

# ◆ Excavation of medieval burgage plots and further evidence of iron working on land off Pegler Way, Crawley, West Sussex

By Stephen Hammond

with contributions from

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*Excavation at Pegler Way has extended the evidence of medieval burgage plot boundaries recovered from an adjacent site on the Crawley High Street Relief Road and added more evidence of the local disposal of iron-working waste, although again the primary working site has not been identified. A rare find of a wooden scutching knife suggests flax processing. The site appears to have been used only for a short span, from the late 12th to the 14th century.*

## INTRODUCTION

Planning permission (app. No. CR/2004/0501/FUL) had been granted to Allenbuild South East by Crawley Borough Council for the erection of 16 two-bedroom flats, subject to a condition requiring the provision of an archaeological survey prior to the commencement of work. The site was a roughly triangular plot of land located to the northwest of Pegler Way and to the south of The Driftway, Crawley (TQ 2675 3695) (Fig. 1), covering 0.17ha, at approximately 68m above Ordnance Datum. Geological maps (BGS 1972) indicate that the underlying geology is close to a boundary between Weald Clay and Upper Tunbridge Wells Sand mixed with clay. Both sand and clay were revealed during the excavation.

The archaeological potential of the site was recognised from evaluation and excavation carried out by Thames Valley Archaeological Services (TVAS) in 1995 prior to the construction of the adjacent Crawley High Street Relief Road (Saunders 1998). That work revealed deposits of medieval date in association with evidence of iron working. As a result of likely damage to or destruction of extensions of these archaeological deposits during development, a programme of archaeological excavation was requested for the site. This was to follow a specification produced by CPM Environmental Planning and Design (CPM 2004) and a project design prepared by TVAS, both

approved by Mr John Mills, the archaeological adviser to West Sussex County Council. This was in accordance with the Department of the Environment's Planning Policy Guidance *Archaeology and Planning* (DoE 1990) and the Council's policies on archaeology.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Much of the archaeological potential of the development area derived from its location in the core of what was a 13th-century 'new town' (Harris 2008). The town appears to have formed a centre for the medieval Wealden iron industry, as witnessed by the discovery of a number of sites relating to this activity. Cartographic and documentary sources (CPM 2004) suggested iron working in the area, principally the Ifield Tithe map of 1839, although this does not directly relate to the current site. The Tithe map shows two buildings south of the Driftway; one would have been just south of the current site, whilst the other would have stood directly on the route of Pegler Way close to the High Street. Deeds from 1357 onward show a two-acre piece of land labelled as 'tyes', a medieval term for the troughs in which iron ore was washed. There are also records to show that the holding was owned by a family known to be local ironmasters.

Furnace cinder and medieval pottery have been found at a number of locations close to the line of the relief road known as Pegler Way. Several

