

An archaeological excavation at Long Grove Road, Epsom

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with contributions by
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Excavation undertaken by Archaeology South-East at Long Grove Road, Epsom in 2003 revealed evidence of mid–Late Bronze Age features including ditches, pits and other, amorphous, features. It is thought that the more irregular features may represent tree and scrub clearance in the early prehistoric period. The ditches are likely indications of agricultural features, such as droveways and fields, imposed on this cleared landscape in the later Bronze Age. Several postholes were identified within the fields, which may be the remains of internal fences, possibly for stock control. Nearby settlement may also be suggested by a pit containing pottery and worked flint. The excavation has revealed valuable, if ephemeral, evidence of the early landscape in an area that has seen little previous work.

Introduction

Archaeology South-East (a division of University College London Field Archaeology Unit) was commissioned by Surrey County Council Planning and Resources to undertake an excavation of an archaeologically sensitive site at Long Grove Road, Epsom (TQ 2010 6200; fig 1A and B) prior to the construction of a new primary school (Clouston 1998).

The site is bounded by Long Grove Road to the north/north-east, common parkland to the south, south-west and south-east and the former Horton Hospital to the north-west and west (fig 1C). At the time of the excavation the area was mostly given over to a former recreation ground including grassland, an upstanding pavilion, derelict tennis courts and bowling green. This land forms a fairly gentle east-facing slope. The underlying geology is on the boundary of the London Clay and Undifferentiated River Terrace Deposits (British Geological Survey: sheet 270).

An initial stage of archaeological investigation in January 2003, consisting of evaluation of the site by fourteen trial trenches (fig 1C), identified sufficient ancient remains, mostly of prehistoric date, that the Surrey County Council Archaeological Officer recommended further investigation of the site by area excavation; this was carried out in March 2003 (Stevenson 2003). Archaeology South-East also carried out an evaluation at Horton Hospital (Stevens 2003), which lies adjacent to the present excavation. This work proved to be archaeologically negative.

The general objective of the excavation was to identify, excavate and record any archaeological remains before they were affected by the development. A more specific aim was to investigate and clarify the nature of prehistoric activity in the area.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

There has been little large-scale excavation in the vicinity of Long Grove Road, although some, more limited, archaeological investigation has taken place. About 800m to the south-west of the site, a small evaluation at Manor Hospital revealed pits of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date. Although these were thought to represent a fairly low level of activity, they might indicate a more substantial settlement nearby (Saunders 2000, 177–8). Evidence for aspects of later Bronze Age land management was identified at Warren Farm, Ewell, some 2.5km to the west (Hayman 1995). In sharp contrast to this area of Surrey, the Thames River Terraces to the north have seen a significant number of large-scale area excavations. As a result of this work, the Bronze Age landscape on these terraces can be characterised by the

