

A Bronze Age and Saxon occupation site at Frog Hall Farm, Fingringhoe

by Howard Brooks

with contributions by Nigel Brown, Peter Murphy, and Susan Tyler

*Excavations in 1975-76 revealed the site of a structure defined by an oval setting of posts, lying slightly off-centre within an irregular ring ditch which is part of wider network of undated but probably associated cropmarks. Pottery from the post-holes, ditch and associated pits is of a flint-gritted, Late Bronze Age type. A sample of *Vicia faba* (Horsebean) gave a radiocarbon estimation of 1130-790 cal BC, which is broadly in line with the ceramic evidence. Other contemporary finds included spindle whorls and struck flints. There was a residual Neolithic sherd among the Bronze Age material, and Roman, Saxon and medieval pottery and a Saxon bead in the ploughsoil.*

Introduction

An aerial photograph taken for the Potato Marketing Board in 1974 revealed a cropmark complex south of the village of Fingringhoe, 6 km south-south-east of Colchester. As the area was scheduled for gravel extraction, the Essex County Archaeological Officer (then John Hedges) asked the Colchester Excavation Committee (now the Archaeological Trust) to excavate the focus of the cropmark complex, a ring ditch at TM 0347 1966. This lay in the field immediately north of 'Jaggers', on land formerly owned by Frog Hall Farm. The site was excavated from September 1975 to February 1976 under the supervision of the writer. This is a summary of an archive report lodged with the finds and archive at Colchester Museum (accession 1998.270).

The aerial photograph revealed cropmarks in Ordnance Survey field numbers TM 0219 8000, and TM 0319 0005, 2500 and 6500 (Fig. 1). Cropmark features of particular interest are the oval enclosure in field 8000 (cropmark A), the double ditched trackways in fields 0005 (B) and 2500 (C), and the large (tripartite?) rectangular enclosure D, E, F, in field 6500. The latter includes a smaller enclosure on its western side which contains a broken circle (G) – the site of the 1975-76 excavation. A ring ditch I lies to the north of E. Those cropmarks which corresponded convincingly with field boundaries shown on the 1881 Ordnance Survey 6 inch series (sheet XXXVII), and on the 1842 Tithe Map (Essex

Record Office D/Ct 140) have been omitted from Fig 1. Some of the short cropmark lines around the north and east sides of enclosure E may also be of recent origin.

A description of the excavation

The excavation was targeted on the comprehensive examination of cropmark G (Figs. 1-2), the logical focus of the enclosure D/E/F. There was no brief to investigate any other of the cropmark areas.

Ploughsoil and subsoil

A variable depth (250-450mm) of modern ploughsoil was removed using a JCB digger with a flat-edged bucket (Layer 1: sections 19, 20, Fig. 3). The many post-medieval and modern finds from L1 are listed in the archive report. The removal of layer 1 exposed layer 2, in which were visible cultivation marks running parallel with the modern crop rows. Layer 2 was therefore a plough-disturbed horizon. Although no features were visible in it, most of the prehistoric sherds from the excavation were found in L2. These were recorded in 1 metre squares, and by 'spits' as L2 was worked down by hand to the level of the undisturbed natural subsoil. After the removal of L2, a number of archaeological and geological features were exposed, cutting into the natural subsoil (glacial till and gravel).

The great concentration of prehistoric potsherds and other material found in L2 indicates that the original site ground level must have been somewhere in the thickness of L2, and that subsequent ploughing has destroyed it and truncated the tops of the features.

The geological feature (Fig. 2)

A ditch running west-north-west to east-south-east south of cropmark G was sectioned in three places. Its sides were of gravel, and its fill consisted of clean layers of sand and till quite different in nature to the fill of cropmark G (excavated feature 1). The profile of the feature was that of a smooth funnel, and the sides were still dropping down steeply at a depth of 2m below cleared site level. It appeared to be a natural periglacial ice wedge crack.

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The ring ditch - Feature 1 (Figs. 2, 3)

This was the principal excavated feature - an irregular pennanular ditch with a narrow causeway on its eastern side. Approximately 65% of the fill was excavated, in separate lengths labelled A-K (e.g. F1/K). Its average internal diameter was 11.2m.

The fills of F1 can be split into a number of distinct types: rapid silts; primary silts; wash-down layers; other fill layers. After the original digging of the ditch, rapid silts L23 and L28 (Fig. 3, sx 25, 24) accumulated on both the south and north sides of the open ditch. These were followed in some instances by primary silting, L22, and perhaps L14 (Fig. 3, sx25, sx20). There is no reason to suppose that a long time elapsed between the opening of the ditch and the accumulation of this primary silt, which contained no finds. Subsequently, the next fill layer in some of the ditch sections (primarily the larger ditch sections on the north and south sides, sx 19, 20, 22, 25, 26) had stripes of cleanish sand mixed in with the otherwise dark yellowish or dark

brown loam fills. The most obvious explanation of these stripes is that they derive from material washing down off a bank, with the sand fraction settling separately from the other material. The division between water-borne and non water-borne fills was not clear cut. Apart from the fills above, the rest of the ditch was filled in with a fairly uniform deposit of dark brown sandy loam (L3, L13). A number of Late Bronze Age sherds and prehistoric flints were excavated from F1.

