EXCAVATIONS AT SPITAL STREET, DARTFORD, 1991

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INTRODUCTION

In October 1991, an excavation was undertaken by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust on the site of nos. 37–41 Spital Street, Dartford (N.G.R. TQ 54027412; C.A.T. site no. 319) in advance of a proposed re-development by Talus Developments Limited. The development scheme was to incorporate a basement car park along the street frontage to the south, an area already basemented by previous buildings. The principal aim of the excavation was to determine the nature of the Roman strata, and hopefully locate the line of Roman Watling Street, so the excavation was positioned within the confines of the former basements in order to minimise the amount of overburden to be removed.

The excavation, of four weeks' duration, uncovered an area of 57 square metres (Plate I, Fig. 1). Dividing walls aligned north–south between the properties at nos. 37 and 39–41 Spital Street effectively separated the excavation into two areas, that to the west being more heavily truncated by the overlying basement than that to the east. It was, therefore, within the eastern area that much of the excavation was concentrated.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Evidence was revealed of Roman occupation. This included the remains of a metalled road constructed in the first century A.D., perhaps laid shortly following the Roman conquest to provide a primary link between Canterbury and London, and so form the early line of Watling Street. An attendant road ditch was located to the north, in the backfill of which lay the remains of a small baby, possibly new-born. During a period of disuse, an earth deposit was allowed to form

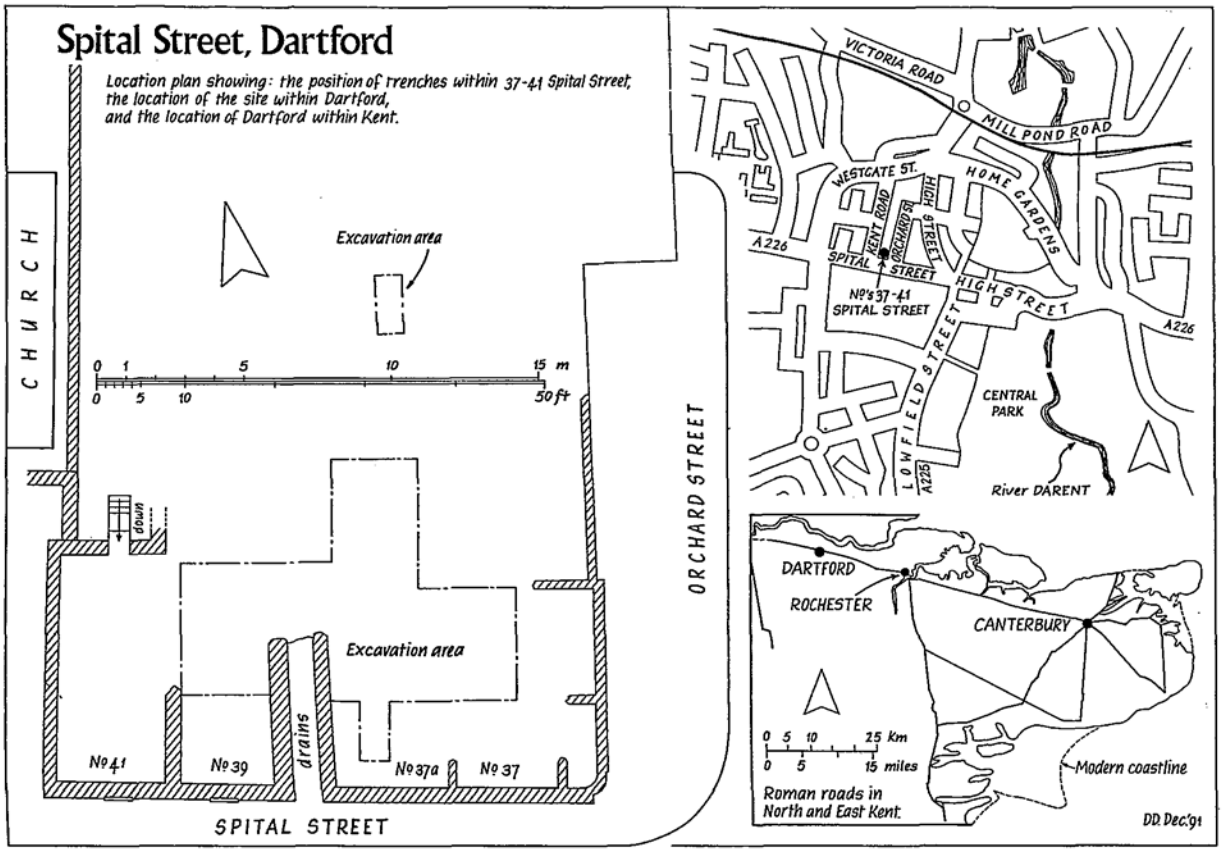

Fig. 1. Location plan

Plate I View of the site looking west. The road metalling is just visible on the left; the road ditch (partially excavated) lies on the right.

across the line of these earlier features, suggesting that the road alignment had altered. Once firmly established, and primary supply routes laid, the Romans may have constructed a new road, as yet undiscovered, of a more substantial nature.

A number of features were identified cutting the ground surface overlying the road, including an infant burial lying within a shallow scoop lined with the remains of a flagon.

