

number of the bone counters have also clearly been through the funeral pyre, as at Old Kent Road, Elms Farm, Heybridge and Holgate Bridge, York, for example. Glass counters so treated would be virtually impossible to identify.

Associated paraphernalia includes wooden gaming boards with or without metal attachments (eg Welwyn, Stanway (2), Alton, Mansell Street and Lullingstone); bone or ivory dice (Alton (1), Mansell Street (4), Grave 250 Chichester (2) and Lankhills (1)); glass rods and/or bone plaques (eg Welwyn, Mansell Street and Lullingstone); even in one instance (Litton Cheney) a stylus, perhaps for keeping score.

Excavations and observations on Priest Hill Farm, 1945–52

BACKGROUND AND LOCATION OF FEATURES

In addition to the work carried out within the confines of the garden of The Looe, described above, stray finds and a number of features were recorded by Tom Walls in the fields of Priest Hill Farm (fig 1) between c 1945 and 1952. Records comprise written entries and sketches in the site notebook and a note prepared for the *Surrey Archaeological Collections* but never published (Walls 1949). The National Grid references quoted below are those contained within the County SMR.

In addition to groups of struck flint and Romano-British pottery centred at TQ 228 612 (SMR 1152/2555) recovered between 1945 and 1949, nine features were located, some apparently from the air (John McManus, pers comm) but others seemingly as parchmarks prior to and during May 1949 (several additional large shafts were noted during subsequent levelling operations). Of these, four were tested by excavation. While a number of the local landmarks used to plot the positions of these features have gone, it seems clear that a majority lay north-east of The Looe, in areas now under rough grassland.

At least six of the nine features appear to have been large shafts, although only two can be pinpointed with reasonable accuracy. These were partly excavated in June 1948 at TQ 2291 6120 (SMR 1102) and June 1949 at TQ 2289 6101 (SMR 2565), the latter during the construction of a reservoir at the rear of The Looe. The other features comprised a small 'working hollow' containing a few sherds of MPRIA pottery (see below) which was located and excavated in 1948 at TQ 2306 6122 (SMR 2566), an undated posthole, and an unexcavated length of ditch (the exact whereabouts of the latter two features remain unclear).

DESCRIPTION OF SURVIVING FEATURES

The most complete record relating to this work comprises an unpublished note (Walls 1949) on the large shaft sectioned by Tom Walls and Messrs John McManus (father and son) in June 1948 (fig 13; SMR 1102). The shaft appears to have been over 30 feet (9.14m) in diameter at its mouth, narrowing to an estimated 10 feet (3.05m) further down, and was cleared to a depth of 15 feet 8 inches (4.78m) but not bottomed. Several possible postholes were located around its lip. Finds from the shaft fill included a dog's jawbone and a chalk spindlewhorl from 13 feet (3.96m) (see below); a small rimsherd of 'brown-black gritty ware' with finger-tip decoration from 8 feet (2.44m); numerous snail shells from 3–4 feet (0.9–1.2m) and abraded Roman pottery from the topsoil. Ross (1968, 264) noted the depth as 23 feet 6 inches (7.16m), though there may be some confusion here with another shaft located on the reservoir site (SMR 2565) which seems to have been over 20 feet (6.1m) deep. This was excavated, apparently under Tom Walls' direction, by men employed to construct the reservoir. Entries in the site notebook relating to this latter feature record 'very occasional snail shells throughout. Animal bones in earthy layer at 12ft 6in (3.81m). Very few calcined flints and no potsherds down to 16ft 6in (5.03m) [;] a very occasional struck flake'.

