

EXCAVATION OF AN IRON AGE PIT GROUP AT LONDON ROAD, THETFORD

by John A. Davies

SUMMARY

Excavations in 1989 by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit at an undisturbed site on the south western edge of the town of Thetford revealed evidence for a succession of prehistoric occupations. Attention was centred on a cohesive group of features which were found to have been used during a short-term occupation in the Iron Age. In addition, assemblages of flint and pottery from the backfill of the pit group and from site clearance provide evidence of activity in the immediate vicinity during the Mesolithic, Neolithic and Late Bronze Age.

Introduction

The proposed purchase of part of the playing field at Redcastle Furze Primary School, Thetford, by Breckland District Council from Norfolk County Council, for re-development, provided the opportunity for archaeological investigation of a site located in a prominent position in relation to the south-western approach to the Late Saxon town. The land has a frontage onto the main London Road (A11) and includes part of Scheduled Ancient Monument no. 291. Excavations, funded by Norfolk County Council, were undertaken across the area of the proposed development by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit during the summer of 1989.

The site

The site (Norfolk SMR no. 5756 THD; TL 862 826) lies within the area of the Breckland, on a sand and gravel terrace to the south of the Little Ouse river. The Breckland soils are easily tilled and have encouraged occupation in most post-glacial periods (Clarke, 1960). Here, environmental evidence has shown that there has been widespread forest clearance without regeneration since the Neolithic (Godwin, 1944). This area of heathland has been extensively covered by deposits of wind-blown sand, which obscure the underlying geology.

The site was located within the boundaries of the playing field, adjacent to the London Road (Fig.1), to the south-west of the modern town. It has remained free of any substantial buildings in modern times. It lay just 50m outside the line of the Anglo-Saxon town defences (as outlined by Rogerson and Dallas, 1984, Fig.2), which are still visible as a low ridge in this section, extending north-west along the edge of the school playing field towards the Norman Red Castle 400m distant. Thetford Castle, a Norman motte and bailey construction with Iron Age antecedents, lies 1km to the east (Davies 1992, 17-28; Gregory 1992(b), 3-17). A main medieval road lay beneath the A11 (Robinson and Rose, 1983) and it has been thought that a Saxon route may have also preceded the line of the present London Road. The site of the extra-mural pre-Conquest church of St Margaret lies c.150m to the south-east. Thus it was to be expected that the excavation would fall within a Late Saxon/early Medieval suburb that had grown up around the main entry to the town from the south-west.

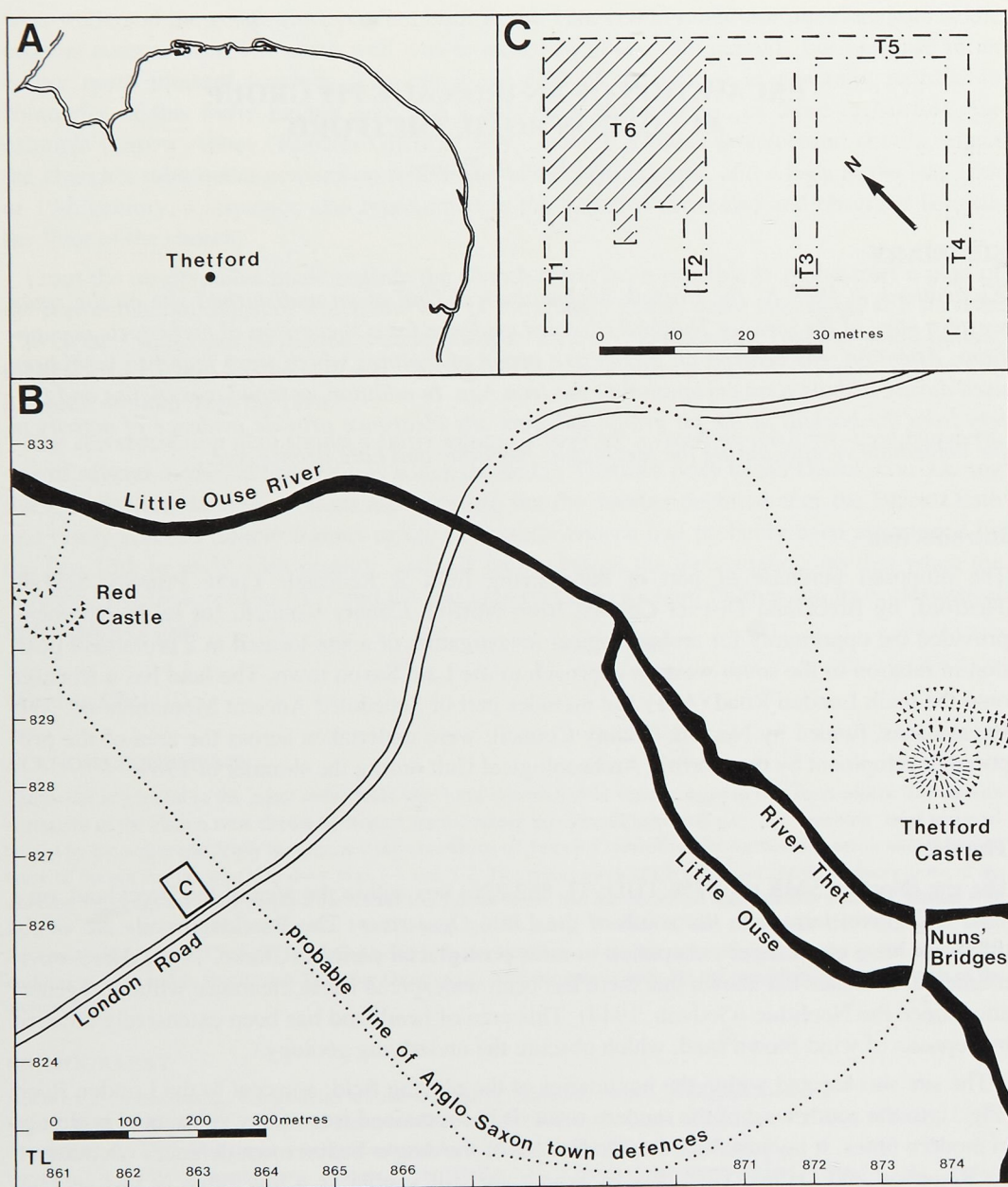


Fig.1

Site location: the situation and location of the trenches.
 Scales, map B 1:5,000 and map C 1:1,000

The excavation

The excavation was financed by Norfolk County Council initially to evaluate the nature and extent of archaeological deposits situated within this potentially important location adjacent to the Saxon town. Preliminary excavations were directed by Phil Andrews for the Norfolk

Archaeological Unit in mid-July 1989 and were continued under the direction of John Davies during August and September.

Turf, topsoil and wind-blown sand were mechanically removed to a depth of between 0.3 and 0.5m from the surface of five 2m wide trenches (T1 – T5; Figure 1). Trench 5 was positioned at right angles to London Road, stretching 60m and oriented NW-SE. Four shorter trenches (T1 – T4), each approaching 40m in length, projected southwards at right angles from Trench 5. Trench 4 was positioned as close to London Road as was possible.

The fine deposit of wind-blown sand overlay a natural subsoil of fine to medium sand interspersed with variable amounts of gravel, in patches and bands, mainly concentrated at the southern end of the site. The distinction between the wind-blown deposit and the underlying sand was very slight. When this had been removed, archaeological features were distinguishable within the subsoil. Despite the shallow nature of the overlying topsoil the archaeological deposits had not been disturbed by modern use of the area. The only evidence of post-medieval activity came from objects recovered from the topsoil, including horseshoe fragments, clay pipe and glazed pottery sherds. Nor was the medieval period any better represented. Seven small sherds provided the only evidence of a medieval presence in the vicinity. A small number of varied animal bones and oyster and cockle shells were also recovered.

A single pit (feature number 14) was initially revealed at the northern end of Trench 4, at its junction with Trench 5. This shallow feature contained a clay lining, of 1 – 2cm thickness, and was filled with burnt flint and fragments of charcoal. The rest of the cleaned area to the east of Trench 2 was found to be devoid of features. At the western end of the site, parts of features were revealed within the narrow trial trenches. The area between Trenches 1, 2 and 5 was subsequently opened (Trench 6) and a total of twenty-six sub-circular and oval features were distinguished within the natural sand and gravel surface, forming an apparent concentration to the north and east of the open area (Fig.2). Seventeen of the features were fully excavated. Numbers 36, 42, 55, 66, 82, 84, 96, 97 and 98 were partially excavated, with the deeper pits 42 and 84 being curtailed for reasons of safety. The salient points of each feature, including physical description and principal finds, are given below.

