

EXCAVATIONS IN ROSE WOOD, IGHTHAM, 1933.

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ROSE Wood, Ightham, is a small artificially planted chestnut coppice marked on the Kent Six-inch Ordnance Survey maps, Sheet XL N.E., quite close to the hamlet of Ivy Hatch. The underlying geological formation is Folkestone Sand, which typically supports a natural vegetation of heath land with plenty of cover in the form of thickets of broom and gorse. Such a natural vegetation is to be found on what remains of Ightham Common, and may also be seen renewing itself in the derelict cob-nut plantations which are close to Rose Wood.

When Benjamin Harrison, Kent's famous pre-historian, was a young man, he often used to visit the wood in search of wild ferns. In those days it was extremely boggy, and Harrison describes how he used to jump from stump to stump in order to avoid the pools.¹ In the year 1854 he noticed that the wood contained a considerable number of basin-shaped pits, whose purpose and origin were unknown. In 1857, "Old Bob Jessup," a workman,² gave Harrison a flint axe which had been picked out of an excavation close to the wood. This find encouraged further investigation and led Harrison to discover a very large number of flint flakes and many implements in the neighbourhood, and to suppose that Rose Wood was the site of a neolithic settlement, the group of basin-shaped pits which he had noticed three years before being, he thought, a village of pit-dwellings.³

Rose Wood was partially cleared of trees in 1869, and Harrison then found great numbers of flint implements

¹ Sir Edward Harrison, *Harrison of Ightham* (Oxford, 1928) which we have consulted extensively, as will be evident.

² A curious man who was very fond of beer, and died in the night, 12th July, 1869.

³ See also George Payne, *Collectanea Cantiana* (1893), 177.

which he showed to Sir John Lubbock who wrote of them : " They indicate a place of abode, and wherever flakes are common, it is worth while searching for more interesting remains."

Harrison's suggestion that the pits in Rose Wood were the site of a Stone Age village was further strengthened by the support of Canon Scott-Robertson, the Secretary of the Kent Archæological Society.¹ The site was visited in 1871 by Sir John Lubbock who " stated that he saw no reason to doubt that the pits were pit-dwellings. They were the same shape as those found in Wiltshire by Sir R. Colt Hoare."² The opinion of so well-known an antiquary no doubt carried considerable weight with Harrison, and thereafter Rose Wood was known as the site of a village of pit-dwellings. An account of them is given by Mr. F. J. Bennett who unhesitatingly identified them as Neolithic and Bronze Age in date.³ No archæologist seems to have voiced his doubts concerning this identification, and within recent years the pits were scheduled by the Office of Works as an Ancient Monument.

Other finds from Rose Wood, now in the British Museum, include three small conical cores of flint, three leaf-shaped arrow-heads, a finely worked scraper on a blade of lustrous black flint, one or two blades with delicate retouching, and a clumsy flint axe. In Maidstone Museum is an axe of polished and partly ground flint, and a small poorly made pottery cup which were found together near Rose Wood. The pottery cup has a flat base, and the sides are ornamented with a row of irregularly pinched nodules in a fashion that was in use during the late Bronze Age.⁴ We are unable to throw any light on the " rude pottery " which Mr. F. J. Bennett says was found in the pits.⁵

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, IX, liv.

² Sir Edward Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

³ F. J. Bennett, *Ightham, the Story of a Kentish Village* (London, 1907), p. 43.

⁴ R. F. Jessup, *Archæology of Kent* (1930), p. 49 and Fig. 14.

⁵ F. J. Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

An examination of the site early in 1933 raised grave doubts in the writers' minds. The pits looked to be of far more recent origin than that generally accepted. They seemed too deep to be pit-dwellings of recognized types, and their edges looked sharper than one would have expected in dwelling-pits undisturbed since antiquity. It was known, however, that Benjamin Harrison and George Payne had excavated at least two of them in 1888, and it seemed possible that the pits owed their fresh appearance to such labours. Among the deeper pits, however, were several shallow depressions which seemed most nearly to resemble the remains of untouched pit-dwellings and it was decided to excavate them in order to discover whether they contained any evidence of their origin. Permission was obtained from Mr. Fox, the agent for the Fairlawne Estate, and with the sanction of H.M. Office of Works, excavations were begun on April 10th.

