An Iron Age and early Romano-British farmstead at the War Memorial Hospital, Carshalton

Douglas Killock

The Carshalton area has produced a wide range of archaeological discoveries, the best known and most extensively studied of which is undoubtedly the Late Bronze Age enclosed settlement at the former Queen Mary's Hospital, located *c.* 1.5km to the south of the War Memorial Hospital.[1] Also, an important Late Bronze Age ritual enclosure was located on the gravel terrace at Westcroft Road, *c.* 500m to the north-east of the study site.[2]

The spur of higher ground on which a large part of the suburb is built has a history of finds dating to the Bronze Age, Romano-British and Saxon periods.[3] These discoveries date back to at least the 1860s when railway cuttings unearthed bronze implements and weapons. Many of these finds have been dispersed without proper study, and their provenances are poorly recorded.[4] The misinterpretation of some of the evidence has also undermined efforts to understand the development of the ridge.

However, the clear potential of the area led to an evaluation and excavation being carried out on the southern part of the War Memorial Hospital site by Pre-Construct Archaeology (PCA) in 2008 (site code ASW08), which revealed two phases of activity dating to the Middle Iron Age and the Late Iron Age/Romano-British transition including a dense cluster of pits, some of which were clearly bell-shaped shafts of the classic form widely interpreted as grain storage pits.[5] The presence of Middle Iron Age material, even in limited quantities, is particularly significant as evidence for this period is sparse both in Surrey and the Greater London region as a whole. The discovery of another farmstead dating to the immediately pre-Roman and early Roman Iron Age might seem somewhat prosaic. However, Cotton neatly summarised the current state of knowledge concerning this type of settlement in 2001 when discussing an analogous site excavated at The Looe, Ewell, in the 1940s. He stated 'Overall, there have been surprisingly few advances in our knowledge of M/LPRIA and early Roman non-villa downland settlements in east Surrey and west Kent since The Looe was excavated'.[6] The Carshalton site is one of very few new sites that have come to light in the last 50 years, the areas where they might be found either being permanently under pasture or, as at the War Memorial Hospital, only being recently redeveloped as older buildings are renewed.

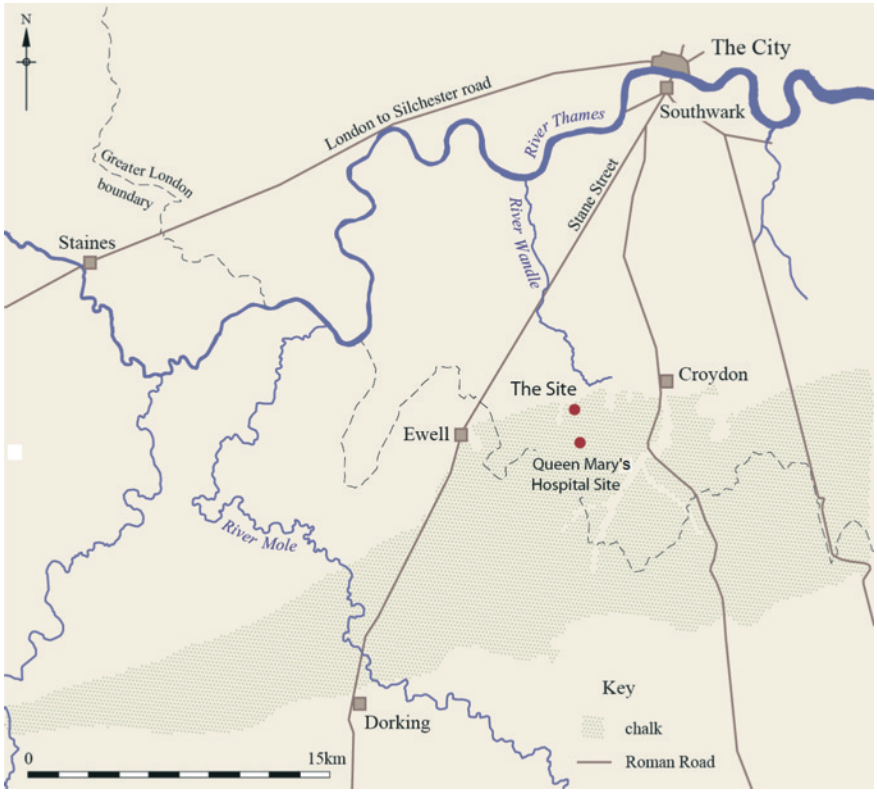

Fig. 1: site location, geology and Roman roads (based on Bird and Bird, 1987)

