

# Wander about Wednesday: Pottering Around Haringey (part 2)

Wednesday 27 May 2020

Welcome to Wander about Wednesday: Pottering Around Haringey (part 2) – sharing our heritage from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

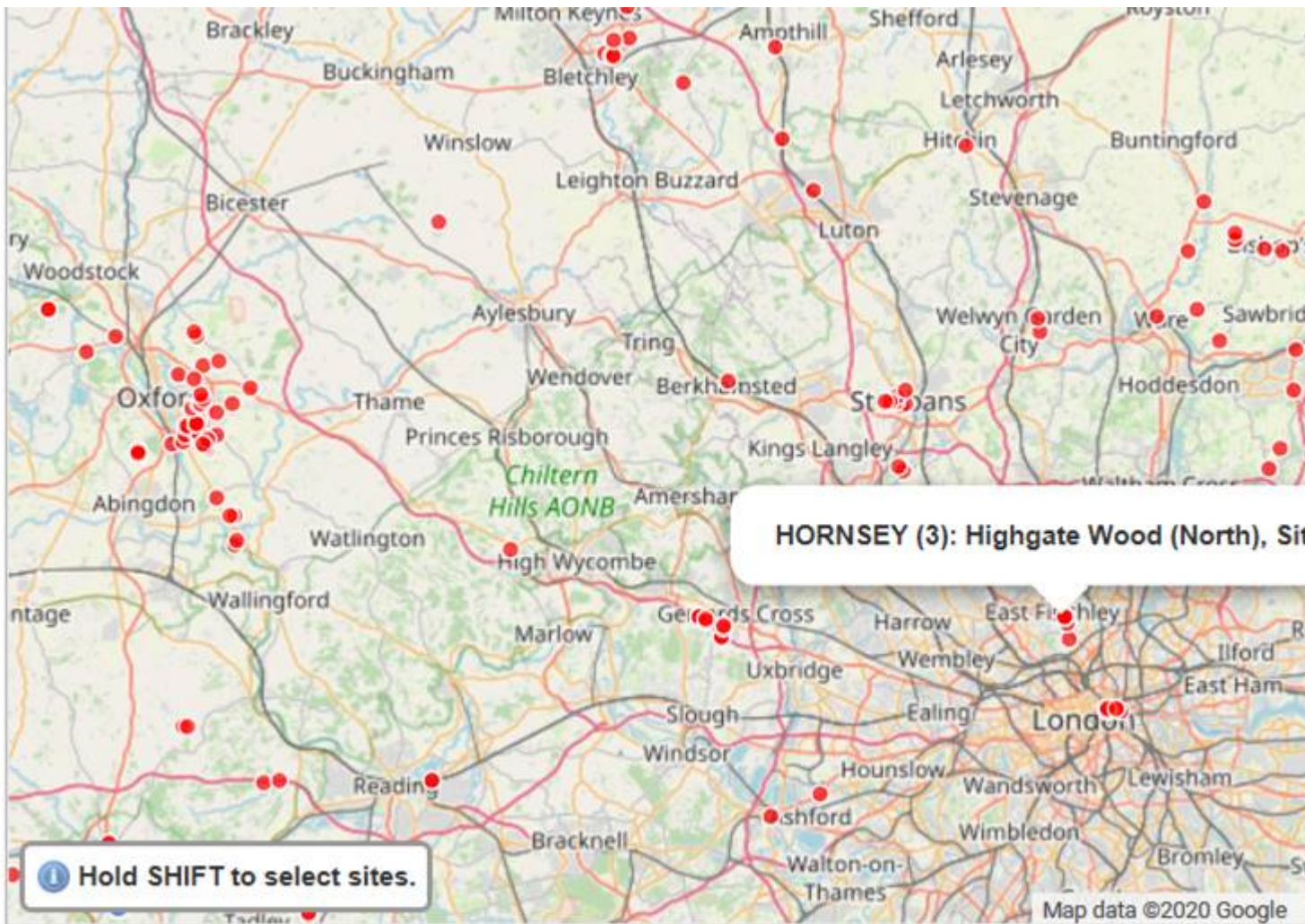
We are very lucky to have a very significant craft and archaeological heritage of potteries and making pots in Haringey. We heard the other day about [South & Sons potteries](#) in White Hart Lane, and today's post features another important 'pottery' – one that has a history stretching back the best part of two millennium and clearly the earliest evidence we have in Haringey for making pottery in the area. We will therefore take a wander to the depths of Highgate Wood and its 'pottery'. To help tell its story, we hear from Nick Peacey (who describes himself as a 'sometime kiln-maker') and helps lead the Friends of the Highgate Roman Kiln Project.

