

# Romans in Twickenham

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## Introduction

UNTIL RECENTLY, little was known about Roman occupation and activity in the Twickenham area, and no evidence for Romano-British settlements in the vicinity had been found. This lack of evidence suggested that the area was largely undeveloped or given over to agriculture during this period. Only two isolated finds, a Roman coin<sup>1</sup>—a *denarius* of Trajan — and a pewter tankard<sup>2</sup>, were known of in Richmond, both poorly located. Further afield some Roman pottery and a Roman cinerary urn had been found on Ham Common<sup>3</sup>. In an excavation by the Museum of London Archaeology Service at 11 Lower Teddington Road, Hampton Wick<sup>4</sup>, a limited number of features of 3rd- to 4th-century date had been found.

However, two excavations recently carried out in the Twickenham area by the Museum of London Archaeology Service have altered our interpretation of this area during the Roman period. These excavations were undertaken at Heathcote Road Nursery, Twickenham Bridge, (TQ 1710 7460) in August and November 1992, and at St Johns Hospital, on the corner of Amyand Park Road and Strafford Road, Twickenham, (TQ 1645 7365) in March and April 1994 (Fig. 1). Both were carried out as a condition of planning consent for redevelopment.

## Archaeological background

Recent work by the Museum of London Archaeology Service in the surrounding area has revealed evidence to indicate a large area of prehistoric activity. The drift geology of Taplow Terrace Gravels, capped by brickearth in this area, provided fertile and easily tillable soils which were well drained. Such landscapes, with readily available water supplies, would have proved attractive to early settlers and farming communities.

1. Greater London Sites and Monuments Record 020843.
2. Greater London Sites and Monuments Record 103033.
3. Greater London Sites and Monuments Record 021034.
4. J. Nowell (1990) *An Interim Report on the Excavation at 11 Teddington Road, Hampton Wick, Middlesex* (MOLAS Report).
5. D. Simpson (1993) *Twickenham Past — A Visual History of Twickenham and Whitton* Paper No. 14, Historical Publications Limited.
6. J. Cotton, J. Mills and G. Clegg (1986) *Archaeology in West Middlesex: the earliest hunters to the late medieval period* (Hillingdon Borough Libraries) 34.

Numerous palaeolithic flint implements have been recovered from the brickearth in the region around Twickenham, Isleworth, and from the River Thames on and around Eel Pie Island. Excavations for a sewer trench at Popes Grotto in 1892, and by the Borough of Twickenham Local History Society at Church Street in 1966<sup>5</sup> recovered bones of hyena, hippopotamus, ox, red and giant deer, bison, reindeer, and straight-tusked elephants. Flint implements recovered included hand axes, picks, scrapers, and microliths. Excavations on Eel Pie Island revealed a series of wooden piles forming a causeway. Implements consisting of bone and flint axes, hoes and hammers were also recovered. Neolithic flint tools have also been found in abundance, and suggest the presence of a sizeable neolithic population<sup>6</sup>.

Later bronze and iron age discoveries included swords, a drinking beaker, socketed axes, and arrow heads, found along the Thames foreshore between Syon House and Kew Bridge, and at other sites in Brentford and Isleworth. Although no excavations have been undertaken at the confluence of the River Thames and the River Brent, at

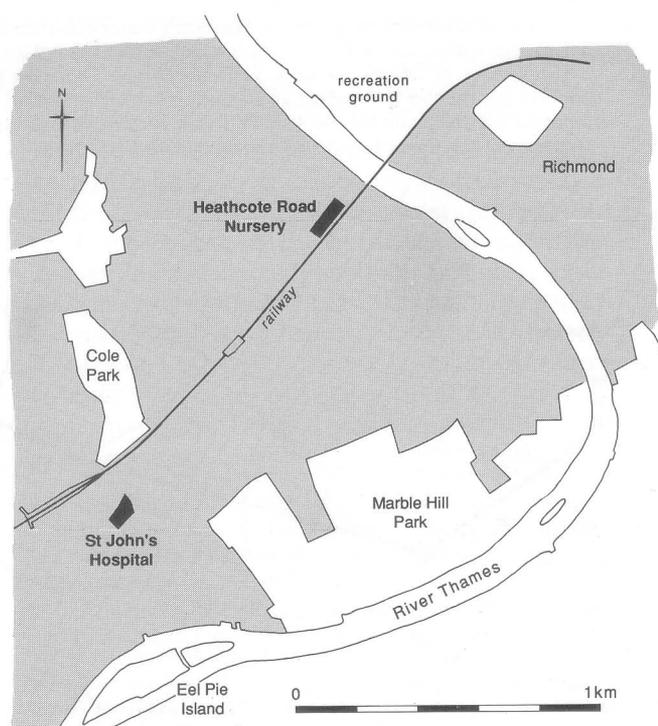


Fig. 1: site locations

Brentford, it is now thought that a significant bronze age waterside settlement existed<sup>7</sup>.

