

Fig. 1: location of the site in the Roman city of London.

Excavations in the Walbrook Valley

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EXCAVATIONS at 52-63 London Wall (see Fig. 1) started in February 1989, with phase 1 taking place within the basement of the standing building. Phase 2 was post-demolition and started in June and finished in September 1989. They have been carried out by the Department of Urban Archaeology, Museum of London, and funded by Scottish Widows. The work has been fully integrated into the development programme by the managers Jones Lang Wootton.

Background

The site is in the Walbrook Valley (Fig. 2) and lies immediately within the line of the Roman and medieval city walls. Though settled during Roman times the Walbrook Valley was chiefly the site for industrial activity such as the glass foundries recently

located at Moorgate¹. In the late Roman period the culverts and canalised drainage of the Walbrook fell into disuse. The area reverted to marsh and became uninhabitable, hence the name Moorfields. Only in the mid-17th century did the open ground give way to occupation.

From the 19th century onwards the Walbrook Valley has been a focus of archaeological activity. In 1866 Pitt-Rivers observed the presence of timber piles during the construction of the recently-demolished building. He concluded that they were the remains of prehistoric stilt buildings of an early "London"².

In 1928 Mortimer Wheeler re-assessed Pitt-Rivers' work and concluded that what he had recorded was in fact revetments of the Walbrook stream banks and

Wall and Southwark, possibly the remains of pile dwellings' *Anthrop Rev* 5 (1867) 71-83.

1. 55-61 Moorgate; see *LA* 5 no. 14 (1988) 386.

2. A Lane Fox 'A description of certain piles found near London

the foundations of timber buildings of Roman date³. Recent work at 15-35 Cophall Avenue⁴, and the present excavation, have confirmed these conclusions.

The excavations – Walbrook tributary

Trenches I, J and K (see Fig. 3) revealed the Walbrook channel filled with waterlain deposits and a number of human skulls. Since the early 19th century excavations have produced large numbers of skulls from the earliest fills of the Walbrook channel⁵. Mortimer Wheeler suggested they were the remnants of the massacre of AD 60 carried out by the rebellious Queen Boudicca. They are more likely to reflect funeral or votive practices.

Cut into the channel deposits were pits which contained much scrap leather from the production of Roman sandals. Human skulls were also recovered from these pits and from contemporary drainage channels.

Brickearth and timber buildings

West of the channel the backs of Roman brickearth and timber buildings were recorded. They consist of timber uprights regularly spaced, with brickearth filling the spaces to form the walls. The walls were rendered on the internal face with clay, and then covered with painted wall plaster of which much has been recovered (see Figs. 4 and 5). The floor surfaces were of compacted brickearth, and the trampled occupation debris survived up against the walls. A timber-lined Roman well was also recorded in an area interpreted as a backyard.

In a trench to the west of the buildings (area P) a drainage channel of an earlier date than the buildings contained a pot unique in Roman Britain (see below).

Trenches in the north-west of the site (areas A and B) uncovered at least two 1st century AD Roman clay and timber buildings. The westernmost of them (area A) consisted of a rectangular shallow cut lined by planks and packed with rammed gravel onto which timber sill beams were laid and retained at the corners by substantial posts.

Above these beams sat a clay wall with two distinct lifts or builds. Outside and running around the walls of this building a shallow gully, plank-lined only to the south, presumably acted as a run-off for rainwater. External surfaces of compacted gravels on clay dumps lay between the buildings and a channel or ditch running roughly northeast-southwest.

3. R M Wheeler *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in London*, 3. *Roman London* RCHM(E) (1928) 1-67. See also John Clark 'New Troy to Lake Village – the legend of prehistoric London' *London Archaeol* 4 no. 11 (1983) 292-6.

4. *London Archaeol* 4 no. 14 (1984) 385.