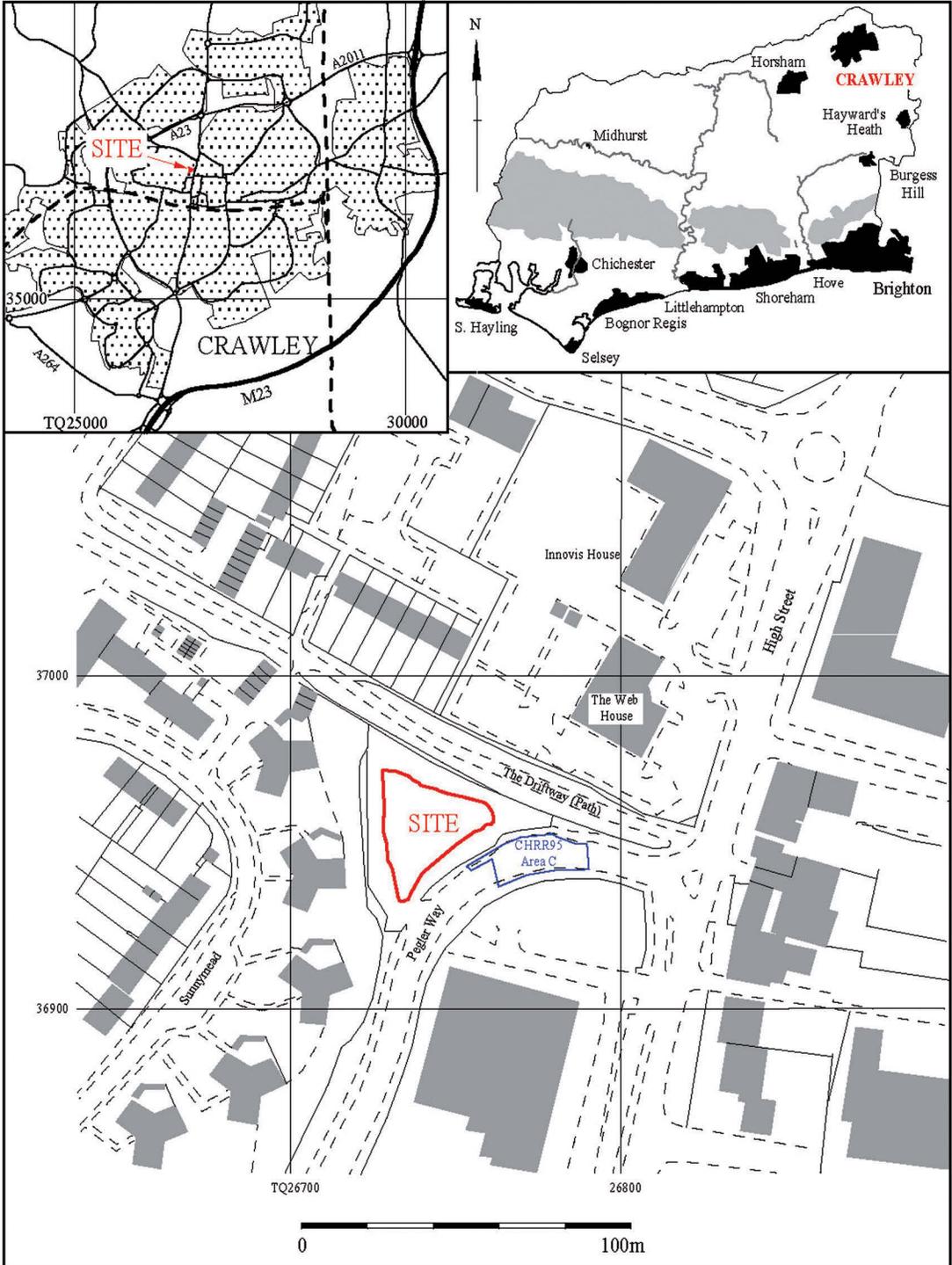


Fig. 1. Site location, also showing Crawley High Street Relief Road (CHRR95), Area C.

excavations have been carried out by TVAS in various locations close to the centre of Crawley to the west of the High Street (Saunders 1998). Of particular relevance was an excavation located adjacent to the current site (CHRR95 Area C; Fig. 1). Most of the archaeological activity on this side of the High Street dates from the middle or late 13th century through to the 15th century, and most of the areas examined displayed at least one stage of the iron-production process.

Excavations further south, at the Old Post Office site, 15–17 High Street (Stevens 1997), revealed a number of medieval features including 13th- to 14th-century pits and associated deposits of iron slag suggesting the proximity of a forge. An area of land now occupied by a leisure park, bounded by London Road and Ifield Road, was excavated to reveal more evidence for the smithing and forging of iron during the second half of the 14th or early 15th century (Cooke 2001).

## METHODOLOGY

As not all of the site was to be affected by intrusive ground work, only part of the whole was excavated. The excavation covered approximately 700m<sup>2</sup> in a single stripped area (Fig. 2). Concrete was broken using a pneumatic breaker before the remaining modern overburden was removed by a 360° mechanical excavator fitted with a toothed bucket. A toothless bucket was employed to expose the uppermost surface of archaeological deposits.

