

Fig. 1: Deptford and major known Early to Middle Saxon sites within Greater London; the lines mark Roman roads

## Saxons in Deptford

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### Introduction

The location of mid-Saxon London to the west of the walled Roman city, centred on the modern Covent Garden, was revealed in the mid-1980s.<sup>1</sup> Known from documentary sources as *Lundenwic*, the character of this urban settlement has since been explored through numerous excavations, most recently by the Museum of London Archaeology Service and Pre-Construct Archaeology.<sup>2</sup> Outside of *Lundenwic*, far less is known of the people who inhabited the Greater London area at this time. With the exception of Early and Middle Saxon settlement recorded in Battersea and Clapham,<sup>3</sup> the only other significant site within a five-mile radius of London Bridge has remained the Anglo-Saxon barrow cemetery discovered in Greenwich Park in 1784<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> Just to the north of this site, on the Thames riverfront, Anglo-Saxon burials are also known from the site of the Old Tilt Yard of the Tudor

royal Palace.<sup>6</sup> Further to the south of London, the nearest known major Early and Middle Saxon settlements are those at Mitcham and Croydon in Surrey.<sup>7</sup>

Today the picture of Anglo-Saxon settlement is beginning to change with the many recent archaeological finds within Greater London, shown by the catalogue generated by the London Archaeological Archive and Resource Centre (LAARC). To this should be added the important discovery in 1992 of two Anglo-Saxon burials at Deptford Broadway, in the south-east London Borough of Lewisham. Together with documentary evidence and other recent archaeological discoveries in this area, they add significantly to our knowledge of Deptford's early history and, in extension, to the wider demographic and economic context of *Lundenwic*.

## The Deptford Broadway site

In 1989, major development took place behind the *Dover Castle* public house, on the northern side of Deptford Broadway. In connection with this, trial excavations were carried out by the South-East London Archaeological Unit. Subsequent work on the site by the Unit, in 1992, included the monitoring of foundation trenches and the excavation of two pipe trenches.<sup>8</sup> It was here, in the East Trench, that two inhumation burials were discovered (Fig. 2). The presence in the northernmost burial (F137) of grave goods datable to the Anglo-Saxon period, and the similar NE–SW alignment of the two burials, suggested they may be part of a hitherto unknown Anglo-Saxon cemetery.

To the west of the burials, the digging of foundation trenches had revealed few features,

and further to the west and south any cultural deposits would have been removed in the 18th and 19th centuries with the construction of deep cellars for buildings fronting onto Deptford High Street and Deptford Broadway. In 2003, further work was carried out by AOC Archaeology on a plot adjacent to the site, with a trench immediately to the south of, and partly overlapping, the South Area of the 1989 excavations and the West Trench from 1992.<sup>9</sup> Although this excavation re-located a previously recorded Roman ditch, no further burials were revealed. These findings support the initial impression, that the most likely extension of a possible cemetery would be to the north and north-east of the recorded burials. The location of burial F137 within Admiralty Close indicates that the area immediately to the east harbours significant potential for further discoveries. The

