discovering the Port of Roman London

Gustav Milne

UCL MOLA
1910 County Hall ship
Regis House 1930
New Guy’s Hospital 1958
1963 Blackfriars Ship
1973
Customs House

THE TIMES 6th Oct 1973

Archeological report

Roman quay: Beams recovered after 1,700 years

Huge beams and joists from the original Roman quay in the Pool of London were yesterday lifted from the site where they have lain for about 1,700 years, preserved in Thames clay.

The site beside the Customs House in Lower Thames Street is being redeveloped and archaeologists employed by Guildhall had their last day there to remove what they could before the bulldozers and pile-drivers move in. The timber was sunk in the moat of the Jewel House beside the Houses of Parliament to prevent it from drying and deteriorating. There experts will be able to examine and preserve it at leisure.

With the possible exception of the Roman wharf at Dover excavated by the Victorians, this is the finest wooden quay recovered from anywhere in the Roman Empire. The great Roman harbours at Ostia and Leptis Magna were more spectacular, but they were built of stone. In Londinium the nearest stone for building was many miles away, and so the Romans built with timber. The mud has preserved it almost intact.

The box structure about 40ft long by 12ft wide where the gallows tied up is of particular interest for the light it sheds on the arcane subject of ancient carpentry. It includes magnificent examples of half-lap joints, splayed bare-face soffit tenons, and other contrivances of the Roman carpenters.

To judge from pottery found on the site the quay appears to date from the end of the second century AD. Dendrochronology measurement of the spaces between the annual rings in the timber, and its comparison by computer with weather tables, may provide a more precise date.

The excavation also uncovered a large braced wooden structure of the thirteenth century, whose function is still obscure. It might have been a tidal mill. This is particularly interesting because it provides a rare example of medieval mortise-and-tenon work and other techniques that will enable specialists to trace the evolution of carpentry joints. Balks of this medieval structure have also been removed to the moat of the Jewel House.

Mr Tim Tatton-Brown, of the Institute of Archaeology, who is supervising the dig, said yesterday, as the crane hoisted beams out of their glutinous bed: “We should like to have taken more, but the beams are enormously heavy, and we have no more time.”

The foundation of the original stone Customs House of the fourteenth century, where Chaucer worked, was also uncovered and a wooden drain removed from it for preservation.

When the remains of London’s original waterfront have been examined and preserved they will probably be reconstructed in the new London Museum, or perhaps in a display on their original site. Meanwhile the archaeologists hope, when Billingsgate market is redeveloped in the next few years, to uncover, just upstream from the Roman quay, the remains of the Roman and Saxon bridges across the Thames.

By Philip Howard
1973-1991
Rescue Archaeology
1979-81: Pudding Lane Fish Street Hill Lower Thames St
1982-3: Billingsgate Lorry Park
1988 underneath Cannon St Station: mouth of the Walbrook Stream
Contract Archaeology 1991+
MoLAS 96
2016  Sugar Quay
Roman London *Londinium*

- **AD 47** new foundation
- **AD 60** destroyed in native uprising
- **AD 60-75** rebuilt: new public buildings forum & basilica, bath-houses, amphitheatre, PORT begins
- **AD 85-120** major expansion: BRIDGE; enlarged forum, PORT
3 (FAR LEFT)
The Thames formed a boundary between warring tribes

4
The Iron-Age tribes of southern Britain at the time of the Claudian invasion:

1. BRIGANTES
2. PARISI
3. CORITANI
4. DECEANGLI
5. ORDOVICES
6. CORNOVII
7. ICENI
8. TRINOVANTES
9. CATEVALLAUNI
10. DOBUNNI
11. SILURES
12. DEMETAE
13. DUMNONII
14. DUROTURGES
15. ATREBATES
16. CANTIACI
Map 1: The position of the City of London in the Thames valley. Iron Age sites are predominantly to the west of the City, or on the surrounding gravels. The Roman road network which quickly made London a centre of communications may have been based in part on prehistoric trackways. These major routes all survive as major roads today.
The Romans’ London bridge found

By Martin Walker

THE HUB of the Roman Empire in Britain, the site of the vital bridge across the River Thames, has at last been found.

A team of the Museum of London's Department of Urban Archaeology, working 30 feet below the surface of Upper Thames Street, has cleared up "the last great mystery of Roman London". The team, led by the London Bridge of today, and adjoining the site of the medieval London Bridge with its clustering shops and houses, to "Roman" Bridge, the "Great Hotel", the church of St. Magnus, the "Martyr" and, across the river, the "Old" Wharf site of the dock, has almost certainly under the large site which adjoins the "Museum of London".

"This is the last great mystery of Roman London, the greatest site of that bridge," said the site director yesterday. "It is the one site that still fills me with excitement and excitement.

"The Roman and the Imperial Era and the Age have stood for 30 years, about the birth of Christ and the birth of London, and the site of this bridge has, at last, been found.

The bridge pier has been found on a site being redeveloped by English Property Corporation and the National Provident Institution and Mr. Holme yesterday..."
C2nd: enlarged Forum & Basilica
Walbrook

Southwark
Walbrook industrial zone

The Glass Workers of Roman London

John Shepherd and Angela Wardle

Roman pottery production in the Walbrook valley


Fiona Seeley and James Drummond-Murray
Tidal mills on Walbrook and River Fleet
Classis Britannica CL BR

troop transport; *cursus publicus*

ship-building; harbour construction;

stone-quarrying; bricks; iron industry
Roman London *Londinium*

- **AD 200**  Landward city wall built
- **AD 250-450**  settlement contracts, but private housing high-quality
- **AD 250-300**  Public buildings demolished: HARBOURWORKS dismantled
- **AD 270-300**  RIVERSIDE WALL built
- **AD 350+**  defences strengthened
- **AD 457+**  settlement abandoned
C3rd riverside wall
Quays dismantled: warehouses abandoned
C3rd riverside wall
Diagram showing Roman waterfront development from the first century (f), to the mid-third (b), after which the riverside wall was built (a). The dark tone marks the depth of water at low tide, the lighter tone the increased depth at high tide. Note how the tidal range (lighter tone) decreases over time [Clarkiss Milne].
Barbarian invasions: Londinium abandoned c. AD 457
For the province and the port, Britannia’s Brexit from the Roman Empire did not go well......