

A Roman building and gravel surface at 4-10 Asylum Road, Southwark, London SE15

Simon Blatherwick*

* Museum of London Archaeology Service, Number One London Wall, London EC2Y 5EA. Telephone 071 972 9111 Facsimile 071 972 9112

Introduction

THIS ARTICLE gives the results of a short archaeological evaluation, conducted by the Museum of London Archaeology Service, at 4-10 Asylum Road, SE15. The evaluation (consisting of a 5.0m by 8.0m, 16ft by 26ft, trench) was conducted between 10 and 12 February 1993 and was aimed at;

i. examining topographical and geological evidence, including the alignment of the River Peck,

ii. assessing the potential for evidence of prehistoric occupation on or near to the site,

iii. locating the alignment of a Roman road, secondary to Watling Street. Asylum Road has long been considered to run along or close to the alignment of the Roman road from London to Lewes¹, whilst the Old Kent Road is thought to run on the alignment of Watling Street.

Topographic and geological background

The site (Fig. 1) is located on the river terrace of the London Basin at the junction of flood plain gravels and alluvium². The terrace overlies London Clay (surviving to a thickness of over 100m) and the Woolwich and Reading Beds laid down in the Eocene period³. Borehole surveys on the site record the possible presence of Woolwich and Reading Beds, 2.20m (7ft) beneath the modern ground surface at an upper level of $c +0.49\text{m}$ (1ft 7in) OD⁴.

The topography of the south bank of the Thames, to the north of the site, is that of alluvial marshland surrounding areas of high sand and gravel. It is this

high, dry sand and gravel which has proved congenial for early human occupation as well as determining the course which lines of communication have taken.

Barton⁵ locates the River Peck as running along the western side of Asylum Road and then turning eastwards, to run towards the junction of The Old Kent Road and Ilderton Road, just south of the evaluation site. The Peck, a tributary of The Earl's Sluice, rose at Peckham Rye and drained into the Sluice to the west of Ilderton Road; the Sluice then drained eastwards into the Thames at Deptford. The main part of The Peck "was enclosed as the Earl Main Sewer in 1820-3, but the section nearest to the Old Kent Road remained open until 1831"⁶.

Archaeological background

The Greater London Sites and Monuments Record maps four finds spots along Asylum Road and its junction with The Old Kent Road. Two of them

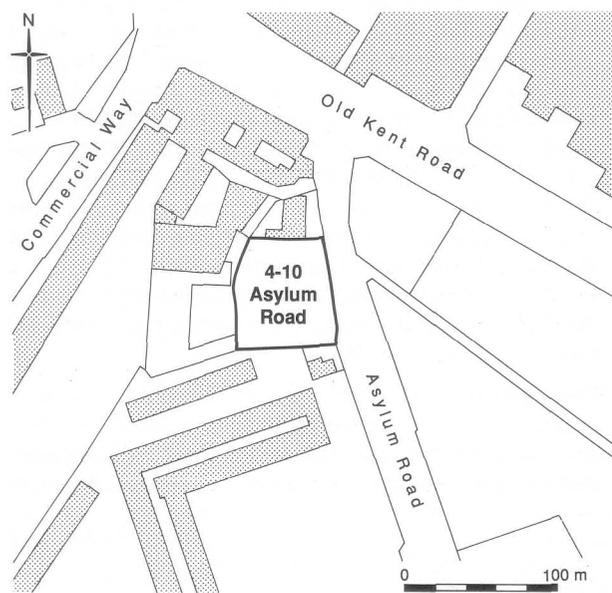


Fig 1: site location showing the position of the site at 4-10 Asylum Road, London SE15, on the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 Series map.

1. I. D. Margary *Roman Ways in the Weald* (1968) 126.
2. As indicated on the Ordnance Survey Geological Survey of Great Britain, Sheet 270.
3. R. L. Sherlock *British Regional Geology: London and Thames Valley* (1960) 28.
4. South Eastern Soils Trial Pit Log, Asylum Road, London SE15. Job No. S8861. Dated 8.1.93.
5. N. Barton *The Lost Rivers of London* (1982).
6. *Ibid.*, 44.

are relevant to the alignment of Watling Street, at the junction of Asylum Road and the Old Kent Road and to the alignment of Asylum Road itself. The two remaining finds spots relate to excavations conducted by B. F. Davis⁷.

