? LONDON (LO)

14-38 Albany Road
London SE5

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Archaeological Assessment

Oxford Archaeological Unit
February 1990

INTRODUCTION

Between January and February 1990, the Oxford Archaeological Unit carried out an assessment on behalf of Thames Property Developments Limited. The aim was to assess the archaeological potential of an area for redevelopment in the Walworth/Bermondsey district of south-east London (figure 1).

The site at present is vacant, and for the most part under turf. The proposed development is for a five storey block of flats with a frontage facing Albany Road and car parking to the rear.

GEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The area was tested by drilling three boreholes, each 150 mm in diameter, to a depth of 20 m. The tests showed that the underlying natural subsoils comprised Thanet sands, Woolwich and Reading Beds overlying gravel. These deposits occurred at 4.0 m below topsoil with made ground and humic sands above.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

No previous archaeological work has been undertaken on the present site. However, numerous projects have been carried out by the Museum of London's D.G.L.A. in the surrounding area.

At the Old Bricklayers Arms railway yard, located approximately 400 m north-east of Albany Road, work in 1987 revealed well preserved wooden platforms and evidence of a large marsh, possibly indicating settlements on stilts dating to the Bronze Age. Several finds of Roman date have been recovered along both sides of the Old Kent Road, formerly a major Roman arterial road called Watling Street. Latterly the site was near the spot of the municipal gallows.

ASSESSMENT STRATEGY

The proposed building development consists of a piled foundation with the piles covering approximately 5% of the ground. To the north the area is designated for car parking which is not a threat to archaeological remains.

The aim of the assessment was to sample the concentrated areas of deep piling, to locate the line of the Earls Sluice (figure 2), and to clarify the presence or absence and quality of any archaeological remains.

The method involved digging four trenches with a 360° excavator. Two trenches were located to the west of the area, both measuring 5.0 x 5.0 m and set 6.0 m apart, while Trenches 3 and 4 were positioned to the south, fronting Albany Road with the specific aim of cutting across the anticipated course of the Earls Sluice. Both of these latter trenches measured 5 x 10 m and were set 25 m apart. Trench 3 was later enlarged on its north-western edge by a further 5.0 x 5.0 m to include an area of dense piling close to the western corner.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS

TRENCH 1

This was machined to a depth of 2 m and the Victorian and pre-Victorian deposits were removed. A further 200 mm comprising several humic levels was then removed to a total depth from topsoil of 2.20 m, [0.35 m OD]. At this point a bed of hard clay was encountered, mechanical excavation stopped and the area carefully examined and cleaned by hand.

TRENCH 2

All Victorian occupation was removed by machine to a depth of 1.20 m. Subsequent humic deposits were also removed revealing strata identical to Trench 1 with an archaeological feature in the south-west corner. A further 2.0 x 1.0 m test trench was machine dug in the centre of the area to determine the top of the natural geological levels, this occurred at 0.09 m OD.

TRENCH 3

Slightly different Victorian material from that found in Trenches 1 & 2 was machined to a depth of 1.01 m. Pre-Victorian humic soils encountered were mechanically excavated to a depth from topsoil of 1.41 m. Below this a deep archaeological sequence of layers complete with features was observed, recorded and removed to a total depth of 2.22 m, [0.22 m OD] At this point the excavation was stopped at a prehistoric level, cleaned and recorded.

TRENCH 4

Victorian activity was removed to a depth of 2m. Scant humic soils to a total depth of 2.20 m [0.19 m OD] were machined out and the excavation stopped on a flat clay level similar to Trenches 1 and 2, with an archaeological feature mid-way across the area.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

VICTORIAN

All four trenches had dense Victorian occupation represented by building rubble and pottery. Trenches 1 and 2 were very disturbed and mixed, presumably consisting of redeposited material laid after action during World War II. Trench 3 had a property boundary wall (figure 5, feature 1) two courses thick with remnants of a basement and backfilled debris to the north (figure 5, layer 2) and humic levels, probably gardens, to the south (figure 5, layer 3). This was similar in design to surviving buildings along Cobourg Road (next road parallel to Albany road). Trench 4 had deep basements fronting Albany road, built of brick in two long narrow chambers and backfilled not only with Victorian to 1940s material, but also very modern debris indicating a quite recent structure occupying the spot.

The deep basement of Trench 4 had virtually wiped out all earlier archaeological levels.

