

# Saxon and medieval Newham

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## Introduction

Archaeological investigations were undertaken by Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd at the site of a former Electricity Board depot, to the north-east of the junction of Romford Road and Vicarage Lane, Stratford, London Borough of Newham (Fig. 1). The work was done in two phases between 30th September 2002 and 5th July 2004, and was commissioned by Duncan Hawkins, CgMs Consulting, on behalf of Barratt (East London) Ltd in advance of the redevelopment of the site for residential accommodation. The site (RDV 02) was centred on TQ 3950 8445. The first phase consisted of a single evaluation trench, later widened into an excavation area (Fig. 1), which revealed evidence for post-medieval, medieval, late Saxon and prehistoric activities. In the second phase three evaluation trenches were excavated, revealing post-medieval layers sealing undated features cutting into the natural. While these trenches were extended in an attempt to attain dating evidence, the features remain undated and are therefore not considered further in this article.

## Background

The site is located on level ground on the Taplow gravel terrace of East London, where widespread overlying brickearth has resulted in the formation of fertile, well-drained soils. While it is assumed that this area would have attracted settlement over a long period of time, the dearth of modern development has meant that little archaeological exploration has taken place nearby.

The most notable archaeological sites in the immediate vicinity consist of Romford Road to the north, West Ham village to the south and the abbey of St Mary Stratford Langthorne to the south-west. Romford Road represents the London-to-Colchester Roman road, and while a deposit of gravel excavated at 30 Romford Road was interpreted as being part of this thoroughfare,<sup>1</sup> no other archaeological intervention has corroborated this find, and it may be that with the change in road alignment between 1100 and 1118<sup>2</sup> the original Roman road lay to the north.

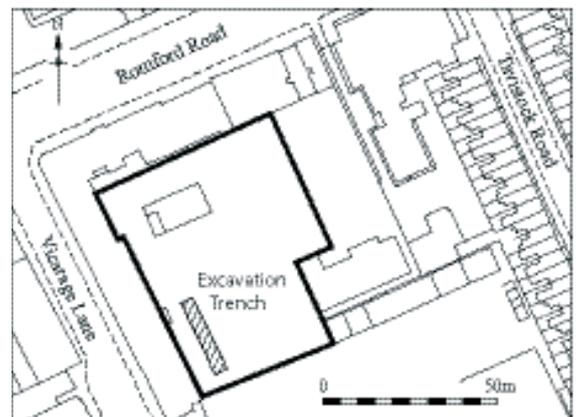
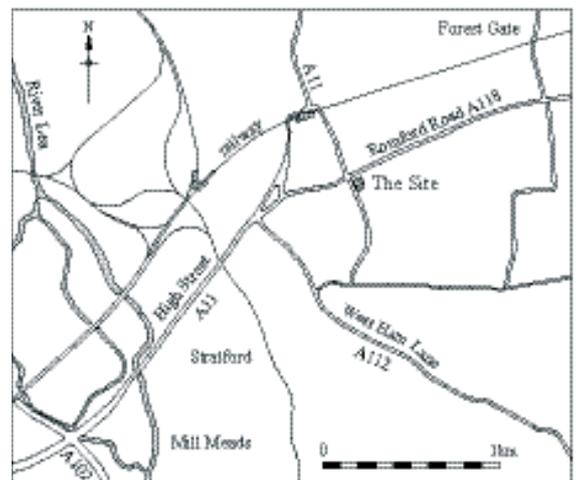


Fig. 1: site location

The village of West Ham has the tradition of having a Saxon origin, and while the manor of Ham was held by an Alestan in 1066,<sup>3</sup> the only archaeological evidence for Saxon activity in the area is from excavations at the abbey of St Mary Stratford Langthorne, where residual Saxon finds, and a late Saxon to early medieval agricultural field system were found to predate the abbey foundation.<sup>4</sup>

### The archaeological sequence

#### Geology

Natural deposits were highly variable with sand, gravel, alluvial clays and brickearth forming meandering patterns across the excavation area, and are part of the Taplow Gravel, deposited during the Pleistocene and found here at 8.26 – 8.40 m OD. These cap Lambeth Group (Woolwich & Reading Beds) sediments encountered at *c.* 7.75 m OD.

#### Prehistoric

A prehistoric stakehole contained two struck waste flakes, similar in both their raw material and technology of production. They are thought to have been from a single industry, possibly Mesolithic or Neolithic in date. A further posthole, due to its similar fill, may also be prehistoric.

