

The Roman Roadside settlement at Westhawk Farm, Ashford, Kent: excavations 1998-9

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Summary

An area of *c* 6 hectares was excavated at Westhawk Farm, Ashford prior to a housing development. Flint artefacts included Lower Palaeolithic as well as Mesolithic and later pieces. The earliest features formed part of a field system probably of middle to late Bronze Age date. Its principal alignment (NE-SW) was followed by that of the Roman road from Canterbury to the Weald, probably established soon after the mid 1st century AD. A second road, from Lympne, formed a junction with the first, around which developed a previously unknown major settlement perhaps 15 hectares in extent. The plan of the focal (junction) area of the settlement was revealed by geophysical survey while the excavation concentrated on its south-west end (Area B).

The settlement was established within a generation of the Roman conquest. A rich cremation burial probably of pre-Conquest date suggests a pre-existing local focus of high status settlement. In Phase 2, the earliest Roman occupation of pre-Flavian date, the Canterbury road was partly defined by roadside ditches, but a feature diverging from this alignment formed an early boundary on the north-west side of the settlement in the vicinity of the road junction. At the south-west margin of the settlement area on the north-west side of the Canterbury road two structures were used in this phase, while south-east of the road at least one settlement unit, probably of agricultural character, was also of pre-Flavian date. A small cemetery was established outside the main north-west settlement boundary very early in the life of the site (Area C).

Phase 3, dated *c* AD 70-150, saw most of the main features of the settlement in place. These included a shrine structure, set in a rectilinear enclosure within a larger open space on the south-east side of the Canterbury road. The north-east side of the open space was defined by a double-ditched enclosure that fronted onto the road. Trackways led from outside the settlement up to the shrine area and domestic/agricultural activity continued in the complex on the south side of this area. On the opposite side of the road from the shrine, overlying the early settlement boundary, an iron-producing workshop housed both smelting and related smithing activities.

This workshop was abandoned early in Phase 4 (AD 150-200), the surrounding area being incorporated within a series of plots set out approximately at right-angles to the line of the Canterbury road. Further south-west another block of five or six recti-

linear plots was laid out. These contained a variety of timber structures. South-east of the road, occupation continued in the area south of the shrine complex and two sides of the shrine enclosure were redefined.

The last phase of widespread occupation in the south-west part of the settlement is dated *c* AD 200-250 (Phase 5). Intensive activity continued in some of the south-west roadside plots and a plot on the opposite side of the road also remained in use. South of the shrine area the latest building, still of circular plan, may have been linked with a new iron-working structure north of the shrine. Like the earlier iron working establishment, this structure accommodated both smelting and smithing activities.

Early 4th century deposits in Area B were concentrated in a waterhole beside the Canterbury road. These contained large numbers of redeposited 2nd century coins perhaps from the shrine opposite. The only late 4th century activity in Area B was the apparent removal of a large post which had been a central feature within the shrine complex. Elsewhere, metal-detected finds of early-mid 4th century coins suggest continuing activity within the focal (unexcavated) part of the settlement, but even there such material was scarce. The latest burials in the Area C cemetery were probably of early 4th century date.

Limited activity of 13th century date, possibly indicating adjacent settlement, was located at the extreme southern end of Area B.

The Roman settlement contained areas of contrasting plan - groups of carefully laid out plots interspersed with zones of more 'organic' form. The 20 or so excavated structures were of timber and circular and rectilinear building forms were found side by side throughout the period. The economic emphasis of the settlement was presumably on agriculture and local market functions. Iron production was important, but its scale is such as to suggest that it had only local significance. It is possible, however, that one function of the settlement may have related to the administration of iron production. The finds, amongst which the large pottery assemblage is particularly important, suggest for the most part only modest prosperity.

A striking aspect of the site is the effective cessation of occupation by the mid 3rd century. This pattern is reflected in a considerable number of other rural settlements and a number of the Wealden iron working sites in the region. Its significance remains uncertain.

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