

BEAKER PITS AT CHURCH HILL, SAXMUNDHAM, SUFFOLK

by ANDREW A.S. NEWTON

Summary

Archaeological evaluation and excavation revealed a concentration of Early Bronze Age pits in a natural dry valley, associated with layers of colluvial origin and evidence for an interlude of wetter, marshier conditions sometime after the main phase of occupation. Further Early Bronze Age features were spread around the site. The site comprises one of the few Beaker pit clusters to be recorded in Suffolk. The evidence indicates brief or transitory occupation of the site, possibly comprising more than one phase of occupation, and represents evidence of Early Bronze Age occupation to complement the comparatively plentiful evidence for funerary monuments in the county.

INTRODUCTION

SAXMUNDHAM IS LOCATED in eastern Suffolk, about twenty miles north-east of Ipswich (Fig. 1). It lies in a valley, mostly on the west bank of the River Fromus, on the Pliocene/Pleistocene Crag deposits, the estuarine or marine shelly sands that overlie the chalk in the east of the county. Despite its proximity to the light soils of the Sandlings, most of Saxmundham lies on the slowly permeable calcareous, sometimes non-calcareous, clayey soils of the Hanslope Association.¹ It is on such soils that the majority of this site is situated.

The site at Church Hill lies on the eastern side of the river, to the north of Church Street and the church of St John the Baptist. It falls partially on the flood plain and partially on the lower western-facing slope of the valley at a height of 11–20m AOD. Within the site, the land forms a small natural dry valley, aligned broadly east to west that runs from the high ground onto the flood plain (Figs. 2 and 3). Several similar promontories and valleys are evident. The main concentration of the archaeology recorded at the site lay in the base of this dry valley. The sudden break in slope that occurs at the base of the southern edge of the valley would appear to provide conditions suitable for the curvature-dependant deposition of colluvium.²

Previous evidence for human activity of prehistoric date in the Saxmundham area is limited. This is especially true of the Bronze Age; within the vicinity of the site at Church Hill the only recorded evidence for Bronze Age activity comprises the discovery of a greywacke adze³ and a barbed and tanged arrowhead, recovered from the area of the Saxmundham pumping station.⁴

The potential for prehistoric archaeology to exist at the site was identified during a desk-based assessment, on the basis of its topographic setting.⁵ An archaeological trial trench evaluation revealed archaeological features distributed widely across the site (Fig. 2).⁶ A tight cluster of 16 pits of Early Bronze Age date was identified in Evaluation Trench 25. These were located in a small valley between two promontories close to, and leading on to, the river flood plain. The evaluation was followed in January and February 2011 by an archaeological excavation, focussed on the area adjacent to Evaluation Trenches 22 and 25 (Fig. 4).⁷ This phase of work also comprised the monitoring of groundworks associated with the excavation of a large ditch for the construction of a storm drain (Fig. 2).

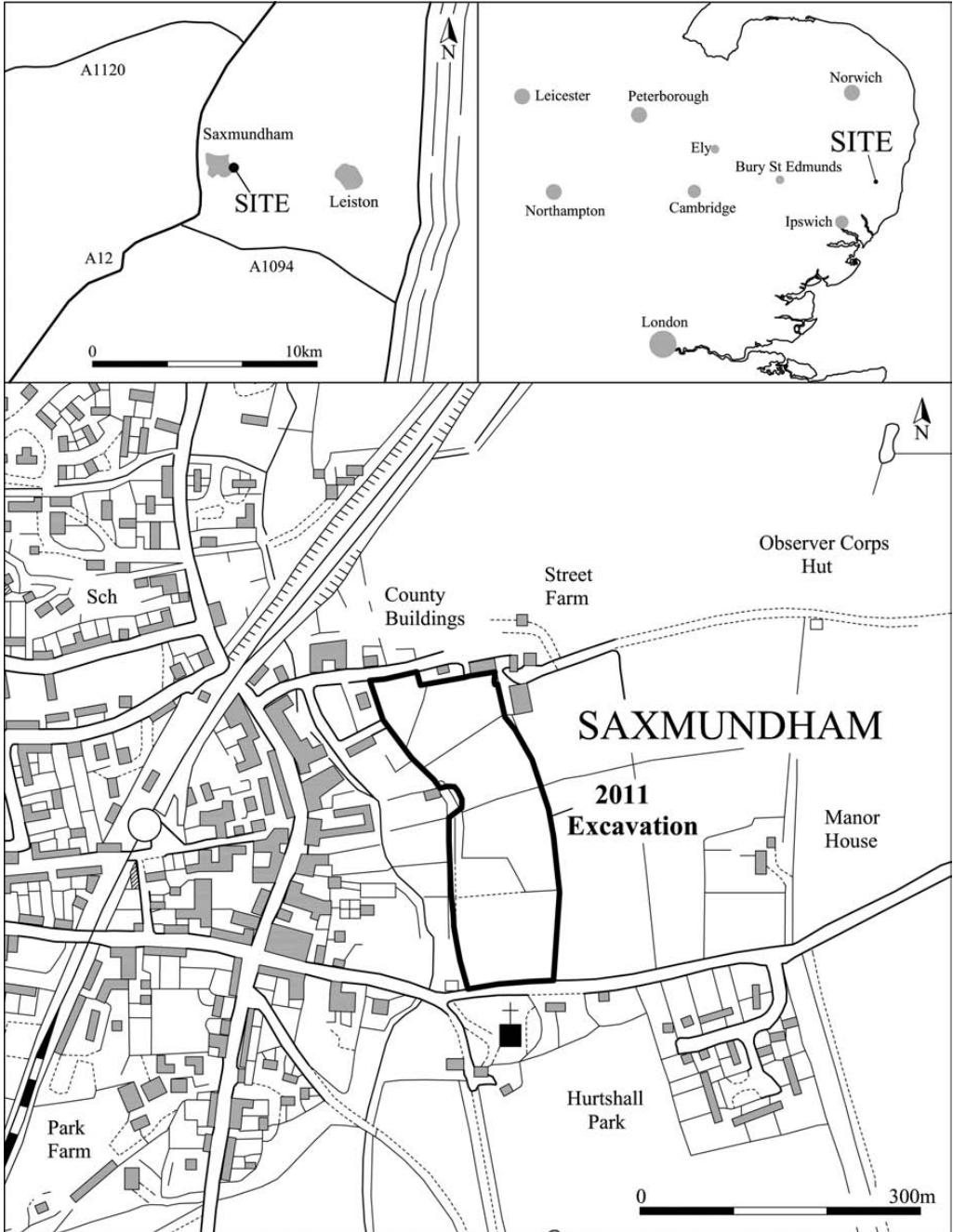


FIG. 1 – Site location plan.

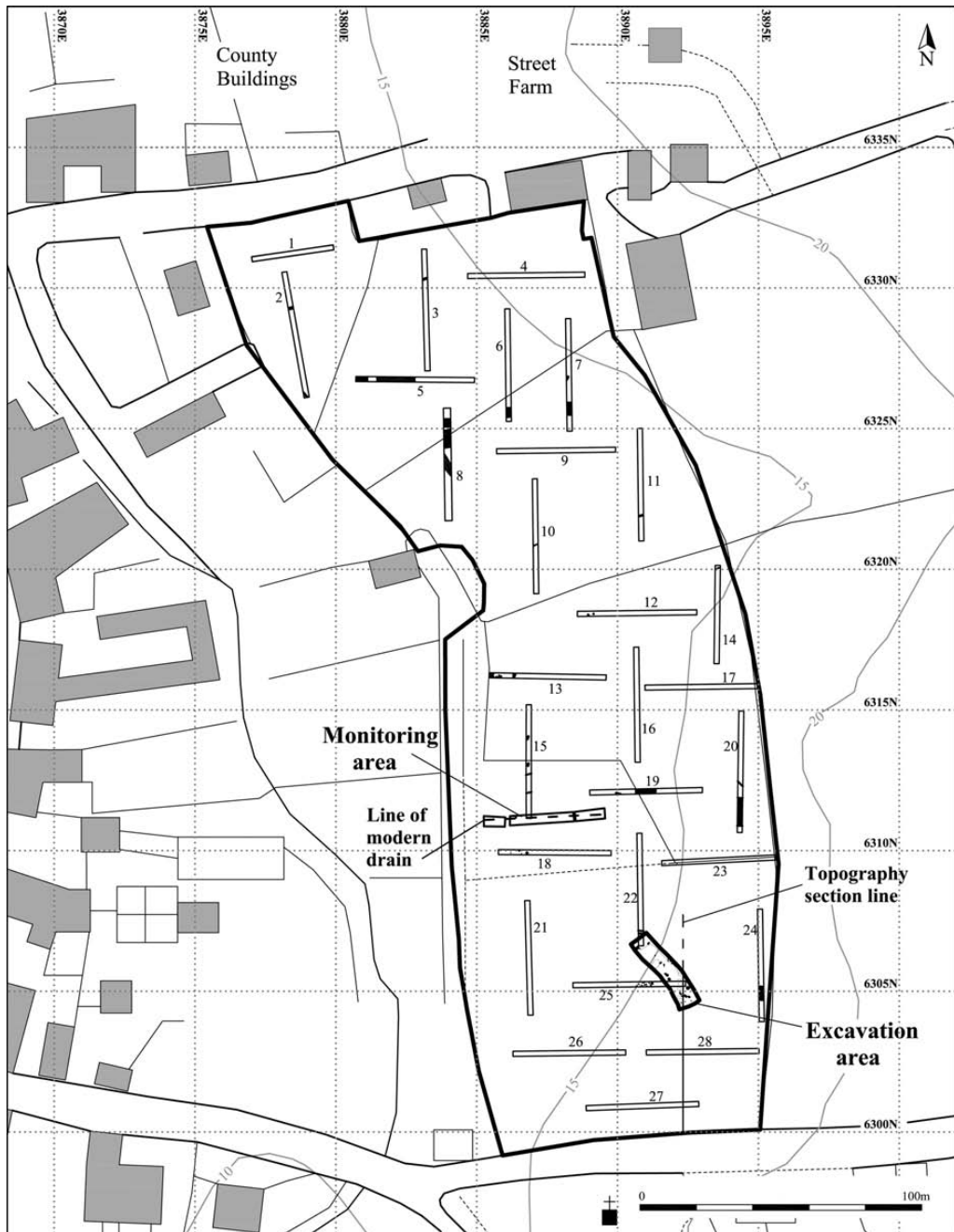


FIG. 2 – Detailed site location.

