

The Roman road Stane Street uncovered in Merton

Introduction

Between January 1997 and April 1999 the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) undertook an investigation of land bounded by High Street Colliers Wood, Christchurch Road and the river Pickle, London Borough of Merton (TQ 2672 7014; fig 1). This consisted of a preliminary site assessment, followed by field evaluation, excavation and a watching brief (Saxby 1997; 1998; Sloane 1997). The site archive is available for consultation at the London Archaeological Archive Resource Centre under the site code CCC97.

This work led to the discovery of a section of Stane Street, and allowed a detailed record of the road alignment and construction to be made. The road is projected to continue in a straight line under the site of the medieval Merton Priory and thence on to Morden. There was also topographical and environmental evidence for the contemporary river crossing the line of the Roman road.

The site lies within the flood plain of the river Wandle, a tributary of the Thames rising at the foot of the North Downs and running northwards through the boroughs of Merton and Wandsworth. Prior to the archaeological investigation, the course of Stane Street within the locality had been reported within the area of Clapham to the north (Imber 1974, 235–50). Projecting the line of the road from Clapham gives an alignment along High Street Colliers Wood, but there was no evidence for its passage across the Wandle flood plain.

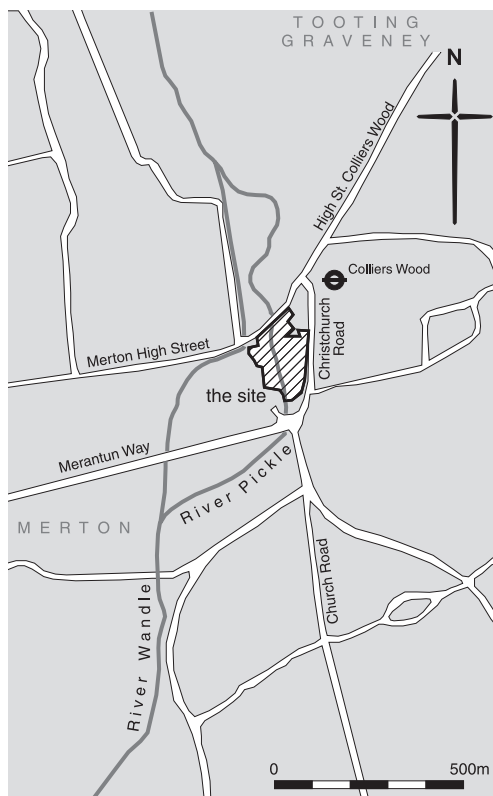


Fig 1 Stane Street, Merton. Site location. (© Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. All rights reserved)

The archaeological evidence

The archaeological evaluation consisted of eight trenches, two of which exposed the Roman road in the north-western part of the site. These were subsequently enlarged in excavation (fig 2, trenches 1 and 2), revealing two phases of the road construction and associated ditches, sealed by alluvial deposits 0.40–1.0m thick. A watching brief in the northern part of the site produced further evidence for the road construction over a distance of 40m.

The evaluation trenches in the centre and south-east of the site did not produce any evidence of human activity. However, several palaeochannels were identified cutting into the underlying sand and gravel and presumably formed part of a braided system of the river Wandle (not illustrated). The lower level of natural in the centre of the site suggests that an early river channel crossed this area. Similar evidence came from the north-western part of the site, where natural gravel was found at 10.64m OD in trench 1, dropping to 10.00m OD in trench 2. Some 40m further north the watching brief revealed alluvial riverlaid deposits to at least 9.65m OD, with natural not exposed.

The first phase of Roman road construction was principally represented by roadside ditches, located to the north-west and south-east of trenches 1 and 2 (fig 3). These were less clearly defined in trench 2, apparently because of the proximity of the river channel noted above, and because the ditches had been flooded and eroded before silting up.

