Fig. 1. Section across Eastern half of Aldersgate Street, with walls of 14th century cellar on the right cut into natural gravel

Medieval Streets in London

Photography by the Author

JEREMY HASLAM

A NUMBER OF Roman streets in the City of London have been seen in building sites and excavations during the past few decades, and their character, composition and alignment have been recorded. Most of these, with the notable exceptions of the roads recently excavated at Milk Street by Nicholas Farrant and COLAS, and against Fenchurch Street, by Brian Philp and the C.I.B. Group, both on behalf of the Guildhall Museum, have been discussed in Ralph Merrifield's *The Roman City of London*. During the past year or so, however, a number of opportunities have arisen in building operations to observe and record in a fairly systematic fashion—and with one or two exceptions for the first time in London—the character and make-up of several of the streets and lanes of the medieval City.

There are several reasons for the lack of research or discussion of medieval streets in London. Firstly, and most obviously, the Roman levels are the last to be destroyed in any cellar digging, and all too often where Roman features are still extant the medieval ones have long since disappeared. Secondly, the alignments of many of the medieval streets are often sufficiently displaced from the original Roman "grid pattern" to allow the latter to be observed under cellars to the side of the modern streets, which in the

main, follow the medieval alignments. Medieval streets are only made accessible therefore, under exceptional circumstances, when the modern streets are cut into or truncated. Thirdly—and probably all too frequently in the past—the trouble taken to record Roman features on building sites has not usually been equalled by that spent on later features.

Our knowledge of the character of medieval streets has thus been limited until the beginning of this year to one section excavated across Aldermanbury by Peter Marsden in 1963.[1]

The importance for the interpretation of a town's history of the archaeological and historical investigation of its streets cannot be overstressed. The streets of a town are its skeleton, and a study of the streets will, therefore, provide a clue—and in many cases a solution—to a great many of the problems concerning its topographical and historical development. The streets are primary; the houses and other structures are, as it were, "hung" on this skeleton as a dress on a tailor's dummy, and take their shape and character from it. In any town, therefore, the realignment of the streets and changes in their overall pattern must reflect equally radical changes or phases of development in the history of that town. By studying the archaeology and topography of an urban street system, as much can be learnt about its history as by any amount of excavation of houses which rise and fall by the sides of these streets. Structures excavated in towns must, in consequence, be interpreted in relation to the pattern of the surrounding streets, although of course, in many cases the only clue to the position of a road may well be the alignment, and indeed the very existence, of house structures by their sides.

In London, as in many other towns, the historical relationship of the medieval to the Roman street layout is possibly the greatest single unknown in its history, and indeed has never been the subject of detailed discussion, or investigation from medieval documentary sources. Indeed, no detailed plan of medieval London as a whole has yet been attempted, as it has for other towns, and as it has for the Roman period in London.

In any discussion on this subject, therefore, it is necessary to recognise that the street pattern of medieval London is manifestly not based on its Roman predecessor. It is thus far easier to cite cases of the divergence of the medieval pattern from the Roman than it is to provide instances where they coincide. Some of the reasons for this change have been suggested by Sir Mortimer Wheeler in his *London and the Saxons,* but other reasons have emerged from more recent archaeological and historical work in other medieval towns with Roman origins.

In Winchester, Chichester and Colchester, amongst other towns, the medieval streets follow a completely different pattern to the Roman layout. In those cases, the medieval street system appears to have been imposed on, rather than grown up from, any pre-existing Roman pattern. The recent archaeological investigation in Winchester of several of the medieval streets, some of which can be shown on both documentary and archaeological evidence to have been in use at least since the early 10th century, has suggested that the layout of those streets is the result of deliberate planning at this period, and the particular consequence of a deliberate and general policy of urban renewal by King Alfred in response to the military situation caused by the presence of the Danes, in the later 9th century.[2]

The same arguments can, in general, be applied to London. There is, of course, no archaeological evidence for the origin of any of the medieval streets in London (except for those cases discussed below), but documentary evidence suggests that London (including Southwark) was one of the main beneficiaries of Alfred's policy of urban development. King Alfred in effect, repopulated the town, and granted out to various bishops and other magnates, blocks of more or less vacant land between the central settlement and the walls, and including in some instances, the Roman Thames-side embankment wall, still, in part, in evidence at that time.[3]

