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A NEOLITHIC PIT AT REMENHAM, NEAR HENLEY-ON-THAMES, BERKSHIRE

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INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1983, a major gas pipeline was laid from Ascot in Berkshire to Nuffield in Oxfordshire, crossing the River Thames just north of Henley-on-Thames (Figs. 1 and 2). The proposed route was field-walked in advance of construction and subsequent ground disturbance while laying the pipeline was monitored to record archaeological features prior to their destruction. The extent of ground disturbance was strictly limited to a 30 metre wide corridor and no fieldwork was undertaken outside this area.

Before construction work began, known sites of archaeological activity along the pipeline route included areas of Neolithic activity on the northern valley slopes (Bucks S.M.R. Nos. 0794 and 0867) and an unusual Lower Palaeolithic assemblage from a remnant of the Lynch Hill river terrace at Remenham (Wymer 1968, 202–9). Topsoil removal during pipeline construction, however, produced significant quantities of Late Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age flintwork. On the floodplain on the north side of the river (Fig. 2, site B: N.G.R. SU 765 847) a scatter of Late Mesolithic/Earlier Neolithic flintwork was located (see the Appendix), while the floodplain on the south side (Fig. 2, site C: N.G.R. SU 771 845) yielded Later Neolithic/Bronze Age flakes (see the Appendix). Neolithic/Bronze Age flintwork was also recovered towards the top of the chalk slope above the terrace (Fig. 2, site A: N.G.R. SU 7819 8380) and subsequent disturbance in digging the pipe trench in the vicinity of this flint scatter located a shallow pit.

THE PIT

This feature was only visible in the southern trench section and lay between adjacent ice wedges which cut deep into the chalk bedrock (Fig. 3). The pit was cut into the clean sand overlying the chalk bedrock. It has two fills: the lower fill contained charcoal flecks and fragments, worked flints and potsherds. Neither could be discerned in plan and were ill-defined in section, the interface distinguishable only by the presence or absence of charcoal flecks. The nature of pipe trench excavation made it impossible to estimate how much of the pit was destroyed, but the surviving portion was sub-circular and extended back 0.3m (maximum) from the section edge. It is regrettable that this pit was located by a process which led to its partial destruction and was, of necessity, excavated and recorded under adverse conditions.

THE POTTERY

Description. 22 potsherds were retrieved from the pit, representing portions of two vessels. Only two lug fragments survived from the first vessel; these were black (fired in a reducing atmosphere) and tempered with medium to small calcined flint grits.

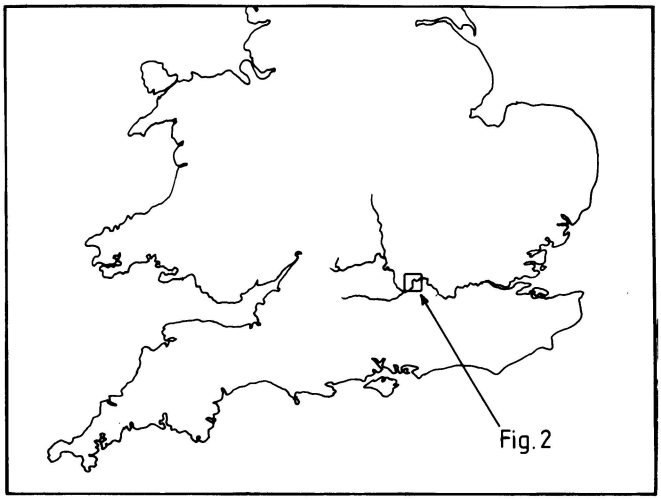

Fig. 1. Location of Henley-on-Thames.

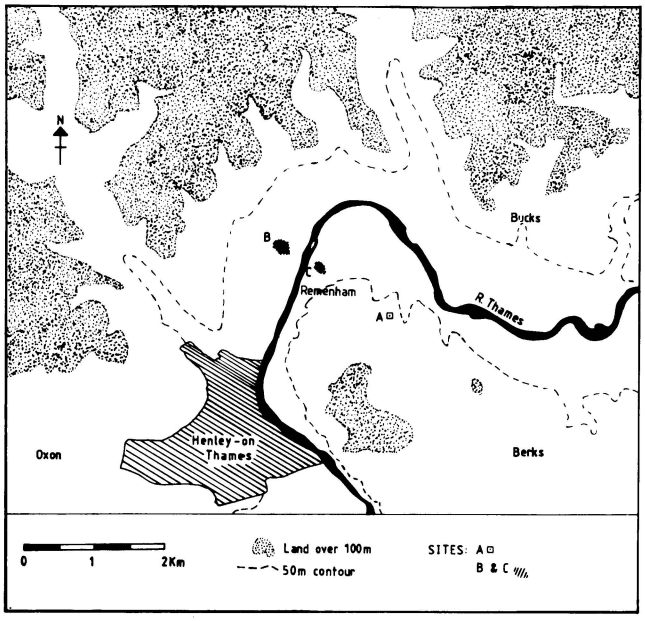

Fig. 2. Location map showing Neolithic sites close to the River Thames discovered in the course of pipeline construction in 1983.

