

# The Roman Cray Valley: some peripheral landholdings on the Crofton Villa estate

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The Cray Valley lies approximately 22 km south-east of the City of London, and 2 km inside the Greater London boundary (Fig. 1). Excavations over the last century have revealed a string of Roman riverside sites in the valley, their average separation being 1.5 km, or about one Roman mile. Despite this apparent evidence for planning, clear proof of centuriation has eluded even the most persistent researchers, and it must be concluded that this particular form of land organisation did not exist in the area.<sup>1</sup> The identity of the authority responsible for the Roman land allotments – the valley appears to have been unoccupied during the Late Iron Age (LIA) – can only be guessed at, but it seems, on circumstantial evidence, that the valley fell within the jurisdiction of the city of *Londinium*.<sup>2</sup> Sites located slightly away from the River Cray could have had some direct relationship with the riverside sites.<sup>3</sup>

Several sites in the valley, such as

Beden's Field (Northcray) and Horwood's Pit (St. Paul's Cray), appear to have been of the multi-compound type, with each compound occupied by a branch of an extended family.<sup>4</sup> We might have expected some of these sites to spawn a sumptuous villa, as the headman of each family accumulated wealth. Nevertheless, although some sites produced a bathhouse, no high-status, stone-founded dwellings, of the type seen in the adjacent Darent Valley, appeared at the riverside sites. The reason for this disparity almost certainly relates to the fact that most of the Cray sites were abandoned at the end of the 2nd century. However, several might have been reoccupied by the 4th century.<sup>5</sup>

## Crofton Villa

One Cray Valley site that survived beyond the 2nd century was the Crofton villa, within the modern parish of Orpington, which flourished until at

least 400. Located away from the river, on the steep western slope of the valley at 85 m O.D., the site lies in a district unoccupied during the LIA.<sup>6</sup> Recently a study was undertaken to determine the possible extent and nature of the estate associated with the villa.<sup>7</sup> Using the Peripheral Holdings Model, first proposed by Shimon Applebaum in 1963, an estimate of the area of the estate was initially attempted by noting where occupation sites fell around the villa. It was found that an area with a radius of 2 km from the villa was devoid of sites, although a 1st- to 2nd-century compound, 200 m from the villa site at Station Approach, is known to have existed.<sup>8</sup> It is likely, though, that the two sites were related as the Multi-Compound / Extended Family Model predicts.<sup>9</sup> The area of greatest interest lay on the north-eastern boundary of the hypothetical estate, where a linear group of Roman sites has been discovered alongside modern roads (Fig. 2).

## The north-eastern estate boundary

The roads mentioned above have long denoted a section of the northern boundary of the Orpington parish. They are Poverest Road, Kent Road and Chelsfield Road, which form a single route running east-west across the valley (Fig. 3). It may be significant that the parish boundary, separating Orpington and St. Mary Cray, runs down the centre of these three roads. As a measure, perhaps, of the antiquity of the roads and the parish boundary, the northern side of Kent Road closely parallels a 2nd-century ditch, while a similarly dated ditch is paralleled by Poverest Road. Until the modern works carried out at Fordcroft, a row of houses stood well above the level of Poverest Road, giving the road the classical appearance of a hollow way. This suggests the road may be of great antiquity, as constant use over many centuries can produce a deeply sunken track. However, some hollow ways

