



Fig. 1: location of the sites at Abbey Road Station (AYF08) and the Bakers Row Scheduled Ancient Monument (SFY07) and the archaeological trenches

View from a cesspit: a late Georgian household in West Ham Abby

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Introduction

In March 2009 a brick cesspit was excavated by a team from the Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) during the construction of Abbey Road Station on the Stratford International Railway extension of the Docklands Light Railway (Figs 1 and 2).¹ Pottery associated with its construction dated to 1770–1800, whilst objects recovered from within it indicate that it probably fell out of use sometime in the 1820s. The cesspit was discovered in Bakers Row, on the

western edge of a Scheduled Ancient Monument – the site of the Cistercian abbey of St Mary Stratford Langthorne² – and had probably been used by occupants of the former abbey gatehouse, which lay some 20m to the east and was not demolished until about 1825.³ It is of particular interest because it contained a large assemblage of household items, probably discarded in the final clearance of the building.

Remains of the gatehouse were discovered during excavations by the

Passmore Edwards Museum in the mid-1970s, which revealed a two-room extension abutting the north side of the original building.⁴ For many years the remains were mistakenly thought to represent a modest building, possibly the abbey guesthouse, comprising at ground level just two rooms.⁵ The identification of the building as the Great Gate (gatehouse) of the abbey was first made through map regression analysis,⁶ but was confirmed in 2008 by excavation, when the remains were

