

Church Meadow, Ewell: Excavations in 2014

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The third and final season of rescue excavation in Church Meadow took place in July 2014. Permission was granted for the original project in expectation of a 10m wide strip of the field being absorbed into the adjacent graveyard within the next five years (for previous interim reports see Cowlard 2012; Cowlard 2013). A change of plans means that the entire field is now to be converted into a sports training ground for nearby Ewell Castle School. Although the field is now 'out of bounds' the School's heritage statement for this development was written by the author, ensuring that the importance of the site was recognised in the planning process. Any ground disturbance will be restricted to the top 20cm of plough soil and the project will carry out a metal detecting survey once the turf has been removed, and further geophysics once the field has been reseeded.

For practical purposes over the three seasons the trench was divided into nineteen 6m sections, named alphabetically with 'A' at the lower end of the field closest to Church Street and 'S' towards the Ewell by-pass at the north-east end. The first two seasons had seen the excavation of 60m of the strip, which had revealed evidence for several Romano-British features beneath a horizon of deep ploughsoil; the ploughing which had destroyed almost everything above early Roman ground level is thought to have been carried out by a single episode of steam ploughing in the second half of the 19th century. In 2014, 4m of Area I and the entire 6m of J were re-opened together with 55m of 'virgin' 10m wide strip (K-S) in order to complete the excavation in view of the new plans for the area. A further small area in Area D was re-opened over the previously excavated 'amphora' pit to complete its examination.

At the end of the 2013 excavation a small gully was noted to the west of the deep pit in Area J. Further investigation revealed a ditch of probable 1st century date, shallow and wide in profile, running across the trench in a NE-SW direction, roughly in line with the anticipated route of Stane Street across the site. This ditch was filled with a grey silt, containing some concentrated areas of pottery and other rubbish. There is evidence that the ditch was then recut twice; the first was a steep-sided U shaped ditch following the eastern edge of the original ditch, with a homogenous pale silt fill; the second recut was on the western edge of the ditch and contained several episodes of fill. The segment excavated close to the pit in J was free of finds but to the north it contained a grey gritty fill full of rubbish. Finally a small V-shaped gully was cut into the west edge of the ditch. This sequence mirrored features found in 2012-3 and together they are interpreted as parallel roadside ditches for Stane Street. No agger or road base was apparent between these ditches; the area where it should have been in the trench, F,G,H and part of I, had been noted as a 'barren' corridor with no below Roman ground surface features, in contrast to elsewhere in the trench. It seems probable that the road was built up on a causeway as it descended to the marshy area around the springs. This would have left no evidence for the cutting of the road into the natural as would otherwise be expected, and the causeway and surface would have been destroyed by ploughing, with the stones being used over the centuries for buildings and other roads/ tracks or surfaces in the village. Otherwise the absence of foundation cuts/ base flints for a main thoroughfare is a conundrum. Between the 'non-agger' and the eastern roadside ditch were areas of closely-packed pebbles, chalk, pot and ceramic building material. On the western side there was an area of scattered flints sunk into the natural clay and a wide but thin layer of crushed mortar. These are interpreted as the remains of metalled roadside tracks roughly 3m each in width with the road about 6m wide on a

causeway between them. There is evidence for some chalk and 'chalk over flint' surfaces extending over the ditches and the eastern gully, which suggests encroachment onto the road; it may be that as the roadside ditches went out of use occupation spread onto the roadside tracks leaving the central agger as a functioning highway. The shallow remains of a gully was found in Area O running NNW-SSE, at right angles to the road and may be a property division similar to those seen in 2012.



