

A road to where?

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Archaeological investigations were undertaken at the Beaumont Road Estate (hereafter BRE), Leyton, London Borough of Waltham Forest (TQ 3785 8770: Fig. 1), between 19th May and 18th June 2004. The evaluation comprised 24 trenches in two phases of work, all of which were located within the footprints of proposed buildings. With the exception of Trench 15, located at the north-west of the development (Fig. 2), all trenches were void of archaeological features. Located in Trench 15 was a fragment of probable Roman road, and the trench was enlarged to obtain its full width (Fig. 3).¹ However, due to site constraints it was not possible to extend the trench further to explore more of the feature in plan.

The underlying geology at the site was Taplow River Terrace Gravel, which in turn sealed the Lambeth Clay Group. The Taplow gravels were recorded in all of the trenches, the top of the surface at between 14.00m OD in the north to 13.00m OD in the south.

The earliest feature, a wide shallow scoop, was cut through the natural deposits and effectively marked out the line of the road (Fig. 3). The scoop was filled with a sequence of mixed gravel and clay, which were raised some 700mm above and beyond the highest level of the construction cut. Clearly some of this material originated from the cut, but additional material was imported from elsewhere, possibly from the adjacent side ditches, from other marking-out ditches or from roadside

quarry pits. Neither the outer ditches nor the pits were present in the excavation area. The deposits formed a central platform or embankment, known to the Romans as an *agger*, a term still applied to these types of roads.² The BRE road *agger* was approximately 7.5m wide and 700mm high, the top occurring at approximately 12.54m OD. This width of road brackets it with many significant roads in southern Britain, such as Stanegate (7.7m), Dere Street (7.7m), Stane Street (7.4m), Ryknild Street (7.4m) and Watling Street West (6.8m),³ and its potential importance should not be underestimated.

The *agger* was flanked by side ditches that appear to have been dug more or less contemporaneously with



