NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE LAND USE AT ALDEBURGH ROAD, LEISTON

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Summary

Archaeological evaluation and excavation at Aldeburgh Road, on the southern periphery of Leiston, revealed several loose clusters of Early Neolithic pits and a Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age ring-ditch monument, replaced by a Middle to Late Bronze Age field system and trackway, demonstrating intensified and increasingly managed land use. The pits represent a relatively rare occurrence of multiple Early Neolithic features with stratified finds assemblages in this part of Suffolk; of particular note is the inclusion of early loom weights. The ring-ditch, debated to be either the remains of a barrow or a small henge-like monument, is subsequently accommodated within the enclosed later Bronze Age landscape that extends to the east and demonstrates a continued and evolving use of this location in the wider landscape throughout the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods.[1]

INTRODUCTION

LEISTON IS LOCATED *c.*3km from the Suffolk coast, roughly halfway between Felixstowe and Lowestoft. The site, east of Aldeburgh Road, was situated on gently sloping farmland (18.6m–15m AOD) at the southern edge of the town, over bedrock sand of the Crag Group and clay/silt soils of the Lowestoft Formation (TM 44742 61817, Fig. 110). Archaeology South-East (ASE) carried out a trial trench evaluation and subsequent excavation in two areas on the *c.*5ha site in 2014 to 2016 (Fig. 110). The most significant results of the fieldwork were the discovery of several loose clusters of Early Neolithic pits containing well-stratified deposits and moderate finds assemblages with related radiocarbon dates, a possible Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age ring-ditch monument and contemporary pits, followed by the construction of a Middle to Late Bronze Age field system with trackway.

Previous evidence for prehistoric land use in this part of Suffolk is limited, with the majority of sites within the vicinity of Aldeburgh Road comprising barrow crop-marks recognised from aerial photography and dispersed Bronze Age and Iron Age remains. Early Neolithic settlement activity is poorly understood within the region, so these site results provide additional insights into the changing nature of land use from the Early Neolithic through to the Late Bronze Age.[2] Recent excavations by Oxford Archaeology East (OA East) immediately to the east have revealed two settlement enclosures dated to the Middle Bronze Age period which, together with the evidence from this site, informs a more detailed picture of the nature of Middle Bronze Age settlement.[3]

RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATION

The majority of the recorded archaeological features were dated to the Neolithic and Bronze Age, as indicated by a moderate assemblage of pottery, worked flint and radiocarbon dates,

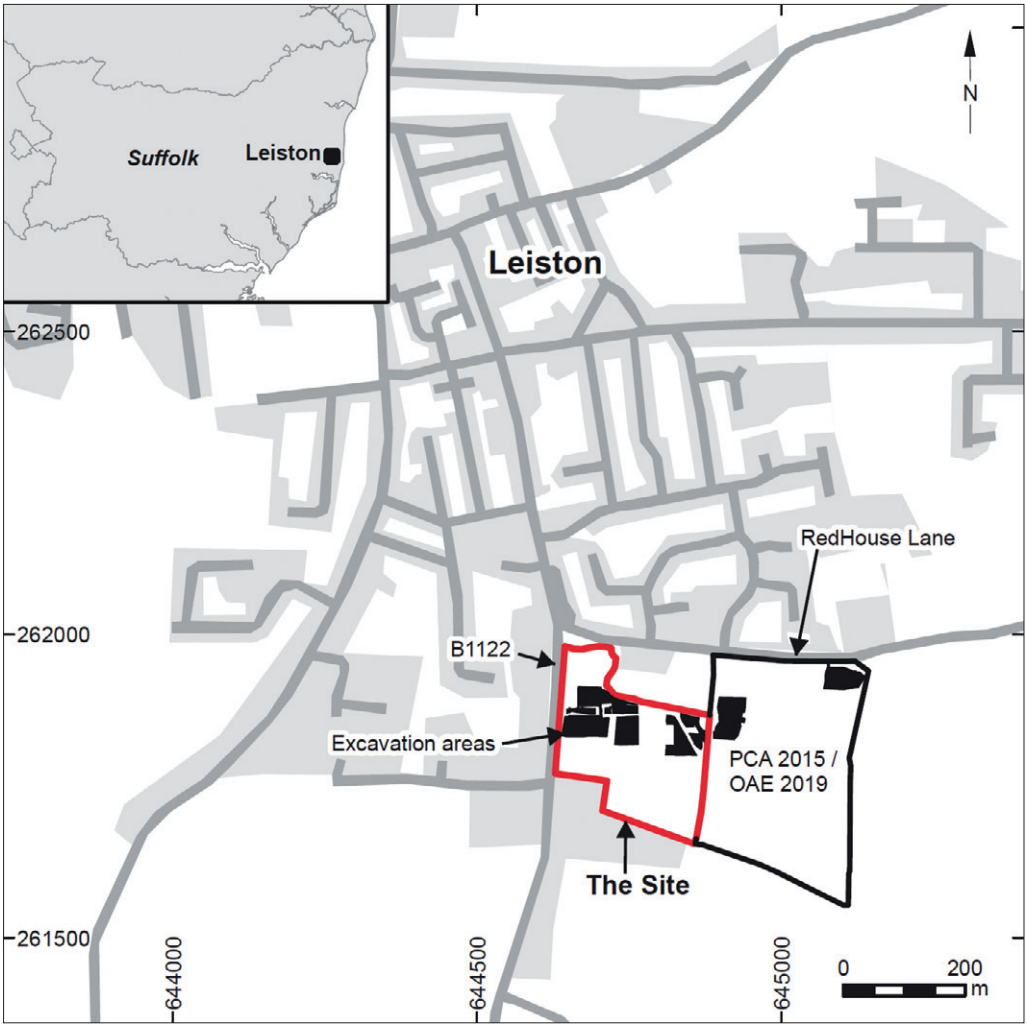

FIG. 110 – Site location plan.

and further refined through stratigraphic relationships and spatial patterning. Remains of earlier and later periods were also encountered, comprising small amounts of worked flint, including possible Mesolithic pieces, found residual in later features, a few Iron Age pits and both Roman and post-medieval to modern ditched field systems (Fig. 111), but are not the focus of this paper. Further detail about these aspects of land use can be found in the final archive report.[4]

Early Neolithic

The earliest demonstrable evidence for land use activity comprises the digging of loose clusters of pits within an unenclosed landscape during the Early Neolithic (Fig. 111). Primarily concentrated in the west part of the site, several groups of pits and reused tree-hollows/throws were found to contain Early Neolithic Plain Bowl pottery and contemporary flintwork which,

