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PREHISTORIC ACTIVITY IN THE MEDWAY VALLEY: A MIDDLE BRONZE AGE SITE AT SITTINGBOURNE

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PREHISTORIC ACTIVITY IN THE MEDWAY VALLEY: A MIDDLE BRONZE AGE SITE AT SITTINGBOURNE

By Alexis Haslam with Barry Bishop & Mike Seager Thomas

INTRODUCTION

An archaeological watching brief was conducted at East Hall Farm (NGR TQ 927 645, (Fig. 1) by Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd. between 3rd and 21st July 2003, on preparatory works for the Sittingbourne Northern Distributor Road, commissioned by Paul Chadwick of CgMs Consulting Ltd on behalf of Trenport (East Hall Park) Ltd. and Symonds Group Ltd. The site is located north-east of Sittingbourne and abuts an existing section of the Sittingbourne Northern Distributor Road at the eastern boundary of the Eurolink III site, running in a south-easterly direction to a point to the east of East Hall Farm where a roundabout (Junction 2) is proposed. The site itself was irregular in shape, comprising a corridor of land typically 50m wide and 700m long with additional land at its northern end for a works compound and spoil storage. Topographically, the land at the site was relatively flat open farmland (c. 2.5m OD) situated between Milton Creek and Conyer Creek, both of which empty into the Swale. The underlying geology is of Thanet Sands, which are, in places, capped by a deposit of Head Gravel/Brickearth. The site was assigned the code KEHF 03. The site was supervised by Alexis Haslam and the project was managed by Peter Moore.

PREHISTORIC FEATURES

In all, six features were exposed and recorded in the northernmost part of the site, directly under East Hall Wood (Fig. 2). The remainder of the site appears to have been exposed to heavy brickearth extraction during the late 19th and early 20th centuries to supply the brickworks at Murston. This process of brickearth extraction had clearly removed the archaeological horizons and left no trace of archaeological features or evidence of activity.

All of the six features under East Hall Wood were cut into the natural brickearth, and all but one of the features took the form of either pits or postholes. Cut [4], measuring 1.10m x 0.70m in plan and 0.10m deep, was filled with a silty-sand, with flecks and fragments of charcoal. Seventeen fragments of burnt flint were recovered from the fill and appeared to be consistent with the lining or base for a small hearth or fire. To the south of hearth [4] was posthole [11], measuring 0.36m in diameter and 0.12m deep. The fill of this feature consisted of a sandy silty clay. Large amounts of pottery fragments were recovered from this fill and were found to be fineware sherds from a globular bowl with a straight neck or collar and a rounded lower body. A distal fragment of a large blade, or blade-like flake, made from translucent black flint had been modified by retouch forming a 'nosed' long-end scraper. Such implements are most characteristic of Mesolithic and Early Neolithic industries, although the slightly chipped condition of this flake may suggest it had been redeposited into the posthole (Bishop 2003).

Immediately to the south-east of [11] was shallow pit [13] measuring 0.78m x 0.67m in plan and 0.17m deep. This was filled by a silty-clay deposit, containing charcoal flecks, daub, several fragments of pottery and two flint flakes. Neither flint was chronologically diagnostic, one of them being burnt and distorted and the second having a heavily abraded striking platform suggesting that it had been splintered off a flint cobble pounder or hammerstone (ibid.). To the south-east of [13] was pit cut [9], measuring 0.38m x 0.44m and 0.20m deep. Situated within this cut was an Ardleigh-type 'bucket-urn' of coarseware fabric decorated with multiple deep finger-tip impressions aligned in a horizontal fashion, filled with re-deposited brickearth. Environmental analysis of this fill unfortunately produced no macro-fossil remains other than recently deposited roots and twigs from local vegetation.

Located to the south-east of [9] was posthole cut [6], measuring 0.36m x 0.45m in diameter and 0.20m in depth. Filling the posthole was a deposit of silty sand. Several sherds of pottery were recovered from the fill, along with two fragments of burnt flint and one small blade-like flint flake. This unmodified waste flake was produced no later than the Early Bronze Age, however, its slightly chipped condition possibly suggests that it had been redeposited into the posthole. South of [6] was pit cut [15], measuring 0.60m in diameter and 0.26m deep and filled by sandy clay silt. Recovered

from this fill were several sherds of pottery from at least three different vessels; a convex sided coarseware jar, roughly finished with a finger-smear exterior; the finger-tip impressed rim of a convex-sided jar; and fragments from a fineware globular bowl or jar with a straight neck or collar.