Internal features (Figs. 2, 3)

Within the area enclosed by the ditch F1 were a number of shallow (i.e. truncated) features, F2-8 and F13-18. Stratified Late Bronze Age pottery was recovered from F2, F3, and F4 (Fig. 4.5). Features 2-4 also contained comminuted and unidentifiable charcoal fragments. Features 4, 6, 7, 14-16 and 18 fall on an ellipse whose diameter is 6.4 m north-west to south-east, and 4.8m north-east to south-west. This arrangement is best interpreted as the post

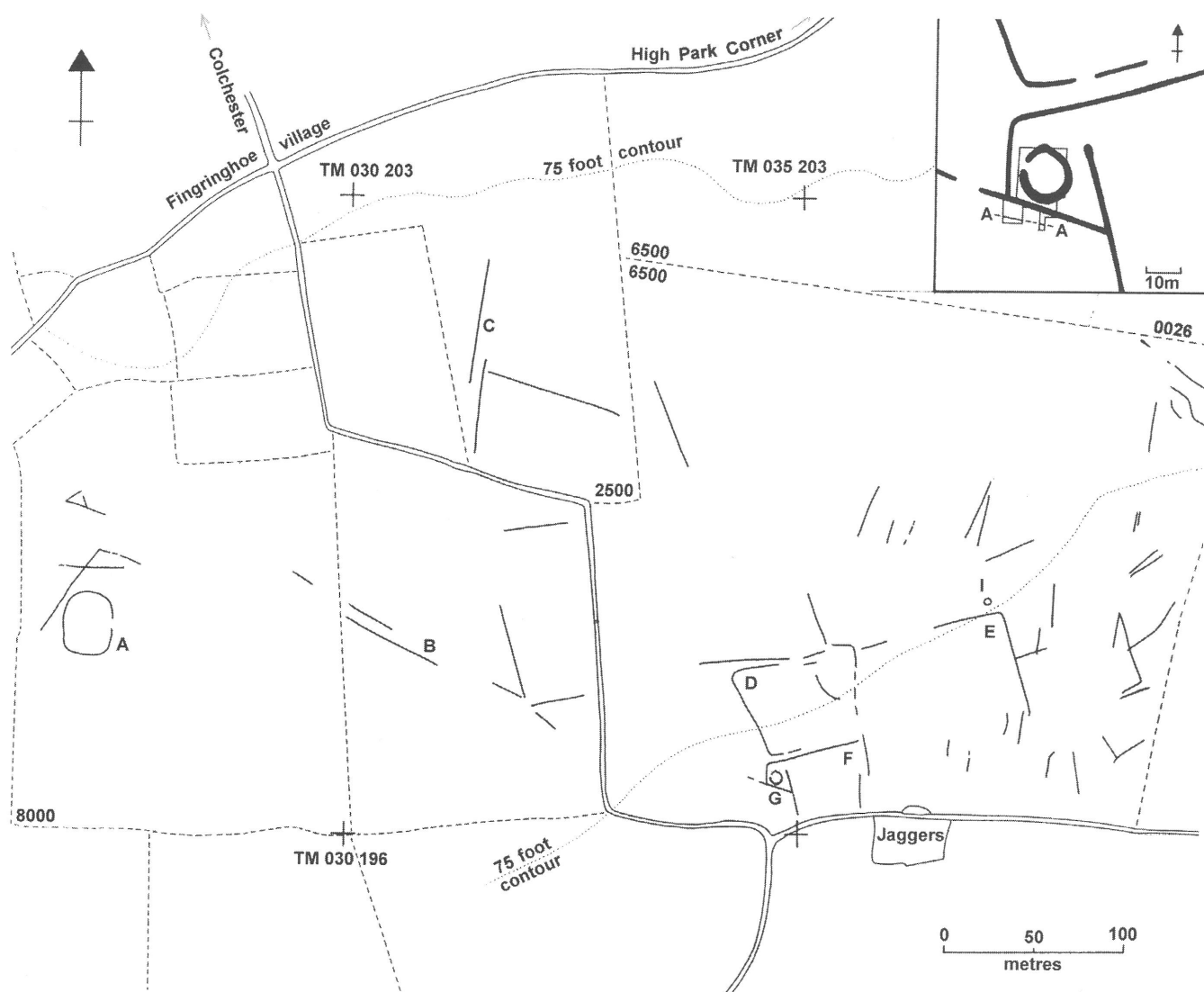


Fig. 1 Fingringhoe site location map with local cropmarks and, inset, the excavated area (G).

