

Early medieval activity in Old Ford, Bow, London E3

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Introduction

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL excavation was carried out at 36-38 Ruston Street, Bow (Fig. 1) by AOC (Archaeology) Ltd in July 1996 as a condition of planning consent for redevelopment¹. An evaluation was required because the site lies a short distance from the historic crossing of the river Lea in Old Ford, a Roman road passes nearby, and Roman activity associated with this was a possibility. In the event, however, it was the early medieval occupation of the area which came to light in the excavation.

Archaeological background

The site lies on the gravel terraces on the west bank of the river Lea. The Roman road from London to Colchester crossed the river about 100m to the south. This southern area has been the subject of substantial archaeological investigation, both in the 1960s and '70s as well as more recently in 1995/6² when, as part of their plans for the rehabilitation of the district and its housing stock, the area was declared an Area of Special Archaeological Importance by Tower Hamlets Borough Council.

This work to the south produced substantial remains of the road itself as well as of occupation along its sides during the Roman period. In addition to this, some Bronze Age features were identified, which indicated a presence in the area from this earlier period as well. However, the extent of this occupation north and south away from the line of the road was unknown, and it was with this in mind that the investigation of the Ruston Street site took place.

Excavation results

A trench was opened down the centre of the site running roughly north-south (Fig. 1). It was 11m long and just under 2m wide, some irregularities occurring due to the presence of concrete piles, which had to be avoided by the machine (Fig. 2). It was mechanically excavated to remove modern rubble and overburden, then hand-dug once archaeological levels were reached.

1. D. Kenyon *An Archaeological Evaluation of 36-38 Ruston Street, Bow, London E3* (1996). AOC (Archaeology) Ltd., unpublished excavation report.

