

# Number 1 Poultry -- the main excavation: Roman sequence

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THE FIRST stages of archaeological excavation by the Museum of London Archaeology Service at Number 1 Poultry were described in an earlier issue of *London Archaeologist*<sup>20</sup>, and included the discovery of the 11th-century parish church of St Benet Sherehog. Beginning in July 1995, the main excavation took place as part of a top-down construction programme, completed in June 1996<sup>21</sup>. This article summarises the Roman sequence recorded during the main phase of excavations. A third article, on the post-Roman sequence, will follow<sup>22</sup>.

## Pre-Roman topography

Number 1 Poultry overlies the west side of the Middle Walbrook valley, with the main channel of the Walbrook stream located just to the east of the site apex. The pre-Roman topography of the site was dominated by a natural slope downwards to the Walbrook. Less pronounced slopes related to Walbrook tributaries to the north and south of the site delineated a raised, gravel plateau between 7.5 and 8.75m OD, which occupied much of the western part of the site and extended east towards the main channel of the Walbrook<sup>23</sup>. Over the eastern third of the site the natural surface sloped more steeply, and at the site apex the pre-Roman surface lay at c. 3.3m OD<sup>24</sup>. A paleo-soil horizon survived above the natural, terrace sand and grav-

els in places, but there was no evidence of pre-Roman occupation.

## Pre-Boudican development

The earliest extant evidence of Roman activity at Poultry was associated with the construction of a major east-west aligned road, some 60m of which was recorded within the area of excavation. The road was part of the main east-west route (*via decumanus*) within the town, which continued



Fig. 11: view looking west along the main Roman road, which was probably established in c AD 50. A plank from the phase of roadside box-drain pictured gave a precise felling date of the winter of AD 77-78. Dovetail housings visible on the upper edges of the side planks indicate that the drain would originally have been covered by a timber lid. 5 x 100mm scale.

20. P Rowsome 'Number 1 Poultry -- evaluation and Phase 1 excavations' *London Archaeol* 7 no 14 (1995) 371-82.

21. See P Rowsome 'Invention and Tradition -- development of an integrated programme for archaeological excavation and construction at Number 1 Poultry, London' *Project* 9 no 4 (1996) 18-21 for a description of how the integration of construction and archaeological work minimised delays to the redevelopment of the site.

22. Summaries of the archaeological findings can also be found in Excavation Round-Up *LA* 7 no 13 (1995) 337, *LA* 8 supplement 1 (1996) 7, and *LA* 8 supplement 2 (1997).

23. For an interpretation of the natural topography of the area see Fig. 2 in A Woodger 'The archaeological reinvestigation of Bolsa House (76-80 Cheapside) in the City of London' *London Archaeol* (forthcoming).

24. This was a full 9.3m below the modern street level, and is typical of the Middle and Lower Walbrook, where very deep archaeological sequences can survive, even beneath single and double basements.

westwards to join the road system leading to *Callera* (Silchester) to the west and *Verulamium* (St Albans) to the north-west. The *via decumanus* was one of two principal London streets built in about AD 50 to form a T-junction on Cornhill, linking the Thames crossing to the north bank, and to a route east-west.

The location and alignment of the main road at Poultry corresponds with that of the gravel ridge, which seems to have been of considerable influence, offering the most convenient point at which to bridge the Walbrook and continue west to cross the Fleet River.

Extensive landscaping and drainage work took place before and at the same time as the construction of the main road at Poultry. A relatively narrow, poorly-metalled gravel track beneath the earliest good road metalling may have been a temporary access route used during this period. To

25. For a comparative sequence through the *via decumanus* just to the W of Poultry see J Hill '72-5 Cheapside: The Roman Sequence' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* (in preparation).

26. A mass of oak piles was recorded by J E Price in 1872 during

the north-east of the road, a series of terraces were cut into the prevailing natural slope. To the south of the road, lines of oak piles and small post-and-plank revetments sealed by structured peat deposits and midden layers were associated with the consolidation of a wet area prior to its development. Analysis of selected dendrochronological samples from a temporary land-drain beneath the road has produced a felling date range of AD 47-67.

The primary metalling of the main road was formed of rammed gravel laid on a raised roadbed of sand and clay-silt<sup>25</sup>. The road was c. 7.5m wide -- later widened to 9m -- and was flanked by timber box drains c. 0.4m wide and 0.4m deep, which carried surface water east towards the Walbrook (Fig. 11).

The Walbrook crossing lay to the south-east of the site<sup>26</sup>, and the earliest evidence of modification to the western bank of the stream was a north-south line of oak piles for a timber revetment between

groundworks for the National Safe Deposit Building, which almost certainly lay on the site of several phases of a timber bridge at the Walbrook crossing. The evidence is summarised in R Merrifield *The Roman City of London* (1965) Gazetteer 195-6.



