

An Excavation at Aldgate

ALAN THOMPSON

THE excavation was carried out by the Department of Urban Archaeology from July to October 1974. The site which lies opposite Aldgate underground station, is bounded by the Minories to the west and Mansell Street to the east. Now owned by British Rail, it was once a goods yard for the London and North Western Railway.

The purpose of the excavation was to locate the Roman cemetery¹ and fort², known to exist in the Aldgate area. The area is also known to be connected with the Abbey of St. Clare of the Minoreness (founded in 1293)³.

The Excavation

Once the make-up layers for the goodsyard had been removed, a row of 17th century terraced buildings was located (fig. 1). These proved to be the only structural remains of any archaeological significance within the area of excavation. In total, seven structural units were excavated, two of which were workshops, four domestic buildings and one a possible cellar.

The terrace formed part of Harrow Alley, known in the 19th century by the nickname of Blood Alley, as a number of the buildings in this area were slaughter houses⁴. One section of Harrow Alley still exists, now known as Little Somerset Street.

Workshops 1 and 2

At the northern end of the terraced row were two workshops for the manufacture of clay pipes. The first of these had large patches of soot and ash covering its floor area. In the second workshop a clay-pipe kiln was uncovered, associated with a spread of mottled white-grey clay, which covered most of the floor and contained many clay-pipe fragments. All the pipes were of plain form without makers' names or initials, and from the size and shape of the bowls can be dated to 1640-60⁵.

A fairly square brick feature was found beneath the west walls of both workshops. This feature (possibly a water tank) was at one time part of the structure of the workshops but eventually went out

of use, was backfilled and finally new west walls were constructed over the backfill and the old walls.

House 3

Connected to the workshops were domestic buildings, one of which (fig. 1 House 3) was extant just prior to the building of the goods yard. Beneath the rubble from the building was a brick floor, which covered the entire area up to a chimney structure (fig. 2). The floor was largely constructed of re-used half-bricks, some of which were laid irregularly, with occasional fragments of pot and tile used as packing material.

Against the north wall and beneath the brick floor, was a substantial cesspit with a rubbish chute incorporated into its north wall. From this came several complete 17th century vessels including a bellarmine jug.

Two traces of timber were found in the area between the north wall and the end section of the chimney structure and it seems likely that these timbers represent a stairway base leading to an upstairs room.

House 4

This building had a floor level of green-brown sand with areas of pounded soil and cinder. Close to the west wall traces of five timbers survived which could have been the remains of floorboarding or the base of a stairway (see House 3). Beneath the green-brown sandy layer and close to the southern wall of House 4, a cesspit which drained directly into the soil beneath was uncovered. This also produced several complete 17th century vessels (see House 3).

House 5

In House 5 two demolition layers were found covering the interior surface, below which was a floor level of fine grey-green sand. Three timbers had been set into this sand, two of which abutted the north wall and were set into its foundation step. From their related positions it would seem likely that they also represent the base for a stairway (see House 3 and 4). The third timber abutted the

1. R. Merrifield, *Roman City of London* (1965) 95.

2. H. Chapman, 'Excavations at Aldgate' *Trans London and Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* 24 (1973) 12-4.

3. E. M. Tomlinson, *A History of the Minories* (1922)

Chap. III.

