

Excavations at Watling Court

Part 2: Late Roman to Modern

Photography by Jon Bailey, Museum of London

DOM PERRING

THIS SITE, immediately to the north of Mansion House tube station, was the subject of a six-month excavation by the Museum of London's Department of Urban Archaeology in 1978. The Roman remains found on this large site have already been considered in a previous issue of *the London Archaeologist*.¹

The post-Roman material had been largely truncated by Victorian cellars but enough survived of the later cut features (pits, wells, wall foundations and the like) in combination with the evidence from a few small areas of horizontal survival, to indicate

the later use of the site. The Roman occupation had apparently ended in the middle of the second century and the remains of the latest buildings were levelled off. This material was sealed by a thick horizon of 'dark earth' (up to 0.5m (1ft 8in) thick where it had survived intact) (Period VIII). The horizon contained abraded late Roman pottery, and on stratigraphic grounds could be assigned to any period between the third and tenth centuries. Similar horizons have been examined in more detail on other sites (notably at Milk Street²), and by analogy the Watling Court material is considered to represent a period of agricultural land use. Together with the evidence from other sites, this suggests a relocation or contraction of the occupied part of the city and a shift to a more land based economy. A group of stakeholes (period VII) which appeared to have been buried by the 'dark earth' were hard to date and it was difficult to find a satisfactory explanation for their presence. An equivalent sequence was noted in the excavations at Well Court³ where late- or post-Roman timber structures predating the 'dark earth' were implied.

Whatever the date and nature of the 'dark earth' it was clear that, with the possible exception of the stake-built structures referred to above, the site was effectively abandoned until late in the Saxon period. The first signs of renewed use came from a small number of deep square rubbish or cess pits, provisionally dated to the late-Saxon period (period IX). These pits were probably contemporary with the late-Saxon urban renaissance which is more clearly illustrated by the timber buildings and street surfaces recently excavated at Botolph Lane⁴ and Well Court⁵. Because the Saxon levels had been destroyed over so much of the site, it is not possible to be certain whether or not these pits accompanied similar timber buildings.

The earliest identified building activity after the

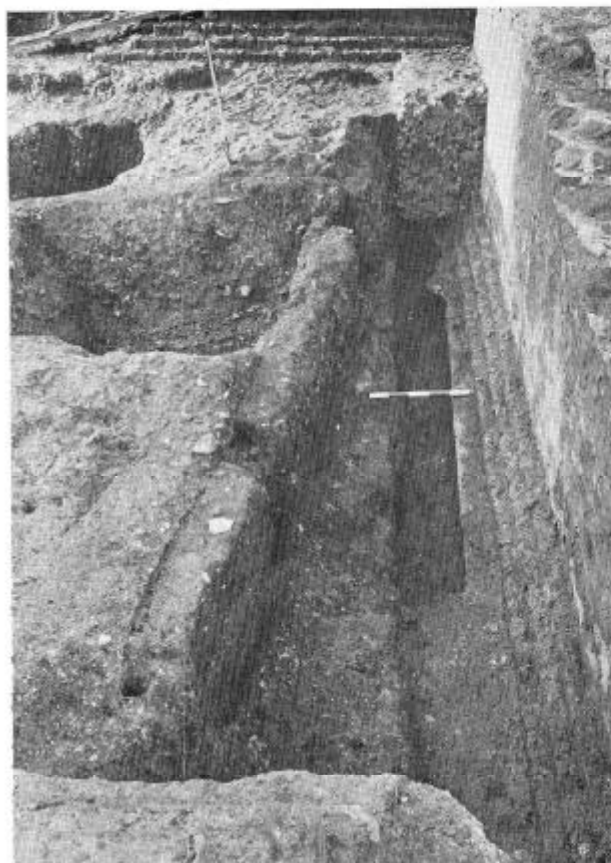


Fig. 1: The retaining wall of squared studs and planking of one of the 11th century sunken featured buildings. The scale is in 0.10m units.

1. D Perring, 'Excavations at Watling Court. Part 1: Roman,' *London Archaeol.* 4, No. 4 (1981), 103-108.
2. S Roskams and J Schofield, 'The Milk Street Excavation: Part 2,' *London Archaeol.* 3, No. 9 (1978), 227-34.
3. B Richardson, 'Excavation Round-up 1979,' *London Archaeol.* 3, No. 14 (1980), 384.
4. G Milne, 'Saxon Botolph Lane,' *London Archaeol.* 3, No. 16, 423-430.
5. *Op. cit.*, note 3.

