

Monuments to the Dead: Excavations at West Meon

Bronze Age and Saxon archaeology

Digging up the past

The TVAS archaeology team, working on behalf of Drew Smith Ltd and Hyde Housing Association have been excavating an area on the outskirts of West Meon, Hampshire in advance of housing construction. Preliminary work in the form of trial (evaluation) trenches identified a Bronze Age ring ditch and a small number of Saxon graves. We have opened up the area around the ring ditch to identify its full extent and record and excavate it and any burials that may be at risk from the future development of the site.

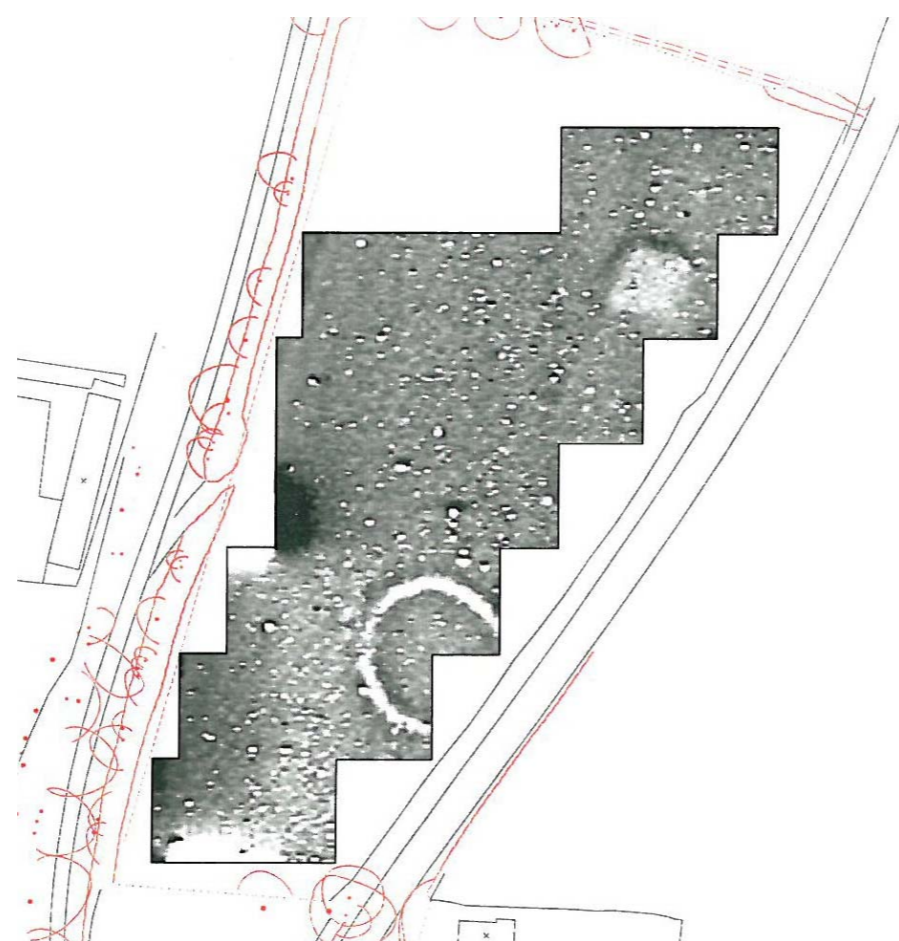
West Meon through time

Prior to these discoveries, the history of the site on the northern edge of West Meon appears to have been largely unremarkable. The earliest evidence of human impact on the area is the Bronze Age ring ditch, first identified from cropmarks on aerial photographs and later confirmed by geophysical survey and the archaeological evaluation. Following this, the site appears to be undisturbed, though it may have been used as farmland, until the Saxon period when it was then used as a cemetery, presumably for members of the local community.



Above: The urned cremation burial from the centre of the ring ditch.

Right: The geophysics plot for the site. The signature of the ring ditch can be clearly seen.



The early Saxon period (450-650 AD) in Hampshire is represented archaeologically by the remains of rural cemeteries, individual farms and small hamlet-sized settlements. Cemeteries similar to that found at West Meon have previously been discovered at Itchen Abbas, Alton and Andover, to name but a few. By the time of the middle Saxon period (650-850 AD), the small rural settlements have become rarer, (at least so far as recorded) and the focus shifts to two growing towns: Winchester and Hamwic – the Saxon trading port at modern Southampton.

