

◆ Bronze Age barrows in the High Weald

EXCAVATIONS AT POTMAN'S LANE, EAST SUSSEX

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Archaeological investigation on land to the east of Potman's Lane, Catsfield, East Sussex, comprising geophysical survey and evaluation trenches uncovered four ring ditches and a variety of other features such as post-holes, pits and ditches. Three of the four ring ditches are on a single alignment, located on a small promontory overlooking Watermill Stream. A Middle Bronze Age Deverel-Rimbury vessel found inverted in one of the infilled ring ditches, and radiocarbon dates obtained, indicate activity in the 16th–13th centuries BC, but other dating evidence was limited. The ring ditches are interpreted as ceremonial or funerary monuments of Bronze Age date and are important additions to a small Wealden dataset. There was evidence of later land organisation in the survival of ditches, many of which were also observable on the Catsfield Tithe Map.

INTRODUCTION

Planning permission was granted by Rother District Council for the installation of a solar farm at land to the east of Potman's Lane, Catsfield, near Battle, East Sussex. Owing to the size of the development, and after consultation with East Sussex County Council (archaeological advisors to Rother District Council), a planning condition was attached to the consent requiring archaeological work at the site prior to development. Archaeology South-East (UCL Institute of Archaeology) was commissioned by CgMs Consulting Ltd, on behalf of their client, Lightsource Renewable Energy Ltd, to carry out the necessary evaluation, which was undertaken between 14 May and 21 October 2014, with a subsequent watching brief between November 2014 and February 2015.

The site lies between Bexhill and Ninfield, to the east of Potman's Lane, at heights between 13m and 33m AOD (NGR 572670 111162) (Fig. 1). Overall, it comprises an area of around 15.6ha which currently forms two large, irregular-shaped fields. It is bounded on all sides by adjacent fields, although its northern boundary is formed by Watermill Stream. The bedrock geology of the southern part of the study site is siltstone, mudstone and sandstone of the Tunbridge Wells Sand Formation. The northern part is mudstone of the Wadhurst Clay Formation. Alluvium is recorded following the course of the stream along the northern boundary (BGS 2014), but was not encountered on site.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Little archaeological evidence had been previously encountered in the locale of the site, with a single neolithic, leaf-shaped arrowhead comprising the only prehistoric find recovered within one kilometre (HER MES21064). Within the wider area, there are numerous Iron Age and Roman iron working sites in the High Weald (Hodgkinson 1999), especially along the edges of watercourses like Watermill Stream, although no evidence had been found close to the site.

Equally, no direct evidence of Saxon activity has been noted nearby, although many of the settlements in the wider area, such as Catsfield, Ninfield and Bexhill have Late Saxon origins, indicating some land use during this time. Moving into the medieval period, the Historic Landscape Characterisation of Sussex (Bannister 2014) found documentary evidence for several medieval farmsteads in the purlieu of the site. These projected locations are situated 175m to the north-west, 150m to the west, 700m to the south and 1.1km to the south-east. It seems likely that the site comprised agricultural land on the periphery of these settlements at this time.

Historic maps show that the site probably remained undeveloped from the early 18th century onwards. On the earliest detailed map, the 1839 Catsfield Tithe, it was divided into 11 different fields which have been consolidated into larger parcels of land over time. Post-medieval industrial activity has also been noted in the immediate vicinity of the site, with a blast furnace recorded approximately

