EXCAVATIONS AT CROMWELL GREEN IN THE PALACE OF WESTMINSTER

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SUMMARY

The earliest features on the site were a number of Iron Age gullies and postholes. There was evidence of general flooding in the late Iron Age/early Roman period following which some small gullies were cut, possibly indicating late Roman occupation in the vicinity. Further flooding followed, and the bed of a 7th/8th-century stream was located. Three medieval soakaways and the foundations of the 17th-century Treasury were identified at the south end of the site.

INTRODUCTION

An excavation was carried out from March to May 1978 by the Inner London Archaeological Unit on behalf of the Department of the Environment at Cromwell Green in the Palace of Westminster prior to a programme of landscaping the area. The site (TQ30187953) lay on the west side of Westminster Hall (Fig. 1) within the bounds of Thorney Island, the sand and marsh delta formed by the bifurcation of the river Tyburn. Previous excavation[1] beside the Hall indicated that though most of the medieval levels had been destroyed during the 19th century some medieval features survived, and, in addition, there was slight evidence for earlier occupation.

Two trenches were cut, the north trench being 9m by 1.5m and the south trench being 19m by 1.5m with two extensions, east and west, both 4m by 1.5m. Considerable disturbance had been caused by service trenches for the Houses of Parliament, particularly in the south trench where the east extension had to be abandoned due to modern intrusions. Dating evidence was sparse and all dates must be regarded as tentative.

PHASE I

This phase consisted of features cut into the natural sand and sealed by a dark grey water-deposited sand, F80 in the south trench and F213 in the north trench.

In the south trench (Fig. 2) lay a sloping sided round bottomed gully F82 (excavated length 2.06m, width 0.64m, depth 0.28m) with a rounded terminal. Its fill, fine grey sand with scattered charcoal flecks L83, contained worked flints and fragments of Iron Age pottery.

To the south of the gully lay a subcircular posthole F87 filled with mottled grey sandy clay. On the west side of the bottom of the posthole was a post socket. A similar posthole with socket F89 lay to the north of the gully F82 but its stratigraphic position had been destroyed by a modern pipe trench.

To the west of the gully lay three other postholes F114, F116, and F122 all filled by grey sand and charcoal flecks but dissimilar in size and shape and probably unrelated.

Further west of the gully was an irregular depression F108 (max. depth 0.2m) sealed by the waterlain clay F21 not the grey sand F80. Stratigraphically it could belong with either Phase I or Phase III but having produced several cores and flint flakes it is included in Phase I.

