

A Roman Building at St. Thomas Street, Southwark

MICHAEL DENNIS
LAURA SCHAAF

DURING the summer of 1974, SAEC carried out an excavation at 1-7 St. Thomas Street, Southwark, in advance of office redevelopment. The site lies approximately 230 m. south of London Bridge, and just to the east of Borough High Street. (TQ 3274 8019).

This area was of archaeological interest for a number of reasons. In the Roman period the site lay close to the main approach road for a bridge into London, a road formed the junction of Watling Street and Stane Street further south.¹ West of the bridge approaches and particularly around Southwark Cathedral, several chance finds of stone walls and tessellated floors had already suggested the pre-

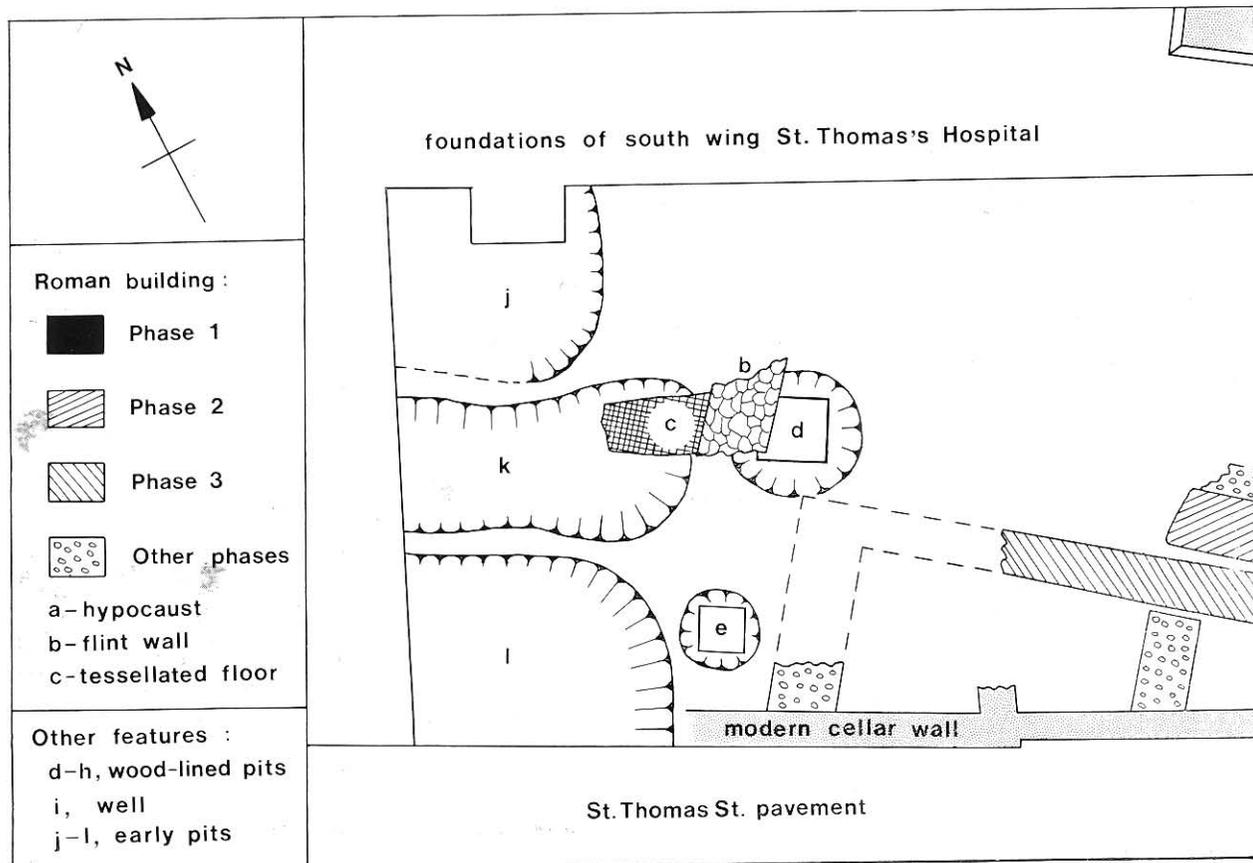
sence of substantial Roman buildings.² A masonry structure was also known from just east of the road at a point on the northern boundary of the St. Thomas St. site. Here in 1840 Charles Roach Smith recorded a large plain red tessellated floor surrounded by walls of flint and rubble with tile bonding courses.³ Similarly on the south side of St. Thomas Street, at the junction with Borough High Street, a tessellated floor had been found in 1819.

The site remained within a significant area during the post-Roman period as from 1215 to 1864 it lay adjacent to the St. Thomas's Hospital complex. Only the south-eastern part of the site could be completely excavated and here modern cellars had

1. The road alignment is discussed in R. Merrifield and H. Sheldon, "Roman London Bridge" *London Archaeol* 2, no. 8 (1974) 183-191.