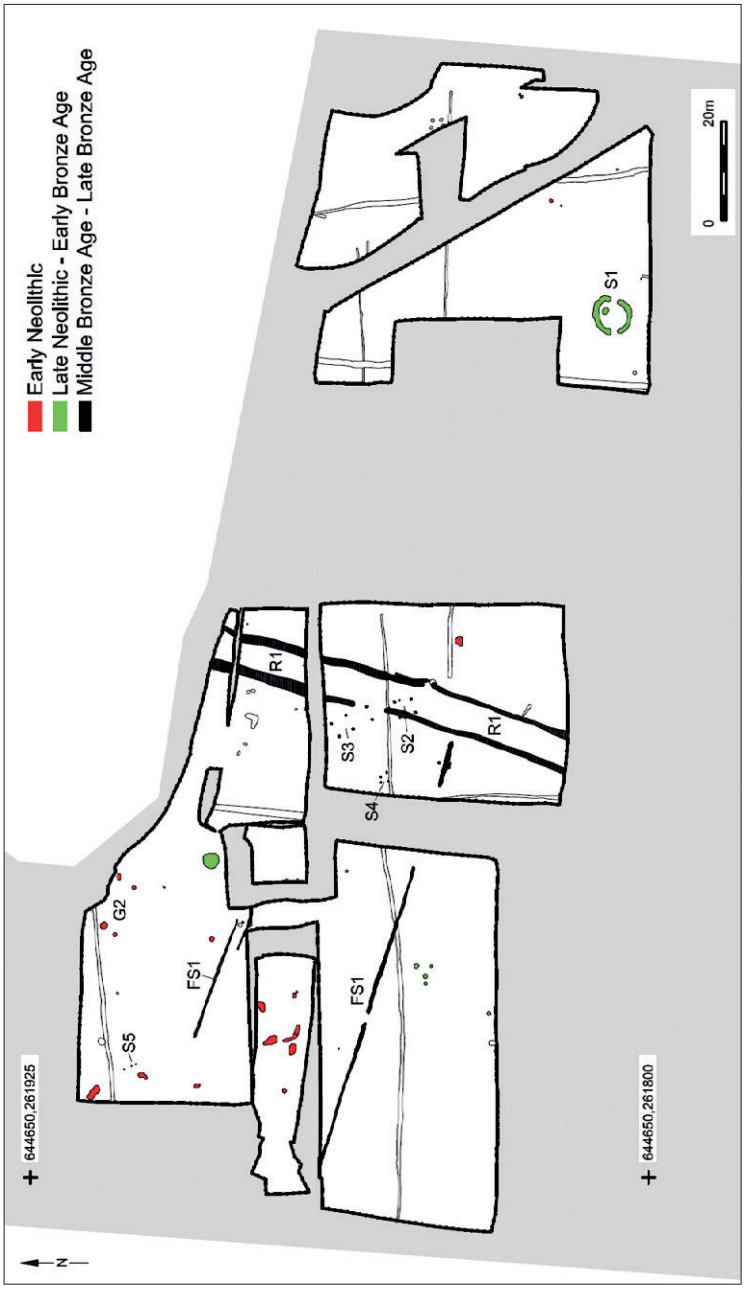

FIG. 111 – Phased plan of archaeological features.

along with charcoal-rich deposits, charred plant remains and fire-cracked flint, suggest low-level settlement activity at this location within the landscape.

Four similar round to slightly oval pits (G2), located in close proximity of one another, measured 0.75–1.44m in diameter and 0.60–1.0m in depth, and had steep, almost vertical sides and mostly flat bases (Fig. 112). While they contained differing deposit sequences, all were well-stratified with rich artefact assemblages and primary fills comprising a high

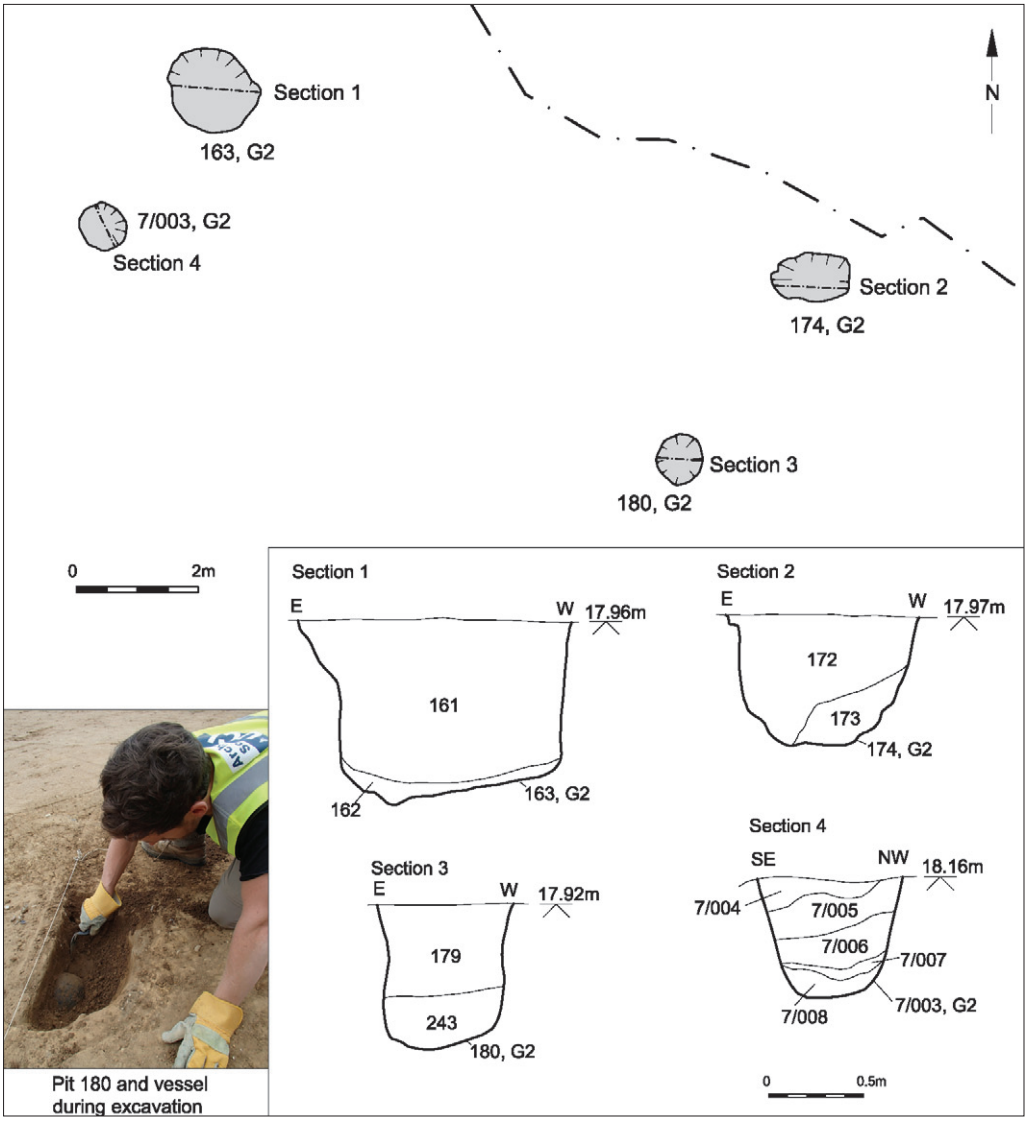

FIG. 112 – Early Neolithic pits; plans and sections and photo of vessel in pit [180] under excavation.

proportion of burnt material. The pits all contained a fairly large amount of Early Neolithic pottery and contemporary flintwork; of particular significance, an intact Plain Bowl vessel recovered from the upper backfill of pit [180] (Figs 112 and 115.4) and several fragments of contemporary loom weights from pit [163] (Fig. 116). The presence of the intact vessel suggests intentional placement and perhaps constitutes a structured deposit; it was found on its side in the centre of the pit. However, the vessel fill did not contain any significant inclusions, such as diagnostic human cremated bone or other artefacts, instead appearing to be filled with redeposited natural material. Undiagnostic burnt bone and burnt hazelnut shell recovered from the basal fill of pit [163] have provided radiocarbon dates of 3766 to 3647 cal. BC and 3763 to 3642 cal. BC respectively (Beta–487916; Beta–48917).

Six subcircular pits (G9, G40, G44, G45, G61) and eleven irregularly shaped features (G43, G47 and G53), mostly clustered in the western excavation area, contained some evidence of early prehistoric activity. Over half yielded small amounts of probable Early Neolithic pottery, contemporary flint flakes, fire-cracked flint and fragments of fired clay. Therefore, they could represent refuse dumps or working hollows/shelters, or ground surface debris washed into hollows made by tree clearance.

Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age

Only a small number of features could be securely dated to the Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age, although a moderate amount of residual/intrusive artefacts were recovered from later contexts and seemingly natural features (Fig. 111). Two loose clusters of pits (G28 and G39) and an irregularly shaped 'working hollow' (G6) may indicate a temporary settlement, such as a hunting camp, which is supported by the recovery of a small, broken Early Bronze Age barbed and tanged arrowhead, albeit in a residual context. The pits were generally small and circular to oval in plan, with diameters of 0.46–0.96m, steep sides and flat or slightly concave bases. Small amounts of Grooved Ware/Beaker and Neolithic Plain Bowl pottery sherds, along with worked flints, were collected mostly from single, sandy silt fills, with the exception of a moderate assemblage of large, abraded sherds from larger 'hollow' G6.

More significantly, a small ring-ditch with opposing entrances (Structure 1, G20) and an associated internal pit were uncovered in the eastern excavation area, isolated from other features belonging to this and the later Bronze Age periods. It is suggestive of either a round barrow or henge-like monument, both of which would infer that this location was used for funerary and/or other ritual activity.

The external diameter of the roughly circular, interrupted, ring-ditch measured *c*.7.5m (Fig. 113). It had opposing entrances on its east and west sides with rounded terminals, measuring 1.33m and 1.40m wide respectively. The ditch predominantly had gradually sloping sides and a concave base, 0.81–1.13m wide and 0.15–0.35m deep. A single, naturally accumulated fill yielded a low density of finds; these included thirty-seven small pottery sherds from a single vessel, with ambiguous dating to either the Early Neolithic or the Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age period, and five non-diagnostic flint flakes of broad Mesolithic to Bronze Age date. Six environmental soil samples were collected; however, their analysis revealed no significant insights into the nature of deposition in the ditch, or into contemporary land use and environment.

