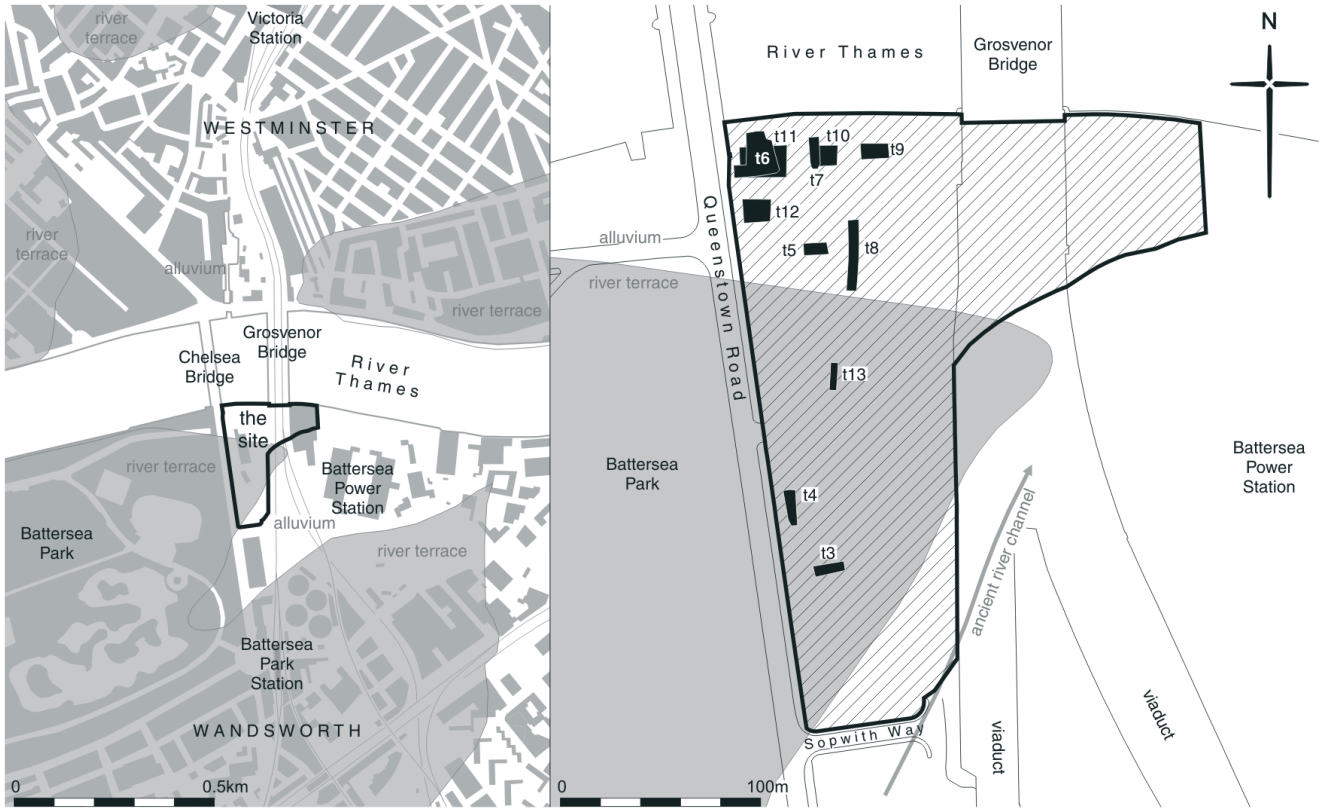

Fig. 1: site location plan

Drinks by the river

Jane Corcoran, Nigel Jeffries and Tony Mackinder investigate the remains of a notorious tavern at Chelsea Bridge Wharf, Wandsworth

Introduction

The Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) was commissioned by Berkeley Homes (Thames Valley) plc to undertake an archaeological investigation at a redevelopment site, to be known as Chelsea Bridge Wharf. The site is located on the south bank of the Thames, on the east side of Queenstown Road, Battersea, SW8 (National Grid Reference 52865 17750: site code QST01; Fig. 1).

