

The Roman London

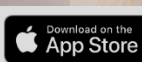
Short Guide to Roman Sites in London

- Mithraeum
- Amphitheater
- Town Defenses



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Short History of London

London was first founded by the Romans nearly 2000 years ago. The Romans called their new settlement Londinium. The etymology of this name is uncertain but one possible explanation states that it is derived from the Indo-European word *plowonida* (in Brythonic this would have been *lowonidonjon*) meaning 'fast-flowing river'.

The location of the settlement was chosen for its strategic position along the banks of the river Thames at the first point the river could safely be bridged. Its proximity to the sea also meant that Londinium would be capable of providing port facilities for seafaring vessels. Not much is known about the first phase of Roman occupation at London, it was established no earlier than 50 AD and probably took the form of a military fort around which a *vicus* developed. The Roman writer Tacitus describes the London of circa 60 AD as being 'famous for its wealth of traders and commerce'. This period of Roman London did not last for long as in 60 - 61 AD it became one of the three Roman towns (the others being Colchester and St. Albans) that were razed to the ground by the Boudiccan Revolt. Roman sources claim that the Britons took no quarter and massacred any civilians, men, women and children, that had not evacuated the city - the sheer violence of the attack is attested to by a layer of red scorched earth that can still be seen in the archaeological record across much of the city.

In the years after Boudica's uprising, the city was rebuilt, within 15 years of the revolt Londinium had all of the facilities associated with a Roman town, including a forum, baths and an amphitheater. Provincial administration seems to have moved from Colchester to Londinium in the latter part of the 1st century AD and by the beginning of the 2nd century AD it had become established as the provincial capital. Throughout the 2nd century AD, Londinium's defensive capabilities were increased; a large fort was constructed at Cripplegate and the landward side of the settlement was encircled by a huge masonry wall (3.2 km long and up to 3m wide and 6m high) and accompanying ditch.

In 197 AD Septimius Severus divided Britannia into two provinces, Britannia Superior and Britannia Inferior. Londinium was the provincial capital of the former of these with Eboracum (York) being made capital of the latter. In the 290s AD, Britannia was further divided, with Londinium this time becoming the capital of Maxima Caesariensis. Throughout these changes, the imperial treasury was kept in Londinium and it seems to have remained the financial center for the whole of Britannia.

By the early 400s AD, instability throughout the Roman Empire as well as Saxon aggression was making Roman rule in Britain increasingly untenable and in 410 AD orders were received from Rome to withdraw from the province. The complete breakdown of Roman governance, economics and trade in the years immediately following 410 AD greatly exacerbated this and the majority of Roman towns and cities within the province, including Londinium, were either abandoned or fell into long periods of decline.

By 700 AD, the Saxons had established a settlement called Lundenwic about 1.6 km to the west of the ruins of Roman Londinium, in the area that is now Covent Garden. The settlement covered an area of approximately 600,000 sq ft, and, like Londinium before it, it became an important commercial center. Throughout the 800s, London, along with the rest of Britain came under increasing attack from Viking raiders; one such raid, that took place in 842 AD, was described by a contemporary chronicler as 'the great slaughter'. This was the era in which Alfred the Great rose to prominence, he eventually defeated the Vikings in battle and negotiated a treaty which consigned them to ruling the north-east of Britain, or the Danelaw as it later became known. In order to consolidate his position in the south Alfred sought to increase the defensive capabilities of the towns under his control. In the case of London, this meant a move away from Lundenwic and the re-occupation of Londinium (to the Saxons it was known as Lundenburgh - burgh meaning fortified). The city's old Roman walls which had survived into this period were patched up and defensive ditches dug. Lundenwic, now largely abandoned, gained a new name Ealdwic (Old Town) which is preserved today in the part of London called Aldwych.

The Saxon establishment of Lundenburgh marks the founding of what would become modern London. Although the name 'London' now covers a large metropolitan area, the City of London itself is still loosely bounded by the borders of its original Roman defences. It was under the Saxons that London became the seat of political power in the newly formed Kingdom of England. The penultimate Saxon king, Edward the Confessor ordered the construction of an abbey and a royal palace at Westminster (then known as Thorney Island) thereby consolidating London's position. Westminster has remained the heart of the British state ever since, being the site of coronations, royal burials and government. Over the ensuing centuries, London continued to grow, becoming increasingly important on both a national and a global level.

Mithraeum



The temple of Mithras was built around AD 240. It would have originally been located on the east bank of the River Walbrook. It measured 18 x 8 meters and was constructed in ragstone, Roman brick and tile. It was rendered with a smooth plaster which was likely painted. The floor was made of timber, over beaten earth and gravel, with stone stairs. Entrance was through a narthex and via stairs which led down to a central nave and then up to an apse at the rear which contained the altar. Two rows of seven columns created aisles along each side of the nave. A timber-lined water vessel was located in the southwest corner.

