

CORALIE ACHESON (MOLA): MAPPING THE HISTORY OF BLOOMSBURY

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Probably the very first stage in most commercial archaeological investigations in the UK is in pre-planning when developers request an archaeological assessment (often known as a desk-based assessment/DBA) to tell them what archaeology there might be on their site and what they might need to do about it. This is my job and it involves a lot of maps.



I'm sure there's a desk under there somewhere!!

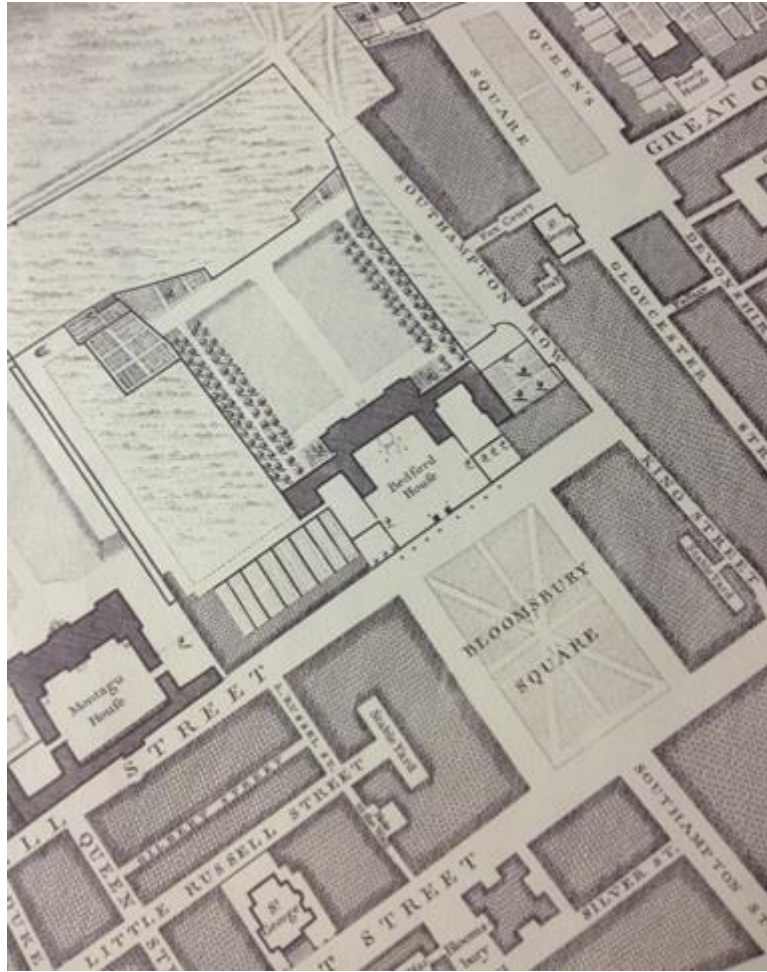
Today I was researching a site in Bloomsbury, looking for clues as to what archaeological remains might be on the site, and what archaeological remains might have been removed (because as interesting as 18th century quarry pits are they don't leave much earlier stuff in place). The area I'm looking at has little evidence for prehistoric activity and was some distance from the Roman and Saxon settlements. During the medieval period it was part of the manor of 'Blemundsbury' (sound familiar?) named after the owner in the 13th century, William Blemund. The site is a little way from the medieval village of Lomsbury though so was probably farmland.

We're lucky in London to have maps going back to the 16th century easily accessible. The first one of these I usually look at is the Agas map of 1560. It has wonderful little details of people as well as buildings. Bloomsbury was pretty rural at this time.



The Agas map. I like to think these dudes are having fun pretending to be birds (as aeroplanes hadn't been invented!)

During the Civil War defences were being built to defend towns, cities and other strategic points all over the county. London's are pretty hard to pin down but on Rocque's map of 1746 you can see the outline of one of the batteries which ran along the northern part of the defences in the gardens of Bedford House, just south of where Russell Square is today! It's a little bit from my site though so not going to affect my history.



Rocque's map of 1746

Moving into the 19th century we had a bit of a panic as I found a Baptist chapel lurking ominously near my site. This caused a flurry of overlaying and georeferencing to find out the exact relationship between my site and this chapel. Turns out it was outside the site so no need to fuss. Nonconformist chapels of the late 18th and early 19th century have a tendency to have burials under the floorboards and few, if any, records.

Later 19th century development of the site looks relatively straight forward so I'm going to write up my report to say there is a high potential for post-medieval structural remains and associated features (i.e. foundations and wells!) but not much happening prior to that date except perhaps a bit of quarrying.

So, time for another cuppa and then I'll get on to assessing what this means when put into the context of what of the proposed development. This will involve looking in detail at the current buildings and how much archaeology their construction is likely to have involved and what might be left now.