



Fig. 1: site location in relation to other excavated sites along London Road/High Street, Brentford, and plan showing location of evaluation trenches and area of excavation to the rear of 2 Commerce Road

# An Iron Age enclosure at Commerce Road, Brentford

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## Introduction

A proposal to develop a large site on the west bank of the River Brent, c. 130m to the north of the London Road in Brentford, led to the first phase of archaeological evaluation being conducted by MOLA in October 2012. The site is bounded to the east by the Brent and by a basin of the Grand Union Canal; to the south-east by warehousing and Spruce House; to the west by Commerce Road; and to the north by the main London (Waterloo) to Hounslow railway line. The centre of the site is located at National Grid Reference 517224 177398 (Fig. 1).

The evaluation revealed a series of truncated Iron Age, Roman and later features located at the south-west end of evaluation Trench 3 (Fig. 2). The features occupy a low bluff of brickearth-capped river terrace gravels at around +7m OD; the ground falls away gradually to the south and rather more steeply onto the alluvial deposits in the floor of the Brent valley 100m to the east.<sup>1</sup>

A further phase of excavation was carried out in late January/early February 2013 (site code BNL12). As

the principal focus of interest lay at the rear of No 2 Commerce Road, a 15m by 15m area was opened in that area. The excavation area included the previous evaluation Trench 3.

## The archaeological background

Following excavations carried out along the High Street/London Road alignment since the 1960s Brentford is best known as a Roman and later settlement sited at the point where the Roman road running west-south-west from London to Silchester crosses the Brent.<sup>2</sup> Traces of Roman settlement have been recorded west of the Brent in the past,<sup>3</sup> and recent work at Syon Lodge, at the Syon Waldorf Astoria Hotel, and close to Syon Park's Lion Gate has both confirmed and significantly extended its known westerly extent.<sup>4</sup> The northern and southern limits of the Brentford settlement are less well defined, however, and the settled area is usually assumed to have been confined to a narrow corridor that fronted onto the Roman road either side of the Brent, with fields beyond.

Despite the large numbers of prehistoric finds that have been

recovered from adjacent stretches of the Thames, and from the Thames/Brent confluence at Old England and at Brentford Dock,<sup>5</sup> traces of anything pre-dating the Roman ribbon settlement have proved elusive. Struck flint of diagnostic Mesolithic and Neolithic to Bronze Age type, and pottery of Early Neolithic to Later Bronze Age date has been identified at various points along the Roman road, though often in disturbed or residual contexts.<sup>6</sup> Iron Age material is somewhat better represented, and includes fugitive traces of possibly Late Iron Age features at the far eastern edge of the known Roman settlement;<sup>7</sup> while on either side of the Brent Iron Age features have been reported at 2–10 London Road<sup>8</sup> and at 159–188 High Street, 130m to the south.<sup>9</sup> However, the present site provides the clearest evidence so far for the presence of well-dated Iron Age activity beneath the modern town.

## Excavation results

### Iron Age features

The earliest of the features located in the 15m x 15m area comprised short stretches of two shallow and broadly

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parallel ditches [70] and [80] cut into the brickearth and aligned NW/SE (Fig. 2, phase 1). The larger of the two, ditch [70], was 1m in width with a surviving depth of 0.22m, and was 5m in length. Ditch [80] 2m to the north was 0.88m in width, retained a depth of 0.20m and was 3.36m in length. Both ditches were filled with compact iron-stained grey-brown sandy silt containing occasional sherds of prehistoric pottery and fragments of burnt flint; one small sand-tempered sherd from [80] featured a fingertip impressed rim of likely Early/Mid Iron Age type.

Both ditches were subsequently re-cut/replaced by two more substantial parallel ditches [52] and [78], less than a metre apart (Fig. 2, phase 2). These shared the same alignment as the earlier ditches, and their termini were also

broadly coincident. It is unclear whether these ditches were contemporary or sequential, though given their close spacing and the truncation to which both have been subjected, the latter seems on balance more likely.

The northern ditch [78] was 1.5m in width and up to 0.25m in depth; its terminus was marked by two shallow double holes [91] and [93]. The southern ditch [52] was also 1.5m in width and 0.22m deep; its terminus extended a metre or so beyond that of [78], to bring it into alignment with the pair of double post holes (Fig. 3). A small pit or posthole [30] lay beyond its terminus; other features were noted in this same area but had been disturbed by modern foundations. Both ditches were filled with compact brownish grey sandy silt, containing for

the most part small sherds of pottery, fired clay and burnt and struck flint. However, the terminus of the southern ditch [52] produced a relatively large assemblage of conjoining Early/Mid Iron Age pottery during the evaluation phase, together with substantial parts of several triangular clay weights with perforations at the corners.