Geology

Although the site lies on a chalk hilltop (Fig. 1), the geology of the surrounding area is complex and has had a considerable impact on human development in the area.[7] Soil types are widely held to have been the major determining factor in the location of prehistoric and later settlement in the area. The land to the north is covered by London Clay and the sand, silt and gravel deposits of the Thanet, Reading, Woolwich and Blackheath Beds.[8] These water-bearing strata supported streams flowing north from the Downs and could have provided a water source for wells, whereas the depth of the chalk usually precluded this.

The site occupies a small but well-defined hilltop, lying around the 60m contour, on the northern edge of the chalk escarpment. The height of the

land that stretches to the east toward Croydon and west toward Sutton is fairly consistent at *c.* 50m OD. To the north of the chalk ridge the ground falls rapidly to the very flat area occupied by the upper tributaries of the Wandle. The modern parks and heathland crossed by these waterways lie at *c.* 25m OD. The land to the south of the site rises gradually but consistently to heights of up to 140m before falling sharply into the Chipstead valley.

Although the British Geological Survey[9] suggests there are no drift deposits on the site, a considerable depth of subsoil composed of reddish-brown fine sandy silt was apparent in the western half of the site. This suggested that levelling had taken place on the eastern side where this deposit was not extant. The thickness of the subsoil increased from east to west to a maximum of 0.55m, this deposit can probably be equated with the Thanet Sand that outcrops to the north.

Fig. 2: trench location

Archaeological sequence

The initial evaluation covered the southern part of the War Memorial Hospital site around Ashcombe House. It showed that the focus of the settlement lay on the eastern side of the site, where an array of cut features and, in the case of Trench 7, a complex concentration of inter-cutting pits, were revealed. The western side of the site, where the sandy subsoil was encountered, had clearly been shunned when the settlement was established. An extended excavation area (Trench 8) measuring 14m by 7m and covering all of Evaluation Trench 7 and most of Trench 2 was opened up (Fig. 2). The size of the area was largely dictated by the presence of many protected trees.

The evaluation had shown that no horizontal stratigraphy existed, and the entire archaeological resource consisted of features cut into the chalk. The central part of the area excavation presented a dense cluster of inter-cutting features, the fills of which were very similar to each other and leading to many of the relationships between the cut features being somewhat speculative (Figs. 3 and 4). Essentially the phasing consists of Middle Iron Age features and those dating to the Late Iron Age/early Roman period. Some features contained only pottery forms that are attributable to the Late Iron Age, but they were probably contemporary with the Romanised forms found in other features.[10] All of these features have therefore been included in the same phase.

Fig. 3: general view of the site facing north-east

Middle Iron Age

The Middle Iron Age was principally represented by four large pits and an east-west aligned shallow linear cut [16] only 0.30m deep, that had been exposed during the evaluation, and lay beyond the limits of the excavation area and could not be further investigated (Fig. 5). This feature probably represented the base of a large ditch that had been truncated by levelling of the hillside. It was impossible to determine whether the pits or other parts of the farmstead lay to the north of this round-bottomed gully or whether it may have delimited the area of pitting. Only one posthole was found to the north of the gully; as this feature contained no datable artefacts it is not certain that it formed part of the Iron Age complex.

