New light on early leather-working industries in medieval West Ham

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Summary
Archaeological investigations by Compass Archaeology during Thames Water Flood Alleviation works at Densham Open Space, West Ham, Newham, in 2007 and 2009 revealed a hollowed area filled with distinct stratigraphic deposits containing a wealth of data on the medieval leather industry in West Ham.[1] Of particular interest is the pottery assemblage, which was predominantly industrial in nature, containing jugs and storage vessels dating from the late 15th to late 16th centuries. This contrasts with the predominance of domestic wares and deposits discovered very close to this site in the 1970s. The new investigations shed additional light on the division of the rural hamlet and the nature of the leather-working industries in early West Ham.

Location and archaeological setting
The location of Densham Open Space immediately north of the 12th-century (or possibly earlier) rural parish church of All Saints', Stratford, places it within the small medieval settlement of West Ham (NGR TQ 39395 83925) (Fig. 1). The settlement had strong ties with the nearby Abbey of St Mary Stratford Langthorne, just to the southwest, founded in 1135 by William de Montfichet.[2] By the 13th and 14th centuries the Abbey was immensely rich and powerful, and steadily enlarged its administrative estates controlling, by the 15th century, much of the parish of West Ham.

Archaeological excavations immediately east of the study site by the Passmore Edwards Museum in 1973 (Site Code: HW-CS-73) revealed the plan of a timber-framed building and exposed wattle-lined pits containing horn cores of cattle, dating from the 13th/14th centuries.[3] Remains of a brick house built *c.* 1550 included footings containing materials from the demolished abbey buildings at Stratford Langthorne. Other investigations, since the 1970s, have indicated similar links and a tannery is recorded in operation here by 1621.

In the early 16th century Richard Parker is recorded as having a tannery within the precincts of Stratford Abbey until *c.* 1534. After this, he and his relative Thomas Parker, formerly a currier (specialist leather finisher), are mentioned in association with West Ham; along with documentary references to various leather trades, such as fellmonger (dealer in hides or skins), leather-dresser, saddler, bridle-maker, collar-maker, and whipseller. The cordwainers (luxury soft leather shoe-makers) seem to have been important in the area and the High Street, Plaistow, was known in 1527 as Cordwainer Street, showing that the industry was by then well established. The leather trades were still well represented in the parish throughout the 19th century.[4]

Fig. 1: site location

Summary of the archaeological investigation
The archaeological evaluations in 2007 and 2009 revealed a sequence of recent made-ground deposits, to a depth of *c.* 2m (+4.5m OD) below the current

