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1-D array of perforated diode neutron detectors

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ABSTRACT

Performance of a 4 cm long 64-pixel perforated diode neutron detector array is compared with an identical array of thin-film coated diodes. The perforated neutron detector design has been adapted to a 1-D pixel array capable of 120 μm spatial resolution and counting efficiency greater than 12%. Deep vertical trenches filled with ^6LiF provide outstanding improvement in efficiency over thin-film coated diode designs limited to only 4.5%. This work marks the final step towards the construction of a much larger array consisting of 1024 pixels spanning 10 cm. The larger detector array will be constructed with a sub-array of 64-pixel sensors, and will be used for small-angle neutron scattering experiments at the Spallation Neutron Source of Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

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1. Introduction

A 1-D array of thin-film neutron detectors was previously fabricated specifically for small-angle neutron scattering measurements at the Spallation Neutron Source (SNS) of Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL). The first prototype array, consisting of 32 channels, demonstrated spatial resolution of 119 μm [1], and also the successful operation of newly developed readout electronics [2]. The simple array also demonstrated the advantage of solid-state detectors in neutron imaging. Benefits include precise micron-scale structures and high counting rates in the range of 10^6 cps.

Thin-film-coated diode detectors are, however, limited in neutron counting efficiency to 4.5% [3]. Recently developed perforated diode neutron detectors offer a solution to the low-efficiency limit of coated diode neutron detectors. Perforations as deep as 100 micrometers in theory can achieve counting efficiency as high as 12% [4]. In the present work, the thin-film detector array design has been modified with perforated diode pixels to achieve a more efficient array. This new sensor has been expanded to 64 pixels from the previous 32-pixel design and marks the final progressive step before tiling multiple sensors into a larger 1024-channel system.

2. Sensor design and fabrication

Each pixel is 4 cm long and is just wide enough to accommodate a single trench 30 μm wide that runs the entire length of the pixel. A p-type diffusion is performed on high-resistivity n-type silicon ($> 10,000 \Omega\text{cm}$) to layout a diode 20 μm wide around the perimeter of the trench (Fig. 1).

With 5 μm buffer spacing between the diffused diode region and the etched trench, the total pixel is 80 μm wide overall. This buffer spacing, in addition to a silicon dioxide passivation in the trench, has been shown to substantially reduce leakage current [5]. Each pixel is separated by 20 μm spacing, making the final array pitch 100 μm .

Each trench was plasma etched to a depth of 90 μm . The etch chemistry was optimized to keep the trench sidewalls as smooth as possible and hence to minimize leakage current from surface damage. Careful attention to etching is imperative since deep structures can create surface damage that can propagate into the bulk region of the device thereby compromising device performance.

Shallow diffusions only 40 μm wide over a length of 4 cm can provide significant resistance, enough to reduce signal magnitude for radiation interaction events at length from the bonding pad. To alleviate the problem, a metal layer of Al was deposited on top of the diffused region to minimize resistance along the vast length of the pixel. The Al layer also assisted with wire bonding. After the perforated diode array was fabricated with the contacts, ^6LiF powder was forced into the trenches (Fig. 2) and a very thin layer of Humiseal[®] was applied as a protective coating (Fig. 3).

In the final system, the array chip will mount on a small-circuit board with traces fanning out to connectors. The connectors allow

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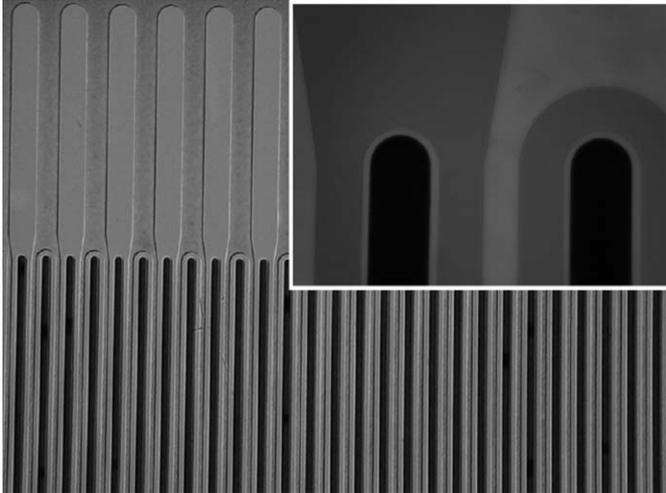


Fig. 1. Perforated diode pixel array pattern. Large bonding areas extend from the pixels. Close-up shows the 5 μm spacing between trenches (black) and diffused area (dark grey).

