Riparian Barnes revisited

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Introduction

This article summarises the results of fieldwork undertaken, on behalf of Thames Water, on the south bank and foreshore of the Thames at Barnes by the Museum of London Archaeology Service.[1] The work was carried out intermittently from September 2003 to January 2004 during the construction of an outfall. The site is located opposite Chiswick Eyot and is bounded to the south-east by the towpath adjacent to the playing fields of St Paul's School (Fig. 1; NGR 522120 177888). It lies within a foreshore survey zone (FRM20) between Ferry Lane and Hammersmith Bridge explored by the Richmond Archaeological Society (RAS) and Thames Archaeological Survey (TAS) during the mid-1990s.[2] During this earlier survey the remains of a possible causeway and a tree stump (probably modern) were the only features recorded in the immediate vicinity of the site.

Archaeological background

A number of prehistoric artefacts were recovered from the Thames at Barnes during the 19th and early 20th centuries, several of which are now in the Museum of London, including two diorite axes, bone and flint 'lance-heads', a scraper, a knife and two 'picks'.[3] Other local river finds include a heavy polished flint axe, now in the British Museum, Iron Age coins and a Saxon spearhead.

Several palaeoenvironmental sites have been identified along the Thames foreshore in the Borough of Richmond,[4] two of which are located near the site. One is Chiswick Eyot, which was investigated between 1956 and 1960[5] and more recently by Keith Wilkinson as part of a comparative study to aid the interpretation of the past sedimentary environment of Bull Wharf in the City. The other site is located a short distance downstream at Barn Elms (site code FRM21), where an extensive peat bed was recorded at -1.50m OD during the survey by RAS/TAS. Calibrated radiocarbon dates suggest that the peat formed between 10360–9050 BC and 6600–6000 BC.[6]

Methodology

The project was designed to produce an archive that could be integrated with TAS records.[7] The foreshore survey area extended 100m either side of the outfall (Fig 2). Fieldwork was generally undertaken during very low tides. Initially, the foreshore was systematically walked and minor amendments and additions were made to TAS records. It was also mapped in three dimensions to accurately plot the position of features. The resulting contour plan showed the foreshore surface sloping gently down from +0.84 and +0.15m OD next to the river defences to about -1.10m OD near the low water mark. An auger survey was then undertaken in five locations along the foreshore to record and study the sequence of deposits. During the final phase of work contractor's excavations of the foreshore and adjacent river wall were closely monitored. The most important results are outlined in the following sections.