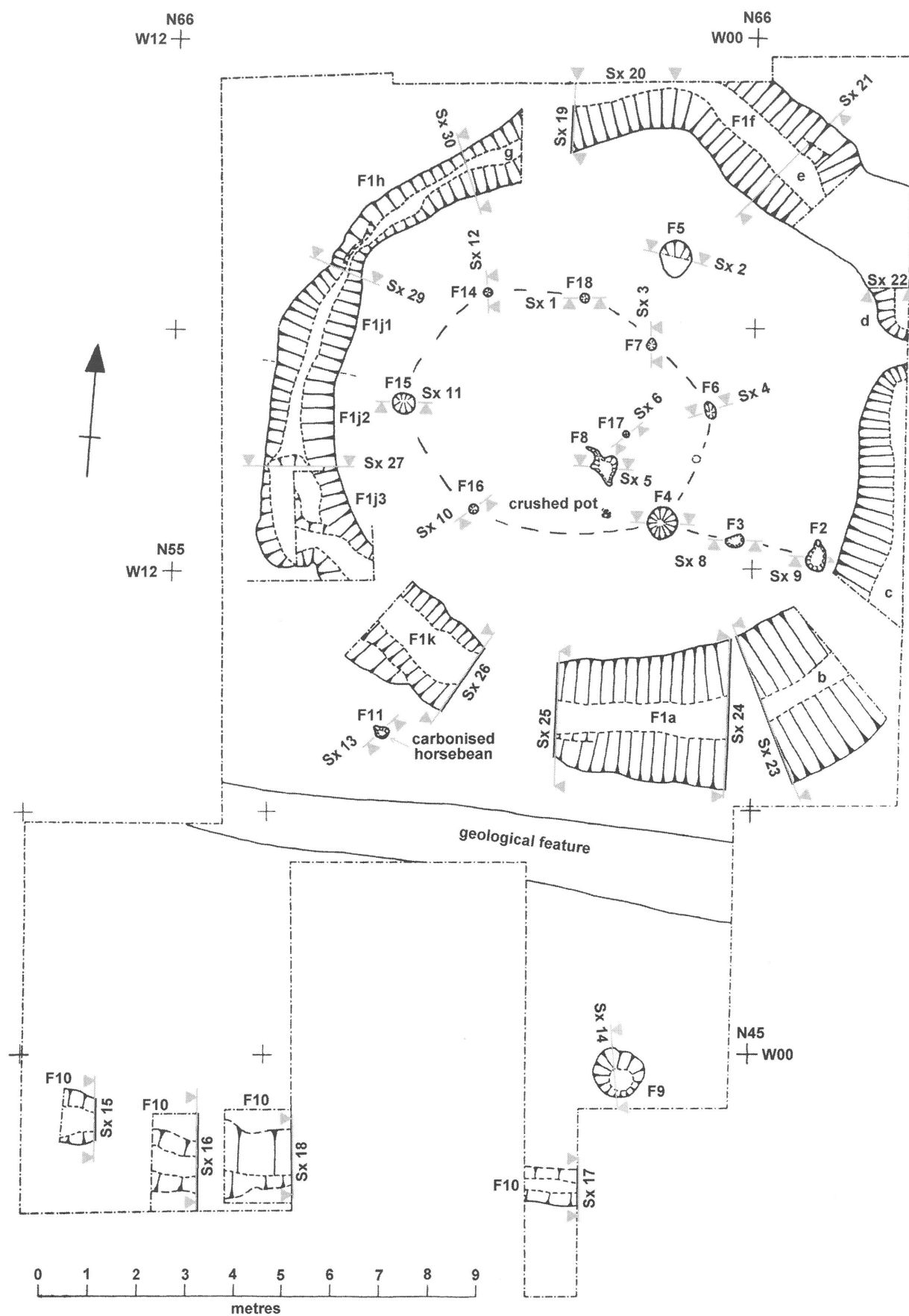


Fig. 2 Fingringhoe: plan of excavated ring ditch F1 and other features.

