

Fig. 1: (a) location map of site showing (b) location of trenches.

# Excavations at 15-23 Southwark Street

DAVID BEARD  
CARRIE COWAN

BETWEEN MARCH 1980 and April 1984, and between July and December 1986, excavation took place on the site of 15-23 Southwark Street, London SE1 (Fig. 1).

## Summary

The site lay on what, at the time of the Roman conquest, would have been the southern edge of an area of dry land in the predominantly marshy area south of the main channel of the Thames. This area of high ground is an eyot of gravel capped with sand, with a maximum height of *c* +1.25m OD<sup>1</sup>. To the south of this eyot the level dropped sharply into a

channel filled with waterlaid clays; the edge of this channel lies on the south-east of the area of excavation. The site is between the lines of two major Roman roads. One of them led from the Roman bridge to Watling Street and Stane Street, and the other is thought to have led to a crossing at Westminster<sup>2</sup>.

The excavations produced an assemblage of struck flints of neolithic and early bronze age date. Use of the area in the later prehistoric period is suggested by a number of gullies which appear to be iron age. During the Roman period, early clay and timber buildings were succeeded by two phases of stone

1. A. H. Graham 'The geology and topography of north Southwark' in J. Bird *et al* (eds) (1978) *Southwark Excavations 1972-1974*, joint publication no. 1, London and Middlesex Archaeological Society and Surrey Archaeological Society, 501-

17.  
2. H. L. Sheldon 'The 1972-1974 excavations: their contribution to Southwark's history' *ibid*, 13-14.

structures, and towards the end of the occupation part of the site was used as an inhumation cemetery. Because of the destruction caused by cellars and other modern activity, little post-Roman stratigraphy survived. "Dark earth" deposits overlay the Roman sequence, where it was not disturbed by intrusive features. The "dark earth" was cut by a number of features including mid 11th century pits, a late medieval industrial pit and a cellar, and an 18th century clay pipe kiln. Post-Roman ground surfaces survived only in the eastern area of excavation, and included a late medieval cobbled alley and remains of a medieval building.

## INTRODUCTION

The excavation was funded by the Greater London Council, the Department of the Environment and its successor, the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission, the London Borough of Southwark, the John Lewis Partnership, Courage Ltd, and Mecca Ltd. The site covered an area of some 2000 sq.m (1/2 acre). Three areas were excavated (Fig. 1). Area I was on the eastern half of the site and area II was to the west. Unfortunately very deep basements had destroyed all archaeological levels between areas I and II making it impossible to be certain of the relationships between the structures in each area. The activity in each area has therefore been described separately for each phase, and although Figs. 4a, b and c show the structural sequences for areas I and II in their relative geographic positions, this should not be taken to indicate that the buildings in the two areas are necessarily contemporaneous. In addition, the better survival of archaeological levels in area II may explain why more phases of buildings were recovered from that part of the site. In area III, in the extreme south-eastern corner of the site, it was only possible to excavate the higher levels, that is, the medieval and later periods, owing to the proximity of the surrounding buildings.

Post-excavation work has begun, but it will be some time before detailed interpretations of the stratigraphy are available and the finds firmly dated.

## THE PREHISTORIC PERIOD

In areas I and II, the natural sand was overlain by a soil which contained an assemblage of neolithic and early bronze age flint tools and pottery, including beaker sherds<sup>3</sup>.

Many stakeholes and small linear and semi-circular gullies, which may have been dug to take timber structures, cut the soil over the natural sand in both areas I and II. All the gullies were sealed by early Roman buildings. Some of the gullies produced iron age pottery, and the upper fills of one contained the bronze fittings from a sheath for a Roman *dolabrum*, or military axe.

## THE ROMAN PERIOD

The southern part of area I was covered with a deposit of sand containing early Roman material overlying the waterlaid clays alongside the edge of the channel. This sand may be the result of deliberate dumping to create a usable surface over what had previously been a boggy area. Just how marshy this part of the site had been was shown by large numbers of cattle hoof-prints discovered on the surface of the clay (Fig. 4a).

The next phase of activity consisted of the digging of a series of linear features along the eastern edge of area I (Fig. 4a). The material contained in their backfill dates to the AD 60s. There was no indication of their function, but they may have been sand quarries or robbed-out wall trenches.

### Buildings 1 and 2

Two phases of early Roman clay and timber buildings were present in area I.