Church Meadow, Ewell 2014: Area J in foreground

The deep pit [241] in Area J, which had been sectioned the previous season, was re-excavated. This circular pit was 1.3m in diameter with clay-lined vertical sides and more than 2m deep. It had been cut through the eastern roadside ditch [but not the later gully] and the uppermost layers were 1.4m deep and full of burnt material and rubbish. A number of late 4th century coins were retrieved and towards the bottom of this layer were deposited the bones of what have been identified as those of a foetal/neonatal

pig and at least one domestic fowl. Beneath this was the base of the clay lining which extended up the vertical sides to the top of the pit, presumably making it water-tight. Whether its use was industrial or ritual at this point cannot yet be ascertained, but initial examination of environmental samples have revealed the presence of single spiral water snails. Beneath the clay lining was a layer of 252 flints, 177 of them knapped, mixed with the cow bones and part of a horse pelvis. These would have been carefully placed as neither the flints nor the bones were damaged as they would have been by being thrown in from the surface. Below was a cow skull with horn cores placed on its side against one wall, with the rest of the layer packed with sand. This overlay more flint sitting on loose clay, underneath which was the flat sandy natural base of the pit. Extending across the base was what looked like a raised branch of concreted sand, about 10-20cm in width, more than 20cm deep, and running vertically 40cm up the west wall of the pit. Placed parallel to this natural concretion on the south side was a single animal rib. It appears that the base of the pit cut through part of this linear iron-pan concretion. Three substantial postholes were found cut into the surface of the roadside track to the north-west of this pit. They may have supported posts denoting an entrance from the road to a ritual area; pottery dating may help ascertain whether they are contemporary.



Ritual pit 241 with flint and bone deposits beneath a clay lining

A number of pits were found in Areas N and P-S. A circular pit [324N] with vertical clay-lined sides, 1.2m in diameter but broadening to 1.4m at the top, was only excavated to a depth of 0.75m due to time constraints. The upper fill contained a concentration of charcoal and ash with chalk and mortar inclusions, pot and bone. Beneath this was a layer still containing much charcoal but also more clay. A melon bead, an iron tool and a stamped samian base of a Drag 18 or 15/17 shallow bowl or dish, from La Graufesenque [pre- or early Flavian in date], was retrieved from this context. The fill beneath this was mounded as having been filled from the centre in one episode; the fill was similar but contained more sand and clay in the mix. The pit's vertical sides and clay lining are reminiscent of pit [241J] but rather than being sited at the roadside it is about 12m to the east, 28m to the NE of [241J]. A shallow scoop was found close by, containing pot and a large quern fragment.

Three pits were sited running under the NW baulk to varying degrees in Areas, P, Q-R and S and thus were only partially excavated. They were approximately 8m, 13m and 14m respectively from the projected road alignment and may represent activity behind roadside buildings. About two-thirds of the pit in P [311] extended into the trench and consisted of an outer bowl-shaped pit approximately 2m in diameter. A 0.8m wide steep-sided shaft was seen to descend from the base of the pit, and was excavated to 0.8m, with augering indicating it was at least 0.75m deeper. At some point a smaller pit was cut within the fill of the bowl-shaped pit. This was 0.8m in diameter and remnants of a flint and mortar lining, 15-20cm thick, survived on the northern edge. Pottery from the fills suggests a 3rd-4th c. date.

About half of the pit [319] straddling the junction between areas Q-R extended into the trench, and again consisted of a bowl-shaped pit over a more vertical shaft, with an inner lined bowl. The earliest bowl was 3m wide and 1m deep, but in contrast to the pit in P the 0.8m wide shaft descended only 0.3m. The inner bowl was 2.4m wide and 0.5m deep, much shallower than the inner bowl in pit [311]. It was lined with hard mortar, laid in patches of differing colour and consistency, and about 10-15cm thick. The lining only survived on the southern curve of the pit, being absent on the base and northern sides. In the fill of the inner bowl where the base should have been was found a very large flint, 25.4kg in weight. Early indications suggest a late 2nd-mid 3rd century date for the overall feature.