The archaeological deposits included postholes and pits, with possible evidence of quarrying (some containing a quantity of iron slag) and linear gullies. All archaeological deposits were cleaned and excavated by hand. All isolated features within reason were half-sectioned as a minimum, and all solitary features less than 2m across not containing solely iron slag were fully excavated. A minimum of 25% of each linear feature was excavated, including all termini and intersections. A range of context types across the site were sampled for environmental and industrial evidence. Samples were taken from 61 contexts; of these only 16 proved to be securely dated contexts (gully, pit and posthole fills). Some of the undated features were noted to be filled almost exclusively with smelting debris. It is considered that these can be regarded as dated by association.

## PHASE SUMMARY

The excavation uncovered a medieval site (Fig. 2) which appears to have been used for industrial purposes, including the disposal of iron slag and possibly one of the steps in the process of turning flax into linen. The pottery assemblage indicates a very short span of activity on the site, extending at most from the late 12th to the 14th century, and perhaps more restricted within that period. The phasing is based broadly on artefactual and stratigraphic evidence. All deposits revealed either dated to the medieval period or were modern.

### **PHASE 1: EARLY MEDIEVAL (LATE 12TH CENTURY) The burgage plot**

Two gullies with later re-cuts (Fig. 3) approximately 3m apart and parallel to one another (1000 and 1001) (Fig. 2) are thought to represent the continuation of a burgage plot, suggested by the excavation on an adjacent plot (Saunders 1998). Their lines run approximately at right angles to the High Street. This implies either an extremely narrow burgage plot or, perhaps more likely, that the area between the gullies was an alley between two plots. This would mean that only one edge of each of two plots was located, giving a minimum width for the northern plot of 16m, and 15m for the southern (which may have been subdivided), which appear more reasonable sizes. It is also possible that a third gully excavated as slots 142, 143 and 144 is part of another plot boundary. Although the gully appears to terminate in slot 144, its shallow depth could make it appear to be intermittent at this point.

### **PHASE 2: MEDIEVAL (13TH CENTURY) Site industrialisation**

It appears that the land division noted from the previous phase was abandoned in favour of a more industrialised use. This included the processing of flax for textile production and the disposal of slag by-products from the production of iron.

A large pit (128) is thought to be a retting pond used to prepare raw flax as part of the process required to make spinning flax which can then be turned into linen. The full dimensions of this pit could not be ascertained as it partly lay beyond the limit of excavation. A wooden scutching blade (Fig. 4: 5) found in the lowest fill (Fig. 3, context 262), an organic waterlogged deposit, helps to support this conclusion, although unfortunately the