The practical effect of this policy would have been the creation of more or less regular blocks bounded by streets — a pattern still visible in part in the street system of today. The Roman walls were probably still standing in late Saxon times, and the Roman gates still in use. This imposed street system, therefore, would naturally have had to have taken account of those features as well as any standing Roman stone buildings, and would also have respected any through routes between one gate and another kept up or re-established in the earlier post-Roman periods. A similar situation exists in Winchester, where the main E-W High Street follows approximately, but not exactly, the line of the main Roman street connecting the East and West gates in the Roman wall.

In medieval towns, the upkeep of roads was, in general, the responsibility of the individual householders whose property fronted onto the streets—a situation which might be expected to make the

1. *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* **21** pt. 3 (1967) 215-6—no section was published.
2. Martin Biddle and David Hill, "Late Saxon Planned Towns," *Antiquaries J.* **51** pt. 1 (1971), 70-85.
3. W. Page, *London, its origins and early development* (1923) 129f. See also M. Biddle and D. Hill, *op.cit.;* and D. Ekwall, *Street names of the City of London* (1965) 49f.

Fig. 2. Road surfaces under Aldersgate Street: 1, Medieval surfaces. 2, Mortar spread representing construction level of 14th century cellar. 3, 12th century pit covered by later surface. 4, Roman road surface. 5, Natural brickearth and plough soil.

archaeological record difficult to interpret. In spite of this, however, the make-up of street levels, which unlike modern roads were built up as the occasion demanded by the superimposition of successive layers of gravel or stones, can in general give vital information about the degree of use of the particular road, and hence its importance in the internal economy of the town. More important still, dateable finds from the inevitable accumulations of mud and refuse on these surfaces can provide evidence for the chronology of the development and use of the street, and in some cases the date of its origin, which information can seldom be obtained in any other way, and which is absolutely fundamental to the understanding of the history of the town in question.

As has been mentioned above, opportunities for archaeological observation of this nature have been given by redevelopment in a number of towns in England, among them Lincoln, Winchester and Oxford. In Lincoln, excavation of a 30 metre length of medieval road is currently in progress, and in Winchester and Oxford the results of the detailed excavation of lengths and sections of major Saxon and medieval streets have suggested solutions to the most fundamental questions about the development of these towns after the Roman occupation.

Until this year, however, redevelopment in London has presented no opportunities for observations of this kind, and all discussion on this subject, where it has been attempted, has had little detailed observation to direct it. In May 1972 the writer noticed that excavation for the Rotunda of the new Museum of London was cutting through the line of Aldersgate Street, just to the north of the city wall. A long weekend spent on behalf of the Guildhall Museum scraping down the side of the contractors' excavation across this line and drawing the resulting section was rewarded by some detailed information about the make-up of both the medieval roadway and its Roman antecedent.[4]

Almost two metres of medieval and Roman deposits still remained under the line of the modern street, and consisted of up to 12 successive road surfaces of the medieval period overlying at least one laid gravel and cobblestone surface of the Roman Street. This section illustrated very clearly the character of the make-up of what was a fairly important road through one of the early medieval extra-mural suburbs, and also gave some important information about the line of the street frontage on

4. This will be published in full in the *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.*

its eastern edge and the date of development of stone houses there (probably in the 14th century).

The medieval street levels consisted of what must be considered as being a fairly typical make-up—that is, successive spreads of gravel of greater or lesser degree of adequacy, representing somewhat casual renewal of the road surfaces, alternating with layers of churned up mud and refuse which accumulated during the street's use. Towards the middle of the roadway, two deep pits or gullies (containing much 14th century pottery) cut into the earlier layers must have presented considerable hazards to the users of the road on a dark evening. Towards the top of the road, thicker and more compact spreads of gravel in probably the 15th century represent a great improvement in the filthy conditions which the early medieval travellers and householders had to put up with.

