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Archaeological investigation at Majestic House, High Street, Staines-upon-Thames 2013

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with contributions by

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Excavations revealed evidence of intermittent human activity over a considerable timespan. Residual flint artefacts of Mesolithic and Neolithic date, and a small number of Neolithic/Bronze Age features including postholes, were found. The most significant prehistoric evidence was the remains of a Neolithic/Bronze Age ring ditch, a monument type rarely recorded in the area. A small Iron Age artefact assemblage was also found, as was evidence for drainage ditches from that period. Drainage and boundary ditches formed much of the evidence for later activity on the site, which is located outside the centre of Staines-upon-Thames but close to the probable line of a Roman road. Roman occupation debris and agricultural features of 2nd–3rd century AD date were found, and there was a suggestion of continuity of occupation into the 4th century AD. There was no evidence for Saxon or early medieval activities, but the remains of later medieval rectilinear buildings, a well and ditches were found. Post-medieval features included a double horse burial of 17th or 18th century date.

Introduction

LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY, GEOLOGY

The site comprises 0.72ha of ground lying less than 500m to the east of the historic and archaeologically significant core of Staines-upon-Thames (hereafter Staines) (centred on TQ 03800 71750; fig 1). It was formerly occupied by a large office block known as Majestic House, as well as by retail units and car parking. The site is situated on the north side of Staines High Street, which is thought to overlie the Roman road to London. It is bounded to the west by Mill Mead and the east by Fairfield Avenue; modern retail and office buildings bound the north side (fig 2).

The site lies at 15.6m OD. The underlying solid geology of the area is London Clay, lying generally at 6m OD, and overlain by a succession of gravels (Shepperton and Taplow Gravel Members) and the Langley Clay and Silt Member, known widely as 'brickearth', or by relatively recent Holocene alluvium deposits (BGS Online Viewer, 2011).

Numerous archaeological excavations within Staines and its environs over the last *c* 50 years (Jones 2010) have shown that the town is built on a series of gravel 'islands' around the confluence of the rivers Colne and Thames (fig 1). This alluvial or riverine environment has affected the areas and levels of archaeological preservation in differing parts of the town, some areas being scoured and others sealed by alluvial deposits as the positions of palaeochannels shifted over time leading to numerous episodes of over-bank flooding.

Geological gravel deposits, lying at *c* 13m OD, were exposed only in the base of deeply machined trial trenches or at the base of some features in the west of the Cotswold Archaeology (CA) excavation area (CA trench 9). The overlying alluvial 'brickearth' deposit, which all the archaeological features physically cut, was a pale yellowish-brown silty clay. This deposit lay across the whole site and was highest (*c* 14.5m OD) in a broad north/south ridge across the central *c* 80% of the site, dipping gently down to the east (*c* 14.2m OD) and to the north-west (*c* 13.8m OD) (fig 3).

In trenches 4, 7 and the north-west of the excavation area (CA trench 9) a *c* 0.3m-thick, distinctive greenish-grey sandy alluvial deposit overlay the brickearth, cut by Roman or later

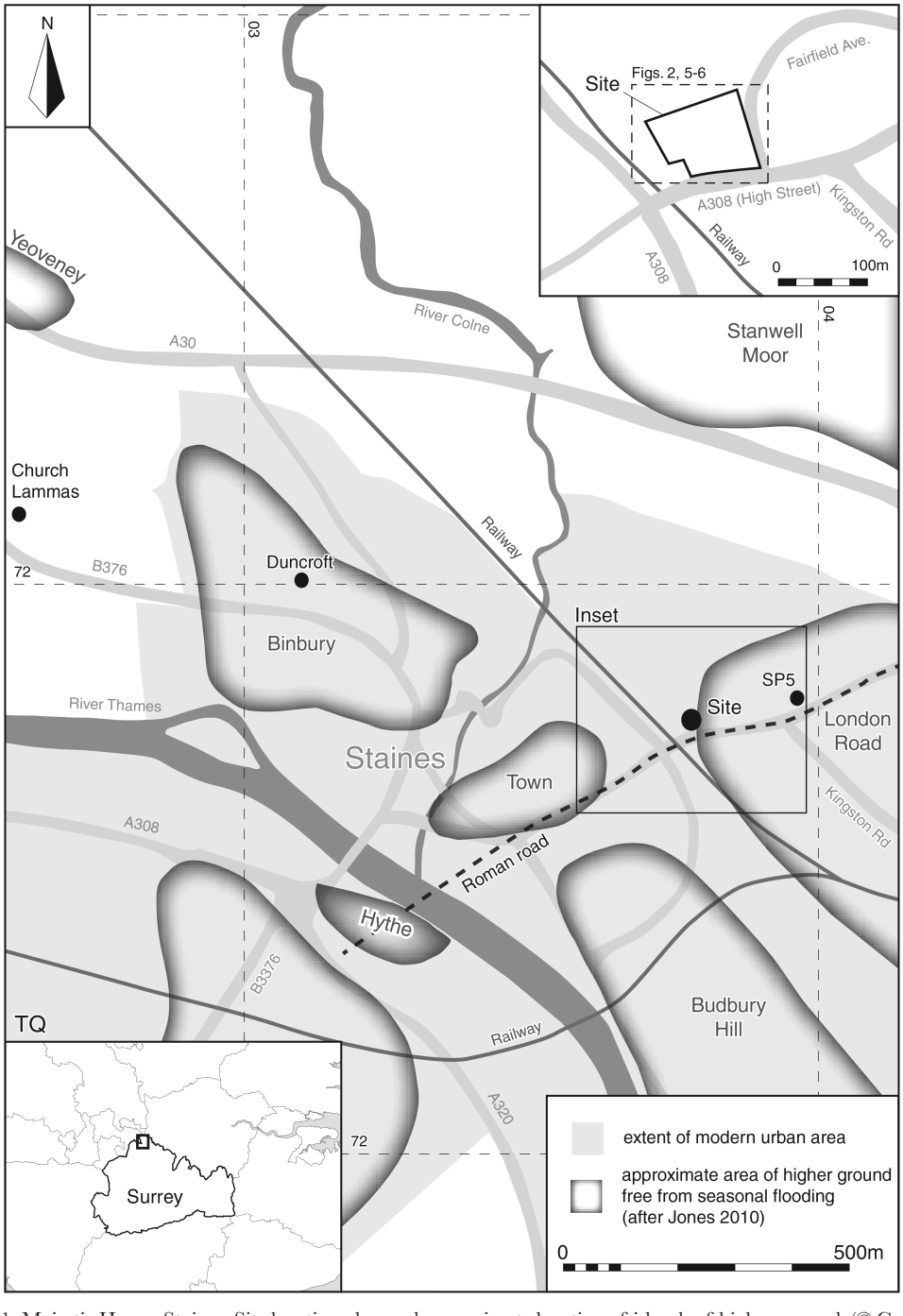

Fig 1 Majestic House, Staines. Site location plan and approximate location of islands of higher ground. (© Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. All rights reserved)

features. It also filled natural hollows in the brickearth (trenches 4 and 10) and contained possible early prehistoric (possibly Late Palaeolithic, Mesolithic or Neolithic) as well as later prehistoric (Bronze Age) worked flint.

