

Excavations at 217–219 Long Lane, Southwark: medieval pits and ditches to post-medieval tanneries

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Introduction

During February and March 2003 Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) undertook an archaeological evaluation and excavation at 217–219 Long Lane, Bermondsey in the London Borough of Southwark (NGR 53307 17946; site code LLW03) (Fig. 1). The work was commissioned by The Buxton Group in advance of the redevelopment of the site as a courtyard block with residential units. Of the three evaluation trenches (trenches A, B and C) those in the north of the site (A and B) revealed a series of 19th-century tanning pits which did not warrant further excavation. In trench C, however, located along the Long Lane frontage, medieval features were recorded which led to an excavation within a larger trench.

Geology and topography

The site is located on the Bermondsey eyot, which in the prehistoric period was a low sandy/gravelly island surrounded by channels and tributaries of the River Thames. Archaeological investigations immediately to the west located the edge of one of these channels, known as the Neckinger River.¹ Similar eyots in Southwark have proved to be foci for prehistoric activity and the same could apply to Bermondsey. The earliest deposit encountered on the site, in trench C, was natural sand and gravel which sloped down from the south (at 1.65m OD) to the north (at 1.27m OD).

Cut into the natural sand was the edge of a possible palaeochannel 1.00m deep (Fig. 2), the eastern edge of which sloped at c. 45° to a slightly

rounded base. The channel was filled with yellow sand with lenses of clay.

Prehistoric and Roman

Evidence for prehistoric activity of Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age date has been found nearby,² and Roman pottery was common on the adjacent site of 211 Long Lane,³ but no prehistoric or Roman features were found in the excavated areas. A few residual mesolithic and neolithic struck and burnt flints were recovered from later features, as was Roman building material.

Medieval ditches, pits and dumps

The primary focus of medieval activity in the area is Bermondsey Abbey, located about 200m to the east of the site. The abbey was founded in the 11th



Fig. 1: site location (scale 1:1000)



Fig. 2: palaeochannel cutting natural sands (scale 1:200)



Fig. 3: principal medieval features (scale 1:200)

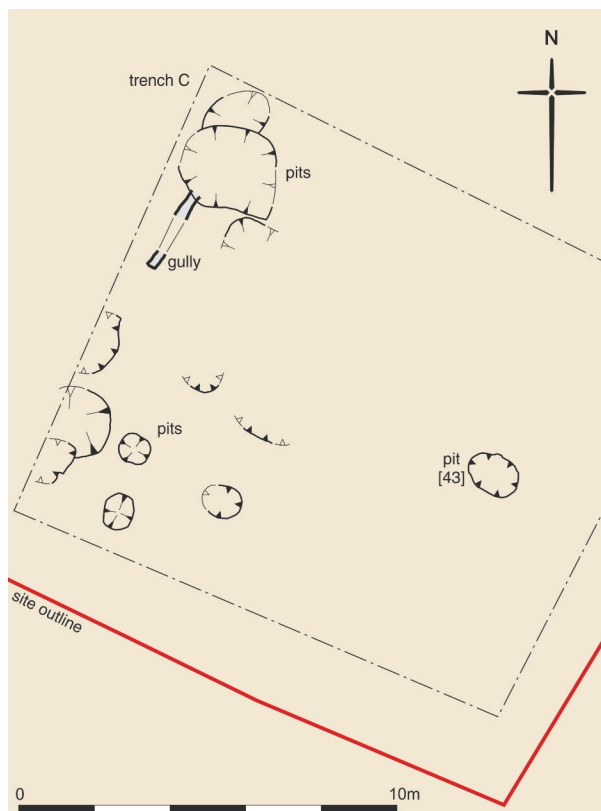


Fig. 6: principal later medieval pits (scale 1:200)

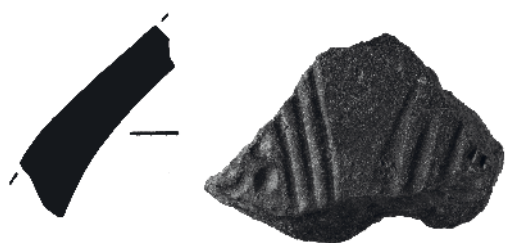


Fig. 4: decorated sherd of possible Early Saxon pottery (width = 50mm)

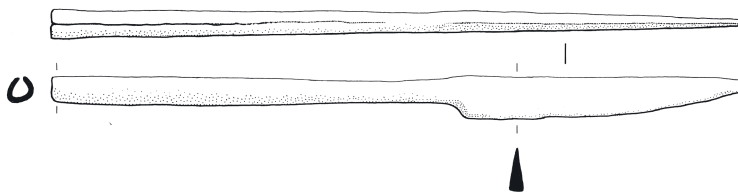


Fig. 5: iron knife with cleft socketed handle (length = 220mm)

century and continued to dominate this area until the Dissolution in 1542.⁴ Long Lane was the approach road to the west gate of the Abbey, linking it with St. George's Church and Southwark High Street (modern Borough High Street). The surrounding land was probably in agricultural use throughout the medieval period.

