

# Prehistoric activity at the Townmead School site, West Drayton

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## Introduction

THREE STAGES of fieldwork: evaluation, excavation and watching brief, were conducted by RPS Consultants intermittently from February 1998 to May 1999 at the site of the now demolished Townmead School, Wise Lane, West Drayton (WLN96 at TQ 057 788). These investigations were carried out on behalf of Notting Hill Housing Trust through Campbell Reith Hill. This report is primarily concerned with the main excavation, but incorporates the results of the evaluation and watching brief. No archaeological sites or finds were previously known within the site boundary, although the area is rich in archaeology, including prehistoric settlement and ritual sites.

## Archaeological background

The site lies on flat ground at a height of c. 24 m OD, beside the floodplain of the River Colne, which runs north-south 0.6 km to the west (Fig. 1). The natural subsoil consists of terrace gravels, which were deposited between 297,000 and 130,000 BC, overlaid in places by floodplain alluvium. Alluvium extends to the southern edge of the Townmead site from deposits capping a lower gravel terrace (c. 23m OD) to the immediate south-west of the site, to depths of between 0.4m and 1.4m<sup>1</sup>.

The Colne valley has produced important archaeological material and sites over a wide area. They include the Stanwell Cursus, a Neolithic linear monument near Colnebrook to the south-west of the site. The cursus indicates a probable ritual element in the landscape and suggests that the associated area of floodplain and gravel terrace was cleared of trees at this time. Neolithic settlement is also suspected from excavations in the region<sup>2</sup>. Middle Bronze Age cremations within a possible ring ditch, and widespread Late Bronze Age settlement, associated with brickearth soils, have been excavated at Prospect Park, next to the M4 motorway c. 0.5km to the south-east of the Townmead School site. An important Late Bronze Age ring ditch, 20m in diameter, has been identi-

fied and sampled at Mayfield Farm, just to the south of Heathrow Airport. This very large enclosure may have been an important regional centre.<sup>3</sup> Evidence of Iron Age and Roman occupation from the area is fragmentary, but suggests continued agricultural exploitation.

## Methodology

The evaluation of five 2m by 20m machine-cut trenches across the proposal site was undertaken as a condition of planning permission. The evaluation informed the extent of further excavation and watching brief work. English Heritage (Greater London Advisory Service), on behalf of Hillingdon Borough Council, set out the requirements for further fieldwork to mitigate the effects of residential development of the site.

The excavation comprised two groups of trenches in areas of potential archaeological activity (Fig. 1). Excavation Area 1 (trenches 1A and 1B) covered 1057m<sup>2</sup> and was situated to coincide with proposed development in the south-east part of the site. It was anticipated that alluvial deposits, capping the gravel, and possible prehistoric features (comprising shallow hollows and a ditch which contained burnt flint) would be encountered, following findings in evaluation Trench 1.

Area 2 (trenches 2A, 2B and 2C) encompassed an area of 774m<sup>2</sup> situated in the north-west part of the development site. It was to investigate further a segment of Roman field ditch and possible prehistoric pit features which had been identified previously in evaluation Trench 5 (Fig. 1). No further areas of potential interest were highlighted by the evaluation trenches, except for an alluvial layer capping the gravel in Trench 3 on the southern edge of the site. All trenches were opened by a mechanical excavator equipped with toothless ditching bucket, under constant archaeological supervision. Machine excavation proceeded to the surface of the natural gravel. Alluvial deposits were removed by machine, although sample areas