The earlier survived only in an extremely fragmentary form, but enough remained of a second building (building 1 on Fig. 4a) to indicate that it was a rectangular structure measuring c 10 × 6m (33 × 20ft). It was stratigraphically earlier than building 4 (see below) which was constructed in c AD 74.

Several slots, pits, stakeholes and a hearth were found in area II. Many of the slots contained the charred remains of timbers. The first building which was clear in plan in area II (building 2 on Fig. 4a) measured at least 6 × 3m (20 × 10ft) and consisted

3. Stuart Needham *pers comm.*

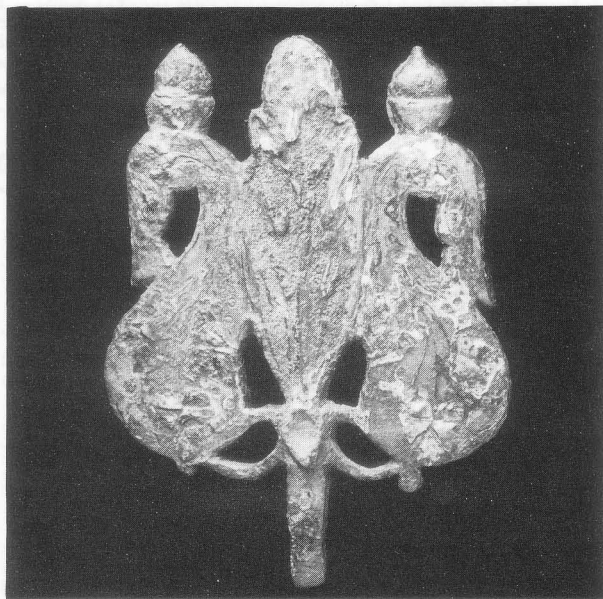


Fig. 2: auxiliary bronze harness pendant. From area I. Length 55mm.

of linear slots with large postholes placed evenly along them. Building 2 was likely to have been made of clay and timber. No evidence of floor surfaces survived, but two slots in the centre may have been internal wall supports.

### Buildings 3 and 4

Building 2 was replaced by a large masonry building (see building 3 on Fig. 4a). All that survived were two wall foundations, 1m (3ft) deep and constructed of a very compact mortar layer containing flint, ragstone, and chalk, over a layer of tightly packed pieces of chalk. This method of construction is unusual, and appears to have no parallel in London<sup>4</sup>. The return walls to the south did not appear to lie within the area of excavation, indicating that the building was of considerable size (at least 11 × 7m, 36 × 23ft) yet there were no clues as to its function. Any associated internal or external surfaces or internal divisions had been destroyed.

In area I, a masonry building (building 4 on Fig. 4b) replaced the clay and timber building (building 1). As its foundations had been largely robbed out, and most of the floors destroyed, it was seldom possible to separate phases of construction. Much of the structure may have been beyond the area of excavation, but sufficient of the ground plan remained to indicate that it was a substantial building with a courtyard at least 18m (59ft) across. The bases of the foundation trenches on the south of the building, where the ground was softer, were piled with oak stakes which supported walls of mortared ragstone. Traces of over 500 stakes were found, and the waterlogged nature of the ground ensured that some 200 survived in a condition good enough for a dendrochronological date of AD 74 to be given for their felling<sup>5</sup>. Three tessellated floors from this building were found, one in the corridor and two in rooms divided by a clay wall. As the clay wall had replaced an earlier one, it is clear that at

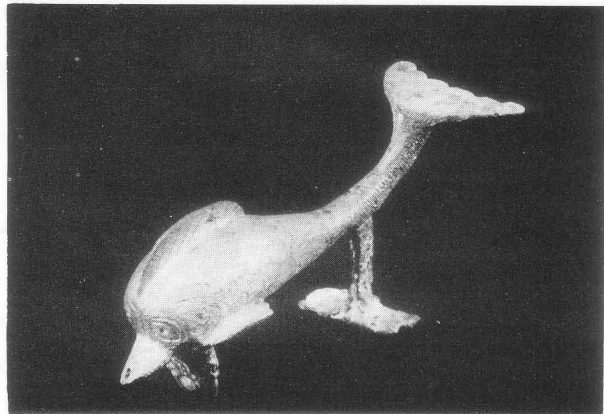


Fig. 3: 1st century bronze fitting, possibly from a flagon lid, in the form of a dolphin. From area I. Length 95mm.

least one major refurbishment of the building had taken place. After the northern part of the wall enclosing the courtyard had been robbed of its stone, the area was levelled for the next phase of buildings. Finds from the backfill of the robber trenches and of two wells in the courtyard were of late 2nd century date.

