Late prehistoric land division at Balcombe Road, Crawley

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Archaeological investigation on development land at Crawley North East Sector, West Sussex, comprising a 144 trench evaluation and subsequent strip, map, and sample excavation, uncovered evidence for late prehistoric land division, particularly in the north-east of the site. Ditches, termini, pits, and post-holes were excavated relating to the later Bronze Age and Late Iron Age periods and the contemporary land division. A significant assemblage from the 2nd millennium BC was found within the base of one of the later Bronze Age enclosure ditches and similarly dated pottery was found nearby in peripheral features. The enclosure ditches are interpreted as an early boundary or land division relating to a later Bronze Age settlement nearby. There was evidence of late medieval and post-medieval land organisation and small-scale industrial activity, but none related to the known larger-scale operations at nearby Tinsley Forge.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeology South-East (ASE) was commissioned by CgMs to undertake an archaeological evaluation and subsequent strip, map, and sample excavation on development land at Crawley North East Sector, West Sussex. This was to meet the requirements of a condition (Condition 19) attached to the granting of planning permission for the redevelopment of the site. The excavation and evaluation was undertaken between 5 May 2016 and 10 February 2017.

The site was located just south-east of Gatwick Airport and north-east of Crawley at heights between 65m and 75m OD (NGR 529295 139393) (Fig. 1). Overall, it comprised an area of around 31.9ha that formed two large, subrectangular fields between Toovies Farm and a smaller, triangular-shaped parcel of land immediately south of Forgewood.

The site was bounded by the M23 to the east, the B2036 (Balcombe Road) to the west, and small parcels of fields on all other sides; the Gatwick Stream and several other small tributaries run south to north through the study area. The majority of the site was located on Upper Tunbridge Wells Sand. Terrace gravels occur on the westernmost edge and a narrow band of Holocene alluvium ran through the site, alongside the course of the Gatwick Stream.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Little evidence of early prehistoric activity has been found in the area around the site; however, several Palaeolithic handaxes ‘from the Crawley area’ are thought to have derived from the terrace gravels, which are considered to be of Pleistocene date (CgMs 2012).

Excavations in 2001 at Gatwick Airport by Framework Archaeology uncovered a Late Bronze Age enclosure in the airport’s north-west zone (Wells 2005). The investigations culminated in the recording of a partially enclosed Late Bronze Age settlement on the edge of the River Mole floodplain, with ditches, pits, and partial ring gullies excavated.

The archaeology of the Late Iron Age/Roman period in the northern Weald has been historically dominated by the iron industry, with a distinct lack of occupation zones around the Gatwick/Crawley area. There was no indication of Roman activity within the general area of the site before excavation, although chance finds of pottery and coins have been recorded on the Burstow Stream Valley (Webster 2005).

Equally, no direct evidence of Anglo-Saxon activity has been noted nearby, although the place name Tinsley is of Old English origin, indicating an early medieval presence in the area. Moving into the later medieval/post-medieval period, several historic buildings are within the site’s study area, such as Forge Farm, shown on the 1842 Tithe Map.
Fig. 1. Site location.
This is known to be the location of Tinsley Forge, in operation between the 16th and 18th centuries.

**EXCAVATION RESULTS**

**RESIDUAL FLINT WORK**

Sixteen pieces of struck flint were recovered from around the site. The assemblage comprised 11 flakes, the majority small and fragmented. A blade recovered from ditch [15/004] was the product of a blade-orientated industry; edge damage, wear, and more recent removals suggest the blade could be of late upper palaeolithic, mesolithic, or early neolithic date. The remaining assemblage was not particularly diagnostic, but most pieces are likely to pre-date the Middle Bronze Age.

**LATER BRONZE AGE ACTIVITY (FIGS 3 AND 4)**

The Bronze Age is best represented in the north-east of the site by a set of ditches, possibly part of an enclosure. Dating to the 2nd millennium BC, this activity was situated at the top of a low hill, bounded by trenches 89, 90, and 100. Additional activity was observed outside the enclosure area within Trench 116, where two boundary ditches, a small post-hole, and pit [116/010] were identified.

