

Excavations at Buttsbury Estate, Ilford.  
London Borough of Redbridge.

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Excavation Summary.

An assessment and rescue excavations were conducted on an area chosen for development by the London and Quadrant Housing Association. The area consisted of the existing Buttsbury housing estate, and an area of land to the east, previously used as allotments and more recently as a grassed playing area. It is bounded to the north by Loxford Lane, to the west by Buttsbury Road, and to the south by Loxford Water (Fig 1).

The site is known to have been the property of Barking Abbey, the Abbess being licensed in 1319 to fell trees in Hainault Forest to rebuild the house at Loxford after a fire. The estate went to a Thomas Powle in 1557, and was owned by a succession of farmers until the end of the 19th. century, when much of the land was sold for house building. The current Loxford Hall dates to the 19th. century.

The site is also in close proximity to the iron age settlement at Uphall Camp, within half a mile of the Barking Archaeological Priority Zone. Before the 20th. century canalisation of Loxford Water it was on the high tide mark of the river. There is also evidence of possible ridge and furrow, the remains of Medieval or post-Medieval ploughing visible on the allotments area to the east.

The excavations were intended to determine the extent and location of surviving archaeological remains, in advance of development, and to assess the need for further archaeological investigation.

The work was conducted in two phases; the first an assessment on the whole area affected by development, starting on the 21st. of November 1992 and lasting four weeks, and the second phase, of rescue excavations on the playing fields to the east of the estate, commencing on the 4th. of January 1993, and lasting six weeks. A total of ten trenches were excavated in both phases, varying in size from 3m. x 5m. to 65m. x 12m. The excavations were conducted by field staff from the Passmore Edwards Museum.

The document below sets out, phase-by-phase and trench-by-trench, a preliminary provisional summary of the excavation results.

Phase 1: Assessment.

Phase 1 was designed as an assessment to evaluate the archaeology of the estate, in order to determine a strategy for rescue excavations if deemed necessary.

At the start of the project it was decided to run a limited geophysical survey to target areas of potential surviving archaeological remains. Due to the nature of the site, this was limited to a resistivity survey over the playing field area, and on the larger grassed areas within the estate itself.

Twenty-one 20m. x 20m. resistivity squares were surveyed in advance of the phase 1 excavations. The plot for the playing field showed three large linear ditches, two running north-south, and one running east to west. These were located to the east of the survey area, with the west of the area showing considerable over-burden. Three trenches were sited to investigate these features.

The plots surveyed in the estate itself revealed modern service runs over most of the areas surveyed, with the exception of plots 16 and 17 (Fig. 2). These showed badly defined high and low resistance anomalies.

#### Trench 1.

Trench 1 was positioned in the playing field area (Fig. 3). It measured 10m. x 5m., aligned north-south, and was sited over the east-west resistivity anomaly. The trench was excavated by machine to a depth of c. 1.20m. below current ground surface, at which point the natural gravel was reached. The excavation revealed c. 0.30m. of modern topsoil and two layers of Post-medieval plough-soil. Cut into the natural gravel were a linear ditch running east-west, and several smaller features. The ditch fill yielded fragments of an almost complete Romano-British storage jar. These features were excavated.

#### Trench 2.

Trench 2 was positioned in the playing field area (Fig. 1). It was located to the north of Trench 1, and also measured 10m. x 5m. It was aligned east-west across a second resistivity anomaly. It was machine-excavated down to natural gravel, removing a similar sequence of topsoil and plough-soils. The plough-soil was cut by the cut for a linear ceramic land drain, running north-south. As in Trench 1, the natural gravel was cut by silt filled features. These were excavated by hand, and have been interpreted as post-holes, stake-holes, and pits of probable pre-Roman date. The fills of these features yielded pottery and some worked flint implements.

#### Trench 3.

Trench 3 was positioned in the playing field area (Fig. 1). It was another 10m. x 5m. machine excavated trench over the third linear resistivity anomaly. It is thought that this corresponds to a field boundary shown on 19th. century maps of the area. Similar topsoil and plough-soils to those in Trenches 1 and 2 were removed to the natural gravel. This was cut by the cut for a linear ceramic land drain, running north-south, and two natural features. No indication was discovered of the linear feature identified on the resistivity plot: no sign of its presence existed either in section, or could be observed in the natural su-strata. This is peculiar, in that the plot shows the feature strongly, and the two other similar features were identified in both Trenches 1 and 2.

Enough residual pottery of probable Iron age and Roman date was recovered from the plough-soils in all three of these

trenches to postulate the presence of a fairly sizeable settlement in the vicinity.

#### Trench 4.

Trench 4 was located to the far west of the site, on a grassed area between Buttsbury Road and the backs of the properties to the west (Fig. 1). It measured 5m. x 3m., and was aligned east-west. 20th. century topsoil was removed to reveal 19th. century deposits, and these were removed to the natural gravel. Cutting the gravel were two linear ditches of Post-medieval date, and two undated post-holes.

#### Trench 5.

Trench five was located on the corner of Loxford Lane and Medway Close (Fig. 1). It was a machine-dug 3m. x 5m. trench with a depth of c. 1m. This revealed deep 20th. century dump layers overlying a brick and cobble surface, cut by two 20th. century iron pipes. These were in turn cut by the pipe trench for a concrete encased pipe of 20th. century date. The brick surface consisted of stock bricks laid on edge to form a solid surface, with parallel lines of cobbles laid into the top to either in-fill wheel ruts, or to create a harder surface for wheels. The surface lay over dump deposits of 18th. or 19th. century date, which lay over natural gravel. It is thought likely that the brick and cobble surface relates to a predecessor of the present Loxford Hall, c. 15m. away.