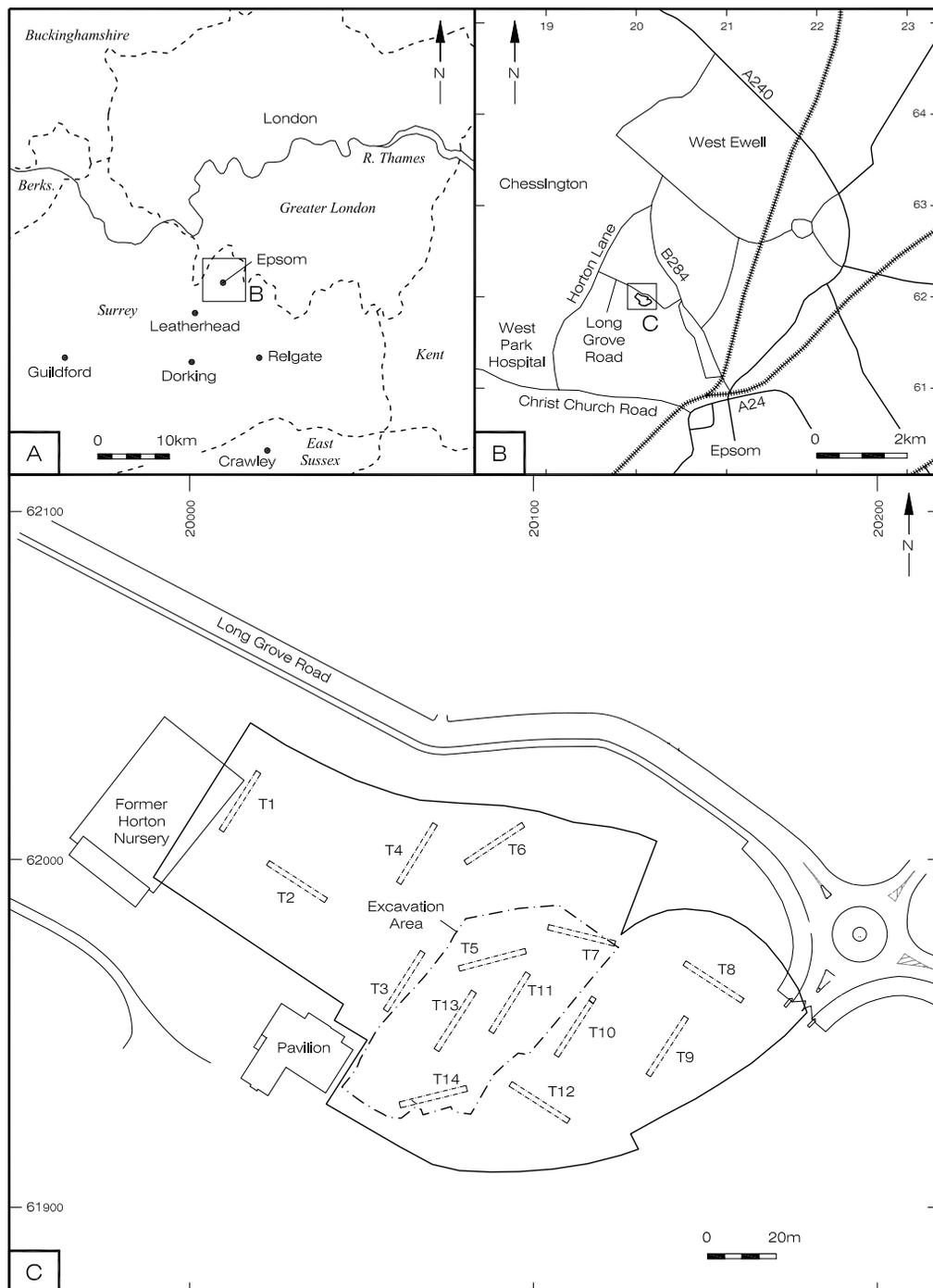


Fig 1 Long Grove Road, Epsom: site location and trench plan (© Crown copyright and/or database right. All rights reserved. Licence number 100014198)

increasing intensification of agricultural systems, typified by co-axial fields, droveways and waterholes with occasional elements of settlements embedded within the fields (Cotton 2004, 27–8; Poulton 2004, 51). It may be that elements of this type of landscape exist further south in the Epsom and Ewell area but lie as yet undiscovered.

METHODOLOGY

The site at Long Grove Road was stripped under constant archaeological supervision using a mechanical excavator equipped with a 1.8m-wide toothless bucket. Excavation stopped at the interface between the subsoil and the underlying London Clay/River Terrace Deposits (the level at which archaeological features usually become apparent), or higher if significant archaeological deposits were visible. Typically, 0.4–0.5m of overburden was removed to expose the archaeological level.

Results

The excavation has shown the local geology on site to consist of variable sands, clays and gravels, becoming sandier to the east as the change from London Clay to Undifferentiated River Terrace Deposits occurs. The general stratigraphic sequence was 0.1–0.2m of turf and topsoil or hard-core levelling layers, overlying an intermittent layer (0.2–0.3m where present) of grey/brown silty clay (subsoil), which overlay the natural substrate. The observed features were sealed by the subsoil and cut into the natural clays, sands or gravels.

