LATE BRONZE AGE, ROMANO-BRITISH AND EARLY/MIDDLE SAXON FEATURES AT HOO ST WERBURGH

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Wessex Archaeology was commissioned by Southern Water to undertake a watching brief during pipeline construction between the Hoo Wastewater Treatment Works and Whitewall Creek, 4km to the west (**Fig. 1**). The pipeline passed close to the southern edge of Hoo St Werburgh, an area of known Roman activity and postulated as a likely location of a documented Saxon settlement and nunnery associated with the royal estate of the kings of Mercia.

In order to investigate this area of interest, a section of the pipeline easement extending for some 500m between Cockham Cottages and Vicarage Lane was stripped of topsoil under archaeological control: an intermittent watching brief was maintained elsewhere along the pipeline route. All archaeological features revealed were then excavated by hand. All posthole and pit features were half-sectioned. Sections of all linear and enclosure ditches were excavated to establish date, function and stratigraphic relationships. A programme of environmental sampling was also undertaken. The fieldwork was carried out over a two-week period in August 1999.

The Cockham Cottages/Vicarage Lane section lies some 500m north of the present shoreline of the River Medway (TQ 7788 7164-7848 7174). The land typically lies at *c.* 10m OD, sloping gently south-east from Cockham Cottages to Vicarage Lane. The underlying geology comprises brickearths and Tertiary sand and gravel terrace deposits. The land was under arable cultivation prior to the stripping of the easement.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The earliest finds from the area comprise two Palaeolithic hand-axes and four flint flakes found in a small gravel pit some 380m south of the church of St Werburgh, and a further hand-axe found on St Mary's

