

A Late Roman Military Site at London Docks

Photographs by the author

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AN EXCAVATION by London and Middlesex Archaeological Society which is being conducted as part of an archaeological survey of the London Docks, prior to redevelopment, has revealed a late Roman military site adjacent to the modern Ratcliffe Highway about three quarters of a mile from the City walls. The work is being generously financed by Riverside London Limited, and the machinery has been provided by Mc-Alpines. An exploratory trench 20 metres by 5 metres showed a 2 metre accumulation of post medieval material sealing 1st century levels, with an intervening layer of plough soil between the two. The site is situated on the natural gravel terrace which underlies the Ratcliffe Highway. The trench traversed a partially robbed structure (fig. 1), whose walls were just under 2 metres in breadth. The full depth of the wall foundations is not yet known: they have already been traced to a depth of 0.5 metres. The wall construction is of chalk and mortar foundation with a first level of ragstone coursing just visible. The building is provisionally dated to the late 3rd century on coin evidence.

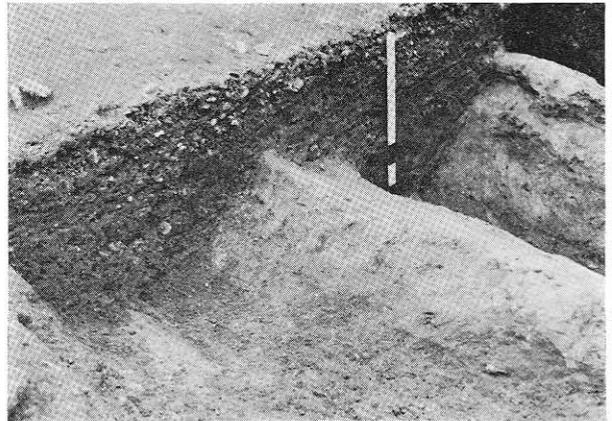


Fig. 2. Double ditch of military character.

The ground plan of the structure so far revealed shows three sides of what is apparently a square building, measuring 9 metres externally between the two parallel sides. It remains to be seen whether this structure is associated with a larger complex. There does not appear to have been any type of mortar or similar floor within the building; presumably the natural gravel would have been firm enough to fulfill this function.

5 metres to the south, a double ditch of military character, with a total span of 3 metres and a maximum depth of 1.1 metres was found (fig. 2). The ditches had been infilled and a level of metalling laid over them some time in the 4th century.

Small trial trenches were opened to the east of the

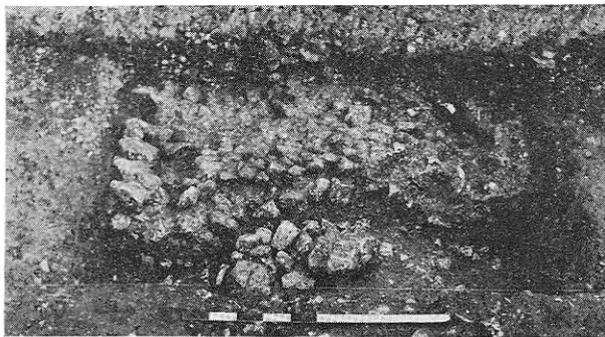


Fig. 1. Partially robbed wall of ragstone building.

main site to establish the extent of the archaeological potential of the area. No further masonry structures were located, although timber framed buildings with clay floors and external metallised surfaces were revealed. At least one of these appears to be contemporary with the main building.

The position of the building has confirmed the Roman origins of the Ratcliffe Highway alignment. Extramural development along this line outside the Roman city would be expected, and late 1st and early 2nd century features have shown this to be the case. The presence, however, at a later date, of a military structure was unexpected. This discovery opens up a whole range of possibilities. It is unlikely that any military installation in this position could possibly stand alone, it is more likely to form part of a network of similar structures, protecting the river and approaches to the city and functioning in conjunction with shore forts further east. The eastern side of the city was recognised as being the most vulnerable, as suggested by the evidence of the hastily constructed mid-4th century bastions on the east wall. To protect the city effectively a strict watch would have to have been kept on the river, and some sort of signalling system employed, to give advance warning of impending raids. From this point of view the situation of the building would have been highly favourable.

Excavations are continuing, and it is hoped that within the next three months it will be possible to retrieve a complete plan of the structure and its associated features.