

# St Mary Stratford Bow Workhouse, London E3

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## Introduction

Excavations were carried out during 2014 by AOC Archaeology at a site at 213–217 Bow Road (site code BWD14), which lies on the north side of Bow Road E3. The site is located close to St Mary’s Church (Fig 1) and covers a rectangular area, lying perpendicular to the road. Excavations uncovered a brick building first erected during the 16th century and a series of associated outbuildings and pits.

The site saw six different phases of use over almost 300 years<sup>1</sup> and this article presents the results of the later phases, Phase 5b and 6, which date to the mid-18th century onwards and

represent the use of the building as a workhouse (the archaeology of the earlier periods, Periods 1–5a, is also in preparation for publication).<sup>2</sup>

Archaeological evidence has made it possible to confirm the location of a workhouse here, to place it into the context of the local economy, and to gain insights into the lives of its residents.

### ‘A mansion of some antiquity’: tracing the history of the workhouse

There are very few references to the workhouse in contemporary literature, although it is referred to in historic surveys and maps. On Joel Gascoigne’s

Survey of Stepney, 1703, the Tudor house is identified as ‘The Rector’s House’. This probably relates to nearby St Mary’s Church, which was a daughter chapel to St Dunstan’s, Stepney. It became a Parish Church in 1719, with a specific Rector’s House built near Fairfield Road in 1726–30.<sup>3</sup>

Documentary evidence for a workhouse on the site appears during the early 19th century, and it is likely that the property was used in this way from the mid- to late 18th century, once the Rector’s House for St Mary’s Church was built.

