



**Chris Butler MfA
Archaeological Services Ltd**



**An Archaeological Watching Brief
at
Methersham Farm, Beckley,
East Sussex.**

Project No. CBAS0147

TQ 8645 2693

by
Keith Butler PIfA

August 2011

Summary

An archaeological watching brief was maintained on groundworks at Methersham Farm Beckley, East Sussex. The works comprised the reduction of the ground surface for the relocation of a stable block, and the excavation of the footings for a garage and tool store on the site of the stables.

No archaeological features were noted, and only a small quantity of artefacts was recovered, most of which were of a recent date. The exception being three peg tiles recovered from the subsoil of probable late Medieval or early Post Medieval date.

Chris Butler MifA Archaeological Services

Prehistoric Flintwork Specialist

**Rosedale
Berwick
Polegate
East Sussex
BN26 6TB**

Tel & fax: 01323 811785

e mail: chris@cbasltd.co.uk

web site: www.cbasltd.co.uk

Contents

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Historical & Archaeological Background
- 3.0 Archaeological Methodology
- 4.0 Results
- 5.0 Finds
- 6.0 Discussion
- 7.0 Acknowledgements

Figures

- Fig. 1 Site location and Archaeological Notification Areas
 - Fig. 2 Site plan showing buildings affected
 - Fig. 3 HER data
 - Fig. 4 1st Edition OS Map
 - Fig. 5 1947 aerial photograph
 - Fig. 6 Site Plan showing location of areas monitored
 - Figs. 7 & 8 Photographs
- Appendix 1: HER Summary Form

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1** Chris Butler Archaeological Services Ltd (CBAS) was commissioned by Mr & Mrs Holcombe to carry out an archaeological watching brief at Methersham Farm, Hobbs Lane, Beckley, East Sussex (TQ 8645 2693). The watching brief was maintained during the reduction of the ground for the relocation of an existing stable block and the excavation of footings for the construction of a garage and implement store on the former site of the stables.
- 1.2** Methersham Farm is situated within an Archaeological Notification Area (Fig. 1) which defines the site of the Grange, and is also within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The development is likely to disturb features of archaeological interest, which need to be examined and recorded in accordance with Policy GD1 (viii) of the Rother District Local Plan and PPS5.
- 1.3** A planning application (RR/2010/906 & 907) for the construction of a garage and implement store and relocation of existing stables has been approved (Fig. 2). However, as a result of the site's location, and the archaeological potential of the area, the local planning authority have put a condition on the planning consent for the development, requiring an appropriate programme of archaeological work to be undertaken.
- 1.4** Methersham Farm is the site of a former Grange of the Cistercian Abbey of Robertsbridge. It is surrounded by a moat which is traceable either as earthworks or as a water-filled pond. The Grange appears to have been in use from the second half of the 13th century until 1538.
- 1.5** The geology, according to the British Geological Survey Sheet 304 is Wadurst Clay, with Alluvium in the Rother valley to the north and east, and along the line of a small stream to the south. Further south there is Tunbridge Wells Sand, and to the north is a broad area of Tidal Flat Deposits.
- 1.6** The archaeological watching brief carried out by the author on the 22nd November 2010 and 7th January 2011, with the project being managed by Chris Butler for CBAS.

2.0 Historical and Archaeological Background (Fig. 3)

- 2.1 There is some evidence for Prehistoric activity in the area, with a small group of Mesolithic flintwork, including a tranchet adze, was collected from a location (TQ860230) to the south of the site¹. Neolithic and Bronze Age arrowheads were also found in the same area. A Neolithic axe was found at TQ877265 (MES3464) to the east of the site, whilst a Bronze Age bronze spear (MES3466) was found in the River Rother at TQ843275².
- 2.2 Little evidence of Roman activity is known from the area, although on the east side of the Rother at Wittersham Manor in Kent (TQ88872671), a Roman ironworking site was investigated by HAARG, who recovered Roman pottery and coins³. Another undated, but possibly Roman, ironworking site is situated at Lossenham Farm, Kent (TQ84702775). A Roman lead weight has also been found nearby.
- 2.3 The name Beckley is derived from the Anglo-Saxon Beccanleah (the woodland cleared by Becca). In 880AD it was recorded as Beccanlea, and the manor was bequeathed by Alfred the Great in his will to Osferthe as Beccanleagh⁴, although this identification is unconfirmed, and there is no later manor of Beckley⁵.
- 2.4 Methersham Manor was granted by Gervase de Osp' to William de St. Martin in 1185. In 1190 the Methersham was leased to Robertsbridge Abbey, and in 1296 William de Northey, who was then in possession, granted the manor to Robertsbridge Abbey⁶.
- 2.5 Methersham became a Grange of Robertsbridge Abbey, until the dissolution of the Abbey, after which the Manor of Methersham, together with other lands of Robertsbridge Abbey, was granted to Sir William Sidney in 1539.
- 2.6 The Knelle Dam (MES3468) was constructed for 2.7km across the valley of the River Rother in 1332 to the west of the site in an effort to prevent flooding, and had an associated quay by 1357 for loading and unloading vessels⁷. By 1347 600a of Wittersham Level was under fresh water which could not find its way out to sea. This ensured that the tidal Rother flowed to the north of the Isle of Oxney where Smallhythe and Reading were centres of shipbuilding until the mid 1500s⁸.

¹ Wymer, J.J. 1977 *Gazetteer of Mesolithic sites in England and Wales*, CBA Research Report 22.

² Devenish, D. 1979 'A Barbed Spearhead from the Rother', *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 117

³ www.wirgdata.org

⁴ <http://www.villagenet.co.uk/rotherlevels/villages/beckley.php>

⁵ *Victoria County History: Sussex* Vol. 9.

