

Fig. 1: site location; site code FLL01, National Grid reference TQ 3023 8094

Middle Saxon remains at Covent Garden

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Introduction

This article presents the results of work carried out by the Museum of London Archaeology Service at 33 Floral Street, City of Westminster, London WC2 (Fig. 1). The excavation took place in September and October of 2001, prior to refurbishment of the present building and lowering of the basement slab. The work was commissioned by the client, Mrs J. Otnes.

The excavation took place in the basement of the existing building within an area measuring approximately 7m NW-SE by 4m SW-NE. The modern tile floor sloped downwards from north to south, with OD heights of 21.41m at north and 21.11m at south. The floor and underlying concrete slab were removed by building contractors.

An area at the northern end of the basement (Area B), measuring 2m by 2m, was fully excavated. The rest of the basement (Area A), was only excavated to a depth of between 100–200 mm; the remaining archaeology was preserved *in situ* and protected by a layer of iron-free sand. In addition, underpinning pits around the perimeter were monitored as part of a watching brief.

The site revealed evidence relating to the Middle Saxon and post-medieval periods. Saxon features included stakeholes cut into the natural brickearth subsoil and into the earlier deposits overlying the brickearth, pits and postholes, and gravel surfaces representing an external courtyard area. Significant finds from the Saxon sequence included a bone comb, a ceramic loomweight marked by textile and other impressions, and the

first example of a copper-alloy sword pommel cap from *Lundenwic*.

Post-medieval features dated from the 17th century onwards and included postholes, brick drains and mortar bedding for a brick floor.

Archaeological and historical background

When Christianity was reintroduced to Britain in AD 597, London was already the capital of the East Saxon kingdom. The main focus of the Early and Middle Saxon settlement was a busy trading port further to the west around Aldwych, the Strand, and Covent Garden, in an area known as *Lundenwic*. Floral Street lies immediately north-west of Covent Garden, in an area which was fairly central within *Lundenwic*, slightly towards the north-west of the settlement.

The evidence for *Lundenwic* excavated in the general vicinity of the site consists of remains of timber buildings, streets, pits and yard or alley surfaces, along with finds and environmental remains.

In 1538, the Dissolution of the Monasteries resulted in many church lands passing into private ownership. In 1552 John Russell, the first earl of Bedford, was granted the former convent garden, most of which continued to be used as pasture until the 17th century. The Covent Garden Piazza and surrounding streets were developed between

1630–41 by Francis Russell, the 4th Earl of Bedford, as the first planned housing scheme in London.

Results of the archaeological fieldwork: Saxon

The earliest Saxon features recorded were three stakeholes truncating natural brickearth at the northern end of the site – Area B (Fig. 2). A fourth stakehole truncated a layer of burnt brickearth overlying the natural, which has been dated to AD 730–850 by the presence of Ipswich Ware pottery. These four stakeholes were probably associated, but no clear structural pattern emerged.

The stakeholes were overlain by a layer of ‘dirty brickearth’, similar to that identified at other sites in the area, which represents the cleared land surface during the Middle Saxon period, on which horizons of activity accumulated. This was sealed by a make-up layer, which was punctured by two stake holes. These deposits were overlain by a series of rough surfaces composed of a mixture of gravel and brickearth.

Subsequent Saxon activity included two phases of a shallow NE-SW aligned gravel surface. The alignment was defined by the northern edge of the surface, which was clearly revealed in Area B. Further spreads of gravel in Area A proved to be at a similar level, and were probably associated