An archaeological evaluation in May 2001 indicated that archaeological deposits survived along the river frontage, and was followed by a further period of investigation between July and August 2001. The 11 trenches investigated (Trenches 2–13; Fig. 1) were combined with a series of geoarchaeological auger holes designed to recover the complete sequence of deposits in a north–south transect across the site.

Natural topography

Geoarchaeological observations show that the site straddles the southern margin of the Thames floodplain and a remnant of Pleistocene river terrace, which, according to British Geological Survey mapping, forms several large low islands in the Battersea area. Trenches 5 to 12 lie within the floodplain where Holocene alluvium, 1–2 m thick, overlies the Shepperton Gravel (deposited 10,000–15,000 years ago), whilst Trenches 3, 4 and 13 lie above the river terrace, where brickearth overlies the Kempton Park Gravel (deposited 30,000–150,000 years ago). There is no alluvium in the river terrace area; instead there is evidence for weathering and soil formation, and this part of the site is likely to have remained as dry land throughout the Holocene. The islands of river terrace in this part of Battersea are dissected by an ancient river channel, which entered the floodplain of the Thames in the vicinity of Battersea Power Station. The channel can be traced in previous borehole data across the southern part of the site, although deposits associated with it were not examined as part of the project.

The site has a significant geoarchaeological location, as it lies at the point where the Thames emerges from a narrow valley floor constrained by Pleistocene river terraces and flows into a deeper and wider floodplain,

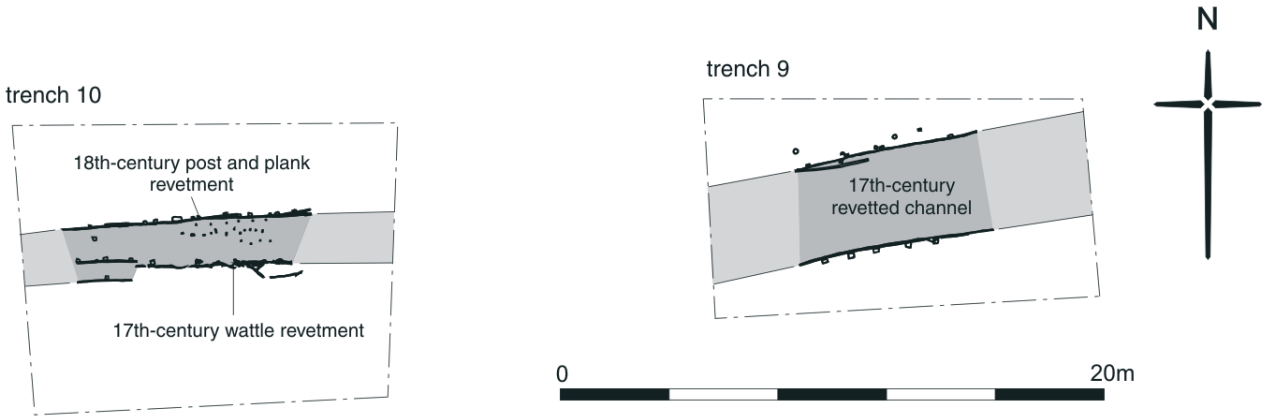

Fig. 2: timber revetments in Trenches 9 and 10

characterised by thick alluvial deposits. In fact, Battersea is often taken to be the place of transition from the Middle to the Lower Thames, and this landscape position of the site may have influenced its prehistoric and historic landscape and use.

