

PREHISTORIC AND ROMANO-BRITISH SETTLEMENT AT QUEEN ELIZABETH SQUARE, MAIDSTONE

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With contributions by

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Summary

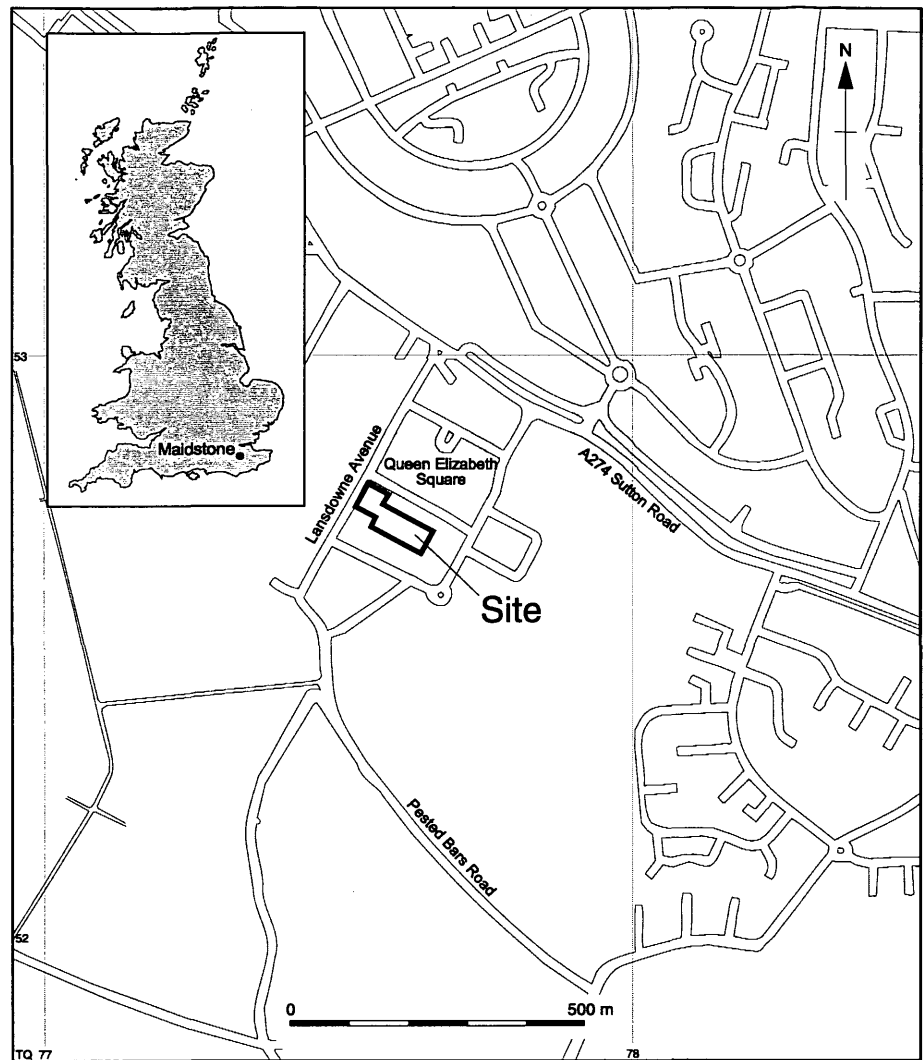
An evaluation in 1998 on land at Queen Elizabeth Square, Maidstone, revealed evidence of Iron Age and Roman activity. Excavations by Oxford Archaeology during the following year examined the site in more detail, uncovering evidence for long-lived rural settlement focussed on the late Iron Age, but continuing into the early 2nd century AD. The decline of the settlement may have been linked to the development of a nearby villa estate.

Project background

During May and June of 1999 the Oxford Archaeological Unit (now Oxford Archaeology) conducted excavations on land at Queen Elizabeth Square, in the Shepway area of Maidstone (TQ 776527) (Figs 1 and 2). The project was undertaken on behalf of Kent County Council in advance of proposed housing development and commissioned in accord with recommendations made after an initial programme of evaluation undertaken in 1998 by the Kent Archaeological Rescue Unit (KARU). The latter identified Iron Age and Roman activity concentrated in an area between the south side of Queen Elizabeth Square and Coverdale Avenue, particularly in the vicinity of KARU Trench 6 (Figs 3 and 5). A posthole and linear features associated with reasonable quantities of pottery of late Iron Age date were unearthed suggesting the presence of a late Iron Age settlement in the immediate vicinity. It was on the basis of this evidence that the need for further work was defined.

Two trenches were opened during the course of the excavation (Areas 1 and 2), encompassing an area of 1500 m² (Figs 1 and 3) and subsuming KARU evaluation Trench 6 (KARU 1998). The layout of the excavated areas was determined largely by the presence of trees on the site.

