

Excavations at Dukes Place: The Roman Defences

JOHN MALONEY

ONE IN FIVE of the Roman sites examined in London have provided information about the City defences, and these data have been evaluated¹ but some of the most important sites have yet to be fully published and there are still many unanswered questions. Prior to 1977, none of the sites on the east side of the city had produced a comprehensive picture of the defensive sequence and such a "type" site was needed in order that the previous excavations and observations might be evaluated more effectively. The decision to excavate at Dukes Place was made by the Department of Urban Archaeology because the redevelopment would involve the cutting of a trench for a subway, 30m (98ft) long,



Fig 2: Collapsed J.C.B. in Area 2.

(Photo: John Maloney)

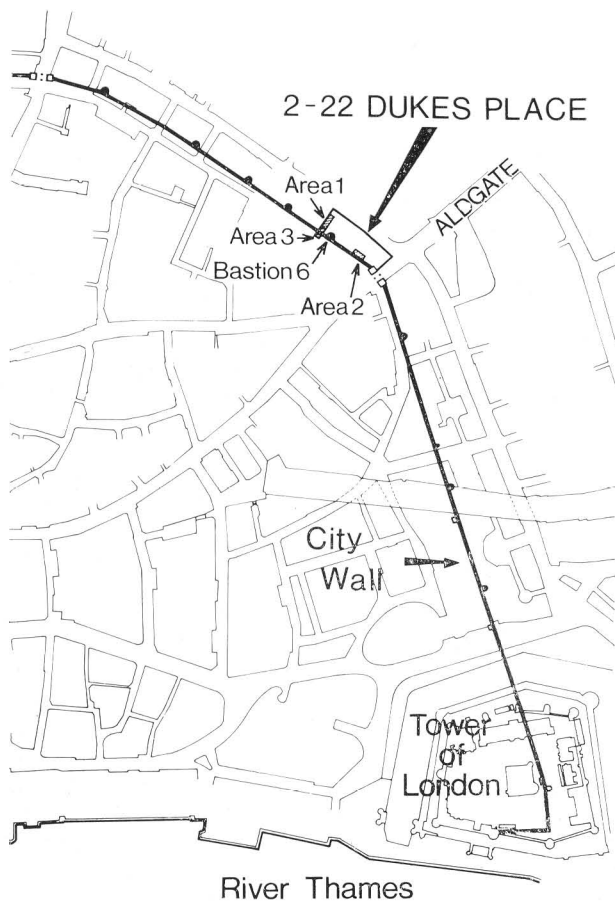


Fig. 1

across the line of the defences. Previous excavations on the site revealed the foundations of four gates of Roman to post-medieval date (on the site of Aldgate), three defensive ditches, and Bastion 6². On the opposite side of Dukes Place evidence has been found of a military ditch pre-dating A.D. 60³.

The Excavations

Excavations at 2-22 Dukes Place, Aldgate, were carried out in three areas (Fig. 1) between September, 1977, and May, 1978; the Corporation of London acknowledged the archaeological potential of the site and included a clause in the contract of works which allowed for archaeological investigations during the programme of redevelopment. The rescue excavations involved eight weeks actual digging which enabled a detailed record to be made of the defensive sequence. There was insufficient time to confirm all of the ditch profiles by excavation in plan and by that means collect stratified groups of pottery rather than isolated sherds.

A good working relationship was quickly estab-

- 1 R Merrifield, *The Roman City of London* (1965), 101-113.
- 2 P Marsden, "Archaeological Finds in the City of London 1966-8," *Trans. Lon. Middx. Arch. Soc.* (1969), 22, Pt. 2, 20-26. Bastion 6 excavated by P Marsden is unpublished.
- 3 H Chapman and T Johnson, "Excavations at Aldgate and Bush Lane House in the City of London, 1972," *Trans. Lon. Middx. Arch. Soc.* (1973), 24, 1-56.



Fig. 3: Area 1 looking south. The indented profile of the (?) ditch/boundary can be seen just above the scale, extending back to the timber shoring. The foundation wall in the centre is post-medieval.

