

Somers Town Goods Yard: Excavations at Brill Place, Camden

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Introduction

From March 2011, Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA), carried out an excavation and watching brief at Brill Place, Camden, London NW1, on behalf of the client UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation (UKCMRI)- which has now changed its name to The Francis Crick Institute. The primary archaeological interest on site was the Somers Town Goods Yard, which was in use from the 1880s to the 1950s. The site of the Goods Yard, located to the immediate west of St Pancras Station and north of the British Library, has remained a prominent landmark in the urban landscape of Camden (Fig. 1). During the last week of the excavation, public tours of the site were hosted by MOLA and members of the local community were invited to share their experiences and information on the goods yard with MOLA staff members to add to the project archive.

Fig. 1 Site location (site code UKC09) and trenches excavated at Brill Place 2009 – 2011

The excavation comprised three large open areas (Areas 1 – 3) targeted on the Goods Yard hydraulic power station (Area 1) and the ground level of the Milk and Fish depot (Areas 2 and 3) (Fig 2). The excavation was followed by a watching brief on ground reduction. Previously, MOLA monitored the excavation of 17 geotechnical test pits and boreholes on site intermittently between March 2009 and March 2010, exposing a number of foundations and structures associated with the depot, including stanchions, tracks and floor and yard surfaces¹.

Fig 2 Rocque's map of 1746

The National Grid Reference (NGR) for the site is TQ 529884 183068. The full site archive is accessible from London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC) under the site code UKC09.

Archaeological and historical background

The site is located within the vicinity of the Brill River and to the west of the Fleet River, a tributary of the Thames, although no evidence for palaeo-channels or alluvium was identified on site. The underlying geology in the area is London Clay, which was uncovered across site at varying depths between c. 17.56m – 18.15m OD. It appears that the Goods Yard had been constructed on the Clay, thereby destroying any potential earlier archaeological evidence.

Up until the mid 18th century the site and the surrounding area was primarily open land. Rocque's map of 1746 shows the site in an area of open fields, with a small number of rural settlements scattered in the surrounding area. The site lay to the immediate north of a small settlement shown as 'The Bruel' (presumably the Brill), which had a narrow thoroughfare, the Brill Path, running north-south through it (Fig 2) and from where the name 'Brill Place' has continued in use.

The first significant transformation of the area was the construction of the New Road (now Euston Road) in 1756, which connected Paddington in the west with Islington to the north-east. The road became an impetus for urban development in the area. The Brill Farm estate, which encompassed the site, was leased for construction in 1783 by the grandson of Charles Cocks, who became Baron Somers of Evesham. Somers Town was originally intended to be a pleasant outlier suburb, separated from the City by fields². However, as a result of rapid urban expansion the area was quickly swallowed up by poor quality housing. By the early 19th century, a number of streets crossed the site, lined with terraced houses with gardens. Brill Path had been divided into Brill Row and Brill Terrace and a number of stables and commercial buildings were situated along Phoenix Street, which bordered the site to the north³.

The arrival of the railways in the mid-19th century reshaped Somers Town into the urban landscape still recognisable today. King's Cross Station, built in 1851–2, and St Pancras Station, opened by Midland Railway in 1868 as the southern terminus of the Midland Main Line, were both situated to the immediate east of the site, which by this date comprised terraced housing, streets, stables and a school⁴.

St Pancras station was initially serviced by a goods and coal depot located to its north. By 1874, however, these depots were no longer sufficient in size to cope with the freight handling and storage capacities that the Midland Railway Company required. After obtaining an Act of Parliament, the Company bought just over 5 hectares of land to the west of St Pancras Station, stretching from Brill Place in the north to Euston Road in the south and encompassing the entirety of the site, which was located in the north-western corner of the depot (Fig 3). The Somers Town Goods Yard was constructed on this land between 1883–87 resulting in the demolition of around 4,000 homes and the displacement of up to 10,000 people⁵. In the space of 25 years, St Pancras, Kings Cross and Euston had been transformed from predominantly residential London suburbs to major transport hubs and key industrial areas.

Fig 3 Ordnance Survey 2nd edition 5ft:mile map of 1894 – 6, showing the upper level of Somers Town Goods Yard

The construction of a major distribution centre in this location required an economy of scale which was overcome with the same two-storey design as had previously been employed at St Pancras Station. This enabled a facility, which otherwise required a large area of land, to be constructed in a restricted area of uneven terrain bordered by the Regent's Canal to the north. The main function of the Somers Town Goods Yard was to facilitate the importation and distribution of perishable goods, such as milk, fish, vegetables and fruit, around London and beyond. Designed by John Underwood, the Midland Railway's Engineer for New Works, the Goods Yard was constructed on two levels. Leading into the upper level the trains were diverted from the main line over a viaduct at the eastern end of Brill Place⁶, where the rails divided into some 30 sidings

and the trains entered the various goods sheds to be unloaded. The wagons were carried on hydraulic lifts down to the lower ground level of the Goods Yard where loads could be temporarily stored or transported on by horse-drawn carts or road vehicles⁷.