Many of the features observed were ephemeral. This is particularly evident with the gullies sampled, which tended to exist sporadically across the site, frequently on a roughly similar alignment (fig 2). Their sporadic nature may be the result of later truncation by groundworks during the levelling/terracing of the area to make the sports field, bowling green and tennis courts. Another factor may be the variable geology: features seemed to survive better on sandy areas than on the more gravelly patches. A total of 26 features were excavated: ten gullies and sixteen pits, postholes or features of an indeterminate nature

MID–LATE BRONZE AGE

Three features, gully 267 and pits 285 and 232 (fig 2), were dated by finds of pottery or flint to the mid–Late Bronze Age. Fill numbers are shown bracketed in the text.

Gullies

Gully 267 was aligned east–west and was segmented or truncated in nature. It appeared to terminate after about 12m, although this may have been due to disturbance. The two slots excavated through it revealed a profile ranging from moderately steeply sloping and U-shaped near the ‘terminal’ to a steeper, more V-shaped profile further west (fig 3, section 1). It possessed a similar single light grey/brown silty sandy clay fill throughout, which produced a sizable sherd of pottery dating to the mid–Late Bronze Age. At the northern edge of the site, a similar gully, 294, was identified with a similar fill matrix and profile. Burnt flint recovered from it suggests a prehistoric, possibly Bronze Age, date.

Pits

Feature 232 (233) (fig 3, section 2) was sampled during both the evaluation and excavation stages of work. This feature appears to be a fairly substantial elongated pit with a steep U-shaped profile. It had a mid-orange/brown to light-blue/grey sandy clay fill which became more sterile with depth. Within this deposit, there was a diffuse lens of charcoal. Flint flakes were recovered of possible Bronze Age date. There is a possibility that this feature may be a segmented section of gully 224.

