

Archaeological discoveries at Rochester in 1861

Some discoveries were made in 1861 which, if they had been more carefully recorded, would have added up to a significant advance in knowledge of the city's archaeology. There were, coincidentally, two construction projects under way at the time. Water mains were being installed along the High Street, and southwards up King's Head Lane and Boley Hill. Meanwhile, an extension was being built for the Mathematical School, just inside the city wall. The following reports from the *South Eastern Gazette* give some account of what was being discovered; there are probably similar reports, perhaps more informative than these, in other local newspapers, but I do not have access to them.

Charles Roach Smith (who had settled in Strood in 1856) kept an eye on what was happening: it was his opinion, quoted here, that the city wall at Eastgate was Roman at the bottom, like the stretch of wall to be seen from the Esplanade. He was right that far ... but he never got any further. (How he could have failed to see the wall behind the Eagle remains a mystery to me.)

An inhabitant of Rochester – angered by the damage that had been done, appalled by the plan to turn the north-east bastion into a cess-pool – wrote a letter of protest to the *Gentleman's Magazine*. It was published in the issue for October 1861, under the headline VANDALISM AT ROCHESTER. I have quoted it in full elsewhere ([ccr-defences-1397.pdf](#)).

South Eastern Gazette, Tue 4 Jun 1861, p 6

The Ancient City Walls. – During the past week, excavators have been employed in laying down the pipes for the Chatham Water Works Company. In the course of their labours, when nearly opposite the Free School, they came down upon part of the stone foundations of the city wall, or rather that portion of them which formed the foundation of the East gate of the city. The stones were much broken by the workmen, and but a small portion remained in its entirety. A few years since similar foundations were discovered in the opposite side of the street, whilst workmen were engaged in repairing the gas pipes opposite the Eagle Inn, the whole of which was in a more perfect state than the remains found on Thursday, leaving no doubt whatever that the East gate was opposite the Free School, on the one side of the road, and fronting the dwelling-house adjoining Mr. Girling's, linen-draper. The fact has been so long known to antiquaries that it created but little attention. We have heard of a coin or two having been found, but we believe nothing of a remarkably interesting character was discovered, except a mysterious finding of something by a working man, who, to use the words of a spectator, "looked at it, rubbed the dirt off, put it in his pocket, and walked away." People, however, were not exactly content with the foundations of the walls. There was another discovery. Going along Eastgate towards Star-hill, there were found several trunks of trees, hol-

lowed and laid down for water pipes, after precisely the same pattern that we find them in some of our agricultural districts, even in the present day. Many of these had rotted and certainly looked extremely ancient, quite enough for our enthusiastic archaeologists to assign a date when they were laid down, the only difference of opinion being whether it was during the Saxon heptarchy or the more remote time of the Romans. Much learned discussion ensued, but it was ultimately decided in favor of the Romans, from its contiguity to Troy town. Scarcely had it been satisfactorily settled, and notes drawn up for the "Gentleman's Magazine" or the "Builder," when an elderly mechanic, who was looking on, upset the whole affair by explaining that he remembered their being laid down for the purpose of conveying water from Shepherd's brewery to Chatham about 40 years ago, which proved to be the fact.

South Eastern Gazette, Tue 20 Aug 1861, p 5

The Ancient City Walls. – By the removal of the block of houses in High-street, adjoining the Free Mathematical School, for the proposed enlargement of that building, an excellent view is obtained of an extensive portion of the ancient city wall, which formerly bounded the eastern portion of the city. The part of the boundary wall there opened up has long been hidden, and in fact formed a portion of one of the houses taken down. Formerly the East-gate stood exactly opposite where the free school now stands, and a short time since the foundations of the ancient gate were discovered during some excavations at that spot. It is to be hoped that in the proposed enlargement of Sir Joseph Williamson's Free School no more of the old walls will be pulled down than is absolutely necessary.

South Eastern Gazette, Tue 27 Aug 1861, p 6

Removal of the Ancient City Walls. – Very general regret is felt by the public that the enlargement of Sir Joseph Williamson's Free Mathematical School will necessitate the demolition of that portion of the ancient city walls adjoining High-street. During the past week workmen have been employed in taking down this part of the wall, which although built about a thousand years since is of enormous strength, defying the ordinary tools to remove it. Recourse has therefore been had to gunpowder, and it was only by repeated blasts that any part could be destroyed. The wall is of great size, measuring at this spot about 9ft. in thickness, the east gate formerly standing at this portion of the city boundary.

