

◆ Romano-British activity and medieval clay extraction at Osborne House, Chichester, West Sussex

By Julia Sulikowska

Excavations on land at Osborne House, Chichester revealed evidence for activity dating from the early neolithic to the post-medieval period. Some residual early neolithic worked flint, as well as a few sherds of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery, were recovered from later features. A field boundary ditch provided evidence for Romano-British agricultural activity, and residual Romano-British finds, including pottery, ceramic building material and copper alloy objects, were retrieved from later features. The main focus of activity is related to the clay quarrying of late 12th, 13th and 14th century date, located in an unoccupied waste area within the outskirts of Chichester. It is likely that clay extracted from the site was used for pottery production, such as at the kiln sites near Southgate just north of the site, as it was a common practice to obtain clay in the vicinity of the production site. A number of possible medieval and post-medieval pits, some of which might have been used for rubbish disposal, were also recorded.

INTRODUCTION

Between 2010 and 2011 Wessex Archaeology carried out a programme of archaeological fieldwork comprising trial trench evaluation, excavation and a watching brief (Wessex Archaeology 2010; 2011) prior to the residential redevelopment of land at Osborne House, Stockbridge Road, Chichester.

The site comprised an L-shaped plot of land (centred on SU858040, Fig. 1), formerly occupied by office buildings, located approximately 1.6km to the south of the centre of Chichester, to the east of Stockbridge Road and immediately south of the Chichester Canal Basin. It lies between 7.5m and 10m above Ordnance Datum. The underlying geology comprises Lewes Nodular Chalk Formation which is overlain by superficial Quaternary alluvial deposits comprising gravel, sand and clay (British Geological Survey 1957).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

There is no evidence for prehistoric activity recorded in the immediate surroundings of the site, but an assessment of the historical development of the site, undertaken by West Sussex Archaeology (2007), indicated the potential for Romano-British activity in the vicinity.

The site was situated on the outskirts of the Roman town of *Noviomagus Reginorum*, approximately 500m to the south of the town's south gate (Cunliffe 1971), and pottery, a coin hoard and an inhumation and a cremation burial found during the excavation of the Canal Basin (West Sussex Archaeology 2007) indicated that Romano-British activity extended beyond the town's walls, as far south as the Canal Basin. An undated spear head was also found within the Canal Basin, as indicated on the 1875 Ordnance Survey map.

Following the Norman Conquest, the site remained within the outskirts of the city of Chichester, which developed within the walls of the Roman town and grew in significance during the medieval period (Cunliffe 1971). In the post-medieval period, the Yeakell and Gardner 1778–83 map of Sussex shows the site as a field of what appears to be pasture in the east and an orchard in the west.

The Chichester Canal Basin was constructed between 1819 and 1822 to the north of the site, and the excavated material is thought to have been deposited in the eastern part of the site. The western part of the site, within which the archaeological fieldwork was carried out, was occupied by a timber yard in the latter half of the 19th century.

