

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME XLVII

JANUARY 1953 TO DECEMBER 1953

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BOWES AND BOWES

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A WINDMILL HILL SITE AT HURST FEN MILDENHALL

GRACE BRISCOE, M.B., B.S., F.S.A.

PRELIMINARY REPORT

IN May 1951, at an Historical Exhibition held at Mildenhall, Mr T. W. Morley of Holywell Row showed me a tinful of flint artifacts which he had dug from a site in Hurst Fen, close to the source of the Eriswell Lode. The majority were leaf-shaped arrowheads of light or honey-coloured flint, very thin, and beautifully worked. A few days later I went with Mr Morley and Dr Parsons, the Chairman of the Mildenhall Archaeological Society, to inspect the site.

Hurst Fen is not in the true fen but is situated in the marginal lands which lie between the black-soil fens and the East Anglian chalk ridge; the hump of Codson Hill rises a mile to the east. It is a swampy area, providing a gathering ground for the waters of the Eriswell Lode which flow through Lakenheath to the River Little Ouse (Fig. 1). The swamps are cloaked by a dense growth of rushes and reeds. Between the swamps there are islands of sand, rising two or three feet above the general level, on which gorse, heather and willowherb grow. Twenty years ago these islands were bare of grass and were swarming with rabbits. Now the rabbits have completely disappeared, nobody knows why, and the sandy expanses are covered with long tough grass.

On arrival at the site, which lies on O.S. 6 in. map Suffolk XXI N.W., National Grid Reference 52/726767, we found a bare sandy patch (approx. 12 sq. yd.) on a slightly rising slope surrounded by long grass. All the artifacts had been obtained from this area, the soil of which had been carefully sifted. There were a number of flint flakes, mostly honey-coloured, on the surface of this patch. In a heap at one corner were a number of sherds of Neolithic ware, very rough and gritty. These had been found during the search for 'leaves' and as no interest was taken in pottery they had been put on one side. There were several other small bare patches where digging had taken place, flint chips and small sherds giving evidence of former occupation. Local information suggested that the place had been a hunting ground for many years for those in search of attractive flints to sell. The long grass concealed many small holes, a foot or so deep, which may have been due to trial digging, though in some cases they were the remains of old rabbit-holes.

Subsequently Mr Morley lent me all the objects he had collected from the site. They included the flint arrowheads already mentioned, three javelin heads, the butt of a polished flint celt broken in antiquity, half a flint pick, 237 small narrow flakes,

216 large flakes, some with saw edges, and over 100 flint scrapers, many of these only slightly worked. The pottery found on the surface was much broken, many of the sherds having split longitudinally owing to exposure to sun and rain. There was however sufficient evidence to show that this pottery was of neolithic type, some of

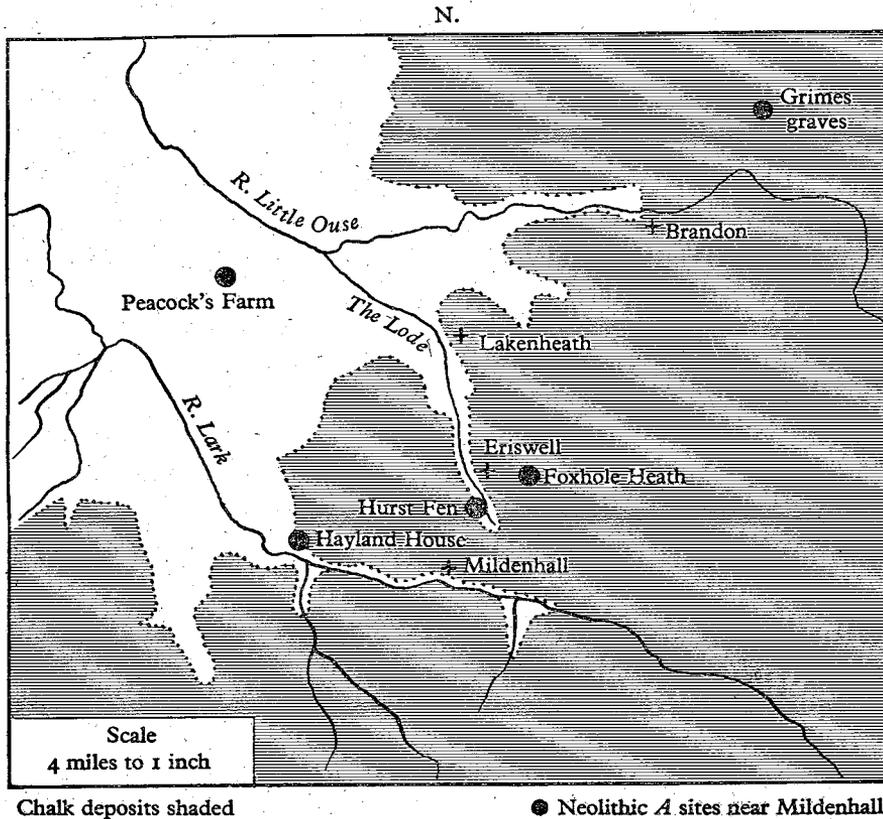


Fig. 1.

the rim sherds showing the characteristic decoration of the later 'Windmill Hill' or Neolithic A 2 wares. It was decided to make a preliminary investigation to determine as far as possible the extent of settlement.