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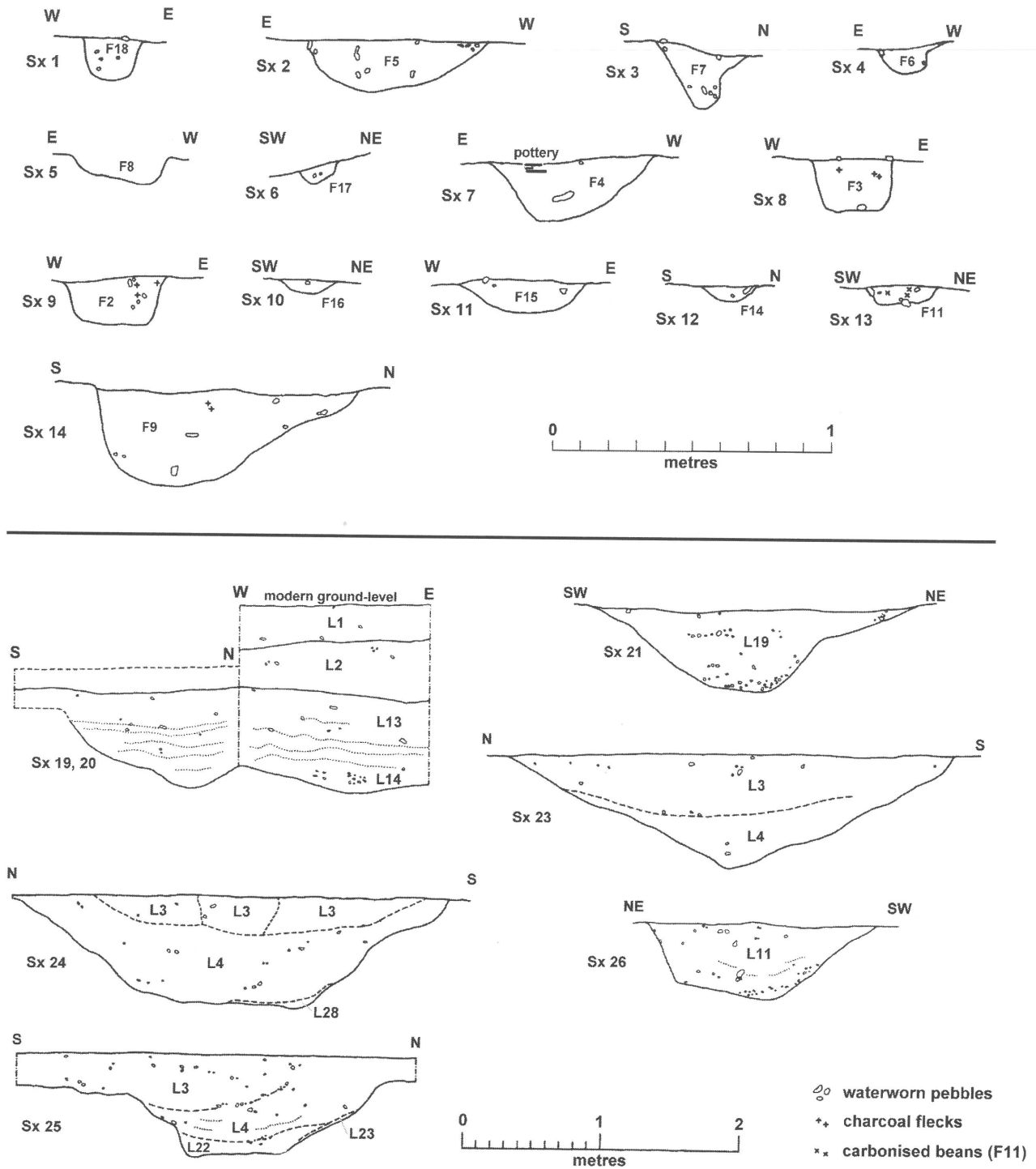


Fig. 3 Sections through ring ditch F1 (below), and other features (above).

ring of a timber structure. The larger size of F4 and F15 may be due to later disturbance. A crushed pot F13 (pot 1232; Fig. 4.4) was found close to the wall line defined by the elliptical post setting. To survive the later plough damage, this pot must have been set below floor level (no cut was visible). It contained no finds or cremated bone. The position of features 2 and 3 suggests that they may be unconnected with the ellipse of posts.

External features (Fig. 2)

In the area outside F1 were a shallow feature F11, a pit F9 and a gully F10. Feature 11 produced several sherds of Late Bronze Age pottery and a deposit of horsebean (*Vicia faba* L. var. minor), a report on which is given below. A radiocarbon date of 1130-790 cal BC (Harwell reference 2502) was obtained from half of the carbonised beans. Pit F9 contained several sherds of pottery and one abraded fragment of baked clay – possibly a weight fragment similar to those from L2. Gully F10 was nebulous and difficult to excavate, and there was no clear division between it and the overlying L2. This cannot be the ditch which produced the cropmark – it is much too far south. In fact, the cropmark must be the geological feature (Fig. 2). The line of the F10 ditch is shown as A - A on Fig. 1 (inset).

