

# AN EARLY ROMAN OCCUPATION SITE AND PREHISTORIC FINDS AT WESTFERRY ROAD, ISLE OF DOGS, TOWER HAMLETS

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## SUMMARY

*Excavation in advance of development at Express Wharf on the Isle of Dogs by Thames Valley Archaeological Services has revealed traces of possible prehistoric settlement and certain Roman occupation concentrated in the 2nd century AD. The chronology of this settlement may provide support for the idea of falling water levels during the Roman period, allowing a previously inundated area to be exploited. Despite its small size, evidence of Roman occupation is important as no sites of this period have previously been discovered on the Isle of Dogs, the nearest site being that recently excavated at Shadwell (British Archaeology (March 2003)).*

## INTRODUCTION

Located on the east side of the River Thames abutting the contemporary river wall (Fig 1), the site lies on the Thames floodplain, with underlying geology of gravel capped by alluvium (BGS 1981). An evaluation (Ford 2001) following an earlier desktop study (Parry 2000) revealed the presence of a small portion of sand-capped terrace edge buried by alluvium. From the alluvium three sherds of Roman or probable Roman pottery were recovered, suggesting the potential for more substantial archaeological remains on the higher ground to the east.

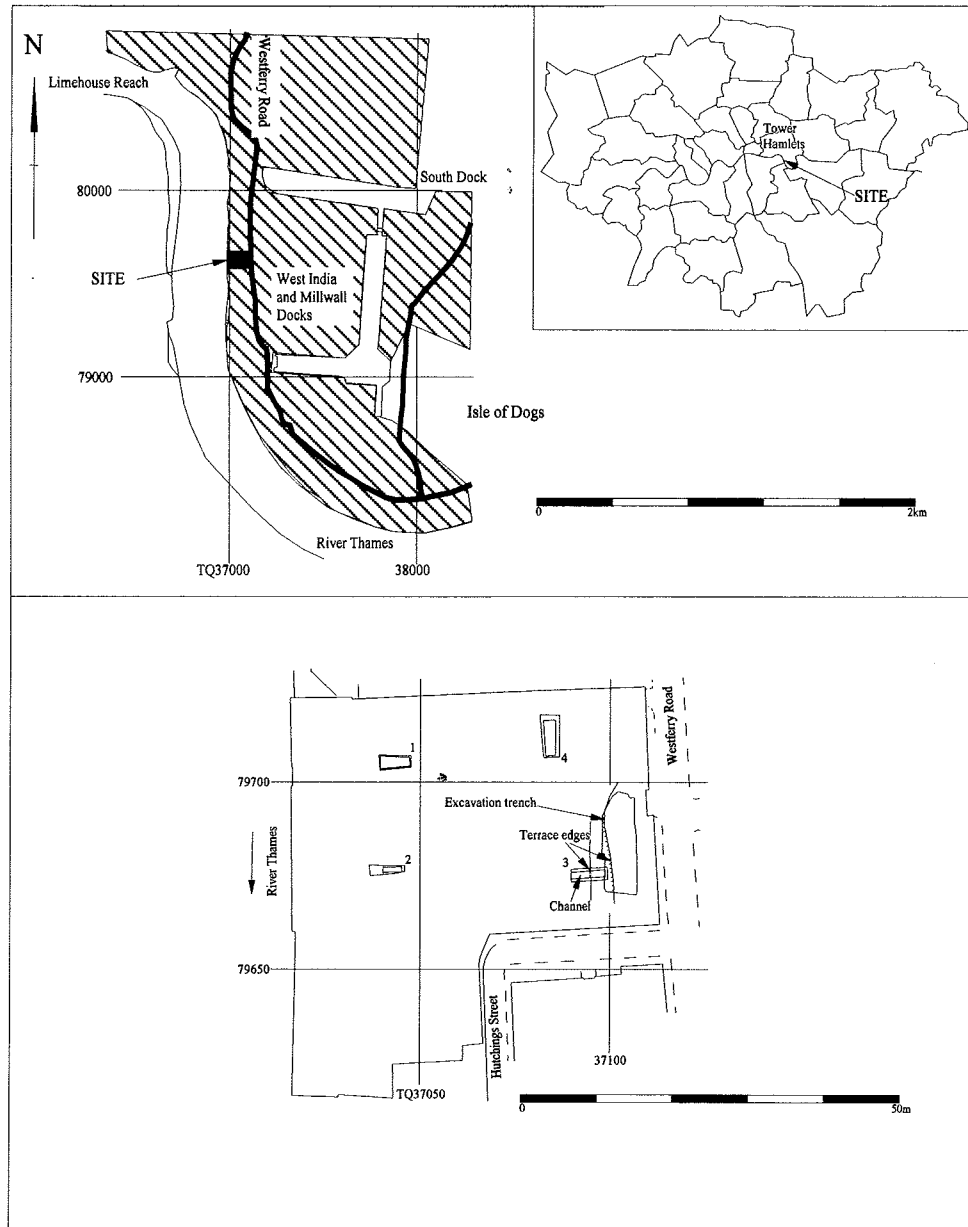
## ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Few sites of any period on the Isle of Dogs are

