



Fig. 1: children from Atwood School; each child is standing in an excavated Romano-British post-hole.
(Photo: Museum of London)

“Friends, Romans, School children!” – archaeology and education in Croydon

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EXCAVATIONS BY the Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology at Atwood Primary School in Sanderstead, South Croydon (TQ 3428 6052), revealed traces of a late Iron Age and Romano-British settlement and also provided an opportunity to look into the possible role of archaeology in schools. Excavation took place during the summer months of 1989 and was financed by the Council of the London Borough of Croydon. This report gives an interim account of the archaeological discoveries, prior to major post-excavation

analysis and also a discussion of the educational potential of such a project.

Location

The site lies within the parish of Sanderstead, in the London Borough of Croydon, and is approximately two and a half miles south-south-east of Croydon town centre (Fig. 2A). Sanderstead is situated on a high plateau of natural clay with flints, which is a tertiary relic deposit, capping the North Downs in certain areas. The modern parish of Sanderstead is

believed to have developed along the line of a prehistoric track way, which is thought to have run to the Sussex Iron field, and which may now be beneath the existing Limpsfield Road (A269)¹.

Archaeological background to the site

Previous archaeological excavations and discoveries from around the Limpsfield Road area suggested the presence of extensive late Iron Age and Romano-British settlements². With the proposed redevelopment of the area adjacent to Atwood Junior Middle and Infants School on Limpsfield Road an opportunity to excavate one of these settlements was presented.

The site of Atwood School was one of known archaeological potential, not only because of its topographical situation, but because several small scale excavations in the school grounds, had revealed prehistoric and Roman material. The first of these excavations was undertaken in 1960 by the Sanderstead Archaeological Group³.

The 1989 excavation

The area made available for excavation had previously been used as a children's playground (Fig. 2B). The "natural" deposits comprised clay with flints overlain by a sub-soil of mixed silt and clay with flints. It was known that the area had been farmed over the centuries and successive ploughing of the ground had resulted in a definite disturbance to the natural deposits. It appears also, that the ground surface had been reduced at some time, possibly when the school was built.

The investigation was by open area excavation. The first phase of the excavation took place during the school summer vacation (31 July 1989 to 6 September 1989). The second phase of the excavation covered the two remaining weeks of the agreed contract (6 to 20 September 1989), when the Atwood School children had returned for the autumn term. It was during this time that the educational project took place.

Phase One: excavations

The excavation covered an area 50 × 40m (164 × 131ft) and was divided into five areas of 10m (33ft) width, denoted A, B, C, D and E (Fig. 2C). Archaeological deposits had been anticipated before

1. There is still dispute as to whether this track-way exists or not; Farley 1967, makes some mention of it.
2. M. Farley *Guide to Antiquities* (1967) The Bourne Society.
3. The Sanderstead Archaeological Group excavated the site under the supervision of Michael E Farley and Roger Little. The results of this excavation are published: R Little 'The Atwood Iron Age and Romano-British site, Sanderstead, 1960' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 61 (1964) 29-38. Other small scale excavations

the excavation, but the extent of occupation and quantity of finds surviving was greater than had been expected. Numerous features were discovered across the site, all of which have been provisionally dated to the late Iron Age or the early Roman period. This occupation appears to be indicative of a Romano-British settlement site, most likely a small native Celtic style farmstead. The nucleus of the Romano-British settlement is believed to be situated beyond the area excavated, most likely under the temporary classrooms and toward the modern line of Limpsfield Road (see Fig. 2B). An opportunity to excavate this area may occur in 1991 with the proposed further redevelopment of the School.

The archaeological features

Within the area excavated 108 post-holes were discovered (Fig. 1), indicating standing structures on the site. Different construction techniques had been used and the post-holes did not have uniform dimensions, some inter-cutting was observed and varied post-pipes and packing. The fills from every post-hole and post-pipe on the site were collected for environmental analysis and may enable the post-holes to be further arranged into sub-groups.

