

Fig. 1: site location

# 'A farm frequented by rooks': archaeological evidence for Early Saxon rural settlement at Roehampton

### Giles Dawkes, with contributions from Luke Barber, Anna Doherty and Elke Raemen

#### Introduction

The site lies to the east of the A306 Roehampton Lane, Roehampton (Fig. 1) on land previously occupied by the Queen Mary's Hospital (TQ 2220 7430). It is located on the Boyn Hill gravel terrace, at around 44m AOD, and lies approximately 2km south of the Thames and 1km to the east of the Beverley Brook.

In advance of residential redevelopment, Archaeology South-East (UCL) undertook archaeological evaluations in 2007 and 2008, which led to a targeted excavation. No Saxon

features had been previously identified in Roehampton, although some of the 23 burial mounds, which were located at Tibbet's Corner until the 18th century, may have dated to the Saxon period.1 The site is known from cartographic sources to have been open land and gardens from the 18th century until the foundation of the hospital in the 19th century.

### Prehistoric and early Saxon features

The earliest feature identified was a tree throw (Figs. 2 & 3: [1010]) which contained 31 pottery sherds of Late

Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date, most derived from a semi-complete jar with a heavily-sooted exterior, indicating its probable use as a cooking vessel.

The vast majority of the dated features appear to relate to Saxon settlement, consisting of two post-built buildings, a number of pits and a curved shallow ditch. The features produced 101 mostly large and unabraded sherds of Early Saxon pottery and a spindle whorl fragment.

Two apparently contemporary postbuilt rectangular buildings were identified. The northern portion of

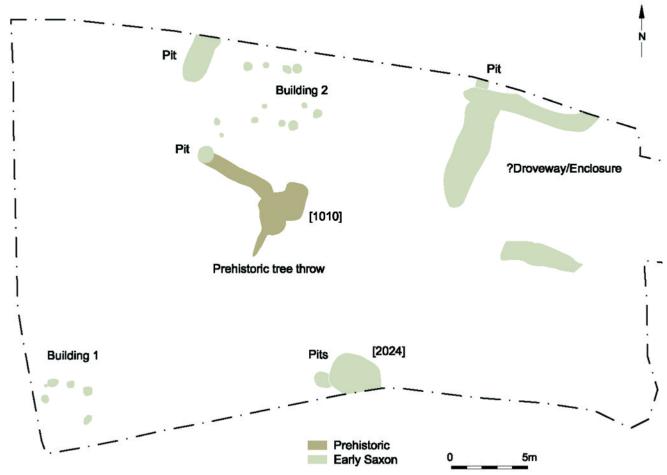


Fig. 2: site plan

Building 1 was located in the southwest corner of the site. It was aligned north-south and measured at least 5m in length and 4m wide. Six sub-circular postholes forming the rectangular northend were identified; most had irregular concave sides and concave base.

Located some 20m to the north was Building 2. It was aligned east-west, 8m in length and 4m wide, and comprised 12 postholes in two roughly parallel rows; most had near-vertical sides and concave base. No finds were recovered from the postholes and interpretation of its apparent date is based on its similarity with Building 1. The somewhat large and irregular nature of some of the postholes suggests the posts were deliberately removed rather than left to rot in situ. No floor deposits or internal features were identified.

To the east of the buildings were a series of contemporary pits and ditches. The two ditches were 8m apart and at least 10m long and may have formed an entrance to an enclosure or droveway. The pits contained domestic waste; a notably large pit [2024] had 74 sherds of Saxon pottery and a fragment of spindle whorl.

#### The Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age **Pottery**

by Anna Doherty

A single group of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age pottery was recovered from a tree throw [1010] (Table 1).

