



Fig. 1: Early medieval stone house from the north.

(Photo: John Bailey)

The Milk Street Excavation: Part 2

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THIS SECOND PART of the interim report on the excavations at Milk Street in 1976/8¹ covers the late-Roman to early medieval sequence and hopes to show how this excavation poses some new questions about the growth of London in the post-Roman period.

1. By the Department of Urban Archaeology, Museum of London. Andy Boddington supervised the site in the opening stages. For the first part of the interim, see *L.A.* Vol. 3 No. 8, 199-204.

A major aspect of the Milk Street site was that of the dark earth. In most places it lay directly on top of the Antonine levels, and was up to one metre (over 3ft) deep (see Fig. 2). Such an horizon is known from various sites within the city, and indeed from other Roman towns in Britain, and in contexts outside this country. It was necessary to know how it got there, whether it was all one layer, what it was used for once deposited, and the period of its use. The best preserved area was chosen for close



Fig. 2: A typical Milk Street section, showing
A: fragmentary wooden structure of 10th-11th
century date
B: dark earth
C: Antonine levels

(Photo: John Bailey)

examination, which coincided with that of the excavated Roman sequence so that the relation between the two could be examined.

Seen in section, the deposit appeared to be one thick layer. It was excavated in a series of spits, with plans drawn at 5cm intervals and finds kept according to metre grid squares. This will hopefully allow any stratigraphy within it to be reconstructed retrospectively, perhaps with the use of a computer to allow the drawing of composite sections through the dark earth.

Whilst the full results of this analysis are not yet available, some preliminary observations can be made. It is apparently homogenous in both elevation and plan; it contained a large amount of residual, very abraded material (the black colour is mainly due to smashed up charcoal, for instance) and 9th century pottery was founded to within 30 cms (1ft) of its base. Cultivated soil of the late Saxon period is the simplest interpretation. However, the situation may be more complicated than that. Cultivation is an obvious choice, partly because of the abrasion of its cultural material, partly because it is difficult to envisage an alternative use. But the period of use is a problem. A late Saxon date would involve the removal of those underlying deposits representing the previous 700 years occupation. However, there is not a large amount of late Roman residual finds

in the dark earth. Hence their removal would have to be wholesale and not just a mixing with later levels. A striking fact about the stratigraphy below the dark earth is that it forms a chronological horizon, but not an absolutely level one. For example, the Antonine mosaic and its associated gravels are 50cm (1ft 8in) apart in absolute level and yet both are directly overlain by black earth. A cutting away action being influenced by a situation many centuries earlier is difficult to envisage. Also, none of the underlying strata was affected by any signs of cultivation — the tesserae of an underlying mosaic, for example, are completely intact. Lastly, there is no identifiable destruction debris associated with the Antonine structures. This implies that they were systematically dismantled at the end of the second century and some of the dark earth laid directly on top. If this argument is accepted, it means that the cultivation process which it represents started off in the third century, continuing until the 9th. This of course, has great implications for the economy of late Roman London. But if one looks at the evidence here and in other Roman Towns, the situation becomes more understandable. Insofar as evidence survives—that it has all been removed by later actions is unconvincing when repeated too often — it suggests much sparser occupation of London, with substantial stone buildings where structures do survive. Farms within the walls therefore become a very real possibility. The nature of economic activity would then be markedly different from before. The 4th century re-vitalisation, only really ever convincingly demonstrated for the rural sphere, would be shown to take over the towns in the same way. The early evidence is of commercial activities, a busy and

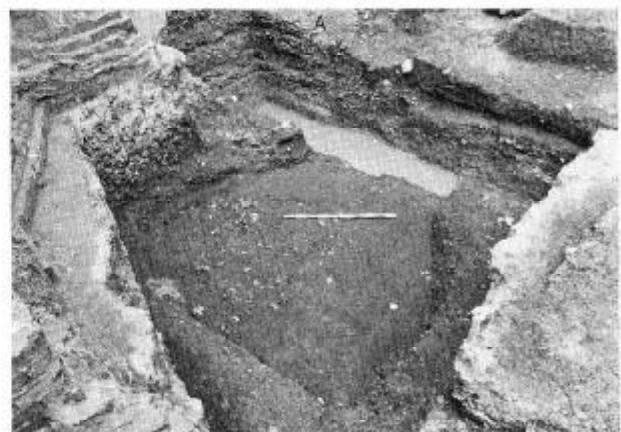


Fig. 3: The 9th century hut
A: the Roman street metalling
B: the entrance

(Photo: John Bailey)

