

Three inhumation burials from Southwark

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THIS ARTICLE describes three burials found in Southwark between 1977 and 1979. The earliest, a late Iron Age inhumation, (Fig. 2.1) was found in 1977 during excavations at 124-126 Borough High Street (TQ 3250 7993). This office redevelopment site is located within the Roman and medieval settlement on the line of the Roman road from London Bridge to Watling and Stane Streets.

Two Roman period skeletons (Fig. 2.2 and 3) were found in 1977 and 1979 during separate short-term training excavations in an area between Harper Road and Merrick Square (TQ 3246 7936). These training digs were organised by S.L.A.E.C. on behalf of the Extra Mural Department of the University of London, and I.L.E.A.'s City Literary Institute, Holborn.

The excavations were carried out in advance of the proposed construction of a school, a scheme which has since been abandoned. The area available for excavation was about 9000m² (2 acres), and, as a preliminary, several machine-dug trenches were opened in 1977. An area of 60m² was then investigated in greater detail by hand.

The Burial from 124-126 Borough High Street

This burial was sealed by a layer of sandy loam which extended across much of the site and which contained pottery of the Roman conquest or immediately after. The layer was cut by post-pits of a possible timber structure, which, in turn, were sealed by the Roman road. The construction date of this road is at present thought to be c. A.D. 50-55; the burial should therefore not be dated later than c. A.D. 40-50, and may be earlier.¹

The inhumation (Figs. 1, 2.1) lay in a grave which was truncated by a modern wall footing but was probably c. 1.30m (4ft 3in) long and 0.75m (2ft 6in) wide. It had been dug into the surface of the natural yellow sands (at +1.38m (4ft 6in) O.D.), to a depth of 0.45m (1ft 6in), and was a broad, flat-bottomed scoop in the sand. No evidence for a coffin was found, and there were no grave goods.

1. In the face of this firm *terminus ante quem*, however, the Carbon-14 date for the bones, at A.D. 1100±90 (Har. 2524), is conflicting and must be anomalous.
2. A. H. Graham in *Southwark Excavations 1972-1974* (1978) 501.

The skeleton, of a male aged about 30 years and about 1.60m (5ft 3in) tall, lay on its back, arms spread against the sides of the grave and legs flexed, crossing at the ankles. The position of the skull suggested that the head had originally been supported, perhaps on the sloping end of the grave destroyed by modern foundations.

Excavations in Southwark have suggested that, in the late prehistoric period, the area comprised sand and gravel islands lying among marshes and channels². Mesolithic to Iron Age material has been found, though not in quantity, and often in Roman and later contexts. The burial might be

