

The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at 82-90 Park Lane, Croydon, Surrey: excavation or preservation?

Martin Welch

REGULAR readers of *London Archaeologist* will be aware of the Public Inquiry on the English Heritage proposals for a mixed package of preservation and limited excavation on this relatively small surviving pocket of an Early Saxon cemetery in Croydon¹. This was the same burial ground which had been uncovered in 1893-94 at Edridge Road, immediately to the west of the present site. As one of the participants in the Public Inquiry, I would like to place this Inquiry and its outcome into context, as well as discuss some of the implications for London's archaeology into the third millennium. The Croydon case is a scandal which should never have happened. It is a demonstration of what occurs when archaeological bureaucrats are allowed to elevate policy decisions over best practice, in the process rejecting expert advice because of course they know better and continue to allege they do, even pursuing their policy after it has been demonstrated to be inadequate.

I. H. O'Sullivan '82-90 Park Lane, Croydon: a planning case-study' *London Archaeol* 7 (1996) 424-31.

like to place this Inquiry and its outcome into context, as well as discuss some of the implications for London's archaeology into the third millennium. The Croydon case is a scandal which should never have happened. It is a demonstration of what occurs when archaeological bureaucrats are allowed to elevate policy decisions over best practice, in the process rejecting expert advice because of course they know better and continue to allege they do, even pursuing their policy after it has been demonstrated to be inadequate.

Palaeoenvironmental sites

Although foreshore deposits, and the plant and animal remains they contain, can provide valuable information about the nature of the surrounding countryside, and changes in river level, tidal patterns and pollution, this source of data was largely overlooked by archaeologists until well into the 20th century. Nevertheless, there were exceptions, notably the 19th-century antiquarian F. C. J. Spurrell, who described alluvial and peat deposits at Tilbury, an important sequence which was used many years later to identify fluctuations in sea level during the prehistoric and Roman periods⁴⁷. Peat was subsequently observed at various places upstream⁴⁸, possibly including the foreshore at Syon Reach where an 'organic deposit' containing an Iron Age potsherd was found in 1955⁴⁹. However, the first palaeoenvironmental site in the study area to receive serious attention was at Chiswick Eyot, where shelly sands and gravels were sampled by M. P. McGann and J. W. Simons during a number of visits between 1956 and 1960⁵⁰ (K). They recovered eleven species of gastropod, including *Planorbis acronicus* (now extinct in the Lower Thames), eight

species of bivalve, and the remains of horse, ox, pig, sheep and deer. The deposits could not be closely dated, but the presence of domestic mammals indicated that they were post-glacial. Simons also discovered shelly sand on the Surrey shore between Kew Bridge and Twickenham Railway Bridge, and reported that beds containing freshwater mollusca had been seen at Brentford Ait. Some years later a layer of sand containing molluscan remains and mammalian bones were recorded on the Surrey shore 120m downstream from Hammersmith Bridge⁵¹ (L). However, this deposit produced objects of suspiciously late date, including pieces of 18th-century wine bottle and an early 19th-century clay pipe.

Conclusion

The desk-based assessment clearly demonstrated that the river has been the focus of a wide range of human activity since the end of the last glaciation. It was for the field survey to assess the nature and extent of the archaeological evidence left by this activity on the foreshore. The often surprising results of the survey will be discussed in part 2.

47. F C J Spurrell 'Early sites and embankments on the margins of the Thames Estuary' *Archaeol J* 42 (1885) 269-302; R J N Devoy 'Flandrian sea level changes and vegetational history of the Lower Thames Estuary' *Phil Trans Roy Soc London B* 285 (1979) 355-407.

48. G F Lawrence *op cit* fn 12, 70.

49. I Noel Hume *op cit* fn 23, 44.

50. J W Simons 'Note on the occurrence of Holocene shell deposits at Chiswick Eyot' *Lond Natur* 43 (1964) 150-3; E A and J B E Jarzembowski 'Two Thames foreshore deposits in West London' *Lond Natur* 59 (1980) 6-7.