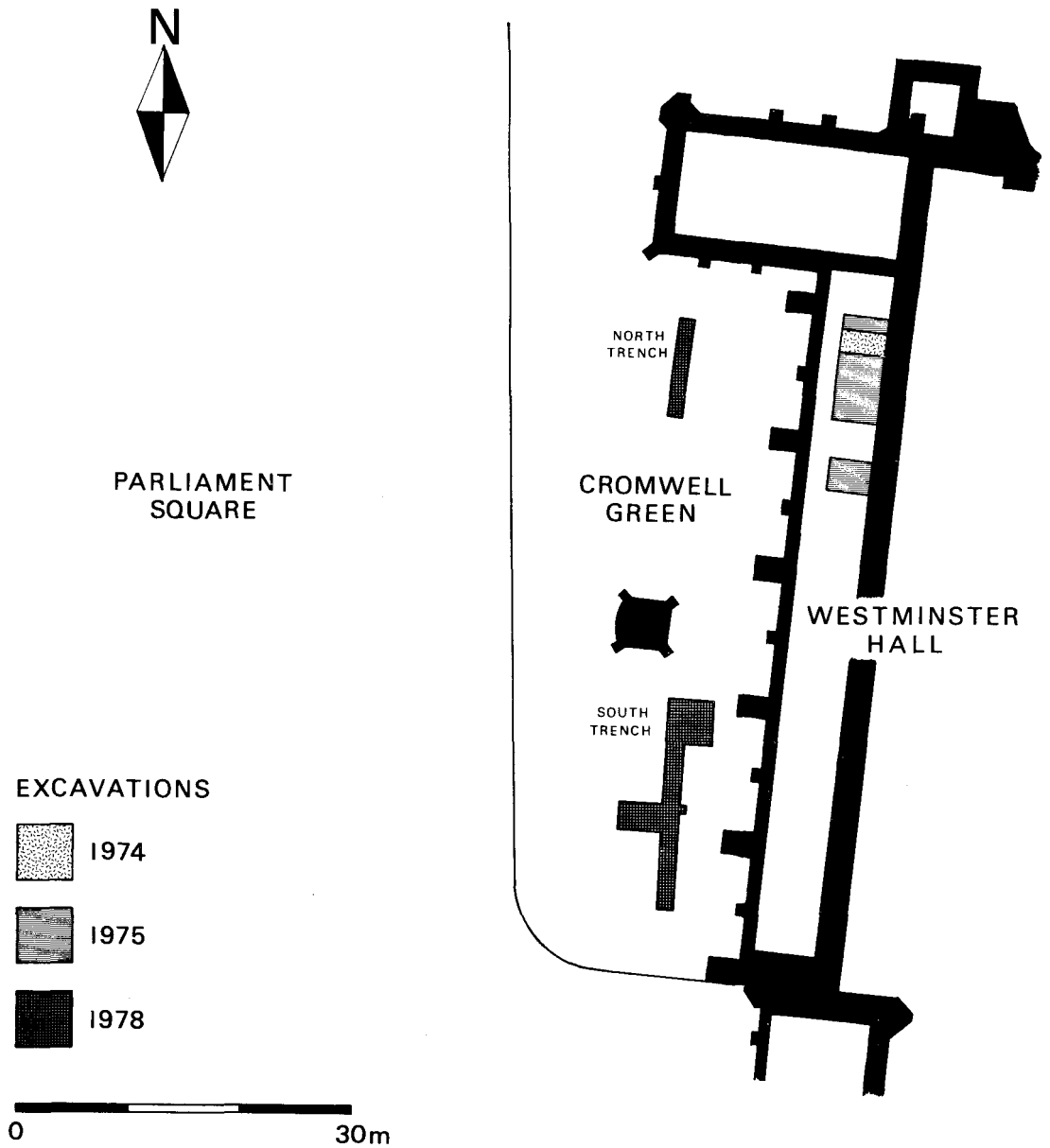

Fig. 1. Cromwell Green: site location plan.

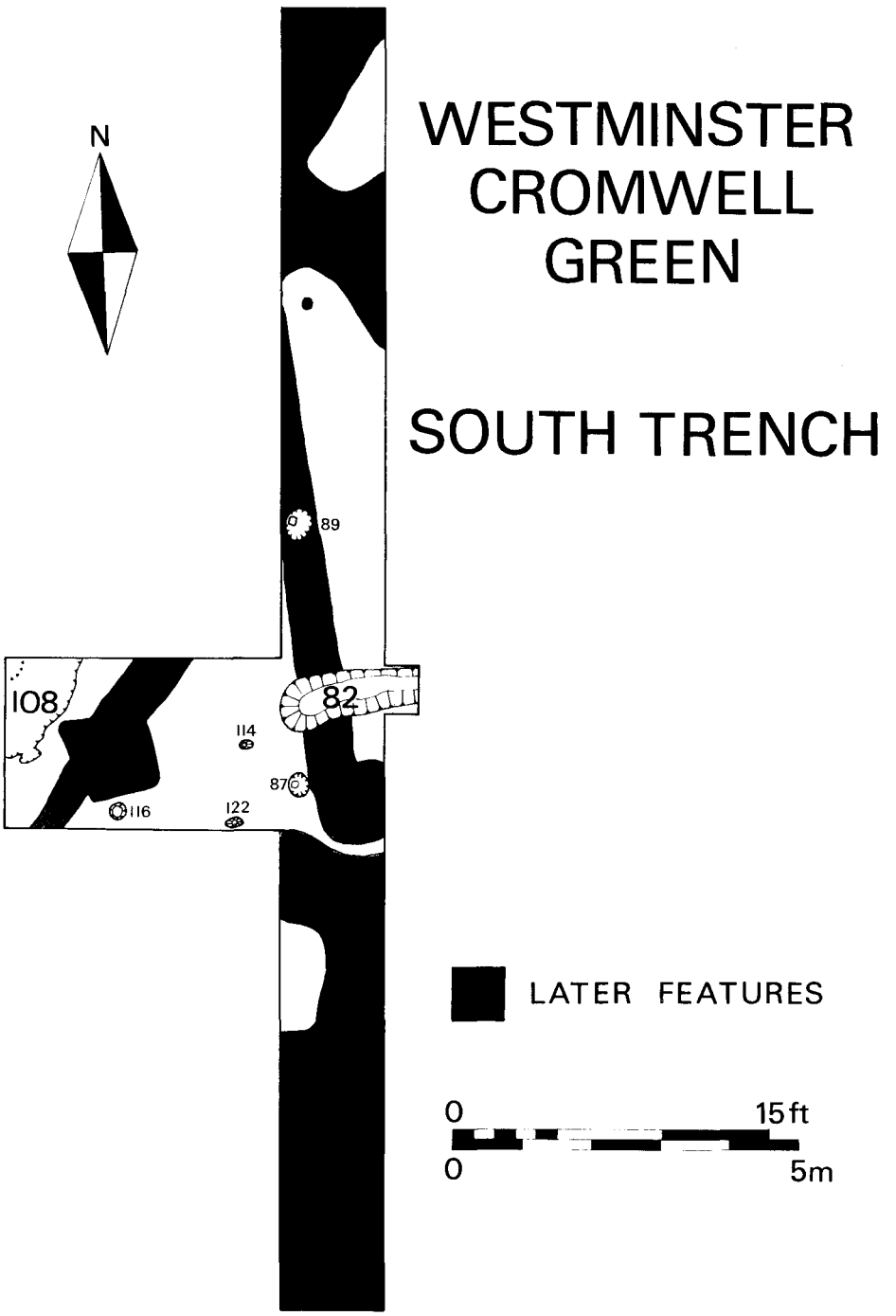

Fig. 2. Cromwell Green: south trench, plan of Phase I.