Feature

- 14 (Fig.3) Circular pit. 0.85m diam., 0.28m deep.
Clay lining of 1 – 2cm thickness. Packed with burnt flint and charcoal.
Iron Age sherd (c.12)
- 15 (Fig.3) Circular pit. 2.20m diam., 0.56m deep.
Straight sides and flat base.
Scraper and core (c.16). Flint knife and stone 'bead' (c.17).
- 19 (Fig.3) Circular pit. 1.85m diam., 0.70m deep.
Straight sides and flat base.
Iron Age sherd (c.20).
- 22 (Fig.3) Circular pit. 1.54m diam., 0.30m deep.
Rounded base.
Poss. Palaeolithic blade (c.21).
- 25 (Fig.3) Circular pit. 1.70m diam., 0.60m deep.
Conical profile.
2 scrapers (c.23), core (c.24).
- 29 (Fig.3) Oval pit. 1.85m x 1.70m, 0.55m deep.
Straight sides and flat base.
- 31 (Fig.3) Oval pit. 1.80m x 1.60m, 0.45m deep.
Straight sides and curved base.

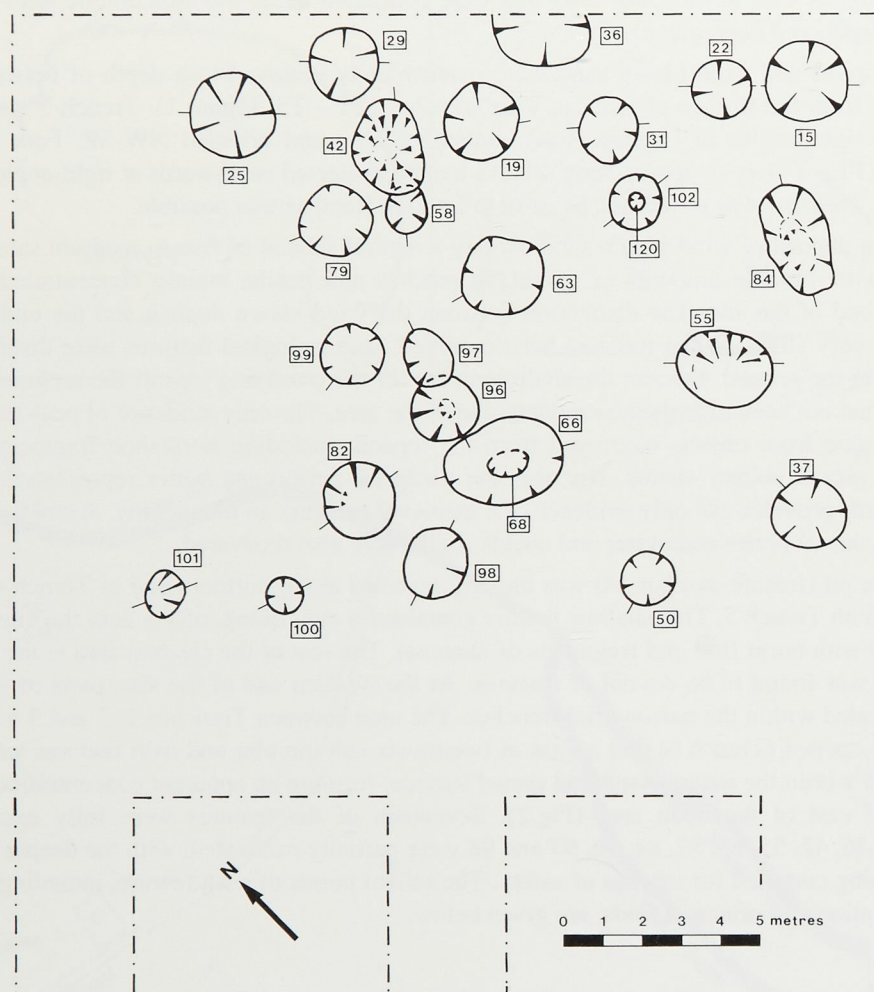


Fig.2
Trench 6.
Scale 1:100

- 36 (Fig.3) Oval pit. 2.20m diam. (northern half obscured beneath baulk), 1.00m deep. Undulating/flat base.
Piece of quartzite (c.33), scraper (c.34).
- 37 (Fig.3) Circular pit. 1.92m diam., 0.52m deep.
Rounded base. Burnt flint and charcoal frags in lower fill (c.39).
4 scrapers and core frag. (c.38).
- 42 (Fig.3) Sub-circular pit. 2.4m x 1.79m. Excavated to depth of 1.52m (not bottomed). Sides stepped (north side) and curved (south). Cuts Pit 58.
Scraper (c.40), scraper (c.47), Iron Age sherds (c.40, 41, 47. Sherd from c.41 joins others from Pits 58 and 79).
- 50 (Fig.4) Circular pit, 1.35m diam., 0.31m deep.
Flat, sloping, base.