On updated versions of Horwood’s Maps from 1813 and 1819 (Fig 2) and

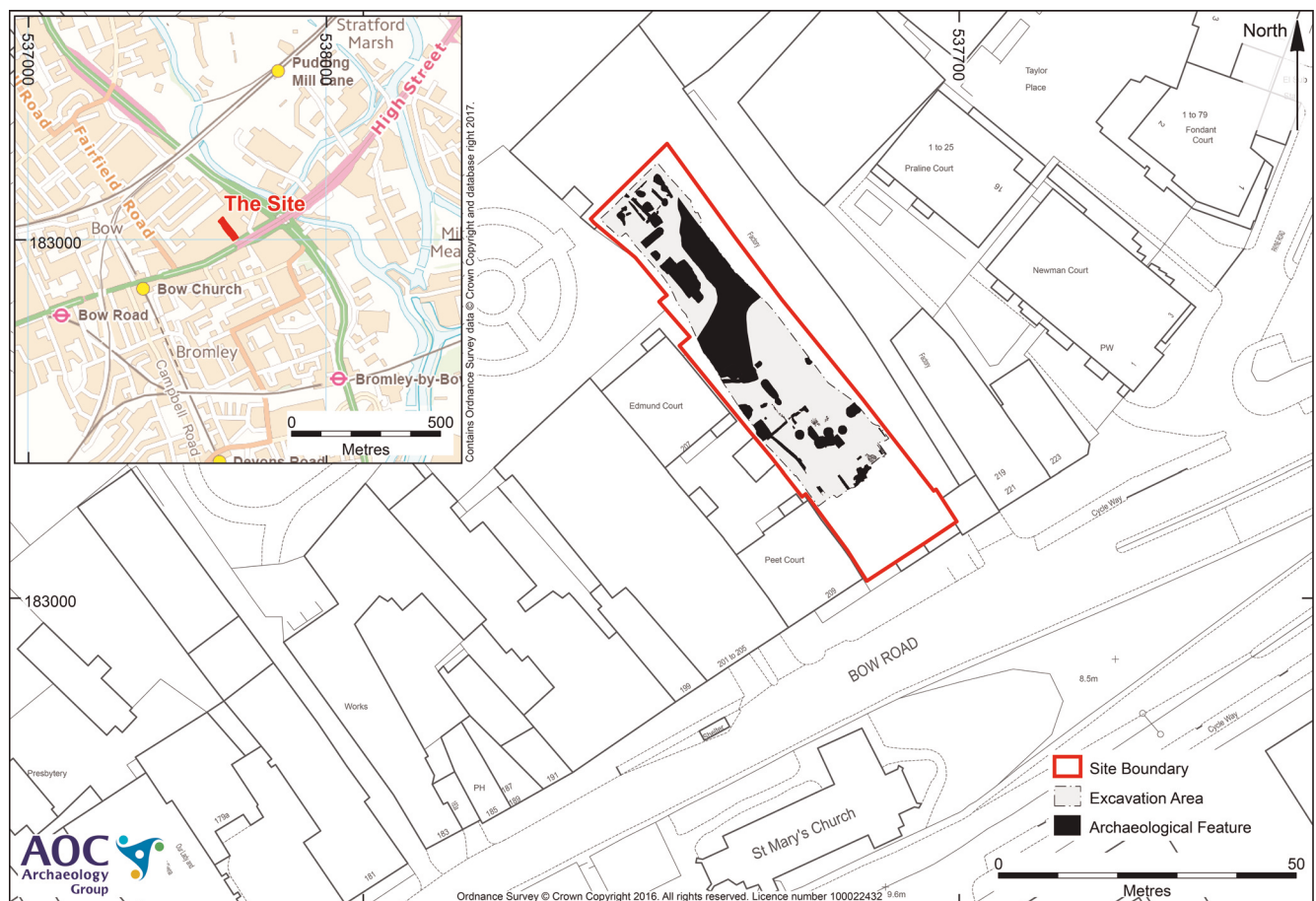


Fig 1: site location and detailed trench location



**Fig 2: Faden's 1819 update of Horwood's map of London, showing the position of the workhouse to the north of St Mary's Church (© British Library Board. Maps 33.e.24.)**

on Thompson's 1823 map, the title of 'Workhouse' is given to the building. In 1816, it was noted that it was a 'mansion of some antiquity'.<sup>4</sup>

An exact founding date is difficult to establish, as the earliest surviving workhouse records, dating to 1806, appear to be compiled from earlier documents. The Land Tax records of the mid-18th century do not define a poorhouse or workhouse, but there is a reference to the 'Old House' in 1741–5.<sup>5</sup>

The earliest register of paupers at St Mary Stratford Bow Workhouse, names the first inmate as George Butler, admitted on 24 June 1782, and discharged in 1808.<sup>6</sup> Accounts also survive, with a typical example from 1824, noting residents in the week of 3 October 1824 as 13 men, 3 boys, 20 women and 10 girls, costing £9. 4s. (£9.20) in total.<sup>7</sup> The lists show long-term residents, of all ages, sexes and degrees of infirmity, with many of the younger born in the workhouse.

The workhouse was demolished during the mid-19th century, after c. 1840, and by 1859 the parish records made by the Parish of St Mary, Stratford Bow, include 'the register of persons receiving out-door relief and of persons admitted to Poplar Union Workhouse', suggesting that the workhouse at Bow had been superseded by this newer establishment before this date.<sup>8</sup>

### The archaeology of the workhouse

The Tudor house that came to be used as the workhouse was a fairly large building (Building 2), perhaps 17.5m wide and extending 27m back from Bow Road, with the remains of cobbled yards, garden areas and outbuildings to the rear, including a structure containing a water cistern with a chalk floor and culverted outflow (Building 5). Life in the workhouse during Periods 5b and 6 is represented by the contents of rubbish pits and the fill of a large, extensive gravel quarry in the middle of the site (Fig 3).

#### Period 5b: Mid- to late 18th century

The finds in the quarry [415] behind the workhouse spanned the 16th–18th centuries, suggesting that material from the unquarried areas of the site were used to backfill the quarry during this period.

A single large square pit [462] situated towards the north of the site also dates to this phase. It contained a series of organic fills with sand and gravel lenses at the base, followed by further organic silt (458), and a top fill (457). The lenses of sand, probably derived from minor slumping at the edges of the pit, indicate that it was open for some time.

#### Period 6: Early to mid-19th century

Evidence from this period is dominated by large pits and brick-lined features

(Fig 3). Two soakaways lay in the south centre of the site. One [583], had half its domed roof intact, and was 0.8m deep. It had been used as a refuse pit and the fill (585) contained corroded iron objects and common household porcelain of 19th-century date. The second [543] contained part of a ceramic lion ornament, <SF133>, and a toy bath, <SF201>, from a doll's house.

