

ROMAN FIELD BOUNDARIES AT SYON LODGE, LONDON ROAD, ISLEWORTH

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With contributions by Lucy Cramp, Steve Ford, Jennifer Lowe and Malcolm Lyne

SUMMARY

A small area excavation revealed low-key settlement evidence (ditches and pits), probably related to the nearby Roman road. The earliest ditch may be pre-Roman. The first dated ditches silted up in the first half of the 2nd century. The latest phase on the site is certainly late Roman (3rd- or possibly 4th-century). It is unclear whether there were two distinct phases with a break, or continuous use over a longer period. Very few finds other than pottery (and not much of that) were recovered, suggesting this area was at best peripheral to any occupation. The site was abandoned by the 4th century, and part of it was subsequently covered by a deep brickearth deposit.

INTRODUCTION

A small excavation was conducted by Thames Valley Archaeological Services Ltd between the 10th and 25th November 2004, adjacent to Syon Lodge and to the rear of 191 London Road, Isleworth. Planning permission had been granted to Rushmon Homes Ltd by the London Borough of Hounslow for development of the site for residential purposes, subject to a condition requiring the provision of an archaeological survey prior to the commencement of work.

The site comprised a rectangular plot of land on the south side of London Road, just north of the River Thames near its confluence with the Brent (TQ 1673 7688) (Fig 1), and covered approximately 0.1ha, of which roughly one third (330m²) was excavated. The site was on brickearth overlying gravel, with the modern surface at approximately 6m above Ordnance Datum.

The archive is currently held by Thames

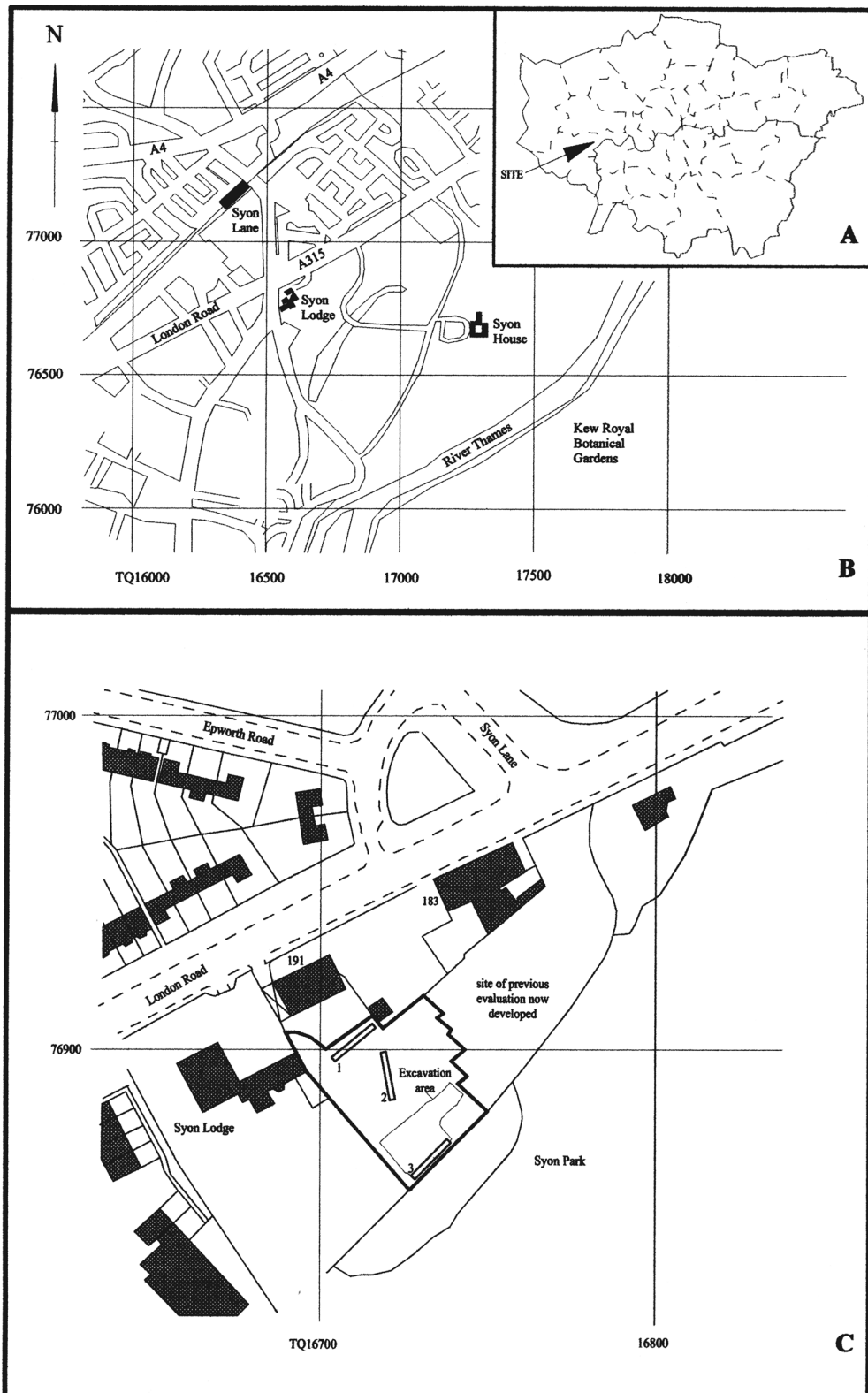
Valley Archaeological Services Ltd but will be deposited with the Museum of London in due course. The site code and museum accession number is SYG04, the TVAS project code is SYG04/54.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

