

# Roman London: a first century boundary

DAVID BENTLEY

FOR MANY YEARS archaeologists have thought that the occurrence of scattered burials within the western part of Roman London indicates an early city boundary wall to the east of the city wall, ultimately established at Newgate *c* AD 200. The distribution of first and second century cremation burials, normally located outside a Roman settlement, implies a first century boundary, perhaps an early defensive ditch and rampart, running south in line with the west side of the Cripplegate fort of *c* AD 100. It has also been suggested that the curious displacement in the line of the primary east-west Roman road at the western end of Cheapside pinpoints the likely entrance through this early boundary into the City. The discovery of early, pre-Boudiccan 'suburban' buildings aligned with the main east-west road further west indicates that the displacement (and therefore the early western boundary) was probably established as a primary element in the planning of Roman London.

Recent discoveries of Roman roads at sites off Foster Lane and Aldersgate Street seem to reinforce the conclusion that the main western entrance to the City in the first century lay at what is now the junction of Newgate Street and Cheapside. This article considers the postulated boundary and gateway in terms of their relationship to the development of the settlement, by examining the evidence of natural and Roman topography in this part of London, and suggests that although their function changed, these boundary features survived and continued to exert an influence over the development of London throughout the Roman period and possibly beyond.

## The evidence

The distribution of burials in Roman London within the area defined by the walls is usually taken to show that the early formal extent of the City was smaller than that established by AD 200, as throughout the Roman period burial was confined by law to areas outside settlement limits. In his discussion on the first century Roman baths at Cheapside, Marsden has argued that the first and second century cremation burials around Newgate Street and in the St. Paul's area (Fig. 1) would have been excluded from the City by an early boundary

immediately to their east<sup>1</sup>. Such a feature could explain the non-alignment of two portions of the main east-west road at the west end of Cheapside (Fig. 1, 1). Bends or displacements in the alignment of Roman roads normally indicate a change of level or the need to accommodate an obstacle, and (Merrifield argues) in the absence of the former, a ditch and rampart are most likely to account for the kink in the Cheapside road<sup>2</sup>. Marsden suggests that the Cheapside baths located near the main road conveniently close to this boundary and inferred gateway to the early City, may have been attached to an inn serving travellers (Fig. 1, 2). Their demise in the late second century, he thinks, was because the bath and inn were then in the wrong place after the boundary had moved farther to the west in *c.* AD 200, with the building of the defensive wall. More recently, buildings have been discovered in alignment with the Newgate Street stretch of the main east-west road at the old Post Office site (Fig. 1, 3). Roskams argues that their position at the time of the Boudiccan revolt in AD 60 demonstrates that the street and postulated boundary were already established as primary elements in the planning of Roman London<sup>3</sup>. The evidence suggests that these strip buildings arranged in a ribbon development in the area of the early cremation burials had a commercial function, perhaps exploiting opportunities provided by people travelling to and from London. It appears that at this time burials were not confined to special cemetery zones within suburban areas.

## Two new roads

The significance of the Cheapside displacement or kink has been reinforced by the chance discovery of a Flavian period road 50m (160ft) to its north in Foster Lane<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 1, 4). A projection of its alignment to the south west meets the Cheapside road at the west end of the kink where the east-west course is re-established. Here, metalling previously identified as part of the Cheapside road can be seen as marking the junction of these two Roman roads. The most likely interpretation is that the junction lay just within the early boundary, so that the Foster Lane road led directly to the postulated gateway.

A northerly projection of this same alignment is straddled by the south gate of the early second

1. P. Marsden 'Two Roman Public Baths in London', *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 27 (1976) 47-9.

2. R. Merrifield *London: City of the Romans* (1983) 51.

3. S. Roskams 'GPO Newgate Street 1975-9: The Roman levels', *London Archaeol* 3 no. 15 (1980) 403-4.

4. I. Blair 'Foster Lane: The Finding of the Foster Lane Glass', *Popular Archaeol* 5 no. 4 (1983) 23-6.

century Cripplegate fort (Fig. 1, 5), so that the road must originally have served an earlier development, possibly a precursor of the fort, in a similar position. Once established, the second century fort made use of the existing pattern which provided direct access westwards via the Cheapside road. Evidence for the main north-south axis (*via praetoria*), often shown linking the fort at right angles to the Cheapside road on plans of Roman London, has never been found. The Foster Lane road continued in use into the third century at least, as buildings of that date are found aligned with its west side. This demonstrates that a road originally established for specific reasons on a certain line could continue to function as a thoroughfare after those determinants no longer applied.

