

Fig. 1: site location

# The Royal College of Art site, Battersea Bridge Road, from the Iron Age to modern times

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## Introduction

This article describes the results of archaeological excavations carried out at the Royal College of Art (RCA) site, Battersea Bridge Road in the London Borough of Wandsworth, during May 2010, by AOC Archaeology Group on behalf of RCA, as well as those from earlier interventions on this and adjacent sites.

The site was within land bounded by Hester Road to the north, industrial buildings and Radstock Street to the east, Howie Street to the south and Battersea Bridge Road to the west (Fig. 1). The buildings of 17–35 Battersea Bridge Road lay within the footprint of the site, which covered an area of c. 1800 m<sup>2</sup> in total.

## Geological, archaeological and historical background

The bedrock geology of this area is the London Clay formation which is overlain by Kempton Park Gravel formation. The site is located in an area of geological transition, with Langley Silt formation to the south of the site and alluvium overlain by made ground (reclamation) to the immediate north of the site.

The south bank of the Thames now lies c. 100m to the north of the site but would have been closer in ancient times.<sup>1</sup> The site would have lain towards the tip of a promontory jutting out into the Thames at a conspicuous bend in its course. The area to the east of the RCA site, along the south bank of

the Thames, was a marshy area up until the 19th century.

A few scattered prehistoric remains have been recovered from Wandsworth, at least indicating an early human presence in the area. The earliest of these are the Lower Palaeolithic hand axes (c. 500,000 – 40,000 BP) found in the glacial gravels throughout the Borough.<sup>2</sup> Archaeological evidence for the wider area during the Mesolithic and Neolithic suggests prehistoric woodlands and marshes on either side of the Thames, but with much better evidence coming from the opposite northern bank. This type of complex landscape is known to have been attractive for early human settlement,



Fig. 2: Late Iron Age features

offering ready defence, and easy access to water and a full range of river resources such as fishing, fowling and water supply. On the Wandsworth side of the river prehistoric finds have been very sparse, although isolated Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic flint artefacts have been found on the Thames foreshore. The finds record for the later prehistoric period, particularly the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age, is dominated by metalwork and other finds from the Thames. A large number of Iron Age swords, daggers and coins have been recovered from the stretch of the Thames immediately to the north of Battersea Park known as Chelsea Reach, a few hundred metres to the east of the site.<sup>3</sup> Many of these such as the Wandsworth<sup>4</sup> and Battersea Iron Age shields<sup>5</sup> are extremely well known.

As with the prehistoric periods there is very little by way of evidence of Roman settlement in Wandsworth. A few scattered finds have been recovered from the area which is now central Wandsworth town to the south-east, and an isolated sarcophagus was discovered on the eastern side of Battersea Park but nothing of Roman date has been found in this part of Battersea. The exception is once again the river itself. Perhaps the most interesting and enigmatic group of finds may have been deposited in the River Thames nearby in the later Roman

period. These were eight pewter ingots found during 19th-century dredging "near Battersea Bridge." They had stamps saying SYAGRI and a chi-rho Christian monogram symbol with the words SPES IN DEO (hope in God) arranged around it in a circle on six of them, and SYAGRIUS in two lines with a chi-rho monogram and an alpha and omega beside it on the other two.<sup>6</sup> A conclusive identification of Syagrius and a convincing explanation of how and why the ingots came to be in the river are still open to suggestion, although they are provisionally dated to the 4th century. On the other side of the river, on sites at Chelsea Old Church Street and Cheyne Walk, a few Roman finds and features have come to light, indicating at least a minor presence there during the Roman period.<sup>7</sup>

The earliest known reference to Battersea dates from AD 693 in an Anglo-Saxon charter when Caedwalla, King of the West Saxons, granted 'Batricesege' to Ethelburga, Abbess of Barking. The name derives from the Saxon 'Badric's Island', and indicates that the Saxon settlement was on high ground above marshland. This is thought to be some 750m south-west of the site. Battersea is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086 and is recorded as a settlement of substantial size. The medieval village was to the south and east of the church (now the

southern part of Battersea Church Road), and eventually extended down Battersea High Street. Medieval activity, such as wharf and jetty features, has also been recorded in several locations along the Thames foreshore; however, there is currently no evidence to suggest the existence of medieval activity or settlement close to the site.

