

Fig. 1: Location of the site in relation to Milk Street.

Ironmonger Lane

JENNIFER NORTON

EXCAVATIONS IN THE AUTUMN of 1980 on the site of Nos. 24 and 25 Ironmonger Lane (TQ 3250 8123) took place over a four month period, in advance of redevelopment of this and the adjacent area to the west fronting onto King Street (Fig. 1). The excavations were carried out by the Department of Urban Archaeology (Museum of London), and generously funded by the developers, Guardian Royal Exchange Assurance.

The site under investigation covered an area 8m x 8m (26ft x 26ft) and lay on the western side of Ironmonger Lane about 60m (65 yards) north of present day Cheapside. It was bounded to the south by a Victorian alley, Prudent Passage, leading into King Street. The first documentary reference to Ironmonger Lane is c. 1190 and it was hoped that excavations would be able to date more exactly the setting out of the street, and its relationship with an

underlying east-west Roman road which was thought to cross the site. A third priority was to establish whether any Roman properties aligned with the street grid or with a tributary of the Walbrook, 30m to the north-east of the site, which fronted a 3rd century town house¹.

Roman levels

The earliest activity on site (Period I) was represented by a series of large pits dug for the extraction of the underlying natural gravels. This may have been drawn up a shallow slope from the bottom of the extraction pit using a rope attached to a receptacle containing the gravel. A group of finds dated this activity to the Neronian period (50-64 AD) and indicates that there was no proper occupation in the area at this time, thus substantiating recent evidence

