

Fig. 1: site location map



Excavations at 2–14 Whitgift Street, Croydon

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Introduction

Between May and July 2006, Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA), previously known as the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS), carried out archaeological investigations at 2–14 Whitgift Street in the London Borough of Croydon (Fig. 1). (National Grid Reference 532280 165250; site code WHZ06). At the time of the excavation, the site was a cleared, open plot.¹

The excavation strategy differed between the two halves of the site: in the western part, excavation remained confined to pile cap positions A–E but, to the east, a strip, map and record approach was used and the individual pile cap areas were amalgamated into much larger areas of investigation. The rest of the site was not excavated but preserved *in situ* (Fig. 2).

A previous excavation carried out at 14 Whitgift Street in 1987–88 by the Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society (CNHSS) revealed prehistoric, Roman, medieval and early post-medieval cut features, and a range of finds of prehistoric to post-medieval date.² Further work on the same site by MoLAS in 1995 provided evidence for extensive late Roman activity. Pits and a boundary ditch were recorded and 39 late 3rd- to 4th-century coins recovered.³ Although 141 pieces of prehistoric struck and burnt flint were present, these were probably *ex situ* and transported onto the site through soil movement down slope from the

higher ground to the east. No evidence for Saxon settlement was found but some medieval material was recovered, notably from one large pit that produced a range of environmental evidence. It is likely that the area was fields or gardens from the medieval period until the 19th century, when tenement housing was constructed on the site.⁴

As part of the process of the interpretation of the site, it was divided into Open Areas. This term defines a sub-division of the site during a particular period of its development. A fence line or boundary ditch would, for example, separate two Open Areas. A number of other conventions are employed within the text of this article. Context numbers are presented in square brackets ([]); accession numbers of finds are presented in angled brackets (< >). These numbers, and interpretative terms such as Open Area, relate to the site archive which is kept at the LAARC.

Archaeological and historical background

The earliest evidence for human presence in the area comes from the dispersed flint assemblages of Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic date (*c.* 8000–1800 BC) which have been found in the vicinity (Fig. 3; 1,⁵ 17,⁶ 34,⁷ 35,⁸ 36,⁹ 37,¹⁰ 38¹¹), but settlement evidence is generally later, dating from the Later Bronze or Iron Age (*c.* 1000–600 BC).¹²

In the Roman period, Croydon lay on the probable route of a Roman road running from Kennington (where it joined the main London–Chichester road) to a port (*Novus Portus*) on the south coast near modern Brighton. The line of the Roman road is today followed by High Street, immediately to the east of Whitgift Street. The evidence for Roman settlement in Croydon is extensive and long attested. Burials, thought to be of Roman date, were found during the construction of the Whitgift Almshouses at the end of the 16th century (Fig. 3; 2).¹³ Other burials have been found in the same area, including two lead coffins in Park Street,¹⁴ and form a nucleated group that straddles High Street (Fig. 3; 3–9).¹⁵ In addition, stray finds of coins and pottery have been recorded (Fig. 3; 10–12)¹⁶ including a hoard of 3800 coins from Wandle Road in 1903 (Fig. 3; 13).¹⁷ Archaeological investigations from the late 1960s onwards have added considerably to our knowledge of the extent of Roman occupation in Croydon. These sites include Rectory Grove (Fig. 3; 14),¹⁸ Old Town (Fig. 3; 15)¹⁹ Mint Walk (Fig. 3; 16),²⁰ Overtons Yard (Fig. 3; 28)²¹ and 113–121 High Street (Fig. 3; 18).²²

The name of Croydon is known to be of Saxon origin, but evidence for settlement in this period is sparse. Saxon coins have been found on Park Street, *c.* 300 m to the north-east of the site (Fig. 3; 19),²³ but it has been suggested that the nucleus of the



Fig. 2: trench location

settlement is likely to have lain in the Old Town, c. 300 m north-west of Whitgift Street²⁴ (Fig. 3; 20,²⁵ 21²⁶). The discovery in 1893/94 of the 5th- or 6th-century pagan cemetery at Edridge Road, some 350 m to the south-east of the site, is of note. Further inhumations and cremations were found in 1992 on an adjacent site,²⁷ and part of the cemetery was excavated in 1999–2000.²⁸ From the late Saxon period onwards, Croydon was the centre of a large estate belonging to the Archbishop of Canterbury, who used the manor house as an occasional residence and developed and expanded it accordingly.

