

## Analytical survey and excavation of earthworks in Albury Bottom, Chobham Common

ISABEL ELLIS and JUDIE ENGLISH

*Analytical survey of the earthwork on Chobham Common known as the Bee Garden revealed a banked, trapezoidal enclosure, c 100m across, with an external ditch and, for most of the circuit, a slight external bank. A possible entrance was located at the north-west corner. An annexe at the southern end contained slight scarps that may represent the position of internal features. Excavation suggested a 'dig and dump' construction of the main enclosure bank, but lack of organic survival in the palaeosol beneath the inner bank militated against palynological analysis or radiocarbon dating. On comparing the morphology of the site with other examples, and considering the place-name evidence, a prehistoric date is thought more likely than its identification as a bee garden although re-use either as a medieval sheepcote or a bee garden by tenants of Chertsey Abbey is not ruled out.*

### Background

On 19 April 2007 a major fire damaged vegetation over c 40ha of heathland on Chobham Common, including the southern portion of the enclosure known as the Bee Garden (SU 9742 6430). Since the earthworks were clearly exposed, and a detailed survey had been recommended (Currie 2002), it was decided to undertake an analytical survey of the Scheduled Monument. Fire further exposed the earthworks at the north-west corner of the enclosure and this area was re-surveyed to provide further evidence of a possible original entrance. During 2013 a section was excavated across the bank of the enclosure in an attempt to study both the nature of the earthworks and of any palaeosol beneath the bank.

### Location, geology, topography, vegetation, present land use and statutory designations

The Bee Garden is located on Chobham Common on rising ground on the western side of a valley known as Albury Bottom, at a height of 45m OD (fig 1). To the immediate west the site is overlooked by Chobham Ridge, which attains a high point of c 72m OD at Staple Hill. At 574ha this common is one of the small remaining areas of what was once an expanse of lowland heath covering much of north-west Surrey and parts of the adjoining counties of Hampshire and Berkshire. Here sands of the Bagshot Formation, Bracklesham Beds and Barton Beds were deposited in a shallow marine or estuarine environment and now overlie London Clay (Ellison & Zalasiewicz 1996, 105 *et seq*). In Albury Bottom the predominant deposits are those of the Windlesham Formation, one of the Bracklesham Group, but small areas of peat and undifferentiated river terrace deposits also exist (British Geological Survey 1:50,000 series Sheet 269). The ridge to the west, Staple Hill, is capped by Camberley Sand Formation, also part of the Bracklesham Group; the ground falls away gently to the east and south.

The majority of the common is covered with the usual heathland vegetation of heathers, gorse and, where not controlled, birch, but there are small areas of lowland bog where the purple moor grass dominates together with small clumps of rush. The presence of impermeable clays underlying the sands in the area of the Bee Garden is indicated by the standing water found in some of the ditches outside, and ponds inside, the monument. The common is presently managed by Surrey Wildlife Trust and is a public open space used by walkers and riders.

Chobham Common is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, a Special Protection Area under the EU Birds Directive and a National Nature Reserve, while the Bee Garden is a Scheduled Monument (no 250949).

