



Plan of the centre of Brentford, showing the location of the eight excavations to date. (This plan is based upon the Ordnance Survey Map with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office. Copyright reserved).

# EXCAVATIONS AT BRENTFORD

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SOME TIME DURING the Summer of 1966, when the author, newly arrived at the London Museum, was considering how best to involve himself in the London archaeological scene, he learned from the Curator of the Gunnersbury Park Museum, that the town of Brentford was scheduled for redevelopment, and surely, in view of the discoveries of Thomas Layton in that area, merited some form of excavation programme.

A quick review of the evidence disclosed the wisdom of this suggestion. Finds dredged from the river near Brentford, of all periods from Mesolithic to medieval, could with justification be described as

'prolific.' Admittedly, this profusion of antiquities is a common feature of the Thames in its London reaches, though what interpretation can be made from it is difficult to say. There are aspects of this material from the river at Brentford that suggest prehistoric settlement, of various periods, within the area. The Late Bronze Age range of artifacts — swords, spearheads, socketed axes, gouges and horse harness gear—include types that stem from the Urnfield and Hallstatt cultures of mainland Europe. More or less every object type of Late Bronze Age date ever found in Britain must be represented here, a strong indication of a Bronze Age settlement per-

sistently occupied over several centuries. A tantalising feature of this presumed settlement is its connection with the introduction of iron working technology to the British Isles, for included among the objects from Brentford are some of the earliest iron tools known—iron sickles and socketed axes that are modelled on Late Bronze Age forms. A concentration of Thames picks from the river here had led to similar suggestions of settlement by Mesolithic peoples; it has been pointed out by Mr. John Wymer that such concentrations in the Thames occur elsewhere only where a face of chalk is exposed, and attracted, one presumes, Mesolithic peoples intent on mining flint.

Of all these antiquities dredged from the Thames or found on its foreshore, prehistoric pottery, in sherds or whole vessels, has exhibited distinct concentrations in its distribution. The Brentford-Syon Reach section, along with the Mortlake and Hammersmith vicinities, has been notably rich in the yield of both Neolithic and Iron Age pottery finds. These concentrations, and indeed the nature of the pottery as being less 'mobile' than stone and metal tools and weapons, are sometimes presented as indications of settlement on the adjacent banks. This is not the place for a discussion of the evidence for prehistoric settlement on the London gravel terraces generally, but one should in passing point out two things. First, that air survey of river gravels and loams in other parts of Britain has established a high density of prehistoric occupation and secondly that, although few such habitation sites have appeared in and around London, the study of certain artifacts from the Thames has demonstrated strictly local development of certain types<sup>1</sup> refuting those who would relegate these objects to the status of votive or casual losses from the migrating bands passing through the area.

The line of the *Londinium-Pontes-Callewa* road clearly runs through Brentford and since the position of the present High Street plainly represents a drift away from the ancient alignment, one might reasonably hope to discover and section the road surface in, say, some of the garden areas north of the High Street. Of greater import was the possibility of some form of Romano-British settlement, for at Brentford the road must have approached the Thames closely near where it was necessary to ford or bridge the Brent. Such a confluence of man-made and natural highways at a point half-way between *Londinium* and *Pontes* would provide a suitable basis.

There are no extant documentary references to Brentford before the 8th century. The name

*Bregunt-ford* (A.D. 705) does nothing to elucidate the history of the town, for it could quite simply refer to the ford where the (presumably still surviving) Roman road crossed the Brent, without any implication of Saxon inhabitants. The synods held in the town later in the same century are to be similarly evaluated, since it may have been chosen as a convenient meeting place in open country rather than as a village that offered shelter for the gathering. There is no Domesday reference to Brentford, though by the 14th century a busy market town had developed.

During the inevitable run-down of the town prior to reconstruction a number of areas have become available for excavation, either through demolition of unsafe buildings or where groups of houses with associated back gardens have been vacated. In 1966 an approach was made to Mr. R. F. Holman, Planning Officer of the London Borough of Hounslow, initially for information on the development programme but eventually for permission to excavate.

