



Location: Vauxhall foreshore, London (TQ 30228 78181), Bermondsey foreshore, London (TQ 34533 79725), Bankside foreshore, London (TQ 32116 80568)

Main period: Mesolithic–present day

Access & ownership: This factsheet gives details for three discrete stretches of foreshore where there is known prehistory. Each site requires sturdy footwear such as wellies or boots. Visitors should be aware that the foreshore is uneven and often muddy. Visitors should never go alone, always have a mobile phone and wash hands after visiting. The majority of the Thames foreshore in Greater London is owned by the Crown Estate (CE), but managed by the Port of London Authority (PLA). The public are free to walk on the majority of foreshore in London, but are not allowed to metal detect, dig or collect finds without a special permit. If significant finds are discovered then the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) should be contacted: <http://finds.org.uk/>. For more information on Health and Safety regarding the Greater London foreshore see: <http://www.thamesdiscovery.org/about/foreshore-safety>

- Vauxhall foreshore, London

Parking: There is paid parking available underground at the St George's Wharf building. For more information see: <http://www.sgwra.org.uk/underground-parking-at-st-george-wharf.html>

Access: Access to and egress from the foreshore is the ramp just past the east side of the M16 building. NB: you cannot walk closer than 15 m to the river wall at this site (restricted area).

- Bermondsey foreshore, London

Parking: There is paid parking available at *Q-Park Car Park*, Butlers Wharf, 46-50 Gainsford Street, SE1 2NE. For more information see: <http://www.q-park.co.uk/language/en-us/parking/qparkparkinglocatorvw3377/parkingdetail/parkingid/587>

Access: Access to and egress from the foreshore is concrete stairs with metal handrails located at Fountain Stairs, at the end of Bermondsey Wall East (close to the intersection of Wilson Grove).

- Bankside foreshore, London

Parking: There is paid parking available at the *NCP Car Park* on Upper Thames Street. For more information see: <http://www.ncp.co.uk/find-a-car-park/car-parks/london-vintry-thames-exchange/>

Access: Access to and egress from the foreshore are two sets of concrete stairs near to the entrance of the Tate Modern and the Globe Theatre.



Fig. 1. View of the Bermondsey foreshore with volunteers from the Thames Discovery Programme (Photo: C. Nimura)

The **prehistoric landscapes** on today's **Thames foreshore** went through many changes, particularly between the beginning of the Mesolithic (c. 10,000 BC) and the end of the Bronze Age (c. 800 BC), as a result of local and global environmental factors. When we look down on the Thames today, we see a fast-flowing river forming an iconic shape, dotted by numerous speeding boats. In

prehistory we would have encountered a broader, meandering and often braided river whose twice-daily rising tides expanded well beyond the present day river walls.

It was once assumed that the land flanking the Thames and its floodplain was uninhabited during the Mesolithic and Neolithic, but evidence from the last two decades has quelled this assumption. After the big thaw at the end of the last glaciation, river currents gradually slowed allowing sand and gravel islands (eyots) to form. Such islands and the resources of the river and its banks would have been important for early people. The area around Chamber's Wharf in Bermondsey (Fig. 1), for example, would have been situated amongst a group of these ancient islands, namely the Bermondsey, Horselydown and Rotherhithe eyots. During the Bronze and Iron Ages the floodplain of the Thames became increasingly wet, creating a wetland / salt marshland environment, where peat was able to form. This period of the river's history is complex: the channel itself was probably migrating as was the position of the tidal head – the furthest upstream point in the river that is affected by tides (currently at Teddington in West London). Though peat formation occurred from the Neolithic through to the Iron Age in this area, archaeological evidence points to the majority having formed during the Bronze Age, the period from which we have a significant number of prehistoric artefacts deposited on what is now the foreshore.

A significant quantity of prehistoric artefacts and material has been identified over the last 20 years of monitoring the foreshore in central London. Most are worked flints and pottery sherds, but significant finds such as Bronze Age metalwork, Iron Age coins (Fig. 2), finger rings, brooches, daggers and swords have also been recovered from the foreshore. Recently at Bermondsey and Vauxhall large quantities of flint flakes and flint tools, such as a scrapers, hammer stones, and borers have been recovered, which are all likely of Bronze Age date.



