



Colne Valley Park: A Brief History

The Colne Valley Regional Park was established in 1967 to preserve areas suitable for leisure, recreation and conservation to the west of London, between Rickmansworth and Staines. The area that is now the Park has been valued by different people for different reasons at different times and many of those long since dead former inhabitants of the area have left traces of their way of life.

Palaeolithic (400,000 – 8,500 BC)

The earliest traces of people in the Park date to around 400,000 BC. During this geological period (the Pleistocene) vast sheets of ice advanced from Polar regions to cover much of Britain. There were numerous climatic changes with cold or 'glacial' phases, alternating with more temperate 'interglacial' phases. The dramatic changes in temperature are associated with changes in flora and fauna. It was during this period that rivers deposited gravel, silt and sand within the Colne Valley, and it has been during gravel extraction that evidence for this

View of the Park today



period has been recovered. During the milder periods Stone Age people would have inhabited the region.

Evidence is limited due to the changes wrought on the landscape by the ice and all that survives are remains of abraded flint tools, moved from their original location and re-deposited in riverbeds. Yiewsley (just outside the borders of the park) is one of the most important sites in Europe for this period, and the earliest tools found here are crudely modified rocks. Within the last great interglacial period (175,000 – 70,000 BC), more sophisticated flint tools appear at Denham (The Lea), Harefield and Uxbridge. They are pointed with a heavy rounded butt for gripping and could have been used for a number of different tasks. Other tools include 'cleavers' long straight edges (for chopping and hacking) and 'scrapers' with rounded smooth edges (to remove fatty tissue).

Sites in Uxbridge and Staines have revealed a sequence of hunter-gatherer butchery sites which were discovered on gravel islands on the floor of the valley. Uxbridge represents one of the most important hunter-gatherer sites in Britain because of the close proximity of tools and bones, showing the relationship between hunters and hunted. As well as numerous stone tools, bone and antler artefacts (harpoons and pins) were uncovered.

Colne Valley
Park:



Mesolithic (c. 8,500 – 4,500 BC)

The period following the final retreat of ice sheets resulted in a series of climatic and environmental changes. With the melting of the ice, the climate grew steadily warmer and wetter, and forest land expanded in the clay hills to the north of the park. The river valley became dominated by a system of marsh and fen, interconnecting streams and firmer ground. From site finds it has been suggested people practised a shifting subsistence economy combining hunting and gathering with fishing, fowling, and trapping. Tools include heavy flint axes, probably used for tree felling and boat construction.

Scraper from
Three Ways Wharf, Uxbridge



Arrowhead from
Three Ways Wharf



Neolithic (4, 500—2, 300 BC)

A sign of increasing complexity and social organisation in the area comes from Staines during the Neolithic period where the remains of a 'causewayed camp' were discovered. The site would have been a large, roughly circular enclosure with two concentric rings of interrupted ditches. Although little remains, it has been interpreted as a specialised centre for trade and social activities. Finds include: pottery shards and broken fragments of polished flint and stone axes – several brought from a long distance indicating trade with Wales and the Lake District. Leaf arrowheads have also been found at the Lea, Denham. Settlement evidence remains limited in the park until the medieval period. This coincides with the growth of written sources, such as the Domesday Book in 1086.

Bronze to Iron Age (2, 300— AD 43)

In the periods archaeologists refer to as Bronze and Iron



Bronze Age weapons from London (axe, spearhead, dirk)

Roman and Saxon times, although evidence for Roman occupation in *Londinium* (London) points to a well-developed market economy with roads and waterways. Farmers in the area continued to have access to imported goods – luxury pottery, beads, glass and small pieces of metalwork. The best evidence for occupation has been discovered just outside the Colne Valley Park at Heathrow, but also at Staines where the remains of a sub-rectangular camp were uncovered. Towards the end of the Roman period (AD 280 - 400) someone was buried near Denham on what is now the access road to a quarry. Although no trace of bones remained, iron nails were found close to the grave-cut corners suggesting the use of a coffin. Grave goods suggest the occupant was a woman because finds included a necklace of three hundred small glass beads and seven Jet (black precious stone) hairpins.