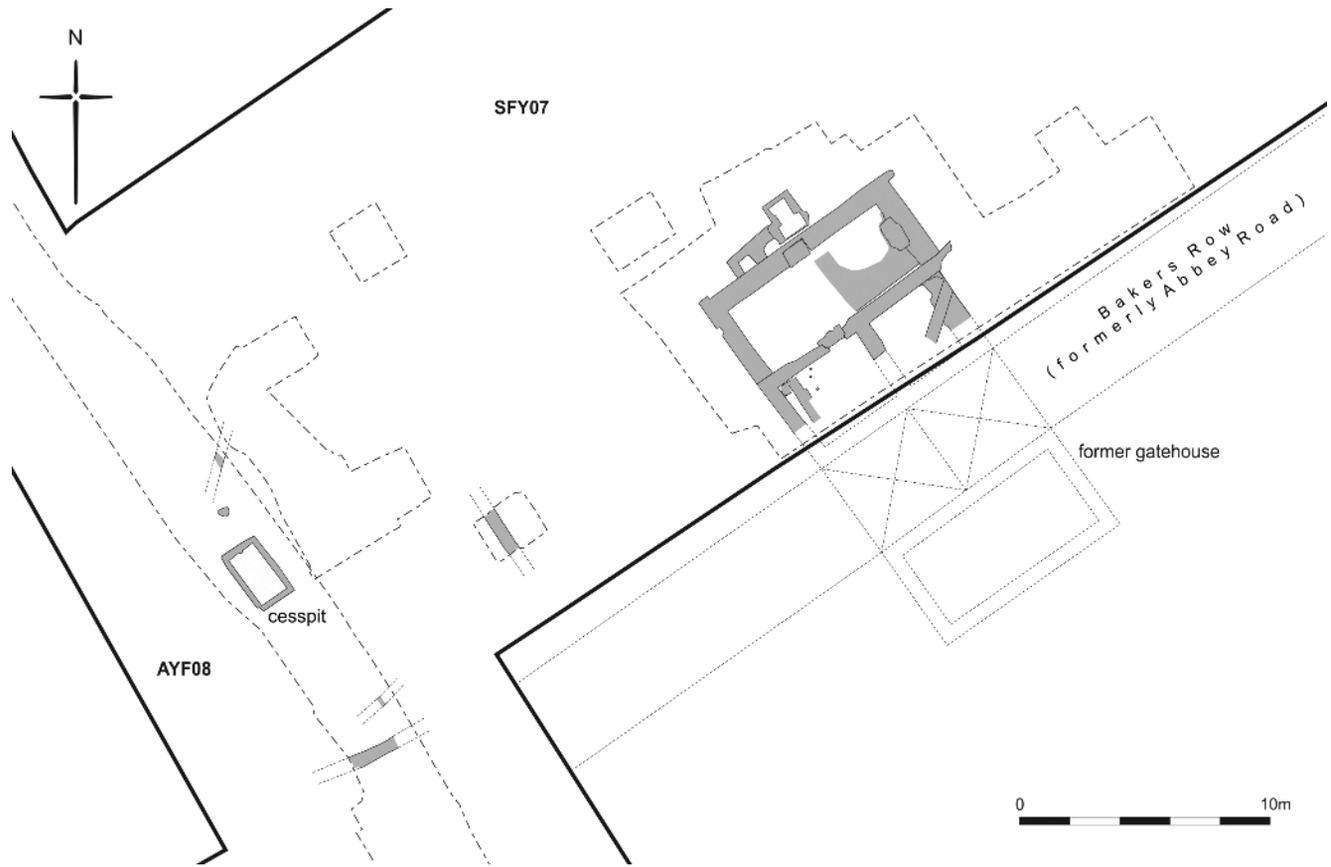


Fig. 2: plan showing the cesspit, the former gatehouse and nearby contemporary features

uncovered again, along with part of the original north range of the gatehouse to the south.⁷ After the suppression of the abbey in 1538 the building became a dwelling in the hamlet of West Ham Abby (as named on 18th-century maps), which lay about 400m south-west of the village of West Ham.

The cesspit

The cesspit was rectangular in plan, with internal dimensions of 2.18m (7' 2") by 1.18m (3' 10½"). Both its base and sides were built from reused bricks (dated to 1500–1666) bonded in

a buff sandy mortar. There were very few whole bricks. Most of those in the floor were half and three-quarter bats, while those in the walls, which survived to a maximum height of 0.86m above the base, were mainly half bats.

The cesspit contained two distinct fills: a lower fill of crumbly dark greyish brown silt, [171], which was up to 0.25m thick and covered the entire base of the cesspit, and an upper fill of paler sandy silt, [109]. In addition to food waste, both contained much building debris, as well as numerous household objects mainly dated to the

late 18th and early 19th century. It is likely that many objects deposited with the upper fill (probably during a household clearance) would have sunk into what would have been the relatively soft effluent at the bottom of the cesspit (the lower fill). This may account for the presence of sherds from four pottery vessels in both fills.

The lower fill almost certainly represented the final use of the structure as a cesspit, for a sample taken from it contained moderate amounts of food waste, some of which was mineralised probably due to the presence of phosphates in faecal matter. However, preservation was generally quite poor, which together with the shallow depth of the fill might indicate that the cesspit was only in use for a short time after its last emptying and was not continuously waterlogged. The upper fill appears to represent the abandonment and filling of the cesspit.

Butchery and food consumption

The sample from the lower fill produced a range of plant remains including fig (*Ficus carica*) that had probably been imported as dried fruit (Table 1). Other fruits noted were apple/pear (*Malus/Pyrus* spp.), gooseberry/

Latin name	common name	preservation	quantity
<i>Potentilla/Fragaria</i> spp.	-	mineralised	+
<i>Prunus</i> spp.	plum/cherry	mineralised	++
<i>Pyrus/Malus</i> spp.	pear/apple	Mineralised	++
<i>Ribes</i> spp.	-	Mineralised	++
<i>Apiaceae</i> indet.	-	Mineralised	+
<i>Ficus carica</i> L.	fig	Mineralised	+++
cf. <i>Morus nigra</i>	mulberry	Mineralised	+
<i>Chenopodium</i> cf. <i>album</i>	fat hen	Waterlogged	+
<i>Rubus fruticosus/idaeus</i>	blackberry/raspberry	Waterlogged	++++
<i>Aethusa cynapium</i> L.	fool's parsley	Waterlogged	+
Cucurbitaceae	marrow/pumpkin/squash	Waterlogged	+
<i>Corylus avellana</i> L.	hazelnut shell	Waterlogged	+
<i>Sambucus ebulus</i> L.	danewort	Waterlogged	++
<i>Sambucus nigra</i> L.	elder	Waterlogged	+++
<i>Carex</i> spp.	sedge	Waterlogged	+

Table 1: plant remains from the lower fill [171] of the cesspit: + = rare, ++ = occasional, +++ = common, ++++ = abundant