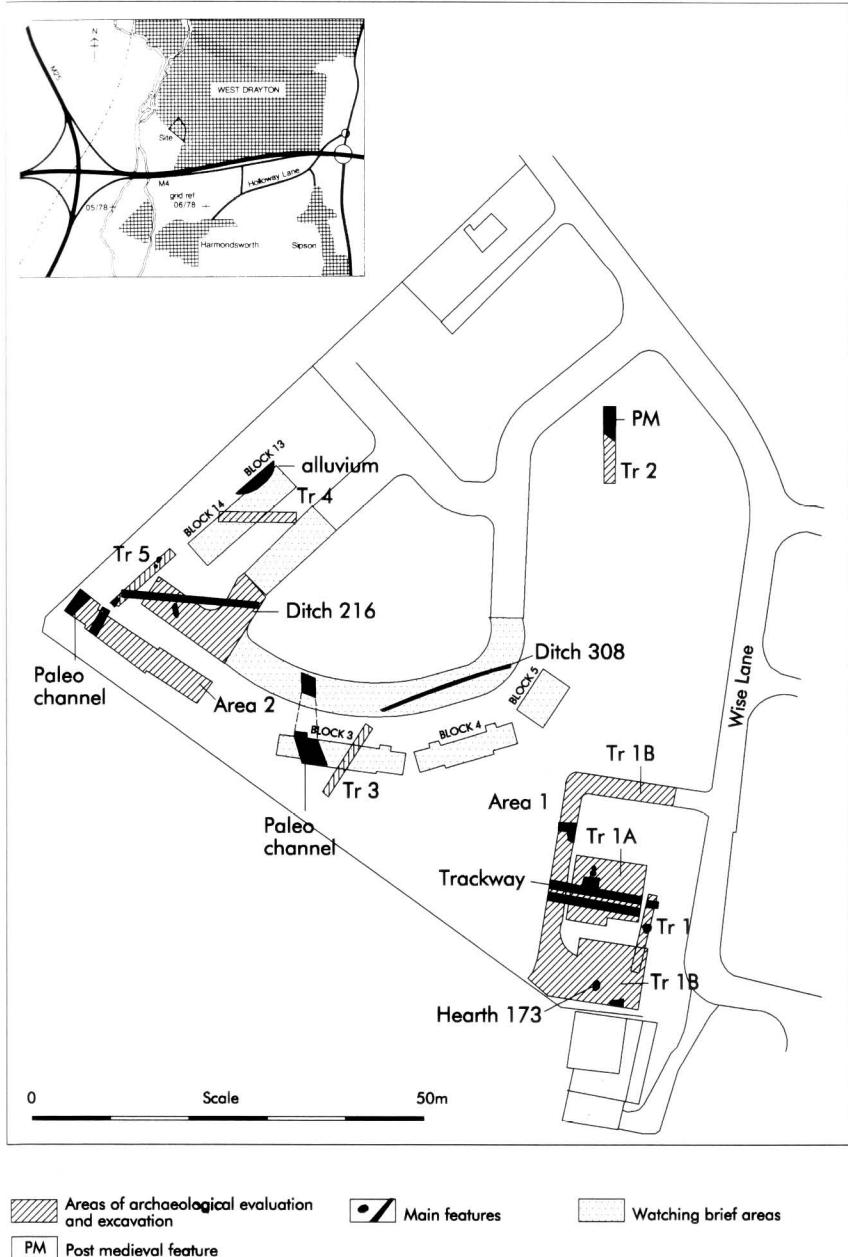
1. P Andrews and A Crockett *Three excavations along the Thames and its tributaries*. Neolithic to Saxon Burial report No. 10. Wessex Archaeology (1996), 1-50, 105-III.

2. J Cotton et al *Archaeology in West Middlesex, the London*

Borough of Hillingdon from the earliest hunters to the late medieval period

Hillingdon Borough libraries (1986).

3. N Merriman *Prehistoric London* HMSO (1990) 31.



**Fig. 1:** site location and site layout showing main features

were excavated by hand. A monolith column was taken through that typical alluvial sequence and feature fills were bulk sampled in accordance with advice from a MoLSS environmentalist.

The final watching brief stage was conducted during foundation and service works in April and May 1999. The areas of close monitoring were confined to western and southern areas of the development site as required by English Heritage.

### The archaeological excavation

Trenches IA and IB were excavated first. A 0.3 metre thick topsoil was removed by machine to expose several features cut into the gravel in

trench IA and the northern arm of trench IB from an OD level of c. 23.6m. The gravel level sloped down to the south to c. 23.1m OD within the southern area of trench IB where it was capped by alluvial clay. The earliest feature on the higher level was a 3.9m x 2.5m x 0.28m deep oval hollow (115) whose silty gravel primary fill produced a single flint flake. This feature, as with a similar alluvium-capped feature (166) to the west and (175) to the south, may represent a tree throw hole (Fig. 2).

