

Archaeological investigations at 29–35 High Street, Crawley, West Sussex

By Simon Stevens

A small-scale archaeological excavation was undertaken at 29–35 High Street, Crawley following an evaluation of the site by trial-trenching. A small group of medieval and post-medieval features was uncovered including, significantly, the remains of an ironworking ore roasting hearth. Other features included pits and the remains of a number of late post-medieval buildings.

INTRODUCTION

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Archaeology South-East (ASE), the contracts division of the UCL Institute of Archaeology, was commissioned by Rolfe Judd Architecture Ltd on behalf of their client Derreb Ltd to undertake an archaeological evaluation and subsequent excavation at the site. Planning permission had been granted by Crawley Borough Council for the demolition of existing buildings and the redevelopment at 29–35 High Street, Crawley, West Sussex. Owing to the archaeologically sensitive nature of the area, and after consultation with West Sussex County Council (Crawley Borough Council's advisers on archaeological issues), a planning condition was attached to the consent requiring archaeological work at the site prior to redevelopment.

The site lies to the south of the historic centre of Crawley, at the junction of High Street and Haslett Avenue West (formerly Three Bridges Road) at a height of c. 67m AOD (NGR 526770 136510) (Fig. 1). The wall of the churchyard of St John the Baptist forms much of the eastern boundary of the site. According to the British Geological Survey 1: 50,000 map of the area (Sheet 302, Horsham), the underlying geology at the site is Upper Tunbridge Wells Sand, with Weald Clay to the south.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Documentary evidence for the town suggests that it was an important centre in the medieval period, with its wealth based on the iron industry. Following the grant of a market charter to Michael de Poynings in 1202/3 (Salzman 1940, 145), the settlement apparently prospered and by the 14th century there were tanners, cloth-weavers and ironworkers in the town (Gardiner 1997).

A number of archaeological sites have been excavated in Crawley in recent years (Fig. 2).

Archaeological investigations carried out along the line of the Crawley High Street Relief Road in 1995 uncovered various medieval features (Saunders 1998). Excavations at the Old Post Office, in the same year and on the opposite side of Haslett Avenue West from the current site, revealed 13th to 14th century cess and rubbish pits and the remains of a house probably dating from the 16th century (Stevens 1997). Further evaluation in the area at the corner of High Street and Pegler Way (26–36 High Street) also uncovered medieval material (ASE 1999), and recent work has uncovered medieval features in Church Walk, including ditches which appear to mark plot boundaries running at a right angle to the High Street frontage (ASE 2008). An evaluation at 1a–3a High Street (ASE 2007) and a watching brief at 34 High Street (ASE 1998) showed that both sites had been heavily truncated and that no significant archaeological deposits had survived at those locations.

Previous excavation work has uncovered remains of *in situ* medieval ironworking hearths. Archaeomagnetic dating suggested a late 14th to early 15th century date for the features uncovered at the London Road site (Cooke 2001). A group of medieval pits containing ironworking slag were also discovered at the junction of Kilnmead and High Street in 1998 (Stevens 2006). Similarly, pits containing iron working slag have been discovered during excavations at Pegler Way (Hammond 2005).

However, the largest archaeological excavation in the town to date was at the Asda development site to the west and south-west of the current site, and provided abundant evidence of both medieval domestic and industrial activity including two *in situ* medieval ironworking hearths/furnaces (Stevens 2008).



Fig. 1. Site location plan.

