

Fig 1: the site of Bolsa House and its relationship to two other recent excavations at 72-75 Cheapside (CID90) and 1 Poultry (ONE94).

The archaeological reinvestigation of Bolsa House (76-80 Cheapside) in the City of London

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IN THE SPRING of 1995 the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MOLAS) carried out limited recording work in advance of the redevelopment of Bolsa House at 76-80 Cheapside (Fig. 1). The site occupies a significant position in relation to the road networks of both Roman and medieval London. The redevelopment area straddles the line of the major east-west intramural Roman road which ran westwards from the south side of the forum, crossing the Walbrook and continuing to Newgate.

1. W F Grimes *The Excavation of Roman and Medieval London* (1968) 131-4.

The major thoroughfare and market street of Cheapside was established along the line of the northern edge of the site in the late Saxon period.

Previous archaeological observations

The site was first investigated by Professor W F Grimes in 1955¹, whose observations were restricted to an area of the north-east of the site north of the Roman road. He recorded an early Roman wattle structure standing about 0.3m high² and three

2. Imperial measurements from earlier reports have been converted into metric form for consistency; 1 ft is about 305 mm.

successive phases of earth-and-timber buildings, the second of which showed signs of charring and contained a quantity of corn. Fragments of quern-stones were associated with the early levels, suggesting that milling was a significant activity in the area at that time. Medieval pits, including a wattle-lined example, had been cut into the Roman occupation levels, as had a possible Saxo-Norman sunken building measuring about 2.3m wide and 0.9m deep.

The site was subsequently more extensively investigated by Peter Marsden in advance of office building in 1962³. He recorded that the surface of natural brickearth lay between 9 and 9.6m OD in the north part of the site. To the south, natural was apparently cut by the 'u' shaped channel of a stream *c.* 4m deep. The projected line of the stream observed in 1962 extended west onto the adjacent property, but a Museum of London excavation of the property in 1991 found no sign of the stream⁴.

The 1962 investigation also revealed the east-west Roman road, with gravel metallings up to 1.7m thick and probably about 9.7m wide. The extent of timber piling beneath the centre of the metallated area suggested that the road may initially have been about half its later width, though it has also

been suggested that the piles simply represent stabilisation of the ground surface⁵.

Fragments of four lava querns were found with pot sherds of Flavian date in the north-east part of the site. A timber-lined well approximately 0.8m square was also found nearby. Burnt layers from horizons at *c.* 9.6m OD and *c.* 10.7m OD would appear to be debris from two quite distinct fires during the Roman period.

The reinvestigation

In 1995 MOLAS was asked to produce an archaeological methodology⁶ in response to a proposal to redevelop the site. In line with the policy of 'preservation *in situ*'⁷ a methodology was devised which was intended to minimise the destruction of archaeological deposits which had survived the 1962 baseminting. This was to be achieved by investigating only the area of sixteen pilecap locations for the new building, and leaving the remaining deposits untouched. The small size of the intended pilecaps (between about 1.4 and 1.7m square) and their restricted depth (generally not far below the surface of surviving archaeological deposits) meant that the scope of the excavation was very limited. The presence of Roman buildings on site has been deduced from small areas of what are thought to be

3. P R V Marsden 'Archaeological finds in the City of London, 1963-4' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 21 (1967) 206-7; summarised in J D Shepherd 'The Pre-urban and Roman topography in the King Street and Cheapside areas of the City of London' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 38 (1987) 28-33.
4. J Hill and A Woodger *An Archaeological Excavation at 72-75 Cheapside, 83-93 Queen Street, London, EC4* (1993) unpub. MOLAS

archive report; also J Hill '72-5 Cheapside: The Roman Sequence' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* (in preparation).

