

# LATER PREHISTORIC SETTLEMENT AND CERAMICS FROM THE DOWNLAND FRINGES AT NEW THANINGTON, CANTERBURY

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*Although a significant number of later prehistoric settlement sites are now known along the north Kent coastal plain and across the Great Stour headwaters at Ashford, adjacent landscapes have witnessed lower levels of archaeological investigation, leaving apparent gaps in the regional settlement record. Recent excavations at New Thanington go some way to addressing this bias in the geography of investigation, providing further evidence of later prehistoric occupation and activity upon Kent's Downland fringes. This paper offers a summary of the excavations, focussing on the later Bronze Age and Early Iron Age archaeology. It provides an overview of the occupation sequence and highlights a series of key pottery assemblages, each with associated radiocarbon dates.*

Between June-July 2017 Oxford Archaeology East (OA East) carried out excavations at land off Cockering Road, New Thanington, Canterbury, centred TR 1358 5607 (Site Code/Canterbury Museum Accession No. XKTTHA17). The investigations were focused on a 73ha parcel of arable land on the eastern side of Great Stour valley, with a bedrock geology of chalk, overlain by superficial deposits of sand, gravel and clay. These rested along the lower lying contours, or otherwise filled the bases of dry valleys that bisected the site, with the topography broadly rising from 18m AOD in the north, to a plateau of 64m AOD in the south (**Fig. 1**).

Previous finds from the site and surrounding area announced the potential for prehistoric activity. These included a Bronze Age razor (MKE 57157) and a copper alloy 'object' (MKE 57161), whilst an assemblage of worked flint spanning the Neolithic and Bronze Age was recovered immediately to the north-east (KHER reference: TR 15 NW 614). Other stray finds of prehistoric date from the site include Iron Age coins (MKE 57031 and MKE 57674) and a copper alloy brooch (MKE 57151), with remains of similar date being recorded in a watching brief immediately to the east (KHER reference: TR 15 NW 215).

In January 2017 OA East conducted an archaeological trenched evaluation across the site, identifying the two areas of significant later prehistoric remains. These were subsequently targeted for open area excavation, with Area 1 (1.27ha on river terrace deposits) in the southern central upslope plateau of the site, and Area