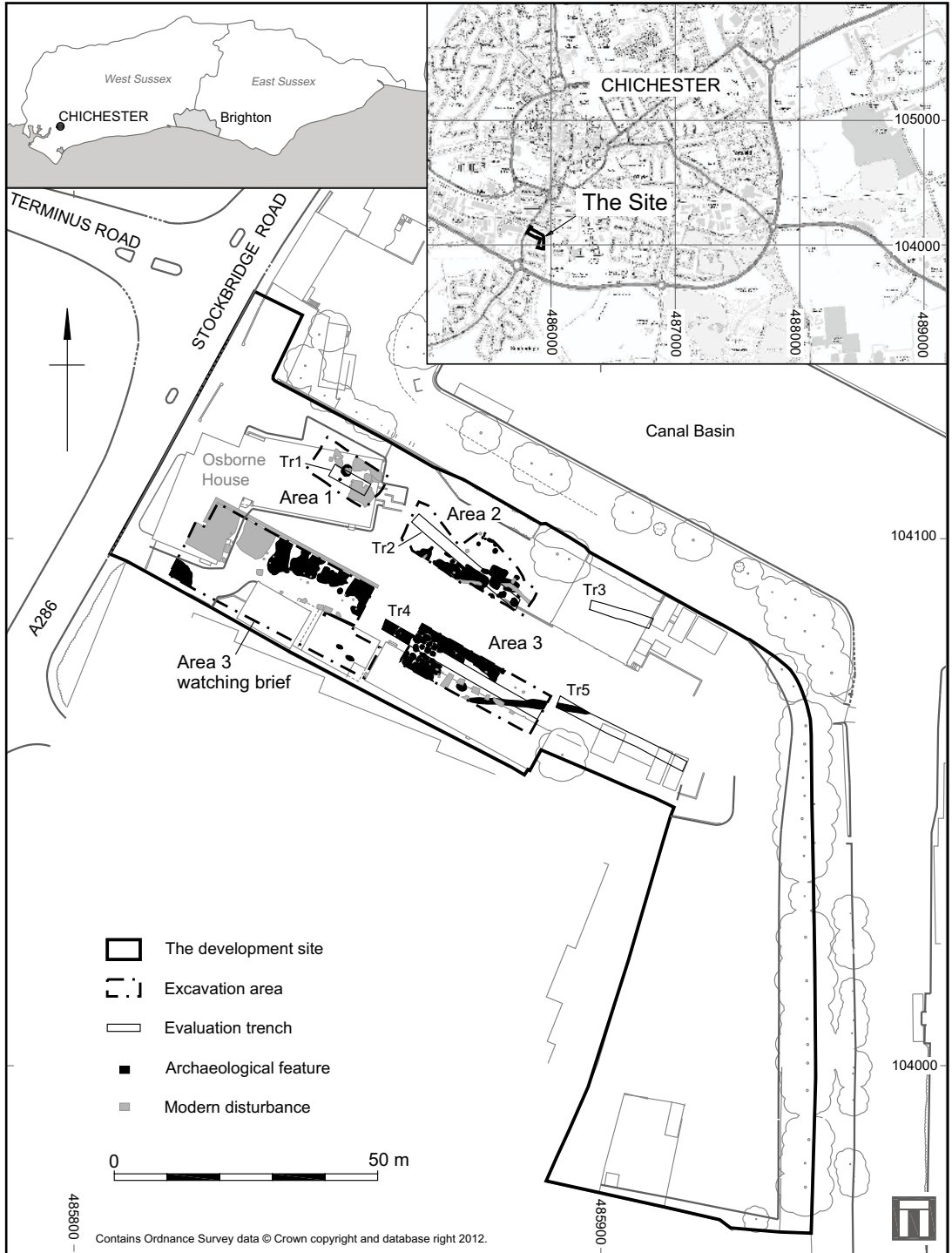


Fig. 1. Site location.

RESULTS

The archaeological evaluation comprised the excavation of five trial trenches in the western part of the site (Wessex Archaeology 2010). Three areas (Areas 1–3) were excavated within the site, with a subsequent watching brief to the north-west of Area 3, giving a total area opened of approximately 0.1ha (Fig. 1).

The recorded deposits, above the natural Chalk and gravels, comprised a thick deposit of brickearth in the central part of the site, overlain by c. 0.5m of subsoil and up to 0.8m of made ground.

PREHISTORIC

The limited evidence for prehistoric activity comprised predominantly residual worked and burnt flint, including early neolithic flakes, blades, cores and part of a leaf-shaped arrowhead, recovered from later features, although a tree-throw hole (2090, Fig. 2) containing diagnostic worked flints may date to the early neolithic period. The flint is considered to have been sourced from the local gravel deposits comprising nodules of varying sizes and quality.

Two small body sherds, weighing 8g, in a sandy fabric with sparse flint inclusions came from medieval pit 3029. These sherds are tentatively dated to Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age.

ROMANO-BRITISH

During the Romano-British period the site probably lay within agricultural fields on the outskirts of the Roman town, and the only feature of this period was an east–west ditch (3104, Fig. 2), up to 1.6m wide and 0.45m deep, probably a field boundary, draining water from the west towards the lower, wet area in the east. The ditch, from which Romano-British pottery was recovered, contained up to three gradually accumulated fills, some laid down in standing water conditions.

Further significant quantities of Romano-British pottery were recovered residually from later features which (as suggested below) may have become incorporated within medieval/post-medieval waste, possibly cleared from a site within Chichester.