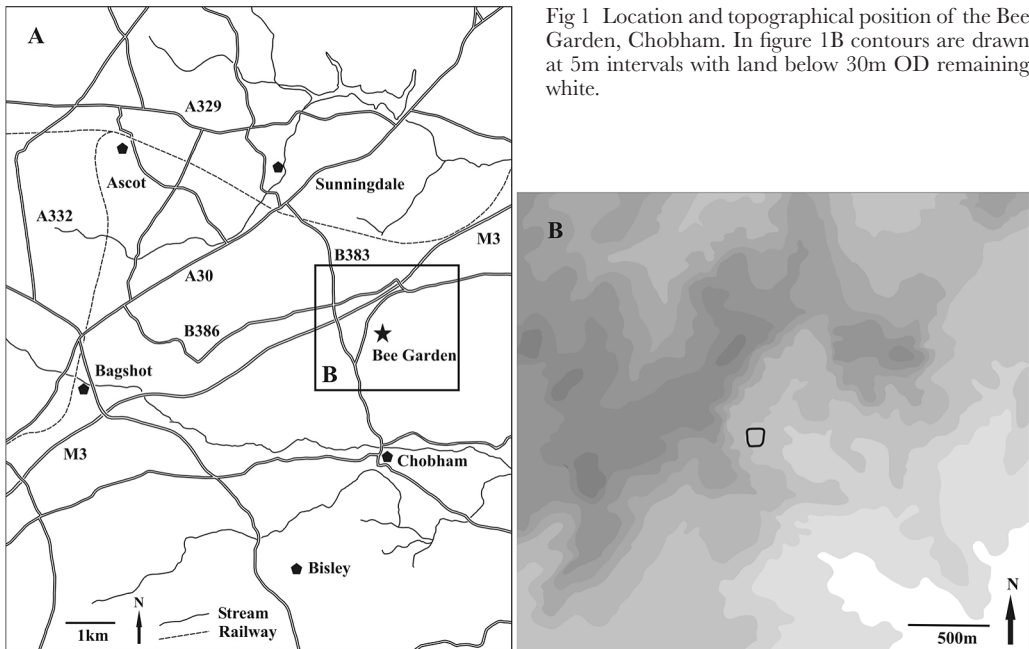


Fig 1 Location and topographical position of the Bee Garden, Chobham. In figure 1B contours are drawn at 5m intervals with land below 30m OD remaining white.

## Historical and archaeological background

Heathland is considered to be an anthropogenic environment produced by unsustainable agriculture in prehistory, often during the 2nd millennium BC (Dimpleby 1962). However, heathland development on the Lower Greensand during the Mesolithic (Ellaby 1987, 58) or Neolithic (Field & Cotton 1987, 73) periods has been suggested. In north-west Surrey and the adjoining counties 'to recount the Names of the several Commons on this heathy Part of the Country would be infinite, and but wearisome to the Reader' (Aubrey 1718, vol 1, 208). Recent work on Whitmoor Common, to the south of Chobham, has produced radiocarbon dates from palaeosols beneath the banks of two phases of 1522–1415 cal BC and 1297–1199 cal BC (both at  $2\sigma$ ) (English 2013, 29) and pollen analysis from similar palaeosols showed that heathland vegetation was present at those dates (Ellis 1996). Elsewhere on Bagshot Series-derived heathland in Surrey, at Ashley Farm, Windlesham, the first appearance of *Calluna* has been radiocarbon dated to 1610–1430 cal BC (at  $2\sigma$ ) (Groves 2008).

Construction of Sunningdale Golf Course, *c.* 2.5km to the north-west, in 1900 involved destruction of a barrow and excavation produced 25 Late Bronze Age secondary burials, all except two of which were inurned (Pastscape Monument no 250894; SU 9520 6622). Other barrows exist on West End Common (HER no 1851; SU 9343 6134) and on Chobham Common Bronze Age activity is probably evidenced by the presence of barrows although there is some debate over which of the mounds reported by various observers are genuinely prehistoric in origin (Currie 2002, vol 1, 19–20). Recently a portion of a Middle Bronze Age palstave (*c.* 1500–1300BC) has been found in a field to the south of the common (SU 96 63) (PAS database, item number SUR-F7F0A9).

There is little evidence of activity on the common between this period and its incorporation into the holdings of Chertsey Abbey although the apparent persistence of open heathland may suggest utilisation as rough grazing.

Chobham is one of the estates named in a charter of 672 x 674 by which Frithuwold, of the province of the men of Surrey, sub-king of Wulfhere, king of the Mercians, gave an area of land comprising most of what became Godley Hundred, then part of the *regio* of the

*Woccingas*, to Eorcenwold, abbot of the minster at Chertsey, which had been founded about ten years earlier under Kentish rulers (Blair 1989, 97). Although there is considerable doubt about the authenticity of the Chertsey charters they are generally considered to contain some genuine information (Sawyer 1968, no 1165; Stenton 1955, 29). Chobham remained in the ownership of Chertsey Abbey until the Dissolution, but in 1537 reverted to the Crown.