It is more certain that the Old Town, clustered around the parish church and the Archbishop's mansion, was the focus of the medieval settlement (Fig. 3; 25,²⁹ 26a, 26b³⁰). Although a few sites produced evidence of activity as early as the 11th century (Fig. 3; 27,³¹ 32,³² 30³³), the majority of the archaeological evidence dates from the 14th century and extends east as far as High Street: Whitgift Almshouses,³⁴ 113–121 High Street,³⁵ Palace School, 3–11 High Street,³⁶ 14 Whitgift Street³⁷ and 49–61 High Street,³⁸ Overton Yard,³⁹

Scarbrook Road⁴⁰ (Fig. 3; 2, 18, 20, 22, 23, 24, 28, 29). In general there is little physical evidence for medieval Croydon much before the late 13th century.⁴¹

By the later 16th century Croydon was well established. The road alignment of North End, High Street and South End formed the main thoroughfare and was flanked by buildings on either side, as is well illustrated by surviving cartographic⁴² and documentary evidence.⁴³ The development of the London to Brighton road in the 18th century stimulated ribbon development further north and south.⁴⁴ In 1800 the site would have lain in an undeveloped open area to the rear of a property fronting onto the High Street.⁴⁵ Whitgift Street had been laid by the later 19th century.⁴⁶

The archaeological sequence

The geology and topography of the area

The site is located on a west-facing slope, overlooking the Wandle valley. The geology is formed by river terrace gravel (Taplow Terrace).⁴⁷ This is a relatively recent formation, which reflects fluctuations of climate and sea level during the Pleistocene.⁴⁸

During the excavation, natural gravel was found approximately 2 m below the current ground level at 46.95 m OD on the south-eastern side, falling away in a north-westerly direction to 43.96 m OD. The natural deposits varied widely across the site, ranging from orange silty gravel, at the eastern end of the site, giving way to gravel with pea grit, midway across the site. Here, there was evidence for periglacial activity: freeze and thaw processes in the gravel created hollows that were subsequently filled by waterlain or fine windblown deposits. Such lenses of finer material are often found to occur within Pleistocene gravels.⁴⁹ On the western side of the site, the natural deposits changed to cobbles and gravel. The gravel forms part of the second Wandle terrace, which was deposited during the Pleistocene under fast-flowing fluvial conditions in a cold climate braided river environment.

A clayey silt, 0.10–0.15 m deep, overlay the gravel. It survived over the entire site except the western edge, where it had been eroded away. These deposits demonstrated root disturbance and heavy iron-staining and are also

likely to have been formed during the Pleistocene, either by alluvial fans during flood events or as deposition within a slower-flowing, braided river system. Dry terrestrial soils would have formed within this unit during the Holocene period (c. 10,000 BP), by which time the Wandle would have cut down to its present floodplain position. Before it was built over, the Wandle ran c. 300 m to the west of the site.

Prehistoric

An assemblage of 112 pieces of struck or worked flint was recovered, almost entirely from the ploughsoil horizon that sealed the Roman features. The bulk of the material comprises débris in the form of flakes, blades and blade-like flakes, together with two cores and pieces of miscellaneous shatter. There were, however, no prehistoric features

such as post-holes or pits found on the site to demonstrate any prehistoric settlement and the flints, as with the worked flint found on earlier excavations on the site, are *ex situ* and most likely to have derived from up-slope, to the east of the site.

