

LATER PREHISTORIC FEATURES AT LAND OFF CHINEHAM LANE, SHERBORNE ST JOHN, BASINGSTOKE, HAMPSHIRE

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ABSTRACT

Excavations undertaken in advance of a proposed residential development on land off Chineham Lane, Sherborne St John, Basingstoke, uncovered a number of pits and postholes of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date. A small number of 19th and 20th century features, including hedgerow ditches and a hedgerow alignment were also found. Artefacts recovered from the prehistoric features indicate the presence of a domestic site of indeterminate type.

INTRODUCTION

During May 1997, Wessex Archaeology, on behalf of Bewley Homes plc, undertook a sample excavation within the site of a new residential development on land off Chineham Lane, Sherborne St John, Basingstoke, Hampshire. Following an initial desk-based assessment of archaeological potential (Wessex Archaeology 1996), the proposed development site had previously been subjected to an archaeological evaluation which had revealed evidence for activity of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date (Wessex Archaeology 1997). In response to these results, Wessex Archaeology, in collaboration with the Archaeology Section of Hampshire County Council, prepared a project design detailing a programme of further investigation for the site to ensure that an adequate record of the archaeological remains was made prior to their destruction by construction activities.

Excavation was carried out over two weeks and uncovered a small number of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age features and several late 19th/20th-century features. A small assemblage of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age artefacts was recovered. With the completion of the post-excavation

programme on the finds and archive recovered from the site, this report has been prepared as the final stage of work required by the project design.

