

# Revelations in Eden

*Roy Stephenson built his career on two key interests: medieval pottery and a determination to enable the public to experience history, heritage and archaeology.*

*Becky Wallower met him to explore how these interests have played out, and the role of a formative site.*

Despite having renowned sites in central London under his belt, Roy Stephenson has designated a specialised excavation at Eden Street in Kingston upon Thames as the one of most fundamental significance for him. As with others we've interviewed for this occasional feature series, it was a foray to the outskirts of London that brought him particular experience of archaeology which would shape his understanding of the subject, and his approach to his career.

Up river, Kingston had been a busy medieval centre and market town, one where Saxon kings had been crowned, with the first bridge beyond London Bridge, and a port giving good access to regional materials. Eden Street lies at the edge of the early town, and was expected to have roots into Kingston's medieval past. Previous excavations had been undertaken in the 1960s by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society (KUTAS) who had found a medieval pottery kiln at an adjacent address. When C&A sought to develop a new store in Eden Street in 1995, MoLAS (now MOLA) was contracted to investigate and record the site, EDN95.

Roy was one of the three-person finds unit on site as evidence of four kilns was revealed in natural brickearth, with stoking pits, associated features and substantial amounts of Surrey Whiteware pottery: 31 different types of Kingston ware were identified, with some complete vessels, and substantial quantities of wasters.

## Steps forward

Surrey Whiteware of various sorts was prevalent in the London of the early 14th century, but its sources and details of the manufacturing process hadn't yet been fully documented. Roy was ideally positioned to move the story onwards via Kingston ware at Eden Road.

He had developed a specialism in medieval pottery through training at Dorset Institute of Higher Education (now University of Bournemouth), and early jobs at Passmore Edwards Museum in Newham, where he left with a portfolio of pot drawings, and the first



**ABOVE** Roy (top right) at Billingsgate Roman baths, a site where archaeology encourages public engagement. Photo: Museum of London

incarnations of the Museum of London (MOL) archaeology unit. There he took over as a ceramics specialist from Clive Orton in the mid-1980s. 'I liked working on the Southwark and Lambeth archaeology,' he recalls, 'mainly because I could benefit from Clive's copious and comprehensive handwritten notes, memorably written on yellow and green paper.'

But why the interest in pottery? 'I think I am attracted to the aesthetic,' he says, 'although some of it is very ugly. And it is probably about a direct personal link back to the past, when you hold things that people held hundreds of years ago.'

At Eden Street, one of the four kilns fortuitously retained most of the below-ground elements, complete with a central pedestal and stoking pit either side. This enabled its structure and its construction from brickearth and straw, with flues of medieval ceramic roof tiles bonded with brickearth, to be determined. Although the caps of the kilns hadn't survived, enough material in the form of peg tiles, wasters, straw and brickearth was present to be able to surmise the techniques.

Roy also remembers Eden Street using a technique – archaeomagnetic dating – which seems to have faded from use in the UK, perhaps from lack of equipment and operators. Pioneered by Tony Clarke, this uses

**BELOW** Kiln I at Eden Street with central pedestal being recorded by Nick Holder. Photo: Roy Stephenson





**ABOVE** Some of the 31 types of Kingston ware excavated at Eden Street

Photo: A Chopping/MOLA

**BELOW** Pile of sherds at Eden Street for disposal following recording, per successful retention strategy developed by Roy

Photo: Roy Stephenson



the property of heated clay to align particles to the magnetic north prevailing at the time. The results fixed the operation of the site tightly to 1300–40.

### Simply sampling

One especially important legacy from Eden Street is the work Roy did to determine what material to keep.

The pottery was clearly a busy one in operation for decades. Activity on that scale would inevitably yield literally tons of wasters, much of which would simply have been disposed of in rubbish pits and disused kilns on site.

It was obviously impractical to preserve and store everything, but a policy was required to ensure that meaningful data could be retained. Having the finds team working on site made it more straightforward

to examine the pot as it emerged and sort it into diagnostic and non-diagnostic sherds. Diagnostic sherds, ie those such as rims with characteristics used for Estimated Vessel Equivalents (EVE), or those with evidence of faults or decoration, were kept. Non-diagnostic were weighed. Because sherds were mixed in the disposal process, reconstructions were difficult and attempts using pottery from KUTAS's earlier excavations were shown to add little to the vessel total. Analysis showed that weight provided sufficient data for quantification of non-diagnostic pottery.

Simply put, the sampling policy to retain only pot that contributed to reconstruction of vessels or statistical analysis of the assemblage saved the transportation and storage of c. 2 tons of material. Roy went on to develop the retention schedule for application across excavations.

### Legacy

Two activities were planned to capitalise on the local and archaeological importance of the kiln site. Discussions were held between C&A and the Museum of London about installing a display in the basement of the new store. Roy remembers, 'The Museum wasn't very good at making the connections between archaeology, clients and the public at that stage, so it never happened. I later visited C&A to find a pile of towels in the area earmarked for our display.' This is an aspect that has improved as developers increasingly recognise the benefit of connections to heritage and local history, although that has come after MOL and the archaeological unit, now MOLA, were separated.

The second key outcome was a seminal publication, the first in a new Archaeology Studies Series, in 1999. The hectic onrush of post-PPG16 developer-funded excavations had led to an enormous backlog that needed to be published if the work was to be of any use. Although monographs were produced for a few sites, an injection of funding from English Heritage was needed to move forward on small to medium sites.