1. D Dawe *11 Ironmonger Lane London* (1952) 18.

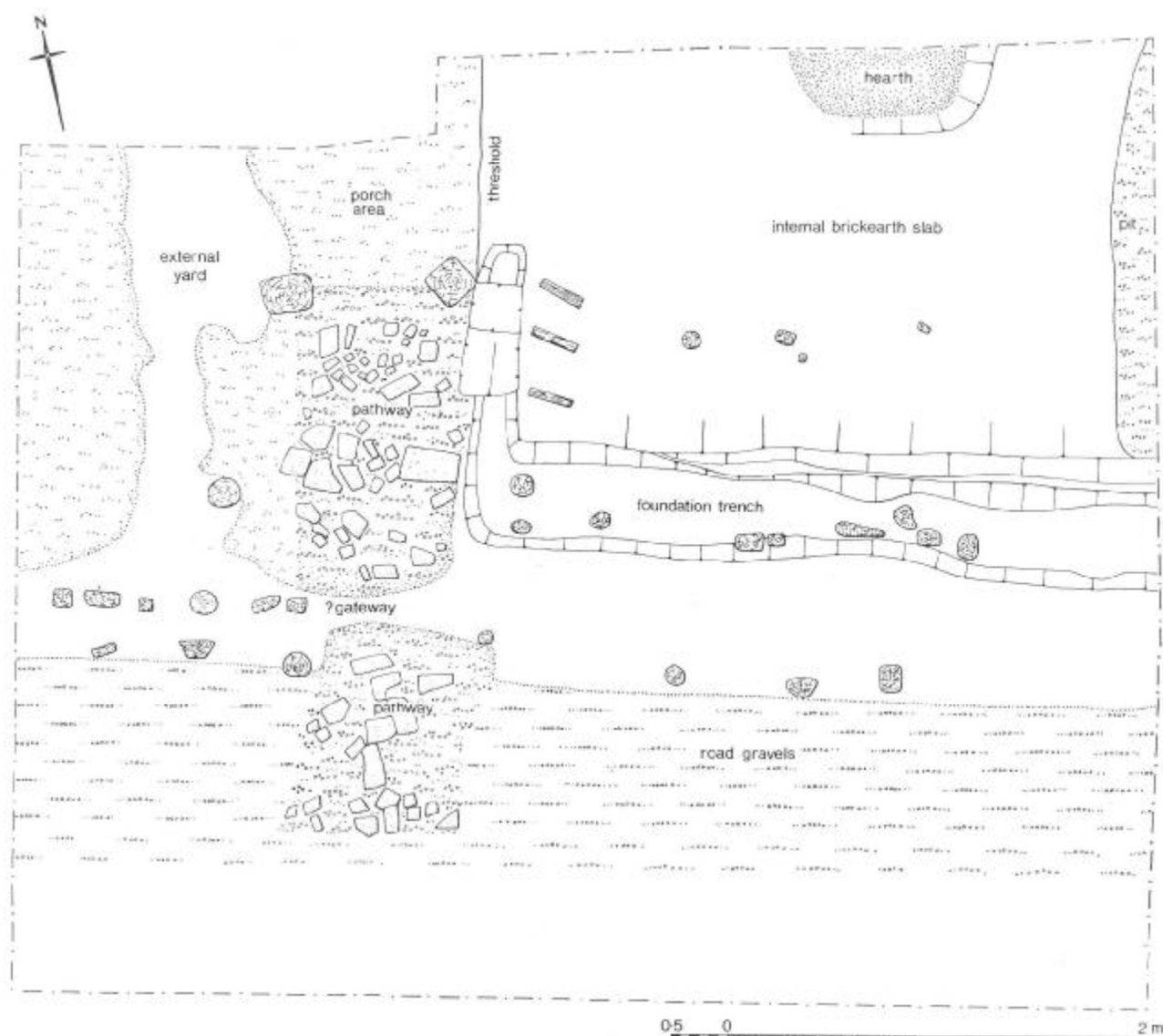


Fig. 2: Period II — fourth building with external yard fronting onto east-west street.

from Milk Street, less than 200m (220 yards) to the west (Fig. 1).²

The first sign of organised activity (Period II) was the cutting of a flat bottomed ditch to mark the northern edge of the proposed east-west street. The line of the street was thus laid out, with the back-filled ditch forming a strip of land which created the frontage throughout the repeated phases of streetside development. This operation may suggest a centralised planning policy from the outset to lay

2. S Roskams 'Milk Street Excavation', *London Archaeol* 3 No. 8 (1978), 201-2.

out the street grid system prior to development, rather than piecemeal occupation of the area. It appears to have been part of the early Flavian planning of the city, also noted at nearby Milk Street.³

The first structure was marked by a post hole and two converging slots which presumably supported a timber framework. The building lay in the north-east part of the site parallel to, and set back from, the northern street edge which was represented at this time by patches of gravels and pebbly clays. Silty deposits, probably eavesdrips below the roof

3. *ibid.*

line, accumulated along the frontage with the street. This phase of activity ended when the building was dismantled. At the same time, the street was levelled over by an extensive spread of brickearth mottled with charcoal and daub.

A replacement structure was put up immediately along the same alignment as before, but marginally closer to the street. A coin (69-79 AD) found in the make-up slab gives a useful indication of the date of the construction of the building. A brickearth hearth, scorched in situ, was set up inside against the western face of a possible partition which was a residual feature of the previous building. Outside, a gravelled yard ran up to the western side of the building and abutted a strip of compacted pebbly clay to the south forming the frontage between the yard and the street, above the line of the backfilled marking-out ditch of Period I. The second building was dismantled at the same time as a thick make-up for the first major street surface was laid, and it appears that the two operations were organised and carried out in conjunction, possibly as part of a centrally planned exercise.

A third building, aligned almost exactly over the first structure on the site, was marked by the remains of a plank-lined slot running east-west. Four phases of internal pebbly make-ups below trodden silty occupation surfaces were each associated with a new hearth setting indicated by superimposed areas of scorched brickearth. There were few finds and no domestic debris, apart from spreads of fine charcoal which gave no indication as to the function of the hearths. Externally, the yard was patchily resurfaced on four occasions particularly along the western side of the building where a threshold leading in from the yard was indicated. A double row of post holes fronting the building may have supported a raised wooden verandah running alongside the street, which was also resurfaced by a gravelled metalling.

