

# Excavations at the Old Quarry, Ashtead, Surrey (TQ 184 575) 1974

by JAMES F BARFOOT

## Summary

The excavation of two pits surviving on a terrace within the Old Quarry at Ashtead yielded struck flints, prehistoric pottery, animal bone and clay tobacco pipe stems. The evidence discovered does not support the contention that the Ashtead pits or shafts are 'ritual', the more probable use being that of chalk wells.

## Introduction

In 1933 A W G Lowther published details of two pits found during gardening operations at his house, The Old Quarry, Ashtead, Surrey (Lowther 1933, 93-7). The pits were discovered on a quarry edge terrace some fifteen feet below the present ground level. A sketch plan showed one pit to survive only as a segment on the edge of the terrace: the position of the second pit was not shown.

Captain Lowther wrote 'Most of this pit had, in the past, been removed by quarrying; the upper fifteen feet (assuming the ground level originally carried straight across the quarry) had been cut into and removed some time before the 17th century, while a lower and more recent working had cut away about two thirds of what remained, leaving only the small segment shown' (Lowther 1933). This pit therefore had an original depth of about nineteen feet, while the second pit is described as being nine feet deep. Pottery from the pit infill included a rim, and base sherds of forms similar to those of Park Brow and All Cannings Cross and so was assigned to the LBA - EIA. The report concluded with the suggestion that the pits or shafts might have been flint mines. The pits were subsequently listed by A Ross (1968, 259), who suggested that they were of ritual origin and members of a group of such shafts or pits.

It was in an attempt to elucidate further the origins of the pits or shafts that the excavation of 1974 was undertaken, prior to probable redevelopment.

## The Excavation

The area was trenched as shown in the general plan (fig 1).

- Trench 1 a-d On terrace opposite and below house where it was believed Lowther's original pits were found.
- Trench 2 On quarry edge above terrace to determine true quarry face.
- Trench 3 At western end of garden. Dug to a depth of 43 cm, four layers encountered: 1, Topsoil; 2, Light brown soil at northern end of trench; 3, Sandy clay; 4, Sandy clay with chalk. Finds included fire-cracked flint and a cluster of nails.
- Trench 4 6 × 1 m, at right angles to Trench 3. No finds.
- Trench 5 Originally 6 × 1 m, set north-south, later enlarged to 4 m square at northern end. This trench was laid out on a well-established lawn. Six layers: 1, Humus 0-30 cm; 2, Light brown sandy loam 30-60 cm; 3, Dark brown sandy feature in middle of E