(Photo: John Bailey)

lished with the contractors by getting to know them socially, and maintained by working within the prescribed time limits and by keeping them informed of the archaeological developments at every stage of the excavations. Cultivating the contractors' goodwill paid dividends in terms of their assistance, e.g. the use of their machines and equipment⁴. However, when working on sites where large earthmoving machines roam, archaeologists must be keenly aware of the potential dangers involved — a point given emphasis at Dukes Place by the experience of seeing a JCB collapse into a trench where we had been excavating a few hours previously (Fig. 2).

Features pre-dating the Roman Wall

Brickearth, the natural subsoil on the site, was found surviving to a height of 11.50m (37ft 8in) O.D. in Area 3 and 11.30m (37ft) O.D. in Area 2. Few traces of rootlets were found within the brickearth which may indicate that the level of the ground surface had been lowered, perhaps during extensive clearing of turf or undergrowth. The earliest signs of occupation were two cuts into the brickearth, in the form of a (?) beam slot abutted

4 Thanks are due to the contractors Lilley-Waddington, especially Andy Vincent (Site Agent) and Dave McRobbie (Foreman); C.O.L.A.S. for all their help; Charlotte Harding, Lez Watson, Dave Bentley and Catharine Maloney of the D.U.A., who bore the brunt of the work in difficult and dangerous conditions; and Harvey Sheldon for the active interest that he took in the excavations.

by a shallow posthole (Fig. 5, 476). These were sealed by a dump of brickearth (470) which was cut by the earliest datable feature on the site, a shallow flat-bottomed (?) ditch (Figs. 3 and 5). This feature which was recorded in Areas 1 and 2 (some 50m -164ft apart), was at least 4m (13ft 1in) wide but barely 0.6m (2ft) deep, and had remained open long enough for a layer of silt to have accumulated on the bottom. The backfill on top of the silt contained pottery of c 120 AD and the disturbed remains of two articulated human skeletons (Fig 4) which apparently had been unceremoniously dumped, arousing suspicion as to the circumstances of their deposition.

This (?) ditch could hardly have been defensive and is unlikely to have been a drainage channel or a result of the quarrying of brickearth. The most remarkable aspect of this feature is its position; it was on an alignment parallel with, and less than 2m from, that of the future Roman Wall. In view of this it is suggested that it may have been an earlier boundary.

Whilst no evidence has been found to suggest that London had a defensive circuit prior to the late second century, the major cemeteries in use from the Flavian period were located just outside the limits of the future Roman wall. This suggests that the *pomerium*, dividing the urban area (*urbs*)



Fig. 4. The remainder of a skeleton found in the backfill of the (?)ditch/boundary.

(Photo: Jenny Orsmond)

from the rural territory attached to it (*ager*), had already been formally marked out. It is interesting to note that the *pomerium* was traditionally defined by a ritual, observed at the foundation of a town, which involved the ploughing of a furrow and thereafter the digging of a ditch along this line⁵.

