

3-11 High Street, Croydon: the investigation of a late medieval to early 17th century urban site

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Introduction

ARCHAEOLOGICAL investigation of a redevelopment site to the rear of 3-11 High Street, Croydon was undertaken by the Museum of London Archaeology Service during May 1994.

The investigation consisted of a single trench of about 47 sq.m (500sq.ft). There were many late medieval and early post-medieval finds, including a particularly good range of 16th-century pottery; this was supplemented by environmental evidence, primarily from discarded animal bone. Contemporary features included two large pits, probably dug for gravel extraction, and two sections of mortared flint wall.

Many sherds of medieval (12th to 14th-century) pottery were recovered, residually and within a possible cultivated soil horizon. Only one sherd of Roman pottery was found but there were pieces of burnt and struck flint, suggesting prehistoric activity in the area.

Archaeology and historical background

The site was located on fairly high ground in the centre of the present-day town (Fig. 1, TQ 3235 6553). To the west the ground drops away to the Wandle Valley; to the east and southeast there is a gradual rise towards the North Downs. The natural ground surface was formed by geologically recent gravel (Boyn Hill), one of several terraces recording climatic and sea level fluctuations during the Pleistocene¹.

The town of Croydon grew up at the entrance to a natural communications route through the North Downs, and at the edge of the flood plain of the River Wandle. The first substantial evidence of activity comes from finds of Mesolithic and Neolithic date (c 8000 to 2500 BC). Settlement evidence is later, either Late Bronze or Iron Age (c 900 BC to AD 43); this appears to have been concentrated along the line of the Wandle Valley.

1 D S Peak 'The ground upon which Croydon was built. A reappraisal of the Pleistocene history of the River Wandle and its basin' *Proc Croydon Nat Hist Sci Soc* 17, 4 (1982) 89-116.

2 J B Gent *Croydon: A Pictorial History* (1991).

There are references to Roman activity in the area. Croydon lay (more or less) on the line of a Roman road leading to the south coast, otherwise known as the London-Portslade Way. To the north this route is fairly well established, but it remains uncertain within and to the south of the town. The road may have followed the line of North End and the High Street, i.e. very close to the present site, or it may have lain to the west, passing through the Old Town.

There was also a Roman settlement in Croydon: its extent is unknown but it may have originated as the site of a *mutatio* or posting station². A number of burials which may form part of a late Roman

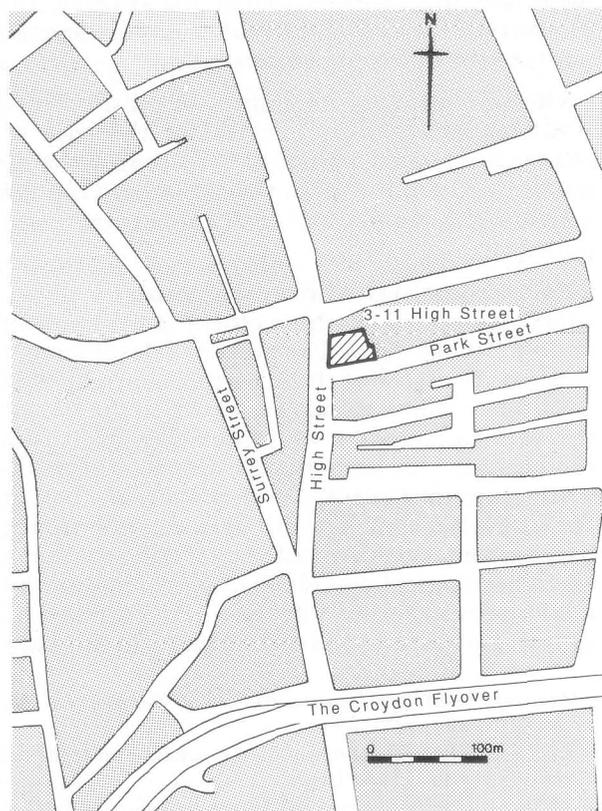


Fig 1: site location.

cemetery have been found in the Park Street area, close to the present site³.

