

Keyhole excavation at Mill Field, Hempstead, Essex

Evidence of Late Bronze and Iron Age, Late Saxon and Medieval activity

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Haverhill Archaeology Group

Archaeology Unit at Essex County Council

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Introduction

A Roman road, passing from Wixoe to Great Chesterfield, passes at its nearest approximately 2 km to the northwest of Hempstead. There is evidence also of a Roman route running to the west of Hempstead, from Great Sampford to Radwinter.

The village of Hempstead, in north Essex, is recorded in the Domesday Book. The entry, under the Half-Hundred of Freshwell, reads:

Withgar held HEMPSTEAD as 1 manor, for 4 hides less 30 acres before 1066. Now Robert of Vatteville (holds it) from Richard.

Always 22 villagers. Then 6 smallholders, now 10; then 8 slaves, now 7. Then 4 ploughs in lordship, now 3. Then 14 (men's) ploughs, now 10.

Woodland, 200 pigs; meadow, 15 acres.

Value then £12; now £16.

The village was granted the right to construct a Chapel of Ease in circa 1090, and was under the authority of Great Sampford parish.

A stone church was completed in 1365, and the oldest dated burial is within the church, dated 1318. It is unlikely however that the existing graveyard (immediately to the north of Church Hill road, on the north of Millfield in Figure 1), was used prior to 1365.

Mill Field

Mill Field, also known as Spring Field, is situated on the summit of a steep northwest-facing slope. The hill at Hempstead is one of the highest pieces of ground in Essex. The field itself, even with the existing hedgerows, offers an excellent and well-defended view of any approach from the northwest through to the southwest.

The name Spring Field apparently derives from the fact that water rises along the course of the modern road to the north of the field, and is still delivered from a pump on the north side of the road near the summit of the hill in the grounds of "The Miller's House" to an outlet near "Turpin's Ring" nearer the foot of the hill.

The rising of water at this point is apparently due to the layering of clay and gravel which characterises the geology of land between Hempstead and Great Sampford to the southeast.

A resistivity survey of the northern mound carried out by Haverhill Archaeology Group (Figure 1) suggests waterlogged soil in the northeast corner of the field. It is likely that water emerging at this point contributes to the flow of the pump

The name Mill Field derives from the presence for several centuries until the late 1800s of a windmill at the south end of the field. The windmill site was unusual in that it was built on a moated mound.

A small excavation conducted in the 1970s (By the current author, see Figure 1) was unable to establish conclusively whether the moated mound was originally intended for a mill, or whether its original purpose predated the mill. A 1615 map of the field, held in Chelmsford, shows an apparently all-timber mill on the site. Periods of rebuilding were evident from the 1970s excavation. Some shards from the 1970s excavation indicated medieval activity on the site.

To the north of the moated mound, there are surface features suggesting that two large areas, rectilinear in shape are also mounded to a degree, most noticeably at the north end, where the mound is raised to a height of over a metre. The two mounded areas have a flat surface and are separated by a dip which widens towards the West. It is possible that this is an old road up the hill.

Definite recorded ownership of the field dates only back to the 1600s. Then it belonged to the estate of Wincelow Hall, which stood on the opposite side of the north-south valley along which the modern village is built.

Ownership by Wincelow Hall, named after a 13th century landlord, suggests that the field was part of the original estate mentioned in the Domesday Book.

The excavation

The 1999 excavation was along the Eastern bank of the northerly of the two raised features. The eastern bank was chosen in an effort to avoid any recent disturbance through road-building on the north face, and to have a good chance of finding any structure associated with the straight edge.

In addition to the clearly artificial shape to the northern flat-topped mound, pot shards similar to those found in the mill mound excavation were found in an area disturbed by cattle on the north-west corner.

Location and size of trench

The excavated trench was 1.5m wide (north to south) and 3m long. The northeast corner of the trench is 4 metres due west of the most westerly part of the foundations of the kitchen extension of the property known as Pippins.

The long edge of the trench is thus a cross-section of the sloping easterly edge of the mound.