In the Saxon period (AD 400 – 1066) we find the beginnings of written evidence, but little about people who lived, worked and died in the park region. The first documentary reference to Iwer, for example, is in the 'Chronicles of St Aethelweard' from 893, where the settlement is called 'Evreham' (Village on a slope). The source also makes reference to a host of Danes taking refuge on an island in the Colne after escaping from King Alfred's army. The fact that waterways in the area were important can be gleaned through the origin of names: West Drayton means 'Draeg-tun', a place where boats had to be dragged a short distance, Uxbridge means 'the bridge belonging to the Wixan', an important site for crossing the Colne. Denham meanwhile means 'village in a valley' and is first recorded

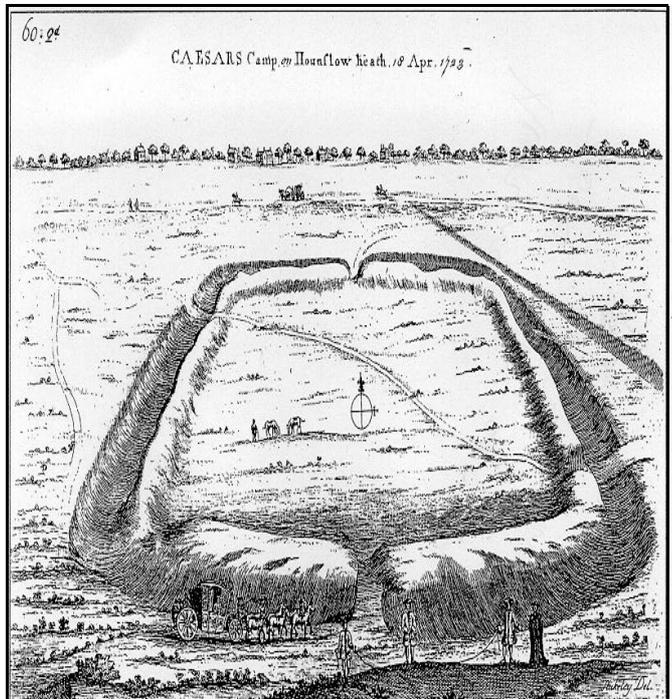
Artists impression of Uxbridge 10,000 years ago, with reindeer migrating along the river Colne



Ages, there is a certain continuity on individual sites that sees the development and increasing complexity of farming, technology and social activities. Finds include jewellery and weapons, such as a bronze sword at Wraysbury. Remains of Iron Age settlements at Iwer, Staines and Denham reveal traces of roundhouses with post-holes and hearths, but generally evidence is limited, this is probably because the low lying areas of the park were prone to flooding and only suitable for grazing. The picture that emerges is of an agricultural economy with a mixture of arable farming and stock raising (cattle, sheep, and pig). Sites are usually dated by the quality and type of pottery discovered.

Roman to Saxon (AD 43—1066)

The area seems to have remained sparsely settled in



Depiction of Caesar's Camp on the outskirts of the Park, on Hounslow Heath. This drawing by Stukeley in 1723 shows the site before intensive cultivation. This site is contemporary with the continued occupation of the 'causewayed camp' at Staines.

in 1065 when the Saxon Lord Wulfstan, granted it to Westminster Abbey.

Medieval to the present day

The Medieval period yields more substantial remains. The Domesday book, a national register of land and landholders, gives details of who owned the land of the Colne Valley. The record reveals that the park area was shared amongst manors, such as Colham and Hillingdon. The book also illustrates the continuity of certain villages from 1086 to present, such as Wraysbury ('Wirecesberie'). Each Manor's land was divided into extensive fields, each containing a number of long, narrow strips. In any one field, groups of these strips were reserved for the Lord of the Manor, as part of his farm. The remainder were distributed among tenant farmers, local officials and villagers. At West Drayton, deposits produced



Excavations underway at Denham



Silver Coins from Uxbridge. The left hand coin depicts Edward II / III (1320—1335). The other is a clipped half groat from the 14th Century.

bones of pigs, sheep, oxen, and also remains of rabbits, wildfowl, eels and fish, showing a variety of food sources. Hunting was popular and in 1086 there was a 'park for wild beasts' at Ruislip. Agriculture was well organised and sophisticated, at 'Evre' (Iver) meadows for thirty plough teams, four fisheries, and a vineyard were recorded. Agricultural surplus was sent to market towns such as Uxbridge to be sold. Medieval farm and Manor houses were in many cases surrounded by water filled moats; aerial photos now often provide the only clue to their location. Towns like Uxbridge started to develop and became important market centres and staging posts on the way to other areas (such as Oxford and Bristol). The river continued to play an important role, especially in the growth of industries such as water mills. Mills were also an important local industry and at the end of the eighteenth century there were thirteen in the Uxbridge area alone which made use of local farm produce.

