

A Bronze Age Cemetery at Chitts Hill, Colchester, Essex

by PHILIP CRUMMY

SUMMARY: Rescue excavations at Chitts Hill, Colchester, led to the discovery of a Bronze Age cemetery, apparently of two phases. The first of these consisted of a group of seven small round barrows and the second of a Deverel-Rimbury unfield yielding 27 or more cremations, mostly in urns. Twenty-five small pits of unknown purpose were found which were contemporary with the unfield. The barrows were levelled in the late Bronze Age or Iron Age period.

Introduction

The Bronze Age cemetery at Chitts Hill lies at the northern end of the field in which the ditch described by M. Petchey on pp. 17—19 is located (Fig. 1). The cemetery was discovered in July 1973 during a visit to the site by the writer when gravel extraction for Colchester's new northern by-pass was under way. Several cremations were found which had been exposed as a result of the topsoil being stripped off. Consequently, over the following month an area around the discoveries was excavated. The work had to be done in two stages to fit in with the gravel-extraction process which accounts for the two offset areas in plan (Fig. 2). Despite pressures on time and labour, it was felt that most of the cemetery was uncovered and recorded.

In addition to the cremations, a large sherd (Fig. 10, unstratified) of Bronze Age pottery was also found as shown approximately by point M in Figure 1. Unfortunately, the area where the piece was found had been so badly rutted and pitted by heavy plant that any excavation would not have been worth while.

The cemetery lay close to the River Colne by its southern bank (Fig. 1). The top of the underlying gravel is about 0.50 m below present ground level and is sealed by approximately 0.25 m of plough-soil and about 0.25 m or more of brown sandy silt loam, the so-called 'cover loam'. This is a soil which contains a high proportion of wind-borne silt and which was formed under periglacial conditions during the Devensian Glaciation. It has an irregular junction with the underlying sand and gravel and consequently is of varying depth.¹

The principal archaeological feature in the area is Gryme's Dyke which can be traced by cropmarks down to the ford across the River Colne where the dyke was seen in section.² The dyke lies to the west of the site (Fig. 1).

In addition to the dyke, aerial photographs³ of the area around the cemetery indicate a sub-rectangular enclosure, a large ring-ditch and some field-ditches (Fig. 1). Also, some years ago, 'Bronze Age and Iron Age' pottery was found at the old quarries south of the cemetery.⁴ The approximate find-spot is shown on Figure 1 by point N. In view of the cropmarks and pottery, a substantial amount of evidence relating to prehistoric occupation in the area is likely to have been lost elsewhere in the present quarry although occasional site inspections after July 1973 led to no further discoveries.

For this report,⁵ the features have been classified into six groups which are discussed in turn below. These are ring-ditches, cremations in urns, cremations without urns, pits, linear ditches and other features.⁶

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The stripping of the site by the contractors led not only to the removal of the plough-soil but the cover loam too. Since the archaeological features were cut into the cover loam, this led not only to the loss of the uppermost parts of all the cremations, pits and ditches but also, no doubt, to the complete loss of some other features. The shallow depth of many of the features which survived the stripping makes this clear.

The finds and site records from the excavation have been deposited in the Colchester and Essex Museum.

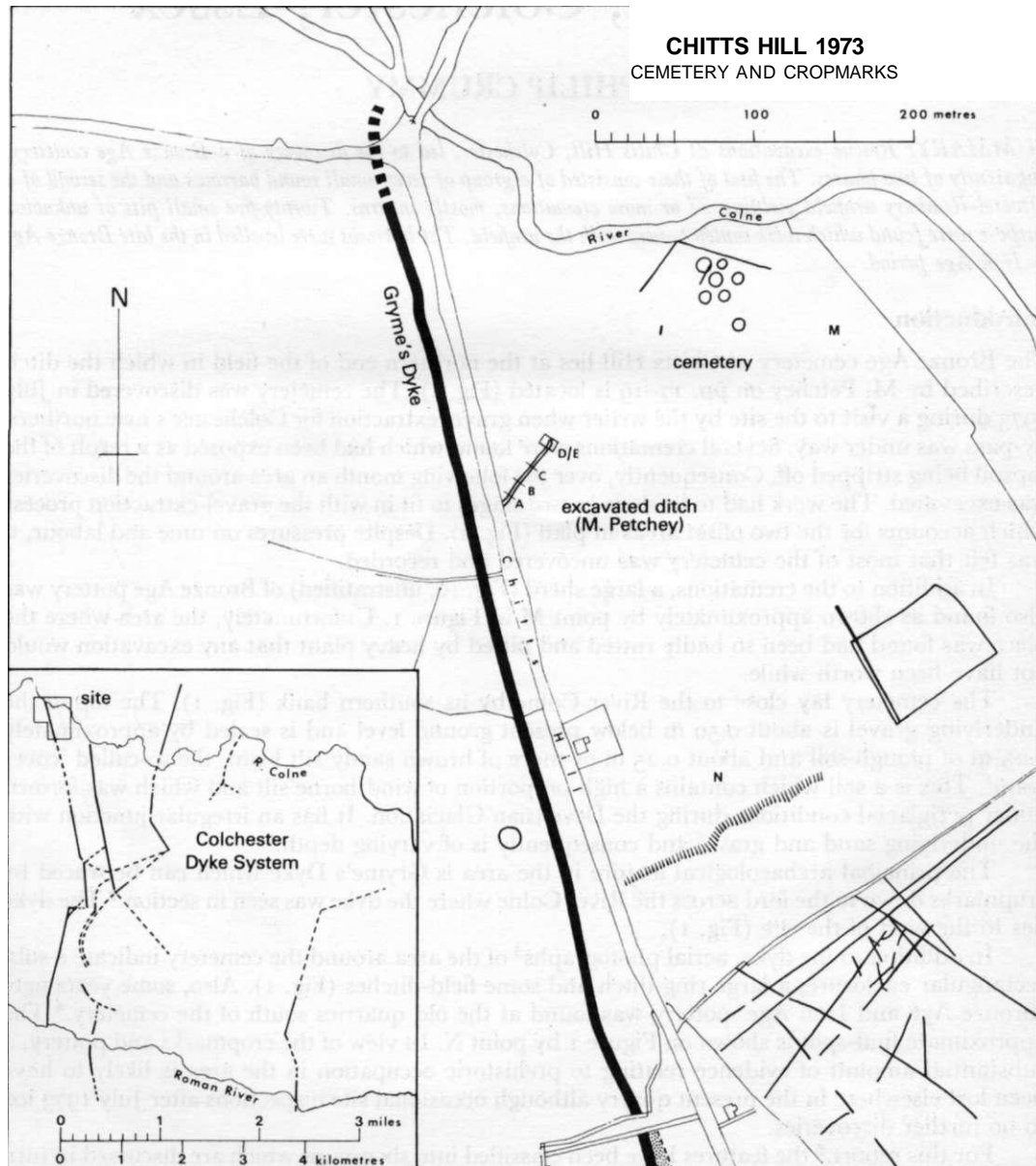


Fig. i Chitts Hill: Cropmarks and location plans.

