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Assessment of the ceramic building material from the watching brief stage, Crossrail, Tottenham Court Road (XR10)

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Introduction

A total of 84 pieces of ceramic building material (CBM) weighing 11.164 kg. were recovered from the Watching Brief stage of the excavation. This brings the overall site CBM total to 557 pieces weighing 112.254 kg. The material is very similar in character and date-range to the 473 pieces from the main excavation (see elsewhere). It is nearly all post-medieval in date, with the 17th and 18th centuries particularly well represented (as with pottery and clay tobacco pipes from the site). The only definite 19th-century item is a chimney pot. A few worn residual pieces of medieval roof tile and a single piece of Roman tile were also noted. The material was recorded following standard OA procedure and using templates established for other CBM assessments in southern England.

Methodology

Unlike the main assemblage, the WB produced no significant quantity of complete bricks (a single example), and no bricks deliberately sampled from structures, so no separate catalogue of complete bricks has been compiled. The WB has therefore been treated as 'Mixed CBM'. This was treated in the same way as the mixed CBM from the main excavation and catalogued on an Excel spreadsheet at an 'intermediate' level of detail. By this method, broad predictable functional categories were recorded by sherd count per context (ie. plain roof tile, brick fragments, floor tile and 'other' types of CBM). A whole weight was recorded for each context but not generally for each type. In this instance, however, brick has a separate record for each context it occurs in, as brick tends to be the heaviest element in CBM assemblages. This approach gives a reasonably detailed snapshot of the composition of the assemblage. Measurable dimensions were recorded (in the comments field) for many of the more complete or unusual pieces and an approximate spot-date assigned to the latest material in each context. Spot-dates assigned are based on the character of the material itself and are of necessity quite broad due to the highly conservative nature and regional variation of ceramic building material. CBM dates should therefore be used with caution and regarded as of secondary importance to dates based on pottery or clay pipes. Although the most frequent spot-date in the catalogue is '17th-19th century' (largely based on post-medieval peg tile, which is difficult to date with more accuracy), some of these contexts also contain 17th-18th century brick and the latter date might be more accurate in view of the scarcity of 19th-century material.

Character and condition of the assemblage

The assemblage is generally in a fragmentary but fairly fresh condition depending on the type of CBM in question. The predominant post-medieval roof tile assemblage is generally fairly fresh with some large fairly fragments surviving (including one complete width) but no complete examples. Bricks, being softer (as here), exhibit more wear. The condition of other types is variable. As with the assemblage from the main excavation, flat roof tile (peg tile) fragments are the predominant category present; others being minor in comparison. The individual types or categories are briefly described below (see spreadsheet for more details).

Flat roof tile: 63 pieces

Also known as peg tile. These are of typical rectangular shape and fairly crude manufacture with a pair of circular nail holes at one end. None preserves its complete dimensions but one complete lower end has a measurable width of 138 mm (5800). The latter is over-fired and may be a second or possibly a kiln waster. They mostly have a hard, smooth, orange-red, slightly sandy fabric. They are not closely datable, although (in view of pottery dates etc) most probably date to the 17th and 18th centuries. Four smallish and worn pieces are in a sandier brown fabric including one with splashes of glaze; these are probably medieval, but residual - mostly from Context (5749), which also produced the Roman tile below.

Brick: 12 pieces (5.486 kg.)

These comprise one complete (but heavily chipped/worn) brick, a few complete brick ends and smaller rubble-like pieces. The complete brick measures 225 mm. long x 105 mm. wide x 60 mm. thick (5457). The smaller pieces have a similar thickness (58-65mm) and similar widths (where preserved). They are all of very similar appearance although some are slightly thicker or 'neater' than others and possibly slightly later (or just better made?). Like the bricks from main excavation they most probably date to the 17th or early 18th century and are possibly from the same brick manufactory or the same general area. Most are in a fairly soft red or purplish-red sandy fabric containing random flint grits and pebbles which can be very coarse. They are unfrogged, handmade and generally fairly crude in appearance which - along with their relative thinness - suggests an early post-medieval date.

Floor or 'quarry' tiles: 3 pieces

The are all fragmentary and fairly worn from lifetime usage. None preserves complete measurable dimensions apart from thickness - although some fairly large corner pieces survive. They are typically quite thick (26-31 mm.), have bevelled edges, and occur in a fine sandy orange-red fabric. None of the pieces here shows evidence of glaze. An English (rather than Flemish) source seems likely, and a 17th-18th century date.

The remaining minor types of CBM have been classified under the 'other' or miscellaneous CBM category:

Pantile: 2 pieces

Small pieces of curved tile in a hard red post-medieval fabric. Probably 18th-19th century.

Tin-glazed wall tile: 1 piece (8 g.)

A single small piece with a 'powder' purple border enclosing a central ?hexagonal (or ?octagonal) area with traces of blue-painted decoration within (5563). This style characteristic of c 1730-1770. Probably English.

Ridge tile: 1 piece

A single edge fragment from a curved tile in the same red post-medieval fabric as the peg tiles above (5742).

Chimney pot: 1 piece (126 g.)

A single fairly large fragment from the rim of a wheel-thrown 19th-century chimney pot in a fine red fabric (5627). It has a band of complex rouletted decoration on the shoulder, and is sooted on the inside.

Roman CBM: 1 piece (74 g.)

A single residual and very worn piece of curved roofing tile (imbrex), in a light reddish-brown fabric, was identified from Context (5749). Thirty other pieces of Roman CBM were recovered from the main excavation.