

ROMAN LONDON BRIDGE

Part 2: Its Location

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AS WAS STATED in the first part of this article¹ the site of the Roman Bridge over the Thames at London has been bedevilled by a scarcity of information, although more relating indirectly to the site of the bridge has come to light in the last few years². The evidence then available was summarised in 1965³ as pointing to the bridge being somewhere between Fish Street Hill and Botolph Lane, though a bridge in the former position, that is on the site of Old London Bridge, has been the favoured one. The evidence for this was the find of Roman material across the river at this point when it was dredged after Old London Bridge was demolished in 1831⁴, and the traces of Stane Street further back from the bank (described in the part 1) as well as the general alignment from Chichester (though this is not accurate enough to decide between the various possibilities mentioned below).

In 1969 a study of the position of the pre-Norman wooden bridge⁵ by Miss Honeybourne was published which expanded her earlier argument for a line running from the bottom of Pudding Lane to Toolies Stairs just to the west of St. Olave's Church. However, at the end of this study, this argument was taken one step further with the suggestion that the Saxon bridge was in the same place as the Roman bridge although as it must have been constantly repaired, it can not really be said that they were the same bridge.

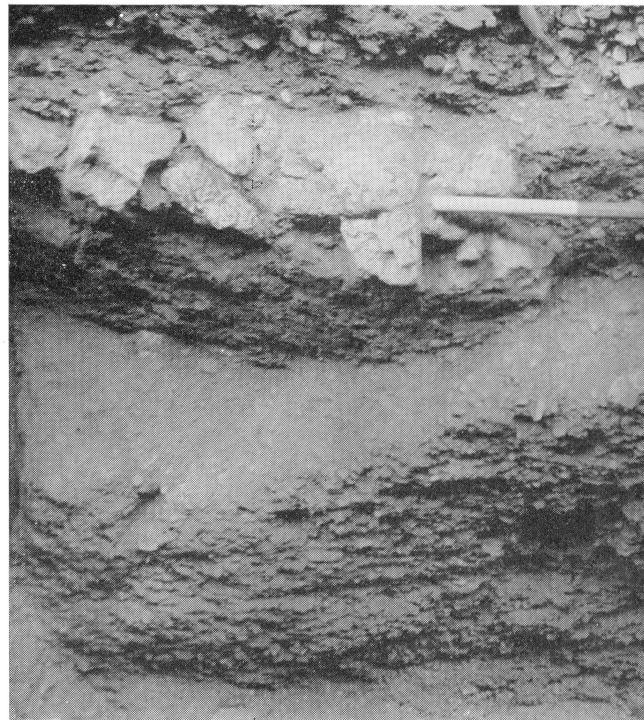
A position for the Roman bridge upstream from Old London Bridge has always been ruled out but the finding of an important road in Montague Close last year, in just a position, has reopened the controversy. Did the evidence really rule out an upstream bridge or were we being misled by what little evidence there was? Fortunately we now know con-

siderably more about Roman Southwark and London and can now eliminate some of the suggested positions for the bridge.

The Old London Bridge position can now be ruled out as a result of the excavation on the site called London Bridge in 1969 (site B on plan in part 1), for here, in an area across the line of the approach road to the mediaeval bridge were found a series of early Roman rubbish pits and ditches and a late Roman well described in the first part. Two years earlier, excavation of the area immediately to the east had revealed similar features across the projected alignment of the Roman bridge approach. Since such features could not have existed where the road

Excavated section through the Roman road at Montague Close showing the camber and the layers of make up.

(Photo: Brian Bloice)



1. *London Archaeol* 1 114-117.

2. I would like to thank Ralph Merrifield for discussing this problem with me although he does not necessarily agree with my interpretations.

3. R. Merrifield, *The Roman City of London*, (1965) 116-7.

4. This evidence has been strengthened by the observation during the construction of the new bridge that Roman coins only occur downstream of it, though only half a dozen were found. R. Merrifield *in letteris*.

5. M. B. Honeybourne, "The pre-Norman Bridge," *Studies in London History* (1969) 17-45.

ran, this rules out a road approaching the bridge on the conventional alignment.

