

Fig. 1: Traces of the timber floor of Structure 2. The scale is in 0.10m (4in) units.
(Photo: Trevor Hurst)

Excavations at Watling Court

Part 1: Roman

DOMINIC PERRING

IN JUNE 1978 the Museum of London's Department of Urban Archaeology commenced excavation in advance of redevelopment on the Watling Court site. This site (TQ 3235 8105) lay on the north side of Cannon Street, bounded on the east by Bow Lane and west by Watling Court; north, separated from the excavated area by a row of buildings, ran Watling Street. In the Roman period the site lay approximately 210m (230 yards) west of the Walbrook, on level ground above the Thames. The excavations were completed in February 1979 and watching brief observations continued until March 1980: in all an area some

40m by 40m (130ft by 130ft) was investigated. The potential of the site had been demonstrated by Roman remains recorded during the construction of Watling House and Gateway House to the west of the site¹, and by the early medieval buildings excavated by Professor Grimes on the *Financial Times* site to the south-west². In this issue the Roman material from the site will be discussed; the post-Roman findings will be reported on at a later date.

The earliest levels above the natural brickearth (Period I) were examined rapidly, in adverse con-

1. R. Merrifield, *The Roman City of London*, 1965, sites 68-80.

2. W. F. Grimes, *The excavation of Roman and Mediaeval London*, 1968, 155-60.

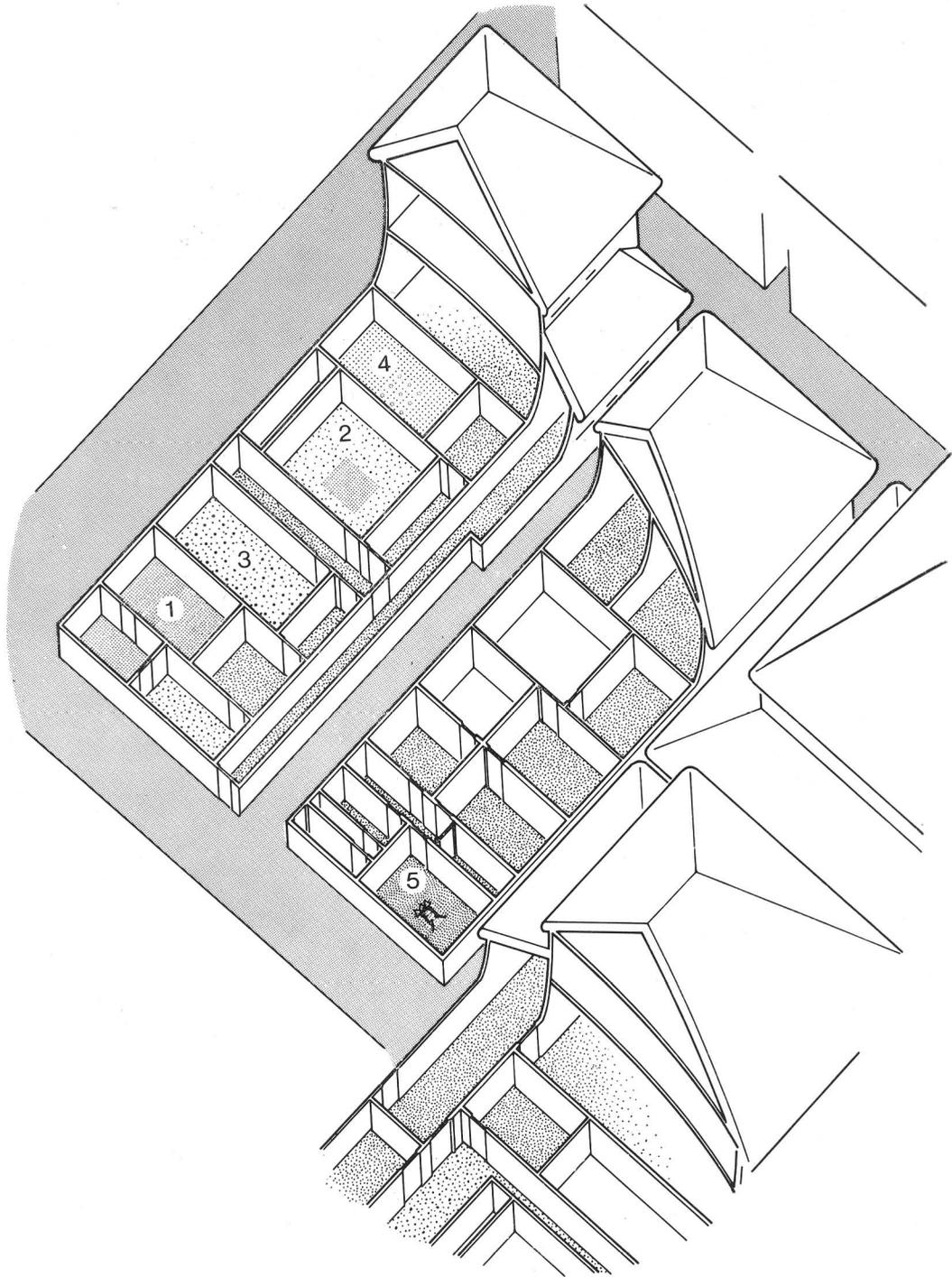


Fig. 2: Conjectured extent of the Period IV buildings seen from the north-east. Structure 6, in the middle, was *c* 29m (30 yards) long. Rooms number 1 to 5 are referred to in the text.



Fig. 3: First century mosaic floor in Room 1 of Structure 4, viewed from the south-west. The scale is in 0.10m (4in) units.
(Photo: Jon Bailey)

ditions, in a small part of the site only, and in consequence the interpretation of these levels must remain tentative; especially in view of the very slight traces which can be left by timber buildings (as illustrated by the earliest structures on the GPO, Newgate Street site³). The absence of a natural soil horizon and of root disturbance suggest deturfing of