The north-western roadside ditch 101 in trench 1 was 1.85m wide x 0.27m deep, and was filled with a silty clay with gravel (100). The ditch had sides cut at 45° and a flat base, although at the northern end the sides became near vertical. In trench 2 the ditch (129) was *c* 1.80m

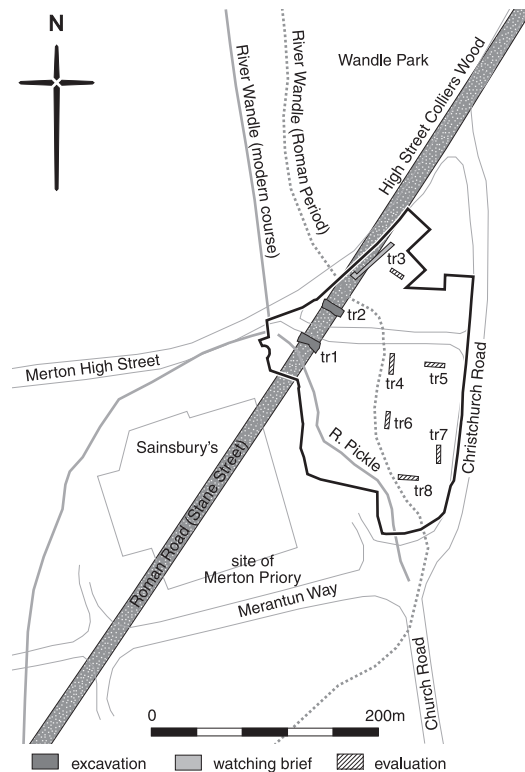


Fig 2 Stane Street, Merton. Plan showing the trench locations, the projected line of Stane Street and suggested course of the river Wandle during the Roman period. (© Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. All rights reserved)

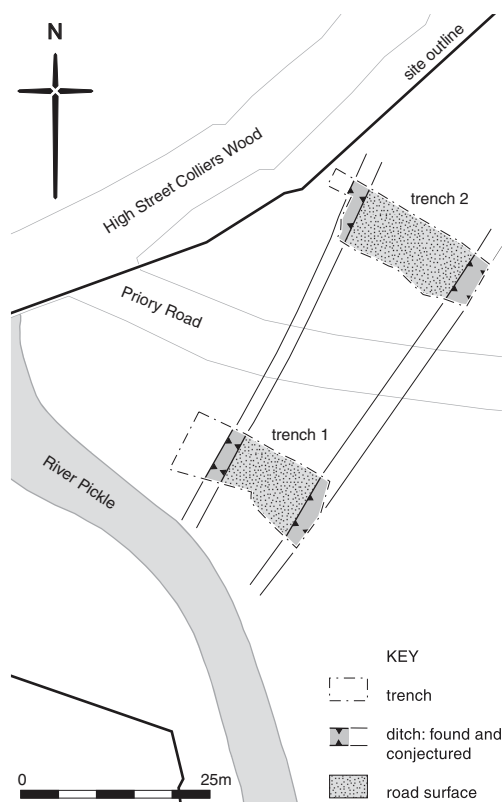


Fig 3 Stane Street, Merton. Plan showing the phase one Roman road.

wide x 250mm deep with shallow sloping sides and a rounded base, and was filled with grey sandy silt (107). Between trenches 1 and 2 the base of the ditch fell from 10.43m to 9.89m OD.

The south-eastern roadside ditch (90) in trench 1 was narrower, at 0.60m wide x 0.20m deep, and was filled with organic silt (89). The sides were near vertical with a flat base at 10.30m OD. In trench 2 the south-eastern ditch was some 2m wide and 0.20m deep, and had shallow sloping sides with a slightly rounded base. The primary fill (122) was of coarse sand overlain by silty sand, but no finds were recovered. The base of the ditch was at 9.66m OD, a fall of some 0.64m from south to north.

The road make-up layers within trench 1 were lost, presumably truncated during the second phase of road building. In trench 2 the road consisted of a layer of sub-rounded flints (114) bedded on a 0.15m-thick layer of coarse sand, at about 10.25m OD.

The distance between the ditches in trench 1 was *c* 12m, which presumably represents the actual width of the road during this phase. Within trench 2 the width between ditches was *c* 16m. There was no direct dating evidence from the road make-up or ditch fills in either trench. Excavations in Southwark suggested a date shortly after AD50 (Drummond-Murray *et al* 2002, 14), and presumably the road in Merton was constructed at some time after this date.