On the published evidence, it is not possible to rule out the area immediately to the east, where a gravel feature of some sort was found⁶. A road coming off Old London Bridge on a straight alignment would cross this gravel feature but would produce an alignment which would take the road off the gravel terrace⁷ 300-400 yards to the south. It might be objected that it could alter its alignment but to fit the evidence this change in alignment must come 80 yards back from the river bank (to avoid the pits, etc. mentioned above), whereas it seems inherently more likely that the change of alignment would occur at the river bank and it is difficult to explain it a little further south.

The evidence for the conventional alignment of the road north of St. George's Church is also suspect. Apart from the general alignment of Stane Street, the main evidence other than the suspected site of the bridge, was an area of gravel discovered by Kathleen Kenyon at 199 Borough High Street⁸. Even she had to produce a *tour de force* of interpretation to explain away a feature which cut across the road but

was certainly early Roman in date. The gravel was certainly not primary here, for it overlay three layers of occupation debris and its two layers were themselves separated by a thick layer of burnt daub which seems an unlikely occurrence on a road. Further excavation in 1963 failed to find any trace of a road and cast serious doubts on its existence on this line⁹. The evidence from Talbot Yard of a layer of yellow gravel on a pavement of trimmed Kentish rag is hardly sufficient on its own and this form of construction for a Roman road is otherwise unknown in the London area¹⁰. There is also very little room for a road between the Roman building found under the south wing of St. Thomas's hospital in 1940¹¹ and the one found by Kathleen Kenyon at King's Head Yard¹².

The theory on the Roman bridge site put forward by Miss Honeybourne is in two parts, of which the second is dependent on the first, but not vice versa. The first states that in Saxon times, the bridge into London ran from a strip of land west of St. Olave's Church to the bottom of Pudding Lane. There is no space here to discuss this part of the theory¹³ but for the purpose of this discussion, it is assumed that

6. R. Merrifield, *Roman London* (1969) 26-7.

7. P. R. V. Marsden, *Illustrated London News*, 10 March, 1962 and G. J. Dawson, "Weichselian Fossils in Southwark," *Southwark & Lambeth Archaeological Society Newsletter* 20.

8. K. M. Kenyon, *Excavations in Southwark*, (1959) 27-9.

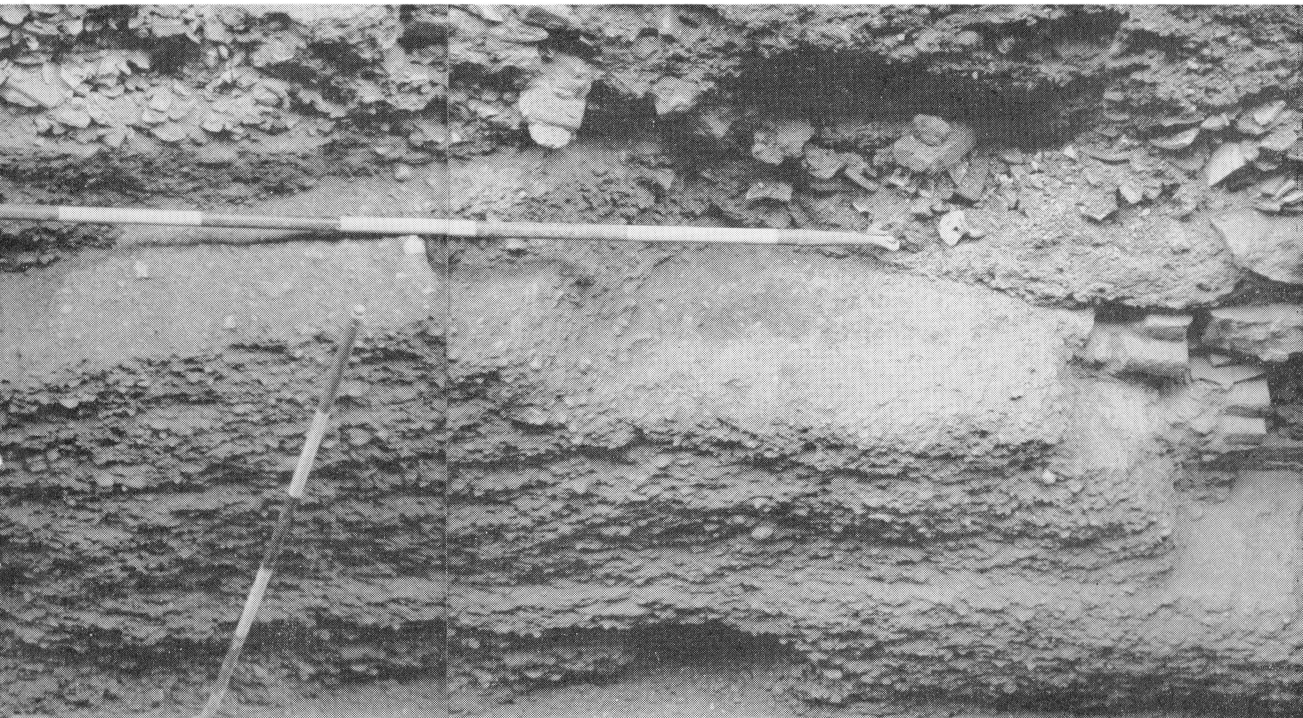
9. Preliminary Report issued by Southwark Archaeological Excavation Committee.

