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A MIDDLE BRONZE AGE HOARD FROM A PRE-HISTORIC SETTLEMENT SITE AT ST. MILDRED'S BAY, WESTGATE-ON-SEA

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INTRODUCTION

During November 1987, gale-force winds scoured away sand from the chalk of the wave-cut shelf at St. Mildred's Bay, Westgate-on-Sea, in the Isle of Thanet. Subsequently, Mr Peter Brenchley, a local resident, observed features cut into the shelf, these having been concealed during the previous twenty years of his regularly taking walks on the beach. He contacted the Isle of Thanet Archaeological Trust, who dispatched an excavation team to investigate.

On examination, the remains of a prehistoric settlement were found. These covered an area of about 150 m. \times 70 m., and consisted of pits, an infilled ditch, and a preserved ancient horizon in which could be seen the trunks of fallen trees and what appeared to be the remains of huts. A surface scatter of pot-sherds in Late Bronze Age fabrics was sampled, and the hoard of Middle Bronze Age palstaves that is the subject of this report was discovered by metal detector. Because of the anaerobic nature of the silts, organic materials were found to be well preserved.

It seems probable that the site was inundated during a series of marine transgressions. Levels taken at the bronze hoard find-spot and at the centre of the pottery scatter are in good accord with a now well-established graph of rising Flandrian sea levels.¹ The evidence from the site can usefully be compared to that from the discoveries made at Minnis Bay, Birchington, in 1938.² The two sites, together

¹ R.J.N. Devoy, 'Flandrian Sea Level Changes and vegetational History of the Lower Thames Estuary', *Phil. Trans. Roy. Soc.*, (1979), B 285, 355-407.

² F.H. Worsfold, *PPS*, ii, (1943), 28-47.

with those revealed by aerial survey and other means,³ form a developing picture of Bronze Age Thanet as being populous and perhaps economically and culturally important.

A report on the St. Mildred's Bay remains has been prepared; publication has, however, been delayed since wave attrition dictates ongoing investigation, if this interesting and important site is not to share the fate of 'Westward Ho!' and others.⁴

THE SITE

This is situated on the eastern foreshore at St. Mildred's Bay, and is centred about 100 m. seaward of the promenade, (N.G.R. TR 32807050). It lies in front of a slipway constructed as part of a seaplane base in World War I.

A vanished feature of the cliff tops nearby to the east was a series of mounds known as 'Westgate Humps'. The writer has interviewed a local resident who remembers the site from boyhood, and who volunteered that he now realises that the humps were round barrows.⁵ Sadly, the mounds were removed by workmen in 1931 to provide material for a railway bridge embankment.

The Bronze Hoard was found in Area B, a large area of what appears to be brickearth, its pitted surface being scattered with burnt flint, animal bones, and (ancient) oyster shells. Along its northern edge it exhibits a concentration of burnt flint forming a 'bank' up to 10 cm. high in places. The area is crossed by features 21 and 24. At a point near the find-spot of the bronze hoard, the surface of the area had a level of -0.09 m. O.D.

Feature 21 appears to be a section of ditch curving inshore at each end. It is about 2 m. wide, and is filled with a light blue-grey sticky clay or silt. The bronze hoard was found in this clay at a depth of c. 45 cm. from the surface (-0.54 m. O.D.), and 0.70 m. from the apparent edge of the ditch.

Feature 24 is a band of dark brown clay or silt running parallel to Feature 21, and cut by it in places. Although darker than the surface of Area B, it is similar to it in texture, as might be the case if it

³ See: The Trust for Thanet Archaeology, (1988), 'The Thanet Sites and Monuments Record.'

⁴ N.D. Balaam, B. Levitan, and V. Straker, *Prehistoric and Romano-British Site at Westward Ho!, Devon*, BAR 181, Oxford, 1987, in which the loss of the site area by wave attrition is mentioned throughout.

⁵ Information from Mr F. Chandler, by letter 2.8.87.

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were a pallisade trench or small ditch that had infilled naturally on dry land.

A natural assumption is that the hoard was buried in the side of the ditch cutting Area B (feature 21). It may, however, belong to an horizon overlaid by the brown loam of Area B as a result of valley downwash. Should some future sectioning of feature 21 support the latter thesis, this would allow conjecture that the hoard had been deposited in a marsh.

THE BRONZE HOARD

The palstaves were found laying in a row with their cutting edges vertical and pointing inshore on a line roughly south-east. It was observed that two of the axes were fragmented in a way that would normally require considerable force; despite this the fragments seemed to be more or less *in situ*. A feature of the ten palstaves is their ochre-coloured patina, this being quite unlike that usually found on bronzes from terrestrial or marine contexts. In places the patina bears deposits of bright copper, perhaps an electrolytic phenomenon.