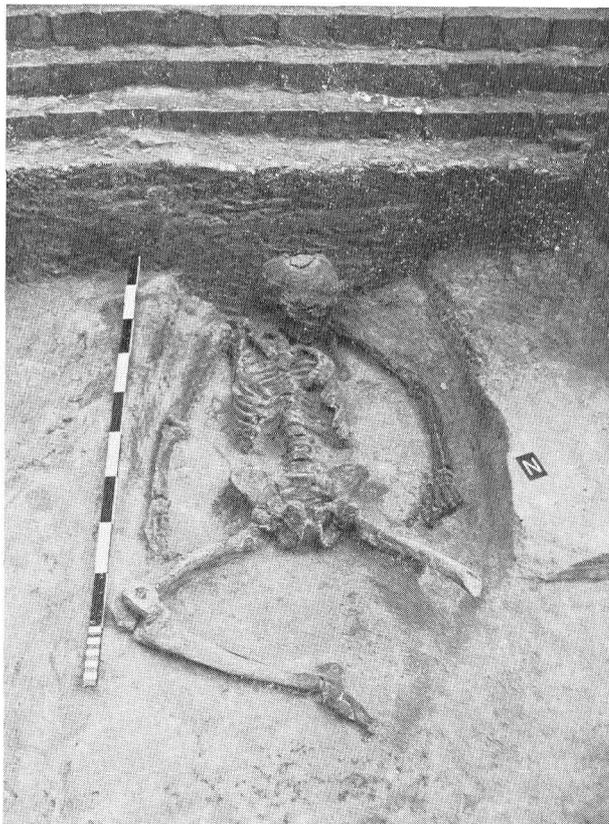
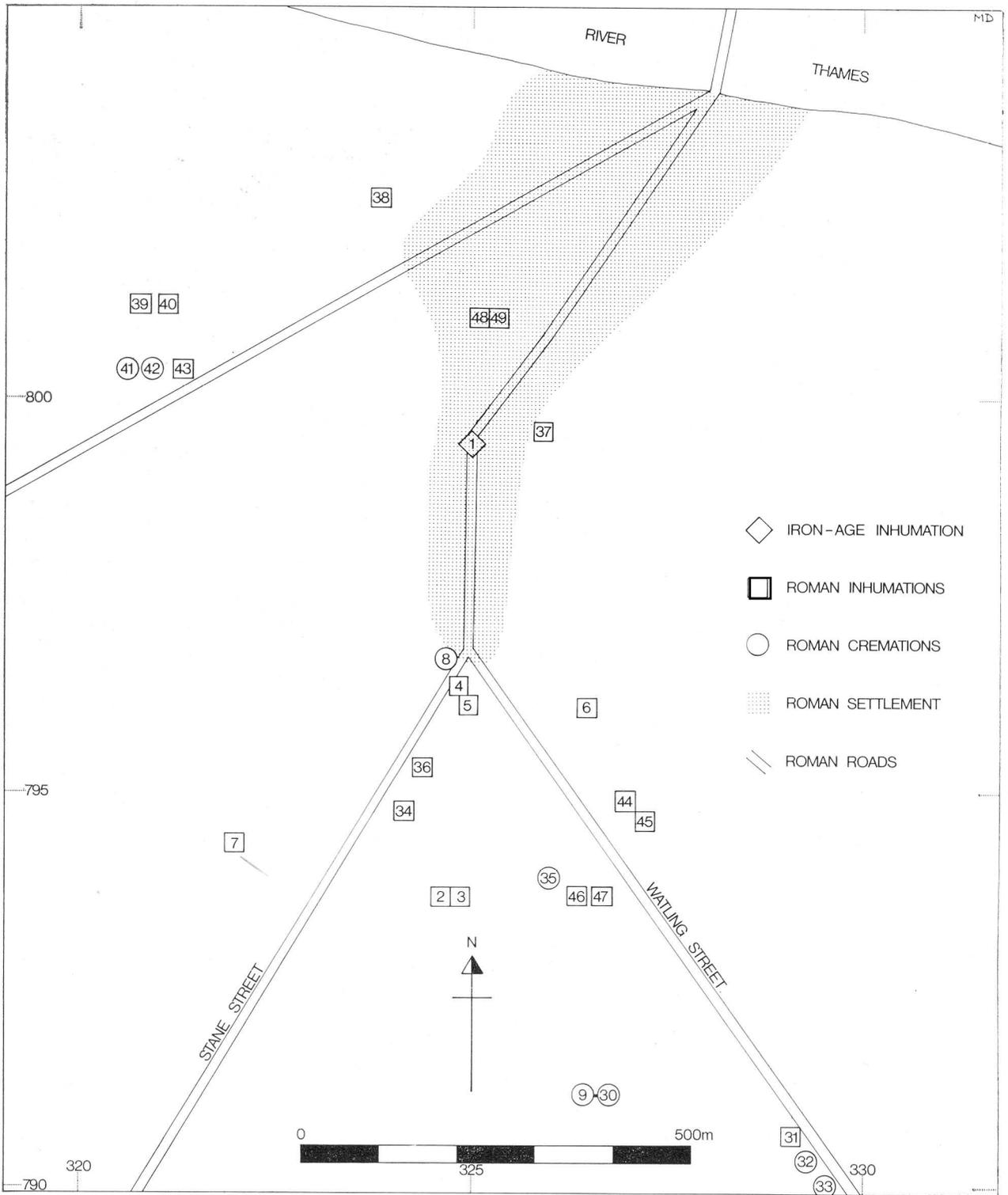


Fig. 1: Late Iron Age flexed inhumation, from under the Roman road leading to London Bridge. Scale: 1m long.



taken as evidence for settlements in the locality during the late Iron Age.

Only one other burial with comparable rites has been noted from the London area. This was found in recent excavations at the Tower of London, and yielded a Carbon-14 date of A.D. 70 ± 70^3 .

