

Archaeological investigations at Stepstile Meadow, Flanchford Road, Reigate

Introduction

Between May 2007 and November 2008 Archaeology South-East (UCL Institute of Archaeology) was commissioned by RPS Planning and Development on behalf of their client to undertake an archaeological investigation at Stepstile Meadow, Flanchford Road, Reigate (fig 1). The site was known to have high archaeological potential from remains found during the construction of the original house in 1939. The current excavations were required in fulfilment of a planning condition. Development comprised demolition of the existing dwelling and construction of a new house with basement leisure facilities, swimming pool, underground car park and new driveway. The archaeological investigation revealed further, albeit limited, archaeological remains predominantly of Iron Age/Romano-British date.

Background

The site lies on sloping land close to the river Mole within an area of variable clay drift geology overlying the Hythe Beds. Previous finds from the site include a single Neolithic blade (HER ref 3008), Iron Age pottery (HER ref 3009), a quern stone, Roman pottery and tile (HER ref 828) and a Tudor Green ware sherd (HER ref 3010). This material was recovered in 1939 by Sheppard Frere during construction of the original house. Further Neolithic findspots are recorded at Wonham Mill (HER ref 3007) and from Reigate Heath (HER ref 2493), which is better known for a linear series of scheduled Bronze Age barrows (centred at TQ 237 504). Further to the east a 2nd and 3rd century Roman tileworks has been discovered in the area of Doods Way (Bird 2004, 71; Jones 2004; Masefield & Williams 2003).

Results

The initial work comprised the machine excavation of archaeological evaluation trenches (trenches 1–5) within the garden of Stepstile Meadow, in close proximity to the house (ASE 2007). Trenches 1, 3, 4 and 5 contained no archaeology and revealed evidence of truncation (trench 5) or made-ground layers where the ground surface had been raised (trenches 3–4). In trench 2 there was less disturbance and a possible posthole and natural hollow both yielded grog-tempered pottery sherds of Late Iron Age/early Roman date.

Subsequently, a watching brief and excavation in close proximity to the house were conducted during 2007–8 (ASE 2009a). Areas 1, 3 and the northern half of Area 2 were devoid of archaeological features probably due to truncation from previous construction. However, within the southern half of Area 2, eight features of Late Iron Age/Romano-British date were located (fig 2). Three charcoal-rich pits with evidence of *in-situ* heating or burning (621, 650 and 697), a terminating ditch or hedge line (684), several further pits (648, 623 and 628) and a deposit of pottery were recorded. In addition, several natural features (tree-throw holes or animal burrows), which occasionally contained residual archaeological material, were present.

The shallow ditch or hedge line (684) survived to *c* 11 m in length and contained Late Iron Age/Romano-British pottery, struck flint, bone, a piece of furnace lining with adhering slag, a fragment of copper-alloy Colchester/dolphin brooch and a decorative tapering cylinder fragment that may also be part of an Aucissa-type brooch. One circular pit (648) contained three vessels that appeared to have been deposited in a semi-complete state. The vessels