10. *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 52 (1950-51) 80.

11. *Gentleman's Magazine* 1840-1 191 and R.C.H.M. *Roman London* (1928) 150.

12. K. M. Kenyon, *op cit* 16-24.

13. See review in forthcoming S. & L.A.S. *Newsletter*.

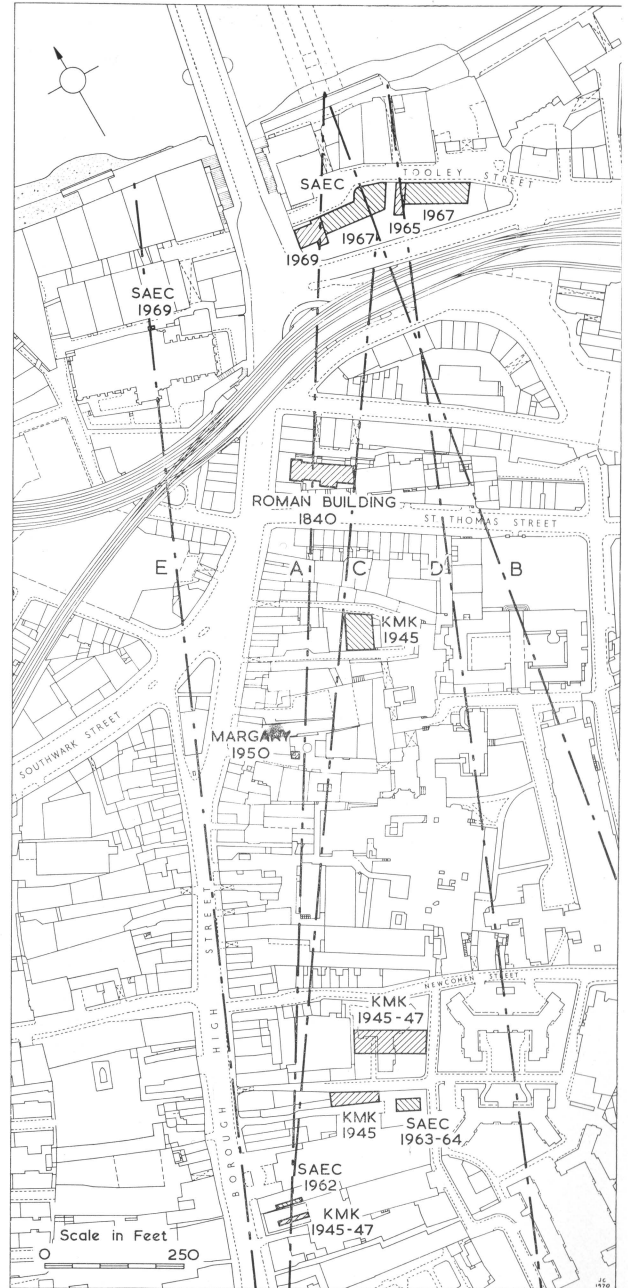


Plan 1. Plan of Southwark showing the various alignments for the road discussed in the article. A.—Kenyon's (or Margary's) Line. B.—Alignment suggested by Beeby if produced in a straight line. C.—Same but if bent a little way back from the river. D.—Alignment suggested by Honeybourne's proposed bridge approach. E.—Alignment based on the Montague Close Road.