Team discussion on Pit 319

Only the edge of the third pit [316] could be seen in the trench but it probably extended to a diameter of 2.5m. Two layers of fill were evident separated by a band of chalk and mortar fragments. The fills were same in appearance and consistency as those in pits [311] and [319]. These pits, together with the amphora pit described below, share characteristics of repetitive use with some indication of mortar lining and burnt material. A mortar-lined flint bowl found in Area B in 2012 may also represent a similar function. It is likely that these pits had an industrial function and parallels are being sought. Environmental samples have been extracted from all the excavated pits and may give us an indication of what use they were put to.

The 1m wide trench from Clive Orton's 2000 excavation (ECY00) was more clearly seen running at a right-angle to the road corridor in I-J (Orton2000). The flint, pebble and chalk surfaces identified in 2000 were seen to be part of the surface excavated to the west of the 'ritual' pit in 2013-14. The CME14 trench was extended to the north-west in K in an attempt to tie in Frank Pemberton's SMC03 churchyard trench. A flint layer, originally thought to be the surface of the Roman road, was found to mirror the disturbed flint layer found in the CME13 trench; post-medieval pottery was found beneath both the CME13 and SMC03 flint layers confirming the flint had been turned over by the plough and re-deposited. Exceptionally dry conditions in 2003 meant that it had been impossible to excavate beneath the exposed flint layer.

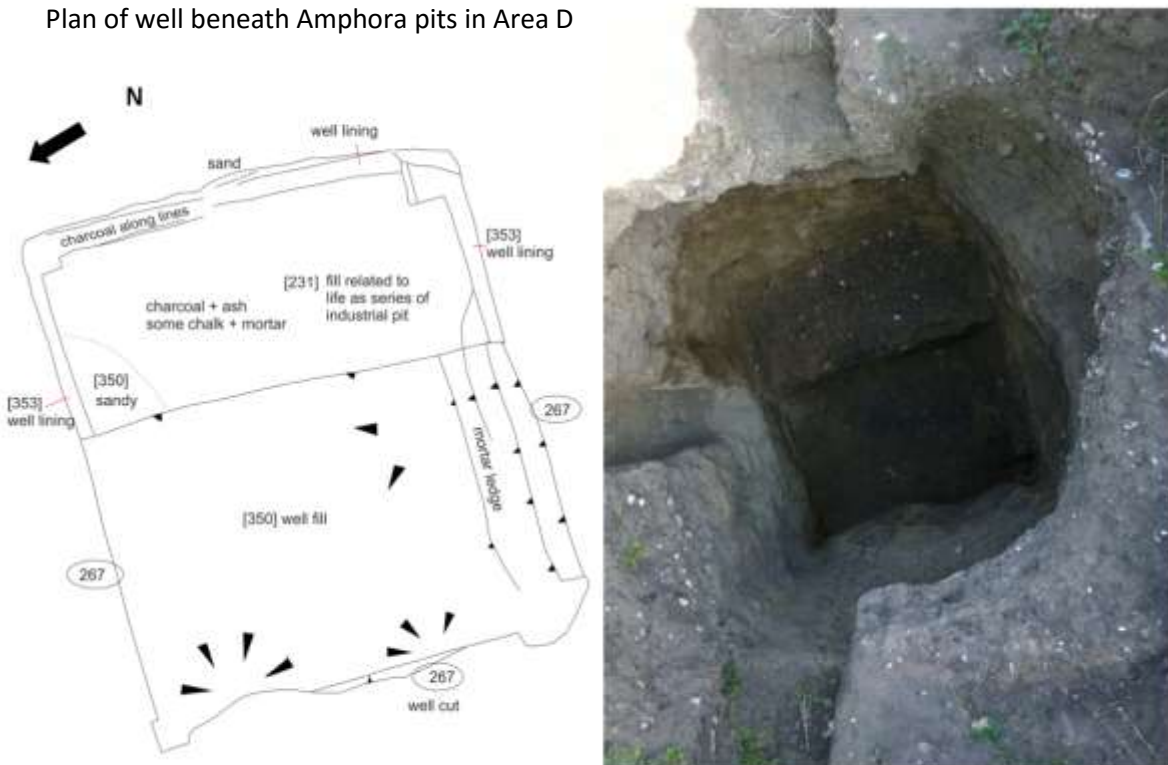
The 'amphora' pit, cut into the roadside ditch in D was re-opened for the second time; due to its complexity it had been left unfinished until there was time to examine it carefully. Excavation revealed a 1.15 x 1m rectangular feature identified as a timber-lined well. It was probably about 3m deep including an augered depth of 0.8m which was not excavated. The upper 0.75m was dug vertically through clay and beneath that through sand. There was evidence for corner posts with internal planking; the wood only survived as a sticky grey/white mottled lining, often with a band of charcoal on the inner surface. Unlike the earliest of the two wells found in A there was no barrel in one corner, posts being evident in all four corners. On the southern side, there was a mortared ledge parallel to and within the lining; this may be a replacement lining but more likely belongs to the next phase of activity. About 1.5m below the top of the western edge a niche 60cm wide, 20cm deep and 10cm high had been cut into the side of the well. This may have been part of, or behind the lining and probably originally held a greyware dish, perhaps as a kind of foundation deposit; some large sherds were found in the niche and other conjoining sherds were found in the main fill nearby.

