

Number 1 Poultry and the development of medieval Cheapside

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SUMMARY

The 1994–96 excavations at Number 1 Poultry provided an opportunity to examine a large area at the eastern end of Cheapside, the City of London’s principal market space and thoroughfare in the medieval period. The area was abandoned at the end of the Roman period and was reoccupied in the late 9th or early 10th century. By the 10th century the street frontages were lined with timber buildings, to the rear of which were external areas. Between 1100–1300 the plots of land in the Cheapside area were progressively subdivided and existing open spaces encroached upon. By the middle 13th century the area was very densely occupied and the former external areas (back from the street frontage) were now covered by large stone-built houses built by merchants and financiers.

INTRODUCTION

The following paper looks at aspects of the Late Saxon and medieval phases recorded at Number 1 Poultry in the City of London, excavated by the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) between March 1994 and June 1996 (see Fig 1, 11). Post-excavation analysis is now underway and this will result in a number of publications, including a volume on the Saxon and medieval sequence.

The significance of the site lies partly in the extent and complexity of the archaeological deposits uncovered and partly in the site’s prominent position at the eastern end of Cheapside, the medieval city’s principal market space and thoroughfare. Together with the wealth of directly relevant documentary material surviving from the 12th century onwards it will be possible to reconstruct, in some detail, the

development of the Poultry/Bucklersbury area between the 9th and 15th centuries (Treveil & Rowsome 1998).

POULTRY AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE LATE SAXON TOWN

The Middle Saxon settlement of *Lundenwic*, now known to have been situated in the area of Aldwych and the Strand, and its subsequent replacement by a new settlement within the walls of the old Roman city in the final decades of the 9th century, are described elsewhere in this publication (see Bowsher & Malcolm this vol). It is from about this time that London is increasingly referred to in documents as a *burh* (Vince 1990, 22), and, following the example of other large *burh*, such as Winchester and Southampton (Biddle & Hill 1971), it has been suggested that a planned rectilinear grid of streets, with a number of north-south lanes connecting Cheapside with the Thames waterfront, was laid out towards the end of the 9th century (Schofield *et al*; Vince 1990, 424–8; 1991, 124–9). Poultry is often regarded as an eastwards extension to Cheapside, and with the recent development of Number 1 Poultry on the southern side of the street an unparalleled opportunity arose to investigate a key area of the Late Saxon and medieval city by means of controlled excavation.

A large public open space or market was almost certainly present at the eastern end of Cheapside from the late 9th or early 10th century, probably occupying the area later bounded by the streets of Poultry, Bucklersbury and Walbrook. It is probable that Poultry itself originated as a route skirting the market’s

northern edge. Documentary sources suggest that vestiges of this open space survived into the mid 13th century (Keene 1987), but it was finally swallowed up by the building of large masonry houses in the latter part of the century (see below). Number 1 Poultry overlay the western half of this area, and, during the course of the excavation, gravel and cobble surfaces were noted to the south of the later Poultry frontage, above a major junction in the Roman street network to the east of the church of St Benet Sherehog.

A small number of Late Saxon sunken floored buildings, one constructed against the west wall of a partially ruinous late Roman masonry building, represent the earliest post-Roman structural activity on the site (Burch *et al* 1997). Walls and partitions were constructed in a variety of methods, including upright earth-fast posts, horizontal planking and wattle hurdles, with internal floors of brickearth, brushwood or planking. Thick organic deposits in external areas adjacent to one of the buildings may suggest the presence of contemporary stock enclosures. The distribution of the sunken buildings implies an early date for the establishment of Poultry, with three of the five identified structures located close to the Poultry frontage. The stratigraphic relationship between the sunken buildings and the surfaces of the hypothesised market area also suggest that by the late 10th century the process of encroachment was already underway.

The topography of the late Roman city also seems to have exerted a considerable influence over the development of the late Saxon town. The line of the principal east-west Roman road across the city may still have been at least partially visible in the 10th century. A drainage or boundary ditch, which ran along the crest of the road cutting late Roman pits and dumps, is likely to have been of post-Roman date, possibly from the earliest phases of the Saxon reoccupation, and at both Poultry and the site of 72–75 Cheapside to the west, sunken buildings of Late Saxon date were located on or close to the Roman road.