The nature and function of these features would appear to suggest evidence of domestic activity. All of the pottery recovered from the six features characteristically belongs to the Deverel-Rimbury pottery tradition, most closely dated to the Middle Bronze Age and indicates that the features are contemporary. However, the nature of these features does remain somewhat speculative due simply to the limited number of features surviving. No convincing evidence of permanent structures were revealed, although the pottery does indicate proximate occupation. Furthermore, no ditches were exposed, offering no evidence of field systems or agricultural activity. It is likely that, if further evidence for occupation and settlement previously existed on the site, it was removed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries when the area was extensively quarried for brickearth.

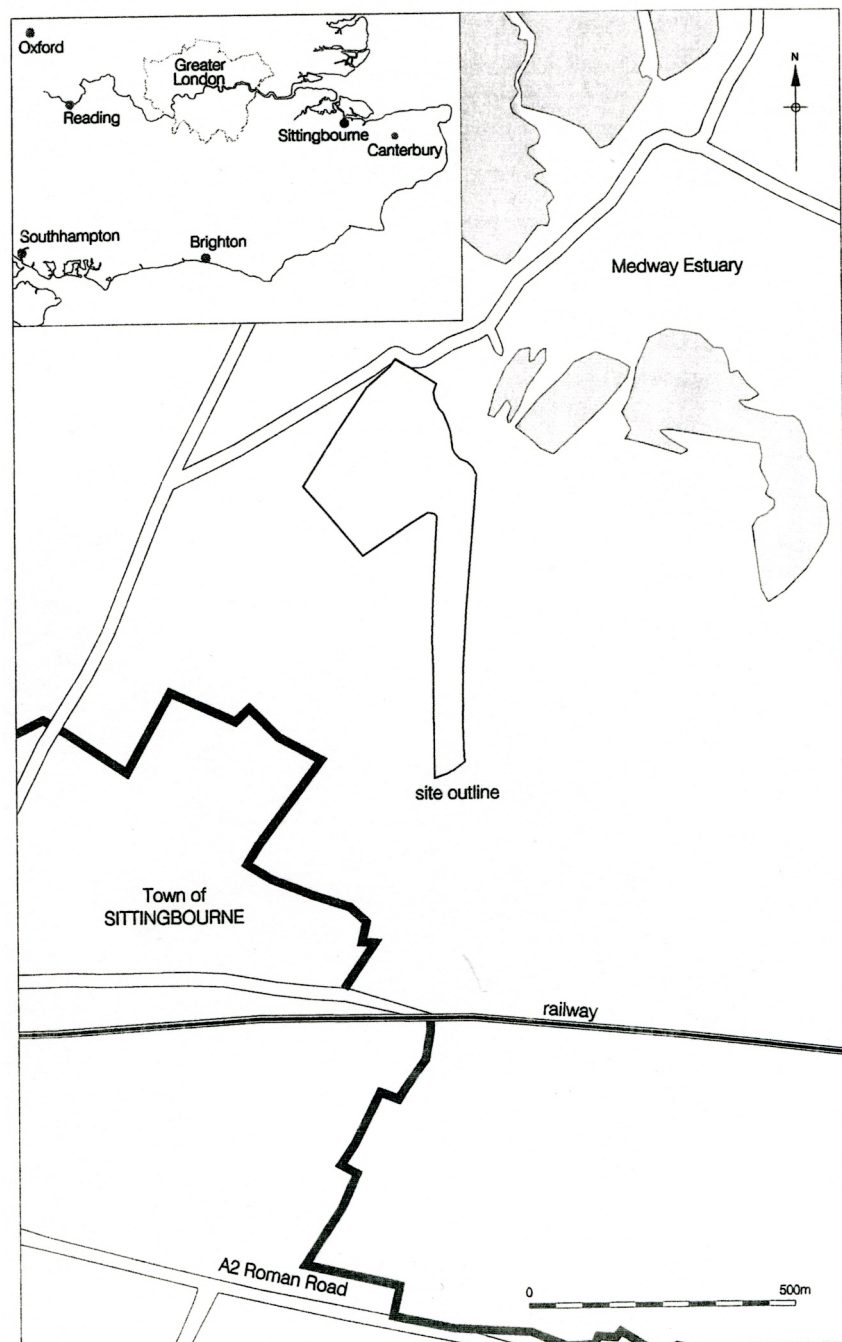


Fig. 1. Site location

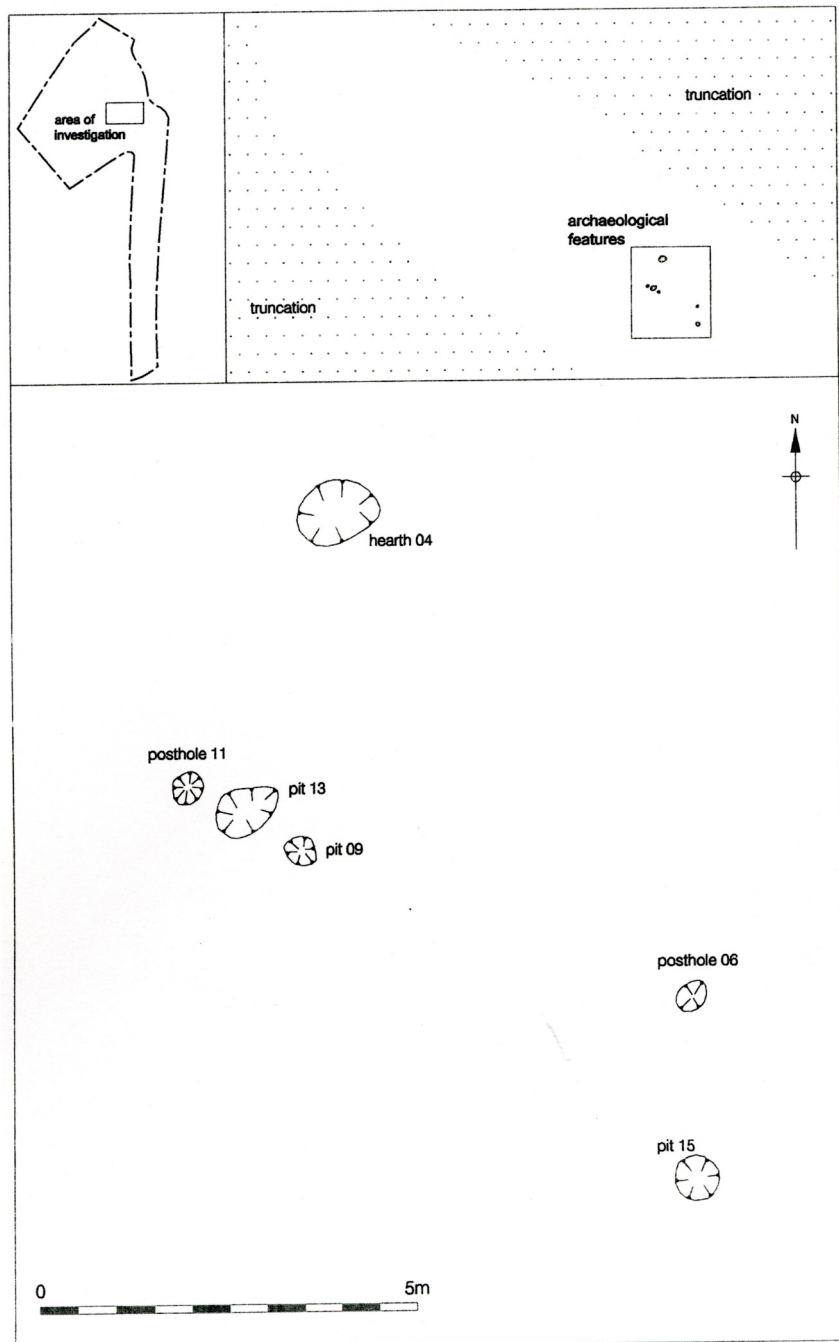


Fig. 2. Middle Bronze Age features

CONCLUSIONS

East Hall Farm lies to the north-east of Sittingbourne between Milton Creek and Conyer Creek, both of which are tributaries of the Swale. Although there is a considerable amount of archaeological information recorded from the immediate vicinity, very little Middle Bronze Age activity has been discovered. Deliberately placed Middle Bronze Age pots, also lacking bone or plant material in their fills, were found in strikingly similar circumstances at the nearby site of Iwade A and B (Bagwell 2001). Two complete straight-sided bucket urns were found in pits, presumably purposefully dug to hold the pots, and a globular fineware bowl was found at the base of a well or shaft (Bishop & Bagwell 2005). These were interpreted as being putative ritual features associated