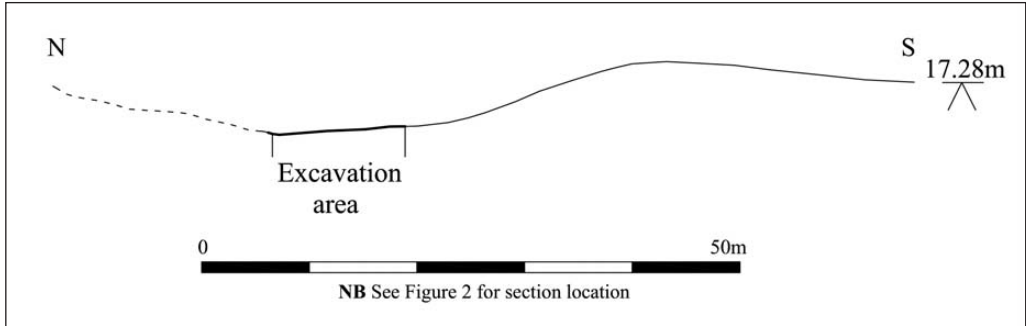


FIG. 3 – Topography of the site in section.

RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATION

The majority of the recorded archaeology dated to the Early Bronze Age. This was confirmed through radiocarbon dating. However, some indication of activity of other dates was also identified. Neolithic worked flint, present in a natural depression, in Pits F1073 and F1075, and as residual material in the topsoil, indicated a low level of occupation of this date. Abraded Samian ware pottery recovered from the topsoil indicates a Roman presence in the area. Roman finds have previously been recorded in the area around the site.⁸ The stratigraphically earliest Bronze Age deposit was L2006, a mid brown-grey, friable, silty sand, which contained Early Bronze Age pottery and struck and burnt flint (Fig. 4). This deposit

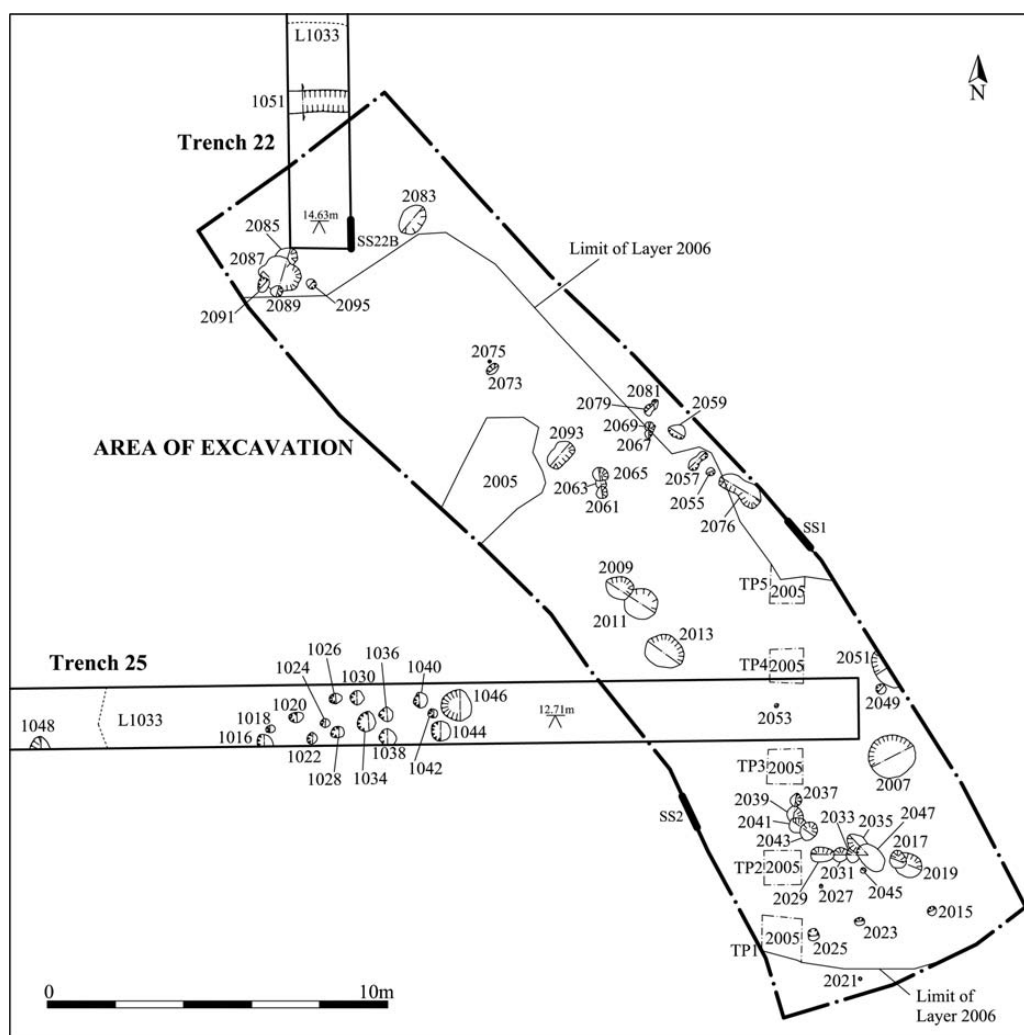


FIG. 4 – The excavated area, showing test pits excavated to investigate L2006, the earliest of the Early Bronze Age deposits.

was identified overlying the natural substrate within that part of the site subject to open area excavation (Fig. 5). The majority of Early Bronze Age features comprised pits, occurring in three main groups, cutting, or located in close proximity to, Layer L2006. A further concentration of Early Bronze Age pits, those identified in Trench 25 of the trial trench evaluation, was located to the west (Fig. 5).

The southern Early Bronze Age feature group (Andrew A.S. Newton with Andrew Peachey)

The most southerly of the main feature groups associated with L2006 comprised a large pit, F2007 (Fig. 6), with 17 smaller discrete and intercutting pits and 3 stake-holes positioned nearby. L2008, the fill of Pit F2007, had a distinctive pinkish-red hue indicating *in situ* burning. This is supported by the presence of charcoal flecks within L2008 and has led to the suggestion that F2007 may have functioned as a hearth or fire pit.



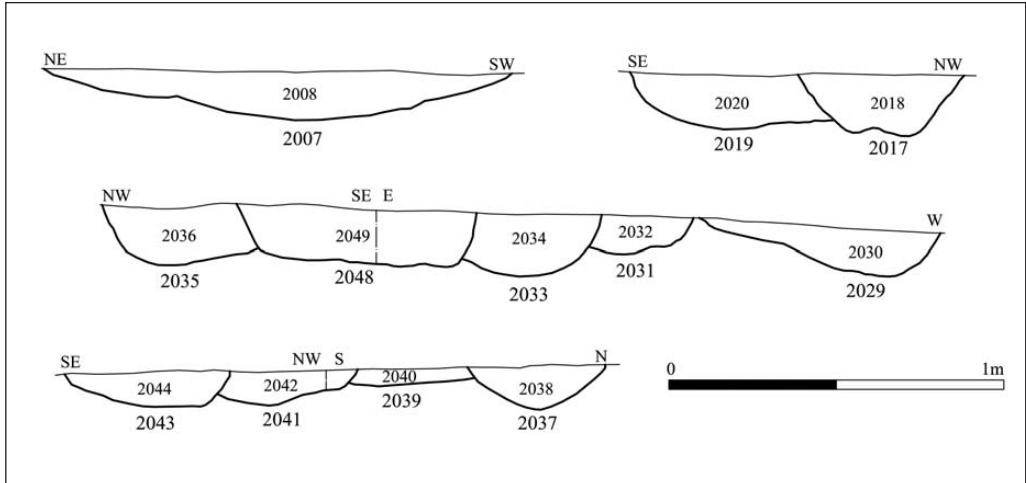


FIG. 6 – Sections of selected features from the southern feature group

Three clusters of smaller intercutting pits (F2017 and 2019; F2029, F2031, F2033, F2035 and F2047; F2037, F2039, F2041 and F2043; Fig. 5) occurred to the south-west of Pit F2007. These were arranged in a broadly crescent-shaped formation giving the impression that they may have been focussed on F2007. It was possible to identify some degree of similarity in form between the features of each cluster.

Several further pits (F2015, F2021, F2023 and F2025) and 2 stake-holes (F2027 and F2045) were located just beyond the denser clusters of intercutting pits to the south-east. An isolated stake-hole (F2053) was located 3m north-west, and two discrete pits (F2049 and F2051) were present 2m north of Pit F2007. None of these features contained dateable artefacts, but their stratigraphic and spatial relationships suggest that they formed part of the same group. Pit F2051 extended beyond the limit of the excavated area and could therefore relate more closely to activity outside of this area.