Pit [14], which measured 1.55m in diameter by 1.02m deep, was partially

Fig. 4: overhead view of site

excavated during the evaluation and contained a small assemblage of Middle Iron Age pottery. A sheep's skull found near the bottom of this feature might be a placed deposit, especially as it appeared to be an entire ewe's head including the lower jaw.[11] However, the skull had not been placed in the base of the pit but was found lying at an angle within the fill, which might be more indicative of waste disposal rather than ritual deposition. The pit also contained horse and cattle bones. Pit [52], located close to pit [14], was of a similar size and shape but only 0.45m deep. Both fills of this steep-sided feature contained single sherds of pottery dated to the Middle/Late Iron Age.

A larger pit [18] was excavated during the evaluation; it measured 1.70m wide by 1.14m deep. A small pottery assemblage dating to the Middle Iron Age was recovered from its fill, but otherwise it contained remarkably few finds with the exception of 2.5kg of burnt flint. An even larger pit [105] (Fig. 6) was located to its north. This feature was 2.45m wide and 1.23m deep. The fill produced a small pottery assemblage, but it did include the most complete profile from this phase: a simple, upright rounded-rim jar with a low rounded shoulder. The pit also produced over 3.2kg of burnt flint. Pits [105] and [18] were surrounded by fragments of other inter-cutting features of diverse forms (Fig. 5). Of these, pit [92] had clearly been a substantial deep cut but its original form was unclear due to later truncations. Most of the other features were relatively shallow and amorphous; some appeared to be remnants of linear cuts but they could not be traced over any distance due to the concentration of later pits in this area.

None of the larger pits dated to this phase had the classic bell-shaped profile interpreted as a grain storage silo, nor were they as deep as the later features from the site, which undoubtedly did fulfil this function. In the case of pits [105] and [18], the efficiency of the pits for preserving cereals might have been compromised by their having been cut through earlier backfilled features rather than solid chalk.

The pottery assemblage, consisting of 50 sherds (767g), comprised a range of fabrics including: shell-tempered, flint-and-sand-tempered and sandy wares which are consistent with the types recorded at the nearby Beddington (Sewage Works) site, but usefully occur here in stratified (albeit small) groups rather than the residual, unstratified nature of the Beddington collection.[12] Elsewhere in Greater London comparable fabric types have been dated to the range 400–100 BC; it is likely the material from this site can be placed into this broad period, although a few of the forms could equally be placed in the earlier Iron

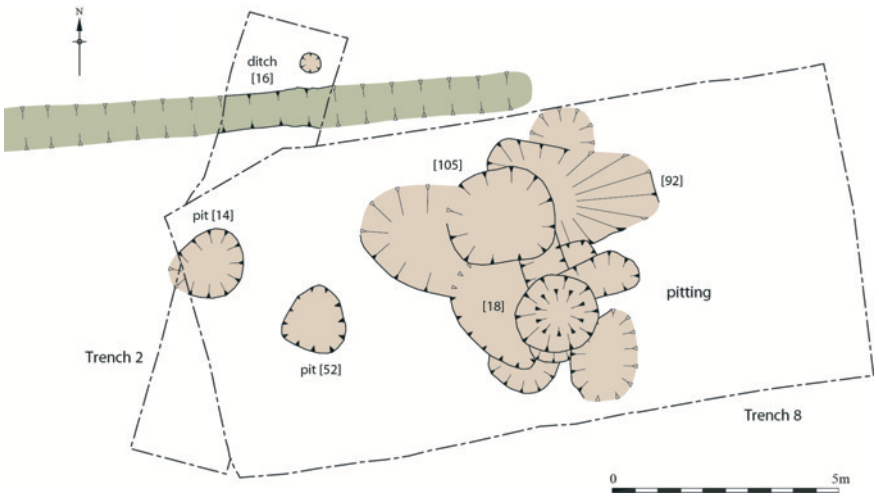

Fig. 5: Middle Iron Age features

Age and may indicate a date early in the suggested range. As flint-tempered fabrics are still present and grog-tempered fabrics absent from these groups, they are unlikely to date much into the 1st century BC, although closer dating is hampered by the small assemblage size.

Apart from the pottery, the finds assemblage consisted entirely of burnt flint and animal bone. The latter demonstrated the presence of cattle and sheep with smaller quantities of pig and horse bone. A few of the cattle and one of the sheep bones had been butchered. Smaller mammals were not represented, even from the sieved environmental samples, which also only contained unidentified carbonised material and seeds.

