

# Roman road in a railway cutting

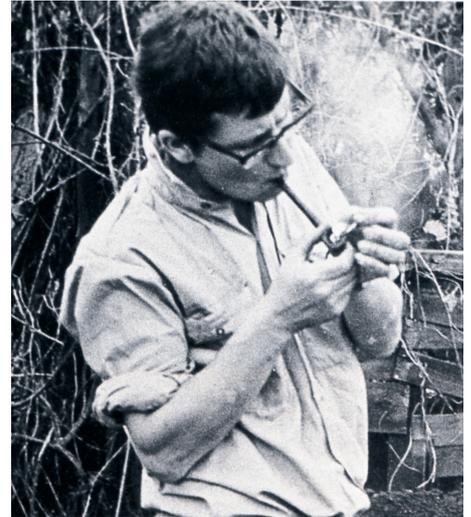
Harvey Sheldon reflects on a dig that influenced both the way major Roman highways are interpreted and his own view of archaeology

For Harvey Sheldon, it was more than just the location of a wide Roman road that was determined at Old Ford in 1969: it was also a belief in the involvement of local people in their historic environment and a deep sense of sadness at all that has been lost of the past.

When he began what was supposed to be a two-week dig in September 1969 the possibility of finding Roman remains was obvious enough. The site, at Lefevre Road, near the east end of modern Roman Road, was close to the presumed line of the London to Colchester highway believed to run from Aldgate towards the River Lea at Old Ford before heading onwards to Stratford. Roman coins, pottery and burials, found from the mid 19th century onwards when Old Ford was being developed as a residential and industrial suburb of London, had been reported by both Roach Smith and Reginald Smith.

The opportunity to dig the site came up when Harvey was approached by Roy Canham, Archaeological Field Officer at the London Museum, a national museum with a London wide remit, which merged in 1975 with the Guildhall Museum to form the Museum of London. Canham asked Harvey to investigate an area near Old Ford behind Lefevre Road then occupied by Victorian houses and their gardens but about to be replaced by a tower block. It was the discovery of a Roman sarcophagus in nearby Parnell Road a few months previously that had brought into focus the early discoveries and raised the area's priority for Canham, who had enough London Museum funds to pay for a small excavation.

By then Harvey was an amateur digger with well known sites including the Highgate Roman pottery under his belt and was teaching archaeology in adult education classes. However, his



degree in economics had taken him into a profession in consumer and social research, and he was currently investigating consumer satisfaction with builders. His 'real job' only allowed him to practice archaeology at weekends and holidays.

The small team of diggers initially planned to investigate just the back gardens of the terrace in the two weeks allotted. The bitty, disrupted site was difficult, with rubbish pits, air raid shelters and other disturbance, and the diggers got to know the residents well. Although it was a traumatic time for those about to be displaced by the new estate, most gladly cooperated with the diggers, and some became deeply involved in the excavations. Harvey remembers several local people whose interest in archaeology developed from that point: Eddie Philips, a plumber with a fine eye for spotting finds; Eddie Jeffries, a worker at the local furniture factory, who used his talent for drawing on this and later excavations; and Pete Daniels, another furniture worker who has continued to discover sites, most recently the Old Ford site subsequently excavated by PCA just two years ago, one that would have slipped through the curatorial net without his vigilance.

As the developers were delayed in starting their own excavations, the dig

**Above: Harvey Sheldon on site at Old Ford**

**Left: The site at Lefevre Road. Initial excavations in the gardens revealed fragmentary evidence. Later the ground level margins of the railway cutting were to provide evidence of a great Roman highway.**



extended from late summer into the hard snowy winter of 1969 and on to June of the following year, with a volunteer team of between five and ten showing up every weekend. Roman pits, ditches and other features, including what appeared to be road gravels, were found, but disturbances made it difficult to prove the existence of the Roman road and to examine it as an archaeological entity. The team began to realise that the archaeological grass was likely to be greener on the other side of the garden fences. Beyond lay a railway cutting, created in the 19th century for the North London Line and abandoned since the war. While the cutting had wiped away vast swathes of evidence, the narrow strip of land at ground level was largely undisturbed.

With a questionable right to dig and a scant regard for health and safety – Harvey remembers with less humour than his colleagues a tumble he took all the way down the steep embankment onto the railway lines – the diggers systematically excavated long sections along the edge of the cutting. Slowly a vast three track, unmistakably Roman highway emerged. This was far larger and more complex than previously excavated examples: 66 feet wide, raised in the centre, with two track ways on either side, and no apparent ditches. Alongside it two structures were found, indicating late Roman occupation.

Research suggested that the reason the road had survived so well in the



Old Ford area was because the main road had been diverted in the 12th century, traditionally at the behest of Henry I's queen Matilda, who had nearly been swept away by high water at the ford. Bow Bridge was then built to the south to carry the detoured road, and the old Roman road had been abandoned, eventually to be incorporated into farm land. The rest of this old highway between Lefevre and the River Lea was then gradually obliterated by mineral extraction, residential and industrial building near the river, and most comprehensively by the Victorian railway.

