Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age placed deposits from Carshalton

Jennifer Proctor

Introduction

IN JUNE 1997 Pre-Construct Archaeology carried out an archaeological excavation on land at Westcroft House, Westcroft Road, Carshalton (Fig. 1) which was to be redeveloped by Barratt (South London) Limited. The excavation comprised two trenches measuring 11m x 10m and 13m x 2.40m, referred to as Trenches 1 and 2 respectively (Fig. 1). They were located in areas where Bronze Age occupation had been identified in the preceding evaluation of the site[1].

The excavations in Trench 1 uncovered a group of cut features which do not have any apparent domestic or agricultural function. Many of these features contained deposits of artefacts and faunal material which are interpreted as a ritual structured deposition. Trench 2 contained two ditches and several post holes or small pits, from which a small quantity of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age material was recovered. The features were sealed by a deep plough soil and it is presumed that this developed over a considerable period of time; documentary evidence and artefactual remains demonstrate that this agricultural land-use continued up to the early post-medieval period. A large quantity of LBA/EIA pottery and worked flint was recovered from the plough soil; this demonstrates that the top of the LBA/EIA features had been truncated by ploughing and that the prehistoric occupation surfaces do not survive.

Geological, topographical and archaeological background

The site is located on the northern foot of the Downs along the dip-slope spring line at the head of the Wandle Valley[2] (Fig. 1). This gentle north-facing slope would have been an important position for settlement and the surrounding area offered a range of environments for exploitation[3], thus allowing access to a range of potential resources. The chalk ridge of the North Downs, which is capped along much of its length by Clay-with-flints, lies several hundred metres to the south from where it rises up[4]. The solid geology of the area is Chalk which in the vicinity of the site is overlain by Tertiary gravels and sands. Thanet Sand, a marine-deposited formation, outcrops along the northern edge of the Downs, and the Woolwich and Reading Beds and Taplow Terrace gravels are situated nearby to the north. The present course of the River Wandle lies a short distance to the north-east of Westcroft House, however the natural topography has been altered in recent times by landscaping. As a result the original location of the watercourses is uncertain but it is possible that a watercourse passed very close to the site.

Westcroft House lies less than 2km downhill from the LBA ring fort at Queen Mary's Hospital, Carshalton. There appears to have been a concentration of LBA activity around the ring fort and a cluster of LBA metalwork hoards and single finds have been recovered from the vicinity of this enclosure[6]. The ring-fort was located within an area of ritual significance and is thought to have influenced local patterns of votive activity. A limited evaluation at Carshalton House, *c.* 750m south-west of Westcroft House, produced evidence of LBA occupation. Pottery, burnt flint and animal bone were recovered from a feature interpreted by the excavators as either the terminus of a ditch, or a pit[7].

1. Evaluation supervised by David Divers and excavation supervised by Jennifer Proctor.
2. C Orton 'Recent archaeological work in Carshalton, a dip-slope spring-line settlement' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 79 (1989) 161-172.
3. S Needham 'The Bronze Age' in J. Bird & D. G. Bird (eds) *The Archaeology of Surrey to 1540* Castle Arch, Guildford, (1987) 97-137.
4. British Geological Survey South London Map (Sheet 257, 1:50,000).
5. British Geological Survey, *op cit* fn 4.
6. S Needham & C Burgess 'The later Bronze Age in the Lower Thames Valley: the metalwork evidence' in J Barrett & R Bradley (eds) *Settlement and Society in the British Later Bronze Age* BAR British Series 83 (1980), 437-470.
7. A Skelton & L Howes *Carshalton House Excavations 1992 (Science Block Evaluation)* unpublished evaluation report (1992).

