

Chapter 1: Background and Survey Work

Keith Parfitt

In early November 2001 Cliff Bradshaw of Broadstairs was metal-detecting in a recently harvested potato field at Ringlemere Farm, near Sandwich in Kent (Fig. 1), when he discovered a gold vessel buried at a depth of about 0.40m below the surface (Front cover). Suspecting it to be an important object, he was able to find a parallel in the celebrated Rillaton gold cup, recovered from an Early Bronze Age cairn on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall during the 19th century (Smirke 1867; Needham 2000a). Having informed the farmers and all the relevant authorities, Mr Bradshaw invited Keith Parfitt, Field Officer with the Canterbury Archaeological Trust, to visit the find-spot soon after the discovery (Parfitt 2001). The vessel had been found on a low, but quite distinct, rise in the middle of the field. Mr Bradshaw suspected that this might be the remains of an otherwise unrecorded round barrow, an opinion supported by preliminary inspection.

The site lies in the parish of Woodnesborough, about 1.5km west of the parish church (NGR TR 2938 5698; Fig. 2). The neighbouring parish church of Ash is 1.55km to the north, with Ringlemere Farm some 400m to the south-east and Black Pond Farm on Fleming Road 150m to the south-west (Fig. 3). The mound is situated at an elevation of between 10 and 13m above O.D. and in subsequent fieldwork has been designated Monument (M)1.

At the British Museum, a more detailed examination of the

gold vessel confirmed its Bronze Age identification. With only the Rillaton vessel in Britain and four or five more parallels in gold on the Continent, it was clear that the Ringlemere cup would be of both national and international importance. Versions of these cups are also known in other materials, including amber and shale in southern England and silver in Brittany. The distribution of such cups thus ranges from southern England to the Alps and the new find from Kent represents a pivotal addition to this select corpus.

Given the importance of the find and its apparent association with the remains of a previously unknown round barrow, it was agreed through a Steering Group,¹ consisting of a partnership of local and national archaeological organisations, that the find-spot should be investigated on three grounds:

- it provided an unparalleled opportunity to identify the immediate context of one of these rare cups in unusual materials;
- it was crucial to prospect the site further because of the risk of damage and looting when the find became public knowledge;
- there was an on-going threat of damage to the context of the find and the remains of the monument from annual ploughing.