The accumulated evidence from these excavations points to extensive occupation and in some cases ritual use of the landscape from the neolithic (c 4,500 BC) to the Saxon periods (5th to 11th centuries AD), and up to the present day<sup>8</sup>.

### Historical background

The nucleus of Twickenham dates to the Saxon period (AD 600-1066), and was centred around the parish church. During this period the earliest documents referring to Twickenham were produced. Several early deeds refer to Twickenham by a variety of different spellings, but it is thought that Twickenham is of English origin, '-ham' denoting 'land in a river bend, or promontory'.

The earliest documentary evidence for Twickenham dated to a charter of AD 704, and referred to a land grant in 'Twicanhom'.

The Domesday Book AD 1086 lists the area as being part of the 'Gistelworde' (Isleworth) Hundred in Middlesex, and gives details of the landowner, and mentions the number of hides (a unit of land) and ploughs. At this time the area was scattered with small villages whose economy was centred around the local manor. Isleworth Manor was located to the west of present-day Syon Lane,

adjacent to All Saints Church, and had two sub-manors: Wyke Manor and Worton Manor.

Prior to the Norman Conquest of AD 1066 'Gistelworde Hundred' belonged to Earl Algar. Later the land was owned by Walter de St Valery (*Waleric*). The land remained in the control of the same family until 1227, when it was seized by Henry III, who granted it to his brother Richard, Earl of Cornwall<sup>10</sup>.

### The archaeological investigation of Heathcote Road Nursery

The site was located on the western bank of the River Thames, adjacent to Twickenham Bridge (Fig. 2). The initial evaluation of the site consisted of three trial trenches measuring 7.0m by 3.0m (23ft by 10ft) and was undertaken in August 1992<sup>11</sup>.

The natural (Taplow) gravels were revealed at a height of between +32.15m (105ft 4in) OD and +32.35m (106ft) OD and were sealed by a severely truncated subsoil layer up to 0.30m (1ft) thick into which several features were cut.

Within Trench 1 three pits of varying size and depth were recorded. Two of the pits contained abraded pottery fragments dated to the 1st to 2nd century AD. The terminal of a ditch, possibly of a similar date, was excavated (Fig. 3). No features of note were recorded in the remaining trenches.

Further work undertaken in November 1992 on a larger area was based around Trench 1. The area examined measured 15m by 15m (49ft by 49ft) and was excavated to reveal a complex pattern of activity. Amongst the features recorded were several intercutting domestic and industrial rubbish pits containing abraded sherds of pottery and metal fragments dating to the 1st to 2nd century AD. Two lines of post holes were identified, almost at right-angles to each other. They probably formed part of a structure, or a fence line, and were possibly associated with a series of associated gulleys and ditches, some of which may be interpreted as drainage and/or boundary ditches. This suggests the presence of a series of buildings and/or enclosures forming what could have been part of a Romano-British farmstead.

