

Field boundaries or funerary enclosures – a new look at Old Ford

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Introduction

This article summarises the results of an evaluation undertaken by the Museum of London Archaeology Service in advance of proposed redevelopment at 490 Roman Road, Bow (Fig. 1; TQ 536545 183290). The site comprised a roughly rectangular plot behind buildings on the south side of Roman Road. The investigation, which was carried out in January 2002, entailed the excavation of two trenches covering nearly a fifth of the site. These revealed several features including ditches and pits containing late Roman pottery (Fig. 2). Conventional wisdom would have the ditches as field boundaries and the artefacts as rubbish from a nearby 'settlement' at Old Ford, but could there be another explanation for these finds?

Natural topography

The site is located about 1 km west of the present course of the River Lea and lies on Taplow river terrace gravel.² The natural recorded on site consisted of bands orange-brown and yellow-brown sand and gravel, the truncated surface of which lay between 10.80 and 10.90 m OD.

Archaeological background

The site was situated about 3.5 km north-east of Roman London and close to the projected line of the London (Aldgate) to Colchester Roman road (Fig. 3). Evidence for the road, which was constructed in the mid-1st century and was still in use at the end of the 4th century, has been recorded nearby at Lefevre Road, Appian Way and Parnell Road.³ It was one of two major Roman roads that converged on a crossing point of the River Lea at Old Ford.

The site lay within or close to an extensive cemetery that seemingly overlapped a small,

poorly defined settlement at Old Ford. Evidence for the cemetery comprises widely scattered burials including several of high status in stone coffins.⁴ The closest burials to the site were discovered immediately to the south in Saxon Road during the 19th century. The putative settlement is mainly represented by gullies, ditches, pits, gravel surfaces and assemblages of pottery and other artefacts of late 3rd- and 4th-