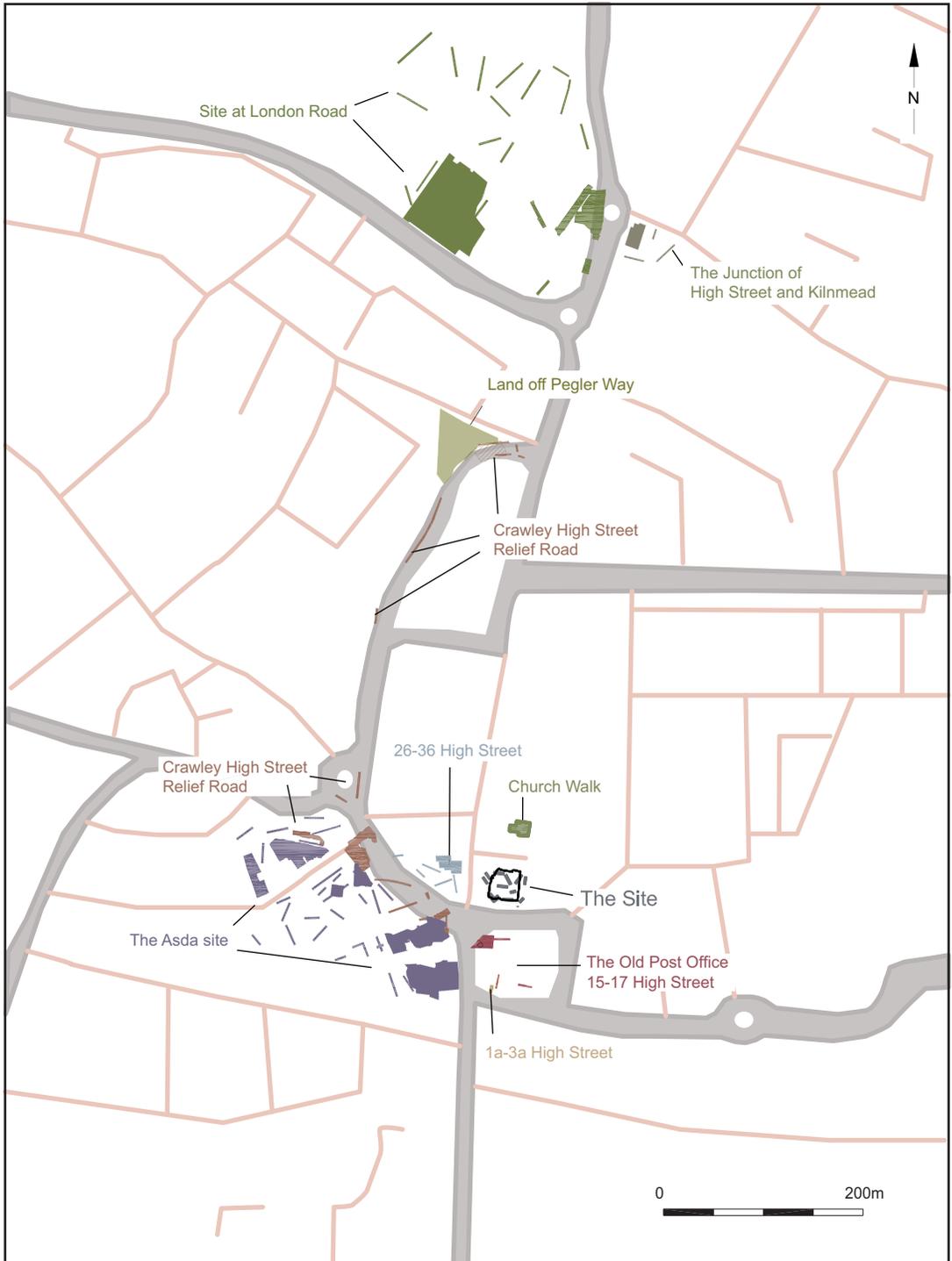


Fig. 2. Plan showing sites excavated in the vicinity.

THE SITE

INTRODUCTION

Trial-trenching at the site in October 2009 revealed a number of significant archaeological features (ASE 2009) requiring further excavation work, which was undertaken during January and early February 2010. Mechanical stripping of the overburden revealed the remains of brick- and stone-built structures, most of which could be dated to the late post-medieval period through examination of cartographic sources. The masonry was recorded and then removed to allow investigation of the underlying archaeological deposits, most of which showed significant truncation, some from the buildings and others from more recently laid services (Fig. 3).

Period 1: Saxo-Norman (c. 1050–c. 1225)

A single sherd of residual pottery of Saxo-Norman date was recovered from a later feature. Even though material of this period has been encountered in the vicinity at both the Old Post Office and Asda sites (Stevens 1997; 2008), it is still a rare find for Crawley.

Period 2, phase 1: medieval (c. 1225–c. 1350)

In keeping with the results at several of the other recent excavations within the town, the current site uncovered a number of medieval pits and post-holes. It is assumed that the features are associated with medieval properties fronting on to the High Street, and lay in the rear of the tenements.

The majority of the features were situated in the central area of the site, which appeared less truncated than other areas (Fig. 3). Four pits, [178], [223], [249] and [250], were assigned to this phase by modest assemblages of medieval pottery from their fills. Pit [266] was assigned to this phase on the basis of a stratigraphic relationship with a later feature (pit [264]) and similarity of fill to the other demonstrable medieval features (it might equally be of period 2, phase 2 date and could not be fully excavated).