The pit F9, F11 containing the carbonised horsebeans and the crushed pot F13 are the only features on the site for which a non-structural function might be suggested. Current thinking on prehistoric features would suggest that material which used to be considered simply as ‘rubbish’ may be deliberately placed deposits. Thus the crushed pot F13 was set into the ground within the oval post setting either for storage or ritual purposes. As for the other two features, there seems no strong evidence either way – F11 contained beans and two potsherds, F9 contained two sherds and a weight fragment, and rubbish disposal may be an equally valid interpretation as placed deposits in these cases.

The small finds (Fig. 4)

The small finds consisted of a number of fired clay objects, a Saxon bead, and a Roman pottery counter. The bead is reported on separately below.

1. *Fig. 4.7* Simple biconical spindle whorl in very gritty dark brown fabric identical to some of the Late Bronze Age pottery. Rounded edges and straight-sided 6mm diameter perforation with very slightly splayed ends. Slightly abraded on one surface, otherwise intact. Miscellaneous find 38. Layer 2 (N61.09/W10.05) Weight 25g.
2. *Fig. 4.8* Biconical spindle whorl in gritty dark grey fabric identical to some of the Late Bronze Age pottery. Larger than no. 1, and with more angled edges. Depression in one

surface. Perforation 6mm diameter. Small chip, otherwise intact. Miscellaneous find 39. Layer 2 (N53.20/W08.46) Weight 35g.

3. *Fig. 4.9* Fragment of a biconical spindle whorl in gritty dark brown fabric. Perforation missing. Found in two pieces in Layer 2 – pot no. 403 (N44.98/W06.38), pot no. 405 (N45.12/W06.59). Combined weight 15g.
4. *Fig. 4.10* Fragment of a vertically perforated baked clay object. Chaff or grass impressions on surface. Fabric is orange-brown. One surface and the perforation are reduced grey. The perforation implies that it is a weight. Vertically perforated weights (rounded and slack in profile) are known in MBA or LBA contexts at Itford Hill (Burstow & Holleyman 1957, 200-201) and Shearplace Hill (Rahtz and ApSimon 1962, 321-2). Found in two pieces in Layer 2 – pot no. 777 (N47.62/W03.96), pot no. 1060 (N52.49/W04.52). Weight 40g. Perforation 5.5mm across.
7. (Unillustrated). Pottery counter cut from Roman grey ware sherd. Layer 2. Weight 2g, maximum diameter 21mm.

