

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

# Excavations at 10-18 Union Street, Southwark

BETWEEN JULY 1988 and February 1989 teams from the Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology conducted two rescue excavations at 10-18 Union Street, SE1 (TQ 3245 8002) (Fig. 1). This work was carried out in advance of redevelopment of the site by the owners, Price Waterhouse and Co., who generously sponsored the

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

excavations. The following is a preliminary report of the main findings, based on an initial consideration of the sequence of deposits and of the dating of finds from selected contexts only.

## Introduction

Previous excavations in north Southwark have 501-17; B. Yule 'The natural topography of North Southwark' in P. Hinton (ed) *Excavations in Southwark 1973-6, Lambeth 1973-9* London and Middlesex Archaeological Society and Surrey Archaeol Soc joint publication no. 3 (1988) 13-18.

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established that at the time of the Roman invasion, in AD 43, the area was low-lying and mostly waterlogged, but that dry land existed at a few places where islands of sand and gravel rose above the surrounding marshes and watercourses<sup>1</sup>. The site lies towards the western edge of one of these islands. It is approximately 30m (100ft) west of the line of the Roman road which linked Watling Street and Stane Street with the Roman bridge across the River Thames.

Natural sands were encountered at between 0.90m (2ft 11in) OD and 1.10m (3ft 7in) OD across the whole site. There was no evidence for the natural channel which defines the edge of the island further to the north<sup>2</sup>, and it is assumed that this channel must lie somewhere to the west of the site. Overlying the

natural sands was a layer of grey-green sand, approximately 0.10m (4in) thick, which was probably a weathered land surface.

A few struck flint flakes, including two blades, were recovered from Roman deposits, but otherwise there were no indications of pre-Roman activity.

### Early Roman features

The earliest Roman deposits were dumps of sand and gravel. In the south-east corner of area A they filled a large depression in the underlying natural sands, and may have been put down in order to level the existing ground surface. They contained small quantities of

2. A. H. Graham '64-70 Borough High Street' in Bird *et al* (1978) *op cit* 55-66.



Fig. 2: plans of buildings and later features.

1st-century pottery, building debris and a coin of Agrippa (AD 23-32).

These dumped deposits were cut by several rubbish pits containing large quantities of painted wall-plaster, mortar, *opus signinum*, brick, tile and pottery dating to the 2nd century AD.

At the east end of area C, dumps of gravelly sand, of unknown date and function, overlay the natural land surface. They were sealed by layers of clayey sand mixed with crushed brick and tile, charcoal, burnt daub and pottery of the period c AD 70-120. Several overlapping layers covered an area of at least  $6.0 \times 7.0\text{m}$  (19ft 8in  $\times$  23ft), but did not extend into area B. They are interpreted as levelling or make-up layers for Building One (described below), and may themselves represent the remains of a nearby building which had been destroyed by fire.

In area B the natural sands were partly truncated by a large linear feature, running north-south for at least 3.5m (11ft 6in). Although the western edge of the cut was not located, it was at least 3.0m (10ft) wide and 0.5m (1ft 6in) deep. The lowest fill within the feature was a thin deposit of sterile waterlaid clay. Above this were several dumped layers of clay, sand, gravel, charcoal and crushed chalk and mortar which contained pottery, oyster shells, bones, charcoal fragments and broken bricks and tiles, some of which were burnt. The pottery from these fills is of the period c AD 70-120. It is difficult to interpret this feature because it was only present in area B, and its relationship to surrounding deposits is unknown. It might have been a ditch or a sand quarry which was deliberately backfilled as part of a general levelling of the site, contemporary with the dumped burnt deposits in area C. The feature was sealed by an extensive layer of compacted gravel, of unknown date, measuring at least  $4.80 \times 3.50\text{m}$  (15ft 8in  $\times$  11ft 6in). This was probably a yard or path associated with the sequence of buildings to the east, in area C.

## The buildings

### Building One

The first building or buildings to occupy the site survived as a number of narrow beam slots cut into the surface of the underlying levelling layers, in area C (Fig. 2a). The slots were filled with sandy clay and silt. There was no evidence for timbers within them or for vertical posts to support an internal framework, which suggests that the slots contained horizontal ground beams which either rotted away or were robbed out. These slots were largely removed by a series of shallow pits, of unknown function, which were backfilled with dumps of sand containing pottery of the period AD 90-150. The structural remains were so disturbed by this later activity that it is impossible

to reconstruct a ground plan or even to determine how many buildings, or building phases, were present.