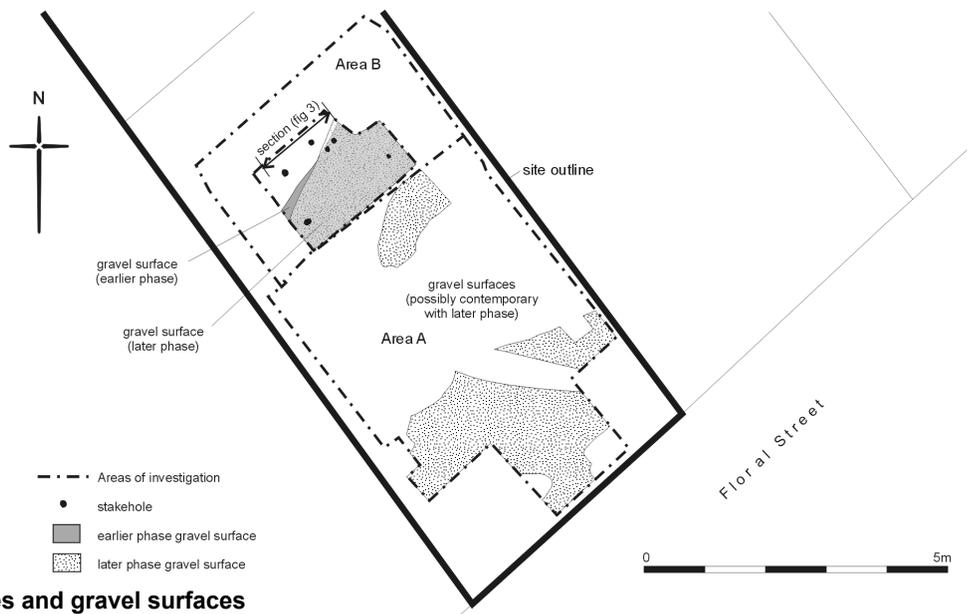


Fig. 2: Saxon stakeholes and gravel surfaces

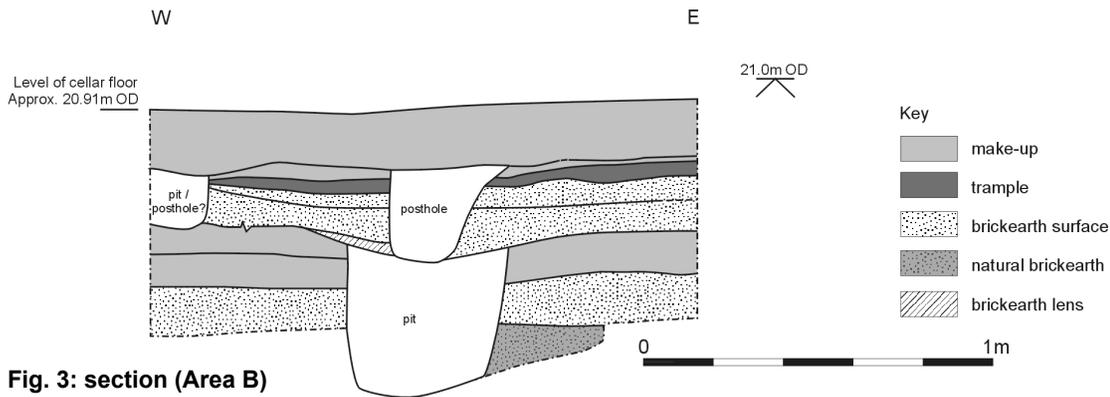


Fig. 3: section (Area B)

(Fig. 2). The extent of the gravel deposits suggests they represented an external courtyard area rather than a path or roadway. A rubbish pit was revealed immediately below the gravel at the SE limit of excavation, but could not be dug because of the depth restriction.

Sealing the gravels in both Areas A and B was a series of make-up layers dated AD 730–850, which represented the point where the two areas could be reliably phased together. The layers were truncated at varying levels; in Area B, by two small rubbish pits and a posthole, and in Area A by a large posthole, also unexcavated because of the depth restriction.

A small sample of Middle Saxon pottery was recovered from the site (18 sherds), providing dating evidence that is briefly summarised below. Finds analysis identified three stratified objects of particular interest, all of which were retrieved from the make-up layers described above:

Pottery

Most of the Saxon pottery was found in the gravel surfaces and make-up layers, which made up the latest phase of the Saxon sequence (12 sherds, 252 g). Most are of chaff-tempered ware, (seven sherds found in gravel surfaces and make-up layers, (Fig. 3), but sand-tempered wares and a shelly-limestone-tempered ware were also present.) Two sherds of Ipswich Ware were found within the later sequence of make-up layers, and two more were found in a thin spread of burnt brickearth, which was the earliest dated context on site. Taken together, the combination of different fabrics suggests that this activity dates to the mid-8th century.

