

# Fleet Street in microcosm

Amelia Fairman

An archaeological investigation at 37 and 40–43 Fleet Street, London EC4 (FLE11) was undertaken by Pre-Construct Archaeology between March 2011 and January 2012 (Fig. 1). After initial geotechnical trial pitting, an archaeological excavation of a large H-shaped foundation pad and lift shaft was undertaken, later supplemented by the excavation of numerous additional manholes, foundation pads and service trenches (Figs. 2 & 3). The site was bounded to the north by Fleet Street, to

the east by Old Mitre Court, to the south by Mitre Court buildings and to the west by Falcon Court and 30–32 and 33 Fleet Street.

## Archaeological and historical background

The site is located adjacent to the projected alignment of a Roman road that ran from *Londinium* along Ludgate, Fleet Street and the Strand, traces of which were thought to have been identified in 1598 by John Stow, to the

north of Fleet Street, between Chancery Lane and St Dunstan-in-the-West.<sup>1</sup> During the Roman period it is likely that only piecemeal activity was present along the thoroughfare, as suggested by burials encountered at 4 King's Bench Walk (KBK92) and a masonry building beneath St Bride's Church.<sup>2</sup>

During the Middle Saxon period *Londinium* was largely abandoned and the trading settlement of *Lundenwic* was established along the Strand. The road from Ludgate along the Strand is likely to have been one of the key roads out of *Lundenwic*, and is first mentioned as 'Akemannestraete' in a charter of AD 1002.<sup>3</sup> *Lundenwic* was abandoned during the second half of the 9th century, and the settlement retreated back within the old Roman city walls due to the increasing dangers of Viking raids.

It was thought that the area of the study site comprised houses, gardens and orchards lining the banks of the River Thames during the early medieval period,<sup>4</sup> and it is likely that Fleet Street developed as a major thoroughfare at this time. In 1161 the Knights Templar acquired the land between Fleet Street and the River Thames and established a round church called 'New Temple' c. 90m south-west of the site, which was consecrated in 1185; monastery buildings developed around it. The identification of clay extraction and quarry pits on Kings Bench Walk, Church Court (TCT99) and Hare Court (HEC02), and a tile kiln at 4 King's Bench Walk (KBK92) testify to these



Fig. 1: site location

(Continued from page 99)

1. All records from the project have been archived under the site code LEC08 and can be consulted by prior arrangement with the Museum of London's London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC).

2. E.g. N. Holder, D. Bowsher and K. Pitt with L. Blackmore 'Across the Saxon town: three new sites in *Lundenwic*' *London Archaeol* 9 no. 6 (2000) 151–9; G. Malcolm and D. Bowsher with R. Cowie *Middle Saxon London: Excavations at the Royal Opera House 1989–99* MoLAS Monogr Ser 15 (2003), fig 1; R. Cowie and L. Blackmore with A. Davis, J. Keily and K. Rielly *Lundenwic: Excavations in Middle Saxon London, 1987–2000* MoLA Monogr Ser 63 (2012), fig 2.

3. After Cowie and Blackmore *op cit* fig 2.

4. P.S. Toms *Optical dating of sediments, Sheffield Street excavations, London*, unpub University of Gloucestershire Geochronology Laboratories rep (2011).

5. Toms *op cit* fn 4, tables 1 and 2; sample ref LSE01, lab code GL11016, age 165 ± 15 (13) ka BP; sample ref. LSE02, lab code GL11017, age 179 ± 24 (23) ka BP.

6. After Cowie and Blackmore *op. cit.* fn 2.

7. Cal AD 660 to 870 (Beta-317304, 1260±30 BP).

8. R.G. Scaife *Pollen analysis (LEC08)* unpub MOL rep.

9. J.E. Whittaker *Ostracods (LEC08)* unpub MOL rep.

10. Site code ROP95; Malcolm and Bowsher *op cit* fn 2, 118–20.

11. Malcolm and Bowsher *op cit* fn 2, 119.

12. *Ibid*; the ditch at Bruce House, Kemble Street (site code BRU92) is medieval, see R. Cowie with L. Blackmore 'Excavation and mitigation in *Lundenwic*: a case study' *London Archaeol* 8 no. 12 (1999) 318, fig 7, ditch 3; this ditch does not appear in the final publication, Cowie and Blackmore *op cit* fn 2, 75–84.

