Prehistoric finds at Hopton Street in Southwark

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with a contribution by J. Butler

Introduction

PRE-CONSTRUCT Archaeology was commissioned by the Manhattan Loft Corporation Ltd to undertake a variety of archaeological work on land at 47-67 Hopton Street. The work was conducted in various phases between November 1994 and March 1997, according to the construction program. Following evaluation works six areas, including a series of eight pad foundation trenches and one test pit (Area 3), were archaeologically excavated. Their locations are shown in Fig. 1.

The site lies on land bounded by Hopton Street, Holland Street, Castle Yard and Hopton Gardens, in the London Borough of Southwark, approximately 100m south of the River Thames (Fig. 1). This area is located on the low-lying Floodplain Terrace, formed after the most recent glaciation *c.* 10,000 years ago. The land has been subjected to cycles of marine transgression and regression and was therefore periodically flooded. However, during periods of regression gravel islands and sandbanks were exposed on the river's edge above the surrounding marsh, which were ideal places for prehistoric occupation.

This report deals with the evidence for prehistoric occupation uncovered at the site. Additionally, significant remains of late medieval and post-medieval date were revealed,which will form the basis of an article in the next issue. They include a furnace, associated flues and various structures forming part of a glassworks of 18th and 19th century date.

A natural sand island

Natural floodplain gravels were observed, overlain by at least 1.2m of fine sand. The sand survived in areas which were not truncated either by subsequent fluvial activity or by more recent building works (Areas 2, 3, 5 and 6, Fig. 1). The surface of the sand tended to slope gently from north to south, dropping 0.44m over 37.20m becoming slightly steeper towards the south.

This appeared to represent the remains of a natural eyot, which would have been situated towards the southern shores of the Thames. A combination of archaeological investigations and the study of borehole data have revealed that, in the Prehistoric and Roman periods, the landscape of Southwark was composed of low-lying sand islands interspersed with areas of marshland and braided channels. Various plans of the projected Prehistoric and Roman landscapes have been produced based on this evidence[1]. However, most of this work has concentrated on the area of Roman occupation around Borough High Street[2], to the east, and thus the evidence from Hopton Street is important in helping to fill in a gap in our understanding of the early topography of this part of Southwark.

Prehistoric occupation

The natural sand was overlain by a deposit of brown grey charcoal flecked silty sand which survived to a thickness of between 100mm and 200mm, and which appeared to have been truncated by water scouring[3], representing the remains of a deflated subsoil.

This occupation deposit and an associated ploughsoil contained a large finds assemblage comprising approximately 820 worked lithics, 2400 fragments of burnt flint and 300 pot sherds (many in a very fragmentary condition, but with some diagnostic pieces), five badly degraded fragments of bone, some daub and two pieces of a red compound which appears to have the properties of a strong dye. Assessment of the worked lithics[4] and pottery[5] suggests a predominantly Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age assemblage, with a smaller Mesolithic to Early Neolithic component. All finds were three dimensionally located and their spatial relationships await analysis. However various pat-

1. e.g. K Heard, H Sheldon and P Thompson 'Mapping Roman Southwark' *Antiquity* 64 (1990) 608-19; N Merriman 'A Prehistory for Central London' *London Archaeol* 5, no. 11 (1987); *op cit* fn 12.
2. See, for example, LAMAS & SAS Joint publication No. 3, *Excavations in Southwark 1973-76 Lambeth 1973-79* (1988).
3. H Keeley *Assessment of soils from Hopton Street* Pre-Construct Archaeology unpublished report (1998).
4. B Bishop *Lithic Assessment, Hopton Street* Pre-Construct Archaeology unpublished report (1998).
5. A Gibson *The Prehistoric Pottery from Hopton Street* Pre-Construct Archaeology unpublished report (1997).

