II Canterbury District Sites

The construction of a cross country pipeline associated with a waste water treatment scheme for Southern Water Services was the subject of a detailed watching brief by the Trust during the first six months of 1994. Running inland from Herne Bay to the Great Stour, the pipe trench cut across an area considered to be of archaeological potential. Skirting the western edge of the former Wantsum Channel, which once separated the Isle of Thanet from mainland Kent, the route crossed the line of two Roman roads and passed through one previously recorded major site, the prehistoric and Roman settlement complex at Highstead, near Chislet, extensively examined by the Trust in 1976 (Annual Report 1975–76, 2–3).

The pipe line ran for a total distance of about 8 km. From the sea front at Herne Bay to Beltinge, the route ran eastwards along the cliff top, then turned inland to the south east towards the May Street treatment works. From here the pipe passed by Highstead, Boyden Gate and Chislet to reach the banks of the Great Stour just east of Grove Ferry.

In topographical terms, the pipe line crossed a series of high ridges and plateaux, separated by valleys often containing areas of low lying marshland. These features represent former promontories set between ancient inlets of the Wantsum Channel. Geologically, the route extends across Thanet Beds and London Clay of the Eocene period, capped by peri glacial deposits of brickearth or gravel laid down during the Pleistocene period. One of the most important contributory factors in the development of these drift formations was the ever shifting course of the ancient River Stour. The marshlands associated with the Wantsum mainly comprise recent alluvial clays. These later deposits, particularly across the valley of the Sarre Penn, were the subject of episodes of sampling for palaeo environmental evidence by the Geoarchaeological Service Facility of the London Institute of Archaeology.

Site 1: Hawthorn Corner, May Street

Between the Thanet Way and main railway line were two separate unrelated features. These comprised a pit just to the north of the Thanet Way, near Hawthorn Corner (TR 2134 6720) and an ancient stream channel south of the railway (TR 2126 6742). The pit, probably dating to the early Iron Age (c. 600–200 B.C.) on the evidence of the small quantity of pottery it contained, appeared to be an isolated feature but is perhaps suggestive of a settlement nearby.

The ancient stream channel located some distance away was of a later date; the pottery from the silt within it dates to the thirteenth to fourteenth century indicating that it was filled during the medieval period.

Site 2: Beacon Hill, Beltinge

This extensive site is on the clifftop at Beltinge, just to the north of Beacon Hill Road (TR 4168 6810 to TR 4188 6810). The archaeological features were contained within a 70 m. length of the 12 m. wide pipe trench easement. The site stands at an elevation of about 36 m. above O.D., the underlying geology here being London Clay capped by brickearth. The archaeological remains included eight ditches, three gullies, two pits, eight post holes and a well. A substantial part of the site had probably been destroyed by coastal erosion and its landward continuation is now largely obscured by modern housing.
Most features yielded dating evidence and the majority can be dated by pottery to the period of the Late Bronze Age–Early Iron Age transition (c. 950–550 B.C.). A smaller number of features were dated to the Early to Middle Iron Age (c. 550–350 B.C.). Subsequent activity was indicated by a small quantity of Late Iron Age Early Roman pottery and unstratified sherds found in the upper subsidence fills of some of the deeper features. A short distance to the east of the main area, a shallow well was found to relate to similarly dated features revealed at Site 6. The underlying subsoil was brickearth and the site again stood at an elevation of approximately 14 m. above O.D. The archaeological features were contained within a 93 m. length of the easement and comprised some forty one pits of varying sizes, fifteen ditches or gullies and ten post holes. A significant quantity of pottery was recovered and the great majority of this is datable to the Late Bronze Early Iron age (c. 950–600 B.C.). All but one of the features have been dated to this period. A large ditch, yielding Late Iron Age Roman material, indicated some later activity. The bulk of the features would appear to form part of a single period, intensively occupied, settlement. The outlying pit on Site 5 may also be connected with this settlement. The full extent and nature of occupation remains uncertain but it is clearly contemporary with a number of similarly dated sites nearby and provides further evidence for considerable activity in this part of north east Kent during the transitional Late Bronze–Early Iron Age period.

