

New Fresh Wharf: 2, The Saxon and Early Medieval Waterfronts

Photography by Trevor Hurst

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THE EXCAVATION of the Roman Waterfront was discussed in the first article on New Fresh Wharf in *the London Archaeologist*. Significant Saxon features were found in both Area II (New Fresh Wharf)² and Area III (St Magnus)³ excavated in 1974 and 1975 (fig. 1) with early Medieval features above.

The importance of the waterfront area was stressed in *The Future of London's Past*⁴ and although the river frontage of the Saxon and Medieval waterfronts was not established in either trench, so that direct evidence for "the commercial development of

London from the fifth to the eleventh centuries,"⁴ was slight, the structures recorded reflect a major area of activity down-stream of London Bridge in this period. No evidence for a pre-Norman bridge was found on the line suggested by Miss Honeybourne.

At the Custom House site, about 150m to the east, a collapsed beam of the Roman waterfront was found within late 4th century deposits⁵ but at New Fresh Wharf the silting containing the collapsed waterfront beams is provisionally dated to the seventh to ninth centuries. The waterfront could have fallen in

1. John Schofield, Louise Miller "New Fresh Wharf: 1, The Roman Waterfront," *London Archaeol* 2 No. 15. See fig. 1 for location of site.
2. Supervised by Gerald Clewley.
3. Supervised by John Schofield.
4. Martin Biddle and Daphne Hudson with Carolyn

Heighway, *The Future of London's Past: a survey of the archaeological implications of planning and development in the nation's capital* (Worcester 1973) Rescue publication No. 4.

5. Tim Tatton-Brown, "Excavations at the Custom House Site, City of London, 1973," *Trans. London and Middlesex Archaeol Soc.* 25 (1974) 148-149, fig. 25.

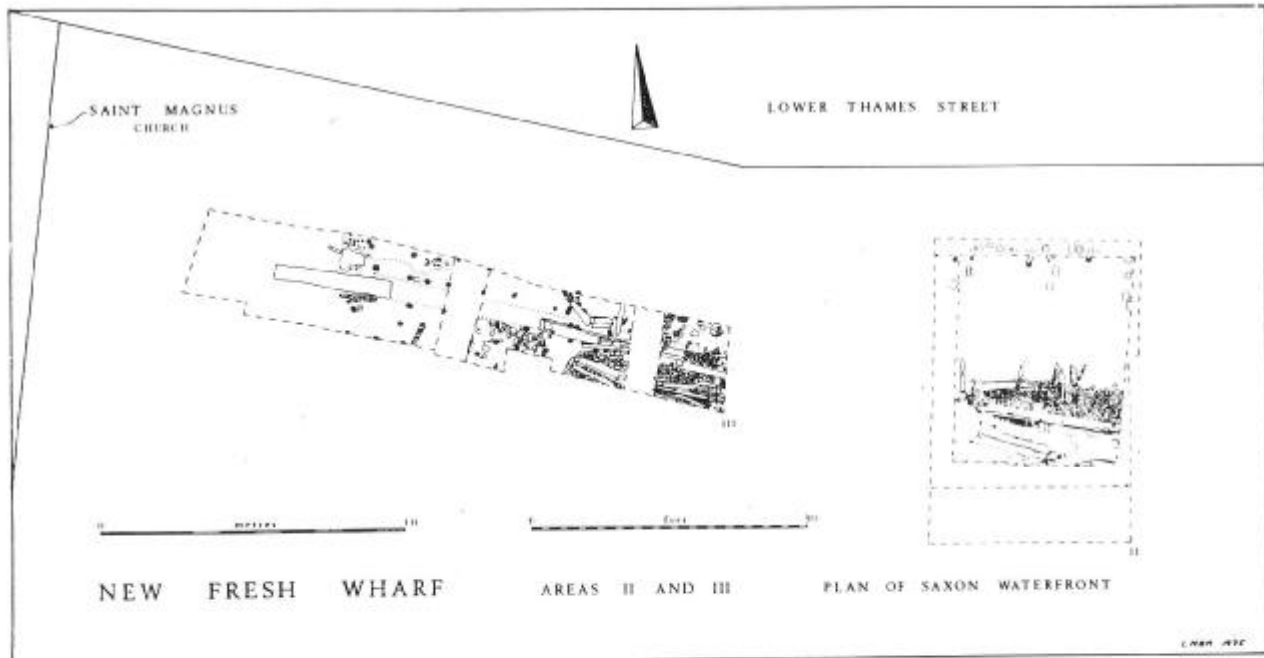


Fig. 1: Plan of Saxon waterfront, Areas II and III.