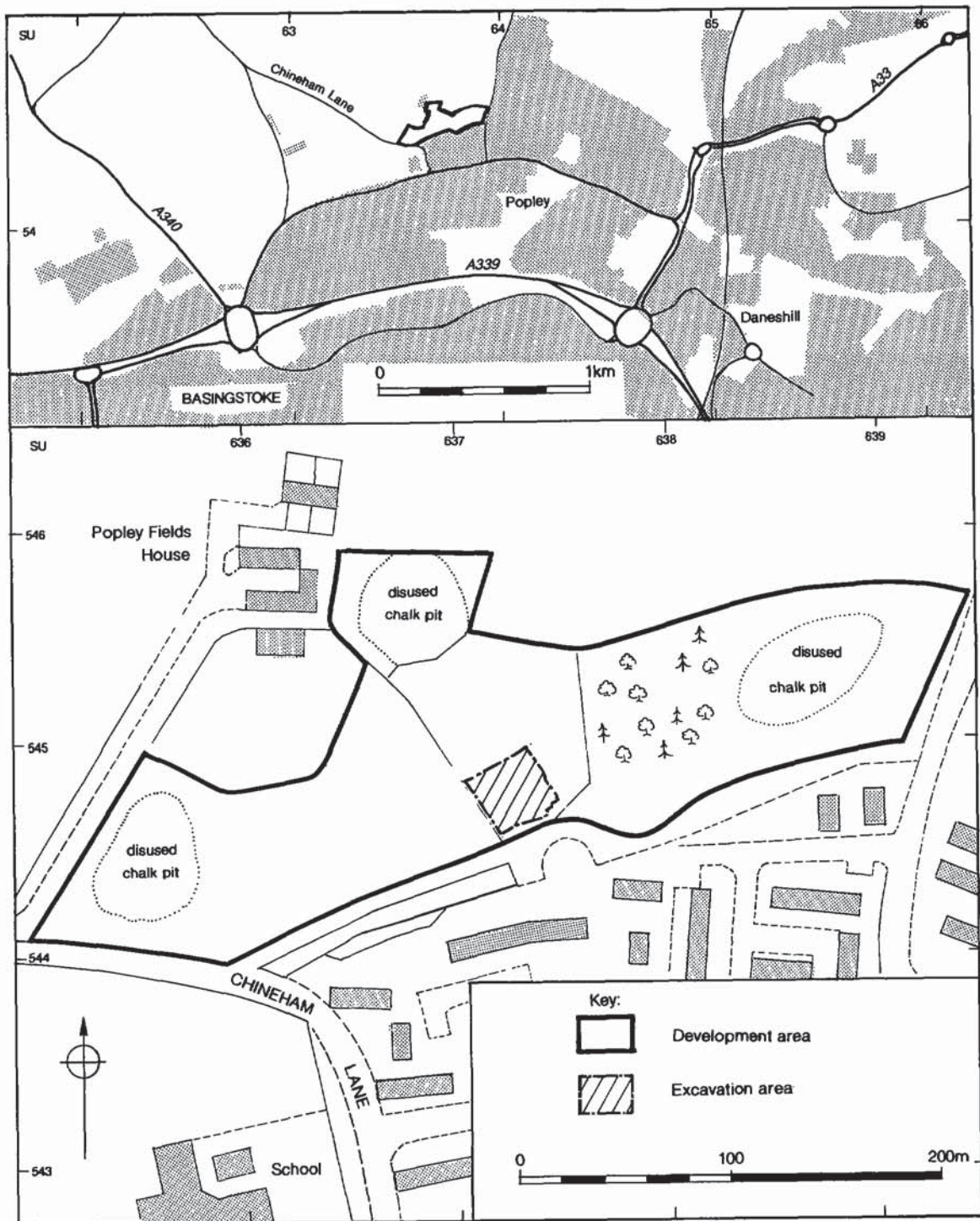
Site Location, Topography and Geology

The excavation was positioned within an irregularly shaped block of land occupying an area of approximately 3.9 ha of permanent pasture within the modern civil parish of Sherborne St John (Fig. 1). The site comprised an area measuring 35.7 m by 31.5 m centred on NGR SU 63725 54467 and represented approximately 3% of the total area of the proposed development. It was bounded to the north and east by disused chalk pits, to the west by a grass field containing another disused chalk pit, and to the south by recent residential development.

The site was located along the boundary between the Hampshire Downs and the London basin, within north-east Hampshire. It was situated on the lower part of a moderate, south-facing slope which forms one side of a low ridge at a height of between 85.5 m aOD and 83.5 m aOD. The basal geology of the area comprises Upper Chalk of the Cretaceous Period with widespread deposits of Tertiary Reading Beds and London Clay located immediately to the north of Popley Fields House (Fig. 1). Well-drained, calcareous brown earth soils overlie the chalk, and there are localised colluvial footslope deposits along the western and southern edges of the excavation area.

EXCAVATION STRATEGY

The trench location was determined by the results of the earlier evaluation (Wessex Archaeology



1997). Topsoil and colluvial deposits were removed using a wheeled excavator under constant archaeological supervision to the surface of archaeological deposits and/or the Upper Chalk. All archaeological and potentially archaeological features were then excavated and recorded.

Phasing

The excavation area was found to contain a number of archaeological and natural features (Fig. 2). A total of five small pits and eight postholes was found to be of later prehistoric date, while modern features included a pair of curving, parallel hedgerow ditches, a linear hedgerow alignment, two postholes and a service trench. Natural features recorded for the area included a number of tree bowls/throws and an erosion gully.

Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age

Five subcircular pits and eight postholes, all thought to be of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date, were found within the excavation area. These features occurred largely within the western and south-eastern parts of the site.

Pit 113 measured 0.66 m in diameter and 0.33 m deep with vertical sides and a flat base (Fig. 3). The single fill (112) contained moderate amounts of small/medium-sized chalk fragments and a large flint nodule. Five sherds of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery were recovered from the pit fill, along with a few pieces of worked flint, some fragments of fired clay and nine pieces of burnt flint.

Pit 125 was 0.85 m in diameter and 0.38 m deep with straight/concave sides and a flat base (Fig. 3). The single fill (124) was more clayey than that of pit 113, and contained four sherds of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery along with five pieces of worked flint (including a core) and 42 pieces of burnt flint.

Pit 127 was 1.5 m in diameter and 0.63 m deep with concave sides and an irregular sloping base (Fig. 3). There were three fills in this feature, although no artefacts were recovered from the upper or lower ones. The middle fill contained thirteen sherds of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery, including

ones from a small jar or bowl with finger-impressed decoration on the shoulder. This vessel is almost certainly of 7th century BC date. Other finds comprised thirteen pieces of worked flint (including a core), a few pieces of burnt flint and a small fragment of animal bone.

Pit 147 was 0.88 m in diameter and 0.23 m deep, with concave sides and a sloping base. Seven pieces of worked flint, including one core, were recovered from the single fill (146) of this pit.

Pit 149 was 0.94 m in diameter and 0.29 m deep with irregular sloping sides and a sloping/concave base (Fig. 3). The upper fill (148) contained a single sherd of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery and a piece of worked flint, but no artefacts were recovered from the lower fill.

