

Fig. 1: site location

# From medieval malt house to 20th-century pub: excavations at 9–11 Poplar High Street, London E14

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## Introduction

Archaeological investigations at the site of the former *White Horse* public house at 9–11 Poplar High Street, London E14 (Fig. 1) were carried out by the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) in the summer of 2002 under the site code PPH02.<sup>1</sup> The site is situated at the junction of Poplar High Street and Saltwell Street (National Grid Reference 537420 180810), where modern pavement level lies at *c.* 3.7m OD. The excavation trench was located towards the north of the property, away from a cellar associated with the rebuilding of the *White Horse* in 1927–8.<sup>2</sup> Field evaluation was extended to include excavation at the request of English Heritage.

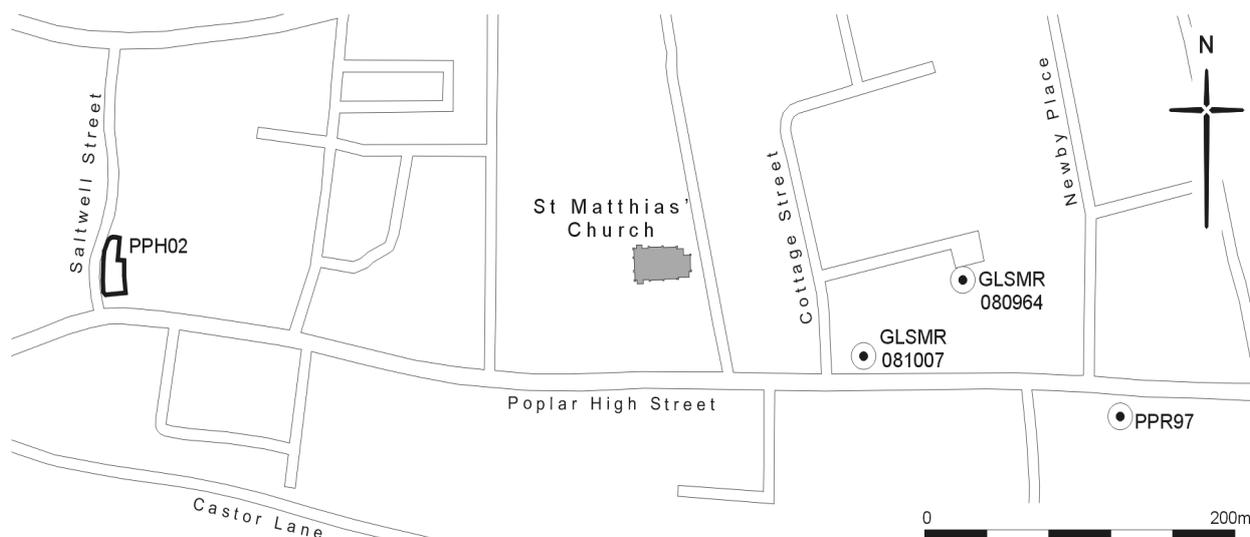
The work was commissioned and funded by Buxton Homes.

## Natural deposits and topography

Natural sands and gravels were recorded across the site at an untruncated height of *c.* 2.50m OD.

## Medieval

The earliest documented reference to the village of ‘Popler’ occurs in 1327 (Fig. 2, GLSMR 080964), its name probably taken from the poplar trees that grew in the marshy ground nearby.<sup>3</sup> Archaeological evidence of medieval activity along the High Street is limited to the observation



**Fig. 2: the site in relation to PPR97 and GLSMR points**

of medieval timbers and a 15th-century cellar during the demolition of 141 Poplar High Street (Fig. 2; GLSMR 081007) and medieval pottery and tile sherds recovered during an evaluation at 216–242 Poplar High Street (see Fig. 2; site code PPR97).<sup>4</sup> Poplar High Street and North (now Saltwell) Street are first referred to in the 15th century<sup>5</sup> and are believed to be medieval roads. The earliest reference to properties in the immediate vicinity of the site is to a ‘Stanbregge’ cottage in 1452, located at the west end of the High Street and taking its name from the ‘Stonebridge’ that crossed the ‘black ditch’ or sewer coming down from the north.<sup>6</sup>

