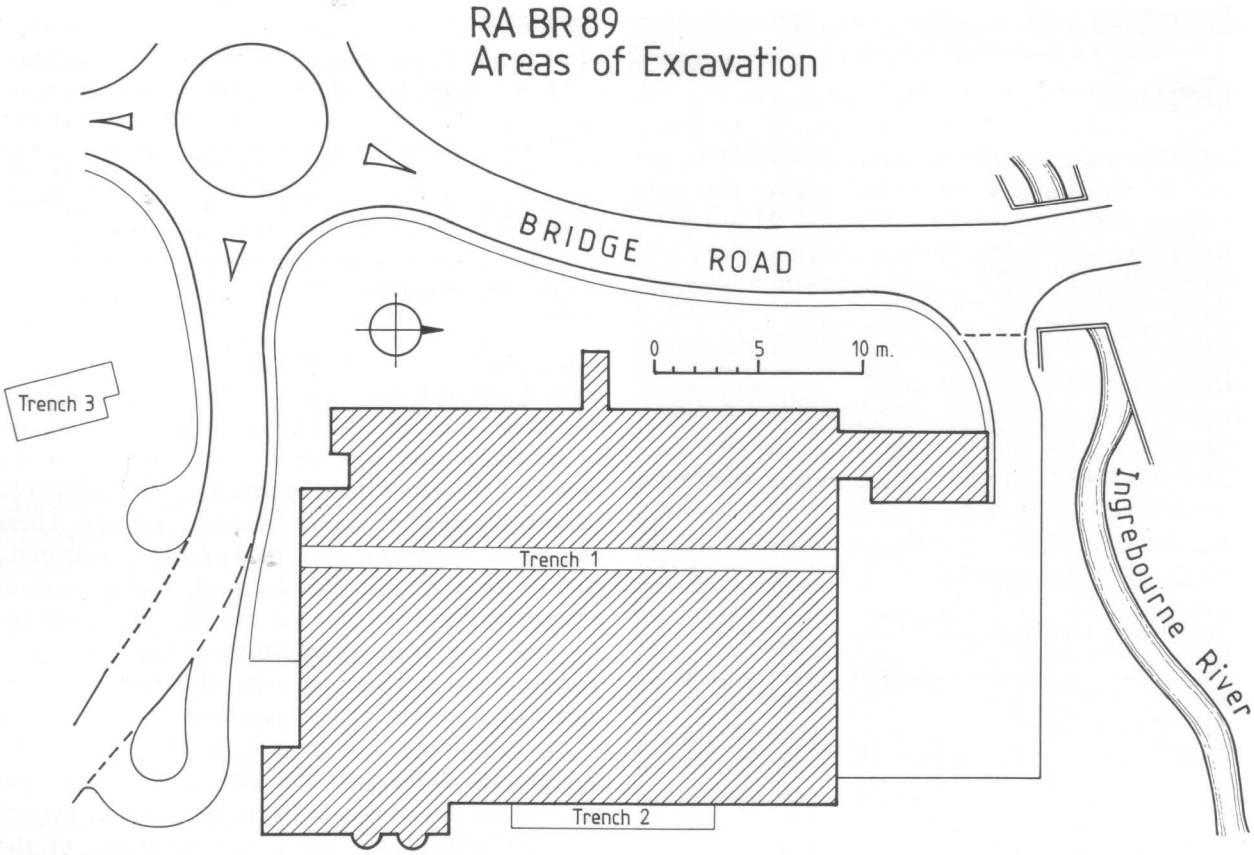

Fig. 1: site location plan.

Wetland use in Rainham, Essex

Frank Meddens
Mark Beasley

The site (RA-BR-89) on which this report is based is located on the east side of Bridge Road and north of Upminster Road South in Rainham, Essex (Fig. 1). Rainham is a village located on a gravel outcrop in marshlands on the bank of the Ingrebourne River (Fig. 2). It appears to have been occupied in Saxon times. The first documented reference to the village dates to 1086. A church of 12th century origin is located on the highest point of the gravel spur on which Rainham is situated. A manor house and bridge crossing the Ingrebourne River, of around the same date, are known to have existed in the area. Little further is known of the medieval settlement.

