

Excavations at Bridge Wharf, Chertsey, 2001–9

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A series of archaeological investigations was carried out by Museum of London Archaeology on the site at Bridge Wharf, Chertsey (SY-BRI01) between 2001 and 2009 in advance of redevelopment. In addition, a programme of historic building recording was carried by WA Heritage in 2008. Limited evidence was found of later prehistoric and medieval occupation. A revetted channel shows an increase in activity during the late 16th to 17th centuries, and a post-medieval wall and garden features may relate to buildings shown on Rocque's map of 1762. A sawpit, redeposited 19th/20th century boat timbers and a 20th century slipway reflect the later use of the site for boat building, for which considerable documentary evidence survives. In the 20th century, land on the western side of Bridge Wharf was used for the production of armoured vehicles.

Introduction

A series of phased archaeological investigations was carried out by Museum of London Archaeology on the site at Bridge Wharf, Chertsey (SY-BRI01) between 2001 and 2009 in advance of, and during, the redevelopment of the site by Laing Homes Ltd and subsequently by Taylor Wimpey South West Thames (fig 1). The redevelopment involved the construction of eleven blocks of apartments and associated remediation, car parking, landscaping and road works. The investigations included monitoring of geotechnical boreholes and test pits, archaeological evaluation and excavation, and watching briefs (fig 2). Furthermore, a programme of historic building recording was carried out at the site by WA Heritage in 2008.

The site is located on the outer bend of a meander loop of the Thames, immediately south of Chertsey Bridge, and is situated between the Chertsey Meads and Abbey Meads. Many watercourses drain this part of the flood plain, which is low-lying and is likely to have been marshy and frequently flooded in the recent past. Flood plain gravel appears to dip from 8.65m OD in the north of the site to about 6.8m OD in the south. Modern ground level slopes from around 9.6m OD in the north to 9.2m OD in the south.

Benedictine monks founded the abbey at Chertsey in AD 666, and by the time of the Domesday Survey the manor of Chertsey appears to have been a fairly prosperous agricultural community. The core of Chertsey and its abbey lay over 1km to the west of the present site. There is evidence that a ferry crossing of the Thames existed near the site at least as early as 1300, while the earliest documented recording of a bridge at Chertsey dates to 1410, when King Henry IV granted a licence for its construction (Stratton & Pardoe 1982, 115). Rocque's map of 1762 shows that the pattern of the historic core of Chertsey has changed little from the 18th century to the present, and probably represents a continued medieval settlement pattern (fig 3). The site is shown as developed with buildings on either side of the bridge abutments. In 1780, the medieval bridge was demolished and replaced by the present stone bridge.

Much of the site was later owned by the Bates family, who started building wooden commercial vessels in the 1850s. They diversified into pleasure and sailing craft towards the beginning of the 20th century. In the mid-19th century, Bridge House and gardens occupied the north-west corner of the site, with a small courtyard of possibly industrial buildings to its south. The OS map of 1865 (fig 4) shows that at this time the north-eastern area of the site was occupied by 'Thames Wharf'. The principal spine road through the site was flanked by cottages on its eastern side. Between these and the riverside was an apparently undeveloped area containing an inlet or a dock. Most of the southern part of the site remained as open fields.

