

INTERIM REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS IN ADVANCE OF
THE DUALLING OF THE A253 BETWEEN MONKTON
AND MOUNT PLEASANT, THANET

CANTERBURY ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST
and the
TRUST FOR THANET ARCHAEOLOGY

In June 1994, work began on a large-scale archaeological investigation in advance of the construction of a new dual carriageway along the line of the present A253 between the Monkton and Mount Pleasant roundabouts on the Isle of Thanet. The road scheme is one of a number of improvements to the Thanet Way and conjoining routes by Kent County Council Highways and the Department of Transport in recent years. The project, designed and monitored by the Heritage Section of Kent County Council and completed early in 1995, produced a wealth of archaeological discoveries. These comprised a number of dispersed Neolithic and Beaker inhumation burials, parts of three prehistoric barrow cemeteries, a unique Roman settlement or village, a small Anglo-Saxon cemetery, a twelfth-century farmstead and numerous isolated features of various dates. Included in the latter was a sequence of ancient hollow ways or trackways which extended over most of the route and a number of Second World War trenches sited at the western end of the easement.

At an early stage of the fieldwork the route was subdivided into ten areas numbered from east to west. The earliest features appeared to be connected with a Neolithic to Late Bronze Age ritual landscape associated with burial of the dead. Primary features comprised at least seven widely dispersed Neolithic and Beaker period graves, all unmarked by funerary mounds. Two high status burials, set closely together, were located in Area 9 at the centre of a later complex of burial mounds. Finds from these graves included a fine Beaker, a necklace of 217 minute jet beads and a copper alloy bracelet. Some 500 m. east of these was a third grave, probably of Neolithic date, containing a crouched inhumation, a pottery vessel and a flint knife. Further east and underlying a later Romano-British settlement in Area 4 was a group of three graves, one containing two human skeletons. All of these graves contained a Beaker;

