

THE LONDON THAT WAS ROMIE

Michael Harrison

Michael Harrison is well known as a journalist and writer of numerous books and articles. His particular interests range through philately and palaeography to Sherlock Holmes (on whom he is now a recognised authority). But his reputation is today firmly based on his having become an historian and interpreter of London, as revealed in many articles and three outstanding works, *London beneath the Pavement*, *London by Gaslight*, and *London Growing*.

£3.75



This book is both a detective story and a tale of buried treasure. Some years ago, Michael Harrison set out to discover the truth about Roman London. Did it survive the Saxon onslaught in the fifth century, or (as many historians have claimed) did it lie sacked, ruined and abandoned for about a century and a half. Searching for an answer, Michael Harrison forged for himself a new 'truth-detecting' method of discovery; but even he could not anticipate the immense success of this method.

It is often claimed of a work that 'there has never been a book like this.' But with *The London that was Rome* this claim is literally true, for the fascinating new archaeological method which it expounds is the author's very own invention — and to him must go the sole credit for its discovery.

What he has done in this book would have seemed impossible even a short time ago — and indeed would have been impossible to the methods of conventional archaeology. For with the 'New Archaeology' he has not only recovered the street-plan of Roman London, he has replaced the buildings — temples, barracks, banks, picture-galleries, baths, treasuries, and so on — which lined those streets. What is more, he has in many cases been able to name the streets, and at the same time vividly describe for us the social and economic life of a London which, under the Caesars, ranked among the principal cities of the Empire. Thanks to Michael Harrison's 'archaeological miracle' (as one eminent scholar has described it), we can now see Roman London restored to bustling life, wander through its markets, visit its basilicas, observe the pageant of its heterogeneous population.

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journeys through Britain, marked out straight line-of-sight routes, or 'leys,' erecting stones or mounds as sighting-points at suitable places; these routes could be traced on the ground or on modern maps by drawing straight lines linking such features as pre-historical burial mounds. (their use as burial places being secondary to their purpose as sighting-points) and medieval churches (erected over sighting-points which had attracted veneration and superstition). O. G. S. Crawford refused to accept an advertisement for this book for *Antiquity*, of which he was then editor, and the reaction was immediate and violent. A pamphlet was issued accusing him of "Poisoned Criticism and a Boycott" and quoting favourable reviews from a number of newspapers which should have known better. A controversy can hardly be said to have raged ever since, for archaeologists have generally refused to be drawn into argument on the matter, but Watkins' theory seems to bear a charmed life. A new edition of the book has appeared, a periodical *The Ley Hunter* is still published regularly, while the theory has found its way into mythology in Alan Garner's fantasy *The Moon of Gomrath*. Recently a paper appeared in the *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society* pointing out 'A Remarkable Alignment of London Churches,' while the arguments of a contributor to the magazine *Essex Countryside*, who had linked up a large number of churches in south-east Essex, were neatly demolished by a school teacher who set his class to throwing darts at a board and drawing lines linking the resulting holes, and found just as many alignments as there were of Essex churches.

Meanwhile an American professor of physics and astronomy has been studying the alignments and layouts of megalithic stone circles, and has proved to his own satisfaction that a large number of English cathedrals and churches have similar layouts, and must lie upon the sites of such circles.

The originators of archaeological crankeries are usually dedicated to their beliefs; they are frequently very intelligent people, sometimes highly qualified in fields outside archaeology (and it must be admitted that some highly qualified archaeologists have their own obsessions!), whose time and energy could be much better employed. The popularity of such theories, and the enthusiasm with which they are upheld, suggests that they fulfil some deep-seated psychological need in the human species. One might suggest that if the Loch Ness Monster didn't exist, Man would have invented her. Part at least of this need may be revealed by the various Alignment theories, which are attempts to impose a pattern upon essentially random phenomena; man has always feared the unknown and uncontrolled, and

priests, philosophers and scientists have long sought for a first cause, or pattern, behind apparently random events. Perhaps also there is a need for an occasional escape from the world of reality, admirably met for the reader by some of the wilder fantasies of pseudo-archaeology.

Highly elaborate—and logical—structures can be erected on the original hypothesis; it is a failing of historical and archaeological evidence that with a little persuasion proof can be adduced for almost any absurdity. These elaborate structures, however, tend to be entirely self-contained; the arguments are often circular and generate their own evidence, while inconvenient facts can be conveniently ignored. Unfortunately, many of these theories reach print in the form of books for a 'popular audience,' an audience which has no knowledge of the facts that have been ignored and must see the subject through the author's eyes; nor is it likely, since the absurdities are far more exotic and entertaining than reality, that they will read a 'conventional' book on the subject and discover those facts and balanced opinions based on them. Even with the facts to hand, though one may blast gaping holes in the edifice, it is seldom possible to shake it, (or even ruffle the composure of the architect), since its foundations are so firmly based in the irrational.

A great deal of amusement can be derived from crankeries, if precautions in the form of large doses of facts and commonsense are taken to avoid infection; nevertheless, they are dangerous. If we believe that the purpose of archaeology is not only to discover facts about the past but to make them known to a wide audience, we must be dismayed at the popularity of this pseudo-archaeology among both readers and publishers. Michael Harrison's latest excursion into the field of London archaeology, which has already received a kind review from at least one London newspaper, should be of great concern to the readers of this magazine.