2. See J. Plouviez, "Roman Southwark" *ibid* 2 no. 5 (1973) 106-113.

3. *Archaeologia* 29 (1841) 148.



removed all levels above +2m O.D. This meant that the only sequence of occupation surviving was Roman. Limited excavation was undertaken over the remainder of the site, during redevelopment, with valuable results.⁴

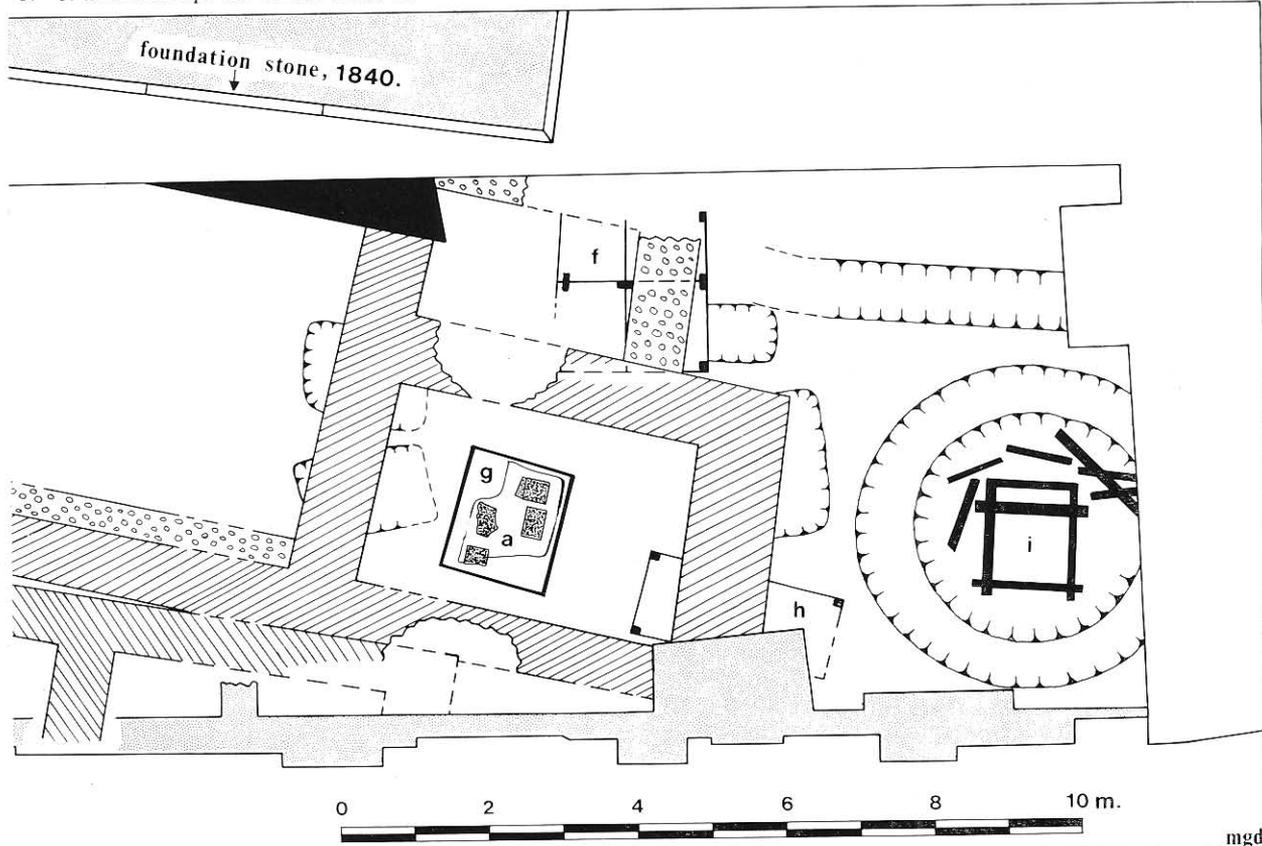
The earliest surviving features on the site were closest to the Roman road, the construction of which they probably post-date.⁵ These consisted of large shallow pits (Plan j-1), with a soft organic fill containing quantities of animal bone. The dating (c. A.D. 70), corresponds well with the beginnings of Roman occupation elsewhere in Southwark. Across the north-west of the site and overlying these pits a sequence of Roman building levels was investigated. This build-up survived to a maximum of +2.50m O.D. and included probable clay floors. A thick layer of clay and pieces of wall plaster may have been the remains of walling. Below one earth floor an everted-rim jar, of approximately mid-2nd century date, was found. This contained some charcoal and a coin of Vespasian which had been carefully

placed upright in levelling deposits, possibly in a votive context.

The unpretentious building described above occupied the north-west of the site until the later 2nd century. During this period a series of fourteen rectangular pits, several with traces of wooden linings, were dug over the remainder of the site. The major examples were shown as Plan d-h, the best preserved being (f), which probably dated to A.D. 160-180. This pit had been cut through by a later Roman wall foundation but its lower levels remained intact. Vertical posts supported a timber lining and internal compartments, of which there were at least four. An organic fill produced much pottery as well as glass, bone, shoes, textiles, writing-tablets, and the signet stone from a ring.⁶ Examination of the tablets, which are of wax-inlay type, has suggested that one has a branded stamp.⁷ Environmental analysis of the pit filling has already produced some interesting cultural evidence, discussed in pages 272-3. The ditch shown in the western corner of the site seems on pottery

4. This was only possible through co-operation of the construction firm, Messrs. Trollope & Colls and their site agent Mr. R. Johnson.
5. J. Plouviez *op. cit.* in no. 2 above.

