

Tower of London - Inmost Ward excavation 1979

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IT IS AN ESTABLISHED FACT that during the late Roman period, London's riverfront was provided with a continuous defensive wall from the Tower in the east to Blackfriars in the west. The construction date, based on a combination of radio carbon analysis and dendrochronology, can be attributed to the period A.D. 350 - 370¹. Doubtless the closing of the city's *enceinte* can be seen as part of the general pattern of measures taken throughout Roman Britain in the fourth century to combat the increasing Saxon threat. A more precise context, however, might be found in the Theodosian reconstruction, which followed the *barbarica conspiratio* of A.D. 367.

The discovery in 1976/7 of a second, and later, Roman river wall at the Tower would seem to complicate the pattern of London's defences. The wall was sited 4m (13'2") north of the earlier one and on the same east-west alignment. Some 14.50m (46') west of the landward wall, it turned abruptly south at 100°, to terminate against the inner face of the earlier wall (see Fig 2). At least part of the earlier wall was allowed to remain standing to the west of the junction, thereby forming a corridor between the two². The probable intention was to transform the corner of the circuit into a salient feature which could only be approached by way of the narrow passage to the west. The possibility of a gate at this point was perhaps suggested by the partial discovery of an angular projection at the end of the passage.

The surviving remains of the first wall were structurally sound and unless conditions had deteriorated further to the west, it might be supposed that re-modelling was initiated by design rather than by defect. The alterations are particularly impressive when the date is taken into account; from a mass of dumping contemporary with completion came coin evidence for a construction date no earlier than A.D. 388 — the latest known date for a structure of this kind anywhere in Britain.

The removal in August 1979 of an unprepossessing

twentieth-century toilet immediately east of the Wakefield Tower, provided an opportunity to excavate a small trench on the projected line of the period II river wall. The site itself was destined to accommodate new cages for the Tower Ravens, and in advance of this rather novel redevelopment an investigation was carried out in September and October 1979.

The Site

The wall was found to occupy its anticipated alignment. In the narrow 8 x 5.40m (26'4" x 17'9") confines of the trench a section of masonry 2.40m

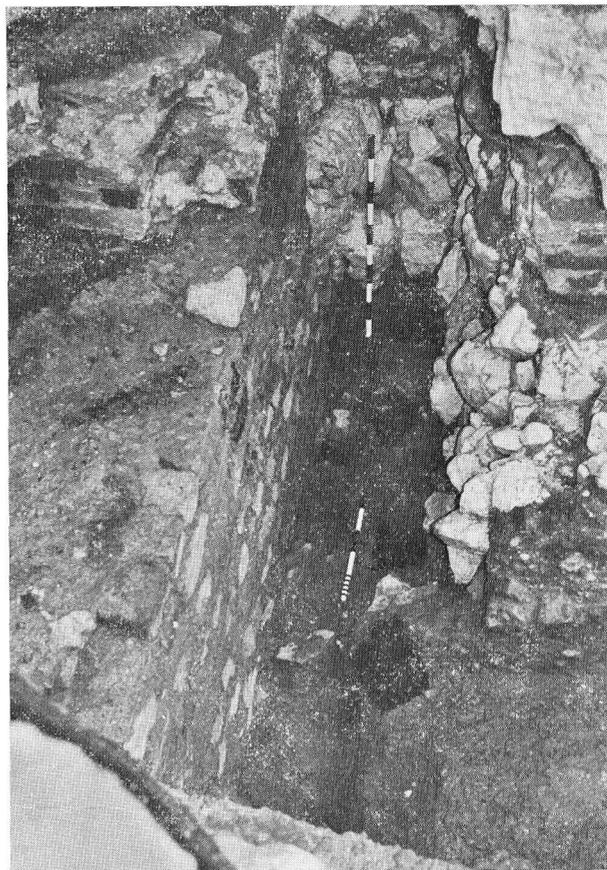


Fig. 1: Internal face of river wall looking west. The parallel line of timber was sealed by the later medieval footings on the right.

1. J. Hillam & R. Morgan, "The Dating of the Roman Riverside Wall". *London Archaeol* 3, No. 11 (1979) 283-288.
2. G. Parnell, "An earlier Roman riverside wall at the Tower of London". *London Archaeol* 3, No. 7 (1978) 171-176.

(7'11") in length and 1.10m (3ft 8in) in height was available for inspection. Only the north (inner) face of the wall and 1m (3'3") of its core could be examined, since the south face and eastern limits lay beneath the extant curtain — an ignorant reconstruction of the late nineteenth century. To the west the masonry had been totally replaced by massive medieval chalk foundations (see 78, Figs 1 & 2).