Fig. 12: a secondary road running north-westwards from a complex pre-Boudican junction on the west part of the site. Although narrow, it was lined by roadside buildings and remained in use well into the late Roman period.

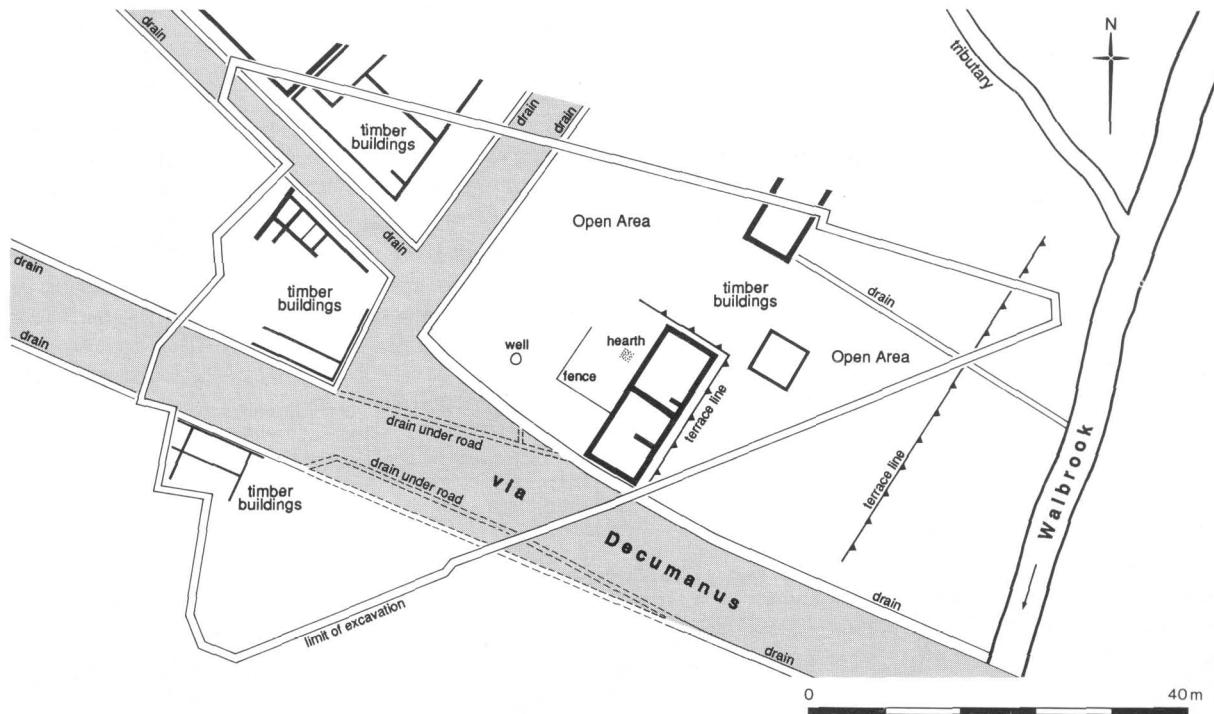


Fig. 13: pre-Boudican development of the road system and contemporary buildings.

two terrace levels<sup>27</sup>. Stray timbers sealed within a deposit on the stream bank, which may be contemporary with the revetment, had a felling date range of AD 52–55<sup>28</sup>.

Shortly after the construction of the main road, an offset road junction was established on the higher ground of the western part of the site, with apparently contemporary roads leading north-westwards towards the area of the (later) fort and amphitheatre<sup>29</sup>, and north towards the Upper Walbrook. The

road to the north-west was between 4 and 5m wide and constructed of rammed gravel (Fig. 12). Evidence of the northern road only survived at the junction area<sup>30</sup>, but its alignment is clearly reflected in the layout of contemporary roadside buildings to the west (Fig. 13).

The early date of the secondary roads suggests that they, with the *via decumanus*, were part of the earliest development of the area west of the Walbrook. Together the roads may represent the prin-

27. The main excavation findings near the site apex indicate that the earlier interpretation based on data from an evaluation shaft was mistaken in identifying this revetment as the actual W side of the main channel. See P Rowsome *op cit* fn 20, 373 and Fig. 4.

28. At present the earliest securely dated structure from Roman London is the Claudian pile-and-plank revetment from Regis House, which is dendrochronologically dated to AD 52, but included re-used fence posts from an earlier structure of some sort. See T Brigham *et al.* 'Current archaeological work at Regis House part 1' *London Archaeol* 8 no 2 (1996) 33–4.

29. The existence of an important radial street leading NW from the Walbrook crossing was provisionally identified in 1985 with the discovery of the NW-SE aligned road and early Roman building sequence at 36–7 King Street. Summarised in P Rowsome 'Roman Streetlife' *Archaeology Today* 8 no 9

(1987) 22–5; J Shepherd 'The pre-urban and Roman topography in the King Street and Cheapside areas of the City of London' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 38 (1987) 11–58.

