



Fig. 1: excavations in progress on the Jubilee Hall site, Covent Garden.

Thoughts on Saxon London

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RECENT PAPERS by Vince¹ and Biddle² have sought to reconsider the nature of the mid-Saxon occupation in the City and along the Strand. The debate is not wholly new as it has long been recognised that the evidence for mid-Saxon activity on the riverfront between Westminster and the City is more prolific than that within the former Roman

city walls³. The contributions of Biddle and Vince have been to suggest that the scale of the mid-Saxon settlement along the Strand may be of an extent hitherto unsuspected and be of an urban nature rather than the farmsteads and widely scattered settlements which have been suggested in the past.

Since the publication of the articles by Vince and

Biddle, an excavation at Jubilee Hall, Covent Garden, by the Museum of London, Dept. of Greater London Archaeology (Fig. 1), has lent support to the suggestion that, in the mid-Saxon period, occupation the area of the Strand may have been sufficiently dense to justify the description urban. Although the site was quite small and heavily disturbed, the density of features and quantities of artefactual and environmental material were such that one hesitates to interpret the evidence as simply representing part of a small farm. A summary of the excavation has appeared elsewhere⁴ but, in brief, evidence was found for timber buildings with clay floors, irregular pits, circular wells and a hearth. A burial, face down, may be broadly contemporary. Large amounts of animal bone were found, with mussel and oyster shells. The pottery includes Ipswich ware and continental imports mainly from northern France and the lower Rhineland. A *sceatta* of c 720-730 AD was also found. The general range of finds appears to span the period AD 650-850 with the majority falling between AD 700-800⁵.

Obviously more sites require investigation before the true nature of the Strand settlement can be determined, but at least it can be said that the case for significant mid-Saxon occupation along the Strand is stronger now than when Biddle and Vince put pen to paper. Unfortunately opportunities for archaeological investigation in this area are few and far between. Many of the existing buildings are listed and where development occurs it tends to be refurbishment rather than demolition and reconstruction. Where comprehensive redevelopment has taken place it has usually been the case that nineteenth century cellars have destroyed all archaeological deposits. Even the Jubilee Hall site had largely been obliterated by basements. Planning applications for Westminster have been monitored by the Inner London Archaeological Unit and more recently by the Museum of London, Department of Greater London Archaeology, for the last eleven years. Whilst it is true to say that the archaeological effort expended has often produced disappointing results it is hardly accurate to claim that the "area in the past has received hardly any attention from archaeologists"⁶.

If the mid-Saxon settlement in the area of the Strand is eventually shown to be of an extensive nature and to have an industrial/commercial base, what would this tell us of Saxon London, and in

1. A. Vince 'The Aldwych: Saxon London Discovered' *Current Archaeol* (August 1984) 310-312.
2. M. Biddle 'London on the Strand' *Popular Archaeol* (July 1984) 23-27.
3. For a summary see R. Whytehead & L. Blackmore 'Excavations at Tottenham Court' *Trans London & Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 34 (1983) 82-3.

particular the status of the walled city? Would it prove, for example, as Vince would have it, that apart from the cathedral the walled city was deserted and that the London referred to by Bede as "a mart for many nations" was in fact along the Strand? The relevant passage in Bede is worth quoting in full.

"In the year of our Lord 604, Augustine, Archbishop of Britain, consecrated two bishops, namely Mellitus and Justus. He consecrated Mellitus to preach in the province of the East Saxons, which is divided from Kent by the river Thames, and borders on the sea to the east. Its chief city is London, which is on the banks of that river and is an emporium for many nations who come to it by sea and land. At that time Seberht nephew to Aethelbert and son of his sister Rricula reigned over the province though he was under the dominion of Aethelbert who ... held sway over all the English nations as far as the Humber. After this race had accepted the word of truth through the preaching of Mellitus, King Aethelbert built the church of the apostle St Paul in the city of London, in which Mellitus and his successors were to have their episcopal seat."⁷

This passage allows us to draw a number of conclusions. When Bede was writing at the beginning of the eighth century, London was situated on the banks of the Thames, it was a city (*civitas*) and an emporium for many nations. A century earlier Aethelbert of Kent had sufficient authority in the area to build a church for Mellitus in the *civitas*. If we accept that the present St Paul's cathedral was also the site of Aethelbert's church then it follows that the walled city was an integral part of London as it was understood by Bede. In these circumstances it is difficult to share Vince's view that the Roman walls sheltered only the Saxon cathedral. Biddle is more likely to be correct in envisaging a London with a dual entity, the walled area being "the seat of traditional authority" and the Strand "an open unwallled trading and manufacturing place". He would see the walls as enclosing "... a royal palace, the cathedral and it's community, perhaps a number of enclosed residences of high status". To these one can presumably add the first church on the site of All Hallows Barking, on Tower Hill, the fabric of which contains a mid-Saxon arch made of reused Roman building materials. The walled area is also a likely candidate as a site for the mint and the same is true for the royal hall where the men of Kent could have

4. R. Whytehead *Rescue News* No. 37 (Summer 1985).
5. L. Blackmore, *pers. comm.*
6. F. Grew, review of 'London, City of the Romans' by R. Merrifield *Trans London & Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 34 (1983) 279.
7. Bede *History of the English Church Book 2, Chap. 3* Trans B. Colgrave & R. Mynors 1969.

their purchases warranted in the presence of the King's reeve⁸.

