

IRON AGE AND MEDIEVAL SITES AT ST. NICHOLAS, HYTHE

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The site (N.G.R. TR, 1550.3495) lies in the parish of Hythe, Kent some 650 m. west of St. Leonard's Parish Church. It occupies an area of rough ground on the north side of Sir John Moore Avenue. On the east is Radcliffe Court and on the west is Barrack Hill (Fig. 1). The plot lies on a steep slope of unstable, degraded cliff formed of Wealden Clay and Lower Greensand strata between the 15 to 24 m. contours.

During 1978, planning consent was granted for residential development and in September work, involving land clearance, construction of access roads and the excavation of main sewers, commenced. An immediate visit was made by the Unit and with the ready consent of Mr. Jameson, the site-agent for Shorncliffe Construction Ltd., the Unit was allowed full access for watching and recording during the development.

The Unit's "Sites and Monuments Record" for Kent, showed that the area was very close to the presumed site of St. Nicholas Church, Hythe, marked by a cross on the Ordnance Survey map for 1901. (Ref. 1). It seemed likely that the development might reveal the church, or the limits of the associated graveyard.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks must be given to the developers, Shorncliffe Construction Ltd., and in particular to their site agent Mr. Jameson, for their ready co-operation. Thanks are also due to Shepway Council for their advice and support. I am grateful to members of the Kent Archaeological Rescue Unit for their excavation and recording under the direction of Brian Philp and the writer; namely Miss D. Ashby, Messrs. K. Farrell and K. Moat. The plan and sections have been prepared by Mike Dutto and the finds drawn by Joy Wheeler.

THE WORK

It was clear from the observation of the main sewer trench to the north of "Frenchmans Field", that the land had slipped on many occasions. In several places, odd human bone fragments were showing in previously disturbed soil and at one point a grave had been largely destroyed by the trench. Nothing, however, was found of the church itself, or of any enclosure wall for a graveyard. However, an Iron Age ditch, several medieval features and a medieval grave were recorded.

DITCH 1. (Fig. 2).

This ditch was seen in the face of a terrace cut into the hillside along the extreme northern edge of the site. It lay 45 m. east of the north-west corner of the site and Barrack Hill. It was traced for a minimum distance of 20 m. eastwards from this point, where it ran into the side of the terrace cut. To the south-west it was destroyed by the builders' cutting. The drawn section represents a broad, oblique cut through the ditch with a filling of dark brown sandy-loam and carbon (L-2). This layer was 20 to 40 cm. thick and overlay a primary layer of