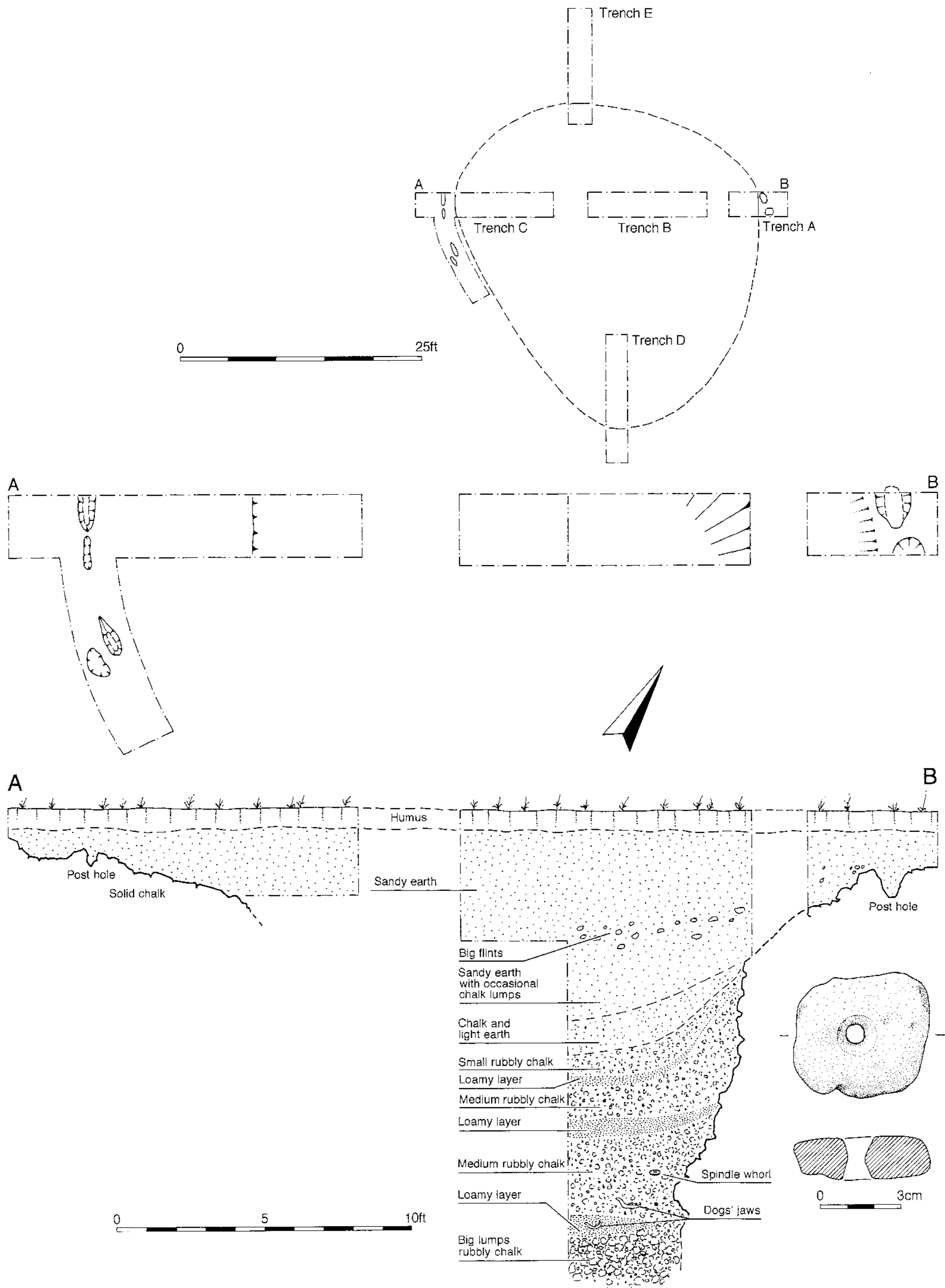


Fig 13 Priest Hill Farm: plan and section of the large partially excavated shaft. Inset: chalk spindlewhorl

The finds from Priest Hill Farm

Surviving finds include a collection of struck flint from Priest Hill Farm; a small group of sherds from the 'working hollow' (SMR 2566) identified recently amongst Lowther material held by Bourne Hall Museum, and the chalk spindlewhorl and dog jaw from the large shaft sectioned in June 1948 (SMR 1102).

STRUCK FLINT

In all, 88 pieces of struck flint from Priest Hill Farm were retained by Tom Walls. Table 11 (M7), however, makes it clear that these are the end result of considerable selectivity, for little knapping waste or debitage is present. Each piece is either an implement in its own right (scrapers, as might be expected, predominate), or a core or core fragment, or else has some other significant or distinguishing feature.