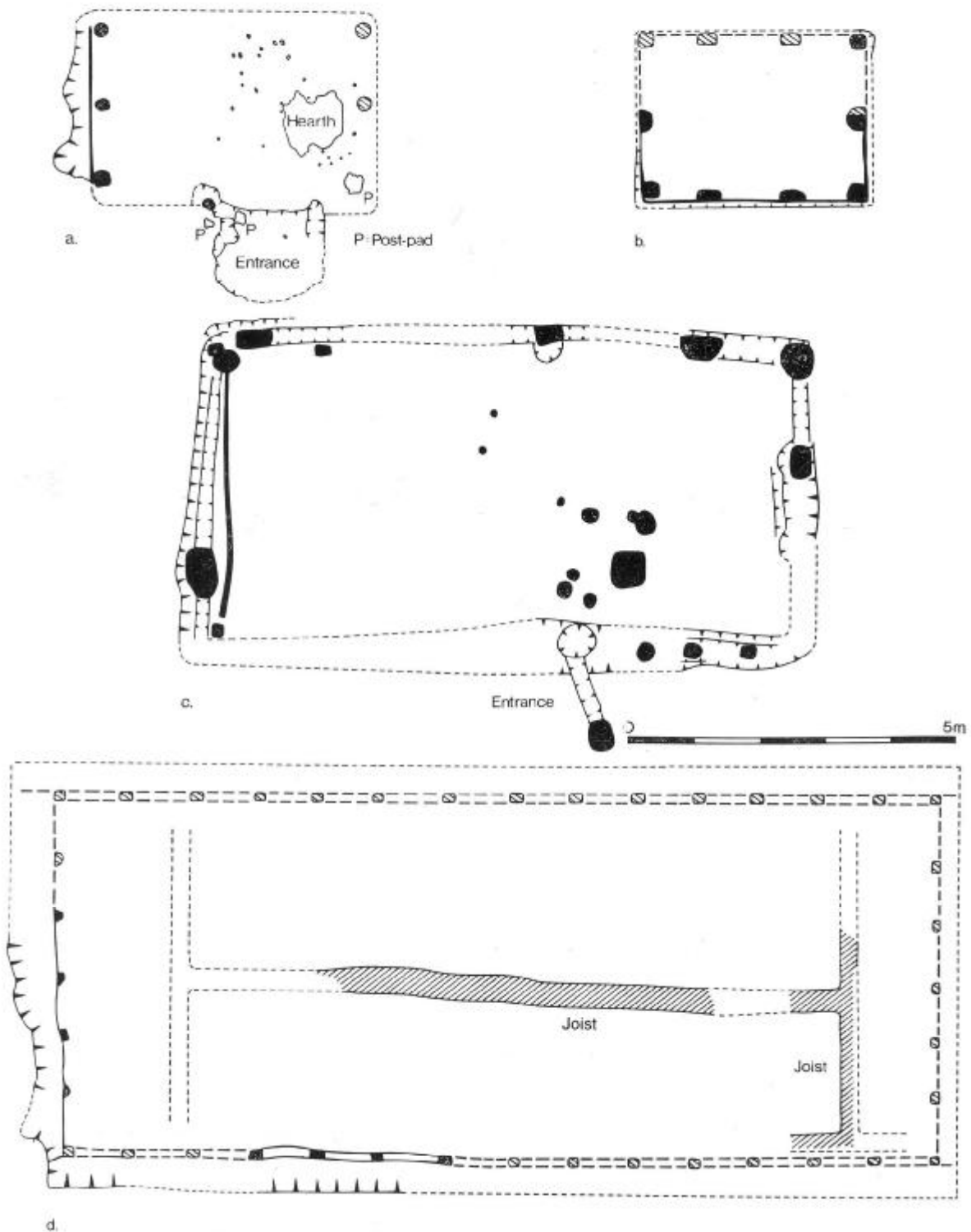


Fig. 2: Comparative plans of early medieval sunken featured buildings from the City. a: Milk Street; b and c: Financial Times site, Cannon Street; d: Watling Court.