the site, perhaps in association with the quarrying which was implied by three shallow pits scooped into the brickearth. Brickearth and silt dumps overlay the natural and provided the ground surface on which the earliest buildings identified on site were constructed. The purpose of the dumping is not clear but might have been a combination of rubbish tipping, back-filling of the presumed quarries and a general, but possibly piecemeal, levelling off of the site. Two buildings (period II, Structures 1 and 2) were positively identified in the south-east corner of the site and apparently fronted off the site to the south. Building destruction debris noted in section during the watching brief to the north and east of the excavated area might indicate the presence of further structures.

These rectangular buildings (Fig. 1) may have been timber framed, but the walls were so slightly founded that their positions could only be determined from the extent of the floor surfaces. The destruction debris included many fragments of air-dried or poorly fired bricks which may have been used as infilling for the walls. The buildings were destroyed by fire so early within the structural sequence as first to suggest its equation with the documented razing of the city by Boudica in

3. B. Richardson, 'Excavation Round-up 1979', *London Archaeol* 3, No. 14 (1980), 384.

AD 60-61. A preliminary investigation of the finds, however, indicates an early Flavian date for the earliest buildings, at which date it now seems probable that the organised settlement of the area occurred. The comparative scarcity of even residual Neronian or Claudian material supports this view.

After the fire the site was not redeveloped immediately; a series of apparently irregularly positioned post- and stake-holes associated with redeposited fire debris might have been created during the dismantling of the Period II buildings. After this activity several large intrusive features, very probably brickearth quarries, were cut. This quarrying was presumably associated with constructional activity off the site and shows that the delay in the redevelopment of the Watling Court site did not reflect a more general decline.