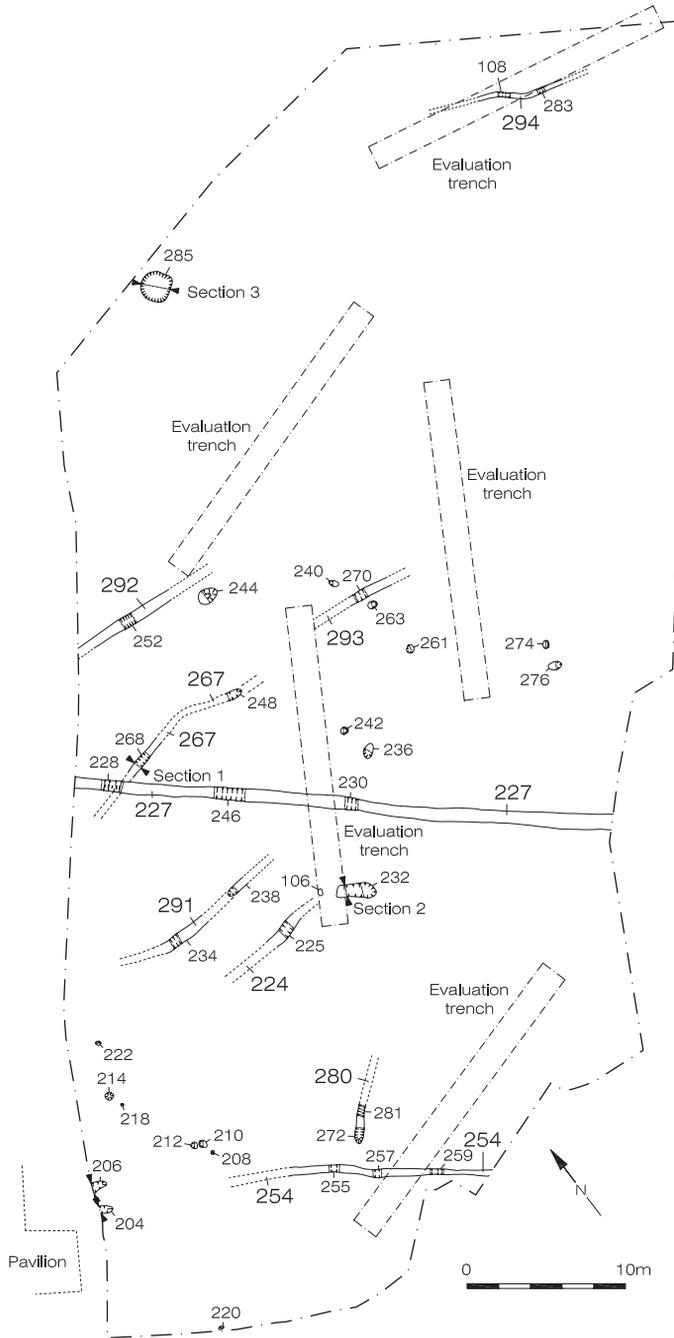


Fig 2 Long Grove Road, Epsom: excavation area with excavated features.

Feature 285 (286; 287) (fig 3, section 3) was the most northerly feature excavated. This context was roughly circular in plan with gentle to moderately sloping sides and a wide, reasonably flat base. The most distinctive aspect of this feature was its uppermost fill (286), which consisted of a burnt matrix of dark grey/black silty sandy clay with a high frequency

of flint nodules, burnt flint and charcoal. It also produced pottery of mid–Late Bronze Age date, struck flint and a small stone bead (see below). There was no evidence of *in-situ* burning. This context partially overlies a fill of grey/brown silty sandy clay (287) that also contained charcoal and mid–Late Bronze Age pottery and struck flint. It is probable that this charcoal was leached from the upper fill (286). The primary fill of 285 was orange/brown silty sandy clay containing flint fragments and nodules (288). This fill and fill (287) may represent a natural accumulation of material rather than a deliberate infilling whereas the charcoal-rich matrix (286) was clearly an anthropogenic and possibly deliberate later event.

POST-MEDIEVAL

Ditch 227 (depth 0.2–0.25m) was aligned west-north-west to east-south-east. Excavation across this ditch revealed profiles ranging from a moderately steeply sloping, irregular U-shape to an irregular, shallow and probably truncated profile. The gully had similar mid-grey/brown sandy silt fill throughout that produced post-medieval tile dating to the 18th–19th centuries. The homogenous silty nature of the fill of this ditch suggests natural silting rather than deliberate infilling. Posthole 208 lay to the south-west of this feature and had a similar fill and vertical sides.

UNDATED

The majority of the features excavated at the site did not produce any datable finds. However, the fills and spatial relationships of some of these contexts are indicative of an ancient date. This is highlighted in the descriptions below where such features are possibly associated with those more securely phased.

A total of 21 features, eight gullies/ditches and thirteen pits/postholes or amorphous features, have been categorised as undated.

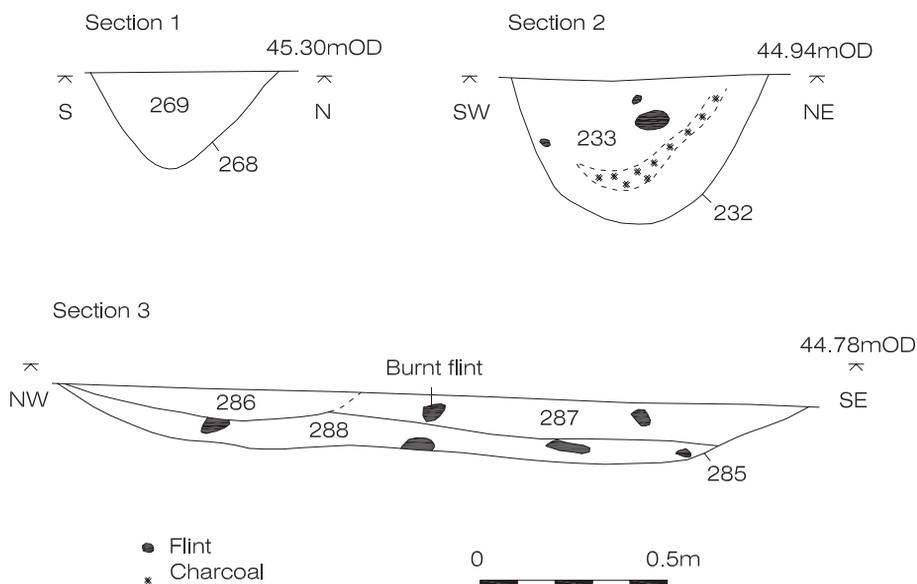


Fig 3 Long Grove Road, Epsom: selected sections.

