The Saxon origins of Queenhithe

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SUMMARY

The 1990–96 excavations at Queenhithe within the City of London revealed for the first time evidence of the late 9th century Saxon port. During the medeival period Queenhithe became one the principal landing points on the Thames foreshore.

INTRODUCTION

Queenhithe (see Fig 1, **8**) today is little more than a small inlet filled with foreshore gravel and silt surrounded by unprepossessing modern buildings. During the high medieval period, however, it developed into a major port for London accommodating mostly traffic from inland markets via the Thames and its tributaries, much of it bearing grain and timber. Prior to the excavations at an adjacent site, Bull Wharf (now redeveloped and named Thames Court), its origins were obscure, with historians relying on fragmentary documentary evidence for its Saxon foundation. This paper considers the light thrown on the foundation of Queenhithe dock, and by extension, the Saxon city, as a result of excavations on Bull Wharf.

The site at Bull Wharf was redeveloped between 1990 and 1996 with full archaeological coverage by the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) and its predecessor the Department of Urban Archaeology (DUA). From the outset it was believed that the traditional view of Queenhithe's origins under King Alfred could be tested. The received historical wisdom is that King Alfred reoccupied the Roman city site in AD 886 in response to the continuing Viking raids on *Lundenwic*, the middle Saxon settlement of London to the west (see Bowsher & Malcolm this vol), as a more defensible location (Swanton 1996, 72–7, 80–1). Charters show that primary occupation centred around the Queenhithe area (Dyson 1978) and archaeology suggests that Fish Street Hill, 600 metres to the east, was also a focal point. Queenhithe became the primary landing point in the re-established city. It was known at this time, and for several succeeding centuries, as Aethelred's Hithe after Alfred's son-in-law and adviser. The chronicler, Asser, a contemporary of King Alfred, wrote regarding the year AD 886 (Stevenson & Whitelock 1959):

> In this same year Alfred, King of the Saxons, restored the city of London splendidly after many towns had been burnt and so many people slaughtered and made it habitable again: he entrusted it to the care of Aethelred, ealdorman of the Mercians.

There is little evidence for occupation within the walls of the Roman city during the Saxon period prior to the late 9th century. Bede refers to the foundation of St Paul's Cathedral in AD 604, when St Augustine installed Mellitus as Bishop of London (Sherley-Price 1990, 108), and King Offa was reputed to have had a palace within the Roman Cripplegate fort area. There is no definitive archaeological evidence for either of these structures or any related material.

EXCAVATION AT BULL WHARF

Three major phases of excavation and several smaller evaluations and watching briefs were conducted at Bull Wharf over the seven-year period. The discoveries described in this paper derive from these investigations (Ayre *et al* 1996; Wroe-Brown 1998).

The earliest structure on the site was the late 2nd-century timber Roman quay, robbed to the base baulk in the late Roman period and

extremely well-preserved in the waterlogged conditions. It is not directly relevant to the foundation of Queenhithe except that its position suggests a bend in the shoreline. When compared with the slightly earlier Huggin Hill bath house waterfront to the west the quay appears to be further south than expected (Rowsome forthcoming), implying that the foreshore at Bull Wharf outcropped into the river to some degree. The quay was covered by a series of alluvial silts and gravel foreshores up to 1m thick, which were probably laid down over several centuries following its dismantling.

The highest intertidal foreshores of this sequence produced an intriguing surprise: two female burials. One was in a simple cut laid out in conventional fashion, extended, supine and orientated east-west aligned with the river edge. The other, less than 5m away was anything but conventional. She had died from a blow to the head which broke a piece out of her skull. She, too, was extended and supine, but was laid on a bed of reeds between two bark layers as a form of coffin, with moss over the face, pelvis and knees. The burial was staked out on the surface of the foreshore with posts above the head and between the knees, possibly as markers. Then she was probably covered in a mound of foreshore gravel. The bark was carbon-dated to between AD 670 and AD 880 (95% probability), therefore before Alfred's resettlement of the City. There are several possibilities regarding the circumstances of the deaths, for example Viking raid casualties, murderer and victim or high-ranking lady and servant, but it would seem that the pair were prominently buried on an outcropping foreshore of the City resulting in a highly visible landmark. This suggests some occupation was present locally at the time.

Further evidence of occupation and trade prior to AD 886 was less secure. It was known that a land grant to the Bishop of Winchester in AD 889 included a stone market building close to Queenhithe known as *Hwaetmundes Stan* which had been in existence for some time (Dyson 1978). This charter also mentions street commerce and the trading shore or *Ripa Emptoralis*. Several 9th-century finds with diverse European parallels were discovered on the foreshores at Bull Wharf but nothing diagnostically earlier than AD 886. The best candidates for a pre-Alfredian date were two Northumbrian *Styccas* found in the foreshore which were directly linked with the hoard excavated on the Royal Opera House site in *Lundenwic* (see Bowsher & Malcolm this vol).