The fourth building reproduced the alignment of the previous three structures (Fig. 2) with a post hole setting along the western wall where the threshold led from the yard into the building. Immediately inside the threshold, a lateral timber framework was set into a thick brickearth slab which formed a raised sill where it ran along the line of the east-west wall of the building. A scorched hearth area was superimposed above the hearths of the previous two phases, and this was associated with a wide shallow pit to the east encrusted with rusty brown concreted material and then filled with clean sandy gravel. The function of the superimposed hearths and the associated internal pit could not be ascertained from the surviving evidence, but it demonstrated the similarity and probable continuity of activity throughout the successive building phases and suggested that the

process involved was of an industrial, rather than domestic, nature.

A tiled pathway led from the street, through a possible gateway into the yard and ran down the west side of the building to terminate where two posts, aligned east-west with the southern end of the threshold, marked the position of a porch leading to the doorway. During the lifespan of the fourth building, the yard was partially resurfaced and the street patched where subsidence had occurred. A post alignment marked the northern edge of the street, and a second line of posts was set up along the frontage between the yard and the street.

A trench, which robbed out the structural components of the east-west wall, marked the dismantling of the fourth building which was then replaced by a fifth structure, marginally closer to the street than all the previous buildings had been. The position of the threshold and porch was marked by the remains of a substantial post and slot arrangement, reproducing exactly the line of the porch associated with the fourth building. Internally, a hearth area of scorched brickearth was associated with another shallow encrusted pit, aligned directly over the earlier pit, but with no further indication of the activity or process involved. Outside, the yard was surfaced with sherds set into clay, and two posts, aligned with the porch, probably indicated a gateway leading from the yard onto the street. During this time, the street was crudely patched with tile, ragstone and oyster fragments and then resurfaced with a substantial make-up and metalling.

A sixth structure, on the same alignment as before, followed the dismantling of the fifth building and indicated an unchanged pattern of activity. Three successive hearth areas with spreads of silty ash and oyster lay in the vicinity of a third gravel-filled pit superimposed above the earlier shallow cuts. Observations during a watching brief suggest that these features may have extended at least 1.50m (5ft) to the north-east. The final phase of occupation in the sixth building utilised a changed hearth position closer to the southern wall of the building, but this did not necessarily reflect a change of activity within the building. Externally, the yard was resurfaced on three occasions. A gravel spread led from the street to the porchway and a less well constituted area lay to the west further away from the building. The existence of a porch on the same alignment as before was inferred by a post hole and differential surfacing to either side of its implied line. The pottery forms associated with the sixth building phase are thought to have been in use for a considerable time from the Flavian period onwards, but Late Flavian and Trajanic types (90-117 AD) predominated.



Fig. 3: Oval Saxon sunken feature with circular ash pit, with a section across the larger sunken feature in the background. (Photo: J. Bailey)

A replacement building, the seventh similar structure, contained a hearth of tile fragments, with an external porch which was marked by a horizontal beam slot terminating against a timber upright. There then followed a hiatus of activity when the porch was dismantled and the yard fell into disrepair. Renewed occupation, retaining the original east-west wall of the seventh building, was marked by the construction of an external sill along the western side of the building, which replaced the timber framework, and a raised sill which formed an internal division to the rear of a brickearth hearth. The porch was not renewed, but a drainage channel encrusted with compacted aerated material, was cut across the yard. A second channel closer to the frontage replaced it, and it is possible that some industrial process utilised these channels replacing the internal gravel-filled pits of earlier phases.

All activity was then halted by a fire, which was represented by the collapse of burnt debris. Charred

timbers and scorched daub faced with plaster had fallen across the yard, probably from an adjoining property to the north-west, as the structure within the area of excavation was affected primarily by scorching of its internal surfaces. There was some evidence to suggest that the fire was part of the Hadrianic conflagration which spread along Cheapside. Sherds of Hadrianic pottery were sealed into the construction trench beneath a crust of fire debris, but generally the pottery forms indicate a progression in type from the late 1st century onwards into the 2nd century.