### Building Two

The rather more substantial remains of a second building were found overlying Building One (Fig. 2b). It was constructed on the same alignment as its predecessor, and had at least three rooms. The most southerly of these measured at least  $2.5 \times 3.5\text{m}$  (8ft 2in  $\times$  11ft 6in). It had clay walls which were plastered and painted. The north wall of this room was a thin partition of clay and plaster less than 0.10m (4in) thick which survived to a height of c 0.30m (1ft). It was constructed on top of the silty clay fill within a beam slot associated with Building One. The plaster surface on the south side of the wall was decorated with a painted design consisting of alternating wide and narrow panels of splashed red paint, presumably simulating marble, separated by vertical grey-black bars with thin white borders. The west and south walls were thicker, but were similarly decorated. The floor of this room was a thin layer of compacted sand which was eroded completely away in places. It had obviously slumped during its lifetime because a layer of gravelly sand was deposited over it in order to level up the surface. This was 0.15m (6in) thick and was laid up against the walls so that it covered the lower parts of their painted surfaces. Two shallow grooves in the surface of this layer, approximately 1.0m (3ft 4in) apart and at right angles to the north wall of the room, may have been the impressions of joists which supported a wooden floor, or the slots for timber ground beams supporting additional partition walls.

To the north of this room was another, with a floor of orange-red brickearth containing fragments of mortar and a few sherds of pottery of the period AD 70-150. This floor was removed by later intrusions to the west and ran beyond the area of excavation to the north and east, but measured at least  $2.80 \times 3.30\text{m}$  (9ft 2in  $\times$  10ft 10in). The brickearth floor of a third room lay to the west, but only survived where it had slumped into an underlying pit. It was therefore at least 3.0m (9ft 10in) across.

### Building Three

After it had been demolished, most of Building Two seems to have been cleared away, and its remains partly sealed by a layer of gravel, up to 0.10m (4in) thick, which was apparently part of a general levelling of the site. The new ground surface provided a firm base for the next phase of construction (Fig. 2c). This building had clay walls up to 0.16m (6in) thick which were heavily mortared on both faces. Two walls forming part of a corridor 1.50m (4ft 1lin) wide survived to a height of 0.21m (8in). It had a thin

brickearth floor which was laid on the underlying gravel surface. A sequence of brickearth floors which survived partially to the south of the corridor may indicate the presence of an adjoining room. The remains of this building were sealed by a demolition layer of brickearth and silt containing broken tiles and mortar fragments, but no datable material.

### Building Four

A mortar floor which was constructed to the west of the corridor may have been contemporary with Building Three, but preliminary analysis of the stratigraphy suggests that it belonged to a later phase of construction (Fig. 2d). It was laid on a bed of gravel and was made of yellow, pebbly mortar approximately 60mm (2in) thick with a thin layer of *opus signinum* on the surface. Although the floor was partly removed by later intrusions, it originally measured at least 5.80 × 4.00m (19ft × 13ft 1in). To the west the gravel foundation on which it was constructed extended as far as a narrow linear trench which may represent a robbed out stone wall. To the south a short stretch of surviving clay wall faced with mortar may mark the southern extent of the room containing the mortar floor. There was no evidence for a continuation of the building to the south of this wall, but other robber trenches at the west end of area C may indicate the positions of adjoining rooms. Although there was no direct evidence for masonry walls or foundations, these trenches were backfilled with soil containing large quantities of mortar and painted plaster. There was also a rubble-filled pit immediately to the south of one of these trenches which contained thick slabs of mortar and *opus signinum* faced with painted plaster, which presumably once adorned a nearby stone building.