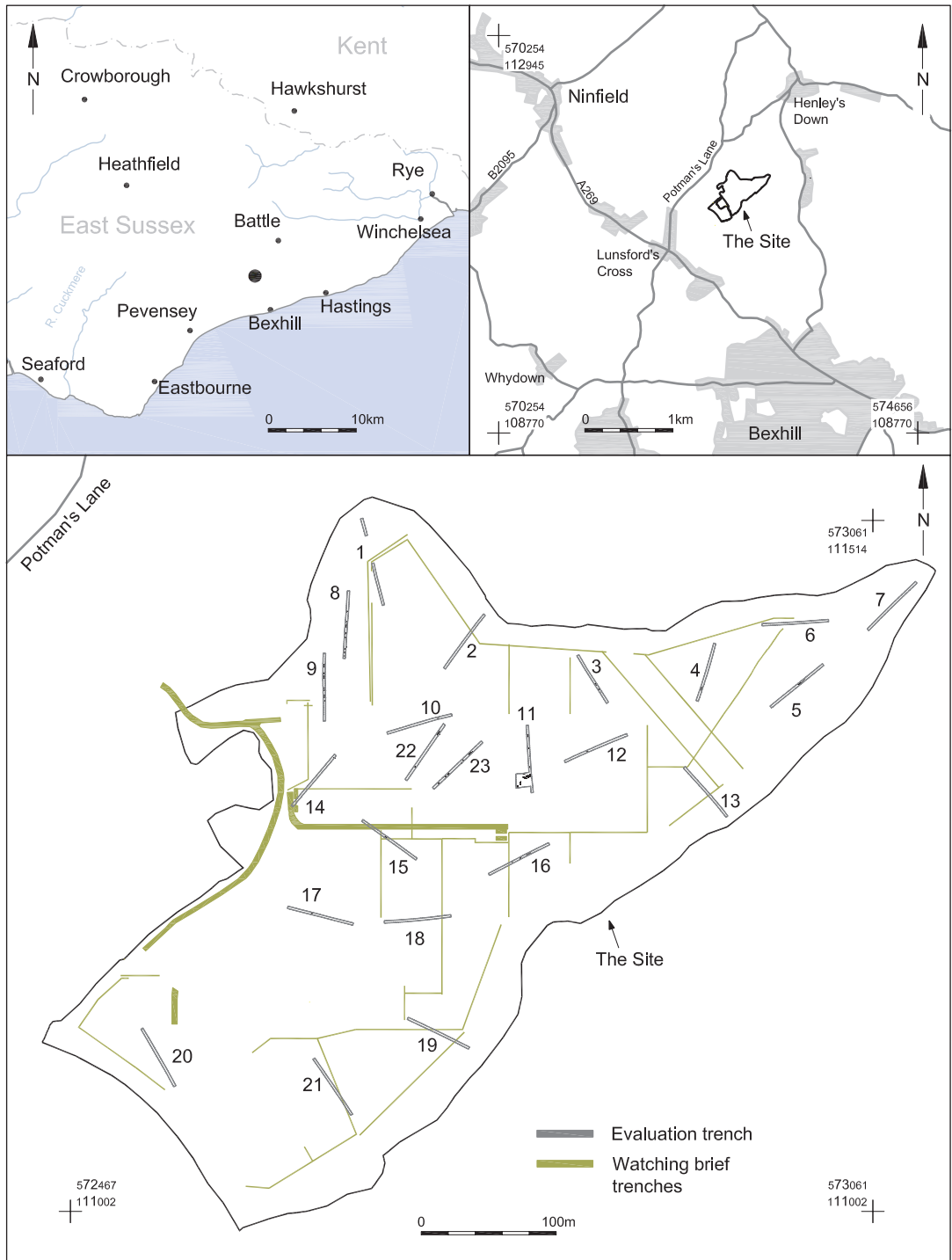


Fig. 1. Site location plan.

75m to the north-east (HER MES 3721) and an iron forge about 175m to the north-west (HER MES3708).

THE SITE

INTRODUCTION

Trial-trenching at the site in May and October 2014 was targeted on the results of a prior geophysical survey which revealed the location of four possible round barrows (BCC 2014) (Fig. 2). The mechanical trenching, and subsequent monitoring of the development groundworks undertaken between late November 2014 and early February 2015 (ASE 2015b), helped clarify the origins of the anomalies identified during the geophysical survey and exposed further pits of indeterminate date.

Period 1: mesolithic

A single bladelet of mesolithic character was recovered from a large shallow pit [11/006] in trench 11. The feature produced no other finds and contained no burnt material. Elsewhere across the site there was a paucity of lithic artefacts.

Period 2: Bronze Age

The Bronze Age is represented by one, possibly complete, ring ditch and three penannular ring ditches (Fig. 2), initially revealed by the geophysical survey. Firmly dated Bronze Age activity was restricted to trenches 8, 9 and 11, all of which were situated on a relative plateau on the east-facing slope of the hill.

Ring ditch 1

The initial survey suggested a penannular ditch with diameter of around 12m, open at the northern end. Overhead cables prohibited machine excavation; where trenching was possible, it appears to have coincided with the gap in the north side of the ring ditch and none of the ditch was exposed. The ditch is situated on a small promontory at a height of between 18 and 19m OD, and its apparent similarity in form to the sampled ring ditches provides some degree of confidence in drawing analogies.

Ring ditch 2

The second monument is formed of two concentric ditches (Fig. 3), the larger of which is estimated to be between 13.6 and 14m in diameter and the other between 5.3 and 8.5m. Both had breaks on the eastern side. It sits on the same promontory as

ring ditch 1 and ring ditch 3, at a height of between 22 and 23m OD. The excavated portion of the external ring ditch was around 0.35m in depth, while the inner ditch was approximately 0.30m and contained two sherds of Middle Bronze Age pottery and a small quantity of charcoal. The latter was radiocarbon dated to 3225±21 BP (Beta-405632 and Beta-405633; 1535–1435 cal BC, weighted mean age) (Table 1). The southern side of the external ditch could not be located during the evaluation, which may be a result of slightly inaccurate geophysical survey or difficulty in correlating survey with features when on site.