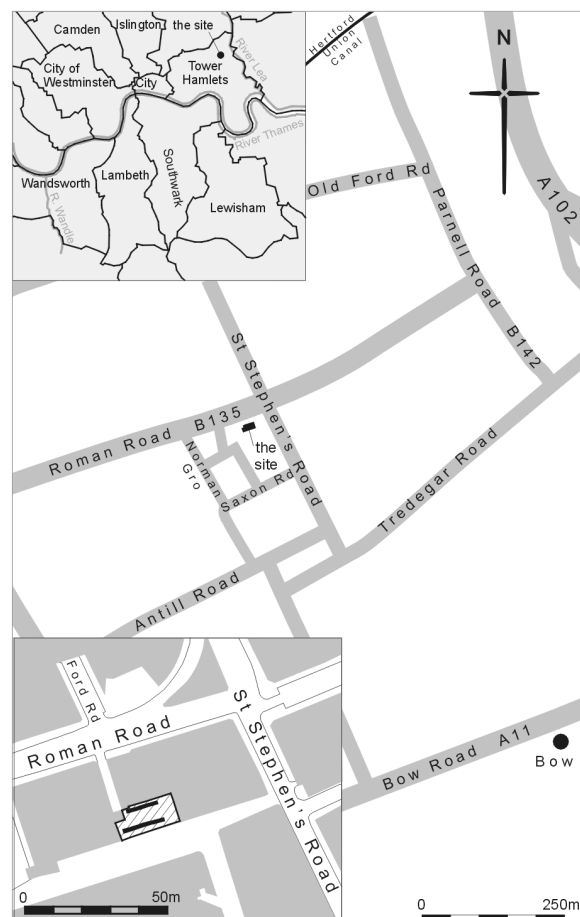


Fig. 1: site location

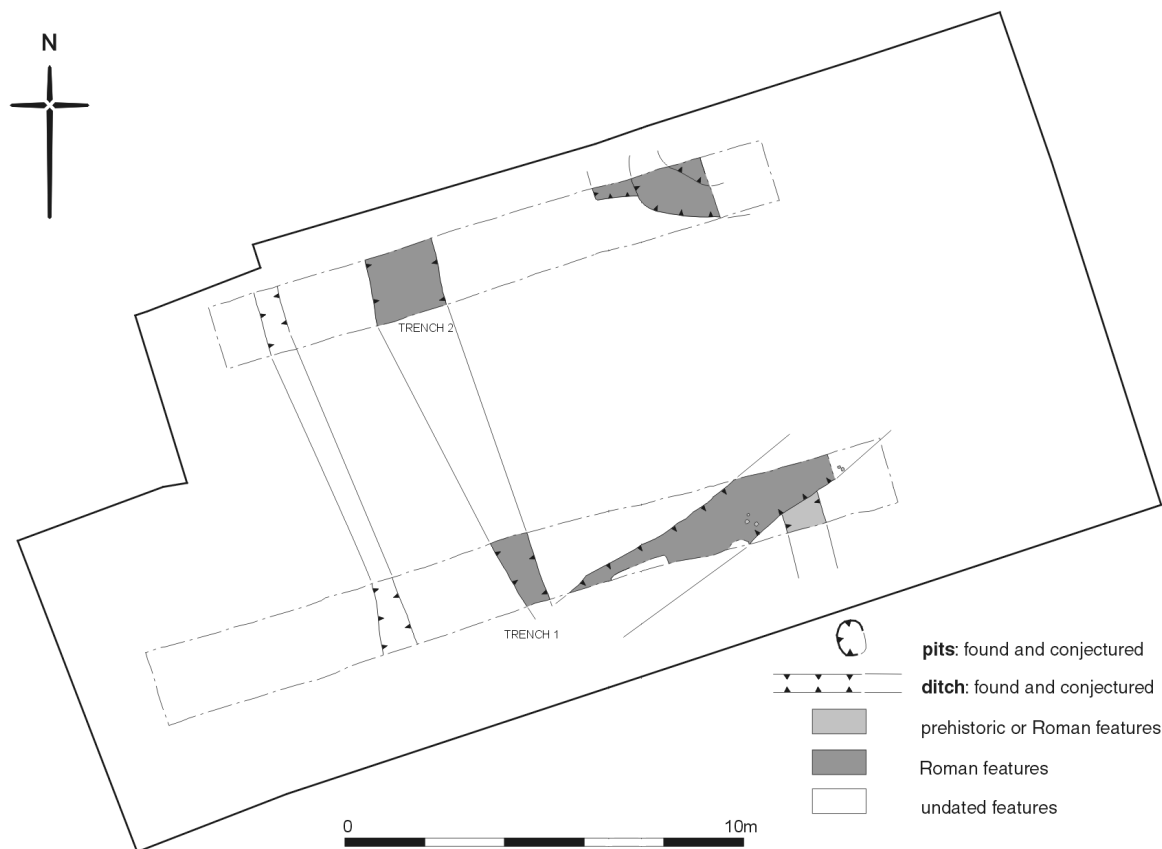


Fig. 2: plan of the archaeological features

century date.⁵ Oddly, structural remains have only been found at two sites, where limited evidence for clay and timber buildings was recorded.⁶ Roman ditches in the locality are generally interpreted as land boundaries representing extensive field systems.

Results of the archaeological evaluation

The features described below were generally filled with sandy silt, and all had been dug into natural and truncated from above by later activity. The site records may be found under the site code RMW02 in the Museum of London archive.

Undated ditch

An undated ditch was found in both evaluation trenches and traced over a distance of 9.7 m. It was aligned NNW–SSE and was 1.28 m wide and 0.30 m deep. The sides were steep and the base had a rounded profile.

Prehistoric or Roman features

This group comprised a ditch and five small postholes at the north-west end of trench 1. The ditch and three of the postholes could not be later than Roman in date as they were cut by a mid-3rd- to 4th-century ditch. The other postholes were on the projected line of the Roman ditch, although the relationship between these features had been lost due to modern truncation.

The postholes were 60–100 mm in diameter and 80–130 mm deep. The ditch was aligned roughly NNW–SSE. It survived to a depth of 50 mm and had steep sides and a flat base. A single potsherd dated to AD 50–400 was found in the fill, but may have been intrusive, especially considering that the feature was cut by a ditch containing a considerable quantity of Roman pottery.

Roman features

Those features that could be confidently dated by pottery and other artefacts to the Roman period

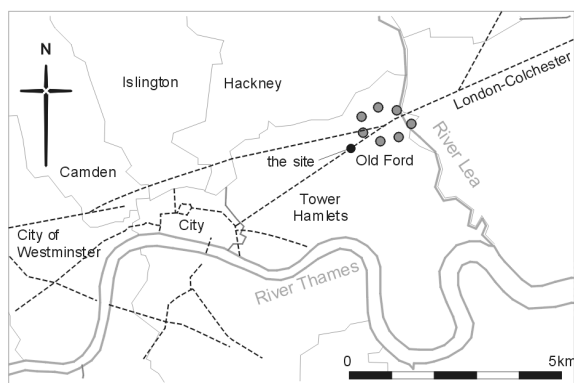


Fig. 3: location of Old Ford in relation to Londinium and major Roman roads

comprised two successive ditches and a series of three poorly defined pits.

