

THE ROMAN POTTERY
MANUFACTURING SITE IN
HIGHGATE WOOD:
EXCAVATIONS 1966-78

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Cover image: George Demetriou, a participant in the Horniman Museum kiln experiment in 1971, finishing off a necked jar. (Photographer: Bernard Brandham, Horniman Museum Photographer).

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Part I.

The Excavations

1. Introduction

Highgate Wood is a wooded park owned by the Corporation of the City of London in the parish of Hornsey, now part of the London Borough of Haringey. The Roman pottery manufacturing site there was discovered by one of the writers (AEB) during an archaeological survey of the public open spaces of the area. The primary objective of the survey was the recovery of prehistoric flintwork, which was at that time abundantly visible in bare patches on the ground surface, but the finding in July 1962 of an abraded sherd of samian Drag 37 was followed up later that year and in 1963 by the discovery of quantities of small fragments of Romano British buff and grey ware (Brown 1962, 1963). In the summer of 1966 a small trial trench designed if possible to establish the nature of the Roman site was excavated by the writers, with the kind permission of the Park Superintendant of the Corporation of London; enough was found to show that the site had been concerned with pottery manufacture. For eight years after that annual excavations of five to six weeks duration were carried out on the site, with a short final season in 1978; several interim reports have been published (Brown & Sheldon 1968b, 1969a and b, 1970, 1971, 1974; Anon 1968). The site was excavated entirely with volunteer help; from 1968 to 1972 work was combined with adult education classes on practical archaeology organised by the City Literary Institute and the Department of Extra Mural Studies of the University of London (Brown & Sheldon 1968a, 1969c). During the 1971 season an experiment in the manufacture of pottery on the site and its firing in replica kilns was carried out by teachers of pottery employed by the then Inner London Education Authority (Experiment 1972, 1973); the archaeological aim of the experiment was to establish some general ideas about the practical aspects of pottery manufacture on a site such as this, which could be used in its overall interpretation once the excavation was over. A similar exercise in the reconstruction of a Roman pottery kiln took place in the Wood in July 2010 under the auspices of Bruce Castle Museum, London Borough of Haringey, and MLA Renaissance London (Peacey & Hurst 2012).

1.1. The Site

Figs. 1 and 2

The site lies on the top and both sides of a small knoll at the northern end of Highgate Wood; its highest point is at *c.* 102.7m OD (centre at NGR TQ 28308900). Its northern edge is bounded by the cutting belonging to the branch railway to Alexandra Palace, opened in 1873 but now abandoned; it is not known whether Roman material was discovered when the cutting was excavated. The knoll formed part of a ridge, running north-south, which is the watershed which separates the catchment areas of the River Brent to the west from the River Lea to the east. Highgate Wood and the western part of Queen's Wood lie on a thin deposit of the Claygate Beds, a more sandy material than the underlying London Clay, very suitable for the manufacture of pottery and London Stock bricks (Collins & Hacker 2012; Hacker, Scaife & French 2014; Clements 2015). This particular geological formation was of key importance from the potting point of view, and if further sites are to be found they can be expected to lie on it; but since the Geological Survey does not mark deposits less than a metre thick on its maps, its actual distribution is not easily determinable.

There are also thin spreads of superficial flinty gravel and occasional thicker deposits of sandy gravel. These gravel deposits are of glacial origin and may belong to the Dollis Hill Terrace gravels, which lie 500m to the north, or form part of a more generalised spread of clays, sands and gravels which was the result of slope degeneration in periglacial conditions during the Pleistocene.

A small stream, mostly dry now, arising 100m to the south-west of the site from the junction of the relatively permeable Claygate Beds and the impermeable London Clay, ran towards the western edge of the wood (Fig. 44). The potters could have obtained water from this, or, more probably, collected rainwater in the ditches which formed such a prominent feature of the excavated site and from which clay for potting could have been obtained.

The topsoil consisted of a yellowish/brown earth, the result of the weathering of the superficial Claygate Beds. Its pH (an average of 4.2 was recorded) indicated a high degree of acidity; very little bone material survived.