A desk-based assessment for the adjacent site to the east (Sadarangani 2001) revealed a number of Sites and Monuments Record entries for the environs of the site, ranging from the Neolithic to the post-medieval period. Entries reflect the high potential for riparian settlement between the River Thames and the River Brent. Indeed, an ancient course of the Thames may have cut off what is now Syon Park as a separate ait (VCH 1962, 85; 87). There were entries for the site itself relating to the nearby excavations in Syon Lodge that identified prehistoric and Roman finds from the site (LA 1976); although no deposits were located, these suggested settlement in the close vicinity.

London Road, to the north of the site, probably marks the line of the Roman road from London (*Londinium*) to Silchester (*Calleva Atrebatum*), Margary's (1973) Route 4.

Excavations in the area have revealed prehistoric and (mainly) Roman occupation, with limited Saxon, medieval and later evidence (eg, most recently, at the nearby Brentford Gasworks, Bishop 2002; cf Canham 1978; Parnum & Cotton 1983). Although Roman finds are plentiful, especially along the roadside, there is nothing to indicate any great wealth or status in this period.



Syon House, with its park, to the south, was the site of a 15th-century abbey of the Order of the Most Holy Saviour (the English Bridgettines) and, since the 16th century, the seat of various Dukes of Somerset, Earls of Northumberland, and later Dukes of Northumberland (*VCH* 1911, 97–100).

Cartographic evidence shows that the site was part of the surrounding field-systems until the 18th century when a small part of the site may have been occupied by the Coach and Horses Inn. The Syon Park estate is shown on the Glover map (1635) and the boundary wall delimiting the site to the south was partially created by the 17th century, with Syon Lodge constructed in 1780. Until the 20th century the site seems to have been orchards and therefore relatively undisturbed until the construction of various small industrial units.

Despite the high potential of the area, evaluation of an adjacent site (Pine & Taylor 2002) located only features or finds of modern or late post-medieval date. Evaluation of the site itself during November 2004 (Ford & Taylor 2004) comprised three trenches, each 1.6m wide and approximately 15m long. These revealed well-preserved gullies and a pit dated probably between the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. To mitigate likely damage to or destruction of these archaeological deposits during development the excavation was required, in line with PPG16 (1990) and the Borough's policies on archaeology.

EXCAVATION METHODOLOGY

The excavation concentrated on a single area of 330m², in the south-eastern portion of the site where the evaluation had shown three gullies. The area stripped is shown in Fig 2. Topsoil and made ground (up to 1.2m deep) were removed by a 360° mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless bucket to expose the uppermost surface of archaeological deposits. An orange-brown, stony silty clay with some finds (151: redeposited brickearth), at deepest 0.62m, was confined to the eastern end of the site where it overlay almost all of the archaeological features. After cleaning, which failed to reveal features cutting through it, this layer too was removed

by machine. Archaeological deposits (cutting through the natural brickearth layer in the west of the site, and through gravel in the east) were then cleaned and excavated by hand. Discrete features were half-sectioned. Linear features were sample-excavated in slots. All termini and intersections were examined. Bulk soil samples for environmental evidence were taken from ten sealed and securely dated contexts, only two of which yielded tiny amounts of carbonised grain.