#### **Fabric series**

FL1: Sparse to moderate, moderately- to ill-sorted flint inclusions. Most are between 0.5 and 2mm, but rare examples up to 4mm are present in most sherds. The background matrix is very silty with sparse or moderate grains



Fig. 3: photo of site looking south-west (photo: ASE)

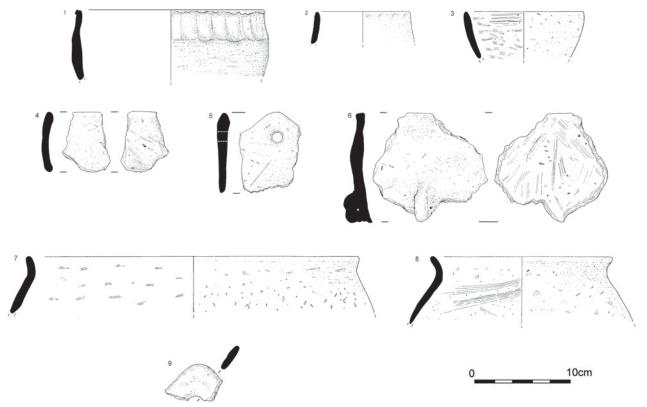


Fig. 4: prehistoric and Saxon pottery

of up to 0.1mm visible at ×20 magnification.

FL2: Sparse to moderate, very ill-sorted flint inclusions. Again, most examples are between 0.5 and 2mm but very coarse examples of up to 5-6mm are more common in this fabric than FL1 and the matrix contains less visible quartz although it is still silty. V1: A similar silty matrix to FL1, containing common, very ill-sorted voids of 0.5 to 6mm. The voids are of varying shape and although most appear to be plate-like shapes indicating leached shell, some more elongate voids may indicate the presence of organic matter.

The majority of fabrics are of a single type with moderately coarse and ill-sorted flint (FL1). This might be considered more typical of plain ware

fabric	sherd count	weight (g)
FL2	2	94
FL1	26	246
V1	4	34
AS3	1	8
total	33	382

Table I: summary of LBA/EIA fabrics in the tree throw

post-Deverel-Rimbury (PDR) assemblages (c. 1150-950 BC). These sherds also feature very silty to fine sandy matrices, a feature which is more prominent in later PDR groups. However, there were no examples of non-flint-tempered sandy wares, which are a fairly common feature of developed plain ware groups like that from Perry Oaks.2 It is uncertain whether the flint-tempered sherds are contemporary with four other sherds in a highly vesicular fabric. Many of the voids in this fabric have the characteristic plate-like shape associated with leached shell-inclusions and there are traces of calcareous material still present in the matrix. However, other voids are more elongated and may indicate the presence of burnt-out organic material. Shell-tempered fabrics are not usually a feature of PDR groups in the Thames Valley, and the presence of these sherds could be indicative of a date of deposition into the Iron Age. A single small sherd of a Saxon sandy fabric with sparse chaff (AS3) was found intrusively in this group. The vesicular fabric is not likely to be of Saxon date, but the demonstrable presence of intrusive material suggests that the integrity of the group as a sealed

contemporary unit may not be reliable.

Two diagnostic rim sherds from jars, both in the main fabric type, FL1, were recovered. The basic shape of the more complete profile, with a weak shoulder, short neck and slightly folded over rim, is very common and appears to span the PDR period (Fig. 4, no. 1). For example, similar forms can be found in some of the earliest stratigraphic units from Runnymede Bridge dating to the Late Bronze Age proper (c. 1150–950 BC).3 The surface treatment or decoration on the vessel is also of ambiguous chronology. There is a zone of very prominent vertical finger furrowing which creates a more defined neck for the vessel; light finger impressions are also visible along the rim. It is not clear that this constitutes the deliberate decoration typical of later PDR/Early Iron Age assemblages. Finger smearing was seen to be more common in stratigraphically earlier contexts at Runnymede;<sup>4</sup> however, this surface treatment usually occurs low on the body in most of these groups and appears to be less of a deliberate feature than on the Roehampton vessel. It is notable that a zone of heavy sooting is present below the finger-smeared zone, suggesting that the area below the upper part of the vessel was less

exposed to direct heat during cooking. The other vessel probably has a broadly similar shouldered profile but appears to have been slightly more finely smoothed (Fig. 4, no. 2). Again, light finger impressions are visible below the rim, but it remains ambiguous whether they are deliberate decoration or more related to the forming of the vessel.

