

15-17 Brighton Road, Croydon: the investigation of a prehistoric and Roman site

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Introduction

Archaeological investigation at 15-17 Brighton Road, South Croydon, was undertaken by the Museum of London Archaeology Service in July 1993. This work was a condition of planning consent for redevelopment of the site, formerly Dee's Garage¹.

The site lies some 1200m (3900ft) south-east of Croydon Old Town, and historically formed open land (Fig. 1). Brighton Road may follow the line of the Roman road to the south coast, sometimes referred to as the London-Portslade Road; it is also possible that the adjoining Croham Road follows an Iron Age and Roman route.

The investigation consisted of nine separate or connecting trenches. Excavation produced nearly 300 struck flints, mainly waste flakes but including some tools. Of particular importance was a Late Bronze Age copper alloy razor.

There was also Roman material, principally potsherds, and several associated cut features. Evidence for a late Roman presence was afforded by a dispersed coin hoard of mid-4th century date.

Archaeological and historical background

The site is near the lower or northern end of a dry valley in the North Downs, a natural communication route now followed by the Brighton Road. The valley floor contains geologically recent alluvial gravels (the Taplow Terrace), overlying the much older Cretaceous chalk.

There are frequent references to prehistoric activity in the area, particularly along the line of the Wandle Valley to the northwest. There have been a few Palaeolithic finds, but the first evidence of extensive activity dates to the Mesolithic and Neo-

lithic period (c 8000-2500 BC). Settlement evidence is later still, either Late Bronze Age or Iron Age (c 900 BC to AD 43).

The general line of the Roman road through Croydon is fairly well established. However, to the south of the town and as far as Godstone Hill the exact route is uncertain: it may have followed the line of the valley or possibly lain on higher ground just to the west².

It seems likely that there was a Roman settlement in Croydon, although the nature and extent of this is also unknown. The scale and distribution of finds would suggest at least a roadside village; it

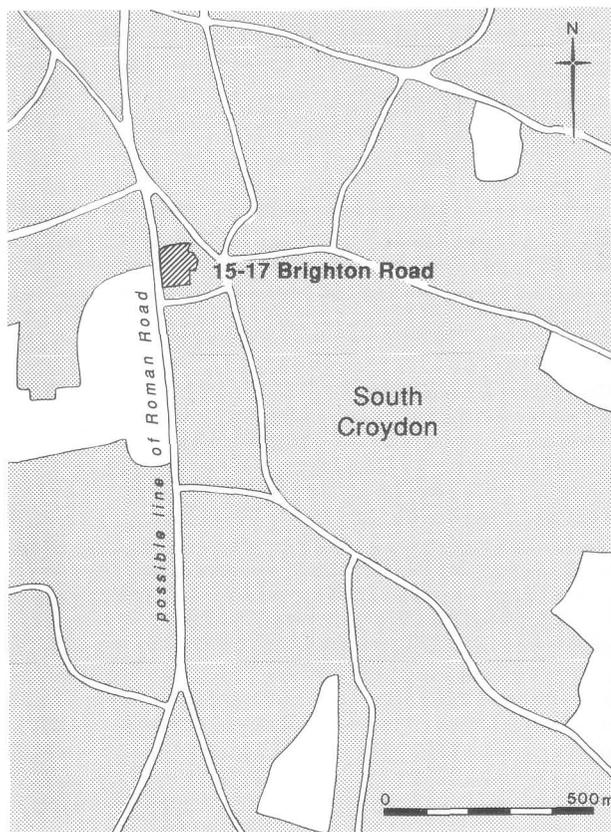


Fig. 1: site location.

1. This article summarises the post excavation report; see G Potter, *Former Dee's Garage, Brighton Road, South Croydon. An Archaeological Report*. MoLAS (1993).
2. P Drewett 'Excavations in Old Town, Croydon, 1968/70: A Middle Saxon to Post-medieval Occupation Sequence' *Res Vol Surrey Archaeol Soc* no 1 (1974) 1-45; I D Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain* (1973) 62.

has been further suggested that this grew up around the site of a *mutatio*, or posting station³.

The name Croydon is of Saxon origin, and the area has produced a number of finds of this period. Of particular note is the discovery of parts of an Anglo-Saxon (5th-6th century AD) cemetery just to the south-east of the Old Town. Recent work has shed further light on this⁴.

There are references to Croydon from the 9th century, and in the Domesday Survey of 1086. The residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury – possibly dating from the Conquest, although only definitely attested in the later 13th century – must have had a major influence on the town's development. By the 14th century Croydon was firmly established, with a market and annual fair, and although still small was starting to expand beyond the confines of the Old Town.