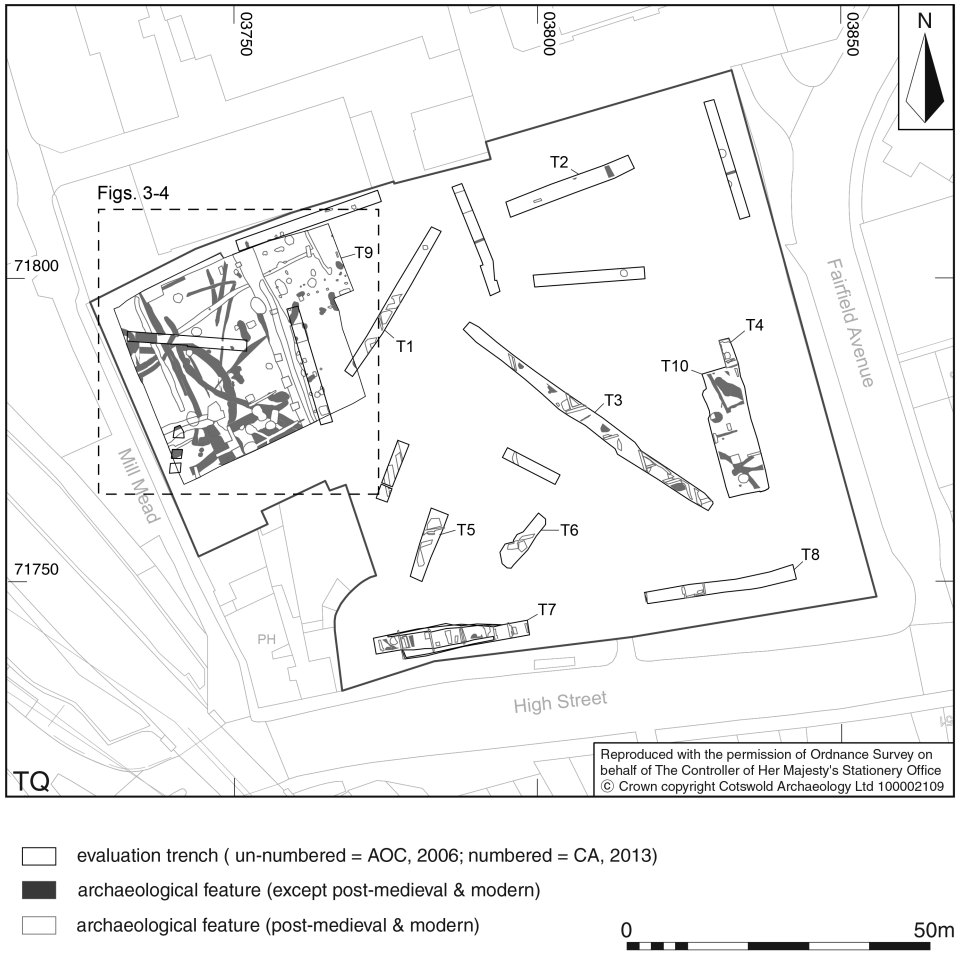

Fig 2 Majestic House, Staines. Plan of all features. (© Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. All rights reserved)

Also lying above the brickearth was a *c* 0.3m-thick slightly darker alluvium recorded in CA trenches 7 and 9, which contained 2nd–4th century AD Roman pottery, Roman ceramic building material (CBM) and animal bone. This deposit was also recorded in evaluation trench 7 (below: AOC 2006, 12), which contained Roman pottery and large fragments of *tegulae*. This deposit was cut by medieval and later features.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The gravel islands of the Staines area are known to have attracted people from the earliest times. Staines was an important town during the Roman period and is referred to in the Antonine Itinerary, a *c* 3rd century AD document, as *Pontibus*, meaning '(at) the bridges' (Rivet & Smith 1979, 441). The Roman town emerged quickly because of the merits of its location near a Thames river crossing as well as being within an area of rich pasture and cultivated lands on the gravel terraces. The settlement was located near to where a major Roman road (believed to be under the line of the current High Street) crossed the Thames. It has been suggested that Staines was not entirely deserted in the Saxon period, and medieval settlement was focused on Town Island where it is known there was a market from 1218 (Poulton 2003, 3).

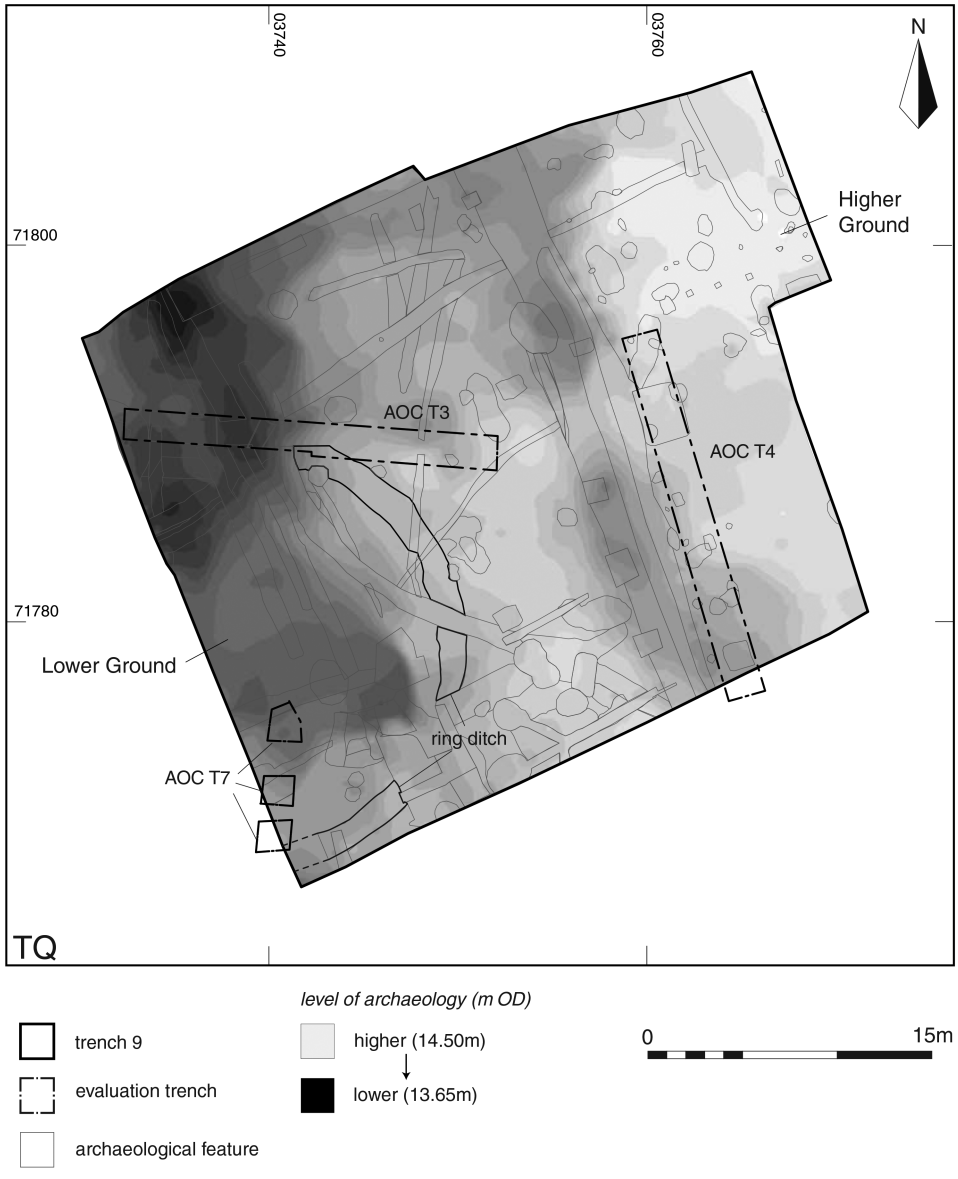

Fig 3 Majestic House, Staines. Contour plot of natural 'brickearth' in CA trench 9 with all features.

A large number of archaeological excavations have been undertaken in Staines, particularly since the advent of statutory guidance and developer-led archaeology from 1990 onwards. However, most of these have been undertaken on or close to the Town Island on which the core of Roman and later settlement occurred, and to a lesser extent on the other islands in the area (fig 1). The results of a series of archaeological excavations located to the north of Staines High Street have been published in this journal (McKinley 2004), and the archaeological background of Staines has recently been comprehensively reviewed and published (Jones 2010). Consequently it will not be reprised as a separate account here, although aspects pertinent to the archaeology of the site have been incorporated within the results and, principally, in the discussion below.

Between September and November 2013, Cotswold Archaeology undertook a combined evaluation and excavation at the site, which had previously been investigated by desk-based assessments (AOC 2000; CA 2011) and an evaluation (AOC 2006). The work was commissioned by CgMs Consulting acting on behalf of Deutsche Bank. The AOC evaluation recorded a small number of probable prehistoric features, as well as Roman, medieval and post-medieval features (AOC 2006). These works were undertaken to fulfil the requirements of a planning condition, prior to the redevelopment of the site.