30. The road leading N from Poultry can be related to parts of a N-S aligned road along the W side of the Walbrook recorded at two sites further N. At 15–35 Cophall Avenue the N-S road was established in the early 2nd century, and may be an extension of the Poultry road into a peripheral industrial area. See C Maloney *The Upper Walbrook in the Roman Period* CBA Res. Rep. 69 (1990) 26–77. The N-S road from Poultry was more recently recorded to the S of Cophall at 12–18 Moorgate. This road should not be confused with a parallel but local road to the E, recorded at 10–12 Cophall Avenue and 52–62 London Wall and described in D Lees, A Woodger, and C Orton 'Excavations in the Walbrook Valley' *London Archaeol* 6 no 5 (1989) 115–9.

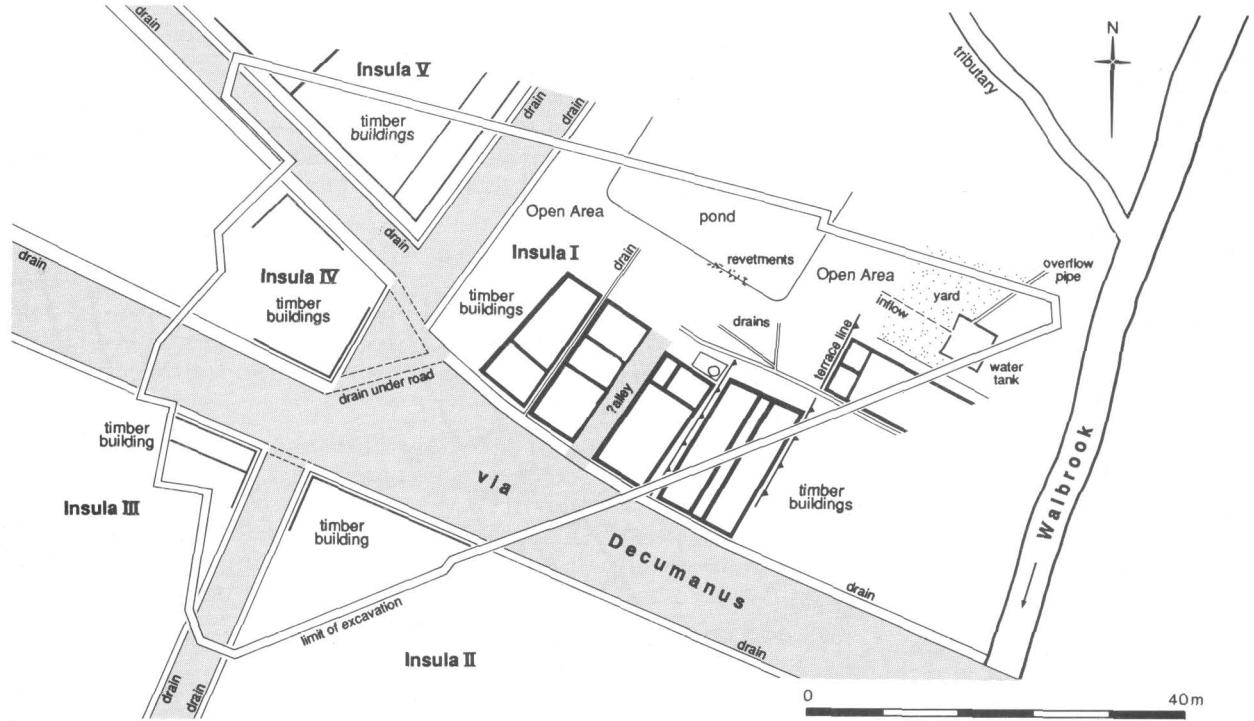


Fig. 14: Flavian-Trajanic expansion of the road system, roadside building, and an industrial zone adjacent to the Walbrook and set back from the main road.

cipal pre-Boudican junction in an area which was more extensively settled and subject to a greater degree of planning than was previously thought<sup>31</sup>. The construction of the roads heralded the opening-up of the western part of the town, both by subdividing land into blocks (*insulae*) and giving access to the boundaries of the settlement. It is intriguing that the north-western road heads towards the site of the later fort and amphitheatre, where no evidence of pre-Flavian activity has been found<sup>32</sup>.

31. Some argue that the very early settlement W of the Walbrook was a suburb of the planned core, and not incorporated into the formal town until c. AD 70 or later - see for instance T Williams *Public Buildings in the South-West Quarter of Roman London* CBA Res. Rep. 88 (1993) 33-8. Others contend that a large part of the W hill was identified from the outset as being within the settlement. See D Perring, S Roskams, and P Allen *Early Development of Roman London West of the Walbrook* CBA Res. Rep. 70 (1991) 108-17 and D Perring *Roman London* (1991) 6-21. The evidence of extensive Claudian development at Poultry seems to support the latter view.