THE TRIAL TRENCHES

A three-foot-wide trench was dug eastwards from the eastern border of the disturbed area (marked D.A. on Fig. 2) into undisturbed ground. The section shows that here as elsewhere the topsoil consists of a dark grey sandy loam to a depth of 9-12 in. Below that is a dark brown mottled layer, 4-6 in. thick, with lumps and streaks of sand stained with iron deposit, possibly an old land surface. The subsoil is yellow sand. The water table is variable and is met at a depth of 2½-3 ft. The soil profile is, therefore, quite different from that of the black-soil fen. Other trenches were dug,

radiating from the disturbed area, and also in the neighbourhood of the smaller bare patches where flakes and scraps of pottery were showing on the surface. A centre

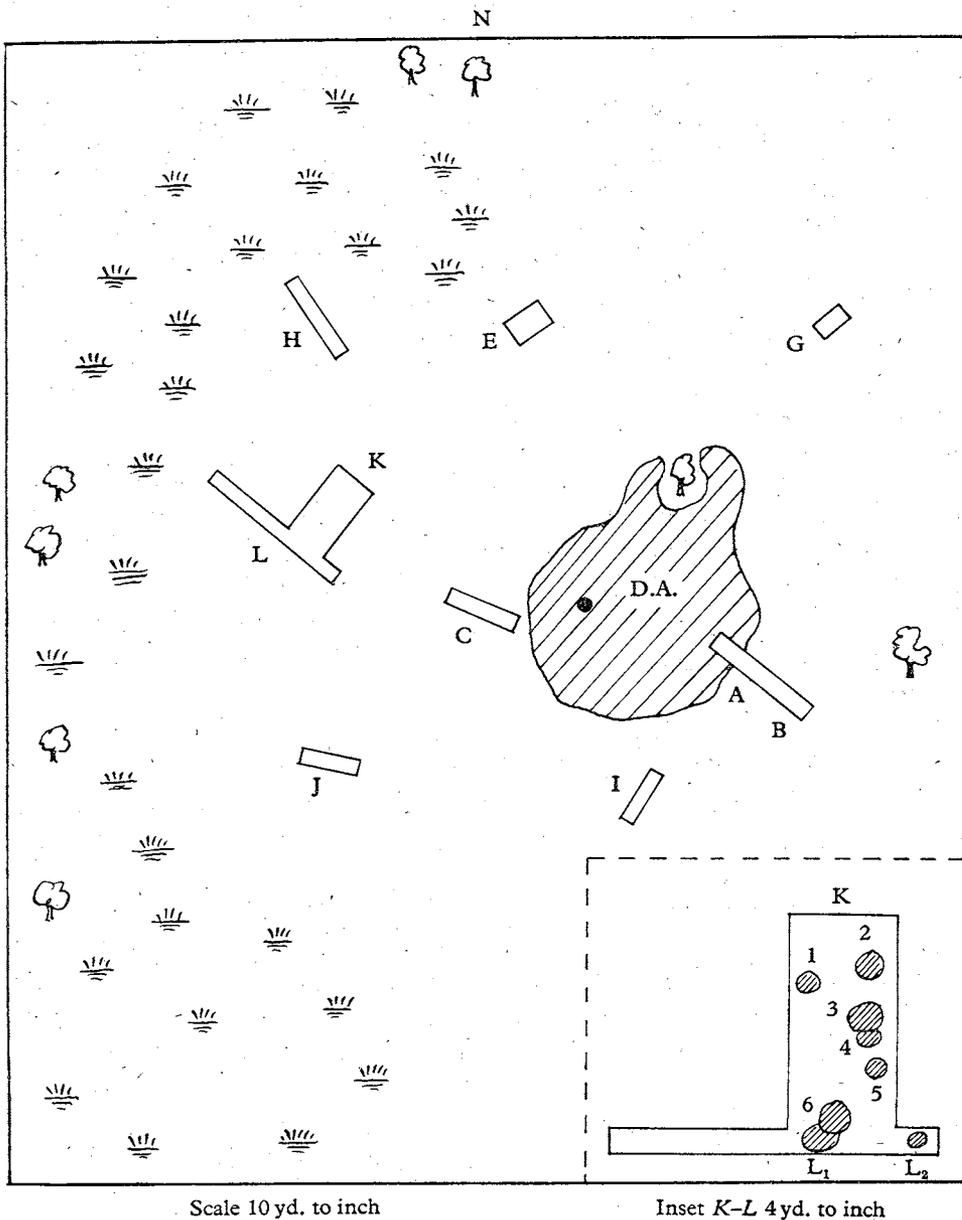


Fig. 2. Trial trenches around the central disturbed area D.A.

survey point was staked inside the disturbed area and traces of occupation were recorded on a large-scale plan. One group of sherds was found on an eroded patch 120 yards to the north of the centre point.

Trench AB (15 ft. by 3 ft.). The first part of this trench lay within the disturbed area and showed that this part had not been dug very deeply; only the two top dark layers had been dug, and the yellow sand looked undisturbed. In the remaining part of the trench there were two blackish patches A and B, each about 4 in. or 5 in. thick, at the base of the dark brown layer. They did not form pits or hearths, but here the sand was darker and more compact, and contained more objects than the surrounding lighter sand. A decorated rim (Fig. 3o) and a shoulder sherd (Fig. 6e) were found in A, and a black shoulder sherd with vertical grooves in B (Fig. 6k). Flint flakes were numerous.

