

Romano-British occupation site near Downe, Kent

Kieron Heard

Introduction

IN APRIL and May 1996 the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) carried out a watching brief during the construction of 6km of new water main between Farnborough reservoir and Berry's Green, in the London Borough of Bromley (Fig. 1). The work took place during topsoil stripping of the 15m wide easement, along the entire route of the new pipeline. The route crossed arable and pasture land and recreational ground on the lower northern slopes of the North Downs, and the watching brief provided an opportunity to investigate areas which previously had received very little archaeological coverage (Fig. 2).

The watching brief revealed a number of intrusive features of Romano-British date at Cudham Road, near the village of Downe (Fig. 4). A limited excavation was carried out in order to investigate the remains, which were threatened by the construction of the pipeline.

Topography and geology

The site is located on arable land about 350m south-east of Downe (TQ 4356 6155). It is on fairly level ground at an average height of 155m OD, at the head of a dry valley forming part of the upper reaches of the River Cray system. Another steep-sided dry valley lies about 0.5km to the east of the site. It is not known when these valleys became 'dry', but it is reasonable to assume that the Cray rose at a higher elevation in the Romano-British period and that the river was then still flowing close to the site. The underlying geology consists of superficial deposits of 'clay-with-flints' which are at least 1.5m thick, overlying Upper Chalk. The topsoil is approximately 0.3m thick, and the archaeological features were all found immediately below the topsoil, cutting the clay-with-flints. They have been truncated by modern ploughing, which has removed the contemporary ground surface.

The excavation

The excavation revealed parts of three ditches, a pit and two post-pits. The features are shown in plan on Fig. 5 and described briefly below.

Ditch 1

Ditch 1 was traced for a distance of 9.3m. It was up to 1.4m wide and 0.55m deep, and had a V-shaped

profile with a slightly rounded base (Fig. 3). The ditch remained open long enough for a weathered deposit of clayey silt and fractured flint nodules to accumulate against its lower sides and base. It was then infilled with sandy silt containing frequent pottery fragments and lesser amounts of ceramic building material, charcoal and slag. The pottery is generally dated to the 2nd century AD, although there are also fragments of a jar which is 'Belgic' in style and probably dates to the mid to late 1st century AD.

Ditch 2

Ditch 2 ran parallel to ditch 1, at about 23m to the north. It had a similar V-shaped profile and was up to 1.6m wide and 0.5m deep. After a period of weathering the ditch was infilled with deposits of

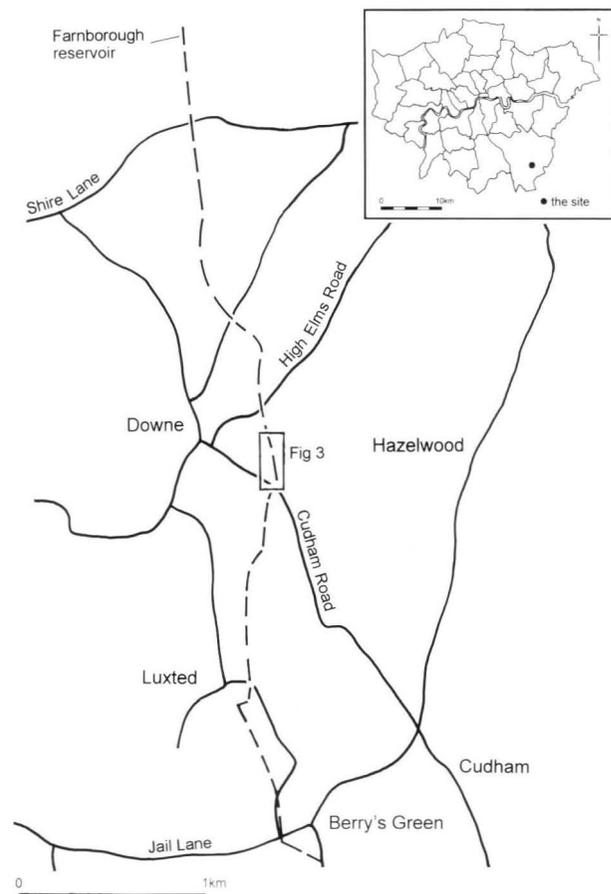


Fig. 1: map showing the route of the new water main, and the approximate location of the Cudham Road site



Fig. 2: a general view of part of the contractor's easement, looking north towards Farnborough reservoir

sandy silt containing fractured flint nodules and much pottery dated to the mid to late 2nd century AD. Some residual pottery of late 1st century AD date was also present.

