

# The Highgate Wood pottery industry

*Harvey Sheldon raises questions about the scope and management of the Roman kilns site in Highgate Wood and asks whether production was a by-product of official procuratorial woodland management.*

**ABOVE** One of the kilns (Kiln 4) under excavation during the 1970 season



## Introduction

In the early 1960s, as Tony Brown was searching for evidence of late prehistoric activity in north London's parks and open spaces, abraded fragments of Roman pottery were found, unexpectedly, on the surface of the high ground in the northern part of Highgate Wood. During the summer of 1966, a 'trial trench' was dug in Highgate Wood, to find out more about what sort of site the pottery might have signified. It led to the discovery that the ceramic vessels had actually been manufactured in the wood, a result which came as even more of a surprise!

During the following years, as the excavations that located kilns, pits, ditches and dumps of rejected pottery progressed, the ceramics were studied and classified into form and fabric types. The term 'Highgate Wood pottery' was coined to describe the vessels found, but it was soon extended to pots of similar form and fabric, found on archaeological sites in London and elsewhere.

The series of annual excavations in the 1960s and 1970s revealed much evidence of pottery production, but little in terms of archaeological finds or features that were necessarily unrelated to the process of pottery making – perhaps with the exception of the hones, used to sharpen axes. Without more evidence of contemporary settlements, it seemed likely that the potters who made use of the site were itinerant – utilising the wood and its resources to build kilns and make pottery from time to time – but probably not as part of a community nearby.

## Looking at the evidence

In trying to learn more both about the potters and the production site, two clear findings arose from the report of the archaeological evidence and are featured in the most recent study of the site.<sup>1</sup>

The first was the site's longevity. The evidence indicates that production began close to the time that the armies of Imperial Rome invaded Britain in AD 43 and that it continued into the middle years of the following century. Clearly a production period lasting for a hundred years or more signifies that a number of generations of potters were involved in the manufacture that took place in Highgate Wood. However, a sequence of potters from several generations may not necessarily imply that a single enterprise, or family, was responsible for production throughout the period.

The second finding suggests that, despite a century or more of pottery making, production took place episodically, rather than continuously. The individual episodes, which presumably occurred during the lighter summer months, perhaps lasting for only a few weeks, reveal technological advances through time. This can be seen both through developments in kiln construction and in the appearance of more sophisticated pottery, indicating improvements in both forms and fabrics. In addition, each episode of production in the wood appears to be separated from the preceding one by an interval. The length of these intervals is not easy to calculate, and may be uneven, but an average of a decade or more was possible.

**BELOW LEFT**  
Preparing the site for excavation

**BELOW CENTRE**  
Site supervisor, Jude Plouviez, excavating the top of a dump of broken wasters

**BELOW RIGHT** 1970: excavation under way



### Who were the potters and was this the only production site?

Firstly, how closely can we identify the people who made use of what is now Highgate Wood to construct kilns and produce pottery during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD? From the archaeological evidence, it is difficult to ascertain whether the potters were drawn from communities established in Britain prior to the Roman conquest, or whether they were newcomers, associated with the dramatic attempt that began in the mid-1st century AD, to create a province of *Britannia* on the north-western edge of Rome's empire.

Secondly, was this the only site where the vessels, that soon became categorised as 'Highgate Wood pottery', were manufactured? There is an indication – from sherds of pottery and a tile – that a second production site had existed towards the southern end of the wood.<sup>2</sup> Had there been other similar manufacturing sites in the extensive woodland of what is now north-west London, perhaps destroyed – without record in recent centuries, as the fields and remaining tree-covered areas north of the City disappeared under housing?

Thirdly – and perhaps more provocatively – did the production of pottery in Highgate Wood stand alone as an activity? Or was it an indication, perhaps even an offshoot, of more extensive operations taking place in the woodland landscape of north-west London? More specifically, as pottery manufacture would require both clay to make the vessels and build kilns, as well as the fuel to fire them, might it have been related to opportunities provided through the management and exploitation of the ancient oak and hornbeam clay woodlands of this area?

Wider questions about the site, not easy to answer directly from the archaeological evidence, also need to be asked: who owned this segment of land during the Roman period and was it under public or private control? Was its management and exploitation likely to be different or similar to other land in the vicinity?