Two parallel ditches (105 and 110) about 2m apart and between one and two metres wide were identified for a length of 25m (Figs. 2, 3). They were oriented east-west and were partially sealed by the alluvium at their western ends. They are thought to have been contemporary. Northern ditch 105 cut hollow 115. The fills of the ditches were alluvium-based at the west end, where they were vulnerable to flooding, and gravel-rich elsewhere on slightly higher ground. A few fragments of worked flint and a collection of burnt flint were recovered from sample excavation. The ditches were uneven in both width and depth (depths varied between 0.3 and 0.7m) at points along their exposed lengths, but demonstrated strikingly similar profiles to one another at several points. This correspondence might suggest different sections of the double ditch were dug by different individuals or teams, rather than one gang moving along their length. This is perhaps supported by the evidence of an abrupt change of depth, without a change of fill, within one excavated segment of ditch (105). The ditches are interpreted as

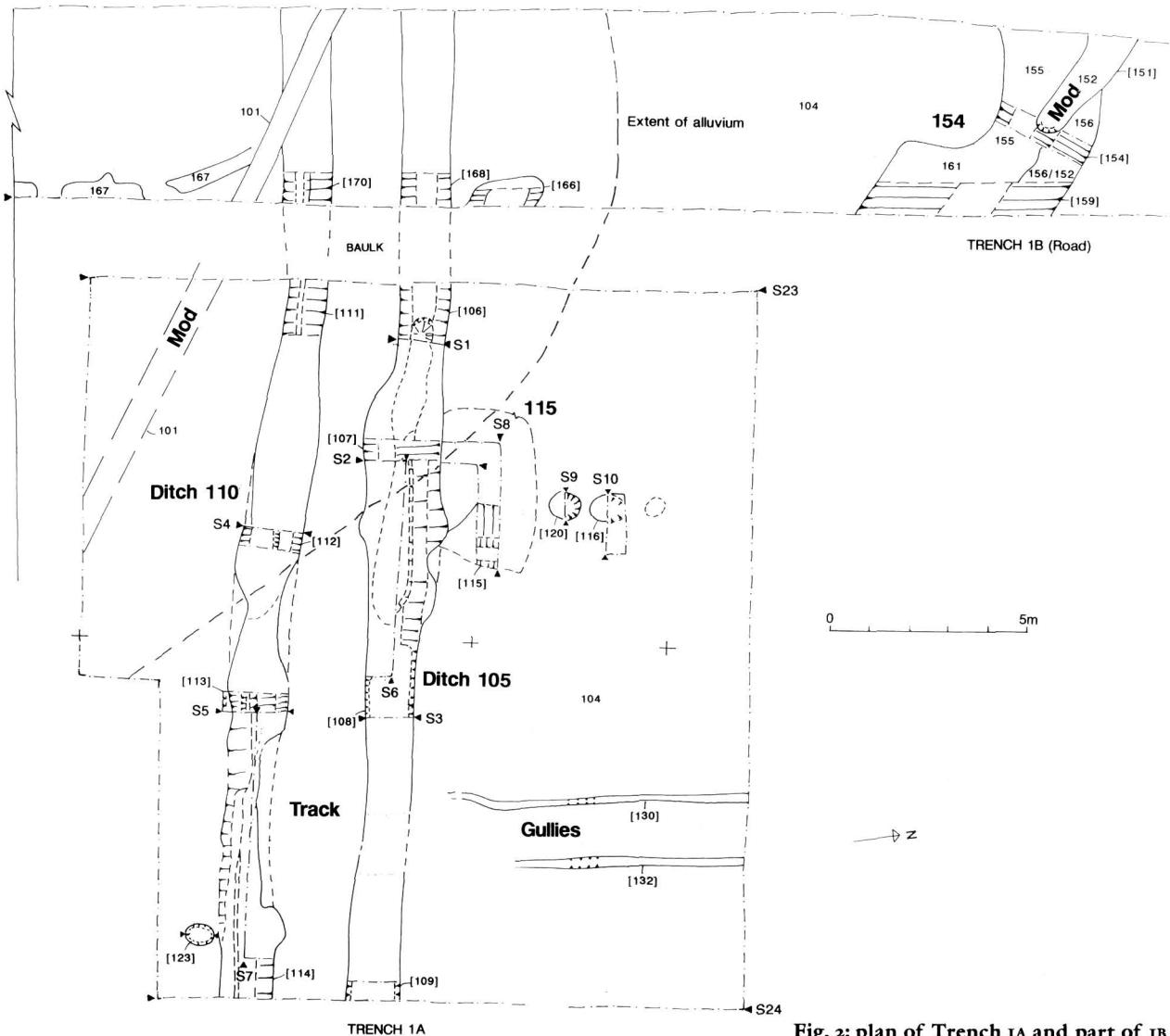


Fig. 2: plan of Trench 1A and part of 1B

drainage features which flanked a narrow trackway, the date and function of which is discussed below. Soil samples taken from the fills of the ditch failed to provide any significant environmental evidence<sup>4</sup>.

A pair of parallel narrow gullies (130 and 132), were recorded 1.3m apart to the north of the trackway and at right angles to it in Trench 1B (Fig. 2). They may represent contemporary drainage features, but since no physical link between them and the trackway had survived later ploughing, this possibility could not be proven. No finds were recovered from the gully fills.

A curvilinear feature (154) over 5m long by c. 2.5m wide was also located to the north of the track within trench 1B (Figs. 2, 3). The terminals of the feature were outside the trench, though it could

not have continued much further east since it was not found in trench 1A. It was well defined and certainly man-made. Its sand and gravel primary fills were devoid of finds, but the tertiary fill (156/152) produced a high concentration of burnt flint and charcoal which had evidently been dumped into the northern edge of the feature from a nearby hearth or burnt mound. A soil sample from the fill contained fat hen (*Chenopodium album L.*) seeds. These edible plants are common to waste ground and have been found in prehistoric and later contexts<sup>4</sup>. Unfortunately the charcoal fragments were unidentifiable. The feature is likely be prehistoric given the high density of burnt flint, but its function is unknown.