According to Margary, the London to Lewes road was constructed early in the second century AD as a means of linking London with the corn-growing areas of Sussex and the south-east whilst, at the same time, providing London with a link to some of the port facilities of the south coast. The route also provided access to the iron-working sites of The Weald, enabling these districts to develop and export their products. Extending from the South Downs, the road is thought to have crossed the Ashdown Forest and the Weald and headed north through West Wickham, Bellingham and Brockley Rise before joining Watling Street. Margary places its junction with Watling Street at 77 Asylum Road, "nearly opposite the south-east corner of the Licensed Victuallers' Association Asylum buildings"⁸ on the strength of Davis' recording of the sections through the road in the gardens of Nos 79 and 115 Asylum Road⁹.

The excavations conducted by Davis at 79 and 115 Asylum Road were on the eastern side of the present course of Asylum Road. In both cases the presence of what was interpreted as a Roman road was recorded. At 79 Asylum Road a gravel surface was recorded in section and at 115 Asylum Road, Davis recorded a layer of gravel metalling averaging 8-10in (0.20m to 0.25m) thick, resting on large pebbles with a layer of white sand below. The road was recorded as being 18 feet (5.48m) wide and was sealed by 15in (0.38m) of clay and 12in (0.30m) of topsoil, suggesting that it lay c 0.68m below the ground surface. Unfortunately, the recording of these sightings is not comprehensive but if this latter assumption is correct one can presume that Davis recorded this road surface at +2.72m (8ft 11in) OD. The Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map records Asylum Road as being at +3.40m (11ft 2in) OD outside 115 Asylum Road.

In 1975 a gravel layer at c +2.60m (8ft 6in) OD (0.84m or 2ft 9in below the pavement level) was observed and in 1976 two ditches dated to the Romano-British period were recorded at 119-121 Asylum

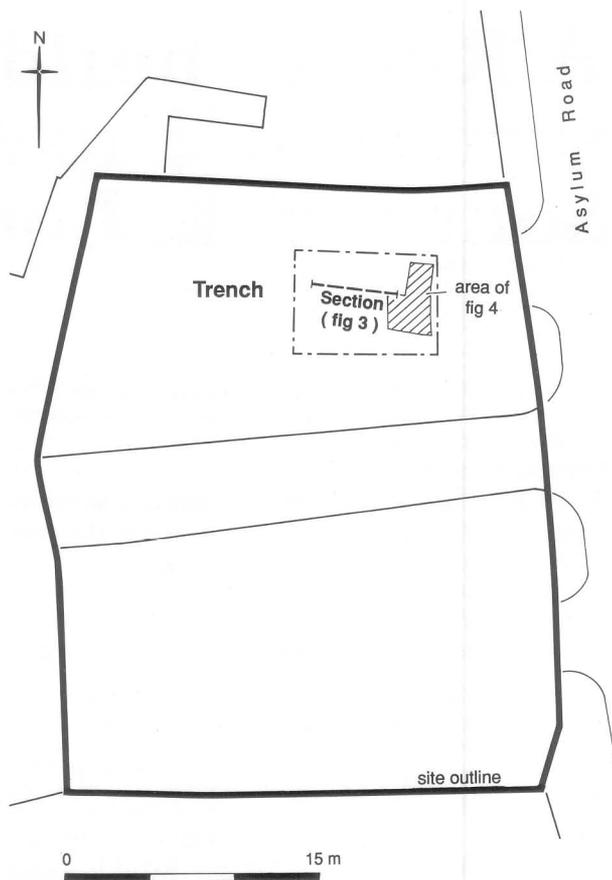


Fig 2: trench location showing the location of the evaluation trench within the site boundaries, and the position of Figs. 3 & 4.

Road, 500m south of the present site¹⁰. The sections recorded in 1975 are noted as being similar to those observed by Davis at 115 Asylum Road but were thought to be natural subsoil and not the surface of a Roman road. The ditches recorded in 1976 had an upper level of c +2.50m (8ft 2in) OD dropping to a lowest point at +1.85m (6ft) OD.

