NEOLITHIC AND SAXON OCCUPATION AT CHARNHAM LANE, HUNGERFORD, WEST BERKSHIRE

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SUMMARY

A pre-development excavation at Charnham Lane, Hungerford, provided new evidence in this area for occupation in prehistory and later. Most of the excavated features were undated, but charcoal from a double gully yielded two late Neolithic radiocarbon dates and pottery of comparable age. The gully may represent an element within a wider field system or a simple land division. Saxon occupation was represented by a posthole and a large pit, possibly a sunken-featured building, both of which contained domestic pottery. Unstratified finds included struck flints, further Neolithic and Saxon pottery, Middle to Late Bronze Age pottery, and a single sherd of medieval pottery.

INTRODUCTION

An archaeological excavation was carried out by Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd in January 2014, in advance of the development of a hotel complex at Charnham Lane, Hungerford, West Berkshire (SU 3365 6905), to comply with a condition on planning consent from West Berkshire Council.

The site was located on the north side of Charnham Street (A4) on the west side of Hungerford (Figure 1) on an irregular area of derelict land of just under 0.5ha. The ground was level at a height of *c*. 97m above Ordnance Datum. The site was bounded by Charnham Street to the south which was raised by up to 0.5m relative to the site. An industrial estate bordered the site to the west and north but the site was undefined to the east towards Charnham Lane. The site lay close to the confluence of the Rivers Dun and Kennet, with the Dun around 100m to the south-west and the Kennet to the north.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The site's archaeological potential stemmed from its location on the fringes of the Charnham suburb of medieval Hungerford (Astill 1978). The Kennet Valley is also considered to be rich in Mesolithic occupation sites and finds (Froom 2012). Areas adjacent to the site were subject to extensive excavation in 1989 (Ford 2002) which revealed deposits of prehistoric, Saxon, and medieval through to post-medieval dates, most notably an Early Bronze Age pit circle (Ford 1991). Evaluation of the site itself revealed a modest volume of deposits including two parallel linear features with postholes, interpreted as a possible palisade (Ford 2010). No unambiguous dating evidence was recovered but prehistoric struck flints were found.

THE EXCAVATION

Overburden was mechanically stripped from an irregular area of *c*. 1070 sq m on the footprint of the new hotel building (Figure 2) avoiding live services. The natural geology varied across the site, due in part to its location near the confluence of two rivers, but also because areas in the east had previously been used as a site compound for an earlier development. The natural geology there comprised gravel in a clay matrix. Towards the south-west and west, the natural geology was higher and comprised light brown silty clay 'brickearth'. The centre of the site, which was frequently inundated during the wet winter, sat on grey silty clay that may represent an alluvial deposit, or simply indicate that the 'brickearth' here was frequently waterlogged.

The subsoil incorporated a modest number of struck flints, especially towards the central area, and a few sherds of medieval and Bronze Age pottery. Further struck flints were revealed when the subsoil was removed to expose cut features of several periods. All of these finds were plotted individually (Figure 3). The flintwork was typically scattered but apparently clustered towards the line of a pair of gullies in the centre of the site.

Late Neolithic

The dominant feature was a linear gully (200) aligned SW–NE, partly redefined or doubled (201) (Figure 2).

Gully 200 was 0.5m wide, 36m long and from 0.10m to 0.29m deep with a profile that varied from a deep rounded form to one with vertical sides and flat base. To the NE it petered out (or was truncated) and to the SW it also shallowed. The gully usually had a single fill with frequent charcoal and yielded four sherds of Late Neolithic pottery and a single flint flake.

Gully 201 lay 0.5m to the north of gully 200 and was continuous for about 15m. To the NE it also petered out (or was truncated) while in the south it was lost beneath an area of modern disturbance but did not in any case continue beyond this disturbance. Gully 201 reached up to 0.44m wide and 0.1m deep and yielded six sherds of Late Neolithic pottery and eight flints.