Recent excavations at Aldersgate Street have revealed a 10m (30ft) length of road, provisionally dated to the first century, aligned approximately north-south and, like the Foster Lane road, leading towards the Cheapside kink<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 1, 6). It is likely that this road functioned as an early route out of London, providing access to the north. The road lies immediately outside Roman Aldersgate (a later addition to the city wall of c AD 200), and to its north successive road surfaces have been recorded on a similar course, but with a third century date, broadly contemporary with Roman Aldersgate<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 1, 7). The road seen on earlier occasions therefore post-dates both the more recent discovery at Aldersgate Street and the postulated early gateway towards which it presumably led. Differences in description and levels, as well as dating evidence, strongly suggest that these were separate roads, of which the later may have been a repositioning slightly to the west of the existing thoroughfare, perhaps to take account of the construction of the new gate through the city wall. The discovery of this first century road at Aldersgate Street must dispel the widely held view that no road leading from the settlement was constructed in this area until the gate at Aldersgate was built in the third century. And it is possible that Aldersgate itself was merely the replacement of an earlier gate which had been built to accommodate the previous course of the thoroughfare when the city wall was built c AD 200.

The course of this road to the south of its location just outside Aldersgate is unclear. If it followed precisely the same course, aligned directly on the kink in the east-west route, it would have crossed *en route* a large site on the east side of St. Martin's le

Grand (Fig. 1, 8) which was excavated in 1915<sup>7</sup>. No evidence for such a road or for its third century replacement was recovered here: although the whole area had been truncated to below natural at the beginning of this century, it was closely studded by the bases of rubbish pits, containing pottery of the first to fourth centuries. Unless many of these pits were much later than their earliest contents, it seems that, very close to where it was found, the Aldersgate route must have been deflected a little to the west, along the line of St. Martin's le Grand. Perhaps this was because it would otherwise have approached the boundary line at an undesirably acute angle. It might well also have been inconvenient if each of these roads converged at precisely the same point: some allowance would clearly have to be made for the boundary itself, and for any associated defences, between the junction with the Foster Lane road inside and that with the Aldersgate Street road outside.

#### The topographical significance of the Cheapside kink

The early Aldersgate Street road line, as recorded, seems to have been determined by the position of the kink in the Cheapside road. It is reasonable to suppose, therefore, that the area in the vicinity of the displacement represented a conspicuous topographical feature in the western part of early Roman London. The line of the early boundary would have bisected the large plateau which forms the more westerly of the two hills on which Roman London stood (the other being Cornhill to the east). The only natural feature likely to have determined the course of the boundary is a slight rise in ground level: the brow of the hill in the area where Roman Cheapside crossed its line. From this point, the ground gradually slopes down to the north and south, as well as east towards the Walbrook. This is illustrated on Fig. 1 by the use of modern contours<sup>8</sup>. They are supported by a survey of natural deposits compiled by the Department of Urban Archaeology, and particularly by an observation in 1962 pinpointing a high point on the plateau at the junction of Roman Foster Lane and Cheapside. To the west of this point along Roman Newgate Street the land was fairly flat, but seen from within the early settlement, the position of the west end of the kink would have appeared as the highest point of the hill.

In road surveying, Roman engineers made particular use of high points of land, between which each new stretch could be fixed in a direct line<sup>9</sup>. Perhaps this provides a more obvious reason for the

5. G. Egan, Museum of London DUA. Archive Report forthcoming.

6. J. Haslam 'The Excavation of a Section Across Aldersgate Street, City of London 1972', *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 24 (1973) 76-9.

7. F. Lambert 'Excavations on the Site of the Old Post Office, St Martin le Grand', *Archaeologia* 116 (1915) 235-46.

8. R. Kelsey *Original Plan of Contours 1841*, to be found in manuscript form at the City of London Record Office.

9. I. D. Margary *Roman Roads in Britain* 1 (1965) 11.

displacement in the east-west road alignment: the relatively small rise here on the western hill would have been sufficient for the purposes of surveying. From this point the most practical routes from the new settlement could be determined, west across the River Fleet towards modern Holborn and Westminster (followed by Roman Newgate Street) and north in the direction of the Highgate hills (followed by Roman Aldersgate Street).

