

The undercroft at 34 Watling Street

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THE DEPARTMENT of Urban Archaeology was aware that part of an undercroft survived at 34 Watling Street, EC4. However, its exact role, location and orientation were not known.

The opportunity to study it arose when developers were granted planning permission to refurbish the listed building that rests on it. An isolated vault springer had been rediscovered by the Architectural Surveyors, concealed behind a boarded door in a dark corner of the basement, which formed part of the west wall of a medieval structure. Access was therefore granted to the DUA for a week, to permit a proper record to be made of this fragment. It was hoped that it would be possible to tell from which part of the lost undercroft it came. An assessment would also be made of just how much of the undercroft still survived concealed beneath the Victorian fabric.

The nineteenth century survey

An early 19th century survey in the Library of the Society of Antiquaries shows that the undercroft survived until its destruction when Queen Victoria Street was laid out. However, of this survey only a plan and one longitudinal section survive; there is no drawing that relates the undercroft to its surroundings. While it was known that the undercroft had existed, its relationship to the modern city was entirely unknown. Before November 1985 there were no drawings of the Victorian building; the architect's new drawings were therefore to play a crucial role in the comprehension of the fragment.

The anonymous draughtsman recorded an undercroft 22.67m long and 4.75m wide (74ft 4in by 15ft 7in); it had five bays with quadripartite vaults and appears to have been constructed with considerable regularity. The visible remnant is one of the intermediate springers and was not a corner of the undercroft; a short length of wall is also visible to one side. It was immediately apparent that the western wall of the modern cellar could well be medieval work, encased in modern plaster. It is straight in plan and runs roughly north-south, at right angles to the ancient Watling Street. Since the finish could not be damaged, it was necessary to resort to more indirect methods to test this assumption.

Objectives

Permission was given by the developers for an archaeologist to carry out a week's recording. It was therefore important to have a clear strategy. The most important task was to determine the orientation of the 19th century plan; this would automatically relate the surviving vault springer to the remainder of the undercroft.

It was also necessary to record the surviving springer in detail; it would then be possible to attempt a reconstruction of the vault independently of the 19th century survey. The visible wall surface would also be described in detail; the style of masonry, materials used and any blocking, renderings or alterations. The level of the fragment would need to be established, so that the undercroft could be related 3-dimensionally to the Ordnance Survey. It was hoped that it would be possible to record earlier floor deposits to supply dating evidence for the undercroft, otherwise dated only on stylistic grounds.

Relating the springer to the modern basement

An independent survey was made of known and suspected medieval features, to act as a check on the basement plan because several features had been omitted from that record as they were irrelevant to the architect. Fig. 1 is an elevation showing the relationship between the visible fragment and the west wall of the modern cellar. There are two oblong recesses high in the cellar wall; one is functionless and the other forms a duct for gas and electricity. It was suspected that they were somehow related to features of the medieval undercroft.

Locating the foundation

It was fortunate that a plumber had dug a hole right against the internal face of the medieval wall, but it was very tightly bounded by this wall, a modern wall foundation and a modern drain. All floor surfaces within this triangle had been recently destroyed. The spoilheap was inspected in the hope of finding medieval pottery, but only some sherds of 'red ware' (dating from after 1700) were found. However, the hole had revealed the boundary between the medieval wall and foundation; the wall face was set back 0.15m (6in) from the edge of the