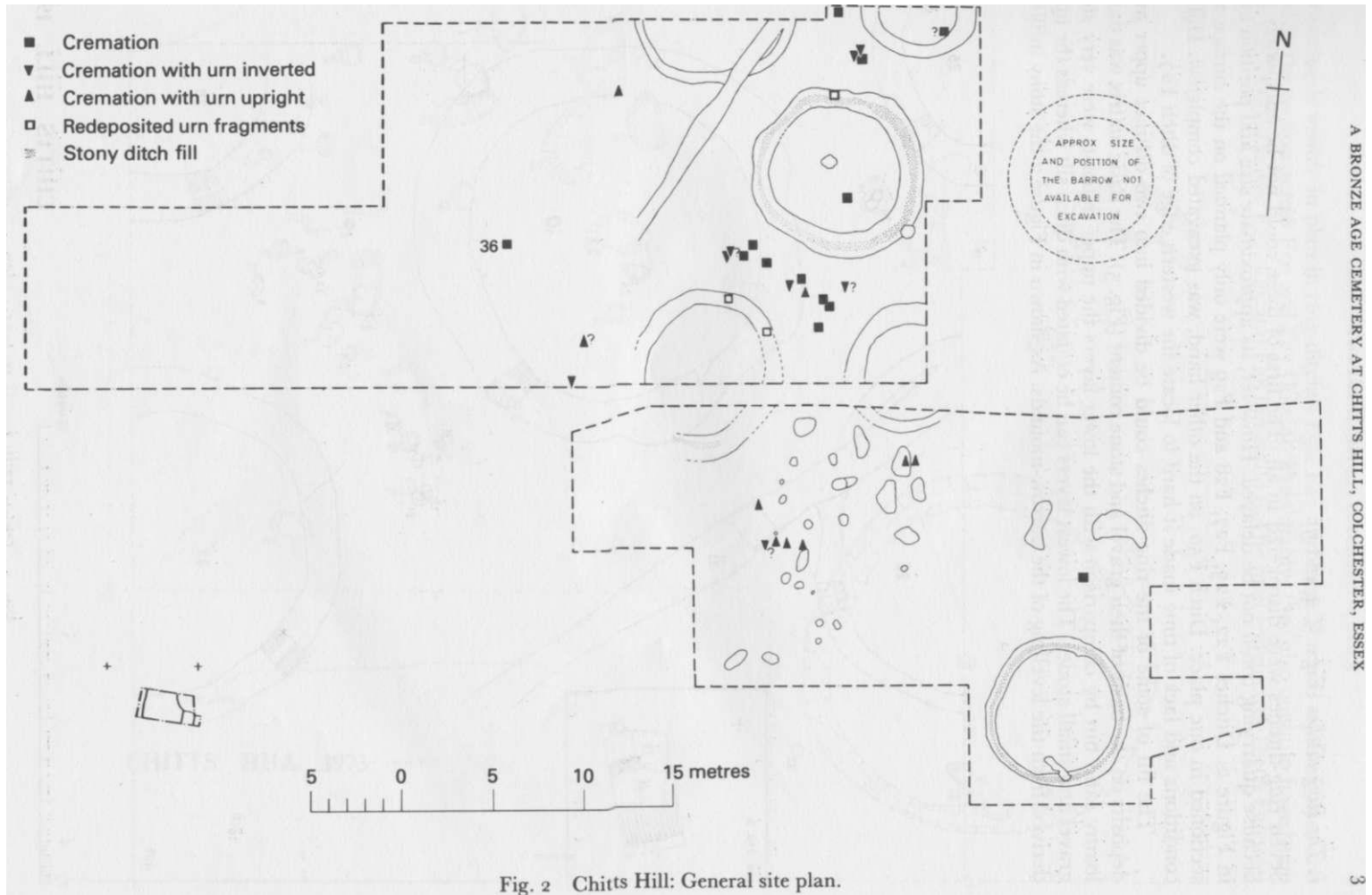


Fig. 2 Chitts Hill: General site plan.

i. The Ring-ditches (Figs. 3, 4 and 5)

Seven ring-ditches were discovered in all. The first of these could not be adequately recorded because quarrying could not be delayed. However, its approximate size and position are shown in Figure 2. Ditches **F22**, **F25**, **F27**, **F28** and **F29** were only planned on the surface and each sectioned in one place. Ditch **F50**, on the other hand, was excavated completely. Difficult soil conditions and lack of time made it hard to locate the western edge of ditch **F27**.

The fill of some of the ring-ditches could be divided into two distinct upper and lower deposits on the basis of their gravel and stone content (Fig. 5). The basic matrix was dark brown loamy sand but by comparison with the lower layers the upper deposits were very stony with gravel and small stones. The lowest layers can be equated with ditch silt whereas the upper ones derived from the levelling of the barrow-mounds. As shown in Figure 2 the stony infilling of the

