



Fig. 1: general view of the site, looking south.

(Photo: John Earp)

Excavations at 175-7 Borough High Street, Southwark

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BUILDING redevelopment at 175-7 Borough High Street has enabled S.A.E.C. to carry out excavations over the past nine months. The site lies approximately 500m south of London Bridge on the eastern side of Borough High Street (see fig. 2). The building frontage is about 13m east of the projected

line of the major north-south Roman road which forms a continuation of Stane and Watling Streets northwards to the Roman Bridge¹.

As modern cellars had removed all deposits down to + 1.60m OD, the post-Roman features were limited to a few late medieval rubbish filled pits,

1. For discussion of the position of the Roman bridge and roads, see: Ralph Merrifield and Harvey Sheldon:

"Roman London Bridge: A View from Both Banks," *London Archaeol* 2 no. 8 (1974) 183-191.

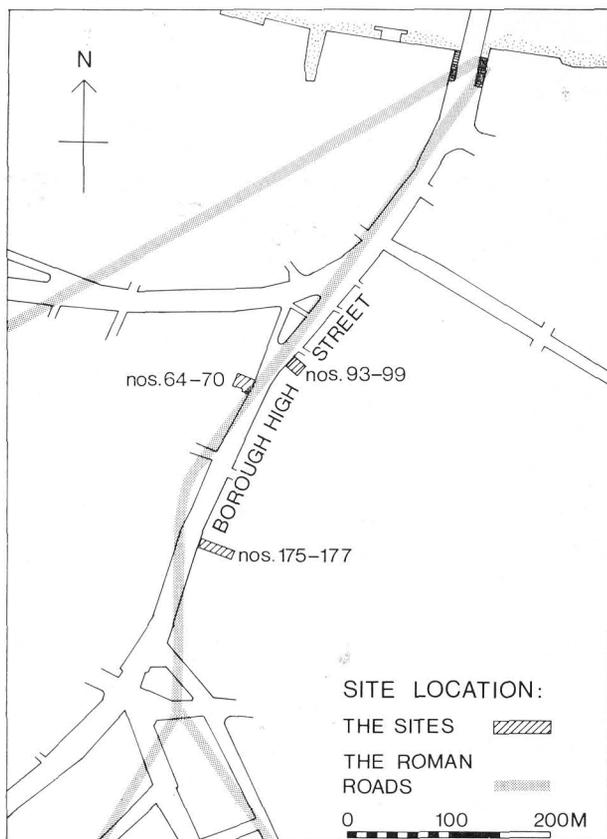


Fig. 2

and a part of a chalk wall of similar date which survived as a foundation of a later brick wall along the northern side of the site. The Roman features found included three channels, two of which were revetted (Channels 2 and 3), two rooms of a clay and timber building, and three wood-lined wells (see fig. 3).

The site is situated on yellow sand which survived up to + 1.60m OD in the western part of the site. This high sand has been traced at 199 and 201-11 Borough High Street to the south of 175 Borough High Street, where in the Roman period it formed a ridge of high ground running north-west—south-east across which the Roman road ran.

The earliest deposits on the site were a series of waterlaid clays and sands which filled a channel, Channel 1, probably running north-south across the area of excavation. Little evidence of Channel 1 remained, probably due to erosion of its fill deposits by the later revetted channel, Channel 2. The sequence of Channel 1 fills only survived to the south of the east-west revetment of Channel 2. Here Channel 1 had eroded away the natural sand down to - 0.35m OD. The initial fill in the channel was a

coarse sand, this was overlaid by clay and finally by a thick deposit of thin discontinuous lenses of fine sand and clay up to + 0.80m OD. All these deposits were waterlaid and except for the coarse sand, indicate slow moving water in the channel. Pottery from the fills of Channel 1 has been dated to the third quarter of the first century AD².

