



Above:— The stoke hole of the Caldarium.

Roman House and Bath at Billingsgate

By PETER MARSDEN

IN 1848 the Coal Exchange was being built at Billingsgate in Lower Thames Street, and during the excavations part of a Roman bath building was discovered. One of the rooms, the *tepidarium*, was preserved by the Corporation of London through the then City Architect, Mr. J. B. Bunning. Although access to the bath was difficult it has proved to be a most interesting survival of the Roman city of London.

A group of warehouses were built next to the Coal Exchange in 1859 and much more of the bath was discovered, including the *cald-*

arium and *frigidarium*. These were preserved beneath the modern basement floors but could not be seen by the public.

The Coal Exchange and the warehouses had to be demolished recently for road widening of Lower Thames Street, and in 1968 members of the City of London Archaeological Society were able to start exposing the Roman bath once again and to excavate the surrounding area. It has now been discovered that it was a private bath suite attached to a large private residence which stood beside the Roman waterfront. This is the first time that there has been a chance to

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excavate a considerable part of a private Roman dwelling in London, and the opportunity is being well used.

Two wings of the house have been discovered, each bounded by a corridor. The corridor in the east wing (8) had a plain red mosaic floor, and beside it there was a range of living rooms, one of which was centrally heated by a channelled hypocaust (9).

So far the excavation has merely removed the rubble layer which resulted from the destruction of the building and overlay the floors. Most of this comprises smashed roof tiles which evidently slid off or fell through the rafters at the end of the 4th or beginning of the 5th centuries. We have been trying to discover the fate of the house, and are trying to establish whether it was deliberately destroyed, or just abandoned so that weather action gradually eroded the walls. So far we have found no sign of the house having been burnt down, and at present it seems most likely that it was merely abandoned. Beneath the layer of smashed roof tiles we have found many fragments of green translucent window glass.

Coins give a clue

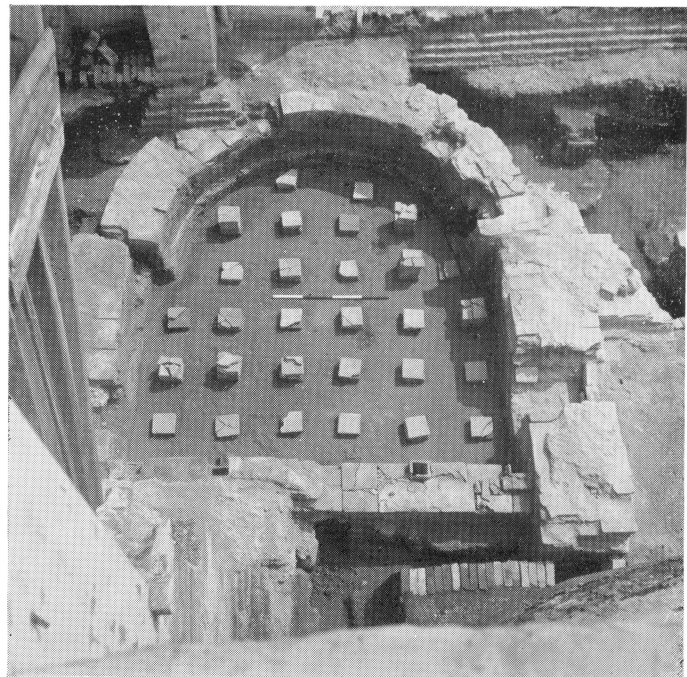
A few fragments of 4th century Roman pottery have been found with the roof tiles, showing that the house continued in use until the late Roman period; but particularly exciting is a group of 241 bronze coins found in a stone-lined pit (10)—possibly a urinal—under the rubble layer. These coins must have been thrown into the pit before the roof collapsed and, as the latest coins were minted after A.D. 395 they prove that the house was occupied at least until the last fifteen years of the Roman occupation of Britain. This discovery is vitally important for it is the latest definite evidence for Roman occupation in London. By A.D. 410 the structure of the Roman

administration in Britain had collapsed and the Roman legions were never to return.

The coins were scattered over the floor, and do not seem to have been in any container. It is almost as if they were thrown in by the handful, and it is not easy to explain why this was done. A *possible* explanation is that during the late 4th century, when Saxon barbarians were raiding this poorly defended Roman province, the coins were hurriedly thrown into the pit by a member of the household to hide them during a time of great danger. It is especially significant that the coins were not recovered, and, as we shall see, other possible evidence of danger overtaking the household was discovered in the adjacent bath suite.

