

Perry Oaks -- a history of inhabitation

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Introduction

OVER A period of twelve months from November 1998, a team of archaeologists from Framework Archaeology undertook the excavation of a 21 ha site at Perry Oaks Sludge Works in west London (Fig. 1). The work was carried out at the request of Thames Water Utilities Limited, who own the site, and with the support of BAA plc.

The original research design¹, drawn up by Gill Andrews and John Barrett for BAA plc, proposed that the project should aim to move beyond the recovery and description of archaeological remains and instead should attempt to create an understanding of the history of human inhabitation of

the landscape and to develop this into a site narrative during the course of the excavation programme. The theoretical and practical implications of this approach have been discussed in a recent article published in *Antiquity*².

The building of such a narrative requires the constant feedback of information as excavation progresses in order to allow new interpretations to be formulated and challenged. In order to do this, Framework Archaeology has developed an integrated database and GIS system, which allows site staff access to up to date stratigraphic, artefact and environmental information during the course of excavation.

The first part of the history, the transformation of the hunter-gatherer landscape into a landscape dominated by the monumental architecture of the Neolithic, is described below. It draws on the results of the 1998/1999 excavations at Perry Oaks (site code: WPR98)³, two smaller areas of excavation to the north (site code: GAI99)⁴ and to the south-east (site code: GAA00)⁵, and an excavation carried out by MoLAS in 1996 (site code: POK96)⁶. The further history of the development of the landscape, from the Bronze Age through to the Roman period, will be described in a future *London Archaeologist*.

The transformation of hunter-gatherer landscapes (Fig. 2)

Around 6600 BC, people gathered by a stream channel, and left behind a series of pits filled with burnt flint. It may be that these are all that remain

1. BAA 1998 *Heathrow Terminals Archaeological Strategy. Written Scheme of Investigation.*
2. G. Andrews, J. Barrett, J. S. C. Lewis 'Interpretation not record: the practice of archaeology' *Antiquity* 74 (2000) 525-30.
3. Framework Archaeology *Perry Oaks Sludge Works: Project Design Update Note 2* (2000a).
4. Framework Archaeology *Grass Area 6c, Heathrow Airport: Project Design Update Note 1* (2000b).
5. Framework Archaeology *Grass Area 21, Heathrow Airport: Project Design Update Note 1* (2000c).
6. G. Andrews, J. Barrett and J. S. C. Lewis *Perry Oaks Rescue Excavations: Post Excavation Assessment Report* (1998) BAA/TWUL/MoLAS.