It therefore seems unlikely that the Roman city became a walled ghost town completely superceded by what an estate agent might describe as a 'new town development on an adjacent green field site', but rather that there evolved a specialisation of function between two distinct and flourishing parts of the same city. The archaeological evidence for an administrative, ecclesiastical, and royal sector within the walls has certainly left little trace in comparison to that of the more intensively occupied domestic/industrial area along the Strand, but is this no more than one might expect?

Finally it is worth examining the general assumption that the Strand settlement was a creation of the Saxon period. Biddle sees the origins of the mid-Saxon settlement as a new Royal foundation. Vince also sees it as a 'new' settlement and hints at a 6th century origin. Grew⁹ states that "the main mid-Saxon settlement lay on the west bank of the Fleet, an area which may have been vacant in the Roman period". There is, in fact, considerable evidence for Roman activity along the Strand and Whitehall and large amounts of residual Roman

8. B. Thorpe *Ancient Laws & Institutes of England* Record Commission 66.

9. F. Grew *op. cit.* 279.

building materials were recovered from Jubilee Hall. Although one would be hard pressed to argue a case for continuity of occupation from the Roman to mid-Saxon periods it is true to say that whatever evidence for early Saxon occupation may be eventually found in the area it did not take place in a region ignored by the Romans.

Until significant early Saxon occupation is found within, or in the hinterland of, the walled city we should be concerned not only with the location of mid-Saxon London, but also with the whereabouts of the population converted by Mellitus to Christianity in AD 604 and which summarily ejected him from London in AD 617. The picture obtained from sites such as Euston Road/Tottenham Court¹⁰ and Rectory Grove, Clapham¹¹, suggests an early Saxon occupation in the London area of small scattered farming communities exploiting the gravel terraces. In the case of the Strand and Whitehall this succeeded Roman activity of unknown scale. It appears that the early Saxon occupation in the area was replaced in turn by a more extensive and densely occupied settlement in the mid-Saxon period. This dramatic change may be most satisfactorily explained by Biddle's suggestion that it was founded by royal decree probably in the mid 7th century.

10. R. Whytehead & L. Blackmore *op. cit.*

11. R. Densem & D. Seeley 'Excavations at Rectory Grove, Clapham, 1980-81' *London Archaeol* 4, no. 7 (1982) 177-184.

Excavations & Post-Excavation Work

City, by Museum of London, Department of Urban Archaeology. A series of long term excavations. Enquiries to DUA, Museum of London, London Wall, E.C.2 (01-600 3699).

Croydon & District. Processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collection every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collection of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Mrs Muriel Shaw, 28 Lismore Road, South Croydon, CR2 7QA, tel. (01) 688 2720.

Hammersmith & Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from Sandford Manor and Fulham High Street. Tuesdays, 7.45 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, S.W.6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, S.W.6. (01-731 0338).

Inner and North London Boroughs, by the Museum of London, Department of Greater London Archaeology (North London). Several rescue sites in various areas. (01-837 8363).

Kingston, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Marion Shipley, Kingston Heritage Centre, Fairfield Road, Kingston. (01-546 5386).

North-East London Boroughs, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, E.15. (01-534 4545).

South-West London Boroughs, by Museum of London, Department of Greater London Archaeology (South-West

London). Excavations and processing. Enquiries to Scott McCracken, St. Luke's House, Sandycombe Road, Kew. (01-940 5989).

Southwark and Lambeth, by Museum of London, Department of Greater London Archaeology (Southwark and Lambeth). Several sites from the Roman period onwards. Enquiries to Derek Seeley, Port Medical Centre, English Grounds, Morgan's Lane, SE1 2HT. (01-407 1989).

Surrey, by Surrey Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to David Bird, County Archaeological Officer, Planning Department, County Hall, Kingston, Surrey. (01-541 8911).

Vauxhall Pottery, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society. Processing of excavated material continues three nights a week. Enquiries to S.L.A.S., c/o Cuming Museum, 155 Walworth Road, S.E.17 (01-703 3324).

West London Boroughs, by West London Archaeological Field Group. Enquiries to 273A Brentford High Street, Brentford, Middlesex. (01-560 3880).

The Council for British Archaeology produces a monthly Calendar of Excavations from March to September, with an extra issue in November and a final issue in January summarising the main results of field work. The Calendar gives details of extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The annual subscription is £5.50 post-free, which should be made payable to C.B.A., 112 Kennington Road, SE11 6RE. (01-582 0494).