Placed in the top of the surviving fill of the inner ditch were the remains of an *in situ*, inverted Deverel-Rimbury vessel (Fig. 4), with associated charred material. The vessel was heavily truncated, with only the rim surviving, and was a typical Deverel-Rimbury urn of fairly neutral upper profile with finger impressions along the rim and an applied horizontal finger-impressed cordon. The charred material included hazel or alder and some unidentifiable but non-oak charcoal, and was dated to 3055±25 BP (Beta-405634 and Beta-405635; 1405–1230 cal BC, weighted mean age), slightly later than the sample from the ditch infilling.

Ring Ditch 3

This example is perhaps the clearest of the four from the geophysical survey and is also the largest, with a diameter of 15.5m (Fig. 5). Its design is unclear; it could be formed of two portions of semi-circular ditch, or have only a single opening on its north-west aspect, and may have a single associated pit in its interior. The highest of the identified ring ditches, it sits at a height of between 23 and 24m OD.

The excavated portions suggest an evenly executed construction, as both segments of ditch were around 0.53m deep, with fairly steep sides and rounded base. The infilling was also uniform, with an initial phase of silting followed by possible deliberate infilling and further silting. A single sherd of undated pottery was recovered from the uppermost fill.

It is unclear what the central feature observed in both the survey and the trenching of ring ditch 3 may be. There is a chance that it could be a pit or grave, and it remained unexcavated so that it might be more proficiently dealt with during mitigation or preserved *in situ*. Without excavation there is the

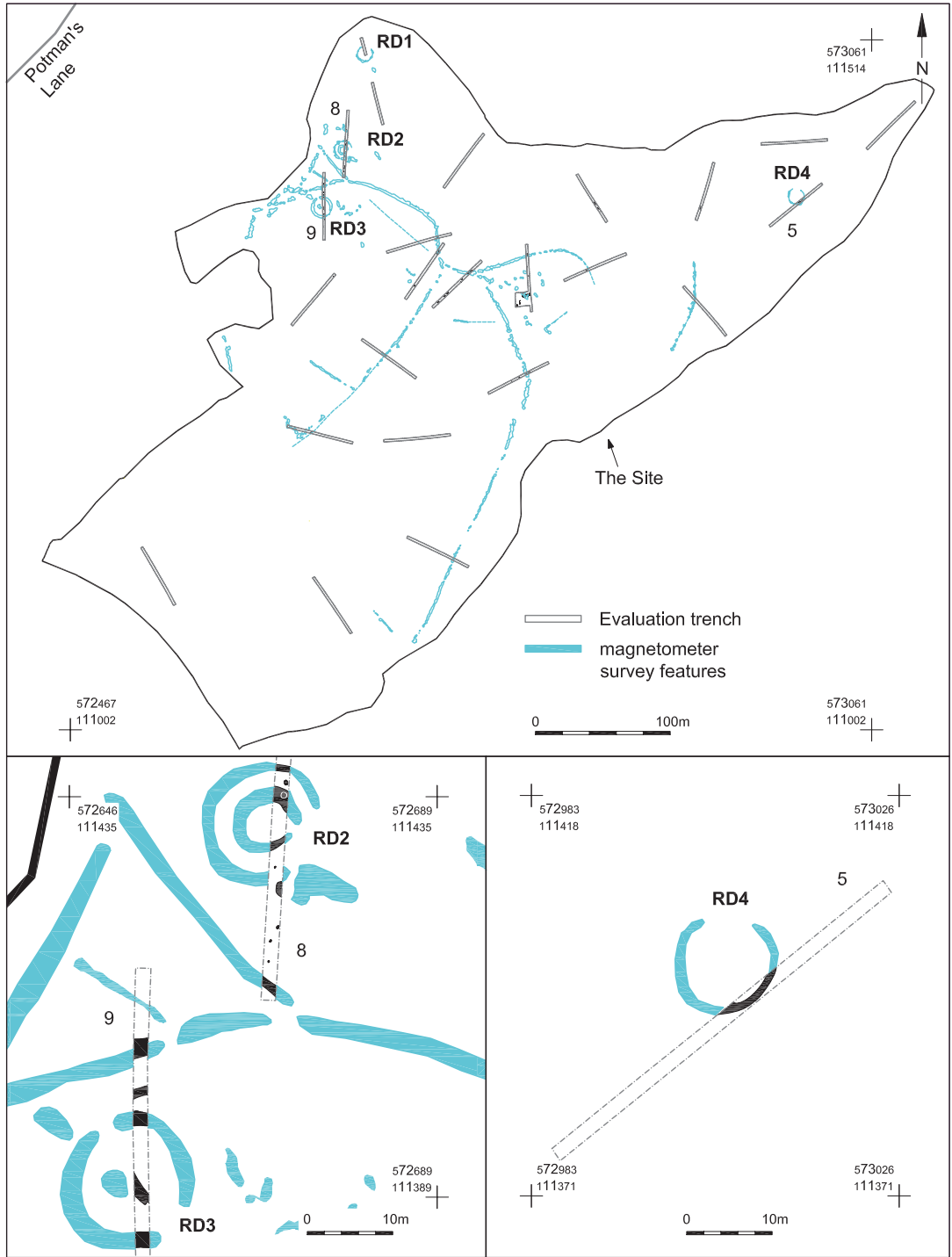


Fig. 2. Plan of excavation and ring ditches.