13. Site code KWH96; Holder *et al op cit* fn 2, 155–8.

14. Cowie and Blackmore *op cit* fn 2, 115, 203.

15. Holder *et al op cit* fn 2, 157.

16. Holder *et al op cit* fn 2, 155–7 fn 8; J. Schofield *St Clement Danes Parish Hall, Sheffield Street, London WC2: archaeological desk-based assessment* unpub MOL rep (2008), 11.

building schemes and the local availability of raw materials.<sup>5</sup>

The Knights Templar were suppressed in 1308, and in 1338 the New Temple was granted to the Knights Hospitallers of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. During the reign of Edward III (1327–1377) the land was leased by the Knights Hospitallers to law students, in which use it has remained ever since. Documentary sources from 1336–7 refer to an earthen wall bounding the consecrated areas of the New Temple and it has been suggested that the line of this wall is now followed by the property line to the rear of 17–40 Fleet Street,<sup>6</sup> on the southern boundary of the study site. The Charter of Agnes of Neddinge (1286) refers to Mitre Court, which lies along the eastern boundary of the site, and states that the Temple precinct wall lay on the western side of the Court and extended up to Fleet Street.<sup>7</sup>

The Knights Hospitallers were suppressed at the Dissolution in 1539 and their property reverted to the Crown. By 1609 James I granted ownership of the Inner and Middle Temple to the lawyers who had occupied the site since the 14th century. The area of Ram Alley, Falcon Court and Mitre Court (so named after the Mitre Tavern)<sup>8</sup> maintained a special status because of the earlier ownership of the land by the Hospitallers. This meant such properties were exempt