Of significance is a Final Palaeolithic curve backed blade piece found within the colluvium/ploughsoil over the natural subsoil in Area D (Fig. 4a). This is similar to the *Federmesser* pieces dated to the second half of the Late glacial Interstadial (after c. 12,000 BP), on the site at Hengistbury Head in Dorset,⁵⁰ and the unpublished assemblage from Brockhill, Horsell, near Woking.⁵¹ Such artefacts are rare in the Croydon area, though a steep-nosed scraper identified as 'probably Upper Palaeolithic was identified during a watching brief

conducted further west at the junction of Charles Street and Church Road in 1969.⁵²

Slightly earlier Late Upper Palaeolithic shouldered points have been located elsewhere in the Wandle catchment at Wallington and Wandsworth,⁵³ while excavations around the Wandle's western headwaters at Carshalton have revealed a group of heavily decorticated blades and blade fragments which could be relevant here too, though no retouched pieces were present. Perhaps the key to understanding the significance of the new Croydon find lies in its topographic position: its find-spot overlooks a gap in the North Downs likely to have acted as a seasonal corridor for herds of migrating animals moving between the Wandle valley floor and the higher ground of the downs to the south.



Fig. 3: location of archaeological finds in the vicinity of the Whitgift Street

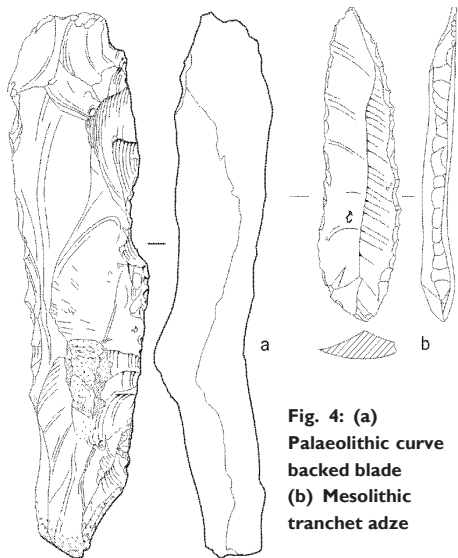


Fig. 4: (a) Palaeolithic curve backed blade (b) Mesolithic tranchet adze

This advantageous position also explains the presence of the Mesolithic *tranchet* adze and many of the blades and blade-like flakes on the site (Fig. 4b). Other Mesolithic blades, a bladelet core and two backed bladelets were recovered from the previous two archaeological investigations,⁵⁴ while blades and backed bladelets have been located up-slope to the east at Park Lane.⁵⁵ In addition there is a thin scatter of core adzes along the northern edge of the chalk dip-slope to the south.⁵⁶

The remainder of the collection comprises material of Neolithic/ Bronze Age type, with evidence of core maintenance and flake production. Some pieces may be later still, e.g. the

hard-hammer flakes from medieval and post-medieval soils/surfaces could relate to the dressing of flint for building purposes, as evidenced by the medieval chalk and flint wall in Area C6 (Fig. 7).

Roman

Croydon has been identified, on the evidence of a significant scatter of coins and of the Roman burials,⁵⁷ as part of an inner ring of settlements located on roads radiating from Roman London, and as a possible *mutatio* or posting station serving the needs of travellers.⁵⁸

Evidence for Roman activity at 2–14 Whitgift Street consisted mainly of cut features such as ditches, pits and post holes (Fig. 5). Two further stretches of a ditch of late 3rd-/early 4th-century AD date, initially recorded in the 1995 excavation, were uncovered, and these observations extended its recorded length both north and south to a total of c. 18 m (Fig. 6). A very small amount of pottery dated to the 1st and early 2nd centuries was recovered from the backfill of the ditch, though is likely to be residual.

To the west of the ditch (Open Area 3), a rubbish pit produced pottery dated AD 270–400, a copper alloy ring <7> and a coin <9> of Valens dated 364–

378. Faunal remains included fragments of red deer antler and a very small quantity of slag. This pit also contained all the fragments of Roman tile found in Roman contexts on the site. As the Roman tile is concentrated in the one pit, it may derive from the demolition or alteration of one particular building nearby. The tile can be dated to the late 1st to mid-2nd century (fabric group 2815). This early Roman building evidently had a hypocaust heating system as three box-flue tiles are present. As these are in three separate fabrics, they may come from different tileries and are not necessarily contemporary. Some may represent later additions or alterations to the building. One brick (in a variant of fabric 3061) suggests building work in the mid-2nd to mid-3rd century.