The pottery is predominantly in coarse fabrics (greywares and oxidised wares). One sherd of Black Burnished ware from south Dorset and a few sherds of Rowlands Castle ware were identified, and the likelihood is that the remainder are largely, if not

wholly, of local source(s), although this cannot be stated definitively. Apart from the Black Burnished ware sherd from a straight-sided ‘dog dish’, the only coarseware vessel forms present were jars. Sherds of samian and Spanish Dressel 20 amphora were also recovered, as were two sherds of Oxfordshire fineware, one of colour-coated ware and one from a whiteware mortarium. Other Roman finds included fragments of a stone mortar, two copper alloy objects (one a 3rd- or 4th-century armlet fragment made from a ‘double cable’ of twisted strands, and the other a small strip fragment with an expanded, perforated head) and building material including roof tile fragments.

MEDIEVAL

More than 80 pits of probable medieval date were recorded on the site (Fig. 2). Although two of them (pits 2099 and 3062) contained only Romano-British finds, their location among the medieval pits, many of which also contained residual Romano-British material, suggests that they also were probably of medieval date. The location of the medieval pits corresponds with the extent of the brickearth which they rarely penetrated below. None was recorded on the gravel geology. Those in Area 2 broadly followed the extent of brickearth, in a band running north-west to south-east and those in Area 3 occupied the north-west part of the trench, to the west of the natural gravels. In the watching brief area, large pits were recorded on the same north-west to south-east alignment.

Most of the excavated pits are interpreted as clay extraction pits, although they varied considerably in size, the smaller pits probably representing small-scale (single event) quarrying, and the large pits the result of industrial-scale clay extraction. The small pits were steep-sided and sub-oval or sub-square in plan, most (2014, 2039, 3074 and 3108) measuring 0.8m by 1.3m wide and up to 0.25m deep, but some up to 1.7m wide and 0.5m deep (2011, 2029, 3038, 3067 and 3071). They were located at the edges of the quarrying activity, where brickearth deposits were thinnest, and seem to have been dug with no particular arrangement, often intercutting, perhaps indicating infrequent, non-systematic extraction. One pit (3069), which was 0.8m deep and penetrated the underlying deposits (sand/clay with chalk), may have been dug for some other purpose.