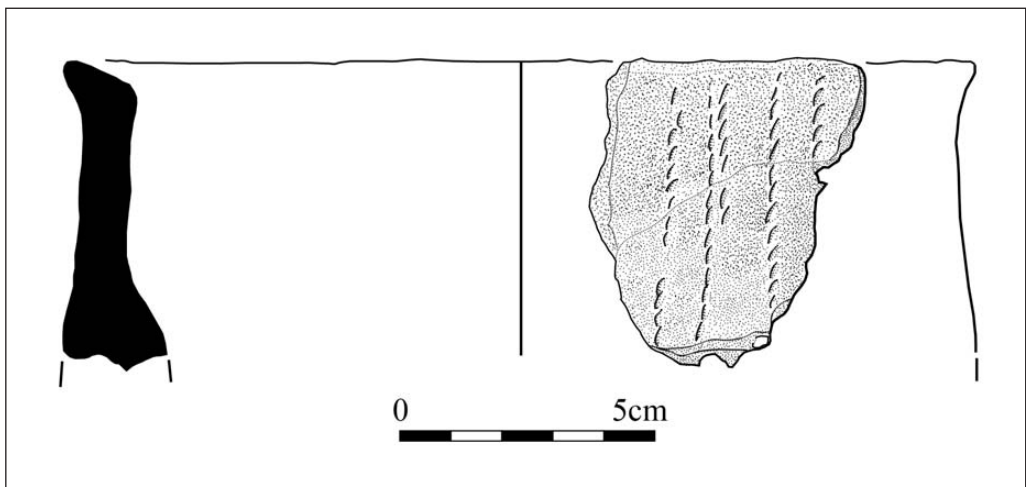


FIG. 7 – Collared urn from pit F2035.

Charcoal, in quantities ranging from frequent to occasional, was identified in the fills of 11 of the features arranged to the south of F2007. It is possible that this material derives from the high-temperature process from which L2008 (the fill of F2007) may have obtained its pinkish-red hue.

Six pits from this group (F2007, F2015, F2017, F2035, F2037 and F2039) contained Early Bronze Age pottery. Of these, Pit F2035 contained the rim and collar of a collared urn decorated with vertical lines of twisted-cord decoration impressed on the collar of the vessel (Fig. 7). This vessel is comparable to an example from Hockwold-cum-Wilton⁹ and collared urns also dominated the assemblage at West Row Fen.¹⁰ The Early Bronze Age pottery from the remaining five pits in the group was limited to sparse, undecorated body sherds in a sand and grog tempered fabric. Struck flint from this group of features comprised mostly debitage flakes. These were not numerous and were of irregular to broad and squat profile.

The central feature group (Andrew A. S. Newton with John Summers and Andrew Peachey) The central group of features comprised three pits (F2009, F2011 and F2013; Fig. 8) which formed a small cluster, with F2009 cutting the north-western edge of F2011 and F2013 a short distance to the south. All of them contained pinkish-red fills suggestive of *in situ* burning. Frequent charcoal flecks were also present in the fills of F2011 and F2013. Situated to the north of these three features were a post-hole and 14 smaller pits, some discrete and some intercutting, arranged in a loose arc which may be considered to be focussed on the 3 pits to the south. An outlying pit and stake-hole (F2073 and F2075), located further to the north may also form a part of this group.

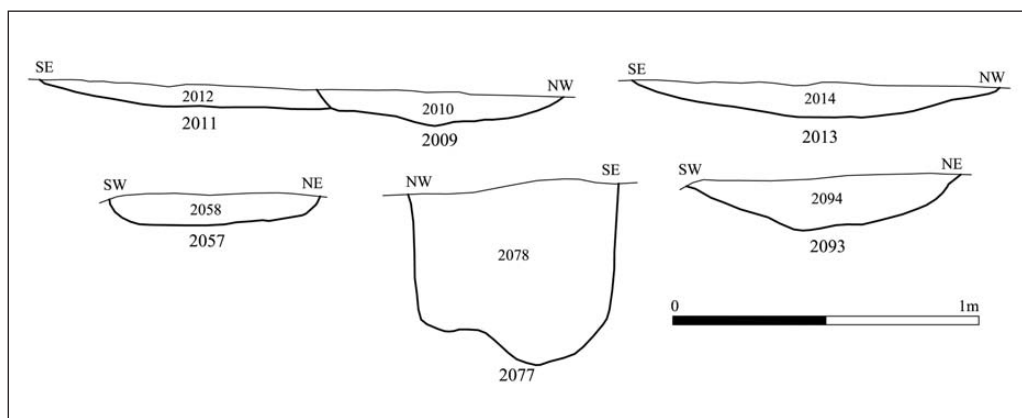


FIG. 8 – Sections of selected features from the central feature.

The features containing the distinctive pinkish-red fills were, on the whole, larger than the other features in this group; a pattern also identified in the southern group of features. Archaeobotanical analysis of the samples taken from these three pits, and from F2007 from the southern feature group, however, revealed few charred plant remains, indicating that little of the fuel used for burning in these locations was present in the pits.

Of the features arranged to the north of these three larger pits, some (F2059, F2079 and F2081) lay beyond the extent of the buried soil layer L2006 and cut the natural drift geology (L2005). This may suggest that they were not directly contemporary with the rest of the group. However, their spatial positioning would indicate that they formed a coherent part of the feature group.

This group of features contained a significantly higher proportion of struck flint than the other concentrations. Pits F2057, F2061, F2065, F2067, F2069, F2077 and F2081 all contained struck flint. Pits F2057 and F2081 are notable for containing single examples of long flint blades with traces of edge wear, in association with low quantities of Early Bronze Age pottery. The remaining pits in the group contained Early Bronze Age debitage flakes. The pottery assemblage from this group is less notable, comprising only undecorated body sherds.

The fills of the features to the north of the three large pits were all fairly uniform, comprising mainly orange-brown to dark grey-brown friable sandy silt. Perhaps notably, Pits F2057, F2055 and F2077, which lay in close proximity to one another at the eastern edge of the group, all contained charcoal flecks within their fills. Pit F2093, which was located towards the western edge of the group, contained moderate charcoal lumps. There may be a link between the presence of this charcoal in the fills of these peripheral features and the high temperatures that may have caused the pinkish-red hue of the fills of F2009, F2011 and F2013. The uniformity of the fills of these features was not matched by their shape in plan or profile; this varied quite widely between the features within this group.

The northern feature group

This group of features differed from the previous groups in two key ways. None of its constituent features cut the buried soil layer L2006 (but were located close to its northern edge) and none of them displayed the pinkish-red fills observed in certain features in the central and southern groups. The isolated Pit F2083 and the amorphous F2087 were similar in size to the ‘fire-pits’ recorded in the other two groups of features but no evidence for heating or burning was identified within them; Pit F2095 was the only feature in this group to contain charcoal.

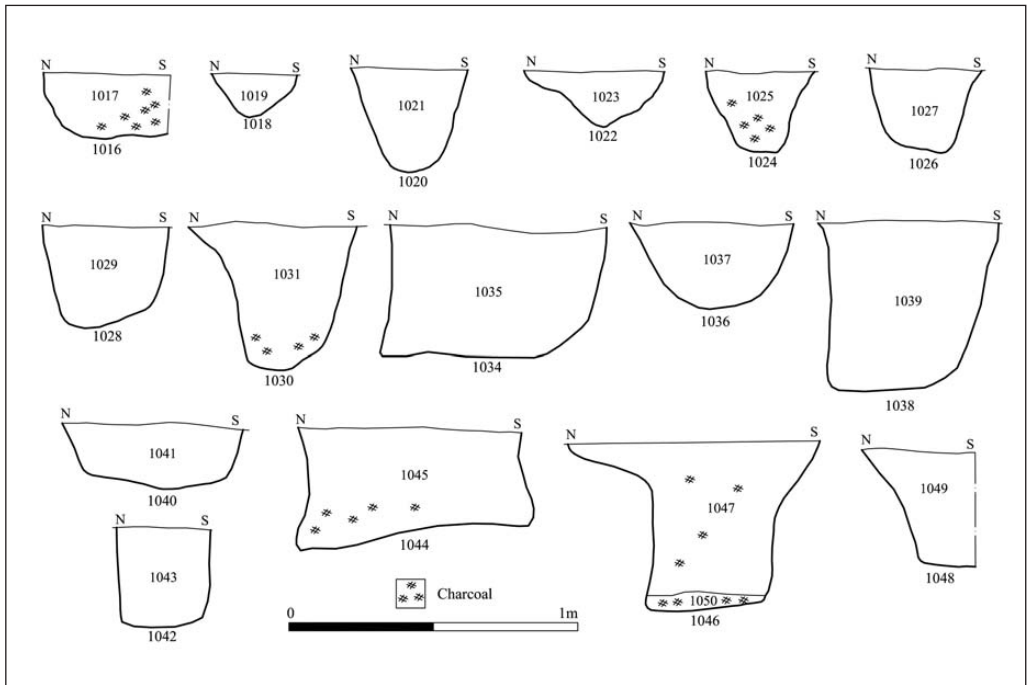


FIG. 9 – Sections of western features.

This northern feature group consisted of two elements: the intercutting F2085, F2087, F2089 and F2091, with F2095 situated *c.* 0.4m to the south-east, and the more isolated Pit F2083 which lay *c.* 4m to the north-east. Small quantities of Early Bronze Age pottery were recovered from F2083, F2087 and F2091. This comprised undecorated body sherds. Struck and burnt flint was recovered from Pit F2083 and Pit F2087, which also contained burnt stone.

A fairly wide degree of variation existed in terms of the shape and dimensions of the features forming this group. More uniformity was observed in the fills of these features, which were all of friable silty sand.

The western feature group (Andrew A. S. Newton with Andrew Peachey and Beta Analytic Ltd.)