A series of postholes seemed to be set into, or connected by, the gullies. Gully 200 truncated postholes 123 and 128. Four postholes (104–107) were identified in the SW end of gully 200 with two other possible examples (101–102) towards the middle of the gully. Towards the southern end of gully 201 were two cut features (116 and 117), that were twice as deep as the main body of the gully and may have been additional postholes.

Two radiocarbon dates from charcoal (Table 2) suggested that gully 200 dated to 2576–2435 cal BC (UBA-25177) and gully 201 to 2586–2457 cal BC (UBA-25176). The considerable overlap between

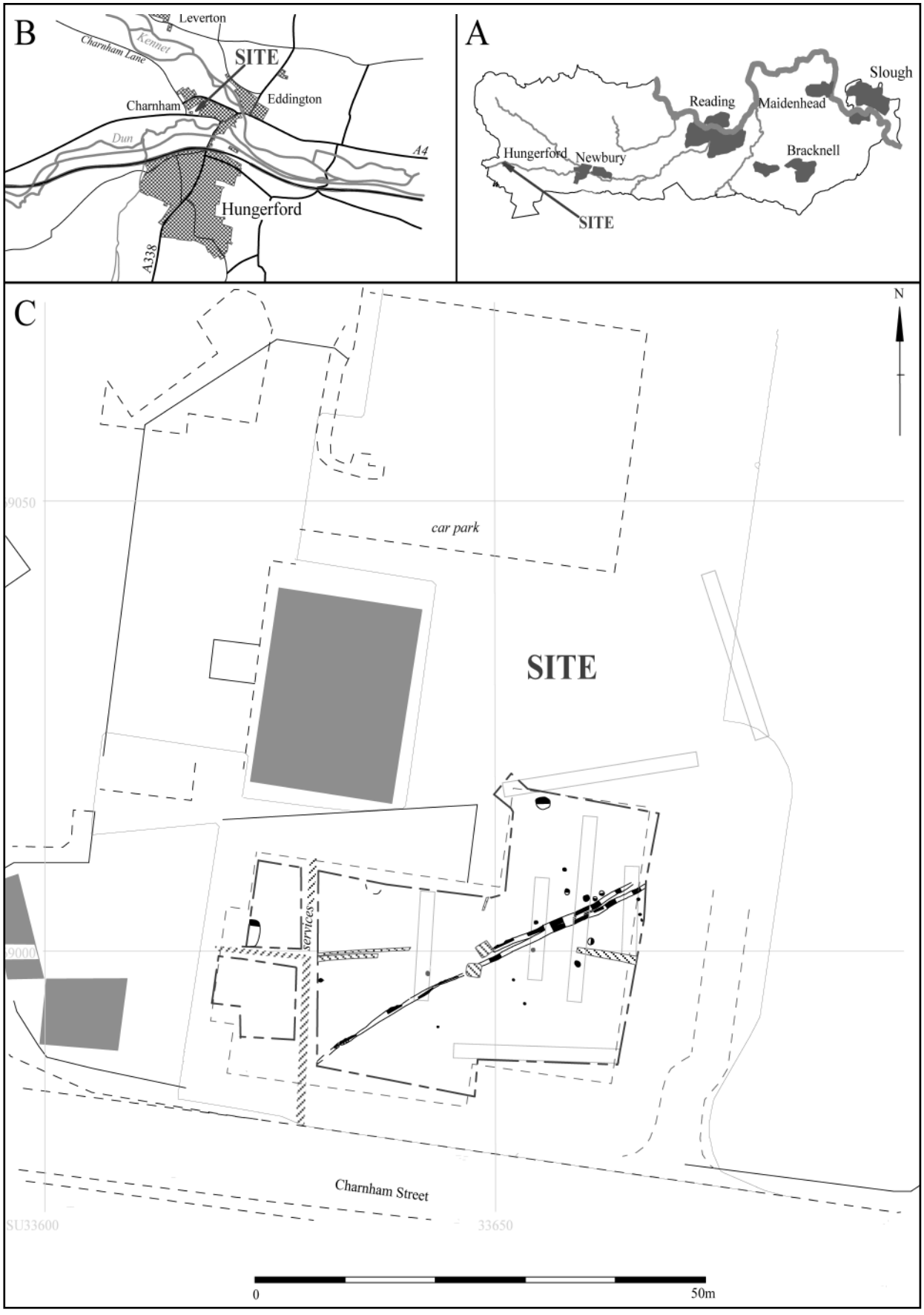

Figure 1. Location of site within Berkshire (A), Hungerford (B) and location of excavation area within site (C)