This area in the north of Battersea was a little way away from the main part of the village to the west in the 18th century, and the lane on the line of the modern Battersea Bridge Road led to what was then a horse ferry, where Battersea Bridge itself now stands. The Desmaretz map of 1717 shows no development on the RCA site, whilst the Rocque map of 1746 shows the first buildings along the Hester Road frontage, with nothing along the modern Battersea Bridge Road frontage. The Battersea Parish map of 1787 shows, albeit in crude form, the outline of the buildings along both frontages, as well as the recently built Battersea Bridge of 1772. The basic pattern of development remained the same for the next 150 years, with an entrance way from Battersea Bridge Road into the large open space behind the buildings on its frontage and that of Hester Road. This is shown as a large orchard or market garden in the Stanford map of 1862 and shrank in size in the later 19th century to become a backyard

area, when the terraced housing of Radstock Street was built on the eastern side of the RCA development site. The area to the north of Hester Road along the riverbank became used for heavy industry at the time, for the manufacture of saltpetre, candles and white lead, for example, but the south side of the road remained largely residential.

Perhaps the most significant development in the Battersea area in the 19th century was the alteration of the Thames foreshores, in particular the areas of the Chelsea Embankment and Battersea Park.<sup>8</sup> The area on the south side of the river in particular had been marshland for centuries and was subject to regular inundation, with the higher ground behind it used for market gardening. From the 1840s onwards huge quantities of material were dumped onto the foreshore for the consolidation of the riverbanks in the area, the levelling of Battersea Park, which opened in 1858, and the construction of Chelsea Bridge and its approaches. Two of the main sources of this material were the construction of the docks in East London and the dredging of the river between Battersea and Vauxhall Bridges.

The site was densely covered in housing until the Second World War,

when Radstock Street was destroyed by bombing and many other buildings on the RCA site were severely damaged. The backyard area was not extensively redeveloped after the war and was used until recently as a bus depot.

### The RCA site and circumstances of fieldwork

An archaeological assessment of the RCA site in 2002<sup>9</sup> highlighted the Albion Wharf site immediately to the north of the site on the other side of Hester Road and on the south bank of the Thames (Fig. 1). An evaluation of the Albion Wharf site, carried out in 1993 by MoLAS (BBG93), recorded modern overburden with underlying reclamation deposits containing artefactual material dating to the 17th and 18th centuries.<sup>10</sup> A later desk-based assessment of the Albion Wharf site<sup>11</sup> noted the potential for Iron Age material within peat deposits on the Wandsworth foreshore, generally referring to places further to the west of Battersea Bridge in the Putney area and along Chelsea Reach to the east. Subsequent monitoring of geotechnical investigations<sup>12</sup> identified no archaeological deposits below the alluvium and there was no evidence of human activity on the site, artefactual or otherwise, predating the mid-18th

century.

Monitoring of geotechnical test-pits in 2007 at the RCA site identified pottery of possibly 17th and 18th century date, such as redwares and transfer-printed wares. An archaeological evaluation was carried out in March 2010 in the form of seven test pits (Fig. 1: Trenches 1–7).<sup>13</sup> The sequence in all test pits revealed naturally lain terrace gravels overlain by what appeared to be an agricultural soil. Ditches running towards the river were present in two trenches, two of which contained pottery of medieval date, indicating that some form of activity was taking place nearby in that period. The results of these various phases of evaluation had been very consistent and in line with the archaeology predicted in desk-based assessments, but the presence of medieval pottery introduced a new element into the considerations. An excavation was designed accordingly, essentially to clarify the nature and dating of these medieval and post-medieval remains, and was carried out during May 2010.<sup>14</sup>

