



Faversham Society Archaeological Research Group

Understanding Ospringe 2011

**Report for Keyhole 83, 1 Queen Court Cottages,
Vicarage Road, Ospringe
and Keyholes 84A and 84B at Laurel Cottage,
Mutton Lane, Ospringe**

Grid References:

K83: TR 00284 60420

K84A: TR 00299 60563

K84B: TR 00316 60563



1 Introduction

These small keyhole excavations were part of a project aimed at completing an investigation into prehistoric settlement on the east side of the middle Westbrook valley in Ospringe.

The Westbrook is a chalk-spring-fed small river which used to run from south to north through a steep sided valley. It rose just to the east of Painters Forstall (at TQ 99566 58780), ran down through Ospringe, and ended up flowing into tidal Faversham Creek. En route it picked up permanent or temporary (nailbournes) feeder streams, e.g. from the springs at TR 00121 60216. Ospringe village grew up at the point where Watling Street crossed the Westbrook and, from at least the medieval period onwards, the Westbrook was harnessed to drive water mills for corn, madder and/or gunpowder milling.

Nowadays, water extraction by Southern Water, especially at TR 00111 60152, means that the Westbrook no longer runs through Ospringe although local people tell of how during wet spells they can hear the old watercourse roaring through the underground culvert installed in the 1960s. Down in Faversham itself, only the lowest part of the watercourse survives, much reduced but still impressive.¹

In 2008-9, FSARG carried out a major investigation into the development of Ospringe.² The most exciting discoveries were of evidence for prehistoric settlement ranging from the Mesolithic through the Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age³. Our findings, however, were limited by the fact that we had concentrated on the west side of the valley along Water Lane, except for a few sites east of the Westbrook along Ospringe Street (the A2, formerly Roman Watling Street).⁴ The return to Ospringe in 2011 was designed to remedy this by investigating the east side of the middle valley,⁵ looking for evidence for prehistoric activity.

2. Location of excavations

The locations are shown on the 1907 OS map extract. They were chosen to give samples of the highest point on the valley side (K83), the foot of the slope (K84B) and the valley floor (K84A). Within each of the gardens concerned, a quick geo resistivity survey was carried out to see if there were any striking anomalies (there weren't).

The location of the excavation in the garden of Queen Court Cottages was therefore pinned to a point where two years previously two Bronze Age scrapers had been found on the surface of a vegetable plot during a casual visit by FSARG members. Queen Court Cottages were built around 1870 as tied cottages for Queen Court Farm down in the valley, with No 1 now privately owned. To the south of the Cottages is a large chalk quarry (disused since the 1960s) but the field beyond is rumoured to have yielded bronze artefacts to metal detectorists and has hints of circular crop markings: it is certainly a classic ridge top location for Bronze Age barrows, now completely ploughed out. For 2011, however, we aimed only to investigate further the location of those scrapers.

¹ FSARG website www.community-archaeology.org.uk, Paper on Faversham Creek

² website op cit: Reports 43-65

³ website op cit: e.g. report for K61, 4 Dawsons Row.

