Prehistoric land use at Beddington, Surrey

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with a contribution by Jon Cotton

Introduction

THREE STAGES of watching briefs have been conducted by RPS Consultants in 1998 and 1999 for a series of warehouse developments at Beddington Cross, 138 Beddington Lane, in the London Borough of Sutton (TQ 2994 6665). The 480m by 165m site is flanked to the east by Beddington Farm Road and to the west by Beddington Lane and is situated to the north of Beddington Sewage Works (Fig. 1). The work was carried out on behalf of Quintain, the 10 Group and Jackson Building Ltd. An excavation ahead of a proposed new loading dock site was conducted in the northern area of the site by the Museum of London in 1989[1]. The results demonstrated that ground levelling had truncated overlying deposits, but two large ditches and two irregular pits were identified below a subsoil created by flooding of the site. The features were undated but indicated the potential for the discovery of prehistoric archaeology at the location. No other sites or finds were previously known within the site boundary.

Prehistoric and Roman background

The site is situated in the Wandle valley (*c.* 2km to the east of the River Wandle) on Quaternary Second River Terrace gravels above London Clay. The topography is relatively flat with gravel at heights between 33 and 34m OD. Beddington has proved to be a rich source of archaeological finds. Palaeolithic tools, Mesolithic flintwork and Neolithic pottery were found within a gravel pit which encroaches on the north-west part of the site[2] and Neolithic flintwork is widely scattered within the area[3]. Bronze Age burial mounds and metalwork finds are known from Mitcham Common to the north-west[2]. A Roman villa has been excavated at Beddington Sewage Farm and prehistoric settlement features including Late Bronze Age (hereafter LBA) ditches were located on the western edge of the works[4]. Further extensive evaluation at the location identified a small number of features with Late Neolithic-Early Bronze Age pottery recovered from two ditches[5].

Excavations for the Valley Park Development, 0.5km to the south of the Beddington site, produced LBA and Iron Age ditches and pits which were interpreted as agricultural, with possible settlement evidence[6]. Excavations at 14 Progress Way, south of Valley Park, demonstrated Late Neolithic features, whilst some LBA pottery and a contemporary ditch indicate further LBA activity in this area[7]. A second Roman villa was reported in the 19th century about a kilometre north of the site[8], and

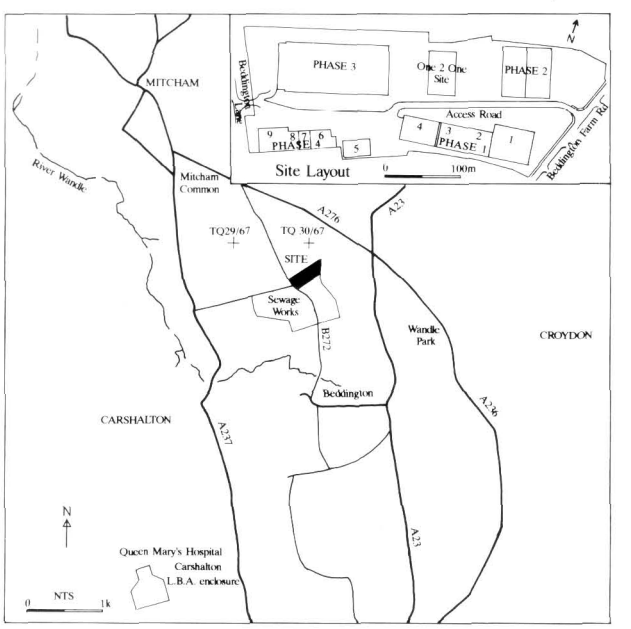

Fig. 1: site location

1. S Tucker *Proposed New Loading Dock Site, London Carriers Limited, Beddington Lane, Sutton. Preliminary Report of Archaeological Investigation* LCL90. Museum of London (1990).
2. Greater London Sites and Monuments Record (GLSMR) information.
3. GLSMR nos 020136, 020535, 020114/5.
4. L Adkins and R Adkins 'Excavations at Beddington 1982' *London Archaeol* 4 (1983) 326-9 and 'Excavations at Prehistoric and Roman Beddington 1984-85' *London Archaeol* 5 (1986) 152-7.
5. M Heaton and C Hearne 'Site Investigations at Beddington Lane Sutton, Surrey' *London Archaeol* 7 no. 1 (1992) 19-23.
6. B Bazely *The Valley Park Development Site, Purley Way, Croydon: Preliminary Report of an Archaeological Investigation* Museum of London DGLA (1990).
7. S Tucker 'Further Evidence for prehistoric Occupation Found on the Purley Way, Croydon' *London Archaeol* 8 no. 1 (1996) 12-17.
8. GLSMR 021759.

