

THE EXCAVATIONS OF A ROMAN PALACE SITE IN LONDON: ADDITIONAL DETAILS

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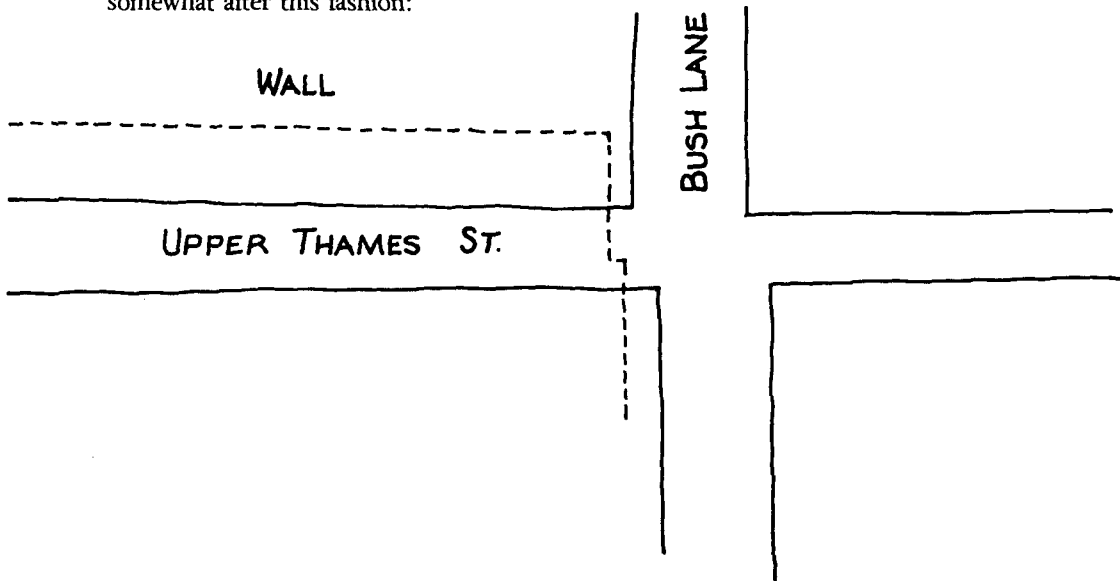
Since the report on the excavation of the Roman palace site was published in Volume 26 of these *Transactions* in 1975, additional detail about the structure of part of the palace has been found in two letters preserved in the Museum of London. They had been written to Charles Roach Smith by two London antiquaries in 1864, and supplement the information that was given in the description of discoveries on the site of Cannon Street Station,¹ thus making possible a revised interpretation of the finds in that area. The letters are as follows:

Letter from John Price to Charles Roach Smith, dated 1st June 1864.

“Dear Mr. Roach Smith,

. . . There are just now some discoveries in Upper Thames Street, which of course are quite new to me and I wish I had time to follow them up closely. In excavating for the new railway which is to cross the river by Dowgate — into Cannon Street they have come on a Roman wall. I imagine the same portion that I think is referred to in your works as having been cut into in U. Thames St. I was there on Monday and though but a hasty visit I wished you had been with me as there was so much that I should have liked to have asked you. I hope to get down there again tomorrow . . .

From what I could make out of the remains which are being quickly removed there seemed to be a great length of wall (Note A) fronting the Thames turning round sharply at Bush Lane downwards towards the river and going right across U. Thames Street somewhat after this fashion:



Just about here the incline is very steep and the wall shows itself at a short distance from the surface, the men say about 10 feet. They are taking away masses of Kentish Rag with the foundations of sandstone by cartloads all day long. In front of this wall and also extending across the street are a large quantity of wooden piles and transverse beams of extraordinary length and thickness — the lowest of these — for they are ranged one above another is 25 feet from the roadway (Note B). Quite a network of timber. I suppose this may be considered as the Thames embankment of the period! As yet the excavations are very awkward for tracing the course of this wall for they only dig here and there just where the supports for the arches are to come, and I could find no convenient spot to obtain any drawing or section, but more will be found when I hope to be more fortunate . . .