It was predicted that the use of the field for livestock in the recent period, coupled with natural erosion, would make the stratigraphy of the sloping edge less reliable as a means for dating the earthworks. Finds from the western half of the trench (described as "summit" in the finds trays) were kept separate from those on the slope (described "slope").

A total of 6 stratigraphically discernible layers were found. The sub-layers within these, (referred to, for example, as 4.3, were arbitrary, each approximately 5cm thick at the summit, the upper levels tapering down the slope.

Unfortunately, as will be seen from the County report on the finds, the bulk of the stratigraphy shows a high degree of disturbance. Only the fill (layer 6) of ditches and pits, apparently dug into the underlying natural chalk marl, appears to be undisturbed by medieval activity.

None of the layers gave the impression of an internal floor of a habitation.

Layer 1. Dark black/brown topsoil. The first three sub-layers disclosed relatively recent material, none of which was dated. Layer 1.4 contained some medieval material, and may represent the upper part of layer 2, though stained by topsoil. The layer contained no features.

Ploughing and/or earth-shifting activity has apparently disturbed all prehistoric deposits except those formed in ditches dug into the chalk marl.

Apparent absence of post-Roman topsoil

One anomaly concerns the apparent absence of a topsoil layer above the highest level of the natural marl. The medieval finds from layer 5.4 are contiguous with the upper limit of the chalk marl into which the prehistoric ditchwork seems to have been cut.

One possibility is that layer 5 represents roughly the depth of the early medieval plough, which would explain the presence of medieval shards in this layer. At that time, only a slight mound was present, and therefore no bank to make an obstacle to ploughing.

The section suggests that the postholes were cut into layer five, and more importantly, that the timbers were removed fairly soon afterwards, no later than the end of the accumulation of layer 4.

What was the purpose of the postholes?

The western posthole is virtually circular, about 45cm in diameter, suggesting a large upright, and the eastern posthole is oblong, 45cm by 85 cm, suggesting a support at approximately 30-40 degrees to the horizontal. If this is the correct interpretation, the support would have joined the vertical at between 70 cm and 1.5 m above the ground.

The hilltop position might appear to suggest a defensive role for any construction. But at the time that the timbers were erected, there is no evidence of an "internal" mounding around the perimeter of the present mound.

More importantly, the current mound does not appear to have existed at the time the timbers were in place. There was therefore no "defensive" bank. In addition, any diagonal timber meeting the upright would have provided an attacker with assistance.

Nor could the timbers have played a part in holding accumulated earth on the current mound, because the accumulation seems to have only begun in earnest once the timbers had been removed. This fact also seems to rule out the possibility that the timbers were part of a small bridge or steps to the mound -- since neither a ditch nor a mound existed at the time the timbers were in place.

The size of the timbers, and the existence of a buttress suggest that a large structure may have existed on the site. Could this have been a large barn, perhaps?

The rectilinear shape of the mound might indicate such a large structure. But if the shape of the mound is in some way related to the shape of a large building on the site, then at some point, the building timbers were apparently robbed out, and earth heaped up over the site.

A final possibility, of course, is that the timbers formed part of a smaller free-standing structure which is not related in any way to the shape of the current mound.

The mound

Relatively soon after the apparent removal of the timbers, the shape of the current mound was formed, possibly in two phases.

As can be seen from the section, layer 3 has a clearly defined edge, exactly below the edge of the mound as it is today.

The current churchwarden, Alan Weedon, reports that the depth of topsoil in the graveyard, to the north of the mound, is usually no deeper than a foot or so, before the chalk marl and gravel is revealed.

A similar depth of topsoil is found in the back garden of Pippins, to the east of the mound, as was confirmed during the construction of a swimming pool 30 years ago.

Thus the depth of nearly 1.5 metres of deposits above the chalk marl under the mound is unusual, and suggests the artificial creation of the mound.

Perhaps earth was carted from the surrounding area in order to create the mound, perhaps over the site of a pre-existing building.

At that time, it is possible that the graveyard was not yet in use. The site of the current church was occupied by a chapel of ease prior to the mid-1400s, and the dead were buried in Great Sampford.