By the time of the fire, over a period of about sixty years, the successive street metallings had raised the level of the original road by almost 1m (3ft 3in). The repeated replacement of the timber framed structures with the resultant build-up of internal deposits, and the frequent resurfacing of the yard, had paralleled this rise in the general ground level to the north of the street.

After the fire (Period III), a number of intercutting gulleys were dug into the yard. These appeared to continue the type of activity evident before the fire, and probably pre-dated the construction of a substantial chalk-founded wall along the frontage of the yard and the street, which was aligned with a smaller ragstone wall within the frontage area between the street and the earlier timber framed buildings. The ragstone wall bounded an open area, as indicated by accumulations of grey silt, apparently deposits of 'dark earth'.⁴ The two types of contrasting wall suggest that, after the fire, the property of Period II was split into two areas along the line of the western wall of the Period II buildings. The associated street surfaces were less substantial without the gravel make-ups of the previous period, and a deposit of loose silty gravel marked the final street horizon. This may have been the result of lack of maintenance, or it may indicate that the street gradually became disused and fell into disrepair.

Following the demise of the street, the ragstone wall was robbed out and pits covered the area to its north. The chalk-founded wall remained intact and the yard was roughly resurfaced and finally, a layer of grey silts marked the end of the Roman occupation. The majority of pottery associated with Period III was 3rd/4th century types, particularly that recovered from the final street horizon, the yard gravels and the pit fills.

Saxon period

There was no evidence for any activity on site after 4th century until the early 9th century when two interconnecting sunken features (Period IV) were cut

4. S Roskams 'Milk Street Excavations: Part 2', *London Archaeol* 3 No. 9 (1978) 227-8.

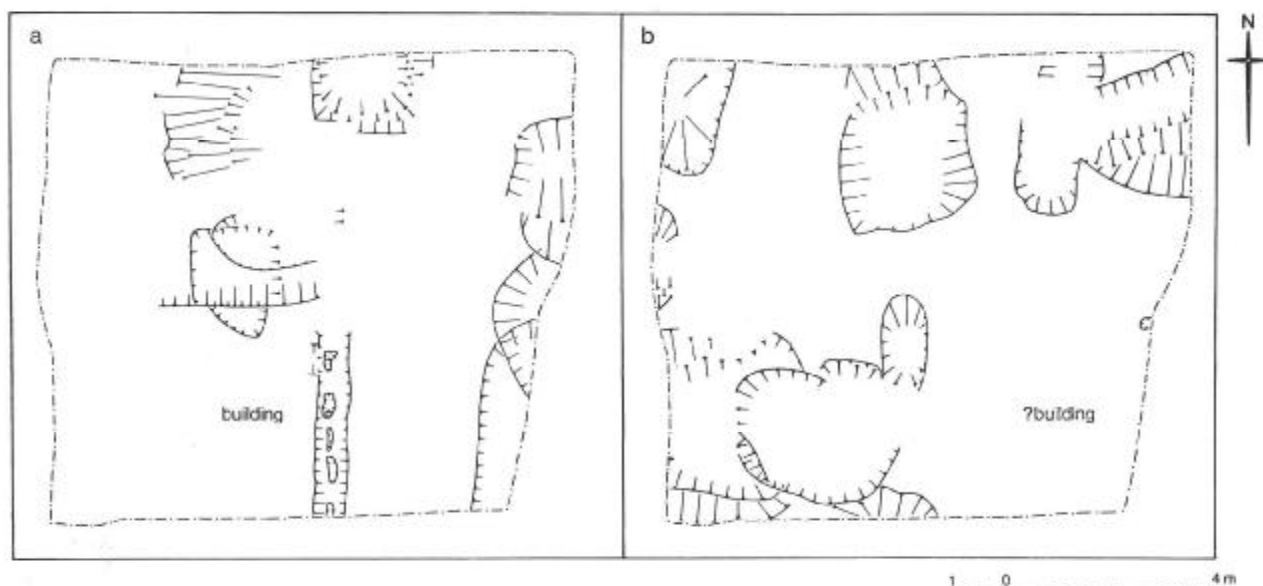


Fig. 4: Distribution of pits in the 10th (a) and the 12th (b) centuries indicating the change in property frontages from the west to the east of the site.