Prehistoric pottery

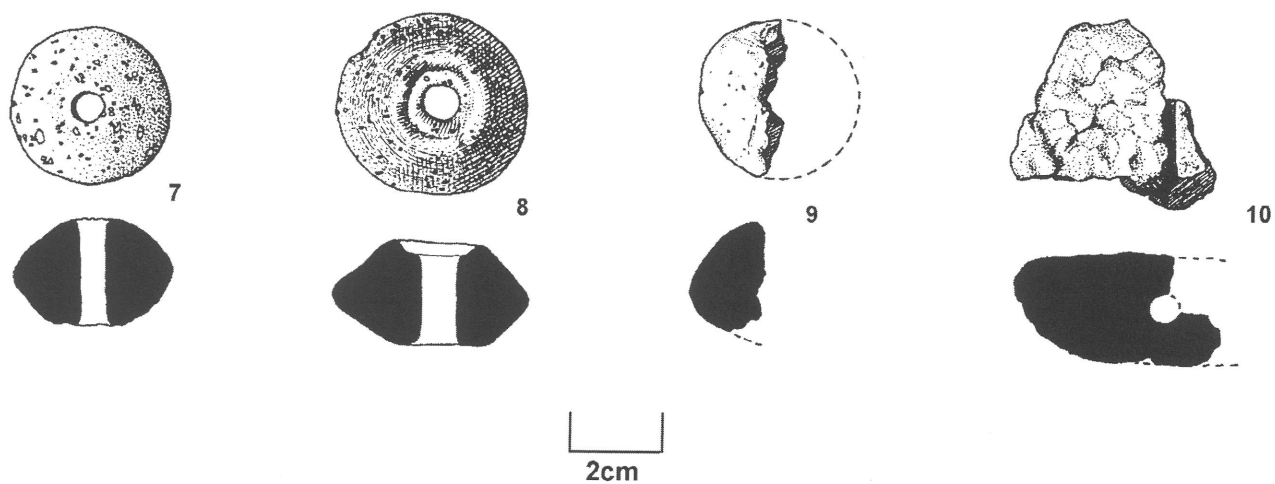
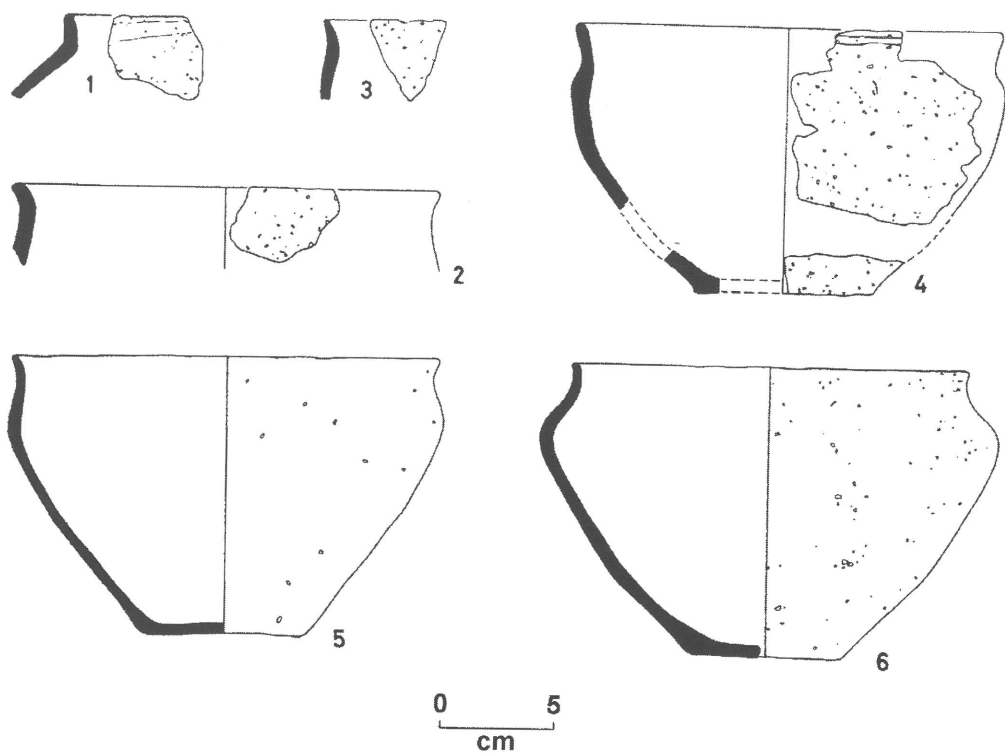
Nigel Brown



The excavations produced a total of 1183 sherds weighing 6.25kg. The material has been recorded using a system devised for prehistoric pottery in Essex (Brown 1988; details in archive). The great majority of the pottery (930 sherds weighing 4.671kg) was recovered from layer 2, which clearly incorporated material which had once been on the prehistoric ground surface. The pottery is of a Late Bronze Age date, with the exception of one small rim sherd (P364) which might be part of a rolled rim of an early Neolithic bowl.

Catalogue of illustrated sherds

At an early stage in the post-excavation programme, all the rim sherds and most of the base sherds were drawn. These drawings are held in the site archive.

Fig. no.	Context no.	Description	Fabric
4.1	L2 (P545)	Upright flat-topped rim of round shouldered jar; smoothed surfaces.	B
4.2	L2 (P455)	Slightly everted rounded rim of ?round-shouldered jar. Burnt.	C
4.3	L2 (P340)	Rounded rim with slight internal bevel. Smoothed surfaces. Fine bowl.	A
4.4	F13 (P1232)	Upright flat-topped rim of slack	C



 opaque terracotta red
 opaque yellow

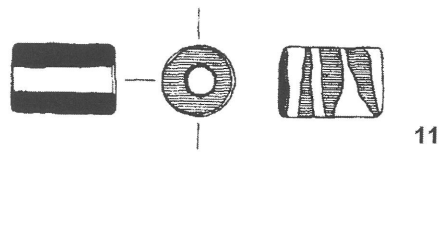


Fig. 4 Prehistoric pottery (nos.1-6): small finds (nos. 7-11).

		shouldered jar, roughly wiped exterior.	
4.5	F4 (P1178)	Upright flat-topped rim of plain bowl with slight rounded shoulder. Smoothed surfaces.	B
4.6	L2 (P1181)	Slightly everted rounded rim of round-shouldered bowl, smoothed and burnished surfaces.	B

The pottery is typical of Late Bronze Age (LBA) assemblages. However, the full range of vessel types is not present. The Frog Hall Farm pottery is characterised by small jars, both coarse and fine, together with coarse and fine bowls and cups, some with burnished surfaces. Very large storage jars, which are a characteristic part of most large LBA assemblages, are not represented. The very coarse flint tempered sherds derived from such jars which usually form a high proportion of LBA pottery assemblages are virtually absent. It seems likely that the restricted nature of the excavation has resulted in ceramic refuse relating particularly to cooking and eating being recovered. Variable distribution of ceramic refuse on LBA sites is a well-known phenomenon (e.g. Bradley *et al.* 1980; Brown 1988). It seems reasonable to suggest that the restricted nature of the ceramic assemblage is an indication of the activities carried out in and around the circular structure at Frog Hall Farm.

