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ABSTRACT

The excavation of 29 trenches and the associated geophysical survey at Goresbrook Fields revealed many traces of past human activity on the site.

The only securely dateable features were uncovered in trench 20. These comprised four cremations dating from not before the late 1st century to early 2nd century AD (early Roman). These were found within a rectangular ditched enclosure (which may have had an internal timber fence) possibly dating from the 1st century AD (early Roman), this latter truncating an earlier post hole.

Four ditches of indefinite date (possibly early Roman) were uncovered all oriented roughly nne-ssw or ne-sw. Additionally, two pits and two ditches, which may have been of an earlier Prehistoric date, were excavated and recorded.

SITE INTRODUCTION AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

An archaeological evaluation was commissioned by T.H.I. Leisure Ltd. in advance of the construction of a Leisure Centre, comprising a cinema, bowling alley and restaurants, at Goresbrook Fields, Dagenham, in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. The work was conducted by archaeologists from Newham Museum Service between 26th April 1995 and 2nd June 1995.

The site area is bounded to the west by Dagenham Avenue, to the south by the A13 (Ripple Road), and to the north and east by Goresbrook Road and recent housing developments (**Fig 1a**). The approximate dimensions of the site area are 320m from east to west by 130m from north to south.

An archaeological evaluation was deemed necessary as the area of the proposed Leisure Centre development lies within the Archaeological Priority Zone of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Unitary Development Plan (Surveyor and Planning Officer, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, undated).

The site lies on drift deposits of recent and Pleistocene Thames gravel, approximately 200 metres north of the boundary with the Thames Alluvium (Institute of Geological Sciences, 1976).

Previous fieldwork by Newham Museum Service in the vicinity has revealed evidence of Prehistoric activity. An oblique flint arrowhead was found during an earlier watching brief on the Goresbrook Fields site. Approximately 650 metres to the south east (at the Hays Storage depot), a flint and pebble causeway was revealed within the Thames Alluvium (peat deposits). The peat underlying this causeway was dated to the middle Bronze Age, implying that the causeway itself may have been of a slightly later date (see D. Divers, 1994).

In 1922 a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age wooden figurine (the so-called Dagenham idol) dated by radiocarbon determination to 2350-2140BC was found in the peat deposits near the site subsequently occupied by the Hays Storage depot (N. Merriman 1990, 26).

Additionally, in recent years, fieldwork by Newham Museum Service along the north Thames littoral in the London Boroughs of Newham, Barking and Dagenham, and Havering has revealed considerable evidence of Prehistoric and later activity and settlement. Prehistoric timber trackways have been uncovered at various sites in Rainham, Barking and Beckton within the alluvial deposits, and a settlement site occupied in the middle Bronze Age, the late Bronze Age - the early Iron Age, the late middle Iron Age and the Roman period has been excavated at Uphall camp on the east bank of the River Roding in Barking (see P. Greenwood, 1989).

METHOD

The archaeological evaluation undertaken by Newham Museum Service Archaeological Unit at Goresbrook Fields, Dagenham can be divided into four distinct phases.

The first phase of the evaluation involved the excavation of 25 trenches using a mechanical excavator (10m long x 2m wide), spread evenly throughout the site area (see **Fig.1b**).

The trenches were then cleaned manually by Newham Museum Service site staff to define the archaeological deposits. In all trenches (including those where archaeological features were not discernible), overall trench photographs were taken and one long section drawn at a scale of 1:20.

Where archaeological deposits or features occurred they were excavated, planned at a scale of 1:20, photographed, and recorded using pro forma context recording sheets. Soil samples were taken for environmental analysis where this was deemed necessary, for instance, in the case of the four features which contained quantities of burnt human bone. Trenches 24 and 25 were not recorded as their excavation revealed modern deposits associated with the footings of the school which had formerly occupied the site.

The second phase of the evaluation involved the extension of trenches 15, 16 and 20 (see **Figures 2, 3a and 3b**), which were then recorded as described above.

Following this a geophysical survey was conducted of the north western zone of the site (covering an area of approximately 50m from north to south by 140m from east to west) was conducted (the third phase). The purpose of this survey was to determine the position of the four further trenches (trenches 26-29), which were excavated in the fourth and final phase of the evaluation and then recorded as described above.

The site archive, comprising the written, drawn and photographic records of the evaluation, the finds recovered during the evaluation and the records of the geophysical survey, is presently held at the Newham Museum Service, 31 Stock Street, Plaistow, London, OBX E13, but will ultimately be deposited at Valence House Museum, Becontree Avenue, Dagenham.