The name of Croydon is of Saxon origin, and there may have been finds from this period. Particularly notable was the discovery of a pagan Saxon cemetery (5th to 6th-century AD) some 500m to the south of the present site; recent work has shed further light on this⁴.

There are references to Croydon from the 9th century and in the Domesday Survey of 1086. The residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury may have been constructed at this time, possibly on the site of a Saxon manor. The town really appears in the written record from the later 13th century, with the establishment of a weekly market and an annual fair. Croydon remained small throughout the medieval period, perhaps overshadowed by its proximity to London⁵. Nevertheless, there appears to have been some expansion, particularly on to the higher ground to the east in the area of the present-day Surrey Street and High Street⁶.

By the later 16th century the High Street was established as part of the principal route through the town, as is indicated by both cartographic and archaeological evidence⁷. One notable development was the construction in the 1590s of the Hospital of the Holy Trinity almshouse, some 35m (115ft) to the north of the present site.

Croydon continued its gradual expansion until the later 18th century. Thereafter the pace of change accelerated, particularly following the introduction of railways in the 1840s; between 1851 and 1931 the population of the town increased tenfold.

The archaeological investigation

3-11 High Street lies within a plot of land some 26m by 41m (85ft by 135ft). The proposed development covered about 30% of the site area, essentially as an addition (within an open yard area) to the rear of the existing standing buildings (Fig. 2). It was therefore in this area that the archaeological investigation took place, as a condition of consent for redevelopment. The initial evaluation trench covered some 3m by 8m (10ft by 26ft). To the north all archaeological deposits had been removed by modern construction, but elsewhere a number of significant features were identified. On this basis

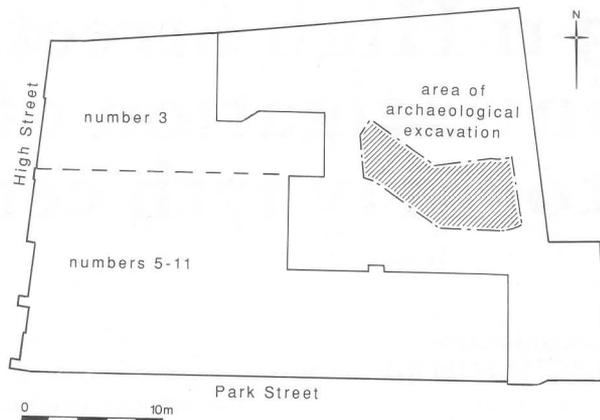


Fig 2: site outline and location of the archaeological trench

it was agreed to undertake further archaeological excavation, the final trench measuring approximately 5m by 11m (16ft by 36ft).

It is likely that the trench covered most of the extant remains within the redevelopment footprint. Both the evaluation findings and past plans show the area to the north to have been heavily affected by modern construction. To the south of the trench there was further evidence of recent disturbance, with several drains and a cellar attached to the standing building.

The archaeological trench was initially excavated by machine, in general to a depth of 0.35m to 0.50m (14in to 20in); this increased to c 1.00m (40in) with the areas of modern disturbance.

Prehistoric and Roman

The investigation produced sixteen pieces of struck flint (including one scraper), plus occasional burnt flint which may relate to domestic activity. These finds were residual, within deposits of medieval or later date. Nevertheless they do suggest some prehistoric activity in the area; given the relatively shallow soil profile it is possible that earlier surfaces have been truncated.

An abraded sherd of 2nd-century pottery formed the only Roman find. In the light of previous evidence this seems somewhat surprising. However, the site may lie inside or close to a burialground, with the settlement located on lower ground to the west; thus it might also be that the two areas were separated by the road.

3. M Shaw 'Roman Period Burials in Croydon' *Croydon Nat Hist Sci Soc Newsl* 71 (1988) 2-5.
 4. R L Nielsen *Report on Archaeological Evaluations at 82-86 Park Lane, Croydon* MoLAS (1992).
 5. D J Turner 'The Archaeology of Surrey, 1066-1540' in Bird J & Bird D G (eds) *The Archaeology of Surrey to 1540* (1987) 248-50.