32. The first amphitheatre, which has been the subject of extensive controlled excavation, was built entirely of timber and has been dendrochronologically dated to shortly after AD 70. See N Bateman 'The London Amphitheatre: excavations 1987-96' *Britannia* 28 (forthcoming). The masonry fort at Cripplegate has been dated to the early 2nd century - see W F Grimes *The Excavation of Roman and Mediaeval London* (1968) 17-40 - although the existence of a timber antecedent is thought possible - D Perring *op cit* fn 30, 39-40. Recent excavations at 3-9 Noble Street have found evidence of extensive Flavian occupation on the site of the later fort.

### Early buildings

By the time of the destruction of Londinium in AD 60/61, earth-and-timber buildings had been constructed on much of the site. In the east terracing provided level plots for building, although no buildings were found on the lowest lying terrace adjacent to the Walbrook. The easternmost building, which may have been an out-house, lay c. 28m west of the Walbrook and 16m north of the main

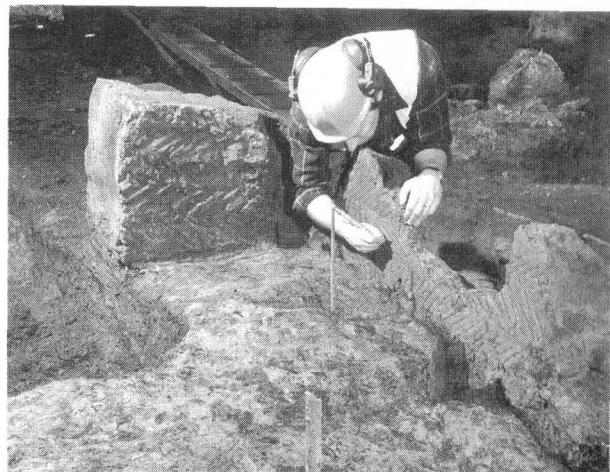


Fig. 15: part of a building in the western part of Insula I contained at least three rooms and a corridor, with mudbrick walls standing to 0.6m. The internal faces of the walls had been chevron-keyed for the application of plasterwork.

road. A second, similar building, was recorded 8m further north, whilst a larger roadside building lay to the west. Generally however, a large portion of the lower, eastern terraces remained open space, crossed by timber-lined water channels. It seems likely that some of this area was used for industrial purposes from an early date. In contrast, a greater density of roadside buildings was constructed on the higher terraces to the north and west of the pre-Boudican road junction (see Fig. 13). Some of these buildings contained more than one phase of use, suggesting that they had been present for some time before AD 60/61.

### Post-Boudican rebuilding and expansion

A deposit of soil and charcoal sealing the earliest metallings of the north-western road may be indicative of a short period of disuse concomitant with the rebellion and its aftermath. The removal

<sup>33</sup> Post-Boudican reconstruction may also have included the rebuilding of the timber bridge over the Walbrook. Evidence from 1987 excavations in Bucklersbury indicates a possible realignment and advancement N of the early Flavian buildings along the S side of the main road, perhaps caused by building a new bridge immediately to the N of a damaged one. See J Hill *Excavations at DLR Bucklersbury [BUC87]* DUA Archive Report (unpub), and P Rowsome

of any debris and reopening of the roads, particularly the main road, must have been a priority, but this may not have been accompanied straight away by rebuilding of roadside properties. It seems more likely that the roadside properties were at first merely levelled, and the ground retarred<sup>33</sup>. The site of one early building, on the south side of the main road opposite the pre-Boudican junction, was not only cleared but replaced by a new north-south aligned road. The road junction had now become a proper cross-roads, with the route north-west also retained and resurfaced. In all, parts of five Flavian *insulae* lay in the excavation area (Fig. 14).

Each of the *insulae* contained successive phases of roadside timber buildings of Flavian-Trajanic date (c. AD 70-120). The new buildings included a greater variety of materials and styles of construction than their predecessors<sup>34</sup>, and were set more closely

<sup>34</sup> 'Excavations in advance of the DLR City Extension' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* (in prep).

<sup>35</sup> The majority of the late 1st century buildings recorded at Poultry had oak-pile foundations. Superstructures included forms with timber ground-beams and wall studs with wattle and daub infill, brick earth sills, mudbrick, and lathe and plaster. See D Perring and S Roskams *op cit* fn 30, 67-107 for a review of building types.



Fig. 16: a late-1st-century water-tank located in an industrial area on the west bank of the Walbrook stream.

together than before, particularly in Insula I, but generally reflected the alignments and plot boundaries of the buildings they replaced. Taking Insula I as an example, parts of 5 roadside properties can be identified along the north side of the *via decumanus*. They were between 6 and 8m wide and c. 16m deep, and generally contained small rooms (Fig. 15). Eavesdrips and covered drains between some of the properties ran south to the larger roadside drain, which may also have been covered.