The temple was found during construction of Bucklersbury House in 1954. Initial excavations found fine quality, 3rd century Carrara marble statues of Minerva, Mithras, Serapis, Bacchus and Mercury, as well as courser local clay religious figurines. To allow continued construction on the site in the 1950-1960s, the entire temple was relocated by 100 meters and installed in Temple Court along Queen Victoria Street. Following demolition of Bucklersbury House in 2010 the temple was returned close to its original location. Excavations in 2010 and 2014, led by Museum of London Archaeology, recovered over 14,000 artefacts from the site, including tools, pewter vessels, footwear, a large number of ancient Roman writing-tablets.

The temple has been reconstructed 7 meters below street level as part of an archaeological exhibition within the new Bloomberg building. In order to preserve walls of the original temple which have not been excavated, the reconstructed temple is about 12 meters west of its original location.

The temple as displayed reflects the first building phase dating to AD 240 prior to later Roman modification. The reconstruction uses the original stone and brick, however modern timber, lime mortar, and render have been used based on samples of the original Roman materials. A number of artefacts are also on display here and in the Museum of London.



Mithraeum - Visual effects shown during the visit. Picture by Timetravelrome. ©



Mithraeum. Picture by Timetravelrome. ©



Mithraeum. Picture by Timetravelrome. ©



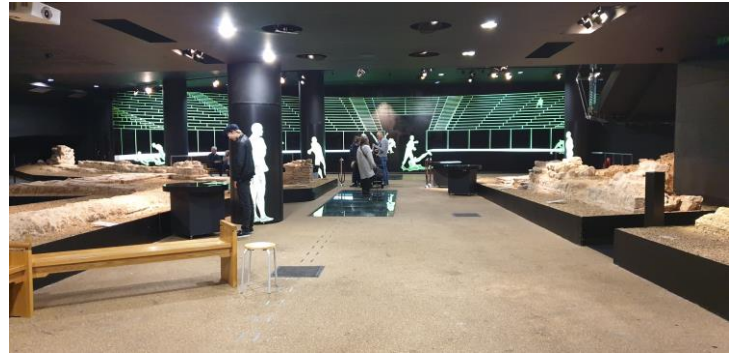
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London Amphitheatre ★ ★ ★ ★

The remains of the Roman amphitheater were discovered in 1985 during the redevelopment of the Guildhall Art Gallery. A wooden amphitheater was built in this location around AD 70, just to the southeast of Cripplegate Fort.

The entire structure was rebuilt in stone the early 2nd century. The amphitheater's tiered seating had a capacity of around 7,000 spectators who would have assembled to watch gladiator battles and animal fights. The overall stadium was elliptical in shape measuring 130 x 110 meters – one of the largest in Roman Britain. The central gravel arena measured 62 x 44 meters. The spectators were protected by a curved podium wall 1 meter wide. Timber seating was supported on piers around a raised earth bank. The entrances were via 7 meter wide tunnels which gave also access to two small shrines dedicated to Nemesis, the goddess of retribution. Plank-lined drains ran around the inside of the retaining wall and across the central arena. By the late 4th century the amphitheater was abandoned and much of the stonework was removed.

The ruins of the amphitheater are displayed in the Guildhall Art Gallery and can be viewed as part of a tour. The remains of the original walls and drainage system are conserved eight meters below the current ground level. A digital projection recreates the layout of the amphitheater. Artefacts are also on display. Outside, the courtyard has been paved with a line of darker stone that traces the edge of the amphitheater.



London Amphitheatre – Basement of the Guildhall Art Gallery.
Picture by Timetravelrome. ©



Guildhall Art Gallery building. Picture by Timetravelrome. ©



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Town Defences and Tower Hill Wall



The Roman walls around Londinium were built around AD 200. Construction of the 3.2 km stretch of wall was completed within a fairly short length of time, and enclosed an area of approximately 330 acres. No wall was built along the river. The initial wall was built as a series of lengths separated by 10 gates – the four main Roman gates later became known as Bishopsgate, Aldgate, Ludgate, and Newgate. The wall was generally 2.4 meters wide and 5.5 meters high. The inner wall was built with a raised bank butting up against the wall that was 3.5 meters wide and between 1 to 1.5 meters high. Approximately 86,000 tonnes of ragstone was imported from Maidstone in Kent via barge along the Thames River for the construction of the walls. The sandstone for the plinths came from the Cotswolds. A minimum of 22 bastions were later added. Along the eastern wall the bastions were added in the 3rd century. They were generally 65 meters apart and constructed with solid bases. Additional, hollow centered bastions were added to the remaining walls towards the end of the 4th century and later during the medieval period.