There is no indication as to where on Priest Hill the majority of the pieces were found. However, two — both scrapers — are marked 'Near The Looe', while a group of seven — four scrapers, two awls and a miscellaneous retouched piece — are marked 'NGR TQ 225 615'. The County SMR records scrapers as having been found in five separate locations, presumably on the authority of Tom Walls, the majority lying on the spur to the north-east of The Looe and centred on TQ 228 612. There is no means of knowing which, if any, of the surviving pieces in the collection is involved.

Most of the obvious local sources of raw flint seem to have been exploited: weathered and bleached surface nodules from the Upper Chalk; cobbles from the gravels along the Hogsmill; and small nodules of Bullhead Bed flint from the Reading Beds/Thanet Sands. The condition of the collection is equally diverse, and ranges from pieces with thick white patination and iron staining, through pieces with faint milky patina, to others bearing little or no discernible changes at all.

Typically, the collection comprises a mixture of Mesolithic and Neolithic/Bronze Age artefacts. Potentially Mesolithic types include the single platform pyramidal cores (fig 14, nos 1–2) and core rejuvenator (fig 14, no 3), and probably most of the blades/bladelets. Carpenter (1958, 156) noted the presence of similar material from an outcrop of Thanet Sand at TQ 230 618, 'amongst cruder work of a probable Late Bronze Age date' (SMR 1103/2567).

Neolithic/Bronze Age types no doubt include a number of the scrapers (fig 14, nos 4–9), the knife (fig 14, no 11), awls (fig 14, nos 13–14) and notched pieces (fig 14, nos 15–16). Scarcely an excavation in the locality has failed to produce a similar array of material (eg Lowther 1946–7, 15–17).

POTTERY AND FIRED CLAY FROM THE SMALL 'WORKING HOLLOW' (SMR 2566)

In all, ten sherds of pottery were recovered from the small 'working hollow' (SMR 2566). Nine sherds, weighing 193g, were in a sandy crushed burnt flint-loaded fabric; the tenth, weighing 2.4g, was in a shell-loaded fabric.

Most of the sandy, flint-loaded sherds, five of which conjoin, belong to a weakly-shouldered jar (fig 15, no 1). A single rimsherd belongs to a second, round-shouldered jar with internal burnishing (fig 15, no 2).

Both form and fabric suggest that the two vessels can be placed firmly within the earlier part of the MPRIA (say 4th–3rd century BC) at a point where quartz sand was replacing crushed burnt flint as the main tempering agent. Similar vessels have been recovered from a range of local sites including Nonsuch Park and Hawk's Hill, Leatherhead.

In addition to the pottery, the hollow contained two small fragments of fired clay, weighing 30g, the larger of which appears to form part of a triangular loomweight.