Figure 1: Location of Queen Elizabeth Square in the Shepway area of south-east Maidstone



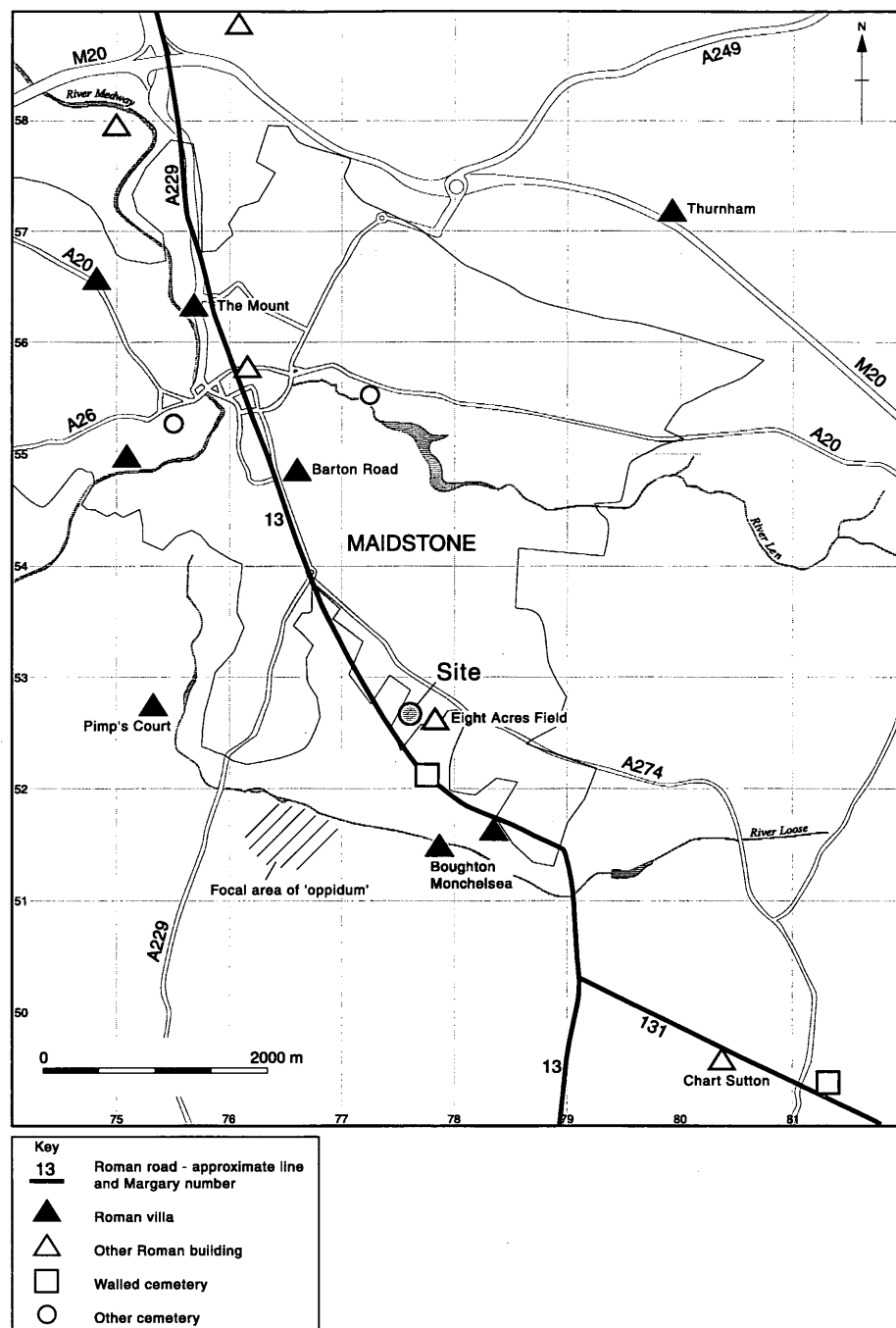
Topography and Archaeological Background

The site lies approximately 3 km to the south-east of the centre of Maidstone (Fig. 2), on the sandy limestone and calcareous sands of the Hythe Beds. These give rise, locally, to the clay and silty clay subsoils encountered during the excavation. The excavated area was fairly level, c 92.3 m OD.

A number of archaeological find spots and sites are known in the vicinity, although there is some debate as to the nature and status of the Roman settlement in Maidstone (Fig. 2). The closest of these is the site of a discovery of 'Roman foundations and tiles' in 'Eight Acres Field' noted c 1840 (Kent SMR KE2138). The precise location of this find spot is unknown, but the centre of Eight Acres Field was located approximately 100 m south-east of the present site, so prior to the excavation it was quite possible that the Roman features could have lain within the general area of the Queen Elizabeth Square redevelopment. The Roman road from Maidstone to the Weald (Margary 13) passes c 250 m south-west of the site. The probable site of its junction with road 131, running to Ashford and Lympne, lay approximately 3 km distant to the south-south-east (Margary 1973, 44-5). Adjacent to road 13 and approximately 500 m south of Queen Elizabeth Square was the site of a small walled cemetery containing substantial monuments and rich cremation burials, first examined in 1842 (Jessup 1959, 26-7) and re-excavated in 1998 (MoLAS 1998).

The evaluation carried out in 1998 covered a considerably more extensive area than that examined by these excavations. Trenches to the east and south-east

Figure 2: Location of Queen Elizabeth Square in relation to principal Roman sites in the Maidstone area



of the present site revealed a low density of archaeological features and a small quantity of late Iron Age and Roman material, but there was no indication of the structure implied by the 19th century account. The finds from KARU Trench 6 (Figs 3 and 5) suggested settlement in the immediate vicinity but it remains unclear whether this related in any way to the site identified in the 19th century.

The excavation

Methodology

Topsoil and subsoil were removed by machine under close archaeological supervision. All subsequent investigation was undertaken by hand. After the removal of topsoil, the site was cleaned and planned at a scale of 1:50. Discrete cut features were half-sectioned as necessary to record their character and relationships, and to recover artefactual and ecofactual evidence which might contribute toward the dating and/or the interpretation of activity at the site.