

Medieval and post-medieval remains in Islington

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Introduction

Between December 2014 and October 2015 an archaeological investigation was conducted by Pre-Construct Archaeology (PCA) on land previously occupied by the former Almeida Sorting Post Office at Islington Square, 5 Almeida Street and 129 Upper Street, London Borough of Islington.¹

The proposed development extended also to the east as a narrow strip of land, previously used as the Mitre pub's beer garden, fronting on to Upper Street from the east (Fig 1).

Evaluation Trenches 1, 2 and 3, located in the east of the site, recorded a sequence of archaeological deposits associated with the development of the site spanning from the medieval to the late post-medieval period. As a result, Trench 4 was opened in order to further investigate this area. The area previously

occupied by the Sorting Office was evaluated by trenches (5 to 11) with no further mitigation work carried out in this area. This article details the results of the archaeological evaluation and excavation.

Archaeological and historical background

The archaeological evidence for the prehistoric and Roman periods is very limited, despite the possible presence of a Roman road which is thought to have followed the same route as Upper Street, which left London by Cripplegate, and passed through Islington.²

Islington is first mentioned as *Gislandune* (Gisla's 'hill' or 'down') in a charter of c. 1000 or as *Isendone* in the *Domesday Book*.³ At this time, Islington had a very limited number

of occupants consisting of 27 householders, 13 cottagers, nine *villeins* and five *bordars*, mostly concentrated along two droeways – Upper and Lower (now Essex Road) Street.⁴

Soon the area of Islington became increasingly dominated by religious communities, which built country retreats here,⁵ and by the early 14th century it was divided into five manors, with the site lying on the east side of Upper Street, the location of the Manor of Barnsbury.⁶

St Mary's Church, located c. 70m to the south-east, was the first documented building and is dated to 1128. The church was dissolved during the 15th century, and demolished and replaced during the 18th century.⁷ Attesting to the growing importance of Islington, Edward IV was met here by the Lord Major and Aldermen of London and, in 1465, Henry VI was arrested here by the Earl of Warwick.⁸

Archaeological evidence for the medieval period was recorded during the excavation at 7–9 Islington Green⁹ with further evidence for medieval activity, in the form of agricultural plough-soil, recorded at 21 Popham Street¹⁰ and at 10–12 Islington Green.¹¹

By the 16th century, Islington had become increasingly known for the handsome and elaborate mansions with gardens, and Henry VIII owned properties there where he supposedly installed his mistresses.¹² During this period, Islington was a refuge during plague outbreaks and after the Great Fire of 1666.¹³ By the late 17th century, it had become a major source of London's milk supply.¹⁴

In the late 16th century, Upper Street was lined with inns and 15 victuallers were licensed for Islington¹⁵ – some of them continued to trade into

