

# Further evidence for prehistoric occupation found on the Purley Way, Croydon

Steve Tucker

## Introduction

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL excavation was carried out at the factory site of 14 Progress Way and 222 Purley Way by the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) in November 1993 as a condition of planning consent for redevelopment.

The site is situated to the north-west of central Croydon (Fig. 1), in an area which has been extensively redeveloped and where previous archaeological evaluations have indicated prehistoric activity<sup>1</sup>.

## Archaeological and historical background

The site lies on the dry, gravel floodplain terrace of the Wandle valley, to the north-east of the River Wandle. Results from excavations carried out over a number of years on the Wandle floodplain have produced consistent evidence to suggest that localised arable and pastoral agriculture was being practised by, at least, the start of the last millennium BC (late Bronze Age). This evidence has been in the form of pits and linear ditches which have been found to contain struck and burnt flint with fragments of late Bronze Age pottery. However, little evidence for structures or dwellings of this date has as yet been located.

Recently, fragments of late Neolithic pottery have been found in isolated pits at Valley Park<sup>2</sup> and in two adjacent ditches at Beddington Sewage Farm<sup>3</sup>.

1. G. Potter, 1995 'A prehistoric site at 542-46 Purley Way, Croydon' *London Archaeol* 7, no. 12, 307-312; M. Heaton and C. Hearne, 1992 'Site Investigations at Beddington Lane, Sutton, Surrey' *London Archaeol* 7, no. 1, 19-23; S Tucker, 1990 *Beddington Sewage Treatment Works, Beddington Lane, Sutton: Preliminary Report of Archaeological Investigation* Museum of London DGLA; B. Bazely, 1990 *The Valley Park Development Site, Purley Way, Croydon: Preliminary Report of an Archaeological Investigation* Museum of London DGLA; S. Tucker, 1991 *The Philips Factory Site, Beddington Farm Road, Croydon* Preliminary Report of the 1990-91 Archaeological Investigations Museum of London DGLA; S. Mason, 1990 *Beddington Infants School, Croydon Road, Sutton* Preliminary Report of Archaeological Investigation DGLA.

2. B. Bazely *Op cit.* fn 1.

3. M. Heaton and C. Hearne, and S Tucker. *Op cit.* fn 1.

4. B. Bazely, M. Heaton and C. Hearne, and S Tucker. *Op cit.* fn 1.

Assuming that the pottery is contemporary with the use of these features, it suggests there was human activity on the floodplain before the Bronze Age, although at this stage the evidence is too scant to suggest how intensive or extensive that occupation was.

The interpretation that much of this activity was of an agricultural nature is supported by the discovery of evidence for prehistoric tree clearance in the general vicinity, in the form of several irregularly shaped features at the sites of Beddington Sewage Farm, Valley Park and Philips Factory<sup>4</sup>. Although the features generally contained no finds, they were sealed by the earliest horizons and

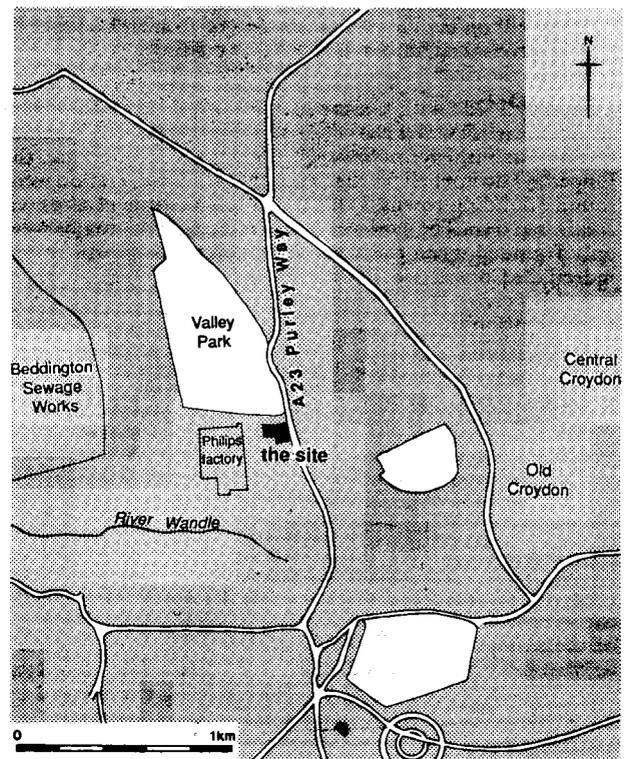


Fig. 1: site location.

