

REDCROSS WAY/UNION STREET, SOUTHWARK

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Archaeological Unit undertook a 3 week assessment during January 1990 on behalf of City Gate Estates PLC; the aim being to provide information on archaeological deposits at 17 - 19 Redcross Way/Union Street, Southwark, London, SE1 (TQ 324 800).

At present the northern part of the site is occupied by a large building with basement and the southern part by warehouses to the south (Fig 1). It is proposed to redevelop the site; the nature of the archaeological deposits may determine the design of the building.

Borehole investigation carried out by STATS Geotechnical indicated humic loam containing elements of brick and bone to a depth of 4.5m, overlying peaty alluvial clay and terrace gravel. London clay was encountered at c 10m.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The ancient topography of north Southwark was primarily marsh with large raised areas of dry ground. This landscape has been occupied since the prehistoric period. The area around Redcross Way is of archaeological importance not only because of its long occupation, but also from its proximity to two Roman roads and the first Roman bridge across the Thames, near the modern London Bridge.

There has been no previous archaeological excavation of the site, but the Museum of London has conducted several investigations in the surrounding area, revealing evidence of Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Age activity. From an excavation 70m south-east of 17 - 19 Redcross Way the Museum's Department of Greater London Archaeology recorded four phases of Roman buildings, ranging in date between the 1st to 4th centuries AD (London Archaeologist Vol 6, No 5, 1989, pp 126-131). A further four phases of Roman buildings and a subsequent late Roman cemetery were excavated 60m to the north-east (London Archaeology Vol 5, No 14, 1988, pp 375-381).

Published sources (R Merrifield 1983, London, City of the Romans, 26; Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee 1984, Rescuing the Past in Southwark, 11; P Hinton (ed) Excavations in Southwark 1973-6, Lambeth 1973-9, LMAS & SAS publication no. 3, 21) suggest that a channel between two of the higher areas of sand (eyots) ran across the proposed redevelopment site, although its exact location varies according to the source consulted. This channel was located at 64 - 70 Borough High Street (A H Graham '64 - 70 Borough High Street' in P Hinton (ed) op. cit, 55 - 66). The publication of the

recent excavation on the site immediately to the east of the Redcross Way/Union Street investigation states that 'the island of sand on which the site is located extended further west than was previously supposed' (K Heard 1984 'Excavations at 10 - 18 Union Street, Southwark' London Archaeologist, Vol. 6, No. 5, 131. The bore hole data indicated that the edge of the channel crossed the southern part of the site, running north-east - south-west, with higher ground on the north-west side.

During the medieval period and later, the area represented by 17 - 19 Redcross Way seems to have been open land. An 18th century map by Roque describes the area as 'St Saviour's burying ground', later changed to 'The Cross Bones Burying Ground'. By the 1800s a school had been built which was subsequently demolished and the buildings which now occupy the site were erected in its place.

ASSESSMENT STRATEGY

The aim of the assessment was to identify the nature and survival of the archaeological deposits under the present basement and to investigate the density of burials within the known graveyard and the presence/absence of archaeology underneath. This was achieved by the excavation of two 5 x 5m trenches (Fig 2).

Trench 1

Modern material was removed by a 360° machine to a depth of 1.3m. A further 2.8m was excavated by hand.

Trench 2

Trench 2 was excavated by hand to a depth of 1.3m (0.98m OD).

SUMMARY OF THE ARCHAEOLOGY

The archaeology varied greatly between the two trenches. The construction of a modern basement had destroyed all post-Roman levels in Trench 2 and had disturbed the surviving Roman occupation levels. In Trench 1, grave-digging in the 'Cross Bones Burial Ground' destroyed much of the upper Roman stratification.

The part of the post-medieval burial ground sampled in the investigation proved to have been extensively re-used and 28 skeletons were carefully excavated from Trench 1. All were within coffins, whose degraded remains were represented by brown stains within the soil. Four female and six male adults, two adolescents, two infants, four babies and ten miscellaneous adults whose identification was impossible due to damage or partial loss were individually recorded and listed.

Levels below the graveyard in Trench 1 revealed a sequence of silty loams, each layer containing Roman material of mixed date ranging from the first to third centuries AD (Fig 3, 35 and 36). These completely sealed a thick layer of silt containing the same

broad range of datable pottery and a mixture of building material in the form of stone and well worn tesserae. The mixed nature of the artefacts suggests that these layers were dumps. It appeared that the silt layer had been eroded away leaving a bank in the south-western corner of the trench (Fig 3, 40). This indicated the presence of a shallow channel orientated north-south. Beneath this were thin layers of powdery sand, containing fragments of Roman material (Fig 3, 44 and 47). Cut through these layers was either a man-made gully or small water channel some 1.50 m in width running east-west.

