

# The hinterland of Roman Southwark: part 1

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## Introduction

THE AIM of this paper is to consider the evidence for later prehistoric and Romano-British activity on the Bermondsey eyot, a low-lying gravel island which formed part of the hinterland of Roman Southwark. Much of the evidence is derived from excavations carried out during the last ten years by the Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology (DGLA) and its successor, the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MOLAS).

Many of the sites which are discussed are being reviewed currently by MOLAS as part of a major post-excavation assessment project, funded by English Heritage, and the following is intended as an interim statement only. Similarly, much of the dating evidence presented here is provisional.

The Bermondsey eyot was situated to the north of Watling Street, the major Roman road from London to the Kent coast, and approximately 0.5 km south-east of the Roman settlement which developed along the approach road connecting Watling Street with the bridge over the River Thames (Fig. 1). A forthcoming article will describe recent excavations along the Old Kent Road, which have located part of Watling Street and evidence for road-side activity. Prehistoric and Roman occupation of the Horsleydown eyot, to the north of Bermondsey eyot, has been discussed previously<sup>1</sup>.

Until comparatively recently very little archaeological work had taken place outside the main Roman settlement in the Borough High Street area. The first excavations in Bermondsey were carried out by Corbett and Grimes in the 1950s and 1960s on the site of the conventual church of Bermondsey Abbey, at the junction of Tower Bridge Road and Abbey Street. Between 1984-88 DGLA carried out a major excavation of the Abbey's claustral buildings and monks' cemetery. Since then there have been a number of smaller watching briefs, evaluations and excavations in the area, all carried

out in advance of redevelopment. The sites are located on Fig. 2.

## Natural topography

The natural topography of north Southwark has been discussed in detail elsewhere<sup>2</sup> and has been summarised in a previous article<sup>3</sup>. Stated briefly, the geology of the Bermondsey area consists of Palaeocene London Clay overlaid by 4.5 to 6.0 m of Pleistocene flood plain sands and gravels. These have been eroded and dissected by braided channels and tributaries of the Thames, resulting in a landscape of low-lying islands or eyots (with surfaces at between +1.0 to +2.0 m OD) separated by mudflats, marshes and tidal watercourses.

Recent research at MOLAS by David Bentley<sup>4</sup> has refined our understanding of the topography of north Southwark (Fig. 1) and has allowed the Bermondsey eyot to be mapped in greater detail than was possible previously. At the time of the Roman invasion it was by far the largest of the islands in the area, extending over 2 sq. km approximately. The surface of the natural gravels is generally above +1.20 m OD and has been recorded at a maximum height of +2.20 m OD. There seems to be a spine of higher ground running across the middle of the eyot from west to east, and geological surveys indicate that at the eastern end the sands and gravels are capped by brickearths, which elsewhere have been removed by fluvial erosion. These deposits have yet to be examined archaeologically.

## Preservation of archaeological remains

Unlike the City where archaeological remains can survive at depths of 6 or 7 m below the modern ground surface, in Bermondsey deposits are much shallower. In general the surface of the natural sands and gravels lies at only 1.5 to 2 m below modern pavement levels. This means that the evidence for early occupation is at great risk of destruction in the course of modern redevelopment. However, until comparatively recently the great-

1. J Drummond-Murray, D Saxby and B Watson 'Recent archaeological work in the Bermondsey district of Southwark' *London Archaeol* 7 no 10 (1994) 251-7.

2. B Yule 'Natural Topography of north Southwark' in P Hinton (ed) *Excavations in Southwark 1973-76 and Lambeth 1973-79*

London Middlesex Archaeol Soc and Surrey Archaeol Soc joint pub no 3 (1988) 13-17.