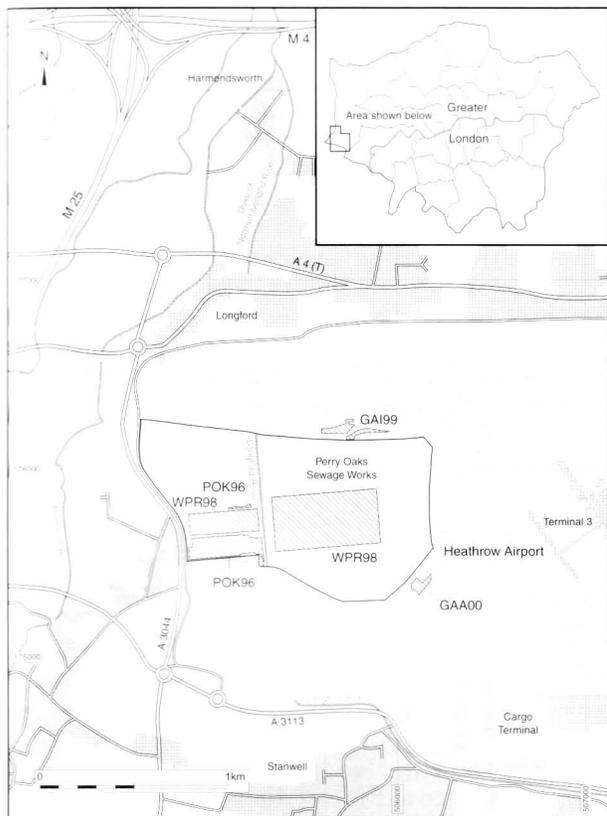


Fig. 1: site location

of a cooking midden or low mound, or possibly the bases of burnt post settings. The pits occupy a classic hunter-gatherer location, next to a stream, and on the margins of the Heathrow terrace where it meets the Colne floodplain. No other remains dating to the Mesolithic were recovered from the site, and this mirrors a pattern that has been observed generally in west London. That is, that during the later Mesolithic, human activity which left archaeological traces, whether kill sites, temporary campsites, or these pits, was confined to the margins of the floodplain and gravel terrace. These activities were thus located on the boundary between different geological and vegetational zones. Over many millennia the boundary zone, together with the floodplain and the Heathrow terrace, must have acquired a cultural and social significance beyond merely providing different resources. For instance the memory of the use of the Colne floodplain many centuries before (prior to inundation and peat formation) will have remained and so the boundary zone marked the transition from the ancestral past of the floodplain to the descendants' future on the gravel terrace. The Perry Oaks burnt pits may therefore represent a communal meeting place where feasting and ceremonies took place on a regular cycle.

Communities in the earlier Neolithic appear to have been more active on the Heathrow terrace than during the preceding millennia. In addition to more general occupation of the terrace, monuments were constructed and acted as foci for ceremonial and ritual activities. To the south, a double row of off-set timber posts seems to have been associated with ceremonies that produced burnt flint which survives as residual material in later ditches. In Bed B, ceremonies associated with a horseshoe-shaped enclosure also deposited a finds assemblage dominated by burnt flint with no pottery. Further to the south, in Burrows Hill, a possible ring ditch has been recorded although this produced no finds at all⁷.

In broad terms, the finds assemblages from these monuments are very similar in composition to those from the Mesolithic pits, but are in clear contrast to those associated with the occupation of the wider landscape. The pattern is one of movement and activity across the entire landscape of the terrace resulting in the deposition of pottery and struck flint, as well as burnt flint, in tree throws and as material subsequently incorporated into later deposits. People do not seem to have

carried out any activities that left material residues on the floodplain to the west of the now largely silted-up stream channel. The progression from valley floor to terrace that started in the Mesolithic was accelerating.

It is thus possible to see the monuments as a formalisation of practices which had been in existence for several millennia. As has been argued, many of these ceremonies occurred along the transition between floodplain and terrace, and were probably linked by ceremonial processions that visited different locations along the route during different seasons. As time progressed, new locations and rituals were added, whilst others were merely visited but not re-sanctified, or may have faded from memory. The rituals and ceremonies had inevitably changed with time and with changes in the subsistence economy. It is thus unsurprising that the ceremonial practices required a modification of the landscape and a new monumental architecture to reflect these changes.

Cursus landscape

The modification of the landscape and the incorporation of new architectural elements continued into the later Neolithic with the construction of the Stanwell cursus and possibly the horseshoe-shaped enclosure. Analysis of the pollen data from the cursus ditches gives the impression of a very open landscape in the locality – while trees were present, they were poorly represented when compared with the herbaceous taxa. Ferns such as *Polypodium* (polypody fern) and monolete *Pteropsida* (undifferentiated ferns) were quite well represented, and these may have been growing in association with the trees. *Pteridium* (bracken) may also have been growing with stands of trees, but this fern is confined to dry, acidic soils where it can compete well on open ground; it is often an invader of dry pastures. The area certainly seems to have been dominated by weedy grassland and open, broken soils and these may have been created and kept patent through active management associated with stock rearing. Cereal pollen grains were also found and some of the ruderal weeds such as *Artemisia* (mugwort), *Chenopodiaceae* (goosefoot), *Rumex* (docks), and others could have been growing where soils were opened up for cereal cultivation.