Fig. 2: Saxon boat.

to disrepair gradually with some part of it possibly still in use in the early Saxon period, but it was certainly systematically dismantled between the late seventh and early tenth centuries, with the pottery dates being supported by C14 results. The timber baulks of the Roman waterfront were sawn up (marks of the saw were still visible) and some of them were removed leaving the remainder in a state of collapse and allowing river silt to enter the box structures, leaving a deposit of gravel and sand about 1.00m thick at a level of +0.80m O.D. just south of the present Lower Thames Street and sloping down to -0.65m at the southern limit of the excavation.

On this gravel surface in Area II, a bank of rubble with Roman tile and building material and large lumps of chalk and Kentish ragstone, was raised to a height of O.D. covering the upper surviving beam of the Roman waterfront. The rubble was packed around 14 logs of silver birch which were laid horizontally north-south, their northern ends

going into the rubble underneath a re-used Roman beam, over 4.40m long, which revetted the upper part of the bank. A C14 date from the logs was 760 ± 100 ; they supported layers of strakes from a clinker built boat and other planks which formed a flat surface (fig. 2). The whole structure lay about 7.25m south of the present Lower Thames Street and only the remains of two rows of posts, one just behind the collapsed Roman waterfront and the other row 3.60m to the north, suggests that there was any structure behind the bank on the landward side. On the river side the bank extended south for 2.60m without the limit being established in the trench.

In Area III the first phase of activity after the robbing of the Roman waterfront, dated to 870 ± 60 , consisted of the erection of a large number of vertical posts: 47 were found in the excavation but they clearly extended both north and south (fig. 3;

6. Ref. Birm. 548.

7. Ref. Harwell 1244.

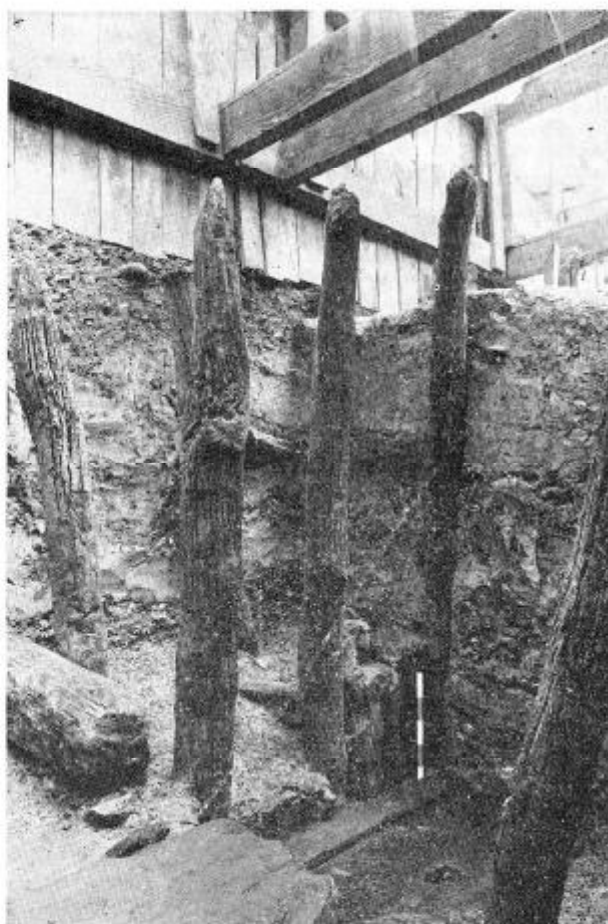


Fig. 3: Saxon timbers, area III.