Sealing the palaeochannel was a soil horizon, naturally formed but later re-worked. The earliest layer [121] contained one sherd of early medieval pottery, while the overlying deposit [103] contained a sherd of hand-made sand-tempered pottery, possibly of Early Saxon date, and a medium-sized group of medieval pottery;⁵ this mostly dates to c. 1270–1350 but one sherd dates to after 1340. This layer also contained a small copper-alloy rotary key with

hollow shank and simple bit with symmetrical squared clefts, a form that was in use from the 12th to the 14th centuries.⁶

Cut into this soil was a north–south aligned ditch [62] (Fig. 3) that probably had a dual purpose of defining a boundary and drainage; its base sloped downwards from south to north. The fill contained eight sherds of 11th- to 12th-century pottery and a single sherd from the shoulder of a large jar decorated jar (Fig. 4). The date of this find is problematic, as the pot is thick-walled and evenly fired to a high temperature, which suggests that it could be of late Roman manufacture.⁷ However, nothing remotely like this sherd is represented in the published Roman pottery from Southwark, while the decoration is typically Saxon,

comprising a pendant triangle defined by grouped diagonal lines and flanked by stamped impressions. On the left is part of a 'hot cross bun'-shaped stamp made up of dimples (Briscoe stamp type A 4avii). The surviving part of the stamp on the right is, unfortunately, too small to classify. A similar combination of decorative elements is seen on a faceted carinated jar from Newark.⁸

Other finds comprise fragments of lava quernstone with part of the central hole,⁹ and five iron objects. They include part of a barrel padlock similar to a late 11th- or 12th-century find from Seal House,¹⁰ a near-complete padlock key with angled bit, a form typical of the 9th to 12th centuries,¹¹ and a complete iron knife-like implement. The latter is unusual in that it has a relatively short blade and long hollow

handle with cleft socket¹² (Fig. 5); no parallel has yet been found for this object but it is probably of 14th-century or later date.¹³ The other iron finds from the ditch comprise a flat strip, possibly associated with the lock, and a narrow spike, bent at the pointed end and of uncertain function.

Four rubbish pits lay to the east of this ditch (Fig. 3), all with similar fills of mid-dark grey silty sand. One contained a single sherd of pottery dated to c. 1050–1150, but two others can be dated to the later 12th or early 13th century. It is unclear whether these features were contemporary with the ditch.

Cut into the backfilled ditch and soil horizon was a group of rubbish pits between 0.20–0.70m in depth (Fig. 6) with similar fills consisting of dark grey silty sand. The associated pottery mainly dates to the 12th and 13th centuries, and includes single sherds of Kingston-type ware and coarse Surrey/Hampshire border ware. The majority of these pits were sealed by a layer of dark grey-brown sandy silt. This

layer, which may be upcast from the digging of some of these pits mixed with general dumping, was cut into by another phase of rubbish pits, a north–south aligned gully (Fig. 6) and two stakeholes that probably represent part of a lightweight structure such as a fence.

A further 13th- to 14th-century rubbish pit [43] (Fig. 6) was found in the east of trench C; it is probably associated with the later phase of pitting to the west. It was circular, measuring 1.40m by 1.00m by 0.93m deep and filled with dark grey-brown silt with a high organic content. It contained the largest group of pottery recovered from the site, with several substantially complete vessels.¹⁴ The group is dominated by coarse Surrey/Hampshire border wares,¹⁵ which include two near-complete cooking pots with flat-topped rims, two probable cauldrons, and sherds from six other cooking pots, a dish and a jug. Almost all the pots have evidence of considerable use over the fire, and some were clearly used even when damaged, notably a

complete Kingston-type ware rounded jug (Fig. 7). Other Kingston-type wares comprise a small rounded jug (Fig. 7), and sherds from three other jugs, a dish and a cooking pot. Eight London-type ware vessels are represented, including a small rounded jug with cordoned neck (Fig. 7) and the base of a drinking jug, both dating to after 1270. Other contemporary finds include a Limsfield greyware jug (Fig. 7), south Hertfordshire greyware, and single sherds of Mill Green ware and late medieval Hertfordshire glazed ware. The latter is the latest diagnostic type, dating to after 1340. As a whole, therefore, the group dates to c. 1270–1350, but may have been deposited c. 1340–50. It is broadly contemporary with a deposit in the City ditch at Ludgate,¹⁶ with other groups from 201–211 Borough High Street,¹⁷ 223–227 Borough High Street¹⁸ and recent finds from Tabard Square.¹⁹