In this and subsequent requests the attitude of the Planning Officer's Department, the Valuation Officer's staff and many others has been very much in our favour. The officers of the G.L.C. Valuation and Estates Department, also approached in the many cases of joint ownership have been similarly minded in readily providing information and granting access. One particularly helpful measure arranged by Mr. Holman comprised the drawing up of a formal Agreement between the two parties, Borough and Museum, to govern the conditions applicable to any future excavations in Brentford. Thus negotiation for each new site was cut to a bare minimum by simple reference to the original Agreement.

#### Site 1 (TQ 173 771)

Excavation began in September 1966. In the absence of any specific evidence of archaeological settlement, an overall plan of working eastwards through the town on available sites was adopted. Thus an area close to the Brent was the first to be sampled of particular interest in itself by virtue of the name for that area ('the Ham,' — settlement). Further, the site stands several feet above the roadway, a factor which, it was thought, could be the result of prolonged inhabitation. In fact, nothing of interest was discovered. The 'mounding' of the site had arisen from the dumping of silt dredged from the canal, and from inspection of the blackened quality of the natural gravel the area had for a long period been marshy and uninhabitable.

1 J. D. Cowen, "The Hallstatt Sword of Bronze: on the

Continent and in Britain," *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 33 (1967) 410-16.



**Fig. 1. Gully of Neolithic period—site 4.**

(Photo: Roy Canham)

### **Site 2 (TQ 174 772)**

Late in 1966 work was transferred to an area south of the High Street, adjacent to St. Lawrence's Church. The overburden here proved to be some six feet deep. The normal pleistocene gravel, clean and hard packed, was seen in one trench only, on the west side of the site. Elsewhere layers of silt and dirty gravel were encountered, apparently the infilling of a former channel of the Brent. Resting on and cutting into this infill were traces of Roman occupation. The water-table occurred at about the same depth as the Roman ground surface, causing considerable difficulties.

The earliest feature was an east-west ditch 7 feet wide by 2½ feet deep. It had filled almost totally with a fine uniform silt, in which were included a few pottery sherds of the period A.D. 50 - 120. The northern lip and part of the silt filling had been cut away by a wide shallow scoop, probably formed when the excessive silting had caused the ditch to flood. This shallow cutting seems then to have been deliberately filled with a mixture of coarse earthy gravel. This event can be dated to the first half of the 2nd century. Further silting occurred on the surface of the gravel filling.

At some time in the late 3rd or 4th century a narrow steep-sided ditch was dug across the line of the early ditch. This in turn was filled totally by its own silt. Further late Roman activity was indi-

cated by the presence of a small refuse pit and two post holes, all dug into the ditch silt, whilst these features in turn were sealed beneath a dark occupation layer containing 4th century pottery.

Little of interest was found above the Roman levels. Some three feet of accumulated soil represented the period from the 4th to the 17th century. Apart from stray Roman sherds the earliest material within this horizon dated to the 13th century. The scatter of medieval sherds was uniform but poor, and very few features of this date were noticed. Apparently the area remained open until circa 1600 when the land adjacent to the High Street was built on.

### **Site 3 (TQ 174 773)**

In September, 1967, trenches were dug on a vacant plot opposite Site 2 on the north side of the High Street. It was quickly proven that the Roman occupation did not extend in this direction, nor was there any evidence of the infilled river channel; the geology here was undisturbed brick-earth. The site was generally barren, except in the vicinity of the High Street where layers of 17th century domestic refuse were excavated.

### **Site 4 (TQ 174 773)**

Moving eastwards, towards the centre of the town, the site formerly occupied by Nos. 184 - 187 Brentford High Street was an obvious next choice. It is divided by an alley which runs north from the High

Street; the plot to the west of the alley contained little of interest although it was extensively trenched.