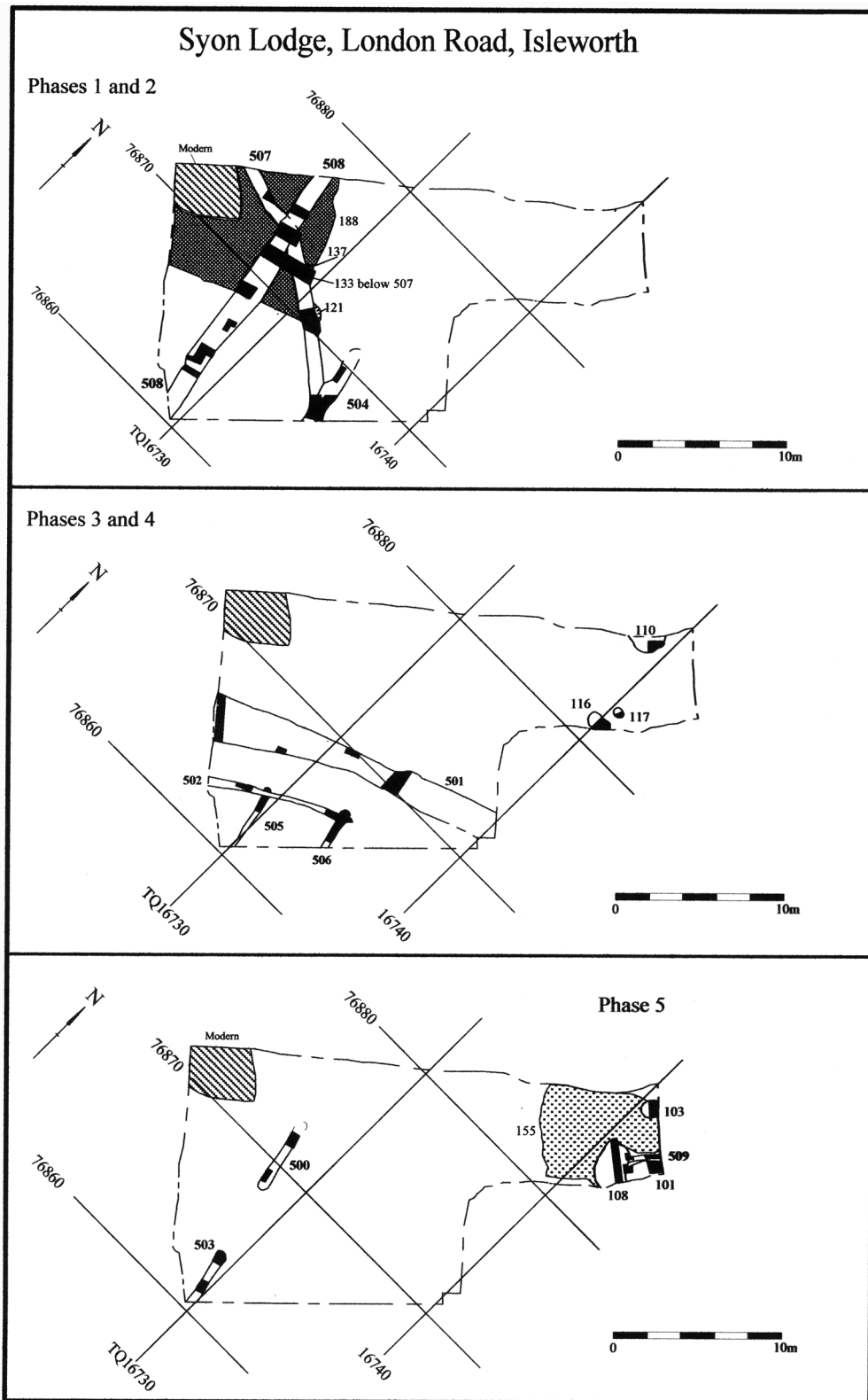
PHASE SUMMARY

The excavation uncovered a series of ditches, pits and a surface. Five phases of activity can be defined on stratigraphic and ceramic grounds, all but Phase 1 dating to the Roman period: no date can be assigned to Phase 1. There was no sign of use of the site beyond the late Roman period. The phasing is derived primarily from stratigraphy for the ditches (Fig 3), and from pottery for the pits and other features. Few features produced enough pottery to give secure dates, but the relative sequence is clear.