Groups of post-holes are discernible in area A where nineteen posts-holes may indicate a circular structure: one of the post-holes contained the base of a large storage jar. Crossing areas D and E there appears to be a four-post structure. Within Area D was a small square pit of similar dimensions to the post-holes it had a friable black ash fill and contained a large inverted pottery vessel. The pot was successfully lifted and is now at the Museum of London awaiting dating and analysis of the contents. Other small pits contained pottery sherds, but no clear evidence of domestic refuse. Several small silt-filled gullies appeared to be associated with the post-holes.

One of the most interesting discoveries was a sub-circular area of ash and flint surfaces, 3m (10ft) in diameter and 0.70m (2ft 4in) into the natural clay.

The fills of this feature may indicate some form of raised surface or structure with good drainage, which would be necessary to facilitate a dry working surface at this site. After study, the charcoal and numerous finds contained within it may indicate its usage. The lower flint layers produced finds of a ferrous hob nail,

on the site have taken and are published as follows: A J Parkinson 'Sanderstead Iron Age and Romano-British Occupation' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 65 (1968) 126; D R Rudling 'Archaeological Finds from Atwood School, Sanderstead' *Proc Croydon Nat Hist Sci Soc* 16 part 1 (1974) 35. Excavations in the area have been conducted by the Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society under the supervision of Mr Jim Davidson, the results of these are available from C.N.H.S.S., 96a, Brighton Road, South Croydon, CR2 6BB.

