

# An Iron Age settlement at Lady Margaret School, Parson's Green, Fulham

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## Introduction

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL evaluation was conducted in May 1996 by AOC (Archaeology) Ltd, in advance of the construction of a new technology block at Lady Margaret School, Parson's Green, SW6 (TQ 2518 7657, see Fig. 1). Remains of post-medieval garden features were anticipated and were seen to be present. However, we unexpectedly came across evidence of prehistoric settlement, in the form of an early Iron Age ditch which was cut by a middle Iron Age pit. The results of the evaluation led to an excavation of the entire area of the new building in June 1996, with special emphasis on the status of the prehistoric remains.

## Archaeological and historical background

The site is located on the First River Terrace Gravel, over London Clay. Iron Age material has previously been found in this area at Imperial Road, Fulham (050458), Woolneigh Street, South Park (050460), Harwood Terrace (050248) and Putney Bridge (106027)<sup>1</sup>. Although the first three are fairly closely grouped, around 500 to 700m to the east of the site, they have generally been in the form of isolated finds rather than structural settlement remains. The Putney Bridge reference is to a late Iron Age coin hoard from the river, and is not likely to have an association with the Parson's Green site.

The earliest historical references to Parson's Green indicate a medieval origin, the name itself being derived from the proximity of Fulham rectory. In the post-medieval period, numerous cartographic and documentary sources suggest high status settlement around Parson's Green<sup>2</sup>.

## Archaeological results

The excavated trench was effectively divided into two unequal parts by a fairly recent garden wall, which will be discussed later. The differing degrees of post-medieval disturbance on either side

of the wall has had a profound effect on the survival of prehistoric features. Within the north-west garden these were extremely fragmentary, with isolated pockets being all that remained. To the south-east of the wall, however, larger areas survived, and these allow a higher level of interpretation.

## Iron Age (Fig. 2)

The largest single prehistoric feature was a substantial ditch, 2.50m wide and 1m deep. It was basically aligned south-east to north-west, but

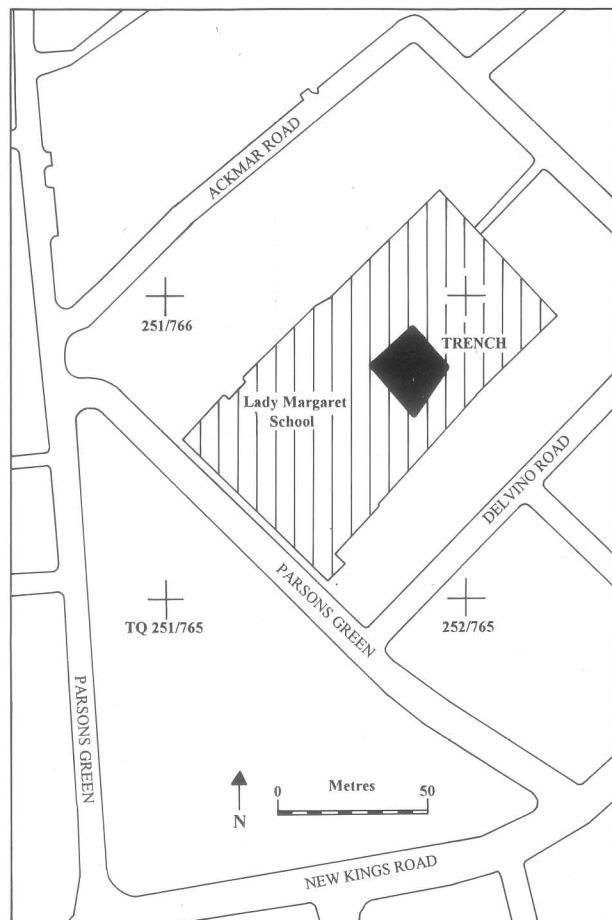


Fig. 1: site location

1. Bracketed numbers refer to the Greater London Sites and Monuments Records.
2. See P. D. Whiting (ed.) *A History of Fulham to 1965* (1970) Fulham History Society.