The Brighton Road site remained open agricultural land until the second quarter of the 19th century⁵. Thereafter rapid development took place, and by 1900 the area was almost wholly built-up.

The archaeological investigation

The initial evaluation consisted of two trenches, each 5m (16.5ft) wide and 20 to 25m (66 to 82ft) in length. They were located within the proposed building footprint, where development would disturb significantly any archaeological remains.

The positive evaluation led to the implementation of further archaeological measures. It was agreed that this should take the form of archaeological excavation over a large part of the site (Fig. 2).

The final trench layout was determined on both practical and archaeological grounds, in essence that an adequate sample should be obtained. The investigation covered just over 20% of the whole site – and in practice of much larger proportion of the area directly affected by development.

The trenches were excavated by machine to depths ranging from about 0.15m (6in) to as much as 1.0m (39in). This was principally determined by the topography of the natural gravels on the site, which dropped down from the west to the east. To the west, truncated natural gravel was exposed directly below recent demolition debris, whereas to

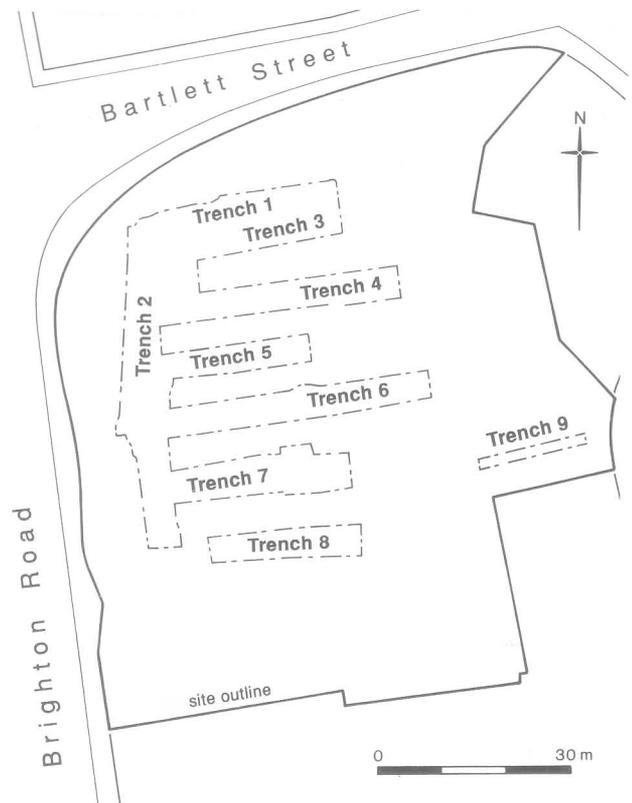


Fig. 2: site outline and archaeological trenches.

the east this material overlay an increasing depth of earlier soil horizons.

Prehistoric

The investigation produced 286 pieces of struck flint, as well as larger quantities of fire-cracked material. Nearly 80% of the struck flint was made up of miscellaneous flakes and other waste, but there were also a number of scrapers and blades (or fragments thereof). Dating is tentative but may embrace both the Mesolithic/early Neolithic and later prehistoric activity. There was only one sherd of probable prehistoric pottery, apparently of Iron Age date.

The bifid copper alloy razor (Fig. 4) was a find of particular interest⁶. Although not common, other examples indicate a Late Bronze Age date, probably in the 8th or 9th century BC⁷. The razor was found in a waterlaid deposit infilling part of a

3. J B Gent *Croydon: A Pictorial History* (1991).

4. R Nielsen *Report on Archaeological Evaluation at 82-86 Park Lane, Croydon*. MoLAS (1992).

5. T Bainbridge *A Plan of the Parish of Croydon* (1800).

6. G Potter & J Cotton (forthcoming) 'A Late Bronze Age Razor from South Croydon' *Surrey Archaeol Collect.*

7. S P Needham 'The Bronzes' in D Longley *Runnymede Bridge 1976: Excavations on the Site of a Late Bronze Age Settlement*, Res Vol Surrey Archaeol Soc no 6 (1980) 13-37; C M Piggott 'The Late Bronze Age Razors of the British Isles' *Proc Prehist Soc* 12 (1946) 121-41.