The pottery assemblages were dominated by Earlswood (Turner 1974) and Limpsfield wares (Prendergast 1974), as seen at other sites in Crawley at this period (Barber 1997; Timby 1998; Mephram 2001). These wares appear to have gradually been replaced by increasing quantities of West Sussex Ware and Surrey whitewares during the 14th century (Barber 1997), although the

exact chronology of the transition is uncertain. As seen before, the town was supplied during this period by well-established, competent potteries, all of which were within easy reach of its market influence; the nearest, at Earlswood, unsurprisingly supplied the largest quantity at this time.

The metallurgical remains from these pits is dominated by material associated with iron smelting (4021g), in the form of dense smelting slag, including distinctive tap slag as well as furnace cinder. The bulk of the material comes from a single pit [249] (3311g smelting slag), and the other pits produced relatively small quantities. There is a total absence of hammer-scale associated with iron smithing in this phase. Pits of this period containing varying quantities of iron slag but little domestic waste are well-known from the town, although the exact reasons for the initial pit digging is unclear. It may be that areas of more clay-rich geology were dug for raw material for furnace building or other uses.

Other artefacts of this date included Upper Tunbridge Wells sandstone roofing slabs (usually residual in later contexts). This somewhat friable stone is not as suitable for roofing as the more common compacted Horsham stone, but its use for roofing has been noted in the town during the mid 13–14th centuries (Barber 2008a). The animal bone assemblage contained fragments of cattle, sheep, pig and horse. Both juvenile and adult animals were present, and there was some evidence of butchery.

The only other features assigned to this date were found further to the north. Post-holes [254] and [269], which were both c. 0.30m in diameter and 0.15m deep, contained only one sherd of medieval pottery each, and their inclusion within this phase is tentative. The evidence is too limited to suggest what type of structure they formed.

Period 2, phase 2: medieval (c. 1350–c. 1550)

Introduction

In this phase, the majority of features were pits and small pits or post-holes but, as well as evidence of domestic refuse disposal, there was clear evidence for ironworking in the form of a hearth/furnace, and a separate group of pits almost completely filled with smelting slag, located at opposite ends of the site (Fig. 3).

Features of this date have proved rare on sites excavated in Sussex in recent years, especially

