

Fig. 1

Excavations at New Hibernia Wharf

Drawings by Robert Symberlist

NEW HIBERNIA WHARF is part of the Hays Wharf Tooley Street estate on the south bank of the Thames, just west of London Bridge. Recent excavations at Toppings Wharf¹ and Montague Close² have provided evidence of early Roman settlement along the river front east of the Bridge, and one postulated position of the Roman bridgehead would have resulted in its approach road crossing the site.³

The Wharf is also close to the environs of the medieval Priory of St. Mary Overy. During the

period from 1106 until the Reformation, the land between St. Mary Overy's Dock, the church (now Southwark Cathedral) and London Bridge was largely covered by buildings of the Priory. Dolman suggests that the buildings extended about 150ft. north of the church (i.e. as far as the north side of Montague Close), where they were bounded by a river wall; between the wall and the river foreshore was an open space planted with trees.⁴ If his suggestion is correct, the site excavated should lie

1. Harvey Sheldon, "Excavations at Toppings Wharf, Tooley Street, Southwark," *London Archaeol.* 1, no. 11 (1971) 252.
2. Graham Dawson, "Roman London Bridge," *London Archaeol.* 1, no. 5 (1969) 114.
3. G. Dawson, "Roman London Bridge, part 2: Its loca-

- tion," *London Archaeol.* 1, no. 7 (1970) 156. Ralph Merrifield, "Roman London Bridge: further observations on its site," *Ibid.*, no. 8 (1970) 186. G. Dawson, "London Bridge: a rejoinder," *Ibid.*, no. 10 (1970) 224.
4. F. T. Dolman, *The Priory Church of St. Mary Overy, Southwark* (1881), 24.

S.A.E.C.

within this garden and therefore just north of the Priory.

The Excavation

Between January and June 1973, six of the riverside warehouses were demolished, the four nearest London Bridge to cellar floor level (on average +1.2m O.D.) thus providing an opportunity to examine the archaeological deposits sealed beneath them.

Construction work was due to start almost as soon as demolition was completed, and although machining by the contractors would be watched as a matter of course, only a short time was available during July in which controlled excavation could take place. For this reason, it was decided to open a limited number of trenches.

It was known from excavations at Toppings Wharf and Montague Close that a late 13th century flooding by the Thames had removed earlier deposits on this part of the river bank. The profile seen at Toppings Wharf, where the erosion plane sloped steeply down towards the river,⁵ indicated that in the north of the Hibernia Wharf site, the cellar floors would cover a deposit of mud several metres in depth, overlying natural undisturbed gravels.

The excavation was, therefore, concentrated in the southern part of the site, where it seemed likely that early medieval and Roman deposits would have survived the 13th century flooding. When the concrete and York stone floors had been removed by mechanical excavator, it was discovered that foundation walls for the vaulting of the 19th century warehouse cellar criss-crossed the area and extended to a depth of about -0.3m. O.D. into natural river-gravels, thus restricting the area available for excavation.

In view of these limitations, only six trenches were dug, using a machine to remove cellar floors and as much of the black earth as possible, so that the deposits of gravel laid down in the flooding and the levels preserved beneath them could be excavated by hand.

It was hoped that the two long trenches, 3 and 4 (See Fig. 1) would provide evidence for the occupation of the site prior to the medieval erosion. Unfortunately, the level of the cellar floors was so deep that the concrete foundations were set directly on to undisturbed river silt in the southern part and on to the black earth deposited after the 13th century erosion in the northern part.

The silt in the south part of the trench appeared to be the same deposit on which the early Roman structures at Toppings Wharf were built.⁶

No clear indication was found in either T3 or T4 of pre-erosion structures, such as the Roman bridge

5. Sheldon, *op. cit.* as in Note 1 above.

cutting down into natural silt and gravel, nor of Roman levels overlying natural. However, both provided further evidence as to the nature of the late 13th century flooding seen elsewhere in the area. (See Fig. 3, Section Z-Z).