Ditch 3

Ditch 3 was at a right angle to ditches 1 and 2, and had a rounded terminus within the area of excavation. It was up to 1.6m wide and survived to a depth of 0.65m. This also had a V-shaped profile with a rounded base and an accumulation of weathered natural material against its lower sides and base. Like the other ditches it was infilled with deposits of sandy silt with fractured flint nodules, containing some domestic and industrial refuse and building debris. The pottery dates mostly to the period 120-200 AD, but there is also a single abraded sherd from one of the upper fills with a date of 250-400 AD, which is likely to have been intrusive.

The pit

A steep-sided, sub-rectangular pit at least 2.2m long by 1.9m wide and 0.7m deep contained a basal fill of soft, grey silty clay with occasional fragments of pottery dated to the 2nd century AD. The presence of this fine sediment might indicate that the pit was used as a water cistern. After the pit went out of use it was backfilled with dumps of soil containing large flint fragments, much do-

mestic refuse such as pottery, quernstones, charcoal and burnt grain, and building material.

The post-pits

Two large post-pits were found in the area between ditch 3 and the pit. Both contained Roman pottery fragments and are likely to have been contemporary with the other activity on the site, but it is impossible to tell whether they were part of a single structure. Post-pit 1 contained fragments of quernstone and a piece of sandstone rubble, which were used as packing around the post, which was completely decayed.

The finds

Pottery

The excavation produced a total of 848 sherds of pottery, mostly dating to the 2nd century AD. The two most common fabric types are both Kentish wares. Patch Grove ware makes up nearly 30% of the total assemblage, by sherd count. This ware was distributed across west Kent, east Surrey and into London and dates from the mid-1st century AD, with some vessel types continuing in circulation until the early 3rd century AD. It is represented at the Cudham Road site by storage jars with everted rims, carinated shoulders and stabbed decoration, jars with corrugated necks and carinated shoulders, and necked jars with flat rims.



Fig. 3: recording a section through ditch 1

The second most common identifiable fabric is Black Burnished Ware (fabric 2). Most of this was made at kilns along the lower Thames valley, concentrated around Cliffe in Kent. It dates from the Hadrianic period (120 AD onwards), and was by far the most common ware in use in west Kent in this period, almost to the exclusion of other reduced wares.

Other locally produced wares are present in smaller numbers, including white-slipped ware from Hoo Island and fine, reduced grey wares from north Kent. The only non-local fine ware is Nene Valley colour-coated ware.

Imported wares make up only 9% of the total assemblage by sherd count. They include samian from workshops at Lezoux and Les Martres de Veyre in Central Gaul, a Baetican Dressel 20 globular olive oil amphora and a south Gaulish flat-bottomed Gauloise 4 wine amphora.

The pottery assemblage is similar to those from other sites in west Kent. It is composed mostly of local products, although some of the more common imported wares, which circulated in the region, are present also. The pottery is clearly derived from a domestic context, as represented by tableware, kitchenware (including mortaria), storage

vessels and amphorae. Jars are the most common of the identifiable form types, making up over 41% of the assemblage.

Building materials

Ceramic building materials were recovered from all three ditches and the pit. Fabric 2815 is most common, dating from the mid 1st to the mid 2nd century AD. It was produced at various kiln sites either side of Watling Street between London and St Albans, and also possibly to the south-west of London. Ditches 1 and 2 also produced some fabric 3018, dated 100-120, from the Hartfield area of Sussex. Bricks, *tegulae* and *imbrices* (roofing tiles) and flue tiles are all represented. The latter have both combed and roller-stamped designs for plaster keying.

Ditches 1 and 2 and post-pit 1 all contained fragments of medium-grained sandstone. Some of these have one flat face, and one has been rubbed smooth, suggesting that it was used for paving. Ditch 3 produced a fragment of Kentish ragstone rubble, from the Maidstone area. This was used widely as a building stone.