After Channel 1 had become filled a timber revetment aligned east-west was constructed across it along the southern side of the site. The revetment consisted of planks set on edge supported by a line of closely set posts. Unfortunately the planks were too poorly preserved to show many details of construction, but in the deeper, eastern part of the channel, at least two planks could be seen, one on top of the other. The lower plank was approximately 0.25m wide and the revetment survived to a height of + 0.95m OD. At two points ends of two planks were seen to overlap in plan, and in one case a small post had been placed between two of the planks, probably as an additional support. This revetment formed the southern edge of Channel 2, the northern edge was not present on the site, and a western limit to the channel was marked by the high surviving natural sand at the west end of the site. Channel 2 seems to have eroded almost all the fill deposits of Channel 1, and towards its centre near the middle of the site, cut deeply into the natural sand to a depth of - 1.20m OD. The primary fills of the channel, up to + 0.40m OD, were lenses of fine sand and clay, some of which had plant remains preserved in them. As in the case of Channel 1 fills, these indicate deposition by slowly moving water. A fair amount of rubbish including animal bone, broken pottery, and broken building tiles had been dumped into the channel as it was silting up. Additional finds preserved in the waterlogged clays included a quantity of leather and a large portion of a shallow wooden bowl. Over the waterlaid channel fills was a deposit of lenses of dumped earth and domestic rubbish about 0.60m thick, up to + 1.00 OD, which probably represents deliberate filling of the stream. Pottery from the fills of Channel 2 has been dated to the late first century.

A second timber revetment, aligned north-south, was found in the eastern part of the site, cutting across the fills of Channel 2. This revetment (see fig. 4) was far better preserved than the earlier east-west one. It had five planks, set on edge, one on top of another, 0.40m thick and varying in width from 0.40-0.20m. Two planks were seen to overlap in the uppermost row. The planks were supported by a row of posts preserved up to + 0.60m OD and driven deeply into natural sand. Although the revetment appears to have been cut into the Channel from

2. Dates mentioned in the text are based only on a preliminary examination of the pottery.

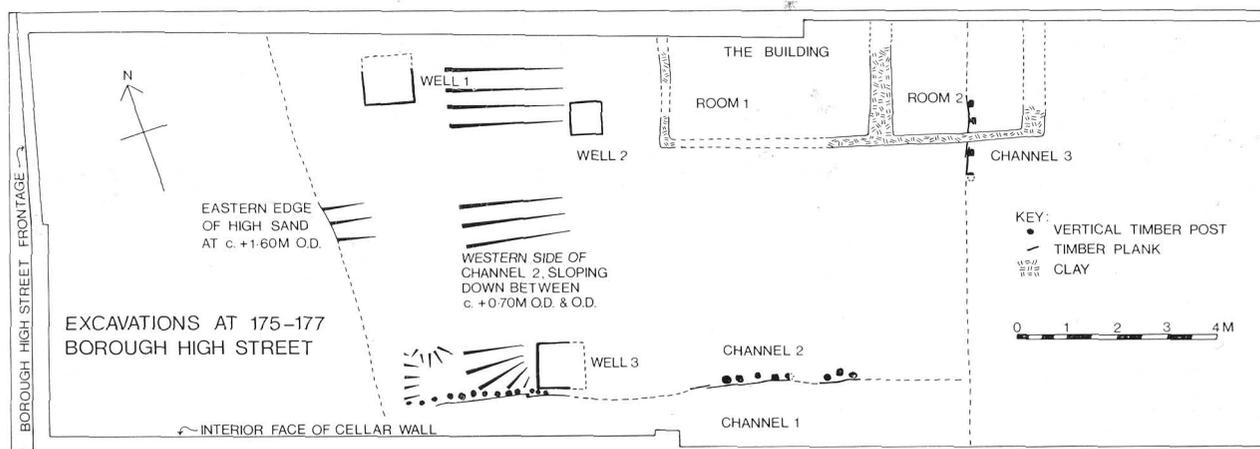


Fig. 3

+ 1.00 OD it only survived 1.00m in height up to + 0.60m OD, as the uppermost row of planks had largely decayed. The posts and planks were not jointed together. This revetment formed the western side of a north-south channel, Channel 3. Excavations extending 6m east of the revetment revealed no eastern side of the channel. Channel 3 cut down into the natural sand to a depth of at least — 0.60m OD. The primary fill in Channel 3 was sand which was overlaid by a thick deposit of clay with very few finds. Overlying the clay were lenses of clay and sand with some preserved plant remains up to + 0.50m OD. Into these waterlaid sediments was dumped a fair amount of pottery and other domestic rubbish; one unusual find was a fragment of a basket. Finally the channel was artificially filled in by dumping up to + 1.10m OD. Pottery from the fills of Channel 3 has been dated to the first half of the second century.