with the cremation tradition, but such finds are recognisably distinctive because of their isolation within a larger excavated landscape. At East Hall Farm the features are isolated because of later truncation and therefore a ritual interpretation cannot be confidently inferred: the function of the pit containing the Ardleigh-type bucket urn remains enigmatic.

The archaeological investigations at East Hall Farm have revealed evidence of residual Mesolithic and Early Neolithic material, and Middle Bronze Age activity, although the nature of the features discovered is still somewhat speculative, with little evidence for either settlement or agricultural activity. The fact that the site remained in agricultural cultivation up until the late 19th century suggests that the land has provided fertile and easily tilled brickearth soils for a long period of time and would have been ideal for agricultural exploitation during the Middle Bronze Age. The pottery from East Hall Farm appears to represent domestic activity with the complete Ardleigh type 'bucket-urn' drawing comparisons with Iwade in terms of a potential ritual deposition. However, the brickearth and gravel quarrying of the late 19th and early 20th centuries has removed any further potential for the discovery of associated features to assess more accurately the precise nature of the East Hall Farm finds. Further work in this part of Kent may help to characterise and contextualise these Middle Bronze Age complete pot burials.

THE POTTERY ASSEMBLAGE

By Mike Seager Thomas

The prehistoric pottery assemblage from East Hall Farm comprises 381 sherds weighing approximately 4 kilograms. The bulk of the sherds are unabraded, suggesting that they have not been moved from their original point of deposition. It is likely therefore that they provide a reliable indicator of the date of the features which yielded them. All belong to a single broad period group: Middle Bronze Age, here represented by forms and fabrics characteristic of the Deverel-Rimbury pottery tradition. The assemblage is important for three reasons. Firstly, single date assemblages are the key to characterizing the pottery of a region. Despite its small size the present assemblage, which incorporates fine, medium and coarsewares, provides such an opportunity for north-central Kent. The presence of finewares, which have only been identified on a handful of Kent sites, additionally demonstrates that local pottery use during the Middle Bronze Age was as eclectic as elsewhere in the Deverel-Rimbury zone. Secondly, among the reconstructable vessels are two types which are best associated with other regions: an Ardleigh-type 'bucket-urn' and globular jar similar to examples from Wessex. These vessels, which are in local fabrics, help in establishing the tradition's extra-regional credentials. Lastly, the feature associations of these and the other Deverel-Rimbury types from the site differ, the Ardleigh-type 'bucket urn' being dug-in like a cinerary urn, the remainder coming from domestic-type contexts. The comparison of these associations with associations elsewhere suggest the possibility of a distinct tradition of pottery use in Kent during the period.

The principal vessel types associated with this tradition include large 'bucket-urns', smaller straight or convex-sided vessels, often with applied bosses, and small to medium-sized globular jars. The tradition is discussed in detail by Ellison in her unpublished 1975 thesis. Although the county has yielded a great deal of Deverel-Rimbury pottery, few major assemblages have been published, and none comparable to the best assemblages from East Anglia, the Thames Valley and Sussex. Accordingly all finds of Deverel-Rimbury pottery from the county are important. For Kent, the tradition has been discussed by Hawkes (1942), Champion (1982, 34), Macpherson-Grant (1992) and a handful of others. Major Kent assemblages relevant to the interpretation of the present assemblage come from nearby Iwade, Kingsnorth/Stoke, just across the Medway, Birchington (Powell-Cotton and Crawford 1924), and, in the Canterbury area, Highstead and Bridge (Longworth 1980, 173).