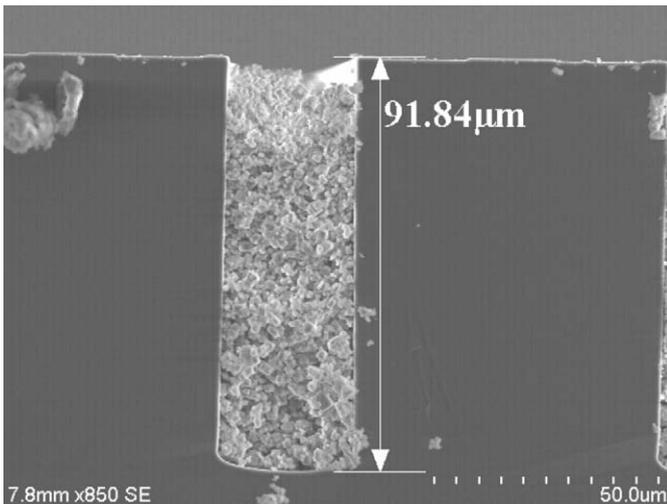


Fig. 2. A cleaved device reveals a trench completely filled with ${}^6\text{LiF}$ powder.

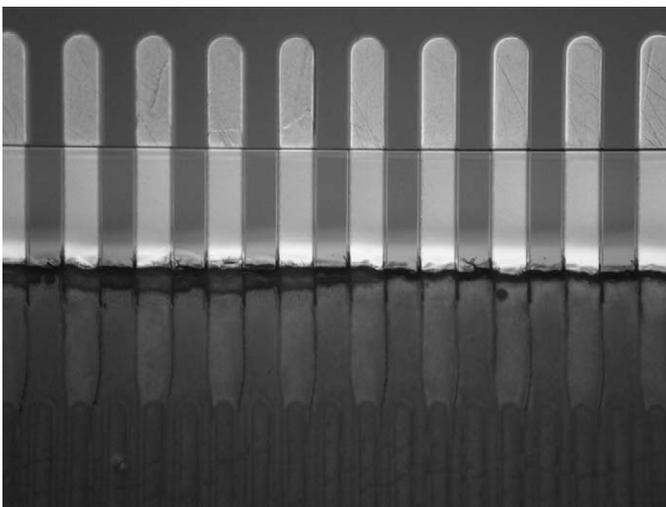


Fig. 3. Metalized, coated, and sealed pixel array with exposed bonding pads.

for a modular design where the sensor array may be easily removed or replaced from the signal processing electronics. Those electronics are all populated on a single large motherboard that provides digital communication to a PC. The motherboard electronics fan out away from the sensor array such that sensitive components conveniently reside outside of the beam path. This design reduces concerns of radiation damage and excessive beam scatter.

3. Experimental setup

3.1. Efficiency test

Several 64-pixel chips are to be tested for functionality before being assembled into the 1024-channel system. A failure discovered after mounting 16 chips could be costly and time-consuming to correct. Therefore, a test box was constructed that allows temporary electrical connection to each pixel through two custom probing cards. The alternating pixel design allows for 32 connections from each end of the array, easing the burden of fanning out to larger structures (see Fig. 4).

Switches on the test box allow the user to test separate pixels. An Ortec 142 pre-amplifier was connected to the test box and standard NIM electronics were used to collect the pulse height spectra from each pixel individually. The pre-amplifier provides an inherent -1.3 V that is applied to the detector and is sufficient for operating these self-depleting structures. Beam testing was performed in a diffracted beam from the TRIGA Mark II nuclear reactor on-site. The diffracted beam is an excellent source of thermal neutrons at a flux of $2 \times 10^4\text{ cm}^{-2}\text{ s}^{-1}$, calibrated periodically with a He^3 detector.

With the array located at the center of the neutron beam, a spectral collection was taken on several pixels with and without a Cd sheet blocking the beam. The Cd shielding blocks thermal neutrons, yet will allow for epithermal and higher energy neutrons to pass. Also, the neutron-irradiated Cd will produce prompt gamma-rays in a distribution of energies that can extend into the MeV range [6], which can give some indications of the expected sensitivity to background gamma-rays.

3.2. Spatial resolution demonstration

The first prototype array was delivered to ORNL for demonstration. On a neutron beam line at the High Flux Isotope Reactor (HFIR), a 300 μm slit was placed in beam. The 32-channel system collected counts from all channels simultaneously and plotted them on-screen with a LabView program as they were collected.

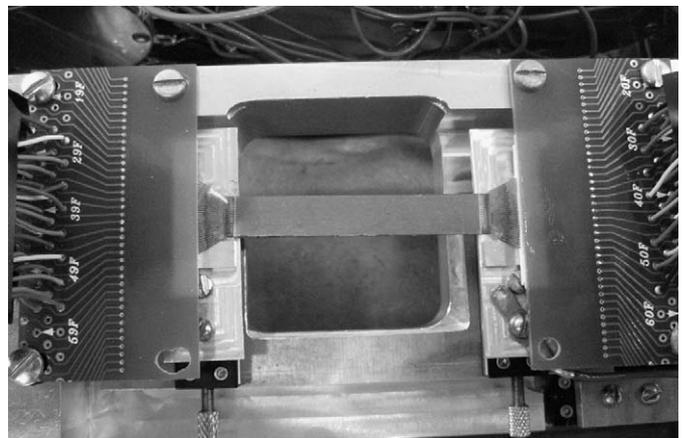


Fig. 4. 64-pixel chip test box with two 32-channel probe cards connecting each end of a sensor array chip. The sensor array bridges across a large cavity to minimize beam scatter.