3. Drummond-Murray et al, *op cit* fn 1.

4. D Bentley in C Cowan (in prep.) *The Development of north-west Roman Southwark. Excavations at Courage's Brewery, 1964-90.*

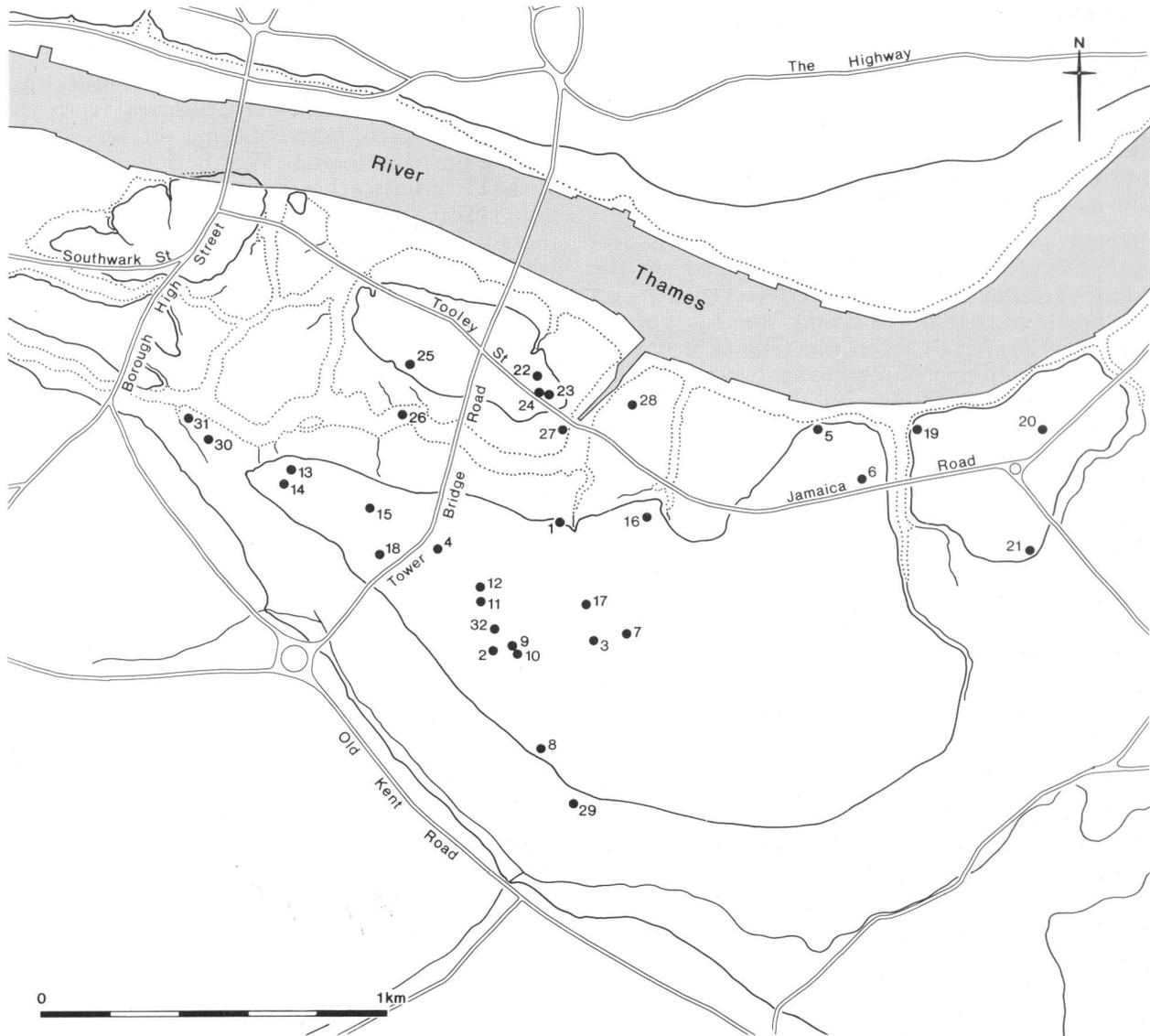


Fig. 1: location of sites mentioned in the text.

est threat to the survival of the archaeological record was agriculture. The lay brothers of Bermondsey Abbey (founded in 1086 as a Cluniac Priory) farmed the surrounding land in the medieval period, and much of the area remained rural until the 19th century when the expansion of the local leather industry meant that the fields were engulfed by tanneries, factories and workers' housing. Those centuries of agriculture and market gardening resulted in the truncation of earlier deposits, of ten down to the surface of the under-

lying natural gravels, and created thick deposits of re-worked "ploughsoil".