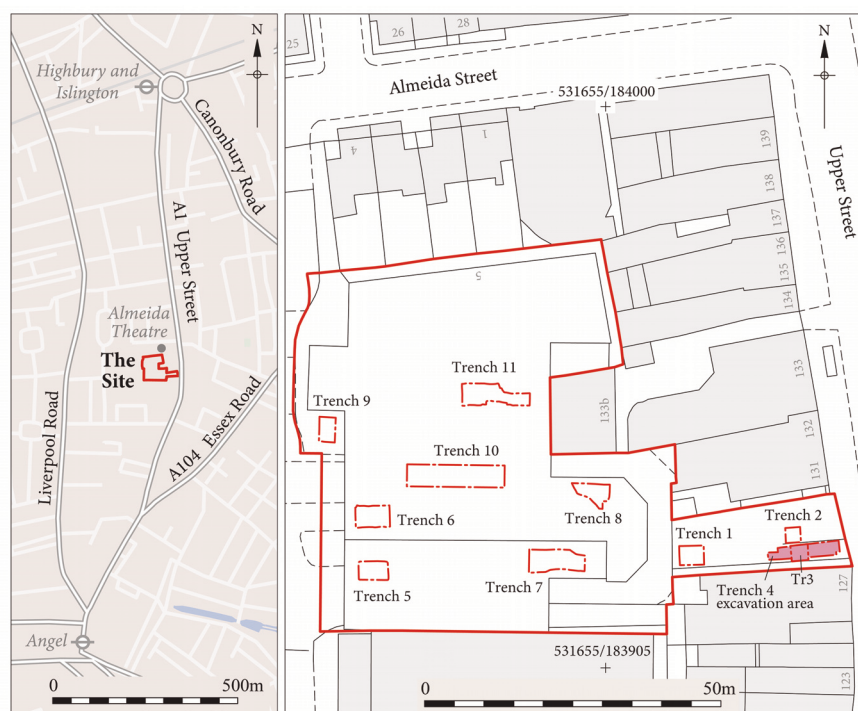


Fig 1: site location and trench location

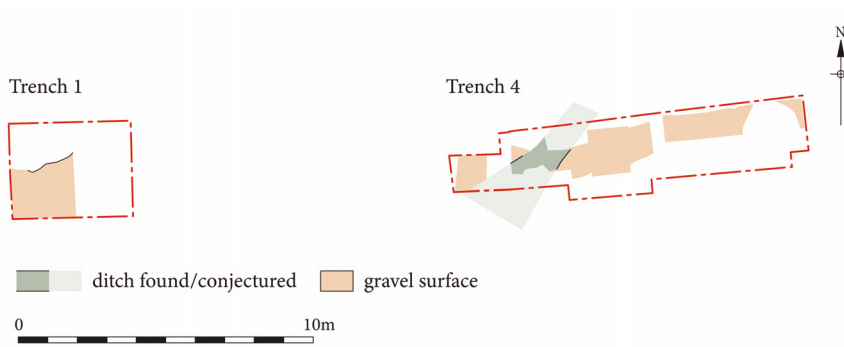


Fig 2: medieval (11th century or earlier to 1200) possible road/alley and medieval ditch

the 19th century under the same name.¹⁶

During the 19th century, urban development overtook most of the undeveloped fields and the population of Islington grew rapidly. This was a golden age for Islington with the flourishing of a number of schools, academies and theatres.¹⁷ However, by the early 20th century, it had seriously declined. It was not until the 1960s that it was rediscovered by the professional classes, including journalists and the entertainment world.¹⁸

Medieval activity

11th century or earlier to 1200: possible road/alley and ditch

The earliest archaeological evidence was recorded in the eastern part of the site in Trenches 1, 3 and 4. Here the natural sandy gravel, sloping gradually from the west downwards to the east, was sealed by compacted redeposited gravel.

This same gravel was observed across the 12.5m width of Trench 4 with a similar deposit revealed c. 15m to the west in Trench 1. It thickened from 0.10–20m in the west in Trench 1 to 0.39m towards the eastern part of the site where the slope of the natural deposits was more pronounced (Figs 2 & 3).

This gravel did not produce any dating evidence. However, its position in relation to Upper Street suggest that this was a deliberate attempt to construct a solid surface and as a result was interpreted as being part of a driveway/ thoroughfare. The extensive possible width of the feature may suggest that the road may have migrated to the east over time or that the feature was actually a side road or courtyard on an east–west alignment.

The site is located within the projected line of a Roman road as postulated by Margary.¹⁹ It is believed to have run from Cripplegate to St Albans through Islington and it could have been still in use during the later periods as part of medieval Upper Street. Archaeological evidence for a *terminus ante quem* for the construction of the gravel surface was suggested by a north-east/south-west ditch which truncated the gravel in the west part of Trench 4. The infill of the ditch produced a single sherd of early medieval shelly ware pottery dated to 1050–1200, suggesting an earlier date for the construction of this gravel surface.

1200–1340: boundary ditches

In Trench 4, two parallel east–west ditches truncated the infill of the earlier ditch (Fig 4). These ditches were set

0.70m apart with the southern one containing one sherd of early medieval gritty ware pottery dated c. 1080–1200 and the northern one, abraded pottery of London-type ware, South-Hertfordshire greyware and Coarse Border ware dating from c. 1270 to 1350. The ditches were interpreted as property boundaries which defined plots located beyond the northern and southern limits of excavation.

It is possible that, rather than being a road, the apparently earlier truncated compacted gravel between the two parallel ditches could have acted as the base of a narrow walkway alongside the two properties.