The large sub-rectangular pits, at least 3m in

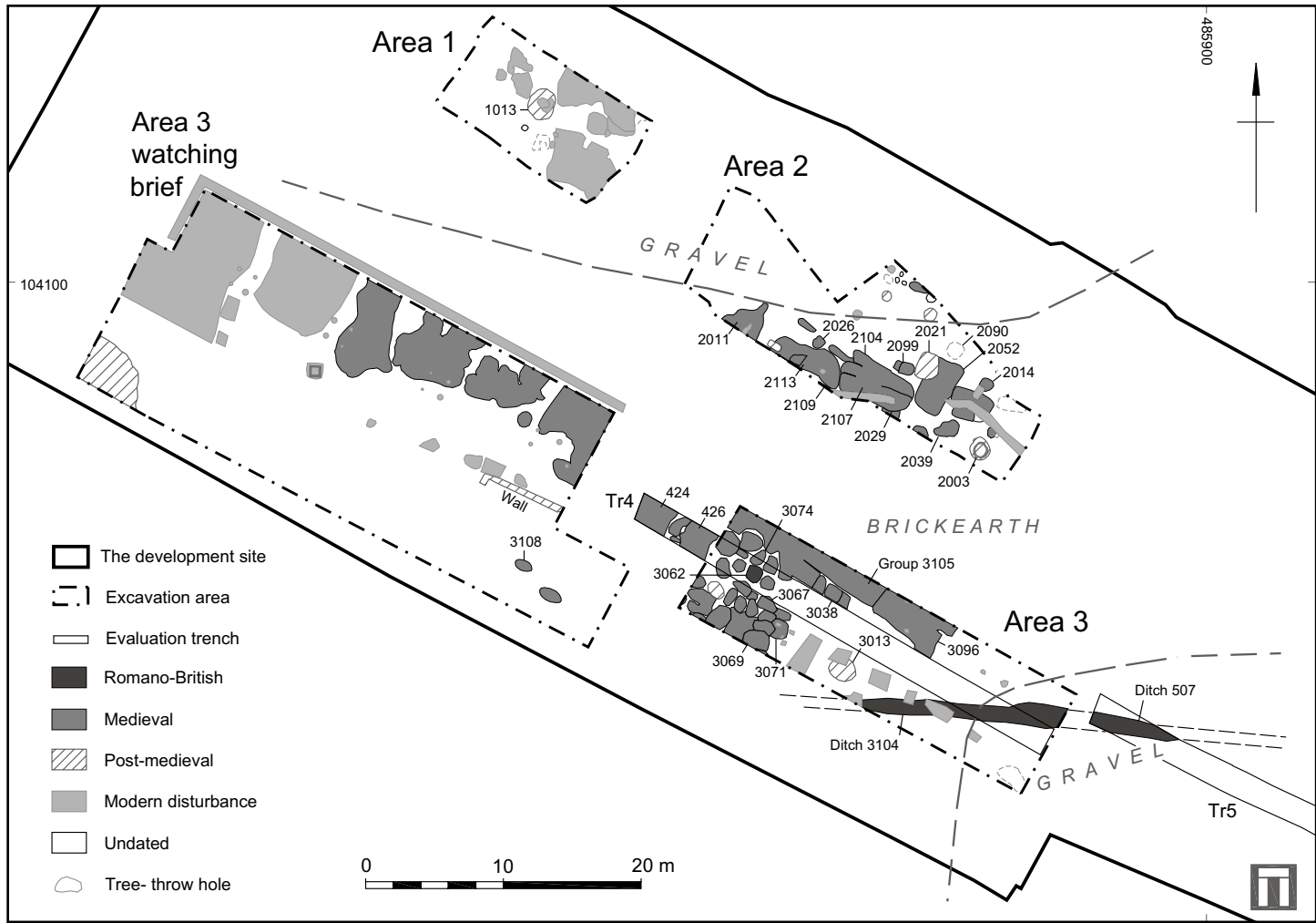


Fig. 2. Excavation area showing archaeological features.

length, aligned north-west/south-east and up to 0.7m deep with steep to vertical sides, were dug into thick deposits of clay along the southwest edge of Area 2 (2026, 2104, 2107, 2109 and 2113), the north-east edge of Area 3 (pits 3096 and 3105) and, possibly, in Trench 4 (424 and 426) and alongside the north-eastern edge of the watching brief area.

The pits contained from one to four different fills that accumulated gradually over a period of time, and contained residual finds of prehistoric, Romano-British and medieval date. Once dug, the pits appear to have been left to silt up naturally, the lower fills of all deeper features accumulating under standing water conditions, reflecting the area's high water table. Some of the pits in Area 3 were sealed by a layer of mid-grey brown silt/clay/loam (3050), interpreted as a silt that accumulated into a hollow in the landscape created by the extensive quarrying.

Apart from two pottery sherds in calcareous (shelly) fabrics, all the medieval pottery from the pits consisted of flint-tempered, sandy/flint-tempered and sandy wares. Flint-tempered wares appear in the Saxo-Norman period in Chichester, made, for example, in the 11th kiln at Chapel Street (Down 1981, 190–2) but continued in use beyond the early medieval period; they were still being produced in the 13th century, as seen at the Orchard Street and Southgate kilns, although better fired and by this stage augmented by sandier wares (Barton 1971, 157–8; Down 1978, 10–16). Finer sandy wares appeared in the late 13th century, produced by the kilns at Orchard Street, Southgate and Eastgate (Adcocks) (Down 1978, 5–6). The absence here of any clearly diagnostic 'early' features, such as spouted pitchers, or stamped decoration, and the predominance of more carefully moulded rim profiles, suggest that this assemblage may contain little or nothing that predates the late 12th century, and probably extends through the 13th century, and perhaps into the 14th century. Few contexts produced only flint-tempered and/or shelly wares, and even in these instances quantities are so small that confident assignation of an early date on fabric grounds is problematic.

The identifiable vessel forms are almost entirely confined to jars, with occasional decoration of applied, thumbled strips, although the occurrence of glazed sherds (two with applied decoration)

suggests that these were also used for jugs. Other finds included worked and burnt flint, ceramic building material, shell, fired clay, iron nails and animal bone (mostly cattle and sheep/goat) with evidence for butchery and gnawing.

One pit (2011) was rich in palaeoenvironmental evidence and its fills produced charred remains of free-threshing wheat and barley, as well as marine shell and fish bone in significantly higher amounts than in other pits, perhaps indicating its secondary use for occasional rubbish disposal by those extracting the clay, including the remains of locally sourced seafood.

The plant remains from the pits allow reconstruction of the surrounding landscape. They included free-threshing wheat and barley, indicating arable cultivation, as well as seeds of oats/brome grass, vetch/wild pea, cleavers and campions and hazelnut shell. These common arable weeds are often found in hedges surrounding fields or in scrub. Together, they suggest an agricultural landscape that may have become overgrown before being used for clay extraction.

