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PREHISTORIC ACTIVITY IN THE CRAY VALLEY: A NEW SITE AT OLD BEXLEY

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An archaeological field evaluation and excavation was conducted in Old Bexley Village (NGR TQ 4945 7365) by Pre-Construct Archaeology during mid 1998. The site is located just north of Bexley High Street, its northern perimeter formed by Thanet Road, and bounded to the west by the Catholic Church, to the east by a car park and to the south by the *Kings Head* (**Fig. 1**). It was sub-rectangular in plan and measured approximately 80m NE-SW by 28m NW-SE. The site was situated on a relatively flat area of land, which formed a terrace overlooking the Cray Valley, approximately 250m to the south-east. The underlying geology is London Clay overlain by the Quaternary Gravel Terrace. The results of the evaluation and excavation have been synthesised into a phased summary and assessment report (Rae and Meddens 1998), deposited with the rest of the archive at the Bexley Museum (site code TNT 98).

THE EXCAVATED PREHISTORIC FEATURES

Cutting in to the natural deposits in the north of the site as seen in Trench 3 were four ditches, all aligned north-east to south-west and parallel to each other (**Fig. 2**). All terminated in butt ends to the north and continued south beyond the edge of excavation. They varied in size, the two westernmost ones substantially wider than the easternmost ones (**Table 1**).

Cutting into the base of ditch [55], near its northern termination and sealed by its fill, was a post-hole or large stake-hole [57]. This measured 160 x 80mm in diameter and was 130mm deep. It was filled with a mid to dark reddish brown clayey silt which may have been the remains of the rotted post. The post would appear to have been erected after the digging of the ditch but before it had silted up.