"Mills on the River Colne are getting few and far between, and whereas a couple of thousand years ago there were scores of Colne Mills gaily going round and busily at work, there are, at present day, barely two dozen, and, alas! Even some of these are silent or even derelict"

S. Springall (1907)

Other settlements within the area began to develop and grow, such as Colnbrook in the Eleventh century as a river crossing and staging post.

In this period a noteworthy historical event occurred in 1215 when King John sealed the Magna Carta at Runnymede, which enshrined the principle that King and barons were bound by the rule of law. Runnymede, although now connected to the mainland, was an islet and lay halfway between the King at Windsor and the camp of the rebel barons at Staines. A memorial on site was erected by the American Bar Association commemorating the historical importance of the event.

After the medieval period there are copious historical records for the Park, and local historical groups and libraries are a good source of information for specific towns, villages and landmarks. In general, the area prospered due to developments in transport, which in turn stimulated new industries and phases of house building. One such development was the construction of the Grand Junction Canal. During the industrial revolution there was a great demand for improvements in transportation, especially between the industrialised

The fate of two Mills in the Colne Valley Park



**Cowley Mill:
Now a gauging station**



**Fountains Mill:
Now a young People's Centre.**

Midlands and London. A canal route through Harrow was rejected in favour of the less popular plan to follow the Colne valley. Labourers using picks, shovels, horse and cart shifted earth away from the construction site, and in 1794 the Brentford to Uxbridge stage was completed. A dispute with millers at Cowley led to imaginative feats of engineering: aqueducts were built to carry the canal over the Frays River. This also occurred at Denham, and later on the Slough Arm. The canal stimulated local industries, such as copper works and sand and gravel extraction. In 1882 the Slough arm was initially built to provide transport for the brick industries at Langley, but later carried sand and gravel and rubbish from London to fill the gravel pits. The development and encroachment of urban areas from the Nineteenth century onwards created a great demand for gravel, brick clay, sand and cement-making materials.

“Forty years ago when burly farmer Gurney lived at the farmhouse near by and farmed the outspread-ing fields hereabout, the waving corn presented a smiling picture, and the field path along here invited passengers by reason of its sweet and bright conditions. With the advent of the Slough Branch Canal these conditions greatly changed, for the canal was made right through these fields to facilitate the making of bricks...So the once smiling and luxuriant cornfields of Farmer Gurney have now given place to bricks, and although brickmaking is a most useful and necessary industry it is palpably plain that its concomitant factors are not productive of such delectable things as when the fair Ceres is reigning supreme”

S. Springall (1907)



Wide boats with refuse, being towed along the Lower Grand Junction in the 1930's

During the Eighteenth century, the area became a fashionable place to build country houses due to the proximity of London. A good example is Chalfont Park, which was built in 1755 by General Charles Churchill. The growth of estates led to changes in the landscape as many landowners closed or re-routed paths and roads. The landscape was also changed through the enclosure acts, a process whereby the system of regulation and communal use of arable land, open pastures, meadows and uncultivated areas were gradually replaced by a system of private land management. The communal element was abolished and individual landowners and tenants took over separate control of defined areas of land. For example in Iver, in 1725 the parish register records that Richard Bigg, local brickmaker, took on an apprentice and in 1741 leased Coney warren from the Earl of Uxbridge to make and burn bricks. During the early nineteenth century turnpike roads were developing and providing closer links between London and surrounding urban areas. In 1838 part of the Great Western Railway opened between London and Maidenhead with stations at West Drayton, Iver, Langley and Slough. Further developments in rail transport occurred when the Metropolitan line reached Rickmansworth in 1887 and Uxbridge in 1904.

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North of Rickmansworth steam trains were used until the track was electrified in 1961. The railway reached Wraysbury earlier when a station was opened on the Waterloo to Windsor route in 1848; this led to people being able to move swiftly and economically outside the area for the first time and stimulated trade and property expansion due to shortened travel times. This was followed by the opening of Heathrow as a civilian airfield in 1946 (nearby Uxbridge airfield was the base for no 11 fighter command during World War 2.) and the growth of road systems, the M4, M40 and M25.

This leaflet was produced by volunteers at the Colne Valley Park Visitor Centre in 2003, with the aid of Groundwork Thames Valley