A cobbled yard surface was subsequently laid, and later re-surfaced. This may have been incorporated within a building complex located beyond the boundary of the excavations. A large fragment of quern-stone incorporated as a repair in the metalled surface suggests local occupation activity, whilst concentrations of metal-working debris recovered implies that some of this may have been industrial.

Approximately 20 kg. of Roman pottery spanning the mid-first to fourth centuries A.D. was recovered, although most of this, comprising mainly sand- and shell-tempered North Kent/Thameside products, dated to between the late first to mid-second century. Some imported wares were noted, however, including fragments of samian ware and a few amphora sherds, including several from a South Italian Dressel 2–4 wine amphora. Of the other finds, the discovery of a fine Roman brooch of mid-late first century date was of particular

importance, for on its reverse it bore the maker's stamp, thought to read DRIMELIO.

Later Roman occupation was attested by a group of post-holes forming the south-east corner of a structure or fence line. Roman activity subsequently declined and an earth horizon built up, capped by medieval and post-medieval deposits. A small number of post-medieval features were revealed but they were too limited to allow interpretation of the area.

FORMER EVIDENCE OF ROMAN DARTFORD

The rich, alluvial deposits of the Darent Valley provided ideal conditions for intensive agricultural activity and a number of Roman villa sites lay along the length of the valley (Boreham, 1990, 18–23). The nearest known was at Tenter's Field, East Hill, Dartford, discovered in 1895 and excavated in 1979 (Dartford District Archaeological Group, 1986, 7–9). Evidence of a sizeable population within the area is also provided by the extensive Roman cemetery at East Hill (Dartford District Archaeological Group, 1986, 10–12). However, little evidence of the true nature of settlement within the present town of Dartford has been revealed. It is, as yet, uncertain whether occupation took the form of a small urban community, or perhaps a further villa site.

Dartford would, however, have provided an ideal location for settlement in the Roman period for two principal reasons. First, it lay at the site of the fording of the River Darent by the main London to Canterbury road (later known as Watling Street); a part of the metalled roadway approaching the ford in the Roman period being uncovered by members of the Dartford and District Archaeological Group at Bridge House in 1974 (Dartford District Archaeological Group, 1986, 4). Secondly, the River Darent was wider during Roman times and may have been navigable from Dartford into the River Thames to the north.

Watling Street was the principal Roman road leading from the port of Dover into Canterbury and on westward into London. As well as the metalling uncovered in 1974 leading to the ford, a portion of Roman Watling Street was discovered in 1897 at the base of East Hill (Codrington, 1918, 44). This section comprised of stones set in gravel, 2.50 ft. below the present road level. Thus, there seems little doubt that the road would have led through Dartford and yet, despite a number of investigations by local archaeologists, its alignment through the centre of the town remained unknown. It seemed likely, however, that it roughly followed the line of the High Street and Spital Street.

DESCRIPTION AND DISCUSSION OF THE EXCAVATIONS

Natural deposits

Lying within the base of the Darent Valley, Dartford lies upon the alluvial soils flanking the river. These deposits were identified upon the site. Underlying the occupation levels was a deposit of gravel sealed by horizons of natural alluvium (57)[1] ranging from moderately compacted pale brown silts to hard, bright orange silty clays. The surface of the natural deposits sloped from 3.70 m. O.D. to 3.80 m. O.D. from east to west.

A number of tiny flint flakes was recovered from the surface of the alluvium. Although none appeared worked, they may represent the earliest activity upon the site.

Phase I – The Roman road and ditch (Fig. 2)

The earliest deposit excavated was a Roman street surface (56). It consisted of compacted metalling, formed from flint nodules and pebbles, aligned approximately east–west. It was uncovered only along its northern edge but was seen to continue south below the line of the present Spital Street. A depression in the gravel surface was probably a wheel rut.

Running parallel with, but 3.30 m. north of, the road surface was a ditch (55), a linear, parallel-edged, steep-sided cut up to 1.60 m. wide and 1 m. deep, only fully excavated within a short length to the east. It was probably a drainage ditch for the road. Its lower levels were infilled with a sequence of naturally laid erosion deposits (51–54) formed from weathering of the cut sides, demonstrating that the ditch was open for a period of time. Some material was also being discarded into the ditch, however, as demonstrated by the sticky, organic deposit (58) lying towards the base and the remains of a small child (skeleton 2), possibly new-born, recovered from one of the fills (51). According to Philpott (1991, 97–8), infants were often placed within partly filled ditches in the Iron Age period, these being considered suitable burial sites for new-born or very young children, and the burial practice continued into the Roman period.

Although no material was recovered from the road metalling, finds recovered from the ditch fills and overlying deposits suggest that the

[1] Numbers in brackets denote the context units allocated during the course of excavation.