South Eastern Gazette, Tue 10 Sep 1861, p 6

The Destruction of the City Walls. – We briefly noticed in our last the attempt made to remove those monuments of undoubted antiquity, our ancient walls. This week the design has been further proceeded with, and is still proceeding, the work of destruction being now aided by the efforts of the Royal Engineers, whose blastings of walls in our quiet streets create no little consternation. In the “Sketches of Rochester” about to be published, are the following remarks on the subject of the City walls: – “The antiquary who visits Rochester for the purpose of investigating its ancient remains, cannot fail to be struck with the great ingenuity displayed in endeavouring to conceal from his view those landmarks of antiquity which are still left to us. Indeed, the magnificence, and much that is interesting in the old city, have been concealed, and while I am writing this, the workmen are busily engaged in adding a new room to Sir Jos. Williamson’s school, and effectually blocking out all access to the most interesting portion of the wall.”* And the purpose for which this is being done is, simply to enlarge a school-room, to enable the trustees of a charity to accomplish a design never intended by the generous benefactor. This is not a question of Whig or Tory – Conservative or Radical, but simply one of good taste. And let us see who are the virtuoso that sanction this destruction of property? Among the trustees of the school we find the names of “ordinary governors,” the Mayor, Recorder, Dean of Rochester, the two M.P.’s, the Bridge Warden, Master of Trinity House, Dockyard Commissioner, Resident Prebendary, the ex-Mayor, the eldest Alderman, and the Town-clerk.” What are termed “extraordinary governors” are the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Chancellor, the Bishop of Rochester, and the lord or proprietor of Cobham Hall.” We have also a local committee and a local secretary of a Kent †Archaeological Society, with well known taste and judgment in such matters. Among these surely there might be one or two found, to feel some little interest in preserving antiquities. We hope sincerely that some steps will be at once taken to stop the further progress of the spoliation, and convert the place into an ornament for the city. Why not lay open the whole wall from the street to the round tower at the angle of the present wall – converting the space into pleasure grounds, leaving these walls open to the inspection of the public, as they ought to be? Looking at it even in a commercial point, it would bring hundreds to the city purposely to see those interesting marks of antiquity which, we fear, will be shortly hidden from their view. We throw out the hint, and hope that others will handle it, and prevent a stigma which it would be well to avoid. We

hope that the report is incorrect which says that the remarkable tower at the north angle is destined to be converted into a cess-pool. Mr. Roach Smith, the value of whose opinion need not be estimated by us, says "You may now see at Eastgate what appears to be the Roman wall of Durobrivis laid open to daylight. You will observe, however, only the core or interior of the wall. The facing stones are gone. Upon this wall, which was evidently much injured in early times, the middle age portion was erected. If the corporation could be induced to clear away the modern work at the bottom, we should probably see the facing stones, and be better able at once to pronounce upon the masonry. At the depth of, perhaps, some four or five feet from the present street level, the Roman wall would be found with its facing stones perfect, presenting the same appearance as the fragment above the esplanade." During the past week, whilst digging the ground for laying water pipes in St. Margaret-street, human bones have been found in several places, and foundations have also been discovered nearly opposite the magistrates' clerk's office. By some these have been supposed the site of the south gate. This we are disposed to think an error, and will revert to it.

* Quoting from Phippen 1862:134–5.