Trench C (12 ft. by 2 ft.). This contained a group of sherds in a blackish patch at the dark brown level at a depth of one foot. No suggestion of a pit or floor.

Trench D. This trench was started in a small bare patch at the top of the little slope, two or three feet higher than *AB*. The soil here was drier. There was evidence of a small fire at a depth of two feet. Fired flints and stones and small pieces of charred wood were found in this intensely black spot as well as sherds. Three portions of a light grey polished celt came from this trench, two of them having been fractured by fire. The water table was not reached at a depth of $3\frac{1}{2}$ ft.

Trench E. Near the swamp level. There were two dark patches which contained most of the sherds, each patch being about 18 in. in diameter and a few inches deep. Two cores, a piece of quern and two javelin heads were found.

Trench G. This small trench showed no dark patch, but yielded a leaf-shaped arrowhead of honey-coloured flint broken at the base (Fig. 8e), a scraper and a rubbing stone.

Trenches H and I showed no fresh features.

Trench J. Below the dark top soil, 1 ft. to 1 ft. 3 in. down, there was a layer of blackish compacted sand containing sherds and an abundance of flint flakes, the majority honey-coloured. Some of the chips were so small as to suggest the presence of a final pressure-flaking floor.

Trench K. This trench, near the swamp level, was started because there were signs of recent digging by persons unknown, black soil and sherds showing on the spoil heap. As this trench gave signs of two black spots an area measuring 13 ft. by 6 ft. was cleared by horizontal scraping disclosing six patches of black soil (Fig. 2 inset).

K 1 was shallow, from 1 ft. to 1 ft. 6 in. deep, about 1 ft. in diameter. It yielded six rim sherds.

K 2 was deeper; there was a layer of lightish sand between the dark brown old land surface and the top of the patch at 2 ft. It was difficult to see its exact depth as the discoloration went down below the water table at 3 ft. Diameter 18 in. approx. *K 2* produced over 100 sherds, which included seventeen rims, six shoulders, a base sherd, two small pieces of bone, and a large fragment of a saddle-quern.

K 3 was cone-shaped, extending from the base of the dark brown layer to a depth of 2 ft. 6 in. The sherds were mainly in the top 6 in. of the patch, which also contained a little bone. There were dozens of flint flakes in the dark sand, many of them honey-coloured, but none outside in yellow sand.

K 4 appeared at a depth of 1 ft. from the surface. At 1 ft. 3 in. it blended with *K 3* but was shallower, and at 1 ft. 9 in. it had disappeared. It contained lumps of soft yellow vacuolated clay, possibly imperfectly fired pottery.

K 5 was a shallow patch, only 3 in. deep. It contained a few small sherds. Below the patch, in clean sand, there was a rim sherd with slash-and-stab decoration (Fig. 4*a*) and two flakes. It was unusual to find a sherd in yellow sand.

K 6. This patch extended from a depth of 1-2 ft., with sherds at 1 ft. 3 in. Diameter about 18 in.

Trench L. A long narrow trench, 18 ft. by 2 ft., was dug on the south side of the *K* site. There were two black patches (Fig. 2, inset).

L 1 was a deep pit with a foot of lightish sand between it and the dark brown layer. It extended well below the water table and its contents had to be scooped out. It contained sherds of a large coarse pot, its surface spoilt by root growth (Fig. 5*a*), a decorated shoulder sherd (Fig. 6*b*) and the remains of animal teeth.

L 2 was a shallow patch containing sherds, including a shoulder with stab decoration (Fig. 6*a*), at a depth of 18 in.

THE POTTERY

Much of the pottery excavated was in a deplorable condition. In the drier portions of the site sand was cemented on to the surfaces, often mingled with remains of root growth encased in iron deposit. In the damper areas the sherds had the consistency of cheese and had to be removed in a lump of sand. After slow drying this sand was gently brushed away. If, after thorough drying, the sherds were still too friable to be handled they were immersed in a solution of polyvinyl acetate, kindly supplied to me by the Institute of Archaeology. This proved very effective in making the sherds reasonably tough.

Although hundreds of sherds have been found it has not been possible to obtain the complete form of a single pot. Fifty-seven vessels at least are represented by over eighty rim sherds, and fifteen of these rims are decorated. Shoulder sherds number twenty-one of which nine are decorated. There are also three body sherds with patterns. Perforations occur in four sherds, three made after, and one before, baking.

Ware. The most common ware is coarse, of loose texture, with abundant flint grits, a black or reddish core and an external surface varying from a light sandy colour through brown and red to black. Some sherds have a lumpy but smoothed-over exterior. Better, scarcer ware consists of a fine firm paste with hardly any grit and a burnished dark grey surface. All the sherds can be included in the varieties of Neolithic A ware described by Stuart Piggott,¹ except for several sherds of a nearly white ware packed with coarse flint grits, which stands out from the other pottery by being hard when excavated. The paste, the external and internal surfaces, are all of a whitish colour and both surfaces are smoothed. A single sherd closely resembling this group in paste and colour, except for a faint pinkish tinge on the

¹ Stuart Piggott, *Arch. J.* LXXX, viii, p. 67.

outer surface, is in Ipswich Museum. It was found in Bolton's brickfield under ten feet of hill-wash in association with Neolithic ware.