Coarsewares

The assemblage includes seven partially reconstructable coarseware jars. It is certain, however, that a number of other vessels are represented. Four sherd groups derive from straight or convex-sided jars. The rim diameters of these vessels range in size between c 14 and 32cm. The largest, a slightly convex-sided jar from pit [15] (Fig. 3.6), is paralleled in the assemblage from Iwade, as is a smaller convex-sided jar with a finger-tip impressed rim from the same context. Further Kent examples of this finger-tip impressed form come from Highstead, Newington (Macpherson-Grant 1992, fig 4) and Ramsgate (Hawkes 1942, fig 1). The sherds comprising the two remaining vessels are too small to reconstruct with certainty but both were probably straight-sided (Figs. 3.2 and 3.3). Such vessels are known from all the foregoing sites. Extra-regional parallels for all four types occur in assemblages from Essex, notably those from Ardleigh (eg Erith and Longworth 1960, fig 5) and North Shoebury (Brown 1995, fig 62), and Sussex, notably those from Steyning Round Hill (Burstow 1958, fig 4) and Varley Halls, Brighton (Hamilton 1997, fig 15).

The second major coarseware type, represented by sherds from a single vessel from context [8], is an Ardleigh-type 'bucket-urn'. As found it was asymmetrical in shape, one axis measuring 38cm across and the other 44cm across. Ardleigh-type bucket urns are characterized primarily by the presence of multiple, deep finger-tip impressions (Erith and Longworth 1960, 180; Brown 1995). In this case they are aligned horizontally. Sherds from up to two other Ardleigh-type vessels are published for Kent, both from Gravesend (Barclay 1995, fig 10). Otherwise Ardleigh-type vessels are restricted to East Anglia. Like many East Anglian vessels the two Gravesend vessels contain grog-temper (*ibid.*, 387). They may be imports from across the Thames, or, alternatively, the proximity of this part of Kent to East Anglia may have resulted in some mixing of traditions. The vessel from East Hall Farm is in a local fabric (see below).