Latin name	common name	no. of fragments		
		upper fill [109]	lower fill [171]	total
<i>Osmerus eperlanus</i>	smelt		50	50
<i>Scomber scombrus</i>	mackerel		1	1
<i>Anguilla anguilla</i>	eel		4	4
<i>Pleuronectes platessa</i>	plaice		2	2
Pleuronectidae	plaice/flounder		1	1
Cyprinidae	carp (family)		75	75
Gadidae	cod (family)		1	1
<i>Gallus gallus</i>	chicken		7	7
<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	mallard/domestic duck		5	5
<i>Bos taurus</i>	cattle	12	21	33
	cattle-sized	4	17	21
<i>Ovis aries</i>	sheep	5	1	6
<i>Ovis aries/Capra hircus</i>	sheep/goat	6	19	25
	sheep-sized	8	12	20
<i>Sus scrofa</i>	pig		3	3
<i>Rattus spp.</i>	rat, unidentified		13	13
Total		35	232	267

Table 2: animal bones from the upper and lower fills of the cesspit

currant (*Ribes* spp.), plum/cherry (*Prunus* spp.) and possible mulberry (*Morus nigra*), all of which could have been grown locally.

In addition, the lower fill yielded 232 fragments of animal bone that represent waste from the table as well as butchery and primary processing waste (Table 2). Hand-collected bone is dominated by cattle and sheep/goat, but also includes poultry, pig and a significant component of fish. Cattle bones are represented by skull and rib fragments with single examples and small numbers of mandible, vertebra and adult and juvenile elements of the upper and lower fore-and hind-leg. A tarsal and a long-bone fragment had evidently been gnawed by rodents.



Fig. 3: view of the cesspit looking south-east

Sheep/goat bone mainly comprises fragments of rib and vertebra with small numbers of adult mandible and juvenile femur and single examples of juvenile maxilla (upper jaw), juvenile upper and lower fore-leg and lamb metacarpal (fore-foot). Dental evidence from two sheep/goat mandibles indicates adults in the fourth and fifth-to-seventh years of life; animals probably slaughtered for mutton after primary use for wool production, breeding and dairying. Pigs are represented by single fragments of foetal or neonate innominate (pelvis), adult radius (fore-foot) and infant metapodial (foot); the presence of the younger animals perhaps suggesting local pig-keeping. Poultry are represented by waste from dressing carcasses and from the table, including a chicken breast bone with three adult hen metatarsals (feet) and a few toe phalanges, an adult mallard or domestic duck breast bone, adult metacarpal (wing), adult femur, and two adult metatarsals (feet). The fish bones mainly comprise vertebrae of migratory (mainly smelt) and freshwater (carp family) fish. However, they also include single examples of marine/estuarine fish: mackerel vertebra, cod (family) gill arch and a head and vertebra of plaice – all species found in the tidal Thames and its estuary.

Fewer bones were recovered from the upper fill and they are entirely from cattle and sheep or sheep/goat (Table 2). The cattle bones include single

examples or small numbers of skull, vertebra, rib, humerus (upper fore- and hind-leg), and first phalange (basal toe joint). Sheep/goat bones mainly include single examples of ribs with single examples of mandible, vertebra and adult and juvenile bones from the upper and lower fore- and hind-leg, while sheep bones include skull, radius (lower fore-leg), a first-year lamb mandible and metacarpal (fore-foot) – areas largely, but not entirely, of prime meat-bearing quality.

Evidence for butchery on cattle and sheep/goat bones from both fills clearly shows a marked emphasis on the use of saws for virtually all butchery with only occasional use of cleavers and little or no use of knives. Cattle butchery includes midline division of the vertebral column, transverse sawing of the vertebra and rib, removal of the cheek meat and the feet, and to a lesser extent transverse sawing of the vertebra and rib.

Associated fauna is limited to a partial skeleton of a small rodent, probably a sub-adult black or brown rat. This comprises 13 fragments of mandible, rib, vertebra, upper and lower fore leg and foot.

Kitchen and dining wares and utensils

Pottery vessels are by far the most common artefact type. In all 924 sherds (302 ENV, 21.53kg) were recovered. The lower fill, which is dated to 1810–30, yielded 658 sherds (207 ENV, 12.247kg). The rest are from the upper fill, dated to 1820–30.