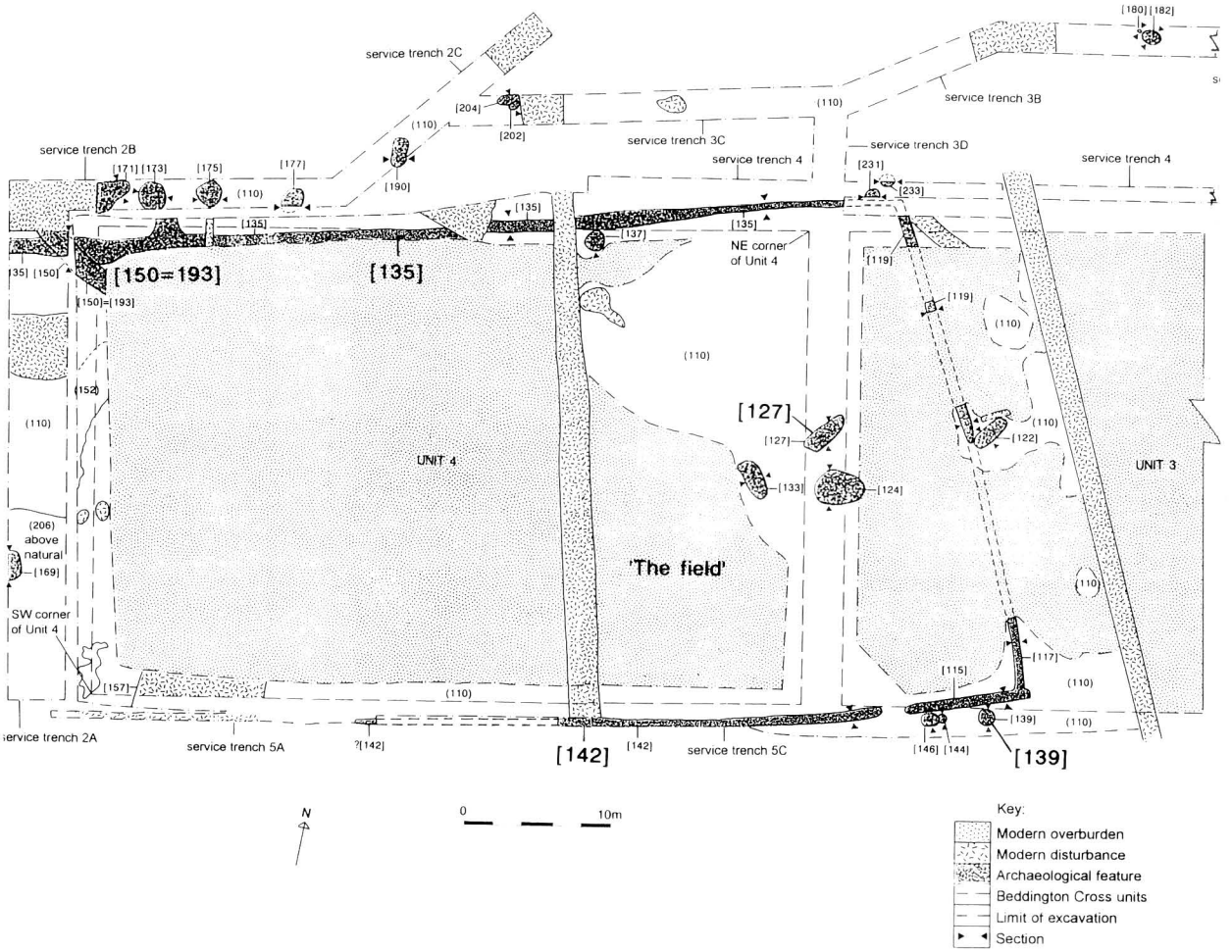

Fig. 2: phase 1 Units 3 and 4 showing field ditches and pitting

Roman finds and features are scattered in the vicinity[9]. The Beddington Cross site remained open fields until about the time of World War 1, when the gravel pit to the north began to encroach.