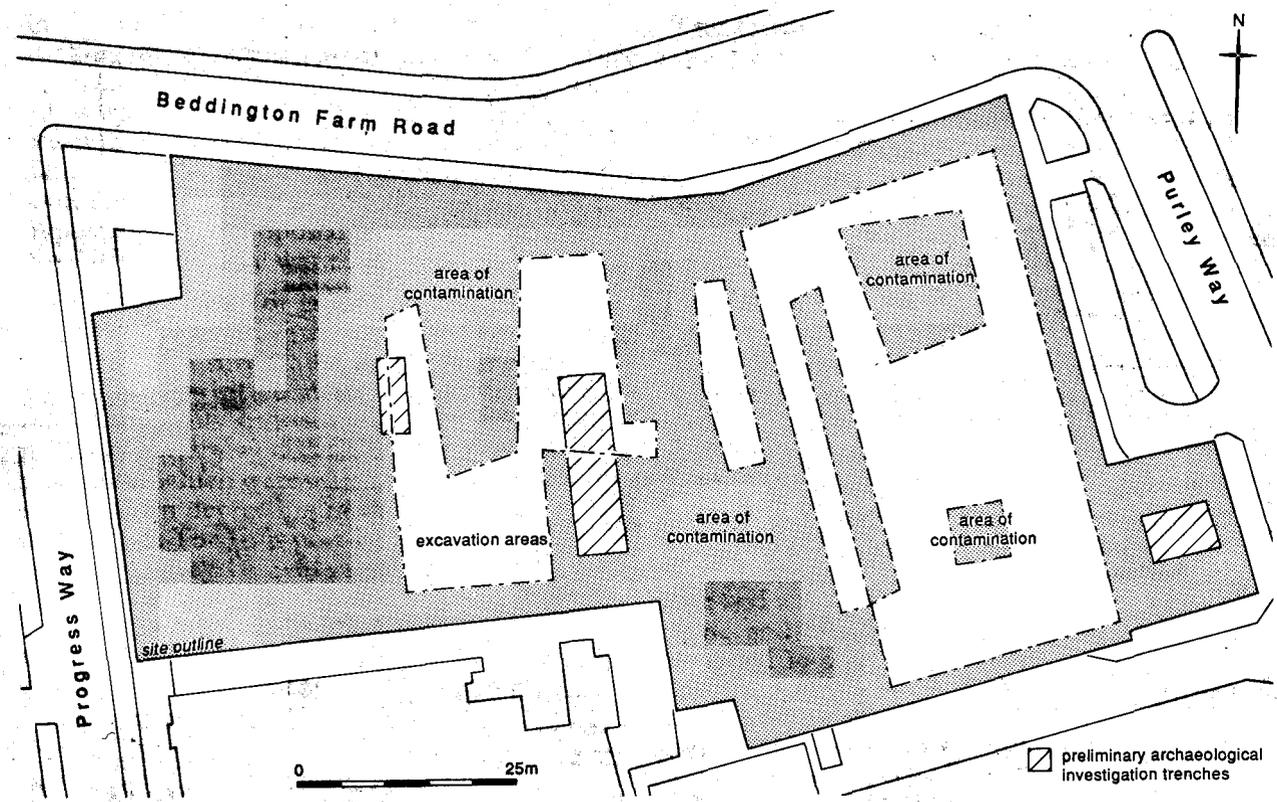


Fig. 2: site outline and archaeological trenches.

are thought to be prehistoric in date. Their irregular shape and size suggests that they were the products of the grubbing out of trees or tree-stumps, and may be interpreted as evidence for woodland clearance in advance of farming.

### The archaeological investigation

At the site of 14 Progress Way and 222 Purley Way the initial archaeological investigation consisted of three trenches. Two were excavated inside the factory building and the third was situated outside facing on to the Purley Way (Fig. 2). The work revealed a large, prehistoric feature interpreted as a cooking pit, and a prehistoric ditch leading towards the Purley Way.