Much of the wall was either altered during the medieval period, or lays buried beneath the modern city, however several sections of the Roman wall are well preserved. The best sections of wall are visible aboveground at **Tower Hill**, **Cooper's Row**, and **Noble Street**. Additional sections of wall can be seen underground at London Wall and around **Jewry Street**.

The **Tower Hill Wall** on east side of Trinity Place is one of the best preserved sections of the wall which surrounded Roman Londinium. It was originally built in AD 200 however the upper portion of this section of wall is a later medieval addition. Excavations uncovered the original Roman construction down to its foundations with a lower levelling course of stone, inner core of mortar and rubble, and a facing of alternating sections of courses of squared ragstone with double or triple bonding-courses of flat red tile. The original wall was approximately 6.4 meters high in this area. The Roman wall had an inner rampart and a deep external ditch. The foundations of an internal tower were also found, which would have given access to the ramparts via a set of stairs. The wall was increased in height during the medieval period.

The visible portion of wall here is about 38 meters long and stands at a height of almost 11 meters including the medieval addition. The layers of ragstone and red tile clearly show the Roman-era wall. The nearby postern gate is a medieval construction.



Roman London wall at Tower Hill. By Mariordo - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://bit.ly/2LATQEN>



Roman London wall at Tower Hill. By Katie Chan - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://bit.ly/3bGL6Ym>



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Coopers Row City Wall ★ ★ ★

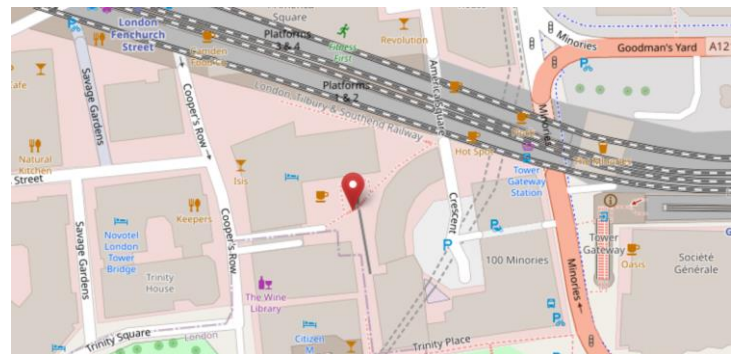
This section of the Roman city wall on east side of Trinity Place is one of the best preserved sections of the wall which surrounded Roman Londinium. It was originally built in AD 200 however the upper portion of this section of wall is a later medieval addition. Excavations uncovered the original Roman construction down to its foundations with a lower levelling course of stone, inner core of mortar and rubble, and a facing of alternating sections of courses of squared ragstone with double or triple bonding-courses of flat red tile.

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Coopers Row Roman Wall . BBy Mariordo - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://bit.ly/2TegSpi>



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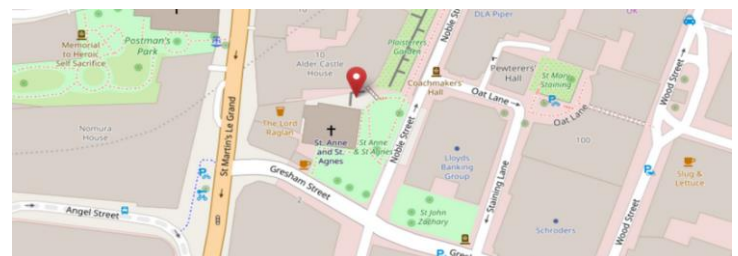
Noble Street City Wall ★ ★

This section of the city wall is one of several that have been found near modern Aldersgate Street and would have run to the east of the ancient Roman Gate to join with the western section of the walls of the Roman Cripplegate Fort. This length of Roman wall and a bastion were excavated in 1922 within the yard of the Castle and Falcon Hotel. The wall was well-preserved from the modern ground level down to the foundations (about 3 meters in height) although a 6 meter section closest to the bastion was badly damaged. The wall was constructed with the standard external face of alternating sections of squared ragstone and double bonding course of red tile. Overall this length of wall the outer face showed signs of repair during the late Roman period. A brick-lined drain ran through the wall at one point.

The Roman wall runs along the west side of Noble Street and turns towards Aldersgate Steet. The section running parallel with Noble street towards the bastion and fort are visible, however the section that turns towards Aldersgate is preserved below ground level along the modern Alder House.