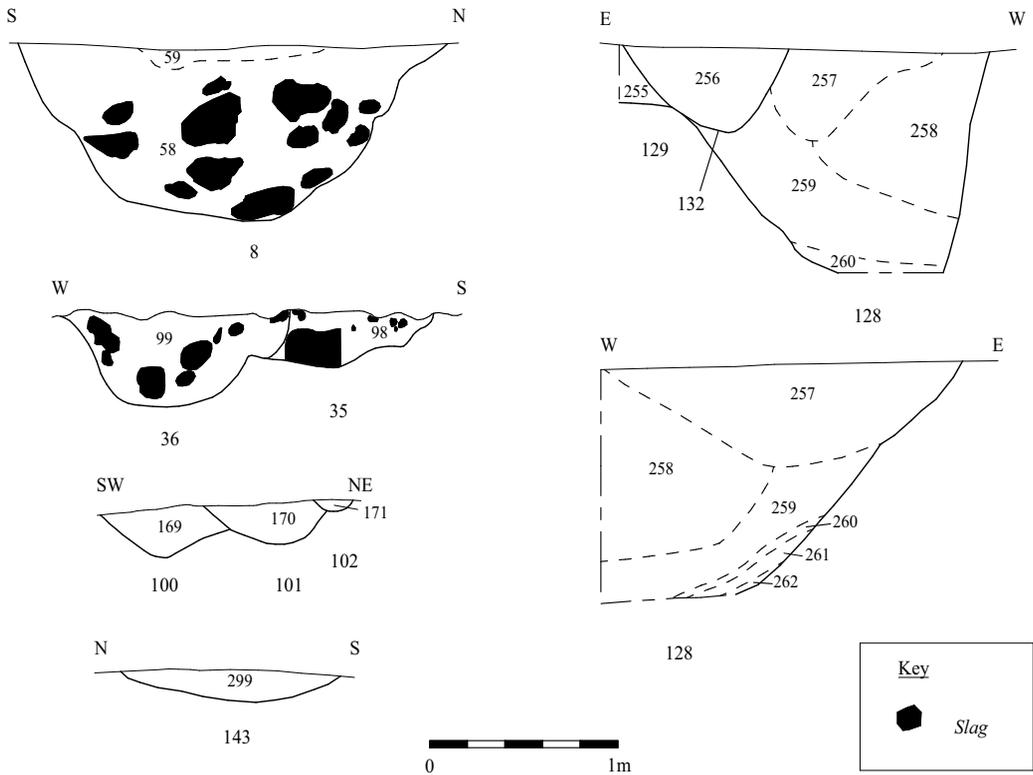


Fig. 3. Selected sections.

waterlogged plant remains from the same deposit contain nothing else to support the hypothesis. They, of course, will relate to the disuse of the pit, rather than its use-life. This pit cut through the earlier burgage plot boundary (gully 118). Although no direct dating or stratigraphic distinction can be made between this feature and the numerous pits containing dumps of slag, it is thought to precede at least some of this activity because of the quantity of slag found in its upper fills (contexts 257 and 258) while this material is not present in any quantity in the lowest fill. A large, disused, partially infilled pond would obviously have made a handy dumping point for disposing of the unwanted by-product (slag).

Various pits spread over the site can be associated with the disposal of iron slag from the same period (a selection of these pits is illustrated in section, Fig. 3). Although the pits can often be assigned more specific dates on the basis of pottery, it is likely that in fact they represent a single continuous series of actions rather than separate phases, and so it would perhaps be artificial to

attempt to separate them into phased groups; it is probably more realistic to treat the pits of Phases 1 and 2 as a single episode.

As is commonly found in Crawley, the quantities of iron metalworking debris (slag, smithing hearth bottom) are modest (no more than 4kg in any one feature) and probably insufficient to indicate metal working on the site itself, but they do imply this activity nearby. No primary evidence of smithing or smelting was present.

#### PHASE 3: MEDIEVAL (LATE 13TH TO 14TH CENTURY)

Two pits (5 and 13/17) located towards the eastern margin of the stripped area represent the last medieval phase on the site before it was deserted; the lack of later medieval and early post-medieval pottery is striking.

#### PHASE 4: EARLY MODERN TO MODERN

Following a long period of abandonment and inactivity, the final phase of site activity includes the digging of various field drains and services and the use of the site as an area of hard standing.