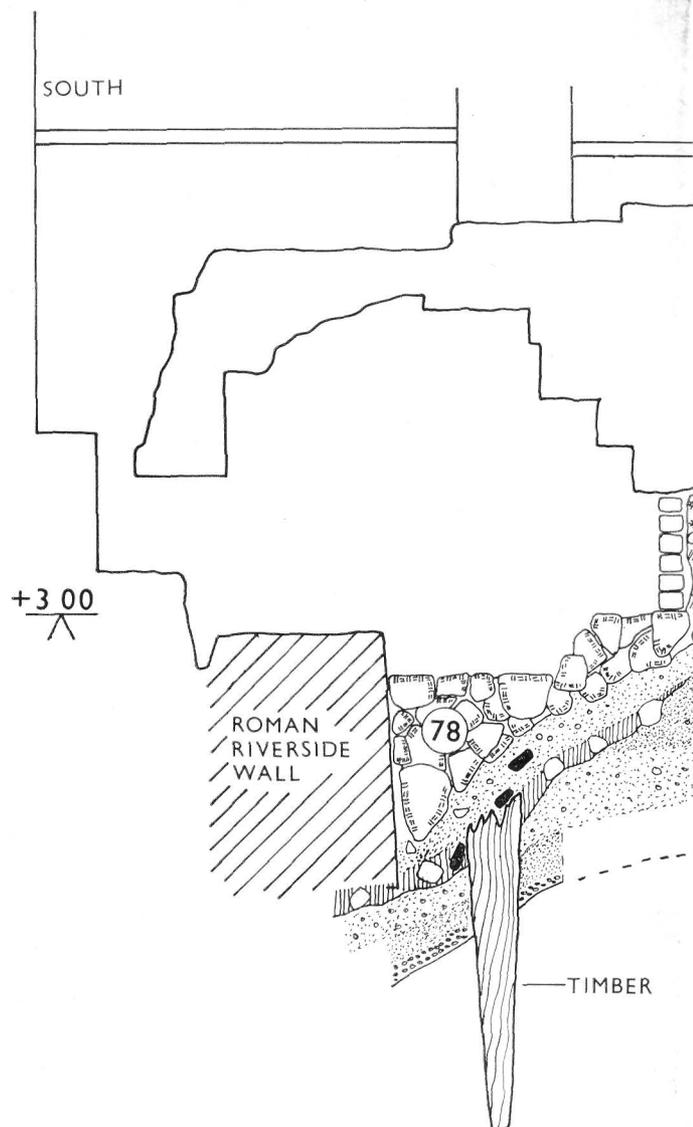
The appearance of the masonry was much the same as that previously recorded. Eight neat courses of squared ragstone, with occasional pieces of purbeck marble, sandstone, tufa, brick and tile, formed the face, while the wide joints between the rows were pointed with a fine mortar. The core comprised alternating layers of packed rubble and bands of very gravelly yellow mortar. The only apparent modification in building technique was the use of a construction trench (see Fig 2). Cut to a depth of 1m (3'3"), with the base of the wall occurring within at 1.8m O.D., this contrasts with the previous stretch of walling which along its 21m (69') length was built entirely free-standing at between 2m and 2.50m O.D. Presumably the Roman builders perceived adverse conditions in the existing ground levels and altered their construction methods accordingly.

Within the construction trench, some 25cm (10") away from the face of the wall, were found the remains of a line of oak timbers set approximately 30-40cm (12"-16") apart (see Fig 1). Their alignment suggests an affinity with the wall. Evidently cut down to their existing height when much of the construction trench was re-excavated during the medieval period, the timbers were probably not associated with the earlier wall to the south, since the masons erecting the second wall — even if they were exceptionally agile — would have found them a considerable inconvenience. They would appear, therefore, to be contemporary either with the construction of the wall, at a higher level, or with an addition to it. If the former is appropriate, it is tempting to equate them with scaffolding; the previous excavation established that this was used, as evidenced by a row of putlog holes in the wall at a height of 1.50m (5')³.

For a small trench, with much of the late Roman stratigraphy destroyed by medieval scarping, the numismatic evidence for dating the wall is impressive. From deposits 51 and 59, through which the construction trench was cut (see Fig 2), a total of forty eight coins was found. A provisional examination has revealed that fifteen belong to the first half and twelve to the second half of the fourth century⁴.

