IRON AGE HUT CIRCLES DISCOVERED NEAR LOWER MILL FARM, STANWELL (T003577418)

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SUMMARY

Salvage excavation and recording of features revealed during overburden removal within a gravel pit demonstrated that they belonged to a small settlement of prehistoric, probably Iron Age, date. Eaves-drip trenches belonging to two round houses and an ancillary structure were recorded. A scatter of medieval and post-medieval sherds within the permission imply arable use not previously known for that period.

INTRODUCTION

The granting of permission for gravel extraction in an area just to the west of the King George VI water reservoir near Staines led the Conservation and Archaeology Section of Surrey County Council to make arrangements with Greenham Sand and Ballast Ltd to monitor the removal of the deposits. The work was kindly financed by Greenham Sand and Ballast, and observation was maintained by the authors on an intermittent basis during September 1987.

During this time two points of interest emerged. Firstly, a scatter of medieval and post-medieval potsherds seemed likely to have been introduced as a result of manuring of arable fields. There is apparently no unequivocal documentary reference to medieval farms hereabouts (cf *VCH*, 33–50) and the intensity and duration of arable use must remain uncertain. However, the 18th and 19th century cartographic sources indicate that the area was then pasture or meadowland—on a 1748 map of Stanwell parish the field is called 'Lord's Hay'. Aerial photographs indicate that ploughing has occurred in the 20th century, though most recently the land has been used as rough pasture.

The second point of interest was that several prehistoric pits containing calcined flints, flint-gritted pottery and animal bone were observed (Fig. 1C) but unfortunately circumstances did not allow these to be excavated. At the start of October 1987 the features which are the main subject of this note were revealed, and it proved possible over a period of five days to clarify and record most of their surface appearance, and to excavate formally a sizeable sample of nearly all of them. The assistance of Steve Dyer (of the Spelthorne Archaeological Field Group) in this work is gratefully acknowledged.

The area of the discoveries is a low-lying part of Stanwell parish (between 16.5 m and 17.5 m above O.D.) adjacent to the river Colne. Removal of the overburden showed that the geological sequence was of brickearth overlying deposits of Shepperton gravel (cf Gibbard 1985, 75 & 82). The thickness of the brickearth increased from south to north, with the main concentration of prehistoric features lying on localised higher ground (Fig. 1C), which was perhaps just sufficiently so to raise them above the flood plain of the Colne.

