

# A Roman Crossroads in the City

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IMMEDIATELY following the "event" of Baynards Castle over Easter in 1972, work on three other sites was started—four simultaneous excavations was (then) an all-time record for archaeology in the City. Of the four sites, three were excavated on a full time basis using the limited funds available while the remaining one at Milk Street was offered by Max Hebditch, Director of the Guildhall Museum, to the City of London Archaeological Society (COLAS).

It was decided to investigate the site (fig. 2) on the corner of Milk Street and Mumford Court because Peter Marsden had observed that Roman levels still existed beneath the cellar floors on an adjacent building site. The excavation was started at the beginning of June 1972 and although only expected to last two months, it finally finished in mid-September (which, incidentally, was mainly the reason why the summer 1972 issue of *the London Archaeologist* came out so late). COLAS responded magnificently and usually produced over 20 volunteers a day.

## The Excavation

The whole site (40m by 20m) was cellared with the exception of the alley, Castle Court, passing through it. Some two to three metres of deposits lay upon a one metre thick band of natural brick earth which in turn lay upon the terrace gravels. It was obviously impossible to clear the whole site manually in the limited time available.

After trial trenching had located Roman gravel surfaces, the strategy adopted was to investigate and, where it seemed worthwhile, to fully excavate all the post-Roman features and to expose as much of the gravel surfaces as was possible.

In addition, there were a number of physical problems which affected the excavation: in the south-eastern corner lay a double basement within which the dumping of spoil was prohibited, while the north-eastern corner was out of bounds because of the existing Castle Court right of way (then leading to nowhere) which was not demolished until the beginning of September. It was only then that it was both physically and financially possible to bring in a tracked digger.

Spoil was obviously going to be a problem and the heap was allocated to the southern-western corner where the adjoining building was supported by massive temporary wooden buttresses. Other im-

pediments on the site were the very substantial Victorian building foundations.

The processing of the material is now nearing completion and it is hoped that the final report will appear in the *Transactions* of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society in December 1976 or 1977. This interim report has been written because of the prolonged time-lag and because particularly the evidence for Roman roads on the site could be helpful both to the Department of Urban Archaeology (an adjoining site is shortly to be re-developed) and to research archaeologists interested in the topography of *Londinium*. It is perhaps worth mentioning that there were also a number of interesting medieval features on the site including a chalk cellar; in addition, the site has produced some unique Saxon pottery.

In the following paragraphs the numbers in bold within brackets after a feature refer to the *Gazeteer* numbers in Ralph Merrifield's *The Roman City of London* (1975); the numbers also appear as find spots on the map accompanying the book.

## Trench I

While the trial trenches were being extended, in time honoured fashion a trench was also cut across the centre of the area allotted to the spoil heap (fig. 1). Needless to say, in time honoured fashion, it proved to be the most interesting trench on the site.

Here, two Tudor or 17th century brick relieving arches were found, partly lying on a cambered Roman gravel surface and, in the south end of the trench, partly spanning a Roman ditch or pit containing black silt. Only 150mm thickness of gravelling was removed, but it was enough to show that there were at least three surfaces, all cambering down to the ditch or pit; the latest surface contained a considerable proportion of crushed building debris. *Interpretation*: the edge of a Roman road (hereafter called Road C) running very roughly WNW/ESE with an accompanying ditch. The latter seemed very substantial and it might join up with the hollow filled with black silt, "evidently the bed of a stream or pond" in Russia Row (53).

## Trench II

This trench was little disturbed by post-Roman occupation except at its eastern end. A Roman gravel surface over a metre thick extended over most

