

The Hadrianic Fire of London - a Reassessment of the Evidence

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Photography by Trevor Hurst

IN RECENT YEARS several sites excavated by the Department of Urban Archaeology, Museum of London, have produced evidence of a Hadrianic fire, first recognised on previous sites by G. C. Dunning over 30 years ago.¹ In particular, large scale excavations at the GPO site, Newgate Street (site 5, Fig. 1), Milk Street (15) and Watling Court (91) have provided graphic evidence of the destruction. In the context of this new information, and of the more detailed knowledge of the conflagration which it provided, a study of other new sites and reassessment of old ones was undertaken by Lez Watson on behalf of the DUA. The main source for this work was Merrifield², supplemented by later published material such as Grimes³, and also archival records held by the DUA. Sites with no structural evidence — roads, streams, cemeteries etc. were excluded. The rest were numbered sequentially (the numbers used in this report) and plotted on a map according to the degree of certainty of existing fire debris or structural evidence of the appropriate date. Here, only those sites which have implications for the fire and its date are described and discussed (except for the negative evidence on two sites — 19 and 22 — where the fire might have been expected). Hence the site numbers do not form a complete, running sequence. (See appendix for details).

The forty-three sites to be considered can be divided into two groups, either side of the Walbrook, and are discussed separately.

West of the Walbrook

The westernmost recorded evidence of the fire occurs at site 4, where burnt debris seen in section can be correlated with that found nearby on the GPO site (5). At the latter, structures interpreted as shops covering the whole of the excavated area were burnt down in the Hadrianic period. Sixty

metres (65 yards) further east, an excavation in 1913 (6) uncovered "the debris of a 'wood-and-daub' house which had been destroyed by fire".⁴ Although undated, the characteristic debris and its proximity suggests contemporaneity with the GPO fire. East of this, at site 8, a published section shows a burnt layer which, though not referred to in the text, implies a late first—early second century date, given its position above natural brickearth. It may be *in situ* and thus relate to nearby site 9, where traces were found of timber buildings burnt at that time.

Further east, at Milk Street (15), structures of an apparently residential character in an area set back from the main thoroughfare to the south and apparently less built-up than further west, were destroyed by fire during the Hadrianic period. This correlates with site 17 to the south where "a bright red layer of burnt clay with mortar and brick . . . clearly due to burning *in situ*"⁵ was found. Later observations in the area (site 21) revealed a "deposit of clay containing pottery of the early second century . . . and on this was burnt daub".⁶ In spite of their proximity to the Cheapside bath house (19), however, the latter shows no similar signs of burning. This probably survived because of the building material it employed. Nearby excavations (22), with evidence of occupation throughout the Roman period, also lack a destruction horizon. More spread out development at Milk Street resulted in destruction debris of considerable depth in one part of the site to be entirely absent only five metres away in another part. Therefore, its absence on site 22 cannot be taken as conclusive negative evidence, though it does suggest a reduced degree of structural coverage back from Roman Cheapside.

Still further east, observations at site 26 revealed

1. G. C. Dunning, 'Two Fires in Roman London', *Ant. J.* 25 (1945) 48-77.
2. R. Merrifield, *The Roman City of London*, London, 1965.
3. W. F. Grimes, *The Excavation of Roman and Medieval London*, London, 1968.

4. F. Lambert, 'Recent Roman Discoveries in London', *Archaeologia* 66 (1915) 246.
5. *loc cit* fn 3, 138-9
6. *loc cit* fn 2, 204.
7. *ibid.*, 203.