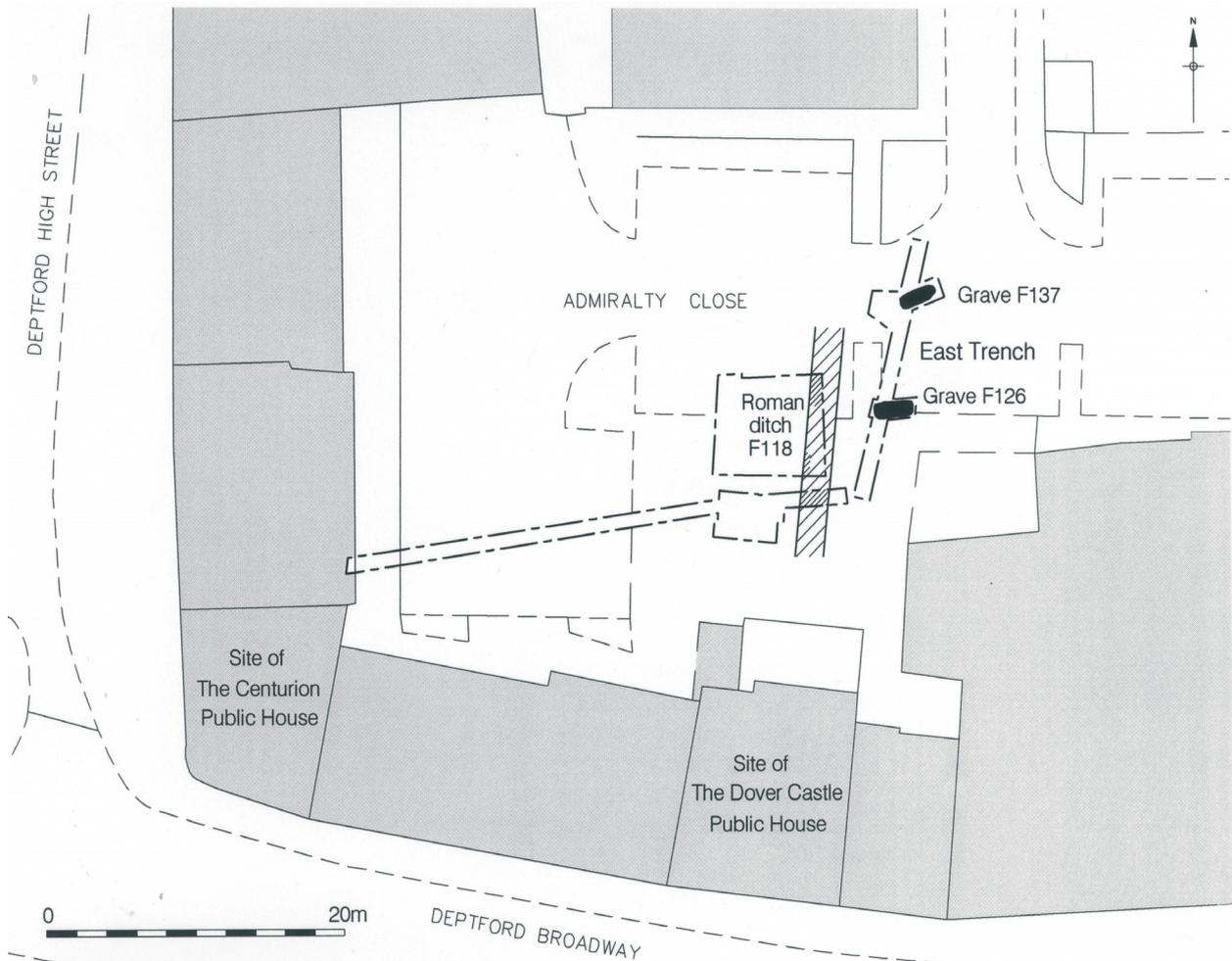


Fig. 2: site of the 1989 and 1992 excavations at Deptford Broadway

monitoring of clearance in this area in 1989 suggested many cut features survive beneath the parking and landscaped areas.<sup>10</sup>

### The archaeological finds

All finds from the 1989 and 1992 excavations were transferred to the Lewisham Local History Collections, now housed in the Local Studies Centre in Lewisham Library. In 1997, with major development underway in Deptford, the finds were re-assessed in a survey commissioned by the Creekside Renewal Project.<sup>11</sup> The survey showed that the furnished burial F137 could in fact be dated to the 7th century, and the urgent need for conservation, further analysis and publication of this important find was recognised. As a result the Borough of Lewisham, with the support of English Heritage, agreed for the grave goods to be conserved and drawn at the British Museum. Full publication of this burial is being prepared for *Medieval Archaeology*.<sup>12</sup> Awaiting the realisation of a local museum in Lewisham, it is hoped that the finds from Deptford Broadway will be transferred to the LAARC.