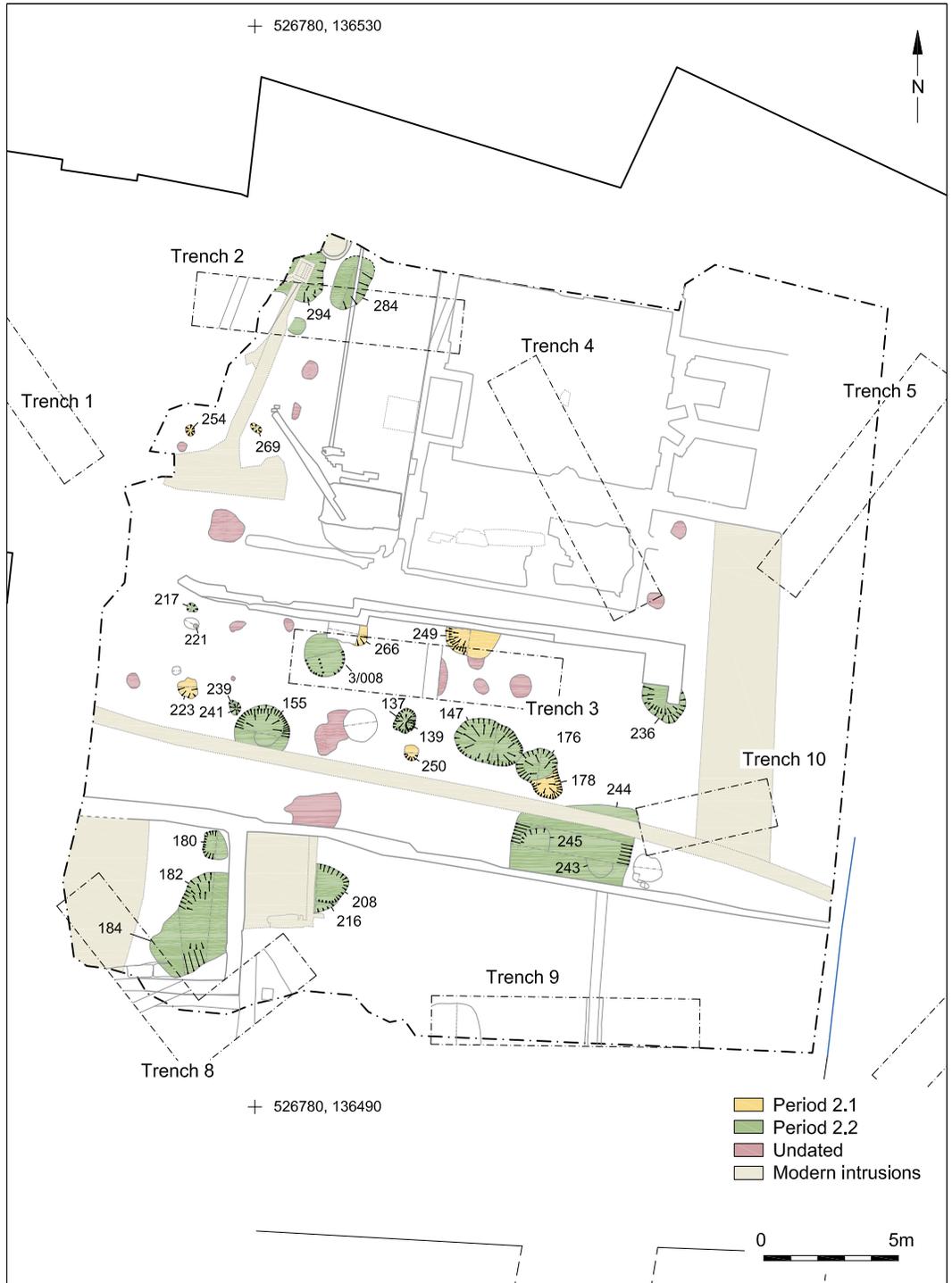


Fig. 3. Site plan of all features.

on the coast, for reasons which remain unclear (Stevens 2004, 91), but have been encountered in Crawley, including at the Asda site (Fig. 2; Stevens 2008). Pottery of this period had been less well represented in ceramic assemblages from Crawley (Barber 1997; Timby 1998; Mephram 2001), but the Asda site excavations have established a fabric series and produced a few useful groups (Barber 2008b; 2008c). The current assemblage has been of use in confirming the fabrics in use at this time, although the small context groups do not allow for a reliable refinement of the fabric ratios during the period. Recovered pottery included examples of West Sussex Ware, local hard-fired sandy Transitional wares (including glazed redwares; Barton 1979), Surrey Whitewares (Pearce and Vince 1988), Tudor Green-type ware and some imported Raeren stoneware (Hurst *et al.* 1986).

Pits and post-holes

Most of the surviving features of this date were located in the central, less truncated, area of the site. They included four substantial pits [3/008] (encountered during the evaluation), [147], [176] and [236], which varied in diameter between 1.4m and 2.4m, but with little variation in depth between 0.39m and 0.45m.

Some smaller pit or possible post-hole features were present, [137], [139], [217], [221], [239] and [241], (which varied in diameter between 0.21m and 0.85m and between 0.80m and 0.20m in depth). Pit [137] also contained Hastings Beds ferruginous sandstone, considered to be a deposit of discarded iron ore.

A cluster of intercutting features all containing pottery also dated to this phase; pits [243], [244] and [245]. Pit [244] was the largest and was over 2m in diameter but only 0.35m in depth, and the others ranged from 0.20m–0.80m in depth and diameter. Pits [243] and [245] contained single episodes of infilling, whilst pit [244], unusually for the site, had four silty clay fills. Pit [243] contained the largest assemblage of Horsham stone roofing slabs found at the site and a block of Reigate stone. Pits were also encountered in the southern part of the site (pits [208] and [216]).

The fills of all of these features contained domestic refuse with small assemblages of finds. The animal bone assemblage contained fragments of cattle, sheep, pig, hare and domestic chicken. Age data suggest that both adult and juveniles

animals were present, and some of the cattle and sheep bones showed signs of butchery.

