

2. Site description

In this chapter, the following notation is employed: eastings are referred to by a distance followed by a /, e.g. 215.6/ for 215.6 m east of datum, and northings by a distance preceded by a /, e.g. /100.4 for 100.4 m north of datum. Points are referred to by a double reference, e.g. 215.6/100.4. Directions in this section refer to the site grid, i.e. 'north' is across the trench. Context numbers are indicated by < >.

Subsoil

The 'natural' subsoil was located at about 36.71 m at 200/, rising very gradually to 37.14 m at 230/ and 37.75 m above Ordnance Datum (aOD) at 265/ (a gradient of about 1 in 60). In the western part of the trench (from 200/ to 216/) it consisted of alternating bands of yellow sandy clay <109>, <131>, <124>, stiff yellow clay <114>, <123>, <120>, and greenish clay <122>, running approximately north-south across the trench (table 1). Test sections cut into these deposits suggested that the sandy clay filled hollows in the irregular surface of the yellow clay, for example <109> overlay <114> and appeared to be about 0.22 m deep. East of 216/ was sandy clay <128> until about 244/, gradually becoming more sandy and less clayey towards the east. From 244/ to the end of the trench at 265/ was a rough gingery sandy gravel <119> overlying a soft light grey-brown sand <133>. The whole pattern is interpreted as the interface between the Reading Beds to the west and the Thanet Beds to the east.

<i>easting</i>		<i>context description</i>
200.0–201.0	109	yellow sandy clay
201.0–204.6	114	stiff yellow clay
204.6–210.1	131	orange/yellow/green sandy clay
210.1–213.0	123	stiff yellow clay
212.8–214.5	124	yellow sandy clay
214.0–216.0	120	stiff yellow clay
216.0–244.0	128	yellow sandy clay
244.0–265.0	119	rough gingery sandy gravel
244.0–265.0	133	soft light grey-brown sand

Table 1: subsoil layers

Phase 1

The earliest feature appeared to be <132>, a small cut into <131> revealed south of /100.46 when <112> (see below) was half-sectioned (fig. 2). Its width varied between 0.3 m and 0.4 m and it appeared to run approximately north–south between 207.9/ and 208.4/. It was about 0.1 m deep; its black fill contained many large flint pebbles (up to 0.13 m in length) and much charcoal in both small and large fragments. The only direct dating evidence was provided by two sherds of undiagnostic Roman pottery.

Above <132>, and above <131> on either side, was a compact layer of rounded flint pebbles <112> and <121>, extending from about 204.4/ to 209.4/ (fig. 3). Most of the pebbles were small (up to 30 or 40 mm in length), but some were larger, up to 0.1 or 0.12 m in length. The upper surface of the layer was at about 36.86 m aOD. As well as flint pebbles, it contained small amounts of chalk and tile, and about 50 sherds of pottery which suggested a late 1st to early 2nd century date.

This layer was partly overlain by a surface <117> consisting of squared chalk blocks, most about 60 mm in length but with some up to 0.12 m. It extended irregularly from 206.9/ to 208.2/ (fig. 3), and had a markedly level surface at about 36.92 m aOD. It appears to be contemporary with <112>. It may be that this is the surviving patch of a much larger chalk surface extending as far as the limits of <112/121>, which may have been a foundation for it.

To the west of <112> was a layer of yellow sandy clay with pebbles <115>, extending from 202.5/ to about 205.5/ (fig. 3). It apparently abutted <112>, and the stratigraphic relationship between the two is not clear. It contained four sherds of undiagnostic Roman pottery.

Phase 2

East of the features of Phase 1 was a group of features related to each other by their alignments and by their probable date. Cut into the clay of <123> was a long narrow feature <113>, extending from 210.8/ to 212.4/, aligned at about 20° clockwise to the line of the trench. It had a maximum width of about 0.30 m, and appeared to taper towards both ends (fig. 4). Its lower fill consisted of a mixture of chalk blocks and rounded flint pebbles with tile and pottery, above which was some 50 to 60 mm of black crumbly soil. The pottery included sherds of a rare glazed bowl of late 1st to early 2nd century date (fig 9), but more diagnostic in terms of dating was a rolled-rim bowl (RRB), probably of BB2 fabric, which is not likely to be earlier than c. AD 120 (see 3.1.1).

At right angles to <113> was a stony feature <110> lying across the trench between 214.5/ and 215.5/. It was at most 0.75 m wide, with a well-defined western edge and a less well defined eastern edge (fig. 4). The sixteen sherds of pottery found in this feature include rims of a Nene Valley colour-coated beaker and an Alice Holt rolled-rim dish (RRD), both likely to date to the mid- or late-2nd century. This may be the damaged remains of a wall.