#### The Saxon pottery

#### by Luke Barber

A total of 101 sherds (1842g) from nine contexts have been dated to this period. The unabraded nature of this assemblage is demonstrated by the high average sherd weight of 18.2g. Of the five fabrics allocated to this period, four (AS1-4) are undoubtedly closely related, judging by their overall fine sandy matrices and manufacture. The fabrics are briefly outlined below and allocated a Museum of London code where possible (Table 2).

AS1 – Mixed grits: Sparse/moderate fine/medium sand with common mixed sub-angular quartz and flint grit to 0.75mm and rare dull orange iron oxides to 0.5mm. Medium fired. Black cores, dull brown surfaces. Similar to a series of mixed gritted wares from London<sup>5</sup> dated between the 7th and mid-8th centuries AD.6 A single vessel is represented by the flat base of a colander in a post-hole of Building 1. The vessel is quite similar in both form and fabric, to a colander base from Mucking though the perforations, at 7mm diameter, are notably larger on the current vessel.7

AS2 - Chaff and fine sand: Moderate/ abundant fine sand with moderate/ abundant organic/chaff tempering. Occasionally very rare inclusions of sub-angular quartz and flint grits to 0.5mm. Low fired. Dark grey/black cores with dark grey/black to dull orange patchy surfaces. Some vessels burnished. Chaff-tempered pottery in

London (CHAF) spans the 5th to mid-8th centuries AD.

AS3 – Fine sand with sparse chaff: Closely related to AS2. Moderate/ abundant fine sand with sparse organic/chaff tempering. Low fired. Dark grey/black cores with dark grey/black to dull orange patchy surfaces. Some vessels burnished. Possibly equivalent to London fabric CHSF, dated c. 400-750 AD.8 AS4 - Fine sand: As AS3 and undoubtedly closely related, but with no notable organic/chaff inclusions. Sand tempered wares in London (SSAN) have proved difficult to source<sup>9</sup> as they show similarities with wares found in a number of SE Saxon centres. A rare fabric only represented by two sherds. AS5 – Fine sandy greyware: Moderate fine sand, wheel-turned and well-fired greyware. Grey core, dull orange margins and mid grey surfaces. Only a well-thrown base sherd is present. Although a Roman origin cannot be ruled out, it is quite possible the sherd represents a contemporary imported vessel, possibly from Northern France,10 as some of these types noted in London are very similar to Roman fabrics.11

The vast majority of the assemblage consists of chaff-tempered hand-made domestic coarse wares. Although these have been divided into two sub-groups (AS2: 84/1484g and AS3: 11/158g) they could easily have originated from the same kiln(s). The vessels are all quite crudely made with surfaces ranging from quite roughly wiped with grass to well-burnished. They are always lowfired and tend towards being reduced black/grey, though many show signs of oxidised patches, particularly on the exterior surfaces. With the exception of the burnishing, decoration is extremely rare, consisting of a thumbed indent on a body sherd and a jar shoulder with faint clumsy oblique impressed line decoration from pit [2024]. Forms,

nos. 3-9), consist of bowls and globular jars with simple rims, sometimes with pierced lugs. Some AS2 sherds had carbonised residues on their interior and the opportunity was taken to obtain two radiocarbon dates on these vessels in an attempt to refine the dating of the assemblage and for this fabric type.12 The remaining fabrics are represented by much smaller numbers of sherds. The crudely made oxidised

mainly noted in the large pit (Fig. 4,

colander from Building 1 is of interest as it was the only vessel in fabric AS1. The lack of this fabric in contexts associated with the chaff-tempered wares AS2 and 3 means its exact dating is uncertain, though it is not out of place in Saxon fabrics from the area.13

#### The assemblages

Most contexts produced only small assemblages of pottery (Table 2). By far the largest is from pit [2024], which produced 62 Saxon sherds weighing 1125g. The sherds are often large and derive from at least nine different vessels, mainly bowls (x2) and jars/cooking pots (×5) in chaff tempered wares (Fig. 4, nos. 3-9). Feature sherds (not illustrated) include one rounded basal angle and a body sherd with thumb indent. The AS3 sherds may all derive from the same lugged bowl (Fig. 4, no. 9), while the AS4 sherds consist of the rounded basal angle from a jar and the AS5 sherd from a small jar with a c. 46mm diameter base. It is unfortunate that no sherds in this deposit had carbonised remains allowing radiocarbon dating.