Forms. The forms vary from a tiny thin-walled cup (Fig. 3*a*) and small probably bagshaped pots (Fig. 3*b, c*) to large clumsy bowls with rim diameters of twelve to fifteen inches (Fig. 5*a*). The bowl with largest diameter (Fig. 5*b*) has comparatively thin walls (7 mm.). Base sherds suggest that the bowls were round-bottomed, and no sherd indicating a flat base has been found. Nine vessels show a definite carination with hollow neck above, the other shoulder sherds show rounded curves (Fig. 6*e*). The two most complete profiles demonstrate these forms (Figs. 5*a* and 6*l*). No lugs or handles have been found.

Rims. The commonest type of rim is slightly rolled and everted. Three rims are of the hammerhead type (Fig. 4*m, n, o*) resembling those found at Abingdon.¹ Straight rims appear to belong to the smaller pots, and three rims have internal bevels (Fig. 3*l, m*). The remainder have rounded tops with or without slight eversion (Fig. 5*c*).

Decoration. Decoration is seen on twenty-seven sherds taking the form of scored parallel lines, rows of round or oblong punches, stabs, and in one case a girth line of tiny arrowshaped impressions (Fig. 4*g*). The rims are usually adorned with shallow grooves, either diagonal or straight, and these are occasionally carried over to the inner side of the pot (Fig. 4*b*). In one case stabs are used to decorate the top and inner surface of the rim (Fig. 3*o*). An interesting combination of ornament appears on one sherd. It consists of vertical grooves above the carination and below four rows of punches (Fig. 6*b*). It bears a close resemblance to the ornament on the fine A 2 bowl from Hayland's House,² and also to that on a rim found in this neighbourhood on Foxhole Heath and hitherto unpublished (Fig. 4*c*); it is illustrated here by permission of the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology. In all three cases the paste is fine and hard, the colour is dark grey and the surface is slightly burnished. A fourth example in this region of this combination of ornament is in Ipswich Museum (unpublished). A large A 2 bowl found on the Neolithic floor at Kesteven Road, Ipswich, is decorated with vertical lines on the neck and four rows of punches below.

THE FLINT INDUSTRY

The flint implements include twenty arrowheads; of these twelve are made from a honey-coloured flint, three from a light grey and five from a dark grey or black flint (Fig. 7). All these are of the leaf-shaped variety except one (broken) which suggests the 'petit tranchet' derivative type (Fig. 8*f*). There are also five javelin heads and two others partly finished (Fig. 8*a-d*). Also the cutting edge of a polished axe (Fig. 8*j*), three fragments probably all of the same light grey polished axe, half a pick (Fig. 8*k*), numerous scrapers (Fig. 8*i, l*) and surprisingly few cores. In the abundance of flint flakes there are a few showing serrations on one or both edges (Fig. 8*g, h*).

¹ E. T. Leeds, *Antiq. J.* VIII, p. 472.

² C. S. Leaf, *Proceedings C.A.S.* xxxv, p. 106.

