

Late Bronze/Early Iron Age settlement evidence from Manor Hospital, Epsom

A desk-based assessment carried out in Spring 1996 (Shaikhley 1996) assessed the archaeological potential of the proposed development site at Manor Hospital, Christchurch Road, Epsom (TQ 19464 61457) and was followed by a geophysical survey of the northern part of the site later that year (GSB 1996). Both reports served to highlight the archaeological potential of the c 30 hectare development site. The desk-based assessment included information regarding the earthwork towards the southern end of the site, thought to be a moat (Turner 1977), and a nearby fishpond, now filled in, which may be related to the possible moat and could signify the presence of a manorial complex. The geophysical survey suggested the presence of possible industrial features such as kilns or associated debris (*ibid*).

An archaeological evaluation was carried out by Thames Valley Archaeological Services (TVAS) in November 1996 (Saunders 1996), in accordance with PPG16 (1990) and with the approval of the Archaeological Officer for Surrey County Council. The site lies on London Clay with an occasional drift geology of brownish-grey mottled sandy clay. The site archive is to be deposited with the Bourne Hall Museum in Ewell (site code MHE96/39).

The evaluation consisted of 57 machine-cut trenches across four areas (fig 1, A–D) designed both to test for the presence of the possible moat and to examine whether other features existed on the site. None of the possible features identified by the geophysical survey were discovered during the evaluation or the later excavation and the anomalies were probably due to the presence of modern or ferrous material, nor did the fieldwork locate the supposed moat. It was concluded that the earthwork illustrated on maps in the 19th century was a relatively shallow, ornamental feature. The location of an earlier, medieval, moat was not found.

Just two evaluation trenches, 17 and 17a, contained archaeological features (fig 1). Both were shallow scoops (3 and 4) containing pottery and worked flint of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age (LBA/EIA) date (fig 2, 2–14). The features were very ephemeral and had been much disturbed by root action from nearby trees. Scoops 3 and 4 contained 68 and 44 pottery sherds respectively. Distinctive sherds from both features indicate a LBA/EIA tradition, with shouldered jar forms decorated with fingertip impressions on the shoulders and very occasionally on the rim. Three sherds, possibly from the same vessel, were decorated with horizontal incised lines. All the sherds were well fired and tempered with calcined flint with varying quantities of sand and ochre.

The findings of the evaluation were sufficient to prompt a small excavation in the south-eastern part of the site. The excavated area was limited by the presence of mature trees and live services. During discussions with the County Archaeological Officer on site it was decided to excavate two conjoined areas, A1 and A2, adjacent to evaluation trenches 17 and 17a, and two further areas, B and C, a little distance to the west (fig 1). This was carried out by TVAS during April 1997 and revealed a small pit (100), truncated on its eastern side by modern services. This was found to contain 37 body sherds, two base sherds (fig 2, 1) and 22 very small fragments of pottery, all probably belonging to a single, undecorated, handmade vessel with a slack profile. The vessel belongs to the LBA/EIA tradition and, although it lacks distinctive decoration or form, is probably of similar date to the material recovered during the evaluation from neighbouring features 3 and 4. The fabric contained a low density of calcined flint, up to 1mm across with rare voids formed from burnt out organic material (grass) and had rare mica inclusions. The pottery was in too fragmentary a condition for reconstruction of the profile to be possible.

Eight pieces of struck flint were recovered during the evaluation and excavation and, whilst none were diagnostic in themselves, all would fit easily within a LBA/EIA context. A flint core from the fill of pit 100 almost resembles a crude denticulate scraper.