Also in Insula I, a large box-structure of oak beams -- felling date range AD 73-90 -- was constructed on the second terrace as a platform for an earth-and-timber building, possibly with a central corridor. An oven built into the external face of the rear wall of this property was designed to function with a gravelled back-yard. A small shed containing a water reservoir built from re-used silver fir barrels lay behind the adjacent property to the west. Timber drains crossed the backyards, which may have been the location of small-scale indus-

35. Numbers of very well preserved, 1st-century metal artefacts have been recovered from these deposits, and may deserve careful study, particularly in relation to other finds groups from the Walbrook and its banks.

tries pursued by the residents of the roadside buildings, with the fronts of the buildings containing retail and residential space.

The land further to the north in Insula I, and extending east to the Walbrook, was developed for industrial use. The area was dominated by a large, timber-revetted pond which measured c. 22m east-west by at least 10m north-south, and was 1.2m deep. It was probably supplied from the west and drained eastwards to the Walbrook.

The ground surface along the Walbrook had been raised substantially by the Flavian period through the dumping of material, perhaps associated with canalisation of the stream<sup>35</sup>. The area remained open, and later in the 1st century a clay-lined and oak-planked water-tank was constructed there. The tank, which may have supplied water to a nearby trade or industry, was c. 5m square and 0.7m deep, and had a capacity in excess of 2000 gallons (Fig. 16). An overflow pipe carried water north-east

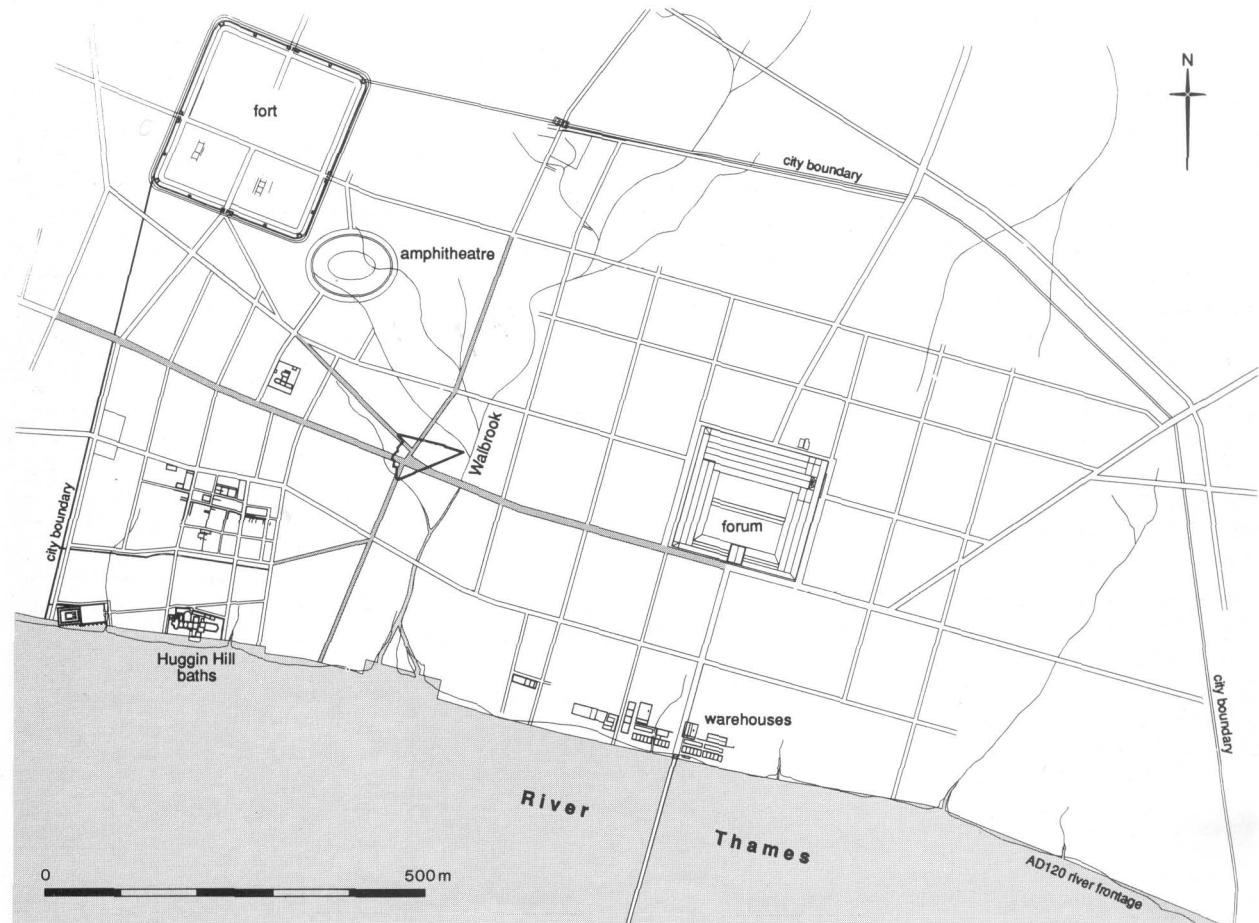


Fig. 17: conjectured extent of development of the town north of the Thames in the early 2nd century. The road junction at Poultry provided access to much of the western half of the town.

