

NOTES

Archaeological investigations at Airport Way, Stanwell

Oxford Archaeology carried out an excavation and a watching brief (centred TQ 038 747) in 2001 during construction work for two flood relief channels parallel to the line of the river Colne in Surrey. The site lies to the west of Stanwell Moor between Wraisbury and the King George VI reservoirs. The work was undertaken on behalf of the Environment Agency.

The site (fig 1)

The geology of the site is gravel underlying deep alluvium. Archaeology buried within this type of landscape tends to remain undetected by conventional prospection methods, such as geophysical or aerial survey. Consequently, little information was revealed by a desk-based assessment carried out by the Surrey County Archaeological Unit (SCAU 1996). A subsequent evaluation by Thames Valley Archaeological Services (TVAS 1997), however, revealed post-medieval gullies, features of Bronze Age date, and the edge of a palaeochannel of the Colne. These were revisited during the excavation. The scope of the excavation was somewhat limited by the high water table, which rendered areas of the site inaccessible because of flooding. This reduced the overall sample size, consequently affecting the reliability of the material.

The excavation (fig 2)

A burnt flint spread (127/128) was the earliest dated feature to be encountered. The fire-cracked flint was set within a dark clay silt soil. It was up to 80mm thick and filled a hollow. The part of 127/128 encountered in the evaluation trench was recorded as being charcoal-rich (TVAS 1997, 5); however the subsequent excavation found relatively little charcoal in this feature. Pottery, including sherds from a small cup, provided a Late Bronze Age date. A group of three postholes (120, 121 and 122) and three small pits (118, 119 and 138) were located around the southern edge of the flint spread. No finds were recovered, although pit 138 appears to cut into the spread and must be Late Bronze Age or later in date. Given their proximity to each other, the remaining features may share this date.

Apart from a palaeochannel of the river Colne silting up possibly during the Iron Age, no further activity took place until the Roman period, when a narrow ditch was cut. This extended across the width of the excavation area and truncated the flint spread. A high-shouldered, greyware jar rim recovered from the feature suggests that it filled during the later 1st century AD. The ditch was then sealed by a layer of alluvium. Since then, little discernible activity appears to have taken place until modern times. Post-medieval activity is characterized by ditches and amorphous material spreads. These typically yielded pottery, brick, glass and coal fragments.

A watching brief was maintained along the route of the development, although archaeological remains were recorded only in the area of Greenhams Crossing (fig 1). These comprised three ditches or gullies of probable modern date.

The archaeological remains, while limited, nevertheless augment archaeological knowledge of the area. The flint spread is perhaps the most significant discovery, pertaining possibly to the degraded remains of a burnt mound. This enigmatic feature-type, which seems certain to represent the accumulation of water-heating stones used for cooking, or possibly industrial activity or saunas (Barfield 1991; Jeffery 1991), typically comprised fire-cracked stones and