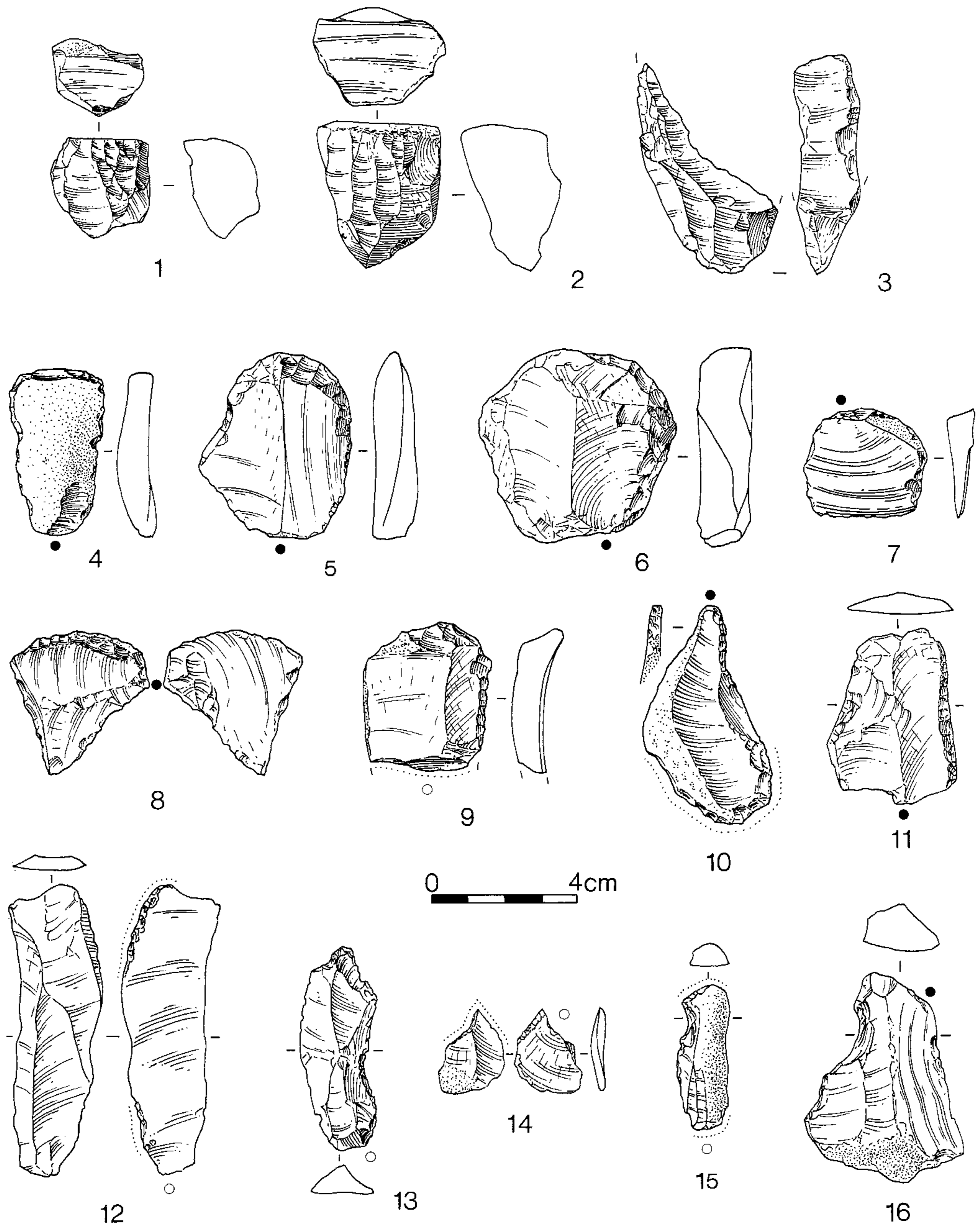


Fig 14 Priest Hill Farm: struck flint

CHALK SPINDLEWHORL FROM SHAFT (SMR 1102) (fig 13, inset)

Chalk spindlewhorl measuring 56 x 49mm and 17mm thick, weight 40g, found by John McManus junior. It has an unworn hour-glass perforation placed off-centre; traces of tool-marks survive within the perforation (indicative of a rotary motion) and around the edges. A similar object was recovered from pit 1 within The Looe (see above and fig 10, no 1).