Eight postholes have been assigned to this later prehistoric phase of activity at the site largely on the basis of the similarity of their fills to those of the pits. Four of these (103, 105, 145, 109) occur as two opposing pairs and are likely to represent the remains of some sort of structure.

Postholes 103 and 105 both measured *c.* 0.3 m in diameter and were 0.11 m deep, whereas posthole 109 was 0.34 m in diameter and 0.16 m deep and posthole 145 was 0.31 m in diameter and 0.20 m deep. The only artefacts which were recovered from this group of postholes were two sherds of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery found in the fill (108) of posthole 109.

The remaining four postholes attributed to this phase (123, 141, 162, 166) do not form any recognisable patterns which may be attributed to some kind of structure. Posthole 123 was similar in size to those described above, whilst the other three were substantially smaller.

Colluvial Deposit

A colluvial or hillwash deposit (101) of pale yellowish-brown silty clay loam was found within the western and south-western parts of the excavation area. The thickness of this deposit varied from 0.24 m on the north-western edge of the excavation area to 0.35 m along the south-western edge. The colluvium sealed the prehistoric features located in the south and south-eastern parts of the site, and was cut by the two parallel hedgerow ditches described below. Three unretouched flint flakes of likely Bronze Age date and a single sherd of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery were recovered from this deposit.

