A ROMANO-BRITISH RURAL SITE AT LONG LANE PLAYING FIELDS, ICKENHAM

David Lakin

SUMMARY

Excavations at Long Lane Playing Fields, Ickenham, produced slight evidence for a settlement of late Iron Age date superseded in the late 1st century AD *by an extensive multi-phase field system. The latest modification to this system can be dated to the mid 2nd century, although later activity on the site is indicated by a substantial surface scatter of 3rd and 4th-century pottery.*

The importance of this site lies in the contribution it can make, in conjunction with similar recently excavated sites, to our knowledge of the Romano-British settlement pattern in London's hinterland.

Of particular note is the indication that areas of the hinterland previously thought to be unattractive in this period may in fact harbour localised variations in the drift geology where settlement did occur.

INTRODUCTION

The Museum of London Archaeology Service undertook excavations on the site of the former playing fields at Long Lane, Ickenham, in the London Borough of Hillingdon, between 31 October and 16 December 1994. The site lies on the eastern side of Long Lane (B466) at OS grid reference TQ 0780 8523 (Fig 1).

The site was to be developed as a residential scheme by Acton Housing Association who generously provided funds for excavation when initial evaluation work showed that archaeological deposits on the site were threatened by the proposed construction. An area totalling 2650sq m was examined during the course of the excavation.

The site lies equidistant between the River Pinn and the Yeading Brook, which here run roughly from north to south 1.5km apart. The mean height of the modern ground surface in the area of excavation was just over 36.00m OD. The ground rises to the north and west to a maximum of *c.*40.00m OD.

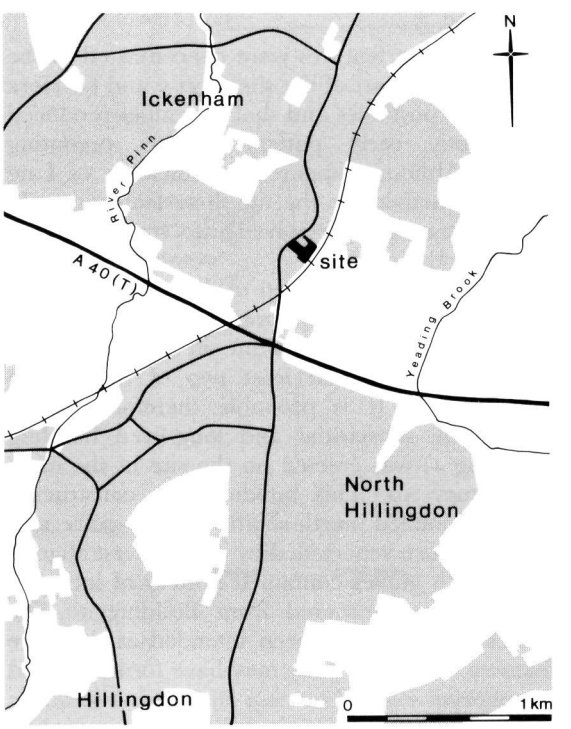

Fig 1. Site location

The central part of the Borough of Hillingdon, where the site is located, lies on a London Clay outcrop and for this reason settlement in the area was believed to be unlikely to predate the medieval period. In fact, evaluation of the site showed that it was situated on an apparently anomalous brickearth subsoil and that activity on the site was confined to the Roman period.

Excavation demonstrated the presence of an extensive multi-phase Romano-British field system and produced tenuous evidence for a pre-Roman conquest late Iron Age phase.

THE SEQUENCE

A subsoil of stiff mottled tan brickearth was observed across the entire area of excavation. The depth of this deposit was not tested by excavation but had previously been shown by a borehole survey to be *c.*1.00m thick and to overlie sand.

A small assemblage of burnt and struck flint indicated activity on or near to the site in the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods. However all of the flint was residual within much later features and no obviously contemporary features could be identified.

The earliest features were concentrated in the south-eastern part of the site (Figs 2 and 6). Here a series of postholes and shallow gullies produced consistently early pottery (mostly predating AD 50). Although apparently indicative of Late Iron Age activity on the site these features could only be tentatively resolved into structures and field boundaries.

The postholes appeared to define a rectilinear structure in excess of 2m × 5m.The postholes were, on average, 500mm in diameter and 300mm deep and at least two of them were replacements. It is probable therefore that a moderately substantial and long-lived building (Building 1) was erected on the site in the early 1st-century AD. This building was constructed over an infilled north-south aligned gully and was in its turn superseded by an east-west aligned gully. Both gullies contained pottery of identical date to that recovered from Building 1. The gullies seem to have been intended as drainage features – the later gully may have formed a field boundary.

All subsequent activity on the site can be securely dated to the Roman period and has been divided into three broad phases. The date range of ceramic material from all three phases is identical and lies within the range AD 70–160 (although small amounts of both residual and intrusive material were present).

The first phase, Roman Phase 1 (Fig 3), consisted of field boundaries defined by narrow, relatively shallow, gullies and associated pits, post- and stake-holes. Five distinct lengths of ditch were noted; all were U-shaped in profile and varied in depth from 70mm to 300mm. No gully junctions could be identified and projected continuation of alignment suggests that the gullies must have met at quite acute angles. The pits, post- and stake-holes assigned to this phase stratigraphically predate the features in the next phase and are largely datable to a period later than AD 50. Consequently they are probably broadly contemporary with the field system defined by the narrow gullies, though they are too scattered to be indicative of particular structures or areas of occupation.

