

ROMAN LONDON BRIDGE

By GRAHAM DAWSON

IT HAS LONG been an important archaeological objective in Southwark and the City to locate the position of the Roman bridge across the Thames either directly or by finding the road leading up to it. Traces of it were claimed at Talbot Yard¹, 199 Borough High Street and Swan Street², Elephant and Castle³ and under Newington Causeway⁴, though none of these have been particularly convincing. In 1967 extensive excavations were carried out for the Southwark Archaeological Excavation Committee and Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society by Barry Beeby on a site close to the southern approaches to Old London Bridge which was believed

to be the site of the Roman one too. Again, however, the excavations were inconclusive.

In 1969, never daunted, the two bodies returned to the task by excavating a small area immediately next to the site excavated in 1967 which was known to lie directly under the medieval bridge approach and a small trial trench was put down on the other side of London Bridge Approach in Montague Close to test the potentialities of this area. The results of these two excavations are described below.

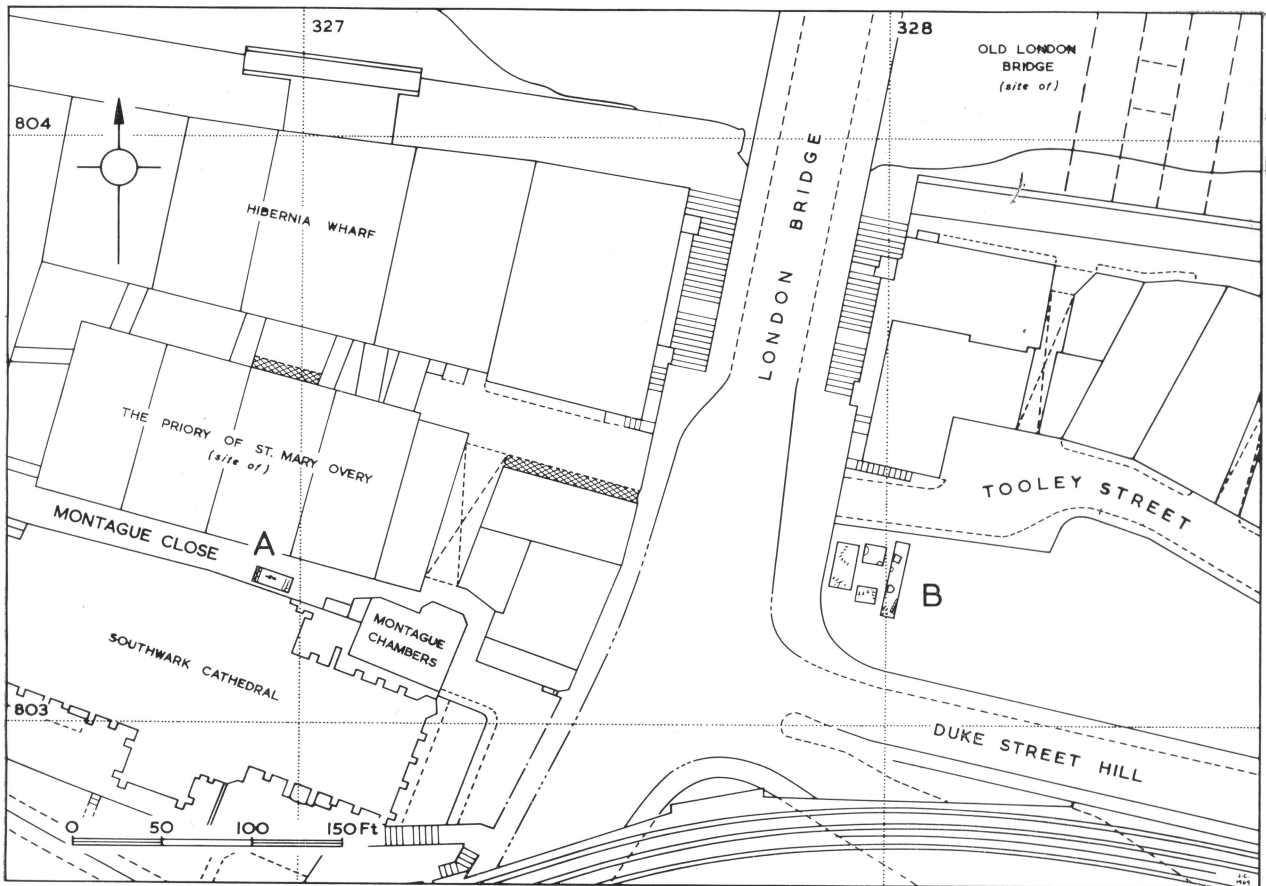
Both sites lay on a brown clay which had a level surface at about 4½ feet O.D. On the London Bridge site this was shown to overlie gravel whose top was about 3 feet O.D. though its surface seemed to be very irregular. This clay is natural and occurs elsewhere in Southwark and Lambeth overlying or filling hollows in the gravel surface. It should not be confused with the recently deposited river clays.