### Burial 137

Burial 137 was contained in a grave cut measuring 2.38m long by 1m wide, with sloping sides and with no trace of a coffin. Skeletal remains were poorly preserved, with only parts of the left arm and legs surviving.<sup>13</sup> Despite the poor organic preservation, the burial contained many grave goods, most strikingly a gilt-bronze pendant cast with animal-style interlace and set with a small garnet on gold foil (Fig. 3 and Cover). The decoration is characteristic of Style II, widely used across western Europe and south Scandinavia during the first half of the 7th century.<sup>14</sup> Among the more spectacular burials including Style II-decorated objects are those from Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk,<sup>15</sup> and the recently discovered burial at Prittlewell in Essex.<sup>16</sup> In female burials, parallels can be seen in embossed pendants, the so-called Kentish Style II bracteates.<sup>17</sup> Unlike these, however, the Deptford pendant represents the secondary use of an ornamental mount; this is obvious from the suspension-loop, which is an addition and fastened with a rivet. A similar disc is known from Caenby in Lincolnshire, and originally these

mounts may have decorated wooden caskets or bronze hanging bowls.<sup>18</sup>

The pendant was found in the chest area of the body, together with eleven colourful glass beads and a slip-knot ring of gold wire, forming a necklace or other chest decoration; a copper-alloy bracelet lay near the right knee (Fig. 3).

Conservation has revealed that pieces of iron found in the abdominal area and down towards the knees are the remnants of a chatelaine; these chains carried both practical and symbolic items, such as keys and latch-lifters, spoons, toilet-sets or amulets.<sup>19</sup> In this case, no associated objects were found. However, several iron fittings found by the woman's feet show that she was furnished with a small wooden casket. Characteristic of 7th-century female burials, and influenced by Frankish customs on the Continent, such caskets are particularly common in Kent.<sup>20</sup> Like the chatelaine, they may contain personal or symbolic belongings such as combs, amulets or jewellery;



**Fig. 3: Some of the grave goods from Burial 137: gilt-bronze Style II pendant, glass beads, gold-wire ring and copper-alloy bracelet.**  
Photo: C. Blundy, PCA



**Fig. 4: Fittings from the small wooden casket in Burial 137; the sherd of Roman glass and the two shale spindlewhorls may have been stored inside.**  
Photo: C. Blundy, PCA

frequently they contain textile equipment in the form of spindle whorls.<sup>21</sup> At Deptford Broadway, a fragmentary shale spindle whorl and a piece of Roman vessel glass were associated with the fittings. A further shale spindle whorl was found just outside the grave fill (Fig. 4). All of these objects may have been stored in the casket; sherds of both glass and Roman pottery are not unusual in Anglo-Saxon burials and are often found in so-called bag collections.<sup>22</sup>

The Deptford find does not rival the richly furnished early 7th-century burials from east Kent, some of which may contain hundreds of beads in addition to precious-metal brooches and pendants.<sup>23</sup> However, elements such as the reused mount and the precious gold-wire ring, set this burial out as unusual; slip-knot rings associated with bead necklaces were normally of copper-alloy or silver.<sup>24</sup> Nearer to home, numerous Anglo-Saxon burials are now known from the early phase of the *Lundenwic* settlement, where they may represent several cemeteries or burial-places.<sup>25</sup> The most tangible cemetery is represented by six burials, dating from the 7th –

9th centuries, revealed during excavations in Floral Street in 2000. Among the finds from this excavation was the only female burial with grave goods hitherto recorded from *Lundenwic*, including a high-class gilt copper-alloy brooch set with garnets and decorated with gold filigree.<sup>26</sup> The brooch, which dates from the 7th century, was associated with twisted silver-wire rings and three glass beads.<sup>27</sup> Further south, the Deptford burial may be compared to one of the earliest interments from the Middle Saxon cemetery at Polhill, west Kent. Here, Grave 37 included a 7th-century composite copper-alloy disc brooch, a simple copper-alloy pendant with punched-dot decoration, twelve beads and two copper-alloy wire rings.<sup>28</sup>

