

NOTES

This series of notes is used to provide a place to publish important individual objects or finds that would otherwise remain unpublished.—*Editor*.

A ROMAN SIGNAL TOWER AT SHADWELL, E.1.

AN INTERIM NOTE BY TONY JOHNSON

In December of 1973 the writer was invited by the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society to conduct an archaeological survey of derelict dockland to the east of St. Katherine Docks (Fig. 1). Finance for the project was provided by Riverside London Ltd., the Department of the Environment and the Greater London Council. Preliminary work was carried out using information from the Port of London Authority borehole records, 18th and 19th century surveys and a recent map of Roman and mediaeval findspots in Tower Hamlets prepared by Miss Pat Evans of the Southwark Archaeological Excavation Committee.

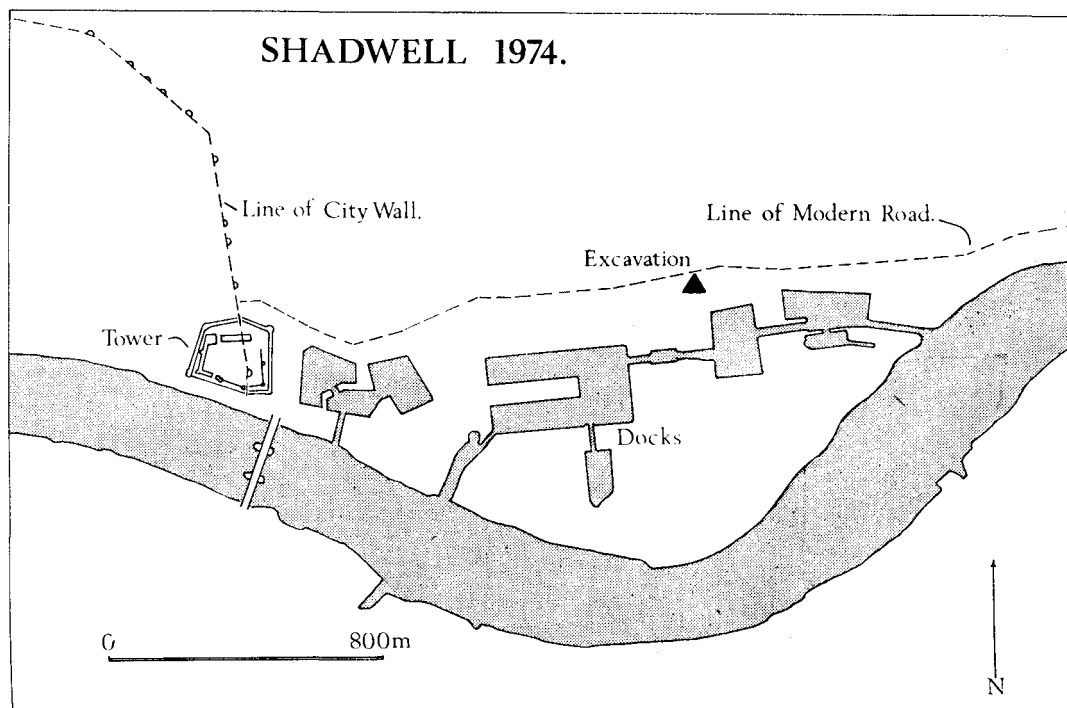


Fig. 1. Shadwell. Position of site and relationship to the Roman city.

An outline of archaeological potential was drawn up and submitted to the developers. A generous grant from Riverside London Ltd. enabled an exploratory excavation to be carried out within an area due for imminent re-development and assessed in the survey as likely to be of high archaeological potential.