2. H. Sheldon 'Brief Encounter' *Rescue News* 68 (1996).

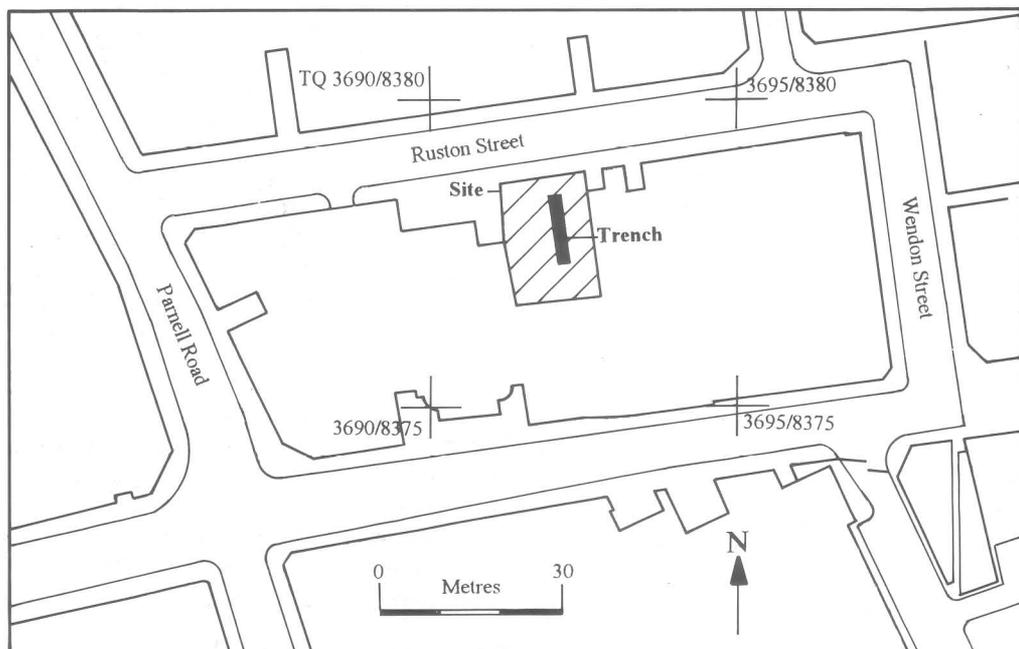


Fig. 1: site location plan

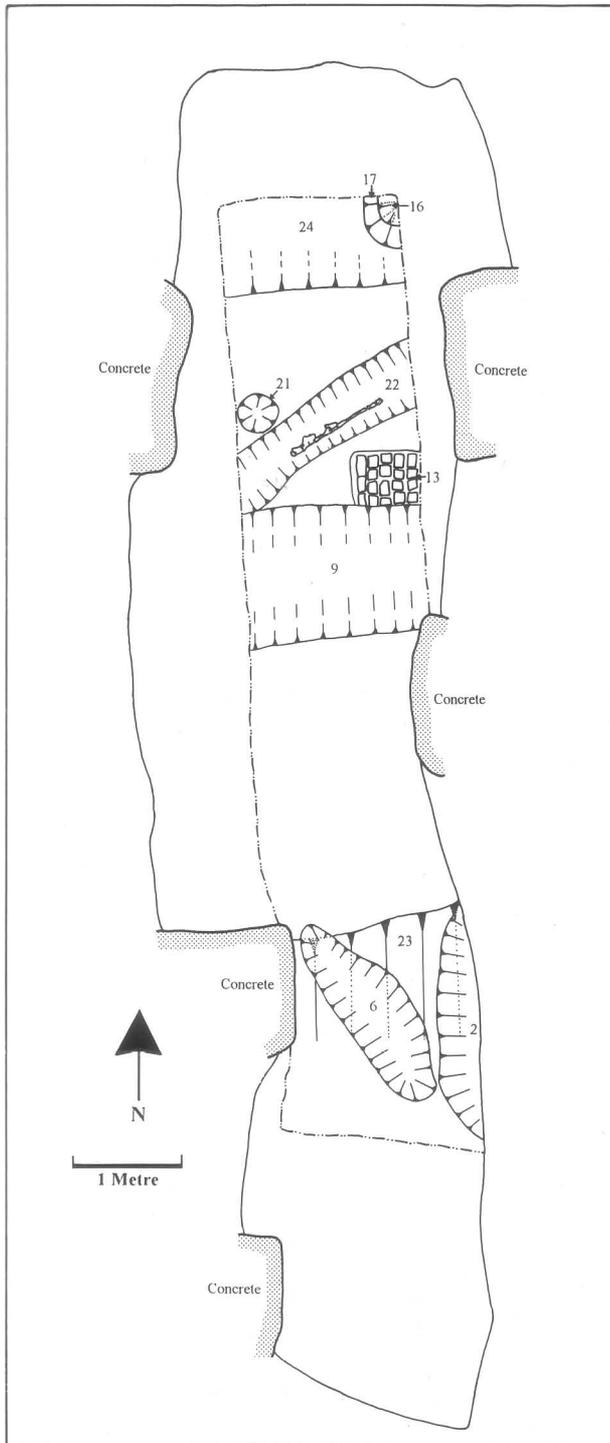


Fig. 2: trench plan

Archaeological features were identified about 2m below the modern ground surface. They were cut into the natural gravel at the base of the excavation trench, and were overlaid and in some cases truncated by the more recent deposits above.

At the south end of the trench was a large ditch cutting across the whole width, and extending up to 2.4m north from the southern end (contexts 007/023). In profile it was U-shaped and up to 0.75m deep. It contained a small but cohesive assemblage of early medieval pottery; many of the sherds may have come from the same vessel. The fill was sandy with small stones, but very organic green in colour, containing both burnt cereal grains and cattle and horse bone fragments. Other features at this end of the all cut this ditch wholly or partly.

A rubble-filled linear feature, 2m long and extending 0.4m from the eastern section (contexts 001/002) lay within this larger ditch; it was filled with probably early post-medieval building material. Also cut into the fill of the large ditch was a round-ended sub-rectangular cut (contexts 005/006), 1.9m long by 0.5m wide and 0.3m deep. It too contained early post-medieval building material. Further sherds of early medieval pottery were recovered from both these features, but it is likely that they originated in the earlier ditch below, since the building materials are of a later date.

