

Late Bronze Age waterlogged remains at Willingdon Levels, Sussex

Christopher Greatorex

Remains of a timber platform and trackway were discovered in 1995 at the edge of the Pevensey Marshes in Southeast England.

The platform is the first of its type to be found in the region, and the objects excavated include an exceptionally well preserved metal hook still attached to its wooden handle, which has been radiocarbon dated to the ninth century BC.

Outstanding archaeological remains, preserved by waterlogging and dated to the Late Bronze Age, have been discovered on the site of the new Shinewater Neighbourhood Park near Eastbourne in East Sussex. The site is located on the Willingdon Levels, a flat region of lowland on the western margins of Pevensey Marshes (see Fig. 1 on p. 16). The Levels are protected by a shingle bank known as the Crumbles and consist of "unconsolidated clays and silts, with a thin peat horizon at c. +1.5 m OD".¹ Together with an overlying deposit of alluvium, this layer of peat has protected some of the best preserved prehistoric remains in Sussex.

However, the Levels are now subject to considerable change, because of the construction of the park and associated improvements to the A22 road. Wetland landscapes are being destroyed throughout the British Isles and many of the remaining

waterlogged environments are under threat. This is regrettable, because waterlogged deposits tend to preserve organic materials and thus wetlands can yield discoveries of archaeological structures and artefacts unrepresented on dryland sites.

Archaeological evaluation

Before development, Willingdon Levels had been the subject of a desk-based archaeological assessment undertaken by East Sussex County Council. No evidence was found during this study to indicate the existence of any archaeological deposits. However, in September 1995, a Late Bronze Age timber platform and associated trackway were revealed during landscaping work on the site of the new park, and the Institute of Archaeology Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned to evaluate and record the archaeological potential of these remarkably well preserved remains.

The exposed platform was built of large

oak posts driven vertically into the fresh-water peat and underlying marine clay. These uprights were associated with horizontal timbers, which had been placed into the top of the peat to form the base of the platform. This base supported horizontal rods and intermittent layers of brushwood. A 200 mm thick "cultural" layer was located directly above the platform surface. A large quantity of Late Bronze Age pottery and other artefacts indicative of occupation in the ninth century BC were recovered from this deposit. Three raised clay hearths were also situated on the platform. During the evaluation, several copper-alloy items were discovered within the peat. These included four axes, a chisel, a bracelet and what was identified originally as a sickle with an intact wooden handle.

The reed hook and other finds

On the basis of recent ethnographic records of farmers still using traditional technologies and tools, Gordon Hillman of the Institute of Archaeology has suggested that the sickle is in fact a reed hook (Fig. 1). The metal blade of the hook may be closest to the "Thames" series described by Fox.² The short blade would have facilitated the efficient cutting of reeds and rushes, especially the tough common reed (*Phragmites australis*), and the crooked end of the handle would have helped to prevent the implement from slipping or pulling from the grasp of the user (Hillman, personal communication). The wood of the handle has been identified as field maple (*Acer*

