

Fig. 1: Middle and Late Bronze Age c. 1800 to c. 750 BC

## Docklands before the Docks: a model of settlement history c. 1800 BC to c. 1800 AD

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The archaeology of Docklands was a comparatively neglected subject until the mid-1980s, perhaps because of difficulties with development control in the area. Since those pioneering days, and especially since the advent of PPG 16, Docklands discoveries have come thick and fast. An attempt may now be made to give some shape to what all these discoveries might mean for the settlement history of the area, a thematic synthesis of the sort I suggested in a brief article for *London Archaeologist* in 1997.<sup>1</sup> Throughout

prehistory and history the Docklands landscape has been moulded by human agency and exploitation, until the natural land surface has almost entirely disappeared and much of the stratigraphy beneath has been destroyed. As the River Thames was progressively confined and controlled, the level of the high tides rose, and its banks were therefore raised in response in a sequence of chronological steps. This process was the critical determinant of land use and settlement along both shores of the lower Thames,

a theme previously explored for a more limited area in an article for *Landscape History* in 1999.<sup>2</sup>

The present article considers the development of the riverside from the Pool of London to Erith and Purfleet at the eastern boundary of Greater London, over a time-span ranging from the Bronze Age to the end of the 18th century. Within this area the river meanders in a course established about 10,000 years ago, between terraces of flood-plain gravel to the north and south, laid down by earlier river

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regimes at about 5 m OD. The Rivers Lea, Roding (Barking Creek), Beam and Ingrebourne (Rainham Creek), and Mar Dyke join it as tributaries from the north, and the Rivers Ravensbourne (Deptford Creek), Cray and Darent from the south. Five broad chronological phases of settlement have been distinguished, each of a different type, location and function; these phases cut across some of the more usual period boundaries to suggest a series of step-changes in settlement type. The earlier phases of this predictive model draw upon the archaeological evidence reported in numerous evaluation reports, desk-based assessments and wider area studies undertaken by a number of archaeological contractors and consultants since 1990. The fieldwork has been reported in the annual *London Archaeologist* round-ups (to which detailed reference is not made here), and the sum of current knowledge in the SMR was summarised in the *The Archaeology of Greater London* in 2000.<sup>3</sup> For the later phases, documentary evidence becomes available from the medieval period onwards, and there are reasonably detailed maps of parts of Docklands from the late 17th century onwards.

### **Phase 1: Middle and Late Bronze Age c. 1800 to c. 750 BC (Fig. 1)**

In the later prehistoric periods the edges of the flood-plain gravel terraces were clearly visible to the north and south of the Thames; marshes stretched between them and enclosed the course of the river, with islands of sand and gravel rising above the marshland surface. Peat layers derived from the marshes are largely confined to the alternating north and south peninsulas of the Lower Thames, such as Wapping, Bermondsey and Rotherhithe, the Isle of Dogs, the Greenwich Peninsula (the site of the Millennium Dome), the Royal Docks and Plumstead Marshes. At the south end of the Isle of Dogs, the Greenwich Peninsula and Woolwich, excavation and borehole evidence has shown that the surface of the peat lies at 0 m OD or below. This peat built up during the Neolithic period and the Bronze Age, when the tidal head was at the Isle of Dogs. There is a high potential for the survival of wooden artefacts and structures in its waterlogged soil, and

Neolithic landscapes may be preserved beneath it.

Evidence of Neolithic and early Bronze Age occupation has been found on the low gravel islands along the southern shore of the Thames in the Southwark area, and activities continued here into the Iron Age.<sup>4</sup> At Yabsley Street in Blackwall a Neolithic burial and an early Bronze Age hearth were found on a sand and gravel bar buried beneath alluvium. The most likely locations of the first mainland settlements in the model area were on the dry ground of the terrace edges at convenient access points into the marshlands, established in the middle Bronze Age when the trees were cleared from the gravel terraces. The terrace edge settlements probably lay at locations like early Wapping (on the Highway) and Poplar on the north side; Plaistow, East Ham, Barking and Rainham east of the Lea; and Bermondsey and Charlton on the south side, but must have been subject to subsequent settlement shifts. Between Plumstead and Erith the stiff clays and pebbles of the Woolwich Beds on the terrace edge may have been less attractive to settlement.