Table 1. Radiocarbon measurements.

Lab code	Context	Material	d13C	Species dated	Conventional radiocarbon age (BP)	Sigma calibrated date (95% confidence)	Weighted mean age (calibrated at 95% confidence)
Beta-405632	[8/010] <9>	Charcoal	-26.5 ‰	Corylus/Alnus sp.	3220±30	1595–1430 BC	3225±21 BP 1535–1435 BC
Beta-405633	[8/010] <9>	Charcoal	-26.4 ‰	Indeterminate (but not oak or Corylus/Alnus sp.)	3230±30	1605–1435 BC	
Beta-405634	[8/007] <1>	Charcoal	-27.0 ‰	Corylus/Alnus sp.	3030±30	1390–1210 BC	3055±25 BP 1405–1230 BC
Beta-405635	[8/007] <1>	Charred plant macrofossil	-25.4 ‰	Corylus avellana	3080±30	1420–1260 BC	

possibility that this feature might be a tree throw, so speculation of its origins must be cautious.

Ring ditch 4

Ring ditch 4 (Fig. 6) is seemingly isolated and stands alone on a second promontory of the hill at between 16 and 17m OD. The geophysical survey suggests it consists of a single penannular ditch of around

12m diameter, with an opening on its northern side. A curvilinear portion of the ditch was exposed and investigated during the evaluation phase and revealed a ditch of 0.30m depth, but no finds.

Period 3: Post-medieval

Ditches corresponding to field boundaries shown on the 1839 Catsfield Tithe Map were recorded

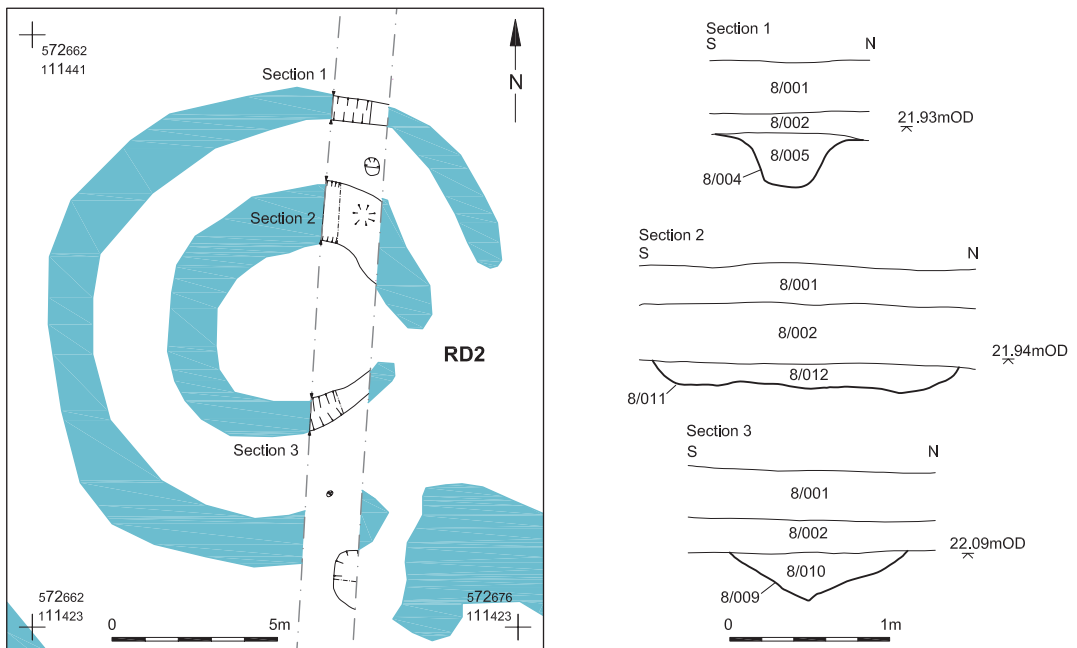


Fig. 3. Detailed plan and sections of ring ditch 2.