The watching briefs

English Heritage, on behalf of Sutton Borough Council, set out the requirements for the archaeological mitigation. Method statements were prepared for each stage by RPS Consultants. Three stages of fieldwork were conducted (see Fig. 1 for locations). The first stage (Phase 1) consisted of monitoring ground disturbances during construction of warehouse units 1-4. The work was conducted from January to April 1998 and included monitoring a service trench which ran for the length of the site access road[10]. The second stage was carried out in summer 1999 for works associated with a One 2 One warehouse development in the central northern area of the site[11]. The third and final stage comprised ground disturbances associated with warehouse units 5-9 in the south-west area of the site (Phase 4 of the development), and of the foundation trenches for units 17 and 18 in the north-east area of the site (Phase 2)[12]. The third stage was conducted from October to December 1999. The fieldwork was directed by R. Masefield (Stages 1 and 3) and M. Connell (stage 2) under site code BDT98.

Results

Phase 1 of the work was the most informative. The stratigraphic sequences for the site were typified by a ditch [108] which cut directly into the sands and gravels and was sealed by a homogenous sandy silt

9. GLSMR 020249, 021759-60, 0200260, 020219, 020465 and 021205.

10. R Masefield *Beddington Cross Archaeological Watching Brief Results* RPS Clouston Report (May 1998).

11. M Connell *Beddington Cross One 2 One Site Archaeological Watching Brief Results* RPS Consultants Report (January 2000).

12. R Masefield *Beddington Cross II Archaeological Watching Brief Results* RPS Consultants (January 2000).

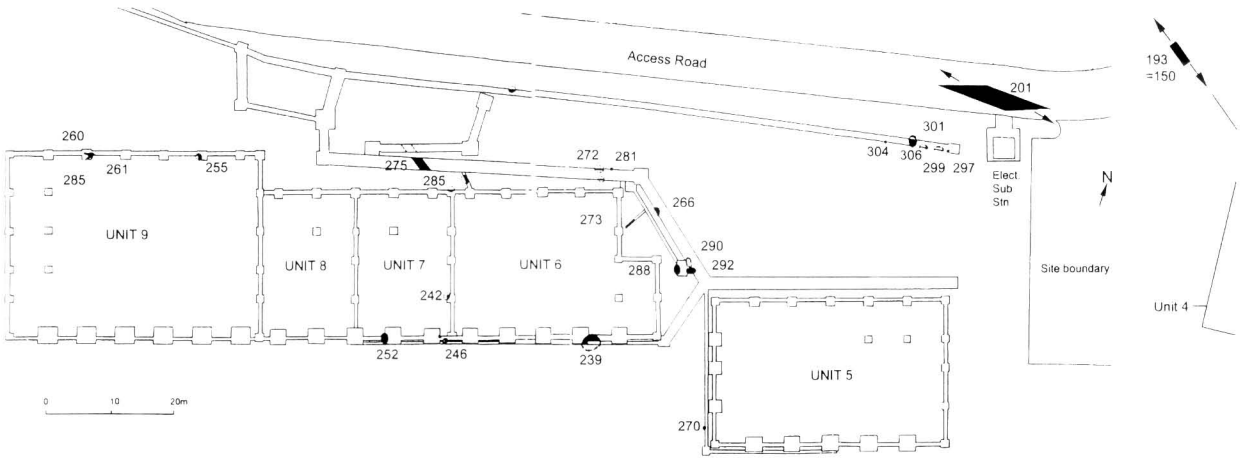

Fig. 3: phase 4 Units 5-9 showing field ditches and pitting

alluvial layer. The ditch was orientated *c.* north-south from the south-east corner of the development (where it was partially preserved by a modern bank). An associated gravel bank had survived later truncation. The undated ditch was filled with silty sand (typical of fills across the site). The 0.3m thick flood layer above was found to exist (where not removed by modern truncation) over the entire site and produced small amounts of flintwork typical of the Late Neolithic or Bronze Age period. An absence of any later finds from the deposit may suggest that it represents a prehistoric soil horizon.