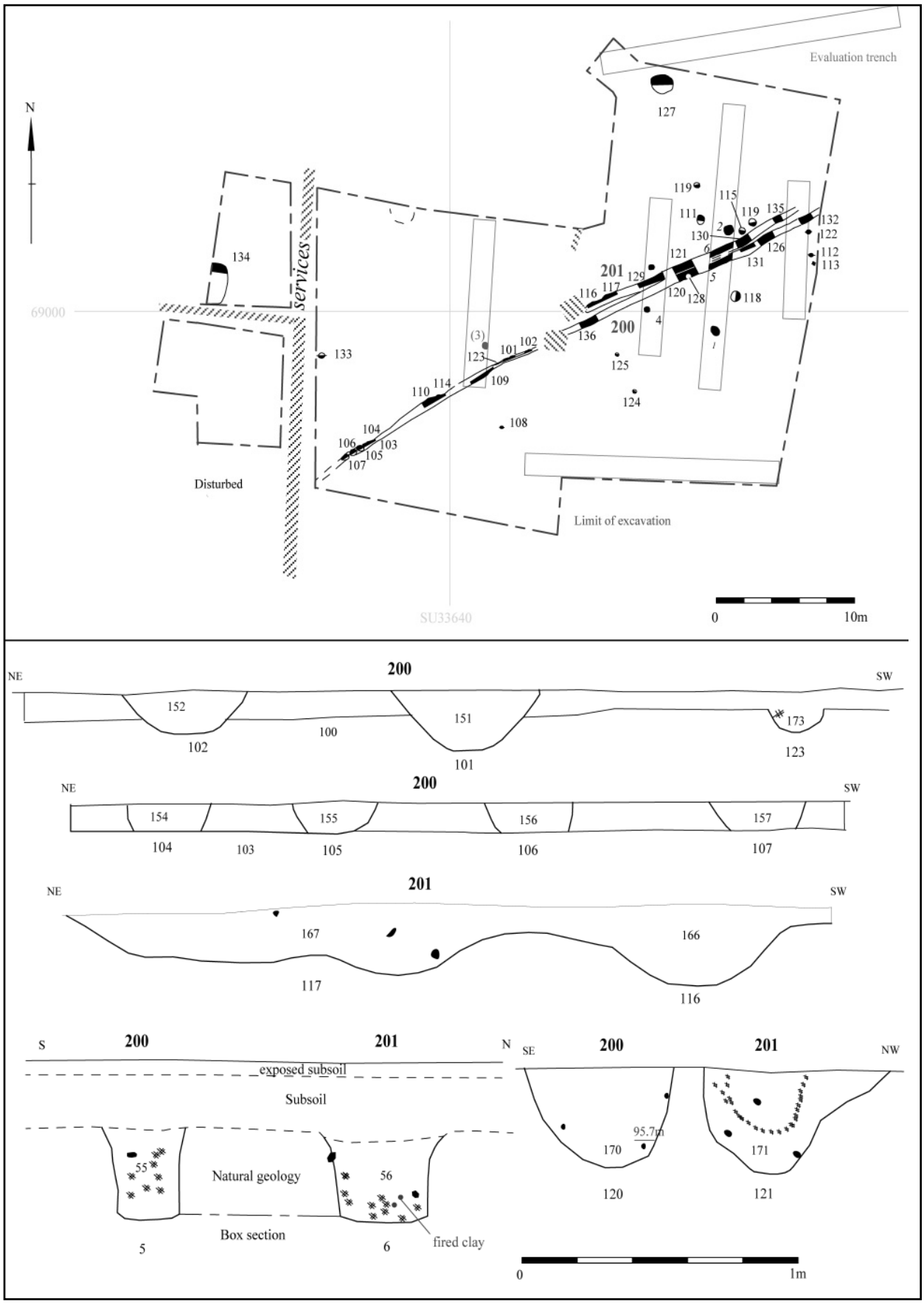

Figure 2. Detailed plan of all excavated features and selected sections

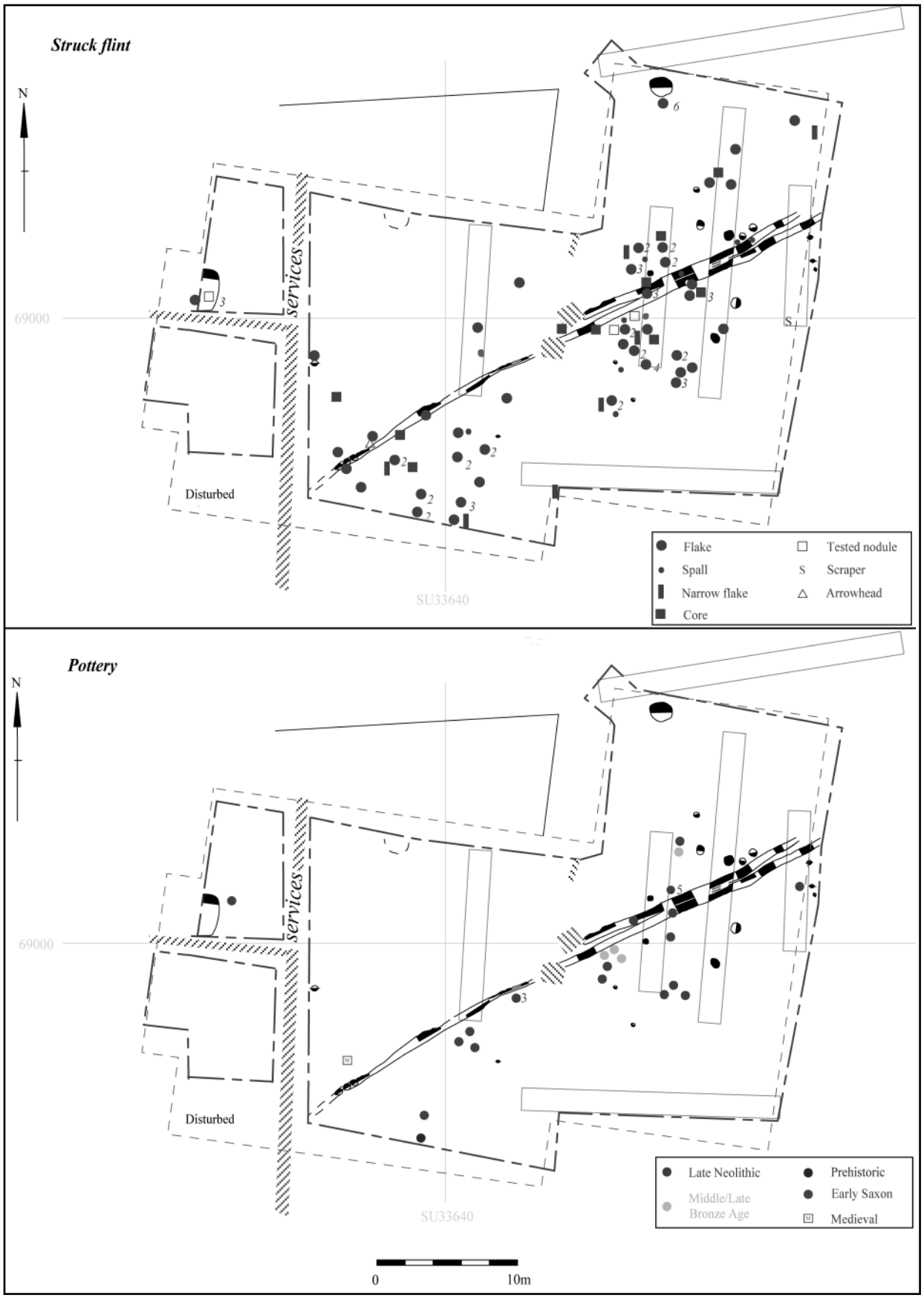

Figure 3. Distribution of struck flint and pottery

these determinations suggests the gullies may have been contemporary.