Aethelred's Hithe and the beach market were certainly in place by AD 889 but the exact location was unknown. An assessment of the archaeological features one might expect to find on the intertidal foreshore from such an activity was more problematic. Prior to the excavation it was considered likely that nothing very substantial would be necessary to operate a market where goods were traded directly from the vessels beached on the foreshore. Possible features included a designated place to dock a boat, a walkway for secure passage, perhaps an artificially flattened area to serve as a barge bed, possibly temporary buildings. In the earliest Saxon structural phase, covering the late 9th century, a series of relatively insubstantial but well-preserved timber features were uncovered: two lines of trestles originally supporting gangplanks with space between them to pull boats up, to the east a possible barge bed supported by low timber structures and packed with foreshore gravels, and the remains of a turf and wattle hut. Dendrochronological dating was not possible on much of the timber due to lack of suitable rings but dates of AD 890 (with a possible bark edge) on the barge bed structure and a *terminus post quem* of AD 880 on the trestles were obtained.

The artefactual evidence was also indicative of trading activity. Three coins of King Alfred were recovered from the contemporary foreshore, minted in London with a London monogram on the reverse. These are the first of their kind found in the City itself. A variety of other finds from the period included mounts, dress accessories, leather, textile and bone objects, some from abroad, notably Scandinavian.

There are several plausible reasons why this particular site was chosen by Alfred and his advisers for the dock. Firstly, as mentioned above, there may have been a bend in the shoreline which could have offered some protection from the river currents and the tides. Secondly, it was relatively close to St Paul's Cathedral and local to the market area of *Hwaetmundes Stan*. Thirdly, there may have been a gap, possibly even a gate, in the barrier created by the 3rd-century Roman riverside wall which would have still been standing to the north of Aethelred's Hithe beneath modern Upper Thames Street. Finally, the position of the tidal head in the Thames estuary at that date is still

the subject of speculation and debate but it could have had a bearing on the site of the dock.

Whatever reason determined its position it was certainly a successful venture. The shore and activity thereon apparently changed little over the next century. Although there was scant structural evidence prior to the late 10th century, possibly due to robbing or tidal action, the continuing presence of 10th-century finds in the foreshore, particularly of metal artefacts, suggests a lively trade with the Continent. Objects of Scandinavian, Frankish and Carolingian as well as Anglo-Saxon manufacture were excavated on the foreshore. For example, one particularly fine artefact was a copper alloy comb connecting plate. Unique in London (and probably Britain) it has parallels in southern Scandinavia at Birka and Haithabu, where combs and mould fragments have been found. It dates from the early to mid 10th century.

From the late 10th century development of the foreshore became more rapid. Either the river shoreline had begun to recede or successful business and increased pressure on land space led to reclamation of the foreshore. A succession of low timber revetments were erected to provide a landing place for boats. They followed a basic constructional pattern; posts were driven into the foreshore supporting horizontal planks or baulks behind which the ground was levelled with dumps of earth, stone and wood. They created a river frontage with a northward return at the west end forming the side of the dock later to become Queenhithe. Most of the timber in the structures was reused from elsewhere providing a valuable insight into architecture and shipbuilding in the 10th and 11th centuries.

The first of these structures provided perhaps the most remarkable timber finds on the site. The revetment itself was only 0.4m high but was supported by posts driven deeply into the foreshore. Excavation on the adjacent site of Vintners' Place had produced a post from a 10th-century building reused in a revetment. Four more elements from the same building were found at Bull Wharf, reused as supporting posts in the dock. They had been part of a high status aisled building of three storeys with an ogival arched arcade on the ground floor level. The fragments of architecture were discovered to be made up of several timbers, some fairly fragile and still fixed together, which could not have been moved far without breaking. Somewhere in the immediate locality, therefore, was a late 10th-century high status edifice which probably served as a hall or church. Its unique state of preservation means that there are practically no known parallels for this building apart from stave churches in Scandinavia of a much later date, and the ground plans of postholes from examples such as Yeavering and Cheddar, the style of which remain unknown.

The second revetment represented an advance into the river of 1.5m with the dock edge 3m further west than the original structure. It produced reused fragments of a sailing vessel, including much of one side complete with the rubbing strake forming the top edge, and a dugout base. Tree-ring analysis showed that it was built in the Low Countries in the late 10th century and it has been identified as a Frisian Hulc, a type of vessel not recognised until now as capable of crossing the channel.

A new century brought a new type of technology to the London waterfront. Instead of the low revetments which characterised the 10th century, the early 11th century saw the introduction of large embankments of dumped timber supported by rows of stakes and posts. Much of the timber consisted of branches and twigs of firewood grade material, but again some reused structural timbers were present. There were two distinct phases of the embankments, both of which could be dated accurately by dendrochronology. The first was built during the reign of Cnut in 1021, possibly in response to a succession of serious floods such as that recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 1014 (Swanton 1996, 145):

> And in this year, on St Michael's eve [28th September], that great sea-flood came widely throughout this country, and ran further inland that it ever did before, and drowned many settlements and a countless number of human beings.

The second was a later repair and extension in 1045 during the reign of King Edward the Confessor. These embankments would have been difficult to traverse on foot, especially when covered in river silt, and may have acted not only as flood defences but also as a barrier to landing cargo from boats, forcing them into the harbour of Aethelred's Hithe.