Phase 1: ?Prehistoric

Ditch 507 is stratigraphically the earliest ditch on the site, being cut by ditches 504 and 508 (and later features). At its westernmost limit, ditch 507 was overlain by a widespread reddish-grey sandy layer with occasional burnt flint (188), which in turn was cut by all later features in this area. The ditch cut only minor pits 133 and 121. None of the five slots through this ditch produced any dating evidence except three worked flints (from three separate slots) which could be of almost any prehistoric date and cannot in any case provide more than a broad *terminus post quem*. The sinuous line of this ditch and the lack of finds suggest a pre-Roman date, but this is speculative. The fact that the fills were no more markedly leached than those of the Roman ditches might suggest it was not significantly earlier; equally, the development of layer 188 above it might suggest a longer period between Phases 1 and 2. The ditch was generally 1m wide, from 0.1m to 0.5m deep, in a shallow u-shaped profile, with a single fill ranging from

Fig 1 (opposite). Location of site within London (A) and Hounslow (B), and detailed location of evaluation trenches and excavated area (C)



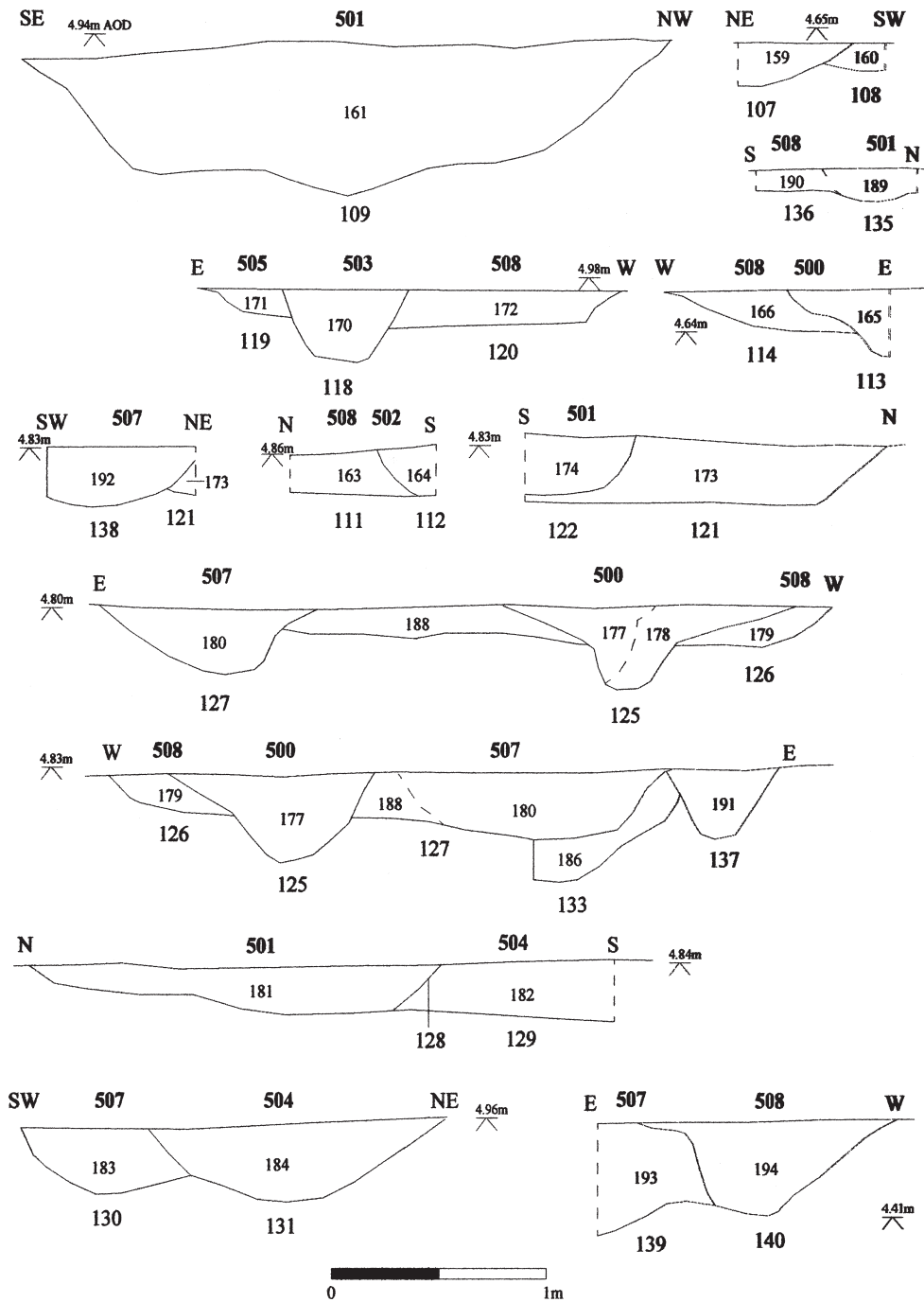


Fig 3. Key sections showing relationships between ditches

Fig 2 (opposite). Phased plans of the site showing excavated slots (shaded)

dark grey silty sand with common small stones to red-brown silty sand.

The origins of the sandy layer 188 are unclear, but it certainly developed between Phases 1 and 2 and was in places 0.3m deep. It contained no finds.

Pits 133 and 121 were cut by ditch 507, but in fact neither of these features was particularly clear. Pit 121 produced a single sherd of Roman sandy greyware which predates AD 270; it is probable this represents contamination, as this area was somewhat confused in excavation, and this sherd has not been used to date ditch 507.

Phase 2: early Roman (2nd century AD)

Ditches 504 and 508 formed the second phase. Ditch 508 was a major feature, generally 1.2m wide and 0.4m to 0.5m deep, and seven slots were excavated through it. These produced just a single large sherd of a grog-tempered storage jar and one of Highgate Wood C ware dating to AD 70–160.

Ditch 504 ran parallel to 508, 7m to the east. It was slightly less substantial and seems never to have extended north of the line later taken by 501, so possibly this line was already a feature in the landscape marked in some other way. Ditch 504 produced just one sherd of pottery. It is possible that 508 was a major boundary and that 504 marked the opposite side of a trackway or driveway.

Phase 3: Roman (late 2nd century AD)