A programme of field-walking, geophysical survey and

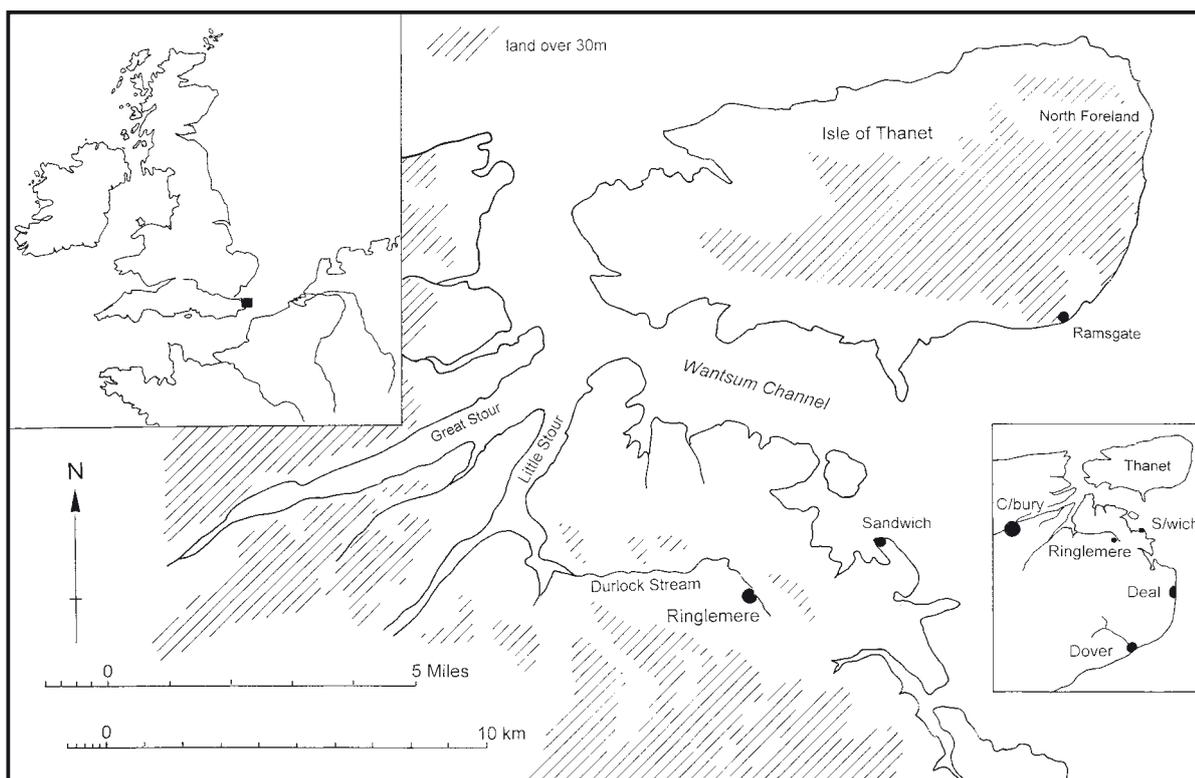


Figure 1 Location map for Ringlemere. Coastline around north-east Kent showing the Wantsum channel at its maximum extent during prehistory.

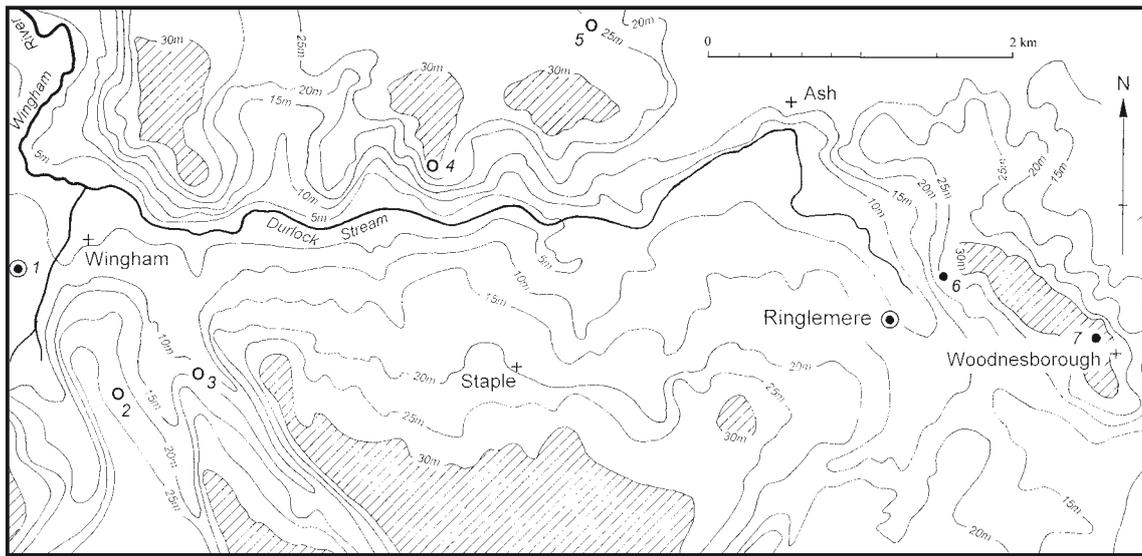


Figure 2 Ringlemere and the valley of the Durlock Stream. Other possible Bronze Age monuments around the valley are shown. Key to sites: 1, Wingham Bridge, monument complex (see **Figure 17c**); 2, Neavy Downs, ring-ditch with beaker; 3 & 4, ring-ditches on air photographs; 5, double ring-ditch on air photograph; 6, RAF Ash, destroyed mound; 7, Woodnesborough Church, destroyed mound

excavation was agreed, and from this has evolved the Ringlemere Ancient Landscape Project, led by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust. The full excavation of monument M1 is a collaborative project between the Trust and the British Museum. At the time of writing six separate excavations have taken place over four years, 2002–2005.

Findings have been acquired by the British Museum, the gold cup through the Treasure process and the bulk of the assemblage through generous donation by the Smith family.