During the period of Chertsey's tenure a number of strategies were used to improve the economic output of the Chobham holding. In some cases specific features can be assigned to this period, but some of the documentary descriptions do not allow these constructs to be located with sufficient precision. Abbot John de Rutherwyk was responsible for a number of improvements in 1318/19 when he built a sheepcote 'in *Chabeworthe* and a 'turf house in the heath there' (in trans) (SRS 1915–63, no 767). Although the translation of the Latin term *bercaria* given in this reference is 'sheepcote', 'sheepfold' would have been equally valid. Sheepcotes, also known as sheephouses, were enclosures, usually situated on areas of grazing away from habitation, where sheep could be gathered for shelter during harsh weather or at lambing time, or scattered flocks brought together for stock management. They often comprised a large earthwork bank and external ditch, the former probably at the time surmounted by a hedge or palisade, surrounding a rectangular building divided internally into stalls and provided with a drain, and often substantially built of masonry (Dyer 1995). Sheepfolds, used only for short periods, did not usually contain buildings. The turf house may have been a building of turves or one where turves were stored. The abbot was also responsible for creating Gracious Pond, then called *Crachettespond*, and for enclosing land called *Langeshote* at the edge of the common for improved pasture (SRS 1915–63, no 767).

Evidence of assarting around the edge of the common in the early 14th century (Currie 2002, 25–6) indicates a response to population pressure at that period, when the resources of the common were probably more extensively exploited than they either had been since the Bronze Age or were to be after the Black Death removed the pressure on the system of food production. Many of the watercourses on the common were probably created for drainage of low-lying boggy areas during the medieval period or later. During the 20th century military activity, particularly use of tanks, has considerably damaged earlier earthworks.

### Analytical survey

The level 3 survey (RCHM[E] 1999) was undertaken during August 2007. At the time of survey vegetation over the southern portion comprised new growth of grass, gorse and heathers and in general was relatively sparse and no more than 15cm high. It is unlikely that any features would have been missed within this area. However, the northern portion had not been affected by the fire and here the vegetation comprised mature heathers and gorse with some birch saplings and in this portion of the earthworks only major features could have been noted in the interior. The ditches and other damp areas were covered with purple moor grass up to 1m tall.

The survey, drawn at an original scale of 1:500, was accomplished using tape and offsets located relative to the national grid using a hand-held global positioning system (Garmin eTrex). The survey was concerned only with earthworks related to the Scheduled Monument, the Bee Garden, and only the edges of water-filled features were accurately measured. The results of the survey are shown in figure 2. The enclosure is approximately trapezoidal in shape, *c* 100 x 100m internally, and is defined by a bank (a) with an external ditch (b) and, for the majority of its circumference, an outer bank (c). The present height of the bank varies from between *c* 0.4 and 1m above the interior, being greatest at the south-east corner and portions of the northern and eastern sides. The bank on the western side has been considerably damaged by users of the public rights of way, one of which crosses the bank twice and either runs along the top or cuts into the flank for a distance of *c* 65m (d). On the eastern side is an area of severe damage (e) occasioned by tracked vehicles being driven over the banks and ditch. Close to the south-east corner the inner bank has been cut in two places