The silt around and under the palstaves was hand-sorted and passed through a series of sieves down to 300 microns aperture. Among the organic remains so isolated were pieces recognisable as birch bark, their inner surfaces bearing cast impressions left by palstaves, and fragments of what appeared to be grass blades. While reconstruction was not possible, these materials seem to have once formed some kind of container for the hoard. All the palstaves belong to the Ornament Horizon, and fall within the Anglo-Welsh Series. The group can, therefore, be attributed to the period 1350–1250 B.C. All are unlooped and low-flanged.

Decoration and dimensions are as listed below and illustrated in Fig. 1.

- | | |
|--|-------------|
| (1) Trident decoration formed by raised ribs. | L. 16.9 cm. |
| (2) Indented shield decoration. | L. 16.3 cm. |
| (3) Vertical slot decoration. | L. 16.8 cm. |
| (4) Indented shield decoration with vertical ribbing. | L. 15 cm. |
| (5) Indented shield decoration and raised median rib. | L. 16 cm. |
| (6) Combination of raised-rib trident decoration on one side, raised median rib and intended shield on the other. Raised ribs following blade edges. | L. 14.8 cm. |

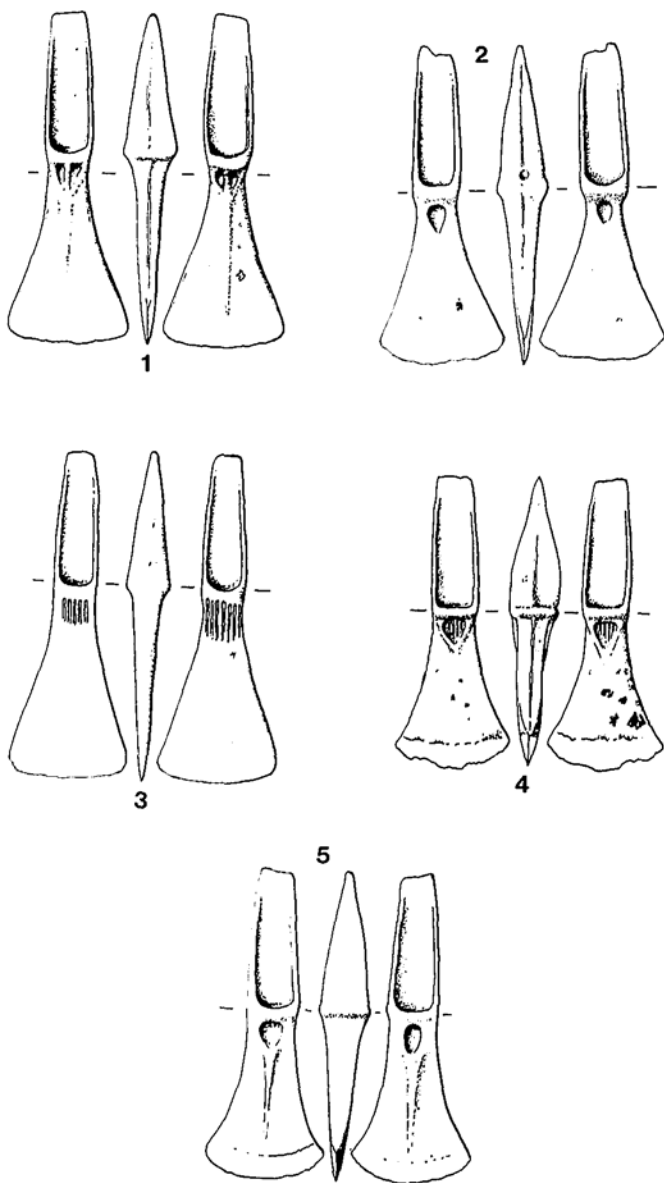


Fig. 1. The St. Mildred's Bay hoard (Scale: $\frac{1}{4}$).

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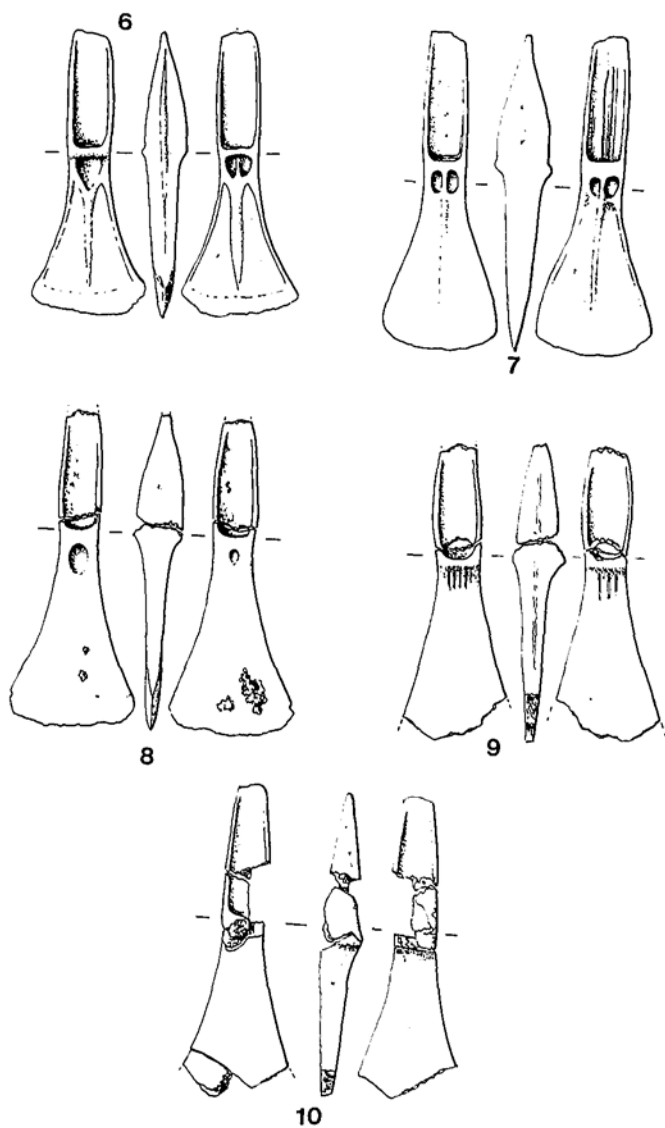