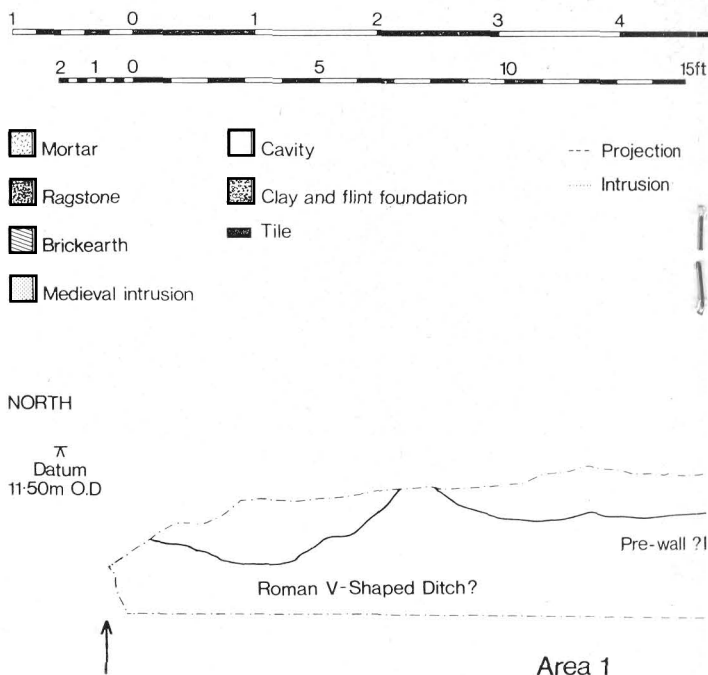
The Roman Wall and Defences

From a large dump of brickearth (Fig 5, 468), on top of the backfill of the (?) ditch/boundary, pottery of c 180 AD was recovered and it was through this deposit that the trench for the foundation of the Roman wall was cut. Above the clay and flint foundation was a ragstone rubble footing, 1.15m (3ft 9in) high, which supported the main body of the wall. The wall survived to its full width, 2.6m (8ft 6in), and to a height of 1.7m (5ft 7in) above the plinth (Fig. 6). The angle of the ragstone masonry, seen in a longitudinal section (Fig. 8), indicates that this length of wall was constructed from east to west. Both sides of the wall were faced with blocks of ragstone retaining the rubble core of ragstone laid in courses, each of which was capped by a layer of concrete which only partially percolated between the stones, leaving cavities (Figs 5 and 8). The ornamental red sandstone plinth with chamfered edge on the external face of the wall was mirrored by a triple facing-course of tiles on the internal face (Fig. 5). Four courses of ragstone above this level was a triple course of tiles, which was carried through the full width of the wall to provide horizontal stability. On the internal face, between the top and second tile, there was an offset which reduced the width of the wall by 0.12m (4½ins). A number of whole tiles were recovered and found to be of usual Roman size, 29.57cm (11½ins) x 43.17cm (17ins), that is 1 x 1½ Roman feet. They varied in thickness from 3.17cm (1¼ins) to 5.08cm (2ins), and in colour from orange to dark red, although a whole yellow tile was also recovered. Broken tiles were made use where the tile courses passed through the core of the wall. There was no indication of reused material in the fabric of the wall.

Although the above details conform to a common pattern⁶, an unusual feature of the construction of the wall at Dukes Place was that the bottom of the plinth did not appear to be at, or just above, the contemporary ground surface. At the juncture of the clay and flint foundation with the masonry footing there was a layer of mortar on both sides of the wall (Figs 5 and 9) on which the internal bank was formed, and which must therefore

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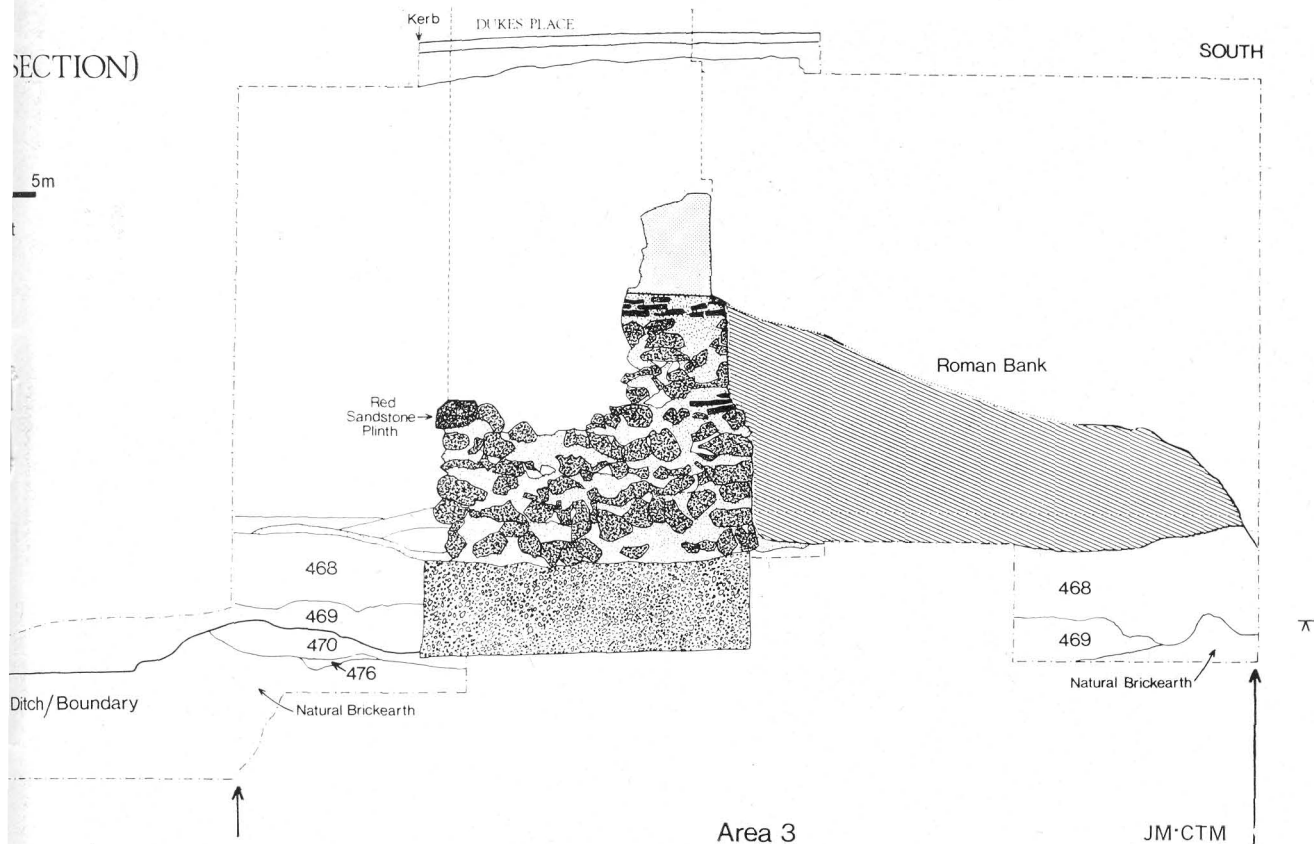
indicate the level of the contemporary ground surface. Presumably this level was unusually low in this area so that even after a substantial dump of brickearth (468) was deposited in preparation for the construction of the wall, the plinth at its predetermined level was 1.15m (3ft 9ins) above the mortar surfaces which resulted from the construction work. The layers above the external mortar surface also contained pottery of c 180 AD and it may be that, subsequent to the construction of the wall, dumping occurred against its external face to make the ground surface level with the plinth.