The formation of sand and silts within this area indicate that Trench 1 was located across a channel which was silting up during the early Roman period. The presence of the gully and small channel suggest an attempt to drain or control the water. The dumping of material above may indicate an attempt to retain and stabilise a marshy area.

The presence of the channel in the southern part of the site indicates that the northern part is located on the eyot associated with the Roman road that ran approximately along the present line of Southwark Street. No evidence of any structures associated with the buildings found at 15 - 23 Southwark Street was discovered in Trench 2. However, meagre occupational levels associated with some Roman activity were represented by a layer of loam containing animal bone and pottery (Fig 4, 10). This was cut by a small pit (Fig 4, 12) and a gully 0.4m deep, running west to east across the excavated area, with a 0.12m drop down to the east. The gully was filled with a dark loam (Fig 4, 6) and may have been dug to combat seasonal flooding, or, perhaps a crude property boundary to an enclosure surrounding occupation of late Roman date. The explanation of these and other features can only remain inconclusive given the area of the assessment trench. For a fuller understanding a much larger area would have to be excavated.

Beneath lay three pits and four Roman burials, cutting a surface of clayey loam containing general building rubble (Fig 4, 11). The skeletal remains were badly disturbed, presumably by animal action, but had been within coffins. Two were adult males, one adolescent and the remaining one survived only below the lower spine. While the graves all contained large amounts of building material within the fills, grave 14 (Fig 5) proved to be an exception, with large fragments of intact tessellated flooring used as packing. Grave 22 (Fig 5) provided the only object found - a simple penannular brooch in a form which ranges from the second to fourth centuries AD.

These graves, and the nature of the contemporary surface, indicate that there are no major Roman buildings in the immediate vicinity. At the time of burial the nearest structures were probably in a ruinous state with building debris scattered and available for re-use, confirming a late, possibly fourth century date for this level, - following the decline of Roman occupation in Britain as a whole.

A similar sequence of events was evident below this, with layer 16 containing two further badly disturbed burials (Fig 4, 18 and 24) and a shallow pit (Fig 4, 20).

A thick deposit of striated sand containing a scatter of pottery and bone along the surface was completely sealed by these occupation layers (Fig 4, 25). Together with 26 (Fig 4) layers 26 and 25 are probably evidence of earlier Roman activity. The presence of charcoal, burnt tile and fragments of iron slag within 26 possibly indicates small scale industrial activity, perhaps associated with the building complex suggested by the excavations at 15 - 23 Southwark Street. Natural sand lay below at 0.98 m OD.

IMPLICATIONS

Substantial archaeological material extends across the whole area under consideration for redevelopment. The southern 30m of the proposed redevelopment site is occupied by the post-medieval burial ground called Cross Bones which went out of use in the early 19th century (Fig 6). If the density of burials is consistent across the whole ground (different parts of the ground may have been used during different periods and numbers of burials may have differed), then an estimate of c 2500 complete burials from the entire area can be made from the sample investigation in Trench 1. Many burials had been heavily disturbed by later burials and skeletal remains were found throughout the graveyard fill.

The burials had been placed in wooden coffins; the later ones survived in poor condition, and the earlier ones only as dust or stains. Three coffin plates and several handles were found with the burials. One skeleton had fragments of hair surviving. One inhumation was accompanied by a copper alloy frame for a headdress and the remains of a leather ?pouch (still to be x-rayed). Shoe leather (poorly preserved) was found with another burial. Remains of fabric with a fastener covered the sternum of one skeleton, while the presence of pins with others indicated that many had been buried in shrouds.

Underlying the southern two-thirds of the burial ground is a water channel (Fig 6) that started to silt up during the early Roman period and was used as a dump during the late Roman period. The Roman buildings found further east along Union Street do not appear to extend into the site. This confirms the interpretation of the western part of 10 - 18 Union Street.

Under the modern basement virtually the full depth of Roman stratigraphy survives. The upper levels contain the late Roman cemetery found at 15 - 23 Southwark Street. It would appear that this cemetery must extend across the northern part of the site, probably to the edge of the silted up channel. The density is difficult to assess as in Area 1 of 15 - 23 Southwark Street, one burial per 100 sq m was found, while in Area 2 of the same site (immediately adjacent to the Redcross Way/Union Street site)

one burial per 24 sq m was found; in Trench 2 of this investigation the density was one burial per 4 sq m.

