Down the Bright Stream

The Prehistory of Woodcock Corner and the Tregurra Valley, Cornwall

Sean R. Taylor
One sees great things from the valley; only small things from the peak

G K Chesterton

Another pleasant valley Sunday
Charcoal burning everywhere

G Goffin and C King
## Contents

List of Figures .......................................................................................................................................................... iv
List of Tables ........................................................................................................................................................... x
Abbreviations ........................................................................................................................................................... xii
Acknowledgements ..................................................................................................................................................... xiii
Summary ................................................................................................................................................................. xiv

1 Background to the Investigations ...............................................................................................................................1
  1.1 Introduction .......................................................................................................................................................... 1
  1.2 Report structure ................................................................................................................................................ 2
  1.3 Terminology used in this report ...................................................................................................................... 2
  1.4 Overview of archaeological work undertaken on the site ............................................................................... 3

2 Location and Setting ............................................................................................................................................... 5

3 The Excavations ...................................................................................................................................................... 8
  3.1 Natural stratigraphy .......................................................................................................................................... 8
      3.1.1 Devonian ................................................................................................................................................... 8
      3.1.2 Pleistocene (Fig 3.1) ............................................................................................................................... 8
      3.1.3 Holocene (Fig 3.1) ..................................................................................................................................... 9
  3.2 Soil development ............................................................................................................................................... 9
  3.3 Mesolithic (c8000-4000 cal BC) .......................................................................................................................10
  3.4 Neolithic ..........................................................................................................................................................12
      3.4.1 Early Neolithic (c4000–3400 cal BC) ......................................................................................................... 12
      3.4.2 Middle Neolithic (c3400–3000 cal BC) .................................................................................................... 15
      3.4.3 Late Neolithic (c3000-2400 cal BC) ......................................................................................................... 23
  3.5 Early Beaker Period to Bronze Age ...................................................................................................................35
      3.5.1 Early Beaker Period (c2400–2000 cal BC) ............................................................................................... 35
      3.5.2 Early Bronze Age (c2000–1500 cal BC) ................................................................................................. 41
      3.5.3 Middle Bronze Age (c1500–1000 cal BC) ............................................................................................. 66
  3.6 Other earlier prehistoric features .....................................................................................................................67
      3.6.1 Features with pottery, flint, or worked stone not otherwise mentioned ................................................ 67
      3.6.2 Features with hazelnuts not otherwise mentioned .............................................................................. 73
  3.7 Iron Age ......................................................................................................................................................... 75
      3.7.1 Early Iron Age (c800–350 cal BC) ........................................................................................................... 75
      3.7.2 Middle Iron Age (c350–100 cal BC) ........................................................................................................ 78
      3.7.3 Late Iron Age (c100 cal BC–AD 43) ....................................................................................................... 83
  3.8 Roman and Post-Roman periods ......................................................................................................................87
      3.8.1 Roman (AD 43 – 410) ........................................................................................................................... 87
      3.8.2 Post-Roman (AD 410–cAD 600) ............................................................................................................ 88
  3.9 Medieval ...................................................................................................................................................... 89
      3.9.1 Early medieval (cAD 600 – 1066) .......................................................................................................... 89
      3.9.2 Medieval (AD 1066–1540) ................................................................................................................... 91
  3.10 Undated furnaces, ironworking pits, and charcoal pit-clamps .................................................................... 91
  3.11 Undated hearths and burnt pits ....................................................................................................................104

4 The Ceramics ....................................................................................................................................................... 107
  4.1 Prehistoric ......................................................................................................................................................... 107
      4.1.1 Summary of the assemblage .................................................................................................................. 107
      4.1.2 Early Neolithic ........................................................................................................................................ 107
      4.1.3 Middle Neolithic Peterborough ware .................................................................................................. 108
      4.1.4 Late Neolithic Grooved ware .............................................................................................................. 113
      4.1.5 Beaker ................................................................................................................................................... 120
      4.1.6 Bronze Age .......................................................................................................................................... 121
      4.1.7 Early Iron Age ..................................................................................................................................... 124
      4.1.8 Later Iron Age ..................................................................................................................................... 124
  4.2 Roman .......................................................................................................................................................... 125
  4.3 Early medieval .............................................................................................................................................. 125
  4.4 Undatable gabbroic sherds ............................................................................................................................ 125
  4.5 Post-Roman amphora .................................................................................................................................... 125
9.3.5 Summary: Neolithic .......................................................... 221
9.3.6 Early Beaker Period (c2400-2000 cal BC) (Table 9.4) .................. 222
9.3.7 Early Bronze Age (c2000-1500 cal BC) (Tables 9.4, 9.5, and 9.6) 222
9.3.8 Summary: Bronze Age .................................................................. 224
9.3.9 Unphased earlier prehistoric features (Table 9.7) ......................... 224
9.3.10 Early Iron Age (Table 9.8) .......................................................... 227
9.3.11 Middle Iron Age (Table 9.9) ......................................................... 227
9.3.12 Summary: Iron Age and ironworking........................................... 227
9.3.13 Post-Roman (AD 410–cAD 600) ..................................................... 228
9.3.14 Early medieval (cAD 600–1066) ..................................................... 229
9.3.15 Undated furnaces, ironworking pits, and charcoal pit-clamps (Table 9.10) 229
9.3.16 Undated pits .............................................................................. 229

