Land at Bishops Lane, Ringmer, East Sussex

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INTRODUCTION

Archaeological excavation work was carried out by Archaeology South-East (ASE) on land north of Bishop’s Lane, Ringmer, East Sussex, in two phases between November 2018 and March 2019. Two kilns incorporating recycled Roman tile were recorded in ‘Potters Field, Ringmer’ in 1894 (HER MES 1902, TQ 448 128, also EES 14017; TQ 44987 12779). These were discovered by the landowner, William Martin, during clay extraction. The results of Martin’s rudimentary excavation were published in the Sussex Archaeological Collections (Martin 1902; see Fig. 2).

Although the site locations accompanying the published report have no scale, Martin’s ‘Kiln B’ clearly lay in an area just south of the site, which was re-investigated in 2002 (HER MES 16125; TQ 4498 1279), in advance of development at ‘The Kiln’. Extensive dumps of pottery manufacture waste were also recorded in the immediate vicinity (HER EES 9090; TQ 446 128).

Martin’s ‘Kiln B’ was thought to lie within the bounds of the current site, in the approximate area of a visible earthwork (see below). These kilns appear to be the same as ‘2 brick-built kilns excavated in 1894’, recorded under HER entry MES 16145, at TQ 4495 1282. Clearly, this HER entry is a duplicate and in error. These kilns are additionally recorded under HER entry EES 9094; TQ 44900 12800, EES 9579; TQ 449 128 and EES 14605; TQ 4495 1282.

The recent excavations, ahead of development at the site, revealed new medieval and late medieval/early post-medieval evidence and have afforded the re-investigation of a kiln structure that was the subject of the antiquarian excavation in the 1890s. This short note summarises the recent archaeological excavations and compares them to the antiquarian and modern archaeological work and interpretations thereof.

RESULTS

The mitigation works established that evidence for prehistoric and early historical activity on the site was scant. The combined prehistoric material from the evaluation and excavation phases amounts to two abraded flint flakes and a single sherd of pottery, all found as residual material within medieval deposits.

Heavily abraded pottery sherds, recovered from across the site, indicate some manuring of the land in the first three-quarters of the 12th century, with a significant increase in agricultural activity after 1150. Medieval settlement activity seems to have commenced in the later 13th century and may have been preceded by attempts to consolidate the low-lying, inundation-prone land.

This settlement activity appears to have been primarily focused on the southern, more elevated, drier part of the site, along the Bishop’s Lane road frontage (Areas 2 and 3, Fig. 1). The features suggest a trackway and land division close to that frontage.

Extensive research on the medieval potters of Ringmer by John Bleach shows a potter named William Byshop was listed in documents of 1285 and 1305/6 as a tenant holding land in the immediate vicinity (Bleach 1982). This suggests that Bishop Lane is of significant antiquity, with the possibility that plots ran northwards from the street frontage in the medieval period. Only a small quantity of pottery sherds could be defined as wasters in the recovered medieval pottery assemblage. Such sherds are typical in the assemblages associated with local excavated medieval kilns (e.g. Hadfield, 1981, table 2). This strongly suggests that the deposition of significant assemblages of material close to the Bishops Lane thoroughfare likely relates to domestic refuse rather than pottery production.

The excavation of Area A established the full surviving extent of the parallel flue updraught kiln for firing brick, which is clearly the same structure excavated as Kiln A in 1894 (Fig. 3). In addition, the re-excavation confirmed that the surviving footprint of the kiln is substantially larger than that recorded in the 19th-century excavation.

Further structural remains identified in the evaluation relate to the previously unexposed western part of the kiln buildings. This western chamber also appeared to have encompassed two parallel flues but was subject to later
modification and showed no actual signs of having been fired, as no burning was detectable. Further structural remains found to the east were presumed to represent the remains of a preparation or drying building.

Two heavily truncated walls, first identified in the evaluation and located to the southeast of the kiln in Area B (Fig. 1), were confirmed to have been part of a larger structure. This may have been a storage building or perhaps (although less likely) the remains of a second kiln.

Ceramic building material (CBM) analysis of the construction material of the kiln and associated structures and the brick and tile assemblages recovered from surrounding overburden give only a very late medieval/early post-medieval date range of around 1450–1700. This most likely suggests that the construction and use of the kiln dated to the early/mid-16th century.

The homogeneity of the brick assemblage, in both fabric and size, and the presence of glassy vitrification on some of the bricks suggests that they were made in the Area A kiln or a similar structure nearby. On the other hand, the roof tile assemblage is less indicative of kiln material, despite the uniformity of the fabrics, and is not as likely to represent the primary deposition of kiln debris.

It is now clear that the medieval pottery published by Martin (1902) in association with Kiln A should be regarded as residual material deriving from a layer of medieval made ground that the kiln truncated. Kiln A appears to date from the early/mid-16th century and was primarily related to the production of bricks.

However, the possibility that two typologically different firing chambers may be present in Kiln A should be noted, although the second (western) chamber was never apparently fired. Therefore, the possibility that these two chambers may relate to both brick and tile production should be considered.

REFERENCES

Bleach, J. 1982. The medieval potters of Ringmer, Ringmer History 1, 43–54.


Fig. 2. Plan of 19th-century excavations (Martin 1902, figs 1–3).
Fig. 3. Aerial photo and plan of Area A with 19th-century kiln plan overlay.