through the disused Roman street gravels to a depth of 1.00m (3ft 3in). Both had vertical sides, and utilised the same compacted Roman road surface to provide a firm base (Fig. 3). Only part of the larger eastern feature lay within the area of excavation, but it was probably about 5m x 4m (16½ft x 13ft) with a post setting at the base of the central point of the northern side, presumably supporting a ridge pole secured onto a second timber. Two phases of occupation, represented by gravel and tile fragments forming areas of compaction with the trodden surfaces, produced a general build-up of occupational material angled up against the gravelled walls, before tips of rubbish marked the disuse and back filling of the feature.

The smaller feature, which was oval in plan (3.6m x 2.40m; 12ft x 8ft), was an addition following the primary occupation in the larger feature, and contained a large circular pit with *in situ* ashy deposits. The main body of the feature showed a similar build-up of uneven surfaces and occupational debris, associated with bedding gravels for a horizontal timber and, later, a number of post settings along the base of the northern wall.

Both sunken features were covered, presumably by timbers resting on top of the gravelled walls and secured across a ridge pole. The smaller one may have been a working area, but the dimensions and arrangement of the larger one suggest it was inhabited.

To the north of these sunken features, a large

trench marked the robbing out of the chalk-founded Roman boundary wall of Period III. This action may have taken place prior to the construction of a late Saxon building (Period V) indicated by the remains of a horizontal base plate supporting split D-shaped timber uprights, which enclosed the south west corner of the site making a right-angled turn above the intersection of the two earlier sunken features of Period IV. Traces of an internal surface lay slightly below the contemporary exterior ground level which was heavily pitted and produced the articulated skeleton of a horse from a deep cess pit. The pottery evidence suggests that this period covered the late 9th and 10th centuries, and the distribution of pits implies that the building fronted onto an access to the south or west of the site, and that the modern Ironmonger Lane frontage, to the east, was not yet in existence (Fig. 4, a).

Medieval

This contrasts with the preceding Period V, and is represented by a close grouping of pits dated to 11th and 13th centuries (Period VI) over the whole of the site except for the south east corner which was deliberately levelled over, suggesting that the pits were associated with a building, built on prepared ground, which fronted onto Ironmonger Lane for which the first documentary evidence is c. 1190 (Fig. 4, b). By the 12th century, two properties are apparent running west from the Lane, the southern following the northern edge of the underlying Roman street.

Post-medieval

The earliest archaeological evidence of a building on the northern property was a chalk, ragstone and brick foundation (Period VII) dated to 14th or 15th century which would have been contemporary with an uncoursed ragstone and chalk foundation on the southern property, possibly of 13th century origin and utilised until the late 17th century.

Various modifications to the northern property were apparent including its division into two narrow plots (Period VIII), the evidence of which is supported by 16th century documentary sources⁵. Brick founded rear walls (Period IX) were added to both Period VII properties in the early 17th century and

were re-utilised during the construction of the post-Fire properties when new basement floors were laid (Period X).

Conclusions

Although the area of excavation was limited, the results obtained had proved the alignment of the Roman road and produced a well stratified sequence of Roman occupation along its northern frontage. In addition, it was shown that Ironmonger Lane was in use by the 12th century, while the late Saxon frontage probably lay to the south or west of the site.

5. I am grateful to Derek Keene for discussing the documentary evidence with me.

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 Archaeological Unit. Excavation of R.B. villa. Also processing of finds. Enquiries to Roy & Lesley Adkins, 25 Union Road, Croydon (01-683 1326).

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).

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, 86 Clancarty Road, S.W.6. (01-731 0338).

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

Kingston, by Kingston-up-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, Sandycombe Road, SE1 2HT. (01-407 1989).

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 3655).

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. 110 Kennington Road, S.E.11.