The Harper Road Burials

The comparatively shallow depth of stratigraphy beneath garden soil on this site indicated that it was

1. 124-126 Borough High Street (TQ 3250 7993) Inhumation. Male. S.L.A.E.C. excavation.
2. Harper Road I (TQ 3246 7936) Inhumation. Male. S.L.A.E.C. excavation.
3. Harper Road II (TQ 3246 7936) Inhumation. Female. S.L.A.E.C. excavation.
4. Swan Street I (TQ 3251 7959) Inhumation. Male. S.L.A.E.C. excavation. A. H. Graham in *Southwark Excavations 1972-1974* (1978) 477.
5. Swan Street II (TQ 3251 7959) Inhumation. Female. S.L.A.E.C. excavation. A. H. Graham *Ibid* 477.
6. Chaucer House (TQ 3265 7961) Irregular Inhumation. Female. S.L.A.E.C. excavation. B. Yule *London Archaeol* 2 No. 14, 359.
7. Sessions House, Newington Causeway (TQ 322 794) Cremation. Horniman Museum Collection.
8. The Dover Castle, Great Dover Street (TQ 3246 7966) Cremation. Museum of London Collection.
- 9-30. Deverell Street 1-22 (TQ 3264 7910) Cremations. *Royal Commission On Historical Monuments — London* 3 (1928) 167.
31. Old Kent Road I (TQ 3291 7904) Inhumation. *Ibid* 167.
32. Old Kent Road II Cremation. *Ibid* 167.
33. Old Kent Road III Cremation. *Ibid* 167.
34. Trinity Church (TQ 3240 7945) Inhumation. *Ibid* 167.
35. Trinity Street I (TQ 3260 7939) Cremation. *Ibid* 167.
36. Trinity Street II Inhumation. Museum of London Collection. *Ibid* 167.
37. Newcomen Street (TQ 3256 7997) Inhumation. *Ibid* 167.
38. Park Street. Inhumation. *Ibid* 167
39. Ewer Street I Inhumation. *Ibid* 167
40. Ewer Street II Inhumation. *Ibid* 167.
41. Union Street I Cremation. Museum of London Collection. *Ibid* 167.
42. Union Street II Cremation. *Ibid* 167.
43. Union Street III Inhumation. *Ibid* 167.
44. Tabard Street I Cremation. Museum of London Collection. *Ibid* 167.
45. Tabard Street II Inhumation. Bird and Graham in *Southwark Excavations 1972-1974* (1978) 525.
46. Great Dover Street I (TQ 3265 7936). Inhumation. P. R. V. Marsden *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* 20 (1961), 166
47. Great Dover Street II (TQ 3265 7936). Inhumation. P. R. V. Marsden, *ibid.*
48. Calvert's Buildings, Southwark Street I (TQ 3252 8010). Inhumation. Female. S.L.A.E.C. Excavation.
49. Calvert's Buildings, Southwark Street II (TQ 3252 8010). Inhumation. Male. S.L.A.E.C. Excavation.



Fig. 3: Fourth century male inhumation. Scale: 2m long.

outside the medieval and Roman settlement. In 1977 a ditch was found aligned north west-south east which contained fourth century pottery. Immediately adjacent to the ditch, and parallel to it, was an inhumation burial lying on its back, arms across the lower chest, and with the head to the north west. (Figs. 2.2, 3). The skeleton was that of a male about 1.75m (5ft 9in) tall and in his late teens. Iron nails, mostly distributed around the body, indicated the use of a wooden coffin, while a concreted mass of hobnails under the one undisturbed foot implied that he was wearing boots or some other form of footwear.

A layer of fine-grained chalk found under the skeleton showed that it probably belonged to the 'plaster burial' group⁴. This is a category of Roman burials where gypsum or chalk was packed around the corpse, probably in the belief that it helped

3. G. Parnell in *London Archaeol* 3 No. 4 (1977) 97.
4. C. Green in *Burial in the Roman World* (1977) 52.

preserve the body. Fragments of fourth century pottery were recovered from the grave fill. In the 1979 excavation three separate areas totalling 12m² were investigated close to the 1977 grave. A second skeleton was found 13m (42ft) east of the first. Figs. 2.3, 4). This was of female in her early twenties and about 1.60m (5ft 2in) tall, lying on her back, head to the south west, and arms by her side. She too, was in a wooden coffin, as shown by the iron nails around the body. Alongside the head was a complete mid-first century A.D. flagon⁵, (Fig. 5) and at her feet was a decorated bronze neck-collar⁶ (Fig. 6) and the remains of a square tinned-bronze mirror⁷.