### Later Prehistoric activity

An important development of recent years has been the discovery in Bermondsey of a number of Bronze Age sites in marginal, low-lying areas away from the higher ground. At Phoenix Wharf [27] a Bronze Age cooking pit was found beneath a land surface showing evidence of prehistoric ard plough cultivation<sup>5</sup> and similar ploughmarks were discovered at

5. J M C Bowsher *Archive Report on Excavations at Phoenix Wharf, Southwark (PHW88) MOL (1988).*

Wolsey Street<sup>6</sup> [28]. At the Bricklayers Arms Railway Goods Depot [29] a brushwood platform of Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age date was found projecting from the southern edge of the Bermondsey eyot. This is possibly a landing stage or part of a trackway<sup>7</sup>. A Bronze Age trackway has been found also at Bramcote Grove<sup>8</sup>. This may indicate a seasonal link between Bermondsey and the mainland to the south.

Recent work on the Bermondsey eyot has produced evidence for prehistoric activity on the higher ground. At Abbey Street/Neckinger [1], on the northern edge of the island, Iron Age pottery has been recovered from the fills of a natural channel. On higher ground to the west the terminus of a ditch was found, containing some worked flints (including an awl), burnt flint and some flint-tempered pottery dated 500-400 BC. Nearby, three truncated pits also produced small quantities of Late Bronze Age and Iron Age pottery<sup>9</sup>.

Two parallel ditches, one of which contained Neolithic and Bronze Age flint implements, have been found at Alscot Road<sup>10</sup> [3], and the Bermondsey Abbey site [4] produced a quantity of Neolithic and Bronze Age flint tools and cores. There were also several small gullies containing Iron Age pottery, including a complete vessel, and a triangular loom weight<sup>11</sup>.

Iron Age occupation is suggested at Cherry Garden Pier [5] where fragments of pottery were recovered from the fills of pits and from deposits lying on top of the natural sands and gravels<sup>12</sup>. The Platform Wharf site [19], located on a smaller gravel island to the east of the Bermondsey eyot (the Rotherhithe eyot), was crossed by a north-west to south-east ditch which was more than 16m in length, up to 1.75m wide and 0.71m deep. The ditch appears to have remained open for some time before silting up gradually. Small amounts of prehistoric pottery were recovered from the fill and these included a post Deverel-Rimbury rim sherd dating to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age (800-600 BC). A cluster

of stakeholes to the south of the ditch suggest a possible contemporary structure and some small pits nearby may indicate associated activity<sup>13</sup>.

So far the best evidence for Late Iron Age occupation of the Bermondsey eyot comes from 170 Grange Road [11], where a large pit was found cutting the natural sands. Weathering of the sides of the pit indicates that it remained open for some time before being backfilled gradually. The fill contained fragments of Late Iron Age shell and grass-tempered pottery including a sherd with an incised linear graffito and one with thumb-impressed decoration around the shoulder. Flint tools including a blade and a scraper were recovered, as well as a large bone assemblage consisting mainly of the remains of cattle, sheep and horses<sup>14</sup>.

Although the evidence for prehistoric activity is sporadic there is now sufficient data to suggest that the Bermondsey eyot and the surrounding marshland was settled during the later prehistoric period. It is now possible to refute the assertion, made less than twenty years ago, that "There is no reason to suggest any permanent occupation.... on, or close to the high areas of sand or gravel in north Southwark"<sup>15</sup>.