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ Gardiner, M. 1995 'Medieval Farming and Flooding in the Brede Valley' in Eddison, J. (Ed) *Romney Marsh: the Debatable Ground*, OUCA Monograph 41.

⁸ <http://www.yates.clara.net/changes.html>

- 2.7** In 1600 the Knelle dam gave way with the pressure of flood water in the Rother valley, but since the structure gave benefit to the Wittersham levels it was repaired⁹. A Commission of Sewers was set up to manage the river from Bodiam down to Rye. Several projects to drain the valley failed costing over £11,000 and £6,000 by 1621. Early in the 17th century 1200ha of the Rother levels were described as deeply drowned see and 800ha were summer lands and in 1609 the Commission for the Upper Levels of the Rother was set up to drain the deeply drowned land. The Knelle dam was finally breached in 1635.
- 2.8** Methersham Farmhouse is a listed building (DES2523) and dates to the 17th century or earlier¹⁰, and probably replaced an earlier house on the same site. It is surrounded by a moat which is traceable either as earthworks or as a water-filled pond.
- 2.9** The 1839 Tithe Map¹¹ shows Meathersham (*sic*) Farm comprising a centrally placed house, with a number of smaller buildings arranged along the southern edge of the site, one of which may match the same footprint as the current open-sided timber building currently on the site.
- 2.10** The 1st Edition OS map (1878) shows much more detail, including the ponds and earthworks which form the surviving evidence for the moat, and the barn in the south-east corner of the site (Fig. 4). The 2nd (1898) and 3rd Edition (1910) OS maps show little change.
- 2.11** The 1947 Aerial photograph (Fig. 5) also shows little change in the buildings on the site, although a possible L-shaped earthwork may form an enclosure in the south-east corner of the site. The stables and other buildings to the east of the barn have appeared between the 1947 and 1999 aerial photographs.

⁹ <http://www.yates.clara.net/changes.html>

¹⁰ Martin, D & Martin, B. 1991 Rape of Hastings Architecture Survey Report 1142

¹¹ ESRO TD/E 34

3.0 Archaeological Methodology

- 3.1** On the first visit to the site a watching brief was maintained during the reduction of the ground surface for the re-erection of the stable block that was to be dismantled and reconstructed to the west of a steel framed barn adjacent to the eastern boundary fence (Fig. 6).
- 3.2** The area to be reduced measured 16.5m north to south by 8.0m east to west; this was marked out in spray paint and string lines by the contractor. The depth of the reduction was 600mm at the northern end of the reduction, and graded up to a depth of 350mm at its southern end. The reduction was carried out using a 7 tonne 360° tracked digger with a 1.5m toothless bucket. The spoil removed in this process was piled up on the side of the trench.
- 3.3** On the 7th January 2011 the watching brief was maintained on the excavations of the footings for the garage and implement store. These were located between the farm house to the west, and a large septic tank to the east (Fig. 6). The footings were marked out in spray paint and string lines. All the trenches measured 500mm in width, with a depth of 1m, except for an area in the east-west trench that was excavated to a depth of 1.3m (this was requested by the building inspector due to the unstable nature of the ground).
- 3.4** The spoil from these excavations was taken to an area to the east of the footings by a dumper truck. The excavations were carried out by the same digger as before, but for this phase of the excavations a toothed bucket was used due to the presence of concrete foundations of a former barn on the site of the stables.
- 3.5** All the spoilheaps were visually inspected for artefact recovery, a Precision Gold metal detector was also used to scan the spoil. This was also used to carry out a pre-excavation scan, and during the course of the excavation.
- 3.6** All archaeological deposits, features and finds were excavated and recorded according to accepted professional standards. Deposit colours were recorded by visual inspection and not by reference to a Munsell Colour chart.
- 3.7** A full photographic record of the work was kept as appropriate and will form part of the site archive. The archive is presently held by Chris Butler Archaeological Services Ltd. A site reference of MFB 10 has been allocated.

4.0 Results

- 4.1** In the area of the reduction there were two layers. Context **1** was a dark to mid brown topsoil of silty clay loam with a loose consistence. The layer was up to 100mm thick, and had inclusions of rooting (1%) and small pebbles (<1%). In the north-west corner of the area of reduction the topsoil had been the site of a recent bonfire. In this area the topsoil was a very dark brown with added inclusions of charcoal flecks and small pieces of burnt wood (Context **3**). No artefacts were recovered from these contexts.
- 4.2** Below Contexts **1** & **3** was Context **2**, a subsoil of an orange-buff coloured silty clay with patches of mid to dark grey. This deposit continued below the level of impact, so its full depth was not determined. It had inclusions of sandstone pieces up to 70mm (<1%), there were also two pieces of laminated sandstone up to 600mm, ironstone pieces up to 110mm (1%), rooting (1%) and pebbles (<1%). Artefacts recovered from this deposit were of pottery, ceramic building material, metal and glass.
- 4.3** In the footings there were three layers; Context **4** was a layer of topsoil contaminated with demolition rubble, with a thickness of up to 350mm. This was a dark brown coloured silty clay loam with a loose consistence, and having inclusions of pebbles (2%), pieces of tarmac (2%) and moderate rooting (5%). There were no artefacts recovered from this layer.
- 4.4** Below Context **4** was Context **5**, a layer of mid orange-brown subsoil with a depth of up to 500mm, of silty clay. This had a friable consistence with inclusions of pieces of sandstone up to 40mm (1%). Also incorporated into this layer were large sections of concrete foundations, of the demolished barn that stood in this area before the stables had been constructed. There were no artefacts recovered from this layer.
- 4.5** Below Context **5** was Context **6**, which was the natural silty clay. The silty clay was an orangey buff colour with patches of grey. This layer had a firm consistence, and contained no inclusions. This layer was not fully excavated as it continued below the depth of the excavated footing trenches.
- 4.6** Context **7** was located in the eastern trench, and was a cut with steep, almost vertical, sides with a gradual break of slope into a slightly dished base. The dimensions of the feature were 3.5m width at the top, with a depth of 1.1m. The break of slope at the top of the cut was sharp. The feature was adjacent to the septic tank to the east, and cut both Contexts **4** & **5**. The feature was visible in both the east and west facing sections of the trench (Fig. 6).