Geology and topography of the region

Ringlemere lies some 3.75km west of the ancient Cinque Port town of Sandwich in Kent (**Fig. 1**), towards the bottom of a long north-east facing slope. This slope constitutes the southern side of the broad, shallow valley of the Durlock Stream (**Fig. 2**). The underlying geology around the site is Thanet Beds, partially sealed by deposits of gravel and head brickearth. Rolling chalkland of the North Downs dip-slope rises gently to the south, its heights lying 21km away.

Today, the Durlock Stream begins at a spring which rises in the immediate environs of the site (**Fig. 3**) and flows for about 8km westwards to join the Wingham River, which in turn empties into the Little Stour near Ickham (**Fig. 2**). A ridge of Eocene sands separates the Durlock valley from the south-western edge of an extensive tract of drained marshland which represents the now silted remains of the former Wantsum Channel (**Figs 1 & 2**). Throughout the prehistoric and Roman periods the Wantsum appears to have been open water (Champion 1980). Archaeological evidence for settlement around its shores suggests it was a much-used waterway, providing a more sheltered alternative to rounding the North Foreland for vessels traveling between the Thames estuary, the southern North Sea and the English Channel.

The Wantsum Channel divided the Isle of Thanet from the Kentish mainland until medieval times. It seems to have been formed by rising sea-levels at the start of the Neolithic period, if not a little before, and by the Bronze Age the silting-up process must have been underway (**Fig. 1**). On the evidence of prehistoric finds recovered from the surrounding area, however, it would seem that the shores of the Wantsum were well

populated, and received a disproportionate share of metalwork deposits during the Middle and Late Bronze Age (Champion 1980, 229; Perkins *et al.* 1994, 310).

Ringlemere lies just over 4km from the Wantsum shore which seems significant in terms of the continental connections of the Early Bronze Age items from the site – the gold cup and two pieces of worked amber. The Wingham River may once have formed a fairly broad inlet opening off the main Wantsum Channel and its lower reaches might have been usable by ancient vessels with shallow draught. A rare example of such a craft, of Bronze Age date and sewn-plank construction, has been discovered in the valley of the river Dour, at Dover, just 16km to the south of Ringlemere (Clark, ed. 2004a & 2004b; **Fig. 1**).

The lower reaches of the Wingham River are, however, now infilled with a complex sequence of riverine clays and peats (Dover Archaeological Group archives) and peat samples recovered north-west of Wingham church (**Fig. 27**) provided Harry Godwin with some of the material for his pioneering paper on the ‘Vegetational History of the Kentish Chalk Downs as seen at Wingham and Frogholt’. This work produced a series of pollen diagrams suggesting that the region had been extensively deforested, presumably through agriculture, by the earlier Bronze Age (Greenfield 1960; Godwin 1962; see Chapter 5).

Accepting a general absence of woodland, as is suggested by Godwin’s research, reasonably long views would have been available from the summit of the mound at Ringlemere inland, in a wide arc extending from north-west, through west and south to south-east. The view across the Durlock valley in the opposite direction, between east and north, however, is limited by the well-defined ridge which lies in that direction. This high ground generally reaches an elevation of between 25 and 35m OD (**Fig. 2**). It effectively obscures any view from Ringlemere to the Wantsum Channel, the Isle of Thanet and the open sea beyond, all of which can be clearly seen from the top of the ridge. If such coastal vistas were of interest to the local prehistoric inhabitants, they were apparently not important in the siting of M1.

The region around Ringlemere is generally rich in archaeological remains, with numerous prehistoric, Roman,

Anglo-Saxon and later sites. However, the bulk of the recorded information has been the result of antiquarian investigation, chance discovery or, in more recent years, development-led intervention. With the notable exception of the extensive research work carried out at Richborough (Cunliffe 1968; Millett and Wilmott 2003), there have been few large-scale excavations or detailed programmes of field survey in the area. There can be no doubt that much awaits discovery and the intensive survey and excavation work conducted at Ringlemere since 2002 is salutary on this point. The following account provides an overview of discoveries made up to the end of 2005 and must be treated as an interim statement on work still incomplete.

