

# Archaeological investigations into the English Civil War Defences of London

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SEPTEMBER 1997 marked the 350th anniversary of the decommissioning of the 17-kilometre circuits of forts, bulwarks and other earthworks which comprised the *Lines of Communication*, the Civil War Defences of London.

One of the major studies of these defences was by David Sturdy, who stated "I am sure that at least once every year for the last century and a half a section across the Ditch has been laid open"<sup>1</sup>. As part of my research I have been keen to discover whether this was the case and, if so, then what investigation was undertaken. This has led me to review the Greater London Sites and Monuments Record, a record which has no less than 31 entries relating to London's Civil War Defences. As there are little or no traces of the defences remaining, the majority of the entries rely on documentary or literary sources for evidence of their location (many quoting David Sturdy). However, in the case of five of these sites some further investigation has taken place.

The first of these was not on a site usually associated with the alignment of the Lines of Communication. Its location in St. Alphage Street (grid reference TQ 32464 81633) is in the area of the earlier medieval defences. The evidence for the Civil War usage of these defences came from the work undertaken by W. F. Grimes in 1949-50 (site code GMII)<sup>2</sup>. He discovered a U-sectioned ditch which he surmised as a late feature in the sequence of the cutting of the city ditch. The upper part of the fill contained much 17th-century pottery, which Grimes interpreted as either an infilling of the ditch or a re-cutting during the Civil War<sup>3</sup>. In 1960,

P. Marsden observed a similar feature to the east in Fore Street (site code GM209). The initial phase of defences (during the Autumn and Winter of 1642) mainly took the form of blocking streets with barriers or suspending chains across them to prevent the passage of cavalry, and the building of guardhouses<sup>4</sup>. It is probable that a decision was made to re-use the original city wall and ditch, either at this time or perhaps as a second line of defence when the Lines of Communication themselves were constructed during the Spring of 1643. Brett-James has argued for two distinct fortifications, the first in 1642 and the second in 1643<sup>5</sup>.

In 1977, J. Maloney investigated a site at Dukes Place (site code DUK77) at the junction of Houndsditch and Aldgate (grid reference TQ 333503 81215), and revealed part of what was tentatively interpreted as a defensive ditch dug during the Civil War<sup>6</sup>.

The next site is in the area of the London Hospital and Medical College in Whitechapel (grid reference TQ 3456 8153). Excavation was undertaken by A. Mackinder in October-November 1994, following an earlier inspection by R. Bluer (1992). During this excavation (site code NRN92), a large post-medieval ditch was found, its location agreeing with the suspected line of the Civil war defences, the dating of which was compatible with 1643 construction. The dimensions of the uncovered ditch are given as 5.5m wide and 1.40m deep<sup>7</sup>. This compares with other excavated civil war ditches such as Exeter (3m wide and 2m deep), Gloucester (5.5m wide and 2.3m deep), and Taunton (5m wide and 1.5m deep)<sup>8</sup>. It was concluded that this was part of the Civil War

1. David Sturdy 'The Civil War Defences of London' *London Archaeol* 2, no. 13 (Winter 1975) 336.

2. Greater London Sites and Monuments Record, SM. Reference 041898.

3. W. F. Grimes *The excavation of Roman and Medieval London* (1968) 88.

4. Thomason Tracts, Index, I. 185, No. E. 124 (12).

5. Norman G. Brett-James *The Growth of Stuart London* (1935) 269.

6. Greater London Sites and Monuments Record, SM. Reference 041910; Beth Richardson 'Excavation Round-up 1978' *London Archaeol* 3, no. 10 (Spring 1979) 261-5.

7. Museum of London Archaeological Service *London Hospital Medical College, an archaeological post-excavation assessment* (1994) 19.

8. S. Ward *Excavations at Chester, the Civil War Siegeworks 1642-6* Chester City Council and Grosvenor Museum (1987) 30-33.

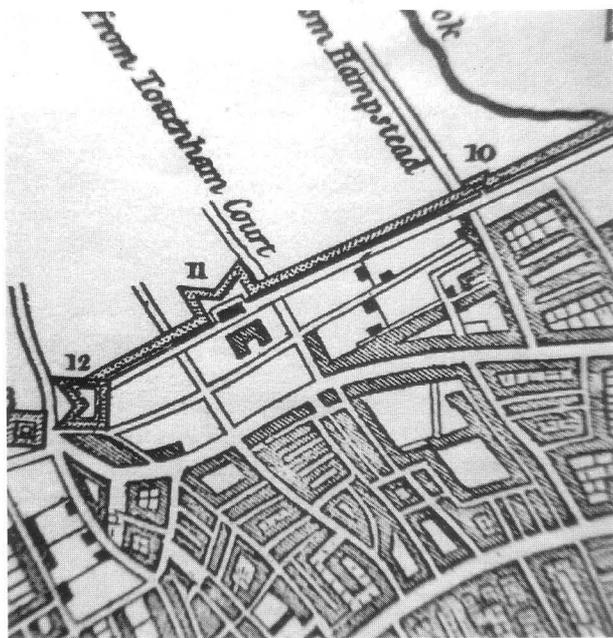


Fig. 1: detail from Vertue's map of 1738 showing the Fort at Southampton (later Bedford) House (ii). (*Kings Topographical Collection*, 20, no. 16, British Library)

defences, but proof would be more conclusive if a section of the ditch together with traces of a rampart could be found in the vicinity<sup>9</sup>.

