

## **Further excavations at the former War Memorial Hospital, Carshalton**

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*Two phases of occupation dating to the Middle Iron Age and the transition between the Late Iron Age and Roman periods were revealed at the former War Memorial Hospital in Carshalton, which had previously been the subject of an excavation in 2008. The features that may be associated with a farmstead or small settlement consisted of a number of pits including grain storage pits, which were backfilled with ritual items such as placed animal carcasses, human longbones and fragments of pottery.*

### **Introduction**

The archaeological potential of the former War Memorial Hospital at Carshalton had first been demonstrated in 2008 (figs 1 and 2). The excavation of a small area measuring 14 x 7m showed that a dense cluster of pits dating to the Middle Iron Age and early Romano-British periods extended across the south-eastern part of the site (TQ 2794 6395; site code ASW 08). Some of these were particularly substantial; their size and belled shape were consistent with similar features dated to these periods, which have been interpreted as grain storage silos. Although the size of the excavation area was quite limited it appeared likely that a farmstead or small settlement had been located close to the site, which is located on a flat chalk hilltop that overlooks the upper Wandle valley to the north (Killock 2012).

Analogous sites are known at Ewell, which lies to the west of Carshalton and Keston and Farningham to the east. Excavations carried out at the former Queen Mary's Hospital, Carshalton by Wessex Archaeology have demonstrated that a settlement of some size existed there in the Late Iron Age to early Roman period. This had been preceded by a substantial settlement dating to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age (Hunnisett 2011). Recent excavations have clearly demonstrated that the chalk ridge that runs roughly east–west through this area and defines the southern limit of the London Basin appears to have been an attractive location for prehistoric farmers. Although the later phases of occupation span the very late Iron Age and early Roman periods the systems of farming being adopted, as characterised by the use of grain storage pits, appear to be very similar to those practised in the Middle Iron Age.

Further evaluation work was carried out at the War Memorial Hospital by Archaeology South-East in 2009 (fig 2). Pits dating to the Middle Iron Age and early Roman periods were found in the trenches located to the east of the hospital (Dawkes 2009). These features were very similar in size, form and date to those found in the 2008 excavations. The latter were located c 25m to the south of the trial trenches excavated in 2009.

The open-area excavation (CST 12) conducted by Pre-Construct Archaeology in the winter of 2012 comprised a single irregularly-shaped trench measuring c 372m<sup>2</sup> (fig 2). The area excavated covered the location of a new car park that will serve the residential development. This area also encompassed most of the location of the eastern wing of the hospital, which had been demolished immediately prior to the start of the excavation. A concentration of pits was evident in the eastern half of the trench, the majority of which dated to the Middle Iron Age, although some were excavated in the decades before and after the Roman invasion of Britain.

### **Excavation results**

One particularly notable difference between the excavation previously undertaken at Ashcombe House (fig 2) and that carried out in 2012 concerned the underlying geology.



Fig 1 Carshalton War Memorial Hospital. Site location, geology and Roman roads. (© Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd 2014)

The earlier excavation had encountered weathered chalk immediately below the topsoil. A substantial depth of subsoil capped the chalk across the entire area of the 2012 excavation. The composition of this deposit varied considerably, from yellowish-brown sandy silt to a reddish-brown mixture predominantly formed of silt and clay. The surface of the solid chalk undulated throughout the area investigated, but it was clear from the sections exposed in the pits that in places the subsoil reached depths of 0.60–0.80m. The hill slopes naturally from south to north and from east to west. The highest levels recorded on the surface of the subsoil were 59.02m OD in the south-east corner of the trench, 58.37m OD in the south-west, 58.25m OD in the north-west and 58.68m OD in the north-east.

