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Archaeology

## Excavation of a multi-period site at Foster Road, Ashford, Kent

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# **Excavation of a multi-period site at Foster Road, Ashford, 2006**

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with contributions by  
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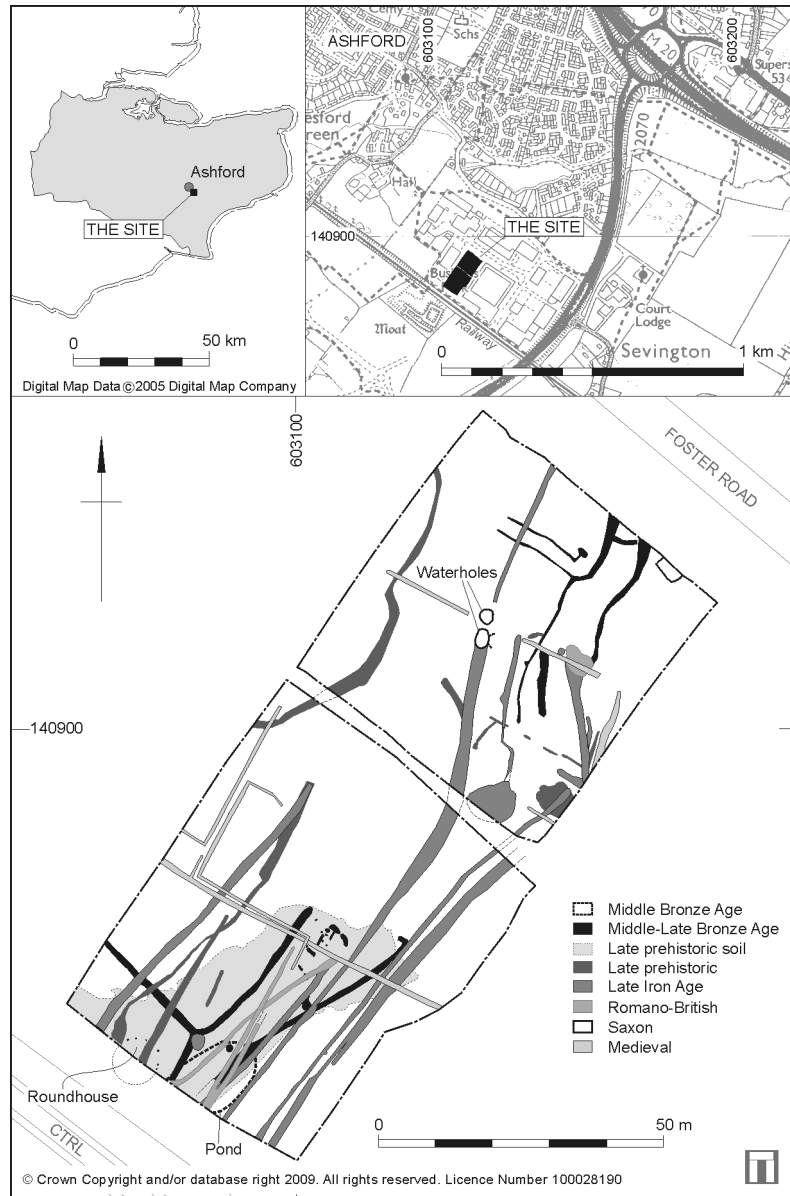
## **ABSTRACT**

Excavation at Foster Road, Ashford, revealed features of late prehistoric to medieval date, many comprising field, driveway or drainage ditches running downslope to the south-west towards the East Stour River. Following the silting up of a Middle Bronze Age pond used by livestock grazing on the edge of the floodplain, a Middle-Late Bronze Age settlement, including at least one roundhouse and with evidence of possible metalworking, was established within an arrangement of field or enclosure ditches. This pattern of ditch construction and nearby settlement continued through the Late Bronze Age and, following a possible break in the Early and Middle Iron Age, into the Late Iron Age and Romano-British period, perhaps reflecting the largely unchanging landscape of open damp grassland, woodland edge and scrub, which supported mixed agriculture regimes during these periods. In the Early Saxon period, two waterholes with timber structures at their bases, radiocarbon dated to cal AD 570-660, and possibly a sunken-featured building, were constructed on the site. Although no Saxon ditches were recorded, the site subsequently formed part of an extensive 12th- to 13th-century field system probably associated with the medieval moated site at Sevington to the immediate south-west.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Wessex Archaeology excavated an area of land off Foster Road, on the south-eastern side of Ashford (Fig. 1). The site covered c. 0.65 hectares (NGR 603110 140891) and was situated within an area of known archaeology, with many sites of prehistoric and Romano-British date having been previously recorded in the vicinity. Evaluation by Canterbury Archaeological Trust identified the presence of a Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age settlement and an array of stock enclosures or small fields (Helm 2006; Chadwick 2006).

The site occupied gently sloping ground, falling from c. 45.9m above Ordnance Datum (aOD) in the north-east into a shallow coombe at c. 43.2m aOD at the south-west, where the site was bounded by the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL) (Fig. 1). The underlying geology is mapped as Atherfield Clay and Hythe Beds over Weald Clay, all of the Cretaceous Lower Greensand/Wealden Formation (BGS Sheets 289 and 305-306). The soil, which is generally rather poor and sandy, is mapped as typical argillic brown earths of the Fyfield 2 Association, with pelo-alluvial gley soils to the south west (Soil Survey of England and Wales Sheet 6).



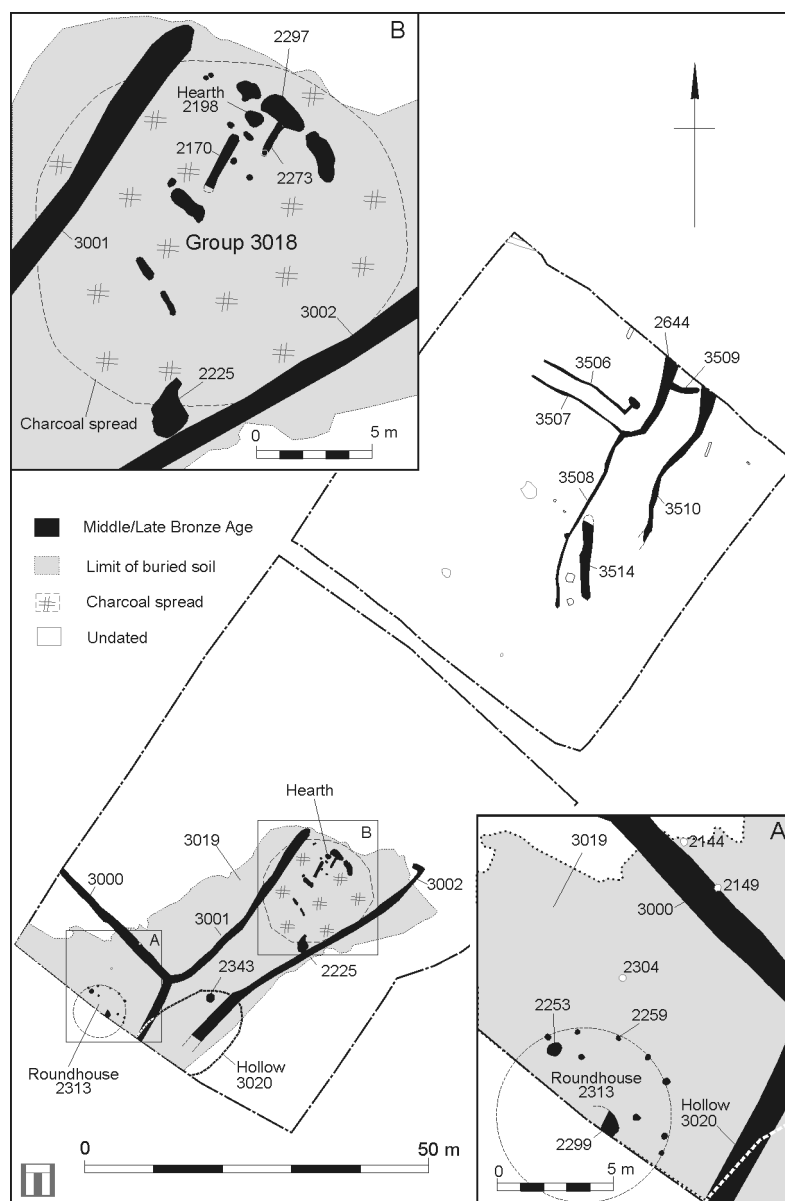
**Figure 1 The site location and plan of all features**