METHODOLOGY

The aims of the 2013 evaluation and excavation (CA trench 9) were to further investigate and characterise the archaeological potential of the site following the demolition of buildings, and to record the relatively dense area of archaeological features in the north-west of the site, respectively. The evaluation consisted of eight trenches (10–30m long), which in addition to the earlier nine evaluation trenches (AOC 2006) comprised an 8% sample (by area) of the site (fig 2). The excavation (CA trench 9) was located to further investigate a 1700m^2 area of features of prehistoric and Roman date in the north-western area, identified and recorded in the earlier evaluation.

During the evaluation stage, a concentration of Roman and medieval features was recorded along the eastern boundary of the site (CA trench 4) resulting in a request by the Local Planning Authority (LPA) archaeological advisor Gary Jackson (Surrey County Council), for a further 100m^2 (CA trench 10) of detailed excavation immediately to the west of CA trench 4. By agreement with CgMs Consulting, this work was undertaken concurrently with recording in evaluation CA trench 4. Despite widespread truncation, with extensive and deep brick and concrete structural intrusions in most of the investigation areas (particularly trenches 3–8), the survival of stratigraphy was relatively good, and archaeological remains were recorded across the site.

Following excavation, a post-excavation assessment was undertaken to determine the potential of the archaeological record and the artefactual and environmental assemblages (CA 2014). The overall finds quantifications are presented in table 1. Data derived from individual specialist reports, including pottery and CBM, have been integrated into this text. Summaries of the data recovered are presented in tabulated form and the more significant specialist reports (lithics, plant macrofossil and charcoal evidence, and the post-medieval horse burial) are available online (see *Endnote*). Other individual specialist reports are retained

Table 1 All finds totals, by period

Type	Category	Count	Weight (g)
Pottery	Prehistoric	32	144
	Roman	292	2900
	Medieval	112	1600
	Post-medieval/modern	41	481
	Total	*477*	*5125*
CBM	Roman	136	14000
	Medieval/post-medieval + undated	257	14540
	Total	*393*	*28540*
Flint	Worked	638	–
	Burnt	107	889
Metals	Iron	50	–
	Copper alloy	1	–
	Lead alloy	1	–
Glass	Roman	2	1
	Post-medieval/modern	12	159
Fired clay	All	32	332
Clay tobacco pipe	Stems	6	–
Metallurgical residues	Ironworking	–	597

in the archive, which is currently held by Cotswold Archaeology prior to deposition in Spelthorne Museum (acc no SMXSP2013.220).

Results

PREHISTORIC (fig 4)

As with most archaeological investigations on the Staines islands, the evidence for prehistoric activity at Majestic House is predominantly reflected in residual artefacts (worked and burnt flint and pottery) and lacks associated palaeoenvironmental evidence. However, a small group of Neolithic/Bronze Age features was recorded in the north-east of CA trench 9.

A total of 638 pieces of worked flint were recovered, the majority of which was residual in later alluvial deposits or features. They comprise mainly debitage, with a small component of 30 (5%) retouched tools, some of which are attributable to the Mesolithic or Neolithic periods based on morphological and/or technological traits. Diagnostic Mesolithic and Neolithic flint tools, including five microliths, eight scrapers, a truncated flake, a fabricator and a pick, were recorded mainly from features of Neolithic/Bronze Age date in the centre and north-east of CA trench 9 (fig 4). This area was a relatively higher area of ground to the immediate east of an area of increased alluviation (possibly channel fills) in the west of CA trench 9.

The recovery of Mesolithic material, from a small group of Neolithic/Bronze Age features in the north-east of CA trench 9, indicates the use of this location within the riverine landscape in this period. The small volume and limited range of lithic material, taken with the under-representation of associated microdebitage and debitage, indicates that the use of the site was small-scale and probably episodic or seasonal. Initial flint processing occurred off-site although the presence of a microburin, crested blades and core rejuvenation flakes within the assemblage, as well as its overall fresh condition, indicates that secondary flint working was one of the activities undertaken on the site. Hunter-gatherer sites have been recorded previously at other nearby river channel/gravel island margins, including Church Lammas (Hayman 1991; cf Jones 2010, 12), the Friends' Burial Ground (FBG) site (Crouch & Shanks 1984; cf Jones 2010, 10) and the nearby Staines Police Station site (Poulton 1999; cf Jones 2010, 12) and also on the London Road Island (figs 1 and 8).

The most significant prehistoric feature recorded to date from the Staines islands comprised approximately 40% of the circuit of a Neolithic/Bronze Age ring ditch of *c* 21m diameter (fig 4). About one-quarter of the exposed ring ditch was investigated through a number of sections (fig 9). The ditch was *c* 1.6m wide and 0.35m deep with moderate to steep, concave sides and a flat base, with all sections displaying a consistent morphology and fill sequence. Although truncated by a meandering Roman drainage ditch, the northernmost part of the ring ditch displayed a 0.2m-deep possible terminal (fig 4). Its morphology suggested that this was a real termination rather than a 'shallowing off' through scouring/erosion, although scouring had undoubtedly occurred after the silting up of the ring ditch given the presence of alluvial deposits sealing the infilled ditch. Primary silting occurred from the outside edge, perhaps representing the collapse of an external bank into a waterlogged ditch, suggesting the ring ditch represents the remains of a 'saucer' or 'pond' barrow, and that any central mound (if ever present), however slight, had been totally removed by subsequent river erosion. The small finds assemblage did not include human bone or cremation-related deposits.

All but three pieces of worked flint from the ring ditch derived from the secondary fills. The primary silting of the ring ditch contained a redeposited bladelet of Mesolithic date and a chip and flake of a broadly prehistoric date. The assemblage from the secondary fills included a chisel arrowhead, two side-scrapers, two sherds of Early to Middle Bronze Age pottery, nine sherds of later prehistoric (probably Iron Age) pottery and burnt flint. Overall, the stratigraphic sequence and finds suggest a probable Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age construction date for the ring ditch. Finds from the final silting of the ditch, in conjunction