The only other feature likely to be of this phase was pit 115, which was 0.5m across, 0.03m deep and contained a single sherd of Late Neolithic pottery and a flint spall.

Early–Middle Saxon
Towards the eastern edge of the site, posthole 112 was 0.35m in diameter, 0.10m deep with a single fill (163). It contained one sherd of Early to Middle Saxon pottery. At the western edge, an irregular, flat-bottomed pit (134) lay partly beneath two baulks left for services. The pit was 2.9m long, at least 1.2m wide and 0.22m deep with a flat profile. Its single fill (184) yielded five sherds of Early to Middle Saxon pottery and some residual flints. The pit may represent a sunken-featured building, though it lacked the characteristic postholes. Several unstratified sherds of Saxon pottery were also recovered (Figure 3).

Undated
The majority of the discrete cut features were undated, shallow postholes and small pits (Figure 2). Several contained small quantities of burnt flint, occasional struck flint (residual?) and indeterminate cereal seeds.

FINDS

Pottery

Frances Raymond

The small assemblage (34 sherds, weighing 193g) included sherds dating from the Late Neolithic to the medieval period (Table 1). The two largest groups were composed of abraded Late Neolithic wall fragments mainly from the gullies (13 sherds, 54g); and early to Middle Saxon sherds from two features and the subsoil (14 sherds, 126g). A single sherd (3g) of Newbury 'B' Ware of the late 12th to 14th century (Mepham 1997) came from the subsoil. None of the pottery was suitable for illustration.

The pottery was recorded by context following the guidelines of the Prehistoric Ceramics Research Group (PCRG 1997). Details of fabric, form, decoration, surface treatment and colour, wall thickness, fragmentation and condition are available in the archive. The sherds were sorted into fabric groups with the aid of a binocular microscope at x20 magnification, while the descriptions were prepared using a higher magnification of x40.

Late Neolithic

The only diagnostic sherd was derived from a Peterborough ware vessel of indeterminate sub-style decorated with two parallel rows of twisted cord impressions. The sherd, which was moderately abraded and small (6g, 30mm across), was recovered from the subsoil and was accompanied by two split fragments in the same soft fabric (2g). This incorporated sparse burnt flint (up to 3.5mm), sparse well rounded glauconite (0.1–0.8mm) and very common, rounded quartz sand (0.25–0.8mm). A date anywhere between 3400 and 2500 BC is possible (cf. Gibson and Kinnes 1997): the radiocarbon determinations from the site lie towards the end of this period.

The rest of the Late Neolithic pottery consisted entirely of heavily abraded, split wall fragments (10 sherds, 46g) from the gullies (slots 120, 121, 123 and 129). The sherds represent at least four vessels in contrasting fabrics that could have been used for Peterborough ware and/or Grooved ware, although the latter is the more likely. Two of the wares were tempered with common grog of contrasting grades (up to 2mm or up to 5mm). Both also incorporated rare burnt flint (up to 2mm) and abundant predominantly silt-sized sand (<0.0625mm). The other wares included one with rare burnt flint (up to 5mm) and abundant mainly silt-sized sand; and one with common voids characteristic of shell (up to 5mm).

Middle to Late Bronze Age and indeterminate prehistoric

The later prehistoric sherds from the subsoil were exclusively wall fragments that provided no evidence of vessel form. Four (8g) in the same soft fabric tempered with very common burnt flint (up to 2mm) were most likely to be of Middle or Late Bronze Age origin. The other two (2g) were in a prehistoric ware of uncertain phasing that incorporated sparse burnt flint (up to 2mm) and abundant well rounded to angular quartz sand (up to 0.5mm).

