

Archaeological excavations at 31-33 Prescott Street

Ahead of the development of the Rockwell East Hotel at Prescott Street, archaeological excavations were undertaken by L - P : Archaeology for Marldon, in the years spanning 2014 - 2016. The excavations revealed a complex sequence of archaeological layers, and the captivating story of a developing east London suburb. Since the end of the excavation, a wealth of specialist archaeological research has been undertaken to reveal more about what was uncovered on site. The results of the work will be synthesised in a forthcoming publication, this summary provides a taster of the article to come.

Prescott Street is located 500m east of the line of the ancient city wall of London. The site lies within the area of the Eastern Cemetery of Roman London, a vast cemetery situated on the outskirts of the city, which remained in use for over 300 years. The exact extent of the cemetery is as yet unknown, however in 2008, L - P : Archaeology excavated a site just 20 metres to the north of the Rockwell Hotel, which uncovered numerous Roman burials and cremations. Unfortunately, no evidence of Roman activity was found on the site because it had been destroyed by later phases of activity throughout history.

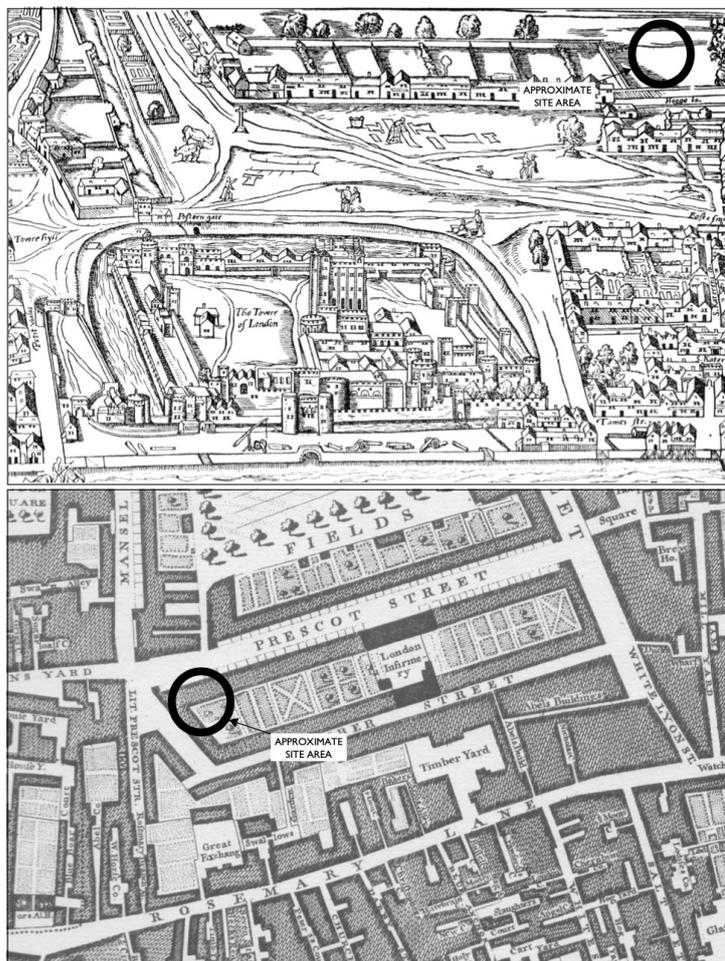


Plate 1 - The location of the site shown on two maps; above, the Agas map of 1562, and below, Rocque's map of 1746

Quarrying for the capital

In 1594, the lands in this area were sold to one Thomas Goodman. His name is preserved in two local place names "Goodman's Yard" and "Goodman's Fields". John Stowe, famous for his Survey of London (published 1598) wrote that Goodman's Fields were once a part of a farm belonging to the Abbey of the Nuns of St. Clair, and recalled fetching milk from there in his youth, suggesting a fairly

rural pace of life on the outskirts of the city.

The earliest archaeological evidence found on site, were large quarry pits, where both gravel was extracted for construction work and “brickearth” was dug for brick making. These pits were dated to roughly 1550-1600 from the artefacts that were found within them. Mixed in with this Tudor material, there was also quantities of Medieval building material. There is widespread evidence (from many nearby sites) that this area of East London was systematically quarried during this period, and this reflects the increasing demand for construction materials required to build the burgeoning capital.

The “Agas” map of 1562, an early “view” type map of London, depicts the site seemingly on an area of open land, surrounded by a rapidly developing and industrialised suburb. Clearly the quarrying of land east of the city had ceased by this time, eclipsed by the demand for real estate.