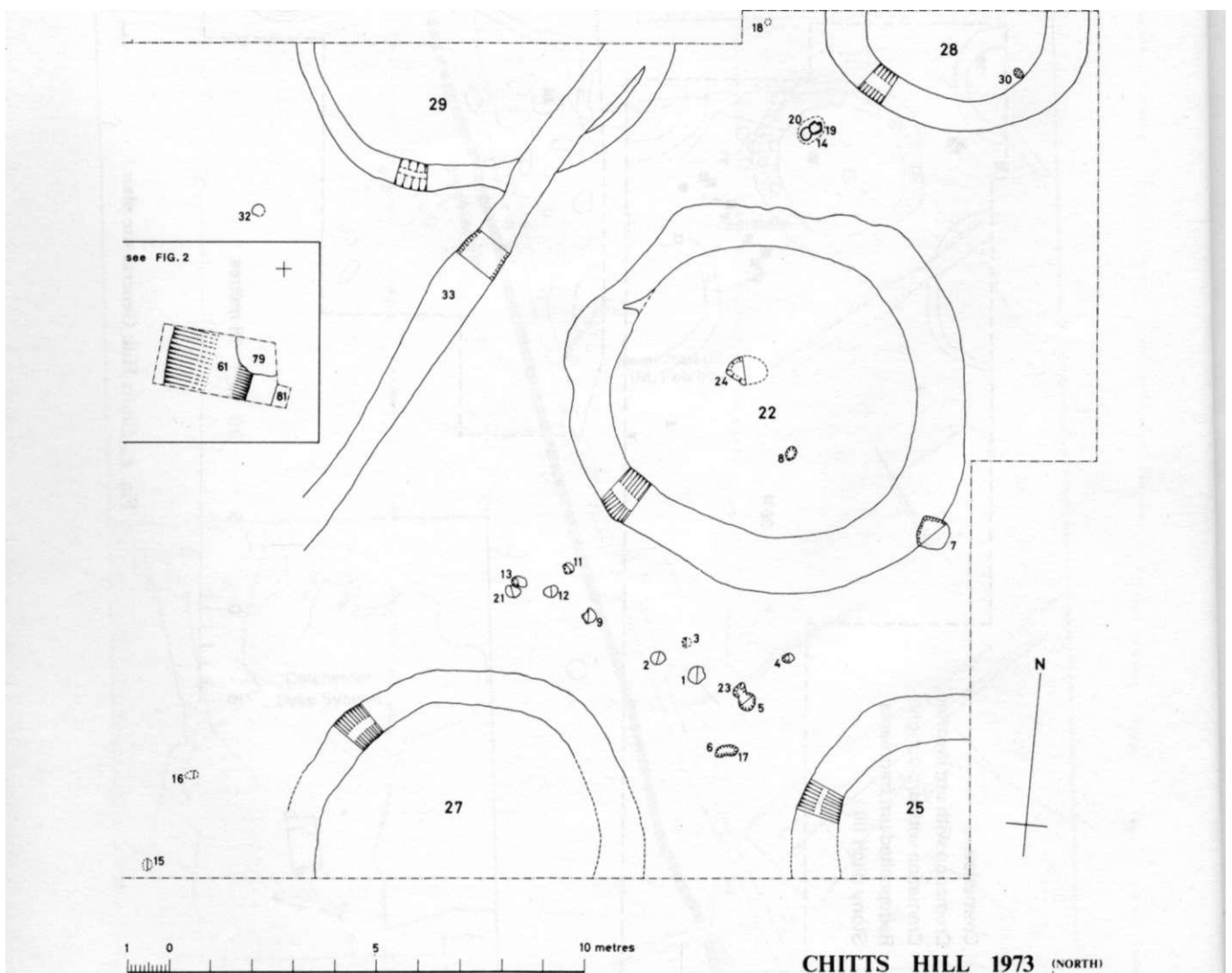


Fig. 3 Chitts Hill: Large-scale site plan: north.

ditches was clearly visible in plan in ring-ditches **F50**, **F22** and **F27**. The two types of layer are illustrated in the section across **F50** and **F27** (Fig. 5). Presumably, they also ought to have been present in the sections across **F22**, **F25** and **F28** but could not be readily detected. Ditch **F29** was

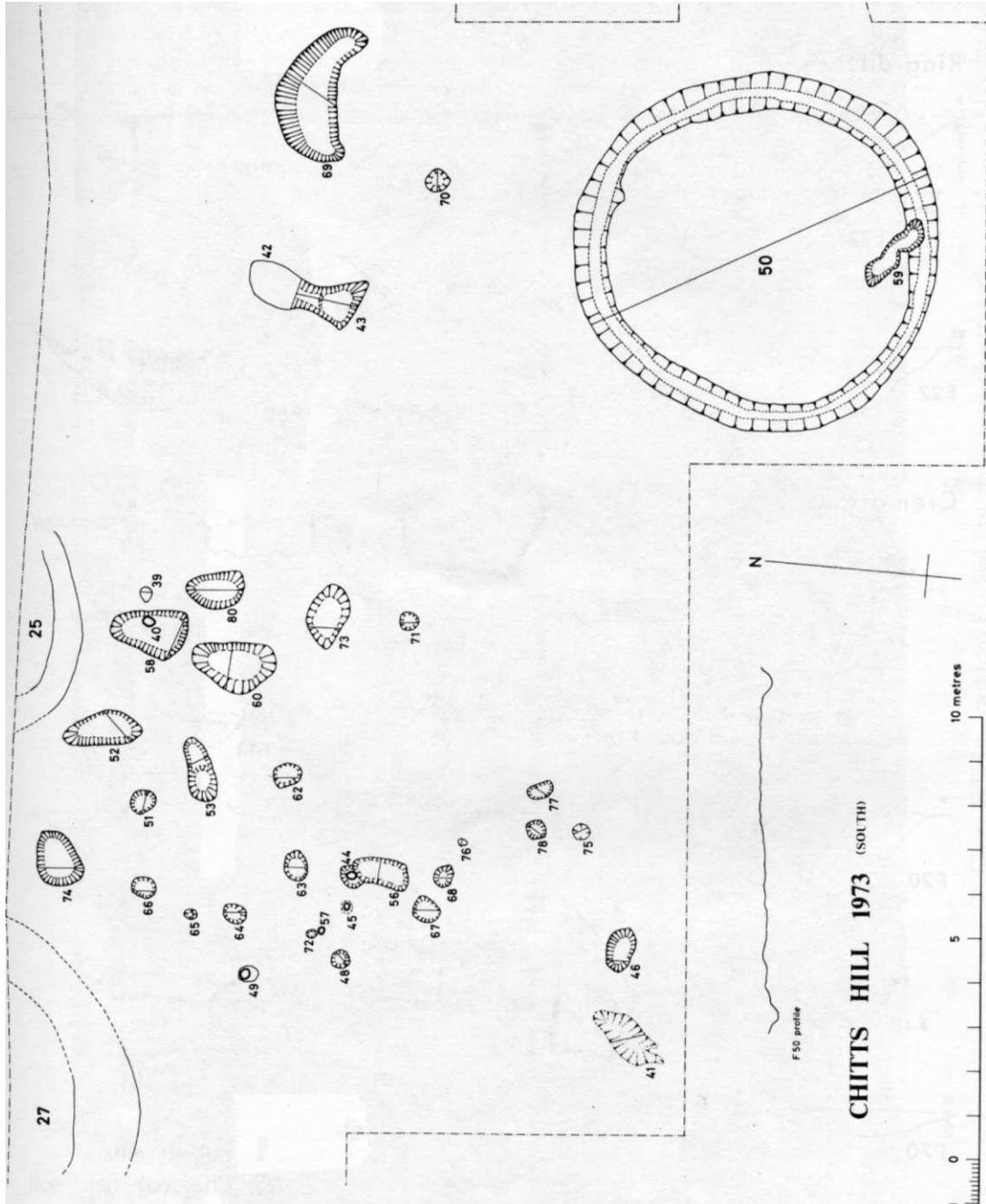
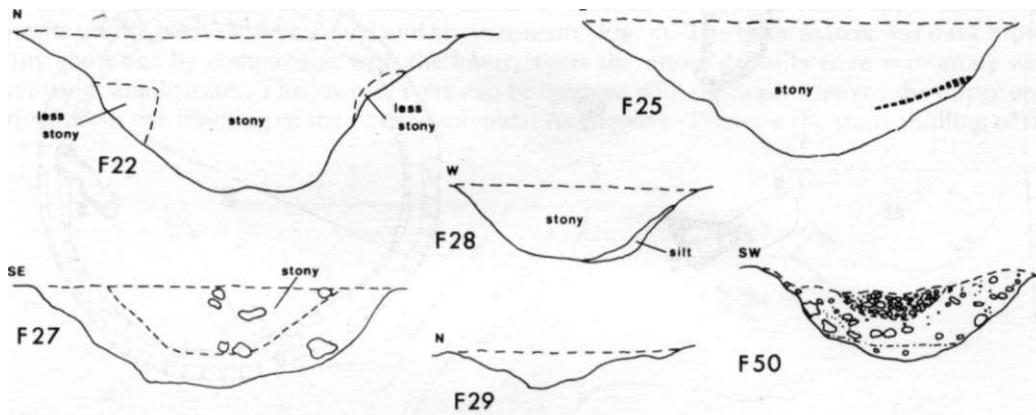