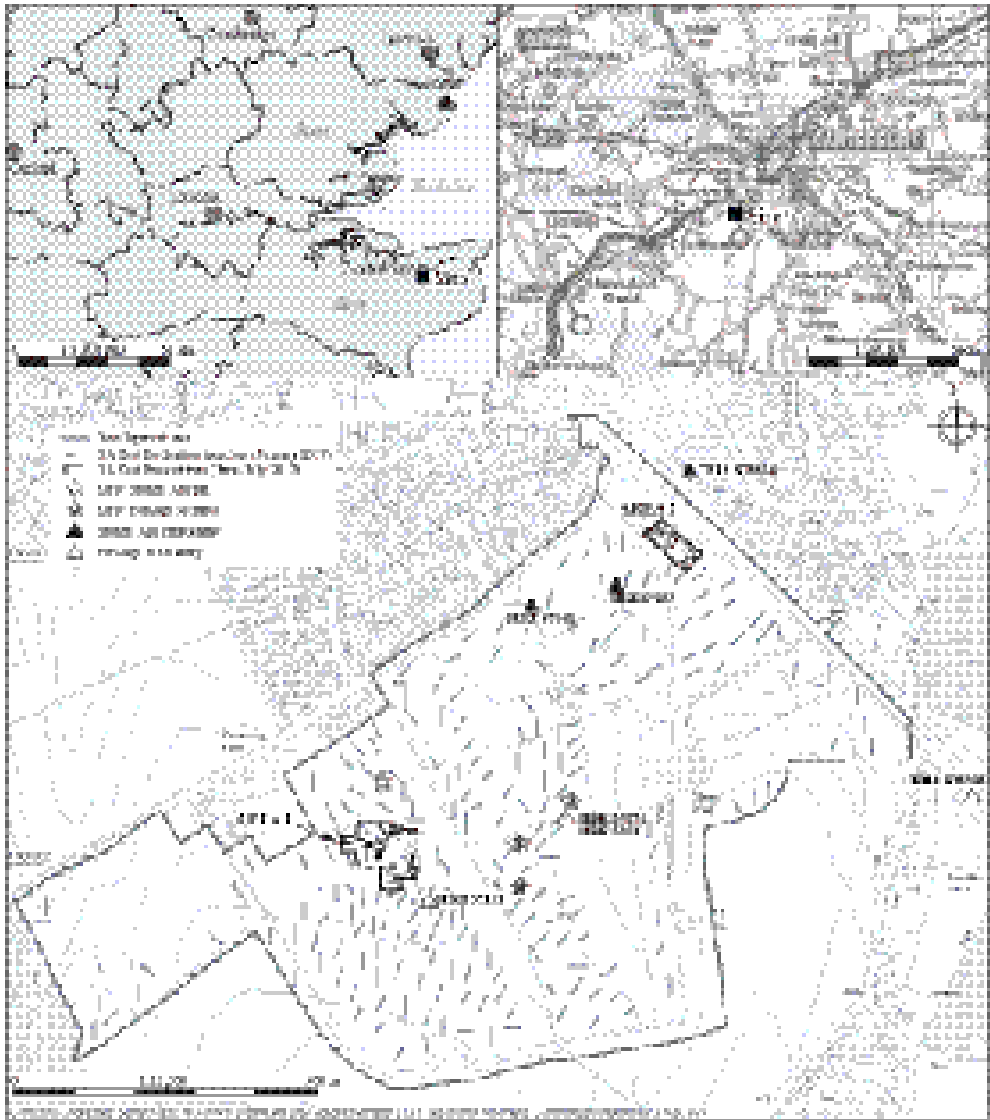


Fig. 1 Site location map.

2 (0.35ha on head deposits) focused on the lower contours in the north of the site (Clarke 2018). Both excavations exposed components of a ditched Middle Bronze Age field system, together with a series of earlier prehistoric features dating from the Neolithic to Early Bronze Age (**Fig. 2**). In Area 2, the Middle Bronze Age enclosures were succeeded by Late Bronze Age settlement represented by two loosely clustered groups of pits. A scatter of Early Iron Age pits was also found to extend across part of Area 1. Significantly, several of the settlement-related features contained relatively substantial assemblages of well-preserved pottery

