

Fig. 1: The mid-2nd century mosaic pavement with central panel of a cantharus, during cleaning.

(Photo: John Bailey)

The Milk Street Excavation

STEVE ROSKAMS

THE MILK STREET EXCAVATION was a rescue operation which took place in the first two thirds of 1977¹. The site is situated in the western part of the City, just north of Cheapside. It lies on the eastern side of Milk Street with the Cheapside bath house to the south.

Originally the work of the Department of Urban Archaeology here was envisaged as a fairly

short term operation. The expected survival, based on Biddle's projections², implied that only the earliest part of the Roman sequence would remain. Consequently the research questions initially posed of the site were phrased in those terms. It was decided to confirm the existence and alignment of the North-South street encountered by Nick Farrant in a previous excavation further

1. Supervised by A. Boddington, S. Roskams and J. Schofield.

2. M. Biddle and D. Hudson, *The Future of London's Past* (1973), Map 6, Fig. 5.



Fig. 2: The series of cuts into the natural brickearth representing Period I (later intrusions have been backfilled with dark soil).

(Photo: Trevor Hurs.)

north³, to look for an East-West street which could be postulated as crossing the site (in fact found not to exist) and excavate as much of the early Roman structural sequence bounded by these possible streets as time and limited resources allowed. In the event, the amount of archaeology surviving on the site required a re-assessment of priorities. Horizontal levels right up to the 10th century, constituting 2m (6ft 7in) of stratigraphy, were found below basement level. This situation meant changes both to the tactics of excavation on the site and, indeed, perhaps to the strategy of excavations in the city as a whole. As such it demonstrates the fluidity which should be incorporated into any approach to archaeological planning of priorities.

In strategic terms, the existence of deep coherent sequences in the centre of the city will, perhaps, allow a change of emphasis from defensive sequences and other sites at the fringes of the city—the ob-

jects of some attention in the past—to consideration of domestic and commercial premises of the Milk Street variety which must have covered the greater part of the city. Another aspect of the site is its demonstrating the viability of achieving a variety of objectives of different periods simultaneously on the same site. Lastly it indicates that excavations of less than a year's duration provide something between the long term, research-speed dig and the salvage operation of several weeks. The former come with their inherent problems of inertia and obscuring of specific objectives over time; the latter seldom allow the use of excavation techniques sophisticated enough to match those of the post-excavation work for which they provide the material basis.

With the increased survival, the Saxon levels were given priority over the Roman. Hence it was only possible to dig the latter in one small area. In any case they were extremely cut away in many parts of the site (up to 50 per cent). The best preserved area was therefore selected for excavation. An outline of

3. N. Farrant, "A Roman Crossroads in the City", *London Archaeol.* 2, No. 12, 300-3.

the sequence derived is set out below (the post-Roman periods will be discussed in a second article for *the London Archaeologist*).

To cover the loss of information due to partial excavation of the earliest levels, the sections of earlier stratigraphy provided by emptying later intrusions were studied and drawn to provide correlations right across the site. Without any excavation, comparisons would have had little value. However, interpretation of sections in other areas based on sound working knowledge of the excavated sequence in one part meant that their information value was greatly increased. Comparisons of sections from different parts of the site show the close connections which can be made, due to major horizons tying these sequences together. One would not expect to understand all of the structures completely in

plan without total excavation, even if then given the amount of disturbance. However a good idea of their structural nature, alignment, date etc. could be derived.

Period 1

The natural stratigraphy of the site is London clay below Thames gravel capped with 0.5m (1ft 8in) of brickearth. Rootlets within the brickearth suggested turf or undergrowth above it in its original state. However no sign of this was seen in excavation, perhaps implying extensive deturfing to prepare the area for occupation.