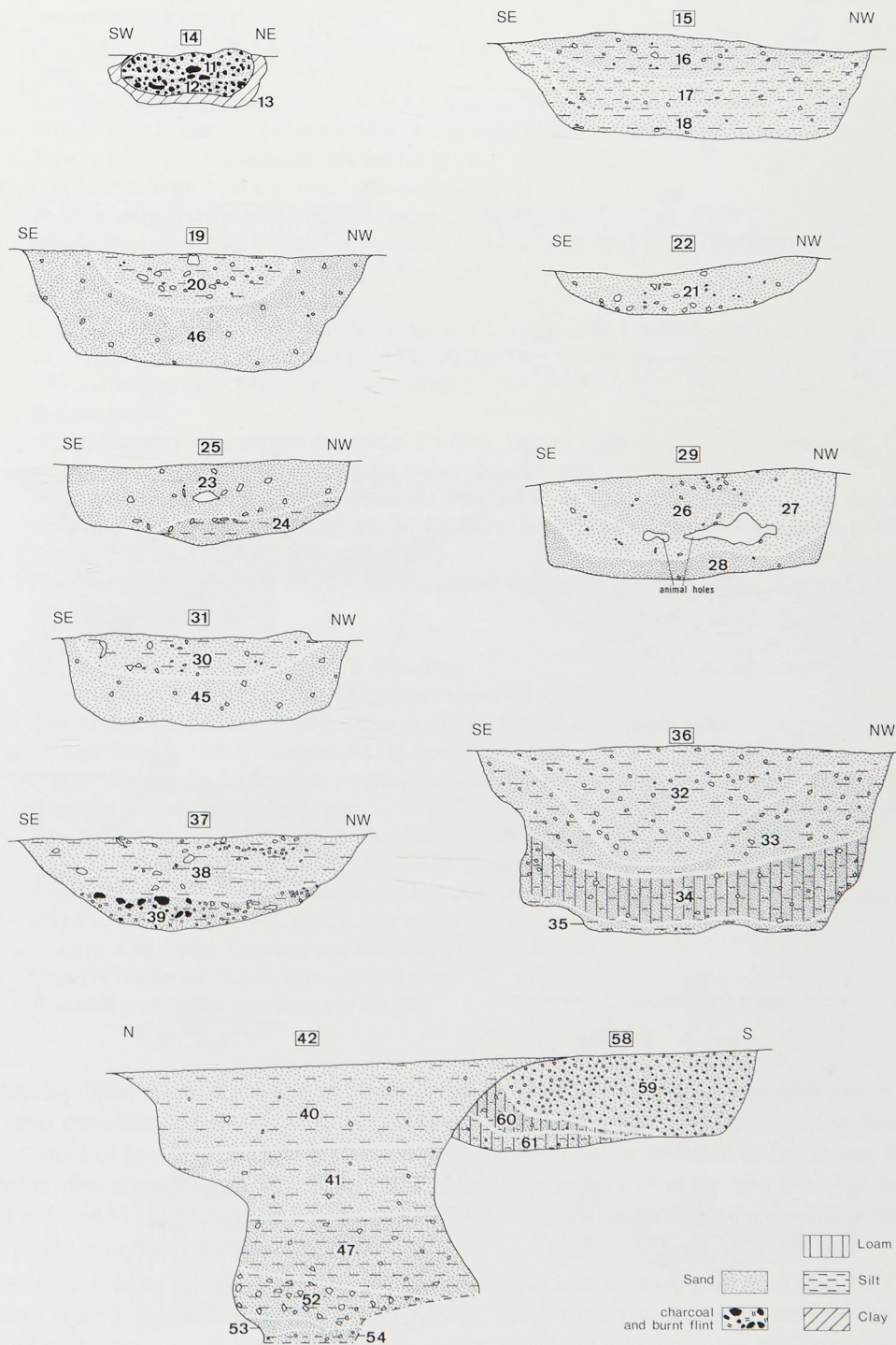


Fig.3 Sections. Scale 1:40

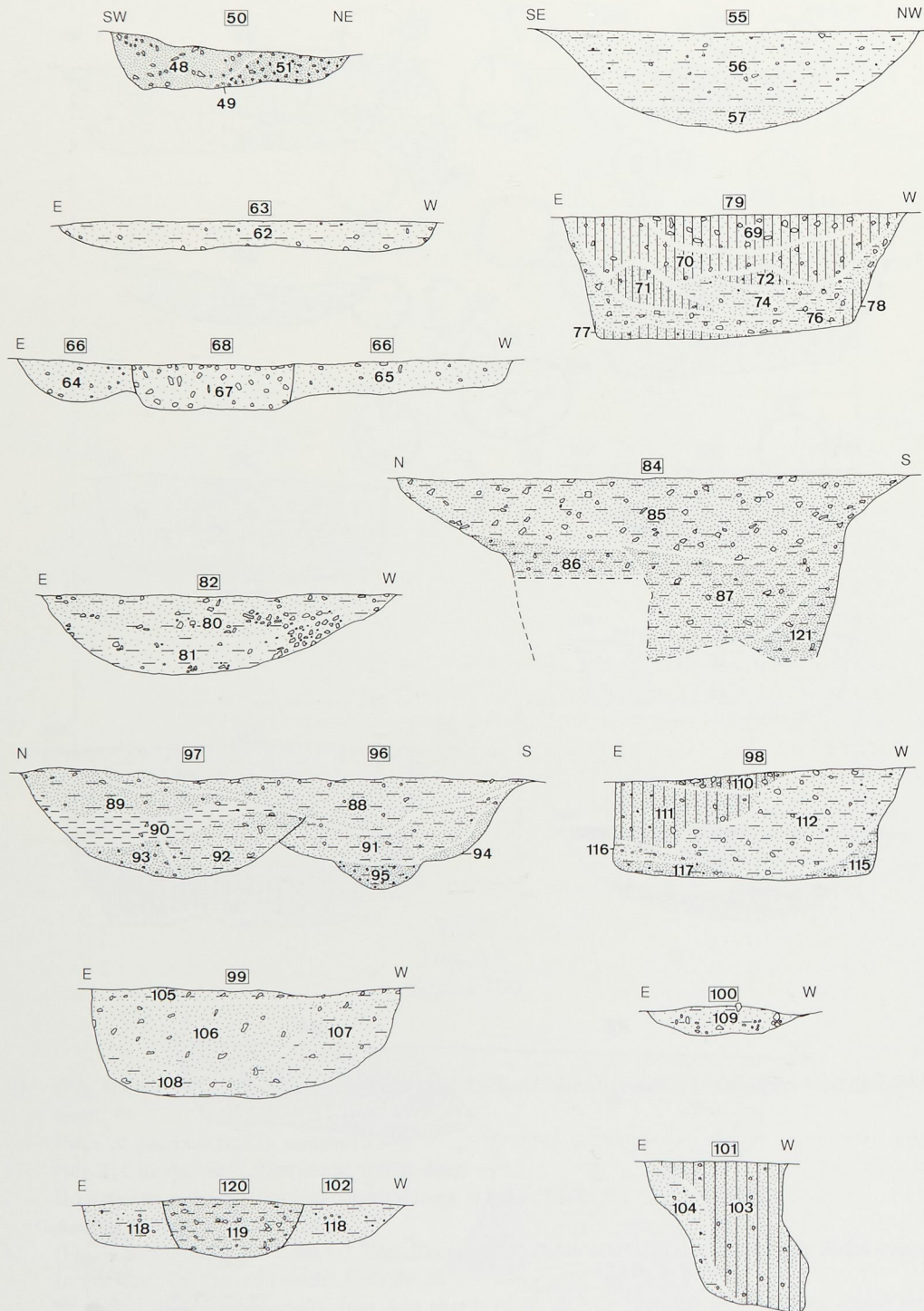


Fig.4 Sections. Scale 1:40

- 55 (Fig.4) Oval pit. 2.60m x 2.01m, 0.56m deep.
Rounded base.
Retouched flint (c.57).
- 58 (Fig.3) Oval pit. 1.50m x 1.00m, 0.50m deep. Flat base, with curved side in south. Cut by pit 42 in north.
2 scrapers, knife, fabricator (c.59), Iron Age sherd (c.59 – joins with others from Pits 42 and 79).
- 63 (Fig.4) Sub-circular pit. 2.01m x 1.95m, 0.25m deep. Shallow, with rounded edges and flat base.
Scraper and ?core rejuvenation flake (c.62).
- 66 (Fig.4) Oval pit. 3.10m x 2.20m, 0.25m deep.
Shallow, with rounded edges and flat bottom. Cut by Pit. 68.
- 68 (Fig.4) Oval pit. 1.10m x 0.70m, 0.30m deep. Flat base with steep sides. Cut into middle of Pit 66.
- 79 (Fig.4) Sub-circular pit. 1.90m diam. 0.72 deep.
Flat base and straight, sloping, sides.
Scrapers (c.69 and c.76), 3 retouched flints and scraper (c.70), LN/EBA sherds (c.70, c.72, c.77), Iron Age sherd (c.76, joins others from Pits 42 and 58).
- 82 (Fig.4) Circular pit. 1.84m diam., 0.44m deep.
Rounded base.
- 84 (Fig.4) Roughly oval-shaped pit. 2.94m x 1.66m. Dug to depth of 1.04m (not bottomed). Upper section conical in profile. Sides become steeper below 0.40m.
Core rejuvenation flake, scraper, retouched flint (c.85), Iron Age sherds (c.85 – joins with sherd from clearance above T6 and c.87 – joins with sherd from Pit 19), Grooved Ware sherds (c.86).
- 96 (Fig.4) Oval pit. 1.80m x 1.30m, 0.65m deep.
Rounded profile, dropping away to form a conical depression in centre of base. Cut by Pit 97 and sharing upper fill (c.88).
Utilised flake (c.88).
- 97 (Fig.4) Ovoid pit. 1.40m x 1.20m, 0.55m deep.
Rounded base. Cuts Pit 96, sharing common upper fill (c.88).
- 98 (Fig.4) Oval pit. 1.77m x 1.65m, 0.63m deep. Flat bottom and straight sides.
Utilised flake (c.110), 2 scrapers (c.111), borer (c.112).
- 99 (Fig.4) Circular pit. 1.74m diam., 0.60m deep.
Rounded base. Sides steeper in east.
- 100 (Fig.4) Shallow circular feature. 0.84m diam., 0.18m deep.
- 101 (Fig.4) Oval post-hole. 1.19m x 0.85m, 0.84m deep.
4 cores and scraper (c.103), M/LBA and Iron Age sherds (c.103).
- 102 (Fig.4) Oval pit. 1.80m x 1.30m, 0.36m deep.
Shallow with rounded corners and flat base. Contains Pit 120.
- 120 (Fig.4) Circular pit. 0.80m diam., 0.36m deep.
Rounded profile. Cut into centre of Pit 102.

The clay-lined Pit 14 was situated 32m from the main feature group. It was different in profile from the other features (Fig. 3) and contained scorching marks in the centre of its base. A single sherd of Iron Age pottery, recovered from its lower fill, is different in fabric and finish to those from elsewhere on the site and resembles other pottery from the late Iron Age settlement at Fison Way, Thetford (Gregory 1992a, 158). This feature belongs to a distinct period of occupation from that evidenced in Trench 6.