### Prehistoric activity

The prehistoric evidence for settlement on the RCA site is much more humble

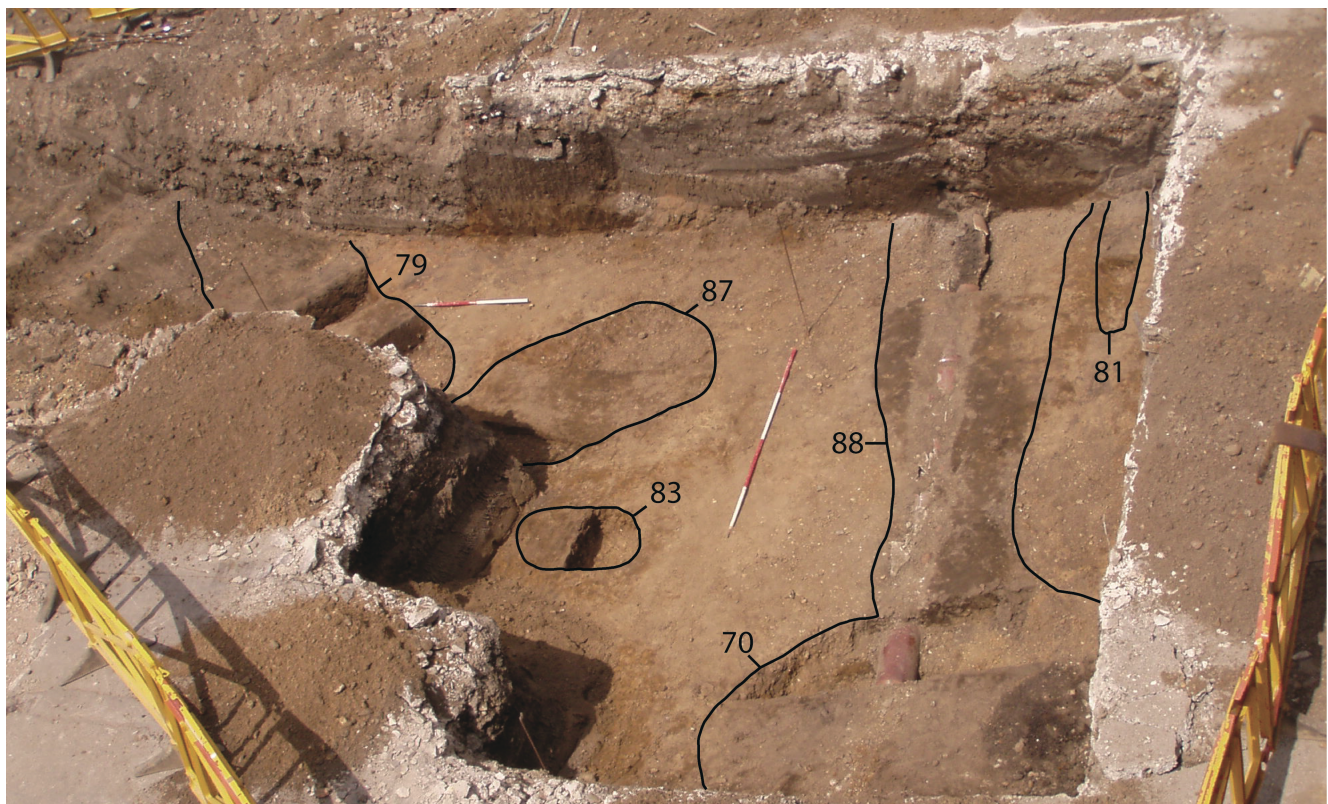


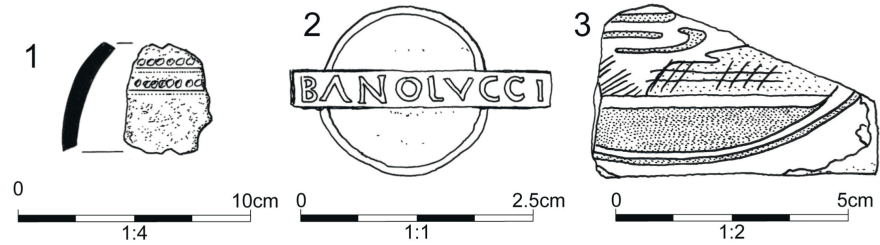
Fig. 3: Late Iron Age features in Areas 2 and 3