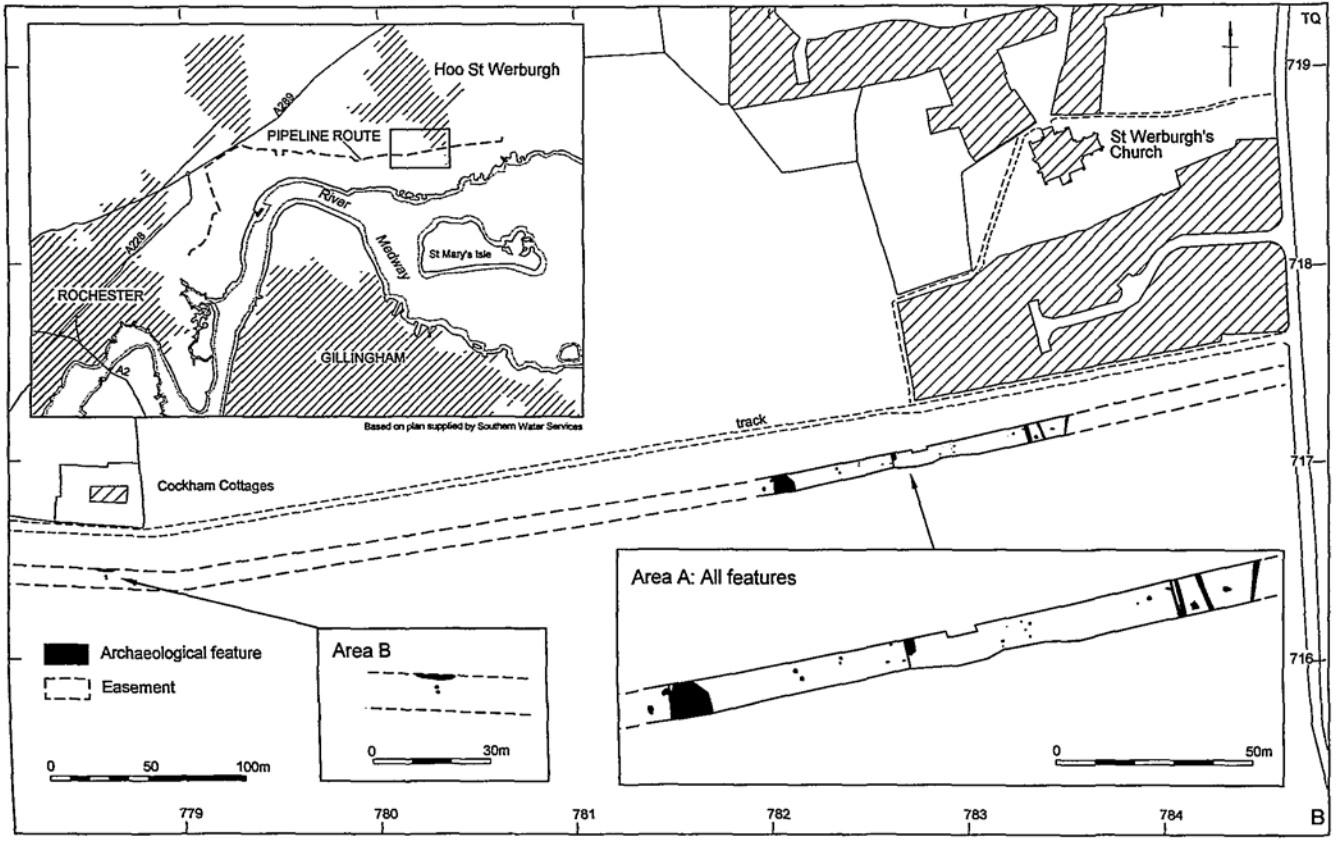

Fig. 1 Location of Site and Archaeological Features.

Isle in the Medway. Neolithic flints and a polished axe, together with Bronze Age tools were also found on St Mary's Isle. An Iron Age coin and silver torc were found to the south-west of Hoo St Werburgh, although the latter is now lost.

Finds suggest that a Roman settlement, possibly associated with evidence of pottery manufacture recovered from what is now the intertidal zone of the Medway, existed to the south-west of Hoo St Werburgh. Roman burials and buildings were uncovered during quarrying for clay and gravel on, and in close proximity to, the pipeline route; the fabric of the twelfth-century church of St Werburgh contains reused Roman brick and tile.

A document dated 664 grants land at Hoo to the monastery at Peterborough. A nunnery was subsequently founded here by Werburgh, the daughter of Wulfere, King of Mercia. Werburgh died in 700 and was canonised. In *c.* 741, King Ethelbard of Mercia, a cousin of St Werburgh, annexed Kent. Ethelbard founded a church dedicated to St Werburgh, and Hoo became the focus of a large estate documented as Werburgh Wic, a royal residence and prosperous town. The site was strategically important both for its proximity to the religious centre of Canterbury and as a base for the Mercian kings in Kent. In 854-5, 857 and 1017, Viking raiders wintered on Sheppey, and it is likely that Werburgh Wic would have been destroyed during this period.

RESULTS

Two well-defined clusters of archaeological features (Areas A and B) were encountered within the 500m section of easement between Cockham Cottages and Vicarage Lane (Fig. 1). The majority of the recorded features survived to a depth of less than 0.20m, suggesting extensive truncation of the archaeological deposits due to recent arable land use.

The largest and most significant group of features (Area A, centred on TQ 7828 7170) lay within a 160m-long section of easement, 40m to the south of the Hoo St Werburgh Vicarage. The group consisted of thirty-one features, comprising pit and posthole clusters, boundary and/or enclosure ditches and a possible post-built structure. The second group, comprising two pits and a section of ditch (Area B, centred on TQ 7788 7164) was located some 340m further to the west, opposite Cockham Cottages.

Three principal phases of activity (**Fig. 2**) were represented by the features and finds from Areas A and B, dating to the Late Bronze Age and the Early/Middle Saxon Period, with limited traces of intermediate Late Iron Age and Romano-British activity. In addition, medieval