4. P.R.O. Census returns 1841.

5. D. Atkinson and A. Oswald, 'London Clay Tobacco Pipes' *J. Brit Archaeol. Ass.* 32 (1969) 177-8, fig. 1.

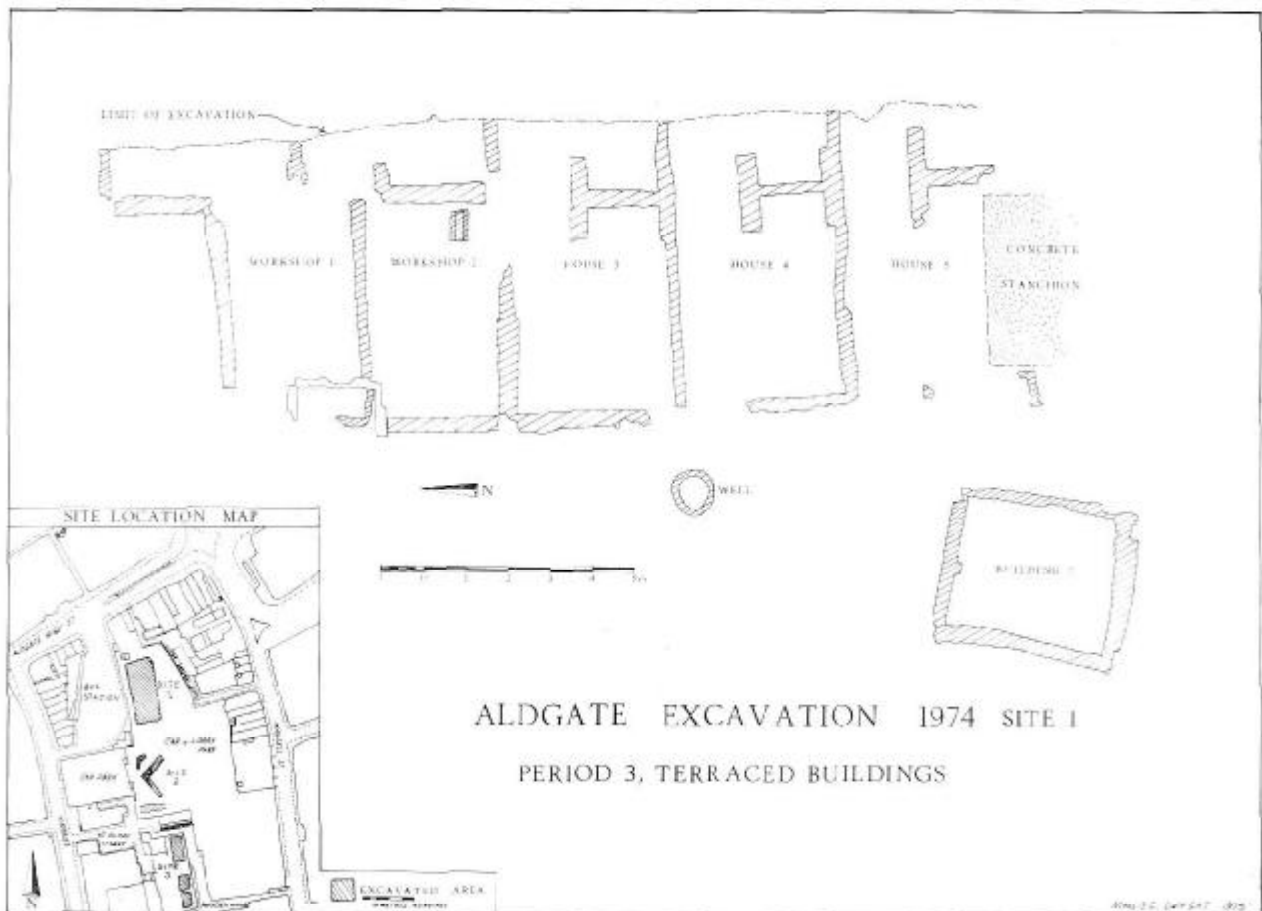


Fig. 1.

south wall and possibly formed a rectangle with the T-shaped chimney structure, or alternatively a frontage for the gate.

House 6

The structure of House 6 was in the main recorded from the east section. It was possible however to excavate a portion of the interior (the west wall and approximately 0.1m. of the interior levels). A brick floor (orientated E-W) partially packed with half-bricks and mortar fragments was discovered. Below this was the build-up for the floor consisting of sooty black soil. Above the floor were two soot layers which represent the initial deposits. Outside the south wall a cobble yard surface was found comprising a layer of fragmented brick, smoothed ragstone and cobbles.

Building (Cellar) 7

Building 7 was an almost square structure whose surviving remains can be divided into three phases.

For phase one, only the north and east walls remained. The north wall was buttressed in the centre, presumably to act as a load bearer, and on either side of the buttress was a "candle" niche. The east wall had what was possibly a window inset with the window being at ground level and the wall being stepped in to allow light to reach the interior. Abrasion on the brickwork does suggest that at a later stage it was possibly used as a coal chute. There is no evidence of a floor for this phase.