Archaeological work in northern Southwark has shown that north of the junction of Stane and Watling Street, probably near St. George's Church, the land was low lying and intersected by several channels³. Recent excavations have revealed two revetted channels north of 175 Borough High Street. One channel aligned north-east—south-west with three phases of revetment, dated to the mid first to early second century, was found on the western side of Borough High Street at nos. 64-70⁴. A second channel, aligned north-south, with post and plank revetments, was found on the eastern side of Borough High Street at nos. 93-9⁵. This channel was about 14m wide and the construction of the revetments has been dated to the early second century AD. The western revetment at 93-9 lines up quite well with

the north-south revetment of Channel 3 at 175 Borough High Street, also dated to the early second century, and probably both form the western revetment of the same channel. These features taken together suggest that in the early Roman period, up to the mid second century, a great deal of work was done to drain the few areas of high ground that existed along the Roman road and to control the larger streams. Eventually these streams could be backfilled and the land used for building or cultivation.

A deposit of sandy earth, about 0.30m thick and up to + 1.40m OD, was found covering the fills of the three channels. This deposit may represent a period during which the site was waste ground or was being used for cultivation. The small amount of pottery found in this earth has been dated to the mid second century.

Sometime after the deposition of the sandy earth, probably in the later second century, a building was constructed over the buried Channels 2 and 3, of which two rooms were found on the northern side of the site. The walls were cut 0.20-0.30m into the sandy earth and were made of clay mixed with sand and lumps of mortar and burnt clay. The external wall was about 0.14m thick, except at the corners where an extra thickness of clay had been added, probably as additional strengthening. The internal wall was about 0.40 thick. Spaced unevenly along the external wall, between 0.12 and 0.40m apart, were a number of roughly circular earth-filled holes in the clay, measuring about 0.04m in diameter. These may indicate the position of small stakes forming an internal wooden frame for the wall. The only large post-hole found was at the junction of the

3. See forthcoming report on excavations in Southwark, 1972-4 to be published jointly by the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society and the Surrey Archaeological Society.

4. "A Roman Channel at 66 Borough High Street," *London Archaeol* 2, no. 11 (1975) 277.

5. Ralph Merrifield and Harvey Sheldon; *op. cit.* 186.



Fig. 4: timber revetment of Channel 3

(Photo: John Earp)

internal and external walls and measured 0.10 by 0.06m. The walls survived about 0.35m in height up to + 1.35-1.40 OD where they had collapsed or been pushed into the interior of the building.

Room 1, measuring 4.00m by at least 1.70m, was the more elaborate of the two rooms. The floor was made of white mortar with pebbles and was 0.08m thick. The walls of Room 1 had been plastered, initially, with a coat of rough white plaster, on top of which was a second coat of plaster with a painted surface. Although the rough primary coat of plaster and a few fragments of red painted plaster survived *in situ* on the walls, most of the painted plaster was found in fragments on the floor of the room sealed under the collapsed walls. The colours used include red, yellow, white, black and green and these were probably parts of a decorative scheme of plain panels. Along the walls of the room, was a rounded moulding, 0.05m wide and 0.01m thick, of dark red mortar which filled in the angle between the bottom of the walls and the floor.

Room 2 measured 2.60m by at least 2.00m and was plainer than Room 1. It had a clay floor which

had been resurfaced once. At several places on the surviving walls were found remains of two coats of white plaster, and on the floor under the collapsed walls were fragments of smoothed white plaster.

No traces of a hearth or doorway were found in either room, and there was no evidence of the type of roofing material which had been used. The absence of roof tiles on the floor of either room however, may indicate that the roof had been made of thatch or wood.