The main feature group, in Trench 6, contains 25 pits and a single post hole (Fig.2). These features were concentrated within a tight group. They were not found in areas of the site cleared to the west, south and east. The pits can be separated into a number of distinct shapes. Nine have flat bases and near-straight sides (15, 19, 29, 31, 36, 58, 79, 98, 99). Five are rounded in profile (22, 37, 55, 96, 97). One is conical (25). Five are shallow, rounded, features (50,

63, 66, 100, 102) and two of these have inner, circular, pits (66/68, 102/120). Two are larger, deeper, more irregular cuts (42, 84).

The features were dug in very fine sand, which would not have permitted them to stay open for many hours at a time. They could have been kept open for longer by the use of baskets for an inner lining. The use of the pits as containers or for storage would seem to be the most likely function. Unfortunately the acidic conditions have not preserved the contents and no impressions of any organic lining were visible in the collapsible sand walls. The choice of a site with such unsuitable subsoil for storage pits does seem odd but the alternatives are less credible. It is unlikely that this would have been an extraction site. Minerals are not present and the flint, which is poor, could have been readily collected from the surface. It is possible that they may have served as rubbish pits, although no contents have survived to support this possibility. Small unidentifiable fragments of bone were recovered from Pits 36 (c.34) and 42 (c.40) and sheep teeth were recovered from Pit 79 (c.70). The collapsible nature of the features and the absence of evidence for associated structures suggests that they enjoyed only brief use.

The wide chronological range of finds recovered was a surprising feature of the excavation, given the ephemeral nature of the features. A Mesolithic presence is identified by flint recovered from machine clearance above the pit group and also adjacent to London Road. Worn pottery of Later Neolithic/Earlier Bronze Age date was also recovered. A substantial flint assemblage, together with a single sherd of pottery indicates a presence here in the Late Bronze Age. However, it is to the Iron Age that the features must be dated. There is an absence of flints from primary pit fills and earlier pottery shows a substantial degree of wear, in contrast to that of the Iron Age which is unweathered. Sherds of single Iron Age vessels were recovered from different pits which shows that a number of them were open and backfilled at the same time. Although datable finds were not recovered from all features, there is no evidence for any Iron Age features having cut pits of a much earlier date, although several may have been re-cut because of the collapsible nature of the subsoil. The close association of the features also serves to confirm that the site belongs to a single, brief, period of use. When the features went out of use the significant quantities of earlier prehistoric material from the immediate vicinity became buried in upper fills of the features. The possibility that the later prehistoric flintwork may belong to the Iron Age occupation must also be considered feasible, as considered below (The Flint Assemblage).

The finds

Copper alloy bracelet (Fig.5)

Fragment of a D-shaped bracelet. Approximately 83mm of its length survives. Round in section and flattened on the straight side. Seven ring and dot motifs are inscribed on the flat face, positioned between straight borders, with fine notches on the edges above and below. Probably Roman. Found in topsoil above Trench 5 (c.10).

The Prehistoric Pottery

by H.M. Bamford

Introduction

There are 95 sherds of prehistoric pottery recorded from sixteen pits and covering 28 separate site contexts. Parts of at least eleven and not more than thirteen hand-built vessels are identifiable by form or decoration and four out of the remaining 48 individual sherds and fragments can be matched specifically to featured vessels by fabric, colour and surface treatment.

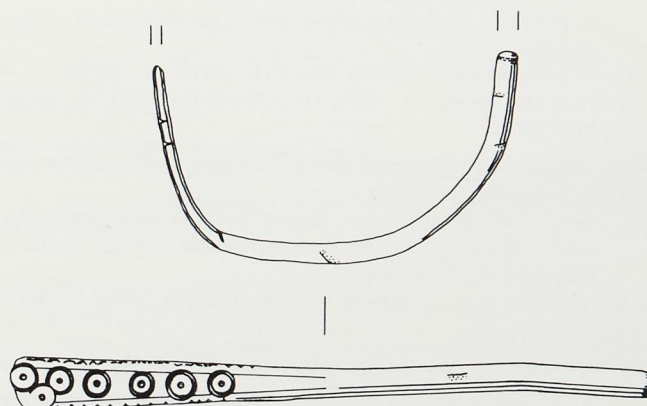


Fig.5
Copper alloy bracelet.
Scale 1:1

The material is extremely fragmentary and most of the sherds are small. Joining parts of one pot (P10) were found dispersed in three different pits (42, 58 and 79) and a sherd of identical appearance in a fourth (101). Matching rim sherds P11 and P12 are from two different pits (19 & 84), and a single sherd (P61) recorded in clearance of contexts 43/44 is almost certainly from the same vessel as P13, from pit 84.

Note on dates: In the following text, uncalibrated radiocarbon years and estimated dates based on uncalibrated radiocarbon determinations are indicated by the convention bc. Calibrated radiocarbon dates and estimates in calendar years are shown as BC.

The Fabrics

The following purely descriptive grouping of fabrics is based on the types of inclusions present in different proportions and combinations and visible in fresh fracture surfaces at 30x magnification. There appears to be some correlation between certain distinct fabric types and different pottery styles, but the subdivision of principal groups according to some of the more marked differences in other characteristics, such as fabric structure or the relative frequency of secondary inclusions does not necessarily carry any similar significance. Prehistoric pottery in Britain is not of a kind to suggest that raw material or the manufacturing process were ever precisely controlled, and minor variations are sometimes to be seen even within a single sherd or vessel.

Hardness of a fabric is described below according to the following subjective scale:

- Soft: Easily marked by finger nail
- Fairly soft: Moderately resistant to marking by finger nail
- Fairly hard: Difficult to mark with finger nail
- Hard: Very difficult or impossible to mark with finger nail.

Below the fabric descriptions, the number of sherds is given, the maximum number of vessels represented and a list of contexts, with the number of sherds from each shown in brackets.

Group A: Fabrics containing grog.

- A1(a) Fairly soft to fairly hard; fracture rough to hackly; structure fairly coarse, sometimes slightly 'blocky', as if poorly wedged.
- Inclusions: Grog – normally frequent or very frequent, occasionally more sparse; particle size generally 0.5mm-3.0mm, occasionally up to 7.0mm.