I remain yours very truly
John E. Price.”

Letter from F. Fairholt to Charles Roach Smith dated 24th October 1864.

“My dear Smith,

I have had a very long day in the City, and now write the result for your amusement.

I went first to Cannon St., they have cleared away all Bush Lane to the neighbourhood (opposite London Stone) for a new Railway terminus; a bridge crossing the Thames. It is midway between Cannon St. and Thames St. that the Roman work appears you wrote about (Note C). There is no doubt about its being Roman, and of great size and solidity. It consists of foundations and sections of walls running about 30ft in a line with the Thames (Note D). Where the sections appear, there is a regular course of Roman tiles at the angles of the walls. The foundations of what I should take to be an extensive floor, is laid upon the native soil, and is a concrete of stone flint & mortar with a few broken bricks (Note E). The mortar predominates and is so strong that it seems almost impossible to separate it. In fact to clear all away, it has been necessary to undermine it, and split it up with gunpowder.

I saw a portion thus acted on. Something like 12ft of rubble had been undermined, and stood firm like a bridge across the excavation; and though this was drilled and a large charge of powder used, it failed to do more than slightly crack the tenacious mass. Had it been modern work, a man with a pickaxe would have cleared all away in an hour.

I cannot help thinking that such walls and foundations must have belonged to some great public building, and this is a likely spot for such a place . . .

With kind regards,
yours very truly
F. W. Fairholt.”

It is worth pointing out that the first of these letters shows that much of the Roman palace structure still survives beneath Cannon Street Station and that selective excavation beneath the Station would even now clarify much of the plan of the Roman palace.