Prehistoric to later medieval topography

In prehistoric times the central London Thames was not a large tidal river constrained within present artificial embankments. Instead it was a mosaic of stream channels, with islands rising above an expanse of wetland; some of these sandy islands were possibly formed as late as the Neolithic.[1] These islands may have been preferentially exploited by prehistoric farmers, who valued their light-to-work and easy-to-clear sandy soils, for the prehistoric forest that cloaked the river terraces and London Clay had not yet had time to become established on the sandy eyots. In contrast, the deposit characteristics and pollen evidence from the site shows that woodland had developed in the ancient brickearth soils across the Battersea islands since the Mesolithic. By the later prehistoric period, the oak and hazel woodland with a grassy groundcover that existed provided unattractive environment for exploitation.

Evidence for the changing river regime was found in the alluvium in the northern part of the site. Pollen and radiocarbon dating of a diachronous organic sandy deposit at the base of the alluvium suggested that during the Neolithic and Bronze Age the river level was falling, or the river channel was migrating away from the site. Vegetation appears to have colonised the lower-lying floodplain area as the river progressively abandoned it, which supports previous evidence from Westminster for falling river levels in the Bronze Age.[2] Later, grey clay accumulated in shallow standing water, indicating a return to wetter conditions. The lack of estuarine diatoms from the clay and its pollen assemblage suggests it built up within a freshwater fen, which may have fringed the island in the Iron Age, perhaps as a result of increased run-off from the river terrace or impeded drainage, as estuarine conditions encroached into central London.

This largely prehistoric landscape continued through to the later medieval period. Recorded in auger holes in trenches 9, 10 and 12 and located in the northern part of the site, the finely-bedded organic and clay deposits producing radiocarbon dates between A.D. 1170 and 1390 represent channel-edge accumulations. By this period the river had migrated close to or into this part of the site, possibly eroding earlier deposits. The response appears to be the construction of a localised embankment, inferred from the auger holes, between Trenches 8 and 12 and Trenches 9 and 10. A lead medieval pilgrim badge in the form of an ampulla depicting the death of Thomas Becket (found in Trench 10) is a significant local find, and is thought to be the only archaeological example recovered in Wandsworth.

16th- to early 18th-century topography and river defences

A pronounced soil horizon developed by the late 17th century, probably when the area was first fields before later cultivation. Closer to the river, deposits were more waterlain in character; two drainage ditches were found in Trenches 5 and 8. The revetted post and plank channel and clay bank observed in Trenches 9 (Fig. 2) and 11 respectively, appear to be localised constructions to aid water management and prevent flooding of this low-lying ground.

A flimsy wattle structure, which probably acted as a temporary revetment to stabilise the riverbank, was uncovered in Trench 10 (Fig. 2). A pine post from this structure was tree-ring dated to between 1657 and 1768 and was certainly of Scandinavian origin, perhaps south of Trondheim, Norway. To the north, a further line of stakes suggests there was an earlier wattle revetment and a more substantial post-and-plank revetment survived 0.60 m high, including some reused ship planks. One of these softwood planks,

Fig. 3: view of the riverfront walls associated with the Red House, looking east

Fig. 4: plan and elevation of the Red House (by permission British Library , 1022251.051)

tree-ring dated to between 1662 and 1755, came from the eastern Baltic, possibly Poland.

The Red House

The mid-18th century witnessed a major change to the area when the clay bank was replaced by two brick river walls (Fig. 3) and a famous local landmark, the riverside tavern known as the *Red House*, was built behind these new defences. This tavern is depicted on an undated plan and elevation held in the British Library[3] (Fig. 4) together with one of the various illustrations dated between 1820 and 1850 located in the Guildhall Library[4] (Fig. 5).

The original status of the *Red House* is unclear, but it was properly served as a tavern, offering accommodation with dining facilities predominantly for a male clientele and mostly serving wine as well some beers and spirits.[5] Its two-storey layout reflects this, with the ground floor containing two parlours providing private meeting rooms, a livelier taproom for supping beer, whilst non-alcoholic drinks were served in the coffee room.