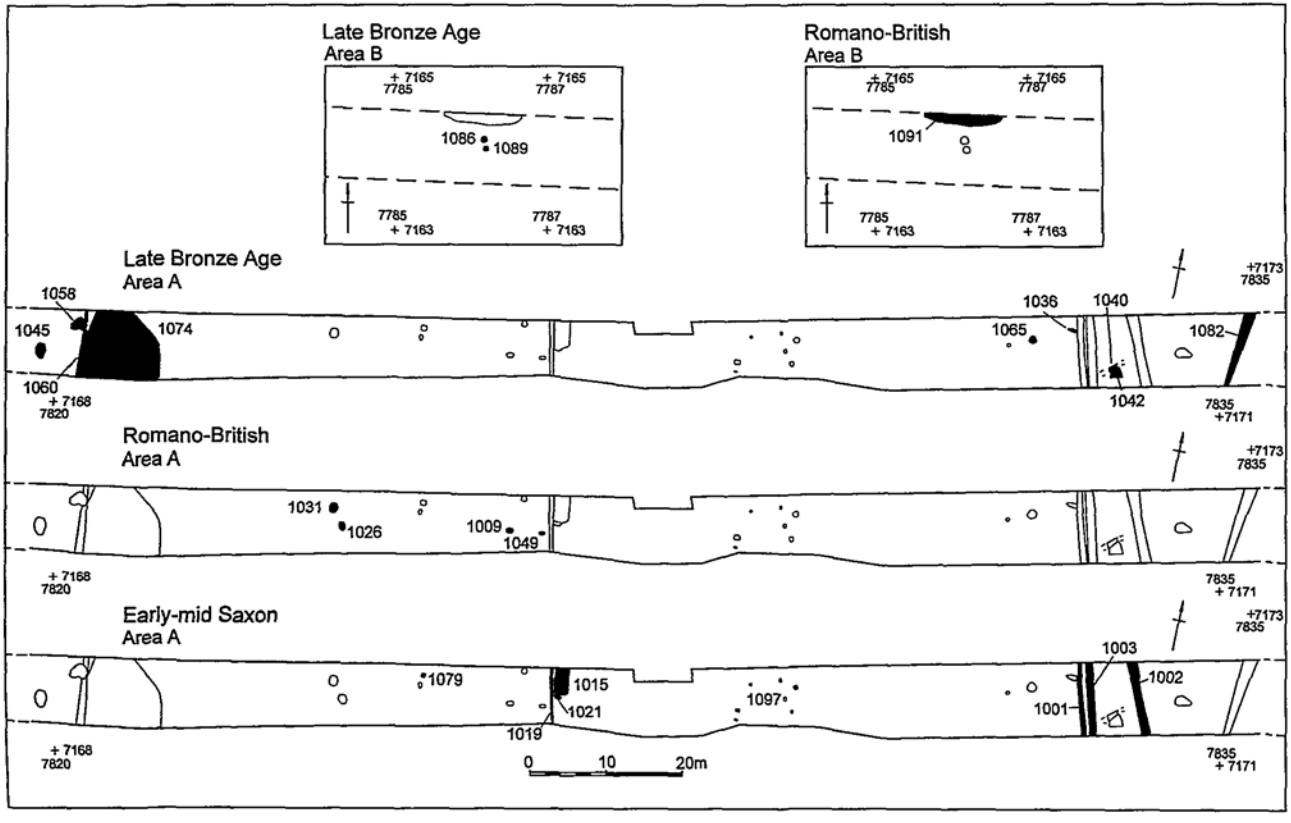

Fig. 2 Phase Plans of Areas A and B.

TABLE 1. NUMBER AND WEIGHT (IN GRAMS) OF ALL FINDS

	LBA		Rom-Brit		Early/Mid Saxon		Unphased		Totals	
	No.	Wt	No.	Wt	No.	Wt	No.	Wt	No.	Wt
Burnt Flint	-	17623	-	74	-	127	-	2253	-	20077
CBM	-	-	20	2683	6	3858	34	5334	60	11875
Fired Clay	106	2393	35	597	59	1149	24	256	224	4395
Flint	47	844	-	-	9	127	4	72	60	1043
LBA Pottery	439	4740	1	3	22	356	37	285	499	5382
LIA/R-B Pottery	-	-	12	40	21	74	3	11	36	125
Saxon Pottery	-	-	5	43	22	208	3	25	30	276
Later Pottery	-	-	-	-	4	7	8	71	12	78
Shell	-	-	4	98	48	358	3	26	55	482
Slag	-	-	-	-	-	3015	-	411	-	3426

activity was represented by intrusive pottery of possibly thirteenth/ fourteenth-century date recovered from Saxon contexts, and unstratified post-medieval pottery was also recovered. The finds (see **Table 1**) and environmental evidence are not discussed in detail here: full reports exist in the archive.

Phase I: Late Bronze Age (1100-700 BC)

Late Bronze Age activity within Area A was represented by a total of nine features. At the eastern end of Area A, a shallow linear feature [1082], 1.93m in width, ran from north to south across the easement, turning slightly to the north-east at the northern edge. A small group of pits [1065, 1036, 1042], the last of which was partly cut by a similarly dated pit [1040], lay less than 15m further to the west.