The characteristic features of the assemblage, such as a predominance of flint tempered fabrics, finger wiping/smearing on coarse pots, traces of finger impressions where bases are joined to bodies, dense flint temper on the bottom of bases, smoothed and burnished surfaces of fine pots, are all typical of LBA assemblages (e.g. Adkins and Needham 1985; Brown 1988). The fabrics and forms present, together with a general lack of decoration (only one jar rim sherd has traces of finger impressions giving a cabled effect), indicate a fairly early date within the LBA. A date within the first half of the 9th century BC may be suggested, and this accords with the radiocarbon date.

A particularly striking feature of the assemblage is the quantity of burnt sherds, many of which have been reduced to a pumice-like consistency. Occasional burnt sherds occur in any large assemblage, but at Frog Hall Farm over 10% of the sherds have been burnt, indicating intense and/or frequent burning activity in the vicinity.

The flints

Dr. J.J. Wymer has very kindly examined the flints, and the main points of his report are given here. The Fingringhoe flints are not distinctive. They could range in date from Neolithic to Bronze Age, or even Iron Age. There are no signs of the methodical micro-blade production which characterises all Mesolithic industries.

Table 1. Worked flint.

Contexts	No.	Weight
Layer 1 (ploughsoil)	3	5g
Burnt flints (all L1)	3	160g
Layer 2 (lower ploughsoil)	19	99g
Ditch F1	4	13g

The Roman pottery

I am obliged to Stephen Benfield of Colchester Archaeological Trust for his comments. 23 sherds of Roman or probable Roman pottery weighing 422g were recovered from the plough-disturbed horizon L2. Most of the sherds were general greyware body sherds, but there were also sherds of samian, probable Dressel 20 amphora, and storage jar rim.

The Saxon pottery

Susan Tyler

A total of 16 sherds weighing 68g (representing between 10 and 15 vessels) were recovered from layer 2. Only one fabric type is present, characterised by an organic temper with varying amounts of small to medium quartz sand and occasional inclusions of other minerals such as iron oxide. The mineral inclusions and varying amounts of quartz-sand are most likely the result of natural variations in the raw clay as collected from local sources rather than a deliberate act to vary the temper. The precise dating of this small assemblage is difficult given the lack of diagnostic forms. The only feature of the assemblage that gives any indication of date is the fabric which, being exclusively organic tempered, suggests a 6th- to 7th-century date (see Hamerow 1993, 28-31).

The Saxon bead (Fig. 4.11)

I am grateful to Jenny Price, Tania Dickinson, and Margaret Guido for their comments on the bead (from ploughsoil, layer 1). The bead (Fig. 4.11) is cylindrical and made in light blue glass, with a trail of white glass marvered into its surface. Beads of this type are matched on the continent by 6th- and 7th-century examples (Koch 1977). Although there are no Saxon deposits or features on site, one must assume that there was Saxon occupation here, since Saxon pottery was present among the material from Layer 2.

The medieval and post-medieval pottery

32 sherds of unstratified medieval and later pottery weighing a total of 311g were recovered from the ploughsoil (L1) and the lower ploughsoil (L2). Principal wares (after Cunningham 1985 and Cotter 2000) were fabrics 48d (ironstone), and 40 (post-medieval red earthenware). There were smaller quantities of fabrics 51a and b, 21, 20, 13, and 12. The pottery shows a broad date range, from 11th century through to modern. Sherds of the 13th-16th century are less common than other dates. Since there are no contemporary features, we must assume that the pot sherds have been carted out from local farms, and dumped on the fields with farmyard manure. Taking the pottery dates at face value, this would indicate strong arable activity in the early medieval period, a drop off of arable in late medieval and early modern periods, and a strong 19th to 20th-century arable revival.

Charred beans from feature 11

Peter Murphy

A sample of approximately 90ml of charred plant material, with traces of a matrix of yellowish-brown silty clay and a few small pebbles, was received for examination. The sample arrived in two portions, one of which was ultimately intended for radiocarbon dating. To

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avoid the risk of contamination, this portion was only quickly looked through, but it appeared to be very similar in nature to the second portion. This included 191 seeds of the horsebean, *Vicia faba* L. var. minor, together with 110 isolated cotyledons and large fragments. Something over 500 beans were represented in the deposit. No charred weed seeds or pod fragments were observed.