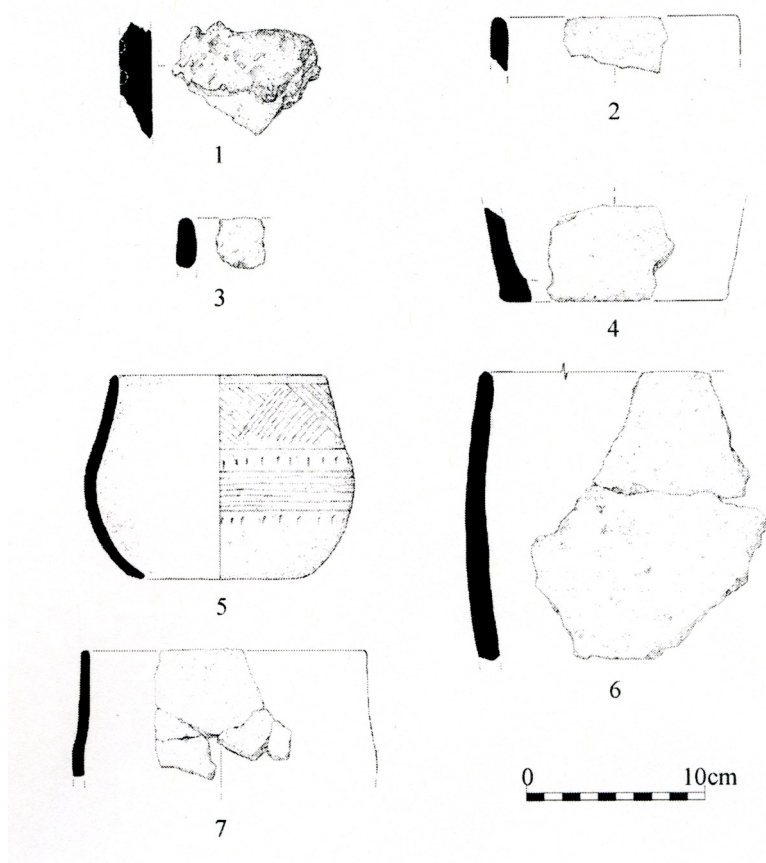


Fig. 3. The illustrated sherds

Finewares

Two groups of fineware sherds were recovered, one from posthole [11] and one from pit [15]. Each belongs to a different globular bowl. The most complete comes from posthole [11]. It has a straight neck/collar, with a rim diameter of 12cm, and a round lower body. Roughly incised decoration comprising alternating upright and inverted hatched-chevrons covers the neck/collar. The shoulder, divided from the neck/collar and the undecorated part of the lower body by two finger-tip impressed cordons, carries six to eight horizontal incised lines. (Fig. 3.5). The vessel from pit [15] is slightly bigger (c 16cm). It has a similar neck/collar configuration, but, although finished with a rough burnish, is undecorated (Fig. 3.7). Finewares are rare in Kent. The slightly shouldered globular form of both vessels has an approximate parallel in the assemblage from Iwade and incised decoration has been reported from Gravesend (Barclay 1995, 387), but Kent finewares are best represented by a round-bodied, stamp-decorated bowl from Birchington (Cotton-Powell and Crawford 1924). The Birchington bowl is paralleled in assemblages from North Shoebury (Brown 1995, fig 62) and Sipson Lane, Middlesex, further up the Thames Valley (Cotton et al 1986); while those from East Hall Farm are best paralleled in Wessex assemblages such as that from Kimpton, Hampshire (Dacre and Ellison 1981, 173, figs 14 and 16).

Discussion

Minor differences in the shape and decoration of Deverel-Rimbury vessels from different regions have resulted in the identification of a number of distinct local variants of the tradition, including East Anglia's Ardleigh group (Erith and Longworth 1960), a South Downs group (Ellison 1978), a lower Thames Valley group (Barrett 1973; Ellison and Dacre 1981, 174), and at least two Wessex groups (Calkin 1962; Ellison and Dacre 1981, 173). To date Kent has yielded forms with close parallels in assemblages from all these regions. However, the distribution of vessel types belonging to these different sub-groups is by no means uniform across the county. This is demonstrated at East Hall Farm by the two fineware types and the Ardleigh-type 'bucket-urn', neither of which can be paralleled in East Kent, and elsewhere in the county by the distribution of un-perforated applied bosses, a lower Thames Valley variant, which focus on the northwest, and below-rim perforations, a lower Thames Valley and Ardleigh variant currently unknown west of Canterbury. There is no distinct Kent Deverel-Rimbury tradition (contra Champion 1982, 34), but, assuming it is not an accident of recovery or publication, there are sub-groups within Kent. Given that none of the vessels comprising them are demonstrably imports, it seems likely that the origins of these are cultural rather than economic.

Radiocarbon dated finds associated with Deverel-Rimbury pottery from outside the county place the tradition as a whole between c 1700 and 1150 cal BC (Needham 1996, 132-4), although where within this to place East Hall Farm is uncertain. A series of radiocarbon-dated associations for Ardleigh-type wares from Brightlingsea similar to the vessel from pit [9] would suggest an early date (Brown 1995, 128), but the decorated bowl from pit [11] has a similar form as, and is in a fabric identical to, a post Deverel-Rimbury bowl from Iwade. The principal distinction in the composition of feature assemblages is between pit [9], where the Ardleigh-type 'bucket urn' was dug-in like a cinerary urn, and pits [11], [13] and [15], which resemble domestic-type features. Of the 256 sherds from pit [9], all but three belonged to the Ardleigh-type urn and no other finds were made; whereas pits [11] and [15] yielded sherds from three or more vessels each. Additionally, pit [11] yielded daub, pit [13] contemporary struck flint, and all three burnt stone. All in situ Kent Deverel-Rimbury finewares have been found either in non-funerary ritual or domestic contexts. This is not what is seen outside the county and suggests a distinct tradition of pottery use in Kent during the period.

East Hall Farm importantly adds to the number of single period Bronze Age assemblages from Kent. The assemblage, with its range of coarse, medium and fineware fabrics and types, suggests that the Kent Deverel-Rimbury pottery tradition (and by implication local community relations) were less isolated than previously thought. This is demonstrated by an Ardleigh-type 'bucket urn', which has parallels in Essex, and a highly decorated globular bowl which has parallels in Hampshire. Kent was distinct in its pottery use, however, and seems to have hosted a number of locally distinct typological sub-groups. This is demonstrated by the distribution of different pottery types within and across the sites which yielded them. Work on the Kent Middle Bronze Age pottery database is ongoing and may yet explain this anomaly.