Ditch [90/006] made up the north-east end of the postulated later Bronze Age enclosure and measured 1.12m in width with a depth of 0.82m. The ditch contained multiple dark fills and had the most significant amount of Bronze Age pottery recovered from the site, with possibly three deliberately placed vessels, in a coarse, flint-tempered fabric found near the base of the feature (Fig. 3).

The pottery included partial rim sherds from a neutral or barrel-shaped urn/jar, each with a series of narrow (approximately 5mm) pre-firing perforations below the rim, possibly suggesting that the vessel was used with a fastened organic covering or lid.

All of the other material comprised undiagnostic bodysherds. This enclosure ditch is probably connected with two other ditches excavated in trenches 89 and 100 to form part of a large enclosure or boundary in the northeast of the site.

While every feature within Trench 116 probably originated in the later Bronze Age, only pit [116/010] produced dating evidence (Fig. 4). This small, irregular-shaped feature was filled with waste material such as burnt clay and daub.

It also contained a modest assemblage of later Bronze Age pottery of a similar fabric to that found in enclosure ditch [90/006] but also contained spare grog or natural argillaceous inclusions, a feature of rare Wealden later Bronze Age assemblages. Again, one of the sherds featured a pre-firing perforation (Fig. 4).

The single diagnostic rim sherd, together with the coarseness of the flint tempering, are attributes in keeping with the middle Bronze Age Deverel-Rimbury (DR) tradition (approximately 1500-1150BC). However, the moderately thick-walled vessel profiles could also suggest a transitional Deverel-Rimbury/post-Deverel-Rimbury (PDR) assemblage, potentially extending into the late 2nd millennium BC.

Although the assemblage is relatively small, it is significant because pottery from the 2nd millennium is rare in the Sussex Weald. Only one substantial assemblage, more than 1,000 sherds from Burgess Hill, has been published (as a grey literature report; Raymond, undated); two smaller groups of comparable size to the current assemblage, from America Wood and Gatwick Airport, are fully published: (Hamilton 1994; Every and Mepham 2005).

**LATE IRON AGE LAND DIVISION**

Further field systems, post-holes, and pits broadly dated by relatively undiagnostic pottery to the late Iron Age/Roman period were excavated across the site but especially focused around Toovies Farm. The most substantial feature was observed in Trench 33 (Fig. 2) and comprised a large, multiple-fill ditch on a north-east to south-west alignment [04].

A subsequent strip, map, and sample excavation revealed its terminus and a series of post-holes forming either a fence line or gated area at its north-east end. Similar large ditches were also found within trenches 76, 141, and 142, suggesting multiple Iron Age land divisions to the north-west and south of the earlier later Bronze Age enclosure.

The subsoil produced RF<2>, a 2nd-century sestertius (probably) of Divus Lucius Verus, minted in AD 169 under Marcus Aurelius (RIC 1507). The coin was in very poor condition, with active corrosion.
Fig. 3. Trenches 89, 90, and 100.
Fig. 4. Trench 116 and pottery sherd showing pre-firing perforation.
LATER ACTIVITY IN RELATION TO KNOWN HISTORICAL FARMSTEADS AND TINSLEY FORGE

There was a small amount of medieval activity within the evaluated areas of the site, mostly small boundary ditches, some of which contained pottery, most notably ditch [05/004] which produced a sherd dating to the 13th–14th century. The dates corresponded with pottery recovered from the northernmost land parcel where additional medieval features were excavated, including another boundary ditch and pit ([105/004] and [114/005]).

These ditches likely formed part of a rural working landscape, perhaps associated with the medieval village of Tinsley Green or Oldlands Farm, which was first recorded in 1353 (CgMs 2012). No ditches relating to the post-medieval field boundaries observed in the Ordnance Survey map of 1870 were found in the evaluation trenches, but it is clear from features found in trenches 99, 109, and 149 that some small-scale post-medieval activity occurred in the area surrounding Toovies Farm.

