MUSEUM OF LONDON

Archaeology Matters

No 14, May 2001

Gresham Street

As visitors queued in the Museum to inspect the mosaic that had just been brought in from 10 Gresham Street (see the February issue of *Archaeology Matters*), archaeologists on the site itself were turning up one final surprise. The largest collection of Romano-British roundhouses yet uncovered in the City was revealed in the last weeks of the dig, which was funded by Standard Life Investments Ltd.

The remains of at least 11 circular houses, about 5m in diameter, were recorded clustered around a larger rectangular building. In some houses the remains of hearths and floor layers were discovered. Initial dating evidence suggests they were in use from AD50, shortly after the Roman invasion of AD43, and thus comprise evidence of the lifestyle of the very first Londoners. However, representing as they do the persistence of a pre-Roman building tradition, they were probably occupied by local British people, rather than by the Roman invaders themselves.

It is likely that the houses were abandoned after the Boudican revolt of AD61 – though, interestingly, there was no evidence for the firestorm which destroyed most of the Roman city in that year. The majority of the houses were sealed beneath a road that ran north from Roman Cheapside towards the south gate of the Roman fort (located just to the north of Gresham Street). That road was probably laid out in the years following the revolt, though on present evidence the fort itself was not built for another half-century.

Prior to this excavation, only a handful of roundhouses had been uncovered in London – the nearest being on Newgate Street – and never before in such a concentration. This new information will prove invaluable in understanding the origins of *Londinium* and the transition from the Iron Age.

James Drummond-Murray/Julian Ayre
Museum of London Archaeology Service

Roman Armour

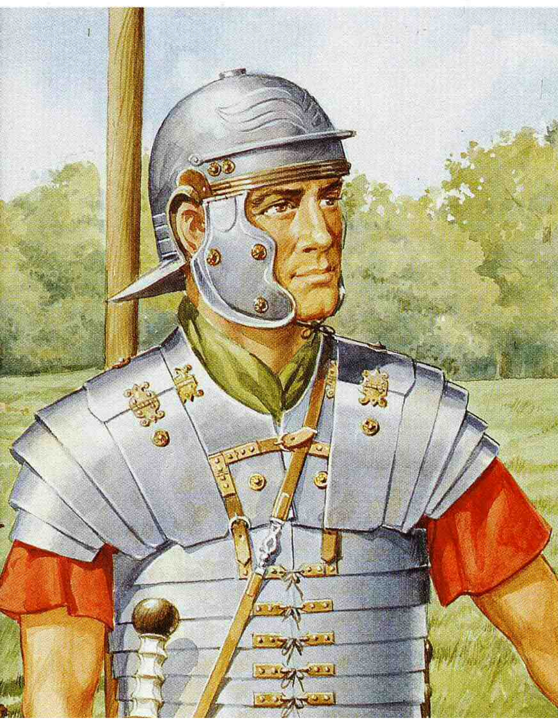
When they hit upon a large lump of corroded iron on the Plantation Place site last autumn, the archaeologists had guessed they might be on to something important. Six months later, after painstaking treatment in the Museum's conservation laboratory, the largest item of Roman armour ever to have been found in London has been revealed.

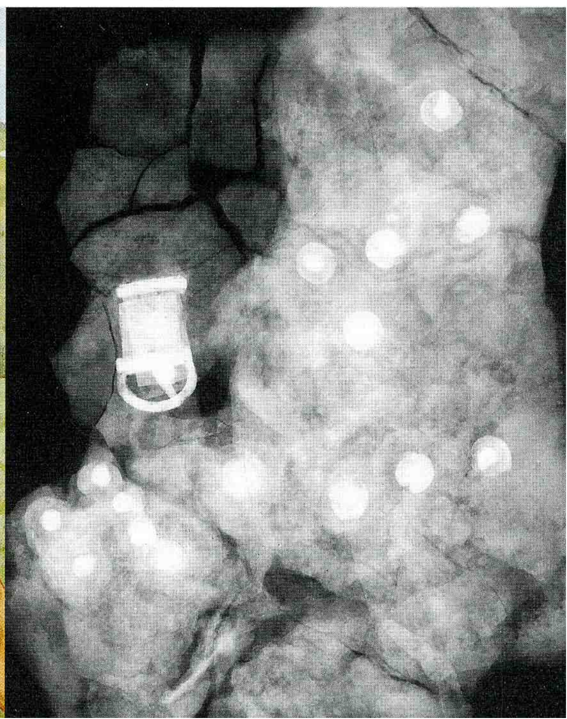
The iron lump had been lifted as a block of soil and sent immediately to the laboratory for investigation. A temporary support was made from polyurethane foam and the soil scraped away from beneath. Then the slowly emerging object was despatched to the British Museum's Department of Scientific Research to be X-rayed. Penetrating deep into the corroded lump, the X-rays revealed several series of long iron plates, joined together by copper alloy rivets, hinges and ties. There could be no doubt that this was a substantial portion of a Roman plate armour cuirass – probably the breastplate, collar-plate and back-plates on one side. The object was then cleaned further, exposing for the first time the rosette-decorated copper alloy rivets and the carefully shaped hinges. It was mounted on a permanent support of epoxy resin, though sadly its condition will never be good enough for it to be displayed in the Museum.