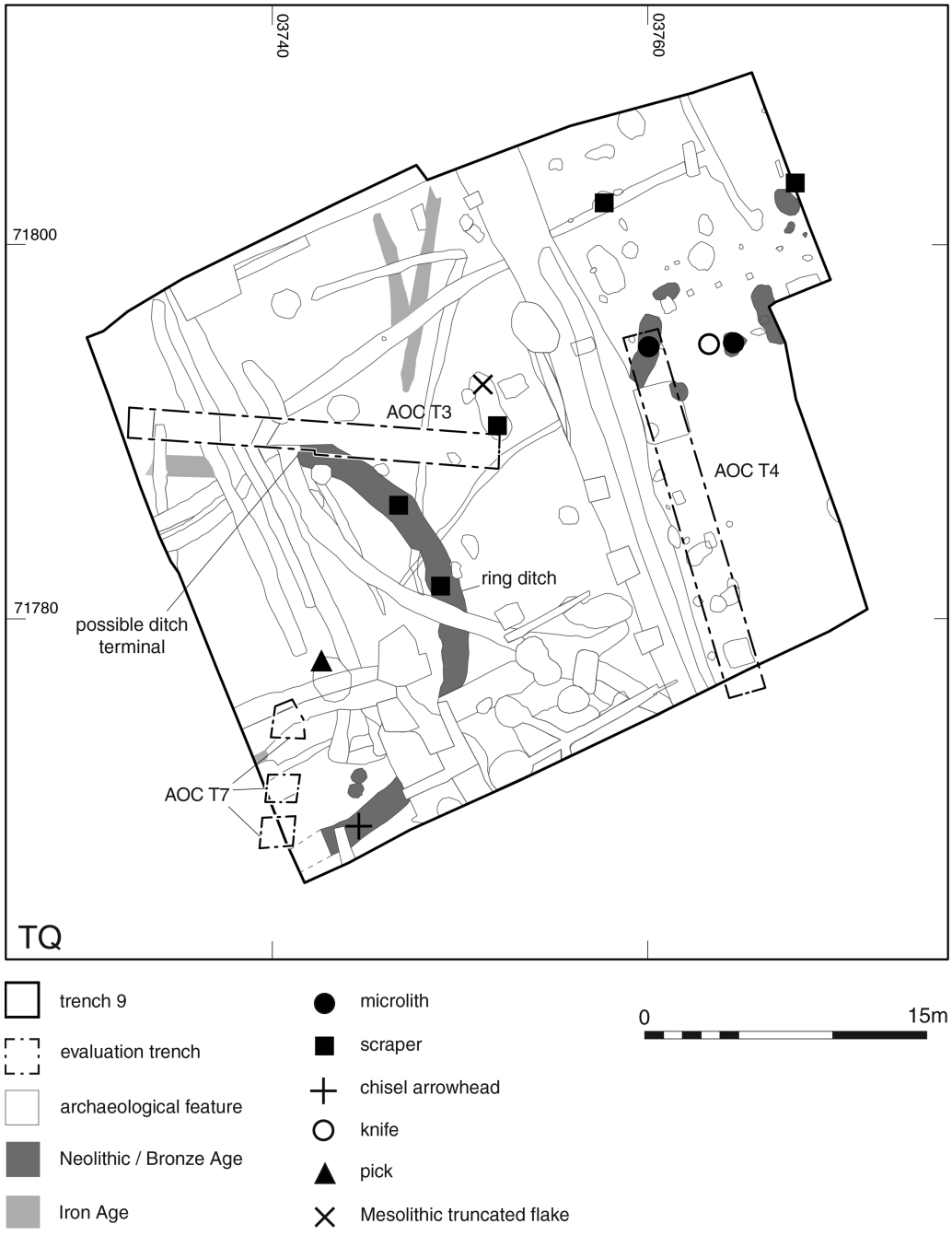

Fig 4 Majestic House, Staines. Prehistoric features and findspots in CA trench 9.

with Iron Age pottery from the overlying alluvial deposits in this area, indicate when the end of the visibility of the monument in the landscape occurred. Two similarly-sized pits located in the southern part of the area enclosed by the ring ditch and therefore possibly contemporary in date, although undated by artefacts, had nearly identical mostly sterile fills. The southern pit contained a fragment of bone, possibly from a cattle leg bone.

The location of the ring ditch, close to one of the many river channels of the Colne delta, on the north-western edge of the London Road Island, indicates that this area was relatively dry in the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age when it was constructed. The island would presumably have been prone to periodic flooding (and erosion), before being sealed by over-bank flood deposits in the Roman period, perhaps the 3rd century AD (Jones 2010, 29).

A further small group of Neolithic/Bronze Age features concentrated in the north-east of CA trench 9 included postholes, a post-pit (with 0.2m diameter post-pipe), quarry pits, and small pits. Most of the features contained worked flint of Neolithic/Bronze Age date including two scrapers and a knife, as well as the residual Mesolithic flints listed above, and a small quantity of burnt flint. Although sampled, no palaeoenvironmental material was present, but small quantities of debitage and microdebitage from the sample residues show secondary flint processing occurred on the site. Although there was no coherent spatial patterning to the features, they indicate Neolithic/Bronze Age settlement, however transient, with evidence for post-built timber structures, quarrying (possibly for clay for pottery and daub), pits (perhaps for waste disposal) and burnt flint (food preparation).

The pattern of evidence for the later prehistoric periods follows that of the earlier prehistoric, consisting predominantly of residual Iron Age pottery (32 sherds, 144g) from later features and alluvial deposits, as well as features with exclusively Iron Age pottery recorded in CA trench 9. A small array of shallow drainage ditches was recorded either within or leading to the relatively low-lying western part of CA trench 9, cut at a time when the ring ditch would still have been a shallow earthwork feature. These irregular drainage ditches were superseded by at least three phases of Roman field boundary/drainage ditches.

ROMAN (fig 5)

The activities on the site during the Roman period were mostly dictated by the palaeotopographic situation, with a slight elevation of the contemporary ground surface of the site to the east, bordering an increasingly flooded area of low-lying ground along the west side. Roman finds were recovered across the site in later medieval, post-medieval and modern features as well as in alluvial deposits sealing the ring ditch.

Roman features in the west of the site were characterised by successive phases of agricultural field boundary or drainage ditches. To the south and east, bordering the line of the Roman road to London, further ditches were indicative of settlement and to the north-east an agricultural ditch was recorded (CA trench 2). Unfortunately, the southern and eastern areas had been very heavily truncated by post-medieval and modern foundations and basements. However, small pockets of intact Roman stratigraphy survived in isolated areas of trenches 3, 7 and 10. The finds assemblage mostly comprised CBM, including *tegula*, *imbrex* and possible *pilae* fragments. Roman wall plaster fragments were also recovered from later medieval and post-medieval drainage ditches in CA trench 9. The pottery assemblage (table 2) comprised mainly local reduced coarsewares including Alice Holt/Farnham wares and a mix of regional types (south-east Dorset Black-burnished ware, Colchester colour-coated ware, Oxfordshire wares and Lower Nene Valley colour-coated ware). Continental imports were also present including Central and East Gaulish samian. Overall, the diagnostic Roman ceramic fabrics and forms of the pottery assemblage suggest Roman occupation of the 2nd–3rd centuries AD, although the preponderance of jar forms based on later style Black-burnished ware cooking pots from the possible enclosure ditch (see below) indicates a date in the later 2nd or 3rd–4th centuries AD. This evidence perhaps suggests the continuity of settlement and agricultural activity from the 2nd to 4th centuries AD (table 2: see *Endnote*).

The most significant Roman feature was a small section of curving ditch, possibly of a settlement enclosure in the south of CA trench 10, which had been cut by a sinuous drainage ditch of similar date. Unfortunately, it was not possible to trace the 'enclosure' ditch to the

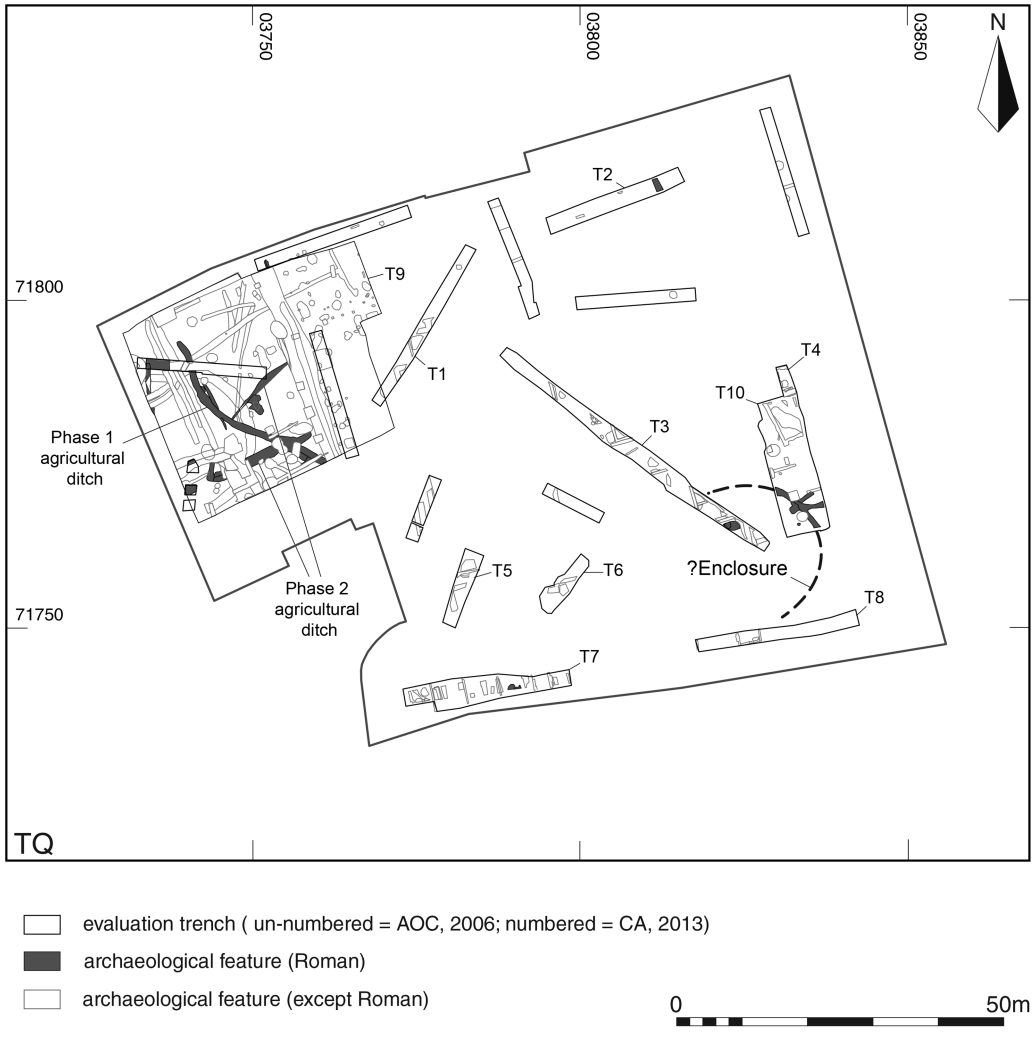

Fig 5 Majestic House, Staines. Plan of all Roman features.