#### Advantages of the course of the boundary

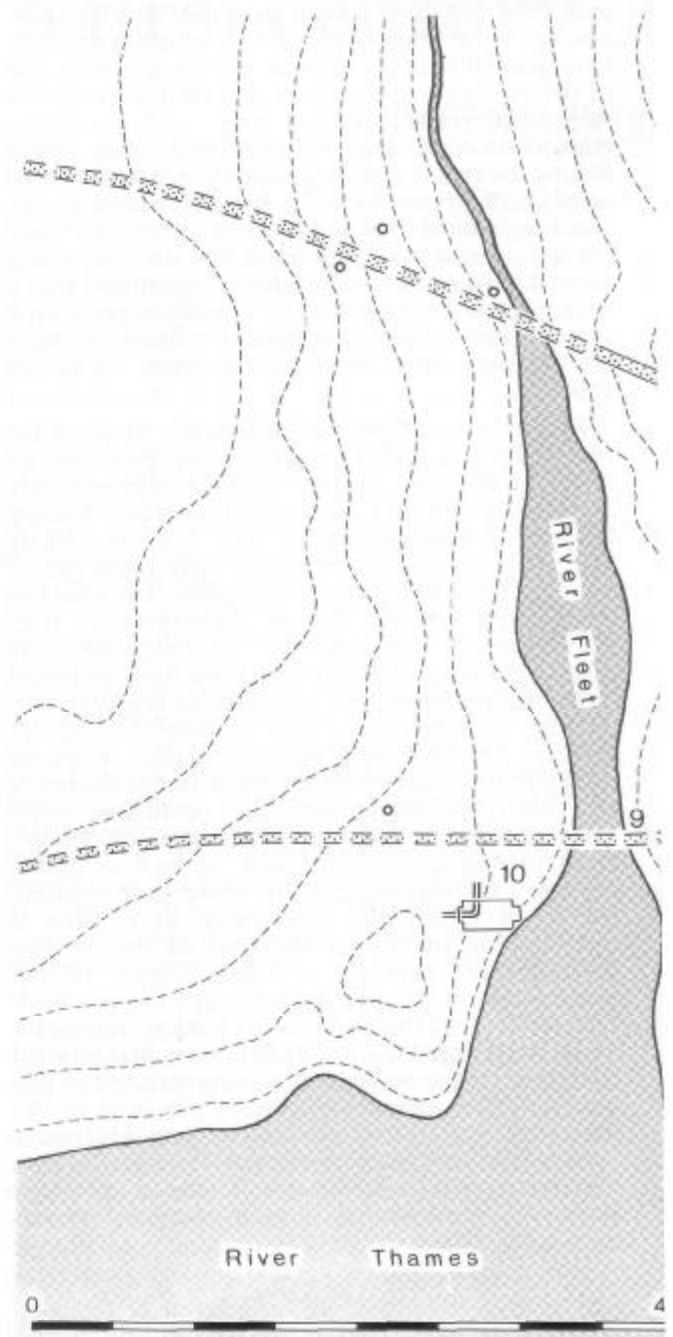
By setting the boundary on this elevated position the planners of London would have exploited a number of interrelated advantages. The radial character of the Foster Lane, Aldersgate and Newgate Street intersection suggests a desire to control and to limit access. Since the *pomerium* had legal and religious connotations (considerable importance being attached to where the boundary ran) it would have been convenient if the line was conspicuously marked and better still if it was conspicuously placed. Converging roads drawn together by a formal, hill top entrance would help to define and control the ordered layout and development within the settlement.

The choice of high ground would also have made good strategic sense in the early years, by providing enhanced views of the western and northwestern approaches as well as surveillance eastwards to the core of the new settlement across the Walbrook. Indeed, the position of the later second century fort (and of its possible predecessor) may well have been influenced by just such a consideration. There is no evidence that defence was a prime consideration in the pre-Boudiccan period: hence the chaos caused by the revolt. Even later the risks to the settlement were presumably thought to be adequately covered by the Cripplegate fort. By c AD 200, on the other hand, the much increased preoccupation with security which led to the building of the city wall also saw the steep natural slope of the Fleet valley as a more effective line of defence to the west (Fig. 1).

#### The Ludgate road

It can also be suggested that the route from early Roman London to the probable pre-settlement ford at Westminster would have branched off from the main east-west route at the position of the Cheapside kink. The exploitation of the hill top as a survey point and later as a settlement boundary and gateway suggests that a route would probably have led directly from there to a crossing point of the River Fleet west of Ludgate (Fig. 1, 9), on a course followed for most of its length by medieval Paternoster Row.