The only feature in T3 definitely earlier than the first medieval flooding was an area of green gravel (A), about 8.5m. south of the northern edge of the trench. No interpretation of this feature could be made, since so much had been removed by later disturbance, and the only dating evidence found was a Roman tile. The earliest identified erosion by flooding in this area was followed by the deposition of a mixed layer of sands and gravels (B). About 7m. south of the northern edge of T3 was a large ditch (C), which ran east-west through T3 and into T4. It appeared to have been cut from the top of the first post-erosion gravel deposit, and to have later filled with silt.

No dating evidence was found in the first post-erosion deposit, but pottery from the ditch was of the late 13th century. After the ditch had filled up, it was re-cut (D), slightly to the south of its original line, also in the late 13th century. The re-cut ditch contained large, well-preserved wooden beams and blocks of chalk (which did not appear in section). After the ditch had again been filled, there may have been a second erosion, which removed the top fill of the re-cut ditch. Then a deposit of grey silt (E) was laid down; this contained a considerable quantity of shells. Most of these appear to have been washed in, but the periwinkles and mussels present in this deposit were in their natural habitat. Since these are found in inter-tidal zones, it seems likely that the area at this time became a beach, covered by water at high tide.

Soon, river conditions seem to have changed again, since the shelly beach was covered by a mixed deposit of river gravels (F), again containing late 13th century pottery. These gravels seem to mark the line of a greater and final erosion extending further to the south. They also partially covered a second ditch (G) which also contained late 13th century pottery, and ran east-west into T4.

Although it is difficult to be certain of the purpose for which these ditches were dug, it seems likely that they were intended as some form of defence against flood, with a bank revetted to the north, perhaps — in the case of ditch D — with the wooden beams found in the fill.

Above the latest gravel deposit was a very thick and seemingly homogeneous layer of black earth (H), which also contained late 13th century pottery. This could be a further river deposit, but since the pottery found is not noticeably water-worn, and it