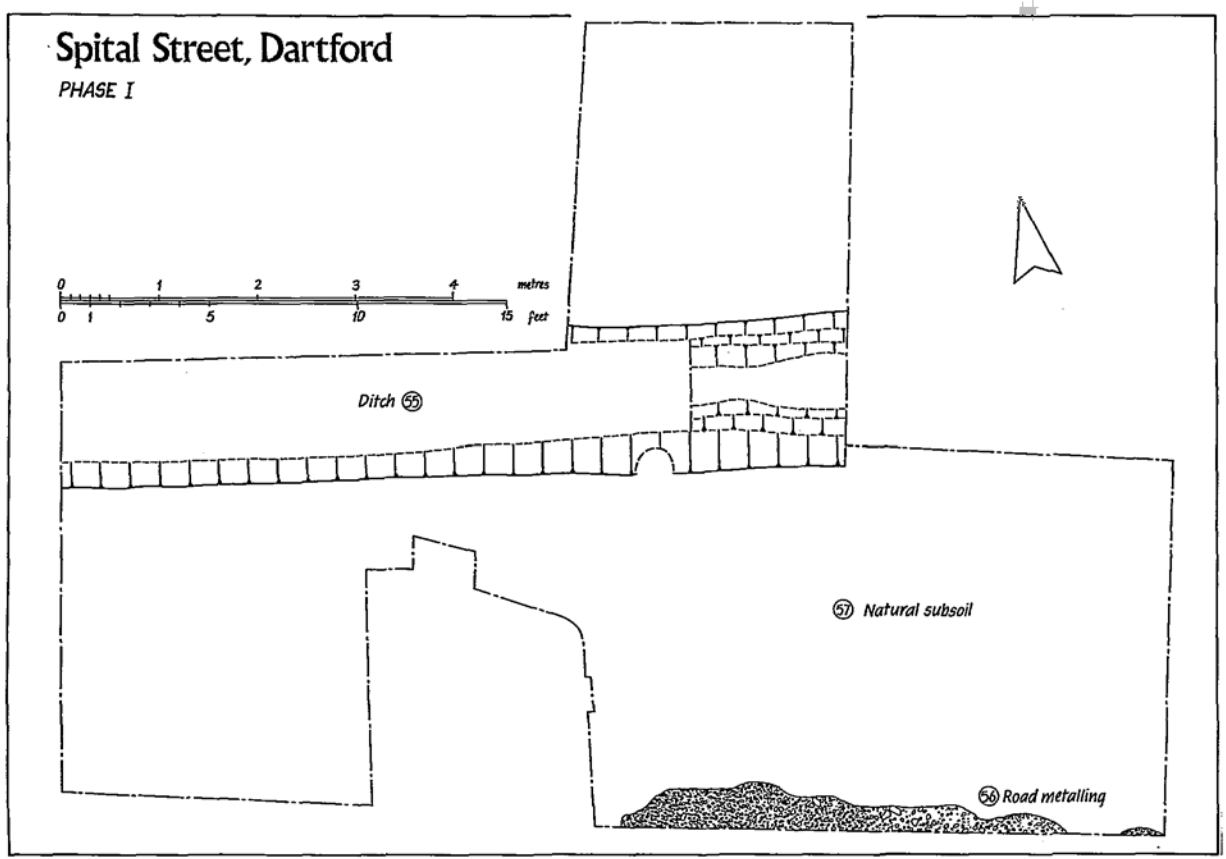

Fig. 2. Phase I – The Roman road and ditch

road and its attendant ditch were in use during the second half of the first century A.D. Hence, it is possible that the road was laid shortly following the Roman conquest to provide a primary link between Canterbury and London and so form the earliest line of Watling Street. However, the road, as uncovered within the area of the excavation, consisted of only a single layer of metalling, perhaps indicating a temporary surface. Once established, the Romans may have constructed a new road, on a slightly different alignment and as yet undiscovered, consisting of deeper, successive gravel deposits of the type usually associated with a major Roman road.

Phase II – Disuse of the road (Fig. 3)

Following the disuse of the road, the ditch was deliberately capped with a deposit of dark grey clay loam (50). This implies that the area was not abandoned, but was levelled off for further occupation activity. A soil horizon (37), comprising of a slightly greenish grey, silty clay loam, was then allowed to build up across the site. Recovered from this deposit was a number of pottery sherds, mostly late first to early second century in date, an incomplete copper alloy spoon dated between the second half of the first century to the second century, and a copper alloy rosette brooch, tentatively dated to the mid-first century and with a maker's stamp on the back. The brooch has been fully described and discussed by Mackreth (1992).

The nature of the overlying soil horizon suggests that it was formed by a mixture of natural accumulation combined with trampling and general surface activity, the finds suggesting that this formation began in the mid-late first to early second century. Occupation may perhaps have been occurring within an adjacent area beyond the bounds of the excavation.

Phase III – Features cutting the Phase II levels (Fig. 3)

After a period of perhaps peripheral activity, a number of features were cut into the soil horizons of Phase II. Unfortunately, the area uncovered was too small to interpret much of the nature of this occupation. Two post-holes, one (49) located within the central southern area and the other (47) in the central northern area, were discovered, the latter containing a quantity of slag. This was the earliest evidence for metal-working occurring near the site.

A large pit (42), 2.30 m. diameter, was also excavated within the centre of the excavation, but neither its full extent nor its true depth were uncovered and, therefore, its nature remains uncertain. It was backfilled with a sequence of sterile clay loams (38–41).