Several post-medieval features filled the centre of the trench: a ditch (009), a small pit (021), and a possibly 18th-century brick foundation (013). However, in the northern part of the trench were signs of earlier activity. Of most interest was a flat-bottomed linear ditch, 0.5m wide and 0.3m deep, with sloping sides, running diagonally across the trench from south-west to north-east (contexts 020/022). It contained an articulated horse leg laid along the line of the feature. Brick fragments from this ditch could be dated to the 12th to 13th centuries; an early date within this range would make this feature contemporary with the southern ditch.

Finally, crossing the north end of the trench was another large ditch, dated from brick fragments to the 15th to 17th centuries (contexts 011/024). It had two further later circular features cut into it, a lower feature containing animal bone (context 012/017) with a second pit lying completely within it (context 010/016). Slag and burnt material suggestive of metal or glass-working was recovered from the upper of these two pits, as well as a tile fragment dated to c 1450-1800.

Books

German Stoneware 1200-1900, by David Gaimster. *British Museum Press*, 1997. 430 pp., 40 colour and 500 black-and-white illus., bibliog., index. £40.

GERMAN stoneware is one of the all-time ceramic success stories. After much experimentation with clays and firing techniques, the production of fully-fused stoneware was finally achieved in Europe around 1300

AD in the Rhineland. The ensuing products captured a large slice of the northern European market for pottery in the course of the next two centuries, being robust, impervious to liquids, and attractive to the eye, capable of almost any function except cooking. In the 16th century production shifted from mass production of high-quality but basically plain utilitarian wares to more limited production of highly decorated wares; in the

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Finds

The pottery recovered from the southern ditch and the features cut into it, comprised 40 sherds, the majority of which are of 11th to mid-12th-century date. Most come from just two vessels in early medieval chalk-tempered fabric (EMCH), one with vertical applied thumbled strip decoration, and the other, possibly a large storage jar with horizontal applied thumbled strip decoration around the shoulder. In addition, two rim sherds were found of late Saxon shelly ware (LSS) of mid-9th to 11th century date. Other sherds in a variety of fabrics were found, mostly within the date range 1050-1150, and all within the range 950-1350, producing a cohesive assemblage of 11th to mid-12th-century pottery.

Animal bone was also recovered from the early medieval features. Ditch 22 contained some cattle bone fragments, as well as the articulated horse leg mentioned above. Cattle and horse bones, as well as the tooth of a sheep, also occurred in the southern ditch and the features cut into it (contexts 1-7).

Discussion

Early medieval

Documentary research has been undertaken into the history of the Old Ford area on behalf of the Tower Hamlets Action Trust³; the results of this excavation appear to confirm the results of that research. It is suggested⁴ that the settlement at Old Ford grew up in the 11th century in association with the establishment of a mill on the other side of the river Lea⁵, but that the settlement had diminished by 1303 after the ford had become difficult, and a new road had been established to the south with new bridges over the river, at the instigation of Queen Matilda. This dating ties closely with the pottery dates, which concentrate

in the 11th to mid-12th centuries. The project has therefore been useful in confirming archaeologically the nature of early medieval activity in the area, as suggested by documentary research. A hint at the nature of this activity is provided by the large quantities of animal bone found, along with burnt cereal grains⁶. Both suggest that domestic settlement was not far away.

In addition to the discoveries on this site, further evidence of this medieval activity has been found elsewhere; ditches identified as field boundaries were also uncovered at Morville Street, 300m to the south of Ruston Street⁷.

Post-medieval

After the early medieval activity on the site, there is evidence of more intensive post-medieval activity, in the form of building rubble and foundations in a date range from the 15th to 18th centuries. The metal-working debris recovered from context 10 was also dated to the early post-medieval period. Extensive use of the woodland covering Victoria Park at this period is known from documentary sources⁸; this nearby fuel source may have contributed to the possible metal working on the site. It is not possible however to characterise this activity further.

Acknowledgements

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3. G. Brown *Archaeological desk-top assessment of possible development sites in and adjacent to the H.A.T. Designated Area TQ3657 8343* (1994) Pre-Construct Archaeology, unpublished.

4. *Ibid.*, 28.

5. Recorded in the Domesday Book as the mill of Algot.

6. Recovered from environmental samples.

7. *Op cit* fn 3, 28.

8. *Ibid.*, 29.