**RIGHT** Oven and flue of Kiln 5 during excavation

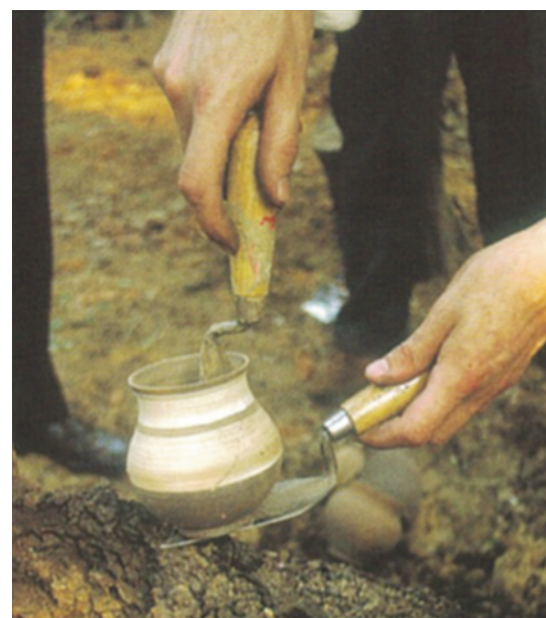
*London Archaeologist* has published 10 articles in the past about the excavations in Highgate Wood. Please see inside the back cover for a list of their titles and links to PDF versions online at the Archaeology Data Service.

### What was the influence of *Londinium* and the procurator?

As in the medieval and early modern periods, it seems likely that extensive tracts of woodland covered the northern heights of London and that most of the timber resources came under the authority of a public body. During the Roman period, the institution most likely to control the woodland, was *Londinium*, situated about five miles to the south.

Established on both banks of the Thames during the early stage of the Roman conquest, *Londinium* became the base from which the governor of the province – the chief administrator and commander of its military garrison – operated. The surviving literary

**BELOW LEFT** George Demetriou finishing off a jar as part of the Horniman Museum kiln experiment in 1971 (Bernard Brandham/Horniman Museum)  
**BELOW RIGHT** Removing a replica beaker in Highgate Wood style from a kiln firing in 1972, using the local clay





**ABOVE** The surviving parts of the tombstone inscription of Julius Classicianus, the province's procurator appointed after the Boudican fire. Now in the British Museum, it was found at Tower Hill (MoL)

**BELOW** Highgate Wood with coppiced trees today  
**BELOW RIGHT** A mid-2nd-century oak warehouse found in waterlogged ground in Southwark – this building would have needed a good supply of timber

sources indicate that from the conquest until the end of Roman Britain in the early 5th century, *Londinium* was central to the functioning of *Britannia*, even though arrangements for the province's administration radically changed later in the period. Archaeological discoveries reveal

that, from as early as AD 58, *Londinium* also housed the office of the Emperor's chief financial and supplies officer in Britain: the imperial procurator. An imperial procurator in a province such as *Britannia* would normally serve for a short term, perhaps three years, as part of a long-term career that would include a series of senior civil as well as military appointments.

Once in post, assisted by junior procurators, he would have responsibility for the financial affairs of the province, including the provision of supplies to its extensive army as well as resources deriving from *Britannia* but required beyond its boundaries. To fulfil these duties, his office would have a substantial complement of staff attached, including soldiers as well as imperial slaves and freedmen serving within the province.

**Did the procurator's office organise timber supplies and woodland management?**

*Londinium* has provided much evidence for the presence of the procurator's office and its activities at a local level. Archaeological site finds include numerous stamped tiles, associating the office with the construction and presumably the repairs and extensions of many of *Londinium's* public buildings.

To guarantee timber supplies, it is likely that the procurator's office would be responsible for providing

the variety of material required, perhaps from a combination of managed woodland and surviving 'wyldewood'. Additionally, extensive and regular consignments of timber would also be needed in *Londinium* for constructing and maintaining the waterfronts and other port installations, as well as for building boats, carts and carriages. Timber supplies for these buildings were also likely to be required to produce furniture and fittings, tools and utensils and to provide constant fuel for heating, cooking and bathing.

Meiggs' study of woodland within the Roman world<sup>3</sup> concluded that Roman cities owned woods nearby to ensure regular timber supplies. He noted Roman records of coppicing chestnut every five to seven years and oak every seven to ten years to meet the fuel needs of local towns. Rackham, discussing Britain's woodlands,<sup>4</sup> envisaged that, during the Roman period, permanent coppice systems were in place near to cities to provide timber for building. He concluded that this system also operated in more rural areas, to ensure that fuel was available for manufacturing iron and pottery.