Fig 2. Iron Age coin; PAS ID LON-F9B3B4. © Portable Antiquities Scheme

Two important prehistoric structures have been found on the foreshore either side of **Vauxhall Bridge** (also known as Nine Elms) and approximately 600 m apart. Across this whole area extensive ancient peat, sand and silt deposits are exposed (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. (left) In situ peat deposit at Vauxhall (Photo: C. Nimura)

Fig. 4. (right) One of the Mesolithic timbers at Nine Elms, Vauxhall foreshore. Photo: Nathalie Cohen

The first structure, just downstream of the bridge, is one of London's oldest. Three upright timbers averaging 0.3 m diameter (Fig. 4) and three smaller stakes of around 0.1 m diameter are aligned parallel to the foreshore in a line running c. 4–5 m long (Milne *et al.* 2010/11). Of these, the three larger timbers have been radiocarbon dated to the late Mesolithic: 4790–4610 cal BC, 4690–4490 cal BC, and 4720–4540 cal BC. Other timbers occur close by, but it is not yet certain that all are contemporary.

The second significant feature on the Vauxhall foreshore is a Bronze Age piled structure, consisting of at least 20 piles, c. 0.4 m diameter, that form two irregular rows around 4 m apart. These piles can only be seen at very low water and reach almost 15 m out into the river. Interpreted as the footings for either a 'jetty' or a 'bridge' leading to an ancient eyot, it is dated to 1770–1520 cal BC / 1620–1260 cal BC (Fig. 5). A single timber has been excavated (during the filming of a *Time Team* episode) to show that the gradually tapered pile was driven down at least 1.25 m below the current foreshore, and that 'much of the bark and sapwood had been hewn away using a tool with a 20–30 mm wide blade...' (Sidell *et al.* 2002, 29). Amongst these timber piles, two bronze side-looped

spearheads were found 'pushed down into the foreshore between two of the wooden piles' (Sidell et al. 2002, 30; see also Cotton & Wood 1996, 14–16).



Fig. 5. The Bronze Age structure at Nine Elms, Vauxhall foreshore. Photo: Nathalie Cohen

Both structures are situated close to the confluence of the tributary river Effra with the Thames, and the finds recovered from the foreshore around these features were likely originally strewn across a series of low sandy eminences overlooking the confluence (Cotton & Green 2004, 125). This area has, for the last two decades, been monitored closely as worked flints and prehistoric pottery are regularly found eroding out of the peat deposits. It is possible that this site would have been of long-standing symbolic importance to prehistoric peoples.

Although the **Bermondsey** and **Bankside** stretches of foreshore have not yet yielded any prehistoric structures, burnt flint, possible prehistoric shells and burnt animal bone have been found alongside flint debitage (the waste made from creating flint tools), implying that these sites were regularly used by prehistoric peoples. The Thames foreshore therefore represents a rare opportunity to experience a prehistoric landscape in the heart of the nation's capital.

References & Links

- Cotton, J. & Green, A. 2004. Further prehistoric finds from Greater London. *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society* 55: 119–51
- Cotton, J. & Wood, B. 1996. Recent prehistoric finds from the Thames Foreshore and beyond in Greater London. *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society* 47: 1–33
- Milne, G., Cohen, N. & Cotton, J. 2010/11. London's oldest prehistoric structure. *London Archaeologist* 12(11): 287–9
- Sidell, J., Cotton, J., Rayner, L. & Wheeler, L. 2002. *The Prehistory and Topography of Southwark and Lambeth*. London: MOLAS Monograph 14
- Thames Discovery Programme (offers guided walks on site for school children): www.thamesdiscovery.org
- Port of London Authority: <http://www.pla.co.uk/Environment/Metal-Detecting-and-Digging-on-the-Thames-Foreshore>
- Thames Explorer Trust: <http://www.thames-explorer.org.uk/thames-education/river-lesson-plans>

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