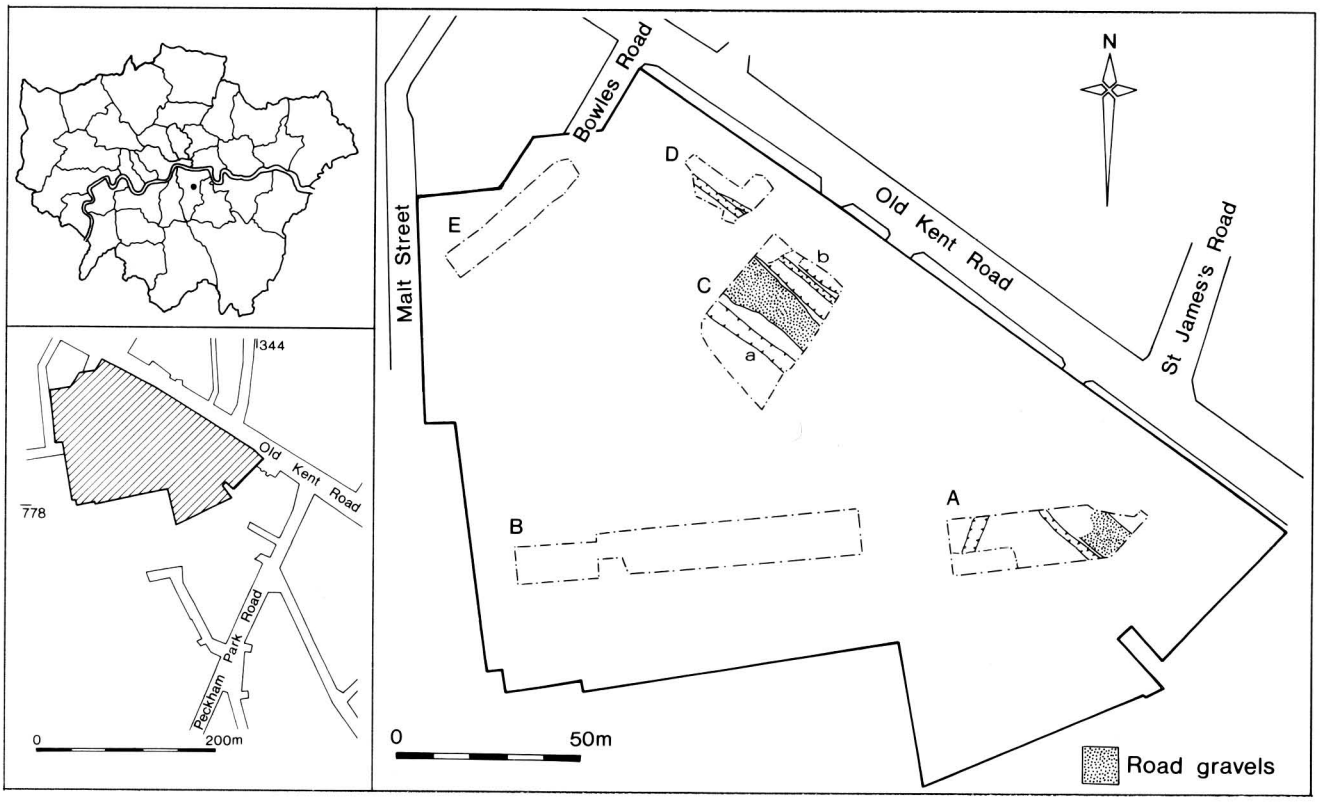

Fig. 1: location maps of site and trenches showing Roman road and ditches.

Mesolithic and neolithic flint tool-manufacturing areas buried beneath Roman Watling Street in Southwark

Wendy Rogers

BETWEEN MARCH and August 1990 archaeologists from the Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology carried out a rescue excavation at the site of Old Kent Road/Bowles Road, TQ 344 778 (Fig. 1).

The investigation uncovered evidence *in situ* of the manufacture of flint tools during the mesolithic and neolithic periods and the remains of an extensive stretch of Roman Watling Street and adjacent Roman activity.

During an initial six-week evaluation, substantial undisturbed archaeological remains were revealed in four trenches (Fig. 1). Preservation *in situ* was not considered appropriate and a full excavation took place.

The site lies on the flood plain of the River Thames but is situated near the boundary of alluvial deposits and sand and gravel subsoils. In the areas exposed sandy-clay gravels were noted at +0.70m OD (+27in OD) but there was a definite rise in the levels towards the south-west. Weathered yellow sands overlay the subsoils, and were in turn overlain by either a grey silty-sand or a layer of brown clay. Stratigraphically over these were varying depths of a silty-sandy "plough soil". Cutting into this "plough soil" were Roman remains and post-medieval intrusions.