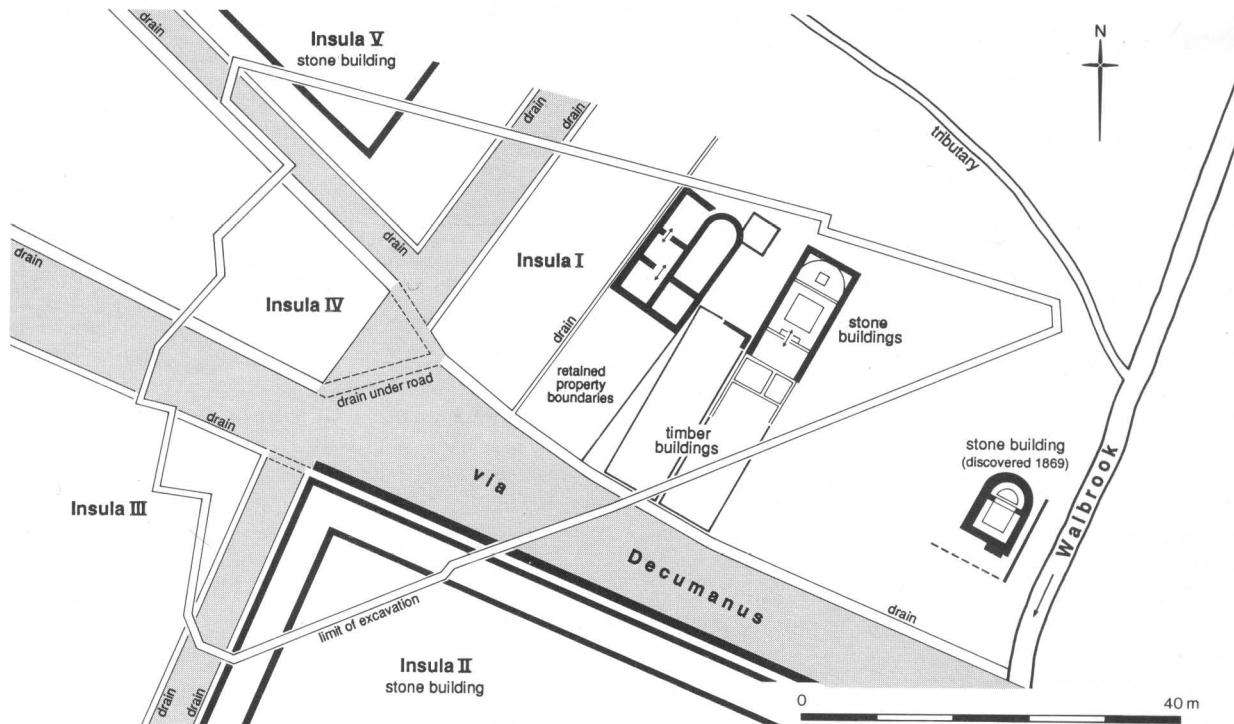


Fig. 18: post-Hadrianic and later Roman development at Poultry. Of particular interest is the Insula I evidence for the continuity of earlier boundaries and the construction of stone buildings on the backs of the properties (compare with Fig. 14).

towards the Walbrook<sup>36</sup>. The surrounding yard was surfaced with broken and discarded fragments of manual, rotary quernstones<sup>37</sup>. Wear patterns indicate that the querns had been used, perhaps in a nearby mill or bakery, but it is also possible that they arrived in London as ballast after use elsewhere. Part of a remarkably well-preserved Flavian timber building lay to the south and west of the yard, but its function is unclear.

Industrial activity associated with the water management system in the north part of Insula I may have been independent of the roadside buildings to the south. Both the pond and the water cistern fell out of use and were backfilled before the Hadrianic Fire.

### After the Hadrianic Fire

It is generally accepted that commercial activity in Roman London reached a peak in the early 2nd century (Fig. 17), and declined sharply after the Hadrianic Fire of c. AD 120-125. At Poultry post-Hadrianic rebuilding in timber seems to have been patchy, although the apparent absence of activity on some of the properties may be exaggerated by the poor survival of ephemeral structural evi-

dence. London was not unusual in experiencing a contraction at this time, due to more widespread economic change<sup>38</sup>. The fire which destroyed much of the town, whilst perhaps hastening the change in London's fortunes, may be best considered as coincidental to it. At Poultry the changing character of the town is tellingly illustrated by the industrial area in Insula I, which became the site of late masonry buildings.