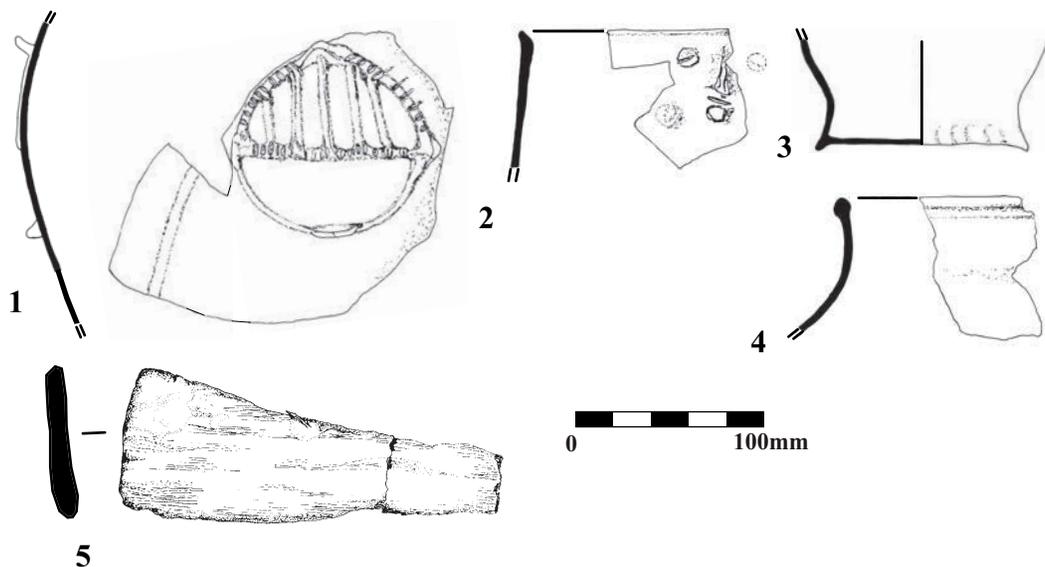


Fig. 4. Pottery (see text for details) and scutching blade from pit 128.

## FINDS

### POTTERY by Paul Blinkhorn

The pottery assemblage comprised 133 sherds with a total weight of 621g (Table 1). The estimated vessel equivalent (EVE), by summation of surviving rimsherd circumference, was 1.26. The entire group was of medieval date, and spanned the period from the mid-12th to the 14th century. It comprised mainly local wares, although a single sherd from an unknown, non-local source was also noted.

The following fabric types were noted:

**F300:** Grey/brown sandy ware, very similar to Surrey fabric Q2, late 12th–13th century (Jones 1998). 31 sherds, 318g, EVE = 0.37.

**F301:** Coarse grey/brown sandy ware, very similar to Surrey fabric GQ2, late 12th–13th century (Jones 1998). 10 sherds, 116g, EVE = 0.11.

**F302:** Ironstone sandy wares, very similar to Surrey fabric IQ, late 11th–12th century (Jones 1998). 1 sherd, 17g.

**F324:** Earlswood-type ware, mid 12th–13th century (Turner 1974). 12 sherds, 94g, EVE = 0.11.

**F325:** Smooth micaceous glazed ware. Regional or foreign import from an unknown, non-local source. 1 sherd, 24g.

**F356:** Surrey Whitewares, 13th–15th century (Pearce and Vince 1988). 5 sherds, 57g, EVE = 0.17.

**F401:** Coarse Border ware, 14th–15th century (Pearce and Vince 1988). 1 sherd, 51g, EVE = 0.16.

One fabric proved somewhat problematic.

**F355:** Buff sandy ware. Some sherds have sparse angular red iron ore up to 2mm. Mainly glazed jugs, some with white slip decoration and others with applied faces and 'buckles'. The ware has affinities with pottery from the Earlswood kilns in Surrey (Surrey fabric OQ: mid-12th–13th century) and with Barton's West Sussex ware

(Barton 1978), particularly the sherd with the applied buckle (Fig. 4: 1). The white-slipped vessels are not typical of the West Sussex tradition, however; Barton mentions only iron-rich slip as being used, although there is a sherd from this site with such decoration. Petrologically, there is no discernible difference between the white-slipped sherds and those with buckle or brown slip decoration. Clearly, there are a number of similar sources for these sherds. Barton (1978) noted that a large assemblage of West Sussex ware came from a site at Horsham (Barton 1978, 94). Given Horsham's proximity to Crawley, it would be very surprising if none of the wares from this site were West Sussex fabric types. Seventy-two sherds, 944g, EVE = 0.45.

The range of fabrics and vessels from this excavation is similar to that of the much larger assemblage from the excavations on the route of the Crawley High Street relief road (Timby 1998). Perhaps most relevant, the pottery from Area C at the latter site, which was located opposite this site, produced a range of wares dated from the 12th–14th centuries, but no late medieval wares, just as on the current site.

Here, the entire assemblage comprised jars (EVE = 0.61), bowls (EVE = 0.17) and jugs (EVE = 0.48), apart from a single example of a handle from a skillet or pipkin. Many of the jugs were highly decorated, with white slip and sgraffito common on both F324 and F355. An applied face and an applied buckle, both possibly from the same vessel, were also noted. A single sherd had a fragment of decoration in an iron-rich slip. A few jug bases were noted in these fabrics. All were thumb-frilled.