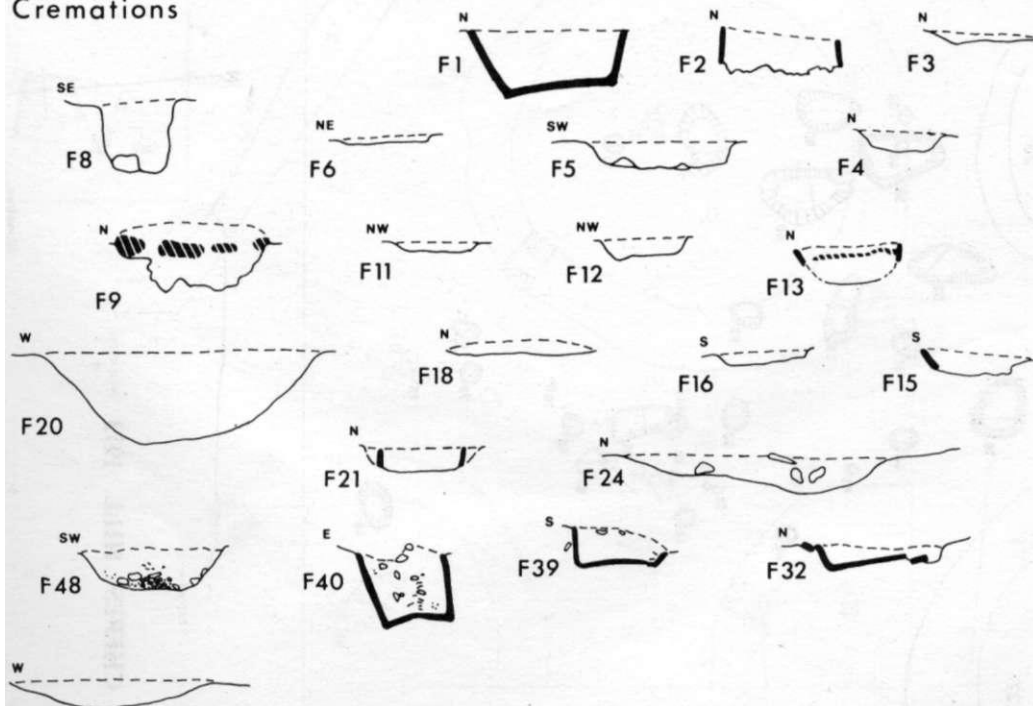
Fig. 4 Chitts Hill: Large-scale site plan: south.

shallower than the other ditches and had been completely removed by the initial stripping which accounts for its narrow breadth in plan. All that survived was silt at the base of the ditch, any stony destruction layer having been lost entirely. In the case of **F50**, some primary silt at the very bottom of the ditch was also detected (Fig. 5).

Ring-ditches



Cremations



F 7 0

I Pot in situ
Charcoal-rich soil

.. Fig. 5 Chitts Hill: Sections and profiles: ring-ditches and cremations. Scale 1:20.



PLATE I

Chitts Hill: Inverted urns **F14** and **F19**, set in **F20** half-sectioned.

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N. *Cremations in Urns* (Figs. 3, 4 and 5)

Five cremations were found inside inverted urns. These were **F2**, **F15**, **F19**, **F21** and **F14**. Three other cremations, **F4**, **F13** and **F48**, were associated with small quantities of sherds, at least one of which in each case was a rim sherd suggesting therefore the possibility of an inverted urn almost wholly destroyed during the topsoil stripping.

Eight cremations were found in upright urns. These were **F1**, **F32**, **F39**, **F40**, **F44**, **F45**, **F49** and **F57**. **F16** consisted of a shallow patch of the slightly darker soil characteristic of the cremations. This feature contained fragments of base but no bone. Nevertheless, on account of the soil, **F16** was very likely the remains of a cremation in an upright urn.

Only the more complete urns, i.e. **F14**, **F19**, **F40**, **F44**, **F45**, **F49** and **F57** are shown in plan here (Figs. 3 and 4).

In general, it was difficult to detect the pits into which the urns were placed. When located, for example as in **F44** and **F49** (Fig. 4), they were substantially bigger than the urns themselves, the latter generally resting directly on the natural. In the case of the pots in **F14** and **F19**, the vessels were touching one another and apparently set in a larger pit (**F20**) which contained a large quantity of cremated bone (Plate I). Although treated as a separate group in the report below on the bones, the material in **F20** probably derived from the urns in **F14** and **F19** when they were inverted for burial. The proximity of **F14** and **F19** and their relationship to pit **F20** suggests that both pots were contemporary.

Parts of three or more crushed urns were found in two of the ditches, one (**F26**) in ring-ditch **F22** and at least two (**F37** and **F35**) in the ring-ditch **F27**. Visual examination of the sherds comprising **F35** indicates the possibility of two different urns with similar tempering although alternatively these could represent different parts of the same vessel. The rim from **F35** is illustrated in Figure 10. **F26** was found in the lower half of the silt of the ring-ditch **F22** (Fig. 2). **F35** and **F37** were found in the stony destruction layer in the ditch of **F27** and must have derived from burials either sealed by or inserted into the mound which belonged to **F27** (Fig. 2).

The fill of all the cremations, with or without urns, was typically dark brown (10YR 3/3) or very dark greyish brown (10YR 3/2) loamy sand with small stones and gravel.

til. *Cremations Without Urns* (Figs. 3, 4 and 5)

Ten cremations were found which contained no fragments of pottery. These are **F3**, **F5**, **F6**, **F8**, **Fg**, **F1**, **F12**, **F18**, **F23** and **F70**. With the exception of **F8**, all these features were so shallow that they could have been the bottoms of in-urned burials. In addition, there were two features which consisted of very shallow deposits of comparatively dark soil but contained neither bone nor pot. These are **F30** (Fig. 3) and **F36** (Fig. 2). They were so shallow that they were not drawn in section and may be spurious.

F24 was a small patch of dark brown loamy sand with stones (Fig. 3) and was most likely the base of the primary burial in **F22**.

The few fragments of bone contained in features **F3**, **F8** and **F12** were considered too small (less than about 4 mm) to be submitted for inclusion in the bone report below.

iv. *Pits* (Figs. 3, 4 and 6)

A total of 26 prehistoric pits were found which did not contain cremations. With the exception of **F7**, these were all concentrated south of the two ring-ditches **F25** and **F27** and north and west of the ring-ditch **F50**.

Pit **F7** was dug into the stony infill of the ring-ditch **F22** and was unusual in that it contained two distinct layers, the later one of which is likely to have been the result of back-filling (Fig. 6).