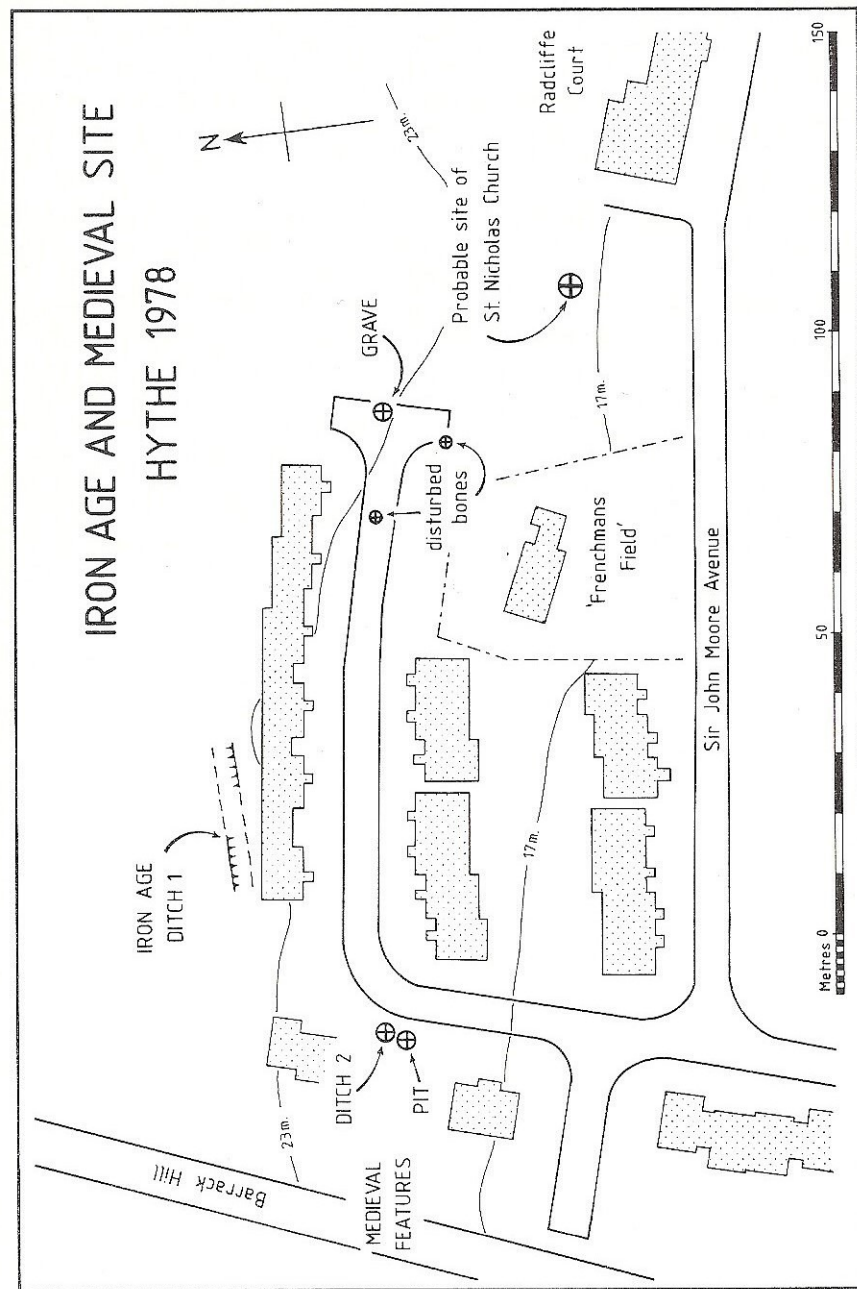


Fig. 1. Plan showing Iron Age and Medieval Sites, St Nicholas, Hythe.

light brown loam and sand (L-3). The ditch had a flatish V-shaped profile and was set on an east-west axis. It was at least 6.00 m. wide, 1.20 m. deep (min.) with sloping sides and a flat base. It contained daub, animal bones and 49 sherds of flint-tempered Iron Age pottery dated to c. 500–350 B.C. (Fig. 3, Nos. 1 to 5). It was sealed by a deposit of light brown clay-loam and carbon (L-1), containing daub, oyster shells, animal bones, iron nails and pottery sherds – Iron Age, Roman and largely medieval in date (Fig. 3, Nos. 6 and 7).

It was not possible to cut into the terraced bank due to the instability of the subsoil, which in places had already started to collapse due to heavy rainfall and natural springs on the hillside.

THE MEDIEVAL FEATURES

On the west side of the site a north-south face was exposed in a cut to construct a new access road. At a point 26.15 m. east of Barrack Hill and 29.35 m. south of the northern limit of the site, several medieval features were exposed in the section face. These were measured northwards along the section face from this point (hereafter called point 'A') to a point 26.85 m. east of Barrack Hill and 16 m. south of the site's northern limit.

The features were a pit, a ditch and a general deposit of medieval date and all lay above, or were cut into, a series of clay bands which may represent natural landslips.

THE PIT (Fig. 2).

Centre 3.40 m. north of point 'A'. As it was only seen in the section face the shape remains uncertain. The section was 74 cm. wide, 60 cm. deep, with sloping sides and an angular base. Its filling consisted of a sticky grey clay, plus pebbles and sandstone lumps (L-3), but no finds.

DITCH 2 (Fig. 2).

Centre 6 m. north of point 'A'. Only seen in the section face, it was 2.40 m. wide on an east-west axis, with sloping sides and a flatish base. Its filling of a mixed brown and grey clay plus sandstone lumps (L-2) contained pottery sherds of medieval date, unfortunately too fragmentary for illustration.

The ditch cut a general medieval deposit of a stained grey-brown clay (L-4) which was traced from 6.90 m. to 9.30 m. north of point 'A' and which contained sherds of medieval pottery (Fig. 3, No. 8) dated to c. A.D. 1300. To the south the ditch appeared to seal the Pit.