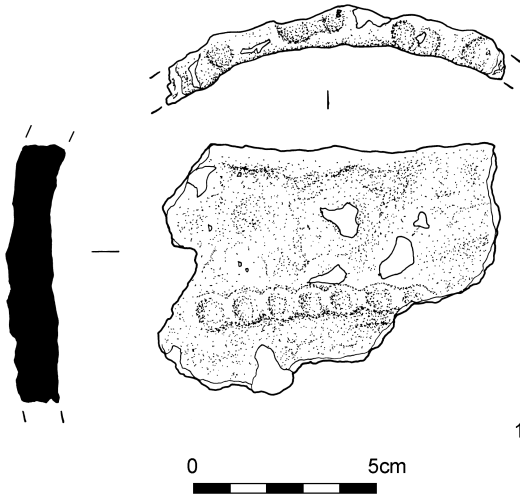


Fig. 4. Middle Bronze Age Deverel-Rimbury pottery.

in trenches 8 to 15, 17, 22 and 23, and during the watching brief phase. Independent dating was retrieved from three of the excavated portions, all of which yielded fragments of vitrified brick of possible 16th- to early 19th-century date. One

of these pieces, however, may have derived from a re-cut of the boundary ditch in which a field drain was placed. A dump of material of post-medieval date was encountered in trench 4, within a natural depression.

Undated

Several discrete features were also investigated that yielded no dating information. These include a pit in trench 3, post-holes and pits near ring ditch 2 in trench 8, post-hole [16/006], two post-holes and tree throws in trench 23, and a further two post-holes found during the watching brief. Two groups of undated discrete features were also revealed in trenches 11 and 11A.

DISCUSSION

The archaeology of the High Weald has, until recently, been an under-explored resource and therefore an under-represented facet of the archaeological record. This was mainly due to the paucity of both commercial and research work carried out in the area but, in recent years, recognition of the prehistoric use of the High Weald has increased, with settlement and

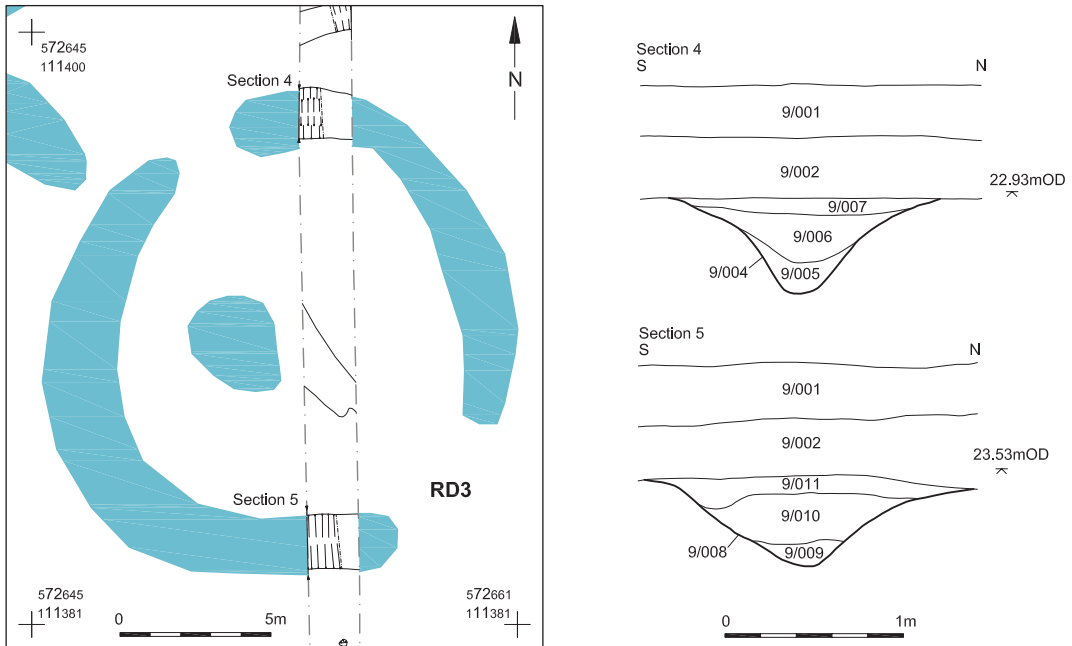


Fig. 5. Detailed plan and sections of ring ditch 3.

