

Fig. 1: site location

# New evidence for the London–Colchester Roman road and adjacent settlement at Bow / Old Ford

Johanna Vuolteenaho  
with Ian Betts, Alan Pipe and Beth Richardson

## Introduction

Evidence for part of the London–Colchester Roman road and contemporary roadside features was uncovered during archaeological excavations by Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) in advance of redevelopment at 568a Roman Road, Bow.<sup>1</sup> The site lies on the south side of Roman Road, within an area of archaeological importance as defined by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets (Fig 1).

The archaeological investigation began with an evaluation in May–June 2005, when three trenches (1–3) and an additional area (A) were excavated. Only post-medieval features and garden soil were found above natural brickearth on the south side of the site. In the northern part of the site, however, Trench 1 and Area A revealed a sequence of Roman strata close to the modern street frontage. This work was followed by an excavation in August–September, when further evidence for

Roman activity was found in adjacent areas (B and C).

## Archaeological background

The site is located about 700 m west of the present course of the River Lea and lies on Taplow river terrace gravel capped by brickearth. It is about 3.75 km north-east of Roman London and it slightly overlapped the southern part of the London–Colchester Roman road. Evidence for the road had previously



Fig. 2: Early Roman features associated with the London-Colchester road

been found at a cluster of sites just over 400 m to the east<sup>2</sup> at Lefevre Road, Appian Way and Parnell Road, and at 510–518 Roman Road c 170 m to the west.<sup>3</sup> Only the central part of the road was found at the latter, but complete cross-sections have been recorded at sites to the east, where it began as a ‘three-track’ highway comprising a central gravel road on a brickearth agger, flanked on either side by slightly lower auxiliary tracks.<sup>4</sup> At one site it was observed that the central road was deeply rutted, whereas the auxiliary tracks were not. This prompted the suggestion that the central road was principally used by heavy and fast-moving vehicles, while pedestrians and livestock kept to the adjacent tracks. The archaeological evidence shows that this important road was probably made soon after the conquest and remodelled on several occasions during the Roman period. For example, by the mid- to late 2nd century the south track had been raised and shifted slightly to the north so that it was incorporated with the central road.<sup>5</sup> The route continued in use during the medieval period, and today it is perpetuated by the B119 (Roman Road).

A settlement may have extended alongside the road, but the evidence for it mainly comprises gullies, ditches, pits, gravel surfaces and artefacts mostly of late 3rd- and 4th-century date. Although a considerable quantity of building material has been recovered from sites at Old Ford, few structural

features have been found.<sup>6</sup> Roman ditches further back from the road may have been field boundaries. In addition, Roman burials have been found widely scattered to the north and south of the road, including several of high status in stone coffins.<sup>7</sup>

**Prehistoric to early Roman?**

The earliest activity on site consisted of an apparently random cluster of postholes and shallow pits cut into natural brickearth on the east side of Area C (not illustrated). None of the features produced any datable artefacts. The only clear evidence for prehistoric

activity comprised four residual struck flints of possible Bronze Age date.

**Early Roman (c AD 50–160)**

The undated features described above were sealed by a substantial layer of re-deposited brickearth, which extended across the north end of the site, thinning out towards the south in Trench 1. The brickearth was dated by pottery to 100 BC–AD 100, and may have been spoil thrown up during quarrying for gravel, or have been the remnants of a base for the road. No evidence for substantial gravel-quarrying was found on the site, but large gravel quarry pits have been recorded elsewhere in the area.<sup>8</sup>

Subsequent early Roman features may also be associated with the construction and use of the road. They included a substantial roadside ditch that had been dug into the re-deposited brickearth at the north end of the site (Fig. 2). It produced pottery dated to 100 BC–AD 100. Immediately north of the ditch a thin gravel surface had been laid over a thin layer of brickearth make-up. A thin spread of pea grit had either been spread over or had accumulated on the pebbled surface. A similar gravel surface was recorded in the north-east corner of Area B (not illustrated). The metallised surfaces probably represented part of the south track of the Roman road previously found at Lefevre Road<sup>9</sup> and Roman Road/Parnell Road.<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 3: Early Roman features next to and encroaching upon the road