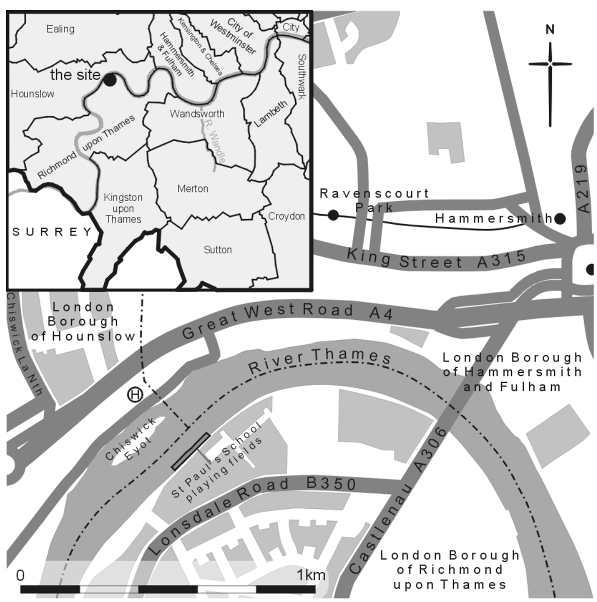

Fig. 1: site location

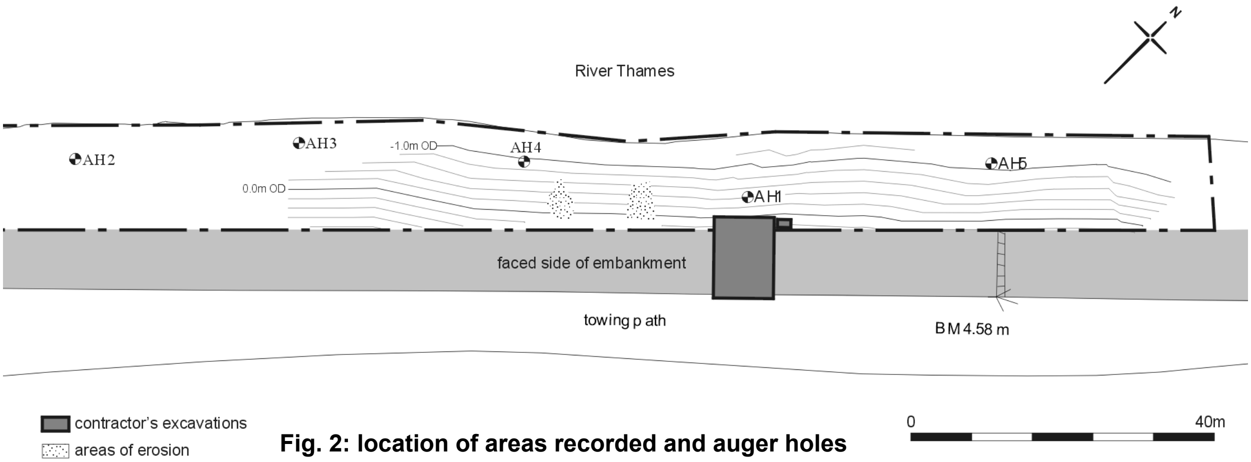

Fig. 2: location of areas recorded and auger holes

The prehistoric topography of the river

Deposits revealed in the auger cores could be broadly divided into three successive facies (Fig 3). The earliest comprised floodplain gravel, the surface of which undulated – the highest areas probably represented point bars.

Subsequently, fine-grained sediments were deposited in a shallow trough in the surface of the gravel. These comprised clay, silt and fine sand. Of particular interest was a 0.40m-thick bed of organic silt in auger hole 1 (Fig 2, AH1), the top of which lay at -1.35m OD. The deposit may have accumulated either in slack water behind a point bar or as an overbank flood deposit within a hollow. A sample from the base of the organic silt produced a radiocarbon date of 5260 ± 40 BP calibrated to Cal BC 4220 to 3980 (lab no. Beta-185439), while material from the top of the layer gave a date of 3080 ± 70 BP calibrated to Cal BC 1500 to 1130 (lab no. Beta-185440).[8] This suggests that the silt began to accumulate during the transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic, and apparently continued to do so at least until the Middle Bronze Age. Given that the period of deposition saw major changes in economy and land use it is possible, though perhaps unlikely, that human activity contributed to this process.

The latest foreshore deposits comprised loose sand and gravel extending across the entire site. Some contained fragments of brick, tile and pottery of late post-medieval or modern date.

The existing riverside embankment

A trench cut through the embankment showed that it had been founded on foreshore deposits probably of 19th-century date. The embankment mainly comprises successive dumps of pebbly clay and sandy gravel. Its solid defences are surprisingly insubstantial. The foot of the embankment is retained and protected by a shallow concrete beam. Behind this the slightly concave side of the embankment, which is faced with small granite blocks, curves gently up to the towing path.

Interestingly, the clay forming the lower part of the embankment looked as if it had come from the river, suggesting that it may have been dredged alluvium. This seems plausible as it is recorded that dredged material was dumped on the Thames foreshore at various locations, including Hammersmith and Wandsworth, and was also thrown into disused gravel pits on Barnes Common.[9] Such practices are potentially problematic for the archaeologist as there is always the danger that dumped river mud, possibly dredged many miles away, may contain artefacts that will distort distribution patterns of river finds.