5. J Shepherd, *op cit* fn 3.
6. P Rowsome *Bolsa House, 76-80 Cheapside, City of London EC4 -- Archaeological Project Design* (1995) MOLAS.
7. Department of the Environment *Planning Policy Guidance 16 -- Archaeology and Planning* (1990),

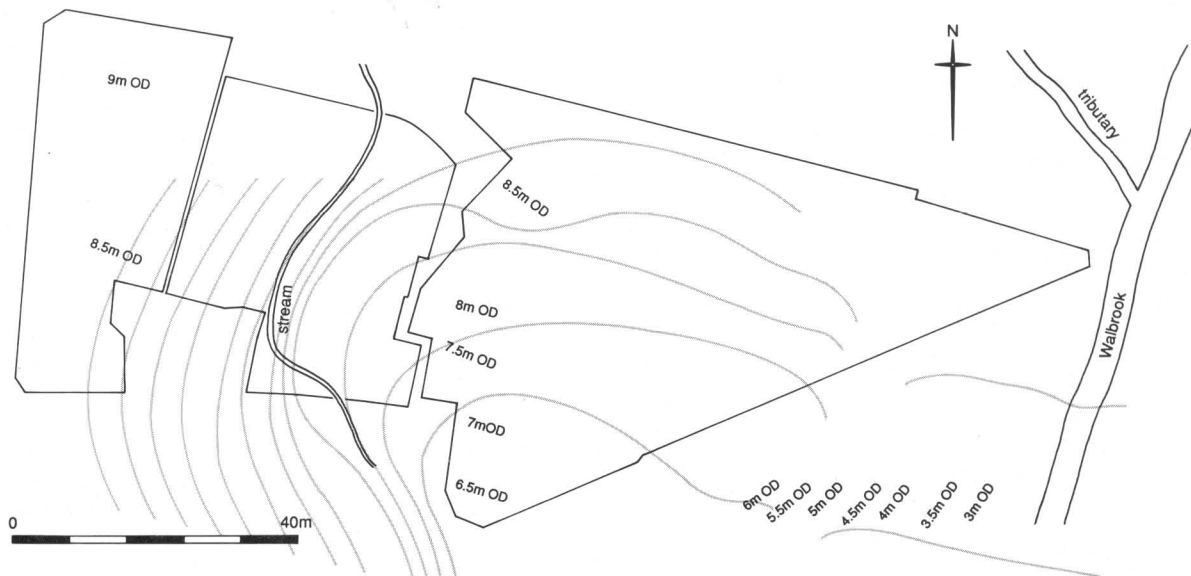


Fig 2: an interpretation of the natural topography of the area based on information from the three recent excavations. It is thought that a minor tributary of the Walbrook crossed the Bolsa House site.

