

Burpham: Excavation in 1978

by M G O'CONNELL

Introduction

This is a short report on the excavation undertaken at Burpham during the spring and summer of 1978 in advance of the construction of the Burpham–Ladymead Diversion which now forms part of the London–Portsmouth Trunk Road (A3). A full report is to be found in Microfiche. The work was directed by Martin O'Connell on behalf of the Surrey Archaeological Society and funded by the DoE. The site (fig 1) is close to the edge of the Wey terrace on sloping ground that drops steeply into the alluvial flood plain of the River Wey on its eastern bank (TQ 010 521). The underlying geology is varied — the high ground is Higher Terrace River Gravel, while the sloping ground changes from London Clay to alluvium with scattered patches of gravel. In view of the place-name evidence (Ekwall 1951, 73 and Gover *et al* 1934, 162) and the discovery of a small group of Roman burials in the vicinity (Whimster 1931, 245) it was decided to undertake some form of archaeological investigation. Because aerial coverage of the area and geographical surveying by A J Clark together with fieldwalking by the Guildford Group of the Surrey Archaeological Society all produced inconclusive results, a series of exploratory trenches were opened by machine along the course of the projected A3. A large area (Area 1) was also excavated by hand as a result of finds from the machine trenches and a small trial trench (TT 2).

Results

On the basis of the finds from the area investigated it seems likely that some form of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age settlement existed on the brow or top of the high ground and that material from that settlement has been washed down the hillside by the natural process of weathering and soil drift, accelerated at various periods by plough action. The existence of such a hilltop settlement perhaps with a defensive earthwork might explain the place-name evidence and is so far the only explanation that can be offered.

In view of the extensive quarrying of sand and clay carried out in the area during the late 19th and early 20th centuries most of any existing settlement would have been destroyed together with any traces of later occupation. Because of the lack of exact recording of the quarrying operations and subsequent attempts at levelling the uneven ground it was only possible to appreciate the extent of these workings after excavation.

The only archaeological material which could possibly be considered as stratified was discovered in Area 1 (fig 2). A number of very irregular hollows intruded into the natural subsoil which alternated between clay and alluvium with gravel, and three of these features (26, 28 and 29) had been affected or perhaps even caused by slumping of the clay subsoil that sloped steeply in this part of the site. Between the end of the first season on 21 April and the beginning of the next season on 7 June, the eastern edge of TT 2 had moved forwards by almost 0.70m due largely to the weight of the large spoil heap to the east of the trench. It is probable that this was the cause of the three hollows (26, 28 and 29) slumping forwards and at the same time assuming an elongated slope. Apart from 43, a very shallow feature which is