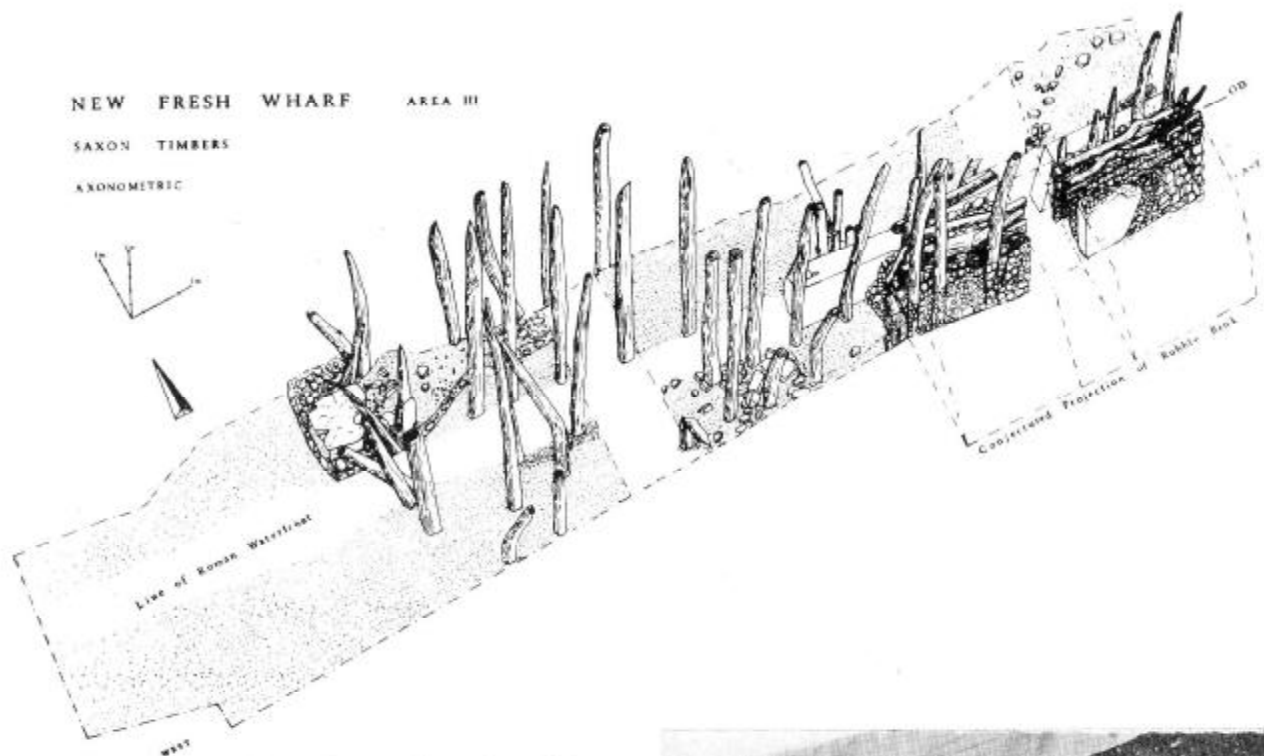


Fig. 4: Axonometric of Saxon timbers, Area III.

fig. 4). Five irregularly spaced rows were found, ending about 5.20m from the west—or Bridge—end of the trench. There was no evidence to suggest that these were the supporting posts of a superstructure and the intervals between the posts were irregular, between 0.20 to 1.70m, so that a superstructure is hard to conceive. In section they were 0.19m maximum and although 15 of them were crushed and bent into the south baulk of the excavation, the remainder were pointed and projected straight up out of the contemporary strand for a maximum height of 2.50m at + 1.75m O.D.

Towards the west end of the trench a mixture of rubble, mortar and clay was laid over the silty strand consolidating the surface, extending to the north side of the Roman sill beam at that end of the trench and levelled at -0.34m O.D. It incorporated a large boulder 0.70 x 0.85m and 0.20m thick. West of the boulder the silt was disturbed and it is not known if there were any features there (fig. 4).

At the east end of Area III, possibly later than the above features, a rubble bank, of Roman tile and building material, Kentish rag, and small pebbles was built round the easternmost closely spaced rows of vertical posts (fig. 4: fig 5). It was 1.50m north south stacked against the three surviving beams of the Roman waterfront and extending 5.00m to the west where it was revetted by a tree trunk. It



Fig. 5: Saxon timbers and rubble bank, Area III.