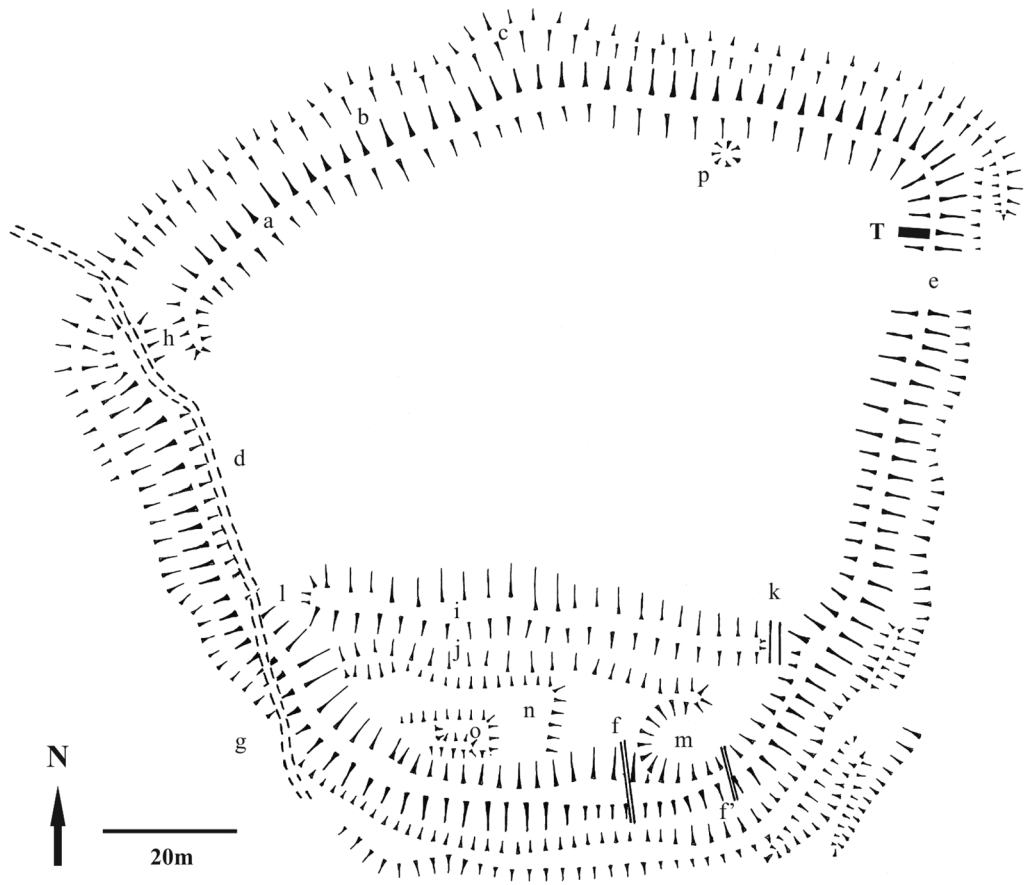


Fig 2 Analytical survey of the Bee Garden, Chobham. The position of the excavated trench is marked T.

(f-f'), from the sharpness of the cuts probably relatively recently, possibly with the aim of draining the interior.

The ditch is largely intact except for one area of damage on the eastern side close to the north-east corner (e), and on the western side where it is crossed by a public right of way close to the south-western corner (g). The depth varies and is likely to have been largely obscured due to silting in this particularly unstable geology. At the time of survey the ditch was damp and in places contained standing water.

The outer bank is clearly defined to the north and south of the enclosure (c), but to the west and east quarrying has impinged close enough in some places to render its identification problematic and it is uncertain whether it originally surrounded the entire monument.

There is a possibility that an original entrance has been identified for the first time at the north-western corner, but the area has been heavily damaged by users of the public rights of way and this cannot be stated with certainty. Detailed survey was made possible by vegetation clearance. The northern bank turns into the enclosure, parallel to the northern end of the eastern bank, providing a short 'neck' c 5m wide (h). Although the ditch of the northern arm appears to end at this point, the outer bank is continuous and it is not possible to determine whether these breaks are original to the construction of the monument. Superficial quarrying beyond the northern end of the western boundary complex and use of the footpaths have rendered interpretation in this area uncertain.