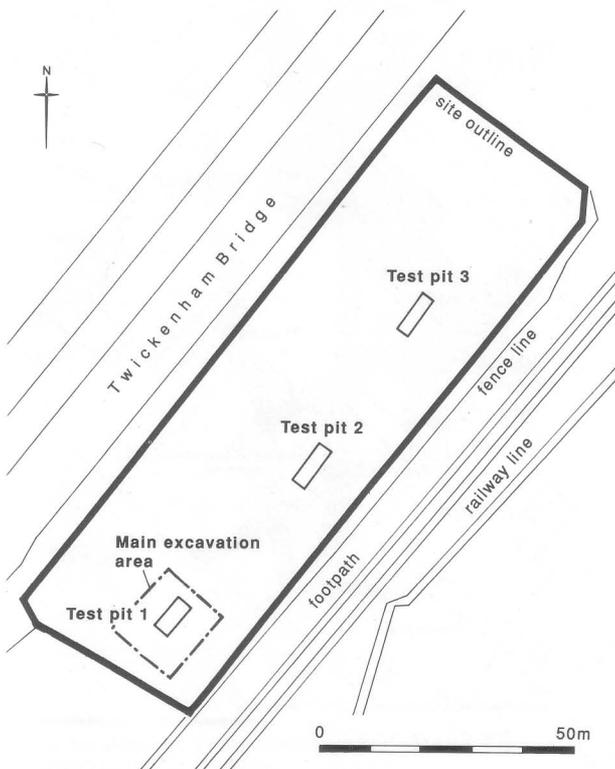


Fig. 2: location of trenches at Heathcote Road

7. G. Clegg (1991) *The Archaeology of Hounslow* (West London Archaeological Field Group) 19.
8. *Op cit* fn 6.
9. M. A. Gelling (1979) *The Early Charters of the Thames Valley* (Leicester University Press) 95 No.191 and P. H. Sawyer (1968) *Anglo Saxon Charters — an annotated list and bibliography* 87 No.65
10. J. Morris (ed.) (1975) *Domesday Book* 2 fo. 130a-b.
11. I. Grainger (1992) *The Heathcote Road Nursery, Twickenham Bridge* (HRD92). *London Borough of Richmond upon Thames. An Archaeological Evaluation* (MOLAS Report).

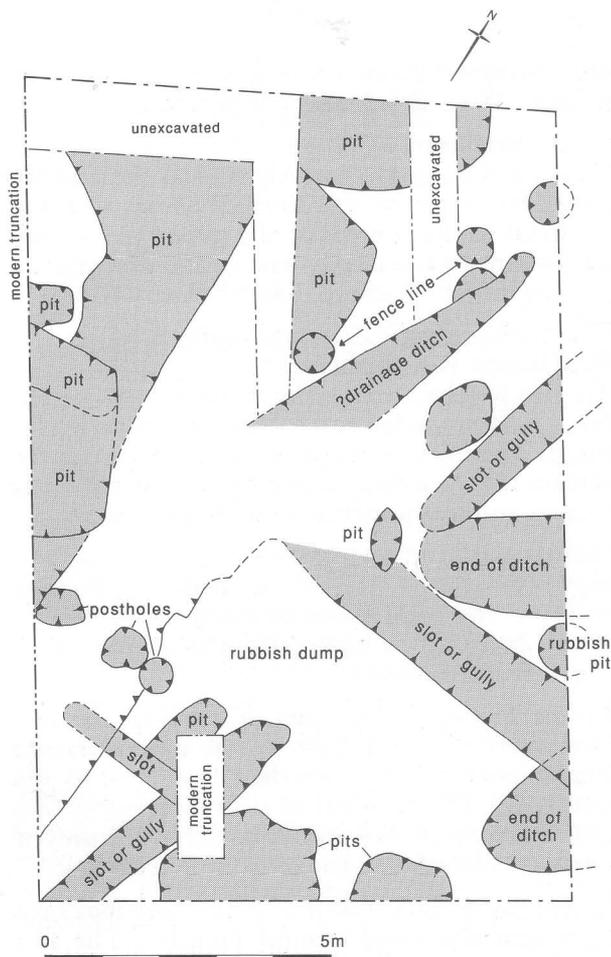


Fig. 3: location of features in Trench 1 (Heathcote Road)

Artefacts from these features consisted of several fragments of pottery, again dated to the 1st to 2nd century, fragments of iron slag and iron objects. The iron had been deposited in a ditch and pits at the eastern end of the excavation, which appeared to indicate some form of localised metal-working activity in the immediate area.

### The archaeological investigation at St Johns Hospital, Twickenham

This site was located within the grounds of the St Johns Hospital, on the corner of Amyand Park Road and Strafford Road, Twickenham<sup>12</sup>, and covered a total area of approximately 3400 square metres (3718 square yards), of which approximately 80% was subject to the proposed building footprint (Fig. 4).

12. S. Hoad (1994) *St Johns Hospital, Amyand Park Road, Twickenham, London Borough of Richmond upon Thames. An Archaeological Evaluation and Excavation Report* (MOLAS Report).

The archaeological evaluation was undertaken in March and April 1994. Initially five trenches (A to E) measuring 10 to 25m by 3m (32ft 8in to 82ft by 10ft) were opened. The natural gravel surface was revealed between +4.80m (15ft 7in) OD (at the western end of the site) and +6.60m (21ft 6in) OD (at the eastern end of the site). The gravels were overlaid by a layer of natural brickearth. This in turn was overlaid by a layer of plough soil, a layer of garden soil, modern dump deposits, and topsoil. The evaluation revealed a few fragments of severely abraded Iron Age pottery (Trench B), a Roman ditch (Trench E), and numerous post-medieval pits and bedding trenches throughout the site (Fig. 4).