The *Red House* mirrored changing recreational fashions during its *c.* 100-year history as subsequent owners took commercial advantage of its comparative rural riverside setting within easy distance by boat from the burgeoning metropolis. Its landing facilities, located in an inlet between the two brick river walls and evidenced by the decayed flight of wooden steps excavated, also increased traffic to the foreshore or to ferryboats that crossed the river at this point between here and fashionable Chelsea. Building on its initial favourable reputation for the quality of the asses milk sold, and the bird-shooting competitions held, the tavern was ideally suited as the focus for formal tea gardens during the early 19th century (Fig. 6), a space enjoyed by both men and women. A surfaced terrace with trees or shrubs planted to provide shade formed part of the tea gardens.

However, the *Red House* appears to have gained notoriety by the time of its closure and demolition in 1850; William Archibald Allen, during his testament against Richard Curtis whilst giving evidence at the Old Bailey criminal court in 1831,[6] recalled how he witnessed a number of prize fights, and the *Red House* and Battersea Fields developed a seedy reputation for the staging of fights, duels and gambling, although these male activities were the preserve of all classes. Nevertheless, Battersea Fields remained a centre for market gardening until mid-19th-century redevelopment, harvesting carrots, melons, lavender and

Fig. 5: the Red House in *c.* 1850 (Guildhall Library)

asparagus sold in 'Battersea Bundles'. Following the demolition of the *Red House* in 1850, the site was cleared and in 1861 a new river wall was constructed; the land behind it was raised by nearly 2.0 m and the site became a railway yard.

Unfortunately, little survived of the *Red House* as later buildings had removed any traces. Only part of the front brick wall remained (Fig. 7), with its interior face hinting at decoration with painted yellow, pinkish red and light grey plaster.

However, the brick river walls survived to greater degree (Fig. 8). Its western edge, standing 2.0 m high, was three-sided and jutted out from the line of riverbank; however, only two sides of the eastern section were found, as it could not be investigated due the proximity of a modern storm drain. Both river walls were identically constructed, with the lower section comprising large fragments of tooled ragstone, with some chalk and greensand and occasional red bricks.