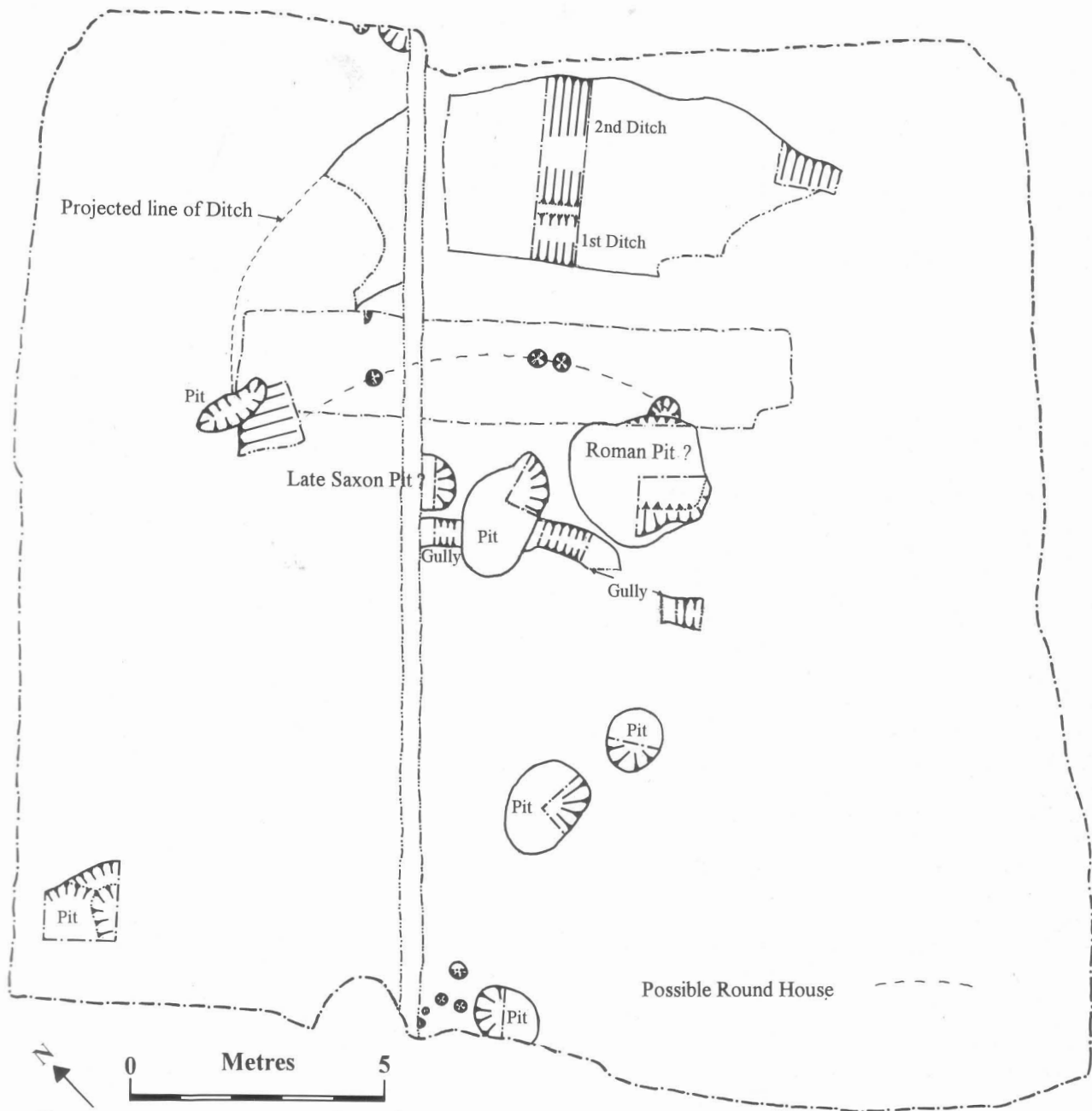


Fig. 2: Iron Age, Roman and late Saxon features

towards the west end it appeared to curve around to the south-west. However, the degree of later disturbance casts some doubt on whether this is all the same feature. There was evidence that this ditch was a recut of an earlier, smaller ditch, which was at least 1.20m wide and 0.40m deep. The upper fill of the later ditch contained pottery ranging in date from the late Bronze Age to middle Iron Age and fragments of fired clay loom weight. The earlier ditch contained no datable finds.