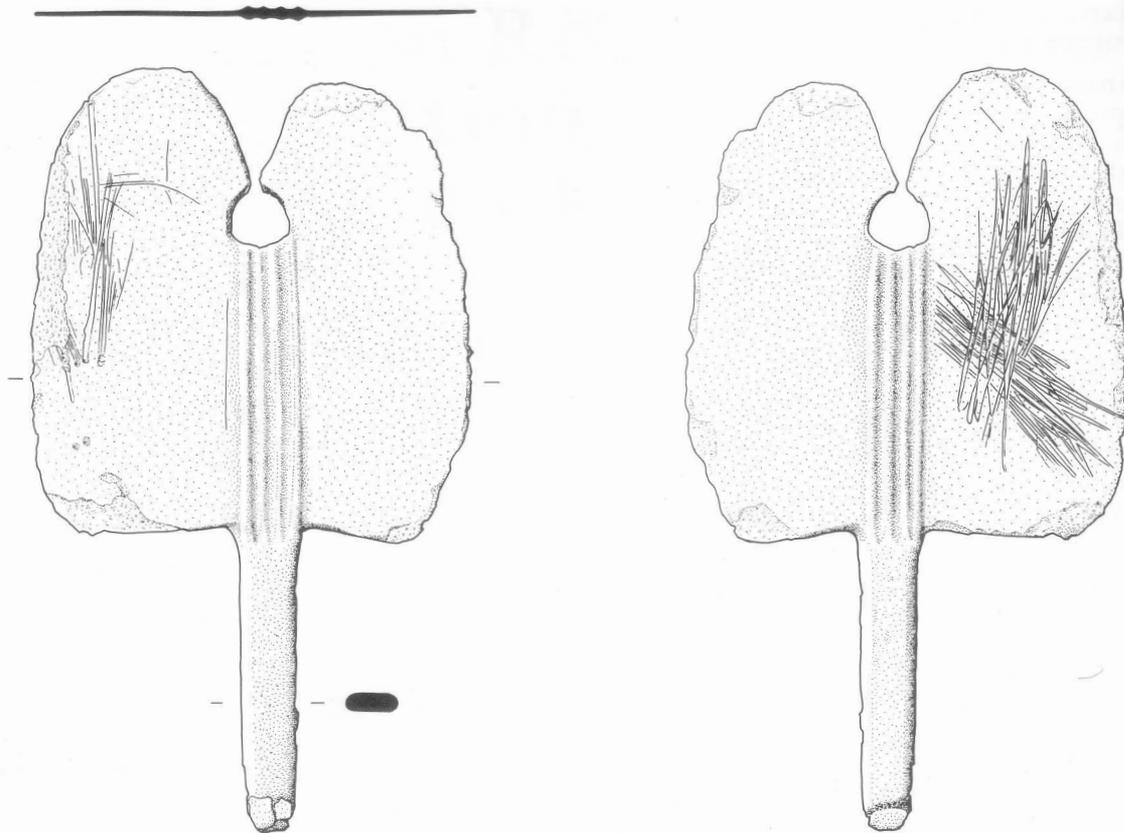


Fig. 4: Late Bronze Age copper alloy razor.

probable 2nd-century Roman ditch, and may well have been deliberately thrown into standing water. The blade exhibited heavy cross-hatched scratching, on one surface in particular, and it is tempting to see this as part of a process in which the

object was found, tested for metal content and then discarded.

Most of the prehistoric finds were residual in later contexts, either Roman or post-medieval. Trenches 1 and 3 contained four features which may be prehistoric (Fig. 3). This conclusion is based partly on flint finds (although there was no closely dated material) and partly on the stratigraphic sequence, in so far as some of the fills were overlain by demonstrably Roman levels. In fact the cuts were quite shallow — 0.1 to 0.25m (4 to 10in) in depth — and as they were only discernible at the level of the natural gravel some truncation would seem to have taken place.

Three of the possible prehistoric features were linear and on the same (approximately north-south) alignment, and all four terminated to the south at roughly the same point. These facts would further suggest that the cuts were more or less contemporary and that they respected some previously extant boundary. However, there is no real indication of their use or function, although cultivation is one possibility.

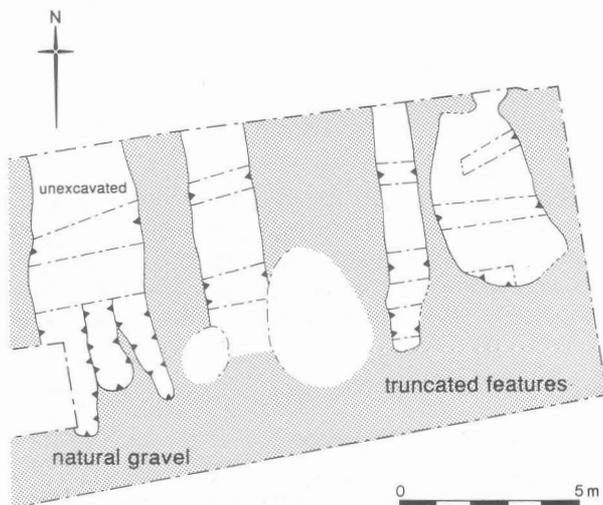


Fig. 3: possible prehistoric features in Trenches 1 and 3.

