

SUMMARY REPORTS

West of Sittingbourne Road (TQ 7830 5770)

As part of an extensive programme of archaeological investigation carried out in advance of the construction of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL), the Oxford Archaeological Unit were commissioned by Union Railways (South) Limited to undertake a watching brief on earthmoving operations between Pilgrims Way and Lenham Heath in Kent. As part of this work a medieval sub-circular ditched enclosure was investigated at West of Sittingbourne Road. Although the features were heavily truncated by archaeologically unsupervised machine stripping in the south-west quadrant of the enclosure, the investigation revealed the remnants of an entrance and three pits, two within the enclosure and one without. All contained 11th-13th century pottery and small assemblages of animal bones and oyster shells. Subsoil stripping was rapidly halted and the remainder of the enclosure fenced to prevent further damage. The undamaged part of the site will be preserved outside the permanent railway fenceline.

No clear parallels for the site have been found and its function is not known. Although the pottery, animal bones and oysters indicate that it was at least temporarily occupied it does not appear to have been a settlement. It lay in marginal woodland away from contemporary centres of settlement. The most plausible hypothesis is that it was used for the semi-specialised exploitation and management of resources from the surrounding woodland. Early medieval villages centred in areas of higher agricultural potential sometimes also held rights in pockets of more marginal land some distance away. The enclosure may have been related to such rights.

As a unique discovery the site is of considerable interest. Although the uncertainty concerning its function vitiates its significance to some degree, the site nonetheless has the potential to address issues concerning the organisation of the landscape, the exploitation and management of natural resources, and settlement morphology and function in the early medieval period. More detailed artefactual, environmental and stratigraphic analysis will not contribute significantly to understanding of the site, but further research is needed to examine the topographical setting of the site in relation to early medieval patterns of settlement in the locality and exploitation of the landscape. This, together with a search for functional parallels in the archaeological or documentary record, may shed light on the function of the enclosure and associated features.