#### Saxon (Fig. 2)

A shallow 'U'-profiled ditch extended *c.* 16 m due north from its terminus and continued beyond the limits of the trench. It may have originally been deeper than the 0.30 m recorded here, as the higher levels were probably lost to post-medieval ploughing. Radiocarbon dating of the charred plant remains recovered from this feature gave the fill a likely deposition date of 885–980 AD<sup>5</sup> thus relating it to the late Saxon period. Unfortunately there were not enough bioarchaeological remains to warrant further environmental analysis, though the presence of waterlogged seeds indicates that the feature contained standing water, while moderate quantities of charcoal and some charred seeds signify burning nearby.<sup>6</sup>

#### Medieval (Fig. 2)

To the north of the trench a deep sub-circular pit was identified as a watering hole. It was almost 5.0 m wide and 1.5 m deep, cut into the underlying London Clay. The pit contained two fills, the primary one having accumulated naturally and the secondary being a dumped backfill. The pottery from the latter was of a local Essex origin and dated from between 1150 and 1300, showing the watering hole to have been out of use by the late 12th century.<sup>7</sup> Environmental sampling of the primary fill demonstrated that most of the seed assemblage had been preserved by waterlogging, which, together with the presence of wood fragments, indicates that it most likely held standing water. During excavation it was noted that the clay-rich fill

peeled away from the sides in successive sheets, leaving clear striations down the length of the pit. It is possible that these were caused by the repeated drawing of a bucket up the sides while the pit was filling naturally with water-lain clays. The interpretation of the feature as a watering hole is supported by the plant macrofossil analysis, as seeds from sedge, marsh woundwort and water-dropwort were identified, all of which colonise damp environments, with stinking chamomile and nettle implying a habitat disturbed by human activity. The surrounding land-use was also represented in the seed assemblage. Vetch and two charred cereal grains (one of wheat) were present, with evidence of the arable weeds flax, self-heal and stinking chamomile, suggesting a picture of local arable farming. Hedgerows bordering arable fields were indicated by a high proportion of bramble seeds and other species indicative of this habitat, with rough ground and woodland also represented.<sup>8</sup> The presence of small amounts of charcoal, charred grains and pulses demonstrated that domestic activities were taking place near the medieval pit, and probably involved the processing and cooking of wheat grains and pulses. Evidence for this was also seen in the pottery

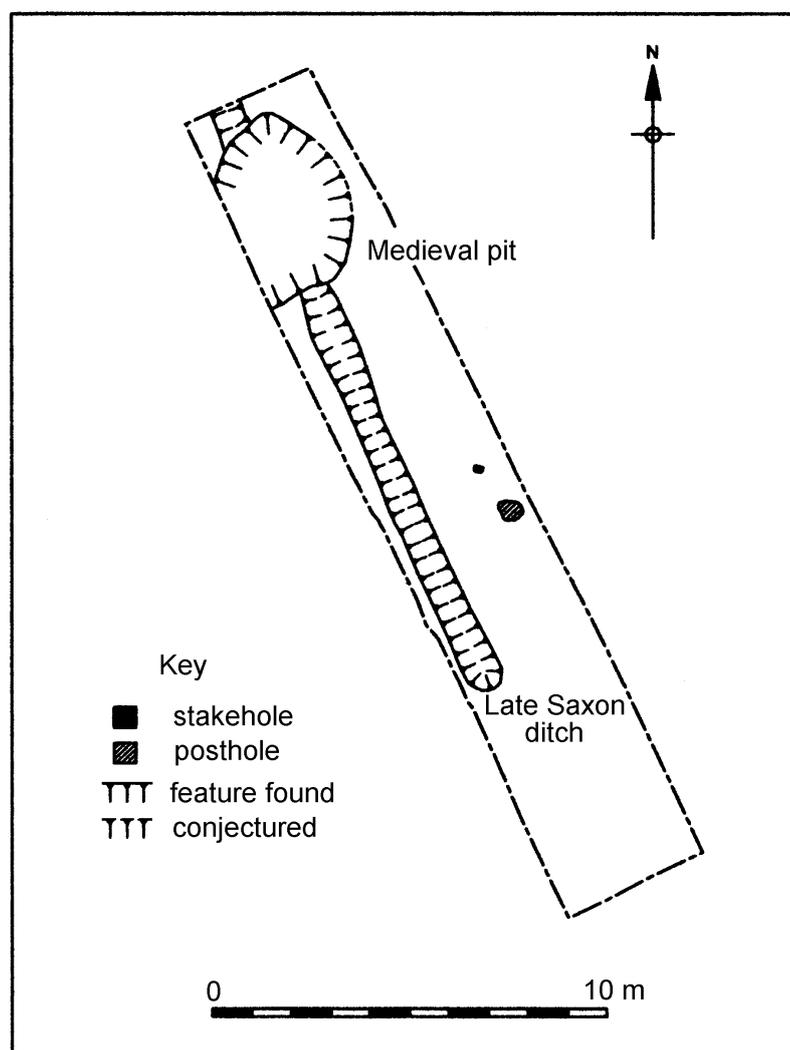


Fig. 2: Saxon and medieval features

assemblage, which included sherds with a coating of soot.