One surprising find made during works at this site was of a finely worked Acheulian hand axe of the Lower Palaeolithic period (400,000 to 100,000 years B.P.). The axe was recovered from a deposit of river gravel (one of the ancient Stour valley terraces) sealed beneath natural brickearth. Two other pieces of struck flint were gleaned from the gravels some distance further north and a second hand axe has recently been recovered from an adjacent field. These recent finds together with an earlier assemblage provides further significant evidence for occupation of this region during the Lower Palaeolithic.

Site 7: Hoath Road, Boyden Gate

A group of features broadly dating from the Middle Bronze Age to the Middle Iron Age was found on the south side of a spur some 200 m. south of Hoath Road, near Boyden Gate (TR 220 653). The underlying geology here is Thanet Beds with a capping of loamy brickearth; the summit of the spur stands at about 7 m. above O.D. All the features were contained within a 45 m. length of the pipe trench easement and comprised a ditch, a hearth pit and two irregular pits (possibly small quarries).

Site 8: Bogshole Lane, Herne Bay

This site, on a gentle east facing slope between May Street and Bogshole Lane on the outskirts of Herne Bay, lies just 50 m. east of Site 9 (TR 204 677) and may well form part of the same complex. All the features were contained within a 25 m. length of the pipe trench easement. The underlying geology here is London Clay capped by a thin layer of brickearth.
The elevation is about 35 m. above O.D. The natural watertable was found to be fairly shallow and was reached in several deep excavations.

The recorded archaeological features comprised eleven pits, four ditches, a gully and a post hole. The ditches and gully were aligned either north east by south west or north west by south east and may well be connected with a more extensive group of similar ditches revealed on Site 9. Both sets of ditches seem to relate to a rectilinear field system dating from the Late Iron Age and early Roman periods.

Of the remaining features, one pit yielded approximately fifty sherds of Early Neolithic pottery, but this appeared to be an isolated feature pre dating the other recorded remains. Another massive pit may represent a quarry or water hole; it yielded only a few small fragments of somewhat nondescript prehistoric pottery and a quantity of burnt flint fragments. With the exception of the Neolithic material, only a small quantity of datable pottery was found on this site; most appears to be broadly datable to the later Bronze Age–Iron Age period.

Site 9: Bogshole Lane, Herne Bay

This site was located on a level plateau on either side of Bogshole Lane, on the outskirts of Herne Bay, some 50 m. to the west of Site 8 (TR 201 677). It stands at an elevation of about 37 m. above O.D. The underlying geology here is London Clay overlain with some Head Gravel, capped by a thin layer of O.D. The underlying geology here is London Clay

677). It stands at an elevation of about 37 m. above O.D. The natural watertable was found to be fairly shallow and was reached in several deep excavations.

The recorded archaeological features comprised eleven pits, four ditches, a gully and a post hole. The ditches and gully were aligned either north east by south west or north west by south east and may well be connected with a more extensive group of similar ditches revealed on Site 9. Both sets of ditches seem to relate to a rectilinear field system dating from the Late Iron Age and early Roman periods.

Of the remaining features, one pit yielded approximately fifty sherds of Early Neolithic pottery, but this appeared to be an isolated feature pre dating the other recorded remains. Another massive pit may represent a quarry or water hole; it yielded only a few small fragments of somewhat nondescript prehistoric pottery and a quantity of burnt flint fragments. With the exception of the Neolithic material, only a small quantity of datable pottery was found on this site; most appears to be broadly datable to the later Bronze Age–Iron Age period.

Most of the ditches investigated were later than the settlement features and seemed to form part of an extensive field system also recorded at Site 8.

The finds recovered from this site, which included over 2000 sherds of pottery, clearly indicated occupation spanning a considerable period. A scatter of struck flints, together with a few abraded, residual pot sherds may be of Neolithic date, c. 4000–2000 B.C. (a more certain Neolithic pit was excavated on Site 8, a short distance to the east). The fabrics of a small group of other sherds, also residual, are reminiscent of Derevl Rimbury type products, c. 1400–1000 B.C., although there are unfortunately no diagnostic decorated pieces and their dating must remain uncertain. Another small quantity of residual material might belong to the Late Bronze Age–Early Iron Age transition period, c. 1000–800 B.C., but the great bulk of the prehistoric pottery recovered can be assigned to the Early to Middle Iron Age period, c. 500–300 B.C.

