

# King Alfred's plan for London?

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THE IDENTIFICATION of the middle Saxon settlement of *Lundenwic* in the Aldwych area to the west of Roman Londinium was one of the most significant discoveries in British urban archaeology<sup>1</sup>: the work of Alan Vince, Martin Biddle and of the Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology deserve all credit for it. Such a startling discovery, while dramatically resolving old problems, opens many new questions: the study of Saxon London has only just begun. It is with one such question, the size of the settlement which directly replaced *Lundenwic*, that this note is concerned.

It is now thought that *Lundenwic* was established in or by the 7th century, but was abandoned when Londoners moved into the more readily defensible walled area of the old Roman town: the archaeological evidence from *Lundenwic* suggests occupation terminating there in the late 9th or early 10th century, while similar dates are proposed for the earliest substantial occupation of the Roman site. An historical context for this major redevelopment may be found in the defeat of the Vikings in London by Alfred in the late 9th century and the subsequent restoration of the City, noted in contemporary sources. But what did the new town look like? How extensive was it, how regular was its layout, how did it expand subsequently?

A combination of archaeological, topographical and documentary research is beginning to answer these questions by identifying the primary streets in the new development. They seem to lie within a block of streets bounded by Cheapside to the north and the Thames to the south. They include Bread Street<sup>2</sup>,

Garlick Hill/Bow Lane<sup>3</sup> and College Hill<sup>4</sup> in the west, with Fish Street Hill and Botolph Lane in the east<sup>5</sup>. Streets north of this area, such as Milk Street, Ironmonger Lane<sup>6</sup>, Gracechurch Street/Bishopsgate<sup>7</sup> or Leadenhall Street<sup>8</sup> do not seem to be intensively occupied until at least one or two generations later. The approximate extent of the northern edge of the 9th/early 10th-century town can thus be identified, lying well to the south of the sites of Cripplegate fort and the Roman amphitheatre.

The southern boundary has been identified after intensive archaeological work as lying just south of Thames Street, an area where medieval reclamation has extended the waterfront riverwards<sup>9</sup>. Significantly, all sites where pre-Norman Conquest riverfront embankments have been found lie in the central area between Queenhithe and Billingsgate<sup>10</sup>. Such developments were not found to the east on the Custom House site<sup>11</sup>, or to the west on sites from Trig Lane<sup>12</sup> to Baynards Castle<sup>13</sup>. That those waterfront areas were not extended until the 12-13th centuries could suggest that the insulae to the north of them were not laid out or intensively occupied until the 11th or 12th centuries. Thus it is argued that the eastern and western limits of the intended Alfredian core lay at Billingsgate and Broken Wharf respectively.

It has therefore proved possible to identify a discrete grid of streets within the City, at least part of which can be shown to have been occupied in the late 9th to early 10th century. This is demonstrably earlier than in adjoining plots to the north, east and west. Although the street pattern in this area has been distorted and developed with the addition of second-

1. R. Cowie and R. Whytehead 'Lundenwic: the archaeological evidence for mid-Saxon London' *Antiquity* 63 (1989); A Vince *Saxon London* (1990).
2. Incorrectly labelled as "Huggin Hill" on Fig. 109 in V. Horsman, C. Milne and G. Milne *Aspects of Saxon-Norman London, Vol. 1* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Special Paper no 11 (1988).
3. T. Dyson 'Two Saxon Land Grants for Queenhithe' in J. Bird, H. Chapman and J. Clark (eds) *Collectanea Londoniensia* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Special Paper no 2 (1978) 200-215; Horsman *et al* fn 2, 112-3.
4. Excavations at Thames Exchange site, 1988-9.
5. Horsman *et al* fn 2, 112-3.
6. Horsman *et al* fn 2, 113-5.
7. G. Milne, N. Bateman and C. Milne 'Bank deposits with interest' *London Archaeol* 4 no 15 (1984) 399-400.
8. Excavations at Leadenhall Court 1984-6; report in preparation for HMSO; meanwhile see B. Richardson 'Excavation Round-up 1985' *London Archaeol* 5 no 6 (1986) 159 and 'Excavation Round-up 1986' *London Archaeol* 5 no 10 (1987) 271-2.
9. T. Dyson *The medieval waterfront: documents and archaeology* (1989); G. Milne and C. Milne 'The making of the London waterfront' *Current Archaeol* no 66 (1979) 198-204.
10. T. Dyson and K. Stedman *The late Saxon Waterfront in London* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Special Paper in preparation.
11. T. Tatton-Brown 'Excavations at Custom House site, London, 1973' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 25 (1974) 117-219.
12. G. Milne and C. Milne *Medieval waterfront development at Trig Lane, London* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Special Paper no 5 (1982).
13. C. Hill, M. Millett and T. Blagg *The Roman riverside wall and monumental arch in London* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Special Paper no 3 (1980) 46-7.