The function of buildings 3 and 4 is unknown, but their massive construction and apparently early date suggest a public rather than private ownership, and in this context it is interesting to note that a number of military objects (Fig. 2) were recovered from the site. The significance of these objects, and the likelihood of an early military presence in Southwark has been discussed elsewhere<sup>6</sup>. Other large courtyard buildings, e.g. at Silchester<sup>7</sup> and Caerwent<sup>8</sup> have been interpreted as *mansiones* (inns or public lodgings<sup>9</sup>).

### Building 5

In area II, part of the north wall of building 3 had been robbed, and the backfilled robber trench covered by a layer of gravel which may have been deposited to level the ground for a clay and timber building (building 5 on Fig. 4b). Building 5 was built to the same plan as building 3. Some of the walls were built of clay, surviving to a height of c 0.45m (1ft 6in), but in places only beam slots were present. Some of the walls were plastered. There was also a floor surface of white mortar and chalk which had a make-up of broken tiles. The extent of the building was unknown but there were indications of beam slots continuing to the north, giving it dimensions of at least 15 × 14m (49 × 46ft).

Later, a deep well and what appeared to be a drain were dug through the clay walls of building 5. Finds from the backfilling of the well suggest that it went out of use in the late 1st century. After the well had been backfilled, a hypocaust system was constructed over it. The hypocaust was positioned within a room, c 2.40m (8ft) square, with clay walls which were truncated but stood to a height of 0.54m (1ft 9in). On a floor of white mortar, stood *pilae* constructed of circular tiles. The use of clay walls around a hypocaust system is unusual and unparalleled in Southwark, and circular *pilae in situ* are so far unparalleled in London and may indicate an

4. P. Marsden and R. Merrifield *pers comm*.
5. H. Sheldon and I. Tyers 'Recent Dendrochronological Work in Southwark and its Implications' *London Archaeol* 4 (1983), 356-8, Fig. 3.
6. M. Hammerson and H. Sheldon 'Evidence for the Roman Army in Southwark' in *Brit Archaeol Rep Int Ser* 336 (1987) 167-73.
7. J. Wachter *The Towns of Roman Britain* (1976) 263, fig 62.
8. R. G. Collingwood and I. Richmond *The Archaeology of Roman Britain* (1976) 123, fig 44(a).
9. *Ibid* 122.

