

CURRENT DIG AT OLD FORD

Roman Road & Settlement

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THE AIM OF this excavation has been to investigate whether either of the two Roman roads suggested as running north-eastwards from London to join at the Lea crossing point of Old Ford—and then on to Colchester—could be located¹. One of these roads should come, theoretically, straight from Aldgate²; the other, on a more easterly course, from Old Street³.

The site chosen, which could be crossed by either or both of the proposed roads, is approximately two and a half miles north-east of the Roman city—and a quarter of a mile south-west of the traditional fording point of the Lea. It comprises a triangular stretch of ground lying between the houses at the back of Lefevre Road and Lefevre Grove, and the railway cutting. Both the houses and the railway are of mid-19th century date and there is no record of any building here prior to these developments⁴.

The north-eastern corner of the site is at TQ 3705-8360 where the present land surface is approximately 40 feet above O.D. Geologically the first natural layer encountered is a sandy clay which

lies about a foot deep on top of gravel. The gravel—which is mingled with layers of sand and sandy clay—is shown by deep borings to descend for about 20 feet on to the London Clay⁵.

Excavations have so far succeeded in revealing a 60 foot length of road which appears to be aligned on Aldgate and on the assumed Old Ford crossing point⁶. Alongside and to the south of the road, substantial evidence suggestive of a 4th century settlement and more tentative evidence of 2nd century habitation have been found.

The road lies at the northern edge of the area available for excavation. Its line has been cut through to the west of the site by the cellars of the Lefevre Road houses, and to the east by the railway. The most serious interference is to the north, where the houses of Lefevre Grove (now demolished to cellar level) have been dug into it making a complete through section impossible.

On the site itself there is some "local" interference: the foundations of Victorian out-buildings lie on top of the road but only their accompanying

1. The course of both these roads east of the city and west of the Lea have generally been treated as hypothetical.
2. I. D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain* (1967) 246, "a direct road probably led from London Bridge through Aldgate to Old Ford though remains of it have not yet been traced." He thought it to be "one of the earliest of the main highways." (p56).
3. Its existence might be indicated in the report of Roman road surfaces seen at Bethnal Green (*J. Roman Stud* 29 (1939) 217). Some authorities suggest that it follows the line of a pre-Roman track. W. E. Grimes, *The Excavation of Roman and Medieval London* (1968) 45; I. D. Margary, *loc cit* 54.
4. Fields are shown in John Jennings's "A Survey of Land Owned by Christ's Hospital" (1655) and in the 18th century maps of Gascoigne (1703) and Rocque (1740). (Information obtained by Bernard Barell).
5. Information on the deep-bores was provided by John Laing Construction.
6. This is at Iceland Wharf. A short un-named access road which still leads to the Wharf, was shown on Gascoigne's map (1703). In 1906 some pieces of herring-bone masonry, thought to be Roman, were dredged up from the Lea river bed "opposite the Chemical Works of Forbes, Abbott and Leonard" (*V.C.H. of London* 1 31-32). The description of the find spot was vague, but according to *Kelly's Post Office London Directory* of 1870, the premises owned by the firm were at Iceland Wharf. (Research by Bernard Barell). A compass bearing was taken over 50 feet along the southern edge of the road giving an approximate magnetic reading of 242 degrees.



Part of a typical "London ware" pot from the sandy fill of the quarry ditch.

(Photo: John Earp)

drainage trenches have made deep intrusions into its structure. Enough of the road has survived to allow a detailed examination. This is still in progress but the following general points concerning construction and dating have emerged.

The road has been built on a clay bank (or agger) laid on the natural layers of gravel and sand. This bank extends for approximately 25 feet, from what is assumed to be the centre of the road to its southern edge⁷. Directly on the clay bank lies the first surface of the road. This is very compact but composed only of a single layer of small and irregular sized pebbles rammed hard on to the clay. From the assumed centre the first surface cambers downwards for 8 feet (losing one foot in height over this distance) and then continues horizontally for a further 16 feet to the road edge. It therefore looks as though we are dealing with a surface of considerable width: perhaps 48 feet. Three later surfaces of the road can be identified, although only two of them

7. The centre is purely an assumption. It is highly probable that we have not reached the middle of the road at the point where the Lefevre Road cellars cut it. We may in fact be dealing with a "three-tracked road" with a raised middle portion. Convincing evidence for this has been found on the

seem to extend over the central cambered area, and none are as well preserved as the first.

These later phases individually consist of clean, sandy gravel layers covered by a spread of larger pebbles. The latter contain much grit and dirt—probably as a result of usage. The various phases of the road are very compact: the maximum depth from the top of the road to the top of the clay bank is only two feet.

Despite the lack of depth, the indications are that the road was in use for most of the Roman period. An early date for its construction is suggested by the 1st century pottery occurring both in the agger and in the accompanying quarry ditch. A late date for its abandonment is likely as, although 4th century settlement features are found directly alongside it, there is no evidence of late Roman interference with its structure or of the occupation debris extending on top of it.