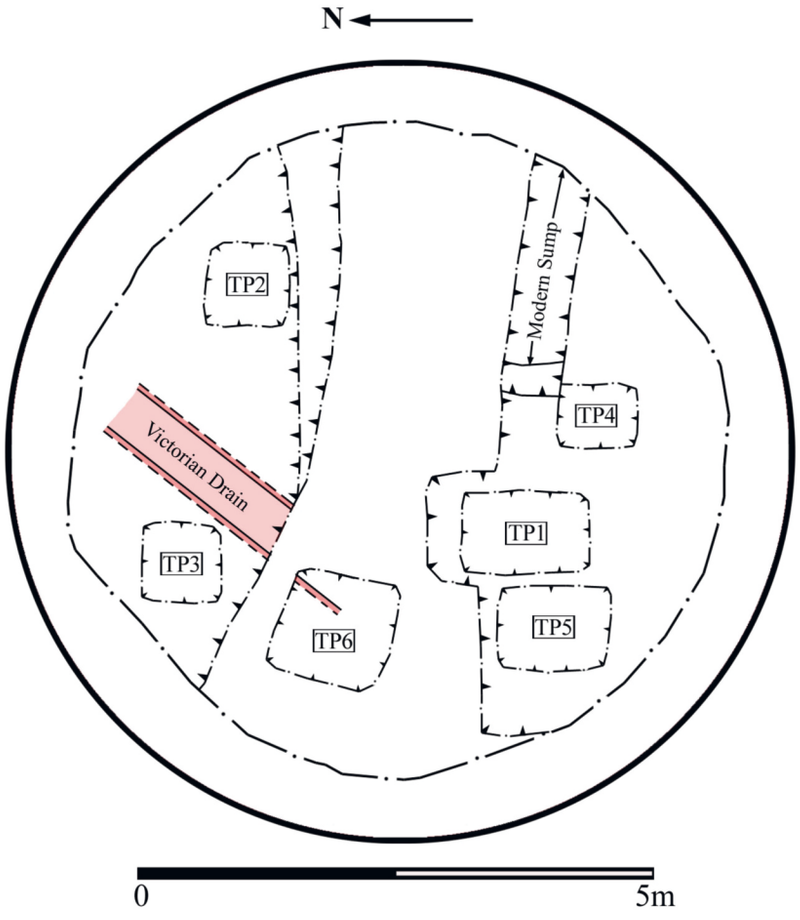

Fig. 2: plan of evaluation area and trial pits

ground surface. Beneath this was a buried sequence of five distinct, but broadly contemporary, stratigraphic infill deposits of later 15th to late 16th century origin. These five deposits are discussed here as deposits A–E, but they only totalled up to 0.65m of the overall accumulated material. Deposit A, stratigraphically the latest, was a discrete area of burnt and degraded wood and bone. Analysis of the environmental samples[5] indicated a range of taxa including holly, hazel, oak and willow, and particles of sediment indicating saturation or water-logging. The animal bone assemblage also indicated water-logging, while the pottery assemblage showed little abrasion and few cross-fits, possibly indicating a secondary deposition. Deposit B, grey-silty clay with high frequencies of oyster shell and charcoal, was observed across almost the entire excavation area, thinning to the west and giving way to a dark, more clayey, deposit C. Underlying deposits B and C a green, cessy deposit, D, was recorded across the site, but thinned to the northeast and was absent from the north-eastern-most test-pits. In the northern part of the site deposit D directly overlay discoloured natural gravels, but in the south an additional deposit, E, was recorded (not observed during the initial evaluation work). Deposit E was a very fine, loose, sandy and ashy deposit with large pieces of degraded wood and animal bone. Analysis of a column sample taken from the south-facing section of Test Pit 1 indicated deliberate dumping of waste within a natural or artificial depression near an area of residential and/or industrial activity. The feature was dry, but had suffered intermittent saturation through a rising water-table.

Analysis of the finds

The earliest datable material recovered consisted of five residual pottery sherds of Kingston-type ware (1230–1400) and Mill Green Ware (1270–1350).[6]

The pottery assemblage recovered from Deposits A–E was broadly contemporary, ranging from late-15th century wares to late-16th century wares (Fig. 4). The assemblage was dominated by fragments of large jugs and storage vessels, with a significant quantity of drinking vessel fragments including Tudor Green cups and German stoneware mugs. Conversely, pottery associated with food preparation and consumption was sparsely represented, indicating industrial rather than domestic activity.

The animal bone assemblage was large, with a predominance of cattle skulls, horn cores and teeth. While the assemblage seems to be of mixed origin, including typical domestic waste of butchered meat-bearing limb bones,

