

Fig. 1: site location

285–291 Tooley Street: further evidence for late Iron Age/early Roman settlement in Bermondsey

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Introduction

Archaeological investigations were carried out in 2001 by Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd in advance of the redevelopment of 285–291 Tooley Street, in the Bermondsey district of the London Borough of Southwark (site code: TLT 00) (Fig. 1). Three trenches, located over proposed piling concentrations, revealed late Iron Age/early Roman ditches, pits and postholes cutting a prehistoric soil horizon (Fig. 2).

Background

The site is located on the Lower Thames Valley floodplain. Bermondsey is a very low-lying area where Pleistocene floodplain gravels have been eroded by numerous meandering stream channels.

A prehistoric landscape of sand islands (eyots) separated by river channels, marshland and mudflats started to form during the early Holocene period.¹ The site is located on the eastern side of one such eyot, Horselydown, approximately 300 m to the south of the present course of the River Thames.

Recent excavations have shown that this island had been exploited from the Mesolithic to the Roman period, although this activity or occupation was possibly seasonal and was certainly intermittent. Mesolithic flints have been recovered from 283 Tooley Street,² Three Oak Lane³ and Butlers Wharf,⁴ and 53–65 Tanner Street⁵, while evidence for a more settled way of life is indicated by mid- to late Neolithic features at 53–65 Tanner Street⁶ (with a radiocarbon date