This pit also produced assemblages of charred and waterlogged plant remains. Charred grains of free-threshing wheat (*Triticum aestivum*/



Fig. 7: pottery from pit [43]: (clockwise from left) Limsfield greyware rounded jug with corrugated neck and decoration of incised wavy lines on the body; complete Kingston-type ware rounded jug with incised horizontal lines on the upper body and external sooting showing that the pot continued to be used over a fire even when damaged (height 192mm); London-type ware small rounded jug with lipped rim, cordoned neck and patchy green glaze over a white slip coating (base missing); Kingston-type ware small rounded jug with sooted base

turgidum/durum), with smaller quantities of oats (*Avena* sp), hulled 6-row barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) and rye (*Secale cereale*) were found, along with charcoal, occasional cereal rachis (chaff) and straw fragments, and seeds of arable weeds. In addition several leafy shoots and seed capsules of bell heather (*Erica* cf *cinerea*), and two complete horse beans (*Vicia faba*) were found. These remains probably all come from burnt hearth debris, with the cereal grains and beans disposed of after spillages or kitchen accidents, while the straw and heather would have been used as fuel.

The majority of the waterlogged plant remains were seeds of plants which grow on disturbed ground, including waste land, arable fields and gardens, and probably indicate conditions on or close to the site. They include several persistent weeds of nitrogen-rich soil on waste ground, including teasel (*Dipsacus* sp.), greater celandine (*Chelidonium majus*), hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) and stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*), and some indicators of rich cultivated soil, possibly in gardens, such as sun spurge (*Euphorbia helioscopia*) and petty spurge (*E. peplus*). Occasional seeds of plum/bullae (*Prunus domestica*), fig (*Ficus carica*) and hemp (*Cannabis sativa*) suggest a small element of food waste. Damp habitats, perhaps a muddy ditch, were also indicated by seeds of spike-rush (*Eleocharis palustris/uniglumis*) and water-plantain (*Alisma* sp), and by several plants such as celery-leaved crowfoot (*Ranunculus sceleratus*), henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) and red/glaucous goosefoot

(*Chenopodium rubrum/glaucum*), which grow on muddy banks.

Animal bones recovered from the medieval deposits comprise a mix of food waste; generally incorporating each of the major domesticates (cattle, sheep/goat and pig). The ages of these animals suggest the use of animals bred for the table as well as those culled following the provision of some secondary product, as milk or wool. As well as the domesticates, there was a selection of game and fish species, the latter indicative, as is typical for this period, of a heavy reliance on estuarine and marine fisheries. In addition, a single chicken bone was recovered; this from an infant bird and indicative of poultry-keeping. There was also a collection of horse bones, including seven relatively complete and a near-complete tibia. None of them had butchery marks and it can be assumed that they represent the remains of partially or completely rotted carcasses, which, by accident or design, ended up amongst the food waste dumps.

Post-medieval

The focus of post-medieval activity was centred on the former abbey precinct, Bermondsey Street and Long Lane. It was during the post-medieval period that the local leather industry grew to prominence. Bermondsey was well suited to this industry due to a number of factors. A good supply of animal skins was available from the butchers of London, a plentiful supply of water existed in the many streams running through the area, oak bark could be locally acquired and a ready market for leather existed just over the river in the City.²⁰ There is some evidence for a tanning industry in the medieval period, but it is best documented in the post-medieval period, especially after the arrival of Huguenot immigrants in the 16th century. The importance of the industry by the early 17th century is shown by a charter granted by Queen Anne in 1703, whereby the Bermondsey tanners were incorporated under the name of 'the Master, Wardens and Commonality of the art or mystery of tanners of the parish of St. Mary Magdalen, Bermondsey, in the county of Surrey'. In 1832 Bermondsey Leather Market was erected by many of the principal tanners and other

inhabitants of the parish. By 1840 many of the tanners and leather-factors had their warehouses here. The 18th- and 19th-century maps of the area show tanners' yards extending westwards along the north side of Long Lane, the site being labelled on Rocque's map of 1746²¹ (Fig. 8) as a Tanners Yard located opposite Wilds Rents and to the south or west of The Green. On Horwood's map of 1799²² the site is labelled as Mr Savignac Fellmonger, and by 1894 it is labelled as Stables, with tanning pits clearly visible in the east of the site.