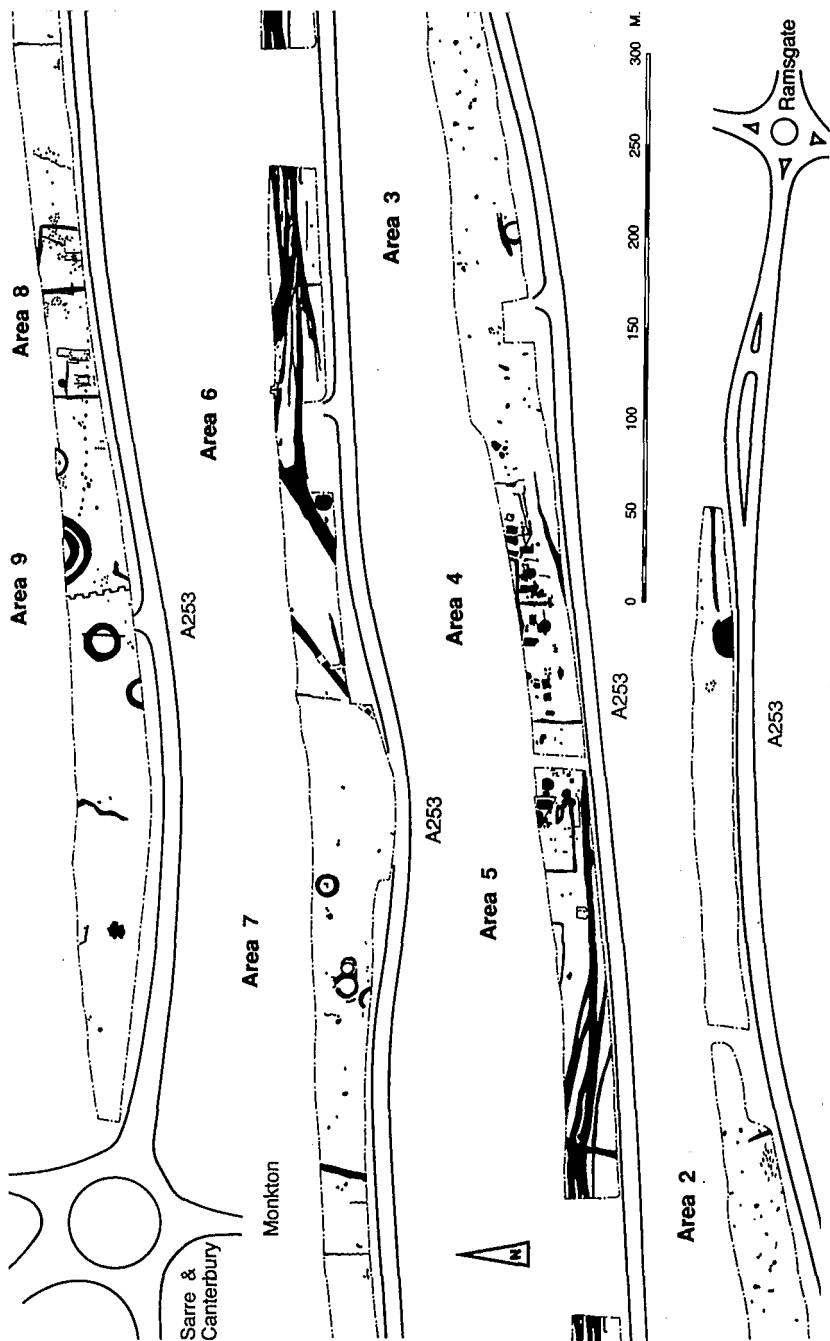


Fig. 1. Overall plan of the excavations.

the double inhumation also yielded a copper alloy bracelet. A short way east of this group was a final grave containing a well-preserved skeleton and unusually the stains of a rotted wooden coffin.

No burial mounds were located during the excavation. These had all been removed by a long history of ploughing. Some ten individual ring ditches, originally surrounding burial mounds, were, however, located in three separate groups perhaps representing individual cemeteries at different locations along the route. The earliest of the ring ditches, comprising a ring of interconnecting pits possibly formed in the Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age, was located in Area 9. Perhaps associated with this early mound was an east-west alignment of 18 equidistant post-pits. The post-pits, perhaps marking a sacred row, were interrupted close to the barrow by two Beaker inhumation burials. At this point the alignment of the row was found to change and a relationship between the mound, Beaker burials and post-pit alignment is suspected.

These early features almost certainly encouraged the gradual development of a cemetery. The early barrow was provided with an outer ring-ditch creating one of the largest Bronze Age barrows known in Kent and at least four additional burial mounds were constructed nearby.

Most of the mounds exposed in Areas 9, 7 and 3 were of Mid to Late Bronze Age date. Only three ring-ditches produced internal cremations or burials; all were severely plough-damaged. Four satellite cremations contained in pots of Deverel-Rimbury type, were found immediately outside the ring ditches of the barrow group in Area 7.

An isolated ring-ditch in Area 3 marked the easternmost cemetery (at least two further ring-ditches are indicated by crop-marks nearby). Total excavation of the ring-ditch (within the easement) produced a jet bead, a copper alloy bead and an almost complete, but fragmented, pottery vessel found lying in the base of the ditch. The vessel, broken soon after the burial mound had been constructed in the Mid to Late Bronze Age, was of Trevisker cordoned ware, a pottery type from the Lizard peninsula in Cornwall and until now only found in south-west England. The discovery has presented us with a new set of questions relating to trade and mechanisms of transport in the prehistoric period and is particularly relevant given the recent discovery in Dover of a Bronze Age boat.

One of the most surprising discoveries made during this project was evidence for hollow ways extending along the eastern half of the easement. The hollow ways for a minor road were formed by the constant passage of men, animals and carts during the Roman period. Although numerous hollows existed, these primarily formed one east-west route now partially beneath the existing line of the A253. A T-junction was located at the eastern end of Area 6. Here the east-west road met a much deeper and broader hollow for a north-east to south-west aligned route. An earlier version of the T-junction was observed to the west of the intersection.

