

CLAYPITS AND SOME STREETS OF THE CITY OF LONDON.

BY

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THE study of the claypits of London, especially those within or near to the City area, may be interesting and instructive. The claypits of London appear to have been worked in a systematic, if not scientific manner. The straight cuts, some at right angles, some at about 60 degrees, suggest that the material excavated was sold at a definite price, or that the builders using the material were exact in what they did. Our earliest ancestors built wattle or clay houses, and some of the Roman builders used to make their bottom foundations of stones puddled with clay, so that from early times the clay of London was a most important building material.

Within the memory of many there were claypits and brickfields all around London, and a number of comparatively modern houses in our near suburbs were built with bricks made from clay obtained and burnt on the sites. Such bricks were usually made with cinders in the centre, and on this account the contents of the dustbins of a district were sold by contract to brickmakers or special men. I have heard amusing stories of men called "running dustmen" who used to get over back-garden walls, empty the dustbins, make off with the rubbish to the brickfields, and there sell the cinders they thus obtained.

In the *Liber Albus* appears a regulation that "tieules" (which appear to include bricks) shall be of the ancient dimensions and that they shall be well burnt (quiteez) and well leaded (plomeez), whatever the word "leaded" may mean (Riley's edition, vol. i, p. 278).

Near the west bank of the famous Walbrook there was once a mound of clay suitable for bricks (what Sir Christopher Wren called "pot-earth,") and the fact seems to me commemorated in a lane, centuries ago, called, and still known as, Brick Hill Lane. The Lane is a hill no longer, for all the clay has long ago been used.

During 1922, the writer found two of these claypits. One was at Nos. 2-6, Bishopsgate Street, a few doors north of Leadenhall Street, where the clay had been excavated to a present-day depth of about 25 feet. Deducting the rise of the highway adjoining, the depth a thousand years ago was at least about 12 feet. If this stratum of brick earth was of the same thickness as that found in St. Helen's Place (on which St. Helen's Church is built), it would work out at about 12 feet thick. Into this hole at Nos. 2-6, Bishopsgate Street, were pitched later all sorts of rubbish. Among the rubbish was found a large number of fragments of amphorae, many with inscriptions. A basketful of these fragments was also collected and put aside for the writer, but, alas, some ignorant workman threw away its contents and the writer secured two only, instead of perhaps a score. Here also were found the skeletons of two horses, which an expert from the Natural History Museum, South Kensington, described as amongst the smallest that he had seen in England. When was this claypit filled up? I hope to make a suggestion on this point later on.

On the west side of Crosby Square similar claypits were found. Into these, at some ancient date, all sorts of Roman rubbish had been cast. Here, in company with Mr. Cater, I found the remains of what appeared to be a wattle wall, not *in situ*, but amongst the deposited rubbish. We also found numerous remains of red brick tessellated pavements, and the remains of mediæval buildings which apparently were once connected with Crosby Hall. On the St. Helen's Place site, the clay seemed quite untouched. This suggests that the site was early occupied by some sacred edifice and

so was protected from the clay-hunters, the tile-workers, and the brickmakers of old London. The claypits, being inside the so-called London Wall, must be of great antiquity, i.e., before the Wall was built.

Stow has various notes on the search for clay,—see his note on “Lolesworth now Spittle field,” as well as the following: “17 of Edward IV (A.D. 1478) Ralfe Ioseline, Maior, caused Moorfields to be searched for clay, and bricks thereof to be made and burnt; he likewise caused chalk to be brought out of Kent, and to be burnt into lime in the same Moorfields.” These claypits may have a bearing on the history and direction of some London streets. In later Roman times the eastern gates were, I imagine, three, namely, what we call (1) Bishopsgate, an exit from a street going from the City centre along what are now Threadneedle Street and Bishopsgate Street and leading into the country; (2) Aldgate, an exit from a later Roman street going along where now is Cornhill and on through Leadenhall Street; and (3) a gate near the Tower, the exit from a street running from London Bridge along East Cheap and Great Tower Street.

These streets had no cross streets communicating, except the one running round just inside the walls like the modern street that we know as London Wall. The streets which connect Bishopsgate with Gracechurch Street and Gracechurch Street with London Bridge are, I opine, of post-Roman date, and are all of made earth. I hazard the theory that these streets were made in Saxon times, and I should be glad to think that they were the work of Alfred the Great, being made after the Danes had been driven out of London, say, about 880 A.D. If so, it was about this time, I suggest, that the southern end of Bishopsgate Street was made and the claypits filled in to make a new road from Bishopsgate Street—Gracechurch Street—leading direct to London Bridge.

During the course of the operations of laying telephone-cables along Gracechurch Street, I found, running east and

west across the street, many Roman walls which appeared to have been almost entirely demolished in early times. There were in places two or three levels showing where men had cleared the tiles and stones of mortar. At some levels the broken tiles and Roman mortar were thick; at others, very thin, as though every fraction possible had been swept up at some time when the need of building material was very great.

I have an idea that Fenchurch Street is also a very late Street, and that its "Fennie" or "Moorish" character (which Stow says was the origin of the name, "Fenne-church street") was due to claypits becoming filled with water. Now Fenchurch Street runs along the top of a hill and is a most unlikely spot for a moor or marsh, but there is at a depth of about 18 feet some small quantity of clay still remaining. Most, if not all, however, of the overlying soil is "made earth."—in the laying of a new sewer in 1922-23 I noticed this particularly—and I suggest that the "Fennie" character that gave its name to Fenchurch Street was caused by people digging out the clay deposits found there and leaving pits which in after years became a source of trouble either to drain or to fill up with rubbish.

When people from Cheapside began to build houses amongst the ruins of considerable Roman buildings on the site of Lombard Street and made a way through to the Grassmarket and so to London Bridge, instead of going southward alongside the Walbrook and then eastward along the streets now answering to Cannon Street and Thames Street, Lombard Street became a busy thoroughfare. On the western side of the Marsh was built the little Church of "S. Gabriel Fenchurch, corruptly Fan church." People coming to the church from the east or going to it from the west found a pathway, which developed into a thoroughfare that joined up with Leadenhall Street and passed on to the Aldgate. When the large houses in Great Tower Street began to get through to the Fenny land, there ran lanes from

the south to the north, alongside many of the houses, lanes that to-day are remembered in the four lanes of Fenchurch. On the North side there are no streets of ancient times.

Lime Street is a comparatively modern cut-through, and Billiter Street is alluded to by Stow as "Belzetta lane, so called of the first Builder and owner thereof," showing that, from the North, no thoroughfare into Fenchurch Street worthy of the name existed.

I should be glad if this note induces some of my readers to study this subject of the claypits of the City, or leads them to send particulars of any claypits that come to their notice to me at 64 Mark Lane, E.C.3, or to the Editor of these *Transactions*.