At the western end of Area A, a substantial, amorphous feature [1074] was excavated. This shallow-sided feature, between 6-9m in width and 0.78m in depth, extended over the width of the easement and produced a substantial assemblage of pottery (**Fig. 3**, 1, 3, 5) together with fragments of a briquetage vessel (**Fig. 4**, 1-2) and perforated clay tablets. (See **Appendix 1** for catalogue of illustrated finds.) The feature was cut at its western extent by a narrow, shallow linear feature [1060] running north-south across the width of the

easement. This was in turn cut by a pit 1058. A similar pit [1045] was excavated *c.* 5m to the west. In Area B, two further isolated pit features [1086 and 1089] produced larger assemblages of pottery (Fig. 3, 4, 6) and [from 1086] further fragments of perforated clay tablets.

This phase of activity is dated mainly on the basis of pottery (Table 1). A total of 499 sherds have been identified as Late Bronze Age, mainly on the basis of fabric type. All sherds are in flint-tempered fabrics, predominantly 'coarsewares' (fabrics FL1 & FL2: see **Table 2**) with a small proportion of sherds attributed to a finer well-sorted flint tempered fabric (fabric FL3), which may represent a fineware element within the assemblage. Diagnostic vessel forms are scarce but include a small number of rim sherds assigned to four vessel forms including both jars and bowls, only two of which are decorated (Table 2; Fig. 3, 1-8). On the basis of fabric types and vessel forms, and the lack of decoration, this group may be placed broadly within the plainware tradition of the post-Deverel-Rimbury ceramic style, with a potential date range between the eleventh and eighth centuries BC (Barrett 1980).

TABLE 2. POTTERY FABRIC TOTALS

Fabric	No. sherds	Weight (g)	Vessel forms Type/(no. rims)
LATE BRONZE AGE			
FL1	*212*	*2076*	*1 (1); 2 (1); 3 (2)*
FL2	205	2520	1 (1); 2 (2); 4 (2)
FL3	82	786	2 (1)
sub-total LBA	*499*	*5382*	
LATE IRON AGE/ROMANO-BRITISH			
FL1	5	37	Bead rim jar
SH1	5	5	
Greywares	18	64	
Coarse oxidised	8	19	
sub-total LIA/RB	*36*	*125*	
EARLY/MIDDLE SAXON			
QU400	1	49	
QU401	2	39	
QU402	2	14	
VE400	20	133	Rounded jar
VE401	4	34	
VE402	1	7	
sub-total Saxon	*30*	*276*	
MEDIEVAL	4	7	
POST-MEDIEVAL	8	71	
TOTAL	577	5861	

KEY TO POTTERY FABRICS

Later prehistoric

FL1 Hard, moderately coarse, clay matrix with abundant, well sorted, sub-angular flint <2mm; sparse sub-rounded quartz 0.25mm.

FL2 Hard, moderately coarse, clay matrix with sparse to moderate, fairly well sorted, sub-angular flint <5mm; sparse sub-rounded quartz <1mm; rare iron oxide.

FL3 Hard, fine, clay matrix with common, well sorted, sub-angular flint <1mm; rare sub-rounded quartz <0.5mm.

SH1 Soft, moderately coarse, slightly micaceous clay matrix with common, fairly well sorted, crushed shell <3mm; rare iron oxides.

Early/Middle Saxon

QU400 Imported wheelthrown greyware: hard, moderately coarse clay matrix; common fairly well sorted, subrounded quartz <0.5mm.

QU401 Imported wheelthrown greyware: hard, moderately fine clay matrix; moderate fairly well sorted sub-rounded quartz <0.5mm. Oxidised margins.

QU402 Hard, moderately fine, clay matrix with moderate, Sub-rounded quartz <1.5mm; sparse black glauconite 0.5mm, rare mica. Handmade; unoxidised.

VE400 Soft, moderately fine clay matrix; moderate, fairly well sorted, linear voids representing burnt-out organic temper <3mm; sparse fairly well sorted rounded quartz <0.25mm. Handmade; unoxidised.

VE401 Soft, moderately coarse clay matrix; moderate, fairly well sorted, linear voids representing burnt-out organic temper <5mm; sparse fairly well sorted rounded quartz <1mm. Handmade; unoxidised.

VE402 Soft, coarse clay matrix; moderate, fairly well sorted, linear voids representing burnt-out organic temper <5mm; sparse poorly sorted sub-rounded quartz <3mm, mainly 0.25mm. Handmade; unoxidised.

Fragments of perforated clay tablets, all in flint-tempered fabrics, were recovered from several Late Bronze Age features (Fig. 4, 3-4). Comparable tablets have been identified on a number of Late Bronze Age sites in the Thames Valley, such as Carshalton (Adkins and Needham 1985, figs 12-13) and at Mucking, Essex (Bond 1988, fig. 27). Their function is obscure, although uses in salt-making, pottery manufacture, or cooking have been suggested, none of which can be substantiated here, and it is more probable that they were used in cooking, perhaps as parts of baking ovens.

