

In the brickfields: archaeological investigations at Latham's Yard, Leaside Wharf, Clapton

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In January 2006, an archaeological evaluation was carried out by Pre-Construct Archaeology at Latham's Yard, Leaside Wharf, in Clapton (Fig. 1). Three trenches, targeted on structures shown within the brickfields in the historic map sequence and on the Lea Canal, revealed evidence for widespread brickearth quarrying and subsequent backfilling with the residues of brick production (Fig. 2). Although no evidence for brick firing was found *in situ*, traces of ephemeral buildings and a canal serving the brickworks were identified. In all three trenches, the upper part of the sequence consisted of 19th/20th-century landfill/levelling deposits; pottery and clay pipes recovered from the site dated no earlier than 1760, and principally belonged to the period 1830–1900. Until the late 18th or early 19th centuries the site was situated in a wholly agricultural landscape composed of hedged fields. At this time most of the southern part of the site lay in 'Round Meadow', which also included a tongue of land running into a meander of the River Lea on its east side. The northern part of the site lay in a field called 'Duckats' and another field called 'Hope and Vigne'. To the north of the latter, just beyond the boundary of the site, lay another field called 'Greens Field'. In the south-western angle between the two parts of the site lay 'Birchen Field'.

The archaeological evaluation

The evaluation was specifically targeted at the Lea Canal and associated structures shown in 19th-century maps. Trench 1 was aligned roughly north-west–south-east, and measured c. 23 by 4.8 m; it was excavated to a depth of 2.4 m. The vast majority of the sequence evident in section consisted of 19th/20th-century rubble, clay and cinders; all of these elements could

represent waste from the extraction of brickearth and brick production. Some brickearth was identified *in situ* in the north of the trench where it survived to a height of 5.82 m AOD. It was sealed by a concentration of brick-production waste consisting of over-fired brick

fragments and dust. Material with these characteristics is typically found toward the bases and sides of brick clamps where the heat is most intense. A lower temperature would obviously have been obtained within the clamp where the bricks would have been correctly