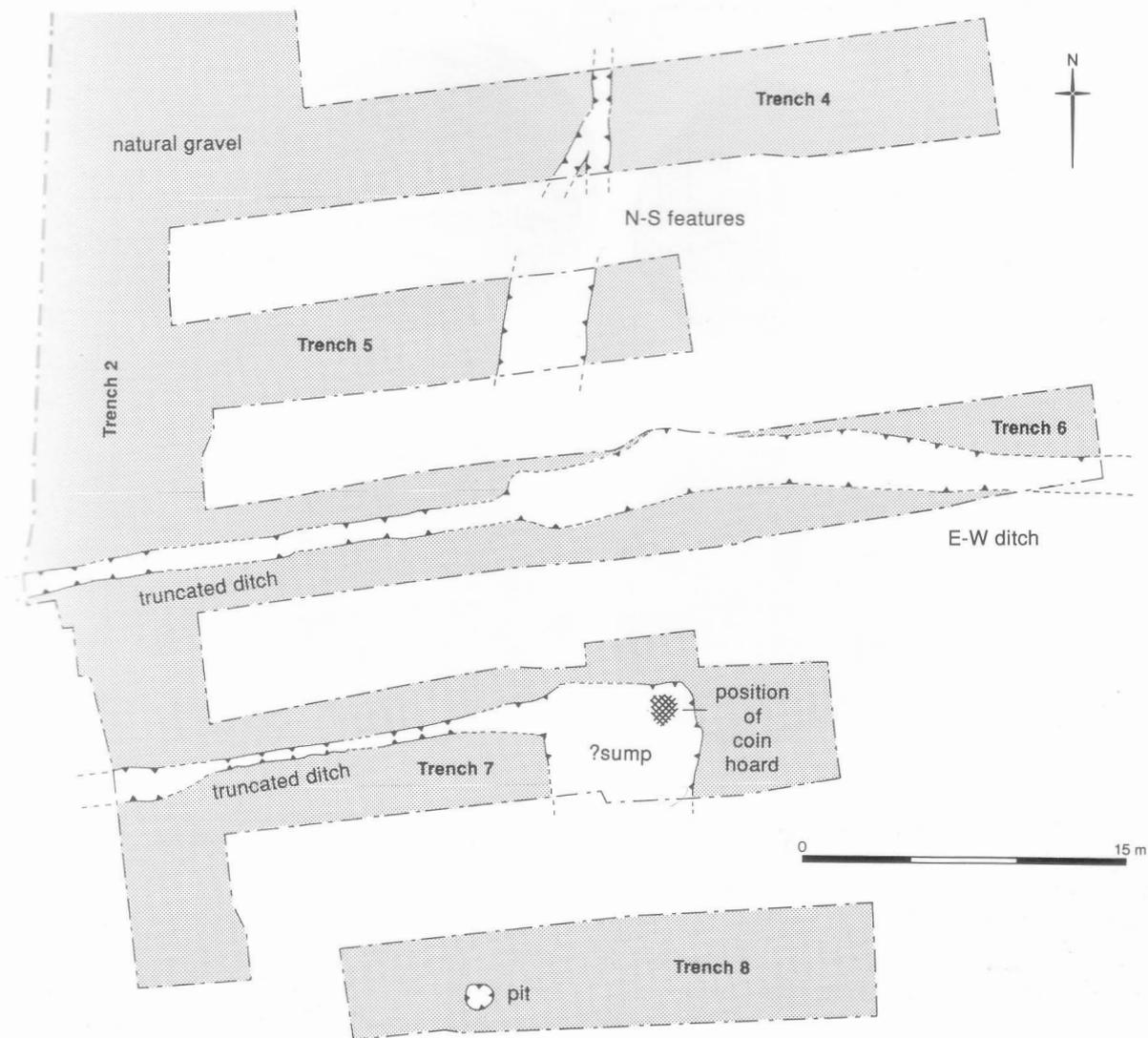


Fig. 5: Roman features recorded during the investigation.