### Post-medieval

These features were covered by a pre-18th-century plough-soil, which was c. 0.30 m thick. Cutting through it, and visible in the south-facing section, was a pit containing much 18th-century pottery and masonry rubble. The pottery assemblage comprised tin-glazed earthenwares and stoneware. Although the feature was not structural itself, the quantity of brick in the fill certainly indicated the proximity of buildings, most likely fronting onto Romford Road.

### Conclusions

This site provides the first excavated evidence for prehistoric activity in this area, although the stakehole and posthole (dated by association) are limited in their scope for interpretation. No evidence of Roman occupation or activity was found, which may suggest that the line of the original Roman road lay further to the north than the current Romford Road. The 10th-century ditch excavated gives the first direct evidence for activity here in the Saxon period. The dearth of cultural material from its fill suggests that there was no settlement in the immediate vicinity and that the ditch formed part of a possible arable landscape between the road and a village at West Ham.

In the medieval period, a deep circular watering hole lay open until it was backfilled in the late 12th century. Macrofossil plant remains from its primary fill gave a picture of the surrounding landscape as arable bounded(?) by hedgerows with some areas of rough ground. Domestic activities were indicated by the presence of charred grains and pulses, and pottery which had been subjected to burning. There was no further evidence of occupation until the 18th-century ribbon development along Romford Road.

### Acknowledgements

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1. M. Redknap 'Recent work at Stratford, E15: 30 Romford Road' *London Archaeol* 5 no 11 (1987) 291.

2. The original Bow and Channelsea bridges, and therefore the route of the current road, were constructed by Maud, Queen of Henry I, away from a more northerly route. London Borough of Newham, *West Ham 1886-1986* (1986) 28.

3. *Ibid.*, 44.

4. B. Barber et al. "The Cistercian abbey of St Mary Stratford Langthorne, Essex", *MoLAS Monograph* 18 (2004) 12–13.

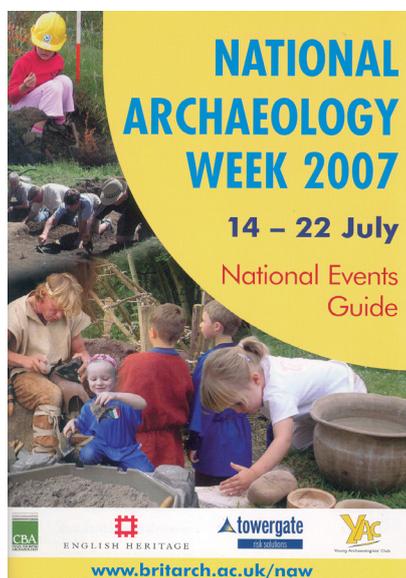
5. Two samples were taken from the ditch, laboratory numbers Beta-181655 & Beta-181656. They gave dating of 775–980 cal AD and 885–

1020 cal AD. N. Branch *Radiocarbon dating of charred plant material from Romford Road, Stratford, London Borough of Newham (RDV 02)*, ArchaeoScape, Unpublished Report (2003).

6. N. Branch and C. Rackham *Environmental Archaeological Assessment for Romford Road and Vicarage Lane (RDV 02)*, ArchaeoScape, Unpublished Report (2003).

7. C. Jarrett *RDV 02 Pottery Assessment*, Pre-Construct Archaeology, Unpublished Report (2003).

8. A. Vaughan-Williams *Analysis of the archaeobotanical material from Romford Road, Stratford, London Borough of Newham (RDV 02)*, ArchaeoScape, Unpublished Report (2003).



## National Archaeology Week

Events will take place all over London. Highlights include:

**Paul Hamlyn Library**, The British Museum

Open all week 10 am to 5.30 pm.

**Fun on the Foreshore**

21 to 22 July, 10.30 am to 4.00 pm

The Foreshore, HM Tower of London.

**Greenwich Uncovered**

14 July to 18 August

Greenwich Heritage Centre, Royal Arsenal, Woolwich SE18 4DX

**Home Sweet Home, Roman Style!**

21 to 22 July, 11 am to 4.30 pm (12.30 pm to 5 pm Sunday)

Museum of London, London Wall.

**Prehistoric Kingston**

21 July 10.30 am to 4.30 pm

Kingston Museum and Heritage Service, Wheatfield Way, Kingston.