### Middle Iron Age

The 2012 excavation demonstrated a considerably more pronounced Middle Iron Age presence than did the previous work carried out at Ashcombe House, where the Middle Iron Age was principally represented by four large pits and an east–west ditch (Killock 2012, 103) (fig 3). Sixteen of the 22 pits recorded dated to this period and the remains found in them were far more substantial than anything previously recorded on the site (table 1; *see Endnote*). One of the principal points of interest was the animal bone assemblage, much of which derived either from complete carcasses that had been interred in pits or notable selected parts of the animal such as the skull. The pottery assemblage recovered from the Middle Iron Age phase in 2012, although not large, was also nearly three times larger than that recorded in 2008. This is a significant difference as the overall assemblage from all phases recorded in 2012 consisted of 160 sherds compared with the 329 collected in 2008. Most of the pits were located to the east of a series of fragmentary linear cuts that traversed most of

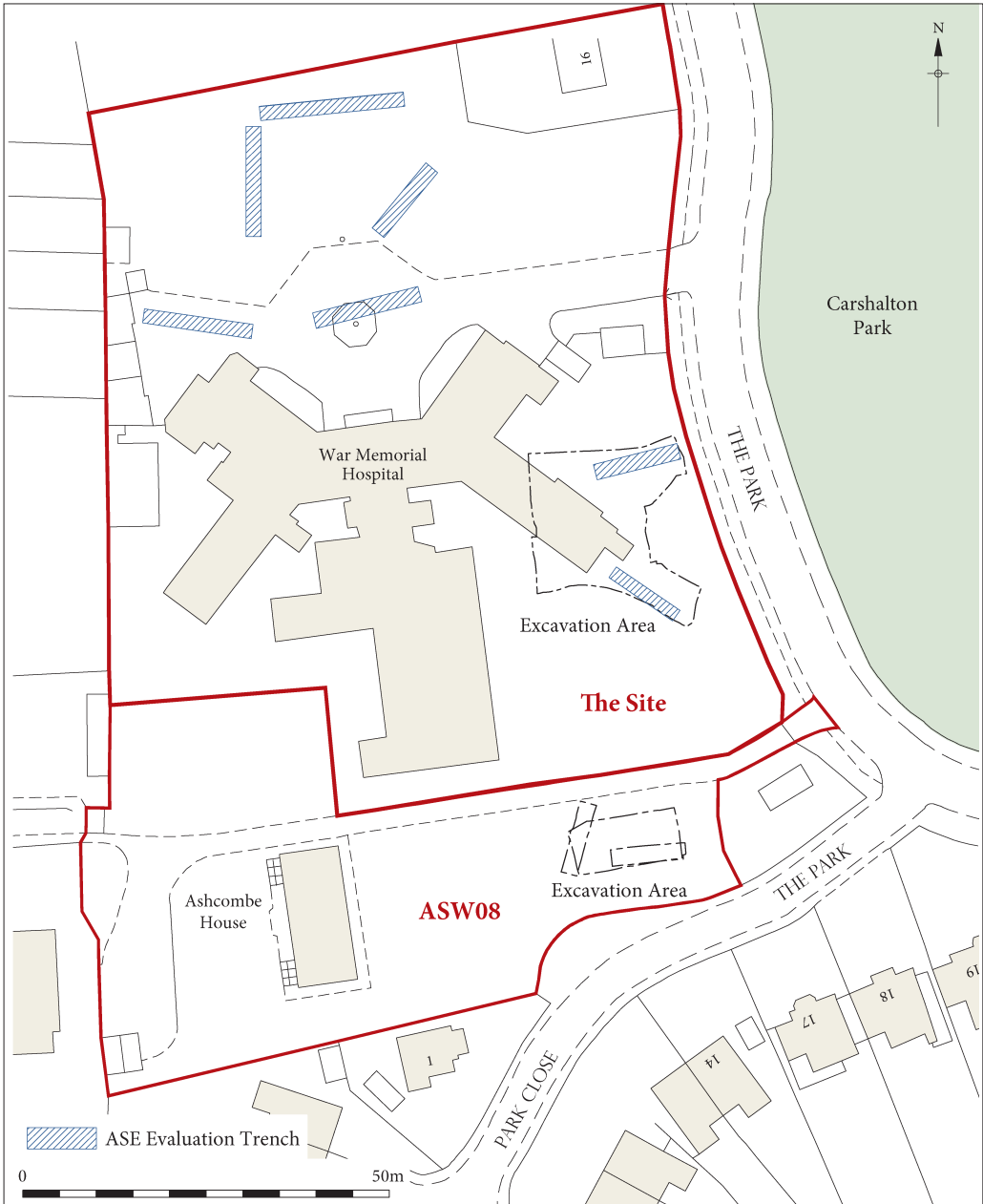


Fig 2 Carshalton War Memorial Hospital. Trench location including ASW08 excavation area and ASE evaluation trenches. (© Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd 2014)

the central area of the trench. Although the linear features as found were very shallow they had presumably been cut through a topsoil horizon and their original depth may have been greater. If accompanied by a bank these linear cuts would have provided a more substantial marker in the landscape than the features seen during the excavation.