The next phase, Roman Phase 2 (Figs 4 and 6), consisted of field boundaries defined by relatively wide and deep ditches. Eight distinct lengths of ditch were noted, varying in width between 600mm and 1.60m and in depth between 200mm and 700mm. They were on average in excess of 500mm deep and generally had steep sides and flat or shallow U-shaped bases. The ditches formed a rigidly rectilinear field system composed of, by implication, at least five definable fields. These fields, where measurable, were 15m and 30m in width and in excess of 40m in length and appear to have been laid out on a grid aligned on the cardinal compass points. At least one of the ditches had been recut and one other appeared to represent a slightly later modification of the system subdividing one of the fields—both indicative of a moderately long life-span for this phase.

The final phase, Roman Phase 3 (Figs 5 and 6), consists of field boundaries defined by wide, deep, curvilinear ditches and associated burnt spreads and 'tree-throws' indicative of the disuse of the field system of Roman Phase 2. Two distinct lengths of ditch were observed. The principal ditch ran roughly north-south and was up to 2.30m wide and 1m deep, and the secondary ditch joined it at a rough right-angle and was 1m wide and 320mm deep. Associated with this field system were a number of wide, shallow, irregularly shaped features, typically 3m

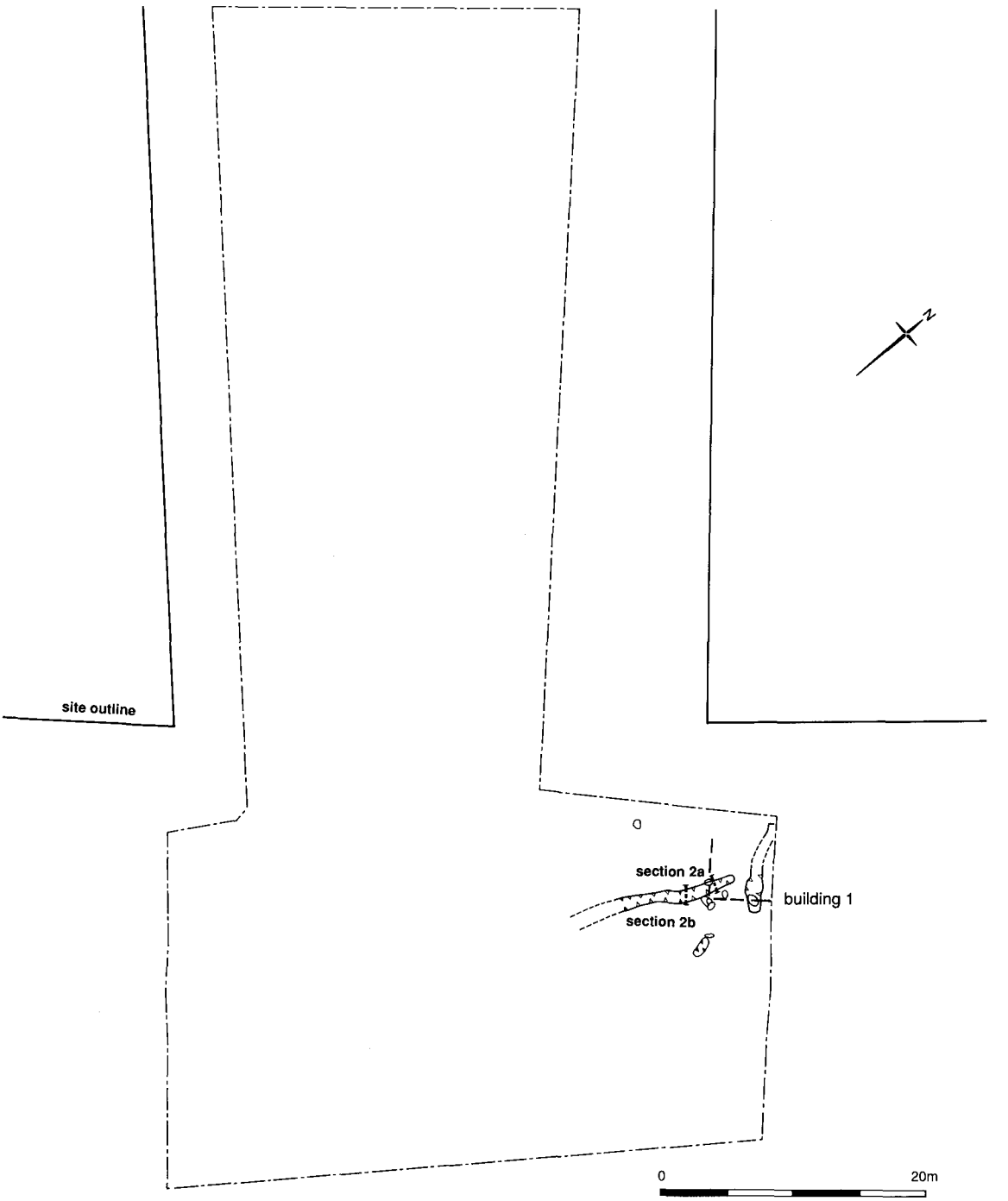

Fig 2. Possible prehistoric features

in diameter and 100mm deep, which have been tentatively identified as the remains of 'tree throws'. These features overlay the ditches and entrance-ways of the Roman Phase 2 field system and are indicative of the disuse of that system. In addition two extensive spreads of burnt