## EXCAVATION

The excavation revealed evidence of later prehistoric activity dating from the Middle Bronze Age to the Late Iron Age, with possible continuity of occupation into the Romano-British period, as well as Early Saxon and medieval activity. It produced only a small finds assemblage, and while the following description of the phasing of the site has been aided by an analysis of the site stratigraphy, the precise dating of some of the later prehistoric features remains unclear. The results of the specialist analyses are integrated (full reports on the pottery and environmental analyses are available in the archive).

## Middle to Late Bronze Age

The earliest feature was a large hollow (3020) at least 12m long and 10m wide, which extended beyond the excavated area (Fig. 2). It was filled with fine-grained, well-sorted, coarsely-laminated, organic-rich sediments that are consistent with low energy alluvial deposition such as could be expected from a pond-type environment. The basal and middle fills (up to 0.2m and 0.6m thick respectively) produced small quantities of Middle Bronze Age flint-tempered pottery. The hollow was up to 1.25m deep with irregular sloping sides that may have been trampled by animals and, although the environmental evidence (see below) suggests standing water for much of the year, even as it silted up it is likely that water levels varied seasonally and that the fills would have been regularly churned up and mixed by livestock.



**Figure 2 Middle/Late Bronze Age features**

Environmental samples from the hollow were dominated by the seeds of water-crowfoot (*Ranunculus* subg. *Batrachium*), indicative of ponds, ditches and slow-flowing rivers, which along with duck-weed (*Lemna* sp.) suggest that for much of the year the feature contained standing water; curiously, however, a monolith sample through the pond sediments contained no pollen from aquatic plants associated with pooled or standing bodies of water. Waterlogged plant remains from the water's edge were recovered, such as species of sedge (*Carex* sp.) and rush (*Juncus* sp.), while many species of mint (*Mentha* sp.), frequently found in disturbed ground close to water, were also identified. The hollow may have been thickly vegetated, possibly part of a small mire or patch of localised marsh. Fat-hen (*Chenopodium album*) and henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*), often associated with disturbed nitrogen-rich soils, may indicate the presence of animals, while thistles (*Cirsium/Carduus* sp.) and common nettle (*Urtica dioica*) are frequent components of rough grazed pastures, as are species of cinquefoil (*Potentilla* sp.), although their ecological range is wide. Probable field-wood rush (*Luzula campestris*) is a species generally associated with short-grassland. There is some indication of close-proximity to hedges or scrub in the presence of bramble (*Rubus* sp.), elder (*Sambucus nigra*) and hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*).

Apart from the absence of pollen from aquatic plants, the pollen from the sediment paints a largely similar picture to that outlined above. The low levels of tree pollen indicate substantial clearance had taken place by the Middle Bronze Age, although the species represented – mostly oak (*Quercus* sp.) and alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), but including also birch (*Betula*), beech (*Fagus*), elm (*Ulmus*), lime (*Tilia*) and hazel (*Corylus avellana*-type) – indicate that some local stands of mixed woodland and scrub remained, with the alder reflecting wet or damp ground environments. Local woodland is also suggested by herbaceous types such as dog's mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*) and the rose family (Rosaceae, which includes raspberry and blackberries). The most common pollen types recorded were grasses (Poaceae), sedges (Cyperaceae) and dandelions (*Taraxacum officinale*), indicating the dominance of open environments, the sedges reflecting damp marshy conditions whilst the dandelions may indicate the presence of damp, open pasture, meadows or waste ground, as also may chamomile. Pollen of ribwort plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*) and the buttercup family (Ranunculaceae), which often indicate ground disturbance as a result of clearance and pastoral/grazing activities, was recorded throughout the sediments. This suggests that the human impact on the immediate landscape was long-lived, fairly intensive and extensive. Further evidence of pastoral activity is indicated by the presence of sheep and common sorrel (*Rumex acetosa/acetosella*) (Behre 1981). There is also evidence for nearby cultivation of cereals in the form of oats (*Avena*-type) and barley (*Hordeum*-type), both of which are relatively tolerant of damp conditions.

The hollow's upper fill produced a small assemblage of Middle/Late Bronze Age pottery along with animal bone and worked and burnt flint. Subsequently, the earliest of a long sequence of NE-SW ditches were dug, one of which (3002), cut across the silted-up hollow. At its north-eastern end, over 30m up-slope from the hollow, this ditch turned sharply to the north-west (where its terminal was truncated by a modern feature), while to the south-west it probably continued beyond the excavated area. It

produced a single sherd of Middle/Late Bronze Age pottery and a small assemblage of animal bone with charcoal being noted in all the fills.

North-west of the hollow were two adjoining ditches (3000 and 3001). These may have been contemporary, although their junction was partially obscured by a later pit, and their only dating evidence – sherds of Middle/Late Bronze Age and later prehistoric pottery – was found in the secondary and upper fills of ditch 3000. Ditch 3000 (1.1-1.4m wide and 0.5-0.9m deep) continued beyond the limits of the excavated area, while ditch 3001 (<1.5m wide and 0.4m deep) ended at a rounded terminal some 30m north-east of the ditch junction. These ditches also produced small assemblages of animal bone and worked and burnt flint with abundant charcoal flecks being noted in the fill of ditch 3001.