Of the sixteen pits dated to the Middle Iron Age (in this case by pottery dated *c* 400–200 BC) four contained undoubted evidence of structured deposition, and two further pits



Fig 3 Carshalton War Memorial Hospital. Middle Iron Age features (shaded features showing structured deposition). (© Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd 2014)

contained animal skulls that could place them in this group. Two pits contained complete animal skeletons. The near-complete skeleton of a dog was found in pit 21 (fig 4). This individual presented some quite remarkable characteristics apart from its apparent use at death as a form of dedication to the spirits. The dog had clearly suffered serious injuries



Fig 4 Carshalton War Memorial Hospital. Dog burial 17 in pit 21, 10cm scale, facing south. (© Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd 2014)



Fig 5 Carshalton War Memorial Hospital. Calf burial 28 in pit 26, 1m scale, facing south. (© Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd 2014)

as a result of one or more incidents during its lifetime, but had been cared for during and probably after its recovery. The major injury had consisted of a broken left hind leg, which had healed but would have left the animal with a shortened leg and probably a serious limp (Rielly 2013). The dog could not have survived during the period of its recovery without being cared for and might well have needed looking after once the injury had healed. It appears that the dog buried in pit 21 was given considerable attention before being buried after dying in old age.

A calf of around six months old had been buried in the base of pit 26 (fig 5), which was located only 1m to the south and west of the dog burial 17. Although the position of the calf was rather contorted, almost all the skeleton was present, which suggested that the animal had not been killed for its meat. However, cut marks on the forelegs suggested that the animal had been skinned before being deposited in the pit. An area of burning was evident close to the forelimbs of the animal. Analysis of a sample taken from this area demonstrated the presence of burnt bones from the foot of an adult sheep or goat. These bones might suggest either ritual feasting associated with the deposition of the calf or the placing of cooked animal parts in the pit. Whatever occurred this clearly was not simply a case of domestic refuse being disposed of when a convenient site became available.

Not surprisingly, pit 26 was a considerably deeper feature than the shallow cut that held the dog (21) and may have functioned as a storage pit before being backfilled. Apart from the size of the feature it had been slightly undercut towards the base, where it had been excavated into the solid chalk and had a noticeably bell-shaped profile. The pit measured 1.20m in diameter at the top but was 1.50m across at the base and 1.02m deep.

Pit 32 was located to the south and slightly to the east of the two pits that contained the complete animal burials. This pit would have been worthy of comment simply because of its

size: it measured 2.30m north–south by 2.00m east–west and was 1.43m deep. However, the fills of this feature also contained a remarkable assemblage of animal bones that included seven lambs – six of which were neonates – and parts of a calf in its second year. The bones found in this pit must suggest seasonal deposition (the neonates were presumably all born within a limited timespan) and might indicate that stored grain was seed corn being emptied from the pits as lambing commenced in the spring.

Pit 7 had been partially excavated by ASE in 2009; it was located to the east of the three pits described above. This feature was notable for a group of human bones, consisting of the shafts and distal ends of a left and right femur, a complete but fragmented left tibia, the proximal end and shaft of a right tibia, a left rib and a single phalange that had been collected and placed together in the pit (Sibun 2009). No new finds of human bone were made when the feature was revisited in 2012. A large pit (9) was located adjacent to the northern limit of excavation, to the west of pit 7; it measured 1.70m in diameter and was 0.72m deep. Pit 9 had also been partially excavated during the 2009 evaluation and contained a horse skull. When viewed in conjunction with the animal bone assemblage from the surrounding features the horse skull becomes a significant find and may be interpreted as a placed object, or evidence of structured deposition. A largely complete if fragmentary cattle skull was also recovered from pit 37, which lay to the south-west of the pits previously mentioned. Six of the cluster of twelve pits found in the north-east corner of the trench demonstrated evidence of structured deposition. Four or possibly five of the pits may have been used for grain storage; the remaining seven were almost certainly too small and shallow for this purpose.

