

# Hounslow through history

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The Borough of Hounslow probably doesn't immediately suggest a place of great antiquity, being better known for its proximity to Britain's major airport and all the problems that creates, but Hounslow has in fact been occupied since earliest times and boasts one of the richest archaeological collections in the whole of Greater London.

This is not just due to its attractiveness as a place to settle (the brickearth soils that cap the gravel terraces laid down by the River Thames make for fertile and tractable agricultural land), but also because Hounslow was lucky enough to have a number of avid antiquarians who were active before the archaeologists arrived.

Antiquarian collectors were much ridiculed in their early days — "...one that has an unnatural desire to be enamoured of old age and wrinkles, and loves all things the better for being mouldy and worm-eaten" was the rude description applied to them by John Earle in 1628. However, they persevered, and archaeologists owe them a debt of gratitude for recording historical monuments that have been subsequently destroyed, and for preserving artefacts that would otherwise have been lost by the frenetic building and river dredging activity of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Hounslow's best-known antiquarian, Thomas Layton (1819-1911) was a strange fellow who played an active role in local affairs but led a solitary and extremely eccentric private existence. His collections crammed into his house in Kew Bridge Road, overlooking the river, consisted of around 22,000 books, prints and maps; 3000 coins, tokens and medals; 900 pots, glass vessels and tiles and 2600 antiquities — many acquired by offering monetary incentives to workmen (this unfortunately makes the provenance of some finds dubious)<sup>2</sup>.

Layton's collection is now housed in the Museum of London and the Gunnersbury Park Museum. It was the incredible riches of the Layton collection that led the (then) London Museum's Field Officer

(Roy Canham) to base himself at Brentford in 1966. Archaeologists from the Museum of London, helped by the voluntary West London Archaeological Field Group, have excavated more than 40 sites in the Borough of Hounslow.

It was another antiquary, Montagu Sharpe, a man firmly convinced of the area's importance throughout history, who in 1909 erected the monument that still stands in Ferry Lane, Brentford. Its four inscriptions read:

1. BC 54. *At this ancient fortified ford the British tribesmen under Cassivellaunus bravely opposed Julius Caesar on his march to Verulamium.*

2. AD 780-1. *Near by King Offa of Mercia with his queen and the bishops and principal officers held a council of the church.*

3. AD 1016. *Here Edmund Ironside King of England drove Canute and his defeated Danes across the Thames.*

4. AD 1642. *Close by was fought the Battle of Brentford between the forces of King Charles and his Parliament.*

Although the claim of the first inscription is very much open to question (see p. 446), there is documentary evidence to support the other three.

## Prehistoric Hounslow

The great majority of archaeological finds for the early periods in the Borough of Hounslow come from the bed and banks of the River Thames — a major transport artery from earliest times until comparatively recently. The massive numbers recovered may suggest that Hounslow was more extensively occupied during the Palaeolithic period than was probably really the case, since artefacts have been redeposited here from their original positions by the action of the river.

Early finds from the river include flint axes, scrapers, cleavers, blades, hammers and flakes from the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic (Fig. 1) and Neolithic periods; also many flint tools dating to the Bronze and Iron Ages.



Fig. 1: Mesolithic Thames pick from Brentford, in the Layton collection.

1. Gillian Clegg is the author of *The Archaeology of Hounslow*, recently published by the West London Archaeological Field Group, Town Mission Hall, Mission Square, Pottery Road, Brentford, Middlesex TW8 0SD. Price £3.90 plus 60p postage and packing.

2. David Whipp and Lyn Blackmore "Thomas Layton, F.S.A. (1819-1911) "A misguided Antiquary"" *London Archaeol* 3 no. 4 (1977) 90-5.

A few nice Palaeolithic hand-axes have been found away from the river in Hounslow, as have other flint tools; also implements made from antler.

Pottery, which made its first appearance in the Neolithic, has been recovered from three excavated sites in the Borough. Several stray sherds have been picked up on Chiswick Eyot, along with a quantity of flint, leading to speculation that there might be a Neolithic settlement there.

The only evidence in Hounslow of the religious and ceremonial monuments put up by Neolithic man is a small hengiform monument excavated at Mayfield Farm, East Bedfont.

The Borough has some marvellous evidence of early metal-working, with a large number of Bronze Age axes, knives, rapiers, daggers, spearheads and swords recovered from the foreshore between Syon House and Kew Bridge. The range and quantity is so remarkable that it may suggest ritual or burial practice. Alternatively, there may have been a trading or manufacturing centre here, where high-quality metalwork changed hands.

Although no excavation has been carried out, it is now thought that a waterside settlement existed close to where the River Brent joins the Thames at Brentford. The land at this point may well have been surrounded by water.