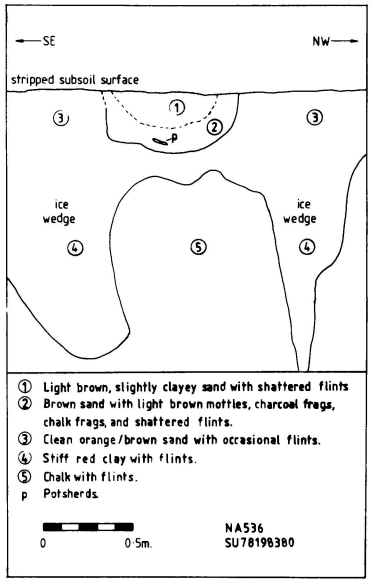

Fig. 3. Section of pit at site A containing Earlier Neolithic pottery and flintwork.

The second vessel (Fig. 4) is a round-based bowl, represented by twenty pieces (including two rim sherds and one from the base). The clay had been tempered with medium to fine calcined flint; the pot was hand-built from coils of clay and then smoothed with the fingers. A number of shallow nail impressions were visible both in- and outside the vessel, showing how the clay had been smoothed over and protruding grits pushed into the body until they were flush with the surface.

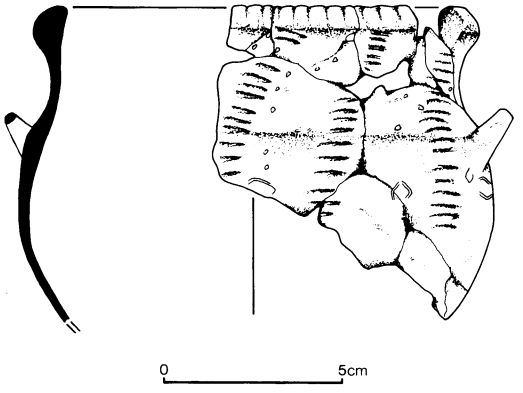

Fig. 4. Earlier Neolithic bowl recovered from the pit at site A (drawn by Vivienne Tanner).

The pot is carinated, with a slightly thickened and everted rim and probably two vertically-perforated lugs (only one was preserved). Impressed decoration was added to the top of the rim and in vertical columns around the neck and just below the shoulder, in some instances executed with a fingernail and in others with a pointed implement similar in shape and diameter to a thorn (compare the left hand column with that on the right, which was impressed with a fingernail, in Fig. 4). A simple circle, indented by the use of a fingernail, was inserted between each column below the shoulder.

The body was dark brown internally and around the rim and neck on the outside; the base was orange-brown. The pot was probably placed upside down while it was being fired, so that as the fire died away air circulated around its base and oxidised the surface.

Discussion. The fabric and form of the vessel are characteristic of the Earlier Neolithic round-based bowl tradition (Smith 1974, 106). The layout and style of the decoration, however, cannot be paralleled directly elsewhere in the Neolithic pottery repertoire. It is probable that this bowl fits into the decorated series of Earlier Neolithic pottery (Whittle 1977, 85–97), which consists of a series of regionally-defined decorative styles. As such, it could relate to a hitherto unknown regional style present in the southern Chilterns/Middle Thames region; alternatively, it could be one of the early Ebbsfleet bowls described by Smith as occurring in the lower Thames Valley (1974, 112). The only other presently known Earlier Neolithic pottery assemblage in this region came from Cannon Hill, c.12km to the east of Remenham between Maidenhead and Bray, Berkshire (N.G.R. SU 8964 7926). Here, undecorated pottery was recovered, including carinated, round-based bowls tempered with crushed flint (Bradley *et al.* 1976). The pottery assemblage from the Whiteleaf Barrow, Buckinghamshire (N.G.R. SP 822 041), situated c.20km to the north, included decorated pottery with similarities to Abingdon (Oxfordshire) and Mildenhall (East Anglia) wares (Childe and Smith 1954, 224). This site is located at the interface between the known distribution of these two regional styles and Smith suggested that decorated pottery from the Chilterns comprised a "mingling of traditions" (*ibid*, 228). The Remenham bowl has similarities in both fabric, form and the use of decoration on the rim and below the shoulder with some of the decorated pottery from Whiteleaf. It would not be surprising,

therefore, to find a discrete style-group in the decorated series appearing in the middle and lower stretches of the Thames, reaching as far north-west as the Chilterns.