The lower Goods Yard was at street level and had the capacity to support 600 railway wagons at a time. Offices and storerooms, rented out to food traders, were located on this level, as well as a storage shed for bananas, which were probably imported from Liverpool, and a large potato market situated in the southern Goods Yard area which corresponds with the present day site of the British Library. Also constructed on the site on the site was a hydraulic power station and a Milk and Fish depot (see Fig 3).

The lower level of the depot incorporated a number of cobbled roadways for street vehicles and the main thoroughfare entrance to the Goods Yard on the corner of Phoenix Street/ Brill Place and Ossulston Street, where a ramp also inclined to the upper Goods Yard (Fig 4). This allowed horse-drawn carts, drays and vans direct access to goods as they were unloaded from the trains on the upper level. At any one time, Midland Railway had between 1000–1200 horses at their disposal, for goods deliveries and transferral⁸.

Fig 4 The Goods Yard entrance on the junction of Brill Place and Ossulston Street, 1927 (copyright)

During the Second World War the railways were a major target for enemy attack and the depot was damaged by a landmine in September 1940. In the aftermath of the War, Somers Town Goods Yard was never restored to prominence and its functionality was increasingly threatened by the use of motor vehicles for freight transportation. Effectively redundant by the close of the 1950s, the Goods Yard was largely dismantled in the 1960s⁹. The railway tracks were removed by 1976, although the Milk and Fish Depot and another large goods shed on the south-western edge of the site survived. The final buildings were demolished in the 1980s and '90s.

Area 1: The hydraulic power station

The base of the hydraulic power station was excavated in Area 1, which comprised the remains of two buildings. The northern building contained two cast-iron tanks set on brick foundations, with the possible foundation of a third tank, which had been truncated by modern concrete foundations, situated in between them. Located to the west of the tanks were two substantial rectangular concrete plinths.

The southern building contained a large flue system in its eastern half, which was used to transport exhaust gas to the base of a tall chimney, located to the west of the flues. To the north of the chimney was the base of a rectangular brick-built accumulator tower. Both structures can be seen in the background of the photograph of the Goods Yard dating to 1927 (see Fig 4).

Only the scarred base of the accumulator tower, which was demolished in 1995, survived on site (Fig 5). A steam powered engine was used to pump water into a tank at the top of the accumulator tower. This water produced a downwards force on a piston, located within the tower, which pressurised the liquid. The pressurised water was then

fed around the Goods Yard in pipes, none of which were found *in situ* on site, in order to power the hydraulic hoists, lifts, cranes and capstans used in the unloading of goods wagons and transferral of wagons themselves from the high level to low level of the Goods yard ¹⁰.

Fig 5 Area 1: Accumulator tower base, south facing

The pumping station required to lift the water into the high-level tank was powered by a steam engine with two boilers. It is probable that the cast-iron tanks in the northern building would have served as either reservoir tanks or boilers for the accumulator tower, whilst the two rectangular concrete plinths presumably supported a type of steam-driven hydraulic pump, which would have maintained the flow of water into the numerous pipes that served the depot machinery (Fig 6). The steam was generated from six boilers located in the southern building, supported on brick foundations. Exhaust gas, generated by burning coal, travelled through the large flue and several flue chambers beneath these boilers on route to being expelled out of the tall chimney. Its high temperature contributed to heating the water in the boilers. (Fig 7). Presumably the Coal Depot, located in the north-eastern area of the Goods Yard, supplied the coal which was used as fuel to stoke the boilers. Of particular interest, one of the flue linings contained a cream firebrick stamped *JOHN KNOWLES & CO / WOODEN BOX*, the first example from this manufacturer, which was located in Derbyshire, to be found in London¹¹.

*Fig 6 Plan of Area 1: tanks, plinths, accumulator tower and southern building containing six large boilers and flue (scale 1:****)*

Fig 7 The large flue in the southern building, Area 1, north facing

Looking south, the fourth and fifth chambers of the flue had been constructed to respect a circular iron stanchion, located in between them (Fig 8). Another stanchion, situated c. 8m to the north of this one, had been incorporated into the southern wall of the northern building. The stanchions, which were wrought iron girders, sat on cast iron columns and set into substantial concrete and stepped brick foundations, supported the weight of the upper level of the Goods Yard (Fig 9).