Late Iron Age/Early Roman

The features dating to the Late Iron Age/Early Roman period consisted entirely of pits which appeared to have been dug into areas of undisturbed chalk and largely avoided areas that had previously been disturbed by earlier excavation (Fig. 7). Two of these features have been interpreted as grain storage pits; two others may well have served that function. One of them was a shaft [42], which measured 1.30m in diameter at the top but increased to a maximum of 2.20m wide near the base before narrowing again; it was 1.63m deep. It had not been uniformly undercut but excavated as a series of small galleries. Although the galleries were largely filled with chalk which might have collapsed from the sides, fragments of burnt flint found in them showed conclusively that these areas had been excavated and backfilled. No particular signs of structured backfilling were evident within the fill, although bands containing elevated quantities of chalk were noted. The pottery recovered from the fills consisted of Late Iron Age grog- and shell-tempered wares in forms dated 100 BC to AD 40, and two Romanised forms that are pre-Flavian in date. Over 10.2kg of burnt flint was also recovered from this pit.

A very similar pit [84] (Fig. 8) measured 1.30–1.50m wide at the top and flared gently toward the base, it was 1.53m deep. A distinct series of fills was evident within the pit, showing that it had been backfilled and levelled in stages. The most notable differences in the fills comprised one deposit *c.* 0.50m thick that consisted of compacted chalk lumps and another *c.* 0.30m thick composed largely of burnt daub. The pottery recovered from the upper fill [81] contained some sherds in Romanised forms. The lower fill [85] contained a single sherd of South Gaulish samian ware, probably from the lower part of a Dragendorff 27 cup. Sherds of Verulamium white ware and Alice Holt grey ware recovered from the same fill probably indicate a date after AD 55 for this pit. A relatively small quantity of burnt flint, 1.8kg, was also recovered from the fills.

Two further pits might also have been excavated as storage pits. Pit [51] consisted of a steep-sided ovoid pit measuring 2.18m by 1.66m at the surface and 1.39m deep. It contained small quantities of Middle Iron Age pottery that is believed to be residual, and *c.* 8.5kg of burnt flint. It is possible that this feature did not retain the bell-shaped profile of pits [42] and [84] because it had been left standing open before being backfilled, and the overhanging top had collapsed. The basal fill contained many shattered chalk lumps that may have been material eroded from the sides of the pit. A sawn ram's horn-core recovered from this feature clearly demonstrated that bone or horn-working was being practiced on the farmstead.

A fourth feature that might have been used for grain storage was pit [47]. It consisted of two parts that almost formed a figure-of-eight shape, as if the excavation had been begun in one spot then relocated and taken deeper. However, even the deeper part of the feature measured only 1.07m deep, and if it had functioned as a storage pit it was considerably shallower than the two confirmed examples. Whatever the original function of the pit may have been, it contained a notable pottery assemblage of 71 sherds, which included shell-tempered and sandy wares in simple beaded-rim jar forms. Also present in a fine sandy oxidised ware was a round-shouldered, cordoned jar of 'Belgic' style with post-firing perforations in the base indicating a secondary use as a strainer or similar function. This key group is dated to *c.* AD 50. A large quantity of animal bone was recovered from the pit together with 4.8kg of burnt flint.

Another of the larger and more diagnostic pottery groups was recovered from a shallow pit [31], which was located immediately to the north of the possible storage pit [47]. The assemblage included grog-tempered cordoned necked jars and a shell-tempered storage jar; wheel-thrown bases were also noted. This group was also dated to *c.* AD 50. The pit was only 0.43m deep and had gently shelving sides that met a fairly flat base. A group of four post-holes were spaced irregularly around the periphery of the feature. They may be coincidental, but the very small numbers of postholes recognised during the excavation suggest that the features are associated with each other. If this were the case, the pit may represent a working area with an associated timber structure rigged above it.