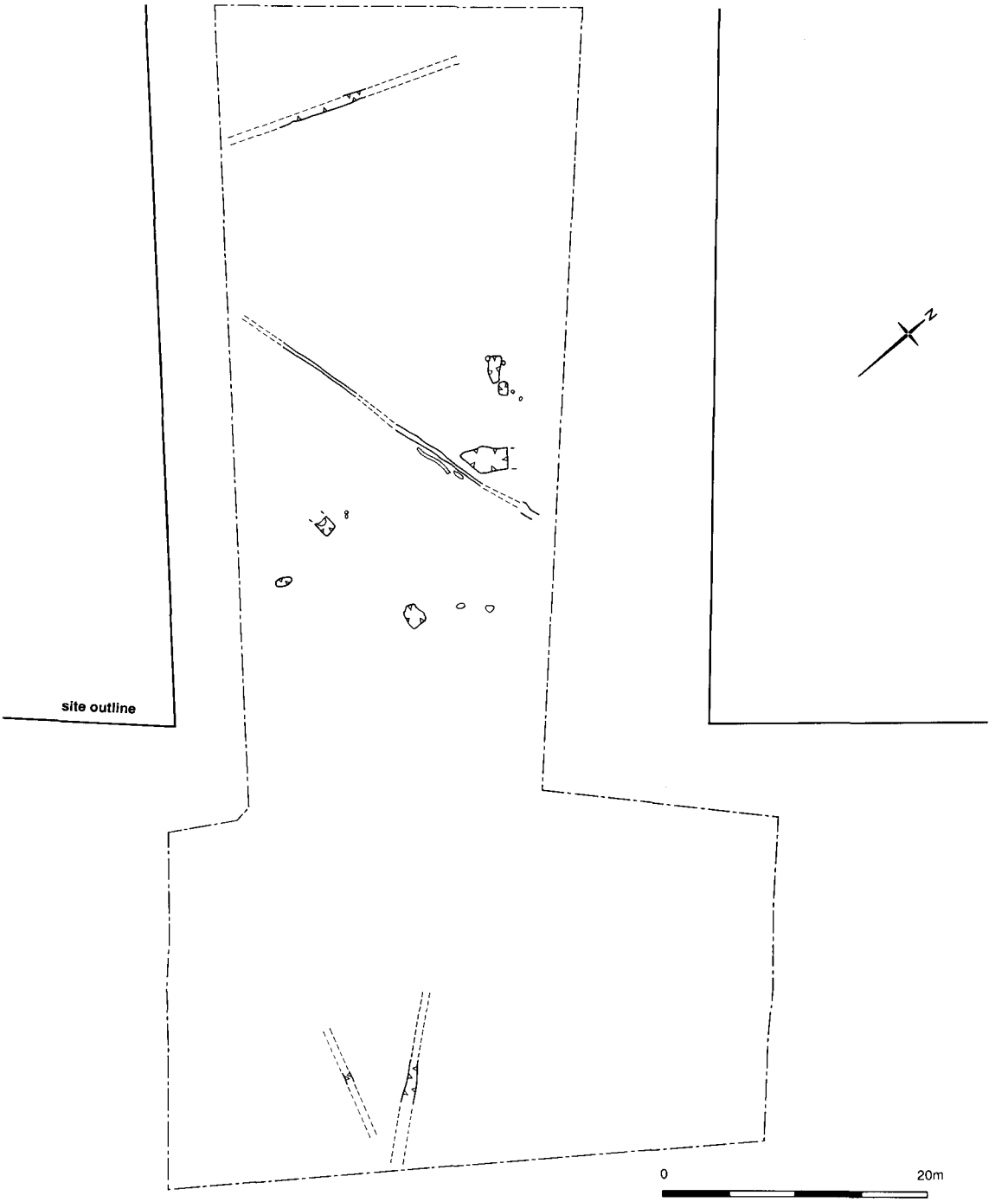

Fig 3. Roman Phase 1

material can, on a similar basis, be assigned to this phase. Carbonised cereal grains recovered from this material showed that grain processing was undertaken nearby, but also indicated that carbonisation was accidental or at least took place after rather than during processing.

