

# Filling our minds with rubbish and facts at Gladstone Place, Old Ford

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## Introduction

It was Oscar Wilde who once reasoned that we fill our minds with rubbish and facts in order to keep our place in the “wild struggle of existence”. Never has a phrase been more apt as an allegorical description of the career of an archaeologist. However, it is not just for our own existential gratification that we scramble around in the dirt collecting long-abandoned artefacts and recording obsolete features, it is, of course, also to broaden our understanding of those who came before. But exactly what can we glean from the refuse of people who occupied the land thousands of years previously? In the case of Gladstone Place, Old Ford, a reasonable amount it seems. On the one hand the finds from a series of rubbish pits and the backfill of a ditch

can raise interesting notions of what their provenance means to our understanding of the type of settlement that existed at Old Ford at the time. On the other hand if we are to bear in mind that such behaviour could be considered as ‘ritual’ and that ‘ritual’ can be considered both as a traditional practice and a form of social action,<sup>1</sup> we could draw interesting conclusions as to what the landscape at Old Ford meant to those who inhabited it. Either way this article seeks to address what information, factual or theoretical, can be obtained from the Roman features and in particular the artefacts contained within, at Gladstone Place.

The archaeological investigation at Gladstone Place in Old Ford, Tower Hamlets (Fig. 1) was undertaken by Pre-Construct Archaeology in two stages;

the initial evaluation was completed in November 2008 and the second phase of evaluation and excavation was carried out in November 2009 (Fig. 2). During the course of the works a series of inter-cutting pits were observed dating to between the 1st and 4th centuries. Alongside the area of pitting a 4th-century ditch was seen running on a NNE–SSW alignment. Both the ditch and the many phases of pitting produced a good assemblage of pottery, animal bone, ceramic building material and a few small finds of particular interest.

## Geology, topography and archaeological background

The site lies on a gradual south-facing slope, falling from c. 12.20m OD at the northern boundary to 11.60m OD along its southern boundary. The main branch of the Lea follows a meandering north-south course 750m to the east. The crossing of this river by the major Roman road running through the area, connecting London with Colchester, provided a natural focus for settlement. During the investigations at Gladstone Place, a variety of natural deposits were encountered underlying the site, consisting of interleaving bands of fine, often loose, sands; coarser sands with fine gravel and light yellowish brown clay.

Despite an increasing amount of evidence emerging for the existence of later prehistoric settlements in the area, Old Ford is probably best known for the abundance of Roman features and deposits that have been identified there from a number of sites over the past several decades. The Roman Road, located immediately north of the site, approximately follows the line of the original Roman road running from London to Colchester and a number of significant finds, including burials, have been recorded along its margins (Fig. 3). Excavations in and around the Lefevre



Fig. 1: site location

Walk Estate area (LEK95) have revealed indications of 4th century AD, and possibly earlier, settlement activity including Roman pits, ditches, burials and remains of clay and timber buildings. There remains some discussion, however, as to the nature of the settlement during the Roman period, and indeed the implications behind the presence of the ten cemeteries sited in the area.<sup>2, 3</sup>

Of most relevance to this investigation was an excavation at 568a Roman Road (ROB05), immediately north of Gladstone Place (Fig. 2); the works recorded several phases of Roman occupation including a substantial wooden structure with a mortar floor, a kiln or oven, boundary ditches and rubbish pits.<sup>4</sup>

### Results of the archaeological excavation

The initial evaluation at Gladstone Place produced some evidence of Roman occupation, most notably to the north in the form of a dense area of inter-cutting pits. The following excavation revealed a north-south aligned boundary ditch adjacent to the



Fig. 2: trench location

area of pitting. Although sherds dated to the late Bronze Age-early Iron Age were recovered from bioturbated contexts

(alongside a residual retouched blade attributed to the Neolithic or Bronze Age period recovered from a Roman pit), a majority of the features encountered during the excavation were securely Roman in date. Some later post-medieval truncation was also evident.

### The inter-cutting pits

Approximately 18 pits were observed within an area 5m across (Fig. 4). They varied in size with the fills producing evidence for activity that spanned four hundred years from the 1st to the 4th centuries AD.