In trench 3 dumping took place in the early post-medieval period, raising the ground level to c. 2.00m OD. The dumped material is dated to 1480–1650. Cut into this dumping was a pit backfilled with a dark purple/black ash/clinker, found along the limits of excavation. Its exact purpose is unclear but it may have had an industrial function. Over this pit was a compacted gravel surface which may be part of an alley between two buildings (B1 and B2, Fig. 9). The associated pottery is similar to, but less abundant than, that from a ditch (S1654) at 211 Long Lane.²³

In the south of the site a brick building (B1, Fig. 9) fronting onto Long Lane was probably open-ended in the north, with tanning pits inside the building. The walls of this building were built in red unfrogged brick bonded with a dark grey mortar. The east wall had tiles laid on edge on its inner side. These tiles only started four courses up from the base of the wall, a height that coincided with the level of clay packing associated with the tanning pits. The tiles may have acted as a damp course for the wall. The tanning pits were lined with horizontal softwood planks (250mm wide by 35mm thick) with a plank base. Each corner contained an upright internal post. Between each of the tanks a deposit of clay formed a waterproof lining. The tanks to the south were probably internal, those in the north may have been in a yard or partially covered. No lime-staining was observed on the timbers but they were heavily decayed. The pits to the south were c. 1.50m square and may have been used in the initial process of tawing, which was used principally for treating