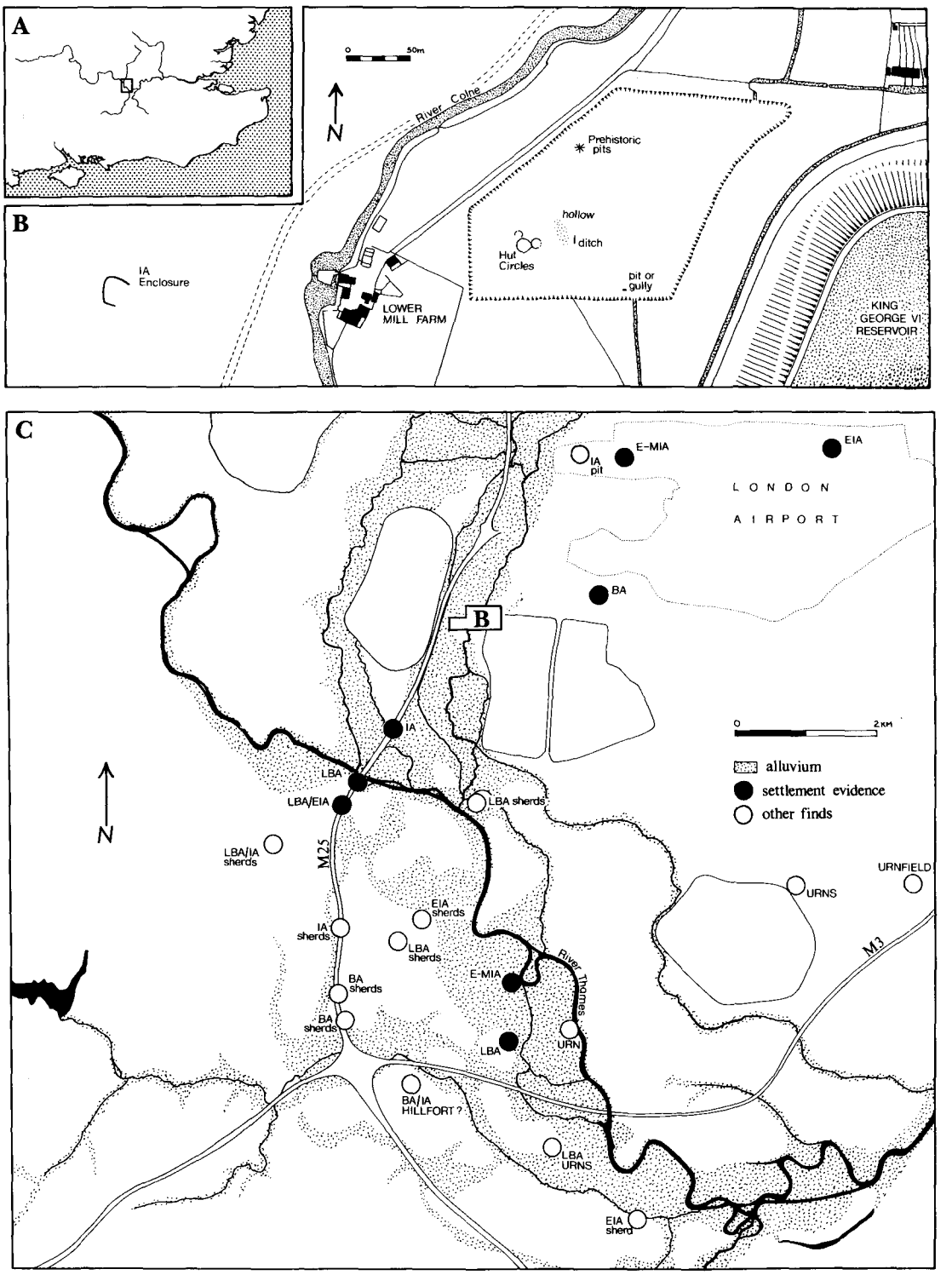

Fig. 1 Lower Mill Farm, Stanwell: Site Location

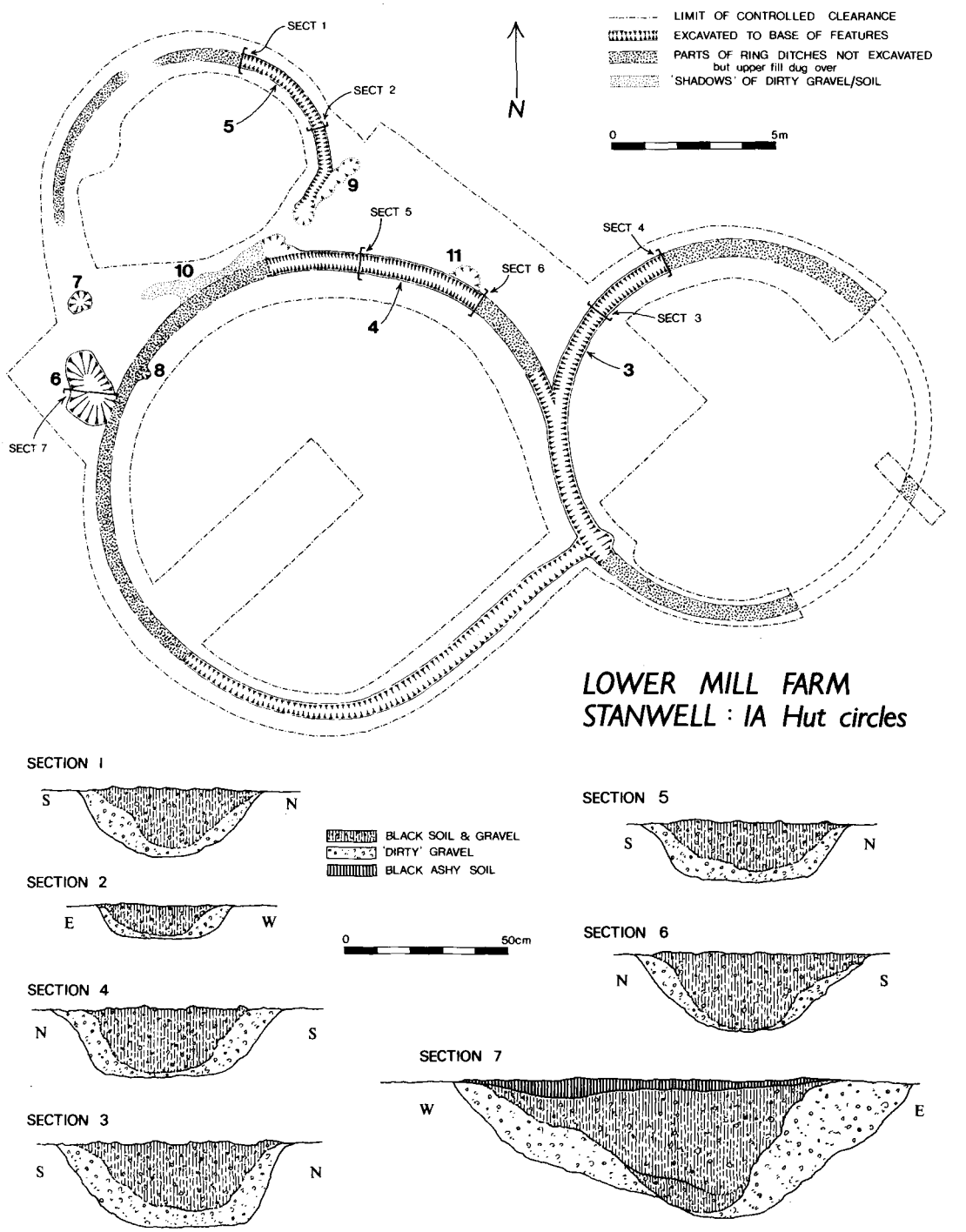

Fig. 2. Lower Mill Farm, Stanwell: Plan of the eaves-drip gullies and other features in the area examined in detail.