⁴ website op.cit. Reports on K 62 and 63/63T

⁵ website op.cit. Plan for 2011

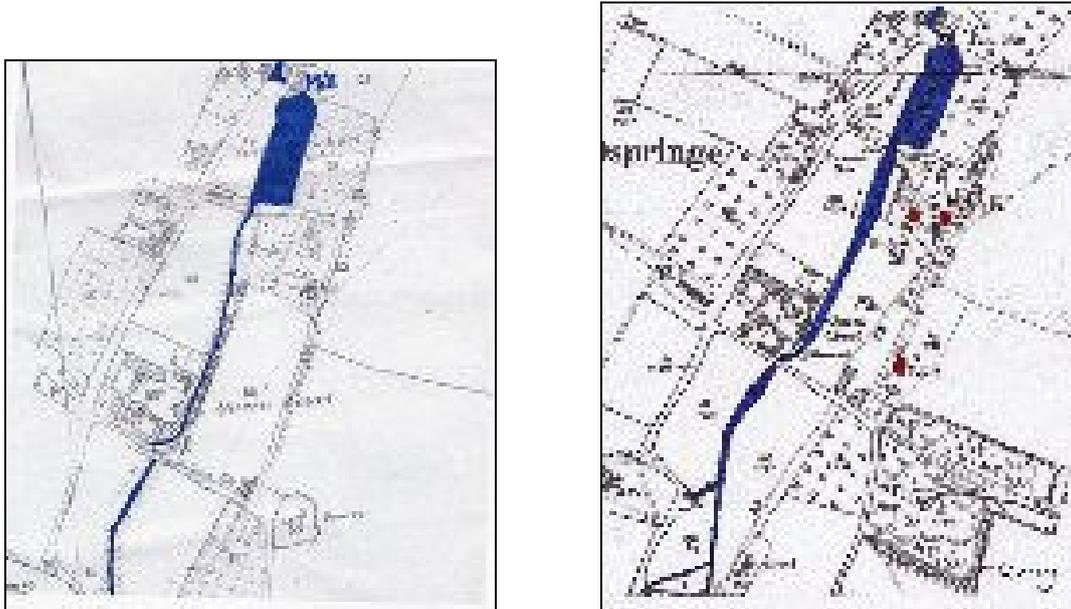


Fig 1: Left, 1865 map of the middle Westbrook valley.⁶ On the right, the 1907 version⁷. The waterway is shown in blue. The east side of the valley is much steeper than the west side.

We did not expect to find much evidence for Roman, medieval or post medieval human activity on the Queen Court Cottages site, an assumption which proved correct. The garden of Laurel Cottage was, however, a very different proposition. Laurel Cottage is a Grade 2 listed building, thought to have been built in the late medieval period and possibly originally a small Wealden hall house⁸. It was extended in the 17th and 18th centuries, and it is thought that the stonework incorporated in these extensions may have come from the ruins of the Hospital of St Mary, Ospringe, a short distance to the north⁹.

Laurel Cottage is an interesting property in its own right, but for this particular investigation into the prehistoric, we decided to keep away from the house area itself. At the southern end of the large garden, there had been a pair of cottages. (See Fig 1). These were demolished by the 1960s, presumably as part of the general clearance of 'unfit for human habitation' properties going on in the Faversham area in the 1950s and 1960s¹⁰, but the plinth on which they stood is still there. The date for these cottages is not yet known (research continues), but they are not thought to be medieval. We predicted that digging at the cottage end of the garden would give a clear separation between the archaeology of relatively modern settlement and the archaeology of the prehistoric period. Again, this assumption proved right.

⁶ OS 1865 Sheet XXXIV Scale 1: 2500

⁷ OS 1907 Sheet XXXIV Scale 1: 2500

⁸ Kent HER Number: TR 0031 6060 Laurel Cottage

⁹ HER op. cit.

¹⁰ website op.cit. Creek paper

3. The procedures

In each case, a one metre square was pegged out using the planning square and the areas delineated marked with string. The position of the squares were recorded by measuring to mapped corners of the houses. Turf was removed carefully from each square, rolled and set aside in plastic bags. The pits were then hand excavated using single contexts, each of which was fully recorded. The keyholes were excavated to a depth which did not exceed the maximum safety depth of 1.2 metres. All excavated soil was sieved meticulously, and the spoil heap scanned using a metal detector. Finds were set aside for each context and special finds were given three dimensional coordinates to pinpoint the exact find spot. Any features revealed were carefully recorded. Finally, the spoil was put back in, tamped down, watered and the turf replaced.

4. The findings

All three pits had simple stratigraphy - no wall foundations, ditch edges or courtyard surfaces, just a sequence of horizontal layers which were allocated context numbers. The only feature was a post hole in context [5] in keyhole 84B. The boundaries between layers were not sharp, but there were clear differences in texture, colour and finds between the various contexts. The details are summarised in Table 1. The artefact categories shown are those particularly relevant to this investigation or particularly useful for dating. Where the amount of a material recovered from a single context is less than 5gm, it has been counted as residual or intrusive and classed as X (absent).