PHASE DISCUSSION

Phase 1

Phase 1 is comprised of groups 20, 24, 26, 33 and 71. Phase 1 represents the underlying drift geology of Holocene or Pleistocene gravel found in all trenches, the upper level of which was encountered at a height of between 5.94m and 6.30m above Ordnance Datum.

Phase 2

Phase 2 comprises groups 6, 32, 60 and 61. Phase 2 represents the earliest human activity on the site and consists of two pits (groups 6 and 32) and two possible ditches (groups 60 and 61) cut into the natural gravel (Phase 1) and overlain by sandy silt subsoil (Phase 3). Phase 2 was encountered at a level of between 6.09m and 4.74m above Ordnance Datum.

Phase 3

Phase 3 is comprised of groups 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 14, 17, 18, 19, 22, 23, 25, 29, 31, 36, 39, 41- 43, 53, 55, 56, 58, 59, 63, 65, 66 and 70. Phase 3 represents a deposit of sandy silt subsoil of Holocene date (possibly later Prehistoric), formed by natural processes overlying the natural gravel (Phase 1) and in trenches 2, 15 and 26 overlying features cut into the gravel (Phase 2). The upper level of phase 3 was encountered at a level of between 6.89m and 5.56m above Ordnance datum.

Phase 4

Phase 4 comprises groups 16, 35, 38, 50- 52, 64 and 69. Phase 4 represents possible early Roman activity within the site area. (For discussion of the dating evidence recovered see Appendix V: Finds Report.) Groups 50 and 51 represent the south east corner of a possible rectangular fenced ditched enclosure (oriented nnw-sse, and ene - wsw) uncovered in trench 20 (see **Figure 2**). Group 52 is an earlier post hole truncated by the ditch (group 51), and containing no dating evidence. Groups 16, 35, 38, 64 and 69 are linear features, with groups 38 and 69 being the same feature passing through two adjacent trenches. Groups 16, 35 and 38/69 are oriented approximately nne -ssw, while group 64 is oriented approximately nw-se. Small quantities of finds covering a wide date range (Bronze Age to early Saxon) were recovered from the fills of groups 16, 35 and 38/69. These did not constitute samples large enough to utilise as dating evidence, and may have been redeposited within the fills of these ditches by natural processes of plant or animal action. It may be possible, however, to tentatively assign an early Roman date to Group 35 on the basis of the large size fragments of material that were recovered. Phase 4 was encountered at a level of between 6.03m and 5.49m above Ordnance Datum.

Phase 5

Phase 5 comprises groups 46- 49. Phase 5 consists of four features containing quantities of burnt human bone, which can be interpreted as cremation burials (see Appendix IV: Environmental Assessment), found within the earlier rectangular enclosure in trench 20 (groups 50 and 51). Two of these features were dateable to the later 1st century to early 2nd century AD (early Roman period) on the basis of their associated ceramic grave goods (see Appendix V: Finds Report). A third contained small fragments of abraded early Roman ceramic material. This phase represents the possible reuse of the earlier enclosure as a cremation cemetery. Phase 5 was encountered at a level of between 5.98m and 5.74m above Ordnance Datum.

Phase 6

Phase 6 is comprised of groups 4, 9, 11 -13, 15, 21, 27, 28, 30, 34, 37, 40, 44, 45, 54, 57, 62, and 68. Phase 6 consists of deposits of sandy silt subsoil directly below the topsoil (groups 9, 11, 15, 21, 27, 30,34, 37, 40, 44, 54, 57, 62 and 68), four possibly natural features which may be the result of tree root disturbance (groups 4, 12, 13 and 28) and a number of irregular gullies and features in trench 20, probably produced by burrowing animals (group 45). Phase 6 was encountered at a level of between 6.54m and 5.21m above Ordnance Datum.

Phase 7

Phase 7 comprises groups 1, 2 and 67. This is the most recent phase of activity on the site, and represents the modern topsoil overlying the whole site area (group 2), a 20th century service trench (group 1) and a modern refuse pit (group 67). Phase 7 was encountered at a level of between 6.89m and 5.56m above Ordnance Datum.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Phase 2 - the two pits and two ditches cutting the natural gravel (Phase 1), and sealed by the lowest deposit of subsoil (Phase 3), can be identified as the first period of human activity discovered by the evaluation at Goresbrook Fields on the basis of its relative stratigraphic position within the sequence of deposits at the site.