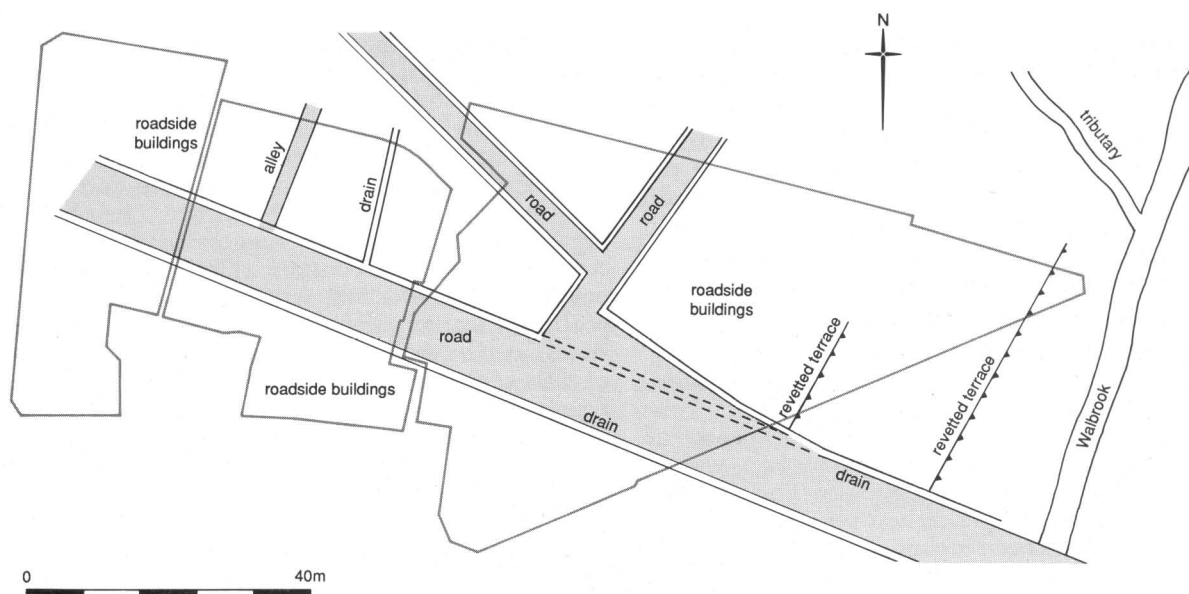


Fig 3: findings from the three sites indicate that the area was the subject of extensive pre-Boudican development

brickearth floors, and no walls or other structural evidence was found to indicate the layout or ground plans of buildings. The size of the areas investigated also means that the majority of datable finds assemblages were small⁸.

Natural topography

On the north part of the site natural Thames terrace gravels were recorded at about 8.8 to 8.9m OD, capped by about 100mm of natural brickearth. Natural brickearth was also recorded to the south at about 7.7m OD but may have been truncated below about 8.3m OD, suggesting that the pre-urban ground surface sloped at a gradient of less than 1 in 40 downwards from north to south.

Redeposited gravels at 7.75m OD in the north, and organic gravels and silts at 6.5m OD in the south west may indicate the presence of a tributary channel up to 1.8m deep flowing north to south and turning east to head towards the Walbrook (Fig. 2). Samples of silt units recovered from the channel suggest that at least some of the material could have been deposited in a regime of flowing water. Some of the deposition could however have been influenced by human activity, and here again the limited area of investigation makes unequivocal interpretation of the evidence problematical.

Pre-Boudican occupation

Investigations at 76-80 Cheapside and adjacent sites suggests that the area between the Roman Walbrook crossing and modern Queen Street, approximately 160m to the west, was fairly intensively occupied by AD 60. At 76-80 Cheapside the 1962 basement had truncated the archaeological sequence down to the pre- or immediately post-Boudican levels, but at 1 Poultry and 72-75 Cheapside⁹ a more complete Roman sequence has been recorded. Brickearth floors of buildings were recorded over much of the Bolsa House site at the lowest level of archaeological survival at about 9 to 9.5m OD and associated pottery can be dated to around AD 50-70. To the north of the main road a small area of metalling and parallel ditch was probably part of an alley running perpendicular to the road, perhaps providing access to the rear of roadside properties. The density of occupation suggests that the natural stream was probably canalised at the time of the early road building programme. All of the extant areas of early buildings and an external area in the north east part of the site were sealed by dumps of burnt brickearth and daub and Roman pottery which had also been burnt. In conjunction with the early date of the ceramics this would seem to support the inter-

8. A Woodger *Bolsa House 76-80 Cheapside, London EC4 - An Archaeological Assessment* (1996) MOLAS.

9. The Poultry Roman sequence is described in P Rowsome 'Number 1 Poultry - evaluation and phase 1 excavations' *London Archaeol* 7 no. 14 (1995) 371-7 and in J Hill, P Rowsome, and P Treveil 'Number 1 Poultry - the main excavation: Roman sequence' *London Archaeol* 8 no. 5 (1997) 127-136. For 72-75 Cheapside see *op cit* fn 4.