### Cooking pit

The pit was oval-shaped, approximately 3.0m by 2.8m (9 feet 10 inches by 9 feet 2 inches) in plan, and was cut into "natural" gravels. It was least 0.6m (2 feet) deep, but had been truncated by construction work for the former factory: its stratigraphic relationship to other archaeological features is therefore unknown.

The pit had been lined at the sides and base with brown London Clay between 0.3m (1 foot) and 1.0m (3 feet 3 inches) thick, perhaps indicating that the pit had been intended to contain water. It had been filled with burnt flint fragments and small amounts of charcoal. Analysis of the wood yielded a C14 date calibrated to 2490-2050 BC (Beta 68582, 3860 ± 70 BP uncal, 1 standard deviation), correlating with the late Neolithic period. There was a thick 'slurry' of very fine, fragmented burnt flint at the bottom of the pit which was thought to be a 'silt', as further evidence that the pit had contained water.

The pit has been interpreted as a cooking pit, which had been partly filled with water to be heated by the introduction of hot flints, allowing food to be boiled or steamed. There is circumstantial evidence for to support this interpretation in the form of a broken 'backed blade' found within the pit. Such tools are normally associated with chopping or butchery, and microwear analysis of this example indicates that it had been for cutting up meat. The absence of any animal bone in the pit may be

