All Cannings Cross



All Cannings Cross lies at the foot of the Marlborough Downs escarpment. It is overlooked by the Neolithic and Iron Age enclosure complex at Rybury. Clifford's Hill Neolithic enclosure lies to right, just out of the picture

John Barrett and David McOmish

The prehistoric Wessex landscape is celebrated as a national treasure and has been investigated so extensively that we might expect it to offer few genuine surprises. John Barrett and David McOmish outline their exploratory work at All Cannings Cross in Wiltshire – and show how this well-known but poorly understood site is currently one of the most exciting locations in British archaeology.

The origins of the British Iron Age was once hotly debated; protagonists argued between a continental origin brought by invaders or an indigenous origin generated by economic change. As in all such archaeological debates, the issue is likely to be rather more complex. The period that witnessed the adoption of iron was accompanied by new trading networks linked to the decline of bronze working, and significant shifts in settlement location along with the development of early hillforts.

All Cannings Cross in Wiltshire is a Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age site, dug by Maude Cunnington in 1911 and then from 1920–22. Her discoveries established the site as pivotal in the definition of the earliest British Iron Age largely because of the distinctive range of pottery for which All Cannings Cross became the type site. In the archaeological world, it had long been assumed that little was left after Cunnington's excavations and the last eighty years of ploughing. How wrong that assumption was.

As part of a University of Sheffield project 'Landscapes and Consumption', the site was revisited to examine the extent, condition and



Test-pitting (and discussion!) in progress

nature of any surviving deposits. Why this site? All Cannings Cross is in a striking position at the foot of the Marlborough Downs escarpment, looking out across the low-lying Vale of Pewsey towards Salisbury Plain. It was clear from Cunnington's excavation that occupation here was on the cusp of the dramatic changes that accompanied the shift from bronze to iron-based technologies. The site appears to comprise large midden deposits – made up of pottery fragments, large quantities of animal bone and other cultural deposits, along with buildings and pits. The midden deposits are intriguing, we now have several other sites that seem to comprise huge accumulations of such material and that date to roughly the same period as All Cannings Cross. Are these the results of feasting, or are they particularly messy farmsteads? Given that the excavations took place nearly a century ago, the nature of All Cannings Cross is poorly understood. If there were any deposits surviving in situ, then potentially the site could provide the foundation for reviewing the Bronze Age/Iron Age transition.

The first step was to produce a detailed topographical plan in which Cunnington's trenches were located. A series of 1m square test pits were opened up with the intention of defining the edge of the main (if any) archaeological deposits. What appeared to be natural platforms, shallow depressions and dry valleys were also examined. Parts of the area in which the site lay was subject to a build-up of colluvium which incorporated fragments of Bronze Age pottery, so it seems that occupation was situated in a landscape which had already been heavily utilised agriculturally. There was also an indication that the present-day relatively level ground surface masks bedrock that is undulous and pitted with pockets of deeper soil. Under the guidance of Mike Allen (Wessex Archaeology) a detailed deposit model is now being prepared, and this will be followed up by geophysical survey directed by Colin Shell of Cambridge University.

The results of this preliminary work were startling. From the test pitting it was possible to identify larger areas for examination, mainly to the north of Cunnington's trenches. Although these excavations confirmed that cultivation and erosion has affected the archaeology, an Early Iron Age deposit survived intact with an excellent accumulation of cultural deposits. A number of cut features, including pits and postholes, were uncovered. Cunnington had noted a somewhat enigmatic feature – 'chalk floors' – in a variety of shapes and sizes. We were able to excavate one of these and, although damaged by ploughing and cut by Cunnington's trenches, it sealed extensive spreads of cultural material, including fragments of pottery and articulated animal bone.