Oval pit [366] was located within the ring-ditch interior, to the north of its centre, measuring 1.5m by 1.1m and 0.5m deep. It had steep, almost vertical sides and a mostly flat base. Three fills were recorded, the lower two appearing to have been intentionally placed within the pit, while the uppermost fill appeared to be the result of natural silting or from the erosion of an internal mound. All fills yielded a small amount of non-diagnostic pottery, flint flakes, fire-cracked flint and charred weeds with charcoal fragments, insect remains and charred wheat present in the lower and animal bone in the upper fill. No burnt bone was recovered from this feature to confirm that it was a burial pit.

Middle to Late Bronze Age

Land use intensifies during the Middle to Late Bronze Age with the establishment of a vaguely rectilinear field system, constituting the beginnings of permanent agricultural settlement of this landscape, which is typical countrywide.[5] A series of ditches spanning the western excavation area were orientated orthogonally to form a field system (FS1) that included a

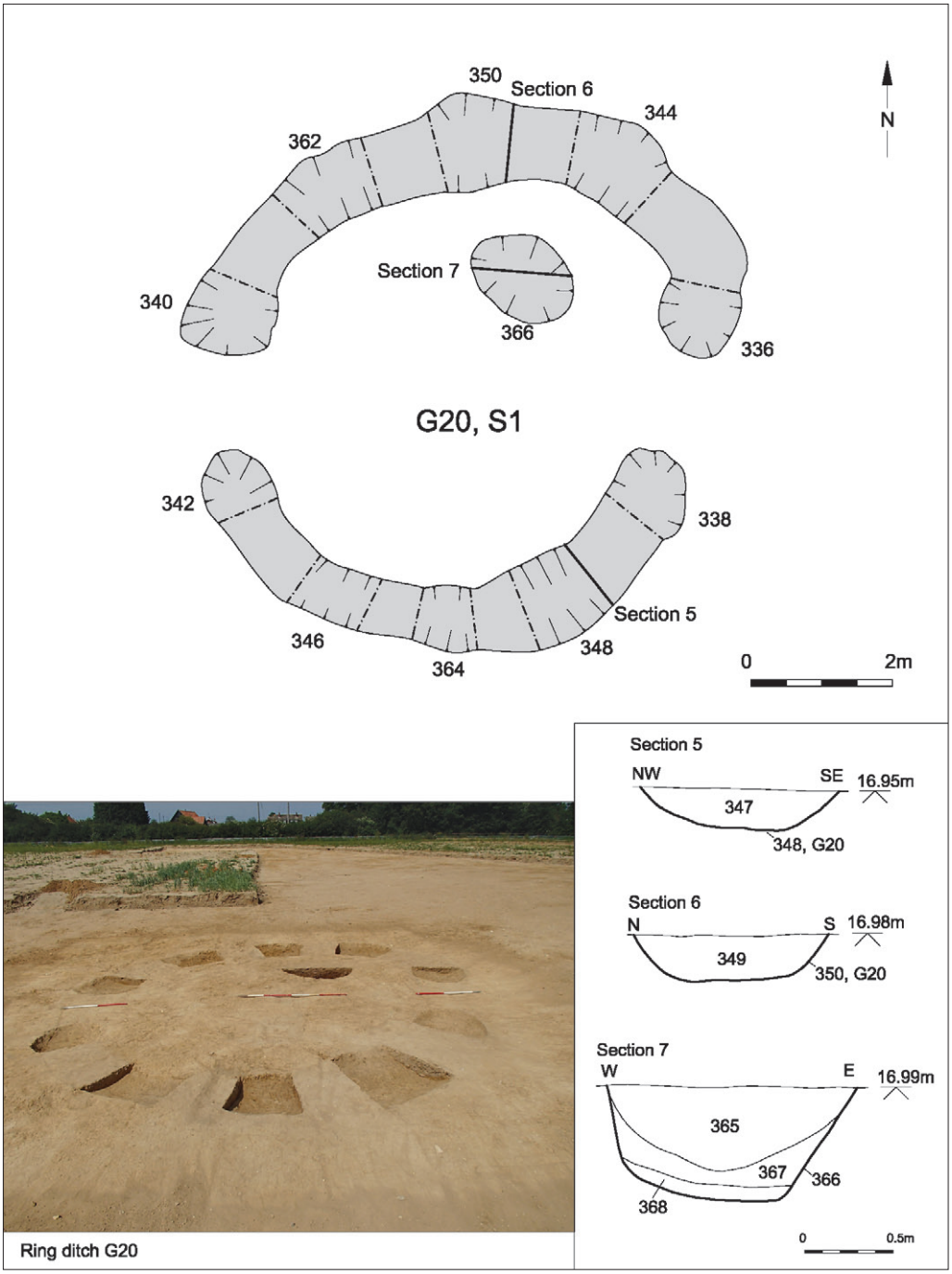

FIG. 113 – Late Neolithic / Early Bronze Age ring-ditch S1.

trackway (R1) (Fig. 111). Four large, rectangular fields defined by FS1 are presumed to be associated with agricultural activities, such as crop cultivation and/or livestock management. Contemporary post-holes and pits, some possibly constituting the fragmentary remains of structures, were also located within FS1. Small amounts of broadly Late Neolithic to Middle Bronze Age pottery and undiagnostic flintwork, most of which appeared residual, were recovered from features phased to this period.

FS1 comprised five interrupted ditch lengths with rounded termini, defining two parallel boundaries across the west of the site. They were aligned west–north-west by east–south-east, varied between 0.26–1.02m in width and 0.06–0.31m deep, with mostly concave bases (G4/G12 and G3/G26). The gaps between the termini varied in size, but appear to have formed entrances. The more extensive G4/G12 ditch was in excess of 51m long and clearly extended away from the R1 trackway. Less substantial ditch G3 was recorded for a length of *c*.26m. While it does not appear to have extended as far east as the trackway, vaguely parallel but offset ditch fragments G26 may have extended this boundary further.

The eastern extent of this ditch system was defined by parallel, interrupted ditches G7 and G8 on a north–north-east – south–south-west alignment, spaced *c*.5.5m apart, and in excess of 63m long. These are interpreted to delineate an unsurfaced trackway (R1). A staggered crossing through R1 is inferred by the gaps in G7 and G8, potentially to move livestock on and/or off the trackway from/into the fields. The simplicity and narrowness of the G8 gap may suggest that only people were moving in and out through that access and the livestock were confined to the west of R1, separating the sacred landscape to the east and the agricultural landscape to the west. All the FS1 and R1 ditches had similar naturally accumulated single fills composed of mid-greyish-brown silty sand with few inclusions.

Three rectangular-shaped fields, averaging 95m long and 27m wide, are defined by FS1 to the west of the trackway. The fragmentary nature of the boundaries created wide access points between the fields. Scattered remains of discrete features were located within these that are likely to be contemporary. A larger tract of unenclosed landscape lay to the east of R1, which was distinct in its lack of contemporary occupying features. It is suggested that the remains of the earlier henge-like monument S1 were still visible and perhaps incorporated into the Bronze Age landscape.

Four groups of post-holes forming potential building and/or fence line structures (S2–S5), are assigned to this period. Only a small amount of fragmented pottery and flint flakes broadly dated as prehistoric were recovered across the four groups, making dating of these features inconclusive. However, it is unlikely that structural remains are present in the landscape before the Middle to Late Bronze Age. Environmental sampling yielded small amounts of burnt hazelnut shell fragments, charred barley, wheat and wild radish macrofossils that, while informing on the dietary habits of the occupants, do not suggest that significant crop processing was occurring on-site. The recovered charcoal assemblage from deposits of this period is almost exclusively oak, indicating that it was likely used for structural posts and they could have been burned *in situ*.