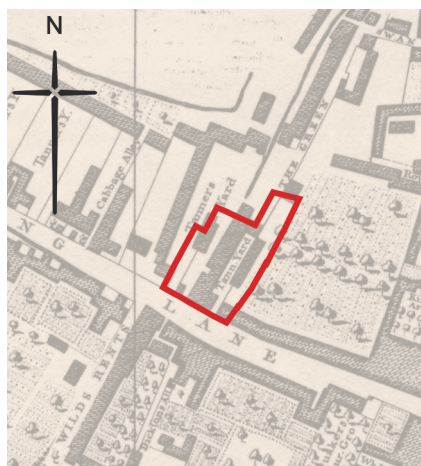


Fig. 8: extract from Rocque's map of 1746

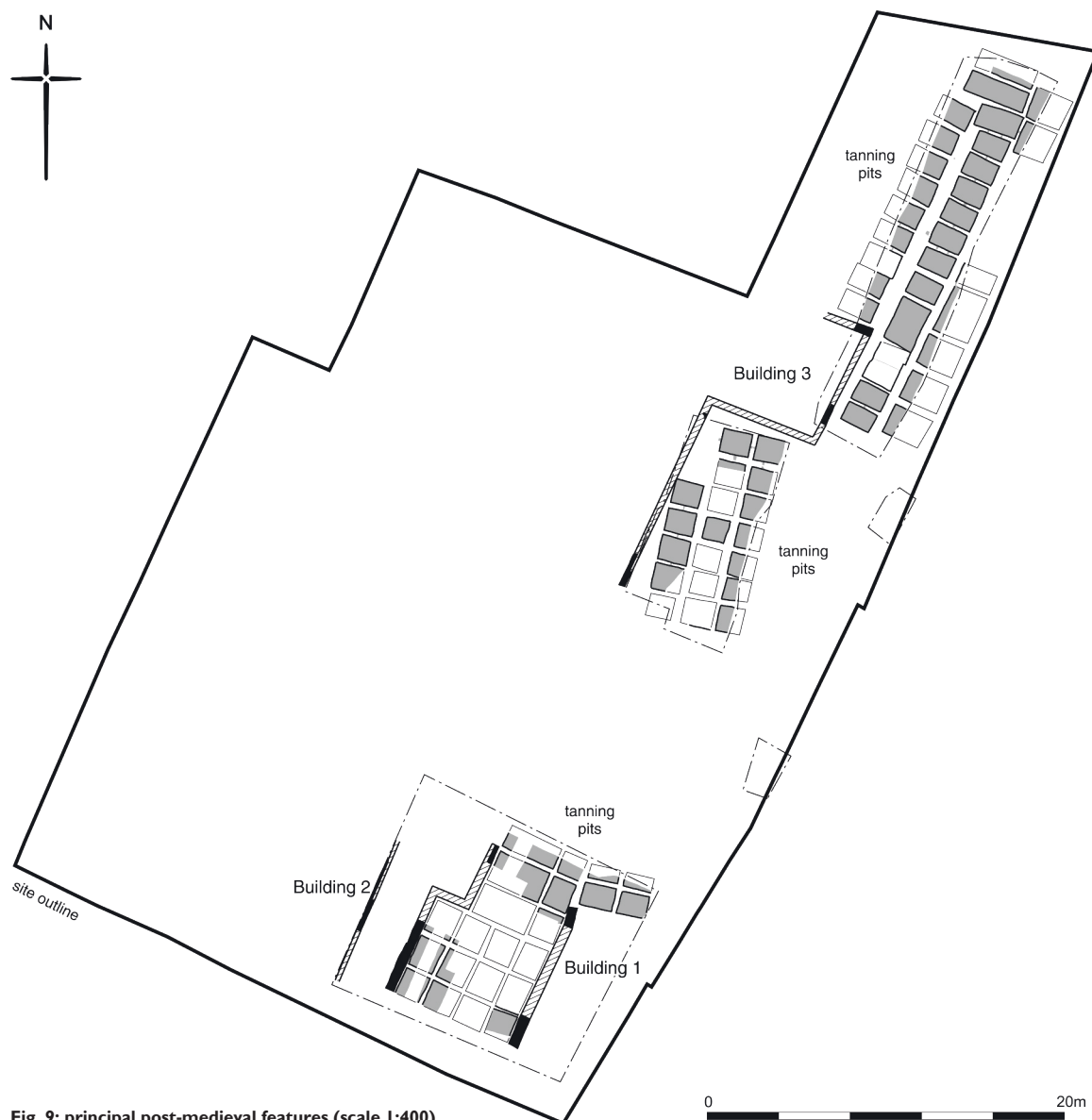


Fig. 9: principal post-medieval features (scale 1:400)

the skins of smaller animals such as sheep, goats, calves and pigs. In the traditional method a combination of alum and other substances such as egg yolk, oil, butter or flour was worked into the skin, to produce lighter leather for the manufacture of gloves, most leather garments, laces and shoe uppers.²⁴ Traditionally the tawyer did this by trampling the skin with his bare feet in a tub set on the ground. This process was often undertaken by a fellmonger after removal of wool from the sheepskins. The wool was more valuable than the skin itself.

These tanning pits were backfilled with a loose mid-brown organic silt with moderate inclusions of broken-up timber and occasional building material. This probably represents the destruction of the top of the tanning pits and the demolition of the associated

building. Similar and contemporary timber-lined tanning pits were recorded in archaeological investigations immediately to the west at 211 Long Lane.²⁵

Another brick building (B2, Fig. 9), located to the west of Building 1, was built with similar bricks. Only the eastern wall of this building was found within the excavated area. Four sections of brick footings probably represent the remains of a further building (B3, Fig. 9) in the north of the site. All were built in unfrogged dark red/purple bricks bonded with an off white/light grey lime and sand mortar.

To the east of this building (B3), and probably contemporary with it, were two separate groups of tanning pits on slightly different alignments (Fig. 10). The tanning pits were generally rectangular in shape and measured

1.75m by 1.20m by 1.25m deep. They were constructed from horizontal softwood planks (250mm wide by 35mm thick) with a plank base. Each corner contained an upright internal post. The tanks survived to five planks in depth; between each of the tanks was a dump of clay forming a waterproof lining.

The tanning pits were backfilled in the late 19th or early 20th century and contained groups of pottery similar to, but less complete than, that from 211 Long Lane.²⁶ Over this was a compacted consolidation layer consisting of mid-brown grey clayey silt with frequent inclusions of pebbles and moderate brick and tile.

Conclusions

The site was located on the Bermondsey eyot, with a north-south



Fig. 10: view of the rows of tanning pits in trench A, looking south-east

palaeochannel or early undated drainage ditch crossing it. The first datable activity was the digging of rubbish pits and a ditch in the medieval period. The presence of residual prehistoric and Roman material in these features, however, suggests that there may have been limited human activity in the area during these periods. The presence of possible Early Saxon pottery is unexpected, but perhaps not surprising given the location of the site, on the route from Southwark to Bermondsey Abbey, where middle Saxon pottery has been found. The

earlier medieval finds probably represent general rubbish from elsewhere but the range of 12- to 14th-century pottery fits with that from 211 Long Lane,²⁷ and the backfill of the ditch and subsequent phases of rubbish pits may indicate the presence of a building or buildings nearby fronting onto Long Lane.

