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ARCHAEOLOGY IN LONDON

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Underneath the streets of London 'city' there is some four to six metres of archaeological deposit, including Victorian, Post Medieval, Medieval, Saxon, and Roman remains. Not since the Second World War, when a third of the city was destroyed by German bombing, has there been such an opportunity to excavate the material as there is today.

The Museum of London has two archaeological departments to service the London area: the Department of Urban Archaeology and the Department of Greater London Archaeology. These departments were established in 1973.

One site type regularly excavated by archaeologists in London are waterfront sites. For centuries the banks of the Thames river have been subject to piecemeal reclamation. The remains illustrate the different methods and construction techniques used in both land reclamation and waterfront structures. The site I am presently working on includes sections of a late third century Roman wooden quay, Saxon earth embankments, and early medieval wooden revetments.

The opening up of the financial markets in London in 1986, known as the 'Big Bang', has created an unprecedented rate of redevelopment in the city centre. This redevelopment offers archaeologists a unique opportunity to investigate London's Roman, Saxon, and Medieval remains.

The Department of Urban Archaeology (D.U.A.) concentrates on the square mile of the 'city centre', the same area in which the Romans established their city in the first century. The Department of Greater London Archaeology (D.G.L.A.) covers the remaining 599 square miles of greater London.

The 'city centre' is experiencing the greatest development, most often by large multi-national companies with substantial financial backing. On average excavations in the 'city' last for three to four months and cost between 1000,000 to 200,000 pounds (\$NZ 270,000 to 540,000). The total budget for 1988 was 3.3 million pounds (approximately \$NZ 9 million), nearly all of which was paid for by the developers. In 1986 the D.U.A. employed 25 full-time archaeologists, this has now risen to well over 150 (March 1989). There were more than 200 staff in the department, this includes excavators (most of them on renewable short-term contracts), environmentalists, conservators, photographers, draughtsmen, researchers, and administrators.



Figure 1. Front braced thirteenth century revetment. Note the buildup of foreshore rising up against the front of the revetment and later dumping on top of that.

Recent excavations in the centre of London include the remains of Roman public buildings such as the amphitheatre, basilica, and baths and also substantial remains of wooden waterfront structures.

Reclamation of the northern bank of the Thames River in the London 'city' area began with the arrival of the Romans in the first century A.D. Excavations have revealed that the Roman foreshore was some 100 metres north of the present Thames waterfront. Roman waterfront remains have included two phases of wooden quays and riverside stone walls. The extension of the Roman foreshore was dramatic, reaching its limit by the third century.

This was followed by a period of abandonment from the fifth to the ninth centuries when the centre of the Saxon settlement was to the west of the Roman city. Possibly through fear of Viking raids the population returned to the more easily defensible walled site of Roman London by the tenth century and land reclamation in this area once again began (Milne 1985:9).

Saxon land reclamation consisted mainly of constructing large clay and earth embankments with cobbled surfaces running down to the foreshore to facilitate access to the river.

During the Medieval period, from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, more elaborate wooden structure were employed in reclamation. Timber revetments (some sections of which still survive to a height of two metres) were built on the foreshore some distance from existing frontages and the area behind them filled in with contemporary refuse (Fig. 1).

The site on which I have been working for the last seven months is on the north bank of the Thames River, covering an area of 320 sq. metres (80 x 40 m). Almost a third of this has been excavated under controlled conditions, the remainder was recorded while being removed by machine. The earliest structural remains on this site (in the most northern area) are sections of a late third century Roman quay, consisting of large oak timbers (600 x 400 mm) parallel to the river, resting on top of one another and held in place by horizontal backbraces and posts.

A series of clay embankments and associated cobbled surfaces, above and to the south of the Roman quay demonstrates the different phases of Saxon land reclamation from the ninth to the twelfth centuries. These banks are both stabilised and reinforced by simple wooden revetments.

At least three phases of medieval reclamation have been identified on the site. The earliest of the structures had been robbed out in antiquity and horizontal backbraces were all

that remained. But some 20 metres further south a virtually intact section of a thirteenth century wooden revetment was excavated. It consisted of upright posts and horizontal planking (held in place by wooden pegs) with angled front bracing (see Fig. 1). A further five metres south, outside the area of controlled excavation, the remains of another revetment were uncovered. It was of a very similar construction to the earlier structure but with the upright posts set in a baseplate rather than earthfast.

Artefacts from the waterlogged and often highly organic dumps have a very high survival rate. Metal, leather wood, and other organic material are found in a very good state of preservation. The wood used in the waterfront structures are in particularly good condition with construction joints, milling and tool marks easily identified.

Dendrochronological dating of these timbers helps to date the various structures, along with pottery and coins from the dumps. It also identifies possible timber re-use and revetment repairs.

Other information that can be gleaned from waterfront sites is the identification and dating of the different levels of the river horizons.

The intensive redevelopment of central London has created a dramatic increase in archaeological work which is expected to continue at least into the early 1990s. It is salvage archaeology at its most advanced with severe time limits on excavations and resources often stretched to the limit. An unprecedented amount of material is being recovered including both expected and unpredicted discoveries, all contributing to the further understanding of London's 1900 year old history.

Postscript

The numbers of excavators required in London fluctuates throughout the year with different large projects either beginning or winding down, so it is difficult to predict job prospects. It is possible to do volunteer work for the museum who offer 20 pounds (\$NZ 50.00) a week to cover expenses, if you work for a minimum of two weeks.

References

Milne, G. 1985. The Port of Roman London. B.T. Batsford, London.