The ground level in the south-east area of the site (units 1 and 2) was previously lowered *c.* 0.7m into the natural gravel and consequently no features had survived here. However a further series of ditches, representing at least two phases of field or plot systems, and a number of discrete features, survived modern damage to the west (Fig. 2). The earlier phase was represented by two parallel ditches/gullies [135] and [142], the northern of which was traced for 60m. The NEE/SWW orientated linear features were some 33m apart, and were connected at their eastern extents (proven at one junction and inferred at the other) by the perpendicular linear feature [117]/[119]. No western side was located, but three sides of a probable rectangular field appear to be represented. Dating evidence was scarce, comprising single flint flakes from ditches [115] and [117] in addition to a small quantity of burnt flint. However, a prehistoric date was further suggested by the presence of more burnt flint from later ditch [150]/[193] which cut through the earlier field on a NW/SE alignment. This later ditch ran for over *c.* 20m from the main 1.8m wide service trench (which ran NE/SW for the length of the site) to the north-west corner of unit 4. An undated ditch [275] was excavated during the Phase 4 watching brief (Fig. 3 -- to the north of unit 7) *c.* 125m to the west of and parallel to ditch [150]/[193] as a possible further element of the later landscape. The main service trench produced two further ditches [201] and [218]/[220] on similar alignments to the earlier phase ditches. These may represent contemporary boundaries of this phase. Ditch [201] produced a quantity of burnt flint and several items of "fresh" probable Bronze Age flintwork.

A total of 46 pits and probable pits were sampled during the course of work. Features were widely spread, although the limited areas of investigation preclude meaningful comments on their density or distribution. A small circular truncated pit [139] immediately south of the south-east corner of the earlier 'field' (Figs. 2 and 4) was 0.2m deep and was clay-lined. Sherds of a Middle Bronze Age (hereafter MBA) vessel were pressed into the surface of the clay lining at the flat base of the feature (pottery report below). This pit may have been used to store water. The interpretation of other pits is more problematical. Several features were considered to be tree holes but the remaining 46 features were well defined in plan with definite sides and bases and appear to be anthropogenic in character (Fig. 4). Their form varied from small, shallow scoops to larger oval and 'cigar-shaped' pits. A minority of them produced finds, and the fills comprised sandy silts with some edge slumpage but with no evidence of more humic occupation-derived deposits. Pit [288] at the west end of Unit 6 (Fig. 3) produced probable Neolithic Peterborough ware[13] in addition to hard hammer-struck flints, burnt flint and burnt clay. Otherwise dateable finds were scarce, though low densities of

13. J Cotton *pers comm.*

worked and burnt flint from pits [127], [160], [171], [173], [177], [182], [190], [290], [297], [299], [302] and [306] suggest a later prehistoric date. As well as the probable pits, six possible post holes were excavated.

The finds

51 worked flints were recovered from 21 contexts. The comments of N. Barton and B. Chilcott are summarised here. Most of the flints were relatively 'fresh', raw material was probably obtained from the river gravels. No diagnostic tools were found, but the alluvial layer (106)/(302)/(408) produced two hard hammer cores whilst fills (199) and (295) produced similar cores demonstrating apparently *ad hoc* flaking typical of the Late Neolithic/ Bronze Age. Of the flakes, no axe-thinning flakes were found and only one blade of probable Mesolithic/ earlier Neolithic date was present. The remainder of the flakes and chips demonstrate use of a hard hammer, typical of the Late Neolithic/ Bronze Age period. A total of 65 fragments of burnt flint (2285g) was recovered from 18 contexts.

Ceramic finds included two fragments of burnt clay and a sherd of pottery from fill (295) of pit [288]. The sherd is relatively thin walled with ill-sorted flint temper and internal wiping. A mid to Late Neolithic date is probable as a possible example of undecorated Peterborough Ware[13].

A MBA vessel from Beddington Cross
(by Jon Cotton)

The pottery considered here was recovered from the base of clay-lined pit [139] (junction between clay lining (141) and silting fill (140)). It comprises thirteen sherds weighing 625g belonging to a sin-