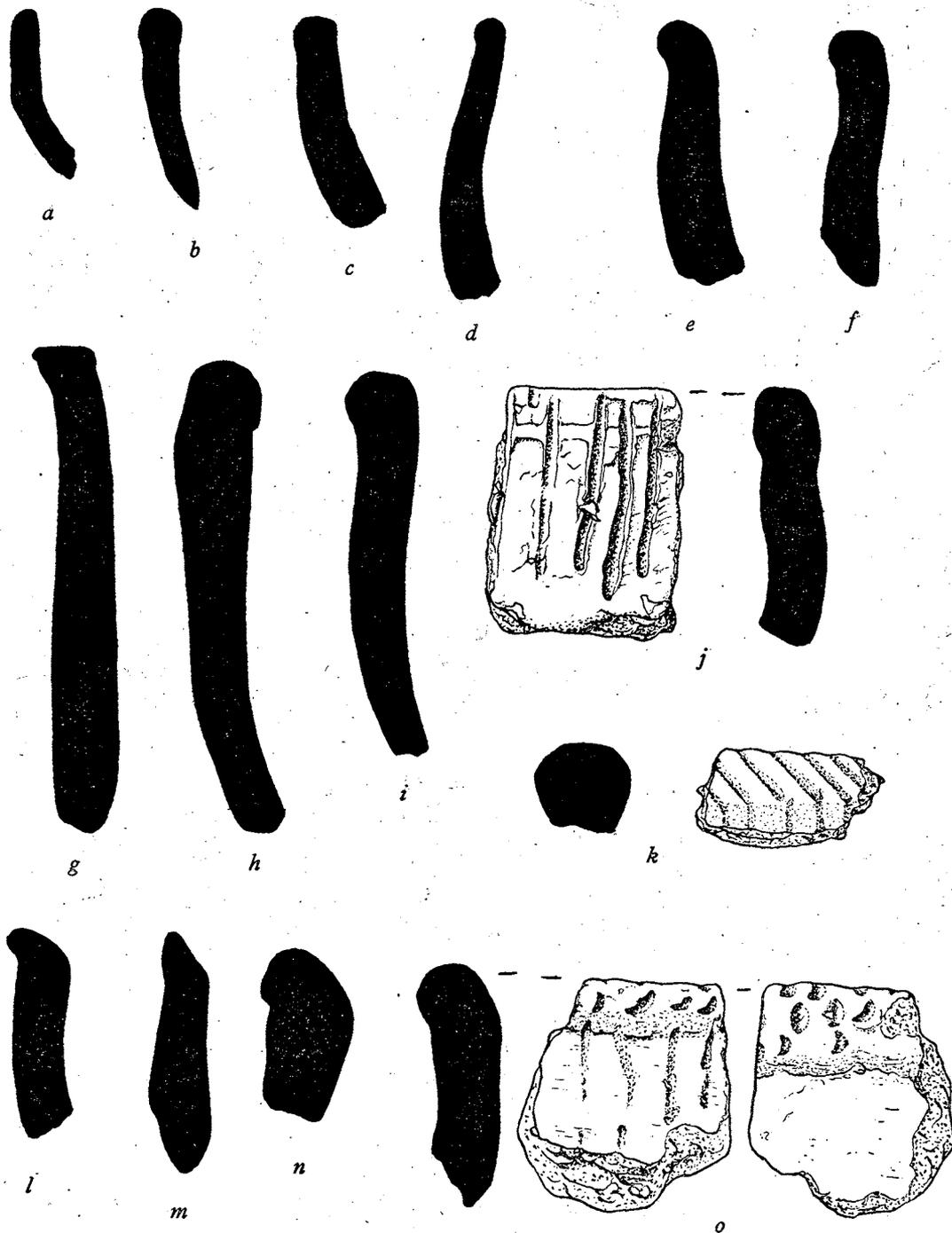


Fig. 3. Pottery from Hurst Fen, Mildenhall, natural size.
 (The drawings in this figure and in Figs. 4-6 are by Mrs M. E. Scott)

IMPLEMENTS OF STONE

The largest piece of stone, a 'quartzite pebble probably from the Bunter beds', weighs 13 lb. and is clearly the quarter of a saddle quern. It came from Pit K 2, which contained the largest assemblage of pottery. Other portions of querns are made from 'hornblende diorite probably out of the drift'.

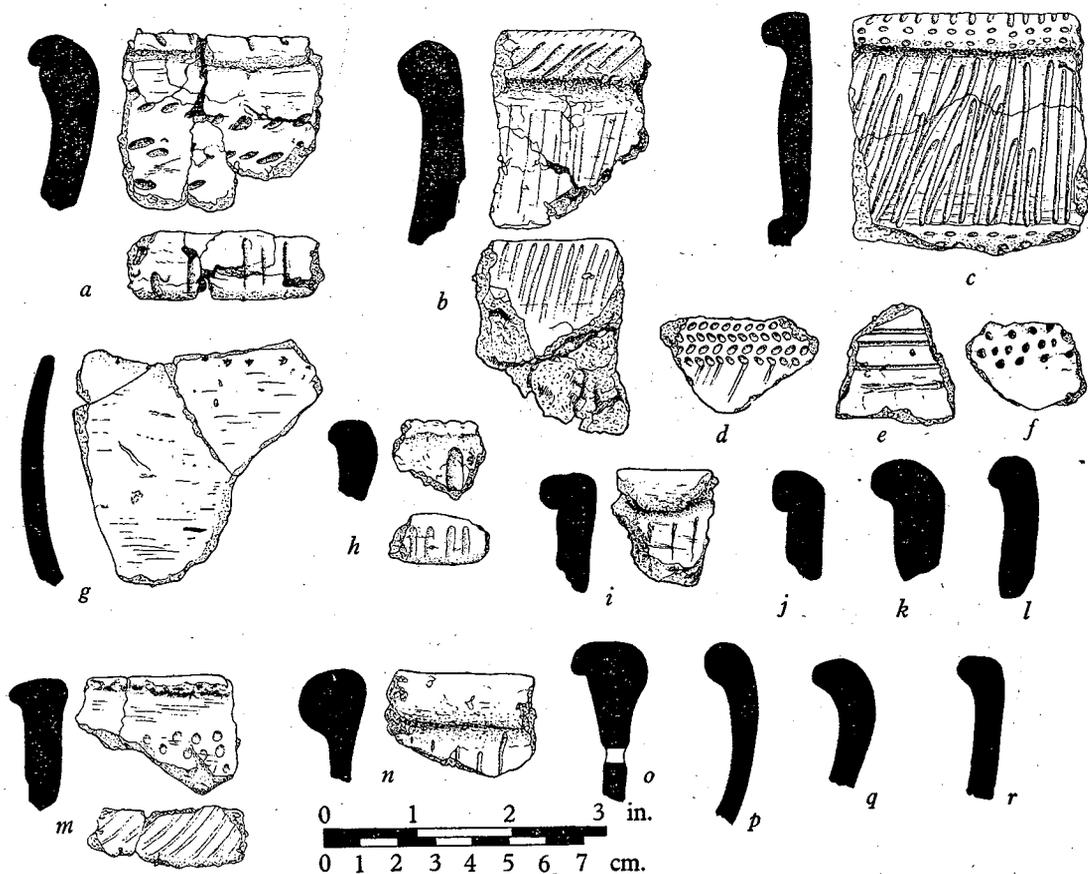


Fig. 4. Pottery from Hurst Fen, Mildenhall, one-half natural size.