The two postulated properties were interpreted as burgage plots, which can be described as the very basic ‘cells’ in any analysis of the medieval town plan.²⁰ This was land rented by a lord or king and formed the basis for the urban development patterns of towns (boroughs) during the medieval period²¹ and was usually later subdivided into smaller properties.²²

The site was located, during the early 14th century, within the manor (*demesne*) of Barnsbury, named after Hugh de Berners and his descendants who owned the medieval manor from 1086 until the early 16th century.²³ A glimpse into the activities carried out within the site during this period is suggested by the analysis of the environmental samples taken from the



Fig 3: compacted gravel (road/alley?) looking east, 1m scale

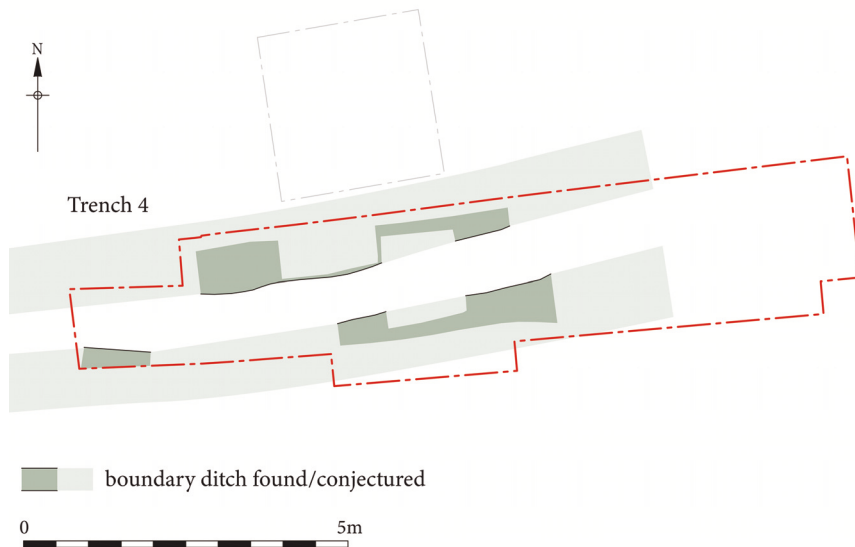


Fig 4: medieval (1200–1340) boundary ditches

parallel ditches, which produced charred grain tentatively identified as wheat, rye and barley.²⁴ However, the cereals seem to have been processed off-site and their presence within the parallel ditches is more likely to be the result of trade rather than farming activity performed on site.²⁵

Post-medieval activity

1450–1650: building 1

The two silted-up parallel ditches were sealed by a plough-soil formed between the late 14th and the 15th centuries. This was in turn sealed by a 0.17m thick levelling layer upon which was constructed the earliest building (Building 1) recorded during the investigation (Figs 5 & 6).

The sequence for its construction consisted of the laying of a floor, or floor bedding, consisting of rammed/compacted redeposited clay through which was inserted a north-south foundation which represented the western side of Building 1. The foundation consisted of roughly hewn lumps of chalk with occasional lumps of Reigate stone, ragstone and re-used roof tiles bonded with soft chalky mortar typical of late medieval to early post-medieval builds.²⁶ To the east of the wall was the remains of an internal floor consisting of a spread of re-used roof tiles, dated 1480–1550, located in the south-east corner of Trench 4.

Further evidence for the development of Building 1, dated to

the second half of the 16th century, was a north-south gully to the west of the wall, which was either a drip gully or part of the external drainage, while internal elements, possibly also associated with the drainage, were a north-south gully and a circular pit.

Occupation layers and dump deposits immediately to the west of the building contained a small finds assemblage consisting of an iron wall hook, an iron buckle, iron scissors with parallel tapering and a copper-alloy rondel dagger plate.²⁷ These, plus a collection of animal bones consisting of cattle and sheep/goat, confirmed the domestic nature of these deposits.

The deposits to the west of Building 1 were later sealed by an external floor constructed of re-used roof tiles. Evidence for the repair of the floor consisting of well-compacted patches of clayey gravel was seen, which produced London-area early post-medieval redware pottery dating the repair to c. 1480 to 1600. This floor might suggest that either the building was extended further to the west at this time, or represented an external yard.

In the mid-17th century, Building 1 was partially demolished when the north-south foundation was sealed by a compacted levelling/consolidation layer to form a larger external area. The presence of a later 19th-century foundation located in the same position (see below) suggests that part of Building 1 may still have been intact.

A building similar to the one found at Almeida Street, was recorded in Islington Green approximately 270m south of the present site. Here a north-south orientated structure (Building 1), located in the south-east part of the site, consisted of a shallow chalk and mortar foundation inserted on a brickearth slab. Mirroring the underlying stratigraphy of the Almeida site, this building was constructed above two medieval backfilled parallel ditches, interpreted as field boundaries/drainage ditches.²⁸ Of note is the similarity in date and stratigraphy between the two sites – in particular the possible subdivision of larger tenements' plots into smaller properties fronting on to the road.