The Roman street network may also have influenced the alignment of Bucklersbury. The southern end of the street in part follows the line of the principal east-west street, which perhaps explains the coincidence in alignment between Roman and medieval properties to the north of Bucklersbury. At a point later marked by the junction with Pancras Lane, Bucklersbury swings

north to join Cheapside and Poultry. This northern section of Bucklersbury shadowed the course of the southern roadside ditch of a disused secondary Roman road, with later buildings utilising the road gravels as hard standing (see Fig 15).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EARLY MEDIEVAL TOWN TO THE END OF THE 11TH CENTURY

The dispersed pattern of sunken floored buildings was replaced in the first half of the 11th century by rows of narrow timber buildings fronting the south side of Poultry. Presumably the Cheapside frontage was already built up by this time, and in the development of Poultry and the side streets leading off Cheapside we may see a growing need for greater trading space close to the Cheapside market, a process of development which was largely complete by the mid 11th century (Keene, 1987).

Preservation was particularly good with, in some cases, up to 11 successive floor surfaces and intervening occupation deposits, the latest phases dating to the early 12th century. The earliest buildings appeared to be free-standing structures, each with a frontage of about 3m and separated by narrow gaps, and each extending back from the street by about 5.5m. Most of the excavated buildings contained thin brickearth floor surfaces, although mortar and beaten earth were also used. Floors may have been covered by wooden planking (some *in situ* burnt timbers were present), hay, rushes or other organic material. The majority of buildings were constructed with posts set directly into the ground or into baseplates laid in slots; although post and earth walls were used in at least one building. Many hearths or open fireplaces were also found, ranging from scorched areas of floor, to tile and brickearth structures, to brickearth contained within timber surrounds. Examples of the latter type are known from York (Addyman, 1980) and Dublin (Murray 1983) as well as from other sites in London (Horsman *et al* 1988, 97).

Timber buildings, albeit with wider frontages than the buildings on Poultry, had been constructed on the north side of Bucklersbury near the junction with Poultry and Cheapside by the first half of the 11th century, utilising the gravels of a secondary Roman road as hard standing. Development further east along