Three small struck chips of a greenstone found on the surface have been examined by the Petrological Department of the Geological Survey (Enq. 1264). They come from a tuff comparable with Group VI (Great Langdale).

ORGANIC REMAINS

These were very scanty and consisted of small pieces of bone too fragmentary to be recognizable and portions of the teeth of ox and sheep.

Burnt wood was only present in small quantity. The largest piece was adherent to the inner surface of the decorated shoulder sherd (Fig. 6*b*), but was too crushed to permit identification.

SUMMARY

The discovery of the Hurst Fen site is of particular interest since it gives additional information about the Neolithic settlement on the eastern edge of the Fenland (Fig. 1). In 1934 Grahame Clark¹ discovered Neolithic A sherds at Peacock's Farm,

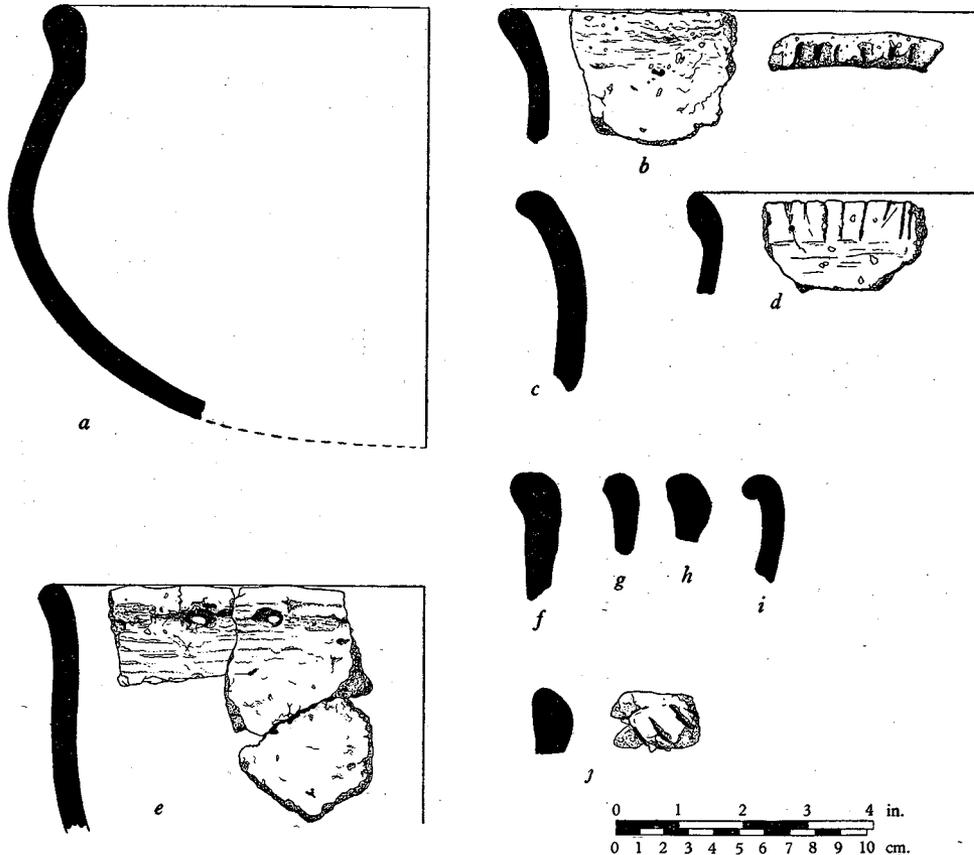


Fig. 5. Pottery from Hurst Fen, Mildenhall, one-third natural size.

Shippea Hill, near Littleport, close to the meeting point of Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. In 1935 C. S. Leaf² found a large Neolithic A 2 bowl at Hayland's House in Mildenhall Fen. Neolithic A sherds have been found in Grimes Graves on the north bank of the Little Ouse valley while Foxhole Heath and the site just described lie on the south side of the valley. Hayland's House is 4 miles to the west of Hurst Fen, Peacock's Farm 7 miles to the north-west, Grimes Graves 10 miles to the north-east, Foxhole Heath less than a mile away. A circle of 7 miles radius would embrace all five sites.

¹ Grahame Clark, *Antiq. J.* xv, p. 284.

² *Proceedings C.A.S.* xxxv, p. 106.

Although the investigation at Hurst Fen has been only of a preliminary nature, it is safe to say that up to the present nothing has appeared to invalidate the identification of the site with a Neolithic A culture. A representative collection of sherds submitted to Professor Stuart Piggott were judged by him to be of pure 'Windmill

