



Chapter 1: from about 6000 years ago

The earliest archaeology on Thanet Earth was evidence of the earliest farmers in the British Isles, people who still partly subsisted through hunting and gathering, but who were either pioneers, among the first to bring cultivation of cereal crops from the Continent, or locals, who had only very recently added farming to their existing repertoire.

The key find here, in the earliest Neolithic pits on the site, is of tetraploid free-threshing ('naked') wheat (*Triticum durum/turgidum*). The identification of this cereal was confirmed by the recovery of a few fragments of chaff (Fig 1.4 left). This cereal was already known from contemporary sites in Europe, both in the north associated with the Funnel Beaker North group and in the south-west linked to the Michelsberg culture. With its discovery on Thanet, however, it has now been recognised for the first time in the UK.

The everyday lives of these people involved cultivation of cereals in cleared areas of woodland perhaps on more lowland parts of the Isle of Thanet which have today been reclaimed by the sea; there is physical evidence in the few hill top pits they left at Thanet Earth of their processing of these crops. Apart from continued gathering of wild resources, the other aspect represented, however, is of a form of 'offering': placement of bundles of objects into the earth; often this material, including human remains, had already been ritually modified through breakage or burning, or long-term storage in middens, possibly in the Continental homeland.

Earliest Neolithic pits

Nine very early Neolithic (c 4000–3500 cal BC) pits were found in the northern half of the Thanet Earth site (Fig 1.1), one apparently isolated (S10454) on Plateau 1, and two groups of pits to the south-east of it on Plateau 8.

Pit S10454

Pit S10454, on Plateau 1 (Figs 1.2–3), seems to have been the earliest on the site, and clearly resulted from the activities of people during the period of 'first contact' between hunter gatherer groups in Britain and a new farming life and culture from the Continent. The pit contained the earliest known UK find of tetraploid free-threshing wheat (Fig 1.4) as well as emmer wheat (*Triticum dicoccum*) and barley, some of it possibly naked barley (*Hordeum vulgare* cf. *var. nudum*). The few weed seeds recovered included woody nightshade and cleavers. These cereals were part of a 'bundle' of different, and significant, items deliberately buried, re-visited and re-buried, rather than being 'thrown away' (Fig 1.5). A tetraploid wheat grain from the earliest fill was radiocarbon dated to 3994–3668 cal BC (UBA-22207).

The pit itself was roughly oval (just over 2m by 1.2m and 0.7m deep), with steep sides and a nearly flat base. The earliest deposit filling it was a mixture, interpreted as material from a hearth, which included dark brown and black silty clay with red patches of burnt clay, grey ashy clay and white/yellow chalky clay and silt patches. There was a lot of carbon in this fill, with burnt flint, fragments of chalk

Opposite: Carinated Bowl. Note the signs of smoothing around the ridge forming the carination, and the fragments of burnt flint mixed with the clay.