At the southern end of the excavation area a fired surface sealed natural deposits. The surface may have been part of an early kiln or oven and was sealed by disuse backfills [62] and [65]. The backfills contained a sherd of coarse London-type ware, three sherds from a cauldron or pipkin in Kingston-type ware, and one sherd of Scarborough-type ware. Taken together, the pottery can be dated to between 1240–1350. Although the pottery assemblage is limited in size, it supports a medieval date for the site, and the small amount of domestic material present suggests an industrial use of the site. A history of industrial activity is also indicated by the subsequent construction of a sequence of probable malting kilns or grain ovens (Fig. 3). Malting kilns and grain ovens were normally built with raised platforms and vertically-sided walls

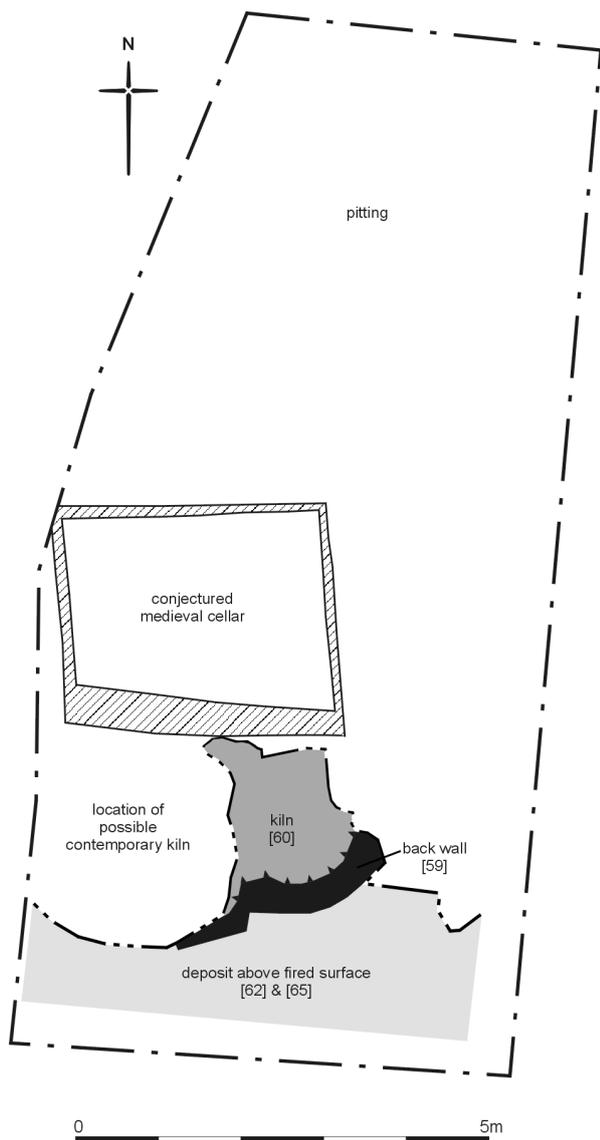
for drying floors.<sup>7</sup> Grain was spread finely on the drying floor and heated without a ‘fierce fire’ for several days.<sup>8</sup> The process was the same whether for drying grain before milling after a wet harvest or drying and arresting the growth of grain that had been germinated as part of the malting process.

Construction cut [66] for the best-preserved of the medieval kilns measured at least 2.72m by 2.28m. A back wall for the kiln was created by cutting into the burnt surface and backfill of the possible earlier kiln to the south. A platform [60] of reused Reigate blocks, brick and chalk formed the base of the new kiln, onto which was built a vertical back wall [59] of reused Reigate blocks, chalk and flint bonded in a yellowish mortar. The centre of the platform had been burnt through use. The extent of the surviving back wall suggested that there had once been an additional kiln to the west.