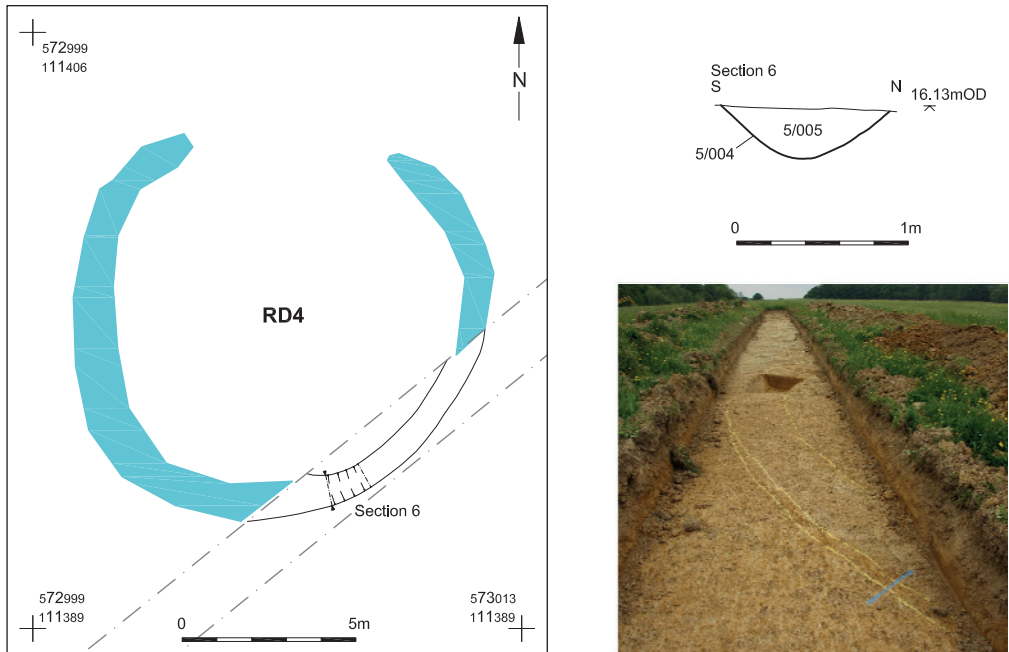


Fig. 6. Detailed plan and section of ring ditch 4.

agricultural sites becoming more commonly recognised (Gardiner 1990; Yates 2007, 43–6). This growth in the number of known sites has in turn led to more developer-funded archaeology being undertaken and an increase in the amount of archaeological evidence. Examples of such work include the Hastings to Bexhill Link Road, which yielded a panoply of multi-period archaeological features. Despite these advances, the understanding of monumental structures on the High Weald remains poor, as few examples have been encountered and even fewer examined through excavation (Garwood 2011, 125). The examples identified during these works therefore shed some new light on our understanding of this aspect of prehistory.

MESOLITHIC AND NEOLITHIC

Little evidence for the mesolithic and neolithic periods was encountered. A few isolated pieces of struck flint were recovered from a pit, tree throw and ditch. Although only a small assemblage was encountered, it should perhaps be considered as having greater significance than simply residual, background material. The pit from which a bladelet

was recovered may, along with similar feature types nearby and in trench 3, represent potential evidence of minimal purposeful interventions of mesolithic date, although the paucity of other finds or burnt material preclude any further interpretation.

BRONZE AGE

The most significant discoveries date to the Bronze Age, with the combination of geophysical survey and subsequent trial trenching successfully confirming evidence for Bronze Age funerary monuments. Four penannular ditches were identified, and three of them were sampled during the evaluation, providing radiocarbon dates for one of the group. These are the first investigated examples of ring ditches in this part of the High Weald, with most previous instances occurring further east or west on chalk downland (Garwood 2003, 50; Drewett *et al.* 1988, 79). Recently, five other potential round barrows have been noted in the locale; three to the north of Bexhill (Carl Champness pers. comm.; ASE 2015a), another to the east near Westfield (Kevin Cornwell pers. comm.), and one around one mile to the north west between Ninfield and Catsfield (CA 2014). Two of these have

now been excavated, but their results are still being processed (Carl Champness pers. comm.).

All four of the ring ditches found at Potman's Lane occupied slight promontories on the higher ground of the valley that overlooks Watermill Stream to the north. Nearby are several small springs which give the local landscape its slightly boggy nature. There is also a larger spring to the south which feeds into Watermill Stream, a tributary of the Combe Haven River. The existence of these springs contemporaneously with the Bronze Age activity is conjectural, but the proximity of the Potman's Lane ring ditches to springs, and their location on higher ground overlooking valleys, is analogous to the other examples near Bexhill and Westfield.

More reliable evidence for the Bronze Age environment comes from the limited charred remains from the fill of ring ditch 2 and the inverted vessel placed in the top of the ditch. The species identified include alder, hazel and oak. Alder, a plant that prefers riverine, fen and wet woodland habitats, was identified from both the ditch and the Deverel-Rimbury pottery vessel. The presence of alder wood here is unusual, as most Bronze Age cremation burials in the south-east of England contain oak, ash and/or *Maloidae* charcoal (e.g. Gale 2009; Alldritt 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; Challinor 2006; Stevens and Challinor 2009; Mooney 2015, 139–40). Alder has, however, been noted as fuel in a Roman cremation burial at Broadbridge Heath, West Sussex (Le Hégarat and Mooney 2013), and in cremation cemeteries in northern Gaul (Deforce and Haneca 2012). The choice of alder wood in this case may be an adaptation to the availability of wood in the local environment, and as such reflects the taxa of the valley, which may have suffered from a decline in boreal species through human intervention, an occurrence noted in the nearby Ouse Valley (Scaife and Burrin 1983).