4. L Gray-Rees *An assessment of the plant remains in environmental samples Townmead School (WLN96)* RPS Consultants unpublished report (1999).

The alluvium deposits comprised an upper greenish grey clay (190-103) and a lower dark grey clay (191-125). They were traced from the south edge of Trench 1B in a dip in the gravel, where a maximum depth of 0.7m of clay was recorded, to the north, where the deposit petered out, corresponding with a rise in the gravel. A 1m diameter burnt area of silty clay was identified below 0.5m of alluvium, resting on the natural gravel in trench 1B. The deposit was probably a hearth and contained fragments of burnt flint. Dating of the feature using archaeomagnetic techniques was attempted given the uncertain date of the overlaying alluvium. W. McCann of The Clark Laboratory, MoLAS, provided the specialist service and his report<sup>5</sup> is summarised below:

The inclination of the feature demonstrated that it had been disturbed since its last firing and it was not possible to bring the

<sup>5</sup>. W McCann *Townmead School, West Drayton (WLN96) Archaeomagnetic Dating* MoLAS unpublished report (1999).

data on to the curve. However despite a scatter of declination data, a group from the centre of the feature formed a coherent group. ‘The average of these was located around  $530 \pm 30$  BC on the calibration curve at the 68% confidence level. This may indicate the historic period in which this feature was last fired...’

The results, although tentative, suggest a late prehistoric date for the hearth.

A geoarchaeological investigation of the alluvium in Trench 1B conducted by MoLSS<sup>6</sup> concluded that the associated dip in the gravel was probably part of an eastward bend of a former low energy watercourse. This may later have become an oxbow lake before being sealed by floodplain alluvium derived from the River Colne. Finds of burnt flint were recovered from the lowest level of the alluvium and it was concluded that there was a hiatus in the deposition of alluvium at this time which allowed human activities to be con-

<sup>6</sup>. G Spur *A geoarchaeological investigation at Townmead School, West Drayton (WLN96)* MOLSS RPS Consultants unpublished report (1999).