In the north trench (Fig. 3) was another depression F226 (max. depth 0.15m) which also produced a scatter of struck flakes. To the south of this depression lay a gully F223 (1.4m wide, excavated length 1.5m, depth 0.9m) with a V-shaped cross-section and an irregularly sloping terminal (Fig. 4).

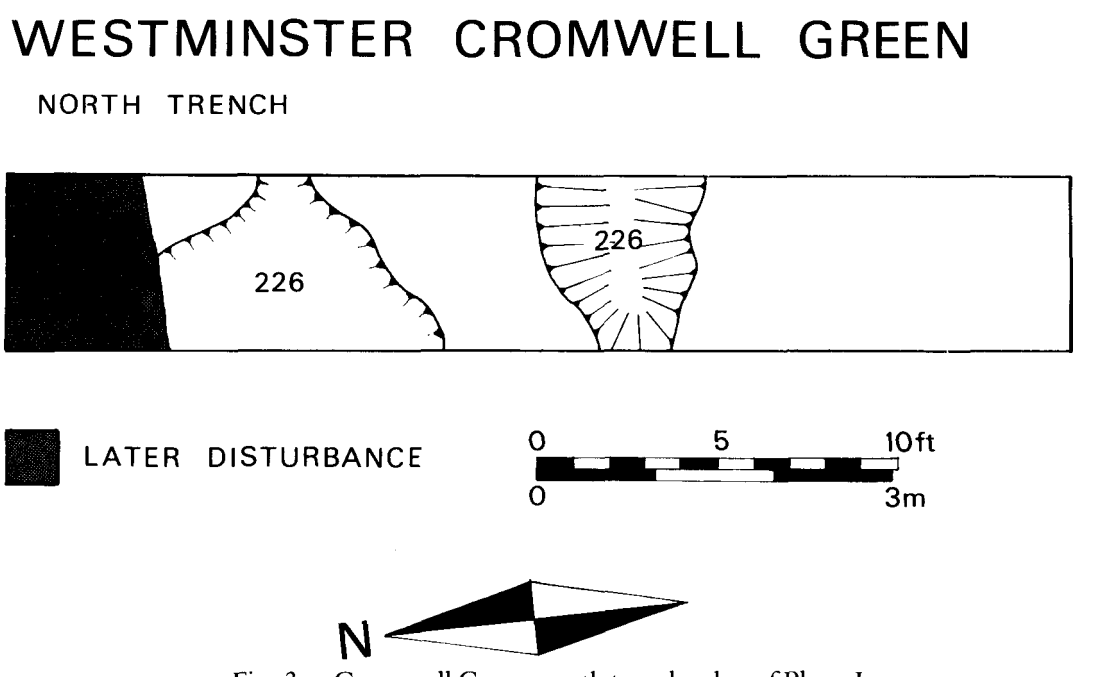

Fig. 3. Cromwell Green: north trench, plan of Phase I.

PHASE II

This phase comprised a layer of water-deposited grey silty sand F80 in the south trench and F213 in the north trench which covered the natural sand. In the south trench a sand bank was formed (max. height 0.45m) sloping east/west. Some late Iron Age material was recovered, suggesting the area was extensively flooded during the late Iron Age/early Roman period.

PHASE III

This phase consists of features cut into the sand F80 and sealed by a layer of sandy clay F21. All these features were in the south trench (Fig. 5).

At the north end of the south trench a sloping sided gully, F84, with a round bottom (excavated length 2.4m, width 0.65m, depth 0.34m) ran NE/SW containing fragments of Roman brick. Cutting through this gully was another gully F91 (excavated length 2.2m, width 1.2m, depth 0.6m) running approximately east/west. This second gully was irregular in outline and was filled with grey sand and clay, containing one abraded sherd of colour coated ware and some thirty struck flints.

South of the gully F91 was an oval posthole F94 which had a circular post socket at its south end.

In the west extension of the south trench was a gully F110 having sloping sides and flattish bottom (excavated length 3m, width 0.6m, depth 0.3m) and filled with grey sandy clay containing fragments of Roman brick. Over the fill of the gully lay the soil stain of an irregular spread of branches and small planks F112.

The gullies F84 and F110 were fairly straight and regular and may have been field boundary

ditches. The other gully F91, showing erosion by flowing water, was possibly a natural channel though originally it may have been a boundary ditch.

PHASE IV

At the extreme south end of the south trench (Fig. 5, 6) lay a stream bed with sloping sides and flat bottom, F118 (excavated length 1.6m, excavated width 4.0m, depth 1.8m). In the gravel and sand L124 at the bottom of the feature two fragments of Roman brick were recovered. Higher up, in a layer of viscid blue clay L120, were two pieces of oak plank dated (HAR-2692 and HAR-2696) to 600±80 ad and 720±80 ad. No other dating material was found. Unfortunately most of the relationships between the stream and the rest of the site were destroyed by later features. Stratigraphically Phase IV could be earlier than, contemporary with, or later than Phase III or Phase V.