than the apparently highly prestigious objects recovered from the Thames and its foreshore (Figs 2, 3). Three large pits [70, 79 and 87] were found cutting into the natural underlying gravel. They measured 2.20m by 1.80m by 0.60m deep, 2.30m by 1.50m by 0.16m deep and 3.50m by 0.32m deep respectively. Their fills contained weeds and seeds, charred and uncharred, charcoal flecks and fragments, domestic animal bones, wattle flecks and fragments, and all contained crude pottery fragments. Three smaller pits [57, 59 and 83] and a linear gully [81] all contained similar inclusions in their fills, as well as more fragments of pottery. Another large ditch [88] also contained similar material and may have been contemporary, but it had been heavily disturbed by later features on the same alignment cutting into it, including a modern drain, and its dating is not completely safe; it was from one of the recuts of this feature that the medieval pottery was recovered during the evaluation.

The prehistoric pottery was generally not very diagnostic. The sherds with flint-tempered and quartz-rich fabric might have been of any date in a range *c.* 400 BC–AD 40/50 but these were usually associated with shell- or grog-tempered wares, including a wheel-thrown shoulder of a jar in the latter fabric (Fig. 4.1). The assemblage therefore seemed more likely to be of Late Iron Age date. The most diagnostic piece, from pit [81], in a coarse quartz fabric, contained very fine shell and was the shoulder of a highly burnished closed vessel which features a series of tooled lines and burnished dots. This decoration may be related to the Mucking-Crayford style, usually distributed around the lower Thames area.<sup>15</sup>

These remains indicate a small rural settlement with domesticated animals, pottery and cultivated crops in the form of evidence of common wheat species and intrusive weeds in the pit fills, with possible water management activity in the form of the gully and ditch.

There is obviously no direct connection between the high-status metal objects found in the Thames and this settlement, but its occupation would have been broadly contemporary with such famous archaeological finds



**Fig. 4: Iron Age, Roman and post-medieval finds. (1) Late Iron Age grog-tempered sherd, (2) stamp of Banoluccus on Lezoux samian ware base (probably Dr. 33 or similar cup form), (3) fragment of probably 18th-century tin-glazed wall tile**

from the river as the Wandsworth and Battersea Shields. If, as is often suggested, these were votive offerings dropped into the Thames,<sup>16</sup> the location of the settlement on a bend in the river overlooking Chelsea Reach and Battersea Reach might have allowed its inhabitants to be witnesses to their deposition.

#### Roman activity

Evidence of occupation of the site during the Roman period comprised three inter-cutting features cut into the natural terrace gravels; a pit and two linear features (Fig. 5). Their recorded extents were 3.85m by 0.80m by 0.15m deep and 1.65m by 1.10m by 0.30m for the linear features, and 0.80m by 0.50m by 0.20m deep for the pit. Two postholes nearby may also have been of Roman date but had no finds associated with them.

The Roman pottery assemblage was of mid-1st to mid-2nd century date. One context, a linear ditch fill, contained a flint-tempered sherd alongside south Gaulish Samian ware, dated AD 40–100, and a body sherd similar to Roman fabric Early Roman Sandy Ware Type B. This could provide some evidence of continuity with the later Iron Age material described above, although the amounts of pottery are so small that residuality may be an equally likely explanation. Much of the Roman pottery came from a single context, a pit fill, dating to *c.* AD 120–160. Considering the generally poor condition of the rest of the assemblage, this small to moderate-sized group consisted of unusually unabraded and large sherds, and suggested that some relatively substantial activity took place in the vicinity. Of particular note was the base of a Lezoux samian cup with an intact stamp of Banoluccus, reading BANOLVCCI (Fig. 4.2). Other

diagnostic material from this group includes a Black Burnished Ware Type 2 (4G) flat rim bowl, and two Alice Holt/Surrey necked jars. Another unidentified partial stamp on a Les Martres-de-Veyre samian bowl or dish, reading SIN[?IVR]V[?], was also recovered on a residual piece from a later context.<sup>17</sup>