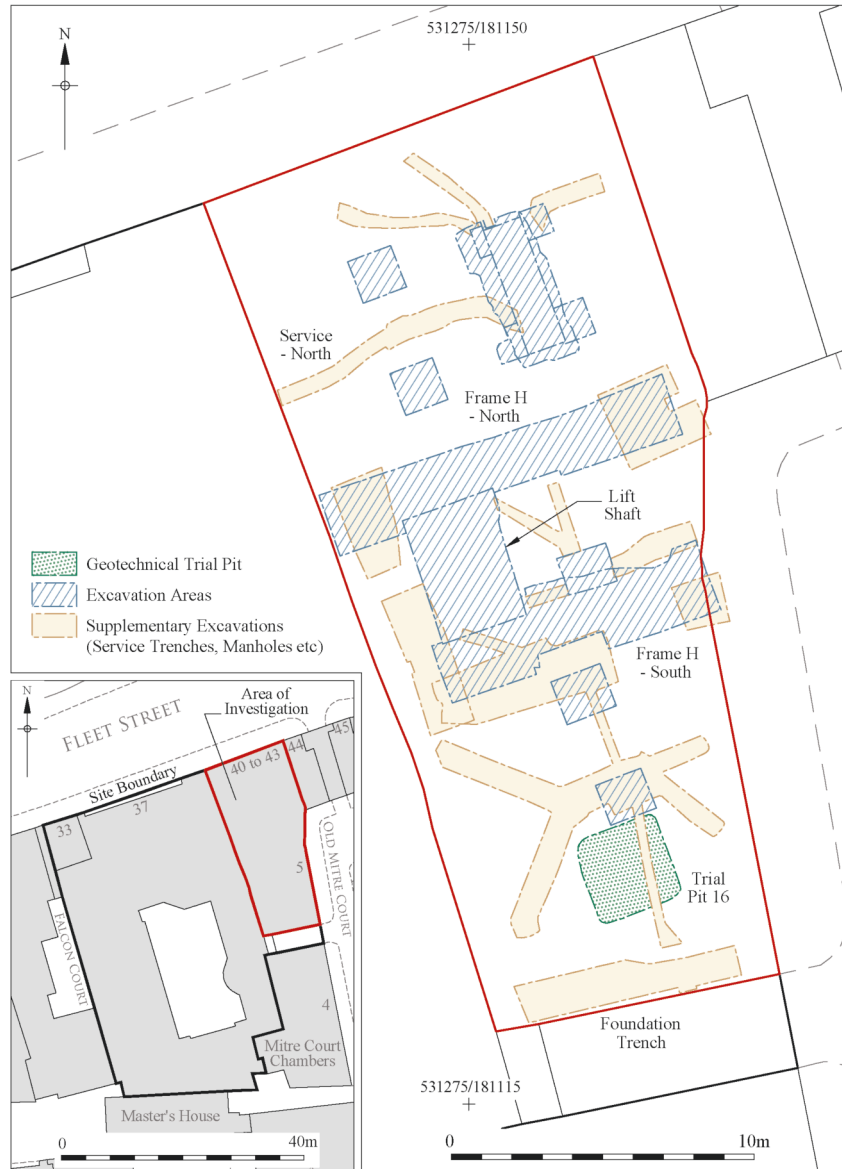


Fig. 2: trench locations



Fig. 3: photo of H Frame and Lift Shaft areas, looking south-west

from ecclesiastical and secular authority by order of the Pope. This ‘peculiar’ status was maintained at the Dissolution, and the area remained a sanctuary for debtors and others fleeing the law, known as ‘Alsatia’ after the disputed Alsace-Lorraine territory on the French-German border.<sup>9</sup> This area has been described as a ‘chartered abode of libertinism and roguery’,<sup>10</sup> full of ‘lewd persons’<sup>11</sup> with ‘habits dirty and manners none’.<sup>12</sup> The immunity of these areas was rescinded by an Act of Parliament in 1697 following a particularly violent disturbance involving Benchers of the Inner Temple and some of the residents of Ram Alley.

Cartographic sources suggested that 40–43 Fleet Street were developed from at least the mid-16th century. Mitre Tavern occupied the site from at least

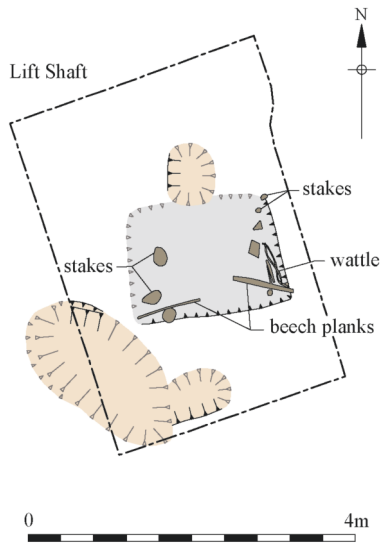


Fig. 4: 12th-century features (Phase 3a)

1475.<sup>13</sup> The original building and others in the vicinity were subsequently destroyed during the Great Fire of 1666. By 1682 the site was redeveloped and underwent numerous alterations throughout the later post-medieval period.

Hoare's Bank, founded in 1672 by Richard Hoare, a goldsmith and banker originally in Cheapside, moved to 37 Fleet Street in c. 1690.<sup>14</sup> The redevelopment of Hoare's Bank between 1829 and 1830 led to the final demolition of the Mitre, which had ceased to be a tavern in 1788.<sup>15</sup> Joe's Coffee House, which lay on the east side of Mitre Court took over the name 'Mitre tavern' from 1829.<sup>16</sup> 40–43 Fleet Street were also rebuilt in 1913, and additional alterations made to the eastern side of Hoare's Bank courtyard in 1929.

**The archaeological sequence**

Natural terrace gravels were initially overlain by undated ground-raising deposits of greenish-blue and red gravels. Possible evidence pertaining to activity before the medieval period derives from the recovery of vitrified hearth-lining fragments. These were recovered from medieval cut features, but significantly contained flint tempering indicative of an date earlier than medieval.<sup>17</sup> Although they are clearly redeposited, their presence might suggest the location of later Saxon industrial processes in the immediate vicinity.

The earliest evidence of human activity derived from a series of pits and

dump layers dating from the 11th and 12th centuries (phase 3a) (Fig. 4). One large rectangular cut had been reinforced along the eastern and southern edges with willow or poplar wattle and beech planks supported by driven stakes. A second phase of use was implied by a series of driven oak stakes which post-dated the wattle and were located around the eastern and western edges of the cut (Fig. 5). An oak sample from the latter phase of use dated between 1158 and 1169 (tree-ring dating).<sup>18</sup> The earlier revetting, however, appeared to be Saxo-Norman in date based on the technological evidence and types of raw material used.<sup>19</sup> The differences in the nature of the woodwork suggested that rather than one structure, these elements represented several phases of building and repair over a short period of time.

The precise nature of this structure, however, cannot be determined with any certainty. The clay packing behind the wattle work led to an initial interpretation as a tank-lined pit, with several stages of use. Alternatively, this may represent a small, revetted, minicellar under the floor of a light 'earth-fast' building.<sup>20</sup> The larger upright stakes, assigned to the secondary phase of use, could have supported parts of a structure which existed at a higher level. Unfortunately, truncations along the eastern limits, and horizontal

truncations from later pitting, make definitive interpretation difficult.