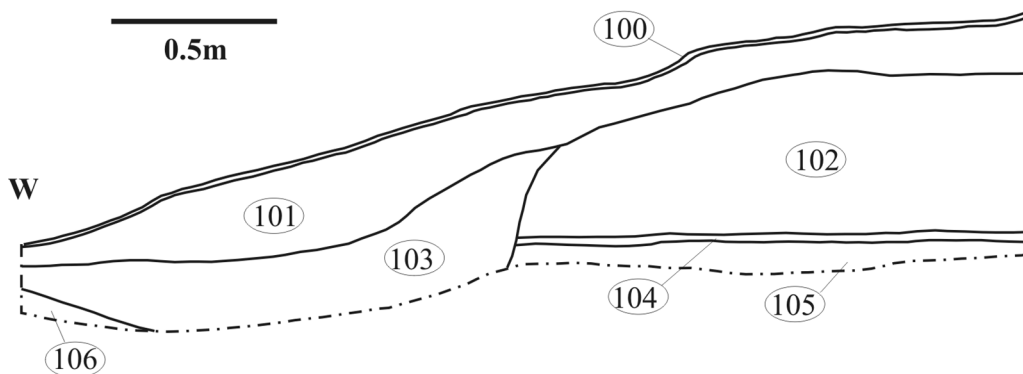


Fig 3 South-facing section of the inner portion of the inner bank of the Bee Garden, Chobham.

There is a bank running east to west across the interior of the enclosure  $\approx 25\text{m}$  from the southern end (i) with a ditch to its southern side (j). Despite a modern cut across this bank (k) it can be seen to abut the eastern bank at a lower level. At its western end the bank terminates short of the western bank and at this end the ditch is overlain by slumped material. The phasing of any developmental changes in the form of this monument is unclear. The enclosure, with its annexe, may represent an original design. However, it is conceivable that bank (i) and ditch (j) post-date construction of the enclosure, cutting off the southern portion and effectively creating an annexe, with the gap at the western side representing an entrance (l) between the two parts of the interior of the enclosure. Both the western and eastern arms of the main enclosure curve slightly inwards at these points, which might suggest that the southern annexe was a later addition, with a breach deliberately created in the south-western corner of an original circuit to provide an entrance into the new addition although, given the similarity in construction of the entire outer circuit, this scenario seems relatively unlikely.

Within the southern part of the enclosure, on higher ground at the western end, a number of very slight features appear to delineate an inner enclosure (n) and, within that, a platform (o) some  $10 \times 5\text{m}$ , possibly partially overlain by slumped material from the southern bank.

Two ponds were located within the enclosure. One, at the eastern end of the southern portion (m) had been cut into the southern and eastern banks of the main enclosure and truncated the side of the ditch of the interior cross bank. Although shallow sided the centre contained standing water at the time of the survey and its depth was not determined. The main bank is at its highest at this corner, possibly also augmented by upthrow from the creation of the pond, which clearly post-dates construction of both the internal cross bank and the main bank of the southern portion of the enclosure.

A small pond close against the northern bank (p) has track marks leading into it from the breach in the eastern banks and ditch complex. It has steep sides and the depth was not measured; in its present form this pond does not appear to be of any great age and it may relate to relatively recent military activity.

## Excavation

With Scheduled Monument Consent granted by English Heritage, and permission from Surrey Wildlife Trust, a section was cut across the inner half of the inner bank at a position close to the damaged area at the northern end of the eastern leg of the enclosure (fig 2). This aimed at examination of the structure of the bank and the obtaining of samples from any visible palaeosol underlying the bank. These samples would be subjected to radiocarbon

dating and palynological analysis. No attempt was made to section the outer bank or the ditch, the latter feature being water-filled at the time.

A section drawing is given in figure 3. After removal of the surface vegetation and roots (context 100) and an underlying dark brown humic layer (context 101) the matrix of the bank was shown to comprise pale yellow sand and sandy clay (context 102). There is no reason to believe other than that the material came from digging the ditch to the east and that this part of the enclosure at least was of 'dig and dump' construction.

It was clear that a ditch had been dug inside the inner bank, filled with dark brown/black loam (context 103) and truncating the inner slope of the inner bank. No dating evidence for this feature was located, but the degree of slumping from the bank matrix overlying the ditch fill might suggest the elapse of a considerable period of time.