Ditches 3001 and 3002 appear to define parts of two adjacent subrectangular ditched enclosures or fields, the south-western enclosure having a possible settlement function as indicated by part of a roundhouse close to its north-eastern corner. This was represented by an arc of seven postholes (2313) with a projected diameter of 7.6m (Fig. 2). The postholes were 0.2-0.3m in diameter and up to 0.2m deep. At the north they were regularly spaced at 1.4-1.8m intervals, but there was a 2.4m gap, possibly an entrance, on the east side, followed to the south by a narrow gap of just 0.8m. A further two slightly deeper postholes of similar diameter were recorded just over 1m inside the arc, possibly representing load-bearing roof supports. There was also a single large posthole/small pit (0.55m in diameter and 0.35m deep). Most of the postholes contained small quantities of charcoal, possibly deriving from a shallow spread of charcoal-rich soil (2299) towards the centre of the roundhouse (truncated by a later ditch), which may have derived from an internal hearth (although no hearth was recorded). The only finds from all these features were two small sherds of Middle/Late Bronze Age pottery from posthole 2259. Posthole 2304, 2.6m to the north of the roundhouse, may be associated with it, while two further postholes (2144 and 2149) were recorded on the northern edge of ditch 3000, although their stratigraphic relationship with the ditch is unclear. Posthole 2144 contained a single sherd of late prehistoric flint-tempered pottery.

Ditches 3001 and 3002 converged, from 16m apart to just 6m, and while this funnel-shaped arrangement might suggest a means of controlling the movement of livestock, possibly towards the East Stour river, the presence between them of two pits and a cluster of other small features (group 3018) suggests that such an interpretation is not necessarily correct. These small features included a hearth, up to seven postholes, four slot-like features and a number of irregular, shallow pits, at least some of which would appear to have been structurally related (Fig. 2). The hearth (2198) consisted of a shallow irregular cut, 0.7-0.8m wide and 0.07m deep, filled with burnt silty clay and charcoal. It was flanked, from the north-west to the south-east, by an arc of three elongated pits, while another lay some 4m to the south-west. The main concentration of other features in the cluster lay between these pits, including a 1.6m long slot (2273) that ran perpendicular from elongated pit 2297, with a possible posthole at its southern end, and another offset slot (2170) running parallel to it. The slots may have had a structural function associated with the adjacent postholes, although together they do not appear to form any coherent structure. At the north of the cluster was a pair of postholes c. 0.15m apart, while to

the south a single pit 2225 cut the fills of ditch 3002; another small pit (2343) cut the upper fill of the silted-up pond.

Although the contemporaneity of all the features in this group could not be established definitely, this was clearly a focus of activity. The range of finds – Middle/Late Bronze Age and late prehistoric pottery, animal bone, fired clay and burnt flint – seem typical of a domestic context, and the presence of charcoal in slot 2170 supports the assumption that these features had a functional relationship with the hearth. However, the charcoal was vitrified, indicating very high temperatures exceeding 800°C (see Prior and Alvin 1983), and had a mineral coating suggesting that the hearth may have been used for metalworking. It consisted mostly of oak but also contained small quantities of willow/aspen (*Salix/Populus* sp.), pomaceous fruit wood (Pomoideae, a group of taxa with consistent internal anatomy which includes *Crataegus* (hawthorn), *Sorbus* (whitebeam), *Pyrus* (pear) and *Malus* (apple)) and a few fragments of alder.

Apart from pit 2225, the relationship of these features to the flanking ditches, possible enclosures and roundhouse could not be established, and the different elements of this phase could represent a sequence of events reflecting the development and changing character of occupation on the site during the Middle to Late Bronze Age. Nonetheless, the broad contemporaneity of all the Middle/Late Bronze Age features described above is indicated by the fact that all were sealed below a soil horizon (3019).

The soil horizon appears to have been largely anthropogenic in origin, and the recovery, from a spread of charcoal within it overlying the cluster of features, of a charcoal assemblage (oak and pomaceous fruit wood) similar to that from slot 2170 suggests that it may have derived some of its character and components from activity in the immediate area. The soil, recorded immediately below the topsoil, covered an area some 20m wide and extended at least 40m down the slope from near the terminals of ditches 3001 and 3002 to beyond the excavated area, averaging 0.15m deep but thinning towards the edges. It may originally have been more extensive but subject to later truncation by ploughing, but it was well preserved within the shallow coombe at the base of the slope. Its date and duration, however, are unclear – it produced just two sherds of pottery – one of Middle/Late Bronze Age date, the other of general late prehistoric date – along with small quantities of animal bone and worked and burnt flint, while some of the features cutting it (see below) could only be assigned a general late prehistoric date.

In the northern part of the site, a roughly rectilinear arrangement of ditches and gullies with the same general axes as those to the south suggests that the pattern of possible ditched enclosures at the south was part of a more extensively organized and divided landscape during this period (Fig. 2). Two roughly parallel ditches (3508 and 3510) followed similar, although sinuous lines from the northern edge of the excavation, diverging slightly towards the south. However, while their irregular lines may have been deliberate, other similar features are interpreted as having been naturally formed (below). At its north, ditch 3510 comprised two parallel cuts that converged into a single ditch 1.5 wide, and which in turn narrowed to 0.7m wide at the point where it was truncated, at the south, by a later pit. It contained a number of

sherds of Middle/Late Bronze Age and late prehistoric pottery. Some 4.9m to the west, ditch 3508 ran for some 40m, also narrowing from c. 2m wide at the north to just to 0.6m at its southern terminal. It contained Middle/Late and Late Bronze Age pottery, along with small quantities of animal bone and worked and burnt flint.

A short curved 'arm' (3509) ran east from ditch 3508 to just short of ditch 3510, while running north-west from a marked kink in 3508 was a narrow gully (3507). A second gully (3506) ran parallel to 3507, with an adjacent terminal at the north-west, and turned sharply north-east to an undated oval pit (2644) close to ditch 3508. Because this gully was only 0.02m deep at its eastern end, its stratigraphic relationship to the pit could not be established with certainty. The gullies, which were up to 0.5m by 0.2m deep, appear to have defined some form of trackway of uncertain function, and are dated by a single sherd of Middle/Late Bronze Age pottery from gully 3506.

Ditch 3514 was truncated at the north by a later gully. Its fill produced a single sherd of Middle/Late Bronze Age pottery, but its dating to this phase should be treated with caution, particularly since it appears unrelated to the layout of the other features.