The pit features located in the centre of the excavated area produced the richest and most diverse assemblages of wood charcoal found at the site. The most frequently identified taxa are oak, beech, birch and hazel, all of which could have been managed to provide good fuel through the use of coppicing. Unlike the assemblages from the ore roasting hearth (see below), the heterogeneous assemblages present in these pits are more likely to result from dumps of wood charcoal and other refuse deriving from several original sources. Small quantities of holly and Maloideae taxa were also recorded, although they do not appear to have been as important as the other, larger trees recorded above.

All the taxa recorded could have been used for purposes other than fuel. Hazel, for example, is suitable for wattle, while oak, beech and ash may have been used for other structural elements of the site. The growth form of holly can vary from small shrubs to large trees and, although it is a relatively unusual wood type in archaeological charcoal assemblages, Mabey (1979) notes that it is a good fuel, burning well when green.

The nature of the assemblages supports the view that these pits contain detritus from everyday life in the vicinity, and were either deliberately excavated refuse pits or features infilled with domestic waste but of an unknown original function (Stevens 2006).

Features associated with iron working

A number of other pits, dated to this phase by small pottery assemblages, were of a conspicuously different character. Pits [155], [176], [180], [182] and [184] all contained high concentrations of iron smelting slag, and pit [184] also produced a piece of furnace lining. These features varied in diameter between 0.80m and 2.0m, and in depth between 0.33m and 0.59m. It is worth noting that there is no evidence that these features were directly associated with the iron smelting process, as there was very little charcoal or any evidence of *in situ* burning.

These features were markedly similar in character to those encountered at the Kilnmead site, at the opposite end of the High Street (Fig. 2, and Stevens 2006), and must be considered strongly indicative of the location of a smelting furnace in

the vicinity. This may have been lost when Three Bridges Road (now Haslett Avenue West) was widened in the 1960s (Hygate 1997, 197), or may lie within the boundaries of the development site to the south of the excavation area.

An iron ore roasting hearth

Unequivocal evidence for ironworking was recorded in the shape of a hearth, [294], encountered during the evaluation and re-examined during the open area excavation. The hearth had been heavily truncated by a modern drain and an undated brick-lined well, which negated the possibility of archaeomagnetic dating. Pottery recovered suggested a date within this phase in the latter half of the 15th century.

The location of the feature was clear, despite the truncation, because of the presence of a 'halo' of natural clay, [293], baked to a reddish orange colour around it. However, the exact nature and size of the hearth were difficult to ascertain, given the truncation. It consisted of a dark brown deposit, context [295], which was overlain by a grey baked clay lining, [296], in turn overlain by dark grey fill, context [297], which contained charcoal derived predominantly from ash trees. The entire feature sat in a hollow of indeterminate size, [294]. An adjacent feature consisted of a patch of similarly baked *in situ* clay [2/012], but with no associated overlying deposits. The hearth fills [295] and [296] produced 54g of magnetic roasted ore fines but no other smelting or smithing slag, suggesting that the feature was associated with ore roasting, and as such was the only feature uncovered on site directly linked to the iron-making process.

This feature also contained the largest group of fired clay recovered during the excavation, a total of 668 fragments. These fragments are likely to be derived from the collapsed daub (super-) structure of the feature.

The assemblage of taxa recorded in the charcoal assemblage was restricted to ash, with individual fragments of beech, hazel and a small fragment thought to be heather. Homogeneity within the assemblage suggests that very little reworking occurred in these deposits. This charcoal may derive from a single event for which ash was specifically selected, and the assemblage may be directly related to the use of this feature. A more diverse range of taxa would be anticipated if the feature contained waste material derived

from several activities. Ash wood burns well even when green and, although not apparent in the archaeological assemblage, coppiced ash trees could have provided a sustainable source of fuel for the industrial activities undertaken at the site.

The main hearth feature, [294], appeared remarkably similar in character and size to a hearth excavated and recorded at the Asda site in 2002. That hearth was dated to the medieval period (1040–1260 cal AD) on the basis of a C14 radiocarbon date (Beta-198015, 870±40 BP; Stevens 2008, 119–120). Archaeomagnetic dating gave a late 14th to early 15th century date for a similar feature at the London Road site (Cooke 2001, 156), which is broadly comparable to the date suggested by the pottery for feature [294]. The function of the Asda and London Road site features remains uncertain, although the current hearth [294] has good evidence that it was used for roasting iron ore, a process carried out prior to smelting to increase efficiency in the furnace (Hodgkinson 2008, 15-7).