Associated with the east-west route in Areas 4 and 5 was a Romano-British settlement of the late first to late second century A.D. The settlement, of which about 1 hectare (10,000 sq. m.) was examined, overlooked the former Wantsum Channel, c. 1.5 km. to the south. The bulk of the settlement extended for about 320 m. along the northern edge of the contemporary hollow way, thus defining in all probability its east, west and southern limits. The northern boundary was outside the excavated area and remains to be determined, although recent air photographs have suggested that only about a quarter to a third of the settlement, at most, was exposed.

In addition to the usual suite of features commonly encountered on chalk downland sites (such as enclosure ditches, storage and rubbish pits and post-hole structures), perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this site was that twenty-two sunken-floored or cellared structures, representing an unusual building type for this period, were present.

Other building types were also in evidence. Two deeply-cut sub-rectangular structures located in Area 4, were probably storage cellars. Two other curious and virtually identical tank-like structures, each set within a surrounding circular hollow, may have been industrial features. At the western end of Area 4, a group of six large post-pits described a possible granary. On the western fringes of the settlement in Area 5 a more usual type of Romano-British building was located. This 6 m. square cill-beam structure has been interpreted as a roadside shrine. A ritual pit, excavated within the building, yielded a votive offering of a Rhenish, beaker 'hunt cup' decorated with a relief of hunting dogs and a stag.

Most of the structures forming this settlement are very unusual in a first- to second-century Romano-British context. At present it is not possible to cite any close parallels in Britain. A Continental origin for the building type has been suggested, based largely on their superficial resemblance to sunken-featured buildings of the Anglo-Saxon period, but none of the finds appear to suggest a Continental connection. It is possible, therefore, that the buildings represent a previously unrecorded local development.

The road extended from the settlement to Area 6 where a T-junction with a north-east to south-west aligned hollow-way was encountered. Between the settlement and the junction a prolific number of hollows had been formed, these representing short and long term tracks following the same route, but effectively joining with the north-east to south-west aligned road to the north of the main junction. Located against the main junction and to the north-east of it was a second possible shrine of cill-beam construction. This building may have been associated with a number of inhumation burials located nearby.

