The Bloomberg bonanza

Unravelling the story of what lies under Bloomberg Place in the City will take a few years yet, but excavations between 2011 and 2013 are clearly revealing exceptional evidence of habitation and activity, going back to the earliest Roman settlement. To update April's press extravaganza, Becky Wallower talked to MOLA's Site Director Sadie Watson and others working on the project.

Since Grimes' dramatic last minute discovery of the Temple of Mithras in 1954, the Bucklersbury area along Walbrook has remained perhaps the City's most iconic, the one that archaeologists would most like to revisit. With the imminent development on the three acre site of a new London HQ by the Bloomberg global financial news organisation came a tantalising opportunity: but would there be anything left to find?

A few early investigations by MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) to get a picture of what was likely to have survived the deep basements and piling of the 1950s insurance building produced glimmers of hope. An initial cramped trench along Walbrook found some foundations of the temple still preserved in situ, giving precise context for Grimes' records. And it looked like the north east corner structures had minimal underground levels, despite deep piles. As snippets of news emerged sporadically, it became clear that major results could be expected.

In April 2013, the press were invited to see some of the discoveries. Their visit to the teeming, cramped, muddy site on the banks of the Walbrook was covered on TV, radio and in pretty much every daily newspaper. Most took on board the key factors of just why all the visible wooden piles and planks, and the selection of finds on display were so significant. Preservation in the deep, mucky anaerobic conditions was superb for everything, but particularly for the timber structures and organic finds, meaning that much was found at Bloomberg Place that would simply have disappeared had it been present on, say, the neighbouring Poultry site. Superlatives flowed in abundance, and the journalists picked up on the Pompeii of the North theme heading the press release. What had less coverage though was how the findings would impact our understanding of the foundation of Roman London.

Since March 2011, more than 30 excavations on small piling and crane base sites, and on the Walbrook street boundary have dotted the three acre site. By early 2012 it was confirmed that the single basement in the northeast corner had sheered off only post medieval layers, potentially leaving seven metres of stratigraphy right down to the bed of the Walbrook stream, the central valley between the two hills on which Londinium was founded. In the final weeks, after the press visit, MOLA got down to the natural bank of the Walbrook. If there was evidence of the earliest Roman activity, it was likely to be here – and indeed it was, though unravelling the 75,000 man hours of excavations and recording is a mammoth task.

Sadie Watson described some of the early – very provisional – views on what was there. "The east bank of the Roman Walbrook was gently sloping towards the river. Under two metres of concrete we found timber piles for the Watling Street river crossing here – and it's possible that human remains buried at one corner may be related to its foundation. Early structural evidence shows a building platform on a terrace cut into the western slope. In the 2nd century a large structure – it could be a two or three storey mill as we've found paddles, a lantern gear and a timber lined drain that may be a mill race – was built along the Walbrook, lasting until destroyed by fire, perhaps the Hadrianic one. Another structure had wattle walls and a large domed area – a possible communal bread oven? Later in the Roman period, at the time the Temple of Mithras was active, a gravelled roadway led to it from the north, passing at least two high status ragstone urban villas, both of which had bread ovens in rooms to the rear. A small grove, with a tessellated area perhaps for a shrine, was ten metres from the Temple. This sector seems to have strong military associations throughout the Roman period, and large numbers of weights and measures hint at mercantile functions too."

Analysis of the more than 10,000 accessioned finds and hundreds of boxes of pottery and building material will paint a more vivid picture still. There is painted plaster from the houses, the oldest doors yet found in Britain, a palisade fence standing to shoulder height, plus lamps, furniture fittings, pottery of all descriptions and other domestic paraphernalia. Amongst the largest collection of phallic and fist good luck charms from any London site is a jingling horse fitting. A hoard of


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decorated pewter bowls and cups had been deposited in a well with coins and cow skulls. Over 150 imported and locally made brooches, 87 knives of all shapes and sizes, 460 studs and 70 needles have been identified so far. Gladiatorial preoccupations are seen in examples like the tiny, amber helmet amulet (below left) and the bone handle of four military or gladiatorial gladii.

