

# Brentford's Roman roadside settlement: excavations at Lion Gate, Syon Park

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## Introduction

Between June and July 2013 a community and training excavation, Excavate London: the Romans, was organised by the Museum of London as part of the 'Museum's Opening Up ... Archaeology' project at the Lion Gate, Syon Park (site code LIG13). The excavation was carried out in collaboration with MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology), with funding from private donations and Arts Council (England), the kind permission of His Grace the Duke of Northumberland (the landowner) and the full cooperation and assistance of Syon Park Ltd. The post-excavation analysis and writing of this article were carried out by MOLA and generously funded by a grant from the City of London Archaeologist Trust (CoLAT).

The site lies to the west of London within the grounds of Syon Park, with Syon House, the London residence of the Duke of Northumberland, and the site of Syon Abbey both situated

c. 0.5km to the south-east (Figs. 1 and 2). It is located within an Archaeological Priority Area and situated close to the projected line of the London–Silchester Roman road, adjacent to the recently published Hilton Hotel site, which recorded evidence for a Roman settlement that extended alongside the road into the centre of Brentford.<sup>1</sup>

The community and training dig provided an opportunity to involve local schools, groups and interested individuals and to teach them the basics of digging and finds processing, together with something of the local history of the site and the area. The community excavation ran for two

weeks, and was followed by a two-week training excavation, during which students received training in archaeological excavation and recording (Fig. 3). Over the course of the community excavation we worked with nine local primary and secondary schools and a Young Archaeologists' Club. The training excavation comprised two week-long courses aimed at adults, and we received sponsorship to pay for two places for people who would otherwise have been unable to cover the cost. We also organised an open evening and an open day to explain the project and to showcase the results to local residents. The entire programme was supported