Phase II: Late Iron Age / Romano-British (c. 100 BC – AD 410)

Late Iron Age activity was represented only by a very small quantity of flint-tempered and shell-tempered pottery residual in Saxon contexts, although some flint tempered sherds attributed to the Late Bronze Age period could also be of this date. The only diagnostic sherd is a rim from an ovoid jar with incised decoration (Fig. 3, 9).

Evidence for Romano-British activity was restricted to five features, forming a small minority of all those identified. Within the main cluster of features in Area A, three shallow pits [1031, 1009 and 1049] were dated to this phase on the basis of very small assemblages of pottery, none closely datable within the Romano-British period. A fourth pit [1026] produced quantities of charred grain including barley and spelt wheat, together with pea or bean fragments and weed seeds typical of a grassland or arable environment, from its lower fill (**Table 3**). Charcoal included hazel, maple, holly, oak sapwood and hawthorn, a range consistent with domestic fuel residues (**Table 4**). The pit is likely to have had a primary storage function prior to reuse for the disposal of domestic debris, including fired clay fragments of possible structural origin.

Within Area B, part of a large feature [1091] was encountered, at least 1.10m in width and 1.10m in depth, running approximately east-west along the northern edge of the easement for at least 10m. Both pit 1009 and feature 1091 contained large concentrations of Roman ceramic building material, including roof, flue and possible hypocaust tiles. Residual Romano-British pottery and ceramic building material was also recovered in small quantities from phase III features.

Phase III: Early to Middle Saxon (AD 410-850)

Activity within the Early/Middle Saxon period within Area A consisted of a posthole structure, which may have been contained within an enclosure represented by two very different groups of north-south running linear features, 35m to the east and 20m to the west. The structure 1097, part of which lay beyond the easement to the south, was *c.* 10m in width and at least 7m in length, defined by seven postholes, each approximately 0.60m in diameter. The plan and nature of structure 1097 is unclear, and no evidence for floor surfaces, occupation horizons or functional internal features, such as storage pits or hearths, survived. Quantities of oyster shell, a small monochrome glass bead and an iron knife blade were recovered from one posthole. Environmental evidence included charred grain and weed seeds, together with hazelnut shells and charcoal.

TABLE 3. CHARRED PLANT REMAINS (EDIBLE SPECIES ONLY)

	Sample	115	116	101	111
	Context	1032	1027	1014	1012
	Feature	1031	1026	1013	1003
	Feature type	Pit	Pit	PH/Pit	Linear
	Period	Rom	Rom	Saxon	Saxon
	Volume	10	10	10	10
Cereal Grain					
Triticum sp.	Wheat, Free-threshing grain	-	1	-	2
Triticum sp	Cf. free-threshing wheat	-	-	1	-
Hordeum vulgare	Barley, asymm. hulled grain	-	-	1	-
Hordeum vulgare	Hulled Barley	2	2	2	1
Hordeum vulgare	Barley	-	7	1	-
cf. *Secale cereale*	Rye	1	-	1	-
Secale cereal/ Triticum sp.	Rye/wheat	-	-	-	1
Avena sp.	Oats	-	-	1	1
Cerealia indet	Indet. grain	1	3	5	4
Cereal Chaff					
Triticum spelta	Spelt Wheat glume base	-	2	2	-
Triticum spelta/ dicoccum	Spelt/Emmer Wheat glume base	-	2	1	1
Triticum sp.	Free-threshing Wheat rachis	-	1	-	-
Other Species					
Vicia/Pisum sp.	Vetch/Bean/Pea	-	2	-	-
Corylus avellana	Hazel nut shell fragments	-	-	20	-

To the east of the structure, three parallel linear features [1001, 1002 and 1003], between 1.20-0.90m in width and 0.20-0.45m in depth, suggest at least two phases of enclosure, one represented by a double ditch, the other by a single ditch. To the west of the structure was a further group of three linear features. The northern side of a possible enclosure entrance was defined by a steep-sided linear feature [1021], at least 1.22m in depth and 1.20m in width, running north-south and terminating in the centre of the easement. This was re-cut by a shallower, 2.20m wide terminus [1015]. A later north-south linear feature [1019] was subsequently cut across the possible entrance. An isolated pit feature [1079] was located 17m further to