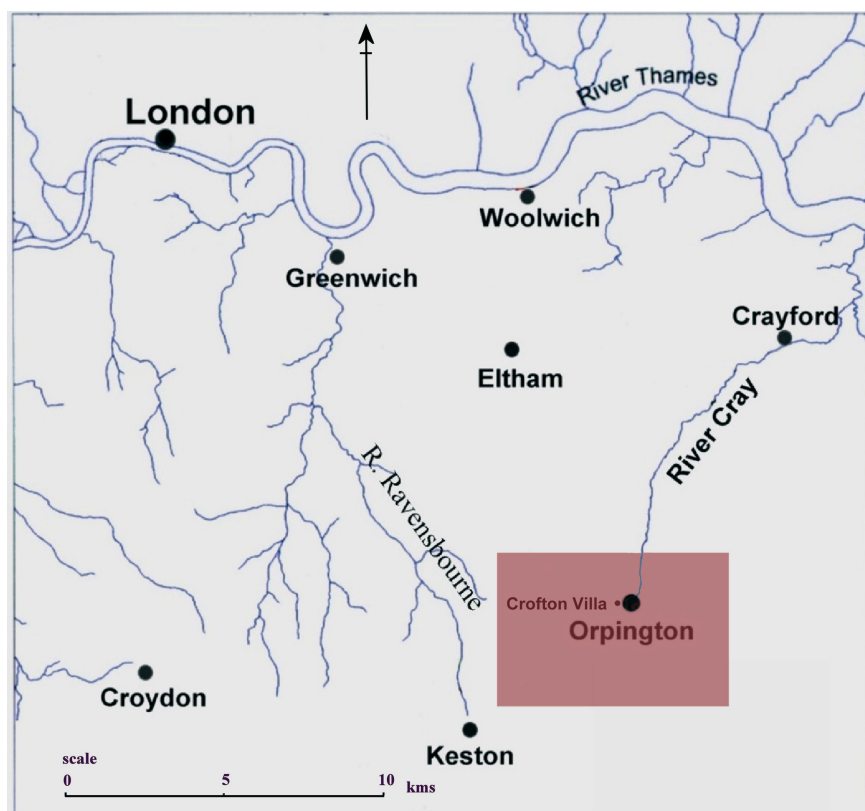


Fig. 1: Cray Valley and London environs

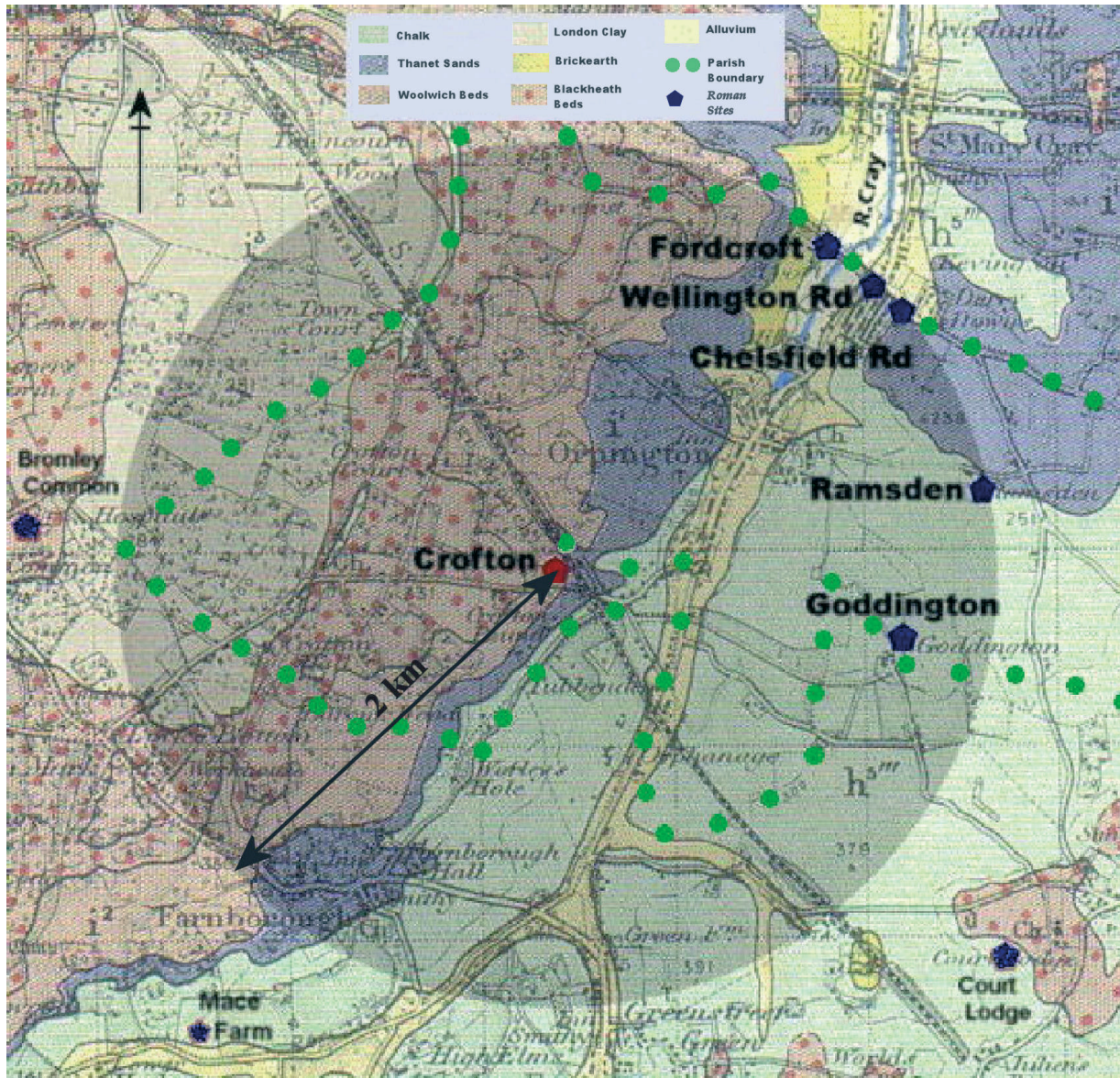


Fig. 2: potential extent of the Crofton Villa estate (1924 Geological Map by kind permission of Ordnance Survey)

appear to have evolved from double ditches, created by the owners of adjacent landholdings digging parallel boundary ditches.<sup>10</sup> The 2nd-century ditch running alongside Poverest Road may well be the precursor to one half of the double ditch that eventually became the road, while the 2nd-century ditch alongside Kent Road could itself have been an early property boundary. Although we have no idea as to when the double ditch was created, it would probably be safe to suggest that the sites lie on the periphery of the Crofton villa estate, as defined by the ditches and the parish boundary.

**The peripheral sites**

Investigations at these sites have given us tantalising glimpses of settlements in the Roman period. The site at Fordcroft

has seen the greatest amount of archaeological activity down the years, while excavations at the other sites have been smaller intrusions into an area now covered with Victorian and modern housing. The following interpretations are based on the information available today, but they may need some revision as new facts emerge.

The sites, forming a ‘string’ across the valley over a distance of 500 m, are *Fordcroft* (on Poverest Road), *Wellington Road* (bounded by Wellington Road and Kent Road) and *Chelsfield Road* (located where Kent Road becomes Chelsfield Road). A further site, *Anglesea Road*, lies a short distance to the west of the *Chelsfield Road* site. It has to be said, however, that the latter two sites are represented by dumps of Roman

building materials and 1st /2nd-century pottery in ditches, which could clearly have originated at any place in the locality. Furthermore, the proximity of the two sites suggests that the materials derive from the same dwelling.

The Wellington Road site – yet to be fully published – consists of a north-south metalled trackway, ditches, pits, a fenceline and some apparently random postholes. Associated with these features is a corn-dryer found in the excavations known as ‘Lower Road’.<sup>11</sup> As corn-dryers are thought to be connected with domestic occupation, it appears this is a delineated compound or farmyard.<sup>12</sup> The house has yet to be discovered and might lie, if the postholes are not the extant remains of the structure, beneath Victorian housing slightly to the south.