Period 3, phase 1: early post medieval (c. 1550–c. 1750)

The inclusion of this phase is based on the presence of a small number of sherds of pottery and pieces of clay pipe, either intrusive in earlier features or residual in later ones, or from the overburden. The occurrence of this material is clearly indicative of activity on the site, which is supported by limited documentary sources.

Period 3, phase 2: late post medieval (post 1750)

The information dating to this phase has come from the results of the archaeological investigations at the site and from research of cartographic, photographic and written sources. The pottery (mostly recovered from the overburden) includes a range of domestic wares probably representing activity between c. 1825 and 1925.

Only a handful of pits and post-holes dating to this phase were identified, all in the central part of the site (Fig. 4). Nineteenth-century material was recovered from pits [9/009], [150] and [163] (all c.1m in diameter, but of varying depths), and from smaller pits/post-holes [153], [167], [169], [219], [226] (which were in the diameter range of 0.30m to 0.50m, with depths that varied between 0.40m and 0.10m) and larger, only partly excavated, pit [264]. The assemblage of material from 19th-century pit [150] was perhaps the

most enlightening, as it contained a range of domestic pottery, construction materials and a noticeable concentration of iron smithing slag, a plano-convex forge bottom and fuel ash slag. A piece of Horsham stone with a worn upper face from flooring was also recovered from this feature. Although probably residual, this piece had traces of hammer-scale adhering to its upper face, suggesting that it may originally have formed part of a workshop floor. Additional smithing slag, including another forge bottom, was recovered from pit [9/010] (evaluation) strongly indicating the presence of a blacksmith at this time, which is supported by documentary sources which are clear on the presence of a blacksmiths on the High Street frontage of the current site from the 17th century until the 1870s (Nadine Hygate *pers. comm.*).

Given the survival of such documentary sources and cartographic evidence, it has been possible to interpret the surviving masonry remains encountered at the site. Although buildings fronting on to the High Street recorded on the Tithe Map of 1839 (Figure 7) and the later Ordnance Survey maps were not detected during the archaeological work owing to truncation, elements of structures to the rear were uncovered and recorded.

Remains of a family bakery

The most striking group of brick-built masonry remains encountered at the site were those of the cluster of buildings and associated courtyard surface in the northern part of the examined area, clearly the remains of the long-lived commercial complex known to have occupied the site (Fig. 4). The main element, (Structure A), is clearly visible on the Tithe map of 1839, consisting of a substantial square building with a smaller building to the rear (Structure B) (Fig. 5). This building incorporated ovens (Hearths C and D) and a feature of uncertain origin (Feature E), and constitutes the below-ground remains of the Gravely/Hill family bakery business. The excavated structure represents the surviving elements of a former barn converted for use as a bakery in the 19th century. The family house occupied the truncated High Street frontage with a passage allowing access for vehicles to the courtyard and bakery for loading and unloading, initially by horse-drawn vehicles but later by the company vans. The business is known to have

continued in operation at the site into the 1950s (Nadine Hygate *pers. comm.*)

Other masonry remains

The other masonry remains found at the site consisted of boundary walls running east to west across the site, and evidence of buildings in the southern portion of the examined area. A wall on the alignment of brick-built Wall G is marked on the Tithe map (Fig. 5), and on subsequent Ordnance Survey maps (not illustrated). Wall H is shown for the first time in 1897. Wall I appears for the first time in 1910 as an element of a row of buildings fronting on to Three Bridges Road (now Haslett Avenue West).

Structures J and K are present on the Tithe Map of 1839 (Fig. 5) but are more clearly shown in 1897 and on subsequent Ordnance Survey maps of the site. It is possible that the short length of stone wall encountered in evaluation trench 8, [8/004] (Wall L), is also part of this building, subsequently rebuilt in brick.

DISCUSSION

The information recovered during the excavation of the site allows some conclusions to be drawn about the development of this part of the town over time. The absence of discernible boundaries of any antiquity may support the argument that this part of town was laid out later than the plots to the north, and on a more *ad hoc* basis (Harris 2008, 26). Nevertheless, the presence of defined early boundaries to the north at Church Walk (ASE 2008) and medieval boundary ditches at the Asda site to the west (Stevens 2008) may indicate that the development is more complex, with some laying out of plots at an early stage at the southern end of the town.