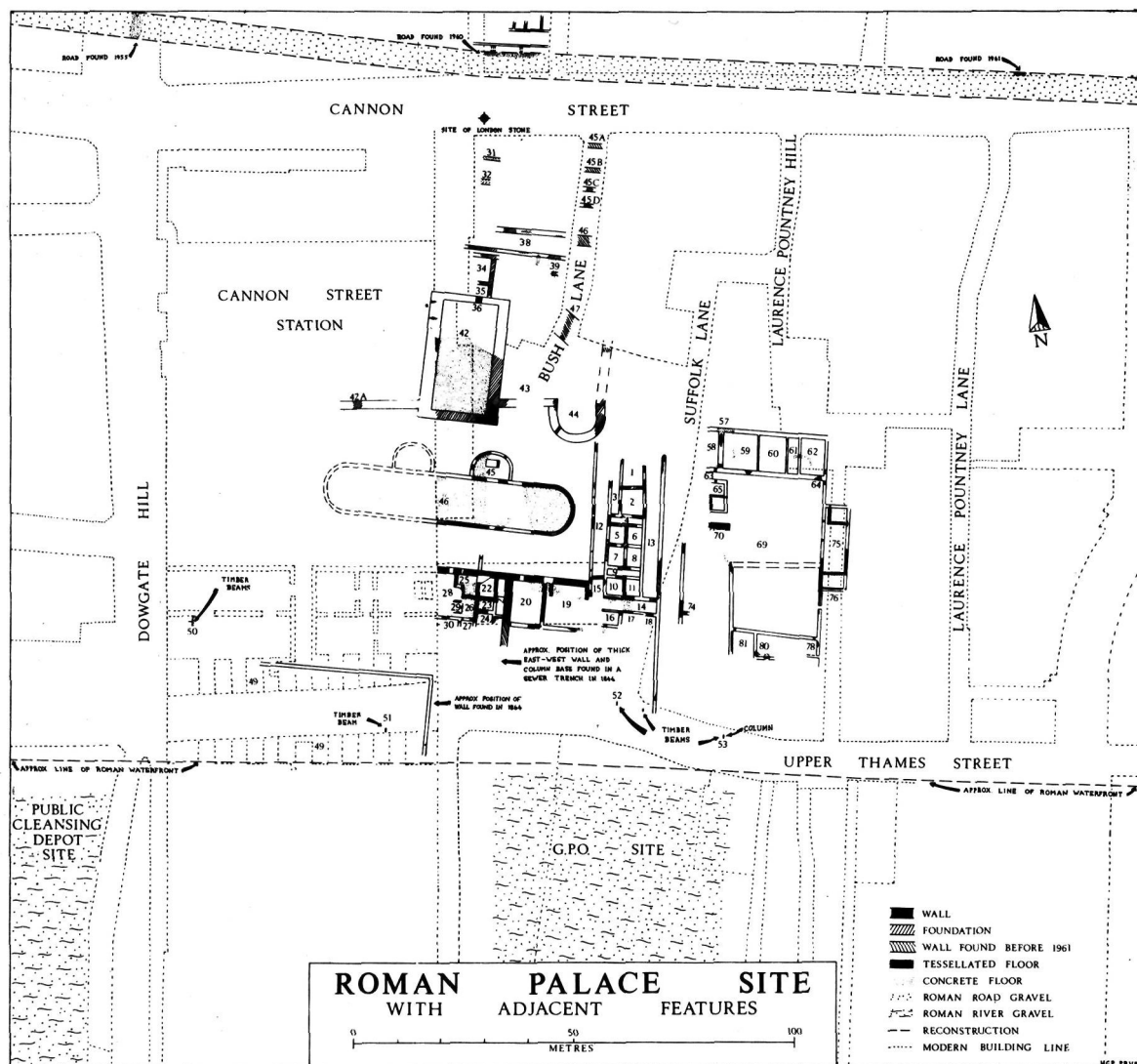


Fig. 2.

COMMENTARY ON THE LETTERS

Note A The position of this major Roman wall, both in relation to the south wing of the palace and to the waterfront, does suggest that it might have formed the frontage of two subsidiary wings along the waterfront. Of special interest, however, is the fact that the north-south wall found in 1864 crossing Thames Street lies on the prime north-south axis of the palace,² and that this wall apparently extends southwards almost to the Roman waterfront. If this positioning is

reasonably correct, then it seems likely that the two subsidiary wings will have been bounded by the north wall of Room 28 and the massive east wall of Room 21; while the walls found in 1864 may have formed the south and west sides of those wings. The enclosed area between, in the region of Feature 49, may have been a quayside open court. The area to the east of these wings, and south of Rooms 19 and 20, may therefore have formed another riverside court (Fig. 3).

Note B

The description of the Roman waterfront structure seems very similar to those found at Custom House,³ and at New Fresh Wharf and Seal House⁴ where the waterfront was built of squared baulks of timber ranged one above another, while behind was a network

of timber beams forming boxes which supported the surface of the quayside. It is presumably this inshore timber construction that is represented by the timber beams Features 51-53 (Fig. 2), in the Roman palace.⁵