THE FLINTWORK

A total of 75 flints were recovered from the pit fill; a further 47 pieces came from the topsoil in the vicinity of the pit (Table 1).

Table 1.

	Topsoil	Pit fill	TOTAL
Unretouched flakes and blades	44	62 (9 are fire-fractured)	106
Shattered pieces	–	5	5
Crested pieces	–	3'	3
Utilised flakes	–	2	2
Miscellaneous retouched flakes	–	1	1
Cutting flakes	1	1'	2
Scrapers	2'	–	2
Fire-fractured flint	–	1	1
TOTAL	47	75	122

' denotes illustrated pieces

Raw material. The flint varies in colour from light brown to dark grey-brown with cream cherty patches. 69% of the flints from the topsoil still retain cortex; the figure is 27% for those from the pit fill. Cortex is usually thin and smooth and all the flint is nodular. Flint of a similar nature can be obtained from the gravel deposits and the chalk surface within the immediate vicinity of the pit. All the flint, with the exception of fire-fractured pieces, is unpatinated.

The flint from the pit is clearly quite different in nature to that recovered from the topsoil. The colour of the topsoil flint is consistently darker than that from the pit, with the exception of one scraper which is compatible with some of the flint from the pit fill. The topsoil flints are also well-rolled, while those from the pit are sharp and unabraded.

In looking at the flint from the pit, it is apparent that at least four nodules were worked. The flint is not too badly flawed and a number of removals traversing the full length of the flaked surface were detached. The topsoil flint is much poorer in quality and comparable with the majority of natural flint in the area. The nodular flint recovered from the pit was probably carefully selected from the natural flint available for working (a process which can easily be done by tapping the flint or taking off one removal).

Production techniques. As with the quality of flint used, the pieces from the topsoil and those from the pit show a marked contrast in the manner in which the flint was worked. The flints from the topsoil have pronounced bulbs and points of percussion, showing that they were mainly struck using a stone hammer; some pieces have hinged and others show signs of mis-hits on their proximal ends. Platforms on the core were seldom abraded before detaching the next removal and butts average 4mm in width.

The flints in the pit, however, were worked with both stone (about a third of removals) and soft hammers (about two thirds of removals); traces of mis-hits and hinge fractures are absent, though one piece plunged during its removal from the core. Furthermore, care was frequently taken to trim off all overhangs along the edge of the platform in between detaching each removal and butts are frequently less than 1mm in width. Although the two flint groups are too small for detailed metrical analysis, the proportion of blades varies between the two groups: 10% of the topsoil flints are blades, increasing to 27% for those in the pit (Table 2).

Table 2. Length: breadth ratios for unbroken removals.

	Topsoil	Pit fill
0 – 1.0	14 (30%)	13 (29%)
1.1 – 2.0	21 (54%)	20 (44%)
2.1 +	4 (10%)	12 (27%)

The majority of flints in the pit could represent débitage resulting from one flaking session. The sequence of flaking began after the selection of a suitable nodule with the removal of one of its ends. The freshly-exposed flint surface was then used as the striking platform from which to detach blades. The edge of the platform was frequently abraded to clear away overhangs in between detaching removals and ridges on the flaked surface were used as guidelines when removing each blade. When the angle between the platform and the flaked surface became too obtuse for the removal of requisite pieces, an alternative surface on the core was selected for use as a platform, thus changing the direction of flaking (as demonstrated by the two refitted pieces illustrated in Fig. 5a). The process continued until removals of the desired size and shape could no longer be taken off the core. This core reduction strategy is different to the one commonly employed in the Mesolithic period: on single platform cores, striking platforms were frequently changed by detaching core tablets, thus more or less preserving the same direction of flaking throughout (e.g. at Hengistbury Head, Dorset: Barton 1981, 7).