9.4 Discussion ................................................................................. 231

9.5.16 Undated pits .............................................................................. 229
9.5.15 Undated furnaces, ironworking pits, and charcoal pit-clamps (Table 9.10) 229
9.5.14 Early medieval (cAD 600–1066) ..................................................... 229
9.5.13 Post-Roman (AD 410–cAD 600) ..................................................... 228
9.5.12 Summary: Iron Age and ironworking........................................... 227
9.5.11 Middle Iron Age (Table 9.9) ......................................................... 227
9.5.10 Early Iron Age (Table 9.8) .......................................................... 227
9.5.9 Unphased earlier prehistoric features (Table 9.7) ......................... 224
9.5.8 Summary: Bronze Age .................................................................. 224
9.5.7 Early Bronze Age (c2000-1500 cal BC) (Tables 9.4, 9.5, and 9.6) 222
9.5.6 Early Beaker Period (c2400-2000 cal BC) (Table 9.4) .................. 222
9.5.5 Summary: Neolithic .......................................................... 221

10 Geoarchaeology ........................................................................ 233
10.1 Landscape and land-use; soil, sediment, and pollen evidence .......... 233
10.2 Chemistry and magnetic susceptibility of fills from two Neolithic pits 246

11 Radiocarbon Dating ...................................................................... 248
11.1 Results from the dating programme ............................................. 248
11.1.1 Radiocarbon samples .................................................................. 248
11.1.2 Samples from Peterborough ware contexts ................................. 248
11.1.3 Samples from Grooved ware contexts ....................................... 251
11.1.4 Bayesian modelling methodological approach.......................... 252
11.1.5 Bayesian models and results...................................................... 252
11.1.6 Samples from contexts associated with other pottery types ......... 255
11.1.7 Samples from pit contexts with no associated diagnostic artefacts 258
11.1.8 Samples associated with non-pit contexts ................................... 260

11.2 Conclusions ............................................................................ 261

12 Spatial and Artefactual Analysis of the Neolithic and Bronze Age Pits 265
12.1 Definitions .............................................................................. 265
12.2 Feature analysis ........................................................................ 266
12.3 Artefactual analysis ..................................................................... 267
12.3.1 Taphonomy ............................................................................. 267
12.3.2 Deposition of artefacts and ecofacts ......................................... 267
12.3.3 Distribution of finds in soil deposits at Woodcock Corner .......... 273
12.4 Spatial analysis ......................................................................... 274
12.4.1 Middens ................................................................................ 276

13 Discussion ................................................................................ 278
13.1 From pits to postholes: a chronological summary of the site and the Cornish context of the earlier prehistoric (c10,000-1500 cal BC) ................................................................. 279
13.1.1 Beginnings ............................................................................. 279
13.1.2 The Neolithic (c4000–2400 cal BC) .......................................... 279
13.1.3 The Early Beaker Period and Early Bronze Age (c2400-1500 cal BC) 289
13.2 Discussion of themes raised by the earlier prehistoric evidence from Tregurra 302
13.2.1 Location ............................................................................. 302
13.2.2 Environment ........................................................................ 306
13.2.3 Settlement... ........................................................................ 306
13.2.4 ...and middens ...................................................................... 308
13.2.5 Activity .............................................................................. 309
13.2.6 Pit deposition ...................................................................... 318
13.2.7 Enclosure ............................................................................ 322
13.3 The Iron Age to early medieval .................................................. 323
13.3.1 Agriculture ......................................................................... 323
13.3.2 Ironworking and charcoal production ................................... 327
13.3.3 Woodcock Corner: early medieval monument? ....................... 337
13.4 Concluding remarks .................................................................. 338