The fills of the datable features containing fragments of Roman pottery were mixed deposits, which also contained charred and uncharred weed and crop seeds and charcoal flecks and fragments, apparently evidence of domestic refuse. These remains appear to have formed part of a small rural domestic settlement and their early Roman date, as well as their contents, suggested that there may have been continuity of settlement from the later Iron Age into the Roman period.

One sherd of Oxfordshire red-slipped ware, dated to AD 270–400, from earlier ditch [88], represents the only later Roman material in the assemblage. Although not of great intrinsic significance, this piece does show that there was activity in the vicinity during the later Roman period.

#### Later developments

After the end of the period of Roman occupation, a long hiatus followed for which no evidence of settlement was found. During the evaluation four sherds of 10th–12th century pottery were found in the silt fills of former ditches, at least implying medieval agricultural activity in the area, although no evidence of anything structural was found. In the various phases of evaluation a few residual sherds of early post-medieval pottery were found dating to the late 17th or early 18th centuries, as well as a tin-glazed wall tile fragment (Fig. 4.3), but these again do not confirm specific



Fig. 5: Roman features

activities on site and may have originated elsewhere.

The foundations of some of the 18th- and 19th-century buildings and drainage works were recorded on site and can be closely related to those shown on historic maps, especially the Ordnance Survey map of 1896. Many of the buildings recorded on the site at the time of the evaluation were apparently of 18th- or 19th-century date. The site was bombed during the Second World War, and evidence for the damage to properties within this parcel of land was also present.

### Discussion

The stages in the evaluation procedure have been outlined above to show that, although the possibility of earlier material being found had never been dismissed, given the low-level background noise of prehistoric and Roman remains in the area, there was no strong evidence to suggest its presence before the excavation.

Gerald Wait and Jonathan Cotton wrote in 2000 that 'The presence of Londinium (*i.e. the Roman city of London to the east*) itself has encouraged too narrow a view to be taken of the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age, one that simply seeks to provide background for its foundation. Rather, future evidence should be accumulated and studied in its own right for what it

might tell us about late prehistoric settlement within the lower Thames Valley. We still have too little of this from central London, and what we do possess is often as noted above, the result of simple serendipity rather than problem-oriented fieldwork and research. North Southwark provides an indication of the sorts of evidence that might be anticipated and such evidence is just now beginning to emerge from a handful of sites along the Thames further upstream'.<sup>18</sup> The Iron Age remains from Battersea Bridge Road provide another serendipitous example of just such a site.

The transporting and dumping of these vast quantities of imported material obviously have implications for the provenance of the copious finds from the Wandsworth foreshore.<sup>19</sup> It has often been suggested that many of the spectacular finds found in the Thames may have originated elsewhere in London and been picked up by the excavations for the docks and dredging, so that the Battersea Shield, for example may have had nothing to do with the Battersea area in prehistoric times. The first glimpse of Iron Age and Roman settlement in Battersea at the RCA site, however, might suggest that some of them at least may have been put to use or destined for use in the immediate vicinity, and that further research into ancient settlement near the Battersea

foreshore might prove extremely fruitful.

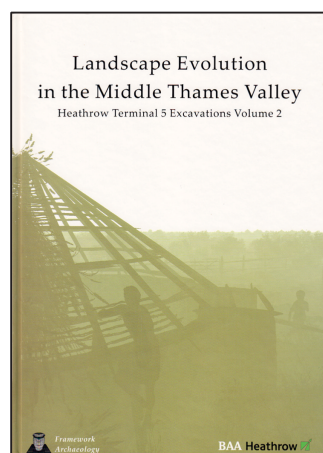
### Acknowledgments

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## Landscape Evolution in the Middle Thames Valley: Heathrow Terminal 5 Excavations Volume 2