- Sand* – frequent to very frequent sub-rounded and sub-angular quartz, sometimes unevenly distributed, generally 0.2mm-0.5mm, occasionally up to 1.5mm, sometimes with finer particles c.0.1mm
- 23 small sherds and fragments. Contexts 25[24] (1), 29[27] (1), 42[40] (1), 42[41] (2), 42[47] (1), 58[59] (3), 58[61] (1), 79[69] (1), 79[77] (1), 82[80] (1), 84[85] (1), 88[96/97] (3), 99[105] (1), 101[103] (3), 102[118] (2).
- A1(b) Fairly soft to fairly hard; fracture uneven, sometimes slightly hackly; structure finer than A1(a), generally close but sometimes slightly vesicular.
Inclusions: *Grog* – fairly frequent to very frequent, 0.5mm-1.5mm, rarely up to 4.0mm.
Sand – sparse to fairly frequent sub-rounded and sub-angular quartz, 0.2mm-0.5mm, sometimes with finer particles.
15 sherds and fragments from a maximum 9 vessels. Contexts 25[24] (1), 84[86] (11), 88[96/97] (1), 99[105] (1), [6] cleaning (1).
- A1(c) Fairly hard; fracture uneven; structure generally close, sometimes slightly vesicular.
Inclusions: *Grog* – sparse, 0.5mm-3.0mm.
Sand – sparse or fairly sparse sub-rounded and sub-angular quartz, 0.2mm-0.5mm, with some finer particles.
5 sherds and fragments from a maximum 3 vessels. Contexts 79[72] (1), 82[80] (1), 99[108] (3).
- A1(d) Fairly hard; fracture hackly, slightly flaky; structure laminar.
Inclusions: *Grog* – fairly frequent, unevenly distributed, 0.5mm – 2.5mm.
Sand – frequent sub-rounded and sub-angular quartz, unevenly distributed, 0.1mm-0.2mm.
1 small sherd. Context 42[40].
- A1(e) Fairly hard but friable; fracture uneven to hackly; structure fairly coarse and slightly contorted.
Inclusions: *Grog* – frequent, 1.0mm – 5.0mm.
Sand – sparse or very sparse sub-rounded and sub-angular quartz, 0.2mm-0.5mm.
2 small sherds.. Contexts 36[34], 82[80].
- A2(a) Generally soft or fairly soft and friable; fracture uneven to hackly; structure coarse and generally slightly 'blocky', but in one instance slightly laminar.
Inclusions: *Grog* – fairly sparse to frequent, coarse, 1.0mm-4.0mm, occasionally up to 10mm.
Flint – sparse to fairly sparse, unevenly distributed, 0.5mm-3.0mm.
Sand – sparse to frequent sub-rounded and sub-angular quartz, 0.2mm-0.5mm with some finer particles.
4 small sherds and fragments. Contexts 15[17] (1), 88[96/97] (1), 99[105] (1), 101[103] (1).
- A2(b) Soft to fairly hard; fracture rough or hackly; structure fairly close and generally fine.
Inclusions: *Grog* – fairly frequent to abundant and mostly finely crushed, 0.5mm-3.0mm.
Flint – very sparse to fairly frequent, generally calcined, unevenly distributed, 0.5mm-3.0mm.
Sand – sparse to fairly frequent sub-rounded and sub-angular quartz, unevenly distributed, 0.2mm-0.5mm.
3 sherds and fragments. Contexts 15[17] (1), 29[27] (1), 101[103] (1).
- A3 Fairly hard; fracture uneven to slightly hackly; structure moderately vesicular, sometimes slightly contorted.
Inclusions: *Grog* – fairly sparse to frequent, sometimes unevenly distributed, 0.2mm-3.0mm.
Shell (?) – sparse to fairly frequent plate-like and angular voids, some containing calcitic residue; ooliths (?) sometimes present.
Sand – sparse to frequent sub-angular and sub-rounded quartz, 0.2mm-0.5mm; finer particles present in varying quantity.
3 small sherds. Contexts 36[34] (1), 42[41] (1), 79[70] (1).
- A4 Fairly hard; fracture rough; structure close.
Inclusions: *Grog* – fairly sparse, 0.5mm-2.0mm.
Chalk – sparse, unevenly distributed, 1.0mm-1.5mm.
Sand – abundant sub-rounded and sub-angular quartz, 0.3mm -0.8mm.
1 small sherd. Context 99[107].

Group B: Fabrics containing calcite or evidence of leached shell (?) as principal inclusion.

- B1 Fairly hard; fracture hackly, structure laminar and slightly vesicular.
Inclusions: *Shell* (?) – frequent lenticular and plate-like voids aligned with the sherd walls, 0.2mm-2.0mm.
1 small sherd. Context 42[40].
- B2 Fairly soft; fracture rough; structure dense and fine.
Inclusions: *Calcite* – abundant and mostly very finely crushed, 0.2mm-3.0mm.
Sand – very frequent sub-rounded and sub-angular quartz, 0.1mm-0.3mm.
1 small sherd. Context 42[40].

Group C: Fabrics in which sand is the predominant inclusion.

- C1 Fairly hard; fracture rough to hackly; structure close.
Inclusions: *Sand* – abundant sub-rounded and sub-angular quartz, 0.1mm-0.3mm with some larger particles up to 0.8mm.
2 small sherds, probably from one vessel. Contexts 19[20], 84[87].
- C2 Fairly hard; fracture rough to hackly; structure close.
Inclusions: *Sand* – abundant sub-rounded and sub-angular quartz, 0.1mm-0.5mm with some larger particles 0.8mm-1.0mm.
Vegetable – frequent chopped grass (impressions and carbonised residue).
28 sherds from not more than 3 vessels (probably all from 1 vessel). Contexts 42[40] (1), 42[41] (5), 42[47] (2), 58[59] (15), 79[76] (4), 101[103] (1).

Group D: Fabrics containing crushed calcined flint as principal inclusion.

- D1 Hard, fracture hackly, structure close.
Inclusions: *Flint* – frequent, unevenly distributed and mainly coarsely crushed, 0.3mm-8.0mm.
Sand – frequent to very frequent sub-rounded and sub-angular quartz, 0.2mm-0.5mm
4 sherds, probably from 1 vessel. Contexts [43/44] clearance (1), 84[85] (3).
- D2 Hard; fracture hackly, structure close.
Inclusions: *Flint* – fairly frequent, fairly finely crushed, 0.5mm-2.0mm.
Milky quartz – sparse, angular fragments 0.5mm-2.0mm.
Sand – frequent sub-rounded and sub-angular quartz, 0.1mm-0.5mm.
1 sherd. Context 14[12].
- D3 Fairly hard; fracture hackly; structure fairly close.
Inclusions: *Flint* – fairly frequent to frequent, unevenly distributed, fairly finely crushed, 0.3mm-1.5mm.
Vegetable – frequent chopped grass (impressions and carbonised residue).
Sand – fairly frequent sub-rounded and sub-angular quartz, 0.1mm-0.5mm.
1 sherd. Context 84[87].

Note that in all these fabrics the principal inclusions are obviously deliberate additions to the clay, but sand, when present as a secondary inclusion, could have been a constituent of the raw clay, depending on its source, as could fossil shell.

Discussion

There is a surprising disparity amongst the small number of individually identifiable pots, but it is possible to isolate at least three groups, belonging to three different chronological periods.

1. Later Neolithic/earlier Bronze Age.
2. Middle/late Bronze Age.
3. Iron Age.

The fabrics of the Iron Age pottery are distinctive in texture and composition and the sherds show little or no weathering, in contrast to those of the earlier groups, which tend to be abraded on at least one surface. According to the same criteria of fabric, colour and surface appearance, almost all of the remaining sherds without other diagnostic features may be assigned a broadly later Neolithic or Bronze Age date, even though precise classification is impossible.

Neolithic

P1 is part of a large, straight-sided Grooved Ware jar of the Durrington Walls sub-style. Both the style of decoration and the technique, which is fairly uncommon in this series, have much closer parallels in pottery from the eponymous site in Wiltshire than locally (Longworth 1971, 63-70, Figs 39-46), but there is also a non-specific similarity to a technique of ornament seen on some late Beaker pottery found in domestic contexts, especially on the Fen edge or West Norfolk and Suffolk (Bamford 1982; Gibson 1982).

Sherds P2 and P3 are of very similar fabric to *P1* and the incised decoration on them is consistent with Grooved Ware, also.

Many of the sites in the region which have produced Grooved Ware are on the west side, roughly along the chalk escarpment (Healy 1980, 85-87; Cleal 1984, Fig. 9:4). They include not only the flint mines at Grimes Graves, some five miles north west of Thetford (Mercer 1981) but two other finds in Thetford itself, at Red Castle Furze (Site 5815), from which came sherds of a Durrington Walls style jar (illustrated Healy 1984, Fig. 5.10), and at Fison Way (Site 5853), where pre-Iron Age pottery from excavation includes sherds of what appears to be Grooved Ware of indeterminate type (Healy 1992, 148-154). The fabric of *P1-3* is not as coarse in texture as that of the greater part of Grooved Ware from Norfolk, but is not wholly untypical (Healy 1980, 92). The date of these sherds is most likely to be within the range 2700 – 2000 BC, according to the calibrated values at one sigma (Pearson *et al* 1986) of radiocarbon determinations from samples associated closely with Grooved Ware at Durrington Walls, Grimes Graves and other sites. The great majority of these cluster between 2100bc and 1800bc (Wainright & Longworth 1971, 265f.; Burleigh *et al.* 1972; Pryor 1978, 226; Mercer 1981, 23, 28). The points of resemblance between *P1* and some late Beaker domestic pottery might, if significant at all, indicate a date at the very end of this span, if not later still (Case 1977) but this is not a very safe inference.