14 Bibliography .............................................................................. 339
List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Location map.................................................................1
Figure 1.2: previous work on the site.........................................................3
Figure 2.1: the Tregurra Valley, looking east from the edge of Truro, prior to development © Cornwall Council .....5
Figure 2.2: wider topography and the ‘Carrick Thrust’........................................6
Figure 2.3: LiDAR imagery of the upper Tregurra Valley in 2007. Polwhele Castle is visible top left (as a sub-circular mark) while the ditch of Woodcock Corner is faintly visible on the right ...........................................7
Figure 2.4: named areas and topography ..................................................7
Figure 3.1: ‘natural’ stratigraphy across the site ..........................................8
Figure 3.2: Map of potentially Mesolithic features .....................................10
Figure 3.3: Plans and sections of potentially Mesolithic features ...............11
Figure 3.4: Map of Early Neolithic features.............................................12
Figure 3.5: Plan and section of Early Neolithic pit [3378] (key on this and subsequent drawings: brown=pottery; grey=stone; blue=quartz) ..................................................13
Figure 3.6: Plans and section of Early Neolithic hearth pit [3017] ..................14
Figure 3.7: Two photographs of Early Neolithic hearth pit [3017], corresponding to top right and bottom left of Fig 3.6. Note north is to the bottom of the photographs, 0.5 m (v) and 0.25 m (h) scales .......................15
Figure 3.8: Map of Middle Neolithic features ..........................................16
Figure 3.9: Plan of Middle Neolithic ‘quincunx’ at Woodcock Corner ........16
Figure 3.10: Plans and section of Middle Neolithic burnt pit [1107] ..........17
Figure 3.11: Sections through Middle Neolithic pit [2312] and burnt pit [3068] 18
Figure 3.12: Plan and section through Middle Neolithic pit [2438] .............20
Figure 3.13: Plan and section through Middle Neolithic pit [2496] and Late Neolithic pit [2502] .................21
Figure 3.14: Photographs of Middle Neolithic pits, clockwise from top left, the quincunx (1 m scale); artefact-rich pit [2438] with some of the finds and its excavator (0.5 m); artefact-rich pit [2496], left, and Late Neolithic artefact-rich pit [2502], right (0.5 m); the flaring base of Fengate vessel P15 in the upper fill of [2496] (0.1 m) ..........................................................22
Figure 3.15: Map of Late Neolithic features ............................................24
Figure 3.16: Plan and section through Late Neolithic pits [1102] and [1105] 25
Figure 3.17: Plan and sections through Late Neolithic pits [1092] and [1108] 27
Figure 3.18: Position of finds within pit [1092] (top) and [1108] (bottom) .................................................................28
Figure 3.19: Sections through Late Neolithic pits .....................................29
Figure 3.20: Plans and sections of Late Neolithic artefact-rich pits [2327], [2355], and [2486] .........................32
Figure 3.21: Photographs of Late Neolithic pits, clockwise from top left: the slate disc MA1 and its excavators; slate disc MA1 and other artefacts in pit [1092]; artefact-rich pit [2502] and its excavator; notched slate S46 in pit [2478] (all 0.5 m scales) ........................................34
Figure 3.22: Map of Early Beaker Period features .....................................36
Figure 3.23: Plan and sections through Early Beaker Period features [1132], [1198], and [1211] .........................37
Figure 3.24: Plan and sections through Early Beaker Period hearth/stakeholes [2357]/[2367] and pit [2359] ........39
Figure 3.25: Photograph of stakeholes [2357]/[2367] (0.5 m scales) ..................40
Figure 3.26: Map of Early Bronze Age features ....................................41
Figure 3.27: Photograph of the Woodcock Corner enclosure, looking north–west. The light linear bands in the foreground are quartz flushes (see ‘Holocene’, this Chapter) .................................42
Figure 3.28: Topographic plan of Woodcock Corner (contours at 2 m intervals) ..................................................42
Figure 3.29: Profile through Woodcock Corner .......................................43
Figure 3.30: Plan of Woodcock Corner enclosure ditch segments ................43
Figure 3.73: Photographs of undated charcoal pit-clamps, clockwise from top left: [1025], (0.25 m (v), 0.5 m (h) scales); [1027] (0.05 m (v), 0.5 m (h)); [4064] (0.25 m (v), 0.5 m (h)); [5079] (0.5 m) ..................................................102
Figure 3.74: Map of undated hearths showing background of all pits on the site .................................................................104
Figure 4.1 Early Neolithic vessels P1–5. Scale 1:2. Drawing Jane Read ..................................................................................109
Figure 4.2 Middle Neolithic Peterborough vessels P6–15. Scale 1:3. Drawing Jane Read .............................................................112
Figure 4.3 Grooved ware P16–17. Scale 1:2. Drawing Jane Read ............................................................................................115
Figure 4.4 Grooved ware P18–23. Scale 1:3. Drawing Jane Read ............................................................................................117
Figure 4.5 Grooved ware P24–27. Scale 1:3. Drawing Jane Read ............................................................................................118
Figure 4.6 Beaker P28–31: Collared Urns P32–33: Trevisker P34. Scale 1:3. Drawing Jane Read ........................................122
Figure 4.7 Amphora sherd. Scale 1:3. Drawing Carl Thorpe ..................................................................................................125
Figure 4.8 Amphora reconstruction. Scale 1:3. Drawing Carl Thorpe ..................................................................................125
Figure 5.1: Slate disc, obverse (Photo: Antonia Thomas) ........................................................................................................128
Figure 5.2: Slate disc, reverse (Photo: Antonia Thomas) ........................................................................................................128
Figure 5.3: Slate disc, line drawing (illustration: Antonia Thomas) .......................................................................................129
Figure 5.4: MA2 close up detail ..................................................................................................................................................130
Figure 5.5: MA2 Reflective Transformation Imaging (RTI), Marta Diaz-Guardamino ..............................................................130
Figure 5.6: S1 Curio with vein quartz saw edge, probably Early Neolithic: S3 Small cobble grinder, Middle Neolithic. Scale 1:2. (Photo: Gary Young) ..........................................................................................................................132
Figure 5.7: S2 Saddle quern, Middle Neolithic. Scale 1:2. (Photo: Gary Young) .................................................................132
Figure 5.8: S9–S11 potential axes from Late Neolithic contexts. Scale 1:2. (Photo: Gary Young) ..............................................134
Figure 5.9: S12–S14 pieces with patches of abrasion or hammerstone use from Late Neolithic contexts. Scale 1:2. (Photo: Gary Young) ..................................................................................................................................135
Figure 5.10: S18 slate with worn notch, Late Neolithic. Scale 1:2. (Photo: Gary Young) ..............................................................135
Figure 5.11: S46 Square slate with notched edge, Late Neolithic. Scale 1:3. (Photo: Gary Young) ...........................................136
Figure 5.12: Stone balls or spherical hammerstones, S25 Beaker period, S30 Early Bronze Age. Scale 1:2. (Photo: Gary Young) .................................................................137
Figure 5.13: S29 Early Bronze Age muller. Scale 1:2. (Photo: Gary Young) ..............................................................................137
Figure 5.14: S36 pebble with pecked depressions, later prehistoric. Scale 1:1. (Photo: Gary Young) ..............................................137
Figure 6.1: Mesolithic flint ..........................................................................................................................................................141
Figure 6.2: Middle Neolithic mixed pit contents ......................................................................................................................144