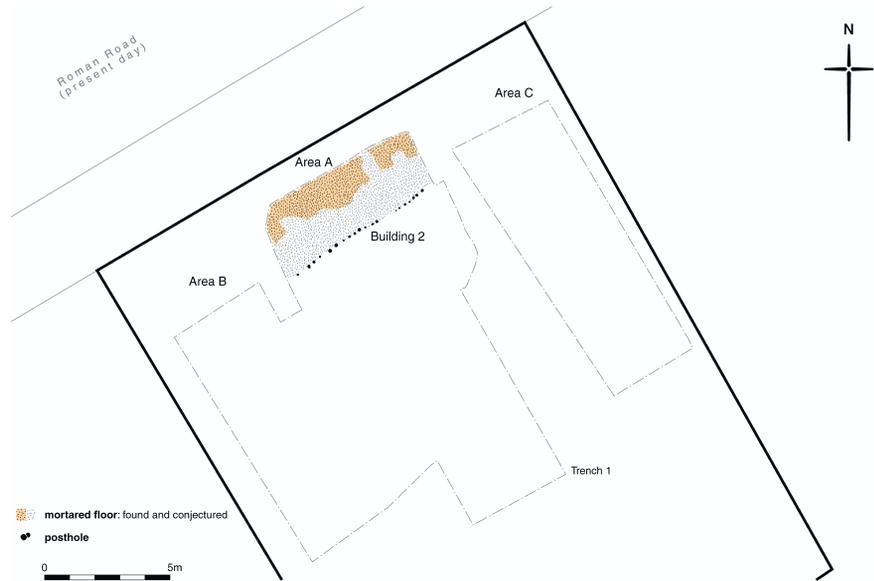
An external brickearth surface extended across the northern part of the site in Areas A and B, and an isolated island of possibly the same surface also survived in Trench 1 (Fig. 3). The surface appeared to extend over and partially cover the fill of the roadside ditch, indicating that the ditch, and possibly also the south track, had fallen out of use by this time. The brickearth was probably laid down to level the ground on the north and east sides of a structure represented by a row of postholes and an adjacent drip gully, both aligned parallel to the road (Fig. 3, Building 1). Several of the postholes yielded pottery dated to AD 70–80.

Towards the end of the early Roman period the roadside settlement apparently shifted slightly northwards and encroached on the road, for a building was erected on top of the south track. The remains of the building comprised a row of postholes, marking the position of a wall aligned parallel to the road, with a mortar floor on its north side (Fig. 4, Building 2). However, the building apparently only stood for a short time, and soon after its demolition a ditch (not illustrated) was dug through its remains. The ditch, which probably marked a boundary, was at a right-angle to the road. It produced pottery dated from AD 40–100. The ditch fill and levelling dumps sealing the remains of the building also produced a few slightly sandy orange and brown fragments of burnt daub, one of which has a wattle impression.

**Mid-Roman (c AD 160–250)**

A large part of the site was levelled during the late 2nd/early 3rd centuries, when all previous features and structures were sealed by dumps that extended across Areas A and B and into Trench 1. By this time all trace of the south track had disappeared from the site, although it may have survived as a narrower track to the north or, as found at Lefevre Road Estate, it could have shifted slightly north to be amalgamated with the central road.<sup>11</sup>

Subsequently, several pits and gullies were dug across the northern and western part of the site, and a cluster of postholes indicated the construction of at least one timber structure (Fig. 5). The latter was less



**Fig. 4: Early Roman building**

substantial than the early Roman buildings.

A small kiln or oven lay just over 5 m to the south of the structure. It was made of tile fragments, including *tegulae* and bricks, and mud bricks set in daub (Fig. 6). The latter had been scorched and baked during the use of the structure. The structure was sampled for archaeomagnetic dating, but it had been badly disturbed by modern activity and the results of the survey were inconclusive.<sup>12</sup> However, the building material used in its construction dates from AD 120–250 and the pottery from associated fire debris from AD 150–400.

The eastern part of the site appears to have been an open area at this time with very little activity. Only two features, an L-shaped gully and a north-south gully were attributed to the mid-Roman period in the whole of Area C.

**Late Roman (c AD 250–400)**

During the late Roman period the layout of the site changed, and there appears to have been a significant increase in activity. All the earlier structures and features were levelled and sealed by extensive external dumps. Pits were dug from this new level, one of which produced a large quantity of roof tile and brick together with smaller amount of building stone, a piece of combed box-flue, a red ceramic *tessera* and possibly part of a

*pedalis pila* brick. The building stone included a piece of fine-grained, laminated sandstone with a partly worn surface that indicated its use as a paving slab. The use of such sandstone in London occurred mainly in the second half of the 4th century, when fresh supplies of ceramic tile were generally no longer readily available (although the kiln discovered at St-Martin-in-the-Fields, Westminster, indicates that some tiles were still being made at either the end of the 4th century or the beginning of the 5th century).<sup>13</sup> The presence of the box-flue and *tessera* suggests that at least some of the material came from a masonry building with hypocaust heating and tessellated floor.

A series of gravel surfaces, probably for a yard, were then laid over the levelling dumps and pits (Fig. 7). Finds associated with the gravel surface suggest deposition between AD 250 and 400.