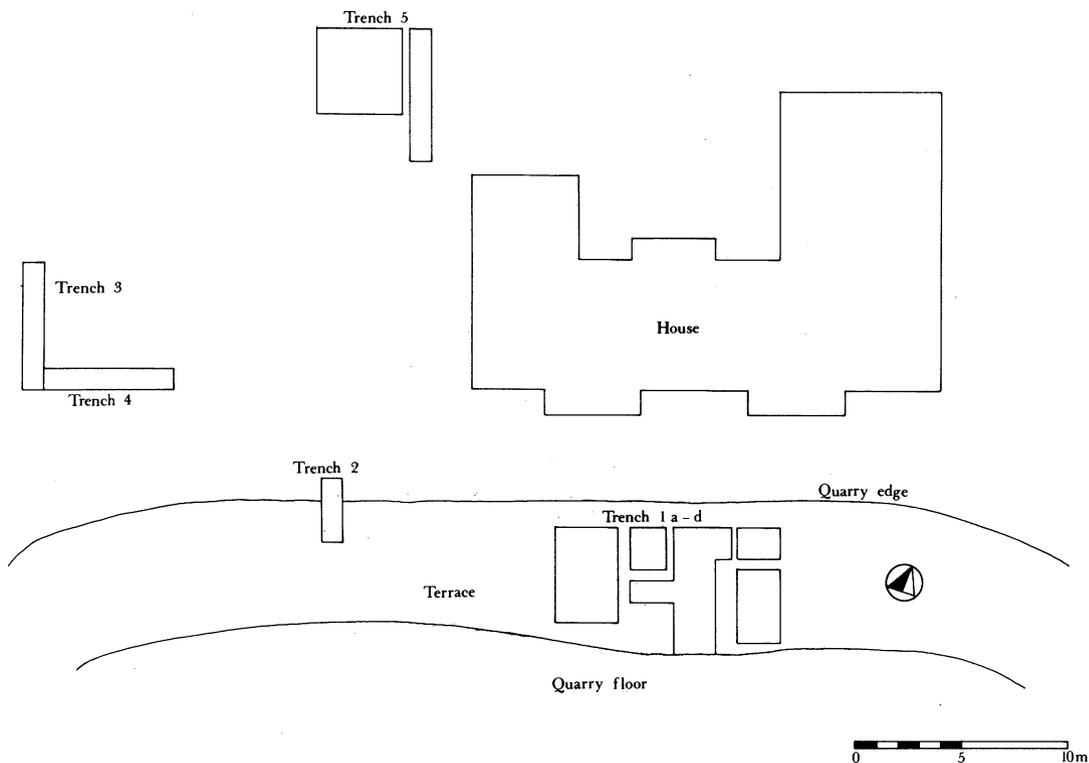


Fig 1. The Old Quarry, Ashtead, general plan of the site, 1974

face, 45–60 cm, V-shaped and cutting into layer 4; 4, Sandy clay with chalk; 5, Orange brown clay; 6, Dark grey lens 46 – 60 cm. Pottery of several periods was found.

The principal effort of the excavation was in Trench 1 and its extensions along the terrace. Trenches 1, 1c and 1d exposed a pit, Pit 1, with an average depth of 1 m (figs 2, 3). It was irregular with at least one extension or short gallery, on the floor of which was found a neat heap of flint nodules. In the pit-fill were found two pieces of struck flint and several fire-cracked flints, while on the floor were two clay tobacco pipe stems. The original depth of the pit/shaft would have been about 6 m (approx 19 feet) and so similar to that published by Lowther.

Pit 2, Trenches, 1, 1a and 1b exposed a second pit with a base diameter of some 6 m (figs 2, 3). Like Pit 1 it survived to an average depth of 1 m so it too was originally 6 m (approx 19 feet) deep. The floor, like that of Pit 1, was smooth and reasonably level.

Fig 3, Trench 1 Section a – b records what may be seen as the remains of a debris cone – created by the backfilling of the redundant shaft and indicating that the shaft was narrower than the pit bottom. The majority of the small finds from the two pits, including all the pottery, came from the layers comprising this debris cone. Fire-cracked flint was abundant throughout all layers.

### The Finds

A catalogue of all small finds, together with fig 5, small finds location plan, is on microfiche.

