



Understanding Ospringe

Report for Keyholes 85 A to H (Transect)

Brook Cottages Field, Ospringe, Faversham

Grid References:

K85A: TR 00206 60216
K85B: TR 00195 60225
K85C: TR 00184 60222
K85D: TR 00170 60229

K85E: TR 00159 60233
K85F: TR 00147 60240
K85G: TR 00216 60213
K85H: TR 00162 60240



View south towards transect:
diggers mark excavation points.

Brook Cottages just before
demolition, 1960s. Looking
westwards towards church.



1. Introduction

This line of small excavations was part of a research project aimed at investigating the possibility of prehistoric settlement on the east side of the middle Westbrook valley in Ospringe village.

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 Forstal (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 and madder grinding and / or gunpowder production.

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 Age.³ 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

2. Location of excavations

During the 2009 FSARG investigation of the Westbrook stream we were able to perform a geophysical survey on the east side of the valley at the demolition site of a pair of semi-detached thatched cottages, Brook Cottages (**Figs 1 & 2**). These were situated opposite the church Bier House.⁶ The level nature of this dwelling site at the foot of the valley east side and raised above the stream suggested a possibly ancient river bank settlement site and therefore worth re-visiting.

We were also able to examine the archaeology of the complete valley side at this location as the whole field had been made available to us. To achieve this extended research aim, a series of six keyhole pits (K85A to F) were excavated at 10m intervals down the valley side (see cover picture). Jim and Suzanne shared overall supervision but each team member had the opportunity to take responsibility for an individual keyhole, with Jim and Suzanne joining in with the keyhole K85H 14m to the north of K85E and an additional one on the hill top K85G. Keyholes (E), (F) and (H) were in the area of the site of the demolished cottages.

This approach was good for all FSARG diggers but particularly for Harvey who had joined us last year and has now gone off to Reading University to read Archaeology, and for 2011 new comer Anna who is starting her pursuit of archaeology with university hopes for next year. Due to the very dry spring and summer and the underlying chalk geology, the clay dominated ground at the base of the slope was extremely hard and Anna said that although she helped find some good pottery and flint finds she also learnt how to trowel concrete!

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

² website op cit: reports 43-65

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

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

⁵ website op.cit. plan for 2011

⁶ website op. cit. report for OA65, Bier House



Fig 1: 1865 map⁷ showing Brook Cottages, springs and willow-lined streams. The red line is the transect , with a branch off to K85H.



Fig 2: Brook Cottages in around 1900 view looking westwards across the valley to the church.⁸

3. The procedures

The transect pits were sited 10m apart in a line up the hill slope starting with (F) 5m east of the boundary fence at the foot of the slope. The alignment was taken from two utility poles, one on the road near the church (BT-telephone) and one (electricity) in the valley floor near (F). Initially each pit was a 0.6m square, pegged out using the planning square and the area delineated marked with string. The position of the transect line was further recorded by measuring to mapped points of the field boundary.

Turf was removed from the squares and set aside to enable reinstatement. The pits were then hand excavated using single contexts, each of which was fully recorded. The keyholes down the slope (G and A to D) were excavated to the natural chalk surface. (E) was excavated to our maximum safety depth of 1.2 metres, and (F) with ledged access, the solid nature of the ground and managed excavation, was taken down to 1.65m. The excavation of (H) was time limited but taken down to 0.98m. All excavated soil

⁷ OS 1865 (1904 reprint) Sheet XXXIV Scale 1:2500

⁸ Photograph from Faversham Society archive

was sieved meticulously, and the spoil heaps scanned using a metal detector. Finds were set aside for each context and finally, the spoil was put back in, tamped down, and the turf replaced.

Later in the excavation, K85G at the top of the hill was extended west (towards the hill slope) to 1m, as an undulation in the chalk debris surface had seemed to be a cut feature or wheel rut (it was not). K85F was extended at 40cm down [05] to become 1m x 1m and at 45cm the northern 40cm was left as a ledge across the 1m length to enable deeper excavation into the lower hard, clay-dominated, layers. K85H was 1m x 0.75m.

At the completion of all excavations in the transect K85G and K85A to F, the depth of the chalk below ground level was measured in the SE corner of each. In K85E and F this was done by driving a steel rod progressively into the south-eastern reference corner and noting when clear indication of the solid chalk became visible on the point. In K85F, this was not achieved at a total depth of 2.45m with the length of rod available (80cm). **Figs 1 & 3** show the full transect surveyed and the underlying chalk surface depths. **Figs 4 & 5** show the natural chalk surface.

4. The findings

In all keyholes, the [3] context was a layer of crushed chalk pieces and gravel with a little light brown clay and of similar thickness 10cm to 15cm in all keyholes. This context also contained a number of larger (up to 12cm x 10cm x 8cm) flints, with the flints on the slope often in their natural undamaged state. The [3] contexts on the platform had a higher proportion of clay to chalk. The [2] layers above this were grey-brown friable soil with less chalk gravel flecks and fewer flint pieces, with [1] being the turf layer.

