

Thurrock's Deeper Past: A Confluence of Time

The archaeology of the borough of
Thurrock, Essex, from the last Ice Age to the
establishment of the English kingdoms

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Cover illustration: The Late Iron Age triple-ditched enclosure at Orsett Cock, Thurrock, Essex (Essex County Council).

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Dedications

I ask forgiveness of my partner, **Ms Pamela Louise Simpson**, for putting up with a lowly paid digger, leaving thin layers of Roman and prehistoric soil in the bottom of the shower for the last twenty plus years, and to say a big thank you for all her support. This volume is dedicated to her, my two sons Peter John and Michael David and to my grandsons Ronnie and Henry, who are the future.

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Geoff Carter: Figures 46-51.

Introduction

It was one sunny day in 1969, if my memory serves me correctly, that my class mates and I, pupils of St Chad's Secondary Modern School in Tilbury, were herded onto a coach for an outing. Always a very exciting prospect, as many families still did not own cars. I do not remember being told where we were going and we probably did not care. It was a chance to get away from the usual classroom routine. As usual the more rowdy elements sat at the back, as far away from the teacher's eye as was physically possible, and proceeded to throw projectiles at the rest of us.

The coach did not take long to reach our destination, having only driven two or three miles, before dropping us off at what was still an unknown and unfamiliar place to most of us. The vast majority of us had never travelled extensively around Thurrock or Essex on a regular basis and certainly had never been to foreign climes on holidays. Those that had were considered very rich and exotic creatures. Indeed going over to Kent was a major exploration into the unknown and London a rare day out on the train Up Town.

The landscape that surrounded us was indeed very strange. The topsoil had been stripped off to leave an orange and yellow carpet of sandy and stony ground all around us. Extensive views stretched away to the Thames in the distance, a brown grey colour with sparkling specks of light enlivening its sluggish surface. What could possibly be here for us to see? It looked like somewhere Doctor Who might fight off another attack from the Daleks, but in colour! Instead of an animated 'pepper pot' threatening to *ex-ter-min-ate* us a woman with a mass of frizzy black hair (funny what you remember) walked over and told us that she was an archaeologist, whatever that was. We were going to see where some Anglo-Saxons lived, in this place called Mucking (cue giggles). I knew what and who they were as I had been one of the few survivors of the History Club at primary school, instilling in me a basic chronology of Celts, Romans, Saxons and Normans. My history teacher's name has long been forgotten by me, unfortunately, but I have a sense of gratitude to him for going to the trouble of setting up the History Club to show us (on a colour television, no less), films and pictures of past peoples that fascinated me and a few of my classmates. Many of my schools mates came to goggle at the wonder of colour on a television set (still a rare thing) and then soon disappeared in the following weeks when the novelty wore off and they lost interest in the subject matter.

The archaeologist started to show us around. Here were some holes in the ground - pits used for various things; here was a kiln for making pottery - another hole in the ground; here is a ditch - a long hole in the ground. By now many of my

fellow pupils were starting to amuse themselves by kicking gravel into the holes, much to the annoyance of the archaeologist. I was entranced, especially when we were taken into a shed and shown and touched some of the artefacts. The actual age of the objects in years meant little to me, as my young mind found it impossible to comprehend such an abstract concept as hundreds or thousands of years before my existence. I once taught a digging workshop to some five year olds and tried to explain that the objects they were finding were made at the time of Jesus, hoping that they could see the time frame in relation to a familiar figure they had heard of. I heard one say 'do you know when Jesus lived?' and the other replied 'it must be more than seven years ago. I'm seven and I never met him'. I was eleven or twelve and not much more advanced in my personal concept of time.

My imagination had been fired by being able to handle such objects and to wonder who made them and who the last person in the past to touch this thing before I did, apart from the digger who found it. And that is what most people feel, archaeologists and volunteers, when they are asked why they bother to dig about in the dirt in foul weather. Archaeology is a hands-on subject that can be experienced directly and not just read about. It can make anyone have the feeling that they have a direct link to the past and to the people that were alive at the time. Many people have asked me what is the most exciting artefact I have found during my years as an archaeologist. I am sure that they were expecting an answer that included the words treasure, gold and coins or at least a juicy story about bodies. My answer is always the same. It is the time I *smelt* the Great Fire of London of 1666.