On the London Bridge site, occupation layers above this clay were only found in one place where two thin 1st century layers survived. Elsewhere all

1. *Surrey Arch Collect* 52 (1950-51) 80.
2. K. M. Kenyon, *Excavations in Southwark* (1959) 29.
3. *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 20 (1959-61) 170.
4. *Survey of London* 25 1.



Aerial view of the northern half of the London Bridge site ('B' on Plan) showing Roman pits and the ditch together with modern disturbances.



Plan showing trenches excavated in 1969 and their relationship to London Bridge

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the Roman occupation layers had been removed by the cellars dug in the 19th and 20th centuries. Therefore only the Roman features which were cut into the natural clay survived. These comprised seven pits, all of which appear to be early Roman, that is, late 1st or 2nd century. Two of the pits were square, three round and the others of indescribable shapes. One of the round pits was cut into by a square one and must therefore pre-date it. None of the pits survived in their entirety but it would seem that the square pits contained considerably more rubbish than the circular ones which contained quantities of either gravel or clay in their filling. Of the two peculiarly shaped ones, one was otherwise similar to the square ones while the other had a large quantity of domestic rubbish stratified between layers of clay and on one side had a stake hole at each end. Along the western edge of the site was a feature which was termed a ditch because that was the nearest approximation to it, but its sides and base were very irregular. It appeared to be "L" shaped with its one arm filled with largely sterile gravel but with layers of occupation debris in the top while its other arm was com-

pletely filled with domestic rubbish in huge quantities. There was also a shallow "V" shaped ditch running east-west which appears to be the earliest feature on the site stratigraphically. The only late feature was a square, partly wood-lined, well which was filled in with almost solid domestic rubbish, in the 4th century.

There was a conspicuous lack of any post-Roman material earlier than the 19th century except for one black glazed jug, and probably the front of a cellar originally built in chalk but later rebuilt, probably twice, in brick. This almost certainly belongs to a medieval or post-medieval structure fronting on to the approach to Old London Bridge and the reason for the lack of material of this date is that all the rest of the site lay underneath the roadway. This shows that even where the road has been completely destroyed, as in this case, one can still detect it by the negative evidence.

At Montague Close, immediately overlying the natural clay, was the gravel of a road, and no features here cut into the clay. Where it survived in its

entirety, the gravel of the road was five feet three inches high and had eight or nine surfaces in it, some of which were clearly cambered, and at the eastern edge a probable roadside ditch. On top of the road was a post hole and possibly some scarping at the edge, which were filled in by a thin black layer which contained only Roman pottery but is probably post-Roman in date. Above this was a make-up of earth with delftware waste material of 17th century in date supporting a rough stone floor. Elsewhere the top of the road was disturbed, firstly by two late medieval burials, the one disturbing the other, and secondly by three superimposed basements, each floored in either stone (the upper two) or brick and clinker (the lowest). The lowest had two steps surviving leading down to it, and it is likely that the other two had steps also which had been destroyed. There was evidence of burning, especially on the lower two floors, and they are all probably the ends of rectangular delftware kilns. Filling the latest of these was a pure dump of kiln material with the admixture of hardly any domestic rubbish at all. Overlying this and the floor was a deep layer containing large quantities of delftware waste material mixed with domestic refuse. Underlying it, at the end of the trench to the east of the Roman road, was a massive late 12th century wall running north from the Sacristy of the Priory of St. Mary Overie. Lying on the top of the make-up layer was a curved brick drain of the 18th century.

Apart from the large amount of material connected

with the delftware kilns, Montague Close only produced a little Roman material from the roadside ditch and layer on top of the road. But the London Bridge site produced a huge amount of Roman pottery, bones and shells with a little glass and very few metal objects including a few heavily corroded coins. It is, of course, much too early to be able to say much about this material since the majority has still not been washed or marked, still less analysed. But, from observation of it during excavation, it would seem to have certain features which suggests that some at least of it is not derived from ordinary domestic households but perhaps from some types of commercial establishments. The finds do, on the whole, suggest a fairly high standard of living, and particularly striking are the number of Samian vessels with pottery stamps, and four or five sherds of green glazed Roman pottery. The rarity of coins is therefore the more surprising, but is probably due to the conditions of the environment causing them to corrode away except for the odd one.