If a pre-existing site was deliberately covered over, is this evidence of a response to plague? Alternatively, it is possible that the area, whether within a barn or an open field, proved to be waterlogged, and the land was returned to effective agricultural use only following a mounding of earth to protect crops from the underlying springs.

The chalky feature at the top of layer 3

At the time of the creation of this feature, the timbers had been removed, and the first phase of mounding had been completed.

As seen in Figure 3, there is no clearly defined shape to the chalky feature. Although the feature may mark the edge of the mound, it seems more likely that it was simply a stray load of chalky marl. Only further excavation will reveal if this is a continuous feature along the bank of the mound.

Conclusion

The hilltop in Hempstead appears to have undergone phases of occupation during the Bronze and Iron Ages, but apparently none during Roman or early Anglo-Saxon periods.

There is evidence of nearby occupation for most of the medieval period, including some evidence for the existence of a large timber structure, possibly a barn.

It is likely, therefore, that the mounded moat and the land between it and the Church were the site of at least one of farmsteads referred to in the Domesday Book.

The site of the timber structure was later covered over with a mound of earth, possibly removed from surrounding land to the north and east.

The construction of the timber structure and the later mounding up of the site appear to have occurred within a relatively short time period, probably no greater than 300 years.

Despite its position, it seems the mound was returned to agricultural use in the mid- to late medieval period. The field is shown as pasture in the 1615 map, and appears to have remained in agricultural use ever since.

