

VAL88

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Fleet Valley between Blackfriars and Holborn Viaduct Stations, EC4

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A series of excavations, before and during this extensive redevelopment along the E side of the lower valley of the River Fleet, began in 1988 and ended in January 1992. Work was funded by Rosehaugh Stanhope Developments plc.

Natural topography and prehistory

Two small eyots lying alongside the east bank of the prehistoric Fleet river were discovered. The downstream eyot extended from the north side of modern Ludgate Circus to Apothecary Street and was approximately pear shaped with a maximum width of approximately 36m on its N side. The upstream eyot lay between modern Fleet Lane and a little to the S of Old Seacoal Lane. This was more symmetrical in shape than the downstream eyot being approximately 64m long and 52m wide. There was evidence of deep natural scouring in the channel between this eyot and the riverbank. This may have been associated with a natural stream which joined the Fleet at the NE corner of the channel. Both eyots were to be exploited in the historic periods.

There was very little which could be safely attributed to the prehistoric period. The skeletal remains of an infant which were recovered from the channel to the S of the upstream eyot did appear to be pre-Roman.

Roman

This area of Londinium was exploited at an early date by the Romans. The downstream eyot was used to import wheat around AD 70. A substantial jetty and warehouse were constructed on the downstream eyot for this purpose. The upstream eyot was used for the processing of the imported wheat and the remains of a substantial tide mill were found here during the excavations. Both eyots were abandoned sometime towards the end of the 2nd c. This coincides with a tidal regression in the Lower Thames which may have made the eyots unusable. The upstream eyot was not again used by the Romans. The downstream eyot, on the other hand, was used to help span a bridge across the Fleet. The remains of a substantial ragstone and tile structure were excavated on the N side of Ludgate Circus. The dating evidence suggests that this feature was contemporary with the construction of the city wall around 200.

The road down Ludgate Hill is earlier than this, probably being first laid in the latter half of the 1st c when it had a gradient of 1:20. This was subsequently reduced to 1:10 when the wall and bridge were constructed. There was no evidence of an earlier bridge across the Fleet as it was not possible to investigate the south side of Ludgate Circus means that the possibility cannot be categorically ruled out. The alignment of the later Roman road on Ludgate Hill together with its width strongly suggests that the Roman gate was a double gate, with only the southern carriage way being used in the medieval period.

Evidence of industrial activity was located on the Hill above the Fleet close to the present site of the Old Bailey and immediately to the south of the road to Newgate. The hillside was extensively terraced between AD 40 and 100. Sometime before 120 a series of glass-making kilns were constructed and these survived until the construction of the city wall around 200. Following their destruction a very large octagonal temple was constructed. With a total area of 520 sq m, this is the largest yet found in Britain. A pit, situated adjacent to the outer wall line of the temple, contained a human skull, possibly that this was a foundation deposit for the temple. The main structure was constructed in masonry with *opus signinum* floors and a tiled roof. A significant quantity of wall plaster painted red with a border of white and green was recovered from one of the robber trenches associated with the destruction of the main building. There also appears to have been an ancillary building. The temple was completely destroyed, possibly by fire, around 270 and replaced by a large multi-roomed building with ragstone walls and *opus signinum* floors. The full extent of this building could not be determined as much of it lay beyond the limits of excavation. It appears to have been rebuilt or substantially altered at least four times. It may also have had a courtyard to the east. One unusual glass tessera hints at the existence of a high quality mosaic. The building survived to at least 335.

Saxon

Between the end of the Roman period and the middle of the 11th c the area between the city walls and the Fleet river was apparently abandoned and it is not until the late Saxon period that any evidence of activity was recorded: an unusual burial group on the foreshore at the confluence of the Fleet and Thames. The burials were not regular and given the partially disarticulated state of the individual skeletons, it is possible, although not proven, that the group had been decapitated and/or dismembered before burial. A preliminary scan of the skeletal material suggests that this may have been a family group. Deliberately placed pieces of ragstone were also associated with some of these burials. In one case the stone was placed in the position of the missing skull.

Saxo-Norman

The first of a series of shallow post-Roman resurfacing of the road out of Ludgate date from this period. A new timber bridge was built across the Fleet probably immediately before or immediately after the Norman Conquest. It was founded on piles driven into the N end of the downstream eyot and stabilised with consolidation dumps. Longitudinal beams carried a walkway of transverse planks and there was evidence that the bridge had

been burned at some stage in its life with the more badly burned timbers being subsequently repaired.

The Fleet Prison

The first Fleet Prison was constructed on the upstream eyot around 1180 and took the form of a square tower with polygonal turrets on all four corners. The channel around the eyot acted as a natural moat until the period 1230–61 when an artificial moat and a ragstone perimeter wall around the entire eyot were constructed. Between 1270 and 1400 the moat was dredged on a number of occasions. Often the dredged material was dumped inside the compound and used as makeup in some of the areas of the compound still prone to subsidence. The small strip of land immediately outside the perimeter wall was frequently encroached upon, notably for the construction of cesspits. Major rebuilding took place in the 16th c with a new prison building being added at the south end of the eyot. An annex to this building served as a toilet block with timber seats arranged around three sides and a well constructed drainage system beneath the paved floor. Occupation continued, with the moat finally being reduced to a bricked over drain towards the end of the 16th c. Some industrial activity took place, notably pin making, in the properties which now encroached up to the perimeter wall itself. The prison suffered substantial damages in the Great Fire of 1666 which was followed by a substantial rebuilding programme. The original tower and later building were demolished and a brick and timber building erected on a completely new alignment. The perimeter wall was rebuilt in brick and it is likely that the western side of the compound was extended out to the newly constructed Fleet Canal at this period also.