In contrast to the evidence for post-Hadrianic changes in land-use, the area saw a high degree of topographical continuity through to the late Roman period. All of the roads were retained and kept in good repair, and roadside drains were widened and deepened, possibly to incorporate the drainage of minor Walbrook tributaries. Along the north side of the *via decumanus* in Insula I, some of the roadside properties were re-established after the fire on pre-Hadrianic lines, and timber buildings rebuilt (Fig. 18).

### Late Roman stone and timber buildings in Insula I

Two stone buildings were constructed over the disused pond in Insula I. Both were set back from

closely-dated groups of querns from the Western Empire, their study is likely to be of international importance.

36. P Rowsome *op cit* fn 20, 372 and fig. 3.

37. Over 1100 quern fragments were recovered from the area, the majority being a lava-type imported from the Mayen-Niedermendig region of Germany. As one of the largest

38. D Perring *op cit* fn 30, 76-89.



Fig. 19: view looking west across the late Roman house or bath in Insula I, with the large apsidal room in the foreground.

the main road, but respected Flavian-Trajanic roadside boundaries, which were extended northwards.

The westernmost of the stone buildings probably began life as a domestic residence. Timber piles associated with the building's north wall had a felling date range of AD 223-255. The building contained five room areas, and was substantially rebuilt on at least two occasions, perhaps becoming a private or commercial bath<sup>39</sup>. The large, rectangular north-eastern room, which may originally have been heated, was modified by the addition of a north apse and new mosaic floor. The north-western room was converted to a bathing chamber by removing the original floor and installing a hypocaust system, a raised tessellated floor, and a hot plunge bath in one corner. This work required the strengthening of the building's west wall by adding external buttresses; dendrochronological analysis of associated timber piles has yielded a felling date range of AD 299-354. The southern rooms remained unheated, although tessellated

floors were renewed. Other modifications or repairs also took place, some apparently made necessary by the building's tendency to subside into the backfill of the underlying pond. The building was extended eastwards in the 4th century with the addition of a small heated room to the north-east of the apsidal room (Fig. 19).

The western building respected the east and west boundaries of a pre-Hadrianic roadside property and adjacent alleyway immediately to the south (compare Figs. 14 and 18), but there was no clear evidence that a timber building had been constructed there after the Hadrianic fire. However, on the lower terrace to the east there was evidence of a succession of roadside timber buildings dating from AD 120 to the mid 3rd century or later. The latest extant timber building was well preserved with both sill beams and portions of plank floors surviving. Good evidence for a timber building of such a late date is rare, but it is made more noteworthy by the fact that the property was extended

39. For a discussion of the evidence for a transition from public bathing to smaller private baths in later Roman London see P Rowsome 'The Huggin Hill baths and other bath buildings in Roman London' Roman Baths and Bathing eds. D E Johnston and J DeLaine, *J Roman Archaeol Supplement* (forthcoming).

northwards in stone in the late 3rd century. The foundations of the stone building consisted of oak piles overlain by lap-jointed, crossed beams beneath uncoursed chalk footings. Perhaps the owners were prompted to build strong foundations through knowledge of the subsidence problems encountered by the stone building to the west.

The lower superstructure of the building was also built of chalk<sup>40</sup>. The south end of the building had been built without a masonry foundation or superstructure, and a timber beam slot and associated post-pads across the opening may be related to a timber structure -- perhaps the modified north wall of a contemporary timber building to the south. Ephemeral structural evidence does suggest that a final phase of timber building was constructed on the area to the south around the start of the 4th century. Although the upper superstructure of the chalk-founded building may well have been wooden, the juxtaposition of timber and stone building forms, even at foundation level, is extremely unusual for Roman London<sup>41</sup>.

The eastern stone building, which may have been a reception room or hall<sup>42</sup>, was unheated and contained a tessellated floor with at least two mosaic panels. The centre-panel, which measured c. 3m square, carried a complex geometric polychrome design radiating from an octagonal centre (which did not survive). It has been provisionally dated to the 4th century on stylistic evidence. In the northern part of the building there was a smaller rectangular mosaic, of which only fragments of a polychrome figurative design survived. Oddly, the northern side of the tessellated border was laid to a semi-circular template, suggesting that an apsidal internal structure or screen may have stood within the north end of the building (Fig. 20). Although the internal area was divided by one or possibly two insubstantial partitions, these may have been later modifications to a single room.

40. It may be noteworthy that the Bucklersbury Pavement, discovered in 1869 during the construction of Queen Victoria Street, came from a late Roman building which also had chalk foundations and lower walls. See T Wilmott *Excavations in the Middle Walbrook Valley* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Special Paper no 13 (1991).