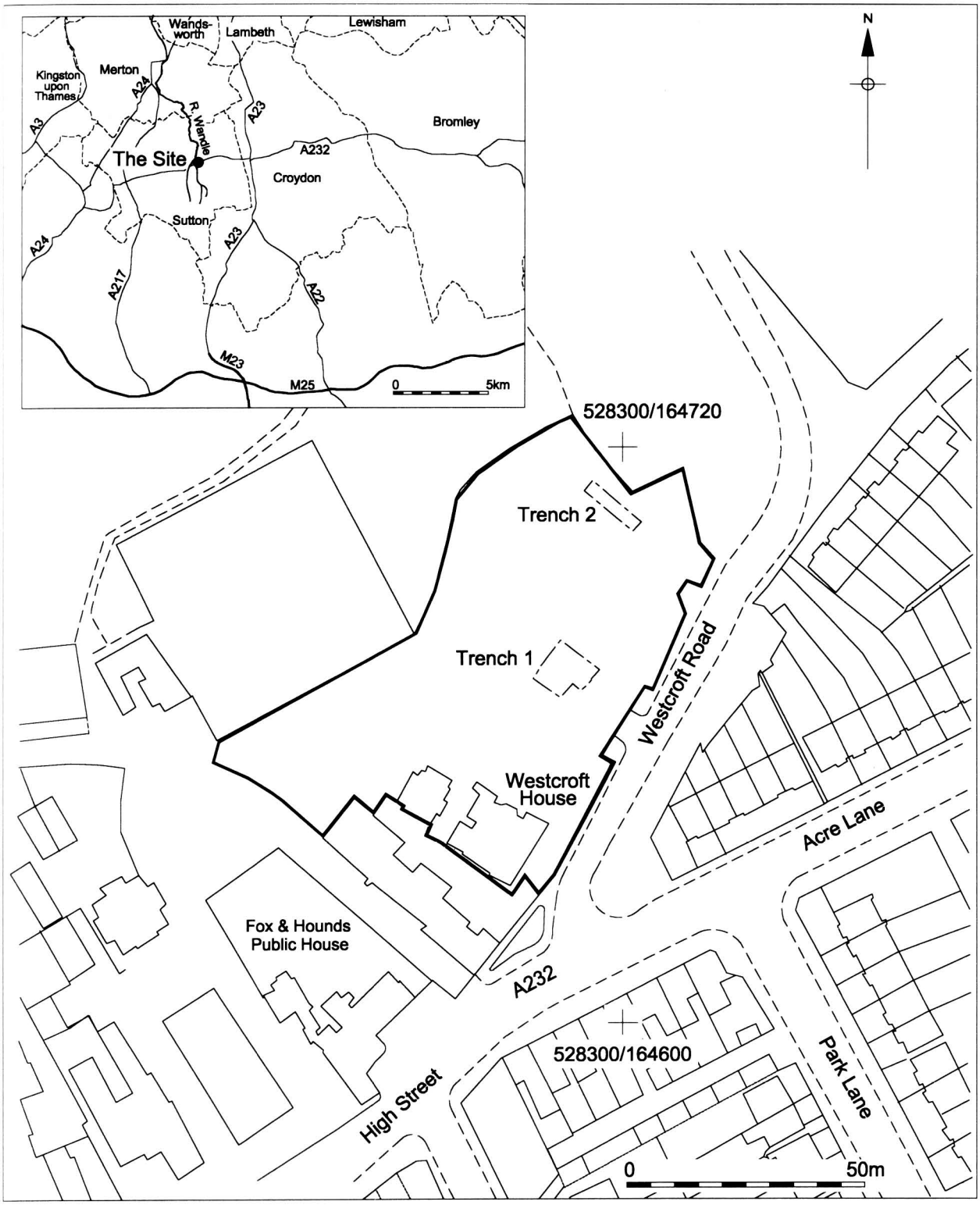

Fig. 1: site location plan, and trench location plan.

The archaeological remains at Westcroft Road

A semi-circular ditch [59] was located in the central area of the large trench; it was oriented north-south for a distance of 4m then turned to run east-west for 3.4m. Two oval pits were cut through the base of this ditch at each butt end. A horse skull was placed at the base of pit [62] with the skull and jaw located slightly apart, large fragments of quernstones and a lump of fired clay were arranged around the faunal remains (Fig. 2). Fragments of quernstones recovered from the upper fills of the pit join to the querns from the basal deposits demonstrating that they were covered with material soon after deposition. Pit [82] at the south-eastern butt end of the ditch contained a large quantity of sizeable flint nodules (Fig. 3) with a number of flint flakes and two flint blades. The fill of ditch [59], which sealed the two pits, contained pottery fragments, burnt and worked flint, charred plant remains and dumps of charcoal.