The rim sherd P4 appears to be from an undecorated bowl of earlier Neolithic type, but the grogged fabric is very uncharacteristic of such pottery in East Anglia where it is normally flint-gritted or, occasionally, vesicular, and where the use of grog as a filler is associated very much with distinctive later Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age ceramic styles (Healy 1980, 67-70; 1988, 71; forthcoming). The anomaly might be accounted for if this sherd were contemporary with the later Neolithic pottery (*P1-3*) but, as evidence, it supports little weight. Available radiocarbon dates do, indeed, suggest that the earlier Neolithic pottery tradition continued until very late in the 3rd millennium bc (Calibrated mid – 3rd millenium BC) (Smith 1974, 32; Green 1976, 22), and the possibility of an even later survival has been argued on the basis of an apparent association of undecorated Neolithic bowl sherds and Grooved Ware, together with charcoal dated 1880±150bc (HAR-858) in a single feature at Stacey Bushes, Bucks (Green *ibid.* 13, 16f). It should perhaps be noted that east of the Fens, in the Nene Valley, for example, Neolithic bowl type pottery containing grog does sometimes occur in contexts dated prior to the mid-3rd millenium bc (Bamford 1985, 105, 108).

Indeterminate Neolithic/Bronze Age

The form and fabric of the basal angle sherds *P5* and *?6*, although not precisely diagnostic, are consistent with a general later Neolithic or Bronze Age date of origin, and the same is true of the rim sherds *P7* and *P8*. The latter are too small for positive identification, but *P7* could well be from a Beaker and *P8* might have similar affinities. Bowl forms with squared or slightly bevelled rims are certainly found sometimes in late Beaker assemblages in the region (e.g. Fifty Farm, Mildenhall, Suffolk: Gibson 1982, 401f). Amongst the remaining material, all the sherds in fabric group A closely resemble pottery from later Neolithic or early Bronze age sites in the region.

Bronze Age

Only one sherd (*P9*) can be assigned with any confidence to the later Bronze Age period. The form of this rim sherd and the type of decoration can be matched approximately amongst pottery associated with the later occupation at Grimes Graves (Longworth 1981, 44-59; Longworth *et al.* 1988) and from sites at

Hockwold-cum-Wilton (Healy, forthcoming) and, more particularly, Mildenhall Fen (Clark 1936). Small, relatively thin-walled vessels in close-textured fabric are not a large component of these and similar mid- to later Bronze Age pottery assemblages, in which coarse Biconical and Bucket Urns tend to predominate, but the published material from Mildenhall affords reasonably good parallels for P9 (Clark *ibid.* 40, Fig.5). The pottery from Mildenhall conforms generally to the Biconical Urn tradition of the region and also includes sherds of vessels resembling Collared Urns. All this suggests a probable date not later than the third quarter of the 2nd millennium bc, assuming occupation of that site was of one period. Such an assumption is, however, not entirely secure (Lawson 1980, 279). In the main, the chronology of later Bronze Age pottery types in the region is not precise within the compass of the second half of the 2nd millennium and early 1st millennium bc (Lawson 1984, 157) and almost the only firm data underpinning it are the many radiocarbon determinations associated with Bronze Age midden deposits at Grimes Graves. These range between c.1100 bc and 800 bc (Calibrated c.1400 BC – 900 BC) at one sigma (Lawson 1980, 279; Longworth *et al.* 1988, 31).

Iron Age

No detailed chronology yet exists for the Iron Age pottery of East Anglia (Lawson 1983, 37; Gregory 1992a, 158) and so it is impossible to place P10 – P13 very precisely in context within a possible range from the 5th to 2nd centuries BC. The jar P10 is a slack-profiled form typical of the ceramic tradition of the middle Iron Age (Harding 1974, 36) as exemplified in a pot from Lakenheath, Suffolk (Clarke 1940, Pl.VII). The finger-tip/finger-nail impressed decoration confined to the top of the rim is seen on pottery in eastern England from perhaps the beginning of the 4th century BC (Harding 1975), and bears only a generic resemblance to the decoration on final Bronze Age/early Iron Age pottery of the kind from West Harling, near Thetford (Clark & Fell 1953). It occurs sporadically on assorted vessels from various local sites, including the above mentioned jar from Lakenheath, sherds from Fison Way, Thetford (Gregory 1992a/58) and further afield in Norfolk, as at Witton (Lawson 1983, Fig.38), and is common locally in the east Midlands, for example at Twywell, Northamptonshire (Harding 1975).

The faint vertical striation visible on the external surface of P10, below the shoulder, is probably the result of wiping the rough surface, not deliberate scoring.

The two small rim sherds P11 and P12 are alike in form and fabric and almost certainly from the same pot. The rim type is acceptable in a middle Iron Age context, but this is a much finer ware than P10, and the faint, regular surface striation suggests that the vessel may have been finished on a turn-table (cf Denham 1985, 118).

The sandy fabrics of P10 – P12 can be matched in material from several Iron Age sites in Norfolk, but the inclusion of chopped grass as a filler in the fabric of P10 seems to be unusual in the region. Grass or chaff-tempered sherds do, however, occur amongst apparently Iron Age pottery from Barnham Cross Common, Thetford (N.C.M. 179.955), Feltwell (Site No.5188; N.C.M. 375.961), Aylsham (Site No.7586; N.C.M. 193.950 & 219.956) and Hainford (Site 22834; N.C.M. 216.947) and may have gone unnoticed elsewhere. At Fison Way, sandy fabrics tended to be less frequent in earlier than in later contexts in the Iron Age sequence on the site (Gregory 1992a, 158), but this is of doubtful relevance to the material under discussion, since the pottery forms are not directly comparable.

Probably Iron Age

The form of P13 is indeterminate, but the sherds are classed as probably Iron Age on the basis of fabric and finish. Similar flint-gritted fabrics are common in early and middle Iron Age pottery of the region, including that from local sites such as Snarehill, Brettenham (Site 5955; N.C.M. 195.959). Much of the final Bronze Age/early Iron Age pottery from West Harling is also flint-gritted, but the surface appearance is different; and flint-gritted pottery of the later Bronze Age, including Deverel-Rimbury type urns from Fison Way (Healy 1992, 150) is distinctly coarser.

All the sherds in fabric group D appear to be of Iron Age type, in fact, but one sherd (P14) is different from the rest in fabric and finish and much closer in both respects to some of the pottery from Fison Way.

Catalogue of illustrated and featured pottery

Neolithic

- P1 *Grooved ware*: 7 joining body sherds from a large, straight-sided vessel. Decoration vertical cordon with finger tip/finger nail impressions, bordering a panel of triangles defined and filled by finger nail impression. Estimated diameter c.280mm; thickness 9-10mm. Fabric A1(b) with a few irregular vacuoles. Colour light brown to reddish-brown exterior, light brown interior, dark grey core. Surfaces – exterior weathered, slightly crazed; interior abraded and pitted.
Context 84[86] (Fig.6)
- P2 *Grooved ware* (?): sherd with incised linear decoration. Thickness 10mm. Fabric A1(b). Colour light brown exterior, dark grey interior and core. Surfaces slightly abraded.
Context 84[86]
- P3 *Grooved ware* (?): sherd with incised linear decoration. Thickness 9mm. Fabric A1(b). Colour light brown exterior, dark grey interior and core. Surfaces abraded and pitted.
Context 84[86]
- P4 Plain bowl(?): rim sherd. Thickness 9mm-12mm. Fabric A1(b). Colour light brown exterior, black interior and core. Surfaces weathered.
Context [6] cleaning. (Fig.6).

Indeterminate later Neolithic/earlier Bronze age

- P5 Small basal angle sherd. Angle c.60°. Thickness 9mm – 10mm. Fabric A1(a). Colour reddish-brown exterior, dark grey interior. Surfaces weathered, traces of horizontal wiping.
Context 79[77] (Fig.6).
- P6 Very small basal angle sherd. Angle c.55°. Thickness 7mm. Fabric A3. Colour dark grey throughout. Surfaces – exterior heavily abraded, interior weathered.
Context 79[70]
- P7 Beaker(?): very small, square-profiled rim sherd with possible traces of impressed decoration on external surface. Thickness 10mm. Fabric A1(c). Colour light brown surfaces, greyish-brown interior. Surfaces – exterior smooth, weathered, interior abraded.
Context 79[72] (Fig.6).
- P8 Rim sherd of thick-walled bowl; rim with slight internal bevel and traces of possible impressed decoration. Thickness – rim 12mm; body 10mm. Fabric A2(a). Colour brown exterior, brown to dark grey interior and core. Surfaces rough with protruding grit, slightly pitted, weathered.
Context 99[105] (Fig. 6).