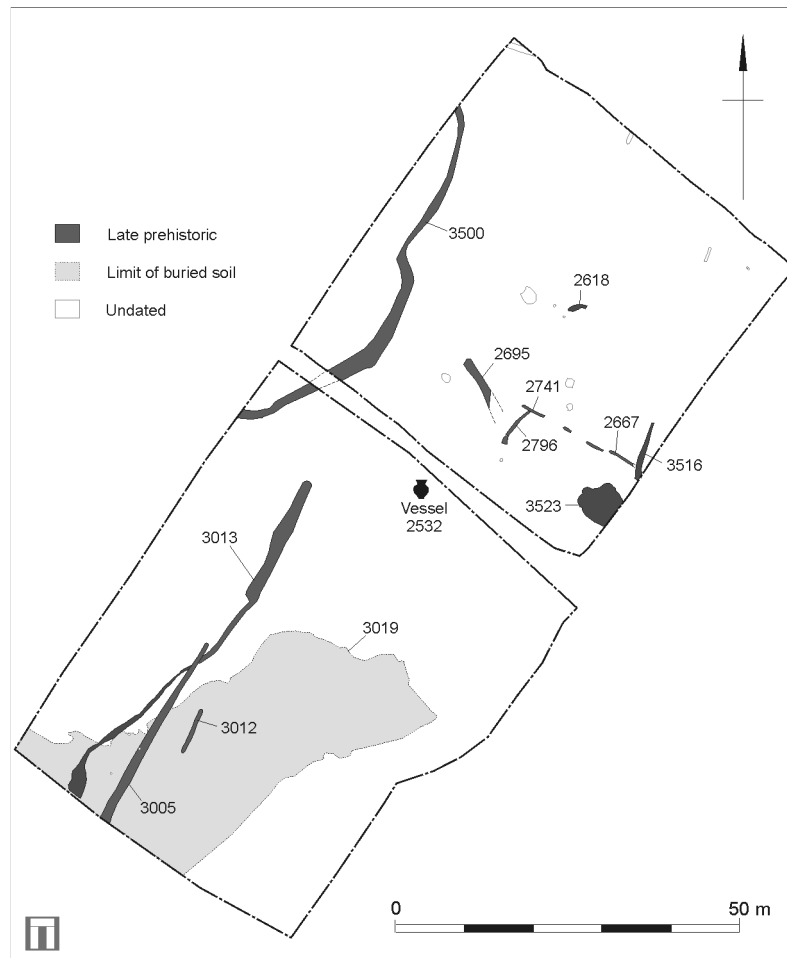
### **Late prehistoric**

Possibly the earliest of the features cutting soil horizon 3019 was an irregular, sinuous and possibly naturally formed run-off gully (3013) that ran north-north-east for c. 60m from the southern edge of the excavation, being truncated at the north by a Late Iron Age/early Romano-British ditch (Fig. 3). It produced a small assemblage of late prehistoric pottery (18 sherds, 47 g), as well as two probably residual Late Bronze Age sherds. It was also cut by ditch 3005, which terminated after 30 m, its terminal subsequently recut. Parallel to ditch 3005, some 4m to its east, was a 7m long gully (3012). Together features 3005 and 3012 produced only small finds assemblages consisting mainly of late prehistoric sherds and a few pieces of worked and burnt flint. As such they provide little indication either of their own date or that of the formation of the soil horizon they cut.

Further features containing late prehistoric pottery were recorded to the north, and although they had no stratigraphical relationship to the soil horizon, the assumption is made that they are broadly contemporary with those cutting the soil to the south. Of these, feature 3500, which ran for c. 60m along the west side of the site, was similar in character to feature 3013 and is also interpreted as a naturally formed run-off gully; it also contained small quantities of late prehistoric and possibly residual Late Bronze Age pottery, along with worked and burnt flint.

Single sherds of late prehistoric pottery were recovered from two other features – an irregular oval pit (2618) and a gully (3516). Towards the southern end of this gully there was a large irregular hollow (3523) (6m by 5m wide and 0.15m deep, with three small shallow pits cut into its base) which also produced a small assemblage of Middle/Late Bronze Age and late prehistoric pottery.





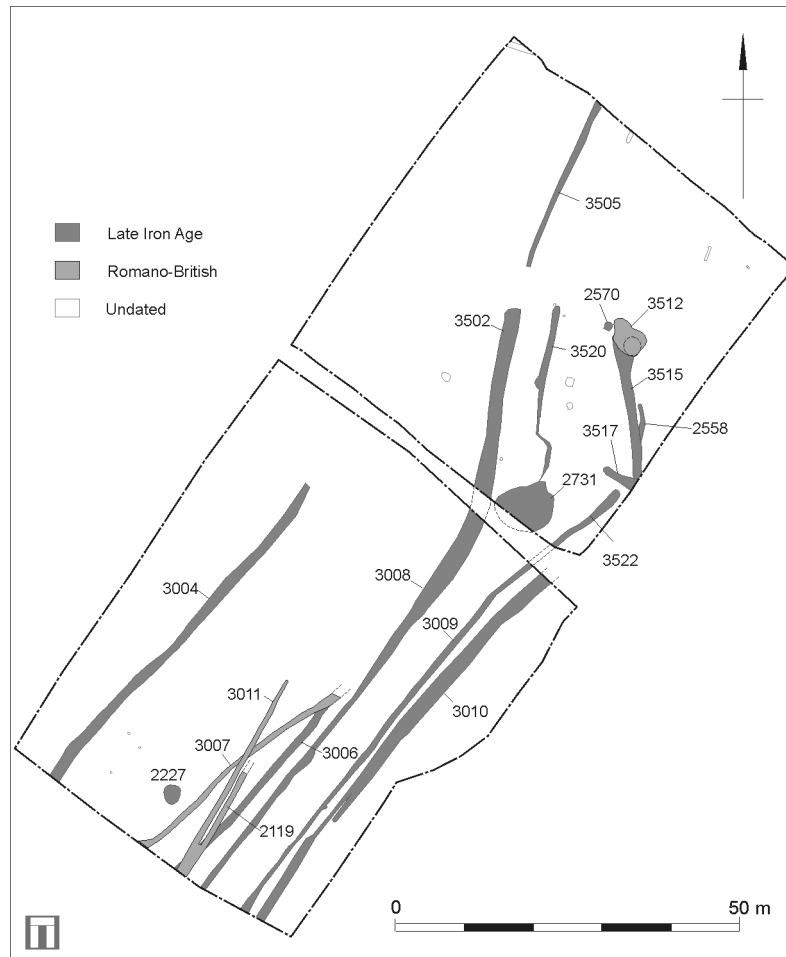
**Figure 3 Late prehistoric features**

The late prehistoric pottery recovered from these feature, which can be broadly dated to the late second/first millennium BC and, therefore, has a potential date range spanning the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age, provides little help in dating the features. There is, however, an apparent absence of clearly Early and Middle Iron Age pottery. By far the largest assemblage of prehistoric pottery (120 sherds, 411 g) comprised the truncated and fragmentary remains of a single large vessel (2532) from a very shallow, irregular scoop (2533), although the flint-tempered body sherds displaying very little curvature could be dated only broadly to the prehistoric period.

Possibly of late prehistoric date was a 7m length of ditch (2695), 4m wide and 0.3m deep, aligned south-south-east to north-north-west, which was cut to the south by a Late Iron Age ditch but was otherwise undated. A line of four short linear slots, aligned west-north-west to east-south-east may also belong to this phase, although none contained any dating evidence. At the west, slot 2741 was cut by feature 3520 suggested below to be of Late Iron Age date, while at the east, slot 2667 was cut by Late Iron Age ditch 3009/3522. The slots, which were 1.3-4.2m long, and up to 0.35m wide and 0.2m deep, appear clearly to be associated, with an overall length of 18m. A slightly curving gully (2796), running south-west from slot 2741 may also be associated.

## Late Iron Age

Evidence of activity more precisely dated to the Late Iron Age is provided primarily by an array of largely parallel north-east to south-west aligned ditches and gullies running down the prevailing slope and beyond the southern edge of the excavation (Fig. 4). The only other cut features were a large subcircular pit (2227) located towards the south-west of the site and a small pit 2570 towards the north-east.