6. Report forthcoming in *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* (1974).

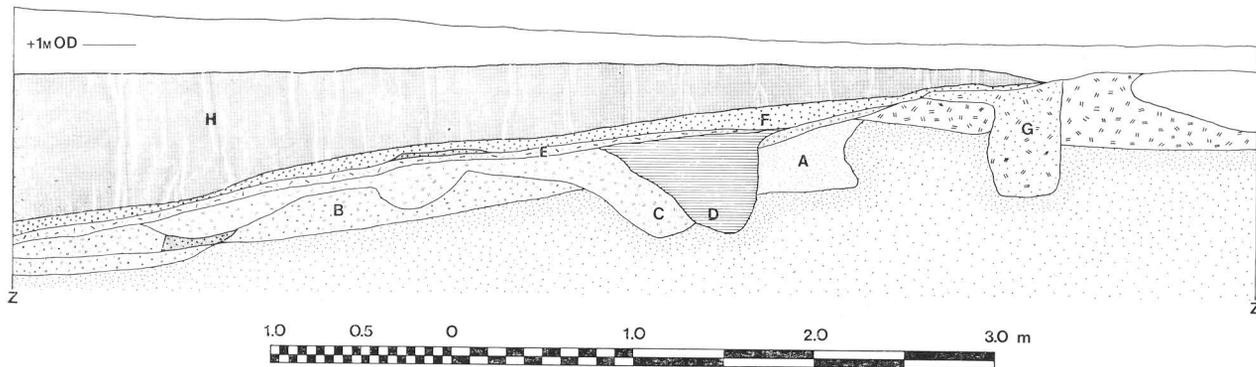
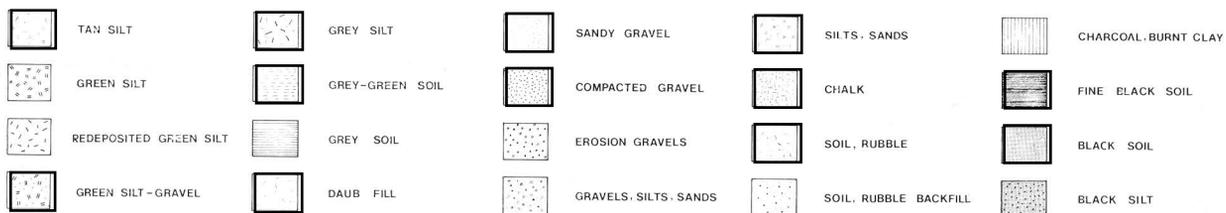
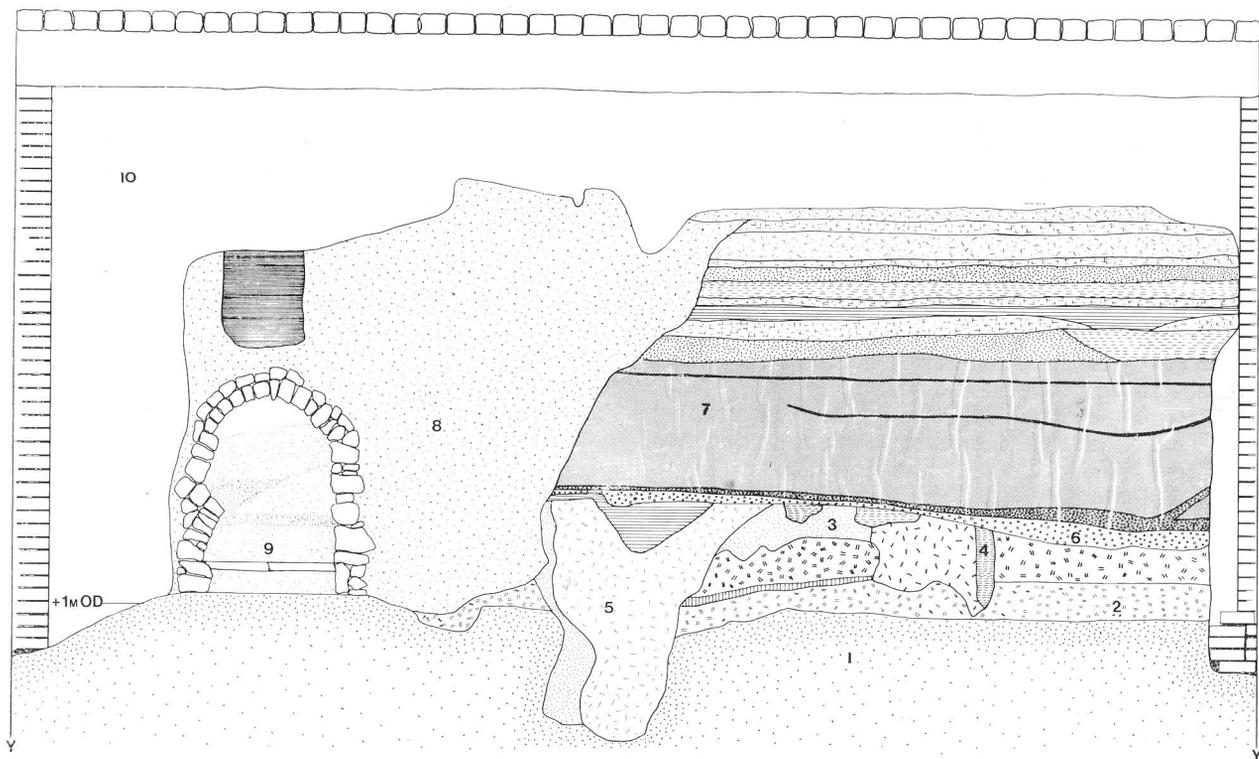


Fig. 2 Part of the site's southern section (y-y)

Fig. 3 A section to show the late-medieval flooding (z-z)

contained no separate layers, it could be seen as a dumping of earth, perhaps as an effort to build up the river bank against floods.