Pit [77], located to the east of the south-eastern butt end of the ditch, measured *c* 1m in diameter and was 0.52m deep. Three stakeholes were cut through the base of the pit, it is presumed that they were contemporary and associated with the pit, and not earlier features which the pit had truncated. The primary fill of the pit contained traces of a decomposed material which may originally have been bone. Three large flint nodules were placed over this in the centre of the pit and a fragment of a decayed copper alloy object was placed on top of one of the nodules. Precise identification of this object is not possible as too little survives, but it originally formed part of a hollow object with an angled exterior cross-section and its size and weight suggests it may have been a part of a small socketed axe. Red deer skull fragments and antlers were placed around and on top of the flint nodules. A skull with one antler still attached, but broken, had a separate antler placed next to it, creating the impression that it was still attached to its pedicle. A second red deer skull was placed face down on the edge of one of the flint nodules, both of the antlers were still attached but broken. The upper fill of this pit was very similar in composition to the material used to backfill the ditch.

A large oval pit [100] which measured 2.9m x 1.88m x 2.14m deep was located to the east of the northern butt end of the ditch (Fig. 2). The primary fill was a deposit of apparently mixed random dumps which appear to be redeposited natural material. Two small deposits, an amalgam of black silt, charcoal, pottery and burnt bone, were contained within the primary fill towards the top of the deposit. The overlying fill comprised redeposited natural sand mounded up towards the centre of the pit. The upper fills, which filled the top 1m of the feature, were again similar to the upper ditch fill. The upper fill contained half of a small unworn coarseware tub (Fig. 4), the other half was recovered from the plough soil near to the pit. A small pit [130] was located to the south of pit [100] and this contained tightly packed large flint nodules.

The western side of pit [77] and the south-east end of ditch [59] were truncated by pit [75] which measured 1.28m x 1.1m x 0.32m deep. The primary fill, which was redeposited natural sand, contained a broken saddle quern rubber and a water vole mandible. The upper fill contained inclusions of pot, burnt flint and charcoal. A small pit [98] truncated the western side of pit [100] and the northern butt end of the ditch [59].

A large pit [72] was partially excavated in the south-eastern corner of the trench. The area visible, 1.63m x 1.04m x 0.63m, suggests that this was a substantial feature, but it was not possible to ascertain the total size and depth as it continued beyond the limits of excavation.

A group of nine postholes, all of similar size and shape, were located in the east of the trench. The fills of these postholes were homogeneous, silty sand and gravel, suggesting that if they had contained posts, then these were not left to rot *in situ*. The exception was feature [126], the fill of which contained a large quantity of charcoal with some burnt bone.

The archaeological remains in Trench 2 were very different in character to those in the Trench 1. Two ditches were excavated in this area and four postholes and two shallow pits were located between the two ditches. A small quantity of worked and burnt flint was recovered from the ditches and postholes. A few sherds of pottery were also recovered from the fill of one of the ditches and these date broadly to the same period as the assemblage from Trench 1, *c.* 950-700 BC[8]. However, it was not possible to ascertain if these two activity areas were contemporary or not.

Discussion

The majority of the archaeological features excavated at Westcroft Road do not have any apparent domestic function. The faunal remains and artefacts placed within the intrusive features display