Plan 2. Plan showing the layout of the suggested alignments south of the river with the street plan in the City.

it is correct. But the second part, that this is also the Roman bridge, can be shown almost certainly to be incorrect. For, on the northern side in Pudding Lane, in 1826-41¹⁴ there was found the remains of a hypocausted building of Roman date which rules out any road or bridge there, though this seems to have been taken as evidence supporting the theory¹⁵. It could be that this wall fronts on to the road and if so, the road must run west of Pudding Lane, for further north a Roman building lies immediately to the east of Pudding Lane¹⁶. Nor does a road in this position fit very easily into the known and inferred road pattern on the north bank¹⁷ for it lies between the continuation of the east Forum road, along Botolph's Lane to its east, and an inferred road along Gracechurch Street and Fish Street Hill from the centre of the Forum, to its west, which is based on the need for a road to the main entrance to the Forum and on the evidence of symmetry in the layout of the roads in this area.

A road from this bridge position would have to run NNE parallel with Botolph Lane (because of the building mentioned above) and would thus run into the south wall of the Basilica/Forum and would not be midway between the known roads east and west of the Forum, but very much closer to the east than the west road. On the south bank the course suggested by Miss Honeybourne is quite impossible for the Roman road, not only because it curves in a gentle bend to join up with Borough High Street but because this would take it straight over the Roman pits discovered in 1967 and 1969. The alignment given by the strip of land which is one of the pieces of evidence for this position¹⁹ would mean that the road ran off the gravel a little way further south and any other alignment, besides being difficult to fit in between the St. Thomas and King's Head Yard buildings, would also destroy this piece of evidence for the position. The gravel feature discov-

