finds, as reviewed and discussed by May in 1984 Prospects of Lincolnshire. Often the result of metal detection, the metalwork normally consists of large amounts of Iron Age coins, but LIA style brooches make up a sizeable proportion of the metal objects discovered. On a number of these sites LIA pottery has also been discovered, such as at Kirmington (which lies very close to Yarborough camp), where a small quantity of LIA pottery was found over an area approximately 50 hectares in size, along with coins, brooches and other metalwork. However, the discovery of LIA pottery amongst surface scatters still seems to be a rare occurrence, even on sites which have yielded masses of LIA metalwork.

May (1984) has already pointed out the regularity of spacing of these sites, which he describes as Major Late Iron Age settlements. On the whole they appear to be spaced approximately 15-20 miles apart and tend to lie on the higher ground of the limestone uplands and the Wolds. Other smaller settlements appear to have existed around the county in the vicinity of the so called major settlements. In the south west of the county, excavations at Colsterworth in the 1940s revealed a small yet defended LIA settlement, containing evidence for roundhouses and pottery, which suggested a date at the very end of the Iron Age and early Roman.

Excavations prior to housing development found evidence for LIA settlement just north-west of Bourne at the site known as Mill Drove. This lay adjacent to an area believed to contain a Roman Villa. At the Brauncewell quarry site the remains of a substantial, LIA trapezoidal structure was discovered which has been interpreted as a form of stock enclosure. The area continued in use through into the Roman period albeit with what appears to be a change of land use.

Other sites have revealed evidence for a speciality other than farming. One of the most significant LIA finds from northern Lincolnshire was that of a LIA bronze working site at Wheelsby Avenue, Grimsby.. Overlying the MIA site already mentioned, this LIA site yielded a wide range of pottery forms including a number of types of fine ware, such as black burnished pedestal bowls and LIA stamped and rouletted wares as found at Dragonby, Sleaford and Ancaster. All this was found alongside large amounts of Bronze-casting debris, which included crucibles, furnace debris, slag, wax moulds, and bronze wire. The evidence found indicated that the main product of this particular foundry had been horse and chariot fittings and that it had probably been producing a surplus which could have been traded, making the site's position at the mouth of the Humber an important factor. Sills and Kingsley 1990.

There may well have been a two if not three tier structure of settlement in Lincolnshire during the Late Iron Age, with May's major settlements being the territorial focus for smaller (sometimes defended, sometimes not) agricultural and industrial sites.

## **Conclusions.**

Both the Bronze and Iron Ages have already yielded large amounts of evidence, far more than can actually be mentioned here. A number of important sites are yet to be published, although some are imminent, and they should provide invaluable information for future research. But the evidence from individual excavations, evaluations, watching briefs or even large scale surveys are still being viewed mostly in isolation.

The work of the National Mapping Programme has provided an important resource of information which should be tapped in the future. Also, further work clearly needs to be done to establish ceramic sequences for both periods across the whole of the county and there is still the need for good environmental and faunal data collection.