Hempstead
Resistivity
Traverses
2.5.1999

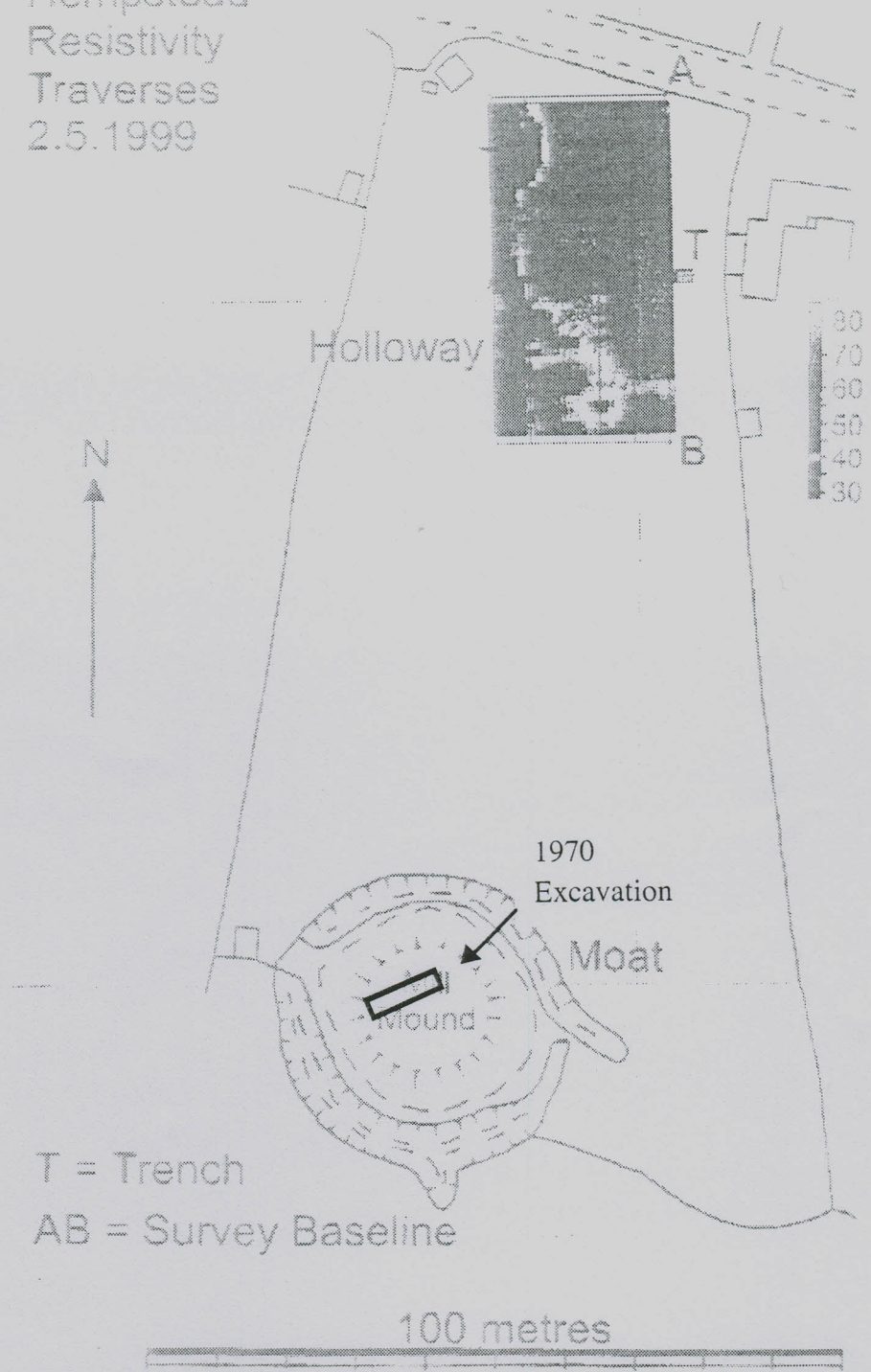


Figure 1: Resistivity survey, site of trench is marked by T

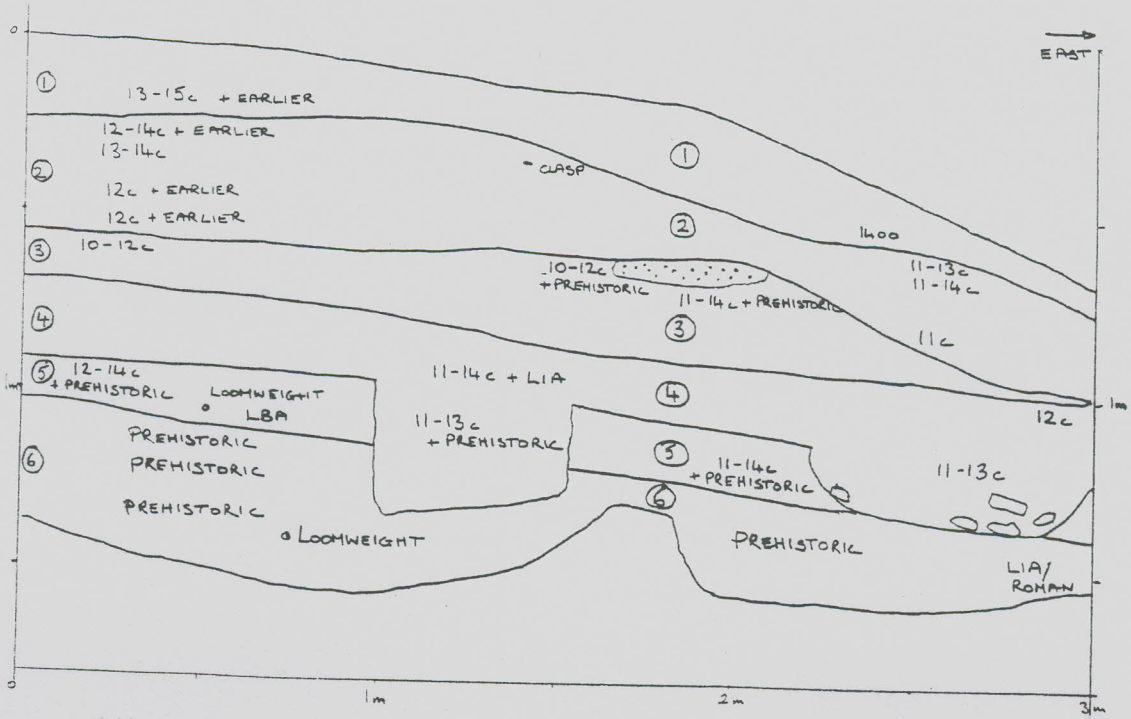


Figure 2:
Vertical section looking north

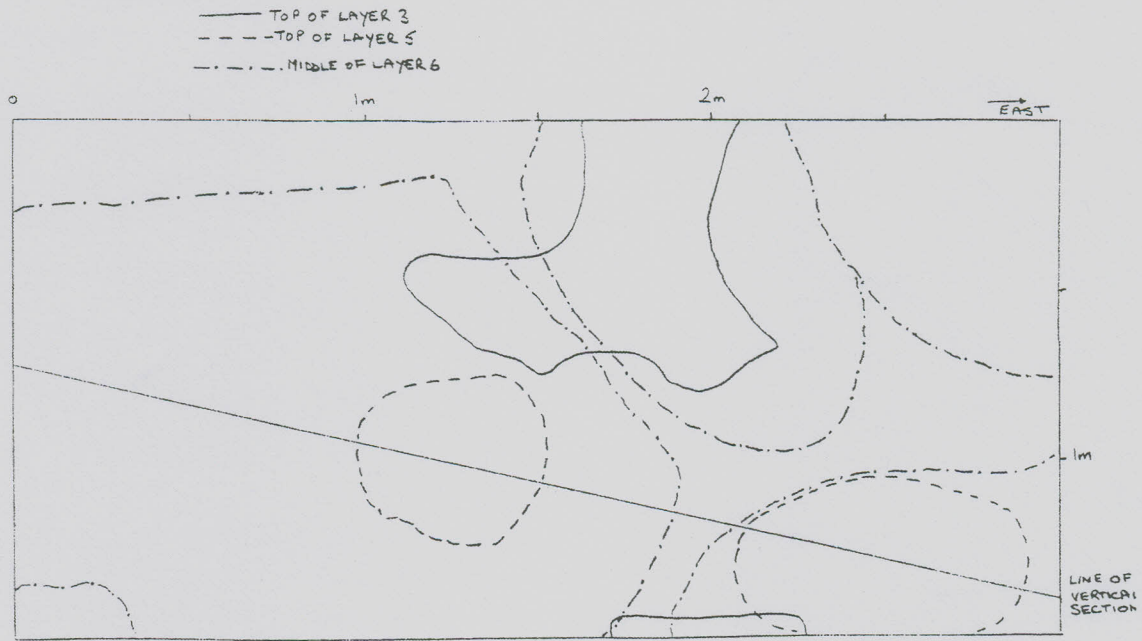


Figure 3: plan showing three levels with features

Please find enclosed a copy of the finds reports for Little Hempstead. You will see that reports have not been prepared for the bone and the flint. On examining them it was decided that they could contribute little to the overall understanding of the site, there is too little bone for assessing species representation and the flint is undiagnostic, although some may well derive from medieval or post-medieval knapping for wall building rather than being prehistoric.

**LITTLE HEMPSTEAD
FINDS REPORTS**

Catalogue of contexts containing pottery:

CONTEXT	PREHISTORIC POT	LATE IRON AGE / ROMAN POT	MEDIEVAL POT	POST-MEDIEVAL POT
1.4 slope			8	
1.4 summit			8	
2.1 slope			10	
2.1 summit			12	
2.2 slope			5	
2.2 summit			2	
2.3 summit			12	
2.4 slope			3	
2.4 summit			8	
3.1 level with wall	1		2	
3.1 summit to wall			12	
3.1 summit N. corner			2	
3.1 below wall			2	
3.2 W. wall area			3	
3.2 inside wall summit 2			5	
4.1 house end			1	
4.2 down post-hole	2		6	
4.2 within post-hole			3	
4.2 post-hole area			3	
4.3 Summit	5	2	3	
4.3 ditch end might be post-hole			3	
4.3 outer wall not in post-hole	2			
3.2 inside wall summit 2	1			
5.1 summit		3		
5.2 summit end	9		1	
5.2 post-hole 2 top of 5.1			3	
5.2 slope end		2		
5.3 summit noted in slope end	4		1	
5.4 Summit end	9	2		
5.4 slope end	3		2	
5.5 NE hole		1		
6.1.2 W. hole	7			
6.2.3 W. hole	1			
6.3 W. hole	1			
6.3 NE hole	2			
6.3.14 w. hole	1			
6.4 NE hole		1		