6. M Barratt *Mint Walk, Croydon. Preliminary Report on the Archaeological Investigation* Museum of London DGLA (1991).

7. J Norden *Map of Surrey* (1595); P Miller *Preliminary Report of the Second Phase of Archaeological Investigation at Mint Walk, Croydon* Museum of London DGLA (1991).

Medieval

There were many medieval finds, principally pottery. Sherds were found both residually in later features and exclusively within a possible cultivated soil horizon (c 1100 to 1350); the latter appears as 'A' on Figs. 4 and 6.

Much of the pottery dated from the 12th to early 14th century, with a further significant group of 15th-century material; there was also one sherd of late Saxon sandy ware. Almost all the pot was produced locally – the earlier examples from sites such as Ashted, Limpsfield and Earlswood, whilst the later group consisted largely of Surrey whitewares, including Coarse Border ware and several items from Cheam. The only imported pottery was some sherds of Dutch redware.

Later medieval to 17th century

The bulk of the evidence *in situ* from the site related to the period c 1450 to 1650, and in particular to the 16th century.

c 1450 to 1530

The earliest feature was a large pit (Figs. 3 and 4, 'B'). It was steep-sided, some 1.7m (5ft 7in) deep by at least 2m by 3m (6ft 6in by 10ft) in plan, and may well have been dug for gravel extraction. The fill was fairly uniform, principally a dark brown or grey sandy silt, but containing a number of finds – pottery, ceramic tile, bone and oyster shell; it is possible that there were also quantities of organic matter, now wholly decayed.

The backfilled pit was overlaid by two developments, as follows:-

To the west, a length of loosely mortared flint wallbase (Figs. 3 and 4, 'C'). About 2.0m (6ft 6in) remained, but the eastern end had apparently sub-

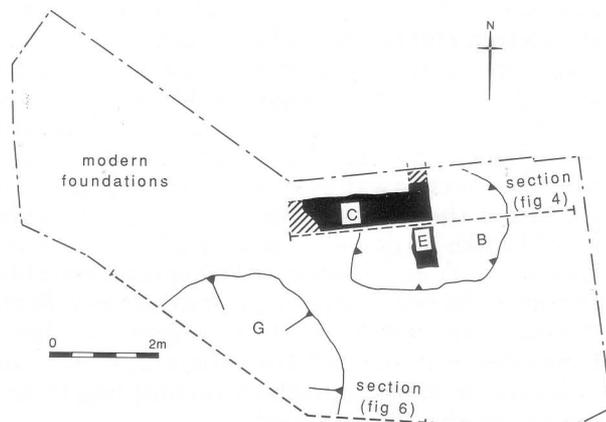


Fig 3: the principal archaeological features c.1450 to 1600.

sided into the underlying pit. To the west the wallbase was cut away, and any further trace removed by modern construction.

To the east deposits were truncated by part of an extensive excavation (Fig. 4, 'D'). This was fairly shallow, no more than 0.20m (8in) deep, and was backfilled with a mixed silty sand with chalk fragments. The cut was only defined at its western limit, where it followed a north-south line (possibly a property boundary) at right angles to the wall described above. The function of the feature is uncertain, although terracing is unlikely given the absence of an appreciable natural slope; it may be that the soil was simply removed for use elsewhere.

c 1530 to 1600

This period produced two major features, which were not directly related.

Within the eastern part of the trench there were several structural features. A north to south