Roman finds specialist Michael Marshall says that the preservation of organic materials, particularly the leather, is among the best ever seen in London. With bags full of leather still to be cleaned and identified, it's already obvious that the more than 250 shoes alone will add hugely to archaeological knowledge. The most intriguing leather object to date is the enigmatic piece of upholstery on our cover, featuring a stitched design of sea creatures and their adversary. It's of a type not previously known, and the six slightly different panels found together may be upholstery for a set of chairs: the rather whimsical attribution as a chariot fitting however is almost certainly false.

Hopes are high that the most revealing finds of all will be the more than 350 pieces of wooden writing tablets, including the only inked example discovered in Britain outside Vindolanda. The tablets, found in groups and scattered over the site, are being slowly conserved in order for a specialist in cursive Latin to begin to unravel the script and the evidence of messages scratched into the wax-filled surfaces. They may just be accounts of army supplies, but could equally provide rare personal details and names of Londinium's inhabitants.

Graham Kenlin, in charge of processing the vast quantities of material, is the first to get an overview of what could have been happening on site. He's seeing lots of bits of Roman armour, in various stages of finish, and small alloy figures, some only partly complete. There's little slag, but quite a few crucibles and scrap metal abounds: was there an outlet for custom metal talismans and military outfitting there? An oil lamp mould and bone and antler waste indicate other industries present. Metal detecting was employed to search spoil from every context, so the incidence of metal finds is high. With far less concretion and degradation than would normally be seen, all manner of objects have been recovered that would ordinarily only be seen in X-rays, including decorative keys, equipment, tools, hinges, brackets and fittings.

Julian Bowsher is working through the more than 600 Roman coins, dating between 123 BC and AD 395. The story he sees emerging is one of how the empire's money supply worked in distant outposts like Britain. The many Republican silver coins were probably brought over with the invading forces in AD 43, and a huge range of Claudian copies indicates a lack of small change available in the early years of the province.

Although the Roman finds have grabbed the headlines and the public imagination, the north east corner area also yielded medieval and early post medieval archaeology of importance. Documentary evidence is being further researched now to throw more light in particular on the estate of the Buckerel family, who produced a 12th-century Lord Mayor and occupied a grand mansion there called the Barge for generations. The gardens to the rear prevented development for centuries, playing an important part in preserving the underlying Roman layers. In the Tudor period the Barge was home to Thomas More, and a chalk-lined well yielded pot and tableware from that period as well as a Rondel dagger, a type of knight's weapon used in both tournaments and battle. The medieval foundations of St Stephen's church, possibly the Buckerel family chapel,

have also been located. In the south west of the Bloomberg site, evidence points to an area of French wine merchants' houses near Vintry.

The MOLA team is back on site this summer for several more small areas, then has until 2016 to complete all the post excavation analysis, not just of all the features, structures and excavated materials, but of hundreds of geoarchaeological samples from across the site.

The deadline corresponds to the completion of Bloomberg Place, and the opening of a new, integral, three-storey museum already underway on the site of the Temple of Mithras. The internal design will be finalised in the coming months. Visitors will enter through an interpretation gallery, and then view an account of the Temple's discovery. They finally reach a below-ground reconstruction evincing some of the atmosphere of the Temple. Missing this time though will be the crazy paving and medieval masonry that found its way into the previous 1960s version, elevated above ground level on a windswept plaza, oriented the wrong way. Many of the exceptional objects will be displayed to tell the story of perhaps the City's most important Roman site to date – significant not for its grand municipal buildings but for the stuff of Londinium's foundation.


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ABOVE LEFT The three acre City site showing excavation areas, Walbrook and tributaries, Mithraic temple and Roman roads, including the Watling Street crossing of the Walbrook. ABOVE Timber foundations of a 1st century building along the Walbrook. ©Maggie Cox LEFT a) 13mm high amber amulet in the form of a gladiator's helmet; b) fragments of the inked writing tablet; c) lead plaque possibly of the Zodiac symbol Taurus; d) coin depicting Emperor Nerva, AD 97 and e) Republican coin of 123 BC – all ©MOLA and ©Andy Chopping (a, b and c), or ©Edwin Baker (d and e)