Another singular feature of a section of wall briefly observed in Area 2, was an offset between the top and second tile of a triple bonding course on the external face (Fig. 7). This apparent aberration is perhaps indicative that stretches of the wall were built by different gangs of workmen. This second length of wall enabled the alignment of the Roman Wall in Dukes Place to be plotted using a theodolite, with the result that it appears to be a little further to the north than previously suggested⁸.

7 M Todd, *The Walls of Rome* (1978), 31. From the visible evidence of the building joints it appears that the Aurelian wall was built in sections 4.5-6m in length and 1.3-1.8m in height.

5 J S Reid, *The Municipalities of the Roman Empire* (1913) 29-30, and see A L F Rivet, *Town and Country in Roman Britain* (1964), 78.

6 Merrifield, *op. cit.* 101-111.



The bank against the internal face had clearly been formed after the construction of the wall; it was at least 2m (6ft 6in) high and appeared to be tailing off 4m (13ft) away from the wall (Fig. 5), and there is evidence that this may be representative of its usual dimensions. The pottery recovered from the bank dates, once again, to c 180 AD.

A further feature of the defences contemporary with the construction of the Roman wall was a V-shaped ditch, the inner edge of which is normally found approximately 3.05-4.5m (10-15ft) from the external face of the wall. The ditch is recorded as being some 3.05-4.88m (10-16ft) wide and 1.37-1.98m (4 ft 6in-6ft 6in) in depth¹⁰. The bottom of a feature whose position accords with that the V-shaped ditch was recorded in Area 1 (Fig. 5), but only a few small sherds of Roman pottery were retrieved from the back-fill. The V-shaped profile is not necessarily a diagnostic feature in so far as it could be expected to be eroded and rounded out if the ditch was open for a considerable period, which was probably the case. The outer edge of such a ditch, once again in

8 Merrifield, *op. cit.* map of Roman Remains found in the City of London. The external face of the wall observed in Area 2 was in line with the north face of the street frontage.

Area 3

the usual position relative to the wall, was recorded in Area 2, and the homogeneous backfill contained a coin of Constans of AD 341-6 as well as pottery of the 1st and 2nd centuries, but the feature was not sealed.