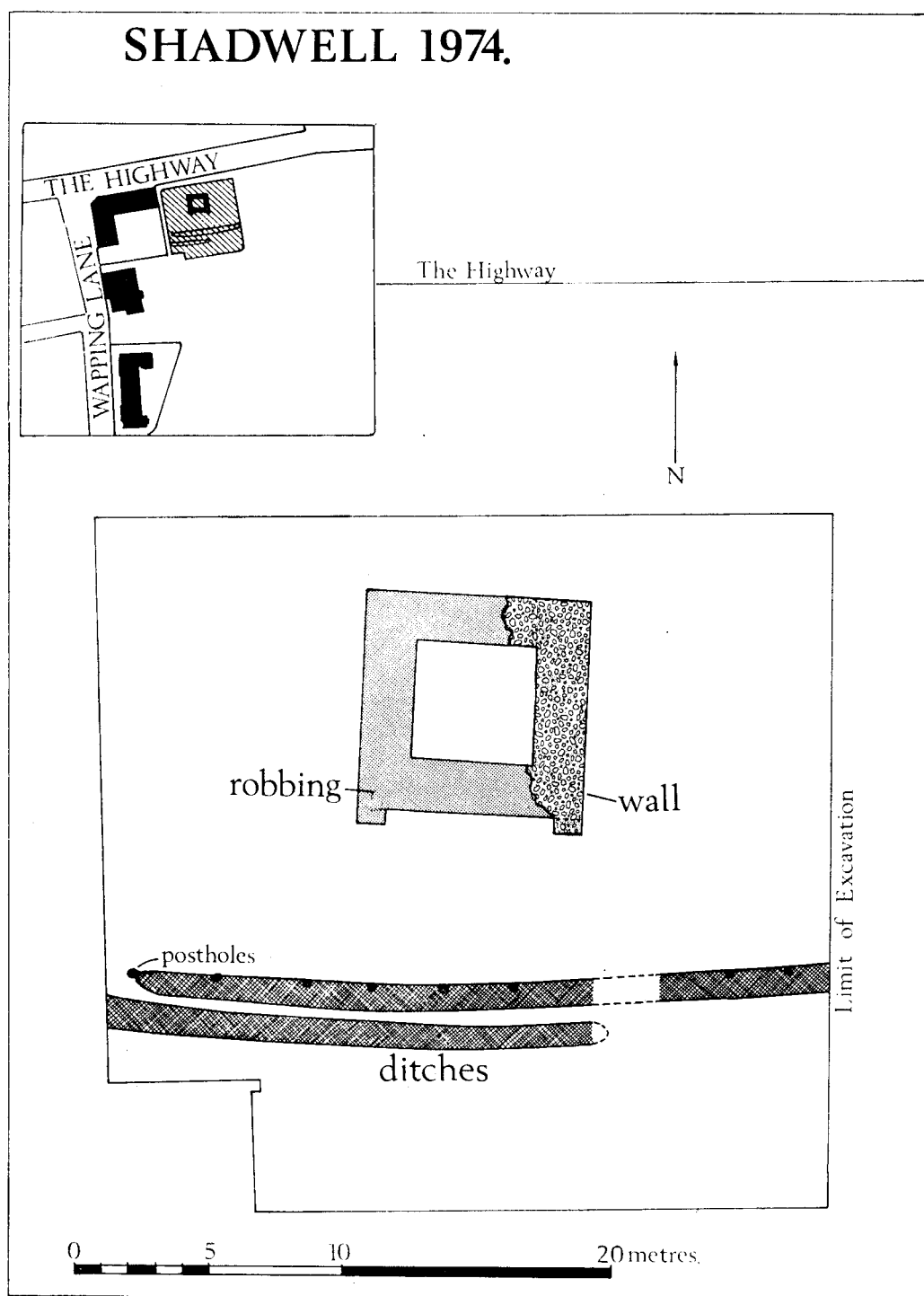


Fig. 2. Shadwell. Plan of main structure and ditches; and (inset) local position of site.

Work began in January 1974 and an area 5 x 20 m. was cleared of modern debris. At a depth of slightly more than 1 m. a surface was found which corresponded to the location of a yard known as Old Starch Yard on the 18th century maps. The yard area was marked by a single level of cobbles and brick together with numerous industrial tanks, pits and hearths. Excavation showed that these pits had been cut through various Roman deposits and into the underlying natural sand and gravel. In places post-medieval quarry-pits had disturbed large areas of the Roman material. No trace of medieval occupation was found; an homogeneous layer of soil, between 200–400 mm. in thickness, separated the post-medieval from the Roman deposits.

Further excavation revealed intrusive 17th century trenches following and robbing-out 2 m. wide Roman walls of a building 8 m. square. The east wall, protected by the line of an alley-way remained intact to the first level of bonding tiles, slightly above the contemporary Roman ground surface. The wall was of chalk and mortar construction with a knapped flint facing. Although the building had been constructed on a north–south slope no terrace had been cut. The foundations had been levelled by digging the foundation trenches deeper to the north. Two small buttresses had been constructed into the corners of the south wall (Fig. 2).

6 m. to the south of the building two parallel ditches were found. The excavation was extended to examine these, and other features in more detail. Neither of the ditches continued across the whole width of the excavation (Fig. 2) but they were found to overlap in front of the south wall. The inner ditch replaced a line of large upright posts.

Traces of clay floors, sill beam foundations and uprights, together with burnt wattle and daub walls, both within the area of excavation and in trial trenches cut to the east, showed that timber buildings had formed part of the layout probably contemporary with the stone building. Other features included an elaborate water system of clay-packed oak-plank construction and a water storage tank of similar build. Water-logged conditions in the tank had preserved organic material including leather and a large sample of seeds and pips. The earliest features produced coins of Carausius (A.D. 286–293). In all over two hundred coins were found. A distinctive bronze strap pendant (a terminal from a military belt [*cingulum*]) provided evidence for military occupation.

The ground plan, massive walls and ditches strongly suggest that the excavations have revealed the site of a signal station or watch tower, garrisoned at least on a temporary basis. and probably engaged, together with similar installations in controlling river traffic and relaying information, perhaps from the forts of the Saxon shore. The building would have been clearly visible against the skyline to observers on the eastern side of the city defences. Few signal stations are known from southern Britain although a group of three are associated with the East Anglian shore forts of Brancaster and Burgh Castle. Structures on the small scale of the Shadwell building, however, would easily be lost, especially underneath urban development such as modern-day Thameside.

(The final report is now in preparation and it is hoped that it will be published in 1976.)