

Ringlemere

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Introduction

Metal-detecting conducted by Cliff Bradshaw during November 2001 in a recently harvested potato field at Ringlemere Farm, near Sandwich (Figure 1), led to the discovery of a prehistoric gold cup buried at a depth of about 0.40 m. (Parfitt 2003, Figure 2). The only British parallel for this vessel is provided by the Rillaton gold cup, recovered from an Early Bronze Age cairn on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall during the nineteenth century (Smirke 1867; Needham 2000; Needham *et al* 2006, fig. 1).

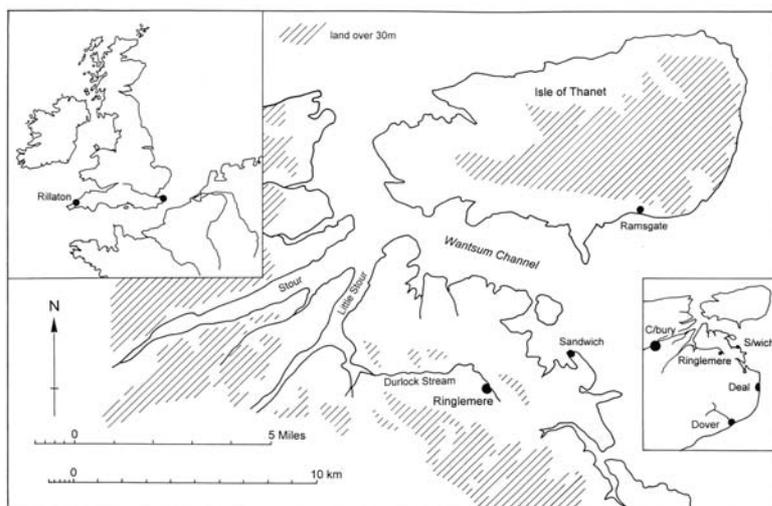


Figure 1.



Figure 2

The vessel from Ringlemere was discovered on a low, but quite distinct, rise in the middle of the field, which had every appearance of being a previously unknown round barrow. In view of continuing plough erosion, full excavation of this mound (now designated Monument 1) was made a collaborative project between the Canterbury Archaeological Trust and the British Museum. Work was completed in the summer of 2006, having been undertaken with the support of the British Academy, English Heritage, Kent Archaeological Society and the Dover Archaeological Group, amongst other bodies. The results have provided a context for the gold cup and demonstrated that this is a complex site - the mound producing the cup had been constructed within an earlier enclosure which seems to represent a henge monument (Needham, Parfitt and Vardell 2006; Parfitt and Needham 2007).

Ringlemere lies some 3.75 km west of Sandwich, in the parish of Woodnesborough, about 1.5 km west of the parish church, NGR TR 2938 5698. Ringlemere Farm is some 400 metres to the south-east (Figure 3). The mound is situated at an elevation of between 10 and 13 metres above O.D and lies towards the bottom of a long north-east facing slope, which constitutes the southern side of the broad, shallow valley of the Durlock Stream. The underlying geology here is head brickearth, with some gravel, overlying Thanet Beds clay. Today, the Durlock Stream begins at a spring which rises in the immediate environs of the site and flows for about 8 km westwards to join the Wingham River. A ridge of Eocene sands separates the

Durlock valley from the south-western edge of the former Wantsum Channel, which once divided the Isle of Thanet from the Kentish mainland and was a much used water-way in