10. Both sides of the tablet were recessed to take wax, showing that it formed the inner leaf of a document, and one side is divided into three compartments, similar to examples from New Fresh Wharf (H Chapman and V Straker, 1986, 'Writing Tablets' in L Miller, J Schofield and M Rhodes *The Roman Quay at St Magnus House, London* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Special Paper 8, 227-9, nos 9.2, 9.3, 9.7).

pretation of the earliest occupation phases as pre-Boudican (Fig. 3).

In addition to the early pottery a 1st-century coin was recovered from the stream channel deposits and a writing tablet from the ditch associated with the alley¹⁰. Generally however, the finds recovered do not indicate the nature of the early occupation and the absence of structural evidence means that the size and type of the Roman roadside buildings which occupied the site also remains unknown.

Later Roman occupation

After the Boudican revolt brickearth-floored buildings were again constructed on either side of the main road. A sequence of up to three phases of building, probably of timber construction, was recorded on the eastern part of the site. The alley was probably retained in the earliest post-Boudican period and may have been expanded either into a wider road or, perhaps more likely in view of its later history, when it was built over, as a metalled yard area between about 8 and 14m wide. Early Flavian pottery¹¹ and 1st- to 2nd-century glass were recovered from these buildings. Amongst the building material were two combed fragments of flue tile in a 1st- to mid 2nd-century fabric and a fragment of Purbeck marble 32-33mm thick with a slight bevel on one edge, one side apparently worn smooth as the result of use in a floor.

Although evidence of later buildings was truncated, isolated cut features provide some evidence of continued occupation in the later Roman period. An open ditch alongside the main road is thought to be late Roman in date, and groups of timber piles in and around the ditch were probably associated with the revetting of a substantial drain or a related feature. Residual 3rd- and 4th-century pottery was also recovered from medieval pits.

Medieval and post-medieval pits

Evidence of the post-Roman occupation of the site

- ii. Two contexts contained Highgate C ware, which is probably post AD 70, but the small proportion suggests that they are likely to be early Flavian, rather than later.
12. The material from 72-75 Cheapside (CID90) reported in A Woodger *et al* (in preparation) included smithing hearth

only survived in the shape of cut features, due to truncation caused by the 1962 basement. In the south-east a cluster of four roughly circular pits with decayed wattle linings were dated to the Saxo-Norman period by the presence of Early Medieval Sandy ware, Early Medieval Sand/Shell ware and Local Grey ware of the 11th to 12th century. Their highly organic waterlogged fills suggest that they were cesspits. The fills also contained finds which indicate possible local industrial activity. Three of the pits produced leather waste, offcuts and fragmentary shoes dated by their constructional details to the 10th or 11th century. One of the pits also produced a fragment of vitrified daub and a bowl-shaped lump of iron slag, which are of particular interest in view of the recovery of about 250 kg of similar material from a Saxo-Norman sunken building at 72-75 Cheapside¹². A pair of rectangular pits with a post-and-plank lining may also have had an industrial use but did not yield any finds to support the interpretation. A rubbish pit in the south of the site, which contained an 18th- to 19th-century English stoneware bottle, was the only surviving evidence of later occupation.

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bottoms with tuyere holes and hammer scale indicating the presence of a blacksmith in the area. According to Justine Bayley of the Ancient Monuments Laboratory the building in which the material was found would have been unsuitable as a smithy itself (AML Report 44/92 Bayley 1992).

(continued from p. 152)

The bone assemblage from Exeter Street represents animals slaughtered, with some form of economic or technological imperative being shown by species preference and age selection. The initial assessment of the assemblages show a low diversity, in keeping with the *Lundenwic* sites studied so far, but the contribution that the Exeter Street assemblages can make to the debate, on whether a centrally controlled supply of animal food was employed or whether a market system existed in middle Saxon London, lies in the virtue of the large size of the collection. This relatively small excavation has produced one of the most important assemblages of bone from a middle Saxon

site in London. The assemblages were all from good primary fills with a range of deposition events, furthermore the bone is in very good condition with little post-deposition fragmentation and therefore the potential for information on age, measurement and sex data is high.

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