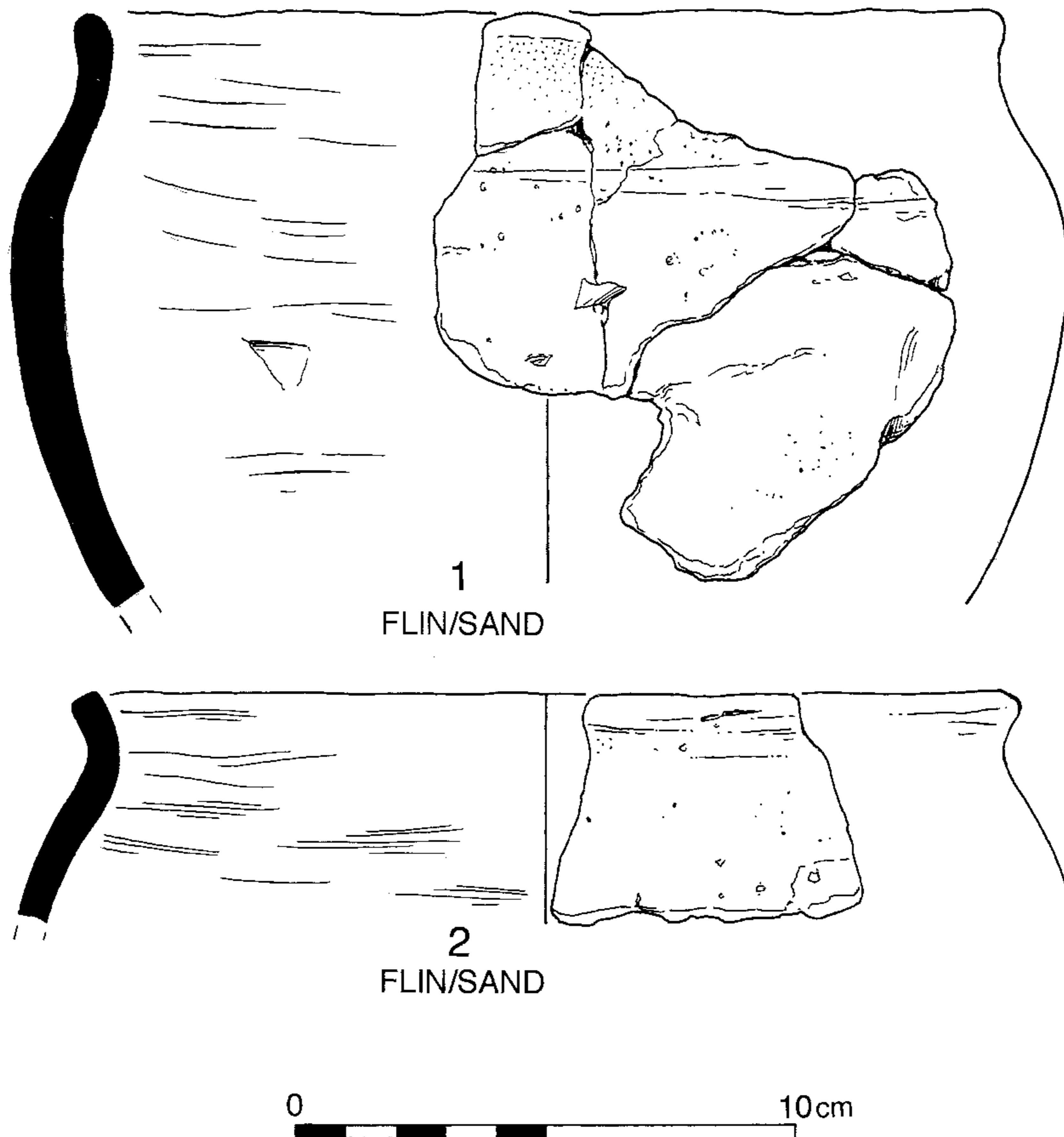


Fig 15 Priest Hill Farm: middle pre-Roman Iron Age pottery from the 'working hollow'

ANIMAL BONE FROM SHAFT (SMR 1102), by Pat Nicolaysen

Two dog mandibles (right and left) were recovered from the shaft and are still with the site archive. They are from the same animal, an adult individual, with pre-molar and molar teeth *in situ*.

Concluding discussion

The sum of the evidence presented here indicates that the chalk spur on which The Looe stands has acted as a focus for intermittent activity since at least the 6th or 5th millennium BC, if not earlier. This activity intensified from the end of the first quarter of the 1st millennium BC and culminated in the establishment of a small farming settlement just above the 85m contour in the decades either side of the Roman conquest. Activity probably continued throughout the Roman period into the 4th century, though this is attested mainly by unstratified pottery, small finds and coins. However, the presence of ceramic building material, 'pink plaster', and an iron slide key suggests that a reasonably substantial structure may have existed somewhere close by. Despite the presence of Saxon activity elsewhere within the Ewell area, none was located at The Looe.

EARLY ACTIVITY ON THE CHALK SPUR

Earlier prehistoric activity is confined to a highly selective lithic collection of probably Mesolithic and Neolithic/Bronze Age date recovered from various points across Priest Hill Farm. Surviving tool types are dominated by scrapers. Episodic later prehistoric activity is attested by the shallow EPRIA 'working hollow', context 26, excavated within The Looe property, and by the MPRIA hollow located in the fields to the north-east (SMR 2566), both of which produced small groups of diagnostic ceramics and scraps of triangular clay loomweights. Further unstratified sherds of MPRIA type were also recovered from The Looe. Doubtless other, more extensive, settlement traces of this date remain to be found on the spur.