## ROMAN CRAY VALLEY

The interpretation of the enigmatic site at *Fordcroft*, 400 m west of Wellington Road, has proved challenging, despite it being one of the most intensively studied sites in the Cray Valley (Fig. 4). Numerous difficulties, such as a lack of secure dating for the bathhouse, have resulted in a host of divergent conclusions being drawn on the site evidence. However, the surviving stratigraphy has revealed that *Fordcroft*, perhaps established in the late 1st century, was most active during the 2nd century, when the owners seem to have been engaged in both ferrous and non-ferrous metalworking. By analogy with other 'isolated' bathhouses in the area, the bathhouse could have been erected during the early 2nd century.<sup>13</sup> No Roman dwellings, or domestic indicators such as corn-dryers, have ever been found at the site. The metalworking activity at *Fordcroft* represents a distinct phase, which terminates with the various features (ditches, gullies, postholes, metalworking hearths and storage shelters) being either filled in or dismantled. This appears to have occurred, judging by datable material within the features, over a short period of time, leading us to conclude that the site had been abruptly abandoned in around 200. Complete, or near-complete, vessels found in ditches might be votive offerings made, as in

the Third World today, to assure a safe conclusion for industrial processes (Fig. 5).<sup>14</sup> Should the metalworkers have resided at 2nd-century *Fordcroft*, then their dwellings must have been very flimsy structures, which we are now unable to detect. The lack of animal bone recorded at on the site, except for some horse (perhaps a votive deposition), might indicate that no person ever lived there, although it is possible that low-status workers did not have access to meat.

If *Fordcroft* had been abandoned at this time, the setting down of a metallised area around the bathhouse, and as far west as the centre of the site, signals the advent of a new phase. The metallising seems to have been laid some time after 200, but perhaps before 290, as an apparently dispersed coin hoard, comprising coins dating between 250 and 290, was discovered lying directly on the western metallising.<sup>15</sup> As a hoard deposited on a functioning layer makes no sense at all, we must assume that a depth of soil, perhaps hill-wash, had accumulated above the metallising, and it was into this soil that the hoard was inserted. This implies that the western area of metallising had ceased to function by *c.* 290, although it could clearly have gone out of use much earlier. It seems that some rather crude alterations were made to the bathhouse around 270, when a possible timber dressing-

room was replaced with what might be a roughly-built stone *frigidarium* (Room 1). Another interpretation, though, relates the alterations to a re-use of the bathhouse for metalworking.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, we can be fairly certain about the development of *Fordcroft* during the 2nd century, although we can barely guess at how the bathhouse figured in this scheme. However, 'isolated' bathhouses seem to be associated with industrial activity.<sup>17</sup> There is no such certainty concerning the history of site from the mid-Roman period onwards, as positively dated features of this time are virtually absent, although a north-south ditch, located just east of the bathhouse, was found to contain exclusively 4th-century material. A nearby pit contained a considerable quantity of mixed Roman material. The ditch had been dug through the eastern part of the metallising, and so post-dates this late 2nd-century or early 3rd-century feature. Furthermore, the ditch must have been fully filled or silted by the mid-5th century, for early Anglo-Saxon graves had been cut into the fill. This cemetery / bathhouse area has given up most of the 3rd- and 4th-century material known from the site, so it seems, if there was late Roman occupation, this sector was the focus of activity.