Noble Street City Wall. Picture by Timetravelrome. ©



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Cripplegate Fort West Gate ★ ★ ★

Excavations by Professor Grimes in Falcon Square in 1956 revealed the western gate of Cripplegate Fort. The fort covered an area of 12 acres and was built to house some 1,500 men (cavalry and infantry) along with administrative buildings and supply stores. The wall around the Roman fort was built in AD 120. Four gates gave access to the fort, one on each side of the perimeter wall. This western gate had twin entrances with turrets on each side, a sentry walk, and guardroom. The northern turret, central road piers, and guardroom are preserved. The northern turret measured 4.5 meters square. The guardroom was 2.5 meters square with a small door on the southeast corner from the road. The base of the guardroom was made with large sandstone blocks weighing over 500 kg. The two arched entrances through the gate were made of ragstone with wooden doors, and were wide enough to fit a cart. The road through the gate was lined with gravel. During the late Roman period, the gate was blocked with a ragstone wall.

The remains of the Roman wall and western gate to Cripplegate Fort are well-preserved. They are displayed in the underground carpark below London Wall Road. The gate was not modified during the medieval period and thus displays its original Roman construction. The Museum of London offers tours of the gate and wall in this area.



Cripplegate Fort West Gate - By 3BRBS - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://bit.ly/2Za3OVH>



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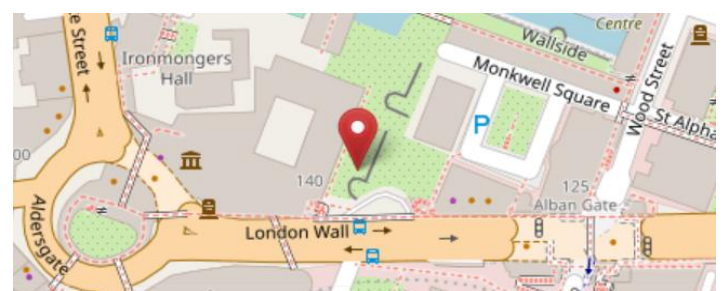
Bastion 14 ★ ★

Bastion 14 was discovered in 1865, and the section of wall from the Roman Cripplegate fort found during Professor Grimes's 1948 excavations. The north and western walls of the fort walls built in AD 120 were incorporated into the main city wall in AD 200. In this area, a section of wall 1 meter high was found with a clay bank behind it. The clay bank is the remains of the earlier wall structure where the internal thickening wall was added. A gravel road surface was found beyond the clay bank. This section of wall does not show the usual sandstone plinth, instead it has a horizontal offset which would have been part of the original fort construction.

Bastion 14 is a semi-circular tower, about 12 meters high. It is made of rough flint and ragstone with red-tile bonding courses similar to that found in the Roman walls. The construction of the bastion likely dates to the medieval period. The Roman constructed fort walls are buried beneath the current ground level. The medieval bastion 14 is visible within the park area of the Barber-Surgeons' Hall along with additional sections of the Roman city wall. "



London Wall bastion 14. Picture by Timetravelrome. ©



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Giltspur Street City Walls ★

A section of the Roman wall was discovered east of Giltspur Street during extensions to the General Post Office Yard in 1907. A 4.6 metre long curved portion of wall and a medieval corner bastion were located. This section of wall would have joined Aldersgate and Newgate. The wall survived to its full width at the lower levels with a sandstone plinth and the upper courses of squared ragstone and double tile-bonding. The wall leans slightly outwards and showed evidence of water damage and cracking prior to the medieval-era corner tower being added.

A quite large section of wall is preserved inside the Merrill Lynch building. Viewings can be arranged with security during business hours.



Part of the Roman City Walls in the Merrill Lynch building.
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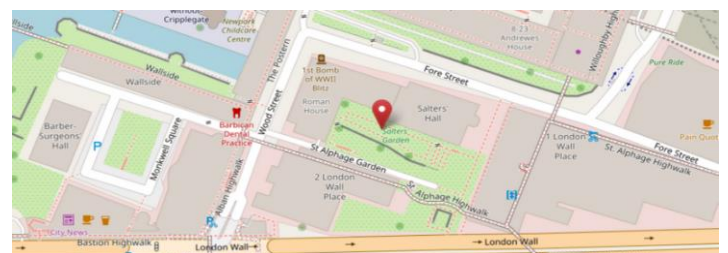
St Alphage's Garden City Wall ★★

The Roman city wall here forms the northern boundary of St Alphage's churchyard. This section of wall was initially excavated in 1882, although archaeologists at the time failed to recognize the wall as Roman as the earliest wall was without the usual course of red-tile bonding. The main city wall here was added to the original fort wall. The inner core is of Roman construction, and shows the double-thickness at the base where the two walls were joined to increase the thickness of the wall to suit the newer fortifications. The wall shows several later modifications and repairs. The outer face on the north side has two distinct stone facings which date to the medieval period.

The lower section of the eastern part of this wall shows most clearly the original Roman construction. The core and thickening wall are visible. The visible face of the remaining upper portions are all medieval era modifications.



St Alphage's Garden City. Picture by Timetravelrome. ©



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