This group comprised a tight cluster of 16 pits, forming an apparent band aligned north to south (Fig. 9). They were all similar in size, ranging from a maximum of 0.58m to a minimum of 0.28m in length and from 0.54 to 0.22m in width; far greater variation in depth was observed. The only exception was Pit F1046, which measured 0.88 x 0.86 x 0.58m. All were circular or sub-circular in plan and most had steep or vertical sides with bases varying between flat and concave, with brown-grey or grey-brown fills varying in consistency from loose to compact. Some contained charcoal flecks and/or natural (unworked) flint.

A greater density of finds was present in this group. Only two features were devoid of finds; a third contained no pottery but did contain other finds. Worked flint from this group of features comprised only debitage. One of the features that contained no pottery was confirmed as Early Bronze Age through the radiocarbon dating of hazel charcoal in its fill, which returned a date of 2140 to 1950 BC.

Eleven of the 13 pits within the Western Group that contained Early Bronze Age pottery only yielded small quantities, but this did include numerous decorated body sherds. Pit F1020 contained a significant concentration of 36 sherds (297g) that represent a minimum of six vessels, while Pit F1046 contained a concentration of 22 sherds (238g) derived from a single vessel.

Four of the Early Bronze Age vessels from Pit F1020 are Rusticated Beakers, two in a sand, grog and flint tempered fabric and two in a sand and grog tempered fabric, all with finger-pinched decoration, predominantly represented by body sherds but including a single rim of a sand, grog and flint tempered example (Fig. 10). A comparable vessel has been recorded at Hockwold-cum-Wilton,¹¹ while body sherds with similar decoration are common in assemblages from Martlesham¹² and Little Bealings.¹³ Also present are two Beaker vessels with differing styles of impressed decoration. The first is a sand and grog tempered vessel

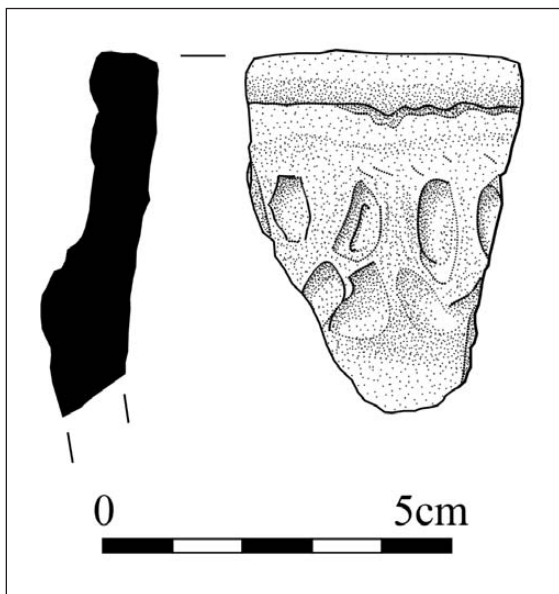


FIG. 10 – Rim of sand, grog, and flint tempered rusticated beaker.

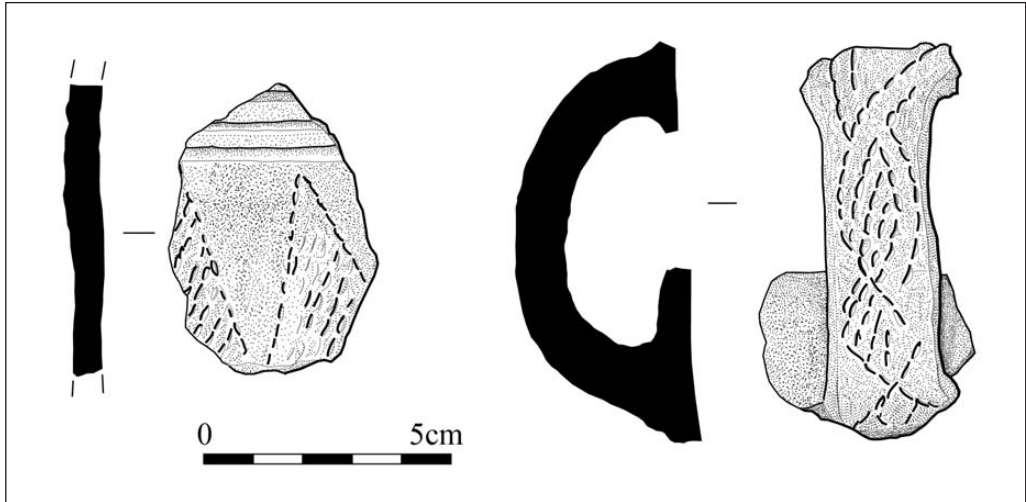


FIG. 11 – Beaker vessel with comb-impressed decorative scheme.

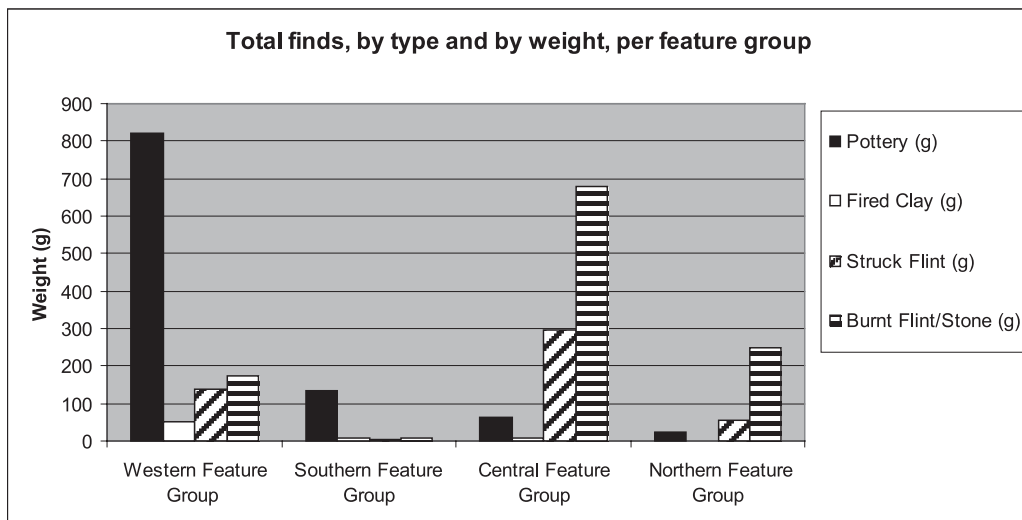
represented by a handle and body sherds with a comb-impressed decorative scheme of filled diamonds (Fig. 11). A similar handle has been recorded at Hockwold-cum-Wilton,¹⁴ while body sherds with similar comb-impressed diamonds have been recorded at Little Bealings.¹⁵ The second Beaker vessel is represented by body sherds decorated with rows of small stick or bone impressions, comparable to body sherds recorded at Martlesham¹⁶ and Little Bealings.¹⁷

Rusticated Beakers were the most common vessel type in the remaining features of this pit group, with Pit F1046 containing the base and lower body of a sand, grog and flint tempered vessel with finger-pinched rustication, while Pits F1024, F1030 and F1040 contained similar body sherds. Also present, in Pits F1022 and F1034, were body sherds decorated with rows of stick or bone impressions similar to those in Pit F1020. The final type of Beaker vessel in the pit group comprises a sand tempered vessel from Pit F1038, decorated with closely spaced rows of impressed cord on the body. The vessel is comparable to examples from Hockwold-cum-Wilton¹⁸ and Barrow II at Martlesham,¹⁹ where this type of decoration is the most common style. The assemblage from this group of features as a whole has more in common with the assemblage from Hockwold-cum-Wilton where comb-impressed and rusticated Beaker vessels dominate.²⁰

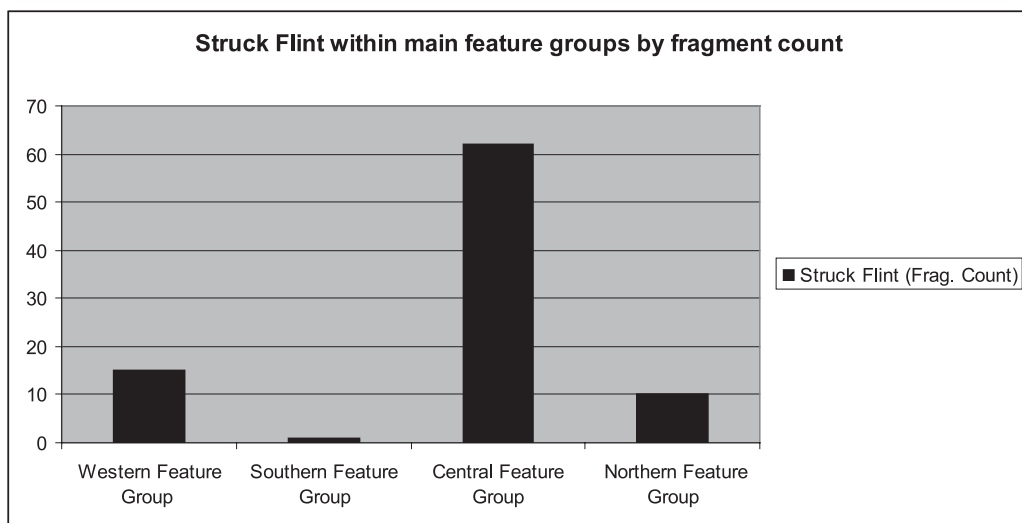
The central and southern feature groups both appeared to be arranged around the larger pits that displayed evidence for burning/heating. No such features were present in the western feature group, and the features forming this group appear not to have been focussed on a particular central feature. It was a characteristic of this pit group that the constituent features were all discrete and displayed no intercutting; this is in notable contrast to the other three groups. The greater quantity of finds, the slightly different layout and the lack of evidence for intense heating may indicate a slightly different function for this group of features.

