

Fig. 1: site and trench locations

Late Prehistoric and Roman Brentford: evolution of an agricultural landscape

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Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd. was commissioned by CgMs Ltd. on behalf of Barratt West London, to undertake archaeological investigations at the site of the former Brentford Gasworks, Brentford High Street (TQ 1840 7780; Fig. 1), in advance of the redevelopment of the site. An archaeological evaluation, conducted between 24 January and 4 February 2000, determined that much of the site had been severely truncated by activity relating to the gasworks. In one area, on the eastern side of the site, evidence of activity from the Mesolithic to post-medieval periods had survived. Accordingly, an open area excavation of c. 1000m², centred on the concentration of features identified during the evaluation, was conducted between 10 February and 22 March 2000.

The excavation produced evidence of activity during the Mesolithic period in the form of flintwork, including microliths and micro-burins, which suggested occupation in the form of short duration hunting or task-specific camps. Little subsequent activity prior to the Iron Age was recovered, when evidence suggests the area was

cleared of trees and a possible settlement established. This was superseded during the Late Iron Age by a field system or enclosure, which in turn was replaced by another field system, on a different alignment and probably dateable to immediately after the Roman conquest. This seems to have been abandoned by the end of the first century, and there was apparently no further activity until field boundaries were established in the medieval period. In the post-medieval period the site was increasingly developed, and domestic or light industrial/retail properties were established along the High Street frontage.

This article is an interim account, concentrating on the late prehistoric/early Roman sequence; a full account of all of the significant findings will be published later, after full stratigraphic, artefactual and environmental analysis.

Geology and topography

The site lies on thick deposits of the Langley Silt Complex (brickearth), overlying the Kempton Park Gravel Terrace, approximately 42m north of

the north bank of the River Thames, which here is on the exterior side of a large meander. As the meander is cutting northwards, the site is located on a relatively elevated gravel terrace rather than on the floodplain, as could be expected from its proximity to the river. The thickness of the brickearth deposit found on site, and its imperviousness to water, would have made the site poorly drained and difficult to till, unlike many other areas of the west London gravel terraces, with possible consequences for land use.

Later prehistoric activity

Worked flint recovered throughout the excavation was characteristic of industries normally considered Late Bronze Age in date, although recent research has suggested that such industries may have continued into the Iron Age.¹ The struck flint was concentrated within features dateable to the Iron Age/early Roman period. Although possibly residual (no other evidence of Bronze Age activity, either structural or artefactual, was recovered), it may indicate that traditions of flintworking continued in to the Iron Age.

Tree-throw hollows

The earliest features recorded were four large shapeless pits with irregular sides and bases, interpreted as tree-throw hollows (Fig 2.1). They were filled with a sandy silt-clay containing charcoal, burnt flint and struck flint, indicating human activity nearby. They may have been deliberately used for rubbish disposal. Precise dating of the up-rooting was problematic. All contained relatively high quantities of struck flint, mostly characteristic of Late Bronze Age or Iron Age industries, but only one contained any pottery -- a single sherd dateable to the Late Iron Age. The hollows may indicate an episode of land clearance, although a natural cause for the up-rooting of trees cannot be excluded. It was uncertain whether the site was cleared of woodland in order to facilitate the subsequent settlement (see below), or occurred naturally, with the settlement situated to take advantage of the opened space. Although large tracts of south and west London were reorganised into fairly regular and formally laid-out agrarian landscapes by the Late Bronze Age, this area appeared to have remained under mature woodland until the later

part of the Iron Age, possibly due to its relatively heavy, badly drained soil.

Iron Age occupation

The first clear evidence of occupation consisted of a metalled surface and various pits and/or postholes (Fig 2.2). Some of them had been truncated by the subsequent Late Iron Age enclosure (see below) and clearly predated it. Other features had not been; their interpretation as representing a single phase of activity must remain tentative. The extensive horizontal and vertical truncation observed throughout the site may have limited the recovery of more extensive evidence, especially that relating to possible surface-laid structures.

In the north-central part of the site a tightly-laid layer of rammed flint gravel pebbles with abraded and battered upper surfaces was interpreted as a deliberately laid metalled surface. The surface had suffered from considerable horizontal truncation, probably significantly reducing its extent. Interestingly, a significant proportion of the pebbles used for the surface consisted of flint knapping cores with Late Bronze Age/Iron Age characteristics. Towards the south-west of the site was a pit backfilled with burnt brickearth but containing little artefactual evidence. No evidence for burning was seen *in situ* and the burnt material had apparently been dumped into it.