Fig. 1: site location

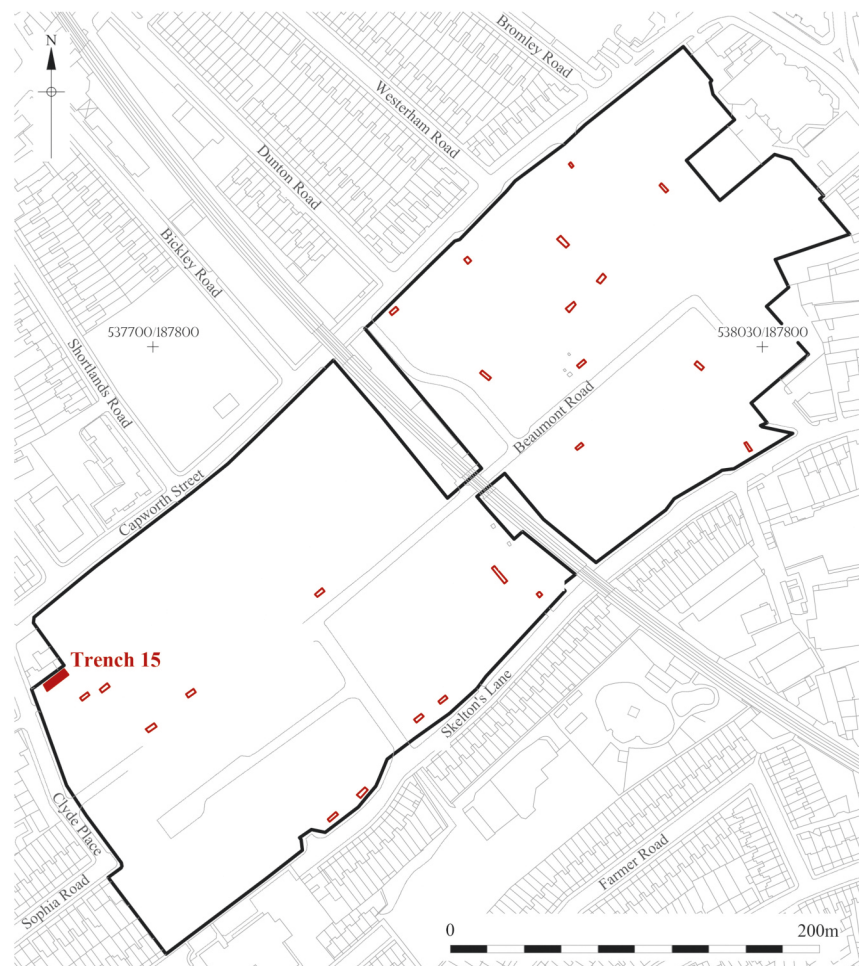


Fig. 2: trench locations

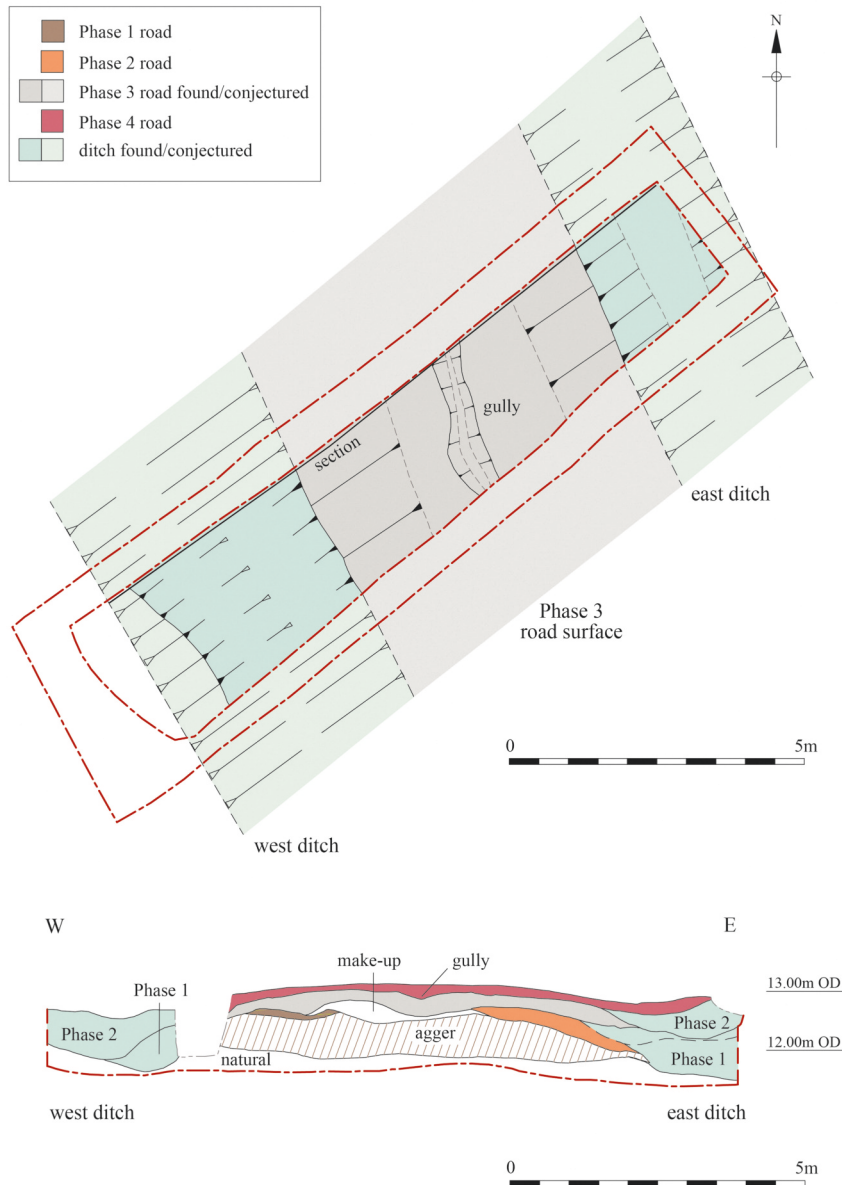


Fig. 3: plan and section of road

the construction cut for the road and from which some of the material for the *agger* was probably derived. Neither ditch was recorded to its full width, either because of later truncation or being beyond the limits of excavation. The western ditch had a shallow 'U'-shaped profile, was at least 1.3m wide and 750mm deep, the base of which was at 11.64m OD (Fig. 4). The eastern ditch appears to have been somewhat larger, with a wider cut and a gently sloping base. It was at least 1.55m wide and 750mm deep, the base occurring at 11.49m OD. Although in the circumstances it is not possible to determine the exact centres of each cut, it appears that they were approximately 9.65m apart.

The primary fills of both ditches

were sandy gravel, and may have been deposited during the construction of the road *agger*, but no finds were recovered.

A compacted gravel deposit (Phase 1 Road), the top of which was at 12.70m OD, sealed the top western side of the *agger* only. It is not clear if this represented part of the primary road or was part of the *agger* make-up. Certainly it was dissimilar to the underlying materials, and Fig. 3 represents it as being part of the road.

Sealing the putative primary metalled surface was a new layer of make-up deposit composed of gravelly clay, approximately 140mm thick and occupying a central position on the crest of the *agger*. This was covered on the east side only by a possible second compacted gravel road surface (Phase 2 Road).