John Lewis, Matt Leivers, Lisa Brown, Alex Smith, Kate Cramp, Lorraine Mepham, Chris Phillpotts et al

Framework Archaeology  
Monograph no 3

2010

394 pages  
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Reviewed by Alastair Ainsworth

I had been aware that the excavations in advance of Terminal 5 at Heathrow Airport had been unusual but, until I read this book, I had not realised how remarkable they were. Including the site of the Perry Oaks sludge works, the excavators had the time and funding to undertake an open area excavation over approximately 75 hectares. The excavators also had the available funding to commission numerous radiocarbon dates and detailed environmental studies. The site was situated on the brickearth-capped Middle Thames gravel terraces where the water table was not far below the surface. This enabled the excavation, unusually for the south-east of England, to produce a large number of specialist environmental reports on waterlogged pollen and plant remains. Unfortunately the acidity of the gravels meant that bone preservation was poor except in waterlogged contexts.

The book explores the history of human habitation over the whole site. There are four main chapters covering the periods, 500,000 to 1700 BC, the 2nd and 1st millennia BC, 400 BC to

the 4th century AD, and post-Roman. All the chapters include excellent figures and tables, all in colour, as well as colour plates.

The authors of each chapter detail the archaeological data from the excavation and then utilise both the archaeological and environmental evidence to create a picture of the landscape at various periods. Extracts from applicable specialist reports are quoted in the main text to support the conclusions that the authors have reached. The landscape for each specific period is then compared with the landscapes of previous periods to explore whether the previous landscape features were respected or ignored. This comparison required an assessment of whether the previous landscape features were still extant at each subsequent period. For example, the extraordinary Stanwell cursus, that crossed the entire site, was built between approximately 3600–3300 BC and apparently still existed as a low mound in 1943. The authors of the chapter on the post-Roman period incorporate historical documentary sources and maps into their discussion of the landscapes for the Saxon and medieval periods. The airport's name derives from the settlement of Heath Row was first mentioned in a document of 1416.

I was uneasy about three aspects of the chapters on the Bronze Age and Iron Age landscapes, and particularly the colourful artist's reconstructions. Firstly, that when considering periods of time covering many hundreds of years, it is possible that the various excavated habitation sites are successive generations of the original settlers moving their home around their territory. Secondly, the untended land inside the boundary fences along our modern motorway system is demonstrating how few years it takes for shrubs and then trees to colonise abandoned land. The prehistoric landscapes are more likely to have resembled this vegetation mix than to have looked like the neat modern landscapes on the other side of the motorway fence. Thirdly, it is probable that the large predators such as wolf, lynx and the big eagles were still living in the Thames region in prehistoric times. The presence of these predators would have necessitated different pastoral farming methods than herds of domestic animals calmly grazing in fields.

This book is highly recommended for anyone interested in the evolution over time of landscapes in south-east England. As archaeologists we can look forward in anticipation to the bonanza that awaits if Heathrow Airport is moved elsewhere and a similar excavation can be undertaken over the whole footprint within the airport perimeter.

1. P. Greenwood 'Prehistoric Wandsworth, Part II: Post-Glacial changes in the Mesolithic Period' *Wandsworth Historian* 50 (1986) 1–8.
2. P. Greenwood 'Prehistoric Wandsworth, Part I' *Wandsworth Historian* 48 (1986) 1–8.
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4. B. Cunliffe *Iron Age Communities in Britain* (2005).
5. I. Stead *The Battersea Shield* (1985).
6. Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England) *London (Roman)* (1928) 175.
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8. J. Cotton 'A miniature chalk head from the Thames at Battersea and the 'cult of the head' in Roman London: Appendix: The Formation of the Battersea Foreshore' in J. Bird et al., *Interpreting Roman London* Oxbow Monograph 58 (1996) 93–4.
9. S. Hemley *Howie Street, Battersea, London Borough of Wandsworth: Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment* Unpublished AOC report (2002).
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19. *Op cit.* fn 8.