Generally, the pottery from the Pegler Way site appears typical of medieval sites in the area, the range of fabrics and vessel forms showing no traits which could differentiate it from domestic assemblages.

Table 1. Pottery occurrence by number and weight (in g) of sherds per context by fabric type.

Cut	Deposit	F300		F301		F302		F324		F325		F355		F356		F401	
		No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt
	U/S			1	5							1	12	2	18		
1	50											1	9				
2	51											1	6				
5	54	1	7	1	17			1	3			13	267			1	51
8	58	1	14									2	17				
11	61											1	3				
123	64	1	3														
13	65											1	31				
14	67	1	9					1	7			2	21				
14	68											1	4				
15	73									1	24	1	3				
17	78											1	1				
18	79			1	2							2	13				
20	83	1	3														
24	84											1	236				
26	88			1	5												
25	89							1	12			1	7				
36	99	1	4	2	59			1	12			1	9				
32	150			1	3			3	18								
40	157	1	2														
41	158											1	5				
42	159							1	4								
104	173					1	17					2	16				
	181											1	14				
115	186											1	2				
117	189											1	12				
129	255	1	5					1	2			2	22				
132	256											1	4	1	8		
128	257	3	42									24	119				
133	263							1	30								
134	264	16	195					1	2								
135	265	3	27					1	4								
137	268			3	25							3	20	1	8		
137	269	1	7									3	44	1	23		
138	272											1	11				
139	273											1	21				
	<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>944</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>51</b>

**Illustrated sherds**

Fig. 4: 1: Pit 5, fill 54. Fabric 355. Bodysherd with applied buckle and vertical strip. Buff fabric with a grey core, glossy dark green glaze on outer surface.

Fig. 4: 2: Pit 5, fill 54. Fabric 355. Rimsherd from jug. Applied, modelled face below rim. Patchy green glaze with some copper-spotting.

Fig. 4: 3: Pit 24, fill 84. Fabric 355. Jug base. Buff fabric with salmon pink core. Thick white slip over whole of outer surface above the base, patchy bright green glaze with copper-spotting.

Fig. 4: 4: Gully 34, fill 264. Fabric 300. Jug rim. Grey fabric with paler inner surface.

**THE SCUTCHING KNIFE** by Maisie Taylor

A wooden paddle object was recovered from the bottom fill (262) of pit 128 (Fig. 4: 5). Wooden paddles of various shapes and sizes are found on sites of all dates and they are usually so badly preserved that little can be said about them. The wooden paddle from Pegler's Way, however, is extremely well preserved and is almost certainly a scutching knife. These objects, which were used in the processing of flax, were

common enough in the past but they rarely survive. It is particularly rare to see one in such good condition (although damaged). The knife is carved from a radially split piece of oak, and is flat. The end of the handle is carved into a circle of about 70mm diameter. The handle itself is 35mm wide and 12mm thick. The blade has rounded shoulders and tapers slightly along its length and width. The cross-section is rectangular with flat, blunt edges. This key characteristic of scutching blades distinguishes them from various paddle-like tools used in food preparation.

**Detail:** Radially split oak (*Quercus* sp.), carved, with an expanded handle. Total length: 485mm; blade: max. width: 140mm; min. width: 93mm; max. thickness: 18mm; min. thickness: 10mm.

When flax is harvested the stems are quite hard and woody. These stems are then soaked and pounded to break them up. Tools used in this part of the process are slightly more common from archaeological contexts because they are heavy. The separation of the fibres from the stalks is a slightly more delicate process and this was apparently done with wooden scutching knives. These flat blades were worked up and down the bundles of stalks against a vertical surface.