**Figure 4 Late Iron Age and Romano-British features**

Pit 2227, which lay close to the edge of the infilled Bronze Age hollow and cut through the junction of the Bronze Age enclosure ditches, was c. 3.6m in diameter and 1m deep. As well as producing five sherds of Late Iron Age grog-tempered pottery from the basal fill (2228), a c. 1.5m long piece of unworked alder of uncertain function was recovered from the waterlogged base of the pit. The overlying layers produced eight sherds of residual Middle/Late Bronze Age pottery and two late prehistoric sherds. The pit, which produced a small number of barley grains, seems to have occupied a similar environment to that of the earlier hollow – year-round standing water, a range of wetland plants around its edge and wet grassland with some scrub beyond. Four sherds of Late Iron Age pottery were also recovered from the single fill of a small subrectangular feature (2570) cut by a later ditch.

The most westerly of the ditches (3004) ran north-east for c. 56m, beyond which it could not be traced. Its assignment to this phase needs to be treated with a degree of caution since, although it cut Middle/Late Bronze Age ditch 3000 and later prehistoric gully 3013, it contained only a single fragment (1 g) of Late Iron Age pottery from the second of four fills, most of the rest of the pottery being of Middle/Late Bronze Age and late prehistoric date.

Parallel to ditch 3004, some 17m to its south-east, ditch 3006 ran for c. 33m to a point where it was cut (possibly at its terminal as it was not traced any further north) by ditch 3007 (below). Again, the precise dating of this late prehistoric feature is not certain, being based on two Late Iron Age sherds from its upper fill.

Ditch 3008 ran upslope for c. 67m on the same orientation as the other ditches of this phase, before turning to the north in the northern part of the site (as ditch 3502), where its terminal was truncated by a later pit. It varied in width considerably along its length (0.8m up to 2m). Although it produced a small sherd (2 g) of Romano-British pottery from its upper fill and another, clearly residual sherd of Middle/Late Bronze Age date, its relationship to the other Late Iron Age ditches suggests it belongs to this phase of activity. Beyond an estimated gap of 6m, its line appeared to be continued by ditch 3505, which ran for a further 26 m to the north-eastern edge of the excavation. However, apart from a single fragment (1 g) of later prehistoric pottery from near the top of its single fill, this latter feature was undated. Yet their lines certainly suggest that the ditches either side of the gap were associated, possibly forming a single boundary with an entrance. Although ditch 3505 was smaller than the northern end of ditch 3008, it was comparable in scale to its southern end.

The line of ditch 3008 appears to be matched some five to eight metres to the south-east by a series of other ditches which turned, from approximately the same point, in the opposite direction (eastwards), with the result that together these features appear to form a funnel leading downslope into a possible trackway running to the south-west. Ditch 3009 ran parallel to ditch 3008 for c. 60m before turning slightly towards the east for a further 24m where it ended at a slightly expanded terminal (as 3522) in the northern excavation area. The basal fill in the terminal contained a group of 13 sherds (139 g) of Late Iron Age pottery, the ditch also producing a Neolithic leaf-shaped arrowhead, and four sherds of medieval pottery intrusive in the upper fill.

Just 0.5-1.5 m east of ditch 3009 were a further two ditch cuts, separated by no more than 0.2m when excavated, although probably originally abutting or intercutting. Towards the south the two cuts were clearly distinguishable, the eastern cut, which produced a single Late Iron Age sherd, ending at a southern terminal 18m short of the edge of the excavation area, and the western cut, which produced four sherds of late prehistoric pottery, continuing to the south-west. Towards the north-east, however, the two cuts merged into a single feature (3010) of similar width to ditch 3008, and which like 3009 turned slightly eastwards from the same point. As this feature was not recorded in the south-eastern corner of the northern excavation area, just 5m to the north, it either ended at a terminal at this point or continued to curve east.

Within the mouth of the 'funnel' formed by ditches 3008, 3009 and 3010 there was a large amorphous spread of mottled grey-orange gravelly clay (2731) containing late prehistoric and Late Iron Age pottery, animal bone and charcoal. It was located at the downslope end of an irregular and possibly natural gully (3520), whose fill although containing no dating evidence was identical in colour and texture to the spread material. The spread, which was 7.5m across and 0.1m thick, may represent settlement material washed down a natural run-off gully, settling where traffic into the trackway had created a slight depression.

Ditch 3515 ran north for c. 20m from the eastern edge of the excavation, from close to the terminal (3522) of ditch 3009, and ended at a terminal that was cut and obscured by a Romano-British pit. It averaged 1m wide and produced 19 sherds (105 g) of Late Iron Age pottery. It cut a small gully (2558) of the same general phase.

At the edge of the excavation, ditch 3515 was cut by a further ditch (3517) which ran across the slope for c. 5m to a terminal. This averaged 1m wide and displayed some evidence of recutting. Although it produced sherds of late prehistoric, and Middle/Late and Late Iron Age pottery, its south-east to north-west orientation is perpendicular to most of the other ditches of this phase, and it appears to partly block the mouth of the 'funnel'. Its stratigraphical position cutting ditch 3515 may indicate a relatively late date in this phase.

## **Romano-British**

While the Late Iron Age ditches may have continued in use into the Romano-British period, there was little evidence that this was the case, and evidence of Romano-British activity, apart from some residual pottery in later features, is provided by three features – two ditches and one waterhole (Fig. 4).

Waterhole 3512 cut the northern terminal of Late Iron Age ditch 3515 towards the north-east of the site, and produced a small assemblage of Late Iron Age and Early Romano-British pottery. It is possible, however, that this waterhole was constructed in two stages. A marked hollow in the base of the waterhole, possibly the remains of an original cut, measured at least 1.8m by 2.8m and was 1.2m deep with steeply sloping concave sides and a flat base. However, a sharp ledge in the north-west quadrant suggests it may have been subsequently extended in that direction, at a shallower depth of c. 0.8m, resulting in overall dimensions of c. 3.6m by 2.8m. A lower fill, possibly the uppermost surviving fill (2710) of the original cut, produced seven sherds of Late Iron Age pottery, with a further two being recovered from the extended waterhole's uppermost fill (2705) along with eight Romano-British sherds. The waterhole produced a small number of cereal grains (barley and spelt), perhaps reflecting its distance from a focus of settlement, and a single seed of dock (*Rumex* sp.), with no significant difference in its environmental conditions to the earlier hollow and waterlogged pit.

At the south-west of the site, Late Iron Age ditch 3006 was cut by two other intercutting ditches (ditches 3007 and 3011), both with noticeably different alignments to the majority of the Late Iron Age ditches. The earlier, ditch 3007,

which ran for c. 25m to a terminal, contained Romano-British pottery as well as some residual Middle/Late Iron Age sherds.

Cutting ditches 3006 and 3007, ditch 3011 was traced for c. 32m to its northern terminal. Again it contained a number of late prehistoric, Late Iron Age and Romano-British sherds, along with small quantities of burnt and worked flint. Running parallel to ditch 3007, just 0.7m to its east and possibly related, was a similar, although undated, ditch (2119) which was recorded for c. 17m but no terminal identified.