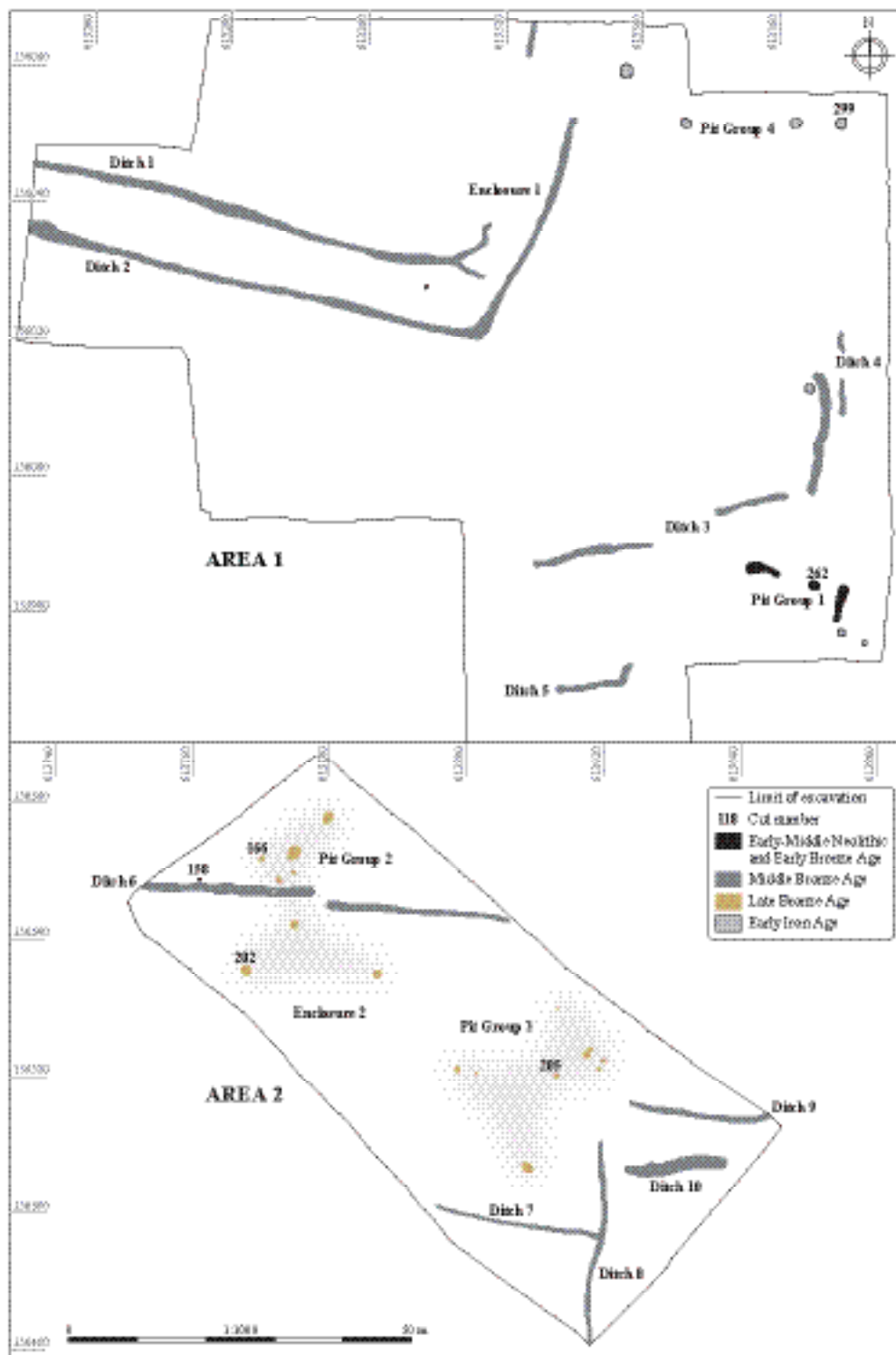


Fig. 2 The prehistoric remains found in excavation Areas 1 and 2

(discussed below), along with varying quantities of associated flintwork. Organic remains did not survive due to the acidic nature of the soils on the site. Reports on both the evaluation and excavation phase of the investigation are freely available to download from the OA Library (<http://library.thehumanjourney.net/4407/>).

### *Early-Middle Neolithic and Early Bronze Age beginnings*

Evidence for earlier prehistoric activity at the site was attested by a series of dispersed pits, and finds of residual pottery in later contexts. The earliest features in Area 1 comprised three pits (Pit Group 1), amongst which was a pit [262], which yielded 41 sherds (270g) of Early Neolithic pottery (c.3700-3350 BC), largely characterised by coarse flint-tempered wares from a variety of plain shouldered vessels. The pottery was recovered alongside a range of flintwork (polished axe head, cores, blades and retouched items) indicative of at least transient occupation. Foraging was also evidenced by the presence within the pit fill of charred hazelnut and crab apple remains. Within Area 2, a pit [158] contained 10 sherds (17g) of pottery, including an impressed herringbone-decorated rim related to the Middle Neolithic Peterborough Ware tradition (c.3350-2800 BC), whilst four fragments (16g) of Early Bronze Age Beaker pottery (c.2200-1900) were recovered from a pit to the north of Area 1.

### *Middle Bronze Age remains*

The excavations revealed evidence for widespread and more sustained activity during the Middle Bronze Age. Within Area 1, a large ditched enclosure (Enclosure 1) was partly revealed extending beyond the northern and western limits of the excavation. It was defined by two parallel 'inner' ditches (Ditches 1 and 2) placed c.10m apart that measured up to 1.6m wide and 0.7m deep; Ditch 1 yielded a total of 46 pieces of flintwork comprising flakes and blades along with a scraper and denticulate tool. The partial remains of three further 'outer' ditches (Ditches 3-5) also shared the alignment of the enclosure, that as a whole, delineated a larger concentric arrangement of enclosed land measuring at least 120m by 95m in extent.

Combined, the excavation of the Area 1 ditch system yielded 108 sherds (1,956g) of Middle Bronze Age pottery, 85 per cent (by weight) of which was recovered from the north to south aligned segment of Ditch 3. The pottery is unambiguously related to the Deverel-Rimbury ceramic tradition (c.1600-1150 BC) and is characterised by hard-fired wares with abundant, coarse burnt flint inclusions. Diagnostic sherds include fragments of vessel bases, a flat-topped rim and fingertip decorated sherds from straight-sided bucket-shaped vessels. The partial profile of a crushed bucket-urn from Ditch 3 refitted. This vessel stood over 32cm tall with a plain flat-topped rim and mouth diameter of c. 20cm (**Fig. 3**, No. 1). The exterior of the urn is sooted, indicating that it had been used in cooking activities. The surrounding fill yielded charcoal (unidentified) that was radiocarbon dated to 1440-1300 cal BC (95.4 per cent confidence; SUERC-76181; 3112 ± 27 BP).

A further rectilinear arrangement of ditches was revealed in Area 2 along the lower/gentler contours of the site. Another enclosure (Enclosure 2) was defined by a group of ditches (Ditches 6-8), measuring up to 1.5m wide and 0.8m deep;