## The Highgate Wood Roman pottery

Between 1966 and 1978 Tony Brown, Harvey Sheldon and a team of archaeologists excavated a Roman pottery manufacturing site (AD 50-AD 150) in Highgate Wood, Muswell Hill. The potters had everything they needed there: water, excellent clay for the pots and kilns, and wood to fire the kiln and bake their pots. It was likely they were itinerant potters, working seasonally in the wood.



Excavating the kilns at Highgate Wood



The pottery was near the markets of Roman Londinium. You can see in the [map of surviving kilns in Roman Britain](#) (the image pictured above) the good and advantageous position that the Highgate Roman kiln site had with its markets. Located near a main thoroughfare into Londinium, it is not surprising that excavations in the City nowadays often find ‘Highgate Ware’ – the type of pottery made at Highgate Wood. The London Mithraeum and the Roman amphitheatre in Guildhall Yard have examples with its distinctive dot pattern (see photograph below).



The Highgate team of archaeologists had found one of the best preserved Roman pottery kilns ever excavated in England. It is still the oldest kiln to be found in London (see the site summary in attached PDF).

It was lifted from the ground and conserved. The kiln is presently kept at Bruce Castle Museum, although not all of it is on display (it is very big!). Due to its size, only one small section can be exhibited at the Museum.



During [the summers of 1971 to 1973](#) Nick Peacey and archaeologist Harvey Sheldon constructed a number of replica kilns in Highgate Wood, with experimental re-enactments of the Roman firings. Its purpose was to discover how the Roman potters made the distinctive dark-coloured pottery. Despite a few summers of potters potting pots – as seen in the photograph below - the experiment was not as successful as was hoped. The pots mainly came out a typical terracotta colour, and not the dark grey of the original Highgate ware

pottery (all of these replica pots survive today with the records of these experiments at Bruce Castle Museum).



The original Roman kiln and its story has inspired more projects which in turn are wonderful resources for learning. In 2010, Bruce Castle Museum led the *Haringey Potter* project: local young people made and fired ceramics in a kiln reconstructed to the 'Highgate model'. This project was based on the 1971 - 1973 original kiln experiments - to discover how the Romans made and used the original kiln and how they created such dark-coloured pottery. It was part of the **Stories of the World: London** programme at the heart of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad. Bruce Castle Museum was one of a cluster of organisations leading this project at Highgate Wood with the Museum of London.



It was quite a challenge to do this in just two weeks. However, a dozen or so young people successfully built a kiln from the clay under their feet and made pottery from the very same material. The successful final firing of the kiln ensured not only their pots survived but a 'reduction' process was achieved (i.e. creating a kiln atmosphere where oxygen is reduced and the flames pull oxygen molecules out of the clay to change its character) - something **not** accomplished in the experiments almost 50 years ago!



The young people had successfully discovered the Roman method of making pots and firing them in such a way to make them dark-coloured rather than a light terracotta. These pots clearly matched the examples of Roman pottery found on the site, making a real connection between today and 2,000 years ago.

One of the participants Khyesha wrote: “Before this project I had made a variety of clay pieces, but nothing compared to this! I was always used to an electric kiln so it was interesting to see where it originated from and great to be part of making a kiln. A sensational experience I will never forget!”