Two additional sub-phases of activity were identified for the medieval period, dating from the 12th to 13th (phase 3b) and 13th to 14th (phase 3c) centuries respectively (Fig. 6). A significant increase in activity was immediately apparent during the 12th to 13th centuries, with numerous episodes of pitting and dumping recorded across the site. Two of the pits contained pottery assemblages of interest. Pit [94] was dated to 1150–1200 (Fig. 7) and contained pottery consisting of shelly-sandy ware (1140–1220) and included possible cooking pots which were externally sooted and either had internal food deposits or lime scale, one of the latter vessels having a hole made after the vessel was fired. The latest pottery type present was Limpsfield greyware, while jug sherds occurred in coarse London-type ware and the finer London-type ware. Pit [92] was dated 1170–1225, and the main function represented by the pottery is as serving vessels in the form of sherds of jugs in coarse London-type ware, dated 1080–1200 and London-type ware. These jugs were decorated with white slip, green glaze and applied decoration in a chevron pattern, while the presence of a strap-handled vessel dated the final in-filling of the feature. Cooking forms are provided by the



Fig. 5: photo of wattle structure, looking east

coarse wares and include cooking pots in shelly-sandy ware, dated 1140–1200, and grey wares from Limpsfield, Surrey, and south Hertfordshire, which included a rare example of a cauldron or pipkin with mortised feet and an applied thumbed strip on the shoulder.

Other finds of interest from this phase of pitting and dumping were significant quantities of over-fired and vitrified tiles and redeposited smithing hearth bottoms. These suggested the potential presence of localised tile production and secondary smithing activities.<sup>21</sup> The animal bone assemblage from these features offers further support for an increase in industrial activities at this time. The majority of animal bones recovered from the site were from this phase of activity, particularly cattle, with an abundance of horn cores. Indications of saw marks and damage to the latter examples suggested these to be waste from a nearby horn-working establishment.<sup>22</sup>

A comparable sequence of pitting and levelling/dumping was encountered across the site dating to the 13th to 14th centuries (phase 3c). The quantities of building material recovered from these features had decreased by comparison to the 12th to 13th-century features and might infer a slight decline in the levels of production and construction within the immediate vicinity. Although the