Both of these later ditches arced gently away to the west beyond the limits of the excavated area, and appear to form part of an entrance-way and possible accompanying gate structure(s) belonging to an enclosure facing east towards the Brent. If this is so, no traces of any corresponding ditches marking the southern side of what must have been a wide entrance-way were located within the excavated area: these presumably lie immediately beyond the limits of the excavation to the south-east (Fig. 4).

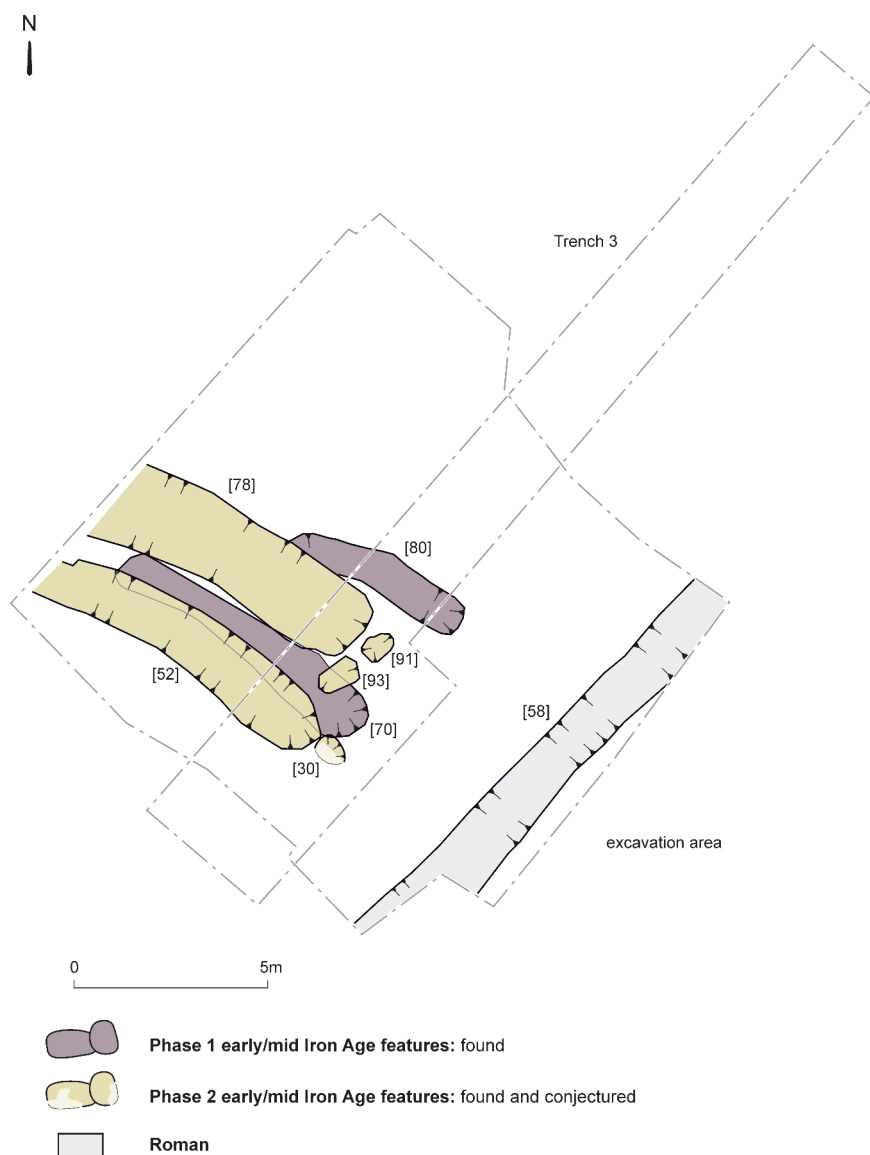


Fig. 2: plan of excavation showing the principal Iron Age and Roman features

### Roman and later features

The enclosure ditches and associated bank(s) must have survived as visible features within the local landscape into the Roman period, for a linear ditch [58] neatly exploited the break in the ditches at the putative entrance (Fig. 2). Its north-east to south-west alignment suggests either that it represents the northern boundary of activity focused on the Roman road to the south, or that it demarcated a land-holding (such as a water meadow) orientated at right angles to the Brent to the east. The ditch was 1.1m in width and 0.35m in depth (Fig. 5). At its base was a distinct lens of iron panning. Three sherds of worn 2nd century AD Roman pottery lay on its floor, including body sherds from a Central Gaulish (Lezoux) cup (possibly a Drag. 33 form) and the rim of an oxidised necked jar with a large bead rim, similar to the mid to late 2nd-century Verulamium region white ware jar form found in the same ditch.