These together constitute a disparate group of features normally associated with occupation or settlement, although the remains as found do not necessarily suggest more than limited, possibly temporary, occupation. They were scattered around the site and no discernible patterns or structures could be determined, nor could direct contemporaneity be demonstrated. Dating evidence was poor in quantity and quality, with the few pieces of pottery recovered suggesting a date in the Late Iron Age, and it must be concluded that rubbish from any such settlement was being disposed of off site. This is a pattern frequently encountered in the Late Iron Age, where actual evidence for structures is elusive and ephemeral, even when more tangible evidence, such as field boundaries or enclosure ditches, is available.² It may indicate that here we are dealing with a more transient community, possibly based around a livestock economy.

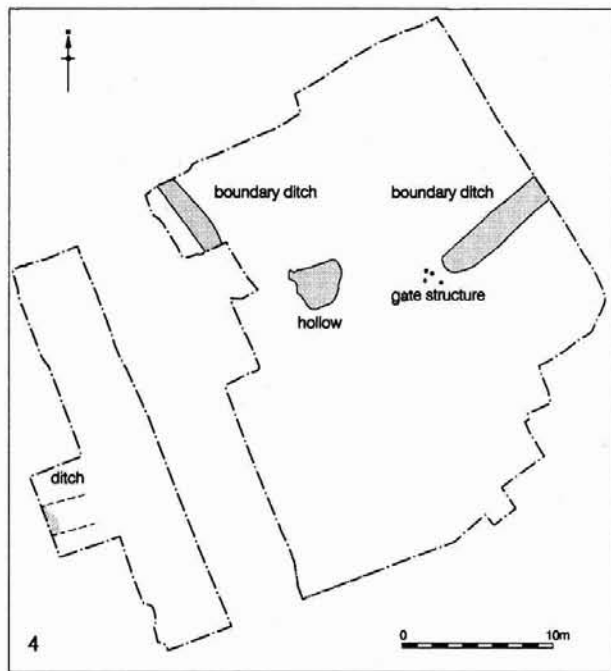
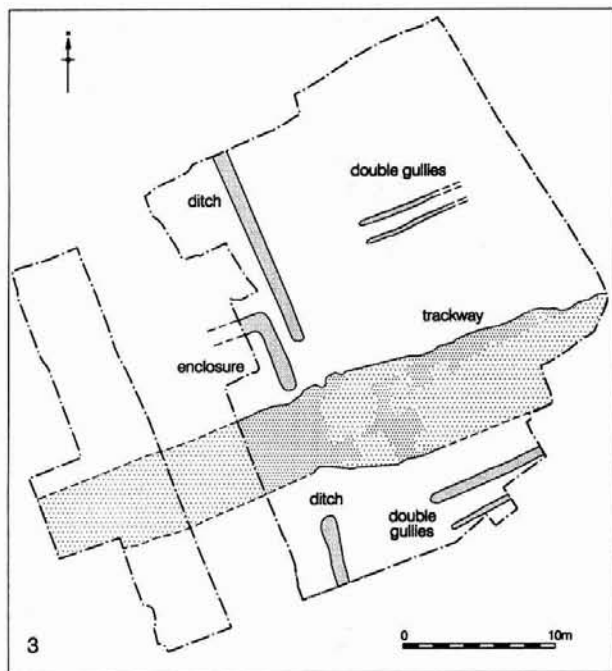
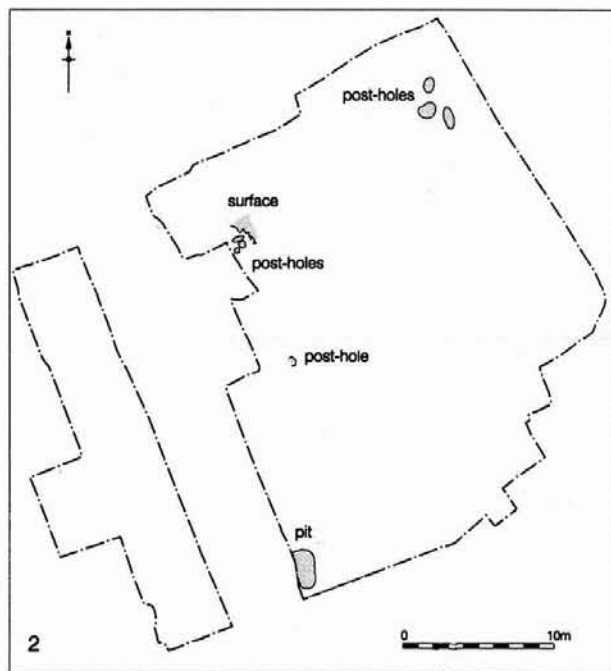
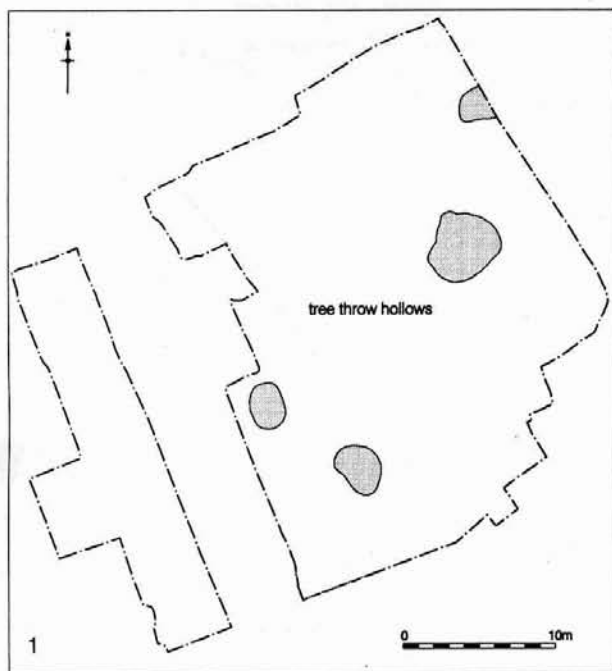