The stream was undoubtedly part of the network of river channels that crossed Thorney Island, gradually silting up but remaining a marshy depression for a considerable time.

Pollen, snail and soil samples are being studied by the Ancient Monuments Laboratory.

PHASE V

This comprised a layer of red brown sandy clay F21 in the south trench which sealed Phase III and was cut by a 14th century soakaway (Phase VI). One fragment of Roman tile was recovered. The clay, which sloped down from east to west, was water deposited and seemed to represent another period of flooding in this part of Thorney Island.

PHASE VI

Though most of the medieval and post-medieval deposits were removed during the restoration of Westminster Hall in 1884 some features survived.

In the south trench a series of gravel layers were deposited, apparently with the intention of levelling and draining the site of the silted up stream F118. Three successive soakaways cut in the vicinity of the stream F118 indicate the area still needed draining as late as the end of the Middle Ages. The earliest soakaway F67 was of 14th-century date, the second F100 14th-15th century, and the third F73 was dated to the late 15th–early 16th century.

Cutting through the soakaways F67 and F73 were the substantial post-medieval foundations of a wall F50 composed of large chalk and greenstone blocks set in a creamy white mortar.

In the north trench lay a waterlogged depression F225, possibly a pond, which contained a few fragments of 16th-century pottery. This feature and the area around it were levelled by a dump of blue grey sandy clay F207 which was cut by a land drain F209 filled with tiles and a few 16th-century sherds.

CONCLUSIONS

Other excavations in the area have indicated an Iron Age presence on Thorney Island but Cromwell Green is the first site to have prehistoric features.

If the prehistoric gullies and postholes form part of a land boundary it would suggest a fairly permanent settlement existed in the area rather than merely a transitory riverside camp. However, the exact nature of the settlement could not be determined within the confines of the excavation.

Subsequently Thorney Island appears to have been flooded at some time in the late Iron Age or very early Roman period. Previous excavations in Westminster Hall corroborated this phase of flooding.[1] This also tallies with the rise in the river level found at both Toppings Wharf [2] and 106–114 Borough High Street,[3] Southwark where late Iron Age/early Roman flood laid clay covered prehistoric material and was itself covered by deposits probably dating to soon after AD 43. Other excavations in Westminster[4] have produced evidence that the island and its hinterland were sporadically submerged during

