

Temples in Thames Street

The Romans struggled for centuries to tame the riverside site they had earmarked for a rich and commanding complex of buildings. A new monograph from Pre-Construct Archaeology to be published in March reveals what excavations over more than 160 years have discovered.

Victoria Ridgeway provides a preview.

The area around the Salvation Army Headquarters was peripheral to the Roman City until late in the 1st century, and its subsequent development was heavily influenced by its topographic location. The area adjacent to the Thames frontage was a tricky one to build on – the ground sloped sharply to the water’s edge and a spring line some 60m north of the river frontage made for steep and frequently-flooded terrain that was traversed by natural channels, a situation which was repeatedly to affect attempts to develop the area.

The first indications of substantial Roman remains surviving in this part of the City came in 1841 when the antiquarian Charles Roach Smith recorded ‘a wall of extraordinary strength’, founded on ‘oaken piles’,



incorporating fragments of sculpted and moulded stone and marble. Additional masonry remains were found in the 1920s and the construction of a new building to house the Salvation Army International Headquarters in the early 1960s allowed Peter Marsden, then working for the Guildhall Museum, to monitor ground-reduction revealing massive Roman monumental masonry representing at least two periods of construction (‘Period I’ and ‘Period II’).

These tantalising glimpses of an extensive and opulent monumental development were further augmented by more detailed excavation, particularly in the 1980s by the Museum of London’s Department of Urban Archaeology at Peter’s Hill and Sunlight Wharf. These revealed that the ‘Period II’ remains were part of a vast building complex extending for over 150m along the river frontage and linked to the construction of the riverside wall in the late 2nd century.

Tim Williams produced an excellent synthesis of all the available evidence in 1993, suggesting that the Period I structures formed part of a massive programme of public works, which included a temple and at least one monumental arch or entrance. However, there was still little evidence to precisely date this phase of



development. In contrast, dendrochronological analysis of timber piles had provided a remarkably precise date of AD 294 for the foundations of the Period II structures, which have been interpreted as elements of an extensive administrative complex terraced into the hillside.

The 1960’s Salvation Army building, described by the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner as ‘large and fussy’, was short lived. Its redevelopment in the early 2000s enabled Pre-Construct Archaeology to carry out a series of excavations, generously funded by Bowmer & Kirkland, which have added substantially to the emerging story of this area, an account of which is the subject of the forthcoming monograph*.

In addition to evidence for a previously unanticipated possible 1st-century quay and associated warehouse, major advances have been made in understanding the dating and form of the ‘Period I’ complex. Much modified over time, this complex faced out over the river and appears to have been flanked by apses with ambulatories between, and buildings extending to the north up the hillside. The buildings were well-appointed, their lavishness attested by the recovery of imported stone, such as fragments of marble veneer deriving from across the Empire, including France, Italy, the eastern

TOP: The demise of Period I structures was most probably a result of erosion and collapse, this Period I wall can be seen leaning steeply to the south

LEFT: The sheer size of the culverts - over half a metre wide - incorporated into the Period II masonry demonstrates the need to incorporate serious drainage measures into the new complex
NEXT PAGE: Fragments of pottery fused together demonstrate the intense heat of the Great Fire of London

Mediterranean and North Africa.

The complex in its final form was short-lived and it collapsed, the masonry cracking and slumping down towards the river, a consequence of building on this steeply sloping site. The vast foundations, piling and terracing associated with Period II testify to continued attempts to control this unstable ground. These remains suggest that the new complex, arguably constructed during the reigns of Carausius and Allectus in the early AD 290s, incorporated at least two temples of classical form as well as baths; but it may never have been finished.

The reduction of Booth Lane as part of the redevelopment provided a rare opportunity to examine a sequence of medieval road surfaces and buildings, located at the junction of Thames Street and Lambeth Hill. The

latest surface showed evidence of extreme heat, presumably caused by the Great Fire of 1666, which also destroyed a building on the northwest side of the junction.