The site showed evidence of human presence and use over a prolonged period of time, interrupted by periods of flooding and environmental change.

The underlying base geology to the site consists of Woolwich and Reading Beds of Tertiary gravels, clays and sands. Unfortunately the earliest phases with demonstrable human activity which cut these deposits are undatable. The first evidence of human land-use here consists of a large trench, cut into the gravel, and a few stake holes. This phase is sealed by a series of silty sands representing a sequence of foreshore deposits. They were laid down by the flowing water of a stream or river, possibly a predecessor of the Ingrebourne River.

During the second phase a line of stakes had been driven into the foreshore on a north-south orientation. A number of pits were found which were associated with spreads of fire-cracked pebbles. The stake holes may have been part of a fenceline or

possibly belonged to a structure used to exploit the fishing resource of the river. The pits and fire-cracked pebbles may have related to some domestic cooking activities on the foreshore.

The third phase commenced with peat formation on the foreshore. This may have resulted from the river meander having been cut off, silting up, and with marshy vegetation starting to grow in the former riverbed. A series of stakelines with wattling (Fig. 3) were associated with the first layer of peat formation, both on north-south and east-west alignments. These appear to represent fences. Corresponding to the same phase was a brushwood trackway (Fig. 4), running from the former foreshore into the marsh in a northerly direction. It consisted primarily of coppiced Alder wood, laid in overlapping bundles. The stems had been cut on a rotation ranging from 1 to 3 years, with a few exceptions on a longer rotation. The angle of the cuts, and curvature of the facets on the cut ends indicated the use of a metal tool, probably an axe with a rounded cutting edge (Fig. 5:8). Similar brushwood structures have been found in the Crouch and Thames estuaries[1]. The presence of small oak chip debris indicated wood working had taken place at the site. The size of the chips and shape of the tool scars identify the use of a narrow bladed axe or adze. The shape of the chips suggests mortice or hole making of a type similar to that identified in investigations in the Somerset Levels[2]. As no finished oak timbers or artefacts were found in connection with this material, the wood clearly had been removed for use or reuse elsewhere.

Preliminary analysis of the pollen from a core taken from the peat sequence indicates a dominant, mature,

1. T. J. Wilkinson, P. Murphy, S. Juggins and K. Manson 'Wetland Development and Human Activity in Essex Estuaries During the Holocene Transgression' *in* P. Murphy and C. French (eds) The Exploitation of Wetlands *British Archaeol Reps* 186 (1988) 213-238.