The first signs of that occupation were a series of cuts into the brickearth. The profile, plan and regularity of depth of these show that they represent a series of beam slots for massive timber buildings

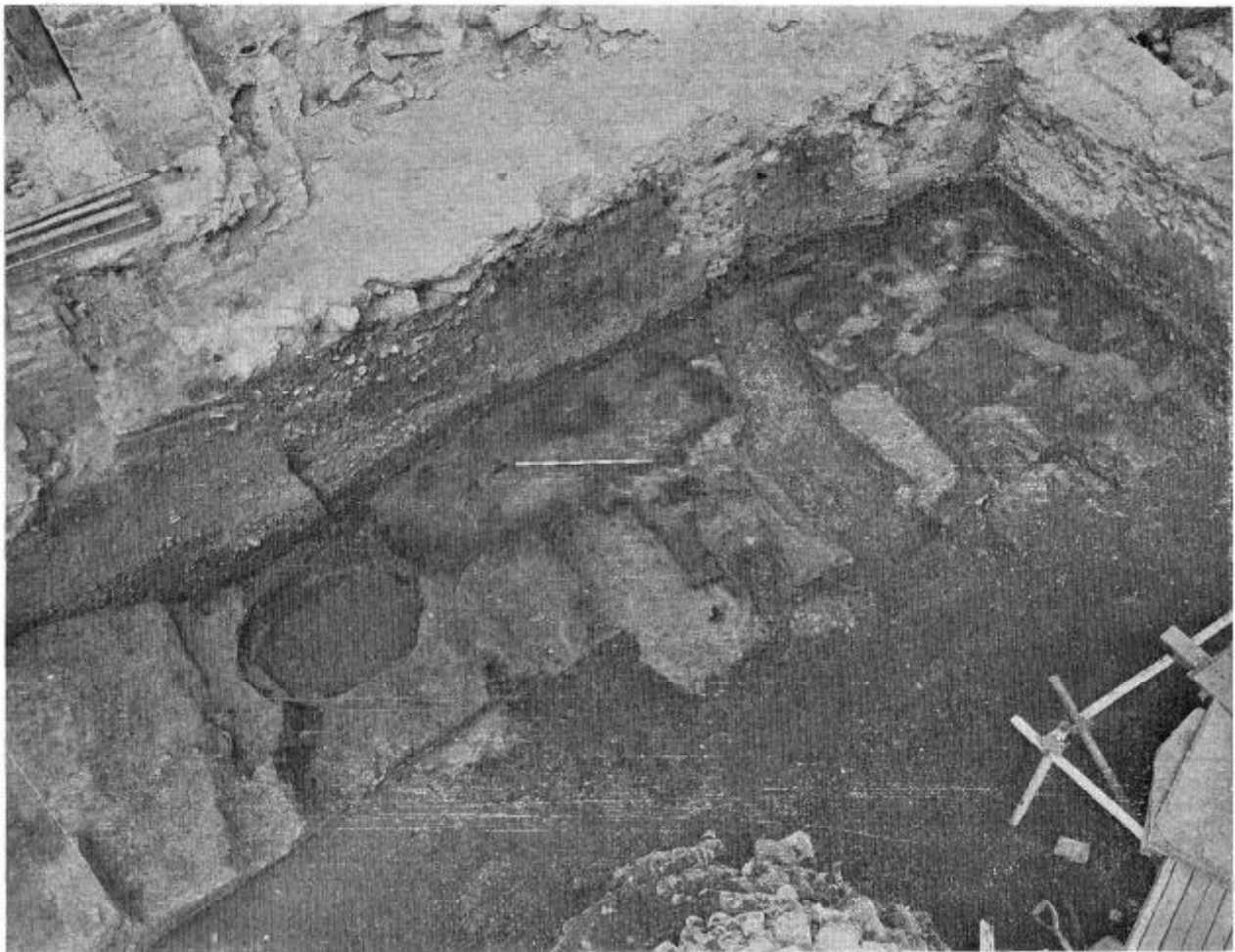


Fig. 3: The excavated part of the western range of the Period II building, flanked by a gravelled area further west.