## The Roman Period Pits and ditches

The extensive truncation and re-working of deposits caused by agriculture and market gardening has meant that on most of the evaluation sites the only evidence for Roman occupation has been intrusive features such as pits, postholes and ditches which have survived partially, cutting into the natural sands and gravels. None of the sites excavated so far have produced conclusive evidence for contemporary land surfaces.

Pitting has been recorded on approximately half of the sites, concentrated on the higher ground in the Grange Road area. Further analysis of the artefacts, ecofacts and environmental samples is required before the dating and function of many of these

6. J Drummond-Murray *Wolsey Street, Southwark. An Archaeological Evaluation* (WOY94). MOLAS archive rep (1994).
7. H Jones, N Branch, J Giorgi and I Tyers 'Excavations at the Former Bricklayers Arms Railway Depot Site' *Surrey Archaeol Coll* (forthcoming).
8. P Greenwood and C Maloney 'Excavation Round-up 1992: part 3' *London Archaeol* 7 no 4 (1993) 105.
9. S Mason *Preliminary Report on Archaeological Investigation at Abbey Street/Neckinger, Bermondsey* (ABY91). MOLAS archive rep (1992).
10. I Grainger *Alscot Road, Southwark. An Archaeological Evaluation* (ARD93). MOLAS archive rep (1993).
11. D Beard and D Malt *Bermondsey Abbey Project. Application for*

*a grant for assessment* MOLAS unpub (1994).

12. S Girardon and J Heathcote 'Excavation Round-up 1987' *London Archaeol* 5 no 15 (1988).
13. S Batherwick 'A Royal Residence on the Riverside at Rotherhithe' *Surrey Archaeol Coll* (forthcoming).
14. A Steele *Excavations at 170-176 Grange Road, Bermondsey SE1. Preliminary Report* (GRA89) MOL archive rep (1991).
15. A H Graham 'The geology of north Southwark and its topographical development in the post-Pleistocene period' in J L Bird et al (eds), *Southwark Excavations 1972-74* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc and Surrey Archaeol Soc joint pub. no. 1 (1978) 508.