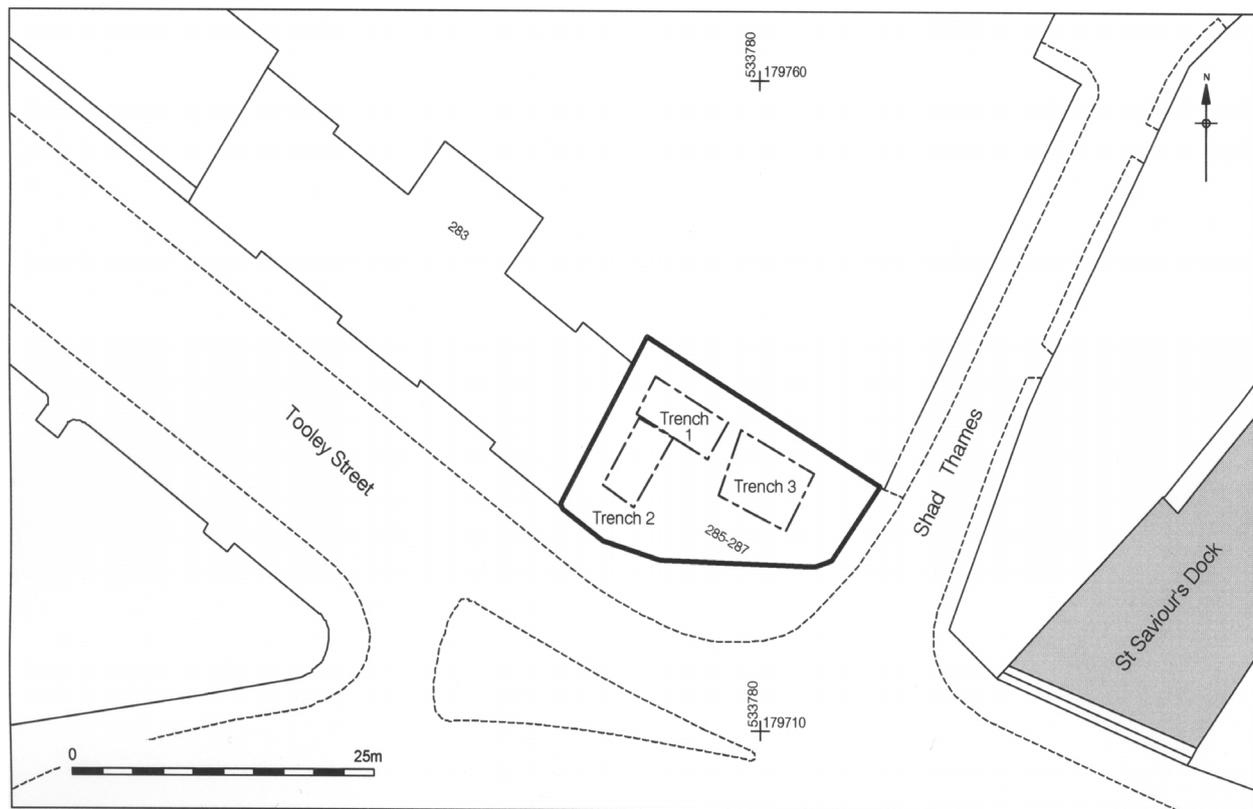


Fig. 2: site plan

range of 2910–2470 cal BC; 4140±90 BP; Beta-189167)⁶ and Three Oak Lane.⁷ Cultivation is indicated during the middle Bronze Age by ard, spade and hoe marks, recorded at Phoenix Wharf, Wolseley Street, Lafone Street⁸, Tower Bridge Road⁹ and 53–65 Tanner Street,¹⁰ as well as an ard share from Three Oak Lane¹¹, while animal management is indicated by fence lines at 1–2 Three Oak Lane¹² and 53–65 Tanner Street.¹³ During this period, settlement and cultivation on Horselydown would have been affected by periodic flooding (as indicated by a ditch and bank, possibly forming a river wall, at 53–65 Tanner Street),¹⁴ which resulted in the abandonment of the area during the late Bronze Age. To date, evidence of Iron Age activity on Horselydown has been limited, although there are indications from other sites on Tooley Street that the area was re-occupied during the latter part of this period (1st century BC).¹⁵ There is also evidence for early Romano-British activity in the vicinity, leading to the suggestion that a small late Iron Age and early Roman settlement may have existed in this area of Horselydown.¹⁶

The archaeological sequence (Fig. 3)

The earliest deposit encountered on the site was a loose, fine sand deposit, with occasional gravel inclusions (the upper facies of the eyot). This was recorded at a height of 1.15 m OD to the northwest of the site, falling to 1.09 m OD to the southeast, suggesting a gradual slope down towards the natural inlet to the Thames at St. Saviour's Dock. The presence of *Chenopodium* (fat hen) and *Quercus* (oak) in the pollen sequence from this context suggests an open woodland environment. This may have resulted in a soil formation *in situ* overlying the sand horizon, archaeologically visible as a brown sandy homogenous layer, varying in depth from 0.1 to 0.25 m. A small lithic assemblage from this soil horizon, which was largely undiagnostic, may indicate activity as early as the Mesolithic period, but included a possible knife and an awl-type piercer, probably dating from the late Neolithic or later. The pottery from this soil also indicates a wide date range from the Bronze Age to the early Roman period. The bulk of the