3. G. Parnell, "Excavations at the Tower of London 1976/7". *London Archaeol* 3, No. 4 (1977) 98.

4. I am grateful to Peter Curnow for examining the coins.



The latter group terminates in an issue of the House of Theodosius I and another of Arcadius, both A.D. 388+. This compliments the evidence from the 1976/7 excavations and illustrates that work on the wall could not have started before A.D. 388. In fact, there is reason to believe that a start was made somewhat later than this. Both coins were well within their parent deposits, and these lay directly over an extensive scatter of ragstone waste which might be interpreted as masons' debris associated with the construction of the earlier wall to the south. It is possible that these deposits represent the tail-end of the wall's internal bank or a levelling operation immediately to the north.

In the north-west corner of the excavation, where the medieval scarping was least damaging, a tanta-

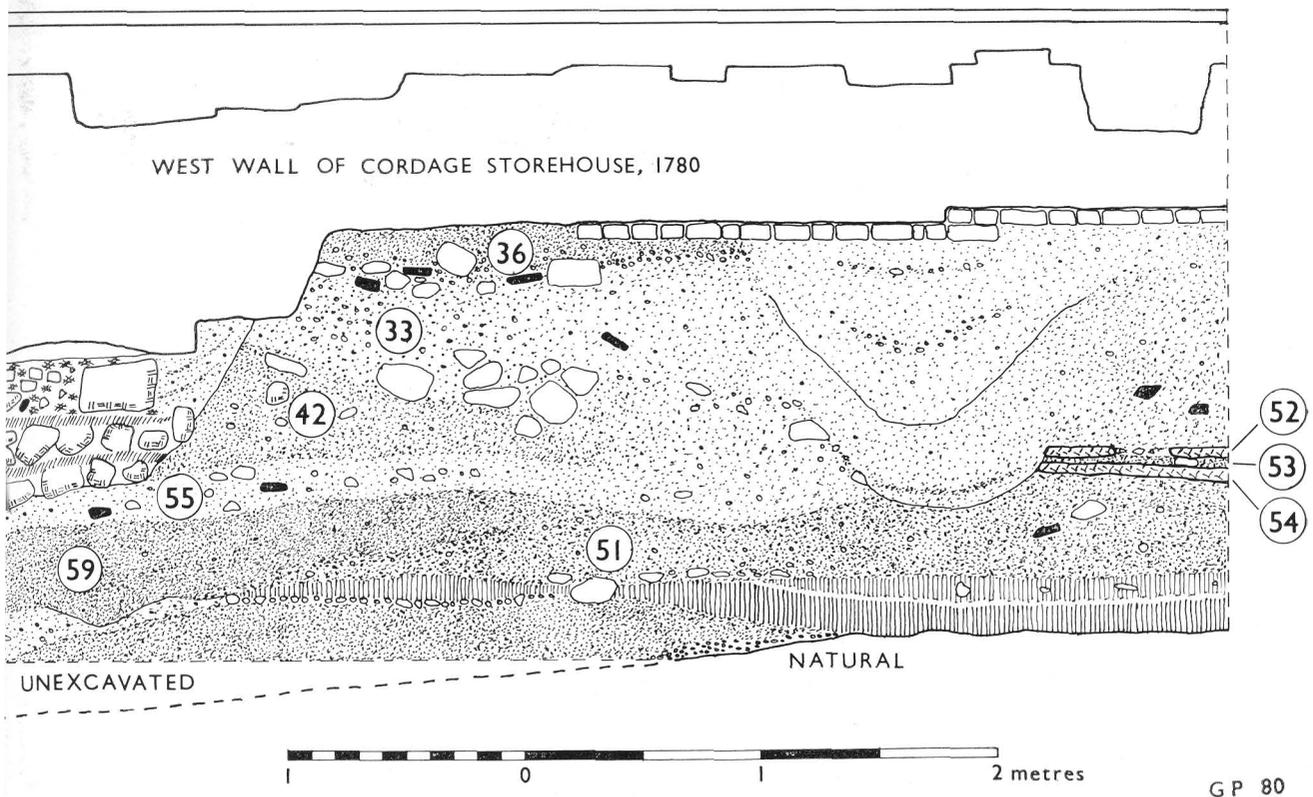


Fig. 2: Inmost Ward 1979: west section.