Early to Middle Saxon

The stratified pottery comprised five fresh to lightly abraded sherds (109g) from pit 134 and one moderately abraded wall or base fragment (1g) from posthole 112. The assemblage from pit 134 derived from at least two vessels, one represented by a simple, rounded rim (13g). This was a short everted form from a handmade jar with a high shoulder and a smoothed, very dark grey exterior. The inner surface of the rim was burnished, while the rest of the interior was smoothed. There was no evidence of the vessel profile below the top of the shoulder and the rim form can only be dated broadly to the Early to Middle Saxon period. The hard and unoxidized fabric incorporated common, well rounded quartz sand (0.1 to 1mm) and sparse organic inclusions (up to 5mm in length). The associated handmade base and wall fragments had brown or very dark grey smoothed surfaces.

One of the base sherds had several shallow and apparently random fingertip impressions on its interior. All were in a hard ware that incorporated abundant, rounded quartz sand (0.25–1mm) and rare flint (up to 3mm). The wall or base fragment from posthole 112 was in a contrasting hard, unoxidized fabric with rare flint (up to 1mm), common well-rounded quartz sand (0.1–0.5mm), rare rounded and angular quartzite (up to 3mm) and moderate angular voids characteristic of leached calcareous inclusions.

Cut	*Deposit*	*Date*	*No*	*Wt (g)*	*Fabric*	*Notes*
112	163	Early to Middle Saxon	1	1	SV/1	
120	170	Mid–third millennium	1	7	GS/1	
121	171	2619–2457 cal BC	2	10	GS/1	
121	171	2619–2457 cal BC	2	14	S/1	One with surviving inner surface.
121	171	2619–2457 cal BC	1	3	sh/1	
123	173	Mid–third millennium	3	10	S/1	
129	188	Mid–third millennium	1	2	GS/2	
134	184	Early to Middle Saxon	1	13	OS/1	Jar with short everted rim; traces charred internal residue; smoothed exterior, interior burnished around vessel mouth; smoothed below.
134	184	Early to Middle Saxon	1	26	S/2	Base and lower walls. Traces external sooting; exterior and interior smoothed and wiped, with traces of burnish internally.
134	184	Early to Middle Saxon	1	66	S/2	Base. Exterior smoothed; interior smoothed and wiped. Fingertip impressions interior of base are apparently random and are likely to be result of manufacture rather than being decorative.
134	184	Early to Middle Saxon	1	2	S/2	Base. Exterior smoothed, interior smoothed and wiped with traces of burnish.
134	184	Early to Middle Saxon	1	2	S/2	Smoothed exterior and interior.
	Subsoil	Middle to Late Neolithic	3	8	FglS/1	Peterborough Ware; 1 sherd decorated.
	Subsoil	Middle to Late Bronze Age	4	8	F/1	1 smoothed interior, 1 smoothed and wiped interior.
	Subsoil	Prehistoric	2	2	FS/1	
	Subsoil	Early to Middle Saxon	3	6	SV/1	1 smoothed exterior and interior, 1 burnished exterior, smoothed interior.
	Subsoil	Early to Middle Saxon	1	1	SV/1	
	Subsoil	Early to Middle Saxon	3	7	S/2	1 undiagnostic rim.
	Subsoil	Early to Middle Saxon	1	2	OS/1	Burnished exterior and interior.
	Subsoil	Medieval	1	3	CFS/1	

Table 1: Catalogue of pottery by context

The eight sherds (16g) from the subsoil were made from the same three fabrics represented in the stratified assemblage. All were wall or base fragments apart from one simple, rounded and upright rim (6g), which provided no evidence of vessel form.

Radiocarbon dating

Two AMS determinations were obtained from Queens University Belfast and calibrated using Intcal 13 (Reimer *et al*. 2013) (Table 2). The probabilities are expressed as area under the curve at 2-sigma (96.4% confidence).