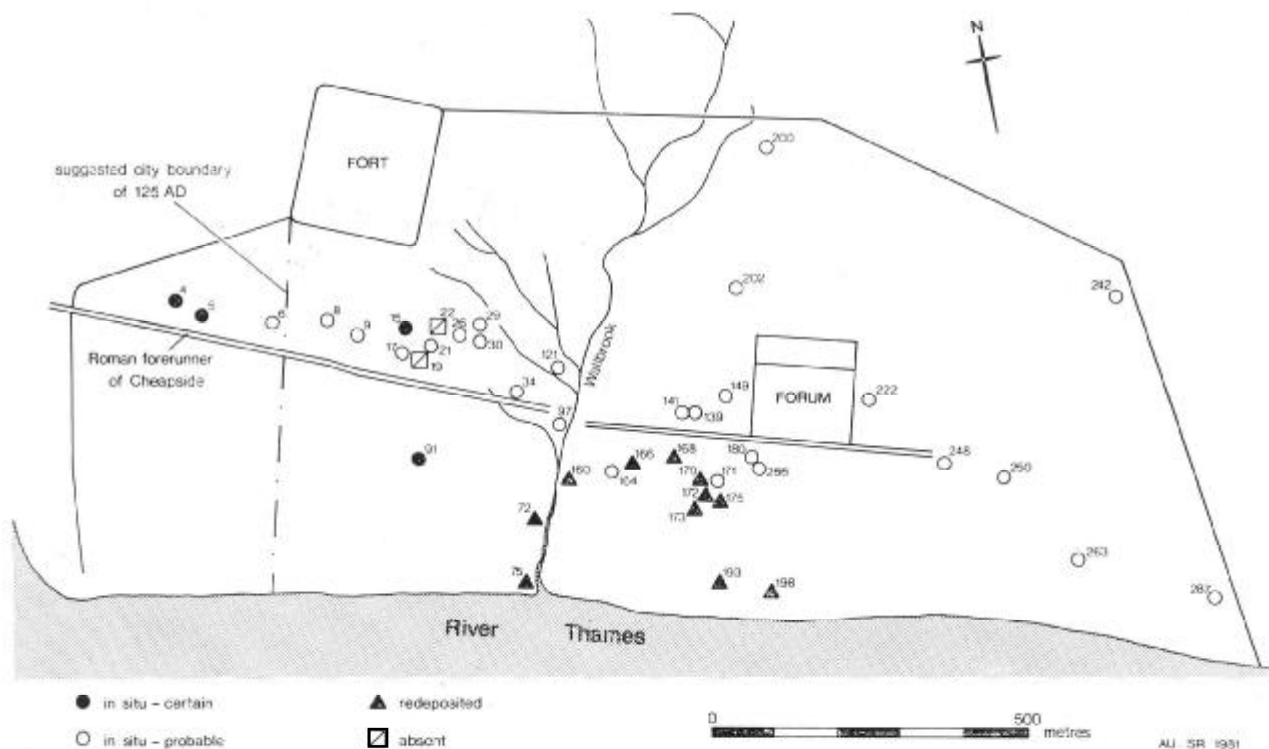


Fig. 1: Sites with evidence of post-Boudican destruction debris.

“a 14 inch layer of burnt daub . . . (which) contained pottery of the second century”,⁷ whilst on nearby site 29 was “a scatter of burnt daub and fragments of red and white wall plaster . . . (suggesting) wattle and daub houses in the neighbourhood in the late first and early second centuries”.⁸ Finally, at site 30, there was “evidence of two fires”,⁹ the uppermost halfway up an occupational sequence which, however, apparently ended in the Trajanic period.

To the east of these three sites, observations in 1936 (121) showed a layer of burnt daub “1 foot 3 inches thick. In it was found a fragment of Samian form 38, partly burnt, of Hadrianic date”,¹⁰ whilst to the south-east “a burnt layer with its bottom about four feet above the natural soil”¹¹ (34) was revealed, but was undated.

To the north of those described, no positive traces of any fire have been discovered, even in the intensively investigated area around Cripplegate fort (though it must be admitted that horizontal strata rarely survived in the area). Any evidence

of burning might be attributable to industrial activity. Similarly, sites to the south-east show second century occupation but no destruction by fire, the only burning being apparently associated with domestic activity.

Adjacent to the Thames, a site mentioned by Dunning on Upper Thames Street (75) revealed redeposited destruction debris. Further north, a layer of burnt material “apparently the remains of timber and clay houses”¹² was found on site 72. Samian forms suggest a Trajanic to Antonine date, a range which might imply redeposition. Lastly, at site 97 to the north was an undated, burnt timber building.