Prehistoric Pottery

By Nigel Brown

Approximately 50 sherds were recovered, mostly body sherds of small size but not particularly abraded. A range of flint and flint and sand-tempered fabrics are present. Context 5.3 produced a sherd of a small jar with a short upright rounded rim, with finger wiping on the exterior below the rim. Context 6.1 produced a rounded rim and context 6.3 a rim with slight internal bevel probably form a cup or small bowl. Neither the fabric nor rims are particularly diagnostic but an earlier Iron Age date may be suggested.

Late Iron Age and Roman pottery

By T.S. Martin

Excavations at Little Hempstead produced a total of ten sherds of Late Iron Age and Roman pottery weighing 37 grams. This material was recovered from a total of six 'contexts'. A total of three fabrics were identified, although the assemblage was so fragmentary that no individual vessel forms were recognised. The following fabrics were present (numbers after Going 1987): Fine grey wares (39), Sandy grey wares (47) and Grog-tempered wares (53). The contexts and quantities in which they occur are recorded below. Because of the absence of identifiable vessel forms none of the sherds can be dated any closer than Late Iron Age and Roman. The Grog-tempered wares are not likely to be later than mid-1st century AD in date, while the grey wares fall within the period AD43-400. Nothing more meaningful can be said about these sherds.

Catalogue

Pottery was recovered from the following 'contexts'.

Context	Fabric	Sherds	Wt. (g.)	Comments
4.3	Summit	53	2	Misc. body-sherds
5.1	Summit	47	3	Misc. body-sherds
5.2	Slope end	53	1	Jar rim, form uncertain
5.4	Summit end	47	1	Body-sherds
		39	1	Body-sherds
5.5	NE hole	53	1	Body-sherds
6.4	NE hole	39	1	Body-sherds

Late Saxon and Medieval Pottery

By H. Walker

Context	The Pottery	Wt (g)	Date range
1:4 slope	1 sherd early medieval ware; 6 sherds medieval coarse ware including an E5A cooking pot rim, a type datable to the late 13th to 14th centuries; 1 sherd ?Cambridgeshire sgraffito ware showing line of sgraffito decoration; all small and abraded sherds	33	?14th C + earlier
1:4 summit	1 sherd early medieval ware; 5 sherds medieval coarse ware; 1 sherd Suffolk buff ware; 1 sherd sandy orange ware flanged jar rim with internal clear glaze – NW Essex type, late medieval; all small abraded sherds	32	14th to 15th C + earlier
2:1 slope	3 sherds early medieval ware; 7 sherds medieval coarse ware – all small abraded sherds	36	12th to 13th C
2:1 summit	1 sherd St Neots-type ware; 1 sherd unglazed slip-painted sandy orange ware, 13th to 14th C; 10 sherds medieval coarse ware including an early to mid-13th century type H2 cooking pot rim, all small abraded sherds	68	13th to 14th C + earlier
2:2 slope	5 sherds medieval coarse ware, small abraded sherds	11	12th to 14th C

Summary of Late Saxon and medieval pottery

A small amount of pottery, 126 sherds weighing 542g was found. Only small amounts of pottery were excavated from individual contexts, and the sherds tend to be small and abraded, indicating they are residual. The presence of prehistoric sherds in some contexts (especially 5:) is also an indicator of residuality. It would therefore appear that at least some of the pottery is redeposited, making dating of the features difficult. The largest amount of pottery comes from site 2.

Sites 3, 4 and 5 produced combinations of only three wares; St Neots-type ware, early medieval ware and medieval coarse ware. St Neots-type ware is a Late Saxon fabric dating from c.900 to the 12th century, and was made from Jurassic clays naturally containing fossil shell fragments including those of bryozoa. It has a wide distribution in the east and south Midlands, and is sometimes found in north-west Essex. St Neots-type ware is a relatively common find here but mostly occurs with later coarse wares, indicating either that the St Neots-type ware is residual, or that it is occurring at the extreme end of its date range. Forms comprise two everted jar rims.