41. In light of the findings at Poultry, a review of other non-public, late Roman masonry buildings in London might consider whether there is any evidence of timber-built contemporaries or antecedents. Comparison with towns such as *Verulamium* and *Calleva* might also prove useful.

42. The nearness of the Walbrook stream, known to have had a religious significance, raises the possibility that the building was associated with a cult. Finds thought to be associated with Bacchus have been recovered from Poultry, although not from this building.

## Other late Roman stone buildings

Two other extensive stone buildings were recorded within insulae on the western part of the site. In the mid to late 2nd century, a wall of tile, ragstone, and flint was built along the perimeter of Insula II, at the south-east corner of the road junction, and may have formed the precinct wall for an imposing new structure (Fig. 21). The wall incorporated a 1m high, arched culvert along the southern side of the main road. A second stone wall 3.4m to the south and parallel to the outer wall may have been part of the northern wall of a building within the precinct (see Fig. 18). No associated floors or ground surfaces were found within the building, which extends south beneath Queen Victoria Street, and whose function is uncertain.

Insula V also contained a post-Hadrianic stone building. The main, load-bearing, walls of the building were set back from the roadside, suggesting the presence of a corridor or portico. The building had been heavily robbed, and no associated floor levels survived.

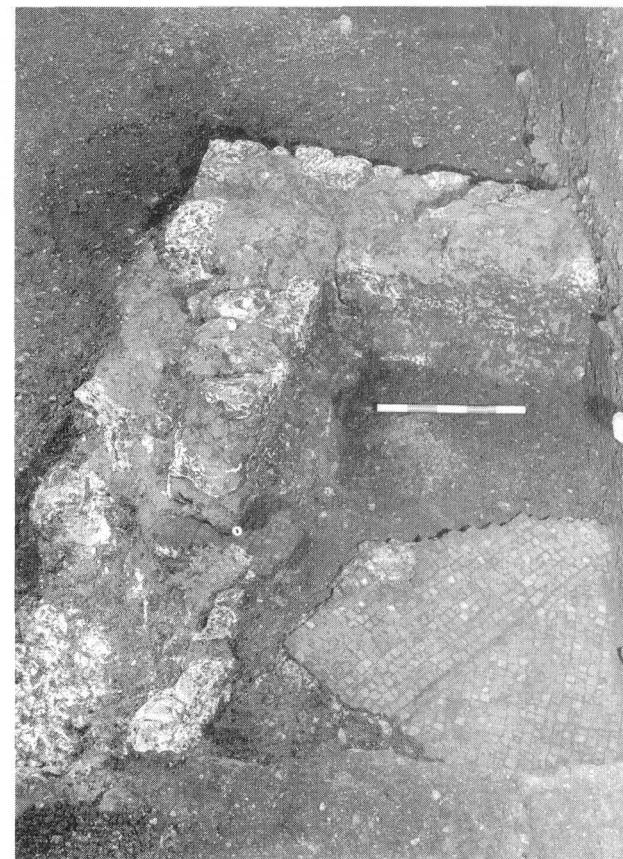


Fig. 20: detail of the north-western corner of the unusual 3rd century chalk building in Insula I. Note the apsidally-laid tessellated pavement within a square room.  
5 x 100mm scale.



Fig. 21: looking east towards the late 2nd century precinct wall of Insula II, with the southern road in the foreground.

### Late 4th century decline

The balance of evidence suggests that some, but not all, of the roadside properties in Insula I had become open areas or yards by the 4th century. However, occupation within the stone buildings -- and perhaps in a few contemporary timber structures -- continued<sup>43</sup>.

Some evidence for a final decline around the end of the 4th century was recorded. Mosaic panels from the stone buildings had been salvaged, presumably for the value of the tesserae. In one case a missing panel was replaced by a rudimentary floor of roofing tile prior to the building's demise<sup>44</sup>. After abandonment, the buildings may have been partly demolished, and the area became buried by debris and deposits similar to dark earth, although the latter appeared to have been dumped rather than the result of soil formation. Maintenance of the last roadside drains ended, allowing them to

become clogged with silt. The roads are also thought to have gone out of use at this time, although they and the more substantial ruins may have remained visible for some time.

### Acknowledgements

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occupation has been argued for Verulamium, the latest building phases are not securely dated beyond c. AD 400, and the lingering final use of buildings is largely assumed. See for instance Insula XIV Building 3 in S Frere *Verulamium Excavations Vol II* (1983) 93-101.

43. Pottery dated to AD 350-400 and many late 4th-century coins, including a Theodosius of AD 379-402, pre-dated the latest mortar floors in the Insula I western stone building.

44. There is little to suggest that London was occupied for long beyond the end of the 4th century. Whilst 5th-century