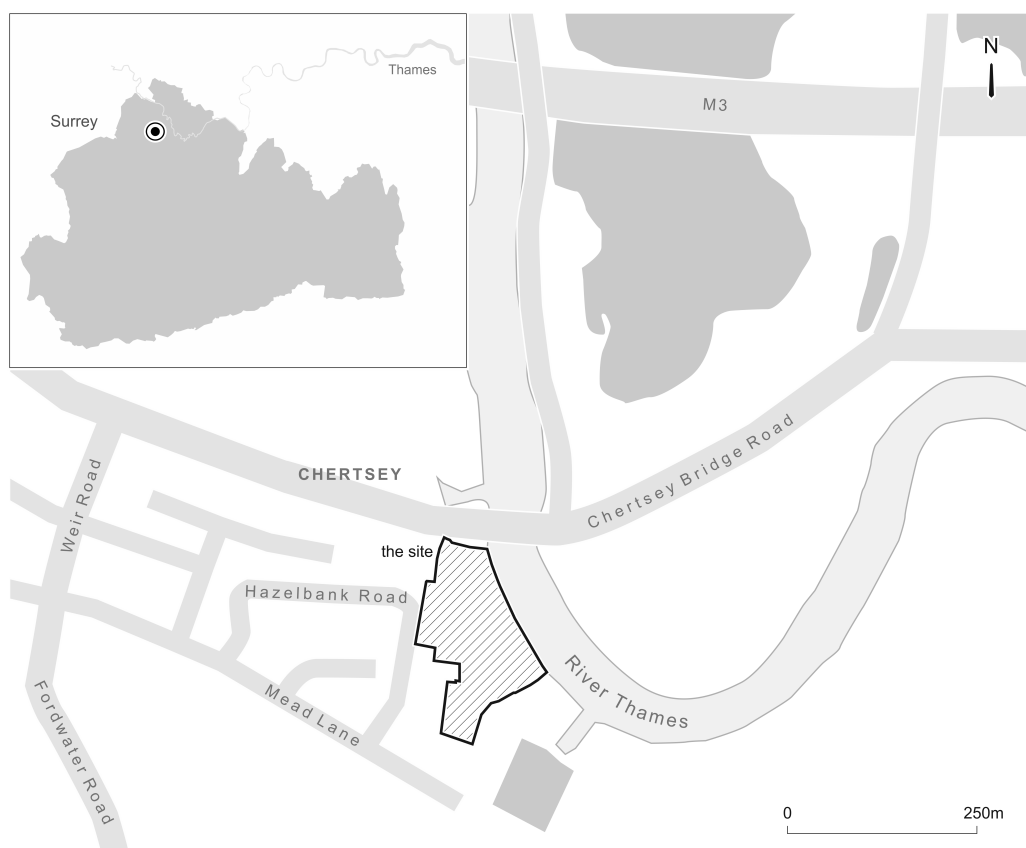


Fig 1 Bridge Wharf, Chertsey. Site location.

By the late 19th century, the dock had been infilled and further new buildings constructed within the north-east quadrant of the site, which by then was known as Bridge Wharf.

Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age occupation

The Bridge Wharf site lies *c*2.6km to the south-east of St Ann's Hill. This is described in *The Victoria History of the County of Surrey* (VCH 3, 403), as 'a prominent gravel-capped knoll rising out of the Thames Valley'. Archaeological excavation in 1990 and survey have confirmed St Ann's Hill as a univallate hillfort (Jones 1990). A small trench in the interior identified 53 prehistoric features, mostly of Early to Middle Iron Age date.

Limited evidence of later prehistoric activity was recorded on the Bridge Wharf site. To the east of Bridge Wharf Road a dry land surface in trench 8 was found to be cut by two features that contained four pottery sherds dated to the Late Bronze Age or the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age (1000–500 BC).

The hillfort on St Ann's Hill would have had a commanding view of, and have been a dominant feature within, the surrounding landscape. The hillfort may not only have performed the function of a redistribution centre for both subsistence products and higher status goods but, as it was probably permanently occupied, it would have relied upon agricultural resources of the area under its control. It is thought that such resources were supplied by the inhabitants of smaller open settlements. It is likely, given the relatively close