The earliest ditch crossed the eastern half of Trench 1 on an ENE–WSW alignment. It was up to 0.73 m deep and had a roughly V-shaped profile, although its south-south-east side was slightly stepped. It produced a considerable quantity of pottery dated to AD 250–400, as well as fragments of tile (fabric group 2815) and a corroded copper-alloy coin. The latter is illegible but probable dates from AD 320–375.

The later ditch crossed the middle of trench 1 on a NNW–SSE alignment, and had been dug at right angles across the earlier ditch. Its probable continuation was found on the same alignment in Trench 2. There were, however, differences between the two stretches. The ditch in trench 1 was 0.73 m wide and 0.34 m deep, and produced pottery dated to AD 250–400, a fragment a blue-green vessel glass, fragments of lava quernstone, a copper-alloy buckle plate dated to AD 250–400 and lower limb and foot bones of ox. The ditch in Trench 2 was 1.70 m wide and 0.50 m deep, and yielded pottery dated to AD 120–250, pieces of tile and fragments of ‘ox-sized’ long bones.

The pits at the north-east end of Trench 2 were 0.25–0.52 m deep. A deposit containing pottery dated to AD 250–400 sealed the pits. One pit contained a single potsherd dated to AD 60–160 and a copper-alloy coin of Antoninus Pius (AD 138–161). The others produced small amounts of pottery dated to AD 120–250 and AD 150–400 respectively.

The pottery

The Roman pottery recovered from the site consists of 235 sherds, from an estimated 212 vessels, weighing 4223 g. It is mostly late Roman in date and reflects intensive activity from about AD 250–400. Reduced wares dominate the assemblage and are represented by 166 sherds (70.6%), weighing 2489 g (58.9%), from an estimated 154 vessels. Conversely, imported wares are relatively rare, especially compared with assemblages from Roman London, although the scarcity of Samian and imported fine wares is not especially exceptional in small late Roman assemblages. However, the absence of Verulamium Region White ware, commonly found in the City, is remarkable. In terms of pottery forms, jars are most common, represented by 186 sherds (79.1%), weighing 2782 g (65.9%), from an estimated 175 vessels, followed by amphorae and bowls (11 sherds each) and bowls/dishes (9 sherds). Other forms include dishes, beakers, jars/beakers and mortaria.

Discussion

The undated ditch may have been prehistoric, but further fieldwork in the immediate vicinity is needed to prove this. Most of the other features, however, may be dated with varying degrees of confidence to the Roman period. The two Roman ditches were respectively aligned roughly parallel and perpendicular to the nearby London to Colchester road, and were initially interpreted as either field boundaries or divisions around buildings.⁷ However, given the proximity of burials it is equally possible that they formed funerary enclosures or defined plots within the ‘Old Ford’ cemetery. Such features have been found in Roman roadside cemeteries immediately outside the City; some apparently began as field boundaries, while others were specifically created to demarcate burial plots.⁸ Many of these were also aligned at right angles or parallel to adjacent Roman roads.

The pottery from the site may also shed light on the nature of activity in the locality during the late Roman period. In particular, the predominance of jars points to activities other than domestic. Indeed, generally the assemblage would fit well with one from a cemetery. For example, jars are the most common form of vessel in London’s

eastern cemetery, where they were often placed with inhumations or reused as cremation containers.⁹ Amphorae were also commonly used for the latter purpose.

In the wider context there is something odd about the putative settlement at Old Ford, which has produced considerable quantities of pottery and coins but has so far yielded remarkably little evidence for buildings. Moreover, the assemblages of animal bone recovered from Roman deposits in the locality show surprisingly little diversity and are overwhelmingly dominated by cattle. It is also peculiar that burials are found in close proximity to features supposedly representing occupation. From this evidence one might argue that many of the finds from Old Ford represent funerary or other ritual activity. Indeed, the discovery of a damaged statue, possibly of Mercury, in a late 3rd- or 4th-century ditch fill at Usher Road, prompted the suggestion that there may have been a shrine at Old Ford.¹⁰

While there can be little doubt that some of the ditches found in the locality are field boundaries,

especially those farther from the road, it is quite possible that others were intended to delineate burial plots. The Roman features and artefacts in the area might indicate the presence of a permanent settlement at Old Ford, but their range is curiously limited and could just as easily be taken as evidence of funerary and ritual activities undertaken by people visiting the area. What is clear is that an up-to-date synthesis and detailed mapping of all the evidence from Old Ford is long overdue. Until this is done Old Ford will remain an enigma.

Acknowledgements

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