MILK STREET
Saxon Sunken-Floored Structure

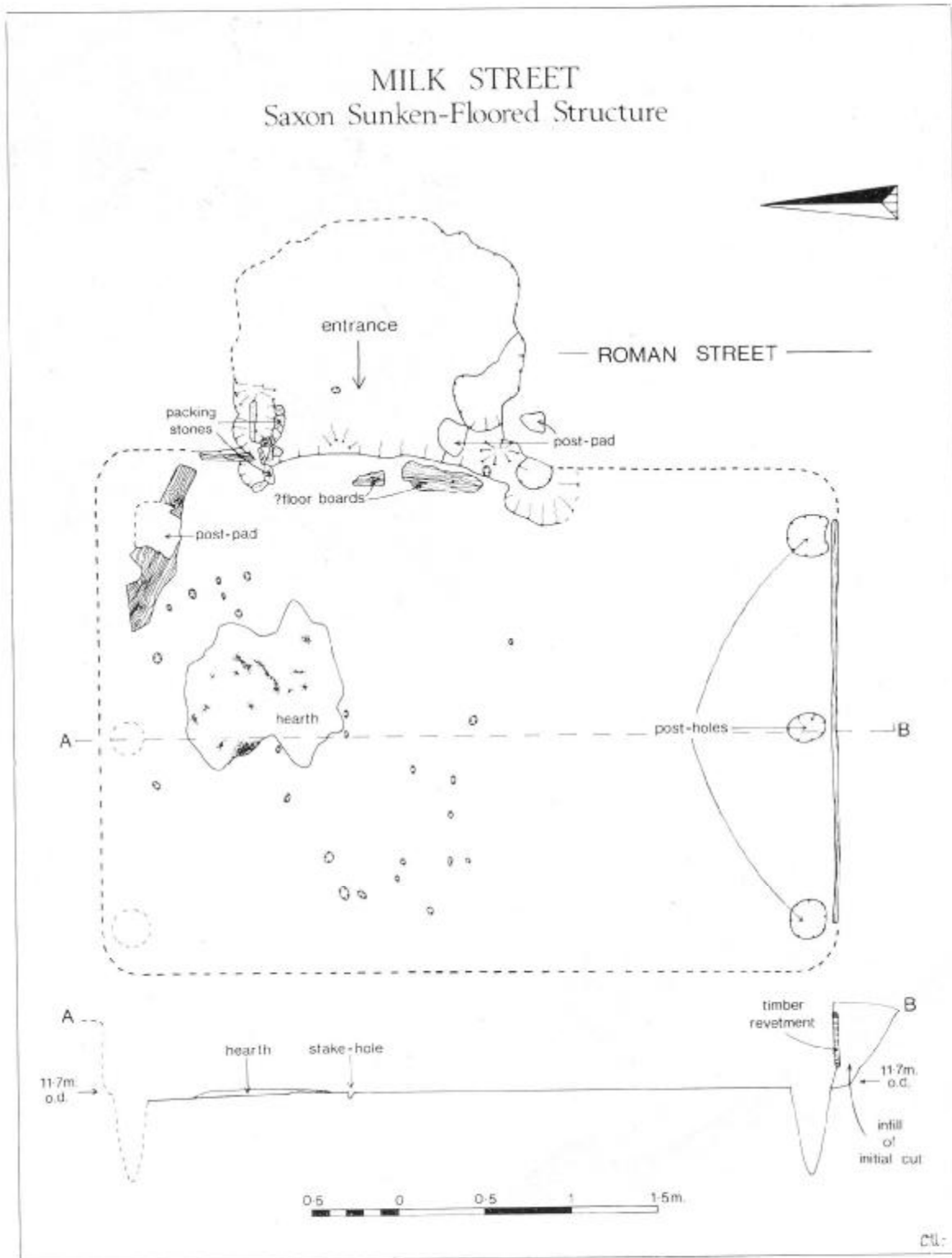


Fig. 4

(drawn by Chris Unwin)

expanding town, an enterprising entrepreneurial class etc. Later, one could suggest a change to large cultivated areas, and substantial stone buildings lasting for extended periods of time. One wonders how successfully the rural land-owning class was urbanised at the start of the Roman period, or, indeed, at all.