lising glimpse of further building activity was recorded. Lying directly over the deposits just described was a thin spread of sand and crushed chalk (54) — perhaps representing the remains of a robbed floor. Above this occurred a thin layer of dark silt (53), which was in turn concealed by a mortar floor (52), up to 15cm (6") in thickness (see Fig 2). Of competent appearance, it comprised a mixture of large gravel and yellow mortar screeded with a second, very fine, mortar. Both can be regarded as contemporary, the second mix being designed to level off the unevenness of the first. It is possible that 54 represents part of a structure disturbed by the raising of the second river wall, with 52 being a subsequent replacement. Alternatively, 54 might be contemporary with, or later than, the wall, making 52 even later. The 5.8m (18') distance between the floors and the river wall produced no evidence for an intervening wall. It is of course possible that the medieval scarping removed all trace, but since the depth of disturbance was very limited this seems unlikely. The possibility must exist, therefore, that the latest floor

at least relied on the river wall as a southern boundary. Appendages against the defences are not unknown; within the Tower itself, a substantial masonry building is known to have stood against the inner face of the landward wall immediately south-east of the White Tower (see Fig 3). The structure in its original form almost certainly pre-dates the *circa* A.D. 200 landward wall, but it experienced a considerable period of use and underwent major alterations; in one room fourth-century pottery was found below a tessellated pavement⁵.

The floors found in 1979 may be associated with a building known to exist on the higher ground further to the north. In 1899 part of a structure, which included a channelled hypocaust system, was found some 16 feet south-west of the White Tower. A short distance to the west, further walling, presumed to be associated, was discovered in 1975 (see Fig 3). This comprised an east-west ragstone wall supported to the south by two tile-bonded buttresses.

5. Information kindly supplied by Sarnia Butcher.

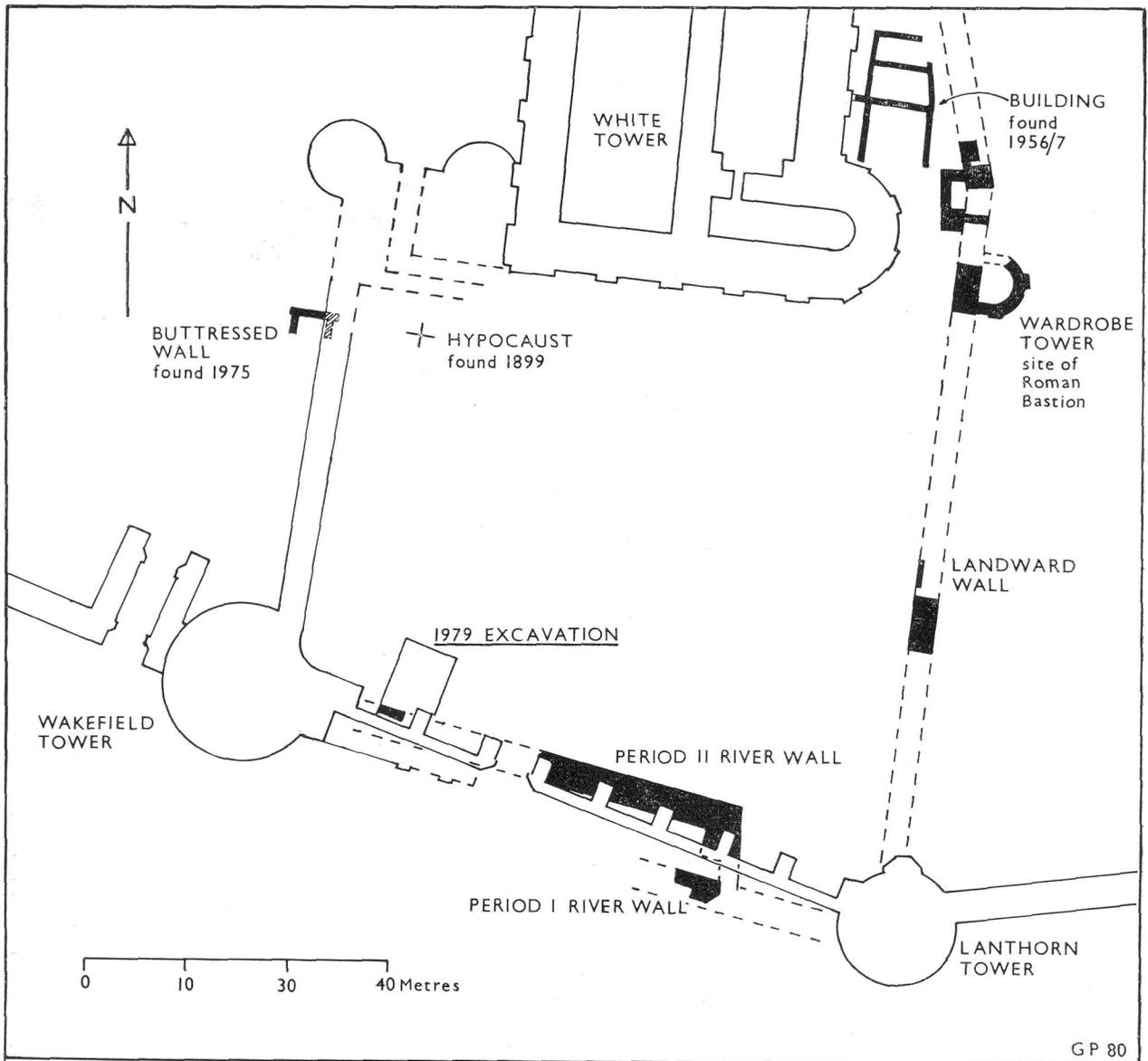


Fig. 3: Tower of London: plan of Inmost Ward showing location of site and Roman environs.