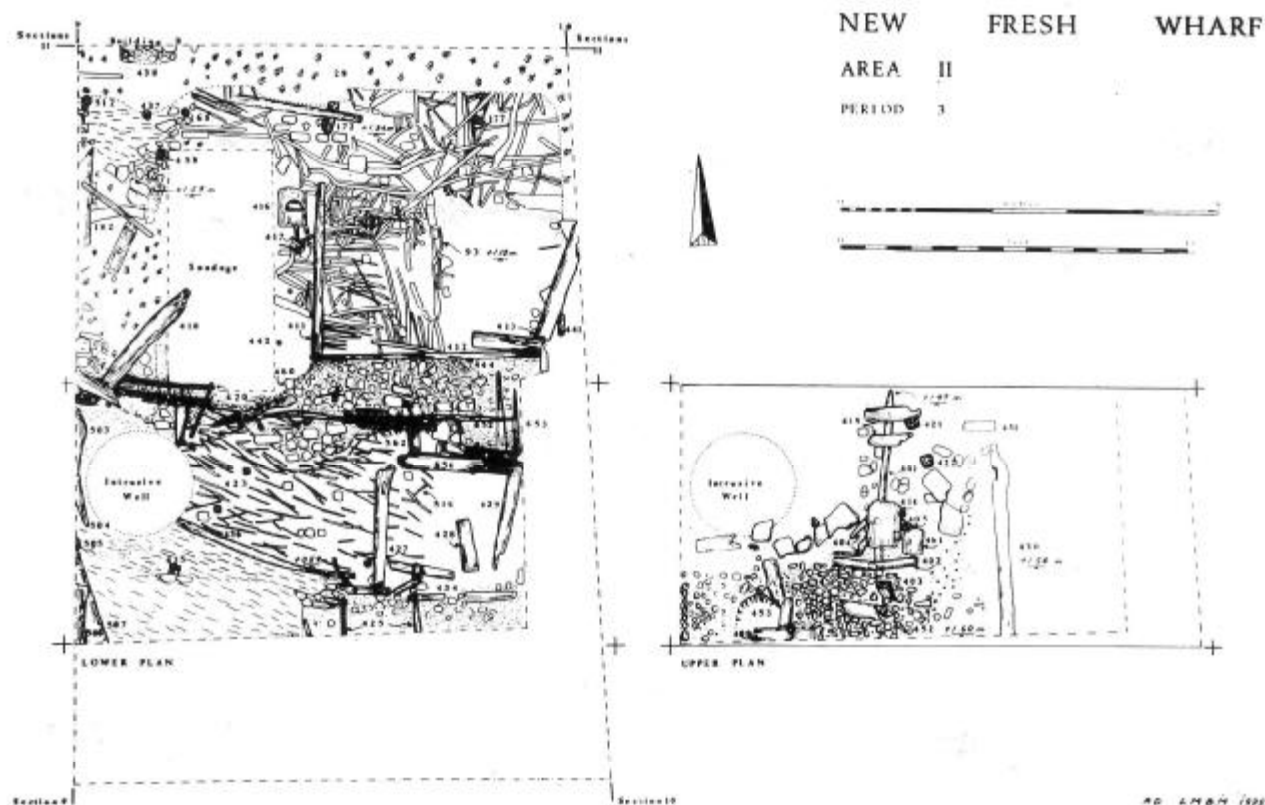


Fig. 6. Plan of base of early Medieval embankment with inset showing the upper surface, Area II.

was 1.20m high reaching a level of O.D. and was revetted internally by logs laid east-west about 2.00m long piled one above the other. The bank was also covered by similar logs which were piled between the vertical posts (fig. 4). A large boulder over 1.23 x 0.70m was incorporated, making a simple but solid bank. It was probably a continuation of the bank found in Area II, thus making a total of 19m of Saxon embankment. Small posts were found driven against or into the Roman waterfront just north of the rubble bank in Area III, being about 1.38m high and reaching 0.28m O.D. This line of posts turned northwards at the point where the second beam of the Roman waterfront had been robbed (fig. 3).

In both trenches the rubble bank and the posts to the north seem to indicate some kind of jetty structure going out into the river closely associated with the Roman waterfront which survived up to three beam high only when found with the bank. Elsewhere to the west of the bank the Roman waterfront was robbed down to the sill beam, but it was removed completely at the west end of the excavation where tenth century silting covered its pos-

ition. There were no vertical posts at this end of the trench either.

The multi-rows of posts seem to bear some similarity to the Palisade at Haitabu on the Baltic⁸ where an arc of posts extended out into Hedeby Noor to protect the Viking harbour. It is possible the posts at New Fresh Wharf were either Saxon or Danish defences in the vicinity of London Bridge in the 9th or 10th centuries, and could be associated with Alfred's restoration of the City.

Towards the end of the Saxon period a process of land reclamation began which led to a waterfront built out into the river by the 12th century and substantial property development of the wharfside (to be discussed in a later article). The first stage consisted of a base made up of either cut branches (Area II fig. 6; fig. 7) or worked timbers (Area III fig. 8; fig. 9) apparently held in place by the posts of the previous period. This was between 0.30m and 0.60m thick reaching a height of +1.10m O.D. to the north of Area II and about +0.80m O.D. over the line of the former waterfront. The timbers were surrounded

8. Kurt Schietzel, "Neue Ausgrabungen in Haitabu," *Prähistorische Zeitschrift* 43-44 (1965-6), 303-7.

by clay and anchored with rubble.