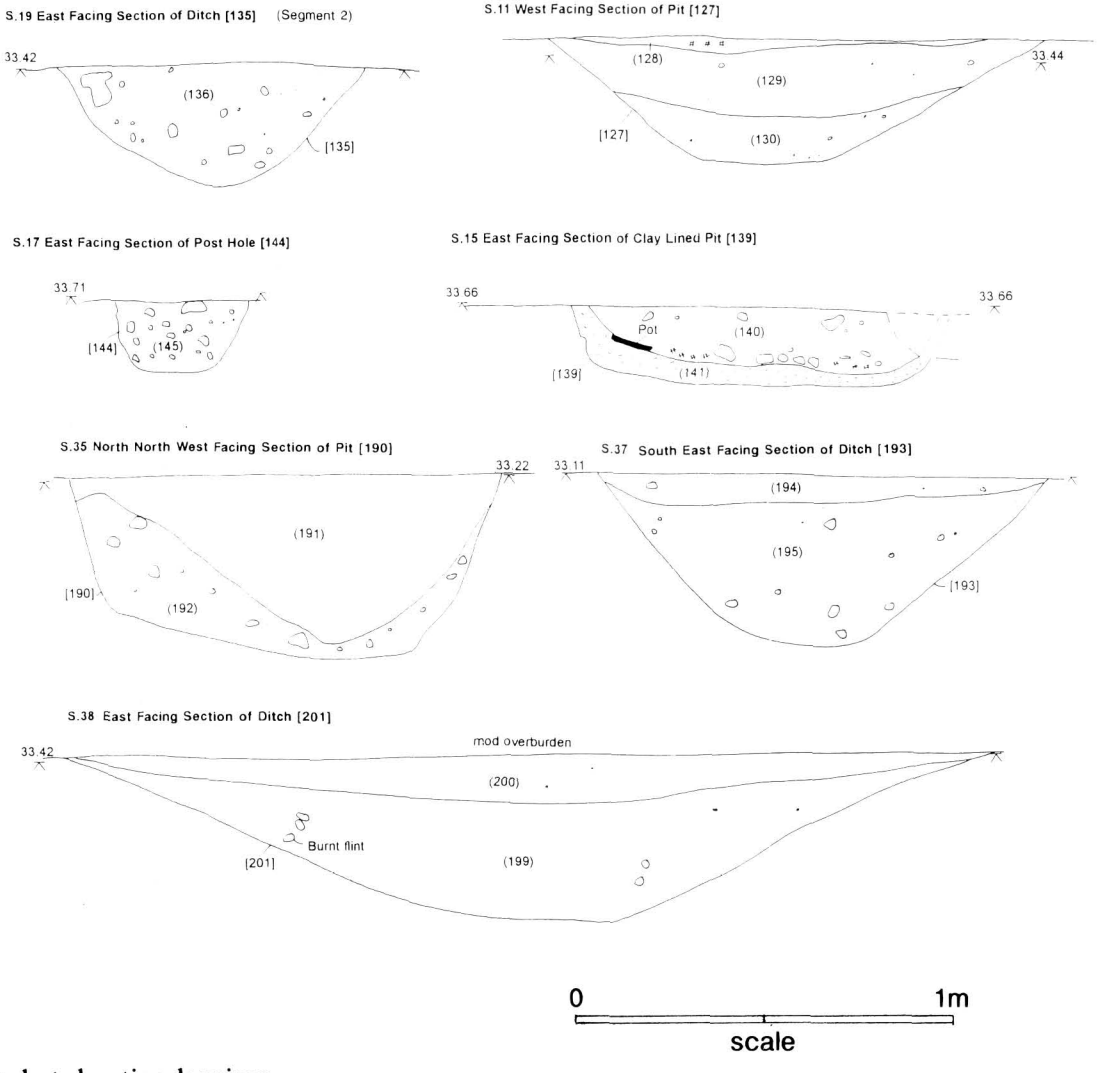

Fig. 4: selected section drawings

gle, large, and unusually decorated, straight-walled bucket-shaped vessel of southern British Deverel-Rimbury type, conventionally dated to the MBA (i.e. mid to late 2nd millennium BC).

Two re-fitting groups of sherds enable the upper 300mm of the profile to be reconstructed with reasonable certainty, but the lower part of the profile (represented by a further two re-fitting sherd groups) and the vessel diameter, are more debatable (Fig. 5). However, with a rim diameter estimated to lie in the region of 400-480mm, the vessel was clearly of large size and capacity.

Fabric

The sherds were examined using a x20 binocular microscope. They have a hard fabric with moderate to common poorly-sorted angular to sub-angular flint filler < 8mm across, rare very fine mica, and rare rounded quartz grains < 0.25mm. The vessel walls are up to 13mm thick and apparently coil-built, irregularly fired with buff to grey-brown exterior surfaces and predominantly grey-brown interior surfaces. Where it survives, surface treatment shows traces of internal wiping, although the condition of the surfaces of individual sherds is variable, and is presumably an indication of their orientation in the ground.