(Photo: John Bailey)

(Fig. 2). No coherent plan could be recovered, though they must represent at least two phases of building. No horizontal levels could be associated with these cuts. Their alignment is specifically not that of the known Roman street grid, which they presumably antedate. Subsequently all were backfilled with re-deposited brickearth, which sealed the whole area and implied systematic dismantling after disuse. Material from the backfill is consistently of a late Neronian date. One therefore has large wooden buildings of c70 AD, for which the area has been extensively prepared, which pre-date the setting out of regular properties and streets, and which are properly taken down at the end of their life. This casts an interesting light on the initial development of this part of the western hill of the city. Dare one suggest a military context for such structures?

Period II

On top of the sealing layer were floors of the western rooms of two buildings (Fig. 3). The main body of both underlay unexcavated strata to the east. However, within the excavated area an *opus signinum* floor of the southernmost was seen (Fig. 4), bounded by brickearth sills with painted plaster on their internal faces (Fig. 5). The unexcavated evidence suggests a western and northern range of rooms around a gravelled area to the south-east, of which part of the western range was excavated.

The northern property was similarly sophisticated. It had traces of a tessellated floor (Fig. 6), with painted wall plaster in its destruction debris (Fig. 7). Its superstructure of timber was set in beam slots, probably below infill of mud bricks. These high quality buildings have a Flavian date and align with the street grid, suggesting that the latter accompanies their setting out. One assumes that the gravelled lane

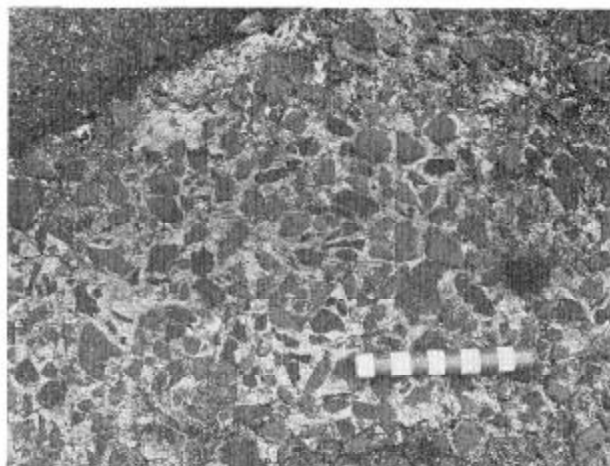


Fig. 4: A detail of the concrete floor of a Period II building.

(Photo: John Bailey)



Fig. 5: A Period II brickearth sill with painted plaster facing on its internal face.

(Photo: John Bailey)

which divided the two ran across to the contemporary North-South street which bounds site in the east, of which more later. Traces of plank-lined drains were found along side the western edge of both buildings, probably leading into the known street-side drain associated with the thoroughfare bounding them in the East. High class structures on even the western hill of the town at such an early date are a tribute to the wealth of London at a time when it was economically only really starting to take off again after the revolt of Boudicca.

Period III

Towards the end of the first century the whole of the site was sealed in by an extensive foundational slab of brickearth. Up to 0.3 m (1ft 1in) deep in places, it levelled the whole of the area to within 10cms and prepared it for the subsequent period of usage. Much of the area seems to have been used as a yard with various rubbish tips accumulating on its surface. The only sign of structural occupation was in the extreme west of the sites, where fragmentary wooden buildings — sheds or lean-to's with clay floors — were constructed. They are probably associated with a more substantial building further west.

Excavation Round-up 1978

Directors, secretaries and other people concerned with excavation carried out during 1978 are asked to send a short report to the co-ordinator, Beth Richardson, D.U.A., 71 Basinghall Street, London, E.C.2. (01-606 1933) for inclusion in the Spring issue. It would be appreciated if these could be modelled on the ones in Vol. 3 No 6 and if they could be sent in by 31 December.

outside the excavated area. In fact, there is a marked change between this and the previous period, in that the Trajanic and later structures have a focus to the West, rather than a frontage on the known street to the East: this may lead one to postulate a North-South street to the west although the nearest one for which there is evidence lies over 100m (110 yards) away from the site, so it would have to be an intermediate street that was influencing the structural sequence in this way.

