

GPO Newgate Street, 1975-9; the Roman levels

STEVE ROSKAMS

THE GPO SITE, Newgate Street, which lies just west of St Martins Le Grand in the City of London, was excavated over several years from 1975 by the Department of Urban Archaeology, Museum of London, as part of its programme of rescue archaeology in the city. Efforts were concentrated in the south-west part of the area of future development because of greater survival here and direct association with a major street frontage just outside the site to the south. This report summarises the main aspects of the Roman structural sequence from this part of the site. All dates given are provisional.

The first sign of building activity, found in the south and of pre-Boudiccan date, was a fragment of a circular hut cut directly into the natural brick-earth (Fig. 1). No associated floors survived, but a probable boundary ditch to the north is contemporary. The latter's alignment is not that of the subsequent structures on the site, which run perpendicular to the Roman forerunner of Newgate Street. Hence, both ditch and hut may ante-date the setting out of that thoroughfare. Material derived from their backfill is of pre-Flavian date. The rest of the area was given over to the piecemeal, small-scale quarrying of brickearth.

In period II several ditches were cut, draining southwards and set perpendicular to the line of the street, marking the start of its influence on activity on the site. These ditches probably prepared the area for future building, perhaps utilising any drainage system associated with the main street.

During period III (Fig. 2) parts of two rectangular buildings were found in the extreme south. They would have fronted on to the street and were timber-framed, with sill beams set into the ground and probably a daub superstructure. Further north, fragments of several circular huts were found of wattle and daub construction. All of these buildings were destroyed by fire (Fig. 4). Their apparent contemporaneity of construction shows the co-existence of rectangular buildings employing stronger framing, near the street and, further north, structures "less

advanced" in terms of plan and building technology. The spacing of these buildings was such that the fire, marking their demise, seems unlikely to have been accidental. This, and its date, suggests a correlation with Boudicca's destruction of London in A.D. 60-61.

It has been deduced from evidence at the centre of the Roman city¹ that the Roman forerunner of Cheapside was set out shortly before A.D. 60. The evidence from the GPO site suggests that its western counterpart below Newgate Street was also set out

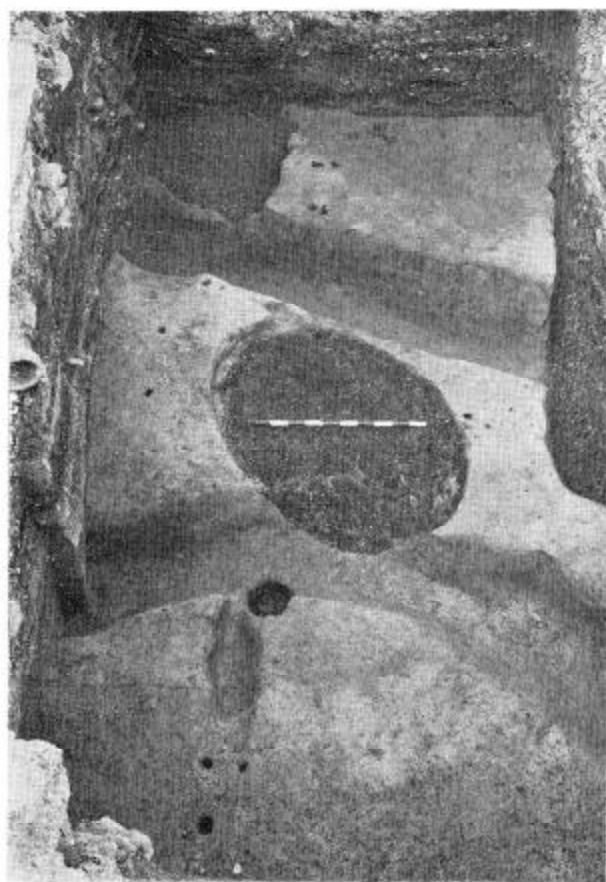


Fig. 1: Period I, fragment of circular hut and associated boundary ditch.

(Photo: John Bailey).

¹ P. Marsden, "The Discovery of the Civic Centre of Roman London", in (eds.) J. L. Bird, M. Chapman and J. Clark, *Collectanea Londiniensia*, LAMAS Special Paper 2 (1978) Fig. 2.