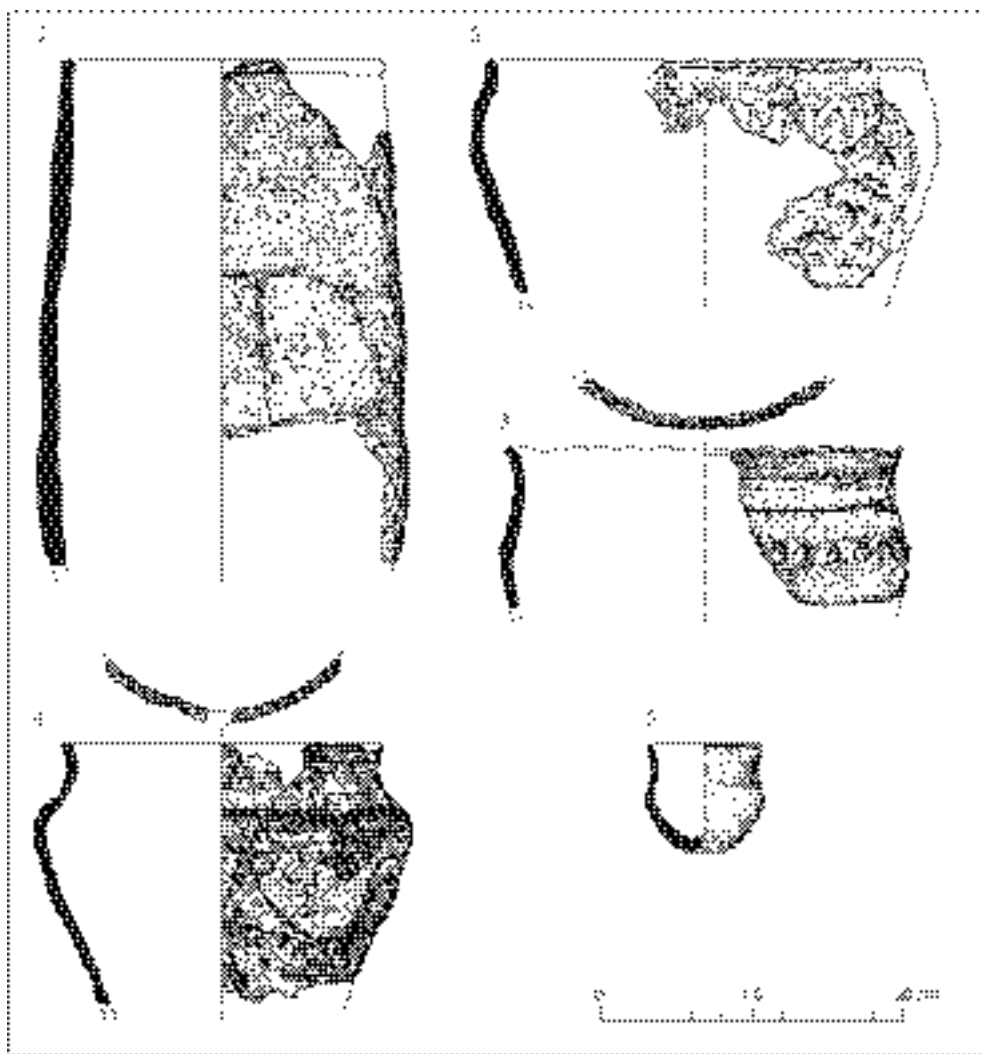


Fig. 3 Middle to Late Bronze Age pottery: *Middle Bronze Age* 1. Bucket urn, Area 1, Ditch 3. *Late Bronze Age* 2. Coarseware jar, Area 2, Pit Group 2, pit 202. 3. Coarseware jar with plain neck cordon and fingertip impressions on rim-top and shoulder, Area 2, Pit Group 2, pit 202. 4. Coarseware jar with fingernail impressions on rim-top and shoulder, Area 2, Pit Group 3, pit 205. 5. Fineware cup, Area 2, Pit Group 2, pit 202.

each displaying single fills. These yielded a further 23 sherds (226g) of Deverel-Rimbury pottery, with Ditch 6 producing the vast majority of flintwork from the area (59 pieces), including four scrapers. Outside the enclosure, the c.8m-wide gap formed by parallel east to west aligned Ditches 9 and 10 could potentially have defined a trackway that led eastward from the enclosure. These had similar fills and dimensions to Ditches 6-8 (up to 1.5m wide and 0.4m deep).

*Late Bronze Age remains*

Enclosure 2 was encroached upon by a phase of Late Bronze Age pitting. A total of 19 pits were revealed across Area 2, with diameters ranging from 0.3-2.0m and depths of 0.1-0.5m. Two loose spatial groupings were defined (Pit Groups 2 and 3). Pit Group 2 focussed on either side of Middle Bronze Age enclosure Ditch 6 and consisted of 10 pits: two of these were intercutting and another cut into the upper silts of the earlier enclosure ditch. Pit Group 3 lay broadly within the confines of the earlier enclosure and comprised nine pits.