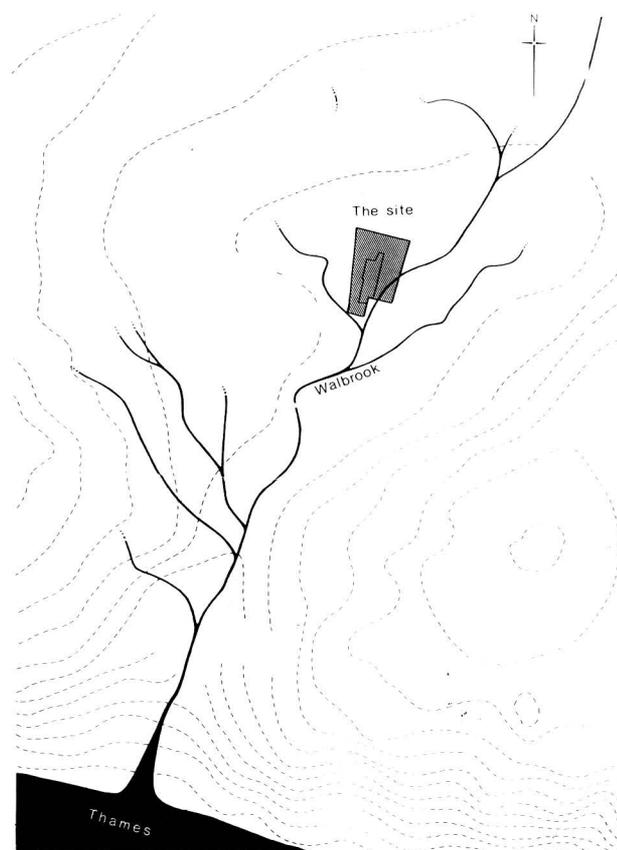


Fig. 2: the site in relation to the Walbrook tributaries and the natural contours of the land.

The eastern of the two buildings (area B) was of wattle and daub construction with a threshold to the west and external surfaces of gravel to the south, divided into two separate areas by a wooden beam abutting the clay rendering of the structure, presumably the base-plate for a fence. Into one of these areas was set a tile and mortar plinth, possibly used as a statue base.

The floors of the two buildings were covered in domestic kitchen refuse from the preparation of food stuffs, one in particular being rich in oyster middens⁶, which was sampled for environmental data.

Gravel road

Trenches in the centre of the site (areas F and G) revealed the western edge of a road running northeast-southwest. It was the continuation of a road located in previous work to the south⁷. We can now

5. For the latest views and a gazetteer of such finds see Geoff Marsh and Barbara West 'Skulduggery in Roman London?' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 32 (1981) 86-102.

6. Also noted by Lane Fox, see fn 2.

7. 10-12 Cophall Avenue; see *LA* 6 no. 2 (1989) 48.