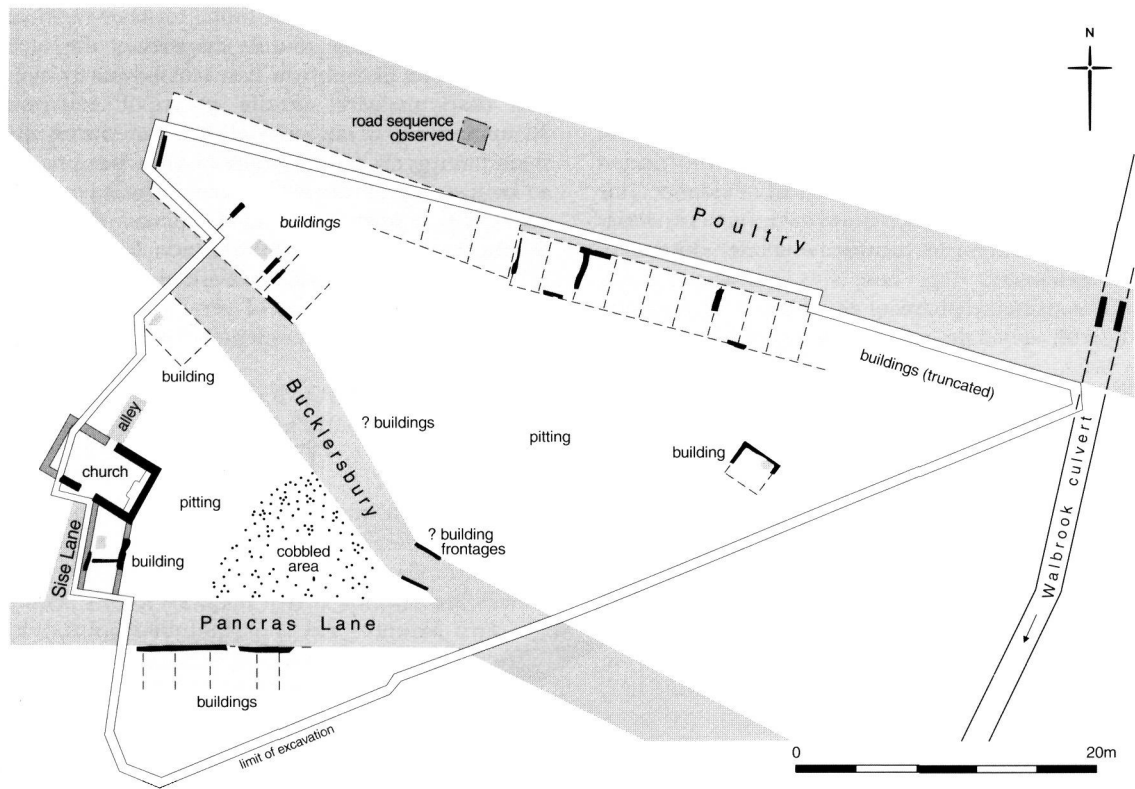


Fig 15. Plan of the Saxo-Norman (c.1050–1100) church, streets and buildings on the site of Number 1 Poultry (MoLAS Susan Banks)

Bucklersbury seems to have occurred later, probably towards the end of the 11th century. One particularly well preserved building, which occupied a frontage of about 6m, contained a large timber lined hearth which was archaeomagnetically dated to the period 1080–1120. Timber buildings also occupied the south side of the street, but structural survival in this area was poor.

Behind the timber buildings lining Poultry and Bucklersbury the relatively large open areas, which in the 10th and 11th centuries remained undeveloped, were parcelled up into individual properties or backyards, perhaps with dividing fences. The identification of separate properties was possible by a study of the distribution and alignment of the many rubbish and cesspits which were excavated. ‘Assize of Nuisance’ records dating from the 14th century suggest that cesspits were often sited close to, and aligned with, fencelines (Chew & Kellaway 1973, xxv). This was especially true of the area on the north side of Bucklersbury, to the east of the junction with Pancras Lane, where at least three separate

properties were identified, each with a width of about 6m and each extending back from the street frontage by about 20–25m. Unfortunately, no associated buildings were uncovered and would probably have been located beyond the limit of excavation in any case. Similar patterns of street frontages buildings with pitted open areas to the rear have been identified at both Flaxengate, Lincoln and at Coppergate, York.

Documentary sources indicate that metalworkers, in particular smiths and ironmongers, were especially well represented in the rows of shops and workshops fronting Poultry and Bucklersbury from at least the 13th century. In 1300 the west end of the street was generally referred to as Ironmongers Row and may have developed as a peripheral area serving the needs of visitors to the great Cheapside market. The eastern half of the street was often referred to as ‘La Lorimerie’ or Lorimers’ Row, presumably because it contained shops involved in the manufacture and trade in metal bridle pieces. In addition more specialised manufacturing activities such as

cutlery and armour production were carried out towards the eastern end of Cheapside. This association with metalworking is amply demonstrated by the recovery of ironworking waste from pits and deposits in the buildings which fronted Poultry and Bucklersbury in the period 1000–1150. The archaeological evidence for metalworking in the 11th and early 12th centuries can also be seen to complement later documentary evidence.

The primary phase of St Benet Sherehog (see Fig 16), a single celled rectangular church of

Late Saxon style, was built to the west of Bucklersbury in the middle decades of the 11th century. The church was constructed partly over the road surfaces of the principal east-west Roman street in an area which had previously been intensively pitted. Many of these pits proved to be a good source of Late Saxon organic finds, especially leather shoes and offcuts. Although firmly in the Late Saxon tradition (with quoins of Saxon long- and-short work) it is uncertain whether the church was of pre or post-conquest date. The earliest documentary references date