Several rubbish pits were dug through the gravel surface. They appear to have been used mainly for disposal of domestic refuse, but they also contained discarded building material. One produced a piece of a Purbeck Marble paving slab (31 mm thick), probably from a high-status building, and a complete *pila* brick from a hypocaust heating system. The pits also produced paving made from fine-grained sandstone and a fragment of a slightly curved tile that could have been a ridge tile used to cover a roof crest.

## OLD FORD EXCAVATION



**Fig. 5: Mid Roman features**

The latter is of particular interest as such tiles are very rarely found in Roman Britain, and only one is previously known from London.<sup>14</sup>

Evidence for late Roman timber structures exists in the form of a cluster of postholes and a solitary beam slot in the south-west corner of Area A (not illustrated).

Boundaries changed noticeably during the late Roman period too. A substantial boundary ditch was aligned at a right-angle to the road (Fig. 7). It was contemporary with the pits and has been dated to AD 270–400. Its fill, like many of the late Roman pits, also produced combed box-flue tiles<sup>15</sup> derived from a hypocaust heating system. A smaller gully on a similar alignment lay to the west.

The features were covered by a soil horizon, possibly indicating late Roman cultivation and agricultural activity. A number of stakeholes and postholes (not illustrated) cut into the soil in Trench 1, and may have represented fences or even small structures. They contained several coins, the latest of which has been dated to AD 340–365, suggesting that the features dated from the second half of the 4th century.

### Animal bones

A total of 350 fragments of animal bones was recovered by hand and wet-sieving from the Roman strata. Most of the identified fragments were of domesticated species – chiefly cattle,

with some sheep/goat and pig. These mainly came from good and moderate meat-bearing parts, although a few foot bones were also present, and they displayed considerable evidence of butchery. The assemblage also included a few fragments of horse and dog, a single rat vertebra and 11 fragments of red deer antler. There was no definite evidence for bone working and none of the antler fragments bore tool marks. The absence of horn-cores of both cattle and sheep/goat suggests that there

was no preliminary horn-working on site and that skulls and attached horn-cores were removed for further processing elsewhere.

### Discussion

The excavation provided further evidence for the alignment and early history of the London–Colchester Roman road. In particular, it shows that the south track of the road and the adjacent ditch may have lasted only a few decades. Indeed, they may have fallen out of use during the late 1st century. This suggests that the track soon became surplus to requirements, which in turn suggests that it may have been intended primarily for a short-term purpose, such as facilitating the construction of the central road.

The excavation also uncovered still relatively rare evidence for Roman structures at Old Ford. Of particular note were the remains of the early Roman Building 2, which would appear to have been of moderately high status. These and other features, such as rubbish pits, earthen and gravel surfaces and a kiln/oven, seemingly provide evidence for a small permanent roadside settlement at Old Ford. Moreover, the stone and ceramic building debris from the site, including,



**Fig. 6: mid-Roman oven or kiln**

Purbeck Marble and sandstone paving stones, *pila* bricks and a keyed box flue, might suggest the presence of high-status masonry buildings in the locality. However, this material could have come from more distant locations, for example, Shadwell (3 km to the south-east) or *Londinium*. Other building material probably derives from the various timber roadside buildings found on the site. Nevertheless, the dated sequence of structural features on the site indicates the presence of buildings in the mid-1st to mid-2nd centuries and structures in the mid-2nd to 4th centuries. Most of the pottery from the site dates from the latter.

The nature and extent of the putative settlement at Old Ford is still poorly understood and there is a need for a detailed synthesis of all the archaeological evidence from the area. Overall, the assemblages of artefacts and faunal remains from sites in the area, including the one described here, display remarkably little diversity. It has been argued that some of the evidence could derive from funerary and ritual activities,<sup>16</sup> including feasting. It has also been suggested that there may have been a cattle market at Old Ford, and that the London–Colchester road may have been used to transport food from Essex and East Anglia to *Londinium*. This would provide another explanation for the considerable amount of cattle bone and the numerous coins found in Roman contexts at Old Ford. It would also fit