To the south and south-west of this ditch were several steep-sided sub-circular and oval pits, up to 2.90m across and 0.90m deep. Most of them were dated to the Iron Age, but one contained a single

sherd of Roman pottery, and another a single sherd of late Saxon date. They were probably originally grain storage pits, being backfilled after they had been used, with domestic refuse, including animal bone, burnt clay or daub fragments and pottery which generally dated from late Bronze Age to middle Iron Age. One also contained a fragment of clay loom weight. Environmental samples taken from these pits produced small quantities of charred cereal grains (wheat and barley), together with some seeds of weed plants which are common in an agricultural setting. Bones of sheep and pig were found in these pit fills, some of which show butchery marks indicating food waste. One of the

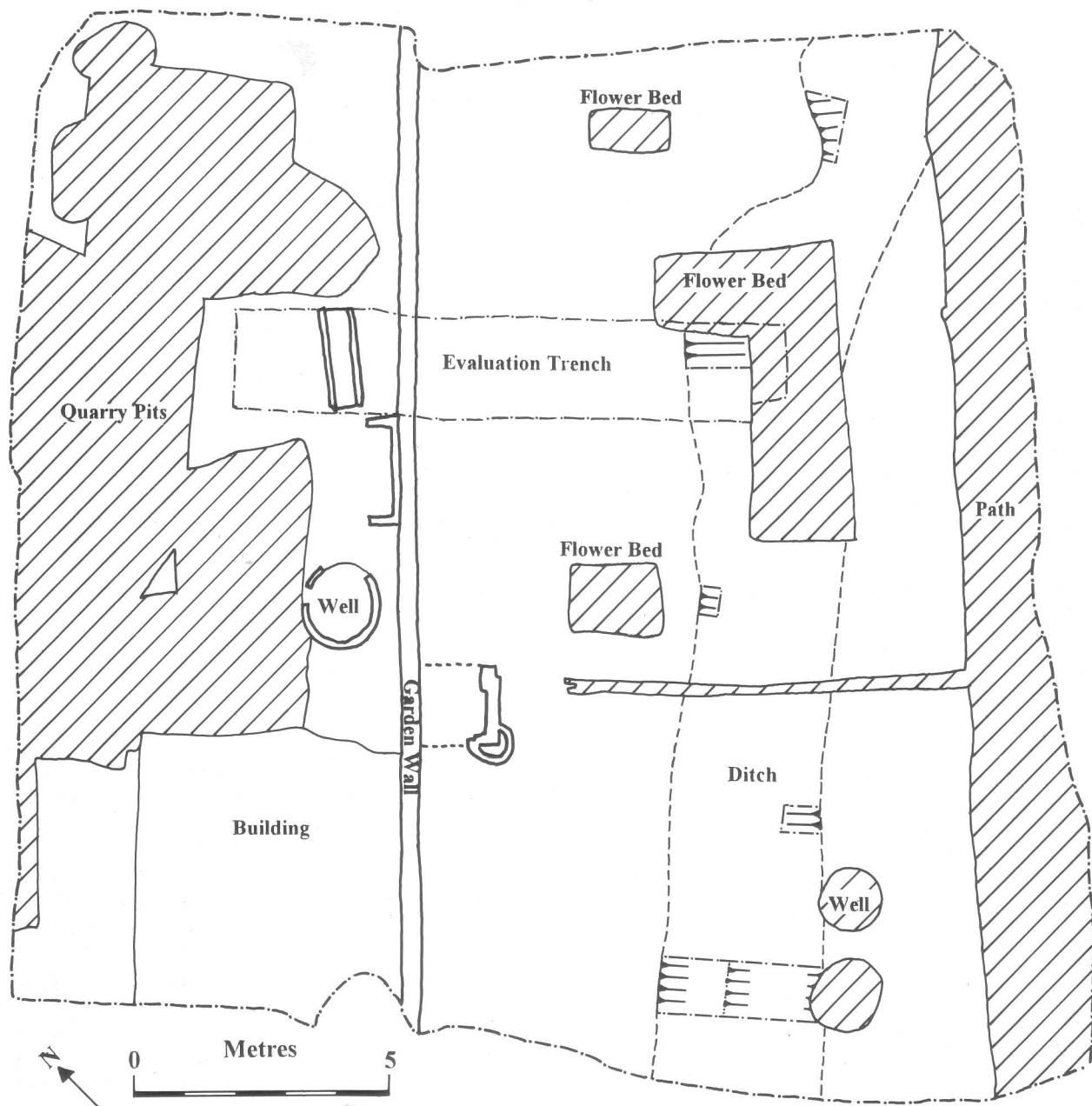


Fig. 3: post-medieval features

pits was clearly seen to cut the large ditch, showing that there was more than a single phase of the site. The pits were also found to post-date a shallow and fairly irregular gully, which was broadly aligned north-west to south-east. The fill of this contained no dating evidence, but charred cereal grains were once again present.

