

# RESCUE ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE CITY

## the Future of London's Past

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THE FIRST known settlement of the area which was later contained by the walls of the City of London, occurred soon after the Claudian invasion of A.D. 43. Although occupation of the site has continued unbroken, our knowledge of the City's development and our understanding of the way of life of its many generations of inhabitants are very limited.

Whatever the period, archaeological work is essential for providing us with information about the City's past. If we wish to study, for example, the changing built-up areas of the succeeding centuries of Roman rule; the trades and industries of Saxon London; or the evolution of the defensive system, then we have to rely on excavation for the recovery of the evidence.

But at this point there is a basic problem — the raw material for such study which lies under the buildings, streets and open spaces of the City, is today being destroyed at an unprecedented rate. This is no gentle erosion but a catastrophic destruction of the layers of archaeological deposits accumulated over the centuries. Once these deposits are gone, the history which they record is lost for ever.

Horribly, virtually all the accessible deposits will be destroyed within the next fifteen years and unless provision is made for their proper investigation, much of the City's history contained in them will also disappear. This is the balanced conclusion of RESCUE's archaeological survey of the City of London, *The Future of London's Past: the archaeological implications of planning and development in the nation's capital*.

The impetus for this survey seems to have sprung from the unhappy affair of Baynards Castle. This extremely large site lay open for two years before a hurried rescue operation on that part of the Castle which was not already buried under the foundations

of the new Thames Street road, uncovered substantial remains.

The main outcome of the affair has been a long overdue showing of proper interest in the archaeological needs of the City by archaeologists, the Corporation and the public. Thus a suitable atmosphere has been created in which to publish and discuss such a report as *The Future of London's Past*, and an opportunity presented to take steps to implement it adequately.

The report is by Martin Biddle and Daphne Hudson, both long standing members of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society. The former, now Chairman of RESCUE and Director of the Winchester Research Unit, is best known in London for his excavation of Nonsuch Palace in 1959/60; the latter, a town planner, has taken part in a number of excavations in Wandsworth and the City, including Baynards Castle. Editorial assistance and a detailed bibliography have been provided by Carolyn Heighway. Sir Mortimer Wheeler's evocative preface recalls his own vigorous contribution to London's archaeology; it is well matched by the trenchant style of the authors in writing what Sir Mortimer hails as "a brilliant survey of deeds and needs."

*The Future of London's Past* surveys the present state of archaeological knowledge in and adjacent to the walled city from Roman to medieval times and discusses the necessity and means of recovering further information before it is lost in the face of modern development; the report appears as a 72 page A4 book together with a set of eight excellent maps, which folded once, fit with the book into an attractive slip case 15ins by 11½ins.

The eight maps each measuring 15ins by 22½ins are at the scale of 1:5000 and show the entire area of the ancient walled City and its Roman and medieval suburbs. They include a base map reduced

from the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 plans and printed on ordinary paper, together with seven overlays printed on transparent paper which allow the user to recombine the evidence in any way he requires. Three of the transparencies show the state of knowledge of Roman, Anglo-Saxon and medieval London in relation to the extent and character of archaeological work up to 1972; one shows the depth of archaeological deposits in the City; another the extent of destruction by existing basements and underground works; the sixth demonstrates the age of existing buildings, the extent of public and private open spaces, listed buildings, conservation areas and other planning matters; and the seventh shows development, both imminent and longer-term. Three of the maps are printed in black, four in three colours and one in four colours.

Perhaps it is worthwhile sounding a note of caution over Map 6 which shows the depths of basements in modern London; the prime source for the map was a survey undertaken for insurance purposes. However, there are a number of errors and omissions, for example, no basements are shown on the site on the corner of Milk Street and Mumford Court (which was excavated last year.) In fact, most of the area was covered by single basements, while there was a double one in the south east corner. Despite this disability the map can still be useful in presenting the general picture.

The text, after briefly looking at the history of archaeology in the City, deals thoroughly with the Roman period, stressing in particular how little is known about London's beginnings. The fact that we have plans of less than ten recognisable buildings in the capital of the Roman province underlines the deficiencies in our knowledge — no theatre, no amphitheatre, no temples (except for Mithras), and no shops, nor is there even certainty of where the bridge was.

Further, the major problem of the Roman road system requires elucidation. From building lines and odd stretches and pockets of road gravelling, there are three separate alignments which contrasts oddly with the usual form of grid found in Roman towns. A number of attempts have been made in the past to produce a credible road system from the present evidence but to date all have failed.

The defences too pose many a problem. As the Cripplegate fort was built circa A.D.100, where was the earlier garrison and supply depot quartered? Could there have been a military enceinte south of Cannon Street whose site became the "governor's palace?" or possibly one in the forum area or to its south?

But we are well supplied with knowledge of the Roman period if we compare it with the following

two hundred years or so. This is the true Dark Ages for which the report pulls together the meagre facts and clues. However, there are enough of these for the report to say that "the fact of continuous occupation of some kind seems no longer in doubt" — the problem is of course to find out more about the nature of that occupation.