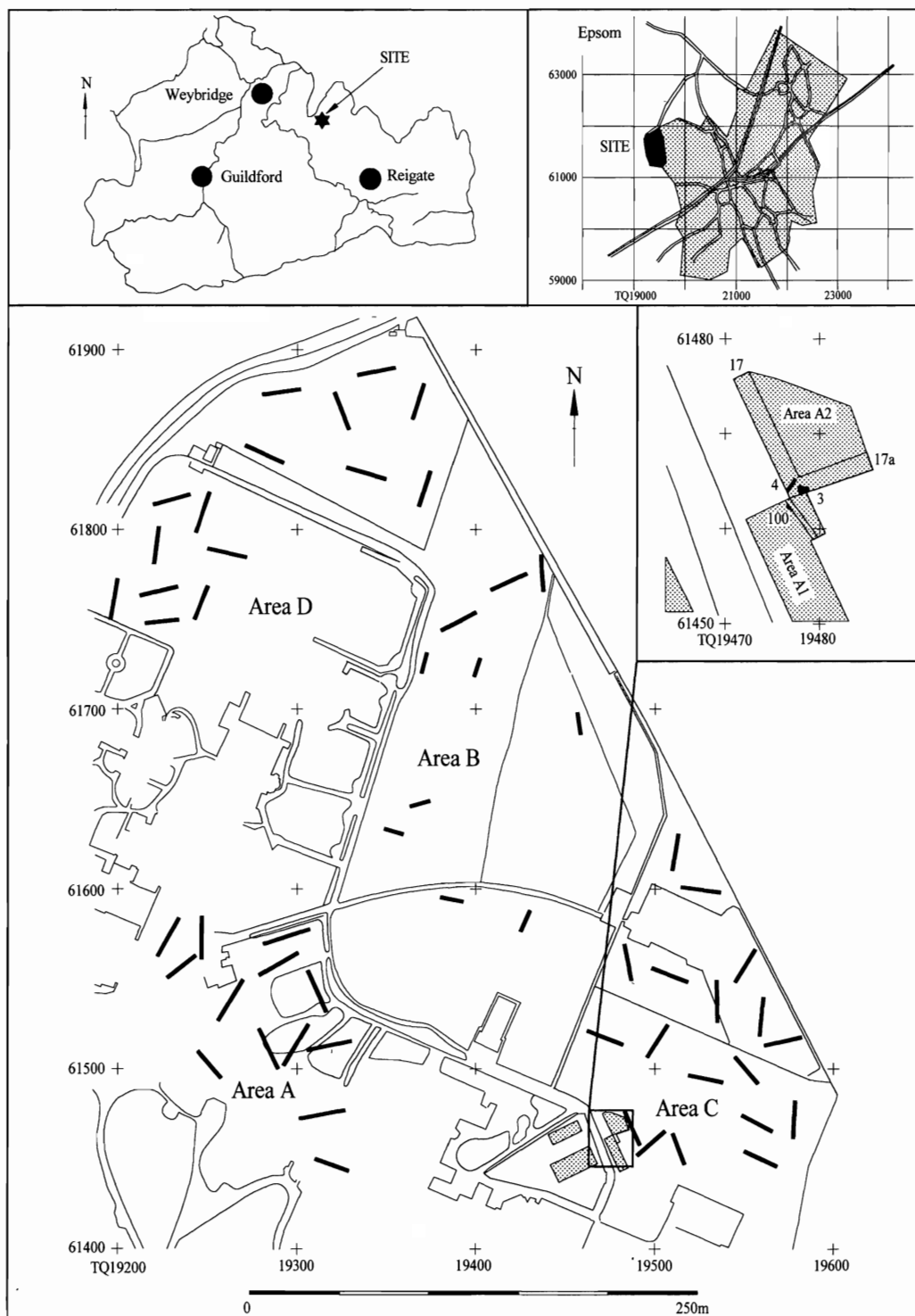


Fig 1 Manor Hospital, Epsom: location of site and plan of evaluation trenches and excavated area. (Reproduced by kind permission of the Ordnance Survey, © Crown Copyright NC/00/1028)