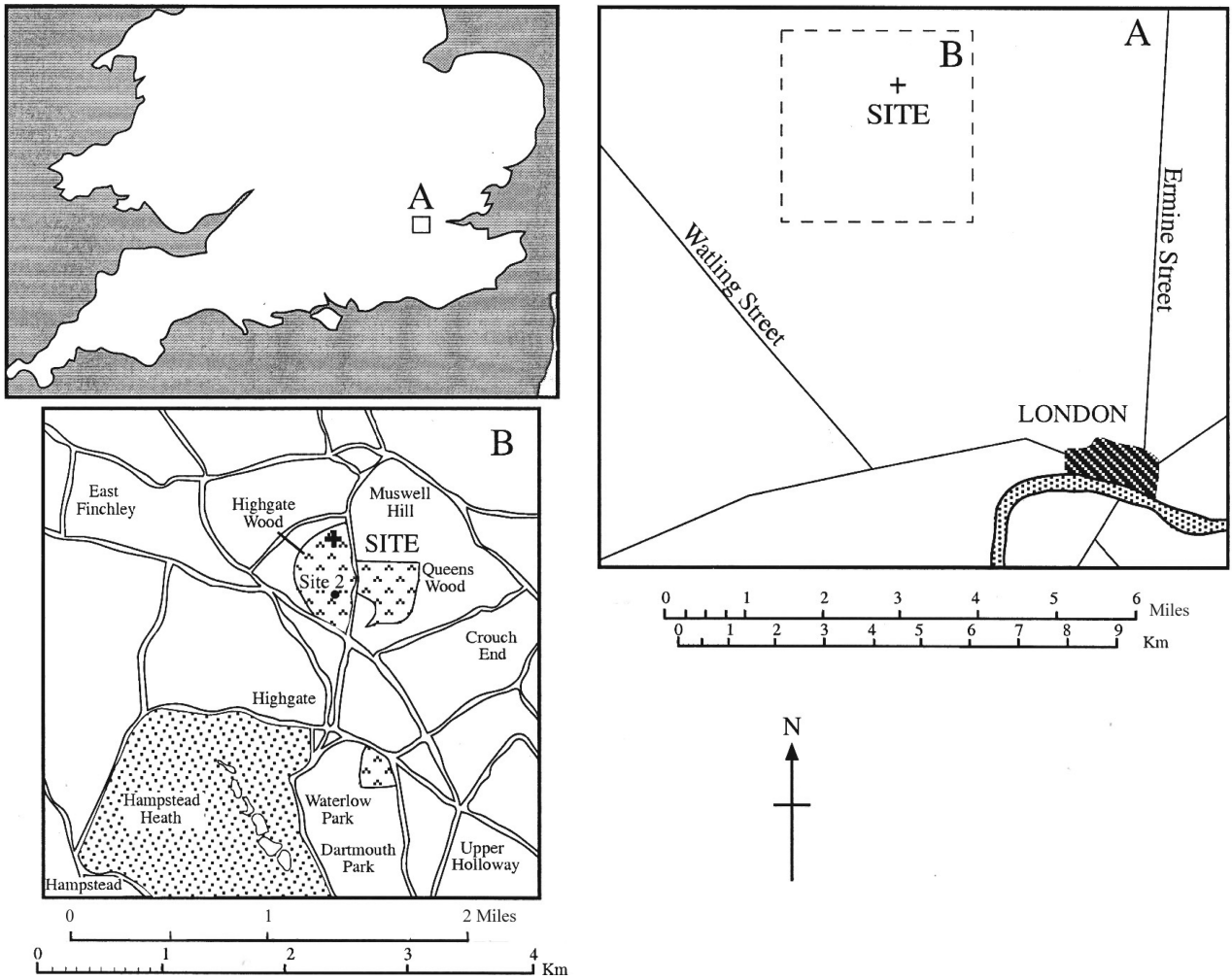


Fig. 1. Highgate Wood: Location