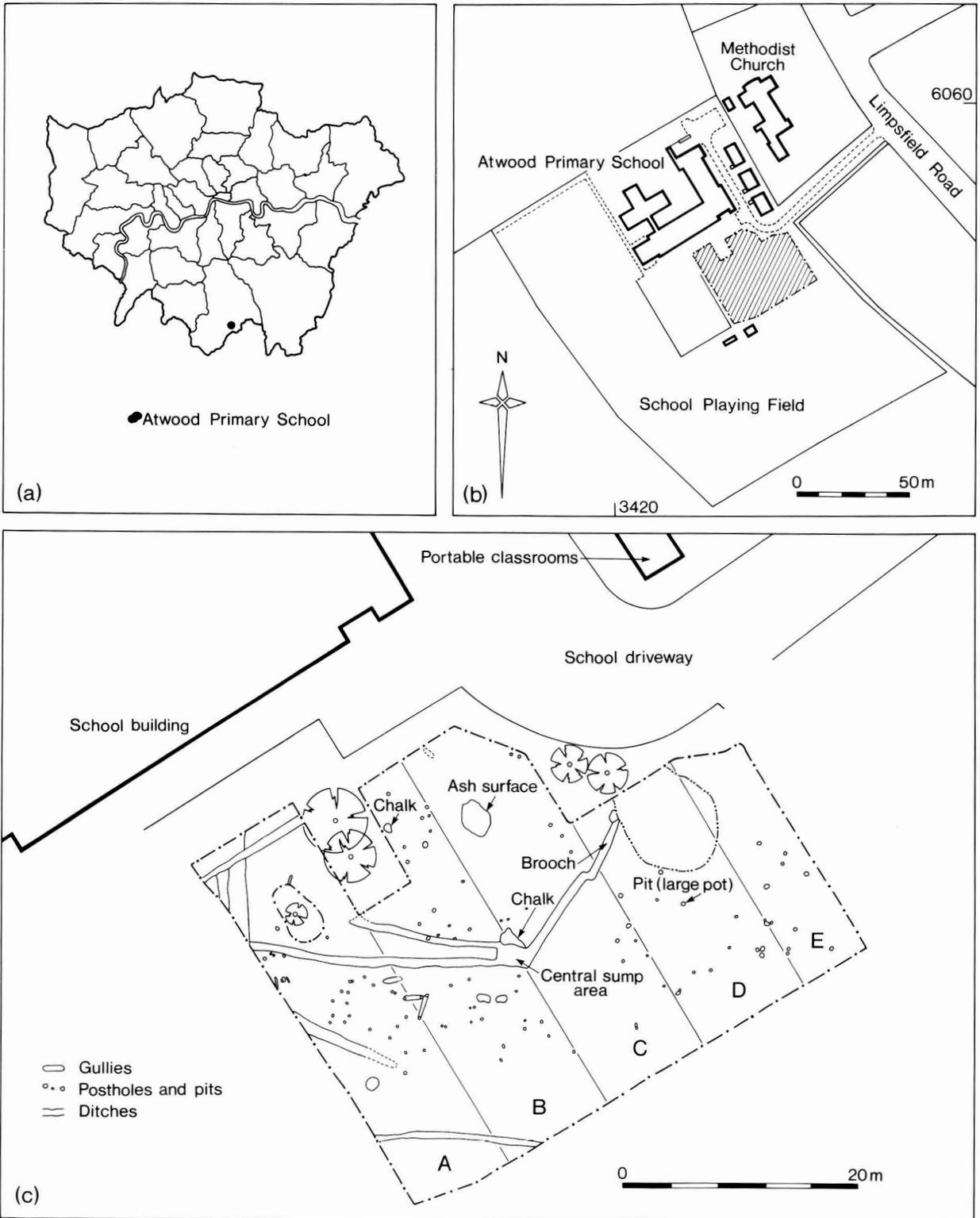


Fig. 2: A, site location map; B, location of open area excavations at Atwood School; C, trench plan showing distribution of archaeological features.

pieces of metal slag, bone and 129 sherds of pottery. The upper layers contained a polished pebble (possibly used as a hammer stone), a whet stone, 55 ferrous metal objects, bone and horn, vast quantities of pottery, and fire cracked flint. The precise function of this feature is unknown at present and is pending further study.

Eight long ditches, apparently for drainage of the site, were excavated. They may have been deliberately backfilled after they had silted up. Within Area B a small circular feature made of puddled chalk and forming a level surface was found. Close to it was an area of burning, which appears to indicate domestic activity.

Within Areas B and C a large pit containing silt and organic debris overlain by crushed pottery and puddled chalk was found (Fig. 3). It is noticeable that the three central ditches appear to terminate at this feature and it may be that it was a central drainage sump for the site, which was backfilled in an attempt to consolidate what must have been marshy ground.



Fig. 3: crushed pottery layers in Areas B and C. (Photo: Museum of London)

The second possible interpretation is that the feature may have been a 'dew pond'. Dew ponds are man-made saucer-like depressions in natural chalk and in clay with flints, which are constructed to cut off the heat from the earth and cause water to condense in the hollow at night. The feature has many of the necessary characteristics, but it is considerably smaller than most dew ponds.

The finds

The 1989 excavations at Atwood School recovered a vast quantity of artefacts. The majority of finds took the form of pottery fragments, estimated to be in advance of 5000 sherds. Finds of worked flint, bone and metals were also made, but very little building material was recovered. Any further comment on the pottery would be purely speculative until the completion of the post-excavation analysis.

Two Mesolithic flint scrapers typical of chalk down-land tools and a transverse arrowhead, probably of Neolithic date were found. A number of metal artefacts were recovered from the 1989 excavations, the majority of which were iron nails and studs. Another discovery was a piece of a bronze Roman Brooch conforming to Haltat's classification⁴ as being a La Tene III Nauheim derivative⁵.

Phase Two: excavation and education

Phase Two of the Museum's excavation strategy was concerned with the three weeks when the children had returned to the school. It had two aims; first, the continuation of the archaeological excavation, and secondly, providing educational information for Atwood School and other local schools. Because the excavation lay within the school's playground, it offered a interesting educational opportunity which, with the support of The London Borough of Croydon, resulted in visits by local schools.

During Phase One guided site trips were available for the public during week days, with the result that, many children were already aware of the dig when they returned to school after the summer holiday. The teaching staff, of those local schools that had responded to the initial information sent out by Croydon council, had been sent an educational information pack by the Museum of London before the commencement of the autumn term.

The Museum's educational pack contained information on the following:-

The forthcoming excavation at Atwood School,
The role of the Museum of London,

4. R Haltat *Ancient and Romano-British Brooches* (1982).
5. N Merriman (*pers. comm.*)
6. M J Corbishley *Archaeological Resources for Teachers* (1983) Council for British Archaeology.

The Museum Education Department's facilities,
Information and book lists for teaching archaeology in schools (as suggested by the Council for British Archaeology),
Ideas for educational projects,
Proposed school visits to the site,
Guidelines for site safety for visitors,
Recommended archaeological societies that young people were welcome to join.