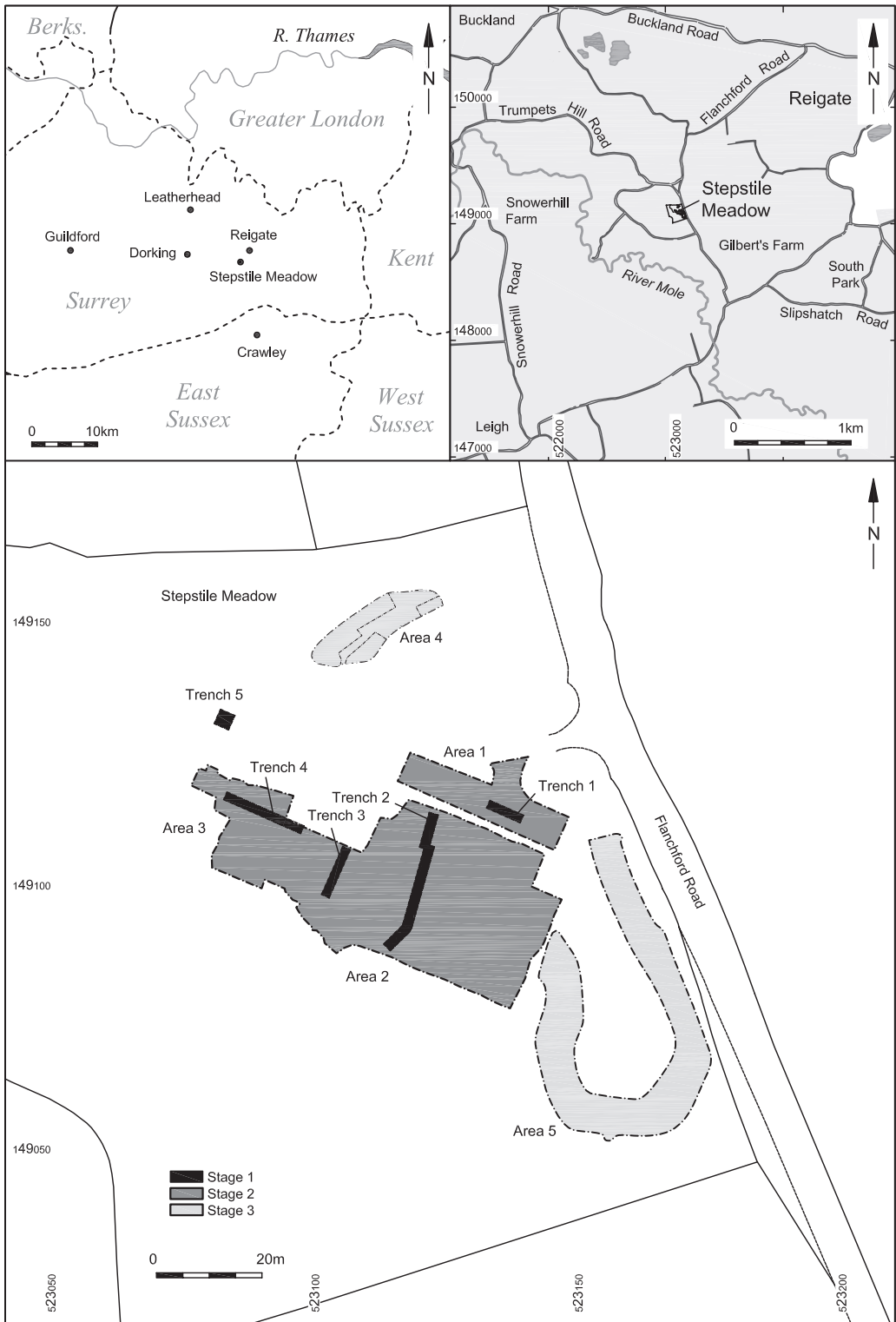


Fig 1 Stepstile Meadow, Reigate. Site location. (© Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. All rights reserved)