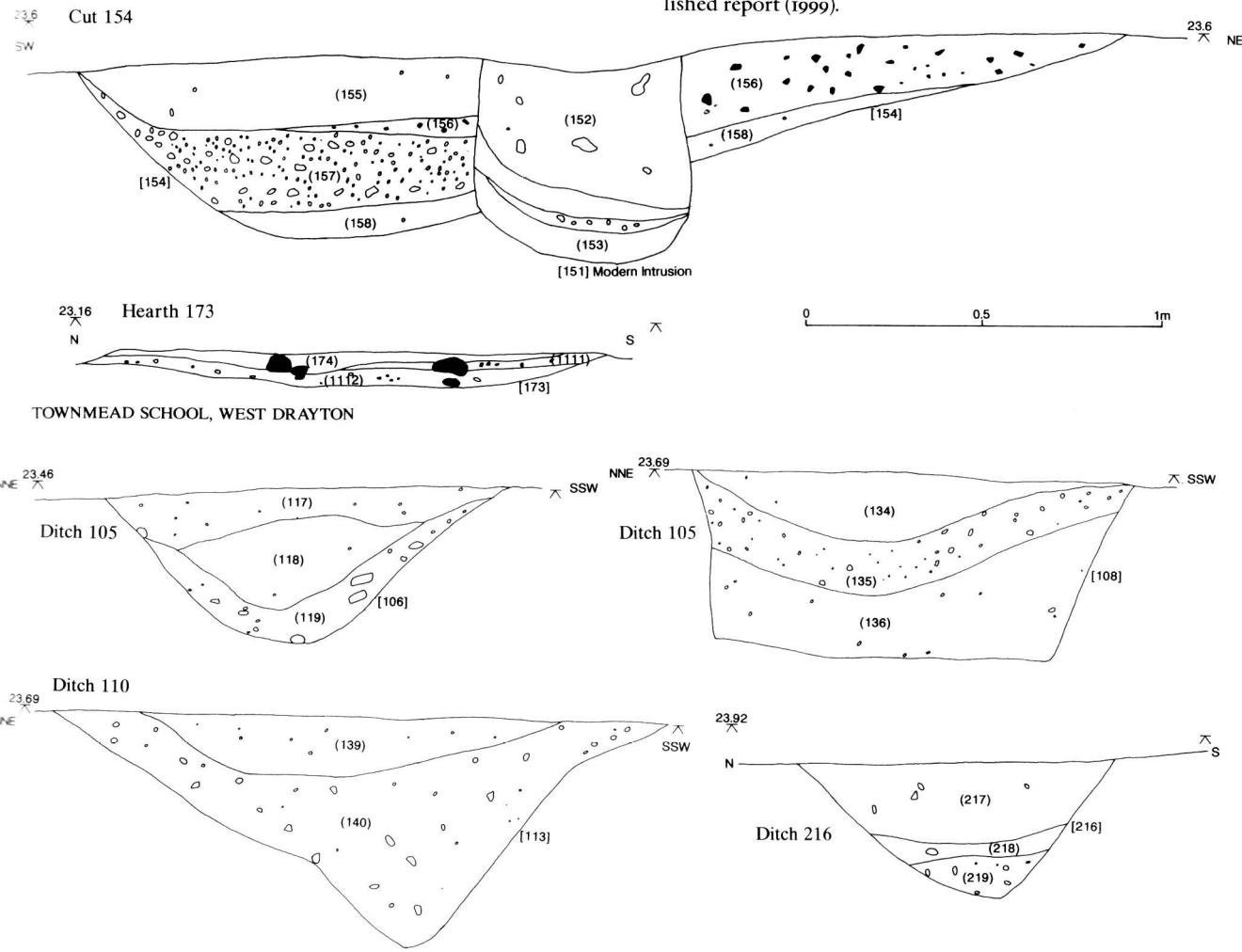


Fig. 3: selected sections

ducted. Such a conclusion was supported by the identification of a second possible hearth (314), during the watching brief stage, sealed by alluvium, within the base of a further former palaeochannel (311) 80m to the north-west. The north-south channel was 0.7m deep by 5m wide and was traceable for 23m.

Excavation Area 2 in the western part of the site produced a third possible palaeochannel (207) cut into the gravel below the topsoil (Fig. 1). The 0.7m deep feature contained alluvial fills similar to the features described above. Fragments of burnt flint from the fill hint at a prehistoric date. The continuation of this watercourse was probably encountered during the watching brief 50m to the north-east where a band of alluvium on a similar orientation was noted.