The first concern before the school visits was to ensure the safety of the children in a situation which was effectively a construction site. The excavation was inspected by the Museum's professional safety consultants and all matters of insurance and liability confirmed. The open area excavation with little deep stratigraphy meant that the possibility of serious hazards was reduced. Spoil was piled far away from the excavated area, grid pegs were covered with wooden safety blocks, and bunting and safety signs were displayed as necessary. Access to the excavated area was only available through two padlocked entrances. Heavy machinery was not used during the educational project. Children were escorted across the site with a ratio of one adult for every ten children and groups were only allowed on the site when under the supervision of one of the Museum staff.

The aims of this project were manifold, but primarily it was hoped that the site visits would instil in the children the concepts of time and of development. The Council for British Archaeology's Handbook⁶ outlines the worth of presenting archaeology to primary schools, as follows;

"Research has shown that young children have problems with the concept of time. Children aged approximately 5 to 9 years are actively concerned with the present and are gradually acquiring the concept of the sequence of time. Trying, therefore, to teach archaeology can be difficult, but can be introduced to young children if it is appropriate to their understanding. If the final result allows young children to have a greater awareness of the sequence of time and extends their imagination by giving them an opportunity of understanding a little more of how people lived in the past, then this early introduction to archaeology is not wasted".

It was also hoped that the project would allow the children to develop an understanding of their own locality and to realise that the area, with which they were at present so familiar, would at different periods in the past have been totally foreign to them and involved cultures very different from the ones surrounding them at present. The teaching staff at Atwood school were also very interested in this opportunity to show the children a professional archaeological excavation and demonstrate the principles of excavation in a real but also safe environment. To see and be involved with an excavation in process has many teaching possibilities, which can be

incorporated far more easily by the primary school form teacher than within the tight syllabus and curriculum of the secondary school system. Teachers mentioned that the site grid was a helpful example of the use of mathematical principles such as triangulation. Interest was also generated by soil strata and the nature of archaeological deposits which demonstrated geographical and scientific principles. Groups of children used the surveying level and accepted that this was used to see "if the ground was straight", perhaps a foretaste of the understanding the importance of relative heights.

The benefits for the history teacher of such a project are perhaps more obvious, as it can demonstrate the proof of the historic record and is a helpful visual aid. The collection of and handling of the finds from the site appeared to have the greatest effect on the children and many were amazed at the objects that had been found. They were interested by the preservation of the finds, how practical most of the items were and also the knowledge that they were the first group of people to handle the particular item since its deposition over a thousand years ago. To show the children the collection of this primary evidence and then allow them to handle it was a valuable experience and, I feel, probably a most effective teaching device, resulting in stimulating discussion. Children became familiar with the different pottery fabrics and many could recognise the difference between the fine wares – such as samian – and the coarse wares. This allowed them to realise that archaeology is not a search for treasure, but to understand different cultures by analysis of the every-day domestic remains that their people leave behind.

In order to realise these aims, the class visits had to be carefully structured. The children ranged from five to eleven years of age and different groups had different abilities and comprehensions. Each visit involved a class of approximately 30 children (Fig. 4). The children would first seat themselves in a large circle on the grass for an introductory talk on archaeology, where they were asked their opinions on the subject. Then the finds would be shown and explained, and the children could pass them around the circle making observations and asking questions. This informal introduction was a good foundation for the site visits. The children realised that they were away from the classroom environment, which was exciting; but nevertheless they realised that they were being taught and had to concentrate. In these groups it was noticeable that many children had very varied reaction to the finds; some were very interested and excited, others had problems accepting that the artefact was actually what it was claimed to be.



Fig. 4: a school party visiting the site. "But how do you know how old it is?"
(Photo: Museum of London)

It became noticeable that archaeology can appeal to children of very different learning abilities. Many found things in their gardens and brought them in for identification, one even having a parent accompany her. The discovery of a find is an impartial process and, therefore, the children realised that not only the clever children could discover important things. It is for this reason that archaeological projects can be used very effectively in schools as team activities for children of different abilities. Archaeology also encourages different skills such as observation, patience and care and can evoke the child to think of broader environmental issues. Very often they would ask disturbingly perceptive questions, so the archaeologist should beware!