A later excavation of the area around Trench E was undertaken in April 1994. Two areas (F and G) measuring approximately 270 square metres (885 square feet) were opened adjacent to Trench E, in order to locate and confirm the alignment of the Roman ditch. The excavation revealed prehistoric, Roman and post-medieval remains (Fig. 5).

The prehistoric features included two isolated post holes, two parallel field drains aligned approximately north to south, one of which was traced for a discontinuous length of 18.50m (60ft

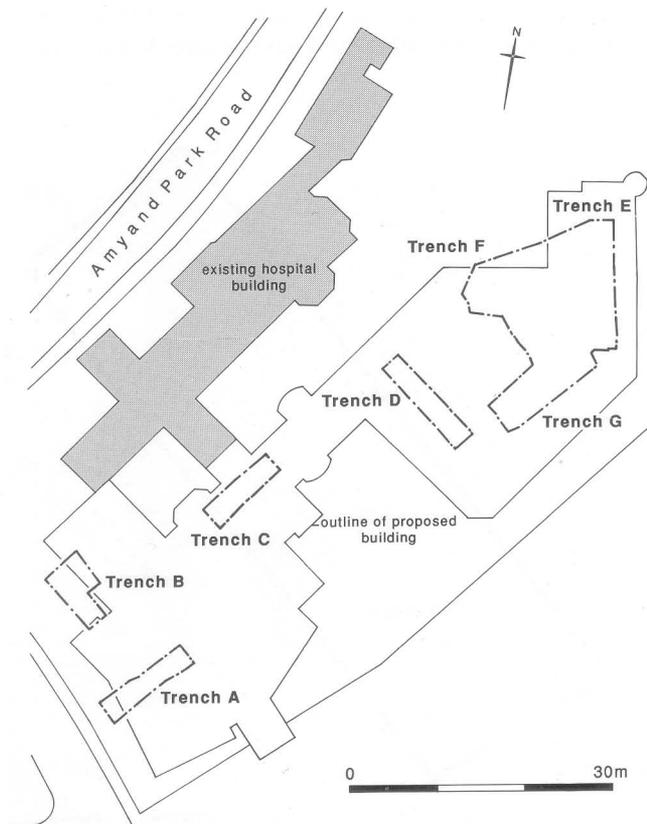


Fig. 4: location of trenches at St Johns Hospital

7in). A ditch aligned north-east to south-west was recorded for a length of 5.50m (18ft). Two intercutting pits of possible prehistoric date were also noted.

Truncating the prehistoric features was a series of intercutting pits, post-holes and ditches, including what is thought to be an enclosure ditch, dated to AD 350-400. A total of twelve features were dated to this late Roman period and all contained numerous and varied fragments of Roman pottery. Several of the features intercut, suggesting continuing activity over a period of time.

The earliest of the Roman features included two ditches. One had a U-shaped profile and was aligned approximately north to south, extending across the entire area for a distance of 18.50m (60ft 7in), parallel with the prehistoric field drains. The ditch was up to a metre in width with a flat base which sloped from south to north, suggesting that it was probably used for drainage. To the east of this feature was another ditch aligned north-west to south-east. This ditch was wide and shallow, and

contained numerous artefacts including iron objects, iron slag, and a fragment of a decorated bone pin. It was truncated to the south by a later Roman enclosure ditch.

Another later ditch was aligned north-east to south-west. This ditch also had a U-shaped profile and was recorded for a length of 9.50m (31ft), being truncated by later activity at either end. The ditch was up to 0.90m (2ft 11in) wide, 0.20m (8in) deep, and sloped from west to east. It was possibly another drainage ditch.

An enclosure ditch had first been noted in Trench E, on an east to west alignment. It extended in this direction (into Area F) for 8.00m (26ft) before turning south, where it was recorded for a further 14.00m (45ft 11in) running parallel to an earlier ditch. The plan of this feature supported the interpretation that it was an enclosure ditch: it contained numerous sherds of pottery, several metal objects, animal bone, and building material.

The enclosure ditch was cut by two further Roman ditches. Both were aligned north-east to south-west and were 2.0m (6ft 6in) apart. These ditches were not, however, contemporary. They have been interpreted as drainage ditches, but information was scarce due to later disturbance and modern tree roots.