Mesolithic and neolithic flint tool-manufacturing areas

Within the weathered sands were many finds associated with the activities of prehistoric people.

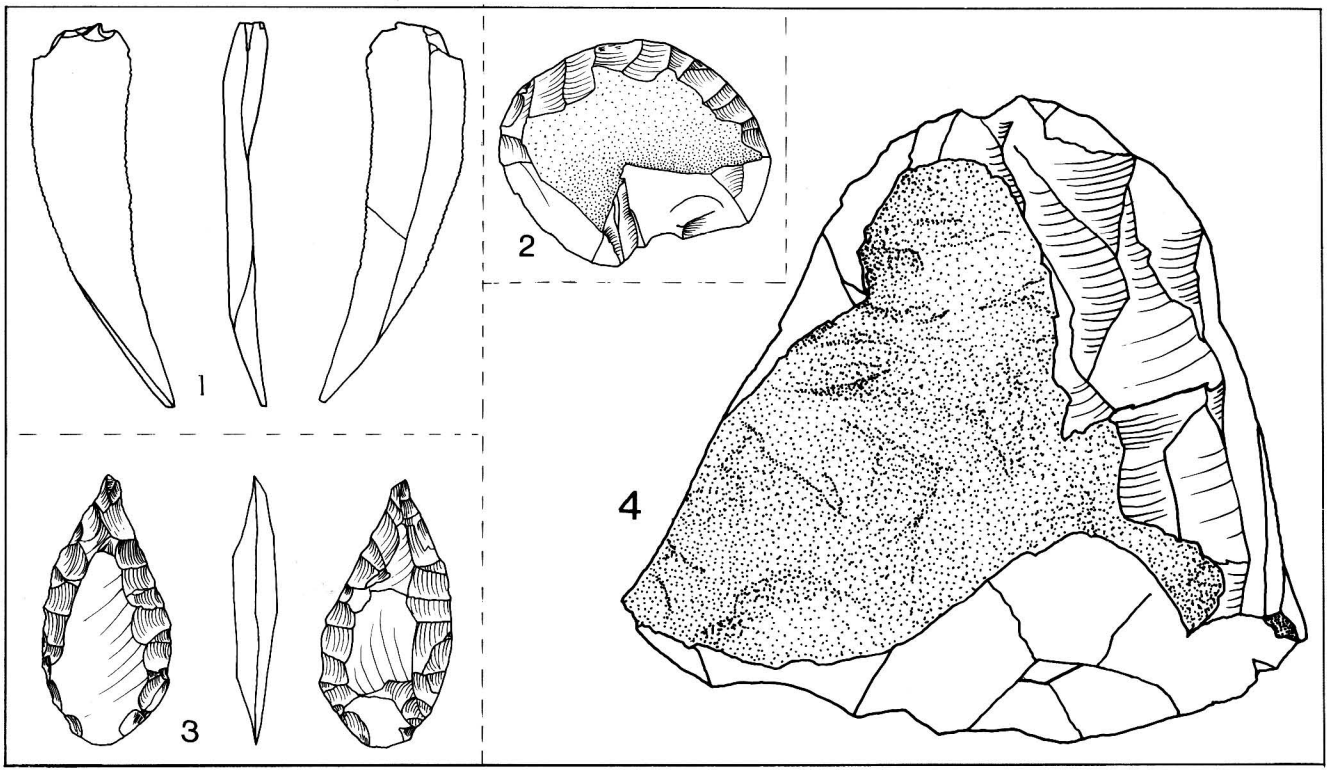

Fig. 2: Flintwork from trenches B and C.
1 – early mesolithic serrated blade; 2 – early mesolithic scraper; 3 – early neolithic leaf-shaped arrowhead; 4 – neolithic core.

These finds included flint artefacts, lumps of daub and pieces of worked sandstone. They were located in all five trenches but there were concentrations in Trenches B and C (Fig. 1). Due to the acidity of the soil, organic remains rarely survived and only four fragments of burnt bone were retrieved.

Areas with a dense distribution of finds were divided into three-metre (10ft) square plots in relation to the trench grid. Each of these squares was sub-divided into metre (3ft) square plots and excavated in spits ranging from 0.02m to 0.04m (1in to 2in). This work was greatly assisted by the use of EDM (Electronic Distance Measurement) equipment which enabled the finds to be recorded in three dimensions and the information processed on computer. All the spoil from three one-metre (3ft) square plots was kept in order to retrieve micro-debitage from wet-sieving.