The majority of early Roman tile found in the London area seems to have come from either the centre of London or from kilns along Watling Street between London and *Verulamium* (St Albans). At least some of the Croydon material, on the other hand, may derive from a more convenient tilerly situated somewhere south of London. Tiles similar to those in fabric 3061 are known from Reigate, Surrey, which may

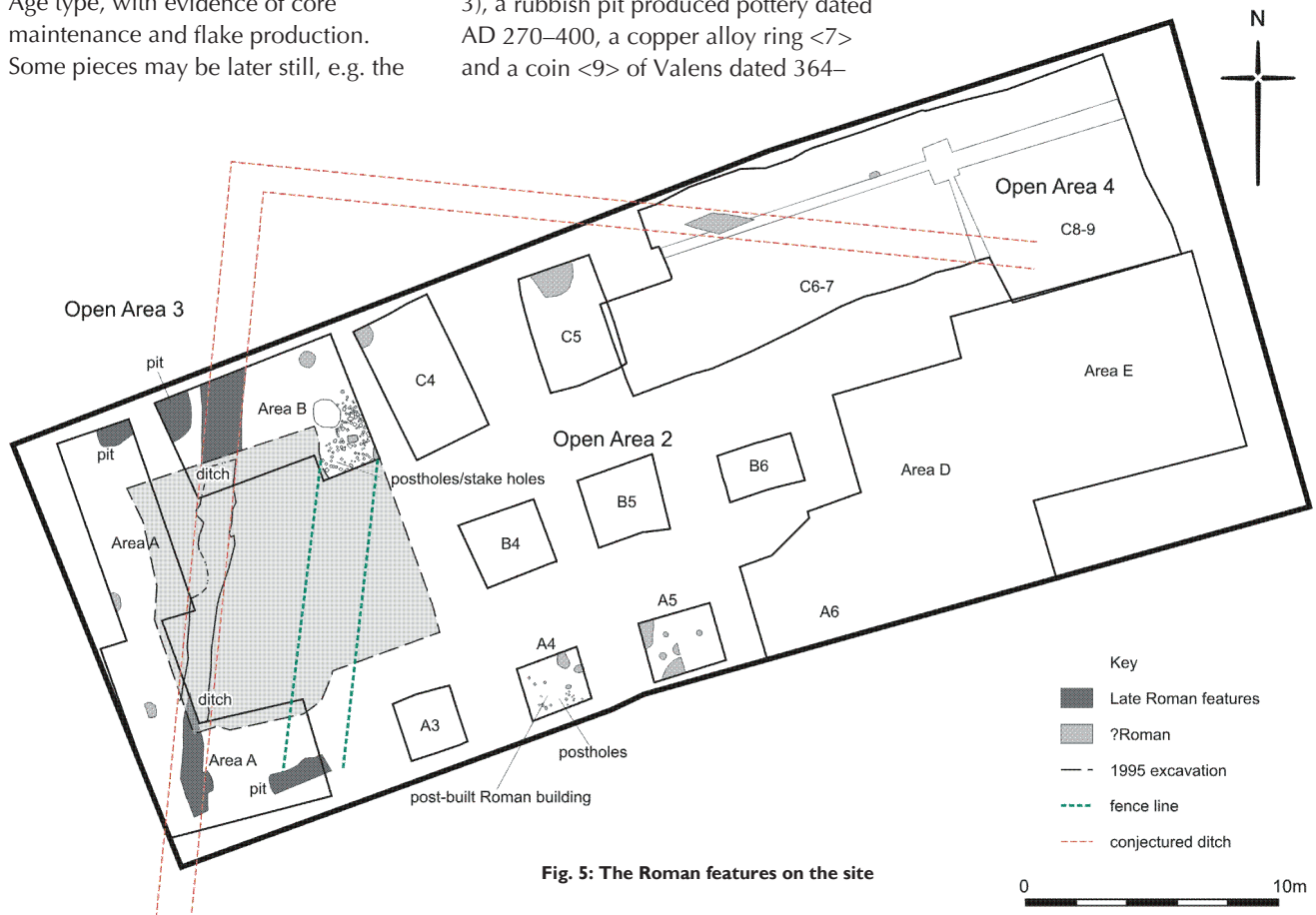


Fig. 5: The Roman features on the site

be the source of the Croydon tile. Other tiles are more likely to have been made to the north-east of London but there is increasing evidence for large-scale movement of building material from the mid-2nd century,⁵⁹ and the tiles could have been imported into Croydon from quite far afield.