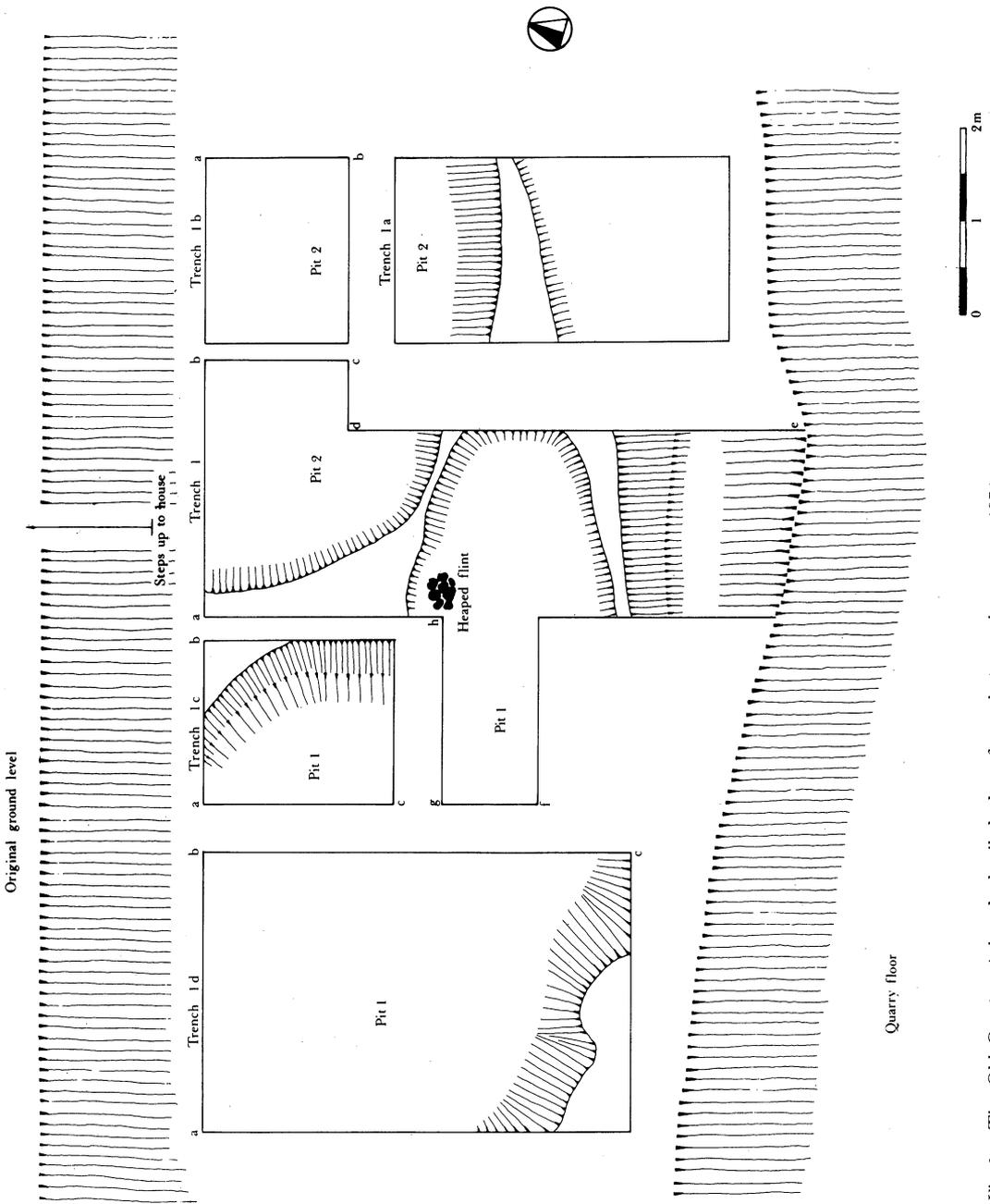


Fig. 2. The Old Quarry, Ashstead, detailed plan of trench 1, on the terrace, 1974