Structure 2 was located mostly within the trackway. Four post-holes form a *c*.3.4m^2 arrangement in a roughly north–north-west – south–south-east orientation, with an additional stake-hole located adjacent to the north-east post-hole. Structure 3 consists of two parallel lines of three paired post-holes, orientated similarly to S2 and positioned within the entrance of the trackway ditch G7. It is posited to define a simple rectangular building, *c*.8m by 3m in extent. The post-holes all had consistent profiles, with steep, almost vertical sides and flat bases, measuring 0.38–0.60m in diameter and 0.09–0.30m deep. The probable stake-hole was noticeably smaller with a more concave base, perhaps suggesting that it reinforced the main structure. The fills of both structures comprised mid-brownish-grey sandy silt with varying

densities of charcoal, with the exception of one that had evidence for a post-pipe and packing material. It is perhaps doubtful that, if indeed constituting structures, S2 and S3 were directly contemporary with the trackway. Both have differing alignments to it and would have disrupted its functioning, making it more likely they are either earlier or later in the period.

Structure 4 was located *c.*11m west of the above groups, partially truncated by a Roman ditch. It comprised four post-holes in a roughly square formation, orientated north–south. Structure 5 comprised a north–north-west – south–south-east line of three post-holes, located in the north-west of the site. The component post-holes were not as well defined as S2 and S3, but the positioning of S4 suggests a four-post structure, measuring at maximum 1.7m by 1.5m, while S5 likely represents a small structure or fence line. Although no dateable material was recovered from any of their post-holes, it is likely that S4 and S5 were contemporary with the other identified structures, based on orientation and stratigraphic relationships.

ARTEFACT ASSEMBLAGE

A moderate-sized, but range-limited, assemblage of finds was recovered, spanning the Mesolithic to post-medieval periods. For the purposes of this article, and relevant to the periods being discussed, only the flintwork, prehistoric pottery and fired clay objects are reported on here. Details of the entire assemblage, the bulk of the remainder being of Roman and post-medieval date, can be found in the final archive report.[6] Environmental sampling results have been subsumed into the site narrative where pertinent.

Flint (Karine Le Hégarat)

Early Neolithic

In total, 295 pieces of struck flint were recovered from eight pits ([7/003, 19/003, 160, 163, 165, 174, 180, 400]) and a tree-throw ([192]) that contained Early Neolithic pottery and loom weights. Except for isolated G9 pit [19/003], all were in the north-west of the site. The exploited raw material appears to have been collected from derived sources, probably at and around the site. Overall, the pieces were small.

The débitage relates to a blade-orientated industry and, although no diagnostic pieces were recovered, the flint is likely to be contemporary with the Early Neolithic ceramics and features. The use of a soft hammer was regularly noted, and platform edges were commonly abraded for the controlled and predictable removal of flakes and blades. Cores were uncommon, limited to five in total; however, the presence of two refits and small amounts of micro-débitage from G2 pits [7/005] and [180] provide limited evidence for knapping activity (Figs 114.1 and 114.2).

Retouched pieces were rare, with the Early Neolithic features producing two end scrapers (i.e. Fig. 114.3), three serrated pieces, a retouched flake and three miscellaneous retouched pieces. The serrated pieces were all made on blades. One example from [19/004] displayed serrations on the left side (Fig. 114.4), the other on the right side at the distal end (Fig. 114.5). The example from [191] (Fig. 114.6) was made on a distal trimming blade, with its serrations on the right side. The presence of possible gloss was noticed on two pieces, though other signs of use-wear were uncommon.

Late Neolithic / Early Bronze Age

Fifty-nine worked pieces were recovered from seven Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age scattered pits and tree-throws. Most of these features produced very few pieces each, but G28 pit [118] yielded forty-four pieces from basal fill [117], which also contained a small amount

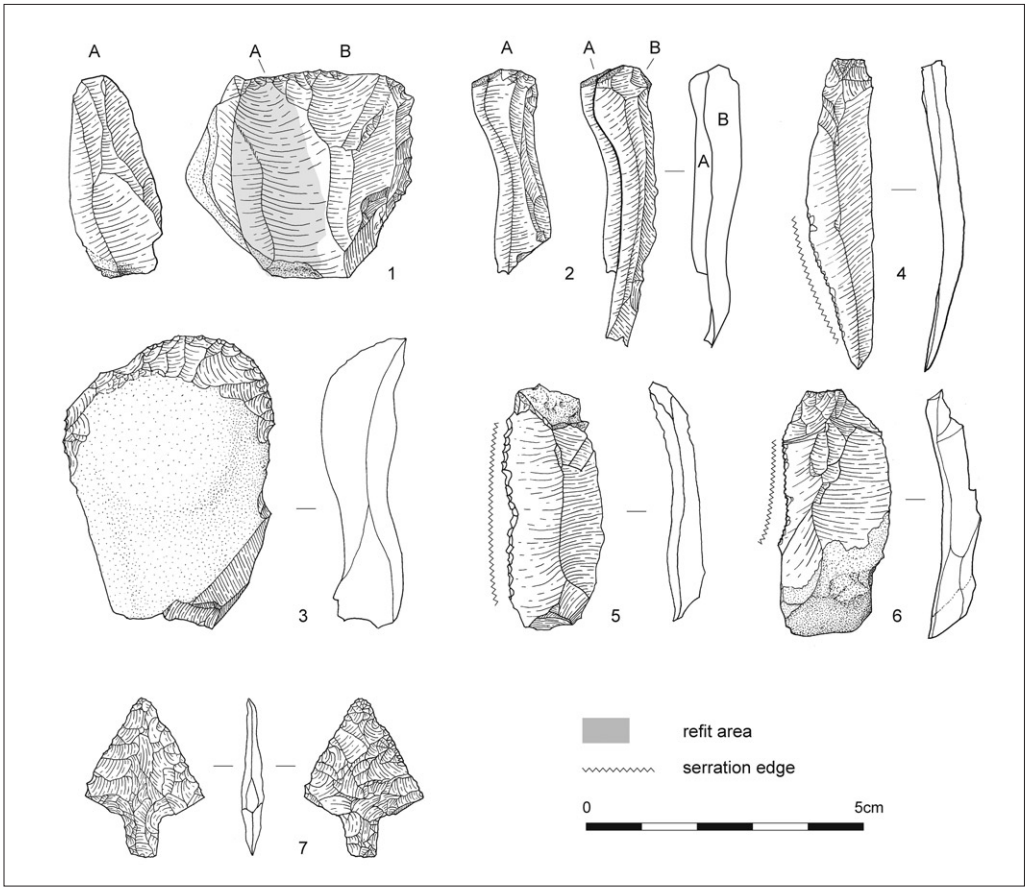

FIG. 114 – Prehistoric flintwork.

of possible Grooved Ware pottery that is likely contemporary. The assemblage comprises twenty-six flakes, two blade-like flakes, two chips, five pieces of irregular waste, three cores, an end-and-side scraper, a core tool and four retouched flakes. The small flakes were struck using a mixed hammer mode, but preparation of the platform edge was slightly less common. Lastly, a broken Early Bronze Age barbed and tanged arrowhead (Fig. 114.7) was found redeposited in a Roman ditch.

Discussion

Early Neolithic pits are well known in East Anglia, but only three early examples are located on the coast; Aldeburgh Road is therefore a significant addition to this.[7] Finds assemblages from such sites are almost exclusively represented by pieces of flints and fragmented pottery. Given their level of fragmentation, the range of surface and edge condition and the overall low level of refitting, the finds are typically interpreted as deriving from surface/midden-type deposits.[8] On occasion they may have been deliberately selected from these deposits to be placed within the pits, but, in general, there is no evidence for this and the material was seemingly dumped in the features.[9] The finds assemblage from Aldeburgh Road differs in that it also includes a complete

vessel and loom weight fragments from two separate pits, indicating a different type of depositional practice (in terms of the type of finds selected and their treatment).

Overall, the flintwork from this site is comparable to contemporary pit assemblages recorded in the region.[10] Dominated by a large amount of knapping waste and containing a few retouched pieces and formal tools, it demonstrates the last stages of the reduction process. Variation in the size of flint assemblages between individual pits seems common, while the technology is also comparable to that observed on similar sites, consisting of a blade or narrow flake-orientated reduction strategy. Although the pits provide some evidence of selective deposition for other finds, there is none to suggest selection and arrangement of the flintwork in them.

The finds from such sites have been interpreted as representing the remains from successive temporary settlements, with activity ranging from task-specific visits to longer occupation.[11] The flint assemblage from Aldeburgh Road comprises working waste and limited evidence of tool use. With the association of pottery and loom weights, this suggests settlement, but the quantity of tools is low. The presence of three retouched, serrated pieces is interesting. They were all made on blades, two of which displayed some possible gloss. They could represent short-lived task-specific activity such as cutting wood, corn or silica-rich plants such as nettles, but their number is too limited to be certain.[12] Additionally, the low quantity of burnt worked flint (four pieces), and the almost absence of unworked burnt flint, is unexpected as both are normally present on occupation sites.