After the initial talk on the grass, the group would be guided to the gates of the excavation, here they would be warned of the potential hazards of the site and the need for responsible and attentive behaviour. All the children behaved in a sensible and intelligent manner, and were an enjoyable distraction for the archaeological staff and volunteers. The group would then be taken across the site, being asked questions about

the various deposits and what each archaeologist was doing. The whole visit lasted approximately 40 minutes. Over 400 children from several schools visited the site and sixteen tours were conducted over the two-week period. After the excavation, contact with Atwood School was maintained by a lecture on the Romano-British period and the results of the excavation, and a visit from two burly Roman soldiers (by kind permission of members of Museum staff who are also members of the Ermine Street Guard) who were very popular with the children.

A study of the results of this educational project as a method of creative teaching is currently being researched by Prof. Peter Woods of The Open University, following an article in *The Times Educational Supplement*. It was noticeable that children of different ages had different comprehensions of the site and its implications and that archaeology is a good medium for teaching children of varied abilities. The Atwood School now has an Archaeology Club, formed by some of the members of the teaching staff, and has found that again children of different abilities are equally interested.

After the excavation, the school presented an archaeological exhibition and some of the projects demonstrate the range of different ideas that archaeology can stimulate (see front cover). These included Roman cookery, pottery making. One class had an interesting idea: they decided that they would make and decorate their pots then break the pots and reconstruct them from the pieces. This was to demonstrate how archaeologists often only find sherds, but how they can learn much about the original vessel by those sherds. Other projects included making models of Romano-British 'farmsteads' and writing a play. Some projects demonstrating how to locate buried sites by techniques such as boring and aerial photography were effectively produced.

Conclusions

As has been shown the area excavated was of considerable archaeological importance and produced significant evidence of ancient settlement. The project was a valuable exercise not only in recovering an important part of Sanderstead's heritage prior to the settlement's destruction, but also providing an unique

educational opportunity for young people to see this sort of work in a safe environment. Every credit is due to the members of the Council of the London Borough of Croydon and the staff and pupils of Atwood School who utilised the educational possibilities of such a project.

Acknowledgements

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Excavations & Post-Excavation Work

City, by Museum of London, Department of Urban Archaeology. A series of long term excavations. Enquiries to DUA, Museum of London, London Wall, EC2Y 5HN (071-600 3699).

Croydon & District, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collection of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Mrs Muriel Shaw, 28 Lismore Road, South Croydon, CR2 7QA (081-688 2720).

Greater London (except north-east and south-east London), by Museum of London, Department of Greater London Archaeology. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to DGLA, Museum of London (071-600 3699 ext. 241).

Local enquiries to:

North London: 3-7 Ray Street, London EC1R 3DJ (071-837 8363).

South-west London: St. Luke's House, Sandycombe Road, Kew, Surrey (081-940 5989).

Southwark and Lambeth: 6-8 Cole Street, London SE1 4YH (071-407 1989 or 403 2920 – office – and 928 0778/9 – finds).

West London: Town Mission Hall, Mission Square, Pottery Road, Brentford, Middlesex (081-560 3880).

Hammersmith & Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from Fulham Palace. Tuesdays, 7.45

p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, SW6 (071-731 4498).

Kingston, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Marion Shipley, Kingston Heritage Centre, Fairfield Road, Kingston (081-546 5386).

North-east London, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, E15 4LW (081-534 4545).

Surrey, by Surrey Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to David Bird, County Archaeological Officer, Planning Department, County Hall, Kingston, Surrey (081-541 8911).

Vauxhall Pottery, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society. Processing of excavated material continues three nights a week. Enquiries to S.L.A.S., c/o Cuming Museum, 155 Walworth Road, SE17 (071-703 3324).

The Council for British Archaeology produces the British Archaeological News (6 issues a year). It gives details of conferences, extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The annual subscription of £7.50 includes postage, and should be made payable to C.B.A., 112 Kennington Road, SE11 6RE (071-582 0494).