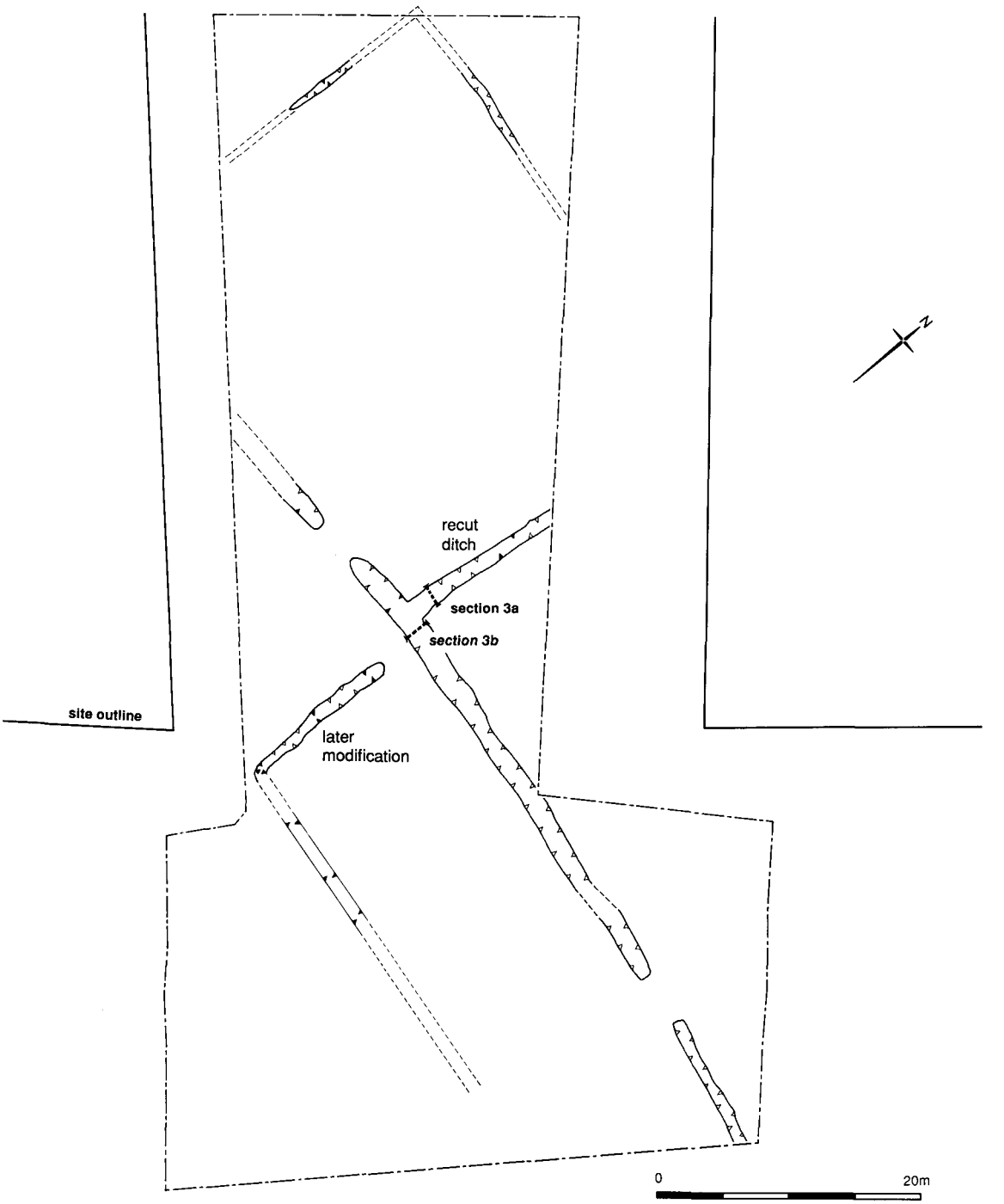

Fig 4. Roman Phase 2

Sealing the cut features over much of the site was a thin layer of mixed brickearth and topsoil, marking the interface between topsoil and subsoil and probably produced by a mixture of plough action and worm sorting. Excavation of this deposit produced a moderately large quantity of

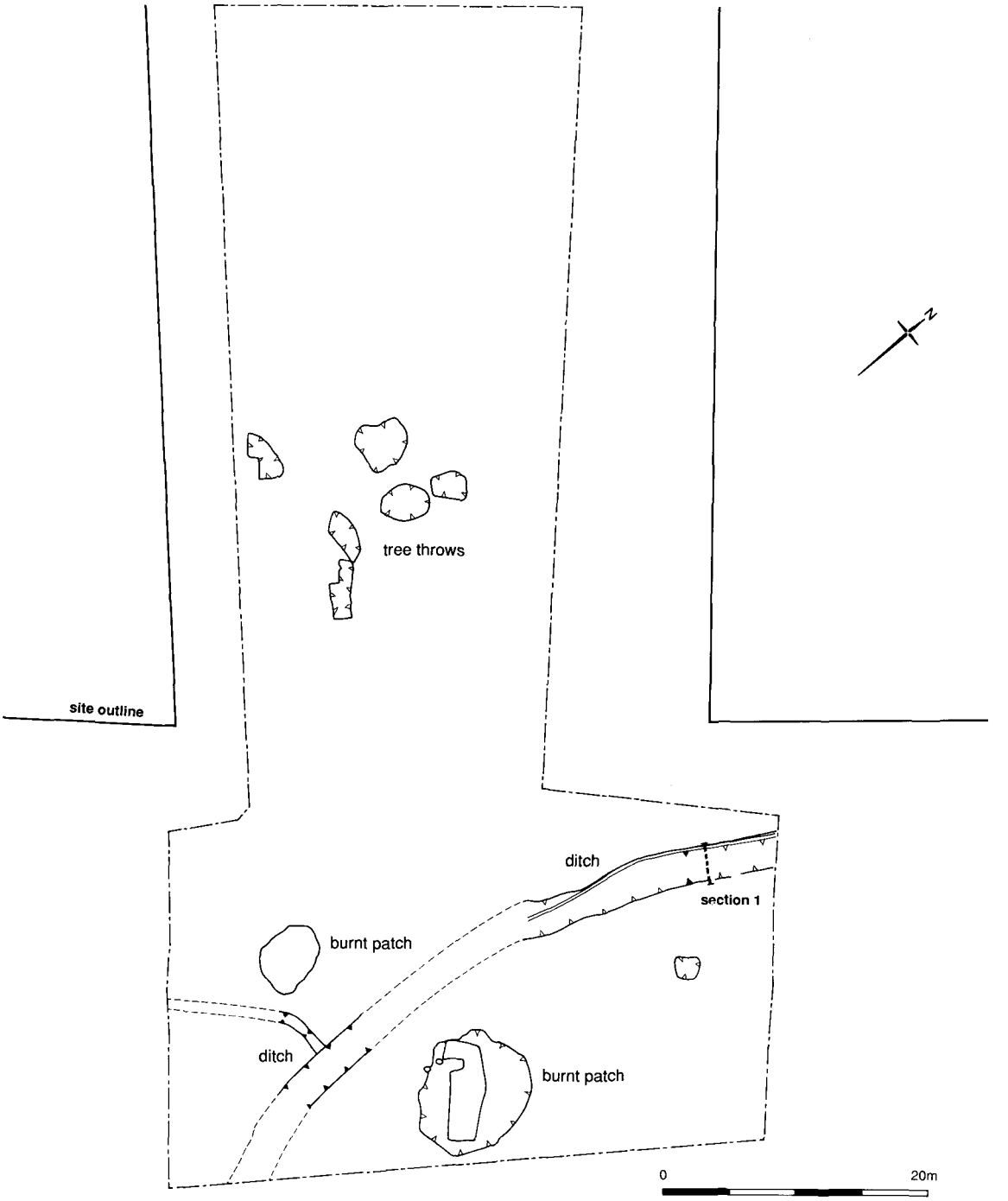

Fig 5. Roman Phase 3

pottery, much of which could be dated to the period AD 200–400. Unfortunately, although this material appears to be indicative of activity on the site in the Later Roman period, it was not possible to identify any features which could be positively assigned to this period.