Turning to *Londinium*, Damian Goodburn has studied timber used for buildings and riverside installations on numerous sites.<sup>5</sup> This might suggest that the timber supplies derived both from wildwood as well as managed land. He envisaged the existence of 'large areas of managed woodland ... in the hinterland of *Londinium*.'<sup>6</sup> Citing evidence of coppicing from Carlisle, he noted oak and alder cut at intervals of about eight years, and reported episodes of cutting elsewhere which might be as frequent as once every three years or as distanced as once every 40 years.<sup>7</sup>

Goodburn also suggested that timber supplies might be derived from wildwood as well as managed land.<sup>8</sup> The former might perhaps provide the larger timbers required from felled trees, while the latter was a source of a range of smaller timbers from the coppices. Assuming a relatively constant yearly demand for timber required in *Londinium*, the development of a system allowing annual exploitation of woodland resources might be envisaged. If much of the supply came from coppices, then, at individual locations, intervals allowing for regrowth might take place between episodes of cutting. The cycle may



have been complex, especially if timbers of different size or strength were required.

The possibility that the pottery production in Highgate Wood was related to both coppicing and felling has been discussed.<sup>9</sup> The waste would have been used as fuel supplies – oak, hornbeam and hawthorn were found as charcoal. Two of the Highgate Wood kilns, 2 and 3, may well have made structural use of coppice poles. The straight lengths of the Highgate Wood ditches may well indicate that the site lay in a woodland clearing, perhaps one intended primarily to facilitate work on the cut timbers prior to transporting them for use elsewhere.

Could the pottery-making episodes in Highgate Wood be seen as a minor constituent of an extensive and ‘official’ programme of woodland management and exploitation in the woodland north of *Londinium*? The episodic pattern of pottery manufacture in Highgate Wood, that the archaeological evidence indicates, would fit well with a system of woodland management allowing individual segments of a much larger resource to be available for coppicing at intervals of perhaps 10 or more years.

**Highgate Wood: a significant pottery supply for *Londinium*?**

It might also help to resolve a rather intriguing question posed by the findings from the excavation. Paul Tyers, in his study of the pottery found in the excavations,<sup>10</sup> has noted that although initially Highgate Wood was thought to be ‘a minor supplier of pottery in the London area’, that view soon changed. This was partly because, with greater resources available, the number of archaeological investigations in the City of London and Southwark greatly increased during the early 1970s and beyond. Many more Roman period sites were investigated, leading to considerable quantities of Roman pottery being found and analysed. By 1994, as Tyers reported,<sup>11</sup> a study of this pottery in the City had concluded that ‘the Highgate industry was a significant supplier to London from the mid-1st through to the mid-2nd century AD, responsible for between 30% and 50% of the coarse reduced ware assemblage’.

Yet the evidence from Highgate Wood suggests a restricted number of kilns – perhaps no more than about a dozen, as well as a limited quantity of ‘waster’



pottery, and manufacture taking place for a century or more, which was episodic rather than continuous. Therefore, any notion that Highgate Wood alone was the production site responsible for so much of the ‘Highgate type’, found in *Londinium* as well as beyond, seems highly improbable. Recent studies of the petrology,<sup>12</sup> as well as chemical analysis of the clays,<sup>13</sup> should help point the way towards establishing whether individual vessels attributed to the ‘Highgate Industry’, found on sites elsewhere, were actually produced in Highgate Wood.

**Conclusions**

If the Highgate Wood potters did make similar vessels elsewhere in other seasons, it seems likely that many other manufacturing sites existed within the woodlands, operating in relation to other annual episodes of preparing timber supplies. Presumably, these sites either await location, or have been lost, perhaps relatively recently, as the woodland was cut down in preparation for the suburban houses.

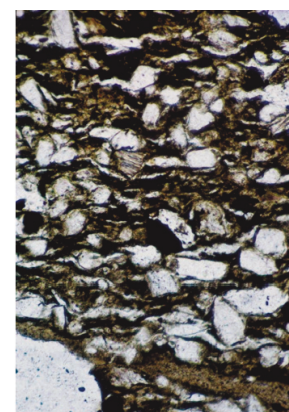
Assuming that all this activity was an ‘official’ programme, under the responsibility of the procurator’s office, does it help us, as I asked at the beginning of this article, to identify the potters who might have been involved? Perhaps not, but two wider aspects of archaeological evidence might be worth considering.