### Later Roman features

The mortar floor of Building Four was cut by a small pit which contained four floor tiles sitting on a thin bed of clay. These were probably part of a later floor which had slumped into the underlying pit but had been truncated elsewhere (Fig. 2d). On the south side of area C was a well which was truncated by modern basements but was certainly cut from a level above the mortar floor of Building Four (Fig. 2d). It was not possible to excavate this feature completely but it was at least 1.30m (4ft 3in) deep. The well had a square construction cut 1.60m (5ft 3in) across. Within this was a square oak lining 0.70m (2ft 4in) across which only survived as solid timber towards the base of the cut where the ground was waterlogged. Only one plank could be recovered from the lining, and details of its construction are unknown. The space between

the lining and the side of the construction cut was filled with fairly clean sand containing patches of clay and a few fragments of pottery of the period AD 120-190. The well was backfilled with clayey silts containing oyster shells, charcoal and pottery. Most of the pottery consists of Black Burnished wares, mainly dishes and bowls, dated to AD 270-290<sup>3</sup>. There are, however, many examples of considerably earlier vessels, in good and near complete condition, which apparently were of quite some age at the time of their deposition. They include a fine imitation of a *Terra Nigra* platter, dated to the 1st century AD, a mica-dusted tazza and an unusual mica-dusted flagon, both of the period AD 90-120. The group also contains fragments of two triple vases. These enigmatic vessels, dated to the 2nd century AD, consist of three small cups standing on a hollow ring into which there is a connection via a hole in the foot of each cup. Although the use of these objects is uncertain, it is often thought that they may have had a ritual function. It is significant that the triple vases were found in conjunction with a group of later vessels containing a preponderance of bowls and dishes, as it has been suggested that these are the types of vessels most commonly found as votive deposits<sup>4</sup>. It should be noted that a backfilled well at 8 Union Street, c 12m (39ft) to the north-east, contained a very similar pottery group and also produced fragments of at least three triple vases. Both wells included deer skulls and antlers, which may also have been deposited for votive purposes.