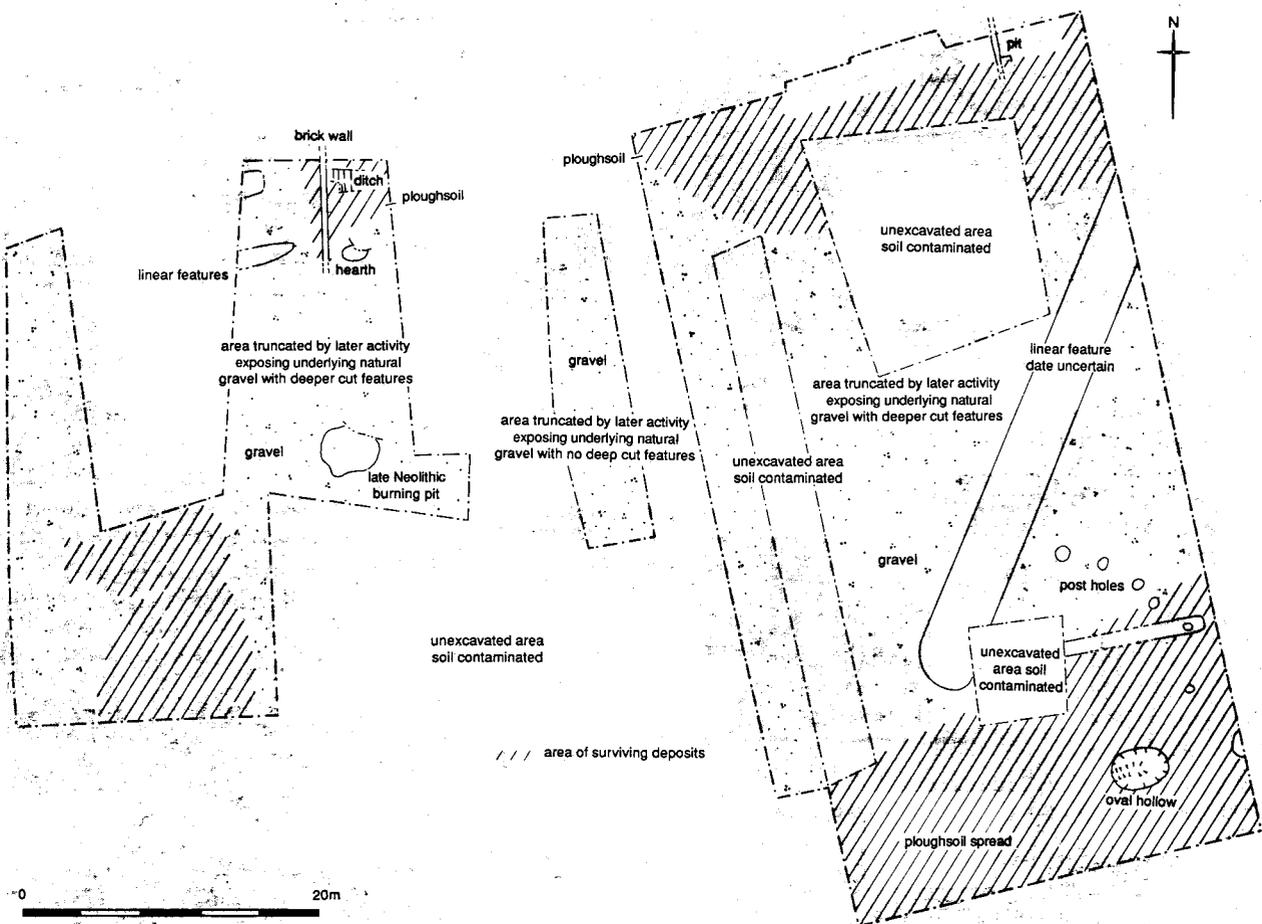


Fig. 3: plan showing the principle features discussed in the text.

explained by the generally poor preservation of bone on the site, or by the possibility that cooked meat was removed from the immediate vicinity of the pit and eaten elsewhere. It should be noticed that although similar features are normally interpreted as cooking pits, other hypotheses have been put forward<sup>6</sup>.

It appeared that the burnt flint had not been removed from the pit following its final use. No evidence such as a spread or mound of burnt flint was found to suggest how long the pit had been in use. Had such evidence existed it would have been unlikely to survive the extensive modern truncation of this area.

### The archaeological excavation

On the basis of this discovery further archaeologi-

cal work was carried out over a larger area of the site.

After the factory building had been demolished, work began as a series of 3m wide trial trenches covering 30% of the site, the layout being constrained by modern truncation and localised areas where there were high levels of toxic chemical contamination. The trenches were excavated by machine to depths ranging from about 0.10m to 0.20m (4 to 8 inches), exposing the "natural" gravels directly underlying the recent demolition debris. The archaeological evidence survived as isolated early soil horizons, truncated ditches, pits and post holes, from which prehistoric pottery fragments, flint artefacts and burnt flint fragments were recovered.

6. J Bowsher, 1991 'A Burnt Mound at Phoenix Wharf, South London A Preliminary Report' in M. A. Hodder and L. H. Barfield (eds) *Burnt Mounds & Hot Stone Technology*. Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, 11-19.

In the north-west portion of the site, close to the cooking pit, was a small pit or hollow. This feature contained burnt flint fragments in the upper fill, but was not lined. Its function is not clear, but it is possible that it was a hearth used for heating the flint, although its distance from the cooking pit — some 12m (39 feet) — may be too great to permit this hypothesis to be proposed with much conviction. No dating evidence was recovered.

Further evidence for late Neolithic activity was found at the south-eastern end of the site in the form of a dark silty gravel, possibly the remains of a ploughsoil, which contained late Neolithic pottery, flint tools and waste flakes. Further fragments of pottery were recovered from one of four post-holes which were sealed by the silty gravel, as were a worn depression in the underlying gravel and a ditch. The four post-holes were arranged in an arc and may be evidence for some kind of a structure, although the absence of any other posts must cast some doubt on this interpretation, or at least suggest that any such structure was of an insubstantial nature, for example a windbreak.

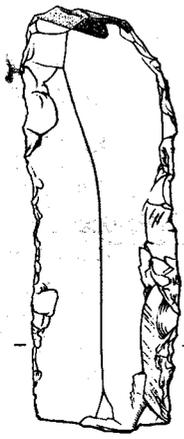
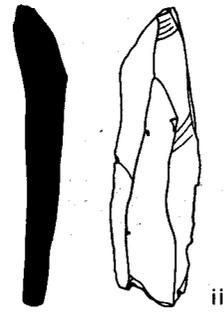
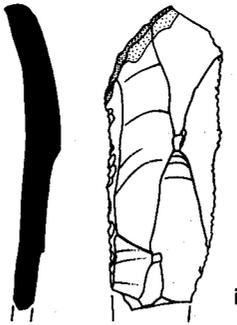
## The finds

During the excavation 31 sherds of flint-tempered pottery were recovered. Two fabrics were present. The first was very coarse, highly oxidised and with large, angular inclusions. The decorated rim sherds were identified as the Mortlake variety of Peterborough Ware, a pottery type which is associated with late Neolithic domestic occupation. The second fabric was darker, with fine, better-graded flint inclusions: there were no decorated pieces. This fabric is probably of late Bronze Age date.