- 4.7** Context **8** was the single fill of Context **7**, and had the same silty clay matrix as Context **5** but its consistence was much looser with a number of voids. Within the fill were areas of a dark grey colour, probably due to seepage from the adjacent septic tank. Also within the fill, at its southern end, was an orange plastic pipe running from the septic tank to the house. This cut was interpreted as being modern.
- 4.8** No other archaeological features or deposits were encountered during the watching brief.

5.0 The Finds

5.0.1 The archaeological work recovered a moderately small assemblage of finds from the site. These are summarized in Table 1.

5.0.2 The assemblage is not considered to hold any potential for further analysis and, with the exception of the probable medieval tile, all is recommended for discard. Future sealed deposits containing similar tile from the site/area, associated with ceramic dating, will hopefully confirm the postulated date of the early tile from the current work.

Table 1: Quantification of finds (no./weight in grams)

Context	Pottery	Ceramic Building Material	Other	Comments
2	3/303g	Brick 1/41g Peg tile 6/1062g Wall tile 1/3g	-	Late C19th – mid 20 th (resid. C14th/15 th)
8	-	Brick 1/281g	Stone 3/62g	C18th – early 19th

5.1 The Pottery by Luke Barber

5.1.1 Pottery was only recovered from Context 2. The assemblage consists of part of the base from a glazed redware vessel of mid 19th to mid 20th century date and two fragments from a refined white earthenware (sanitary ironstone china) water closet rim. This is probably of late 19th, or more likely, 20th century date.

5.2 The Ceramic Building Material by Luke Barber

5.2.1 Two pieces of brick were recovered from the site. Both show signs of abrasion, however, this is mainly due to their fine tempering and low/medium firing temperature. Both are well formed, tempered with fine sand with sparse to moderate iron oxide inclusions to 3mm, and medium fired. The example from Context 8 has a height of 63mm and both are likely to be of 18th to early 19th century date.

5.2.2 Context 2 produced six peg tile fragments. Three of these (186g) are well formed, hard fired and tempered with sparse fine sand and rare iron oxide inclusions to 1mm. These types are typical of the later 18th to 19th centuries and average 10mm thick.

5.2.3 The other three peg tiles from Context 2 (876g) are more ambiguous of date. These consist of thick peg tiles (15mm) tempered with moderate fine/medium sand with common iron oxides to 0.5mm. The tiles are neatly finished and medium fired. Taken together a 14th to 15th century date is perhaps the most likely, however, the finish is notably good for tiles of this period and an early post-medieval date cannot be totally ruled out without associated ceramic dating. The remaining piece of tile consists of a 5mm thick white glazed wall tile from Context 2, of later 19th to 20th century date.

5.3 Other Finds by Chris Butler & Luke Barber

5.3.1 Four fragments of glass were recovered from Context 2. These included a fragment of a brown beer or mineral water bottle of probable early 20th century date, and a fragment from the base of a clear rectangular bottle of late 19th century date. The base and lower side of a light green bottle was embossed MARK / HASTINGS on the lower side and RILEYS / PATENT / LONDON on the base. This bottle is likely to date from the first two decades of the 20th century¹².

5.3.2 Three sheep leg bones (121g) were also found in Context 2. They had been gnawed, and were very weathered.

5.3.3 A large flat piece of iron was found in Context 2 weighing 231gms. It may have come from a piece of agricultural machinery, but could not be identified.

5.3.4 An oval smooth beach pebble was also found in Context 2. It measured 78mm long, 39mm wide and was 13mm thick, weighing 69gms. It had no obvious abrasion, but there were shiny 'polished' areas on parts of its surface, suggesting it had been used for polishing. Although there was no other evidence for prehistoric activity recovered during the watching brief, this piece is typical of a small polishing stone found on prehistoric sites.

5.3.5 Three pieces of stone were recovered from Context 8 all of which are of local origin. These consist of a 12mm thick slab of buff fine non-calcareous Hastings Beds sandstone, a dark grey Wealden siltstone and a mid grey calcareous fine/medium grained Wealden sandstone.

¹² Jones, D.J. 2006 'The British Syphon Company Limited', *Journal of The Sussex Industrial History Society*
No. 36

6.0 Discussion

- 6.1** The watching brief did not produce any direct evidence of the Medieval Grange of Robertsbridge Abbey or the early Post Medieval farm. However the three pieces of peg tile dating to the late Medieval/early Post Medieval period may have come from the demolition of the earlier house that was replaced by the current farmhouse in the 17th century, after the Manor of Methersham was granted to Sir William Sidney in 1539 following the dissolution of the Robertsbridge Abbey.
- 6.2** During the reduction for the relocation of the new stables, the underlying soils appeared to be undisturbed, suggesting that this area had always been open fields or gardens, although the absence of pottery and other domestic waste which would typically be distributed during manuring activity, makes this uncertain. It is possible that archaeological deposits could survive at a deeper level here as the ground level was only reduced by 600mm at its deepest, but this seems very unlikely.
- 6.3** During the excavation of the footings it was noted that this ground was very disturbed due to this area having previously been the location of the stables, and before that it had been the location of an earlier barn of which the remains of the concrete foundations were discovered. Evidence was also discovered for the construction and the laying of pipes from the septic tank to the farmhouse. It is therefore suggested that any archaeology present in this part of the site has been removed by this previous activity.