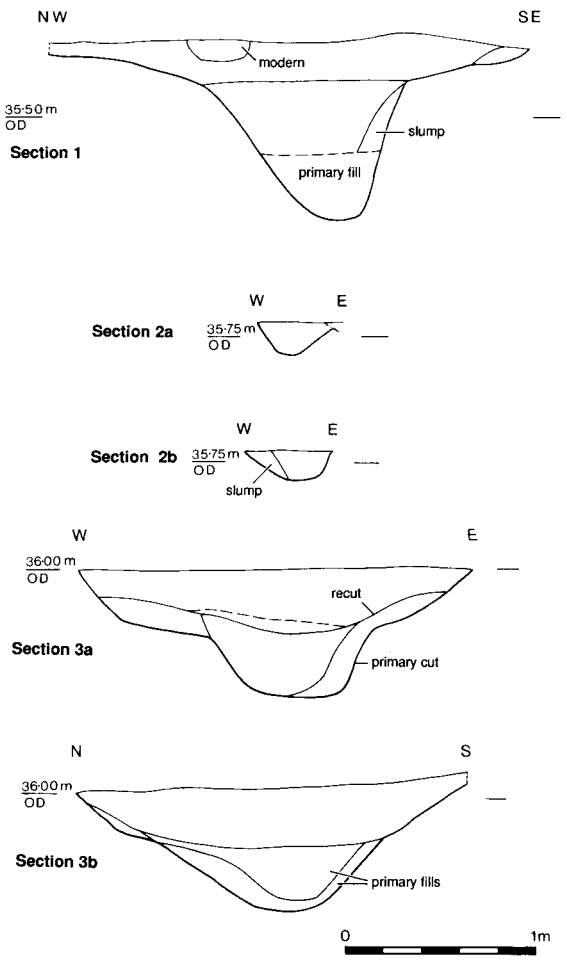

Fig 6. Sections through ditches of Roman Phases 1–3

CARBONISED CEREAL GRAINS

Twenty-six soil samples were collected from a range of feature types, and were processed using standard MoLAS techniques (MoLAS 1988).

Nine samples produced very small assemblages of carbonised plant remains, consisting virtually entirely of cereal grains. The grains were relatively well distributed amongst these samples, although one layer contained 16 of the 38 grains. Bread/club wheat (*Triticum aestivum* type) could be identified to species level and was the best represented cereal, with twelve grains. A small number of grains may belong to either wheat (*Triticum* sp.), barley (*Hordeum* sp.) or rye (*Secale cereale*). One grain was tentatively identified as oat (*Avena* sp.) although this may represent a weed. A weed seed of dock (*Rumex* sp.) was also found.

THE POTTERY

Robin Symonds

The site produced a total of six ordinary museum boxes (180mm × 460mm × 125mm) of pottery, consisting mainly of small or medium-sized sherds. Most of these were badly abraded which has inhibited identification. This is a particularly difficult problem because the identifiable pottery clearly contains Iron Age, early Roman, late Roman and a very small quantity of post-medieval material, and the more badly abraded pieces could conceivably belong to any of these periods. Nevertheless, some conclusions are possible, and these must form the basis for future work on sites of a similar nature in the region.

Most of the pottery is Roman, probably including many of the sherds identified as possibly prehistoric, although Roman pottery found on this kind of site can mean either pottery made in the Roman period (*ie* post-AD 43, including pottery which is essentially 'native'), or pottery made in a Romanised style (*ie* may be marginally pre-AD 43, but was either imported from Gaul or is a direct imitation of types imported from Gaul). In this material there is very little belonging to the latter category, although there are some sherds of grog-tempered ware which are in forms associated with terra nigra, which is a (Romanised) Gaulish style of pottery exported as far as Britain from the Augustan period onwards.

In terms of dating, the pottery reflects occupation on the site from sometime in the late Iron Age, perhaps from as early as the late 1st century BC but more likely from the beginning of the 1st century AD. The Roman phases yielded some elements which would not normally date to before AD 70. There appears to be a hiatus in the occupation, or at least a major decline, which may have begun in the middle of the 2nd century, or rather earlier, perhaps as early as AD 100. There was then still later occupation, which probably began sometime in the first half of the 3rd century, and continued through into the 4th. It is not possible to be much more specific than this, owing to the relative scarcity of the pottery, and its poor preservation. Interestingly, this appears to be exactly the same

picture seen with pottery from urban sites in London, albeit on a much larger scale and with much more evidence. Clearly in central London occupation continued throughout the 2nd century and into the 3rd, but there was an obvious decline in the second half of the 2nd century which corresponds with the description above. (However given the shallow and apparently truncated nature of the features on this site it is possible that the later pottery was derived from the ploughed out upper fills of the ditches. In that case the pottery recovered from the features must have been residual, and the dates of the three Roman Phases may be later than appears at first sight.)