There are, however, other

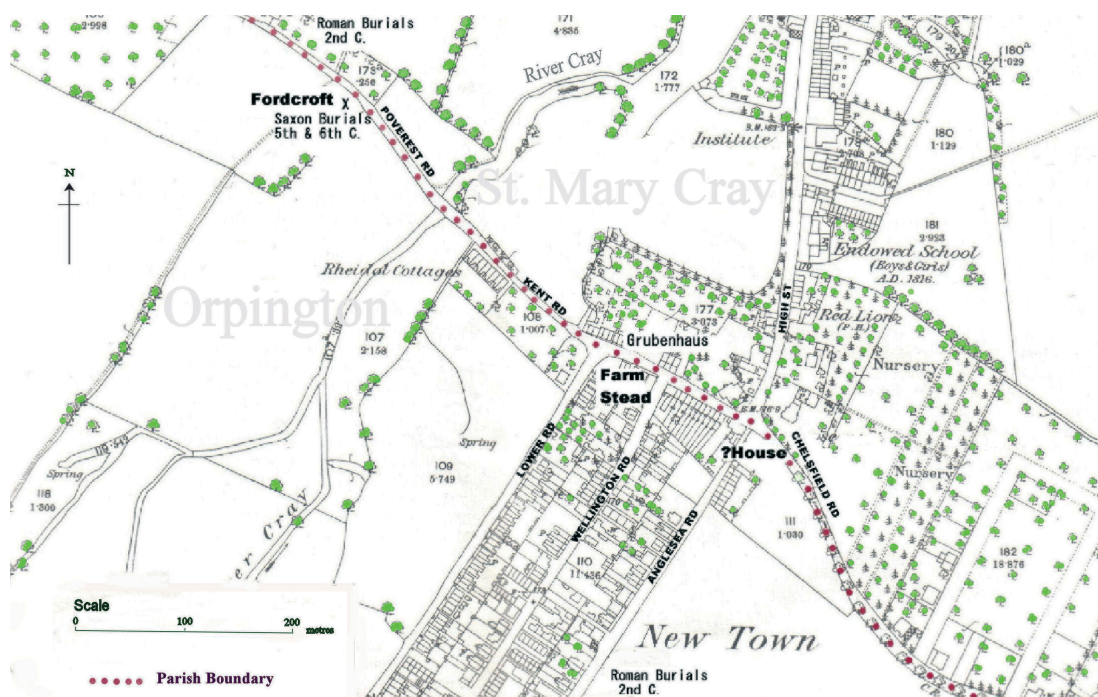
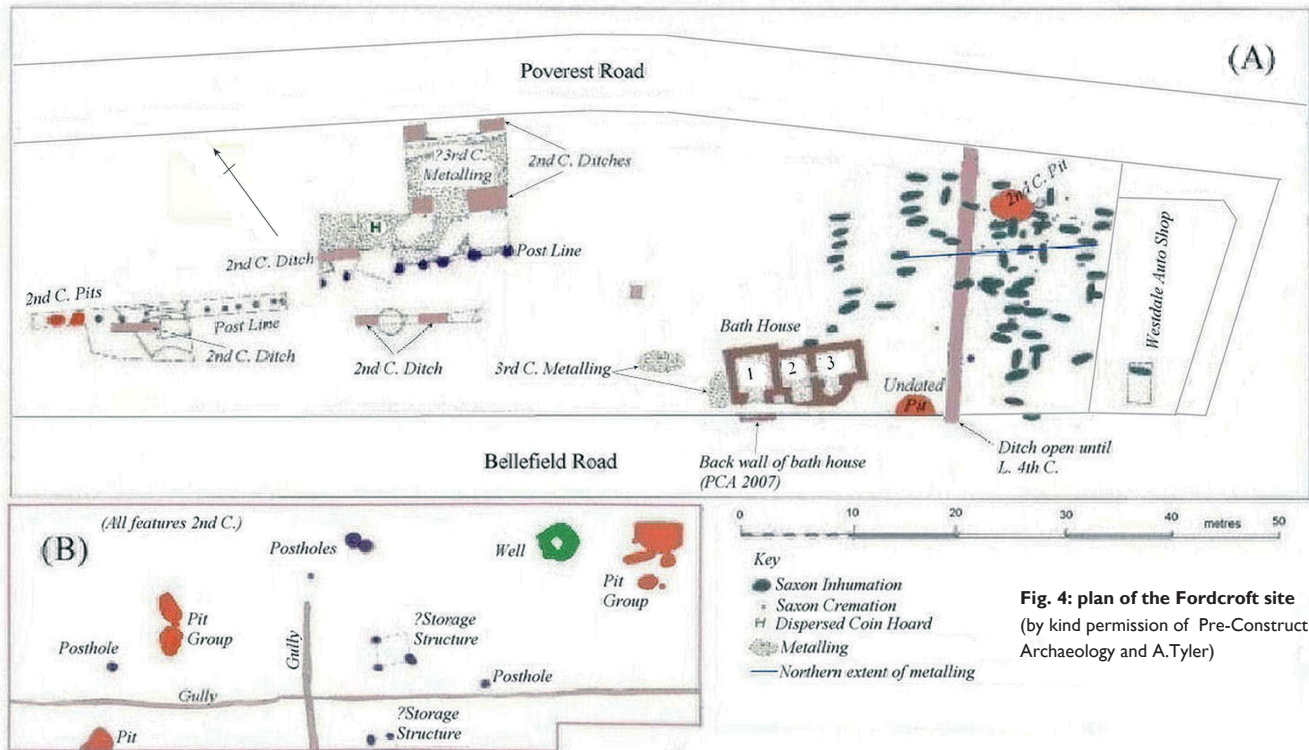