The horseshoe-shaped enclosure was situated on a natural rise in the underlying gravel which would have given the monument prominence in this open landscape. The monument would have been clearly visible across the floodplain, though less visible from the terrace to the east due to the break in slope

7. BAA/902 *Heathrow Terminal 5: Archaeological Evaluation Report*. MoLAS (1994).

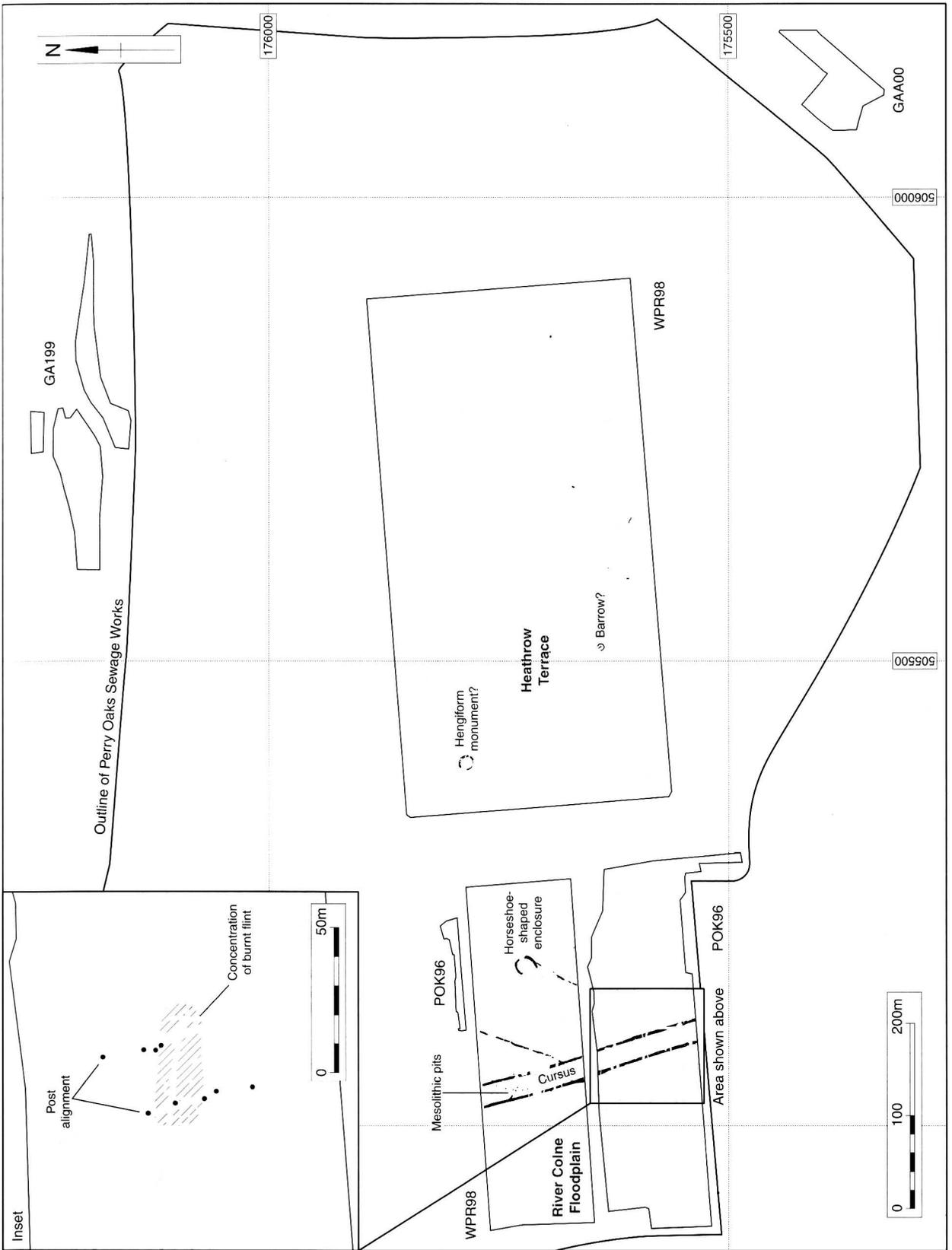


Fig. 2: site plan

at the eastern end of Bed B. The enclosure ditch probably had an internal bank, separating the outside world from the ceremonies carried out inside. However, the open south-western side of the enclosure was aligned on the double timber alignment described above, suggesting that ceremonies at the two monuments were linked, both visually and possibly also by procession. Modification of the south-western entrance of the enclosure may be related to this. However, the major architectural addition to the landscape during the later Neolithic was the construction of the *cursus*.