In phase two the south and west walls were rebuilt, probably using some of the material from the phase one wall. Eventually however the west wall collapsed bringing with it a large amount of soil. A new wall was then constructed which was thicker but in no way better constructed than its predecessor. At the south end the new wall was wider and overlaid the collapsed rubble at the north end.

Other features associated with the terraced buildings include a cesspit just to the north of workshop

1. Only three highly disturbed walls of the cesspit survived. Part of the west and east walls and all of the north wall had been removed for the main north south drainage pipe for the goods yard. It seems possible that this cesspit can be associated with the workshops, although no evidence survived to connect them.

Just to the rear of Houses 3, 4 and 5 a well was located. Constructed of brick, it had an internal diameter of 0.75m and an external diameter of 1.20 m. Although the well was only excavated in part (and its full depth not dug), it is known that its construction pit predates the buildings whose walls overlaid the well pit.

Below the terraced buildings a very thick deposit of garden soil was found covering the whole of the excavated area. How and why it arrived there is not known but pottery taken from this material dates from the 17th century.

The lowest levels excavated consisted of a series of tipping layers the uppermost of which proved to be the fill of a feature cut into the natural sand and gravel, the bottom being very irregular and possibly

represents a quarry.

Conclusion

Although the excavation did not supply any information for the Roman cemetery and fort or St. Clare of the Minors, it did provide a unique picture and environmental study of one of the late developing areas of the City just outside its eastern limits during the 17th century and later.

Oswald's study of London clay-pipe manufacturers⁶ shows that the majority were situated on the poor outer fringes of the City. Harrow Alley with its row of badly constructed terraced buildings with associated cesspits certainly indicates conditions of comparative poverty—distinct, for example, from the development of the corresponding area to the west of the City. The outskirts of Aldgate were clearly never a favoured district and its slow growth is one reason for the survival of the site.

A preliminary search for published accounts of similar industrial sites of this date has not, so far at least, revealed any valid comparisons in London or elsewhere.

6. *Ibid* 171, 210-16.

Letters

ROMAN URN FROM CAMDEN

I WAS particularly interested to see in the article "Roman Camden" by Brian Robertson (Spring edition of *the London Archaeologist*, p.253(4)) the references to three cinerary urns discovered at Grays Inn Road.

I have in my possession a further example found there in 1937 which proved, after enquiries made of Brian Robertson and the Museum of London, to be hitherto unrecorded.

The urn is of dark brown fabric with incised band and "fingernail" decoration high on the shoulder. It can be ascribed to about the second half of the 1st century A.D.

The measurement of the vessel are:—height 12½ ins. (31 cm); maximum diameter of body 11 ins. (28 cm); internal diameter of everted rim 5½ ins. (14 cm); base diameter 4½ ins. (12 cm).

A label on the base reads—ROMAN CINERARY URN FD. OP. GRAYS INN ROAD ON JULY 2, 1937.

28 Rothesay Avenue,
Wimbledon Chase,
SW20 8JU

DAVID LEWIS

BOOKS

Due to various circumstances, "Books" has been held over until the next issue.

ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE CITY

THE TANTALISINGLY brief article in the Spring issue of *the London Archaeologist* by Brian Hobley, on "The City of London Unit: first year of operations" gave a splendid picture of an organisation battling against the considerable odds which face those who excavate in London.

I was struck by the virtual absence of any mention of priorities for excavation and research, the case for which *The Future of London's Past* made such a powerful plea. How, or on what criteria, are sites in the City chosen for excavation? Is a choice in fact made, or is it the aim of the D.U.A. to excavate every site which becomes available?

What, indeed, are the "agreed and defined objectives" which are mentioned in Mr. Hobley's article (para 2).

The idea of priorities or objectives for excavation of necessity requires there to be an overall programme of research, carefully worked out to include a wide range of parameters (from topographical to environmental). Mr. Hobley's article, however, seems to concentrate rather more emphasis on purely organisational matters, and appears to leave out entirely any mention of the fact that archaeological excavation is only one amongst a number of methods of enquiry whose aim is to answer historical questions.

For what is archaeology, and for why is publication . . . ?

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JEREMY HASLAM,
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Mr. Hobley's comments on this letter will be published in the next issue.