The brickearth preparation of the area is interesting in its extensiveness. It transcends property boundaries of the previous period and implies development of the whole of this part of the insula. Either large scale private or possibly even civic development might be suggested.

Period IV

Early in the second century this process was repeated, with a new brickearth foundation running across the whole area. Again, the only structures were unsubstantial, of timber, and lay on the west of the site (Fig. 9). These were completely destroyed in a fire of c130 AD which probably affects the whole of this area, since mention is made of a similar



Fig. 6: A surviving fragment of tessellated pavement in the Northern Period II building bounded by beam slots with traces of a parallel plank-lined drain in the foreground.

(Photo: John Bailey)

situation on many of the sites in the vicinity⁴. It is tempting to see this as an instance of the Hadrianic fire (probably accidental) which is postulated as sweeping across London at this time, for which there is a sound basis in the north-west part of the city at least.

4. R. Merrifield, *The Roman City of London* (1965), Sites 43, 47, 53 *et al.*

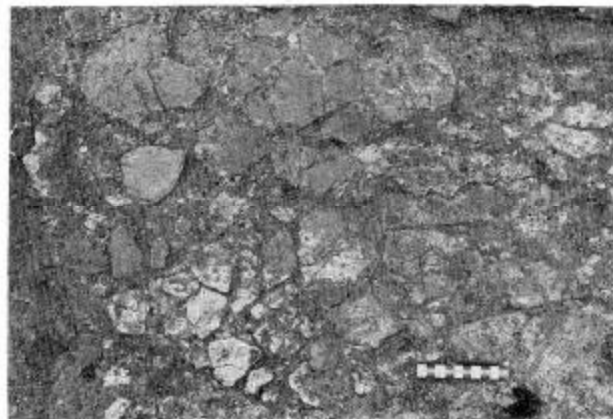


Fig. 7: Collapsed painted wall plaster in the destruction debris of a Period II building.

(Photo: John Bailey)

Period V

The red daub destruction debris of the conflagration was cut by a series of at least eight slots. These are obviously structural in intent, being for a massive sleeper-beam building. However no surfaces were associated with its use. The high amount of re-deposited destruction debris backfilling the slots and marking the building's disuse implies that this material was extensively available for such purposes. For these two reasons, one might say that it was in use for only a limited period of time, perhaps as a short-term solution to problems created by the complete devastation which immediately preceded it.

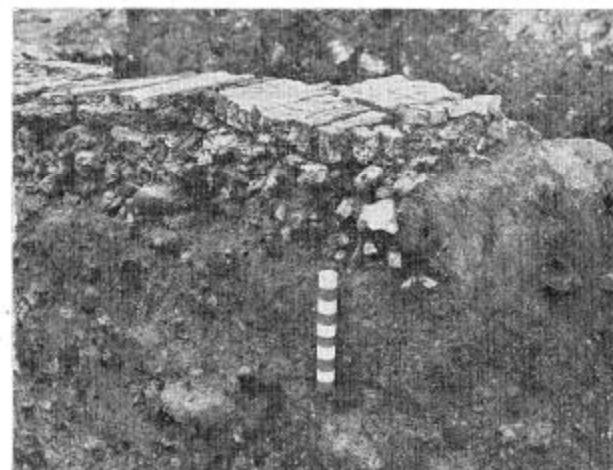


Fig. 8: Traces of the brickearth sill abutting the gravel make-up for the mosaic pavement which it bounded in the north (looking west).