Trench 149 contained a shallow, probable boundary ditch on an east–west alignment, which contained a single, light brown fill of silty clay; a moderate assemblage of slag was also found within the fill. This slag was from the blast process of smelting iron and was most likely of 16th–17th-century date.

Further post-medieval activity within the site was scarce, with no evidence of a working landscape associated with Tinsley Forge or the hammer pond. The slag waste recovered was most likely a by-product from smaller-scale industry relating to the working environment of a farmstead, or simply residual material derived from nearby ironworks.

DISCUSSION

Until recently, the archaeology of the Weald has been underexplored and, therefore, under-represented in the archaeological record. This is particularly evident when dealing with prehistoric archaeology, most notably the later Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age.

Discussion of the Weald has been limited to Roman industry and a few villas and waystations in the landscape (Cleere and Crossley 1995). When Peter Brandon produced his seminal landscape history The Kent and Sussex Weald (Brandon 2003), there was little evidence pointing to any significant Iron Age or Romano-British Wealden settlement.

This trend continued in the results of The Roman Rural Settlement Project (Allen et al. 2016; Smith et al. 2016). However, more recent works, such as that at Wickhurst Green (Margetts 2018), have helped to significantly increase our understanding of the northern Weald in the centuries surrounding the turn of the 1st millennium and its use in prehistory.

Limited evidence for earlier prehistoric activity was encountered during the investigations, comprising isolated pieces of struck flint recovered as scattered residual finds. Although only a small assemblage, it does represent an early use of the area and could suggest that the postulated Bronze Age enclosure followed earlier activity in the landscape. The enclosure itself, a rare find in the Weald, suggests an occupied landscape focused at the top of a small hill, overlooking areas that may have been floodplains.

The Crawley area and the northern Weald are generally sparse in Bronze Age remains. One exception to this relative dearth of activity was uncovered in 2001 by Framework Archaeology at nearby Gatwick Airport (Wells 2005). Here, evidence for another Bronze Age settlement was revealed, suggesting that the Weald may have supported more prehistoric habitation than previously thought.

Both enclosures appear to have occupied an open landscape, on rises overlooking floodplains or areas with a high water table. A further chance find was made in 1956 by workers who discovered a Late Bronze Age Gündlingen-type sword while canalising the Polesfleet Stream in Crawley. The sword was deposited as part of a votive offering (Kaminski 2015).

In the Late Iron Age/Roman period, Wealden activity intensified (Margetts 2018). Enclosures and land division became far more common, and, in the north of the site, it is evident that the Iron Age ditches and enclosures form a new working landscape adjacent to those of the preceding Bronze Age. These later Bronze Age ditches may still have been visible as earthworks in the landscape.

While the area of the site was consistently used (albeit at intermittently low levels) from prehistory to the post-medieval period, the post-Roman and medieval landscape does not correlate well with the later Bronze Age or Iron Age field systems or enclosures. This suggests that, sometime after the Roman period, there was a decline in activity and
then a subsequent reoccupation of the area in the medieval period with small farmsteads in outlying fields or nearby villages.

Medieval and post-medieval evidence was fairly sparse on the site, suggesting that activity occurred further away from the evaluated areas. This is best observed in the lack of industrial waste from nearby Tinsley Forge. Although small-scale agricultural and industrial activity was present in both the medieval and post-medieval periods, this exhibited the same minor nature, presumably belonging to smaller farmsteads rather than large centres of activity.

CONCLUSION

The archaeological evaluation and strip, map, and sample on land at Crawley North East Sector provided a unique opportunity to partially investigate a probable enclosure of later Bronze Age date within the Weald. The site provided an important indication of where later Bronze Age activity might occur within the landscape, especially when compared with nearby sites dating to the same period.

The pottery finds remain significant in rarity and quantity and may help identify wares in future excavations, with the possibility of further Bronze Age activity yet to be revealed in the surrounding areas.

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