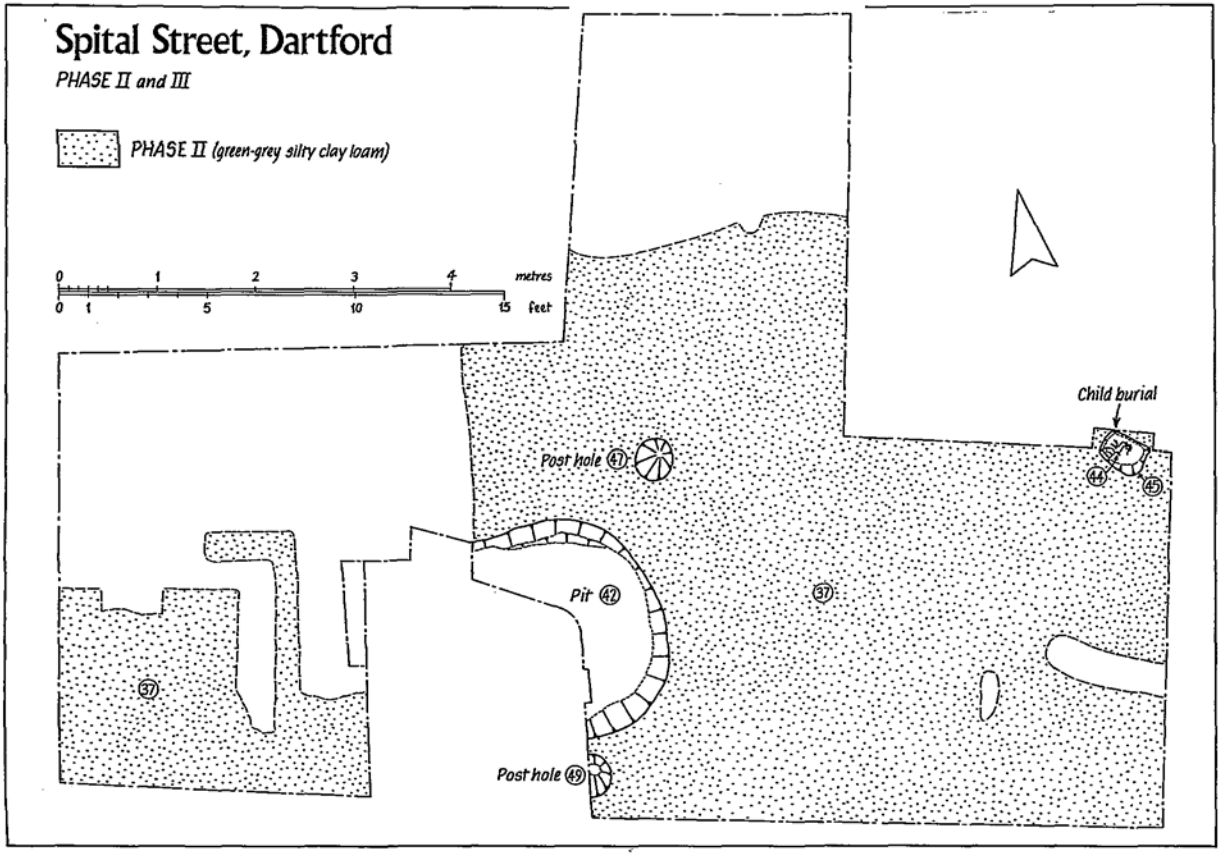

Fig. 3. Phases II and III – Disuse of the road and subsequent activity

The burial of a small child (skeleton 1), possibly new-born, was recovered from the east side of the area, against the north section edge. The body had been placed within a shallow, rectangular cut (45), lined with broken body sherds (44) of a large Brockley Hill flagon dating between *c.* A.D. 70–150. This style of infant burial is unusual. During the Roman period, infants were often laid within shallow scoops in the ground, or in the backfill of pits or ditches (as the burial of Phase III). In some cases, these were lined with tiles or stones (Philpott, 1991, 97–101), whilst others, for example at Poundbury, have been found covered with flints, tiles or stone slabs (Farwell and Molleson, 1993, 15). Infants buried within pottery vessels, however, are uncommon.

Few contexts within this phase yielded pottery. That recovered suggests a late first to early second century date, the pottery range not extending beyond *c.* A.D. 150.

Phase IV – Yards and occupation deposits (Figs. 4 and 5)

A small patch of a cobbled surface (34) survived within the centre of the site. It was formed predominantly of flint pebbles combined with limestone fragments and flint nodules. This was presumably the remnants of a yard within or adjacent to a structure beyond the limits of the excavation area. Overlying the cobble surface was an occupation horizon of dark brown clay loam (33) streaked with yellow sand and containing inclusions of shell, flint, chalk, charcoal, pot and bone. This would have formed during the use of the surface.

A re-surfacing of the yard surface occurred (28), laid upon a mixture of bedding deposits (31, 32, 59). These bedding deposits contained occasional tile inclusions, one fragment (from context 32) possibly a piece of *bessalis* with a signature mark.