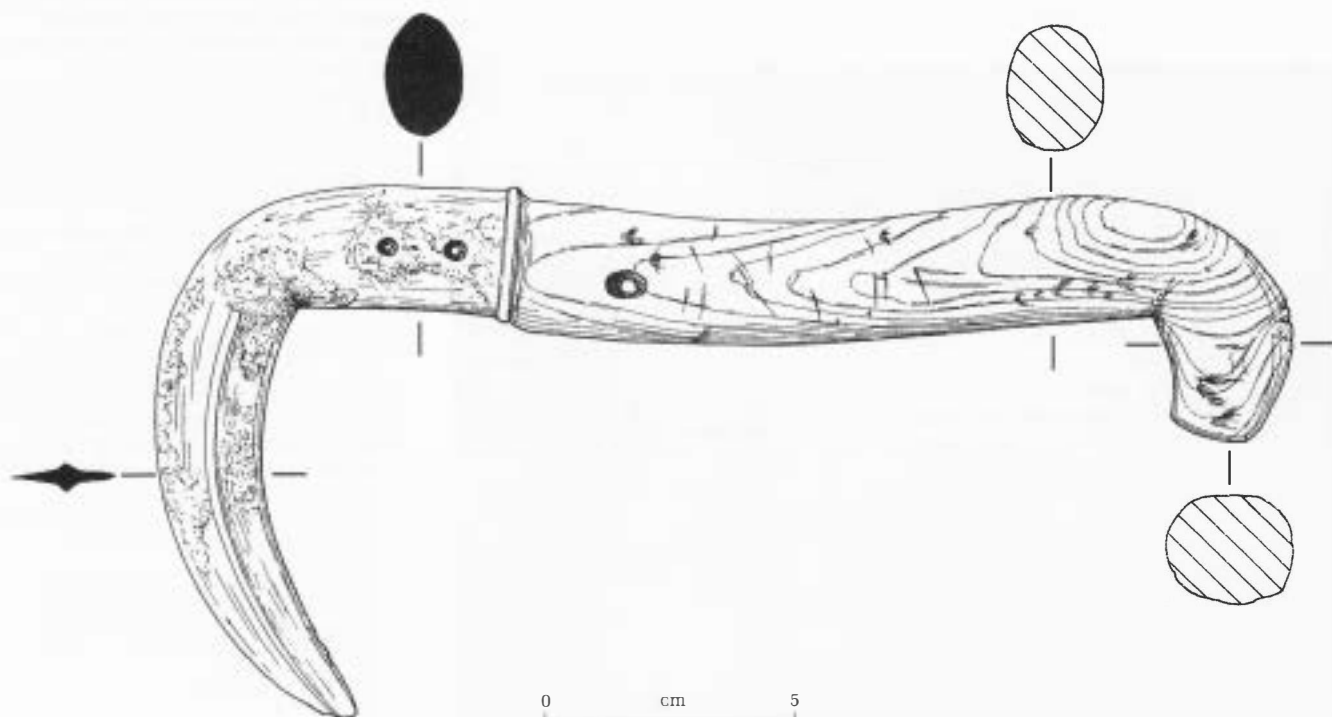


Figure 1 Scale drawing of the Late Bronze Age reed hook from East Sussex, with its wooden handle still attached to its metal blade.

campestre), and it has been directly dated by the Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit at Oxford to 2655 ± 50 cal BP. This accords closely with a radiocarbon date produced by the British Museum for a horizontal timber from the platform, and it confirms that the site was used in the ninth century BC.

The hafted hook is a unique artefact and promises to be of exceptional importance for demonstrating functional aspects of use. Indeed, wear analyses may help to determine the reasons for deposition of many of the metal objects. The stratigraphic spread of the bronze artefacts found, both above and below the platform surface, may indicate that some of them were deliberately dug into the peat from a higher level. It may therefore be valid to suggest that at least some of the higher-status artefacts at the platform site were deposited ritually. There is plenty of evidence of ritual deposition in European prehistory, in both mainland Europe and the British Isles. For example, the waterlogged Bronze Age site at Flag Fen near Peterborough in Cambridgeshire has yielded many artefacts that were apparently deposited ritually.³

Archaeological potential of the site

In addition to the work undertaken on the platform, the Field Archaeology Unit has also excavated a 60m length of the associated trackway (Fig. 2). This structure consisted of horizontal timbers, located in the top 50mm of the Willingdon peat, and its timbers were associated with three parallel rows of *in situ* vertical oak posts. The structures and artefacts associated with the platform site offer possibilities for research far surpassing those of any dryland prehistoric site in Southeast England. However, the platform should not be examined as an isolated activity area, but instead considered as an integral component of the wider landscape. The validity of this argument has been emphasized by the recent discovery on the Levels of two more prehistoric alignments. These probable trackways have been radiocarbon dated to 1440–1310 and 2460–2205 cal BC.

An intensive excavation and analysis of the waterlogged remains within their contemporary environment would enable a previously unrecorded prehistoric landscape to be reconstructed. This would provide a unique opportunity to extend our understanding of the social, economic and ideological factors that underpinned Late Bronze Age society in Southeast England. Further research on the Willingdon Levels can make a significant contribution to both wetland archaeology and our knowledge of prehistoric Sussex.