Among the fragments of wood were timbers of a nautical origin including the first example found in England of an early medieval mast step and a mast prop or myke. Many of the timbers from the 1045 phase were charred indicating a fairly severe waterfront fire prior to its construc-

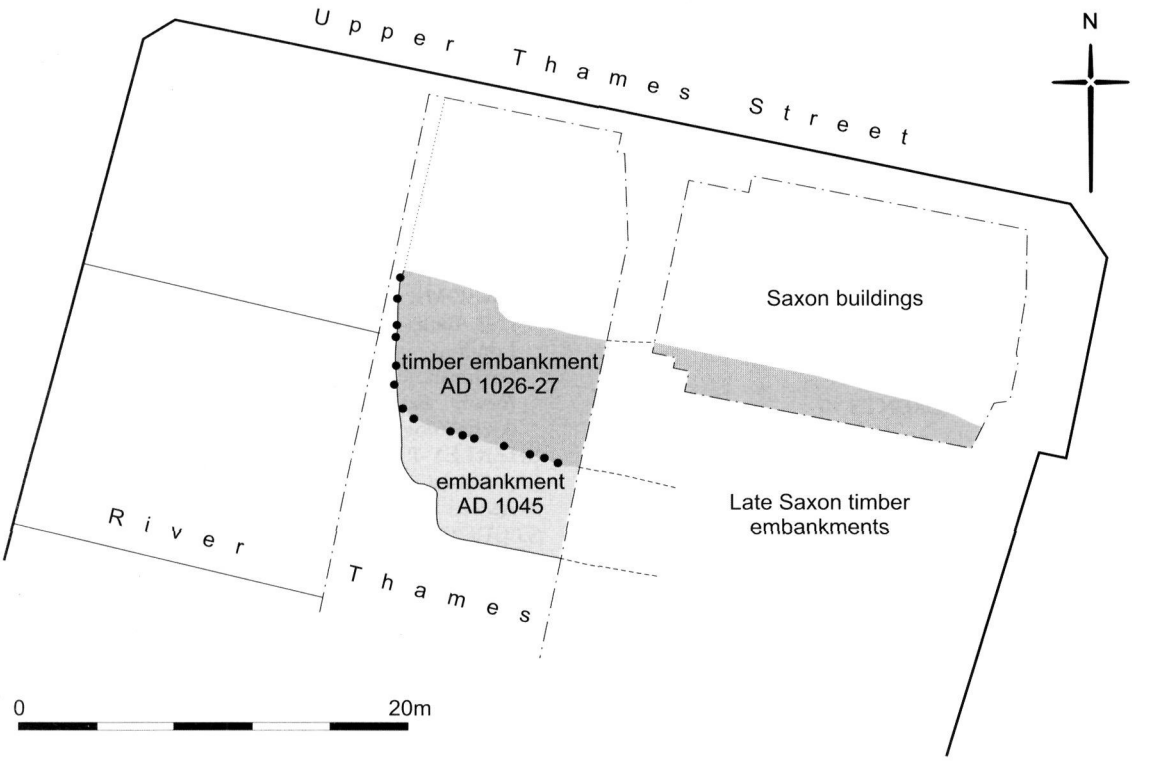

Fig 4. The sequence of late Saxon waterfront embankments at Queenhithe (MoLAS)

tion, presumably providing the impetus and material for the repair.

The western edge of these embankments firmly established a line, interpreted as the edge of the dock, 2m further west than the previous revetment. This north-south alignment remained in the same location for a century and a half, extending southwards with each land reclamation phase. Following this period Queenhithe contracted further to the west but the alignment remained as a property boundary until the present day, and it persists as a line of concrete piles, a remarkable example of continuity.

Excavation at the north end of the site landward of the revetments revealed a series of building phases which, due to their relatively ephemeral nature and constant rebuilding and extension, were difficult to unravel. Being situated on a waterfront no sunken features or cellars were possible. Various combinations of wattle, posts, planks, turf and stone were found, some earthfast, some with ground beams. One of the clearer examples possessed external angled wedges to support the walls and roof, similar to buildings found on the Royal Opera House site in *Lundenwic* but later than those in date. Analysis of the data established that there were three plots of roughly equal size across the site, which developed independently with diverse activities, divided by alleyways. Some rare examples of building timbers were recovered, including a triangular window in a gable end board dating from the late 9th century.

CONCLUSION

This paper describes the evolution of Queenhithe dock from its Alfredian origins as Aethelred's Hithe up to the Norman Conquest in a necessarily brief fashion. The excavations provided a great deal of data from this period which, for the sake of brevity, could not be discussed here. The development of the site in the later 11th to 12th centuries and beyond also yielded a wealth of material in its own right.

The site has been instrumental in furthering our knowledge about the Alfredian reoccupation

of the City. It has corroborated and expanded on much of the documentary evidence, showing that there was indeed a late 9th-century beach-market style dock on the site which developed and grew throughout the late Saxon period. It has established that trade links with other countries in northern Europe were strong. It has also provided an insight into the construction, operation and development of a major Saxon port as well as a range of other topics such as building techniques, industry, nautical archaeology, trade and Saxon artefacts.

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