A number of other features were also recorded within the area examined: they were either undated or demonstrably post-medieval, and perhaps linked to horticultural activity.

### The finds assemblage

The prehistoric and Roman features outlined above produced a restricted but interesting finds assemblage comprising pottery, fired clay, and



**Fig. 3:** photo of ditch termini, with posthole in the foreground. The edges of the features have been outlined with yellow spray marking

struck and burnt flint. With the exception of a few sherds of a weakly shouldered jar from pit [30], virtually all of the prehistoric pottery was recovered from the various enclosure ditches, with nearly 90% by sherd count and weight from the terminus of ditch [52] (context [31]) (Fig 6, <P1>– <P5>). This deposit also contained a number of fragments of fired clay, including half of a triangular weight with perforations at each of its three corners (sides 170 x 170 x 160mm in length and c. 96mm thick; wt: 1140g) (Fig 6, <1>), and the perforated corner of a second example (wt: 340g).

The ditch terminus deposit [31] comprised 160 sherds of pottery, some large and many conjoining, weighing over 3.8k. A minimum of eight vessels are present: six jars and two bowls – though the latter are represented by only seven sherds weighing 170g. Although each of the vessels has its own particular fabric recipe, there are two distinct fabric types: i) quartz SAND with apparently incidentally incorporated red/brown ferruginous granules, and deliberate if sparse inclusions of sub-angular crushed burnt flint (>5mm); and ii) a brittle vesicular SHEL/ORG fabric with sparse ferruginous granules and numerous plate-like voids, probably burnt-out shell.

The brittle ‘corky’ SHEL/ORG fabric makes up half of the terminus deposit

by both sherd count and weight, and appears to belong to a single tall jar with a flattened, externally-expanded rim, weak rounded shoulder and narrow base (Fig. 6, <P2>). Two jars in the SAND fabric are also represented by multiple conjoining sherds: the first comprises the complete profile of a medium-sized jar with a short upright rim, and a weak fingertip-impressed shoulder (Fig. 6, <P1>); the second is of similar size and form but has fingertip impressions confined to the top of the flattened rim (Fig. 6, <P3>). (One small SAND sherd with fingertip impressions on top of the rim was present in ditch

[80].) The two bowls are both plain with rounded shoulders. One shares the coarse surface finish employed on the jars (Fig. 6, <P4>), while the second, in a fine reduced version of the SAND fabric, has been smoothed internally and burnished externally (Fig. 6, <P5>).<sup>10</sup> The suite of fabrics, forms and restricted decorative traits suggests that the assemblage can be dated to the E/MIA transition (c. 6th–4th centuries BC), at a point where the angular vessel forms and the characteristically crushed burnt flint-loaded fabrics of the LBA/Earliest/Early Iron Age are starting to give way to the more rounded profiles and sand-loaded fabrics of the full MIA.<sup>11</sup> This is supported by the absence from the restricted Commerce Road assemblage of jars and particularly bowls with marked angular shoulders of true EIA type, and of late MIA vessel forms such as straight-sided saucepan pots and globular curvilinear decorated bowls. The triangular weights – usually associated with the use of warp-weighted looms<sup>12</sup> – also support a mature IA date for the group. Both weights are in a flint-free sand-loaded fabric containing frequent ferruginous inclusions, some of large size. Both have distinctive and deliberately formed shallow grooves at their apexes.

Comparable E/MIA finds assemblages are becoming available from a number of sites in Thames-side localities: beyond the small and somewhat nondescript assemblages



**Fig. 4:** photo of the area during excavation looking south-east

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from 2-10 London Road and 159-188 High Street 130m to the south,<sup>13</sup> Snowy Fielder Way, Isleworth is the closest as the crow flies.<sup>14</sup> Other sites lie further back on the higher gravel terraces, as at Caesar's Camp and Terminal 5, Heathrow,<sup>15</sup> Western International Market, Hayes,<sup>16</sup> and at Stockley Park, Dawley.<sup>17</sup> Bayesian radiocarbon dates from the latter site centre on the 5th and 4th centuries BC.<sup>18</sup>

### Discussion

Unfortunately, the key area of the Commerce Road site has been subjected to a degree of truncation and terracing that hampers interpretation. The two early ditches [70] and [80] appear to comprise little more than short segments cut through by the later pair of more substantial ditches. As such their function is unclear, although they were obviously influential in determining the positioning and alignment of the later ditches and their accompanying post settings.

