

Fig. 1: earliest Roman features, including the double ditches.

# 7-11 Bishopsgate: a hole in the heart of London's business district

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FOR SIX MONTHS of winter and early spring, 1995-96, excavations were carried out at 7-11 Bishopsgate, EC2<sup>1</sup>. They followed five years of sporadic trial work and were succeeded by a watching brief.

The site lies between the Threadneedle Street and Cornhill junctions of Bishopsgate in the City of London. It comprised a fairly flat but freely drained area of land near the top of localised high ground on the first river terrace above the Thames. Significant buildings in the vicinity reflect the prestige of the area through history: the Roman forum and basilica, the medieval Leadenhall Garner, the Elizabethan Royal Exchange, the Bank of England and today's Stock Exchange.

### Prehistory

Various truncations had reduced the prehistoric remains to a small patch of reworked brickearth which contained a flint scraper, a blade and some very degraded pottery.

### **Roman colonisation**

Below repeated truncations and various cut features were the remains of two east-west substantial

I. Now called simply 7 Bishopsgate. As not all of the pottery has been analysed, the dating of the sequence is provisional.

parallel v-shaped ditches, 1.4m deep and 2.5m wide, which were only 2m apart (Fig. 1). The bases of both were described as 'ankle-breakers'. They were parallel to, and located immediately south of, a later road and exceeded the site limits in both directions. It is possible they were established before the Boudiccan revolt (AD 60/6I) as at Well Court and 72-75 Cheapside.

There appear to have been two orthogonal systems of ditches in the early city. The first straddled the Walbrook and would include the present site, 68-72 Cornhill and 72-75 Cheapside, which are

- 2. E.g. H Chapman & T Johnson 'Excavations at Aldgate and Bush Lane House in the City of London, 1972' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 24 (1973) 1-73.
- 3. E.g. D Perring Roman London (1991) 11.

parallel, and Well Court set at a right-angle. Their form was determined by the line of the main eastwest street (*via decumana*). The second system was aligned with the main road to Colchester, which became Aldgate (street). This system includes ditches at 94-97 Fenchurch Street, 20-30 Aldgate, 9 Northumberland Alley and, possibly, the Baltic Exchange on St Mary Axe.

The ditches have been interpreted as military defences<sup>2</sup> and city boundary ditches<sup>3</sup>, but there would appear to be too many of them for either interpretation. They may merely have defined blocks<sup>4</sup> before the construction buildings and roads.

4. In academic language town blocks have been called *insulae*, curiously as Roman authors used the word to describe multistorey blocks of flats (as well as real islands). See I M Barton *Roman Domestic Buildings* (1996) 3.



Fig. 2: cleaning and recording the late 1st and/or early 2nd century cellar.



#### Fig. 3: quarries dug after the Hadrianic fire.

Other early activity included a post-and-beam constructed building, which maintained the alignment set out by the ditches, an isolated bowl furnace and randomly scattered pits and postholes.

#### Later consolidation

Immediately north of the ditches, and sharing their alignment, an east-west road was observed. Within the excavation its gravels had been quarried away during the medieval period (some were recorded during the watching brief). On its southern side ran a timber box-drain, while along its northern side was a drain constructed of two tile walls laid on Kentish ragstone foundations and with timber flooring. This road is parallel to, and two blocks north of, the *via decumana*.

The general truncation did not affect one of the more impressive discoveries of the excavation. This was a rectangular cellar, measuring 5.2m (northsouth) by 4.9m (east-west), with a flight of stairs providing access (Fig. 2). The stairway was carved out of the natural brickearth, and below the level where natural gravels were encountered was moulded in brickearth, covered with thin planks. The stairs were 1.2m wide, and with rake, risers and treads approximating to modern building regulations. The cellar was 2.7m deep. The eastern half

was floored with opus signinum (concrete with embedded reused tile) and was divided from the unfloored western half by a centrally placed beam slot. The beam it contained is thought to have supported open studs which in turn supported floor joists at ground level. The opus signinum floor sat upon a bedding layer of brickearth which was laid to protect the floor from damp from the gravels. The western half had no floor but exposed natural gravels, in which there was a series of depressions which may have held storage jars. These could have been kept cool by the prevailing dampness. The walls were made of close studs, 400-500mm apart, and driven into natural gravels at the bottom of a deep trench which ran around the cellar sides. They supported wattle and daub and were rendered with plain white plaster.