One of the major puzzles which this section provides is the total absence of any appreciable build-up between the Roman road surface and its probably 12th century successor. The abandonment of the Roman road for 5 or 6 centuries would certainly have resulted in the accumulation of a considerable thickness of probably dark brown or black soil, of which there was no trace in the section. In contrast, levels of black earth and dumped rubbish, themselves cut into by Saxo-Norman pits and wells, were observed overlying the gravel metalling of the Roman street excavated this summer at Milk Street. A similar build-up over a Roman Street of a black rain-washed soil containing mid-5th century pottery was also observed by Peter Marsden some years ago in an excavation near St. Dunstan's Hill.[5] The lack of such deposits in the section across Aldersgate Street, however, could well indicate continuous though infrequent use throughout Saxon times of a roadway which passed through an uninhabited area, and which was not, therefore, subject to periodic inundation with domestic rubbish.

During the past few months the writer has also observed and recorded on behalf of the Guildhall Museum sections across some of the lanes leading down to the Thames from Upper Thames Street south of St. Pauls. The construction of retaining walls for the new road joining the Blackfriar's Embankment with Thames Street near Queenhithe has necessitated the excavation of a large number of deep pile holes and deep parallel trenches right across the site. These have been observed at various times to have cut through numerous substantial medieval stone-built structures, floors, culverts, and some timber features, as well as across the line of at least half a dozen of the medieval lanes.

In addition to other salvage archaeological work done in the area by the staff of the Guildhall Museum, the writer has observed sections across five of the North-South lanes cut by these trenches (see Fig. 3). These observations have made it possible to draw some interesting conclusions both about the character of the make-up and probable degree of use of these lanes as well as about their probable date, and hence, it will be seen, about the date of the first development of this part of medieval London. These conclusions may be summarised as follows:

Section 1. A make-up of a depth of at least 2 metres was observed, in February 1971, in a longitudinal section along St. Paul's Wharf on the W. side of a large 19th century sewer in the middle of the road, which was excavated out and replaced by the contractors. Well made road surfaces of probably the medieval and Tudor periods appeared to confirm this as being one of the more important of the lanes leading from Thames Street to the river. No dating evidence was obtained.

Section 2. Superimposed gravel and earth layers, much cut into by later features, point to the existence of a street continuing the line of St. Peter's Hill southwards from Thames Street. The street formed a ward boundary and was certainly a primary property boundary between two stone built houses.

Section 3. Two metres of superimposed layers of gravel, rubbish and earth between two substantial ragstone and chalk walls are evidence for the existence in medieval times of a minor lane known to Stowe as Bosse Lane. The upper layers appeared to show little signs of compaction and renewal due to wear by traffic.

Section 4. Two sections across Trig Lane are of particular interest, both showing not only a complete sequence of superimposed levels of the medieval street, but also relationship of the street to two massive stone-built houses on either side. Pottery from the earliest street level of the southern of the two sections show it to have been first laid down in the later 13th century, and the stratigraphy suggests that it was exactly contemporary with the very substantial stone built house on its eastern side.

Other interesting features were shown in the northern section across this lane. The first gravel surface was laid directly over the construction trenches and chalk and gravel foundations of the two massive ragstone walls forming both its sides; the road must, therefore, have been laid out as an integral part of the planning and setting out of these properties in probably the late 13th century. Secondly, the gravel surface 1.60 metres above this lower surface was heavily burnt, showing reddening to a depth of up to 30cm, and in all probability