7.0 Acknowledgements

- 7.1** I would like to thank Mr & Mrs Holcombe for commissioning this archaeological watching brief, and their on-site contractors for their assistance and co-operation during the course of the fieldwork. I would also like to thank Greg Chuter for monitoring the project for ESCC and Chris Butler for managing the project for CBAS. Luke Barber reported on the pottery and CBM.

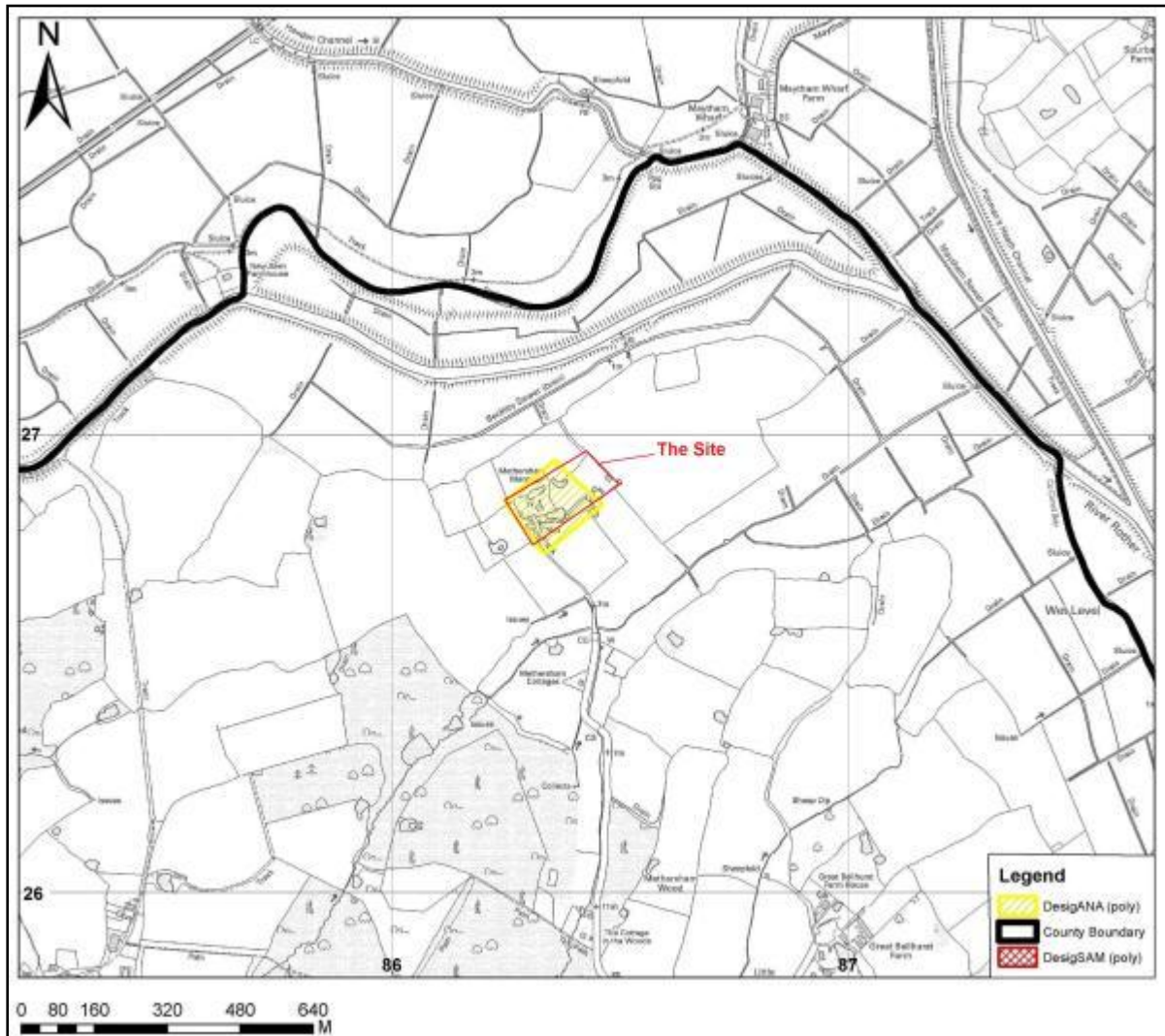


Fig. 1: Methersham Farm, Beckley: Location of the Site and Archaeological Notification Area

(adapted from map provided by ESCC)

Ordnance Survey © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number 100037471