Fig 2: Keyhole 83 towards end of excavation

Keyhole 83, at the top of the valley side, had the simplest sequence - indeed only the topsoil layer [2] had a range of finds (from both age and type points of view) with the two layers beneath [3] and [4] containing only a few tiny vestigial intrusive fragments of CBM and pottery (wormhole size). [3] and [4] did, however yield the earliest worked flint that we have ever found in the Westbrook valley i.e. an Acheulian bifacial hand axe, Wymer Type 5¹¹. This dates from the Early to Middle Palaeolithic, i.e. between 50,000 and 600,000 years ago - 200,000 is a fair bet.



¹¹ Nick Ashton, British Museum, pers.comm

84A and 84B both had a greater depth of archaeology, as would be expected from sites towards the valley foot where downwash and solifluction would be a factor. In both of these pits, the upper contexts yielded mainly 19th- 20th century material with the middle contexts [4] and [5] yielding the full range of material, from prehistoric to modern. In the case of 84A, the valley floor pit, context [6] yielded only early material - no CBM, clay pipes or coal/coke, just a substantial amount of fragmentary shell, worked flint and heat stressed flint. Even the small amount of pottery found was, at latest, early medieval North Kent shelly ware and included a sherd of comb decorated Belgic ware (Late Iron Age - 50BC-AD50) and small pieces of flint tempered ware that could be anything from Bronze Age to Iron Age.

84B, higher up and closer to the demolished cottages was less productive. Some 19th century material was found at all levels, except [05]. [03] was particularly rich in CBM (brick and tile) and mortar. Context [05] was not fully excavated but it did yield worked flints (including a horned scraper, Late Bronze Age) and heat stressed flint and contained no CBM, coal/coke, clay pipe or pottery.

5. Interpretation

Given the nature of the investigation, the most important question is 'Is there any evidence for prehistoric activity?' The answer is unequivocal - apart from the turf layers, every single context contained worked flints. These were not just waste flakes - each context yielded at least one finished flint tool or core. The age of these flints vary from late Bronze Age (a horned scraper) to Lower Palaeolithic. All non-turf contexts bar one (84B [2]) also contained heat stressed flint, small nodules of flint which have been through a heating and quenching process and are often known as pot boilers. Pot boilers are another very positive indicator of prehistoric activity, although they are not dateable in the same way as actual flint tools. Table 1 gives numbers for the flint tool finds - there were, of course, many more waste flakes. I think that 44 finished tools from such small scale excavations is astonishing.

Flint evidence, then, is everywhere: worked flint even popped out of the ground when a team member was inserting a peg for the resistivity survey in the garden of Laurel Cottage. But must we see these abundant flints as residual and therefore unstratified or can we identify prehistoric levels?



In K83, at the top of the slope, the worked flint was concentrated in the uppermost level, [2], along with relatively modern material. This constantly re-exposed top soil has in modern times been re-worked as a vegetable garden. From this small volume of soil [2], little more than a third of a cubic metre, came the attractive Bronze Age assemblage shown in **Fig. 3, to the left**.

This includes scrapers large and small, a borer, a core fragment (showing flint tools were being made here) and many waste flakes (outer circle) This assemblage includes the two scrapers found originally two years ago on the surface.

From the lower contexts [3] and [4], no later material was recovered and the worked flint tools were of the very types, a bifacial and a possible unifacial handaxe.

Fig 4: Lower Palaeolithic bifacial hand axe (point missing).

Do we here have Palaeolithic soils only 40 cm below the surface? This is not as crazy as it sounds - here at the top of the slope, soil will be washed away rather than accumulate. Flint, or otherwise, will tend to remain behind in the way that stones remain behind when the Thanet sands within they have been generated have gone. The nature of the contexts [3] and [4] implies that the hand axes have been undisturbed at least since the early Bronze Age. The unrolled condition and sharp edges confirm very little movement of the hand axe. All in all, a remarkable find.