8. N Macpherson Grant *Ceramic Report from WCR96* Pre-Construct Archaeology unpublished report (1997).

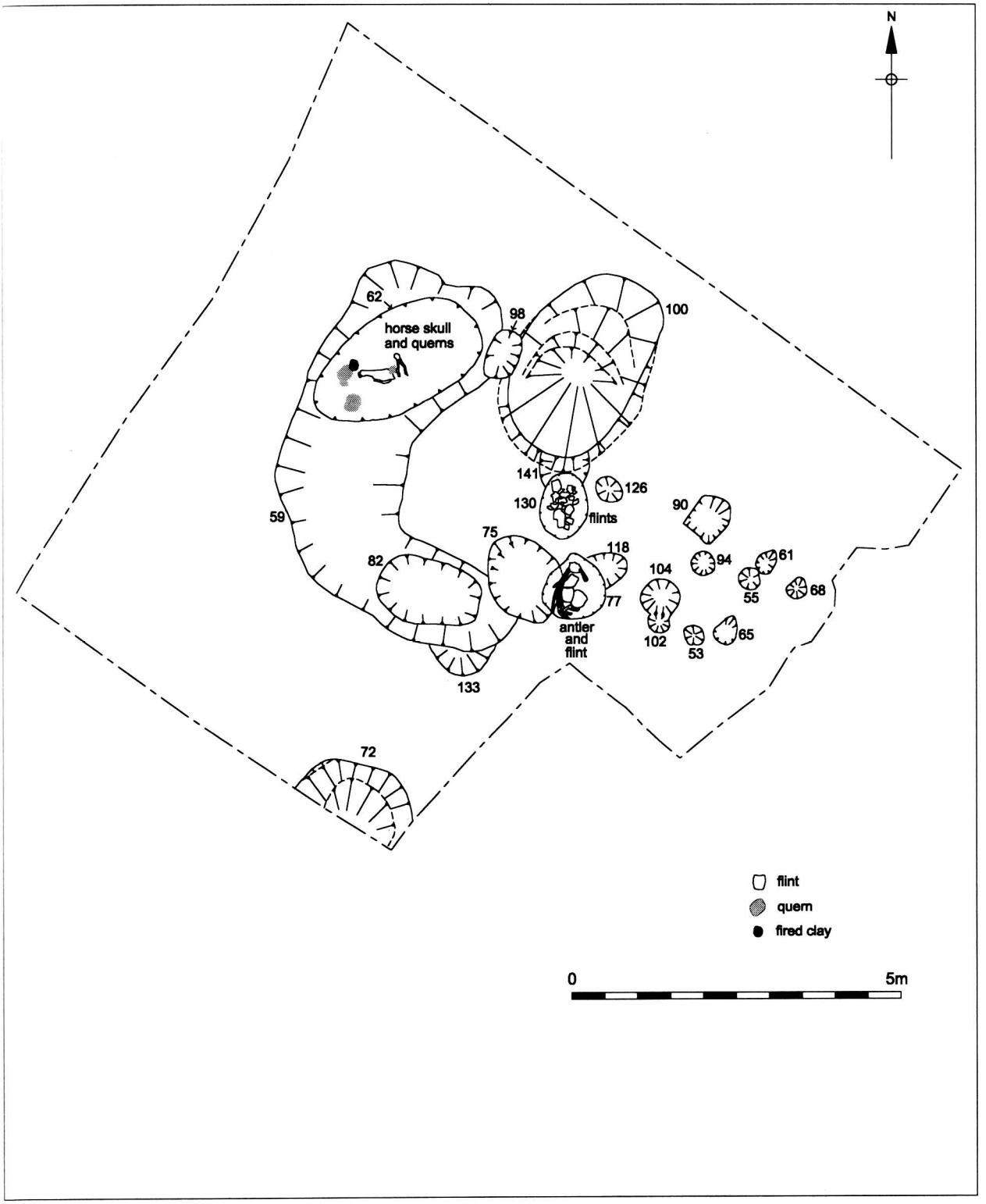

Fig. 2: the placed deposits.

Fig. 3: flint nodules *in situ*.

clear evidence that material had been carefully selected and then placed in an ordered fashion within the pits and had not been simply thrown in during disposal of domestic rubbish. Evidence for similar structured ritual deposition can be found throughout the later prehistoric periods and the closest parallel to the remains at Westcroft Road is with the LBA site at Runnymede, near Egham in Surrey.

At Runnymede a discrete area of ritual activity comprising a series of pits and postholes was located on the northern periphery of the settlement. One of the pits contained part of a single horse skeleton with the forelimbs laid out in crossed formation, which was sealed by a deposit of charcoal and burnt clay interpreted as an inverted hearth[9]. Another pit contained a cluster of corticated flint nodules which were unburnt and unworked and a group of pot sherds were placed on top of them[10]. Needham has examined a series of LBA ritual deposits, similar in form and content to those from Westcroft Road, and concluded; "All these deposits suggest some recurrent themes in reinforcing social values and the structure of society"[11].