Most of the fabrics and forms would have been in everyday use between the 1780s and the early years of the 19th century (Table 3). Factory-made refined earthenwares dominate the assemblage, the main fabrics being creamware and pearlware (Table 4). The former are mainly represented by plates, serving dishes and rounded bowls for dinner services, and the latter by tea cups, tea bowls, saucers, jugs and teapots. Most creamware vessels are plain, but two are more colourful. The first is a near complete small mid 18th-century cream jug with rounded body and cylindrical neck, which has a mottled purple and green 'tortoiseshell' glaze (<P1>); the second is a salt with marbled slip (<P2>) (Fig 4). Other specialised tablewares include a pepper pot (<P3>) and a pastry mould in the form of a

Source	sherd count	%	ENV	%	weight (g)	%
Delftware	5	0.5	3	1.0	124	0.6
English porcelain	7	0.8	4	1.3	95	0.4
English stoneware	16	1.7	6	2.0	884	4.1
Factory-made refined earthenwares and non-local wares	670	72.5	208	68.9	11619	54.0
Factory-made refined stonewares	25	2.7	14	4.6	1088	5.1
London-area redwares	32	3.5	13	4.3	4297	20.0
Oriental imports	78	8.4	30	9.9	1037	4.8
Surrey-Hampshire border wares	91	9.8	24	7.9	2386	11.1
Total	924	100	302	100	21530	100

Table 3: composition of the pottery from the cesspit by ware category (ENV = estimated number of vessels)

sweetcorn (<P4>) (Fig. 4).

The pearlware vessels are more decorative. They include several bowls, teabowls and saucers (<P5>) with underglaze blue-painted decoration in Chinese styles, and a similar range of forms with under-glaze painted decoration in 'earth colours', mostly consisting of simple floral sprays (<P6>) (Fig. 4). There are also numerous dining and teawares with transfer-printed decoration, mostly in underglaze blue, with some decorated in black (<P7>, <P8>) with a range of Chinese and European landscape scenes (Fig. 4). Sherds from the lid of a tureen were found in both fills.

Other finewares include fragmented white salt-glazed stoneware as tea and dining wares. This fabric was mainly in use during the middle decades of the 18th century and ceased production during the 1770s. Finds include part of a cylindrical mug with debased scratch blue decoration (<P9>) (Fig. 5).

Sherds from at least 29 vessels in Chinese porcelain included blue and white wares, Chinese Imari (with overglaze red-painted and gilded decoration), enamelled famille rose wares and an unusual provincial

celadon bowl with carved decoration outside and red-painted decoration of fishes around the inner wall (<P10>) (Fig. 5). A fern motif at the centre of the base is not visible in the illustration. Plates and teawares are the main forms, but part of a large cylindrical mug (<P11>) (Fig. 5), the base of a bottle and sherds of a rounded bowl with dragon decoration in blue are also present. In addition to the Chinese porcelain, there are sherds from a cup and a saucer with underglaze transfer-printed decoration in Caughley porcelain, made in Shropshire from 1772 onwards. Finds of English porcelain from excavated contexts are relatively uncommon, especially when compared with oriental imports, even though the Bow porcelain factory was situated close to the site, in Stratford High Street.⁸ The only other find from the present site is a fluted Caughley cup (<P12>) (Fig. 5).

Heavier tablewares include a bowl and a jug in Nottingham stoneware, while everyday kitchen and storage wares are represented in London-area post-medieval redware and Surrey-Hampshire border redware, mostly bowls and dishes of various kinds, but including one Surrey-Hampshire border

Source	sherd count	%	ENV	%	weight (g)	%
Cooking vessels	1	0.1	1	0.3	35	0.2
Drinking vessels	45	4.9	11	3.6	624	2.9
Food preparation/ serving vessels	137	14.8	43	14.2	5825	27.1
Hygiene	20	2.2	5	1.7	2245	10.4
Pharmaceutical vessels	8	0.9	4	1.3	288	1.3
Serving (including decorative)	413	44.7	109	36.1	6780	31.5
Serving beverages	18	1.9	6	2.0	512	2.4
Storage	31	3.4	10	3.3	2726	12.7
Teawares	245	26.5	107	35.4	2340	10.9
Unidentified	6	0.6	6	2.0	155	0.7
Total	924	100	302	100	21530	100

Table 4: breakdown of pottery from the cesspit by function

redware pipkin. There are also bowls in Sunderland-type coarseware and yellow ware, some with slip decoration.

Three bone and ivory knife-handles are also kitchen or tavern equipment, or personal possessions; one is an 18th-century whittle-tang 'pistol-grip' style, while the other two are plain flattened-oval handles of scale- and whittle-tang-manufacture.