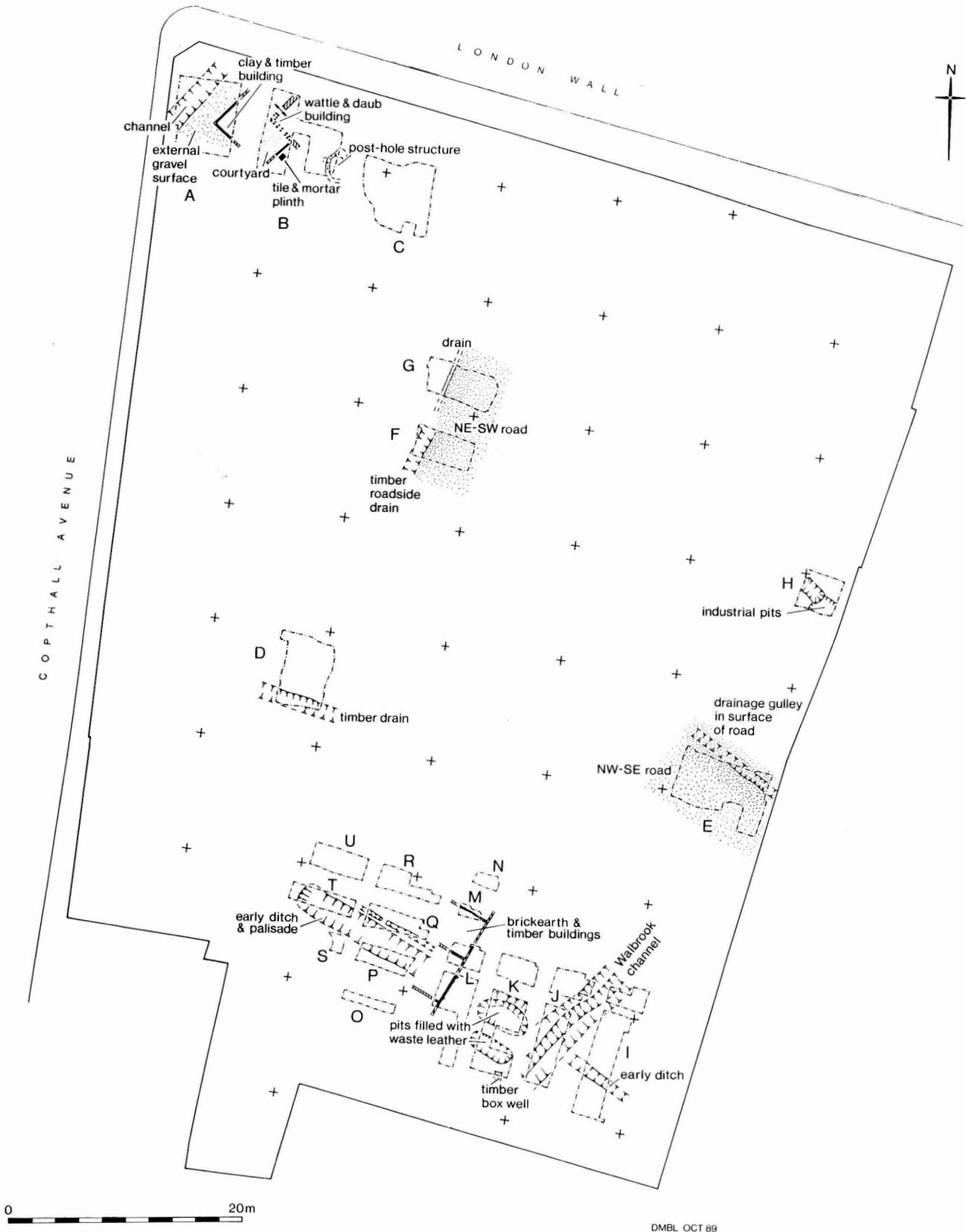


Fig. 3: the main Roman features on the excavation at 52-63 London Wall; Walbrook channel, roads, and clay and timber buildings.



Fig. 4: the brickearth walls of a workshop building in area L being cleaned by Liz Howe. The holes left by the decayed timber uprights can be clearly seen.

Photo: Museum of London.

say that it was some 7m (23ft) wide; it had been resurfaced several times and its width appeared to have been altered at least once. Timber roadside drains were also recorded, as were a series of postholes which may relate to roadside buildings. In a trench on the east of the site (area E) a previously unknown Roman road running west-east was located, covered with a layer of demolition rubble which included several moulded stones from an impressive Roman building. The building range in the south of the site aligned with the observed road network, but the buildings in the north-west do not, suggesting either a difference in date or intensiveness of occupation.

Finds – pottery

Most of the large amount of pottery found is of 2nd century date, including both home-produced and imported kitchen and table wares. One small locally-made beaker survives intact while another semi-complete sooted cooking pot contained the skeleton of a chicken; the absence of butchery marks suggested that it had been placed intact into the pot. A further kitchen jar has a heavy build-up of limescale, indicating that it was used to boil hard water.

Amphora fragments of many different origins were found on the site. Of special interest is an Italian wine-bearing example with a painted Greek inscription which has been deciphered as *THEOU?ROU*; this name may be that of the owner of the goods or the estate on which the wine was produced. The ‘watertight’ pitch lining of this amphora still survives.

Of exceptional interest is a unique metal-decorated bowl of blackish London ware, dated to AD 70-120. Its rim and body have been embellished with strips of tin; it is unlikely that any parallels for applied metal decoration exist on other types of Roman pottery in Britain.

Other finds

Other household vessels include many fragmented glasswares such as flagons, cups, bowls and the more utilitarian bottles. Among the wooden items to survive in the waterlogged conditions are a well-turned bowl and a ladle. Two stone mortars include one made from a Mediterranean marble.

Among the numerous personal items are bone hairpins with lathe-turned heads, an ivory bracelet,

several decorative copper-alloy mounts (probably originally attached to leather belts or garments) and a copper ligula or scoop used to extract cosmetics from long-necked bottles. Many men's, women's and children's leather shoes have been recovered, including hob-nailed shoes, sandals and soft one-piece moccasins.