What remained to be opportunely found by Harvey's team was a rare remnant preserved in one of the few slices of undeveloped land in east London. The site's significance lies not just in its rarity, nor in the fact that it finally established the alignment and size of the much sought road to Camulodunum, but especially in the information it yielded about the road network, road users and roadside settlement activities of pre Flavian Roman Britain. In particular, Harvey believes that Lefevre Road was so indicative of the nature of major Roman highways, that we may be misinterpreting others as narrower than they were. He considers that the section of the Watling Street found at Brockley Hill by MoLAS was just one of the side track ways. The central raised section, he thinks, would have eroded into a hollow way through the centuries: a theory that could be tested by excavation on the other side of the road where the third track way should be found.

Later digs around the Old Ford area



**Above: The 66 ft wide Roman road excavated on the edge of the railway cutting**

**Left: Alongside the road was the cellar of a late Roman building, cut deeply enough to survive, and south of that the type of structure described as a corn dryer. With no security possible, the structure was trashed within 24 hours of the diggers leaving site. Good practice ensured it was at least fully recorded.**

have added to the picture of both road and settlement, and more remains to be discovered. Harvey believes that anywhere a Roman road can be seen to have been detoured should be taken very seriously indeed. He'd like to see one deconstructed over a larger area to understand how they were laid out, when and how they were resurfaced.

For Harvey himself, Lefevre Road was something of a turning point too. Shortly afterwards Roy Canham asked him to excavate a suggested mansio site in Clapham, with funding from the Ministry of Works. This yielded little,



Left: Extreme weather encouraged some makeshift shelters, but digging continued through the winter.

but he was allowed to use the remaining budget on another site, Toppings Wharf in Southwark. With the hint that a professional career in archaeology might just be possible, he never returned to research, instead becoming a leading figure in the Rescue movement and eventually in the organisations that transmogrified into MoLAS.

He remembers the Old Ford team as a disparate group with a huge sense of dedication to a project and a field that many of them might never have otherwise experienced. The strong impression remains with him of sadness over all that had been lost through development in the area, and a deep

commitment to do all they could on their site before it was too late.

In all this time, Harvey has seen two distinct responses to threats to archaeological sites: the first has been to “make a bloody great fuss, the other to suggest little should be done that might rock the boat and jeopardise incremental progress.” He unequivocally believes that the former is the correct one, noting that even Geoffrey Wainwright acknowledges that the Rose has led to PPG 16. Not that Harvey believes that PPG 16 has all the answers: he points to Ros Niblett’s recent conclusion that the small scale of work now done in both Verulamium and St Albans may hinder attempts to

understand the Roman and later cities. He would like to see much more public involvement in archaeology: museum based community archaeologists working with professional teams and local groups could increase participation in the processes of recovering evidence and studying the historic environments which now make up greater London.

Meanwhile, he believes the innate interest and ability of people to get involved in their local archaeology is still strong, although the practice of learning has changed. While no one would wish for a return to the daily threats and destruction of archaeology of the 1960s, it remains to be seen whether even the best breeds of programmes like Widening Participation can galvanise the involvement and enthusiasm of non professionals quite as powerfully as rescue sites like Lefevre Road.

*~~Harvey Sheldon was talking to Becky Wallower*

The Lefevre Road site was published as: Sheldon, H. (1972) Excavations at Lefevre Road, Old Ford, E.3, September 1969-June 1970, *Trans London & Middlesex Archaeol Soc*, 23, 2, 42-77.

## Letters to the editor

### Mercury treatment

I was interested to read Fiona Tucker’s article in the Spring issue of *London Archaeologist* (vol. 11, no. 8), on the use of mercury to treat syphilis in 17th- to 19th-century London.

The discussion of mercury poisoning, in her introduction, immediately reminded me of one Victorian patient who suffered from this, and left a horrifying description of the symptoms – Charlotte Brontë.

The story is related in chapter 24 of Juliet Barker’s *The Brontës* (1994). At the very end of 1851 (when aged thirty-five), Charlotte was experiencing bad

headaches, with ‘white tongue – parched mouth and loss of appetite’. A liver problem was diagnosed, and she was accordingly prescribed a week’s course of ‘blue pills’, which contained a small dose of mercury. However, she quickly became very ill, unable to swallow anything other than a little liquid each day, ‘my mouth became sore, my teeth loose, my tongue swelled, raw and ulcerated while water welled continually into my mouth’, as she wrote on 20 January 1852 to Margaret Wooler (her former headmistress). Recognising the symptoms of mercury poisoning, she stopped taking the pills at once. She

reported to her friend Ellen Nussey that the doctor, Mr Ruddock, was ‘sorely flustered when he found what he had done’, saying that he had never known this effect produced in any patient – adult or child – by that dose.

There may, of course, have been numerous patients who were prescribed mercury for a variety of diseases other than syphilis, and who found, as Charlotte did, that the cure was worse than the illness!

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