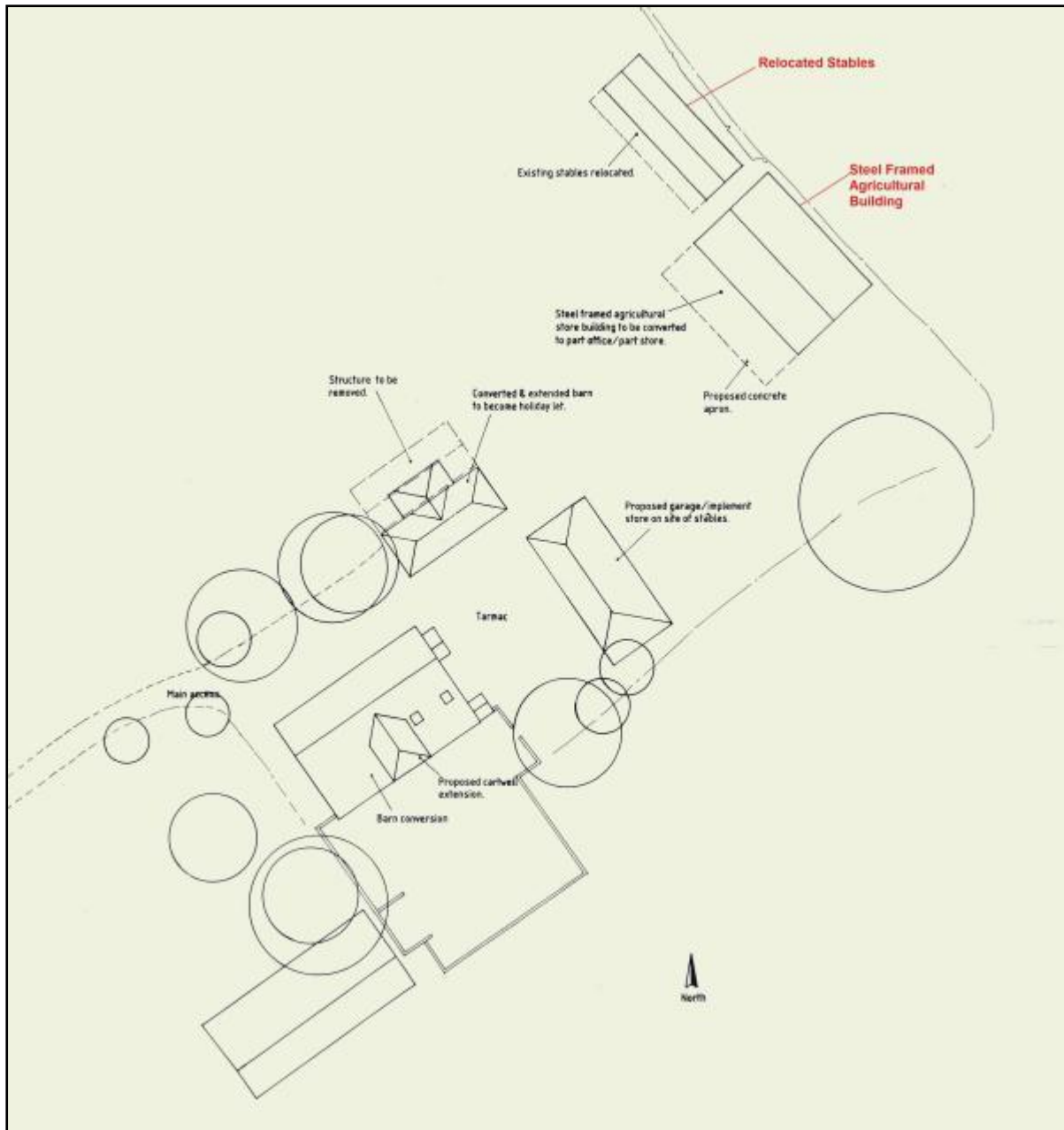


Fig. 2: Methersham Farm, Beckley: site plan showing buildings affected (adapted from architects plan)