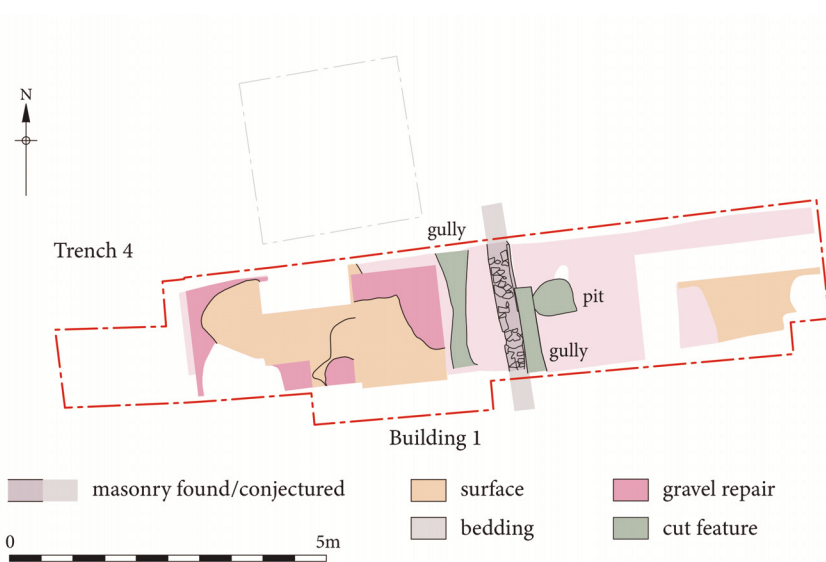


Fig 5: early post-medieval (1450–1650) Building 1

Late 17th century to 1800: consolidation, Building 2 and western area

The eastern part of the site underwent

further change in land use towards the end of the 17th century, with the formation of an organic clayey silt deposit recorded in Trenches 1, 3 and 4. This deposit, containing pottery, ceramic building material (CBM) and animal bones, seems to have formed as a result of domestic dumping in combination with its re-working, which was probably associated with horticultural activity.

In Trench 4, this deposit was truncated by the insertion of a post-medieval masonry foundation which formed the north-west corner of a building (Building 2) which had been constructed in the area previously occupied by Building 1 (Fig 7). It was constructed of re-used bricks during the first half of the 18th century. No internal floors were observed as they were truncated, together with the upper masonry elements. Rocque's map of 1746 shows this area to be occupied by a row of buildings suggesting that Building 2 was probably part of these properties.

Unsurprisingly, in the western part of the site where Trenches 5 to 10 were excavated, the site was less affected by the intense occupation observed to the east, as it was set back from the street frontage. Here the main activity up until the late post-medieval period was mostly associated first with farming and later with gardening. The combined horticultural activity together with the 20th-century development (ie the Sorting Office) removed most of the earlier soft deposits and masonry structures.

However, a wide range of artefacts recovered from deposits pre-dating the late post-medieval development of the site suggests that this area became the focus for general waste, probably disposed of from properties facing on to Upper Street. The bone assemblage possibly offers a glimpse of the activity carried out in the close vicinity, consisting mainly of cattle and in particular head parts, which account for the 22 out of the total 39 cattle and 26 out of the 36 sheep/goat bones. This assemblage may signify butcher's waste, or perhaps an eating house or large domestic dwelling in the vicinity.²⁹

During the 18th century the urbanisation of Islington increased substantially. In 1708 the parish counted 325 houses, but this had



Fig 6: Building 1 looking east, 1m scale

increased to 1,745 houses by 1801. The increased number of properties developed was paralleled by a substantial demographic surge as the population increased from 6,600 in 1793 to 10,212.³⁰ Agricultural activity, once the main occupation, was supplanted by urbanisation.

19th-century structures

During the 19th century, the area immediately to the south of the Mitre pub was developed with the construction of a north-south foundation in Trench 4 (Fig 9). This masonry abutted the south facing wall of the Mitre pub and was constructed on the same orientation and in the same position as the earlier medieval wall (see Building 1 above).

Further to the east, another parallel wall was encountered with a return to the west. Between the two

walls was a rectangular cesspit [64].