(Photo: John Bailey)

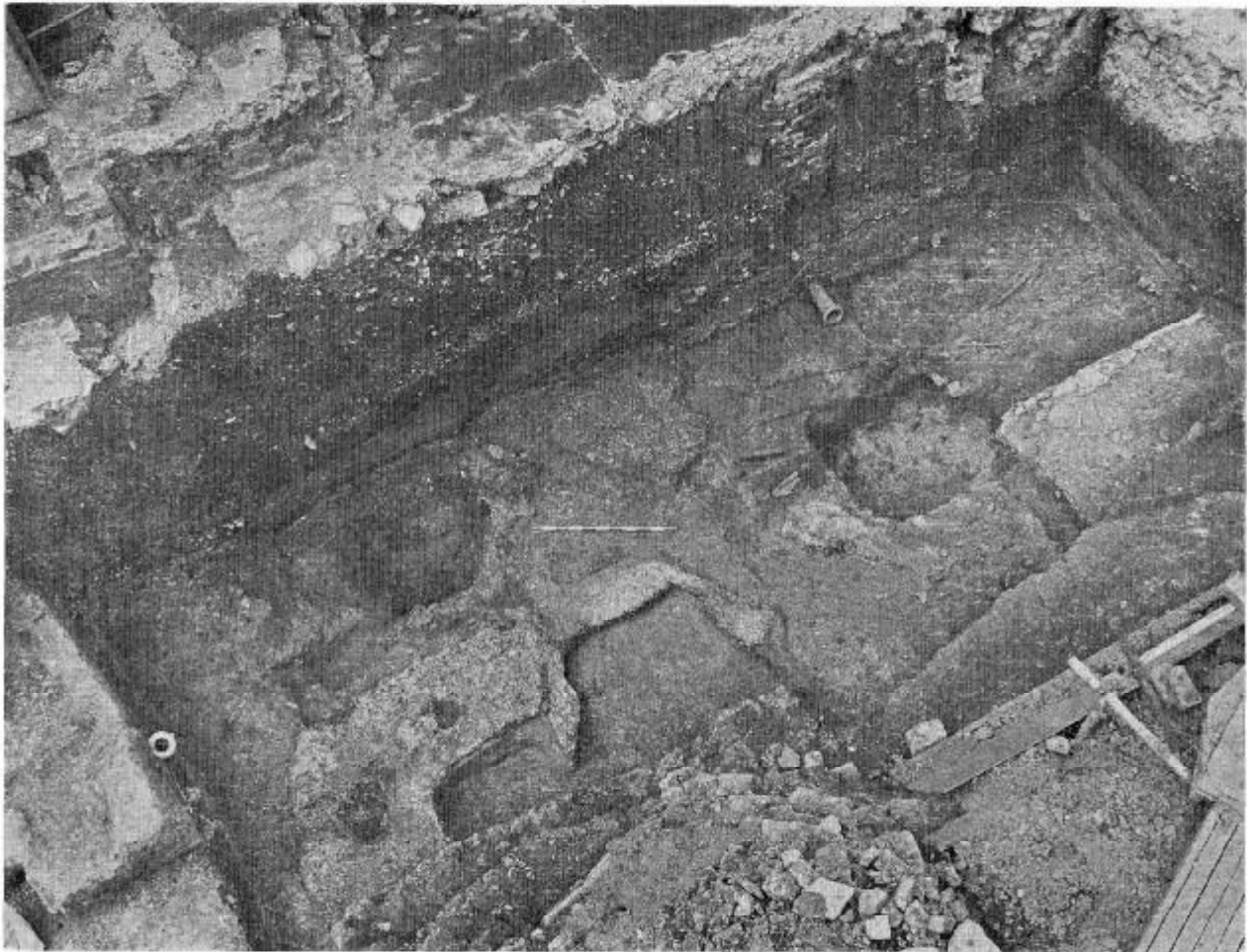


Fig. 9: Scorched occupation layers immediately below the Hadrianic fire.

(Photo: John Bailey)

Period VI

In the Antonine period, a good quality wooden structure was constructed above the redeposited daub in the western part of the site. A mosaic pavement with central panel of a cantharus, probably opening out further south into other rooms, was found (see Fig. 1). Surrounded by sills of brickearth as a base for a wooden superstructure (Fig. 8), it was edged with quarter-round moulding of pink concrete: all in all, a high class structure, albeit timber. It was flanked in the north by gravels, cut by post holes for various installations in the external area and by a clay-lined pit, probably a well. The building was systematically dismantled at the end of the second century, thus marking the end of the Roman structural sequence. (The implications of this will be discussed in the second article.)