2. B. Coles and J. Coles *Sweet Track to Glastonbury, The Somerset Levels in Prehistory* (1986) Thames and Hudson.

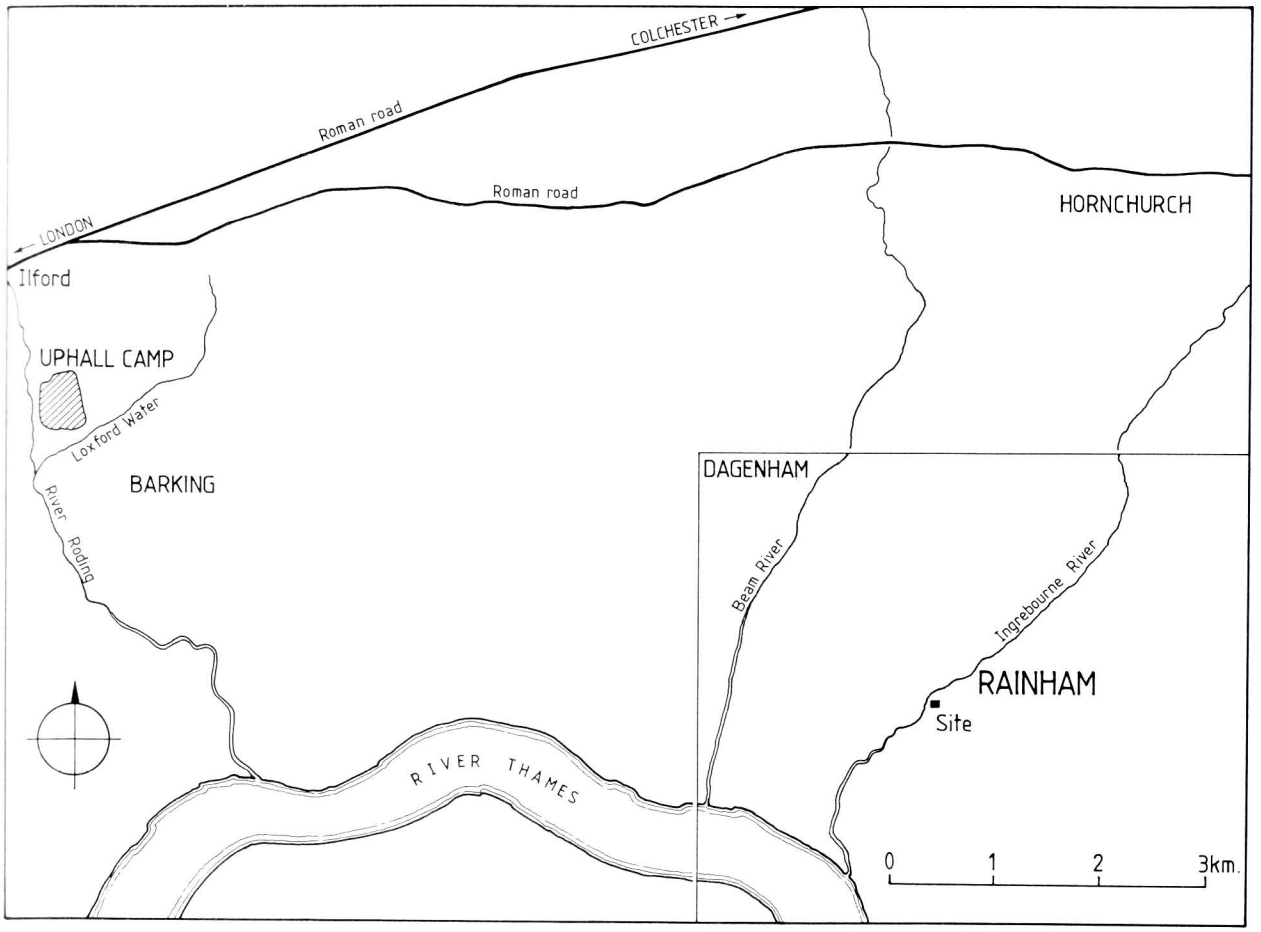

Fig. 2: location of Rainham.

Fig. 3: a wattled stake line.

and dense alder carr woodland (*Alnetum*) for the wetland marsh and an oak (*Quercus*), lindens (*Tilia*) and hazel (*Corylus*) dominated woodland for the surrounding dry land, with some birch (*Betula*), elm (*Ulmus*) and ash (*Fraxinus*). The possibly dense character of the alder carr environment is likely to have limited the intrusion of pollen from outside the immediate surroundings. The evidence is therefore thought to relate to the locale. Comparisons with work done on the Thames estuary[3] and along the Mar Dyke[4] suggest that the peats from this Rainham site correspond to the late-Neolithic and Bronze Age sequence at Mar Dyke and Devoy's Tilbury III stage[5]. Unfortunately none of the oak timber was substantial enough for dendrochronology and C14 dates are not available yet. In terms of dating we would however tentatively like to suggest that the use of metal tools combined with the pollen evidence suggests a Bronze Age date. The peat formation continued and phase three was eventually sealed by a layer of natural brown peaty clay representing flooding.