The investigation of this site uncovered some evidence to suggest that the ditch may not have been of the typical dry type. The environmental sampling undertaken as part of the 1994 excavation suggested that the lower part of the ditch was wet<sup>10</sup> and had silted up during the 18th century. Additional evidence for this comes in the form of G. Vertue's 1738 *Plan of the City of London as fortified by Order of Parliament in the years 1642 and 1643* to which some notes have been added by Cromwell Mortimer M.D., dated 1746. One note says "The green were dry ditches The blue were watery ditches"<sup>11</sup>. Unfortunately, any such colouring has long since faded from the map. However, the shading does remain, and various sections are shaded in different fashions. The section from the Thames to "A Bulwark and half on the Hill at

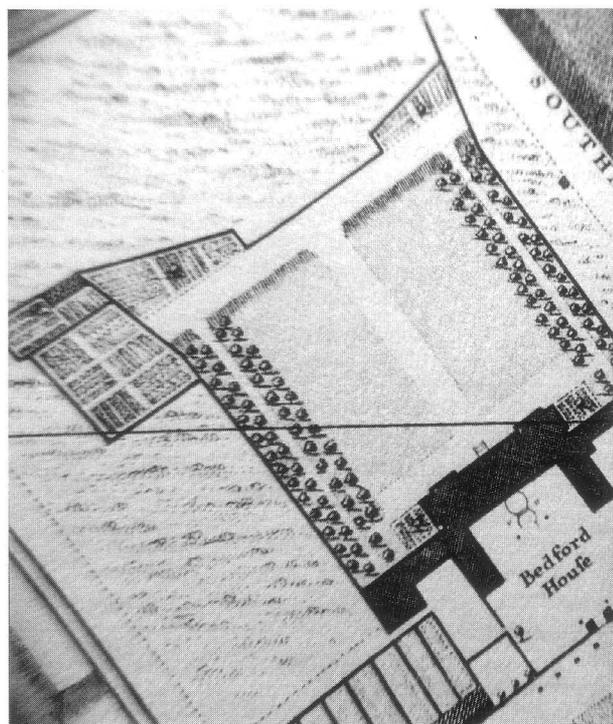


Fig. 2: detail from Rocque's map of 1747 showing Bedford House and the outline of the Fort. (*The A to Z of Georgian London*, London Topographical Society 1982)

the North-end of Gravel Lane"<sup>12</sup>, is shaded in the same way as the Thames itself.

The Lines of Communication ran through Hackney, passing between Hoxton Square and Old Street, although it is possible they clipped Hoxton Square itself<sup>13</sup>. Partly to confirm this, David Sankey undertook geotechnical prospecting in this area during March 1995. This revealed possible evidence for part of the Civil War defensive ditch in Hoxton Square (grid reference TQ 3315 8270, site code HXS95)<sup>14</sup>. However, no archaeological features were recorded.

The last site at Curzon Street (grid reference TQ 285 799) was investigated by Christopher Phillpotts in 1995 (site code CZN95). However, observation of geotechnical test pits failed to locate any evidence for the existence of the fort at Hyde Park Corner<sup>15</sup>.

9. Greater London Sites and Monuments Record, SM. Reference 082772; P Greenwood and C Maloney 'London Fieldwork and Publication Round-up 1994' *London Archaeol* 7, no. 13 (1995) 350.

10. *Op. cit.* fn. 7.

11. G. Vertue *Plan of the City of London as fortified by Order of Parliament in the years 1642 and 1643* (1738) amended by Cromwell Mortimer M.D. in 1746, *Kings Topographical Collection* 20, no. 16.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Museum of London *Archaeological Service An Archaeological Evaluation of 2-4 Hoxton Square, London* NI (1995) 3.

14. Greater London Sites and Monuments Record, SM. Reference 082790; P Greenwood and C Maloney 'London Fieldwork and Publication Round-up 1995' *London Archaeol* 8, supp. 1 (1996) 10.

15. Greater London Sites and Monuments Record, SM. Reference 081638; P Greenwood and C Maloney 'London Fieldwork and Publication Round-up 1995' *London Archaeol* 8, supp. 1 (1996) 25.