Other undated, but presumably prehistoric, features included post holes and stake holes. Four of them, excavated within the original evaluation trench, may indicate the arc of a round house. It would have been about 9m in diameter, and appears to have an east-facing entrance. This is suggested by the larger post at the eastern end, which

may be interpreted as part of a porch structure. However, the presence of two more post holes to the north of the large ditch shows that occupation either took place on both sides of the ditch, or, more probably, it confirms that the site consisted of more than a single phase, with reorganisation taking place. There was also a small cluster of five stake holes next to the south-west edge of excavation, and apparently associated with one of the pits, which may indicate an insubstantial structure or the successive replacement of single stakes.

#### Post-medieval (Fig. 3)

The brick wall foundation mentioned earlier appears to correlate to a property boundary which is

clearly visible on the 1870 OS map, running at right angles to the buildings fronting onto Parsons Green to the south-west (*The Elms*).

The property to the north-west of this wall contained many intercutting post-medieval features. The southernmost appeared to represent a small building butting against the garden wall. This is likely to have been a service building for the high status housing fronting onto Parson's Green, dated to the 18th century.

To the north of this building, the remainder of this property had been heavily disturbed by the digging of quarry pits for the extraction of the natural sand and gravel during the 18th and 19th centuries. As Parson's Green was predominantly a residential area by this period, this quarrying was presumably just for local building work, rather than a commercial venture.

Three brick-built structures were also found within this property. The latest butted against the side of the garden wall, and probably represents the foundation of a small and insubstantial structure, such as a garden shed. To its south-west was a brick-lined well, with an overflow channel heading away from the house. The backfill of the well contained a badly corroded coin, which could be dated only as late 17th to early 18th century, and many bricks, presumably from the well structure, which had been demolished and used to level the ground.

The property to the south-east of the wall had been less disturbed. Most features appeared to relate to garden activity dating from the 19th and 20th centuries. They included the base of a brick shed butting against the garden wall, some rectangular flower beds, an unlined well and a gravel path foundation which ran parallel to the wall.

An earlier phase of post-medieval activity in this property was represented by a large ditch (3m wide and at least 1.50m deep), running from south-west to north-east (parallel to the later garden wall) until it reached its north-east end, where it appeared to turn to the east or terminate. The scale and alignment of this ditch imply an earlier property boundary, with the brick wall to the north-west representing a subsequent alteration in land ownership. The backfill of this ditch suggested a 17th to mid 18th century date.

### **Finds**

The most common materials recovered were pottery, ceramic building material, and animal bone, whilst clay pipe and metal objects were found in post-medieval deposits. Occasional undiagnostic

flint flakes were also present, together with fired clay, either in the form of fragments of loom weights or as amorphous lumps.

The excavation produced 48 sherds of handmade prehistoric pottery, most of which were small abraded body sherds. Two distinct ceramic phases are suggested, with flint-tempered fabrics representing the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age, and sand-tempered fabrics representing the middle Iron Age. With the exception of a single small sherd from one pit fill, all the early, flint-tempered, material was recovered from contexts which also contained the later sand-tempered ware. The late Bronze Age/early Iron Age material is therefore likely to be redeposited, suggesting a middle Iron Age date for most of the excavated features.

One of the post-medieval quarry pits in the north-west of the site produced an assemblage of glazed floor tiles. They would have been imported from the Low Countries, and were dated as late 15th or early 16th century. Although clearly residual, they support the idea of fairly high-status buildings in this area during the earlier period for which we have no structural evidence.

### **Conclusions**

Despite its fairly fragmentary nature, the presence on the site of late Bronze Age to middle Iron Age settlement evidence is an important addition to our view of late prehistoric west London. The small-scale nature of the investigation, coupled with later activity on the site in the post-medieval period, does not lead to a full understanding of the site's layout. However, given the nature of the finds and the type of smaller features present, the ditches presumably represent enclosures rather than field boundaries. The site therefore appears to represent an enclosed domestic settlement with small-scale craft activity, in the form of weaving, being undertaken, probably for local consumption. It is most likely that the inhabitants grew their own wheat and barley rather than importing it, and the pottery is also presumably of local origins, although no evidence for its production was found.