LATE PRE-ROMAN IRON AGE/ROMAN IRON AGE ACTIVITY

The bulk of the reliably stratified evidence relates to the period either side of the Roman conquest, with the digging and subsequent backfilling of three substantial storage pits of classic form and profile. All three lie towards the highest point of the chalk spur; further contemporary activity might be expected to extend away under the present Reigate Road to the south and south-west. Modern experiments (eg Bowen & Wood 1967; Reynolds 1974) have supported Bersu's (1940) original contention that the beehive-shaped pits (nos 1 and 3) in particular were probably used for the bulk storage of grain. Given their size, it is clear that considerable storage capacity was available to the local community. However, even assuming that all three pits were in simultaneous use, the limited sample makes any attempt to calculate arable acreage or population worthless. What may be legitimately supposed, however, is that the area surrounding the site would have been suitable then (as now) for cereal cultivation, and for the grazing of sheep and perhaps cattle, though the latter would have required regular access to water. Bird (1996, 224) notes the likely importance of sheep rearing in the Roman period in Ewell. Of the field systems which might be expected to surround the site there is now no sign, although the landscaping of much of the Priest Hill Farm area downslope to the north is likely to have destroyed any evidence that survived medieval and later ploughing.

There is certainly corroborative, if limited, evidence for both pastoral and arable activities contained in the backfilled storage pits, in the form of quern stones, animal bones and weaving equipment (if the chalk spindlewhorl, fired clay triangular loomweights and the bone implement can be so interpreted). Though compromised by the disposal of much of the animal bone, the evidence points to the presence of sheep/goat, cattle, pig, horse and dog. Several of the surviving sheep/goat, cattle and pig bones show signs of butchery in the form of cut and chop marks; others have been gnawed by carnivores. It could be argued that an articulated lower foreleg of a young horse from pit 1 layer 5 represents residue from the tanning process (Serjeantson 1989), whatever the underlying motives behind its eventual disposal in the pit. If the single fragment of briquetage from pit 2 is correctly identified and interpreted, some of the meat could have been salted. The possible significance of the dog bones is discussed further below.

The fill patterns of all three of The Looe pits conform to Cunliffe's (1995, 82) 'slow cycle'. They were punctuated by a range of 'non-utilitarian' acts and observances widely seen elsewhere and likely to have been structured 'according to symbolic schemes, rationalities and common senses very different from our own' (Hill 1995, 126). These comprised *in-situ* burning and the deposition of complete and semi-complete pots, human remains, worked chalk objects, quern stones and articulated and disarticulated animal carcasses, including the horse foreleg, although those belonging to cattle and dogs were seemingly the best represented. Intriguingly, the remains of one of the dogs (from pit 2) showed evidence of butchery or skinning, a feature noted on a number of M/LPRIA sites.

A broadly similar range of 'placed deposits' has been reported from pits on several other M/LPRIA North Downs sites, as at Hawk's Hill, Leatherhead (Hastings 1965, 10–11),

Lower Warbank, Keston (Philp *et al* 1991, 20, 23), and Farningham Hill (Philp 1984). Remains of three very young puppies were found in pit 10 at Hawk's Hill (Hastings 1965, 41), for example, while pit 14 at Farningham Hill also produced the scattered remains of three dogs (Philp 1984, 18). The recovery of a dog's jawbone from deep within the fill of one of the large shafts located in the fields of Priest Hill Farm (SMR 1102) is perhaps relevant in this context too, although the date and function of these latter features remain somewhat enigmatic, despite the suggestion that several similar Roman examples in west Kent were chalk quarries (eg Philp 1973, 108–9). Dogs also formed an important component of the finds recovered from a group of Roman chalk-cut shafts located to the north of the villa complex at Keston (Philp *et al* 1999, 19–35) and, closer to home, in the Seymour's Nursery/Hatch Furlong area on the southern outskirts of Ewell (Diamond 1847; Abdy & Bierton 1997, gazetteer nos 15, 25; Pat Nicolaysen, pers comm). Further multiple finds of dogs have been recovered from Roman pits and wells at Southwark and Staines (Bird 1987, 189) and the animals were clearly widely regarded as appropriate ritual offerings to local deities during the Iron Age and Roman periods (eg Wait 1985, 150; Merrifield 1987, 46–7).