Central heating

The very fine bath suite was enclosed by the two wings of the house and there are some indications that it was built some time after the house itself. Like all Roman baths, it was rather like a modern Turkish bath, with rooms of varying degrees of heat. It was entered by walking along a short passage (12) from the



Right:— Aerial view of the caldarium showing pila and the vertical flues. On the right is part of the frigidarium.

Billingsgate

north wing of the house, and through a doorway into a small room (2) with a plain red mosaic floor. This room gave access to the three main rooms of the bath. A doorway on the south side led through into the *frigidarium* (4), or cold room, in which bathers cooled off after their hot bath and were massaged. This too had a plain red mosaic floor, but at a later date a new floor, of pink cement, was laid over the earlier floor which had become worn and cracked.

Room (1) was the *tepidarium* or warm room which had under-floor central heating. Here the bather could relax on a brick-built seat for two people while his body became adjusted to the new temperature. Finally he entered the *caldarium* or hot steam room (3). To create steam, water was poured upon the floor, which was heated below, and significantly the door sill projected above the floor levels of rooms (2) and (3) presumably to retain excess water lying on the floor. The bather then returned to the *frigidarium*, via the *tepidarium*, gradually adjusting to the normal temperature. After oils had been rubbed into his skin he stood in the cold water bath (5) and splashed cold water over himself to close his skin pores.

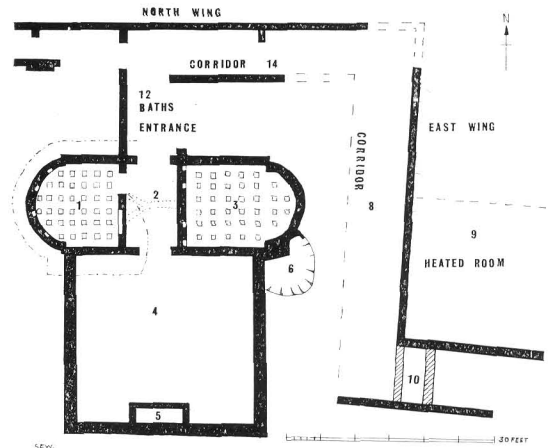
Especially interesting is the central heating system. Heat was produced in the furnace (6) and was drawn by a draught through a flue into a chamber beneath the *caldarium* floor (3). It was then drawn through a second flue under the passage (2) to a chamber beneath the *tepidarium* (1). The draught was created by four chimney-like flues, built in each of the west

CAESAR'S CAMP, WIMBLEDON

An inscribed stone slab, the gift of the John Evelyn Society, explaining the history of Caesar's Camp, Wimbledon Common, was unveiled by the Mayor of Merton on October 18.

In 1950 an earlier tablet was set up but after several years it was cracked in two by vandals and had to be patched. Last year vandals struck again, breaking the stone into small fragments.

In 1937 the Metropolitan Water Board cut a 5ft. wide trench across the site which produced some interesting sections, postholes and eight sherds of pottery. On structural analogy and pottery analysis the camp has been dated to Iron Age 'A'. The old stone tablet ascribed the camp to the Bronze Age and opportunity has now been taken to set the record right.



A provisional block plan of two wings of the house and adjoining bath so far uncovered.

walls of rooms 1 and 3, in which the hot air naturally rose before being expelled into the atmosphere outside.

The small size of this bath is sufficient to show that it was privately owned, but its owners must have been very wealthy men—perhaps city merchants or high government officials. Fortunately the bath building is to be preserved in its entirety by the City Corporation through the present City Architect, Mr. E. G. Chandler, and will be the only Roman bath on view to the public in the London area.

A considerable amount of dating evidence has now been recovered from the bath, and a preliminary examination of this shows that it was probably built during the 2nd century, and continued to be used as a bath during the 4th century. In the *frigidarium* there were possible signs of a hasty departure from the building at the end of the Roman period, for on the pink mortar floor we found 18 bronze coins lying together where they had been dropped. They were all badly corroded, but several have been identified showing that they were lost after A.D. 388, and stratigraphically the group should be roughly contemporary with the coins in the stone-lined pit described earlier.

On this site we have begun to find unique evidence of the end of Roman London, and have the opportunity to discover the major part of the residence of a wealthy Roman citizen, thanks to the co-operation of the Corporation of London and the Ancient Monuments Department of the Ministry of Public Building and Works.