6. The gem is cornelian, engraved with an eagle between two legionary standards. For a report see M. Henig in *London Archaeol* 2 no. 10 (1975). 243.
7. Information from Mr. J. Thorn of the Department of the Environment who is working on the tablets.



mgd

evidence to be slightly earlier than pit (f).

The pit sequence lasted until about A.D. 200 and was superseded by the ragstone foundations of a substantial 3rd century building (Plan, phases 2 and 3). Excavation showed that this building had been added to one corner of a heavily-mortared flint and tile wall (phase 1) found immediately against the south wing of the old St. Thomas's Hospital. The construction of phase 1 corresponded closely to Roach Smith's description of the Roman walling discovered when the wing was built. Hence it is likely that the ragstone structure excavated in 1974 is a later addition to the building found in 1840.

The ragstone building itself was not of one construction, the major division being into the unmortared foundations of phase 2 and a later building where alternate courses of stone and mortar had been used (phase 3). Phase 2 did not survive anywhere as high as its floor level and consisted largely of one room plan. Within this room was part of a pillared hypocaust (Plan a), formed of four tile pila bases set upon a pebble-cement and ragstone base. This part of the hypocaust only survived because it had sunk into the fill of one of the underlying timber-lined pits.

Little is known of phase 3 since most of it appears to lie beneath St. Thomas St. However, associated with its foundations were levelling deposits, perhaps for a floor, at about +1.90m O.D. This height correlates with the later floor levels on the north-west of the site (for example the tessellated floor described below) and would give the main wall of phase 3 a foundation depth of at least 1.90m. In the south-west of the site, where the two ragstone phases abutted, each of the main walls had its own separate foundation trench, the trench for phase 3 cutting into that for phase 2. There were also suggestions that the phase 2 wall had been demolished, perhaps with its foundation left as a buttress, before phase 3 was built.

Just to the south-east of the ragstone building was a sunken tank about 0.60m deep, lined with heavy planks, which was probably a well (Plan i). Its base lay on the upper surface of river gravels at -1.0m. O.D. The filling of the tank dated to the late 3rd century. Some of the upper structure of the feature had survived and took the form of a large circular platform cut into the sands, with the tank below and in its centre. On the north-east side of the tank was a rectangular timber footing plus several collapsed beams. These might have been the remains of stairs or staging giving access to the tank.

Dating of the Roman buildings on the site is worth some consideration. Pottery from the ragstone foundations is mostly residual, derived from the underlying pits but it indicates that construction was

not earlier than A.D. 230-240. However, both ragstone phases could be of a later date. This suggestion is strengthened by two coins dating to around A.D. 270. One was found under the hypocaust and the other in the foundation cut for the phase 3 wall. The upper stratigraphy of the well mentioned above seemed to be one deposit of homogeneous soil and the lower levels contained quantities of ragstone. This late 3rd century feature may have been back-filled prior to construction of a phase of the ragstone building.

Unfortunately the interface between the ragstone phases and the earlier north-west building had been destroyed by contractors' operations. No definite 3rd century levels were found within the north-west structure and in one place a clay floor containing later 2nd century pottery was overlain by a weathered layer possibly representing disuse. This break in the sequence was followed by a mortar floor on a foundation of ragstone chippings, associated with an insubstantial two-phase wall fitting. The earlier (beam-slot) phase of the wall produced part of a flanged bowl of 4th century type. To the later stages of the north-west structure can also be assigned a short length of heavily-robbed flint wall-footing, (Plan b), which cut through a deep timber-lined pit of later 2nd century date. Associated with this wall was an area of *in situ* plain red tessellated floor (Plan c). This showed little wear and had remained quite level at +1.80m O.D. It rested on a base formed of pebble cement over clay, this foundation having been recessed into earlier layers. Bounding the floor on its north-west side was a probable beam-slot. These features might represent a rear wall and corridor for a later phase of the north-west building.

The Roman buildings revealed on the St. Thomas St. site were the first of their kind to have been excavated in the area. They confirm earlier indications of stone buildings to the south of the Roman bridge and their orientation corresponds to the road alignment proposed in reference 1. The quality of construction, particularly of the phase 1 walling, suggests a building of some importance within Roman Southwark. Its location in an area of low-lying unstable sands may seem unusual, particularly as the later structures would have been outside the town defences. We are clearly dealing with a building complex of several phases and it seems to have occupied the site from the 2nd to 4th centuries A.D. The nature of such extramural stone buildings is of significance in the study of Roman towns, but unfortunately in this case any key to function probably lay in the parent structure destroyed in 1840.

We are grateful to the developers of the site, Messrs. Igal Yawetz Associates and to the owners, British Airways Pension Fund, for permission to carry out this excavation.