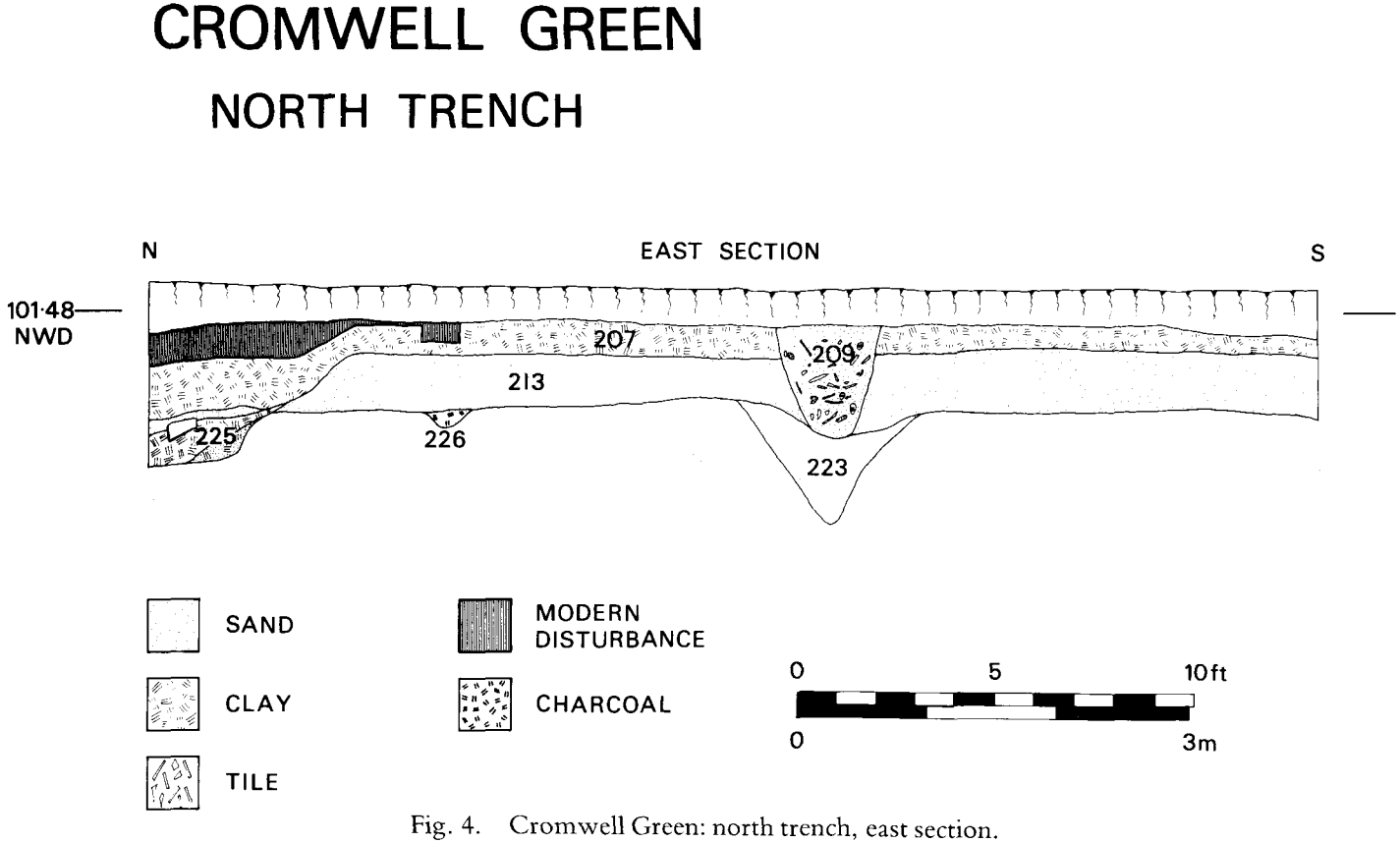

Fig. 4. Cromwell Green: north trench, east section.

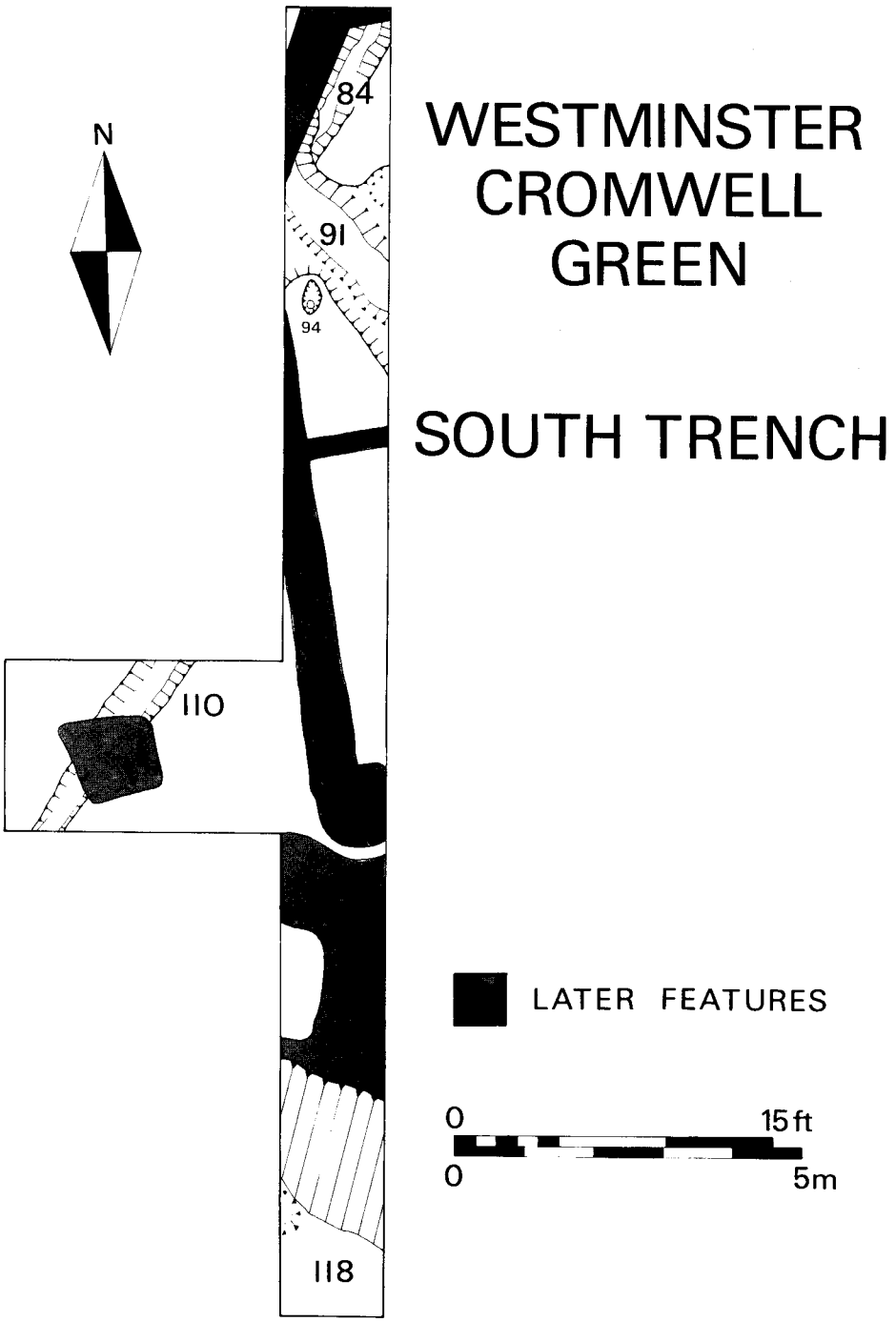

Fig. 5. Cromwell Green: south trench, plan of Phase III and Phase IV.