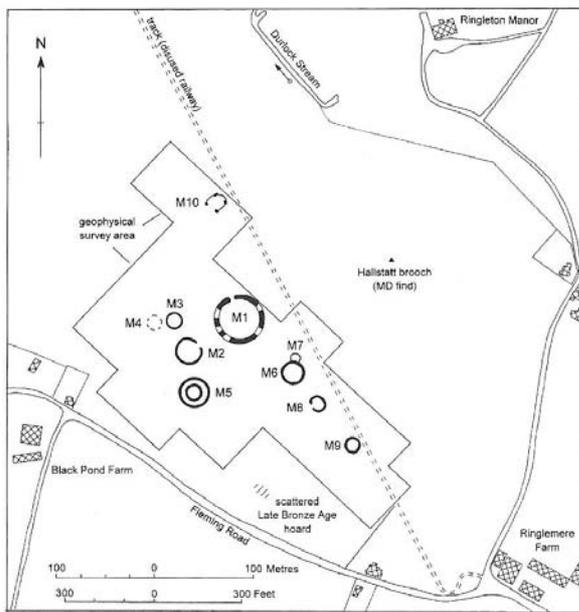


Figure 3

ancient times. This location seems significant in terms of the continental connections of three Early Bronze Age items found at the site: the gold cup itself and two pieces of worked amber.

The henge monument

Following casual Mesolithic habitation, the main period of activity on the site began during the Late Neolithic period when a ditched henge enclosure was constructed (Figure 4). The enclosure was about 42 m in internal diameter with a ditch between 4 and 5 m. across. This was almost 2 m deep, with a broad, flat bottom. The ditch fills in several places showed that more material was slipping in from the outside than the inside, indicating the former presence of a now destroyed external bank. On the northern side, an entrance causeway about 2.5 m across was located, partly obstructed by an off-centre post-pit. In the middle of the enclosure lay a small rectangular timber structure, represented by two L-shaped slots (Figure 5). These originally must have contained timber uprights to form a 'cove',

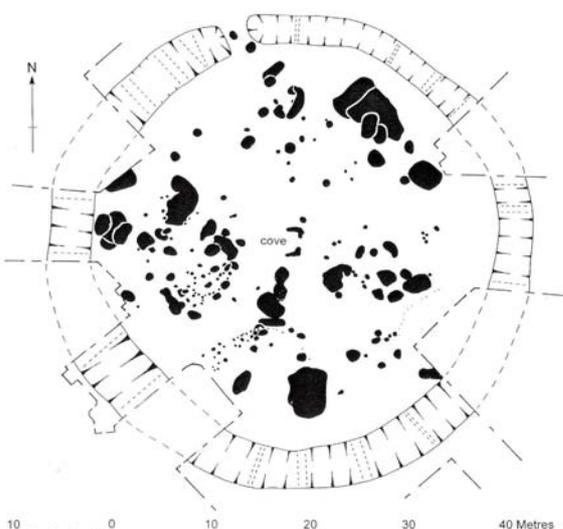


Figure 4



Figure 5

measuring c. 2.4 x 1.2 m in plan. Its main axis was north-south and it was apparently originally open to the west. A central gap in the east side could have offered a narrow window facing east – in effect a portal.

The central cove was surrounded by more than 180 other features, in the form of variously sized hollows, pits and post-holes, together with three hearths. These features clearly indicate considerable activity on the site (see Figure 6). Amongst the pits and post-holes, is a group that seems to form a fairly neat oval inside the ditched area. These features perhaps originally contained timber uprights. Other potential pit/post-hole alignments and settings are currently being considered. Fairly certainly, several phases are represented; these may not all be contemporary with the henge enclosure. Many of the excavated features were associated with fresh flintwork and Late Neolithic Grooved ware pottery (Figure 7). There was also some Beaker ware, including three complete vessels found in pits on the eastern side of the enclosure. The contents of a number of pits suggest that they include special ‘placed’ deposits. Charcoal from a pit containing Grooved ware near the north entrance has yielded a radio-carbon date of 2890–2600 cal BC (2 sigma; Beta-183862).