The pattern of artefact distribution in the main feature groups

Examination of the total quantities of finds of each type (by weight) shows clear differences in the assemblages from each of the four main feature groups (Graph 1). A significantly greater quantity of pottery was recovered from the western feature group than from any of the other groups. Similarly, struck flint was present in a greater quantity in the central feature group than in the other groups. This pattern of flint distribution remains the same when the



GRAPH 1 – Total finds from each of the four main Phase 3 feature groups, plotted by type and by weight.



GRAPH 2 – Total fragments of struck flint from each of the main Phase 3 feature groups.

quantity of flint per feature group is plotted by fragment count rather than weight (Graph 2). Figure 12 shows the distribution and density of struck flint (by fragment count) within each of the features groups; this indicates that the bias toward the central feature group is caused by comparatively large quantities of flint present in Pits F2065 and F2061, while the other features in this group contained quantities of flint comparable to those present in features belonging to the other feature groups. Plotting the distribution and density of pottery (by weight) within the feature groups shows something slightly different (Fig. 13). This demonstrates that there were more features in the western feature group which contained larger quantities of pottery (51g and above) than in the other feature groups and that a greater

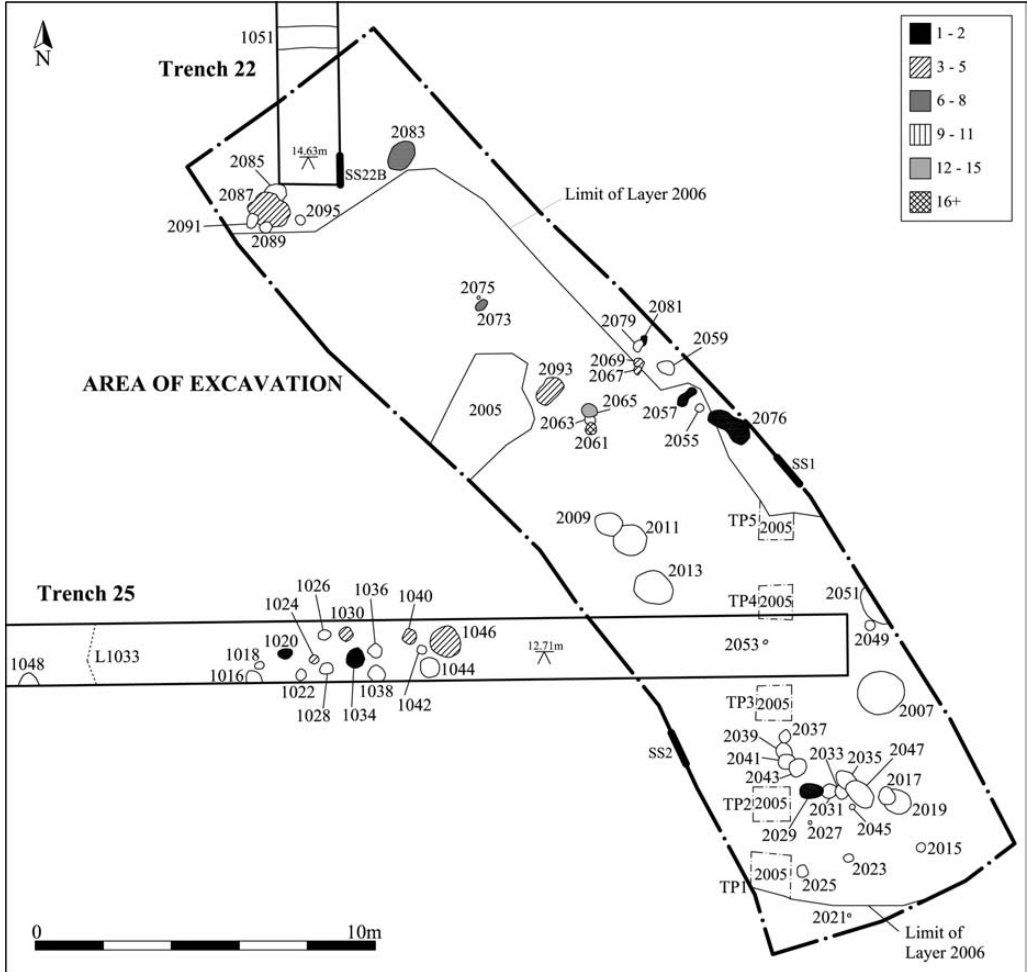


FIG. 12 – Distribution and density of struck flint in main feature groups.

proportion of features within the western group contained pottery than the other feature groups. Indeed, all but two of the features in the western group contained pottery.

Although, when quantified by weight, there appears to be a comparatively (in relation to other types of recovered artefact) large burnt flint and stone assemblage, especially from the central feature group, when quantified by fragment count the assemblages are not large. Twelve fragments of burnt flint and stone were recovered from the western feature group, two from the southern group, 19 from the central group and 14 from the northern group.

The much larger quantity of pottery recovered from the western feature group may indicate a difference in function between this group and the other groups of features. This serves to further emphasise the differences between the western group and those to the east already indicated by its layout and the lack of intercutting between its constituent features.

The predominance of flint in the central feature group (Graph 2) may be indicative of the function of this part of the site. This was the only one of the groups to contain finished flint tools, rather than just debitage. However, if this had been the site of a long-term flint tool manufacturing site it might be expected that a greater quantity of debitage would have been

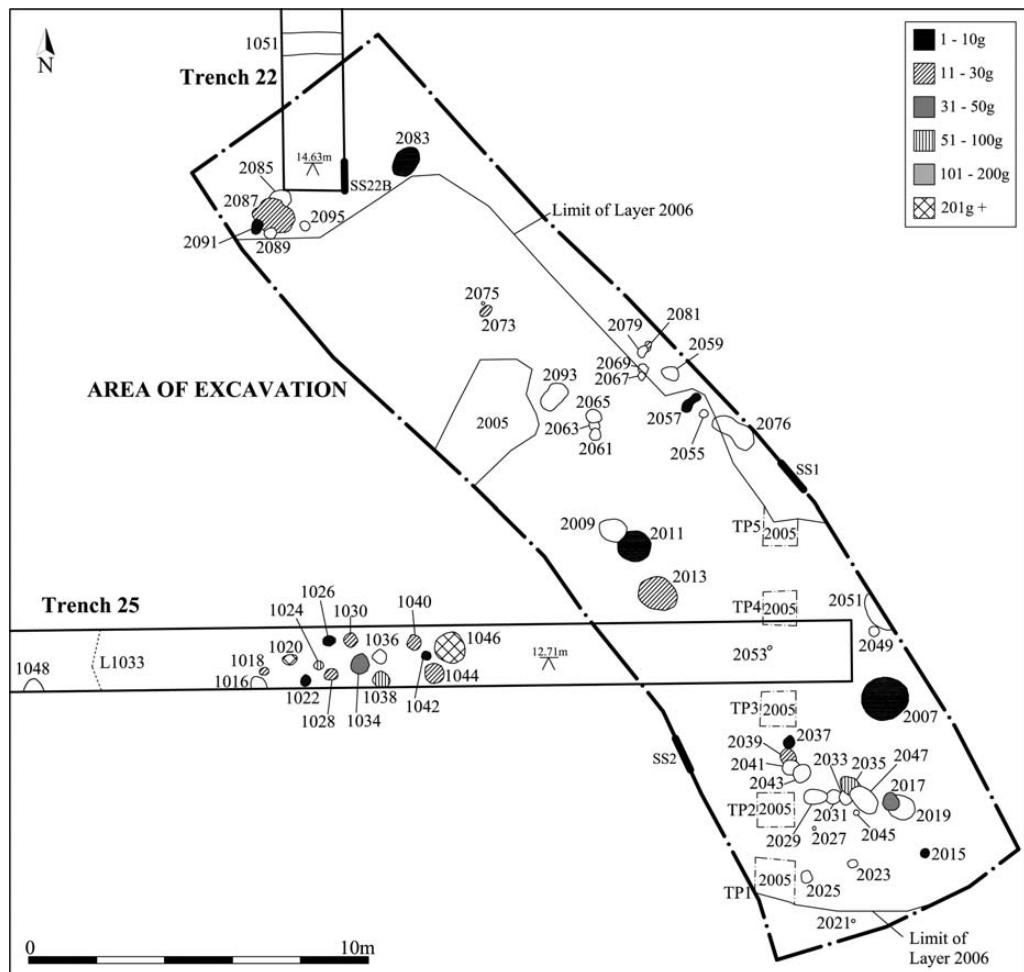


FIG. 13 – Distribution and density of pottery in main feature groups.

present, including broken or discarded tools at various stages of production. It may, at most, be said that more flint-working was carried out in the vicinity of this group of features than in the vicinity of the other groups.

The small quantities of finds, of all types, from the southern feature group are of note as this group comprised a greater number of features than the other groups. This group was very similar in layout and character to the central group, which may be considered to be the second highest-yielding group in terms of finds.

Other Early Bronze Age features

A further eight features of Early Bronze Age date were identified across the site during the initial trial trench evaluation and the programme of monitoring and recording that accompanied the open area excavation. For the most part, these were discrete features, and none had stratigraphic relationships with the deposits representing earlier or later phases of Bronze Age activity. As these features are similar in character to the activity represented by the four main feature groups, it is tentatively suggested that they were directly contemporary with

them. The possibility that they are slightly earlier or slightly later, however, cannot be conclusively ruled out.

Gully F1051 was identified in Trench 22, not far to the north of the northern feature group, raising the possibility that it had some sort of relationship with these features. It was recorded for a length of 1.80m but extended beyond the limits of the trench. Although a fairly narrow feature, it is possible that F1051 may represent some kind of boundary. Beaker field boundaries have been identified at Sutton Hoo,²¹ but more such features would have been identified during the trial trench evaluation if a field system had existed at the Church Hill site. The rounded profile of the feature would suggest that it is unlikely that it had a structural function. Its east to west alignment, following the natural slope of the land, may suggest that it served as some kind of drainage feature. Certainly, waterlogging and wet conditions appear to have occurred at the site in later phases.