The building seems to have been purposefully demolished, probably shortly after it fell out of use, since the floors were found in good condition without an accumulation of rubbish on them, apart from a few sherds of early-mid second century date. This fact makes it difficult to be certain of the date by which the building had been abandoned. The demolished building and the sandy earth on the eastern part of the site were covered by a deposit of fine sandy black earth containing pottery of late third to mid-fourth century date, up to + 1.60m OD where it was truncated by cellar floors. A similar deposit of black earth dated to the fourth century

has been found on several Southwark sites, and it is thought to represent agricultural usage of the area in the late Roman period.⁶

The function of the building is uncertain, but there is no evidence that it had any other than a domestic usage. The more elaborate decoration of Room 1 suggests that it had a different function from the plainer Room 2. It seems likely that these are only two rooms of a larger structure which extends to the north of 175-7 Borough High Street. Observation of trenches dug in Borough High Street by the G.P.O. provided evidence of a gravel surface or road some 8.00m wide, apparently running east-west about 10.00m north of the rooms found on 175-7 Borough High Street⁷. It may have been on to this metalled surface that the building fronted, since it does not seem to have been aligned on the main north-south road. Clay and timber buildings of a broadly similar type have been found on a number of Southwark sites along the main roads where they have been dated to the period from the late first to late second century⁸.

To the west of the building described above were found three wood-lined wells. Due to the shortness of time available for excavation in this area and the height of the present water table, these wells were not completely excavated. All three wells were dug through the fills of Channel 2 some time after the late first century when it had been filled in, and all appear to have gone out of use in the mid second century. This would make them roughly contemporary with the building and they were probably associated with it.

Well 1 on the northern side of the site was dug to a depth of — 0.45m OD. A square or rectangular frame of wooden planks was found lining the lower part of the well. These planks were too poorly preserved to show details of construction. They survived 0.75m in height up to + 0.30m OD. The frame measured 1.00m by at least 0.70m. The earliest fill in the well was a dumped deposit of sand and gravel. Over this fill was dumped sandy earth with domestic rubbish and building material, presumably to level up the well. The upper fill of the well survived to + 1.45m OD where they had been truncated by a concrete foundation under the cellar floor.

Well 2, located slightly to the south-east of Well 1, was of more complex construction. Initially a large roughly circular pit with a diameter of 1.60m had been dug and into this was set a wooden barrel. The barrel consisted of eighteen staves and at its top, at a height of — 0.20m OD, had a diameter of

0.80m. Excavation stopped at approximately — 1.00m OD and at this depth the maximum girth of the barrel had not been reached. Set on to the top of the barrel was a square frame of eight well preserved planks, with two planks on each side. The planks measured 0.65 x 0.40 x 0.02m and had been fitted together at the corners with dovetail joints. This frame survived up to + 0.60m OD. After the timber frame had been constructed the pit into which it was set was backfilled with sand and, between the edge of the pit and the top of the timber frame, was laid a layer of grey clay 0.30m thick. The barrel was filled with sand and the square frame was filled with dumped clay and gravel.

Well 3, located on the southern part of the site, resembled the other two wells in having a square or rectangular wooden frame as a lining. It measured 1.00m by at least 0.60m. The wooden planks, 0.04m thick, were found in a good state of preservation up to + 0.20m OD. The well had been filled with dumped clay and sand containing a little rubbish. The dumped fills were truncated by a brick floor under the modern cellar floor at + 1.45m OD and excavation of the well stopped at — 0.30m OD.

Roman timber-lined wells of a similar construction to these have been found at a number of sites in Southwark and the City of London. A close parallel to Well 2 was found on a site in Lime Street in the City⁹.

The work at 175-7 Borough High Street has produced evidence about the topography of the eastern part of the settlement in the early Roman period, as well as the attempts made to control the channels which ran through it. The analysis of samples taken of the fills of these channels should provide evidence of the contemporary environment. Our knowledge of the character of early Roman buildings in the area has been increased by the discovery of a relatively well preserved part of a building dated to the mid second century A.D. It is hoped that details of the methods of construction used in these clay buildings will be better understood by examination of samples of the walls which were obtained during the excavations.

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6. Harvey Sheldon, "A Decline in the London Settlement AD 150-250?" *London Archaeol* 2, no. 11 (1975) 278.

7. As footnote 3; *Gazeteer of Roman Sites*, no. 54.

8. Judith Plouviez: "Roman Southwark" *London Archaeol* 2, no. 5 (1973) 108.

9. Ralph Merrifield, *The Roman City of London*, London (1965) 146 and Plate 111.