Having interpreted certain of the contents of the pits in this way, the positioning of the human cremation burial and the complete dog skeleton from the mouth of pit 2 at The Looe is easier to understand — they were deliberately placed to exploit the 'special' nature of an already ritually-charged location. The subsequent deposition of a second vessel containing burnt sheep/goat bones over the secondary pit, context 35, is also worthy of note, and hints at the enactment of a 'rite of termination' to mark the formal closure of the pit (Merrifield 1987, 49).

However one interprets the motivations which lay behind the deposition of the pottery found in the The Looe pits, study of the ceramic material itself reveals that, either side of the Roman conquest, the local community had a diverse range of available contacts: with East Sussex across the Weald, with the Surrey/Hampshire border area away to the southwest, and with north and west Kent, along the North Downs. Whether it was the vessels themselves or their contents that were the primary concerns remain, of course, unknown (and in the case of dry goods, probably unknowable). Shell, grog and sand-loaded wares were also presumably being made locally and, if the functions ascribed to the fired clay ring from the upper levels of pit 2 and the (unstratified) 'burnisher' are correct, perhaps very locally. The triangular loomweights and the fired clay figurine were probably made on site too, while the 'lumps of clay' noted in the lower fill of pit 1 could also be relevant here. Certainly the Woolwich Beds to the north and west of The Looe and the Clay-with-Flints deposits to the south would have provided adequate clay sources, and, in the former case, a source of fossil shell too. The East Sussex-type 'eyebrow' decorated vessels from pit 1 are of particular interest. Though still scarce outside their supposed home range (Green 1980a), similar vessels have turned up elsewhere in Surrey as at Hawk's Hill (Hastings 1965) and Brooklands Site II (Phil Jones, pers comm) for example. They have also been noted in urban contexts in north Southwark and from a site close to the forum in Londinium itself (Davies *et al* 1994, 117 and fig 101, no 672), though the latter vessels were recovered from Trajanic contexts and could have arrived by sea or along the recently-established road network.

The presence of such non-local vessels, together with the greensand quern stones, and the single possible scrap of estuarine briquetage, hints at a wider economic picture. Doubtless other commodities, such as live animals, hides, honey, iron, timber and cloth were obtained, though it is virtually impossible to identify these archaeologically, let alone pinpoint their sources or the means by which they arrived at sites like The Looe. A small sherd of EPRIA pottery with a clear plain-weave fabric impression was recovered during the excavations at Purberry Shot, Ewell (Henshall 1950, 135, 159), but, inexplicably, did not feature in Lowther's published report. Indeed, the whole question of settlement interdependence, agricultural specialism and land holding is one yet scarcely addressed

within the county for this period, likewise seasonality and transhumance. That transhumance was a feature of both the Saxon and medieval economies on the North Downs dip-slope seems reasonably clear, however (eg Poulton 1987, 215; Blair 1991, 14 and especially fig 5), and it is conceivable that it started earlier and was connected with the greensand hillforts overlooking the Weald away to the south (Thompson 1979, 296; Hanworth 1987, 161), though these appear to have fallen from use by the 1st century BC. A recent survey has underlined the likely importance of the Weald in the LPRIA (Gardiner 1990, 43–6); within the county, fieldwork around Outwood for example is beginning to hint at the existence of widespread activity, not all of which need be connected with iron-working (Robin Tanner, pers comm).

Overall, there have been surprisingly few advances in our knowledge of M/LPRIA and early Roman non-villa downland settlements in east Surrey and west Kent since The Looe was excavated. In topographic terms, the sites at Hawk's Hill (Hastings 1965), Atwood School, Sanderstead (Little 1964; Batchelor 1990) and Farleigh Court (Hayman 1996–7) are probably the closest matches within the county, though the last two actually lie on the Clay-with-Flints deposit, and none is well understood. The range of features and finds contained within the small Kentish enclosures at Farningham Hill and Lower Warbank, Keston, both dated *c* 50BC–AD50 (Philp 1984; Philp *et al* 1991), provide perhaps better if more distant published comparisons (though there is currently no evidence to suggest that The Looe settlement itself was enclosed). Brian Philp (1984, 32) estimates a further twenty similar ditched sites in the west Kent area alone, together with 'at least twenty more' defined on the presence of pottery, and there is no reason to suppose that east Surrey was any less densely settled. Locally, traces of other M/LPRIA settlements exploiting a wide range of soil types off the chalk have been located in the Ewell area, as for example at Purberry Shot, Nonsuch Park and Warren Farm (Lowther 1946–7a & b; Hayman 1995). Others have been located on the inhospitable London Clay (eg Hawkins & Leaver 1999, 149) and include the extensive and clearly important complex further down the Hogsmill valley at Old Malden (Nielsen 1993), whose origins — like those of The Looe and Purberry Shot — appear to stretch well back into the Iron Age. Though its function remains obscure, the Old Malden site underlines the likely importance of the Hogsmill corridor and the Thames valley beyond, both of which are visible from The Looe.