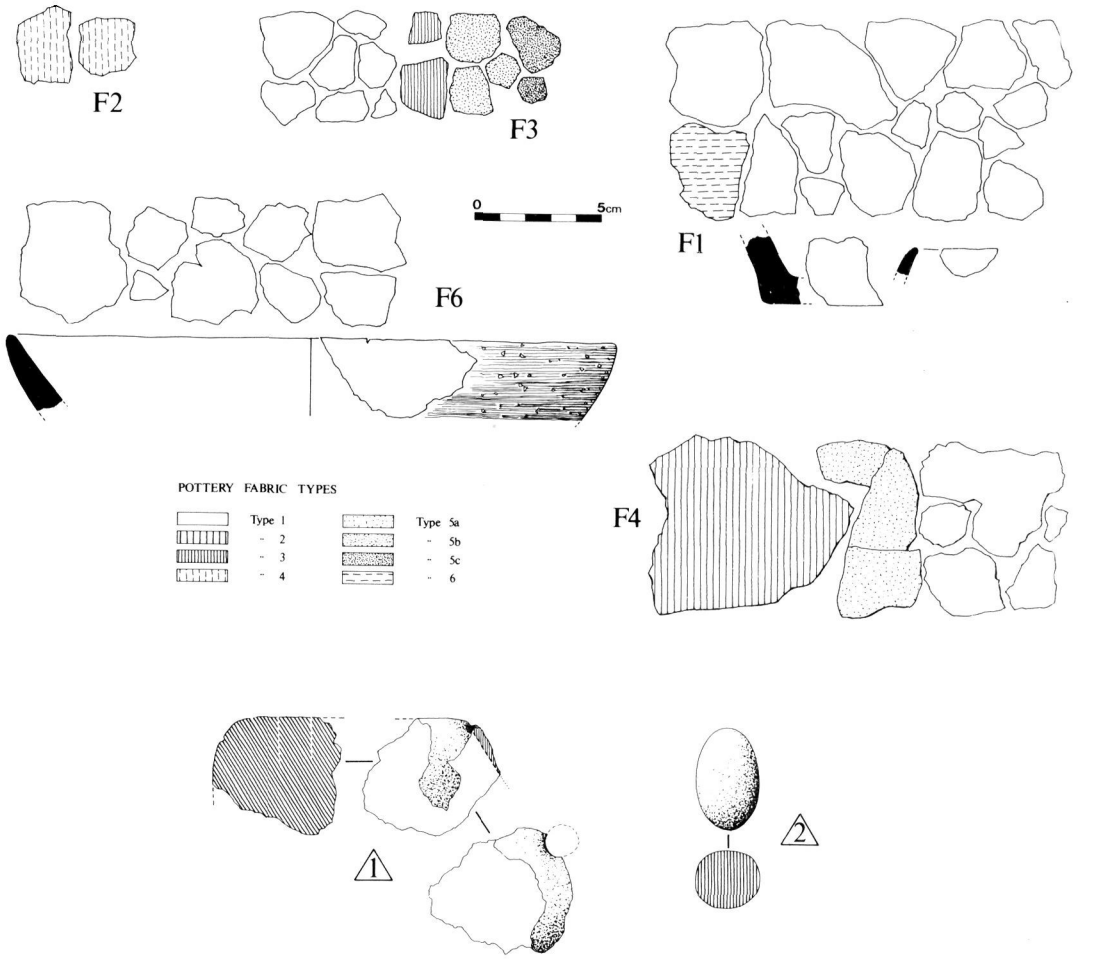

Fig. 3. Lower Mill Farm, Stanwell: The pottery (scale 1:3) and other finds (scale 1:3).

CATALOGUE OF FEATURES

G1 A shallow depression in the surface of the natural gravel which was aligned approximately NNW to SSE. It was of limited extent, being no more than *c.* 30m long by *c.* 10m wide, and although it had become choked with fluvial deposits there was no exit channel apparent to north or south. Some shell-rich organic muds were exposed in its deepest parts, but the fill was mostly of grey to brown clayey silts. It seems probable that this had been a pool lying within a hollow on the surface of the Shepperton gravels which had been created by erosion or subsidence. F2 pits lay on both sides of the hollow and F1 was cut along and through its eastern edge. It is likely therefore that the pool was a landscape feature at the time of occupation of the hut circles.

F1 Ditch or gully *c.* 0.75m wide and 0.2–0.3m deep running roughly north–south which was examined intermittently as it was exposed then removed by machine. The feature was cut through G1. The fill consisted of a water-lain grey slightly silty clay, and contained sherds of prehistoric pottery and fragments of degraded animal bone. Although only a small sample of the fill could be excavated, this contained a high proportion of finds relative to that within F3 to F11, inclusive.

F2 Two or three pits seen immediately west of

Plate 1 Lower Mill Farm, Stanwell: View of the hut-circles before excavation and looking north-northeast. The ranging rods are in the centre of (from left to right) F5, F4 and F3. The scale in F4 is in 50cm divisions, while those in F3 and F4 are in 20cm divisions. The dark area centre left is F6.

F1 and on both sides of G1, which were each of similar size to F6. It was not possible to plan or sample these features, but it is likely that they were prehistoric because of their position, and because all contained calcined flints in their fill. Two sherds of pottery were recovered from one of them.

F3 Ring gully forming an almost perfect circle with an internal diameter of 10.5m. The gully averaged 0.65m wide and 0.25m deep and had an upper fill of sticky grey-black silty clay mixed with plentiful gravel, over a rapid infill of gravel with a little silt at the bottom and sides. The profile of primary infill deposits shown on the section drawings of F3 (Fig. 2) does not seem to have been created wholly by collapse of the sides, since no greater thickness of gravel and silt is apparent at the base than at the sides. Indeed the opposite is the case for some sections of this feature as well as some of F4 and F5, and this may indicate cleaning or redigging of the features subsequent to the occurrence of the initial infilling. The few small sherds of pottery and fragments of bone recovered all came from the top 50mm of the fill.