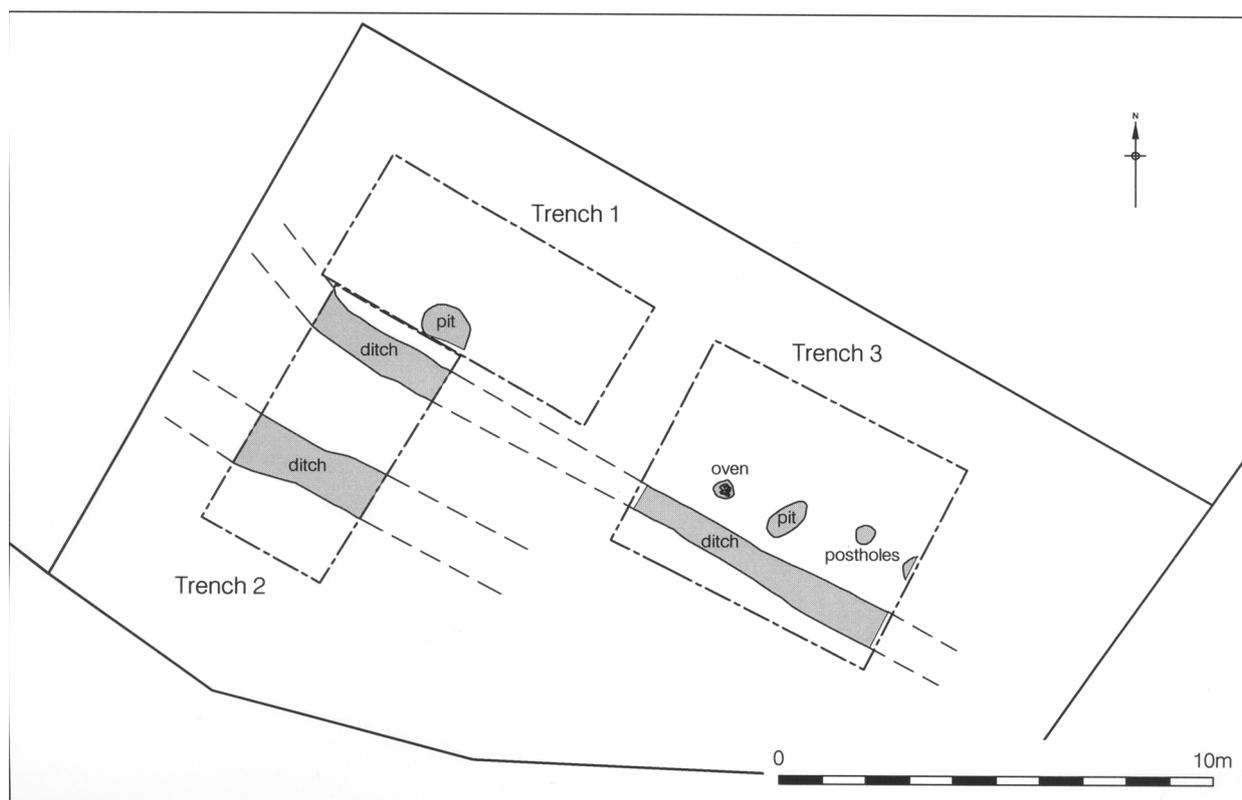


Fig. 3: late Iron Age features

material was late Iron Age in a grog-and-silt tempered fabric (Fig 4.1–2) while a few sherds could be either Late Iron Age or early Roman (e.g. Fig 4.3). The date range of these finds suggests the soil horizon formed over a relatively long period of time and continued to be reworked into the Roman period. The pollen sequence from this horizon suggests that oak woodland persisted although the presence of *Poaceae* (grass family), *Cyperaceae* (sedge family), *Thalictrum* (meadow rue), *Rumex* (docks and sorrels) and *Ranunculus* (buttercup) suggests that grassland may have dominated the environment, possibly as a result of woodland clearance. There was still no conclusive evidence for cultivation in the pollen assemblage.

The earliest direct evidence for human activity on the site was in the form of two parallel ditches, measuring from 0.76 to 1.3 m wide and 0.37 to 0.78 m in depth, cutting the soil formation. The ditches were aligned northwest-southeast, following the natural slope of the site, suggesting that they may have acted as drainage ditches. The fills of the ditches contained mainly late Iron Age

pottery, dating from the early first century AD (Fig 4.4–5), although this was accompanied by later fragments, suggesting that the ditches remained open for ten years or so after the Roman conquest. Plant macrofossil analysis from the northern ditch strongly implies that cereals were cultivated locally during this phase of activity, since significant quantities of cereal remains were recovered, such as *Hordeum* sp. (hulled barley) grains and *Triticum* sp. (wheat) grains, some of which appeared to be of a free-threshing type, while others exhibited characteristics similar to glume wheat. In contrast, however, the southern ditch provided little evidence for cultivation, and the presence of *Betula pendula* (silver birch) may imply a scrub or marshland habitat, while *Sambucus nigra* (elder) may indicate wasteland. This suggests that agricultural and domestic activity may have been limited to the north of the ditches; therefore, as well as draining the ground, the ditches may also have acted as land boundaries, possibly associated with a hedgerow.

Contemporary features, which were only found to the north of the ditches, included two postholes

and three pits, measuring between 1 and 1.2 m in diameter and *c.* 0.3m deep. The function of two of the pits was unclear but the third contained a large late Iron Age/early Roman storage jar in North Kent shell-tempered ware. The vessel was almost on its side, and the surrounding sand had been scorched, implying that it may have been used as an oven, providing very compelling evidence of settlement in the immediate vicinity. Environmental samples taken from one of the pits provided further evidence of cultivation, due to the presence of hulled barley as well as some unidentifiable cereal remains. Plant macrofossils also included *Silene latifolia* (white campion), which normally grow on riverbanks.