#### SLAG by Chris Salter

A moderate quantity of metalworking slag was recovered from the site and the material recovered has been scanned by eye for diagnostic pieces; subsamples totalling approximately 20kg (from nine features) have been examined in more detail (Table 2). The material includes both tap slag and hearth lining, and appears typical of generalised iron production for the area. The quantity of material recovered, in comparison to other iron-producing locations, is modest. The material is clearly not in a primary depositional location and was only recovered from pits, rather than as specific dumps. The slag may simply have been a convenient material to hand for backfilling unwanted pits. Not all the features producing slag can be dated by other means, but it is reasonable to suppose that they all derived from the same process and were broadly contemporary with those that can be dated.

Table 2. Slag.

Cut	Deposit	Type	Phase	Wt (g)
4	53	Pit	1	1806
8	58	Pit		1910
30	96	Pit		2188
109	278	Pit		4000+
120	194	Pit		2118
121	195	Pit		1812
137	267	Pit	2	1040
138	270	Pit	2	2040
139	273	Pit	1	1702

#### OTHER FINDS by Stephen Hammond

Just five pieces of animal bone came from two contexts: the fragmented remains of a cow-sized tooth and a small piece of unidentifiable long bone shaft. A total of four abraded pieces of ceramic building material (70g) were recovered from three contexts. None of these pieces is closely identifiable.

#### CHARRED PLANT REMAINS by Lucy Cramp

Sixty-one bulk soil samples were taken, but many of these are from undated features. It is probable that a number of features which were sampled and which contained almost nothing but slag can be regarded as dated by association. Twenty samples of sediment were floated over a 0.25mm mesh. The flots were then sorted under a low-power microscope for preserved plant material. Preliminary analysis revealed that the majority of samples contained no preserved plant material and did not warrant further analysis. Two samples contained a very small number of carbonised grains or identifiable charcoal. One sample yielded a large number of weed seeds which were preserved by waterlogging. Results are provided in Table 3.

Overall, carbonised plant remains were scarce. A small quantity of oats (*Avena* sp.) was identified in two samples (1 and 3). It was not possible to determine whether these specimens were wild or cultivated, but oats were a common crop during the medieval period. The small number of grains suggests that these remains represent only a background scatter or the reworking of material from elsewhere. No chaff or carbonised weed seeds were present in any pit sample. Few conclusions can be drawn from the small amount of identifiable charcoal which was also recovered from three samples. Oak and beech are likely to have been growing nearby, and their use as a fuel is not unexpected.

The waterlogged material derives from pit 128, which may have been a retting pond, in which a wooden scutching knife was found. However, no remains of flax were recovered from this deposit, and the hypothesis cannot therefore be supported from the environmental evidence. The preserved material from this waterlogged sample contained a vast number of deciduous leaves, in addition to weed seeds and some buds and thorns likely to have derived from nearby scrub. A number of willow buds (*Salix* sp.) were recovered, and blackberry (*Rubus fruticosus*) was represented by numerous thorns and pips. The wetland plant gipsy wort was well represented, and hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), which also inhabits damp environments, was also present. Water plants included water chickweed (*Myosoton aquaticum*) and water pepper (*Polygonum hydropiper*). Arable or disturbed ground weeds included creeping buttercup (*Ranunculus repens*), hedge parsley (*Torilis* sp.), dock (*Rumex obtusifolius*, *acetosella* agg. and *sanguineus* or *conglomeratus*), hemp nettle (*Galeopsis tetrahit* agg.), orache (*Atriplex* sp.), thistle (*Carduus* or *Cirsium* sp.), nipplewort (*Lapsana communis*) and sowthistle (*Sonchus oleraceus* and *asper*). Corn marigold (*Chrysanthemum segetum*) is a cornfield and root vegetable weed which grows on acid soil.

Insect remains also recovered from the waterlogged pit include water beetles such as *Hydrobius fuscipes* which live in stagnant water with leaf litter, and species which inhabit rural, arable environments such as weevil (*Sitona* sp.) and dung beetle (*Aphodius* sp.).

The waterlogged material is therefore indicative of an area of stagnant water in disturbed, arable or waste ground, with nearby scrub, and deciduous trees which were producing the abundant leaf litter.

Table 3. Charred and waterlogged plant remains.