ROMAN ACTIVITY

These wider horizons are elsewhere apparent at The Looe in the presence of the inscribed bone counters apparently belonging to one 'Remus', a name attested in *Gallia Belgica* (the area around modern Reims) and *Gallia Cisalpinae* (Roger Tomlin, pers comm). Leaving aside the problems surrounding the interpretation of the graffiti touched on earlier, such a degree of literacy is otherwise unusual on a rural settlement (assuming, of course, that the 'ox goad' is interpreted as a cattle prod rather than a dip pen). Sets of inscribed bone counters have been recovered from either end of Stane Street, in Chichester and Southwark (the latter from a non-funerary context), though the Ewell set falls squarely within a small group of rural burials accompanied by gaming pieces. Others are recorded from Litton Cheney, Dorset (Bailey 1967, 156–9) and Old Newton, Suffolk (Philpott 1991, 185). Despite the recognition of small, presumably family, cemeteries at Kings Wood, Sanderstead (Little 1961, 39–41, fig 4) and more recently Farleigh Court (Hayman 1996), burials associated with rural settlements in east Surrey (and west Kent for that matter) remain elusive, as Bird has pointed out (1987, 187). Even the larger roadside settlement of Ewell has produced disappointingly few (eg Abdy & Bierton 1997, 139), though one much disturbed example may belong to the LPRIA (Orton 1997, 95).

The later Roman activity at The Looe, which is attested by the quantities of unstratified pottery, building material and small finds, is not well focused, though it is reasonable to assume close links with the Ewell settlement to the north. It is certainly possible that a more

substantial building existed in the area at this time, although elsewhere in the London region villas tend to favour light soils and proximity to reliable water supplies and the road network (eg Sheldon *et al* 1993). While The Looe lies only 800m or so east of Stane Street, other factors are not in its favour. But, as David Bird has noted (1987, 178 and pers comm), the two Walton villas do not fit the currently perceived pattern either, and neither does the new Chelsham find (Hampton 1996); all three lie on the summit of the North Downs on, or adjacent to, tracts of heavy Clay-with-Flints. Further fieldwork would be required before The Looe could be added to this list, however.

CONCLUSION

Despite the long gap that has separated the excavation from the eventual publication of the site at The Looe, it still makes a significant contribution to our understanding of certain aspects of the nature (if not the extent) of the prehistoric and Roman activity on one dip-slope spur of North Downs chalk. It also underlines the multiplicity of resources available to the LPRIA and Roman inhabitants of the site. Products of the chalk Downs, the Wealden districts, the Hogsmill corridor and the Thames valley beyond all played a part, and were eventually supplemented by those channelled through the Roman settlement at Ewell, and along Stane Street to the west.

There is little doubt too that the time that has elapsed since the site's excavation has allowed some of the material to be reinterpreted in ways which would have been undreamed of had it been published 40 or 50 years ago, and with which, in fairness, it must be admitted, the excavator himself may not have concurred. This is perhaps most obvious in the new perspectives which have been brought to bear on the nature of the LPRIA/RIA pit contents and what they might tell us about the beliefs of the people who generated them. For, had the site been published soon after excavation, it is certain that a purely functional explanation would have been favoured, ie that the pit contents were simply 'rubbish' and without a further, arguably spiritual, and regenerative, dimension. That it has been possible to entertain this additional explanation here is due in no small part to the single-minded diligence of the original excavator, Tom Kenneth Walls.

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Brian Hope-Taylor, A W G Lowther, Judith King and Dr F C Fraser for commenting on the finds. This debt I am pleased to discharge now.

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