Khyesha at work in Highgate Wood

Local potter Mooki Hurst had led workshops to encourage participants to enjoy freedom in their creativity and guide them towards achieving the best results. Young people from local award-winning magazine [Exposure](#) recorded much of the project, showcasing the viewpoint of the participants.

A selection of the pots that were made, and the accompanying film by Exposure, were on display at a major temporary exhibition at the Museum of London in 2012. Some of the pots are now on permanent display at Bruce Castle Museum, a selection of which can be seen in the photograph below.



Here are a few photographs taken at Bruce Castle at the launch of the exhibition *Haringey Potter* in 2010.







### **Where is the original Roman kiln now?**

Most of the Highgate kiln is very large and is currently stored in the cellars of Bruce Castle Museum where the public are not able to see it (photograph below). Only a small section is possible to be put on display in the Museum at Bruce Castle and another even smaller section in the Visitors' Information Hut at Highgate Wood.



Over the past two years, Harvey Sheldon, Michael Hammerson and Nick Peacey have joined up with Catherine West MP to form the [Friends of the Highgate Roman Kiln](#) (FoHRK) with the aims to help bring the Highgate Roman kiln back to the Wood where it was made and display it there in an expanded Information Centre, building an exciting education initiative around the kiln's story.

Key heritage partners to help achieve this are of course Bruce Castle Museum, the Highgate Wood team and the Museum of London. In July 2019, a programme was launched at Highgate Wood to deliver some activities with schools and events to create awareness of the Roman Kiln and to consult on a heritage project proposal (to the National Lottery Heritage Fund).



Obviously at the moment, things are on hold like everywhere else, but to get involved or register your interest until the project and activities can get started again, you can contact FoHRK at [fohrkinfo@virginmedia.com](mailto:fohrkinfo@virginmedia.com) or follow on Facebook the [Highgate Roman Kiln Project](#).



Above is a photograph of Harvey Sheldon, the original archaeologist who discovered the kiln with Tony Brown, showing the original layout of the kiln site in Highgate Wood in July 2019. Although we can't all get to the Wood at the moment, by way of a summary of the site and its history, why not take a look [at this short film](#) by Charlie Andrews (a teacher from of Classics For All at Greig City Academy), for a peaceful virtual visit to Highgate Wood. You can also find here [by following this link](#), a Trail around Highgate Wood for you to explore safely from your armchair.

Students from Greig City Academy have been getting inspired by the Romans and the Highgate Roman kiln during workshops in the autumn term 2019 and in February 2020. Below is a short report by FoHRK and a photograph of the students' work:



“We’ve been involved in an amazing pilot project with [Greig City Academy](#), [Classics for All](#) and [Clayground Collective](#) and Bruce Castle Museum on a 10-week Art, Design and Archaeology project designed to give Key Stage 3 pupils an insight into Roman history.

Pupils who took part in the ‘Clay Club’ got the opportunity to visit Bruce Castle Museum to get inspired by the pots and pot sherds that were uncovered next to our very own Roman kiln and were made by Roman potters over a thousand years ago. Back at school, they had a go at making a model of the kiln, explored different techniques of constructing pots (with the fabulous folks at Clayground Collective) and finally exhibited the results of all their efforts at a special exhibition at the school! Interested to know more? Take a look at the Clay Club blog: <https://gcaclayclub.wordpress.com/> “

Fifty years after the excavation, here’s a link to the full [archaeological write-up](#) of the discovery and analysis of the Highgate Wood Roman Kiln, published in 2018 by Tony Brown and Harvey Sheldon.

As it’s ‘half term’ this week, we have also added some **Activities for Families** (attached PDFs) for you to have fun and think about the Romans too.

When we all get the chance again, let’s make a point of visiting the beautiful Highgate Wood in the not too distance future. With our thanks to Nick Peacey and FoHRK.

Until tomorrow, take care, stay well and keep healthy  
Best wishes from us all at Bruce Castle

Deborah Hedgecock  
Curator

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