5. This excavations is still unpublished

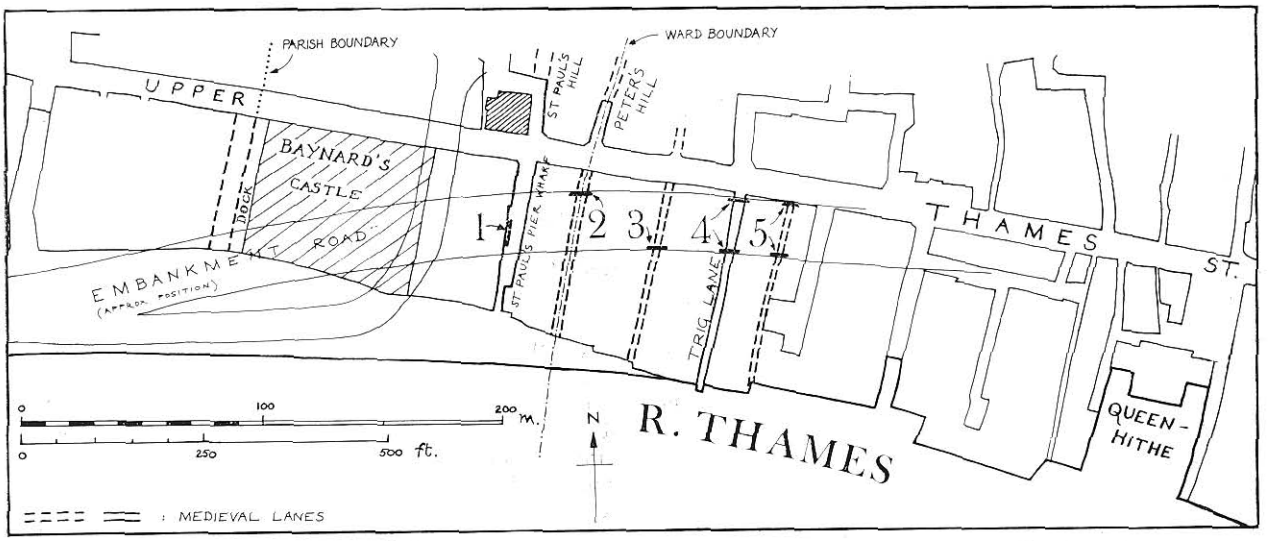

Fig. 3. Map of the western end of Upper Thames Street showing the site of Baynard's Castle and the alignment of the new riverside road. Also shown are the sections observed across various medieval streets.

represented the road level depth at the time of the Great Fire in 1666.

Directly overlying this was 70cm. of brick, tile and mortar rubble, representing the heightening of all these lanes, and Thames Street itself, known to have been ordered by Wren during the reconstruction of London. (He was certainly not short of a ready supply of rubble!) The Great Fire also deposited a thick layer of charcoal in the cellar of the stone house on the W. side of the street, into which in the 17th century had been built a brick wall, widening the street by about 1 metre.

Section 5. Two sections across a narrow lane dividing two stone built houses showed some evidence of gravel metalling on the northern end, but a succession of layers of mud, sludge and dirty gravel further south indicate a lane used probably only infrequently. This accumulation of mud and silt might be either the result of the effects of rainwash down the slope of the lane or else evidence of flooding by the Thames in the 14th and 15th centuries.

It is not possible here to provide more than this summary information. It is interesting, however, to contrast the character of the make-up of these lanes with that currently under excavation by the Guildhall Museum on the West side of Baynard's Castle Dock. From its probable beginning in the 1270's this road was built up with compacted spreads of cobbles, gravel and tile with little accumulation of dirt and refuse. It must obviously have been exceptionally heavily used, acting as a wharf to the Castle Dock, and compressed and smoothed by the passages of numerous carts and trolleys. With the possible exception of St. Paul's Wharf, all the other lanes would have been used as pedestrian lanes from riverside steps up to Thames Street.

In conclusion, therefore, it can be said that the investigation of these Thames-side lanes and buildings, including the site of Baynard's Castle, has suggested a phase in this area of deliberate planning from the later 13th century onwards, with the reclamation of large areas of the Thames foreshore by the building of a number of imposing stone-built houses, lanes and docks. In the near future, the destruction of several of the small lanes around Queenhithe will provide similar opportunities to gather information bearing on these observations, and could well provide evidence for the early development of the harbour and its immediate environs in the late Saxon period.

Furthermore, the destruction of a considerable length of Upper Thames Street within the next couple of years will present opportunities to observe and record in detail the structure and history of one of the few major roads in London to have been in probably continuous use since the beginnings of the Roman occupation. There is not likely to be such a drastic change in the medieval street plan of London in the forseeable future. And since this road is one of the few remaining archaeological sites in the City which can be expected to show evidence of continuous build-up from Roman times to the present day, its excavation will indeed be an archaeological event of the first importance.