The situation at the bottom of the slope in the garden of Laurel Cottage is entirely different. It is not until context [6] for 84A and [5] for 84B that a possible prehistoric level is reached. In both cases it is at a depth of around 65cm. In K84B, nearer to the site of the demolished cottages, the layer [3] seems to be a demolition dump with [4] the pre-demolition garden soil, underlain by an early medieval/prehistoric soil. With K84A, layers [4] and [5] seem to have been dug over the years to produce a well sorted mixture of finds across the ages with [6] tucked away underneath and relatively undisturbed.

Other finds have been mostly 19th-20th century although there has been a sprinkling of medieval pottery sherds in the middle layers of 84A and B, probably from midden scatter during medieval cultivation. A 17th century gunflint was found in context [2] in 84B. These pale however in relation to the importance of the prehistoric material coming from such small scale interventions.

6. Final comments

FSARG had found plenty of evidence for prehistoric activity on the west side of the Westbrook valley in 2008-9. This was also the side where the church can be found and where the main village street runs. We theorised that, as the west side was the flatter and more sheltered part of the valley, cushioned with warm brickearth, that was where the people had lived. Maybe the steep, chalky east side had been unoccupied? How wrong can you be!

There is no doubt that the worked flint from these three pits demands thorough study, and needs to be recorded in the lithics catalogue being developed by FSARG for the Westbrook valley. It will also contribute to a paper being prepared for publication in *Archaeologia Cantiana* in 2013 on the prehistory of the Westbrook valley.¹²

'Finishing off' projects are often seen as chores rather than fun. I think that this is one case that very definitely beats such expectations.

¹² Ancient landscapes in Kent: the Westbrook valley in North Kent. Dr Pat Reid, in prep.

7. Acknowledgments

Great thanks to Lynne and Mike Taylor at Queen Court Cottages and to Cindy and Tom Davis at Laurel Cottage for letting us dig in their beloved gardens. Without such help and support we could not get answers to those fascinating questions about the past.

Dr Pat Reid

November 2011

	Context details									
	Cont. no	Type	Character	Depths	Worked flint *	Pot boilers	Pottery range	Clay pipes	CBM	Coal/coke
K83	1	Layer	Turf	0-5cm	X 0	X	X	X	X	X
	2	Layer	Friable mid brown top soil	5-31cm	Y 8 + 2	Y	Early medieval-modern	Y	Y	Y
	3	Layer	Friable yellow- brown clay with flints	32-40cm	Y 2	Y	X	Y	X	Y
	4	Layer	Orange-brown clay with flints	41-48cm	Y 1	Y	X	X	X	X
K84A	1	Layer	Turf	0-6cm	X 0	X	X	X	X	X
	2	Layer	Fine grained, friable, dark brown top soil	6-10cm	Y 1	Y	Red ware-modern	Y	Y	Y
	3	Layer	Fine grained, mid brown, better sorted than 2.	10-29cm	Y 1	Y	Medieval-modern	Y	Y	Y
	4	Layer	Orangey brown, well sorted	29-32cm	Y 1	Y	Prehistoric-modern	Y	Y	Y
	5	Layer	Firm yellow-brown silty clay, chalk flecks	32-65cm	Y 7	Y	Prehistoric - modern	Y	Y	Y
	6	Layer	As for [5] but darker and moister	65-125cm	Y 7	Y	Prehistoric - early medieval	X	X	X
	7	Layer	Exposed but not excavated.	125cm onwards	Y 1	Y	X	X	X	X
K84B	1	Layer	Turf	0-4cm	X 0	X	X	X	X	X
	2	Layer	Light brown, loose top soil	4-7cm	Y 2	X	Post medieval - modern	X	Y	X
	3	Layer	Hard compact soil, orange brown, many inclusions	8-41cm	Y 9	Y	Prehistoric-modern	Y	Y	Y
	4	Layer	Darker soil with fewer inclusions	42-68cm	Y 1	Y	Medieval-modern	Y	Y	Y
	5	Layer	Light orange- brown soil with chalk flecks.	68-100cm	Y 1	Y	X	X	X	X

Table 1: Context details for the three pits

* numbers in worked flints column indicate number of finished tools (44)