Fig. 1 (*opposite*) Chineham Lane, Basingstoke: location map

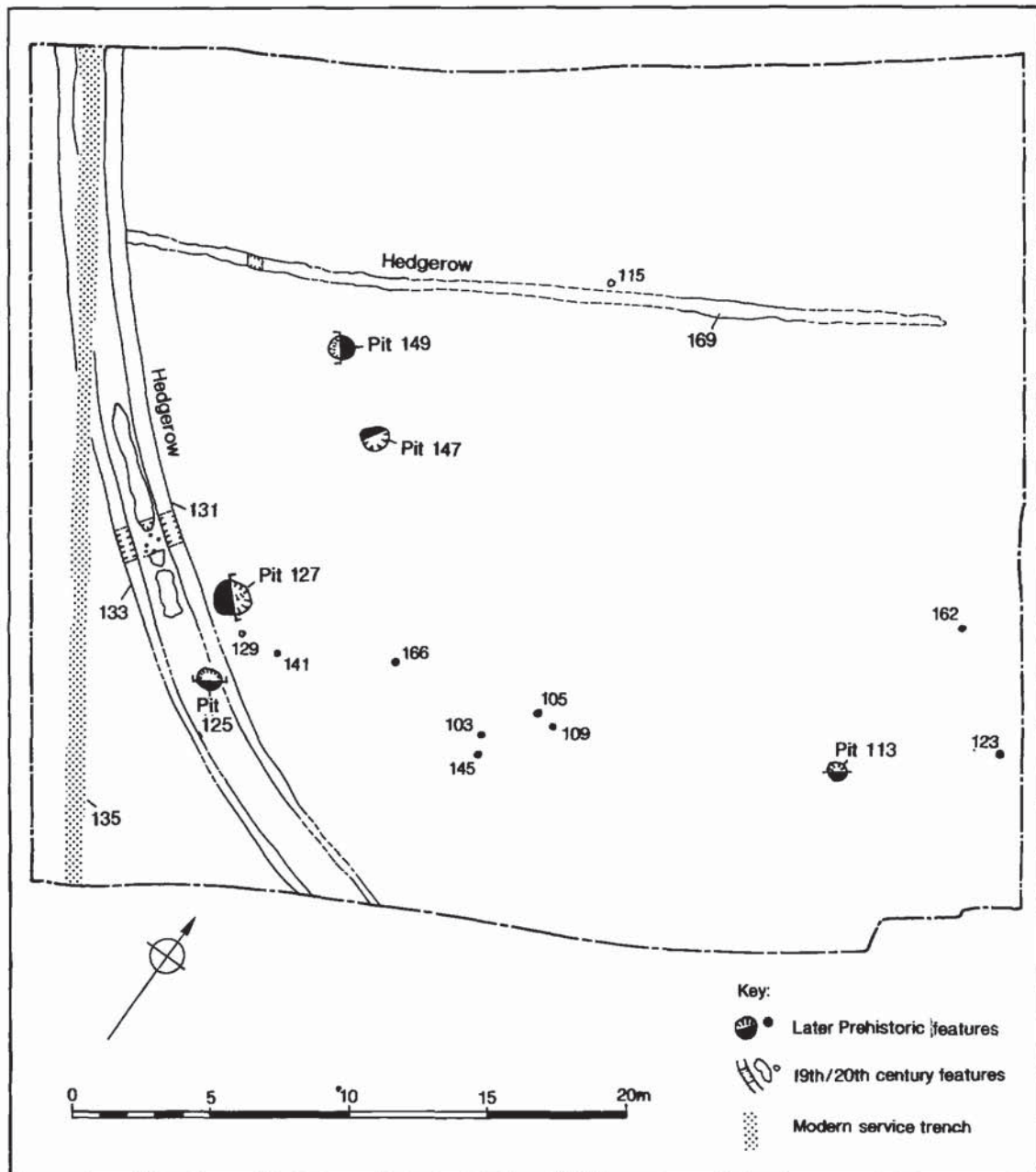


Fig. 2 Chineham Lane, Basingstoke: excavation area

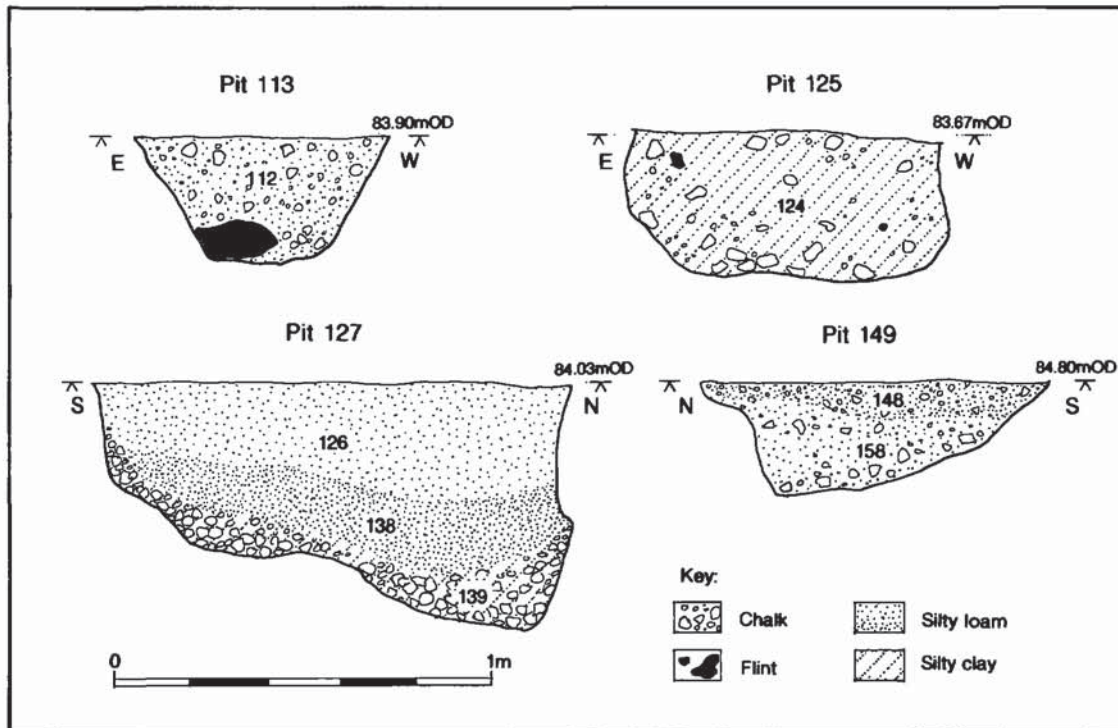


Fig. 3 Chineham Lane, Basingstoke: sections

Modern (19th–20th Centuries)

The excavation area was sealed by a loamy topsoil (100) between 0.1 m and 0.15 m in thickness. Cutting through this topsoil and into the underlying chalk along the western edge of the site was a modern service trench (135). This feature was 0.6 m wide and was backfilled with chalk rubble: it remained unexcavated.

Also in this part of the site, and obviously earlier than the service trench, were two curving parallel hedgerow ditches (131, 133) separated by a series of small irregular features. The ditches were approximately 1.2 m apart and exhibited a gentle curve from north-west to south-east for a distance of 31.8 m along the western and south-western edges of the excavation area. Both ditches were 0.3 m deep with sloping sides and a flat or concave base; ditch 131 was 0.97 m wide and ditch 133 was 0.83 m wide. Both features were filled with a dark friable loam which contained fragments of slag, glass and late 19th or early 20th century pottery. Excavation of the small irregular features located between the ditches revealed a series of small root casts with fills indistinguishable from those of the ditches.