The best preserved structure of the Saxon period on the site was a hut provisionally dated to the 9th century, dug into the second century stratigraphy at the west edge of the Roman street and cutting obliquely through its metallings (Fig 3). About 4 m long by 3m wide (13ft by 10ft), it was constructed by digging a roughly rectangular hole, arranging oak posts around its edges and using them to support a board outside (Fig 4). The timber then effectively revetted the higher Roman stratigraphy into which it cut.

In the base was a series of stake-holes, presumably representing installations within the body of the hut, whilst an entrance arrangement in the north-east corner, running up to the gravels, gave access out onto the street. It seems likely, therefore, that the street continued in use at this time, though not necessarily as a major thoroughfare. At a later date the entrance arrangements were modified, this time with the actual timber of the threshold remaining intact. Traces of timber flooring also survived within the hut in this phase. The flooring, and the evidence of the level from which the stake holes were cut, serve to show that, in this hut at least, occupation actually took place down in the sunken area. All identifiable wood in its superstructure was oak. The potential environmental evidence from the hut is one of the most important aspects of the excavation.



Fig. 5: Wattle-lined pit, provisionally dated to the 12th century

(Photo: John Bailey)



Fig. 6: Parallel alignments of 12th century pits, suggesting intervening property boundary.

(Photo: John Bailey)

The dark earth was eventually sealed by levels representing a fragmentary wooden structure of 10th or 11th century date. Its importance is twofold. Firstly, it seems to mark the end of the cultivation period. Secondly, its alignment was that of modern Milk Street. In general terms, a Milk Street section can be divided into three groups of layers — the early Roman structures, the late Roman and early Saxon darkearth, and the late Saxon structures. The change from the second to the third marks the setting out of Milk Street.

However, alignments further east are influenced by earlier Roman topography, as evidenced by the positions of contemporary pits or, indeed the reproduction of the line of the Roman street by modern ward and parish boundaries. Hence one might suggest that rather than representing a fragment of a new grid in the area, Milk Street is a single answer to a localised problem — perhaps the need to provide a thoroughfare south to Cheapside which bends to avoid the pre-existing church of St Mary Magdalen. As such it would only affect those alignments in the immediate vicinity of the street frontage.