THE GRAVE

Located in the east-west sewer-pipe trench, at a point where it turned north in the hammer-head at the east end of the road. It lay on an east-west axis, was ovoid in plan and had a minimum length of 1 m., a minimum width of 41 cm. and was 32 cm. deep. Its southern side and eastern end had been destroyed by the pipe-trench.

The skeleton lay on its back, its skull at the west end, with left arm across its chest. Present were fragments of skull, mandible, clavicle, scapular, humerus, ribs, vertebrae and a single pelvic fragment, of an adult human.

Four iron nails were found by the skull at the west end and these suggest a wooden coffin.

DISCUSSION

The church dedicated to St. Nicholas, represents one of the lost churches of Hythe. It is mentioned in the Lambeth Registers in 1282 (Ref. 2). By the early-fifteenth century it appears to have been abandoned and is described in a manuscript dated 1426, from the Hundred Court as *fracta ecclesium* – the ruined church (Ref. 3). By the time of Leyland, writing in the reign of Henry VIII, it had been completely destroyed (Ref. 4) and its precise position was uncertain.

In 1902, the military who then owned the land attempted to level the area to the north-east of "Frenchmans Field", for a tennis court. The ground was found to be unstable and full of human bones (Ref. 5). This must be the area at the end of the spur road, where the odd human bones and the grave were recorded in 1978. Human bones have also been found in large numbers over the years in the rear and east side gardens of "Frenchmans Field" (Ref. 6). Clearly these discoveries represent the graveyard.

In 1954, some trial holes excavated on the site in advance of proposed army quarters encountered foundations. These were briefly reported on, but no measured plan showing their location was ever made (Ref. 7).

It seems clear from the earlier descriptions and from the burials discovered in 1902 and 1978, that the graveyard extended over the eastern area of the site

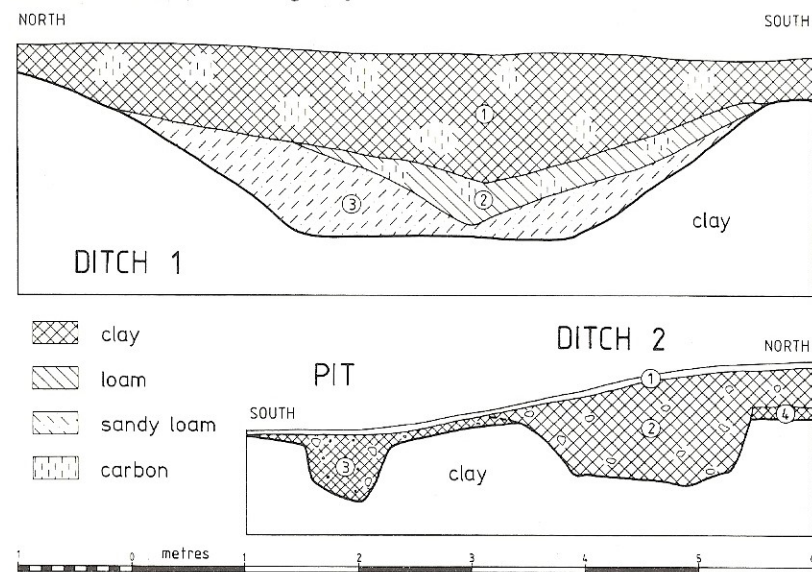


Fig. 2. Iron Age and Medieval Sites, St Nicholas, Hythe – Sections across features.