The first site selected was a circular depression, six feet in diameter, and about two feet deep at the centre. A trench¹ was dug right across it and continued for six feet on either side, so that the original lip of the pit should not be missed. As this trench reached nearly to the edges of neighbouring pits, it covered all the surrounding area which might have contained post holes or a ditch. Within a few minutes of the commencement of excavation, clean sand was reached. The humus was only slightly over one foot in depth, and the clean sand was proved by further excavation to be undisturbed. There was no charcoal or the slightest trace of anything suggesting a hut floor. The transition from pure leaf-mould to clean sand was almost abrupt. Two flint flakes were found, each on the surface of the sand, outside the lip of the pit.

Two similar pits were then explored with the same result. In each pit, clean sand appeared at a depth of eighteen inches. From those portions of the trenches beyond the edges of the pits, several flint flakes and fragments of worn Romano-British pottery were found resting on the top of the sand.

¹ We have not published our drawings of the sections. They may be seen at Maidstone Museum.

As these small shallow pits had failed to yield any evidence of habitation, trenches were next dug across several of the larger pits. Once again clean, undisturbed sand was quickly uncovered and the finds were limited to a few flint flakes and abraded Roman sherds.

One of the larger pits had a small saucer-shaped depression by its side, and surrounding the larger pit were traces of a bank. From the surface indications it was possible to suggest that here was a hut with a cooking pit attached. This possibility was tested by excavation, but once more the theory was shattered by the spade. It was felt that the interrupted bank surrounding the larger pit might afford some useful evidence, and trenches were accordingly dug through it. In one of these, a flint hammer stone was found, resting on the old land surface. This was the only piece of dating evidence discovered, and it could only go to prove that the bank was thrown up, presumably during the excavation of the pit, after the stone had been dropped there. It may be that the pit was dug on the day after the stone appeared there; perhaps a thousand years or more afterwards. As there was no suggestion that the pits were earlier than the Neolithic period, the evidence afforded by the hammer stone, which is likely to be of that date, told us no more than we already knew.

Nine pits were examined altogether, and not one of them showed the remotest evidence of its having been used as a pit dwelling. The only evidence that was forthcoming from our excavations was negative evidence, but it formed a strong argument against the antiquity of the pits.

When the excavations were nearly complete the site was visited by Mr. T. D. Kendrick of the British Museum, Mr. O. G. S. Crawford, Archæology Officer to the Ordnance Survey and Mr. Bryan H. St. J. O'Niel of the Office of Works, each of whom agreed with us that whatever the origin of these pits might be, they were not of great antiquity.

It then became necessary to try to account for the pits. Mr. Crawford pointed out that, with one exception, it was not possible to find any of the soil thrown out from the holes,

and this fact suggested that it had been carried away, the pits being dug merely to exploit the sand. Enquiries were made, and it appeared that there was some vague tradition of sand having been dug in this wood, about a hundred years ago. It must be pointed out, however, that much cleaner and sharper sand has been dug in the immediate neighbourhood for very many years. The natives, at any rate, would be unlikely to dig here. This wood, however, was once part of Ightham Common, and to the dwellers on the Chalk plateau, almost any sand would be of value. If the pits were dug for sand, then it is to such people that we must ascribe them, and not to the inhabitants of Ightham.

An alternative theory is that the pits may have been trial-holes, dug for the iron sandstone which is to be found in the Folkestone sands. The iron stone is, however, of very sporadic occurrence, especially at such a low level in the Folkestone beds, and it is difficult to believe that it could have been worked with profit, either for smelting or for use as quern stones.

Of these two possibilities, the sand pit theory seems the more probable. At all events, the evidence points to the idea that the pits were dug to exploit the minerals found in the subsoil.

It remains for us to account for the large number of flint flakes and implements found in Rose Wood, and its environment. The open heathland which is the natural vegetation of this region was ideal country for primitive peoples who were without the means of clearing large forested areas, and the abundance of their relics all along the Greensand belt, and particularly in the neighbourhood of Ightham, shows adequately the extent of their hunting grounds. Our pits were dug in this region, and it is not surprising that flint flakes from the surface found their way to the very edges and even to the bottom of the pits. It is easy to see how, once the pit-dwelling idea had gained general acceptance, the flints were regarded as evidence of the date of the pits.

We are indebted to many of our friends for assistance in the work of excavation, and above all to Sir Edward Harrison,

whose great fund of local knowledge and enviable skill with a pick-axe were placed at our disposal unstintingly. We must also thank Miss Dorothy Waters and Miss Barbara Laidler, Mr. J. M. Brander, Mr. Arthur Franks (who kindly lent us many tools), Mr. G. W. R. Monckton, and Mr. D. C. Whimster, all of whom, though the excavations were not productive of startling finds, laboured steadily that we might recover some evidence of the origin of the site.