Recent archaeological excavations and evaluations in the area, conducted by the Museum of London, have uncovered a portion of Roman Watling Street to the north-west of the Asylum Road site¹¹ and Roman wall foundations with associated gravel surfaces and ditches at Leroy Street on the north side of the Old Kent Road, again to the north-west of Asylum Road¹². Watling Street was recorded at

7. B. F. Davis 'The Roman Road from West Wickham to London' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 43 (1935) 60-83.

8. *Op cit* fn 1, 127.

9. *Op cit* fn 7.

10. M. Hammerson 'Asylum Road, Peckham ASY75. Museum of London Site Archive (1975).

11. W. Rogers 'Mesolithic and Neolithic Flint Tool Manufacturing Areas Beneath Roman Watling Street in Southwark' *London Archaeol* 6 no. 9 (1990) 227-231.

12. P. Greenwood and C Maloney 'Excavation Round-up 1992; part 3' *London Archaeol* 7 no 4 (1993).

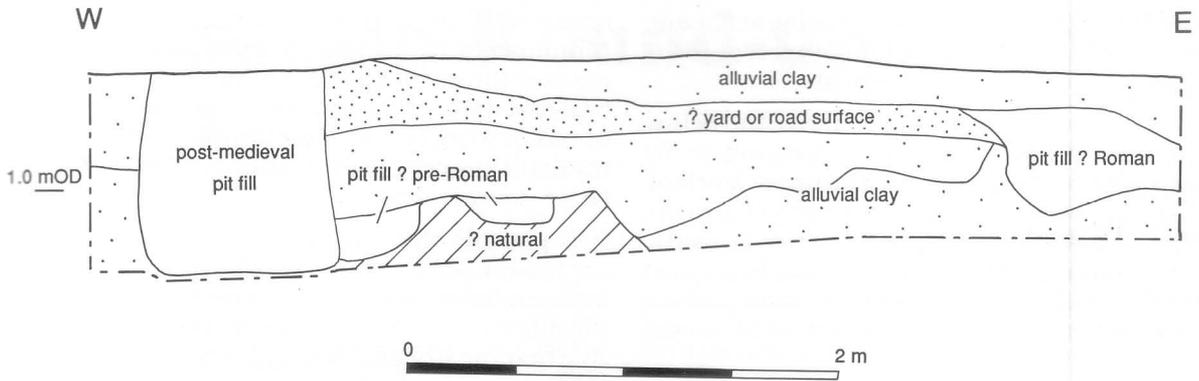


Fig 3: south-facing section in the evaluation trench. This section drawing shows the archaeological sequence recorded. The location of the section is indicated on Fig. 2.

c +1.40m (4ft 7in) OD surviving to a maximum width of 14.0m (46ft) and a maximum depth of 0.60m (2ft) whilst the foundations recorded at Leroy Street were at +1.14m (3ft 9in) OD. Elsewhere on Leroy Street, Roman stratigraphy was recorded at an upper level of +1.20m (4ft) OD¹³.



Fig 4: plan showing the stone "foundation" recorded at the east end of the evaluation trench. The location of the plan is indicated on Fig. 2.

Results of the evaluation

At 4-10 Asylum Road (Fig. 2) natural, clayey sands were recorded at +1.0m (3ft 3in) OD and features cutting these sands were recorded in both section (Fig. 3) and in plan (Fig. 4) at an upper level of +0.97m (3ft 2in) OD. No dating evidence was recovered from these features, although experience suggests that their height and the nature of their fills is indicative of prehistoric activity. Features recorded in both the north- and south-facing sections of the evaluation trench indicate the presence of water-scored ditches and gulleys on the site and mixed layers of clay and sand appear to show water-deposited silts.

At the eastern end of the trench and apparently running parallel to Asylum Road, an extensive spread of angular limestone and Kentish ragstone blocks was recorded. They varied in diameter from c 0.10m (4in) to a maximum diameter of 0.32m (1ft) and were recorded at an upper level of +1.40m (4ft 7in) OD. Although only a small area (c 4.20m by 1.60m, 14ft by 5ft) of this stonework was uncovered and recorded, the nature of the pattern of the stonework was suggestive of a linear rubble foundation. The stones appeared to be set within a fairly compact grey, clayey sand which contained frequent flint pebble inclusions, plus evidence of localised cultural activity in the form of occasional flecks of charcoal and burnt daub. They were sealed by alluvial clays.