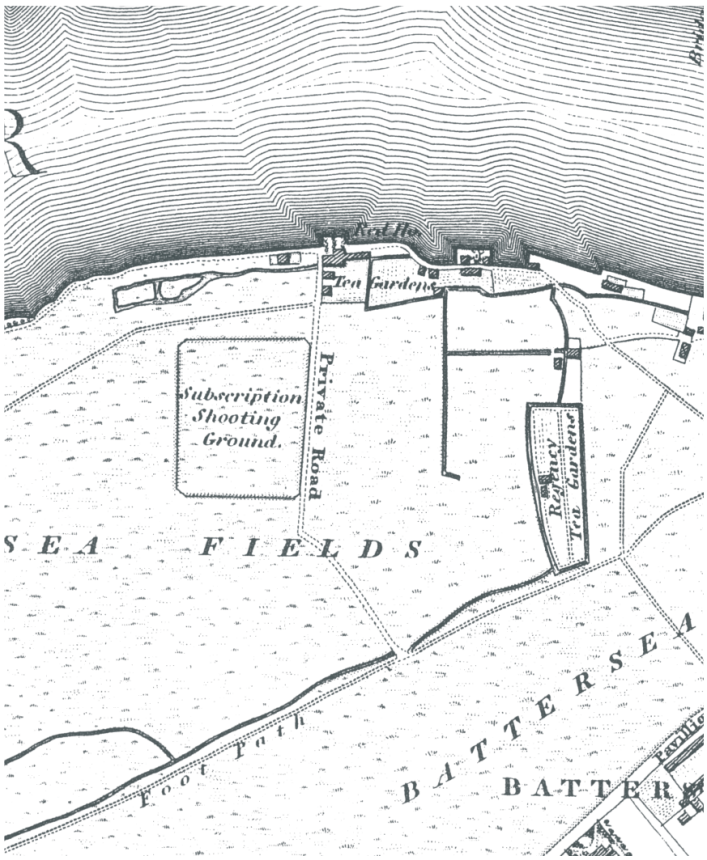

Fig. 6: extract from Greenwood's map of 1824–26

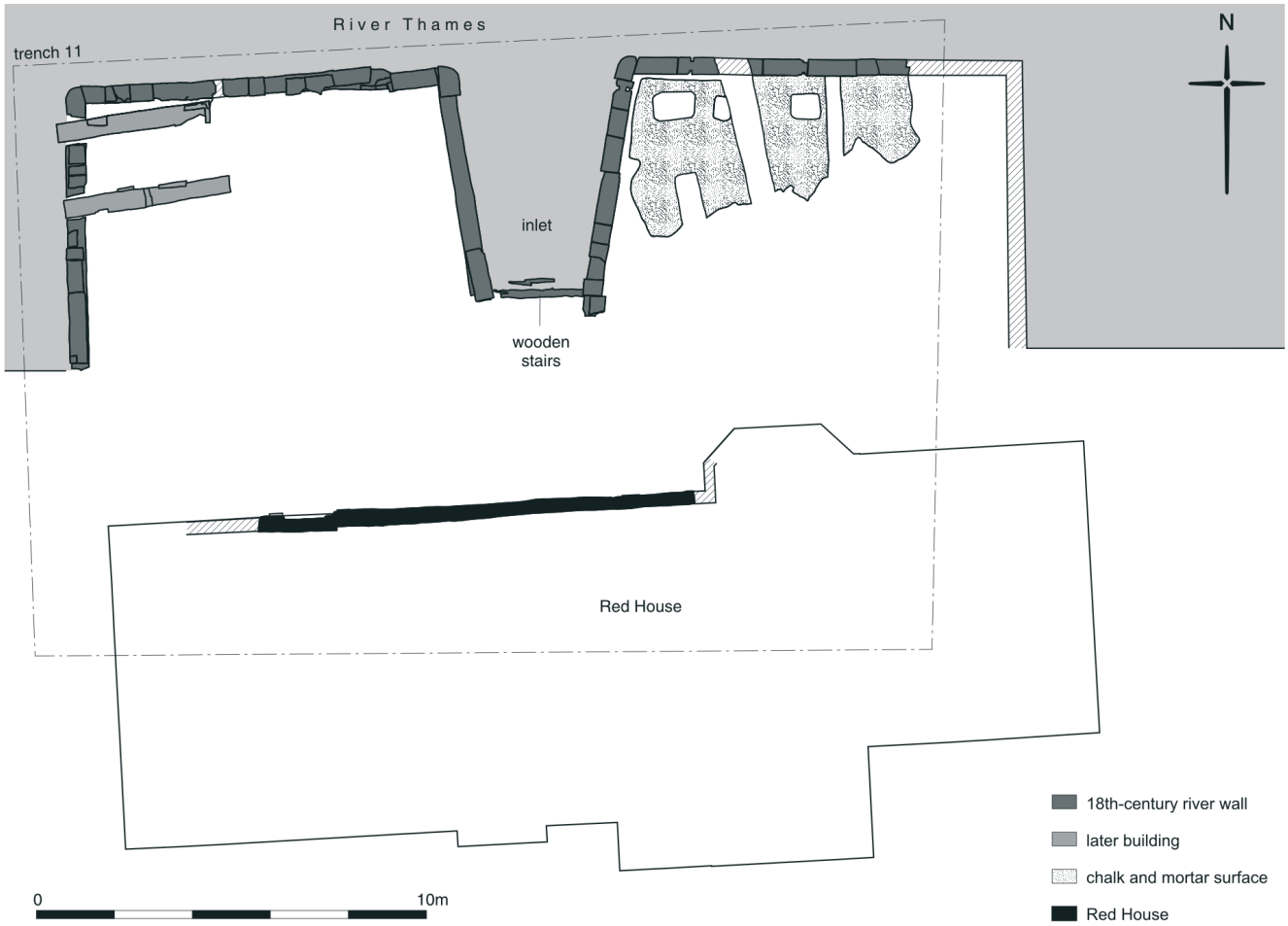

Fig. 7: the Red House and associated riverside walls

Fig. 8: view of the riverfront walls associated with the Red House, looking south