The Roman Defences in the fourth century

It had been anticipated that Bastion 6, originally recorded by P Marsden, would be "excavated" but this did not occur because it is an area not affected by redevelopment. However, the coin of Constans recovered from the backfill of what is thought to be the V-shaped ditch in Area 2, may have some bearing on the dating of Bastion 6. As Bastion 6 projected approximately 5.8m (19ft) forward of the wall its construction would have necessitated the backfilling of the V-shaped ditch. Therefore, if the coin of Constans was deposited with the backfill immediately prior to construction, a date for the erection of the Bastion after c 350 AD is indicated. There was no sign of the late Roman flat-

9 P Marsden, "Archaeological Finds in the City of London 1966-9," *Trans. Lon. Middx. Arch. Soc.* (1970) 22, Pt. 3, 4.

10 Merrifield, *op. cit.* 105.

11 Merrifield, *op. cit.* Fig 8, 71.

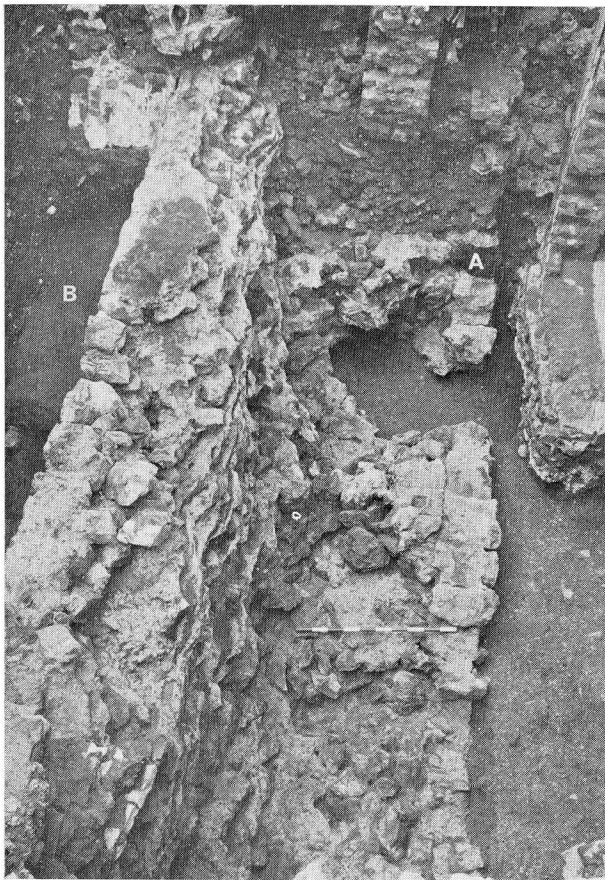


Fig. 6. View looking west. The Roman wall surviving to its full width.
A: the red sandstone plinth in situ.
B: the bank behind the wall.

(Photo: John Bailey)

bottomed ditch that would have been dug just beyond the bastion, but in Area 1 the cutting of the late medieval ditch would certainly have obliterated it.

Discussion

Excavation at Dukes Place have revealed evidence of activity concerning the City defences from 2nd-17th century (the Medieval Defences will be discussed in a future issue of *the London Archaeologist*). The tenuous evidence of early occupation of the site—the (?) beam slot and abutting post-hole—is not closely dated and virtually nothing is known of the Roman topography of the north-eastern corner of the city, except for the existence of an

early military ditch and the road to Colchester. The (?) ditch/boundary has not been observed in a similar juxtaposition to the wall elsewhere and might therefore only be a local feature. However, it does raise the question of how the limits of London were established prior to the construction of the wall. The manner of establishing boundaries in the Roman Empire varied from the setting up of stone altars or boundary stones to the adoption of suitable natural features¹². There was no evidence to suggest the existence of defences pre-dating the construction of the Roman wall and it was clear that the bank behind the wall had not been cut back to accommodate it¹³, but was in fact stratigraphically later than the wall. Pottery from under the wall and from deposits against its internal and external faces dates to c 180 AD and is in accord with evidence from elsewhere¹⁴ which suggests a construction date for the wall not earlier than the last decade of the second century. The apparently substantial raising of the level of the ground surface outside

