M.40 Site 15

Unidentified Features at Stoney Close, Hill Farm, Stokenchurch, Bucks.

By R. A. Chambers

In September 1972, Mr. F. Holmes of Hill Farm, Stokenchurch,* reported that a number of black areas had been uncovered in one of his fields locally named Stoney Close, at SU 742967 (see Sadler's Wood report, Fig. 1, p. 147). This had been stripped of topsoil by the contrators who were also about to remove the subsoils down to the Chalk.

TOPOGRAPHICAL SITUATION

Stoney Close is on the south-west side of the Chiltern escarpment ridge, at the head of a valley, the upper part of which was dry.

The field drained naturally towards the south-west corner, which was about 60 feet lower than the northern boundary, some 800 ft. above sea level. The field surface was indented by three dry gulleys, each partly-filled by Plateau Drift.[1] They radiated N.W., approx. N., and N.E. (gulley A), uphill from the south-west corner of the field.

Locally the subsoil consists of Plateau Drift which overlies a thin deposit of Clay-with-Flints that in turn caps the Chalk. Plateau Drift is a mixed material derived from the erosion of Eocene beds and the wasting of the Chalk beneath producing flint-laden material. Locally this deposit contains sarsen.[2]

THE EXCAVATIONS

Because of limited time only two pits were excavated (F10 and F12). The remainder were watched as the soil was mechanically stripped off in thin layers to reveal at least 19 similar pits (FIG. 1). This procedure revealed a clear plan and the approximate depth of most of the pits.

The black spreads were of wood charcoal and burnt debris which partly or wholly filled and spread out from each pit. As well as charcoal in these spreads there was a little ash and much flint with lumps and fragments of sarsen, some of it burnt. Usually there were also spreads of light brown loam which contained

* I would like to express my grateful thanks to Mr. Holmes for informing me of the discovery of these pits and also for interest, help and advice during the excavation. I am also indebted to Mr. John Hazelden of the Soil Survey of England and Wales, for advice on geology and to Mrs. J. M. Chambers who typed out the text.

[1] Soil Survey Dept. of England and Wales. Also J. Loveday, 'Plateau Deposits of the Southern Chiltern Hills', *Proc. Geol. Assn.*, 73 (1962), 88.

[2] R. J. Small *et al.*, *The Sarsen Stones of the Marlborough Downs and their Geomorphological Implications.* Southampton Research Series in Geography, No. 4 (June, 1967).
R. L. Sherlock, *London and Thames Valley. British Regional Geology series*, 3rd edit. (1960), 56.