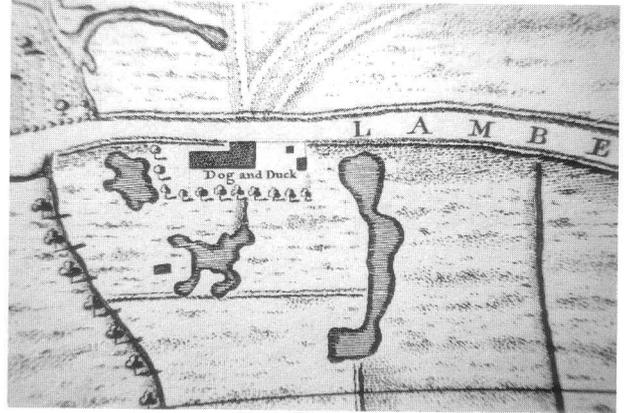
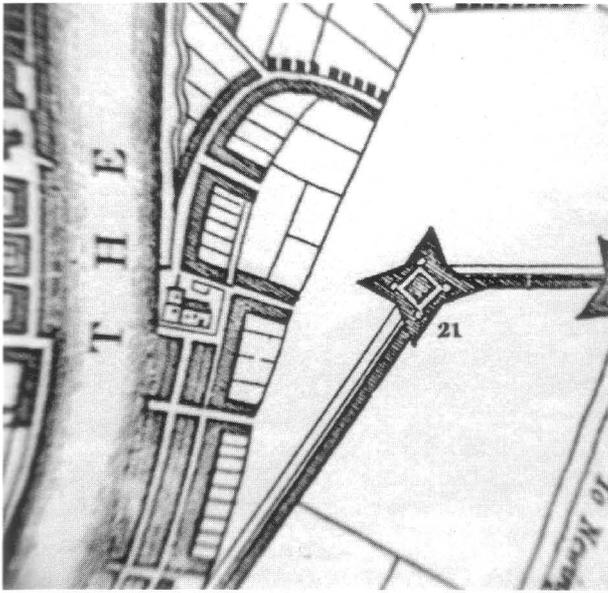


Fig. 4: detail from Rocque's map of 1747 showing the Dog and Duck Public House which occupied the site of the Fort in St George's Fields. (*The A to Z of Georgian London*, London Topographical Society 1982)

this site lies beneath the park beside the Imperial War Museum. Sturdy was very enthusiastic about this site, and noted that surface features were still visible in 1974<sup>18</sup>.

I hope that this summary of the archaeological investigations into the defences may encourage some of you to find out a little more about them. There is certainly a great deal more work to be undertaken before we can be absolutely sure of the course of the Lines of Communication and the locations of the forts. If you would be interested to learn more, the most recent published work on the defences is an essay written by Victor Smith and Peter Kelsey<sup>19</sup>. David Sturdy's article is an excellent introduction and guide to the defences, whilst a more detailed account of the construction was given by Brett-James<sup>20</sup>.

Since completing this article, I learnt of investigations into a site in Pear Tree Street, EC1<sup>21</sup>. The report by the Museum of London Archaeological Service concluded "It is at least an interesting possibility that the dark 'peaty' layers observed in Test Pits 1 to 3 are fills of Civil War defensive ditches."

### Acknowledgement

I would like to express my thanks to Ms J. Reeve, Head of the Greater London Archaeological Advisory Service at English Heritage, for providing me with the necessary print-outs from the Greater London Sites and Monuments Record.

Macmillan Press Limited.

20. N. G. Brett-James 'The Fortification of London in 1642/3' *London Topographical Record* (1928).

21. C Maloney 'London Fieldwork and Publication Round-up 1997' *London Archaeol* 8, supp. 3 (1998) 00.

Fig. 3: detail from Vertue's map of 1738 showing the Fort in St. George's Field (21). (*Kings Topographical Collection*, 20, no. 16, British Library)

P. Wardle undertook a desk-top assessment in the same year, which showed up some topographical anomalies on a plan of the Berkeley Estate dated 1710. The plan showed an interrupted stretch of a ditch or a stream to the north of Piccadilly, with a field boundary kinked at a point in alignment with this ditch. Immediately to the east of the feature was a ducking pond. These anomalies, it was hypothesised, could represent a remnant of the defensive ditch.

As far as I'm aware, no further archaeological investigation has taken place on any of the defences since 1995. There are various sites which are worthy of further investigation, although two in particular stand out. The first is Southampton Fort (Figs. 1 and 2)<sup>16</sup>. With regard to this site, David Sturdy felt that "a great deal must still survive below the south side of Tavistock Square"<sup>17</sup>. However, perhaps the greatest opportunity for archaeological investigation lies with the site of the fort which was situated in St. George's Fields. This site was later occupied by the *Dog and Duck* public house which stood amongst the eroded earthworks until the 19th century (Figs. 3 and 4). Today,

16. So named because of its close proximity to Southampton, later Bedford, House.

17. *Op cit* fn 1, 337.

18. Donald Imber *Lambeth Lost and Found* (1979) 20.

19. In Stephen Porter (ed.) *London and the Civil War* (1996)