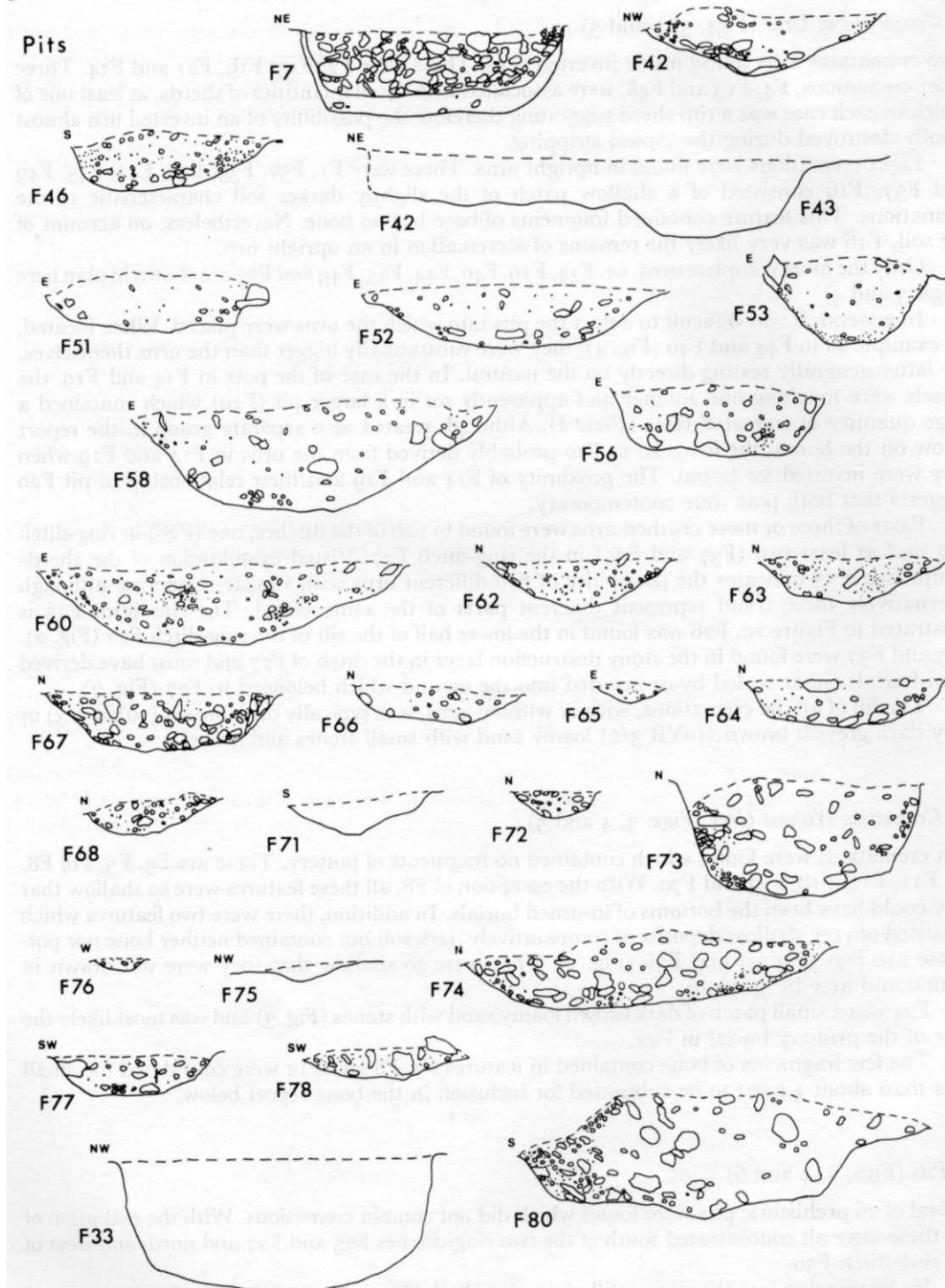


Fig. 6 Chitts Hill: Sections and profiles: pits and ditch F33. Scale 1:20.

The lower layer, perhaps a silt or a lining, was mottled greyish brown silty clay loam with pockets of sand and gravel. The upper layer consisted of brown sandy clay loam which was extremely stony with gravel and small and medium stones. This layer contained burnt flints, lumps of burnt sandy clay and some charcoal. The bottom layer, however, showed no sign of having been scorched *in situ*.

The fill of the remaining pits was typically dark brown (7.5YR 4/4) loamy sand with gravel and small stones.

These pits can be broadly divided into two groups on the basis of size and shape although the archaeological significance of this is doubtful. The first category consists of large pits of irregular shape and comprises **F42, F43, F46, F52, F53, F56, F58, F60, F73, F74** and **F80**. The relationship between **F42** and **F43** is not known and it is likely that they both represent different parts of the same feature. The second group consists of small pits less than 60 cm or so across. These are **F51, F62, F63, F64, F65, F66, F67, F68, F71, F72, F75, F76, F77** and **F78**.

Although this division may in some way be significant, particularly in view of the manner in which the large pits cluster together, the distinction is probably not particularly important since it is quite possible that, rather than being post-holes for example, the small pits are simply the bottoms of much larger features of sizes comparable to those of the larger type. In profile, none of the small features has vertical or nearly vertical sides but they all resemble the bottoms of the larger features.

Two stratigraphic relationships are of prime importance. These are that the in-urned cremation **F40** cut the pit **F58** and that the pit **F56** cut the in-urned cremation **F44**.

v. Linear Ditches (Figs. 3, 6 and 7)

Parts of two linear ditches were found.

Ditch **F33** was traced in plan for a total of 15 m and sectioned in one place (Fig. 6). No finds were made. The southern end of the ditch was found but its exact position was difficult to detect in plan. The ditch cut through the ring-ditch **F29** and must therefore have post-dated the demolition of the barrow.

A section was excavated across a much more substantial ditch **F61**, the depth of which was about 1.2 m. It was not possible to trace this feature for any length but the contractor's digger-driver who discovered the ditch during his work, said it ran for some considerable distance in a

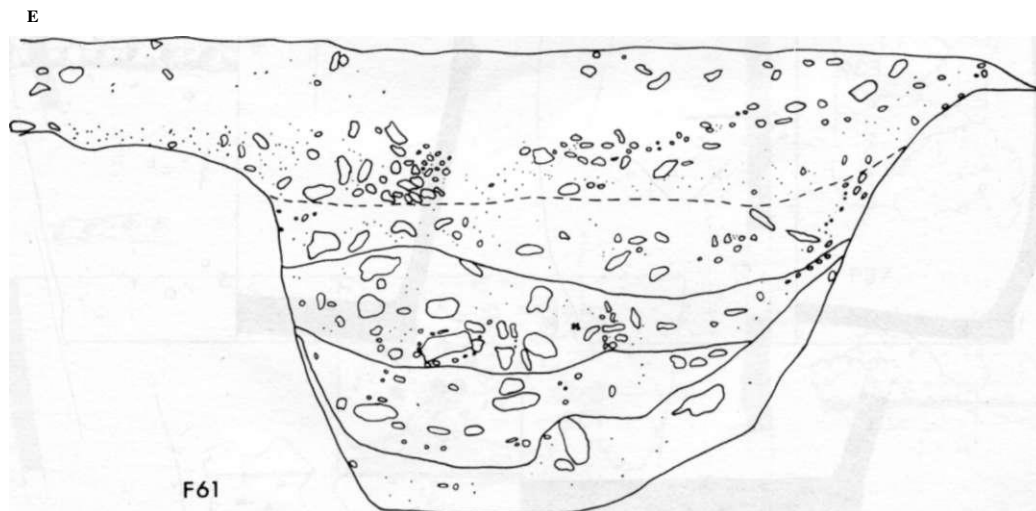


Fig. 7 Chitts Hill: Sections across **F61**. Scale 1:20.

south-west direction. It did not, however, extend as far north as the main archaeological excavation. Five layers were visible in the ditch-section (Fig. 7). The four upper layers consisted of stony brown sandy clay or loamy sand and may all have been the result of deliberate back-filling. The lowest layer — the silt — consisted of slightly stony light brownish grey clay loam with large stones. The only finds came from the uppermost layer. These comprised three body