What is certain is that the box-flue tiles must have come from a fairly substantial masonry building, which is presumably also the source of at least some of the ceramic building material. It is possible that a Roman posting station would have had at its core masonry buildings, perhaps with a small bath house containing box-flue tiles.

A second pit, in the south-east corner of Open Area 2, produced pottery of a late Roman date, 250–400. In general, although some sparse Late Iron Age pottery and early Roman finds were recovered, the bias towards late Roman material concurred with the findings of the 1995 excavation.

A number of other features, undated but possibly Roman because they were sealed by the medieval soil horizon, included a gully in Excavation Areas C6–7 which was aligned at right-angles to the ditch. It may delineate a boundary between two plots of land fronting the west side of the Roman Road, which would have run a few metres to the east (Fig. 3). A group of 105 stake/postholes in the south-east corner of Excavation Area B yielded one sherd of pottery dated AD 150–400. Though the postholes were densely concentrated, some linear formations running perpendicular to the ditch were easily recognisable within them, and may represent a post-built structure, most probably a fence. Further postholes were found to the south of the site, in pile cap trenches A4 and A5, providing evidence for other timber structures, possibly buildings. Undated pits were also recorded.

The Roman pottery from the site divides principally between a medium-sized 1st- and 2nd-century assemblage and much later vessels from the 4th century. The late Roman pottery reflects the major ceramic industries of the period, with Alice Holt/ Farnham ware (AHFA) being the most dominant and is consistent with other sites in the town. It should also be noted that further



Fig. 6: the northern part of the Roman ditch under excavation

quantities of late Roman coins (four in total) were found residually in the medieval soil horizon (four *nummi* of Constantian and Constantine I; <1>, <2>, <3> and <5>, dating from around 340–350). Several pieces of iron slag and a few grams of hammer-scale from several contexts of both Roman and post-medieval date together suggest the presence of a smith in the immediate vicinity. This material presumably all originated in the Roman period and had become scattered through the subsequent sequence.

The site at Whitgift Street furthers our understanding of the southern hinterland of *Londinium*. Although only a small quantity of pottery and tile was recovered from the site, it reflects patterns found elsewhere in Croydon. It is possible that roadside settlements underwent a revival in the 4th century, as considerable rebuilding has been noted at other towns including Enfield, Brentford and Staines.⁶⁰

Medieval

It appears that the area was abandoned in the post-Roman period. The ditch and gully features infilled naturally as colluvial deposits washing downhill accumulated within them.

There is no dating evidence to demonstrate reuse of the site before the mid-13th century. The formation of a ploughsoil over the site indicates agricultural use: a total of 13 sherds of pottery were retrieved from this soil, but the poor condition of this material reflects the reworked nature of these horizons. Coarse border and Kingston-type ware, both local Surrey whitewares,⁶¹ dominated (eight of the sherds) and suggest a date after c. 1240/70. Three sherds of wheel-thrown reduced coarsewares from Middlesex and south Buckinghamshire were also present.