Ditches/gullies

Gully 254 (depth 0.1m) was located at the south-east of the site and aligned east–west. Excavation revealed a gently sloping U-shaped profile and an uneven base. It possessed a light grey/brown silty clay fill. The gully petered out after about 12m. Located just to the north and apparently terminating and respecting 254 was ditch 280 (depth 0.3m) although this feature did have a steeper profile. It is possible that two linear features, 204 and 206, which ran outside the limit of the excavation, may be associated ditch terminals.

Features 224 and 291 (depths 0.15–0.2m) were ephemeral sections of possible gullies existing on the same east–west alignment. They possessed gentle to moderately sloping sides, irregular/rounded bases and had a light grey/brown sandy clay fill. A small feature, 106, sampled during the evaluation stage may represent a possible terminal to gully 224. Similar in nature were gullies 292 and 293 (depths 0.18–0.25m) located to the north. All these gullies are on the same alignment as the mid–Late Bronze Age gully 267 and may, therefore, be associated. It is possible that 293 may in fact be a continuation of this truncated, ephemeral feature. These gullies were not visible during the earlier evaluation stage.

Pits/postholes/amorphous features

Five features, 210, 212, 214, 218 and 222 (depths 0.05–0.25m) were located in the south-west corner of the site. They ranged from small and shallow features to more substantial ones with steeply angled sides with fills of light to dark grey silty sandy clay. It is difficult to be sure of the function of these features. The larger sizes of 210 and 214 perhaps indicate that they may be pits; the smaller features may be postholes. However, all are likely to be very truncated so their original size is unknown. Features 236, 240, 242, 244, 261, 263, 274 and 276 (depths 0.15–0.2m) were located in the vicinity of gullies 267 and 293. This series of features, like many of the others on site, was enigmatic and had no clear function. Generally, these contexts were oval or roughly circular in plan and had profiles ranging from fairly gentle to a moderately steep U-shape. Their fills ranged from a light grey to mid-orange/brown silty sandy clay some with evidence of charcoal. Feature 236 produced one small struck flint. It is possible that some of these features are truncated postholes (perhaps associated with gully 267/293); some may be tree or scrub clearance features.

The prehistoric pottery, by Mike Seager Thomas

FABRIC AND FORM

Bronze Age pottery was recovered from two features: gully 267 and pit 285. Two fabrics are distinguishable: fabrics F1 and F2 (table 1). Both are heavily tempered with fine sand-sized (0.25mm) to small granule-sized (5mm) burnt flint, soft, and irregularly fired with red oxidised surfaces merging into dark grey unoxidised surfaces. F1 comprises thicker sherds, incorporates less intermediate-sized flint and is redder than F2. Sherds from three vessels came from pit 285: a convex-sided jar in F1 with a squared hook-rim \approx 26cm in diameter (fig 4, vessel 1); a convex to straight-sided jar in F2 with a rounded hook-rim of unknown diameter (fig 4, vessel 2), and a convex-sided jar in F2 with an internally bevelled rim \approx 18cm in diameter

Table 1 Later Bronze Age pottery

Cut	Fill	Sample	F1		F2	
			Qty	Wt (g)	Qty	Wt (g)
267/268	N/A	12	1	14	12	37
285	286	N/A	–	–	1	3
285	286/7	N/A	6	138	10	50
285	287	N/A	3	32	3	21

and, located just below, a small applied-boss (fig 4, vessel 3). From gully 267 are a rim and a base-shoulder in F2 that cannot be reconstructed fully but probably belong to a vessel similar to vessel 2.