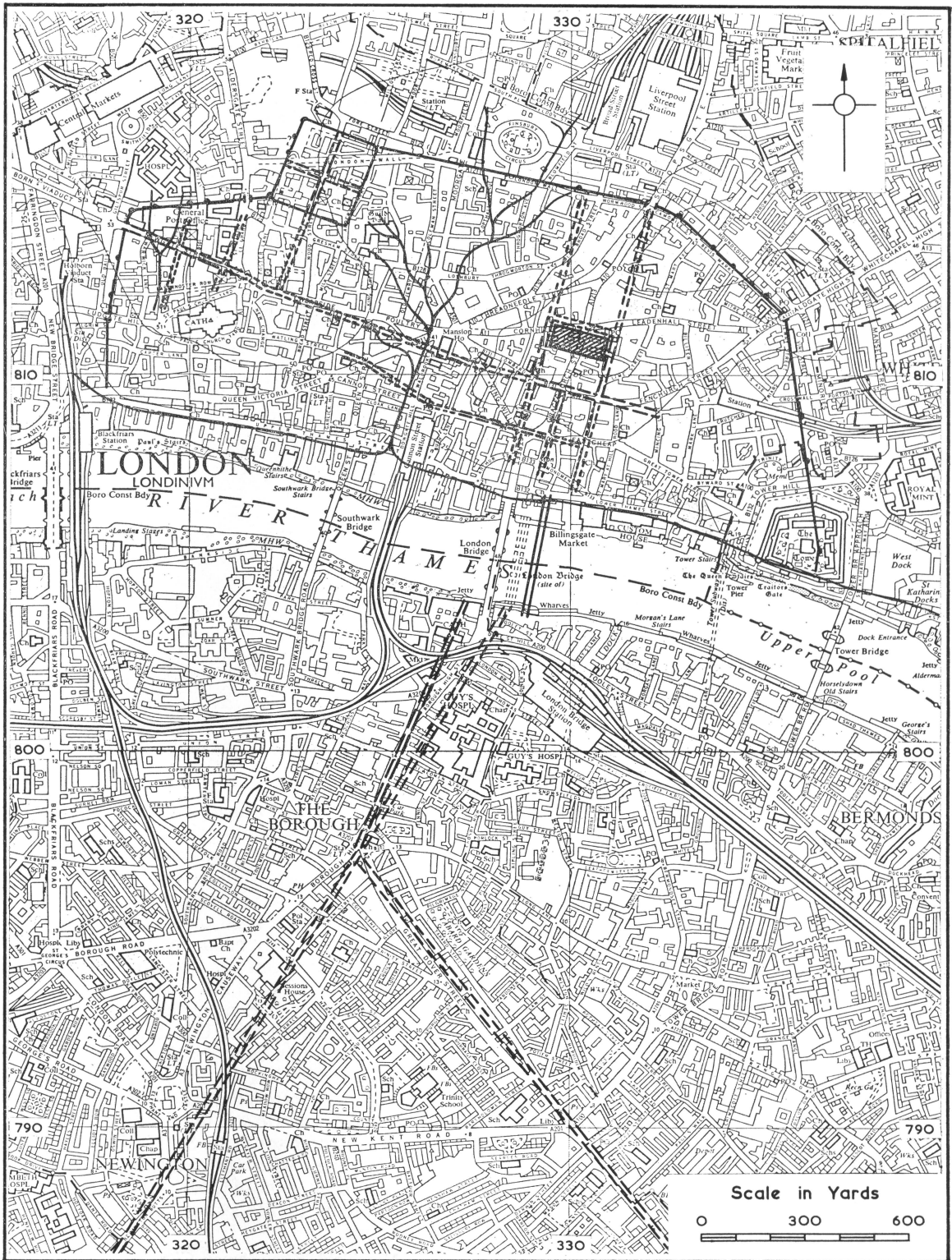


Plan 1

The plans are based upon the Ordnance Survey Maps with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.

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14. R. Merrifield, *The Roman City of London*, 286 (Gaz. No. 314).
15. M. B. Honeybourne, *op cit* 37.
16. R. Merrifield, *The Roman City of London*, 286 (Gaz. No. 315).
17. *Ibid* fig. 30.
18. M. B. Honeybourne, *op cit* 33.
19. *Ibid* 34.



Plan 2

ered in 1967 on the London Bridge site, which it was suggested might be a road, also has these objections to it, besides the disinclination of the director to accept it as a road (oddly enough it is more or less 136 yards from the Montague Close road, the distance apart of the east-west roads north of the river).

If these two positions are discounted, there is only one position downstream from Rennie's London Bridge which would fit in with the accepted road pattern north of the river which would be from the bottom of Botolph Lane. Although this would have much to recommend it north of the river, since it is a known Roman road and goes directly to Bishopsgate, it is much too far east on the south and right off the gravel. Most other positions, though theoretically possible, are unlikely for the reasons given above. However, it is not impossible that the first bridge occupied one of these positions but that it moved upstream in the great re-planning c. A.D.80. But there is no evidence for this suggestion either.

Although an upstream bridge has never really been considered before, if the arguments above are accepted, it is hard to see where else it could be. If an upstream bridge is accepted, then the Montague Close road obviously leads to it. This is the inference that one would draw in any case, from its nature. From the slope of the camber, it is suggested that it is 30 feet wide, which is clearly a main road, and its depth too shows that it must have been a major and very well used road. It is difficult to see that this could apply to a road which stopped a few yards further north on the river bank. North of the river it would fit in easily enough with the west Basilica/Forum Road. It is, of course, well known that this road does not pre-date c. A.D.80²⁰ and is contemporary with the replanning of this area when the Basilica/Forum was built. It is, in fact, very difficult to see any route which an earlier road from an upstream bridge could have taken north of the Fenchurch Street road, for there are a large number of early buildings closely packed together here, and the only gap between them seems to lie east of

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Second phase of the delftware kiln at Montague Close (see first part of article for details).

(Photo: Brian Bloice)

Gracechurch Street which is much too far east to connect with an upstream bridge²¹.

It has already been suggested that the Bishopsgate road did not start from the bridge but from the northern edge of the original urban nucleus²² and perhaps the Aldgate road too. This would certainly explain why the early road has not been found and why there is no room for one coming from an upstream bridge. Then the road coming over the bridge would slot into an essentially east-west grid. Another possibility, that this bridge does not pre-date c. A.D.80, has been mentioned above, and this too would explain this anomaly. But the problem of the early north-south road remains a problem.

The exact position of the bridge and the alignment of the road south to St. George's Church can not yet be fixed with certainty since so little of its length has been exposed but the line suggested on the map seems to fit best the evidence we have at the moment.

20. R. Merrifield, *The Roman City of London* 117-8.

21. *Loc cit.*

22. M. B. Honeybourne, *op cit* 44.