Other finds included a near-complete rectangular-sectioned hone of Norwegian grey schist, for sharpening knives and tools and the distorted rim from a large lead/tin vessel, neither of which can be closely dated. Norwegian schist hones were imported into Britain throughout the medieval and post-medieval periods and it is not possible to say whether this example is residual or contemporary with the latest finds from the cesspit.

Health and hygiene

The pottery assemblage also includes sherds from a large creamware stool pan, which would have been used in a close stool or commode, and a large ewer from a toilet set. A similar stool pan in white salt-glazed stoneware is a more unusual product in this ware.

Several fragmented glass phials dating to the last quarter of the 18th century were also recovered. Each would have once contained any one of hundreds of pharmaceutical remedies (oils, tinctures, smelling salts and elixirs) widely advertised in newspapers of the day to cure a wide range of common ailments. The complete upper profile of one colourless glass phial appears similar to the slim cylindrical examples from colonial America.⁹ Likewise, the two thinly-flared rim and neck fragments from two larger-shaped phials also have trans-Atlantic parallels.¹⁰ Also retrieved was a green-coloured two part mould-blown rectangular-shaped bottle with flat chamfered corners which may have contained spirits or, more likely, a medicine. The blowpipe or 'open' pontil scar manifesting as a ring of glass on the base suggests this vessel is contemporary with the phials.

Dress accessories

Dress accessories consist of a button, a lace-chape and a pin. The button is of unusual construction with a domed bone centre (with four holes) set in a