South Eastern Gazette, Tue 17 Sep 1861, p 6

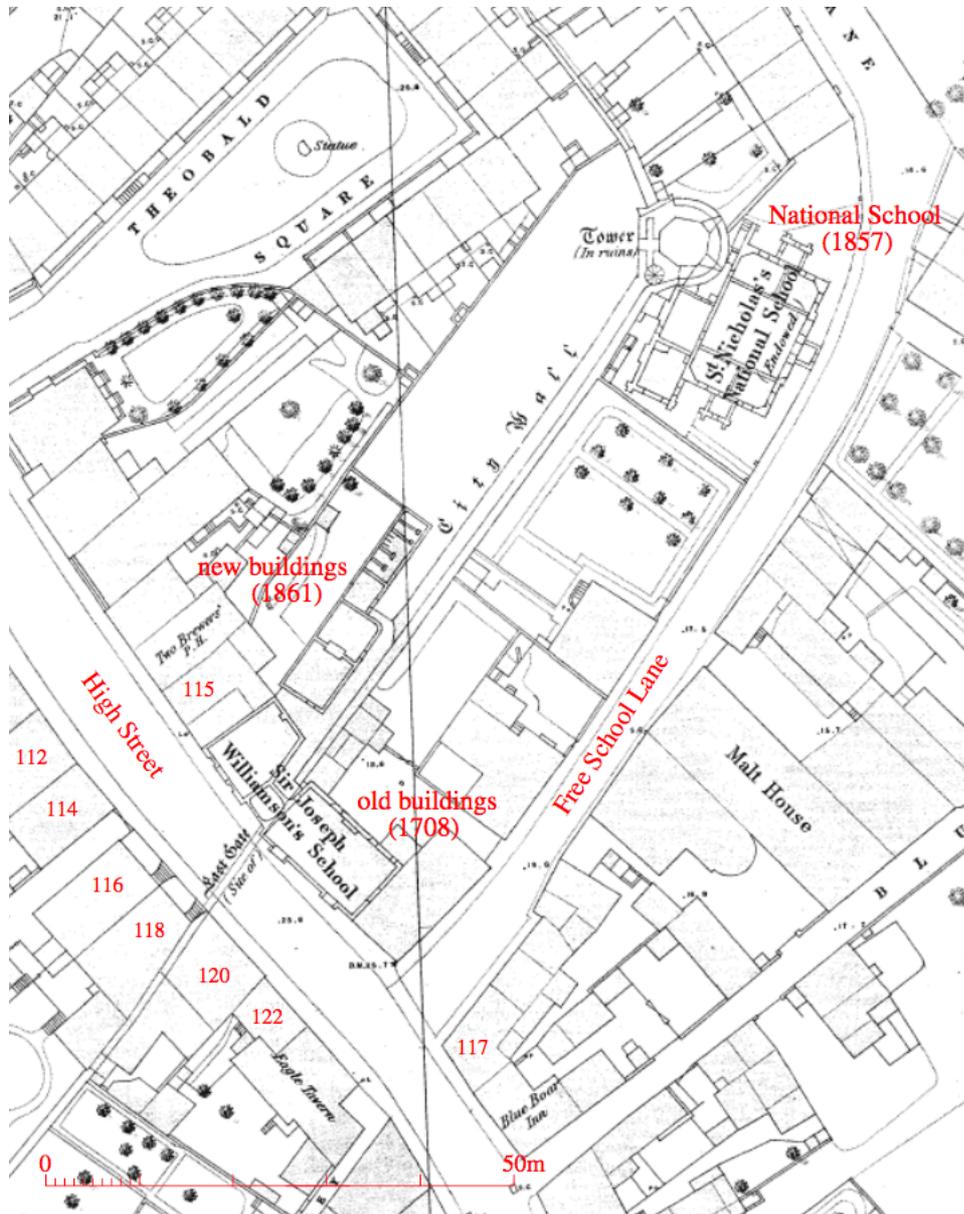
Rochester Antiquities. – During last week, as the workmen were employed in laying water pipes from the back of the King's Head to St. Margaret's-street, many human bones were dug up, and, opposite some stables three entire human skeletons were found. Much conjecture has been created as to the period when the inhumation could have taken place, and how they came to be deposited where they have been found. Speculation on the matter would be useless, although it is more than probable that from the contiguity of the spot where the three skeletons were found to the present burial ground of St. Nicholas parish, there might have been a cemetery here at a former period – at the same time it is certainly singular that human bones should have been found where they have been, from this spot nearly to the Grammar School. There were also found, as we hinted in our last, some stone foundations nearly opposite the magistrates' clerk's office, and which were considered by some as the site on which the South gate of the city once stood. Now, independent of this spot being almost on the edge of the castle moat, a most unusual place for the entrance to a city, there are two places which claim the same distinction. One is at the turning of the road nearly opposite the residence of the Rev. W. Conway, on Boley-hill, and that certainly presents strong claims, which have been supported by good authorities; the other

is what has long been termed the "Prior's gate" at the end of Minor Canon-row, and which we cannot help considering has equally strong claims to be regarded as the original southern entrance to the city from St. Margaret's-street. The entrance to the Prior's grounds still occupies its original position, although the stone archway is half embedded in the ground. The South gate (vulgo, the Prior's gate), over a ribbed archway of stone, in which the iron stanchions for the gates still remain, has a chamber above the arch, which – and we call particular attention to this fact – had an entrance on two sides of it to the platform of the embattled walls of the city! It may be, therefore, fairly asked what probability there is that the entrance to the Prior's grounds should form part of the defences of one of the main entrances to the city? We doubt, indeed, if a similar thing can be shown in any other quarter. The Engineers are still labouring to effect the destruction of the wall at Eastgate, and the Goths and Vandals who employ them turn a deaf ear to the "groans of the citizens." It may be hoped that when they are withdrawn, the work will be finished in a more reputable manner than it was accomplished at the bridge, which not only occupied a considerable time, but the debris has since remained, and remains still – a scandal to the city, and a disgrace to those who have allowed it to remain. Will none of our eminent resident archaeologists (!) step in, and inform the governors and extraordinary governors of the Free School, of the work of demolition going on? Or will they allow their names to be handed down to posterity, as aiding and abetting an act of perfect barbarism?

James Phippen, *Descriptive sketches of Rochester* (Rochester, 1862), appendix, p. 259

The City Walls. Page 135. – Whilst engaged, in the summer of 1861, in pulling down the wall at the side of the school, it was found that the usual description of labourers employed were unequal to the task, from the hardness of the cement; and some Royal Engineers from the barracks were employed at the works for some months, who were obliged to resort to blasting operations before they could accomplish their task, and even then it was with difficulty they got through the mass of cement in front of the wall. Many were of opinion that it was the core of a Roman wall, but it was evidently not the case; and when it was removed, the irregularly built flint wall that was exposed destroyed the illusion, and the idea of its being of Roman construction was entirely dispelled. Many Archaeologists were thus confirmed in their previous opinions, that an excavation of two or three feet deep would displace a Roman foundation. It is probable that the wall then

exposed was of the early part of the thirteenth century, that being the last date we have of the town walls being built. The piece of Vandalism committed on the wall will long remain a disgrace to those who sanctioned it.



Detail from the 1:500 Ordnance Survey map surveyed in 1861-3.