Other features recorded included domestic rubbish pits and isolated post holes.

Interpretation of these features suggests the presence of a small farmstead occupied for perhaps 200 years. Although no structures could be identified, the large quantity of pottery and metal artefacts recovered indicated that occupation occurred in the vicinity, possibly centred under what is now Trafford Road, adjacent to St Johns Hospital. Localised metal-working also appeared to have occurred nearby.

The pottery assemblage recovered during the excavation ranged in date from AD 250 to AD 400 and consisted mainly of domestic wares with occasional imports from Southern and Central Gaul. The local wares had been produced in London, Oxford, Colchester, St Albans, and included an almost complete, but smashed, vessel from Much Hadham in Hertfordshire. The majority of the pottery originated from Alice Holt in Surrey.

The range of pottery forms recovered exceeds that usually found during excavation. This material could provide a valuable component to any project examining the dating and distribution of late Roman pottery in London and the surrounding area.

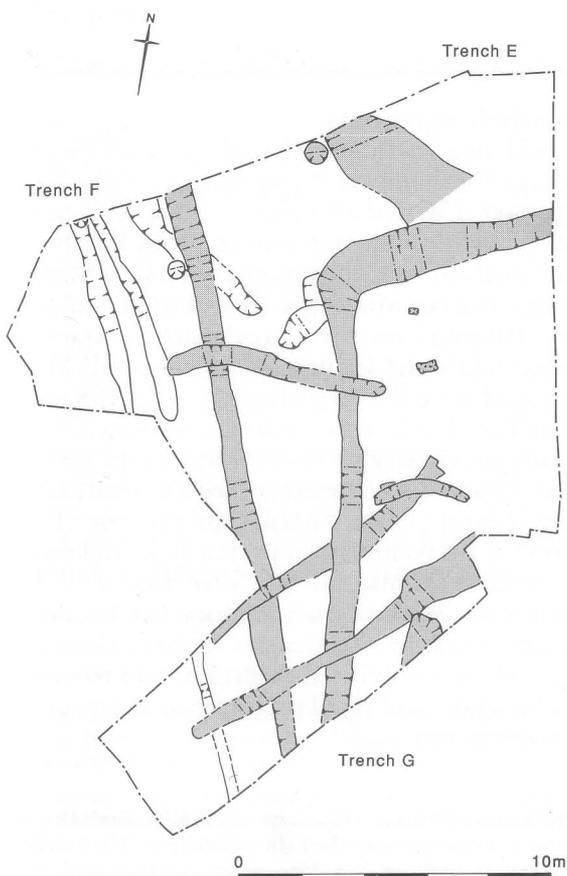


Fig. 5: location of Prehistoric (unshaded) and Roman (shaded) features (St Johns Hospital)

## Conclusion

Although limited, the archaeological excavations in this area have proved of value. The evidence for Roman activity has filled a gap in the archaeological record for Twickenham, proving that the Romans did occupy this area, trading with neighbours and others farther afield. There are indications of small Romano-British farms, and evidence for localised metal-working. It is to be hoped that future work in this area will provide evidence for other activities, and add to our picture of Roman Twickenham.

## Acknowledgements

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of a submersible pump dewatering system, a ventilation system capable of six below-slab air changes per hour, a 700 lux theatrical lighting system suspended from the underside of the slab, and spoil removal systems.

The 1994 evaluation at Poultry has indicated that the main excavation work is likely to encounter a complex Roman timber building sequence similar to that found at the DLR Bucklersbury site, where seven major phases of Roman timber buildings associated with the intensive commercial and residential use of the area from AD 50 until the 4th century were recorded<sup>18</sup>. It is hoped that the Poultry excavation will allow multi-disciplinary study of this sequence over a much larger area, and that the analysis and publication of the results can make a worthwhile contribution to our understanding of Roman London<sup>19</sup>.

## Acknowledgements

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18. See J Hill *op cit* fn 8 and P Rowsome *et al* forthcoming 'The Docklands Light Railway City Extension: excavations in Bucklersbury, Lombard Street, Lothbury, and at the Monument' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc*.

19. Of the many important Middle and West of Walbrook Roman sites excavated in the 1980s very little has been

published. D Perring, S Roskams, and P Allen *Early Development of Roman London West of the Walbrook* CBA Res. Rep. 70 (1991) is based upon evidence from sites excavated up to 1982. Findings from more recent excavations are included in D Perring *Roman London* (1991), the best overview presently available.