A shallow and indistinct linear feature (169) aligned

east/west across the northern part of the excavation area was also examined. This feature measured between 0.3 and 0.4 m wide and was a maximum of 0.05 m deep, with an irregular base containing a number of small root casts. No artefactual material was recovered from this feature, but it could be seen to pre-date ditches 131 and 133.

Two postholes (115, 129) have also been assigned to the modern period of activity at the site on the basis of their loamy fills. Both of these features were c. 0.25 m in diameter and 0.06 m deep.

THE FINDS

A small quantity of artefactual material was recovered during the excavation. Although most was from identified features, a small number of pieces of worked flint and sherds of pottery were also recovered from the colluvial deposit (101) and two of the larger tree holes (110, 142). All artefacts have been cleaned and quantified by material type

Table 1 All finds by context

Context	Animal bone	Burnt flint	Worked flint	Fired clay	Glass	Pottery
101	–	–	3/22	–	–	1/5
108	–	–	–	–	–	2/15
110	–	3/99	3/15	–	–	–
112	–	9/179	9/84	6/17	–	6/36
124	–	42/502	5/156	–	–	4/6
132	–	–	–	–	1/127	1/5
138	1/1	5/57	13/260	–	–	13/97
142	–	1/8	8/104	–	–	4/10
146	–	3/6	7/98	–	–	–
148	–	–	1/14	–	–	1/2
TOTAL	1/1	63/851	49/753	6/17	1/127	32/176

within each context (see Table 1). The finds which merit further comment are briefly discussed by material type below.

Worked Flint

A total of 49 pieces of worked flint was recovered, consisting of 40 unretouched flakes, five unretouched flake fragments, one blade and three cores. No retouched tools were recovered. Table 1 summarises the total amount of worked flint recovered by context.

All lithic artefacts recovered were made from flint obtained from local chalk sources. The condition of individual artefacts is good, with only two pieces exhibiting minor post-depositional edge damage. All 49 artefacts exhibit a white to bluish-grey patina characteristic of the material from the chalk. No spatial patterning in the distribution of artefacts between the features is apparent in the material recovered.

Technologically the artefacts conform to the general characteristics of the Middle Bronze Age industries from southern England. The three cores are prepared single and joint platform types worked with both hard and soft hammers. Unretouched flakes are predominately squat, thick flakes with thick platforms and hinge terminations. The single blade in the assemblage is a by-product of the

removal of a core edge rather than a deliberately manufactured blade.

Burnt Flint

A total of 63 pieces (weighing 851 gms) of unworked burnt flint was recovered from six contexts (Table 1). Burnt flint is not intrinsically datable, although it can be assumed that the majority recovered is probably of similar date as the worked flint and pottery.

The Non-Lithic Artefacts by Lorraine Mephram

Small fragments of fired clay were retrieved from the fill of pit 113 and were associated with Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery. These fragments are featureless and undiagnostic, and are of uncertain origin.

One modern glass jar came from the fill of curving ditch 133. This has been discarded following quantification.

With the exception of one modern (19th/20th century) sherd from curving ditch 133, all of the pottery recovered is of later prehistoric date, and comprises sherds in coarse sandy and flint-tempered fabrics. The only diagnostic sherds came from pit 127 and represent a small jar or bowl with finger-impressed decoration on the shoulder. This vessel may be dated to the Early Iron

Table 2 Assessment of the charred plant remains and charcoal

Feature type/no	Context	Sample	Size litres	Flot								Residue
				Flot size	ml	Grain	Chaff	Weed uncharred	seeds charred	Charcoal >5.6mm	Other	Charcoal >5.6mm
Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age												
pit 125	124	1000	10	60	30	C	-	a	-	C	Mollusc (A)	-
pit 127	138	1002	10	80	16	C	-	a	-	B	Mollusc (A) Smb (C)	-

Key: A = ≥ 10 items, B = 9–5 items, C = < 5 items, smb = small mammal bones

note: flot is total, but flot in superscript = ml of rooty material. Uncharred seed in lower case to distinguish from charred remains

Age (c. 7th century BC). It is likely that the other sherds are of similar date, although a broader range of Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age (10th–7th centuries BC) is possible.