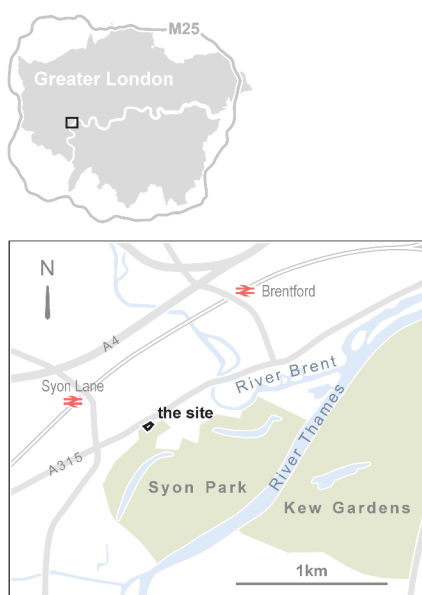


Fig 1: site location

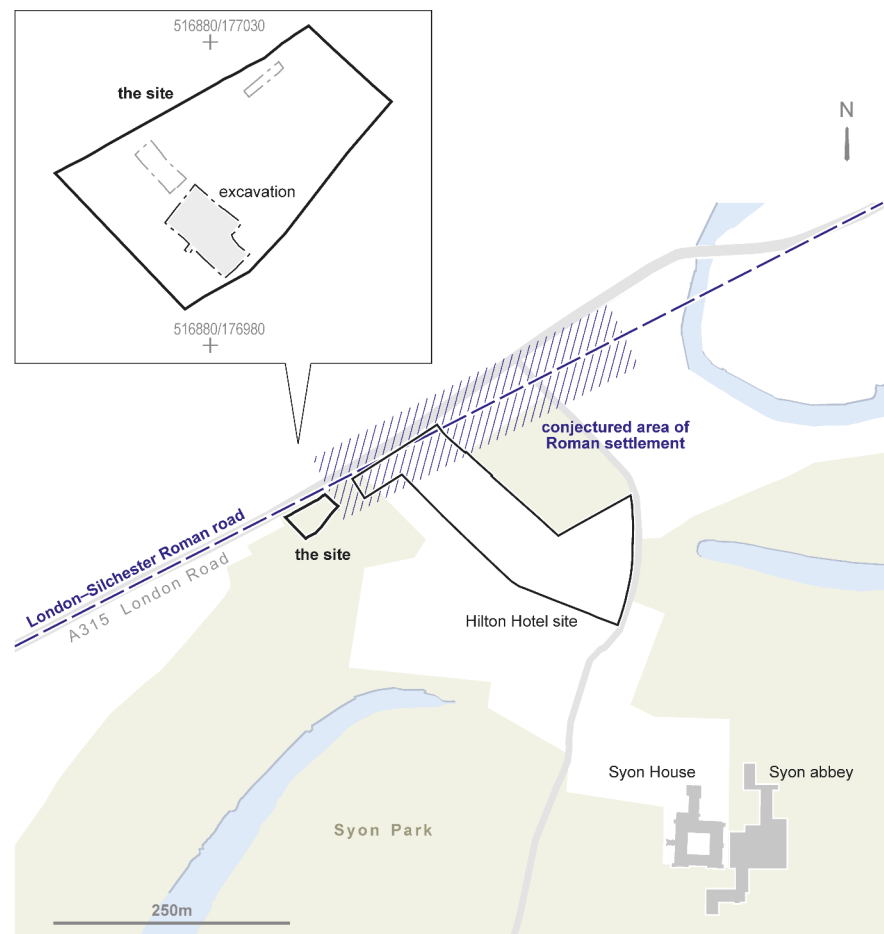


Fig 2: site and trench locations, with nearby excavations



**Fig 3: students during the training excavation**

by two groups of volunteers: one group assisted with and progressed the excavation and recording of the site, whilst the other team worked alongside the participants and supported the public engagement. Finally, we were also able to host UCL student placements, one of whom supported our social media output and also used the project as a case study for his research.

Although the project was initiated primarily as a training and community excavation, there were nevertheless a number of research objectives, which included confirming the alignment of the London–Silchester road and the presence of the Roman roadside settlement, recording any evidence for prehistoric activity, and identifying the

remains of any post-medieval structures and/or features associated with Little Syon (built in 1592) and Syon Park.

Following the excavation of three evaluation trenches across the site in March 2013 in order to gauge the

feasibility of the project, a larger area was opened up for the community and training excavation during the summer. The excavation revealed new evidence for a Bronze Age riverside settlement and added to the information about the Roman ribbon development, suggesting that the known extent of the settlement continued for at least another 100m to the south-west along the Roman road.

**The prehistoric landscape**

Prehistoric activity has been noted on several sites in the Brentford area, with the adjacent stretch of the Thames and Syon Reach producing large quantities of Neolithic and Bronze Age objects.<sup>2</sup> Evidence for a Bronze Age and Iron Age riverside settlement was recorded during archaeological investigations south of Syon Park, and included a Middle Bronze Age to Early Iron Age

midden pit<sup>3</sup> as well as a potential Middle Bronze Age rectilinear ditch or field system.<sup>4</sup>

The earliest recorded feature on the site was a small gully or base of a ditch oriented northwest to southeast. It was interpreted as part of a field system and is likely to be of Middle Bronze Age date (Figs. 4a and 5). Its fill produced five sherds of flint-tempered prehistoric pottery of Middle Bronze Age date, with only one very abraded, likely to be intrusive, Roman sherd. Two of the sherds are thick-walled and heavily flint-tempered and could belong to large bucket urns of Middle Bronze Age Deverel-Rimbury type. The three thinner-walled flint-tempered sherds (two conjoining) may represent fragments of the finer globular urns with which such bucket urns are often associated.

The excavation also revealed five struck flints and a small number of sherds of prehistoric pottery in a handful of contexts, in association with later material.