51. E A and J B E Jarzembowski *ibid*.

My personal involvement began in September 1992, when I was invited to visit an evaluation excavation by MOLAS at this site, which had uncovered a number of intact graves and cremation burials in pottery urns clearly belonging to the Edridge Road cemetery. The 1890s finds had been looted by workmen and no grave assemblages had been recorded, let alone grave plans or even a map indicating the approximate location of the cemetery. Whereas other Saxon cemeteries discovered by workmen in the late Victorian and Edwardian period sometimes prompted amateur or museum archaeologists to mount rescue excavations, as at Ipswich and Sleaford, this had not happened at Croydon. Instead, many of the finds were purchased from the workmen and subsequently donated to museums, and the surviving finds are now housed in the British Museum and Croydon Borough's own museum collection.

The significance of the 1890's finds are well known among Anglo-Saxon specialists, for this site was one of the few burial grounds with origins in the first phase of Saxon settlement in south-east Britain, yet continues to be occupied through much of the 5th century, all of the 6th century and at least as late as the first half of the 7th century. In particular, Late Roman belt equipment of the 4th and 5th centuries and two items of Quoit Brooch Style metalwork point to a possible post-Roman military role for this community when it was first settled some ten miles south of Roman London. As a professional group, we looked forward to any opportunity to excavate part of it to modern archaeological standards, and indeed local archaeologists in the 1970s and 80s had taken every available opportunity to investigate sites in its vicinity in a search to locate it.

The English Heritage (London Division) inspector who invited me to comment on the site was really interested in whether I was prepared to confirm that the Croydon site was of national importance. Of course, the early finds of the 1890s do indeed indicate that further finds might be recovered, which would be of national importance in terms of their contribution to a research agenda, and might well increase our understanding of the process of Saxon settlement in 5th-century post-Roman Britain. Yet we could only assess whether they are of national importance *after* we have revealed them in their burial contexts by excavation and having carefully recorded them as fully as possible.

His interest in this issue was related to the fact that the Planning Policy and Guidance document

number 16 (known as PPG 16) issued by the Department of the Environment on the advice of English Heritage states that in cases involving sites of national importance, the presumption should be that the site be preserved *in situ* rather than be recorded by excavation. As he wished to have as much of this Croydon site preserved by modification of the proposed development with as limited excavation as possible, he was pleased that I had to agree that this is a site of national importance. Of course, such a policy of preservation might be appropriate for a monument such as a building, like a standing or ruined castle or church, but is it really appropriate for a buried ancient cemetery, of which all surface traces have been lost?

Further, it is more than dubious whether the claims in PPG 16 can be justified that adequate and tested preservation techniques exist. We do need test-bed sites on which to experiment with various techniques, and assess the scientific basis for their relative success and failure. Even now English Heritage is funding some relevant programmes of research, for example at Durham University, rather giving the lie to its own claim that adequate techniques are now in place. So it might be considered less than responsible, even irresponsible, to use the most historically significant sites (those of national importance) to carry out such experiments, yet permit excavation or even destruction of sites of allegedly lesser importance.

It seemed to me then and now that the case for excavation of the Croydon cemetery was overwhelmingly strong. First, the site has never been excavated by archaeologists, yet potentially it has a great deal of information to give us, and an early iron spearhead recovered from one grave fill in 1992 implied that more 5th-century graves survive among those in this sector of the cemetery. The only comparable site which has produced both late Roman 5th-century belt equipment and 5th-century Quoit Brooch Style metalwork is the cemetery and settlement complex at Mucking in Essex, overlooking the Thames estuary near Tilbury. So in a research-led agenda, and English Heritage often assure us that PPG 16 was supposed to support rather than hinder the development of research agendas, it could certainly be justified.