On the eastern part of the site there was space for only one set of narrow trenches in a north-south line. Within two feet of the surface a layer of rammed earth and gravel was exposed. This was eventually traced over the whole of one 25 feet by 5 feet trench. It proved to be 6 inches thick and sealed a scatter of 1st century A.D. pottery. Was this a section of the Roman road? The point might have been proven had the area on the west of the site not been so badly disturbed.

A test excavation into the brickearth on which the Roman strata rested produced a small collection of struck flints, in sharp condition. As a result approximately 18 inches of brickearth were removed by trowelling and 180 struck flints, including a few cores and flake tools with secondary working, were found. Associated with this material were 105 sherds of pottery, all of it hand-made and including in its fabric much flint grit. There is little doubt that all the finds belong to the Neolithic period.

One small gully belonged to this prehistoric occupation. Averaging two feet in width and one foot in depth, it had been dug with an irregular outline (fig. 1). The majority of the prehistoric finds were slightly above the level of this feature, although one object of special interest was found within the gully filling. This is a fragment of sandstone with two smoothed surfaces, possibly part of a quern.

#### Site 5 (TQ 175 773)

Following the discovery of prehistoric material north of the High Street, it was hoped that similar results would be obtained on the south side. Nine trenches were opened in the autumn of 1968 in a north-south line running through the former Span-ton's timber yard. In the trenches nearest the High Street the brickearth subsoil was again encountered and closely examined for signs of prehistoric occupation. None were found, and in fact the earliest artifacts were a few dozen sherds of Roman pottery.

A small trench, some 8-10 inches wide, dug into brickearth contained sufficient dating evidence to assign it to the period A.D. 50 - 100, and possibly carried the foundation of a small timber building. A buried soil layer sealing this contained a few sherds of mid to late Roman pottery, and a far larger quantity of 14th century material.

The principal stratification, however, belonged to the post-medieval period, and although a number of phases in the development of the site can be itemized, it must be remembered that complete building plans could not be recovered by means of the narrow trenches which were employed.

It appears that the first masonry structure was erected in the 16th century. Its remains consisted of



Fig. 2. Bronze spout of 1st century A.D.—Site 8.

(Photo: George Matthews)

an L-shaped wall, forming the west side and rear of a building which fronted on to the High Street. The original construction was of flint nodules set mortar, but at some stage the west wall was rebuilt in brick. The upper surface of both brick and flint sections stood at a more or less uniform level, and it is very likely that this was a dwarf wall, rising about one foot above ground level and supporting a timber framed superstructure.

Towards the end of the 16th century, following the demolition of the brick and flint structure, the area was paved with a mixture of regularly set bricks, tiles and rough patches of brick and stone.

The surface sloped evenly downwards towards a flattened central gutter. Refuse pits and the post-holes of a large timber structure obliterated much of the paved surface in the first half of the 17th century and a large quantity of domestic refuse and soil was allowed to accumulate. The minor street of granite setts, which formed the surface at the time of excavation, dates presumably from the 19th century. The southern part of the site proved to have been marshland until at least the 17th century and possibly very much later.

#### Site 6 (TQ 177 774)

Late in 1968 the foundation trenches for a new furniture store on the west corner of Brentford High Street and the Half Acre were examined. Under the circumstances detailed observations could not be made, although major features were recorded and small groups of stratified dating evidence obtained.

The first few inches of dark soil resting on brick-earth contained 1st century A.D. pottery, and was sealed by a six inch thick layer of gravel. The gravel

was seen to spread across the filling of an east-west ditch, the lowest filling of which also contained early Roman sherds. Again, one suspects that a small surviving patch of the road was being observed.

#### Site 7 (TQ 176 774)

A second building site, at 209-215 Brentford High Street was visited early in 1969. Foundation trenches here showed that the area was very thoroughly disturbed by recent buildings. In one area however where the lower strata still survived, early Roman pottery was again found to be present. In particular a very large storage jar of the Patch Grove type was recovered. It had been set upright in the Roman ground surface and seems to have been intact until struck by a trench digging machine.