Filling all of the ditches were similar deposits consisting of mid

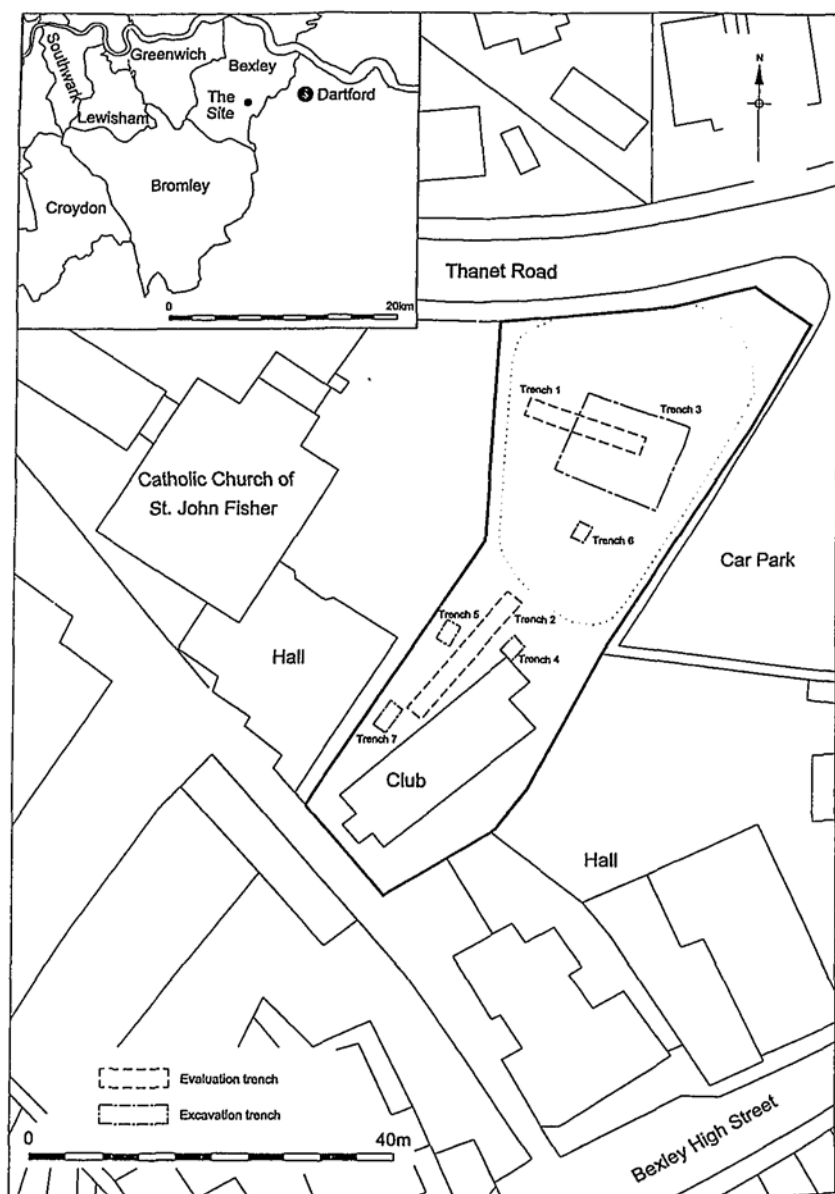


Fig. 1 Location of Site.

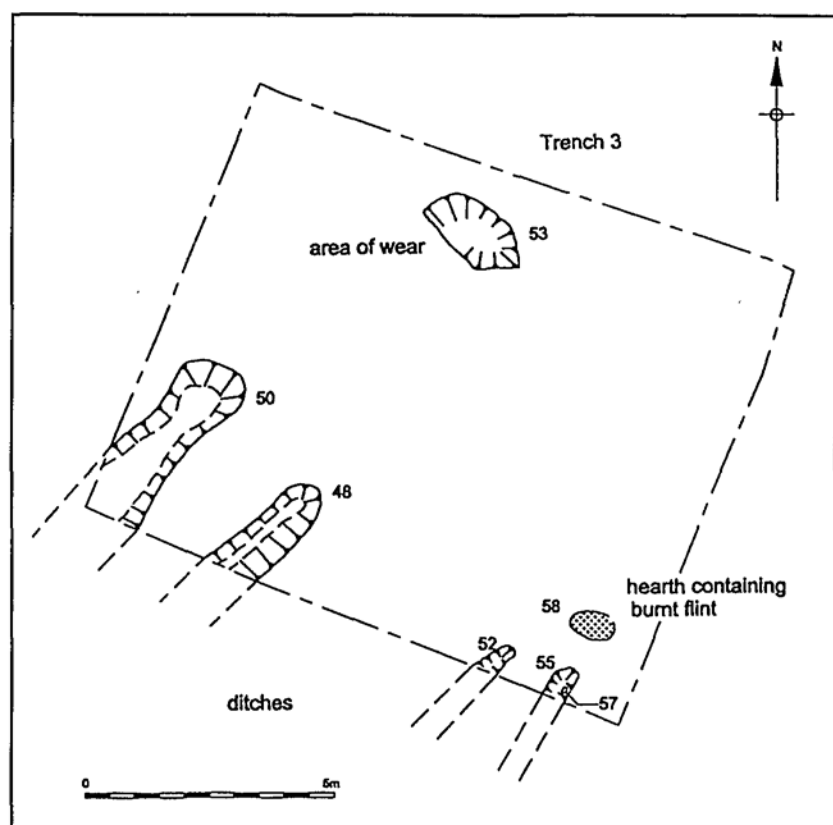


Fig. 2 Plan of Trench 3.

TABLE 1. DETAILS OF THE PREHISTORIC DITCHES

Feature	Length	Breadth	Depth	Fill No	Description of Fills
[48]	2.52m	1.02m	0.38m	[47]	Mid grey brown silty sand
[50]	4.02m	1.40m	0.51m	[49]	Mid orange brown sandy silty clay
[52]	0.72m	0.40m	0.31m	[51]	Mid grey brown sandy clay silt
[55]	0.72m	0.48m	0.31m	[54]	Mid brown grey silty sandy clay

grey brown or orange brown sands and silts. Although no laminations were observed, the ditches appeared to have silted up naturally rather than have been deliberately backfilled. The only finds recovered from the fills consisted of four struck flakes from ditch [52] and two from ditch [55]. Environmental bulk samples of the fills revealed no charcoal or any other biological remains.