Phase 3 saw ditches 505 and 506 duplicating the basic alignment of Phase 2, but narrowing the gap between the ditches slightly. Ditch 505 produced no finds: stratigraphically it could belong to any of the first three phases. Ditch 506 produced just a single abraded sherd of Alice Holt/Surrey ware, not closely datable within the early Roman period.

Phase 4: Roman (3rd century AD)

Phase 4 is marked by major ditch 501, which was cut right across the grain of the earlier landscape, and ditch 502; the latter seems to have been laid out across the line of the terminals of 503 and 506, which may still have been visible. From ditch 501 came 27 sherds of pottery of mixed date; one sherd in New Forest colour-coated ware and five (all from one slot)

in Oxfordshire red colour-coat suggest a date after the middle of the 3rd century. Ditch 502 produced no dating evidence.

Phase 5: later Roman (3rd or 4th century AD)

Finally, ditches 500 and 503 redefined the line of 508. Ditch 500 produced only four abraded sherds of 2nd-century pottery which must all be residual if ditch 501 is correctly dated to the later 3rd century. Ditch 503 produced 26 sherds, some abraded, all again of 2nd-century currency, and it is possible this could belong to Phase 3, but it has been phased here on the assumption that it forms a pair with ditch 500.

The eastern corner of the site, on an outcrop of gravel, revealed a number of intercutting pits, which in all probability were not discrete features but repeated reuses of a single large dumping area. These dumps cannot be tied into the stratigraphic sequence of the ditches, but can be broadly grouped into the later Roman period (1, 103, 106, 110, 116 all producing 3rd-century or later pottery, other 'pits' having mixed assemblages).

Several of these indistinct features cut a firm compacted layer (155), up to 0.14m deep, of large subangular gravel set in dark grey clayey silt which seems to have been a deliberately laid surface. In some cases it was unclear if this surface had been laid over the dumping/pit features and been eroded, or was cut by them. Layer 155 was partially stripped off by machine. Pits 110, 116 and 117 were certainly below this layer, and their pottery confirms that 155 cannot have been laid before the middle of the 3rd century. The surface itself also produced five sherds of Roman pottery, suggesting a date in the middle or later 3rd century. It seems likely that all of this activity took place in a relatively short burst at roughly the same period.

Ditch 509 cut across the top of the pit cluster and must be Phase 5, although its pottery suggests it should be earlier.

Later features

Other than modern truncation, there were no later features; in particular there was no medieval or post-medieval presence on the site. As a relatively deep brickearth deposit covered much of the archaeology, it may be that rising water levels in the late Roman period made the site uninhabitable and liable to flooding.