Second, the total area under development amounted to a reasonable archaeological sample area, from which real archaeological conclusions could be drawn following total excavation. It amounted to around 40 by 40m in the northern half, and a slightly smaller area again for the southern half of the proposed low-rise office development. The

street frontage area had to be excavated come what may, as this was where the new offices would be constructed, but in this area cellars from the end of the 19th-century housing had already removed substantial areas of the Saxon burial evidence. The best excavation potential was provided by the area behind to the west, and this was the zone which English Heritage wished to see preserved rather than excavated.

Significantly the 1992 evaluation excavation report assessed the condition of the human bone as poor. You might think that this would suggest excavation now, rather than risk further serious deterioration of the bone evidence for the population of this community, if excavation was delayed for another 50 to 100 years. Yet English Heritage officers claimed that DNA techniques in the future would allow us to gain more information than we could possibly obtain now! They refused to consider that excavation of the bone and its storage in refrigerated conditions might be a surer way of preserving organic samples for future DNA research on this material, if indeed much organic material survived in it even now.

At the Public Inquiry the environmental archaeology specialist who appeared for Croydon Borough Council was able to demonstrate the sloppiness of the approach taken by English Heritage officers to the assessment of the soil environment in which the cemetery lay. English Heritage regarded soil sampling as unnecessary, as its officers knew the soil conditions simply by looking at them. Nevertheless, our specialist took his own augured samples, which demonstrated that the soil was not slightly acidic as claimed by English Heritage, but pH neutral, and indeed had once possibly been slightly alkaline, judging from some snail shells from a possible grave fill. He was concerned that the buried soil was drying out to a worrying extent, part of a long-term process stretching back over a century or so, associated with the lowering of the water table. Sealing the car park area to be preserved under a weatherproof surface would only accelerate the drying-out process, which over time would remove what organic content the human bone in the cemetery currently possessed.

These points of scientific concern clearly weighed heavily with the Public Inquiry Inspector, but unfortunately the onus is on the objectors, i.e. Croydon Borough Council in this case, to prove that the English Heritage preservation scheme would cause measurable damage to the human bone and other grave contents. As English Heritage had not permitted MOLAS to lift any human

bone in 1992, and it was not examined by a bone specialist during the excavation, no one could comment on what was the current condition of the bone, let alone assess the extent to which the bone would deteriorate over a set period of time if sealed under the proposed car park. In legal terms English Heritage and the developers won this argument, but they did so by default and not by a demonstration of professional competence.

Other areas of concern over the English Heritage scheme concerned the plan to machine off the topsoil cover over the buried cemetery deposits and protect the surface with steel decking while building work was in progress. We were assured that this would be sufficient to spread the load of machinery and avoid crushing artefacts in the graves below, because this technique had been used on a pipeline in the USA, and native American Indian artefacts of potsherds and stone tools had survived the process intact. English Heritage did not share the concern expressed among others by Mrs. Leslie Webster of the British Museum that the wider range of artefacts to be expected in the Croydon graves are much more fragile and prone to damage. We were promised that an archaeologist would be present on the site throughout the construction phase, but promises that sound fine at a Public Inquiry are difficult to meet in practice. In particular, though English Heritage promised that soil monitors would be buried in the site with meters that could be read above ground, it was difficult to establish how often these would be read, for how many years the monitoring process would be maintained, and what action would be taken if monitoring revealed a serious deterioration. The impression left was that these measures were sops to deflect criticism of the development scheme, rather than serious proposals to protect the archaeology on the site.

The pity of all this is that the archaeologists objecting to the English Heritage scheme did offer the developer a deal by which a full excavation and publication of the Croydon site would have been funded, giving the developer an archaeology-free site. This option would have cost the developer significantly less than it has actually had to spend to fund its appeal case at a Public Inquiry, as well as the development and partial excavation of the site. If the developer had been prepared to donate at least £80,000 (and preferably around £100,000), a full excavation with a competent mixed professional and amateur team could have been mounted. Thanks to Mrs. Webster, the British Museum was prepared to take on most of the post-excavation

costs, and grants could have been obtained to cover the rest. In other words, the developer could have had a half-price deal, paying only for the excavation itself and getting the post-excavation programme and the consequent publication at no cost.