There was a total of 1356 worked flint artefacts, of which approximately 72% (975) came from a single deposit. This deposit had a total area of  $\approx 434$  square metres (4672 square feet), of which 50 square metres (538 square feet) were carefully excavated in 1m (3 feet 3 inches) squares by 50mm (2 inch) spits. Of the sub-total of 975 flint artefacts, 830 were recovered from the uppermost 50mm (2 inches) of this area and were found in association with late Neolithic and late Bronze Age pottery. The flints included 19 scrapers, and late Neolithic activity was suggested by the presence of a diagnostic tool



Fig. 4: photograph showing excavation procedure.



0 50mm

Fig. 5: flint flake artefacts: (i) double sided serrate, (ii) dihedral burin, (iii) tranchet arrowhead, (iv) backed blade.

assemblage of 2 tranchet arrow heads and a double-sided serrate from the deposit [9], and the backed blade from the cooking pit. No pattern in the horizontal distribution of these artefacts was observed.

The raw material from which the flints were struck was mainly of local derivation including gravel cobbles occurring naturally on the site. The bulk of the struck flintwork was in cherty mottled grey-black North Downs flint. There were also a few 'Bullhead Bed' flint flakes with distinctive greenish glauconite cortex. The number of tool types and unfinished cores was low, possibly due to the paucity of good raw material in the geological layers on the site. Apart from the later prehistoric material, one possibly mesolithic dihedral burin was found within the lower silts of deposit [9].

### The environmental evidence

Large bulk samples from a number of excavated contexts across the site, supplemented by hand-recovery of bone during excavation, have produced a modest collection of biological remains which shed some light on certain aspects of the economies of the societies which used the site. Most sampled contexts were ditches, hollows and pits. The identified material has been linked to human activity because of the presence of domesticates and the presence of charred remains, unlikely to be generated by totally natural processes.

It is unclear whether the remains were deposited as rubbish after use and burnt elsewhere, or were generated at the site and represent primary deposition. Domestic and wild plant use is evident from the discovery of wheat, plum, hazelnut and parenchyma. The presence of cereal and hazelnut fragments in the same samples suggests that they may have been utilised in the same economic system. Domestic cattle were also present.

As outlined above, there is a strong possibility that the many of the deposits sampled represent mixed episodes and processes of dumping, suggesting that the assemblages cannot be seen to be wholly representative of either the range or the relative importance of the taxa utilised by the societies which used the site. The representation of taxa is typical for sites of the period<sup>7</sup> with remains of tougher plant components such as hazelnuts and

plum stones probably over-represented. The material does, nevertheless, suggest that both wild and domestic resources formed part of the subsistence base of the local economy.

### Conclusion

The results of the excavation at 14 Progress Way and 222 Purley Way form a valuable addition to the archaeological record of the area. Until fairly recently it was thought that the earliest prehistoric features in the area dated to the late Bronze Age and that tree clearance with the onset of farming did not happen until that period. The results of this and other nearby archaeological sites such as at Valley Park, Philips Factory and Beddington Sewage Farm now indicate that Croydon's history dates back to the late Neolithic, and these new discoveries illuminate a time when the first settlers began to clear away the woodland and create an agricultural landscape. The presence of the late Neolithic cooking pit gives a fascinating insight into these early inhabitants of Croydon.

The fact that no evidence was found for either early or middle Bronze Age activity suggests either that the site was abandoned in the late Neolithic, or possibly that early and middle Bronze Age activity did not result in the deposition of diagnostic finds. The recovery of small fragments of late Bronze Age pottery from the deposit [9] and from the ditch suggests that there was a resurgence in human activity then.

### Acknowledgements

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The illustrations were prepared by Kikar Singh (MoLAS) and the photography was undertaken by Maggie Cox (MoLAS).

7. L. Moffett, M. A. Robinson and V. Straker, 1989 'Cereals, fruits and nuts: charred plant remains from Neolithic sites in England and Wales and the Neolithic economy' in Milles, A.

& Gardener, N. (eds) *The beginnings of agriculture* BAR International Series 496.

8. *Op cit.* fn 1.