The earliest cut identified was a sub circular/square-shape pit approximately 2.00m across with a depth of 0.62m. It was heavily truncated by later cuts, but the fill, where observed, contained flecks of charcoal and one sherd of potentially late Iron Age pottery. A further four early (1st–2nd century AD) pits truncated this feature (Fig. 4, phase 3) with fills largely devoid of cultural material save for a scattering of burnt flint, one small curved iron sheet/vessel measuring approximately 30mm and one piece of early Roman ceramic building material (CBM) dated to AD 50–120. Two isolated pits, located 2.00m due east/north-east were also



Fig. 3: location of relevant sites referred to in the text

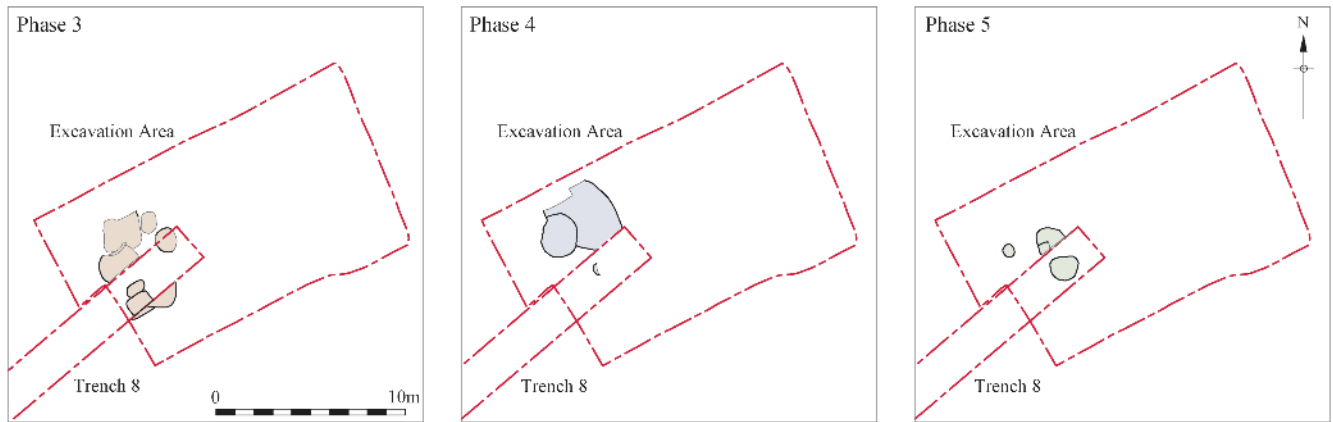


Fig. 4: Phase 3 to 5 pit distributions

excavated producing 3 sherds of 1st–2nd-century AD pottery and one incomplete iron nail.

A later phase of activity is dominated by one large sub-rectangular pit which had silted up and/or been deliberately backfilled between the late 2nd and early 3rd century AD (Fig. 4, phase 4). It truncated five of the seven earlier pits and contained fills that suggested, in part, a gradual silting up alongside deliberate dumps of material thereafter. Combined, the fills contained fragments of pottery dateable to AD 120–300, sandy fabric Roman brick and tile (including a box flue tile with coarse criss-cross patterning) and one sherd of a pale blue Roman glass vessel. Within this pit was a fill comprising a thin dark greyish black silt, rich in charcoal and containing

burnt clay and CBM. This attests to the potential presence of fire debris associated with activity or events taking place at the structure recorded north of the site at 568a Roman Road (ROB05).<sup>5</sup>

Cutting this feature was a moderately-sized oval pit which contained much cultural material dateable to the same period. Amongst the finds were a number of animal bones (including the radius of a young calf, which suggests local breeding or perhaps an imported veal calf), eight individual iron fittings/ objects and 139 sherds of pottery. This assemblage contained large fresh joining sherds from at least four vessels and large sherds of three more. Included in these are two form 2D jars with wavy line decoration. One of these is sand-tempered with a thin pale grey external slip. The fabric is

perhaps a very coarse version (or imitation) of Highgate Wood 'C' with some similarities to Alice Holt / Surrey ware and thus may be a local copy. The other 2D jar was produced in a fine, black ware similar to Essex BB2. A third jar comprised a sand tempered, almost neckless vessel, probably from Essex. Other forms present include a hemispherical bowl in South Essex Shelly Ware (SESH), a plain rimmed indented beaker from the Nene

Valley (NVCC) and a straight-sided dish in Essex BB2. The latter has a post-firing *graffito* that reads RITICI (property of Riticius) (Fig. 5).<sup>6</sup>

Sealing this phase of activity was a dump layer which contained 74 sherds of predominantly 4th century AD pottery, later sandy fabric Roman CBM (including one brick with hobnail impressions), some fragments of pale blue Roman vessel glass (including a base sherd), frequent inclusions of heavily butchered animal bone, and one extremely worn *sestertius* coin of Hadrian. The latter was evidently lost a long time after it was struck. Four more pits, also dated to the 4th century (Fig. 4, phase 5), and contained (between them) 92 fragments of pottery, five iron nails, heavily butchered animal bone and Roman CBM in a sandy fabric.