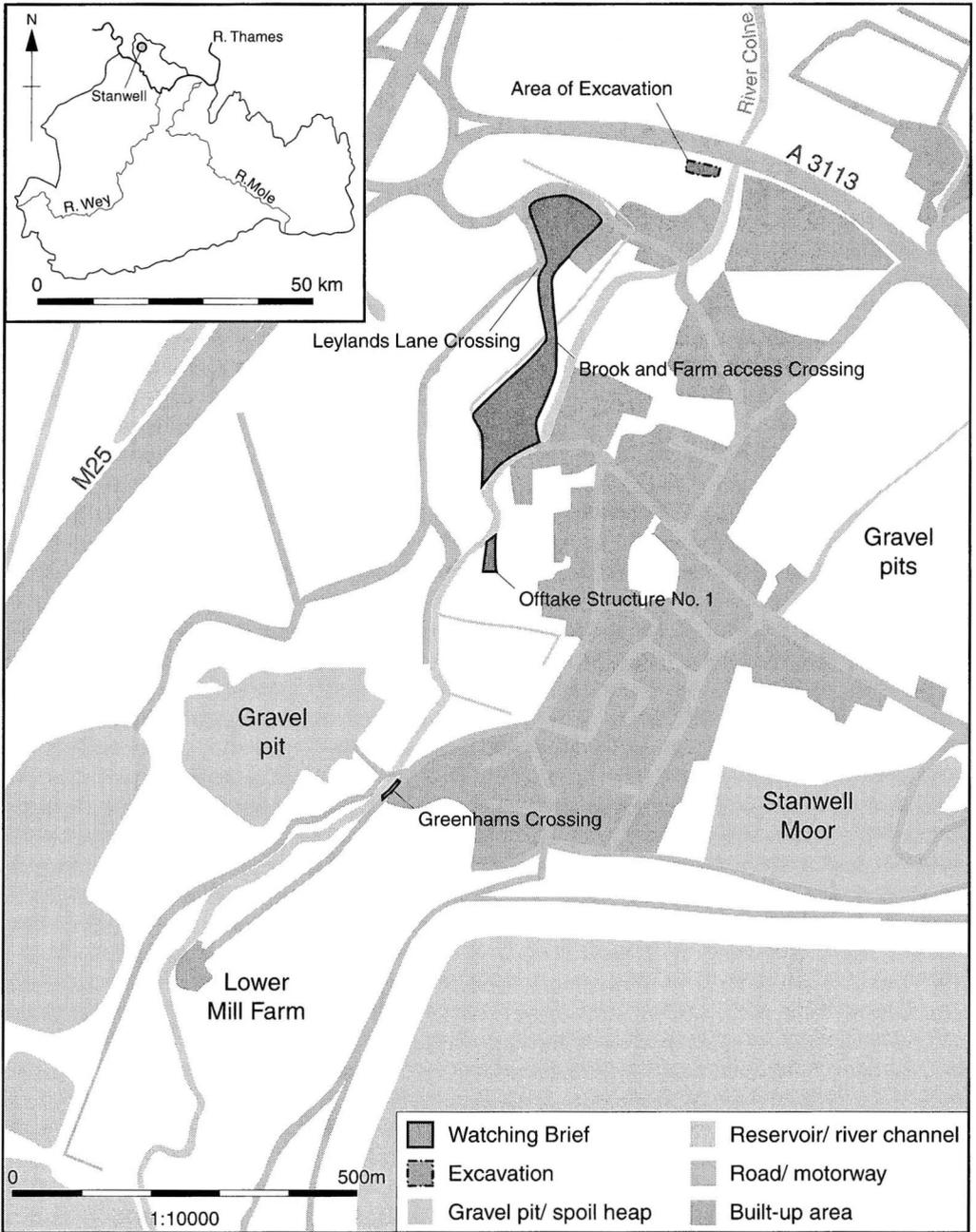


Fig 1 Airport Way, Stanwell: site location. (© Crown Copyright. MC 100014198)