Field walking and metal detector surveys 2002–2004

Initial field walking in 2002 involved detailed surface artefact collection over an area centred upon Bradshaw's mound (M1). All material of archaeological significance was collected and bagged by individual 5m squares. Prehistoric calcined flint and worked flint was found to be spread across the entire survey area with noticeable concentrations being plotted around the mound. Other finds included occasional Roman, medieval and post-medieval pottery and some fragments of Roman tile but there were no significant concentrations of these. In 2003 and 2004 the survey area was extended across the valley, using a slightly less intensive search pattern based on 30m squares. By Easter 2004 more than 130 such squares had been surveyed. It is now apparent that an unbroken scatter of prehistoric struck flint and calcined flint is present across the area examined, although its density is generally less than recorded in the area of M1.

Gridded metal-detector surveys have also been undertaken. Typically for the region, these yielded a light scatter of late Roman coins together with other artefacts of Roman, Anglo-Saxon, medieval and post-medieval date. There have also been two important prehistoric finds. At a point about 200m to the north-east of M1, a rare cast bronze brooch of Hallstatt D2/D3 type was discovered (Fig. 3; Parfitt 2005). The type is well known on the Continent but there are very few close parallels from Britain; it is almost certainly an import.

The second find comprises fifteen objects found scattered in the ploughsoil around 150m to the south of M1 (Fig. 3): a 37mm length of thin gold wire with a diameter of 2.7mm and weighing 3.27g; the mouth fragment of a broken socketed axe with wing decoration; a plate-like fragment of copper alloy, possibly from an artefact; an unidentified tang fragment, and 11 pieces of raw metal. Some of the last are from copper plano-convex ingots, others are more amorphous small lumps, perhaps casting waste. The axe is datable to the Ewart stage, c. 1000–800 BC. Much of this material could derive from a closed hoard deposit, but alternatively the group could indicate a metalworking site. More work in the area is planned.

The suggestion has been made that the gold wire piece may have been residual from the manufacture of the rivets in the gold cup, for it has roughly the correct diameter. There are two obstacles to such a conclusion: firstly, the piece would appear to be associated, albeit loosely, with considerably later material – almost a millennium later. Secondly, the composition of the wire does not correspond, for it has a much higher gold content and correspondingly less silver (approximately 87% and 12% respectively based on non-destructive surface analysis; compare the cup's composition – Chapter 3).

Geophysical surveys 2002–2003

by Aaron Birchenough

The application of geophysical survey techniques to adjacent areas has suggested that M1 is, in fact, the focal point of a more extensive prehistoric ceremonial landscape, now effectively invisible on the surface due to centuries of plough erosion (Figs 3 & 4).

An initial survey, covering some 1.4ha around the cup's findspot, was undertaken by staff from English Heritage's Centre for Archaeology. As well as magnetometry, earth resistivity was applied and this revealed the approximate outline of monument M1, together with two smaller ring-ditches (M2 and M3) situated immediately to the south-west (Martin 2003). Further magnetometry surveys were undertaken by the writer in 2003 in adjoining areas. This fieldwork produced some significant new information and the results were submitted as an undergraduate dissertation to Bournemouth University (Birchenough 2004). The Ringlemere site currently appears to comprise at least 12 major magnetic anomalies of archaeological significance, of which 9 are ring-ditches (Figs 3 & 4). These vary considerably in both size and morphology. It has also been possible to recognise at least three on aerial photographs of the area.

The following provides a summary and interpretation of the main results of the geophysical survey work to 2003. None of the major anomalies identified, other than M1, has yet been tested by excavation and it seems certain that other features remain to be located. Indeed, concentrations of minor anomalies, considered likely to be archaeological in nature, are also present in a number of places. The ring-ditches seem to fall into two distinct linear arrangements, one running south-east from M1, the other lying immediately to its west (Fig. 3). There is every reason to suppose that an extension of the survey area would reveal more features.

The 2003 survey was conducted using a standard Geoscan FM36 fluxgate gradiometer (vertical probe separation 0.5m) fitted with a PSI automatic data logger, employing parallel traverses over a 30m grid system. The resolution was set at 0.1 nT and the digital average was set at 16. Readings were taken every 0.5m. In total, the surveyed area amounted to more than 52,000m². The most obvious anomalies represented on the data-plot are recent: two parallel linear responses along the eastern margin of the survey area represent the bed of the now dismantled East Kent Light Railway, built in the early 20th century (Lawson Finch and Garrett 2003; Fig. 4). Further exaggerated readings were produced by electricity poles which run across the field (T1, T2, T3). The other main anomalies, however, all appear to relate to more ancient monuments.