west owing to deep, modern concrete foundations that were present at this part of CA trench 3. The western half of CA trench 8 had also suffered from the cutting of deep modern foundations in the area where an extrapolated subcircular enclosure of *c* 22m diameter might have been present and would have enclosed the settlement features in the south of CA trench 3.

The enclosure ditch was 2.2m wide and 1.0m deep, with steep, concave sides. The numerous fills consisted of distinctively dark (possibly originally organic-rich) settlement dump deposits, which contained an assemblage of 2nd century AD pottery, animal bone, fired clay, vessel glass, iron nails (including a cart linch pin (Manning's Type 2b; Manning 1985, 74)) and hobnails, as well as Roman brick and tile fragments. The presence of relatively small amounts of ironworking slag and hammerscale of both spheroidal and flake classes from sample residues would indicate that bloomery smithing and/or fire-welding took place in the vicinity.

In the south of CA trench 3, a concentrated area of relatively shallow intercutting, settlement features was recorded, which included three pits and a ditch. All the features in

this small area contained 2nd–3rd century pottery as well as CBM, animal bone, a vessel glass fragment and a spindle whorl made from a fine greyware potsherd.

Another small area of settlement features was recorded in the west of CA trench 7, which included a shallow pit with a dump of charcoal-rich material that included the most significant palaeoenvironmental evidence from the site dating to the Roman period. It consisted of large numbers of charred cereal grains (spelt (*Triticum spelta*), emmer/spelt (*T. dicoccum*/*T. spelta*) wheat grains), a small number of oats (*Avena*) and a single barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) grain. It also included a small assemblage of herbaceous taxa including species indicative of arable/disturbed environments. The assemblage is typical of crop-processing waste and the small number of weeds suggests that the crop was brought to the site partially processed as bulk spikelets. The presence of charred sprouting grains in some instances might suggest a crop that had been spoilt or was being malted to produce ale. Furthermore, the presence of glume/spikelets still attached to some grains suggests that some of the crop was only partially parched, potentially the result of being accidentally ignited within a hearth/corn drier. This evidence either indicates that a number of different activities occurred on the site in this period and the grains were disposed of in this shallow pit or that stored emmer/spelt wheat grain spikelets were found to have germinated and consequently spoilt. This crop was then used as fuel for other purposes.

The animal bone from the Roman features provides evidence for the butchery and consumption of locally-raised cattle, sheep and pig livestock. The recording of an articulated foal leg from the field boundary ditch in CA trench 2 would indicate that as well as food livestock, horses were bred in the vicinity. The presence of a dog femur in the faunal assemblage is no surprise, dogs being useful for guarding livestock and property as well as scavenging on settlement waste. Of some small interest is a hare ulna from the pit cluster of CA trench 3, showing that wild fauna was an element of the diet at this period. The proximity of the site to the rivers Thames and Colne makes it likely that riverine resources were also exploited and consumed daily; however, no fish bones were preserved in the palaeoenvironmental samples to confirm this.

The west of the site contained a sequence of at least three phases of agricultural boundary/drainage ditches of 2nd–3rd century AD date, following the final silting of the ring ditch probably in the Iron Age to 1st century AD period. The relative size and form of these ditches suggest that they represent field boundaries, while the changes in orientation suggest a field pattern shifting over time. Based on spatial layout and stratigraphic relationships, the initial phase of the field system (phase 1) began with an irregular, slightly sinuous ditch, aligned broadly north-west/south-east, which was superseded by at least two phases of more regular ditches (phase 2) (fig 5). The development created a more rectilinear pattern of field boundary/drainage ditches over time, which seems to have respected the alignment of the Roman road to the south and east. The ditches contained Roman mortar fragments, as well as CBM and pottery (including an Oxford whiteware mortarium fragment) and animal bone. The assemblage suggests the dumping of building rubble and domestic waste, some of which was from more substantial structures in the vicinity, or perhaps from Roman Staines (*Pontibus*) itself, deposited as part of general 'manuring' of fields in the town's hinterlands.

MEDIEVAL (fig 6)

The medieval activity on the site somewhat mirrored that of the Roman period, with settlement evidence recorded in the south and east of the site and predominantly agricultural field boundary/drainage ditches and quarry pits in the west. The finds assemblage comprised mainly later 12th–14th century pottery and animal bone, although later medieval brick and peg-tile fragments and a copper-alloy sheet fragment, were also recovered. The medieval pottery from the site amounts to 112 sherds (1.6 kg), including seven sherds (39g) from soil samples. The majority of the hand-recovered group was recovered from the ditches (60 sherds, or 50% of the total assemblage). The fabrics can be matched mostly to types

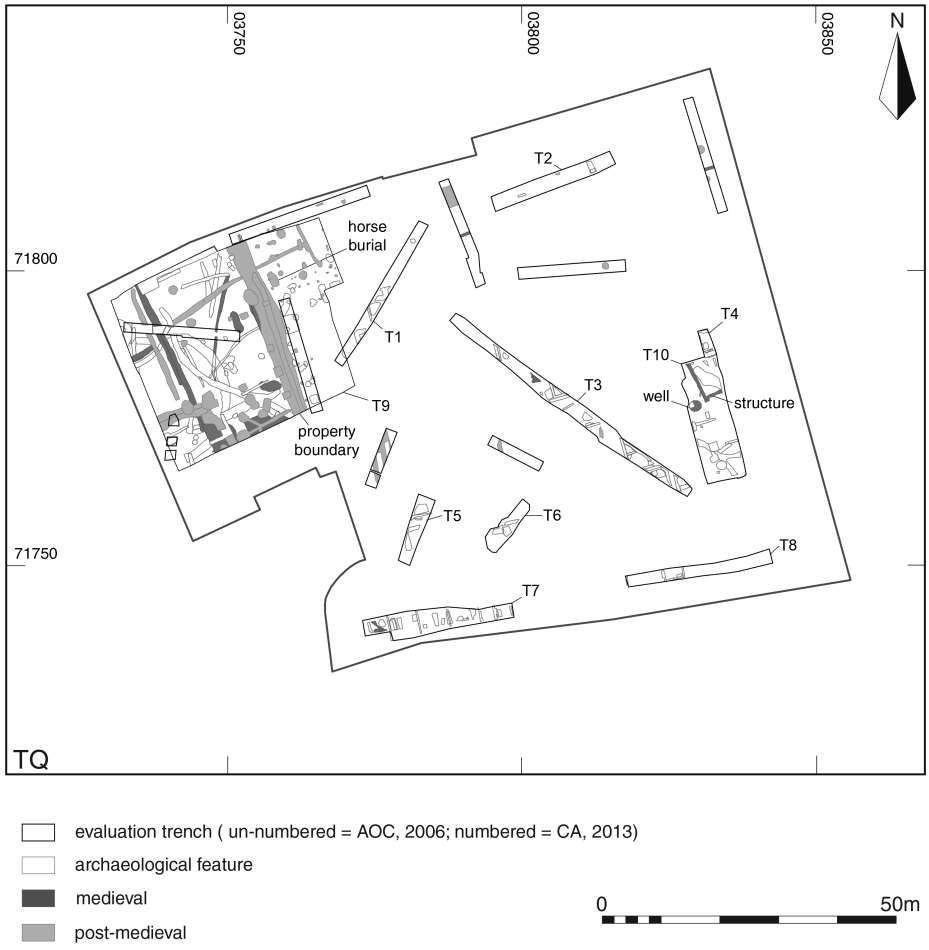

Fig 6 Majestic House, Staines. Plan of all medieval and post-medieval features.

already recorded from larger and better-dated assemblages from Staines itself, and most had relatively local origins (table 2).

