

# A Trench across Upper Thames Street: Roman Riverside Wall discovered

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BETWEEN the end of June and late September 1974 a trench (fig. 1) was cut across the now disused sector of Upper Thames Street to the east of the Blackfriars flyover, some 30m. east of the Mermaid Theatre. The excavation, supervised by the author, was undertaken in advance of redevelopment as part of the Guildhall Museum, Department of Urban Archaeology's excavation programme<sup>1</sup>. The area opened was a trench 12.5m. x 3.5m. on a north-south axis transversing the modern street and cutting into a basement to the north.

Owing to the presence of modern services, a 19th century main sewer and a modern basement, the majority of the upper layers were missing, and to the north the modern basement had destroyed all deposits down to the natural London clay at 1.20m. O.D. However, a small area of undisturbed deposits provided a sequence of roads to the 18th century<sup>2</sup>. From a depth of about 1.5m. the deposits were better preserved and beneath a thick layer of destruction from the Great Fire of 1666 a good cobbled road surface was located which had apparently been in use for at least 50 years at the time of the Great Fire.

This road sealed a large 16th century sewer built in chalk and standing 2m. from its floor to the apex of its arch. The sewer had continued in use from the mid-16th century until it was filled in with des-

truction debris in 1666. In the early 17th century it had been refloored in brick and slightly extended (see figs. 1 and 2).

Broadly contemporary with this sewer was a building which transversed the street. The building, which was badly mutilated by subsequent activity, consisted of a low north-south wall in ragstone with a beam slot in the top, and a small fragment of chalk floor. The majority of the building lay outside the area of excavation to the west and owing to the poor state of preservation no firm date can be given as yet. However, this building does appear on Agas' map of the mid-16th century, a copy of which is in the Guildhall Library.

The 16th century sewer together with two small culvert drains of the 14th and 16th centuries had destroyed much of the medieval stratigraphy. Despite this severe disturbance a complete sequence of street surfaces to 1666 survived in one corner of the trench. There were in all eight of these medieval surfaces (Fig 2) most of which were made of rammed gravel. The earliest of these streets is provisionally dated to the 12th century and this re-

1. I would like to thank the Department of Urban Archaeology, especially Brian Hobley, David Browne and Peter Marsden, for help and advice throughout the excavation, and all those who worked on the site.
2. All dates are provisional.

Fig. 1. Ground plan of trench with 16th and 17th sewers.

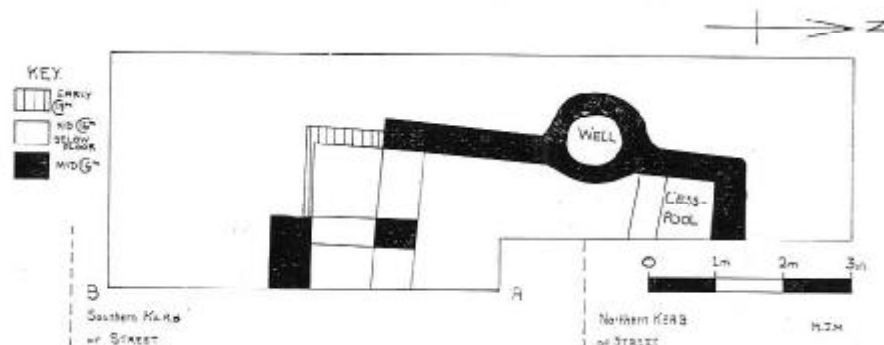
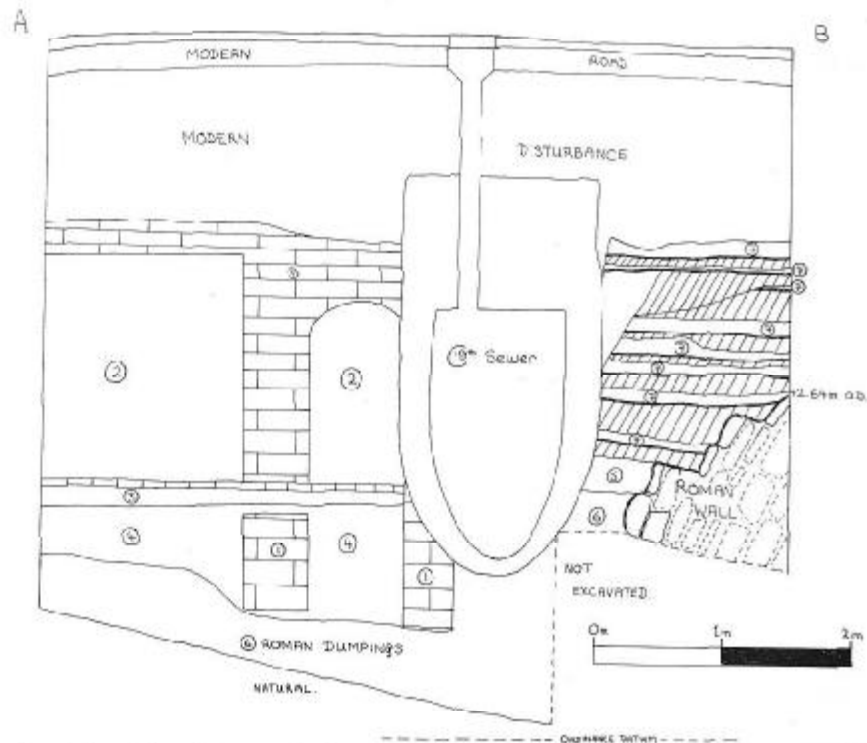