Before the bridgehead from Southwark was established some time after AD 50 it is likely that an important crossing of the Thames was by means of



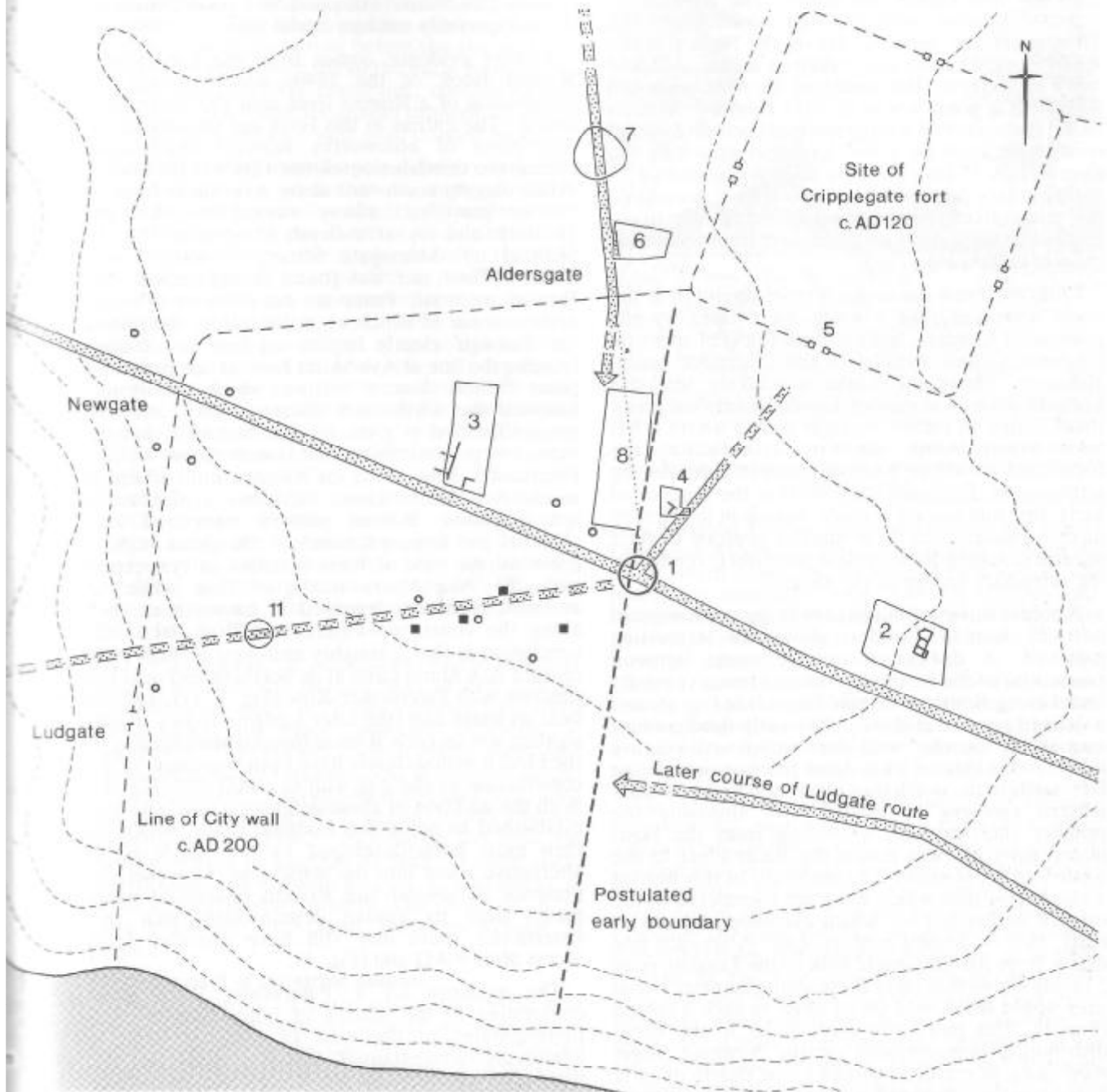


Fig. 1: Roman London: the postulated early boundary and the primary east-west route with features 1-11 mentioned in the text;

circles indicate the site of one or more early burials and squares the site of late Roman pavements. Contours are at 6ft (1.83m) intervals.



a ford at Westminster, a link probably maintained after the first bridge was built<sup>10</sup>. The most direct route to London from the ford would follow the Thames terrace round as far as the mouth of the River Fleet (a course later taken by medieval Strand and Fleet Street). The mouth of the river narrowed slightly at a point where in 1952 Professor Grimes found the corner of a large ditched enclosure on the west bank, lying on a low terrace overlooking the river<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 1, 10). This has been postulated as an early military position which would have dominated the minor river crossing, and reinforces the likelihood of an early route on this course leading towards the site of London.