The survey evidence indicates the existence of a clear linear arrangement of at least four ring-ditches (M6, M7, M8, and M9) extending in a south-easterly direction from the main monument, M1 (Fig. 3). These run along the contour of the valley. Monument M6 lies just under 60m from M1 and despite the weak nature of the magnetic response, the results indicate that its ditch is approximately 24m in external diameter. Worthy of particular note is the strong circular anomaly, perhaps a pit-like feature, which occurs within this ring-ditch. Located upon the northern side of M6, but even more ephemeral in its magnetic response is M7. This appears as a very small ring-ditch, approximately 8m in diameter. Its apparent placement over, or

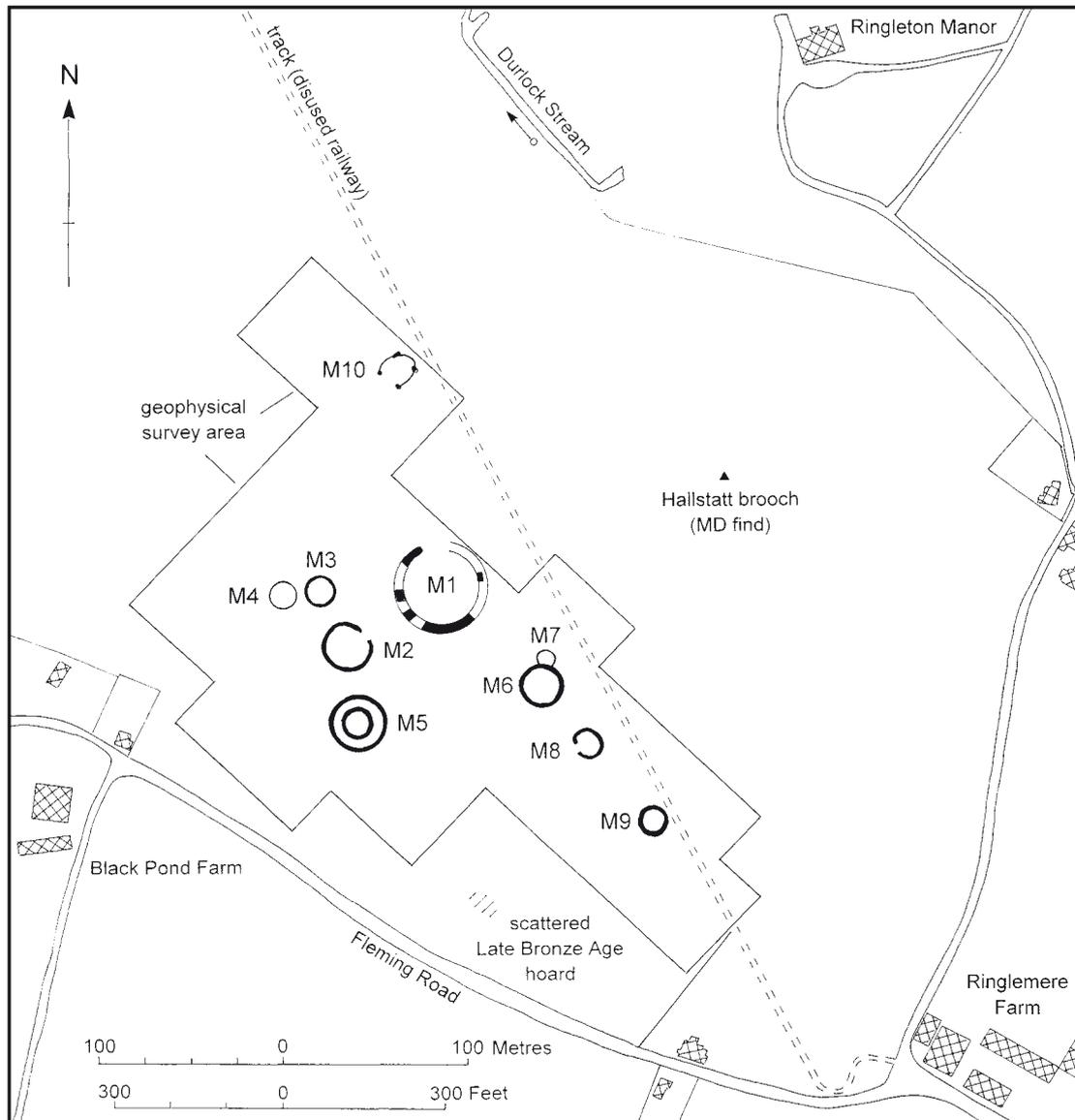


Figure 3 Ringlemere monument complex; M1 is the site of the gold cup (see Figs 7 & 10), M2-10 are those revealed by aerial photography and geophysical prospection.

as an appendage to, the north side of the ditch of M6 could suggest that it is the later of the two monuments.

Some 20m from M6 lies M8, another ring-ditch, with a diameter of about 18m. Of interest here is the apparent break in its circuit on the south-western side (Figs 3 & 4). Inside the ditch there is an indistinct, arc-like, central anomaly represented by an area of raised magnetic response. There are also a considerable number of magnetic anomalies outside the presumed break in the ditch circuit. These are presently difficult to interpret but may be of archaeological origin.

The last ring-ditch on this alignment is M9, 40m to the south-east of M8 and about 160m from M1. It is approximately 10m in diameter and impinges on (or vice versa) the north-western end of an irregular rectilinear feature measuring about 25 x 40m. The exact nature of this structure (M12) remains unclear (not shown on Fig. 3).