Both skeletons were heavily disturbed by root and animal activity, with many of the smaller bones missing or out of position. One of the foot bones of the male was found above his shoulder. This disturbance made it difficult to distinguish the grave cuts much above the level of the skeletons, and the cut for the first century burial was scarcely detectable even around the body.

Roman Burials in Southwark

There are many problems in understanding the distribution of the local Roman burials, as Wheeler discovered in preparing his survey of 1928.⁸ Many of them, especially those reported before the turn of the century, are imprecisely located, poorly recorded and, particularly in the case of skeletons, often attributed to the Roman period without any firm evidence. Despite these difficulties it can be shown that the known and probable Roman burials lie mostly outside the settlements in two distinct areas. (Fig. 2). The majority are located south of the junction of Stane Street and Watling Street alongside and between the two roads. A second group to the north west, previously seen in isolation, might now be regarded as situated along the road thought to run from the Southwark bridgehead to



Fig. 4: Early Roman female inhumation buried with a flagon, a bronze mirror and an engraved bronze neck-collar.

Lambeth. This distribution is in accord with Roman custom in which legal factors restricted burial to beyond urban settlements; favoured sites being alongside important roads where funerary monuments could easily be seen.⁹

5. Paul Tyers writes that the collared flagon is a well known early Roman type — Southwark class IA (Marsh and Tyers in *Southwark Excavations 1972-1974* (1978) 548) — and this particularly fine example could have been made in Britain, or possibly in Gaul or Germany. The fabric and form are unlike either Southwark forms IA1, which possibly comes from Kent, or IA2, which was produced in the Verulamium region. In Southwark such flagons are generally pre-Flavian, but there also a few from early-Flavian contexts.
6. Jenny Hall of the Museum of London describes the neck-collar or torc as being reminiscent in style of Iron-Age jewellery. She writes: "There seems to be no exact parallel. There is a form of flat collar-like neck-rings in the Iron Age to early Roman periods, but these mostly have a hinging device at the centre-back. The collar, without such a hinge, would have been difficult to put on and thus was

- presumably left on permanently. While feathering and ring-and-dot decorations are known throughout the Roman period, and although similar decorations have been found on bracelets in third and fourth century burials, the overall style and appearance suggests a date very early in the Roman period."
7. In the opinion of Dr Glynis Lloyd-Morgan this mirror, in very poor condition, belongs to Group A of rectangular bronze mirrors and was probably made in the workshops of northern Italy, though the square outline is less easy to parallel than the more common rectangular shape. Dr Lloyd-Morgan thinks the date of production is less easy to establish, but it is likely to be before the mid first century, and the mirror may have been slightly old fashioned by the time of its burial.
8. R. E. M. Wheeler *Royal Commission on Historical Monuments London* 3 (1928) 167.
9. J. Liversidge *Britain in the Roman Empire* (1968) 468.

It is generally accepted that in Britain cremation was the usual burial rite through the first century and up to the latter part of the second. This was followed by inhumation in the third and fourth centuries, with a period of overlap when both rites were used.¹⁰ The mid-first century female inhumation might therefore be regarded as unusual. It is possible that she came from a local group that inhumed the dead or, alternatively, she may have come from another part of the Roman Empire. It is probable that many merchants and traders were in London in the mid-first century¹¹, and it seems likely that at least some of them had women accompanying them. Unfortunately the grave goods do not indicate any particular source.

It is thought that Southwark was less densely settled in the later Roman period¹² but, at present, there is no confirmation of this from the burial evidence. There appears to be no significant difference in the distribution of the two burial rites and, although there have been more of the earlier cremations recorded than later inhumations, the numbers are too small to be sure that this reflects population change.