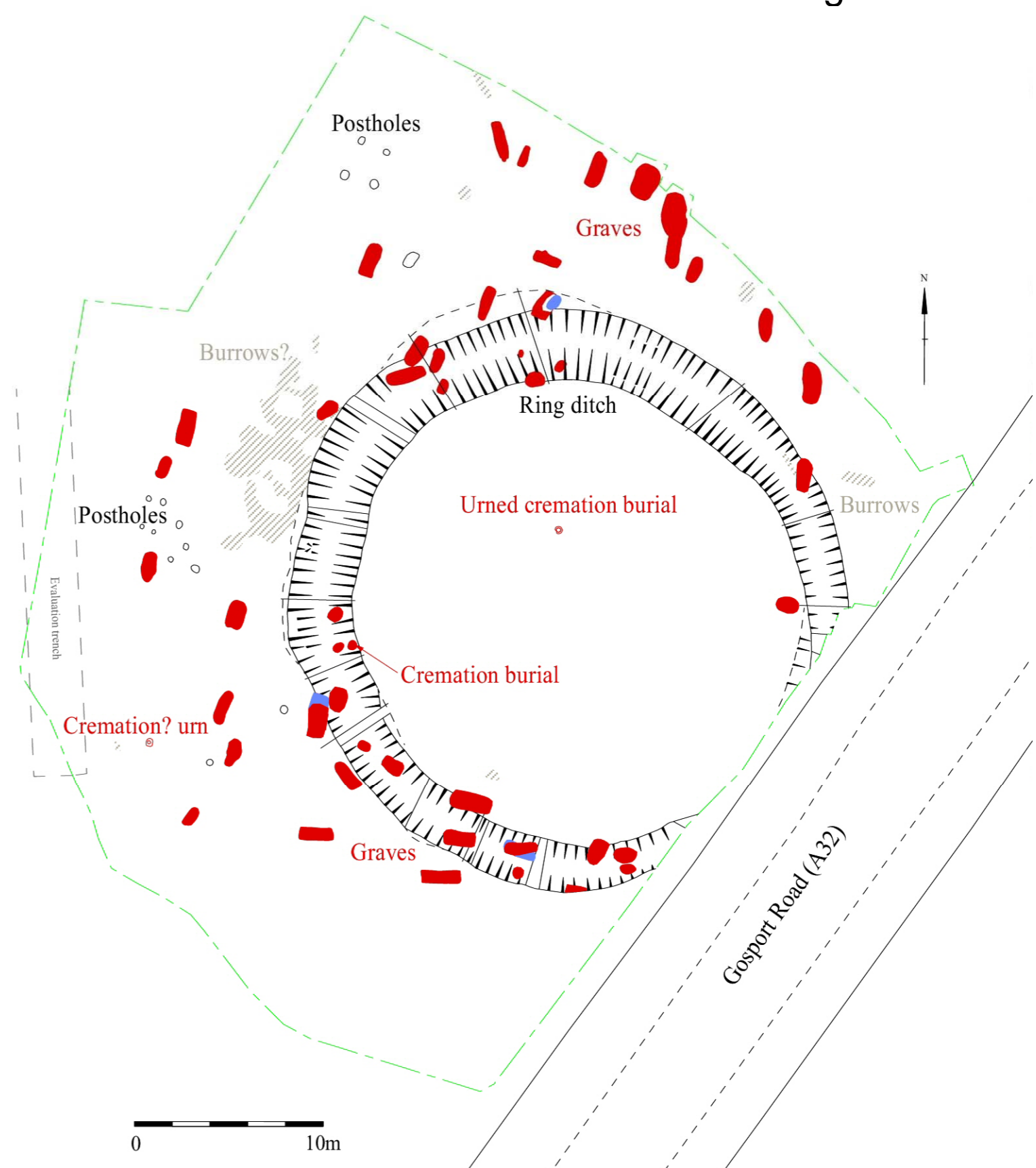
A number of Anglo-Saxon charters refer to grants of land on the River Meon to “the king’s thegns and relations.” However, these have not been closely located on the ground so cannot prove the antiquity of West Meon. Domesday Book records that the manor of West Meon was held by the Bishop of Winchester in 1086, and had been held by the Church before the Norman Conquest. The manor was transferred to the prior and convent of St Swithun, Winchester in 1205. It returned to the Bishop at the Dissolution in 1541, though in 1544 it was granted to Thomas Wriothesley, earl of Southampton.

A study of the historical maps which depict West Meon and its surrounding landscape show that the site has been agricultural land for the past 300 years.

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The first of the two main features discovered on the site is the Bronze Age ring ditch. This would have once formed the circular ditch around a burial mound or barrow with the material excavated from the ditch being used to build up the mound in the centre. The example uncovered here is 29m in diameter with a ditch that is c.3.5m wide and 1.5m deep. The mound itself no longer exists, most likely having been levelled by ploughing since Saxon times. It is unclear who the burial mound was for but a single deposit of cremated bone in a pottery urn was discovered near the centre of the area enclosed by the ditch, and presumably put in before the mound was raised. An un-urned cremation deposit was found on the lip of the ditch and a further urn was excavated to the southwest of the ring ditch. The style of the pottery suggests that the barrow probably dates from the early Bronze Age, around 1700 BC.

As the ring ditch was excavated the upper layers of fill were found to contain numerous struck flints. It appears that the flint nodules within the chalk from the ditch digging had been used as a convenient source of raw material for flint tools in the Bronze Age.



Above: The plan of the excavated site showing the ring ditch and Saxon burials.



Right: The ring ditch during excavation.

By the time that the Saxon cemetery was established the ring ditch was almost fully infilled though the mound was likely to be still visible and a significant place in the landscape. Barrows are sometimes referred to in Saxon land charters (but not here). Graves had been dug into the upper layers of the ditch fill and were found to be at similar depths to those dug into the undisturbed chalk. There are no Saxon burials within the area enclosed by the ring ditch. This could indicate that the mound was still respected, but is more likely to be due to a loss of burials dug at shallow depth when the mound was over-ploughed.