DATING

Individually the foregoing traits could belong either to the Deverel-Rimbury or to the post-Deverel-Rimbury pottery tradition (Middle or Late Bronze Age), but collectively they are more characteristic of the earlier tradition, albeit somewhere near its end (*c* 1150 Cal BC). The key chronological indicators are: 1) the limited range of fabrics and the coarse texture of these; 2) the thickness of vessel 1, which in a convex-sided jar is characteristic of the Deverel-Rimbury tradition; 3) the lack of specifically post-Deverel-Rimbury traits; and 4) the boss, a feature widely recurrent in Deverel-Rimbury assemblages but only occasionally present in post-Deverel-Rimbury assemblages.

USE AND DISPOSAL

The similar form of all four vessels and the lack of fine and/or very coarse wares, both of which are known from contemporary assemblages, suggest that only a limited range of pottery-using activities, probably domestic, occurred on site. Vessels 1 and 2 are within the size-range conventionally associated with storage and vessel 3 within that associated with the preparation and serving of food. After breakage, vessel 1 was burned and though unabraded all four vessels are represented by only a few sherds. In part, this will be a function of the probable widespread truncation of features on the site. However, it also suggests that the vessels were not deposited in the features immediately after breakage.

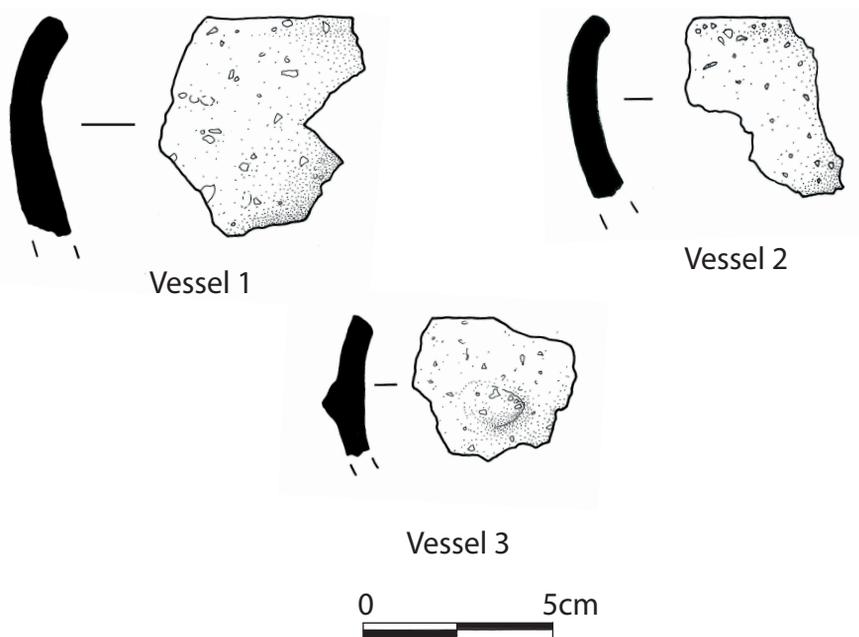


Fig 4 Long Grove Road, Epsom: Later Bronze Age pottery from pit 285.

Prehistoric flintwork, by Chris Butler

Thirteen pieces of worked flint (207g) were recovered during the evaluation and excavation. Full details of this assemblage can be found in the archive and a summary account is provided here.

Apart from a possible bladelet fragment and a small soft hammer-struck flake, both of which could be residual Mesolithic pieces, the flintwork is typical of hard hammer-struck later prehistoric assemblages. Nine pieces, including a two-platform flake core and five hard hammer-struck flakes were found associated with Bronze Age pottery in pit 285.

Other finds

A small crude stone bead (7mm in diameter) with a central hole was recovered from a sample taken from mid–Late Bronze Age pit 285 (fig 5).