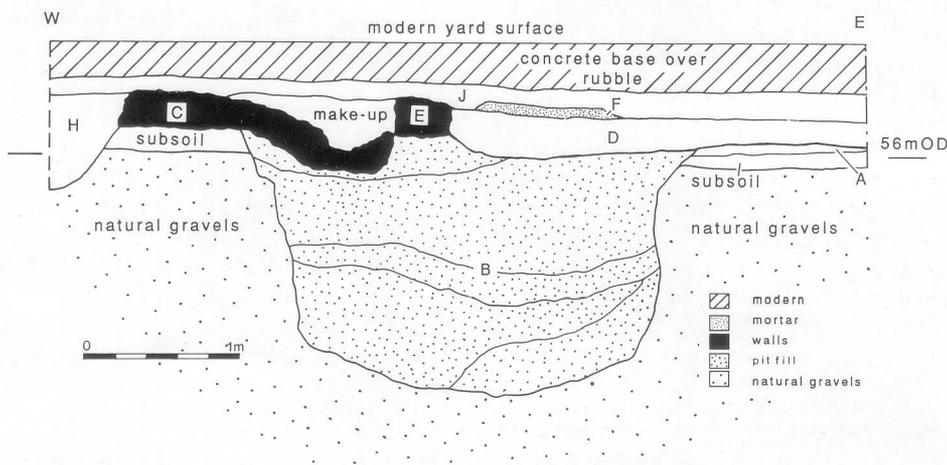


Fig 4: section through the later 15th-century pit and overlying wallbases.

mortared flint wallbase (Figs. 3 and 4, 'E') abutted the eastern end of the earlier structure. The two walls were of similar construction and may represent phases within a single building. The later wallbase was only about 1.60m (5ft 3in) in length but retained an original end to the south; to the north it was cut away by modern construction. To the east of the wall was a separate but presumably related make-up deposit (Fig. 4, 'F'). This was overlaid by a soft and patchy mortar spread, possibly the surviving bedding for a tile or stone floor. Both the walls and the probable floorbase may have formed part of an ancillary structure, such as an outhouse or stable, with the main building fronting one of the adjacent roads.

The second major feature of the mid to later 16th century was a large infilled pit (Fig. 5, Figs. 3 and 6, 'G'). This appears to have been roughly circular in plan, c 4.00m (13ft) in diameter and about 1.40m (4ft 7in) deep. It was probably dug for gravel extraction, as in the case of the earlier feature. The fill was largely made up of mid to dark greyish brown sandy silt with pebbles, and also included substantial lenses of ash. Numerous finds indicate that the pit was used, at least in part, for domestic

refuse and other waste. The bulk of the material consisted of pottery, tile/brick, and bone; there were also metal items including horseshoes, buckles and parts of a knife, a key and two locks, and a possible fragment of chain-mail.

The pottery from the pit was the largest group recovered in the investigation, and was also broadly representative of the whole. It was mainly of 16th-century date, with some residual medieval sherds. The later fabrics include Tudor redwares, probably manufactured in the London area, and Cistercian-type wares from the south Midlands and Buckinghamshire. There were also stoneware and tin-glazed items from the Rhineland and South Netherlands, plus one sherd of a Martincamp flask from northern France. It is evident that by the 16th century the pottery supply network had expanded greatly from its previously local base, becoming in many respects comparable to that of London.

The pit also produced valuable environmental evidence. There was a sizeable assemblage of animal bone, predominantly cattle with a small but significant proportion of sheep and/or goat and pig. Further examples, less frequent but also used for



Fig 5: excavated slot on the south side of the trench through the later 16th-century pit.

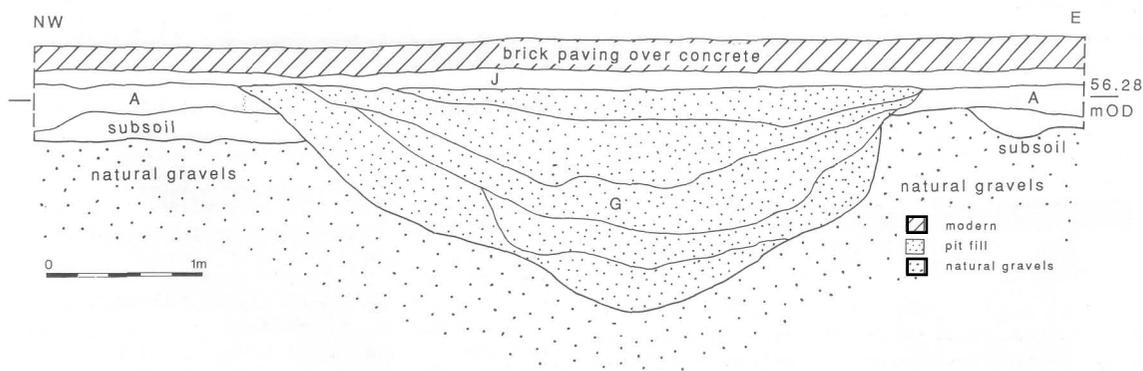


Fig 6: section through the later 16th-century pit and adjacent deposits.