In the main excavation area, along the eastern limits of the site, part of a clay-and-timber building was recorded which was aligned with the road system, not the cellar. Occupation of this building has been dated to AD 50-100. To the south, under today's building facade, was a concrete-floored building occupying a large area of the eastern end of the site. It had wattle and daub walls with earthfast posts. It appears to have been occupied



Fig. 4: groundplan of 2nd century building/s.

for a considerable time as it was refloored in concrete, and extended some 6m beyond the eastern limit of the present site, under the modern Bishopsgate pavement. Originally associated with the building was an access road or courtyard, though its later gravels sealed the building's demolished remains.

#### From Hadrianic to Antonine fires

Following widespread destruction in the Hadrianic fire, c AD 120 (the debris from which filled the cellar), much of the site was affected by large-scale quarrying of both brickearth and gravels (Fig. 3). They were presumably in demand for rebuilding those parts of the city destroyed by the fire.

Overlying the quarries was a series of timberframed buildings (or a single large complex building, Figs. 4, 5). Where they have subsided into large quarry pits survival is excellent. Elsewhere, however, a combination of modern building works and medieval cut features have either totally removed the remains or left them in a fragmentary state. The buildings perished in a further fire which swept through the site catching the occupiers unawares, *c* AD 200. The burnt floors have been sampled for archaeobotanical, soil micromorphological and chemical analysis. The burnt daub overlying them has also been sampled for the latter two.

The best preserved remains were part of a building which exceeded the excavation to the south, east and west and which probably formed a single complex with the other, more fragmentary, remains, to the north. It comprised a series of rooms between two corridors. The rooms varied between sm and 2.5m square and were divided by colourwashed plastered wattle-and-daub walls which combined groundbeams and earthfast elements.

A small room in the western wing of the building(s) contained a collection of burnt and smashed dinner and kitchen wares amongst which was a Purbeck marble pestle and mortar, ten samian bowls and twelve cups dated AD 150-200' (front cover). They evidently fell from a shelf or cupboard, but while this may be good *prima facie* evidence of use as a

<sup>5.</sup> T Grey Roman Pottery Assessment (ETA89) MoL Report (1997).

<sup>6.</sup> L Grey-Rees An Assessment of the Plant Remains in Environmental Samples from 7-11 Bishopsgate (ETA89) MoLAS Report (1997).

kitchen, no hearths or ovens were found. This evidence must be balanced against the samples from floor layers. A burnt plank floor nearby yielded abundant charred seeds from wasteground and grassland, a moderate amount of waterlogged seeds and a small number of charred grain fragments<sup>6</sup>. Depending on the level of disturbance, it is possible that these remains represent the preparation and consumption of plant foods. The charred seeds, for example, may be sieving waste. It is equally possible, however, that some may have arrived as straw floor coverings.

This may be compared with the eastern rooms where a similar layer contained a small number of charred grass seeds along with a moderate amount of wheat grains and abundant stem fragments (straw?)<sup>7</sup>. Soil micromorphology and chemistry revealed characteristics of a dung-rich byre floor deposit, which, when cemented by phosphate, is known as a stable crust. The conclusion is based upon the remarkable similarities between this deposit and microfabric and chemical characteristics of the Moel-y-gar animal stable at Butser Ancient Farm. Furthermore, this layer contained at least twice the amount of phosphate measured elsewhere at Bishopsgate<sup>8</sup>.

It may be that the ground floor, or part of it, was used as stabling. The pottery scatter could have come from a collapsed upper storey, wooden joists burning through before the walls collapsed. To add to the confusion over the use and status of these buildings, in amongst the collapsed burnt clay and timber walls at the west end was found a Bacchic *balsamarium* and flask. Proposed uses for this building, therefore, include stabling, (domes-

7. Ibid.





Fig. 5: the 2nd-century city. The site lies just off the via principia and over a secondary east-west road.



Fig. 6: 4th-century mosaic.

tic?) cooking-dining-entertaining and religious observance or storage.

#### AD 200-400

All the later Roman structural evidence is heavily truncated. The isolated remains from this period comprised two parallel lines of robbed wall foundations, a fragment of mosaic, a truncated cellar and a robbed pad foundation.

The cellar was located on the southern perimeter of the site and lay between the two robber trenches. It was rectangular, 4.2m east-west and in excess of 5.6m north-south (where it exceeded the excavation). Although truncated, it survived to a depth of 1.2m. Earthfast posts and groundbeams supported wooden retaining walls and the floor was relatively clean brickearth. The north side had a rough stone and concrete rubble wall inserted, backfilled with earth, and a hearth was set in the middle of the floor. Plastered masonry walls survived either side of an entrance on the east side and a stone with a socket hole in the backfill may have been from an impressive doorway. The cellar cut through the Antonine fire debris, and the backfill contained pottery dated AD 250-400.