Approximately 1780 flints were retrieved from Trench B but it was clear that the scatter continued beyond the north edge of excavation. No features were associated with the flints. They were lying within a weathered sand over an area 12m × 16m (39ft × 52ft) between the heights of +1.02m OD and +0.80m OD (+3ft OD and +2ft 6in OD).

The assemblage in Trench B consisted mostly of flakes and blades, of which several were utilised and retouched. The collection included a serrated blade (Fig. 2), a crested blade, an inverse retouched blade and several core rejuvenation flakes and snapped blades. Several of the 68 cores were obvious blade cores, including an opposed platform blade core, and there were at least two core tablets. Within this assemblage there were also scrapers (Fig. 2), three hammerstones, microliths including an obliquely blunted point, and micro-burins, the primary by-products from the manufacture of microliths.

About a quarter of all the flints in Trench B were burnt. The occurrence of burnt flints corresponded to a scatter of 182 pieces of daub with high concentrations of both in two places. Also associated with these finds were three pieces of worked sandstone, which could be whetstones, and two large fragments of iron pyrites, possibly used as strike-a-lights.

From preliminary examination of this assemblage it has been suggested that the flints represent activities from an early mesolithic site[1]. This is based on the presence of typical early mesolithic tools such as microliths and the absence of any geometric microliths which are considered typical of the late mesolithic. Further study of the flints could extend the dating, and indeed the assemblage in Trench C appears to be early neolithic[2].

1. Dr Nick Merriman *pers. comm.*

2. *Ibid.*

The flint scatter in Trench C was concentrated towards the east side and was also found within weathered sands overlying the subsoils lying between the heights of +0.95m OD and +0.80m OD (+3ft OD and +2ft OD). This assemblage included 310 flint artefacts of which the majority were waste, utilised and retouched flakes and blades. There were also 15 large cores (Fig. 2) and one leaf-shaped arrowhead (Figs. 2 and 3). There were no features and no daub associated with the flints, although there were a few concentrations of burnt flint. The dating of this assemblage is based on the presence of the leaf-shaped arrowhead which is typical of the early neolithic[3] (Figs. 2 and 3).

The raw flint material used seems to be nodules occurring with chalk deposits, suggesting a degree of mobility by the users to sources of flint such as the North and South Downs, and rolled river gravel nodules.

In both trenches it was possible to refit certain flakes and blades on cores, verifying that the material was *in situ* and was not re-deposited by water or animal action. Refitting can also indicate precise knapping areas and, combined with an overall study of the flints, can reveal techniques of tool manufacture. However, microwear analysis of the utilised flints may indicate that other activities were carried out in the area.

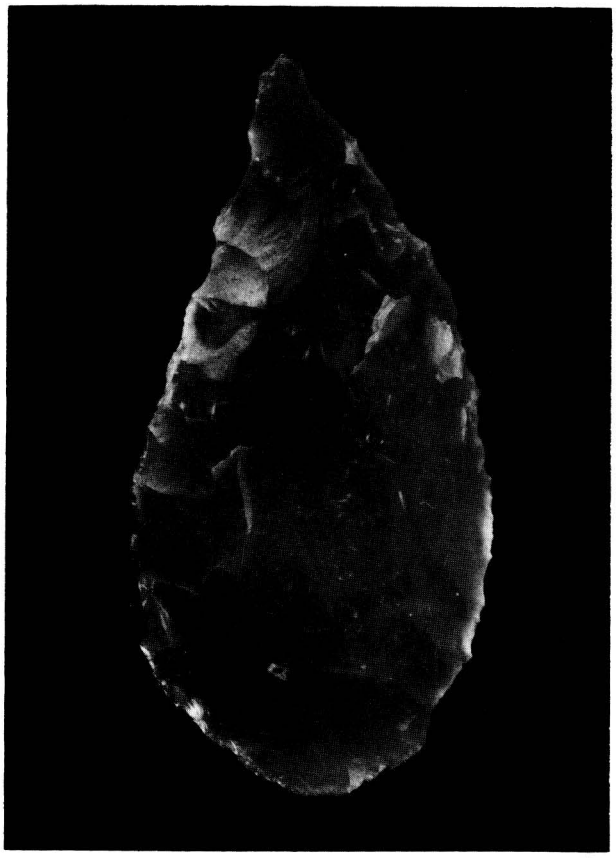

Fig. 3: early neolithic leaf-shaped arrowhead found in trench C.

The preliminary interpretation that the flints in Trench B indicate a tool-manufacturing area is also based on the types of flints present. The majority of the flints were blades, flakes and cores and included such artefacts as core rejuvenation flakes and core tablets. This indicates regular *in situ* reworking of the material.