This foundation allowed for a 0.45 m thick yellow brick wall construction, set by using a special waterproof mortar called Parker cement, which is mentioned in a patent specification in 1796.[7] Topping the walls were flat Portland limestone slabs held together by small lead ties, with the small recesses on the top surface allowing for uprights for an iron balustrade. The outer face of the river wall was reinforced with iron tie rods similar to those used on brick houses, which were attached to vertical timber posts anchored behind the structures. The bracket for the flagpole, depicted on Fig. 5, was also found attached to the river wall.

Further to the east, small-scale attempts at consolidating the riverbank (Fig. 2) were soon overwhelmed by the silts deposited by the repeated changes in the tide, leading to others being constructed, each slightly further towards the river.

Material culture of the Red House

Much material culture contemporary with the use of the *Red House* was found in Trenches 9 to 11, with objects ranging from accidentally lost items such as buttons and coins, to the fragments of pottery, glass and clay tobacco pipes which lay scattered around the tavern.

Trench 9

The earlier 17th-century channel had now been infilled, and several willows had either been planted deliberately or were posts that had taken root and grown over the side of this revetment. Around this, three dumps in particular yielded finds consistently dated between the mid- to third quarter of the 18th century and therefore contemporary with the early use of the *Red House*. The 19 ceramic vessels (weighing 1289 g) found in two of the layers were mainly used for drinking and for storage. Sherds include one fragment each of a white salt-glazed stoneware and a Westerwald-type stoneware tankard, used for alcohol consumption – the last is decorated with the beginnings of a royal cipher medallion . However, the larger-sized fragments from impervious London-made stoneware bottles in the 18th-century 'plain ware' forms[8] provide the bulk of the pottery by weight and vessel count.

Smoking is evidenced by the clay tobacco pipe recovered, contemporary with the ceramics found. The decorated pieces comprise two OS10 bowl types[9] derived from the same mould stamped with the *Fleur-de-lys* symbol, with the initialled maker's marks of ER (of OS type 12) found on three examples made from at least two different moulds. Other maker's marks include IS (AO type 26) and possibly RS (AO type 25), with all the noted examples moulded in relief on the sides of the heel or spur. Glass is less frequent, limited to a wine bottle fragment.

Trench 10

This trench yielded the only dietary evidence collected from a soil sample, revealing that cod, plaice, and flounder were caught or consumed here. Accidentally lost items include a copper-alloy coin, possibly a George II or III worn halfpenny, and a copper-alloy ring.

Up to 32 ceramic vessels were found in a number of deposits around the plank revetments recorded in this trench (weighing 1221 g). Although one deposit contained a chronologically mixed group comprising 18th- and 19th-century wares that were unlikely to have been used together, drinking vessels dominate, ranging from later London-made stoneware bottles to fragments of earlier blue and white Chinese porcelain. The composition of the remaining mid- to late-18th-century ceramics is more consistent, with vessels used for alcohol- or tea-drinking, ranging from blue and white Chinese porcelain teabowl and plate, white salt-glazed stoneware saucer, Westerwald-type stoneware jug and two chamber pots and London-made stoneware jug fragments.

Fragments of moulded green wine bottles were found scattered throughout these deposits, with the pieces of a London-made stoneware jug also providing material used for social drinking. Smoking activities are shown by clay tobacco pipes, with decorated pieces comprising a flower symbol on an AO type 26 bowl and maker's marks initials of WW and GB present on two AO type 27 bowls moulded in relief on the sides of the heel or spur.