Figure 6.3: Middle Neolithic artefact-rich pit [2438] contents .................................................................................................146
Figure 6.4: Late Neolithic pit contents and buried soil horizons ...............................................................................................149
Figure 6.5: Early Beaker Period to Bronze Age contexts ........................................................................................................155
Figure 7.1: Backscattered electron image collages of cassiterite-bearing pebbles from Tregurra. Cassiterite is bright; the dull matrix comprises mainly quartz and tourmaline, with the tourmaline slightly paler than quartz ..................................................................................................................172
Figure 7.2: Fe-Mg-Al ternary diagram of EDS analyses of tourmalines in pebbles TRU19 (crosses) and TRU20 (circles) from Tregurra. Fields after Farmer et al. (1991) for observations at South Crofty (North of Carnmenellis Granite) for tourmaline from the granite (grey tone), tourmaline zone (solid outline) and chlorite zone (dotted line) .................................................................................................................................173
Figure 7.3: Plot of titanium vs iron per unit cell, for EDS analyses of tourmalines in pebbles TRU19 (crosses) and TRU20 (circles) from Tregurra. Fields after Farmer et al. (1991) for observations at South Crofty (North of Carnmenellis Granite) for tourmaline from the granite (grey tone), tourmaline zone (solid outline) and chlorite zone (dotted line) .................................................................................................................................174
Figure 7.4: Plot of (R+ + R2+) against R3+ for EDS analyses of tourmalines in pebbles TRU19 (crosses) and TRU20 (circles) from Tregurra. Fields after Manning’s (1991) compilation of tourmaline analyses from SW England .................................................................................................................................175
Figure 7.5: Location of the sites referred to in the text (1: Tregurra, 2: Tolgarrick Farm, 3: Threemilestone) with respect to the geology (simplified after Dines 1956) and drainage .................................................................................................................................176
Figure 10.12: Photomicrograph thin section M2 (Slot 11); colluvial plough soil with charred monocotyledonous plant material from stubble burning/crop processing waste? PPL, frame width is ~4.62 mm.................................................................240
Figure 10.13: As Fig 10.11, under OIL.........................................................................................................................240
Figure 10.14: Machine excavation of the trench exposing the deposits, showing the putative buried soil........243
Figure 10.15. The darker horizon marks the lower facies (context (3398) – the putative buried soil) ..........244
Figure 10.16. The base of the colluvial facies (3480) and the top of the lower facies (3398) being prepared for kubiena sample 1 ............................................................................................................244
Figure 11.1: Calibrated radiocarbon dates from the Tregurra Valley. Calibrations were calculated using the terrestrial calibration curve (IntCal13) of Reimer et al. (2013) and the probability method of Stuiver and Reimer (1993) with OxCal v4.2 (Bronk Ramsey 2013). Radiocarbon dates are grouped into their corresponding archaeological contexts......................................................................................................................250
Figure 11.2: Results and structure of the Bayesian model for Peterborough ware. For each of the radiocarbon measurements two distributions have been plotted, one in outline, which is the result of simple radiocarbon calibration, and a solid one, which is based on the chronological model use. The other distributions correspond to aspects of the model. The large square ‘brackets’ along with the OxCal keywords define the overall model exactly.................................................................253
Figure 11.3: Results and structure of the alternative Bayesian model for Peterborough ware. The brackets and keywords define the model structure. The format is as described in Figure 2.................254
Figure 11.4: Results and structure of the Bayesian model for Grooved ware. The brackets and keywords define the model structure. The format is as described in Figure 2.................................................................................256
Figure 11.5: Results and structure of the alternative Bayesian model for Grooved ware. The brackets and keywords define the model structure. The format is as described in Figure 2.........................................................................................257
Figure 11.6: Starting and ending boundaries for the primary and alternative models.................................................258
Figure 11.7: Spans from activity in Grooved ware and Peterborough ware models from the primary and alternative models.................................................................................................................................................259
Figure 12.1: Artefact distribution in deposit (1024).........................................................................................................273
Figure 12.2: Artefact distribution in deposit (1011).........................................................................................................274
Figure 12.3: Pits used for spatial analysis........................................................................................................................275
Figure 12.4: Map showing possible locations of middens (dark red)...........................................................................277
Figure 13.1: Map showing Early Neolithic sites in Cornwall............................................................................................280
Figure 13.2: Map showing Middle Neolithic sites in Cornwall.........................................................................................284
Figure 13.3: Map showing Late Neolithic sites in Cornwall.............................................................................................288
Figure 13.4 Map showing Early Beaker period sites in Cornwall......................................................................................289
Figure 13.5: Map showing selected Early Bronze Age sites in Cornwall........................................................................293
Figure 13.6: Photograph of the post-ring, facing south-west (1 m scales)...........................................................................299
Figure 13.7: Chequerboard decoration on MA1 (obverse) (Reflective Transformation Imaging (RTI), Marta Diaz-Guardamino).................................................................................................................................................................................310
Figure 13.8: Lozenge decoration on MA1 (reverse) (RTI, Marta Diaz-Guardamino)..........................................................310
Figure 13.9: Chequerboard decoration on Grooved ware from Penryn College (from Gossip and Jones 2017, P1) 311
Figure 13.10: Lozenge face of the slate disc, rotated 90° clockwise from previous images (© Marta Diaz-Guardamino)....311
Figure 13.11: Cup-marked slate L77 from Davidstow barrow XXVI(22) (© Cornwall Archaeological Society).................312
Figure 13.12: The disc with its finder Angela Bilardi, left, and Laura Ratcliffe-Warren, right ........................................313
Figure 13.13: The contents of pit [3417] including cassiterite pebbles (bottom left), a broken pebble (middle right), crushed cassiterite (bottom) and the muller S29 used to crush it (top).................................317
Figure 13.14: Map showing selected Iron Age to early medieval agricultural sites in Cornwall....................................325
Figure 13.15: Map showing selected Iron Age to early medieval ironworking and charcoal production sites in Cornwall........................................................................................................................................329
Figure 13.16: Birringuccio woodcut showing charcoal production in a mound clamp, 1540........................................331
Figure 13.17: Birringuccio woodcut showing charcoal production in a pit clamp, 1540..................................................331
Plate 1: Reconstruction of the valley in the Neolithic © Jane Read