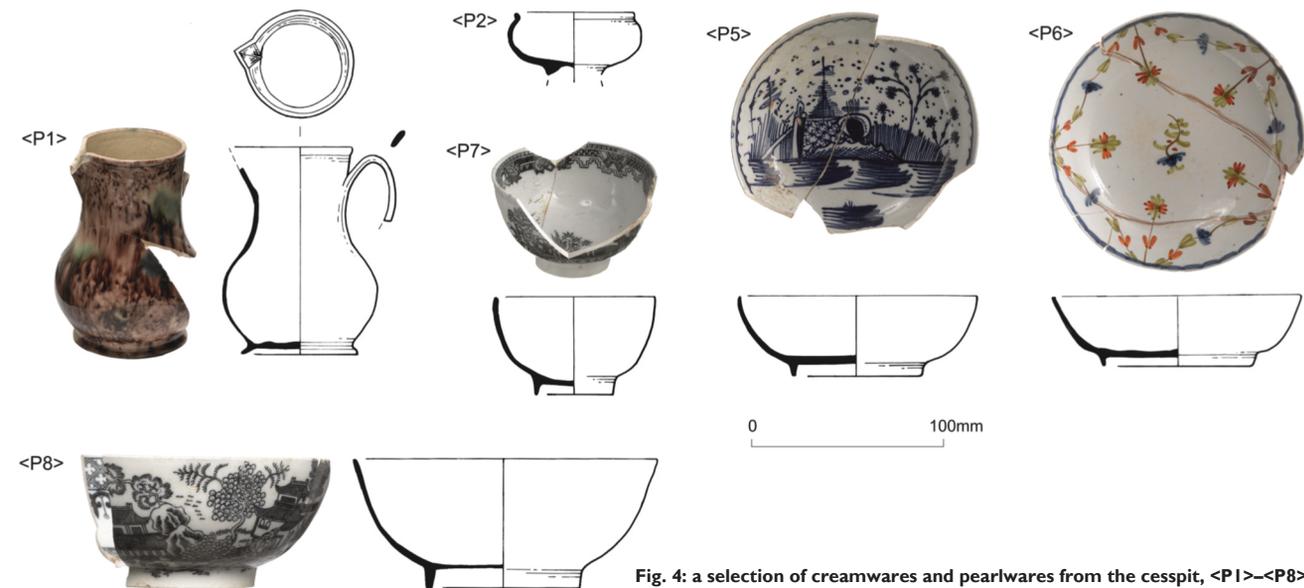


Fig. 4: a selection of creamwares and pearlwares from the cesspit, <P1>-<P8>



AO28 example is stamped incuse on the back of the bowl, facing the smoker, with the maker's name BALME MILE END, and the initials TB moulded in relief on the sides of the heel. Balme was a well known pipe-making family based in the East End for much of the 19th century. Their pipes are commonly found in this area of London, reflecting the primarily local distribution of clay pipes even within a single city. Thomas Balme is recorded in Mile End Road in 1805–45.¹² Another pipe with the Balme name stamped on the bowl was found in the lower fill, although this example has stars moulded in relief on the sides of the heel. Two other type AO27 pipes in the same group have the maker's initials RB moulded in relief on the heel. Although another member of the Balme family is a possibility, the only pipe maker of the right date whose initials match these is Robert Baddeley, recorded in 1805.¹³ The only other marked pipe has the initials MK, which stand for Michael Keens, recorded in Limehouse Fields in 1836.¹⁴ Only one decorated pipe was found, a type AO27 bowl with moulded vertical ribbing and moulded leaf seams. This type of decoration was popular at the time of the Napoleonic Wars.

Evidence for alcohol consumption is limited to the bowl of a colourless lead glass wine glass or tumbler with cut fluted decoration. It is typical of early to mid-19th-century vessel glass produced in large quantities by British glass manufacturers and was used or re-used in middle-income or even quite poor households.

flanged copper-alloy disc. The tubular copper-alloy lace chape and the copper-alloy pin with a spherical wound-wire head are both standard post-medieval types.

Smoking and alcohol

Six clay pipe bowls were recovered from the cesspit together with 22 stem fragments. A latest date of c. 1820–40 comes from a single type AO28 bowl.¹¹ The remaining identifiable pipes date to c. 1780–1820 (all type AO27). The

Building materials

The cesspit contained a considerable amount of building material mainly comprising tiles, bricks and window glass, but also some sub-rectangular pieces of iron with nail-holes that may have been fittings. Notable finds include a pantile with a notched nib and a mid-late 14th-century Penn floor tile, which would almost certainly have come from an abbey building. The window glass included three fragments of a pane of light green coloured crown-edge glass and the central 'bull's eye' portion of another pane which allowed the pontil iron to be affixed. The last was either used in a less conspicuous part of a building (such as a cellar) or was simply waste from cutting glass to size.

Conclusion

The cesspit was built towards the end of the 18th century, when the locality was still predominantly rural in character. It was finally abandoned and filled in during the third or fourth decade of the 19th century. These were years of change and urbanisation. Stratford and West Ham grew rapidly from the second half of the 18th century, and the construction of the Eastern Counties and Thames Junction Railway in the mid 1840s acted as a further spur to suburban encroachment and industrialisation.

Some items recovered from the cesspit could have come from either a household or a tavern, but the nearest ale-house at this time was the Adam and Eve,¹⁵ nearly 80m to the west, and