The prison was again destroyed by fire in 1720 and rebuilt on the same alignment. It was again rebuilt in 1770 following another fire. The new building was much more substantial and followed the alignment established after the Great Fire. This building suffered some damage during the Gordon Riots in 1780 following which repairs were carried out. These included the doubling of the thickness of the perimeter wall by adding buttressed brickwork to the inside face. With the arrival of the railways the face of this part of London changed utterly. An Act for the demolition of the prison was passed in May 1842 and demolition took place in 1845. The railway viaduct which finally connected Blackfriars station and Holborn Viaduct was built in stages between 1864 and 1876.

The Templars and the Blackfriars

The Knights Templar were granted the land S of Ludgate by Henry II in 1159. The excavations revealed that they immediately set in train a vigorous programme of reclamation around the downstream eyot. Problems were encountered around the S tip of the eyot and it was not until the end of the 12th c that the reclaimed land was fully consolidated. Further S, at the confluence with the Thames similar reclamation activity took place, pushing reclaimed land to the S and SW. The western area was used to construct the tide mill which was a source of many complaints during the 13th c. A masonry tank with two culverts was probably associated with the maintenance of water levels in the mill pond.

The remains of tenements established by the Templars were also recorded along the S side of Ludgate Hill and further to the S on both sides of the medieval Blackfriars Lane. One of the three buildings on the Ludgate Hill frontage was constructed at the turn of the 12th/13th c and survived in one form or another until the fire bombs on the night of 22 December 1942. The first step of a spiral staircase from the earliest building survived *in situ*. This was made from Reigate stone and was of the single block type which went out of use around 1200. Reigate stone was also used to provide an ornamental doorway to another building to the S of the first. An open area between the two properties contained a large barrel-lined well and a small lean-to which housed a three-seater toilet carved from oak.

Evidence of industrial activity, possibly a smithy, was associated the tenements further south and lying to the east of the tide mill. A small alley between two of these tenements would later define the pre-19th c Blackfriars Lane (Water Lane). Following the suppression of the Templars in 1314, a large parcel of their land was included in the grant to the Blackfriars who were to give their name to their area.

The excavations were confined to the western limits of the friary which appeared to have been used as gardens but some light industrial activity did continue to the S. The major feature from this period found in the excavations was the extension of the city wall, built at the end of the 12th c to enclose the Blackfriars' precinct (Fig*VAL). More than 80m of this structure were recorded along modern Pilgrim Street and New Bridge Street. Survival was good to excellent, with a foundation width of 3.0m and an overall height of 3.5m in places being found.

A large part of the NW area of the precinct appears to have suffered substantial problems from flooding for some time after the wall was constructed, with only the higher ground close to Blackfriars Lane being usable. There were also delays in completing the section of wall from Pilgrim Street S to the Thames and these appear to be a direct result of the obstruction caused by the Templars' mill and its associated mill pond. The kink which can be seen today in the Fleet sewer is present also in the N-S stretch of the wall. It is now thought that this is a direct result of the difficult topography which occurs at the S end of the downstream eyot. A massive raft of crushed chalk, ragstone and hard mortar was constructed to carry the wall at this point.

The wall survived with numerous repairs until the massive reconstruction of the area following the Great Fire in 1666. This included the construction of the Fleet Canal between Blackfriars and Holborn. The excavations recorded the foundations and cellars of the warehouses which lined the E bank of the canal. The subsequent developments and building works on the east bank which accompanied the abandonment and covering of the canal when Blackfriars Bridge was constructed were recorded in detail in the excavations.

Much reused or discarded timber and stone was recovered during the excavations. They included staves, heads and hoops from about 40 casks, primary evidence for medieval cooperage, and about 500 moulded stones, ranging in date and type from a 12th c window arch to 19th c artificial stone from the original railway station at Ludgate Hill.

During the redevelopment the railway line was repositioned to run under Ludgate Hill and the previous railway bridge over this street was demolished. Part of the W-E stretch of the medieval extension of the city wall was demolished but the longer stretch running N-S is to be preserved in the basement of new buildings.

The sites also produced a notable quantity of late medieval and post-medieval objects, recovery of which was enhanced by wet-sieving and by metal detecting of deposits. The former technique was used, in particular, to retrieve the contents of an early 17th c brick-lined drain. Finds recovered elsewhere include bone objects such as combs and thread-pickers of late Saxon date, several pilgrim badges, much waste from the production of hone-stones, a complete Kingston ware jug of previously unrecorded form and several post-medieval medical implements.

London Archaeol, 6, 1989, 53; 6, 1990, 163; 6, 1991, 273-4; 7, 1993, 49; *Medieval Archaeol*, 33, 1989, 183; 34, 1990, 177-8; 1991, 149-50; *Post-Medieval Archaeol*, 25, 1991, 138

There are many specialist archive reports, notes and tables comprising the Fleet valley project research archive. They are ordered and accessible but usually not grouped into conventional reports. The MoL archive contains an index of the Fleet valley archive computer files; for a general summary, see McCann 1993d. The reports dealing with environmental archaeology are given here.

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