Functional and decorative traits

Functional and decorative characteristics comprise: a row of evenly-spaced pre-firing perforations 5-6mm in diameter below an externally-expanded but otherwise plain upright rim; a carefully-modelled horizontal finger-impressed cordon around the girth of the vessel at an estimated 150mm below the rim; and, remarkably, multiple stab decoration which covers both the external and internal surfaces (Fig. 6).

At least three different tools appear to have been employed in this latter process: a narrow three- or possibly four-toothed comb up to 7mm in width, whose impressions are confined to a horizontal zone expanding 90mm below the rim on the external wall; a narrow pointed spatulate implement of rectangular or slightly plano-convex cross-section some 4mm in width and 1-1.5mm thick, whose impressions are mainly confined to the external wall below the comb decorated zone, although they also occur in a narrow horizontal zone close to the pre-firing perforations; and a pointed implement of circular cross-section (similar to a small knitting needle or large cocktail stick) between 2-3mm in diameter, whose impressions are mainly confined to the inner wall, although individual impressions occur both below the cordon and in a small group above the cordon on the external wall.

The stab decoration was clearly the last decorative feature to be applied to the vessel prior to firing, as individual punctuations overlie the applied cordon. Equally, the circular punctuations appear to be the latest in the stabbed sequence, as several

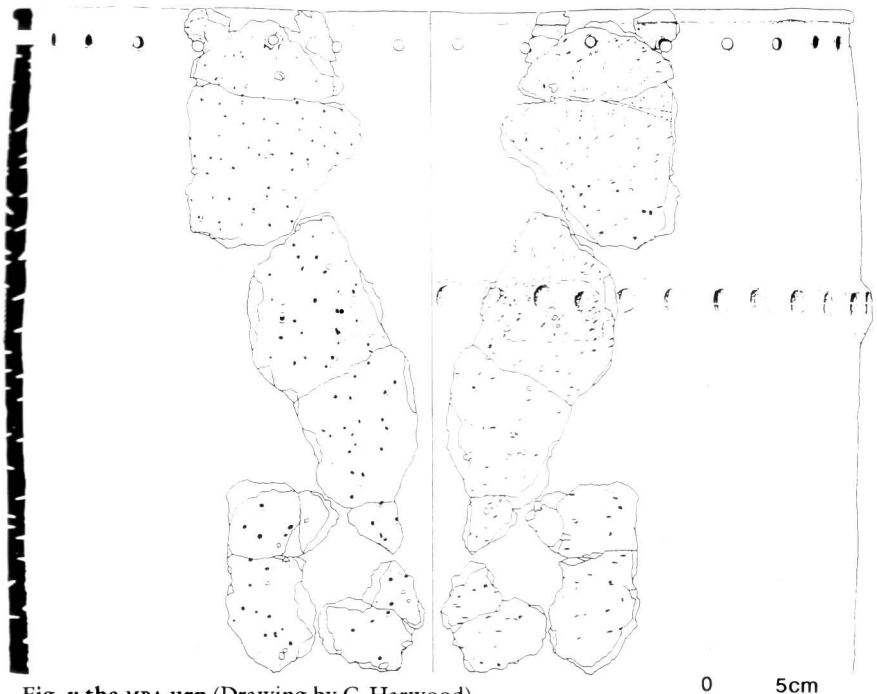

Fig. 5: the MBA urn (Drawing by C. Harwood)

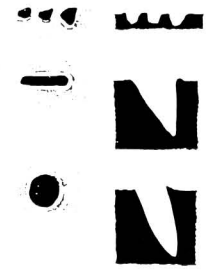

Fig. 6: close up of stab marks x 1.5 magnification

encroach on the spatulate examples. In terms of orientation, the comb and spatulate impressions above the cordon are at an angle to the horizontal, while below it the circular impressions lie more or less parallel with the rim. Individual punctuations, particularly the spatulate and circular examples, penetrate up to 4-5mm into the vessel walls, and have clearly therefore been applied with reasonable firmness, often resulting in halos of raised clay. The comb impressions are, by comparison, much less firmly applied. The angle at which the internal punctuations were made also suggests that the potter was having to reach over the rim and apply oblique downwards pressure; the external punctuations appear to have been applied at right angles to the vessel wall. Rough "zoning" of the decoration above the cordon apart, individual punctuations appear to have been randomly if closely spaced; no obvious pattern or "reserved" areas can be discerned.