Iron slag

Fragments of iron slag were found in all three of the ditches. These were mostly the products of

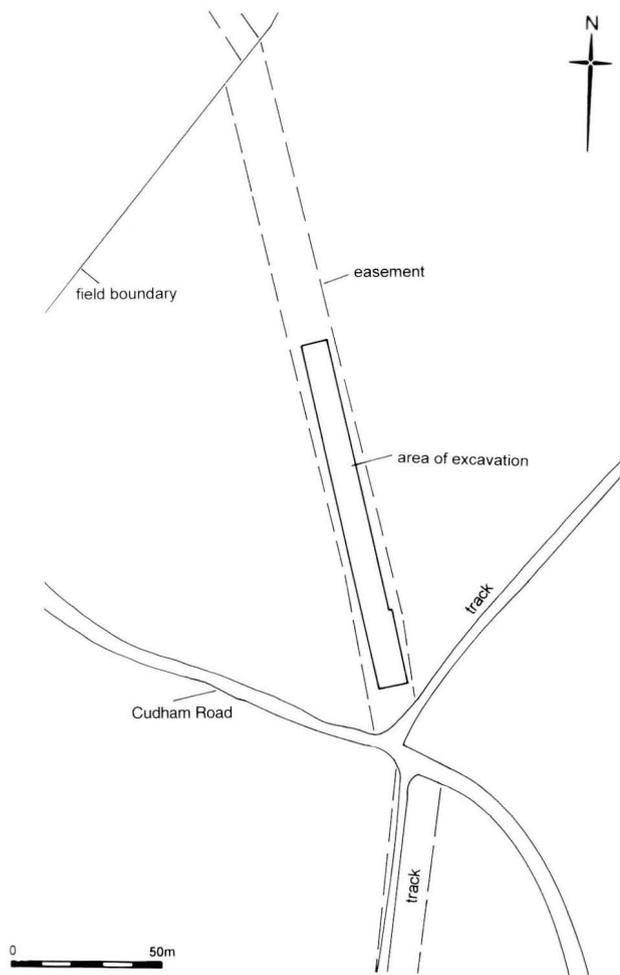


Fig. 4: Cudham Road site location map

secondary smithing activity, rather than smelting. Smithing-hearth bottoms were most common. This fayalitic (iron silicate) slag developed in the hottest part of the hearth, in front of and below the tuyère. It was produced by high temperature reactions between iron and silica, the latter derived from the clay furnace lining or from sand used as flux by the smith. Very small amounts of 'top slag' from a smelting furnace were also present.

Quernstones

Five fragments of domestic, hand-turned quernstones made of Millstone Grit from Derbyshire or Yorkshire were found in ditches 2 and 3, the pit and post-pit 1. The pit also produced two large fragments of the upper part of a hemispherical beehive-type quern made from a hard-textured conglomerate, possibly Hertfordshire Puddingstone. This upper stone has a wide opening or hopper in its centre to receive the grain and house the spindle and a drilled socket in its side for the insertion of a handle, which would provide the