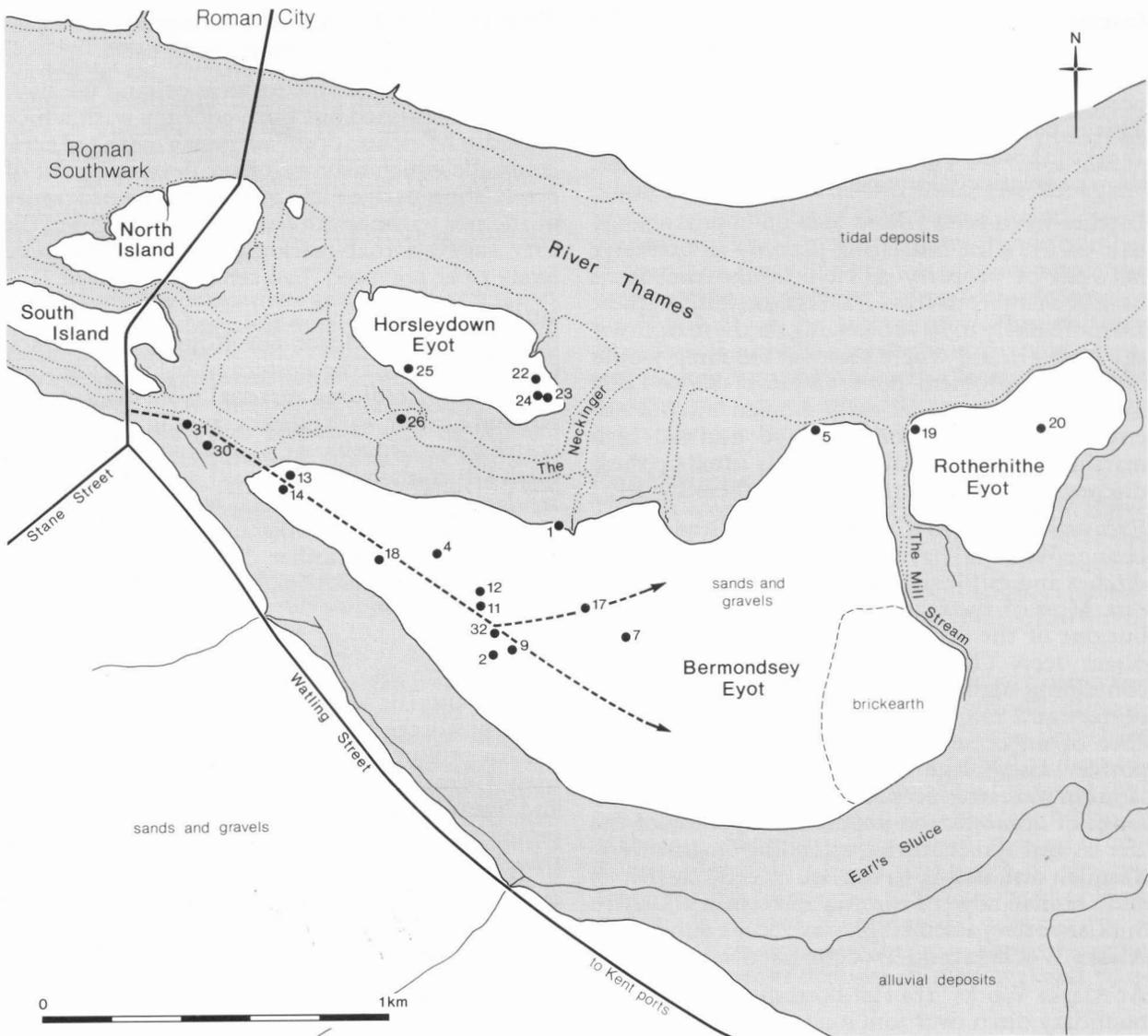


Fig. 2: topography of Roman Southwark, showing site locations.

key to sites. BA = Bronze Age, IA = Iron Age, R = Roman, T = Topographic information only

**Bermondsey eyot**

1. Abbey Street/Neckinger (ABY91) BA IA R; 2. Alaska Works, 61 Grange Road (AW89) (BCN94) R; 3. Alscot Road (ARD93) BA; 4. Bermondsey Abbey (BA84) (LWK92) (TWB94) BA IA R; 5. Cherry Garden Pier (CG87) IA R; 6. Cherry Garden Street (CGR92) T; 7. Croda Gelatine Works, Grange Road (CRODA86, CRODA87) R; 8. Dunton Road (DUN91) T; 9. 80-85 Grange Road (GGA92) R; 10. 86-87 Grange Road (GRG93) T; 11. 170 Grange Road (GRA89) IA R; 12. 41-45 Grange Walk (GRW91) BA IA R; 13. 175-177 Long Lane (Watching brief) R; 14. 180-196 Long Lane (watching brief) R; 15. 239 Long Lane (LGN96) T; 16. Old Jamaica Road (OJR92) T; 17. 74-76 Spa Road/1-9 Alscot Road (SPA93) R; 18. The Trocette Cinema, Tower Bridge Road (TRE91) (TOB95) R

**Rotherhithe eyot**

19. Platform Wharf (PW86 etc) BA IA R; 20. Rupack Street (RS87) R; 21. St. Olaves Hospital (SOR91) T

**Horsleydown eyot**

22. Queen Elizabeth Street (QESS88) R; 23. 283 Tooley Street (TOS93) IA R; 24. 271-283 Tooley Street (TOY94) IA R; 25. 22-28 Whites Grounds (WG87) R

**Marginal sites**

26. 9 Tanner Street (TAN87) R; 27. Phoenix Wharf (PHW88) BA; 28. Wolsey Street (WOY94) BA; 29. Bricklayers Arms Railway Goods Depot (BLA87) BA

**Isolated finds (possible funerary vessels)**

30. SMR 090492 (approx); 31. SMR 090648 (approx); 32. SMR 091081 (approx)

features can be determined. It is clear however that the presence of pits, whether for rubbish disposal, storage or cess, does indicate some form of settled occupation rather than transitory use of the site. This is particularly true of sites, such as Alaska Works [2], where a sequence of intercutting pits shows a relatively long period of use.