Firstly, the possible links between serving soldiers and supply has been one of the features of many writing tablets discovered at the northern fort of *Vindolanda* and more recently, in the early levels of



**ABOVE** Replica kiln construction in 1971, showing the structural use of coppice poles  
**ABOVE LEFT** One of the misshapen wasters from the excavation

**BELOW LEFT** Highgate-type vessels found in the London amphitheatre drain – but were they actually the product of the kilns in the wood? (MOLA)  
**BELOW** Future detailed analysis of the clay’s mineral content may pinpoint other areas of production

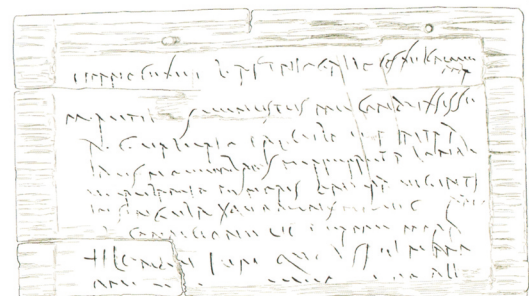




**ABOVE** A kiln built by young volunteers during the Haringey Potter Project in 2010 (© Bruce Castle Museum & Archive)  
**ABOVE RIGHT** 1971: Firing an experimental kiln



**BELOW** Part of a contract concerning wagons of provisions transported to Londinium from Verulamium after the Boudican destruction (MOLA)



the Walbrook site, close to where the *Mithraeum* was later built.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, within the ranks of the legionary and auxiliary regiments serving in *Britannia*, it is likely that there were individuals whose specialist duties were to manufacture the tiles and the pottery required for use by the units.<sup>15</sup> The auxiliaries at least, after honourable discharge including the granting of citizenship, might have needed to continue practising their crafts in order to support themselves and their dependents.

Surviving discharge certificates, metal ‘diplomas’, reveal that a good number of the auxiliary veterans resided within *vici* – settlements close to forts – which were presumably places where work might be

commissioned. Though we are aware of only one such ‘diploma’ in *Londinium*,<sup>16</sup> the extensive military presence that the large Cripplegate fort and other finds indicates, might suggest that commissions to provide supplies, could have been available here.

So perhaps it is worth asking whether this was an annual large-scale programme, run by the procurator’s

office, existing to provide timber supplies required for *Londinium*, but which included associated activities such as pottery production. It might even have involved regularly contracting retired soldiers, including potters, to serve as the participant craftsmen.

**Acknowledgements**

This article is dedicated to Tony MacKenna (1932–2012),<sup>17</sup> whom I first met in 1968 when he joined a City Lit adult education class, studying and classifying the Roman pottery found in Highgate Wood. Tony was drawn to this aspect of archaeology through a combination of his interests in history and science.

As a student, he led the way in identifying how much could be learnt about the Highgate Wood pottery through analysing the mineral content of the clay that was used to make the vessels. He thin-sectioned sherds, producing magnified images revealing the quantities, as well as the shapes and sizes, of the various minerals incorporated in the clay.

Tony’s work helped to point the way towards future studies, which might aim to identify whether pottery found on sites in *Londinium* and beyond, and described as ‘Highgate Ware’, might actually derive from other, yet unidentified, production centres.

*Harvey Sheldon has spent many years helping to bring the Highgate Wood excavation report to fruition. As a lecturer, and now an Honorary Research Fellow, at Birkbeck, he has championed many archaeological sites and projects and is still much involved in advancing plans for the display and interpretation of the Rose Theatre remains on Bankside in Southwark.*

1. A E Brown & H L Sheldon *The Roman Pottery Manufacturing Site in Highgate Wood: excavations 1966–1978* (2018).  
2. *Ibid.*, 59.  
3. R Meiggs *Trees and Timber in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (1982).  
4. O Rackham *Trees and Woodland in the English Landscape* (1976).  
5. D Goodburn in Brigham et al ‘A Roman Timber Building on the Southwark Waterfront’ *Archaeol J* 152 (1995), 1–72; D Goodburn in J Hill & P Rowsome

*Excavations at 1 Poultry*, MOLA Monogr 37 (2011).  
6. Goodburn (1995) *op cit* fn 5, 37.  
7. Goodburn (2011) *op cit* fn 5, 436.  
8. Goodburn (1995) *op cit* fn 5, 41.  
9. *Op cit* fn 1, 65–6.  
10. P A Tyers ‘The pottery from Highgate Wood’ in *op cit* fn 1, 85.  
11. *Ibid.*, 86.  
12. P S Quinn ‘Petrographic Analysis of Roman Pottery’ in *op cit* fn 1, 293–311.