Unlike most other *cursus* monuments, the Stanwell *cursus* consisted of a central mound and two flanking quarry ditches. It is estimated that the *cursus* bank would have been 4m wide at the base and 1.6m high, perhaps higher if the mound had a turf revetment, and thus it would have formed a very significant feature in this largely flat landscape. It is possible that the mound was not continuous but consisted of two separate mounds -- the profiles of the quarry ditches suggest that the two mounds dipped lower and joined at the boundary between POK96 and WPR98. Apart from this change in the ditch profiles, no other evidence for segmented ditch construction exists although this may be due to regular cleaning of the ditches rather than reflecting the original construction techniques used.

The monument seems to have fulfilled several important roles in the lives of later Neolithic communities. First, the *cursus* appears to link together earlier monuments and important locations in the landscape, including the Mesolithic pit cluster, the possible ring ditch at Burrows Hill and the double alignment of timber posts, which the *cursus* ditches followed exactly. The *cursus* therefore seems to represent a formalisation of the processional route through a landscape already rich in history and meaning. As such, the central bank would have provided an elevated causeway, which allowed anyone processing along its length to see and be seen by those in the surrounding landscape. Second, the composition of the *cursus* bank would have reflected changes in the underlying geology and thus emphasised the geological and vegetational changes in the landscape. Third, the *cursus* acted as a physical and visual barrier between the floodplain of the Colne Valley to the west and the flat gravel terrace of what was later Hounslow Heath to the east. When viewed from the west, anyone on top of the *cursus* bank would have appeared to be

walking along the skyline, whilst the bank itself precluded views to the east. The monument was thus both inclusive, in that it allowed people on the top of the bank to see and be seen, particularly from the Colne floodplain, but also exclusive, in that it divided the landscape by means of a line of horizon. Finally, the central mound served to bury and seal the earlier locations and monuments, as if acting as a final line ruled under the history of the past 5,000 years.

Apart from one example from GAI99, there are no pits associated with either Peterborough Ware or Grooved Ware assemblages and this is in marked contrast to other sites in west London (e.g. Imperial College Sports Ground⁸). It is not clear why this should be although it might reflect the specific nature of activities (although IMC96 has both Peterborough Ware and monuments).

The various elements of this landscape seem to be united by two ditches in a zone on either side of the *cursus*, dug on a north-easterly alignment which defined a corridor from the *cursus* to the horseshoe-shaped enclosure. They were constructed in segments and were dug shortly after the primary infilling of the eastern *cursus* ditch. They are stratigraphically earlier than the Middle Bronze Age field system and may therefore date to the early Bronze Age. These ditches produced few finds except for some struck and burnt flint. Their depositional signature is comparable with that of the monuments rather than that of the broader landscape occupation or of the Middle Bronze Age field system. The two ditches could have channelled the movement of people and/or animals through the partial gap in the *cursus* bank and towards the horseshoe-shaped enclosure.

Apart from these ditches, evidence for a human presence in the landscape in this period is sparse. The ring ditch or hengiform monument in the western end of Bed C may date to this period, although it is more likely to be Iron Age in origin, and there is a small ring ditch monument in bed A which could be a small barrow with a central mound. Unfortunately, truncation and a lack of finds make this monument difficult to interpret. This lack of material accords with the general pattern seen throughout west London, although a few abraded fragments of pottery (possible beaker and collared urn) residing in later features, together with several unstratified barbed and tanged arrowheads, show that people were present and moving through a landscape dominated by the

8. *Imperial College Sports Ground, Sipson Lane, Harlington: Archaeological Excavation Interim Assessment Report: Phases 1-4 and 5(N)* Wessex Archaeology (2000).

ritual locations and monuments of the previous millennia.

