Abstract

Between 1989 and 1991 a programme of archaeological rescue excavations was undertaken on the route of the new A27 Brighton Bypass, East Sussex. The archaeological works were designed within a research framework to investigate chalk downland settlement and land-use, from the Mesolithic to the present day. A particular aim of the project was to integrate settlement archaeology into a palaeoenvironmental study, and the various excavations included a large number of lynchet sections and a total of seven dry valley bottom transects. In addition to investigating an area which had previously yielded an important assemblage of Mesolithic and later flintwork (Redhill), and a nationally important block of prehistoric fields (Eastwick Barn), the Brighton Bypass Archaeology Project located and recorded two important and previously unknown Later Bronze Age settlements (Mile Oak and Downsview). The evidence for two of the buildings at the Downsview site was later used for experimental work, and the results and conclusions of these investigations are included in the excavation report. Also included in this volume, due to both their relevance and proximity to the Bypass, are summary reports of two other excavated Later Bronze Age settlements: Varley Halls and Patcham Fawcett.

The palaeoenvironmental studies were successful in documenting changes in the environment and the impact of humans upon the landscape. Although some of these changes, such as forest clearance, have been major, they did not necessarily occur at the same time throughout the Brighton region, and inter-site variation was at its greatest prior to the Later Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, by which time all of the sampled sites were apparently subject to the deposition of colluvium.

The earliest environmental sequence examined on the Bypass was at Toadeshole Bottom East where the first deposits can be traced back to the Devensian Late Glacial, when the environment was open and cold. Subsequently, closed deciduous woodland was the main vegetation type in the region, and it was not until the Middle Bronze Age that there is widespread evidence for open country conditions, both at the various settlement sites and elsewhere. By the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age extensive arable farming resulted in a significant increase in the deposition of colluvium. This increase in arable cultivation may indicate population growth, and thus perhaps greater pressure on the land. Such pressures may also have been an impetus for a more formal division of the landscape, involving permanent fields, ‘territorial’ linear ditches and ‘defended’ enclosures. Although evidence for the later Iron Age is difficult to assess, during the Roman period the environmental data from the valley bottoms are similar to those from the proceeding periods and indicate that farming was predominantly arable.

Evidence for the environment and land-use during the Anglo-Saxon period was minimal, and suggests a much more limited and localised arable cultivation on the Downs, with other areas presumably being used for pasture. Despite evidence for some increase in agricultural activity in the Medieval period, the Bypass investigations generally confirm our general knowledge of land-use on the Downs obtained from historical sources, i.e. the importance of sheep farming until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The excavation of settlements involved both previously known, and newly discovered, prehistoric sites. At Redhill, a ridge-top location on an outcrop of Clay-with-Flints, revealed further assemblages of flintwork and a number of features, the earliest (a ditch) possibly dating to the Early Neolithic. Initially (Mesolithic/Early Neolithic) the site may have been occupied only seasonally, perhaps primarily as a site at which surface flint was used to manufacture tools. Later (Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age) the site may have been more permanently occupied, perhaps as a primary agricultural settlement.

At Mile Oak, trial trenching located an oval ditched enclosure which has been interpreted by the excavator as an Early Bronze Age Class II henge monument. Others, however, have disagreed with this interpretation, and consider the enclosure to belong either to the earliest phase of the Middle Bronze Age settlement at this location, or to represent some other form of enclosure just predating it.

The unexpected discoveries of the Middle Bronze Age settlements at Mile Oak and Downsview are of considerable importance, and together with the finding nearby of similarly dated sites at Varley Halls and Patcham Fawcett indicate that the extent of Later Bronze Age activity in the Brighton area needs to be reassessed.

At Mile Oak the settlement evidence consisted of the remains of three timber round-houses, a ‘pond’, areas of rubbish disposal and/or ‘ritual’ deposition, a burial and perhaps a standing sarsen stone. The initial phase of the settlement was probably located within a ditched enclosure.

At Downsview the settlement, which was at least partially enclosed by a ditch, included a minimum of 12 timber structures (not all being contemporary with each other). It probably also had one or more ‘ponds’. Perhaps the most significant result from Downsview, however, is the calculation from radiocarbon determinations of the longevity of occupation at the site: perhaps between 580 and 860 years.

At Mile Oak, Downsview, Varley Halls and Patcham Fawcett occupation continued into the Late Bronze Age. At
Mile Oak the focus of activity probably switched to an area where there is evidence of at least one, and perhaps two, structures, two mounds containing charcoal, baked clay, fire-cracked flint and metal-working debris, including crucible fragments and slag. This discovery represents a rare example of evidence for the Late Bronze Age re-smelting and casting of copper alloy.

The extensive area of ‘Celtic fields’ at Eastwick Barn was probably established in the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age. Sample excavations yielded evidence concerning the original development of the lynchets, and also of a later expansion of the field system during the Roman period.

This volume builds on, consolidates, and brings to a more synthetic framework, a long history of archaeological work, professional and amateur, in the Brighton area. As an integrated study of settlements, field systems and colluvial sequences it provides a significant advance in our understanding of the prehistory of the South Downs, and has much wider implications for areas beyond Sussex. In particular, the extent of Later Bronze Age activity is very important with regard to our understanding of landscape and social change during this period. The Project’s extensive investigation of lynchets and colluvium also helps us to develop our understanding of the character and date of ‘Celtic fields’, which were the subject of pioneer fieldwork by earlier archaeologists in the Brighton area.