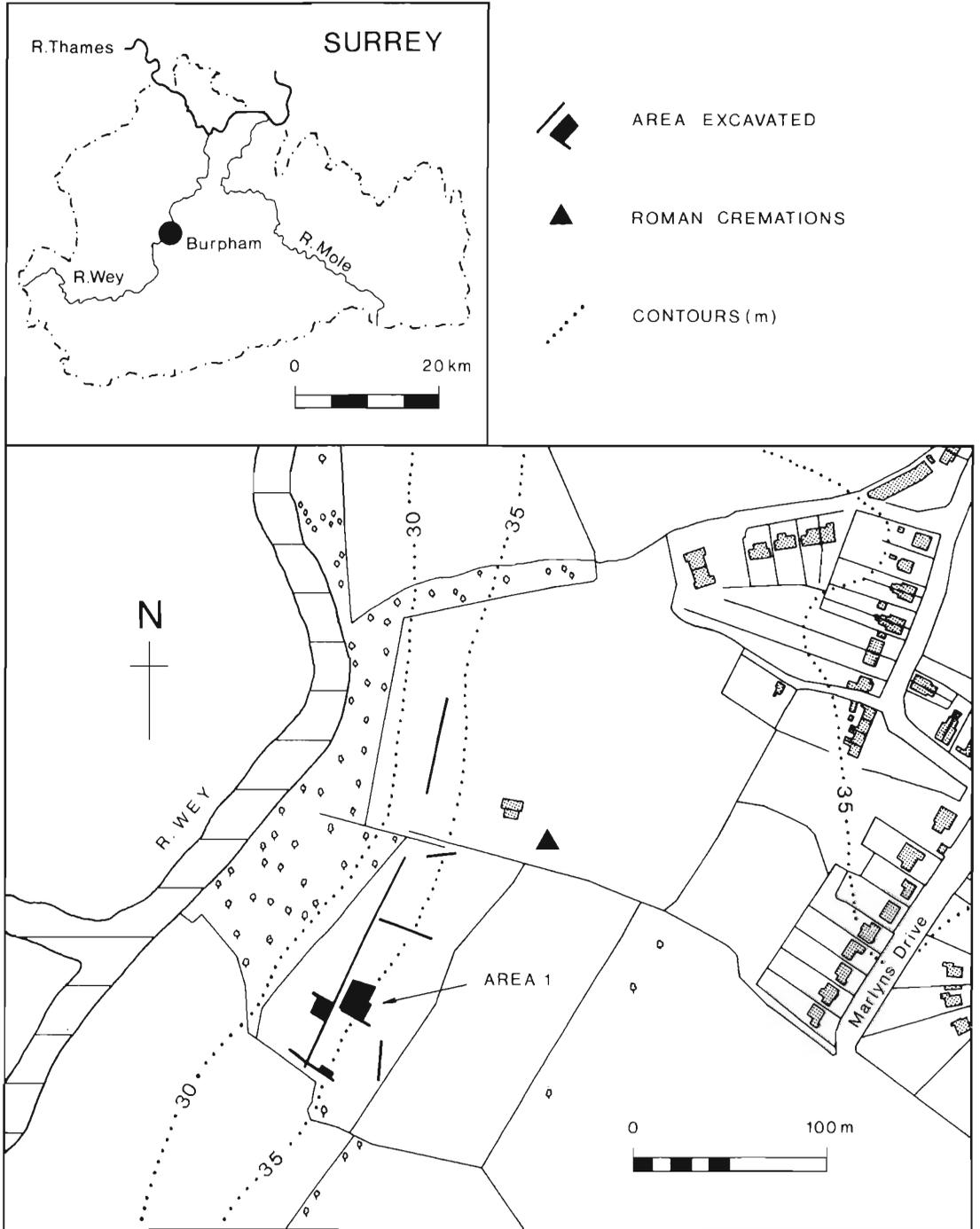


Fig 1 Location Plan.

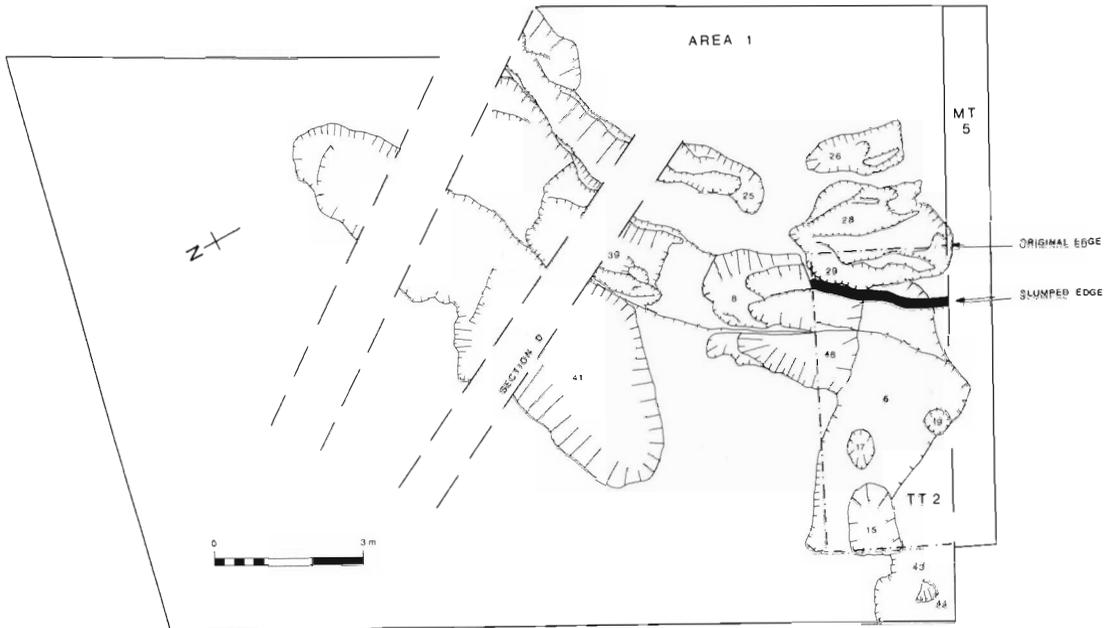


Fig 2 Site Plan: Area 1 and Trial Trench 2.

probably natural, the remaining features in Area 1 appear to be man-made although they may also have been affected by downward movement of the clay subsoil. The earliest feature is a large hollow (6/42) which produced some charcoal and fragments of bone and had been cut by several other features (8, 15, 17, 19 and 48). Five other hollows (8, 25/36, 39, 41 and 48) also contained occupational debris including bone, charcoal flecks and prehistoric pottery while two features (19 and 44) could have served as stake or post holes. The ultimate fill of the hollows was fairly uniform and was probably the result of a natural process of infilling with material washed down the hillside. Although the layer sealing the features contained some fragments of post medieval brick as well as prehistoric pottery the hollows themselves produced exclusively prehistoric material. The dateable finds are Late Bronze/Early Iron Age and suggest a prehistoric origin for the features in Area 1 with the possible exception of the three features (26, 28 and 29) discussed above.

Because of the irregularities in shape and profile of the hollows, it is unlikely that they were designed for any practical or domestic function despite the limited evidence of occupation (see above) nor are they acceptable as clearance hollows. Although a series of closely spaced clearance hollows would have an irregular appearance (cf Bradley and Ellison 1975, 48–50), the process of clearance would normally be part of one operation and the hollows left would then be back-filled so that the cleared land could be utilised. At Burpham, however, the hollows belong to more than one phase of activity and the infilling of the features was a gradual process. The most and possibly the only plausible explanation of the hollows is that they are the result of clay quarrying in the prehistoric period.

The Finds

Apart from some fragments of baked clay objects and a minute quantity of bone the remaining finds consisted almost entirely of prehistoric pottery. Although some of the sherds are unstrati-

fied, the bulk of the prehistoric pottery appears to be part of a roughly contemporary assemblage. On grounds of fabric, decoration and typology the group as a whole could comfortably fit into a Late Bronze/Early Iron Age context, but it is difficult to date the pottery any more closely in view of the scarcity of identifiable pottery types, the lack of easily dateable associated artefacts and material suitable for C14 dating.

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