Plate 2: Reconstruction of the valley in the Bronze Age © Jane Read

Plate 3. Reconstruction of the valley in the Iron Age © Jane Read
List of Tables

Table 3.1: Components of the North Terrace post-ring structure
Table 3.2: Contents of South Terrace (NW) Early Bronze Age pit group
Table 3.3: Undated hearth pits
Table 4.1: Period summary of the ceramic assemblage
Table 4.2: Details of Early Neolithic pottery by sherd number and weight (g)
Table 4.3: Details of Middle Neolithic Peterborough pottery by sherd number and weight (g)
Table 4.4: Details of Grooved ware by sherd number and weight (g). * weathered micaceous slate
Table 4.5: Details of sites with Grooved ware now known from Cornwall, in approximate order of recognition. * indicates radiocarbon dates presented in table in Jones and Quinnell, 2014, fig 103
Table 4.6: Details of Beaker by sherd number and weight (g)
Table 4.7: Details of Early/Middle Bronze Age by sherd number and weight (g)
Table 4.8: Details of Middle Iron Age, Late Iron Age and Late Iron Age into Roman period pottery by sherd number and weight: all standard gabbroic fabric
Table 6.1: Summarised component breakdown of the entire assemblage
Table 6.2: Summarised breakdown of the Middle Neolithic flint assemblage
Table 6.3: Summarised breakdown of the Late Neolithic flint assemblage
Table 6.4: Summarised breakdown of the Early Beaker Period flint assemblage
Table 6.5: Summarised breakdown of the Early Bronze Age flint assemblage
Table 6.6: Summarised breakdown of the Middle Bronze Age flint assemblage
Table 6.7: Summarised breakdown of the undated flint assemblage
Table 7.1: Summary catalogue by context and sample
Table 7.2: ironworking residues (and other archaeometallurgical materials except cassiterite) by classes and context/features. All weights in grams
Table 7.3: Sampled material
Table 7.4: Major elements by XRF. < = below detection. All elements presented as wt% oxide. Adjusted to Mn$^2+$ and Fe$^2+$ and adjusted to exclude volatiles (LOI)
Table 7.5 (continued): Minor and trace elements by ICP-MS. < = below detection. All elements presented as ppm. Adjusted to Mn$^2+$ and Fe$^2+$ and adjusted to exclude volatiles (LOI)
Table 7.5: trace elements by ICP-MS. < = below detection. All elements presented as ppm. Adjusted to Mn$^2+$ and Fe$^2+$ and adjusted to exclude volatiles (LOI)
Table 8.1: Latin and common plant names
Table 8.2: Plant macrofossils
Table 9.1: Charcoal from Mesolithic and Early Neolithic phases (showing quantified data by fragment count)
Table 9.2: Charcoal from Middle Neolithic phase (showing quantified data by fragment count)
Table 9.3: Charcoal from Late Neolithic phase (showing quantified data by fragment count)
Table 9.4: Charcoal from Early Beaker Period phase (showing quantified data by fragment count)
Table 9.5: Charcoal from Early Bronze Age: Woodcock Corner and South Terrace (showing quantified data by fragment count)
Table 9.6: Charcoal from Early Bronze Age: North Terrace (showing quantified data by fragment count)
Table 9.7: Charcoal from unphased earlier prehistoric features (showing quantified data by fragment count)
Table 9.8: Charcoal from the Early Iron Age (showing quantified data by fragment count)
Table 9.9: Charcoal from Middle Iron Age features (showing quantified data by fragment count)
Table 9.10: Charcoal from undated furnaces, ironworking pits, and charcoal pit-clamps (showing quantified data by fragment count)
Table 10.1: Soil profile in Slot 11