The environmental evidence, by Lisa Gray

A total of fourteen features were subjected to environmental sampling on site. Of these, five produced flots containing material of interest though even they were very unproductive. A black nightshade (*Solanum nigrum* L.) seed came from undated feature 242. This plant is native and found on waste and cultivated ground (Stace 1997, 531). The samples from the mid–Late Bronze Age features were equally unproductive with only charred wood and a single charred grass stem recovered, mitigating against further speculation about plant use or feature function.

Discussion

The excavation at the site has produced interesting, if somewhat ephemeral evidence. The features surviving were, as highlighted above, very shallow and may have been subject to truncation during the construction of the bowling green, tennis courts and playing fields. The nature of the underlying substrate may also have a direct bearing on the quality of the archaeological remains and indeed their recognition; the sand and sandy clays generally dictate a better survival (and visibility) rate than the more gravel-rich areas.

The fairly limited evidence discovered, particularly the relative lack of dating material, precludes in-depth speculation as to the exact nature of ancient land use at the site. However,

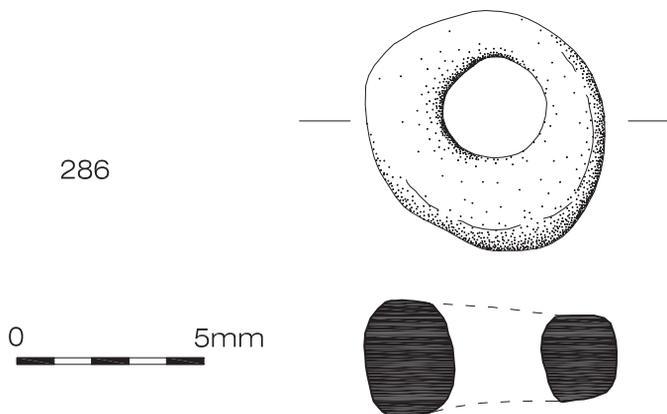


Fig 5 Long Grove Road, Epsom: stone bead (context 286)

it is possible to give some indications that may add to the growing body of archaeological evidence derived from recent investigations in north Surrey.

The several silty, amorphous features present across the site may be truncated pits or perhaps the product of tree and scrub clearance in earlier prehistory, prior to the intensification of land use that occurs across the gravel terraces in the later Bronze Age (Needham 1987; Cotton 2004, 27). Possibly dating to the mid–Late Bronze Age, gullies 267 and 294 may provide evidence for this, more formalised, exploitation of the land. Other gullies (291, 292, 225 and 293) appear to be on the same alignment, run parallel to 267 and may therefore be of the same period. There is the likelihood that these features are all that remains of possible track or droveways aligned east–west and forming part of a wider system (perhaps also evidenced by gullies/ditches 254 and 280). Similarly, some of the undated features have fills of a comparable matrix and may also be associated with these gullies. For example, the several possible postholes excavated may form internal fences for stock control.

The best evidence for mid–Late Bronze Age activity is provided by pit 285. The accumulation of charcoal, burnt flint and the type of pottery present, points to probable cooking or domestic activity in or near the pit. It seems unlikely, given the lack of burnt bone, that this feature is related to any burial practices (such as a pyre or cremation pit). More struck flint was also recovered here than anywhere else on the site. Interestingly, the initial fills of the feature are indicative of natural silting. This, coupled with the wide, shallow nature of the features, may point to the expedient use of an already present, sheltered depression (possibly caused by a fallen tree) for cooking and perhaps flint working. The small stone bead, presumably dropped accidentally rather than deliberately deposited, gives an insight into the personal adornments worn at the time.

The post-medieval ditches are not shown on any maps and were probably for drainage.

The interpretation of the evidence from Long Grove Road, of possible land clearance followed by Later Bronze Age agricultural management features, is perhaps more typical of that found on the Thames Gravel Terraces (Cotton 2004, 27). However, it may be that the greater amount of excavation undertaken on the terraces creates a bias in the data. There is the need, therefore, for further work in the Epsom area to clarify the intensity of occupation during the later Bronze Age. As was suspected at the Manor Hospital site, it is possible that a more substantial occupation site lies nearby and the remains uncovered during the Long Grove Road excavation represent its periphery.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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