By the end of the first century the site had, however, been fully developed; to the extent that no space remained open except for service alleyways. Three buildings (Period IV, Structures 4, 6 and 8, Fig. 2) were excavated in detail, and parts of several others observed; all were apparently domestic in function. They were all destroyed by a major fire of the 120's AD, almost certainly the 'Hadrianic fire'⁴; the debris from which buried the lower part of the buildings, which were conse-

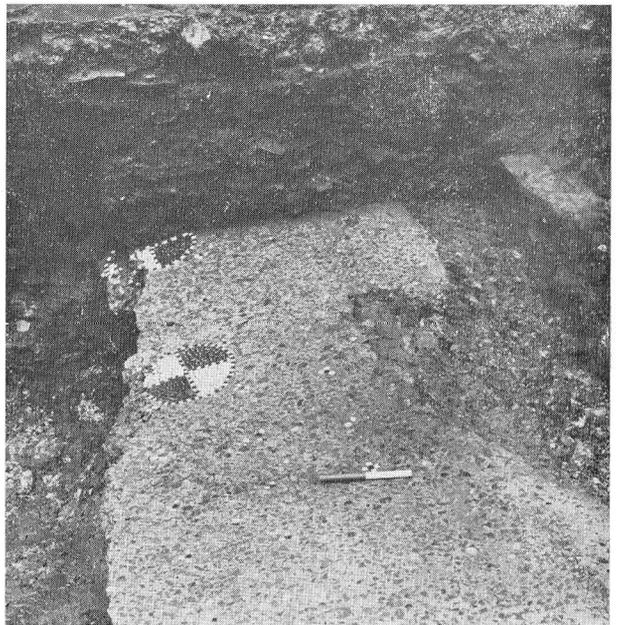


Fig. 4: Mosaic roundels set into the *opus signinum* floor of Room 4 of Structure 4, viewed from the north. The scale is in 0.10m (4in) units.

(Photo: Trevor Hurst)

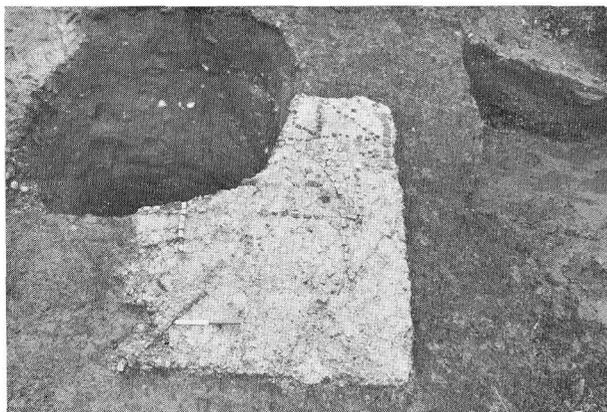


Fig. 5: Tessellated design in Room 5 of Structure 6 as revealed after the removal of the mortar floor, viewed from the north. The scale is in 0.10m (4in) units.

(Photo: Trevor Hurst)

quently preserved in a better state than earlier or later structures on this site.

In the southernmost building (Structure 4) the load-bearing walls had been built on a dwarf wall of ragstone in mortar bonding. Several of the rooms had been appointed with red and white plastered walls, and a number of high quality floors had been laid. A mosaic floor (Fig. 3) in the east end of the building (Room 1 on Fig. 2) was made from small squared black and white tesserae set into a mortar base. The design consisted of a strip of alternating black and white triangles above a floral border of leaves, scrolls, and tendrils. Black and white geometrical designs of this type were most popular during the early Roman period in Britain; more brightly coloured mosaics were rare until the later Roman period. Other floors in the building were of *opus signinum*, a mixture of tile fragments in sandy mortar which had been ground down and polished to a smooth surface. A quarter-round moulded skirting of *opus signinum* was also laid in two of the rooms. In three rooms (Rooms 2, 3 and 4 on Fig. 2) mosaic designs had been set into the *opus signinum*: this was technically complex operation as the tesserae would have been laid before the *opus signinum* had set, and floors of this type are rare (Fig. 4).

In one of these rooms (Room 2), in the centre of the building, was an *opus signinum* floor surrounding a central mosaic panel. Only a thin strip of the black border to this pavement survived.

The rest of the mosaic had been destroyed when the Victorian buildings were erected in 1877, at which time a black and white mosaic was recorded⁵. It is just possible although it stretches the evidence, that room was the dining room (*triclinium*), traditionally one of the most lavishly decorated rooms in the Roman household.

The quality of the rooms examined indicates that they were designed as reception and living rooms. No service rooms (such as kitchens, store rooms, and rooms for the accommodation of servants or slaves) were identified and it is possible that these were in the unexcavated western part of the building. No evidence survived to indicate whether the building was single or multi-storeyed, although the substantial wall footings could easily have supported two storeys. During the lifespan of the building a timber 'lean-to' corridor was added along the north side.