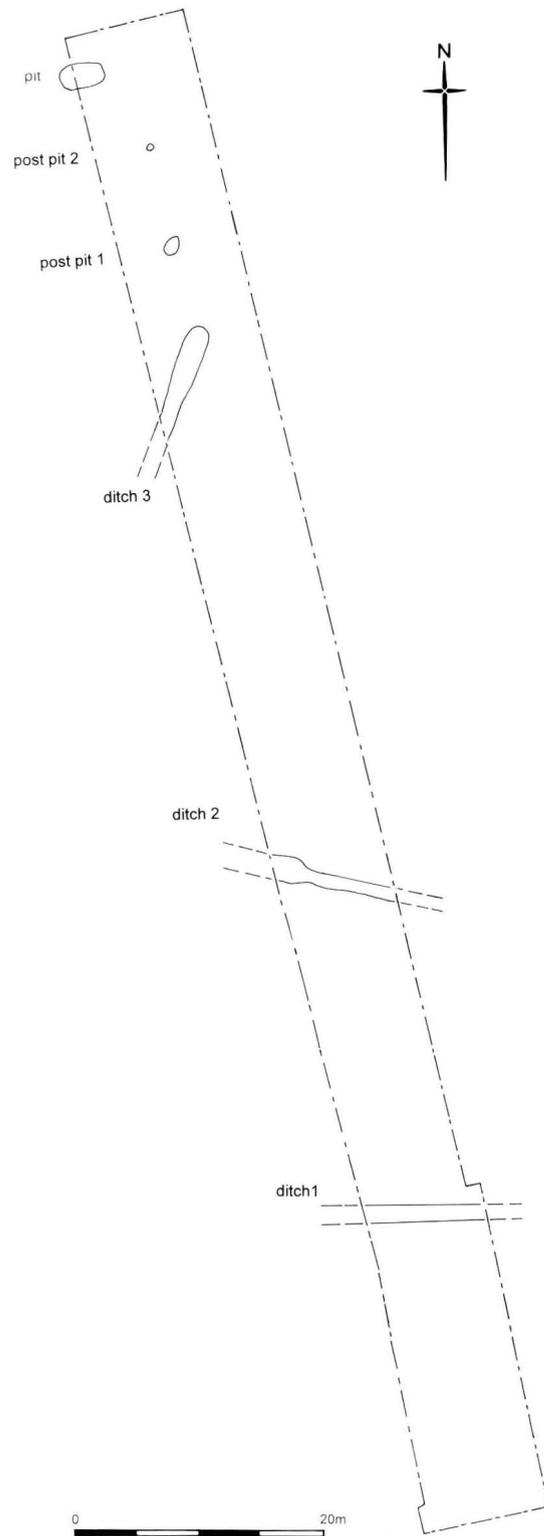


Fig. 5: plan of the archaeological features

rotary action. This type of rotary quern was used in the Iron Age and continued in use into the Roman period. In London, a totally different type imported from the Rhineland superseded it, but in rural areas it was more long-lived.

The use of imported British stone rather than the more-locally available Greensand might be significant.

Small finds

One small fragment of clear vessel glass of indeterminate form came from ditch 3. Colourless glass like this normally denotes a high quality vessel, and dates from the late 1st century AD.

A small number of highly corroded iron objects were found, mostly in ditch 2. They include six flattened strips, some with nails attached, which might have been some form of binding, a plain ring, a loop (possibly a staple) and a fragment of bent iron bar.

Of particular interest is an iron spearhead, recovered from ditch 2. The leaf-shaped blade is 9.8 cm long and 3.8 cm at its widest point, and the socket is long and split. It is similar to Manning's Hod Hill Group IIA, which dates to the mid 1st century AD¹. It is difficult to classify as either a military weapon or a civilian hunting spear.

Plant remains

Quantities of charred cereal grains and chaff and the seeds of wild plants were recovered from the backfill of the pit. The cereals included emmer and spelt wheat with lesser quantities of oats. The charred seeds of fumitory, broad-leaved dock, ryebrome/lop grass and other grasses were also present, representing either crop weeds or plants from the local environment.

Ditches 2 and 3 contained waterlogged seeds from plants with a range of habitats such as disturbed ground, scrub, open grassland and cultivated ground. These are native plants, which thrive in nutrient rich soil and include orache, dock, stinging nettle and dead nettle.

Discussion

The excavation has revealed part of a Romano-British settlement site which was probably occupied in the late 1st century AD and which saw increased activity from about 120 AD. There is little to indicate that the site was in use beyond the late 2nd century AD, but it is possible that any evidence for this could have been destroyed by modern ploughing. The three ditches are likely to have

formed parts of rectangular enclosures or field boundaries and the pit could have been used for storing water. The infilling of these features might indicate a change of land use on this part of the site. The finds assemblage includes domestic and industrial refuse, and evidence for cereal cultivation and processing. There is debris from a substantial building or buildings, with the presence of flue tiles indicating a structure which was equipped with a warm air heating system.

Within the limits of the excavation the archaeological features are spread over a distance of 90m, but the site is likely to have extended much further than this. To the east and west of the contractor's easement indeterminate crop marks suggest activity over a wide area. Also, sherds of Roman pottery were recovered during topsoil stripping in an adjacent field to the north.

How does the site fit into the known pattern of settlement for this part of west Kent in the Romano-British period, and how does it compare with other sites in the vicinity?

Fig. 6 shows clearly that most of the known Romano-British occupation sites in the Bromley area are clustered in the upper reaches of the Ravensbourne and Cray valley systems, where they would have benefited from a ready supply of fresh water and lighter, well-drained soils. This creates the impression that the higher, poorer soils, such as the clay-with-flints at Cudham Road, were generally avoided. It should be noted however that the group of sites in the Cray valley have mostly been found as a result of extensive industrial and residential development and those in the Ravensbourne valley reflect the scale of investigations carried out by the West Kent Archaeological Group, particularly in the West Wickham area². It is likely therefore that the paucity of sites in the area around Downe reflects a lack of fieldwork rather than the true pattern of settlement. There are in fact two sites which compare well with Cudham Road in terms of elevation and soil type: both Higham's Hill and Layhams Road (indicated on Fig. 6) are located on the same clay-with-flints subsoil and are actually at a slightly higher elevation³.