The yard surface (28) above these beddings was considerably more extensive, level and compacted than the original, and was characterised in some areas by a thin lens of 'pea-grit' overlying the surface. It consisted largely of medium rounded flint pebbles and large flint nodules set within a sparse, grey-brown clay loam matrix. The flint nodules were particularly concentrated within a small area to the south-east and may denote patching. Cutting the yard was a sub-rectangular feature (36), up to 1.40 m. across and 0.16 m. deep, filled with a deposit (35) of flint pebbles and rough limestone fragments set within a sparse, grey clay loam which lay flush with the surrounding yard. This fill was very similar to the material forming the overlying yard surface and it, too, was overlain by a thin deposit of 'pea-grit'. The feature may have provided a compact base on which to support a structure or feature set within the yard area.

To the west, another sub-rectangular feature (30), a maximum of

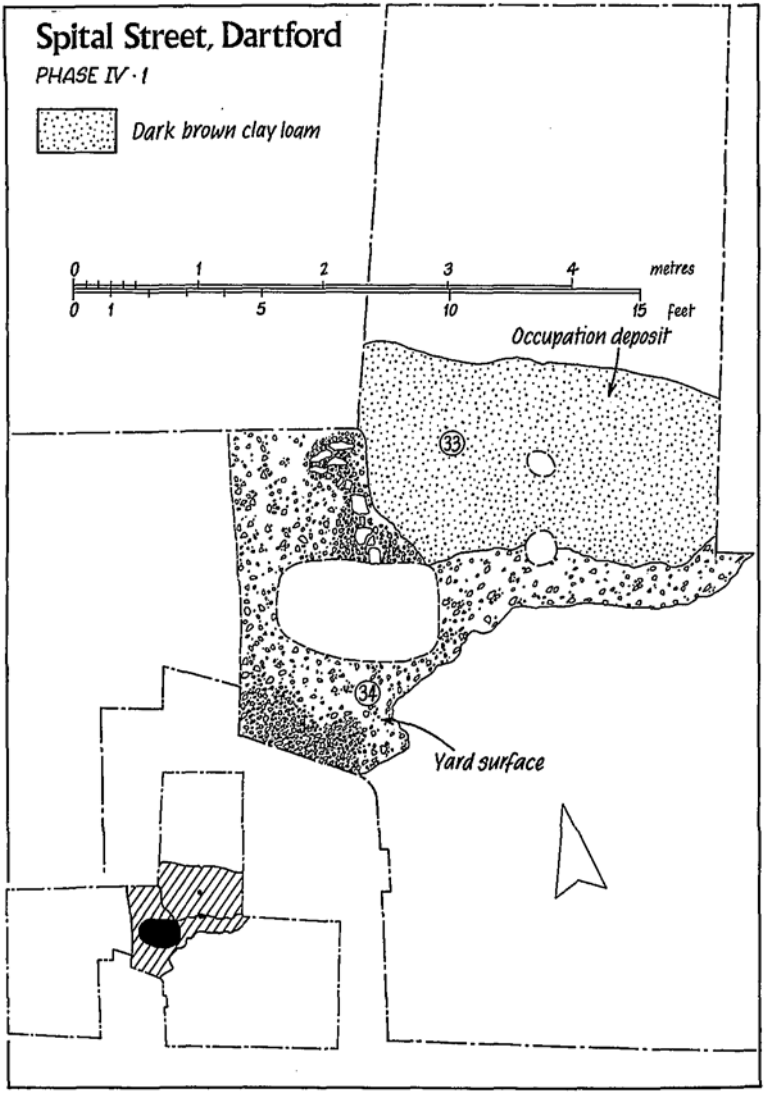

Fig. 4. Phase IV.1 – The first yard surface

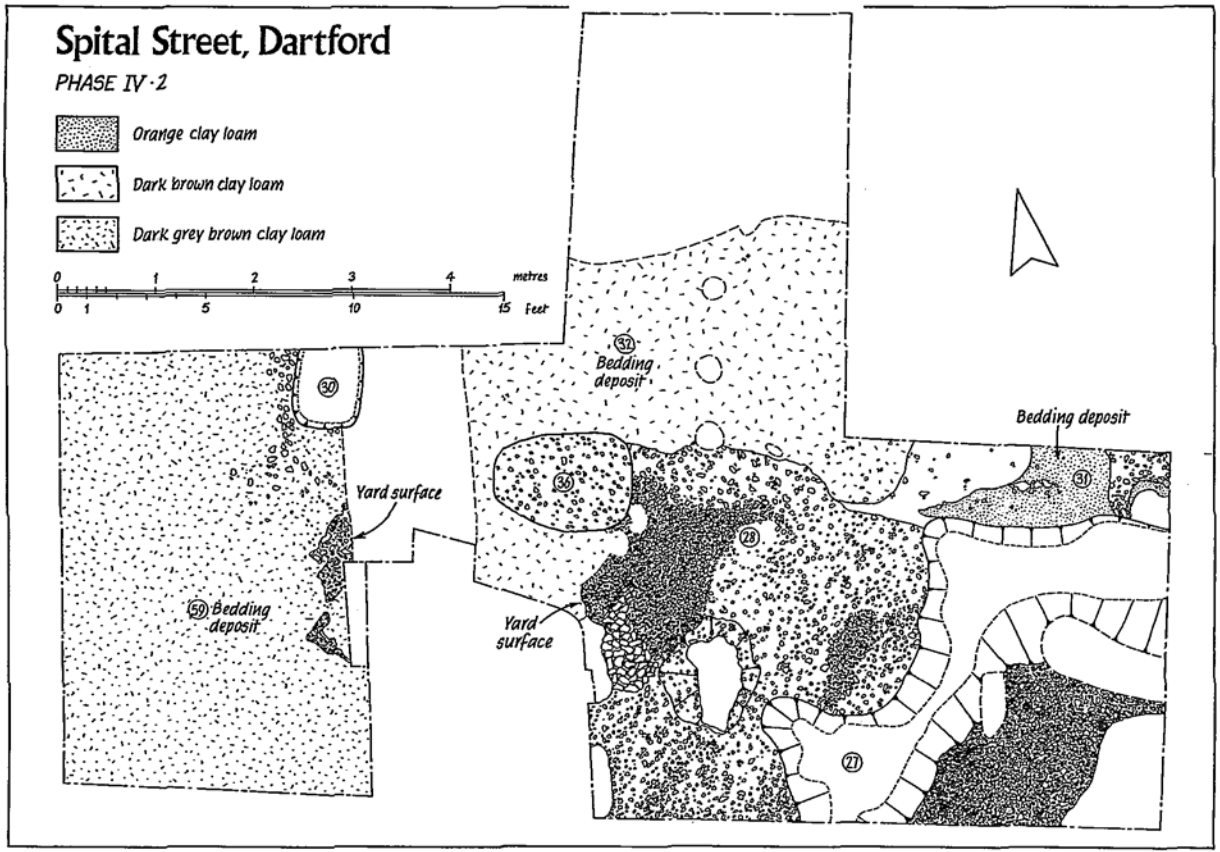

Fig. 5. Phase IV.2 – The yard re-surfacing and associated features

0.80 m. across, cut the yard surface, this one backfilled with a dark brown clay loam (29) containing inclusions of chalk, charcoal, bone, flint pebbles and pottery. Its function is unknown.

Erosion processes, probably a combination of both water action and trampling, created an irregular-shaped cut (27) through the yard surface. This had subsequently been backfilled with a dark grey clay loam (26) in order to repair the yard surface. Included within the deposit were high concentrations of slag and charcoal and a large fragment of Lower Greensand quern-stone. The quantity of slag suggests that iron-working was occurring within the locality; the fragment of quern likewise suggests local occupation.