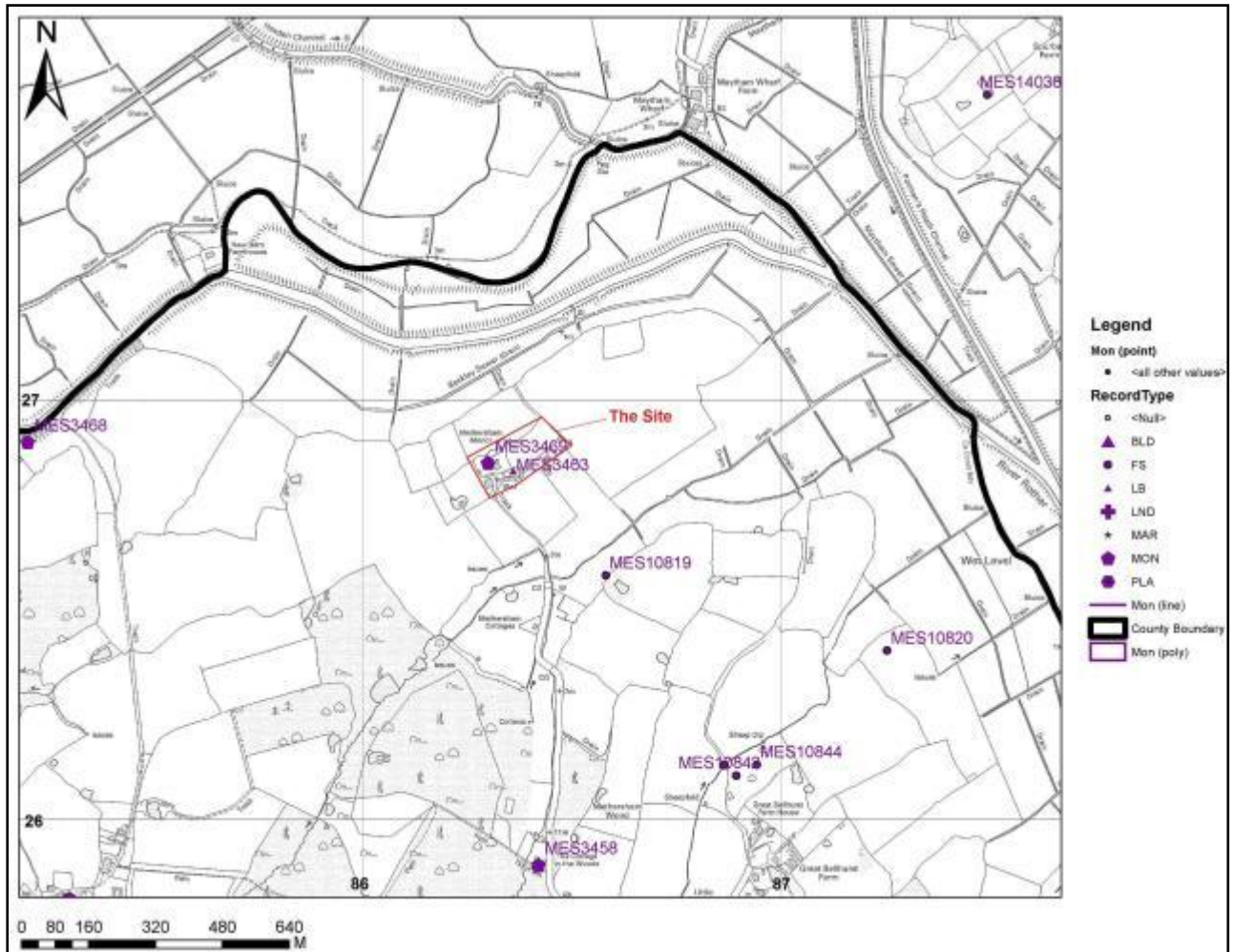


Fig. 3: Methersham Farm, Beckley: Location of the Site and Monuments on the HER
(adapted from map provided by ESCC)

Ordnance Survey © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number 100037471

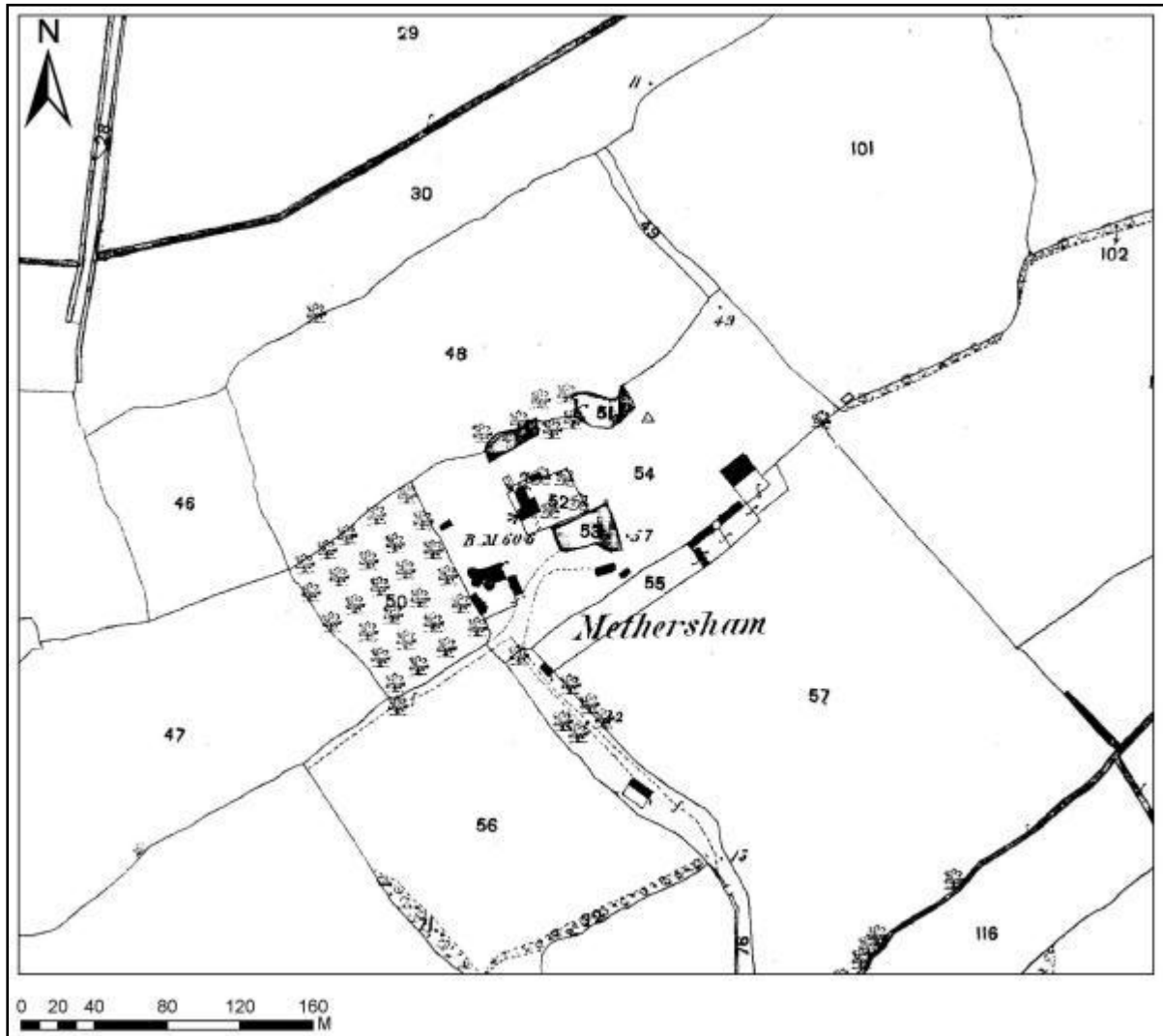


Fig. 4: Methersham Farm, Beckley: 1st Edition OS Map
(adapted from map provided by ESCC)