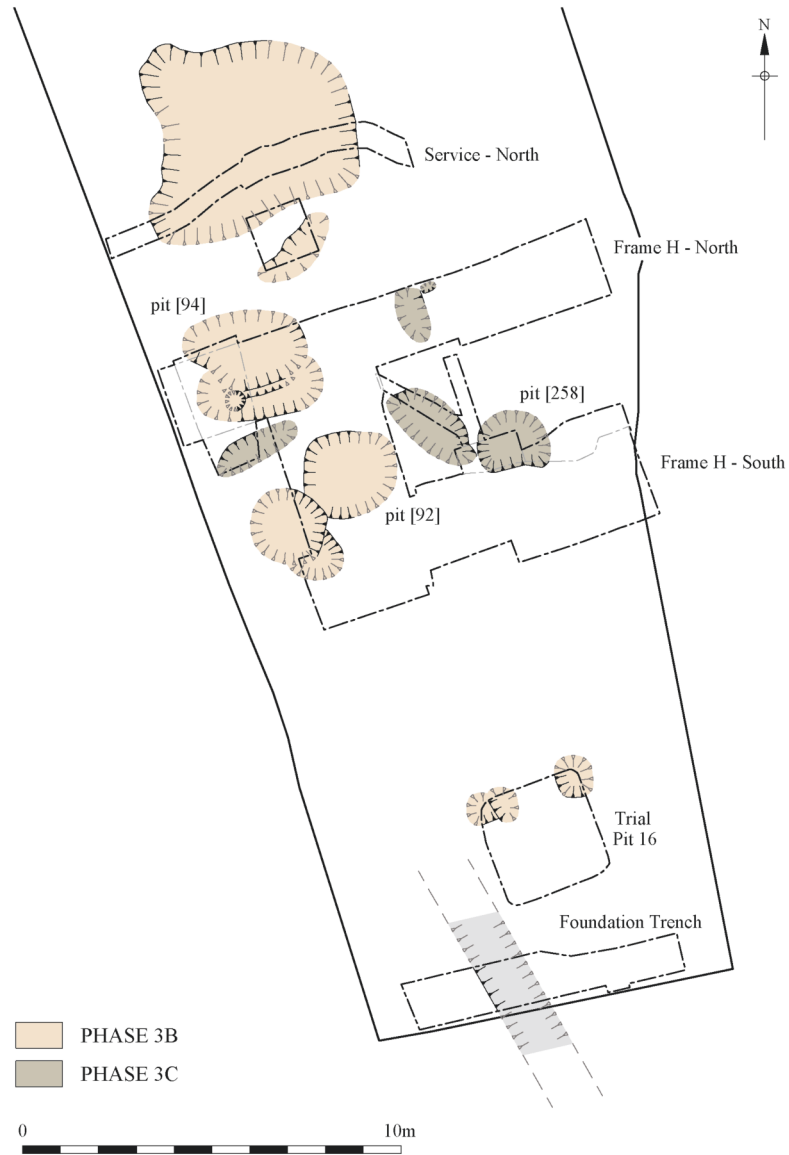


Fig. 6: 12th–14th century features (Phase 3b/Phase 3c)



Fig. 7: clay-lined pit [94], looking north-east

quantities of animal bone recovered were not a large enough dataset to be able to make broad hypotheses, there did seem to be a significantly larger proportion of upper limb portions of cattle bone within features of this phase. This might suggest a change in the diet at this time, with the use of the best cuts of beef implying a degree of affluence.<sup>23</sup> One of the more interesting pottery assemblages was recovered from pit [258] which was dated to 1270–1350. The main form represented in this feature are jugs in a wide range of contemporary fabrics. They are mostly in Kingston-type Surrey whiteware (1240–1400) as four sherds, and there are three sherds of London type, one sherd having white slip decoration. Better quality jugs occur as



Fig. 8: photo of late medieval/early post-medieval moulded stone

the Surrey redware from Earlswood and the thumbled base of a baluster jug in Essex Mill Green ware (1270–1350), which dated the context, besides an imported sherd of French Saintonge ware (1250–1650). Contemporary jar or cooking pot sherds are in greywares in

a miscellaneous fabric and Limpsfield ware.<sup>24</sup>

Material dating to the medieval period was also recovered within later contexts. This redeposited material included a carved Reigate stone fragment depicting a foliate design

beneath horizontal bars. Traces of red and white paint were also preserved, and the moulding was considered to have originated from a high-status secular building of probable late medieval/early post-medieval date (Fig. 8).

The second major phase of activity recognised on this site comprised late medieval/early post-medieval construction roughly dating between the mid-15th up to the early 18th century (phase 4) (Fig. 9). The earliest traces of construction were encountered in the north-east of the site (adjacent to the Fleet Street frontage) and comprised the corner of a Tudor basement. The internal faces of this room had been rendered at least twice, indicating some longevity of use, and traces of glauconite were found adhering to the brickwork. This is not only a highly unusual inclusion, but offers further support for an earlier post-medieval date.

Additional early post-medieval development was evident to the south-west of the site. Numerous red brick walls and floors were encountered, dating from the mid-15th to 18th centuries. It is unclear whether these



Fig. 9: early post-medieval features (Phase 4) on Ogilby & Morgan Map

represent structures pre-dating the Great Fire, or buildings illustrated cartographically from the late 17th century onwards. It was also this area of the site to which demolition material was restricted, and is likely to correspond with the late-18th-century redevelopment of the site prior to the construction of a small terrace along Mitre Court.

A further feature of note was a vaulted brick chamber, dated to the c. late 17th/early 18th century (Fig. 10). This enclosed chamber had an internal area of c. 2.30m by 3.40m along a north-south alignment. The interior faces of the brickwork had been stained black during its use, and the structure was therefore interpreted as a barrel-vaulted cellar associated with a former property along Mitre Court.

The final phase of activity identified archaeologically was dated between the early 19th and mid-20th centuries and consisted of early-19th-century demolition/levelling and construction, and early to mid-20th century remodelling of the buildings.

#### The site in context

No evidence of a prehistoric presence or occupation was recovered during the course of the excavations, and despite the proximity of the site to a Roman road, no traces of Roman roadside ditches, land divisions or occupational

debris that might be expected adjacent to an arterial road were recovered. It is likely that such traces, if they had indeed existed, had been truncated during the numerous phases of redevelopment post-dating the Roman period.