**Roman Brentford**

Evidence for a Roman settlement has been recorded along the London–Silchester Road around Brentford, which is likely to have its origins towards the end of the 1st century AD.<sup>5</sup> The earliest Roman features recorded on this site could be tentatively dated to the early 2nd century AD, including



**Fig 4: excavated features: a, Middle Bronze Age ditch; b, early Roman features; c, late Roman features**

two pit/postholes, a shallow pit and the base of a possible northeast to southwest aligned ditch (Fig. 4b). The pottery from the pit/postholes included two small assemblages, the latest of which is of Trajanic date (AD 100–120) indicated by a sherd from a Dragendorff form 37 bowl from Les-Martres-de-Veyre. The fills also included both combed and relief-patterned box-flue tiles, along with roofing tile and brick, suggesting the presence of at least one early- to mid-2nd-century masonry building, perhaps a roadside *mansio* within the settlement. The possible ditch and pit recorded in the northeastern part of the excavation area did not produce datable finds, but were sealed by a 3rd- to 4th-century deposit and so were possibly also of early Roman date.

No features dating to between the mid-2nd to mid-3rd century AD were identified, but a layer interpreted as a dark earth or agricultural soil was recorded in the north-western part of the excavation area sealing two earlier features. It may have extended further south and east, but was heavily disturbed by tree roots. The layer contained pottery dating to c. AD 250–400, and a copper-alloy 'barbarous' radiate coin dating to AD 275–85. This may suggest a possible decline of settlement activity or the agricultural use of the site in this period, which had also been noted in the wider area, in



Fig. 6: student excavating the 4th-century rubbish pit

particular at the Hilton Hotel site excavation.<sup>6</sup>

A second period of Roman occupation on site was recorded from the mid-3rd century onwards, with the majority of finds and features dating to between AD 250 and 400 (Fig. 4c). These included two small clay lined hearths, the largest of which contained pottery dating to c. AD 250–400. Associated with these hearths were small dumps, stakeholes and a patch of gravel surface. Another gravel surface was partially exposed at a similar level further to the southeast, and, although the area in between had been disturbed by a large amount of tree-root damage, obscuring any direct physical relationship, it is likely that the surfaces are related and may represent part of a larger external work surface.

A large northwest to southeast possible field or property boundary ditch was recorded in the southwest part of the site. Its fill included pottery ranging from c. AD 270–400. A small gully was cut into the northern edge of this ditch and has been tentatively identified as a re-cut. Also truncating this ditch was a pit/posthole that contained pottery dating to c. AD 250–400. This ditch lay perpendicular to the Roman road in the north-west. Similarly-aligned ditches of 4th-century date have also been recorded at the Hilton Hotel site, where they were interpreted as field boundaries.<sup>7</sup>

The latest dated Roman feature recorded on site was a large pit filled with domestic refuse (Fig. 6). This feature produced the largest group of finds, accounting for approximately two-thirds of the overall pottery assemblage ranging from c. AD 350 to 400 AD. Other



Fig 5: a student excavating the Middle Bronze Age ditch

finds included two coins (a 'barbarous' radiate of AD 275–85 and a possibly silver-plated copper-alloy coin dated c. AD 364–402), and a Roman copper-alloy penannular bracelet <23> with a twisted square section and incised decoration at the terminals<sup>8</sup> (Fig. 7). When found as grave goods in contemporary cemeteries, late-Roman bracelets are normally worn by females, and, on the basis of its size, this example is likely to have been worn by an adult. Although complete, it was in two pieces when found and was presumably discarded by its owner when broken.

An unusual but heavily truncated feature comprising a white mortar core overlying a poured mortar base was the only evidence of a possible building revealed within the excavation. This piece of masonry was truncated on all



Fig. 7: copper-alloy bracelet <23>, from the 4th-century rubbish pit





**Fig. 8: recording archaeology in the shadow of Lion Gate**

sides, but has been interpreted as a fragment of a possible wall or pier base of uncertain date.

### The post-medieval landscape

After the 4th century AD the area of the site appears to have fallen into the agricultural hinterland of the settlement at Brentford. A heavily ploughed agricultural soil was found to cover the entire site and included finds ranging from the Roman period to the 18th century.

Between 1767 and 1773 the western side of Syon Park was re-landscaped by Lancelot “Capability” Brown for the 1st Duke of Northumberland, which brought an end to this area of the park being used for agriculture and resulted in the creation of a new path system from Lion Gate into the park and to Little Syon (Fig. 8). One such gravel path was observed

travelling through the excavation area, heading towards Lion Gate.