No buildings associated with the later Roman occupation were located in Trench 2 but the evidence of 15 - 23 Southwark Street indicates that they must be present in the north-east area of the site. Further to the west and south the limited evidence in Trench 2 suggests that the area was used for dumping and disposal of rubbish in pits.

For the earlier Roman period the stone building and the later construction of a clay and timber building on the same plan immediately adjacent to the north-east corner of the site indicate that buildings may extend well into the north-east and northern part of the proposed redevelopment area. The unusual construction features suggest that the buildings may form part of an important complex. The indication of small scale industrial activity suggests that the area under the basement lay outside the main buildings but the industrial activity may well be associated.

While no evidence for prehistoric occupation was found in Trench 2 the presence of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age flint tools and pottery and features such as stakeholes and small linear and semi-circular gullies, some containing Iron Age pottery, indicates that the survival of prehistoric occupation levels sealed by the Roman deposits is likely.

The absence of cellars in the extreme northern part of the site suggests that medieval and post-medieval deposits may survive, but the evidence recovered from 15 - 23 Southwark Street was limited due to the distance from the medieval road, now Borough High Street. Some pits and wells at the back ends of tenement plots fronting onto the medieval high street might be expected.

Early maps show that during the 17th - 18th centuries small dwellings fronted onto Red Cross Street with plots behind in the area to the north of the burial ground.