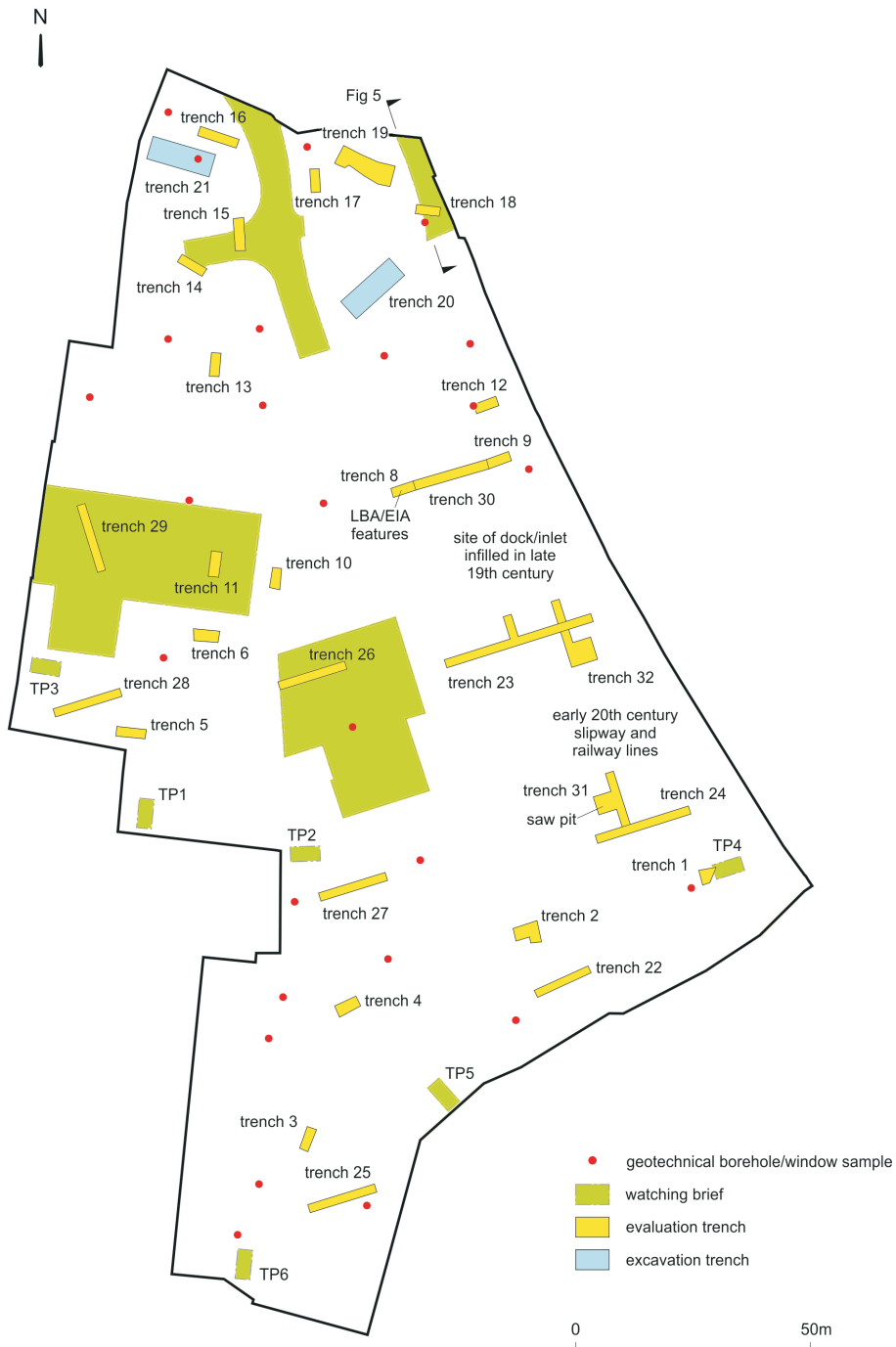


Fig 2 Bridge Wharf, Chertsey. Areas of archaeological investigations.

proximity of the site to St Ann's Hill and its location close to the Thames, a major route for trade communication, that the area around the site would have been in the control of and/or supplied goods to the hillfort.

Medieval riverside

No archaeological evidence of the medieval Chertsey Bridge, which lay to the north-east of the site, was found. Medieval pottery, dated to 1230–1400, was recovered from the topsoil/subsoil interface in some of the northernmost trenches. Remnants of an ephemeral structure were found in trench 21 in the form of two shallow slots, one of which contained medieval pottery.

At the northern end of the site is a promontory of river terrace gravel, recorded at 11.78m OD, the surface of which dips down to the south. Above the gravel was a layer of mid-brown clayey silt and gravel, identified as a buried subsoil. This may originally have formed part of the medieval riverbank that had collapsed and then been truncated by later construction activity. It seems that the current crossing point over the river was chosen deliberately to take advantage of the higher ground, which would have been less prone to flooding.