The central building (Structure 6)⁶, which was built after the buildings to its north and south and lay in an area which had previously been waste ground used for brickearth quarrying, was reached by minor alleyways. Its existence implies that this part of London in c AD 100 was becoming so crowded that no space could be wasted in so central an area. Its inferior position was reflected by its poorer quality design. The timber and brickearth walls were set directly onto a brickearth construction platform without the advantage of foundations or dwarf walls, and the building was not provided with a corridor. Most of the rooms were not decorated with the sophisticated floors recorded in the building to the south and the plastered walls of the interior were left unpainted. The outside of the building was white painted, presumably to help protect the walls from the weather. The room in the north-east corner of the building (Room 5 on Fig. 2) was the only one provided with a decorated floor (Fig 5). A black and white tessellated design, apparently representing a city gateway, had been set into a rectangular panel in the middle of the room. The tesserae had been left slightly proud of the panel and a mortar floor had been spread across the room and up to the tesserae so that the design remained visible (although shoddy workmanship had obscured some of it). This approach was presumably intended to produce a floor similar to those in the southern building, where designs had been set into *opus signinum* floors, without the need for such skilled workmanship. One interesting aspect of this building was the way in which the construction platform had been laid in rectangular units, the limits of which were then followed by the

4. S. P. Roskams and L. Watson, 'The Hadrianic Fire of London — a Reassessment of the Evidence', *London Archaeol* 4, No. 3 (1981), 62-6.
5. R. Merrifield, *op. cit.*, site 87.

6. Oak piles employed in the construction of this building were probably felled in 83 ± 9 A.D. according to a study of the tree rings, see Hillam and Morgan forthcoming.



Fig. 6: Structure 8 viewed from the east; the concrete and brick foundations are modern. The scale is in 0.10m (4in) units. (Photo: Trevor Hurst)

walls despite the fact that when the walls were laid it is unlikely that these limits were visible. This implies that the building was constructed according to a predetermined plan.

The northern building (Structure 8) was generally similar to the southern, although its load-bearing walls were differently constructed. In these the walls were built of brickearth bonded tile beneath puddled brickearth (Fig 6). These walls survived, in places, to a height in excess of 1m (3ft 3in) and no trace of a superimposed timber structure survived the post-destruction clearance. It is possible that these walls were built entirely of tile and brickearth to first floor level. The destruction debris within this building survived well (Fig. 7). A thin band of charcoal had been formed when the timber elements (doors, furniture, etc) were burnt away, and some of the plaster from the walls had also fallen away before the ceiling and roof collapsed. The ceiling plaster lay in a jumble on the floor. Some sheets of plaster had fallen directly to lie face down, but most of it had fallen in an arc to end face up. This plaster could be distinguished from the wall plaster by the impressions of the ceilings lathes into which the plaster had been pressed (lathes had not been used in the construction

of the walls), and it had been decorated with red painted rosettes and flowers against a predominantly white background. Traces of a burnt timber ceiling overlay the plaster and had been buried by material from the first floor. Amongst this material part of a mosaic or tessellated floor was found. The white tesserae had been bedded in a mortar base, and the whole unit had ended upside down. The coarseness of the tesserae and their position directly over the ceiling collapse makes it unlikely that they had formed a wall mosaic. The walls of the buildings had then collapsed, or been demolished, and extended directly over the ceiling collapse. Considerable quantities of brick and tile were found in the wall debris; they had probably been used in courses to strengthen the walls. No trace of the roof had survived and it is probable that it had been constructed entirely of perishable materials, probably thatch.

The buildings were presumably lit by windows but as window glass was very rarely found on the site it is probable that they were unglazed. Hearths were found in the two northern buildings, but not in the better quality rooms and it seems likely that they were used for cooking while the other rooms would have been heated by portable metal braziers. No

chimneys were found, but if charcoal had been used instead of wood smoke would not have been a major problem, provided that the rooms were well ventilated.