The beans were oblong in their lateral view and almost circular in cross-section. Only one seed retained its hilum intact. More often there was a furrow between the two cotyledons in the former position of the hilum. The dimensions of 30 seeds are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Dimension of 30 seeds of *Vicia faba* var. minor.

	Length (mm)	Breadth of cotyledon (mm)	Thickness across cotyledons (mm)
minimum	4.4	3.40	3.00
mean	6.23	4.22	4.60
maximum	8.10	5.60	6.60

Although sometimes known as 'Celtic' beans, seeds of *Vicia faba* var. minor are not common in prehistoric contexts in this country, and at sites where they have been reported the crop is usually represented only sporadically by small numbers of seeds. This does not necessarily reflect the true importance of beans and other legumes in prehistoric agricultural systems. Although beans are nowadays often dried to improve storage qualities (MAFF 1970), drying, which involves a risk of charring, is not an essential stage in processing, as it is with some cereals. Consequently, pulse crops are less likely to have been preserved by charring.

It is now clear that the crop had been introduced to Eastern England by the Later Bronze Age: there are records, for example, from Lofts Farm, Heybridge and Springfield Lyons, Chelmsford, both in Essex (Murphy 1988, 1990). The seeds from Fingringhoe are dated to 1130-790 cal BC (two sigma: 2760 + 80 BP, HAR-2502: Bronk Ramsey 2000).

Apart from their use as a protein rich foodstuff for human consumption, beans and straw make a high quality livestock feed, and the crop also improves soil nitrogen levels by the action of symbiotic nitrogen-fixing bacteria in root nodules. It is, of course, impossible to determine the precise use of beans in prehistoric farming systems, but cultivation of the crop would at least have allowed the possibility of legume-cereal rotations.

Other finds

Other finds (peg tile, brick, slate, iron objects, oyster, charcoal, slag) are listed in the archive.

Discussion and conclusions

The configuration of the cropmark ditches around the excavated site (G) implies that it may be part of the same system as the enclosures D and F (and perhaps E), with G being a centre of occupation, and

D-F the associated fields. Cropmark B (heading directly for G) could be a contemporary trackway. Though it is on the same alignment as the geological feature, the fact that it has two parallel ditches would indicate that it is of an archaeological rather than a geological origin.

The oval setting of posts is best interpreted as the main post-ring of a building measuring approximately 6.4 x 4.8m internally, with a floor space of approximately 31m² within the post ring. Oval shaped buildings are not uncommon on British Bronze Age sites: a similar structure was excavated by Paul Drury at Rawreth near Chelmsford in 1968 (Drury 1977, 23), and another by Richard Bradley at Belle Tout (structure I, Bradley 1970, 322-3). Two features (F5, F3) outside the post ring may represent an outer ring. The question of whether the structure was roofed cannot be answered - if these posts were part of the same structure, then this would increase the likelihood that it was roofed.

Though there were finds in the upper fills of the ring ditch (pottery and flints), there were none in the lower fills or primary silts. Was the structure erected inside a natural circular feature? The answer is no, because the ditch profiles were obviously man-made, and contrast strongly with the form of the adjacent natural ice crack. The lack of finds may imply that the ring ditch was cut before the structure was built (or before there was any rubbish-producing activity on the site), and that natural weathering had caused some filling of the ditch before any noticeable activity took place. The digging of the ditch must have produced spoil, which was presumably banked up somewhere on site. The position of the structure and associated features argues against an internal bank, but an external bank is a possibility.

The presence of spindle whorls and weight fragments indicates that spinning and perhaps weaving took place on the site. The wool for spinning was presumably locally produced. Horsebeans were clearly cultivated somewhere in the vicinity. As Peter Murphy points out, the horsebean is not only a human food source, but also a livestock feed, and its cultivation improves soil nitrogen levels. The radiocarbon date for the horsebeans (1130-790 cal BC) is in keeping with the pottery evidence, suggesting an occupation date in the 9th century BC. At a simple level, therefore, this is a Late Bronze Age domestic structure associated with a field system where both arable and pastoral farming took place.

The ceramic evidence puts an interesting angle on this picture. Over 10% of the pot sherds were burnt, and the range of vessels present relates particularly to cooking and eating activities. The intensely burnt pottery suggests a kitchen area. Perhaps the excavated site was close to (or part of)

two specific zones of activity – the area where spinning and weaving took place, and the area where cooking and eating took place. It is difficult to go much beyond this, except to point out that the bulk of the Late Bronze Age pottery was found outside (south and east of) the post-ring structure, both within and outside the line of the ditch.

The presence of a Saxon bead and pottery suggests Saxon activity, presumably domestic, in the 6th to 7th centuries. This material was all residual – there were no contemporary site features. The medieval and later material can all be explained as the result of manuring activity from local farms, and need not necessarily imply occupation during those periods.

Acknowledgements

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