The findings in trenches 1 and 2 show that the road entered the lower valley close to an early river channel. The natural ground surface drops some 0.65m to the north-east, while the road widens from 12 to 16m. The alluvial deposits subsequently recorded over natural to the north of trench 2 may well indicate the location of a ford.

Localised flooding and erosion, perhaps combined with a rise in river level, probably led to the reconstruction of the road and ditches (fig 4). In trench 1 the north-west ditch was

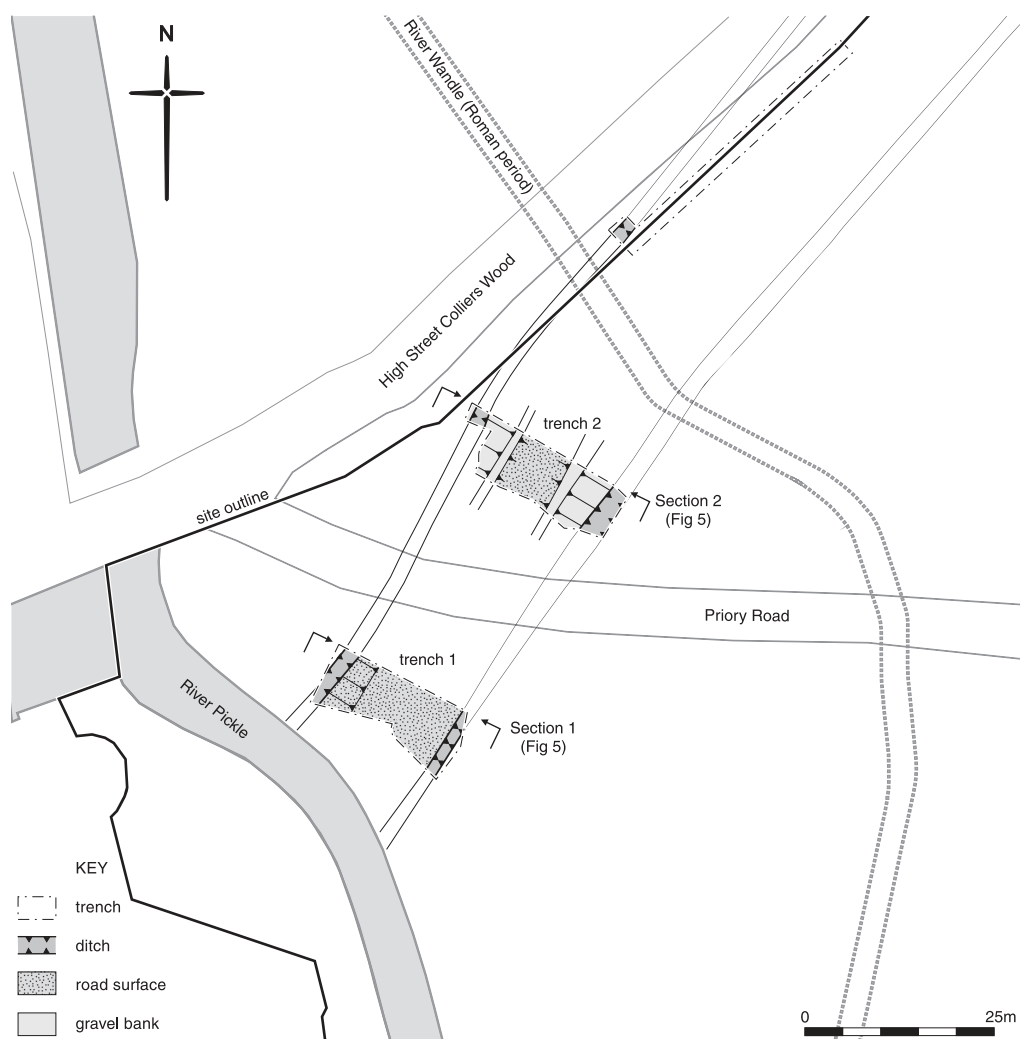


Fig 4 Stane Street, Merton. Plan showing the phase two Roman road.

backfilled and a new ditch (72) dug, at least 3.5m to the north-west and on a different alignment. The south-eastern ditch (48) remained on the same line but was recut at a higher level. Road make-up was spread over the backfilled north-western ditch, widening the road to about 16m.