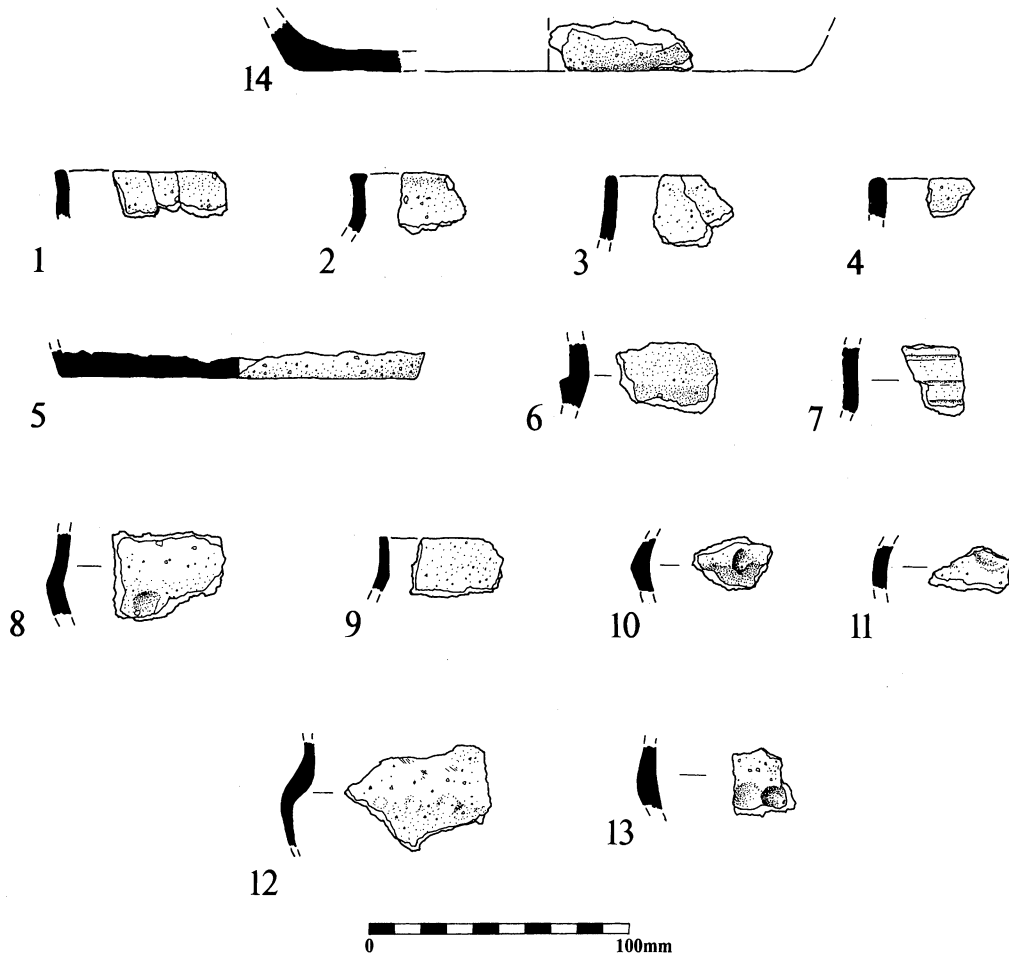


Fig 2 Manor Hospital, Epsom. Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery: 1 from pit 100 (context 150); 2–5 Fabric C from shallow scoop 3 (context 50); 6–9 Fabric B from shallow scoop 3; 10–14 Fabric B from shallow scoop 4 (context 51)

Discussion

The heavy London Clay subsoil, regarded as agriculturally marginal land, runs in an east–west belt to the north of the North Downs and it is generally considered that this land was poorly settled in the prehistoric period (Needham 1987, 130). This is particularly true of the LBA/EIA for which there is an almost complete lack of archaeological evidence for occupation on the London Clay areas of Surrey (Shaikhley 1996, 2). A Late Iron Age gold coin was found on an allotment 0.5km to the south-east of Manor Hospital (Cotton 1936, 138–9) but otherwise few artefacts have been discovered in the vicinity (Shaikhley 1996, 3). Finds made in this area have been seen as nothing more than casual losses during forestry operations (Needham 1987), in contrast to the floor of the Thames Valley. However, field survey of similar geological outcrops to the west, in east Berkshire, have shown the presence of a persistent, if low density, prehistoric use of the London Clay (Ford 1987). Its absence in Surrey is more likely to be a reflection of the lack of excavation and fewer chance discoveries than a genuine absence.

The evidence from Manor Hospital, Epsom, although slightly earlier in date, supports that from RAF Chessington (Ford 1993; Torrance & Durden, forthcoming). Here, an evaluation and

excavation located features of mid/late Iron Age date. Both sites provide useful information on the changing settlement pattern during the Iron Age, indicating an intensification of land use with expansion onto the more marginal, poorly-drained, acidic soils of north Surrey.

Although demonstrating that LBA/EIA settlement is to be found on these heavy clay soils, the limited number of features do not necessarily suggest the presence of a permanent or substantial settlement. The limited area available for examination in this part of the development site makes it difficult to speculate whether other associated features may be present in the vicinity. It might be the case that the finds represent a low level of intensity of activity on the periphery of the main focus of settlement activity, and that more substantial remains lie as yet undiscovered not too far distant.

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