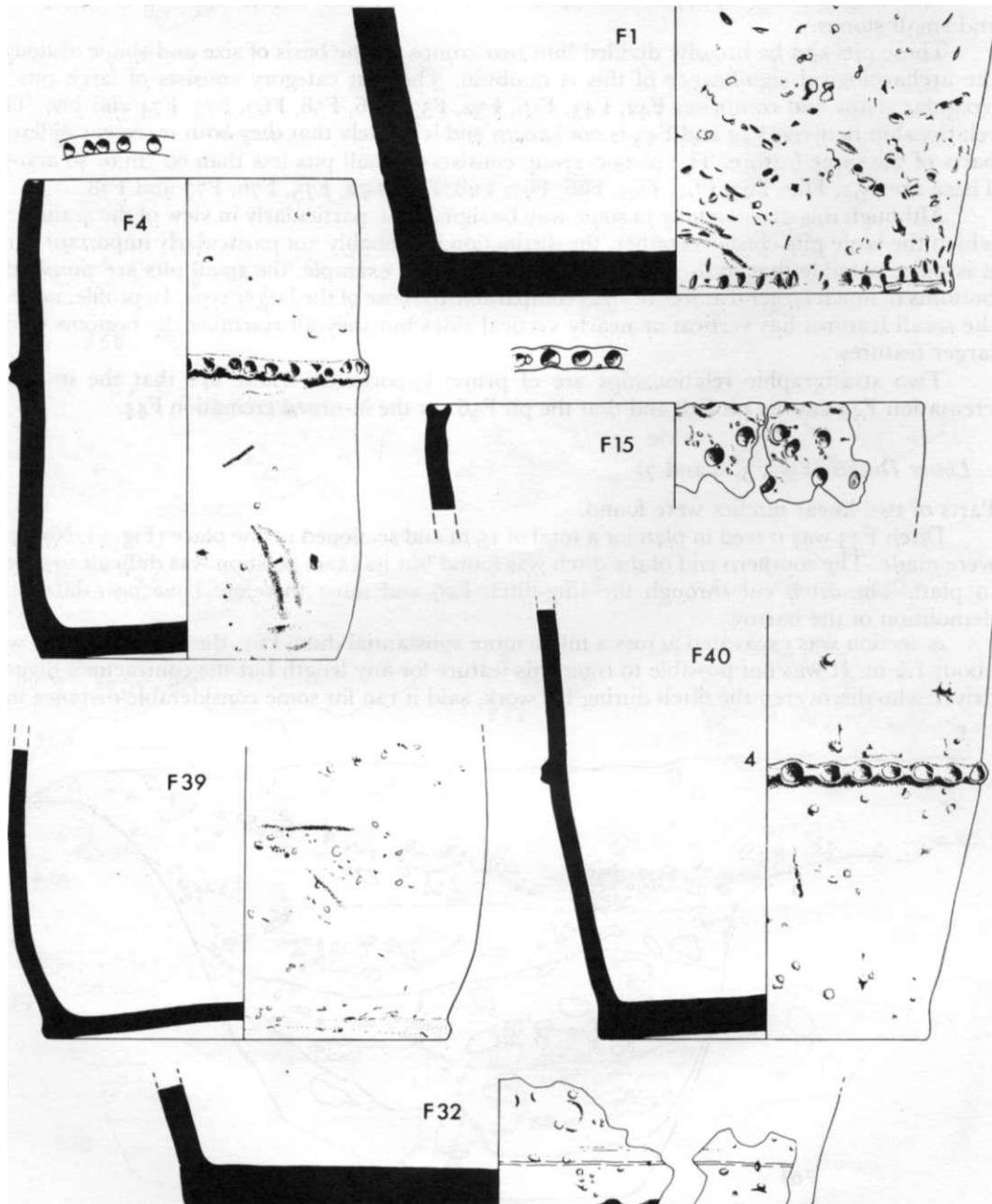


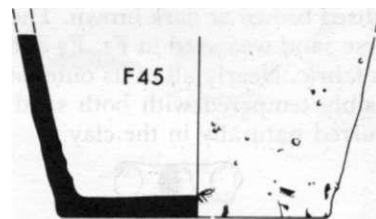
Fig. 8 Chitts Hill: Pottery. Scale 1:4.

sherds which are similar visually to much of the pottery from the cemetery. The largest piece is 13 mm thick and grades in section from red at the exterior to dark reddish brown at the interior. It is lightly tempered with large flint grits.

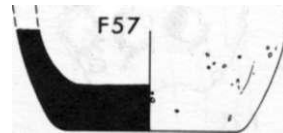
F14

F49

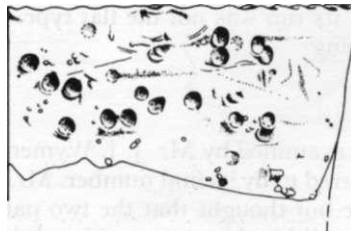
• 3 J



F19



F2



F37

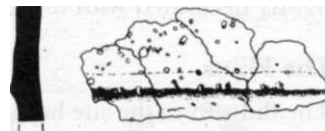


Fig. 9 Chitts Hill: Pottery. Scale 1:4.

vi. Other Features (Figs. 3 and 4)

The other features are likely to be of relatively modern date. **F81** and **F79** (Fig. 3) were probably recent test-holes for gravel. **F59** and **F69** (Fig. 4) contained pieces of brick and peg tile. **F41** consisted of a shallow deposit of burnt stones and black loamy soil. The fill was very loose and thought to be modern.

The Pottery (Figs. 8-10)

Crushed burnt flint, gravel and coarse sand were used as tempering in most of the pots. Since it is often difficult to distinguish visually between crushed flint and coarse sand, the description of the filler below must be regarded as tentative.

The commonest fabric (i.e. **F1**, **F2**, **F4**, **F14**, **F19**, **F32**, **F39**, **F40**, **F44** and **F49**) has a very dark grey core which grades to red or reddish brown near the outer surface. The outer surface is generally brown, reddish brown or yellowish brown. Occasionally the inner surfaces are slightly oxidised brown or dark brown. The clay is usually heavily tempered with crushed flint although coarse sand was used in **F1**, **F2** and perhaps **F19**. The sherd found at point M on Figure 1 is of this fabric. Nearly all of its outer surface has flaked off exposing its tempering (Fig. 10). **F14** is possibly tempered with both sand and flint. **F19** contains only a little sand which may have occurred naturally in the clay.

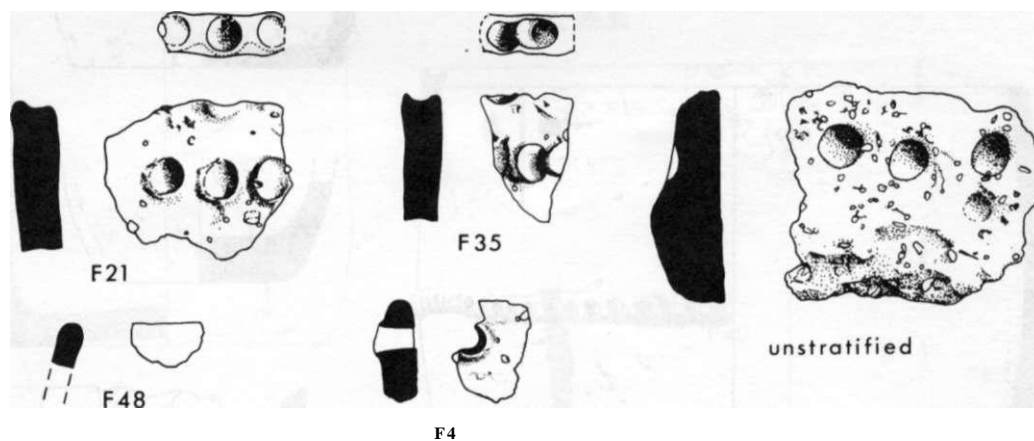


Fig. 10 Chitts Hill: Pottery. Scale 1:2.