Cuirasses of this sort were introduced shortly before the invasion of Britain in AD43. Innovative, mass-produced and effective against cuts from British long swords, they marked a major step forward in the evolution of the Roman army. This particular cuirass may well have been worn by a soldier who fought against Boudica and who was billeted in the camp laid out on the Plantation Place site.

Gill Nason
Museum of London Specialist Services

Legionary soldier wearing armour of the type found at Plantation Place (Derek Lucas)





The Emperor's Left Hand?

Throughout the Roman empire life-size statues of emperors and empresses could be seen in public places. They fulfilled an important political need, reminding the emperor's subjects of his power and authority. And when they looked up at his face, people might be persuaded – by artistic sleight-of-hand – to believe that a weak leader was really a courageous general, that a cruel tyrant was really a kindly governor.

Few stone statues escaped eventual reuse as building material, and most bronzework was ultimately consigned to the melting-pot. So this new discovery, from 30 Gresham Street just south of the site of the amphitheatre, is particularly intriguing. A life-size left hand and forearm, it is broken off below the elbow. Possibly it once grasped a staff or scroll. Hollow cast in bronze, the nails, knuckles and back of the hand show a high level of artistic competence in executing a naturalistic style. Areas of corrosion mask traces of the gold leaf which once covered the entire surface.

Appropriately for the capital of the Roman province, *Londinium* has produced more fragments of monumental bronze statuary than the rest of *Britannia* put together, but this is the first find from a properly dated context. It was discovered in a large pond or soakaway, in sediments laid down before AD70 – an astonishingly early date for the erection, let alone the demolition, of any kind of monumental sculpture in London. Could this be part of a statue of Nero (AD54–68), whose images were torn down by order of the Senate in his own lifetime?

The excavation is being carried out by the Museum of London Archaeology Service, in collaboration with AOC Archaeology Group, and is funded by Land Securities plc; information from Bruce Watson (MoLAS) and Jenny Hall (Museum of London). The arm is on display in the Museum.

Along the A13

How do you tackle a site five miles long? This was the problem faced by archaeologists working on the A13 Thames Gateway road scheme between Dagenham and Canning Town. The construction of underpasses and flyovers provided the opportunity to study an entire buried landscape, 10,000 years old, and some extraordinary results are now surfacing.

A glance at the map showed that the A13 skirts the first high ground to the north of the Thames. Between it and the river lies a long-buried floodplain, traversed by two important tributaries, the Lea and the Roding. The first task was to dig eight boreholes and 65 test pits, so as to investigate how both natural and human-made deposits had accumulated – and at what date. Then, in a second stage, 27 evaluation trenches, up to 40m long, 3m wide and 5m deep, were excavated on three key sites. These revealed numerous structures, artefacts and environmental remains. In a final phase, likely to take place later in the summer, even larger trenches will be opened.

It is becoming clear that the area was intensively exploited by very early people – particularly in the late Mesolithic/early Neolithic (6500–2500BC), the Middle Bronze Age (1500–1000BC) and the Later Bronze Age (1000–500BC). Indeed, more people may have lived here then than at any time until the 19th century AD! On one site, loom weights and an oak-piled structure were discovered; on another, a deposit of grain that is providing new information about Neolithic farming. In the Late Bronze Age, sea-levels began to rise, and the river buried the landscape under at least two feet of alluvial clay and silt. On one site a beaver dam was found – an extraordinary survival that shows how natural vegetation and wildlife returned as habitation became impossible.

Copyright: Gifford and Partners

The project was organised by Gifford and Partners, with contributions from Pre-Construct Archaeology and the University of Lampeter; information from Ken Whittaker.

New History from Old Buildings

People often grow fond of old buildings in their neighbourhood, and the fate of buildings can understandably be contentious. This is one of the reasons why more buildings — not necessarily of great antiquity — are being investigated in London than ever before. The work takes place prior to alteration or demolition, and is carried out by specialists using archaeological techniques.

Recent work by MoLAS includes the gatehouse of the Middle Temple, Fleet Street, rebuilt 1684; the fine 18th-century church of St Leonard, Shoreditch; and 19th-century suburban villas in Roehampton and Hendon. The Museum's archaeologists deduce the history of the building – construction, use and modifications – from its surviving fabric. Their report combines technical data with information about people who lived and worked there, gleaned from records of the last 200-300 years. The ability to put actual names and other details to the inhabitants of buildings is one of the great attractions of this kind of archaeology, bringing the history of London's neighbourhoods to life.