Fig. 3: location of the Crofton peripheral sites (1868 O.S. Map by kind permission of Ordnance Survey)



**Fig. 4: plan of the Fordcroft site**  
(by kind permission of Pre-Construct Archaeology and A.Tyler)

explanations for the concentration of late Roman material. It is possible that the material once covered the entire site and that Anglo-Saxons had gathered up the material with the topsoil to form a burial mound.<sup>18</sup> If so, then it was at this time that the conjectural coin hoard above the metallurg was disturbed from its soil bed. Furthermore, we might wonder whether the late Roman practice of manuring agricultural land with the contents of a site's rubbish dumps, in this case those of another site (perhaps Crofton itself), was applied at an unoccupied Fordcroft. The polluted site would have certainly required 'sweetening up' before going under the plough. This would explain the presence of late Roman domestic refuse in the topsoil and the lack of late features.<sup>19</sup> Just to complicate the issue still further, there is another possible explanation for the lack of features. During Fordcroft's vacant period, hill-wash could have brought a considerable amount of soil onto the site. In this case, any late Roman features (postholes, sleeper-beam trenches etc.) cut into the new layer during a subsequent reoccupation, would have been destroyed by later ploughing, or Anglo-Saxon mound-building. The deeper early Roman

features (and lower portions of late Roman ditches) would have remained intact.

**Site relationships**

There can be little doubt that a relationship of some sort existed between the sites on the north-eastern boundary of the Crofton estate. Brian Philp (Kent Archaeological Rescue Unit) has suggested that the sites represent elements of a single settlement hereabouts. The term hamlet would adequately describe the settlement, indicating that each site represents the habitation of a nuclear unit, forming part of an extended family utilising the local landscape. It is likely that these sites lay on a Roman tenanted farm, or farms, on the periphery of the estate. There is a further possibility that the families at these sites were related through kinship to the wealthy owners

of Crofton Villa. Consequently, it is unlikely that the person directing operations at Fordcroft actually lived on this, presumably unpleasant, industrial site. Rather, we can imagine that he resided at Wellington Road, far enough from the noxious fumes, but near enough, and elevated enough, to keep a close watch on activities at Fordcroft. The apparent abandonment of the peripheral sites c. 200 coincides with an extension of the Crofton Villa by the addition of a new suite of rooms, separated from the old work by a passageway (Fig. 6). This might indicate that the principal tenant on the periphery of the estate had moved to Crofton, possibly to join his blood relatives (although we must remember that the Station Road site was also abandoned at this time). The new suite of rooms was subsequently demolished in around 270, a time when alterations

**Fig 5: possible votive offering from Fordcroft – a Samian bowl unique in Roman Britain**  
(by kind permission of Pre-Construct Archaeology)