Discussion

In broad terms, the vessel can be accommodated within the southern British Deverel-Rimbury series of bucket urns -- the latter particularly well represented in Ellison's Lower Thames grouping[14]. Although unusually large, its form and certain of the functional/decorative traits, such as pre-firing perforations below the rim (the latter thought to facilitate the attachment of an organic cover) and the finger impressed cordon at the girth, can be matched on any number of vessels from the region and beyond[15].

However, the profuse stab decoration is quite without parallel amongst the Lower Thames valley assemblages. At first glance, the most obvious reference points lie within the Ardleigh group of urns from north-east Essex/south-east Suffolk, but even here decorative traits are overwhelmingly confined to the exterior surfaces, and tend to revolve around the use of finger-tip rustication rather than that of pointed bone or wood implements[16]. Nonetheless comb point decoration does occur as a minor decorative trait, and has been identified on vessels in several assemblages including Ardleigh itself[17], White Colne, Wix and North Shoebury[18]. Moreover, and somewhat closer to home, the small Deverel-Rimbury assemblage from Hayes Common, Kent, incorporates sherds bearing traces of combed arcs[19], while a single thin-walled sherd with traces of comb point decoration (possibly part of a globular urn) has been noted amongst material recovered from the Cargo Distribution Service site on the south side of Heathrow Airport[20].

Brown[21] has argued for a broadly early date for the decorated Ardleigh urns, based on details of decoration and fabric, an argument supported by a recent series of early radiocarbon dates from Brightlingsea. The restricted zone of comb point decoration below the rim of the Beddington urn (matched, interestingly, by a similar zone on one of the Ardleigh vessels[22]) might encourage notions of an early date too, bearing in mind the use of such decoration on beakers, within whose north-eastern Surrey distribution-pattern the Wandle valley lies[23].

While the Lower Thames region is often regarded, on circumstantial grounds, as the area in which the Deverel-Rimbury complex first developed, the Beddington urn must remain, for the time being, something of an intriguing one-off. Furthermore, the placing of the sherds on the floor of a clay-lined pit adds weight to the suggestion that this unusually large and remarkably decorated vessel was in some sense 'special' to the community who made, used and ultimately broke it. It is hoped that future work in this part of the Wandle Valley will allow this MBA phase of activity to be brought into sharper focus; a few scattered traces apart, it has defied resolution hitherto despite the extensive excavations which have been carried out in the Beddington area over the last twenty years.

Site discussion

The Neolithic element represented by an oval pit containing possible Peterborough Ware might be part of activity indicated by a wider scatter of similarly dated features. The evaluation at Bed-

14. A Ellison *Pottery and Settlements of the Later Bronze Age in Southern England* Unpublished PhD thesis: University of Cambridge (1975) (quoted in Brown 1995).

15. E.g. J C Barrett 'Four Bronze Age cremation cemeteries from Middlesex' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* **24** (1973) 111-34; N Macpherson-Grant 'A review of Late Bronze Age pottery from East Kent' *Canterbury's Archaeology* **16** (1992) 55-63; and S P Needham 'The Bronze Age' *in* Bird, J & Bird, D G, (eds) *The Archaeology of Surrey to 1540* (1987) 108-11.

16. N Brown 'Ardleigh reconsidered: Deverel-Rimbury pottery in Essex' in Kinnes, I & Varndell, G (eds) *'Unbaked Urns of Rudely Shape': Essays on British and Irish Pottery for Ian Longworth* Oxbow Monograph 55 (1995) 127-8.

17. F H Erith & I H Longworth 'A Bronze Age urnfield on Vince's Farm, Ardleigh, Essex' *Proc Prehist Soc* **26** (1960) 180.

18. N Brown *op. cit.* fn 16; *pers. comm.*

19. B J Philp *Excavations in West Kent 1960-1970* (1973) 51 & fig 18 142b, c & d.

20. Stuart Hoad (*pers. comm.*) site code CDA95.

21. N Brown *op. cit.* fn 16, 128.

22. N Brown *op. cit* fn 16, gazetteer no 26.

23. S P Needham 'The Bronze Age' *in* Bird J & Bird D G (eds) *The Archaeology of Surrey to 1540* (1987) 110 & fig 5.4.

dington Sewage Works produced two ditches containing Peterborough Ware[24]. Peterborough Ware was also found within isolated pit features at Valley Park[25] whilst a cooking pit and ploughsoil layer at the Philips Factory Site[26] were dated to the Late Neolithic. In addition a Neolithic bowl found in 1912 to the immediate north of the site[27] might be derived from settlement. The finds suggest local Neolithic activity which may have been associated with farming clearances.