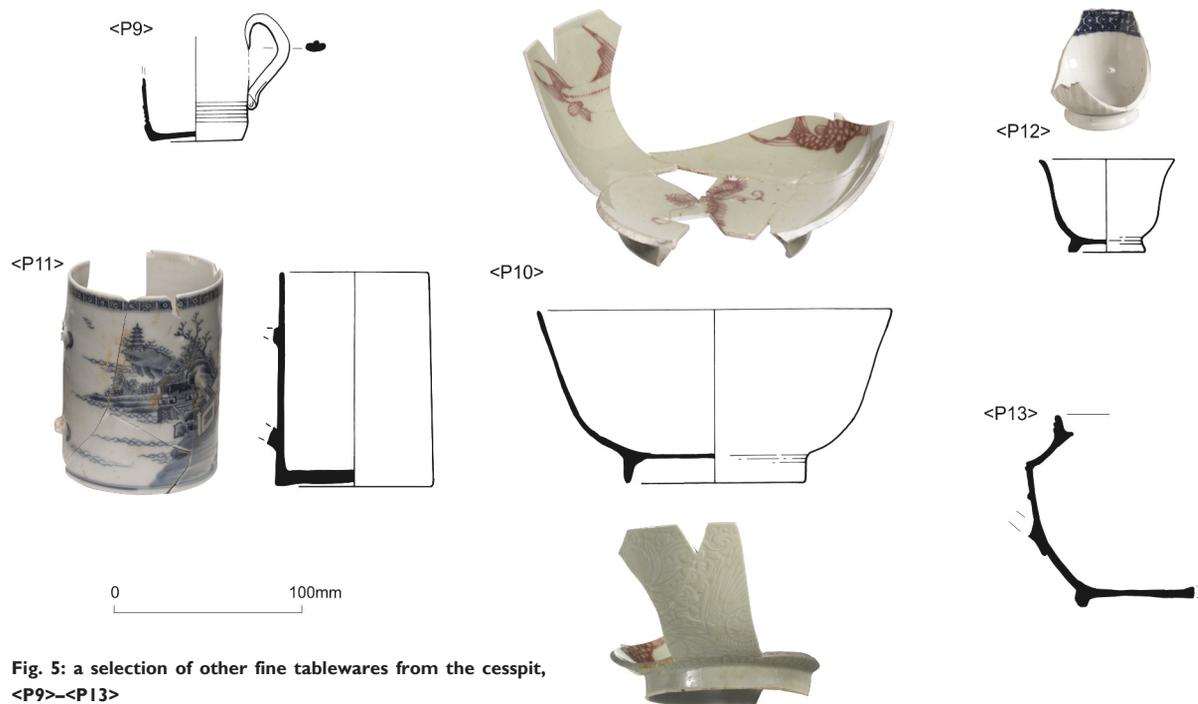


Fig. 5: a selection of other fine tablewares from the cesspit, <P9>-<P13>

a house closer to the cesspit would be a more likely source for the entire assemblage. The former abbey gatehouse was probably the nearest dwelling to the cesspit, and its demolition and the deposition of the clearance assemblage may well be related events. The main (northern) part old gatehouse stood in a large plot, which is described as garden occupied by 'Woodcock' in a survey of 1821.¹⁶

The objects found in the cesspit are entirely consistent with a domestic household, and comprise a tightly dated group that may be linked to a specific property and event. The assemblage was used by a family (possibly the Woodcocks) that was apparently prosperous enough to afford a fairly varied diet, tobacco and fine table wares. Its composition reflects aspects of everyday life in a household during a period when increasing industrialisation and international trade and contact were radically changing the nature of the English home.

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With the exception of James Morris, formerly of MOLA, who now lectures in zooarchaeology at the University of Central Lancashire, all of the authors work for MOLA. Robert Cowie is a

Project Officer and supervised the excavations covered by this article. Lyn Blackmore, Nigel Jeffries, Jacqui Pearce and Beth Richardson are senior pottery and finds specialists, Alan Pipe is a senior zooarchaeologist and Ian Betts senior building building specialist. Karen Stewart is a senior archaeobotanist.

All have written extensively on London's archaeology: Robert's most recent monograph on Roman rural settlement in Brentford will appear next year, whilst Lyn, Nigel, Jacqui and Beth have published widely on post-Roman ceramics and other finds from the London area, including monographs on specific pottery industries. Alan's published work ranges from mesolithic Uxbridge to the Victorian City of London. Ian has written on topics from Roman painted wall plaster to 20th-century picture-panel tiles, and Karen has contributed to many MOLA reports and to MOLA monographs currently in publication.

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2. B. Barber, S. Chew, T. Dyson and B. White *The Cistercian abbey of St Mary Stratford Langthorne, Essex*, MoLAS Monogr Ser 18 (2004).

3. *The Victoria History of the County of Essex* 6 (1973) 114.

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5. *Op cit* fn 2, 29-30.

6. R. Cowie *Scheduled Monument at Bakers Row, Bakers Row, West Ham, London E15: archaeological desk-based assessment*, unpub MOL rep (2007) 14-17, 19, 24, 26.

7. Museum of London site code SFY07.

8. The results of the excavations at the Bow porcelain factory site (14-26 High Street, Stratford, London E15; site code HNB06) are currently being prepared for publication, J. Pearce pers. comm.

9. I Noël Hume *A Guide to Artifacts of Colonial America* (1991) fig 17 no. 11, 72.

10. *Ibid*, no. 12, 72.

11. Classified according to D.R. Atkinson and

A. Oswald 'London clay tobacco pipes' *J Brit Archaeol Ass* 32 (1969) 171-227.

12. A. Oswald *Clay pipes for the archaeologist*, BAR 14 (1975) 132.

13. *Ibid*.

14. *Ibid*, 140.

15. *Op cit* fn 1, 113.

16. Clayton, *Survey of the Parish of West Ham in the County of Essex* (1821), reproduced by J. Davenport *Survey of the parish of West Ham in the County of Essex, West Ham* (1825). There was a family by the name of Woodcock living in West Ham at this time.