Fig. 2: 1. tree-throw hollows, 2. Iron Age occupation, 3. Late Iron Age enclosure and trackway, 4. Early Roman enclosure

Late Iron Age enclosure and trackway

Following the apparent abandonment of the settlement, a rectilinear enclosure represented by three ditches with an entranceway and an

associated trackway was established, suggesting a more formalised use of the landscape (Fig 2.3). The ditches were approximately 1m wide by 0.50m deep and varied from a 'U' to a rounded

'V' shape in profile. They were all filled with a sandy silt-clay, mostly representing rain-wash and natural silting, and contained charcoal and burnt and struck flint. Slumped over part of one of the ditches was a layer of brickearth, possibly the remnants of a bank, or the up-cast from the excavation of the ditch. The two ditch terminals appeared to form an entranceway with the trackway aligned at right angles to it, narrowing as it traversed the gap. The position of the entrance/trackway may have been influenced by the location of the earlier tree throws, the remains of which may have still been apparent.³

The trackway traversed the site in an east-west direction and consisted of a shallow linear depression up to 7.14m wide and 0.29m deep. It appeared to have originated as a hollow-way, and its base was furrowed, suggestive of wheel ruts. It was later filled with dumps of coarse sands and gravels, presumably to aid drainage and form hard standing in the muddy and difficult-going conditions that would undoubtedly have arisen during wet weather. The effort expended on its consolidation suggests that it must have been considered fairly important, possibly even forming part of a much larger system of land routes along the Thames Valley. Approximately 3m south of the trackway was a pair of parallel, east-west aligned, linear gullies or small ditches with rounded western terminals, about 1.5m apart. A similar pair was located approximately 17m to their north, and were about 1.0m apart. Both pairs were parallel to each other and to the trackway, although not equidistant from it. They may have delineated the boundaries of the trackway, separating it from fields to the north and south. Similar trackways were frequently associated with such boundary or marker ditches, and although the ditches recorded here were not large enough in themselves to control the movement of large animals, they may have had hedged banks, a suggestion made for a similar, although earlier, example at Knight's Farm near Reading.⁴

As with the preceding phases, little precise dating evidence was recovered, although again, most of the features produced relatively high numbers of struck flints dateable to the Late Bronze Age or Iron Age. The few pieces of pottery recovered consisted of 'non-Belgic' wares of Late Iron Age date. The field system or enclosure with its

associated trackway was typical of the formal reorganisation of the landscape recognised throughout Britain and recorded in many locations along the gravel terraces of the Thames Valley, although these are normally dated to the Middle or Late Bronze Age.⁵ The apparent lateness of the evidence recorded here may have been the result that soil conditions had on the desire to exploit the land agriculturally. As is often noted from similar sites, little evidence to illuminate the economic basis, such as plant remains or faunal assemblages, was recovered.

Early Roman enclosure or field system

Following the silting of the earlier ditches, a new field system on a slightly different alignment was established (Fig. 2.4). This consisted of three ditches, up to 2m wide and 0.77m deep with 'U' shaped profiles, two of which were aligned at right angles to each other. The two excavated ditches contained relatively large quantities of pottery, including 'Belgic' wares, samian, mortaria and amphorae, as well as a copper alloy bow brooch and much burnt daub and wood. The debris was mostly contained in the upper fills of the ditches, suggesting that they had been deliberately levelled following a period of silting. Next to the ditch terminal was a group of four post or stakeholes, which if the ditch terminal did represent the edge of a field boundary, may have represented a gate or similar structure. Between the two excavated ditches was a large amorphous pit with irregular sides and base, about 3m by 3m and 0.5m deep. It most likely represented an erosional hollow, formed at the gateway into a field. It contained relatively large quantities of pottery and other artefacts, similar in quantity, quality and date to the assemblages recovered from the ditches, and possibly represented attempts to consolidate the hollow.