Phase 4 containing the earliest securely dateable human activity (the early Roman date ditch of the rectangular enclosure in trench 20), is composed of various features cut into the subsoil (Phase 3). The other features in this phase (namely the four ditches: groups 16, 35, 38/69 and 64) could not themselves be dated on the basis of finds. (With the possible exception of group 35 which may also be of early Roman date.). These ditches however had the same stratigraphic position as the rectangular enclosure and shared the same approximate north-south orientation. It may be suggested that all the features of Phase 4 taken together represent an episode of agricultural landuse at the Goresbrook Fields site. The ditches may have functioned as field boundaries respecting the trend of the land towards the junction between the dryer gravel terrace and the wetter Thames Alluvium (see Institute of Geological Sciences, 1976), while the enclosure may have had some related agricultural function.

Phase 5 represents an alteration in the function of the rectangular enclosure (groups 50 and 51) to a cremation cemetery sometime not earlier than the late 1st to early 2nd century AD (early Roman period). It would be reasonable to assume that more cremations than the four excavated may exist within the area of the enclosure that appears to extend beyond the bounds of trench 20.

Phases 6 and 7 contain very little evidence of human activity, aside from stray finds of Medieval and modern material in the topsoil and subsoil and two modern features (a service trench, group 1 and a refuse pit, group 67). This is consistent with the open undeveloped nature of the site at the time of the archaeological evaluation (April-May 1995) and the available documentary evidence which states that an area of common land existed in the south west corner of Dagenham parish immediately to the north of Ripple Road up until at least the 19th century (W.R. Powell(ed), 1966: 281). Furthermore, the historical settlement core of Dagenham lay about a mile to the north of Goresbrook Fields in the centre of the Parish, and the Dagenham area as a whole remained predominantly agricultural until the beginning of large scale residential development at the end of the 19th century (W.R. Powell(ed), 1966: 282).

In conclusion, it can be stated that remains of archaeological significance were encountered during the evaluation at Goresbrook Fields, Dagenham, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, most notably the cremation burials and rectangular ditched enclosure in the north west corner of the site. It is recommended that further archaeological evaluation is desirable in the event of any future development in the immediate vicinity, particularly if this were to be adjacent to the north west corner of the present site area.

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APPENDIX I

Archive Index

Context no	Trench	Plan	Section	Group	Phase
1	1-29	—	all sections	2	7
2	16	—	16	37	6
3	20	—	20	44	6
4	20	—	20	51	4
5	20	5	20	51	4
6	16	—	16	39	3
7	20	—	20	53	3
8	1	—	1	3	3
9	1-29	—	—	71	1
10	3	—	3	7	3
11	19	—	19	43	3
12	17	—	17	40	6
13	17	—	17	41	3
14	22	—	22	56	3
15	23	—	23	57	6
16	23	—	23	58	3
17	7	—	7	15	6
18	7	—	7	16	4
19	7	—	7	16	4
20	7	—	7	17	3
21	16	22	16	38	4
22	16	22	16	38	4
23	6	6	—	12	6
24	6	6	—	12	6
25	6	6	—	13	6
26	6	6	—	13	6
27	15	28	15	35	4
28	15	28	15	35	4
29	6	—	6	11	6
30	6	—	6	14	3
31	15	—	15	34	6
32	15	—	15	36	3
33	18	—	18	42	3
34	21	—	21	54	6
35	21	—	21	55	3
36	2	2	—	4	6
37	2	2	—	4	6
38	2	2	2	1	7
39	2	2	2	1	7
40	2	2	2	6	2
41	2	2	2	6	2

42	2	2	2	6	2
43	2	-	2	5	3
44	4	-	4	8	3
45	9	-	9	19	3
46	9	-	9	20	1
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50	14	-	14	33	1
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54	12	-	12	26	1
55	11	-	11	23	3
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112	20	113	-	45	6
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114	20	115	-	50	4
115	20	115	-	50	4
116	29	117	29	67	7
117	29	117	29	67	7
118	29	119	29	69	4
119	29	119	29	69	4
120	28	121	28	64	4
121	28	121	28	64	4
122	26	-	26	59	3
123	26	124	26	60	2
124	26	124	26	60	2
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128	28	-	28	66	3
129	27	-	27	62	6
130	27	-	27	63	3
131	26	-	26	61	2
132	26	132	26	61	2
133	20	136	-	49	5
134	20	135	-	52	4
135	20	135	-	52	4
136	20	136	-	49	5