A palaeosol (context 104) was located, appearing as a grey, fine-grained, clayey lens, from which samples were taken. This palaeosol overlay apparently undisturbed grey sandy clay with some humic content (context 105) rather than the podzol present over much of the common and visible beneath the ditch inside the inner bank (context 106).

Unfortunately organic survival was poor and insufficient pollen was present for any meaningful analysis (Martyn Waller, pers comm). In view of this, no attempt was made to obtain radiocarbon dating.

## Discussion

The earthwork known as the Bee Garden is a trapezoidal enclosure surrounded by a bank and external ditch with, in some areas a second, outer, bank measuring *c* 100 x 100m. It is located on a slight slope with the south-west corner notably higher than the remainder of the monument.

The earthwork may have been constructed in two phases, the southern portion being either an added annexe, or it may have been separated from the main enclosure by the internal transverse bank. Any time intervals involved cannot be determined. A possible entrance at the north-west corner has a short inturned bank on its eastern side. The two ponds within the interior appear to have been dug relatively recently; that in the south-eastern corner clearly cuts both phases of the pre-existing earthworks, but their existence indicates that it would have been possible to successfully create ponds at an earlier date.

The work described here does little to clarify the identification or date of this earthwork or its date of construction but it is possible to make some suggestions from its morphology.

Bee Gardens are known from areas of heathland on similar soils particularly the New Forest where a recent LiDAR survey has increased the number already known (Royall 2014). Here local bee-keepers took their hives into the forest to take advantage of the heather, and placed them in embanked and hedged enclosures for protection against wandering stock, a practice that appears to have died out in the early 19th century (Sumner 1924, 21–2). However, the earthworks considered likely to represent these enclosures, prevalent in a number of valleys, usually occur in groups and are between 5 and 10m square (Smith 1999, figs 21 & 22) – much smaller than the site on Chobham Common.

Of the known structures dating to the ownership of the common by Chertsey Abbey the 'sheepcote in *Chabeworthe*' seems the most likely contender and it may indeed be that the southern annexe, with its possible internal structures, served this purpose. Certainly the southern end of the monument, located on higher ground, would have been the most suitable place for any buildings. However, the site is relatively isolated and use as a sheepfold, rather than a sheepcote, is also possible.

The Bee Garden is located close to Albury Bottom, a place-name that probably derives from *ealdan byrig*. 'Ald', as a spelling for 'old' became rarer as the medieval period progressed and was increasingly confined to peripheral dialects. *Byrig*, an earthwork, generally refers to larger, more massively constructed enclosures than a sheepcote built for that purpose (Richard Coates, pers comm). This suggests that an earthwork had existed from a time described as

'old' during the period when Old English was the spoken language (Gover *et al* 1934, 118, 219) and is unlikely to have been applied to anything constructed under the guidance of Abbot John de Rutherwyk (1307–46). The name 'Bee Garden' is applied to this earthwork on the OS 6-inch map surveyed 1869–70, but it is not known when it was first used. It probably derives from a requirement placed on the priest at Chobham in 1300 to provide 6lbs (2.7kg) of beeswax annually to Chertsey Abbey (SRS 1915–63, 62–3) and still remembered in the early 20th century (Gardner 1924). When Chertsey Abbey leased Chobham to Geoffrey de Bagshot in 1254, the rent included 12 gallons (54 litres) of honey valued at 6 shillings (*VCH* 3, 415). It should be noted that the enclosure described by Gardner (1924), and also known as the Bee Garden, stands to the east of the monument under consideration here, at SU 9939 6391, and is probably of 19th century military origin. A possible hint at the location of an area devoted to beekeeping lies with the place-name Imley Grove Farm (SU 9874 6138), probably derived from the OE *ymbe*, 'a swarm of bees'.