A most desirable post code

Following the death of Cromwell in 1658 and return from exile of Charles II those wealthy and powerful people who had backed the return of the monarchy stood to benefit in wealth and favour from the restored government. Leman Street derives its name from just such a man, John Leman 1st Baron Leman, a City merchant who acquired the farmland in which the site is located. His descendants developed the land for housing, laying out the four streets: Leman, Mansell, Alie and Prescott. All four names were family surnames in the Leman family. The development is a rare example of planned housing development during the 17th century. This type of speculative development with its square plan prefigures later Georgian developments all across London.

There is a birth record for Elizabeth the daughter of Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovell being born on the 2nd of November 1692 at Prescott Street, suggesting that the houses developed at Prescott Street during the 1680s were of a relatively high status. Cloudesley Shovell was a colourful and controversial character. Despite being distantly related to nobility, his father died when he was just three and Cloudesley joined the Royal Navy as a cabin boy in 1664. During the next 25 years he saw extensive action against the Dutch and the French rising up through the ranks to become a Rear Admiral in 1690. By the time he was living at Prescott Street in 1692, he was promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral of the Red. Clearly the residents of Prescott Street included fashionable, influential and wealthy people. Shovell was thought of as a particular favourite of Queen Anne, becoming Admiral of the fleet in 1701. Number 31 and 33 Prescott Street would have been large townhouses with the latest design and mod-cons of the 1680s.

Our excavation area was located in the back garden of number 31 and the evidence found seems to attest to the relative high status of the inhabitants. Despite the well to do nature of the house, at least some of the household rubbish was disposed of in the back garden. One dump contained over 270 glass fragments of wine bottles. At one point the garden was divided into two parts, separated by a hedgerow the remains of which could clearly be seen in the archaeological layers that were uncovered. This would have separated the functional use of the rear of the garden (such as for rubbish dumping), from recreational use.

Another interesting artefact recovered from the rubbish pits is a tortoise shell box, a rare survival of what would have been a luxury item, thrown away sometime between 1720 - 1780. The box rectangular with a separate lid and base – Tortoiseshell is keratinous and can be stretched when heated – the box is made from a single sheet of tortoiseshell which has been heated, stretched, and moulded to form a rectangular shape. The box is currently being prepared for illustration in the forthcoming publication of the works.

19th century workshops

The status of the area gradually changed over time. The status of those who lived at Prescott Street in the 19th century shows a marked shift from the earlier residents. Life and conditions in London's East End in the 19th century were far from inviting for wealthier members of society. As the Port of London grew in size importance attracting more ships and requiring an increase of labour. The East End came to house a varied set of communities, their dwellings and their workplaces. Over time, the large houses on Prescott Street were converted to multiple occupancy dwellings and workshops.

A sample taken from inside a drain dating to this period, produced two species of parasitic worm egg – presumed to be from human faeces, as they were also mixed in with seeds of edible fruits such as blackberries, figs, and grapes. Of particular note, is the *Diphyllobothrium Latum*, a broad fish tapeworm which can reach up to lengths of 10 metres. Generally only one worm is found per person, they are contracted by consuming raw or undercooked freshwater fish, and are dependent on poor sanitation to spread.

The neighbourhood was dominated by the foul-smelling industries: tanneries, breweries, and slaughterhouses. No 31-33 Prescott Street was converted into live-in workshops with additional work space sheds constructed in the back garden. Documentary evidence gives us an idea of the kinds of tradesman who were operating in the area; with records of gun makers, cooks, goldsmiths, tea dealers, and coal merchants amongst others listed at Prescott Street.



Plate 2 - Late 19th century gravel surface and brick walls of possible workshop building. Y-shaped feature is 20th century drainage.

The most direct evidence of this industry found on the site was the remains of a steam powered sawmill. Wood was one of the principal raw materials imported through the London docks in the 18th

to 19th century. Our own supplies were scarce and timber was increasingly imported from continental Europe and North America. This, combined with the opening of the London and Blackwall Railway in 1840, created a viable economic space for the sawmill.

On site, we found the remains of a static steam engine, used to provide rotary power to the saws in the sawmill. We excavated both the base for the boiler which produced the steam and the solid mounting base for the engine itself. The firebricks were stamped WJONES on the face, and we can trace their manufacture to a William Jones at Springfield Tileries, Trench Vale in Staffordshire who produced them between 1865 - 1870.



Plate 3 - The furnace of the steam engine boiler.

Acknowledgements

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