Insufficient charred material precludes further conclusions on the environment being drawn, but studies suggest that much of the Combe Haven Valley was cleared of woodland by the Iron Age (Smyth and Jennings 1988, 19), and that this likely derived from earlier Bronze Age efforts (Waller and Schofield 2007, 382). However, not all areas are considered to have been subject to intensive clearance or post-clearance activity during the Early and Middle Bronze Ages, and whether the area around Potman's Lane was intensively cleared is uncertain.

Evidence on the form of the barrows was inconclusive. No evidence of an internal bank or mound was observed in any of the bisecting trenches and, if once present, they are likely to have been worn away by soil erosion and ploughing. Similarly, no internal post-holes or stake-holes were observed which might have been used for the revetment of soil. The absence of any internal features is not unusual in many excavated barrows, with truncation often cited as the cause, but the possibility of these monuments being open-type ring barrows cannot be dismissed. More complete examples on the Weald, such as that at Playden (Cleal 1982; Dickinson 1981), around 21km to the east, are of comparable size, with one being constructed of earth with interior post-holes, while another, near Lower Beeding, comprised an earthen mound with stone kerbs or revetments (Beckensall 1967). In the light of the evidence, it is suggested here that the most likely scenario is that most, or all, of the ring ditches discovered at Potman's Lane would have contained an internal mound or bank, possibly revetted by hurdles, which has subsequently been reduced by soil erosion and later ploughing.

All four of the ring ditches revealed at Potman's Lane appear to have an element of incompleteness to their ditches. This might be the product of subsequent truncation, but could also derive from the purposeful inclusion of gaps or causeways allowing access into the central area of these barrows. Only one known example of this exists elsewhere in the south-east, at Beechbrook Wood, Kent, which has only a few analogous sites elsewhere in the UK (Garwood 2011, 130). With the *in situ* preservation of these monuments, it is not yet possible to fully demonstrate whether they were deliberately constructed with causeways, but the evidence so far may be convincing enough to provide us with a unique group of monuments in the south.

In addition to the above, the double concentric ditches of ring ditch 2 also have few analogous examples from across the south-east, with those at Beechbrook Wood and Whitehill Road perhaps being the closest (Garwood 2011, fig. 3.49). It is not known whether both ditches were part of the original morphology of the monument, or whether one was added at a later date.

Considering the above, it is unfortunate that the barrows provided little by way of dating, yielding

only a few sherds of pottery and charred plant remains, and all of these from ring ditch 2. Such paucity of material associated with barrows is not uncommon. Ring ditch 2 was radiocarbon dated to 1535–1435 cal BC from charcoal found midway up in its fill, suggesting a Middle Bronze Age date for the primary infilling and indicating activity of this date involving fire within the environs of the ring ditch. Despite a lack of earlier evidence, and allowing for the gradual silting of the ditch, the actual construction date is thought to be earlier (as with many such structures; Garwood 2003, Appendix 2). The dating to 1405–1230 cal BC of charred remains associated with the Middle Bronze Age Deverel-Rimbury vessel, interred in the silted ditch of the barrow's primary phase of construction, strengthens the notion of a secondary period of activity.

The inverted Deverel-Rimbury vessel, and the charred remains recovered from within what survived of it, suggest ceremonial use, probably for the internment of cremations, although no burnt bone was found associated with it, possibly due to truncation. However, the lack of cremation and other skeletal funerary evidence at Potman's Lane is not unusual and is noted elsewhere, both on and off the Weald. Taphonomic processes and acidic geology may preclude the recovery of skeletal remains, but the absence could also indicate an alternative function for barrows in this region, as opposed to those found on the downs, which often contain some evidence of interment. However, the remaining unexcavated central feature within ring ditch 3 may yield evidence for the function of these monuments.

At this juncture it is prudent to try and fit this site within its chronological, spatial and social setting. In a site-specific context, there is little indication as to what preceded or post-dated the ring ditches, either at the site or in the immediate vicinity. At the Link Road and Gateway Road sites, there was the opportunity to investigate the environs of the ring ditches where a perpetual, if sometimes intermittent, use of their landscape setting was established. Preceding neolithic activity was uncovered, along with later division of the land towards the end of the Bronze Age, but it is still too early to discern how those barrows fitted into the overall chronological development of their immediate setting and also within their own temporal setting.

Generally, there is scant evidence encountered for the Early and Middle Bronze Age on the High Weald. However, utilisation of the landscape is noted from sporadic spreads of neolithic and later flintwork (Tebbutt 1974a; 1974b). It is commonly considered that the landscape was made more open during the neolithic period and Early Bronze Age, both on the High Weald (Scaife and Burrin 1983; Gardiner 1990, 42–3) and its immediate environs (Scaife and Burrin 1987), and with this a tradition of agriculture emerged.