The first authors in the new series were Pat Miller (stratigraphy) and Roy (pottery), joined by specialists ranging from Richenda Goffin on kiln building material to Bob Newell as consultant potter. Importantly, the series also aimed to facilitate publication by working closely with local and regional societies, and KUTAS was able to provide insight on the earlier excavations as well as site volunteers.

Overall, Roy sees Eden Street as contributing refined dating material for the City and Southwark once the period of manufacture was identified. 'It also helped us understand how Kingston worked as part of the conurbation, with links upriver to places like Oxford as well as to the City', he says.

### Onwards

As the publication came to fruition, Roy was embedded as a pot specialist in a new entity, Museum of London Specialist Services, which by 2002 was again part of MoLAS, where he became responsible,

as Senior Project Manager, for about 30 finds, environmental and conservation specialists.

Then in 2005, Roy was seconded to replace John Shepherd at the ever-growing London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (the LAARC). 'I realised at that point that I'd become a manager,' he recalls, and as MoLAS separated from MOL, Roy remained part of the museum. He headed the Early Department covering the period from prehistory to 1714 with notable experts including Jon Cotton, John Schofield, [current LA Editor] Jenny Hall, Jackie Keily and Hazel Forsyth.

It was a period that saw memorable exhibitions such as the One Poultry Roman site recreation and the Cheapside Hoard, and heightened community engagement in the museum – with collaborative exhibitions such as that showing off CrossRail archaeology at MOL Docklands attracting large numbers of people from locations near all the excavation sites.

In addition, of course, the new prehistory and medieval galleries came to fruition. In the latter Roy was hugely gratified to see Kingston ware pottery from Eden Street displayed at last. 'It's kind of like a legacy, but one known only to me, of the connection between my working life and the public. If it leads to someone thinking, "Oh, now I understand this", that's very satisfying.'

For almost 12 years he was Head of Archaeological Collections and Archive, and, continued for another three with a change of title to Historic Environment Lead. This title reflected the idea, as Roy sees it, that 'Historic Environment is all around you all the time, and archaeology isn't all about digging holes.'

He was also part of the team working towards the move to the new museum premises in the Victorian

Smithfield Market – specifically on its content. The transition to that new site will be transformational for the collection and the staff alike, as the museum's contents are decanted and re-organised and new roles defined.

Roy, having left in the midst of the Covid-19 lockdown in spring 2021, is one of a number of experienced curators, managers and experts who have chosen this juncture to move on.

### Futures

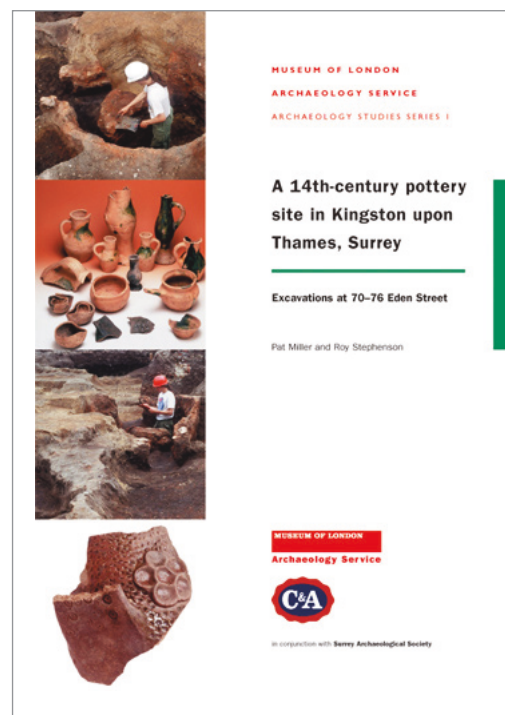
And like others, he is recasting his expertise as a freelance, offering services across museum archaeology (from temporary exhibitions to galleries), archaeological archives in museums (including retention/disposal and research strategies), participative archaeology, and advice to developers on cost-effectively utilising the archaeology and history of sites.

More unusually, he also offers services for film and TV productions...

One of the opportunities that arose over the past few years was as consultant for *The Dig*, the film of the discovery of the Sutton Hoo ship burial. Roy's role was to ensure that the excavation scenes (filmed in Surrey, in fact) were as authentic and accurate as the limits of storytelling and budget allowed. It gave him good experience – and also offered his youngest daughter the chance to have a one-line part in the film (she's even on IMDb).

Roy sees such films as 'potentially a good thing for archaeology', and, conversely, archaeology offering some good settings for cinema: 'The Rose would make great drama,' he says, 'and there are plenty of stories in sites like Nonsuch Palace and the Temple of Mithras.' He's also been working with author Rebecca Stott, Professor of Creative Writing at University of East Anglia, on *Dark Earth* (a book set in Roman London), which is coming out early this year.

And as for the relevance of Eden Street for the future, and the future of archaeology itself? 'There's definitely scope for bringing together the role of outlying sites like Kingston – think Enfield, Uxbridge, Bromley, Croydon, even the Wandle Valley – that fed into the development and character of London,' says Roy, 'And although opportunities for major sites in London may dim, there's excellent potential for standing building archaeology too, as well as revisiting sites, through archives and new technologies.'



**ABOVE** The Eden Street site was published as the first of MoLAS's Archaeological Studies Series



**OPPOSITE** The case in the medieval galleries of Museum of London, displaying Kingston ware pottery from Eden Street Photo: Roy Stephenson