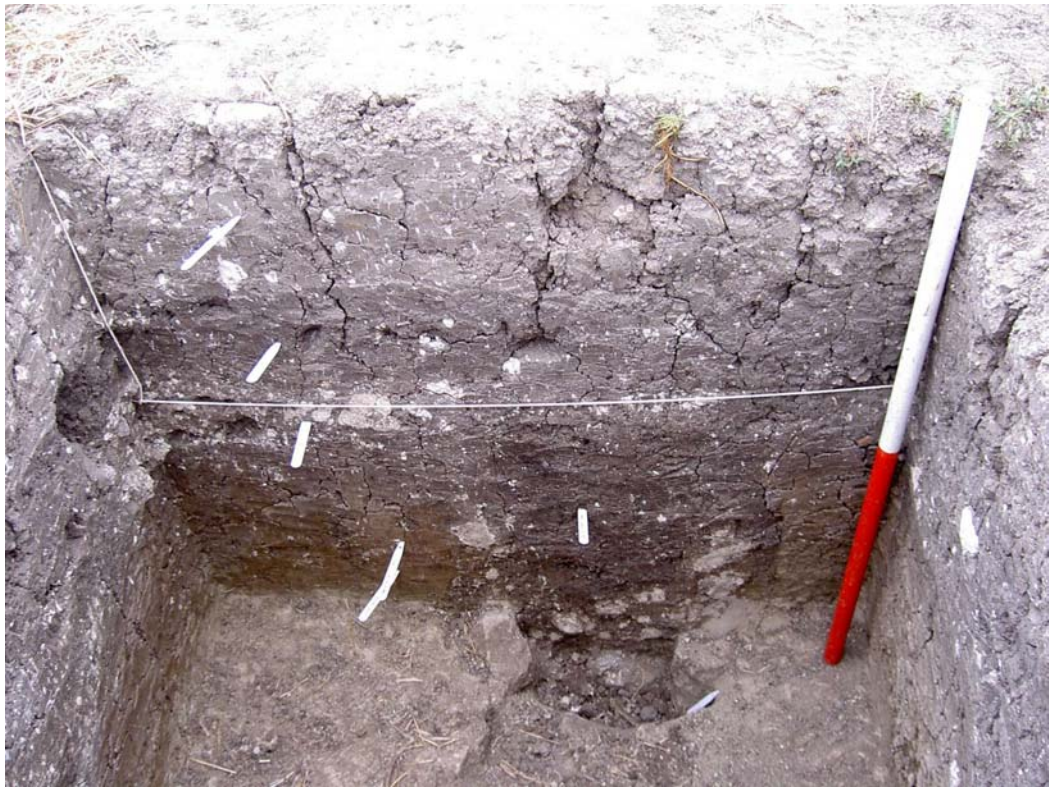
This two-week excavation has confounded our views of site survival in heavily cultivated environments. Augering suggests that there may well be deep in situ deposits buried to a staggering depth of up to 2m between plough-



Detailed view of the artefactual debris spread associated with a chalk platform. A dense concentration of sarsen stone, flint, animal bone and pottery is evident

Planning one of the irregular chalk platforms or floors. The purpose of these features is unknown but they incorporate and seal substantial deposits of material culture—animal bone and pottery can be seen along the leading edge of the platform

eroded spurs of chalk. The site extends over several hectares and links superficially with other local sites such as East Chisenbury and Potterne. Part of our examination of the landscape around the site was by fieldwalking, which produced evidence for another substantial midden site less than 1km to the east of All Cannings Cross. This preliminary exploration of the site forms the basis for a much more in-depth exploration of the landscape at All Cannings Cross and the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age transition. In co-operation with the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society we will develop a programme of work that reaches out to the widest possible audience. The progress of the project can be followed online at www.kennet.gov.uk



West face of test pit 15. This was located at some distance upslope from the main All Cannings Cross deposit, and was an unexpected discovery. Here, substantial deposits had accumulated and were preserved in a deep pocket in the chalk rock. At least two features were cut into this—the postpipe and base of one of these shows clearly in the section