The proposition that this is a distinct manufacturing area is further supported by the total lack of evidence for structures, such as postholes, ditches or hearths, which would be representative of an occupation area[4]. Mesolithic hunter-gatherers are thought to have been fairly mobile and to have tended to use different sites for different purposes[5]. Considering Trench B appears to be a task-specific area, it is not known whether an occupation area lay adjacent to this one or some distance away. This site was probably a grassy rise, with the ground level sloping down towards a marshy area nearer the Thames[6]. With the River Peck to the east, this might have been an ideally situated location for producing tools and for hunting game and foraging.

There is considerable evidence that fires were used, and the clusters of daub and concentrations of burnt flint in Trench B could represent the actual position of at least two fires, whilst the three pieces of worked sandstone and the two iron pyrites fragments might be direct evidence of fire lighting.

The depth of deposit in which the mesolithic flints were found, and the presence of the early neolithic flint scatter in Trench C imply that prehistoric activity on the site occurred over a long period. Despite the lack of faunal evidence, further study of the finds and records may reveal whether this site was used seasonally or periodically and whether there are indications for other activities either on the site or in adjacent areas.

Roman Watling Street

The excavation found no evidence of Bronze Age or Iron Age occupation, but extensive archaeological deposits on this site indicate considerable Roman activity in the area.

3. *Ibid.*
4. S Pierpoint 'Prehistoric Flintwork in Britain' VORDA Archaeological and Historical Publications Research Series 3 (1981) 21.
5. *Ibid.* 30.
6. Helen Jones *pers. comm.*

Archaeological investigations over the last hundred years have established that there were at least six main Roman roads radiating from the London area, of which two ran south of the river, Stane Street to Chichester (*Noviomagus*) and Watling Street to Canterbury (*Durovernum*) and the Kent coast[7]. The alignments of these roads are fairly well established within the city area but beyond its immediate environs the evidence is less precise[8].

Watling Street is believed to have been constructed during the middle of the 1st century AD with the start of the Roman invasion. It was almost certainly one of the most important military routes from the Kent coast and continued to be a vital lifeline for communication throughout the Roman period from the 1st to the 5th centuries AD[9].

It is believed that, once completed, Watling Street ran from Richborough (*Rutupiae*) to Chester (*Deva*) via London (*Londinium*) and St Albans (*Verulamium*). Archaeological evidence suggests that its route through London was via Greenwich and Deptford, under the Old Kent Road, avoiding the boggy alluvial area to the north[10]. It may have crossed the Thames, possibly opposite Westminster, before continuing its journey to St Albans (*Verulamium*) and the North[11].

Archaeological evidence of the road being close to or underneath the current Old Kent Road included the discovery of several burial urns and Roman inhumations along the north and south edges of the current Old Kent Road[12], a Roman lamp during 19th-century building associated with the Grand Surrey Canal[13] and two ditches excavated at Asylum Road, Peckham[14]. Most recently, several ditches containing Roman material alongside a gravel surface were located during the Museum of London's excavation at Old Kent Road/Canal Bridge, about 20m (65ft) north of this site, south of the Old Kent Road[15]. However, discovery of a substantial stretch of the road itself provides firm evidence of its location and alignment.

The excavation exposed a stretch of Roman metalled road up to 14m (46ft) wide and 0.60m (2ft) thick (Fig. 1). The metalled gravel was flanked by two ditches on a NW-SE alignment, parallel to the current Old Kent Road but 30m (98ft) to the south.

The lowest layer of road construction was an impervious grey silty clay about 0.15m (6in) thick (Fig. 4 layer C). This apparently served as a foundation for the road but could also have acted as an aid to efficient drainage allowing water that had percolated through the metalling to run off into the ditches alongside.

Overlying the clay foundation were medium-sized pebbles within a silty sandy deposit. There were frequent inclusions of shell fragments, pea-grit and

7. Harvey Sheldon & Laura Schaaf 'A Survey of Roman Sites in Greater London' in *Collectanea Londiniensia* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Special Paper No 2 (1977) 61.
8. Alan H. Graham & Peter Hinton 'The Roman Roads in Southwark' in *Excavations in Southwark 1973-76 Lambeth 1973-79* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc/Surrey Archaeol Soc Joint Publication No 3 (1988) 19-25.
9. R Merrifield *London City of the Romans* (1983).
10. R E Mortimer Wheeler 'Roman London after AD 60' in Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England) London Vol. III Roman London (1928) 51-2.
11. Harvey Sheldon *pers. comm.*
12. M Dean & M Hammerson 'Roman Burials from Southwark' *London Archaeol* **4** No 1 (1980) 17-22 and **4** No 2 (1981) 52.
13. SMR Reference 090774; *Victoria County History* Surrey Vol 4 1912 p.374c.
14. H Swain 'Gazetteer of sites' in *Excavations in Southwark 1973-76 Lambeth 1973-79* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc/Surrey Archaeol Soc Joint Publication No. 3 (1988) 479.
15. Peter Thompson *pers. comm.*