Fig. 2. The St. Mildred's Bay hoard (Scale: $\frac{1}{4}$).

- | | | |
|------|---|-------------|
| (7) | Raised-rib trident decoration combined with indentations and ribs following blade edges. Haft slot bears vertical striations. | L. 16.5 cm. |
| (8) | Indented oval decoration | (broken) |
| (9) | Indented vertical ribbing decoration | (broken) |
| (10) | Undecorated | (broken) |

In seeking comparisons for the St. Mildred's Bay palstaves, the immediate material is the Birchington hoard.⁶ This consisted of fourteen palstaves found buried in an urn that has been considered a local variant of the Deverel-Rimbury globular urns.⁷ The bronzes survive in the Powell-Cotton Museum at Birchington and have recently been drawn.⁸ Although the passage of time has not served them well, it is still possible to determine that several of them are so similar to axes in the St. Mildred's Bay hoard that they were almost certainly cast in the same mould. The St. Mildred's Bay palstave illustrated in this text as no. 1 has two parallels in the Birchington hoard, no. 3 has one, no. 7 has one, no. 10 has two, and no. 9 has a possible counterpart.

A further parallel discovery once made close by the St. Mildred's Bay site seems previously to have gone unnoticed by archaeologists. In 1724, a farmer, William Castle, found a hoard of twenty-seven palstaves while digging a 'sea-gate' through the cliffs. Lewis illustrates seven of the axes. Apart from two having 'ringles' (loops), the engraving seems to represent palstaves very similar in shape and ornament to those from St. Mildred's Bay. The find spot as described in Lewis's *History of Thanet*⁹ seems to have been north of 'Mutterer', a hamlet later known as 'Mothericks' and which survived as 'Mutrix Farm' until the early years of this century. If so, the hoard was found at most only 500 m. east of the St. Mildred's Bay site.

DISCUSSION

The St. Mildred's Bay site comes as the culmination of a series of discoveries bearing on the importance of Thanet during the Bronze

⁶ Powell-Cotton and Crawford, *Antiq. Journ.*, iv (1924), 220-6.

⁷ T.C. Champion, 'The Bronze Age in Kent', in (Ed.) P.E. Leach, *Archaeology in Kent to AD 1500*, CBA Research Report no. 48, London 1982, 34.

⁸ By Mr L. Jay for the Trust for Thanet Archaeology research group.

⁹ J. Lewis, *History of Thanet*, (1723), 137-138.

Age. When the archaeology of Bronze Age Kent was considered in 1982,¹⁰ Thanet held a respectable place on Kent's Bronze Age distribution map. The point was made that distributions of Middle Bronze Age tools, weapons, and ornaments tend to cluster round major social and economic centres, and it was suggested by Champion that 'a similar major focus awaits discovery in east Kent'.¹¹

Thanet has been subjected to intense scrutiny by field survey, aerial reconnaissance and excavation during the last six years. The resulting evidence has given the preceding comment emphasis. Aerial survey has recorded over one hundred and fifty ploughed-off round barrows in the island, over seventy-five per cent of all those known in Kent.¹² The total of Thanet's bronze hoards now stands at eight (the consequence of growing metal detector use), with single finds turning up regularly. Finally, at the time of writing some evidence has come to light indicating the existence of another and similar Middle Bronze Age site to the west of Minnis Bay.¹³ In the opinion of the writer sufficient grounds now exist to justify a research programme aimed at seeking confirmation for Champion's hypothesis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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¹⁰ Champion, *op. cit.*, 36, fig. 13.

¹¹ *op. cit. supra*, 36.

¹² S.D. Elworthy and D.R.J. Perkins, 'Newly Discovered Sites in the Isle of Thanet', *Arch. Cant.*, civ (1987), 333-9.

¹³ Thanet Sites and Monuments Record, Site no. 262. Features similar to those observed at St. Mildred's Bay have recently been reported.