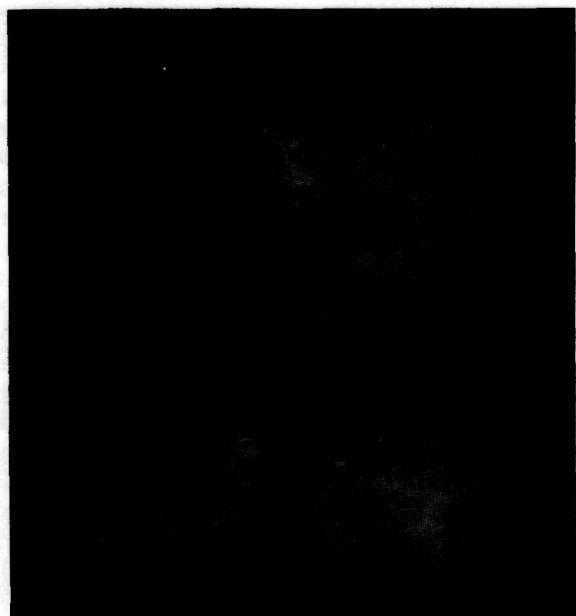


Fig. 3: the *defixio* or lead curse. Height: 75mm.  
Photo: Andrew Fulgoni

3. M. Lyne pers. comm.

4. R. Merrifield pers. comm.

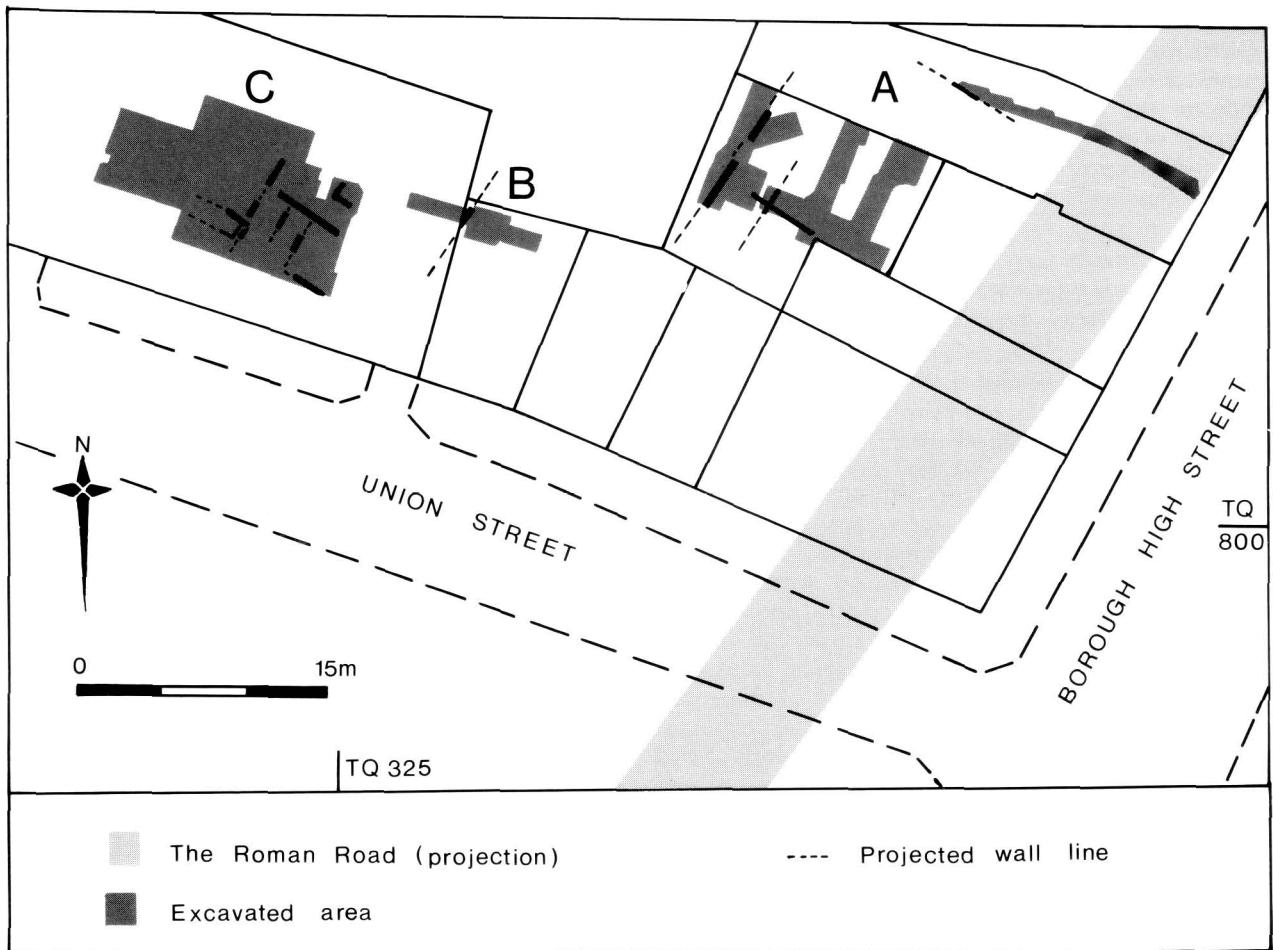


Fig. 4: plan of clay and timber buildings at (a) 84-8 Borough High Street, (b) 8 Union Street and (c) 10-18 Union Street.

Building Four was post-dated by a number of circular rubbish pits containing pottery and coins dating to the second half of the 4th century (Fig. 2d). These pits were truncated and were sealed by over a metre of 'Dark Earth', which also lay on top of the mortar floor of Building Four.

Possibly contemporary with these rubbish pits was a square pit dug in area A. Although the lower part of this feature was cut into soft sand its sides had not eroded, which suggests that it was backfilled soon after being dug. It was filled with clayey silt containing lenses of crushed mortar and gravel. Among the finds of pottery, shell and building material was a coin of Constantius II of c AD 355-365. Right at the base of this pit was a folded lead sheet which bore the Latin inscription *MARTIA MARTINA SIVE* (trans. *Martia*, otherwise *Martina*). The names are written backwards and the letters are reversed, indicating that this is probably a *defixio*, or lead curse (Fig. 3). Although such objects are fairly common, this is thought to be the first to be

discovered in Southwark. It is unclear from the inscription if the curse was aimed at one woman who was described by two of her names or whether the writer was uncertain of the name of the person he or she wanted to curse.

The circumstances of the deposition of this object might suggest more than just casual disposal. Curses were usually deposited in sacred wells or streams, or in shrines and temples where they were often nailed to the walls. Although it is possible that this particular example was removed from its original location and discarded in a rubbish pit, it is equally likely that the pit was specifically dug in order to dispose of the object after it had fulfilled its function! Further analysis of the contents of the fill will indicate whether other objects of ritual significance were present.