A road make-up layer (51) between the ditches in trench 1 consisted of a simple layer of compacted rounded pebbles with occasional flint nodules. This layer was 90–180mm thick, becoming less compacted to the north-west as the surface sloped away. This would give a usable road width of around 12m, over which the surface was generally flat at c 10.70m OD.

Within trench 2 the overall road width increased by up to 3.5m to 19.5m, once again through the creation of a new roadside ditch to the north-west. The first phase construction was buried under a series of make-up layers, built outwards from the middle of the road towards the ditches. This make-up consisted of layers of sand, gravel and silt with pebbles, collectively some 0.30–0.60m thick. The upper sequence of the deposits formed two linear gravel banks flanking the central section of the road parallel with the ditches. The metalled road surface consisted of pebbles compacted into a light grey silt, at c 10.45m OD. This deposit extended over the flanking gravel banks, where it reached 10.73m OD.

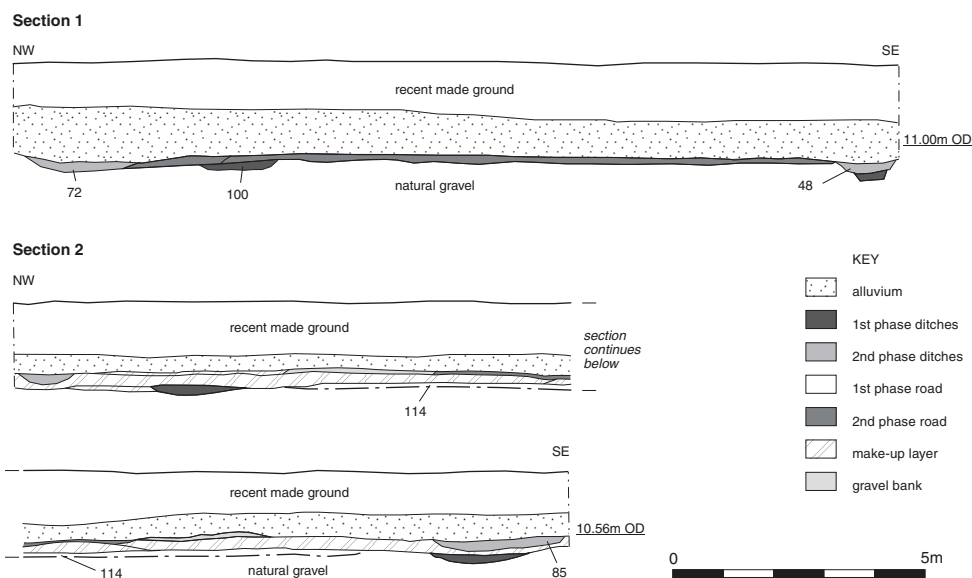


Fig 5 Stane Street, Merton. Sections through the Roman road in trenches 1 and 2.

The overall width of the road was reduced to about 14m by a gradual outward slope from the gravel banks, in particular to the south-east. The relatively flat middle section between the gravel banks measured \approx 6m.

The north-west ditch (72) in trench 1 was \approx 2.20m wide x 0.30m deep and filled with a slightly sandy silt with occasional pebbles; part of a human tibia and a later 2nd century coin were also recovered from the fill. The ditch was cut with a near-vertical north-western side and a shallow south-eastern side, which gradually sloped down from the road surface to a rounded base at 10.40m OD. Within trench 2 the ditch was 1.40m wide x 0.25m deep and was filled with a grey silt over a slightly rounded base at 10.28m OD.

The south-eastern ditch (48) within trench 1 was on the same alignment as the earlier ditch, some 1.90m wide x 0.30m deep, and was filled with a slightly sandy silt with occasional pebbles. In trench 2 the south-eastern ditch (85) measured around 3m wide x 0.40m deep: its outer side sloped at \approx 45° with a flat base at 10.24m OD, while the north-west side rose gently to the adjacent gravel bank. The ditch was filled with an organic silt, but the only datable finds were of 2nd to mid-3rd century pottery. Archaeomagnetic samples were taken, but owing to the high-energy deposition of the silt it could not be dated.

