

# Bathampton Down Settlement

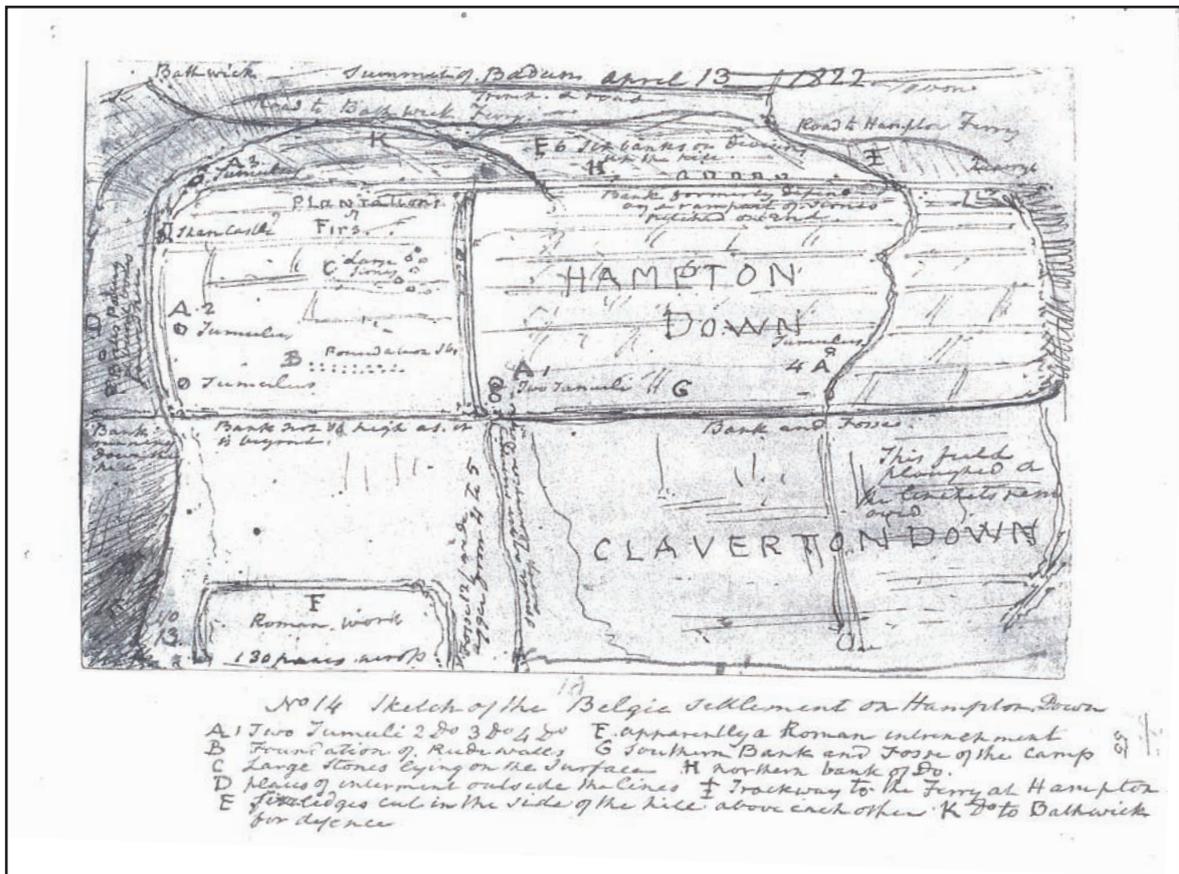
**A Late Bronze Age / Earliest Iron Age settlement on Bathampton Down, Bath**

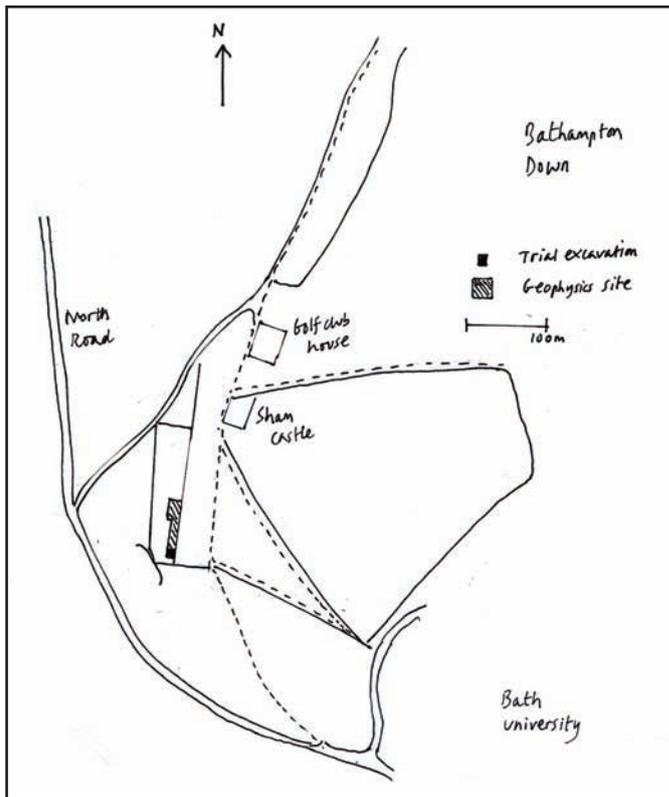
**Rod Thomas, John Oswin and Lisa Brown**

**E**vidence of occupation in the early Iron Age seems to have escaped attention in Bath. This is despite the large number of very important sites only 20-30 km to the east, such as All Cannings Cross and Potterne. Bathampton Down has long been a rich source of archaeological finds, though often tantalisingly limited. The Reverend Skinner found a site on the west side of the Down in 1821 (see Figure 1) where the deep black soil was “abounding in fragments of coarse British pottery”, and his sketches of them looked as though they were from the early Iron Age (Skinner MS 33669). Then in 1949 potsherds were found by Colley after he had been taking soil to make flower beds, probably from the same site as had been found by Skinner. They were dated to the early Iron Age by the British Museum and some of these sherds were illustrated by Wainwright when he reported his excavations of the “hillfort” on the Down in 1967.

It seemed possible to locate Colley’s site which was situated in an overgrown wood owned by the National Trust (NT). The area was shown to Martin Papworth from the National Trust, in March 2008, and then to the Society’s chairman, Bob Whitaker. As a result an archaeological research agreement was obtained from the NT in order to carry out a trial excavation. In October 2008 enthusiastic BACAS members took part in the excavation with three test pits. There were many fascinating finds from the 19th Century but unfortunately nothing prehistoric was revealed. After an apparent impasse there was a breakthrough. Iron Age potsherds were found on the spoil heaps of a huge badger sett, deep in the wood and fairly close to the excavation site. Another archaeological research agreement was obtained from the NT, an area of the very overgrown woodland was cleared and a geophysical survey undertaken in November 2010, by BACAS volunteers. The position is to the west and south of Sham Castle (see Figure 2).

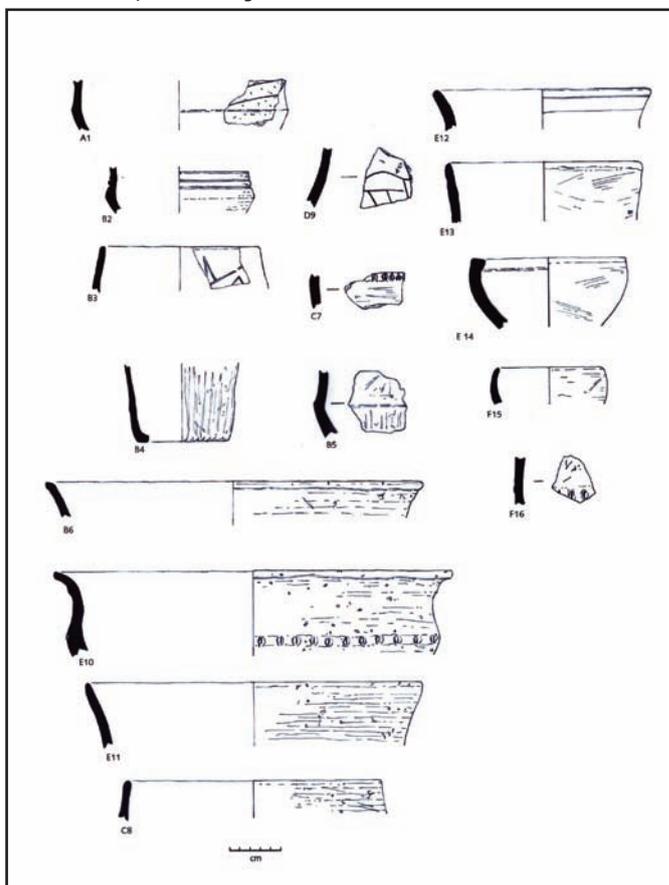
**Figure 1**  
Rev. Skinner's sketch map of the area (MS33671, by permission of the British Library).





**Figure 2**  
**Sketch plan showing the areas of geophysical survey and excavation.**

**Figure 3**  
**The Bathampton Down pottery found during the excavation, drawn by Lisa Brown.**



### The Pottery

What follows is a very condensed version taken from the full report and drawings of the pottery by Lisa Brown from Oxford Archaeology. 68 potsherds were found, in very good condition. The fabrics indicated that the vessels were produced locally. The forms included a variety of tripartite, carinated and biconical bowls and jars. Some were decorated with finger impressions or incised patterns. The single furrowed bowl (B2 in Figure 3), one of the distinctive types of pottery from the earliest Iron Age, was possibly long-necked and therefore dated to the 7th-6th Centuries BC. Two simple cups (e.g. E14 in Figure 3) were similar to those dated to the 7th Century BC at Potterne but could be older. One very large carinated jar or bowl (E10 in Figure 3) had a date range of 10th-6th Century BC.

Overall, and including the pottery found by Colley and that drawn by Skinner, the assemblage has been broadly dated to the 10th-6th Centuries BC. It fits comfortably in the late Bronze Age/earliest Iron Age Wessex tradition, generally still referred to as All Cannings Cross style. The date range might be restricted to the 7th-6th Centuries BC, but this is difficult because of the lack of a stratigraphic sequence of the sherds and the relatively small sample. More details will be available in the full report which has been submitted to Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society (PSANHS).

### Geophysical Survey

Despite the wood clearance, the site remained rather obstructed and the terrace was only about 75m by a varying width of 10-20m. Twin-probe resistance and magnetometry surveys were carried out. The resistance results showed wall footings and a possible rectangular building. Magnetometry revealed a line of probable postholes and/or pits, extending across the area (see Figure 4).

### Discussion

There are a number of sites in Wessex which have been dated to the same period and named after the type site of

All Cannings Cross. These include the midden sites of Potterne and East Chisenbury and also Longbridge Deverill, just south of Warminster. The nearest definite site to Bath, with finds of All Cannings Cross pottery, is probably the small ridge-end hill fort at Budbury, in Bradford-on-Avon.

There is some unfortunate confusion about the terminology of this period. 800-600BC is now usually known as the earliest Iron Age though some archaeologists still refer to it as the late Bronze Age and others prefer to call it the late Bronze Age/ early Iron Age transition. 800BC has been considered a watershed date, as it was around this time that the cultural changes that marked many of the differences between the Bronze Age and Iron Age began.

The geophysical surveys were interpreted as showing a number of postholes, and possible storage pits. Unfortunately the half metre resolution of the magnetometry does not allow accurate measurements of the size of the holes. A possible rectangular structure is most interesting because one of the only rectangular Iron Age houses in England was reported close by at Budbury. Many of the potsherds were found on spoil heaps of the sett in very dark or black soil, which strongly suggests that the badgers had been digging into primary occupation deposits.

The dating of this settlement is broadly contemporaneous with the large hill top enclosure on the Down. Though the nature of this earthwork is still sometimes disputed, good evidence from other similar large monuments with their slight defences and little evidence of occupation, date them to the late Bronze Age or early Iron Age. So the occupants of this settlement may well have been involved with the construction or use of the enclosure.

Despite the limited and somewhat fragmented findings, this settlement adds to our knowledge of this important period in the Bath area.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Martin Papworth and Ben Cross from the National Trust, the BACAS members who helped with the trial excavation and geophysical survey, Bath Golf Club and Jude Harris.

**Figure 4**  
**Results of the magnetometry survey with the interpretation given below. The crosshatched area was heavily contaminated.**