Middle/late Bronze Age

- P9 Rim sherd. Decoration – finger-tip/finger-nail impressions on slightly everted rim and on oblique cordon below rim. Estimated diameter c.150mm; thickness – rim 6mm; neck 9mm. Fabric A2(b). Colour light reddish-brown exterior, light greyish-brown interior and core.
Context 101[103] (Fig.6).

Iron Age

- P10 Sherds of jar with rounded shoulder, short upright neck, and finger-tip/finger-nail impressions on rim. Estimated diameter – rim 150mm-155mm, shoulder 160mm-165mm; thickness 7mm-8mm. Fabric C2
Colour – exterior neck, dark grey to greyish-brown, exterior body brown, interior and core black. Surface – exterior neck smooth but uneven with traces of black encrustation, exterior body rough, with faint vertical striation; interior sandy, with chopped grass impressions..
Contexts 42[41], [47]; 58[59]; 79[76] (sherds from 42 and 79 join others from 58). Probably also 42[40]; 101[103] (Fig.6).
- P11 Small rim sherd, asymmetrically T-shaped above concave neck profile. Thickness – rim 12mm, neck 5mm. Fabric C1. Colour brown exterior with traces of black encrustation, light reddish-brown interior, dark grey core. Surfaces sandy; faint, regular, horizontal striation suggests finish on turn-table.
Context 84[87] (Fig.6).

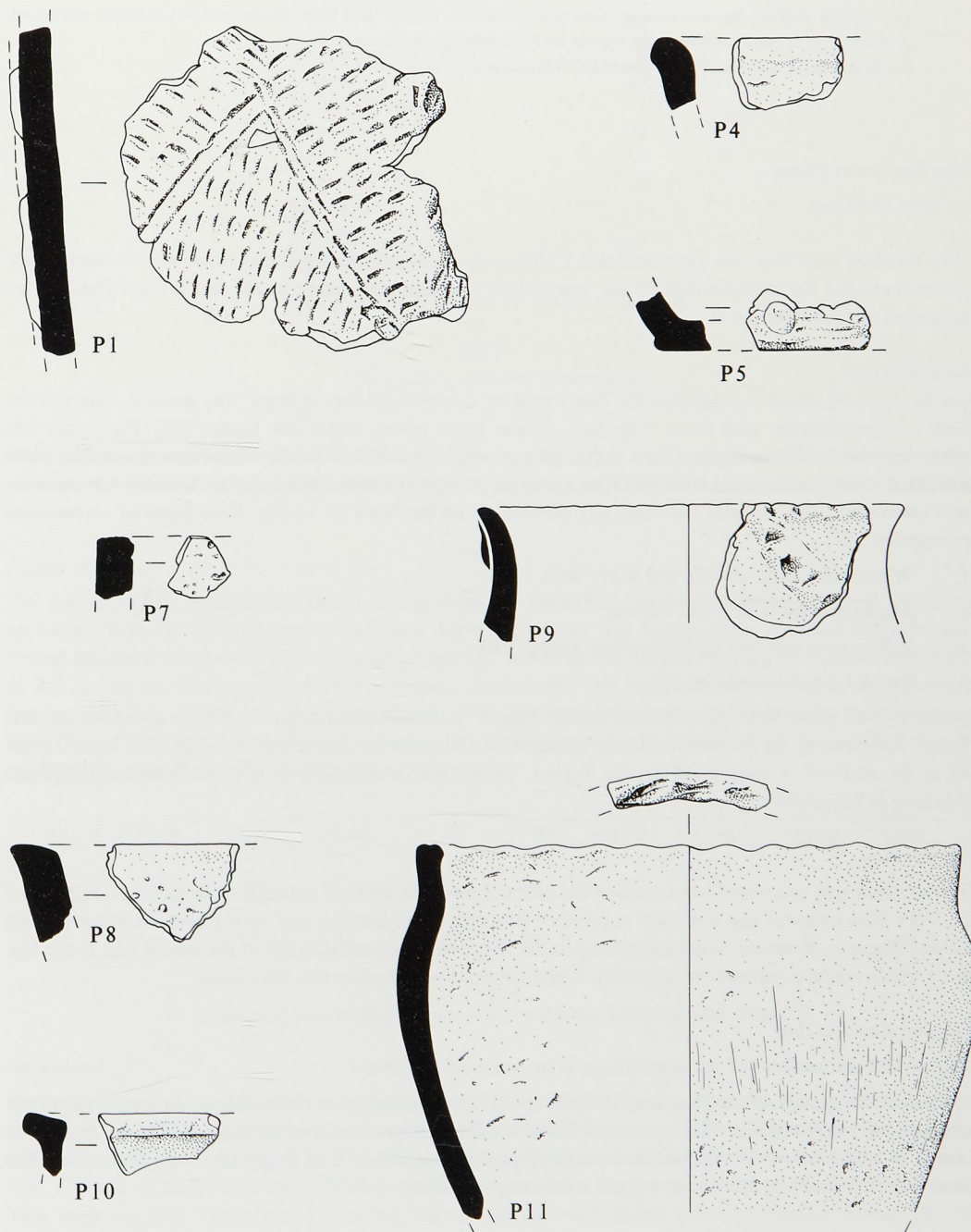


Fig.6
Prehistoric pottery.
Scale 1:2

- P12 Very small rim sherd. Form and fabric as P11 – probably from same vessel.
Context 19[20] Not illustrated.
- P13 3 joining, straight-profiled sherds from a large vessel. Estimated diameter c.440mm; thickness 13mm. Fabric D1. Colour reddish-brown exterior, dark greyish-brown interior and core. Surfaces fairly smooth with some protruding grit; marks of finger-tip wiping on both exterior and interior.
Context 84[85]. See also P61, Context [43/44] clearance.

The flint assemblage

by Julie Gardiner

Two hundred and sixty four pieces of struck flint were recovered during the excavation. No sieving was undertaken and the composition of the assemblage suggests that many small and broken flakes were missed in the very flinty soil.

Raw material

On the basis of visual examination the flint could be divided into four groups. The general colour of the flint was grey/brown, with some very dark, almost black pieces and a few lighter grey. Patination was rarely noticeable, occurring as a light milky grey on only a handful of flakes, with one water-rolled blade patinated a rusty orange-red. This piece seems to be much older than anything else from the site and may be Palaeolithic. The material was basically divided up on the basis of cortex. Four types of cortex were recognised:

- 1 White-buff, quite smooth and fairly thick
- 2 Black, extremely thin and smooth
- 3 White, very thin and smooth with a 'soapy' feel
- 4 Red-brown, thin and smooth

Types 2–4 all seem to be gravel flints whilst Type 1 is clearly chalk-derived. All are available on site. Type 1 flint was by far the most common and most of the cores are also in this material. The overall quality of the material is quite good but the Type 1 'chalk' flint is available in large nodules and deliberate selection is suggested.

Distribution

Worked flint was recovered from most of the pits and from the areas of machine clearance (see Figs 1 and 2). Very little material was recorded in primary silts within the features and most comes from the highest layers. There is, however, some patterning in the distribution of implements to the extent that those features which contain implements generally contain several whilst other pits have none.

Composition and date

The overall composition of the assemblage is summarised in Table 1.

Though the quality of the flint itself is quite good, the assemblage is characterised by a generally poor standard of workmanship. The cores and flakes exhibit wide unprepared striking platforms, frequently obtuse in angle and often with incipient cones of percussion, and 21% of flakes have hinge fractures. It is clear that flintworking at this site was not a delicate operation.

Cores

The cores range in weight from 20g to 215g. All are in Type 1 apart from a single example. This is a carefully worked small, narrow-blade core of Mesolithic type in Type 3. Most cores are roughly worked, with one or several platforms, and several have been subsequently used as hammers. Two possible core-rejuvenation flakes were found. One came from a very large core which was producing large, regular,

Flakes/blades	180
Broken flakes	20
Cores and fragments	15
Core rejuvenation flakes	2
	217
Edge retouched/utilised	9
Scraper	29
Hollow scraper	1
Fabricator	2
Knife	2
Borer	2
Microlith	1
Gun flint	1
	264

Plus 1 flint 'bead', 1 unworked lump of quartzite

Table 1.
Composition of the flint assemblage

blade-like flakes out of keeping with the rest of the assemblage. It may be residual. The cores generally seem to have been abandoned basically because the flint knapper(s) succeeded in making a horrible mess of them.