Single deposits of grey brown silty clay characterised the majority of pit fills, but those of Pit Group 2 were more variable in composition. Despite this, there was nothing evident from the matrix of any fills or the nature of any individual finds assemblages to indicate the primary function of the pits. It is clear, however, that many acted as repositories for an artefact-rich refuse upon disuse, with significant quantities of burnt flint and pottery being recovered. In total, six pits in Pit Group 2 and a single pit in Pit Group 3 were found to contain large quantities of burnt flint, an indicator for possible 'industrial' activity/craft processes taking place within the settlement. Charcoal of *Corylus avellana* (hazel) was found within the fill of pit 205; a tree species that may have been coppiced for firewood.

Sherds of unabraded Late Bronze Age pottery were recovered from both pit groups, with Pit Group 2 yielding 513 sherds (8,839g) and Pit Group 3, 113 sherds (1,412g). These form coherent assemblages, both belonging to the Plainware phase of the Post Deverel-Rimbury (PDR) ceramic tradition (c.1150-800 BC). The pottery is dominated by sherds in flint-tempered fabrics (88 per cent by weight), varying in grade and density according to vessel size and quality of ware. In terms of composition, the assemblage is characterised by a typical repertoire of Late Bronze Age vessels forms, with fineware and coarseware jars, bowls and cups being represented (Barrett 1980; Brudenell 2012). Fineware partial vessel profiles comprise two thin-walled burnished bowls and a shouldered cup (Fig. 3, No. 5). The latter has a crudely dimpled base, similar to a 'true' omphalos form (of which there are three examples in the assemblage). The other partially intact vessels are all coarseware jars (Fig. 3, Nos 2-4), two of which are decorated and display marked shoulders and concave hollowed necks (Nos 3-4). A slurry-like slip (*eclaboussée*) is evident on two rusticated coarseware sherds, whilst cabling and fingertip/nail applications appear on a range of others; the overall frequency of rim decoration being comparatively high for a Plainware PDR group (Brudenell 2012).

Importantly, three key groups of Late Bronze Age pottery were radiocarbon dated from charred plant remains recovered from their associated contexts. These provide a scientific date for 45 per cent of the pottery by sherd count or 63 per cent by weight (283 sherds, 6,437g). Within Pit Group 2, unidentified charcoal from pit 166 was dated to 910-810 cal BC (95.4 per cent confidence; SUERC-76175; 2705 ± 29 BP) and charred grain (*Triticum sp.*) from pit 202 was similarly dated to 980-830 cal BC (95.4 per cent confidence; SUERC-76180; 2756 ± 29 BP). Within Pit Group 3, charred remains of hazel from pit 205 (*Corylus avellana*) were dated to 850-790 cal BC (90.3 per cent confidence; SUERC-76176; 2650 ± 29 BP). Whilst the dates have not been subject to modelling, all fall within a tenth to ninth century BC bracket, and therefore within the accepted currency of PDR Plainware (Needham 2007).