Struck flint

Steve Ford

A small collection of 100 struck flints was recovered during the evaluation and excavation combined (Table 3). This included 67 flakes, 8 narrow flakes, 6 spalls, 12 cores, 5 tested nodules, 1 scraper and 1 arrowhead. Most of the flint was recovered during overburden stripping, within or beneath the subsoil (Figure 3) with very few stratified pieces. From the cortex remaining, the collection all appears to have been made from gravel flint available locally, though flint could

Lab. code	*Context and material*	*Years BP*	*Calibrated date (Cal BC)*	*Probability*
UBA-25176	Gully 201, slot 121, fill 171, charcoal	3992±35	**2586–2457**	**98.6%**
			2619–2606	1.0%
			2599–2593	0.4%
UBA-25177	Gully 200, slot 126, fill 178, charcoal	3971±34	**2576–2435**	**92.3%**
			2421–2403	2.9%
			2379–2349	4.8%

Table 2. Radiocarbon dates (most probable highlighted)

Context	*Intact Flake*	*Intact Blade*	*Broken Flake*	*Broken Blade*	*Spall*	*Core*	*Other*
Trench 2	1						
Trench 4	1						
Trench 6	2					1	
Posthole 1, fill 52	1						
Gully 201, cut 100, fill 150			1				
Gully 200, cut 114, fill 162	1						
Posthole 115, fill 165					1		
Gully 201, cut 121, fill 171	1						
Posthole 125, 176					1		
Pit 127, 177	3		3				
Pit 134, fill 184	1						
Gully 201, cut 129, 188	2		1				3 tested nodules (1 burnt)
Subsoil (plotted on Figure 3)	30	4	16	2	4	11	2 tested nodules, scraper, arrowhead (unfinished)

Table 3. Catalogue of struck flint.

be obtained direct from the chalk just to the west. Two of the unstratified broken blades were patinated blue/white perhaps suggesting a different age from the remainder of the flintwork, but are otherwise unremarkable. Several pieces were lightly iron-stained.

Cores (12) and tested nodules (5) were relatively numerous and perhaps indicate that knapping was taking place here for use elsewhere, yet both the volume of material and lack of an assemblage with characteristics of a procurement site, such as a high proportion of cortical and 'waste' flakes (Ford 1987) qualifies this observation.

Some of the narrow flakes were possibly Mesolithic or Early Neolithic, though this is not clear cut. A probable arrowhead of triangular form, broken or unfinished and not pretty, is of later Neolithic or Early Bronze Age date. None of the other pieces were closely dated but likely to be of Neolithic or Bronze Age date.

Charred plant remains

Thirteen bulk soil samples were wet-sieved and eleven hand selected charcoal samples were retrieved. Poorly preserved indeterminate cereal grains were present in just two samples (from pits 133 and 134). Identifiable charcoal was present in seven samples. All was oak, except one sample (from gully 109) contained only hazel. Oak wood may therefore have been preferentially selected as fuel.

CONCLUSION

The fieldwork revealed a small cluster of archaeological deposits. The associated artefacts and two radiocarbon dates suggest this activity is predominantly later Neolithic in date. The Middle to Late Bronze Age is represented by a few sherds of pottery. A small number of features may be early Saxon and many others did not contain closely dateable artefacts. Yet the latter did contain some burnt flint and occasional struck flints which would be more in keeping with prehistoric origins rather than Saxon. The presence of subsoil over several of the features in the centre of the site also suggests at least some antiquity for many of the poorly dated features.

Neolithic

Later Neolithic occupation deposits are rarely encountered despite the recent decades of monitoring development sites. Even where both earlier Neolithic and Early Bronze Age settlement has been found (e.g. at Yarnton, Oxon (Hey *et al.* 2016)), later Neolithic settlement is absent. Exceptional house sites were found beneath later monuments such as at Trelystan, Powys (Britnell 1982) and more recently at Durrington Walls, Wilts (Parker Pearson *et al*. 2007: 632) but much more frequently occupation is represented only by artefact scatters and isolated pits or small clusters of pits. For example, at Cippenham, Slough, extensive excavations of multi-period deposits only located a single Late Neolithic pit with an intact pot (Ford *et al*. 2003: 155) and at Turnpike School, Newbury, one pit contained a few sherds of later Neolithic Ebbsfleet ware pottery, with several others nearby containing burnt and/or struck flint only (Pine 2010: 4). The extensive excavation to the north-west of this site revealed sites and finds that ranged from the Mesolithic through to medieval times, yet there was no unambiguous later Neolithic activity. A scatter of struck flint was recorded on a gravel island (Ford 2002, figure 26) though it was not necessarily of Late Neolithic date. Detailed pollen analysis of the nearby peat deposits suggested that the local environs were substantially wooded until the Early Bronze Age.