The only site in the area to show definite evidence for a Hadrianic fire lay to the west, at the previously mentioned Watling Court (91). It is of note that earlier observations of the same buildings to the west make no mention of the fire, either because it was undetected or had been removed by later intrusions (modern cellars cut down to the surface of the debris at Watling Court itself). This

8. *ibid.*

9. *ibid.*, 204.

10. *Journ Rom Studies* 27 (1937) 241.

11. *loc cit* fn 2, 245.

12. *loc cit* fn 1, 53.

situation shows the weakness of arguing from negative evidence, especially when relying on chance observations from many years ago.

Overall, however, a coherent picture emerges, suggesting a fire from Christchurch in the west to, at least, the Milk Street area in the east, and possibly even as far as the Walbrook stream which, as Lez Watson suggests, may have acted as a fire break.

The trail of destruction crosses the proposed western Flavian limit of the settlement¹³ suggesting built-up areas either side of this line. It seems, however, not to have penetrated far north of this band along Cheapside, due to more scattered structures beyond and/or the stone built Cripplegate fort.

To the south of Cheapside, with the specific exception of the Watling Court complex, recorded debris is apparently redeposited, either in the Walbrook valley, or along the waterfront. Lack of timber buildings in the vicinity may support the suggestion of Merrifield as to the markedly different character of this south-west quarter of the city.¹⁴

East of the Walbrook

Here the situation is more complex. Two sites (198, 193) near the waterfront have deposits of debris whose character and depth (over eight feet) imply redeposition.

Further north, sites 168, 170, 172 and 175 revealed extensive layers of burnt debris "up to three feet thick".¹⁵ At site 170, it covered late first century objects, and was 2 ft 3 ins above natural brickearth, but elsewhere lay "actually on the brickearth. This might suggest an early date, but perhaps there had been some removal of first century layers".¹⁶ Dating evidence for 168 is contradictory, suggesting late first century and possibly earlier in one source,¹⁷ whereas elsewhere¹⁸ a fire "on or near the site, perhaps in the early second century" is postulated. The inconsistent dating evidence, relationship with natural and depth of deposit imply that further redeposited debris is represented here. Nearby, more recent work, on site 173, revealed fire deposits of Flavian date, but no associated structures and so may be redeposited.



Fig. 2: Articulated bricks of a fallen wall of a building on Site 5, destroyed in the Hadrianic fire.

Other sites in the vicinity include 166, where redeposited "bright red burnt material"¹⁹ was found, undated but possibly second century; a wattle hut "apparently destroyed by fire, probably the great Hadrianic fire"²⁰ (164), and signs of possible occupation and fire, interpreted as either domestic or redeposited (160).

To the west of the *forum* are two more sites with debris. On 149, this had a Flavian to possibly early second century date, whilst that on 139 sealed a coin of Galba of AD68. More recent observations at nearby site 141 produced pottery from the fire debris originally thought to be early second, but now suggested as being of late second century date, whilst site 180 found traces of walls "apparently destroyed in the Hadrianic fire".²¹ Even more recently, site 286 evidenced a burnt layer incorporating a collapsed brick wall with plastered face and piece of tessellated floor believed by the excavator to be post-Boudican and probably Flavian. Adjacent site 171 contained undated fire deposits.

To the east of the *forum* are four sites mentioned by Dunning.²² On site 222 was a burnt layer one foot thick of early to mid second century date; whilst a similar layer at site 248 is also assigned to the second century. The latter was only four inches of red burnt clay over six inches of charcoal

13. P. Marsden, 'Two Roman Public Baths in London', *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 27 (1976) 49.

14. R. Merrifield, 'The contribution to our knowledge of Roman London', in C. Hill, M. Millett and T. Blagg, 'The Roman Riverside Wall and Monumental Arch in London' *London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Special Paper* 3 (1980) 202.

15. *loc cit* fn 1, 55.