Ditches have been found also on approximately half of the sites, indicating possibly an extensive network of property or field boundaries. Some have been interpreted as drainage ditches, but these are more likely to have been dug on the margins of the high ground where seasonal flooding would have been a problem. For example, at 180-196 Long Lane [14] two parallel early Roman ditches oriented north-south might have drained into marshland to the north. After they silted up these ditches were cut by a third, oriented east-west<sup>16</sup>.

Excavations at 170 Grange Road [II] and 41-45 Grange Walk [12] have revealed a series of parallel ditches and gullies oriented north-west to south-east. Most of the features were truncated heavily but one of the ditches was up to 1.90m wide and 0.41m deep. They were infilled with dark silts containing significant quantities of unabraded pottery and animal bones which suggest the presence of an occupation site in the vicinity. The pottery assemblage included a complete Verulamium ware ring-necked flagon (AD 130-160) and a range of domestic and imported fine-wares of the late 1st and 2nd centuries, including fragments of a samian dish dating to the late 1st century (Dr. 18) and a samian bowl of the mid 2nd century (Dr. 31)<sup>17</sup>. Similar pottery assemblages have been found at the Alaska Works [2] and Trocette [18] sites.

At Alaska Works [2] a flat-bottomed north-south boundary ditch over 30m long, 1.75m wide and up to 0.60m deep was dug early in the Roman period. After the ditch silted up a number of pits were dug into its upper fills, perhaps to receive posts for a replacement fence<sup>18</sup>. These pits contained fragments of early Roman shell-tempered coarse pottery. Two east-west ditches and a gully were found, in association with pits containing late 1st- and 2nd-century pottery, at the Trocette site [18]<sup>19</sup>, and at Rupack Street [20], on the Rotherhithe eyot, a

ditch, possibly of late Roman date, produced a 4th-century coin of Constantine the Great<sup>20</sup>.

To date no recognisable patterns of land use have been distinguished but the frequency with which these ditch features occur suggests a managed rural landscape which may well have developed out of pre-existing native field systems<sup>21</sup>. The proximity of the area to the Southwark settlement and to the City suggests that market gardening was more likely to be practised than cereal production.

### Buildings

Much of the evidence for Roman buildings is circumstantial. At the western end of the eyot large quantities of building material were discarded in pits and ditches, with more occurring residually in post-Roman deposits. At 41-45 Grange Walk [12] a ditch fill contained significant amounts of large *tegulae* (roof tile) fragments as well as quantities of ragstone rubble. A short distance to the south at 170 Grange Road [II] another ditch contained much ceramic building material, including a large *pedalis* (hypocaust tile)<sup>22</sup>.

At the Alaska Works site [2] an evaluation in 1989 revealed a double line of pits, which might have housed posts for some form of structure<sup>23</sup>, possibly a barn or storage building. More recent work on the site has produced further evidence for structures in the form of numerous postholes and stakeholes, and linear features which the excavator has interpreted as the remains of beamslots and a robber trench<sup>24</sup>.

### Burials

A number of burials have been found on the Bermondsey eyot, either in the course of recent excavations or as isolated finds. At the Trocette site [18] two truncated inhumations (one oriented north-south, which was cut by the second, oriented east-west) have been found recently, and are likely to be of Roman date<sup>25</sup>. At the site of the former Croda Gelatine Works in Grange Road [7] the truncated remains of a north-south inhumation in a mortar-lined grave were found. The grave fill contained coffin nails and a bronze finger-ring<sup>26</sup>. Three cremation burials were found at Cherry Garden Pier on an area of relatively high ground where there