Following the well phase there was then a series of three pits, one above the other, showing the same sequence of contexts, each apparently involving the setting in place of an olive oil amphora (or part of an amphora): 1. Build-up – grey gritty fill with some pot. 2. Mortar bowl. 3. A burnt layer [the burning did not take place in-situ as there is no sign of burning on the mortar]. 4. Build-up - grey gritty fill [not present in the top pit]. 5. An amphora then seems to have been cut into the side wall and set in mortar; the bowl and sides of the pit lined with flints, mortar and chalk. 6. Another burnt layer, possibly from in-situ burning. The amphora in the earliest pit was represented by a sherd sealed beneath the mortar for the next amphora pit, together with a curved depression in the southern wall of the well shaft into which it would have nestled. The fills, as in the later pits in the sequence, were dark and gritty, containing ash, charcoal, mortar and pot.

Once the initial pit went out of use and most of the amphora was removed, 40cm of a gritty grey layer containing rubbish was deposited and a second amphora placed in the south-east corner, against another curve cut into the wall. The base of this amphora was approximately 35-40cm above the base of the first. A dupondius of Vespasian, dated to 72-73AD, was found in this area and may have been deposited beneath the amphora base. A mortar bowl was formed around and beneath the amphora, and the gaps between the amphora and the straight wall of the well packed with clay and small flints. Activity then left a burnt residue over the bowl outside the amphora, before levels were then built up around the amphora and a further mortar lining laid down. A horizontal slot, 10cm in diameter, set at a 45° angle to the pit wall was evident in the mortar; it contained a soft dark fill and may represent a length of timber laid across the corner to support the amphora while the mortar set. The mortar extended up the walls with flint added in places, especially around the amphora base, perhaps to reinforce it.

When the second amphora was removed the wall of the pit was repaired with pieces of flints, and a grey gritty layer containing rubbish was deposited to raise the floor level of the pit. Again this was bowl-like, extending a short way up the SW side, and all the way up the SE side where the second amphora had been. A thin layer of yellow mortar was then applied to the base, and after at least part of the rubbish layer was removed in the SE corner of the pit, a thick layer of mortar was put in and the amphora placed on top. As with the second amphora pit there is again evidence that the mortar was laid against a piece of timber. The wall in the NE quadrant of the pit was then shaped to accommodate the curve of the third amphora, the remains of which were found in the first year of excavation. This amphora was approximately 55-60cm higher up the pit than the last, and burnt residue was again found above the mortar. On this occasion there was no further build-up layer. The pit was then lined to either side of the amphora ; in the SE corner where the 'Vespasian' amphora had been two layers of closely packed flints were laid without mortar, whilst in the SW corner these two layers of flints sandwiched a layer of chalk set in mortar. This sequence of pits shows evidence

Plan of well beneath Amphora pits in Area D



for the same type of process continuing over time; as with the other 'industrial' pits already mentioned parallels are being sought.



