

MUSEUM OF LONDON



# Archaeology Matters

Roman London Special, Summer 2000

# High Street Londinium

This special edition of *Archaeology Matters* has been printed to coincide with the opening of a major new exhibition at the Museum of London. **High Street Londinium** runs until 7 January 2001, and is a recreation of three houses and shops that are known to have stood in the Roman city in the 1st century AD – the first time that reconstruction on this scale has been attempted in London. You can enter a bakery and a carpenter's workshop, furnished and equipped as they would have been in AD 100. Then you can cross an alley and call in at a slightly earlier building, a pottery shop that was destroyed during the Boudican revolt of AD 60.

The exhibition is the culmination of many years' research, which has made us better informed about Londinium than ever before. Not only have we improved our knowledge of the great public buildings – the forum and basilica, the amphitheatre, the baths, and the fort that housed troops attached to the

Governor of Britannia – but we have also learned a great deal about the **ordinary** citizens of London. **High Street Londinium** is a recreation not of stone buildings, hypocausts and mosaics but of the timber and mudbrick houses where most Romano-Britons lived and worked.

In this newsletter you can find out how the exhibition was put together. You can read about archaeological discoveries that are being made at this very moment. And you can learn how recently published research has informed us about the people who lived in Londinium. Finally, by using the map, you can see for yourself some of the other remains the Romans have left behind.

Exhibition sponsored by

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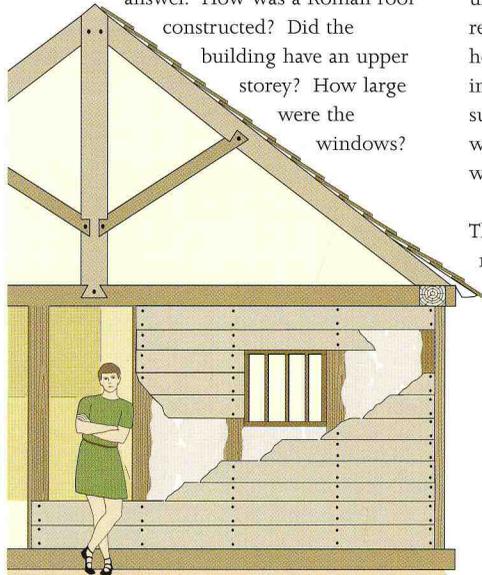
*Roman London in the early 2nd century, looking north-west (Peter Froste)*





## Reconstructing Londinium

To reconstruct High Street Londinium, the Museum worked closely with a film company, Sands Films. Authentic methods and materials were used wherever possible. At every stage the project threw up the sort of question that museum curators and archaeologists never ask themselves – or, perhaps, would prefer not to answer. How was a Roman roof constructed? Did the building have an upper storey? How large were the windows?



The starting point was an excavation by the Museum's Archaeology Service that had taken place in 1994-6 at 1 Poultry. The plan of each building had been fully recorded, and sometimes the walls had survived to a height of 50cm. In one case a door was found to have fallen from its hinges and been buried under later deposits. Artefacts, botanical remains and animal bones gave clues as to how each building had been used. Additional information came from other sites, where surviving timbers showed exactly how the wall frame would have been constructed and which joints would have been preferred.