Later activity comprised a medieval pit (12th century?) and a 14th-century ditch, which ran northwest-southeast along the extent of the excavation, and may have been re-cut once. The orientation of the ditch, as well as the alluvial clay fill, suggests that drainage was the likely function. These features also contained a considerable quantity of residual Late Iron Age/early Roman material (Fig 4.6–7). Alluvial deposits representing episodic flooding of the area during the late medieval and early post-medieval periods sealed the sequence, and suggest a transition from a terrestrial to a semi-

aquatic environment, reflecting the ongoing marine transgression which begun during the late Roman period.¹⁷

The late Iron Age/early Roman pottery is of particular interest as it complements other pottery assemblages from Southwark,¹⁸ which also date from the period immediately before the foundation of the Roman city of *Londinium*. Detailed analysis by Malcolm Lyne forms part of the site archive; a brief catalogue of the illustrated vessels is included here (Fig. 4).

1. Tazza (Thompson Type F3-4) in black grog-and-silt tempered fabric *c.* 50 BC–AD 50;¹⁹
2. Necked jar of indeterminate type in similar fabric;
3. Bead-rim jar in black North Kent Shell-tempered ware (NKSH). Southwark Type II.A.7 form dated *c.* AD 43–80 but probably began earlier;²⁰
4. Girth-beaker (Thompson Type G4) in grog-and-silt tempered fabric *c.* AD 5–50;
5. Necked-jar (Thompson Type B1.1) in similar fabric *c.* 50 BC–AD 50;
6. Narrow-necked jar with neck cordon, in grey sandy fabric fired patchy rough buff/grey/orange with profuse iron-stained quartz filler. *c.* 0–AD 50;
7. Bead-rim storage jar in NKSH. *c.* AD 40–70.

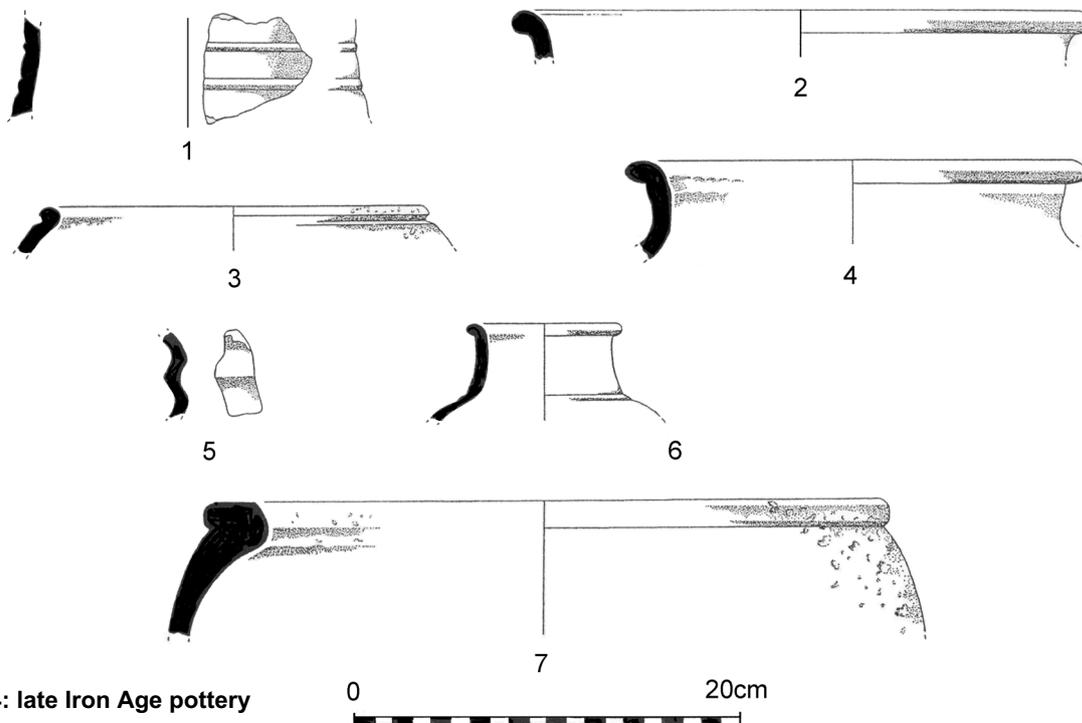


Fig. 4: late Iron Age pottery

Discussion

The site confirms earlier indications that a late Iron Age/early Roman settlement existed on the eastern edge of Horselydown, near a natural inlet to the Thames.²¹ This new evidence includes two parallel ditches, possibly field boundaries, as well as pits and postholes, and a possible oven confirming settlement within the locality. The presence of relatively large quantities of cereal grain from the features suggests that agricultural activity also occurred nearby, possibly limited to the north of the ditches.