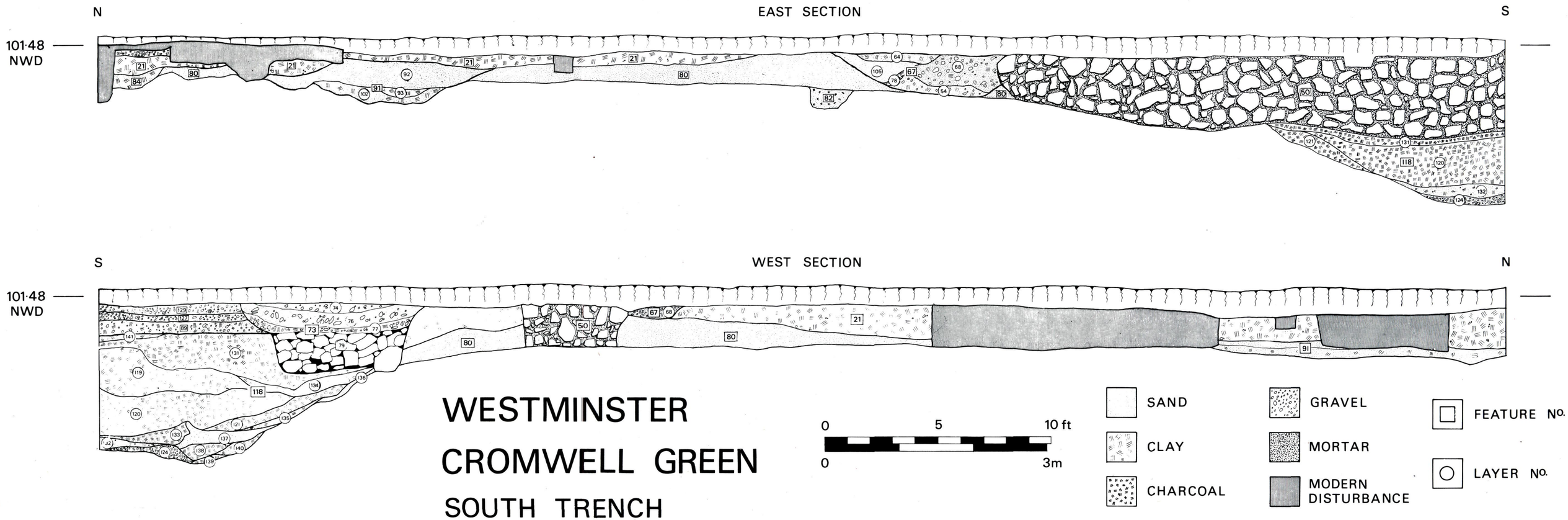

Fig. 6. Cromwell Green: south trench, east and west section.

the Roman period probably resulting from a series of seasonal high tides rather than long term changes in the level of the Thames.[5]

Conclusive evidence for the postulated Roman settlement and river crossing at Westminster is still lacking. The remains of Roman structures were reported during 19th-century building work in and around the Abbey[6] but the finds remain uncorroborated. No recent excavations on Thorney Island have produced more than a handful of pottery, glass or tile, and that only in association with flood deposits. The gullies of Phase III, which contained a small amount of abraded Roman material, may indicate a late Roman presence in the vicinity after the river level had dropped but the lack of concentrated or unambiguous Roman features and finds would suggest that if a settlement existed it lay elsewhere on the Island. The immediate post-Roman history of the site is unknown. Legends place the founding of the West Minster in the early 7th century (mentioning in passing that the area was flooded during the consecration) and documentary evidence suggests a church stood on Thorney Island from the late 8th century.[7] The radiocarbon dates from the two planks in the stream F118 are not positive evidence of 7th–8th century Saxon occupation; pieces of timber might be expected to be washed downstream by the Tyburn, probably out of context and possibly long after they were first discarded.

The deposit of flood laid sandy clay (Phase V) was undated apart from a fragment of Roman brick but emphasises the vulnerability of Thorney Island to any rise in the river level.

Despite the risk of flooding and the marshes surrounding it, Westminster became the nucleus of the most important medieval settlement outside London. The pressure for building space near the Palace and Abbey meant that land, which had been left open because it was too marshy and unstable, was drained and built over. Cromwell Green was still fairly marshy in the medieval period because of the stream bed F118 and the deposit of clay F21 which would have retained flood water: the three soakaways cut down to the natural sand would have improved the soil drainage and made the area available for building. Flooding was (and still is) a danger, contemporary chronicles recording the more extreme inundations of Westminster Palace.[8]

Post-medieval maps[9] show the area west of the Hall was covered by private and government buildings, some remains of which were exposed during the 19th-century restoration of the Palace.[10] The excavation only uncovered the remains of one structure, its foundations having been sufficiently massive to survive the 19th-century site clearance. This has been identified as the Treasury Room, rebuilt 1671–2,[11] shown on a plan by Wren *c.* 1710[12] and demolished by 1795.