Fig.1

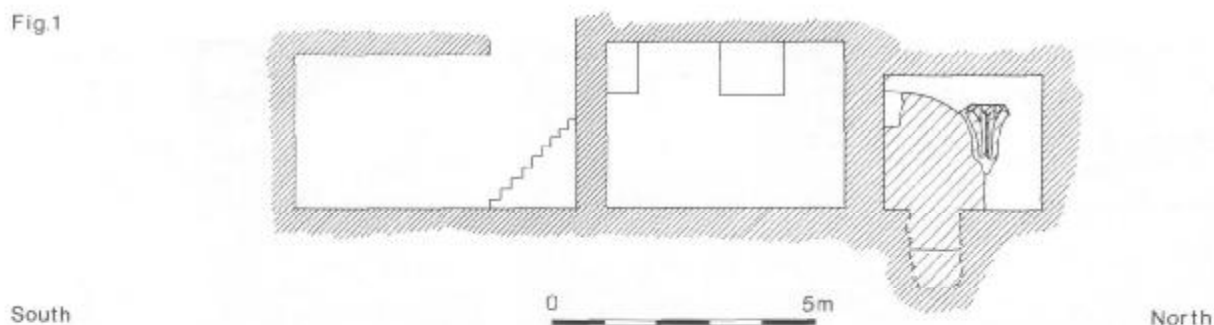


Fig.2

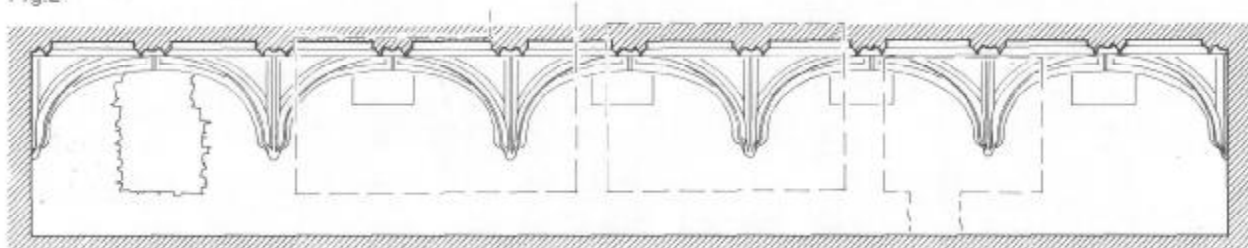


Fig. 1: the position of the surviving springer in relation to the modern cellar.

Fig. 2: the relationship of the modern cellar to the medieval undercroft.

foundation. This gives the level of the primary floor of the undercroft, which was roughly 0.77m (2ft 6in) beneath the modern cellar floor. Though no floor survived in the area observed, it was apparent that this considerable build-up of floor surfaces had occurred in the long life of the undercroft. These deposits may well survive elsewhere under the cellar floor, which seems to have been laid directly over the last undercroft floor.

The foundation was of very solid construction. It was built of large undressed fragments of Kentish ragstone and occasional fragments of Roman tile, set in a solid buff mortar. The uneven top of the foundation was levelled up with complete medieval roof tiles before the construction of the wall. In the small area visible, a deposit of sand and small fragments of ragstone lay against the wall. This implies that the foundation was not 'poured' into a trench but was built free-standing and the trench back-filled with rubble. However, it is equally possible that, in the area observed, the builders had carefully removed the soft fill of an existing pit and replaced it with rubble.

The visible wall

As the wall is part of a listed building, no attempt was made to clean it of the thick coating of dirt, limewash and render that almost entirely obscured its surface. Nonetheless, enough of it could be seen to show that it was constructed of random coursed ragstone blocks up to 0.30m (12in) wide and 0.15m (6in) high, set in a hard mortar of coarse sand with

much lime; the gaps between the blocks were filled with small fragments of rag. Several Roman bricks were apparent in the small area visible. The top of the visible wall continues the curvature commenced by the springer, which faithfully reflects the position of the lost vault (Fig. 1). At the upper left, there is a patch of brick, which proved to be the blocking of an opening. Washing for photography revealed traces of a plaster coating, which survived particularly well around the springer. Its smooth finish, and the neat manner in which it abuts the springer, suggests that it was an original feature of the undercroft.

The springer

It was constructed of four blocks of Kentish ragstone; and has an elaborate form of five ribs of a quadripartite vault gradually developing from a point forming the bottom of the springer. The springer is elegantly 'waisted' before blooming out to form the vault. The stump of an iron fixture was found embedded between two of the blocks; it might perhaps have been a torch bracket.