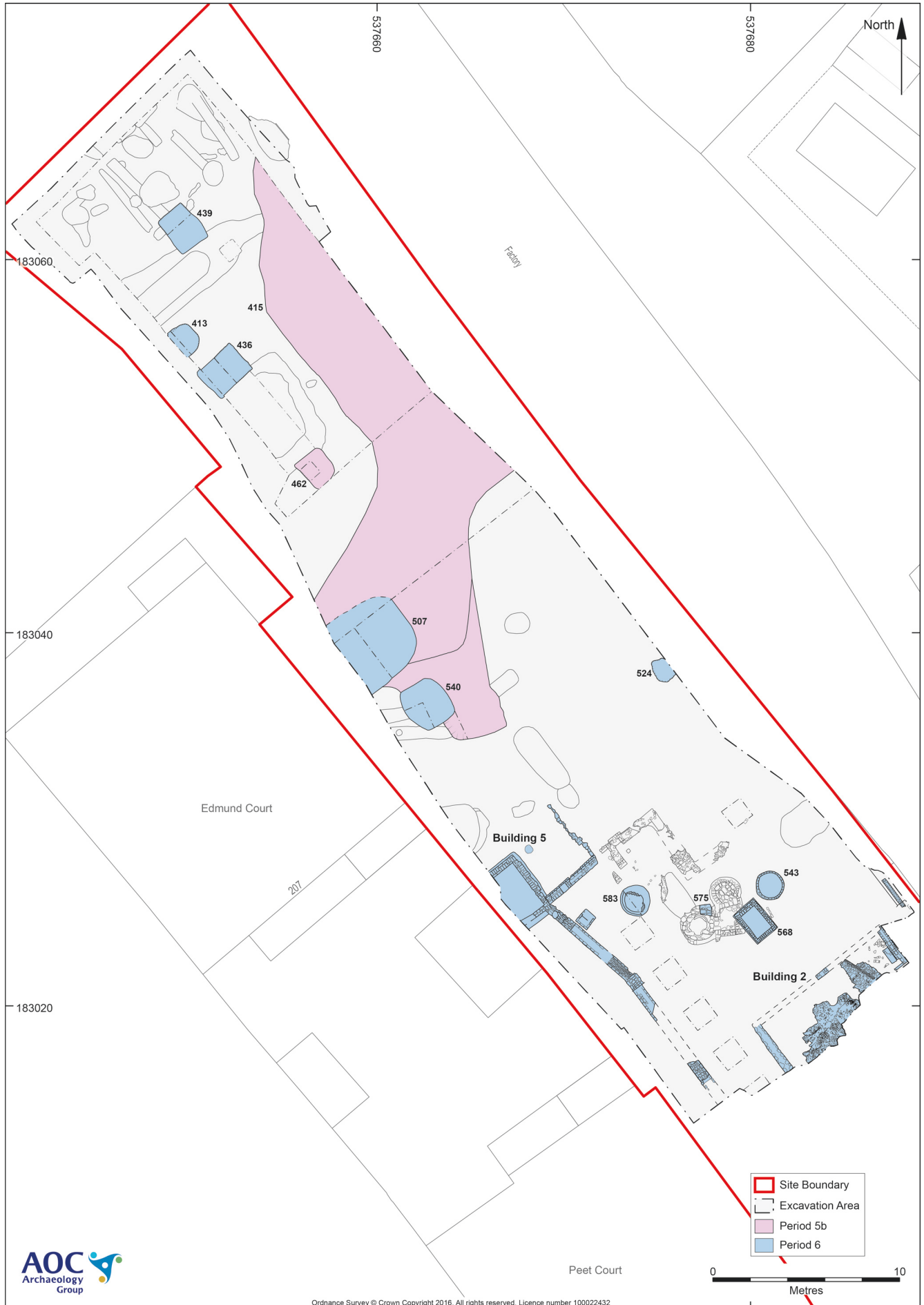
A brick-lined cesspit [568], which may have had above-ground toilet seats, was located to the rear of the main building, and measured 2m by 1.8m and 1.60m deep. The lowest fill had reddish brown staining (574), which typifies cess deposits, and contained pottery and clay tobacco pipes dating to 1804–40, among other household objects. A second, unlined cesspit at the north of the site, dated to after 1790, was c. 3m deep [413] and approximately square, measuring 1.82m across.

Within the organic fills (418, 417, 412, 427, 426 and 425) were objects including a complete stoneware bottle <SF58>, and a copper-alloy lace chape <SF295>. The side of a third cesspit, measuring 2.50m square and 1.5m deep, [540], had slumped slightly during infilling, but one corner contained the imprint of a post 0.1m square, suggesting the pit had some degree of wooden lining or shoring.

The fills (537–539) were generally organic, with occasional discarded animal bone and a pottery assemblage that included Creamware tableware and a brown coloured earthenware (Rockingham ware) bowl dating from the 1770s onwards. In the upper fill, there were examples of Staffordshire white salt-glazed stoneware – a good indicator of the date of the deposit, as production was limited to between 1720 and 1780.

A large, unlined rectangular pit with vertical sides [436] towards the centre-west of the site measured 1.85m by over 2m, and 2.35m deep. This was probably not a cesspit, since it appears to have been filled rapidly, with no slumping of the sides or cess-like deposits within the fill. Objects recovered from within included a copper-alloy button <SF290>, with 'Workhouse St Mary Stratford Bow' embossed on the front (Fig 4).