### Discussion

The work of the students and volunteers at Lion Gate has contributed to our understanding of human occupation in the Brentford area, adding to previous evidence for a later prehistoric settlement. The project has also increased the known extent of Roman ribbon development along the main London–Silchester road by at least another 100m to the south-west of the recently published remains found at the Hilton Hotel site. The results add to what is known about the chronological development of the Roman settlement, with evidence of settlement activity from the 2nd century AD, followed by a decline in occupation during the 3rd century AD. The mid-3rd to 4th century again saw a revival of Roman activity eventually leading to the abandonment of the Roman settlement in the early 5th century.<sup>9</sup>

### Acknowledgements

The evaluation and excavation were undertaken at the Lion Gate, Syon Park, under the auspices of the Museum of London, with kind permission of His Grace The Duke of Northumberland. The archaeological fieldwork and assessment was commissioned and funded by the Museum of London, and we are greatly indebted to the City of London Archaeological Trust (CoLAT) for funding the subsequent analysis and production of this article. Special thanks also to the staff of Syon Park Ltd for their invaluable help and support during the project, especially Christopher Martyn (head gardener) and Leslie Feore (house manager), Emma and Simon Hadleigh-Sparks and

Mackenzie Cotterill. Thanks are also due to Roy Stephenson (Museum of London) and Harvey Sheldon (Birkbeck College), who instigated and oversaw the project.

The organisation and management of the project was undertaken by Kathryn Creed and Kate Sumnall (Museum of London). Project management at MOLA was carried out by Louise Davies (fieldwork) and Louise Fowler (post-excavation). The archaeological team included Sarah Ritchie, Stella Bickelmann, Robert Cowie and Raksha Dave (MOLA) with considerable support from volunteers without whose hard work the project could not have succeeded – many thanks to Laurie Elvin, Stuart Forbes, Andy Longfellow, Sigrid Padel and Christine Woodford for their assistance.

Specialist assessments and comment were undertaken by Ian Betts (building material), Lyn Blackmore (post-Roman pottery, glass, clay pipes), Julian Bowsher (coins), Jon Cotton (flints, prehistoric pottery), Luisa Duarte (conservation), Michael Marshall (registered finds), Alan Pipe (animal bone), Amy Thorp (Roman pottery). The digital mapping of the site was undertaken by Raoul Bull and Mark Burch (MOLA Geomatics). Carlos Lemos prepared the illustrations. Many thanks to Robert Cowie and Jon Cotton for discussing Roman Brentford and the evidence for later prehistoric activity in Isleworth.

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1. Site code SYV04. R. Cowie, A. Thorp and A. Wardle, *Roman roadside settlement and rural landscape at Brentford*, MOLA Archaeology Studies Series 29 (2013).

2. J. Corcoran, M. Nicholls and R. Cowie ‘The geoarchaeology of past River Thames channels at Syon Park, Brentford’ *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 63 (2012) 1–18.

3. R. Bell ‘An archaeological excavation on land adjacent to Snowy Fielder Waye, Isleworth, London Borough of Hounslow, Middlesex’ *Trans London*

*Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 47 (1996) 35–60.

4. G. Hull ‘A Middle Bronze Age field ditch? Excavations at Bankside Close, Isleworth’ *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 49 (1998) 1–14.

5. *Op cit* fn 1, p. 14.

6. *Op cit* fn 1, p. 70.

7. *Op cit* fn 1, p. 42.

8. As conserved its diameter measures 68 x 61mm and the section is c. 4mm wide. It belongs to Cool type IVc. See H.E.M. Cool *A study of the Roman personal ornaments made of metal excluding brooches from*

*southern Britain* Unpublished PhD Thesis Cardiff (1983) 135–8. This is a long-lived type but the present example is notable for being one of the latest dated examples yet recovered from Britain. There is no reason to doubt that it is contemporary, however, and related torc twisted bracelets with fastenings are common finds in 4th-century Britain, e.g. N. Crummy *Colchester Archaeological Report 2: The Roman small finds from excavations in Colchester* Colchester (1983) 38–9, fig 41, nos. 1590 and 1602.

9. *Op cit* fn 1, p. 70.