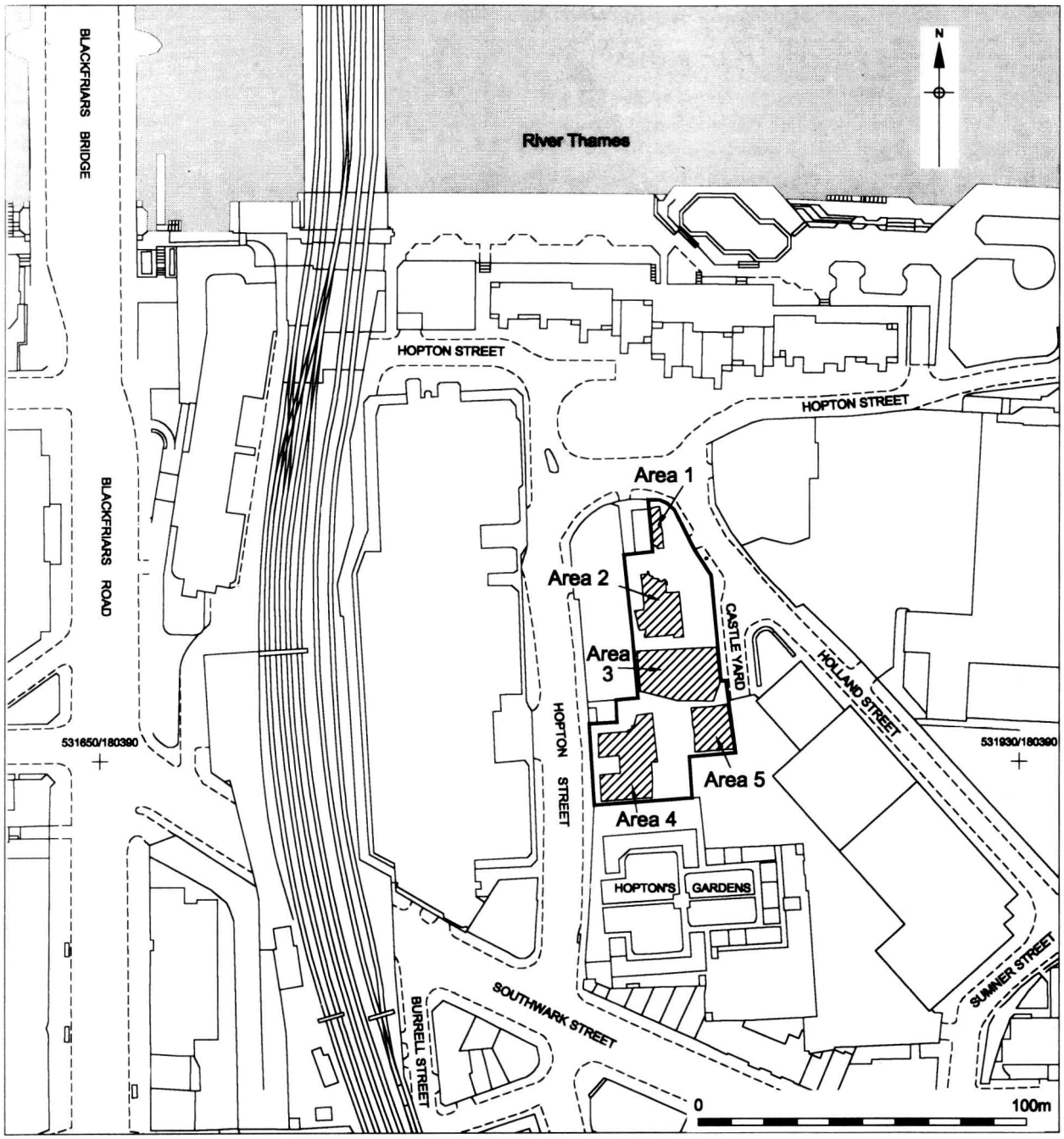

Fig. 1: site and trench location

terns have already been observed; for example there was a concentration of burnt flint in the west of Area 2 associated with the presence of the five fragments of bone, and a higher density of charcoal, suggesting the presence of a hearth. Of the five bone fragments four were identifiable as remains of domestic cattle[6].

Close to the southern limit of excavation, cutting the natural sand, was a small sub-circular pit containing a whole pot (Fig. 2), in association with a flint core and blade. These were evidently deliberately placed within the pit, and are likely to represent a ritual deposition. The pot has been identified as a beaker bowl of late Neolithic date, of a type

6. P L Armitage *Faunal assemblages from Hopton Street, the assessment* Pre-Construct Archaeology unpublished report (1997).

which is rare in Britain, and more usually found in southern Europe[7].