The nature of the evidence from Cudham Road is broadly similar to that from other Romano-British occupation sites in the area. Sites such as Fox Hill, North Pole Lane, Elm Farm, Highams Hill and Layhams Road are typified by the presence of

1. W H Manning *Catalogue of the Romano-British iron tools, fittings and weapons in the British Museum* (1985).

2. P Crozier and B Philp *The archaeology of the Bromley area* (1985) 8.

3. B Philp *Excavations in West Kent 1960-1970* (1973) 77-9.

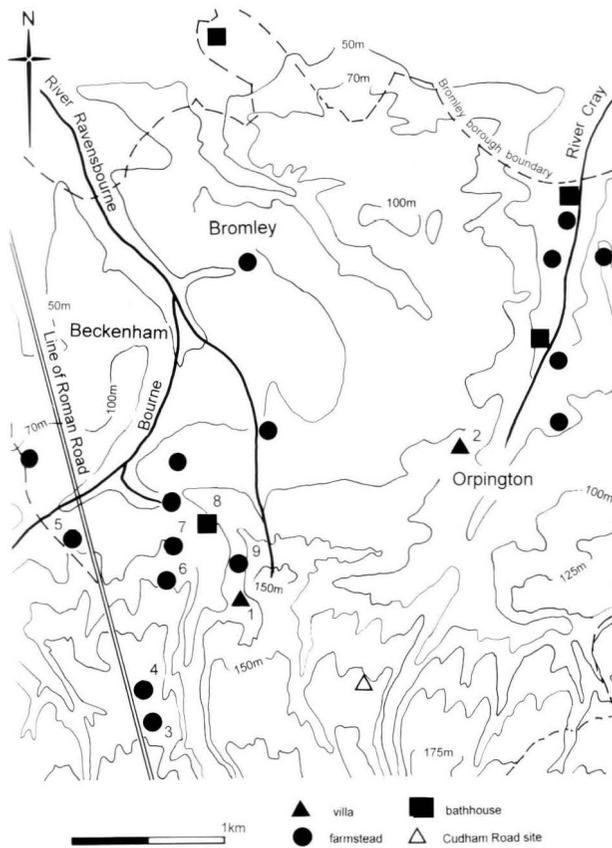


Fig. 6: map of Romano-British sites in the Bromley area (after Crozier and Philp). Sites mentioned in the text: 1. Lower Warbank, Keston; 2. Orpington; 3. Higham's Hill; 4. Layhams Road; 5. Fox Hill; 6. North Pole Lane; 7. Elm Farm; 8. Baston Manor; 9. Leafy Grove

ditches and pits, with occasional post holes but no recognisable structures. They are interpreted as isolated farmsteads. The lack of significant quantities of building materials from the majority of the sites mentioned led the excavator to suggest that any structures nearby were likely to have been of timber construction⁴. By contrast, the Cudham Road site produced quantities of brick, roof tile, flue tile and building stone, which suggest that there was a substantial masonry structure close by. Could this have been a villa?

A survey of the distribution of villas in the south-eastern counties indicates that over four-fifths were within 5km of a river, and that they were at

an average of 7km from a major road⁵. Assuming that the River Cray rose at a greater elevation in the Romano-British period than it does today, the Cudham Road site would certainly have been within 5km of a river, and it was only about 4km east of the Roman road from London to Lewes. In these two respects the site does fit the model for villa location suggested by the authors of the survey. At an elevation of 155m it is considerably higher than the average for villa sites of 52m OD, with two-thirds below 61m OD. However, the two nearby villas at Orpington and Lower Warbank, Keston are both atypical in this respect. The Orpington villa lies on the west slope of the Cray valley at a height of 90m OD, which is about 30m above the valley bottom⁶. The Lower Warbank villa was built across the shoulder of a hill at a height of approximately 125m OD, where it overlooked a largely dry valley of the upper Ravensbourne river system. Its water supply did not come from the river but from the numerous springs above the site⁷.

Most of the villas in the survey were on light, well-drained soils, but the site at Cudham Road is located on heavier, clay soil. However, the geological map shows that Upper Chalk outcrops just 0.5km to the north which means that the site is close to a soil type boundary which was a preferred location, allowing the exploitation of different local environments for mixed farming⁸.