	<b>Sample</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>51</b>
	<b>Cut</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>128</b>
	<b>Deposit</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>162</b>
	<b>Type</b>	<b>Pit</b>	<b>Pit</b>	<b>Pit</b>	<b>Pit</b>	<b>Pit</b>
	<b>Sample volume (litres)</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>10</b>
		<b>No. of items</b>				
<b>Cereal grains (carbonised)</b>						
<i>Avena</i> sp.	Oats	4	1			
Cereal indet.				1		
<b>Charcoal</b>						
<i>Fagus</i> sp.	Beech			+	+	
<i>Quercus</i> sp.	Oak	+				
<b>Weed seeds (waterlogged)</b>						
<i>Ranunculus</i> cf. <i>acris</i>	Meadow buttercup	x				1
<i>Ranunculus</i> cf. <i>repens</i>	Creeping buttercup					8
Cf. <i>Myosoton aquaticum</i>	Water chickweed					6
<i>Stellaria media</i>	Chickweed					11
<i>Atriplex</i> sp.	Orache					24
Cf. <i>Frangula alnus</i>	Alder buckthorn					2
<i>Rubus fruticosus</i> agg. - pips	Blackberry pips					213
<i>Rubus fruticosus</i> agg. – thorns	Blackberry thorns					138
Umbellifers						3
<i>Aethusa cynapium</i>	Fool's parsley					1
<i>Conium maculatum</i>	Hemlock					1
<i>Torilis</i> sp.	Hedge parsley					22
<i>Polygonum aviculare</i> agg.	Knotgrass					1
<i>Polygonum persicaria</i>	Redshank					1
<i>Polygonum hydropiper</i>	Water pepper					9
<i>Rumex acetosella</i> agg.	Sheep's sorrel					1
<i>Rumex obtusifolius</i>	Broad leaved dock					1
<i>Rumex sanguineus</i> or <i>conglomeratus</i>	Red veined or sharp dock					13
<i>Rumex</i> sp.	Dock					1
<i>Urtica dioica</i>	Stinging nettle					1
<i>Salix</i> – buds	Willow buds					17
<i>Lycopus europaeus</i>	Gypsy wort					92
<i>Galeopsis tetrahit</i> agg.	Hemp nettle					2
<i>Carduus</i> or <i>Cirsium</i> sp.	Thistle					6
<i>Lapsana communis</i>	Nipplewort					4
<i>Sonchus oleraceus</i>	Sowthistle					1
<i>Sonchus asper</i>	Sowthistle					33
Cf. <i>Chrysanthemum segetum</i>	Corn marigold					1

## DISCUSSION

The fieldwork carried out on land to the north-west of Pegler Way has been concerned with the excavation of medieval rubbish disposal, related to iron working and textile activity, in an area that had previously been divided up as part of

two burgage plots, probably with an alley between them. Most activity on the site appears to be from the 12th–14th centuries with no further urban land use until the 20th century.

This excavation adds to very similar evidence from the adjacent site and those from around the core of the medieval 'new town' which formed

the centre of the medieval Wealden iron industry. Remarkably little is known in detail about the medieval iron industry (in comparison with pottery or textiles, for instance, and also in contrast to the Iron Age, Roman or post-medieval iron industries), but the debris recovered here is clearly out of context (it does not indicate metalworking directly on this site) and has little to contribute. Nevertheless, the similarity between this site and Area C at site CHRR95, and the apparent coincidence of their dating, suggest they may be elements of a single large complex, reinforcing the conclusion that these activities were not carried out on outlying settlements, but on the margins of the town itself (Saunders 1998). The discovery that at this site at least some of the slag-filled features post-date what must surely be burgage plot boundary ditches adds to the impression that this site may have been on the very edge of settlement, with the implication of contraction southwards, allowing this area to be brought into industrial use. The lack

of features from the 14th century onwards seems to point to yet further contraction of the settled area. This in turn suggests that 12th- and 13th-century Crawley was more extensive than previously thought (and, indeed, than at any time until the relatively recent past). Reasons for its contraction in the 14th century may be related to the effects of the Black Death (as in so many towns), or may be more directly linked to the economics of the Wealden iron industry.

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