Orientating the nineteenth century survey

By using both cartographic evidence and field-work, it was soon possible to tell to which side of the recorded undercroft the springer belongs. The 19th century survey shows a row of windows down one side of the undercroft; it was known from Ogilby and Morgan's map that an alley ran down one side of the undercroft (Fig. 3). As St. Mary Aldermary stood

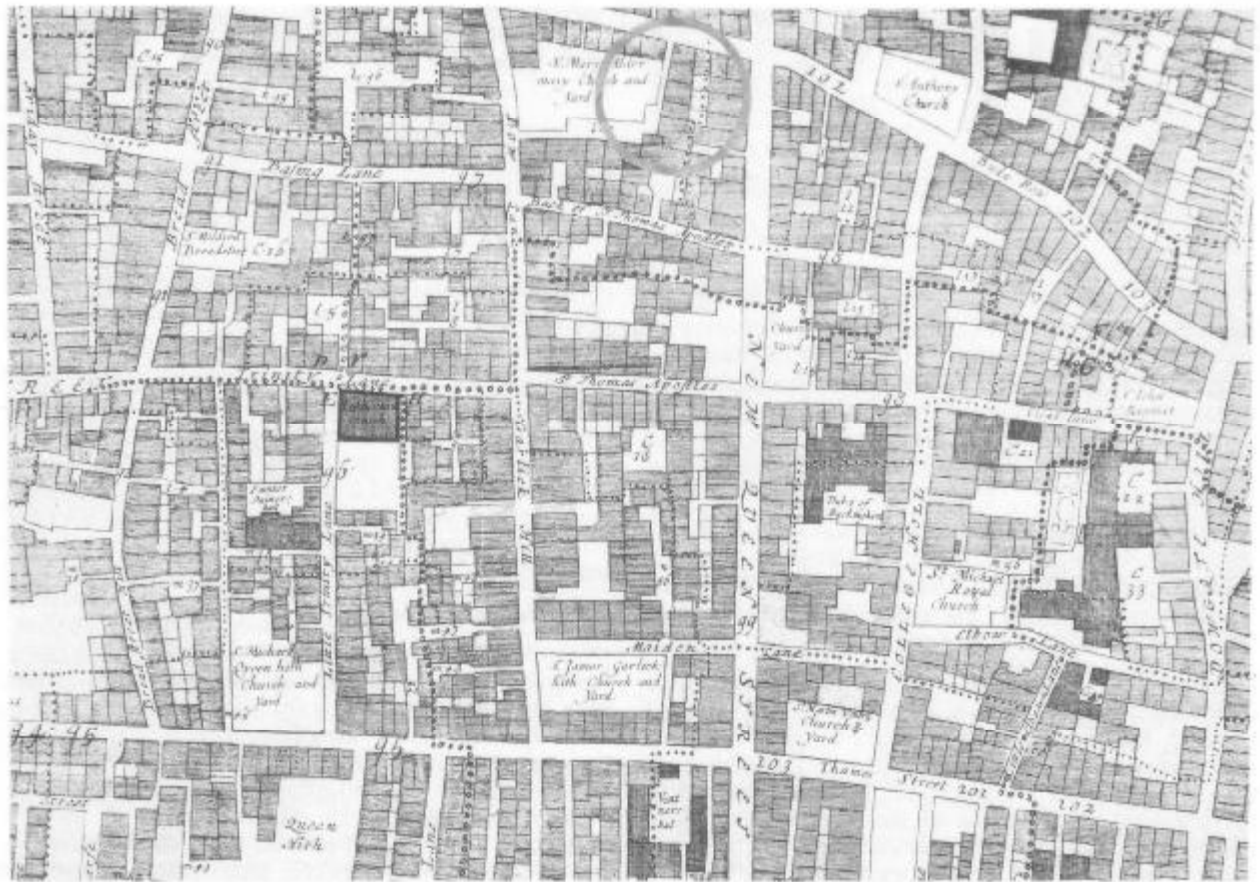


Fig. 3: the undercroft in relation to the 17th century city.

(and still stands) on the other side of the alley, the alley is at least as old as the undercroft. One could therefore expect to find the traces of windows in the surviving western side. That side of the undercroft (depicted with windows) could now be tentatively identified with the surviving side.

In order to relate the Georgian survey to the modern elevation (Fig. 1), it was necessary to redraw it at a scale of 1:50. It was then possible to reconstruct the elevation from the west side (the extant elevation being that of the east) from the plan; the relationship of old and new then became apparent (Figs. 1 and 2). The brick blocking in the visible fragment is exactly where a window would have been (although the dressed splay seems to have been removed or cut back). The large oblong recess is centred directly over the site of a springer. This configuration was probably caused by the demolition of the vault; this would have made a large ragged gap above the springer which the Victorian builders tidied up into a square recess. The second (nar-

rower) recess centres perfectly on the next window along; it has been bricked up to form a service duct.