food, included fallow deer, rabbit, chicken and goose. The occasional presence of bones from other animals (dog, horse, rodent, etc) probably represents domestic refuse, or may simply be fortuitous. There were many fishbones, from both freshwater and marine/estuarine species (e.g. dace, eel and cod): the latter source also produced shells of common oyster, mussel and cockle.

It is clear that the environmental assemblage derives very largely from the disposal of food waste, although possibly as a mixture of primary butchery and domestic consumption. The indication is of a varied and fairly good quality diet, but not one which was based on scarce resources or of particularly high status.

Bulk environmental samples also yielded a few charred plant remains, including domestic cereals (oat, wheat and hulled barley), a single grape seed, and several species of wild grass seed. There were also several fragments of charred soft plant tissue, possibly remains of soft fruits, stems or roots.

c 1600 to 1630

To the north of the 16th-century pit were two much smaller features. The first of them (a probable pit, Fig. 4, 'H') was truncated but at least 1.0m (40in) across and about 0.35m (14in) deep, and produced pottery of c 1600 or later. Cutting this to the south was a further small pit, 0.70m to 1.15m (28in to 45in) in diameter and 0.25m (10in) deep. The fill contained the decayed remains of a circular wooden object 0.35m (14in) in diameter, probably the lower part of a bucket or small barrel.

Most of the archaeological features described above were overlaid by a compact deposit, some 0.10m to 0.15m (4in to 6in) thick. This was variously made up of medium brown to dark grey or mottled yellow clayey silt/silty sand, and probably represents levelling for a yard. It also formed the highest level of archaeological survival, overlaid and possibly trun-

cated by a modern concrete base. The layer appears to date to the early 17th century, on the basis of material from the underlying features. It may also be significant that the investigation produced only one piece of clay tobacco pipe: this is frequently found on 17th-century urban sites⁸, and documentary evidence indicates widespread use by the 1590s⁹.

Conclusion

The archaeological investigation at 3-11 High Street, Croydon has proved of value in a number of areas.

The prehistoric finds (struck and burnt flint) were residual, but add to the evidence for activity in the area. Medieval finds were also largely residual, but clearly derive from the adjacent settlement; it is suggested that the site itself was under cultivation in later medieval times.

The most significant results of the investigation relate to the late medieval and early post-medieval period. There were frequent finds, a number of features – pits, structures and other deposits – and environmental material.

It appears that the site was developed from the later 15th century, with buildings dating from the early 1600s. The street frontage was probably the focus of activity, with ancillary structures to the rear; the latter area also provided a raw material (gravel) and space for waste disposal. These conclusions are enhanced by the quantity of finds, especially pottery. They provide evidence for the commercial and economic life of Croydon, whilst the environmental material gives a further insight into everyday life and diet.

Acknowledgements

Grateful thanks are expressed to Yate's Wine Lodges Limited, who provided funding for the investigation and subsequent work. Also to English Heritage P Miller, *ibid*, 6.

⁹ A Oswald *Clay Pipes for the Archaeologist* British Archaeological Reports 14 (1975) 3-6.

Number One, Poultry

Following extensive negotiation, the Museum of London Archaeology Service has begun excavation of this 3000m² (32,000 ft²) site on the western edge of the Walbrook valley. The work is being generously funded to the tune of £2m by Altstadtbau, and will be spread over two years: it consists of four evaluation shafts, one trial trench, ten controlled excavation areas, and watching briefs.

Evaluation shafts have already revealed 4m (13 feet) of complex Roman, Saxon and medieval deposits, many of which are waterlogged and promise exceptional preservation of organic remains. The former site of the parish church of St Benet Sherehog, destroyed in the Great Fire, has been investigated, resulting in the discovery of long-and-short work walls constructed of re-used Roman materials, standing to a height of 2m (6 feet 7 inches); they form a single cell structure measuring 5m by 10m (16 feet 5 inches by 32 feet 10 inches). St Benet is documented from the early 12th century, but the primary phase may be a Saxo-Norman church or chapel known as St Syth (hence Sise Lane). Two hundred and seventy five burials have been excavated, most from a cemetery post-dating the Great Fire.