Cut into the gravel next to the southern edge of the agger is a "U"-shaped ditch, some 19 feet wide and with a maximum depth of three feet. This has the character of a quarry from which the gravel and clay required for the road was dug. It appears to have been filled back with clay, sand and fine gravel, probably the surplus material from the construction. A quick refill can be argued from the clean nature of the contents and from the sharp profile of the original cut, as well as from the need to provide a firm edge to the road.

Laid directly on top of the filled quarry ditch, another road surface was built. This has a surviving width of about 5 feet and appears to be on the same alignment as the major road; it might be interpreted as an accompanying foot-way. A distance of 13 feet separates its northern edge from the southern edge of the main road's agger. There is no sign of elaborate construction and the 2-3 inch thick spread of pebbles was not apparently resurfaced. This metalled minor road evidently went out of use during the Roman period as it is overlain by 4th century levels.

The top of the quarry ditch—between the two roads—was capped by gravel and moulded at each side to slope gently down and then fall steeply into a "V"-shaped bottom. This ditch—lying above the quarry -- contained a greenish coloured deposit mixed with black streaks of burnt material. Pottery in it can be assigned to the period between the late 1st and the end of the 2nd century. Above the ditch

London road at the Royal Grammar School in Colchester (*J. Brit Archaeol Ass* 3rd Series 6-7 (1941/2) 53-67) where a total road width of 66 feet was claimed. We might be able to clarify the position at Bow by excavating a section on the side of the railway cutting.

occur successive deposits continuing the sequence forward until well into the 4th century.

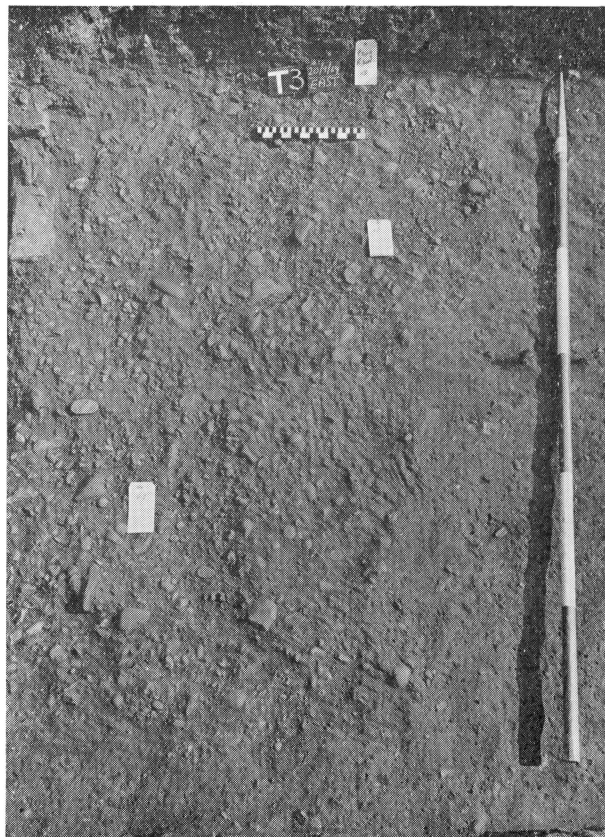
Evidence of a settlement near to the road is obtained from a number of ditches and pits, as well as from laid pebble yards. The former contain much building tile, pottery and animal bone, as does a seemingly general rubbish scatter extending about 60 feet south of the road. The pottery would suggest a 4th century date for most of these features—flanged bowls are especially represented—and this is largely confirmed by the associated coins.

So far 88 bronze coins have been excavated in Roman contexts and the large majority of them can be assigned to the period A.D. 330-396. The series commences with late issues of Constantine I and continues with coins attributable to successor Emperors of the House of Constantine (i.e. to A.D. 361). Post-Constantinian examples include those from the reign of Valentinian I, Valens, Gratian and Theodosius I; most show average wear. A number of barbaric copies of Constantinian coins also occur; they are good imitations showing little wear⁸.

Very little can be said yet concerning the nature of the settlement. The animal bones may well provide the most valuable information about its economic basis. So far only the bones from the 4th century rubbish scatter deposit in two trenches have been preliminary examined. After allowance for duplication, and taking into account age factors, these show that at least 21 oxen, nine horses, four pigs, four sheep and two dogs are represented. About half of the oxen and all of the pigs and sheep were young, possibly an indication that they were killed for food⁹.

Our current knowledge of the settlement's layout is also very limited. None of three pebble yards have yet been completely revealed in plan—but they do not appear to be the floors of structures. There is no evidence of accompanying post-holes or beam-slots to suggest that they were walled and there is no noticeable concentration of collapsed building material lying over them.

The ditches may have served boundary or drainage purposes. One runs parallel to the road about 40 feet from its southern edge. It appears to be of late construction, dug down through earlier Roman levels on to the natural sandy clay. Material in it dates to 4th century and the top fill contains a fairly clean brown earth suggesting that it finally silted up after the end of the settlement. A second is cut from



A detail of a pebble yard's surface

(Photo: John Earp)

the edge of one of the pebble spreads and appears to run in the same direction as the first. This also contains late pottery.