No dating evidence was recovered from the main kiln structure or its disuse, but the style and fabric of its construction suggests a late medieval date. The kiln may have been associated with a cellared processing area to its north, but a post-medieval cellar removed any evidence of it (see below).

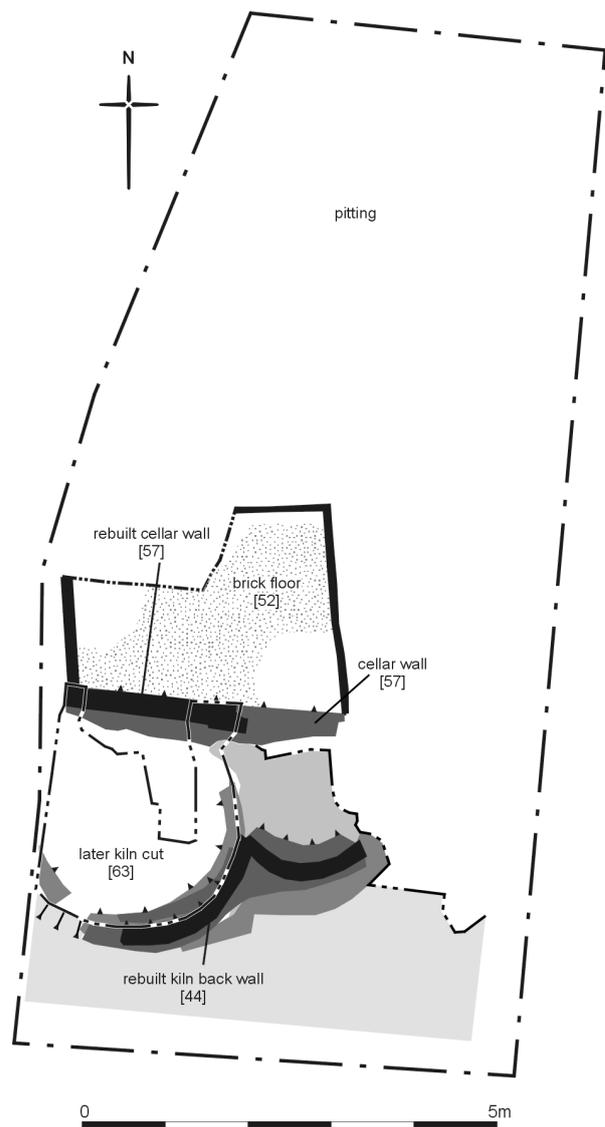
### **Fifteenth- and 16th-century activity**

A shallow cellar, measuring 3.35m east-west by 3.00m north-south, was located just to the north of the late medieval kiln sequence (Figs. 4 and 5).



**Fig. 3** the late medieval kiln and conjectured cellar

The cellar, whose brick floor [52] and walls [57] were bonded in an off-white mortar, was probably a processing area for contemporary kilns to the south, serving as a place to steep or germinate the grain prior to drying. Construction cut [63] for the post-medieval kiln truncated parts of the wall along the south side of the cellar, which was subsequently rebuilt as [51]. This suggests that the first brick cellar was part of an intermediate stage in the development of the kilns, added to the original medieval kilns and then altered to accommodate their post-medieval rebuild. The replacement of the cellar's brick



**Fig. 4:** the post-medieval kiln

floor, presumably due to wear, also suggests that it had a long life.

A charred deposit [9] overlying the brick floor of the cellar was sampled and found to comprise mainly charcoal fragments from narrow twigs, several straw culm nodes and occasional charred weed seeds. A similar charred deposit [24], from a 16th-century pit to the north, contained large amounts of charred straw, cereal chaff fragments and around 150 cereal grains. The majority of the grains belong to the hexaploid bread wheat (*Triticum aestivum*), but a few belonged to one of the tetraploid wheats, probably rivet wheat

(*Triticum durum/turgidum*). Free-threshing tetraploid wheats have been identified from a number of sites in this country from 11th-century and later contexts, but deposits of cereal chaff are rare on medieval and later sites, and this is the first time this type of wheat has been identified from London. The composition of this assemblage is characteristic of threshing floor waste from fuel used in the early stages of crop processing.<sup>9</sup> The fuels used in the malting process were documented in 1577 by William Harrison,<sup>10</sup> who wrote:

“In some places it (the malt) is dried at leisure with wood alone, or straw alone, in other with wood and straw together, but of all, the straw dried is the most excellent. For the wood dried malt, when it is brewed, beside that the drink is higher of colour, it doth hurt and annoy the head of him that is not used thereto, because of the smoke.”