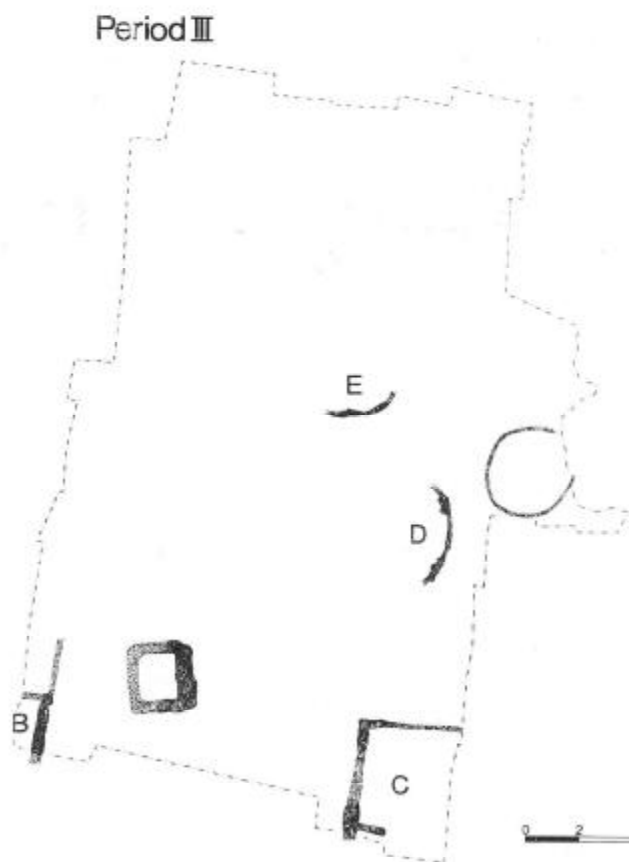


Fig. 2: Period III structures.

at that time. Hence the kink in the vicinity of St. Martins-le-Grand resulting from the non-alignment of the two sections can be seen to be a primary element of the thoroughfare. If that kink is evidence of pre-Boudiccan proposals for the eventual extent of the urban area of the settlement², such decisions were implemented by the time of the Boudiccan rebellion. The evidence of artefacts, structures and the laying out of roads in the area³ gives no reason to suggest any intensive occupation of London for the first ten years of the Roman period, in contrast with the extensive proposed settlement which can be suggested a few years later. This picture of a booming, albeit newly-planned, commercial centre can be set beside the reported decision of Suetonius Paulinus to consider the defence of Londinium first and foremost after abandoning Camulodunum to the rebel forces of

2 P. Marsden. "Two Roman Public Baths in London", *Trans. Lon. Middx. Arch. Soc.* 27 (1976) 46-51. The boundary was suggested as early as 1851 by J. W. Archer, *Vestiges of Old London*, VIII, 2.

Period VII

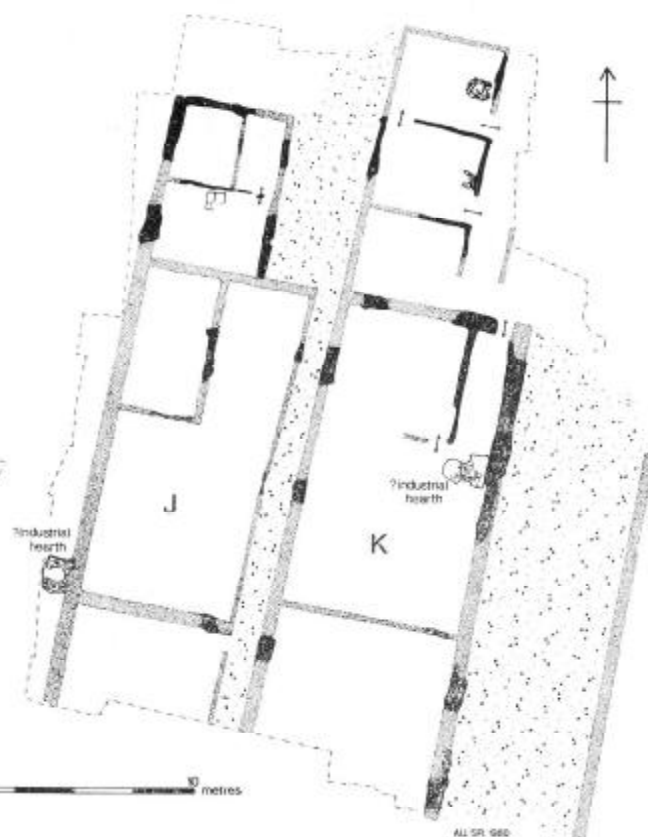


Fig. 3: Period VII structures.

Boudicca. At least some of the plans for London had come to fruition by A.D. 60. Its defence required immediate attention.

In period IV, in the aftermath of the revolt, there seems, not surprisingly, to be a gap in the structural sequence. The only signs of activity are pits with associated gulleys, which may have an industrial function, and pits for disposal of organic waste. At the end of this period, however, there is some suggestion of two north-south pathways on the site. Their positions are such that, given later developments, they can be seen to bound twin strips of properties. These properties, though not built on initially, show that formalised planning along the street frontages to the south had reached this area by the early-Flavian period.

The buildings constructed in period V occupy

3 H. L. Sheldon, discussion in Part I of Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee, *Southwark Excavations 1972-4*, Lon. Middx. Arch. Soc. and Surrey Arch. Soc. Joint Publication No. 1 (1978), I, 11-30.



Fig. 4: Scorched destruction of building D, looking west.