Acknowledgements

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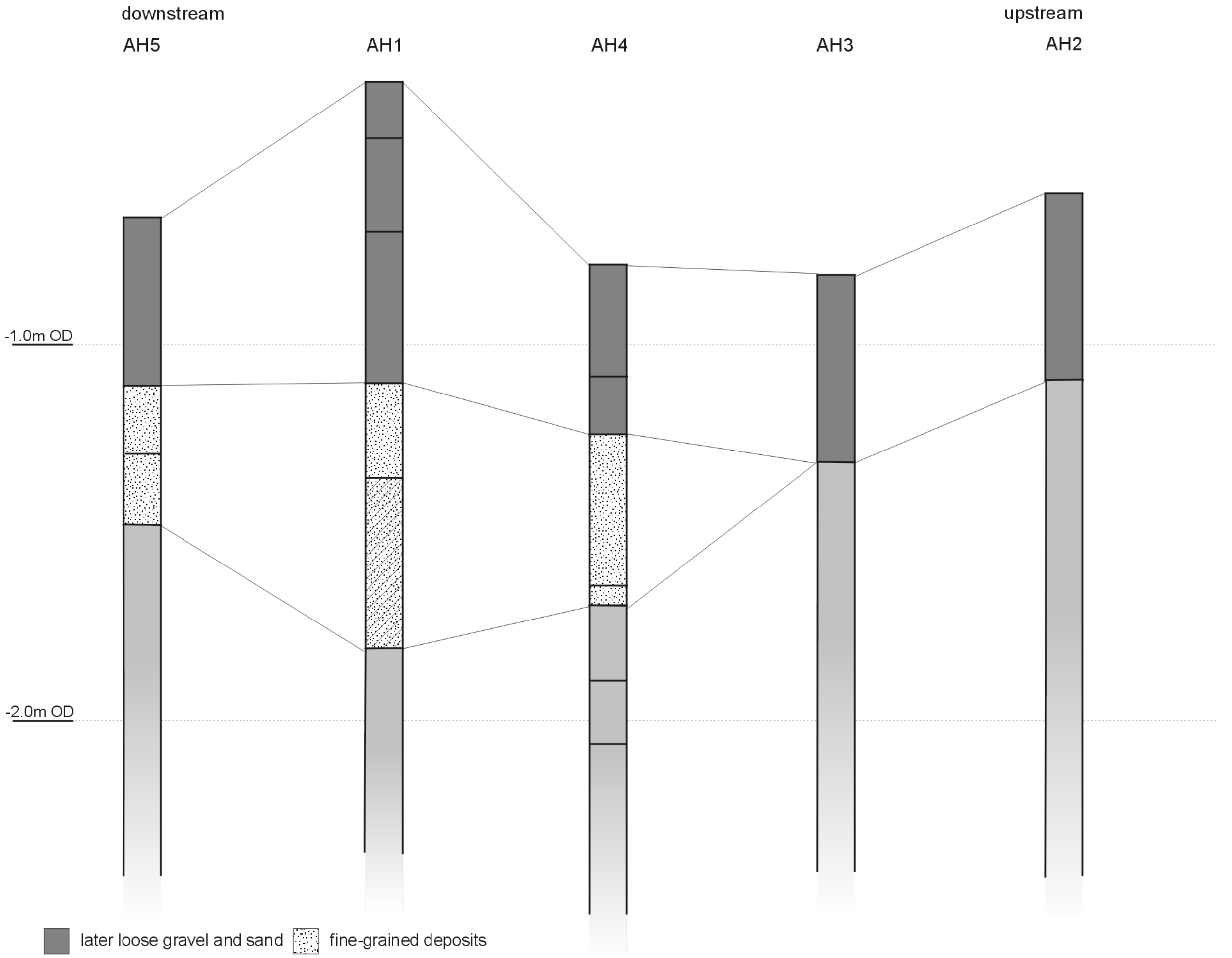

Fig. 3: schematic interpretative section across foreshore deposits

their co-operation. Andy Chopping, Nathalie Cohen, Duncan Lees, Richard Malt and the authors undertook the fieldwork. Advice given by Jane Corcoran is gratefully acknowledged. Fig. 1 is based on a plan prepared by Joe Severn. Sophie Lamb prepared the illustrations.

1. For a detailed account see R. Cowie 'Thames Water Barnes Tank Overflow, Barnes, London SW13, a report on the watching brief', unpub. MoLAS report.
2. R. Cowie and D. Eastmond 'An archaeological survey of the foreshore in the Borough of Richmond upon Thames: part 2, down by the riverside' *London Archaeol* **8**, no. 5 (1997) 115–121.
3. G. F. Lawrence 'Antiquities from the Middle Thames' *Archaeol J* **86** (1929) 69–98, 85.
4. R. Cowie and D. Eastmond 'An archaeological survey of the foreshore in the Borough of Richmond upon Thames: part 1, time and tide' *London Archaeol* **8**, no. 4 (1997) 87–93.
5. J. W. Simons 'Note on the occurrence of Holocene shell deposits at Chiswick Eyot' *London Natur* **43** (1964) 150–3; E. A. and J. B. E. Jarzembowski 'Two Thames foreshore deposits in West London' *London Natur* **59** (1980) 6–7.
6. *Op cit*. fn 2.
7. The site records may be found under the site code FRM20 in the Museum of London archive.
8. Both dates were provided by Beta Analytic Inc, Florida, calibrated at the 95% probability level with reference to M. Stuiver and J. van der Plicht 'Editorial comment' *Radiocarbon* **40.3** (1998) xii–xiii; M. Stuiver, P. J. Reimer, E. Bard, J. W. Beck, G. S. Burr, K. A. Hughen, B. Kromer, F. G. McCormac, J. van der Plicht and M. Spurk 'INTCAL98 radiocarbon age calibration, 24,000–0 cal BP' *Radiocarbon* **40.3** (1998) 1041–1083; A. S. Talma and J. C. Vogel 'A simplified approach to calibrating C14 dates' *Radiocarbon* **35.2** (1993) 317–22.
9. *Op cit* fn 3, 72.