Immediately to the north of ditch [55] was a shallow pit measuring 0.92m E-W by 0.56m N-S and 0.13m in depth [58]. This was filled with burnt flint and ash and contained a struck flake and blade [46].

To the north of the westernmost ditches was a large, shallow amorphous depression [53]. It was roughly oval in shape, measured 2.20m in length by 1.10m wide and was a maximum of 0.37m in depth, approximately aligned perpendicular to the ditches. Its fill was a deposit of orange brown clay-silt sand containing moderate small gravel pebbles, similar to the overlying deposit [39].

The nature and function of these features was difficult to interpret. Although of different sizes, the similarities in alignment, line of termination and fills would suggest that they were contemporary, the differences in the spacing possibly suggesting two sets of double ditches. Sites that have the most comparable features include Coldharbour Lane, Gravesend (Mudd 1994) where a palimpsest of Late Bronze Age ditches was interpreted as representing domestic occupation, land division and demarcation. Such systems of land division can also be seen at sites such as Fengate, where complex ditch systems have been associated with Bronze Age livestock management (Pryor 1996). Neither of these sites offer exact parallels, however, and larger areas would need to be examined before such hypotheses could be put forward convincingly. It was possible that the ditches were part of an enclosure or land boundary with the terminations forming a causeway; the shallow depression [53] could be a holloway caused by the movement of people or animals through the entrance. However, there was no evidence to indicate what the enclosure or boundary's characteristics were, how large they may have been, or even whether the ditches represent an eastern or western side to any possible enclosure. Likewise, no other side to the postulated causeway was seen within the area of excavation, indicating a potential width of over 10m. The small pit containing burnt flint and ash probably represents the remains of a hearth, although its exact relationship to the ditches could not be determined.

Although the precise nature and dating of these features was somewhat problematic, it was likely that they were associated with the struck flint, and therefore of prehistoric origin. In the absence of any

other evidence the most likely explanation was that they form an entrance within an enclosure or a land division. Their nature must remain speculative until further work is done in the area. As with the layout, the function of the features cannot be deduced with the limited information available. Little of a ritual nature could be discerned, and the finds were compatible with the kinds of assemblage one would expect to find from a more domestic settlement. However, imposing any rigid distinction between 'ritual' and 'domestic' or 'settlement' sites is probably not appropriate for the Neolithic and Bronze Age, and it is not worth trying to categorise the nature of this site from the very little evidence available. The features and finds from this site, although frustratingly enigmatic, do provide valuable evidence for prehistoric activity along the Cray Valley (see below).

THANET ROAD – THE LITHIC ASSEMBLAGE

The only potential dating evidence recovered from the features consisted of eight struck flints, three of which were complete or broken blades. The only secondarily retouched piece was a broken flake that appeared to have been obliquely truncated, the incomplete nature of it precluding identification as a tool type. The small assemblage meant that confident dating was impossible, although the nature of what was present suggested either an industry with an emphasis on the careful and systematic reduction of flint and a blade based technology, or selective deposition within those features. If this assemblage was representative of the industry as a whole, it would suggest a date prior to the Later Neolithic for its manufacture (*cf.* Pitts 1978a and b; Pitts and Jacobi 1979).

A much larger assemblage of burnt and struck flint was recovered from the overlying soil horizons. Although disturbed by later agricultural reworking, as indicated by the recovery of Medieval and Post-Medieval pottery from the soils, the lithic material confirms prehistoric activity at the site. The lithic material recovered was reasonably homogenous and it was likely that the majority was part of an associated, possibly long lived, industry. No truly diagnostic pieces were recovered but general considerations of technology and typology, as well as factors such as raw material procurement, would suggest a main period of occupation around the Later Neolithic or Early Bronze Age.