EARLY MEDIEVAL - LATE 1700s

All the striated, very silty humic levels evident in each of the four trenches were devoid of features. This complete dearth of any tangible archaeological features in quite organic humic silts suggests that from the post-Roman period until quite recently the area was under grass, open scrubland or small scale cultivation in a fairly rural setting. A scene typifying the conditions is recorded on a map of 1746 by John Rocque. The landscape since the departure of the Romans was probably built up from various floodings or movement of the Earls Sluice, a water channel running south-west to north-east. The line of this water course probably runs under the present Albany Road, under the Old Kent Road and towards the Bricklayers Arms, possibly explaining the naming of Earls Road, which runs west to east at the northern terminating point of Albany Road.

ROMAN (figure 3)

No Roman activity of any kind was evident in Trenches 1, 2 & 4. Trench 3, however, produced a quantity of Roman pottery and some fragments of building material (figure 5, layer 4). The material was deposited in a band approximately .06 m wide running west to east along the northern edge of the trench. It was not contained within an archaeological feature, but overlaid a flood deposit associated with a man-made gully to the south (figure 5, feature 6). This dumped material possibly formed a rudimentary path along the marsh. The gully was partially in the southern edge of the trench, and ran west to east across the area, cutting earlier flood deposits, and a substantial layer of extremely peaty material (figure 5, layer 7). The gully itself had a very organic fill as a result of the marsh area having been flooded (figure 5, layer 5). This fill consisted of well preserved plant material, which was sampled by Dr Mark Robinson of the University Museum Environmental Unit, Oxford. He identified the plant remains as being associated with a marsh/bog environment, the result of the marsh area having been flooded (figure 5, layer 5). The inference to be drawn from these features is that during the Roman period and earlier the area was heavily waterlogged. The gully probably represents a Roman attempt at draining the area and is likely to be part of a much larger system of gullies and dykes. The gully has silted up and flooded, depositing material to the north in the form of silts.

PRE-ROMAN

Underlying the Roman activity in all four areas was an extensive amount of marsh silts and clays. Trenches 1, 2 and 4 contained the same sequence of strata, primarily a layer of clay striated with silts (figure 4, layer 11) overlying bandings of peat, sealing sand and natural gravel. Trench 3 revealed a separate sequence of water borne deposits. These were bandings of various

coloured clays (figure 5, layer 8) and silts sealing a bed of fine sand striated with gravel (figure 5, layer 9). The sand contained a vast quantity of well preserved organic remains, mostly roots of marsh plants and reeds. Cutting this to the north, and orientated west to east, was a shallow man-made gully (figure 4, feature 10) filled with dark silt and a mass of water-carried twigs. This shallow gully meandered westwards and was located in Trench 2 (figure 4, feature 12) cutting the upper levels of the clay and in Trench 4 to the east (figure 4, feature 13).

The immediate conclusion one can draw is that this early level was part of a reeded marsh, possibly forming part of the landscape connected to the prehistoric swamp and settlement at Bricklayers Arms to the north.

The man-made feature is possibly part of a complex of small dykes representing an early attempt to drain the marsh. This feature appears to have been blocked by woodland material causing successive floods and depositions of silts and clays (figure 5). The date of the earliest drainage gully is uncertain. It is likely to be late prehistoric, although this could be confirmed by radiocarbon dating.

INTERPRETATION

14 to 38 Albany Road was formerly part of a prehistoric landscape. The area was predominantly waterlogged with clusters of marsh reed and a possible submerged sandbank located in Trench 3. There was an early attempt at draining the area, possibly during the Iron Age. The system failed and various waterlaid deposits built up the surrounding area. During the Roman period there was another attempt at regulating the swamp. This also became overwhelmed and created an even distribution of silts over a wide area. A remnant of the Roman system may have formed the basis of Earls Sluice, a watercourse recorded in use up to 1746. The fertile land surrounding the dyke was developed in the Victorian period into housing, subsequently destroyed in the last war. Post-war usage has been varied with small scale commercial activity until the time of the present archaeological evaluation.

IMPLICATIONS

The archaeological assessment has shown that the southern area of the site designated for the proposed building consists of a marshy deposit. Two drainage ditches, probably of late prehistoric and Romano-British date, show that attempts were made to drain the area. The Earls Sluice probably ran to the south-east and was a later phase of this same process.

The proposed building will overlie this marshy area and the remaining piles outside the assessment trenches will not inflict significant damage. The present work has provided a clear sequence of the processes and human activities in the area.

Further archaeological excavation is unlikely to contribute additional information of any value.