During phase four a large shallow rubbish pit was cut from a level which consisted of a layer of alluvial material immediately overlying the peat deposits. The organic material deposited in this pit appears to have been covered over regularly either with silts representing seasonal flooding, or possibly fills brought in to reduce the smell from the rubbish. The pottery from these deposits constitute Late Iron Age, and early Roman types dating to late in the 1st century AD or possibly to early in the 2nd century. Coarse ware cooking and storage vessels constitute the majority of the assemblage although fragments of a large serving dish (Fig. 6:9) and fine black burnished serving bowl (Fig. 5:3) are also present. The incurving cooking vessels of Late Iron Age tradition (Fig. 6:1, 2, 3, 4, 5) were shell tempered although mixed with some grog and the wares were quite hard. A largely complete Roman jar (Fig. 5:2) showed evidence of overfiring. It had slumped slightly but had been used as a cooking vessel possibly because as a waster it was not much use for anything else. Two very small body sherds of samian ware were probably from a piece imported from Gaul. One of the Roman jar fragments was of a Hertfordshire white ware (Fig. 5:5). A retouched flint flake and a scraper (Fig. 5:6, 7) were also recovered from this rubbish pit.

3. R. J. Devoy 'Post-glacial Environmental Change and Man in the Thames Estuary: a Synopsis' in F. H. Thompson (ed) *Archaeology and Coastal Change* (1980) The Society of Antiquaries of London.

4. R. J. N. Devoy 'Flandrian sea-level changes and vegetational history of the lower Thames estuary' *Phil Trans Royal Soc London* B **185** (1979) 355-407.

5. R. G. Scaife 'Pollen Analysis of the Mar Dyke' *in* T. J. Wilkinson (ed) Archaeology and environment in South Essex: Rescue archaeology along the Grays By-pass, 1979-80 *East Anglian Archaeology Report* no. 42 (1988).