TABLE 4. CHARCOAL RESIDUES FROM ROMANO-BRITISH AND SAXON CONTEXTS

	Pit	Structure 1097 posthole	Linear
	LBA 1100-700BC	Early/Middle Saxon AD 410-850	
Feature	1026	1013	1015
Context	1027	1014	1018
Sample	116	101	102
Acer	1	11	2
Corylus	6	28	9
Fraxinus	-	7	-
Ilex	1	1	-
Quercus	8s	7s, 3h	39s, 82h
Prunus	-	1	-
Pomoideae	7	27r	2
Tilia	*cf.*1	-	-

H=heartwood; s=sapwood; r=roundwood (diameter <20)

the west. There was no evidence for a bank associated with any of the enclosure ditches.

Features were dated to this phase on the basis of very small assemblages of pottery, consisting of sandy and organic-tempered fabrics which are almost certainly locally produced, but also including three sherds of imported wheelthrown greywares (Table 2), a type generally dated as mid-sixth to seventh century. Significant quantities of smithing slag and fired clay fragments were recovered from the western enclosure ditch [1015], and environmental samples produced small quantities of hammerscale, charred cereal grain and weed seeds (Table 3), together with large quantities of predominantly oak charcoal (Table 4).

DISCUSSION

The relatively small groups of features recorded here have produced evidence of three phases of occupation. The restricted area available for investigation provides only limited opportunities to expand interpretation of the site. However, the finds and environmental assemblages, although small, do hint at on-site activities beyond the domestic.

The Late Bronze Age features produced the largest pottery assemblage, characterised by domestic vessels in flint-tempered fabrics.

These are comparable with assemblages from Minnis Bay (Worsford 1943), Bridge Bypass site 5 (Macpherson-Grant 1980) and Welling (Couldrey 1988), all of which date to the tenth to ninth centuries BC. The briquetage vessel, which implies on-site salt production, finds parallels among pedestalled fragments from Mucking, Essex (Barford 1988, fig. 27), although closer in form to Late Iron Age and early Roman vessels from Canterbury (Barford 1982). The fragments of perforated clay tablets recovered from Late Bronze Age contexts in association with large quantities of burnt flint may also be related to salt production, or alternatively, they may be related to cooking activities, perhaps part of baking ovens.

Late Iron Age activity is represented only by residual pottery. The flint-tempered pottery of this period is similar to that attributed here to the Late Bronze Age and some sherds residual in Roman or Saxon contexts may also be of Iron Age date; the integrity of assemblages from Late Bronze Age contexts is not, however, in doubt.

Few Romano-British features were found, and these are dated on the basis of very small assemblages of pottery. However, there is further evidence for Roman settlement in the immediate area, including cemeteries and buildings, possibly associated with pottery manufacture exploiting the local clay deposits. Indeed, the presence of Roman ceramic building material, including fragments of *imbrices*, *tegulae* and floor or hypocaust bricks, suggests that a substantial Roman villa-type structure existed close to the site.

The post-built structure, with ditches to the east and west possibly forming an enclosure, provide more substantive evidence of Early to Middle Saxon settlement activity. In addition to evidence of domestic activity in the form of charcoal and charred grain, quantities of smithing slag and hammerscale associated with large quantities of predominantly oak charcoal indicate ironworking on site. This evidence was concentrated in one of the enclosure ditches, but the presence of domestic debris suggests that the feature was used for general rubbish disposal. Although metalworking may well have taken place outside the enclosure, the limited area of investigation makes any such identification of zones of activity speculative.

The presence within the Saxon pottery assemblage of a small number of Continental imports may have implications for the status of the site. Imported wares of this period (dated mid-sixth to seventh century) are generally confined to cemetery sites, although examples from settlement sites, such as Ramsgate (Mepham forthcoming) and Mucking, Essex (Hamerow 1993) are known. Documentary evidence points to the founding by St Werburgh of a nunnery at Hoo in the later seventh century, and Hoo St Werburgh subsequently formed the

focus of the royal estate of King Ethelbard of Mercia during the eighth century. The activity represented here may therefore be associated with an early focus of settlement close to the site of the present (twelfth-century) St Werburgh's church.