On the west side F3 merged with F4. The line of F3 was, however, maintained and so also was its depth. The northern and western junctions between the features were carefully excavated, but although F4 had a much shallower profile than F3 their infills were identical. The sequence in which they were cut cannot therefore be demonstrated, but it seems probable that the separation in time was very short, and the two were undoubtedly open at the same time. The few small sherds of pottery and fragments of bone recovered all come from the top 50mm of the fill.

F4 Ring gully which was circular except for a short straight length on the south side where it merged with F3. It had an internal diameter of *c.* 3.5m. The depth and width of the feature was more variable than F3 and the sections (Fig. 2) show its profile to be square-cut in some parts and V-shaped in others, while the straight portion near F3 was wider,

shallower and had a flat base. Where the gully survived best, the width averaged 0.65m and the depth 0.20m. The fills were similar to those in F3 with the finds again concentrated in the top 50mm or so though some bone and daub fragments were found lower in the fill. See above for the relationship of F4 to F3, and below for the relationship to F5.

F5 Gully, with a short break on the north side, forming an oval shape about 7m wide. The gully varied considerably in depth (0.35 to 0.55m in the excavated part), but less so in width (average 0.45m). The fills were similar to those of F3 and F4, but with a complete absence of finds. The gap on the north side was definitely an original feature but a more difficult question is whether the gully was otherwise formerly continuous. In part this depends on the interpretation of F10 (see below), but the clear survival of F4 (eg. Fig. 2, section 5) in areas immediately adjacent to any postulated continuation of F5 tends to indicate that the plan is a close reflection of its original shape. On the other hand an area on the south-west side had definitely suffered machine truncation.

F6 Pit forming an elongated oval, 2.3m long by 1.3m wide by 0.44m maximum depth. A shallow upper fill of black, ashy silt contained all the finds from this feature. Beneath this, the two lower fills were closely similar to those of F3, F4 and F5, apart from a higher organic content in the deepest part of the secondary fill. Contiguous with F5, but the relationship was uncertain because of the identical nature of the fills. A number of potsherds and bone fragments were recovered.

F7 Post-hole with diameter of 0.7m and maximum depth of 0.10m. The fill consisted of gravel mixed with a little grey-black silty clay, the latter becoming sparser towards the sides and bottom. No finds.

F8 A probable post-hole with a fill of brown silty clay abutting the inside edge of F4. No finds.

F9 Shallow (less than 0.15m deep) irregular scoop adjacent to F5 (relationship uncertain), with a fill of slightly silty gravel. No finds.

F10 Irregular shallow (less than 0.15m deep) scoop, adjacent to F4 (relationship uncertain) with a fill of slightly silty gravel. It may continue the line of F5, but this is by no means certain. No finds.

F11 Small pit or post-hole which was very shallow (less than 0.15m deep), with a fill of slightly silty gravel. It was apparently cut by F4, but there remains some doubt as whether F11 was a real feature.

THE POTTERY

51 sherds weighing 411 grams were recovered from features F1–F4 and F6, and none were found elsewhere on the site. Pottery excavated from the ring ditches F3 and F4 and the pit F6 was only present in the uppermost parts of the fills, whereas sherds from the linear feature F1 were found throughout its depth. Two small sherds from one of the two or three pits of F2 were snatched from the fill before the destruction of the feature.

All sherds were examined with the aid of a X20 binocular microscope and divided into six fabric types according to the suite of inclusions that they continued. These were:

1. Calcined flint type:
   40 sherds (80% of all pottery found) with frequent inclusions of burnt and crushed flint temper of a size range *c.* 0.2–1.5mm. Some iron mineral compounds that are also present probably belong to the original clay. All but five fragments were featureless body sherds, most of which were between 6 and 9mm thick. Two vessel forms were identified from rimsherds. One from F6 is part of a bowl, and the other from F1 may be from another bowl with an in-turned rim, but the sherd is too small to be certain of its correct orientation. A base angle sherd from F1 belonged to a flat-bottomed vessel. The colour of the sherds is extremely variable and ranges from dark grey/black to red/brown. Sherds of this fabric type predominate in all context assemblages except F3 which has almost as many sherds of other fabrics, and F2 from which only two sherds of Fabric 4 could be rescued.
2. Groggy type:
   1 large sherd (3 before joining) from F4. 7–10mm thick, dark grey with pale to dark grey external surface. Inclusions are moderate amounts of rounded grog particles (probably burnt clay) of variable size up to 2.5mm, sparse sub-rounded quartz grains of sizes *c.* 0.1–0.3mm, and rare calcined flint grits.
3. Grog (Ironstone?) type:
   2 small sherds from F3. 6/7mm thick, dark grey with dark grey/brown surfaces. Inclusions are grog, quartz and flint in the same sizes and proportions as in type 2, but with frequent grains of a more rounded red/brown inclusion type that may be a ferric compound rather than baked clay, although this is not certain.
4. Sand/Grog/Flint type:
   2 small sherds, the only ones that were found in one of the F2 pits. 7/8mm thick, black with external grey to brown surfaces. Inclusions are sparse amounts of quartz (*c.* 0.3–0.5 and occasionally up to 2.5mm, sub-rounded), grog (ill-sorted, red/brown), flint (calcined, ill-sorted) and rare organic fragments.

5. Sandy fabrics:
   (a) 1 sherd from F4. 6–10mm thick, dark grey/black. Inclusions are frequent sub-rounded quartz grains *c.* 0.2–0.6mm, sparse grog and organic fragments and rare flint splinters.
   (b) 2 sherds (3 before joining) from F3. 12mm thick, dark grey core with red/brown to brown surfaces. Frequent quartz grains *c.* 0.2–0.8mm, sparse flint but with more showing on the external surface, and sparse iron compound grains.
   (c) 2 sherds (4 before joining and probably all of one vessel) from F3. *c.* 8mm thick, buff/brown with dark grey internal surface. Frequent quartz and sparse iron as of (b) but no flint.
6. Shelly:
   1 sherd (3 before joining) from the ditch F1. 6–8mm thick, mid grey with dark grey internal, and pale grey/brown external surfaces. Contains frequent crushed fragments of very thin shell and sparse grains of acicular calcite. No other inclusions are present and it seems likely that the vessel was made of alluvial clay that contained the calcareous fragments.

excavation on the gravel terraces in this area. Even here the degraded and fragmentary condition of the bone made identification difficult in a number of cases.

F1 2 horse molars
3 cattle teeth, unworn and from a juvenile animal
1 ?ulna fragment (*Bos*)
1 cattle/horse vertebra fragment
1 cattle/horse-size shaft fragment (from a long bone).

F3 2 cattle/horse size fragments
Numerous sheep teeth fragments
Numerous unidentifiable fragments

F4 1 tooth, M2 of sheep, well worn
1 small fragment of right sheep mandible, includes area just in front of P1 (diastema area).
1 fragment of cattle/horse size scapula
8 unidentifiable small fragments.

F6 1 cattle tooth, M2, unworn (tooth erupts at 1–1½ years old)
36 unidentifiable small fragments.

	Fabric Types																		Totals	
Contexts	1		2		3		4		5A		5B		5C		6					
F1	18	138	—		—		—		—		—		—		1	7			19	145
F2	—		—		—		2	13	—		—		—		—				2	13
F3	7	20	—		2	5	—		—		2	12	2	3	—				13	40
F4	5	25	1	61	—	—	1	25	—	—	—	7	111							
F6	10	102	—		—		—		—		—		—		—				10	102
Totals	40	285	1	61	2	5	2	13	1	25	2	12	2	3	1	7				

Fig. 4 Lower Mill Farm, Stanwell: Catalogue of sherds within the features. For each fabric type within each context, a sherd count is followed by the weight in grams.

There are so few sherds that it is not possible to be precise about when they were made and used. Calcined flint-gritted sherds are by far the most common ware-type, as they are on other local Late Bronze Age sites, but there are some fabrics that are more typical of Iron Age pottery, some of which have recently been found at a Middle Age Iron site at Dawley Farm, Hayes (J. Cotton pers comm). It seems more likely therefore that the Lower Mill Farm sherds are from a domestic occupation of the early to middle Iron Age, than that they were of the Late Bronze Age.