13. M J Hughes ‘Chemical Characterisation of Pottery by ICPS’ in *op cit* fn 1, 312–21.  
14. R S O Tomlin *Roman London’s first voices: writing tablets from the Bloomberg excavations, 2010–14* MOLA Monogr 72 (2016).  
15. P A Holder *The Roman Army in Britain* (1982), 94.  
16. S S Frere, M Roxan & R S O Tomlin *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain Vol II, Fasc 1*, (1990), 11–13, No 2401.5.  
17. H Sheldon ‘Tony MacKenna, 1932–2012’ *London Archaeol* 13 (7) (2012/13), 187.

# The current Highgate Roman Kiln project

*For many years, there have been discussions about re-instating a Roman pottery kiln and putting a display about the archaeological excavations in Highgate Wood, near to where the kilns were first excavated. Nick Peacey, Secretary of the new charity set up to achieve this, tells of their hopes and plans.*



**ABOVE** Kiln 2, one of the most complete Roman kilns to be found in Britain, before its removal from the Wood in 1968

## Introduction

There is an information hut in Highgate Wood where, along with nature notes and general information, you can find a small display explaining the archaeological excavations that took place seasonally during the 1960s and 1970s with descriptions of the pottery made there.

The remains of 10 kilns were discovered in seasonal excavations from 1962 to 1974 and one – Kiln 2 from the final production phase – was removed from the site in 1968 for preservation and display in the Horniman Museum. It was then moved to Bruce Castle Museum, Tottenham, and displayed during the 1980s and 1990s. Thereafter the remains of the kiln were dismantled and put into store. This is where it has remained and the kiln is now in need of conservation and restoration.

The excavations had made great use of volunteers under the guidance of Tony Brown and Harvey Sheldon. The firing process and the replica pottery enabled a better understanding of production. In 2010, another project – the Haringey Potter Project – worked with a group of unemployed local young people to build and fire a kiln in the wood, and workshops were held with a local potter to help them make the pottery to be fired.

Some of their pots went on display at Bruce Castle Museum and the project featured as part of a temporary exhibition, *Stories of the World*, to coincide with the London Olympics, at the Museum of London where the excavated material is now stored.

## The project

These volunteer projects, the publication of the excavation report in 2018 and with new thoughts about the pottery industry, have provided greater impetus to take it further. Working with other bodies including the City of London Open Spaces team responsible for Highgate Wood and Classics for All, a new registered charity – the Friends of Highgate Roman Kiln (FoHRK) – has been set up to raise funds and progress the plans to re-assemble the surviving

kiln found during the excavations, and return it to Highgate Wood to be housed in a suitable building to protect it from the elements. They hope to obtain external funding as well as seeking donations from individuals.

Actors Claire Skinner and Hugh Dennis have kindly agreed to be patrons. Hugh Dennis led a team of archaeologists, including Natasha Billson (a *London Archaeologist* committee member), in four episodes of *The Great British Dig*, broadcast on More4 earlier this year. The Chair of the charity is Catherine West, MP for Hornsey & Wood Green, the constituency in which Highgate sits. The charity hopes to get funding from the government Kickstart Scheme to employ for six months six young people currently on Universal Credit, with the aim of them moving into apprenticeships as heritage trainees.

The first step has been to commission a condition survey of the remains of the kiln, carried out by Cliveden Conservation Workshop in June 2019, which recorded the condition of each of the 16 pieces of the kiln. This was to see the viability of such a project, and now proposals are being drawn up for its re-instatement in Highgate Wood.

It is hoped to hang other activities on the project involving local community groups and organisations with talks and tours and practical sessions. A series of summer fund-raising events is planned involving hands-on and drop-in sessions to maintain the excitement caused by experimental archaeology including potting and replica kiln-building.

Further information about the project can be found on the charity's website: <https://www.highgateromankiln.org.uk>.

**BELOW** The experimental kiln (see opposite) was fired successfully (© Bruce Castle Museum & Archive)