*The ditch*

A 2.40m wide ditch was observed within 2.00m due east of the area of pitting, running north–south across the site. This is undoubtedly the same ditch observed due south in Trench 3 of the first phase of the evaluation; despite the apparent change in trajectory it is likely to be a continuation of the boundary ditch identified in the 568a Roman Road excavation (Fig. 6). The ditch itself had steep sides, appearing slightly stepped on the eastern side, and had a slightly concave base. It measured a total depth of 0.88m. The primary fill contained ten sherds of pottery dated to AD 300–400, four fragments of relatively undiagnostic (albeit Roman) CBM, two pieces of thin copper alloy mount/sheet, an iron nail, and iron hammerscale. In addition to this, a coin identified as a *Valentiniac nummus*



Fig. 5: straight-sided dish in Essex BB2 with a post-firing *graffito* that reads RITICI (property of Riticius)

struck between AD 364–378 was also retrieved from the lower fill. Aside from a 0.10m thick layer of slumping identified on part of the western edge, the only other fill identified contained 12 sherds of pottery dated to AD 350–400, sandy fabric CBM dated to between AD 120–400, a small worked paving slab made from Forest Marble, and a fragment of Kentish ragstone. In addition, the animal bone finds produced the tooth of an elasmobranch (Fig. 7) which was most likely to be from a shark. The animal was moderately large, estimated to have measured *c.* 3.4m from nose to tail (based on its tooth size).

### Discussion

It is clear that the features observed at Gladstone Place are directly related to the building(s) recorded to the north at 568a Roman Road (ROB05). This is supported by the fact that the dates of the three major phases of activity appear to correlate across both sites. It is likely that the pits represent refuse disposal associated with the building(s) as seen nearby at Usher Road (UR74/USH76)<sup>7</sup> (although the earlier pits could relate to quarrying activity), and as such their contents can add to our understanding of the nature of that structure, particularly when put into context within the wider Old Ford area. However, what is the significance of the ditch and its contents, most provocative of all being the shark's tooth? Are we, in this instance, witnessing a phenomenon of structured deposition?



Fig. 7: shark tooth

Let us first examine what we can learn from the rubbish pits. At 72a Armagh Road & 91–93 Parnell Road (AGH90/PRB95) and Usher Road (UR74/USH75), further to the east (Fig. 3), rubbish pits associated with buildings contained items such as burnt and crushed daub indicating a clay and timber building had been located close by.<sup>8</sup> The pits at Gladstone Place also produced quantities of daub alongside brick, tile and the box flue tile, the latter of which is indicative of a high status building. This conforms to box flue tiles, Purbeck Marble, *pila* brick from a hypocaust and *tessera* which were recovered from 568a Roman Road (ROB05) (Fig. 3). It is entirely possible, however, that the building to the north may have functioned as a *taberna* (shop or workshop) which in Britain were often found as freestanding narrow rectangular structures set perpendicular to the street.<sup>9</sup> A building with similar characteristics, albeit not contemporary, was observed at the Lefevre Walk Estate (LEK95)<sup>10</sup> (Fig. 3). The presence of a kiln/oven within the building (along with associated fire debris encountered within one of the Gladstone Place pits) could provide some insight into what was being manufactured there. Metal working is one possibility, although the absence of slag or associated metal objects on either site would suggest not, and likewise the small assemblage of glass recovered would not be of significant enough quantity to suggest glass manufacture.<sup>11</sup> It is entirely possible this *taberna* could be firing ceramics for use as pottery or low- and high-status building materials, as sufficient quantities of each were found discarded within the pits. When put into the wider context of the Old Ford area, which is now believed to have been less intensively developed than as first thought,<sup>12</sup> it raises curious questions as to where the ultimate destination of such items would lie; perhaps the possible *mansio* located at Wick Lane further to the east, or further afield?<sup>13</sup>

With regard to the rubbish pits, we have so far been reaching for factual information that can be gleaned from such contexts. The ditch, however, could be regarded as providing evidence for ritual activity in the area, towards the 4th century AD. It accounts