The mosaic (Fig. 6) is dated to the 4th century<sup>9</sup>, and larger tile tesserae at the border are aligned with the cellar. Inside them was a curved chain guilloche design in chalk, shale, red and yellow re-used ceramic tesserae. Inside this was a unique dentillated design.

The presumed masonry walls were robbed in antiquity and were perpendicular to the east-west road, which is therefore considered to have survived the Antonine fire.

It is worth bearing in mind that, at some time between AD 180 and AD 250, a 3km wall was built around the city, shortly to be followed by a similar wall along the river edge. Given the paucity of the evidence on Bishopsgate for the last two centuries of Roman rule, did it really enclose only a sparsely populated city, or have the remains from this period suffered a greater attrition through the ages than those from the first two centuries?

## Dark earth (or garden soil)

Where not truncated by intrusions, a dark grey sediment overlaid definably Roman remains across the site. Within this material were artefacts dating from the Roman, Saxon/Scandinavian and medieval periods. The same deposit(s) filled a whole series of cut features, many of them intercutting, which included finds dating from as late as the 14th century.

Much has been made of this 'dark earth'. Two theories have been presented to explain its origin and significance. One posits that it marks a 'desertion' of most of the built-up area of the city and the dumping of topsoil produced by compost, street sweepings and nightsoil which formed gardens<sup>10</sup>. The other theory is that the material is produced by the biological reworking of archaeological strata with a characteristic truncation horizon<sup>n</sup>. Inconsistent with either explanation is the observation that garden or agricultural soils commonly suffer from a deficit of organic inputs as more is removed through cropping, weeding and tidying up (clipping hedges etc) than is added through manuring and composting.

A further mechanism can, however, be proposed which explains more of the observable data than the previous two. This is that the garden soil fills a series of intrusions (for example, digging trenches to deposit nightsoil filled with ash) and that these intrusions merge over time as an area of land was worked over.

To test these proposed mechanisms, two areas of the site, each measuring 2m x 3m, were selected for sampling as they had no observable deep intrusive pits. They were divided into 1m squares and 100mm spits and sieved through a 5mm mesh. The finds and residues were to be compared and a sequence sought which showed diachronous changes through the soil column, or isolate previously unrecognised features that confused the picture. Biological reworking of earlier deposits should leave differences in composition and finds distribution. There was no discernible pattern to the spread of major residues<sup>12</sup>, though only three medieval pottery sherds were found from a preliminary scan and these were from the top spit. Unfortunately the Roman pottery or coins have not yet been examined.

Furthermore, a subsample was obtained for soil micromorphology and chemical analysis. An increase in voids and worm burrows at the base of the eastern samples should be noted. It is characterised

10. Perring op cit fn 3, 78-81.

- II. B Yule 'The ''dark earth" and late Roman London' *Antiquity* 64 (1990) 620-8.
- 12. Gravel, building material, shell, slag/metal, bone, pot, mortar and chalk were weighed: S Gerber-Parfitt Assessment of the 'Dark Earth' bulk samples from 7-11 Bishopsgate (ETA89) MoL Report.

as 'typical' dark earth: highly humic, with enhanced levels of magnetic susceptibility and phosphate. At higher levels of the eastern samples and in the western sample there is both more phosphate and even crystalline phosphate (vivianite) which is characteristic of saturated soils with both solid and liquid animal (human?) waste added, which would support the third mechanism.

#### Middle Ages

The same dark soil filled a whole series of cut features: wells, quarry, rubbish and cesspits. Associated finds included a Roman emerald and gold chain, a possible Viking soapstone bowl and pottery from Saxon times to the 14th century. Unfortunately there are no associated floors, yards or buildings which survived subsequent truncation.

Building work revealed the top of foundations overlying the crypt of the Merchant Taylors' chapel, above which the party wall survived to ground level (Figs. 7, 8). On stylistic grounds, the crypt has been dated to the 14th century when the ground level must have lain at the top of the foundations, at 15.0m OD. As modern basements had truncated the site to 13.5m OD, the loss to the archaeological record can be gauged.

Rarely are we so aware of the degree of truncation, and the depth, and quality, of survival of some of the features was consequently impressive. For example, a large cross-braced quarry-cum-cesspit, with finds dating from the 13th/14th century, must originally have been some 5m deep, the top 2m being filled by a series of fine laminar soil and brickearth deposits as alternate nightsoil dumps were capped with a less offensive material. Also found were square timber wells with horizontal



Fig. 7: the site in relation to the medieval street pattern.