The roadside ditches both accumulated gravelly sand fills, and the slump lines suggest that they formed as a result of water drainage from the road camber. The gravelly nature of the ditch fills is probably a result of the weathering and degradation of the primary and secondary road surfaces.

Thereafter a new road surface (Phase 3 Road) was laid, whose function may be assigned with more certainty. The surface, which was composed of extremely compact metalled gravel layer, partially sealed the silted up or backfilled eastern ditch. This road surface was approximately 7m wide and was up to 350mm thick,



Fig. 4: section across roadside ditch, facing north-west

the highest point of which occurred at 13.04m OD (Fig. 5). It is possible that the surface actually represented a number of resurfacing episodes, but its compaction and homogeneity made it impossible to distinguish distinct layers within it. With the exception of occasional daub fragments, no finds were retrieved during the excavation of this surface.

The top of the metalled surface was relatively flat, but a 700mm wide, 150mm deep, groove or depression ran along the centre of the road. The groove, in isolation, may be interpreted as a gully, integral to the road, which may have aided its drainage, or alternatively, it may have served as a means of retarding wheels from veering across the *agger*.⁴ Slight staining of the road surface to the east and west of the groove may have represented wheel ruts, although the colour differentiations

were too ephemeral to represent conclusive evidence.

The flat surface area of the *agger* was flanked to the east and west by gentle cambers that sloped off into the road-side ditches. Both the west and east ditches were recut at this time. The primary fills of both ditches were compacted sand, but gravel was absent, and it may be that these deposits represent the by-product of the construction process, whereby natural gravel was riddled and residual sand accumulated nearby or was blown into the ditch.

Abutting and partially sealing both the eastern and western road cambers was a sequence of accumulated ditch fills or dumps. The material in both ditches comprised heavily compacted sands, silts and gravels, and no finds were retrieved.

Covering the upper road surface

and the exposed ditch fills/dumps was a compact layer of sandy gravel that gradually sloped to the east and west. This surface (Phase 4 Road) was at least 8.2m wide and 20mm thick, the top of which occurred at 13.11m OD. It is unclear whether this surface represents the latest phase of Roman road construction, and one where flanking ditches were apparently not dug, or whether it is of post-Roman date. If the latter it demonstrates continued importance of the route. The surface sealed the earlier drainage ditches, and large patches of iron-panning throughout the metalling suggest that the area experienced poor drainage.

Which road?

Although the Roman road network in London is relatively well understood, especially for the major routes, there are significant gaps in our knowledge, both in proving their existence through controlled excavation, and in clarifying local communication networks.

Interpreting the evidence from BRE is difficult for two reasons: firstly no dating material was recovered either from the road surfaces / make-up deposits, nor from the side ditches; secondly the short length hinders the accuracy of interpreting its exact orientation.

Due to the careful construction methods and flanking ditches it is *assumed* that this is a road of Roman date. The recorded fragment appears to have been metalled on more than one occasion and did not display significant repair or lack of management, as might be expected of roads of medieval or post-medieval date, and roads of these later dates are not known in the vicinity.

On first discovering this length of road, the excavators presumed it to be part of the London to Great Dunmow road (Fig. 6, Road 1). Ivan Margary described the whole of this route, Route 30, extending at least 49km (30miles) between Great Dunmow in Essex and the outskirts of London, relatively succinctly but without the aid of detailed archaeological evidence.⁵ Ralph Merrifield agreed with the route of this road but reinterpreted some of the evidence to hypothesise that there was a second road in this area which he designated 'The Northern Fords' road



Fig. 5: Roman road, facing south-west



Fig. 6: Roman roads in the vicinity of the site

(Fig. 6, Road 2) located to the west of the Great Dunmow road and taking a somewhat circuitous route.⁶ It should however be understood that physical evidence for either road is slight, their routes are largely conjecture, and in both cases the evidence is largely of the join-the-dots (find-spot) variety. To confuse the situation further, a more recent representation of the Great Dunmow road puts it to the east of that conjectured by Margary⁷ (Fig. 6, Road 3).

Margary suggested that the London to Great Dunmow road passed through

Clapton and continued south to meet either with what is now Old Street close to Shoreditch⁸ or the London to Colchester road, where the junction could reasonably be on either the west or east bank of the Lea close to the bridgehead over it. It is possible that the southern extremity was in part observed by Daniel Defoe who, in 1722 recorded that in the vicinity of Old Ford, "in the bottom of the marshes, ... the remains of a great stone causeway which, as it is supposed, was the highway or great road from London into Essex..."⁹

the road that bypassed the capital and now marked by the route of Oxford Street/ Old Street before curving north-east across the Lea Valley and joining up with London to Great Dunmow road in the vicinity of Snaresbrook, although, as Merrifield puts it "its line through Leyton Green and Snaresbrook is quite obscure".¹³ When superimposing Merrifield's proposed route on to the Greater London in the Roman Period map (Map 7)¹⁴ there are a number of find-spots that validate the plausibility of such a route, although some also are

Equally, or perhaps more probably, he may have in fact observed part of the London to Colchester road.