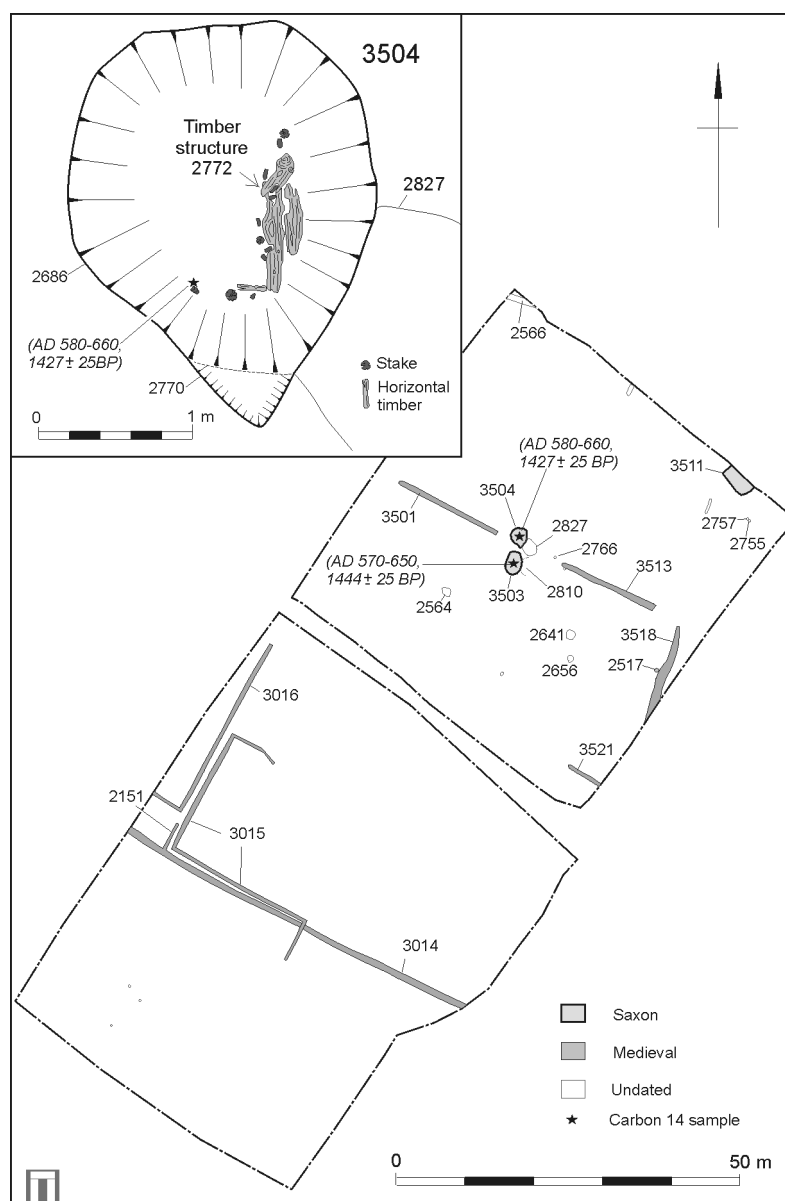
Grasses dominate the pollen assemblage from the waterhole followed by sedges, dandelions and chamomile (*Anthemis*-types), indicating an expansive open environment, with a combination of marshy conditions and rough pasture, meadows or open waste ground. Further evidence is provided by the presence of meadow sweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), while chamomile and knot grass (*Polygonum aviculare*), are common types found on arable and waste ground. Ribwort plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*), dandelions (Lactuceae) and the buttercup family (Ranunculaceae) can indicate grazing activity, and further evidence of pastoral activity is indicated by the presence of sheep and common sorrel (Behre 1981). While oats (*Avena*-type) and barley (*Hordeum*-type) indicate cereal cultivation, the complete absence of wheat (*Triticum*-type), which prefers a dryer environment, supports the interpretation of damp conditions.

The arboreal pollen from the waterhole was recorded in relatively low frequencies. While this could indicate the unsuitability of the immediate area for trees to establish successfully, it could also indicate either clearance, or woodland management by coppicing and pollarding, or woodland being restricted in extent due to the presence of pasture or arable land systems. Within the pollen assemblage, oak and alder were the most dominant types, with birch, ash, pine, elm and willow and to a lesser extent beech and lime also present, indicating the presence of mixed woodland stands or woods within the landscape, with hazel understorey or scrub. Variation during the period of the waterhole's infilling may reflect changes in woodland management, agricultural activity or natural vegetation succession. The dominant presence of oak and alder and the occurrence of willow and hazel suggest wet or damp ground environments as these types are common to stream-sides, marshy ground, wet thickets, hedges and wet oak woods. Herbaceous types such as Crosswort (possibly *Galium cruciata*), stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) and dog's mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*) also preferentially inhabit open woodland, woodland edge, scrub and hedges.

## **Saxon**

During the excavation, three features (two large adjacent pits, probably waterholes/wells, and a large subrectangular hollow, all lying close to the crest of the slope in the northern part of the site) were provisionally dated, on the basis of a few sherds of organic-tempered pottery, as Saxon, a date since confirmed by two radiocarbon dates (below) (Fig. 5). The southern (3503) of the two waterholes, which cut the northern terminal of Late Iron Age ditch 3008/3502, was oval in shape, 3.3m long, 2.45m wide and up to 0.8m deep. The generally concave sides were steepest to the north and east, and shallower and slightly stepped to the west

and south. At the base were the remains of a timber structure (structure 2729), comprising vertical stakes of alder, hazel and oak driven into the natural gravels supporting horizontal oak planks. It seems likely the structure was built soon after waterhole was dug, since, although the largest horizontal timber lay on the top of a primary fill up to 0.1m thick, this layer, deriving from the initial erosion of the waterhole sides, had probably accumulated relatively quickly (heavy rain during the archaeological excavation laid down a similar deposit in the base of the excavated feature over one weekend). The lower fills seem to have been continuously saturated and contained many waterlogged wood fragments. The upper fills, comprising fine grained sediments washed from the surrounding geology had been subjected to a cycle of wetting and drying.



**Figure 5 Saxon, medieval and undated features**

The lower horizontal timber, of which a length of 990 mm was preserved, was of mature, quick grown oak with more than 50 wide-spaced rings (40mm = 9 years). Above it, a second timber also of mature oak (more than 50 rings), had been worked into a wedge-shaped plank (1245mm length preserved), and was possibly part charred on one end. Although the planks were found lying angled, they appear to have been placed on edge one above the other, held in place against the western side of the waterhole by at least one 100mm diameter, tapered alder roundwood stake; there may have been other stakes that did not survive. This stake (wood sample 37) produced a radiocarbon of cal AD 570-650 (95% 1444±25 BP, NZA-28894  $\delta^{13}\text{C} = -26\text{‰}$ ). Due to the relatively shallow slope of the waterhole behind the planks, the resulting 'revetment' was almost one metre in from the upper edge of the waterhole, and the intervening gap had been partly filled with a packing of sandstone rubble. As horizontal timbers were only recorded on the western side, the timbers may have formed a revetted platform closer to the water level within the waterhole. The other vertical timbers, all split and tapered staves, some possibly later additions, were driven into the gravel around the similarly shallow southern side of the waterhole, again over one metre in from its edge. It may have been that the steeper northern and eastern sides were never supported by timbers as access was not gained from those sides.