Recovered from the road surface (51) within trench 1 was a copper-alloy dolphin brooch with half of the bow, catch-plate, pin and spring missing <8> (Museum of London finds accession number). This is a common form, introduced from the mid-1st century AD (Hattatt 1989). The bow is plain with a fine vertical groove running down each side; the arms are also plain with a vertical groove across each end (fig 6, no 1).

A second copper/silver-alloy crossbow brooch was recovered from the road surface (51). This brooch had the catch-plate remaining <10>. The catch-plate has the normal curled return and is cut through on one side to receive the now-missing pin. The other side of the curl is broken open, possibly due to the softness of the alloy. The bow is plain, although there are rough vertical grooves across the foot, similar to those illustrated elsewhere (Hattatt 1989, 368, fig 227, no 1260). The brooch is of an unusual alloy, indicated by X-ray fluorescence to be predominantly silver. Crossbow brooches were almost certainly made on the Continent and would probably have been worn mainly by the higher ranks of society. This example has similarities with the earlier brooches of the 3rd century AD, and as such is relatively rare (fig 6, no 2) (*ibid*, 368, fig 227, nos 501, 1260 & 1261; Hattatt 1985, 130–1, fig 55, no 501).

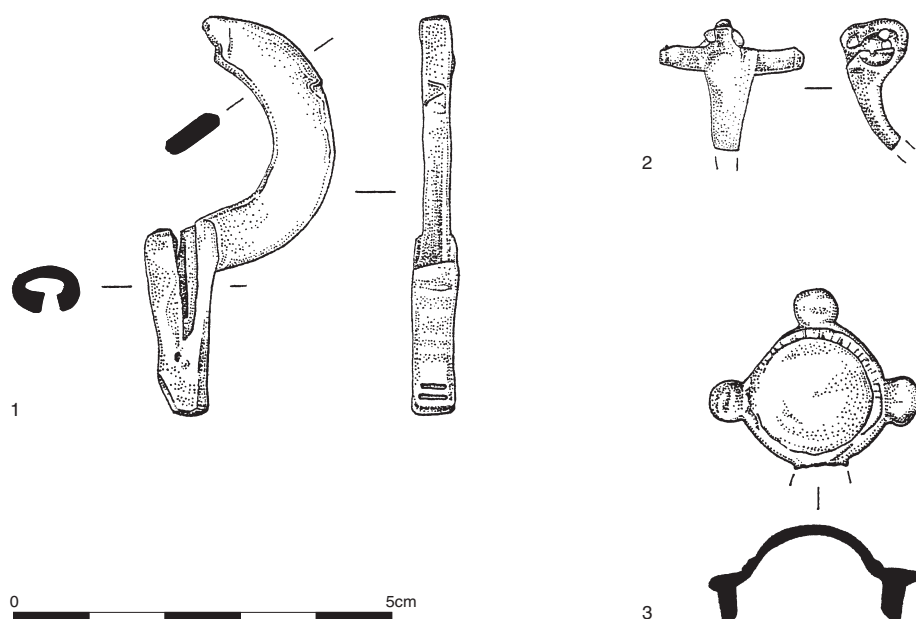


Fig 6 Stane Street, Merton. Illustrations of the 1) copper-alloy brooch <8>; 2) copper/silver-alloy brooch <10>; and 3) copper-alloy mount <6>

Recovered from an alluvial silt (61) overlying the road surface in trench 1 was a copper-alloy hollow-domed mount with a convex centre, slightly stepped rim with fine vertical grooves and four circular lugs (one missing) around the head <6>. A short shaft extends from the underside of each lug. The mount shows no signs of any decoration or enamelling, and may derive from a box or item of furniture (fig 6, no 3).

The watching brief to the north of trench 2 exposed a section across the presumed north-west ditch (fig 4). The feature was 0.22m deep x *c* 1m wide, with its base at 10.09m OD. This level is consistent with the recorded fall between trenches 1 and 2, although the location suggests a slight deviation to the north-east in the road alignment. The road make-up in this area consisted of a compact silty clay and coarse gravel, some 80–350mm thick.