I was digging on a site in Fenchurch Street and we had dug down to the layer that corresponded to the 17th century. There was the dark layer of the great fire. I dug my nail in and sniffed and there was the unmistakable aroma...of burning. I was touching and seeing the end of a London that had existed, much unchanged, for sixteen hundred years, since the Roman Empire had hammered into place timbers into the foreshore near London Bridge in around 52 AD to construct the first wharf (which I was also lucky to see and touch). Sixteen hundred years of development, abandonment, fire and then rebirth under Alfred the Great; growth throughout the Middle Ages and under the Tudors Kings and Queens; a hotbed of radical thought during the Civil Wars and the defying of a King. Gone in just a few hours.

It is the nature of the human condition to have a sense of the past and of the future, for we find it impossible to just live in the present. As a result the past has an impact on all of us, which informs us through experience as individuals and as a community, and thus arms us with the weapon of knowledge, so that we may look to the future with confidence, to see the immensity of life and time and our place in the world.

The one great advantage of archaeology over history is that I could find out these things, without the need for the interpretation of historians and teachers. I could be an archaeologist, find the past under my feet and my interpretation would be paramount, as I had dug it, as in the process of excavation the evidence is destroyed and could never be dug by someone else. What a responsibility, but what a feeling of fulfilment it brings. And there is nothing as exciting as being able to find out about the past of your own home. When I have been asked by workmen on a building site why I do my job and what is the point, I ask them where they got their name. Of course it is from their family, which stretches into the past as long as records have existed. That is their personal past which is then connected to the past of the community in which they live. Without it we are like a drifting ship in a wide and featureless ocean. What a nightmare it would be if you were to wake one morning without a memory. What questions would you ask? Exactly! Where am I? Who am I? Where do I come from? This is why the past is of vital importance to every human being.

Growing up in Tilbury, and having brought up my own two sons in Stifford Clays, I wanted to satisfy another human trait. I wanted to know the full story of my community, or as near to it as possible. How this community developed from the deep past, not just the history of the last two hundred years I was taught at school; the history of kings and queens and tales of the great and good (and not so good). I wanted to know about the lives of the everyday person and the only way to do that is through archaeology. For it is not the artefacts that gives archaeology its *raison d'être*, it is the people behind the objects that is of paramount importance and interest. We are all interested in people and how they live and who they are. Why are soaps and reality television so popular?

The British Isles have been just that for only about eight thousand years, since the land bridge dissolved into the English Channel due to climate change. Over that time the population of this land, battered by the wind and waves of the Atlantic and North Sea, has developed its own ways of thinking and doing to survive, very distinct to the mainlanders over the water. Over those millennia people have had to cross that water, bringing new words and ways with them. These folk movements, made with conquest or trade or settlement in mind, all succumbed to the native's ability to absorb and transform their lives and the lives of the newcomers; producing a continually changing culture that is founded on the past, but can be infinitely flexible to face the future. That process continues to this day and if archaeology teaches us anything it is that whatever way you view yourself, whatever name or ethnicity, it is the *mix* that makes all of us who we are.

Before doing this book I was as unaware of most of the archaeology of Thurrock, as you probably are. After doing the research I was delighted to find out how rich and important the archaeology of this area is to our understanding of

Britain as a whole. How Thurrock has been a vital crossing point over the Thames for millennia. The Thames, that ever moving ribbon of life that is at the heart of our nation and our individual being, has shaped and mirrored the people of the river who live on this particular stretch, from the growth of London from the first city of the Romans to today's international metropolis. The past of Thurrock is all our pasts, no matter where you may live. Primarily it is of importance to the people of Thurrock, because it is *your* past. No matter how long your family has been living here you are laying down the next layer of its rich and fascinating history and adding to the heritage of this borough by the Thames. A borough that has seen so many people's arrive and settle here over time, and will continue to do so long into the future.

So this book is a personal one for me, and I hope for you too. It will not be a compilation of site reports, or an academic study that is for professional archaeologists and scholars. It is a story and a journey through time based on the evidence that we have found over several decades through the dedication and hard work of a few hardy diggers and the occasional individual chance find; evidence that shows that Thurrock holds a unique place in the history of Britain due to its geographical location on the mighty Thames. As a result we have some of the most important sites and finds in the country, if not the world. We must not forget the people who lived and worked and died on these sites and who made the landscape that we live in today.

Because of them we stand on the banks of our river looking out onto the world, but are also mirrored by it.

Thurrock today

Thurrock is a unitary authority area with borough status in the County of Essex. The present-day borough of Thurrock was created in 1974 from the former area of the Thurrock Urban District. It was given administrative independence from Essex County Council on 1st April 1998 by *The Essex (Boroughs of Colchester, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock and District of Tendring) (Structural, Boundary and Electoral Changes) Order 1996*. It remains part of Essex for ceremonial purposes, such as the Lord-Lieutenancy.