North of this pit was a larger example with vertical sides, measuring



**Fig 3: plan of features for Periods 5b and 6**



**Fig 4: copper-alloy button embossed with 'Workhouse St Mary Stratford Bow' (<SF290>), early-mid-19th-century**

2.4m by 1.60m [439] and over 2.35m deep. The lowest fill excavated was dark grey sandy silt (109–438), with bands of yellowish-brown sandy gravel indicative of intermittent slumping during the filling process. This deposit contained a complete glass bottle <SF291>, and the pottery included Pearlware with painted decoration and Creamware sherds painted with Mocha decoration, a style introduced from 1770/80s. Pit [575] was rectangular and was notable for the finds within (542): five paint pots <SF206–210>, holding the residues of green, blue, brown, yellow and purple paint (Fig 5).

One of the latest pits, [507], cut into the south edge of the old quarry, and is dated to after 1828 by clay tobacco pipes, many made by John Jones of Bow. The fill (217–506) of this pit included cattle, sheep, rabbit and deer bones, oyster and mussel shells and a range of household goods, including a broken Surrey-Hampshire red borderware chamber pot, two thimbles <SF20> and <SF87>, a bone apple corer <SF30>, and a glass 'elixir' bottle.

The chalk-floored cistern [517],

Building 5, at the rear of the Tudor House was only filled at the end of the workhouse period, prior to demolition. It had three distinct fills. The lowest of these (515) contained a remarkably large assemblage of late 18th/early 19th-century household pottery, bones from the meat-bearing parts of cattle and sheep, and 36 clay tobacco pipes dating from 1820–40, many manufactured by Henry Hodges of Bow.

Also of interest are a series of glass bottles and phials, described below (Fig 6: <SF166>, <SF167>, <SF146>, <SF152> and <SF182>). The second fill was rubble (514). The topmost fill (513) contained similar pottery finds, as well as a coin <SF75>, the head of a toothbrush <SF96>, and a marble <SF145>. The latest pit was a small one at the east of the site (524). The fill of greyish-brown sand had frequent lenses of sand, and contained one household item: a slate stylus <SF124>.

After the 1840s, the buildings were demolished, and a series of factories and warehouses was erected. Objects found among scatters of demolition material (519, 581 and 586) included buttons made from mother-of-pearl <SF83>, and copper-alloy <SF296>. One area of cobbles associated with the house had a surface drain running across it and contained another bone button <SF114>.

#### *Material evidence for life in the workhouse*

The rich artefactual evidence recovered from the features described above provides valuable insight into life in the workhouse.

The pottery assemblages recovered are characterised by mass-produced finewares. Dinner services, soup plates, cream jugs, chamber pots, cups and saucers occur in Creamware with Mocha decoration and Pearlware with transfer-printed decoration depicting landscape scenes and 'willow pattern'. Similar forms appear in Refined whitewares and Transfer-printed wares with blue, black and coloured patterns; colour being introduced in the 1820s.

English Stoneware vessels occur as ink and ginger beer bottles, storage jars and large spirit bottles with Bristol glaze on the upper section. English porcelain appears as cups, saucers and plates with designs such as painted gold enamel bands, and a small number of

Chinese porcelain vessels include a saucer, bowl with flower design and lid, indicating imports to Bow. Black and Red Basalt ware teapots with machine-tooled decoration are typical 19th-century products, as are coloured earthenwares such as Rockingham ware and Yellow ware. The high quality of some of these tablewares suggests that the workhouse, as a charitable institution, received them as donations.

#### *Glass finds*

The 18th- and 19th-century glass assemblage at the Bow Road site includes a notable quantity of glass phials and medicine bottles. Eighteen examples of rectangular-bodied colourless or olive-green bottles, sometimes with faceted body shapes and tall, narrow necks, are likely to be bottles which contained 'elixirs' as in the example from context (506). Some 67 fragments from 31 cylindrical colourless glass phials are present, with 10 complete examples, all with similar straight-sided cylindrical forms (Fig 6).

The products represented include Dalby's Carminative (an opium-based infant diarrhoea treatment, described as 'fatally destructive')<sup>9</sup> and locally-manufactured Dicey and Co. products, likely to be Daffy's Elixir. These are laudanum products, which were understood at the time to be good for pain relief and diarrhoea and were typically mixed with herbs and mercury, hashish, cayenne pepper, ether, or chloroform.<sup>10</sup> The quantity of medicine bottles may appear over-representative for workhouse residents, but the assemblage probably represents the treatment of dozens of residents over decades rather than constant medication.