Fig. 3: The 'larger' sunken featured building (d on Fig. 2) before excavation, visible as the darker area between the Victorian wall foundations. The scale is in 0.10m units.

deposition of the 'dark earth' has provisionally been dated to the 10th and 11th centuries (periods X-XIII) and took two forms. A sequence of clay surfaces probably represented the successive floor levels of timber buildings, but survived so patchily that little of their plan or nature could be retrieved. The greater part of the evidence derived from a number of buildings which had, at least in part, been sunk into the ground surface and had thus escaped much of the later truncation.

Three of these buildings were recorded in detail, although there may have been as many as seven in total. The earliest one was 3.8-4.0m (12-13ft) wide and its sides had been lined by horizontal planking set behind a wall of circular (c. 0.15m (6in) diameter) load-bearing posts. These posts were set in a shallow wall trench. Although the building was not seen over a large enough area to be certain of the construction technique employed, it seems probable that the posts formed paired trusses dividing

the building into bays. The nature of the access into this building was not established, but by comparison with other sunken buildings, it was likely to have been by a porch.

A more deeply cut structure had been inserted through the backfilled remains of the building described above, probably during the 11th century. This replacement was of a more sophisticated construction, and was effectively identical to the third building. The structural elements of these two can therefore be presented together. The sides of these rectangular buildings were cut at a steep incline, but not vertically, down to a flat base. A strip 0.8-0.95m (2½-3ft) wide was cut 0.2m (8in) deeper than this to form a continuous wall trench around the perimeter of the building. The main walls consisted of squared studs, c. 0.16m by 0.22m (6in by 8½in) set at intervals of 0.7-0.85m (2¼-2¾ft) along a squared ground beam which was laid along the wall trench (Figs. 1 and 2). Evidence of the method of jointing had not survived, although it would seem probable that jointing had been employed. With the addition of a wall plate and tie beams at roof height — to give the building longitudinal and lateral support — these buildings would have been of box-frame construction; one of the standard forms of medieval building. Set behind the timber studs a series of superimposed horizontal planks retained the sides of the sunken area, the space between the vertical faces of the planking and the sloped sides of the cut was backfilled by earth; the spoil was apparently deposited in stages after the insertion of each plank. The inner face of the wall was clad by a further face of

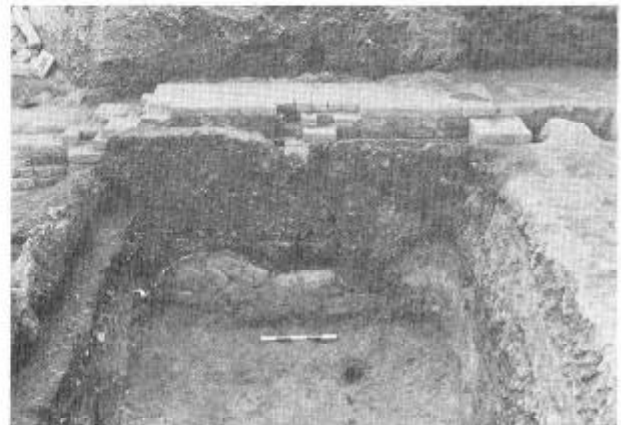


Fig. 4: Section through the fills of the 'larger' sunken building as left by the excavation of a later cesspit. The backfills of the sunken buildings are the darker coloured fills whilst the large voids (notably that on the left hand side of the photograph) were left by the decay of the split timber floor joists. The cut of the north wall of the building is towards the right side of the section. The scale is in 0.10m units.