noted in the recent summary of *The Archaeology of Greater London* (MoLAS 2000). This absence was previously thought to be because the area was flooded: alluvium can reach thicknesses of 2m across the Isle of Dogs, and documentary evidence shows land reclamation from the Saxon period onwards. Occupation in earlier times was concentrated on small areas of high ground, and there is evidence for the linking of such areas with wooden trackways (Meddens 1996). Prehistoric occupation has previously been identified on the Isle of Dogs at Atlas Wharf to the south where Neolithic features and a preserved wooden platform or trackway of Bronze Age date were found (MoLAS 2000, 23), while Neolithic settlement features and a burial dated to 4220–3979 cal BC have recently come to light at Yabsley Street, Blackwall (Coles *et al* forthcoming). In contrast, there are no references to Iron Age or Roman deposits.

## THE EXCAVATION

The excavation comprised a single area of 325 sq m centred on the small area remaining of the terrace edge. The area was machine-stripped of overburden and alluvium to expose the top of the sand representing the terrace. The stratigraphy showed made ground over thick layers of brown silty alluvium; the natural sand capping the gravel terrace was revealed beneath this at a surprisingly shallow depth of between 1m and 0.8m AOD (Fig 3). The sinuous edge



*Fig 1. Location of site and areas investigated*

of the terrace was aligned more or less south-north, with at least two steps present, reflecting episodes of erosion. To the west, a much greater thickness of alluvium was present. The lower terrace step as observed in the initial evaluation trench (just to the west of the excavation area) revealed a channel cut into the natural gravel,

infilled with peat, overlain by blue-grey alluvium. A sample column through these deposits was taken for pollen analysis but revealed low levels of pollen preservation which suggested open country species throughout (Keith-Lucas in Ford 2001).