Sealing the pit and the surrounding sands was a layer of dark organic sand, which when removed revealed a series of over one hundred linear grooves, running in parallel lines, oriented roughly north-south and east-west (Fig. 3). Though varying in length they survived up to a length of 3m, and averaged 15mm wide and 20mm deep, with a 'V' shaped profile. They have been interpreted as the remains of ard marks or plough marks, suggesting that the darker more organic soil was probably a ploughsoil; though it has been suggested that early examples of ploughing, such as witnessed here, may have had a ritual significance[8]. The deposition of the beaker appeared to have occurred immediately prior to the ploughing, perhaps signifying ritual preparation of the land. Excavations at Phoenix Wharf, Lafone Street[9], and Wolseley Street on the Horselydown eyot, to the east of the Hopton Street site in the Bermondsey district of Southwark, where similar topographical and geological conditions prevail, have revealed prehistoric occupation with ard marks, flints and pottery of similar date[10].

Impressed into the upper surface of the ploughsoil were 23 shallow depressions, resembling poaching (the breaking up of the ground into wet muddy patches), suggesting animals trampling over the area when wet, although an alternative interpretation is that they represent the remains of root-boles of plants.

Slightly to the north were the remains of what appeared to be a burnt-out tree bole, up to 3.2m across and 0.6m deep, perhaps indicating deliberate clearing and preparation of the ground for occupation and cultivation.

A concentration of approximately 40 substantial structural postholes occupied an area approximately 5m north-south by 4m east-west, at the north-east corner of Area 5. They were generally sub-circular or oval in plan, and between 0.35m and 0.50m across, with a shallow 'bowl' at the top and deeper central post-pipe. They may represent the remains of fairly substantial, at least semi-permanent or seasonal dwellings, although none of the posthole configurations demonstrate any discernible pattern. There were also approximately 570 stakeholes observed across the site, generally circular or oval in plan, averaging 70mm in diameter, and varying in depth. These were associated with the deposit

7. A Gibson, *op. cit.* fn 5.

8. e.g. P Rowley-Conwy 'The interpretation of ard marks' *Antiquity* 61 (1987) 263-6.

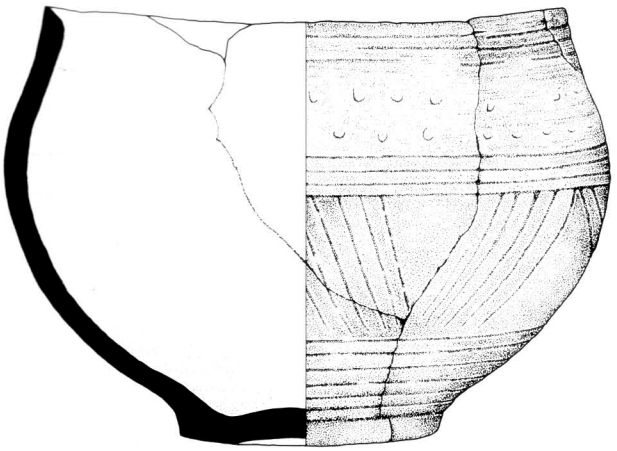

Fig. 2: prehistoric Beaker bowl

containing lithics and pottery. They may represent evidence for temporary dwellings, huts, enclosures, fence lines or similar structures. Further spatial analysis will be undertaken of the stakeholes to establish whether individual structures can be isolated.

A small portion of the southern edge of a watercourse or channel survived later truncation in the north-east of Area 2. Its overall dimensions remain unknown and it may have formed part of a small feature or the edge of a large watercourse or even a channel of the Thames. Two large postholes along its bank were suggestive of revetting, and scouring had occurred behind the posts. To the south parallel lines of stakeholes, running back from the feature at right angles, may have formed part of a small jetty or raised platform.

In a small area of investigation to the south west was an occupation deposit similar to that observed elsewhere, and occupying an area approximately 3m east-west by 2.6m north-south. This was associated with a butt-ended ditch, stakeholes and a pit containing pot, charcoal and struck flint.

The finds assemblage alone is indicative of extensive prehistoric use of the landscape with substantial postholes and ard marks indicating different zones of activity, with possible deliberate clearance of the area as suggested by the burnt-out tree bole, and ritual preparation represented by the pit, with its placed deposits, to the south. Taken in conjunction with the concentration of stakeholes, and pit and ditch to the west, this suggests an area of occupation, albeit possibly seasonal, with extensive use of the island for a variety of activities. Faunal remains have indicated that domesticated

9. J Bates and J Minkin 'Lafone Street Southwark, prehistoric farming and a medieval bridge' *London Archaeol* 8, no 12 (1999) 325-330.