The Streets

With the exception of the original period, all structures described above aligned with the Roman street found at the eastern limit of the site. It had at least 16 metallings, mostly of rammed gravel, though several were rather more substantial. On its western side, it was flanked by a series of drainage ditches.

As previously stated, it aligned with the structural sequence from the Flavian period onwards. The street is part of a grid running north from Cheapside over the whole of this area. One therefore assumes that the thoroughfares, property boundaries, etc. in the vicinity were all set out before the end of the first century. This has particular implications for the second century Cripplegate fort, which can now be shown to be fitting in with a pre-existing grid, rather than dictating to it. One wonders what

previous structures, if any, in the area had to be removed to make way for the new military headquarters.⁵

A second aspect of the street is the height to which its metallings accumulated — at least two metres (6ft. 7in.). None show any distinctive need of successive replacement due to wear. It could be that the influence of a tributary of the Walbrook to the north-east required continual raising of levels. However, such accumulation of metallings occur elsewhere, where local conditions do not allow this answer. A more inviting, general explanation might be that of the need to keep pace with rises in the structural sequence flanking it. This can be shown to rise one metre in the first 100 years. If so, it poses interesting questions as to the relationship between civic authorities, presumably organis-

ing the street system, and the private, albeit much-propertyed, developer. It would require some considerable co-operation between the two.

A third facet of the street sequence is the length of time for which it exerts an influence. It probably continued as a thoroughfare until at least the 9th century. But even after that, the parish and ward boundaries reproduced its line, implying a continuing influence in the 12th century and beyond, a characteristic of course of many present day streets in the city which have Roman forerunners.

A full structural report on the above sequence has now been completed, though publication must await the corresponding detailed work on the finds from the site.

5. W. F. Grimes, *The Excavation of Roman and Medieval London* (1968), 32 and 35.

Ralph Merrifield retires

RALPH MERRIFIELD has devoted much of his working life, and a good deal of his spare-time as well, to London archaeology. His professional abilities, as a curator and communicator, are demonstrated, if anonymously, by his most recent conceptions, the displays in the Prehistoric and Roman galleries of the Museum of London. To many he is best known through his books and articles. His main passion has of course been *Londinium* and *The Roman City of London* (1965) remains the most authoritative account of London under Roman rule. His more general works include *Roman London* (1969), a description of the hinterland as well as the City, while *The Archaeology of London* (1973) examines the London region from the Palaeolithic to the Saxon periods.

He has long been aware of how inadequate, for purposes of historical synthesis, the information at our disposal has been. In the *Roman City of London* he wrote:

"In many respects the history of archaeology in the City of London recalls the story of the Sibylline Books. Knowledge is offered to each generation at a price — and is destroyed when the price is not paid. The price rises for each generation . . . and the remaining store of information diminishes."

It is not surprising therefore that he has been at the forefront of the fight to obtain adequate resources for archaeological research. In the 1960's—

not without opposition — he helped consistently to keep rescue archaeology alive in the City, providing much support for Peter Marsden's endeavours, and he later participated in the efforts which led to the establishment of the Department of Urban Archaeology at the Guildhall Museum in 1973. But his campaigning has not been confined to the City. He was one of the leading advocates for the employment of a full-time team in Southwark — London's first, set up in 1972 — and he played an important part in the negotiation which led to the creation of L.A.M.A.S.'s Inner London Archaeological Unit in 1974.

Though he would never consider himself a digger he has never been remote from those in the field. He has always been keen to visit sites during their excavation and his scholarly interest and enthusiasm has encouraged many workers, both amateur and professional, in their efforts to obtain greater knowledge of London's past.

It seems quite inconceivable that his retirement from the post of Deputy Director at the Museum will result in much diminution of his involvement with London's archaeology. He is already involved in new programmes of lecturing and writing, and those numerous and time-consuming, but essential, it is good to know that he intends to continue on archaeological committees, which he has served so well in the past.