Finally, how does the dating of the site compare with others in the vicinity? Most of the known 'farmstead' sites shown on Fig. 6 seem to have originated in the 1st century AD and to have continued in use into the early 2nd century AD. Similar dates are attributed to the Baston Manor bathhouse⁹ and the cemetery at Leafy Grove¹⁰. By contrast, most of the activity at Cudham Road is dated to the 2nd century AD, commencing c. 120 AD. In terms of dating the site seems to have more in common with the nearby villas. The Period I villa at Orpington was built around 140-170 AD, on the site of a small farmstead dating to the mid 1st century¹¹. The multi-period villa at Keston originated as a number of timber-framed buildings around a courtyard, at about 160-200 AD, and was also on the site of an earlier enclosed farmstead¹². Unlike the two villa sites, which continued in use

4. All of these sites are described by Philp; see fn 2.

5. H Sheldon, G Corti, D Green and P Tyers 'The distribution of villas in Kent, Surrey and Sussex: some preliminary findings from a survey' *London Archaeol* 7, no 2 (1993) 40-6.

6. B Philp *The Roman villa site at Orpington, Kent* (1996) 1.

7. *Op cit* fn 6, 1.

8. *Op cit* fn 5, 43.

9. *Op cit* fn 3, 80-93.

10. *Op cit* fn 3, 94-8.

11. *Op cit* fn 6, 91.

12. Alan Tyler *pers comm.*

Books

Wonderful Things. Uncovering the World's Great Archaeological Treasures. Paul G. Bahn (ed) *Weidenfeld and Nicholson* £25.

AT FIRST glance this glossy publication appears to be yet another in a long line of vaguely thematic coffee table books of main interest to the Christmas gift market. However, this book may offer a little more than the loose collection of pretty pictures expected from such publications.

The abundant photography is very good and dominates the book, but the text is perhaps more informative and challenging than may normally be expected from a publication aimed at the general reader. This is no doubt due in part to the academic backgrounds of the contributors and the editor, who has previously collaborated with Colin Renfrew among others.

The foreword indicates that this book is actually one in a series, another volume of which will apparently deal with items from shipwrecks. This volume is concerned with moveable, although not necessarily portable, objects. According to the editor the selection of items is intended to reflect an archaeologist's, as opposed to a treasure hunter's, idea of 'treasure'. In other words, items that shed light on cultures and their development are included alongside hoards of gold and silver. Each continent is represented although Australasia in particular has only a very short section.

This unusual view of 'treasure' (in the publishing world at least) means that, in the European section

for example, there are entries for hoards of gold and silver from Britain and central/eastern Europe, along with Irish bronze hoards, the Vindolanda writing tablets, the Portland Vase, and the stone bust of the Lady of Elche from Valencia. The somewhat dubious inclusion of Romano-British mosaics rather than superior continental examples, is probably due to the understandable desire of the publishers to maximise sales. It is often the visually least impressive items that hold the most interest for the more knowledgeable reader: the wooden artefacts from the Florida wetlands and New Zealand, or the clay funeral masks from Siberia.

The text, which accompanies the photographs, although very short, helps to convey some of the background to the objects themselves as well as the cultures, which created them. The emphasis is on the value of the cultural or environmental information objects can provide, rather than their monetary or aesthetic value. There is some discussion of the reasons for preservation and/or survival of objects and cultures. Likewise an effort is made to explain the effects of grave robbing, plundering, and treasure hunting both historically and in the present; as well as modern-day burglaries of collections from museums.

This is a coffee table book of wide range, which may help its appeal to the general reader with a slight interest in archaeology but may limit its appeal to those with an interest in a particular period or geographical area. The photographs are undoubtedly the focus of the book but the text holds its own and helps

(continued from p. 115)

for centuries, there is little evidence for occupation at Cudham Road after the end of the 2nd century AD. It is possible of course that the focus of activity shifted at that time.

The villa has been described as 'a building with an agricultural basis, displaying some degree of romanisation in its structure and plan and belonging to the social and economic system of the province; moreover it should be in the countryside'¹³. Although the excavation revealed no masonry structures *in situ* there is evidence to indicate that such buildings existed nearby. By comparison with known villa sites in west Kent it can be argued that the Cudham Road site was a suitable location for that type of establishment, and on the available evidence the dating of the site compares well with the dates of construction of two nearby

villas. It seems likely therefore that a Roman villa remains to be discovered in the countryside south east of the village of Downe.

Acknowledgements

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13. J Wachter *Roman Britain* (1978) 111.