

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

AT OLIVER CLOSE, LEYTON,

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Archive Report

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ABSTRACT

Evaluation trenches in advance of redevelopment at Oliver Close, Leyton demonstrated the survival of late Bronze Age features in the North-west of the site. Archaeological work has been done to record the features at risk for preservation as a paper archive.

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INTRODUCTION

This document acts as an introduction to and summary of the paper archive made during evaluation and rescue excavations prior to redevelopment in the north-west corner of the Oliver Close estate, Leyton.

The Oliver Close Estate of high-rise accommodation is being replaced by low-rise apartments and houses under Waltham Forest Housing Action Trust, the client for this project. The building work requires foundations which will intrude into sub-surface layers likely to contain archaeologically sensitive material. In order to assess the extent of survival of this material so that an appropriate mitigation strategy could be implemented, evaluation trenches were excavated by a team of archaeologists from Newham Museum Service (NMS) within the proposed foundation area. The works were completed according to a project design (MacGowan 1996) agreed between the client, NMS and a representative of English Heritage (Mr. Lawrence Pontin, the Archaeological Advisor for North-east London).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The Oliver Close site lies on gravels of the Taplow Terrace, overlooking the alluviated valley of the River Lea. The river valley is part of an historical marshland, now largely given over to recreation but also the route of a railway line. The fertile, easily worked soil of such alluvial plains has attracted settlement since at least the bronze age and these settlements are typically situated on higher, dryer land to avoid danger of flooding (see figure 2).

This area of Leyton is within an archaeological priority zone identified by the Waltham Forest Unitary Development Plan; it is believed to have been part of the Saxon village that gave Leyton its modern name. Recent excavations at the New Arts Building at George Mitchell School (Moore and Thrale 1993), 250m north-east of the Oliver Close Estate, discovered evidence of early Iron Age settlement (c.700-c.400 BC). Earlier excavations along Church Road, (Greenwood 1979), approximately 100m to the north-east of the estate, showed Roman through to post-medieval activity, although a 1993 excavation, LECR93, on Church Road, 200m to the north (Mamwell 1994), revealed mostly eighteenth century foundations.

The first archaeological work on the Oliver Close estate consisted of the recording of 23 soil test pits excavated by Wimpey Geotech Limited for Alan Baxters Associates, in 1992 (Bissell 1992): a watching brief indicated the areas most likely to contain surviving archaeological deposits (Chew 1992).

The next phase of work consisted of the recording of 2 soil test pits, dug by machine for Alan Baxters Associates by Wimpey Geotech Ltd., in the area of phase 1/B of the proposed development. One, trench 5, was located on the site of the proposed shop unit towards the east of block 1B/1. The other, Trench 6, was located to the west of the proposed shop unit in block 1B/3. Both were excavated by machine to a depth of at least 3 metres. Trench 5 revealed 20th century dumped material above the natural gravel; Trench 6 revealed modern deposits to a depth of approximately 2.8 metres, beneath

figure 1; Site Location

which were alluvial silts with a high organic content. The only conclusions which were drawn from these two trenches was that modern intrusions have truncated the archaeology in this area of the site and that a water channel or river was once located in the area of trench 6, which presumably flowed into the River Lea.

The most important phase of archaeological work on the site thus far was a 1993 rescue project under the supervision of Mr. K. Sabel of NMS, which comprised the excavation of a trench in the south-east corner (area A) and two trenches to the west of the tower blocks, on the grass playing fields then lying west of the site, north of the allotments. More recently, a watching brief was undertaken on further test-pits (Sabel 1995).

From the archaeological deposits revealed in area A, it is possible to trace the history of the area of trench 1:

The natural subsoil was found to consist of Taplow terrace gravel and sand, overlain by sandy clay, into which were cut a large number of prehistoric features. The earliest human activity detected on site is datable by the pottery to the late Bronze Age. It consisted of a layer of soil with associated post-holes indicating the presence of several structures. A linear structure on an approximately north west-south east alignment is discernible in the south west of the trench was dated to between c.2000 and c.1000 BC. Another structure is later than this period as it was associated with pottery dated to c.1000-c.500 BC. To the north east two possible linear structures can be seen, perpendicular to this and parallel to each other. The more southerly of these was dated to the early Iron Age (c.600-c.400 BC). The existence of a curved structure crossing the north-west/south-east oriented linear structure suggests a later period of use. Whether any of these structures is contemporary with the others is uncertain, as is their nature and function.