The unusual aspect of the Charnham Lane site is the long double-gully which traverses the site over 36m, and, originally, may have been longer. Both gullies were irregular in width and profile, not all of which can be attributed to recent truncation. Some stretches appeared to have supported posts, but several lengths lacked evidence for postholes, and other parts appeared too shallow to support uprights. There was no convincing evidence therefore that the gullies supported palisades. They returned near-identical radiocarbon dates of 2586–2457 and 2576–2435 cal BC. Late Neolithic palisade features are known elsewhere, namely at Avebury, less than 30km upstream (Whittle 1997; Thomas 1999: 217) and further afield at Catterick, North Yorkshire (Hale *et al*. 2009), each dated to the second half of the 3rd millennium BC. The Catterick example contained substantial postholes and had a roughly circular or oval plan.

The gullies from Charnham Lane may represent Neolithic land division or field boundaries although most recorded examples of early field systems are of Bronze Age date (Yates 1999) with a few examples possibly from the Early Bronze Age. However, a small earlier Neolithic site at Ashtead, Surrey included short lengths of gully interpreted as Neolithic field boundaries (Weale 2011). Similarly, later Bronze Age field systems at Colnbrook (Taylor *et al*. 2012) and Heathrow Airport (Lewis *et al*. 2007) included paired boundaries in which the intervening gap was not wide enough, for example, to have served as trackways. Rackham (1997: 183–4) notes the much later (Roman) practice for the creation of boundaries using two close-set shallow ditches to allow the planting of a hedge. At Charnham Lane, however, the paired gullies could represent a simple land division rather than a field system; the area investigated was not sufficiently large to determine if other field elements were present.

There is always the possibility that the finds and the radiocarbon dated charcoal are all residual and that the gullies are of later date and have cross-cut a later Neolithic occupation site. That parts of the site were sealed beneath subsoil suggests that it is unlikely that the gullies are Saxon or medieval, but a Bronze Age date is harder to dismiss. While the excavations to the north-west revealed both earlier and later Bronze Age activity, no evidence of field systems was encountered

(Ford 2002) and it seems simpler to take the dating evidence here at face value.

Early Saxon and medieval

Early Saxon occupation is represented by a possible posthole with one Saxon pottery sherd, and a partially exposed pit, perhaps a sunken-floored structure, that contained multiple large sherds of Saxon pottery. Several pottery stray finds were also noted, a comparative rarity for the period. An Early Saxon sunken-featured building, pit and stray finds of pottery were also found on the earlier Charnham Lane excavations to the north-west (Ford 2002: 81). Early Saxon occupation sites are frequently low density and dispersed. The new, albeit small-scale findings from Charnham Lane suggest a wider zone of Early Saxon settlement may be present along the corridor occupied by the old Charnham Lane.

Despite the presence of one or two medieval farms to the north-west, and the Charnham suburbs of Hungerford to the east, just a single sherd of medieval pottery was recovered.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was commissioned by Paul Chadwick of CgMs Consulting, London, on behalf of their client. The fieldwork was carried out according to a written scheme of investigation (CgMs 2013) approved by Ms Sarah Orr, the acting West Berkshire Archaeological Officer and was undertaken by Steve Ford assisted by Joanna Pine and Susan Porter. The text was prepared for publication by Nóra Bermingham. The archive will be deposited at West Berkshire Museum with accession code NEBYM: 2010.14.

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