It was readily apparent that the lithic material recovered from the features was somewhat different to that of the assemblage recovered from their immediate surroundings. Three possible explanations for

this were: the features may indeed date from before the major period of occupation of the site; the material from the ditches may represent selective deposition; or the small size of the assemblage recovered from the features had introduced bias. Selective deposition is well attested during the Neolithic, for example, a blade and core were deposited with a complete Beaker at Hopton Street, Southwark during the Later Neolithic/Early Bronze Age (Ridgeway 1999). The evidence for selective deposition here was tentative however, and until more information concerning the nature of prehistoric activity at Bexley is revealed, a more mundane explanation may be preferable. As the assemblage recovered from the soil horizons does concentrate towards these features it would seem likely that they were associated. The differences in the material from the features and the rest of the assemblage are probably best explained by the larger assemblage indicating activity over a long period or that the assemblage recovered from the features was unrepresentative of the whole industry due to its small size.

Burnt flint

Altogether just over 10.5kg of burnt flint was recovered, including 27 pieces that showed clear indications of previously having been struck, three of them cores. All other pieces were classified as chunks; these had been humanly modified by being burnt but exhibited no signs of previous or subsequent modification. It is likely that at least some of the latter had been struck but, having become fragmented and distorted by being burnt, were no longer identifiable as such. The quantities recovered suggest use in hearth construction rather than in the kinds of activity reported from some sites, where deliberate and large scale burning of flint has been recorded (e.g. Hedges 1974-5; Barfield and Hodder 1987; Bowsher 1991; Meddens 1996). The stratified features produced just under 0.5kg of burnt flint, mostly from the shallow pit, supporting the interpretation that this was an *in situ* hearth.

The Struck Assemblage

The limited quantities recovered from the features preclude detailed statistical analysis, although certain aspects of the assemblage were worth noting. No cores or primary flakes were recovered, and the assemblage consisted of five flakes and three complete or broken blades. All but one of the struck pieces exhibited diffuse or intermediate bulbs of percussion and feathered distal terminations where these features were present. The only secondarily retouched

piece was a broken flake that appeared to have been obliquely truncated. The small assemblage meant that confident dating was impossible, although the nature of what was present suggested a soft hammer technology with an emphasis on blade production. This generally suggests a Mesolithic/Early Neolithic industrial style, although the possibility of selective deposition or bias due to sample size was very real.

Recovered from the overlying soils and deposits across the site, and concentrating towards the ditches described above, was an assemblage consisting of 581 struck flints and just under 10kg of burnt flint **Table 2**. Although of a residual nature, these finds were indicative of prehistoric activity that may have been associated with these features.

TABLE 2. COMPOSITION OF THE NON-STRATIFIED ASSEMBLAGE

Type	Number	% of Assemblage	% of Struck
Burnt Flint	535	47.9	NA
Cores	53	4.8	9.1
Flakes (Complete)	289	25.8	49.7
Flakes (Broken)	157	14.1	27.1
Retouched	42	3.8	7.2
Unclassified struck	40	3.6	6.9
Total	1116	100	100

Although the assemblage was not large by some standards enough was recovered to suggest tentative conclusions. The area to be redeveloped, and therefore excavated, was small (c. 150m²) and most probably only represents a fragment of the total prehistoric activity area, also introducing potential bias.

The raw material utilised was variable, with most originating from secondary deposits close to the parent chalk, although both fresh chalk flint and rounded gravel pebbles were also used. All types are easily available within the Cray Valley.

Most stages in the core reduction were represented. The cores represent a mix of opportunistic working and more systematic reduction strategies. Core rejuvenation flakes were identified, indicating some concern with core maintenance. Crested pieces, associated with blade production, were also identified.

The majority of the assemblage was characterised by the use of irregularly shaped cores with plain, randomly orientated platforms.

Hard hammer percussion was probably most commonly used, resulting in larger bulbs of percussion, wider striking platforms and an increased likelihood of the flake hinging. A small component appears to show much more consideration in production, with carefully prepared and faceted platforms and systematic reduction procedures. Soft hammer or indirect percussion methods were likely to have been employed, increasing the likelihood of the production of long, narrow flakes with narrow platforms, visible lips, smaller bulbs of percussion and feather terminations.