Medieval coarse ware is very common, and occurs in almost every context. This is a type of sand-tempered coarse ware made from the 12th to 14th centuries and is generally grey-firing, although buff or reddish examples also occur. Much of this pottery is probably Heddingham coarse ware, made at production sites in the area of Sible Heddingham in north Essex. The only vessel type found here is the cooking pot, and cooking pot rim types dating from c.1200 to the late 13th/14th century are present. Early medieval ware dating from the 10th to 13th centuries is also relatively common. This is a coarse sand-tempered ware, with typically orange-brown surfaces and a grey core.

Site 2 produced sherds from sandy orange ware jugs dating to the 13th to 14th centuries. The latest pottery comes from site 1, where finds include a late medieval sandy orange ware jar rim and a sherd of Cambridgeshire sgraffito ware. Cambridgeshire sgraffito ware is a type of sandy orange ware decorated by scoring lines through a coating of thick cream slip to reveal the colour of the pot body beneath. It is thought to have been made in Cambridgeshire during the 14th to early 15th centuries, (although it may also have been made in other areas) and is relatively common in north-west Essex. Also found on site 1 was a sherd of Suffolk buff ware, a hard, thin-walled, buff coloured ware, found at sites around the Essex/Suffolk border, and perhaps dating from the 14th century.

Copper Alloy finds By H. Major

2.1 Summit	Hinged book clasp. A very well preserved example, with some leather surviving in the strap end. The patinas of the clasp and strap end are different, showing that two different alloys were used. This is very similar to, though slightly larger than, a book clasp from London (Egan and Pritchard 1991, 154 no.720), the only significant difference being that the present example has a hollow at the back of the terminal. The type comes from late 14 th – early 15 th century contexts in London. L. 41mm, max. W.11mm.
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Daub by H. Major

3.1 Summit N. corner	Fragment of chalky daub with a well smoothed ridged surface.
4.2 Down post-hole	Six small fragments of chalky daub
5.4 Slope end	Two fragments of chalky daub

These fragments of baked clay containing small fragments of chalk are typical of structural daub from this area. The fabric is intrinsically undatable, though they could well be medieval.