Figure 6



Figure 7

The round barrow

At some later stage, perhaps around 2000 BC, a mound was raised in the middle of the old henge enclosure (Figure 8). This probably originally extended as far as the inner lip of the ditch, burying all the earlier features. Exceptionally, for the heavily ploughed landscape of east Kent, the base of this barrow mound survived, with a maximum thickness of 0.50 m. remaining at the centre. A core of soft, decayed turf was enclosed by an outer deposit of orange-brown clay. The turf core contained much residual domestic rubbish in the form of struck flint, calcined flint and broken pottery (mostly Grooved ware with small amounts of Beaker), clearly derived from earlier activity on the site (as described above). Within the make-up of the outer mound, an absence of material derived from the distinctive lower green clay and gravel deposits through which the enclosure ditch was cut implies that the material of the mound did not include up-cast from the ditch.

Given the character of the mound, it initially seemed likely that Early Bronze Age burials would be associated. This prospect was encouraged by the occurrence of the gold cup, since

the vessel from Rillaton is from a grave. However, complete excavation of the barrow has failed to identify any formal prehistoric burials.

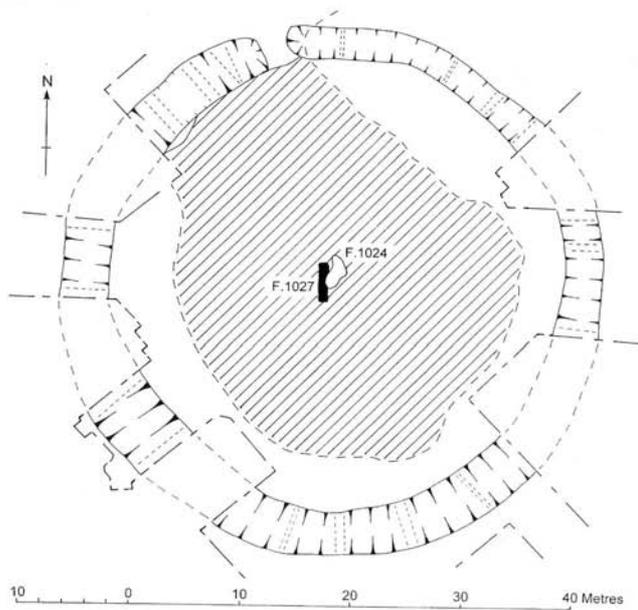


Figure 8



Figure 9

Rather than a burial mound, it now seems more likely that the barrow was created as a low platform to support a new timber structure replacing the earlier cove (see above). This was represented by a 3.68 m. long trench dug through the centre of the turf core, close to the site of the earlier structure (Figure 8: F1027). It probably held a timber façade again respecting the N-S axis. Later, a large irregular pit (Figure 8: F1024) was dug into the top of the turf platform nearby. The western side of this pit clipped the façade bedding trench, but it is possible that the façade posts were still standing. Indeed, it is possible that the façade and pit were functionally linked, one dug quickly after the other was erected. The overall dimensions of the pit, at about 3.30 by 1.45 m., are rather large for a grave and, in the absence of any skeletal material, other ritual functions seem more likely (see below). There is no reason to think that the new pit was intended to contain a replacement façade, although a thin horizontal layer of decayed wood was recorded in its filling. Importantly, this produced part of a rare Early Bronze Age amber pendant (Figure 9), which finds its best parallels in Brittany. Another piece of Early Bronze Age amber, in the form a small dagger pommel (Figure 9), was discovered on the north-western side of the monument in the filling of a recent animal burrow – its original context is unknown.

Towards the south end of F1024 was a small intrusion, a pit of about 0.30 m diameter. It was filled with loose soil and some decayed vegetation and appeared to be of very recent origin. We now believe that this could have been Bradshaw's original excavation to unearth the gold cup. If so, the find-spot is placed 1.50 m. to the south-west of the estimated centre of the monument but some eight metres from Bradshaw's stated find-spot.

By the time the gold cup came to be buried the monument had perhaps already been in use (possibly intermittently) for around 500 years. Yet, not long after, the site seems to have gone out of use. The burial of the cup, together with the amber pendant fragment, may represent a final act of closure. Possibly, the vessel had previously been used in rites and ceremonies performed around the façade on the platform.