Mr. Harrison's theory is that the modern and medieval street and place names of the City of London conceal in heavily disguised form the Latin names of the streets and buildings of Roman London. Thus 'St. Paul's' has in origin no connection with the Apostle; it is built, he tells us, on the site of the SENATUS POPULUSQUE (LONDINARUM), the Senate building of London. Upon this hypothesis he bases his argument that London survived into the Saxon period as a flourishing Roman city preserving its Roman institutions and pagan religion—for oddly enough he can locate no Christian churches in the Roman city, though for most of a century it was part of a nominally Christian empire. One need hardly point out that in this he goes far beyond the most optimistic archaeo-

logical assessment of the situation in London in the 5th and 6th centuries.

However, the major part of the book is taken up with the elaboration of his original hypothesis. By deriving a set of linguistic rules from the forms Latin loan-words took in Old Welsh, allowing for differences between late provincial Latin and classical Latin, 'Old London' Celtic and Old Welsh, and even different dialects within Roman London ('St. BOTOLPH'S' and 'BOLT Court' both being derived from MULCTA), while more changes took place when the city became English-speaking, he is able to produce a Latin pedigree for just about every place name in the city—one is inclined to add 'not surprisingly.' Yet one of his favourite derivations, 'Cock Inn' from COQUINA 'Cook-shop,' he has to admit in an appendix is not borne out by the appearance of COQUINA in Old Welsh in the form *Cegin*. He goes beyond place names; the Worshipful Company of Skinners will be dismayed to learn that they once sold fish (SCOMBRI), while the Vintners were 'Hunting Priests' (VENATORES) dedicated to the service of the goddess Artemis.

Indeed, Mr. Harrison has identified many strange cults not previously recognized in London, such as that of the SALII (> 'All Hallows'), the strange 'Leaping Priests' of Mars, and one of BELIN-SABAZIOS (> 'Belle Sauvage') who he admits is "not hitherto recorded" — why the Celts should identify Sabazios, a mysterious Asiatic god, with their own sun-god is not explained.

The earliest form recorded of the name Cannon Street is 'Candelwrichstrete'; there are also records of the presence in it of candle-makers — 'candle-wrights.' The obvious explanation does not satisfy Mr. Harrison, who derives the name by rather dubious means from CANCELLARIUS VICUS, which he translates as 'the fenced-off area' round the Roman docks. It is presumably a coincidence that candle-makers later settled there, just as he expects us to believe that by coincidence churches were erected upon the sites of buildings whose names could be easily perverted into the names of Saints.

Mr. Harrison suggests that his methods can be applied to any town where there has been continuous occupation since Roman times; unfortunately his methods can be applied even more widely. He is scathing about the suggestion that the intriguing name 'Gropecuntelane' is 'indecent,' deriving it instead from GUBERNACULAE COMITIUM (? 'place of assembly of the government'); of five other towns in England where this name is found only one existed in Roman times — the others are Saxon or medieval foundations.

There is little point in pursuing any more of these absurd derivations — though one is tempted to use the author's methods to prove that his father was

a shopkeeper (Michael Harrison < MACEL-LARIUS son). There are also numerous errors of fact. For example, the strange suggestion that the Cripplegate Fort (built c. AD 120) was built *before* the Rebellion of Boudicca in AD 60, while the four legions involved in the Claudian invasion of Britain did not arrive till *after* AD 60; and that the city wall was built in AD 120 and 72 bastions added to it in the late 3rd century, including 28 along the riverside. In fact the wall was built c. AD 200, there are no traces of riverside defences, only 22 bastions in all are known, and some at least of them are medieval not Roman; Mr. Harrison seems unaware of what has been proved by conventional archaeology.

The end product of his research is what he calls an 'Ordnance Survey' map of Roman London. This appears in three colours as the frontispiece of the book. Mr. Harrison has been badly served by his draughtsman, for there are obvious inaccuracies in even the modern street plan, and it might be kind to blame such mistakes as the placing of the Temple of Mithras on the wrong side of the Walbrook on the artist rather than the author. One is staggered by the number of military establishments that appear on the map, as they do in the text (along with five or six forts). A stadium and other buildings appear on what excavation has proved to be the bed of the river, and a 'wine market' where excavation has revealed a public baths, while north of St. Paul's where Mr. Harrison locates the Senate House and cattle market, there was nothing more substantial than potters' kilns and clay-pits.

A point-by-point criticism of Mr. Harrison's views is not possible in the space of this article. After several readings of the book I have ceased to find it amusing, and cannot recommend it even as pure entertainment—particularly at a price of £3.75; perhaps when it is remaindered . . .

Meanwhile, readers may care to add it to the following list of books which may be dipped into (with caution), if seen on the library shelves.

- Bellamy, H. S. & Allan, P.: *The Great Idol of Tiahuanaco*, 1969.
- Borst, Prof. Lyle: "English Henge Cathedrals," in *Nature*, 25 October, 1969.
- Bruwer, A. J.: *Zimbabwe: Rhodesia's Ancient Greatness*, 1965.
- Däniken, E. von: *Return to the Stars*, 1970 (and others).
- Donnelly, I.: *Atlantis: the Antediluvian World*, 1882, reprinted 1970.
- Michell, J.: *The View Over Atlantis*, 1969.
- Spennuth, J.: *Atlantis—The Mystery Unravelled*, 1956.
- Velikovskiy, I.: *Worlds in Collision*, 1950 (and others).
- Watkins, A.: *The Old Straight Track*, 1925, reprinted 1970.