The requirements of the recent excavations were very much set against a desire to disturb the Roman masonry as little as possible. A strict policy of 'preservation *in situ*' has been followed and the monograph provides an opportunity to assess to what extent this policy was successful. Whilst many advances have been made, questions still remain and it might be concluded that although we have benefited from an opportunity to revisit the site we have also missed an opportunity to answer many of the long-posed and important questions relating to the form of monumental London and its place in the history of Roman Britain.



*** From Temples to Thames Street – 2000 Years of Riverside Development: Archaeological Excavations at The Salvation Army International Headquarters**
By Timothy Bradley and Jonathan Butler

Available March 2008 from Pre-Construct Archaeology (tel 020 7732 3925, or email admin@pre-construct.com) or Heritage Marketing and Publications (www.heritagemp.com)

Letter to the Editor

Following the publication of my article on the Isolated Bath-houses of the Roman Cray Valley (*LA* Vol. 11 no. 9) several local archaeologists have drawn my attention to alternative interpretations of the Fordcroft bath-house. These are based on the conclusions of the various excavations and the site entry in the GLSMR. As there are clear difficulties in interpreting the site, I thought it worthwhile to run through the various analyses and archaeological problems.

Palmer's report of 1984 concluded that the bath-house might have been built in around AD 100, although Room 1 could have seen a period of alteration and reuse. The Tylers carried out a more detailed examination of the fill in Room 1, and found that an earlier structure, housing a metalworking hearth, had existed below the present room assigned to the early 3rd century. The GLSMR interpretation supposes the existence of an occupation site at Fordcroft, the latter stages of which are represented by squalid living (implied presumably by the hearth in Room 1).

In my interpretation, the building was constructed at the end of the first century, and used as a bath-house until around AD 200, when Room 1 (at least)

was given over to metalworking. The metalworking hearth is seen to be located on the broken remains of a mortar floor, associated with the original use of Room 1 as a *frigidarium*. The present Room 1 was perhaps a new, crudely constructed addition replacing (as at Beauport Park) a timber structure. In the absence of useful stratigraphy (the infill is a mix of material dated AD 250 – AD 400). I have, in part, based my interpretation on evidence obtained elsewhere at Fordcroft and other similar sites.

Despite a dearth of meaningful stratigraphy, we can assign most of the site's principal features to the 2nd century. These features consist of metalworking hearths, pits, gullies, postholes and a well. Near-complete vessels deposited in pits could represent a ritual termination of this phase. A feature of the early 3rd century is a cobbled area now thought to be a trackway. There are no features dating specifically to the late 3rd or 4th centuries, although an early ditch had remained open until the 4th century. This negative evidence stands at variance with the amount of late Roman material (which does not include wall-plaster, *tesserae* or window-glass) found in the upper 70 cm of soil, within the area of the Saxon cemetery.

The situation regarding the late Roman period clearly requires some

explanation. There are four possibilities:

- (1) The area of the cemetery was used as a midden by an unrecorded occupation site at Fordcroft;
- (2) The material arrived by the process of 'hill-wash' from an unknown site on the hill overlooking Fordcroft;
- (3) Fordcroft was used as a rubbish dump (?manuring) by a late Roman site, possibly located 360 m to the east, in the area of the supposed Saxon settlement;
- (4) The Saxons themselves transported the refuse to Fordcroft for the construction of their burial mounds.

Explanation (1) now seems unlikely, although (2) might be feasible, but for the fact that the infill of Room 1 was clearly deposited *via* human agency. (3) is the more likely explanation, and it would, moreover, be in line with evidence from Beden's Field, Baston Manor and other isolated bath-house sites. Hopefully, this sets the record straight as far as our current knowledge of the site is concerned. More detailed information could be obtained following a comprehensive re-examination of the bath-house.

Corrigendum

The military features referred to in Note 16 are: 'neat ditch terminals, a wide entrance to the enclosure and the general arrangement of pits,' not an 'ankle-breaker' as stated.
Kerry Boyce