In Area II layers of clay with bands of gravel, charcoal and mortar were dumped on the branches until a bank was formed about 1.00m high, reaching 2.06m O.D. to the north. The stub of a ragstone wall and rubble seemed to divide this dump of clay from another dump of clean blue grey clay to the west. In Area III a line of eleven posts ran north south across the trench whose function seems to have been support for a pile of cut branches and planks which were rammed in between them forming a "fence" about 1.00m high and 1.00m wide (fig. 9) which marked the later line of Rothersgate, a property division south of Thames Street, and a boundary between two parishes by the late 13th century⁹. On the east side of this "fence" dumping on the timber base was mainly organic while that on the west was mainly clay. This dumping perhaps reflects the prop-

9. Information from Tony Dyson.

erty first mentioned in a lease of two wharves at Rothersgate by the Prior of Holy Trinity Aldgate to a certain Brounlocus in 1147-67.

The layers of dumping up to 1.00m high seem to have been held in place by an arrangement of logs, planks and posts into box-like formations (fig. 7) or by planks placed along the tip line of a layer and held in place by posts. These timbers were not jointed together and a rare instance of a morticed timber being used consisted of a wedge-sectioned plank with a mortice 0.12 x 0.18m cut through it but with two round sectioned stakes in the mortice hole. This is but one example of a number of re-used timbers with joints or pegholes cut in them, making rather poor specimens of Anglo-Saxon carpentry.

In Area II (fig. 7) there was a line of short stakes driven into a pile of rubble which ran east west across the trench 1.20m wide with a collection of re-used timbers, logs, branches and planks twined



Fig. 7. Base of early medieval embankment, Area II.

around the stakes to form "hurdling" dividing the clay dumping from organic dumping to the south. The latter may not have been contemporary with the clay on present provisional pottery dating, and with the lower levels of the clay stretching south under the hurdling, apparently coming to an end at a pile of rubble and stakes at the southern limit of the trench, the clay dumping itself closely resembles the Anglo-Danish embankment at York, dated to the 10th to 11th century¹⁰.

The organic dumping to the south in Area II and both the groups of dumping in Area III are provisionally dated to the early 12th century and are all levelled at +1.50m O.D. with the ground rising to +2.06m O.D. to the north. There was a cobbled sur-

face in Area II at 1.50m O.D. and traces of cobbles on the surface of the east part of Area III. This seems to have been the surface on top of the back-fill behind a vertical timber revetment such as that indicated at Seal House¹¹ or at least an extension of the waterfront out into the river probably related to the effect of tides on the northern river bank¹² as well as commercial activity. Foreign trade was represented by Pingsdorf pottery and later Andenne ware, but these were all in either dumps or silting. There were no other significant finds from this period but the Saxon rubble waterfront and its development must reflect the strategic and commercial importance of the Area between London Bridge and Billingsgate in the 9th-12th centuries.

10. Katherine M. Richardson, "Excavations in Hungate York," *Arch. Journal* 116 (1959) 51-114.

11. John Schofield, report forthcoming, and *Current Archaeology*, 5, no. 2 (1975), 53-7.

12. George Willcox, "Problems and conclusions related to the history of the Thames in London region," *Trans. London and Middlesex Arch. Soc.* 26 (1975) 290-1.



Fig. 8. Base of early medieval embankment, Area III.