Deposits sealing the early Bronze Age features within the excavated area

All of the cut features within the limits of the open area excavation were sealed by L2004, a thin layer (c. 0.14m deep) of light grey-brown, loose, sandy silt with moderate small flints and occasional charcoal flecks. This layer was deposited in the base of the small natural valley. No finds were recovered from L2004 but it clearly must have been of Bronze Age date as it was stratigraphically later than the pit groups and stratigraphically earlier than L1033=L2003, which overlay it. L1033=L2003, a dark humic layer, contained Early Bronze Age pottery, similar to that recovered from the cut features, fired clay and struck and burnt flint. It was recorded as L1033 where it occurred within the trenches of the initial evaluation and as L2003 during the open area excavation.

L1033=L2003 is consistent with marshy, water-saturated ground. This may indicate a fairly rapid change in environmental conditions at the site. It is possible that the deposition of L1033=L2003 extends into the Middle Bronze Age and the eventual abandonment of the site may be connected to a shift to a wetter, colder climate during this period, as has been observed at West Row Fen, Suffolk.²² However, evidence for a possibly earlier phase of wet conditions is present. L1055, the basal fill of F1053 (a substantial feature, measuring in excess of 11.10m in length, 1.80m in width and more than 0.80m in depth), was a mid to dark grey-brown sandy silt. This dark fill might be indicative of a wet and humic environment prevalent at the time of deposition. Its upper fill was a mid grey-brown sandy silt and this was sealed by L1033=L2003.

DISCUSSION

Layer L2006

The exact date of deposition of Layer L2006 is not known. It is considered to represent a second phase of archaeological activity as it is clearly stratigraphically earlier than the Bronze Age pits that cut it and appears, from artefactual evidence, to be later in date than the low level Neolithic activity present at the site. It is possible that it is contemporary with, or even later than, other Early Bronze Age pits with which it has no stratigraphic relationship. Furthermore, the Bronze Age artefactual material recovered from it may have been incorporated into L2006 through human agency and other forms of disturbance during activity associated with the pits that cut it, rather than at the time of deposition. Deposition of L2006 could have begun significantly earlier than the dating evidence from it suggests.

Later deposits in the sequence recorded at this site are understood to be colluvial in origin, which suggests that there is a predisposition to this phenomenon at this location. Indeed, the sudden break in slope that occurs at the junction of the base of a valley and the valley slopes

provides optimum conditions for curvature deposition of colluvium.²³ Such a break of slope is visible in the topography of this site (Fig. 3). It therefore appears possible that the silty sand deposit L2006 may have been deposited through colluvial processes.

Although the term colluvium is generally described as relating to material transported by gravity²⁴ and is frequently differentiated from alluvial sediment transported in well-defined channels, this distinction is difficult to make in practice, so colluvium is often identified on the basis of its geomorphological position and sedimentary characteristics rather than its origin. Indeed, in low-energy environments, colluvial layers at the edges of a floodplain are most commonly deposited by overland flow.²⁵ The silty sandy characteristics of L2006 would appear to suggest that it derives from weathering or erosion, further up the slope, of the natural substrate (a light grey yellow, loose, sand with frequent flint gravel) and was deposited at this location through gravitational action or overland flow. Why early Bronze Age activity appears to be focussed on this layer remains unclear, though the comparative lack of gravel in this deposit may have made it preferable to the surrounding natural substrate for the kinds of activities that the early Bronze Age features represent.

The southern and central feature groups

Of the four main groups of features, the central and southern groups are the two which are most alike in layout.

During excavation, the pits with the distinctive pink-red fills were identified as fire-pits. A similar pink-burnt sand and gravel deposit, containing Beaker pottery, was recorded at Little Bealings.²⁶ Canti and Linford have noted that field archaeologists display a range of views on the degree to which fires cause reddening of the underlying soil; their experiments indicate that simple fires built on a normal humic topsoil surface rarely heat the underlying soil enough to cause significant reddening. However, they achieved results that showed that a significant degree of reddening occurred on soils with almost no organic content.²⁷ Despite apparent charcoal being present in the fills of these features, archaeobotanical analysis has revealed little or no evidence of fuel material within them. This would be consistent with the fires having lain on the surface of L2006. The limited organic content of L2006 may have made it susceptible to reddening when heated. The results of Canti and Linford's experiments showed a band of reddened soil 2–3cm deep beneath fires that heated the underlying soil to temperatures of 433–36° C at a depth of 1cm below the surface and 276– 89° C at 4cm below the surface. The depth of 'fire-pit' F2007 was 14cm, while the other 'fire-pits' recorded at the Church Hill site ranged in depth from 7cm to 11cm. For these reddened 'fills' to be solely the result of a fire burnt on the surface of L2006 the temperatures attained by the fires must have been significantly higher than those achieved during the experiments carried out by Canti and Linford, or the underlying deposit must have been particularly susceptible to reddening when heated. It is possible, however, that repeated heating of the same location may have caused increased discolouration to the depths observed at Church Hill.

Reddening of soils by fires may be related to the chemical composition, and possibly the organic content, of those soils but if it is solely due to high temperatures then it is unlikely to be due to ordinary surface fires and may indicate special circumstances such as burnt tree-stumps, hearths or industrial processes.²⁸ Although charcoal was present in the fills of some of these features, it seems unlikely that the quantities present could represent the burning of tree-stumps, furthermore, archaeobotanical analysis has demonstrated that no fuel material is present in these fills. These features could represent hearths, but no *in situ* remnants of hearth structures were present. If these pits had been used for industrial purposes it seems reasonable to suggest that further evidence for such activity would have been present at the site, although evidence for Bronze Age metalworking is very rare.²⁹

The possibility that the fill material of F2007, F2009, F2011 and F2013 attained its red hue through heating elsewhere and was later deposited into these pits must be considered. This appears to be quite possible in the cases of F2011 and F2013, in which the mid pink-red material was mixed with grey-brown material of similar consistency and composition. The fairly small scale of the site indicates that it is unlikely to represent anything more than an occasional camp or small settlement, therefore the evidence for fires and burning is much more likely to relate to the need for heat and to cook than for industrial purposes. Street vendors in India and China cook food in black sand that has been heated to a very high temperature and the Tuareg of the Sahara are understood to cook bread by burying it in heated sand. Cooking with hot sand is well represented in ethnographic examples.³⁰ The sandy deposits in the area of the Church Hill site may have made similar methods of cooking viable at this location. The character of the fills in these features, silty sand with varying degrees of charcoal and burnt flint, may certainly be seen to be similar to the mixtures used in these cooking techniques. Such cooking methods are likely to cause fairly even heating of the sandy soil, though whether they would achieve temperatures sufficient to cause the chemical changes to iron compounds in the soil that bring about the red discolouration is uncertain.

The arrangement of the other pits in the southern and central groups, with an apparent focus on the 'fire-pits', is suggestive of fireside activity. A structural function for these features is unlikely, but the presence of storage pits in an area in which people may have been sitting and working or eating is conceivable.

The intercutting of pits in the southern feature group suggests repeated activity of the same or similar nature in approximately the same location. Ashwin suggests that the early Bronze Age pit groups at Longham, Norfolk, which contained similar 'domestic' assemblages to the pit groups at Church Hill, cannot be conclusively identified as representing human habitation activities or other types of activity (e.g. food-processing, agricultural or craft activities).³¹ At Ingham Quarry, Fornham St Genevieve, a ring of fairly large Early Bronze Age pits, containing few finds and no deposits suggestive of a specific function, have been interpreted as large storage pits.³² At the northern extension of Ingham Quarry it has been suggested that some groups of Early Bronze Age pits may represent nothing more than refuse pits associated with domestic activity in the vicinity, as there is no indication that any of the artefacts recovered from them were deposited for any specific purpose.³³ Either of these interpretations could be feasible for the pits in the central and southern feature groups. The domestic functions assigned to these features do not necessarily preclude the possibility that they also had a ritual or ceremonial function of some kind: 'ritual' and 'mundane' activities were not necessarily mutually exclusive to prehistoric peoples.³⁴

The majority of the Bronze Age archaeology in Suffolk, as in the rest of Britain, is represented by surviving earthworks (round barrows), sites identified from aerial photography (particularly the abundant ring ditches), and finds of metalwork.³⁵ There is very little evidence for Early Bronze Age settlements. This apparent discrepancy results less from a greater interest in barrow sites than from the relative invisibility of Early Bronze Age settlement sites. Ashwin suggests that much Neolithic and Bronze Age human habitation was, to a greater or lesser degree, migratory.³⁶ The resulting ephemeral nature of habitation sites may well be a contributory factor in this relative invisibility. Certainly, while the form of the southern and central pit groups and the finds recovered from them may be considered to represent habitation activity, the limited quantities of artefacts present may indicate only brief occupation.

The western feature group

The western feature group was notably different from the central and southern groups. There was no intercutting of features; the features did not appear to be clustered around a central

feature; and the pits displayed a greater degree of uniformity in plan, profile and dimensions.