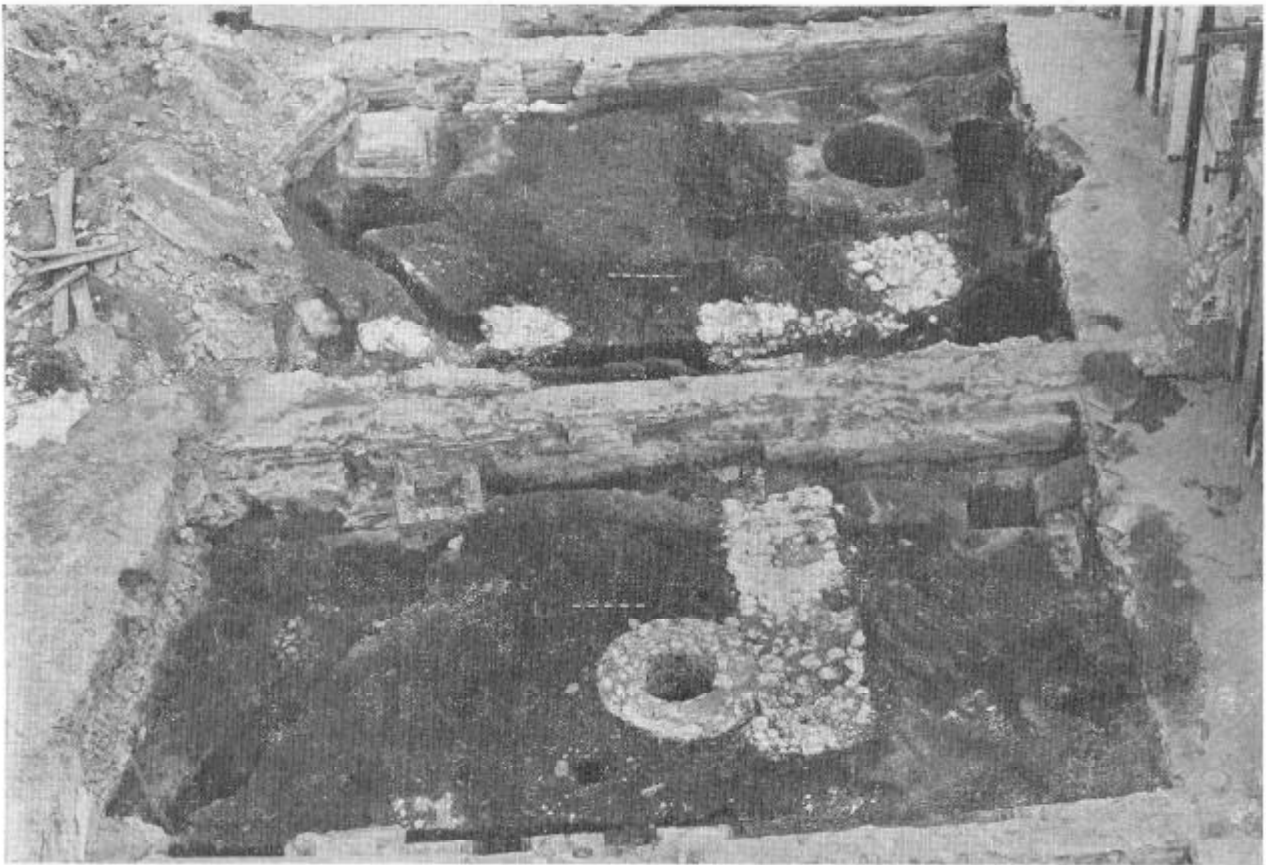


Fig. 5: The chalk wall foundations of a medieval building with associated features, notably a chalk-lined well, to the rear of the building. The scale is in 0.10m units.

horizontal planking. Unlike those behind the studs, which would have been held in place by the weight of spoil, these must have been secured to the studs in some fashion. No nails survived in the wall, or in the destruction debris, and it is more probable that dowels were used. The cavity between the two lines of planking was filled by loosely compacted spoil, which may have fallen into the space after the destruction of the building. The advantages of cavity walling, both for insulation and damp-proofing, are considerable and it would make most sense if the space between the planking had been left as a void or loosely filled by an insulating material. The excavations at Coppergate in York produced a remarkably similar contemporary example of walling where wood shavings were found in the wall cavity⁶.

The 'third' building survived over a larger area than the other examples (Figs. 2 and 3) and three

6. R Hall, 'Excavating Viking York,' *Popular Archaeology* 3, No. 11 (1982), 11-16.

of its walls survived; the position of the fourth could be located, with a fair degree of certainty, beneath a Victorian wall line. The entire cut area measured 14.7m by 6m (48ft x 20ft) with an effective floor area between the walls of 13.3m by 4.7m (44ft x 15ft). The end walls of the building were of slightly different construction from those outlined above; the uprights were not set into a timber ground beam and there was no trace of an inner plank lining. As the end walls would not have taken a significant part of the roof load, this difference does not affect the structural details proposed above. Inside this building a sequence of floor surfaces was comparatively well preserved. Dumps of smithing waste formed a solid platform for the flooring, although impressions of timbers beneath the waste suggest the possibility of an earlier, largely destroyed, timber floor. The nature of the floor set over the waste platform was not established but its successor was well preserved. This floor consisted of timber joists and planking. The joists were longitudinally split and trimmed but otherwise uncarpentered timbers,