Pottery from T1, 5 and 6 confirmed the late 13th century date of the flooding, but produced no sign of any pre-erosion structures or features. The trenches did, however, show that the erosion-laid gravels sloped down to the west — in the direction of St. Mary Overy's dock — as well as to the north. T1 contained an 18th century well, and T6 the foundation of a greensand wall, running north-south from which no dating evidence was obtained. Both the well and the wall were cut through the black earth. T7 was the only trench besides 3 and 4 to contain any pre-erosion features.

A narrow channel dug through natural, running north-south through the trench, contained one piece of 13th century pottery. Beside it, to the west, were two small wooden posts. More small wooden posts and beams were found in the western part of the trench, set into natural gravel. However, as the layers of deposit above the posts were considerably disturbed, apparently during construction of the warehouse floor, it is not possible to say with certainty that these small posts were also pre-erosion.

The excavations did, however, provide additional information on the late medieval floodings. The work at Toppings Wharf yielded proof of only one erosion; here at least two were seen, and sandwiched between them was evidence perhaps of attempts at holding the river back. Documents support this evidence of troubles caused by the Thames. The medieval chroniclers who compiled the Annals of Bermondsey Abbey record local floods in 1099, 1208, 1230 (at Rotherhithe) and 1294.⁷ This last — which occurred on the 18th October — was so serious that the Abbey incurred heavy debt in making good losses and repairs.⁸

In 1303, a petition to the King concerning the condition of the Priory church mentions "the continual resistance, which without ceasing, we attempt against the violence of the River Thames on whose banks our home is situated."⁹ This statement appears to indicate flood damage on more than one occasion at the end of the 13th and at the beginning of the 14th century. The hazard apparently continued; Royal Commissions for the repair of the Thames embankment were issued in 1309, 1311, 1313, 1316, 1320 and 1325, then in 1340, 1353, 1364, 1376 and 1416.¹⁰

Further Work on the Site

The excavation described above was succeeded by site-watching and recording as construction work progressed throughout August. Two areas of par-

7. *Annales Monastici*, vol. 3, ed. H. R. Luard, "Annales Monasterii de Bermundescia A.D. 1042-1432" (1866).

8. *Ccl. Patent Rolls, Edward I, 1292-1301*, 148.

ticular interest were found and investigated: a section from ground to natural levels showing the historical sequence at the south of the site, and a river wall to the north.

The Southern Section

The demolition of the southern boundary wall of the cellars exposed an east-west section some 18.5m. long and 4m. deep, descending from the modern roadway to the natural gravels. (On the rest of the site levels to below about +1m. O.D. had been removed in the building of the 19th century warehouses. Part of this section is shown as Fig. 2, Section Y-Y). The top of the natural gravel (1) lay at about +1m. O.D., and was succeeded by about 0.4m. of clay-like silts (2). The only possible archaeological feature within the silts was a thin layer containing charcoal and burnt clay. Overlying the silt was a patch of gravel which may have been the remains of a naturally laid deposit(3).

Cutting through these earlier levels were a number of intrusions, including a post(4). The most prominent feature was a pit, filled largely with burnt daub, containing pottery of the late 1st or early 2nd century A.D. The top of the daub-filled pit(5), the Roman levels associated with it and presumably all those succeeding it had been removed by the most far-reaching and probably the last, of the late 13th century inundations. The base of this was marked by a layer of gravel which at its highest was +1.6m. O.D.(6). Presumably this sloped down to the north and would have joined with the latest flood-laid gravels found in the excavated trenches; it certainly fell to the west as in T1, T5 and T7.

An examination of shells from the gravel revealed many very small fragments of cockles and oysters. These remains, probably ground up by water, could have been laid down under freak conditions, in a storm or flood, and seem to confirm that the gravels were laid down immediately following erosion. Above the post-erosion black earth(7), which was about 1m. thick, lay a series of chalk and gravel layers, interspersed with soils, possibly representing a succession of streets in the vicinity of the medieval Priory. No dating evidence for these was recovered, but they were cut from a height of +3.1m. O.D. by the foundation for a culvert built of chalk blocks(8). The fill in the culvert contained pottery of the early 19th century, but this may relate only to its final silting(9). The top metre shown in the section consisted mainly of rubble and foundations, probably associated with the construction of the warehouses and the modern roadway in Montague Close (10).