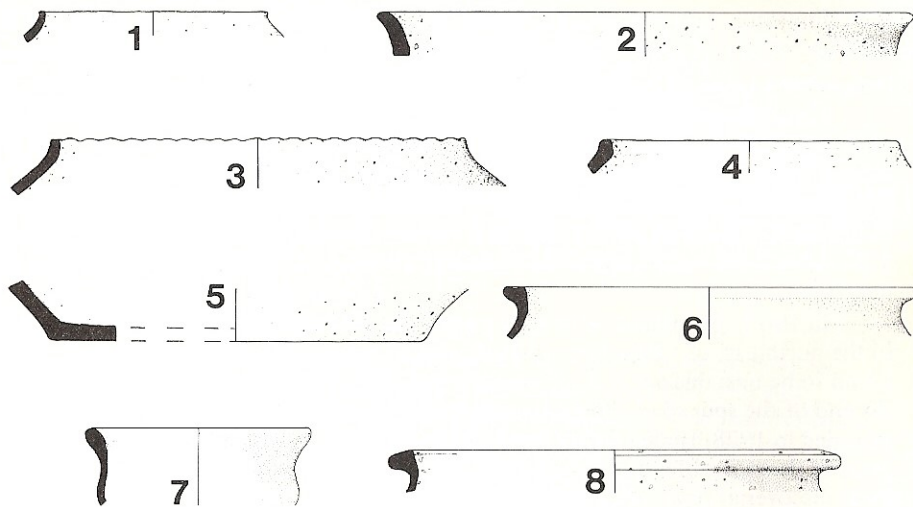


Fig. 3. Pottery from the Iron Age and Medieval site, St Nicholas, Hythe. (¼)

by the road hammer-head and also over the rear and side gardens of "Frenchmans Field". No trace was seen of any foundations relating to the church itself during the 1978 building works. This suggests therefore that the position of the church probably lies further south and east in the small undeveloped wooded area between "Frenchmans Field" and Radcliffe Court.

The Iron Age ditch and the domestic rubbish from it suggest the presence of a settlement, perhaps a farmstead, close by, dating at least between 500 and 350 B.C. This is the first evidence of Iron Age settlement from Hythe and it adds new and important details to the town's history. The presence of a few small Roman pot sherds on the site is also interesting, but the lack of any related features makes comment difficult. However, the suggested line of the Lympe to Dover Roman Road (Margary 131) is less than 100 m. to the north and may be significant (Ref. 8).

Finally, the medieval features seem to be well beyond the limits of the graveyard relating to the church and probably relate to a small medieval settlement centred west of the church of St. Nicholas. The pottery probably represents domestic rubbish dated to about A.D. 1300, possibly from a nearby building, no trace of which was found.

CATALOGUE OF THE ILLUSTRATED POTTERY (Fig. 3).

FROM THE FILLING OF THE IRON AGE DITCH (HSN-79-3).

- (1) Jar with a very fine beaded rim of flint-tempered ware. Dark brown-black fabric with fine flint tempering, black surface. Interior wiped with

burnishing to exterior and rim. A very similar vessel from Barham Down No. 16 is dated c. 500–350 B.C. (Ref. 9).

- (2) Jar with an outcurved rim of flint tempered ware. Grey fabric with coarse and fine flint-grit tempering, orange surfaces.
- (3) Jar, probably shouldered, with an upright, finger indented rim of flint-tempered ware. Dark grey fabric with fine flint tempering, brown interior, dark grey wiped exterior surface.
- (4) Jar with a plain slightly upright rim of flint-tempered ware. Buff-brown fabric with fine flint tempering. Grey-brown wiped exterior surface. A similar vessel from Barham Down, No. 43 is dated c. 500–350 B.C.
- (5) Base of a jar in flint-tempered ware. Dark grey-brown fabric. Burnished black to interior, plain buff-brown exterior.

FROM THE DEPOSIT SEALING THE IRON AGE DITCH (HSN-79-4).

- (6) Cooking-pot with a horizontal, flattened, slightly upturned rim of sandy ware. Pinkish-buff oxidized fabric with a grey core. A similar vessel from Pivington, Ashford, Fig. 4, No. iv, is dated to c. A.D. 1300 (Ref. 10).
- (7) Small cup or jar with an outcurved, thickened rim of sandy ware. Orange fabric, grey-brown surface.

GENERAL MEDIEVAL DEPOSIT (HSN-79-6).

- (8) Cooking-pot with a flattened, horizontal rim of sandy ware with slight shell tempering. Buff oxidized fabric with a grey core and sparse crushed shell inclusions. A similar vessel from Pivington, Fig. 4, No. i is dated to c. A.D. 1275–1300, or slightly earlier.

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THE ROMANS IN KENT

A 20 week (W.E.A.) course of evening classes on the archaeology of Roman Kent will be held on Tuesday evenings, 7.30 - 9.30 pm, at the Victoria Centre, Darnley Road, Gravesend, starting on Tuesday 25th September. For further information and/or course outline, please contact: Deborah French, 74 Church-bury Road, Eltham, London SE9 5HZ. (01-850 7420).