It seems likely that many of the features located at Site 9 are of Early to Middle Iron Age date and clearly indicate the presence of a major settlement. Continued occupation of the area is represented by a smaller quantity of Late Iron Age pottery, whilst the rectilinear ditch system is associated with pottery of Belgic and early Roman date. More or less continuous settlement from c. 600 B.C. to A.D. 200 thus seems to be implied, with a peak of activity during the first three or four centuries of this period.

The site seems to have gone out of use during the third century A.D. No subsequent activity in the area is indicated, apart from a few finds and features of medieval and post medieval date apparently connected with the former course of Bogshole Lane.

Site 10: Hightstead, Chislet

This site immediately to the east of the hamlet of Hightstead, near Chislet (TR 2151 6626), lay on gravel at an elevation of about 30 m. above O.D. and immediately adjacent to a multi period prehistoric site extensively examined in 1975–6. Contrary to initial expectations, only a small number of features was recorded on the line of the pipe trench in this area, consisting of three pits, five post holes and two large quarry pits. The two quarry pits produced small quantities of peg tile and pottery indicating a later medieval date for these cuttings.

Of the other features, datable finds were recovered from just one pit and one post hole both containing Late Bronze–Early Iron Age pot sherds (900/850–600 B.C.). It seems likely that the other, undated features were contemporary. Collectively they must be connected with the other remains of this period previously excavated to the south and east. The paucity of features here, however, clearly indicates that this site is peripheral.

Conclusion

This 8 km. transect across a key region of north east Kent, adjacent to the former Wantsum Channel, has produced a significant number of important archaeological discoveries. A number of these new sites may collectively indicate the presence of single settlements covering a large area. Sites 4, 5 and 6, all located between Church Lane and Chitty Lane at Chislet, probably represent different parts of a single extensive multi period site. A second larger settlement may also be represented by discoveries at Sites 8 and 9 adjacent to Bogshole Lane on the outskirts of Herne Bay. Site 10 clearly forms part of the prehistoric remains previously excavated at Hightstead.

Three major new settlement sites, in use over many centuries throughout the prehistoric and early Roman period are thus represented by the complexes of features revealed during the watching brief. Sites 4, 5 and 6 have provided evidence for a Late Bronze Age–Early Iron Age settlement. An Early to Middle Iron Age occupation site at Bogshole Lane (Sites 8 and 9) has been discovered and a separate Iron Age settlement has been located at Beltinge (Site 2).

The earliest discoveries were made at Site 6, comprising a few ancient Palaeolithic worked flints. Sites 5 (Chislet) and 8 (Bogshole Lane) have yielded rare and important evidence for Neolithic occupation. Of particular note is the density of Late Bronze Age to Early/Middle Iron Age (c. 800–300 B.C.) settlement evidence recorded along the route.
Although several significant individual sites, worthy of further study in their own right, have been recorded it is the combined evidence for the density of ancient settlement discovered along this 8 km. pipe line which constitutes the most significant contribution to archaeological knowledge. The Herne Bay pipeline scheme together with other recent linear developments in East Kent is collectively producing a large volume of new information which clearly indicates a greater density of prehistoric settlement in the region than was hitherto considered likely. As a consequence of these and other discoveries we are now approaching a stage where statements concerning such topics as land division and social structure in the prehistoric period can be tentatively put forward.

15 Horsebridge, Whitstable
Paul Bennett

In February 1995 the Trust undertook an archaeological evaluation of an area east of Reeves Beach in Whitstable for Canterbury City Council. Four evaluation trenches were excavated, two in Browning's Yard east of the Royal Native Oyster Stores, one against Terry's Lane and one west of Horbridge Road next to the old ambulance station. These sites, in the ownership of Canterbury City Council, are presently being considered for redevelopment. The sites are close to the historic centre of the present town, originally called 'Whitstapel Street', the old settlement of Whitstable being situated to the east on higher ground above the coastal plain.

Two of the trenches (B and C) were situated adjacent to Sea Wall, which along with Middle Wall comprise the remains of the first recorded sea defences for the town, built in 1583 'for the better defense of certain houses and grounds lying on the level' (Bowler 1983, 32), i.e. west of the High Street. The sea wall was of sufficient size for a road and houses to be built on it. The only buildings of any great age, however, are now located on the seaward side of the wall.