Although the nature of the site is rather better illuminated by the environmental evidence than by the pottery, it is perhaps equally reflected in the fact that the pottery consists mainly of coarse ware jars and bowls, some of which were probably made nearby, while others were imported from some distance, particularly in the later Roman period. In the early Roman period there were few imported wares of any sort: the pottery included only three sherds of South Gaulish samian ware, which is found almost by the tonne in urban sites. There were two sherds of otherwise unidentifiable amphorae. The early Roman pottery is dominated by sand- and grog-tempered wares (SAND and GROG) which may not have been transported more than a few miles at most. The only exception to this is the presence of Verulamium Region oxidised ware (VRW): local potters obviously made grey wares, mainly jars, while white and buff-coloured flagons or bowls were bought or brought from Verulamium. The grey wares include a few examples of early wares from Alice Holt (AHSU), but it is the later Alice Holt/ Farnham grey wares (AHFA) which dominate in the later Roman period.

In the later Roman period, there are virtually no sherds which can be ascribed to purely local production, with the exception of some sand-tempered wares (SAND), whereas the grey wares include some imported black-burnished wares (BB1 and a wheel-made imitation, BBS) as well as Alice Holt wares. There are also Romano-British fine wares, mainly from the Nene Valley, near Peterborough (NVCC), but also from the Oxford region (OXRC). The mixed ploughsoil includes a sherd of Portchester 'D' ware (PORD), normally dated to the second half of the 4th century.

By way of conclusion, reports on the pottery from several recent sites in west (and south) London have noted the need to study in more detail the fabrics of coarse grog- and sand-tempered wares of the late Iron Age and early Roman period. While the vast majority of the sherds identified as grog-tempered ?prehistoric, or sand-tempered ?prehistoric *etc* offer nothing other than the fabric to identify, the fabrics could be subjected to petrological analysis, and this may lead to some recognition of areas of distribution of particular sources. No such sherds in this material exhibited any elements of decoration, but it has been possible to note the presence of the ubiquitous bead-rimmed jar (type 2A, dated AD 40–100), which occurs in various sizes. In sum, there is some potential further work on this sort of material, but it would be most usefully undertaken as part of a study of a substantial number of sites containing similar late Iron Age and early Roman pottery.

OTHER FINDS

A small quantity of other finds—metalwork, coins, worked stone and building material—were also recovered from the site.

Two coins, both in poor condition, were found. One was probably Claudian in date, although it could not be positively identified. The second was a *dupondius* of Antonine or Severan date. Both coins were found in features associated with Roman Phase 1.

The only other metallic finds were three fragments of iron and one scrap of lead, possibly building material.

A fragment of a hone or whetstone was recovered from the fill of one of the ditches of Roman Phase 2. Four fragments of small rotary quernstones were found, two of them were made from a volcanic lava and had been imported from the Rhineland and the remaining two from a fine grained sandstone probably derived from West Sussex. The quernstone fragments were found in features associated with Roman Phases 1 and 3 as well as within the mixed topsoil layer.

A quantity of mostly abraded ceramic building material was recovered. Where identifiable this material was largely of Roman date, attributable to the mid 1st to mid 2nd century. Brick, roof tile (both *tegula* and *imbrex*), and possibly also box flue-tile were identified. A small quantity of medieval or post-medieval peg-tile was recovered from the topsoil interface.

Table 1. Incidences of fabrics and forms found at Long Lane Playing Fields

Fabrics	
Samian wares:	
La Graufesenque samian ware (SAMLG)	3
Fine wares, Romano-British:	
Nene Valley colour-coated ware (NVCC)	4
Oxfordshire red/brown colour-coated ware (OXRC)	5
Fine reduced wares:	
Miscellaneous fine wares (FINE)	2
Fine micaceous black/grey ware (FMIC)	4
Black-burnished-type wares:	
Black-burnished ware, type 1 (BB1)	1
Black-burnished ware, type 2 (BB2)	1
Black-burnished ware, type 2, fine fabric (BB2F)	1
Black-burnished-style ware (BBS)	5
Reduced wares:	
Alice Holt/Farnham ware (AHFA)	8
Alice Holt/Surrey ware (AHSU)	9
Early Roman sandy ware type B (ERSB)	1
Highgate 'C' sand-tempered ware (HWC)	27
Highgate 'C' wares with added coarse sand (HWC+)	1
Miscellaneous sand-tempered wares (SAND)	104
Tempered wares:	
Miscellaneous coarse wares (COAR)	43
Grog-tempered ware (GROG)	70
Highgate 'B' grog-tempered ware (HWB)	2
Highgate Wood 'B' or 'C' ware (HWB/C)	1
Portchester 'D' ware (PORD)	1
Oxidised wares:	
Hoo ware (HOO)	1
Miscellaneous oxidised wares (OXID)	17
Miscellaneous red- and white-slipped wares (RWS)	1
?Verulamium Region coarse white-slipped wares (VCWS)	2
Verulamium Region white ware (VRW)	44
Miscellaneous mortaria types (MORT)	1
Amphorae:	
Miscellaneous amphorae fabrics (AMPH)	2
Other pottery:	
Prehistoric pottery (PREP)	9
Medieval pottery (MPOT)	1
Pale brown earthenware (MOCH)	1
Miscellaneous red earthenware (PMR)	4
Post-medieval pottery (PPOT)	1
TOTAL	377