Possibly the most similar group of Early Bronze Age features recorded elsewhere in Suffolk is the pit group recorded at Lowestoft Road, Worlingham.³⁷ This group, also comprising sixteen pits, displayed the same lack of intercutting that was evident in the western group at Church Hill, though one of these features may have been a 'double-pit' feature.³⁸ Features in the Worlingham group appear to have varied in shape and size much more than the western group at Saxmundham.³⁹ Pendleton suggests that the Worlingham pits have a domestic appearance and that the material that they contained may have been redeposited from a midden context.⁴⁰ Quite often, the material in Beaker pit clusters would appear to be indicative of infilling with midden material.⁴¹ Garrow states that the often heavily abraded and fragmented condition of pottery in pit groups on Beaker sites indicates that a substantial period must have elapsed between the accumulation of material in pre-pit contexts and its deposition into the pits. The very process of depositing midden material into the pits may have had some kind of significance to the people that were carrying out this act.⁴² As at Worlingham, it is not possible to identify any primary or secondary function for the pits in the western feature group. While they may well have a domestic function, it must be considered that they were deliberately created to receive what may have been deliberately curated midden material in a possibly symbolic or significant act.

The pottery present in the pits forming this group, although highly fragmented, was in a very good state of preservation, showing little abrasion. This may indicate that the pattern of infilling of pits on early Bronze Age sites, as identified by Pendleton and Garrow,⁴³ with midden material is not applicable at this site, or that the length of time between the accumulation of the midden material and its deposition in the pits was not as long as is evident at other sites. Beaker pottery is not always found in an abraded condition in pits: two of the pits recorded at the former hospital car park site at RAF Lakenheath, Eriswell (HER ERL 114) contained large quantities of pottery from a limited number of Beaker vessels and this was considered to represent primary and deliberate deposits.⁴⁴ It may be that the processes or acts by which the pottery within the pits of the western feature group made its way into the burial environment may be more closely related to those which led to the deposition of the pottery at Eriswell.

The clear differences between the western feature group and the central and southern feature groups make it difficult to identify how they related to one another. Understanding of this relationship is perhaps hindered by the limited window onto the Early Bronze Age site that is afforded by the excavated area and the evaluation trenches. Stratigraphically, these groups are contemporary and this may indicate that they represent different parts of, and different activities within, the same settlement. However, our understanding of Bronze Age territoriality has shifted away from a model of long-lasting settlement to one of group mobility and fluidity of land-use.⁴⁵ Fleming suggests that large terrains might be variable in degrees of social inclusiveness and in their ethnic identity.⁴⁶ This makes it possible to suggest that the differences between the western feature group and the central and southern groups can be explained as the use of the area at slightly different times by two, or more, different groups carrying out slightly different cultural practices or using the site for slightly different purposes. No clear typological distinctions between the pottery assemblages from these groups exist to support such a theory, though a collared urn was present in the assemblage from the southern feature group, while the vessels from the western group comprised only Beakers.

The site and the Early Bronze Age in Suffolk

The Church Hill site comprises one of only a small number Beaker pit cluster sites recorded on the Suffolk HER. The others include Eriswell (ERL 114 and ERL 120), Sutton Hoo (SUT 038)⁴⁷ and the group at Lowestoft Road in Worlingham (WGM 007).⁴⁸ Pits containing Beaker

pottery have also been recorded at Little Bealings, to the west of Woodbridge.⁴⁹ It would appear reasonable to suggest that the pit groups recorded at the Church Hill site represent settlement or occupation activity as the smaller, much looser collection of early Bronze Age pits at Ingham Quarry, Fornham St Genevieve have been interpreted as evidence of occupation and settlement.⁵⁰

The activity at Church Hill, however, does not represent occupation on the scale of the early Bronze Age roundhouse settlements that have been identified at West Row Fen and at Sutton Hoo.⁵¹ The activity represented here may be better understood as short-term or possibly intermittent/seasonal occupation. This would accord with the view that Bronze Age society was, to varying degrees, migratory and comprised group mobility and fluidity of land-use. Indeed, it has been theorised that the groups who spread Beaker pottery through Europe and introduced it to Britain comprised small, mobile, armed groups of merchants travelling around the continent trading metals and precious materials.⁵²

Colluviation and topographic setting

All of the cut features within the area of the site that was subject to open area excavation were sealed by the light grey-brown, loose, sandy silt layer L2004. Observations made during excavation suggest that L2004 was the result of natural silting. The topography and geology of the area suggest that there is a susceptibility to colluviation at this location, as is demonstrated by the presence of the colluvial subsoil L1001=L2002. It seems possible that L2004 was also the result of colluviation. The Beaker pit cluster at Worlingham (WGM 007) was also overlain by a silty layer. This was considered to be the result of 'hill-wash'.⁵³ The topographical and geological conditions at this site were not dissimilar to those at the Church Hill site.

Medlycott states that further study into the possibility that significant Bronze Age sites remain hidden under colluviation is an important research area for the eastern counties.⁵⁴ Certainly the depth of the colluvial subsoil, L1001=L2002, which exceeded 0.35m in depth, recorded at this site may have been sufficient to mask the presence of even fairly large archaeological features. As has been demonstrated, it is possible to cite several sites where colluvial deposits and activity of Bronze Age date are associated. This, however, is possibly more to do with the preferred location of settlements at the floodplain edge or within river valleys and, therefore, in locations more predisposed to the effects of colluviation, than any other factor. However, our understanding of hill-slope erosion and colluviation is complicated by post-depositional processes; in some cases it may be possible that these processes may be directly affected by, or indirectly influenced by, human activity both before and after the event.⁵⁵ To suggest a causal link between human occupation and colluviation is to enter the realm of speculation, but the environmental effects of human activity, such as causing changes to the natural vegetation cover, must be considered in later phenomena of physical geography.

In Norfolk, it has been noted that major groups of Beaker sherds and other material are rarely found in pits or other cut features; they are more commonly found in spreads of occupational material.⁵⁶ Ashwin notes that this is in contrast to the preceding Neolithic period and must reflect significant changes in human behaviour during the later fourth millennium BC.⁵⁷ Under such circumstances it is reasonable to suggest that the processes of colluviation may, given the right conditions, have a significant effect on the visibility and survival of archaeological sites. While colluvial deposits may serve to protect archaeological sites, the effects of colluviation may have the effect of removing artefacts and cultural layers from their original depositional context. Colluvial deposits containing Beaker artefacts, but apparently without any association with cut features, have been recorded at places elsewhere in the country such as Bovey Lane, Beer, Devon and on the Malling-Caburn Downs, near Lewes,

East Sussex.⁵⁸ Indeed, in the area around Lewes other sites have been identified as Beaker settlement sites on the basis of artefacts recovered from colluvial deposits.⁵⁹

During the Middle Bronze Age there was a period of climatic deterioration that brought colder and wetter conditions, and which can be seen in the changing rate of growth in peat bogs. In some environments, especially those that would become moor or heathland, the increased rainfall, combined with soil changes resulting from human activity, had a detrimental effect on the suitability of these areas for agricultural exploitation.⁶⁰ This period of climate change may be a plausible explanation for the presence of the dark, humic deposit L1033=L2003, and its somewhat marked differences from the earlier deposits, and would suggest that its deposition extends into the Middle Bronze Age. The pottery recovered from it, however, was of Early Bronze Age date, and a similar deposit to L1033=L2003 formed the basal fill (L1055) of natural feature F1053. This Early Bronze Age pottery was only present in small quantities and, although not particularly abraded, could be residual; it is possible that, if Early Bronze Age occupation continued further up-slope, this material arrived in this deposit during a slightly later period, through the processes of colluviation or overland flow. L1055 was notably stratigraphically earlier than L1033=L2003 and this perhaps suggests that a previous wetter phase may have occurred at the site. If several interludes of wetter conditions occurred, this may suggest that there is no link between the deposition of L1033=L2003 and the climatic deterioration of the Middle Bronze Age.

CONCLUSIONS

The archaeology was focussed in a small natural valley, running from east to west, which led from the high ground to the floodplain of the River Fromus. The site itself was located less than 70m from the river. Although fairly shallow now, possibly due to the effects of colluviation, the valley may have been deeper in the past, providing a greater degree of shelter. These factors, and the light sandy gravelly substrate, suggest that the area would have been a prime location for prehistoric habitation. The recorded evidence would suggest that this was indeed the case; worked flint artefacts indicate that there may have been Neolithic activity in the vicinity of the site and occupation of the site reached its peak during the Early Bronze Age.

The Early Bronze Age activity was mostly represented by a concentration of features lying in fairly close proximity to one another in the base of the valley. This concentration appeared to form four separate groups, though the perception of the relationships between these features that we have may be skewed by the shape and size of the window onto the Early Bronze Age activity that the excavated area gives us. Two of these groups of features appeared to be very similar in form, the third was markedly different and the fourth was represented only by a very small number of features. The differences between these groups may represent different functions. Alternatively, they may represent different episodes of occupation of the site by different groups carrying out different practices or adhering to different cultural traditions. The general lack of evidence for structures suggests that the occupation of the site was only transient and this would conform to suggestions that society was generally more mobile and possibly migratory during this period.⁶¹

The identification of this site adds to the corpus of information regarding human settlements in Early Bronze Age Suffolk. It comprises one of only a handful of Beaker pit clusters so far identified in the county and contributes to characterising the settlement/domestic activity associated with the funerary monuments of the period which are comparatively plentiful in the county.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Archaeological Solutions Ltd (AS) would like to thank Hopkins Homes Ltd for funding and commissioning this excavation. AS would also like to acknowledge the assistance of the main contractor R & D Construction.

The archaeological investigations were directed by Matthew Adams. Finds were co-ordinated by Martin Brook. Pottery, flint and CBM/fired clay was analysed by Andrew Peachey. Environmental Samples were analysed by John Summers. Radiocarbon dating was carried out by Beta Analytic Ltd, Miami, Fl. The figures and illustrations were produced by Kathren Henry.