At K85G and A to D, context [3] was directly on top of the natural chalk geology and hence base of the archaeology. At K85E and F, the [3] layer had less chalk – indeed, K85E and F were the deepest excavations with their bases not reaching the underlying chalk, and are dealt with below.

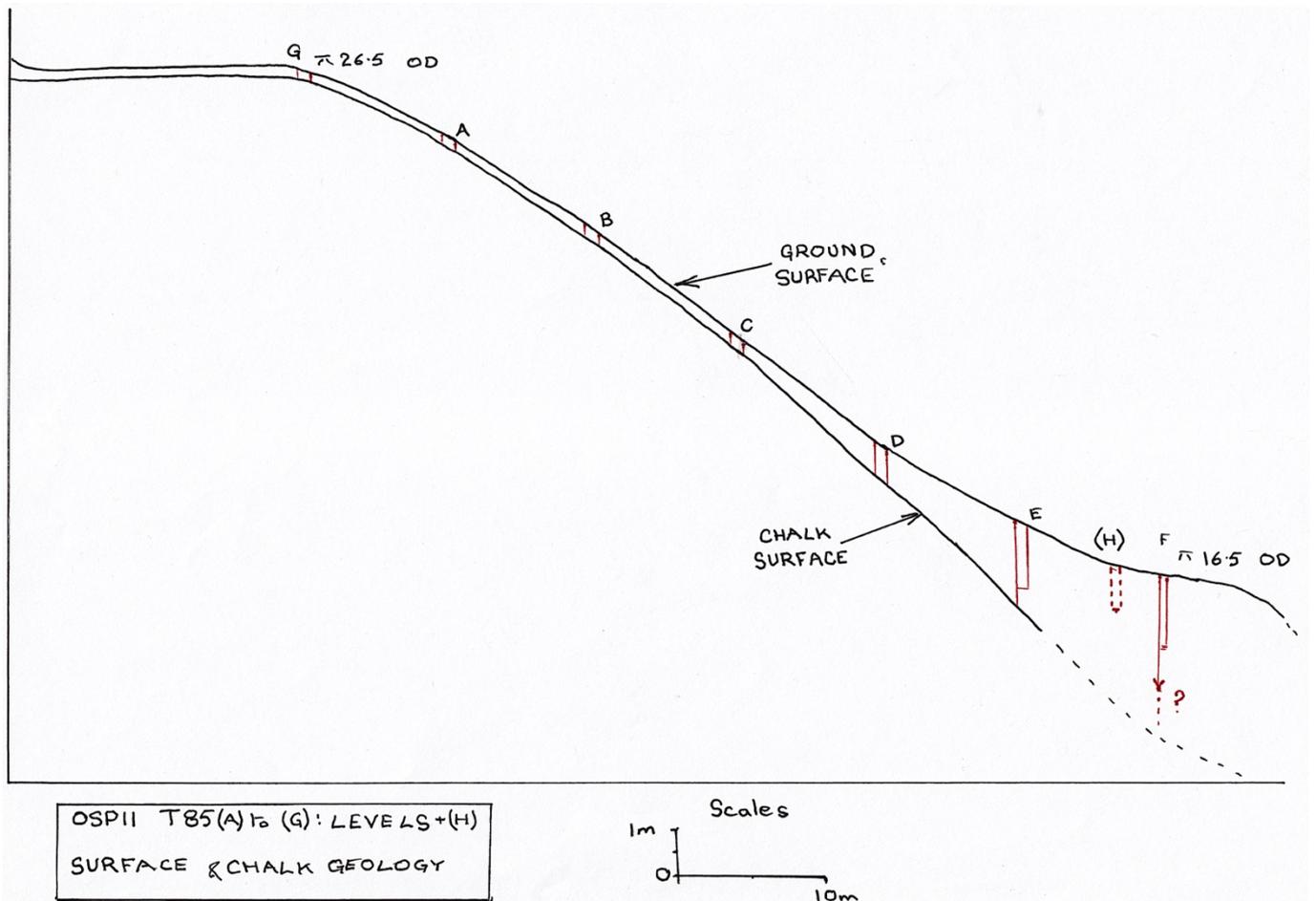


Fig 3: Surface Chalk and Geology.



Fig 4: The chalk base of two pits: on the left, K85B, on the right, downslope, K85D.



Fig 5: K85E, at the base of the slope. No chalk visible.

a) K85E:

Here the lowest context [8] at 1.47m had an orange-brown clay matrix with a chalk gravel content, greater towards the bottom. Above this, from 53cm to 32cm, [7] was a layer of clay-dominated soil with small chalk and charcoal flecks throughout. A cat burial was cut into the surface of [7] at 32cm.

b) K85F:

Contexts [6 / 7] at 1.65m, like K85E, had an orange-brown clay matrix with a chalk gravel content. Similarly, above this was [5] from 90cm to 35cm with layers of clay-dominated soil with small chalk and charcoal flecks. Context [4] was a thin (1cm) concentrated layer of charcoal and darker soil within context [3], from 35cm down to 20cm down. Here context [3] itself had black flecks throughout and was overlying [5].

