

Fig. 1: distribution of Late Iron Age and Romano-British remains

# The archaeological landscape of Imperial College Sports Ground part 2: Roman to medieval

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## Introduction

The earlier periods of activity on this site (Neolithic to Early Iron Age) were reported in part 1 of this article<sup>1</sup>.

## Late Iron Age/Romano-British (100 BC to AD 410)

Activity associated with this phase is focussed within the eastern half of the site (Fig. 1) and apparently using the topography of the subsurface gravel (perhaps for both drainage and resource exploitation reasons), that undulates to emerge

through the overlying brickearth in this area. The Late Iron Age remains that form the nucleus of the Romano-British settlement comprise at least three roundhouses, located to the east and south of a single large square enclosure. The enclosure measured *c.* 30m along each side, and had an east-facing entrance within the north-east corner. A few additional features may be attributed to this period, including the ephemeral remains of what appear to be small subrectangular enclosures formed by discontinuous ditches, to the north-west of the main square enclosure. Artefacts include a quantity of copper working slag, predominantly but not exclusively recovered in association with Late Iron Age pottery. No clear evidence was recorded

1. A Crockett 'The archaeological landscape of Imperial College Sports Ground part 1, prehistoric' *London Archaeol* 9, no. 11 (2001) 295-9.

to indicate a metal-working area, but the presence of the slag would suggest that it is in the immediate vicinity.

Romano-British features, including enclosures, gravel quarries, working surfaces, pits, post-holes, timber-lined wells and middens, are recorded within the settlement limits, located to either side of a trackway formalised by the ditches that define the flanking settlement enclosures. Although awaiting detailed stratigraphic analysis, at least three major phases of activity have been consistently recorded throughout the complex of Romano-British features. The earliest activity appears to be south of the trackway, comprising the addition of a larger enclosure to the east of the Iron Age precursor. Within this larger enclosure, internal sub-divisions, pits, post-holes, middens and curvilinear gullies were recorded, and it is likely that detailed stratigraphic and artefactual analysis will reveal sub-phases relating to internal development. Although no features were recorded to indicate rectilinear buildings, the recovery of Romano-British roof tile suggests that such buildings did exist in the general vicinity.

This development to the south of the trackway is mirrored by a commensurate expansion to the north, with the establishment of a number of enclosures, probably for stock control or some form of small-scale market gardening. The ditches forming these enclosures produced very few artefacts, despite extensive artefact sampling, suggesting that these enclosures were not used as occupation areas. As with features in the main settlement area to the south, many of the ditches forming these enclosures, and the trackway defining ditches in particular, have three phases of use, indicating that they too probably continued in use throughout the Romano-British period.

The Later Romano-British period sees the replacement of the earlier enclosure layout with a pair of conjoining large rectangular enclosures (one end-on and one parallel to the trackway) with fewer internal divisions or features. As noted above, a large spread of midden is deposited in a broad linear band across the line of the trackway, and a second smaller deposit of midden, associated with an adjacent roughly linear spread of gravel, is deposited over some of the earlier enclosure ditches to the north. The midden spread across the trackway may represent the abandonment of the latter as a route at this point, but is perhaps more likely to represent traffic across the trackway between the two sides of the settlement.



Fig. 2: material recovered from the Romano-British well

The second smaller midden, although sealing earlier Romano-British ditches, is composed of predominantly Early Romano-British material, and may possibly represent refuse cleared from the earlier settlement to the south during the establishment of the later enclosures. Few structural remains are clearly associated with this phase, and it is possible that the settlement centre has shifted to the east, beyond the limit of the excavation.

Throughout the Romano-British phase, very few features are recorded beyond the main centre of activity. To the north-east was a large timber-lined well located in the south-east corner of the elongated enclosure to the north of the trackway. This feature is a considerable distance from the main settlement, and is therefore unlikely to have been the only water supply. The basal fills produced a considerable assemblage of pottery, including a near-complete flagon (Fig. 2). To the east of the settlement were a series of 5 to 6 large gravel pits within a larger area of disturbance. It is probable that the extracted gravel served a local purpose, either for floor surfaces within the settlement enclosures, or perhaps more likely used as ballast for the trackway surface. Two smaller shallower gravel pits were also recorded within the limits of the main settlement.