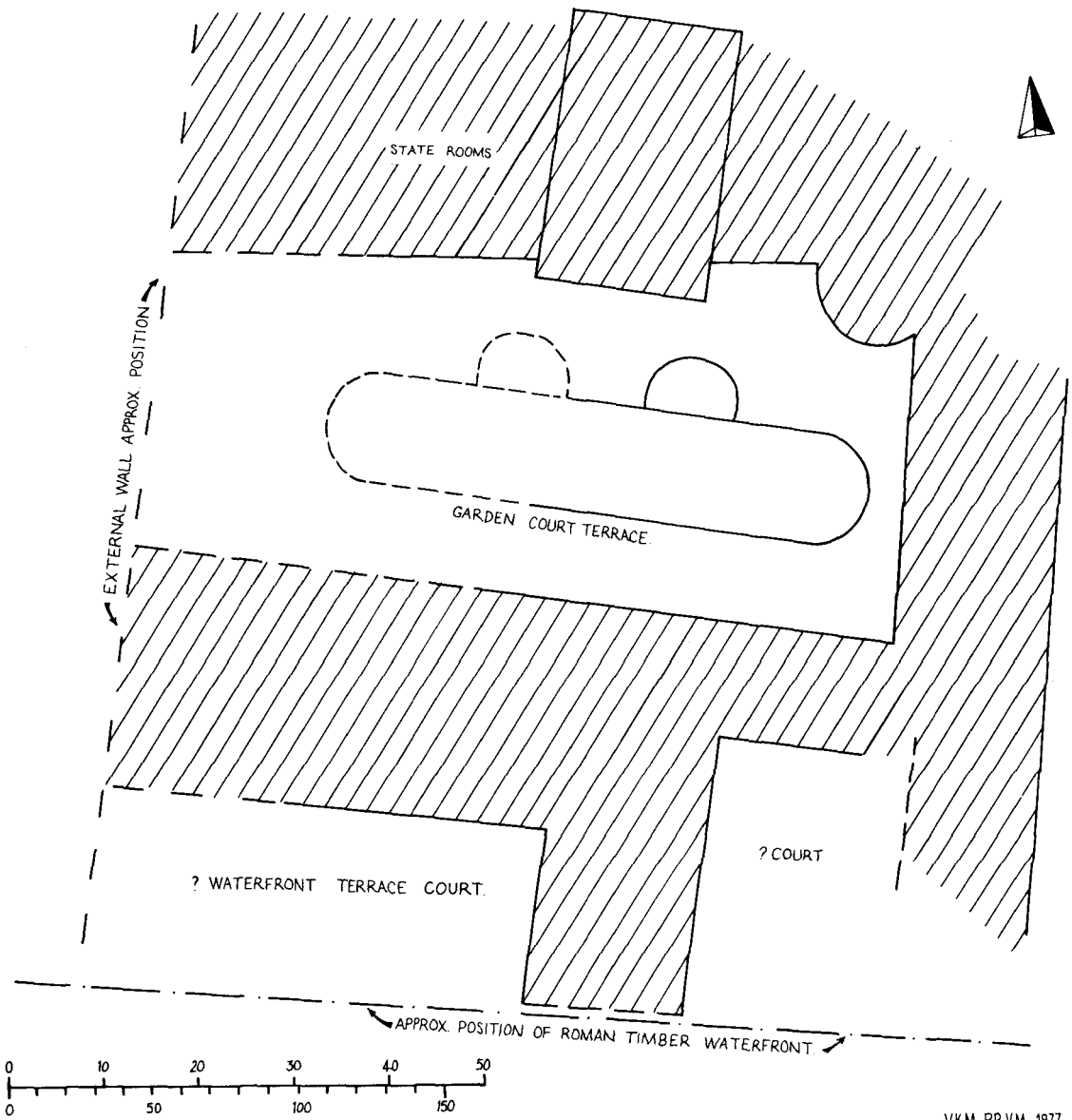


Fig. 3

Note C The statement that the Roman structures lie only in the southern half of the area between Cannon Street and Thames Street is important for this more precisely locates the many recorded and published structures which were found while the Station was being built.⁶ The structures include a massive north-south wall some 200ft (60.96m) long and 12ft (3.66m) in thickness which apparently bounded the west side of the palace. The large room measuring 50ft

(15.24m) by 40ft (12.19m) which was connected with two others now seems to have been part of the range of 'state rooms' on the west side of the great hall, Room 42 (Fig. 2).

Note D The walls mentioned here may have been a continuation of the 'state rooms' on the west side of Room 42 (Fig. 2).

Note E The foundation of an extensive floor is best interpreted as part of the western end of the great pool (Fig. 2, Feature 46).

REFERENCES

1. P. Marsden 'The excavation of a Roman palace site in London, 1961-1972' *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* 26 (1975) 51-54.
2. *Ibid.* Fig. 29.
3. T. Tatton-Brown 'Excavations at The Custom

House site, City of London, 1973' *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* 25 (1974) Fig. 8, 122-128.

4. J. Schofield forthcoming publication.
5. Marsden *op. cit.*, 53-54.
6. Marsden *ibid.* 51-54.