In Garrow's study of the flint assemblages of seven Early Neolithic pit sites from East Anglia, he made a distinction between flint-rich sites with relatively low quantities of retouched pieces, and small assemblages that produced greater quantities of tools.[13] The assemblage from Aldeburgh Road differs; it being of both small size and low in tools. This was also recently noted for another pit site excavated at North Fen, Sutton Gault, in Cambridgeshire, for which Tabor speculates that, depending on the landscape, sites could have functioned differently.[14] At Aldeburgh Road, it may simply be that the recovered assemblage is incomplete.

Pottery (Anna Doherty)

A total of 251 sherds of pottery, weighing 2.32kg, from an estimated 138 vessels was found stratified in Neolithic to Early Bronze Age deposits. The pottery from the former belongs to the Early Neolithic Plain Bowl tradition, whilst that from the latter mostly comprises Late Neolithic Grooved Ware, with some possible sherds of Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age Beaker pottery.

The stratified Early Neolithic assemblage was largely recovered from pit cluster G2, including an exceptional find of an intact Plain Bowl from pit [180] and a substantial group of pottery, comprising ninety-four sherds (664g), from pit [163]. This latter material is fragmentary, with most vessels only represented by one or two sherds. No cross-fits were identified across separate features. Six other dispersed pits also contained very small groups of Early Neolithic pottery and *c*.fifty similarly flint-tempered bodysherds were encountered in later stratigraphic periods, although some of these were difficult to distinguish definitively from later prehistoric fabrics.

The Early Neolithic fabrics are almost entirely flint-tempered, including examples with both sandy and fairly quartz-free matrices (Table 1). The assemblage is chiefly composed of moderately coarse (with flint inclusions typically ranging up to *c*.3–4mm) and coarse fabric types (up to *c*.6mm). Even amongst the coarser fabric groupings, the larger flint inclusions are often rare in frequency and surfaces can nevertheless be well-finished (e.g. Fig. 115.1). Several

Fabric group	Archive fabric codes	Sherds	Weight (g)	ENV
Non-sandy coarse flint-tempered wares	FLIN2, FLIN4, FLIN7	42	390	26
Non-sandy moderately coarse flint-tempered wares	FLIN1, FLIN3, FLIN5, FLIN6	49	970	32
Sandy coarse flint-tempered wares	FLQU1, FLQU3	65	319	25
Sandy moderately coarse flint-tempered wares	FLQU4, FLQU5, FLQU7	46	275	20
Sandy fine flint-tempered wares	FLQU2	1	15	1
Sandy wares	QUAR1	1	6	1
Probable intrusive Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age grog-tempered wares	QUGR1; GROG1	8	16	3
Total		**212**	**1991**	**108**

TABLE 1 – Quantification of the Early Neolithic pottery assemblage by broad fabric type.

of the fabrics contain more frequent and better sorted flint inclusions than is typical in Early Neolithic fabrics, the complete vessel from pit [180] being a good example of this (Fig. 115.4). The assemblage clearly seems to lack the very coarse flint-tempered wares typically associated with thick-walled, heavy-duty vessels. Just a single bodysherd in a sandy fabric was noted in the Early Neolithic assemblage. Eight very small sherds, from three estimated vessels, in grog-tempered fabrics are probably intrusive to this period.

The single substantial diagnostic pottery group, from pit [163], was associated with bone and hazelnut shell radiocarbon-dated to 3766–3647 cal. BC and 3763–3642 cal. BC respectively (Beta–487916; Beta–48917) and is typical of pit groups of this period. These dates fall fairly early within the Plain Bowl tradition, and it is worth noting that one vessel in this group (Fig. 115.1) has some similarities to the earlier Carinated Bowl style, being thin-walled and well-finished with a rounded shoulder carination and concave neck. The remainder of the assemblage is, however, very typical of the Plain Bowl tradition, including rims with strongly out-turning rims (Fig. 115.2) and beaded rim profiles (Fig. 115.3). The intact vessel comprises a small Plain Bowl vessel with a neutral body profile and plain squared rim (Fig. 115.4). As is typically the case in assemblages from pit groups, as opposed to causewayed enclosures or other monuments, no examples of decoration were recorded.

Assemblages of this type have often been interpreted as a form of structured deposit, where the pit seems to have been dug especially for the deposition of cultural material rather than having refuse deposited as part of a secondary phase of use.[15] It is, however, hard to overstate the rarity of finding complete intact vessels of the type represented in pit [180]. Where whole vessels are recovered in this period, it tends to be from contexts with specific ritual or funerary associations in rivers and bogs, or, as at Flixton and the Etton causewayed enclosure, in association with long barrows.[16] By contrast, a review of forty contemporary pit groups from non-monumental sites in East Anglia failed to identify any vessels that were more than a quarter complete.[17] A wider literature search has not identified any other directly contemporary examples either; however, a slightly earlier Carinated Bowl was reportedly

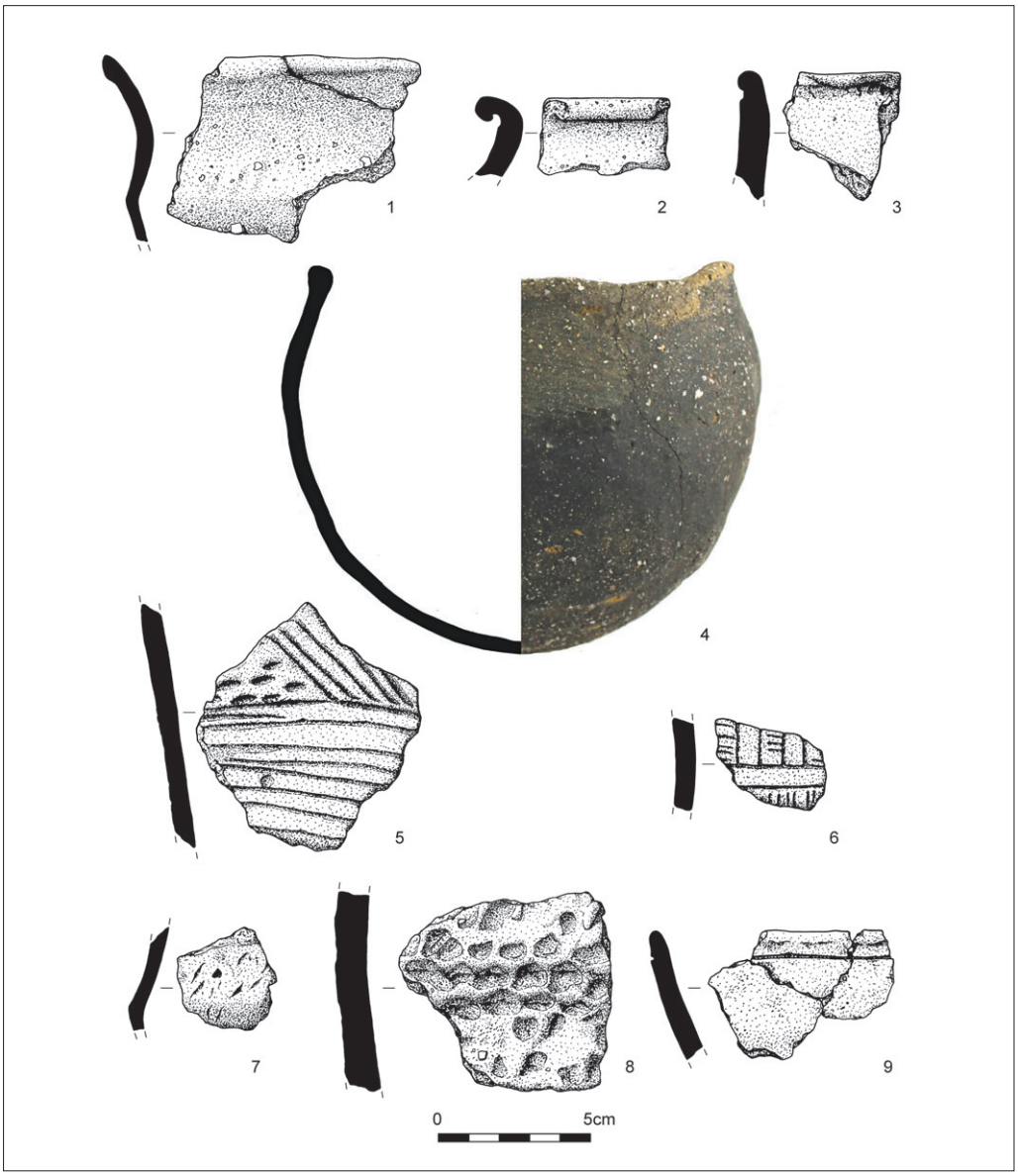

FIG. 115 – Prehistoric pottery.