Environmental evidence in the form of charred plant remains and charcoal was recovered from Romano-British and Saxon contexts. The plant remains include cereal grain, chaff, weed seeds and remains of other plants of economic value. Cultivated crops represented by the Romano-British samples were hulled barley, hulled wheats including spelt wheat, and pulses (bean/pea). The weed seeds were essentially of arable or disturbed ground habitats. Saxon deposits produced wheat and oats with several hazelnut shell fragments. The charred plant remains probably represent re-deposited material lost through small-scale cereal processing accidents or charred as food waste and by-products thrown onto fires. There is no evidence of crop processing on any substantial scale in either phase. The absence of faunal remains precludes further speculation on the agronomy of the site.

Evidence from the charcoal indicates local access to oak, maple and ash, species which form a natural association on clay soils in many parts of southern Britain (Rodwell 1991), often with hazel, holly, blackthorn and hawthorn as understorey or marginal woodland (Table 4). Despite the proximity of the river Medway, there was no evidence of the use of wetland species such as alder or willow. The charcoal can almost certainly be attributed to fuel residues, mostly from domestic hearths. Oak heartwood, which provides high calorie firewood or charcoal fuel that is longer-lasting than the sapwood (Tillman *et al.* 1981), was present in Saxon contexts and was particularly abundant in possible industrial (ironworking) fuel residues. It was not possible to establish whether fuel was provided from coppiced woodlands, although the management of English woodland in this way was well-established by the Late Saxon period, and probably much earlier (Berryman 1998).

The watching brief and subsequent recording action have provided evidence of settlement activity from the Late Bronze Age to Middle Saxon periods at Hoo St Werburgh, with some limited evidence for on-site activities and environmental background. The small number of features encountered and the restricted area of investigation preclude any firm conclusions regarding the nature of the settlement and its economic base in any of the periods represented, although there are a number of points of interest.

The slight evidence of Late Bronze Age salt production is interesting, particularly in the use of vessel forms similar to those from

later contexts in Canterbury, which may suggest that practical Bronze Age forms continued in use into the Roman period in Kent. Although relatively few Romano-British features were present, the finds assemblage indicates more substantial occupation, presumably in the near vicinity of the site, which may be associated with local pottery production sites or agricultural estates. Perhaps most significant is the evidence for Saxon settlement of sixth/seventh-century date, close to the present church of St Werburgh. The presence of imported pottery, more commonly found on cemetery sites, is particularly noteworthy here and suggests a relatively early date for the settlement, perhaps consistent with that of the founding of the nunnery. However, there is insufficient evidence to support further speculation regarding the status of the site and its relationship to the nunnery and royal estate, and the associated settlement of Werburgh Wic.

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APPENDIX 1

CATALOGUE OF ILLUSTRATED ARTEFACTS

Pottery (Fig. 3)

Late Bronze Age

1. Bucket shaped jar, upright rim, slight neck (vessel type 1), fabric FL1. PRN (Pottery Record Number) 79, context 1085, linear 1074.
2. Bucket shaped jar, upright rim, applied finger impressed cordon (vessel type 1), fabric FL2. PRN 47, context 1041, pit 1042.
3. Shouldered jar, everted rim, neck constriction (vessel type 2), fabric FL3. PRN 78, context 1085, linear 1074.
4. Shouldered jar, upright rim, neck constriction (vessel type 2), fabric FL3. PRN 86, context 1087, pit 1086.
5. Jar plain, inturned rim (vessel type 3), fabric FL1. PRN 68, context 1076, linear 1074
6. Shouldered jar/bowl, upright rim, neck constriction (vessel type 4), fabric FL2. PRN 83, context 1087, pit 1086.
7. Bowl curved shoulder, plain slightly everted rim (vessel type 4), fabric FL2. PRN 42, context 1039, pit 1040.
8. Decorated shoulder, finger impressed, fabric FL2. PRN 29, context 1034, linear 1002.