The upper terrace edge was overlain by a slump

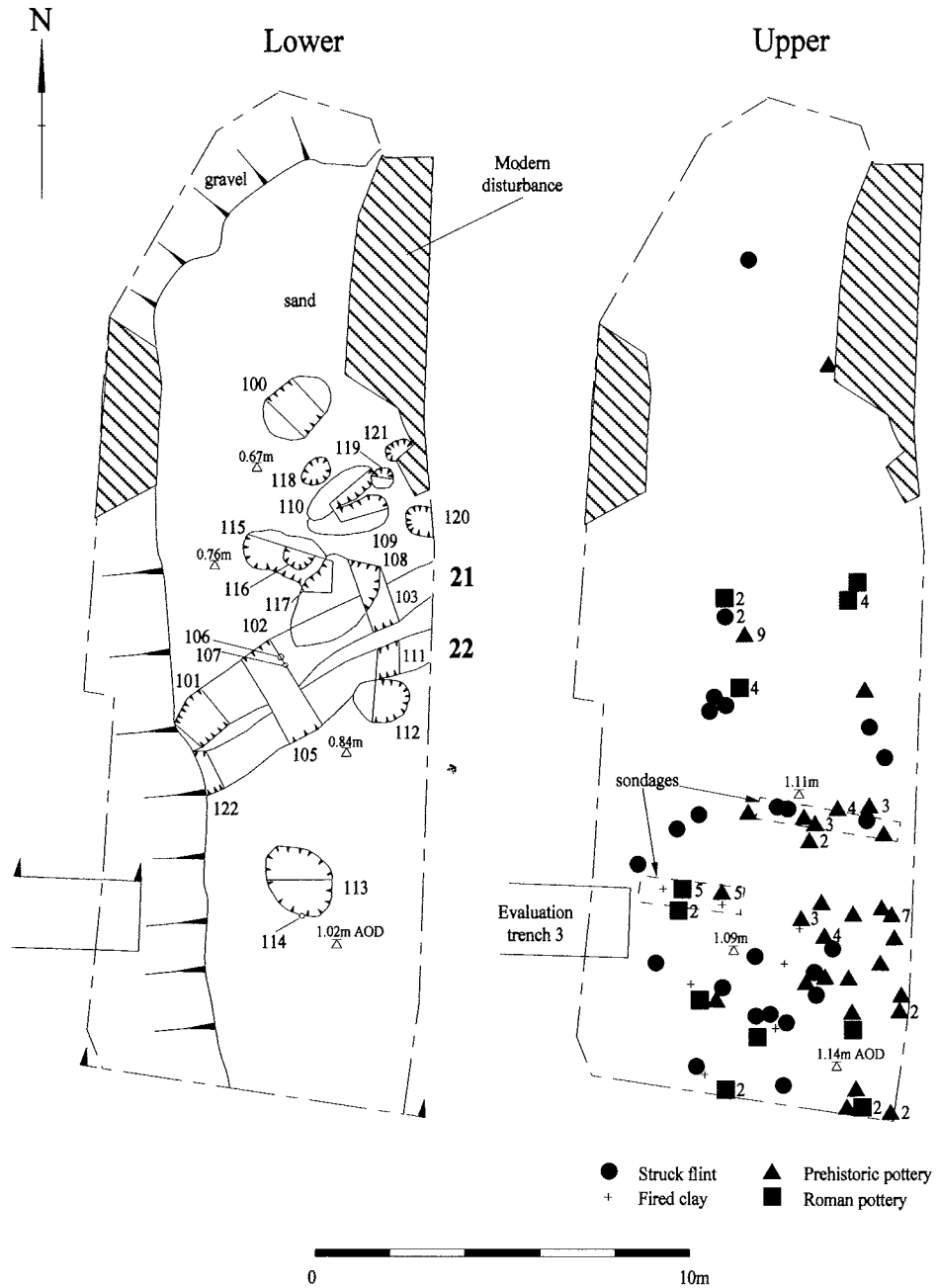
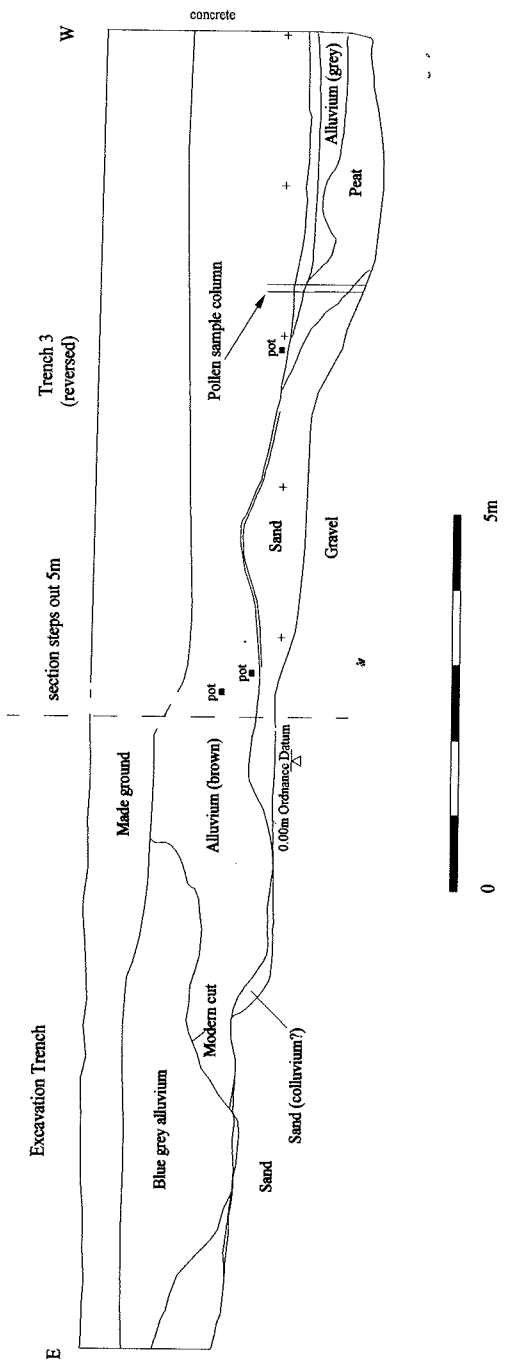