In summary, the hunter-gatherer landscape is transformed during the Neolithic into a monumental landscape. This was not an abrupt transformation, but occurred more gradually as part of the process of constructing the Neolithic itself. Underlying the process was a complex view of the world originating in the Mesolithic period, which involved meeting at special locations and processing through the landscape, in addition to subsisting within it. These traditions and practices changed only slowly over two millennia during the Neolithic, as people's view of the world and their place within it changed. These changes demanded a different, more formalised architecture within which to practise the ceremonies. The dominant feature of this landscape was the *curcus*, which linked and unified the ritual locations of the past while at the same time marking an end to that past.

By the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age, the monuments can be seen as ceremonial and sacred struc-

tures in their own right, but they also served to define the landscape as a large monument within which people worshipped and lived.

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An apology

WE APOLOGISE to readers and to all concerned with the article 'Across the Saxon town: three new sites in *Lundenwic*', which was published in the

previous issue. For reasons which we do not understand, the illustrations as printed were not of the same quality as those submitted to us. In particular, the map (Fig. 1) was seriously distorted, and we are therefore republishing it below.

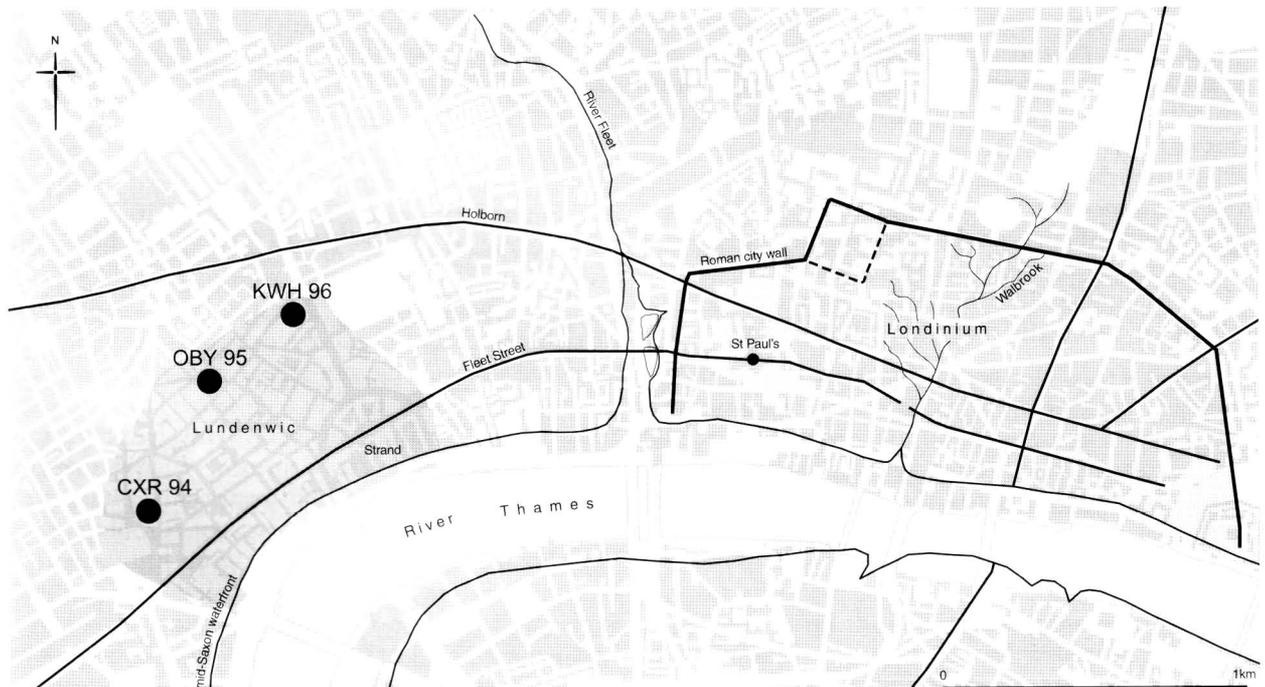


Fig. 1: map showing locations of the three sites in relation to the *Lundenwic* settlement and the walled Roman City