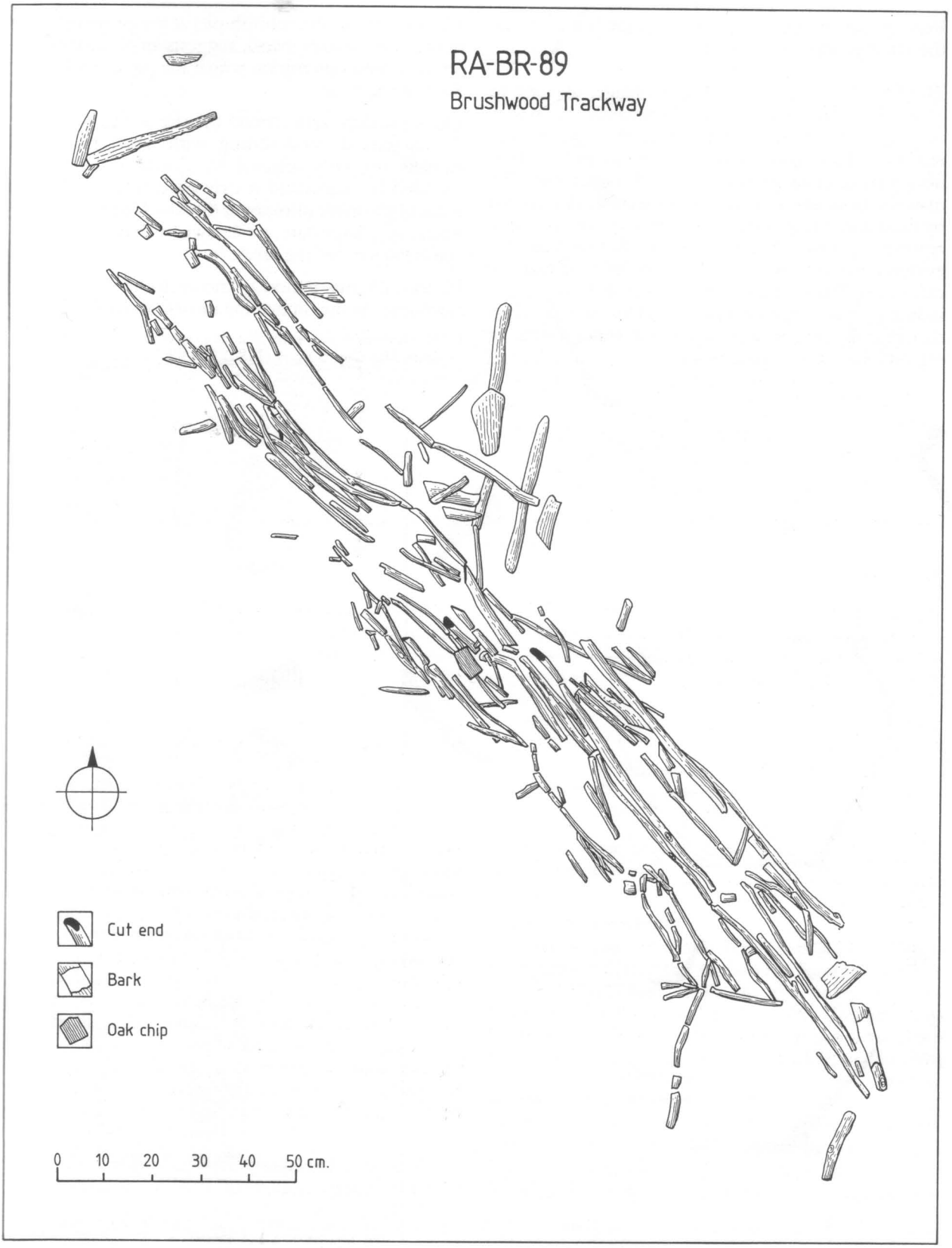

Fig. 4: plan of brushwood trackway.

Further out in the marsh drainage ditches of about the same period were found.

The faunal remains, a small assemblage, all date to phase four. They reflect animal husbandry as well as hunting and fishing. Horse, cattle, sheep/goat, dog, red deer, duck, goose and cod were identified. It is likely that all these species were locally obtainable. The material from the rubbish pit appears to dominated by head and metapodial fragments and may therefore represent primary butchery waste. Actual butchery evidence was limited to a few bones split for marrow extraction. Much of the material was skeletally adult, indicating that it had only been used for its meat when the animals became less useful for other forms of exploitation (wool, traction etc.).

The location of the rubbish pit, at the projected edge of the early Roman marsh, suggests an occupation site on the gravel outcrop on which the present village of Rainham is built.

The immediate area around the site at this time (Fig. 7) suggests a rural setting with small farms and hamlets regularly affected by flooding. Being surrounded by marshland it may have been affected by some of the more unpleasant diseases (such as malaria) which at a later date are known to have had severe consequences for the area[6].

Historically this period is known to have been quite turbulent. At the time of the incursions by Caesar into