found in a shallow pit at Layer de la Haye, Essex, and a similar near-complete vessel, found inverted in a tree-throw at Didcot, Oxfordshire, were perhaps placed directly after the removal of a tree-stump during wider site clearance activities.[18]

A scatter of Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age pottery was primarily recovered from pits G6 and G28, with additional extremely fragmentary bodysherds collected from G38, G53, G56 and G20. Overall, the well-stratified Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age pottery amounts to just forty-seven sherds (294g). A similar quantity of sherds was found as residual or

Fabric group	Archive fabric codes	Sherds	Weight (g)	ENV
Sandy coarse flint-tempered wares	FLQU1	2	74	1
Non-sandy moderately coarse flint-tempered wares	FLIN1	14	40	1
Moderately fine non-sandy grog-tempered ware	GROG1	4	14	4
Sandy coarse grog-tempered ware	QUGR2, QUGR3, QUGR4	20	134	6
Sandy moderately fine grog-tempered ware	QUGR1	56	207	28
Sandy coarse grog-tempered ware, with flint	QUGF1	2	40	1
Sandy moderately fine grog-tempered ware with flint	QUGF2	5	33	2
Total		**103**	**542**	**43**

TABLE 2 – Quantification of Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age assemblage (regardless of phase) by broad fabric type.

intrusive material in other phases, which may suggest that earlier features were truncated, or that there was a fairly large quantity of Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age material on ground surfaces when this landscape was created.

The suite of fabrics associated with the Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age period is fairly distinctive, allowing these to be identified more conclusively even when only isolated bodysherds are present. Most of the fabrics are variants of sparsely grog-tempered wares with sandy clay matrixes, including some containing flint inclusions (Table 2). Two vessels with flint-tempered fabrics, similar to those from the Early Neolithic period features, are also thought likely to belong to the Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age period because they were stratified with other pottery of this date and feature impressed decoration and cordons, which are atypical of the earlier period.

Almost all of the diagnostic sherds come from pit group G28. This material generally comprises fairly small bodysherds, meaning that some pieces are of uncertain Grooved Ware/Beaker designation. Decoration is mostly confined to incised lines (e.g. Figs 115.5–6) and fingernail/fingertip decoration over a wide body area (e.g. Figs 115.7–8) — styles that could belong to either tradition. On the other hand, most of the sherds are moderately thick-walled, a trait more typical of Grooved Ware and some elements — like applied cordons, recorded on three estimated vessels (including Fig. 115.8) — are almost certainly of this tradition.

Despite the lack of large body profiles, it is possible to suggest that the assemblage may contain elements of both Clacton and Durrington Walls style Grooved Ware. For example, the incised diagonal and horizontal incised lines and short impression on a vessel with a probable open profile (Fig. 115.5) has a good parallel at the Clacton type site.[19] By contrast, the cordoned vessels (e.g. Fig. 115.8) are more similar to examples from Durrington Walls style assemblages, such as that from Flixton.[20] The only diagnostic Grooved Ware rim sherd (Fig. 115.9) also appears to be of a more typical Durrington Walls form, with a tub-shaped profile and a plain, slightly recurving rim.

A minority of sherds found within the G28 pits are much thinner walled (e.g. Fig. 115.7)

and typically associated with moderately fine grog-tempered wares. As such, they may well belong to the Beaker tradition. One very small bodysherd from this assemblage features comb stabbing, the only decorative style more closely associated with Beaker than with Grooved Ware. Assuming that this pit group represents a broadly contemporary assemblage, this would suggest a later third millennium BC date of deposition. Recent radiocarbon evidence now places the first appearance of Beaker no earlier than 2475 cal. BC, whilst Grooved Ware is generally understood to have gone out of use by *c.*2100–2000 BC.[21]

Fired Clay (Isa Benedetti-Whitton)

An assemblage of 203 pieces of fired clay (3197g) was collected from twenty contexts, including environmental samples, much of it too fragmentary to provide any basis for interpretation due to the low-fired, friable nature of the clay. Despite this, several fragments of what appear to be Early Neolithic loom weights are identified and, significantly, are of a type that have only been noted at two other sites in the United Kingdom.

The better preserved of these fragments were retrieved from both the upper and basal fills of Early Neolithic G2 pit [163]. The identification of these objects as loom weights derives mainly from the presence of apparent perforations through the objects, which have been interpreted as suspension holes.[22] Partial suspension holes are clear on the two most diagnostic fragments, although more so on the 'doughnut' shaped RF<2> (Fig. 116.2). The perforation on fragment RF<1> (Fig. 116.1) is more subtle, but its overall shape is more illustrative of the bulky, subcircular shape that Neolithic weights are likely to have taken based on comparative examples from Devon.

The best examples of Neolithic loom weights in Britain were found at Hayes Farm Quarry in Devon.[23] Only one other site, at Easington in County Durham, is known to have produced a similarly dated object, described as potentially being the 'earliest loom weight found in Britain to date'.[24] Radiocarbon-dating of charcoal from associated pits at Easington suggested a Neolithic occupation period of a thousand years, from the fourth millennium BC to the mid–late third millennium BC. The loom weights found at Hayes Farm Quarry represent the more significant find, being multiple examples found in a structured deposit within a pit.[25] This deposit was radiocarbon-dated to the early fourth millennium BC, corresponding to the associated Early Neolithic pottery and roughly to the radiocarbon dates from the Aldeburgh Road samples. However, those collected from Hayes Farm appeared completely unused and the nature of their multiple perforations, whilst not entirely inconsistent with weaving, could potentially have had a purely ritualistic purpose. The examples from Aldeburgh Road are formed from a very brittle fabric with large flint inclusions and are clearly burnt. It has not been possible to ascertain whether they had ever been used; their functional interpretation is largely based on their similarity to the examples from Hayes Farm.

Neolithic structured deposits are not uncommon across Britain, but apart from the aforementioned examples, none are known to have contained loom weights.[26] This contrasts with structured deposits of the Bronze and Iron Ages and even into the Roman period, in which the presence of loom weights is not uncommon.[27] It is generally thought that these later deposits were intended to commemorate a particular event or place, with a potential shift in emphasis over time from the act of commemoration to the act of deposition.[28]

As the identification of loom weights is more common in features from later periods, it is possible that this trend has influenced the identification of the Neolithic clay objects as loom weights. Whatever their original intended function, what is undisputed is that the discovery of these objects at Aldeburgh Road is of clear national significance, providing a third example to the very small corpus of sites at which Early Neolithic-dated loom weights have been found.