#### Catalogue [numbers relate to Fig. 4]

- 3. Bowl with simple rim and convex sides. Dark grey core with dull orange/mid grey patchy surfaces. AS2.
- 4. Bowl? with simple rim. Mid/dark grey throughout. Crude wiping on interior. AS2.
- 5. Bowl with raised pierced lug on rim. Dark grey/black throughout. Light all over burnish. AS2. Such pierced lugs are well known at Mucking.14
- 6. Bag-shaped jar with simple rim and side lug with small piercing. Mid/dark grey with dull orange external margin and patchy dull brown/mid grey exterior surface. AS2. Similar in form to a vessel from

feature	AS1	AS2	AS3	AS4	AS5
Building 1	3 (135g)				
Large pit [2024]		65 (1194g)	6 (62g)	2 (43g)	1 (22g)
*droveway/enclosure		17 (193g)	4 (79g)		
*small pits		2 (97g)	1 (17g)		
totals	3 (135g)	84 (1484g)	11 (158g)	2 (43g)	1 (22g)

Table 2: quantification of Saxon pottery assemblage. \* Sherds with C14 dates.

- Mucking.15
- 7. Shouldered jar with upright simple rim. Mid/dark grey throughout. AS2.
- 8. Globular jar with simple out-turned rim. Mid/dark grey core/inner surface with dull orange exterior surface. AS2.
- 9. Pierced lug fragment from bowl (as No. 3) but in finer AS 3. Grey brown throughout.

#### Spindle Whorl

#### by Elke Raeman

Nearby domestic textile production is attested by a single, biconical spindle whorl fragment (Fig. 5). The piece is in a reduced low fired and finely sand-tempered clay and was recovered from pit [2024]. This type of spindle whorl<sup>16</sup> is a form continuing from Iron Age and Roman shapes and can be found into the 5th and 6th centuries. In the 7th century it declines and after that it becomes fairly rare.<sup>17</sup> Similar whorls have been recovered from contemporary sites such as Clapham<sup>18</sup> and Mucking.<sup>19</sup>

## Discussion The pottery

Overall, the assemblage fits well within the chaff-tempered tradition of the Early/Middle Saxon London Basin, where similar forms and fabrics are well known.<sup>20</sup> At Mucking, although the chaff-tempered wares are present from the 5th century AD onwards, they do not become common until the 7th century AD,<sup>21</sup> and in London they are the dominant fabric type between *c*. 630 and 750 AD;<sup>22</sup> thereafter the tradition appears to have been losing

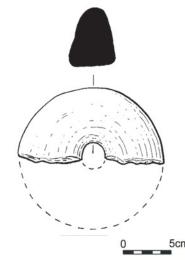


Fig. 5: spindle whorl

popularity from 750/800 AD onwards, with a corresponding increase in Ipswich ware.<sup>23</sup> This increase in Ipswich ware was also in evidence at Barking Abbey, where it made up 65% of the 8th-century AD assemblages.24 The absence of Ipswich ware in the current assemblage would suggest it belongs to the earlier part of the Middle Saxon period, though the geographical position of the current site may have placed it outside the easy reach of the main market area for Ipswich products. However, it is considered more likely that the absence of Ipswich ware is a chronological factor rather than one relating to trade contacts. A similar explanation is probably the reason for the absence of chaff-tempered ware from the significant Saxon assemblage from Godalming.25 The more sandy and gritty fabrics noted at Godalming are likely to be the local wares of the latter part of the Middle Saxon period. Chafftempered wares were however in evidence at the earlier site at Shepperton,<sup>26</sup> though the simple forms may suggest it just predates the current assemblage.

The two radiocarbon dates have been very useful in both narrowing the dates of the current assemblage down to probably the first half of the 7th century AD and providing an independently dated Early Saxon group to add to the growing dataset for the period. Such a date range puts the assemblage somewhat earlier into the late Early Saxon/early Middle Saxon range than based on fabric/form typologies alone. It is unfortunate that the group with the most diagnostic rim forms (from pit [2024]) did not contain sherds with carbonised residues. Despite this, the close proximity of the features and similarity of the fabrics strongly suggests the material was deposited at a similar date and, with the possible exception of AS1, the whole assemblage is most probably from relatively short-term domestic activity at this time.