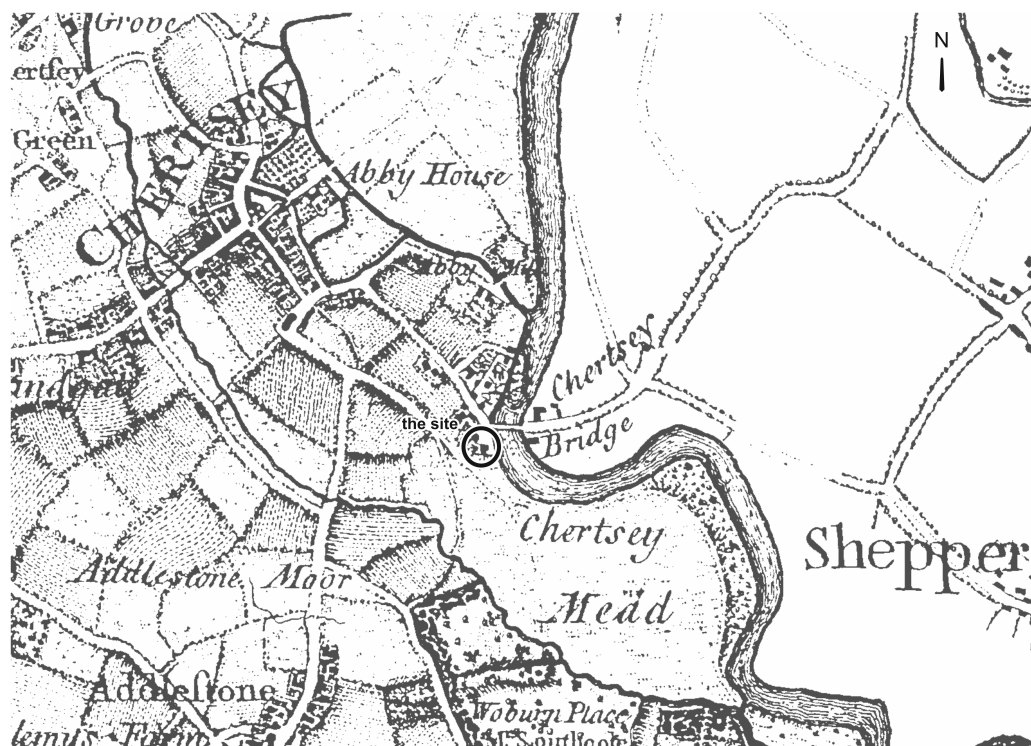


Fig 3 Bridge Wharf, Chertsey. Rocque's map of 1762.

Post-medieval wharves

The area of the site adjacent to the modern river frontage appears to have been open ground during the post-medieval period. Historic maps also show there was settlement along the western approach to the bridge and buildings on the northern end of the site by at least the mid-18th century. Pottery found within a gravel layer recorded in trench 19 suggests an increase in activity at some time in the late 16th to 17th centuries, perhaps resulting from bridge repair or wharf construction. There is documentary evidence of wharves in Chertsey in the 17th century; however, it is unclear as to their exact location (VCH 3, 403–13).

Three parallel garden bedding trenches in trench 21, which appear to be located to the rear of houses fronting Wharf Road, were filled with brown sandy silt and occasional brick

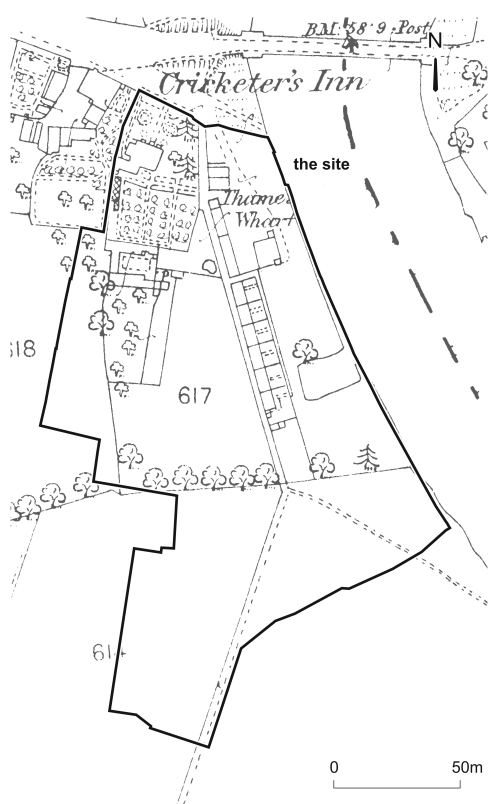


Fig 4 Bridge Wharf, Chertsey. 1865 OS map.

fragments. A footing of brick wall, 0.4m wide and 1m in length, recorded in trench 19 was constructed from bricks that have been dated to 1500–1800. The wall was aligned north–south and the fill of the foundation cut contained a residual fragment of coarse Surrey/Hampshire Border ware cooking pot (1200–1500) and a fragment of post-medieval London-area Redware jar that dates from 1480 to 1700. The function of the wall is uncertain but it may relate to a building shown on Rocque’s map of 1762.

Several fragments of plain glazed and unglazed floor tiles were found and most had square nail holes near their surviving corners, which is a typical feature of post-medieval floor tiles brought in from the Low Countries. Plain unglazed tiles were used in London around 1580–1800, and the tiles were probably brought into Chertsey during the same period. An interesting feature of many of the tiles is that they show no evidence of wear. This could indicate that they were broken in transit and were discarded on their arrival at Chertsey. The tiles may have been shipped into London and then transported up the Thames in smaller vessels.