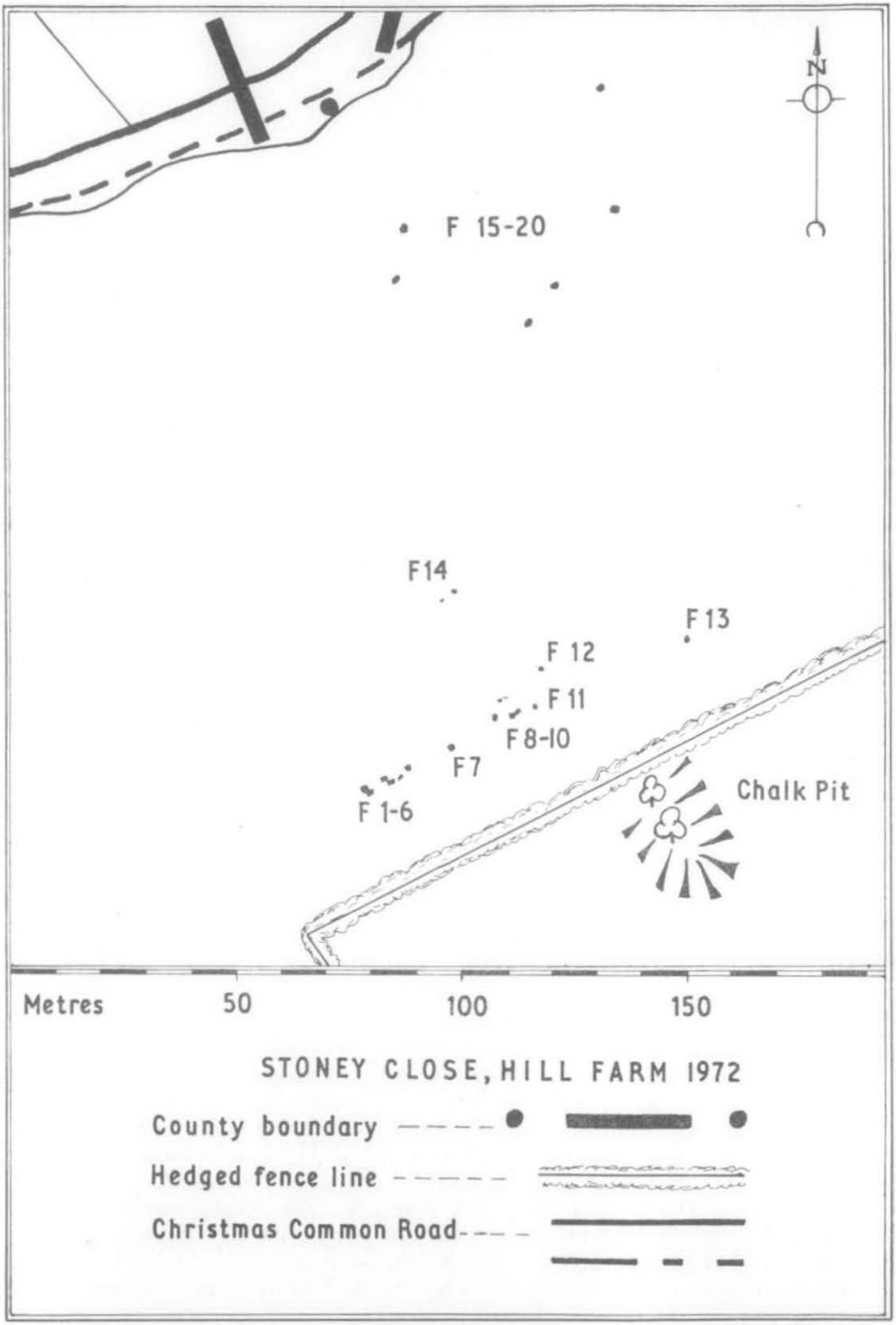

FIG. 1
Stoney Close (Site 15) : Site Plan.

specks of charcoal, some sarsen fragments and much flint. Only a little of the stone in these spreads was burnt. Often this brown loam filled the upper part of each pit.

Some of the pits were closely grouped in the bottom of gulley A (F1–13) and the rest were irregularly scattered over the higher ground to the north-east (F14–20). The latter had a thinner cover of topsoil than the pits in gulley A which were covered by more than 1.0 m. of soil due to soil creep and modern ploughing.

It is thought that on the higher ground two isolated pits were lost unrecorded to the earth-moving machines. These are not indicated on Fig. 1.

Each pit had been dug as a trough 40–60 cm. deep, roughly in the plan of a horseshoe. Each measured between 1·5–2.0 m. long by 1·0–1·5 m. wide. The tongue of ground left intact had been reduced, either deliberately or through use, to slightly below the height of the pit edges. The only tongue not to consist of subsoil was that of F.14 where the end of a natural sarsen boulder had been employed *in situ*. The pits showed little or no evidence of intense heating. The sarsen tongue of F14 was fire blackened on one side only and its surface was not crazed or shattered in any part. A black, dense charcoal layer lined each pit bottom. Both the brown loam and the black burnt debris had spread at random from each pit, except that from pits F1–9 where most of the debris had washed downhill. The pits displayed no regular orientation. Some smaller tongueless pits filled with black burnt debris were also found. Figure 1 shows one just south-west of F14, three on the north-west side of F12, and possibly one to the north-eastern side of F21. Whether F21 had a tongue or was a plain pit between 40–60 cm. deep was not discovered.

Pits F10 and F12

Both these pits and their associated spreads lay under a thin layer of flinty-clay. The brown loams (L, Fig. 2), and the black burnt debris (B, Fig. 2) layers contained small, flattish, white sarsen chips and flecks with much flint. In both layers some of the stone was unburnt. There was very little red or white ash residue in either pit. In places the burnt debris spreads were separated from the underlying subsoil by a thin brown loam. The brown loam spreads which lay against or overlapped the black burnt debris spreads were indistinguishable from this thin underlying loam trace.