Baked clay by H. Major

5.4 Summit end	A fragment with a convex surface, in a fairly sandy fabric. There are two small holes close to each other. One is definitely deliberate, piercing the surviving thickness (16mm) and 5mm in diameter. The other is incomplete, about the same
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2:2 summit	1 sherd St Neots-type ware; 1 sherd sandy orange ware showing horizontal slip-painting and glaze, probably from neck of a jug, 13th to 14th C; 8 sherds medieval coarse ware	48	13th to 14th C + earlier
2:3 summit	2 sherds St Neots-type ware including an everted flanged jar rim; 2 sherds early medieval ware including sherd with wavy line combing; 8 sherds medieval coarse ware including a sagging base most likely from a cooking pot and a B2 cooking pot rim datable to c.1200; sherds relatively unabraded	92	c.1200 + earlier
2:4 slope	1 sherd abraded St Neots-type ware; 2 sherds early medieval ware, one showing wavy line combing, common in the 12th to early 13th C	16	?12th C
2:4 summit	2 abraded sherds St Neots-type ware; 2 sherds early medieval ware; 4 sherds medieval coarse ware including two joining sherds from a B2-type cooking pot rim	64	c.1200 + earlier
3:1 level with wall	1 sherd abraded St Neots-type ware; 1 sherd early medieval ware (+ prehistoric)	9	10th to 12th C
3:1 summit to wall	9 sherds very abraded ?St Neots-type ware; 3 sherds abraded medieval coarse ware	23	?12th C
3:1 summit N. corner	2 joining sherds from St Neots-type ware everted jar rim, internally fire-blackened on inside of rim, unabraded sherds	10	10th to 12th C
3:1 below wall	2 sherds medieval coarse ware	12	12th to 14th C
3:2 W. wall area	1 sherd St Neots-type ware; 2 sherds medieval coarse ware, all abraded sherds	5	12th C or later
3:2 inside wall summit 2	4 sherds St Neots-type ware including neck of vessel; 1 sherd medieval coarse ware with wavy line combing (+ prehistoric)	12	?12th C
4:1 house end	1 sherd medieval coarse ware very similar to sherd in 2:4 summit	5	c.1200
4:2 within post-hole	3 small sherds medieval coarse ware	3	12th to 14th C
4:2 post-hole area	all tiny abraded sherds: 1 sherd St Neots-type ware; 2 sherds medieval coarse ware (+ ?Late Iron Age)	3	?12th C
4:2 down post-hole	3 sherds early medieval ware; 3 sherds medieval coarse ware (+ prehistoric)	17	12th – 13th C
4:3 ditch end might be post-hole 2	2 sherds early medieval ware; 1 sherd medieval coarse ware	14	12th – 13th C
4:3 summit	1 sherd St Neots-type ware; 2 sherds medieval coarse ware; (+ prehistoric and Late Iron Age)	5	?12th C
5:2 post-hole 2 top of 5:1	1 sherd St Neots-type ware; 2 sherds early medieval ware; 1 sherd medieval coarse ware	12	?12th C
5:2 summit end	1 sherd medieval coarse ware (+ prehistoric)	7	12th to 14th C
5:3 summit noted in slope end	1 sherd Hedingham coarse ware – fine version (+ prehistoric)	2	13th to 14th C
5:4 slope end	2 abraded sherds medieval coarse ware; (+ prehistoric)	3	12th to 14th C
		542g	

Layer 2. Paler brown, more clay-like. Contained small flecks of charcoal and burnt clay. The downslope (eastern) element of layer 2 was probably material which has eroded from the summit, mixed with topsoil. The layer contained no features.

Layer 3. Grey/brown, clay-like fill.

In level 3, there was a shallow chalky feature emerging from the northern section and extending approximately 75 cm into the trench. It was associated with a few flint stones about the size of a fist. It is possible this feature represents footings of a retaining wall in line with the north-south axis of the eastern edge of the mound.

Larger pieces of charcoal were found beneath the feature.

It is equally possible that the feature is due to a stray load of chalk and flint boulders deposited during the construction of the mound.

Layers 1, 2 and 3 contribute most to the current shape of the mound.

Layer 4. Orange coloured clay with chalk pebbles. The layer contained no features, but at its base exposed two clearly defined postholes, apparently dug into level 5. The fill in the postholes was contiguous with level 4, with no discernible stratification within the postholes.

There was no evidence of the posthole in layer 3, so it must be assumed that the timber had decayed or been robbed out prior to the construction of the higher levels.

Layer 5. Paler orange clay. Some finger-thick pieces of charcoal.

Layer 6. Dark grey clay, and the only layer not to contain medieval pottery. The top of the fill is presumably what remains of deposits prior to the medieval activity. The pits appear to be cut into the chalk marl, and can probably be considered evidence of prehistoric excavation.

A detailed list of the pottery dating from the Archaeology Unit at Chelmsford is appended.

Discussion

A key finding is the relatively late date of sherds found at the base of layer 5 -- dated to between 1200 and 1400. It is also noteworthy that nothing below layer 1 dates later than 1500 or so (the book clasp).

The implication seems to be that layers 5 through to 2, i.e. the bulk of the mound, the postholes and the chalk/rubble feature, were formed over a relatively short period between perhaps 1200 and 1500.

There were no signs of rabbit burrows or tree roots that may have permitted the migration of the medieval sherds to such a low point in the profile.

It seems likely therefore that the mound was created in the medieval period, and apparently during a period no greater than 300 years.

Prehistoric activity

The prehistoric pottery finds confirm human activity on the Hempstead hilltop at some point during the Bronze and Iron Ages, and perhaps during the Roman period.

Permanent settlement at some point during these periods seems to be indicated not only by the presence of pottery, but especially the loomweights.