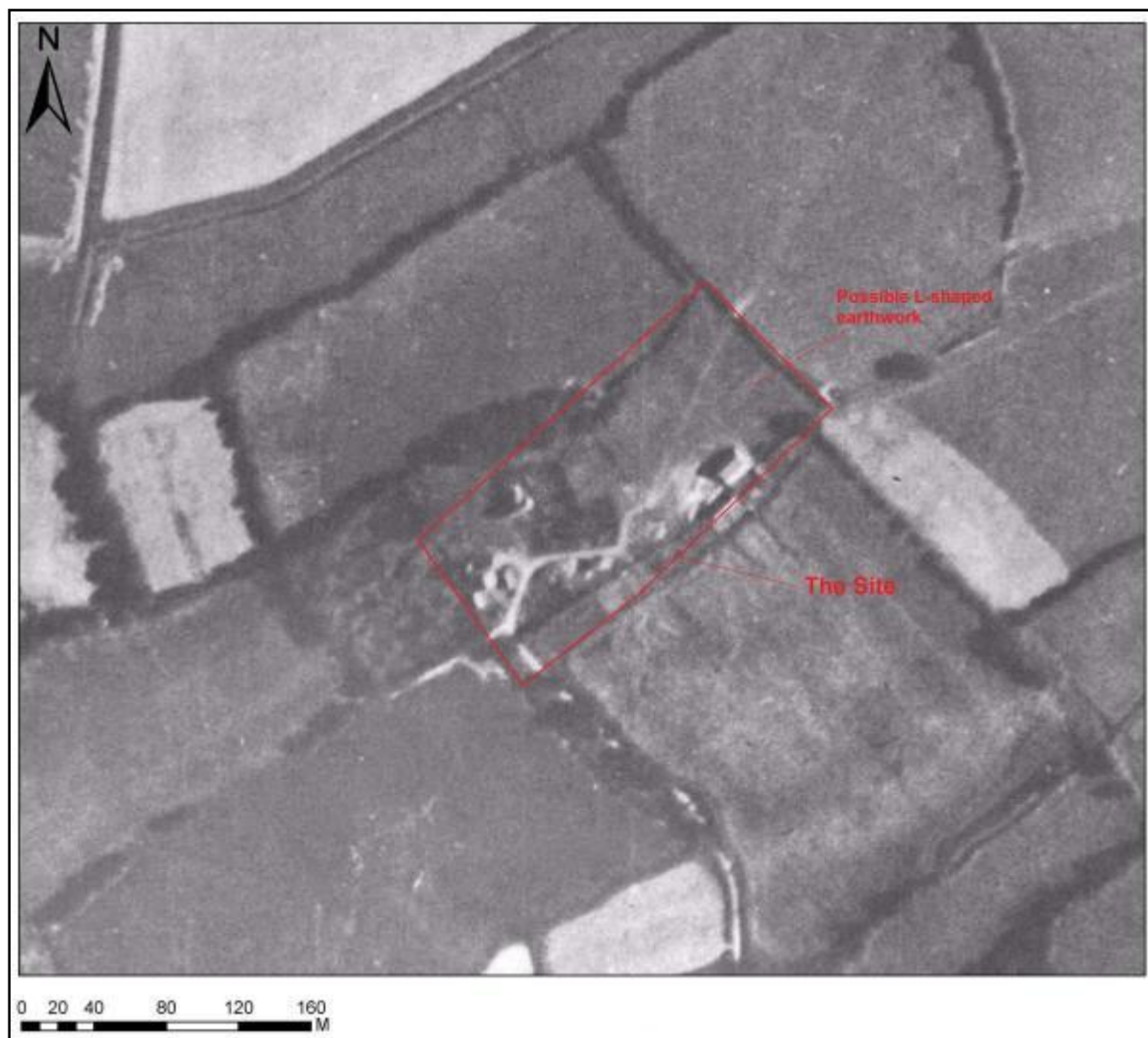


Fig. 5: Methersham Farm, Beckley: 1947 Aerial Photograph
(adapted from AP provided by ESCC)