Associated with this feature, and abutting its eastern edge, was a circular cut feature <126> (fig. 4). It was between 0.3 and 0.35 m in diameter, and 0.22 m deep. The packing consisted mainly of rounded flint pebbles, but also included a large fragment of quernstone and nine sherds of pottery contemporary with that from <113> and <110>.

Further east, between 222/ and 224/, possibly extending to 225/, was a cut feature <130> in the southern part of the trench (fig. 5). It was cut into <128> from a height of about 37.21 m aOD, and varied in depth from about 0.2 to 0.3 m, with one area as deep as 0.47 m. The 21 sherds of pottery from its fill appear to give it a mid- to late-2nd century date.

East of this cut was a spread of material <129> between 225.0/ and 227.1/ (fig. 5), fairly dense in the north (upper surface between 37.22 m and 37.29 m aOD) but rather sparse in the south (upper surface between 37.15 m and 37.25 m aOD). The 22 sherds of pottery suggest a mid- to late-2nd century date.

Phase 3

Parallel to <110>, and just to its east, was a ditch <125> (fig. 6), between 215.6/ and 217.1/. It varied in width between 0.75 and 1.0 m, and had a maximum depth of 0.25 m. The ten sherds of pottery from its fill suggest a late 3rd or 4th-century date, but the ditch itself may be earlier.

This ditch cut a layer of brown sandy soil <118>, which overlay <128> and continued to the end of the trench at 230/. It was related to a series of dumps of building material (see below), most of which overlaid it but did not completely seal it. It contained about 60 sherds of pottery, ranging from 2nd-century to late 4th-century Tilford ware (TILF, see 3.1.1).

East of the ditch was feature <105>, which lay along the northern edge of the trench from 219.4/ to 219.8/, with its upper surface between 37.31 m and 37.33 m aOD. It comprised a single large contiguous area, at least 0.55 m north–south by 0.50 m east–west (but continuing into the baulk, see fig. 7), of what was initially thought to be wall plaster. It was lifted *en bloc* and dissected in the post-excavation process. This revealed that it had a smooth but irregular upper surface of a chalky earth with inclusions of chalk, backed by a dark brown ‘earthy’ soil with chalk lumps and charcoal flecks. It was later identified by soil micromorphology as a burnt area, probably a hearth (Macphail, 2001). As such, it is likely to have been *in situ*, and may define a floor level or exterior surface, of which only it survived, but which is possibly represented by the top of <118>.

Immediately east of the ditch, and both east and west of <105>, between 217.6/ and 222.9/, was a series of deposits of building material, <107>, <127>, <106>, <108>, comprising mixtures of daub fragments, mortar, small abraded chalk lumps and larger blocks, rounded flint pebbles and pieces of Roman roof tile and brick, in varying proportions. Although these contexts may be part of the same dumping episode, they are described individually below, from west to east.

The most westerly deposit <107> consisted of an area from 217.7/ to 218.4/ in the north of the trench and a second from 218.4/ to 219.5/ in the south, as well as isolated flint and chalk blocks at 217.6/ (fig. 7). Its upper surface was between 37.29 m and 37.37 m aOD (north) and between 37.24 m and 37.34 m aOD (south). It consisted mainly of fragments of daub, with a few rounded flint pebbles, up to 0.16 m in length, and chalk blocks up to 0.17 by 0.12 m in size, but mostly much smaller.

The deposit <127> (fig. 8) lay beneath the south-eastern part of <107>, between 218.8/ and 219.5/, with its upper surface at between 37.09 m and 37.19 m aOD, suggesting that it is part of <107>. Its composition was rather different – mostly flint pebbles up to 0.2 m in length, with a few small chalk lumps (up to 60 mm) and very little tile or daub.

East of <105> was a cluster of five large fragments of tile, <106> (fig. 7), between 220.1/ and 220.3/, and with upper surfaces between 37.34 m and 37.36 m aOD. The largest was about 0.13 by 0.08 m.

Still further east was the largest of the dumps, <108>, between 220.3/ and 222.9/ in the northern part of the trench (fig. 7), with its upper surface between 37.25 m and 37.36 m aOD. Its main component was chalk, mostly in the form of small abraded lumps up to 60 mm in length, but also with a few larger squared blocks up to 0.13 m long. There were also several large pieces of daub (larger than in other deposits, the largest being 0.25 m long), and a few flint pebbles, most about 0.1 m long, but some up to 0.25 m. A few fragments of tile completed the composition.