Finding the Roman road is undoubtedly one of the most significant discoveries to have been made in Southwark, but its implications will be discussed more extensively in a second part in the next issue. But this was not, by any means, the only find of especial importance. The London Bridge site produced one of the largest corpus of early Roman material to come from Southwark and it is hoped that the faunal material, which was sedulously collected, will tell us much more about the diet and food in-

**London Bridge site.
Shallow Roman ditch of
1st century, the earliest
feature on the site.**



dustries in Roman London. At Montague Close the massive medieval wall is almost certainly the east wall of the Chapter House of the Priory of St. Mary Overie, which the extant moulding on the north wall of the Harvard Chapel shows to be late 12th century in date when the apsidal chapel on the north transept was squared off⁵. From its position the burial is probably that of one of the Priors of St. Mary Overie⁶ and since it contained tiles with a plain glaze, presumably from the floor of the Chapter House, he was probably one of the later priors. It is hoped that future excavations in the area will produce more information about the domestic buildings of the Priory.

Important information was produced about the delftware industry of the area, but again it was most

5. *Royal Commission on Historical Monuments; London* 58ff.

6. Gilyard Beer, *Abbeys* (1958) 28.

useful in showing the potential of the site for only the ends of the three possible superimposed delftware kilns were found but complete excavation may be possible in the near future. Even so, they show that the kilns are rectangular like the only other known example (Norfolk House, Lambeth) described in the last number. But here much more of the kilns survive than at Lambeth and show that at least one, and probably all three kilns had steps down to what is presumably the firebox, as in mid-18th century illustrations of French faience kilns. The dating of the kilns has not yet been worked out, but one of them is certainly late-17th century in date because there is a documentary reference to it in 1692. The original aim of the excavation was to test the area to see what archaeological potential it had, and they showed that it is probably one of the most important areas in London which is ever likely to be available for excavation.

London's Archaeological Societies — 4

NONSUCH AND EWELL ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY

THE SOCIETY was formed in 1960 by a group of people who had taken part in the Nonsuch Palace dig—in fact the first impulse had been to call the organisation the Society of Nonsuch Diggers. Things have moved on since those days and the Society is now the archaeological, local history and amenity Society for Epsom, Ewell and Cheam and to some extent, in so far as they have no societies of their own for Banstead and Sutton. It has recently become a registered charity.

Although as with all societies it has had its ups and downs in the last ten years and the main work of the Society has always been carried on by a minority of the members, it has some solid achievements to its credit.

Epsom, Ewell and Cheam are all spring line villages—they lie on the Thanet bed exposure which lies between the London clay to the north and the chalk to the south. Ewell and Cheam's past is that of villages evolving from Saxon to Victorian times and then becoming engulfed in the suburban spread of the 1920s and 1930s although the villages centres have survived, a bit battered but recognizable still with quite a few old buildings. Epsom is a more interesting case since it underwent considerable expansion in late Stuart and Georgian times first as one of the earliest spa towns—its assembly rooms built in 1690 the earliest in the county still stand—and then as a commuter centre for city merchants and others e.g. Josiah Diston one of the first deputy governors of the Bank of England built his house at Woodcote Grove in Epsom. The Society's greatest task in Epsom is to persuade the local

planning authority to care about the fine heritage of Stuart and Georgian and early Victorian buildings in the town.

Ewell too has special problems; first there is the fact that its copious springs (from which the Hogsmill River rises) and the stream valley were attractive to Mesolithic man and as a result mesolithic flint finds are numerous; secondly, Stane Street runs in a short link alignment through Ewell and there was undoubtedly a late Iron Age settlement and a Romano-British town of some kind there.

The Society, with a current membership of 160, has always aimed to carry on activity at several levels—during most winters it has run monthly popular lectures on archaeological and historical subjects with both local and national speakers and during most summers at least two outings to places of historical and archaeological interest.

It has in most years since 1961 organised some excavation on local sites and done some recording of threatened buildings. It has both with the London Borough of Sutton Council in relation to Cheam, and the Epsom and Ewell Council in relation to Epsom and Ewell, sought to influence planning decisions in the direction of preservation of individual buildings and a general policy of conservation of the townscape.

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