

Roman Drains, and a possible Saxon Building, in Cannon Street

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The Excavation

THE SITE lies between Cannon Street and Great St. Thomas Apostle Street, about 240 metres north of the present waterfront and 140 metres north of the approximate line of the Roman riverside.¹ A trial trench supervised by Charles Hill suggested the archaeological value of the site, especially in view of its proximity to Grime's Financial Times Saxon huts 250 metres to the west,² and four areas were stripped under the supervision of the writer. Only three weeks were available for excavation and accordingly a policy of priorities had to be determined.

No surfaces or other levels were located in the trial trench; only cut features, which were not clearly defined until a depth of about 0.5m below the basement floor. The brickearth, where exposed, was deeper brown and softer in texture in the top 0.3m, and contained occasional charcoal flecks. Whilst this brickearth, probably not natural, might contain features, experience on the GPO site on Newgate Street had shown that such features were difficult to locate and slow in excavation, and it was decided not to attempt them. Thus 0.5m was removed by machine and hand in Trenches A, B and D, and 1m, because of deep foundations, in Trench C.

Of the surviving features priority was given to the structural remains, i.e., six possible drains and post-holes. Pits were only excavated initially where they intruded into structural features and later when labour was available. Trench D was thus abandoned at an early stage as it revealed only pits upon cleaning, and in Trench A, Pit 14 was left unexcavated.

The Department of Urban Archaeology team was complemented by the COLAS Fieldwork Group, to whom the author is particularly grateful for the bulk of the excavation work. The three trenches were excavated in twenty-three days, despite continual rain, and three evening shifts were worked under arc lamps. Thanks are also due to Ken Dash who watched the site during its subsequent development.

Structural features

Features 1-6 were probably drains, some of which were timber-lined, though some of them may have been for water supply rather than disposal. Running

the length of the site from north to south, Feature 1 produced the best evidence of timberwork (reconstruction, fig. 1). A plank-lined channel 0.4m wide and at least 0.43m deep had been laid in a construction ditch originally at least 1.4m deep. Above this channel the sides of the ditch were revetted with planks held in position by driven stakes. As with Features 2 and 4 the planking did not survive but was represented by a thin dark stain. The bottom of the channel sloped southwards at a gradient of 1 in 100; this had clearly been carefully graded with small slats of wood placed across the bottom of the construction ditch at varying intervals with backfill of brickearth and gravel forming a base for the plank of the channel.

No relationship between F1 and F2 survived, though they both cut F3, and pottery evidence does not indicate differences in date. F3 produced pottery of Trajanic, and F1 and F2 of Trajanic/Hadrianic date.

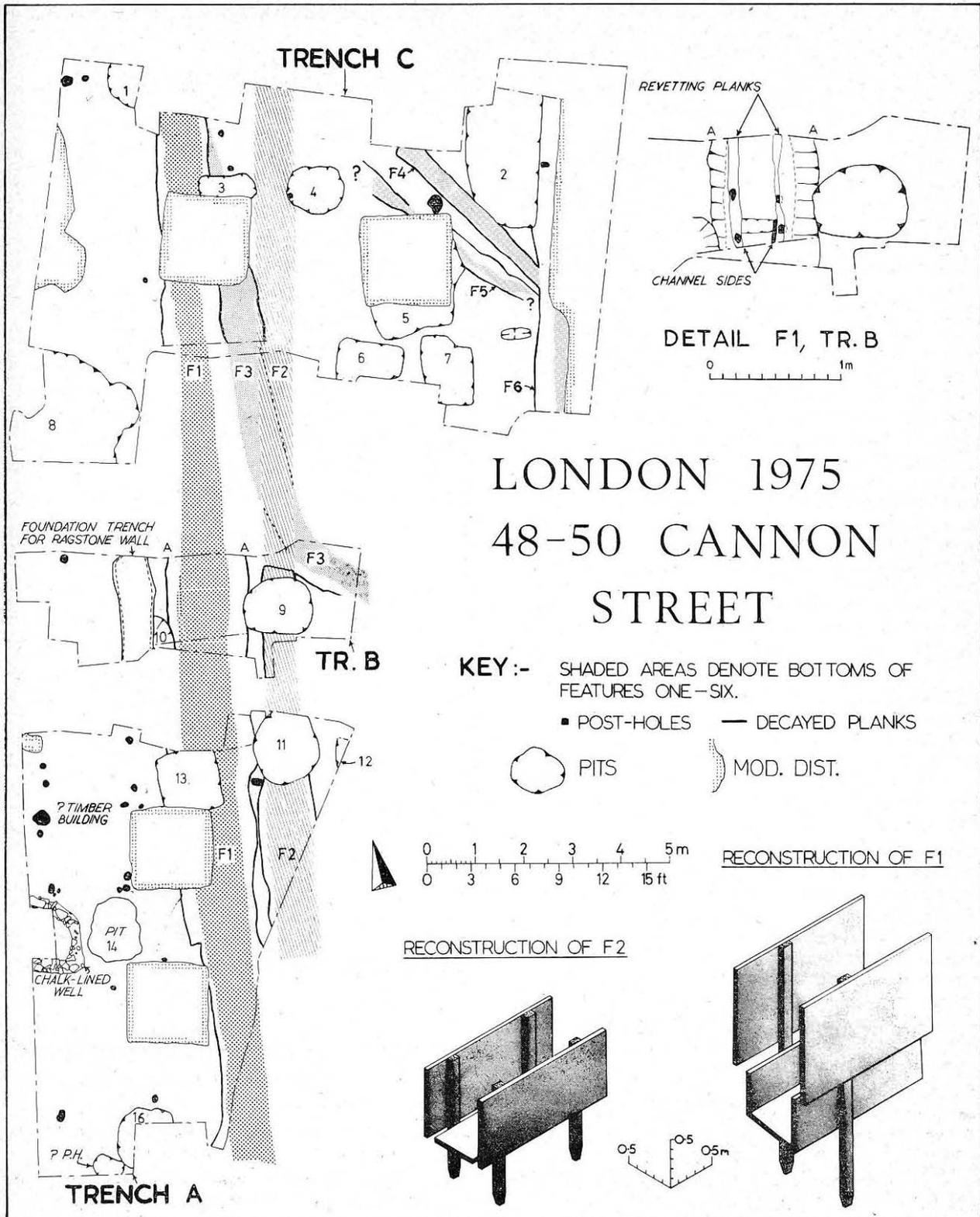
Feature 2 was of simpler construction, consisting of a plank along the bottom of a construction ditch with planked and staked revetting along its sides (fig. 1), the planking here serving to protect the sides rather than contain the water. Shallower than Feature 1, the channel was 0.56-0.74m wide. Feature 3 survived only as a shallow ditch up to 0.25m deep. There was clear evidence of revetting stakes, but not of planking; apparently the ditch silted up after the timberwork had been removed. Two almost parallel drains, Features 4 and 5, ran north-west/south-east across Trench C. Feature 4, the northern of the pair, 0.33m wide and 0.22m deep, showed evidence of plank lining on the bottom of sides, but without stakes. Feature 5 was irregularly cut, 0.05-0.32m wide, and was not lined, though it shared identical layers of silting with Feature 4 and must have been contemporary.