The area was made into a garden following the restoration of the Hall in 1884.

NOTES

1. (a) B. Shepherd, Westminster Hall Excavation 1974. Unpublished.
   (b) D. Whipp and E. Platts 'Excavations at Westminster Hall' *London Archaeol.* 2 No. 14 (1976) 351.
2. H. Sheldon 'Excavations at Toppings and Sun Wharves, Southwark 1970–72' *Trans. London. Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* 25 (1974) 8.
3. I. Schwab '106–114 Borough High Street, Southwark' in *Southwark Excavations 1972–74*, Vol. 1,

Joint Publication No. 1, London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc. and Surrey Archaeol. Soc. (1978) 177.

4. (a) G. Black 'Excavations in the Sub-Vault of the Misericorde of Westminster Abbey' *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* 27 (1976) 141.
   (b) H. J. M. Green 'Secrets of Whitehall Part 1' *Illustrated London News* (29th June 1963) 1004.
5. See G. H. Willcox 'Problems and Possible Conclusions Related to the History and Archaeology of the Thames in the London Area' *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* 26 (1975) 289 for similar evidence in the City.
6. F. C. J. Spurrell 'Early Sites and Embankments on the Margins of the Thames Estuary' *Archaeol. J.* 42 (1885) 274.
7. H. F. Westlake *Westminster Abbey* Vol. 1 (London 1923) 6.
8. See for example Matthew Paris for 1236 and 1242 in *History of the Ancient Palace and Late Houses of Parliament at Westminster* by E. W. Brayley and J. Britton (1836) 43, also 'Two London Chronicles' for 1555 in a *London Anthology* ed. N. G. Brett-James (1928) 92.
9. See John Norden's map of Westminster 1593 (London Topographical Society, 1899) and the 'Agas' map (A. Procter and R. Taylor *The A to Z of Elizabethan London* (1979)).
10. For details of the foundations revealed during the restoration of Westminster Hall see J. L. Pearson, Report of Westminster Hall, Select Committee on Westminster Hall (Restoration) 1884.
11. History of King's Works Vol. V, 412.
12. Wren Society Vol. XI (1934), Plate 23.

THE FINDS

INTRODUCTION

The small scale of the site and the difficulties of excavation made it unlikely that substantial amounts of finds would be recovered, but the particularly small quantity, especially from the early stratified deposits, makes the dating of the occupation of this part of Thorney Island extremely hard. The known long 'useful life' of Roman building material does not pinpoint a date for the Roman settlement of Thorney Island. The small quantity of bone retrieved was almost all fragmentary and in any case mostly came from Phase VI: it consisted of the usual range of domestic refuse for the late medieval period. Unfortunately none of the dateable flints recovered could be considered as coming from other than residual contexts, but their date does open the way for conjecture as to the earliest period of occupation of Thorney Island and its environs.
(The environmental evidence from the site is to be considered for publication together with other similar material from New Palace Yard site.)

THE POTTERY

by *Elizabeth Platts*

The site yielded a very small amount of pottery—just over 200 sherds in all, of which well over half were concentrated in the 19th-century rebuilding layers, and all but 11 of the rest occurred in Phase VI. The small size of the individual sherds and the extreme abrading which the sherds had undergone not only made identification tenuous, but could also imply that almost all the material might be considered residual. It also made it not possible to illustrate any of the pottery, but the material is deposited at Imex House, 42 Theobalds Road, London W.C.1 and may be consulted there.

Phase I

This phase contained most of the flints, although residual flints were found in all succeeding phases. Only two identifiable sherds were recovered, and a few fragments of baked clay. The larger of the sherds (No. i) was 2cm by 1cm and the smaller (No. ii) 1.5cm by 1.25cm, so it was not possible to illustrate either.

i A reduced dark grey fabric heavily gritted with flint grits, and possibly with indented decoration on the exterior surface. The fabric is quite hard.
ii A fairly fine sandy friable fabric, with red external surface, and possible indented decoration.

While not exactly paralleled, both sherds and the fragments are similar to the Iron Age pottery found during the excavations at Heathrow in 1969 (Canham (1978) Figs. 13 to 19) and an Iron Age date is suggested for these two sherds.

Phase II

Two sherds of pottery were recovered from the layer of grey silty sand (213) of this phase. The fabric, which was proportionately thick, was reduced, and very coarse with frequent large flint grits (their average size 3mm×2mm). The sherds were very similar to those found during the excavations at Westminster Hall (Whipp and Platts 1976) and are at present dated to the Iron Age.

Phase III

One extremely small sherd (9mm sq.) of Oxfordshire red colour coated ware was recovered from the gully (84). It was so abraded that almost none of the colour coat remained, and the sherd so small that one can only suggest that it may possibly have come from a small beaker (Young, 1977, Types C20 to C39). While the abrasion could mean that the sherd was water-borne to the area, the fact that fragments of Roman bricks were also found in this phase lends support to the suggestion that there was some Roman occupation on Thorney Island, although not on this particular site.