Bone comb

The only bone object is part of a tooth plate from a double-sided composite comb.¹ Double-sided combs are the most common type in the Middle Saxon period,² and some 30 examples were found at the Royal Opera House site.³ This example is of interest as the tooth plate is rather thicker than usual and the condition suggests that the comb was new, if not unused, when lost or discarded.

Ceramic loomweights

Small quantities of loomweight fragments are common finds from excavations in *Lundenwic*. Textile manufacture, particularly weaving on warp-weighted looms, was widespread in the area. Of the three loomweights from this site, one from layer [39], <14> (Fig. 4), is of interest for two reasons. First, there are four deeply pricked holes, roughly in a square, on the upper side, with two adjacent shallower impressions making a rectangle. Given the irregular shape and depth of the impressions it is likely that they were made with a stick or a bone pin. Second, on the lower side is a burnt-out impression of a finely-woven textile that caught in the clay when the weight was being made.

The textile imprint on loomweight <14> seems to be the stitched edge of a garment or other textile object. The imprint is only 20 by 5 mm, but the technical details are clear. The weave is a relatively fine tabby (plain weave), with 16 by 14 threads per cm, and yarn spun in the Z-direction in warp and weft. A Z-spun thread running across the surface, at an angle to the weave but parallel to the edge of the imprint, dips into the weave at intervals in a way that suggests stitching.



Fig. 4: ceramic loomweight [39] <14>

Simple tabby-weave textiles of this sort were produced throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. They were made in both wool and linen, although the finer examples are mostly linen, and widely used for shirts, shifts, women's head-veils and perhaps also the finer types of household linen.

Copper-alloy sword pommel cap

The single copper-alloy find is an undecorated sword pommel cap of 'cocked hat' form, an elongated pyramid with concave upper surfaces, ([41] <17>, Fig. 5).⁴ This pommel type is characteristic of the first post-Roman swords to have had a metal pommel, rather than a washer over which the tang of the hilt was rivetted.⁵ The upper and lower guards were either of organic material (wood, bone or horn), or a 'sandwich' of organic material between metal plates. This sword form, classified by Behmer as type VI and by Oakeshott as Type 4,⁶ appears to have been used by all Germanic peoples in the 6th and 7th centuries. These swords are often rich, with gold or gilded metal parts, one of the finest being that from Sutton Hoo, which is of gold set with cloisonné garnets and is dated to c. 625.⁷ Despite a widespread distribution across northern Europe, there is little evidence for regional variation, and the forms are remarkably consistent.⁸

Different methods of construction are, however, found. Some swords have iron pommels of cocked hat form that were attached to the tang. Finds from the London area include Walthamstow, the Thames at Cowey Stakes⁹ and Mitcham, graves 163, 193.¹⁰

The Floral Street example is similar to Menghin's type 2b,¹¹ in that the rivets pass through projecting lobed sockets. The number of rivets varies: one on each side, to secure the pommel to the tang, two on one side, and one on the other,

or, as here, two on each side. Examples with four lobes are known from several sites in France, Germany, Norway and Sweden.¹² Within the London region a find from Croydon has two projecting lobes like that from Floral Street.¹³

Post-medieval

The earliest post-medieval features included two associated phases of a brick drainage system, located in Area B, in the NE corner of the site. Bricks from the drain have been dated from the mid- to late-17th or early-18th centuries. A mortar bedding layer with imprints from an overlying brick floor was contemporary with the drain. These features were probably part of the original building at 33 Floral Street.

The brick floor was truncated by two postholes, which may represent a secondary phase of building work. Both postholes contained disuse backfills of coal dust, ash and silt with pottery dated 1740–1800. Two small pits or postholes in Area A were probably contemporary with the features just described, but there was no discernible structural association. They contained similar backfills, and were dated 1700–1900.