The River Wall

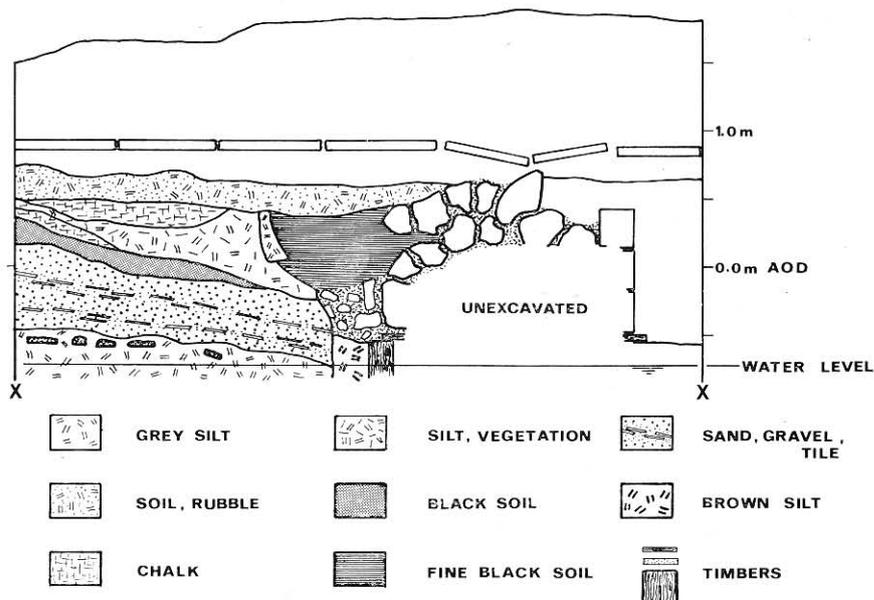
Some 10m south of its modern counterpart

9. W. Taylor, *Annals of St. Mary Overy* (1833) 37.

10. T. Codrington, "London South of the Thames," *Surrey Archaeol. Coll.* 28, 111-163.



Fig. 4. A section through the river-wall (X-X).



under the cellar floor, the remains of an earlier river wall were found. This was running east-west and a length of 18m. was exposed during the construction work.

It consisted of blocks of ragstone retaining a rubble core of mortared ragstone and chalk, with some bricks, in all some 2m. thick (see Fig. 4, Section X-X). In places, three courses of facing stones survived fronting towards the river, with the base at a height of about -0.5m. O.D. The masonry lay on horizontal planks supported by wooden piles; three wooden rubbing posts survived standing to its river side. Although the demolition of the wall had removed much of the evidence for its construction, it was clear that the foreshore deposits cut by the foundation trench were of early 14th century date. These bands of clay, mud, sand and vegetation sloping down towards the north contained at least two horizontally laid tile layers, suggesting walkways at low tide. Beneath the tiles a layer of timbers may have earlier performed a similar function.

Firmer dates for the building of the wall came from within the structure itself. The rubble core included fragments of a post-medieval tin-glazed plate, decorated on the interior with a pale blue and yellow floral motif and externally covered by a clear lead glaze, of a date not earlier than c.1630. A mason's mark cut in the face of one of the ragstone blocks was of the "dumbell" or "double triangle" type, thought to be a stylised representation

of a craftsman's axe. Although common in the medieval period, an example of c.1630 is known from a building in Sussex.¹¹

Future Work

In November, 1973, demolition began on New Hibernia Wharf warehouses south of those previously pulled down. It is hoped to excavate there, and in the adjoining roadways, during 1974. Under the former, more evidence of the early Roman settlements may emerge. Under the latter a more complete sequence should survive, possibly allowing an examination of the later Roman and early medieval deposits to the south of where 13th century floodings have destroyed the archaeological record.

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11. L. F. Salzman, *Building in England* (1952) 127.