16. *ibid.*

17. F. Lambert, 'Some Recent Excavations in London', *Archaeologia* 71 (1921) 57.

18. *loc cit* fn 4, 266.

19. *loc cit* fn 3,

20. *loc cit* fn 2, 270.

21. *ibid.*, 278.

22. *loc cit* fn 1,

and is suggested by Dunning as characteristic of some domestic or industrial process rather than evidence of a fire proper. On site 250 was "burnt clay 1 foot 4 inches thick immediately overlying a Samian fragment form 18/31 and sealed by second century pottery."²³ Lastly, at site 263, a burnt layer of probable Hadrianic date marked the end of the building sequence.

Scattered over the rest of the area are four more recent sites. At site 200 was found a pavement with burning above. Both elements were undated, as was the case with two similar features on site 202. At site 242 were second century structures and a destruction level, though it is unclear whether the two were associated. Lastly, on site 287 was "a large second century timber building",²⁴ destroyed by fire.

The only other occurrences of *in situ* burning in the area, notably around the Forum, can be assigned, on various grounds, to the Boudican fire and so are not discussed here.

Fewer archaeological observations in the eastern half of the city make conclusions more tentative. However, two interpretations of the present evidence can be noted. As Lez Watson suggests, the one significant cluster of sites with *in situ* destruction lies just south-west of the Forum. Sites 149, 139, 286 and 171 all have post-Boudican debris, but none seems as late as Hadrianic. A Flavian date would be more consistent with the finds, perhaps even between AD 86 and 100. A conflagration of this date was previously unsuspected.

23. *ibid.*, 57.

24. *Britannia* 8 (1977) 408.



Fig. 3: Redeposited debris (in section) found on the recently excavated site at Peninsular House, overlying an unburnt floor of early 2nd century date

Secondly, most of the Hadrianic debris seems to be redeposited, especially along the waterfront (e.g. sites 198, 193) thus paralleling the dumps along the Walbrook valley and waterfront area to the west (site 75 etc.). This situation has been illustrated most graphically at the recent excavation at Peninsular House (Fig. 3) where dumps of Hadrianic debris overlay a wooden floor which had definitely not been burnt (*pers. comm.* from G. Milne, in advance of publication, for which thanks). It would seem that the clearing up operations in the north-west of the city involved redeposition in other parts of the settlement area.

Future Work

Given no adequate historical context, the fire seems most likely to have been accidental, as suggested by Dunning, though it is interesting to note that it coincides with great changes in the topography and even character of land use, both on the waterfront and in the domestic and commercial area of the city. Further work will consider any connection in this respect. The fire allows a fuller reconstruction of the destroyed buildings, through closer knowledge of their structural characteristics and comparative analyses of contemporary groups of finds from different types of building (e.g. commercial premises on site 5 and domestic buildings on site 91), from adjacent similarly functioning properties, or from different rooms in the same structure. An overview of the finds may also allow a more accurate date for the fire to be established. These and other projects will be investigated as part of the post-excavation work in the DUA.

Acknowledgements

Lez Watson collected and compared the information, and made some provisional conclusions in a report held in the DUA archive. These are acknowledged where used in the text. Steve Roskams is responsible for the present article and the other interpretations, which in places differ, either by omission or by addition, from those drawn by Lez Watson. Anne Upson's drawing of the figure is gratefully acknowledged.

Appendix

Site index

Note: M numbers refer to gazetteer numbers in Merrifield (1965)², G numbers to the site numbers in Grimes (1968)³ and D numbers to the page in Dunning (1945)¹.