Even as the High Street developed, the site remained open land to the rear of the property fronting onto it and the

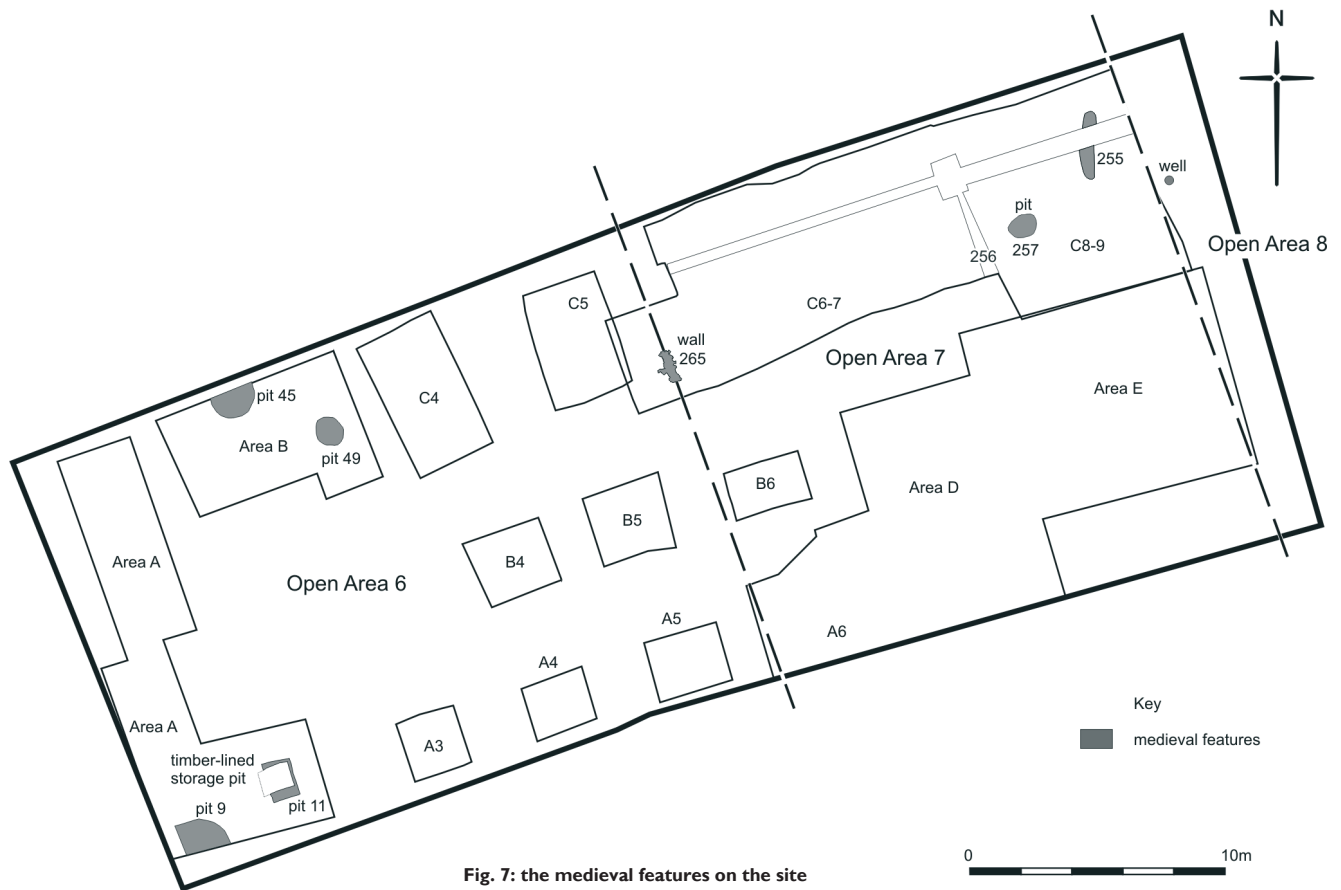


Fig. 7: the medieval features on the site

main evidence for medieval activity came from a handful of cut features (pits), and masonry structures (a well, wall and storage pit) (Fig. 7). Part of a north–south aligned chalk and flint wall was uncovered in the central northern part of the site (Open Area 7) and was previously recorded in an evaluation carried out in 1994 and interpreted as a Roman feature. However, on the basis of its stratigraphic position and

alignment, it is now apparent that this feature is medieval and probably a boundary between two plots of land (Open Area 6 and Open Area 7).

