

Babe Ruth's bathhouse: excavations at Roman Shadwell

Victoria Ridgeway previews a report on the extensive discoveries of a settlement at Shadwell, including an unexpected complex of Roman baths.



In 2002 Pre-Construct Archaeology undertook excavations on two adjacent sites at Shadwell, over a kilometre from the Roman city of *Londinium*, on an escarpment overlooking the Thames.

At Tobacco Dock the investigations revealed an extensive sequence of third- and fourth-century AD clay-and-timber buildings, drains and water tanks. These discoveries were not entirely unexpected. The area's importance has long been known through antiquarian records of high status burials and the 1970's discovery of burials, settlement evidence and a substantial and intriguing masonry structure, the much-debated Shadwell 'tower'. What was more surprising, however, was the discovery of a large, monumentally-constructed bath house beneath the Babe Ruth restaurant, immediately to the east of Tobacco Dock. Occupying a gravel terrace overlooking the Thames, the bath house had heated rooms, an apse and ready access to fresh spring water. A well-

appointed clay-and-timber building to the north may have provided accommodation or other services for the bathers. Yet, as this publication explores, the bath house does not readily conform to known examples; it falls between public and private baths in terms of its size and has an unusually high number of heated rooms. These discoveries have provided us with the opportunity to explore fresh questions concerning the nature and status of Romano-British settlement.

It is clear that the third century AD saw the Shadwell area flourish and prosper. Over time the bath house was modified and extended and the ancillary buildings were frequently upgraded. The settlement and its associated baths were, for a while at least, a commercial success. This success was perhaps in part due to the proximity of the river; in the mid third century Shadwell and the Lea mouth may have become the focus of small 'ports' or beach markets. The existence

of such facilities would certainly accord well with the pottery and coin evidence, the presence of significant masonry structures, the suggested road and other amenities.

The excavations by Pre-Construct Archaeology have transformed our understanding of this area in the Roman period and this monograph presents that evidence, integrating it with the findings from the 1970s. The rich finds assemblages also contribute a wealth of important insights into the character of this settlement. Highlights include a gold ear-ring (see cover) and necklace, suggesting a wealthy clientele for the baths, alongside bracelets, finger rings and a large collection of hair pins. Epigraphic evidence includes part of a funerary inscription and enigmatic cursive graffiti. The building materials recovered not only provide the basis for a reconstruction of the bath house building but also show that it was built largely from reused materials, salvaged from first- and second-century structures, perhaps within *Londinium*. The pottery includes an unusual late assemblage of imported samian and amphora, whilst the animal bones demonstrate a marked contrast in diet between the two sites, alongside early evidence for the elusive black rat.

A Roman settlement and bath house at Shadwell: excavations at Tobacco Dock and Babe Ruth restaurant, The Highway, London by Alistair Douglas, James Gerrard and Berni Sudds, Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited, ISBN 978-0-9563054-2-8

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ABOVE:
LEFT: Overhead view of the Shadwell bath house, looking west.