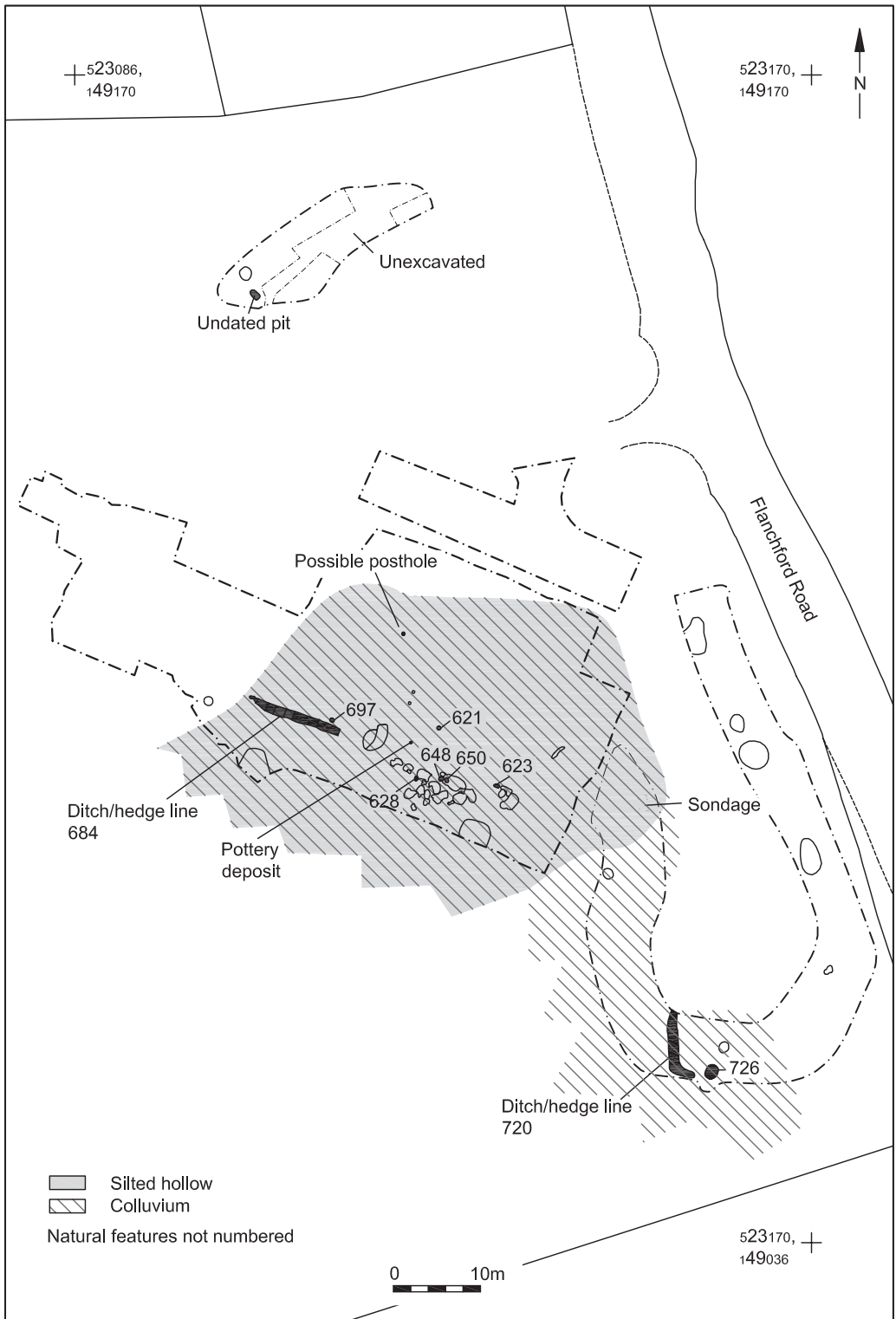


Fig 2 Stepstile Meadow, Reigate. Plan of excavated features.

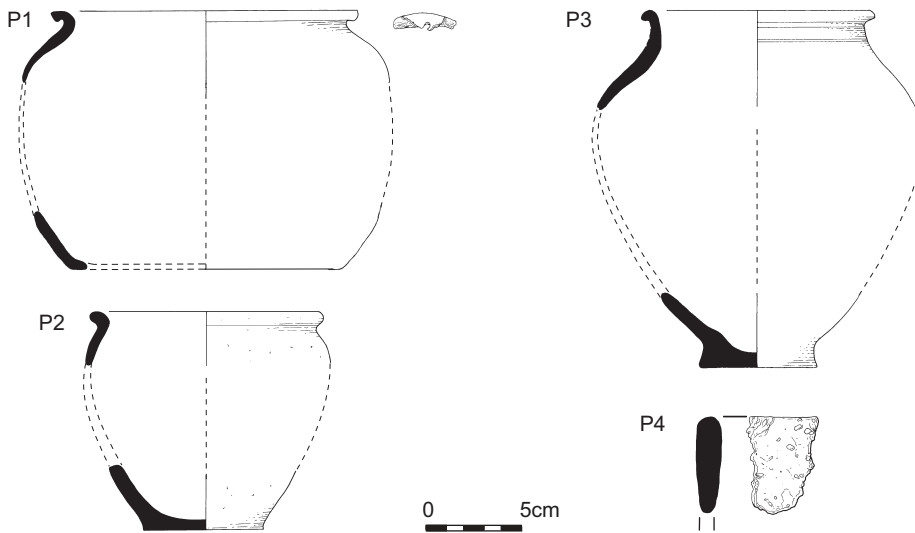


Fig 3 Stepstile Meadow, Reigate. Early Roman pottery from fill 649 of pit 648 and Early Neolithic Plain Bowl pottery from colluvial layer 712.