A resumption of occupation following the abandonment of the settle-

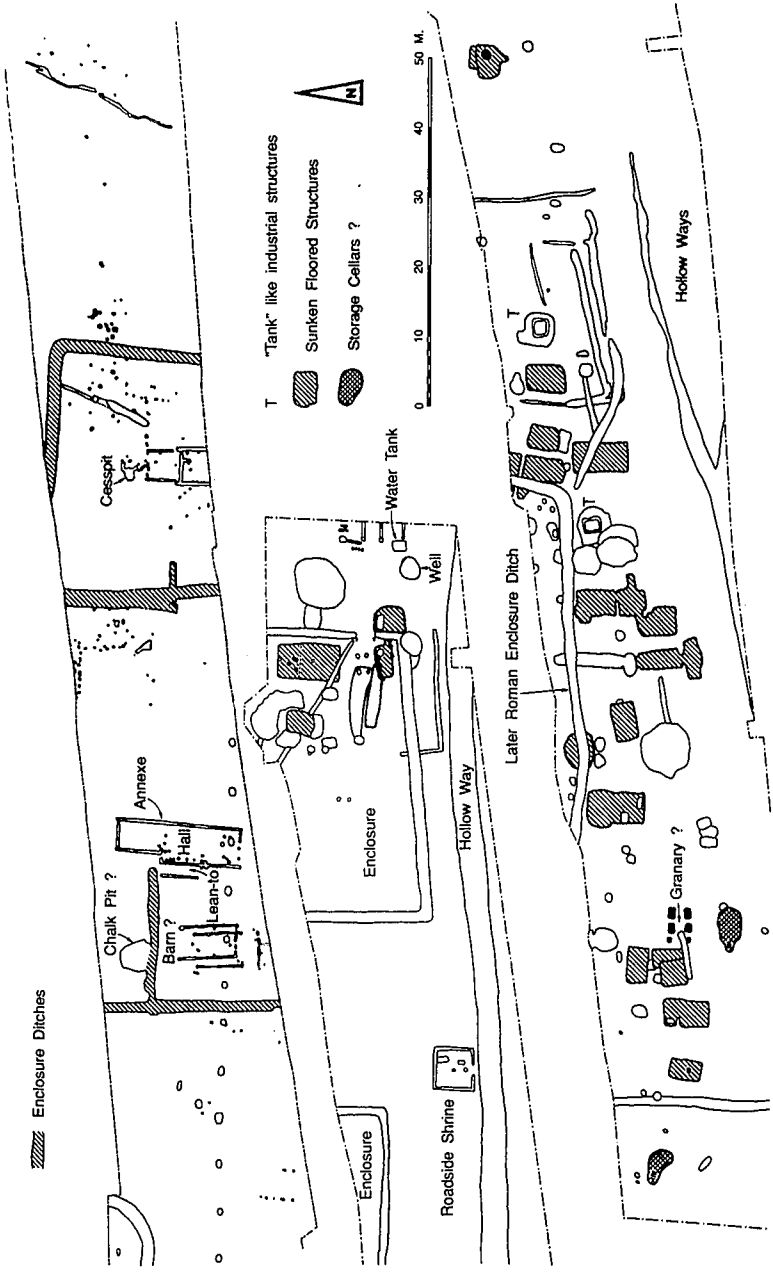


Fig. 2. Plan of Area 8 (top) and 4 and 5 (below).

ment appears to have occurred in the fourth century this being represented by the cutting of a number of ditches associated with late-Roman field systems and enclosures, most of which lay north of the excavated area.

Area 2 provided the next chronological link with the discovery of a small Anglo-Saxon cemetery comprising some 18 graves. A possibly contemporary north-west to south-east aligned hollow-way flanked the east side of the cemetery with all but one grave being grouped to the west of the track. The hollow-way itself appeared to be aligned to approach Minster Abbey at the foot of the ridge approximately 1 km. away. The burials were almost certainly those of local people, perhaps members of an extended farming family or community working the land nearby. Few interments were accompanied by grave goods; two graves contained spearheads, three had knives, one a pot probably made in northern France in *c.* A.D. 650–675 and one burial was provided with a zoomorphic buckle of *c.* A.D. 670–700. Overall, burials appear to have commenced in the second half of the seventh century, perhaps shortly before Minster Abbey was founded in *c.* A.D. 670 and may represent one of the last downland ridge sites in Thanet to have been used for traditional burial practices following gradual conversion to Christianity.

A rare twelfth-century farmstead fell within the excavation in Area 8. Most of the settlement lay within a pair of adjoining enclosures with each enclosure containing buildings defined by post-holes or posts-in-slots. Three separate north–south aligned rectangular buildings were identified in the western enclosure and at least one in the eastern.

The westernmost building, possibly a byre or barn, appeared to have been of two phase build, with both phases using a post-in-slot technique of construction. Insufficient evidence was obtained to determine which was the earliest. A short way east was a separate building, possibly a domestic residence. The surviving remains indicated a principal hall with a narrower annexe at its northern end and a lean-to structure set against the north-west end of the hall. Large opposed post-holes against the walls about half way down the hall's length may have held principal posts. Major post-settings were also found in the slots at the angles and beside both of the principal posts. Chalk packing in the post-slots indicated that the bulk of the walls consisted of split-logs set upright with their flat sides facing inwards. A fourth building with northern annexe was uncovered in the eastern enclosure.

Stripping of the western end of the new road revealed some of the most recent features; three lengths of military ditch cut during World War II for the protection of the nearby Manston air base.

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