The features in both Areas A and B were sealed by a make-up layer, representing consolidation below the basement floor of the modern building.

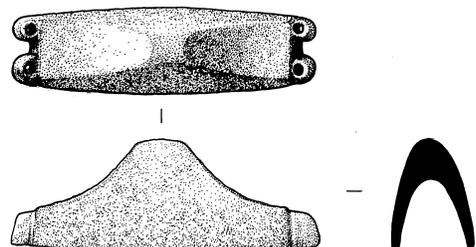


Fig. 5: sword pommel cap [41] <17> (scale 1:1)

Discussion

Interpretation of the results from 33 Floral Street is limited by the small size of the area investigated. However, evidence recovered from the site shows that although the structural remains and later external surfaces dated to the Saxon period were not fully defined, their presence provides further evidence of sustained settlement. Similarly, the post-medieval features recorded at Floral Street will help substantiate documentary and cartographic evidence for urban development from the 17th century onwards.

The pottery sample recovered from the Saxon deposits dated the sequence from AD 730–850. The bone comb and ceramic loomweights are relatively common finds from Saxon sites in this area, but both had unusual properties and add to our knowledge of their usage during the Saxon period. Although chaff-tempered wares were present in the pottery assemblage, the presence of Ipswich Ware near the base of the sequence suggests that the principal period of activity was after AD 730. The pommel cap is of particular significance, being the first example of this component of a sword from *Lundenwic*. Sword pommels of this type have a long date range, but

in the context of *Lundenwic* the find must be dated post AD 730. The only other sword elements from the settlement are two guards found in later 8th-century contexts at the Royal Opera House.¹⁴

Acknowledgements

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1. [11]<19>; width 40 mm, extant length 20 mm, maximum thickness 8 mm.
2. L. Blackmore 'The worked bone and antler' in R. Cowie and R. Whytehead with L. Blackmore 'Two Middle Saxon occupation sites: excavations at Jubilee Hall and 21-22 Maiden Lane' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* **39** (1988) Fig. 38; L. Blackmore 'The worked bone' in R. Whytehead and R. Cowie with L. Blackmore 'Excavations at the Peabody Site, Chandos Place and the National Gallery' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* **40** (1989) 131–2; Fig. 45.
3. L. Blackmore 'Worked bone and antler objects and waste' and 'Cowrie shell and belemnite' in G. Malcolm and D. Bowsher with R. Cowie *Middle Saxon London: excavations at the Royal Opera House 1989-99* (2003) 302–14 and 332–3.
4. Length of base 36 mm, width 11 mm; height at centre 15 mm, at ends 7 mm. Two lobed eyes project at each end to secure oblique rivets (width 4 mm, length *c* 3 mm, height 5 mm; diameter of perforation 1.5 mm).
5. G. Baldwin Brown *The Arts in Early England* (1915) 219; P. Bone 'The development of Anglo-Saxon swords from the fifth to the eleventh century' in S. C. Hawkes (ed) *Weapons and warfare in Anglo-Saxon England* (1989) 64.
6. E. H. Behmer *Das Zweischneidige Schwert des Germanischen Völkerwanderungszeit* (1939); R. E. Oakeshott *The Archaeology of Weapons* (1960) 113; Fig. 41.
7. R. Bruce-Mitford *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial, Vol 2, Arms, armour and regalia* (1978) 277, 291–2; Figs. 210, 218, 220.
8. Bone *op cit.* fn 5, 65.
9. R. E. M. Wheeler *London and the Saxons*, London (1935) 175–6; MoL acc. nos 27.64, A10409.
10. *Ibid.*; MoL acc. no. C 2444; H. F. Bidder and J. Morris 'The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Mitcham' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* **56** (1959) 70, 72; Pl XXI.
11. W. Menghin *Das Schwert im frühen Mittelalter*, (1983) 308–9.
12. *Ibid.*, nos 13, 17, 19–22, 27.
13. *Ibid.*, no. 16.
14. *Op. cit.* fn 3.
15. The archive and associated reports relating to the site can be consulted by prior arrangement at the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC).