FACT SHEET – Archaeology in the Park

Stand in front of the Visitors’ Centre and look out across the lake. What you see today is the water of Grebe Lake. Prior to the 3rd Century AD you would have seen the series of circular buildings that formed a farm surrounded by a 20 hectare (20 acre) fenced enclosure protected by a ditch. This artist’s impression gives us some idea of what it would have looked like:

![Artist’s impression of the late Romano-British farmstead](image)

The occupants were probably an extended family of about 20 people (including aunts, uncles & cousins etc.) who lived off cereal crops and animals that probably included cattle, sheep, pigs and horses. Although they were near the river, they drew their water from carefully prepared wells. These penetrated the water-table to a depth of up to 2 metres (approximately (6 feet). Some were lined with wicker basket work which formed
a crude filter. When the site was excavated in the mid 1970’s, archaeologists also found wells with stone linings.

Examples of wells found on the site

Wicker lined well

Stone lined well
The Romano-British Farmstead

Description from a paper by Brian Dix, the resident archaeologist in 1978

“The homestead, although now transferred to a more open situation, continued as an integral part of the surrounding field system. A succession of circular and rectangular timber-framed buildings evidence the longevity of occupation at the new site, which culminated in the 4th Century with the construction of a fairly substantial ‘cottage-house’. Lying one side of the living area was a yard containing two stone-lined wells and covered drying kiln in addition to other ancillary structures such as a circular hut.

With the close of the Roman period, there is a break in the settlement history of the site until the Middle Saxon period.”
Collecting the evidence

So how do we know all this about an ancient farm, its building and its wells? The location of the wells was known even before quarrying started. The local farmer who owned the land used to complain of deep hollows in his pastureland that threaten to swallow up the wheels of his tractor. Aerial photography undertaken by Prof J.K St Joseph of Cambridge University in the 1950s revealed the presence of habitation. In 1974, the removal of topsoil revealed a site of archaeological interest and professional excavation started in 1975, led by Brian Dix and aided by local enthusiasts. The picture below shows the quarry as it looked at the time.

The working quarry 1975

The Excavation

The archaeological excavation of the site commenced in 1975 under the direction of the Planning Department of Bedfordshire County Council, in conjunction with the Ancient Monuments Directorate of the Department of the Environment.

The ‘dig’ was lead by Brian Dix, the County Archaeologist, who enlisted the practical help of an army of local volunteers.
All this was made possible through the exemplary co-operation with the quarry site owners at the time, Hall Aggregates.

Aerial view of the excavation within the working quarry

The Findings

The evidence of the people who lived on the site was provided by the remains of several burials. The earliest graves lay in small cemeteries where whole pots were buried alongside bags containing cremated remains. Excavated skeletons included those of infants and older children. It is unusual to find burials and cremations on the same site.
Examples of pottery found on the site. The pot in the photograph on the left is a Belgaic pot contained cremated human remains.

Other finds on the site

**Fig 1:** A small collection of coins as they were uncovered. Not many coins were found as it is thought that most trade at the time was carried out through bartering...

**Fig 2:** A selection of artefacts found on the site.

**Fig 3:** Close-up of coins.

**Key**

**Fig 1:** A small collection of coins as they were uncovered. Not many coins were found as it is thought that most trade at the time was carried out through bartering...

**Fig 2:** A selection of artefacts found on the site.

**Fig 3:** Close-up of coins.
Where to see the artefacts

All the artefacts found at the site are currently stored in Bedford Museum now called The Higgins. It is undergoing a major redevelopment and will reopen in Spring 2013.

The refurbished museum will feature new displays, temporary exhibitions and extensive learning and events programmes. A new, single entrance foyer will lead through to redeveloped galleries, large activity spaces, a shop, and a cafe.

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Further Reading:

Archaeological Assessment of Harrold November 2003
http://www.bedfordshire.gov.uk/Resources/PDF/EnvironmentAndPlanning/HeritageAndEnvironment/Harrold%20EUS.pdf

Odell Romano-British Farmstead
http://www.bedfordshire.gov.uk/CommunityAndLiving/ArchivesAndRecordOffice/CommunityArchives/Odell/OdellRomano-BritishFarmstead.aspx

A Romano-British ‘Chimney Pot’ from Odell
http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=7839822

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