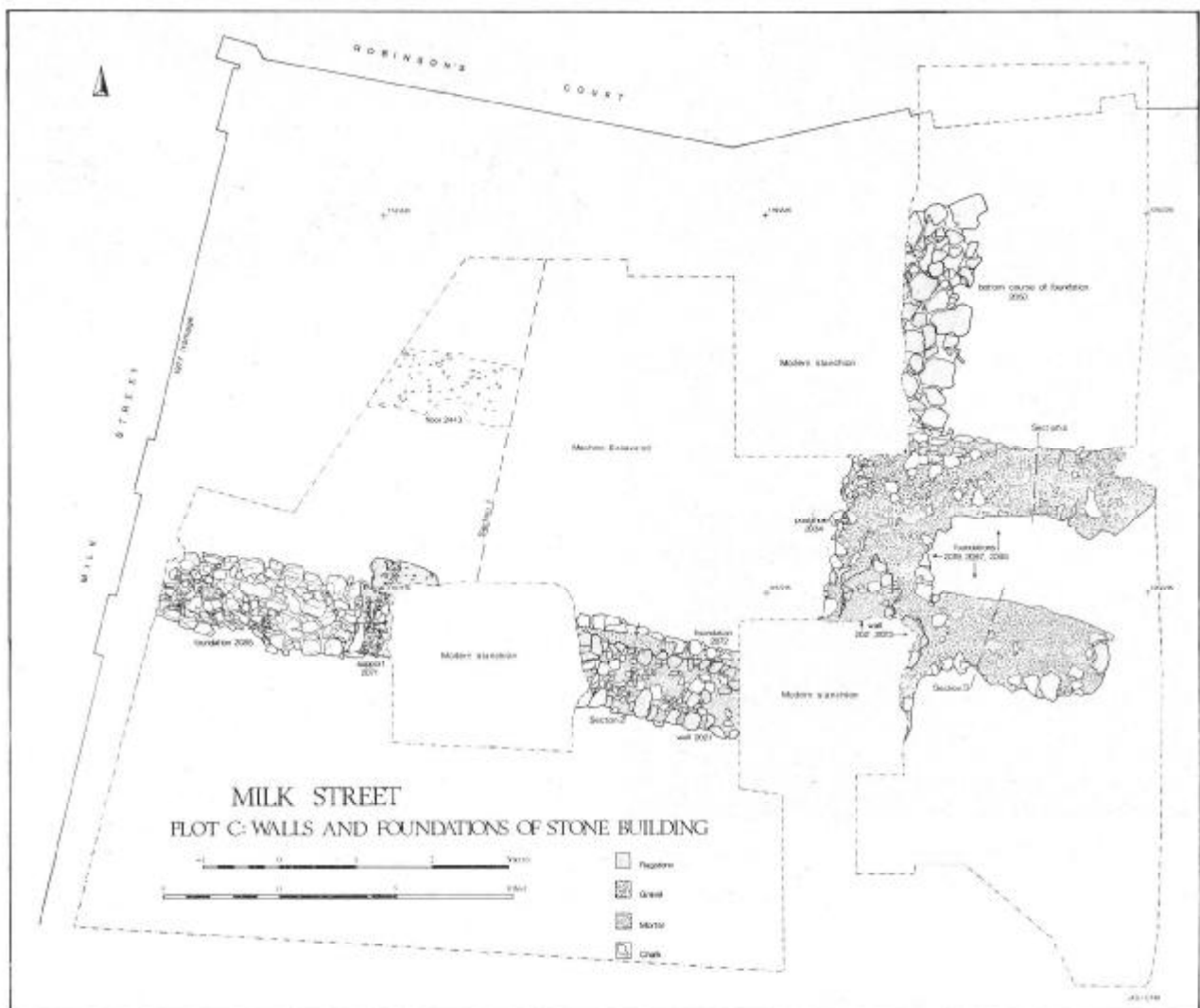


Fig. 7

(drawn by Cathy Maloney)

On the site were large numbers of late Saxon and Medieval pits — over 100 in all. Most were cess, rubbish or industrial pits, or combinations of these functions. Several had well preserved linings (Fig. 5), which suggests long-term usage — backed up by distortion of the withies and patching of the lining. As well as investigation of function, they provide information from large groups of finds, including environmental evidence, and evidence of alignments and property boundaries on the site (Fig. 6). With so many features involved, and so large a number of criteria which can be correlated to provide groupings — stratigraphic relationships, nature of lining, depth of cut (soaking away or water retaining), con-

tent of primary filling, position in plan, date, etc. — the information concerning them is being fed into a computer to allow production of clustering of certain types, either in plan e.g. cess pits along a property boundary, or in time e.g. all 12th century pits are for rubbish.

It is clear that by 1200 Milk Street was a site of several stone houses, possibly in a group round the two churches to the south which stood back from Cheapside. On the third plot north from St Mary Magdelene, in the SW corner of the excavation, parts of a stone building with gable to the street were uncovered. Only fragments of foundations and two small pieces of walling survived, since the tene-



Fig. 8: Rear foundation of stone house, at section 3 on Fig. 7.

(Photo: John Bailey)

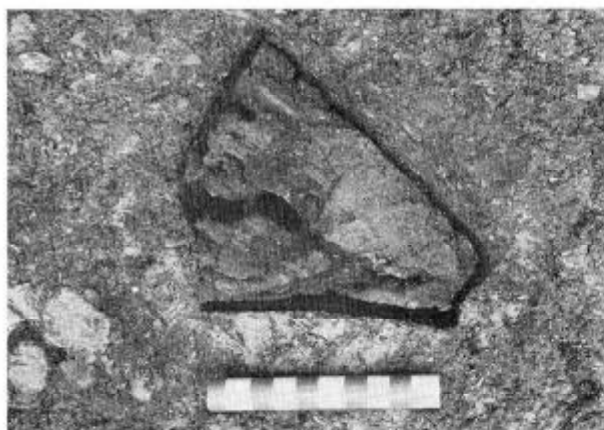


Fig. 9: Details of radially split beech pile.