ANIMAL BONE
by J CHAPMAN

The sample of animal bone recovered was small, but is nevertheless of some interest in view of the comparatively rare survival of such material in

OTHER FINDS

1. Irregularly broken fragment of baked clay from F4, showing a small part of an external surface and a hole that was pierced through before firing. Although the angle of the piercing is set diagonally from the external surface, the fragment is most likely to have been part of a loomweight.
2. 'Slingshot' of baked clay. Ovoid shape 39mm by 25mm and weighing 23g. This was found in machine-disturbed ground *c.* 30m east of ditch F1 but may be contemporary with the hut-circles since it is of a type that has been found on Iron Age sites. Very similar objects (also unstratified) were found at the Iron Age and Roman occupation site at Heathrow (Canham 1978, 38 and Fig. 25 No. 13), and a Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age site at Beomonds Farm, Chertsey (unpublished excavation by F. Holling).
3. Fragment of quartzose sandstone (sarsen) from F3 that retains part of a smoothed and slightly convex surface. Probably part of a saddle quern.

DISCUSSION

The circumstances of the discovery and excavation of these features make it pertinent to enquire how full a sample of the prehistoric occupation within the area of overburden removal they represent. It has been noted above that the local topography indicates that only a limited part of this area would have been suitable for the erection of permanent structures. Most of the features discovered lie within that area, with F1 and G1 defining its limits to the south-west. The whole of the remainder of the 'island' was examined for settlement evidence but no further features were found except for some linear ditches or gullies which were regarded as being part of a post-medieval drainage scheme. Some support for this largely subjective judgement came from the presence of brick fragments in the only one sampled. The inference drawn is that the features shown on Fig. 2 represent a high proportion, at least of the larger ones, of those which existed anciently. A further argument which may be adduced in support of this, is that the archaeological clearance work in the vicinity of F3 to F11 served only to define more precisely the outlines already apparent, and did not reveal any new features. In other words, machine clearance is likely to have revealed the vast majority of features.

A related problem is the degree to which the features had been truncated. It cannot be doubted that stripping of the overburden had reduced the depth of some features, but the total effect was apparently quite small. The question of whether truncation(s) had occurred at any earlier date cannot be divorced from a consideration of the mechanism by which the features had become infilled. All sections show evidence of a rapid primary infilling followed by a slower, though not necessarily prolonged, secondary infilling in which finds of any sort only appeared in the upper few centimetres. It is likely, therefore, that if formerly these features had been much deeper a concentration of finds would have been apparent in the overburden in this area, but this was not the case. It is considered, therefore, that, on an overall view, little truncation had occurred.

In order to explain the character of their infill further, it is necessary to turn to a consideration of the function of these features. F1 may have marked the limit of the settlement, while little further can be said about the F2 pits. The most interesting questions obviously arise with regard to F3, F4 and F5. Three possible explanations may be mooted for the digging of these ring gullies. The first, that they represent the encircling ditches to barrows, can be dismissed since no burials were present, and the character of the finds, such as they are, is clearly domestic. The second explanation is almost equally improbable. If these gullies served as foundation trenches in which timber uprights belonging to the walls of circular huts were placed then one would have expected evidence of deliberate backfilling, continuously flat bottoms and/or post impressions. None of these characteristics were found, which leaves the third explanation, that they were eaves drip trenches, as the only one which is acceptable. It must be presumed here that water ran off the eaves directly into the gullies, because if there had been any gap between the edge of the eaves and the gully this would have produced an obviously asymmetrical infill pattern quite different to that which the sections (Fig. 2) actually show.