*Early Iron Age remains*

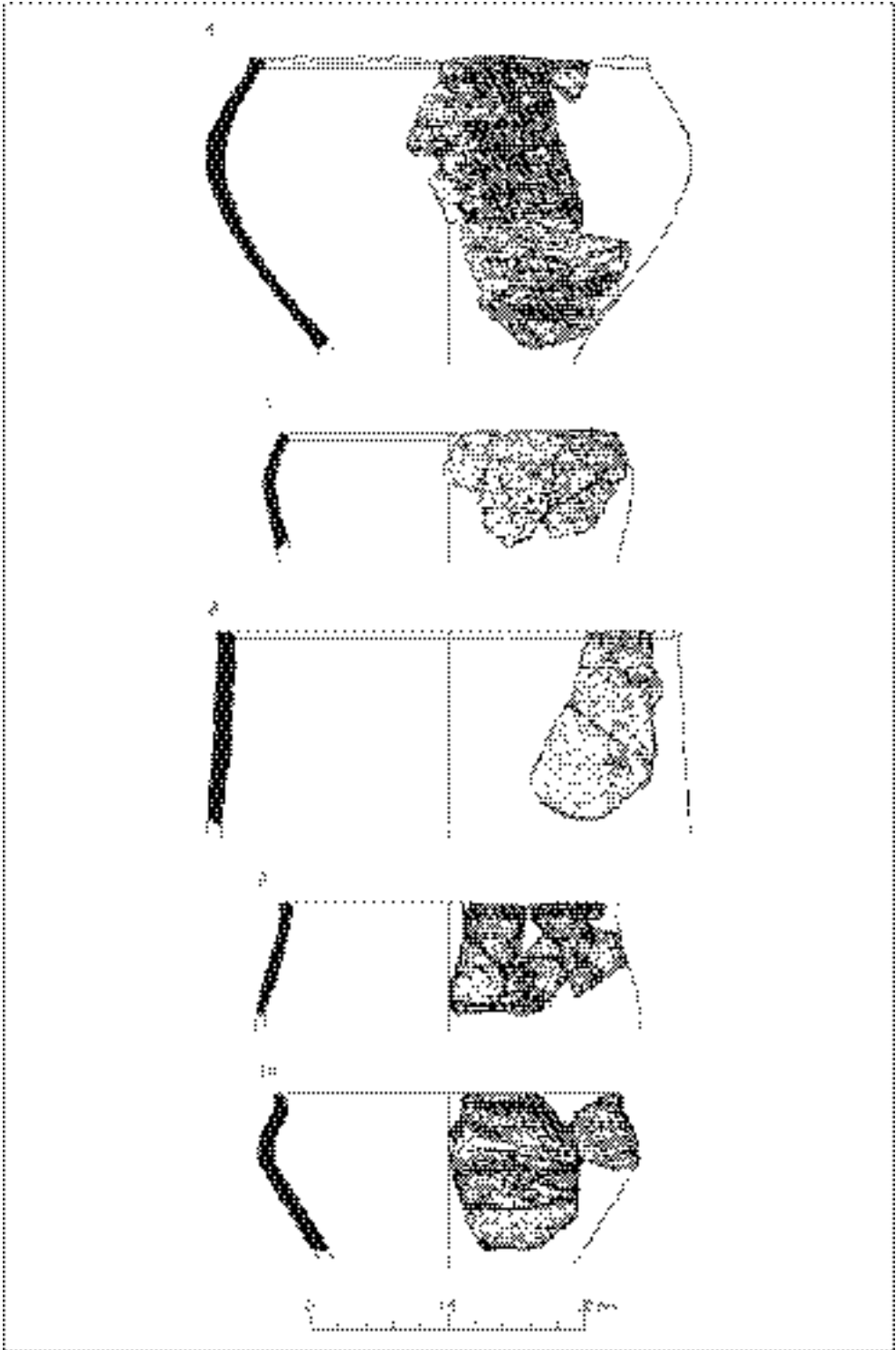
Within the confines of the excavation area, there was no evidence that activity continued across the Bronze Age-Iron Age transition or was attributable to the Earliest Iron Age (*c.*800-600 BC). Occupation did, however, resume in the Early Iron Age ‘proper’, from *c.*600 BC, as evidenced by a group of four sub-circular pits located along the north-eastern extremities of Area 1 (Pit Group 4). These pits displayed a shared morphology of near vertical sides and flat bases that measured between 1.0-1.8m in diameter by 0.28-0.76m deep. Whilst all four contained datable finds, the vast majority derived from an artefact-rich secondary fill of a single pit [299]. This deposit yielded 335 (6,520g) of the 411 (7,701g) sherds of Early Iron Age pottery recovered from the site, and contained a large assemblage (3,229g) of structural fired clay/daub, with some pieces displaying smoothed surfaces and wattle/withy impressions.

The pit also yielded an assemblage of charred barley, wheat, oat grains and weed seeds; one wheat grain (*Triticum sp.*) delivering a radiocarbon determination of 540-390 cal BC (95.4 per cent confidence; SUERC-76182; 2365 ± 29 BP). This date accords well with that assigned to the pottery on typo-chronological grounds (*c.*600-350). The ceramic assemblage itself is characterised by fragments of a series of medium- and large-sized vessels, predominantly in burnt flint-tempered fabrics. Intact were the partial profiles of eight vessels (five from pit 299), comprising two burnished bowls, one comb decorated burnished fineware jar (**Fig. 4**, No. 9), and five plain coarseware jars (Nos 6-8, 10); one with heavy exterior wiping and clay slurry smeared across the lower walls of the vessel (No. 6). Other sherds of note included two flat bases that are heavily gritted with flint on the underside, tool-impressed shoulder sherds, and a small number of red-finished haematite coated sherds. Overall, the assemblage is typical of the period and wider region, falling broadly within Cunliffe’s Highstead-Dolland’s Moor ‘style’ (2005, 103), and sharing affinities with Macpherson-Grant’s ‘East Kent Rusticated Tradition’ (1989; 1991).

## Discussion

Whilst the later prehistoric excavations at New Thanington are relatively limited by contemporary standards, the context of the site on the fringes of the North Downs elevates their significance as they lie within a landscape zone which has witnessed fewer investigations than those regions further north along the coastal plain and Thames estuary. This bias in the geography of Kent’s fieldwork is now widely acknowledged (Champion 2007, 294-95; Booth *et al.* 2011, 176) but, until the balance is redressed, the implications for understanding prehistoric settlement patterns, intra-regional differences and possible divergences in landscape history, remain grounded.