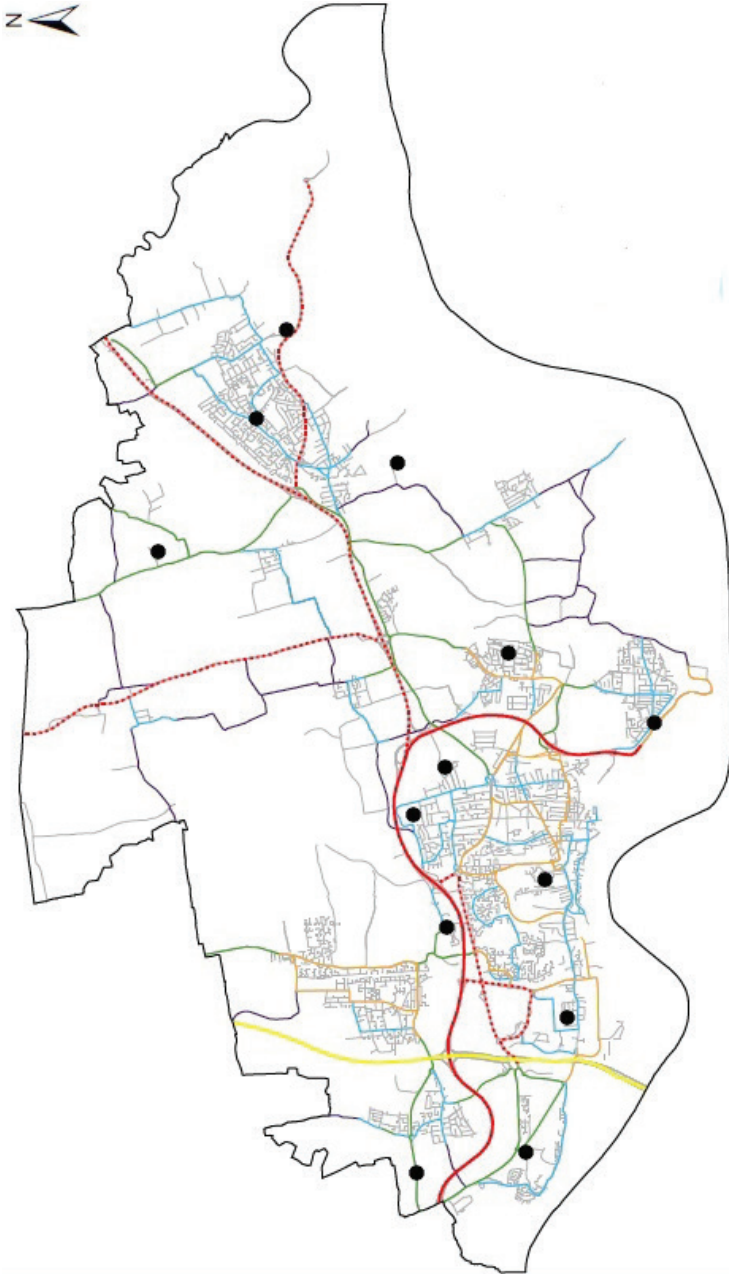
It is part of the London commuter belt and an area of regeneration within the Thames Gateway redevelopment zone, a corridor of opportunity that has been identified by central government as the area with greatest development and commercial potential in the country.

It lies on the River Thames just to the east of London and has over 18 miles (29 km) of riverfront, covering an area of 64 square miles (166 km²), with more than half defined as Green Belt, which covers 70% of the borough. Thurrock has a population of 157,500 people with 494 acres (200 ha) of land available for industrial use. There are seven conservation areas, nineteen scheduled ancient monuments and 239 listed buildings.

Much of the population and commercial activity is centred along the riverfront. This includes many large and important industrial sites, including two large oil refineries, manufacturing industries, a container port, cruise liner terminal, distribution warehousing and one of Britain's largest refuse disposal sites at the appropriately named settlement of Mucking. Thurrock is also home to one of the first 'out of town' mega shopping centres, the Lakeside Shopping Centre.

Historically the area was renowned for mineral extraction, including clay, aggregates and notably the digging of huge amounts of chalk from the West Thurrock area for use in the now defunct cement industries. A number of former pits have been used to form the Chafford Gorges Nature Reserve, managed by the Essex Wildlife Trust.

This book outlines the deeper foundations of this vibrant and important area on the banks of the Thames.



Map 1. Palaeolithic and Mesolithic sites.