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Ancient site destroyed for golf

Michelle Murphy

Hong Kong's oldest known archaeological remains have been bulldozed into oblivion at the new golf course site at Kau Sai Chau because information about their significance arrived too late.

The chairman of the Hong Kong Archaeological Society, William Meacham, said yesterday that work had begun on the hilltop site and it was unlikely that any archaeological deposits remained.

The society gave the go-ahead to the Government and the Jockey Club, which is fund-

ing the course, to continue developing the site because archaeologists believed it was of minor importance.

Scientists in California later identified pieces of charcoal excavated from the area as dating back to the Welch period, 4940 BC, but by the time the news reached the society, the site's redevelopment had begun.

The charcoal is believed to have come from cooking fires lit by fishing communities on the island near Sai Kung, which is being transformed into an 18-hole golf course.

Meacham said yesterday: "It is really unfortunate that

we did not learn of the significance of the site until it was too late.

"A totally new and unexpected element came into the picture when the dating was received in late January.

"However, we learned the hilltop site had already been reduced by about five metres and it is doubtful that any archaeological deposit now remains."

The discovery proves that human life existed in Hong Kong 1,000 years before previously thought.

Meacham criticised the Recreation and Culture Branch for not co-operating with the

society over site excavations.

"We might have been able to discover the significance of the Welch site in time to save it if we had been given the branch's full support in April last year when the society proposed a one-year consultancy to deal with a number of threatened sites," he said.

A spokesman for the branch, Chiu Siu-tsan, said Government archaeologists shared the society's original view that the site was insignificant and unexciting.

"I think we have to accept the cruel reality that it surprised us all with its significance," he said.