A third is important as it is the major indication as yet of earlier activity unrelated to the road. It lies approximately 80 feet south of the road, away from the area of late scatter. It contains pottery assignable to the 2nd century and runs from west to south and unlike the other ditches, is cut down into the gravel.

This evidence of occupation is not altogether surprising. 19th century building developments led to the discovery of at least five places containing either inhumation or cremation burials within half a mile of the Lefevre Road site¹⁰. When describing one of

8. Information from Michael Hammerson; he also notes that a smaller number of the coins are radiate Antoniniani of the period A.D. 253-270. All show heavy wear and it is quite possible that they had been in use for some considerable time before reaching the site.

9. The bones have been examined by Miss R. Warren.

10. These finds are summarised and discussed by Reginald Smith—*Proc Soc Antiq London* 22 (1911). Smith thought that the Roman burials were indications of the proximity of a road which, he believed, ran between Old Ford and Old Street. He was anxious to find evidence of it while there remained "a chance of testing conjecture by the spade."

these—a lead coffin—in 1844 Roach Smith noted that it was “contiguous to fields and gardens in which Roman urns have occasionally been found and Roman coins in great abundance.” He also recorded that “the tenant of one of the gardens . . . told us he had dug up within the last few years, at least 500 Roman coins¹¹.” Two more burials were found by John Laing’s staff in April 1969 and reported to the London Museum: both were within 200 yards north-west of the current site¹².

It is hoped that as the excavation continues, more will be revealed of the character of the Roman settlement bordering the roadside at Old Ford. It is, of course, likely that it extends over a much wider area than that currently available for digging. No doubt, much will have been destroyed by 19th century building; nevertheless, the results so far suggest the importance of continuing the work on

neighbouring areas as they come ready for redevelopment.

All of us on the site would like to thank the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and the MPBW for making grants for the work available to the London Museum. Special thanks are due to the site agent, deputy site agent and the staff of John Laing Construction at the Lefevre Road development; their material assistance has helped us over many difficulties and their interest in the work has acted as an encouragement through the winter. We would also like to acknowledge the kindness of London archaeologists who have given valuable advice on the site and the pottery from it. The assistance of the Museum’s Field Officer has also been much appreciated, both in initiating the dig and in its administration.

11. *Archaeologia* 31 (1846) 308-11.

12. The cremation was found at TQ 3697.8372, the in-

humation at TQ 3693.8360. Information supplied by Roy Canham.

London’s Archaeological Societies — 5

WEST ESSEX ARCHAEOLOGICAL GROUP

THIS GROUP was founded in April 1958 as a means of bringing together local people interested in any aspect of archaeology. The membership has been as high as 150, and members come from a wide variety of occupations. Few are professionally engaged in archaeology, but the Group has a nucleus of trained excavators and specialists. The efficiency and enthusiasm of the Group has led to requests from outside bodies, such as the National Trust, to conduct excavations on their properties.

The Passmore Edwards Museum at Stratford, Essex, acts as the base for the Group, and the two former Curators, Dr. E. A. Rudge and Ken Marshall, had much to do with the early years of the Group. Ian Robertson as the present Curator serves on the main committee and also on the Excavation Committee, and the museum has many objects on display discovered by the Group. The Excavation Committee was set up in 1966 to approve and control excavations, tools and reports, since it was found advisable to have some central authority.

Two off-shoots of the Group were formed, the Stort Valley Area Survey Group in 1964 and the Roding Valley Survey Group in 1967, to take a close look at their specific areas, record them and seek major subjects for the Group to excavate. Both these areas are threatened with development. The Roding Valley Group has been very successful in its field work, and in the last two years has identified, and sometimes excavated, Roman roads, a Roman villa, a post-Medieval pottery kiln, a windmill tump and the stable yard of an old coaching inn, many of which were unknown before.

From September to June there are monthly meetings when well-known speakers cover archaeological

and allied subjects. Field and weekend visits are made, but excavation is the most important task. A fortnight in the summer allows a good look at a major objective, whilst weekends are occupied with training or rescue digs.

Major known sites excavated in the past have been the Mesolithic site at High Beech, Epping Forest, a Bronze Age barrow at Billericay, an Iron Age Camp at Wallbury, a medieval site at Barking Abbey, the Romano-British temple at Harlow, a Roman villa site at Abridge and the Abbey precincts at Waltham Abbey. Apart from exploratory digs, only threatened sites are excavated fully, since often identification of a part of the site is sufficient if there is no threat to it.

Motorways, building development and pipe-lines have all kept local members alert, and recently a number of presumed Romano-British cremation burials were observed in the sides of a gas main trench. Aerial photographs led to a number of Roman road sections, and winter walking over ploughed fields produced a Roman villa. When the M11 motorway is built in the near future, help will have to be obtained from all local sources if we are to preserve all of the past that may be suddenly apparent. However, under its President, Dr. John Alexander, the West Essex Archaeological Group lacks nothing in inspiration, and in an emergency can call together a band of volunteers at short notice.

The Secretary is Miss Betty Gobel, The Mulberries, 7A Bosgrove, Chingford, E.4.

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