However, two formal archaeological excavations have thrown more light on Bronze Age life in the Borough. One such is Mayfield Farm in East Bedfont. On the same site as the Neolithic hengiform monument mentioned above, but some distance away, two concentric ditches, which had shown up in aerial photographs, proved to be a double-ditched enclosure dating to the Bronze Age (Fig. 2).

A substantially defended settlement, it must have dominated this part of the Thames Valley. It may have been an important regional centre controlling a large territory, perhaps including the waterside settlement at Brentford and the similar and important Bronze Age waterside settlements at Runnymede/Egham, only three or four miles away.

Another much smaller Bronze Age settlement was found in 1989 while looking for the London-Bath Roman road in Chiswick. Post-holes indicating the presence of living huts were found with pottery dating to the mid-late Bronze Age.

One of the most interesting chance discoveries in the Borough was a hoard of implements found in a field in Hounslow. Now in the British Museum, the 17 pieces include flat axes, flanged axes and

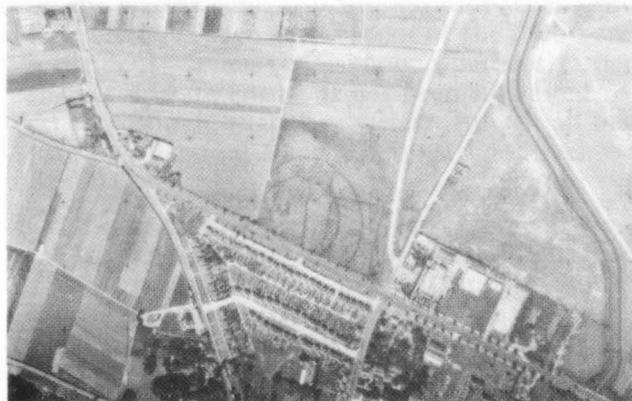


Fig. 2: the Bronze Age double-ditched enclosure at Mayfield Farm, Bedfont, showing up as a cropmark. (Crown copyright reserved)

socketed axes (it's intriguing to find these tool types together since they represent different stages in the evolution of the axe). The hoard also contained gouges, spearheads, part of a knife, sword fragments and a singular curved implement — made apparently by hammering down the edge of a broken sword or dagger.

Cremation became a more common burial practice during the middle part of the Bronze Age. Fragments of a bucket-type cinerary urn with pieces of struck flint were found in the back garden of a house in Osterley while digging a dog's grave.

The area around Heathrow Airport has revealed plenty of evidence for Iron Age occupation (most notably the famous Iron Age village consisting of 11 hut circles and a temple, which lies directly under Runway One, excavated by Grimes in 1944). This, and several other important Iron Age sites, are in the neighbouring Borough of Hillingdon, but the Bronze Age site at Mayfield Farm continued into the Iron Age. Gulleys found probably surrounded living huts and pits nearby were probably dug for gravel extraction.

Pottery and coins have turned up in the Borough and some fine metal objects, most notably a collection of tiny bronze figurines discovered by workmen digging a field in Hounslow in 1864. The collection comprises five animals — three boars and two (possibly) dogs — plus a miniature bronze wheel (Fig. 3). The boar was both a feared and a venerated animal in Europe for centuries, which lends credence to the belief that these figurines had some religious significance.

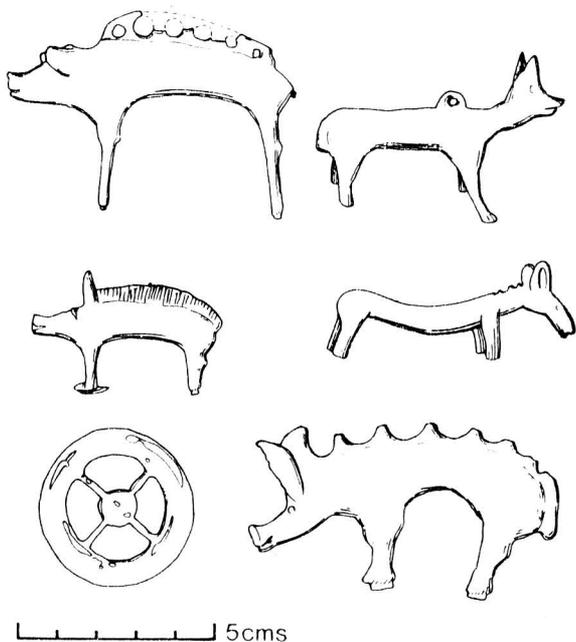


Fig. 3: hoard of Iron Age bronze figurines found in a field in Hounslow last century.