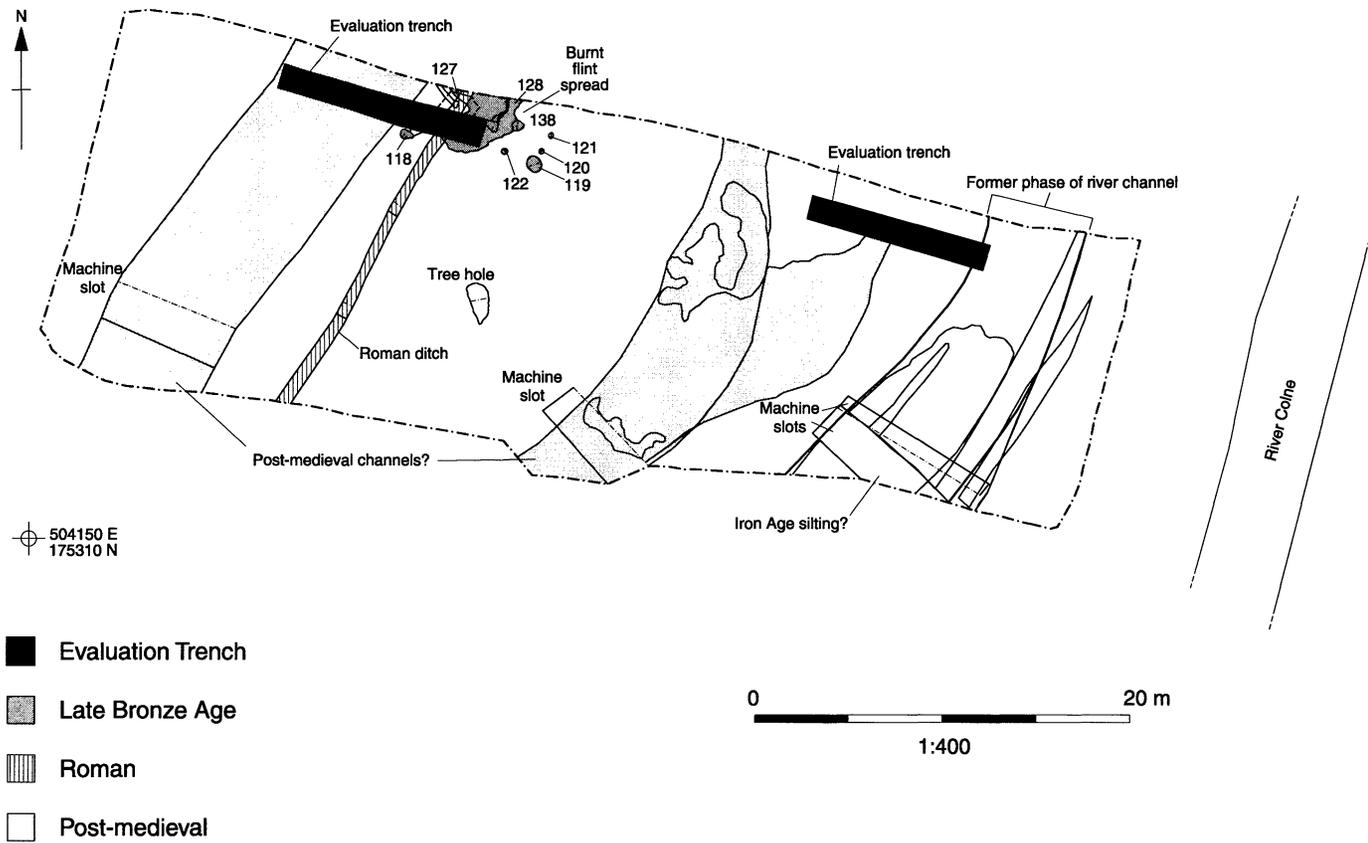


Fig 2 Airport Way, Stanwell: plan of excavation area.

charcoal-enriched soil set within a pit or hollow and located near to a water source, such as a stream. A trough to contain water was often adjacent to the mound. The Stanwell spread displays most of these characteristics, and broadly shares a Bronze Age date that can be assigned to a number of mounds in the region, for example at Phoenix Wharf, London (Bowsher 1990, 18), Barkham Square, Wokingham (Torrance & Ford 2003), and Sipson and Cowley (Hoad 1991; Lewis 1989) within the Colne Valley itself. Crucially, the spread continues north beyond the limit of excavation, where associated evidence might be found. In any case, this evidence can be placed within a wider landscape of later Bronze Age occupation, as represented by field systems and possible huts immediately to the east of the site (O'Connell 1990, 53), ring-ditches and enclosures to the north, and settlement evidence to the south-west (SCAU 1996, 2).

Roman-period and later activity on the site is characterized by ditches that run parallel to the river Colne. All these features appear to be connected with flood alleviation or agricultural activity. Riverine inundation has acted as a barrier to significant domestic occupation at Airport Way. Pasture and arable farming remained principal land uses.

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