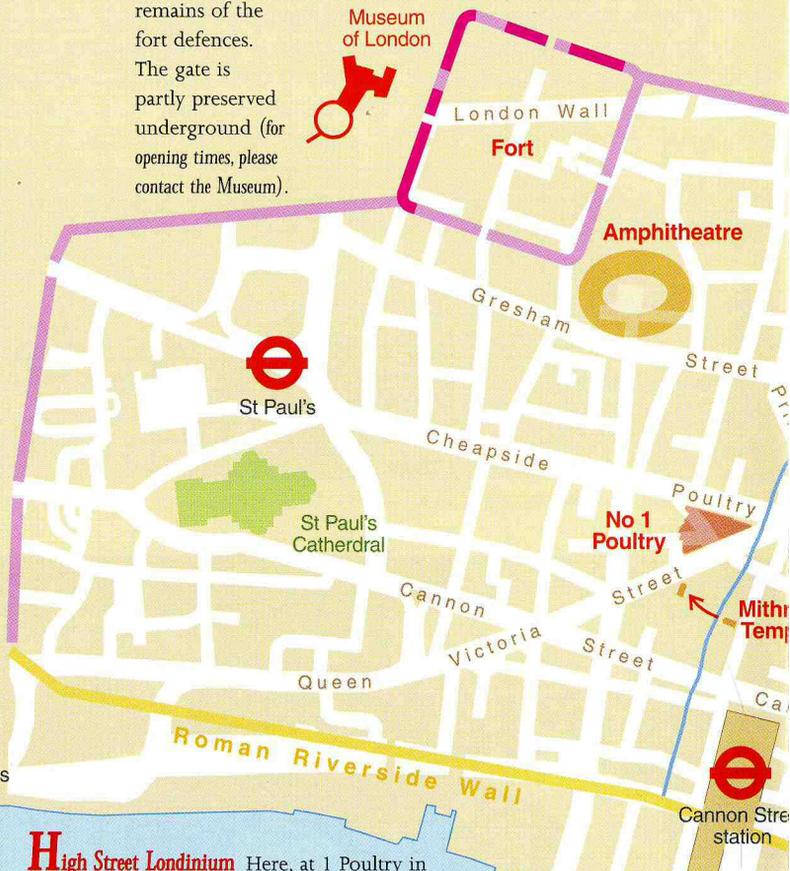
The site information thus made it possible to rebuild each structure on paper. But would it work in practice? The drawings were passed to the master craftsmen, who, with axe and adze, saw and chisel, began to fashion the houses that would stand along Londinium's High Street.

The results you can see for yourselves.

# Londinium A to W

How much of Londinium can be seen today? More than you might think. The city wall is the only standing monument of any size, but you can learn a lot about the appearance of the Roman city if you know where to look.

**F**ort Turn left outside the Museum and look for a plaque 100m down the High Walk, just beyond Bastion House. You are standing above the west gate of a fort which may once have held a garrison of 1000 legionaries. In the gardens on either side of London Wall you can see remains of the fort defences. The gate is partly preserved underground (for opening times, please contact the Museum).



**H**igh Street Londinium Here, at 1 Poultry in 1994-6, archaeologists found the remains of over 70 Roman buildings spanning 350 years. Three of them form the basis for the exhibition.

**W**albrook stream Have noticed the curious dip in the ground outside Cannon Street station marks the position of a stream that now runs underground. In AD 43, when the city was open, several metres wide, the stream divided the city into two halves. The houses along High Street Londinium, including the house at 1 Poultry, stood on the W bank.