To the west of this foundation was a small cut feature — possibly a ditch or pit — and extending west of the cut feature was a layer of rounded and angular flint pebbles set within a matrix of yellow grey sandy clay. The bottom of the cut feature was

13. P. N. Thompson Preliminary Report on the Archaeological Investigations at Leroy Street/Old Kent Road, SE1. Museum of London Archaeology Service report (1992).

recorded at +0.92m (1ft) OD (the top being at c+1.35m, 4ft 5in, OD) whilst the layer of flint was recorded at an upper level of +1.37m (4ft 6in) OD.

Alluvial clays were recorded both above and below the flint layer; the lower clays appearing to lie within a naturally cut feature. The upper levels of alluvial clays were recorded at +1.57m (5ft 2in) OD, having been truncated by 19th century domestic basement activity. These basements were backfilled with loose brick rubble. Modern ground surface on the site was recorded at an upper level of +2.69m (8ft 10in) OD.

On completion of the evaluation the surface of the archaeological level was covered with a layer of Terram 1500 — an inert geotextile. The purpose of this is to provide a permeable yet visible layer between the archaeology and the backfill so that, should archaeological investigations take place in the future, the exact location of the archaeological levels can be quickly and securely ascertained.

All recorded archaeological deposits were left *in situ*.

Discussion

It seems fair to suggest that the alluvial clays and sands recorded on the site are related to the flood plain of the nearby River Peck. Although Barton locates the Peck as turning eastwards to the south of the site¹⁴, it is possible that the river has followed a variety of courses during its existence and both clays and evidence of water-scoured features, recorded on site, may relate to those various courses.

Considering the archaeological history associated with the site and the research objectives of the evaluation, the discovery of stone foundations and gravel surfaces is significant if not wholly conclusive. Specific interpretation of the archaeological stratigraphy is hindered by the paucity of datable cultural artefacts recovered: only two iron nails and a fragment of a horse-shoe were recovered from the clay sealing the stonework. However, the levels recorded on the archaeological remains are commensurate with the levels recorded by the Museum of London on Roman stratigraphy in the vicinity.

The presence of a stone foundation running parallel to the modern alignment of Asylum Road is particularly significant in light of the postulated junction of Roman Watling street and the London to Lewes Roman road. Although Ivan Margary suggests that the junction of the two Roman roads

occurred close to 77 Asylum Road, the Sites and Monuments Record locates the junction of the roads at the north end of Asylum Road. It should be stressed that this is not conclusive but the results of recent work by The Museum of London and the results of the present evaluation tend to favour the latter interpretation.

It is possible that the archaeological remains recorded on the site have produced evidence of a hitherto unknown building which was situated at the junction of the two routes. It is also conceivable that the stonework could relate to other roadside structures — be they cattle compounds or revetments. In addition to this, the flint and clay layer recorded to the west of the stone foundation may either represent a yard surface associated with the stone foundation or may be part of a roadway leading on to Watling Street. Whether it is evidence of the London to Lewes road remains open to question but its recording at +1.40m (4ft 7in) OD could suggest that either Davis was incorrect in his assumption that the gravel surfaces he recorded were Roman roads or that we are incorrect in the calculation of the levels at which he recorded those surfaces. Alternatively, the recording of ditches containing Romano-British pottery (at 119-121 Asylum Road) at an upper level of circa +2.50m (8ft 2in) OD may suggest that the calculation of Davis' levels are correct and that there is a fairly sharp drop in the local topography, from the south of Asylum Road to its northern junction with the Old Kent Road. Levels on the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map show the surface of Asylum Road dropping 0.70m (2ft 4in) from +3.40m (11ft 2in) OD outside 119 Asylum Road to +2.70m (8ft 10in) OD outside the present evaluation site.

The restricted nature and limited duration of the present evaluation has meant that it was not possible to uncover the gravel surface in plan or to retrieve dating material which would have enabled more definite conclusions to be arrived at. However, the density of significant archaeological remains recorded in such a small trench suggest that the whole of the surrounding area is of archaeological and historical importance.

Acknowledgments

The Museum of London Archaeology Service would like to thank Hexagon Housing Association for providing the funding which made this evaluation possible and Eamonn Barry of the Calford Seaden Partnership for facilitating the evaluation. John Dillon (Archaeology Officer for the London Borough of Southwark) and Harvey Sheldon have helped with site interpretation.

14. *Op cit fn 5.*