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WOODSFORD HEATH, CROSSWAYS, DORSET

Archaeological Monitoring and Excavation,

May - September 1988

An Interim Report

Procedure

The commencement of gravel extraction at Hangar Field Crossways (SY 762882) prompted a further phase of archaeological response during the course of the extraction programme in the summer of 1988. This project was the culmination of two earlier evaluations of the whole field carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit at the end of 1987. Both assessments - extensive fieldwalking, and magnetic susceptibility combined with a phosphate survey - suggested areas of archaeological interest towards the western end of Hangar Field. Two specific areas were noted, where geophysical and field walking evidence appeared to coincide (Fig. 1).

Since the extraction programme was scheduled to remove most of these areas in 1988 a programme of salvage recording and excavation was commissioned by A.R.C. Southern with B.U.F.A.U. This involved selective clearance and investigation of areas for archaeological features or deposits, following preliminary topsoil stripping by contractors machinery. This was programmed to take place in between topsoiling and subsoiling operations but was preceded by a sampling exercise involving removal of smaller areas of topsoil entirely by hand or by controlled mechanical (JCB) excavation. These approaches resulted in the investigation of a considerable sample of the subsoil, where any archaeological preservation in situ was to be most expected. At the same time a watch was kept during the more extensive commercial soil stripping operation, wherever feasible.

This phase of the project continued intermittently during May, June and July 1988 and involved the areas marked A on Figure 2. In September a final phase of work was commissioned to carry out a more extensive

Investigation of an area further to the east (area B on Figure 2), which overlapped with a transect examined by hand in May. This encompassed the second area to which attention had been drawn by the results of the previous evaluation exercises. The gravel extraction programme permitted an initial topsoil strip well in advance of quarrying and thus an opportunity to carry out a more careful, and if necessary, extended programme of excavations.

Results

Both the evaluations and the subsequent monitoring and excavation phases during gravel extraction, produced substantial quantities of prehistoric worked flint. Initial characterisation suggests an industry of predominantly late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age type. Among the several hundred worked fragments so far examined some 12% are recognisable tool types, comprising scrapers, blades, burins and axe fragments; and a further 7% are cores. The assemblage is similar in character to that recovered at Mount Pleasant, a major ceremonial enclosure of the late 3rd millenium BC to the east of Dorchester.

More problematic at Woodsford Heath is the context for this material. Almost without exception it was obtained from the disturbed ploughsoil, very little coming from the fills of archaeological features surviving beneath that horizon.

Of the archaeological features themselves rather less can be made. Most numerous, although by no means extensive, were disturbances relating to the use of Hangar Field as a military airfield during the Second World War. These elements were relatively easy to identify and date and have not been indicated on Figure 2. Several field boundary ditch alignments were traced, some of which may correspond to 19th-century field enclosures, although there was nothing dateable (excepting some flintwork) recovered from their fills. What may have been the remains of less distinct features - pits, ditches and post-holes were seen occasionally elsewhere, some in area B and in the area A adjacent to the hangar (Fig. 2). Flint

Flakes and small sherds of Bronze Age-style pottery suggest that they may reflect in some way the flint industry so much more abundantly represented in the ploughsoil. No other coherent traces or periods of human activity were recognised, the only other identifiable material arising from 18th and 19th-century agriculture and found widely distributed in the ploughsoil throughout the field.

Conclusions

Despite the expectations arising from earlier field evaluation results, the virtual absence of prehistoric features or arrangements which might be contemporary with the extensive flint assemblage was a disappointment. While it is still theoretically possible that some more coherent evidence did exist in the area available, the failure (with a few exceptions) to find it suggests that there was little surviving. Since most of the area from which gravel was to be worked in 1988 was at the very least examined to some degree between topsoil and subsoil stripping (Fig. 2), it seems unlikely that any significant remains were missed here. The presence of so much flint working debris and of tools within the ploughsoil should signify a phase of human occupation and exploitation in this area somewhere around 2000 BC. Since there is little to indicate any substantial movement of the surface soils in an area of almost horizontal topography between then and now, it would be reasonable to suggest a relatively close (if not exact) correspondence between the flint distributions and some former human presence and activity. The residual traces of such activity may never have been substantial but in view of the almost exclusive recovery of artefacts and flint waste from the ploughsoil, the heavily ploughscored subsoil surface, and traces of truncated sub-surface features on that horizon, the virtual destruction of in situ prehistoric archaeology can probably be ascribed to modern cultivation.

As suggested above, there was little or no indication of human settlement or organised land use between the late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age and the 19th century. The former presence of ?Early Bronze Age round barrows immediately to the west of Hangar Field reinforces the suggestion that the

area was occupied and exploited at around that period. Such exploitation may well have been relatively short lived; initial clearance of primary woodland on these soils may soon have led to their impoverishment and it is suggested that much of the Dorset heathland owes its creation to prehistoric human interference and exploitation. Since that time, as the local name Woodsford Heath suggests, most of this area will have been waste. In all probability Hangar Field remained in this condition until the 19th century, when the techniques of land improvement and other factors influencing food production brought it back into agricultural use. It was this phase, continued apart from a break during the Second World War, to the present day, which has all but obliterated the remains of a much earlier human settlement and exploitation.