Fig 8 Area 1: Stanchion and flue chambers

Fig 9 Area 1: Stanchion and base, north facing section

Areas 2 and 3: The Milk and Fish Depot

Cobbled surfaces and tracks of the lower level of the depot were recorded in Areas 2 and 3 on site, where the two-storey Milk and Fish Depot had stood. The tracks, set on timber sleepers, were used for the unloading of wagons and also for accommodating traverse cranes (Fig 10). Aided by hydraulic power, some of the Goods Yard hoists and

cranes could lift up to 20 tons, which enabled heavy loads to be manoeuvred across the depot and for wagons to be lifted between the upper and lower levels of the Goods Yard.

Fig 10 Area 2: cobbled surface, a track and sleepers, north facing

Three stanchions were located in Area 3, running approximately north-south across the eastern side of the trench and at c. 8m intervals from one another. The southern-most stanchion was also utilised for drainage purposes, in a similar manner to the cast-iron Tuscan columns of the coal sheds at Greenwich Pumping Station, dating to 1865¹². The stanchion had a drainage grate located either side of it, which were originally set into the cobbled surface, and an east-west orientated ceramic drain ran hard by the stanchion foundation.

The Goods Yard was constructed on compacted backfill, c. 0.5m thick, which was built up against the stanchions and overlaid London Clay. The backfill contained building material debris, presumably derived from the 18th and 19th century houses which had been systematically demolished to make way for the depot. In Area 3, an east-west running ceramic drain cut into London Clay had survived intact. A number of domestic artefacts were found within the primary fill of the drain, which was dated to post-c.1850 by a single clay tobacco pipe bowl of Atkinson and Oswald's London type 30, including a small shell or 'mother of pearl' button with a brass loop fastening, two blue glass beads, and pieces from three slate pencils, commonly used with writing slates in schools and workplaces at a time when paper was expensive in the 19th century¹³. A more unusual find was the small figure of an outstretched hare made in a Parian body, originally called 'Statuary porcelain', which, from the early 1840s, was deemed a suitable material for the production of large numbers of small-scale copies of antique and modern statuary¹⁴. Parian figures were soon being produced in considerable quantities by numerous manufacturers. The hare is cleanly modelled, with its eyes open and ears folded back, and would have been held up by its ankles by a hunter as part of a figure group¹⁵ (Fig 11).

Fig 11 An outstretched porcelain hare from a figurine of 19th-century date (MOLA:Andy Chopping)

The pottery assemblage from the site, a total of 117 sherds, dated to the 19th century and was characterised by domestic crockery, chiefly dining and teawares, which were made in fabrics and forms and decorated in designs that were all popular across England during this period. Finds from the site included English brown salt-glazed stoneware bottles or jars and dinner and tea service wares, mainly plates, bowls and saucers, in refined white earthenware. Part of a tureen in pearlware, with blue shell-edge decoration, was also uncovered, as well as a refined whiteware tea plate with moulded lettering around the rim which would have been part of a tea set used by children. A number of saucers in refined whiteware had underglaze painted decoration, mostly in floral designs, and some examples were also found made in bone china, one of which had additional copper lustre details. These saucers came from a number of different c. mid-19th century pattern sets, although flowers and Chinese-inspired 'willow' were two of the most common themes¹⁶. The broadly domestic and utilitarian nature of the pottery indicates that the vessels were associated with the residents whom had been displaced to make way for the Goods Yard in 1883.

Discussion

The Brill Place archaeological investigations provided an opportunity for the structural and functional elements of a London goods depot to be investigated *in situ*. Whilst a number of maps and plans of the Somers Town Goods Yard exist, the excavations have produced a detailed record of the lower level of the depot, as well as confirming the location of the hydraulic pump station and details on the Goods Yard hydraulic power system which would not have been available in the documentary record. Nineteenth century pottery and a ceramic drain with associated finds were the only surviving artefacts of the residents that were displaced by the construction of the Goods Yard.

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Notes

¹ R. Bull, P. Miller and K. Pitt *Brill Place, London Borough of Camden NW1: A report on archaeological monitoring of geotechnical pits* (March 2010) MOLA unpub. rep.

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⁴ L. Davies *UKCMRI, Brill Place London NW1, London borough of Camden: Written scheme of investigation* (2011) MOLA unpub. rep., Section 1.5.

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⁶ J. Simmons *St Pancras Station* 2nd ed. (2003), Historical publications, 91.

⁷ Midland Railway Company *Somers Town goods station, London* (1922) Derby; Midland Railway, 2–5.

⁸ Midland Railway Company *Somers Town goods station, London* (1922) Derby; Midland Railway, 6.

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- ⁹ C. E. Lee 'St Pancras Station, 1868–1968, Part 2' *Railway magazine* (Oct. 1968), 589.
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