Fig 2. Detailed location of features and residual finds

of sand from which Roman pottery and metal objects were recovered and which represents either colluvium or a deposit reworked by the ebb and flow of water. This sand was overlain by brown alluvium which also covered the terrace

itself. During the final stages of the machine stripping, many stray finds were encountered in this alluvium just above the natural sand (Fig 2). This level was hand-cleaned and the artefacts recorded individually. No cut features



*Fig 3. Complete section of south end of excavation trench and reversed section of Evaluation Trench 3*

were observed at this level and the remaining alluvium was stripped further to reveal the sand-capped terrace, cut by several clearly visible archaeological features.

This phase of activity was represented by two parallel gullies (21, 22) aligned NE–SW, between 0.18m and 0.35m deep. Both disappeared at the western edge of the terrace; they may have terminated at this point but more probably had eroded away. Both had flat bases and curved sides and their fills included 2nd-century AD pottery and residual prehistoric finds. The relationship between the two gullies is unclear; although it is possible that one was slightly earlier, perhaps originating in the late 1st century AD, it is more likely that the two gullies were open and in use at much the same time. The gullies were cut by a tree bole and later pits and stakeholes.

Twelve pits (some little more than ‘scoops’) were identified, clustered around and mostly to the north of the gullies. Despite the presence of prehistoric pottery and struck flint on the site, it is clear that most of this material was residual in features unambiguously of Roman date. However, five pits and one ‘scoop’ which only (or mostly) produced prehistoric material may potentially be of prehistoric date. The number of sherds from each feature though is not large (no more than the six each from pits 100 and 116), nor is the condition of the sherds in these features markedly different from those which are clearly residual. The fragmented remains of a left rear leg from a horse were found on the surface of one of these pits (120).

Four pits were dated as Roman: 108, based purely on stratigraphy; 115 had 1st-century AD pottery (seven sherds from the same vessel); 100 contained a large piece of pottery dated to AD 50–160; and 113 was a circular pit with two fills dating between AD 120 and 160. Four undated, oval and relatively shallow pits (109, 110, 118,

119) seem likely to be contemporary with the Roman features.

Three stakeholes were clearly represented by their pointed profiles. Two cut one of the gullies and a third cut the upper fill of one of the Roman pits.