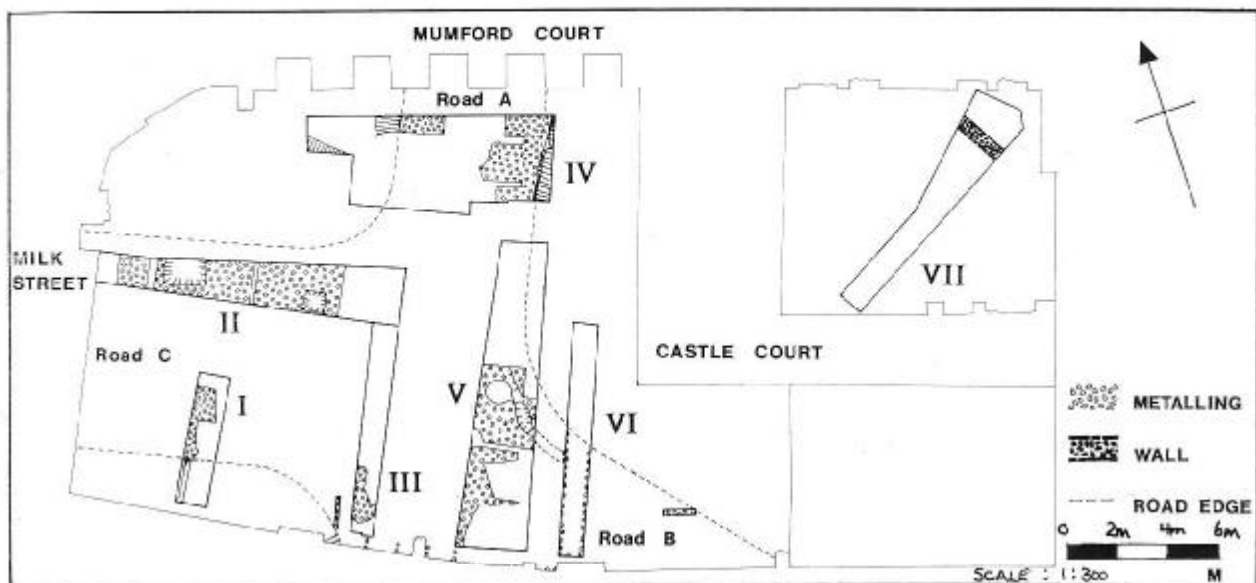


Fig. 1. Site plan showing Roman features.

of its length, with two (?Saxon) pits cut into it. The surface seemed to have a slight camber. *Interpretation*: Roman road metalling running very roughly in a WNE/ESE direction.

#### Trench III

Very heavy modern disturbance had left a small amount of badly mutilated gravel in the south of the trench. *Interpretation*: more Roman road metalling.

#### Trench IV

At its eastern end there was a large quantity of gravel, in some places cambered and in other places much mutilated, with a ditch (or long pit) on its eastern side running NNE/SSW; the ditch contained a large quantity of Roman pottery, provisionally allocated to the first half of the 2nd century. In the centre of the trench was a smaller patch of gravel which had a slope or ditch on its western side. Two metres beneath its surface was a 1.3m deep steeply sided ditch (exposed in the bottom of the medieval cellar) cutting through the natural brickearth into the gravel, its alignment was again NNE/SSW and its date seems to be mid-1st century. *Interpretation*: the early ditch was probably for draining the Cripplegate plateau, although the possibility of a military origin should not be dismissed. At a later date in the 1st century an eight metre wide road (hereafter called Road A) was built (over the ditch) running NNE/SSW with two side ditches.

At the western end of Trench IV an area of Roman rubble including a thick layer of *opus signinum* was discovered, apparently lying on a ditch

or pit aligned NW/SE. *Interpretation*: the edge of a possible Roman road but see Road B below.

#### Trench V

A thick deposit of gravel ran, with various intrusions, the whole length of this trench; a small shallow gully in the gravel surface curved away in a southerly direction. *Interpretation*: Roman road metalling which appears to be the meeting point of the roads already mentioned; the gully could perhaps be a wheel rut caused by traffic coming southwards down Road A and turning down Road B (see Trench VI) to the southeast.

#### Trench VI

This was cut by the trench digger and had gravel in both its main sections, with the gully found in Trench V also showing; the northern edge of the gravel appeared to be staggered in a line NW/SE. The northern part of the gravel lay on brickearth, while the southern end ran across a large ditch or depression which contained early Roman material. *Interpretation*: the northern edge of a Roman road (hereafter called Road B) running NW/SE but with no trace of an WNW/ESE road (i.e. the continuation of Road C and at right angles to Road A). The depression could perhaps be a continuation of the "ditch" found in Trench I and might also be connected with the shallow stream flowing ESE between King Street and Ironmonger Lane (50).