These deposits are all at roughly the same level as the burnt patch <105>, suggesting that there may have been a floor, or at least a ground surface, at this level. The deposits could then be seen as either debris collapsed onto this surface, or as secondary material laid to consolidate the surface. The main dating evidence for them consists of 45 sherds of pottery from <108>. Most are of Roman date, the latest being an AH flanged bowl of the late 3rd or 4th century; there is also one sherd of a possibly Saxon sandy fabric and one sherd of 17th century Border ware. The latter are thought to be intrusive as the deposits were not sealed. There were also seven sherds of undiagnostic Roman pottery from <107>. There were no coins or other 'small finds'.

Phase 4

Above the Roman features of phases 1 to 3 were a series of soil layers interspersed with thin scatters of material of mixed date. The only exception was a small cut <116> into the north-east corner of <115> between 205.2/ and 205.7/ (fig. 3). It was very shallow and contained no finds.

Immediately above feature <113> (phase 2) and the surrounding clay, was a spread of small abraded chalk lumps and rounded flint pebbles <104>, lying between 208.2/ and 213.8/ with its upper surface rising slightly from 37.13 m in the west to 37.22 m aOD in the east. It contained 95 sherds of abraded Roman pottery of 1st to 4th century date, as well as abraded Roman tile, and one sherd of 17th-century Border ware. The only small find was an undated fragment of blue cullet glass (no. 28).

Above all the features, and running from end to end of the trench, was a deep layer of brown sandy loam <101> and <103>, separated between 200/ and 217.1/ by a thin gravel spread <102>, but elsewhere indistinguishable. This spread consisted mainly of rounded flint pebbles (up to 0.12 m in length) and squared flint blocks, together with fragments of tile, with pottery, glass, metal and bone finds. The angle of some of the tile fragments suggested dumping. The upper surface of <102> rose from about 37.23 m at the eastern end to 37.54 m aOD at 217.1/, while the surface of <101> rose from 37.38 m at the eastern end to 37.89 m aOD at 230/ and 38.15 m aOD at 265/. Allowing for the turf <100> removed by the mechanical digger, the ground level rose from 37.45 m to 38.00 m at 230/, to 38.25 m aOD at 265/. Thus the total depth of 'topsoil' varied from 0.74 m at 200/ to 0.86 m at 230/ to 0.50 m at 265/. Except at the extreme eastern end of the trench, this was well in excess of the 0.5 m initially expected (see 1.1). A thin layer of gravel <111> was found above <101> between 264/ and 265/.

This thick band of soil, together with the associated spreads <102> and <104> and the material detected from the spoil-heap <99> (which would have derived from these contexts) contained the bulk of finds from the trench: 89% of the pottery by sherd count (87% by eves), 88% of the animal bone by count (77% by weight), and all but five of the 75 'small finds' (including all 30 coins). Although the bulk of the dateable material is of Roman date, 40 sherds (1.7%) are medieval and 102 (4.4%) are post-medieval. One of the 30 coins is 17th-century in date and the rest are Roman (see 3.4.1). There is thus relatively little later material, but not so little that any undated finds can unequivocally be called 'Roman'.

unphased

The most enigmatic feature, which could not be related to the rest of the site, was a burial, <133>, located between 244/ and 245/ and at its highest 37.20 m aOD, about 0.8 m below the top of <101> here, so about 0.9 m below the ground surface. Only the skull, long bones and a small part of the pelvis survived, and in poor condition; the skull has unfortunately been damaged and removed in excavation, and the legs below mid-thigh remained concealed in the eastern baulk at 245/ (see fig. 9). The grave appears to have been cut through the rough gingery sandy gravel <119> into the soft light grey-brown sand <133>, although no trace of a cut could be detected and the immediate fill appeared to be the same as the soil through which it had been cut. The skeleton was carefully laid out along the axis of the trench, i.e. at right angles to Stane Street. The left arm was extended beside the body, while the right was bent at the elbow, with the forearm crossing the body at waist height. Traces of a large iron object, perhaps 0.2 m long, were visible below the left elbow, but consisted only of a rusty stain in the surrounding sand. Because of its alignment to Stane Street, the burial is thought to be probably of Roman date.

Because of the fragile state of the bones, the incomplete nature of the burial and the fact that it was found only two days before the end of the excavation, the skeleton was not lifted, but after a visit by a representative of the Epsom Coroner, reburied *in situ* together with the fragments of the skull, which were placed in a finds tray to aid identification should further excavation take place.

Fig. 2: plan of early phase 1 feature.

Fig. 3: plan of phase 1 features.

Fig. 4: plan of phase 2 features west of 220/.

Fig. 5: plan of phase 2 features east of 220/.

Fig. 6: plan of phase 3 ditch.

Fig. 7: plan of other phase 3 features.

Fig. 8: plan of phase 3 features in southern side of trench.

Fig. 9: plan of the burial found between 244/ and 245/.

Fig. 10: sherds of Roman glazed bowl from <113>.

Fig. 11: small sherd of stamped Saxon pottery from <101>.