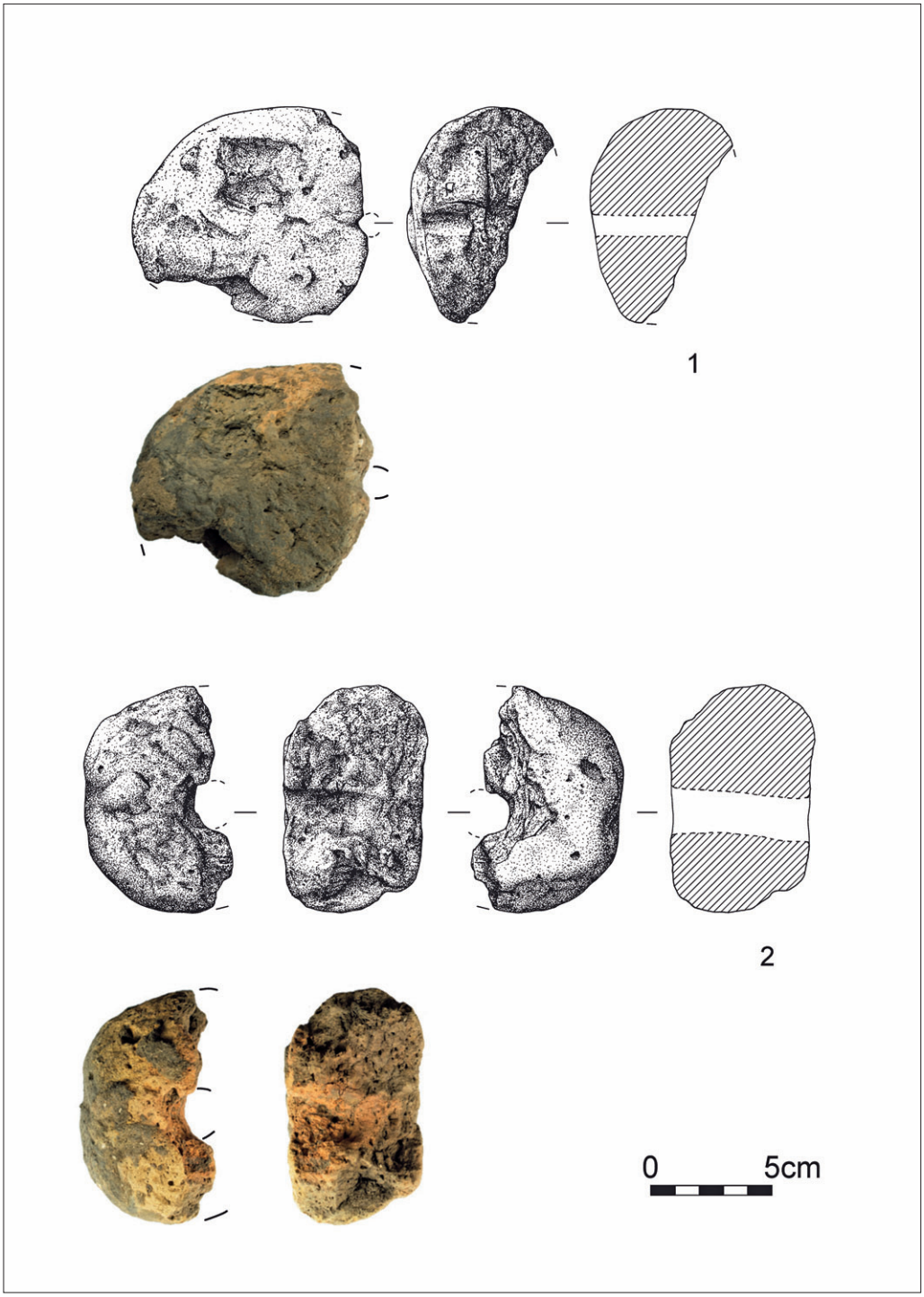

FIG. 116 – Early Neolithic loom weights.

DISCUSSION

The evidence for prehistoric activity at Aldeburgh Road is significant both locally and regionally, particularly with regard to the understanding of land use and deposition during the Early Neolithic period. Additionally, excavated Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age monuments in Suffolk are rare, with their presence in the Leiston area being confined to the identification of crop-marks from aerial photography. The subsequent imposition of a Middle to Late Bronze Age field system on the landscape helps to trace further the spread of permanent settlements and intensified agriculture north of the river Stour. Combined with the evidence for Middle Bronze Age settlement from OA East's excavations, these remains suggest a fairly intensive use of land at Aldeburgh Road by this time.[29]

Neolithic occupation

The occurrence of multiple Early Neolithic features with stratified and substantive finds assemblages is relatively rare in this part of Suffolk and, until fairly recently, pits from this period were often neglected during analysis in favour of more sensational monumental features.[30] Thus, the characteristics of Early Neolithic settlement and deposition were poorly understood. However, pits such as these are now more consistently being appreciated to represent settlement during this period in the east of England — as at Gallows Hill, Barking, Flixton Park Quarry and Game Farm, Brandon, in Suffolk, and at Kilverstone in Norfolk.[31]

The pits at Aldeburgh Road have a number of similarities with comparable sites in Suffolk and the broader East Anglian region. They are located in the most common geological material, gravelly sand, and in the most common geographic locations, lowland areas close to a river or the sea. They are round to oval, but do show variances in profiles, diameters and depths between the clusters. Of particular interest is pit cluster G2, which comprised the largest, deepest pits containing well-stratified deposits and significant quantities of chronologically diagnostic material.

Settlement in the Early Neolithic is generally considered to be impermanent, as it is unusual to find convincing structural remains associated with contemporary pits. However, the stratified deposits of varied artefactual material found within the pits at Aldeburgh Road, and at other sites such as Spong Hill and Hurst Fen, likely suggest dumping of domestic waste on site.[32] G2 pits [163, 174, 180] were found to contain almost entirely rubbish, implying they had been dug purposefully and rapidly backfilled, possibly from a primary deposit, such as a midden or other 'pre-pit context'.[33] Additionally, the presence of fire-cracked flint, charcoal-rich deposits and charred hazelnut shells suggest that cooking activities were occurring directly on site, the remnants of which were being discarded in the pits. Little in the way of faunal remains was recovered, which is unsurprising given the sand and gravel geology of the site. Thus, the pits can be considered to contain a representative portion of the domestic material from on-site occupation during that period. Conversely, the rare presence of Early Neolithic loom weight fragments and a complete Plain Bowl vessel in two separate pits, in conjunction with the lack of ceramic refits within or across pits, could demonstrate more intentional deposition and/or from multiple midden deposits.

It seems likely that a semi-permanent Early Neolithic settlement was present at this location. Although no structural remains suggesting more robust and long-lasting structures could be attributed to this period, this does not preclude other types of more lightweight housing that leave a less permanent mark on the landscape, or the truncation of such features from long-term ploughing and/or weathering. The amount of domestic waste recovered from pit cluster G2 and the intentional deposition of the Plain Bowl vessel, and possibly the loom weight

fragments, seem to suggest some sort of time investment, meaning and longevity to the site.

Also worth consideration are the clusters of tree-holes in the western area of the site, which yielded a moderate assemblage of Grooved Ware pottery and contemporary flintwork with inclusions of charcoal fragments. More recently, the clearance of woodland for pastoral purposes during the Early Neolithic has been suggested as more of an opportunistic practice rather than mass deforestation.[34] The felling of trees from natural causes, such as windstorms or lightning strikes, would have created small clearances within a heavily wooded area, which could be expanded by humans by cutting down smaller, secondary trees and bushes, burning felled trees and grazing from large herbivores. This would have happened more frequently on sandier sites with shallow rooting, such as Aldeburgh Road, creating large, irregular pits in a concentrated area. The presence of these features further suggests the concerted exploitation and management of the landscape, corroborating with the artefactual evidence to infer longevity and investment in the settlement at Aldeburgh Road.

Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age land use

The Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age ring-ditch perhaps represents a small round or disc barrow that has been ploughed flat, as no sign of any earthwork within the ditch remains. They are generally considered to be funerary monuments; the internal pit may have contained a burial or cremation that was removed or had disintegrated due to natural weathering. There are similar pits, both in date and profile, found within ring-ditches classified as round barrows at New Hall, Harlow, Stanway and Flixton Park Quarry.[35] Dating suggests that S1 was slightly earlier than the field system west of the trackway. Unaccompanied by other external features, such as satellite burials, this monument appears to have sat in isolation within an otherwise unused landscape.

Similarly dated barrows have been recorded in Suffolk at Flixton Park Quarry, Boss Hall, RAF Lakenheath, Aldham Mill, Tranmar House and Valley Farm.[36] Aerial photographs from the National Mapping Programme (NMP) have also revealed crop-marks consistent with these types of funerary monuments and late prehistoric field systems.[37] Three potential barrows located south of the site in Aldringham, which are so far undated, could nevertheless suggest a local pattern of these monuments.[38] However, none of the comparable barrow monuments that have been investigated archaeologically exhibit dual entrances like that found at Aldeburgh Road.

Alternative explanations for the form and function of the ring-ditch are, therefore, possible. The irregularity/'roughness' of the ditch, its opposing access points and the off-centre positioning of the pit are fairly atypical for a Bronze Age barrow *per se*. It is possible that S1 is the remains of an alternative form of funerary/mortuary monument, perhaps a simple ditched enclosure with entranceways to facilitate access to and use of its interior — presumably for veneration of the deceased or other ritual activities, either on a regular or episodic basis. However, given the absence of any human remains and the unconvincing nature of pit [366] as the remains of a grave, a non-funerary function may also be considered, though the ring-ditch would appear to be too small to denote a house enclosure or the dwelling itself and lacks associated structural or occupation remains.