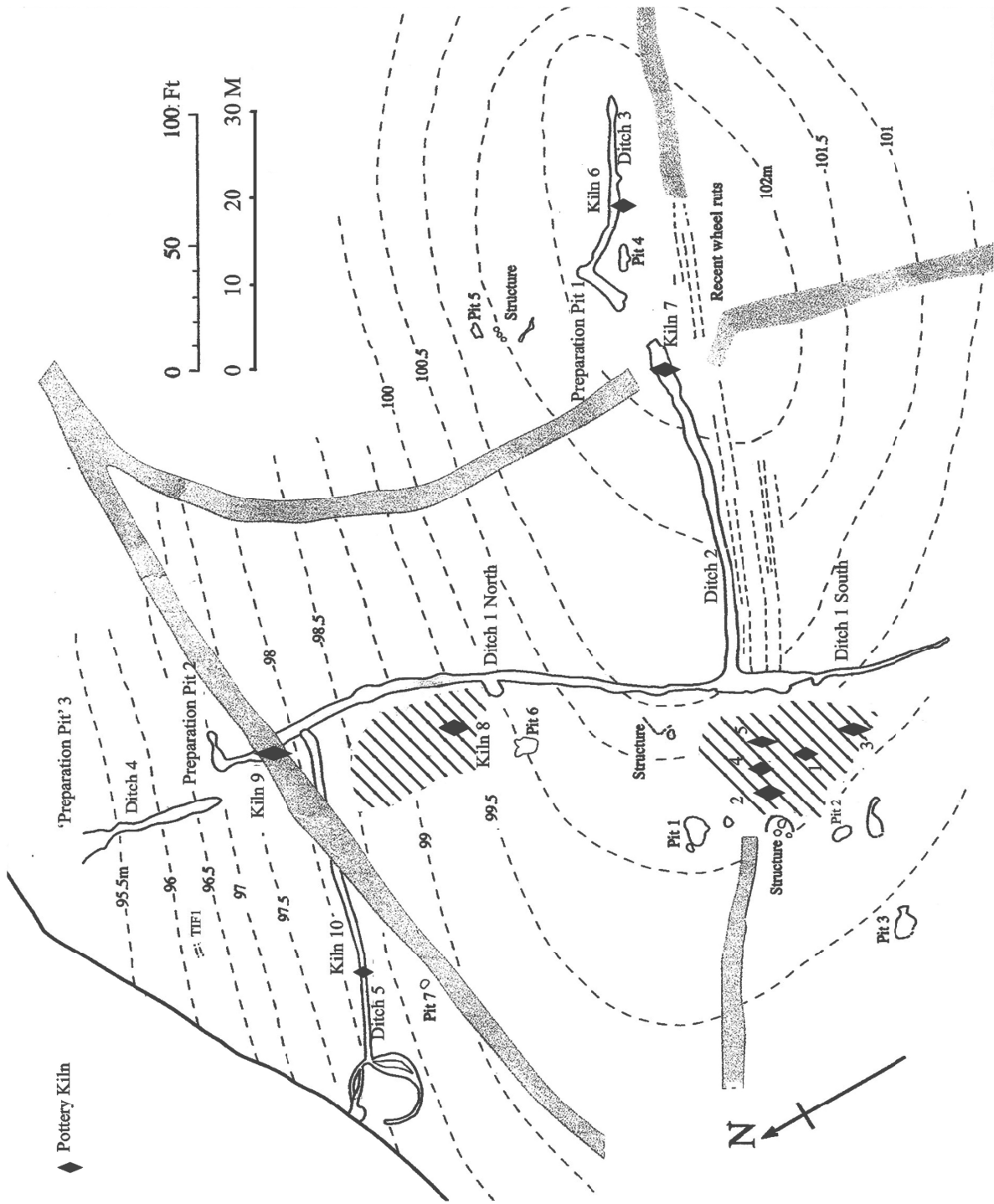


Fig. 2. Highgate Wood: Site Plan