Overlying the primary fill in front of the revetment, were further erosion deposits on the north side, then a layer of brown silty clay (2734) up to 0.25m thick within which were a number of darker lenses representing the gradual silting up of the feature. These were in turn sealed across much of the waterhole by a layer of dumped gravel up to 0.1m thick, which seems to have ended the feature's use as a waterhole. The overlying layers represent the gradual infilling of this inactive feature by largely natural processes, the uppermost fill containing the only finds from the waterhole – five residual sherds of Romano-British pottery.

A gap of just one metre separated waterhole 3503 from waterhole 3504 to the north. The latter was subcircular in shape apart from a sharp point at the south where there was a slight step, giving the feature a tear-shape (Fig. 5). It was 3m long, 2.3m wide and 0.8m deep with concave sides and a slightly concave base. Like waterhole 3503 it had the remains of a timber revetment in the base (structure 2772), (Plate 1), in this case timbers being recorded only on the southern and eastern sides, and with no intervening primary fill. Of the 14 alder and hazel (and possibly oak) stakes, most were vertical and *in situ*. Some were roundwood, other were wedge-shaped staves, the most westerly of which (wood sample 25) produced a radiocarbon date of cal AD 580-660 (95% 1427±25 BP, NZA-28893  $\delta^{13}\text{C} = -27.2\text{‰}$ ). Irregular slots in the horizontal timbers were interpreted during the excavation as possible mortise holes by which they were tenon-jointed to the vertical stakes, but the timbers were too degraded when examined in the laboratory to confirm this. There was no evidence of packing behind the revetment, although the gravelly silt there differed from the basal layer of clay with dark silty lenses in front of it, the latter representing (as in waterhole 3503) silting during the feature's use. This structure too, therefore, may represent a platform within the waterhole, accessed from the 'step' at the south, rather than a lining. These fills, and the timber structure, were sealed by a c. 0.3m thick secondary fill of organic rich silty clay, and further naturally accumulated fills, the uppermost of which contained ten sherds of organic-tempered Saxon pottery and five residual Romano-British sherds.



**Plate 1 Saxon waterhole 3504**

Both waterholes cut earlier large subcircular features on their eastern sides, although the latter were only partly investigated and their full dimensions were not established. Waterhole 3503 cut feature 2810, which was excavated to a depth of 0.4m, while waterhole 3504 cut feature (2827), which was at least 2.5m long and 2m wide and also at least 0.4m deep. Their size and location raise the possibility that these too may have been waterholes.

The contemporary environment appears to have altered significantly from the open grassland of the prehistoric and Romano-British periods, the waterlogged plant remains (particularly from the southern waterhole, 3503) indicating possible open woodland or woodland edge, with hawthorn, sloe, elder, elm, alder and hazel, and some herbaceous species being associated with a damp, shaded environment, and others with more open conditions. The hazel and alder stakes were most likely from a managed (coppiced) source, as both types respond readily to coppicing, ensuring a regular renewable supply of straight even-sized rods (Edlin 1949). The use of substantial quantities of alder indicates the presence of wet alder carr woodland in the local area, most likely fringing the floodplain edge. The snail assemblage from waterhole 3503 indicates that the waterhole was subjected to seasonal drying. The charred remains from the waterholes, giving an indication both of the environment and of domestic activity, included grains of free-threshing wheat, which (along with hulled barley) was the dominant crop in Britain at this time (Greig 1991), being found for instance at other Saxon sites around Ashford (Stevens 2006a).

The charcoal assemblage from waterhole 3504 (context 2805) was dominated by mature alder and lesser oak, with twigwood of both taxa also represented. Small quantities of hazel, beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and pomaceous fruit wood were also identified. The pieces were generally large and well-preserved with few damaged or



vitrified fragments. The presence of a hawthorn thorn and twig indicate the latter may also be of hawthorn. While the assemblage is site-specific, the occurrence of taxa that thrive on base-rich soils, such as beech and field maple which were also identified at Anglo-Saxon Springhead and Northfleet (Barnett in prep.), reflects woodland growth on chalk outcrops in Kent.

The presence of twigwood in the charcoal assemblage may indicate a domestic hearth, a possible domestic context being provided by a large subrectangular hollow (3511) extending beyond the northern edge of the site, whose shape is suggestive of a sunken-featured building. This measured 4 m by at least 2m, and was up to 0.2m deep with straight, moderately steep sides and a flat base on which was a layer of compact gravel. Whether feature 3511 was 4m long or 4m wide, it would fall within the size range for sunken-featured buildings, which could be either square or, more commonly, rectangular. There were no postholes associated with the hollow, despite this being a common feature of such structures. The dearth of finds and other signs of occupation or domestic activity are unusual, the only finds – a single fragment (1 g) of organic-tempered Saxon pottery, and a residual late prehistoric sherd – coming from the upper part of the fill of slightly charcoal-flecked clay silt overlying the cobbled surface.

## **Medieval**

Medieval activity is represented by an array of straight, shallow gullies with largely comparable profiles containing small quantities of twelfth- to thirteenth-century pottery (Fig. 5). These appear to form a rectangular enclosure, c. 63m by over 50m, situated within a wider field system. Gully 3014 ran west-north-west to east-south-east across the slope on the southern side of the enclosure and continued beyond its south-west corner. Marking the south-west corner was a c. 4m long arm (2151) running perpendicular (north-north-east) from gully 3014, and ending at a terminal.

The western side of the enclosure was marked in part by gully 3016, which entered the site from the west-north-west, parallel to and 5.5m from gully 3014, then turned to the east-north-east on approximately the same line as gully 2151. Evidence that the enclosure boundary had been subject to minor modification at the south-west is provided by gully 3015, which cut across gully 3014 in the centre of the site, then turned and ran along its northern side, before turning again as it approached gully 2151. It then ran north-north-east beside gully 3016 for 19m before turning into the enclosure interior.

The northern side of the enclosure was formed by two lengths of gully (3501 and 3513) on the same alignment, separated by a gap of 10m at the point where their line crossed the location of the Saxon waterholes, with an undated posthole (2760) on the eastern side of the gap.

The eastern side appears to have been formed by gully 3518, although its irregular line and dimensions (up to 1.4m wide) makes it noticeably different from the gullies on the other sides. An alternative interpretation is that the eastern side of the enclosure actually lay outside the excavation area, and that gully 3518 was a later feature – it produced a sherd of late medieval sandy ware.

The enclosure contained few internal features; these included a shallow posthole (2517) just inside the line of 3518, and a length of gully (3521) extending 5m into the enclosure from the east, possibly representing part of an internal division similar to gully 3015 on the opposite side.