No diagnostic elements were identified and dating was difficult. There are few detailed published assemblages from south-east London/north Kent that this material can be compared to. The assemblage generally shows more care and formality in its production than is maybe typical of assemblages dating towards the end of the Bronze Age, but still does not demonstrate the concern with systematic blade production characteristic of assemblages pre-dating the Later Neolithic. Although rather crude indicators for dating individual assemblages, especially where cultural preferences and raw material may differ, the breadth/length ratios as given by Pitts (1978b) would suggest a Later Neolithic or Bronze Age date. Flake thickness and feather terminations, as given by Ford *et al.* (1984), and blade proportions as given by Ford (1987), all most closely match those given for the Later Neolithic, rather than Bronze Age. Such a date range was also suggested by comparison of the assemblage with unpublished ones from Bexley Baptist Chapel and *Hall Place*, as well as published ones from *Baston Manor*, Farnborough and Hayes Common. General considerations of technology and typology, as well as factors such as raw material procurement, would suggest that most of the material dates from the Later Neolithic or Early Bronze Age.

It was quite likely that the assemblage contained a small proportion of earlier material, as indicated by some of the more systematically produced blades and pieces reworked subsequent to recortication, although recorticated pieces formed a very small part of the assemblage. This type of technology and resultant flake size is more characteristic of a Later Mesolithic or Early Neolithic date. No major differences in the raw material utilised could be discerned from the possible earlier and later material.

Amongst the secondary retouched material, the assemblage contained a limited series of tool types, none of them particularly diagnostic. With the exception of some of the scrapers, most of the retouch was minimal and restricted in extent. The scrapers were variable in form and manufacture, some having been competently produced and others, far more opportunistically. These formed the

biggest single category of retouched tool, with various types of knives, notched implements and piercers also present. The range of artefact types was consistent with general domestic activity, although whether this represented permanent or repeated short-term use (*cf.* Cribb 1991) is uncertain. The preponderance of scrapers, piercers and knives possibly highlights more industrially oriented hide preparation and working, an activity that has been associated with riverside settlement (Bradley 1978, 56-57), although a singular association of scrapers with hide working is unclear (*e.g.* Odell 1981; Dumont 1983).

In summary, the site at Thanet Road would appear to represent a river margin processing and occupation area, with prehistoric activity probably occurring over a long period of time but concentrating towards the Later Neolithic or Early Bronze Age.

THE CRAY VALLEY IN PREHISTORY

Thanet Road represents one of a series of foci for prehistoric activity along and around the tributaries of the lower Thames (**Fig. 3**). To appreciate a fuller understanding of this activity it is necessary to consider the exploitation of the landscape as a whole, with individual sites consisting of locations where certain functions or activities are concentrated.

However, little synthesis has been undertaken on post-glacial landscape use in Kent, and the far from ideal quality and quantity of archaeological information makes it extremely difficult to discuss particular landscapes (Barber 1997). The Cray Valley can be regarded as a hospitable location for settlement, and was home to some of the most important Lower and Middle Palaeolithic sequences in the country (Roe 1981, 65-93). However, as with much of the lower Thames Valley (*e.g.* Buckley 1980; Bird and Bird 1987), evidence for post-glacial prehistoric activity comes mostly from stray, often individual, finds. An overview of finds of prehistoric date from the Bexley area is given by Tester (1985).

The village of Bexley grew up around a crossing point of the River Cray and it was this river, and the land that it crosses, that would also have been important for prehistoric inhabitants. The river valley system of the Cray and Darent pre-date the southward diversion of the Thames during the Anglian glaciation (Gibbard 1994, 176), but since then it had been truncated and incorporated as a tributary in to the Thames Valley system (**Fig. 3**). The river valley would have connected a series of differing landscapes, varying from the chalk uplands to the