Clearly the site had been divided in the past, given the differing characters of the deposits in the different parts of the site, and the fact that the central area appears to have been an open space in which pits were dug dating back to the first phase of discernible activity, either by deliberate design or by opportune use of an otherwise unused area. In either case, it appears likely that the site had been sub-divided by undetectable historic boundaries, such as hedging, or stake and hurdle fences, arguably as early as the 13th century.

Unfortunately, the character of the buildings

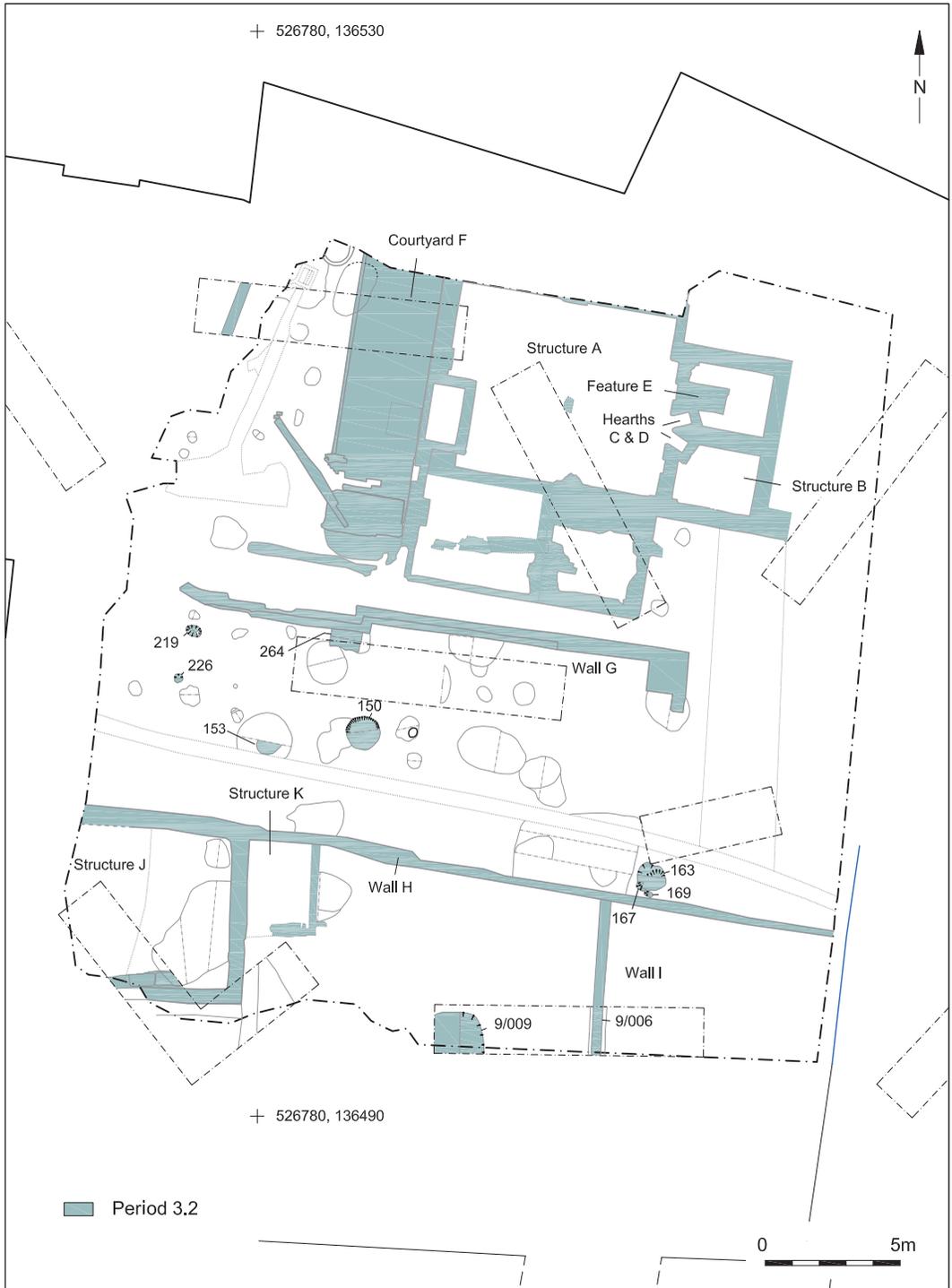


Fig. 4. Plan of period 3, phase 2 features.