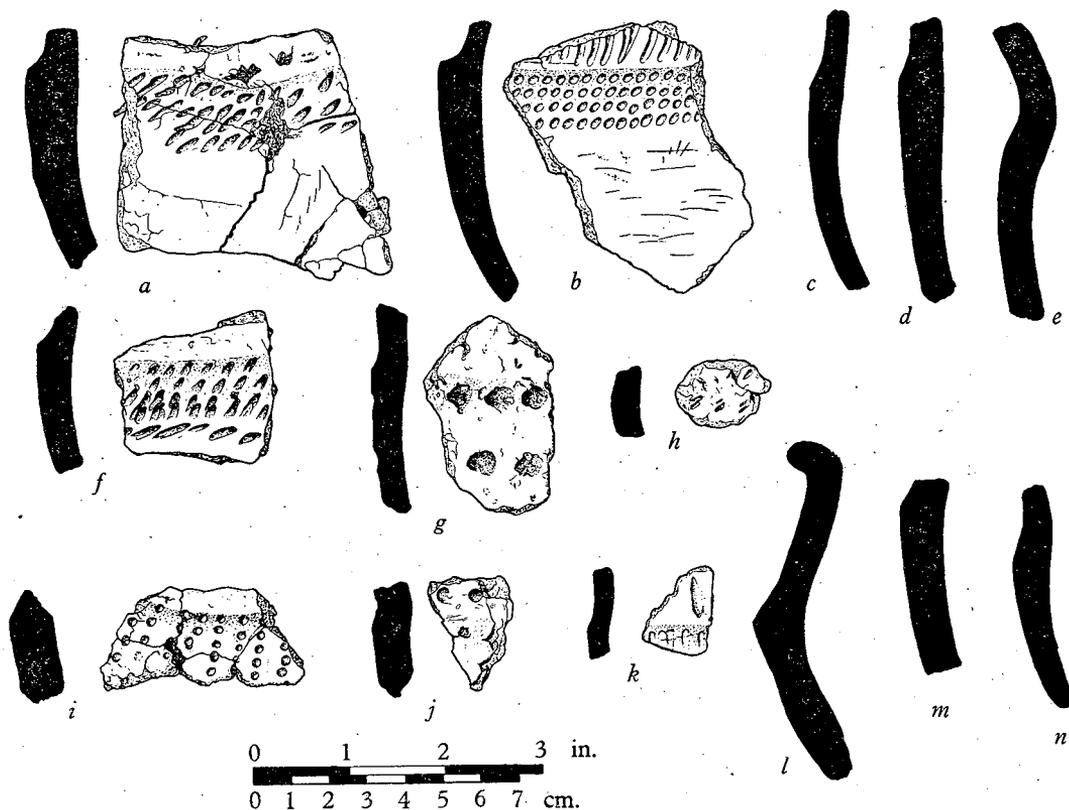


Fig. 6. Pottery from Hurst Fen, Mildenhall, one-half natural size.

Hill' type. The character of the flint artifacts confirms this conclusion. The site may be contrasted with its neighbour at Haylands House in that the latter showed a mixture of Neolithic and Beaker sherds on the same sand hillock.

The presence of undecorated, probably bag-shaped, pots with straight rims indicates that the site was occupied during the early part of the period, while the carinated vessels with hollow necks and decorated shoulders and rims show that the site was also used by later A 2 settlers. The abundance of flint flakes, many honey-coloured, discovered on the central area suggests that the leaf-shaped arrowheads were made on this spot.

No trace of huts has so far been found. The small patches of black sand noticed in the trenches are probably little more than discoloration around a group of sherds. Two of the patches may be described as pits; they are well below the old land surface