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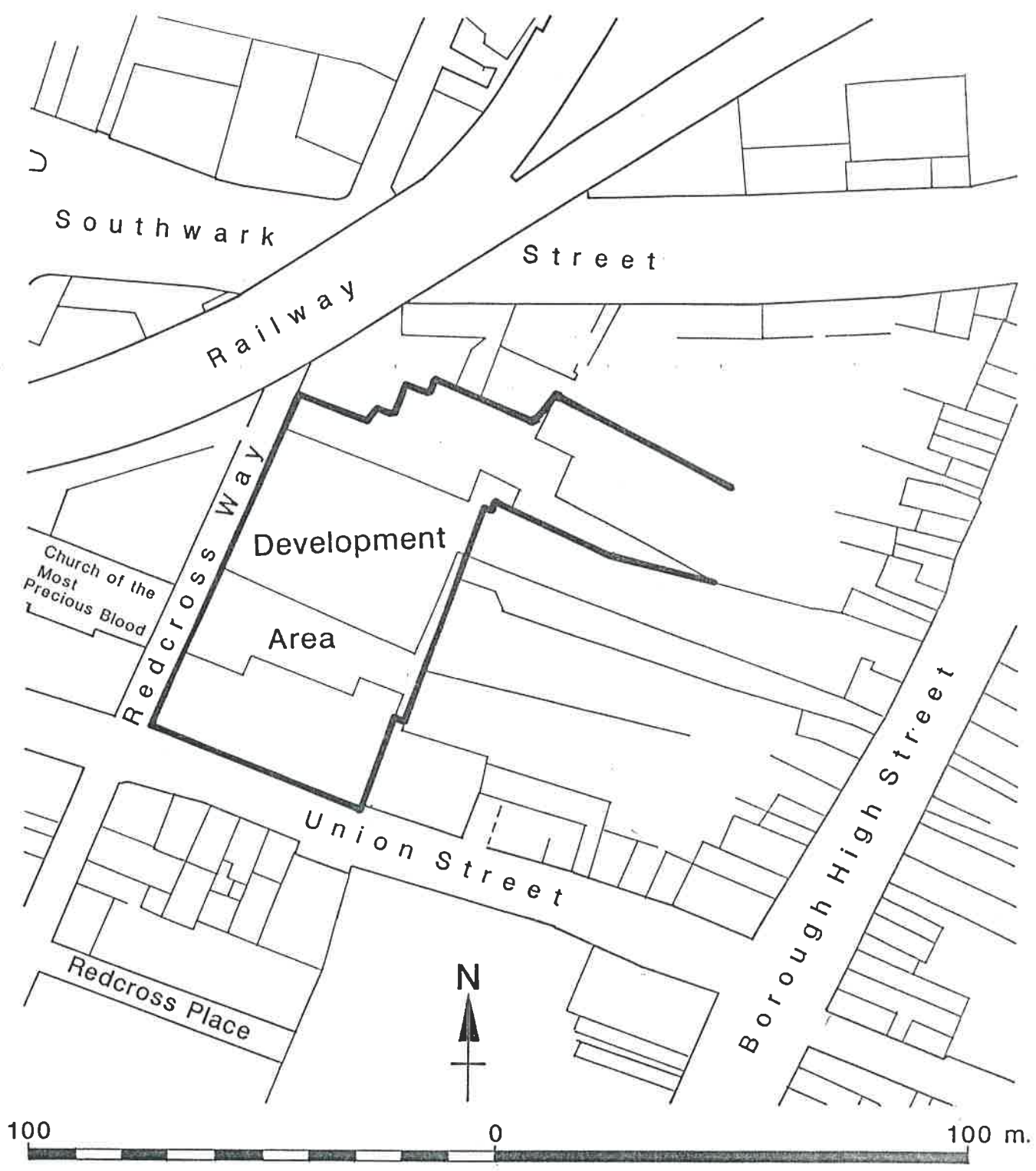
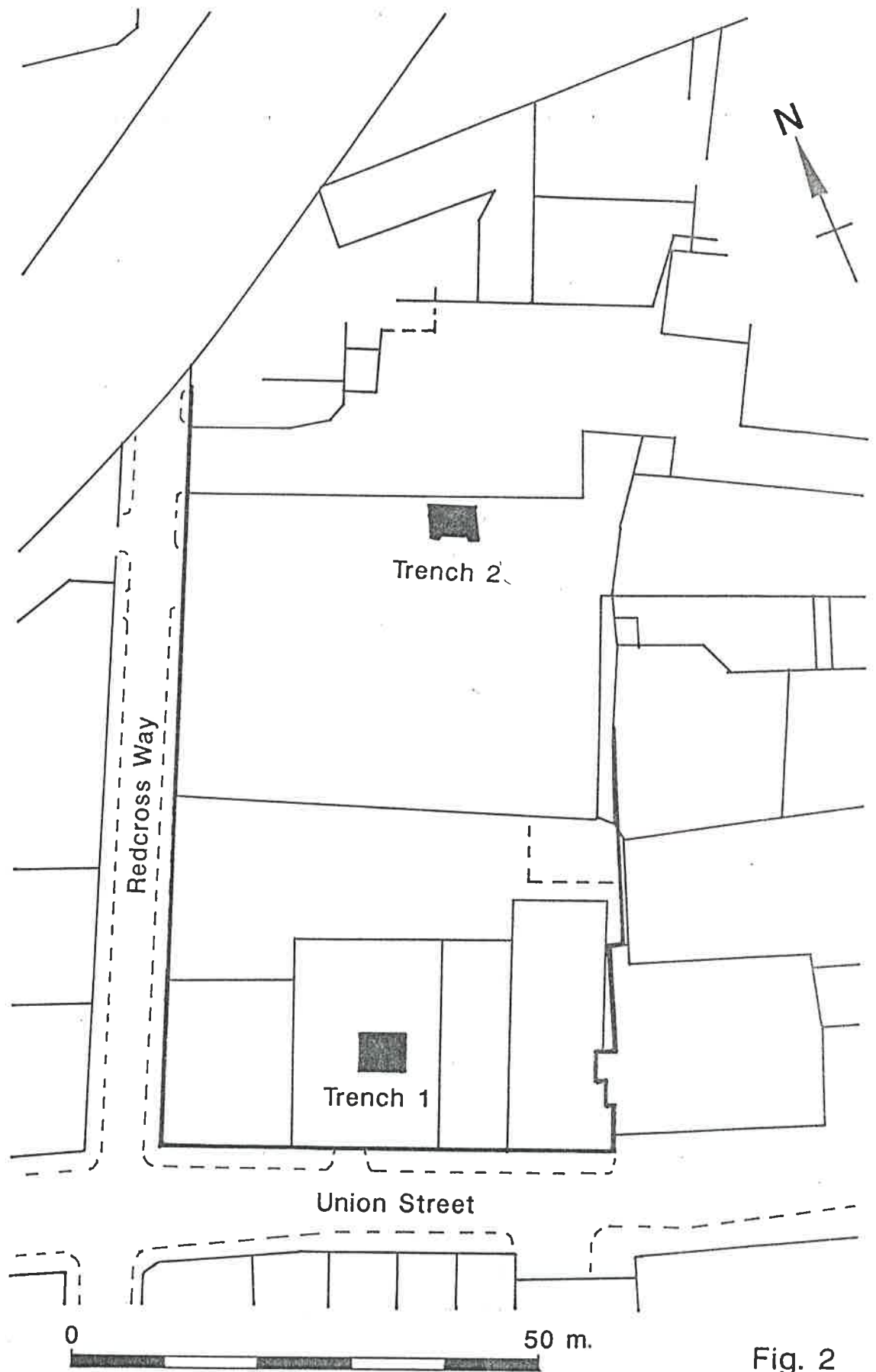


Fig. 1



Trench location plan

Fig. 2