The ritual deposits at Westcroft road are interpreted as representing the raw materials, objects and animals important to the economy and society of the local community. Perhaps the ritual deposition at Westcroft Road may be linked to ideas of regeneration and fertility of the resources important in this community. Thus the material selected for deposition may have been seen as a source of fertility, which was ritually buried in order to ensure the continued economic success of the community.

9. S Needham *Excavation and Salvage at Runnymede Bridge, 1978* (1991), 110.

10. S Needham, *pers. comm.*

11. S Needham 'The Structure of Settlement and Ritual in the Late Bronze Age of South-East Britain' in C Mordant & A Richard (eds) *L'habitat et l'occupation du sol à l'Age du Bronze en Europe* (1993), 63.

12. M P Parker Pearson *Bronze Age Britain* (1993) 104.

13. D Buckley *Querns in Ritual Contexts* Quern Study Group Newsletter no 3 (1992) 2-5.

14. D Williams *The Quernstones from Westcroft Road* Pre-Construct Archaeology unpublished report (1997).

Flint as a raw material had a variety of uses in the LBA; it was used as a temper in the production of pottery and flint tools were still utilised in this period, in particular scrapers which had few metal equivalents. The flint nodules from Westcroft Road are of good quality flint and are the same material as the struck flint recovered from the features. The importation of flint nodules which were subsequently burnt suggests a deliberate policy of obtaining large pieces to be heated and in some settlements there is evidence that food was cooked by placing heated nodules in boiling troughs[12].

Quernstones were essential to the economy of the LBA for processing of grain, and the deposition of quernstones in ritual contexts occurred throughout the prehistoric period. In the past recognition of this practice has tended to focus on complete querns[13]. Reconstruction of the querns from Westcroft Road demonstrates that in total five saddle querns, 2 large and 3 smaller, and 2 rubbers were represented, along with several non-joining fragments[14]. The stone has been identified as Lower Greensand, the nearest likely source being at least 8 miles away. Similar querns were recovered from Queen Mary's Hospital.

The use of horses for riding was an important development in the LBA as it allowed a quick response to threats from other territories, and horses were also used as a means of displaying wealth and power[15]. The horse skull at Westcroft Road consisted of the entire mandible and an incomplete cranium, there were no signs of butchery or indications of cause of death and the estimation of age at death is about 10 years. At Runnymede the remains of horses and equipment associated with horses were ritually deposited and the excavator suggests that "the standing of the horse . . . may have extended to veneration beyond death"[16].

One of the deer skulls had a separate antler placed next to it, at first giving the impression that it was still attached to the skull. This antler had in fact separated from the pedicle and the second antler had a distinct line of severance demonstrating that the shedding process had begun before death[17]. It is unusual to find a pair of partially shed antlers. So in addition to its inherent value as a raw material, antler was used for making objects such as cheekpieces for horse bridles, these antlers may have had further value due to their rarity. The lump of fired clay found in association with the horse skull had been folded, compressed and roughly moulded into a sub-square shape and the only close on-site fabric parallel is with a fragment of perforated slab.

It is possible that further classes of material, such as wool, milk or skins, which have since decayed without trace may have been deposited within features on the site. The large oval pit was dug to some depth yet no finds were present at its base; organic material may have been placed at the base of this feature. A secondary ritual function for this pit is suggested by the two deposits of bone, charcoal and pot. The bone from these two deposits consisted of hundreds of tiny fragments of sheep bone, all probably derived from the same skeleton, the age of which was estimated to be between 3-10 months[18]. Differing degrees of burning suggests that some areas were still covered with flesh when the animal was burnt, and the burning of a young animal may imply ritual activity.