Overlying the cobbled yard surface was a deposit of dark grey clay loam (17), containing occupation detritus including daub, charcoal, pot, tile, slag and the shaft from a bone pin. There was little differentiation in the pottery dating between this occupation activity and that of Phase III, although a single sherd of mid to late second century date from context (29) suggests Phase IV occupation may have extended towards *c.* A.D. 200.

Phase V – Structure or fence line (Fig. 6)

The south-west corner of a structure or fence line was identified. Three post holes (21, 23 and 25), ranging from 0.30 to 0.39 m. diameter, each with a central post-socket of 0.10 m. diameter, were aligned approximately north–south. A fourth, oval post-hole (19), a maximum of 0.30 m. across, ran off perpendicularly to the east. Most of the pottery recovered comprised of small, residual fragments dating from the mid-first century to no later than *c.* A.D. 200. A single sherd of Mayen ware of probable fourth-century date recovered from feature (23) suggests that the activity may have been late-Roman.

A contemporary feature lay to the east, a linear cut (16), up to 1.40 m. long, aligned east–west but curving slightly northwards towards its rounded west end. It was filled with a dark olive-grey, sandy clay loam (15) containing inclusions of flint, shell, bone, pot, slag and charcoal. The feature is of uncertain function.

Phase VI – Abandonment (Fig. 7)

Following the period of occupation, the site was abandoned and a deep, dark earth deposit (12) formed across the excavation area. This consisted of a very dark grey clay loam streaked with pale grey and containing inclusions of shell, chalk, flint nodules and flint pebbles. Also recovered from the deposit were quantities of pottery, very mixed in date and ranging from late first-century to medieval.