The use of the pits is difficult to assess except to say that activity within the landscape but away from settlements is represented. It is certainly possible that some of the less regular pits are grubbing-out holes as part of tree clearance for agriculture. The eight 'cigar shaped' pits are of some interest. In common with the other pits the low finds density and lack of charcoal/humus within the fills tends to indicate a lack of adjacent settlement. Furthermore a storage function seems unlikely without clay lining. Examples of 'cigar-shaped features' are known from west London[28] including a MBA example from Wall Garden Farm (WGF84) on the terrace gravels[29]. As with the poorly dated examples at Beddington the function there was unknown.

The clay-lined MBA pit may have been used for liquid storage but may also have been used as the receptacle of a special or 'placed' deposit of pottery as an offering, perhaps made by a farmer hoping to increase agricultural yield? Other broadly contemporary 'placed' deposits from the area include a pair of palstaves from Mitcham Junction and a very large example of a basal-looped spearhead (over 798mm in length) found with cattle bones (indicative of pastoral farming?) at Wandle Park to the south-east of the site[30].

Whilst the site's ditches are poorly dated, a late prehistoric date is probable given the proximity of Neolithic/Bronze Age pits with similar fills, and sealed by the same flood deposits, (which themselves contained late prehistoric flintwork with no later material). Furthermore the MBA clay-lined pit and two similar though undated pits appear to respect the southern boundary of the rectangular plot and might therefore be contemporary, whilst an alignment of four probable later prehistoric pits may respect the northern edge of the 'field' (Fig. 2). One possibility then is that the 'field' and similarly aligned ditches to the west (which produced probable Bronze Age flintwork) are of MBA date. The MBA evidence could represent a phase of 'land grab' and clearance at which time the land was divided up and brought into agricultural use.

There was a general movement to create widespread field systems possibly linked with more intensive pastoral and arable agriculture and permanent settlement within well defined territories in the LBA[31]. The important LBA enclosure site at Queen Mary's Hospital, Carshalton (4.7km to the south-east) has been linked with the emergence of such a local territory[32] and the creation of extensive field systems in the Wandle valley may have been influenced by its government. Two LBA ditches at Beddington Sewage Farm might be associated with the postulated territory[33]. The later phase of ditches truncating the earlier 'field' at Beddington Cross could be of LBA date in this context as more limited MBA fields were realigned. It is exactly this situation which is increasingly recognised in the Thames Valley. A recent study by Yates shows that the phenomenon of co-axial field systems appears in the eastern Thames Valley in the MBA and is associated with Deverel Rimbury pottery (for example in the River Colne Valley and on the Heathrow terraces)[34]. With the emergence of 'power bases' in the LBA, in this case at Carshalton, came a reorganisation of settlement and field systems. Yates suggests that numerous sites now support the notion that there followed 'economic dislocation' evidenced on the Heathrow terraces, for example, by the abandonment of the settlements and fields. It is accepted that the scarcity of finds from the ditches means that such a conclusion here is conjectural.

LBA activity is widespread at the sites mentioned above and although none of the features at Beddington Cross were proven to be of this date it would be surprising if they were absent. Despite the proximity of the Roman villa at Beddington Sewage Works no Roman evidence was found.

24. M Heaton and C Hearne *op cit* fn 5.
25. B Bazely *op cit* fn 6.
26. S Tucker *The Philips Factory site, Beddington Farm Road, Croydon Preliminary Report of the 1990-91 Archaeological Investigations* Museum of London DGLA (1991) Clay-lined pit dated 3860±70 BC (Beta-68582) (2552-2069 cal BC at 95% confidence).
27. GLSMR 030234.
28. J Cotton *pers comm.*
29. MoLAS, *Post Excavation Assessment Report. The Developing Landscape of West London. Settlement, Economy and Environment on the Thames Gravels* (unpublished).
30. GLSMR data -- I J Coleman 'Note' *Proc Soc Antiq London 2nd Ser* **18** (1899-1900) 352-3.
31. K Whittaker *pers. comm.*
32. K Whittaker *The Late Bronze Age Enclosure at Carshalton, Surrey: an Assessment of Research Potential, English Heritage Evaluation Project Brief* (Draft) (May 1998).
33. GLSMR 021208.
34. D T Yates 'Bronze Age Field Systems in the Thames Valley' *Oxford J Archaeol* **18** (2) (1999) 157-171.