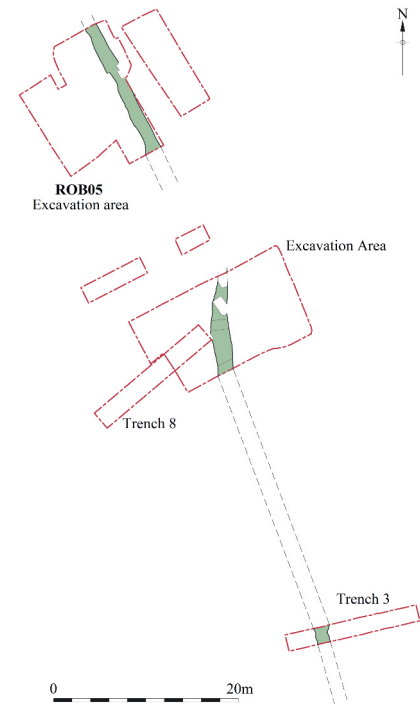


Fig. 6: 4th-century ditch

for one of a number seen in the Old Ford area, many of which (as shown here) ran perpendicular to the London to Colchester road. When we consider the items discarded within it, it does begin to feel like more of a symbolic addition to the landscape, in addition to its more perfunctory role as a land boundary. The *nummus* and the fragment of Forest Marble are both indicative of wealth. It has also been suggested that there may be some significance attached to the reverse of the coin (in this case *Gloria Romanorum*) in ritually deposited contexts, although further research into this theory is necessary.<sup>14</sup> But what of the shark tooth? The tooth is not sufficiently complete to verify its species, although it could come from a Shortfin Mako as these are known to visit our waters today during the summer months. It is entirely likely, however, that its provenance was originally much further afield. Sharks aren't overly represented in the art of the Roman world although sharks could be considered as an example of *cetea* (derived from the ancient Greek *ketoi* – mythical sea creatures). Curiosities in the form of teeth of various kinds have been found on a number of Roman sites<sup>15</sup> and it is possible that the shark tooth once acted as a talisman. It is of

course also possible that it derives from one or a number of people having eaten the shark. Indeed it has been argued that although not causing a tumultuous change in the type of fish consumed by Iron Age people, the arrival of the Romans did see fish playing a more important role in diet.<sup>16</sup> It makes sense that Romano-British populations living close or within towns would absorb new and fashionable trends in food and culture,<sup>17</sup> and one can assume shark would be a familiar delicacy to those of Mediterranean origin. Considering the fact that sharks replace their teeth frequently, a find of a tooth does not necessarily mean that the fish itself was ever physically observed by the individual(s) who caused the tooth to be deposited in the ditch. It should be noted that considering the size of the fish represented here, it seems likely that had it been consumed for food one might expect more detritus than just a single tooth and as such it is more likely to represent the symbolic deposition of a talisman, making it rather unique in a Roman context.

Archaeologists have been warned that they must move beyond “the material residue of the code (a pattern of artefacts)”,<sup>18</sup> and as such the wider cultural landscape need be considered. Placing the ditch in a wider context therefore, it has been suggested, given the proximity of burials in the area, that as opposed to acting as land boundaries some of these ditches observed in the area formed funerary enclosures or defined plots within the ‘Old Ford’ cemetery.<sup>19</sup> Indeed the presence of a damaged statue, believed to be of Mercury, within the fill of a 3rd–4th century AD ditch at Usher Road has led

some to posit the existence of a shrine at Old Ford.<sup>20</sup> The deposition of both the coin, known to be utilised as a votive offering in the Roman world,<sup>21</sup> within the contemporaneous ditch at Gladstone Place along with the potential shark-tooth talisman are suggestive of personal offerings made within a spiritual environment. One theory attributed to the notion of Old Ford as a funerary landscape suggests that the population accounted for by the inhumations and cremations located here may belong from further afield than Old Ford itself, perhaps as far as *Londinium*. This would explain the disparity in the numbers of burials and cremations compared to the paucity of evidence suggesting anything other than that a collection of buildings existed in the area during the Roman period.<sup>22</sup>

The detritus encountered within the collection of inter-cutting pits and the ditch at Gladstone Place has not only added to historical and cultural record of Old Ford, but can be used to support existing evidence and theories as to the nature of Old Ford during the Roman period. The archaeology has also enabled us to expand upon some of these pre-existing notions. Whether you consider what factual information can be extracted from discarded artefacts or whether you wish to consider the more theoretical possibilities surrounding the circumstances of their deposition, it can be said with some confidence that the opportunity to fill our minds with the possibilities has been provided. And that should keep us occupied for quite some time.

## Acknowledgements

Pre-Construct Archaeology would like to thank both CgMs Consulting for commissioning the archaeological investigations on behalf Higgins Homes and David Divers (formerly of English Heritage, GLAAS) for monitoring the project on behalf of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

Thanks also to all the specialists involved in the project, James Gerrard, Kevin Rielly, Kevin Hayward, Chris Jarrett, Märit Gaimster and Daniel Young. Special thanks to Martin Henig and James Gerrard for their thoughts and advice with regard to interpretation of the shark tooth.

Many thanks also to Tim Bradley for managing the fieldwork, Frank Meddens for managing post-excavation work and editing this paper and Jennifer Simonson and Josephine Brown for illustrations. Thanks are also extended to Gary Brown for his thoughts and advice. The 2008 evaluation was supervised by Douglas Killock, and the subsequent evaluation and excavation were supervised by the author of this article. Great thanks also to the team of field archaeologists who worked on site and for their dedication and hard work.

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