21. See J Percival *The Roman Villa* (1981) 137-8.

22. Steele, *op cit* fn 14.

23. MOLAS, *op cit* fn 18.

24. W A McCann *Alaska Works 61 Grange Road, London SE1 Post-excavation assessment report* (BCN94) MOLAS unpub (1995).

25. MOLAS, *op cit* fn 18.

26. H Swain *An Archaeological Excavation at Croda Gelatine Works* (CRODA86) MOL archive rep (1986).

was also a Roman ditch and other cut features<sup>27</sup>. Isolated finds of complete Roman vessels are recorded in the Greater London Sites and Monuments Record and these may indicate cemetery sites or individual burials. They include a "vase" from near the Alaska Works site in Grange Road [30], a jar from Long Lane [31] and two complete flagons (recorded as probable grave furniture) also from Long Lane and held by the Cuming Museum [32].

Apart from the cremations at Cherry Garden Pier the evidence for burials is concentrated along Long Lane and Grange Road. These are two of the earliest roads in the area, dating from the medieval period, and follow the spine of high ground which runs across the eyot. The discovery of Roman burials along this route suggests that the medieval roads may overlie an earlier, as yet unidentified, Roman access road (Fig. 1).

### Coinage

Most of the coin evidence comes from the Bermondsey Abbey [4] excavation. No features which can be assigned definitely to the Roman period were found here, but the site did produce 81 residual Roman coins, from re-worked soils of Saxon and medieval date in the northern and western parts of the site. A recent study by Michael Hammerson has indicated that there was little coin loss before the mid 3rd century and continuing occupation of the site until the end of the Roman period<sup>28</sup>. Most notably, the site produced a significant number of Theodosian coins (AD 388-402), in contrast to sites in the main settlement where Theodosian coins are rare.

It appears likely that during the later Roman period the Southwark settlement contracted towards the bridge head and experienced a change in status, with more stone buildings being constructed within a less densely populated townscape<sup>29</sup>. It has been suggested also that in the later Roman period activity within the walled city was sluggish but that there was a phase of renewal in the suburbs, like Southwark, and in roadside settlements such as Enfield, Brentford and Staines. Furthermore this period saw villa society flourishing. Perring suggests that "more resources were lavished on the villas of this period and city life may have been held inferior to country life"<sup>30</sup>. Although this is not to imply that the Bermondsey eyot formed part of a villa estate, the coin evidence from the Abbey site

does suggest that the area benefited from a period of rural economic revival.

### The Saxon period

So far no evidence has come to light to suggest that there was continuity of settlement into the Saxon period. The name "Beourmund's ey" is of Saxon origin but the earliest occupation of the Abbey site appears to be in the Middle Saxon period. Large quantities of chaff-tempered pottery and a number of sherds of Ipswich ware were found across the site, together with three *sceattas* (coins) dating to the first half of the 8th century. This evidence accords well with the date of the earliest documentary reference to the Abbey in a letter from Pope Constantine (AD 708-715) addressed to Hedda, "Abbot of Bermondsey and Woking"<sup>31</sup>.

### Conclusions

There is sporadic evidence for prehistoric activity on the Bermondsey eyot and on several sites the presence of Late Iron Age and Roman features does suggest continuity of occupation. A similar situation has been noted on the Horsleydown eyot and at Rotherhithe.

That the Bermondsey eyot was settled during the Romano-British period is now beyond dispute. Pottery from pits and ditches indicates that there was occupation during the late 1st and 2nd centuries, and coin evidence from the Abbey site suggests that there might have been increased activity in the mid 3rd century lasting until the end of the Roman period. It is likely that much of the evidence for later Roman activity has been obliterated by centuries of ploughing and market gardening, but artefactual remains may survive within the homogeneous deposits of medieval and post-medieval "ploughsoil".

At the west end of the eyot there is evidence for timber and stone structures, at least one of which may have had a hypocaust. Imported and domestic fine-wares indicate a demand for luxury goods, and a relatively high standard of living for some of the local inhabitants. It seems likely that the area was served by a road, connecting it with the southern end of the main settlement, and there is no reason to suppose that Bermondsey was at all isolated, particularly as the Neckinger and Mill-

(continued on p. 82)

27. Girardon and Heathcote, *op cit* fn 12.

28. M Hammerson 1995 'The Coins' in C Cowan A Possible Roman Mansio: excavations at 15-23 Southwark Street, 1980-86 *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 43 (1995) 137-144.