The New Thanington excavations are significant in this respect, since the results begin to correct these imbalances and provide some glimpses into the potential of this landscape zone. Of immediate significance, they have successfully dated a series of Middle Bronze Age field system ditches/enclosures and have extended the known distribution of such boundary systems. These are widely recorded along





the north Kent coastal plain and across the Great Stour headwaters at Ashford (Yates 2007, 23, fig. 3.3), but have hitherto been more elusive in the landscapes in between. Viewed another way, however, New Thanington's valley-side location along a major watercourse is entirely in keeping with other Bronze Age field systems, and fits comfortably within a wider pattern for Kent. Indeed, with the ancient coastline being in greater proximity to the site than it is today (Fig. 5 and see Middleton 1995, fig. 18.1; Andrews *et al.* 2015, 116 fig. 3.21; Moody 2008, figs 17-19), the Great Stour would have formed a major arterial route way during the later Bronze Age, bisecting the North Downs and linking landscapes known to be intensively occupied during this period. It is therefore a little less surprising that this particular section of the Downland fringe displays field systems/enclosures and traces of later Bronze Age settlement than perhaps the Downland interior itself.

New Thanington's mid second millennium BC ditch system does not appear to have been maintained into the Late Bronze Age. This is suggested by the presence of a Late Bronze Age pit cutting the upper silts of enclosure Ditch 6, and a total absence of PDR pottery from any of the ditch fills. Land use continuity cannot therefore be demonstrated, and instead there appears to have been a shift from bounded field enclosures to 'open' settlement characterised by loosely defined pit groups. The form and footprint of this occupation is similar to that observed in other parts of the county, where low density swathes of pits and postholes are typical (*e.g.* Shrubsoles Hill, Sheerness (Coles *et al.* 2003); Hillborough Caravan Park, Reculver (Allen 2009, 194); Willow Farm, Herne Bay (SERF Seminar 2007, 4); Sandway Road, Lenham (Booth *et al.* 2011, 177, 230); Kemsley Fields (Diack 2006); and Iwade (Bishop and Bagwell 2005) (Fig. 5). Many of these settlements can be broadly categorised as open/unenclosed and, like New Thanington, often lack tangible structural remains such as roundhouses or four-post buildings (Andrews *et al.* 2015, 109). This may be a product of later plough truncation and feature survival, or could otherwise reflect the constraints of excavations undertaken thus far. Either way, the number of pits and the content of their artefact-rich fills indicate sustained occupation, as opposed to transient/sporadic activity.

In some instances, the content and condition of the pottery from the pits suggests that vessels may have been singled out for 'formal' treatment in deposition. This is arguably the case for the ceramics from pits 202 and 205 in Pit Group 2 (Fig. 3), and chimes with patterns of deposition observed at many of the above mentioned sites. In terms of chronology, this pottery is securely dated to the tenth to ninth century BC, making it broadly contemporary with published groups from Monkton Court Farm (Macpherson-Grant 1994), Highstead (Couldrey 2007), Cobham Golf Course and White Horse Stone (Champion 2011), Cliffs End Farm (Leivers in McKinley *et al.* 2014), and Zones 4, 7 and 12 along the East Kent Access Scheme (Leivers in Andrews *et al.* 2015) (Fig. 5).

Other changes are evident across the Bronze Age-Iron Age divide at New

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Fig. 4 (opposite) Early Iron Age pottery: 6. Coarseware jar with clay slurry on lower walls, Area 1, Pit Group 4, pit 299. 7. Coarseware jar, Area 1, Pit Group 4, pit 299. 8. Coarseware jar, Area 1, Pit Group 4, pit 299. 9. Fineware jar with combed shoulder, Area 1, Pit Group 4, pit 299. 10. Coarseware jar, Pit Group 4, pit 299.