The ring ditches then, may be visualised as containing three huts or other structures. These were contemporary since the uniformity of fill suggests all the gullies were open at the same time, and

it is difficult to see how this neat plan (Fig. 2) could have been achieved if this were not so. Equally the small number of associated features suggests that the settlement was not long lived, and there is nothing in the finds that would contradict this. The structures themselves would have been a little smaller than their encircling eaves-drip trenches, and that within F4 was clearly the largest of them. The F4 hut may be envisaged as the principal domestic structure of a small family settlement, with F3 encircling a smaller hut probably for ancillary purposes. It has been suggested above that F5 may never have been continuous; if so, then it may well be evidence for an open-fronted structure, with F7 serving as a post-hole for an upright for the structure in the centre of the opening. The remaining features (F6 and F8 to F11) do not shed any further light on the construction or use of the site. All trace of the huts themselves has vanished although the eaves-drip trenches imply their former existence. No hint of post-holes was recovered, and, if the suggestion advanced above that the effects of truncation of features were quite limited is accepted, this may be because earth-fast posts had never existed. Clear proof that construction of huts in this manner was practised was found nearby at Staines, where 1st century AD round houses were defined on the basis of their surviving floors and hearths despite the fact that post-holes (or any other evidence relating to their superstructure) were absent, although they must have survived if they had formerly existed (Poulton, in prep). Such a mode of construction would have made easier the dismantling and removal of virtually the entire settlement which must have occurred in order to leave only a few fragments of burnt daub to find their way into the gullies. Equally the site must have been kept very clean, assuming that most of the gradual silting of the features occurred while the huts were in use, and that only in the later days of the site or when it was abandoned was there a limited amount of scattered debris lying around to be washed in and level the features. These finds provide some fleeting glimpses through the fog of supposition which otherwise shrouds the activities of the people who lived here: a fragment of a saddle quernstone for grinding corn; a manufactured slingshot for hunting (a not insignificant artifact in a region of plentiful gravel ammunition!); part of a loomweight, perhaps for weaving; the debris of meals involving sheep and cattle; bones from horses, presumably used for transport, then food; and a few pottery sherds.

Although calcined flint-gritted sherds were predominant as they are in all local Late Bronze Age contexts there were a few sand and grog-tempered pieces that may indicate an Iron Age date. The slingshot is of a type found at local Middle Iron Age sites, but was an unstratified find from nearby, and so cannot be directly associated with the hut circles. It may be that the plan of the site actually provides a more sensitive indicator of the date. So far all the definitely Late Bronze Age houses in this part of the Thames valley are of the earth-fast post type, generally forming an irregular ring, as for example at Runnymede Bridge, Egham (Longley 1980), Petter's Sports Field, Egham (O'Connell 1986a) or Park Road, Stanwell (O'Connell 1986b). Houses with eaves-drip gullies have been less frequently found, but some at Dawley Farm, Hayes were definitely Iron Age (Cotton, pers comm). This suggests that the sequence discovered in the Upper Thames Valley (Allen *et al.* 1984, esp 100) may also apply in this area, and that the present structures also belong to the Iron Age. However, some differences are apparent. In the Upper Thames Valley

the drainage gullies seem always to have been pennanular, with an irregular plan, whereas at Lower Mill Farm the two larger circles seem to have been continuous and precisely laid out (F3 is an almost perfect circle, and F4 seems only to be distorted by a desire to link it to F3). The difference may be due to the former being dug after the houses were built, whereas the latter were laid out with stick and rope before structural work began.

In conclusion, it may be said that Lower Mill Farm represents a further addition to the pattern of later prehistoric settlement in the Thames/Colne Valley confluence area (Fig. 1). The nearest site lies only 325m distant on the opposite side of the river Colne. It was sampled by excavation in 1963–4 (Brown 1971), when it was demonstrated that a crop-mark revealed on air photographs was an irregular Late-Bronze or Iron Age (the pottery was not diagnostic) enclosure with settlement features inside. The site was unfortunately destroyed by gravel extraction without further record in the late 1970s. Despite this failure, it is due to increased awareness of the potential destruction of archaeological information in quarrying and other development that many of the sites marked on the distribution map were discovered. In comparison with the middle and upper Thames, research in this area will always be disadvantaged, due to the lack of aerial photographs, but the discoveries of recent years nevertheless tend to suggest that the archaeological resource is not significantly inferior.

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