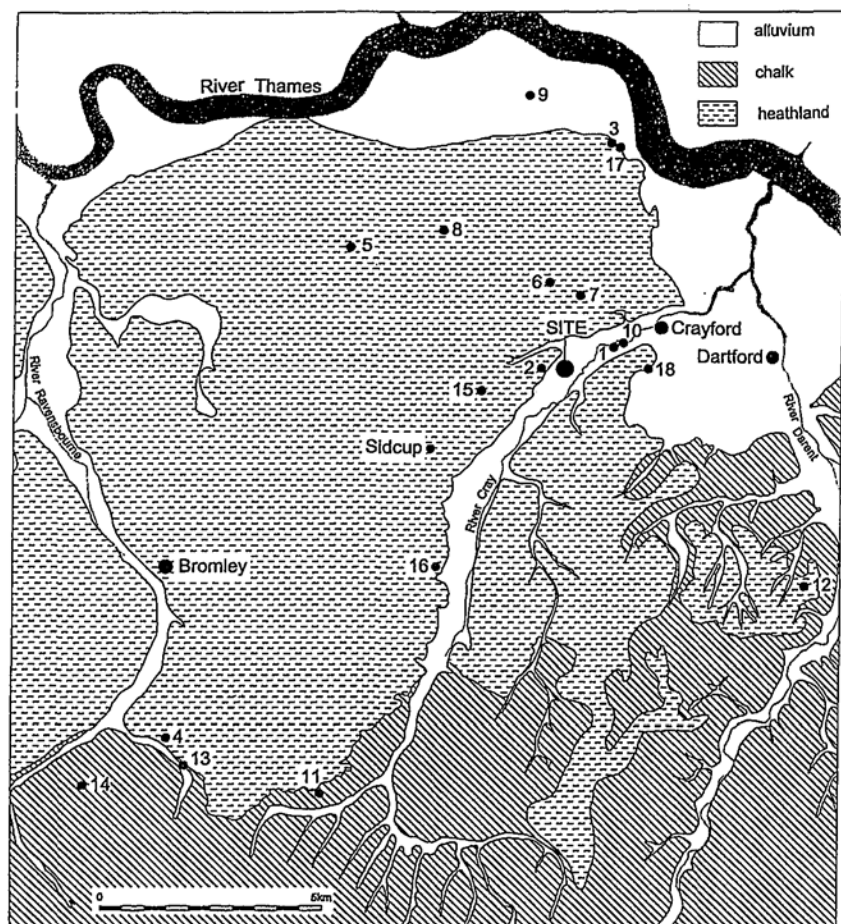


Fig. 3 Prehistoric Sites in the Cray Valley.

south, the terraces and heathlands around the Bexley area and on to the low-lying marshes in the north. From here, the whole of the Thames Valley and beyond would have been accessible.

Occupation of the Cray Valley from the early post-glacial has been indicated by Upper Palaeolithic finds having been made within a few hundred metres of the site (Chandler 1918, 96). Whether or not these were glacial or post-glacial in date was unsure, but an examination by the author of unpublished flint assemblages recovered either side of the Cray in the vicinity of *Hall Place* (site 1 on Fig. 3) suggested a

wide blade Mesolithic component with possibly even Upper Palaeolithic items present. The nearest indications of Mesolithic activity to Thanet Road come from Parkhill Road (2), where Mesolithic waste flakes and cores have been recovered (SMR Ref: 070567). Further downstream at Erith (3) considerable Mesolithic activity involving the manufacture of Tranchet axes has recently been revealed (Taylor 1997).