The settlement evidence comprised a rectangular structure with a large well in close proximity (CA trench 10), a cluster of postholes in the north of CA trench 3, and shallow gullies (possibly beamslots) in the west of CA trench 7.

The rectilinear beamslots from CA trench 10 were 0.62m wide x 0.3m deep with steep, flat sides and a flat base, indicating they were from a rectangular timber structure. A large posthole at the exposed corner of the beamslots probably had a structural function. A near-complete pottery vessel from the southern beamslot, a jar with a thickened everted rim, compares well to types described as from ceramic groups of the later 12th or 13th centuries (Jones 2010, 145–6).

The beamslots defined an (incomplete) area of at least 6.4 x 3m. No floor surfaces or spreads of building materials were recorded from the area. Similar medieval beamslots for timber structures have been recorded at a number of sites in Staines, including late 13th–14th century examples at the GSS Tesco site (*ibid*, 36).

The well was probably associated with the structure and is one of several medieval wells recorded in Staines (*ibid*). It was 1.87m in diameter and greater than 1.3m in depth. Deeper excavation was not undertaken owing to health and safety concerns.

The well had been infilled with a number of deposits containing a small assemblage of later 12th–14th century (possibly 15th century) pottery, as well as residual Roman potsherds. The primary fills comprised bluish-grey gleyed clays that were recorded at the limit of excavation, suggesting the well base was close. From one of these basal deposits a well-preserved, waterlogged wooden oak stake (*Quercus* sp.) was recovered. The stake was 345mm long, 40 x 46mm in cross-section, and had been trimmed into a point. It was found vertically positioned, exactly coincident with a sloping near-vertical interface, suggestive of the removal of a standing structure, probably a timber or wattle revetment 'box' at least *c* 0.8m square, near to the base of the well.

The medieval activity in the west of the site consisted mainly of ditches, although clay extraction pits (particularly in the south of CA trench 9) were also present. There were at least two phases of medieval drainage ditch construction, becoming more regular and rectilinear in plan, and respecting the alignment of the High Street to the south. The alignment, as well as the exact position of some of the ditches, was maintained into the post-medieval period. Again, this has been widely recorded in the Staines area, with both archaeological and early cartographic evidence hinting at the preservation of medieval property boundaries into recent times (Jones 2010, 35).

The clay extraction, which occurred later than the more developed rectilinear medieval ditch pattern, occurred mainly in the south of CA trench 9 and consisted of discrete sub-rectangular or sub-oval pits up to 0.67m deep, and two large areas (*c* 4.6m in extent) of shallow, intercutting pits (*c* 0.5m deep). The backfill deposits contained residual Mesolithic and Neolithic/Bronze Age worked flint (including a truncated flake and a scraper), Roman pottery and CBM, Roman or medieval iron slag, and 12th–14th century pottery.

The medieval faunal evidence indicates cattle meat consumption, with sheep of secondary importance, and horse remains also recorded. The floral assemblage was dominated by barley, with smaller quantities of oats, free-threshing wheat and rye (for bread). These, together with cereal chaff and herbaceous taxa, are indicative of arable, disturbed and grassland areas in the vicinity. The crop-processing waste suggests that crops were brought to the site partially processed. The growing of vetches/peas suggests the preparation of stews and pottages as well as possibly being a fodder crop (Stone 2006, 11). The presence of woodland species, used for fuel, is indicated with roundwood fragments of maple, alder/hazel, birch, gorse/broom, hawthorn/rowan/crab apple, willow/poplar, cherry and oak being recovered.

POST-MEDIEVAL

The post-medieval features were almost exclusively associated with relatively recent (19th century) property boundaries and associated services (foul sewers, drains and soakaways), together with a number of brick-lined wells in CA trench 7 and particularly in CA trench 9 (fig 6). These features are undoubtedly water and waste-management features associated with the domestic properties fronting the High Street and Mill Mead, which are clearly illustrated on mid-19th century maps (fig 7). Of note is the recutting and re-establishment, in the 19th century, of a major 17th–18th century drainage/property boundary at the back of properties fronting Mill Mead. In its latest phase, the ditch was used as a convenient feature for a foul-sewer pipe trench to carry away the waste from a row of brick-built external toilet bases at the very rear of the gardens of the 19th century properties. The boundary ditch, once deliberately infilled, was also exploited for the foundations of a 19th century brick-built boundary wall to demarcate the rear boundary of the same properties.

The only discrete feature of note from this period was located just to the east of the major property boundary. A pit (figs 6, 10) containing a double horse burial was recorded immediately adjacent to the remains of a substantial post-built fence that demarcated the higher ground on the eastern edge of the boundary ditch, as well as probably an area of waste ground or grazing area to the east. Although containing mostly residual finds, the pit fills also contained 17th–18th century brick fragments. Substantially complete horse

Fig 7 Majestic House, Staines. Extract from tithe map of Staines 1843 (Reproduced by permission of Surrey History Centre)

skeletons of 17th–18th century date are uncommon from British archaeological sites, and they merited detailed study and comparison with the other post-medieval horse skeletons known from Chichester, West Sussex (Taylor & Armitage 2008; Armitage 2010) and Whitby, North Yorkshire (Daulby & Baker 2003). The two horses were male and of comparable stature (*c* 1.5m withers heights) and build, and probably of similar age (14–15 years) at time of death. It is unclear exactly how these two animals met their end, but given the absence of any attempt to remove their hides or dismember them, it seems likely they had been hastily buried together close to where they had died or been killed.

Discussion

Recent writers have highlighted the importance of the palaeotopographic position of Staines in defining the nature and development of human activity and occupation of the area (Crouch & Shanks 1984; McKinley 2004; Jones 2010). Staines Town Island sites mentioned below are shown on figure 8; unless otherwise stated, the information on the various Staines Town Island sites cited below is from Jones (2010).

The Majestic House site, together with many others, shows that Mesolithic people (*c* 10,000–4000 BC) exploited the island margins in the varied and resource-rich riverine landscape at the confluence of the rivers Colne and Thames (fig 1). Nearly all sites in Staines show that these island margins were prone to flooding and more extreme scouring events related to seasonal and more widespread climatic changes. However, the ready access to water for people and animals (both wild, and in later periods, domesticated) for a range of terrestrial and riverine resources, and to the watercourses themselves as avenues of movement and communication, would have made this location highly attractive to human groups of all periods.