More activity pertaining to the 19th century was observed in the western part of the site in the form of an east-west wall in Trench 8, together with two brick-lined cesspits [1012] and [1013] in Trench 7 (Fig 8). These cesspits were part of a toilet block shown on the 1871 OS Map (Fig 9) most likely associated with the Mitre pub. They produced the largest assemblage of pottery, clay tobacco pipes, glass, animal bones and small finds during the archaeological investigation.

Finds

Approximately half of the pottery from the site was derived from 19th-century features – virtually all were recovered from the backfill of three cesspits ([64], [1012] and [1013]). These groups are characterised in the main by Pearlware



Fig 7: post-medieval (1650–1750) Building 2

and Creamware services, and sanitary wares, namely plates, cups, saucers and chamber pots. Cesspit [1012] produced the largest assemblage at 234 sherds.

A date for the pottery of 1830 to 1840 is suggested by the presence of the Creamware and Pearlwares, alongside transfer-printed refined whiteware with ‘flow blue’ decoration and other early 19th-century introductions, including Yellow ware and new colour transfer-prints. The shape of a Coalport Adelaide cup also dates to 1830–45, occurring in the group alongside the more broadly dated porringer type. It is, however,

quite possible, even likely, that the Pearlwares and Creamwares were old when deposited and thus a mid- or even late 19th-century date for deposition is possible (see glass below).

Of some interest in this group are two toy chamber pots, one in blue glazed refined whiteware (Fig 10) and a slightly larger Pearlware example with a green and blue transfer-print overglazed with a red painted floral and thistle design.

Porcelain from China, the continent and of English manufacture is also evident with examples including a tea bowl, a figurine and an egg cup. Two

identical hard paste porcelain cream jugs, slip cast with a relief-moulded decoration of a man tending vines, were also present. These have an external matt finish and are probably English in manufacture, but could be of continental origin.

The remaining pottery from [1012] includes a small number of Pearlware and refined white earthenware bears’ grease pots and lids and cylindrical jars, Yellow ware carinated bowls and a tankard, and English stoneware ginger beer and ink bottles. Finally, a Black basalt ware flanged teapot lid, a Sunderland-type coarseware bowl and a number of London-area post-medieval redware flowerpots and two dishes were also recovered.

Cesspits [64] and [1013] contained a similar range of material, either dated to the first or second quarter of the 19th century but, again, a later 19th-century deposition date is perhaps more likely. The latter cesspit, in particular, included dyed-bodied refined earthenware and pale blue transfer-printed pieces, more typical of the later 19th century. This cesspit also contained the fragmented remains of a Pearlware chamber pot with a fluted, globular body, pedestal base and a green ‘Greek’- pattern transfer-printed design depicting figures in traditional dress in a Greek inspired landscape.

Pipes

A sizeable quantity of clay tobacco pipes – 114 fragments (24 bowls, seven mouthparts and 83 stems) – were recovered from cesspit [1012]. Six residual bowls spanning the period c. 1680–1740 were recorded and the rest were manufactured during a timeframe of c. 1840–80, although three were too damaged to assign to a type. Many of these later bowls were of poor quality.

Six examples of the earliest bowl type (type 28) were dated c. 1820–50.³¹ Single bowls, initialled on the spurs with the maker’s initials TS (with oak leaf borders), could have been made by numerous local pipe makers,³² or with IT (with an acorn and oak leaf border) which was possibly made locally by John Taylor, Cromer Street, working in 1844–48.

Two plain bowls had IH on the spur and a circular incuse stamp on the back of the bowl with the name ‘HOBBS’.



Fig 8: late post-medieval brick lined cesspit [1012] in Trench 7, looking north-east