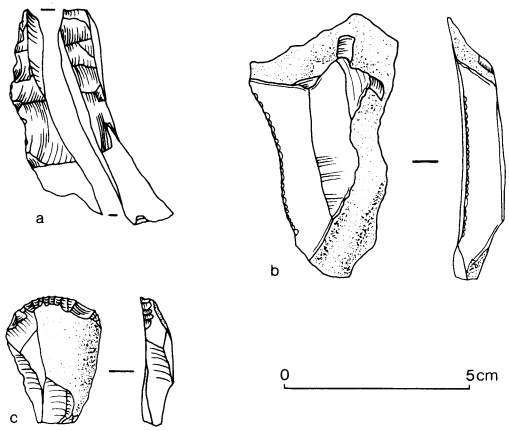

Fig. 5. Flint artefacts from site A: a, conjoining crested piece and blade; b, cutting flake; c, scraper.

The implements. Few implements were recovered (Table 1; Fig. 5b and c) and these are chronologically undiagnostic. These were examined under a microscope for traces of use, but there is a mineral deposit forming a thin film over much of the surface of each flint (John Dumont, pers. comm.). On the cutting flake retrieved from the pit, polish similar to that often produced by working bone was observed through the mineral deposit along the lateral margin and edge of the ventral surface and on the arêtes of the retouched scars on the dorsal surface. Some striations were visible, running perpendicular to the retouched edge, but these are not necessarily related to the polish. Clearly, the implement had been used, but its precise function could not be determined. Of the other implements, one of the scrapers (Fig. 5c) is unrolled and made on flint similar in colour and quality to that recovered from the pit. The utilised flakes have irregular denticulate edges, but it is uncertain whether this derives from use or another process e.g. spontaneous retouch.

Discussion. The flints recovered from the pit differ markedly from those obtained from the topsoil. The material in the pit is largely flintworking waste, but includes a number of fire-fractured pieces and at least one implement. While the length: breadth ratios for both flint groups (Table 2) are broadly similar, the flint in the pit had been carefully selected and flaked in a fashion totally different to the rather clumsily-struck flint in the topsoil. The association of the flint in the pit with Earlier Neolithic pottery provides a date for this industry. The flint from the topsoil could be contemporary; indeed the few unabraded flakes and one of the scrapers could have come from the upper fill of the pit or from the Neolithic ground surface adjacent to the pit. However, it is perhaps more likely that this flintwork is associated with Later Neolithic or Bronze Age activity on the site.

CONCLUSION

The pit produced pottery and flintwork of Earlier Neolithic date (c. 3200–2600 bc). The reconstructed pot from the pit is of particular interest as it could relate to a regional style group of the decorated pottery series, consisting of early Ebbsfleet bowls (Smith 1974, 112) and occurring in the middle and lower Thames valley.

The flintwork from the topsoil in the vicinity of the pit is of a different nature to that recovered from this feature. A study of the raw materials used and methods of working proved more sensitive than crude length: breadth ratio measurements in characterising the two flint groups and it is possible that the topsoil flints are later in date than the flintwork in the pit. It has been suggested elsewhere that there was a change in flint artefact production from blade- to flake-dominant industries by the Later Neolithic period (Pitts 1978). This is undoubtedly related to a change in flint-working techniques used for the production of implement "blanks" and this report is a first step towards describing the different flintworking techniques used in the Earlier and Later Neolithic periods (Holgate in prep.).

The flintwork in the pit, comprising an assortment of burnt material, used implements and flaking débitage, could be domestic in character and perhaps related to the tidying of a work area and disposal of rubbish that could have caused harm had it been left lying around; the sharp-edged flints would have been lethal if accidentally trodden on. Alternatively, the material in the pit could be an intentional deposit associated with some form of ceremonial or religious activity. Certainly the high proportion of complete Mortlake bowls and stone axes recovered from the River Thames and its flood plain are unlikely to have eroded out of riverside settlements, implying that the Thames margin was used for ceremonial purposes (Holgate in prep.). Further fieldwork would be highly desirable to define the extent and nature of Earlier Neolithic activity in the vicinity of the pit.

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APPENDIX

Site B (BGC site references NA 520, NA 521 and NA 553).

Flakes	74
Blades	12
Cores	4
Core fragment	1
Miscellaneous retouched flakes	2

Scrapers	3
Cutting flakes	2
Flake with semi-abrupt retouch	1
?notched pieces	2
?microlith fragment	1
Leaf-shaped arrowhead	1
TOTAL	103

Site C (BGC site reference NA 552).

Flakes	56
Cores	3
Miscellaneous retouched flakes	2
Scrapers	2
Piercer	1
TOTAL	64