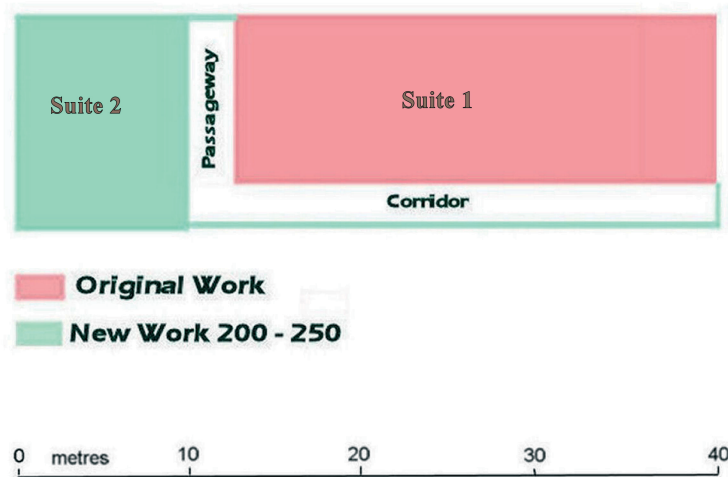


Fig 6: early 3rd-century development at Crofton Villa

were made to the Fordcroft bathhouse.<sup>20</sup> These activities could signify the return of the family to the area of their former landholdings. A possible reoccupation of the Wellington Road area is suggested by the presence of a small amount of residual late Roman material, and the inclusion of the greater portion of an unabrased Oxford-ware bowl (with well-worn interior) in the pit-fill of an Anglo-Saxon *grubenhäus*. The pit had been cut into the silted 2nd-century ditch mentioned above, and lay just north of Kent Road.<sup>21</sup> Its contemporaneity with

Fordcroft's cemetery suggests a continuing relationship between the two sites.

**Conclusions and further research**

The evidence evaluated here suggests that a multi-compound settlement, comprising at least three associated sites, existed on the periphery of the Crofton Villa estate. It is certain that the sites were utilised during the 1st and 2nd centuries, although there is some evidence for continuity, or perhaps reoccupation, in the late Roman period. The occupants of the sites were possibly

related through kinship, and it is conceivable that there were further blood ties with the owner of the Crofton Villa.

More groundwork is required before we can comment further on the chronology and nature of these sites. In particular, firm dates are required for the erection and alteration of the Fordcroft bathhouse. It seems possible that stratified Roman archaeology survives between Fordcroft's Anglo-Saxon graves. As the site is Scheduled this is all in the hands of English Heritage and, for the remaining sites, we must await opportunities to excavate, as houses are demolished or modified.

The evolution of the Roman estate into an English manor has not been discussed in this article, but the continuance of the estate, as a substantial core of the later manor and parish, is of great interest. The fact that Anglo-Saxons settled directly on the boundary of the estate seems to indicate some formal interaction between the Germanic settlers and the estate owners. Further discoveries and research (utilising current models) may help us understand this important transition.

1. Centuriation was the formal means of land organisation in the early Roman Empire. Claims for the existence of centuriation in southern Britain remain unsubstantiated.  
 2. The text of the famous '5-Acre Wood' writing tablet seems to confirm that some areas of Kent fell within the legal jurisdiction of London (R. Tomlin 'A five-acre wood in Roman Kent' in J. Bird, M. Hassall, H. Sheldon (eds) *Interpreting Roman London*. Oxbow Monograph 58 (1996) 209–215). The extent of medieval hunting rights, as defined by Fitzstephens, might indicate that the territory of the Roman city reached as far as the Cray (C.L. Kingsford *John Stow: A Survey of London* Vol. 2 (1908) 228).  
 3. Some of the sites (such as Horwood's Pit) are located so precariously close to the river, in areas renowned for flooding, that they might have been used on a seasonal basis.  
 4. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that the LIA extended family continued into the Roman period. For more on the occupation of rural Roman sites by extended families, see R. Hingley *Rural Settlement in Roman Britain* (1989) 84.  
 5. All dates are AD. The abandonment occurred 100 years before the accepted 'golden age' of villa construction in Roman Britain.  
 6. Material evidence for Iron Age occupation in this area is lacking, and moreover, there is no evidence for the Celtic fields, which indicate Iron Age occupation. Significantly, these fields are evident in the area around the Iron Age Keston Hillfort, 4 km from Crofton (A. Hayes and B. Milne *Hedgerows in Bromley* (1982) 14).  
 7. K. Boyce and J. Harmsworth (forthcoming) *The Roman Estate at Orpington*.