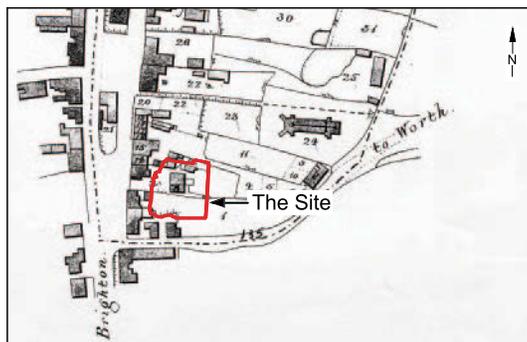


Fig. 5. 1839 Crawley Tithe Map showing structure A.

fronting on to the High Street at this early date could not be ascertained. Although the presence of building stone of quality may hint at a nearby building of status during the medieval period, it may derive from the nearby church of St John. There are, however, numerous examples of the high quality of residences built by later ironmasters (Hodgkinson 2008, 97–103), but little is known about the town houses of Crawley at this time. It is, perhaps, also possible that the recovery of this block of masonry and the associated Horsham stone roofing materials hint at the lifestyle that could be enjoyed from the profits of the iron industry. Little more can be said regarding this point, since in reality the material evidence is poor and limited.

Crawley's association with this industry was clearly attested by the presence of smelting slag in the medieval rubbish pits, which strongly hinted at the location of nearby primary iron production. This is comparable to the sites excavated to the north at Pegler Way (Hammond 2005) and London Road (Stevens 2006), which also revealed good evidence of the disposal of slag in pits, and highlighted the fact that ironworking was undertaken at various locations in Crawley, with no obvious evidence of zoning into industrial and/or domestic areas. The evidence for a nearby smelting furnace was clearer in period 2, phase 2 (medieval), from the slag-filled pits in the southern part of the current site, and there was also the more tangible evidence of ore roasting within the boundaries of the site itself.

Ore roasting was a significant step in the process of ironworking in the Weald, and was undertaken in Sussex from Roman times through

into the post-medieval period, as evidenced by the discovery of the distinctive roasted ore at numerous sites. However, discoveries of ore roasting hearths have been rare (Hodgkinson 2008). It is thought that the ore was heated on an open fire (or in the case of the current site, in a lined hearth) to drive off moisture and break it into more manageable and friable pieces. The process also changed the ore chemically from a carbonate to an oxide, further facilitating the subsequent smelting process (Hodgkinson 2008).

The change evident at the site in the post-medieval period was undoubtedly representative of a wide-scale transformation of Crawley at that time. With the introduction of water-powered forges in the 14th and 15th centuries, and the appearance of the blast furnace in the Weald by 1500, production sites moved away from the riverless town (Cleere and Crossley 1995, 104–17).

The subsequent economic decline was represented by the drastically reduced level of material culture recovered from the site during the early post-medieval period. However, habitation and industry evidently did continue, and the presence of a blacksmiths on the High Street frontage from at least the 17th century into the 1870s (Hygate 2003, 146–9) offers evidence of Crawley's continuing function as a local centre of activity. There was also evidence of other later post-medieval occupation in the form of the remains of the bakery, domestic and industrial waste, as well as photographic evidence of other local businesses. For example, a photograph taken in the 1920s shows that a plot on the opposite side of the road was occupied by a building firm called 'Bartley and Ward' (*'Sanitary Work a Speciality'*) (Goldsmith 1991, No. 52; Nadine Hygate, *pers. comm.*). This is indicative of the residential and commercial role that Crawley continues to offer to this day, although arguably now somewhat distanced from this immediate part of the town.

Acknowledgements

The input of John Mills, WSCC, at all stages of the project is gratefully acknowledged. Thanks are also due to all those who worked at the site in often testing conditions: Gemma Ayton, Nicola Bettley, Rob Cole, Grace Flood, Karine Le Hégarat, Maggie Henderson and Paula Howell, and to the specialists whose work has been integrated into the text: Luke Barber, Sarah Porteus, Elke Raemen and Lucy Allott. Nadine Hygate (formerly of Crawley Museum) commented on a draft of this report, and the text incorporates many of her comments on 19th- and 20th-century Crawley. The illustrations were

prepared by Justin Russell, Fiona Griffin and Hannah Faux. Thanks are also due to the on-site contractors from Japanese Knotweed Solutions Ltd for their co-operation. The project was funded by Derreb Ltd.

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