An enclosure very similar in both scale and morphology at Dark Hat Wood in the New Forest (Smith 1999, fig 5) produced pottery dating to the 1st century AD (Pasmore & Fortescue 1989). Although contemporary evidence of occupation on the north-west Surrey sands is sparse, a late prehistoric date seems a likely genesis of the earthwork on Chobham Common.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the fieldwork skills of all those who took part in the survey: Margaret Broomfield, Bryan Harmer, Jeanette Hicks, Pauline Hulse (who undertook the field drawing), Dave McKay and Geoff Stonehouse, and the excavation – Jenny Newell, Rose Hooker and Peter 'Dozer' Miller. Thanks are also due to the Surrey Wildlife Trust Rangers for the area, Andy Wragg and Stephen Fry, for all their assistance.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aubrey, J, 1718 *Natural history and antiquities of the county of Surrey*, 1975 edn, Dorking: Kohler & Coombes
- Blair, J, 1989 Frithuwold's kingdom and the origins of Surrey, in S Bassett (ed), *The origins of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms*, 97–107
- Currie, C K, 2002 An archaeological and historical survey of Chobham Common proposed Area of Special Historic Landscape Value, unpubl rep for Surrey County Council and SyAS
- Dimbleby, G W, 1962 *The development of British heathlands and their soils*, Oxford Forestry Memoir, **23**, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Dyer, C C, 1995 Sheepcotes: evidence for medieval sheep farming, *Medieval Archaeol*, **39**, 136–64
- Ellaby, R, 1987 The Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic in Surrey, in J Bird & D G Bird (eds), *The archaeology of Surrey to 1540*, Guildford: SyAS, 53–70
- Ellis, I, 1996 The pollen stratigraphy of buried soil horizons of a barrow and associated field boundaries at Whitmoor Common, Surrey, unpubl research dissertation, Royal Holloway, University of London, Department of Geography (GG370)
- Ellison, R A, & Zalasiewicz, J A, 1996 The Palaeogene and Neogene, in M G Sumbler (ed), *British regional geology: London and the Thames Valley*, London: HMSO
- English, J, 2013 *Pattern and progress: field systems of the second the early first millennia BC in southern Britain*, BAR Brit Ser, **587**
- Field, D, & Cotton, J, 1987 Neolithic Surrey: a survey of the evidence, in J Bird & D G Bird (eds), *The archaeology of Surrey to 1540*, Guildford: SyAS, 71–96
- Gardner, E, 1924 A triple banked enclosure on Chobham Common, *SyAC*, **35**, 105–13
- Gover, J E B, Mawer, A, & Stenton, F M, 1934 *The place-names of Surrey*, 1982 edn, Engl Place-name Soc, **11**
- Groves, J A, 2008 Late Quaternary vegetation history of the acidic lithologies of south-east England, unpubl doctoral thesis, Kingston University
- PAS: Portable Antiquities Scheme (<https://finds.org.uk>; Accessed 19 April 2016)
- Pasmore, A, & Fortescue, K, 1989 Excavation at Dark Hat Wood – August 1988, *Hampshire Field Club Archaeol Soc Newsl, New Forest Section Rep*, **27**, 4–9
- RCHM[E], 1999 *Recording archaeological field monuments – a descriptive specification*, Swindon: RCHM[E]

- Royall, C, 2014 *National mapping programme: New Forest remembers*, Swindon: English Heritage, 62–3
- Sawyer, P H, 1968 *Anglo-Saxon charters – an annotated list and bibliography*, London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society
- Smith, N, 1999 The earthwork remains of enclosure in the New Forest, *Proc Hampshire Field Club Archaeol Soc*, **54**, 1–56
- Sumner, H, 1924 *A guide to the New Forest*, Ringwood: Charles Brown & Son
- SRS 1915–63 *Cartularies of Chertsey Abbey*, Surrey Rec Soc, **12**
- Stenton, F M, 1955 *The Latin charters of the Anglo-Saxon period*, Oxford: University Press
- VCH: The Victoria history of the county of Surrey*, H E Malden (ed), 1902–12, 4 vols, Westminster: Archibald Constable & Co Ltd