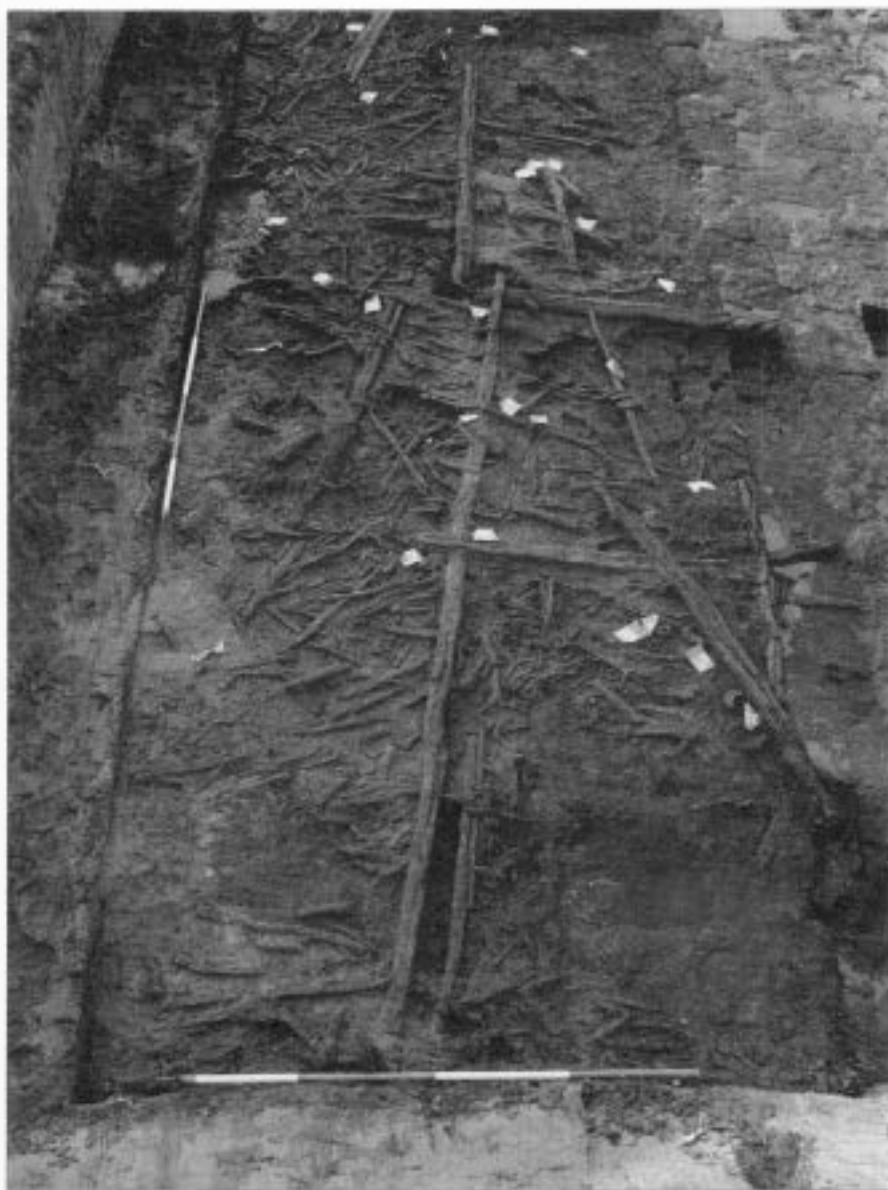


Figure 2 Part of the 60m length of waterlogged Bronze Age trackway excavated at Willingdon Levels, dated to the ninth century BC (scale bar intervals 50cm).

Notes

1. See p. 12 in S. Jennings & C. Smyth, "The origin and development of Langrey Point: a study of Flandrian coastal and sea-level change", *Quaternary Newsletter* 45, 12–21, 1985.
2. See p. 227 in C. Fox, "Socketed bronze sickles of the British Isles", *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 5, 222–48, 1939.
3. See pp. 528–9 in F. Pryor et al., "Current research at Flag Fen, Peterborough", *Antiquity* 66, 439–531, 1992.

Acknowledgements

A preliminary assessment of the special finds was made by Stuart Needham of the British Museum. The reed hook was drawn by Jane Russell of the Field Archaeology Unit, and an investigation of the treatment needed to conserve it was undertaken by Ann Brysbaert, a conservation student at the Institute.