Flakes

The 180 unbroken, unretouched flakes and all unbroken retouched flakes and implements were measured for length, breadth and thickness (Catalogue). Table 2 gives the size distributions. A scatter diagram confirmed the predominance of medium to large, broad flakes with the majority having a breadth/length ratio of 4:5 or greater. The implements do not stand out amongst this distribution. The flakes are generally thick and crudely struck. However, the majority of flakes carry little cortex, reflecting the comparatively large size of the Type 1 flint which dominates the assemblage and which allowed for the removal of cortex from the cores before flakes were taken for use.

	0-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	71-80	80+mm	Total
<i>Length</i>										
0		26	63	56	43	23	9	4	1	225
<i>Breadth</i>										
3		55	60	60	34	12	1	0	0	225

Table 2
Length and breadth distributions of 225 unbroken flakes and implements

Implements

A narrow range of implements is recorded. Overall 46 retouched pieces were recovered (excluding the gun flint), or 17.4% of the total. This is a high proportion, though it may be exaggerated. The majority (65%) are scrapers, including eight end-scrapers and one hollow example. All but six are made of Type 1 flint. Several of these have very abraded working edges and a fragmentary example from Pit 79 has its edge worn smooth. Since there is generally little sign of much recent post-depositional damage to the flintwork we may conclude that these implements saw heavy use. One example, from the upper silts of Pit 25, is a very fine horseshoe scraper, and may be a residual Neolithic piece, but the remainder are not very carefully made.

A broken obliquely retouched microlith was recovered from T4, the area of machine stripping furthest from the pits. This area also produced the Mesolithic blade core.

The other implements in the assemblage do not justify individual comment, they are all roughly made and those that retain cortex are in Type 1 flint.

The stone 'bead'

Pit 15 produced four stone artefacts – a scraper and a small core from its uppermost fill and a knife and a stone 'bead' from context 17, below. The 'bead' is made of a smooth, buff coloured stone, which may be a wholly cortical flint pebble. It is cylindrical with maximum dimensions of 26 x 30 x 28mm. A hole pierces the stone from either direction, but does not connect up. These holes are conical with outer diameters of 14mm and 15mm narrowing to 5 and 6mm respectively. There is no evidence of working or drilling and the piece seems to be entirely natural. Though rare, it is not unknown for naturally perforated flint nodules to occur, or to be recovered from archaeological sites. An example from an extensive Neolithic flint scatter at Down Grange Farm, Hampshire (Gardiner 1988, fig 3.13, no 2) was retouched to form a crude pebble hammer. Its presence in this pit, however, which contained only implements and a core, may not be accidental. It is possible that these artefacts represent a disturbed deliberate deposit which may have included the 'bead' as some kind of talisman or lucky stone.

Date

It is noticeable that flints are generally absent from the basal fill of features but the majority of finds recovered in areas stripped by machine do seem to concentrate in two areas – close to the pits and in the area furthest from them. This latter area produced two Mesolithic pieces, four scrapers and a retouched piece, as well as flakes and may indicate a separate, possibly much earlier, area of activity. Otherwise it seems likely that flint artefacts recovered from the topsoil were originally deposited in them. For many sites this would be a rather dangerous statement to make but at Thetford the soft nature of the soil and pit-fills means that post-depositional movement of flint artefacts is likely to have occurred. The distribution of pottery of different dates within the pits supports this suggestion.

It is always possible that some Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age material is incorporated here but the overall composition and characteristics of the assemblage point to a later date. The presence of a restricted range of tool forms (four out of seventeen Tool Groups proposed by Gardiner (1987)), comprising scrapers, borers, fabricators, and knives; comparatively large proportion of retouched to unretouched pieces; poor standard of workmanship; and size and shape of flakes all point to a date in the 2nd millennium. Late Bronze Age flintwork is not well-attested in the literature but a number of assemblages representing this slovenly and rather decadent 'industry' are published. At Micheldever Wood, Hampshire (Fasham & Ross 1978), Hemp Knoll Barrow, Avebury, Wiltshire (Robertson-MacKay 1980, 152-9), Roxton (Woodward 1978; Gardiner 1985), and Bowthorpe, Norwich (Lawson 1986, 33, 45), 2nd millennium flintwork was recovered during the excavation of barrows. At Fengate, Newark Road subsite, Cambridgeshire (Pryor 1980), the Great Ouse valley in Bedfordshire (Woodward 1978) and Spong Hill, North Elmham, Norfolk (Healy 1988), later Bronze Age material was recovered during the excavation of areas of Bronze Age settlement landscapes, and an Anglo-Saxon cemetery respectively. Closer to Thetford, Saville (1981, table xxviii) records flintwork of similar characteristics from early 2nd millennium and late 2nd/early 1st millennia contexts at Grime's Graves, Weeting-with-Broomhill. The present author has recently summarised evidence for later Bronze Age surface scatters in central southern England (Gardiner 1988, 480-85) but there is still a lack of data, particularly associated with features, with which to compare the Thetford assemblage.

It should also be noted that there may be some evidence from East Anglia of flintworking in the Iron Age. Martingell (1988) discusses lithic material from various Iron Age sites in Essex with reference to material from the Iron Age site of Micklemoor Hill, West Harling, Norfolk, described by Clark & Fell (1953). She concludes that it may be presumptuous to assume that the flintwork recovered from Iron Age features along the line of the A13/Grays Bypass is necessarily residual. Since the Thetford pits have also produced Iron Age pottery, we should not overlook the possibility that the flintwork is even later than suggested above.

Conclusions

The London Road site was situated in a strategic position overlooking the Little Ouse river valley, above an important crossing point. The soil is light and well-drained and provided an attractive location for settlement in all periods. The range of prehistoric finds recovered from the site clearance and from the backfill of features provides evidence for sporadic activity and occupation in the immediate area over a very long period. Excavations at Thetford Castle have also recovered evidence for occupation from the Neolithic to the Iron Age (Davies 1992, 24-26; Gregory 1992b, 13-15).

Lawson has drawn attention to the elusive nature of Late Bronze Age settlement in Norfolk (Lawson, 1980). The pottery is scarce within the county but earlier Bronze Age field monuments and metalwork imply widespread activity at that time, particularly in the west of the county in the area bordering the fenland. The London Road flint assemblage suggests that there was settlement close by, although any associated structures once again await discovery. A lack of ceramic evidence in relation to flintwork is not unusual within a Late Bronze Age context.

The main group of excavated features can be dated within the range from the 5th to the 2nd centuries BC. Ceramic evidence does not allow greater precision at present. This site complements a steadily expanding awareness of the Iron Age in Thetford. Excavations by R.R. Clarke in 1962 established the presence of an enclosure on the site of Thetford Castle (site 5747) and that the defences to the north of Castle Hill had been aligned and remodelled over bivallate Iron Age earthworks (Gregory 1992b). Excavations by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit in 1985-6 provided further evidence for occupation within that site and showed that the Iron Age enclosure made use of the meander loop in the River Thet for its defences on the south and east sides (Davies 1992, 17-27). That impressive defended enclosure was a site of strategic importance within the region. The 1964-6 excavations at Brandon Road (site 5756) revealed round houses, although these have not been dated (Dallas, 1993). A settlement has been located on the banks of the Little Ouse river, some 3.5km to the south-east of Thetford (site 5955). A possible Iron Age sherd was recovered from Red Castle and other sporadic finds of Iron Age material have also been reported from across Thetford since the 18th century. More recently, the large multivallate rectangular enclosure at Fison Way (site 5853), to the north-west of the town, was excavated by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit (Gregory 1992a) with which Pit 14 at London Road appears to have been contemporary. It is hoped that this increasing evidence will allow some refinement of the ceramic chronology of the area and so enable a fuller understanding of this under-studied period in Norfolk.

There was no evidence for subsequent use of the London Road site, with just a few isolated sherds representing the medieval period amongst post-medieval and modern casual finds and a possible Roman bracelet. It is surprising that no evidence for Saxon occupation was discovered, just 50m outside the projected line of the town defences and 400m to the south east of Red Castle. The complete absence of evidence for a cemetery or housing of that period suggests that the present line of the London Road does not follow a Late Saxon or Medieval precursor and that such a road lay some distance away, probably further to the south-east.

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