Of the bronze figurines (of both Iron Age and Roman date) found in Britain, the Hounslow boards are the most famous, being praised for the care and abstract nature of their design. The whole of this collection is now in the British Museum.

Iron Age metal artefacts recovered from the Thames include several brooches, a fine sword, iron spearheads and axes, a massive tankard (it holds four pints and was probably used for communal imbibing at feasts) and a “horn cap” or yoke terminal from a chariot.

The use of chariots as weapons of war greatly impressed Julius Caesar when he first landed in Britain in 55 BC. He describes the great skill of the chariot drivers — they were able to drive up steep inclines with horses at full gallop, checking and turning. They could also run out along the chariot pole, stand on the yoke and get back into the vehicle with great ease. However, these acrobatics were not enough to prevent the Roman army from advancing to the Thames in 54 BC.

The point at which Caesar crossed the Thames is of great interest to us in Hounslow. The assertion on the Ferry Lane monument (see above) that he crossed at Brentford was made by Montagu Sharpe on the basis that stakes in the river there exactly

corresponded to the defensive stakes described by Caesar in his account of the 54 BC invasion. Sharpe took no photographs of the Brentford stakes (they were eventually drawn out of the river because they constituted a danger to river traffic) and no further archaeological evidence has emerged to support Sharpe’s theory. It is now thought unlikely since Caesar claims to have crossed the Thames at its first fording point and, coming from Kent, this is more likely to have been Westminster, which was known to have been a ford 100 years later when the Romans eventually conquered Britain.

### Roman Hounslow

One of the major Roman roads which radiate from London runs right through the Borough of Hounslow. It is thought to start in Newgate Street and follow the line of Holborn Viaduct, Oxford Street, Bayswater Road, Goldhawk Road, Bath Road, Chiswick High Road, Kew Bridge Road, Brentford High Street, London Road then on to Staines and the west of England.

The road’s precise course is more difficult to determine. Actual evidence of the metalled road surface and its two drainage ditches has only been found with any degree of certainty on two of the 20 or so excavations carried out in and around Brentford High Street and Chiswick High Road<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 4). Current speculation is that a large portion



Fig. 4: the Roman Road in Brentford looking north: (A) the cambered gravel surface, (B) the southern road ditch. (Photo: Museum of London)

3. For an earlier summary, see Alison Parnum and Jonathan Cotton ‘Recent work in Brentford: excavations and observations 1974-82’ *London Archaeol* 4 no. 12 (1983) 318-325.

of the Roman road lies directly under the modern road.

Brentford is one of the many Roman towns and villages which grew up along the roads. Its position at the place where the River Brent flows into the Thames (and where perhaps the Thames itself could be forded), combined with the fact that it lies 10 Roman miles (nine modern miles) midway between *Londinium* and the Roman town of *Pontes* (Staines) suggest that it was originally established as an official stop-over for travellers journeying to the west.

Excavations tell us that Roman Brentford was very much a ribbon development flanking the road for 400 to 600 metres. It doesn't appear to have been a particularly prosperous settlement; there is no evidence for the stone buildings found in many Romano-British towns. It's more likely to have been just a small trading post and a travellers' rest — the large number of gaming pot bases recovered (many made from broken pot bases) tell us something about the way travellers chose to relax!

More than 150 Roman coins have come from the excavations, together with pottery, nails, knives, tweezers, buckles, bracelets, beads and brooches. A more unusual find was a bronze spout. An animal's head (described as resembling a puzzled pekinese!), it was probably originally attached to a metal bowl. Although the spout was found in a pit where the pottery dated to the early Roman period, it is possible that it was the work of a Celtic, rather than Roman, craftsman.

Away from the road, a number of what were thought to be Romano-British hut sites have been



Fig. 5: Saxon hut excavated in Brentford High Street. (Photo: Museum of London)

observed — and three excavated — on the foreshore at Syon Reach. Since they were flimsy structures, made of wattle and daub and precariously perched on the water's edge, it is though they were more likely to have been an offshoot of the Brentford settlement (shelters for fishermen, perhaps) rather than a separate entity. It has been suggested recently, though, that they weren't huts at all but part of a landing stage. They may not even be Roman.

Of the many other Roman finds from the Borough, a terracotta theatrical mask, a bronze figure of the goddess Minerva and two "hippo sandals" (they were placed on the feet of animals to prevent them slipping) are the most interesting.

**Hounslow in Saxon, medieval and later times**  
Although most of the place names in the Borough of Hounslow are Saxon in origin, archaeological evidence for the period is fairly sparse. A *grubenhaus* (early Saxon sunken hut) was uncovered in Brentford High Street<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 5), and a hoard of silver coins dating to King Ethelred II (978-1016) discovered in Isleworth.

