

Excavation of a Romano-British site in West Street, Ewell

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Introduction

This is an account of the archaeological investigation that was undertaken during April/May 1985 at 2–16 West Street, Ewell by Rob Poulton and Martin O'Connell on behalf of the Conservation and Archaeology Section, Planning Department, Surrey County Council. The work was occasioned by the redevelopment of the site for housing by the Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, who not only made it possible for investigation to take place but also generously funded the operation. In this context it would be fitting to acknowledge the help and co-operation afforded by the officers of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council and by the architects, E C Harris & Partners, and the contractors, Arthur Wait Ltd, throughout the construction phase. Thanks are also due to Steve Nelson who first brought the site to our attention.

Background

As a result of excavation and research, much of it undertaken by the Nonsuch Antiquarian Society, it is now clear that a Roman settlement existed at Ewell, straddling Stane Street, the Roman road which linked Chichester with London. A number of buildings have been identified on either side of Stane Street and the area covered by the settlement has been estimated at 6ha (Sheldon & Schaaf 1978, 64). Frere classifies Ewell as a small town (1975, 4–7) but the description 'roadside village' (Sheldon & Schaaf 1978, 63) seems more appropriate on available evidence. There is no indication of deliberate planning or of an organised street pattern, and no official buildings have been recognised. Titford (1969, 90–2) has postulated that Ewell was the site of the nearest *mansio* or posting station to London, although Margary (1949, 46) considered Merton to be the logical site for this station. Whatever its precise status the settlement would most probably have performed the role of a small market centre serving the surrounding countryside; certainly the immediate area is relatively rich in Roman material, including a villa at Beddington (Adkins & Adkins 1983; 1984) and another at Ashtead which was associated with a tile works (Lowther 1927; 1929; 1930).

Earlier views that the settlement was enclosed can now be discarded (*cf* Bird 1987), and this is emphasised by recent work at the rear of 26 High Street (Nelson 1983) which uncovered part of a Roman building outside the postulated enclosure ditch. In view of the proximity of this site to 2–16 West Street, further evidence of Roman occupation was expected, and was indeed forthcoming when construction work began at the former Engineering Works in April 1985.

The archaeological investigation

SITE WATCHING

Site watching was undertaken during the early stages of building construction and as a result of this it soon became clear that little archaeological material survived. A chalk cellar and well, probably post-medieval and aligned to West Street, were however found towards the south-eastern part of the site but no satisfactory dating evidence was obtained. Towards the rear of the properties the excavation of two soakaways by the contractors resulted in the discovery of Roman material and the two pits (Trenches 1 and 2) were subsequently investigated.

THE EXCAVATION (for details of contexts see microfiche 2-3)

Part of a cobbled surface (3) of Roman date was detected in the northern section (AA) of Trench 1 although unfortunately much of it had been removed by the contractors. It was possible, however, to follow the same feature in Trench 3 where it could be properly investigated.