As was the case in most of Roman London, none of the buildings was supplied with water or connected to a sewage system. The water was likely to have been drawn from nearby wells; a large number of which were found during excavations at Aldermary House to the east of the site⁷. Sewage and waste would have been collected on site for disposal elsewhere.

After the Hadrianic fire the site may have been briefly abandoned; when it was reoccupied (Period V) the area was less intensively built up than previously. The watching brief to the north of the site indicated that in some cases large and well appointed buildings were constructed after the fire, but within the excavated area the buildings were less substantially founded and much of the site was left open. Those buildings which were erected clearly respected the property boundaries which had been in use before the fire and some boundaries could be traced back to the earliest buildings described above (Fig 8). This period was shortlived and was brought to an end by a further fire which apparently extended over most of the site. A mid second century date is probable for this perhaps local conflagration.

The reoccupation of the site after the third fire (Period VI) left very slight evidence and had been destroyed over much of the area by Victorian cellars. It seems probable that only a limited part of the site was occupied and that the buildings were insubstantial and compared poorly with their predecessors. It is possible that some parts of the site were

7. R. Merrifield, *op. cit.*, site 89.



Fig. 7: Detail of a wall within Structure 8 also illustrating the partially excavated destruction debris of plaster and brick. The scale is in 0.10m (4in) units.

(Photo: Jon Bailey)

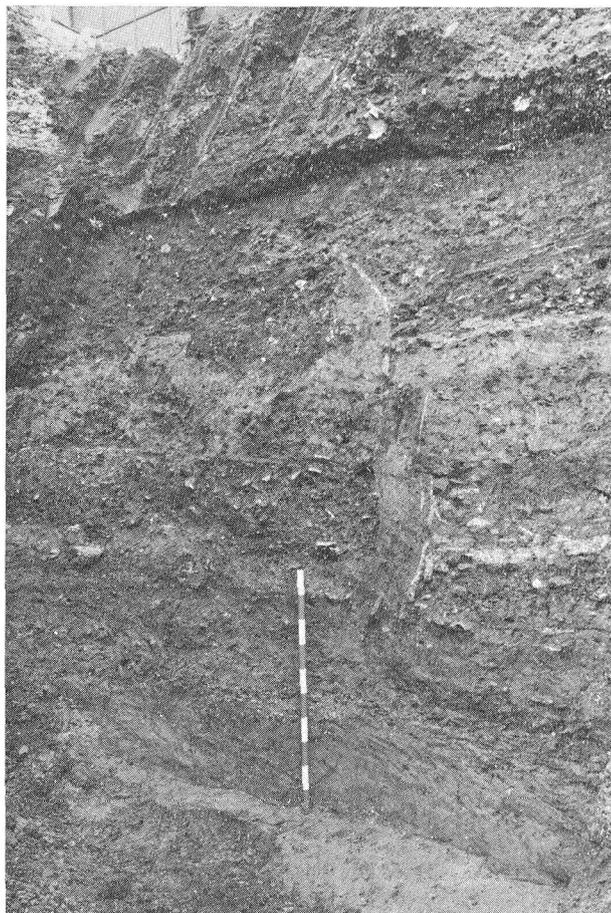


Fig. 8: Section through Roman deposits with natural brick earth at the base and 'dark earth' at the top. Slightly higher than and to the left of the scale (which is in 0.10m - 4in - units) can be seen a sequence of three plaster faced brickearth walls, perpetuating a Flavian wall line. The topmost wall had slumped in the mid-second century fire, and poor quality post-fire surfaces can be seen to its right. (Photo: Jon Bailey)

deliberately levelled off at the end of or shortly after this period.

No further evidence of Roman occupation was found, with the possible exception of a small number of insecurely dated pits. The paucity of late Roman finds from the site suggests that the site had been abandoned by the beginning of the third century. In all, the Watling Court Roman sequence is unlikely to have filled much more than 100 years. The site had been developed rapidly as an affluent residential area and had then declined with almost equal rapidity. Natural disaster, in the shape of the three destructive fires, may have helped speed the area's decline but more deep rooted, and presumably economic, explanations must also be sought.