Wooden trackways and platforms of the middle Bronze Age (c. 1500–1200 BC) have been excavated in the peat strata of the Thames flood-plain on the Isle of Dogs; to the east of the River Lea at Silvertown, Beckton, Barking, Dagenham and Rainham;<sup>5</sup> and south of the Thames at Bramcote Green and elsewhere in Bermondsey (dated to c. 1740–1530 BC),<sup>6</sup> Erith, and a middle Bronze Age alder log platform at Bellot Street in Greenwich. The trackways were a way into the marshlands for seasonal grazing, fishing and fowling, and linked terrace edge settlements to those on the gravel islands. The Bramcote Green trackway provided access from the terrace edge to the east end of Bermondsey eyot. Some of the trackways may also have led to ceremonial platforms for the deposition of precious objects into the water, as at Flag Fen.

The settlements of this phase have remained largely invisible to archaeological investigation, perhaps buried beneath layers of alluvium or underneath later settlement zones; future targeted evaluations may

produce evidence for their locations. There is evidence of contemporary agriculture in the ard marks found at several Thames-side sites in Southwark. Agriculture is thought to have intensified in the late Bronze Age, making the control and division of arable land of greater importance; strung along the terrace edge were barrows and burnt mounds. From the late Bronze Age onwards the water levels rose. The trackways were abandoned and a series of flood deposits of grey and brown clays sealed the peat layer, spreading up the river to beyond Westminster, but on the gravel terraces the organised divisions of the agricultural landscape continued.

### **Phase 2: Iron Age, Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon c. 750 BC to c. 1000 AD (Fig. 2)**

The locations of settlement now moved to the low river cliffs where the Thames and its tributaries cut into the edge of the gravel terrace, at Ratcliff, Barking and Purfleet on the north side, and Deptford, Greenwich, Woolwich and Erith on the south side. These settlements probably originated in the late Iron Age or the Romano-British period, and functioned as river ports. Along the terrace edges Iron Age and Romano-British farms exploited the differing soil types for mixed farming, as at a site near Rainham Town football ground, where there was a possible round-house, and the defended rectangular enclosure at Charlton, both with continuity into the early Roman period. Romano-British cemeteries occur in similar locations. The model area was framed by the main Roman roads running to Colchester and Canterbury, crossing the Rivers Lea and Ravensbourne on alignments which are now uncertain. The sea level fell 1.5 m from the late 1st century to the mid-3rd century and then rose again, which may account for the evidence of Roman occupation on the outer edges of the marshes on the west side of the Isle of Dogs in the 1st and 2nd centuries, and at Crossness in Plumstead Marshes in the 3rd and 4th centuries.<sup>7</sup> The level of the 2nd- to 4th-century Thames foreshore at Shadwell was 1.67–1.97 m OD. The river ports probably increased in importance with the decline of the port of *Londinium* in the 4th century,