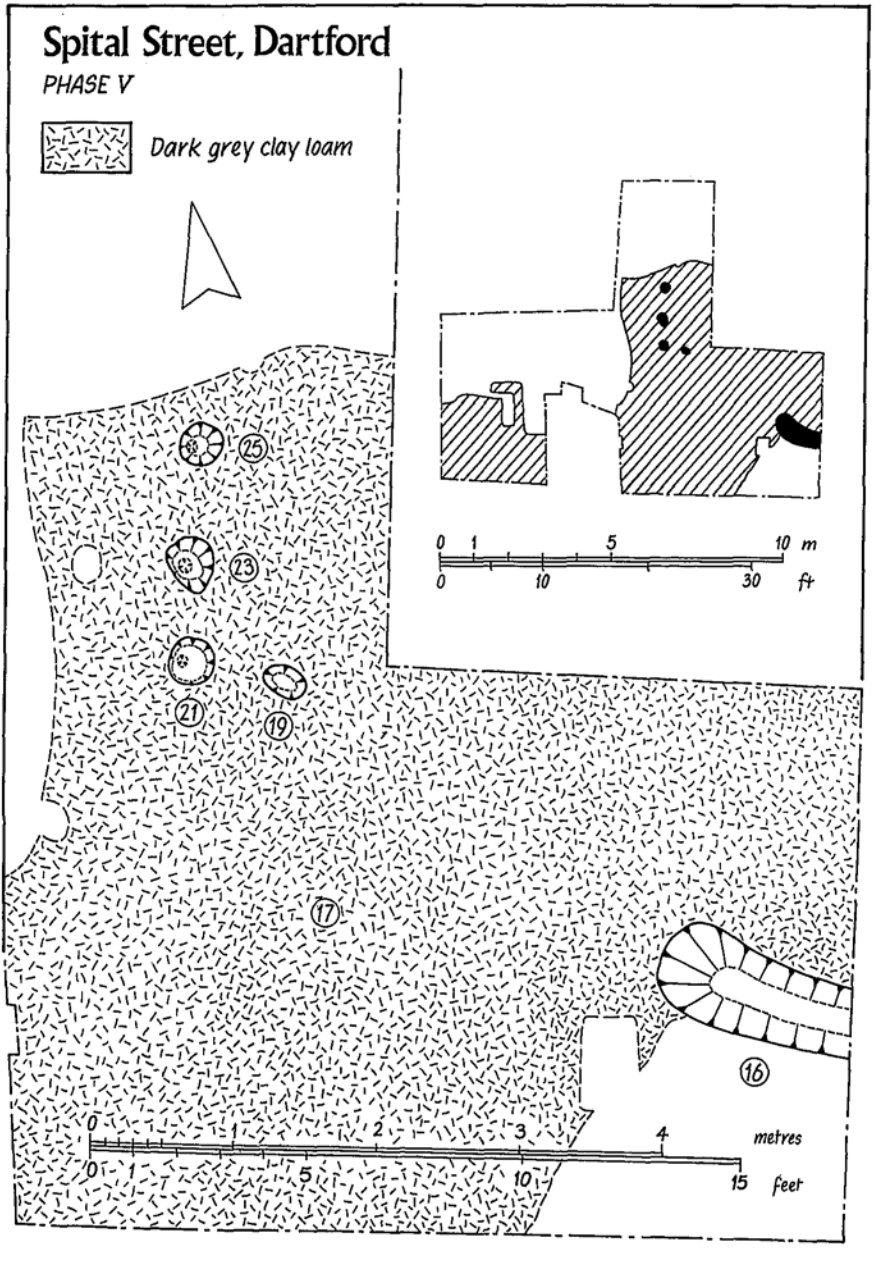

Fig. 6. Phase V – Structure or fence line

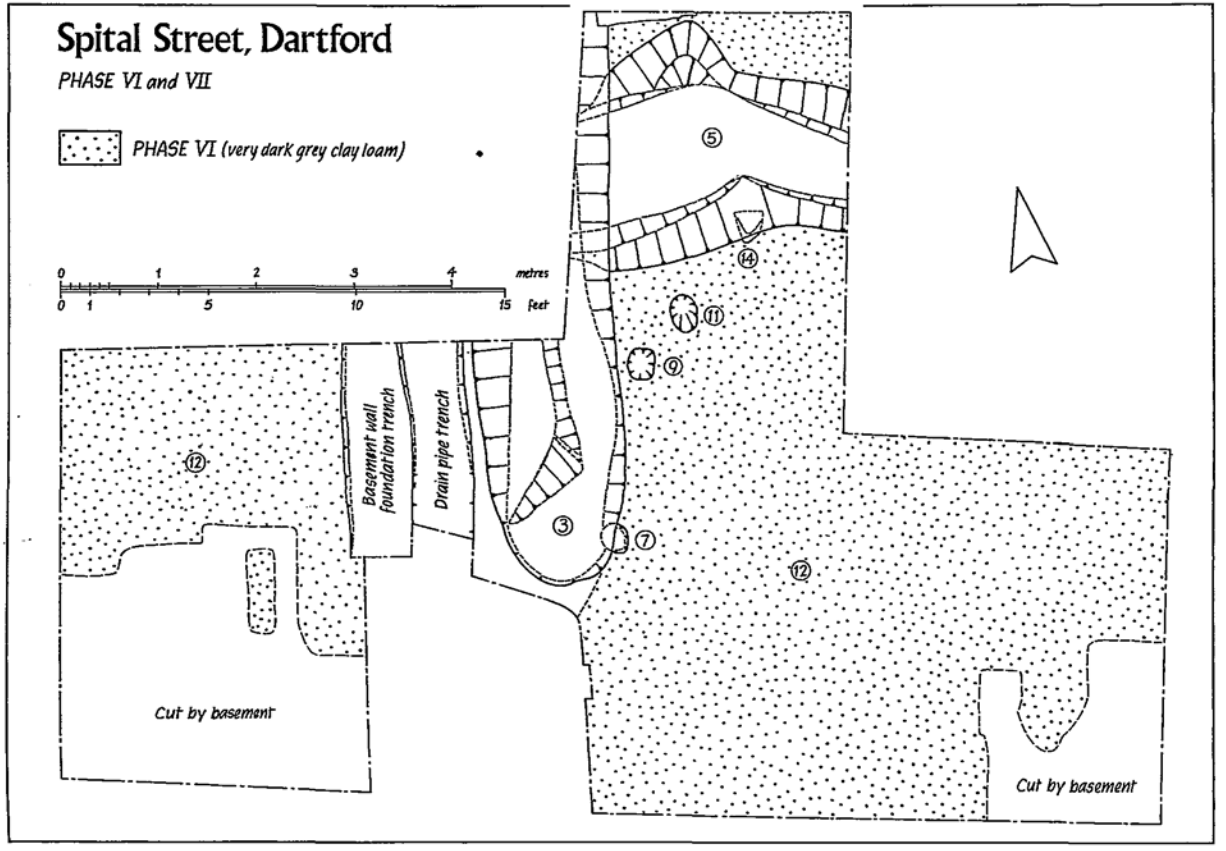

Fig. 7. Phase VI and VII – Abandonment: Medieval and post-medieval activity

The ceramic evidence suggests that the site was abandoned for a period of some 700 years. After this time, sporadic activity occurred within the area from the late eleventh century onwards, with the casual loss of finds onto the ground, following which there was increased activity within the immediate vicinity from the mid-late twelfth century onwards.

Phase VII – Medieval and post-medieval activity (Fig. 7)

Features relating to the medieval and post-medieval period were heavily truncated by later post-medieval activity. In addition, they were concentrated within too small an area to be interpreted within a wider context. They consisted of four post-holes (7, 9, 11 and 14), possibly indicating a fence line, whilst a curious ditch-like feature (5) cut to the north. The ditch had been open for a time, allowing the sides to erode and erosion deposits (60, 61) to form at its base. It was capped with a clay loam (4).

The latest activity identified upon the site was represented by wall footings yielding sixteenth- to early seventeenth-century pottery. They were formed from a gully-shaped cut (3), aligned north–south, packed with a highly compacted fill of pale grey-buff, very clayey loam (2) to provide stable footings for a wall above. Terminating 2.40 m. north of the southern excavation edge, they indicated the location of a cellar wall within the rear of buildings fronting Spital Street.

All subsequent post-medieval occupation horizons were removed by the insertion of basemented buildings along Spital Street, demolished immediately prior to the archaeological investigations.

THE HUMAN BONES Trevor Anderson

The remains of two skeletons were recovered from the excavations at Spital Street, Dartford, one (skeleton 1) a burial within the remains of a large flagon (44) (Phase III), the other (skeleton 2) recovered from fill (51) within the road ditch (Phase I).

Skeleton 1

The lower half of this skeleton is practically complete, although the fibulae are fragmentary and the feet bones were not recovered. The upper half was poorly preserved: incomplete lower arm bones; damaged right scapula; left clavicle; fragmentary ribs and vertebrae. The skull was represented by six vault fragments and the right half of the mandible. The surrounding soil (43) was sieved and fragments of a