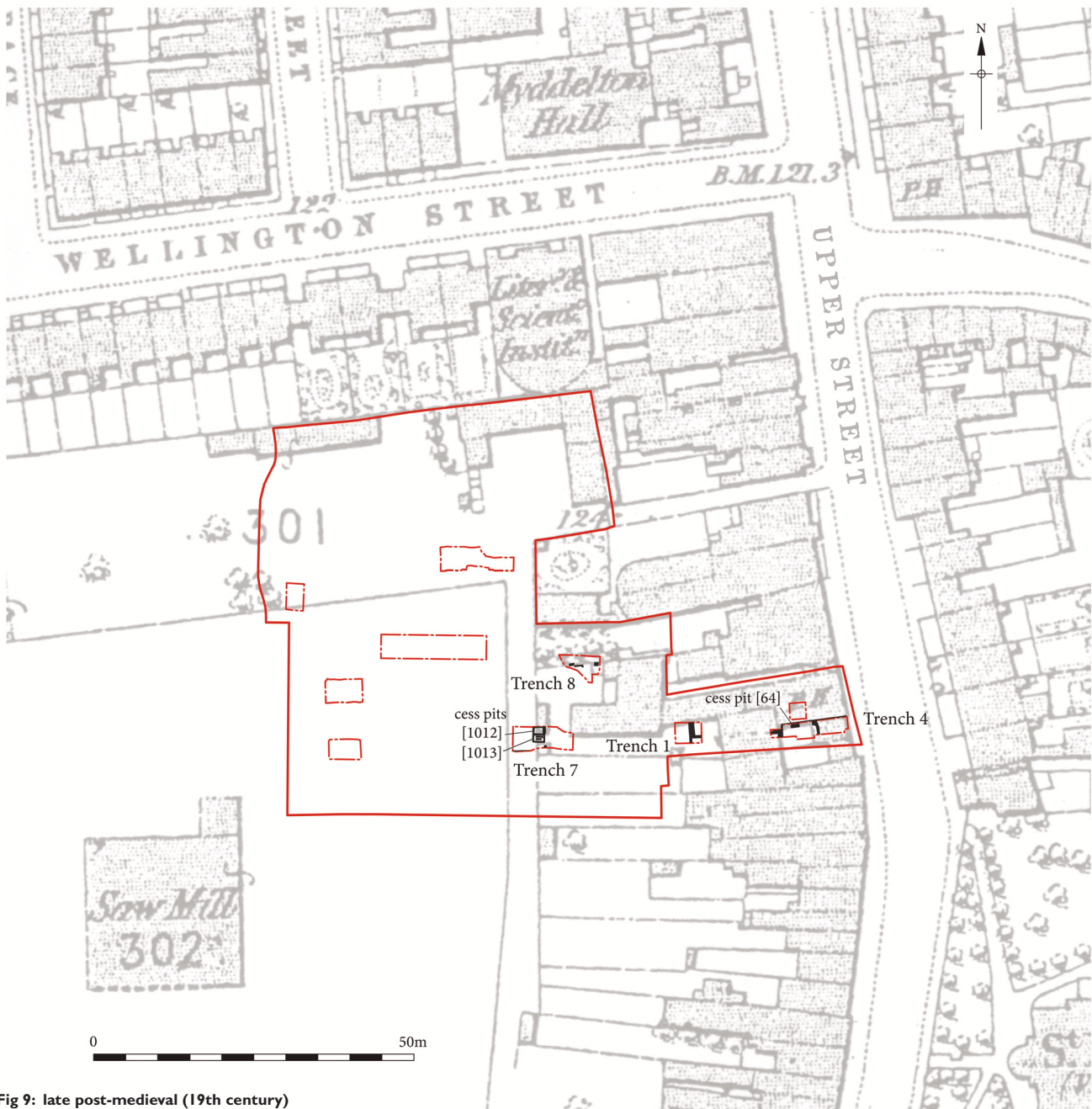


Fig 9: late post-medieval (19th century) masonry overlaid on the OS Map of 1871

These were probably made by John Hobbs, 1828–58, in St George’s in the East, Shadwell.³³

There are three examples of the shorter type 28 bowl, dated c. 1840–80³⁴ – one is plain, another has leaf borders with illegible initials on the spur while the last example is marked SW on the spur, a possible maker’s mark for Mrs S Wheeler, 1867–9, Holborn, or Samuel Wilkinson, 1873–91, Islington.³⁵

All four of the heeled, slanted rim type 29 bowls have acorn and oak leaf borders, although only two bowls survive with their heels intact. One has *party per pale* shields and the other the letters WW, for which there are a



Fig 10: toy chamber pot in blue glazed refined whiteware from cesspit [1012]