Fig. 8: the Merchant Taylors' Hall. Larger (lighter toned) chalk blocks mark the top of foundations above the 14th century crypt, the historic ground level.

planks and corner square posts. They penetrated gravels to slightly under 10.0m OD, which appeared sufficient for extracting ground water, and the initial fill of one of these could be dated to c 1140. Less complete survivals included Saxon and Saxo-Norman cesspits.

Although much archaeological evidence has been lost, this is partly compensated for by an attendant increase in the historical record. From *c* 1230 Holy Trinity priory accepted a 3s quitrent from Martin the baker of Cornhill, for land in the parish of St Martin Outwich who in turn rented the property out. According to the Holy Trinity list of successive payers of the quitrent, the property was held by Hugh Mareschall, Ralph Merssh, Henry Merk, the canons of St Mary Southwark and Peter le Hodere between the 1230s and 1280s. Other sources record subsequent payers of the quitrent, most notably John and Walter Tottenham and John Chircheman. As a major city merchant, collaborator of Geoffrey Chaucer and builder of the first Custom House, it was Chircheman who granted the property to the Merchant Taylors' Company<sup>13</sup>.

13. T Dyson 7-11 Bishopsgate Street: Historical Survey (1997) MoL Report.



Fig. 9: the only archaeological evidence of the entire rebuilding of the site by Abraham Reynardson (mid 17th century) came from the backfill of this medieval well.

The records of the Merchant Taylors' Company, however, note a slow break-up of the property, beginning as early as 1283. Part of this was the granting of a portion of the site which possibly corresponds to two cellars recorded along the Bishopsgate frontage in the main excavation.

In Chircheman's gift of 1405, which contained four messuages and 17 shops/tenements, the properties fronting Bishopsgate are described as: one messuage called the Sterre on the hope and one messuage within and 9 shops... they abut upon the tenement of the Fraternity aforesaid on the west part<sup>14</sup>.

The true function of what were originally thought to be two large chalk-lined cellars could be indicated by an accounts entry for 1444-5 describing: the closing of a great privy and burying of same and casting up of another at the Sterre<sup>15</sup>. The construction of one of these 'cellars' was dated to 1270-1400, and its backfill to 1380-1500, while the use of the neighbouring 'cellar' dated to 1500-1600.

The basic form of building and occupation derived from the historical record would appear to be a large mansion (the 'great messuage' and or 'the Starre') which combined shops to the Bishopsgate frontage, passageways and (two?) forecourts with a garden to the rear, all of which may relate to leasehold plans of the late 17th century. It could have been leased as a whole or as a series of smaller

14. Wills Book (Ancient MS Book 9), 4. 15. Merchant Taylors' Accounts, vol 3. holdings. It was partially rebuilt in or after 1570 following a successful petition by Thomas Rowe to construct a new tenement on the south side of the great gate or entry leading into the messuage. The backfill of one of the shop cellars contained pottery dated 1480-1550 and may be from this alteration.

With other main leaseholders including Sir Thomas Rowe (Lord Mayor 1568-9) and Lord Wriotheseley (first earl of Southampton and lord chancellor 1544-7), it can safely be assumed that the properties were of a fairly high status. This, however, is not obvious from the pottery assemblages or registered finds from the excavation. The true status of the properties was more accurately reflected in the quality of the building material<sup>16</sup>.

Through the early 1640s the properties making up the area of the site were acquired by Abraham Reynardson (alderman and master of the Merchant Taylors). After obtaining permission, he demolished all the buildings and constructed a single large tenement on the property. Evidence for this comes from the backfill of a stone well in the rear garden (Fig. 9) which contained pottery dated 1600-1650. Without the historical record it would have been assumed that this was a small local change. For their own reasons, the Merchant Taylors retained a brick well and a cellar from Reynardson's design and, from the dating of their backfills, they remained in use through to the 18th century.

Little survives of the buildings constructed at this time, although detailed leasehold plans of the 1680s and '90s show shops with passageways leading to two forecourts. These led to the main group of buildings which surrounded a cloistered garden in which three unmortared brick wells were built, possibly at different times. Two new wells were constructed within standing buildings, presumably in the cellars of shop fronts. Together with a few remnants of wall footings and a curious curved foundation, these make up the 17th- and 18thcentury remains, and comprise the latest archaeological remains on the site.

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<sup>16.</sup> Pottery and other finds assessed by A Nailor and G Egan (respectively), building material by S Pringle.