left clavicle, right radius and ulna were found to join with those of the articulated skeleton. Foetal/new-born humeri, metacarpals, rib, vertebrae and cranial fragments were also recovered from the sieved soil. The bones were quite solid, although the shafts had suffered erosion and were encrusted with coarse, gritty soil.

From the 119 foetal metrics defined by Fazekas and Kósa (1978) only nineteen measurements could be taken on ten different bones. All of these, including the maximum length of the arm and the leg bones (ulna 60.4 mm.; radius 54.8 mm.; femur 76.9 mm.; tibia 66.1 mm.) suggest that the remains are either full-term or new-born. Two unerupted deciduous teeth (left maxillary canine and first molar) recovered from the sieving support this conclusion. As such it is possible that the bones represent a still-born baby. The height/depth ratio of the greater sciatic notch of the ilium suggest that the remains may be male (Schutowski, 1989). However, this index is by no means a diagnostic sexing criterion. There was no evidence of cause of death, or signs of osseous pathology, on the available bones.

Skeleton 2

This skeleton is poorly preserved. Only five small cranial vault fragments were recovered. Eleven vertebrae were represented and the few available ribs were fragmentary. The pelvic bones were not recovered, nor were any hand or feet bones. The arm and upper leg bones were available for examination. The surrounding soil was not sieved. The condition of the bones was good. Unlike those of Skeleton 1, they had not suffered erosion nor were they encrusted with gritty soil.

Only five measurements could be taken on three different bones: humerus; ulna and femur. These measurements suggest that the remains are either full-term or new-born (ulna 60.1 mm.; femur 74.3 mm.). The dentition was not available for examination. As with Skeleton 1, it is possible that the bones represent a still-born baby. The absence of the pelvic bones means that no attempt can be made to sex the remains. There was no evidence of cause of death, or signs of osseous pathology, on the available bones.

Conclusion

Analysis of the recovered human bones shows that two individuals are represented. Both are either full-term or new-born, possibly still-born babies. It is possible, but not certain, that one of them is male. The remains do not display any osseous pathology and cause of death cannot be ascertained. There is no skeletal evidence to support a familial relationship.

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