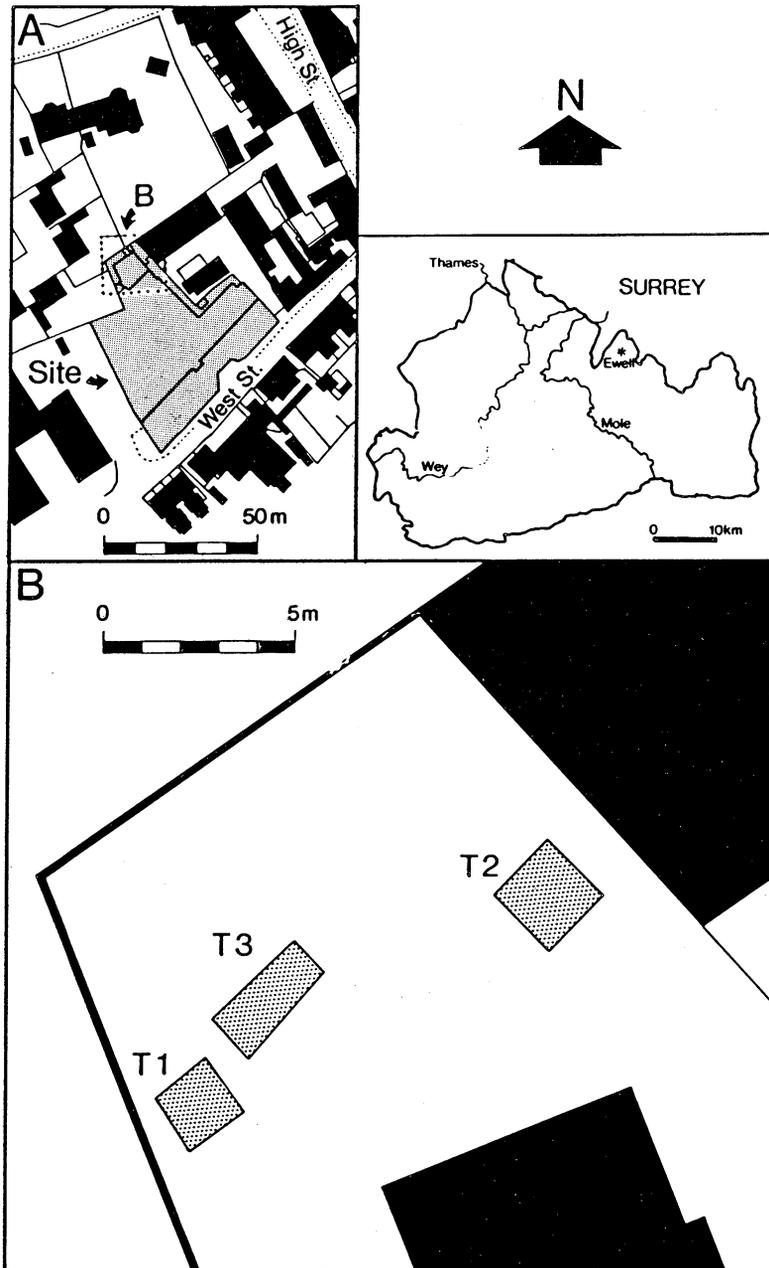


Fig 1. Ewell, West Street. Site location

The cobbled surface

The surface (3) consisted of a layer of flint, chalk and pebbles (flint), overlying dark grey clayey soil containing large amounts of small chalk fragments (4)/(12). The artefactual material obtained suggested a mid to later second century date for the feature. No other evidence of occupation was found and (4)/(12) sealed the natural subsoil which consisted of Upper Chalk (5) partly overlain by sterile brown clayey soil (6). No Roman features or finds came from Trench 2 although one layer (9) bore a superficial resemblance to (4)/(12)

Later history of the site

The cobbled surface was sealed by a layer (10)/(11) which contained exclusively Roman material but whose nature remained uncertain. Overlying (10)/(11) was a layer of disturbed subsoil (2) which produced post-medieval building debris.

Later activity on the site (13)–(18) belonged to the modern development of Ewell.

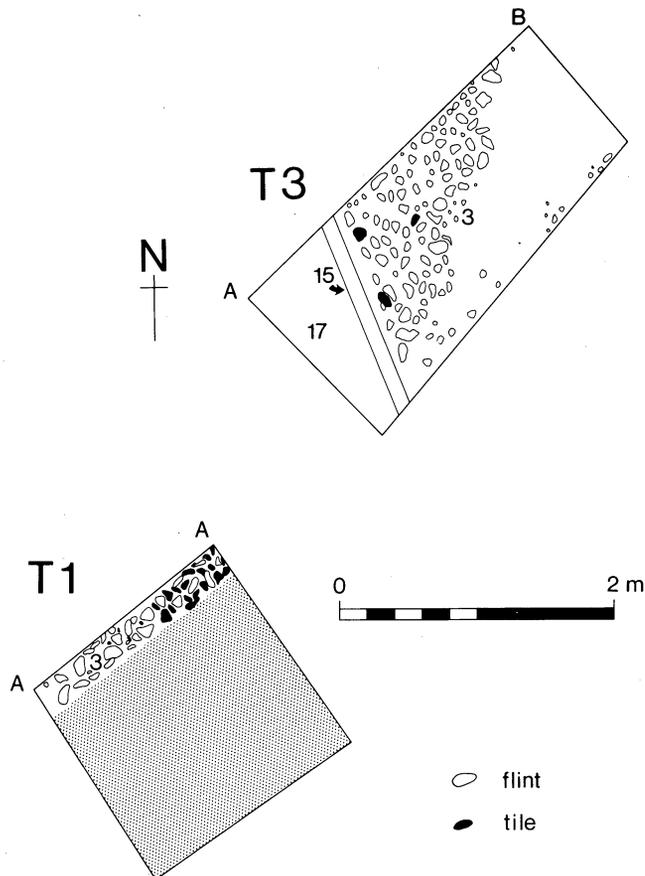


Fig 2. Ewell, West Street. Plan of trenches 1 and 3, showing the cobbled surface. The shaded area in trench 1 was excavated below the level of the cobbled surface (3) without archaeological observation. For details of the numbered layers see the catalogue of features (Microfiche 2-3). The letters (A-A, A-B) refer to the drawn sections on fig 3

The finds

THE POTTERY by Joanna Bird (for the catalogue see microfiche 3-6)

Much of the pottery from the site is not individually closely dateable, but it does indicate a date range from the late 1st or turn of the 2nd century to the 3rd century and perhaps into the 4th century. Imported wares comprise single sherds of South and East Gaulish samian and some 30 pieces of one or more Dressel 20 oil amphorae from southern Spain. Other wares include three sherds of Dorset black-burnished ware (BB1), a mortarium from the Verulamium region and a second one perhaps from there or from Kent, and two sherds of other black-burnished (BB2) wares. The bulk of the pottery however, is from the Alice Holt potteries, comprising some 64 individual sherds.

An unstratified sherd of a 13th century cooking pot was also found.

THE TILE by John Leveson Gower (for the catalogue see microfiche 6-8)

Twenty-six fragments of Roman tile were present, 19 from context 3 and seven (five joining) from context 10. The types of tile represented were *tegulae* and flat tiles probably used for flooring or as *pilae* tiles. No box flue tiles were present and only one very small fragment that could possibly be from an *imbrex*.