A Middle Iron Age settlement must have been located nearby, but no evidence for structures was found in the area excavated. The site may have been abandoned after the Middle Iron Age, although this is not entirely certain. If occupation continued it was certainly on a greatly reduced scale.

### **Late Iron Age/Roman**

It was clear that if the settlement had been deserted it was reoccupied in the very Late Iron Age and that a community was present in the years from around 50 BC to AD 50; this phase of occupation continued until *c* AD 100. This later phase of occupation was still characterised by ritual deposition, but pottery seems to have largely taken the place of animal remains. The Roman features were by no means identical, but compared with the earlier pits they were generally very steep sided and deeper than they were wide, giving them the appearance of being shafts (table 1). Six pits were dated to this period (fig 6).

Pit 31 was one of the best examples of structured deposition recorded at the site and the backfilling appeared to represent a closure ceremony for the feature concerned. A complete sheep had been placed near the top of the pit (fig 7). Obviously a certain depth of topsoil that is no longer extant must have existed above the level at which the pit was recorded, but it is almost certain that the portion of the pit that had been backfilled before the sheep was deposited was considerably deeper than the upper level above the sheep burial.

The deposition of the complete sheep was the culmination of what appeared to be a deliberate backfilling ritual. No concentration of animal bones was recorded from the basal fill (39), but a fragmentary cattle skull was recovered from fill 34 and there were concentrations of sheep or goat fragments in both of the fills (33 and 29), which were found above and below the sheep skeleton (30). Fill 33 contained a notable quantity of burnt bone; at least six animals must have had elements of their carcasses placed in this fill as six right forelimbs were present. The upper fill (29) contained a large quantity of sheep or goat bones, many of which were burnt; these were evident around the complete skeleton as were areas of burnt material deposited in the fill. Many of the bones in the upper fill were from adult individuals, but young lambs were also well represented. These collections might also suggest ritual feasting or the placement of cooked meats into the pit.

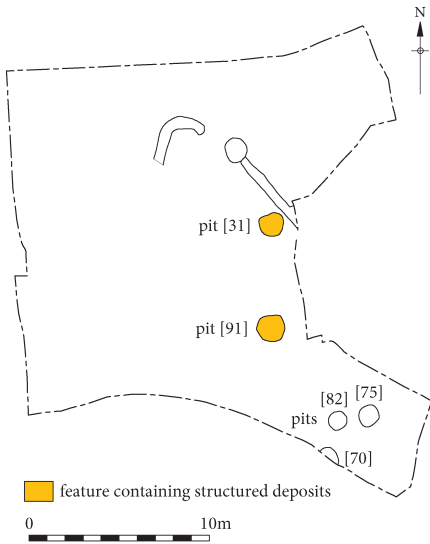


Fig 6 Carshalton War Memorial Hospital. Late Iron Age/Romano-British features (shaded features showing structured deposition). (© Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd 2014)



Fig 7 Carshalton War Memorial Hospital. Sheep burial 30 in pit 31, facing north. (© Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd 2014)

Pit 31 measured a maximum of 1.36m in diameter and was 0.92m deep and very steep or vertically sided. This feature had all the attributes of a grain storage pit and might have been used originally for this purpose. Only the upper fill (29) contained datable artefacts, which consisted of two sherds of pottery dated AD 50–150 and two residual Middle Iron Age sherds.