Based on its double entrances and lack of domestic material within the fill, S1 could instead be regarded as a Late Neolithic Class II henge-like monument, such as that found at Old Hall, Boreham, or Etton.[39] Henges show great variations in size and construction, with those measuring less than 15–20m being designated 'mini-henges' or hengiform monuments.[40] The dimensions of the monument at Aldeburgh Road, measuring 7.5m in external diameter and 5.5m internally, is at the lower end of the scale, as henges most frequently have internal

diameters from 40m up to 110m.[41] The construction of the ring-ditch monument, away from the domestic, everyday use areas to the north-west, suggests the creation of a sacred space in the eastern area, potentially for the veneration of an important individual or a communal centre for ritualistic meetings or ceremonies. Similar to the henges recorded at Etton and Old Hall, very few artefacts were recovered from the ring-ditch and associated pit, making it unlikely that purposeful deposition was occurring at these monuments. The dual entrances may imply a thoroughfare for the procession of people through the monument during these events. Alternatively, the east and west locations of the entrances could indicate purposeful positioning of the openings towards the sunrise and sunset, further suggesting some sort of ritualistic function. Off-centred possible burial or cremation pits have been identified in association with similar ring-ditches, which could explain the placement of pit [366] so as not to block passage between the two entrances.[42] However, the more common occurrence of burials within Neolithic monuments appeared in conjunction with stone monuments, such as Stonehenge, while being more rarely associated with wooden circles or henges.[43] It has been suggested that henges were designed to be used by the living, rather than focusing on the dead.[44] Therefore, as pit [366] did not contain any evidence of cremated or inhumation remains, it seems more likely that it was used for ritual deposition of another type.

Although the nature of the Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age monument is unclear, it appears to infer that some form of sacred or ritualistic activity occurred at Aldeburgh Road during this period. The surrounding space is void of contemporary features and the positions of the later field system to the west and settlement enclosures found to the east seem to respect the S1 location. Very few similarly dated monuments have been archaeologically investigated in this area of Suffolk, with the majority of evidence for barrows and/or henge monuments being derived from the interpretation of aerial photography.

Middle to Late Bronze Age fields

The creation of FS1 during the Middle to Late Bronze Age appears to respect the placement of S1, with R1 demarcating a western space for everyday agricultural activities and keeping the eastern area sacred and revered. Many examples examined and outlined by Cooper overwhelmingly suggest that later Bronze Age communities valued the presence of earlier monuments on the landscape enough to either incorporate (e.g. Pode Hole) or respect (e.g. Brigg's Farm) the location of a barrow whenever field systems were constructed within their vicinity.[45]

The adjacent OA East investigations undertaken immediately to the east of this Aldeburgh Road site identified remains of both Middle and Late Bronze Age date, interpreted to define two distinct phases of land use. Two Middle Bronze Age settlement enclosures were found which comprised a substantial curving enclosure ditch together with pits containing domestic waste in the north-west, and a second, segmented L-shape enclosure in the north-east of the site.[46] Elsewhere in the wider evaluated site area, the incidence of a single isolated cremation burial perhaps supplies additional evidence that the southern part of the landscape was being reserved for ritualistic activities.

Evidence for these types of field systems is relatively plentiful in Essex and along the Thames Valley, however, it peters out going north.[47] Thus, the presence for such a system at this Aldeburgh Road site demonstrates that the transition to permanent agricultural settlements during the Bronze Age is not restricted to the southern part of East Anglia. The pattern of agricultural field systems would suggest that this area would be ideal for the establishment of early arable land tenures, as it is low-lying, well drained and close to the sea.[48] Crop-marks with similar positioning have been noted from aerial photos nearby in Shottisham.[49]

CONCLUSION

The landscape at Aldeburgh Road was subject to several phases of prehistoric occupation beginning in the Early Neolithic period. Until more recently, the identification of Early Neolithic activity was generally biased towards large monument sites and was assumed to be more transient in nature. However, stratified pit clusters are increasingly being recognised as means to identify Early Neolithic settlement and those uncovered at Aldeburgh Road add to the corpus of knowledge on Early Neolithic occupation and ritualistic practices, building on the evidence gathered at such sites as Flixton Park Quarry, Gallows Hill and Game Farm. The artefact and charcoal remains present in both intentionally dug and naturally occurring pit clusters suggest purposeful deposition of domestic waste and opportunistic reuse of holes created by tree clearance. An element of structured deposition was also happening, with the placement of the intact Plain Bowl vessel and possibly the loom weight fragments, the former found in the upper fill, inferring it may be part of a closure deposit/ritual. The rarity of both items cannot be underestimated, especially the loom weight fragments, the increased recognition of which will likely lead to the identification of further examples from this region. Further evidence of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age occupation of the area is evident to the east with a notable amount of flintwork attributed to those periods found within the backfill of the later Middle Age enclosures excavated by OA East.[50]

The subsequent imposition of a henge-like monument and coaxial field system during the Late Neolithic through to the Middle Bronze Age, together with neighbouring enclosures, demonstrates the transition from unenclosed space to a managed landscape, as well as maintaining an area for ritual and ceremony, suggestive of an increased population and change to a settled agricultural way of life. The dataset for Bronze Age field systems located north of the river Stour has grown with the addition of the Aldeburgh Road evidence, further corroborating that this type of settlement was not restricted to the south of England.

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NOTES

1 See Clarke 2023.
2 Medlycott 2011, 13–16.
3 Clarke 2019 and 2023.
4 ASE 2018a.
5 Field 2008, 207.
6 ASE 2018a.
7 E.g. Garrow 2006, 2007, 2010, 2012; Tabor 2016.

8 Garrow *et al.* 2006; Garrow 2012.
9 Thomas 1991; Tabor 2016.
10 Garrow 2007.
11 Garrow *et al.* 2006.
12 Juel Jensen 1994; Curwen 1930.
13 Garrow 2007, 15.
14 Tabor 2016, 188.
15 E.g. Thomas 1999, 64–74.
16 E.g. Thomas 1999, 86; Flixton: Percival 2022; Etton: Pryor 1998, 21, 33.
17 Garrow 2007, 12.
18 Layer de la Haye: Priddy 1982, 114; Didcot: RPS/OA 2013.
19 Wilson *et al.* 1971, 80.
20 Percival 2012, Fig 3.9, e.g. no. 4.
21 Parker Pearson *et al.* 2016; Garwood 1999.
22 Wood 2014, 22.
23 Hart *et al.* 2014.
24 Mackey 2001.
25 Wood 2014, 21; Cotswold Archaeology 2015, Highlight 4.
26 E.g. Thomas 1999, 62–88.
27 E.g. Brudenell and Cooper 2008; ASE 2016.
28 Thomas 1999, 72–3; Brudenell and Cooper 2008, 30–1; Chapman 2000, 64.
29 Clarke 2019 and 2023.
30 Garrow 2006, 4.
31 Gallows Hill: Medlycott 2001, 9; Flixton Park Quarry: Boulter 2015; Game Farm, Brandon: Gibson *et al.* 2004, 8–10; Kilverstone: Garrow *et al.* 2006.
32 Spong Hill: Healy 1988; Hurst Fen: Clark *et al.* 1960.
33 Garrow 2006, 36, 38.
34 Brown 1997; Robinson 2014.
35 New Hall, Harlow: ASE 2015; Stanway: ASE 2017 and King 2022; Flixton Park Quarry: Boulter 2015.
36 Flixton Park Quarry: Boulter 2015; Boss Hall: Everett 2000; RAF Lakenheath: Caruth and Hines forthcoming; Aldham Mill: Everett and Boulter 2010; Tranmar House: Fern 2015.
37 Brown *et al.* 2002.
38 SHER ARG 001, 012, 013.
39 Harding and Lee 1987, 34; Old Hall, Boreham: Germany 2014; Etton: French and Pryor 2005.
40 Historic England 2018.
41 Harding and Lee 1987, 39.
42 Brown *et al.* 2002, 14.
43 Parker Pearson and Ramilisonina 1998.
44 Cummings 2008, 141.
45 Cooper 2016; Pode Hole: Daniel 2009; Brigg's Farm: Pickstone and Mortimer 2009.
46 Lees 2016; Clarke 2019.
47 Clover 2016; Yates 2007, 81.
48 Yates 2007, 81.
49 SHER STT014, 065, 067–069.
50 Clarke 2019 and 2023.

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