8. B. Philp and M. Chenery *Excavation of a Roman Site at Station Approach 1993-1994* (1994).  
 9. See fn 4.  
 10. W.G. Hoskins *The Making of the English Landscape* (1981) 31.  
 11. M. Fisher *ODAS Excavations at St. Mary Cray 1975-78*. Unpublished report.  
 12. Rather than being used for the mass drying of a corn harvest, these structures are now seen as too small for the drying of anything other than corn for immediate domestic consumption. In fact, they may be malting floors used in beer-making.  
 13. Other local examples of isolated bathhouses are: Beden's Field (Footscray), Sandy Lane (St. Paul's Cray), Jevington Way (Mottingham), and Baston Manor (Hayes). An iron smelting site at Beauport Park (Sussex) operated by the *Classis Britannica*, also possessed an early bathhouse. The bathhouses at the gold-mining site of Dolaucothy (Wales) and at Wiggonholt (Sussex) appear to be further examples of industrial amenities.  
 14. For details of the 'votive offerings' see P. Tester 'Excavations at Fordcroft, Orpington' *Archaeologia Cantiana* 84 (1969) 54; J. Taylor *Assessment of archaeological investigations at the former H. Smith yard and Bellefield Road, Fordcroft, Orpington* Pre-Construct Archaeology (2008), unpublished report on [www.pre-construct.com/Sites/](http://www.pre-construct.com/Sites/).  
 15. This western metallurgy is thought to have constituted a trackway (B. Philp and P. Keller *The Roman Site at Fordcroft, Orpington*. (1995) 40).  
 16. Further interpretations may be found in D. Tyler and A. Tyler 'Excavations at the Romano-British bathhouse, Poverest Road, Orpington 1993' *ODAS*

*Archives* 17.2 (1995) 1–46) and my 'Letter to the Editor' in *LA* 11.11, 289. As far as the crudity of the new room is concerned, some similarity is suggested here with the bath-house at Beauport Park, Sussex, where a crudely-executed stone dressing-room replaced a timber version in the early 3rd century. At Wiggonholt, Sussex, a bathhouse appears to have been clumsily adapted for habitation in the 3rd century.  
 17. See fn 12.  
 18. The creation of burial mounds is atypical of the Anglo-Saxons in Kent. However, a few may have existed, and Brian Philp of KARU has pointed out that at least one (now ploughed out) mound seems to have been erected at Fordcroft.  
 19. If, as many researchers believe, there was an empire-wide movement towards the direct farming of 3rd-century estates, then we might expect that, as is modern practice, outlying areas of estates were cultivated with the aid of remote, uninhabited 'farmyards', comprising a hard standing and, perhaps, storage facilities of some sort. Fordcroft would fit this model with its cobbled yard, access road and bath-house altered, perhaps, to fulfil utilitarian purposes, including the fabrication and repair of plough shares.  
 20. The owner of Crofton clearly felt an increase in confidence at this time, for the remaining suite of rooms was remodelled to a new level of luxury, with the addition of tessellated floors and a hypocaust heating system.  
 21. A. Hart 'Excavation of a Saxon Grubenhäus and Roman Ditch at St. Mary Cray, Kent' *Archaeologia Cantiana* 101 (1984) 187–216. For more information on the Anglo-Saxon occupation of Romano-British