Of Feature 6, little is known; apparently a north-south ditch, about 0.96m deep, filled with layers of sand and gravel with no evidence of wooden structure.

It is clear from their revetting structure that Features 1-3 were open channels, draining to the Thames, though their source is not known. There

1. R. Merrifield. *The Roman City of London* (1965), see loose map.

2. W. F. Grimes. *The excavation of Roman and Medieval London*, (1968), 155.



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is a sequence of replacement, though the relationship between F1 and F2 could not be ascertained. F4 and F5 started within the site, and are far less substantial, so perhaps are of only local significance; we may hazard the suggestion that F6 is of the same category as F1-3.

Feature 4, of Trajanic/Hadrianic date, clearly cut the fill of Pit 2, which contained amongst its otherwise Roman pottery four sherds of Pingsdorf ware, datable to 950-1200 A.D., which are probably contamination; a radiocarbon dating from the pit is awaited. One or two sherds from F6 may be Saxon, among another otherwise Trajanic assemblage.

On the west side of Trench A a group of post-holes appear to represent a timber building, the holes surviving up to 1m deep grouped in threes on the east and south sides. The western line, not being in threes, might be an internal division rather than the other side. No dating evidence was obtained except for one sherd of possible Trajanic date. It is, however, significant that the structure is surrounded by pits which are either of proven Saxon date, or contain such little Roman material that a Saxon date may be suggested. Pit 11 contained several 9th century sherds, and Pit 13 produced probable mid-Saxon sherds; Pit 9 in Trench B contained two Roman sherds in an excavated depth of 0.8m. More direct evidence for the date of the building may have lain in the top half-metre which was stripped off, but in the time available the careful excavation necessary for such ephemeral features was not possible.

This excavation on Cannon Street illustrates well the problem of priorities on city rescue sites. Evidence, however slight, of Saxon occupation must rate high in our priorities, yet limited time excavations must be directed towards what can be effectively rescued rather than what may be most crucial with hindsight.

If this building is Saxon in date, it is one of a number grouped in the western part of the City. Nearby there are the hut pits at Financial Times² and St. Mildred's site³; further north a possible hut pit was seen at Bucklersbury⁴. Current work on Newgate Street has revealed a large building of timber-slot construction⁵, as well as hundreds of stakeholes of which at least some are of Saxon date. It remains to be seen whether this western bias is a valid distribution or whether it is due to the lucky selection of sites and the accident of survival,

3. P. Marsden, T. Dyson and M. Rhodes. "Excavations on the Site of St. Mildred's Church, Bread Street, London, 1973-1974. *Trans. London and Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* 26 (1975) 181.
4. Grimes, *op. cit.* 159.
5. D. U. A. "Excavations in the City. April-May 1976." *London Archaeol.* 2 no. 15 (1976), 400.

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Published twice yearly in April and October
Volume 2, 1976

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