Similar contemporary features have been recorded from the neighbouring sites at 283 and 271 Tooley Street²² and possibly from 255 Tooley Street.²³ Dating of these sites has been somewhat problematic as the relatively small finds assemblages mainly comprised pottery, much of which was produced during both the late Iron Age and early Roman periods. A penannular brooch from 271 Tooley Street was similarly dated from the 1st century BC or 1st century AD. The larger pottery assemblage recovered here from 285–291 Tooley Street (357 sherds weighing over 6 kg) gives a higher level of confidence that the area was indeed occupied during the late Iron Age with some continuity of settlement into the early years of the Roman period. There was nothing from 285–291 Tooley Street which need be later than *c.* AD 60, although sherds of Highgate Wood C sand-tempered ware from 283 Tooley Street suggest that occupation continued until after AD 70.²⁴

It has been suggested that rising river levels resulted in the abandonment of the relatively low-lying Bronze Age farmland and occupation sites on Horselydown,²⁵ which have been recorded at levels below 1 m OD (e.g. Lafone Street at 0.39 m OD²⁶ and Three Oak Lane at 0.18 m OD).²⁷ Higher river levels would have significantly reduced the size of Horselydown, resulting in late Iron Age occupation being restricted to the higher parts of the eyot recorded at these Tooley Street sites at *c.* 1.15 m OD. It is tempting to attribute

the abandonment of the Tooley Street settlement, in the second half of the 1st century AD, to rising river levels. This, however, is not the case, as the river level, which had been rising since the late Bronze Age, began to fall rapidly during the early Roman period.²⁸ It would appear that this relatively high part of Horselydown would have remained habitable throughout the later prehistoric period although the absence of finds predating the 1st century BC and post-dating the 1st century AD, indicates a relatively short period of occupation, perhaps as little as one or two generations.

It should be noted that late Iron Age/early Roman pottery has also been found on Bermondsey eyot to the south. However, on this larger island, where natural terrace gravels occur at levels as high as 2.0m OD, early and middle Iron Age pottery has also been recovered, as has Roman pottery dating from the 1st to mid 4th century AD.²⁹ Although no Iron Age or Romano-British settlement has yet been identified on Bermondsey eyot, its higher ground may have remained preferable for settlement during periods when much of the lower-lying Horselydown eyot was submerged or marginal land poorly suited to habitation.

Acknowledgements

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 6. *Ibid.*
 7. *Op. cit.* fn. 3.
 8. *Op. cit.* fn. 1, 36.
 9. C. Pickard, *pers. comm.*
 10. *Op. cit.* fn. 5.
 11. *Op. cit.* fn. 3.
 12. *Ibid.*
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 14. *Op. cit.* fn. 2, 254–5.
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 22. *Ibid.*
 23. *Op. cit.* fn. 1, 65.
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 29. L. Rayner, 'The ceramics' in Sidell *et al.*, *op. cit.* fn. 1, 88–94, 89.

Excavations and post-excavation work

London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre, Mortimer Wheeler House, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7EE. Contact Archive Manager, John Shepherd (020 7566 9317).

Croydon & District, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday. Archaeological reference collections of pottery fabrics, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Jim Davison, 8 Brentwood Road, South Croydon, CR2 0ND.

Borough of Greenwich. Cataloguing of excavated and other archaeological material, the majority from sites within the Borough. Contact Greenwich Heritage Centre, Building 41, Royal Arsenal, Woolwich, SE18 6SP (020 8854 2452).

Hammersmith & Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from the Borough. Tuesdays, 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. At Fulham Palace, Bishops's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 85 Rannoch Road, W6 9SX (020 7385 3723).

Kingston, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society (KUTAS). Processing and

cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Thursday (10 a.m.) at the North Kingston Centre, Richmond Road, Kingston upon Thames KT2 5PE. Enquiries 020 8546 5386.

Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd., Unit 54, Brockley Cross Business Centre, 96 Endwell Road, Brockley Cross, London SE4 2PD. Environmental- and finds processing, cataloguing and archiving of excavated material. Contact Finds Manager, Märit Gaimster (020 7639 9091).

Surrey, by Surrey County Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Rob Poulton, Archaeological Unit Manager, Surrey History Centre, 130 Goldsworth Road, Woking GU21 1ND (01483 594 634).

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