The area to the north of the proposed building is designated for car parking, which will not have an impact on deeply buried deposits. Trench 1 indicated that the marsh did not extend this far north; it did not contain archaeological features and the biological evidence does not indicate intensive human activity in the area adjacent to the marsh. However, in view of the car park proposal, this area was not assessed in detail. If at any stage a change of use was intended which could have an impact on deeply buried deposits then further archaeological assessment would be desirable.

In view of the nature of the archaeological deposits and the limited impact of the proposed building, it is not considered necessary to carry out further excavation. A detailed report including analyses of environmental samples and radiocarbon samples should be produced for publication in an appropriate journal and finds and records deposited with the appropriate museum.

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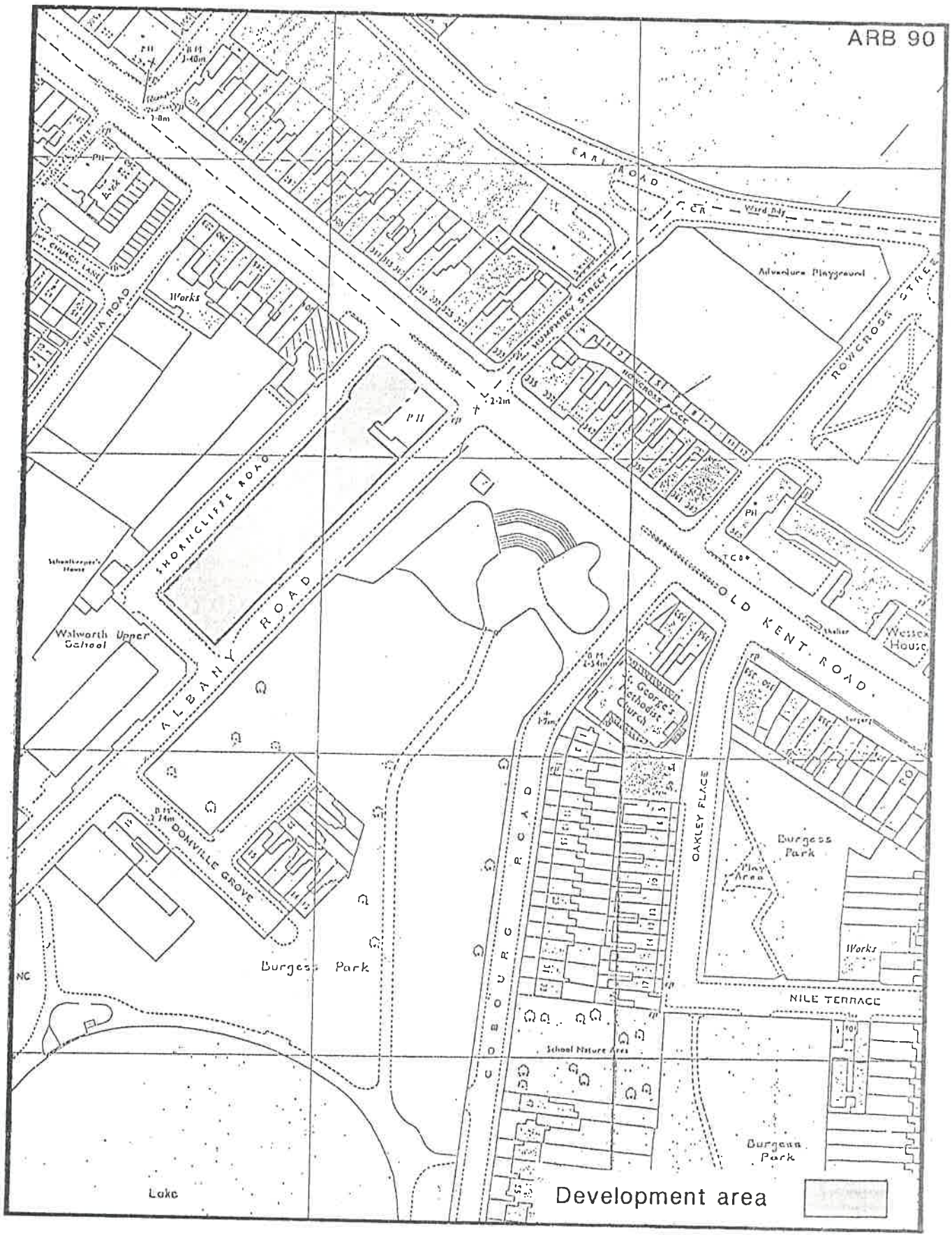

Fig. 1 Site location plan.