There has been little synthesis undertaken on the Neolithic settlement of Kent, although it has been noted as having been largely confined to riverine locations (Holgate 1981, 228), a similar situation is found in neighbouring Surrey (Field and Cotton 1987, 74) and in Essex (Hedges 1980, 34). Knowledge of subsistence strategies and agricultural activity in Kent remains enigmatic. The recovery at Erith, very close to the Mesolithic site mentioned above, of a Grimston-Lyles Hill bowl associated with a C14 date of 4040-3700 BC (Bennell 1998) implies an early date for pottery manufacture and suggests some degree of continuity in landscape use. The local landscape would have provided varied foraging opportunities, although direct evidence for agricultural activity, in the form of animal bones or botanical remains, is more elusive. The river terraces would have provided fertile and easily tilled brickearth soils, although their long history of agricultural exploitation has erased much information; better preserved sites may exist beneath the often thick build-up of alluvium along the valley bottoms. Less easy to assess are the large tracts of heathland that lay between the valleys. Evidence from other parts of the country suggests the heaths could have had viable agricultural soils during prehistoric periods. Localised degeneration of soils in these areas may have begun as early as the Mesolithic, where repeated burning may have led to the formation of podzols and heathland (Ellaby 1987, 58). The timing and duration of any agricultural activity in these areas is unknown, although a major impact during the Bronze Age in southern England has been suggested, with repeated deforestation, burning, and in some cases, agricultural activity, leading to a major extension of heathland (McPhail and Scaife 1987, 42-43, 45). Excavations at Hayes Common (4) suggest field systems were laid out on the heathland during the middle or end of the Bronze Age, although some form of activity during the Neolithic was also indicated (Philp 1973). Unlike the chalklands of Sussex and Wessex, the North Downs show little evidence of settlement until the later Bronze Age. By this time they may have supported pastoral, and possibly transhumant economies, where movement along the river valleys would have been important (Field and Cotton 1987, 95).

Although possibly more representational than functional in character, indirect evidence for cultivation around the Cray Valley is suggested by the recovery of a finely crafted flint sickle from the foot of Shooters Hill (5) (Tester 1985). Another sickle fragment has been found nearer the site, just south of Bexley High Street (SMR ref: 070548). Extensive exchange systems are suggested by finds of exotic axes. An olivine basalt axe, probably originating from Scotland, was found near Bexleyheath (6) (Tester 1959, 210; Woodcock *et al.* 1988, 30). In Erith Road (7), a stone axe from Cumbria has been recovered; and an even further travelled axe, made of nephrite and probably originating from the Alpine region, was recovered at East Wickham (8) (Tester 1959, 209; Clough and Cummins 1988, 164). In addition, a hoard of five flint axes, all probably imported into the area, was found on Bexleyheath during 1883 (6) (Merrifield 1975, 24; Tester 1985, 6-7). The continued importance of the river system during the Neolithic is demonstrated by the finding of a logboat containing a polished flint axe and a scraper in the Erith marshes (9) (McGrail 1978, 190).

Cultivation was also suggested by the recovery of a saddle quern from the eastern side of the River Cray (10), although this could date anywhere from the Neolithic to Iron Age (Tester 1963, 183-184). One of the few sites to provide more substantial evidence for prehistoric activity during this time was at the Bexley Baptist Chapel, located less than 200m to the east of Thanet Road. Here, a light scatter of Neolithic/Early Bronze Age flint flakes was recovered during construction work in 1993 (Greenwood and Maloney 1994, 198). As with that from Thanet Road, the flintwork was mostly recovered from agricultural soils and the proximity and nature of both assemblages suggests that they may represent part of the same, fairly extensive, focus for prehistoric activity. Recovered along side the Mesolithic material from *Hall Place*, and also examined by the author, was a Later Neolithic /Bronze Age assemblage whose raw material and flake shape and size also bore many similarities to that from Thanet Road.

At the head of the Cray Valley, near Mill Hill, Farnborough (11), a predominantly Neolithic/Bronze Age lithic assemblage was identified by field walking. This was characterised by somewhat crudely worked cortical scrapers, knives, notched implements and piercers (Broadfoot 1973, 24-27), all similar to the assemblage recovered from Thanet Road. Other sites that have produced similar lithic material include a scatter recovered from Sutton-at-Hone (12), on the western side of the Darent Valley (Broadfoot 1973, 28-29).