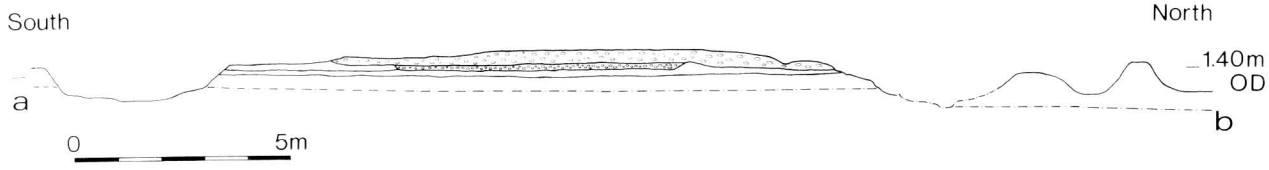

Fig. 4: section through Roman road gravels, foundation layer and adjacent ditches in trench C. See Fig. 1 for location of "a" and "b".

occasional lumps of red tile, brick and pottery sherds. There were two distinct layers of this metalled gravel. The lower layer of metalling (Fig. 4 layer B) was 0.20m (8in) thick but was only 5m (16ft) wide. The excavation exposed a stretch 25m (82ft) long in Trench C and 4m (13ft) long in Trench A (Fig. 1). It was in a shallow cut and was more compact than the layer above. This top layer (Fig. 4 layer A) was 14m (46ft) wide and the maximum surviving thickness was 0.25m (10in). Much of this layer was disturbed by post-medieval farming and modern building foundations, and any "camber" or build-up in the middle of the road would have been destroyed. However, a stretch along the north side was in good condition and revealed a sloping side (Fig. 4).

Two ditches flanked the road and initially may have been the result of gravel quarrying for its construction[16]. The wide ditch on the south side was 3.50m (11ft) wide and 0.80m (2ft 6in) deep and had been recut. It presumably represents a drainage ditch with evidence of repair and maintenance. The ditch on the north side was partially destroyed by modern trenches, but its southern edge respected the northern sloping side of the road.

The Roman finds include 1st to 4th century AD Roman pottery, 1st to 4th century AD Roman coins, tile, iron objects, slag and some bone. Analysis of the finds and records should provide information concerning the history of the road, especially its construction and maintenance. Even though the finds imply that the road was in use throughout the Roman period, further detailed study may reveal when it was abandoned and when the route moved north to the position of the current Old Kent Road.

There was also considerable evidence to suggest further Roman activity or even occupation adjacent to the road. This consisted of four other ditches running slightly askew of the road (Fig. 1). They could represent boundary or drainage ditches connected with roadside activity, such as farming. Roman pottery sherds, tile, bone and iron slag were found within these ditches but of particular interest was the large quantity of Roman building tiles found in the ditches of Trench A.

A large amount of tiles could suggest that a Roman building may have been nearby. This possibility is supported by the large number of Roman samian ware pottery sherds and Roman tiles found during the excavation of the Old Kent Road/Canal Bridge site which was adjacent to this one[17].

16. Harvey Sheldon *pers. comm.*
17. Peter Thompson *pers. comm.*

Fig. 5: Roman intaglio (length 10mm, 0.4in).

A significant find from the ditch to the far north of Trench C was a Roman intaglio made of jasper (Fig. 5). The motif depicts cupid riding a cock-horse, with the head of Silenus (a teacher of Bacchus) towards the base. There is also the head of a ram with an ear of corn in its mouth. Preliminary examination suggests that the combination of so many strange elements could have been deliberate, to enhance the seal's amuletic properties. Martin Henig has proposed that the intaglio could be late 1st century AD but that it is probably Hadrianic (*c* AD 120-140)[18].

Acknowledgements

The Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology would like to thank Chartwell Land PLC for their financial support and Portswood Developments Limited for their constant support and interest in the project. I would also like to thank the site staff and volunteers for their work through rain and heatwave; the Museum of London specialists, particularly Dr Nick Merriman and John Lewis, for their invaluable advice and the London Borough of Southwark for their support. Figs. 1, 2 and 4 were drawn by Sue Hurman and Michael Jones. The photographs were taken by Andy Chopping.

18. Martin Henig & Christine Jones *pers. comm.*