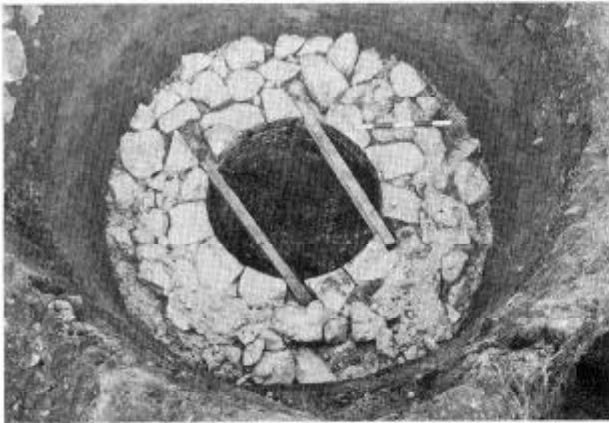


Fig. 6: A detail of the chalk lined well shown in Fig. 5, demonstrating the use of the putlog holes. The scale is in 0.10m units.

with the flat face of the D resting on the ground and the apex supporting the planking. Three joists were identified, but it is probable that there had been several more. The main joists ran along the length of the building but probably did not reach its ends. It appears that they were, instead, abutted in T-junctions by lateral joists. This might suggest that the plank flooring did not continue along the full length of the building but formed a raised platform in its centre.

The depth of these sunken areas was difficult to establish as the contemporary ground surface did not survive. There was little doubt that they post-dated the 'dark earth' the surface of which survived only a short distance away from the edge of the 'larger' building, and on projections this implied a minimum depth of 2.35m (7½ft) to the base of the cut or 1.78m (6ft) to the top of the joist and plank floor. These buildings can therefore be seen as cellared rather than lowered. It was not possible to demonstrate the presence or absence of a further floor above these cellars. There are two points which arise from the nature and location of these sunken buildings. The first is that, apart from a small number of stake-holes, there were no occupational features, such as hearths, within them. This is in contrast with the smaller, earlier structures such as that excavated at Milk Street in 1977 (Fig. 2, a), and this evidence, combined with that of the complex and sophisticated plank linings, might suggest a specialised function, perhaps storage. The second is that these buildings were located towards the rear of the likely property boundaries within which they stood (for which see below); this might suggest that they were associated with surface built structures, of the type briefly referred to above, which would have been built against the frontages. There are grounds for be-

lieving that these cellars served as storage areas, such facilities being documented from the 12th century, which were later to be succeeded by the medieval stone undercrofts. It is interesting to note that one of the better known undercrofts, Gerard's Hall, stood in Basing Lane (the road which formed the south and chief boundary of most of the properties excavated at Watling Court and which now lies beneath Cannon Street).

The later medieval buildings which replaced the various timber structures referred to above were represented by a series of packed chalk foundations (period XIV) (Fig. 5). The earlier foundations were gravel bonded and the later ones mortar bonded. The dating evidence from the walls themselves was minimal but the pottery within the associated pits indicates that the earliest walls were built no earlier than the 12th century and the later ones were in place before the 15th century. These walls indicated

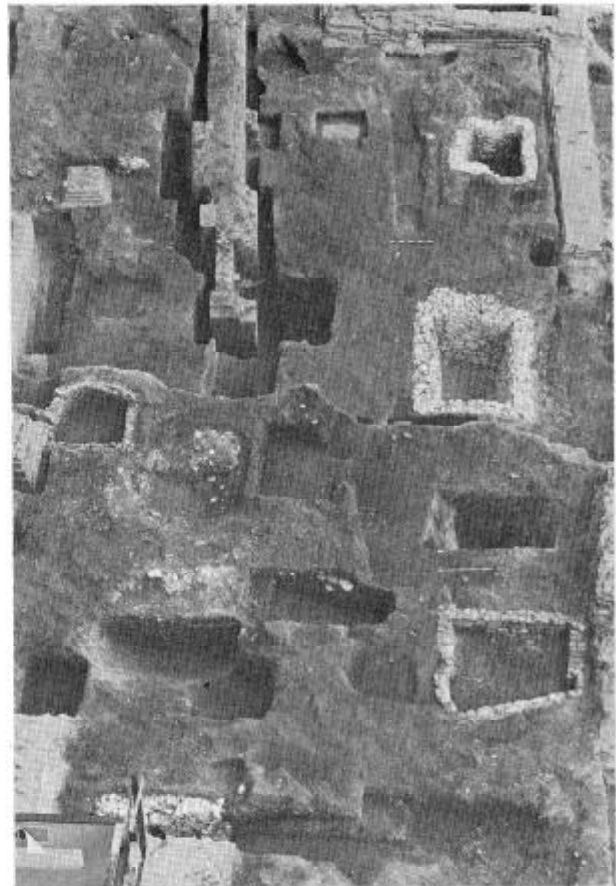


Fig. 7: Medieval and post-medieval rubbish pits and cess pits alongside Salters Court, the line of which is clearly indicated by the chalk and brick lined cess pits. The scale is in 0.10m units.