With regard to finds generally, of particular interest is that worked-flints, ranging from waste flake pieces to small scrapers and blade pieces were found in all of these keyholes. In all excavations and most contexts, the range of worked flint material is good, although few pieces are finished tools. The extensive presence of heat-stressed flint (pot-boilers) is also of interest being present at nearly all keyholes and their contexts.

Those keyholes on the hill slope K85G, A, B, and C were similar in that although they had early medieval and late post-medieval sherds, they had little other evidence in the shallow soil covering the chalk geology. The extension of K85G at the top of the slope produced a single piece of early medieval pottery. K85D at the break point of the slope and platform had early medieval and later pottery in greater quantities than on the slope possibly here associated with some down-hill movement.

The platform keyholes 85 E, F and H, had a greater diversity of dateable finds, with prehistoric, Roman, medieval, post medieval and modern evidence being present. Although K85H was relatively shallow at 98cm, it had the same range of finds as the upper contexts of K85E and K85F. There was no evidence of dwelling activity in this area in the period between the Roman and the early medieval period.



Fig 6: Prehistoric pottery from K85E, F and H, mostly flint tempered.

Tile, and other building material, brick fragments, nails etc., were found in all pits but particularly at K85D, E, F and H. All keyholes had coal / clinker and shell, only K85G had no bone, only K85B had no iron. Vessel and window glass were concentrated in the garden sites K85D, E, F and H mainly in contexts [2] and [3]. As would be expected in this area K85D, E, F and H had clay tobacco pipe stem pieces with only two small pieces found on the slope.

5. Interpretation

Fig 3, the section of the valley east side, and map **Fig 1** show the locations of the keyholes excavated. **Fig 3** also shows the depth of the geological chalk forming the archaeological base. Other than the cottages and their associated gardens which appear on the 1865 map, **Fig 1**, there is no historical documentary evidence of occupation on the line of the transect and this is reflected in the range of finds from the slope keyholes. For example, although all excavations had medieval sherds and 19th - 20th century sherds, by far the largest quantities were from the platform area covered by K85D, E, F and H. This was to be expected for a long-established site with garden and rubbish pit activity, including in later years the toilet pit being moved around the garden (This latter was seen by comparing different photographs and confirmed during talks with a previous resident of the cottages when FSARG met local people in 2009). The charcoal layer [4] within context [3] of K85F was probably a 19th / 20th century garden bonfire site away from the thatched roofing of the cottages and was dated by the 19th century pottery sherds found within the context.

The tile, mortar and ceramic building material (CBM) and iron (mainly nails) found particularly at the bottom of K85E and top of K85D may be associated with demolition of outbuildings as seen on the 1965 map or general garden activity but, as with that in K85F and H, is more likely associated with the demolition of Brook Cottages themselves in the 1960s. The CBM in K85G could also be from this but is more likely to be hill top cart-track stabilisation. The few small pieces of lead and copper alloy may also be from demolition but as with the coal, slag / clinker, window and vessel glass (only as traces on the hillside) and, of course, post medieval pottery it is also likely associated with domestic rubbish disposal during the known period of occupation of the cottages.



Fig 7: Medieval pottery from most pits: bottom of the slope pits on the left, early medieval shelly ware in the lower half of the photograph.

Most of the later medieval pottery in the upper half is local Tyler Hill sandy ware, some of it early 13th century shell dusted ware.

The unexpected presence of significant quantities of shell-tempered early medieval pottery (AD 1050-1225) in the platform area, however, suggests an earlier dwelling than the known Brook Cottages. The relatively large size and sharp breaks of the early and later medieval sherds do not seem to be associated with classic medieval 'midden scatter' compost field fertilizing, and much more likely associated with kitchen waste and garden toilet deposits. Further open area excavation would be needed to explore this possibility.

Finally, the presence of worked flints in all keyholes does, as hypothesised, indicate prehistoric activity on this eastern side of the valley. Although actual occupational evidence was not found on the hillside itself, Roman and pre-historic pottery sherds were found in the platform level keyholes, suggesting near continuous occupation in this favoured spot overlooking the springs.

6. Final comments

The opportunity to examine the site of Brook cottages had long been an aim of the FSARG director Dr Pat Reid and the bonus of being able to transect the whole slope of the eastern valley side was very satisfying for all concerned. The presence of early medieval pottery found at the dwelling site has promoted questions about the occupation of this river terrace site added to by the few fragments of Roman and significant amounts of pre-historic pottery sherds. More thinking and document searching needed here, we think.

Finding the worked flints confirms our view that both sides of the Westbrook valley were active areas throughout the pre-historic period. The knowledge gained from these keyholes into its past will add greatly to the growing data set for pre-historic Ospringe and its fascinating Westbrook valley.

7. Acknowledgments

Thanks to Marian Tester from all the team for this opportunity, which not only gave us valuable information but gave the opportunity for community archaeology to '*do what it says on the tin*', enabling the local people of FSARG and Ospringe village, the land owner and interested neighbours all to learn about and enjoy discovering the past of our locality.

Jim Reid and Suzanne Miles.

12.11.11