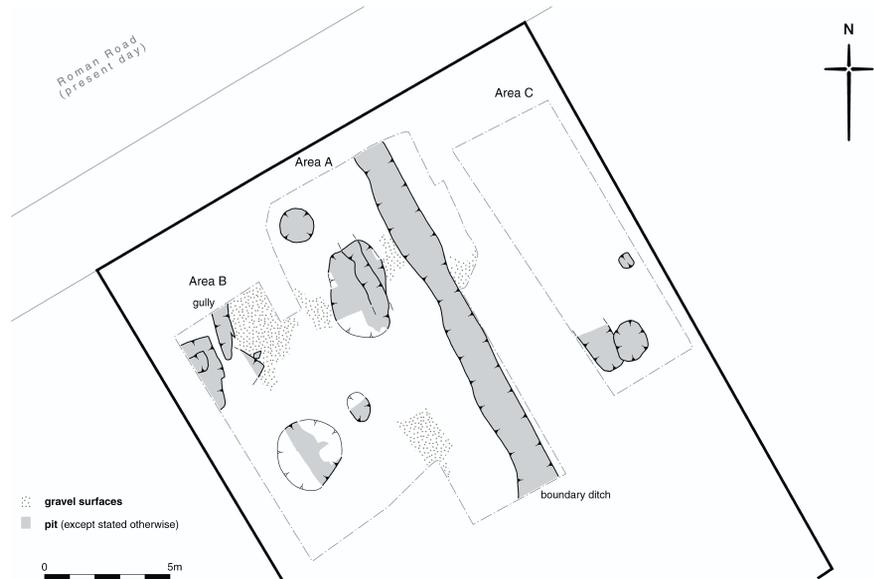


Fig. 7: Late Roman features

well with the suggestion that the late Roman gravel yard on the site may have been the surface of a holding pen<sup>17</sup> for livestock bound for the market. However, the quantity of faunal remains from the site was not large enough to suggest the butchering and trading of cattle and beef on a commercial scale (see above).

**Acknowledgements**

MOLA would like to thank Quadrillion Construction for commissioning the archaeological work on behalf of Toynbee Housing Association, and David Divers of the Greater London Archaeology Advisory Service, English

Heritage, for monitoring the on-site work. Thanks also go to the MOLA staff who worked on the site and the specialists who contributed to the post-excavation assessment and publication. The building material was assessed by Ian Betts, the pottery by Beth Richardson (excavation) and Rubert Featherby (evaluation), faunal remains by Alan Pipe, plant remains by Kate Roberts and accessioned finds by Nicola Powell. The photography for the article is by Maggie Cox and drawings are by Carlos Lemos. The author would also like to thank David Bowsher, MOLA post-excavation manager, and Bob Cowie for all their help and advice during this project.

1. National Grid Reference 536780 183403; site code ROB05. The summary in *LA 11*, supp 2 (2006) 49 describes only the roadside features.  
 2. The road is actually closer to a SW–NE alignment, but for the purposes of this article its alignment is taken to be E–W. This accords with the approach taken by the authors cited below.  
 3. H. Sheldon 'Excavations at Lefevre Road, Old Ford, E3' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 23, part 1 (1971) 42–77; H. Sheldon 'Excavations at Parnell Road and Appian Road, Old Ford, E3' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 23, part 2 (1972) 101–47; P.S. Mills 'Excavations at Roman Road/ Parnell Road, Old Ford; London E3' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 35 (1984) 25–36. For a recent synthesis of the evidence see G. Brown 'Archaeological evidence for the Roman London to Colchester road between Aldgate and Harold Hill' in J. Clark, J. Cotton, J. Hall,

R. Sherris and H. Swain (eds) *Londinium and beyond*, CBA Res Rep 156 (2008) 82–9; B Wallower 'Roman road in a railway cutting' *London Archaeol* 11, no. 9 (2007) 248–50.  
 4. Mills *op cit* fn 3, 26.  
 5. Brown *op cit* fn 3, 85.  
 6. For an alternative view see T. Wilson, R. Cowie and R. Symonds 'Field boundaries or funerary enclosures – a new look at Old Ford' *London Archaeol* 11, no. 1 (2005) 20–23.  
 7. W.J. Owen, I. Schwab and H. Sheldon 'Roman Burials from Old Ford, E3, February and May 1972' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 24 (1973) 135–45.  
 8. K. Pitt *Armagh Road, Bow, London Borough of Tower Hamlets: an archaeological excavation* (1991) unpub. MOL rep.  
 9. Sheldon *op cit* fn 3.

10. Mills *op cit* fn 3.  
 11. Brown *op cit* fn 3, 85.  
 12. GeoQuest Associates 2005 *Archaeomagnetic analysis of context 550 at 568A Roman Road, Bow, London*, unpub. GeoQuest Associates rep.  
 13. I.M. Betts *Roman Building material: south terrace excavations, St-Martin-in-the-Fields (SMD01)* (2006) unpub MOL rep. See also S. Unger 'Red or yellow? The changing colour of Roman London's roof-line' *London Archaeol* 12, no. 4 (2009) 107–113.  
 14. I. M. Betts *Roman Building material: Blossom's Inn, 30 Gresham Street (GTH01)* (2006) unpub. MOL rep.  
 15. Likely to date from the period AD 100–160, and so derive from a building much earlier than the ditch.  
 16. Wilson et al *op cit* fn 6, 22–23.  
 17. D. Bowsher *pers comm*.