The trenches cut adjacent to Sea Wall exposed a rubbish filled ditch, the full dimensions of which were not ascertained, but must have been at least 5 m wide and in excess of 1.5 m. deep. This previously unknown feature may have been originally cut to provide clay during the construction of the sea embankment and subsequently used as a drainage dyke to canalise sea water during exceptionally high tides. The later fills of the dyke clearly indicated that the feature was later used as a common sewer, being re-cut on at least two occasions in order to re-establish flow. That the dyke was also used as a sewer was indicated by a mid nineteenth century brick conduit, leading directly into it from the cesspit of an adjacent house. The ditch was probably designed to discharge in the vicinity of the 'Outletts', a marshland to the north in the area now occupied by the harbour and the Gorell Tank. By the late nineteenth century, the dyke appears to have been used exclusively as a rubbish tip and was gradually allowed to fill up.

Capping the sequence of ditches to the rear of Sea Wall in Trench B were rammed deposits of gravel and crushed chalk forming the basis of an open yard or perhaps even the floors of a large workshop. Localised areas of burning where chalk deposits had been fired to an orange colouration may indicate that an overlying building had been destroyed by fire. A disastrous fire is known to have taken place in this area in 1869.

Rammed chalk deposits similar to those exposed to the rear or the Sea Wall in Trench B were present against Sea Street within Browning's Yard in Trench A. Burnt chalk here was sealed by charcoal and was in turn capped by a brick on edge floor forming part of a recent courtyard. Occupation against Sea Street may have commenced shortly after construction of the sea defences. The earliest deposits exposed in Trench A, overlying storm beach gravels, comprised a layer of domestic rubbish including pottery of sixteenth and early seventeenth century date. Capping this deposit was a sequence of at least two clay floors, possibly associated with the first buildings in the area. Demolition deposits overlying the final floor provided a small number of late eighteenth century pot sherds. The demolition deposit may relate to another natural disaster, the great flood of 1779 when the old sea wall was breached in this area and a number of properties inundated (Kentish Gazette, January 1779). This part of Sea Street appears not to have been built upon for some time after this, but a number of small pits together with gravel pits perhaps associated with yard surfaces, may testify to continuous occupation of the site until the laying of rammed chalk surfaces in the nineteenth century.

Trenches C and D provided evidence for late eighteenth and early nineteenth century building activity, in the form of brick walls, brick floors, clay floors and chalk and gravel levellings, which were probably part of the post flood redevelopment of the area. These horizons underlay an extensive sequence of gravel and rubble make up deposits which appears to extend under the greater part of the Assembly Rooms site. Although deposits associated with the sea wall and dyke were encountered in Trench C these were so deeply buried that further excavation may have become hazardous.

Although evaluation of the Browning's Yard and Assembly Rooms sites was of a limited scale, some significant discoveries were made. The present line of Sea Wall can be seen to follow and incorporate a large earthwork formed in 1583. Additionally, the sea wall can now be seen to have originally been supplemented by a substantial dyke which was later used as a common sewer. Sampling of deposits within the dyke has provided organic remains in an excellent state of preservation with wood, seeds, fruit stones, leather and textiles represented. These soils also contain a wide range of fish and animal bones, including the remains of frog or toad. Overall the contents of the various phases of ditch fill may contain evidence for the changing diet and sanitary conditions of those living in the immediate vicinity from the late sixteenth to the eighteenth century. Moreover, and for the first time, we have archaeological evidence for some of the earliest buildings constructed after the establishment of sea defences for Whitstable and by inference the development of some of the first elements of Whitstable's street grid. In addition to this early evidence the evaluations have provided some details for the later history of this part of the town including disasters of fire and flood.

Cartographic evidence shows that the evaluated areas were occupied primarily by boat yards and warehouses in the period following the great fire of 1869. Traces of these buildings were located in Browning's Yard, adjacent to Horbridge Road (Trench D) and adjoining Terry's Lane (Trench C).

It is hoped that this evaluation, which has extended our understanding of Whitstable origins and development over a four hundred year period will lead to further more detailed archaeological work prior to any major redevelopment of the area.