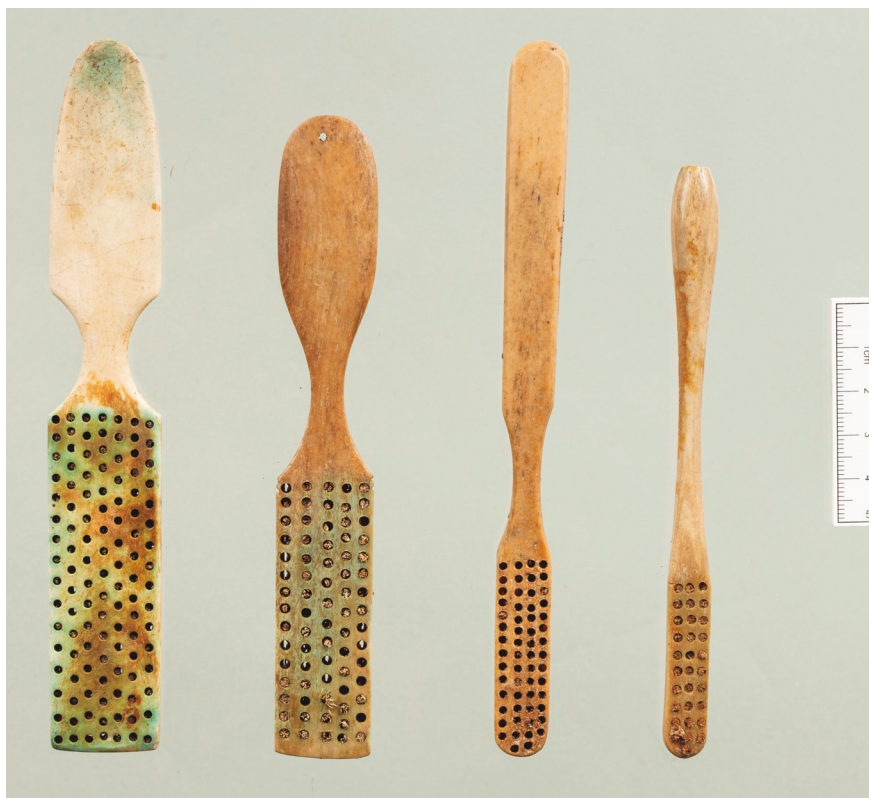


Fig 11: bone brushes (SF 100 and 109) and toothbrushes (SF 110 and 108) from cess pit [1012]

number of documented London pipe makers, including local ones.³⁶

There are two examples of type 30 bowls without a heel or spur, dated c. 1840 onwards, one of which has an elaborate ribbed and gadroon fluted design and the other, damaged and burnt, has a probable grape vine on each side of the bowl and a large veined leaf on the base underside. Very few of the probable pipe makers of the bowls appear to have been working at the same time, indicating some of the bowls may have been old when finally deposited.

The sizeable quantity of clay tobacco pipes found in a cesspit can be indicative of the material culture associated with a drinking establishment,³⁷ in this case the Mitre pub. If they all came from the public house, it seems unlikely that a local master pipe maker had a contract to supply the establishment with clay tobacco pipes as there is no single maker featuring in sufficient numbers.

The poor quality of the pipes could be interpreted as belonging to a low socio-economic group household or clientele associated with the drinking establishment, who purchased mostly products made locally. The two Hobbs stamped pipes may represent the property of an individual from the

Shadwell area travelling to the local environs for reasons of work.

Glass

The glass from cesspit [1012] consisted of 92 fragments representing 37 different vessels (minimum number of vessels: MNV) or items, with most vessels dating to the mid-19th century. Only ten vessels (27%) were used for alcohol, three of which were for consumption, consisting of a rummer, an intact small tumbler and a wine glass with a bucket-shaped bowl. All three vessels were moulded with fluted decoration on the bowls.

There were seven fragmentary olive-green glass wine bottles including a possible mallet-type dated c. 1725–60, while the wall and base fragments of five free-blown cylindrical wine bottles were also recorded, dating c. 1740–1850.

Eight bottles (21.6% MNV) were used for general liquid storage, consisting of four cylindrical examples in either clear (with a prescription-type rim finish) or green-tinted glass, three flat octagonal bottles in either aquamarine, clear or pale blue glass. Two of these were of squat type and one had a packer-type rim finish while a clear oval section bottle had a prescription-type rim.

Two vessels had a hygiene use – one was the base of a dark olive-green tall cylindrical phial, possibly optically blown, the other was a moulded clear glass hexagonal perfume bottle with an embossed panel:

[JEA]N MARIE FARINA/[P]LACE
JULIERS NO4/...COLOGNE

The most datable glass vessel in the cesspit, it was made after 1862 when Roger et Gallet of Paris, having taken over the perfumery business of Jean Farina, launched an improved cologne and named it after their predecessor.³⁸

Fragmentary window glass from some six different clear glass panes included a central crown piece, and two rectangular quarries, all of which were probably of 19th-century date. Eight unidentifiable fragments of vessel glass were recorded, including a medieval–early post-medieval devitrified natural glass fragment and 19th-century fragments of closed forms, besides a tapering tube.