x
Table 10.2: Slot 11: soil micromorphology samples and counts .................................................................235
Table 10.3: Slot 11: Soil micromorphology descriptions and preliminary interpretations ...............................236
Table 10.4: Pollen counts from the buried soil/base of the colluvial brown earth .............................................241
Table 10.5: Soil profile in North Terrace (Pollen samples measurements start from top of monolith, but kubiena samples are from top of profile) ...........................................................................245
Table 10.6: Samples taken from North Terrace ............................................................................................246
Table 10.7: Results of the analysis of pits [2496] and [2502] ........................................................................247
Table 11.1: Radiocarbon determinations from the Tregurra Valley ..............................................................262
Table 12.1: Features with a total finds count >20 (* features containing Grooved ware but contemporary with Middle Neolithic features; ** crushed cassiterite grains not included in count) ...........................................266
Table 12.2: Correlation between pit volume and finds count ..........................................................................267
Table 12.3: Comparison of pit volume to pit type .........................................................................................267
Table 12.4: Comparison of mean pit volume by period ..................................................................................267
Table 12.5: Comparison of pit volume by period .........................................................................................268
Table 12.6: Taphonomy against soil types .....................................................................................................268
Table 12.7: Artefacts and ecofacts by phase ....................................................................................................269
Table 12.8: Odd deposits .................................................................................................................................269
Table 12.9: Selected artefacts .........................................................................................................................270
Table 12.10: Placed artefacts .........................................................................................................................271
Table 12.11: Pits containing possible midden material ....................................................................................271
Table 12.12: Pits with co-fitting sherds ........................................................................................................272
Table 12.13: Distribution of numbered vessels, HW-Hembury ware, PW-Peterborough ware, GW-Grooved ware, BEA-Beaker, CU-Collared Urn, TREV-Trevisker ........................................................272
Table 12.14: Nearest Neighbour Analysis .......................................................................................................276
Table 13.1 Early Neolithic radiocarbon dates from Cornwall ........................................................................281
Table 13.2 Early Neolithic pottery from undated or residual contexts in Cornwall ........................................284
Table 13.3 Middle Neolithic radiocarbon dates from Cornwall ....................................................................286
Table 13.4 Middle Neolithic pottery from undated or residual contexts in Cornwall .......................................287
Table 13.5 Late Neolithic radiocarbon dates from Cornwall .........................................................................290
Table 13.6 Late Neolithic pottery from undated or residual contexts in Cornwall ........................................292
Table 13.7 Early Beaker Period radiocarbon dates from non-monumental contexts in Cornwall ...................294
Table 13.8 Beaker pottery from undated or residual contexts in Cornwall (does not include material from monument-related contexts) .........................................................................................296
Table 13.9 Selected Early Bronze Age radiocarbon dates from Cornwall .......................................................297
Table 13.10 Location of Early Neolithic pit sites and structures .....................................................................303
Table 13.11 Location of Middle Neolithic pit sites (*overlooking freshwater river) .......................................303
Table 13.12 Location of Late Neolithic pit sites ............................................................................................304
Table 13.13 Location of Early Beaker Period and Early Bronze Age pit sites. Dates are Early Beaker Period except *date range includes Early Bronze Age. Pot is Beaker except *Grooved ware ........................................................................305
Table 13.14 Selected Iron Age to early medieval radiocarbon dates associated with agricultural practices from Cornwall ..........................................................................................................................324
Table 13.15 Selected Iron Age to early medieval sites associated with agricultural practices from Cornwall ....326
Table 13.16 Selected Iron Age to medieval radiocarbon dates from charcoal clamps and ironworking sites from Cornwall (*may represent earlier corn-drying activity) ........................................327
Table 13.17 Selected Iron Age to early medieval sites associated with ironworking and charcoal production, and potential ore sources, from Cornwall ........................................................................329
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>APFU</td>
<td>Atoms Per Formula Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BL</td>
<td>Blue Light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BQ</td>
<td>Burned Quartzite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAU</td>
<td>Cornwall Archaeological Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDK</td>
<td>Corn Drying Kiln</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDS</td>
<td>Energy-Dispersive X-ray analysis System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FB</td>
<td>Furnace Bottom</td>
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<tr>
<td>GIS</td>
<td>Geographical Information Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPS</td>
<td>Global Positioning System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HER</td>
<td>(Cornwall and Scilly) Historic Environment Record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HREE</td>
<td>Heavy Rare Earth Elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HWRC</td>
<td>Household Waste Recycling Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICP-MS</td>
<td>ICP Mass Spectrometer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LBK</td>
<td>Linearbandkeramik</td>
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<tr>
<td>LiDAR</td>
<td>Light Detection and Ranging</td>
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<td>Loss-On-Ignition</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Plane Polarised Light</td>
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<td>portable X-ray Fluorescence</td>
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<td>Quality Assurance</td>
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<td>Soil Microfabric Type</td>
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<td>Truro Eastern Park and Ride</td>
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Summary

This monograph reports on a series of fieldwork projects carried out in the Tregurra Valley, to the east of Truro, Cornwall. The work was undertaken over a period of seven years between 2009 and 2015, predominantly by the Cornwall Archaeological Unit. The work was a response to the development of the valley as a Park and Ride facility, Household Waste Recycling Site, supermarket, and housing.

A walkover of the site as part of an assessment had identified an area above the Tregurra Stream as a potential prehistoric habitation site. Geophysical survey identified three segments of a curvilinear enclosure ditch partly encircling a knoll above the stream to the east of this as well as a rectilinear field system underlying the extant field pattern.

Subsequent fieldwork as part of a developer-funded programme of excavation and watching briefs led to the identification of a large number of pits and hearths across the site, the majority of which have proved dateable, spanning the Early Neolithic to the end of the Early Bronze Age periods. Two concentrations of these features were located either side of the stream valley in the central part of the site. One of these was located on the site identified by the assessment. Another concentration at the site of the enclosure included a Late Neolithic pit containing a remarkable incised slate disc. Other pits contained evidence for tin processing at the start of the Bronze Age.