Fig. 3: general shot of evaluation area facing north

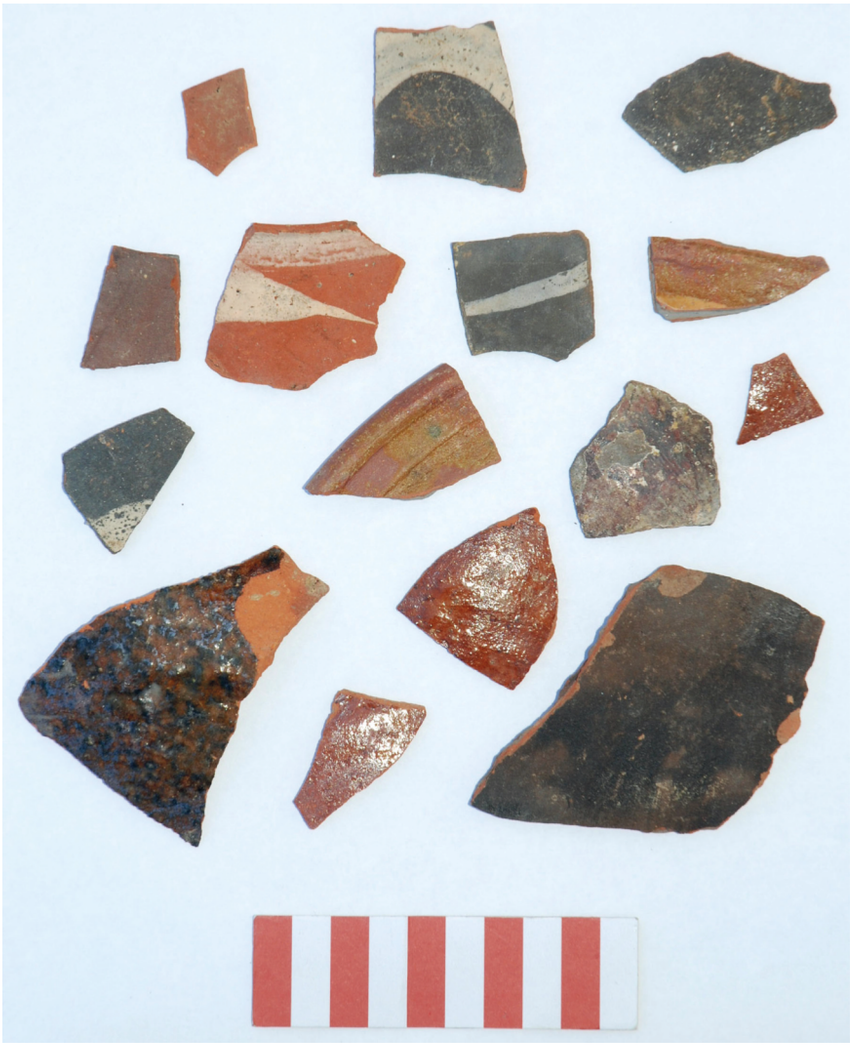

Fig. 4: late medieval/transitional sandy redware (1480–1600) from pit 5, context 2 (Deposit B)

there is a significant quantity of waste indicative of the tanning industry. The site compares closely with other examples of late 15th to 17th-century tanning complexes, such as The Green, Northampton.[7] Tanners in the later medieval period received the hides with skulls and hooves attached; these were then removed during the tanning process and dumped as waste material. Much of the material recovered indicates a localised tanning industry, perhaps exploiting the low-lying hollow of the site as an industrial waste disposal area. Domestic activity appears to have taken place in close proximity, but on the adjacent higher ground.

The ceramic building material recovered from both phases of investigation suggests some domestic influence, being predominantly various flat roof tile forms, but with examples of peg and nib tile included. Furthermore, a small tin-spoon of comparable date was recovered from Test Pit 6, along with two leather shoe pattens. The latter are essentially leather insoles for open-toed wooden or leather clogs (held together by straps).[8] These items suggest the hollow area was also used for some domestic waste disposal in addition to industrial waste.

Conclusions

The remains recorded at Densham Open Space suggest that the man-made, or natural, hollowed area of the site was used as a dumping-ground for local tanning industries, (incorporating some debris from local domestic occupation), and was gradually infilled over a period of approximately a century. Although activity of the 15th and 16th centuries is well represented there is a noticeable lack of pottery types dating from the 17th century. Activity seems to have ceased abruptly *c.* 1600, and the site was not reoccupied until the mid-19th century.

The interaction of zones of domestic settlement, as revealed by the 1970s excavations, and distinct zones of industrial dumping, as recorded in the recent investigations, is interesting to note within the settlement area.

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1. Thames Water Flood Alleviation Scheme, West Ham. Densham Open Space Construction Shaft, Church Street North / Densham Road: London Borough of Newham. An Archaeological Investigation *Compass Archaeology archive report* 2009. Site Code: CSJ 07.

2. B. Barber, S. Chew, T. Dyson, B. White *The Cistercian Abbey of St Mary Stratford Langthorne, Essex: archaeological excavations for the London Underground Limited Jubilee Line Extension Project* (2004) MoLAS Monograph Series 18.

3. Excavations by Passmore Edwards Museum in 1973 (HW-CS-73).

4. 'West Ham: Industries' *A History of the County of Essex* **6** (1973) 76–89.

5. Environmental samples and animal bone assessment by Quaternary Scientific (QUEST), University of Reading.

6. Pottery assessment by Paul Blinkhorn, 2009.

7. 'Excavation of a late 15th to 17th century tanning complex at The Green, Northampton' *Post-medieval Archaeol* **30** (1996) 63–127.

8. L.A. Clarkson 'The Leather Crafts in Tudor and Stuart England' *Agr Hist Rev* **14** (1966) 25–39.