Road construction and evidence for a river crossing

The first phase road surface was generally flat, consisting in trench 2 of a 0.15m-thick layer of gravel and flint. The road measured from *c* 12m wide between the ditches in trench 1 to 16m in trench 2. This increase of 4m lower in the valley suggests that the road was widening at its approach to a ford.

During the second phase the road in trench 1 was widened to about 16m, although the usable width may still have been around 12m as the surface sloped downwards to the recut north-western ditch. Further into the valley in trench 2 the road level was raised by at least 0.30m and widened to 19.5m between ditches. However, this area was divided by linear gravel banks, with the lower central part of the road at *c* 10.45m OD only about 6m wide. The gravel banks within trench 2 may represent pedestrian footpaths leading to footbridges crossing the river to the north, with horses and wheeled traffic travelling along the middle of the road and crossing a ford. Further north the road surface was recorded at 10.35m OD,



Fig 7 Stane Street, Merton. Photograph of the phase two road surface with the south-eastern roadside ditch in the foreground in trench 1.

dropping to a low point of 10.09m OD some 40m to the north of trench 2. Thereafter the surface rose again, reaching about 10.40m OD.

Within the northernmost area, the road make-up largely overlay alluvial sands and clays. These deposits were recorded to a depth of at least 0.50m, and probably represent infills of an early channel of the Wandle. The existence of such a feature was indicated during the evaluation and excavation, and was more or less established by the watching brief. However, the date of the alluvial deposits and their relationship with the first phase of road construction was not clear from the watching brief. There may well have been an early ford, which silted up and was replaced by the road surface seen during the investigation, although it is evident that the latter was itself flooded periodically.

Dating the road

The finds – pottery, building material, small finds and coins – were relatively few in number and covered a wide date range. Consequently the construction date of the road and the date at which it went out of use are hard to ascertain. It is likely that the road was constructed fairly soon after the invasion; excavations in Southwark suggest a date shortly after AD50 (Drummond-Murray *et al* 2002, 14). First century coins and pottery have been found elsewhere along the line of Stane Street, for example in Ewell (Abdy & Birtton 1997). Excavations to the south of the site in 1993 revealed twelve inhumations and several ditches dating to the late 1st–early 2nd centuries (Nielsen 1993), while many residual finds were produced by the Merton Priory excavations of 1976–90 just to the south-west (Miller & Saxby 2007, 11). It seems likely that some form of settlement existed nearby, possibly around a *mansio* or *mutatio*.

The second phase road and ditches were probably constructed in the latter half of the 2nd century. The road make-up in trench 1 produced fragments of ceramic building material that may date to around AD160, although they could be as late as AD230. Other finds of

pottery and tile suggest that the second phase ditches in trench 1 were becoming filled by the mid-3rd century.

Towards the end of the Roman period the road appears to have become less important, although its exact status is not clear. Environmental evidence from the ditch fills and overlying alluvium indicates continued seasonal flooding. The ditches were left to silt up and vegetation grew up along the road margins. Coin finds from and immediately above the road surface suggest that this occurred in the mid-later 4th century AD. Stratigraphic changes within the alluvium indicate formation over a considerable period of time, and may reflect changes in the local environment that began near the end of the Roman period.

It is possible that the road disappeared as the result of a single event such as flooding. However, a gradual process of abandonment is perhaps more likely, in which declining use, lack of maintenance and periodic flooding all played a part. Thus the road would have continued in use for some years, but more as a trackway than the surfaced thoroughfare of the Roman period.

With the foundation of Merton Priory on its present site in AD1117, the rebuilt late 12th century church was placed upon the line of Stane Street with the west door located directly on top of the road. The eastern precinct wall was placed on top of the Roman road or trackway now diverting the road in a westerly direction along the present day Merton High Street towards South Wimbledon.

This period also witnessed a further change in the river regime, reflected in the archaeomagnetic dating of the uppermost alluvial sequence to AD1200–50 (Mackie & McCann 1998, 54). This date coincides with the major building programme of Merton Priory c AD1230–50. This probably brought about the recutting of the river during the Priory construction.

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