#### Trench VII

This too was cut by the trench digger. The sections showed basically a black silt lying on top of

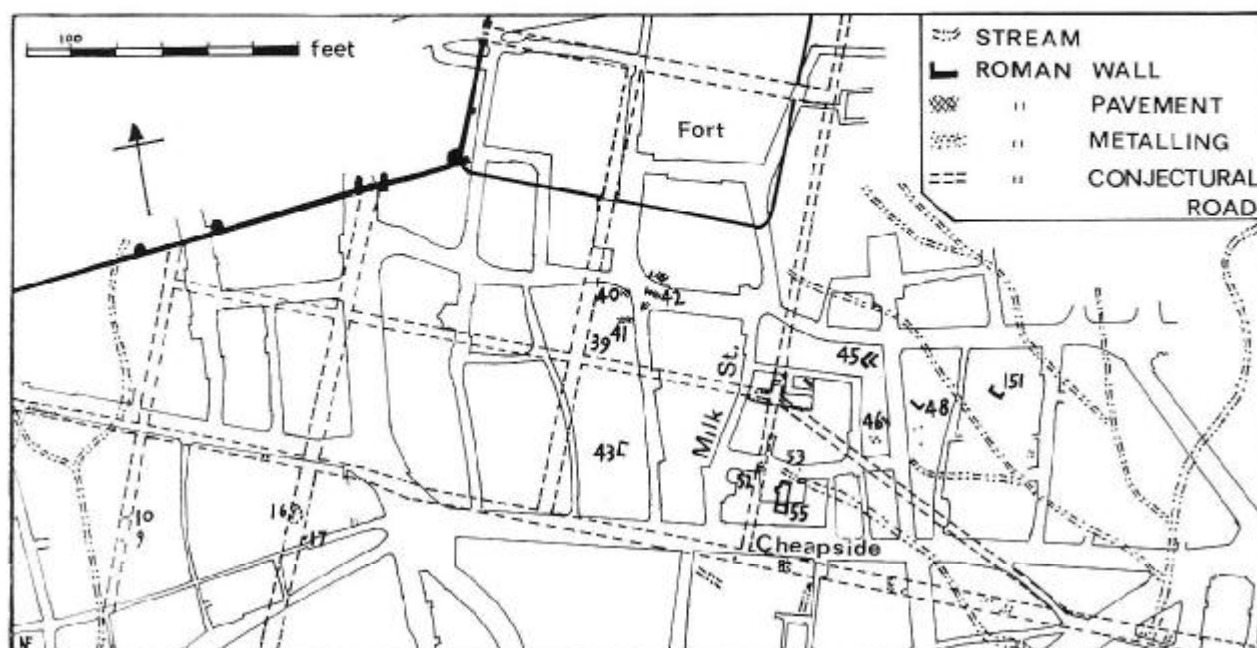


Fig. 2. Conjectural street plan in northwest corner of Roman London (after Merrifield).

the natural brickearth. At its northern end a robbed-out foundation trench was found containing much fragmentary building material including painted wall plaster and *opus signinum*. The alignment of the trench was NW/SE. *Interpretation*: part of a substantial Roman building built parallel to Road B.

#### Site Watching

As far as it was feasible the site was watched during building operations but nothing significant was noticed except when the buildings to the south side of the site were being underpinned. Here, the contractors' trenches indicated that the ditch or pit found in Trench I was at least six metres in length and running roughly WNW/ESE. Elsewhere an apparent turn of this ditch and odd patches of gravel were seen along the southern boundary of the site (fig. 1) while the contractors reported that they had seen the early ditch in Trench IV continuing across the site in a SSW direction.

#### Site Summary

There is undoubted evidence of a Roman road (A) aligned NNE/SSW covering an early Roman ditch on the same alignment. The Roman wall in Trench VII and the gravel in Trench V and VI make a very strong case for a road (B) running NW/SE, at least to the east of Road A. The cambered gravel in Trench I would suggest a road (C) running at right angles to Road A; less likely, it could be the other side of Road B, but that would mean a width of some 11 or 12m which seems unlikely as it would make it the same width as the Cheapside

road, a main arterial route. The possible road edge found in the western end of Trench IV seems an unlikely contender for an extension of Road C on the grounds of alignment.

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

#### Road A

The projection of the eastern ditch would not only bring the road past and parallel to the Cheapside bath-house (55), but also would incorporate the very thick gravel metalling (52) just to the east of that building (fig. 2). (In addition it might suggest that the alleyway leading northwards from Russia Row might owe its origin to the Roman road.) Further south the projection of Road A would cut the Cheapside road at right angles.

If Road A is projected northwards, it would run parallel to the east wall of the Cripplegate fort.