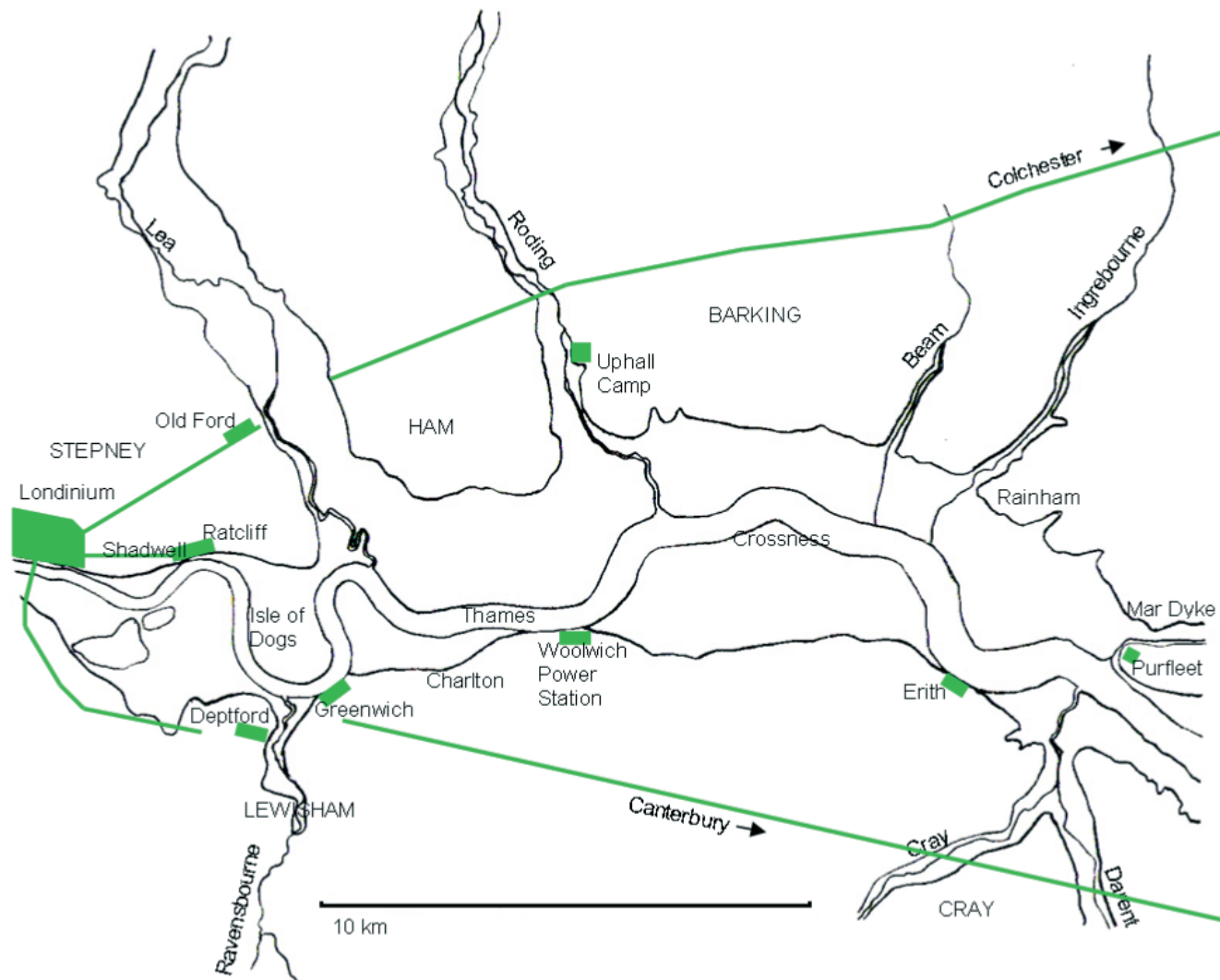


Fig. 2: Iron Age, Roman and Anglo-Saxon c. 750 BC to c. 1000 AD

serving the estates and markets of the surrounding countryside.

These estates may have been utilised continuously from the Iron Age or the Romano-British period onwards. If so, they survived the collapse of the infrastructure of the Roman province, and the subsequent regeneration of woodland on both sides of the estuary. The later estate boundaries on the north side of the Thames ran along its tributaries, while those on the south side followed the watersheds. This implies a fundamental difference of origin, perhaps within distinct political units which may have originally been organised around late Iron Age *oppida* to the north and south of the Thames. These *oppida* might include the sites at Uphall Camp in Barking and at Woolwich Power Station, which were both occupied late into the Roman period.<sup>8</sup>

In the middle and late Saxon periods the river cliff settlements were subsidiary elements of the large multiple estates Stepney, Ham and Barking on the north shore, and Lewisham and Cray on the south shore, governed by both ecclesiastical and secular lords. They still functioned primarily as outlets to the trade of the river in the form of beach markets.<sup>9</sup> The inland settlements of the estates served different functions, such as administrative centres, dairy and cattle farms, and the foci of summer pastures at the far end of transhumance droveways.

### Phase 3: Medieval c. 1000 to c. 1550 AD (Fig. 3)

By the 10th and 11th centuries the large middle Saxon estates were breaking up, as smaller land-units were carved out of them to grant by charters to monasteries

and royal officials, although some episcopal estates survived the process of sub-division. The new smaller estates evolved into manors, as recorded in the *Domesday Book* survey of 1086, the basic medieval units of organisation of the landscape for agriculture and settlement. All the Thameside manors downstream from London engaged in a long struggle to reclaim the marshes from the river by systems of embankments and ditches. As the water level rose further in the late Saxon and early medieval periods, river banks were constructed along the shores of the Thames and its tributaries. These were earthen embankments with drainage ditches to the rear, emptying their waters through sluice-gates into the rivers at low tide.