To the west of the Cray Valley a series of sites with comparable lithic assemblages have been investigated. At *Baston Manor*, Hayes (13) an

important Later Neolithic/Early Bronze Age site consisting of ditches, gullies and a lithic and pottery assemblage was recorded (Philp 1973). The lithic material had an emphasis on flake rather than systematic blade production and was dominated by cortical end, side and circular scrapers and knives (Broadfoot 1973, 14-19). Excavations on the heathland at Hayes Common (4) revealed a settlement represented by pits, postholes, ditches, pottery, quern-stones and loom-weights. The site also produced a lithic assemblage characterised by squat and chunky scrapers, often made on primary flakes, piercers, knives and notched implements. The retouch on the secondarily worked material was described as minimal with little bifacial working. Although most of the excavated settlement appeared to be datable towards the middle or end of the Bronze Age, the flintwork suggested activity on the site commencing much earlier, probably during the Neolithic (Healey 1973, 38-43). At *Wickham Court Farm* (14), field survey and limited trial trenching produced sizeable quantities of struck and burnt flint datable to the Neolithic or Bronze Age (Philp 1973, 20-23).

Other indications of activity at the end of the Neolithic and beginning of the Bronze Age include the recovery of two Beakers during gravel extraction near Erith (Tester 1985, 8), and a flint dagger found at Eynsford Crescent (15) in 1953 (Tester 1955, 204-205). More permanent settlement is indicated by a rectangular enclosure, tentatively dated to the Early Bronze Age, recorded on Broomwood Hill (16) (Parsons 1961).

The river margins continued to remain important during the Bronze Age, as demonstrated by the excavation of a wooden trackway or 'facine' at Erith (17), which had been laid down over what were by this time marshlands (RPS Clouston 1997). Activity at the end of the Bronze Age was represented by a hoard of Late Bronze Age implements found on Dartford Heath (18) in 1930 (Tester 1957, 232-233). These may be associated with the discovery during 1906 and 1907 of a spectacular hoard of seventeen gold bracelets from the same gravel workings and described as being found 'beneath the floor of an ancient hut-dwelling' (VCH Kent 1908, 338).

Evidence for post-glacial prehistoric activity and settlement along the Cray Valley is limited by a lack of well-excavated sites and biased by later agricultural and urban development of the region. Much of what there is suggests that riverine locations were preferred, continuing in use from the Mesolithic onwards, with early cultivation focusing on the light, well drained soils of the river terraces. Areas away from the rivers were likely to have been important for foraging, but it is only during the Bronze Age that there is an increase in settlement evidence from the chalklands to the south and the heathlands surround-

ing the valleys. This is broadly in agreement with the evidence found in neighbouring Surrey (Field and Cotton 1987; Needham 1987) and in Britain generally, where although a wide diversity of agricultural systems were used, an increase in intensity in land use during the Bronze Age led to land being more formally laid out, possibly extending into areas previously only sparsely utilised (Richmond 1999).

Although the nature of occupation at Thanet Road is difficult to qualify precisely, its scale, whether of long or short duration, would suggest it formed an important focus for activity. Whether it represents a settlement in the domestic sense, or a location for more ritualized political, economic or social interaction is still uncertain, but its location would have been ideal for managing interaction, both along the valley, and from there onto the surrounding heathlands.

[Editor's Note. This article is an abridged version of a report prepared by Pre-Construct Archaeology. A copy of the full report is held in the Society's Library; the archive has been deposited at Bexley Museum.]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Pre-Construct Archaeology and the author would like to thank Bellwinch Homes Limited for kindly funding this project. We would also like to thank Ken Whittaker and GLAAS for their invaluable help and advice throughout the excavation, Paul Voden of Bellwinch Homes Limited for his support, Ms S. Lydall-Schwier, London Borough of Bexley for her help at the beginning of the evaluation, and Jessica Vale, Bexley Local History Library for her help during the post-excavation research.

Special thanks also to the Site Supervisor, Alan Aitken Rae and the excavation and survey teams for their sterling efforts: Mark Rander-son, Judith Connal, John Brown, Chris Pickard, Mark Bagwell, Anne George, Dave Dobson, Gavin Glover, Rob Cross, Tim Carew, and Ireno Grosso. Thanks to Gary Brown for his project management and editing, Frank Meddens for his post excavation management, John Lowe, Josephine Brown, Jo Thomas and Allison Cain for the illustrations, and Tudor Morgan-Owen for the photography.

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