The types of floor tiles being imported were primarily used in the floors of higher status buildings such as parish churches and manor houses. Similar floor tiles have been found on other Chertsey sites, although it is not always possible to determine whether they are English or Flemish (Betts 2002). Their presence at Chertsey, which had been a well-known centre of medieval floor tile production, is of interest and it may indicate a decline in the local tile production in the post-medieval period.

A channel revetted by stakes, which may date from the late 16th to 17th centuries, was recorded in the north-east-facing section in the watching brief area in the north-eastern part of the site, close to the modern river bank (fig 5). The channel, which would have emptied into the river, had ceased to be functional by the later 17th–18th centuries and was not

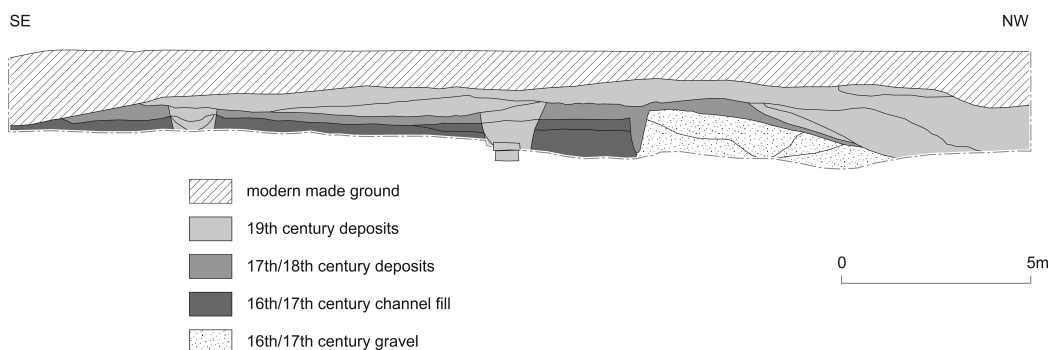


Fig 5 Bridge Wharf, Chertsey. North-east facing section.

recut. The silted-up channel had been deliberately infilled and levelled in the 18th century to create a wharf. It is possible, given the date at which the channel was infilled, that this occurred at the same time that the current bridge was constructed in the 18th century.

Most of the pottery excavated from this area of the site dates to the 17th and 18th centuries. Surrey/Hampshire Border wares dominate, as would be expected in Chertsey, which is very much in the heart of the Border ware 'homeland'. The industry was focused chiefly on the Blackwater Valley, with major potteries known at Farnborough and Cove, Hampshire and further centres situated in Pirbright and Ash, Surrey (Pearce 2007). The range of forms present is largely standard, including types that were in production with very little change in shape and detail over 200 years or more. One fragment, the rim of a skillet in redware with underfired glaze, is probably a waster. This waster had a matt, sulphurous yellow covering over the inside of the vessel, which compares closely to wasters found at the Farnborough Hill kilns (*ibid*). Given the importance of the Border ware industry in the region during the 17th and 18th centuries, it is possible that production was taking place in Chertsey at sites as yet unrecognised.

19th century boat building

Post-medieval reclamation and the effect of 18th century bridge construction was revealed in the form of large dumps of gravel, and a 19th century robbed river wall was found in trenches 9, 12 and 18 running parallel to the river. Prior to the mid-19th century, the site was known as Thames Wharf, Bridge Wharf being the name of a wharf on the north side of the bridge.

The first mention of boat building in the vicinity of Chertsey Bridge is a reference in the 1887 edition of *Kelly's Post Office Directory*, relating to Tom Taylor and Son, 'boat builders and fishermen, Bridge Road', though it would appear that Tom Taylor's yard lay to the north of the bridge, on the original Bridge Wharf (Wessex Archaeology 2008).

The remains of a 19th century sawpit were revealed in trench 31. The sawpit, where timber would have been sawn into planks, was 2.9m long x 1.7m wide with a depth of 1.1m (fig 6). A small elm beam, elm waste plank and an oak branch were found lying on a bed of sawdust. A fill of sawdust-rich material also covered the timbers. The pit had a clay lining to keep out ground water, which flooded the feature to 0.6m depth when removed. The timbers had evidence of sawing but also axing (adzing²), a practice more common in the 18th century than the 19th century. A small pit-like feature was found adjacent to the northern side of the pit and may have functioned as a step down to the sawpit. It is likely that the timber sawn on the site was used in the manufacture of boats, possibly on Tom Taylor and Son's boatyard on the north side of the bridge.