### Pottery

*Charlotte Thompson*

A total of 407 sherds weighing 1.6kg was recovered from 63 contexts. All of the individual context assemblages are small (up to 29 sherds) except those from gully slot 101 (152) and pit 113 (163 and 164) which are medium-sized (30 to 99 sherds). Generally, the sherds are in a poor condition being abraded and 20% of the sherds weigh 1g or less. Details of method, quantification and a full report are in the site archive.

The prehistoric pottery (120 sherds, 0.3kg) is almost entirely plain body sherds primarily in flint-tempered fabrics with very little decoration. Twelve different fabrics were distinguished in five groups; 82 sherds were flint-tempered and 38 vesicular. Fabric FLIN1 can be categorized as Neolithic plain ware. Three of the four sherds in this fabric came from pit 100, which may be of this date. Some rims with fingertip and fingernail impressions could date from the Neolithic to the late Bronze Age. The longevity of the fabrics in the London area hinders using them (other than FLIN1) to date the features especially closely. Beaded rims which occur throughout the prehistoric period were also present but badly eroded. Carbonated residue on one sherd indicates that the vessel has almost certainly been used for food preparation.

The Roman assemblage (285 sherds, 1.16kg, see Table 1) indicates activity from the 1st to 3rd centuries AD, with one third of the contexts having a latest date of AD 160. The majority

*Table 1. Roman pottery by fabric type*

Ware	No. of sherds	% of Roman assemblage
Amphora	4	1
Black-burnished ware type	3	1
Fine ware, imported	0	0
Fine ware, Roman	1	1
Fine ware, reduced	34	12
Oxidized wares	50	18
Reduced wares	143	50
Samian	15	5
Grog-tempered	35	12

of the fabrics date to the first half of the 2nd century AD. However, there is some evidence for 3rd- and 4th-century activity: an Oxfordshire white ware mortarium sherd and a stray find of Oxfordshire colour-coated ware, dated AD 270–400. The small percentage of grog-tempered wares (12%) suggests that the start date for the site is not particularly early, as these fabrics are most common in the 1st century AD in the London area.

It is interesting that just 6% of the fabrics are imported, including samian from east and central Gaul dating from the second half of the 1st century to the end of the 2nd century AD. Few diagnostic sherds were found, most being from jars or beakers (Table 2). With very few exceptions, the Roman pottery is very abraded, generally in far worse condition than the prehistoric pottery. Some of it is rounded on all surfaces, so it is possible that the rising and falling of the water table at this site has caused the heavy abrasion of the sherds.

Table 2. Roman pottery by form

Form	No. of sherds	% of Roman assemblage
Amphora	4	1
Flagon	3	1
Flagon/Jar	27	9
Jar	106	37
Jar/Beaker	34	12
Beaker	24	8
Bowl	7	2
Bowl/Dish	4	1
Dish	5	2
Cup	0	0
Mortarium	3	1
Miscellaneous	75	26

### Other finds

Other finds recovered include two pieces of glass from bottles, one dated between the mid-1st and the late 2nd century AD, an earring and a fragment of what appears to be a very simple penannular brooch of a type in use from the late Iron Age well into the Roman period. A 2nd-century AD date would be consistent with both items.

Small amounts of fired clay include one piece of a possible loomweight. A small collection of flints includes none which is especially chronologically distinctive. One flake was possibly serrated along one edge but lacked any gloss. If this piece was serrated, as opposed to accidentally

edge damaged, it is likely to be of Neolithic date. The single definite retouched piece, a small end scraper, is the only patinated piece, which suggests that it belongs to a different period from the other material; this form might be Mesolithic. The majority of the material, made from local gravel flint of indifferent quality using a hard hammer, is probably of later Neolithic or Bronze Age date.

A small collection of very fragmented and poorly preserved animal bone was found, all of which was heavily abraded. Species represented include horse, cattle, sheep/goat and one pig fragment, all expected domesticated species from a settlement site.