No evidence of actual settlement structures was recovered, although the fills of the two excavated ditches and the amorphous hollow included rubbish, burnt daub and quantities of charcoal, suggesting that the ditches were levelled with occupation refuse and fire debris, presumably from a nearby building or settlement of relatively high status. Similar evidence has been noted elsewhere in west London, where secondary indications of settlement are more commonly

found than actual remains, and it has been suggested that the archaeological invisibility of such settlements may be a factor of the construction techniques used in surface-laid buildings.⁶ The pottery indicates that the field system was probably established shortly after the Roman conquest, and became obsolete before the end of the 1st century AD. Charred plant remains suggest that spelt, barley and possibly oats were grown, and crop-cleaning waste deposited. No bone was recovered, possibly due to adverse soil conditions.

The field system appears to represent continuity, both chronologically and in land-use, from that of the preceding Late Iron Age, although two of its characteristics differ and these may be of some significance. The first concerns the noticeably higher quantity and quality of cultural material present than from the preceding field system. The second difference is a change in the field alignment, the axis having turned slightly anticlockwise. The reason for the realignment, despite the obvious continuation in land-use, was not clear. The Roman Road from London to Silchester is considered to have been constructed shortly after the Roman invasion and projected to pass close to the site on an approximate east-west alignment. This may have caused a reorganisation of the landscape and a re-marking of local property boundaries, possibly making the trackway obsolete. The contrast between the material culture from the ditches and amorphous feature and that of the preceding phases may even suggest discontinuity in the nature of land tenure in the area. Following the silting of the ditches and apparent abandonment of the field system no activity was recorded until further field boundaries, of medieval date, were constructed.

Discussion

The excavation has produced evidence of the changing nature of landscape exploitation. Following patterns recognised throughout much of Britain, seasonal transhumance and short-term sedentism, characteristic of settlement and agricultural practices of the Neolithic, gave way during the Bronze Age to a formal and organised agricultural landscape.⁷ This involved the imposition of extensive, regular field systems with associated communication routes, within which

small-scale settlements were dispersed. Such a pattern has been observed on many of the gravel terraces of the Thames Valley, beginning during the Middle Bronze Age although probably becoming more predominant during the Later Bronze Age.⁸ The apparent lateness of such an agricultural system as recorded here may be a factor of the site's impervious and badly drained soils, and as such, this area may be more closely comparable to the heavy soils of the London Clay regions, which may have largely remained forested, although exploited for timber, until a relatively late date.⁹ Of course, a use for pasturage could pre-date the imposition of any formal field systems. Limited evidence of Late Iron Age/early Roman activity has been recovered from the historic core of Brentford,¹⁰ and this site, although still mostly providing elusive and enigmatic information, adds significantly to that knowledge, as well as that of the London region as a whole.

The London region has long been thought of as a backwater during the Late Iron Age to Roman transition,¹¹ with a decline in settlement density in the Middle Thames Valley throughout the Iron Age noted.¹² This view has recently been changing, and although rural settlement evidence is still elusive and agricultural land-use patterns poorly understood,¹³ a number of small rural settlements of the transition period have been recently identified, including Ickenham to the west¹⁴ and Kensington,¹⁵ Southwark¹⁶ and Bow¹⁷ to the east. The apparent lack of large-scale prestigious settlement and relative rarity of rural settlements is possibly a factor of the London region encompassing a political and cultural boundary zone of several, often conflicting, Iron Age tribal units.¹⁸

The evidence recorded here both for clearance and the establishment of field systems or enclosures suggests continuity of land-use across the Late Iron Age/Roman transition, although the nature of settlement and the alignment of land divisions appear to have altered at around the time of the conquest. The transient nature of the first settlement evidence, the abandonment of the trackway and the subsequent rise in plant remains and realignment of the field system, may indicate a switch from pasture to an arable use of the land around the time of the Roman conquest, which apparently failed shortly after it was established.

This follows a pattern noted at other transitional rural sites, such as at Ickenham, where a short-lived reordering of the landscape also occurred during the second half of the 1st century.¹⁹ The lack of any evidence post-dating the 1st century is less easy to explain, although a hiatus in the archaeological record during the 2nd century has been noted at other Roman rural settlements in west London.²⁰

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