The evidence so far suggests that though burials may be expected to the south of the settlement, few concentrations exist; the excavations at Harper Road found only two burials in a total of 450m² investi-

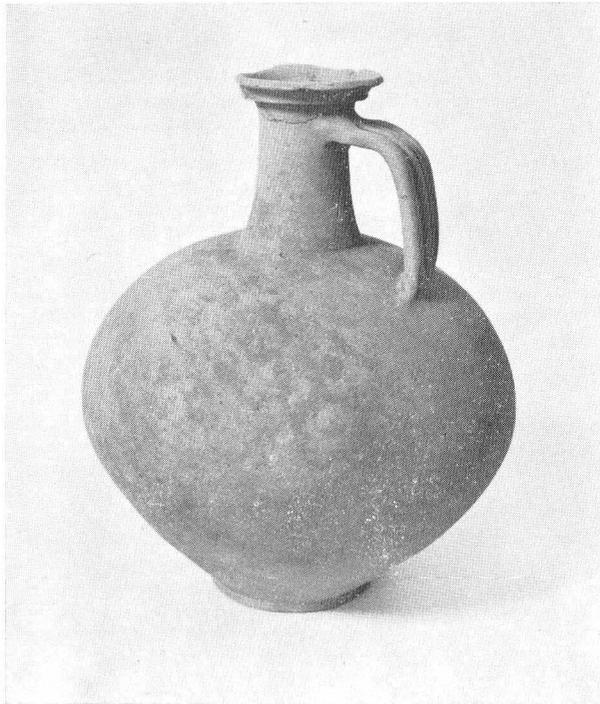


Fig. 5: Mid-first century flagon.

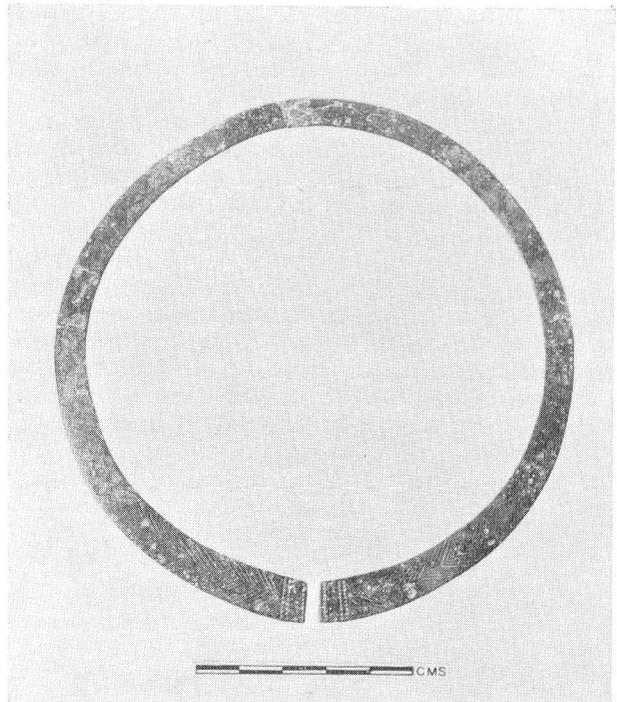


Fig. 6: Bronze neck-collar.

gated. There is some indication from S.L.A.E.C. excavations in this area that much of the land might have been divided into fields by ditches, and was under cultivation¹³. If this was the case it is possible that many of the burials lay in small groups within the fields and are the remains of those who, at various times, worked or owned the land. The closest indication of what might be a cemetery comes from the Deverell Street area where upwards of twenty cremation urns were found. (Fig 2.9-30).

Little progress has been made over the last fifty years in understanding the burial practices and demography of Roman Southwark. Work on museum collections could produce further data, but only extensive excavation, within the areas where burials might be expected, will provide the necessary evidence concerning the nature of the population and its burial habits.

Acknowledgements

We should like to thank Dr Nigel Andrews for

10. L. P. Wenham *Romano-British Cemetery — Trentholme Drive* (1968) 4.
11. Tacitus *The Annals* Book 14 33.
12. H. Sheldon in *Southwark Excavations 1972-1974* (1978) 36.
13. A number of sites in the course of preparation for publication indicate this. They include Chaucer House, Rephidim Street, Long Lane and Harper Road.

his work on the skeletal material; Paul Tyers for his comments on the flagon; Jenny Hall for her research on the neck collar; Dr Glynis Lloyd-Morgan for her opinion on the mirror; Harvey Sheldon and Laura Schaaf for their help and advice during the writing of this article. We should also like to thank all the volunteers, students and colleagues who helped on the excavation.