The recutting of the main ditch on a larger scale, and the fact that the gully and ditch are obviously not of the same phase as each other, signifies reorganisation of the site over time. Also, the possible building could not be contemporary with the ditch or gully, as there is a spatial overlap, although no evidence for their relative chronology was discovered.

One can imagine a ditched enclosure, set within fields of corn, containing round houses with their

respective storage pits, where the occupants lived a fairly self-sufficient lifestyle. The presence of scattered Iron Age material to the east suggests that this is not the only occupation site in this part of London. The proximity of the river and of the crossing in the area of Putney Bridge is likely to have provided some link with the wider world, but this was not reflected in the archaeological record.

The single pit of Roman date initially seems out of place. However, Roman pottery has previously been found in the Parson's Green area, in a possible ditch or pit (SMR 050302). There is also a possibility that the Roman road which leaves the City at Ludgate and continued along the line of the Strand also continued as far as the Putney Bridge crossing<sup>3</sup>. This single pit may indicate some form of roadside activity in the Roman period.

Evidence of late Saxon activity on the site, again in the form of a single pit, was also unexpected. The pottery was in the form of a single sherd of Early Medieval Sandy Ware cooking pot, which is dated as c 900–1050. This is just about the first excavated feature of this date in the area, with the main occupation in the late Saxon period being concentrated at Fulham, which is included in the Domesday survey. This pit at Parsons Green seems to suggest that activity continued well beyond the centre of Fulham, although its nature is unclear.

When one considers the medieval origins of Parsons Green, it is perhaps surprising that there were no features, or finds, from between the 11th and

3. D. Perring, *pers. comm.*

## Letter

### Dark earth

PETER HUGGINS is quite correct to point out that dark earth type soil horizons are found in many urban centres including Canterbury, London, *Lundenwic*, Southwark, York<sup>1</sup>, so it is unlikely that all these soils have identical histories of formation and development. The assumption that *dark earth* is the product of farming or horticulture is largely based on the observation that in section it looks similar to well-worked horticultural soil, due to extensive reworking (root/worm activity). However, this reworking may be the last chapter in a complex history – which obscures the earlier ones. Therefore we should not assume that all *dark earth* type soils have the same origin.

The greatest hindrance to the study of London *dark earth* type soils is that it has normally been truncated by post-medieval cellars – so we cannot study a complete soil profile, plus there is always a high risk of contamination (e.g. intrusive features),

the 16th centuries. Medieval occupation is likely to have been concentrated closer to the green itself, and has been totally destroyed by subsequent buildings. The documented growth and popularity of the area, especially from the 17th century, appears to be mirrored in the archaeological record, with most building-related work in the 18th and 19th centuries. Although the more recent use of the site for gardens has caused some disturbance, it has also led to the survival of some of the prehistoric remains.

### Acknowledgements

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as it is an unsealed context. The only untruncated late Roman *dark earth* soil horizon known inside the walled Roman city was discovered by molas in 1992 during the evaluation of the west yard of King Edward Buildings Sorting Office, Giltspur Street<sup>2</sup>. From summer 1998 until spring 1999 during the redevelopment of the site as the new Merrill Lynch London headquarters, MOLAS is carrying out a series of excavations and it is hoped to examine more of the unique *dark earth* soil horizon. We plan to carry out an interdisciplinary study of the *dark earth* using a variety of analytical techniques including diatoms, magnetic susceptibility, micromorphology, molluscs, pH, particle size, organic content, phytoliths (biogenic silica rods from the cellular structure of grasses) and pollen. It is hoped that this array of techniques will provide detailed information on the parent materials of the *dark earth* and explain how it developed over time, before it was sealed by Saxo-Norman occupation. The interim results of the King Edward Buildings project will be published in the *London Archaeologist* in due course.

Bruce Watson

MOLAS

(site supervisor, King Edward Buildings Archaeological Project)

1. Letters, *London Archaeol* 8 no. 8 (1998) 223.

2. See 'Dark earth and urban decline in late Roman London' in

Roman London Recent Archaeological Work *JoRA Monograph* no. 24 (1998) 100–106.