Forms	
Flagons:	
Miscellaneous flagons (1)	1
Ring-necked flagon with flaring mouth (1B2)	2
Jars:	
Miscellaneous jars (2)	56
Bead-rimmed jar (2A)	19
Necked jar with carinated shoulder (2C)	1
Black-burnished-type everted-rimmed jar (2F)	2
Everted 'cavetto'-rim jar (2F13)	1
Otherwise undistinguishable necked jar (2T)	12
Storage jar (other than 2M) (2V)	4
Beakers:	
Miscellaneous beakers (3)	8
Bowls:	
Miscellaneous bowls (4)	5
Reeded-rimmed bowls (4A)	2
Bowl with flat/hooked/folded-over rim (4F)	1
'Surrey bowl' (4K)	1
Flanged bowl (4M)	2
Dragendorff 37 bowl (4DR37)	1
Dragendorff 38 flanged bowl (4DR38)	3
Dishes:	
Plate with plain exterior profile (5A)	2
Dish with simple rim (5J)	3
Mortaria:	
Miscellaneous mortarium (7)	3
Amphorae:	
Miscellaneous amphorae (8)	2
Miscellaneous forms:	
Miscellaneous forms (9)	2
Lids (9A)	7
Patera (handle) (9J)	1
Unidentified forms	238
TOTAL	377

More detailed descriptions of the above fabrics, along with illustrations of the forms, can be found in Davies et al. *1994 (for early Roman fabrics) and in Symonds and Tomber 1994 (for later Roman fabrics).*

DISCUSSION

What sort of settlement do the remains suggest once existed on the site? Any attempt to answer this question is bedevilled by the exiguous nature of the evidence.

It is possible, tentatively, to suggest that the construction of the modestly-sized building in the

south-eastern part, some time before AD 50, marks the start of the concerted agricultural exploitation of the site. The quantity of pottery datable to the first half of the 1st century AD recovered from the site as a whole reinforces the probability of more than short-term occupation. However in many ways it is easier to note the absence of expected features: there are no hut circles or eaves-drip gullies; no storage pits; no post-built structures; and no droveways or stock enclosures.

Subsequent phases present equal problems. Despite the presence of extensive and well-defined, small-scale enclosures and quite large quantities of domestic refuse, it was not possible to define any element of the settlement which might have produced them. This is a common feature of the Romano-British rural sites of West London. Sites excavated in the 1980s at Holloway Lane, Harmondsworth; Wall Garden Farm, Sipson; and Cranford Lane, Harlington all failed to produce any evidence of buildings despite the presence of extensive field systems and large quantities of pottery (MoLAS forthcoming). It is, of course, possible that in view of the relatively small area excavated at Long Lane (0.265ha) any settlement may have lain beyond the limits of the excavation. But the much larger areas excavated on the other sites make it less likely in those cases that the settlement areas were missed. The possibility exists that where surface-laid buildings have been erected their archaeological remains may be so ephemeral as to elude the excavator. The report of excavations at Brockworth, Glos (Rawes 1981), demonstrates the presence of hut circles within a rectilinear field system, similar in size and layout to that identified at Long Lane. The site was, like Long Lane, covered by a shallow topsoil and considerable truncation had resulted from ploughing. It was only possible to define the hut circles from the presence of shallow penannular eaves-drip gullies. If similar huts had been erected at Long Lane, without eaves-drip gullies, it is probable that their remains would not have been noticed in excavation. Building material noted in the finds assemblage from Long Lane further strengthens the possibility that buildings were once present on or near to the site. Roof tile fragments (*tegula* and *imbrex*) of mid 1st to mid 2nd-century date were found in the topsoil interface deposit, burnt daub and daub with wattle impressions were recovered from some of the ditches of Roman Phase 2, and a fragment of lead pierced by square section holes was also found in the topsoil interface deposit. All of these items point to the presence nearby of one or more buildings erected using typically Roman techniques.

Whether or not a settlement actually once existed on the site it is clear that the second half of the 1st century AD saw a reordering of the landscape on and around the site. Even the somewhat haphazard system of Roman Phase 1 is evidence of greater concern with landscape organisation than was demonstrated in the preceding phase. The rigidly rectilinear scheme of Roman Phase 2 suggests a comprehensive attempt at reorganisation (obviously not entirely successful since it was in its turn quickly replaced). It is possible that these changes in the landscape hold implications about the nature of the economy of the site and even about the nature of land tenure.

The date at which the site fell out of use is difficult to identify with precision. The latest set of field ditches (Roman Phase 3) contained pottery datable to no later than AD 160. Yet clearance of the site provided a considerable surface scatter of pottery, concentrated in the central part of the site, datable to the period AD 250–400. While it has not been possible to identify any features datable to this period, the quantity of material involved suggests that activity on the site did not cease *c.*AD 160, the latest date of the last phase of features.

Recent work on Romano-British rural sites suggests that agricultural practice was more widely based than had previously been thought (see for example Briggs *et al* 1986) with less clear-cut divisions between arable and pastoral regimes. The layout of the field systems at Long Lane, particularly those of Roman Phases 1 and 2 where the individual fields were relatively small, seems to imply their use as stock pens and therefore an economy at least partly pastoral. Material remains from the site are able to add a little to the picture. Arable farming is indicated by the presence of carbonised cereal grains and the fragmentary remains of quernstones. The grains, together with charcoal found in virtually all of the samples taken from the site, are indicative of human activities. The grains were accidentally burnt, possibly while being dried before storage or hardened for milling into flour.

Bread/club wheat has been recorded on sites dating from the Neolithic period onwards (Greig 1986). In west London it has been found in samples from a Roman corn drier at Wall

Garden Farm, Sipson and in late Iron Age or early Roman features at St Mary Abbots Hospital, Kensington. However, only at very few Roman sites, is it the best represented grain *eg* Barton Court Farm, Abingdon (Briggs *et al* 1986).