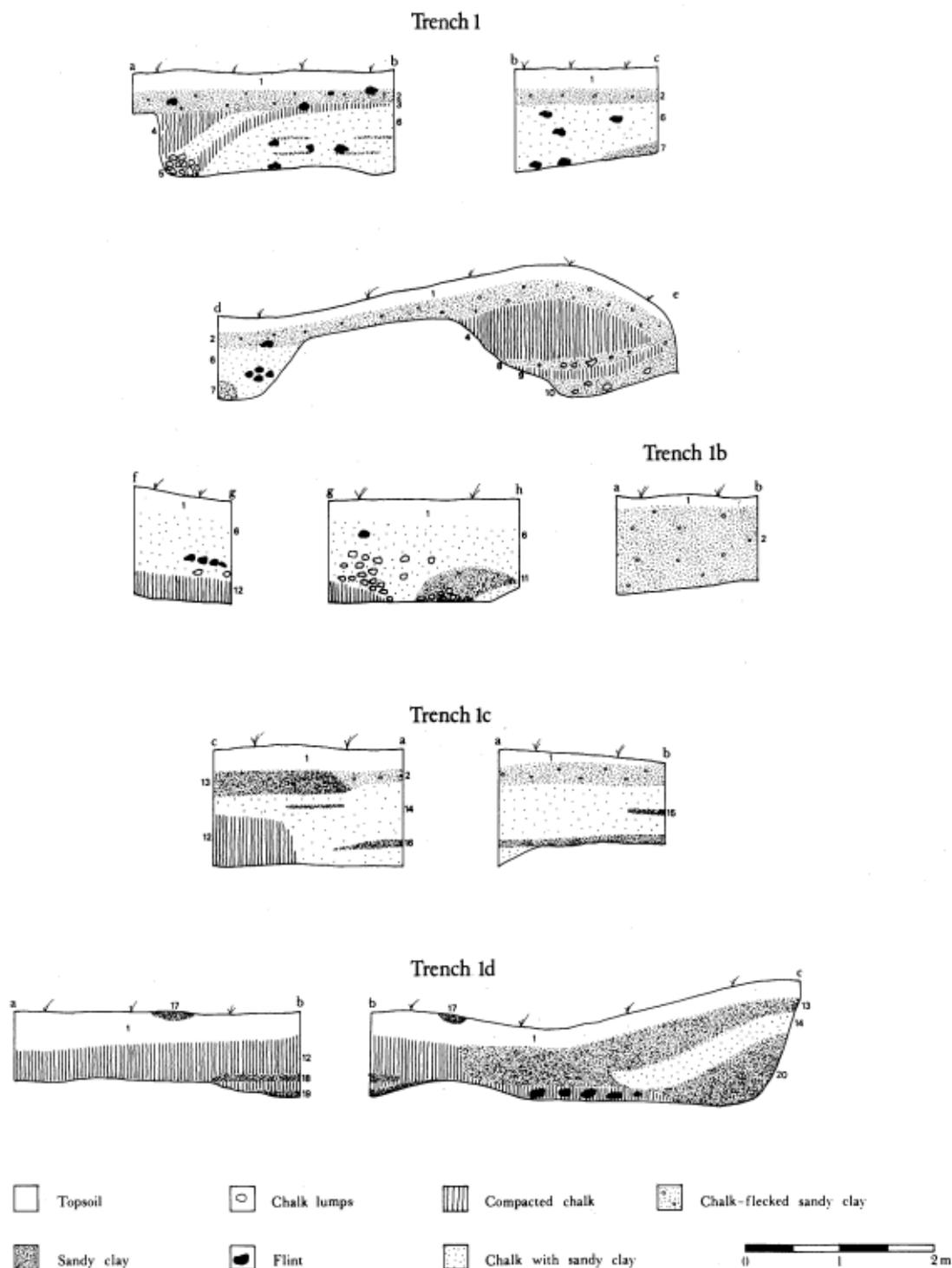


Fig. 3. The Old Quarry, Ashted, sections of trench 1, 1974

*Flintwork (fig 4)*

Fifteen pieces of struck flint were found, thirteen from Pit 1, the remainder from Pit 2. The flints are white, grey, black and mottled brown, with one example patinated blue-white. This colour variation shows several sources for the flint including river gravel. Of the fifteen pieces four may be seen as implements:- SF1, 11, 13 and 18, with the remainder waste.

SF1 Edge trimmed flake. Coarse blue grey flint. Proximal end snapped in antiquity. Edge trimming probably use damage.

SF11 Bladelet. Mottled grey flint with light serration or use damage. Probably Mesolithic.

SF13 Utilized flake. Dark grey mottled flint with creamy cortex. Crushing of dorsal face at bulbar end.

SF18 Squat edge trimmed flake. Light grey flint with dark grey inclusions. Partial hinge fracture at distal end. Some iron staining on dorsal face.

*Clay tobacco pipe stems*

Two pipe stem fragments from the floor of Pit 1.

SF43 Length 79 mm. Diameter 7 mm. Bore diameter 6/64"

SF44 Length 98 mm. Diameter 8 mm. Bore diameter 6/64"

SF43 possess a slight curvature. SF44 is straight but shows heat discolouration.