Pit 2052, a sub-rectangular pit in the centre of Area 2 measuring 4m by 2.4m and 0.5m deep, was also used, after initial silting up, as a rubbish pit, its backfills containing large quantities of Romano-British and medieval pottery and ceramic building material, together with residual worked flints and great quantities of marine shell and fishbone. The Romano-British material may be residual, but perhaps it was dumped into the pit together with the medieval finds following clearance of a site in Chichester that contained both medieval and earlier remains.

POST-MEDIEVAL

Six pits contained post-medieval material. Three of them were large, deep, sub-circular features which may have been waterholes, re-used for refuse disposal. They may have been originally of medieval date, but continued to be backfilled into the post-medieval period. They are not shown on the 1875 Ordnance Survey map, which shows the site occupied by a timber yard.

Sub-oval pit 1013 contained pottery, bricks and worked stone ranging from Romano-British to post-medieval date, including four fragments of a Romano-British mortar made of shelly limestone with a probable source in the Upper

Jurassic Portlandian rocks of the Isle of Purbeck, Dorset (e.g. Cinder Bed). Sub-oval pit 2021 was also re-used for rubbish disposal, its final backfill containing Romano-British and medieval pottery and tile, post-medieval bricks, large quantities of burnt and worked flint, and animal bone. The backfilled deposits in sub-circular pit 3013 contained Roman, medieval and post-medieval pottery, together with the ribs and vertebrae of a horse. Here, too, the Romano-British finds are likely to be residual.

A late 19th-century well, 2003, in the south corner of Area 2 had a brick lining just over 1m in diameter, comprising courses of brick stretchers with little bonding material present, which would have allowed water to seep through the lining (Bob Davis *pers. comm.*). The well was located near a pump within the timber yard, as shown on the 1875 Ordnance Survey map, which indicates that it was probably associated with the yard's operation.

DISCUSSION

The limited evidence from the site fits in with the known prehistoric occupation on the West Sussex coastal plain.

The available evidence indicates that during the Romano-British period the site lay within the rural environs of the town, rubbish from which was used to manure the surrounding fields.

The clay extraction activities, which took place between the late 12th and the 14th century, were associated with an area of unoccupied waste ground. The size of the quarry pits ranged from small to large features, depending on the thickness of the clay deposits and, perhaps, on the purpose of extraction (small-scale to industrial-scale activity). The extraction activities recorded within the site are comparable with the known medieval practices (McCarthy and Brooks 1988). Late medieval clay quarrying, for production of pottery (and tile), was often undertaken in areas such as moor, waste or common and various shapes and sizes of clay pits are mentioned in historical sources. They included small, circular pits and narrow long ditches, recorded at Harlow, Essex (McCarthy and Brooks 1988). Flooding of abandoned clay pits and hazards associated with it were often the subject of complaint, although potters rarely backfilled the features. The evidence from the excavations corresponds with these common medieval

practices. The character of the fills of the pits clearly indicates that there was standing water in these features prior to abandonment.

It was most economic for the potter to obtain the clay in the vicinity of the production site, preferably within a 1km radius of the kilns (McCarthy and Brooks 1988). Numerous quarry pits, and part of a pottery kiln (of double opposed flue updraught type) dated between 1218 and 1262 cal AD, were excavated on the north side of Avenue de Chartres, close to its junction with Southgate, less than 400m north of the site (Robinson and Valentin 2000; Linford 2000). Other evidence of medieval pottery production in the vicinity of Southgate (Down 1978) includes three kilns identified on the site of the new Magistrates Court, the excavated updraught kiln also dated to the 13th century, and the fact that the pottery was of sandy or flint-tempered fabrics similar to the wares identified within the site. Another kiln, which operated between the mid-12th and the mid-14th century, was located to the west of Southgate (Down 1981). This indicates that there was a minor pottery production centre in the area of Southgate in the 12th to 14th century, and it is likely that clay was obtained from nearby pits, such as those at Osborne House.

A number of other pits, some of which might have been re-used for rubbish disposal, were also recorded. They are thought to have been of medieval date, but they continued in use in the post-medieval period. A late 19th century brick-lined well, associated with the timber yard, was also recorded.

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The archive is currently stored at the offices of Wessex Archaeology under the project codes 74440-1; it will in due course be deposited with Chichester District Museum under the accession code CHCDM: 2010.44.

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