Given their level of truncation and close spacing, it seems unlikely that these later ditches can be regarded as directly contemporary with one another. That said, it is not unreasonable to suggest that one represents a close replacement of the other, perhaps as part of a programme designed to modify the suggested gated entrance facing the Brent – though which is the earlier of the two cannot

now be established. However, the pottery group from the floor of the inner ditch terminal [52] is significant in offering a likely date within the 6th to 4th centuries BC for this general phase of activity. The reasons for the deposition of the material are less easy to determine, however, but could well encompass practical as well as spiritual motivations revolving around the construction of the ditch terminal/entrance and the enclosure of space.

The limited evidence allows little to be said about the function of the enclosure, if such it was, though the low eminence overlooking the Brent valley floor was presumably primarily chosen to mitigate winter floods as act in any sort of overtly defensive capacity. (In this context the gated entrance structure would have been equally effective in keeping livestock in as hostile third parties out.) Finally, the Roman ditch lined up on the postulated entrance to the Iron Age enclosure may also help to define the northerly extent of the Roman roadside settlement in this area of Brentford west of the river Brent.

### Conclusion

Nearly 40 years ago John Kent postulated the existence of a Late Iron Age oppidum somewhere in west London, on the basis of the distribution of Gallo-Belgic B gold staters and high tin-bronze flat linear potins.<sup>19</sup> Subsequent mapping of this coin

distribution<sup>20</sup> indicated Brentford-Kew as a potential focus of search.

Although too early to have a bearing on this particular question Commerce Road clearly forms part of a complex E/MIA riparian landscape, parts of which are beginning to emerge in west London.<sup>21</sup> This accumulating evidence is beginning to suggest that the Iron Age settlement pattern was essentially geared to the exploitation of the well-drained gravels along the Thames.<sup>22</sup>

### Acknowledgements

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Fig. 5: photo of Roman ditch [58] looking north-east

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2. R. Canham *Two Thousand Years of Brentford* (1978); A. Parnum and J. Cotton 'Recent work in Brentford: excavations and observations 1974-82' *London Archaeol* 4 (12) (1983) 318–25, 336; L. Darton 'Two multi-period excavations along the Roman road from Londinium to Silchester at Brentford' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 58 (2007) 89–140.
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5. R.A. Smith 'Specimens from the Layton Collection' *Archaeologia* 69 (1918) 1–30; G.F. Lawrence 'Antiquities from the Middle Thames' *Archeol J* 86 (1929) 69–98; R.E.M. Wheeler 'Old England, Brentford' *Antiquity* 3 (1929) 20–32.