Finally, a six-post structure was recorded some distance to the south of the settlement centre, within an area that was presumably open fields, if farmed at all. The provisional Romano-British date for this structure is based solely on one single abraded sherd of pottery. Given the isolated nature for this structure if Romano-British, it is possible that the dating evidence is either residual or intrusive, and given the spatial relationship between the structure and an adjacent Late Bronze Age ditch, perhaps the latter is more likely.

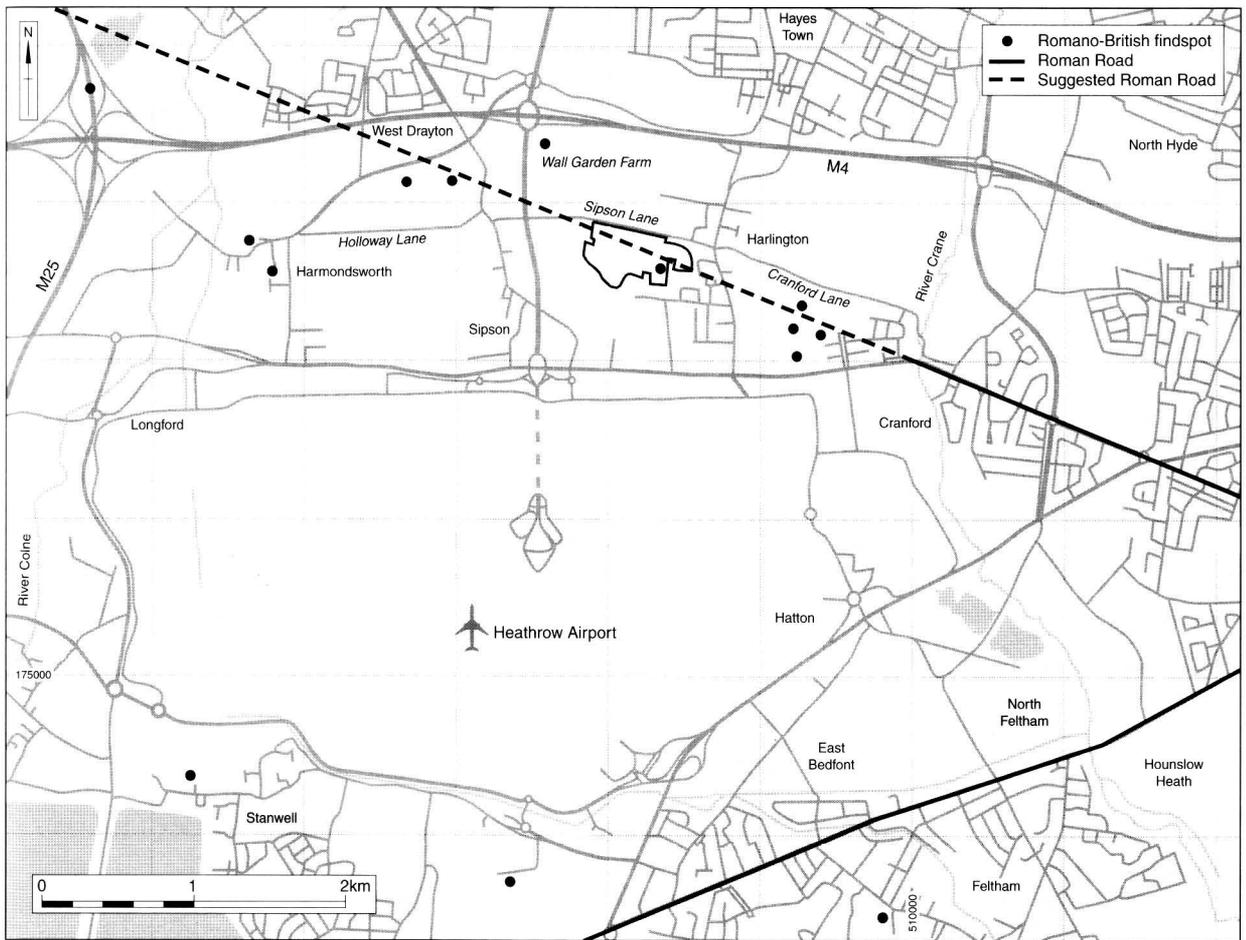


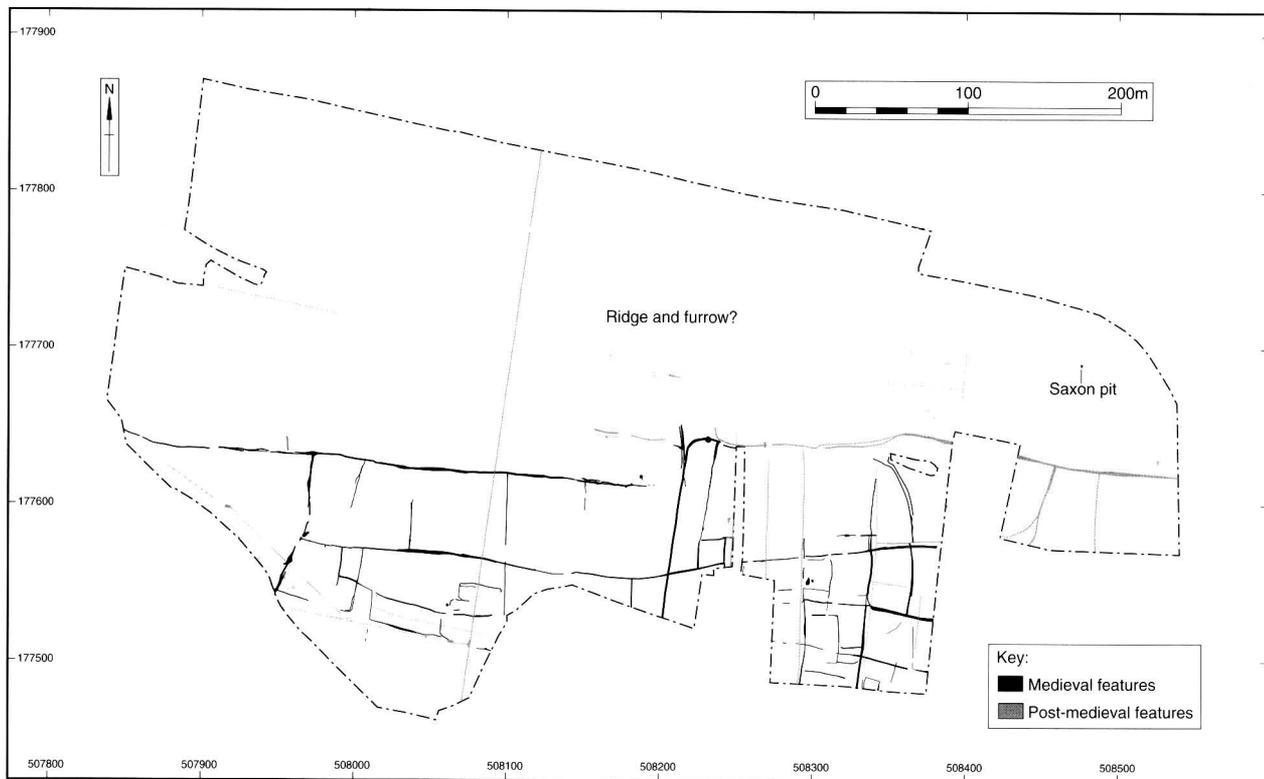
Fig. 3: the Imperial College trackway beyond the site limits

Perhaps most significantly, this period witnesses a whole-scale realignment of the landscape from the predominantly east to west prehistoric orientation, to a more east-south-east to west-north-west arrangement. This realignment appears to be associated with the establishment of a route through the area, co-aligned (and probably contemporaneous) with the earliest Late Iron Age remains. There is no evidence for this route during the preceding periods, although it does coincidentally pass between (and beyond?) two of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age settlement enclosures.