The medieval malting kiln situated to the south of the cellar was partially truncated by a cut [63] for the post-medieval chamber, which measured 2.39m by 2.86m (Figs. 4 and 5). This chamber also had a platform constructed of reused Reigate blocks, brick and chalk [50] and was burnt in its centre, but its back wall [44] was built of brick and bonded with a beige mortar. During the construction of this chamber, the back wall of the earlier kiln to the east was repaired and improved. The overall structural evidence suggests that both the medieval and post-medieval phases featured double kilns.

Whatever the appearance of the original kilns, they were repaired and modified throughout their life, the last act being the relining of the western kiln.

No pottery was recovered from contexts associated with the construction or use of the rebuilt kilns. The disused brick-built cellar and



Fig. 5: south-facing view of the kilns and associated cellar

associated kilns were backfilled with a mixture of mortar, brick and tile [41]. Pit [32] cut into the demolition backfill and contained pottery dated to the end of the 16th century. Two pits in the central area of the site also contained late 16th-century pottery, including the pit containing the charred straw and cereal assemblage described above.

The medieval and early post-medieval malting kilns found on the site could be evidence of a cottage industry, which developed between the 14th and 16th centuries, the malt being sold to a local brewer, but there is no evidence to suggest that a pub or inn was on the site.

### Seventeenth-century and later activity

The site has a demonstrably closer connection with the brewing industry from the late 17th century onwards. A tavern called *The White Horse* stood on the site from 1690 or earlier until the demolition of the last public house immediately prior to development in 2002.<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 6: three gaming counters from an 18th-century house clearance deposit; from the top left: <33>, <32> and <31>

From the 1650s onwards there was also a watering place for animals located in Poplar High Street opposite the tavern. Known as ‘Stonebridge Pond’, it may account for the jog in the High Street outside the site<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 1).

The evidence associated with the tavern which occupied the site in the 17th century is limited to a group of postholes and a wall. In the 18th century the building was apparently demolished, and debris layer [30], which sealed the earlier features, contained an interesting mix of artefacts and pottery. The pottery from the debris is dated to between 1745–1770. Redwares dominate, with 75 sherds from eight vessels; most pieces are from two-handled bowls similar to finds from contemporary deposits at Aldgate<sup>13</sup> and Burlington Road, Fulham<sup>14</sup> and a colander. Also present are sherds from two other bowls (one possibly a skillet), two jars and a chamber pot. Less common by sherd count (11 sherds), but representing ten vessels, are tin-glazed wares, which comprise fragments of four dishes, a hexagonal plate, a bowl, and a fluted lid with blue and white decoration. Other wares comprise two Chinese porcelain bowls (one in the *famille rose* style), an English porcelain saucer, two London stoneware tankards, and a Surrey/Hampshire



Fig. 7: a square gin or case bottle, tankard and clay pipes from an 18th-century house clearance



**Fig. 8: 19th-century drinking glasses and small glass bowl**

border whiteware chamber pot. Of particular interest in this group are three gaming counters made from sherds of tin-glazed dishes (Fig. 6). The smallest of them <31> is sub-rectangular in shape, with blue and white decoration (20 mm by 18 mm); a larger oval example <32> has polychrome decoration (35 mm by 32 mm); the third, <33>, from the base of a small dish, is broken but was originally circular (diam. 39 mm). The layer also contained a small lead-alloy rivet or stud <110>, which has a small convex head with a beaded rim and a long twisted shaft; a similar form in copper-alloy was recovered from a post-medieval pit at Colchester.<sup>15</sup> Fragments from the bowl of a stemmed colourless glass <106> were also found, as well as a cheap elliptical bead in opaque turquoise-blue glass <29>, and a small fragment from a vessel in clear pink glass decorated with an opaque white marvered trail <28>.