4. Results

4.1. Efficiency test

A typical spectrum collected from a perforated pixel array shows substantial signal formation in the presence of neutrons. The Cd response is quite repressed indicating that the neutron beam has a low epithermal neutron component and also that the detector is quite insensitive to gamma-rays radiating from the Cd sheet (Fig. 5). The sensitivity of perforated diode neutron detectors to background gamma-rays has been reported elsewhere to be low [7]. The net sum of thermal neutron counts corrected for the area of the pixel in the beam led to a calculated intrinsic efficiency of 12% for each pixel on average, which matches well to theoretical predictions [8].

4.2. Spatial resolution demonstration

The 32-channel array was operated for 10 min in a HB-2D Future Development beam at HFIR perturbed by a single 300 μm beryllium slit. The slit was approximately 2.5 cm away from the array. Most gas detector arrays offer spatial resolution on the order of millimeters and may have some difficulty resolving such a narrow slit.

The prototype array, however, was able to reveal the presence of the narrow structure accurately (Fig. 6). Significant counts accumulated on 4 of the 100 μm wide pixels. With the slit aligned to the long-narrow pixel structure, it is easily resolved due to the fine pitch of the array. The full-width half-max of the count

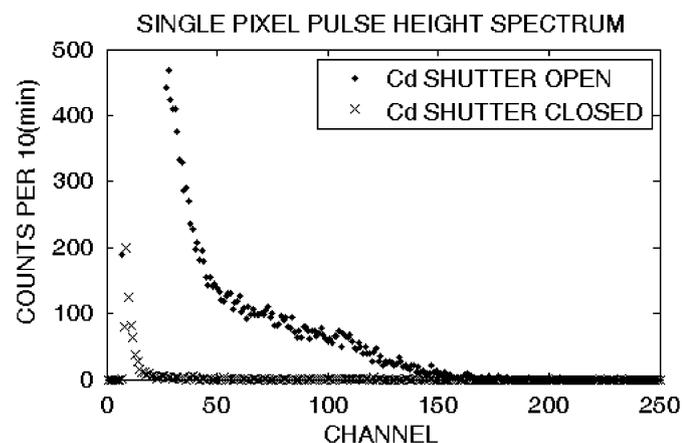


Fig. 5. Neutron response from a pixel in the perforated diode array. The difference between the two plots gives true thermal neutron response.

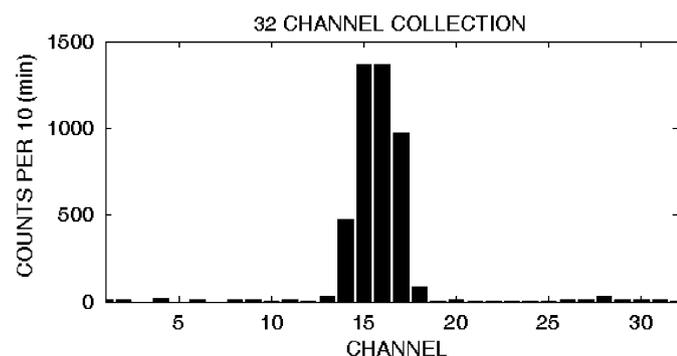


Fig. 6. Counts resulting from exposing the array to neutrons passing through a 300 μm slit.

distribution in the plot was indeed 300 μm , equal to the width of the 300 micrometer beryllium slit.

5. Conclusions

Testing of the new perforated diode pixel array proved to be successful. Pixel chips containing 64 pixels each can be tested on beam line with temporary probing offering valuable quality tests before permanent mounting in a 1024-channel assembly. It can be used to easily identify dead pixels before permanent assembly as well as uniformity across the array.

The slit experiment proved that this design will be capable of precisely locating diffraction peaks. Overall this new design will extend capabilities in the study of material stress and strain at the SNS.

6. Future work

This perforated pixel design holds some unique advantages regarding spatial resolution. In the substantial space between the absorbing trenches, neutrons stream freely through the detector. Additional arrays can be stacked such that trenches align with those streaming paths. The spatial resolution can thus be divided with each stack. In the present case for instance, the spacing between trenches is 70 μm and two identical arrays with trenches 30 μm wide can be stacked beneath the original array so that the trenches occupy 60 μm of the streaming path. Such a structure would offer 40 μm spatial resolution, or one-third of the single array. Furthermore, this increase in spatial resolution could be accomplished with very little loss in efficiency.

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