As indicated by the previous evaluations and more forcefully demonstrated by the following monitoring and excavation programme, the removal of Hangar Field in the course of gravel extraction should not result in the destruction of any significant archaeological resource. The flint assemblage distribution was significantly lighter away from the areas investigated in 1988 in the field, and there is no suggestion of other activity here much before the 19th century. In these circumstances no further fieldwork seems to be justified; what remains however is a considerable assemblage of flint work and some other material including a little pottery, and an archive of records relating to the project and those archaeological features which could be recognised. The final stage required to bring this project to a conclusion will involve more detailed study of the material recovered, research and processing of all the data, leading to the publication of a definitive report and the deposition of finds and archive in the County Museum.

P.J. Leach
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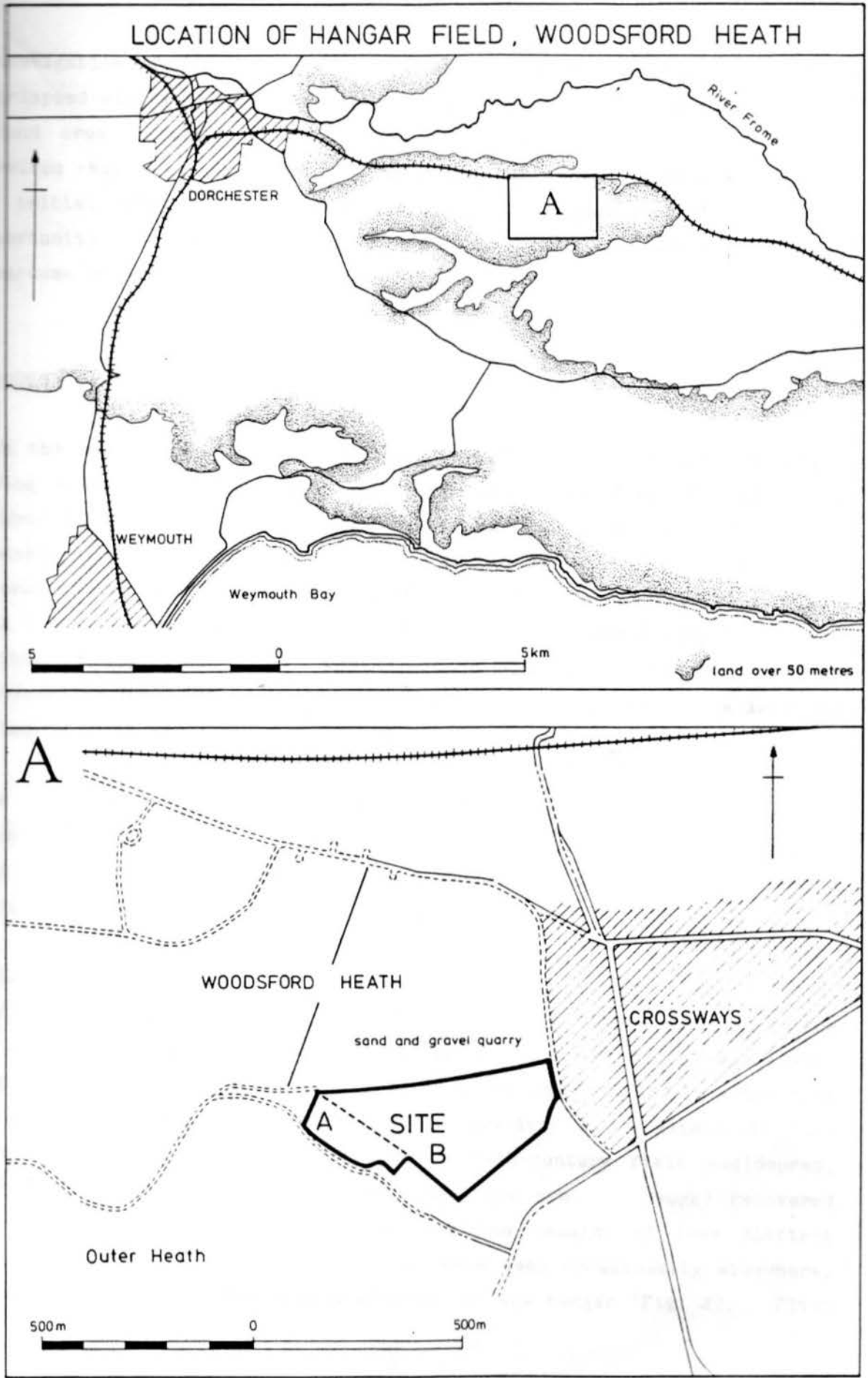


FIG 1

Fig. 2