Fig. 1: site location

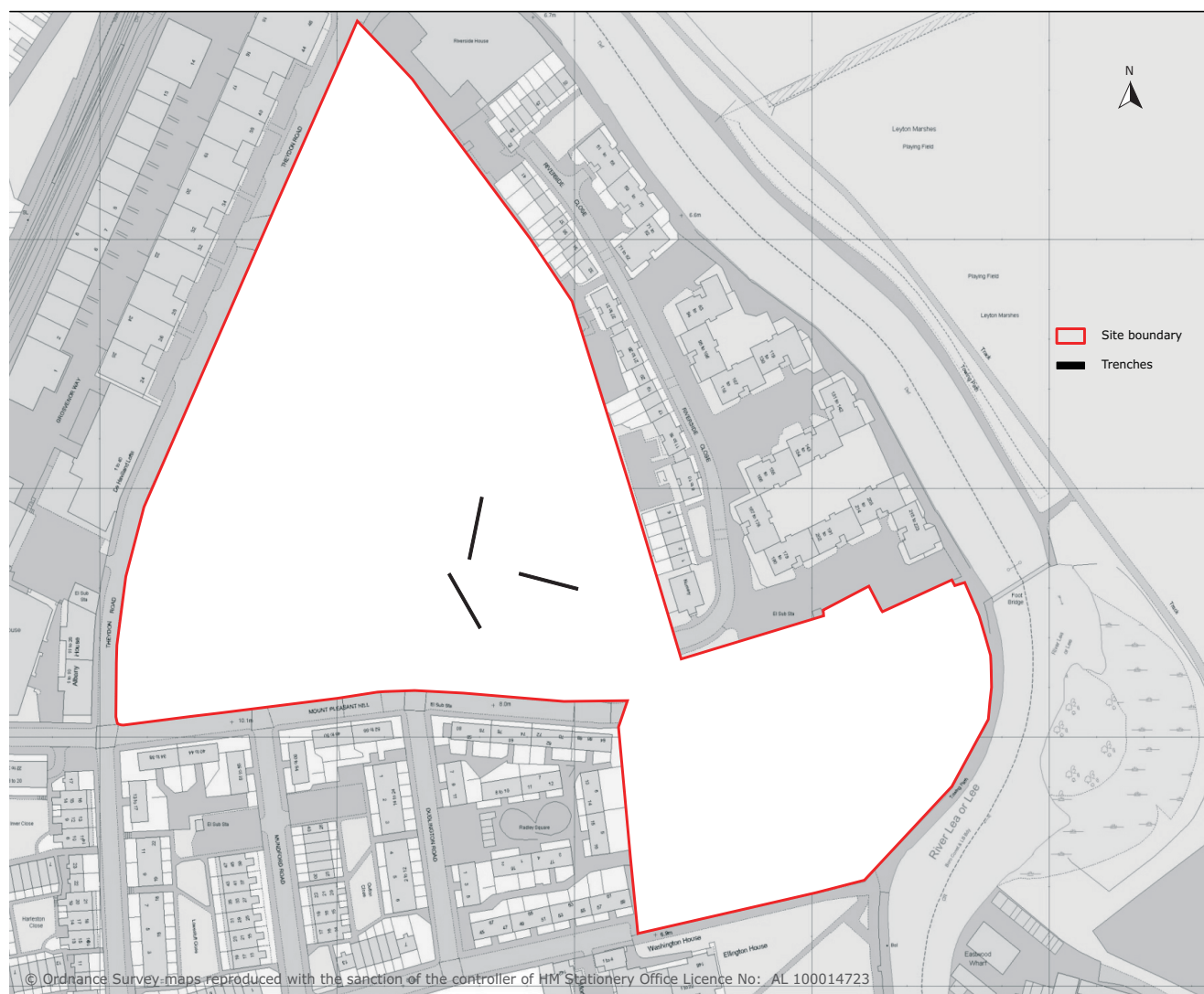


Fig. 2: trench location plan

fired. The production waste was undoubtedly dumped as no sign of brick-firing was evident *in situ*.

Trench 2 was located to the north-west of Trench 1 and measured *c.* 19 m north-south by 4.5 m east-west and was also excavated to a depth of 2.4 m. The majority of the sequence evident in section consisted of similar if not identical material to that recorded in Trench 1. Natural brickearth was evident both in the north and south of the trench and was recorded at 6.92 and 6.90 m AOD. Parts of two large inter-cutting pits were recorded in the north-east of the trench; neither pit was excavated but surface cleaning of the fills produced clay-pipe stems indicating a mid-19th century date. It is probable that pits of this size, measuring more than 3 m across, were for brickearth extraction. In the centre of the trench fragmentary remains of a brick structure were recorded. This consisted of a short stretch of wall

orientated north-west-south-east, and a smaller possible return which extended to the south-west. The latter was not bonded or adjacent to the larger element, which extended beyond the limits of excavation to the east. The walls consisted mainly of a single course of brick laid as headers. Altogether, these remains suggest a structure that was not very substantial.

Trench 3 was located immediately to the south of Trench 2 and measured *c.* 20 m north-south by 5 m east-west. The deposits exposed at *c.* 1.5 m below the modern ground surface indicated that the trench was almost certainly located above the Lea canal, as they consisted of waterlogged material containing vast quantities of domestic and industrial waste such as broken glass and stoneware bottles, tin buckets, leather strops or machine belts and oily substances which floated on the surface of the water. However, no edges to the watercourse were evident.

The brickfields

The digging of brickfields in the London area generally proceeded outwards from the City in advance of the development of housing in the post-medieval centuries. Brick-making expanded into the fields of Finsbury, Shoreditch and Spitalfields, and also the west end of London, in the 16th and 17th centuries. Until the 18th century bricks were usually made close to where they were to be used in construction, and the exhausted brickfields were often built over with new streets. Brick-making spread northwards through the parish of Hackney in the 18th century, reaching the north side of Dalston Lane by 1709, Stamford Hill in 1721 and Upper Clapton by 1762. Land was leased for brickmaking in Shacklewell by 1806, and at High Hill Ferry in 1822.¹ Birchen Field, to the south-west of the site, was already alternatively known as Brickfield by 1762, as were the two

small fields to its south-west, stretching as far as Upper Clapton Road.²

By 1798 Hackney landlords had trebled the rent they demanded for brickfields within the last twenty years, to a figure of £300 an acre per annum, on top of the established rent. In 1806 brickfields occupied 170 acres in the parish, according to a survey made by a Mr Ashpital by order of the parish vestry.³ As other areas were built over, Clapton became a centre for brick-making in the 1840s.⁴ The Hackney Tithe Map of 1843 shows the site as occupied by a mix of brickfields and agricultural land.⁵

The brickfields presented a landscape of large open areas stripped of their upper surfaces. Bricks were made from the quarried brickearth on the spot. The brickearth was dug in the autumn and spread out on the ground to make it workable in the following spring and summer. The bricks were then made by hand or by simple machines, laid out to dry and fired in temporary rectangular kilns called brick clamps; they were then stacked in long rows. There were few structures in the early brickfields, only horse gins for mixing clay and flimsy shelters for the brickmakers (Fig. 3). Many of the workers were only employed seasonally and therefore not resident in the winter months. Women and children also worked in the brickfields. Child labour was more strictly controlled after 1867, but children were still kept out of

school to make bricks. Later brickfields contained kilns and engine houses.