The pits produced domestic pottery from local sources, particularly products of the Surrey whiteware industry such as Kingston-type ware of c. 1240–1400 and coarse border ware of c. 1270–1500, both main types of pottery used in London from the early

13th until the late 15th century.⁶² At the western end of the site, was a chalk-built square pit [11] measuring 1.15 m by 1.50 m by 0.46 m deep. Two nails with remnants of timber adhering were recorded on the inner face in the south-east corner of the pit, suggesting the presence of a timber lining. Given the presence in its backfill of early 16th-century white and redwares of the Surrey-Hampshire border industry it is likely that the structure was constructed earlier and is of medieval date (Fig. 8).

A chalk- and brick-built well, 2.25 m high and 0.80 m in diameter, lay on the eastern boundary of the site (Open Area 8). Its structure included a small number of red- and orange-coloured bricks and, although there is currently no dated brick typology for the Croydon area, the presence of indented borders on the bricks would suggest a date of 1450–1666 (Fig. 9). The well went out of use in the 17th century. Its backfill contained seven sherds of mainly plain or decorated London-made tin-glazed wares. Of this group is a chamber pot similar to those illustrated by Orton.⁶³ A porringer was also found in the well fill.

A rubbish pit [9] in the south-west corner of the site (Open Area 6)



Fig. 8: the late medieval chalk built pit with timber lining

produced the richest environmental and artefactual assemblages. The environmental evidence included rat, rabbit, oyster, mussel, cockle and unidentified fish remains and amongst the artefacts were part of an iron horseshoe <20> and an iron ring, possibly from a horse harness <13>. Pot fragments from the fill dated the pit to 1480–1550. Two other pits, [45] and [49], were broadly contemporary and the latter yielded fragments of an ivory fine-toothed comb <17>. Typologically this item could be of any date from the late 16th to the early 19th centuries, but the deposit in which it was found is assigned to c. 1600 at the latest, making this a relatively early example.⁶⁴



Fig. 9: the chalk and brick well (viewed from the south-west)

Post-medieval

Post-medieval occupation on the site is attested by domestic pitting, ranging in date from the mid-17th to the mid-19th centuries, and garden soils (Fig. 10). A circular pit on the northern side of the site ([178]) produced a copper alloy coin <4> of probable late post-medieval date, a quantity of dog bones and apparently residual pottery (1480–1550). A square pit ([2]) in the south-west corner of the site contained largely burnt material. The pottery assemblage from this pit consisted of bowls and flared dishes in Surrey-Hampshire border ware, and imported Rhenish stoneware drinking vessels, including Frechen jugs dated between 1630 and 1650. A large lace-chape <16> was also present.

The property boundaries on the site were modified by the construction of an

east–west boundary wall ([282]) on a chalk foundation which divided the area into two parts: Open Area 9 and Open Area 10 to its south and north respectively. A gravel path (recorded in section only and not shown on Fig. 10) appears to have run close to the wall. Parts of both of these features had been recorded in the 1995 excavation.⁶⁵ The wall probably is the same as that seen on the Tithe map of 1800.⁶⁶

Further changes to the use of the site occurred during the later 19th century, when housing fronting onto Whitgift Street was constructed. Gardens lay to

the rear of these houses. The east–west wall was demolished and other activity comprised waste pits and/or tree boles dug into topsoil that sealed the earlier post-medieval phase.

Conclusion

The excavation concludes a series of investigations that had uncovered evidence for late Roman, medieval and post-medieval activity. The flint assemblage, whilst residual and *ex situ*,