#### Road B

Unfortunately the evidence on the site for the road does not give a precise indication of its alignment. However, it would seem reasonable to assume that it was parallel to the wall found in the north-east corner of the site. The existence of a road running NW/SE would explain the curious alignment of a number of Roman buildings (45, 46, 48 and 51), whose walls are definitely not set square to the Cheapside road. Road B could owe its alignment to the need for a direct route across the street grid going from the main gate of the fort to the Walbrook

crossing, or more likely, to the course of a feeder to the Walbrook.

An alignment NW/SE would carry the projection of the road along the line of Bucklersbury (which in name at least dates back to the 13th century) and which could possibly be Roman in origin. The junction here with the Cheapside road seems to be at a reasonable distance from the Walbrook for traffic to intermingle before crossing the bridge. Additionally, there is the interesting fact that the length of Road A between Milk Street and the Cheapside road is half the distance between the junction of the two roads and the junction of Road B and the Cheapside road, hinting at a planned grid.

If the same alignment for Road B is carried to the north-east, it would connect up at a convenient distance with the road issuing forth from the main gate of the fort but unfortunately the walls and tessellated pavements (40, 41 and 42) at the junction of Wood Street and Gresham Street rule out this theory (unless they were destroyed by the road or built long after it). It would therefore seem that once Road B met with Road A, its alignment was changed to become parallel to the Cheapside road, that is, it became Road C.

#### Road C

The apparent alignment of this road is WNW/ESE (i.e. at right angles to Road A) and there seems enough negative evidence to prove that it did not con-

tinue to the east of Road A.

Road C's projection to the west might incorporate the reported sighting of a Roman road running in a "north-westerly" direction across a site in Wood Street (39), projected further it would meet the road (16 and 17) which appears to lead to Aldersgate.

#### General

The three roads when projected, give a more coherent topographical picture of the plan of the north-west corner of Roman London. However, an additional fact which seems to have emerged, is that the grid of roads, in this area at least, was not laid in a mathematically regular pattern: the distances between Road A, the road from the main gate of the fort and the two NNE/SSW roads at Paternoster Row (9 & 10 and 16 & 17) are all different lengths. This seems to have been a common practice in Roman towns and is particularly evident at Silchester.

#### Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Max Hebditch for his faith in offering COLAS the site, my fellow members of COLAS for their very great support both during and after the excavation, the members of Wandsworth Historical Society who also gave valuable assistance during the excavation and the various members of the staff of Guildhall Museum and the DUA for assistance and support facilities.

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## Excavations

**City**, by Museum of London, Department of Urban Archaeology. A series of long term excavations. Enquiries to Brian Hobley, Chief Urban Archaeologist, Museum of London, 55 Basinghall Street, E.C.2 (01-606 3030, ext. 2217).

**Fulham Pottery**, by Fulham and Hammersmith Historical Society. Excavation of 17th salt-glaze stoneware factory. Enquiries to V. R. Christophers, 86 St. James, Brighton, Sussex.

**Fulham**, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. A site in the grounds of Fulham Palace. Enquiries to Keith Whitehouse, 56 Tamworth Street, S.W.6 (01-385 6038).

**Kingston**, by Kingston-upon-Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in town centre. Further enquiries to Marion Smith, Kingston Museum, Fairfield Road, Kingston (01-546 5386).

**Line of M11**, Full-time work is taking place along the route of the proposed M11 in the Redbridge-Chigwell-Theydon Bois area. Enquiries to the M11 Field Officer, T. Betts, 3 The Green, Palmerston Road, Buckhurst Hill, Essex (01-504 6708).

**Putney**, by Wandsworth Historical Society. Site off Gwendolen Avenue, behind the police station, directed by Pat and Joan Loobey. Work on a north/south Roman road. Enquiries to 157 Longcliffe House, Arndale Walk, S.W.18 (01-874 9369).

**Southwark**, by Southwark Archaeological Excavation Committee. Several sites from the Roman period onwards. Enquiries to Harvey Sheldon, S.A.E.C., Montague Chambers, Montague Close, S.E.1 (01-407 1989).

**Staines**, by London and Middlesex Archaeological Society. A Roman site at the Friends' Burial Ground, Thames Street. Enquiries to Kevin Crouch (01-560 3880 day or 09-328 62874 eve).

#### GENERAL EXCAVATIONS

*The Council for British Archaeology produces a monthly Calendar of Excavations from March to September with an extra issue in November and a final issue in January summarising the main results of fieldwork. The Calendar gives details of extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The annual subscription is £1.25, post-free, which should be made payable to C.B.A., 7 Marylebone Road, N.W.1.*