There was very little change until the 18th century, when cartographic evidence (Rocque's map of 1746) shows the area of the site to be occupied by a tanner's yard and then by a fellmonger, all trades related to the

manufacturing of leather goods. The tanning pits found during the archaeological investigations were finally backfilled in the late 19th or early 20th century, and are probably those shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1894.

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2. J. Sidell, J. Cotton, L. Rayner and L. Wheeler *The prehistory and topography of Southwark and Lambeth*, MoLAS Monogr Ser 14 (2002).

3. J. McKinley 'Excavations at 211 Long Lane, Southwark Part II: Romano-British pasture to post-medieval tanneries' *London Archaeol* 11 no. 4 (2006) 89.

4. T. Dyson, M. Samuels, A. Steele and S. Wright *The Cluniac priory and abbey of St Saviour Bermondsey, Surrey: excavations 1984–95* MOLA Monogr Ser 50 (2011).

5. 84 sherds (up to 70 vessels, 1086g).

6. G. Egan, *Medieval finds from excavations in London 6: The medieval household – daily living c 1150–c 1450* (1998) 111; cf. fig 86, nos. 294, 298.

7. The fabric contains abundant very fine sand and sparse larger quartz grains up to 0.5mm across; it is reduced throughout. Wall thickness ranges from 7–11mm at the shoulder.

8. J.N.L. Myres *A corpus of Anglo-Saxon pottery* (1977) vol 2, fig 96, no.3884.

9. For similar finds see F. Pritchard 'The Small Finds' in

A.G. Vince (ed.) *Aspects of Saxon and Norman London 2: Finds and environmental evidence* (1991) 160; R. Drinkall and J. Stevenson 'Weighing it all up' *London Archaeol* 8 no. 1 (1996) 3–9.

10. F. Pritchard, *op cit* fn 9, fig 3.21, no. 53.

11. G. Egan *op cit* fn 6, 100; fig 74, nos. 262, 264; P. Ottaway, *Anglo-Scandinavian ironwork from Coppergate* The Archaeology of York, The Small Finds 17/6 (1990) 676, no. 3884.

12. Length of blade c. 90mm (tip missing), width 13mm; total length 217mm (originally 220mm); diameter at end of socketed handle 80–90mm. The cleft of the socket is aligned with the cutting edge.

13. The overall proportions are similar to a 15th-century Dutch knife, which had a scale tang handle (A.P.E. Ruempol and A.G.A. van Dongen *Pre-industrial utensils* (1991) 93, second entry). There is no form like this in J. Cowgill, M. de Neergaard and N. Griffiths *Knives and scabbards: Medieval finds from excavations in London 1* (1988) HMSO.

14. 183 sherds from up to 42 pots (c. 7217g).

15. These amount to 71% of the group by sherd count, 60% by weight.

16. A. Vince 'The Saxon and medieval pottery of London: A review' *Medieval Archaeol* 29 (1985) 89.

17. J.C. Thorn 'Pottery from the medieval pit and well' in E. Ferretti and A.H. Graham '201-211 Borough High Street' in *Southwark Excavations 1972–74*, London Middlesex Archaeol Soc/Surrey Archaeol Soc Joint Pub 1 (1978) 128–40.

18. R. Goffin 'A group of pottery from a medieval pit at 223–227 Borough High Street, Southwark' *London Archaeol* 6, no. 12 (1991) 315–8.

19. C. Jarrett *pers. comm.* (excavations by PCA).

20. K. Heard 'A post-medieval tawyer's yard in Bermondsey' *London Archaeol* 9 no. 5 (2000) 137–43.

21. J. Rocque 'A Plan of the Cities of London Westminster and Southwark with contiguous buildings from an actual survey' by John Rocque (1746), reproduced in H. Margary 'A Plan of the Cities of London Westminster and Southwark' by John Rocque, 1746 (1971).

22. Horwood's map, compiled 1792–9; R. Horwood *Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster, the borough of Southwark* (3rd edn) (1813), reproduced in H. Margary *The A-Z of Regency London* (1985).

23. *Op cit* fn 3, 90, fig 7.

24. *Op cit* fn 20, 139.

25. *Op cit* fn 3, fig 2.

26. *Op cit* fn 3, fig 8.

27. *Op cit* fn 3, 89.