The site did yield traces of possible Saxon industrial processes in the form of residual material, and the revetted pit, or cellar, might have had Saxo-Norman origins. However, the first definitive indications of occupation at the site correlated with the early medieval period, peaking during the 12th to 13th centuries. This peak in industrial processes (horn-working) and construction (tile production) therefore coincided with the date of the documented acquisition of land between Fleet Street and the Thames in 1161 by the Knights Templar. The tile production identified from the material culture would therefore correspond with this redevelopment of the area, and more specifically with the construction of the New Temple and subsidiary buildings as part of the New Temple complex. It is possible that tile wasters derived from the kiln at 4 King's Bench Walk (KBK92), c. 90m to the south-east of the site, which was last fired c. 1210–80.<sup>25</sup>

The horn-working debris recovered during the excavations was also in keeping with results from the wider

area. The horn-cores from the site were considered to be waste items from a nearby horn-working establishment, or representative of waste derived from a tanning site intended for a horn-worker. One of the cores had a sawn-off tip, and exemplified a particular method used by horn-workers to accelerate the rotting of any remaining connective tissues.<sup>26</sup> It is known that tanners and horn-workers occupied the area just west of the city walls during the later medieval period.<sup>27</sup> The results from the subject site would therefore fit this pattern. Other comparable examples of such activities were identified during excavations to the east of the site at Carroone House (FAS02). It is noteworthy that a similar range of horn-core sizes were retrieved from the latter excavation and those from the study site. These demonstrate a preponderance of short and medium-horned cores and therefore illustrate the 'types' of cattle entering the city at this time.<sup>28</sup>

By the 13th to 14th centuries, evidence of construction and industry lessened significantly from that evident during the 12th to 13th century. The higher proportion of upper limb portions of cattle bones retrieved from contexts attributed to this phase could imply the consumption of better cuts of meat at this time. Again, this corresponds well with the known history of the area and correlates with the inhabitation of the area by law students after they had leased the land from the Knights Hospitallers. Furthermore, the Reigate Stone moulding recovered from a later feature is likely to have derived from a high-status secular building, such as may have been constructed under the direction of the lawyers.

The next key phase of activity identified related to the late medieval and early post-medieval development of the area, both pre- and post-dating the Great Fire. Traces of the corner of a former basement were encountered in the north-east of the site and offered the most support for a pre-Great Fire property. The limits of the Great Fire were documented as reaching Hare Court to the west. The Mitre tavern was formerly located on the premises of 39 Fleet Street, on the site of Hoare's Bank.<sup>29</sup> It was this 'Mitre' that



Fig. 10: photo of vaulted chamber, looking north-east

Dr. Johnson was supposed to frequent, and was described as having 'great antiquity'; it was also frequented by Shakespeare.<sup>30</sup> It was recorded that this tavern was 'not actually destroyed' by the Great Fire, but was 'very much demolished and decayed in severall parts', the balcony is supposed to have caught fire but 'was pulled down'. The uncharred remains encountered to the north-east of the site were therefore considered to be part of a basement, and therefore not entirely destroyed by the fire.

The original Mitre Tavern is known to have been located within the boundaries of the site, and the masonry identified to the north-east of the site could potentially represent parts of this property. The vaulted brick structure may also have been a later modification belonging to the tavern, as underground storage, or below one of its neighbouring properties.

The final phase of activity identified

archaeologically related to the 19th- and 20th-century redevelopment of the site which involved the final destruction of the Mitre Tavern to make way for the redevelopment of Hoare's bank during the early 19th century. The wider area, however, saw Fleet Street becoming increasingly associated with journalism, with 40–43 Fleet Street housing the offices of the 'Manchester Guardian' from the early 20th century until the newspaper's relocation in September 1961. In its heyday Fleet Street may not have been so far removed from the anarchic streets of 'Alsatia'. A gossip columnist described it as a 'seething mass of printers, advertisers and journalists, drinking and punching each other every night, all night. People literally never went home...'.<sup>31</sup>

#### Acknowledgements

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## Letter

### Würzburg jetton

Thank you for the splendid Winter 2015 issue, with the illustration (p. 61) of a Nuremberg [Nürnberg] Würzburg jetton, which was unfamiliar. Sadly, the obverse ('front') was published upside-down, but correctly positioned; it can

indeed be seen to bear the arms of the bishopric of Würzburg, with five vertical rays, in base three stars, *cf.* Michael Mitchiner, *Jetons, Medalets and Tokens, Vol. 1: the Medieval period and Nuremberg* (London, 1988), 338, no. 1001, a reference to which

might have been worth including.

Robert H. Thompson

*The authors acknowledge their mistake, and apologise to readers (Editor)*