In the event, the developer was not prepared to negotiate seriously on this issue, offering no more than £30,000, which was the cost of the additional engineering works required to carry out the English Heritage preservation scheme in the rear car park areas. They had not yet costed the archaeological excavation of the front part of the site, and refused to offer what they would have to spend on this aspect as a contribution towards the full excavation costs. It seems now that the developer will have to pay MOLAS at least £80,000 to have the front areas excavated and for the associated post-excavation costs, plus £30,000 for the preservation scheme additional works, and, it is estimated, over £100,000 for its legal costs at the Public Inquiry. The developer company was expecting the Inquiry Inspector to award costs to it, but in the event he refused to do so, ruling that the councillors of Croydon's Planning Committee had acted reasonably in listening to the objections to the English Heritage scheme, and deferring the granting of planning permission.

Here I must pay tribute to the role of the Standing Conference on London Archaeology (SCOLA), and its efforts to knock sense into English Heritage and the developer over Croydon. Of course, I am also grateful to many others, among them local archaeologist members of the Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society, Mrs. Webster of the British Museum, and indeed all my other colleagues in the field of Early Anglo-Saxon archaeology, who supported in writing the case I made for full excavation of this Croydon site. Members of the SCOLA Committee, particularly the representatives of the Surrey Archaeological Society prompted by the Croydon Society's officers, already had their own doubts about the English Heritage proposal. SCOLA then referred the case to its panel of experts, whose responses were all in favour of full excavation. As a result SCOLA next commissioned me to prepare a Research Design making the full case for excavation, submitted in January 1994, though unfortunately it did not influence English Heritage or the developer. English Heritage acknowledged that there was a research case for excavation, but argued that it came second to its duty to ensure the preservation of as much of this site as possible for the future under the advice of PPG 16. Taken together with many other submissions from individuals and organisa-

tions, however, it did persuade the elected councillors of Croydon to overturn the recommendations of its Planning officers and investigate the possibility of a voluntary agreement for a full excavation over the summer and early autumn of 1994, which was negated by the outcome of the Public Inquiry in the summer of 1995.

The problem that underlies this sorry tale is that English Heritage has a dual role in London. On the one hand its London Division is the official archaeological advisor to the London Boroughs' planning services, while on the other side it is a national organisation carrying out Government policy on behalf of the Department of the Environment. These two roles are not really compatible within a single organisation. SCOLA was created to monitor what happened to London's archaeology when the Museum of London lost its 'curator' role and English Heritage took over this responsibility. The need for SCOLA was amply demonstrated at Croydon. I would argue that until the London Boroughs are prepared to create their own independent archaeological advice service, it will remain difficult if not impossible for English Heritage to separate adequately its two roles in London. English Heritage controls the national purse strings and is not adverse to using its powers of patronage for its own ends. Clearly London needs its own county archaeologist, and preferably one who is not over-compliant under English Heritage pressure.

Now I am fully aware that the demise of the GLC has seen Government departments and agencies take over responsibility for a wide range of planning issues in London, and that the current English Heritage role fits that approach to addressing London-wide issues, though it is an approach which has not been problem-free. If the next General Election sees a new government, then changes in the administration of London are likely to follow sooner or later. In the meantime, a scandal, such as the widely-reported mishandling by English Heritage's London Division of the planning issues on the Baltic Exchange site in the City of London, provides an indicator that the Croydon Anglo-Saxon cemetery scenario might recur in the near future. However much one might wish to think that English Heritage would learn from its mistakes, it appears that English Heritage does not regard its conduct in the case of Croydon as anything other than correct. If that is so, then the only answer is to take away its role as London's county archaeologist and create a truly independent service funded by and answerable to the London Boroughs and their elected representatives.