The remaining pieces lack the gradation in colour between core and outer surface. Their cores are very dark grey and their outer surfaces are various reddish and yellowish shades of brown. Several of these pots were only lightly tempered, i.e. **F15** (coarse sand and flint), **F35** (a sandy fabric with possibly no deliberate filler), **F45** (coarse sand) and **F57** (coarse sand and possibly flint). The other pots were more heavily tempered with coarse sand, viz. **F37**, **F21** and **F48** (also possibly contains flint).

Pot **F37** was unusual in that its rim was not the flat type. Its cordon was pinched out and lightly decorated with finger-tipping.

The Flints

The flints from the site have been examined by Mr. J. J. Wymer, and the list below is taken from his work-sheets. Each piece is referred to by its find number. Mr. Wymer regarded the bulk of the flints as probably being Neolithic but thought that the two patinated pieces **FL154** (Fig. 11.2) and **FL298** (Fig. 11.3) may be Mesolithic. He also considered that although unpatinated, **FL155** (Fig. 11.5), **FL173** and **FL320** might also be Mesolithic.

The contexts of the flints are not given here since the assemblage would seem in the main to predate the cemetery.

- i. scraper: **FL153** (small end-scraper; Fig. 11.1);
- ii. flake-blades: **FL154** (patinated; Fig. 11.2), **FL85** (small), **FL299** (broken, non-bulbous end only)
- iii. blades: **FL155** (small; Fig. 11.5), **FL284** (micro-blade);
- iv. flakes: **FL156** (very small), **FL158** (with slight traces of secondary working or use), **FL173**, **FL211** (Fig. 11.6), **FL254** (small, slightly patinated flake ground smooth on bulbous end; Fig. 11.7), **FL300** (outer flake), **FL301**, **FL302**, **FL303** (small), **FL304** (patinated), **FL306** (patinated), **FL307**, **FL308**, **FL310** (2 spalls) and **FL320** (micro-blade);
- v. pot boilers: **FL251** (two flints), **FL290** (three flints).

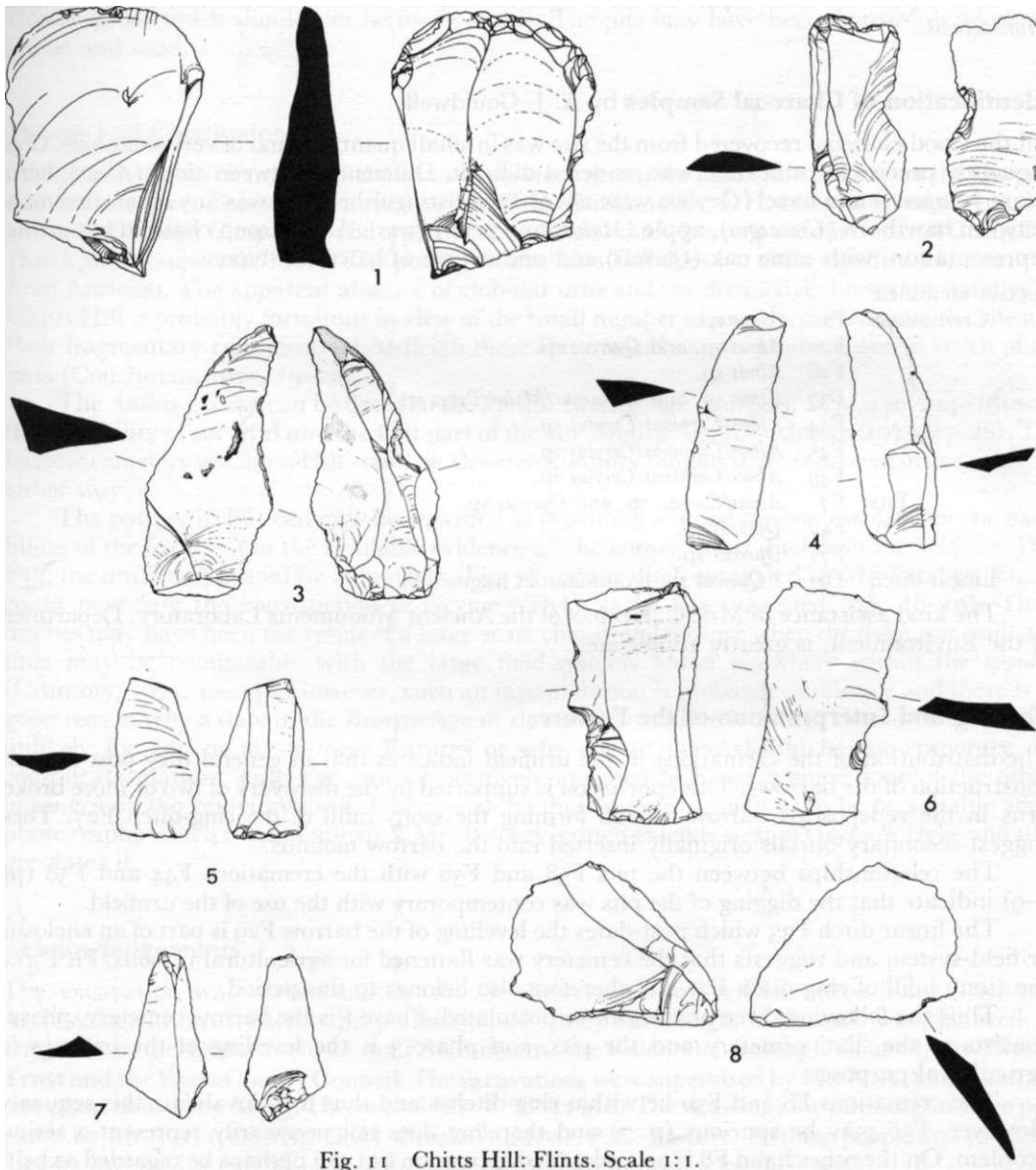


Fig. 11 Chitts Hill: Flints. Scale 1:1.

The Cremations

Dr. C. Wells has carried out a preliminary assessment of the cremated remains. The results of this can be summarised as follows: Out of the 24 groups, 11 consist of bone which is so finely comminuted that no determination of age is possible. Of the remaining 13 groups, five have been assessed as children, i.e. **F2**, **F5**, **F26**, **F32** and **F45**, two as possible children, i.e. **F4** and **F14**, four as adult, i.e. **F1**, **F19**, **F20** and **F40**, and two as possible adults, i.e. **F13** and **F21**. In addition to these, **F19** and probably **F2** are each thought to contain parts of a possible adult. Dr. Wells stressed that in material such as this, it is not possible to be certain that remains termed 'adult' are not those of a well-developed adolescent of 16 or 17 years of age.