Following the SyAS environmental course that took place during CME13, 20 bulk environmental samples were taken from 18 features, including pit and ditch fills. These are being processed by volunteers both at SCAU and in Ewell, and will hopefully add evidence for the environment and human activities in Romano-British Ewell. Whilst a number of interesting finds were retrieved there was the feeling of more mundane pottery with fewer finewares than in previous seasons. Several fragments of quernstone were found together with more than 50 hobnails, and more tile debris and dressed stone fragments.

Roman coins, most of which were found by our dedicated metal detectorists, Mairi Sargent, Dave Williams and Bill Meads, now number around 500 after three seasons. Once the coins have been identified it is hoped that analysis of the coin assemblage, and comparisons to other coins found in Ewell and other Romano-British sites, will be added to our understanding of activity in this part of the settlement. Other interesting finds of Roman date include: the bovid terminal of a cosmetic grinder (probably 1st-2nd c.); a rare Maxey type Bow and

Fantail brooch dated to the late 1st century AD (very few of these have been found in this country, mainly in East Anglia); a Knee brooch of late 2nd-early 3rd c. date, and a copper alloy dolphin-decorated carrying handle for a legionary helmet, probably 2nd-3rd c. Whilst non-Roman finds have always been in the minority on this site, a number of interesting objects of post-Roman date were recovered this season. They include: a pre-1952 'gold-coloured' metal Royal Army Medical Corps brooch; a WVS badge of WWII issue; two Charles I Rose farthings; a 17th c. trader's token from The Boar's Head in Tooley Street, Southwark; a medieval jetton; and a stamped clay tobacco pipe fragment of an early giant pipe dating from c1590-1620. This is an exceptionally rare find and the earliest example of a giant pipe that has so far been recorded in this country [D. Higgins, 2015, pers. com]. Also of particular interest is a copper alloy button stud, decorated with a single frontal face mask; it bears comparison to the style of Anglo-Saxon button brooches but rather than the standard brooch fitting it has a central single stud on the rear; a specialist opinion is being sought.

The second Saturday of the excavation saw an Open Day in conjunction with the Ewell Village Fair and the CBA's Festival of Archaeology. Good weather encouraged more than 200 visitors along to the site where they were given a tour of the trench and the finds area. More than 60 children from the Bourne Hall Museum Club attended for a practical session of excavation and finds washing, and pupils from Ewell Grove School visited over the course of one very busy day.



Open Day

All dating for features is provisional as post-excavation pottery cataloguing continues. Volunteers meet on a regular basis, assisted by a grant from Surrey County Council's Local Committees Fund. The project has only been possible with support from SyAS, EEHAS, CBA's Mick Aston Fund, St. Mary's Church, SCAU, Jeremy Harte and David Brooks from Bourne Hall Museum and neighbours Jane and Rob Pedler. Thanks must go to the more than 80 volunteers that took part over the three weeks, and to those who are continuing with post-excavation work. In particular I would like to thank the following: David Bird, as Project Director for his support and sage advice; Emma Corke, Assistant Director who ran the trench, co-ordinated the recording, and was an invaluable help in interpreting the archaeology; Frank Pemberton, Assistant (Finds) Director; Andrew Francis – finds tent co-ordinator, together with Lou Hays who also organised the volunteers; Colin Nutley – 'pot washing' supervisor; Jenny Newell, site 'gofer' – a vital role; Michelle Cave – environmental supervisor; trench supervisors – David Calow, David Hartley, Meurig Thomas, Laura Dodd, Phil Stanley, Roger Brookman, and assistant supervisor Pauline Hulse; metal detectorists Mairi Sargent, Dave Williams and Bill Meads; Steve Nelson and Ian West of EEHAS for their on-site help; and Chris and Gay Harris for all their ongoing involvement and support.

This is an amended version to the interim report published in the April 2015 EEHAS newsletter.

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