6. Parnum and Cotton *op cit* fn 2, 319–20, 324; Darton *op cit* fn 2, 91–2.

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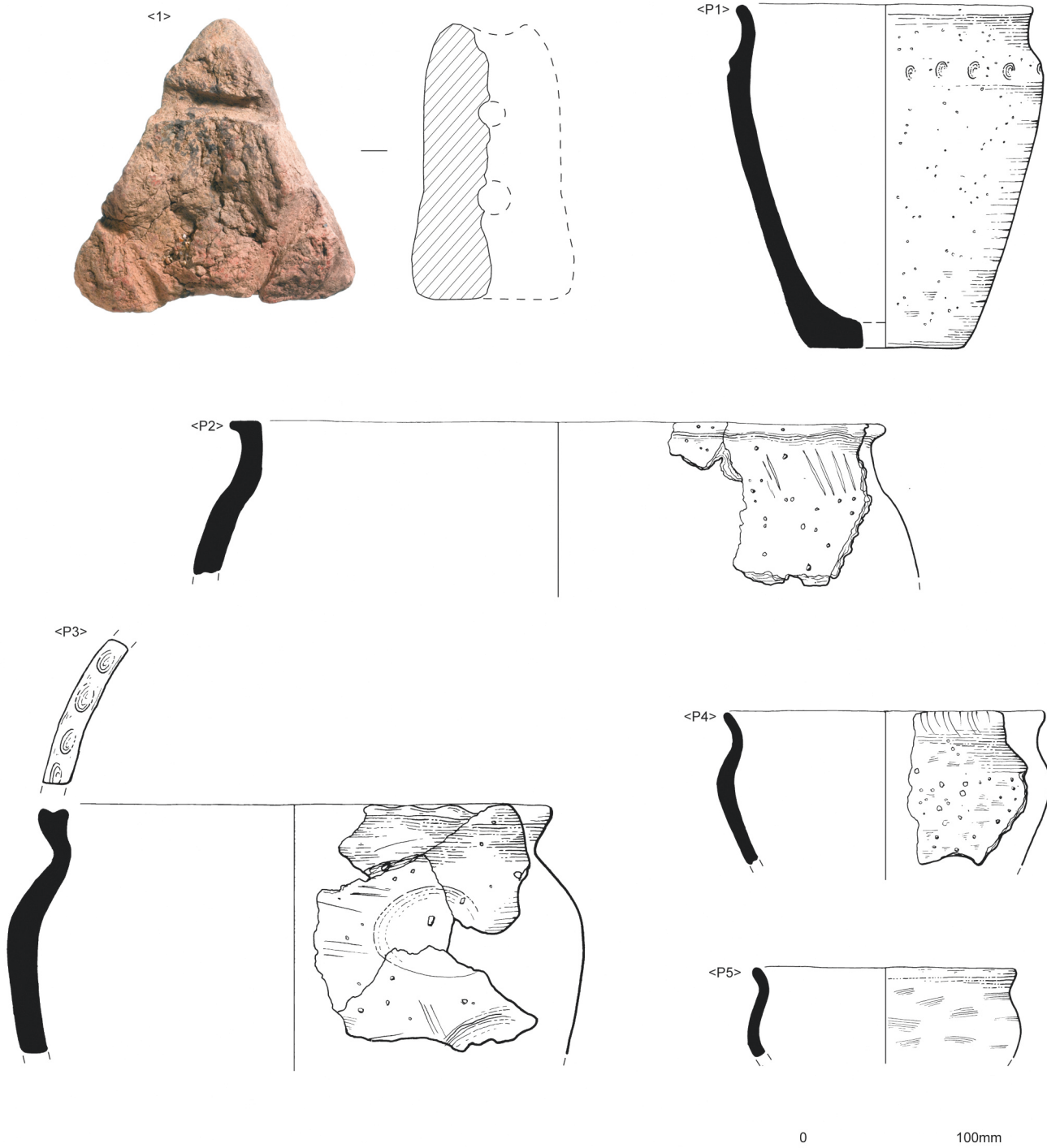


Fig. 6: Early/Middle Iron Age pottery (<P1>–<P5>) and triangular clay weight (<I>) from the second phase ditch terminus, context [31]

8. *London Archaeol* 6 (7) (1990), 189; *London Archaeol* 8 (supp 2) (1997) 47.

9. L. Darton *op cit* fn 2, Phases 2 and 3, 92–3.

10. <P1>–<P5> can be found in the site archive for BNL12 as Accession nos <3-7>.

11. E.g. see P. Jones 'The Pottery' in G. Hayman, P. Jones and R. Poulton *Settlement Sites and Sacred Offerings: Prehistoric and later archaeology in the Thames valley, near Chertsey* (2012) 117–24.

12. See discussion in G. Lambrick with M. Robinson *The Thames through Time. Archaeology of the Gravel Terraces of the Upper and Middle Thames. The Thames Valley in Late Prehistory: 1500 BC – AD 50* (2009) 194–5.

13. L. Darton *op cit* fn 2, 112 and fig 12, nos 1 and 2; few sherds of 1A type from 2–6 London Road (BRF89) are present in the site archive held at LAARC.

14. C. Bell 'An archaeological excavation on land adjacent to Snowy Fielder Waye, Isleworth, London Borough of Hounslow, Middlesex' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 47 (1996) 00–00. Here too are sherds in the distinctive 'corky' SHEL/ORG fabric.

15. W.F. Grimes and J. Close-Brooks 'The Excavation of Caesar's Camp, Heathrow, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1944' *Proc Prehist Soc* 59 (1993) 303–60; Framework Archaeology *Landscape Evolution in the Middle Thames Valley: Heathrow Terminal 5 Excavations Volume 2* (2010) 219.

16. Louise Rayner *pers comm*.

17. J. Cotton 'Iron Age settlement at Dawley, west London' *London Archaeol* 5 (5) (1985) 140.

18. Nick Elsdon *pers comm*.

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interpretation of the earliest coins' in J. Bird, H. Chapman and J. Clark (eds) *Collectanea Londiniensia: Studies presented to Ralph Merrifield*, LAMAS Special Paper 2 (1978) 53–8.

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21. E.g. *op cit* fn 11; *op cit* fn 13; G. Bruce 'An Iron Age settlement at Lady Margaret School, Parson's Green, Fulham' *London Archaeol* 8 (9) (1998) 236–40; J. Partridge 'Prehistoric ditch found at Hammersmith' *London Archaeol* 8 (11) (1998) 304–5; R. Humphrey 'Excavations at 120-124 King Street, Hammersmith' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 52 (2001) 11–25.

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