Commercial activities in Roman London are suggested by the presence of iron and copper styli or writing implements, as well as by an enamelled leaf-shaped seal box of copper alloy, which would originally have contained a blob of wax that held together the bindings of a writing tablet or package. Over 40 copper-alloy coins were also found; they will eventually prove a valuable aid to dating the sequence of activity on the site.

The most striking evidence for industrial activity comes from the organic dumps in the Walbrook. A vast quantity of leather waste, principally from shoemaking, has been collected. This is the largest single dump of such material ever retrieved from Roman levels in the City. Quantification and study of this waste should shed light on the range of footwear styles being produced at this time, techniques of

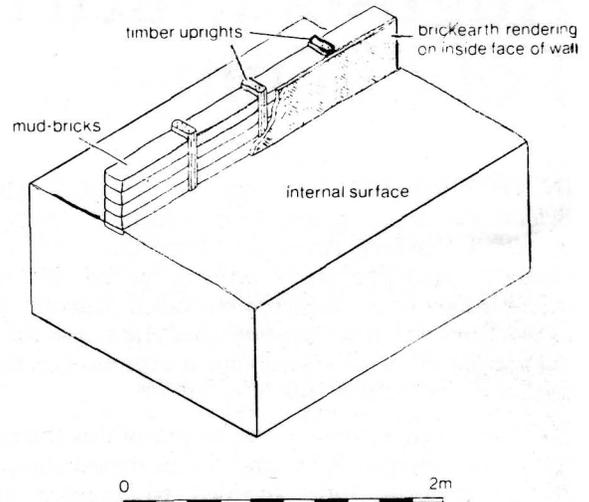


Fig. 5: cross-section through mud-brick/timber wall to show technique of construction.

manufacture and species from the identification of skins. It is likely that this discarded leather originated in a nearby workshop.

Letters

Rescue archaeology needed above ground

HOW MUCH longer will it be before there is proper legislation to prevent listed buildings from being altered, repaired and even demolished without adequate archaeological investigation? A recent letter (see *LA* 6, no. 2, 40) referred to alteration to a 19th century stable block, which incorporated building material from what was probably the earlier timber-framed Harmondsworth Manor House, which went unrecorded.

Two more examples occurred this summer at Ruislip. Both are Grade II timber-framed buildings. New owners started gutting the Old Priory Restaurant without even submitting a planning application. As is part of a range of jettied houses backing onto the churchyard and occupies a central position in the old village, the elucidation of its building history is important to our understanding of the development of the High Street. Across the High Street and quite unconnected, the Swan Inn's ground floor was stripped out; again without planning permission. The local Conservation Group alerted English Heritage who inspected the damage and made a few stipulations about some early walling, but no penalty was imposed and no notes or drawings were made.

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Archaeological bibliographies

In their interesting review of Andrew Fleming's *The Dartmoor Reaves* (*LA* 6 no. 3 pp 82-3), Lesley and Roy Adkins draw attention to the fact that these field boundaries were first demonstrated and published as prehistoric by local workers, but that the publication

was ignored by other archaeologists until the Sheffield academics rediscovered the reaves. One moral the Adkins draw from this event is that it 'highlights the urgency for a well-funded, comprehensive bibliographical service, and the necessity for archaeologists to use it'.

We at the Council for British Archaeology heartily echo the last part of that quotation, but we have to take some exception to the first part. The CBA has provided a comprehensive, though admittedly not 'well-funded', bibliographical service effectively since 1940, firstly with the *Archaeological Bulletin* (later changed to *Archaeological Bibliography*) and then with the *British Archaeological Abstracts*. The Gawne and Somers Cocks publication of the Dartmoor reaves was noted in our 1969 volume as abstract no. 69/447. At that time we had about the largest number of Abstracts subscribers ever, so that conclusion must be that it people were buying Abstracts they were not actually reading them.

That impression was borne out in a survey we conducted in 1986 (brilliantly analysed for us by Dr P W Dixon) which confirmed that 65% of respondents preferred, when looking for information, to ask colleagues or look in the bibliography of a related book or paper. Only 12% conducted a systematic examination of abstracts or serial bibliographies. I fear that the results of this messy way of doing 'literature search' are now to be seen in numbers of inadequate and ill-informed articles that are reaching print.

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