

The eastern boundary of Lundenwic? A watching brief at the London School of Economics, Sheffield Street, WC2

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Introduction

An archaeological watching brief was carried out by Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) in association with Gifford on the development of a new student centre building for the London School of Economics, Sheffield Street, London WC2 (NGR 530715 181215; Fig. 1), between June and October 2011.¹ The site was known to lie on or near the conjectured eastern boundary of the Middle Saxon town of Lundenwic.²

Previous development had truncated brickearth and terrace gravel deposits to a maximum surviving height of between 16.75m OD (north) and 16.80m OD (south). Only the lower parts of two deeply-cut features (a natural watercourse and a ditch) survived in the northern part of the site.

Natural watercourse

The earliest feature was a north-west to south-east aligned watercourse (palaeochannel) represented by fluvial sands which extended below the base of excavation at c. 14.81 m OD. To provide a reliable chronology, optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) dating of two samples from basal sand fills was undertaken.⁴ Both samples provided pre-Holocene dates, and place these deposits within Marine Oxygen Isotope Stage 6 (MIS 6, c. 190,000–130,000 BP) during a glacial period just after the 'Averley' Interglacial.⁵ These sand deposits are therefore likely to be a reworking of the Lynch Hill terrace.

Ditch

Cut into the fills of the watercourse was the base of a large ditch, on a similar north-west to south-east alignment. The feature had been truncated to the north and south by modern foundations and

survived as two distinct segments (Fig. 2). While its original dimensions are uncertain due to horizontal truncation by the modern basement, the excavated ditch was c. 3.1m wide and c. 0.9m deep, with a shallow U-shaped profile and a base falling from 16.00m OD (north) to 15.90m OD (south).

The only fill was a homogenous mid-grey silty clay with occasional gravel, animal bone and charcoal flecks. The only finds recovered were a

single piece of residual Roman pottery and half a fired clay loom weight of typical Middle Saxon annular form. Monolith samples were taken through representative deposit sequences and bulk samples were taken adjacent to the monoliths. The lithology of the ditch fill indicates a homogenous erosional fill rather than waterflow-based silting. A radiocarbon sample of charred terrestrial plant material from the lowest organic sediment produced a date



Fig. 1: site location, also showing the conjectured extent of Lundenwic,³ with sites and features referred to in the text

which suggests that organic material began to accumulate in the ditch in the Middle to Late Saxon period or later.⁷

Pollen analysis⁸ indicates an open environment dominated by grassland and arable or pastoral land. The environment of the ditch itself appears to be damp with grasses and some wetland vegetation (sedges and lesser reed-mace) but with no standing water. There is some potential for beech trees growing locally but no other woodland vegetation. Small mammal and amphibian bones found in the samples and the occasional artefact probably indicate some human waste being dumped into the ditch, but this input does not appear to be substantial. Dumping of waste or faeces may also account for some of the cereal pollen recorded. Ostracods were absent, possibly a further indicator of pollution due to human activity, suggesting that dumping of waste and/or farming had resulted in a very reducing environment, either uninhabitable by calcareous ostracods or causing their removal by subsequent decalcification.⁹

Discussion

The unexpectedly early OSL dates for the natural watercourse do not preclude the existence of a Holocene channel in this location that was subsequently exploited or followed by the ditch. It remains possible that the impacts of both the ditch and modern basement construction had removed any more recent natural channel deposits.

Findings and scientific dating agree that the ditch is of Middle Saxon or later date. Such a large ditch seems unlikely to have been a simple field boundary. Given its size, location and potential date, two other possibilities should be considered.

A major ditch found on the Royal Opera House¹⁰ site was aligned east-west and is interpreted as a 9th-century AD defence. It had a pronounced V-shaped profile and the sides may have been set with sharpened stakes. The full extent of these defensive works is unknown; possible continuations of the ditch alignment have been noted to the west of the Opera House,¹¹ but there have been no good observations to the east.¹² If the Opera House ditch is projected eastwards, it would intersect the line of the Sheffield Street ditch

(Figs 1 and 2). However, not only are the two ditches very differently aligned, they are completely different in form and profile, with the Sheffield Street ditch having no defensive characteristics. On balance it seems unlikely that they are related.

Alternatively, it is possible that the Sheffield Street ditch may have demarcated an eastern boundary of the Lundenwic settlement. It appears to be a continuation of an 8th- to 9th-century ditch excavated at Kingsway Hall, 66–68 Great Queen Street, some 200m to the north-west.¹³ That ditch was on a similar alignment, up to 3.5m wide and 1.5m deep, and was recognised as marking the boundary between an 'urban fringe' area to the south-west and an area with no apparent activity to the north-east (Fig. 1). It should be noted that defining the eastern edge of the settlement remains a work in progress; the 'edge' just to the east of Kingsway is a construct and the outcome of the distribution of sites that have become available for excavation in recent decades. It remains the case, however, that there are no known Middle Saxon settlement sites east of these ditches, with the exception of a possible eastward extension of the trading port along Fleet Street.¹⁴

At Kingsway Hall, successive recuts of the Saxon ditch in the medieval and post-medieval periods were recognised as evidence of a persistent boundary formed by an 'evolving and managed...watercourse'.¹⁵ The absence of such evidence in the archaeological sequence at Sheffield Street is probably due to truncation of all medieval and post-medieval features. Documentary and cartographic research indicates that a stream or ditch of medieval or earlier date did indeed cross the site, and influenced local topography until the 17th century, when the present street pattern was developed.¹⁶

In conclusion, it seems likely that the Sheffield Street ditch was an eastern boundary of Lundenwic, though it should be recognised that the extent of the settled area and the location of its boundaries may have changed over time, along with the fortunes of the town. Further work along the eastern fringes of the settlement – particularly more extensive excavation of more intact sequences and better dating of

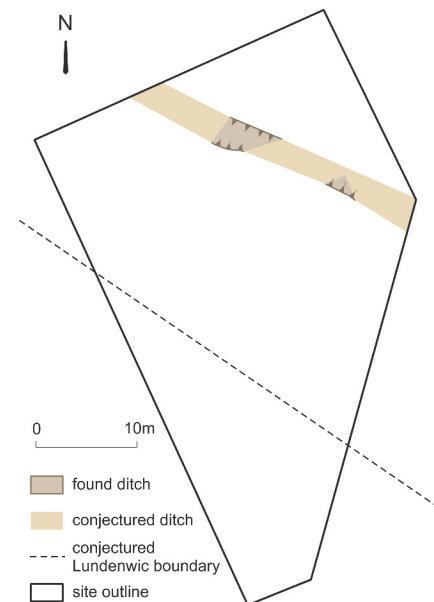


Fig. 2: plan showing the ditch as excavated, also showing the conjectured eastern boundary of Lundenwic⁶

any further exposures of this ditch – will be needed to resolve the remaining uncertainties.

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