The evidence from Westcroft Road demonstrates that there was a clear pattern governing the rules of where material should be placed. The special deposits were placed at the base of cut features and then covered by other relatively clean material. The upper fills of many of the features were very similar in composition and content and displayed a marked difference from the lower fills; they had a higher silt content and contained pottery, charcoal, charred plant remains, fragments of bone, burnt and worked flint, and fragments of perforated clay slab. Conjoining sherds of pot and perforated slab occurred in the upper fills of separate

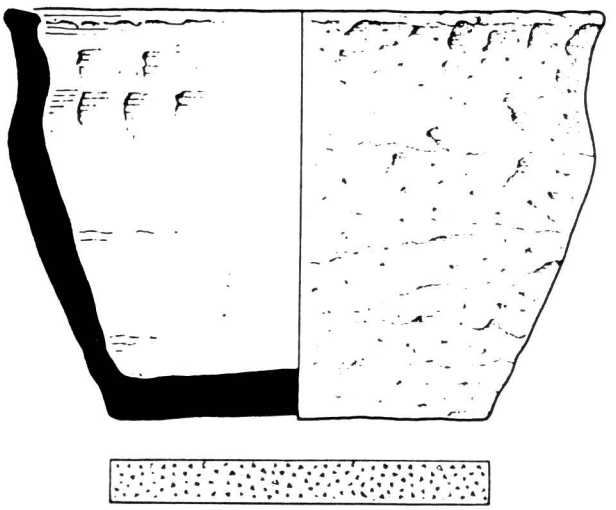

Fig. 4: coarse ware ceramic tub.

15. N Merriman *Prehistoric London* HMSO (1990) 32.
16. S Needham *op cit* fn 9, 380.
17. I Riddler *The Red Deer Antler from Westcroft Road* Pre-Construct Archaeology unpublished report (1997).
18. R Bendrey *The Animal Bone from Westcroft Road* Pre-Construct Archaeology unpublished report (1997).

pits demonstrating that material from the same source was utilised to backfill them. The material used in the final backfilling of the features should not be dismissed as the straightforward disposal of domestic rubbish, as the assemblage of artefacts and ecofacts recovered from these fills points to the deliberate selection of certain types of refuse. The locations chosen for the deposition of classes of material may have had symbolic significance; raw materials and tools used for the preparation of food and objects were selected for basal deposits, whilst finished and broken products such as pottery, flint tools and grain, were selected as suitable material to be used to seal the basal deposits. As discussed above the same source of material was utilised and this is most likely to have originated from a midden. The preservation of bone on this sandy site suggests that the material which filled these features had a high organic content, this again points to a midden as the source of material. The utilisation of refuse rich material in the upper fills may have been invoking a concept of fertility and regeneration; "Refuse has links with fertility where the value of green midden as fertiliser was recognised, and more generally to the cycle of death and renewal"[19].

Although only a small area was excavated, the results from Westcroft Road have provided a fascinating insight into LBA ritual activity and future investigations in Carshalton may provide evidence of the domestic settlement which must surely be somewhere nearby

19. S Needham & T Spence 'Refuse and the formation of middens' *Antiquity* 71 (1997) 85.

Excavations and post-excavation work

City of London. Museum of London Archaeology Service, Walker House, 87 Queen Victoria Street, London EC4V 4AB (0171-410 2200).

Croydon & District, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collection of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Jim Davison, 28 Blenheim Park Road, South Croydon, CR2 6BB.

Greater London (except north-east and south-east London), by Museum of London Archaeology Service. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to MOLAS, Walker House, 87 Queen Victoria Street, London EC4V 4AB (0171-410 2200).

Borough of Greenwich. Cataloguing of excavated and other archaeological material, the majority from sites in the borough. For further information contact Greenwich Borough Museum, 232 Plumstead High Street, London SE18 1JT (0181-855 3240).

Hammersmith & Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from Fulham Palace. Tuesdays, 7.45 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, SW6 (0171-731 4498).

Kingston, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society (KUTAS). Processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Thursday (10 a.m.) at the North Kingston Centre, Richmond Road, Kingston upon Thames KT2 5PE. Enquiries 0181-546 5386.

Surrey, by Surrey County Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Rob Poulton, Archaeological Unit Manager, Old Library Headquarters, 25 West Street, Dorking, RH4 1DE (01306-886 466).

Individual membership of the Council for British Archaeology includes 10 issues a year of British Archaeology, as well as the supplement CBA Briefing, which gives details of conferences, extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The individual subscription rate of £20 p.a. includes postage; payment should be sent to C.B.A., Bowes Morrell House, 111 Walmgate, York, YO1 2UA (01904 671417).