The segmented enclosure ditch was revealed through excavation to be composed of two, rather than three, segments, one short, the other much longer. Of considerable note was the identification of buried soils and colluvial layers pre-dating much of the prehistoric activity and found across the site.

There appeared to be an absence of evidence of activity in the valley between the end of the Early Bronze Age and the start of the Iron Age, when much of the valley was enclosed with the field ditches identified by the geophysical survey. Evidence for crop processing, charcoal burning, and ironworking suggests fairly intensive activity, perhaps associated with the enclosed settlement or ‘round’ known as Polwhele Castle, to the north. A sherd of amphora from the late Roman or post-Roman periods in a corn-drying pit suggests a high status settlement nearby, perhaps continued occupation of Polwhele Castle, as well as maritime links.

The medieval period saw the laying out of another largely rectilinear field system that has survived with modifications into the extant field boundaries visible today, and which have largely survived the development of the valley.

The 19th century saw semi-industrial activity in the valley grow with brickmaking, stone quarrying, and small-scale mineral prospection, and the construction of a well-made early road linking Lower Penair Farm with the Newquay Road. This later activity is reported on elsewhere.
1.1 Introduction

The Tregurra Valley, to the east of Truro in mid Cornwall (Fig 1.1), has proved to contain a remarkable record of human activity stretching from the Mesolithic period over 6000 years ago through to small-scale industrial activities in the 19th century. Few who gazed down the length of the valley from the outskirts of the city, or who casually looked into it from their cars as they skirted its southern edge, could have imagined the span of human endeavour that had left its mark beneath the green pastures and yellowing maize-fields. Before the tide of the car had drowned the valley in noise and dust it had echoed to the cries of hunters armed with flint-tipped arrows, the chatter of foragers collecting the fruits of the forest, artisans and artists crafting and creating, perhaps leaders holding forth at a meeting place carved from the earth. The valley may have fallen silent for a while - perhaps the ghosts of the past kept the people away? - but when memories faded farmers came back and divided the land into fields, and the air was permeated by smoke emanating from the mounds of charcoal burners as the valley rang to the sound of forgers and blacksmiths bending iron to their will. Times changed and different fields were laid out; pastoral peace followed but much later the valley once more resonated with bustle as roads were carved through the hillside, bricks were formed out of the soft valley clay, and stone was prised out of the hillside for public works. This monograph tells the story of the valley from the Mesolithic to the medieval period; the later history is reported on elsewhere (Kirkham forthcoming).

The sites reported on were encountered during archaeological fieldwork preceding, and during, groundworks associated with the construction of the Truro Eastern Park and Ride Scheme (TEPAR), a Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC), a supermarket and housing. The site as a whole is now known as the Truro Eastern District Centre (TEDC).
1.2 Report structure

The monograph reports on all stages of the project undertaken between 2009 and 2016. The first chapter serves as an introduction to the site and offers a summary of the various stages of work.

The second chapter considers the geology and topography of the valley and surrounding areas, which may have had a bearing on the use(s) of the valley throughout its occupation.

The third chapter outlines the site stratigraphy and summarises the artefactual and ecofactual evidence from each feature.

Chapters 4-11, present the detailed specialist reports on the artefacts (ceramics, stonework, flint), the archaeometallurgy (cassiterite and ironworking), the ecofacts (charred plant macrofossils and charcoal), the geoarchaeology (palaeosols and analyses of two pit fills), and the programme of radiocarbon dating.

Chapter 12 analyses the distribution and nature of features and identifies possible groupings and relationships. Only two coherent prehistoric structures were identified on the site, a segmented ditched enclosure at Woodcock Corner, and a post-ring structure on an area which has been termed North Terrace. An interpretation of the spatial distribution of some of the pits has also been made.

Finally, Chapter 13 draws together the strands of the various analyses and discusses them in relation to comparable sites in Cornwall and beyond.

1.3 Terminology used in this report

Detailed records of every archaeological feature were made during the fieldwork, each context being allocated a unique number. Numbers were allocated in blocks according to which of six fields they were located in (features in Field 1 start at 1001, in Field 2 at 2001, etc). An attempt has been made to avoid discussing features as being in Field 1, for example, due to the irrelevance of much of the extant field system to the periods under discussion but the field numbers are shown in Fig 1.2 (below) as the context numbering system allows a feature’s location to be narrowed down for the reader. Features recorded during the evaluation trenching (Cotswold Archaeology 2010; see ‘Overview of work undertaken on the site’, this Chapter) have been renumbered to follow this organisation.

For the purposes of this report the site has been divided into four distinct areas based on topography and the archaeological features encountered (Fig 2.2). The West Ridge forms the higher ground at the western end of the site; the North and South Terraces lie on either side of the Tregurra Valley, including the dry upper part of it; Woodcock Corner lies on a promontory of land protruding into the valley at the eastern edge of the site. An enclosure identified here has been named ‘Woodcock Corner’ on the basis of the nearest placename, a sharp bend on the former turnpike road which is now the A390 (first documented in the Royal Cornwall Gazette, 17 May 1850, p6).

Context numbers for cut features are given in square brackets, for instance [1010], while those for layers and fills are given in rounded brackets, for instance (1009). The segmented ditched enclosure is referred to throughout as the Woodcock Corner enclosure. The post-ring (structure) is referred to as the North Terrace post-ring (structure). Full details of the recording methodology and project archives can be found in the grey literature for the site (Taylor 2013a; 2015a; 2015b).