Trench 2B produced two further undated possible pits and the continuation of an east-west orientated ditch (216) which had previously been located within evaluation Trench 5 (Fig. 1). The V-shaped ditch was up to 0.37m deep by 1m wide and was traced for a total of 33m. The paucity of finds within the feature, other than a few sherds of Roman greyware and an iron nail, suggest that the ditch was peripheral to Romano-British settlement. It is interpreted as a field boundary.

The watching brief produced a further undated hollow/ tree throw within a foundation trench and an undated ditch feature (308), typical of a field boundary ditch, which was traced for 33m within an access road strip within the central southern area of the development site (Fig. 1). A single flint flake was recovered from the fill.

### Finds

A full catalogue is provided in the archive report<sup>7</sup>. Flintwork was scarce with 8 pieces from 7 contexts. Three of them were recovered from trackway ditches (105/110) and included a hard hammer struck side scraper and a notched flake typical of the Bronze Age (Fig. 4).

Burnt flint of probable prehistoric date was more prolific, with 10.86kg from hand collection and soil samples. The main sources were trackway ditches (105/110) (1.44kg), curvilinear feature (154)

(2.87kg, including 2.5kg from a 30-litre sample), hearth (174) (1.54kg) and palaeochannel (207) (1.75kg).

Ceramic material (excluding post-medieval finds) included 6 sherds from a Roman greyware jar in a reduced sandy fabric<sup>8</sup> from ditch (216) and fragments of burnt clay from palaeochannel (207).

### Discussion

The double-ditched track in Area 1 produced few finds and was likely to have been peripheral to any associated settlement. The potential late prehistoric date provided by the flint finds is strengthened by the finding that the same alluvium deposit which sealed the hearth, also partially filled and sealed these ditches and covered the track between. It is probable that the last firing of the hearth and the filling of the ditches were separated by only a short interval, since the fragile burnt feature is unlikely to have survived for any great length of time unless it was quickly sealed and protected. The trackway may have been used as a droveway and may originally have been flanked by hedgerows<sup>9</sup>. The track was however narrow by comparison with other documented drovweways and may have been a simple farm track. There was no evidence of floral remains from hedges within the soil samples.

At Jewsons Yard, Uxbridge, 2km north of the Townmead site, a set of four parallel ditches, oriented east-west, were dated to the Late Bronze Age (with the exception of a Middle Bronze Age ditch)<sup>10</sup>. They were interpreted as a droveway and were associated with settlement evidence. A further probable droveway has been excavated at Holloway Lane, Harmondsworth, to the east of the Townmead site, where Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age settlement was found<sup>11</sup>. This site

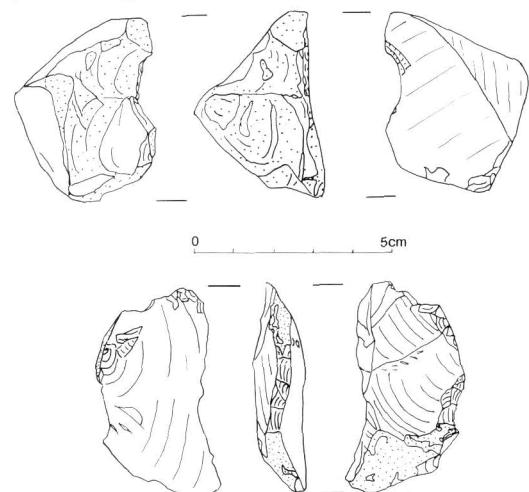


Fig. 4: flint scrapers from trackway ditches 105/110

7. A Wardle *The finds from Townmead School, West Drayton (WLN96)* MOLSS RPS Consultants unpublished report (1999).

8. F Sealey pers. comm.

9. J Cotton pers. comm.

10. A Barclay, A Boyle and M R Roberts 'Excavations at the former Jewsons Yard, Harefield Road, Uxbridge, Middlesex' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 46 (1995) 1-25.

11. Op. cit. fn 2.

may be regarded as part of the same general Late Bronze Age settlement which was excavated above the floodplain at Prospect Park<sup>12</sup>.