A building at Davies Lane, Leytonstone (see picture), is a typically interesting example of such a project. The walls in the background belonged to 17th- and 18th-century stables and other outbuildings attached to a long-vanished country house. In 1877 a local philanthropist, Miss Agnes Cotton, set up a refuge here for girls she rescued from the streets of London. She taught them sewing and laundering, and this room was where they hung the laundry to dry. In the Second World War the building became a pig farm, and afterwards housed a small factory making air conditioning ducting. It has now been demolished and a new development, by East Thames Housing Group Ltd, will provide sheltered and half-way housing.

Andrew Westman
Museum of London Archaeology Service

The Medieval Tube

In 1236 the City of London acquired rights to springs beside the Tyburn – near modern Bond Street tube station – with the intention of piping water into the city so that 'the rich and middling persons therein might have water for preparing their food, and the poor for their drink'. The pipeline, which took over 30 years to build, entered the city at Ludgate. It climbed the hill north of St Paul's cathedral and ran along Cheapside, before disgorging into a great underground cistern near Old Jewry.

This had long been known from documentary sources but, until recently, hardly any *physical* evidence for so important a civic amenity had been recorded. Then, in 1994, the cistern was discovered by Museum of London archaeologists; and now – during a dig sponsored by Charterhouse Bank – the lead pipe itself has been found beneath the pavement of Paternoster Row, a street to the north of St Paul's cathedral. It was encased in clay at the bottom of a deep trench, and had an internal diameter of 90mm. Two sections survived, measuring 3m and 4m in length. Five metres down today, the pipe would have been at least 2m below contemporary street level. During later medieval times a pit had been dug, either so as to effect a crude repair to the pipe or perhaps in order to tap illegally into the public water supply.

The system continued to supply the city until the Great Fire of 1666, and was partly mapped by Ralph Treswell in 1585 (see front cover). Note the water tower, with large wooden tankards for carrying water, and the pipes running in front of shops on Paternoster Row. But why does Treswell show *three* pipes, when – despite extensive excavation – only one has been found? At present, that remains a mystery.

Kieron Heard
Museum of London Archaeology Service
John Clark
Museum of London

Events

NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGY DAYS

Saturday 21 July & Sunday 22 July

National Archaeology Days are an exciting opportunity for families to find out about the Museum's archaeological work. Take the chance to meet some of our experts and to peek behind the scenes.

- Bring in mystery objects from your back garden for identification.
- Join a guided walk along the historic foreshore of the Thames, or along streets whose route was fixed by the Romans nearly 2000 years ago.
- Visit remains of Roman London, including a spectacular bath-house that will be opened to the public for the first time in 30 years.

To find out what will be happening on the day you visit, or to request a Special Events leaflet, please phone 020 7814 5777. As some events are likely to be over-subscribed, please book early to avoid disappointment.

THE DIG

Tuesday 14 August – Sunday 28 October

Have you got what it takes to be an archaeologist? Roll up your sleeves, pick up your trowel and get down to work at the Museum of London. On our reconstructed dig you'll be excavating a mixture of real and replica Roman objects. Can you work out what they are, and what kind of building you have found?

Designed especially for families, **The Dig** will include a fun, hands-on exhibition to fill you in on the background to the job. You'll find out why archaeology is so important in London, and how archaeologists know where to dig. You'll learn to figure out the age of things you unearth. You'll never think of rubbish in the same way again!

For further information, please phone 020 7814 5777

Publications

NEW BOOKS

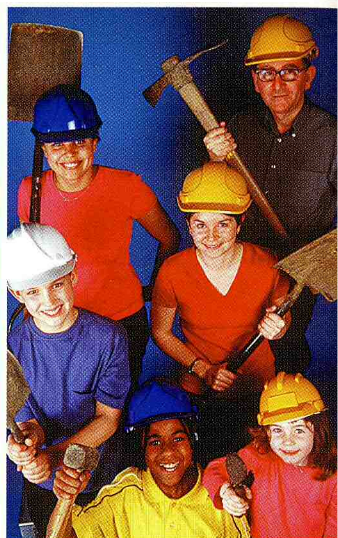
London bridge: 2000 years of a river crossing

By Bruce Watson, Trevor Brigham and Tony Dyson

London exists today because almost 2000 years ago the Romans realised it was the lowest convenient point to bridge the Thames estuary. The Roman bridge went out of use during the 4th century AD and the Thames was not bridged again until *c* 1000, when the first of a series of timber bridges was erected, initially to prevent Viking raiders sailing upstream. The great stone bridge lined with houses was constructed *c* 1176–1209 and demolished in 1831 after the construction of a new bridge upstream. This volume brings together the archaeological, architectural, historical and pictorial evidence for London's greatest bridge.

MoLAS, £22.00

The books mentioned in this leaflet are available from the Museum shop. Telephone orders by credit or debit card: 020 7814 5600. Prices as stated, plus post and packing.



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Front cover: the medieval water supply near St Michael le Querne, Cheapside. By Ralph Treswell, 1585. Copyright: British Museum