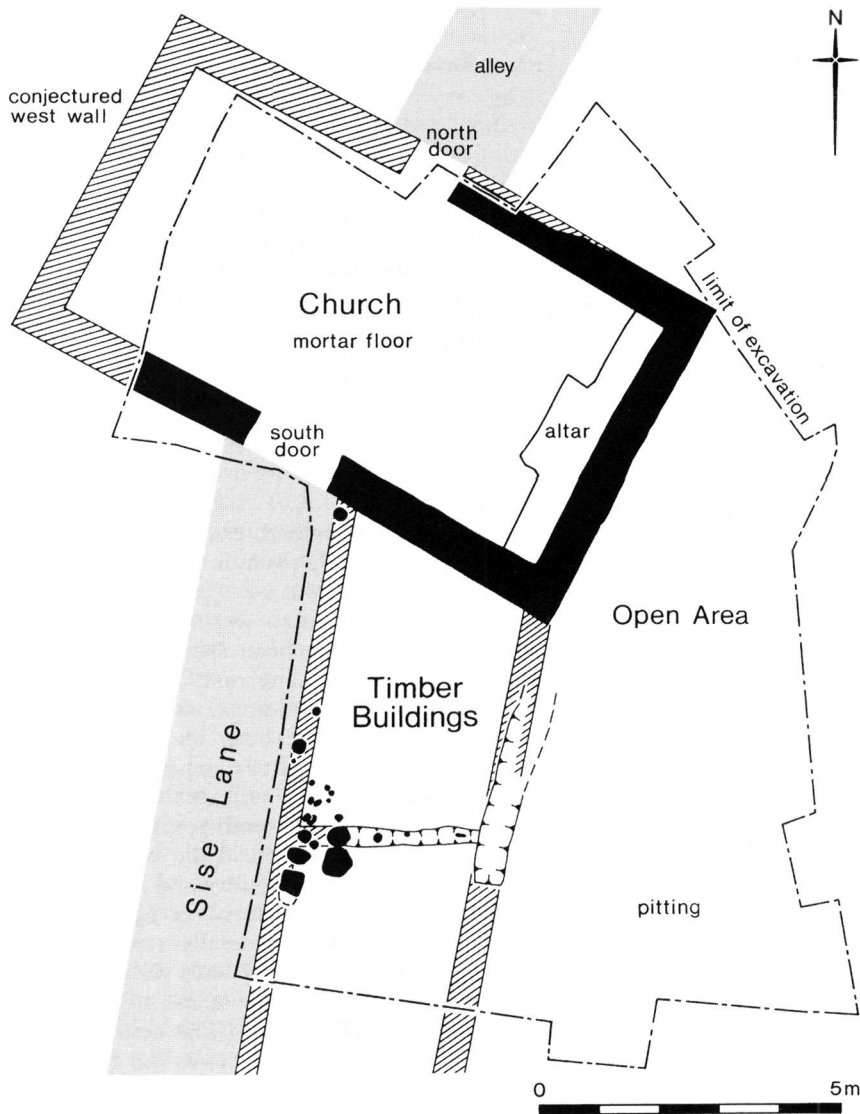


Fig 16. Plan of the 11th-century church of St Benet Sherehog and associated features, on the site of Number 1 Poultry (MoLAS Susan Banks)

from the early 12th century, although pottery from the underlying pits suggests a construction date in the second half of the 11th century. The initial status of the church is also unclear and the position of the church away from the nearest street (probably Cheapside) may suggest that it was originally founded as a chapel within a private house and that only later did it develop a more public function, a not uncommon pattern for a city church (Vince 1991, 74–5).

THE PROLIFERATION OF NEW STREETS AND LANES IN THE 12TH AND 13TH CENTURIES

Between c.1100 and 1300 increasing pressure for space in the Cheapside area resulted in the progressive encroachment of buildings onto streets and other open spaces and the subdivision of existing building plots. For example from the historical record, supported by the archaeology in the north-west corner of the excavation area, it is possible to follow the successive encroachment of building at the junction of Poultry and Bucklersbury onto Cheapside during the 13th century. Similarly, it has been estimated that in certain parts of Bow Lane the width of the street was reduced from 30ft to 6ft as successive buildings encroached onto the street (Schofield *et al* 1990).