Excavation of a service shaft at the junction of Poultry and Bucklersbury uncovered the "Great Conduit", a vaulted cistern constructed in 1286 as part of the first organised supply of fresh water to the City, and reputed on occasion to have run with wine. The vault survives below the street in perfect condition; the wine does not.

Cranford Lane, Harlington

The Museum of London Archaeology Service is currently being funded by Henry Streeter Ltd to excavate a gravel extraction site at Cranford Lane, Harlington (west London). The first main phase of activity dates to the Early Neolithic, and includes a rectangular structure measuring 8m by 6m (26 feet 3 inches by 19 feet 8 inches). Features relating to a rebuilding of this structure contain a large assemblage of pottery, flint-work and an amber bead. The site was again occupied in the Late Bronze Age: a field system, progressively modified throughout the period, has been uncovered. Beside one of the field boundaries are three circular huts, three four-post structures and a line of fence posts. Eight Bronze Age cremations have been found. A series of enclosures dating to the later Roman period has also been found, interpreted as being for stock management: they cluster around the sides a very large rectilinear enclosure.

MoLAS is now discussing funding for further work to the east of the excavated area with English Heritage and Henry Streeter Ltd.

(continued from p. 303)

age (Ken Whittaker) and the London Borough of Croydon Planning and Transportation Department, for their continued support for archaeological measures.

A further note should record the contribution of numerous individuals to the successful conclusion

New London office for the Royal Commission

FOLLOWING THE move of its main office to Swindon, the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England has opened a London search room at 55 Blandford Street, W1H 3AF. It offers access to collections on London's buildings and a reference library containing 1500 titles on the architecture, history and topography of London. Material held includes over 75,000 photographs of London buildings, detailed survey information, specialist collections such as the Rokeby collection of railway stations and the Maltby collection of Odeon cinemas, and a complete set of RCHME inventory and Survey of London archive material which supplements the published works.

Visitors can also use the search room to interrogate the national collection, held at the National Monuments Record Centre at Swindon and covering buildings, archaeology, air photographs and maritime sites. Special high quality fax links have been installed between the London and Swindon search rooms, as well as a free phone line. MONARCH, the National Monuments Record's database of architectural and archaeological information, can also be consulted.

The Public Search Room is open from 10 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. Mondays to Wednesdays, from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Thursdays, and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fridays. The Customer Services phone number is 0171 208 8200.

Double top for Orpington

LONDON'S ONLY entry for the British Archaeological Awards for 1994, Crofton Roman Villa at Orpington (*London Archaeologist* 7, no. 1 (1992) 28), was successful in winning two coveted awards. The Villa was declared joint winner of the *Virgin Group Award* for 'The Best Presentation of an Archaeological Project to the Public', and came equal second in the *Heritage in Britain Award*, for the best project for securing the long-term preservation of a site or monument. Our congratulations go to Bromley Borough Council, the Kent Archaeological Rescue Unit, the Bromley and West Kent Group, and all others involved in this project.

Missed it!

WE WERE unable to give notice of the exhibition *East meets West: Chinese Trade Porcelain*, which closed recently at the British Museum, because it fell between issues of *London Archaeologist*. However, readers make like to know that the accompanying book *Ancient Chinese Trade Ceramics*, by Regina Krahl and Jessica Harrison-Hall, is available from the Museum bookshops price £35. The exhibition has moved to the Chinoiserie Pavilion in Brussels.

of this project. Work on site was undertaken by Richard Hewett, Bill Yendall and Cliff Sampson. Specialist finds reports were prepared by the following MoLAS staff: John Lewis, Richenda Goffin, Geoff Egan, Naomi Crowley, Andy Fairbairn and Alan Pipe. The illustrations in this report were produced by Liz Howe, and Maggie Cox undertook the photography.