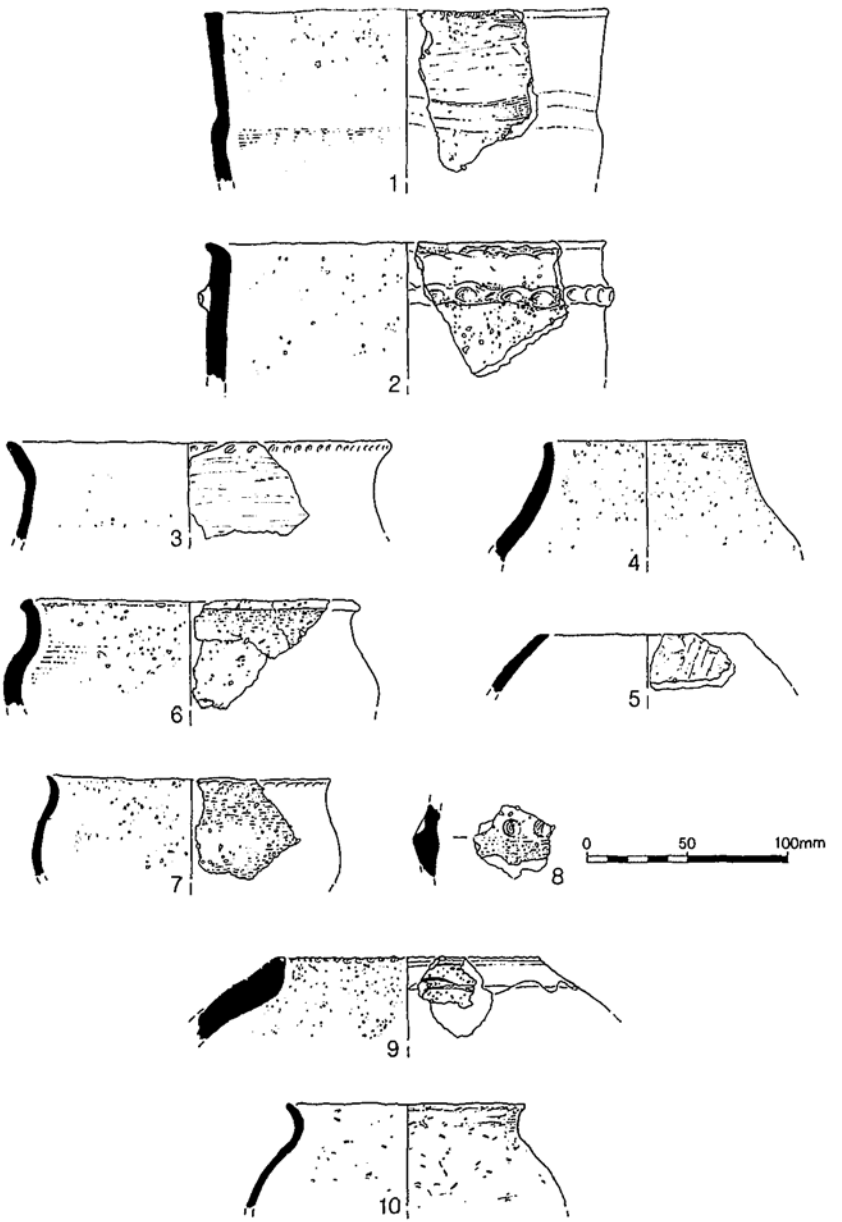

Fig. 3 Hoo St Werburgh: the main Pottery Finds.

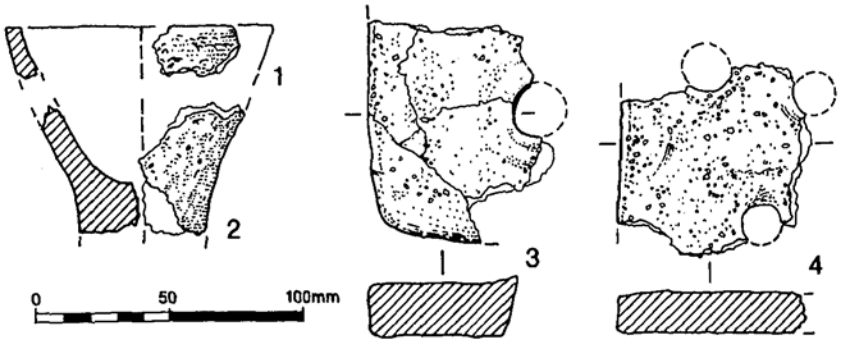

Fig. 4 Hoo St Werburgh: Briquetage/Fired Clay.

Late Iron Age

9. Jar, plain inturned rim internally thickened, incised decoration, fabric FL1. PRN 11, context 1012, linear 1003.

Saxon

10. Rounded jar, fabric VE400. PRN 18, context 1014, post-hole 1013, structure 1097.

Briquetage and Fired Clay (Fig. 4)

1. Rim of briquetage vessel, organic-tempered fabric. Context 1085, linear 1074.
2. Pedestal base, probably same vessel as No. 1, organic-tempered fabric. Context 1085, linear 1074.
3. Perforated clay tablet, flint-tempered fabric. Context 1057, linear 1082.
4. Perforated clay tablet, flint-tempered fabric. Context 1087, pit 1086.