The principal local landowners, the Tyssen family leased many of their fields to the brickmakers William Rhodes (died 1843) and Thomas Rhodes (died 1856).⁶ In 1842 these included 'Duckats', which was divided into two by a lane running northwards from Mount Pleasant Hill and included some buildings in the eastern part, probably associated with brickmaking. At this time the Rhodes had bought the freehold of 'Greens Field' from the Tyssen estate, and were operating it as a brickfield.⁷ In 1836, 1842 and 1855 the intervening 'Hope and Vigne field' was occupied by the brickmakers Harry and John Lee.⁸ The buildings on 'Duckats' are labelled as 'Farm' on a map of Hackney parish in 1847, but this may have been an error. The fields to their north are designated as 'Brickfields'.

There were a number of watercourses running from the meadowlands into the River Lea. One of these was turned into a canal, probably to serve as barge access to the brickworks. It ran along the north side of 'Round Meadow', across the southern tongue of 'Hope and Vigne', and then westward into 'Duckats' in a long shallow curve, and existed in this form by 1819. By 1832 it had been superseded by a canal which ran straight through the northern part of Round Meadow and then in an S-shape into 'Duckats', to join up with the

western end of the original canal. It is shown in this form on the tithe map of 1843, a lease plan of 1865, and the Ordnance Survey map of 1870. By at least 1862 it was known as Lea Dock. It was crossed towards the eastern end by a footbridge, from which a path ran northwards to Hilly Ferry, by at least 1869. The original canal is shown on plans of 1836 and 1855 as terminating in an irregular pond in the southern tongue of 'Hope and Vigne', approximately at the eastern limit of the northern part of the site. Lea Dock was progressively shortened in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, so that by 1939 it was only a short inlet from the River Lea.

In 1865, W. A. Tyssen Amhurst leased three fields and a wharf to James and Alfred Stroud on a ten year term for brickmaking (Fig. 4). They comprised 'Birchen Field', a smaller field to its south west, and a composite holding of the eastern half of 'Duckats' and the meadow bordering the river at the south east corner of 'Hope and Vigne'. The wharf was at the north end of this meadow, reached from Mount Pleasant Hill by a roadway fourteen feet (4.27 m) wide round the edge of the premises, made up of the pre-existing lanes through the middle of 'Duckats' and along the south side of 'Hope and Vigne'. A cottage, offices and stabling also lay on the property. The lease permitted the Strouds to cut down trees and bushes, and to dig clay to make