By the end of the Middle Ages, the river banks had been raised to about 2.7 m OD. In the 14th and 15th

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centuries they were often breached, and behind them frequent flooding of the fields deposited layers of clay up to about 1.8 m OD. This exacerbated the effects of the 14th-century agricultural decline, the Black Death and the later visitations of the plague. Consequently, direct farming by the lords of the manors was abandoned. By now, small industrial settlements had been established at several points along the river banks in the west of the area like Wapping-on-the-Woze, Rotherhithe and Limehouse, based around mills, shipyards, limekilns and wharves; pottery and tile production was established at the older settlements of Poplar and Woolwich. These places served the needs of the city of London for foodstuffs and building materials, rather than the requirements of the old estate and manorial centres.

At the end of the 15th century, the establishment of Greenwich Palace as a royal residence intruded another economic focus into the settlement pattern. In Henry VIII's reign Deptford became the home of a cattle farm at Sayes Court to supply the royal household through the King's Slaughterhouse on the western bank of Deptford Creek, and the King's Dog Kennel to house Henry's buckhounds; the royal hunting grounds extended eastward to Woolwich. Satellite courtier houses also appeared in the orbit of the palace.<sup>10</sup>

### Phase 4: The Waterfront c. 1550 to c. 1700 AD (Fig. 4)

In the late 16th and early 17th centuries the three preceding zones of settlement increased in population and were linked by continuous chains of

development along the waterfront. The pivotal decades were the 1570s and 1580s, when strips of housing spread eastwards from London along the embankment of Wapping-on-the-Wose to Shadwell and Ratcliff; by the early 18th century they had advanced to Limehouse and Poplar, and along the shore of Rotherhithe to Deptford and Greenwich.<sup>11</sup> These new linear suburbs were full of small industries ancillary to the shipbuilding and maritime trades of the Thames, supporting the requirements of London as a national and increasingly imperial capital.<sup>12</sup>

Wharves also extended eastwards along the waterfronts in the late 16th century, claiming land from the river with dumps of crushed chalk from the lime kilns, crushed brick, clay, gravel and silt, laid directly on the river silts behind timber revetments. A series of