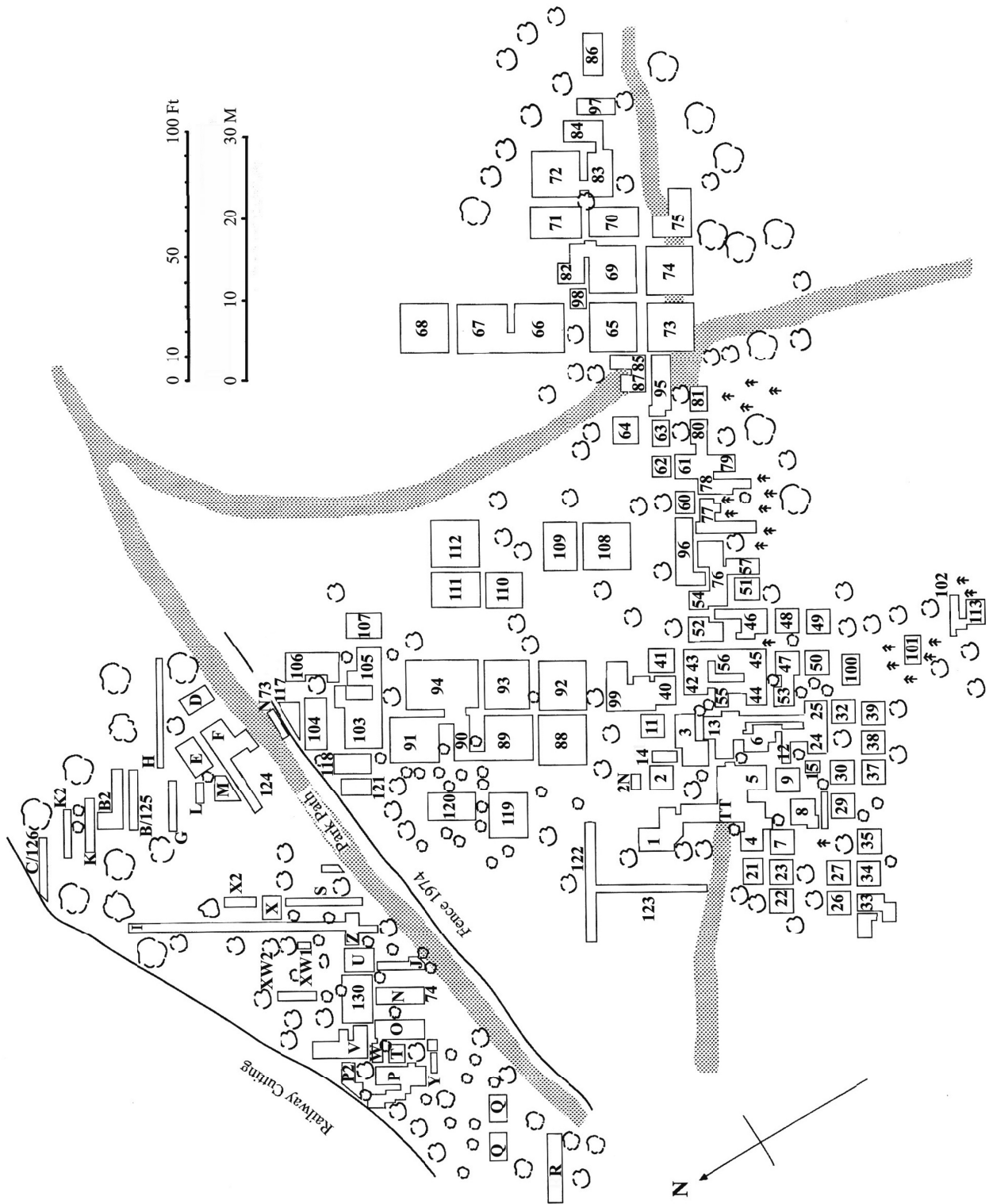


Fig. 3. Highgate Wood: Trench numbering