The range of identified forms in the pottery assemblage from this phase of activity was limited predominately to jars, almost exclusively of beaded rim or necked types. These forms are paralleled in the assemblage from Beddington and more generally from across the London area.[13] The shell-tempered beaded-rim jars in particular are common on sites of this period in west Kent where they are deemed particularly characteristic of later 1st century BC – late 1st century AD.[14]

Apart from the grain storage pits, some indirect evidence for land use in the later period was evident in the form of animal bone, clay loom weights and a fragment of a quernstone. The major component of the animal bone assemblage was cattle along with sheep/goat. Pig was also present along with horse; a single dog bone was recovered. The sheep bones recovered from the pits consisted largely of elements derived from the head and feet, possibly indicating processing waste. Most of the animal bone recovered from the Middle Iron Age features had come from adult animals, the later material showed a wider age range. This was noticeable in the cattle but particularly the sheep. The horse bones derived from small-medium sized adult ponies. Butchery marks were evident on some of the cattle and sheep bones.

A variety of burnt clay objects with flat surfaces was recovered but they were invariably fragmented into pieces that were too small to be diagnostic. However, parts of two triangular loomweights with cross-corner perforations were positively identified.[15] Both came from shallow pits, one of which, [31], might have had a small post-built structure above it. Loomweights are commonly linked to wool production on downland sites. The small quernstone fragment was manufactured from a local greensand found within 15 miles of the excavation.[16]

Fig. 6: large Middle Iron Age pit [105]

The regional context

The excavation, though limited in its scope, produced results that are important for London, Surrey and west Kent. Evidence of Iron Age occupation of any sort in these areas is rare, and although no structural evidence was found at the War Memorial Hospital, there can be no doubt that a settlement lies very close by, possibly beneath the canopies of the chestnut trees within the old hospital grounds. At present it is unclear whether occupation of the Middle Iron Age farmstead continued unbroken into the Late Iron Age/Early Roman period or whether the site was reoccupied after a hiatus.

Analogous sites dating to the decades around the conquest can be found along the edge of the chalk escarpment from east Surrey to west Kent, where the dip-slope of the Downs meets the clay basin or where the chalk is bisected by the sands and gravels of the minor river valleys that lead north to the Thames. The closest parallel is perhaps found at The Looe, Ewell. This transitional Late Iron Age/early Roman site is also situated on a spur of the North Downs which lies at *c.* 85m OD and commands extensive views of the Thames valley to the north. Among the principal features recorded there were three large storage pits of identical form and similar dimensions to those seen at Carshalton.[17] The pottery from pit 3 contained Dragendorff 27 cups, a type probably identified at Carshalton. Although the Carshalton site did not produce clear evidence of placed deposits in the backfilling of the storage pits, the similarity of the topography, feature types and dating is striking. Sites dating to the Late Iron Age and early Roman period have been located on the chalk dip-slope a little to the south and east of Carshalton at Kings Wood[18] and Atwood School Sanderstead.[19] A little to the south of these sites further evidence of transitional material was recorded at Warlingham.[20] Further to the south and west, another site which closely resembles the War Memorial Hospital has long been known from Hawk's Hill, Leatherhead. The storage pits recorded at the site are very similar to those seen at Carshalton.[21] One pit is even recorded as having a 'cave' cut into the side near the base, which sounds very similar to Carshalton pit [22]. Perhaps more importantly, the site has also produced material dated to the Middle Iron Age as well as later transitional finds. The initial investigations reported on by Hastings identified the grain storage area but no structures. However, recent work by Archaeology South-East only 80m from the original excavation has revealed another group of grain storage pits and a roundhouse.[22]

