

Excavations at the Tower of London, 1976/7

Photography by Derek Craig

GEOFFREY PARNELL

BETWEEN June and December, 1976, the Department of the Environment conducted excavations along the south side of the Inmost Ward in advance of the construction of a new History Gallery. The principle discovery was a length of well-preserved Roman riverside wall situated just south of the main excavations.¹ Consequently, it was decided to expose more of the wall and incorporate its display alongside the new Gallery. Additional excavation was carried out between February and April, 1977.

The site in general lies in the extreme south-east corner of the third century city, defended on the east by the landward wall, and to the south by the river (currently there is no evidence of any third-century river defences). With the closing of the city's *enceinte* along the riverside during the fourth century, the area was destined to provide an ideal corner for the erection of the first Norman enclosure in the eleventh century.

Prehistoric

The eastern half of the site revealed a pronounced curved shelving of the natural clay, which was probably part of a meander bend in the course of the Thames. Silting had already occurred before the first discernable evidence of occupation. This was represented by a large pit, which produced an assortment of struck flints, plus a small quantity of grass and shell tempered pottery of possible Iron Age date. A shallow inhumation partly cutting the pit may prove to be of similar date. The burial appears to be a young male, 13–16 years of age; a ring and a flint flake were found beneath the hands.

Roman

Following further silting and flooding, the last of which produced Roman material, the area was raised level with the rest of the site by the dumping of large quantities of sand and gravel. Pottery indicates a late first-century date. A number of oak piles was then inserted into this made ground, generally the smaller timbers driven-in independently, the larger ones being accommodated in pits. Owing to later building activity, their function, other than structural, is not known. However, this type of dumping and piling might find an analogy with reclamation elsewhere along the Thames, and may, therefore, indicate the

presence of a waterfront in the vicinity.

After the apparent deliberate dismantling of the timbers, the area had consolidated sufficiently to allow a new timber building resting on chalk footings, with a clay floor, to be constructed directly upon the earlier deposition. The full extent of this building is unknown as only the western limits were accessible, but it was clearly of considerable size. The building dates from the second century and was eventually destroyed by fire. It was immediately replaced by a similar structure, which survived until the area was vacated in preparation for the building of the city's landward defences in the early third century.

The city wall was not encountered, having been removed in the seventeenth century, but to the rear of its projection traces of an extensive rampart were found. A continuous section through the bank was hindered by the presence of post-medieval walls; the total width, however, appears to be approximately 9m. The bank was traced as far south as the present curtain wall, where it had been completely cut away by later activity. This is particularly unfortunate as the relationship between the landward defences and the river remains unresolved.

Extending approximately 2m behind the line of the city wall, and 1.20m in width, an extremely solid piece of trench-poured masonry was discovered. Situated close to the point where the city wall would have crossed the junction of the clay bank of the Thames and the accumulated material to the south, it seems best interpreted as a buttress.

No further notable activity was recorded until the building of a massive riverside wall in the fourth century. A total length of 21m was exposed, providing valuable information about this late addition to London's defences.

The core of the wall was standing to a maximum height of 2.15m, the face 1.90m, the width of the wall, established at two separate points, was 3.20m.

The footings of the wall appear slight by comparison with the thickness of the masonry. Gravel, which appeared to level off a pre-existing ground surface, was laid first, followed by a mixture of flint, ragstone and chalk puddled in clay, on to which the wall itself was constructed.

The north (landward) face of the wall comprised neat courses of ragstone supplemented with purbeck marble, sandstone, chalk, tufa, tile and brick. The south face, seen only in a limited area, comprised

¹ The wall was partly sectioned in 1955. Interpretation, however, was indecisive owing to medieval alterations.



Fig. 1: General view looking south.

ragstone with a double tile course 1.10m from the base of the wall; there was no plinth.

The core of the wall revealed layers of ragstone with random pieces of chalk, tile and *opus signinum* alternating with thick bands of very gravelly yellow mortar. Running through the core, parallel with the north face, was continuous timber lacing. This appeared to be associated with the first off-set in the wall, 1.50m from the base, and a number of putlog holes for external scaffolding. No corresponding lacing was found along the south face, but traces of a "brace timber" across the width of the wall were found.

On both north and south faces of the wall, the wide joints between the coursing had been smeared with mortar. On the north face this pointing was so well preserved that it must have been sealed almost immediately after application. A mass of dumping against the face produced a comprehensive selection of late Roman pottery. In addition, over thirty coins were found, the latest one being of Valentinian II, 389–392.

Following initial weathering the south face had also been sealed by dumping. The wall displayed a noticeable list to the south, and it appeared that the dumping was intended to arrest further subsidence. The well-preserved mortar pointing on the face indicated that this rather unorthodox "shoring" must have taken place not long after the wall was completed.

Within a short distance of the present Lanthorn Tower, the wall turned south at 100°, several large pieces of architectural stone being re-used to form the corner. A fourth-century scarping of the earlier city bank, revealed adjacent to the Lanthorn Tower, is likely to be associated with the southward extension of the wall and combined with later documentary evidence, would suggest a return just south of the present curtain wall. It is probable that this southward extension of the wall formed part of a promontory linked to the landward defences and guarding the river approach to the city.

Medieval

During the early medieval period a major scarping

of the site took place, which involved the partial re-excitation of the riverside wall. This was only a temporary phase, and the area was back-filled again—possibly with the same material. Several sherds of apparent early Norman ware help attribute this scarping to work within the bailey area of the eleventh-century enclosure.

Later medieval activity again centred on the riverside wall, with a thickening of the wall along the river side. This must almost certainly have been a thirteenth-century addition; the remains of a weathered chamfered plinth which formed the south face, displayed a strong affinity with the water-gate plinth a short distance to the west (adjoining the Wakefield Tower) which is known to be the work of Henry III.

Elsewhere, the only notable medieval feature which survived successive post-medieval rebuilding was the

large ragstone foundation trench of a wall, believed to be part of Henry III's Great Hall.

Post Medieval

During the seventeenth century the Inmost Ward witnessed radical changes. The palace buildings, including the Great Hall (its status reduced to a warehouse) and royal apartments, were unfortunately pulled down, and a new building complex gradually developed. Extensive remains of two of these buildings were recorded—the Constable's Lodgings and Granary building, both constructed in brick. In 1788, these buildings were demolished following a severe fire and replaced by an impressive new Ordnance Office, whose final phase incorporated two series of inverted brick relieving arches. The Office was in turn demolished at the end of the nineteenth century, in advance of the construction of the existing curtain wall.



Fig. 2: corner showing re-used architectural stone.