A complete late 18th- or early 19th-century square gin or case bottle, and the base of another, were recovered from context [38] within a 19th-century pit (Fig. 7). These bottles, normally

between 360 and 420 mm in height, are known as case bottles as they were often stored in cases and used for gin and possibly medicines.<sup>16</sup> The complete example has a ‘pig-snout’ mouth and a short neck. The body tapers towards the base, which has a rounded basal kick with an open pontil mark and a moulded cross mark.

Documentary evidence shows that before 1927 the pub only occupied 11 Poplar High Street, with No. 9 occupied by the hamlet and parish watch-house.<sup>17</sup> The presence of another private property on the site may account for the large assemblage of 19th-century ceramics, glass and accessioned finds, which were recovered from a soakaway and cesspit. A 19th-century wall footing was also recorded in the north of the site. The finds, primarily from refuse backfill [5], consisted mainly of household china, and could relate to either the clearance of a domestic property or the clearance of tableware from an inn. There are similarities between this assemblage and one recovered from a cesspit at St George’s Street, Canterbury,<sup>18</sup> thought to be a house clearance. The assemblage included several mid-19th-



**Fig. 9: the White Horse public house, built in 1927; view looking north-east**

century drinking glasses (Fig. 8), which are all in heavy cut and plain, colourless glass, typical of that used in middle-class early Victorian households. The forms are reminiscent of those published in a catalogue of Apsley Pellatt in around 1840,<sup>19</sup> although none of the present vessels can be identified as products of Pellatt's Falcon glass works in Southwark. Pellatt was one of the leading manufacturers of glass in Britain at this time.<sup>20</sup> Four of the drinking vessels have facet or broad-flute cut decoration which was popular in the early- to mid-19th-century but was superseded by heavier cut designs in the 1850s, which themselves went out of fashion later in the decade.<sup>21</sup> The bases of three bowls or tumblers are unusual, as they are rounded with moulded vertical ribs. No direct parallels could be found for them and, as they are all incomplete, it is impossible to identify whether they were tumblers or small bowls, such as finger bowls. Animal bone recovered from 19th-century deposits showed a greater range of food species, including more fish, chicken and edible crab,

suggesting a possible association with the provisioning of the public house.

## Conclusions

The earliest documentary evidence for a tavern on the site dates from 1690,<sup>22</sup> but the evidence for a sequence of earlier malting kilns suggests a connection to brewing and the ale trade dating back to the 14th century. These kilns are the earliest known structures from the area, with the possible exception of 141 Poplar High Street. The location of the site at the junction of Poplar High Street and North (now Saltwell) Street, both medieval roads, would have made it an attractive place for a tavern, enhanced from the 1650s onwards by the presence of a pond for the watering of animals.<sup>23</sup>

## Acknowledgements

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1. The archive and associated reports relating to the findings can be consulted by prior arrangement at the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC), Mortimer Wheeler House, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7ED.  
2. The White Horse was rebuilt in 1927-8 by H. V. Clogg of Battersea to designs by A. E. Sewell for Truman, Hanbury, and Burton brewers. See S. Porter (ed.) *Survey of London Volumes 43 and 44: Poplar, Blackwall and the Isle of Dogs* (1994) 61, Fig. 9.