Roman

The investigation produced both Roman finds and a number of associated features; the former principally consisted of potsherds, with very occasional building material. The pottery included a fairly high proportion of small and undiagnostic body sherds which could only be described in general terms, as grog or sand-tempered or oxidised (AD 40-400). However, there was also a range of identified fabrics, largely of 1st or 2nd-century date; a further small group, including Alice Holt Farnham and Nene Valley colour-coated wares, was dated to c 250-400.

Trench 7 produced the most interesting find, a dispersed hoard of 58 bronze coins dating between

AD 341 and 352 (Figs. 5 and 6). There was no indication of a container or other receptacle, although a leather or fabric bag — now wholly perished — is a possibility. The majority of the coins were found at a similar level, but spread over a radius of about 0.7m (28in); the most distant coin was found some 9m (30ft) away. Most of the coins were in very good condition, neither worn nor corroded, so it is likely that burial took place soon after the latest recorded date. It is assumed that the dispersal resulted from later cultivation.

The principal Roman features were two ditches, which were cut into the natural gravel in Trenches 2, 6 and 7 (Fig. 5). The ditches were aligned east-west, and thus lay at right angles to the line of the



Fig. 6a: coins from the 4th-century hoard — *obverse types*, 1 Constantius AD 348-350; 2 Constans AD 348-350; 3 Decentius AD 351-352; 4 Magnentius AD 351-352. (scale 2:1)

postulated Roman road (the present Brighton Road). Both features appear to date to the period AD 120-180, and they may even be contemporary. The northern ditch was traced for a length of about 50m (165ft), and, although somewhat truncated, was up to 3m (10ft) wide and 0.5m (20in) deep. In cross-section the cut was roughly bowl-shaped, the sides becoming shallower as the width increased to the east. The material within the ditch fell into two basic types — apparently deliberate infill and naturally waterlaid deposition. Molluscan analysis has shown a further distinction in the latter, between a lower deposit formed in shallow standing water and overlying material which was at best marshy or periodically wet.

The southern ditch was traced for some 20m (66ft): maximum width was about 1.6m (63in) and depth 0.85m (33in). At its eastern end the ditch opened out into a large sump-like feature, measuring at least 7m by 6m (23 by 20ft).

Other Roman features included shallow north-south linear cuts in Trenches 4 and 5, and a pit near the southern end of Trench 8 (Fig 5). The dating of

this group is much less precise than that of the ditches, with a suggested range from the mid 1st or 2nd century AD to the later 4th century. However, it is possible that all these features relate to activity during the 2nd century AD, perhaps contemporary with the development of the nearby settlement.

Functional interpretation of the various features is also tentative. The main east-west ditches are presumably for drainage (and certainly contained waterlaid deposits); the linear features in Trenches 4 and 5 may be associated with cultivation.

To the east of the site Roman features were overlain by a thickening layer of grey brown sandy silt with gravel; in places there was also an intermediate band of lighter coloured silt/sand with pebbles. Together these deposits averaged 0.3 to 0.5m (12 to 20in) in depth: it is likely that they derive from reworking of an extant soil horizon which has also truncated the upper level of earlier infilled features. There may also have been some deliberate deposition, or more probably a gradual accretion of material as a result of cultivation.



Fig. 6b: coins from the 4th-century hoard — reverse types, 5 Magnentius. Two victories, flanking shield; 6 Constans. Phoenix standing on a globe (the 1100th anniversary of the foundation of Rome); 7 Constans. The Emperor standing in a galley, holding Christian standard and phoenix; 8 Constans. Soldier leading captive from a hut beneath a tree. (scale 2:1)

Medieval and later

The investigation produced no more than four or five medieval potsherds (AD 1150-1500) and two or three fragments of peg roof tile.

Much of the site was overlain by a presumed agricultural/garden soil, up to 0.4m (16in) deep; where briefly examined this layer produced material which generally dated to between 1750 and 1900. In some areas — especially to the west and south of the site — the soil profile had been entirely removed by modern development. A few cut features also produced pottery of 17th to 19th century date, although it is likely that these actually relate to the development of the site in the latter part of the period.

Conclusion

The archaeological investigation at Brighton Road has proved of value, both in the main areas of enquiry and in respect of particular finds.

Much of the prehistoric material, especially the struck flint, occurred in later contexts. Nevertheless, the finds clearly indicate earlier activity, and presumably settlement, in the area. At the same

time the Late Bronze Age razor is a find of considerable interest and rarity.

The investigation also produced considerable evidence for Roman activity, probably on the periphery of a small settlement; once again this was enhanced by an intrinsically important find, in the form of the 4th-century coin hoard.

Acknowledgements

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