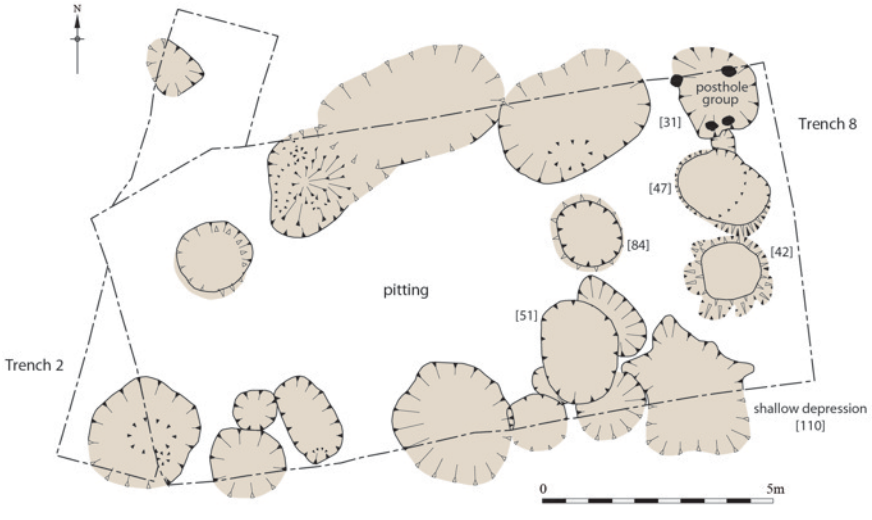

Fig. 7: Late Iron Age to early Roman

Cotton pointed out the close parallels between The Looe and sites in west Kent such as Farningham Hill and Keston,[23] although these sites were enclosed and as yet there is no evidence that either The Looe or the War Memorial Hospital were. However, it appears from the range of finds and features found at Carshalton that the site forms part of a Late Iron Age settlement pattern on the chalk dip-slope linked to a cultural grouping

spanning west Kent and east Surrey as far as the Mole Valley.[24] It has also been suggested that this area looked north toward the Thames, although in the case of south-east London in particular it is difficult to see how the downland sites are linked to the Thames basin, as so few sites dating to the Iron Age have been found in the London boroughs that cover that area.[25] In the case of Carshalton, the location of the site offered particular geographical advantages as it linked the chalk upland and the resources which it offered, to the gravel terraces of the upper Wandle valley. Evidence for Iron Age occupation in the Carshalton area is sparse, although an occupation site is hinted at by pottery and loomweight fragments found in a pit close to the Late Bronze Age site at Queen Mary's Hospital.[26] An Iron Age farmstead site was apparently excavated in Beddington Park in 1922–23, but the entire archive for the site is now lost.[27] This site would have been within walking distance of the Carshalton excavation, and it is a great pity that more is not known of it. However, a little further afield a farmstead dating to the transitional period existed at Beddington before the Roman villa complex was established. Some of the pottery indicated that the site was occupied in the 1st century BC as well as in the decades around the conquest. Middle Iron Age pottery may have been present but the evidence for a settlement dating to the period is slight. The finds assemblage from Beddington, as with The Looe, has also been linked to Farningham and Keston.[28] The Beddington villa site could probably have been seen from the hilltop where the War Memorial Hospital stood and it is perfectly feasible that the upper reaches of the Wandle were used for watering cattle belonging to the Carshalton settlement. This proximity would almost certainly have allowed direct contact between the edge of the upland and river valley. This could have been of great importance to the development of the local economy, as the numismatic evidence from Beddington suggests monetary exchange, possibly with markets in London, in the immediate post-conquest period. How this was achieved is at present unknown, as the nearest known Roman road, from London to Portslade, passes to the east through Croydon.