Fig. 3: the prehistoric features excavated in Area 5

cattle may have contributed to the diet which, given the location of the site, was probably supplemented by fish and wildfowl, although no direct evidence for these was recovered. Fish and bird bones are however less likely to survive. Soil samples from Hopton Street were analysed for pollen, plant macrofossils and diatoms, though unfortunately survival was very poor. Work elsewhere in Southwark has suggested that alder dominated the natural environment of the sand islands while rushes and sedges covered the mudflats[11].

Rising water levels, watercourses and alluviation

Several watercourses of varying sizes were observed truncating the prehistoric deposits. In Area 2 a series of shallow channels, between 40mm and 140mm deep and running in various directions,

10. J Drummond-Murray, D Saxby and B Watson 'Recent Archaeological Work in the Bermondsey District of Southwark' *London Archaeol* 7, no 10 (1994) 251-7.

11. I. Tyers 'Environmental evidence in Southwark and Lambeth' *in* Excavations in Southwark 1973-76 Lambeth 1973-79, LAMAS & SAS Joint publication no. 3 (1988) 443-477.

partially truncated the occupation layer suggesting a rise in water level. In addition deeper watercourses were observed to the east and west of the site. The north-south channel seen to the west of the main area of excavation was at least 52m long and 6m wide. It appears to have had a long life span, with deposits indicative of intermittent slow and fast water flow and some possible later re-cuts. These suggest human modifications to the channel. It was probably in existence in an early form during the period of prehistoric activity at the site and may well have continued as a navigable channel throughout the Roman period.

The slow and possibly episodic water ingress represented by the shallow watercourses appears to have led to the site being abandoned in the early Bronze Age. This was followed by more general inundation and flooding of the site, represented by the deposition of approximately 0.35m of dark grey clay, which was laid down before the Roman period. Further rising of the water level, possibly in the form of occasional flooding, led to the deposition of over a metre of brown clay, which contained finds of Roman and medieval date.

The substantial alluvial deposit masked the underlying prehistoric occupation and until fairly recently the prehistoric landscape of this area remained undiscovered. A 'vicious circle' developed whereby lack of evidence of occupation resulted in such evidence not being looked for[12]. However, since the early 1980s it has become increasingly apparent that the remains of a well preserved landscape may survive beneath the alluvium.

Conclusions

The evidence for prehistoric occupation of the Thames shoreline and islands preserved under alluvium has only comparatively recently started to be uncovered, and this site makes an important contribution to the study of that buried landscape. The evidence seems to suggest that this eyot was a major focus of Neolithic/early Bronze Age occupation, though this may have been periodic or seasonal in nature, possibly occurring during the drier summer months. There are indications of early farming, possibly supplementing a diet largely provided by hunting and fishing, and associated ritual preparations. The data from Hopton Street are significant within the wider parameters of prehistoric Southwark and the environment of the lower Thames floodplain in general.

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12. N Merriman 'Predicting the unexpected: prehistoric sites recently discovered under alluvium in Central London' *in* S Needham and M G Macklin (eds) *Alluvial Archaeology in Britain* Oxbow Monograph 27 (1992) 261-7.

Excavations and post-excavation work

City of London. Museum of London Archaeology Service, Walker House, 87 Queen Victoria Street, London EC4V 4AB (020-7410 2200).

Croydon & District, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collection of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Jim Davison, 28 Blenheim Park Road, South Croydon, CR2 6BB.

Greater London (except north-east and south-east London), by Museum of London Archaeology Service. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to MOLAS, Walker House, 87 Queen Victoria Street, London EC4V 4AB (020-7410 2200).

Borough of Greenwich. Cataloguing of excavated and other archaeological material, the majority from sites in the borough. For further information contact Greenwich Borough Museum, 232 Plumstead High Street, SE18 1JT (020-8855 3240).

Hammersmith & Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from Fulham Palace. Tuesdays, 7.45 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, SW6 (020-7731 4498).

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.

Surrey, by Surrey County Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Rob Poulton, Archaeological Unit Manager, Old Library Headquarters, 25 West Street, Dorking, RH4 1DE (01306-886 466).