Pit F10 (FIG. 2) was only half sectioned. Its tongue was orientated W.–E. and lay slightly lower than the outside pit edge. Two possible stake-holes were found (Ph. 1–2, Fig. 2), whilst the flinty clay subsoil along the south-east side was fire reddened. A dense stone-free charcoal layer covered the pit bottom and filled Ph. 1–2. The upper fill was brown loam (L, Fig. 2) with flints and sarsen fragments both burnt and unburnt, and also clean charcoal specks.

Pit F.12 (FIG. 2) was completely emptied. The tongue was orientated N.E.–S.W. and lay slightly lower than the outside pit edge. Several small sarsen lumps had been pressed into the flinty-clay pit sides which showed no discoloration from intense heat. A hole, 13 cm. deep by 35 cm. diameter, lay

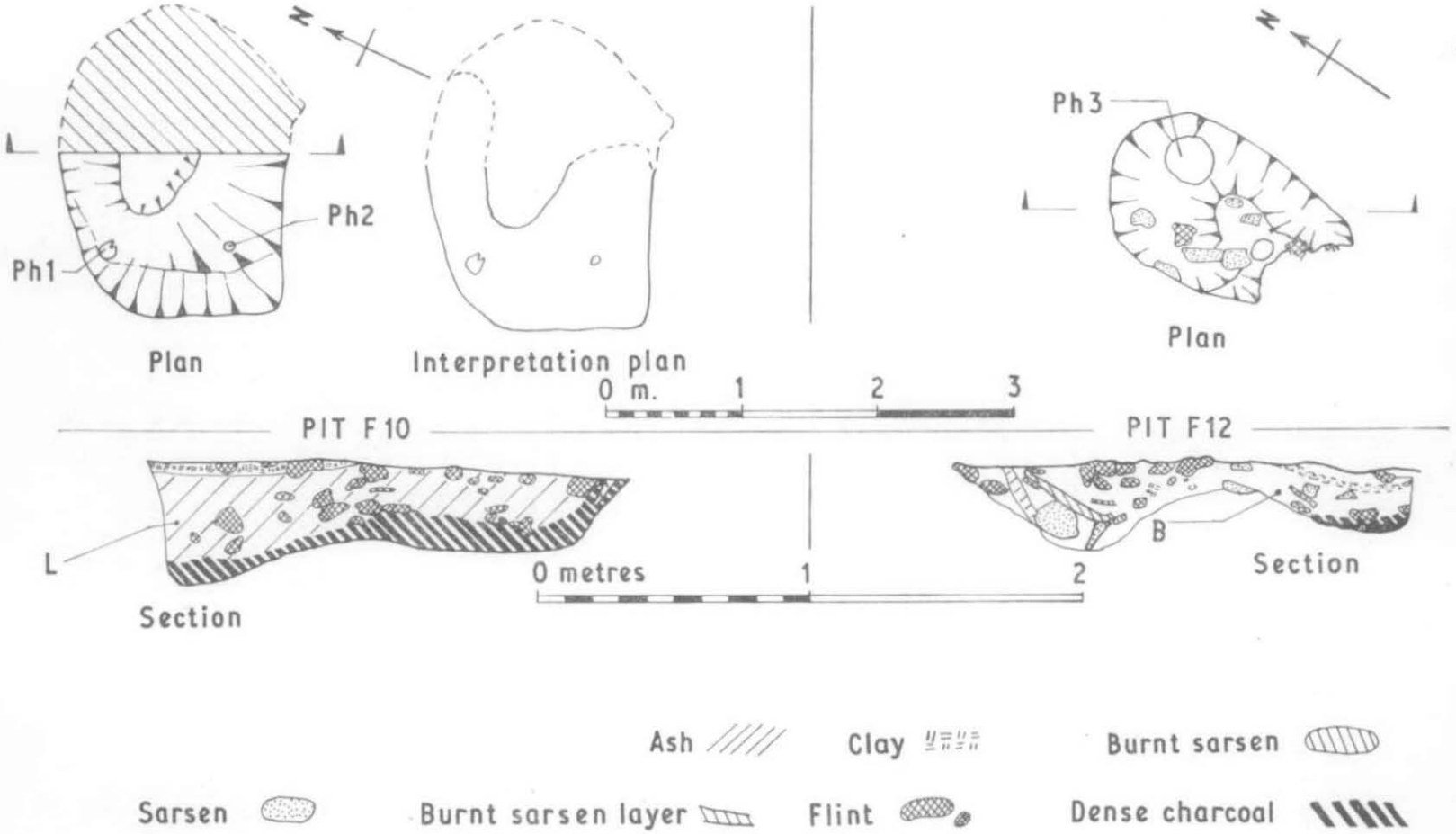

FIG. 2

Stoney Close (Site 15) : Section Drawings.

in the bottom of the pit at the tip of the tongue. This was filled by the dense charcoal that covered the pit bottom and merged upwards into the stonier, slightly ashier, black, burnt debris layer.

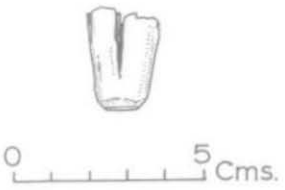

FIG. 3

Unidentified small, crushed, cup-shaped bronze object ; exterior face smooth, no pitting ; from fill of F10. (½).

DISCUSSION

It appears that no importance was attached to the situation of these pits,[3] since some were well protected from wind in gulley A and some were exposed to the funnelling action of the valley from the south-east.

The brown loamy layers that appeared partly as fill and partly as exterior spreads, suggested surrounding turf walls or turf covers to contain the wood fire or restrict the combusion rate in each pit. The turves may have been cut from the immediate surrounds of each pit, their position marked by the thin line of topsoil that separated the black burnt debris spreads from the subsoil. Such a thin topsoil would be unusual in a gulley bottom whilst the purity of the black spreads shows that the debris had not been trodden in very deeply.

Whether the holes in the bottom of F10 and F12 were used for wooden supports during the burning process is doubtful. They may, however, have been left by stones removed on digging the two pits.

The burning process in these two pits was essentially one of low temperature and incomplete combustion, shown by the lack of discoloured clay and stone, and the very small proportion of ash residue to wood charcoal. It is possible that these pits were deliberately dug to ensure incomplete combustion for some process.