The advantages of bread wheat over other cereals are its greater tolerance of frost conditions, a high yield potential and, because it is a free-threshing grain, its ease of processing. This cereal also produces high quality bread. Conversely bread wheat requires greater soil fertility than other wheats, is a poor competitor with weeds and is more vulnerable to insect and fungal attack.

While the paucity of carbonised material from this site provides little detailed information about crop husbandry, processing or the nature of the settlement, the material does add to our understanding of the cereal types utilised in this part of west London during the late Iron Age/Roman period, an area for which at present there is a dearth of evidence.

Unfortunately soil conditions on the site were not conducive to the survival of bone and no animal or human bone was recovered from the site. However dairy farming may be indicated by the remains of two possible cheese-presses (both in sandy grey ware—SAND) one of which was found associated with the features of the Roman Phase 1.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the relatively exiguous nature of the discoveries made at Long Lane Playing Fields the site has some importance for the light it can shed on the nature of Romano-British rural activity in the hinterland of *Londinium*. In particular it allows comparison and contrast to be made with recently excavated sites on the Thames Gravels and in Kensington (MoLAS 1995).

Of most interest is the nature and chronology of the field systems established on the site. As Branigan states '. . .the laying out of thousands of acres of new fields, droveways and enclosures represents a . . . profound change in the British landscape. . .' (Branigan 1982).

The morphology and alignment of these new field systems may serve as indicators of land use, or even of land tenure with all the implications

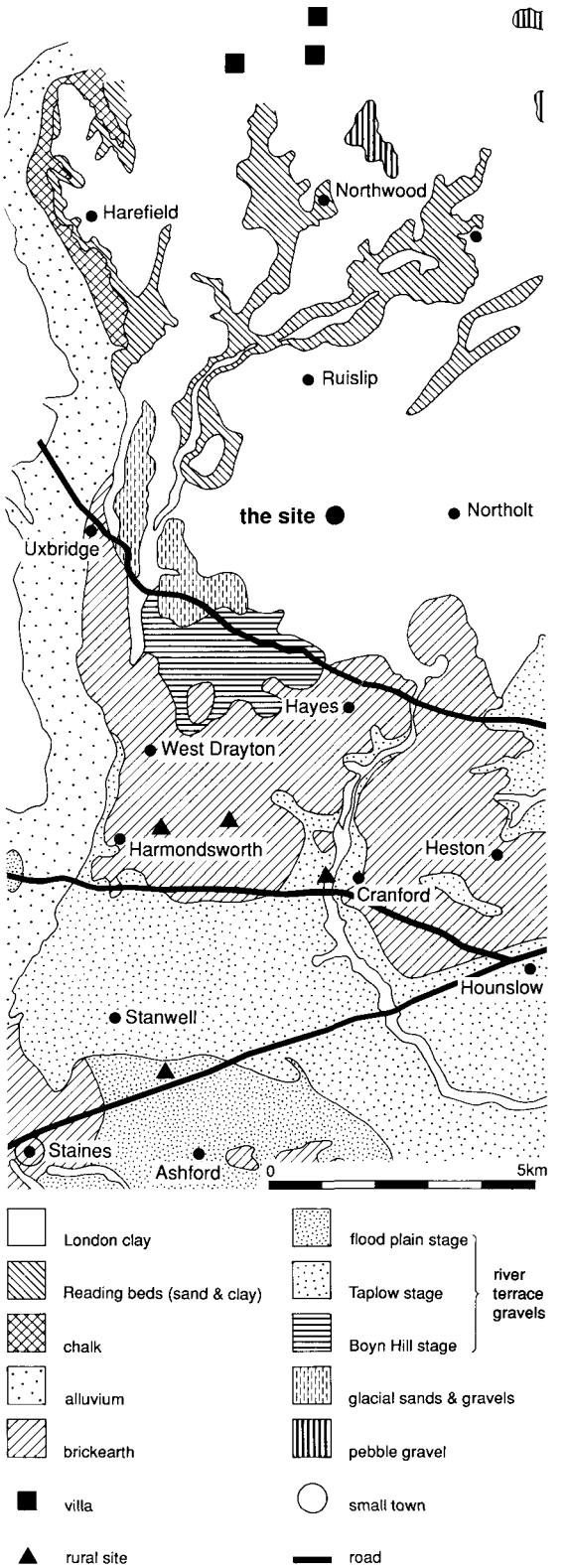

Fig 7. Romano-British sites and geology of west London

this may have for continuity and change between the late Iron Age and the Roman period.

Further study of this and other rural sites in London's hinterland may shed light on the perceived fluctuations in the scale and nature of urban settlement in the capital. For example, at first glance the apparent demise, or at least scaling down, of activity on the site after AD 160 seems to fit the supposed decline in the City's fortunes in the late 2nd century. This apparent link between rural and urban trends remains to be confirmed or modified.

Finally it is worth emphasising the revision of our view of the extent of Romano-British rural settlement which may be necessary following the discovery that localised areas of variation in drift geology may have proved attractive to settlement in areas where occupation has hitherto not been found (see Fig 7). While Romano-British settlement is well known from the Thames Gravels to the south of the site, the London Clay lands to the north of Uxbridge and Hayes have been thought to lack settlements of this period because of their heavier soils. It may be no coincidence that the site at Long Lane provided evidence for a localised variation in the drift geology and occupation of Roman date.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Acton Housing Association for their generous financial assistance at all stages in this project.

Particular thanks are also due to MoLAS colleagues John Giorgi (palaeobotany), Jeanette van der Post and Jane Sandoe (graphics).

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