Trench 11

In addition to the small selection of earlier 17th-century pottery redeposited behind the river wall were the large fragments of up to three locally-made coarse red earthenware conical-shaped sugar moulds. These were used in the sugar refining process during its conversion into white crystalline cones (or sugar loaves) and perhaps used to sweeten the tea, coffee and chocolate drinks that were undoubtedly served in the *Red House* coffee rooms. The introduction of sugar represents one of the most important changes in cuisine during this period.

Although evidence of smoking activities are restricted to two clay

tobacco pipe bowls of the AO type 25, social drinking is shown by the scatter of wooden and cork bungs on the remains of the plank floor in one of the *Red House* rooms. With this trench located close to the site of the tavern, it is of little surprise that it also contained structural fragments, such as copper-alloy nails, an iron wal-type hook and pintle, with copper-alloy piping and a pulley hook completing this group.

Personal adornment is limited to a machine-engraved button, with fishing activities again evidenced by the lead netsinker found. Accidentally lost items include two copper-alloy coins, both worn and corroded George III halfpennies dating from either 1799 or 1806–7 and 1773 respectively.

The Red House and other assemblages from drinking establishments from London

The *Red House* is not the only excavation from London and its environs that has yielded the paraphernalia associated with drinking establishments. To put the finds into context, it is important to distinguish between the taverns, ale-houses (increasingly known as public houses), inns and ordinaries that they were used in, as these places all provided different services in addition to serving alcohol, and in most cases, food. Also situated by the Thames, the pits dug into the backyard of the *Rose and Crown Inn* in Putney[10] yielded large quantities of mid- to late-18th-century clay tobacco pipes – many of which were from the same maker – and utilitarian ceramics used in the kitchen, as well as a London-made stoneware tankard decorated with the Rose and Crown medallion. Significant assemblages dating to the mid-19th century have been excavated at the former *White Horse* public house in Poplar in East London,[11] with the matching liquor glasses derived from *The Crown* public house in north Lambeth[12] etched with the names of two of its proprietors, Joseph Miller and William Aylett. From the City of London, the richness and diversity of the late-17th-century material contained in a cesspit backfill serving a property fronting King Street[13] strongly suggests use in a drinking establishment, although the function of this building has yet to be determined by documentary evidence. Similarly dated ceramics, predominantly Essex-made black-glazed tygs and Frechen stonewares, together with clay tobacco pipes, were found nearby in a cellar of the *Bear Inn* on Basinghall Street.[14] Further afield, the substantial assemblages derived from the *King's Arms Inn* in Uxbridge, Middlesex[15] and the *Tunsgate* tavern in Guildford[16] have been well documented. Although the *Red House* assemblage suffers by comparison, its less well preserved condition merely reflects the open area in which it was discarded.

Conclusions

This site provided important archaeological evidence for the development and prehistoric topography of the Battersea, and the subsequent attempts to control the riverside, with the material and structural evidence of the important *Red House* tavern.

Attempts to control the river to prevent flooding and erosion through clay banking is postulated during the medieval period. As the site was located some distance from the major centres of population and trade, there was no reason to build elaborate or expensive revetment structures such as those found downstream at the City or Southwark. The earliest dated features were a 17th-century channel or drain, a revetment of reused ship planks and a clay bank. In the 18th century there was a substantial change to the character of the area, with the clay bank being replaced by a river wall, built of brick in two sections and forming an inlet with wooden stairs that allowed access to the newly built *Red House* tavern.

Although the condition of the material culture from the *Red House* is not as intact and reconstructable as similarly dated assemblages recovered from finds-rich features, such as well-sealed pits and cesspits, the analysis of this seemingly mundane material provides glimpses into the range of activities conducted in and around the tavern during its use.

Acknowledgements

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This report incorporates contributions by Geoff Egan (small finds), Kieron Heard (clay tobacco pipes) and Ian Tyers of ARCUS (dendrochronology). Peter Hart Allison prepared the illustrations; site photography was by Maggie Cox and studio photography by Andy Chopping.

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