Having established which side survives, the problem remained of establishing which bays were divided by the surviving corbel. To do this, it was first necessary to roughly relate the medieval street frontage to the modern surveyor's ground plan. It is fortunate that the church of St. Mary Aldermary is almost unchanged since the Fire of London, because by overlaying Ogilby and Morgan's map (Fig. 3) on the modern Ordnance Survey, it was possible to determine the position of the medieval Watling Street frontage (about 6m, 20ft, north of the modern one). If one therefore assumes the north side of the recorded undercroft wall to represent the medieval frontage, the 19th century plan can be positioned so that it projects the correct distance beyond the modern frontage (Fig. 4), and the surviving springer falls into its present position. It is then possible to relate the surviving remains to a reconstructed longitudinal section of the undercroft (Figs. 1, 2).♦

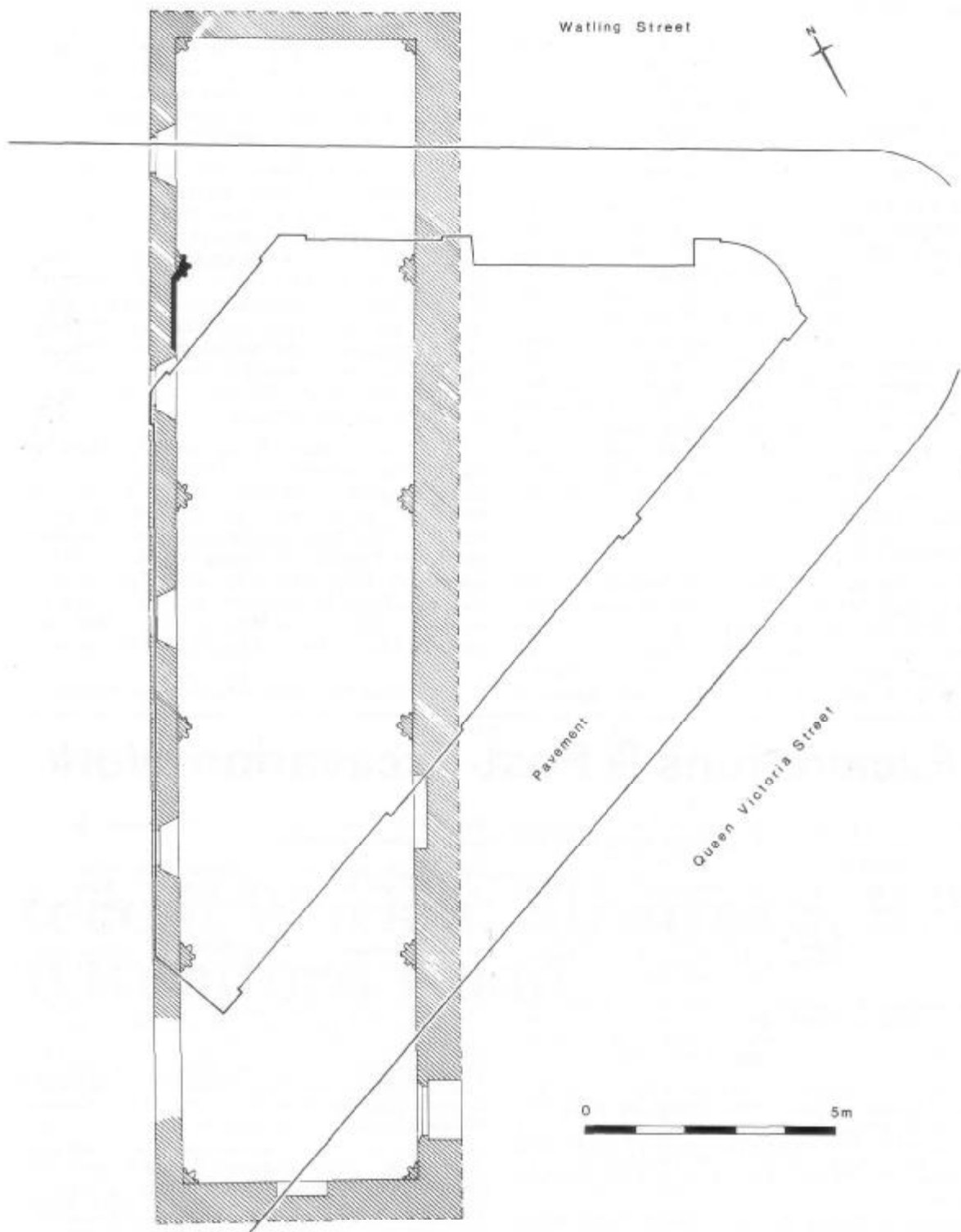


Fig. 4: the undercroft as recorded in the 19th century in relation to present-day London.