Addendum

Since this article was written two inhumations have been found on the site of Calvert's Buildings, Southwark Street (TQ 3252 8010). One is a 'plaster' burial (Fig. 2.48 and front cover) of a young female about 12 years old and 1.38m (4ft 7in) tall. The skeleton, aligned east-west, was surrounded by finely divided chalk within a wooden coffin. Objects placed with the grave suggest a probable burial date sometime within the first half of the fourth century. The assemblage includes six bronze and two bone bracelets, one glass, two jet and two bone pins, a cooking jar, and the remains of a shoe, in the form of a foot-

shaped group of hobnails. The second burial (Fig. 2.49), parallel to the first and 1.20m to the south, could only be partially excavated because the upper part of the torso was outside the site boundary. This skeleton appears to be that of a male about 1.60m (5ft 3in) tall, and probably in his early twenties. No grave goods were recovered, and there was no indication of the plaster burial rite, but the few iron nails found suggest a wooden coffin. It seems likely that these two graves, similarly aligned, close together, and dug from the same height, are more or less contemporary.

An interesting feature of the two graves is that they are within the remains of a substantial Roman building complex. They both cut through an *opus signinum* floor and an underlying tessellated pavement. The date of the burials indicate that the building had probably gone out of use before the mid fourth century. These two burials, together with many other pieces of human skeletal material recovered on the site, perhaps indicate a concentration of late Roman burials within the original settlement area.

Excavations & Post-Excavation work

City, by Museum of London, Department of Urban Archaeology. A series of long term excavations. Enquiries to Alison Balfour-Lynn, DUA, 71 Basinghall Street, E.C.2. (01-236 1946).

Brentford, by West London Archaeological Field Group, Excavation and processing. Enquiries to 71-72 Brentford High Street, Brentford, Middlesex. (01-560 3880).

Croydon & District, Processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collections of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass were also available for comparative work. Hon. Curator, Croydon Natural History & Scientific Society Ltd, Museum Building, Croydon Biology Centre, Chipstead Valley Road, Coulsdon, Surrey. (01-660 3841 or 22 43727).

Fulham by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Sandford Manor, Rewell Street (New Kings Road), S.W.6. Excavation work in grounds of 17th century house, traceable back to at least 14th century, hopefully will find medieval and earlier occupation. Enquiries to Excavation Director, C. E. Oliver, 18 Albany Court, Ashburnham Road, Ham, Richmond, Surrey. (01-948 2633) or K. Whitehouse.

Fulham Palace, Bishops Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, S.W.6. Examination of existing buildings and research work has revealed earlier buildings underneath. Sundays Enquiries to Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, S.W.6. (01-731 0338).

Hammersmith, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of post-medieval material from Sandford Manor and medieval material from Fulham Palace, Tuesdays, 7.45 p.m.-10 p.m., at Fulham Palace, Bishops Avenue, Fulham Palace Road S.W.6 Contact Keith Whitehouse (see Fulham)

Inner London Boroughs, by the Inner London Unit, Several rescue sites in various areas. (01-242 6620).

Kingston, by Kingston-upon Thames Archaeological

Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Marion Hinton, Kingston Museum, Fairfield Road, Kingston (01-546 5386).

North-East Greater London, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, E.15. (01-534 4545).

South West London Boroughs by the South West London Unit, excavations and processing. Enquiries to Scott McCracken, 399a Upper Richmond Road, S.W.15 (01-878 0479).

Southwark, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee. Several sites from the Roman period onwards. Enquiries to Harvey Sheldon, S.L.A.E.C., Port Medical Centre, English Grounds, Morgan's Lane, SE1 2HT. (01-407 1989).

Surrey, by Surrey Archaeological Unit. Paid and unpaid volunteers required urgently for sites in Staines and Stanwell. Enquiries to David Bird, County Archaeological Officer, Planning Department, County Hall, Kingston, Surrey. (01-546 1050 x 3665).

Vauxhall Pottery, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society. Excavation at weekends only. Processing of excavated material continues three nights a week. All enquiries to S.L.A.S. c/o Cuming Museum, 155 Walworth Road, SE.17 (01-703 3324)

GENERAL EXCAVATIONS

The Council for British Archaeology produces a monthly Calendar of Excavations from March to September, with an extra issue in November and a final issue in January summarising the main results of fieldwork. The Calendar gives details of extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The annual subscription is £3.30 post-free, which should be made payable to C.B.A., 112 Kensington Road, S.E.11.