

Archaeology at 31-33 Prescott Street & 99 Mansell Street

A Roman cemetery and the story of an East End neighbourhood. These are the two main types of archaeology we are looking for on the site of 31-33 Prescott Street.

The Roman Cemetery

The site is within the area of the large “eastern cemetery” of Londinium, the Roman city of London. The full extent of the cemetery is not known, but broadly speaking it covers an area of thousands of square metres from Whitechapel Road in the North to Cable Street/Royal Mint Street in the South. Roman tradition dictated that (at least in theory) burials must take place outside the official city limits. This led to large cemeteries forming along the major routes into the walled city. The eastern cemetery was one of the largest of these cemeteries, it remained in use for over 300 years, starting in around 79AD when the first road was laid out in this area.

Building Houses on the Medieval Fields

After the Roman period, the City of London was abandoned and the cemetery disappeared. During this Medieval period, the site was within farmland lying close to the precinct of the Abbey of St. Clare (on the street of Minories). In around 1680 this farmland was turned over for development by the landowner William Leman (2nd Baronet Leman). During the latter part of the 17th century, London was rapidly expanding beyond the old city walls and there was a demand for new “sub-urban” housing developments in both the West End (Bloomsbury) and in the East End. Prescott Street was laid out along with Leman Street, Mansell Street and Alie Street, to form a large square. Plots on either side of these streets were then leased out for new houses to be built.

What Has Been Found On Site?

The remains found on site have helped to verify and to add detail to the broad brush story of the area.

At the rear of No. 31 we excavated a massive sequence of remains dating from the 1680s to the 1880s. These deposits are layered on top of each other, creating a sequence starting with the latest remains at the top and the earliest remains at the bottom. By carefully unpicking this sequence in reverse order, we are able to look at each phase in the life of the house of No. 31. Careful examination of the rubbish pits and drains, shows how the occupants of the building changed over time. This includes the remains of several phases of different drainage systems that were used over time. The earliest house on No. 31 was probably housing for a wealthy family, their rubbish included large numbers of wine bottles, showing that they had (for that time) relatively expensive drinking habits.

Later on, the rubbish pits seem to indicate lower status occupants of the building, perhaps also indicating some sort of craft activity going on in the rear yard area. Finally, at the end of the 1800s the yard was enclosed by a rough shed structure which might well have been a workshop of some kind.

Underneath these layers relating to people living in the fancy houses on Prescott Street, there are large “Quarry Pits”. These are huge pits dug to extract gravel and sand for building work. Sand and gravel were (and remain today) vital building materials for roads and buildings and the extraction and sale of these materials close to their point of use in the City of London would have been big business throughout the history of London.

At present, the only Roman remains identified on site are the remains of further quarry pits. This activity is known from the eastern cemetery and is expected in this area. However the presence of these pits on the site means that no burials or other remains from the cemetery have survived on the site, at least in the parts examined during the works so far.

What Happens Next?

All of the finds are taken off site, washed and repackaged ready to be assessed by specialists. This work will give us accurate dates for each phase of the site. It will also help us to say more about what people were doing on the site over time. Pottery and clay pipes are particularly useful for giving us accurate dating of each phase of building work.

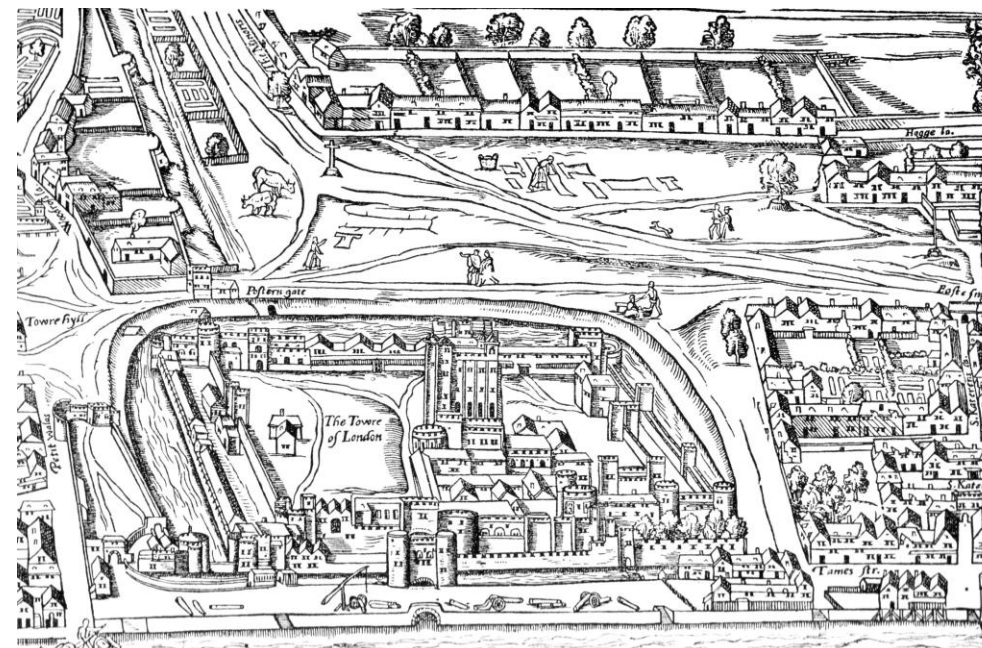
The most important part of our work is to document the site in 3D, using a mixture of written records, drawings and photographs. This will allow people in the future to come back to our records and use them.



No 31 – the foundations of an old Stuart-era residence, rubbish pits at rear



Clay pipes from rubbish pit in the yard at the rear of No 31. Used for smoking tobacco, these were discarded not long after they were made.



1562 Historic map of London