### Burial 126

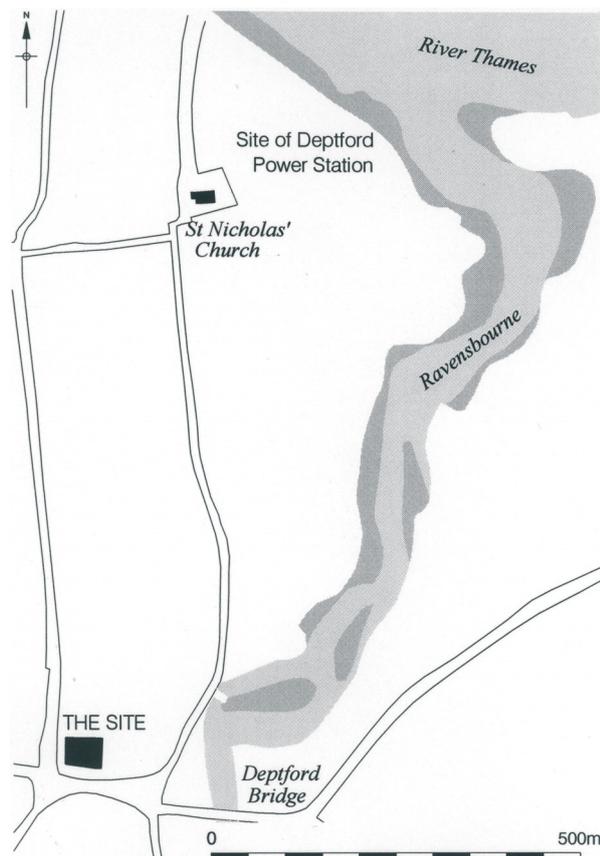
In contrast to the well-furnished Burial 137, no grave goods were recorded in the second burial F126 and skeletal remains were very poorly preserved. However, the presence of a coffin was indicated by two levels of iron nails and by the steep sides of the 2.64 by 1.25m grave cut.<sup>29</sup> In addition, three potsherds were retrieved from the grave fill. Initially thought to be Roman, recent analysis has shown at least two of the sherds to be of Early to Middle Saxon date.<sup>30</sup> The sherds are most likely to have been re-deposited at the time of the burial. Their date further supports an Anglo-Saxon date for this burial, also indicated by the similar orientation to Burial 137 and by the proximity of the two burials, situated only some 6m apart.

### Anglo-Saxon Deptford

The two burials discovered in 1992 represent the first finds from controlled archaeological excavation in Deptford, and the first tangible Anglo-Saxon finds from the Borough of Lewisham. Interestingly, a 7th-century Anglo-Saxon silver coin from Deptford is included in a list of English finds of *sceattas* from 1984, although the authors suspected the find-spot may in fact have been Thetford.<sup>31</sup> There may well be other grounds for this, as the coin belongs to the East Anglian Series R,<sup>32</sup> but the total absence of any Anglo-Saxon finds from Deptford may well have contributed to the reluctance to accept this provenance. The number of *sceattas* from London

find-spots, too, have increased dramatically in recent years, including a wide range of types.<sup>33</sup>

The place name Deptford itself is thought to derive from the Anglo-Saxon for “deep ford”; the “t” in the middle appears from the 15th century onwards.<sup>34</sup> The name refers to the crossing of the river Ravensbourne, where the earliest documented evidence of a bridge dates from around 1230.<sup>35</sup> In early documents, however, the place now known as Deptford carries a different name. In the Domesday Book, William the Conqueror’s survey of 1086, Deptford was referred to as the manor of *Grenviz* (i.e. West Greenwich) and was held by Gilbert de Magminot, bishop of Lisieux, from William’s brother Bishop Odo of Bayeux. Gilbert is said to have built a castle on his land at Deptford; the site of the castle remains unknown, but it may have lain further west on the Thames bank, near Sayes Court. Before the Conquest, *Grenviz* was held as