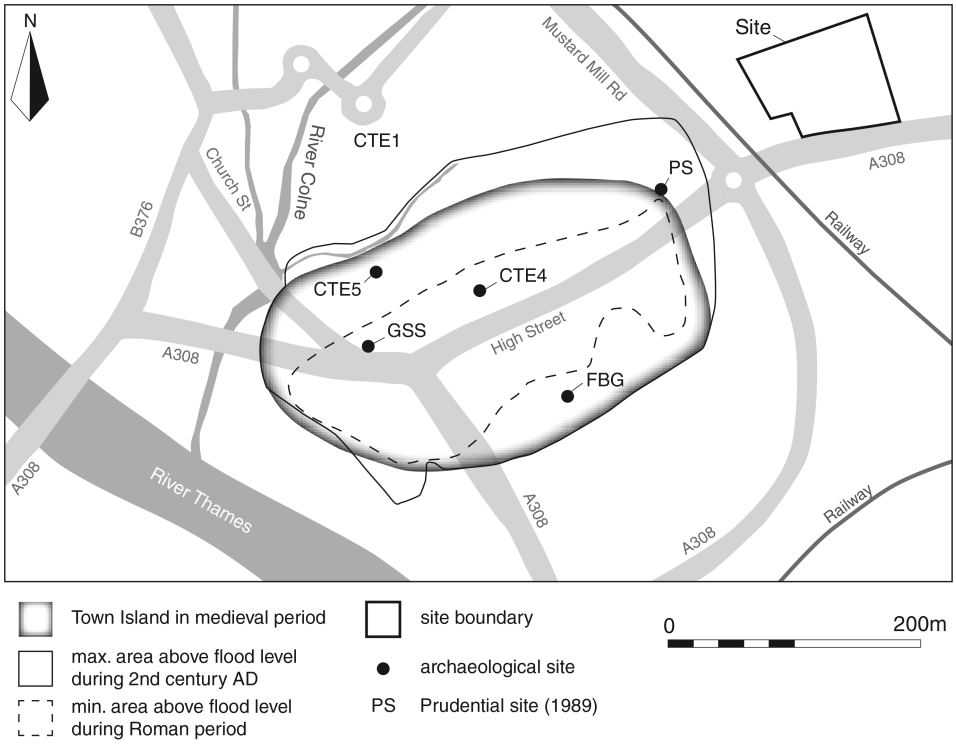

Fig 8 Majestic House, Staines. Town Island sites

The proximity of earlier prehistoric ritual/funerary monuments to rivers is a widespread phenomenon and is reflected in the distribution of barrows and barrow cemeteries along the Thames and its tributaries (Morigi *et al* 2011, 360–72). This includes an example of a Neolithic ring ditch uncovered at Staines Road Farm, Shepperton (Jones 2008), located *c* 3–4km to the south-east of the site. However, there was no evidence to suggest that the Majestic House ring ditch (fig 9) was associated with buried or cremated human remains, although few of the barrows in this region seem to have had a funerary role (Morigi *et al* 2011, 360). The presence of the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age monument suggests that this location was of special significance to the community involved in its construction. It was situated on the north-western edge of the London Road Island, overlooking one of the many river Colne delta channels to the west. It is one of very few features of earlier prehistoric or Neolithic/Bronze Age date yet known from the Staines area. Although *in-situ* features and deposits of earlier and later prehistoric activity have been recorded elsewhere in the Colne Valley, especially in the Uxbridge area (Three Ways Wharf (Lewis 2012); Sanderson Site, Denham (Grant *et al* 2014)) and Heathrow (Framework Archaeology 2006; 2010), the evidence is comparatively poor from Staines.

An undated burnt mound was recorded on the Prudential Site (PS) on Staines Town Island. Such mounds are mostly Bronze Age in date and are often recorded close to or adjacent to watercourses as is a possible example at Denham, 12.5km to the north (Wessex Archaeology 2005). A small number of Bronze Age pits and ditches have been recorded at the FBG, and Central Trading Estate (CTE) sites 4 and 1 (McKinley 2000, 14; McKinley & Howell 1997, 12). A shallow mound was recorded at the GSS Tesco site only 20m to the south of another small part of a bank or prehistoric occupation layer at the CTE5 site (McKinley 2000, 11). Also on Binbury Island, Bronze Age occupations have been recorded at Duncroft (Robertson 1997; 1999) as they have at Church Lammas. A Middle Bronze

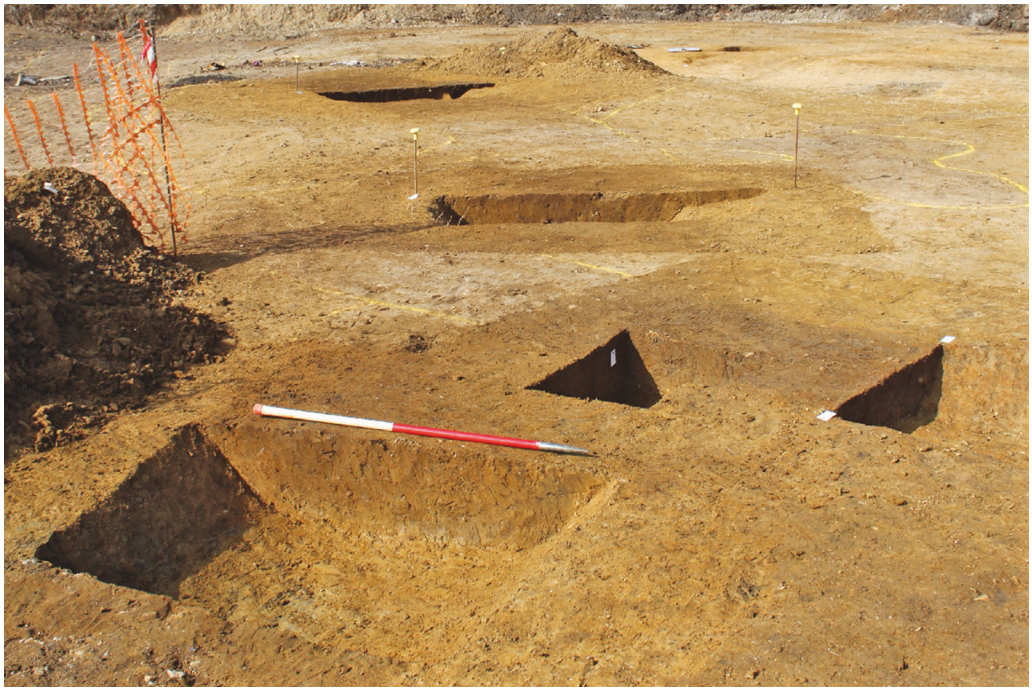

Fig 9 Majestic House, Staines. General view of ring ditch to the north (1m scale)

Age rectilinear enclosure of possible ritual significance or use was also present at Church Lammas (Hayman 1991; Jones 1997).

The lack of evidence for the Iron Age occupation of the site conforms to a pattern reflected in all sites from the Staines islands, particularly for the Middle and Late Iron Age and for prehistory in general. Middle and Later Iron Age material is totally lacking on the Town and London Road Islands and very rare on Binbury Island. Jones (2010, 12–13) proffered possible reasons for this, ranging from increased flooding of the lower Colne during these periods, to sociopolitical factors or the 'sacredness' of the islands at this time.

Only a small number of prehistoric features were recorded at Majestic House; however, the Iron Age features in CA trenches 7 and 9 suggest settlement and agricultural drainage features respectively, and for this part of the Iron Age at least it appears that this north-western edge of the London Road Island was not inundated. The presence of Iron Age pottery in the secondary fill of the ring ditch and overlying alluvial deposits indicates alluviation or inundation of this area in this period. However, significant periods of relative dryness must have occurred for settlement and drainage features to be present.

Widespread and more intensive exploitation and occupation of the Staines islands occurred in the Roman period, when drainage technology was paramount for stable occupation. As with earlier periods, the rich and varied nature of both landscape and available resources, in conjunction with a nearby Thames crossing point, made the Staines islands area significant. The projected route of the major Roman road between London and Silchester through this area also probably contributed to a continuing intensification of activity. The riverine location was highly attractive, but at a cost. There are a number of sites from Staines that show the truncation of Roman deposits or features from riverine erosion and subsequent alluviation, amply displaying the negative aspects of an otherwise advantageous location.

The 1st century AD evidence seems to indicate the prevalence of 'service industries', particularly gravel quarrying (for road metalling; Jones 2010, 18) and ironworking (*ibid*, 15) on

the Town Island. The evidence also indicates that dumping of domestic and industrial waste occurred, some of which was used to infill earlier quarries, and was sometimes succeeded by the construction of ephemeral, post-built and clay-floored structures (*ibid*). The 2nd–3rd century AD occupation of the Majestic House site closely follows the pattern for the town. *Pontibus* in the 2nd century AD (Jones 2010, 29) became a thriving mercantile centre at a convenient stopping place on the road (*ibid*, 19). However, evidence of catastrophic flooding at most sites on the Staines islands in the late 2nd and 3rd centuries AD was followed by a rapid decline, probably beginning in the last few decades of the 2nd century (McKinley 2004, 51; Jones 2010, 29). The finds assemblages from the two alluvial deposits overlying the brickearth, in conjunction with the stratigraphic sequence of the site, suggest that the western and eastern parts of the site were periodically flooded, and alluviation occurred sometime in the prehistoric (Mesolithic to Bronze Age) and Roman periods (2nd–4th centuries AD). Truncation of a ring ditch recorded in CA trench 9 excavation area indicates that episodes of erosion also occurred, probably as a result of this inundation although there is insufficient evidence to rule out anthropogenic processes.