Of Route 30 Margary reports that a "well made gravel road was found on the east side of the River Lea at a depth of 6 feet". His route continues to Leabridge Road, Leyton Green, Whipps Cross and on to Snaresbrook. From here he conjectured that the road passed through Claybury, and indeed at the site of the Claybury Hospital part of the road was archaeologically examined and found to be 7.8m wide with a 1.2m wide flanking ditch on the south-east side.¹⁰ It has also been archaeologically examined closer to the Greater London boundary, with various sections cut across it in the vicinity of Little London¹¹ near Chigwell, and a length apparently attested by geophysics north of Abridge.¹²

Road 2, as proposed by Merrifield, is a slightly peculiar beast, with one terminus being

used as evidence for Road 1.

The most southerly find-spot was at Rushmore Road, Hackney where an inhumation burial was recorded. To the north at Clapton, was a well-made gravel road on the east side of the Lea at a depth of 6 feet (1.83m),¹⁵ but this was also used as evidence for Road 1. A Roman sarcophagus was found close by, and it is this association that suggests that the road was of a similar date. Crossing the Lea and progressing north-east, the next find-spots are enclosure ditches found at Church Road, Leyton. Further round to the north-east were findings of ceramic building material fragments at Leyton Green Road, and pottery at the nearby Clarendon Road. Continuing north, further pottery was recovered in Whipps Cross, and closer to the presumed junction with the London to Great Dunmow road pottery was recovered from Charnwood Drive, Snaresbrook.¹⁶

Road 3 is presumably an alternative route for the Great Dunmow road, and it should be noted that at Cannhall Road, Leyton in the 19th century a 6-foot thick 'causeway' was observed at a point where the road crossed the railway bridge here, and presumed to be part of a Roman road.¹⁷

The question is, "How does the Beaumont Road fragment fit in with the local network of known or suspected Roman roads?", and the answer is "Not comfortably".

Although the road section is relatively close to a couple of the find-spots associated with Road 2, it is unlikely to be part of it. Although only a short length of the road was recorded, the flanking ditches indicate that its orientation was NNW–SSE, whereas

Road 2 near this location is assumed to be NE–SW.

When projecting the line north and south of BRE there are no other obvious known road fragments, but there are find-spots of Roman date in the vicinity of the projected alignment.

To the north, at 57–59a Church Road, Leyton, excavations revealed a number of enclosure ditches dating to the 3rd and 4th centuries.¹⁸ By continuing this projected line further the road could feasibly connect with the main north road out of London, Ermine Street, in the vicinity of Enfield. It is worth noting that a slightly narrower (6.5m wide) east–west road, was excavated on the west side of Ermine Street near this location,¹⁹ and as such a more comprehensive local network in the vicinity of Enfield may now be proposed.

By projecting the road south from BRE the line would pass near to the Ruckholt Estate, Leyton (formerly Blind Lane), where an inhumation and cremation cemetery was located,²⁰ but does not pass other known sites of Roman date. This projection would however facilitate access to the London to Colchester road close to the western crest of the Lea valley and, like the northern bypass, would facilitate travellers being able to avoid entering *Londinium*.

It is probably worth also throwing into the mix one further observation. In 1968 electricity board trenches dug close to the junction of Woodford Road and Whipps Cross Road "revealed gravel metalling of a probable Roman road (Road 4) which was traced over a distance of 40 feet (12m)".²¹ Furthermore, it was oriented NNE–SSW and was thus, potentially at least,

parallel to the BRE example, the two conjectured lines being 2.1km apart (Fig. 6).

Whilst there is a relatively good understanding of the major Roman roads in central and Greater London, such as Ermine Street or the London to Colchester road, there is a more limited one for the more minor, local, routes. Even the Great Dunmow to London road has barely been sampled, and it is probably fair to suggest that there are a number of roads that are still to be uncovered in Greater London. It appears that the Beaumont Road Estate road falls into this category, and, as stated above, the fragment recorded was of very limited extent and without firm dating from associated finds. Nonetheless this fragment allows us to sharpen our understanding of the route-ways surrounding *Londinium*, the connectivity between main routes, and possibly indicates the location of hitherto undiscovered areas of Roman occupation and settlement.

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