(Photo: John Bailey).

the two strips set out earlier. Substantial timber-framed structures, with sills set directly on the ground, were discovered, with lean-to's against their external walls. The buildings had a party wall between them towards the street frontage, though were separated further back. This suggests an integrated development of the whole area when building did take place. Internal arrangements in each building, and subsequent history, were however individual. In period VI, the western structures were removed and the west wall of the previously attached eastern



Fig. 5: Brickearth Quarry.

(Photo: John Bailey).

building correspondingly modified since it continued in use for longer, probably into the early second century.

At the north-east corner of the site was a massive brickearth quarry (Fig. 5) dug at the same time as this development. It had the suggestion of a small pit at one corner cut to test the depth of available natural material. This quarry obeys the limits of the eastern

property, and was probably used to supply material for the building. Discarded bricks were found in its lower fills, suggesting that mouldings of bricks took place nearby. The quarry was subsequently used for the disposal of organic waste, probably derived from the occupation of the building to its south.

For period VII (Fig. 3) two new timber-framed buildings were constructed extending over the whole of the excavation. They had an alleyway between them though the size of the sills suggest that this



Fig. 6: Period VII. Domestic hearth against brickearth sill in northern room of Building K

(Photo: Trevor Hurst).

was covered at first floor level, with the load of the eastern side of the western building taken on the west wall of the adjacent property. Thus they would have presented a continuous facade at the street front. A lane was set out bounding them in the east, also giving access to the street. The plan of these strip structures suggests shops or commercial prem-



Fig. 7: Period VII. Hearth with clay lining in Building J.

(Photo: Trevor Hurst).



Fig. 8: Period VII. Brickearth sills and hearths in central part of Building K, looking north-east.

(Photo Trevor Hurst).

ises with selling taking place at the frontage. Just behind this were large rooms, some of which contained sturdy hearths, implying an industrial function, maybe producing the goods sold at the frontage. At the rear were smaller rooms, containing less substantial, but well-preserved hearths (Figs. 6-8), this time merely for heating. The rooms could have been used for production as well, or for domestic living. No material survived within them to give a direct indication of function. Further living quarters probably existed on a second storey near the street. In later phases the western building was modified and extended in the north, becoming split off from the eastern one at the end of its life. The latter was substantially unaltered until both structures were destroyed in the Hadrianic fire. The resulting destruction debris spread across the whole site. It incorporated partially articulated fallen walls of dried and fired bricks (Fig. 9), collapsed from internal and external frameworks.

In period VIII, the debris was levelled off and redeposited to prepare for rebuilding. Both des-

troyed buildings were reconstructed, the eastern one having a foundation deposit of a small dog under its main east wall (Fig. 10). The reproduction of the



Fig. 9: Collapsed destruction debris resulting from the Hadrianic fire.

(Photo: John Bailey).



Fig. 10: Foundation deposit of small dog below period VIII sill.

(Photo: John Bailey).



Fig. 11: Period VIII. Possible industrial hearth in south of Building J.

(Photo: Jenny Orsmond).

main property boundaries was so exact that it suggests that records of their position may have been kept, as is likely for taxation purposes. The replacement structures, where they survived later activity, show the same features (Fig. 11) as their predecessors and are similarly interpreted as commercial premises. However, before the end of the 2nd century, they were dismantled and the site levelled to prepare for future occupation. A horizon of the enigmatic "dark-earth" overlay them. This feature has been encount-

ered and discussed elsewhere⁴. It has been suggested that this consists of cultivated soil, perhaps implying a shrinkage of the urban area, or at least that the settlement was functioning very differently in the late Roman period. Whatever the interpretation of "dark earth" its appearance marks the end of Roman structures on the GPO site.

4 S Roskams and J. Schofield, "The Milk Street Excavation: Part 12", *London Archaeol.* 3, No 9 (1978) 227-34.

Editorial notices

Subscriptions

The Editor would like to remind readers who subscribe by Banker's Order to notify their bank of the change in subscription rate to £2.60 as soon as possible.

Roman Southwark

This publication, reviewed on pp 418-9, is out of print, but a Third Edition will be produced if there is sufficient demand. If you would like a copy, write to SLAEC, Port Medical Centre, English Grounds, Morgan's Lane, S.E.1, enclosing a suitable donation (£1.00).

A.G.M. of the London Archaeologist

THE ELEVENTH A.G.M. of the *London Archaeologist* was held on 30 May in the Education Department of the Museum of London. The following officers were elected:— Editor, Clive Orton; Assistant Editors, Rhoda Edwards and Beth Richardson; Secretary, Nesta Caiger; Advertising and Promotion, Betsey Kentish; Subscriptions, Sheila Broomfield; Managing Editor, Nicholas Farrant — and the auditors were elected. Representatives to serve on the Publication Committee were elected from the following Societies: Hendon and District, London and Middlesex, Orpington, and Woolwich. The accounts showed a surplus on the year of about £400, which has been transferred to the Price Stability Reserve, and will be used to keep the price at its present level until the end of Volume 3, despite a large increase in printing costs. The price will however be increased to 65p per copy from the start of Volume 4. Following the close of business, Kenneth Whitehorn spoke on "The Vikings".