- 4 Christchurch, Greyfriars — DUA archive report
- 5 GPO site, Newgate Street — *London Archaeol* 3, No. 15 (1980) 403-7
- 6 St. Martins-le-Grand M 35

- Gutter Lane G 25, Fig. 28
- 9 Goldsmith House, Wood Street M 43
- 15 Milk Street — *London Archaeol* 3, No. 8 (1978) 199-205
- 17 100-116 Cheapside M 54
- 19 Cheapside Bath House — *Trans LAMAS* 27 (1976) 30-46
- 21 100-116 Cheapside M 53
- 22 Blossom's Inn M 44
- 26 34-5 King Street M 47
- 29 Atlas Assurance site M 49
- 30 7 King Street M50
- 34 1-2 Bucklersbury M 191
- 72 69-73 Cannon Street D 53
- 75 129-30 Upper Thames Street D 53
- 91 Watling Court — DUA archive report
- 97 Bucklersbury House — DUA archive report
- 121 33-35 Poultry M 177
- 139 Lombard Street D 56
- 141 15 Lombard Street M 201
- 149 5-8 Birch Lane D 56
- 160 Walbrook House G 46
- 164 St. Swithin's House M 265
- 166 Salters' Hall, St. Swithin's Lane G 49
- 168 Phoenix House D 55
- 170 Comptoir National D 55
- 171 Nicholas Lane M 282
- 172 Nicholas Lane D 55
- 173 143-7 Cannon Street M 283
- 175 Stafford House D 55
- 180 Plough Court M 289
- 193 King William Street House, Miles Lane M 304
- 198 Regis House M 308
- 200 Winchester House M 316
- 202 Threadneedle Street M 183
- 222 15-18 Lime Street D 57
- 242 Sir John Cass College — DUA archive report
- 248 4-8 Mincing Lane D 57
- 250 26-8 Mark Lane D57
- 263 All Hallows, Barking D 58
- 285 2-3 Lombard Court — *Britannia* 8 (1977) 408
- 287 Tower of London — *Britannia* 8 (1977) 408.

Excavations & Post-Excavation work

City, by Museum of London, Department of Urban Archaeology. A series of long term excavations, Enquiries to DUA, Museum of London, London Wall, E.C.2. (01-600 3699)

Beddington, by South West London Unit. Excavation of site of Roman bath-house. Enquiries to Roy and Lesley Adkins, 25 Union Road, Croydon (01-679 7054).

Brentford, by West London Archaeological Field Group, Excavation and processing. Enquiries to 71-72 Brentford High Street, Brentford, Middlesex. (01-560 3880).

Croydon & District. Processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collections of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Hon. Curator, Croydon Natural History & Scientific Society Ltd., Museum Building, Croydon Biology Centre, Chipstead Valley Road, Coulsdon, Surrey. (01-660 3841 or 22 43727).

Fulham by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Fulham Palace, Bishops Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, S.W.6. Examination of existing buildings and research work has revealed earlier buildings underneath. Sundays Enquiries to Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, S.W.6. (01-731 0338).

Hammersmith, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group.

Processing of post-medieval material from Sandford Manor and medieval material from Fulham Palace, Tuesdays, 7.45 p.m.-10 p.m., at Fulham Palace, Bishops Avenue, Fulham Palace Road S.W.6. Contact Keith Whitehouse (see Fulham).

Inner London Boroughs, by the Inner London Unit. Several rescue sites in various areas. (01-242 6620).

Kingston, by Kingston-upon-Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Marion Hinton, Kingston Museum, Fairfield Road, Kingston (01-546 5386).

North-East Greater London, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, E.15. (01-534 4545).

South West London Boroughs, by the South West London Unit, excavations and processing. Enquiries to Scott McCracken, St. Luke's House, Sandycroft Road, Kew (01-940 5989).

Southwark, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee. Several sites from the Roman period onwards. Enquiries to Harvey Sheldon, S.L.A.E.C., Port Medical Centre, English Grounds, Morgan's Lane, SE1 2HT. (01-407 1989).

Surrey, by Surrey Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to David Bird, County Archaeological Officer, Planning Department, County Hall, Kingston, Surrey. (01-546 1050 x 3665).

Vauxhall Pottery, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society. Processing of excavated material continues three nights a week. All enquiries to S.L.A.S. c/o Cuming Museum, 155 Walworth Road, S.E.17 (01-703 3324).

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 field-work. The Calendar gives details of extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The annual subscription is £4.50 post-free, which should be made payable to C.B.A., 112 Kennington Road, S.E.11.