Difficulties arise in trying to identify this process as essential features attributable to any single well-known occupation are missing. Presumably a woodland industry is indicated by the isolated situation and the quantity of wood charcoal ; this area has always been well wooded. It is possible that the industry was only local and short-lived.

The high percentages of charcoal to ash found in the pit fills at first seemed to indicate charcoal burning. However, some of the flint in the suggested turf fire coverings had exploded with the heat, causing air holes that would have produced a too-heavily burnt charcoal, and have presented a risk to the atten-

[3] The new Christmas Common diversion road in the valley bottom between Hailey Wood and Sadler's Wood revealed two pits, each filled like the Stoney Close pits, with sarsen fragments present. The pits were recorded by Mr. A. Boarder as black, charcoal-filled areas 2 m. in diameter by 60 cm. deep.

dants. Sarsen fragments introduced into the fire from outside would add nothing to the quality of the charcoal. Assuming that the burning was always confined to the pits, their smallness, the lack of a central post-hole in each and their horse-shoe shapes are uncharacteristic.[4] They were probably not cooking fires as no domestic or other rubbish was found except for a bronze object of uncertain age and purpose. Tree felling is also unlikely, whilst sarsen breaking would have required greater heat, leaving more ash than charcoal. The site might have been associated with the adjacent chalk pit but there is no evidence for this.

There was a lack of any clearly dateable material, though a radio carbon date may be obtained later. It was clear that enough time had passed to allow at least 30 cm. of soil to accumulate over the most exposed pits, as ploughing had never revealed any trace of these pits even on the higher ground.

The use of these pits cannot, therefore, be definitely ascertained, nor a firm date given.

[4] (i) Singer, Holmyard, Hall, Williams (eds.), *A History of Technology*, III (1957), 683–4.
(ii) J. Geraint Jenkins, *Traditional Country Craftsmen* (1965), 32–4.
(iii) W. H. Chaloner and A. E. Musson, *Industry and Technology* (1963), Plates 31–2.