## CONCLUSION

### Prehistoric

Earlier prehistoric (that is Mesolithic through to the Bronze Age) occupation and use of the sand and gravel fringes of the lower Thames is a recurrent pattern in this region (Merriman 1992). The presence of a quantity of pottery and cut features suggests that the prehistoric activity was more intensive than mere casual use and can be taken to indicate occupation here or close by. The varied dating of the pottery and the condition of some of the flint suggest repeated use of a favoured topographic location over many years with some specific areas being occupied more intensively than others at different times. Considering that excavations at Atlas Wharf, south of the present site, yielded just one prehistoric sherd, tentatively dated to the Late Bronze Age, it is noteworthy that this site contained so many prehistoric sherds.

### Roman

Much research has taken place into the variations of the height of sea level relative to the Thames waterfront, particularly during the Roman period. This has established a pattern of slowly rising water levels up to the 1st century AD (Milne *et al* 1983). At this time the general level of high tide is estimated at 1m–1.25m above OD or even up to 1.3m AOD (Yule 1988, 15). Subsequently, the evidence points to a general lowering of water levels that continued until the 4th century AD (Brigham 1990). These estimates can be compared to the occupied levels on this site which are present at 0.7m–1.0m AOD. The evidence for the Roman activity on the Westferry

Road site, taking place from the late 1st century AD onwards, supports this chronology. It is possible that the site was occasionally flooded in the earliest years of the Roman period, but that a subsequent lowering of the high tide level would have made the site dry land and viable for normal use.

The main Roman use of the site appears to be concentrated in the 2nd century AD, perhaps extending into the 3rd century. The pits and gullies suggest an occupied area in the near vicinity, though no structural remains were found. The features continue out of the excavation area to the east suggesting that further deposits may lie in that direction. The western and northern limits of the site are defined by the edge of a river channel and it is probable that some erosion of deposits by the river has occurred in these areas. Finds from the site are not exceptional, with few imports, but the presence of some glass and metal objects suggests a personal/domestic setting with a degree of sophistication. The deposits presumably reflect the presence of a farm and the small collection of faunal remains shows the usual domesticated species. Unfortunately no charred plant remains other than charcoal were recovered to allow the further examination of economic and consumption patterns.

It is likely that rising water levels led to the abandonment of the site and the few sherds of later pottery provide a possible date for this. The subsequent history of the site is one of inundation leading to the deposition of a great depth of alluvium. It was not until late post-medieval times that further intensive activity took place, with the building of industrial works (Parry 2000).

The discovery of this site has important implications for future fieldwork and research in the area, as it has considerably expanded knowledge of both the prehistoric and Roman periods. Although the site reported here is small, it implies more settlement waiting to be discovered in the immediate vicinity. It is possible that this site was exploiting a niche in the environment and occupying a very small area of higher ground such as a gravel 'island' or perhaps a levee along the banks of the river in an area which was otherwise frequently inundated. However, it is also possible that lower river levels overall could have allowed widespread Roman activity on the Isle of Dogs at this time. If so, the

dislocation of settlement in later Roman times due to a new rise in water levels would have been all the greater. The nature of activity in both periods is unclear from this small excavation but this evidence does enhance the knowledge of both prehistoric archaeology in the area and study of the hinterland of Roman London.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of everyone involved in the project. Helen Moore, Emma Tutin, Andy Taylor, and Andy Mundin assisted on site; Andy Mundin also helped prepare the figures. Steve Ford reported on the flints, Sian Anthony on the animal bone, and Angela Wardle on the small finds. Nick Truckle monitored the project for GLAAS. The entire project, including this publication, was funded by St James Homes. The help provided by Paul McGibbon and Neil Ramsdale of St James Homes is especially appreciated. The site code is WYO01 and the archive will be deposited with the Museum of London.

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