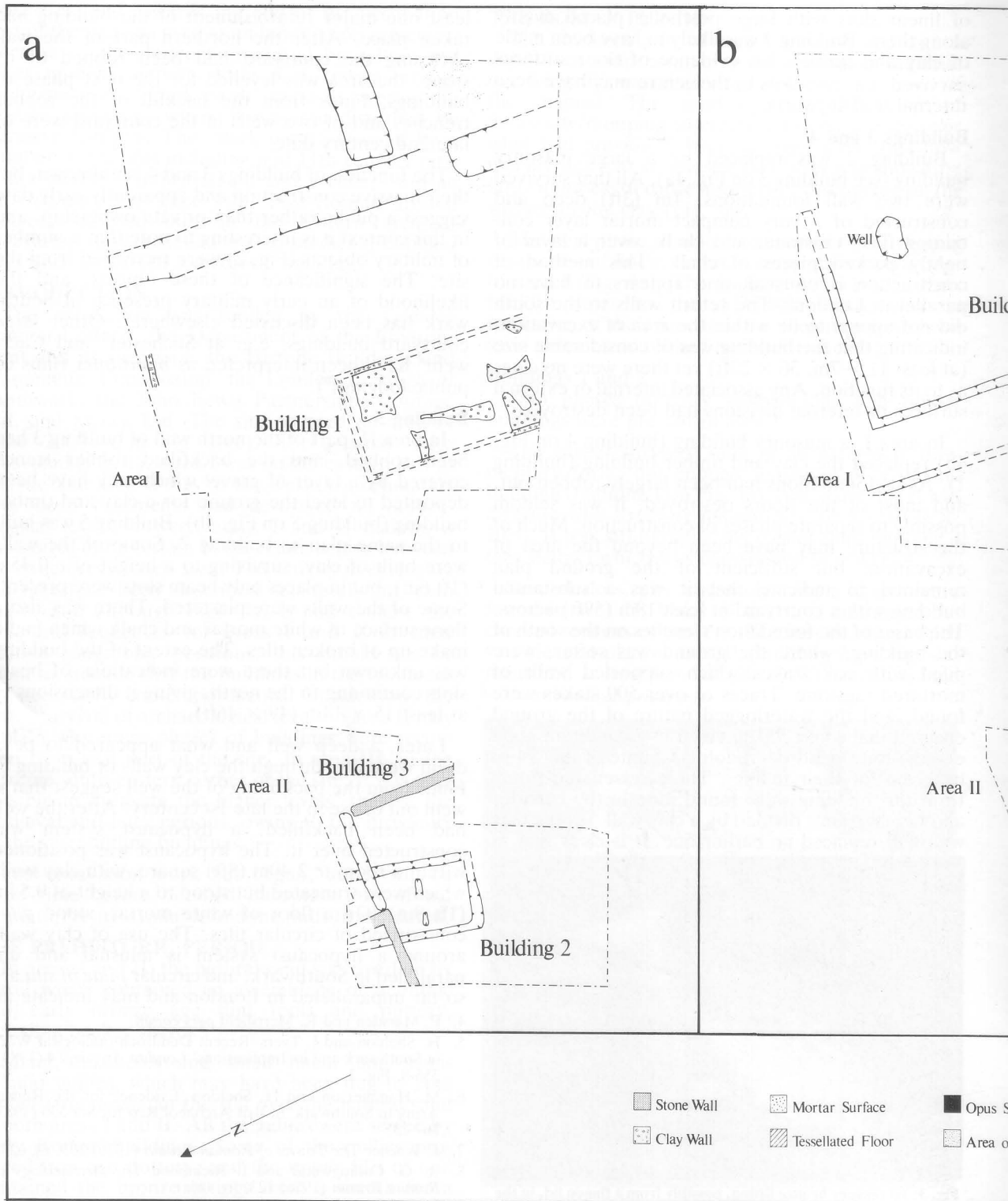
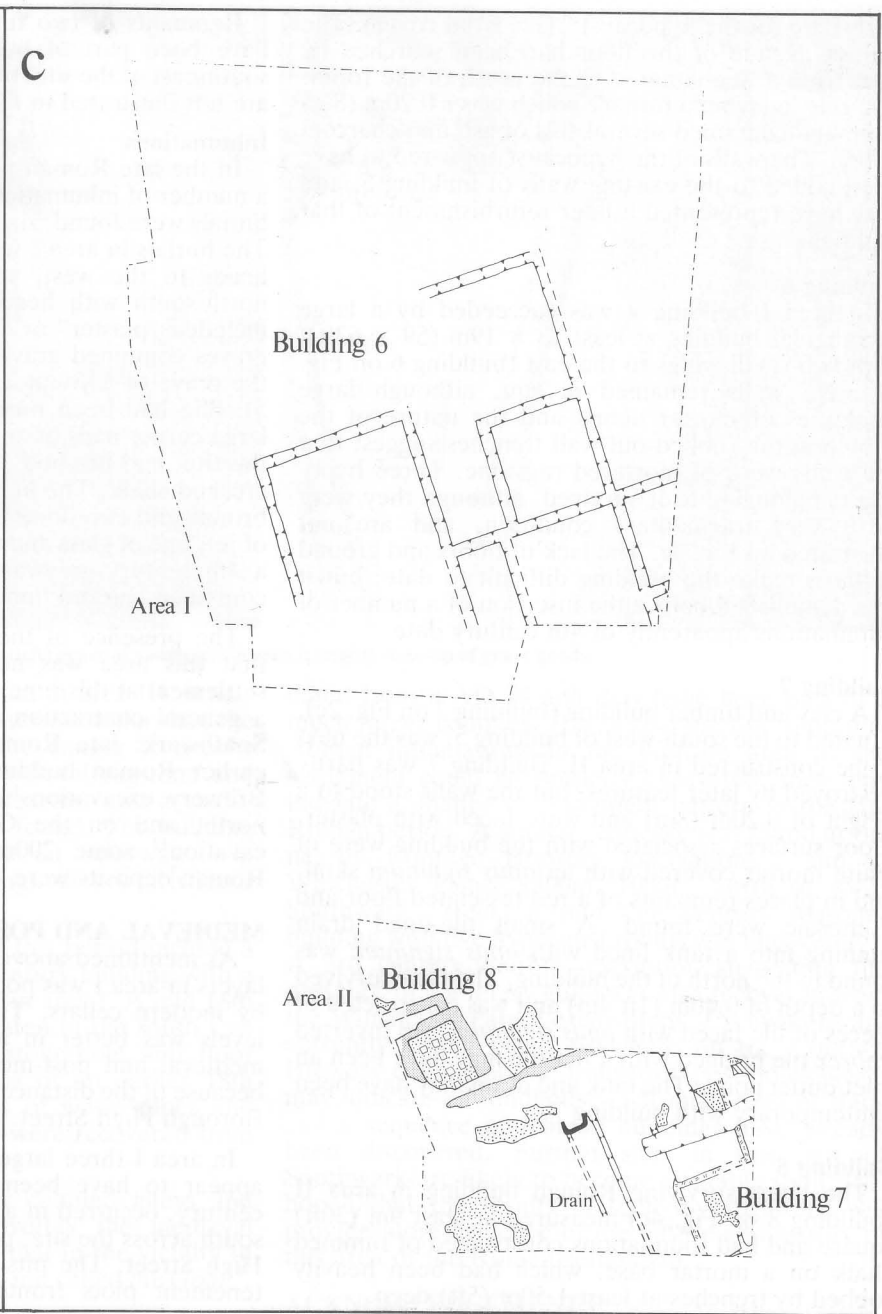