(Photo: John Bailey)

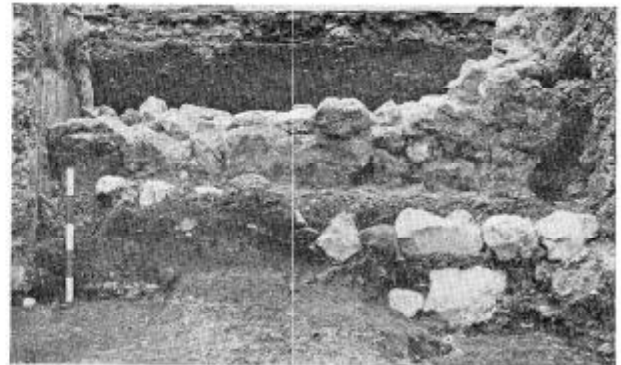


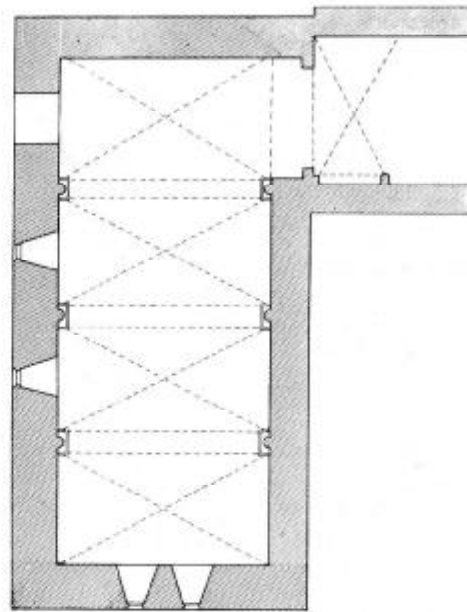
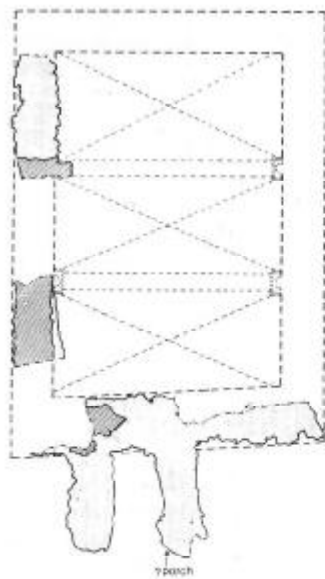
Fig. 10: Interior elevation of south wall (foundation also showing below)

(Photo: John Bailey)

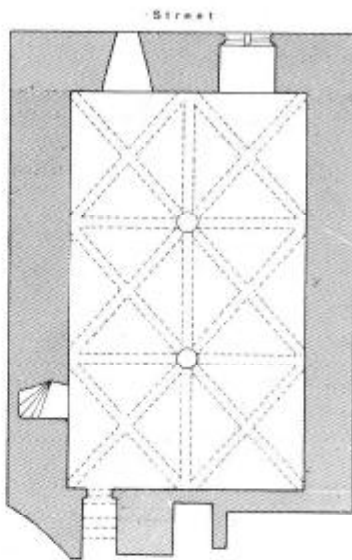
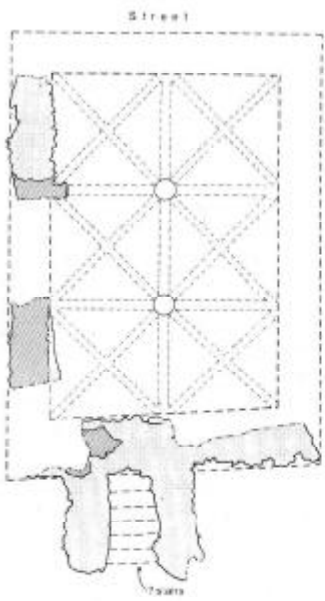
ment boundaries had been followed until the present. The structure was about 10m x 5m (33ft x 16ft) with an alley, of known 17th century date but very probably medieval, along its N side and a small ancillary block of two walls with no fourth side at the rear (Figs 1, 7). The foundations were of alternating layers of chalk and gravel — a technique known from the original build of All Hallows Barking (c. 690) to the mid 13th century — on a base course of harder ragstone (Fig. 8). This lay on a bed of driven stakes, of which 262 were recorded under the surviving foundations. For the most part they had decayed into voids retaining the shape of the timber. The 11 surviving cases (their survival possibly due to differential soil conditions) were of beech. The manner of dressing could be inferred from 217 of them; 141 had been radially split (Fig. 9) and a further 76 had been split and then trimmed by splitting off the narrow inner end to make a quadrilateral shape, the outer edge curved and probably retaining its bark. The piles were predominantly 0.7-1m (27-39in) in length, and the trees they came from seem to have been 0.16m-0.3m (6-12in) in diameter (twice the length of the radial split), with occasional larger piles implying tree widths of up to 0.46m (1ft 7in). There were extra piles at the SE corner of the building (the only one to be investigated) to take the extra stress of the corner.