Assuming that the majority of the glass came from the Mitre pub, then very little of the material can be confidently assigned to ‘front of house’ activities and the majority appears to be associated with the domestic arrangements of the victualler and their family, or possible paying guests.

Other finds

Among the small finds recovered from cesspit [1012] were numerous objects of bone and ivory, versatile materials in a time before celluloid and other man-made materials. They include bone toothbrushes and small handled brushes, probably clothes brushes (Fig 11). It is possible that the brushes were products of the fancy brush manufacturer, John Tompion, who is recorded as being at No 123 (numbered 97 before 1861) Upper Street between at least 1841 and 1871 which lay just to the south of the Mitre pub which was at No 130.³⁹

Other pieces from the cesspit reflect the use of skeletal materials for innumerable lathe-turned objects, many of which are difficult to identify (Fig 12). Unlike needle cases or bone syringe needles, none of these objects is hollowed through. Two ivory pieces have transverse perforations, presumably for a metal pin. One (SF 121) is spiral-shaped and the other (SF 101) is carved at one end

with a palmette-like decoration, above which is a narrower threaded pin, broken in antiquity.

A third ivory object (SF 102) is partly drilled though, with internal threading at both ends. It is possible this was a pen- or pencil handle,⁴⁰ or part of a boot- or button hook or other utensil. A fourth bone object has a lathe-turned knob at one end and an unthreaded opening at the other, most likely a thread reel.

There were also lead-alloy printing types within the cesspit, with altogether at least 80 individual examples (SF 120). The types were associated with about 70 lead-alloy straps measuring c. 20 x 90mm. The function of the straps, which are very thin, is unclear, but their association with the printing types may suggest they are spacers, or 'leading', used in setting type.

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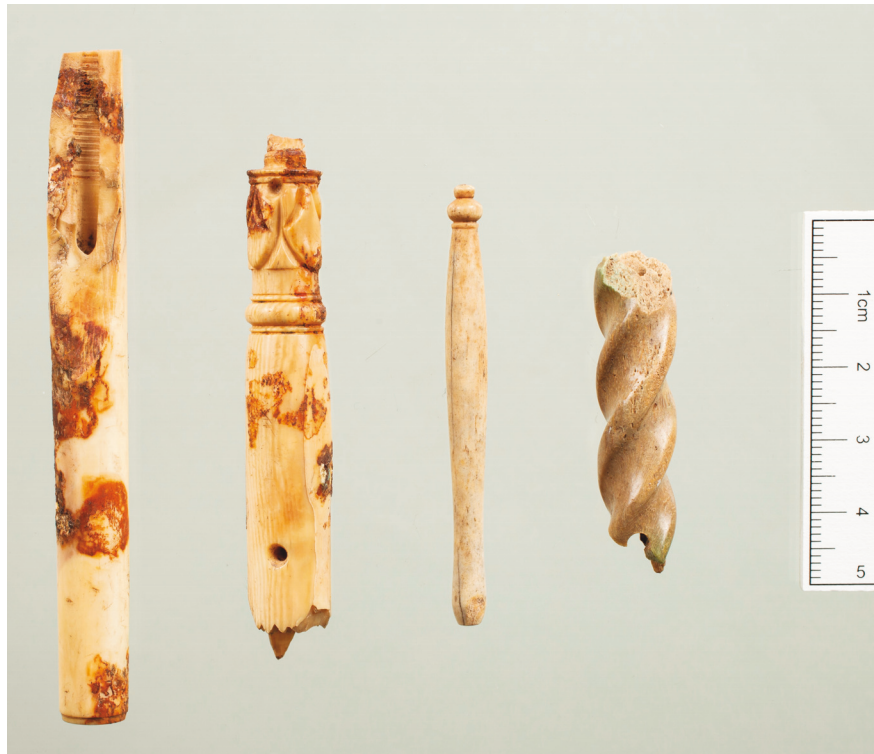


Fig 12: ivory and bone objects (SF 102, 101, 111, and 121 shown left to right) from cesspit [1012]

Islington, who monitored the site on behalf of the council.

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Ireneo Grosso is a PCA supervisor who has undertaken numerous sites across London including major excavations over the River Tyburn in Westminster and in the Roman cemetery, Southwark.

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