**Fig. 5: The two Deptford sites with Anglo-Saxon finds with Deptford Broadway to the south and the former Deptford Power Station to the north. Later medieval roads are marked**

two manors: one by Earl Harold Godwinson and the other by one Brixi Cild.<sup>36</sup>

The precise location of those two manors within Deptford is not known, but it has been suggested they may coincide with two settlement centres: Deptford Broadway in the south, and the area around St. Nicholas’ Church further north<sup>37</sup> (Fig. 5).<sup>38</sup> The earliest documentary references to St Nicholas’ Church date from the early 12th century, but the earliest fabric of the present building dates from the 14th and 15th centuries.<sup>39</sup> However, it is possible that the church was founded in the Anglo-Saxon period. In 1996, excavations at the former Deptford Power Station yielded Early to Middle Saxon pottery from an area just to the east of the church.<sup>40</sup> Not surprisingly, this site, like Deptford Broadway, is situated on gravel terraces rising from the marshy areas around the Creek and the River Thames.

In the later medieval period, certainly, there were two distinct settlements at Deptford Broadway and Deptford Strand, separated by open fields.<sup>41</sup> Here, a shift from the area around St. Nicholas Church may be associated with the construction of Gilbert de Magminot’s castle further to the west.<sup>42</sup> Late Saxon material in Deptford is yet to be recorded, but at Deptford Broadway the excavations produced a substantial sequence of pottery dating from the 11th to the 15th centuries.<sup>43</sup> Within the estate boundaries the focus of settlement may have shifted during time, making use of available resources and with changing economic roles.<sup>44</sup>

### **Settlement in the Roman period**

Proximity to Roman roads and to earlier Roman settlement is not an unusual characteristic of Early Saxon cemeteries.<sup>45</sup> At Deptford Broadway, at least, there is substantial evidence for settlement during the Roman period. Besides two possible field boundaries, pottery sherds dating from the 2nd through to the 4th centuries indicate a continuous occupation at this time.<sup>46</sup> The position of this settlement has been associated with the course of the main Roman road from Dover to *Londinium*, later known as Watling Street.<sup>47</sup> This projected route would have continued along New Cross Road towards Old Kent Road and the City of London. Alternatively, the road may have crossed the Ravensbourne

closer to the mouth of Deptford Creek; this was the route taken in 1023 when the body of St. Alfege was taken from St. Paul's Cathedral to Canterbury.<sup>48</sup>

Regardless of which of these two routes formed part of Watling Street, however, Roman settlement on Deptford Broadway is likely to be associated with a main road. Close to the site, at the junction of Deptford Broadway and Deptford High Street, Roman brick foundations and tessellated pavement were encountered during the digging of sewer trenches in 1866.<sup>49</sup> Further evidence of Roman settlement, on the south side of Deptford Broadway, may be a stone coffin dug up in Vanguard Street in 1868.<sup>50</sup> The coffin is preserved upside-down in a small enclosure at the west end of St. Paul's Church on Deptford High Street; however, no attempts have as yet been made to record the coffin or confirm its date.

## Deptford on the map

The archaeological evidence produced so far for Deptford in the Anglo-Saxon period is exciting. Viewed alongside the known burials from Greenwich, the finds show that both sides of the Creek were settled in the 7th century. The finds from Deptford correspond well with the two later known settlement centres at Deptford Broadway and Deptford Strand; it is also likely that it is this division that is reflected in the two manors of *Grenviz*, recorded in the 1086 Domesday survey. A continuous organisation of land-use may even go back to the Roman period.

Thanks to recent excavations, Anglo-Saxon Deptford is now definitely on the map. But the excavations at Deptford Broadway have also contributed to our knowledge of Deptford in later times, when this was a well-known place: it was the site of the Royal Dockyard, founded by Henry VIII, and later of the East India Company. In the 17th century the famous diarist John Evelyn resided at Sayes Court, where Peter the Great visited in 1698. Ceramics and other finds complement our knowledge, and give a broader insight into the community that inhabited Deptford in the medieval and early modern periods. It is hoped that this material will be published in the near future.

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