The surviving fragment of the S wall was of large rag boulders laid to form a base course, infilled with mortared chalk, flint and Roman tile, presenting a random uncoursed appearance with wide joints (Fig. 10). A post socket had been built into the foundation of the back wall, and a level surface of hard-packed grey-green silt and crushed mortar with frequent charcoal flecks (Fig. 7, 2443) may represent the internal floor level.

The only dating evidence for the structure was 11th century sherds in the foundation trench, but



Prior of Lewes' Hockley (10th century)



The Angel, Guildford (13th century)

MILK STREET
RECONSTRUCTIONS OF BUILDING ON PLOT C



Fig. 11

MS-C16
(drawn by Cathy Maloney)

since this cut through 11th century pits, this date can only be a *terminus post quem*. This is unfortunate, as if it is early, the structure is extremely important as the first extensively recorded Conquest-period stone building in the City.

Study of analogies may help to suggest dates and a purpose for the two stub-walls at the back of the building (see Fig. 11). The street frontage to the West has not moved since the medieval period, and the definite end of the foundations at the NE corner indicates that Robinson's Court, on the N side of the building, retained the original north side. The inferred plan (Fig. 11) admits of two equally attractive reconstructions based on surviving structures. If the building were an 11th or 12th century undercroft, like that below the hall of the hostelry of the Prior of Lewes (demolished for the approach to London Bridge Station c. 1830), it would most probably be vaulted in three rectangular bays. The two stub walls might then be supports for a porch entrance to the first floor above but in the end, not the side as one might expect. If the building is 13th century, it would

probably resemble the surviving undercroft at the Angel, Guildford, and comprise six quadripartite bays with two central piers. The stub walls might then be the walls for a staircase going down to the undercroft (which would be up to two thirds below ground level) from the much more extensive house above. The timber post socket in the wall may be part of a door frame but the surviving fragment of walling next to it would mean a very thin doorway. There was no indication of the vaulting arrangements in the excavated portions, except for a base for one of the wall-piers on the wall which would fit either reconstruction.

Fragmentary remains of the subsequent development of this and the other medieval properties along Milk Street were found, in the form of cess-pits and a foundation for a cellar stair. Number 4, Russia Court, a late 17th century house, was surveyed by the GLC Historic Buildings Division before its demolition in 1976 and thus the final report on the site will provide a history of an important central part of the City over two thousand years.

Frozen Tombs

THIS MAJOR EXHIBITION at the British Museum in the New Wing Special Exhibitions Gallery illustrates the culture and art of the nomads who roamed the central part of the Eurasian steppes in southern Siberia from the 6th century BC to the 3rd century AD.

Most of the exhibits were excavated from the series of burial mounds at Pazyryk. The finds were preserved by a unique combination of circumstances. Burial pits were dug during the brief summer thaw and the deposits covered by stone cairns. The cairns then created a micro-climate, for they shielded the earth below them from the drying effect of the wind and sun, and once the ground had re-frozen, insulated the burial areas from subsequent thaws. The contents of the graves were thus permanently refrigerated and boiling water was a necessary aid to their excavation. A remarkable collection of organic remains survived which under normal conditions would have perished soon after burial.

The importance of the horse to the nomads is shown by a magnificent collection of carved wood-

en bridle and saddle fittings, beautifully decorated saddle-cloths and appliques of felt and leather in the forms of swans, cocks, tigers and elks.

There is a wooden table, a pillow and a bronze pot used for burning hemp in a ritual which was described by Herodotus. A child's fur coat, a shirt, cap, stocking and boots are examples of the clothing worn by the nomads. A scalped human head and the skin of an arm, complete with handsome tattoos, represent the bodies which survived.

There are other splendid finds, some excavated as recently as 1971, from the Altai, Tuva, the Minusinsk basin and the basin of the Middle Yenisei, which demonstrate connections not only with the Scythians but also with Persia and the Far East — Archaemenid textiles from Persia and silk fabric from China. Some of the most striking examples of the animal style are the gold belt plaques from the unprovenanced Siberian Collection of Peter the Great found in the 18th century and preserved in museums for 250 years.

BETSEY KENTISH