THE ILLUSTRATED SHERDS (Fig. 3)

Pit 9, fill 8

1. 'Ardleigh-style' body sherds of probable bucket-urn decorated with rows of finger-tip impressions. Body diameter c 40cm. Fabric CF1. Orange-buff exterior surface, dark grey interior surface, brown to grey brown core. Fig. 3.1.
2. Rounded rim. 14cm diameter. Fabric CF1. Roughly finished. Brown grey to buff exterior surface, dark grey brown interior surface, dark grey core. Fig. 3.2.

Pit 11, fill 10

3. Rounded rim. Un-measurable medium or small diameter. Fabric F. Roughly finished. Grey brown to buff exterior and interior surfaces, grey core. Fig. 3.3
4. Slightly pinched base. 12cm diameter. Fabric F (Fe). Roughly finished. Dark grey to brown exterior surface, dark grey to grey brown interior surface, brown to brown red core. Fig. 3.4.
5. Rounded to flat squared rim, straight neck/collar, slight, rounded shoulder, rounded lower body and flat base of globular bowl. Rim diameter 12cm. Fabric FF. Incised decoration on the neck/collar comprising alternating upright and inverted hatched chevrons, and on the shoulder lower body, divided from the collar and the undecorated part of the lower body by two finger-tip impressed cordons, six to eight horizontal lines. Dark grey to dark grey brown exterior surface, dark grey interior surface, dark grey core. Fig. 3.5.

Pit 15, fill 14

6. Rounded rim and upper body of convex-sided jar. Body diameter c 32cm. Fabric CF1 (better fired than vessel 1. Roughly finished with finger-smeared exterior. Red brown to dark brown exterior surface, dark grey interior surface, grey core. Fig. 3.6.
7. Flat squared rim, straight neck/collar, slight, rounded to angular shoulder of globular bowl or jar. Rim diameter c 16cm. Fabric FF. Smooth, roughly burnished exterior, smooth, finger-smeared interior. Dark grey to grey-brown exterior surface, dark grey (mostly) to buff interior surface, dark grey core. Fig. 3.7.

THE LITHIC ASSEMBLAGE

By Barry Bishop

Just over 0.5kg of burnt flint was recovered. It was all heavily burnt, causing the flint to change to a whitish colour and exhibit extensive 'crazing' (fire cracking). The small quantities found in posthole [6] and pit [13] (57g and 35g respectively) probably represent residual 'background' waste, although the higher quantities recovered from pit [4] (487g) may suggest a more specific function for the pit.

The quantities are probably too small to indicate a use in actual cooking, but may represent either remnants of hearth lining or material originating from the disposal of hearth residues. Four struck flints were also recovered. Posthole [11] produced a 'nosed' long-end scraper made from good quality black flint and which would be most characteristic of Mesolithic/Early Neolithic industries. A small blade-like flake of opaque grey flint recovered from posthole [6] would also be consistent with such a date. Both of these pieces exhibited some post-depositional chipping and may have been residually introduced into the features. Two flakes were recovered from pit [13]; one had been extensively burnt and had become distorted, whilst the other, although generally in good condition and possibly contemporary with the pit, was very battered in the region of its striking platform and most likely represented a spall accidentally struck from a hammerstone or pounding tool. The recovery of the long-end scraper and possibly the blade-like flake demonstrates activity at the site during the Mesolithic or Early Neolithic, although probably still only in the form of a short-term visitation. Such activity is not particularly surprising given the intensity of occupation that the Swale area has witnessed from at least the Mesolithic onwards.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd. and the authors would like to thank Paul Chadwick of CgMs Consulting for commissioning the work on behalf of Trenport (East Hall Park) Ltd and their environmental consultants, Symonds Group Ltd. We would also like to thank Simon Mason and Kent County Council for their invaluable help and advice throughout the watching brief. Special thanks also to Richard Archer for all of his assistance in the fieldwork and the excavation of the site. Thanks to Peter Moore for his project management, Lorraine Darton for her post-excavation management, Cheryl Blundy and Josephine Brown for the illustrations, Graham Sherwood for the environmental assessment and Dave Dobson for logistical support.

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