#### The buildings

The two post-built buildings and the amount of Saxon pottery recovered strongly suggests the site was part of a farmstead, in existence some time between the late 6th and mid-7th centuries AD, outlying some ten

kilometres to the south-west from the former Roman city of London.

No sill-beam slots were evident, nor were any associated building materials recovered; the upper portion of the building remains, such as flooring, were probably lost to later truncation. Saxon earth-fast buildings were typically rectangular in plan, and usually 4–6m wide and 8–12m long with a width to length ratio of 1:2, with pitched roofs of thatch supported by the outer walls.<sup>27</sup> Both of the Roehampton buildings compare well with other excavated examples and were at the smaller end of the size range.

Although earth-fast timber buildings are well-known from the excavations of Saxon Lundenwic, with over 60 such structures identified at the Royal Opera House site alone,<sup>28</sup> sunken feature buildings (SFBs) are far more common in the rural settlement sites of Greater London. Possible explanations for this disparity have included the nature of the underlying geology, (with SFBs supposedly favouring areas of relatively softer ground) and that earth-fast buildings required a greater investment of materials and time to construct, which may have been factors.29 However, more recent work has pointed out, almost certainly correctly, that earth-fast buildings are underrepresented on rural sites, because the ephemeral nature of posthole buildings are, compared to SFBs, harder to identify and more susceptible to erosion and truncation.30 In addition, the scarcity of finds from postholes often leaves these buildings poorly- or undated. The absence of floor deposits associated with earth-fast buildings has led to the suggestion that these buildings had raised plank floors.31

The exact function of SFBs and earth-fast buildings still remains elusive, despite much postulation. SFBs have been interpreted as weaving sheds, granaries and lower status domestic dwellings, with varying degrees of confidence, within London and further afield. Whilst the debate is set to continue, it has been recognised that the finds from these buildings cannot be taken to be reliable indicators of function and they are best seen as multi-purpose buildings.<sup>32</sup>

Earth-fast buildings were more complex and larger than SFBs, and

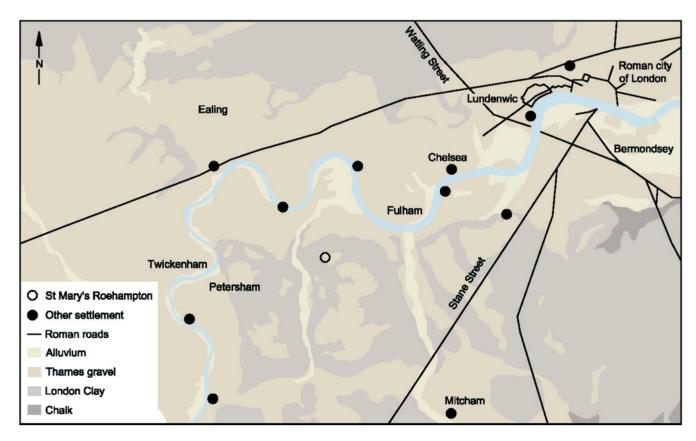


Fig. 6: Early and Middle Saxon rural settlement in south-west London

were almost certainly used as domestic living space, although some weaving activity has been identified in *Lundenwic*.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the functional distinction between Saxon building types may not have been rigid.34

The function of the ditches is obscure. Elsewhere, enclosures have been found associated with Saxon postbuilt buildings of late 6th or 7th century AD date at Airport Gate, Bath Road, Harmondsworth.35 Airport Gate was one of several Saxon sites in the Harmondsworth area, which appears to be part of a dispersed settlement of widely scattered farmsteads. At Tulse Hill, a group of Early Saxon SFBs were found with some surviving portions of contemporary ditches, one of which was tentatively interpreted as relating to a burial mound.36

#### The Saxon settlement of Roehampton

The main clue for the presence of a Saxon settlement at Roehampton is the place name itself, with its Old English meaning 'home farm frequented by rooks',37 but this is the first archaeological evidence for Early Saxon settlement. The two buildings were most likely part of a small isolated farmstead, the prominent type of rural

settlement in Greater London during the period.

