



Fig. 1: prehistory on the foreshore: the Mesolithic site viewed from Vauxhall Bridge, looking downstream (photo: Nathalie Cohen)

London's Top Secret

Gustav Milne, Nathalie Cohen and Jon Cotton

Just metres from the M16 building in Vauxhall (Fig. 1), lies London's oldest prehistoric structure, on a site that has remained wrapped in secrecy until its date could be confirmed. The Thames Discovery Programme (TDP) can now exclusively reveal that a group of six late Mesolithic timbers have recently been revealed on the foreshore (Fig. 2), exposed by an increasingly aggressive tidal scour.

The six-thousand-year-old site has been surveyed by members of the TDP (Fig. 3), with the support of English Heritage, the Museum of London and the Geomatics team of MOLA (Fig. 4).

This feature lies 600 m east of the remarkable Bronze Age timber-built 'bridge' or jetty (dated to 1750–1285 cal BC) recorded by the Thames Archaeological Survey team in 1993 and the subject of a Channel 4 *Time Team* programme in 2001. The new find downstream is even older, with three samples returning radiocarbon dates of 4790–4610 cal BC, 4690–4490 cal BC and 4720–4540 cal BC. The group at present comprises three timbers up to

0.3 m in diameter, some with bark and sapwood surviving, as well as three smaller stakes up to 0.1 m in diameter. The feature is only exposed at very low tides, and thus more may be revealed when the site is re-surveyed in the future. The wooden features do not form any obvious alignments as yet, and may possibly represent more than one phase of activity.

A number of interesting Mesolithic finds have also been recovered from this foreshore, including an assemblage of lithics and a tranchet adze (Fig. 5). This remarkable site is now the focus of a wider study of the area, at the confluence of the Thames and the Effra, at a time when sea and river levels were considerably lower than they are now.

Jon Cotton from the Museum of London takes up the story:

"The Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age is often seen as a period during which hunting and gathering was practised by small, often highly mobile, communities. It is conventionally divided into an Earlier Mesolithic (c. 9600–7600 cal BC), characterised by the use of

MESOLITHIC TIMBERS



Fig. 3: Thames Discovery Programme team recording one of the Mesolithic piles (photo: Nathalie Cohen)

broad-blade microliths, and a Later Mesolithic (*c.* 7600–4000 cal BC), characterised by smaller narrow-blade or geometric microliths. The change occurred some time before Britain became an island separated from the European mainland – a process now thought to have been completed by about 6500 cal BC.

Earlier Mesolithic flint scatters have been found in the London area, often in valley-bottom or flood-plain locations, as at Three Ways Wharf, Uxbridge, or the B&Q site along the Old Kent Road, for example. Later Mesolithic sites are generally less well represented, and it has been suggested that gradually rising river levels prompted a move out of valley floors and onto the higher valley slopes. Structures of Mesolithic date are extremely rare anywhere in the country, which makes the new Later Mesolithic Vauxhall find still more exciting. The Vauxhall foreshore site has also produced a notable assemblage of over twenty sherds of Neolithic pottery (Fig. 6), found at low water a few metres downstream of the Mesolithic timbers amongst a scatter of burnt flint. Some sherds are large, some conjoining, and some are encrusted with a calcareous deposit ('Thames race'). At least two plain flint-tempered vessels are represented. The first is a brittle, thin-walled open bowl with an outwardly-flaring rim (Fig. 7), while the second thicker-walled example is represented by body sherds – one of which has a cereal impression on its exterior surface. Not enough of either vessel is present to enable a profile to be



Fig. 2: Mesolithic pile (scale 0.5 m) (photo: Nathalie Cohen)



Fig. 4: the MOLA team record the level and location of one of the prehistoric features (photo: Nathalie Cohen)

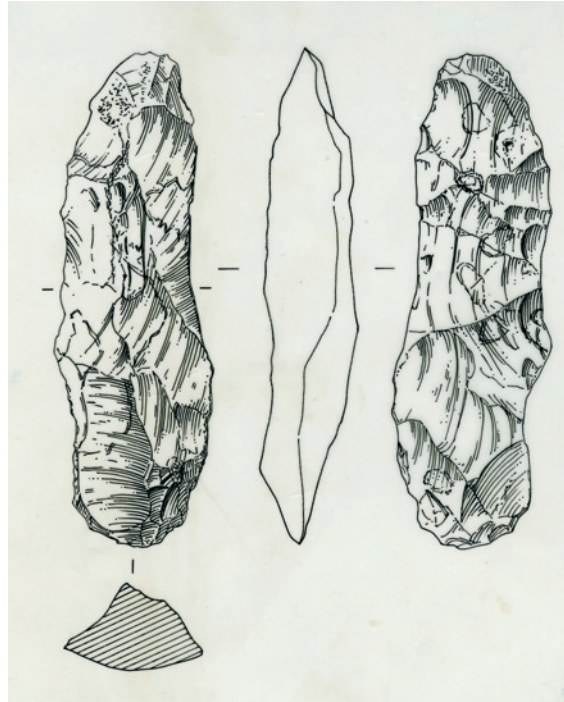


Fig. 5: Mesolithic adze found by Dick Read on Vauxhall foreshore (drawing by Jon Cotton, MOL)

reconstructed with any confidence, although the concave neck of the first suggests that it may have been of carinated form.

Whether or not this is so, the material is clearly of early Neolithic type, and can probably be dated to some time within the first half of the fourth millennium BC. This of course makes it somewhat later in date than the Mesolithic timbers just metres upstream, but it raises an interesting question: was this spot a memorable (perhaps even a named) place in the landscape, and one to which people continued to be drawn over a long period?"

It is not just the eroding power of the Thames that is threatening this prehistoric site, as this stretch of the river is also facing redevelopments that may affect the foreshore considerably. One of these is the plan to construct a new Combined Sewer Overflow connection facility on the foreshore just metres from the new site, as part of the much needed Thames Tideway Tunnel upgrade. The site of London's oldest prehistoric structure seems to become a memorable place once more, this time as the focus of a major research project. The secret is out.

Acknowledgements

The Thames Discovery Programme is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund; the survey at Vauxhall benefited from specialist advice from English Heritage, notably from Jane Sidell, Mark Stevenson and Robert Whytehead, while the high-precision survey was undertaken with a grant from the Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee.



Fig. 6: Neolithic pottery from the Vauxhall foreshore (photo: Torla Evans, MOL)



Fig. 7: drawing of Neolithic pottery from the Vauxhall foreshore (scale in cm., drawing by Jon Cotton, MOL)