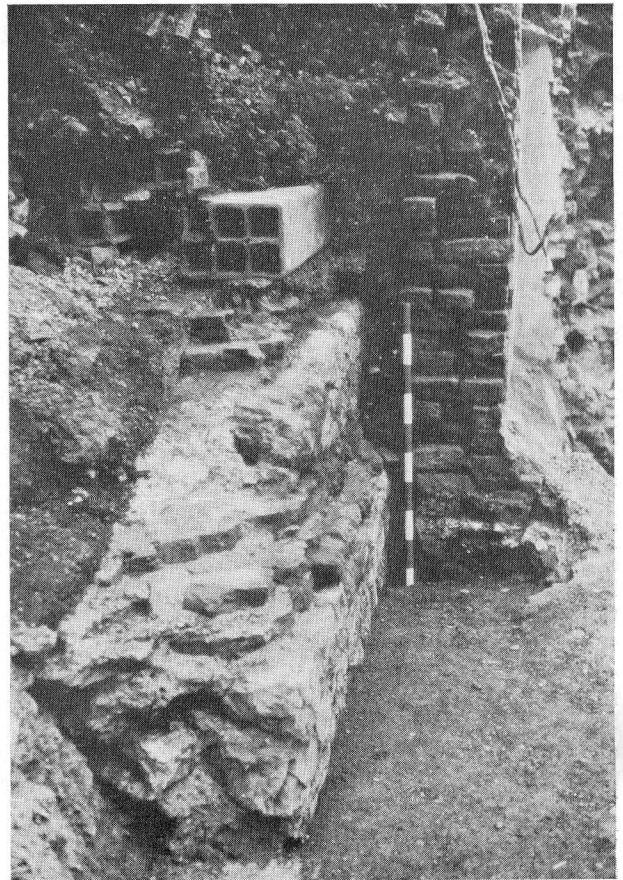


Fig. 7: The external face of the wall with offset above the bottom course of tiles, seen in Area 2.

(Photo: John Maloney)

12 O A W Dilke, *The Roman Land Surveyors* (1971), 98-108.

13 S Frere, *Britannia* (1967) 249-50.

14 Merrifield, *op. cit* 48-50.



Fig. 8: View looking south. Longitudinal section through the Roman Wall showing details of the construction. (Photo: John Bailey)

the wall might be a reflection of the low lying nature of the natural topography. However, if the external offset is not an aberration it may be that these two features of construction were employed to compensate for unstable ground in this area. The finding of a coin of Constans, in a context

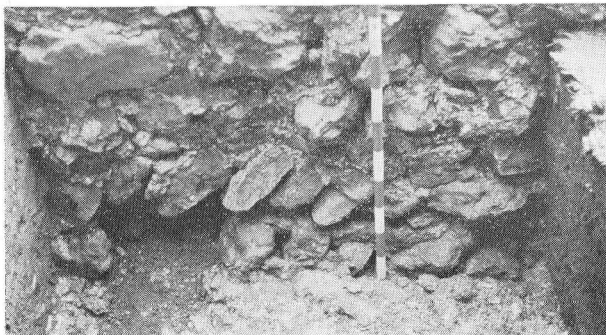


Fig. 9: Details of the construction of the internal face of the wall: the mortar surface which was a result of the construction wall is seen in the foreground.

(Photo: John Maloney)

which is thought to antedate the construction of Bastion 6, is of potential significance to our understanding of the late Roman defences in London. Peter Marsden's excavations at Bastion 6 revealed a deposit post-dating the construction of the bastion which contained pottery of fourth century date and coins of the House of Theodosius (379-395)¹⁵. Recent results of dendrochronological analysis of samples from the Roman riverside wall¹⁶ point to a construction date of *c* 350-370 AD and so it may be that the construction of the Roman riverside wall and bastions were part of a comprehensive reorganisation of the defences of London in the late Roman period¹⁷.

- 15 B Hobley and J Schofield, "Excavations in the City of London First Interim Report, 1974-75," *The Antiquaries Journal* (1977), 57, Pt. 1, 65 (Footnote 34).
- 16 From Baynards Castle, the Tower and the recent excavations at New Fresh Wharf. See pp 283-7.
- 17 C Hill, M Millett, and T Blagg. *The Roman Riverside Wall and Monumental Arch in London. Excavations at Baynard's Castle, Upper Thames Street, London, 1974-76. Lon. Middx. Arch. Special Paper No. 3* (forthcoming).