included a fine grog-tempered wheel-thrown vessel (fig 3, P1), a cruder handmade grog-tempered bead-rim jar (fig 3, P2), and a romanised wheel-thrown necked jar (fig 3, P3). In addition to this Late Iron Age/Early Roman evidence, finds of residual Mesolithic/Early Neolithic worked flint and Bronze Age pottery attest to earlier human activity in the vicinity of the site.

The final stage of work comprised excavation in two further areas (ASE 2009b). Area 4 to the north was bordered by the retained garden in an area that had been terraced during the construction of the original house. A proportion of Area 4 remained unexcavated to avoid live electricity services. Stripping of the overlying topsoil resulted in the exposure of natural sand and two features: a probable tree-throw hole and an undated pit. Area 5 was located on sloping pasture to the east of the development. The stratigraphy was similar to that of Area 2: heavily disturbed topsoil overlying varied deposits of natural sand. In places, particularly down-slope, colluvium up to 0.6m thick overlay the sand. In the western part of Area 5, compact sandy clay natural, also found in trench 2 and Area 2, seemed to be the result of the silting of a hollow or small valley (fig 2). A sondage through this material proved its depth and demonstrated its sterility in comparison with the overlying colluvium.

Only two archaeological features were encountered in Area 5: a possible ditch or hedge line (720) and a pit (726). Although several other features were also investigated, none of these were found to be of archaeological interest. Pit 726 contained a single sherd of Late Bronze Age or Iron Age pottery, an abundance of charcoal and some natural and heated flint nodules. This pit was comparable to the burnt pits 621, 650 and 697 in Area 2.

Conclusions

Colluvial deposits were located across Areas 2 and 5 (fig 2) and partly overlay a deeper deposit of compact sandy clay corresponding with what appeared to be a small silted valley or hollow. The hollow or valley may extend southwards towards the river Mole. The colluvium was homogenous, with no apparent horizons and produced a mixed assemblage of finds from the early Neolithic, Iron Age, Roman and medieval and/or post-medieval periods. One small group of pottery found at the bottom of the colluvial layer is of some interest; although only comprising nine sherds, these appear to be from two or three vessels

of the earlier Neolithic Bowl tradition including one rim sherd (fig 3, P4). The pottery was fairly unabraded, suggesting that it had not moved greatly within the soil.

The conditions of the site itself provided a number of challenges that impacted on the quality of the evidence obtained. The degree of truncation (about one-quarter of the site) left a fairly small area and a limited number of features from which to draw conclusions. Additionally, disturbance by roots and animal activity has affected the preservation of the features themselves, so interpretation can only be tentative.

The two linear features appear to align broadly at right angles and may represent part of a wider system of boundaries. The pits with associated burning produced few datable finds and may, from their form and the species of tree and shrub charcoal present, be the result of vegetation clearance rather than of industrial or domestic activities; the close proximity of pit 648 with the three semi-complete early Roman pottery vessels suggests some deposition was purposeful and related to domestic or perhaps ritual disposal. The evidence may be peripheral to a nearby settlement possibly located on adjacent high ground.

Although a broad range of dated artefacts was recovered, the quantity of Iron Age and Romano-British finds present, especially pottery, seems to suggest that the archaeological activity is largely of this date with residual earlier finds representing limited activity on or near the site. The Early Neolithic sherds are unusually large and unabraded and, as more than one vessel occurred in association, it seems more likely that they were deposited in a single event rather than deriving from intermittent activity. They were perhaps quickly sealed by colluvium (712) and although only a small assemblage of flintwork was recovered and no contemporary features were encountered it could be suggested that some small-scale Early Neolithic occupation occurred at the site.

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