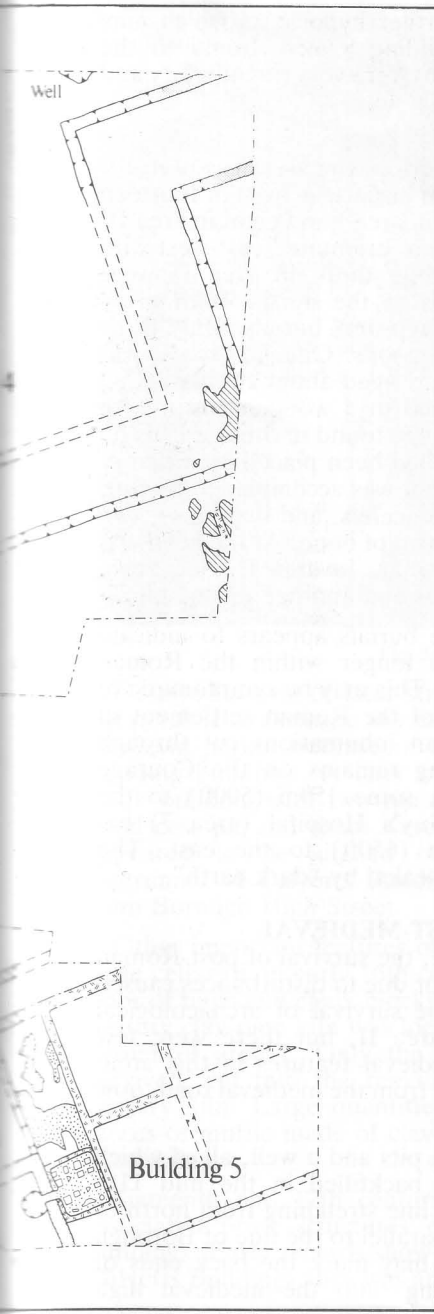