#### Site 8 (TQ 178 775)

The most recent excavations, begun in August, 1970, and not yet completed, have added greatly to our knowledge of the town. Most of the Roman occupation, represented by pits and gulleys, belongs

either to the 1st and early 2nd centuries or to the 4th century. A feature of special interest is a gravel-surfaced Roman road, exhibiting distinct repair or reconstruction layers of mixed soil and brickearth. It is intriguing that the road had fallen into disuse sometime in the 2nd century. Of this there is no doubt, for a number of Roman features of 2nd and 4th century date have been dug through the road layers. It is unacceptable that the route from Londinium to the South-West was abandoned in the middle of the Roman period, and a late Roman road must now be sought in future excavations.

Those who have carried out these excavations, mostly members of the West London Archaeological Field Group, are now assisting with the processing of excavated material on Tuesday evenings at St. Mary's College, Strawberry Hill. Fairly large groups of pottery and animal bone of Roman, medieval and post-medieval date have accrued since 1966 and much useful information should stem from its analysis.

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## London's Archaeological Societies—10

### WEST LONDON ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD GROUP

THE WEST LONDON Archaeological Field Group came into existence as a result of excavations carried out under the direction of Roy Canham for the London Museum at Shepperton and Brentford in 1967 and 1968 and since its inception in 1968 has provided a skilled digging force for further excavations in West London. The Group operates in the western half of Middlesex, roughly the north west quadrant of the Greater London area where the sprawl of urban development either in the form of building work, roads, motorways or gravel extraction is an ever increasing threat to any surviving evidence of ancient settlement and where it is probable that the next few decades will witness the total destruction of all archaeological sites.

The Group bases its work on a scheme of building site inspection. Information about proposed developments is obtained from lists of Planning Applications produced by the relevant London Boroughs and prospective sites are checked against a series of 6in. Ordnance Survey maps which record all known archaeological finds from the area. A continuous watch is kept on all large development sites and any known to be of particular archaeological interest. Recent results from this process include a collection of animal bones, probably dating to the last interglacial period discovered during gravel working at Shepperton and a 14th century pit group from Stanwell.

Combined with the above scheme the Group maintains a policy of excavation for known archaeological sites threatened by building development or discovered as a result of building site inspection. At Heathrow Airport in 1969 a continuous watch on the construction of the No. 1 Runway Extension combined with rescue excavation provided evidence of two ring ditches, the first of their kind to be discovered in the area, and remains of a settlement which was inhabited from the Early Iron Age until the end of the Roman period. The work which lasted over a period of six months, was carried out with the co-operation of the contractors and it was found possible to extract and record the information required whilst in

no way delaying construction work. Further excavations have been carried out in Brentford over the last four years (see p.291) and in addition the Group has helped in excavations at Staines and the current London & Middlesex Archaeological Society's excavations at Bedfont and Kempton Park.

Although site observation and excavation have always been important tools in the decipherment of ancient landscapes and settlement patterns, it is becoming increasingly apparent that this should take place against a solid background of field work and documentary research. The most recent activities of the Group include the formation of two such research groups both working in collaboration with one another on a specific area.

Besides its week-end excavation activities the Group now meets every Tuesday evening at St. Mary's College, Twickenham where the task of washing and marking the excavated material prior to analysis is well under way. All helpers are encouraged to take part in this activity and newcomers are welcome. The task of inspecting building sites, however, involves considerable skill, the primary requirement being experience of archaeological excavation. Unless the field worker is capable of recognising and interpreting archaeological strata in the controlled environment of an excavation, he will be of little use on a building site inspection.

The Group has not "advertised" widely for members, since those without excavation experience cannot be employed in one of the main activities. Furthermore, there are none of the usual benefits from membership such as lectures, visits and publications. However, there is a great shortage of volunteers for excavation in the London area and a list of all those interested in helping is maintained by the London Museum. Details of current excavations will be sent to anyone on application to the Field Officer, The London Museum, Kensington Palace, London W.8.

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