Beyond the broad environmental evidence, little has yet been encountered on the High Weald to suggest more precisely how populated it was, where these populations chose to live, and what activities they were undertaking, and so inferences on the social and spatial settings of the ring ditches must draw from examples beyond the Weald. It

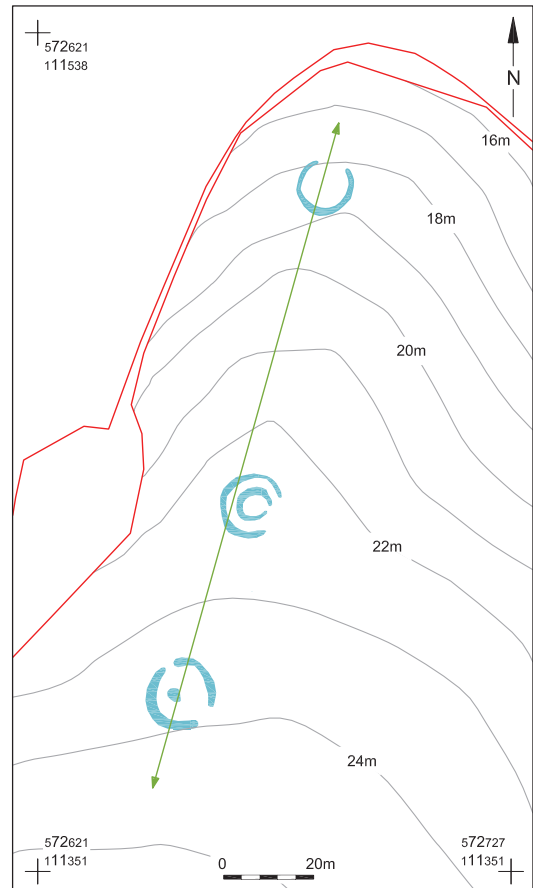


Fig. 7. Alignment of ring ditches 1–3.



Fig. 8. View from plateau looking east.

is generally accepted that barrows occupy spaces beyond individual settlements (Drewett *et al.* 1988, fig. 3.8), but, when transferring this to sites on the High Weald, problems arise regarding where this occupation occurred. To what extent these barrows might have occupied a liminal space within the landscape, between activities based in the Weald and the Downs, or perhaps socio-political boundaries, is difficult to establish. These themes are likely to become more satisfactorily considered as further material comes to light.

Regardless of the reasoning behind the topographic location of the barrows at Potman's Lane, the number revealed suggests an importance of continuity of perception of place over several generations, a point exemplified by the revisiting of ring ditch 2. The temporality of construction and use of these monuments is unclear, but the line of monuments created by ring ditches 1–3 indicates that some planning might have gone into their construction over time. This alignment (Fig. 7) runs up the promontory of the slope, leading to a plateau on the side of the hill with views over the valley from the north-west, clockwise round to the east. Similar linear patterns of monuments can be seen at Saltwood Tunnel in Kent, Devil's Jump, Treyford, and Duncton Common and Heyshott Down in Sussex, where they align either east–west or on the line of the sunset at the midsummer solstice

(Garwood 2003, fig. 5.10; 2011, fig 3.51). Although no obvious cosmological alignment is apparent in the siting of these three barrows, a procession uphill towards the plateau will reward an individual or group with an array of landmarks (Fig. 8). The addition of ring ditch 4 to the group may indicate that systematic spatial organization was not always in use at this location but, without accurate dating, it is impossible to determine whether it fell into or out of vogue, and might suggest a more episodic construction.

POST-MEDIEVAL

As with the Bronze Age ring ditches, the post-medieval ditches mostly utilise the contours of the hill slope, although there may be a degree to which the upcast from the ditches provides a barrier for the downward movement of colluvium from further up the hill, accentuating the contour. Some ditches, such as those located in trenches 8–12, 15, 17, 22 and 23 correspond to field boundaries shown on the 1839 Catsfield Tithe Map, and vitrified brick from three of the excavated ditch slots provides a possible late 15th or 16th century date. It is likely that this field system relates to one of the small farmsteads identified in the Historic Landscape Characterisation which lie 175m to the north-west and 700m to the south (Bannister 2014).

CONCLUSIONS

The Potman's Lane site has provided, thus far, a unique opportunity to investigate a group of Bronze Age barrow monuments on the mudstone geology of the High Weald. Some potential analogous sites are becoming apparent in the local vicinity to the south and east, but full records for these are not yet available and therefore comprehensive comparison to these is not yet possible.

This site provides an important indication of the rich ceremonial landscape that might exist in this area of the High Weald. It creates a stepping stone for future research into prehistoric monumental activity and land use, an aspect of prehistoric archaeology in this region still poorly understood, and indicates the possibility of large-scale utilisation

of the landscape for both ceremonial and secular activities yet to be revealed.

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