Another large pit (91) was located *c* 5m to the south of pit 31 (fig 8). This feature was possibly a notable example of structured deposition, but in this case the animal carcasses or



Fig 8 Carshalton War Memorial Hospital. Pit 91, 1m scale. (© Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd 2014)



Fig 9 Carshalton War Memorial Hospital. Shaft 75, 1m scale. (© Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd 2014)



parts had been largely replaced by the deposition of pottery. The upper fill (89) contained large parts of a single vessel. This had been placed in the lower part of the fill, which occupied a distinct upper chamber within the pit. This part of the feature was much wider than the lower chamber and in effect formed a separate shallow upper area of the pit. The lower chamber of the feature, fill 90, contained a considerable quantity of pottery that derived from at least three vessels – one of which was semi-complete. This group of finds may have been placed in this area of the pit in a deliberate act rather than being mere rubbish disposal. Although the overall assemblage from this pit dates from the Late Iron Age or where given specific dates 50 BC to AD 50, one of the vessels in the lower chamber was dated to the first half of the 1st century AD, which clearly places it in a period at the very end of the Iron Age or possibly immediately after the conquest. A small rectangular copper-alloy plate was also recovered from the primary fill (90).

A group of three pits, 70, 82 and 75, lay to the south-east of pit 91. Pit 70 was a relatively small feature that did not contain any datable artefacts. Pit 82 had been partially excavated in 2009. The fill excavated in 2009 contained pottery dated to AD 70–100, and a bone handle with the remains of an iron tang in it, which may be a knife handle. The lower fill (81) was remarkable as it contained the largest pottery assemblage recovered from either the 2012 or 2008 excavations. This consisted of 89 sherds of pottery dated to AD 30–100. An unusual fired clay object, fragments of daub and lime mortar were also recovered from the fill. The sides were vertical and the feature measured 1.04m in diameter x 1.19m deep and had been cut into the solid natural chalk through the mixed subsoils and degraded chalk that characterised this area of the site. The shape of this feature, which was deeper than it was wide, was very reminiscent of the Roman shafts recorded at Ashcombe House in 2008.

The deepest cut feature was shaft 75, which measured 1.61m deep although it was only 1.20m wide (fig 9). The base of this feature, as was the case with the nearby pit/shaft 82, had been cut into solid chalk bedrock. Signs of burning within similar shafts have often been interpreted as evidence of the cleansing of a pit by lighting a fire to remove or neutralise spoiled grain from its margins. The fills of shaft 75 may present evidence for both grain storage and cleansing by fire. The environmental sample taken from one of the lower fills of the pit 78 contained a high concentration of both cereal seeds and charcoal. It also contained seven sherds of pottery dated to AD 70–100. The lowest fill produced a single sherd dated to AD 50–100, while the top fill (71) held the largest assemblage from this feature of ten sherds dated to AD 50–150. A date of AD 70–100 seems most probable for the backfilling of this feature.

## Conclusions

Although no clear evidence was found for occupation of the site in any period preceding the Middle Iron Age a small quantity of earlier ceramics provides some evidence of earlier settlement in the area. Four sherds of pottery were recovered that date to the Late Bronze Age or very Early Iron Age; these fragments came from three different features and were considered to be residual, as was an Early Bronze Age sherd. Six sherds of Early Iron Age pottery were also found, four of which represented the only pottery found in pit 18. This might suggest that this was an Early Iron Age feature, but the sherds were very small and could easily be residual in a later feature.

However, the presence of ceramics that dated to these earlier periods is a departure from the evidence collected in 2008. The site must have been frequented in these periods for the pottery to have been deposited (unless it was imported in soil introduced from elsewhere, which seems highly unlikely). The excavations undertaken at the former Queen Mary's Hospital site, *c.* 1.5km to the south of the War Memorial Hospital, have amply demonstrated that the surrounding area was settled in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age periods and it may be that the site was visited or occupied temporarily rather than being permanently occupied.

The results of the fieldwork carried out at the War Memorial Hospital site, including Ashcombe House, combined with the evidence gathered from Orchard Hill, demonstrate that thriving Middle and Late Iron Age/Romano-British communities existed on the northern periphery of the downland in the Carshalton area. These agricultural settlements continued to be occupied and apparently prospered for around half a century after the Roman arrival in Britain and then disappeared. At present it is unclear what replaced them.

### Endnote

Table 1 is 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 files are stored as supplementary material under the title of the article. Copies are also available from the Society's library at Castle Arch, Guildford GU1 3SX.

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