THE PALAEO-ENVIRONMENTAL EVIDENCE by Michael J Allen

A total of four bulk soil samples was taken from three of the pits, but only two samples were selected for processing to recover charred plant remains and charcoal. These samples were from the single fill (124) of pit 125 and the central fill (138) of pit 127, both of these pits are located in the south-western part of the excavation area. The other samples have been discarded.

Following processing of 10 litres of each sample by standard flotation methods (flots retained on a 0.5 mm mesh and residues on a 1 mm mesh), the flots were scanned under a $\times 10$ – $\times 30$ stereobinocular microscope and the presence of charred remains was quantified (Table 2). This was undertaken to provide information about preservation and to determine the potential of the charred plant remains for detailed analysis.

The charred seed remains were scant; only a few charred grain fragments were recorded in each sample. No chaff or charred weed seeds were noted. In addition, a high proportion of the flots comprised modern rooty material. A large number of uncharred weed seeds, which can be indicative of stratigraphic disturbance, were also present.

Charcoal was noted from both flots, and only

low to moderate numbers of charcoal fragments greater than 5.6 mm were retrieved (Table 2). The charcoal was mainly large wood fragments.

Charred plant remains are scarce, and as these are from just two features for which there is little related evidence of settlement activity within the excavated area, the potential for these two samples to significantly contribute to our understanding of either the site, or to knowledge of the farming economy in Hampshire (cf. Allen 1996), is low. Further analysis has not therefore been undertaken, but the flots have been retained in the archive.

No samples were taken specifically for land snails as no suitable contexts were excavated. Snail shells, however, were noticed in the flots of the two processed samples. They were predominantly of *Pomatias elegans*, a species that prefers loose soil, and typical open county species (*Helicella itala* and the *Vallonia* species). This assemblage is typical of open environments such as areas cleared for occupation. Few woodland species were noted, indicating that clearance had been either long established, and/or was relatively extensive locally.

The colluvium comprised unsorted, calcareous, silty clay loam hillwash typical of chalkland slopes in southern England. The stratigraphic position of the colluvium indicates that it post-dates the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age features but pre-dates the modern hedge boundaries. Hillwash is a consequence of human action, usually tillage or forest/woodland clearance (Allen 1992), and here it is likely to relate to agricultural activity, possibly in the medieval period prior to the enclosure of small fields.

DISCUSSION

The excavation at Chineham Lane revealed a small number of archaeological features comprising five pits and eight postholes of probable Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date. Modern features were also present.

The nature and significance of the later prehistoric features and finds recovered from the site are difficult to evaluate due to their piecemeal character. With the exception of the four postholes in the central southern area of the site which may form part of a structure, the remaining postholes from this phase of site activity do not form any interpretable patterns. All of the postholes are relatively shallow with depths of between 0.04 m and 0.2 m, suggesting that these may represent isolated survivals of a more extensive distribution of postholes across the site which have been destroyed by later agricultural activities.

The range of artefactual materials recovered from the pits includes pottery, fired clay, burnt flint and worked flint. This might indicate the disposal of rubbish associated with activities carried out at a domestic settlement of some sort. Much of the worked flint recovered from these features, however, appears to be residual in character and deposited with the other material during the backfilling of the pits rather than representing later prehistoric flint working at the site. The exact character of the domestic activity responsible for the formation of the pit artefact assemblages and the type of domestic site represented by the features cannot be accurately ascertained due to the small area of the excavation and the probable extensive disturbance of the site by later agricultural activities.

Evidence for later prehistoric activity within the vicinity of the site includes the domestic site at Cowdery's Down (Millett & James 1983), the settlement at Brighton Hill South (Fasham & Keevill 1995) and findspots of pottery and metal-working debris found close to the Middle Bronze Age cremation cemetery at Daneshill (Millett & Schadla-Hall 1991). Two flint and two pottery scatters of Bronze and Iron Age date with associated field systems are also known for the arable land immediately to the west of the present site (Boismier 1994). These sites indicate extensive later prehistoric settlement and landuse activities within the immediate vicinity of the site.

Although the number of features and finds recovered from the site is relative uninformative regarding the character of prehistoric activity, the occurrence of pits containing domestic rubbish and postholes indicate that they represent the surviving evidence of a domestic site which functioned as part of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age settlement and landuse strategies for the area.

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