THE FINDS

Pottery

Malcolm Lyne

A small assemblage of 153 sherds (1368g) was recovered from 27 contexts, including 25 sherds (81g) from sieving. All the sherds are Roman except a single late post-medieval sherd. A summary of the pottery by fabric is shown in Table 1. The amount of Roman pottery from the site is very small and suggests that the area excavated was peripheral to any occupation.

The fabrics

Pottery fabric codings, with the exception of CVGW, are those formulated by Museum of London Archaeological Services for Roman pottery from the London area (Anon 2000):

Table 1. Pottery summary by fabric

Code	Fabric	Sherds	Wt (g)
AHFA	Alice Holt/Farnham greywares	24	173
AHSU	Alice Holt/Surrey very-fine-sanded greyware	14	84
BAET	Baetican amphora (Dressel 20)	2	59
BB2	North Kent black burnished ware	6	50
CVGW	Colne Valley grey ware	3	31
DORBB1	Dorset Black-Burnished ware	6	15
FINE	Miscellaneous finewares	1	1
FMIC	Fine micaceous grey/black wares	1	5
GROG	Miscellaneous grog-tempered ware	3	109
HOO	Hoo St Werburgh ware	4	6
HWC	Highgate Wood C ware	8	57
LVCC	Lower Nene Valley colour-coat	1	1
MISC	Unidentified	2	3
NFCC	New Forest colour-coat	2	10
NKFW	Thames-side (north Kent) fineware	1	4
OXID	Miscellaneous oxidized wares	14	87
OXRC	Oxfordshire red colour-coat	7	17
POST-M	Miscellaneous post-medieval ware	1	7
SAMLZ	Central Gaulish samian	2	6
SAMMV	Les Martres de Veyre samian	2	61
SAND	Miscellaneous greyware	46	558
VRW	Verulamium region whiteware	3	24

The earliest Phase 1 ditch, 507, was totally lacking in pottery, as was Phase 2 ditch 504. Five of

the six cuts across the other Phase 2 ditch (508) were equally lacking, but one fill yielded a jar rim fragment in Highgate Wood C fabric (c.AD 70–160). This probably dates Phase 2 to the early 2nd century.

The Phase 3 ditches 505 and 506 were entirely lacking in pottery as was the Phase 4 ditch 502: the fills of the other Phase 4 ditch, 501, did, however, yield 27 sherds, of which the latest are five fragments from an uncertain form in Oxfordshire red colour-coat fabric (c.AD 240–400), a fragment from a closed form in New Forest colour-coat fabric (c.AD 260–400), and 15 sherds from 3rd-century jar and dish forms in Thameside greyware. These, coupled with an absence of Alice Holt/Farnham greywares, suggest a 3rd-century date for the Phase 4 ditches.

The Phase 5 ditches 500, 503 and 509 produced 33, 26 and 4 sherds respectively. The material from ditches 500 and 503 dates to before AD 250 and is probably residual: that from ditch 509 is of similar date range and certainly residual, as the feature cut several later pits. Pit 101 produced 4 sherds of 3rd-century Alice Holt/Farnham greyware and pits 103 and 106 yielded a further 7 and 11 late 3rd-century sherds respectively. This suggests that these pits are all Phase 4 features.

None of the pottery can be said to be later than AD 300 with any certainty.

Animal bone

Siân Anthony

Animal bone is represented by only six elements recovered from six contexts and weighing 106g. All are in a poor state of preservation, showing extreme fragmentation, cortical exfoliation, and degradation. This is caused by the acidic geology of the site which consists of sandy brickearth. Some pieces of bone were complete upon discovery but fragmented severely upon excavation. The few details observable are recorded in the archive.

Struck flint

Steve Ford

Just two intact and two broken flakes were recovered. One, from modern made ground, is of dubious antiquity. The three others came from ditch 507 and are likely to be of Neolithic or Bronze Age date.

Burnt flint*Siân Anthony*

A total of 106 pieces of burnt flint were recovered from five features, including Phase 1 ditch 507 and pit 121, and three Roman gullies. Only the concentration of 29 pieces from pit 121 and 50 from gully 504 are of interest, as being possibly prehistoric. There is no information on what activity might have produced this burnt flint; cooking or tree/scrub clearance are equally possible. None of the pieces is worked.

