The Roman road

The Olympic Park lies just five kilometres north-east of Londinium (London) – the capital of the Roman province in Britain – it spans the line of the Roman road from Londinium to the fort, colonia (an outpost of the Roman Empire) and former capital at Camulodunum (Colchester). Because the location of the road on the west side of the River Lea is well known from earlier excavations, a close arrangement of evaluation trenches was excavated within the Park in the hope of determining its precise line across the valley, and discovering where it crossed the river.

Roman roads

Roman roads, with their characteristically straight lines and robust construction, are one of the main surviving legacies of the Roman occupation of Britain (AD 43–410). Their construction started soon after the Romans arrived and, although primarily military in function, they would have radically changed the way the wider population moved through and exploited the landscape.

A series of roads radiated out from Londinium, running to Camulodunum – recorded as Iter V and Iter XI in the Antonine Itinerary – leaving the north-east corner of the capital through the Roman gate at Aldgate, then following the line of what is now Whitechapel Road.

A number of excavations further east – including at Lefevre Walk Estate, Old Ford, just before the road reached the River Lea – have picked up its line, dated to about AD 50. This has allowed its likely course to be projected across the valley, passing right through the Park.

The road’s precise line on the east side of the valley has not been so securely established, although one possibility is that it underlies Romford Road, where observations in a utility trench in 1963 revealed two metalled surfaces. However, its course is only easily traceable once it reaches Ilford, where it is presumed to follow the straight line of the High Street.

The excavations

Numerous archaeological evaluation trenches – many in dense and overlapping arrangements – were laid out over the full potential range of the road’s course across the valley. These arrangements created a very high probability that any surviving traces of the road would be revealed. Despite these concerted efforts, no evidence for the road was found during the Park excavations, nor were any of the features often associated with Roman roads, such as roadside ditches.

In fact, very little evidence was found within the Park for any type...
of activity during the Roman period. A sinuous Roman ditch – partly following the line of an earlier, Iron Age enclosure – was excavated close to the expected line of the road near the eastern side of the valley. Also, a small number of other features were recorded in other trenches; and few finds of Roman date were recovered – a couple of coins and a small assemblage of pottery, but little more.

**Where is the road?**
Apart from the absence of evidence for the Roman road, the limited nature of the other finds from this period in the Park should perhaps be not surprising. After all, the environmental and geoarchaeological evidence indicates that much of the valley was wet and marshy grassland. Later this was probably exploited, mainly as marginal farmland from scattered farmsteads and villa estates – not as a location for settlement.

There is, however, no shortage of evidence for Roman activity off the valley floor – that is, outside the Park. Previous excavations revealed, for example, a Roman settlement at Old Ford, possibly used as an interchange point between road and river traffic. There were timber buildings forming a fairly substantial ribbon development dating from the first century AD. A large quantity of cattle bone with evidence of butchery, together with numerous coins, suggest this may have been a market settlement playing a role in provisioning Londinium.

Explaining away the lack of any trace of the road within the valley, however, is not quite so easy. From prehistory until the present day, the river has flowed through the flood plain of the lower Lea Valley within a number of channels. This would have required more than one crossing point, some may simply have been fords, perhaps reinforced by stones and gravel laid on the channel bed. However, the valley’s marshy conditions could have made that type of crossing ill-suited to the heavy, military traffic such a strategic road was designed to carry. It seems more likely that the road’s crossing of the valley included lengths of raised causeway, as well as bridges and possibly raised timber walkways.

Roman roads are renowned for their straightness, regardless of the shape of the landscape they crossed. However, it is possible the route of the road diverged from the straight line originally surveyed across the valley, and followed an irregular, island-hopping course, linking areas of drier land. This course may also have changed over time as ground conditions varied.

A final possibility is that the road has simply not survived to the present day, having been erased from the landscape (at least at the trench locations) by later activity. The road at Old Ford does not appear to have been maintained after around AD 400. In the medieval period, the river crossing was moved south to the line of the present High Street, linking Bow and Stratford. Like many other stretches of abandoned Roman road across the country, the old Roman road may have simply been ploughed away during the many centuries of post-Roman agricultural use, or obliterated by later industrial developments.