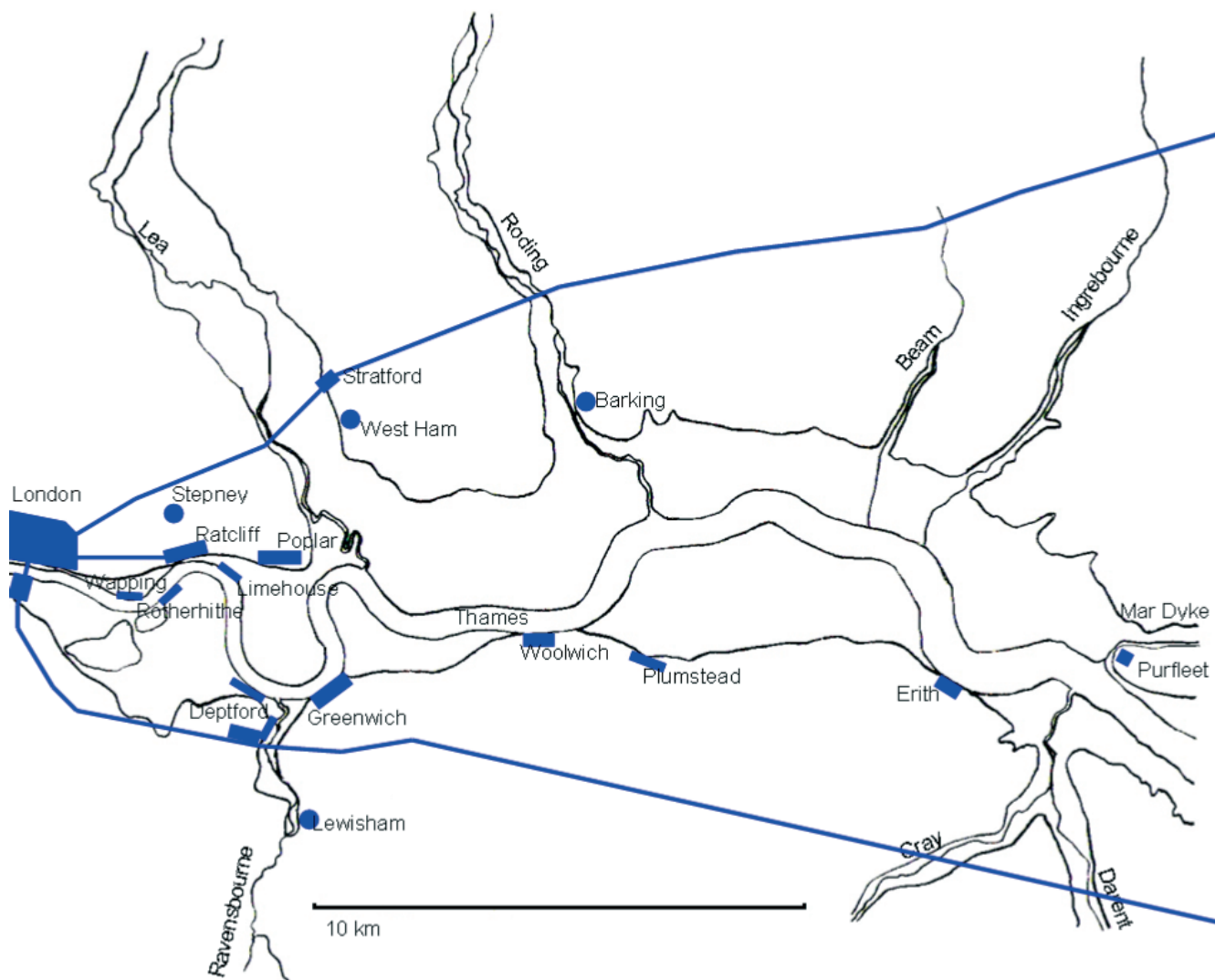


Fig. 3: Medieval c. 1000 to c. 1550 AD

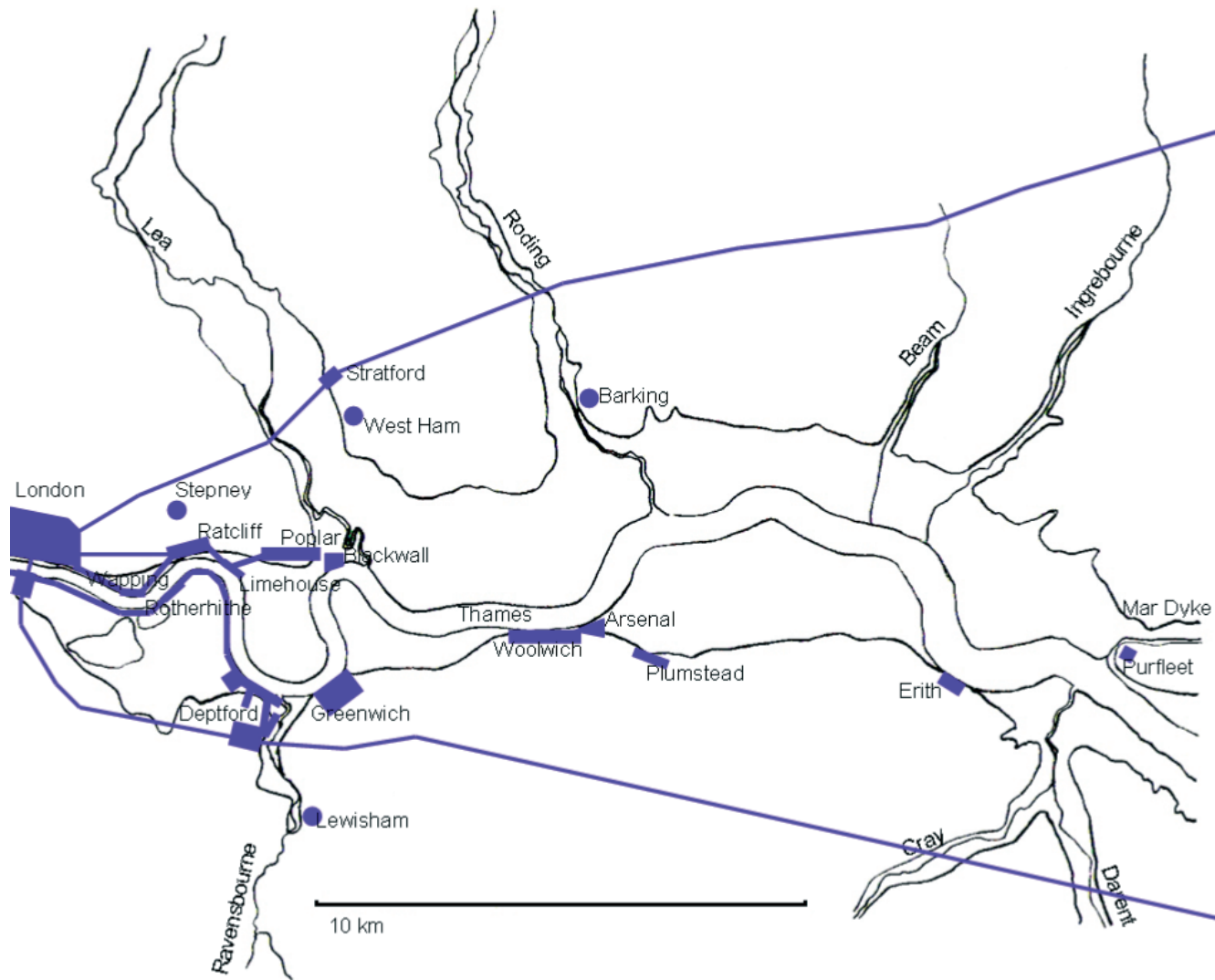


Fig. 4: the Waterfront c. 1550 to c. 1700 AD

wharves was created clear of the high tide level at about 3.5 m OD, and these were subsequently raised in stages, counter-acting the rising waters of the 17th century and advancing further into the river. To their rear the embankments were also successively raised and the ditch systems behind them maintained. This maintenance was overseen by Commissions of Sewers, whose courts ordered repairs and fined those who did not comply.

The presence of the royal court at Greenwich initiated another economic development on the Thames with the establishment of the Royal Dockyards at Deptford and Woolwich by Henry VIII in 1513, with a subsidiary naval storehouse at Erith. This stimulated the expansion of these settlements as the Dockyards grew into major industries, which continued to function until 1869. They were followed in the early 17th century by the commercial shipyards of

the East India Company at Deptford and Blackwall.<sup>13</sup> These establishments needed defences against enemy attacks up the estuary. A series of forts and batteries was built to counter the Spanish Armada in 1588, downstream from Blackwall and the Greenwich Peninsula, and fortification was extended in the Anglo-Dutch wars of the mid-17th century, as at Prince Rupert's triangular fort on the site of Woolwich Arsenal. The pattern and density of settlement in Docklands was therefore influenced by factors well beyond the estuary. Through their wharves and shipyards, the riverside settlements were now connected to world-wide trade and empire.

#### Phase 5: Settlement on drained land c. 1600 to c. 1800 AD (Fig. 5)

Behind the river banks, the pasture lands formerly reclaimed from the marshes were levelled up with dump

layers in the early 17th century, stabilised with driven stakes and drained by timber-revetted channels, as at Limehouse and Wood Wharf in Greenwich. Gardens and orchards were initially established on the raised ground, and the reclaimed areas were crossed by causeways. In the late 17th and early 18th centuries they were infilled with houses and gardens built for Londoners of all social classes. As the zones of settlement expanded and the density increased, new houses were built and old ones subdivided into tenements.<sup>14</sup> In the 18th and 19th centuries these zones were extended again to cover the former arable lands. Housing was interspersed with light industry, but gradually heavier industries expanding eastward from London took them over.