The buttresses were keyed into an earlier chalk wall, but unfortunately no dating evidence was obtained.

Whatever the relationship between the floors and nearby structures, their sequence, post-dating as it does the coin evidence for A.D. 388, makes it the latest known example of late Roman, or sub Roman, building activity within the city. Unfortunately no occupation levels survived above the second, and surviving floor 52, the medieval scarping (represented by layer 55) having literally scraped it clean (see Fig 2). However, it is worth mentioning that as the

scarping rises steadily to the north the chances of survival must greatly increase, thus offering a potentially unique opportunity for future research.

Discussion

The discovery of late Roman building activity within the Tower provides a sharp contrast with evidence from elsewhere in the city. Here, recent excavations have demonstrated a noticeable decline in occupation by the end of the second century, with the featureless and enigmatic 'dark earth' represented instead. Nevertheless, even with the city perhaps

thinly populated, the Roman authorities evidently found it desirable to protect the entire water front with a defensive wall between A.D. 350-370. The addition of projecting bastions to the existing land wall may belong to the same phase. However, these appear to be restricted to the eastern side of the circuit and might represent a programme of refortification which was never completed. Could it be that the undertaking proved too ambitious or unnecessary in the late fourth century, and that resources were eventually diverted to erecting a stronghold in the extreme south-east corner of the city? Certainly this is an area of obvious strategic importance and there is a tradition that the Tower was founded on the site of a Roman fortress. By the time Stow was compiling his Survey of London in the sixteenth century, it was a well-established belief that the Tower was of Roman origin, and as late as the end of the seventeenth century the White Tower was still referred to as "Caesars Tower."

Such an hypothetical enclosure could have been expected to house the official departments operating within the city. The *Notitia Dignitatum* lists an official in charge of the treasury at "Augusta", a late renaming of London which some authors have suggested took place in A.D. 369. In this respect it is worth noting the discovery of a fourth-century silver ingot in the Tower in 1777. This was discovered, along with gold coins of Arcadius and Honorius, while "digging the foundations of the new office for Board of Ordnance"⁶. The exact site of the discovery has until now been uncertain since the construction of the office has escaped attention. Recent documentary research, however, has shown that the building was in fact the main office of the Board, rather than one of their numerous other establishments. Severely damaged by fire in 1788, and subsequently rebuilt, it stood in the south-east of the Inmost Ward, over the corner of the Roman defences.

If a defensive enclosure did exist it might have been expected to influence the development of the early medieval castle. Excavations in 1963 and 1975 revealed Norman ditches whose alignments seem to have been determined by the position of Roman bastions. The 1963 ditch ran south-west to north-east across the parade north of the White Tower, to the supposed site of the second landward bastion, which Stow informs us was taken down by William I. The second ditch, aligned north-south, was directed towards the Wakefield Tower on the line of the south inner curtain. The curtain itself incorporates in its base the second Roman river wall, while the three towers along its length — Lanthorn, Wakefield and Bell — are thought to represent the positions of Roman bastions, their spacing being similar to those

on the landward wall. There is no reason to believe that these two ditches in themselves reflect any earlier defence line which cordon off the corner of the city, but they do illustrate the possible role that the Roman defences played in the formation of the Tower.

Circumstantial evidence associated with the Bell Tower — the most westerly of the inner curtain towers — is potentially more promising. The ground floor chamber of the tower occurs above a massive 18 feet solid base. An excavation in the boiler room of the Queens House, a short distance to the north, revealed that the adjoining curtain wall was inserted through a mass of clay, the top of which occurred at about 7.50m O.D. There is no doubt that this represents an artificial build up, since a bore hole survey of Tower Green, immediately to the east, has demonstrated that London clay is reached at 3.70m O.D. Presumably this accumulation accounts for the abnormally high level of the ground floor of the Bell Tower, and might be interpreted as part of a pre-existing feature running north along the line of the inner curtain. Of course this might be associated with an earlier medieval phase, perhaps forming part of an outer bailey to the eleventh-century castle. If, on the other hand, its origins are earlier, the implications for Roman London could be considerable.

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6. Miles, *Archaeologia* 5 (1779), 291.