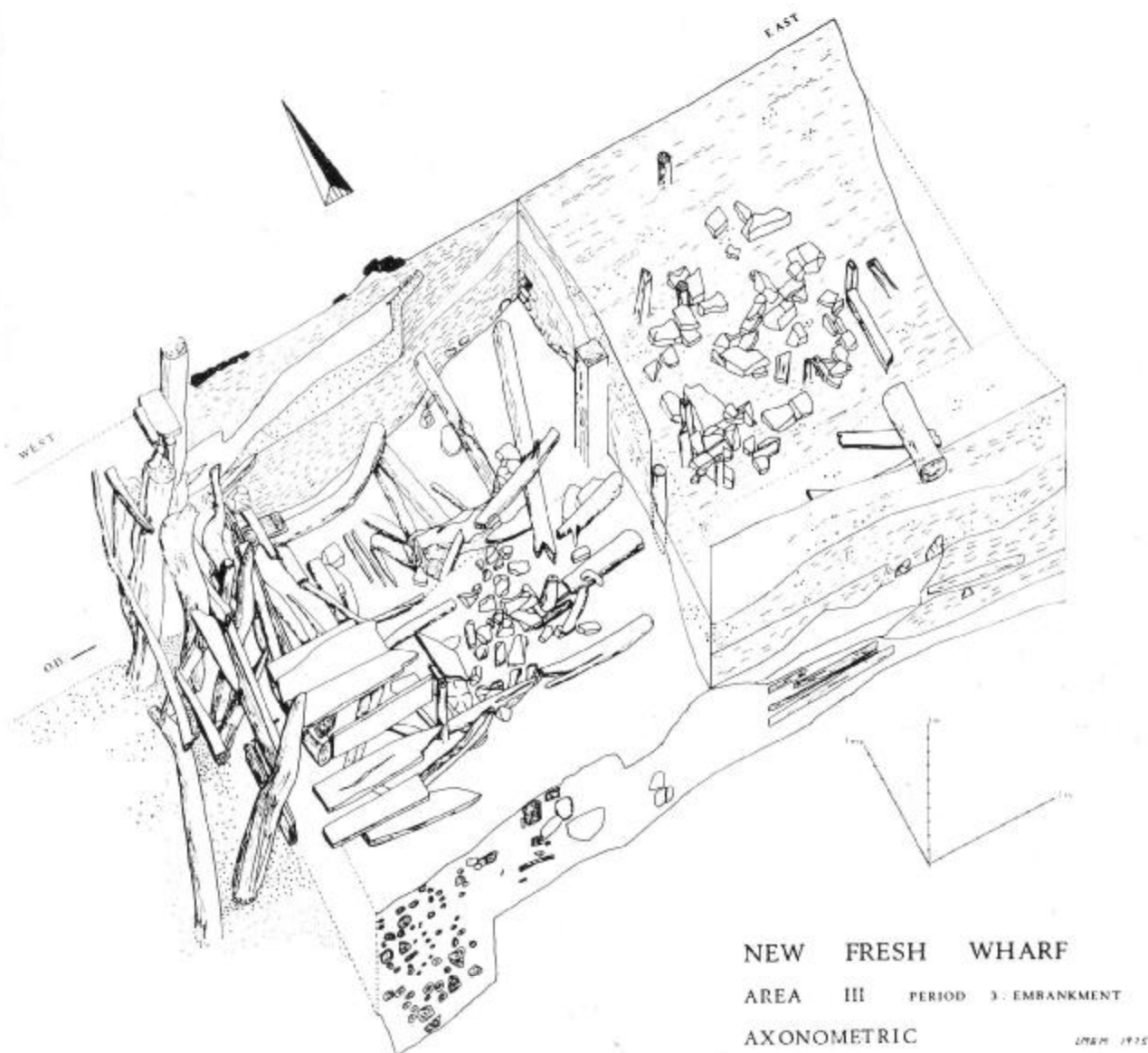


Fig. 9. Axonometric of early medieval embankment, Area III.

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Friends' Burial Ground, Staines. TQ 0370 7152. London & Middlesex Archaeological Society. (K. R. Crouch). See *L.A.* 2, no. 14, 375. Evidence of intensive occupation in late 1st-2nd c. Site abandoned in early 3rd c. due to flooding. Some reoccupation in 4th c., and abandoned in early 3rd c due to flooding. Some reoccupation in 4th c., and evidence of 5th-6th c. habitation. Used for agriculture from late Saxon onwards.

National Westminster Bank, Staines. TQ 0358 7159. L.A.M.A.S. (K. R. Crouch and P. Jones). Evidence for two possible phases (1st and 2nd c.) of substantial timber-framed buildings. A number of gravel and clay surfaces uncovered, a mid 2nd c. well, and a large E-W ditch running behind the timber buildings. Little evidence for Saxon or medieval occupation.

Can you help?

RUSSELL Davies of the Winchester Research Unit is currently involved in an examination of bell-mould material retrieved from a series of bell-pits excavated on Cathedral Green, Winchester; and also mould material (almost certainly from a cauldron, skillet or mortar-founding process) retrieved from a pit in the Assize Courts site (also in Winchester).

He is anxious to view any similar material (particularly cauldron mould) excavated at other sites in Britain, and would appreciate any information from readers which would allow him to do this. Replies by letter to 13 Parchment Street, Winchester, Hants, or telephone to Winchester 65183 in the mornings, before May 1st, 1977, would be appreciated.