Other monuments

Geophysical survey and air photograph analysis undertaken as part of the project has shown that the henge at Ringlemere was not an isolated feature but formed part of a group of monuments clustered in this area, near the source of the Durlock Stream (Figure 3: Monuments 2–10). These other monuments, also assumed to be of prehistoric date, are smaller and take the form of ring-ditches, probably the remains of round barrows. In order to better understand Monument 1, investigation of some of these lesser monuments was undertaken in 2007 (Monuments 2, 3 and 4). These were located immediately to the south-west (i.e. uphill) of Monument 1, situated upon an outcrop of natural gravel. Monument 3 was fully excavated (Figure 10), whilst a single trench was cut across the ditch of Monument 2. Monument 4, however, was found not to exist; it can now be seen that a combination of changing geology and a fortuitously positioned straight gully had led to over-interpretation of some fuzzy geophysical survey evidence here (Parfitt & Corke 2007).



Figure 10

Monument 3 consisted of a continuous near-circular ring-ditch enclosing an area 15.25-16.25 m in diameter (Parfitt & Corke 2007). All evidence for any associated barrow had been ploughed away. The ring-ditch was 1.00 to 1.80 m wide and 0.44 – 0.65 m deep. Its filling produced a moderate quantity of prehistoric flintwork, together with some pottery. The form of the ditch in profile, with its narrow, fairly flat base is somewhat reminiscent of a ‘palisade trench’ rather than a true ditch and it seems possible that the feature may have originally held close-spaced timber uprights for an enclosing fence or revetment. If this is correct, no traces of any post-pipes had been preserved in the coarse gravel filling. Nor were there any surviving traces of a central mound within the enclosed area (but see below).

More than twenty shallow hollows, pits and post-holes were located inside the ring-ditch. These need not all be contemporary with the ditch and several are probably of natural origin. None can be closely dated. At the very centre of the enclosed area, however, lay a neat, oval pit some 0.30 m deep (F2525). This measured 1.02 m by 1.22 m and was aligned ENE by WSW. In the base at the north-eastern end, a deeper depression appeared to represent a substantial post-hole. This was D-shaped in plan and there can be little doubt that an upright wooden post had originally occupied this north-eastern end of the pit. Its D-shaped form indicates that this was probably a split tree trunk, with the flat (split) surface facing south-west. It remains less certain whether the main pit simply represents the construction pit for the insertion of this post or whether it formed a grave, marked by the post at one end. Certainly, the proportions of the main pit would have allowed the insertion of a crouched inhumation, such as have been found in similar positions within many barrows and ring-ditches. However, no traces of any bone survived and the question presently remains unresolved. About 0.75 m

WSW of pit F2525 and continuing its long axis was another substantial post-hole, 0.22 m deep (F2613), which must mark the position of another timber upright.

If upright timber posts did stand inside the ditched area, the question is raised as to their relationship with any mound that might have existed (see below for consideration of mound evidence). Did these posts protrude through the top of a barrow that was erected soon after the uprights themselves, or are different phases represented, with a mound being constructed only towards the end of the use of the monument, as with M1? The lack of any obvious entrance causeway across the ditch of M3 may be a significant detail, since this would have limited access into the enclosed area. However, the ditch could easily have been spanned with a small timber bridge - if it ever existed as a permanent open feature and was not merely the temporary construction trench for a ring of timber posts (see above).

Later activity

Excavation has shown that two field boundary ditches skirting the edges of Monuments 2 and 3 are of early Roman date. Their positioning in relation to the prehistoric remains indicates that these ancient monuments continued to have some influence on activities in the landscape, many centuries after they were first constructed. It must imply that the prehistoric monuments then survived as upstanding barrow mounds.

Almost 60 graves dating to the early Anglo-Saxon period have also been discovered. These were located on the south and west sides of Monument 1 and along the northern side of Monument 3. They clearly relate to a substantial and important cemetery whose full extent has still to be ascertained.

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