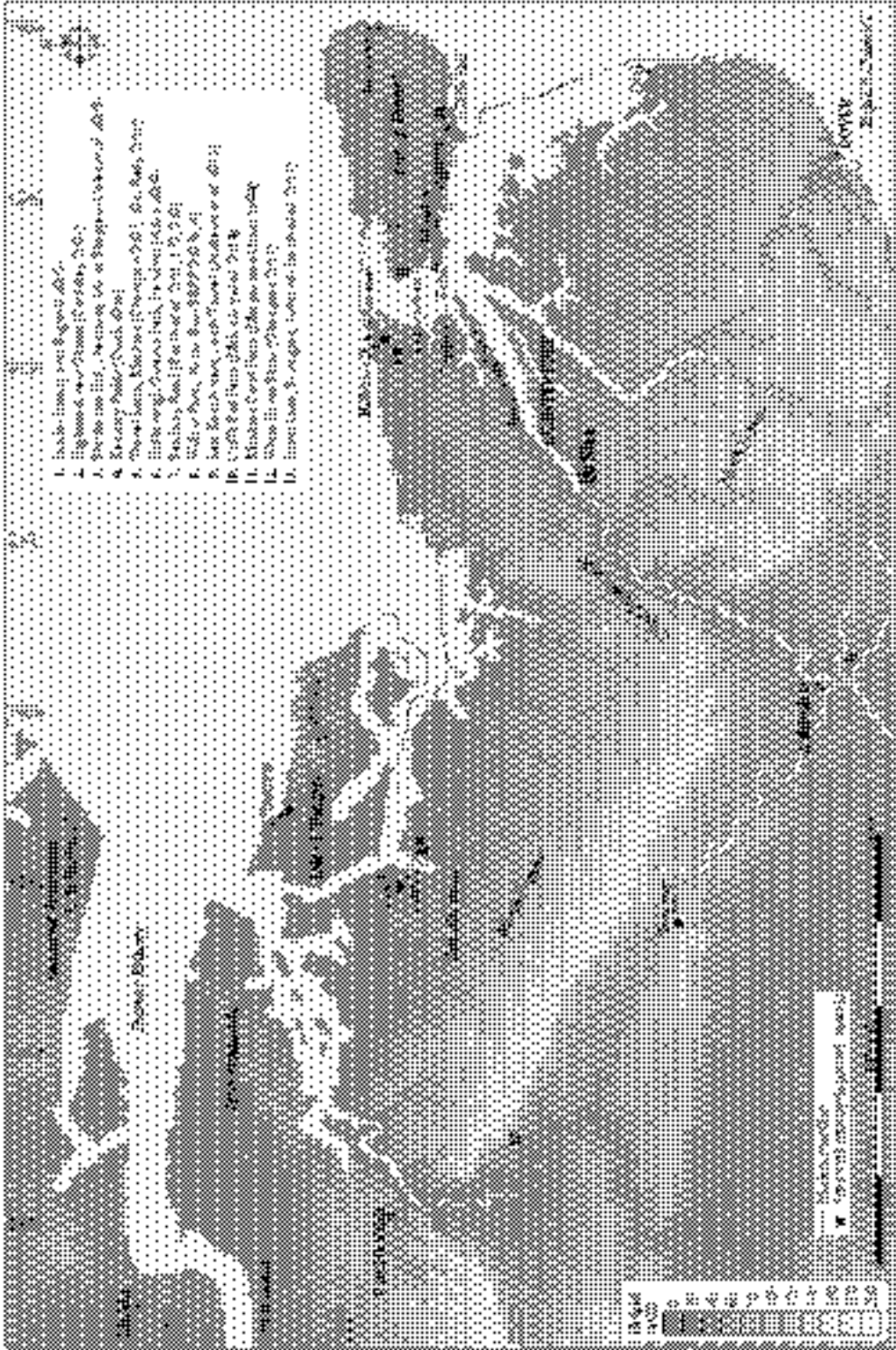


Fig. 5 Topography of later prehistoric Kent, showing the key sites mentioned in the text.

Thanington. Again, the impression is one of disjuncture, with no evidence for activity in the Earliest Iron Age (*c.* 800-600 BC), and a clear shift in the location of occupation/settlement thereafter. Whereas in the Late Bronze Age remains were focused on the lower lying contours of the site at *c.* 23m AOD, in the Early Iron Age activity centred on the higher elevations of the Downland slopes at *c.* 52m AOD. Interestingly, similar fractures in settlement sequence and site location have been observed between these periods in Kent (Allen 2009, 201-202; Bishop and Bagwell 2005, 126; Booth *et al.* 2011, 182; Champion 2007, 299), and may be tied into wider social, economic and environmental changes across the Bronze Age-Iron Age transition (Needham 2007).

Whatever the reason for these transformations, the Early Iron Age settlement itself was announced by a very limited scatter of pits (although these may have extended beyond the limits of the excavation). In fact, were it not for pit 299 and its artefact-rich fills, activity in this period would have been virtually invisible. However, the range and quantity of pottery, structural fired clay and charred cereal from this one pit alone would appear to meet thresholds suggestive of settlement, and attest to a range of food preparation, processing and consumption activities common to sites of the period. It is therefore possible that the limited number of surviving features simply reflects the limited scale and brevity of settlement here. In truth, it is difficult to define precisely what kind of occupation over what kind of timeframe such remains represent. What is known is that sites with similar widely scattered pits or single features containing artefacts have been recorded in Kent (*e.g.* Eyhorne Street, Tutt Hill and Blind Lane (Booth *et al.* 2011, 181) as well as Gravesend (Allen *et al.* 2012, 317)). These seem to form a distant component of the region's settlement geography, existing alongside larger unenclosed sites (*e.g.* White Horse Stone, Booth *et al.* 2011, 199, fig. 4.24; Thanet Earth, Monkton, Champion 2007, 302). At present the relationship between the two scales of settlement remains to be resolved, but as the excavation at New Thanington have shown, further work on the North Downs fringes has potential to shed further light on such issues.

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