29. K Heard, H Sheldon and P Thompson 'Mapping Roman Southwark' *Antiquity* 64 no 244 (1990) 618.

30. D Perring *Roman London* (1991) 117-120.

31. Beard and Malt, *op cit* fn 11.

**Medieval London Houses**, by John Schofield. *Yale University Press*, 1995. 272 pp., 264 illus., bib., index. £40.

THIS authoritative book represents the first comprehensive study of domestic buildings in London from c 1200 to 1666. The study was undertaken as Schofield's doctoral thesis, and draws on a wide range of evidence to provide a detailed description of the London domestic house. The remarkable necessity of this book is best appreciated in regard to the paucity of previous research.

This book is far more than simply an examination of the Stow and Treswell surveys. There are but seventeen surviving fragments of secular buildings of this period in the City of London, and Schofield has produced a work which covers two hundred and one sites or groups of buildings, which, when taken together, provide a comprehensive gazetteer.

The book begins with a brief *Introduction and Survey of Sources*, and continues with an examination of the topographical sources. There is then a twenty-page essay of the topographical setting. This delves deeply into the documentary sources, discusses the development and expansion of the city, and includes a section on the Dissolution and its effects on the city. As Schofield comments: "Such an intensity of prestigious buildings and constructions within a single urban area was not present anywhere else in the country, and there were no towns of remotely comparable grandeur

(continued from p. 81)

brook streams which defined the northern and eastern margins of the eyot could have been navigable at this time.

There is also limited evidence that the lower land surrounding the eyot was utilised. For example, at the junction of Tennis Street and Long Lane (not shown on Fig. 2) pits containing late-1st-century pottery were cut into deposits of alluvial silt<sup>32</sup>, and at 9 Tanner Street [26] an east-west ditch was dug across waterlogged ground<sup>33</sup>.

Since 1984, when excavations began on the Abbey site, much has been learnt about prehistoric and Roman occupation of the Bermondsey eyot. Fig. 2 shows clearly that most of the sites excavated since then have been at the western end of the eyot,

<sup>32</sup> P R V Marsden 'Archaeological Finds in Southwark, 1962' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 21 pt 2 (1965) 143.

in the vicinity" (p. 26). He does his best to demonstrate this, studiously avoiding discussion of ecclesiastical architecture, yet charting the rapidly changing face of the developing city.

Chapter Three is a discussion of properties and buildings, based upon the research of W. A. Pantin. As in all the chapters, a milieu of intricate elements are discussed of medieval planning policy, from roof tiles to the size of gutters. The following two chapters go on to describe the development of the structures themselves and their fabric and furnishings. The various functions of rooms are explored and there is some detailed consideration of their various juxtapositions. Both chapters make good use of the evidence from archaeological excavations in the city and, on the whole, such material is well integrated with the documentary sources.

The final chapter is primarily a discussion of the materials used to build dwellings in the medieval and Tudor city.

The crowning achievement of the book is the selected gazetteer of sites (p. 153-241). The absence of research preceding the survey makes it all the more remarkable that such a complex and well referenced series of sites should be compiled. From the two hundred and one sites considered, a clear insight can be gained about the evolution of London's medieval and post-medieval housing.

The substantial volume is well illustrated and well produced. The illustrations are clear and well chosen, and the book is furnished with an impressive

(because this is where recent redevelopment has occurred), and that there is a large unexplored area to the east where no archaeological work has taken place, but which may yet provide further evidence. In particular the area of brickearth subsoils on the eastern margin of the eyot is potentially of great interest as this would have been a favoured location for early settlement.

## Acknowledgements

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<sup>33</sup> K Heard 9 Tanner Street (TAN87) MOL archive rep (1988).