The pit was sealed by a layer of grey-brown silt which in turn was overlain by 'Dark Earth'. Among the finds from the Dark Earth was a bronze mount in the form of a theatrical mask (see cover).

## Conclusion

The excavation has shown that the island of sand on which the site is located extended further west than was previously supposed.

A sequence of 1st and 2nd-century clay and timber buildings, of unknown extent, was found. The buildings may have been houses, shops or workshops, or may have had combined functions. All of them were constructed on the same alignment, which they shared with a number of similar structures previously excavated on nearby sites. The buildings at 10-18 Union Street might have been the rear portions of structures which fronted onto the Roman road to the east, and might have been part of a large complex of buildings which included those discovered at 8 Union Street<sup>5</sup> and 88 Borough High Street<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 4). At present it is not possible to correlate the building phases on the various sites.

The rear of these properties is probably indicated by the metalled surface recorded in area B, which was either a yard or a path. Beyond this surface, to the west, was an area which was used in the 2nd century AD for disposing of domestic refuse and building debris, in pits.

The clay and timber buildings were succeeded by a stone structure, again on the same alignment, and of unknown extent. This is a sequence which has been recorded on a number of sites in Southwark, and which seems to indicate a change in the nature of the Roman town<sup>7</sup>. At present it is not possible to date this building with any certainty, although it probably belonged to the late 2nd or 3rd centuries.

In the second half of the 4th century a number of rubbish pits were dug in the area previously occupied by Building Four. There was no evidence for the late Roman buildings which must have been associated with these pits. It is possible that the evidence was

5. G. Marsh '8 Union Street' in Bird *et al* (1978) *op cit* fn 1, 221-32.
6. B. Yule with P. Hinton '88 Borough High Street' in Hinton (1988) *op cit* 71-82.
7. H. L. Sheldon 'The 1972-74 excavations: their contribution to Southwark's history' in Bird *et al* (1978) *op cit* 40.

removed at the same time as the pits were truncated, during the formation or deposition of the 'Dark Earth'. Alternatively, the buildings may have been located beyond the excavated area.

Finally, there is the evidence for ritual activity on the site, in the form of the lead curse and the possible votive deposits in the well. It would be easy to dismiss these as unconnected occurrences which, considered alone, are of limited significance. However, there is now a substantial body of evidence for ritual and religious activity in Roman Southwark. For example, a complex of pits found at 1-7 St Thomas Street produced two 'Venus' figurines, incense jars, lamp chimneys and the so-called 'smith-pot'<sup>8</sup>. Fragments of statues of three deities and an altar were found in a well below the crypt of Southwark Cathedral<sup>9</sup>. There are also numerous examples of everyday objects, such as complete pots, which seem to represent votive deposits, and certain types of animal remains which may also fall into this category.

To date, no Roman building in Southwark has been identified as a temple or shrine, yet places of worship must have existed in the settlement. If such buildings are to be recognised it is important for excavators to remember that "... the first clue to the existence of one may be a concentration of evidence for ritual activity in its immediate neighbourhood"<sup>10</sup>.

## Acknowledgements

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8. M. G. Dennis '1-7 St Thomas Street' in Bird *et al* (1978) *op cit* 291-423.
9. M. J. Hammerson 'Excavations under Southwark Cathedral' *London Archaeol* 3 (1978) 206-12.
10. R. Merrifield *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (1987) 9.

# Local Societies – amendments

THE NINTH set of amendments to the list of local societies (Vol. 4, no. 15, 403-4) is below. Secretaries of local societies are asked to tell us of any errors in or changes to this list.

**Hounslow & District Hist. Soc.** Sec. Mrs. M. H. Lodge, 'Albertine', Manor House Court, Shepperton, Middlesex TW17 9JS. (change of address)

**Orpington & Dist. Arch. Soc.** Sec. Janet Clayton, 81 Langford Place, Sidcup DA14 4AZ.

**Ruislip, Northwood & Eastcote Local Hist. Soc.** Sec. Eileen Watling, 7 The Greenway, Ickenham, Uxbridge UB10 8LS.

**Wembley Hist. Soc.** Sec. Robin Morgan, 54 Wood Lane, NW9 7NY.