From the Fleet the route is more doubtful. It has been suggested that a road, later fixed by the position of Ludgate, led east into the settlement on a course roughly parallel to the Cheapside route. However, Merrifield thinks it unlikely that this Ludgate route was one of London's original trunk roads, citing its rather irregular course where it has been found within the City as reflecting the haphazard growth of a minor street in a developing settlement<sup>12</sup>. Roskams suggests that the absence of early, first and second century, burials in the vicinity of this southern route (in marked contrast to their occurrence along Roman Newgate Street) reinforces the subsidiary nature of the route<sup>13</sup>.

A recent survey of burial sites in the north western part of Roman London shows an interesting pattern<sup>14</sup>. A distinction can be made between cremations of the first to mid second century, mostly found along Roman Newgate Street (see Fig. 1), and a defined zone of mid second to early third century cremations together with third and fourth century inhumations located away from this line outside the later walls to the north (not illustrated here). A clear pattern emerges of early burial alongside the primary thoroughfare, extending from the postulated early gateway across the River Fleet to the west. Further burials lie to the south of this line on a number of sites which were not considered in the original survey but for which evidence suggests an early, first or second century date. A straight line drawn from the Cheapside kink to the Ludgate river crossing shows that all of these supplementary burial sites would be located on or close to such a course (Fig. 1). This pattern is very similar to the linear distribution demonstrated on the Newgate Street road and is in marked contrast to the dearth of early burials on the ultimate Ludgate route. It reinforces the proposition that a third road, the Paternoster

route, led directly from the western boundary of first century *Londinium*, and provides a good context for these apparently random burial sites.

Further evidence comes from the City Sewers Record Book of the 1840s which records the observation of a Roman road near the Paternoster course. The entries in this book are the day to day description of noteworthy features encountered during the construction of the City's main sewers. While digging northward along Ave Maria Lane an "ancient gravelled roadway" was cut through. It was 3ft thick and lay at a depth of at least 13ft 3in (4.04m) (cf Aldersgate Street: 3.00m+, Foster Lane: 3.73m) and was found in association with Roman material. From an examination of other entries, some of which were illustrated, the phrase 'cut through' clearly implies an east-west feature crossing the line of Ave Maria Lane at one particular point rather than a feature which persistently followed the north-south course of the Lane. No precise location is given for the find spot, but the next entry, describing the construction of the Paternoster Row sewer at its west end, where it meets Ave Maria Lane, mentions a number of specific finds: Roman pottery associated with charcoal and large quantities of "Roebuck horns", precisely the type of finds described in connection with the Ave Maria roadway. Thus while no metalled road was described as having been seen along the course of Paternoster Row itself, the conclusion is that a roughly east-west Roman road crossed Ave Maria Lane at its northern end near the junction with Paternoster Row (Fig. 1, 11), and not near its south end (the later Ludgate route). If this sighting was an early Roman thoroughfare leading to the Fleet it would clearly have been truncated by the construction of the city wall in c AD 200 (Fig. 1). With the addition of these defences a new gate was established to serve the Ludgate route, which by then must have developed to the south as an alternative route into the settlement. However the presence of several late Roman tessellated pavements near its course demonstrates that this Paternoster route may still have provided local access after c AD 200 (Fig. 1).

The evidence for a 'Paternoster Row' route conforming to the pattern of other early Roman thoroughfares to the west of the settlement is admittedly circumstantial. But it does suggest the most obvious course for the route which must have linked the Westminster crossing with the site of the Roman City at its foundation, with the lasting

10. Summarised by Merrifield *op cit* in note 2, 31-2.

11. W. F. Grimes *The Excavation of Roman and Medieval London* (1968) 183-4.

12. R. Merrifield *The Roman City of London* (1965) 126.

13. S. Roskams, D. Perring *et al*, *The Early Development of Roman London West of the Walbrook*, forthcoming.

14. D. Bentley and F. Pritchard 'The Roman Cemetery at St. Bartholomew Hospital' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 33 (1982) 159-61.

advantage of crossing the River Fleet at the lowest practical point. The postulated route provides an alternative to the rather negative evidence for the Ludgate road in the period before the city wall was built. It also fits in with the of the early boundary as a formal and effective constraint, controlling and confining access to the settlement through a gateway where the primary east-west road crossed its line.