The two biggest topographical influences of Early and Middle Saxon settlement were the underlying geology and proximity to a watercourse. The importance of rivers to settlement locations has long been appreciated, although compared to other sites in south-west London, Roehampton is located relatively far away from a major watercourse, with the closest today, the Beverley Brook, c. 1km to the west.

Saxon settlements in the London region were almost always located on the lighter soils of the brickearth and gravel terraces; in the case of Roehampton, the local geology appears to have been the attraction (Fig. 6). The geology of the site is unusual. The site is on a localised area, not much more than 500m<sup>2</sup>, of free-draining Boyn Hill gravel, surrounded by various London clay deposits. This 'island' of lighter soil compared to the difficult tilling of the surrounding heavy clay areas, was sufficient to attract a small isolated rural community. This settlement was located at 44m AOD, unusually high ground for a rural Saxon site, which are typically found below 30m AOD.38

Although various Roman coin finds

and burials have been made in Roehampton and a fragment of mosaic was found at Howard's Lane39 to the north-east of the site, there is no evidence for any earlier Roman settlement at the Queen Mary's Hospital site.<sup>40</sup> However, the location of a Roman road at Upper Richmond Road,41 1km to the north-east of the site, may well have been an influence on the location.

This site adds to the growing corpus of rural Saxon sites known from Greater London, with a noticeable concentration in the south-west. The reasons for this concentration cannot be readily explained by the geology, or the proximity of Roman roads and water courses, as these conditions are equally found in many locations across London; this is an avenue worthy of future study.

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### Letter

### The defences of Saxo-Norman Southwark

I would like to make a few comments on the article by Graham Dawson in the summer 2011 edition of the *LA* on the extent of the Burghal Hidage defences.

First, it should be noted that Temple Bar along Fleet Street was the City of London's western civic and ceremonial boundary, but not part of the city's defences. So it is quite possible that Southwark Bar in Borough High Street served a similar function. Second, historic Southwark was very low-lying and contained a number of natural stream channels and drainage channels. For instance, part of the Roman Guy's Channel was still a landscape feature during the late 17th century, when it was systematically infilled. Therefore some ditches and channels mentioned in medieval documents may be unconnected with any defence works.

Third, there another possible explanation for relict ditches in

medieval documents, that is they were part of the temporary defences constructed around Southwark during the civil war of 1263-65. On 11th December 1263 Henry III's supporters in the City of London raised the drawbridge and closed the gates of the barbican on London Bridge to prevent Simon de Montfort and his baronial army from crossing the bridge from Southwark. The intention was that royalist forces would converge on Southwark and destroy the trapped rebels. However, the citizens of London seized the bridge and allowed the rebels to cross and evade their pursuers. To the best of my knowledge no one has ever attempted to map the extent of these temporary fortifications, which are mentioned in the Cartulary of St Thomas's Hospital and were apparently being levelled by 1266 (see article on Saxon Southwark p. 58 in *Londinium* and Beyond CBA Res Rep 156 (2008)). I think it is guite likely that the probable line of the defences shown on Fig. 1 of

the article by Graham relates to 1263–65, not the Saxo-Norman period.

Last, in 1979 excavations at Hibernia Wharf revealed short length of a large truncated ditch of Saxo-Norman date (see LA Autumn 2009, p. 149). If this ditch is interpreted as part of the fortifications first mentioned in the Burghal Hidage of c. AD 885-915 (some historians argue for an earlier date for the compilation of this composite document than one I cited in the *LA* , 2009 p. 147). If this discovery is interpreted as a short stretch of the defensive ditch, then it is possible to produce a postulated alignment for the landward Burghal defences. The resulting conjecture is a hypothesis which is now being tested by the Thameslink excavations; this fieldwork is providing an amazing east-west transect through Southwark's archaeological heritage.

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#### 660 cal AD.

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- 17. P. Walton Rogers Cloth and Clothing in Early Anglo-Saxon England, AD 450-700 CBA Res Rep 145 (2007) 24.
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