The necessity for drainage to permit agriculture and settlement resulted in the series of 2nd–3rd century AD ditches recorded in CA trench 9 at Majestic House. The sequence followed the irregular Iron Age drainage ditches, but became more regular and perpendicular to the line of the Roman road (to the south) through time. They did not appear to reflect formal planning, although some property boundaries have been recorded on the Town Island (Jones 2010, 41).

The recording of possible inhumation burials on the London Road Island, as well as a *bustum* burial (Hunt *et al* 2002, 80; cf Jones 2010, 42) and the recording of complete pottery vessels, possibly from urned cremation burials (Sharpe 1932, 115; cf Jones 2010, 42) would suggest that this area was essentially used as a cemetery. This was a not uncommon practice for Roman town communities, although the declining prosperity of *Pontibus* in the late Roman period is reflected in the presence of burials of 4th century AD date from within the town itself (McKinley 2004, 51).

The main Roman road that bounds the south side of the site may have bifurcated. There is increasing evidence for a substantial Roman settlement at Kingston upon Thames (Hawkins 1996; cf. Jones 2010, 42), which might suggest that the line and position of the present Kingston Road to the south maintains that of an earlier, minor Roman road. The position of the 2nd century AD settlement enclosure at Majestic House, in close proximity to two likely axes of movement, trade and communication, would have been ideal for passing trade and interaction. Unlike the Town Island, the evidence from the enclosure does not indicate significant craft specialisation, although there were small amounts of bloomery and/or fire-welding waste material in the enclosure ditch. The finds assemblage and those from intra-settlement feature fills in CA trench 3, include relatively abundant domestic and building material waste, although no structural remains of note were found to compare with those on the Town Island at CTE4 (McKinley 2004, 38). The evidence from the site shows Roman activity continued through the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. The lack of 4th century AD material and the increasing levels of alluviation clearly show that this part of the London Road Island was being inundated in the later Roman period – a widespread pattern recorded for the Staines islands area. From the last decades of the 3rd century AD onwards, the overall rise in water levels and/or the frequency of flooding resulted in major landscape and concomitant settlement changes including the contraction of *Pontibus* and a steady decline in its prosperity (Jones 2010, 19–21).

At the Majestic House site there appears to have been a hiatus of activity during the Anglo-Saxon and early medieval periods, and this again follows the pattern of evidence seen at other sites on the Town Island, although scanty evidence for Saxon occupation does survive on the Town and Binbury Islands. It also fits all the recent archaeological investigations along London Road, which also have reflected a gap in occupation from the late Roman period to the 11th century AD (Jones 2010, 45).

The 12th–14th century AD settlement and agricultural/drainage evidence from Majestic House closely follows the patterns of prosperity seen from Staines (Town Island) for the 12th and 13th centuries in particular. Several other medieval sites in the Staines area indicate attempts to control flooding and to undertake land reclamation (Jones 2010, 36). The prosperity of the town undoubtedly benefited from the construction of a bridge across the Thames in the late 12th or early 13th century. The degree of centralised governance on the development of the town may also be reflected in the metalling of the approach road to the bridge, and the archaeological evidence for formal property boundaries running at a right angle from the High Street/London Road (*ibid*, 44).

The medieval boundary and alignments of structural remains at Majestic House clearly illustrate a pattern consistent with the Roman period. Whether this consistency is due to the natural constraints of the palaeotopographic position of the site, its spatial/functional association with the still-used Roman road (High Street) lying to the immediate south, or the visibility of the alignment of earlier features persisting in a later landscape, is difficult to determine. The cutting of the medieval ditch sequence and quarry pits through the late Roman/post-Roman alluvial deposits in the west of the site clearly shows that, although drainage was still required along the north-western edge of the London Road Island, dry land activities could be safely undertaken. The shallowness of the relatively extensive quarry pitting in the south of CA trench 9, still within the natural 'brickearth' overlying the natural gravels, would suggest that clay was being extracted for brick, tile, and possibly pottery manufacture and daub. There is no reason why brick or tile could not have been manufactured in Staines or its hinterland in this period, as it may have been possible in the Roman period (Jones 2010, 27) and the essential resources of wood, water and clay were readily available locally. However, based on the development of the town in the 12th–13th centuries, it is likely that brick- or tile-making activities were small scale and/or for local purposes.

The orientation of medieval beamslots in the west of CA trench 7, and of the structure in CA trench 10, indicates that occupation alignments were slightly to the west of perpendicular with London Road, and therefore do not fit the more formal planning patterns of contemporary boundaries recorded either side of the High Street on Town Island (above). Perhaps the governance of these aspects was less strictly controlled outside the town itself. The structure is set back surprisingly far from London Road (*c* 35m), in an area that would generally be considered the 'backlands' to medieval properties fronting the road. Its location may indicate a semi-industrial or agricultural function, although no artefactual or palaeoenvironmental evidence from the fills of either the structure or the associated well indicate anything other than medieval residential occupation.

The paucity of evidence for the 14th and 15th centuries from Majestic House again conforms to patterns seen for Staines on Town Island. This evidence suggests another marked decline in the fortunes of the town, as well as the whole of England from the mid-14th century onwards (Jones 2010, 45). The severity of this decline was reflected in the abandonment of medieval occupation of the London Road area and its reversion to agricultural land until the 18th century (*ibid*).

The reason for the burial of two similar-sized and similarly-aged horses (fig 10) on the site is not obvious from the remaining bone or the archaeological context. It seems likely that both carcasses were originally intact when buried. The horses would have been comparable in stature to modern racehorses, but of somewhat sturdier, more robust build. Their primary use (riding or haulage for example) is not clear, and they were not interred immediately adjacent to any of the roads that bound the site.

The Kingston Road and London Road junction, the town of Staines and the site are shown on a plan of Staines from *c* 1806 (Jones 2010, fig 1.21). The site comprises open agricultural fields. The 1843 tithe map (fig 7) shows that ribbon development had extended along London Road and Kingston Road in the intervening 37 years, as the town began another period of prosperity, particularly after the building of the 'new' bridge in 1832 and the coming of the railway in 1848.

Fig 10 Majestic House, Staines. Post-medieval double horse burial in CA trench 9 (background scale =1m).

At least three phases of agricultural/drainage ditches in the north-west of the site demonstrate post-medieval activity. They conform to the divisions seen on the site in the Roman and medieval periods, one of which became a major property boundary/drainage ditch from at least the 17th or 18th centuries. Although this does not appear on the 1806 Staines plan, neither do the main watercourses of the Colne delta of the area, many of which were culverted or canalised by the time of mid/late 19th century surveys. However, the large boundary ditch not only overlies a medieval precursor, but also corresponds with a Colne tributary running down the west side of the site when it was part of London Road Farm. Another watercourse bordered the east side of the site. Both of these watercourses are 19th century canalised versions of the many natural, braided streams and substantial channels that would have cut across this area, and are eloquent reminders of the crucially significant ancient riverine context of the site preserved in its palaeotopographic situation.

Endnote

The full typescript report (CA 2014) containing a detailed stratigraphic description of the site can be found on the Cotswold Archaeology website (http://reports.cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk/report/majestic-house-staines-upon-thames (Accessed 10 February 2016)).

The specialist reports and tables listed below are available on the Archaeology Data Service website http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk. Select 'archives'; accept the terms and conditions; select 'Journals and series'; select 'Surrey Archaeological Collections', then 'volume 99'. The file is stored as supplementary material under the title of the article.

Table 2 Pottery summary quantification with fabric concordance
Animal bone evidence: summary and horse burials in pit 1196, by Philip Armitage
Table 3 Articulated horse skeleton
Table 4 Measurements (mm) from the articulated horse skeletons

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