#### The first century boundary: a defensive system?

No conclusive evidence of an early defensive system around *Londinium* has been found: were it not for the convergence there of three or possibly four different routes, the displacement in the main east-west road might be explicable as much by its hill top position as by the existence of any major ditch or rampart at the same point. What the boundary consisted of is still a matter of speculation, as no investigation has taken place on its conjectured course. A ditch was discovered in 1978 near Aldgate, at the eastern limit of the City, on a course which the Roman wall was later to follow. It was a shallow flat-bottomed feature containing silt, about 2m (6½ft) in front of the wall, and was filled in by about AD 120. It seems unlikely to be a defensive boundary, even allowing for the truncation of a possible bank, and Maloney argues that it probably simply formalized the distinction between the urban settlement and the *territorium* outside<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 2). Presumably such a ditch went round the whole of the mid to late first century settlement.

At *Verulamium*, a settlement which in many respects parallels the development of first century *Londinium*, an early ditch and rampart have been found which are more obviously defensive in character<sup>16</sup>. This feature, which dates from just before, or possibly just after, the Boudiccan revolt, measured nearly 2.9m (9ft) deep and 6m (20ft), wide and had the pronounced 'V'-shaped profile characteristic of military ditches. Nothing on this scale has been identified in London at such an early date: indeed London has produced very little evidence at all to suggest military origins. The existence of an early defensive ditch must therefore remain in doubt.

#### The survival of the street pattern

The framework of early streets discussed here continued to function throughout the subsequent urban expansion in the late first and early second centuries, a process which caused much of the open ground around the western hill to be filled in. The position of the main roads would have become fixed by the gateways when the wall was constructed; but the durability of the mid first century planning is

15. J. Maloney 'Excavations at Dukes Place: The Roman Defences' *London Archaeol* 3 no. 11 (1979) 292-7.

16. S. Frere *Verulamium Excavations* 2 (1983) 44-9.

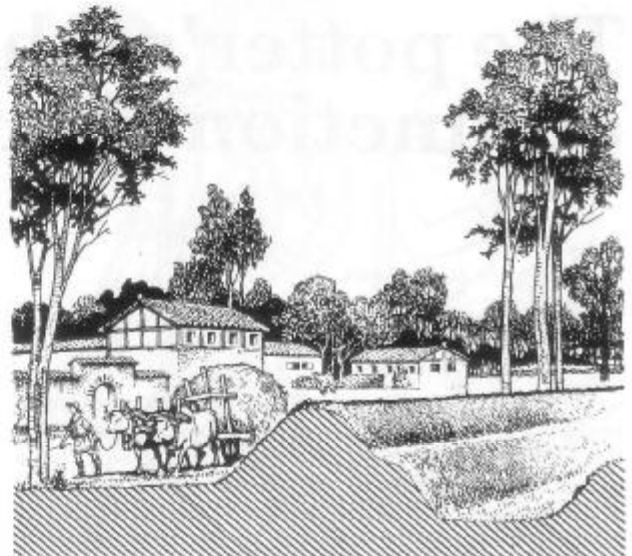


Fig. 2: Roman London: reconstruction of the ditch and bank from near Aldgate; a similar feature may have enclosed the western side of the settlement.

(drawn by Peter Jackson)

demonstrated by the continued use of the Foster Lane and Aldersgate Street roads even though the factor which originally determined their course, the postulated boundary, had probably disappeared. Property development tended to preserve this street pattern. However, there is little evidence for the formal, rectangular street gridding of the kind adopted at the heart of the settlement around Cornhill, and by the time the defensive wall had enclosed the suburb the populated area of London would have already begun to shrink. There was simply no reason to reform the road layout.

The organization implied by the recent evidence supports the suggestion of a central planning authority in London as early as the mid first century. London was, as Roskams has said, planned from the start around a primary east-west trunk route, with development concentrated on, but not confined to, Cornhill. The early decision to enclose a large area, extending from the western boundary to perhaps Aldgate in the east, and the subsequent formalization of this boundary, implicit in the convergent intra- and extra-mural roadways, is indicative of more than a merely piecemeal development. It was not a response to urban growth and changing circumstances, but the product of a unified strategy conceived on a single, and early, occasion.

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