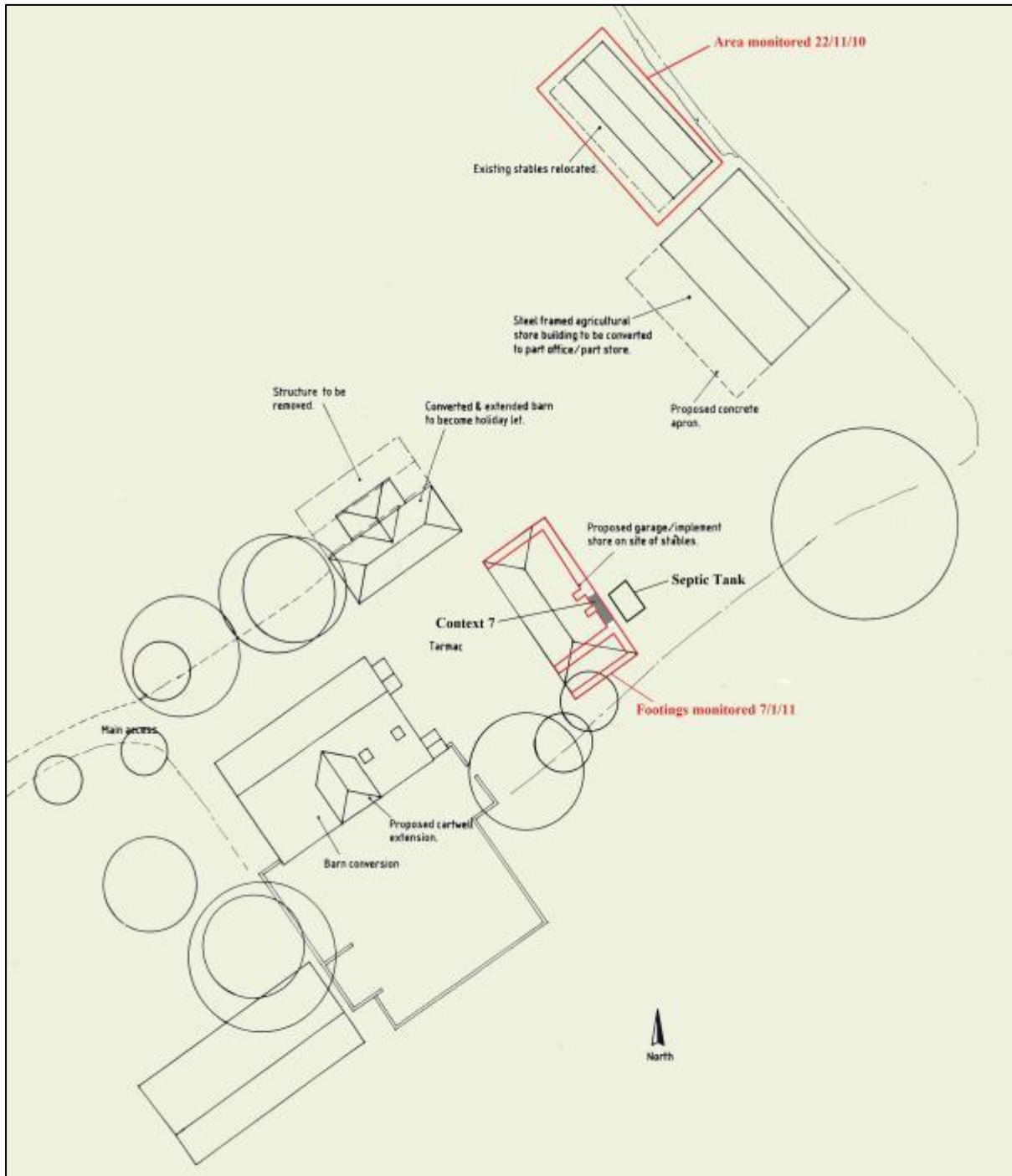


Fig. 6: Methersham Farm, Beckley: Site plan showing areas monitored
(Adapted from architects drawing)



Fig. 7: Methersham Farm, Beckley: Photograph showing reduction over new site of stables



Fig. 8: Methersham Farm, Beckley: Photograph showing excavation of footings

Appendix 1 HER Summary Form

Site Code	MFB 10					
Identification Name and Address	Methersham Farm, Hobbs Lane, Beckley, East Sussex					
County, District &/or Borough	Rother District Council					
OS Grid Refs.	TQ 8645 2693					
Geology	Wadurst Clay, with Alluvium in the Rother valley to the north and east					
Type of Fieldwork	Eval.	Excav.	Watching Brief X	Standing Structure	Survey	Other
Type of Site	Green Field	Shallow Urban X	Deep Urban	Other		
Dates of Fieldwork	Eval.	Excav.	WB. 22.11.10 07.01.11	Other		
Sponsor/Client	Mr & Mrs Holcombe					
Project Manager	Chris Butler MIFA					
Project Supervisor	Keith Butler PIFA					
Period Summary	Palaeo.	Meso.	Neo.	BA	IA	RB
	AS	MED	PM X	Other		
<p>100 Word Summary.</p> <p><i>An archaeological watching brief was maintained on groundworks at Methersham Farm Beckley, East Sussex. The works comprised the reduction of the ground surface for the relocation of a stable block, and the excavation of the footings for a garage and tool store on the site of the stables.</i></p> <p><i>No archaeological features were noted, and only a small quantity of artefacts was recovered, most of which were of a recent date. The exception being three peg tiles recovered from the subsoil, of probable late Medieval or early Post Medieval date.</i></p>						

Chris Butler Archaeological Services Ltd

Chris Butler has been an archaeologist since 1985, and formed the Mid Sussex Field Archaeological Team in 1987, since when it has carried out numerous fieldwork projects, and was runner up in the Pitt-Rivers Award at the British Archaeological Awards in 1996. Having previously worked as a Pensions Technical Manager and Administration Director in the financial services industry, Chris formed **Chris Butler Archaeological Services** at the beginning of 2002.

Chris is a Member of the Institute of Field Archaeologists, a committee member of the Lithic Studies Society, and is a part time lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Sussex. He continues to run the Mid Sussex Field Archaeological Team in his spare time.

Chris specialises in prehistoric flintwork analysis, but has directed excavations, landscape surveys and watching briefs, including the excavation of a Beaker Bowl Barrow, a Saxon cemetery and settlement, Roman pottery kilns, and a Mesolithic hunting camp.

Chris Butler Archaeological Services Ltd is available for Flintwork Analysis, Project Management, Military Archaeology, Desktop Assessments, Field Evaluations, Excavation work, Watching Briefs, Field Surveys & Fieldwalking, Post Excavation Services and Report Writing.

Chris Butler MfA Archaeological Services Ltd

Prehistoric Flintwork Specialist

**Rosedale
Berwick
Polegate
East Sussex
BN26 6TB**

Tel & fax: 01323 811785

e mail: chris@cbasltd.co.uk