Beyond the site (Fig. 3) to the east-south-east the trackway aligns with the bridging point for the A4 Bath Road over the River Crane at Cranford. The A4 continues on this line as the Bath Road to its junction with the A315 Staines Road/London Road, one of the principal routes west out of Roman London. To the west-north-west the trackway heads towards Thorney, to a series of small gravel

islands within the River Colne near Mill Road, West Drayton, again a possible fording/bridging point. Moreover, the alignment and location of the predicted route of the trackway at this point is marked by a parish boundary which divides one of the larger islets within the River Colne into two halves.

The pattern of a predominantly domestic environment is maintained throughout the Late Iron Age and Romano-British periods, with clear evidence indicating this to be continuous occupation. However, ritual elements do occur during the Romano-British period, and most notably an inhumation and three cremations as wayside burials within the trackway corridor. Although the mixed burial rites may not be broadly contemporaneous, they were all sealed by a Late Romano-British midden and are hence probable generally earlier Romano-British in date. Inhumations from any period are extremely rare in the general area, in part due to the



**Fig. 4: distribution of Saxon, medieval and post-medieval remains**

poor conditions for bone survival. The survival here is probably due to favourable conditions produced by the overlying mantle of midden material, which also preserved a small but significant assemblage of animal bone.

#### **Saxon/Medieval (AD 410 to 1500)**

Although a single pit producing early/middle Saxon pottery was recorded, situated *c.* 10m to the south of the Neolithic enclosure (Fig. 4), there is no evidence to indicate settlement continuity into the Saxon period on this site. With documentary accounts recording late Saxon settlements at Harlington, Sipson and Harmondsworth, it is perhaps not surprising that isolated features are recorded within the site, representing the dispersed fringes of what were presumably unenclosed settlements.

Medieval features (Fig. 4), predominantly dated to the 12th and 13th centuries, were recorded within the southern portion of the site, comprising discontinuous lengths of ditch reminiscent of the Bronze Age field system, forming a network of differing-sized fields/enclosures, as well as water-holes, wells and a few pits. The small size of some the enclosures would suggest they were used as paddocks or pasture, or possibly market gardening.

The northern side of a very small subrectangular enclosure was recorded at the southern extent of the site, possibly representing the periphery of associated settlement remains. One of the wells, a sub-circular steep-sided feature, located towards the northern extent of the medieval system, produced an intact withy-bound timber bucket, currently undergoing conservation (Fig. 5).

The northern extent of this field system coincides with the line of a principle post-medieval field boundary, aligned east to west, which is marked on recent maps and revealed as a subsurface multi-phase feature crossing the site. Although the dating evidence for this feature is predominantly post-medieval or modern, it is probable that this represents a well-established field boundary that may have medieval origins. Significantly, although medieval features are not recorded to the north of this post-medieval ditch, the ephemeral undated remains of what may have been ridge and furrow was evident as parallel stains in the surface of the brickearth, suggesting that arable cultivation predominated in this area.

#### **Discussion**

From the results of the excavation a pattern has emerged of a landscape that through human inter-

vention and management has evolved to reflect differing needs and/or beliefs over time.

Towards the end of the prehistoric period it is clear that the landscape is opening up, with the formalisation of a trackway cutting diagonally across the earlier field systems. However, it is probably true to say that this route was not fully established until the Romano-British period, with the growth of the small settlement focussed on the raised gravel 'island'. The settlement, with a number of distinct stratigraphic phases of occupation, appears to be occupied continuously throughout the Romano-British period, even during the economic decline experienced throughout Roman Britain during the 3rd century. The Imperial College Sports Ground settlement therefore not only offers an opportunity to study the Roman hinterland of Londinium, but perhaps with more relevance to its immediate environs, the area around the satellite

roadside settlements such as at Brentford and Staines (*Pontes*).