#### *Food*

The workhouse residents were fed, as well as housed, as shown by a quantity of animal bone. These bones from the Period 6 assemblage largely come from sheep or goat and many are unfused, suggesting a preference for and access to tender meat. The presence of juvenile domestic fowl bones suggest birds were being bred on-site. Cod and goose are also present and would have been a welcome supplement to the everyday diet.

Parish rules provide historical

evidence of workhouse diets. St John's at Hackney stipulated, in the 1750s, a daily allowance of 7 ounces (oz) (200g) of meat, 2oz (57g) of butter, 4oz (114g) of cheese, 1lb (454g) of bread and 3 pints (1420ml) of beer.<sup>11</sup>

Portsea Parish gave an allowance of 2oz (57g) of tobacco per week in the 1790s,<sup>12</sup> which explains the presence of 78 complete tobacco pipe bowls in the Period 6 deposits at Bow Road. Two principal suppliers of pipes appear to have been used: John Jones at the end of the 18th century, and Henry Hodges in the 1820s. Both manufactured pipes locally, indicating the participation of the workhouse in the local economy.

*Other finds*

Dress accessories from the site comprise buttons and combs. Ten of the buttons found were made of copper alloy, including the example embossed with 'St Mary Stratford Bow Workhouse' <SF290> (Fig 4). A bone button with two crudely punched holes in the centre, <SF82>, may have been covered in cloth and a mother-of-pearl example, <SF83>, with four central holes is a basic shirt or dress example. Two incomplete tortoiseshell hair combs were found: one, <SF200> in (569), with fine teeth 25mm long, and a second larger example, <SF109> in (574), with crude, long teeth of 43mm.

Household tools were also recovered, including a bone apple corer or cheese-scoop <SF30>, with scratched decoration on both surfaces,

including initials reading either 'IW' or 'MI'. Parallels for this date to the early-mid-18th century,<sup>13</sup> so this example was old when it was deposited in the late 18th or early 19th century. Four knives were represented by their bone handles: <SF36>, <SF80>, <SF81> and <SF111>.

An intact pair of iron or steel scissors and two small thimbles, <SF20> and <SF87>, attest to needlework activities, while an exhausted iron tool – perhaps a heavy-duty carpenter's or mason's punch – indicate the more labour-intensive tasks of the workhouse inmates.

Four pointed writing styli – <SF89>, <SF90>, <SF99> and <SF124> – are all examples of children's slate pencils for use with a writing slate, and are indicative of lessons in writing or arithmetic being taught to the children of the workhouse.

Toys and ornaments are also present in the finds assemblage. A small refined white earthenware figure of a lion <SF133> was part of a larger ornament, and a small white earthenware bath, <SF201> from (544), is a toy from a doll's house. A blue ceramic inlay <SF97>, in the form of a lady's hand with decorated cuff (20mm in length) from a figurine, and a ceramic bottle marble <SF145> were probably also collected by the children.

**Conclusion**

Archaeological evidence from Bow Road has confirmed the location of the

site of the workhouse indicated on 19th-century maps. The cultural impact of the institution manifests itself through large quantities of pottery, animal bone and small personal and household objects within large pits and brick-lined features situated to the rear of the workhouse building.

While it is difficult to categorise these items as specifically belonging to the occupants of the workhouse, as opposed to occupants of nearby houses, it is noticeable that these are basic portable items rather than luxury items, made in cheaper materials, plausibly the property of a peripatetic community who carried their personal items about their person. Significantly, the ceramic assemblages containing Creamware and Pearlware would seem to be too high a status product to be associated with such an institution and were probably donated as gifts. The presence of locally produced pipes and medical products at the workhouse show that it held a place in Bow's local economy.

Objects from the workhouse also attest to the types of activities undertaken by its residents. Iron or steel scissors and two small thimbles are evidence of needlework activities, while a worn iron tool suggests that more labour-intensive tasks also took place here.

An assemblage of pharmaceutical phials provides insights into the treatment of medical conditions within the workhouse, while animal bone provides evidence of diet. Writing



Fig 5: late 18th- to 19th-century examples of Essex-type post-medieval fine redware paint pots (PMFR) (<SF207-210>) with paint residue *in situ*



Fig 6: late 18th- to 19th-century medicinal glass phials (<SF68>, <SF182>, <SF152>, <SF146>, <SF199>, <SF121>, <SF118-120> and <SF272>), and two examples of Dalby's Carminative bottles (<SF166> and <SF167>) (front: left and right)

styli and children's toys give an insight into the lives of the younger residents of the institution, suggesting that they were learning and playing, as well as working.

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