The size of the property

The 19th century survey makes it clear that the undercroft does not represent the complete area of the large property of which it was part. The undercroft was approached through two doors from the east, where the south-west corner of another chamber is represented, but whether this was another undercroft is impossible to tell.

Ogilby and Morgan's map of 1677 shows that no less than four separate properties were resting on the undercroft itself by this date. In 1677, the area to the east consisted of open yards belonging to brand new houses on the freshly laid out 'New Queen Street' (Fig. 3). The original outline of the property is hinted at by the behaviour of the parish boundary which separates these yards from the new houses. So it would appear that the medieval property originally occupied a plot 23m (75ft) long by c 13m (43ft) broad, but by 1677 this area was divided among 8 other properties. The property divisions on the Ogilby and Morgan map are to be "taken with a pinch of salt", but the general impression of intense subdivision is correct.

Conclusions

It not only proved possible to locate the 19th century survey but also to comment on its accuracy. The written measurements on the plan confirm that its regularity is genuine, and the manner in which extent and recorded features fit together suggest a high level of accuracy. However, it was apparent

that the curve of the vault on the surviving fragment of wall does not correspond with the curve recorded in the longitudinal section. In reality, the long ridge rib was probably at a higher level than the wall rib; Fig. 2 shows it reconstructed in this manner. This 'domed' vault would have been considerably stronger than a flat groined vault.

Figs. 2 and 4 demonstrate the possibility that much of the undercroft survives beneath Queen Victoria Street and Watling Street. The action of driving the new street through the city caused the partial destruction of the undercroft, but probably preserved much of it as well. When a building was designed for the awkward new triangular plot, the springer seems to have been deliberately preserved in a semi-circular void outside the external wall of the new basement, where it could originally be seen from the pavement. Only later was the void roofed in with reinforced concrete.

So far the undercroft can only be dated stylistically. The presence of doors with four-centred arches suggests a late date, but the hollow-chamfer vault ribs were used from the 14th to the 16th century. The large bosses at the intersections are paralleled by those at South Wingfield, where the undercroft dates from 1440-1459¹. The rib profile is well paralleled by those of the West Crypt of the nearby Guildhall, which dates from c 1430. A date range of 1400 - 1500 is suggested for the undercroft.

1. M. E. Wood *The English Medieval House* (1965) 90.

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, EC2Y 5HN (01-600 3699).

Croydon & District, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collection of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Mrs Muriel Shaw, 28 Lismore Road, South Croydon, CR2 7QA (01-688 2720).

Greater London (except north-east and south-east London), by Museum of London, Department of Greater London Archaeology. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to DGLA, Museum of London (01-600 3699 x241).

Local enquiries to:

North London: 3-7 Ray Street, London EC1R 3DJ (01-837 8363).
South-west London: St. Luke's House, Sandycroft Road, Kew, Surrey (01-940 5989).

Southwark and Lambeth: Port Medical Centre, English Grounds, Morgans Lane, London SE1 2HT (01-407 1258 or 1989).
West London: 273A Brentford High Street, Brentford, Middlesex (01-560 3880).

Hammersmith & Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from Fulham Palace. Tuesdays, 7.45 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham

Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, SW6 (01-731 4498).

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

North-east London, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Passmore Edwards Museum, Romford Road, E15 4LW (01-534 4545).

Surrey, by Surrey Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to David Bird, County Archaeological Officer, Planning Department, County Hall, Kingston, Surrey (01-541 8911).

Vauxhall Pottery, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society. Processing of excavated material continues three nights a week. Enquiries to S.L.A.S., c/o Cuming Museum, 155 Walworth Road, SE17 (01-703 3324).

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