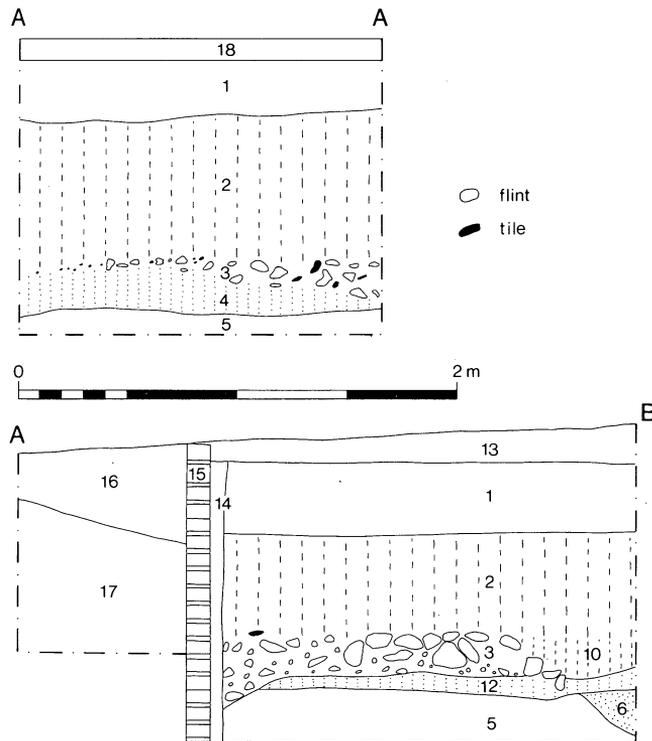


Fig 3. Ewell, West Street. Sections along the north-west faces of trenches 1 and 3

The sample is so small that it is not possible to come to any firm conclusions about the nature of the site based on the extant tile. No detailed fabric analysis has been carried out but visual inspection suggests, as expected, that the Ashted tiler complex was the origin of the Ewell tile. A detailed study of the Ashted Roman tile industry is long overdue (an interim report can be found in Hampton 1977).

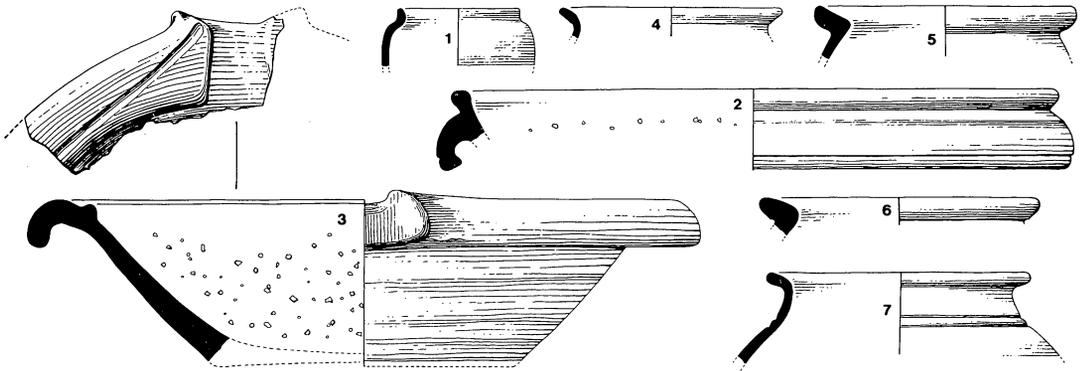


Fig 4. Ewell, West Street. Roman pottery. 1: hand made, possibly Alice Holt, jar, later 1st, perhaps to early 2nd century; 2: rim of mortarium, cAD 150–200; 3: rim and spout of mortarium, Verulamium region, cAD 100–140; 4: jar/beaker, probably 2nd century; 5: jar, probably 2nd century; 6: jar, Alice Holt, probably 2nd century; 7: jar, Alice Holt, later 1st-mid 2nd century (1:4)

THE ANIMAL BONE by Geraldine Done (for the catalogue see microfiche 8)

Fifteen fragments of horse, ox, sheep/goat and pig were recovered from the Roman levels. They are of little significance, with the possible exception of a horse metacarpal which had been burnt.

THE SMALL FINDS by Joanna Bird (for the catalogue see microfiche 8–9)

The small finds, all of probably Roman date, include an unidentifiable fragment of bronze, an iron nail, a probable bone hairpin and an irregular tessera of opaque mid-blue glass.

Conclusions

The very small area investigated in detail makes it extremely difficult to draw conclusions. The evidence is, perhaps, just sufficient to suggest that in the mid to late 2nd century (though possibly both earlier and later – see the pottery report) this area was part of a yard with a cobbled surface, which, judging by the quantity of pottery recovered, cannot have been very far from a building or midden. The site further extends the known distribution of Roman settlement in the Ewell area. It is to be hoped that in the near future someone will find the time and energy to prepare a full report on the Roman occupation of Ewell.

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