A network of minor streets and lanes evolved during the 12th and early 13th centuries both to gain access to previously undeveloped areas behind the main streets and to increase the available trading frontage. At least two streets probably have their origin in this period: Soper Lane, following the line of modern Queen Street to the west of the excavated area, is recorded as a new street in the early 13th century; and Pancras Lane as a new street in the later 13th century. A long section of Pancras Lane, with remains of post built structures of probable 13th-century date lining its southern edge, was examined in some detail, and it now seems likely that it developed as a route along the southern edge of the market area. Sise Lane may already have existed as an alley leading up to the south door of the church of St Benet Sherehog, and its presence immediately beyond the limits of the excavation was indicated by the alignment of the west wall of a 12th/13th-century timber building on the south side of the church (see Fig 16).

LATER MEDIEVAL DEVELOPMENT TO THE GREAT FIRE OF 1666

The general process of building encroachment was largely complete by the middle of the 13th century, with the construction of large stone-built houses in previously unoccupied areas away from the major street frontages. Linked to this was a fundamental shift in the character of the area during the 13th and 14th centuries, with increasing pressure on space and higher land values forcing manufacturing activities to move to less central sites. In their stead more lucrative activities such as the trade in imported luxuries, most notably precious metals, spices and textiles, and money lending became more prominent. In the area around Bucklersbury wealthy merchants and financiers were close to the Cheapside market where much of their business was carried out, but still fairly removed from the hustle and bustle of the main commercial streets. By the second half of the 13th century Bucklersbury was at the heart of the new financial district and remained so until the mid 14th century when the focus of activity shifted eastwards to Lombard Street (Keene 1987).

The survival of later medieval levels at Poultry was poor, with most deposits from this period removed by the construction of deeply-basemented buildings in the 19th century. What did survive however was a network of mortared chalk rubble foundations, stone-lined wells and cesspits which allow for the reconstruction of the ground plans of several large masonry buildings. In conjunction with the wealth of documentary evidence surviving from the 12th century onwards, it is possible to follow the histories of many of the substantial residencies which occupied the area during this period. In 1265 a large property on the south side of Poultry was owned by the powerful Tolesan family, whose capital messuage (main residence) adjoined it to the east. The outline of this building was demarcated by a series of chalk foundations which closely matched the documented limits of the property. On both Poultry and Bucklersbury timber buildings were replaced by new stone-built shops which were apparently integral to the larger houses behind. This process is illustrated by the Tolesan property, the front of which was divided into two shops, one occupied by a lorimer. That there were two shops was indicated by the presence of two stone-lined cesspits towards the front of the excavated building.

Immediately to the south of the Tolesan house was a particularly well documented property. Situated on the north side of Bucklersbury it was occupied in the late 13th century by John Mansell, a leading financial supporter of Henry III. The house was later the London headquarters of the Riccardi merchants of Lucca and then, in the 14th century, the main residence of William Servat, a dealer in textiles and spices. Servat built a large towered gatehouse (later known as Servat's tower), which may have survived as a large mortared chalk rubble foundation in the south east corner of the site. Isabella, the queen of Edward II (1307–1327), used the property as her financial base in the city.

As part of the establishment of a fresh water supply to the City, the Great Conduit was built at the junction of Cheapside, Poultry and Bucklersbury in c.1245. The stone conduit house was said to contain a lead tank, gravity-fed by a series of lead pipes from the Tyburn Brook in the area of Paddington. This building became a focus for the local trades in Poultry and Cheapside and figured in state occasions, until the Great Fire, after which it was not rebuilt. The underground chamber or cistern was located and recorded during preliminary work at Number 1 Poultry in 1994.

St Benet Sherehog was not unaffected by the changing wealth and status of the Cheapside area, and seems to have undergone a number of major alterations and re-builds in the late medieval period. The original church was pulled down, its southern wall having subsided into the backfilled southern ditch of the Roman road, to be replaced by a larger building on a slightly different alignment. In consequence the foundations of the original church were preserved beneath the levelling dumps for the new building. At least one further rebuild, perhaps in the 13th century, saw the replacement of the second church with an even larger building – and another change in alignment, this time closer to true east-west. Archaeologically, the later stages of the church were largely represented by rubble foundations and pier bases. These later alterations included an extension to the east, probably a separate or larger chancel, an aisle to the north and the construction of an aisle or side chapels to the south, and involved the demolition of the earlier timber building. A chapel dedicated to St Mary is recorded in 1348 and another to St Sithe in 1397.

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