The Wandle valley might seem an obvious transport route through to the Thames, but very little evidence of Iron Age activity has been found beyond the upper reaches of the river in the Beddington area. The exception to this may be the Kings College Sports Ground site in Western Road, Merton (KCG89) where multiple phases of Bronze and Iron Age ditches were recorded.[29] In part the apparent absence of Iron Age material in the lower Wandle may reflect absence of excavation opportunities rather than a true distribution.[30] Whatever the true situation was on the Wandle, it contrasts with the evidence from the west, where there is increasing evidence that the Hogsmill corridor was an important economic route in the Iron Age. The existence of a settlement, possibly enclosed, at Old Malden has been known for some time, but until recently few details of the site had been published, the exception being an overall plan.[31] More recent work has shed new light on the site, and although no Early or Middle Iron Age finds or features were recovered, an enclosed settlement dating to the Late Iron Age/Early Roman period was present. The enclosure is somewhat smaller than that proposed by Carpenter and no evidence was found for the 'Belgic houses' that he reported.[32] However, the importance of the site was clear, especially when viewed in conjunction with the finds and features of Middle and Late Iron Age date from nearby Percy Gardens.[33] The results of the work at St. John's Vicarage, Percy Gardens and Manor Farm Buildings demonstrated that a shifting settlement was located on the spur of higher ground overlooking the river. The advantages of the river apparently outweighed the difficulties presented by the heavy clay soils.[34] The traditional view has always been that Iron Age farmers shunned the heavy clays. However, the discovery of another site located on the clay at Alpine Avenue, Tolworth, which lies less than 1km away from the sites in Old Malden, has shown that more farmsteads may be located on these soils, particularly along Hogsmill valley.[35] Recent

Fig. 8: burnt daub fill of storage pit [84]

excavations have also demonstrated that the lower Wey and Mole valleys supported a considerable number of Iron Age settlements.[36]

Conclusion

The small excavation at the War Memorial Hospital found traces of a Middle Iron Age farmstead; similar sites are very rare in the London area. It is extremely difficult to place the Carshalton site into a pattern of settlements dating to this period, as so few are known either from the Surrey downland or the London basin to the north of it. Sites of this date from the wider Surrey region, such as Tongham, are hardly comparable as the areas in which they are found are topographically very different from the chalk upland.[37] The same can be said for the majority of the Middle Iron Age sites from Greater London which are located on the gravel terraces below 30m OD, either on the Thames gravels in west London or in Essex.[38] Farningham Hill, Keston, and Hawk's Hill, Leatherhead, both stand out as analogous downland sites with evidence from both the Middle and Late Iron Age.

It is somewhat simpler to place the Carshalton farmstead into a transitional Late Iron Age/Early Roman context as more sites of the period have been documented. However, many questions still remain concerning the economy of rural sites, not least how they were accessed beyond the road network. The relative abundance of sites around Ewell is almost certainly a function of

the settlement's position on Stane Street. More sites might be expected where the gravel terraces of the upper Wandle and the Roman road converge near Croydon, although the route to Portslade was of secondary importance. The War Memorial Hospital site is a little isolated from the known roads but was in close proximity to the river gravels. If the coin evidence from Beddington indicates that the pre-villa farmstead was participating in monetary exchange soon after the conquest, there is no reason why the Carshalton site could not have done the same.

The farmstead at the War Memorial site appears to have fallen out of use by the later part of the 1st century AD. The question must be why? The farming practices which had been successful for hundreds of years would not have become ineffective as a result of the Roman conquest. It is probable that little changed in the early decades of Roman rule, and many see south-east England as a Roman sphere of influence long before the conquest.[39] Not surprisingly the evidence from Carshalton, as elsewhere, suggested that people continued in very much the same manner as before following the imposition of Roman rule and that this situation continued for some decades. Changes in the economy and organisation of the countryside apparently led to some sites being abandoned whereas others continue and become villas.[40] However, the number of villa sites known from the chalk upland is too few to have totally dominated the rural economy. If, as has widely been assumed, the rural population increased after the conquest, we must ask ourselves where people lived and why they abandoned sites that had apparently been successful.[41] The answer as far as the War Memorial Hospital site may simply be that the farmstead was superseded by the possible villa discovered in West Street.[42] The early phases of the building, furnished with stone walls and a tessellated floor, has been dated to the 1st to 2nd century and rebuilding work took place in the 2nd century.[43] This site offered the advantages of the War Memorial Hospital site and proximity to the water of the Wandle. The proprietors of the War Memorial Hospital site may have been dispossessed as a result of the conquest, alternatively they may just have moved into a plush new house.

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43. Source: www.museumoflondon.org.uk/laarc/new/siteinfo.asp?id=17295&code=WEC02.