The only other Saxon finds, which all come from the foreshore, include spearheads and *seaxes* (knives), javelin heads, swords plus a very fine silver inlaid sword pommel, a shield boss, rings from chain-mail armour, finger rings, a bead, bone whistle and handbell.

Whether any of these were the property of King Edmund's soldiers who, the chroniclers tell us, twice pursued Canute and his Danes across the Thames at Brentford in 1016, we don't know.

We do know, however, that Brentford appears to have been a favourite meeting place for councils of church and state during the Saxon period. It is mentioned first in a letter dated 705 AD from the Bishop of London as the location for a meeting between the King of Wessex, his bishops, abbots and thanes, and the rulers of the East Saxons. In 780 AD Brentford was host to a meeting of the Council of Offa, King of Mercia, and in the following year the Synod of Brentford settled a dispute between Offa and the Bishop of Worcester.

Brentford's position on the boundary of Wessex and Mercia, combined with its easy access by road and river, were the more likely reasons for its choice as a venue than the fact that a sizable Saxon town existed there.

Medieval Hounslow is well documented, but again there is surprisingly little evidence from archaeol-

4. Roy Canham *2000 years of Brentford* HMSO (1978) 30, 150.

ogy — much of it probably lies underneath existing buildings. Medieval house foundations, yards, cess pits, pottery, animal bones and the remains of stakes for fish weirs have turned up in excavations, also material from a leather-worker's dump.

Although medieval features still exist in some of the rebuilt manor houses — and at Syon Park which was the site of Syon Abbey, a famous religious house founded by King Henry V in 1416 — it is only the churches that give any tangible reminders of medieval Hounslow. Five of the churches in the Borough retain their 15th century towers, but the church of St Mary the Virgin, East Bedfont, built in 1150, still has its Norman chancel arch and south doorway, two wall paintings, dating to around 1250, and windows dating to the 15th century.

Archaeological evidence in post-medieval Hounslow has revealed a great deal of pottery dating to the 17th and 18th centuries. Particularly nice is a group of blue and white tinglazed pharmacy jars (made c1650-1700) which appear to have come from an apothecary's shop, and the "Brentford Plate", a blue and white tinglazed plate bearing the inscription M G BRANTFORD 1752. It is thought to have been a commemorative plate, perhaps for a marriage.

One of the best-preserved clay pipe kilns in the country was uncovered in Brentford High Street. Most of the pipe bowls recovered from the ash and cinder filling of the kiln have the initials of

William Heath, a pipe-maker known from the Apprentice Rolls to have worked between 1738-1745.

The several mills on and around Hounslow Heath provide more evidence of earlier industry. One functioned as a sword-blade finishing mill in the 17th century, producing military weapons which were used in the Civil War. Sword-making, though, was just one of the many activities carried out in the Hounslow mills. These same mills were also used during parts of their history as corn mills, paper mills and for the manufacture of gunpowder<sup>o</sup> (not a popular activity with the local residents, judging from the many explosions recorded between 1758 and 1915!) The bases of walls, wheels and millstones have been uncovered during the excavation of one of these mills.

The later history of the Borough of Hounslow is almost entirely bound up with the rapid development of London. Agricultural land was needed to house the capital's ever-expanding workforce, and the parishes which make up the Borough lost their individual identities and became subsumed into the great suburban sprawl.

5. A. J. Laws and A. Oswald 'The Kiln of William Heath, eighteenth century Brentford Pipemaker' in P. Davey (ed) *The Archaeology of the Clay Tobacco Pipe VI: Pipes and Kilns in the London Region* BAR 97 (1981) 15-65.
6. Phil Philo and John Mills 'The Bedfont Gunpowder Mills' *London Archaeol* 5 no. 4 (1985) 95-102.

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## Excavations and post-excavation work

**City of London.** Enquiries to Museum of London Archaeology Service, Number One, London Wall, London EC2Y 5EA (071-972 9111).

**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 Archaeology Service. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to MOLAS, Number One, London Wall., London EC2Y 5EA (071-972 9111).

**Borough of Greenwich.** Cataloguing of excavated and other archaeological material, the majority from sites in the borough. For further information contact Greenwich Borough Museum, 232 Plumstead High Street, London SE18 1JT (081-855 3240).

**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 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 County Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Rob Poulton, Archaeological Unit Manager, Planning Department, Pelham Lodge, Kingston, Surrey (081-541 9457).

**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 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 £10.50 includes postage, and should be made payable to C.B.A., 112 Kennington Road, SE11 6RE (071-582 0494).*