The possibility that a route existed between the Rivers Crane and Colne appears to be confirmed by other investigations along its proposed line. To the east this includes the discovery of a co-aligned linear multi-phase ditch passing centrally between the 1989 and 1990 excavation areas in the Romano-British settlement excavated by MoLAS at Cranford Lane. In addition, the Romano-British settlement at Wall Garden Farm to the west of the site, although located to the north of the projected line, appears to focus on a trackway/field boundary perpendicular to the route of the Imperial College trackway. Again, the trackway and its projected alignment can be incorporated into a wider study of movement throughout the Thames Basin, beyond the better known established routes such as Ermine Street, Stane Street and Watling Street.

The medieval field system superimposes itself on the Romano-British track and settlement, clearly marking the demise of both, and the almost complete absence of any intervening Saxon evidence would suggest that the area was almost completely abandoned during this period. It is of interest to note, however, that the medieval field system re-establishes an alignment of linear features that originates during the Middle to Later Bronze Age. There are sufficient occurrences of this to suggest that elements of the Bronze Age field system (hedgerows for instance) may have survived throughout the intervening years, ultimately dictating the general arrangement of fields in this area through to the medieval period.

### Acknowledgements

This paper is largely based on a lecture presented to the 35th Annual London and Middlesex Archaeology Society conference, and I must thank Jon Cotton of the Museum of London for kindly allowing me the opportunity to let some of these thoughts see the light of day. Furthermore, I must also thank, amongst many others, Robert Whytehead, Head of Greater London Archaeological Advisory Service (English Heritage), for his continued interest and support throughout the project. I also extend my gratitude to many of my colleagues at Wessex Archaeology for their help and advice during the preparation of this paper, and in particular, Jon Nowell (Imperial College Sports Ground Project Manager), John Dillon (Assistant Director), Sue Davies (Deputy Director) and John Lewis (Framework Archaeology Project Manager).

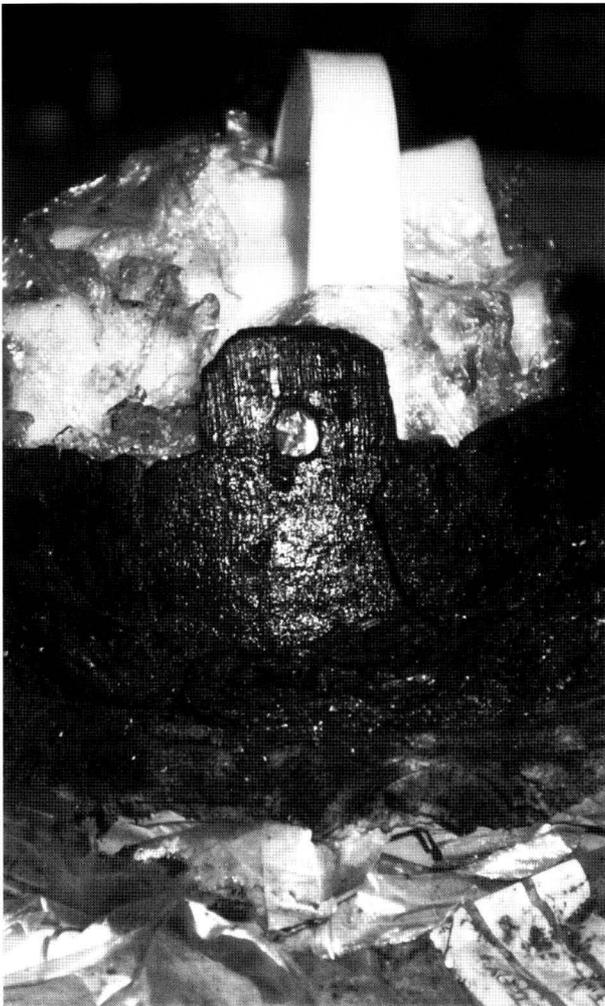


Fig. 5: medieval bucket during conservation