

## **Elms Farm, Heybridge**

### **The unstratified material**

The excavations produced vast amounts of material from the topsoil, nearly all of it from deposits stripped off by machine rather than hand excavated. Some comment on the nature of the collection of this material will help to explain why some apparent trends may not be so straightforward.

#### The 1993 site (Area W)

Some truncation had occurred across the 1993 site (Area W) due to ploughing and this site was machine-stripped directly on to natural gravel. There was thus no opportunity to scan for finds or to metal-detect at the intermediate stage in the stripping process, and unstratified finds are correspondingly rarer here.

#### Area A1

All machine stripping was undertaken in two phases: the first comprised the removal of only topsoil and turf; and the second the more carefully monitored fine stripping of bland deposits to a depth at which archaeological features and deposits could be clearly discerned. The relatively short interval between these levels of stripping permitted limited collection of material from the lower deposits, and extensive use was made of metal detecting at this stage. One member of staff pursued this metal detecting virtually full time throughout the stripping process, and a varying number of local enthusiasts also joined in. A few finds from this stage were logged by individual co-ordinates, but most can be assigned no closer than to the area as a whole.

#### Areas A2-A4

Once these next Areas had been machine stripped and the intensity of cut features revealed, it was decided to change the sampling strategy. The whole of Area A2 was divided into ten 20m wide strips, aligned on the site grid, running north-south, and every second strip selected for excavation. This alternate 20m strip sampling approach was also applied to Area A4 and was intended to be continued across Area A3. However, due to slow progress elsewhere on site, once stripped, the latter was planned and no further investigation was carried out.

Stripping of A2 and A4 proceeded as in A1, with scanning for finds and metal detecting at the intermediate stage of the stripping. Finds from these areas were either logged by individual co-ordinate or bagged by 10m grid square. Some (around 700 out of 1900) still slipped through this procedure and cannot be more closely provenanced than to the Area.

In Area B, only the first stage of stripping (removal of turf and 'organics') was undertaken, due to the boggy nature of the ground here. Essentially this area was left in the same position as the rest of the site would have been prior to the second stage strip. Archaeological features were not discernible at this level, though there were occasional hints that they were present below. Here context numbers were assigned to areas within the stripping plan but collection was rather haphazard within these.

No excavation of any sort took place in Area C along the south-eastern periphery of the site, which was to be built up rather than stripped down.

Within this already complicated picture, further confusion may arise through the inconsistent use of context numbers for the unstratified material. Numbers were assigned initially in order to be used for relatively small areas. At the very least, supervisors had one general number for the unstratified material from each Area (4000 for K, 6000 for H, 9000 for D, etc.) But these soon mistakenly began to be used for material from further afield, until eventually numbers such as 4000 covered material from the whole of Area A1.

The material stripped off in the second stage of machining proved to be so rich in artefacts, that a programme of metal-detecting the machined spoil heaps themselves was instituted. This was far from systematic, however, and even had it been it would still have produced only random results (these spoil heaps were several metres high).

Finally, some material was brought in by local enthusiasts who had been granted permission to continue this scanning of the spoil heaps.

Thus there are in general five types of unstratified context:

- Most useful, small area cleaning layers, hand excavated over specific groups of features. These contexts can be considered to be a mixture of the top fills of underlying features and minimal remnant overburden. These would rarely cover more than a five-metre grid square, perhaps one ten-metre square. They are assigned to Areas, sometimes even to specific groups.
- Larger areas of hand cleaning, often a ten or twenty metre grid square, sometimes larger. These can generally be assigned to specific Areas but no closer.
- Material retrieved by hand cleaning from areas not within specifically defined limits, and now assigned only to the larger divisions of the site.
- Material from the deposits left after the first machining but removed by the second (i.e., before the site was subdivided). These finds can be further subdivided: those with individual co-ordinates to centimetre accuracy; those located to within a given 10m grid square (Areas A2 and A4 only), and those located only by broad area.
- Material from spoil heaps, which could come from anywhere on the 1994 site.

Summary of the ‘general’ unstratified contexts:

Context	Description
3999	Finds from spoilheaps
4000, 4001, 4002	Anywhere in Area A1 (i.e. Areas D-K)
11000	Anywhere in Area A2 (i.e. Areas L to P)
17150	Anywhere in Area A3 / A4 metal detecting
17242	Area C metal detecting (very limited)
12247-12266 inclusive, 12345-7, 12362-3	Machining strips within Area B (i.e. <u>not</u> restricted to the excavated Area R); these are geographically well defined but produce little material.

All other unstratified context numbers refer to specific site areas, or smaller areas within these.

It should be noted that some finds were plotted by individual co-ordinates, some are just given a context number. For the general (non-area specific) numbers, locations other than those from individual finds-spots can be *very* misleading. Although context 4000, for instance, has been assigned co-ordinates 4900E/7945N in the database, finds from 4000 cannot be assigned to that grid square (though that is what the computer will tell us). None of the contexts in the table above (except those in B), in short, can be thought of as having any meaningful location within the broad site area.

Perhaps the important point for specialists to bear in mind is that some of the finds from unstratified contexts are located in two dimensions, and can therefore be used to plot broad distributional trends, but that some of this material must be screened out.