Other finds*Jennifer Lowe*

44 fragments of Roman brick and tile (1423g), mainly tile, were recovered. Three pieces are fragments of *tegula*, and at least one small fragment may have been shaped for re-use as a *tessera*, but no others were more closely identifiable and there were no marked concentrations, eight pieces from surface 155 being the maximum from a single context. Given the robustness of this material, and the prevalence of its re-use, it is not necessarily safe to infer that a substantial Roman building of some pretensions stood nearby, although it is possible.

Soil conditions were not favourable to preservation of most other materials. A total of 22 fragments (272g) of burnt clay, mostly from gullies 500 and 502, provided no distinguishing features. A single amorphous lump of ferrous material (124g) seems to have been natural panning; four lumps of iron slag (86g) are no more than (indeed, much less than) normal 'background noise' for this material in the Roman period.

Environmental remains*Lucy Cramp*

Ten samples of sediment were floated over a 0.25mm mesh and sorted in the laboratory under a low-power microscope for the recovery of preserved plant remains and charcoal. Overall, the recovery of carbonised material was low. Two samples contained a small number of poorly preserved grains, including spelt wheat (*Triticum spelta*), barley (*Hordeum* sp.) and oats (*Avena* sp.). One of these samples also yielded single glumes of *Triticum spelta* and *Triticum spelta* or *dicoccum* (spelt or emmer wheat). The

cereals represented are typical Iron Age or Roman crops and their presence at this low frequency is likely to represent nothing more than background scatter.

CONCLUSIONS

Remains from the Roman period in Hounslow have chiefly consisted of boundary ditches, enclosures, and other occasional low-key, dispersed, settlement activity (MoLAS 2000, especially gazetteer, 167), as here. More substantial settlement remains have only occasionally been encountered. The clustering of this evidence along the line of the London–Silchester road may be an artificial product of the concentration of research, but given the quantity of recent archaeological investigation in Greater London, it begins to look as if it might be a reflection of the real Roman settlement pattern (MoLAS 2000, map 7). Margary suggested (1973, 74) that this main road passed 'through lonely forested country' as an explanation for the lack of branch roads all the way to Silchester. While the Roman countryside might today be thought of as much more densely settled and intensively managed than this, the evidence, in Hounslow at least, does not appear to contradict him. The findings from this site are entirely in keeping with the essentially low-status, rural character observed in much Roman settlement in the area. Excavations at an adjacent site recovered late Roman pottery but no dated features, also suggesting a settlement nearby but not on the site (Sadarangani 2001; LA 1976).

The features here are not particularly closely dated, although a division into earlier and later Roman seems assured. The earliest ditch may be pre-Roman, although there is no solid evidence for this. The first dated ditches silted up probably in the first half of the 2nd century. The latest phase on the site is certainly late Roman (3rd- or possibly 4th-century). It is unclear whether there were two distinct and separate phases of land division or continuous use over a longer period. If the latter, the quantity and nature of finds suggest this area was at best peripheral to any occupation. As the excavation area was around 60m south of the current line of London Road (presumed to equate to the Roman road), the east–west ditches might have marked the rear of plots fronting the road, although a greater density of both finds and features would normally be expected, and it may be that the

road was not specifically the focus here. No evidence of any Saxon element was identified, and no features cut the later Roman ditches.

Unfortunately, no finds to which a specific purpose can be attributed were recovered, other than pottery which indicates normal domestic activity somewhere nearby. Tiny quantities of slag represent only 'background noise' common on almost all Roman sites and need not indicate metalworking on the site. The programme of environmental sampling also produced only a background scatter from which no significant conclusions can be drawn.

The site was comprehensively abandoned by the 4th century. A relatively deep brickearth deposit covered much of the eastern end of the site. The origin of this layer is unclear but it does not appear to have been a natural deposit, such as a flooding episode, and although this is possible, it would be unlikely to have made the site uninhabitable. The generally observed trend of water levels in the Thames shows these rising through the 1st century but falling during most of the rest of the Roman period, before rising again during the Saxon era (Milne *et al* 1983; Brigham 1990). The Roman land surface here was at around 4.8m AOD, and even the greatest estimates for the Roman water level do not normally exceed +1.25m AOD, so that a single flood episode would not account for abandonment. Perhaps the site was abandoned for reasons unconnected with the water level and the brickearth deposit accumulated much more slowly and (potentially) much later.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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