Phase IV

This phase yielded two small fragments of Roman brick which provide only very slight confirmation of the Carbon 14 date.

Phase V

No dating material was found from this phase except for one fragment of Roman tile, which in view of its much abraded condition might perhaps be considered residual.

Phase VI

Most pottery retrieved from the early stratigraphy on the site came from this phase, and almost all of it from the first soakaway (67). However, the group contained no complete profiles, no complete handles, almost no rims or bases, and no identifiable foreign imports. Represented were a number of vessels in 'West Kent' ware, a reduced sandy fabric covered on the exterior surface with a white slip and glazed with a mottled green glaze; and an equal number of 'London' fine sandy oxidised fabric covered with a thin white slip and a sparse yellow lead glaze (Black 1976 and SLAEC 1978). The sherds, insofar as it was possible to judge, came from jugs. No sherds from cooking pots were identified. The lack of highly decorated jug sherds suggested a date after the high point of jug production at the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century, and the lack of imports makes it unlikely that the deposit can be much later than the 14th century. All sherds were abraded to some extent so that it is possible to consider a date of deposition substantially later than the date of production of the wares.

The second soakaway (100) only contained four sherds, representing three vessels, of slightly later date than the first, as in addition to three sherds of 'West Kent' ware, a sherd of 15th century Surrey/Hampshire white ware was present. The third soakaway (73) only contained one sherd, of late 15th century–early 16th century Surrey/Hampshire white ware (Holling 1971). Of course, it is not possible to provide other than tentative dating on such small amounts of evidence.

The land drain (209) contained two fragments of a 16th century Surrey/Hampshire white ware 'Inns of Court' jug handle (Matthews and Green 1969), and the pottery from the suggested pond (225) amounted to one body sherd of 16th-century Surrey/Hampshire white ware.

FLINTS (Fig. 7)

by Desmond Collins

The several dozen flint artefacts recovered include a number of narrow blades and microblades no doubt removed from blade cores like that in No. 1, of which at least two were present. These would be most in place in a Mesolithic context. The three small scrapers, Nos. 3, 4 and 5 are typical prehistoric tools, and could be Mesolithic but also of later age.

Several microliths strongly indicate a Mesolithic occupation. No. 2 is a bladelet with

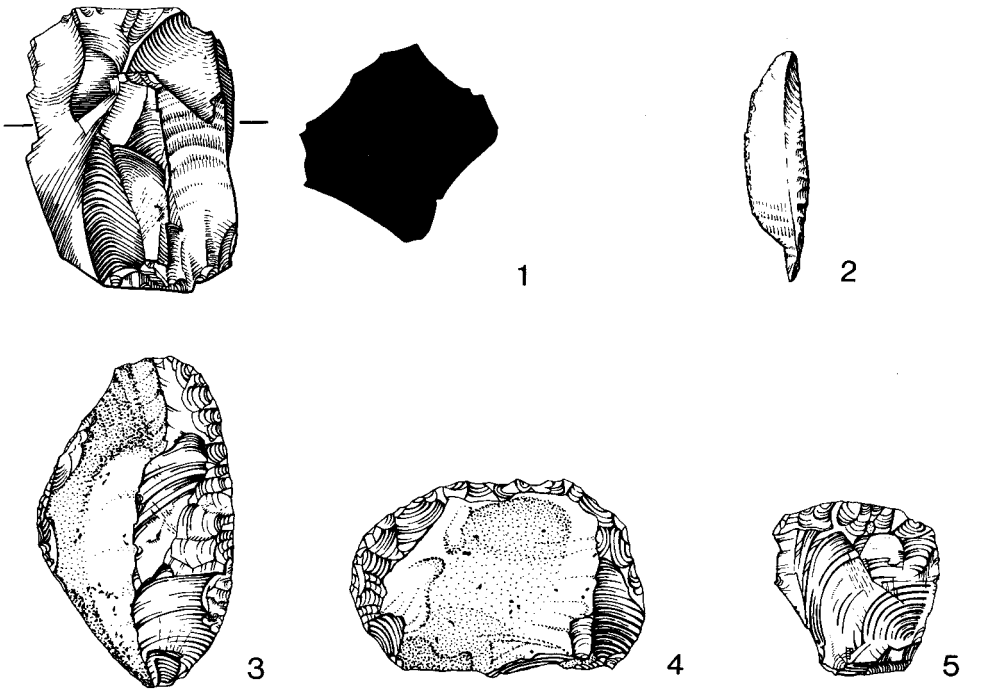

Fig. 7. Cromwell Green: worked flints Nos. 1–5 (1:1).

semi-abrupt retouch of Dufour kind, and is possibly an atypical obliquely blunted point. Two other microliths, not from stratified contexts, are more decisive. One is a small equilateral triangle and the other is a tiny obliquely blunted point. It seems clear that they indicated Mesolithic occupation on the site (possibly late Mesolithic), but the material seems to be all in secondary position.

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