6. M. Dobson 'Marsh Fever, the geography of malaria in England' *Journ Hist Geog* **6** no. 4 (1980) 356-89.

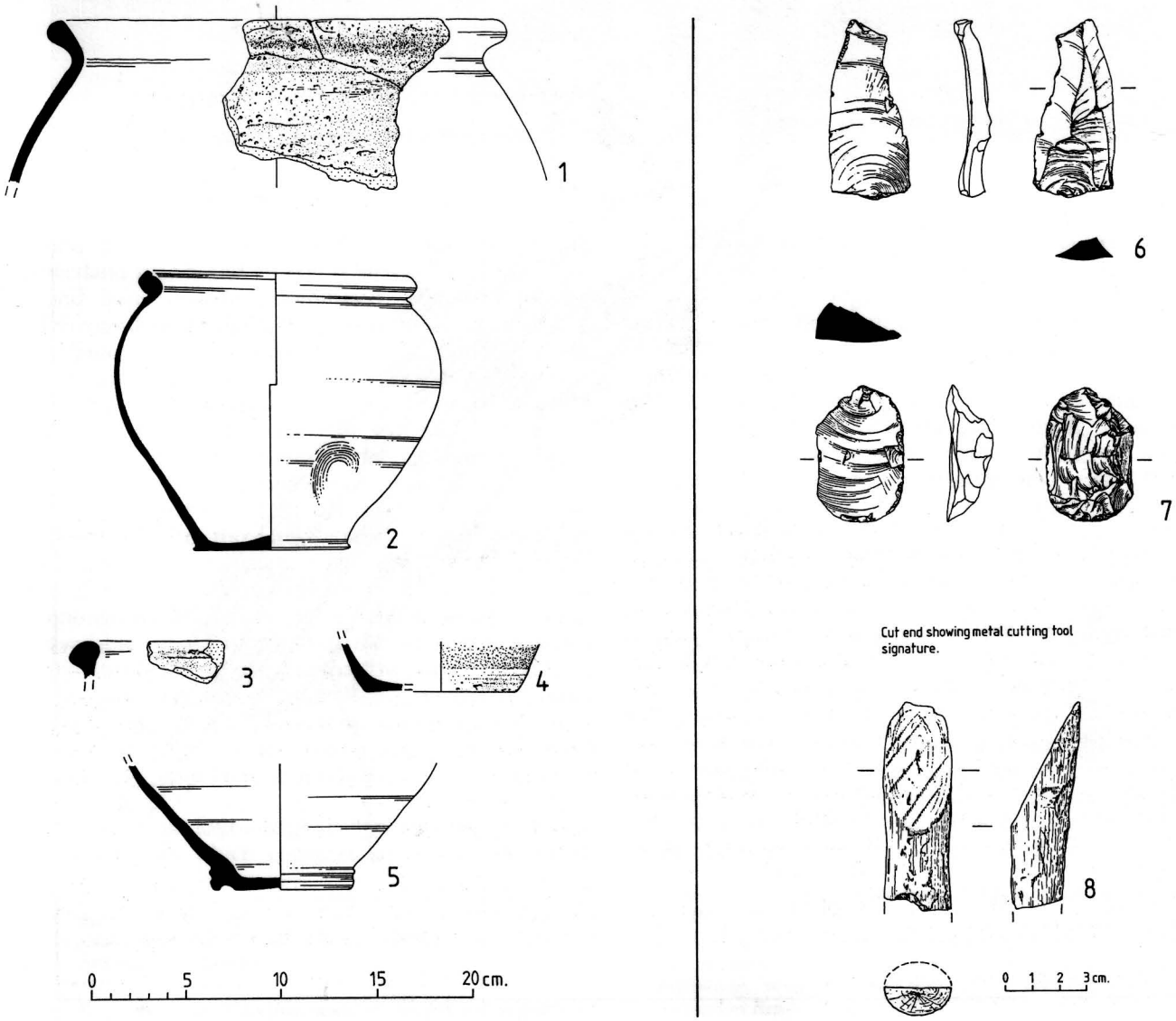

Fig. 5: finds of pottery, flint and wood.