The other group of ring-ditches (M2, M3, M4 and M5), occurs to the west of the main monument (M1) and occupies a slightly raised outcrop of natural gravel. The most responsive of the anomalies here was M2, previously located in the English Heritage survey, but also known from aerial photographs (Pitts 2002, 452) and visible from the ground in growing crops. Approximately 28m in diameter, it would seem that this slightly irregular feature represents a fairly large, possibly penannular

ring-ditch, the potential entrance facing M1. The ditch terminals are apparently marked by two anomalies, perhaps pits or large post holes. A positive interpretation of the penannular nature of the ring-ditch is, however, hampered by the presence of an angled linear anomaly, presumed to be a later field boundary ditch, running across the ditch circuit. The trench for a modern gas main also runs east-west across the centre of this monument. Less distinct to the east, and intertwined with M2, is a possible rectangular feature and associated enclosure which is seen more clearly on aerial photographs of the site (not shown on Fig. 3).

Some 14m to the south of M2 lies monument M5. Whilst the magnetic response given was weak, it is apparent that it is a circular, double-ditched monument. Also recorded on an aerial photograph, the outer ditch is of almost equal proportions to M2, at about 28m in diameter, whilst the inner ditch is some 16m across (Figs 3 & 4). The two remaining ring-ditch anomalies (M3 and M4) lie to the north of M2 and are of more modest proportions. Monument M3 is approximately 18m in diameter and also seems to have been crossed by a later field boundary ditch. As with M2 and M5, this monument has been identified on aerial photographs (see Pitts 2002, 452) and also by ground observation.