NOTES

- 1 Soil Survey of England and Wales 1983.
- 2 Brown 1992, 77.
- 3 Suffolk Historic Environment Record (HER) no. SXM Misc.
- 4 Bull 2007, 7.
- 5 Rolfe 2006.
- 6 Adams 2010.
- 7 Adams 2011.
- 8 HER SXM 001 & HER KCC 030.
- 9 Healy 1996, 119: P9.
- 10 Martin and Murphy 1988.
- 11 Healy 1996, 128.
- 12 Martin 1976, 27, 36.
- 13 Martin 1993, 53–55.
- 14 Bamford 1982, 96.
- 15 Martin 1993, Fig. 36, 9–13.
- 16 Martin 1976, 28.
- 17 Martin 1993, 53–55.
- 18 Bamford 1982, 95: P69.003–6.
- 19 Martin 1976, 23, Fig.10.1–17.
- 20 Healy 1996, 104.
- 21 Bradley 1993, 7; Copp 1989.
- 22 Martin and Murphy 1988, 357.
- 23 Brown 1992, 77.
- 24 Whitten and Brooks 1975, 95.
- 25 Brown 1992, 77.
- 26 Martin 1993, 51.
- 27 Canti and Linford 2000, 385, 392.
- 28 Canti and Linford 2000, 393.
- 29 Bayley *et al.* 2008, 41.
- 30 The *San* of the Kalahari, when a pan is not available, will bury a large piece of meat in the embers or hot sand and leave it to bake (Tanaka 1980, 39); the *!Kung San* (a subcategory of the *San*) cook Mongongo nuts in a mixture of coals and dry, loose sand (Lee 1979); Mountford (1939, 196–200) reports that Australian Aboriginal groups of the southern coast of the Eyre Peninsula in South Australia would cook emus by burying the bird in a mixture of hot sand, coals and ashes.
- 31 Ashwin 1998, 25.
- 32 Caruth and Anderson 1999, 28.
- 33 Newton and Mustchin 2012.
- 34 Ashwin 1998, 26.
- 35 Hill *et al.* 2009.
- 36 Ashwin 1998, 27.
- 37 Bales 2003.
- 39 Bales 2003, 4.
- 40 Pendleton *in prep.*, 13.

- 41 Pendleton *pers. comm.*
 42 Garrow 2006, 59, 138.
 43 Pendleton *in prep.*; Garrow 2006.
 44 Caruth 2002, 219.
 45 Kitchen 2001, 110.
 46 Fleming 1998, 52.
 47 Copp 1989.
 48 Bales 2003; Pendleton *in prep.*
 49 Martin 1993, 51.
 50 Caruth and Anderson 1999, 41.
 51 Martin and Murphy 1988; Copp 1989.
 52 Briard 1979, 18.
 53 Bales 2003, 7.
 54 Medlycott 2011, 20.
 55 Brown 1992, 86.
 56 Ashwin 1996; Ashwin 1998.
 57 Ashwin 1998, 26.
 58 Tingle 1998; Allen 1995.
 59 Allen 2005a and b.
 60 Champion 1999, 103.
 61 Briard 1979, 18; Kitchen 2001, 110.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, M., 2010. *Land at Church Hill, East of River Fromus, Saxmundham, Suffolk. An Archaeological Evaluation*, Archaeological Solutions Ltd unpublished report 3578.
 Adams, M., 2011. *Land North of Church Hill, Saxmundham, Suffolk (Phase 1). An Archaeological Excavation Interim Report*, Archaeological Solutions Ltd unpublished report 3774.
 Allen, M.J., 1995. 'The prehistoric land-use and human ecology of the Malling-Caburn Downs: two late Neolithic/early Bronze Age sites beneath colluvial sequences', *Sussex Archaeol. Collect.*, **133**, 19–43.
 Allen, M.J., 2005a. 'Beaker occupation and development of the downland landscape at Ashcombe Bottom, near Lewes, East Sussex', *Sussex Archaeol. Collect.*, **143**, 7–33.
 Allen, M.J., 2005b. 'Beaker and early Bronze Age activity, and a possible Beaker valley entrenchment, in Cuckoo Bottom, near Lewes, East Sussex', *Sussex Archaeol. Collect.*, **143**, 35–45.
 Ashwin, T., 1996. 'Neolithic and Bronze Age Norfolk', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.*, **62**, 41–62.
 Ashwin, T., 1998. 'Excavations at Salters Lane, Longham, 1990: Neolithic and Bronze Age features and artefacts', *Norfolk Archaeol.*, **43** (1), 1–30.
 Bales, E., 2003. *Land off Lowestoft Road, Worlingham, WGM 007 and WGM 008: a report on the archaeological excavations, 2001*, Suffolk County Council Archaeol. Service Rep. 2002/19.
 Bamford, H.M., 1982. *Beaker Domestic Sites in the Fen Edge and East Anglia*. East Anglian Archaeology 16.
 Bayley, J., Crossley, D. and Ponting, M. (eds.), 2008. *Metals and metalworking: a research framework for archaeometallurgy*, Historical Metallurgy Society Occasional Publication 6.
 Bradley, R., 1993. 'Where is East Anglia? Themes in Regional Prehistory', in Gardiner, J. (ed.), *Flatlands and Wetlands: Current Themes in East Anglian Archaeology*. East Anglian Archaeology 50, 5–14.
 Briard, J. (trans. M. Turton), 1979. *The Bronze Age in Barbarian Europe; from the Megaliths to the Celts*. London.

- Brown, A.G., 1992. 'Slope erosion and colluviation at the floodplain edge', in J. Boardman and M. Bell (eds.), *Past and present soil erosion: archaeological and geological perspectives*. Oxbow Monograph 22, 77–87.
- Bull, R., 2007. *Land between Rendham Road and A12, Saxmundham, Suffolk; archaeological desk-based assessment*, Museum of London Archaeological Service unpublished report.
- Canti, M.G., and Linford, N. 2000. 'The effects of fire on archaeological soils and sediments: temperature and colour relationships', *Proc. of the Prehist. Soc.*, 66, 361–84.
- Caruth, J., 2002. 'Archaeology in Suffolk in 2001', *Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, XL, 219–21.
- Caruth, J. and Anderson, S., 1999. 'A Report on the Excavations at Ingham Quarry, Suffolk' in R. Fenn (ed.), *Tarmac Papers: The Archives and History of Tarmac PLC*, 3, 25–43. Ceredigion.
- Champion, T., 1999. 'The Later Bronze Age' in J. Hunter and I. Ralston (eds), *The Archaeology of Britain*, 95–112. London.
- Copp, A., 1989. 'The Prehistoric Settlement', *Bulletin of the Sutton Hoo Research Committee*, 6, 14–16.
- Fleming, A., 1998. 'Prehistoric landscapes and the quest for territorial pattern' in P. Everson and T. Williamson (eds), *The Archaeology of Landscape: Studies Presented to Christopher Taylor*, 42–66. Manchester.
- Garrow, D., 2006. *Pits, Settlement and Deposition during the Neolithic and early Bronze Age in East Anglia*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 414.
- Healy, F., 1996. *The Fenland Project Number 11: The Wissey Embayment: Evidence for Pre-Iron Age Occupation Accumulated Prior to the Fenland Project*. East Anglian Archaeology 78.
- Hill, T., Fletcher, W. and Good, C., 2009. 'Appendix 1: Suffolk River Valleys Project: a review of published and grey archaeological and palaeoenvironmental literature', *Suffolk River Valleys Project*, Suffolk County Council Archaeol. Service/The University of Birmingham.
- Kitchen, W., 2001. 'Tenure and territoriality in the British Bronze Age: a question of varying social and geographic scales?' in J. Brück (ed.), *Bronze Age Landscapes. Tradition and Transformation*, 110–20. Oxford.
- Lee, R.B., 1979. *The !Kung San: Men, Women, and Work in a Foraging Society*. Cambridge.
- Martin, E., 1976. *The Excavation of Barrows II, III and IV, Martlesham Heath, 1974*. East Anglian Archaeol. 3, 17–42.
- Martin, E., 1993. 'Three prehistoric hill-top settlements in south-east Suffolk' in *Settlements on Hill-tops: Seven Prehistoric Sites in Suffolk*. East Anglian Archaeol. 65, 41–58.
- Martin, E. and Murphy, P., 1988. 'West Row Fen, Suffolk: a Bronze Age fen-edge settlement site', *Antiquity* 62, 353–58.
- Medlycott, M., 2011. *Research and Archaeology revisited; a revised framework for the east of England*. East Anglian Archaeology Occasional Paper 24.
- Mountford, C.P., 1939. 'Aboriginal Methods of Fishing and Cooking as used on the Southern Coast of Eyre's Peninsula, South Australia', *Mankind* 2 (7), 196–200.
- Newton, A.A.S. and Mustchin, A.R.R., 2012. *Permitted extension to Ingham Quarry, Suffolk: Research Archive Report*, Archaeological Solutions Ltd unpublished report 3277.
- Pendleton, C. with Gibson, A., *in prep.*, 'An excavated beaker assemblage, including a bronze flat axe from Worlingham, Suffolk'.
- Rolfe, J., 2006. *Land north of Church Lane, Saxmundham; archaeological desk-based assessment*, Suffolk County Council Archaeol. Service unpublished Rep. 2006/184.
- Soil Survey of England and Wales (SSEW) 1983. *Legend for the 1:250,000 Soil Map of England and Wales*. Harpenden.
- Tanaka, J., 1980. *The San: Hunter-Gatherers of the Kalahari, A Study in Ecological Anthropology*. Tokyo.

- Tingle, M., 1998. 'Excavations of a colluvial deposit and an artefact scatter at the Prehistoric flint source in Beer, Devon', *Archaeol. J.*, 155, 293–303.
- Tomber, R. and Dore, J., 1998. *The National Roman Fabric Reference Collection: a Handbook*. London.
- Whitten, D.G.A. and Brooks, J.R.V., 1975. *A Dictionary of Geology*. Harmondsworth.