Evidence of Roman activity on the site was found in the form of pit or post hole bottom which cannot be closely defined although the aforementioned excavations along Church Road certainly indicate that this is not an isolated find.

The next phase of activity found during the excavation consisted of ploughing. It is uncertain when the area was first turned over to cultivation. On Jean Rocque's map of 1746 the site appears within an enclosed field. The presence of a large quantity of slate in the ploughsoil indicates that ploughing continued after the mid 18th century when slate came in to widespread use in the London area. The ploughing would have removed any evidence of earlier occupation after that discussed above.

Some time after the late 18th century material was dumped across the site, prior to the insertion of two drains in the late 19th century, laid to service buildings to the east of the trench. A dump of material, the laying of a concrete surface and the construction of a drainage inspection hole also occurred at about this time or later.

In the 20th century two structures were built with a series of drains to service them. These were subsequently demolished and material dumped over the area. The modern topsoil overlies these dumps.

figure 2; The Distribution of Late Bronze Age Settlements, East of the River Lea

PHASE II DEVELOPMENT AND EXCAVATION METHODOLOGY

The current archaeological involvement in this project is specifically due to the proposed construction of the buildings shown in figure 2 and trenches were sited to cover those areas known to be at risk from foundation works.

All archaeological work undertaken on site was done in accordance with the project design (MacGowan 1996) and the recommendations of a health and safety report (Waltho 1996). The initial excavation, through modern material was done by mechanical means under the supervision of NMS personnel, stepping inwards at 1.2m intervals to ensure the stability of the trench sides for safety reasons. On discovering archaeological deposits, machining ceased and further work was done by hand, by NMS personnel and all archaeological features were recorded using standard techniques: NMS pro forma record sheets were used, accompanied by measured plans and photography, samples were to be taken for environmental remains as appropriate.

The project began with the excavation of two trenches, each 2m x 10m at the bottom, under the supervision of Mr. C. Jarrett. These were numbered 1 and 2 for convenience but all context descriptions were allocated numbers distinct from those of earlier work on the estate to prevent undue confusion. Of these two trenches, Trench 2, at the top of the slope failed to locate significant archaeological remains and was backfilled; Trench 1, however, produced features of archaeological interest and was therefore extended, by agreement between NMS, the client and Mr. Pontin of English Heritage to an area 4m x 10m, exposing the whole area expected to be destroyed in this part of the site and allow a full archaeological record to be made prior to the groundwork. This later work was done under the supervision of the author.

RESULTS

figure 3; Trench Location

The excavations revealed the site to be made up of several distinct layers of material divided by phases of human activity on site. Each distinct deposit has been assigned a number and described; these contexts have here been organised into groups which indicate activity of a specified type which occurred in the past, across our historically artificial trench boundaries. Each group is described in appendix 4 with its constituent sub-groups and contexts in summary form; since the stratigraphy of the site was simple, each group may be considered to represent a phase of activity as described below.

PHASE I; deposition of material in a flooded landscape prior to known human occupation of the site, probably early post-glacial. This was demonstrated by Group 1.

PHASE II; Bronze age occupation of the site, demonstrated by the presence of post-holes and other cut features of Group 2.

PHASE III; Site apparently unoccupied but possibly used agriculturally as shown by the development of the soil horizons of Group 3.

PHASE IV; Hard-core material dumped across site in 20th century, in Group 4.

figure 4; Cut Features in Trench 2

CONCLUSIONS

As was the case with the archaeological work done in 1993, the presence of a significant Bronze Age settlement is indicated although the trench size in this phase of the project limits our understanding of the features recorded. The remains are such that the threat to the remains from the proposed development would require their excavation or in situ preservation had the whole available part of the currently threatened area not, of necessity, been excavated during the course of this project!

The occurrence of these late Bronze Age remains at opposite ends of the development site must have implications for the presence of remains in the area as a whole. Recent development works throughout metropolitan Essex have exposed a considerable level of destruction of this part of our heritage while permitting limited recording and although the archaeological requirements of this phase of the Oliver Close development have been met, it will be necessary to continue a pattern of archaeological evaluation in advance of all intrusive works during the course of the Oliver Close redevelopment.

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