#### Trench 6.

Trench 6 was located in the centre of the middle block of buildings on the estate (Fig. 1). It measured 5m. x 3m., and was aligned north-south. After removing the paving slabs a layer sand, a layer of crushed tarmac and a layer of compacted earth c. 0.10m. deep were revealed. These overlay natural gravel at a depth of c. 0.10m. The trench was abandoned at this point, without further recording. It is thought that the area was graded when the estate was built. Trench 7.

Trench 7 was located on the southern boundary of the estate (Fig. 1), and comprised a machine excavated 5m. x 3m. trench running east-west. A depth of c. 0.60m of concrete and screed were broken out, revealing a grey-blue silty clay. It is thought this may be either a pond, or a previous silted-up course of the Loxford. 19th. century pottery was recovered from these clays. At c. 1.4m below ground surface, the top of a brick wall was revealed. This was cleaned and recorded, but not further excavated due to Health and Safety considerations.

The clays continued to a depth of c. 2.3m. below current ground surface, at which point they were found to overlie natural gravel.

Phase 1 of the excavations finished at this point.

## Phase 2: Rescue Excavations.

Phase 2 was centred on Romano-British and earlier deposits on the playing field, and began with a further resistivity survey of an area to the north of the previous survey. This showed two further possible linear low resistance features. Three trenches were planned to cover the area of maximum disturbance by the construction activities associated with Phase 2B of building operations.

### Trench 8.

Trench 8 was located in the area of the playing field (Fig. 1) where house construction was likely to destroy large areas of the archaeological resource. It measured 65m. x 12m., aligned north-south. The area covered the footprints of the main block of buildings in Phase 2B of construction. Included in this area was the previously excavated Trench 3. This was not re-excavated, but a baulk left to the north and south of the back-fill. The area to the south was designated Trench 8A. Machine stripping of the areas removed an identical sequence of topsoil and plough-soils as that recorded for Trenches 1 - 3. These again overlay natural gravel.

The gravel was cut by numerous silt filled features of various sizes. These were hand excavated. The majority of them have been interpreted as apparently unconnected post-holes or storage pits. Structural elements were limited to a probable palisade line and a row of medium (c.0.75m. diameter) sized post holes. The palisade line is worthy of note as it appears to have been constructed of vertically driven planks, rather than the usual posts. A number of natural features, including two large tree holes, were also recorded. Two linear land drains were recorded running north-south in trench 8. The first of these aligns with the one found in Trench 3. This continued in Trench 8A. The second ran parallel to this to the west of the trench. All were cut through the plough-soil.

The majority of the man-made features were concentrated to the north of the trench, reinforcing the impression of the settlement pattern observed in Trenches 1 and 2. The finds from this trench are of similar date to those recovered from Phase 1.

Trench 8A revealed only natural features, other than the linear land drain recorded in Trenches 3 and 8.

### Trench 9.

Trench 9 was a 22m. x 10m. machine-dug trench to the south of Trench 8 (Fig. 1), in Phase 2B of house construction. The machining removed plough-soil and topsoil. These deposits overlay a deposit, c. 0.30m. deep, of sandy silt. This is thought to be a possible previous course of the Loxford. From within the silts a number of flint tools, waste flakes, and cores were recovered. These flints included a well-made microlith. The silt also

contained patches of decayed charcoal.

Cutting the silt were three linear land drains, a probable post-hole to the south-west, and a large tree hole. One of the linear drains also appears in Trenches 3, 8, and 8A. The second ran parallel to the first, to the east, and both were fed into a third, running east-west.

A sondage was dug in the south-east corner of the trench to determine the depth of the silt deposits, and they were found to overlie natural sand and clay.

#### Trench 10.

Trench 10 was a machine-dug 20m. x 10m. trench to the north-east of Trench 8. It was aligned north-west to south-east on the footprints of the northernmost block of Phase 2B of house construction. Stripping revealed topsoil and plough-soils, overlying natural gravel. This was again cut by silt filled features. The trench revealed more structural evidence for the settlement in the form of a linear gully, and a curved butt-ended ditch. A collection of large, regular, interacting pits to the north of the site has no interpretation as yet. These features were associated with a number of post holes of various sizes. Very few finds were recovered from the trench, with the exception of sizeable fragments recovered from the butt-ended ditch.

Two more linear field drains were recorded, running north-south. One of these aligns to that found in Trenches 3, 8, 8A, and 9, and the other to the parallel drain in Trench 9.

#### Interpretation.

No evidence of Medieval activity was found on the site during the two excavation phases. The only structural evidence for previous buildings on the site of Loxford Manor appear to be of 18th. or 19th. century date: a wall in Trench 7, and a brick and cobble surface in Trench 5. It would seem, therefore, that the construction of the current Buttsbury Estate has removed all evidence of previous activity on the site, other than on the periphery of the estate, and in some areas currently covered by roads or pavement.

The only activity to the east, on the playing field area, of this period relates to the farming of the area over the last 2,000 years, with an apparently extensive system of field drains being laid some time in the 19th. century. Very little Medieval pottery was recovered from the plough-soils.

Of far more importance is the evidence of possible Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman/Romano-British activity on the site. From the excavation evidence, it appears that the settlement is concentrated to the north and east of the development area, with further activity on what may be the foreshore of the Pre-historic Loxford. It should be stressed that dating for the deposits are presently only provisional.

Although no precise size and location for the settlement was revealed, the extent of the features (nearly 1,000 sq. m.)

suggests extensive settlement activity.

The demonstrable trend of the activity to the north and east has considerable implications for the planned extension of the development in that direction, and for further development of the site.