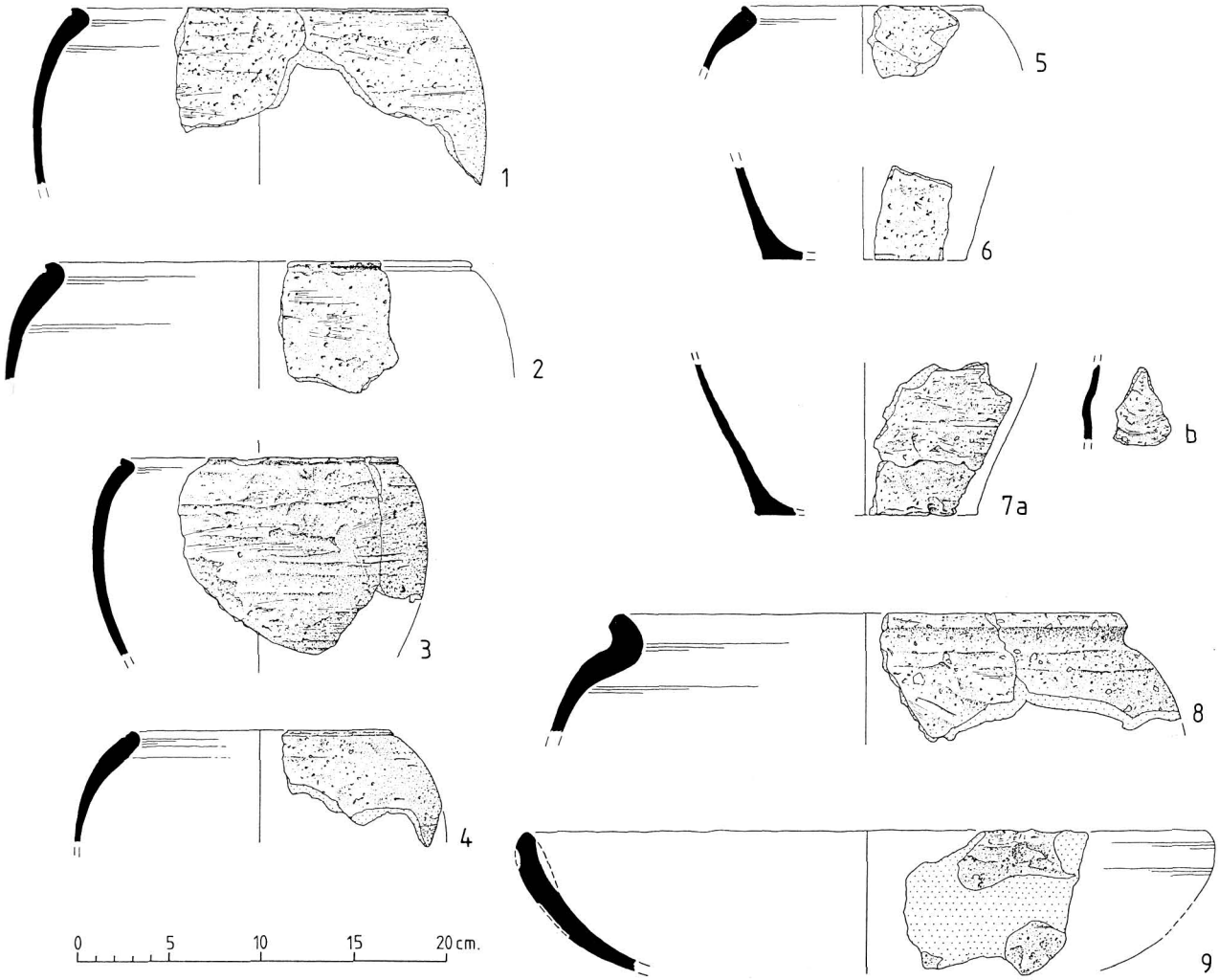

Fig. 6: finds of Iron Age pottery.

Britain (55-54 BC), the area of which the current village of Rainham forms a part may have belonged to the chiefdom of Cassivellaunus, who led British resistance against the invading forces. They would therefore have been included in the groups forced to pay an annual tribute to Rome after these events. The area is likely to to have been associated with the hillfort centre of Uphall camp[7] (Fig. 2). Early in the 1st century AD, possibly during the rule of Cunobeline, the Trinovantes appear to have gained an interest in the area. The region was pro-Roman until the death or fall from power of Cunobeline, when two of his sons succeeded him and strongly allied themselves with the anti-Roman forces[8].

The pollen sequence once completed should reveal further evidence of local fluctuations in sea level. The dating of some of the phases should end up being further refined.

Acknowledgements

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7. P. Greenwood 'Uphall Camp, Ilford, Essex: an Iron Age fortification' *London Archaeol* **6** no. 4 (1989) 94-101.