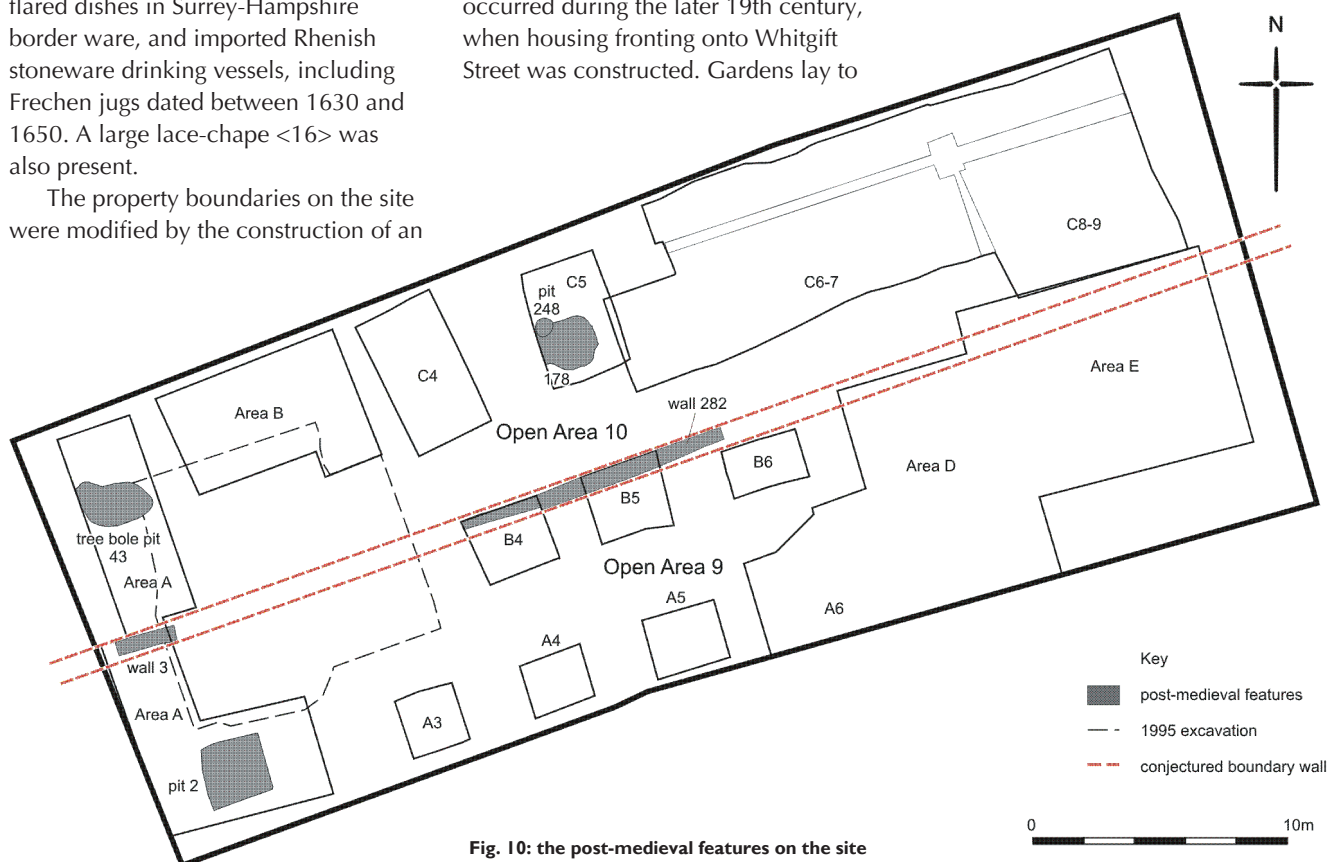


Fig. 10: the post-medieval features on the site

adds to the corpus of evidence for prehistoric settlement in the area.

This final phase of excavation provided further information about the extent of the Roman activity. Whilst the finds assemblages were sparse, they provided evidence for both Late Iron Age/early Roman and late Roman occupation. A concentration of tile provided further evidence for a masonry structure, probably incorporating a hypocaust, having lain nearby. This building may have been 1st- or early 2nd-century in date, but the majority of datable features from the site itself were late Roman. Boundary ditches may have defined an enclosure within which postholes formed evidence for possible post-built structures. A fence line

probably ran parallel to the western ditch. The lack of Roman features in the central and eastern parts of the site suggests that the area close to the Roman road, that would have run just to the east of the site, remained open.

Further evidence of medieval activity, largely pitting and soils, included pottery dated to c. 1200–1600. Post-medieval features spanned the use of the site until the construction of Whitgift Street in the later 19th century. This supports initial findings of previous investigations on the site.

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