At the northern corner of the site, an undated gully (2566) parallel to the north and south sides of the enclosure, may be part of the extended field system.

## **Undated**

A number of other features in the northern part of the site (including pits, short gullies, postholes and possible ditch terminals on the edge of the excavation) provided no finds, stratigraphical or other evidence by which to securely assign a date (Fig. 5). They included: a shallow, irregular, oval pit (2564) whose basal fill contained a small assemblage of animal bone (some burnt) and a single piece of worked flint and which was overlain by a dump of charcoal-rich burnt soil (although not burnt *in situ*); sub-circular pit 2656, which contained badly preserved animal bone fragments from a single fill; and circular pit 2641 that appeared to have filled up naturally and contained no finds. Among the undated postholes were two immediately adjacent (2755 and 2757) close to the possible Saxon sunken-featured building.

## **DISCUSSION**

The features recorded on the site, which appear to span at least some 2400 years, display a level of continuity across the different phases of activity. They consist mainly of a sequence of linear ditches, with their main axes aligned north-east to south-west, and a series of large pits and a hollow probably used as waterholes or wells. Evidence of settlement is relatively sparse, and ambiguous, although the site saw some form of settlement activity, possibly with an industrial component, in the Middle/Late Bronze Age.

Plant remains, charcoal and pollen from features at the start and near the end of this sequence throw light on the nature of the local landscape which, as indicated by the large number of archaeological sites in the surrounding area, appears to have been one favoured for settlement and agriculture throughout much of the site's duration. Evidence from the sediments in the water-filled hollow, possibly part of a small mire or patch of localised marsh on the edge of the floodplain, indicates that there had already been significant woodland clearance by the Middle Bronze Age, the immediate landscape consisting of damp grassland, although with surviving stands of mixed woodland and scrub.

Evidence for the division of the landscape in the Middle/Late Bronze Age, as represented by the array of ditches across the site, has also been found at Brisley Farm some three kilometres to the west of the site (Stevenson and Johnson 2004; Archaeology South-East 2006), with similar features at Westhawk Farm also possibly of this period (Booth *et al.* forthcoming). The shared orientation of the field systems at these sites points to a level of organisation extending over a wide area (Champion 2007, 101), possibly associated with livestock rearing (Yates 2007, 24).

The water-filled hollow is likely to have attracted livestock that were grazing on the rough, damp grassland pasture around the site, but the small number of identified animal bones (mostly from large mammals – cattle and horse) and their poor condition prevent any conclusions being drawn about the nature of animal husbandry in this or in subsequent periods.

The relatively damp ground may also have been suitable for the cultivation of barley and oats. Although richer cereal assemblages of this date are known within the region (Pelling 2003; Stevens 2006; Giorgi 2006a), often associated with substantial or long-lived settlements, such material has often only been found in small quantities in Middle/Late Bronze Age features in Kent (Pelling 2001; Giorgi 2006a; 2006b). Similarly, very few cereal remains were recovered from the settlement at Reading Business Park (Berkshire) despite the number of houses recorded on the site (Campbell 1992).

Despite the relatively damp conditions on the site, its location on gently rising ground on the edge of the floodplain appears to have been selected for more than just farming activity in this period. The concentration of other features – including a roundhouse and a hearth with associated slots, pits and postholes – indicates quite intensive activity that appears to have included both domestic and industrial (possibly metalworking) components; such evidence for non-agricultural activity associated with field systems is sparse in Kent (Champion 2007, 104). The buried soil horizon, initially thought to indicate a hiatus in activity some time between the Late Bronze Age and the Late Iron Age has been shown, conversely, to have been of human origin and possibly closely associated with those activities. If its surviving extent was the product of truncation by later ploughing, it is possible that settlement activity around the site was originally more extensive.

The dating of the later prehistoric sequence is hampered by the small quantities and often undiagnostic character of the pottery; just under 50 features produced pottery, but only two yielded more than 20 sherds – the scoop containing vessel 2532: 120 sherds (Fig. 3), and ditch 3004: 55 sherds (Fig. 4). The assemblage contrasts, therefore, with the large pottery assemblage recovered from excavations along the route of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL), in particular from sites at Beechbrook Wood and Tutt Hill, to the north of Ashford. These revealed a ceramic sequence spanning the period from Middle Bronze Age to Romano-British, in which the flint-tempered fabrics which dominated Middle and Late Bronze Age ceramics were superseded by sandy fabrics, including glauconitic wares, in the Early/Middle Iron Age, and then by grog-tempered wares in the Late Iron Age and into the Romano-British period, although wares from all three major groups co-existed throughout the sequence (Jones 2007; Lyne 2007; Morris 2007). The relative scarcity of sandy wares at Foster Road suggest, therefore, a sharp decline in activity on the site in the Early/Middle Iron Age. While both flint-tempered and grog-tempered wares occurred in the same features, flint-tempered sherds have a markedly lower mean sherd weight (4.6 g) than the grog-tempered wares (9.8 g), and can therefore be seen as largely residual in later contexts. Areas of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age occupation have been recorded at Waterbrook Park, to the south of the site (Panton and Elder 1992, 375-6).

The Late Iron Age and Romano-British features occupy a landscape that was again intensively settled and exploited; some of the ditches recorded to the immediate south-west of the site, in the trench excavated at Boys Hall Moat (Booth and Everson 1994), are clearly associated with those on this site. Activity at Foster Road may also be related to an area of Late Iron Age occupation c. 400m to the south-east (Bennett 1988, 2) or to an Iron Age enclosure at Waterbrook Park c. 1 km to the south-south-east (Wessex Archaeology 2007). There was another enclosure less than 500m to the south-west at the Orbital Park (Philp, 1991, 76-7), and there was also an extensive Middle/Late Iron Age settlement at Park Farm East some 2.5 km to the south-west (Wessex Archaeology 2004). The Late Iron and early Romano-British settlement at Brisley Farm (Stevenson 2004; Archaeology South-East 2006), appears to have been the predecessor of the Romano-British small town at Westhawk Farm (Booth and Lawrence 2000).

Radiocarbon dating confirmed that the two large waterholes with timber structures at their bases were, as suggested by the few sherds of organic-tempered pottery from one of them, indeed of Early Saxon date. Although the possible sunken-featured building may indicate settlement activity associated with these 'wells', apart from the few grains of barley and wheat there was little to indicate the character of any settlement. Saxon woodland was presumably cleared before the establishment of the medieval enclosure which appears to have formed part of a more extensive 12th- to 13th-century field system, and it is likely to have been associated with the moated site at Boys Hall, Sevington, to the immediate south-west, with which it shared the same orientation. The moated site (Kent SAM 146), comprising a rectangular moated island, a long pond and an associated complex of earthworks, was the residential centre of the manor of Sevington and can be traced to the time of Henry III (1207-72) (Hasted 1797-1801, iii 280), and the excavation of a trench on its north-east side produced sherds of 11th- to mid-13th-century pottery (Brown 1994, 432).

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The project archive will be held at Wessex Archaeology (WA 63460-1) until accepted by a Kent museum.

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