Pits of similar form and/or stratigraphic history have been grouped into, ‘pits’, ‘burnt pits’, ‘hearth pits’, and ‘artefact-rich pits’. The distinction between burnt pits and hearth pits, for the purposes of this monograph, are that burnt pits contained charcoal-rich fills and/or other burnt material (for example, burnt earth) but no evidence of in situ burning, whereas hearth pits all displayed evidence for in situ burning in the form of heat-oxidised sides and/or bases and/or ashy or charcoal-rich primary fills. Features displaying in situ burning were further characterised as ovens, corn dryers, or furnaces where the evidence permitted. Artefact-rich pits were those particularly rich in finds, as the term suggests; the numbers of finds from these were of a magnitude higher than those from other pits. A fuller definition is given in Chapter 12.

Measurements in metric are used throughout and heights are given in metres above Ordnance Datum (OD).

Measurements between features are taken from centre to centre. Dimensions of cut features are given across the top of features unless otherwise stated.

The probability distributions for the radiocarbon determinations have been calculated using OxCal v4.3 (Bronk Ramsey 2009) except for the specialist chapter on the radiocarbon dating (Chapter 11) which has used OxCal 4.2. The 95 per cent level of probability is used throughout this report unless otherwise stated. Where determinations from other sites are quoted in full they have been recalibrated with OxCal v4.3. Consequently, they may differ from the original published sources, where earlier calibration curves were used. All calibrated dates have been rounded outwards to ten years to avoid false precision.
1.4 Overview of archaeological work undertaken on the site

Two previous projects had been undertaken within the site, both at the far western edge. An assessment (Exeter Archaeology 2001) and watching brief (Passmore 2002) for a water main replacement did not identify any features while a watching brief on a gas pipeline (Ruddle 2004) identified only post-medieval features.

The programme of work reported on here (Fig 1.2) began with an assessment and walkover survey in 2009 (Lawson-Jones 2009). This identified post-medieval sites of local importance including a quarry, removed field boundaries, lanes, and roads. The assessment did not cover the field at the far eastern end of the development, or the field to the north of Tregurra Lane (Fig 1.2); these were added to the development envelope at a later stage. The assessment did identify one site that is relevant to the results published here and it is worth repeating the description in full:

An ephemeral, slightly raised oval area (130 m long, 60 m wide) was recorded within the northern half of [Field 2]. It was aligned east to west, running parallel to the valley bottom and would probably have been close to seasonally flowing water along its northern edge prior to subsequent alterations and improvement to the land. It is approximately 1 m to 3 m high (although this is difficult to judge, given the natural undulations visible across the area and its sheer scale). Interpretation too is difficult, it could be an entirely natural feature, but the depression vaguely defining its southern, eastern and western sides would seem out of place given that water would have naturally followed the lowest (northern) base of the valley. The 2009 geophysical survey did not pick up on any obvious archaeological activity on this site, but there is still the potential for activity here, particularly given that it would have made an ideal livestock watering spot and hunting place.

(Lawson-Jones 2009, 17-18)

This area was subsequently proved to contain the greatest density of Neolithic to Early Bronze Age pits on the site, as well as the largest cluster of Iron Age metalworking features.

Two geophysical surveys were undertaken on the site (GSB 2009; 2010), the first covering the area considered by the assessment, the second including areas added to the development envelope. These surveys identified a curvilinear segmented ditch, comprising three sections, forming an enclosure at Woodcock Corner, a rectilinear field system underlying the extant field pattern, and various linear features representing later medieval and post-medieval activity. These were also reported on in conjunction with a programme of test pitting (Shepherd 2010).
Prior to the determination of the planning application for the scheme a programme of evaluation trenching was undertaken by Cotswold Archaeology (2010), targeting linear and curvilinear geophysical anomalies as well as areas that were blank geophysically. Although the evaluation did not fully excavate the segmented ditch it recorded enough information to warrant the imposition of archaeological planning conditions when the application was approved.

As part of the planning consent for the scheme four areas were subjected to full archaeological excavation. These included the area around the segmented ditched enclosure at Woodcock Corner, a small part of the area identified by the assessment at the centre of South Terrace, an area containing elements of the underlying field system and pit anomalies at the western end of South Terrace, and a large area on the east-facing slope of West Ridge that also contained elements of underlying field systems and trackways (Taylor 2013a). This stage of the work was undertaken in the summer and autumn of 2012 under increasingly wet conditions. A short article summarising the excavation of the Woodcock Corner enclosure was published in PAST, the newsletter of the Prehistoric Society (Taylor 2013b).

The identification of the importance of the monument at Woodcock Corner, and the surrounding buried soils, led to the redesign of the proposed HWRC so that the monument could be preserved in situ.

An intermittent watching brief had been specified for the rest of the site when groundworks began in spring 2014 but following the discoveries made in 2012 the client agreed to a more intensive watching brief between April and September of that year. This is when most of the prehistoric pits were identified and recorded (Taylor 2015a). June and July were largely hot and dry, making the identification of features more difficult during this stage of the works. This period included the bulk of the work undertaken on South Terrace and West Ridge. Late summer was more overcast enabling a higher confidence that all features had been identified. This is when the bulk of the work on North Terrace was undertaken. Further small-scale watching briefs have been carried out subsequently (Taylor 2015b).