the presence of a series of fairly narrow buildings which extended back from gable ends against the major frontages to the north (Watling Street) and south (Basing Lane) of the site. Behind the buildings intrusive features were cut, presumably from a yard surface; the well with its lining of carefully cut chalk blocks (Fig. 6) was one such feature and had been positioned immediately against the rear wall of the building. To the rear of the properties were the cess pits, unlined at first but with later pits chalk lined and then brick lined. The even spacing of these (Fig. 7) combined with the evidence of the rubbish pits, permits the tentative identification of the property boundaries.

The properties, and cess pits, clearly backed on to an alleyway, the line of which had been perpetuated to modern times by Salters Court. The earlier sunken or cellared buildings were also positioned

such that they respected this alleyway and it seems probable that the topography of the area, both street systems and properties, were broadly established by the 11th century if not before.

A number of later medieval and post medieval features indicated that the early property boundaries had continued in use until the reorganisation of this area in the 19th century when Cannon Street was extended westwards to this point. This later material survived poorly but included a number of interesting groups of finds, among which were a large group of post medieval glass, and a selection of 17th century stoneware and glass vessels. The 19th century reorganisation of the area was the last period of activity represented in the archaeological record. It was these buildings that were demolished as part of the development of the site which made possible the present rescue excavations.

Local Society Bookshop

THIS IS THE THIRD supplement to the list of local publications given in Vol. 3, No. 15, 431-2 (see also Vol. 4, No. 2, 38 and No. 5, 137). Publications are listed alphabetically by their sponsoring Society. Those received for review are indicated by an asterisk, and may be reviewed at a later date.

Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society

Publications available from 96a Brighton Road, South Croydon, Surrey, CR2 6AD.

"Excavations in Old Town 1972-1975, also in Waddon 1972 and Edridge Road 1973 and 1975", by R. W. Savage. *Proc. C.N.H.S.S.* 17 (2), 1982. (40 pp., 25 figs.). £2.00 (plus 20p postage).

"Early Plateways and Firestone Mining in Surrey, an interim report", by B. E. Osborne. *Proc. C.N.H.S.S.* 17 (3), 1982. (15 pp., 3 figs. pl.). 90 plus 25p postage.

Streatham Society

Publications available from Miss D. Rockett, 50 Staplefield Close, London, S.W.2.

"No. 1. A Brief History of Streatham" by Graham Gower*. (32 pp., 4 figs., 2 maps). £1.00 (plus 20p postage).

"No. 2. Two Streatham Childhoods". 50p (plus 15p postage).

"No. 3. Norwood Grove". 50p (plus 15p postage).

"No. 4. A Walk around Streatham Hill" (forthcoming).

Tower Hamlets

Publication available from all Tower Hamlets libraries, and local bookshops.

"A History of Tower Hamlets", by Colm Kerigan*. 95pp, 47pl., index. £2.50 (plus 50p postage).

Local Societies - amendments

THE FIFTH SET of amendments to the list of local societies (Vol 3, No. 17, 318-9) is as follows:

Barnes and Mortlake History Society, Sec. Mrs. Joan Bryant, 32 The Crescent, London, SW13 0NN.

Hornsey Historical Society, please delete amendment (Vol 4, No 5, 137).

Hounslow and District History Society, Sec. Mrs. M. H. Lodge, 28 Elizabeth Way Hanworth, Middlesex.

Islington Archaeology & History Society, Sec. Peter

Watkins, 13 Willow Bridge Road, London, N.1.

St. Marylebone Society, Sec. A. C. Keen, 14 Roxborough Park, Harrow on the Hill, HA1 3BE.

Stanmore and Harrow Historical Society, Sec. Mrs. W. E. Cunningham, 71 Barn Rise, Wembley Park, HA9 9NH.

Woodford and District Historical Society, Sec. Miss Dorothy Brooks, 17 Fairlawn Drive, Woodford Green, IG8 9AW.