3. B. Weinreb and C. Hibbert *The London Encyclopedia* (1983).  
4. A site summary for 216-242 Poplar High Street can be found in C. Maloney 'Fieldwork Round-up 1997' *London Archaeol* 8 Supp. 3 (1998), 104.  
5. *Op cit.* fn. 2, 55.  
6. *Ibid.*, 55-6.  
7. G. Beresford 'The medieval manor of Penhallam, Jacobstow, Cornwall' *Medieval Archaeol* 18 (1974) 111-12; P. J. Woods 'Excavation summary

- Northamptonshire: Brixworth (SP747711)' *Medieval Archaeol* **14** (1970) 205–7.
8. J. Barrow *A supplement to the new and universal dictionary of arts and sciences* (1754).
  9. G. C. Hillman 'Reconstructing crop husbandry practices from charred remains of crops' in R. Mercer (ed.) *Farming practice in British prehistory* (1981) 123–162; G. C. Hillman 'Interpretation of Archaeological plant Remains' in W. Van Zeist and W.A. Casparie (eds) *Plants and Ancient Man* (1984) 1–41.
  10. W. Harrison *A Description of England* (1577).
  11. *Op cit.* fn 2, 61.
  12. *Ibid.*, 56.
  13. C. Orton and J. Pearce 'The pottery' in A. Thompson, F. Grew, and J. Schofield 'Excavations at Aldgate, 1974' *Post-Medieval Archaeol* **18** (1984) 1–148.
  14. L. Blackmore 'The medieval and post-medieval pottery' in P. S. Mills 'Excavations at Burlington Road, Fulham, London SW6' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* **35** (1984) 103–8.
  15. N. Crummy *The post-Roman small finds from excavations in Colchester 1971–85*, Colchester Archaeological Report 5 (1988).
  16. I. Noël Hume *Artefacts of Colonial America* (1970); R. Hildyard 'British Supremacy' in R. Liefkes (ed.) *Glass* (2000) 82–103.
  17. *Op cit.* fn 2.
  18. J. D. Shepherd 'The Glass' in P. Blockley 'Excavations at No. 41 St George's St., Canterbury, 1985' *Archaeologia Cantiana* **105** (1988) 59–177.
  19. H. Wakefield 'Early Victorian styles in glassware' in *Studies in glass history and design (Papers read to the Committee B sessions of the VIIIth International Congress on Glass, London, July 1968)* (1968) 50–4.
  20. *Ibid.*, 54; *op. cit.* fn. 18, 160; R. Hildyard *op. cit.* fn 16.
  21. *Op cit.* fn 19, 51–2.
  22. *Op cit.* fn 2, 61.
  23. *Ibid.*, 56.

## Excavations and post-excavation work

**London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre**, Mortimer Wheeler House, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7EE. Contact Archive Manager, John Shepherd (020 7566 9317).

**Croydon & District**, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collections of pottery fabrics, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Jim Davison, 8 Brentwood Road, South Croydon, CR2 0ND.

**Borough of Greenwich**. Cataloguing of excavated and other archaeological material, the majority from sites within the Borough. Contact Greenwich Heritage Centre, Building 41, Royal Arsenal, Woolwich, SE18 6SP (020 8854 2452).

**Hammersmith & Fulham**, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from the Borough. Tuesdays, 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. At Fulham Palace, Bishops' Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 85 Rannoch Road, W6 9SX (020 7385 3723).

**Kingston**, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society (KUTAS). Processing and

cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Thursday (10 a.m.) at the North Kingston Centre, Richmond Road, Kingston upon Thames KT2 5PE. Enquiries 020 8546 5386.

**Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd.**, Unit 54, Brockley Cross Business Centre, 96 Endwell Road, Brockley Cross, London SE4 2PD. Environmental- and finds processing, cataloguing and archiving of excavated material. Contact Finds Manager, Märit Gaimster (020 7639 9091).

**Surrey**, by Surrey County Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Rob Poulton, Archaeological Unit Manager, Surrey History Centre, 130 Goldsworth Road, Woking GU21 1ND (01483 594 634).

*Individual membership of the Council for British Archaeology includes six issues a year of British Archaeology, as well as the supplement CBA Briefing, which gives details of conferences, extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The individual membership rate of £27 p.a. includes postage; payment should be sent to C.B.A., Bowes Morrell House, 111 Walmgate, York, YO1 9WA (01904 671 417).*