The knowledge and problems of Saxon London are given a great deal of attention mainly because the paucity of archaeological knowledge is so much at variance with the picture painted by historical records. Was the 7th century Kentish palace located within the limits of the Cripplegate fort, and did the folk moot which lay between St. Paul's and the palace, make use of, or at least owe its origins to, the Roman theatre or amphitheatre? these are only two of the particularly tantalising questions, towards the solution of which determined inquiries need to be made.

Since 1935 when Sir Mortimer Wheeler published *London and the Saxons*, little has been done to come to grips with the problems of this period. Martin Biddle's excellent appraisal of Dark Age and Saxon London is therefore most welcome and it should act as a catalyst for a renewed interest, both archaeological and historical. The opportunities remaining for archaeological investigation of this period are still considerable, but the time available is so very short.

The section on the medieval period is almost an anticlimax but the report rightly makes the point that, while so much about the period is known from documentary sources, and despite the massive destruction of the medieval layers, archaeology still has a role to play, particularly in the waterfront area where very deep deposits are presumed to still survive.

The matter of the waterfront is something the report comes back to time and again through all the periods covered. Indeed in the last chapter having decided that a City of London Archaeological Unit should be set up as soon as possible, it recommends that the field section should be split into four teams, the largest of which would deal exclusively with the waterfront. Obviously much of the details of the composition and salary bill of the unit is based on Martin Biddle's own experience in Winchester over ten years — an experience which should not be ignored in the evaluation of his recommendations.

The proposed permanent staff of the unit would number 74; these would be augmented by local amateur forces and by a student volunteer force of up to 150 individuals for a period of at least ten weeks each summer. With such a large task force in mind the size of the estimated annual costs is,

not surprisingly, as high as £185,000. However, comparing this figure with the 1971 budget for Winchester of £42,000 and the revised 1973/4 budget for the York Archaeological Trust of £90,000, it does not seem outrageous.

The report puts forward the view that half of the running costs of the unit should be borne by the City Corporation, with the other half being met by the Department of the Environment. This way the cost would be spread across the City rather than falling, for example, on the particular developers who happen to be rebuilding at the time. From many points of view this seems to be a fair way of apportioning the cost although it is a regression from the aim held by some archaeologists that as in Scandinavia developers should be made to subscribe to the cost of archaeological investigation of their sites.

Since the war almost a half the acreage within the street blocks of the City have been redeveloped and the resultant removal of the buried layers of London's past have been complemented by only a limited

number of excavations. These themselves, because of lack of funds, have had to be carried out on a restricted scale. With so much gone and so little left, the time has come when a much higher priority must be given to its archaeology, both in terms of excavation of sites and the publication of findings, past and future. Without adequate finance and local government support, the necessary large scale excavations, analysis of finds and comprehensive publication of the work will not be possible.

Fifteen years alone are left and the Corporation of London must not hesitate to meet the critical challenge detailed in this report. It must give its generous and whole-hearted support to rescue archaeology in the City.

*The Future of London's Past* is to be very warmly welcomed not only for its proposals for a City unit, but also for the depth and scope of the survey which will continue to be a very valuable document for many years to come for those interested in the City of London's past — £3.50 (£2.50 to members) from RESCUE, 25A The Tything, Worcester.

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**Archaeology in the City of London—An Opportunity.** *Guildhall Museum*, 55 Basinghall Street, EC2V 5DT. 7pp. 5 maps. a limited number free to bone fide inquirers.

**St. Paul's — South West Area — 1973.** *Department of Architecture and Planning. Corporation of London*, Guildhall, P.O. Box 270, EC2P 2EJ. 24pp. 10 maps. free on application.

OF THESE TWO official reports which have recently been published, *St. Paul's* is basically a brief study for the public of the architectural and planning proposals for the area lying south and west of the cathedral. This area which has a certain charm with its narrow streets and little alleys, contains two conservation areas. The proposed limited development is intended to exclude vehicles from the immediate surrounds of St. Paul's by building a by-pass running along a widened Carter Lane. Although the improvement to St. Paul's is only being achieved through the intrusion of the widened road, none of the many buildings of historical or architectural interest is to be demolished.

Little is archaeologically known of the area covered by the report, most of it at present being covered by Victorian and earlier buildings. Some of the new construction work may at last prove the southward line of the Roman city wall and may also throw light on the theory that the Roman theatre

was in the vicinity. Under the heading "Archaeology" the report says "Space and time should be allowed in any proposals for the necessary excavation and recording of archaeological remains." Let us hope that when this development comes, not only space and time will be allowed, but also adequate resources.

*An Opportunity* is a very different document having the feel, and indeed being, an official report to a committee. Historical periods are illustrated by two maps, one showing the expansion of the Roman city and the other the late medieval street plan with its churches and religious precincts.

The report very briefly discusses the problems of the dwindling archaeological deposits in the City with the aid of maps and particularly brings out the importance of allowing enough time for archaeological excavation. The contemporary intensified redevelopment is presented both as an opportunity for investigation of the deposits and as a threat to their destruction.

However *An Opportunity* was presumably accompanied through the various committees by some further papers. What these papers recommended is not known, but the result has been a decision to form a five-man rescue unit, consisting of a chief urban archaeologist, a senior assistant, two assistants and a draughtsman — bearing in mind Martin Biddle's recommended unit of 74, a rather meagre response!