Fig. 2. East Section.

1. 16thC. sewer chalkwork.
2. 1666 sewer infill.
3. Early 17thC. sewer floor.
4. 16thC. sewer floor
5. Rubble spread from collapse of Roman wall.
6. Waterlogged Roman dumpings.
7. Series of occupation layers above medieval street surfaces.



resents the earliest street surface found on the site.

Beneath this street was the water-eroded top of the late 4th century deposits. Thus the street represents a reoccupation of the site after a period of flooding; this same period of marine transgression was seen on the Custom House site<sup>3</sup>. Lying on top of these 4th century deposits and beneath the medieval ones in the southern half of the trench was a large ragstone wall lying on its face.

This wall, which was about 1.6m. thick and at least 3m. high consisted of a rubble core faced with ragstone blocks and had two courses of tile bonding. It was of obvious Roman build and had fallen from the south to lie on its north face. Limitations on time prevented the removal of the wall but its foundations appear to have been to the south of the road

and thus outside the trench; it is hoped that a watch on construction work will confirm this. The presence of this wall on its side tends to support Fitzstephen's account: "that most excellent river the Thames, which . . . has in a long space of time washed down, undermined, and subverted the walls on the south side of the City"<sup>4</sup>. The remainder of the Roman deposits consisted of dumped material of 3rd and 4th century date. The top of these deposits at about 1.3m. O.D. was levelled by the post-Roman erosion. The lack of any early Roman material tends to support the theory that this area of the city was not occupied until fairly late in the period.

Thus the excavation has shown that there was a Roman waterfront wall in this sector of the city. No date was able to be given to the wall and only broad chronological limits were given to the marine transgression that destroyed it. The nature of the wall would seem by its location and size to be defensive and thus the author disagrees with Mr. Marsden's view of 1967<sup>5</sup>. Finally, the excavation has shown that this sector of Thames Street was not of Roman origin as has been suggested in the past.

### Excavation Round-up 1974

DIRECTORS, secretaries and other people concerned with excavations carried out during 1974 are requested to send a short report to the co-ordinator, Brian Bloice, 94 Hubert Grove, S.W.9 (01-733 6665) for inclusion in the Spring issue. It would be appreciated if these reports could be modelled on the ones in Vol. 2 No. 6, but with the addition of grid references, and also if they could be sent in by 10th February.

3. Tim Tatton-Brown, "Custom House Site." *London Archaeol* 2 No. 7 (1974) 155-159.
4. Everyman's edition of Stow's "Survey of London."
5. P. R. V. Marsden, "The River-Side Defensive Wall of Roman London" *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 21 (1967) 149-156.