The first Docks were commenced at the West India Dock on the Isle of Dogs in 1800, and the transformation of the

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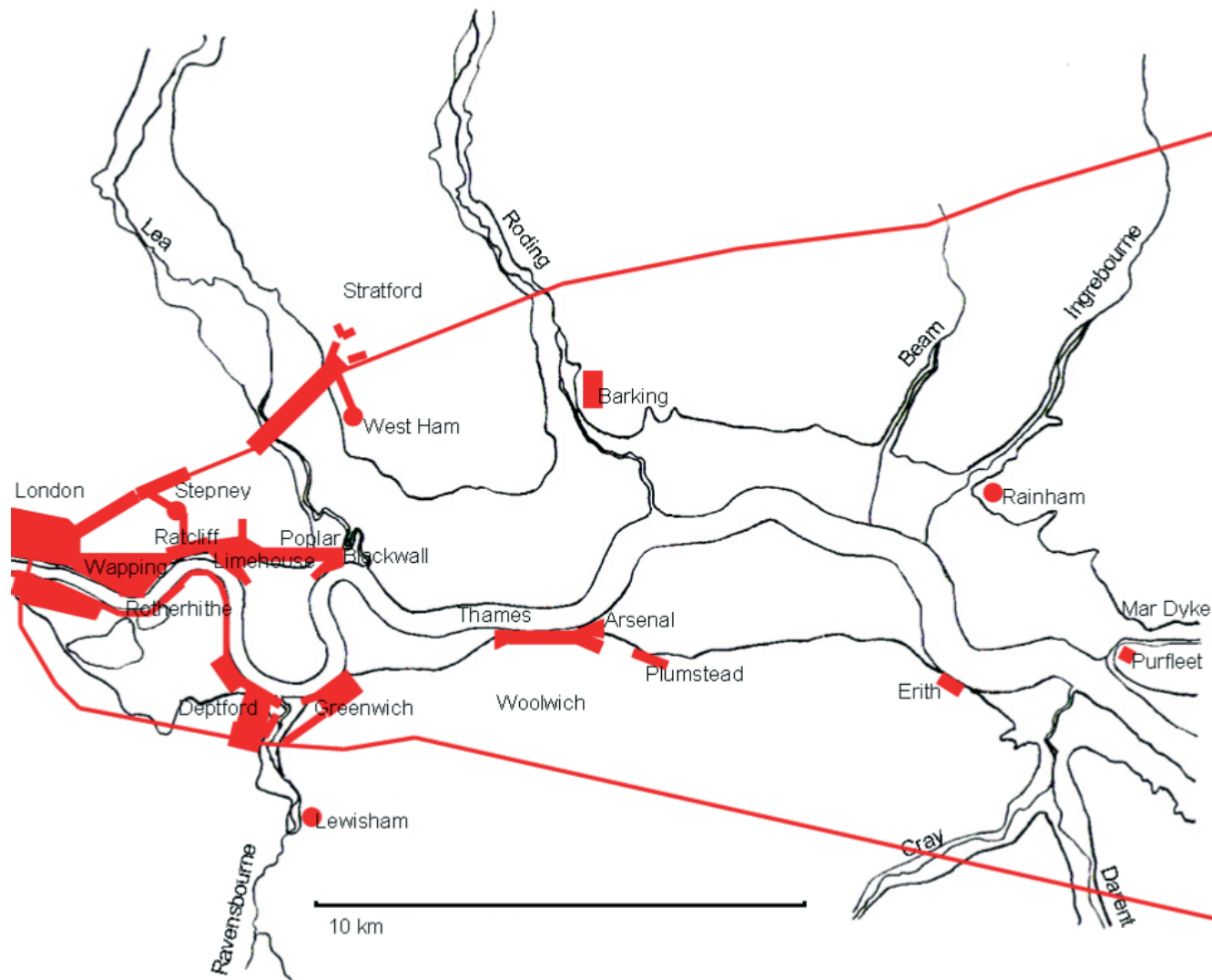


Fig. 5: settlement on drained land c. 1600 to c. 1800 AD

landscape began again. In the 19th century docks were dug across several of the marsh peninsulas, creating a second chain of waterways, to form the Port of London at the heart of the British Empire. Associated warehouses, factories and workers' houses spread to cover the almost the entire land surface of the model area.

The continuum of development described above can be seen as a predictive model for the settlement history of the Thames and its tributaries below London, determined by its drift geology and winding course. This model is consciously ambitious, impressionistic and succinct, and therefore inevitably crude. It is hoped

that others may provide a process of modification, sophistication and nuance, based on continuing desk-based and excavation projects in the lower Thames area. By this process a framework may become established for a strategy of historical and non-intrusive archaeological research here and in other locations along the estuary.

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