Fig. 3: brick-making c. 1808. Note the insubstantial shelter

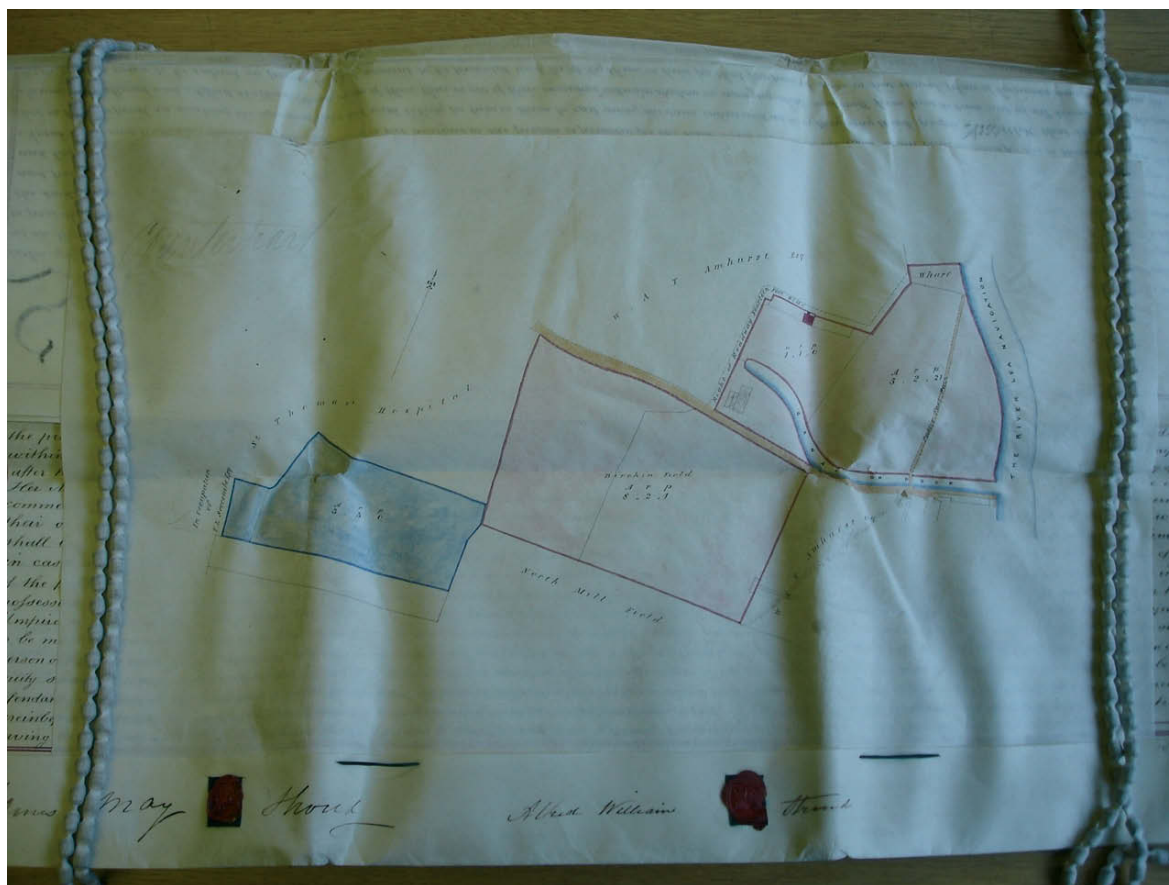


Fig. 4: Brickfield Lease Plan 1865 (from HAD M760)
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bricks no larger than 9 x 4½ x 3 inches (230 x 115 x 75 mm). A 'royalty' charge of 3s 3d was levied on every thousand bricks to be made, besides the annual rental of £160. Any ballast dug up and not used for making the roadways was to be reserved to Amhurst.⁹ This brickfield to the north of Lea Dock was still operating in 1883, but had disappeared by 1901.¹⁰

A scarred landscape

The cumulative effect of several decades of brick manufacture and other intrusive activities must have been to strip the brickearth layer and some of the underlying sand and gravel from much of the site area. A comprehensive geotechnical investigation indicated that the geological sequence had been truncated across almost the whole Latham Yard site. The 'Strouds' lease of 1865 required that they should not dig their clay more than 10 feet (3.05 m)

from the surface.¹¹ Disused brickfields were commonly returned to agriculture, except where they were intended for building houses.¹² Daniel Lysons commented optimistically in the 1790s: "in some fields the vein of clay is exhausted and they have been put back into cultivation with the assistance of manure, and are little less productive than in their original state".¹³ The Strouds' lease of 1865 required them to return the fields to cultivation by filling in the pits and spreading topsoil.¹⁴ Modern made ground was found to lie across the site in a thickness varying from 0.91 to 4.2 m.

The archaeological evaluation confirmed the documented history of the site. Latham's Yard consisted of agricultural land until it was engulfed by the spread of the London conurbation in the 19th century. Like many areas on the periphery of metropolitan development it was exploited for the excavation of

brickearth and manufacture of bricks. When the brickfields became exhausted, they were levelled up and used as industrial premises, in this case by the timber merchants James Latham present on site in 1912. This series of events produced a sequence in which the top layers of the natural geology of the site and the overlying agricultural deposits were horizontally truncated, then replaced with imported fill material, before being capped with yard surfaces. This is representative of the archaeological sequences on many sites in similar locations in the Greater London area, spreading outwards from the City in a series of chronological rings. The impact of early modern brickearth quarrying on earlier archaeological deposits should not be underestimated, with very many areas of inner London having effectively been completely cleared of pre-modern archaeological remains.

1. VCHM *Victoria County History of Middlesex* vol x, ed. T.F.T. Baker (1995) 96.

2. HAD (Hackney Archives Department) M518.

3. D. Lysons 1795 *Environs of London* ii 451 and supplementary volume 1811, 163.

4. Op cit fn 1; D. Mander *Strength in the Tower*. An

Illustrated history of Hackney (1998) 81.

5. PRO IR 30/21/21.

6. Op cit fn 1.

7. NA (National Archives) IR29/21/19 nos 330, 421, 422.

8. HAD M4037/2/1-10; NA IR29/21/19 No 418.

9. HAD M760.

10. Op cit fn 4.

11. Op cit fn 9.

12. Op cit fn 1.

13. Op cit fn 3, ii 451.

14. Op cit fn 2.