It is hoped that a full report on the cremations will be contained in a future edition of these *Transactions*.

Identification of Charcoal Samples by A. J. Gouldwell

All the wood charcoal recovered from the site was in small quantities and of very small size. Consequently precise identification was rendered difficult. Differences between alder (*Alnus*), hornbeam (*Carpinus*) and hazel (*Corylus*) were not always distinguished, nor was any separation made between hawthorn (*Crataegus*), apple (*Malus*) and pear (*Pyrus*). Alder-group charcoal has greater representation, with some oak (*Quercus*) and one sample of hawthorn-type.

Species identified:

Cremations	F1	<i>Alnus</i> sp.
	F20	<i>Alnus</i> sp. and <i>Quercus</i> sp.
	F26	<i>Alnus</i> sp.
	F37	<i>Alnus</i> sp. and <i>Crataegus/Malus/Pyrus</i> sp.
	F44	<i>Alnus/Carpinus/Corylus</i> sp.
	F45	<i>Alnus/Carpinus/Corylus</i> sp.
	F49	<i>Alnus/Carpinus/Corylus</i> sp.
Pits	F7	<i>Alnus/Corylus</i> sp. and <i>Quercus</i> sp.
	F42	<i>Quercus</i> sp.
	F71	<i>Quercus</i> sp.
Linear ditch	F61	? <i>Quercus</i> sp. (comminuted fragments)

The kind assistance of Mrs. C. Keepax of the Ancient Monuments Laboratory, Department of the Environment, is greatly appreciated.

Phasing and Interpretation of the Features

The distribution of the cremations in the urnfield indicates that in general they post-date the construction of the barrows. This conclusion is supported by the discovery of two or more broken urns in the redeposited barrow mound forming the stony infill of the ring-ditch **F27**. These suggest secondary burials originally inserted into the barrow mounds.

The relationships between the pits **F58** and **F56** with the cremations **F44** and **F58** (pp. 8–9) indicate that the digging of the pits was contemporary with the use of the urnfield.

The linear ditch **F33** which post-dates the levelling of the barrow **F29** is part of an enclosure or field-system and suggests that the cemetery was flattened for agricultural reasons. Pit **F7** cut the stony infill of ring-ditch **F22** and therefore also belongs to this period.

Thus the following three phases can be postulated: Phase 1 is the barrow cemetery, phase 2 consists of the 'flat' cemetery and the pits, and phase 3 is the levelling of the barrows for agricultural purposes.

The cremations **F8** and **F30** lie within ring-ditches and thus may invalidate this sequence. However, **F30** may be spurious (p. 7) and therefore does not necessarily represent a serious problem. On the other hand **F8** is an undoubted cremation but can perhaps be regarded as being

in a class of its own since it is unusually deep. It may have been a phase I 'satellite' burial under the barrow mound or an extra deep secondary burial through the mound. If not, then the barrows must have been constructed early in the life of the flat cemetery.

Cremation **F26** was found near the bottom of the silt in the ditch **F22** and must have been washed or dumped in from the side. It need not have pre-dated the barrow. The cremations were nearly all placed at least 1 m back from the edges of the ring-ditches perhaps to prevent them being washed into the ditches like **F26**. An alternative explanation is that the barrows had external banks.

No satisfactory explanation can be put forward to explain the pits. In plan, **F64**, **F65**, **F66**, **F51**, **F53**, **F62** and **F63** form a roughly circular shape and perhaps may have been structural. However, too much should not be made of this. The pits may have been dug simply to obtain gravel and sand.

Dating and Conclusions

The pottery from the urnfield belongs to the eastern group (in Essex and Suffolk) of the Deverel-Rimbury culture. This was identified by Mr. F. H. Erith and Dr. I. H. Longworth and termed by them the '*Ardleigh Group*' after the type site at Ardleigh which lies only six miles east of Chitts Hill (Erith and Longworth, 1960). The pottery from Chitts Hill does not differ significantly from that from Ardleigh. The apparent absence of globular urns and the distinctive 'horseshoe handles' at Chitts Hill is probably fortuitous in view of the small number of urns recovered from the site and their fragmentary condition. At Ardleigh these features only apply to about one in seven of the pots (Couchman, 1975, 19-20).

The *Ardleigh Group* can be dated to the middle Bronze Age (Burgess, 1974, 170, 214-18) with the possibility of survival into the first part of the late Bronze Age (Couchman, 1975, 27-28). The barrow cemetery at Chitts Hill could be Deverel-Rimbury too but there is no conclusive evidence either way.

The pottery in **F61** can only be regarded as providing a broad *terminus post quem* for the back-filling of the feature. On the available evidence all the known linear ditches in the field, i.e. **F61**, **F33**, the ditches indicated by cropmarks (Fig. 1) and the ditch excavated by Mr. Petchey (Fig. 1) could post-date the construction of Gryme's Dyke as he has suggested (pp. 18-19). These ditches may have been the result of a large-scale change in land-use when the dyke was built and thus may be comparable with the large field-systems found elsewhere within the *oppidum* (Crummy, 1975, 12-14). However, such an interpretation is probably too simple and there is no good reason why a date in the Bronze Age or the early or middle Iron Age should be considered unlikely for any or all of these features or why any of them should be contemporary. To complicate matters, only **F33** can be positively assigned to phase 3 since none of the others impinges on the cemetery itself. Unfortunately, there appear at present to be no suitable aerial photographs which might indicate if Mr. Petchey's ditch extends west of Gryme's Dyke and thus pre-dates it.

Acknowledgements

The excavation was carried out by the Colchester Excavation Committee (now Colchester Archaeological Trust) with the permission of Amey-Fairclough. The work was financed by grants from the Department of the Environment, the Colchester Borough Council, the Pilgrim Trust and the Essex County Council. The excavations were supervised by Mr. N. A. Smith and the site plans drawn by Mr. J. Hayes and Mr. E. Godward. The drawings for publication were prepared by Mr. J. Hayes, Mrs. G. M. Crossan and Mr. P. C. Partner. To these people and to all the diggers involved, I extend my warmest thanks and appreciation for their work.

Finally, I am indebted to Dr. C. Wells, Mr. J. Wymer and Mr. A. Gouldwell for their specialist reports and to Mrs. J. Whiffing of the Colchester and Essex Museum who conserved the pottery.

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NOTES

1. Cover loam is described and discussed in recent work of the Soil Survey in Norfolk, *Soils in Norfolk, No. 2; Soil Survey Records, No. 21*. Although the subsoil is different here from that at Chitts Hill, the cover is substantially the same. I am indebted to Mr. R. G. Sturdy for this information and for his help. Deposits with wind-blown elements are discussed in Evans, 1975, 44 and 63-64.
2. A note on the record maps of the Colchester and Essex Museum.
3. Photographs by the National Monuments Record and Professor G. D. B. Jones.
4. A note on the record maps of the Colchester and Essex Museum.
5. The colour notations and names used below are taken from the *Munsell Soil Color Charts (1971)*. The classification of stoniness followed is as defined in Curtis *et al.*, 1976, 310.
6. The following feature numbers were either not used or are redundant: F10, F17, F31, F34, F38, F47, F54 and F55.
7. The urned cremations were not excavated in arbitrary layers as since suggested by Calvin Wells (Wells, 1976).

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