8. G. Webster *The Roman Invasion of Britain* (1980) Batsford Academic and Educational Ltd.

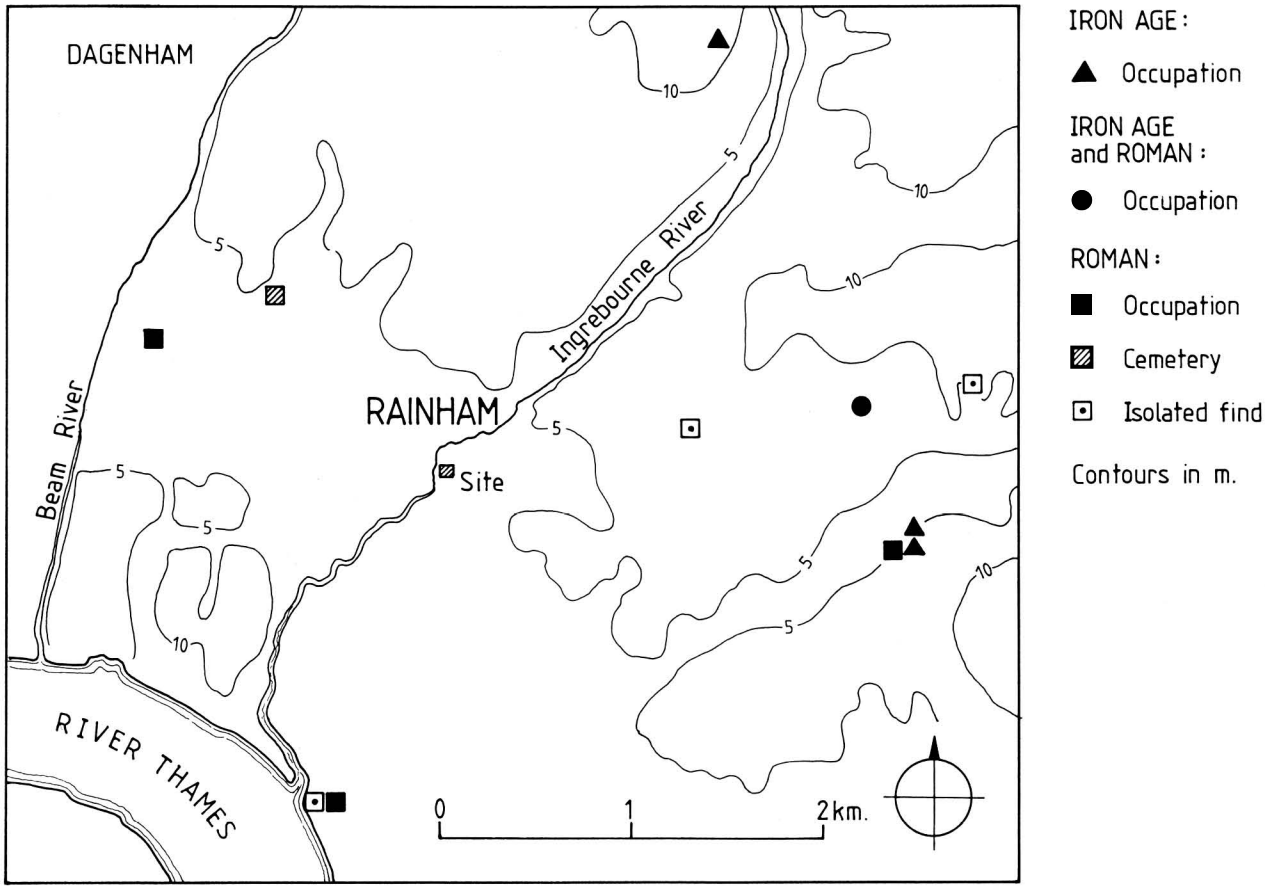

Fig. 7: the site in its Iron Age and Roman setting.

Excavations & Post-Excavation Work

City, by Museum of London, Department of Urban Archaeology. A series of long term excavations. Enquiries to DUA, Museum of London, London Wall, EC2Y 5HN (071-600 3699).

Croydon & District, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collection of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Mrs Muriel Shaw, 28 Lismore Road, South Croydon, CR2 7QA (081-688 2720).

Greater London (except north-east and south-east London), by Museum of London, Department of Greater London Archaeology. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to DGLA, Museum of London (071-600 3699 ext. 241).
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Surrey, by Surrey Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to David Bird, County Archaeological Officer, Planning Department, County Hall, Kingston, Surrey (081-541 8911).

Vauxhall Pottery, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society. Processing of excavated material continues three nights a week. Enquiries to S.L.A.S., c/o Cuming Museum, 155 Walworth Road, SE17 (071-703 3324).

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