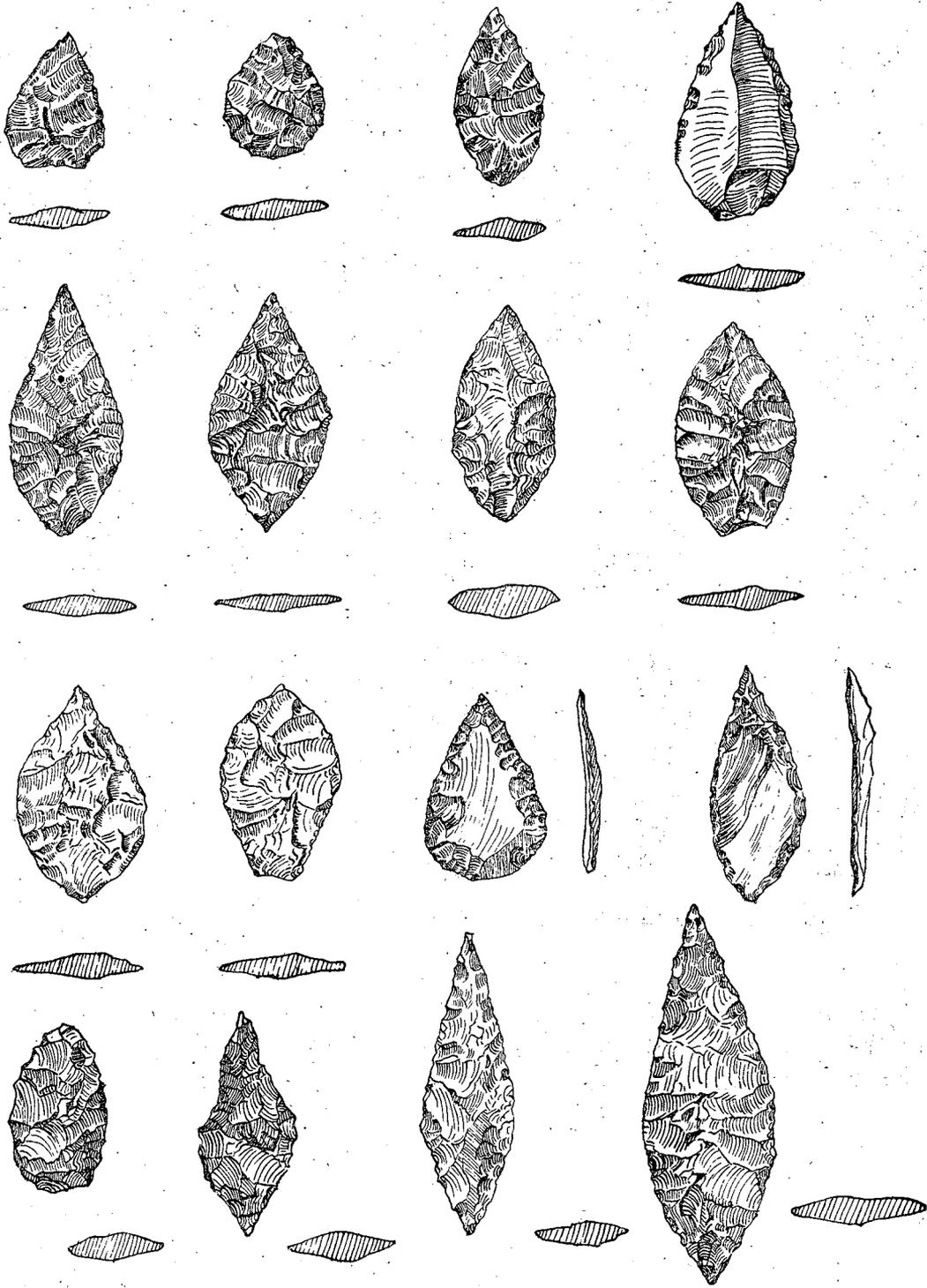


Fig. 7. Flint arrowheads from Hurst Fen, Mildenhall, natural size.
 (Drawn by Mrs R. K. Briscoe)

and each contained a large amount of pottery as well as traces of bone and teeth. The nearer the trenches were taken to the swamp area the more abundant were the signs of habitation, and it is hoped that a season's excavation extending in the direction of the swamp will disclose some definite indications of dwelling places.

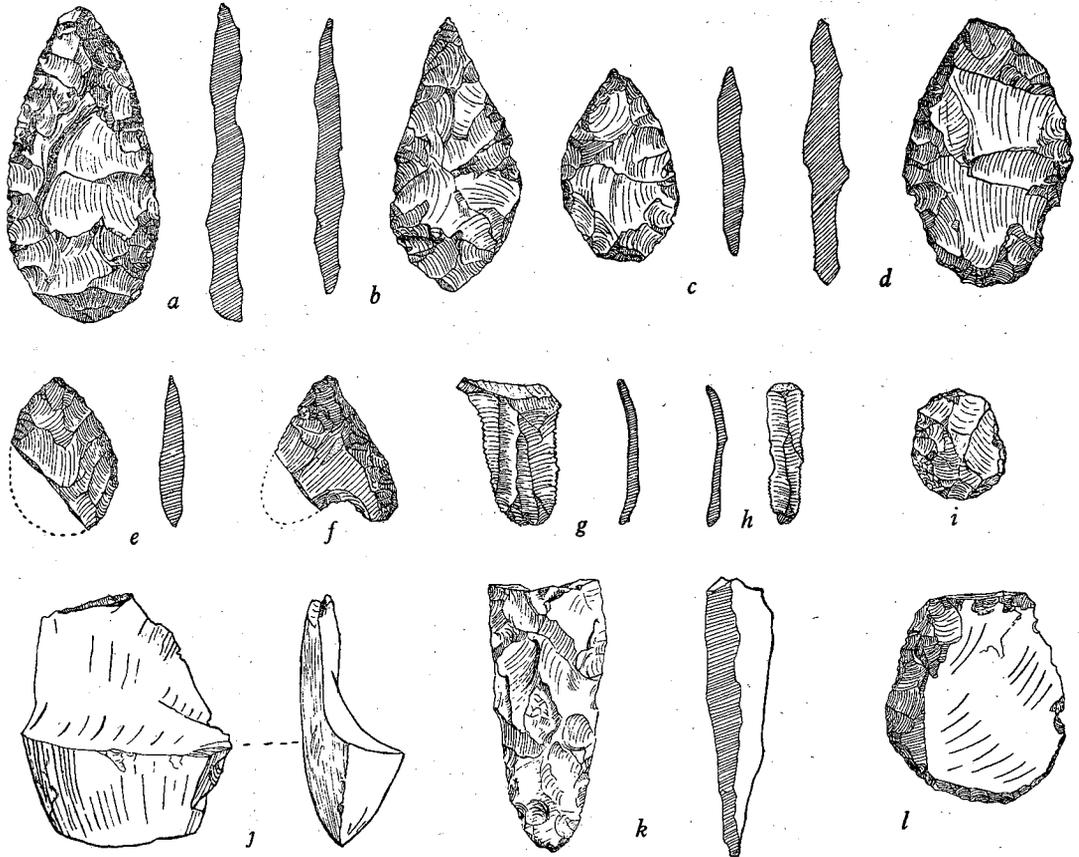


Fig. 8. Flint implements from Hurst Fen, Mildenhall, one-half natural size.

(Drawn by Mrs R. K. Briscoe)

My thanks are due to members of the Mildenhall Archaeological Society who have done the hard work of the excavation. Also to Miss Clare Fell, F.S.A., for her advice in preparing this report.

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