Situated several metres to the west of M3 is the faint trace of

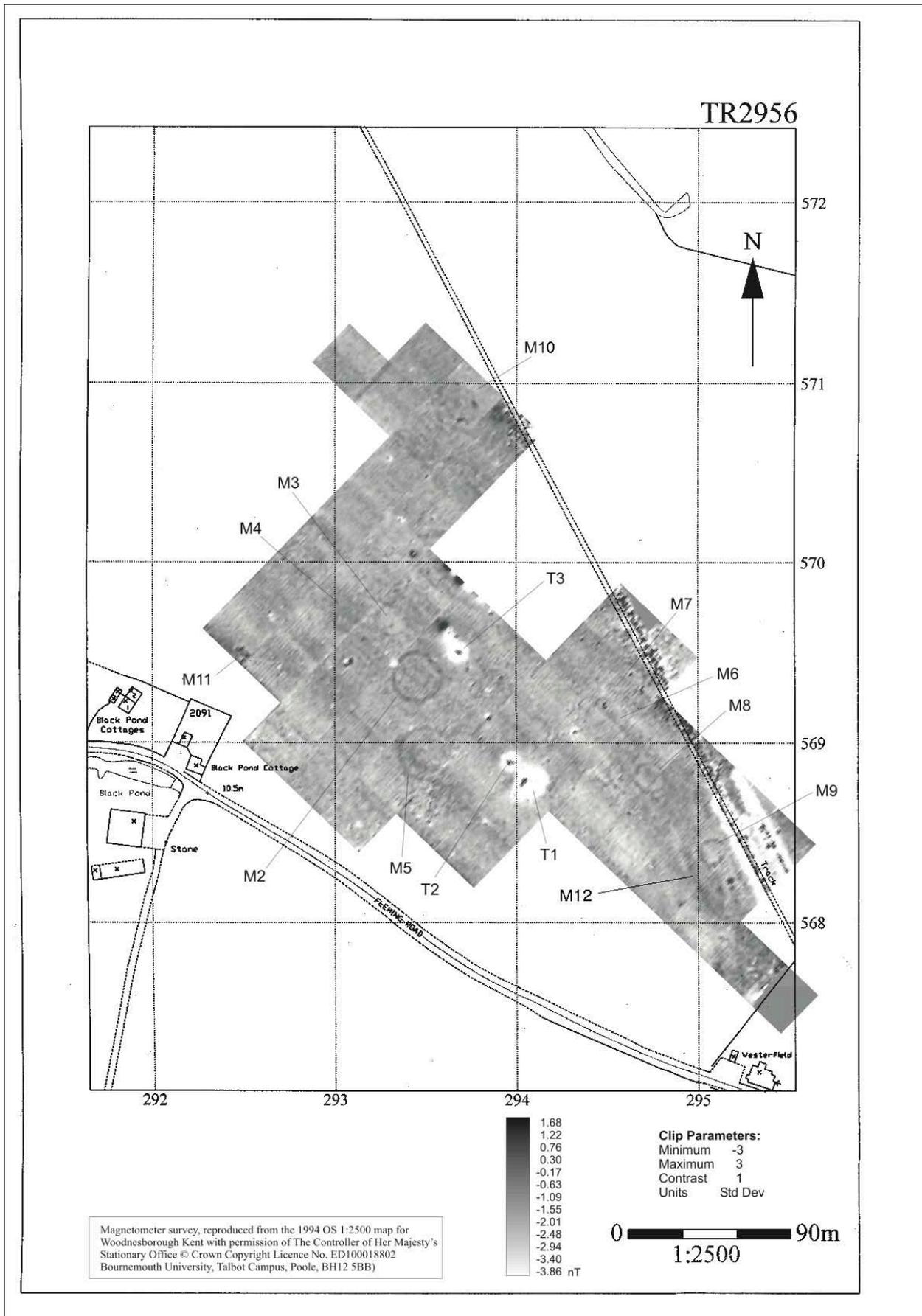


Figure 4 Magnetometry data plot of surveyed areas at Ringlemere

another circular ring-ditch, M4, whose diameter is roughly 14m. The narrow width of ditch indicated suggests that it may represent a post trench rather than a barrow quarry ditch.

Monument M10, located 60m to the north of M1, is

altogether a much more difficult feature to interpret. Its most obvious characteristics are the four irregular anomalies that occur close to the cardinal points of the compass, at a distance of around 14m from each other (Fig. 3). These could represent

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large irregular pits or post settings. They appear to be either incorporated into, or superimposed onto, a faint ring-ditch. A subtle, yet discernible, central anomaly recognisable from the data might represent another pit.

Feature complex M11 is located some 120m to the west of M1 and has again been transected by the gas pipe trench. It may

represent a series of circular pits, or is perhaps just one large pit (not shown on Fig. 3).

Note

1 Representatives of English Heritage, Kent County Council, The Portable Antiquities Scheme, Canterbury Archaeological Trust, Dover Archaeological Group, Dover Museum and the British Museum.



Plate 1 Aerial photograph of Trench 1 fully excavated



Plate 2 Site under excavation, Trench 5