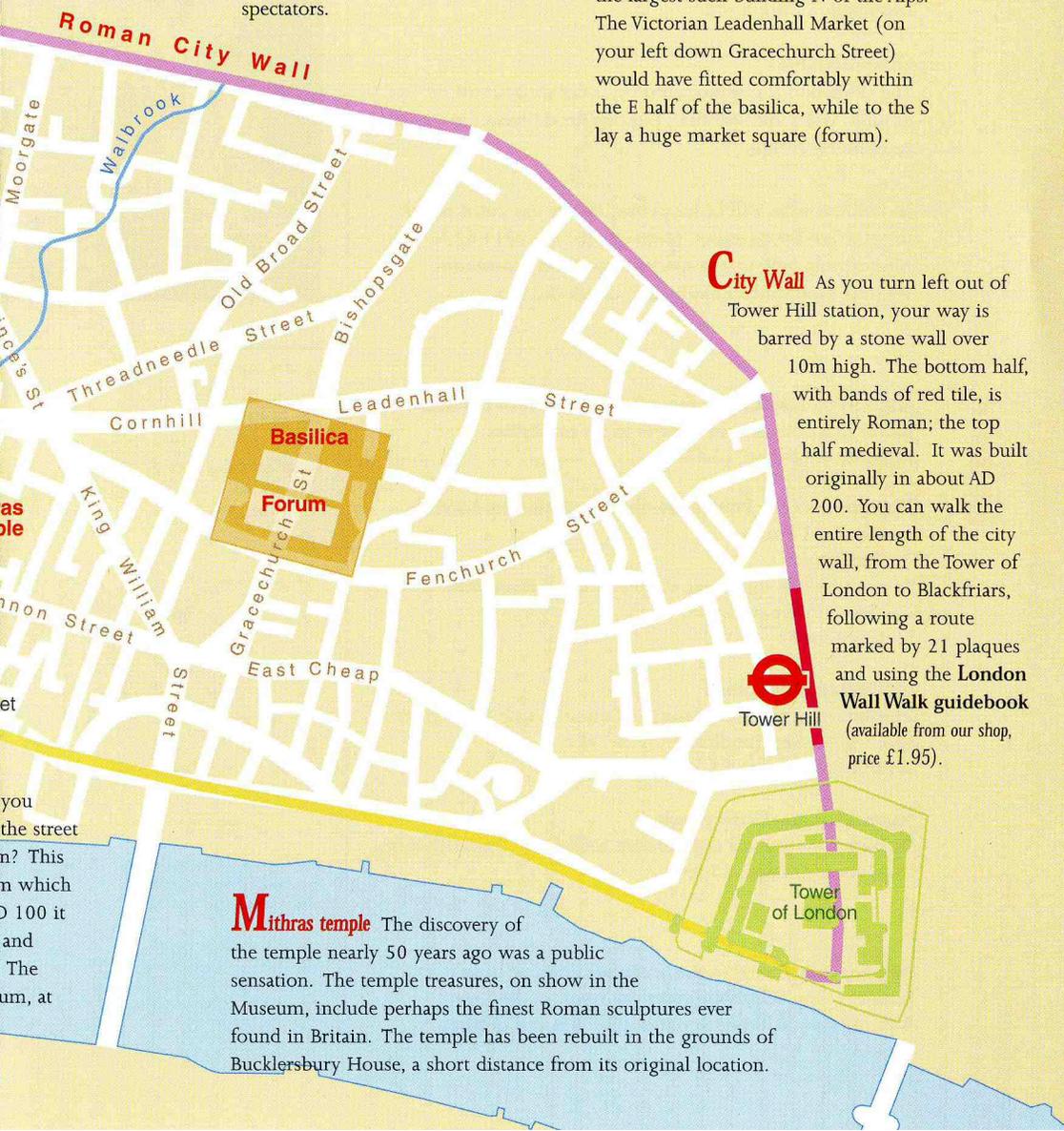
## Amphitheatre

Stand in Guildhall Yard and look down at the curving black line in the paving. This marks the position of the arena wall of the amphitheatre. The buildings around you are roughly where the seating banks once were. First built in timber in about AD 70, the amphitheatre was later rebuilt in stone and held up to 7000 spectators.

**Basilica and forum** Look out for a plaque in the foyer of Marks and Spencer, Leadenhall Street. The Roman town-hall (basilica) once stood here, the largest such building N of the Alps. The Victorian Leadenhall Market (on your left down Gracechurch Street) would have fitted comfortably within the E half of the basilica, while to the S lay a huge market square (forum).

**City Wall** As you turn left out of Tower Hill station, your way is barred by a stone wall over 10m high. The bottom half, with bands of red tile, is entirely Roman; the top half medieval. It was built originally in about AD 200. You can walk the entire length of the city wall, from the Tower of London to Blackfriars, following a route marked by 21 plaques and using the **London Wall Walk guidebook** (available from our shop, price £1.95).

**Mithras temple** The discovery of the temple nearly 50 years ago was a public sensation. The temple treasures, on show in the Museum, include perhaps the finest Roman sculptures ever found in Britain. The temple has been rebuilt in the grounds of Bucklersbury House, a short distance from its original location.



# Unearthing Londinium

The site used to recreate High Street Londinium was excavated in 1994-6. Since then there have been over 50 digs, ranging from tiny 'test pits' to vast area excavations. We are currently investigating an area of 5500 sq m at Plantation Place on Fenchurch Street, a little to the SE of the Roman forum. The work is being funded by British Land Developments Limited.

Three months into the dig, we have exposed the main E-W street that skirts the forum and crosses the Walbrook to become High Street Londinium. Everywhere we are finding timber-framed and mubrick buildings, several of which appear to have burnt down in the early 2nd century. The most important discoveries, however, relate to the very end of the Roman period – two centuries or more after the demise of the houses recreated in the exhibition. Running N-S across our site is a range of stone-built rooms some 40m long.

One room has a sunken corridor in the centre and adjoins a narrow cellar, while at the S end of the range are some massive chalk foundations. These, we believe, may have supported a tower at least as tall as an average medieval church tower. High-quality painted plaster, box flue tiles and areas of collapsed tessellated flooring show that this was a structure of considerable importance.