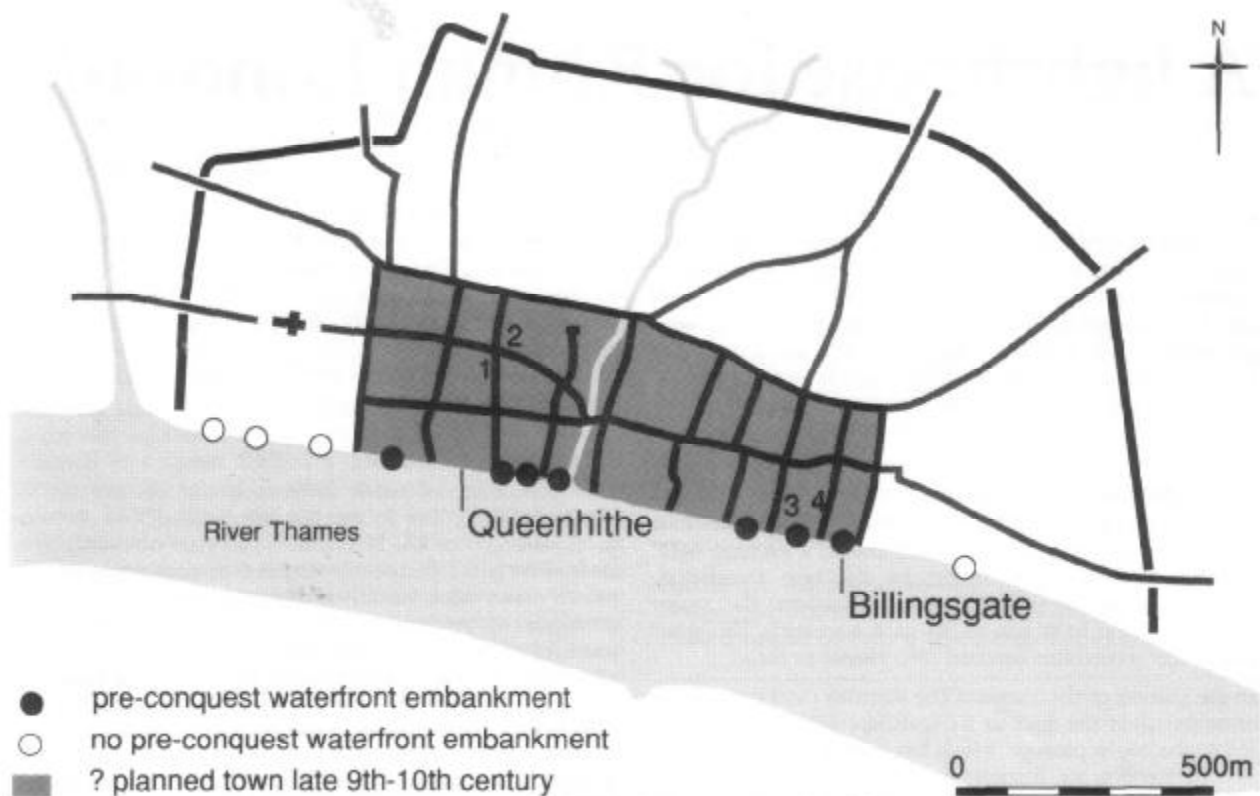


Fig. 1: plan of London showing suggested extent of planned Alfredian town within line of Roman town walls. (Drawing by Chrissie Milne)

ary and tertiary lanes and alleys, the broad framework of the primary insulae may still be detected. This area, extending for some 1000m ( $\frac{5}{8}$  mile) east-west by 300m ( $\frac{1}{2}$  mile) north-south, is argued to be the planned core of the new Alfredian burh. It comprises a grid of up to ten streets running northwards from the river, cut by streets running at right angles to them. The rectilinear pattern may well mirror the broad outlines of the middle Saxon field system on which the town was superimposed.

Fig. 1 shows that rectangular grid, which seems to represent the area laid out for primary settlement: precisely how much of it was actually occupied in the late 9th to early 10th century is a matter yet to be resolved by intensive archaeological study. Indeed some scholars, such as Tony Dyson, would argue that very little of the area beyond the Queenhithe insula saw substantial settlement until the late 10th century.

Leaving aside the question of the population density of the newly-laid-out town, it is clear that even the planned extent proposed here covered only a small proportion of the land available within the Roman walled area. This should come as no surprise, since substantial areas of ground are known to have been deliberately left open (for crops, livestock and so forth) within the walled area of contemporary towns.

It is interesting to note that the perimeter of this primary planned area is ringed by markets and other major features, most of which functioned in the pre-Conquest period. They include the precinct of St Paul's; the possible site of the "King's Hall" at Cripplegate; the great markets at Cheapside, Poultry and (later) Leadenhall on the north side; the site of the old fishmarket on the eastern side, with the two documented harbours at Queenhithe and Billingsgate sitting on the south-western and south-eastern corners. It should be stressed that the position of markets on the edge (rather than at the centre) of the occupied area is a feature of many early town plans. The position of the later medieval London Bridge does not seem to sit centrally in this scheme, and may therefore mark a later 10th century development; presumably the Alfredian town felt more secure with ferries rather than with a fixed link to the southern shore.

Whatever details further research may provide, it now seems clear that the early 10th-century London was significantly smaller than the town which William the Conqueror seized. The City had witnessed a notable expansion in the preceding century or so, suggesting that the Alfredian *burh*, whatever its initial size or shape, had been laid on secure foundations.