Fig. 4: plans of (a) buildings 1 – 3, (b) buildings 4 and 5, (c) buildings 6 – 8.



early date for the hypocaust<sup>10</sup> (see front cover). The central avenue of the floor had been scorched by heat from a flue situated to the north of the room. The flue led from a furnace which was c 0.20m (8in) deep and contained several fills of ash and charcoal debris. The walls of the hypocaust appeared to have been added to the existing walls of building 5, and may have represented a later refurbishment of that building.

### Building 6

In area I building 4 was succeeded by a large rectangular building at least 18 × 19m (59 × 62ft), with two small wings to the east (building 6 on Fig. 4c). No walls remained *in situ*, although large quantities of mortar debris and the nature of the rubble in the robbed-out wall trenches suggest that the walls were of mortared ragstone. Three hypocausts belonging to it survived, although they were in a very fragmentary condition, and are not illustrated on Fig. 4c. The lack of floors and ground surfaces make the building difficult to date; but it was demolished before the insertion of a number of inhumations apparently of 4th century date.

### Building 7

A clay and timber building (building 7 on Fig. 2c), situated to the south-west of building 5, was the next to be constructed in area II. Building 7 was partly destroyed by later features, but the walls stood to a height of 0.20m (8in) and were faced with plaster. Floor surfaces associated with the building were of white mortar covered with an *opus signinum* skim, and in places remnants of a red tessellated floor and a mosaic were found. A small tile-lined drain running into a tank lined with *opus signinum* was found to the north of the building. The tank survived to a depth of 0.40m (1ft 4in) and was constructed of pieces of tile faced with *opus signinum*. An inverted *imbrex* tile bridged with a flat tile may have been an inlet/outlet point. The tank and drain may have been contemporary with building 7.

### Building 8

The latest surviving Roman building in area II (building 8 on Fig. 4c) measured at least 9m (30ft) square and had foundations constructed of rammed chalk on a mortar base, which had been heavily robbed by trenches at least 1.50m (5ft) deep.

A hypocaust which may have served building 8 was disturbed by later features but measured 4.00 × 3.40m (13 × 11ft) and had walls constructed of tile and ragstone.

Remnants of two further hypocausts which may have been part of building 8 were found to the south-east of the site, but were very fragmentary and are not illustrated in Fig. 4c.

### Inhumations

In the late Roman period, the area was used for a number of inhumation burials. A total of fourteen burials were found, six in area I and eight in area II. The burials in area I were orientated east-west with heads to the west, while those in area II were north-south with heads to the north. Both areas included "plaster" or "gypsum" burials. Only three graves contained grave goods. One, in area I, was the grave of a young girl aged about twelve<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 5). She had been buried in a wooden coffin with large corner nails of a type found in other graves on the site, and her body had been placed on a bed of crushed chalk. The burial was accompanied by four bronze and two bone bracelets, and five pins – two of jet, one of glass and two of bone. At the head was a 4th century greyware jar. In area II, one grave contained chicken bones and another a bone pin.

The presence of the burials appears to indicate that this area was no longer within the Roman settlement at this time. This may be symptomatic of a general contraction of the Roman settlement in Southwark: late Roman inhumations cut through earlier Roman building remains on the Courage Brewery excavations<sup>12</sup>, some 150m (500ft) to the north, and on the Guy's Hospital (area 7) excavation<sup>13</sup> some 200m (650ft) to the east. The Roman deposits were sealed by "dark earth".

### MEDIEVAL AND POST-MEDIEVAL

As mentioned above, the survival of post-Roman layers in area I was poor due to disturbances caused by modern cellars. The survival of archaeological levels was better in area II, but there were few medieval and post-medieval features in this area, because of the distance from the medieval road, now Borough High Street.

In area I three large pits and a well, all of which appear to have been backfilled in the mid 11th century, occurred in a line stretching from north to south across the site, parallel to the line of Borough High Street. The pits may mark the back ends of tenement plots fronting onto the medieval high street.

The presence of a large clay-lined pit in area I may indicate some type of industrial process (such as fulling) in the late 14th century.

10. H. Sheldon *pers comm.*

11. M. Dean and M. Hammerson 'Three Inhumation Burials from Southwark' *London Archaeol* 4, no. 1 (1980) 22.

12. B. Richardson 'Excavation Round-up 1984' *London Archaeol*

5, no. 3 (1985) 65.