The tower, if not the whole building, was constructed in the 4th century. Little is known about Londinium at this time – at least in comparison with the Londinium of AD 100. Intriguingly, though, such evidence as we have is heavily concentrated in this area of the city. Had Londinium by AD 350 shrunk to less than half its former size? From sites such as this we may one day learn the answer.

*Trevor Brigham and Robin Nielson  
Museum of London Archaeology Service*



## Researching Londinium

It is easy to make the mistake of thinking that as soon as something has been dug up, the archaeologist's job is over. In fact, it has only just begun. In the library or conservation laboratory the researcher often digs out vital clues that were far from obvious at the time of excavation.

A major research project, a study of nearly 700 graves from a cemetery to the east of the city, has just been published. The study suggests that Londinium was overwhelmingly a city of 'ordinary' people – of people who would have felt at home in the reconstructed houses of our High Street, rather than in the tenements of Rome or Ostia. The specialists who examined the physical characteristics of the skeletons report a high degree of similarity throughout. This, they believe, implies that most Roman Londoners were born, died and buried locally.

Studied individually, the burials often have their own, intensely personal, tales to tell. Take the grave of a young woman who was buried with a casket filled with jewellery and coins. The coins had been chosen not for their monetary value but because they bore images of deities associated with the afterlife. Or consider a child of stunted physical development, who died at the age of about six. He or she wore gold ear-rings and had been laid to rest in a lead coffin. Alongside had been placed some sherds of multi-coloured glass, at least two centuries old at the time of burial. Were these, one wonders, favourite playthings that the child had unearthed in the backyard, recovering 'finds' from much earlier layers of Roman refuse?

**Bruno Barber & David Bowsher, *The Eastern Cemetery of Roman London* (MoLAS Monograph 4) is available from the Museum Shop, price £30**



Reconstruction painting of a funeral in the eastern cemetery (Derek Lucas)

## Events

### Family Festival

Saturday 12 August – Monday 28 August

For the people of Londinium August meant the festival of Lughnasa – a time of feasting, mock fighting and horse-racing. At the Museum of London we are holding our own Romano-British festival, with activities for all the family. Try your hand at lamp-making or shoemaking. Taste the delights of Roman haut cuisine. Meet the men and women who lived on Londinium's High Street.

### Other activities

The exhibition is complemented by a full programme of lectures, walks and seminars, catering for different age groups and interest groups.

To find out what will be happening on the day you visit, or to get a free Events leaflet, please phone 020 7814 5777. Alternatively, look up the special High Street Londinium web site ([www.museumoflondon.org.uk/hsl.htm](http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/hsl.htm)).

## Books

### High Street Londinium: reconstructing Roman London

Richly illustrated souvenir guide to the exhibition  
Museum of London, £3.50

### Heart of the City: Roman, medieval and modern London revealed at 1 Poultry

By Peter Rowsome

The story of the dig where the buildings of High Street Londinium were unearthed  
MoLAS, £5.99

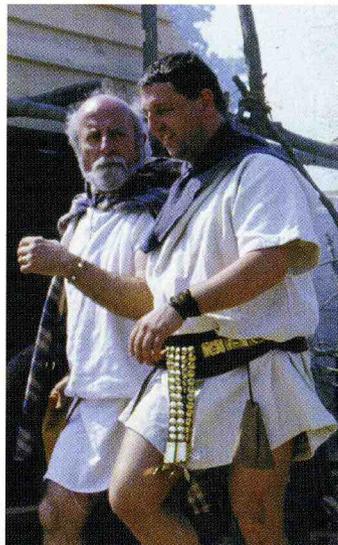
### The Spitalfields Roman

The discovery of a young woman buried in style 1700 years ago, which made headline news in 1999  
Museum of London, £3.50

### Roman London Gallery Pack

Resources for schools and teachers, including 14 activity sheets  
Museum of London, £5.95

All books mentioned in this leaflet are available from the Museum shop. Telephone orders by credit or debit card: 020 7814 5600. Prices as stated, plus post and packing.



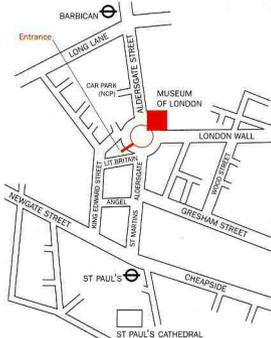
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