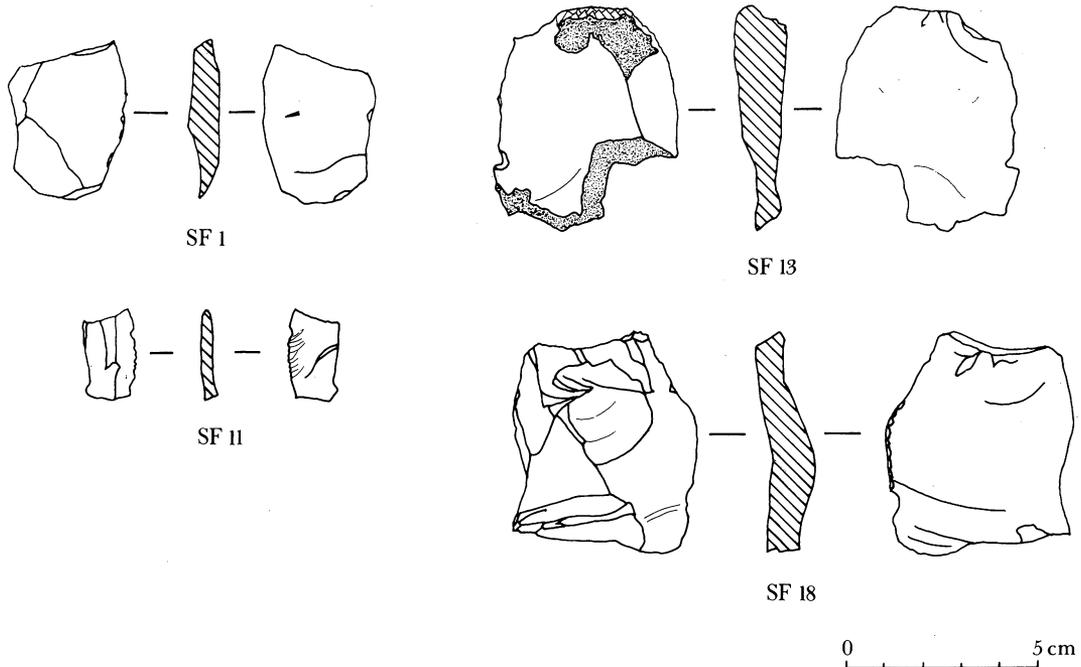


Fig. 4. The Old Quarry, Ashted, flintwork, 1974

*Pottery*

Trench 1. All the pottery recovered was very abraded. The sherds are small, ranging from 12 × 9 mm to 24 × 25 mm, and, with the exception of a possible rimsherd, featureless. They are not therefore illustrated. The small finds location plan, fig 5 (microfiche) shows that this pottery was confined to the fill of Pit 2.

SF5 Layer 6. Abraded ? rimsherd with medium calcined flint temper, probably prehistoric.

SF6 Layer 6. Abraded sherd with sparse to medium calcined flint temper, probably prehistoric.

SF7 Layer 6, unidentifiable.

SF32 Layer 6. Abraded sherd with medium flint temper, probably prehistoric.

## Trench 1b.

SF29 Layer 2. Abraded sherd with sparse to medium calcined flint temper, probably prehistoric.

## Trench 5. (Not included in fig 4)

These sherds are also abraded. Excepting SF46, they were found at a depth of 60 cm beneath a well established lawn, perhaps having been redeposited during gardening operations.

SF46 Unstratified. Abraded sherd, grey fabric with buff surfaces and medium sand temper. Medieval, probably North Surrey fabric.

SF47 Layer 2. Abraded sherd with medium calcined flint temper, probably prehistoric.

SF48 Layer 2. Abraded sherd belonging to the rim of 13th/14th century baluster jug. White sandy fabric, probably of Surrey origin, but not from a known kiln site.

SF49 Layer 2. Abraded sherd from base of small possibly Roman flagon of buff fabric. ? Late 1st/early 2nd century AD.

*Animal bone*

SF21 From the fill of Pit. 2. *Ovis* sp (Sheep).

**Discussion**

It is evident from their dimensions that the pits described by Lowther were not those found during the 1974 excavation, so that at least four pits existed on the terrace. The very abraded pottery found in Pit 2 was in that condition when deposited and its deposition was presumably therefore unintentional. In his report Lowther says that his first indications of early settlement in the area were 'surface finds of fire-cracked flint and coarse gritted ware found in flat plough-land adjoining the quarry', and this seems the most likely source for the pottery in Pit 2.

The pipe stems from the floor of Pit 1 pose a problem. Lowther specifically states that the terrace was created sometime before the 17th century and it must be assumed that the pits had been filled by then; but the pipe stems are obviously later than 1600 and by stem bore measurements most likely date to c 1680–1710 (Walker 1967).

A band of flint nodules was visible in the quarry face opposite the terrace. Measurements made showed that the terrace pits would have been deep enough to reach this flint, a fact which may have prompted the original suggestion that the pits were flint mines. When compared with more convincing examples elsewhere (see Ross 1968 for full discussion of the characteristics of ritual

shafts), it would seem that there is no reason to describe the Ashtead pits as 'ritual', and if not flint mines they might be better seen as chalk wells or draw pits. The application of chalk dug from such pits to poor or impoverished soils was a common practice in the counties of Hampshire, Berkshire, Kent and Surrey. The preference was for chalk dug from a depth, the so called 'fatter' chalk, which was more easily reduced by autumn rains and winter frosts. The pits or wells were sunk with shafts of six feet or more in diameter, but seldom exceeded 25 feet in depth. At Ashtead the situation would appear to be an ideal one with one end of the parish on chalk and the other on London Clay. The practice of digging chalk wells or draw pits continued until about the close of the 18th century (Marshall 1798, 409; Malcolm 1805).

It was not possible to continue the excavation of Pit 1 or to investigate further the position of Lowther's original pits as permission to excavate was quite suddenly withdrawn. The site subsequently remained undeveloped for several years.

#### NOTE by A J Clark

Prior to the excavation, a magnetic scan of all available areas of the Old Quarry garden was carried out, using a fluxgate gradiometer. As is normal in such situations, there was considerable interference from modern iron, although the lawn was fairly free of this. However, no magnetic anomalies indicative of features associated with ancient occupation were detected beneath the lawn or in other interference-free areas. This lack of occupation evidence accords with the author's interpretation of the shafts.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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