13. B. Yule *pers comm.*

14. S. Humphrey *pers comm.*

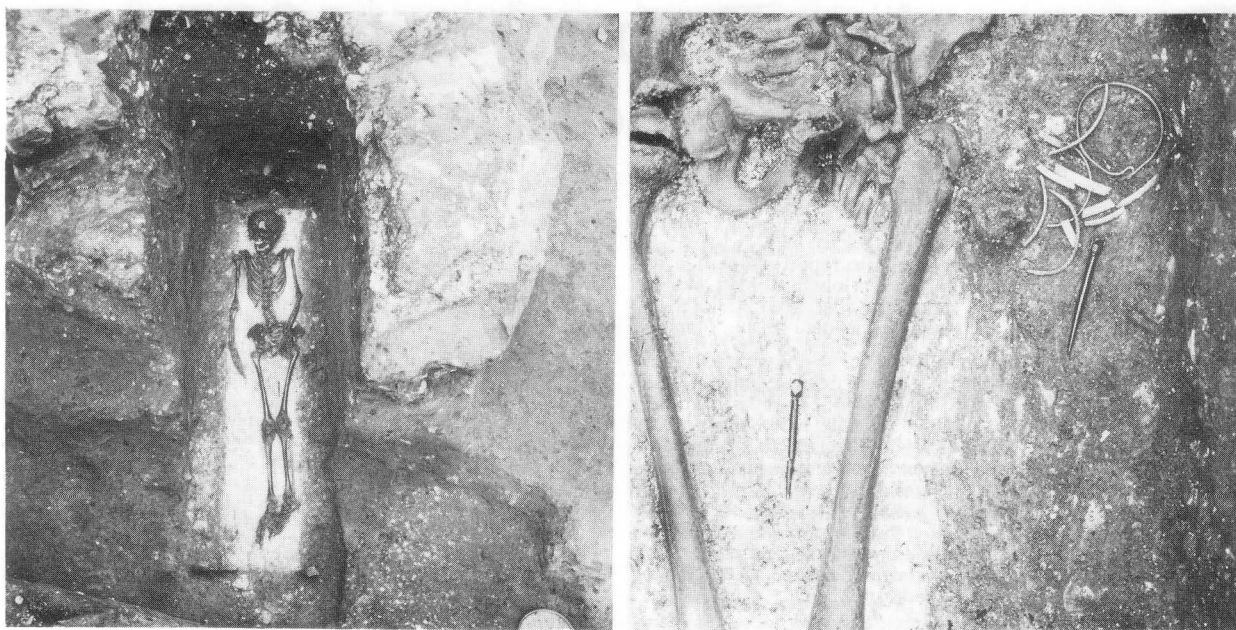


Fig. 5: (left) grave of young girl in area I; (right) close-up of grave goods.

Despite survival of later strata in area III, it was not possible to excavate any features earlier than the medieval period because of the danger to nearby standing buildings. A later medieval ragstone and chalk building with two tile hearths, and a chalk-lined cess pit and drain were found. The building appeared to be aligned on an alleyway – a forerunner of Calverts Buildings alley which leads from Borough High Street.

Other important features of this period include a large cellar of an early 16th century building with a floor of flints and chalk blocks in area I. A mid 18th century clay pipe kiln was located in the south east corner of area I. Only the stoke-hole and floor survived, cut into the remains of an earlier 18th century kiln. Large quantities of waste pipes and pieces of muffle made of clay were recovered from these kilns.

Sixteenth and 17th century cobbled alleys and associated brick structures overlay the medieval buildings. Early records show that in the vicinity of Calverts Buildings alley was an inn called *the Goat*<sup>14</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

The site of 15-23 Southwark Street was the first in north Southwark where resources were available to excavate the site more or less completely.

A number of interesting discoveries were made. The site was important because it revealed for the first time prehistoric features (other than burials), and very early Roman stone buildings, one of which

15. B. Richardson 'Excavation Round-up 1985' *London Archaeol* 5, no. 6 (1986) 163.

dated from c AD 74 and may have been part of a much larger complex. It was also the first time that Roman inhumations in the built-up area of the settlement could be properly excavated; they may indicate a change of settlement pattern in the late Roman period. A similar sequence was found at the nearby Courage Brewery excavations<sup>15</sup>; and at Winchester Palace (300m, 1000ft, north of 15-23 Southwark Street) a mid 2nd century masonry building with five hypocaust rooms was uncovered<sup>16</sup>. A 3rd century marble inscription suggesting the presence of a military guild was also recovered from the Winchester Palace excavations. Excavations are currently taking place elsewhere on the Courage Brewery complex, and prehistoric post-holes which may indicate a roundhouse, a Roman road or track and a sequence of Roman buildings have already been discovered. Further sites in this part of Southwark are likely to become available soon. It is hoped that the results of such investigations will provide more evidence of the nature and history of this area of the Roman settlement.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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16. B. Richardson 'Excavation Round-up 1983' *London Archaeol* 4, no. 14 (1984) 389-90.