It may be significant that all three trackways were similarly oriented. If indications of an Early Iron Age (or slightly earlier) date are correct for the Townmead site's track, then it should be regarded as one element of a widespread, organised pattern of co-axial field systems and tracks which appear to have proliferated in the Thames region in the Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age period<sup>13</sup>. This emphasis on land division may be associated with social, economic and political changes in the Late Bronze Age, with more defined settlement areas and land ownership. The Townmead trackway, like the other nearby examples, was oriented towards the River Colne, which may indicate that access to the river was *via* such tracks. The River Colne was likely to have been a major line of communication in prehistoric times.

Recent evaluation of the Prospect Park site by Wessex Archaeology<sup>14</sup> included trenching and augering of 'Field 4', close to the south of the Townmead School site. Widespread alluvium derived from flooding of the River Colne, covered much of the area. A lack of alluviation in trenches along the north edge of the field, c. 200m southwest of the Townmead site, was interpreted as the south edge of a higher gravel terrace (upon which the Townmead site is situated). A single trench, however, in the north-west of Field 4, and to the

12. *Op. cit.* fn 1.

13. *Op. cit.* fn 9.

14. *Op. cit.* fn 1; D Farwell and K Watson *British Airways plc*

north of the terrace, produced further alluvium.

It is postulated here that a palaeochannel, extending to the north, may have produced this alluvium and that it might have been the same feature as the former stream which was encountered c. 70m to the north-west in Townmead School Area 1.

The identification of two further palaeochannels at the Townmead site indicates that the higher gravel terrace here was crossed by several streams. They were finally filled with alluvium derived from flooding of the River Colne, probably as part of the deposition sequence which capped the gravel terrace to the south-west.

No cultural material with which to date the flooding was found in the Prospect Park evaluation. Assuming that the alluviation in Area 1 was contemporary with the Field 4 alluvium, the 'indicative' Early Iron Age date of the hearth feature, which was sealed by alluvium, gains significance. It suggests, at least, that the widespread alluviation, with its consequent effects on human land use, was occurring in the late prehistoric period.

To conclude, no settlement evidence was found at the site. Evidence of temporary prehistoric campsites has been recorded however (in the form of hearths and burnt flint concentrations), where the resources of the floodplain may have been utilised. In addition, landscape divisions of late prehistoric and Roman date provide indications that the terrace was cleared for agricultural use at these times.

*Combined Business Centre Prospect Park, Harmondsworth, West London Archaeological Evaluation* Wessex Archaeology (1993) II-13, 37 (Chart 6).

## Excavations and post-excavation work

**City of London.** Museum of London Archaeology Service, Walker House, 87 Queen Victoria Street, London EC4V 4AB (020 7410 2200).

**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 Jim Davison, 28 Blenheim Park Road, South Croydon, CR2 6BB.

**Greater London,** by Museum of London Archaeology Service. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to MOLAS, Walker House, 87 Queen Victoria Street, London EC4V 4AB (020 7410 2200).

**Borough of Greenwich.** Cataloguing of excavated and other archaeological material, the majority from sites in the borough. For further information contact Greenwich Borough Museum, 232 Plumstead High Street, SE18 1JT (020 8855 3240).

**Hammersmith & Fulham,** by Fulham Archaeological Rescue

Group. Processing of material from the Borough. Tuesdays, 8.00 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 85 Rannoch Road, W6 9SX (020 7385 3723).

**Kingston,** by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society (KUTAS). Processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Thursday (10 a.m.) at the North Kingston Centre, Richmond Road, Kingston upon Thames KT2 5PE. Enquiries 020 8546 5386.

**Surrey,** by Surrey County Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Rob Poulton, Archaeological Unit Manager, Old Library Headquarters, 25 West Street, Dorking, RH4 1DE (01306 886 466).

*Individual membership of the Council for British Archaeology includes 10 issues of British Archaeology, as well as the supplement CBA Briefing, which gives details of conferences, extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The individual subscription rate of £20 p.a. includes postage; payment should be sent to C.B.A., Bowes Morrell House, 111 Walmgate, York, YO1 2UA (01904 671417).*