The first clear evidence of boat building on the site itself comes from the 1895 edition of *Kelly's Directory*, when Tom Taylor and Son are joined by James Taylor, steam launch, skiff



Fig 6 Bridge Wharf, Chertsey. Elm beam, plank and oak branch lying at the base of the 19th century saw pit.

and houseboat builder, Bridge Wharf, Bridge Road. An article, called ‘Up-river Reflections’, published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 20 June 1892, discusses houseboats on the Thames and names Tom Taylor of Chertsey as one of the best-known boat builders. James Taylor of Chertsey is listed as an exhibitor at a Yachting Exhibition in 1898 (*IPN* 1898). James Taylor’s business appears to have comprised two distinct elements: the industrial scale boat building on the southern half of the wharf, and the pleasure boat rental business, with associated punt store, tea rooms and restaurant at the northern end of the site (Wessex Archaeology 2008).

Bates first appears in *Kelly’s Directory* in 1913, which lists James Taylor & Bates, Bridge Wharf. It is understood that William Bates, a former photographer, had married a Miss Taylor and taken charge of James Taylor’s timber and sawmills business at Chertsey Bridge, before turning his attention to boat building and the production of houseboats for sale and hire. During the First World War Taylor and Bates built Thorneycroft coastal motor boats and pinnaces for the Admiralty. In the 1920s, however, they returned to making river launches and the ‘occasional more exotic craft such as sumptuously appointed houseboats for Indian rajahs’ (*ibid*).

The remains of a concrete slipway with railway lines were found in trenches 1–4. The slipways are not shown on the OS map of 1914, but are shown on the OS map of 1934 (fig 7). Redeposited timber from a late 19th/early 20th century narrow boat was recovered from the modern dumped layer in trench 23. This is in the area of the large rectangular dock shown on 19th century OS maps.

Around 1923, land on the western side of Bridge Wharf was rented by Carden-Lloyd Tractors for the production of tracked armoured vehicles, starting an important association with amphibious and light armoured vehicles that lasted through the Second World War under Vickers-Armstrong. The 1928 Carden-Lloyd Mk IV developed and built at the site



Fig 7 Bridge Wharf, Chertsey. 1914 (left) and 1934 (right) OS maps.

was particularly influential, being widely exported and leading directly to the evolution of the Carden-Loyd carrier (of which over 26,000 were built), and the Vickers-Armstrong 'Universal' (or Bren-Gun) which, with over 113,000 examples built, turned out to be the most numerous armoured fighting vehicle ever built. The early two-man Carden-Loyd 'tankettes' were also the direct ancestors of the Soviet T-27, the Italian CV-33 and Krupp's Panzerkampfwagen I, Hitler's first tank designed to break the Treaty of Versailles under the guise of an 'agricultural tractor' (*ibid*).

Only in 1934 is the firm of William Bates and Sons independently documented in the trade directories. It appears that Bates had established his own small boatyard immediately to the south of Taylor's; the latter continued to occupy the majority of the Bridge Wharf site. Following the Second World War, during which they built air and sea rescue vehicles and seaplane tenders for the MOD, Bates began building their Bates Star Craft, which were to establish their international reputation as boat builders. Bates' boatyards continued to expand southwards onto previously undeveloped fields, reaching their present extent by about 1965. Following the split-up of the Taylor Bates partnership shortly after the war, Taylors sold their half of the site to the coachbuilders Whittingham and Mitchell and moved to new premises at Shoreham, where they could build larger boats than was possible on the Thames. Their boatyards were demolished and the site redeveloped by the coachbuilders Whittingham and Mitchell, in the 1950s, Evershed Power Optics in the late 1960s/early 1970s and then by Radamec (Radar Mechanicals) in 1981 (Wessex Archaeology 2008).

Bates finally ceased production of their Star Craft in 1975, concentrating their business on boat repair, chandlery and their new marina, which had been constructed immediately to the south of the site c 1960. At the time of the building survey, none of the more historic

boat-building sheds associated either with James Taylor or William Bates and Son remained. W Bates and Son's boat stores, and the 19th century punt store, restaurant and tea rooms did, however, survive but no longer used for their original functions. A number of later buildings of some note also survived. These included boat sheds of 1942–3, 1957 and c1965 built for W Bates; the entirety of the Second World War tank factory built for Vickers-Armstrong; and some large factory buildings dating to the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s built for Whittingham and Mitchell, Evershed Power Optics and Radamec. All these buildings were subsequently demolished as part of the comprehensive redevelopment of the site (Wessex Archaeology 2008).

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