

Metropolis in Mayfair?

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Introduction

MODERN HISTORIANS relate that in AD 43 the Roman army invaded *Britannia* and proceeded to conquer the lowlands of the south-east. Our modern archaeologists have sufficient knowledge to postulate that *Londinium* evolved in AD 50 or thereabouts. What happened in the intervening years? Neither historians nor archaeologists have recovered evidence of continuous activity in any area near the tidal limit of the Thames at this time. Therefore, there was no activity worth consideration! Is that an irrefutable conclusion? Were those seven years just a vacuum for London's history? Did *Londinium* sprout out of thin air?

This article offers the hypothesis that there was essential activity for the whole of those seven years, and that the location of the immature metropolis was Mayfair¹ prior to relocation in *Londinium*.

Part A: a tentative interpretation of events AD 43 to AD 50

The Roman invasion of *Britannia* was one of the most carefully conceived and highly organised campaigns in history. A vast army was assembled around Boulogne, then in the summer of AD 43, a three-division assault was made on the Sandwich coastline. Richborough Island, with a timber fort, was made the local command post. Four legions, with a numerically equal force of auxiliaries, forty thousand men all told, were ferried across the strait of Dover. Divisions of troops advanced westwards, Britannic tribes offering resistance on the west bank of the Medway were almost annihilated. No opposition was encountered as the Romans progressed over Blackheath and across the Southwark marshes to the ford at the tidal limit of the Thames. Slight skirmishes occurred at Westminster, and some Romans were lost in the treacherous marshes, but the main force gained the objective of the higher ground of Hyde Park. There was still the powerful kingdom of the Catuvellauni and Trinovantes with their capital at *Cumulodunum* to be conquered, so Aulus Plautius, the Roman com-

mander-in-chief, sent a message to the Emperor Claudius, who arrived two months later.

During those two months, Plautius consolidated his position. Half the army garrisoned Kent and Blackheath, whilst the forward half moved north of the River Thames. There was much labour for the troops; ground was cleared and campaign camps installed, the trackway from Sandwich *via* Canterbury and Rochester was upgraded, and a causeway was built from Blackheath across the Southwark and Westminster marshes to Hyde Park Corner. Encampments were made in Hyde Park and the surrounding area, roads were constructed from Marble Arch corner towards Brentford, Edgware, and Bethnal Green, with a causeway across the Hackney marshes to Old Ford on the River Lea. Also a turf and timber fort was built in the north-west of Mayfair to contain the *principia* (staff headquarters), the Governor's residence and the household troop's barracks; modern Park Street coincides with the *via principalis*.

Emperor Claudius finally arrived in Kent, took formal command of the military forces, proceeded to Mayfair, then gave orders for the advance across the River Lea into enemy territory and the occupation of *Cumulodunum*. Britannic inhabitants offered no resistance. Claudius accepted the submission of the kings of several tribes, instructed Plautius to conquer the remaining territory, and returned to a triumphal welcome in Rome.

Armies marched out from Hyde Park to *Verulamium* and Silchester, then on to Ilchester, Cirencester and Leicester on the Fosse way, along the frontier. Mayfair fort, at the Thames tidal limit, was the hub of the communications system, and remained the administrative centre for the next seven years. Prestigious *Cumulodunum* was created the symbolic and religious capital of the province of *Britannia*.

Nevertheless, day-to-day administration, such as troop transit control, and the responsibility for

1. Note on the use of modern and/or Latin place names.

Consistency is attempted but difficulties arise:

Mayfair has no Latin name; there is no option.

Londinium is the Latin name for Roman London, and is defined geographically and chronologically, e.g. by the Ordnance Survey map of Roman Britain.

Cumulodunum, now part of modern Colchester, is used as in the translation of the narrative of Cassius Dio.

Britannia is more appropriate than England for the period under discussion.

Otherwise, modern rather than Latin names are used for the general convenience of readers.

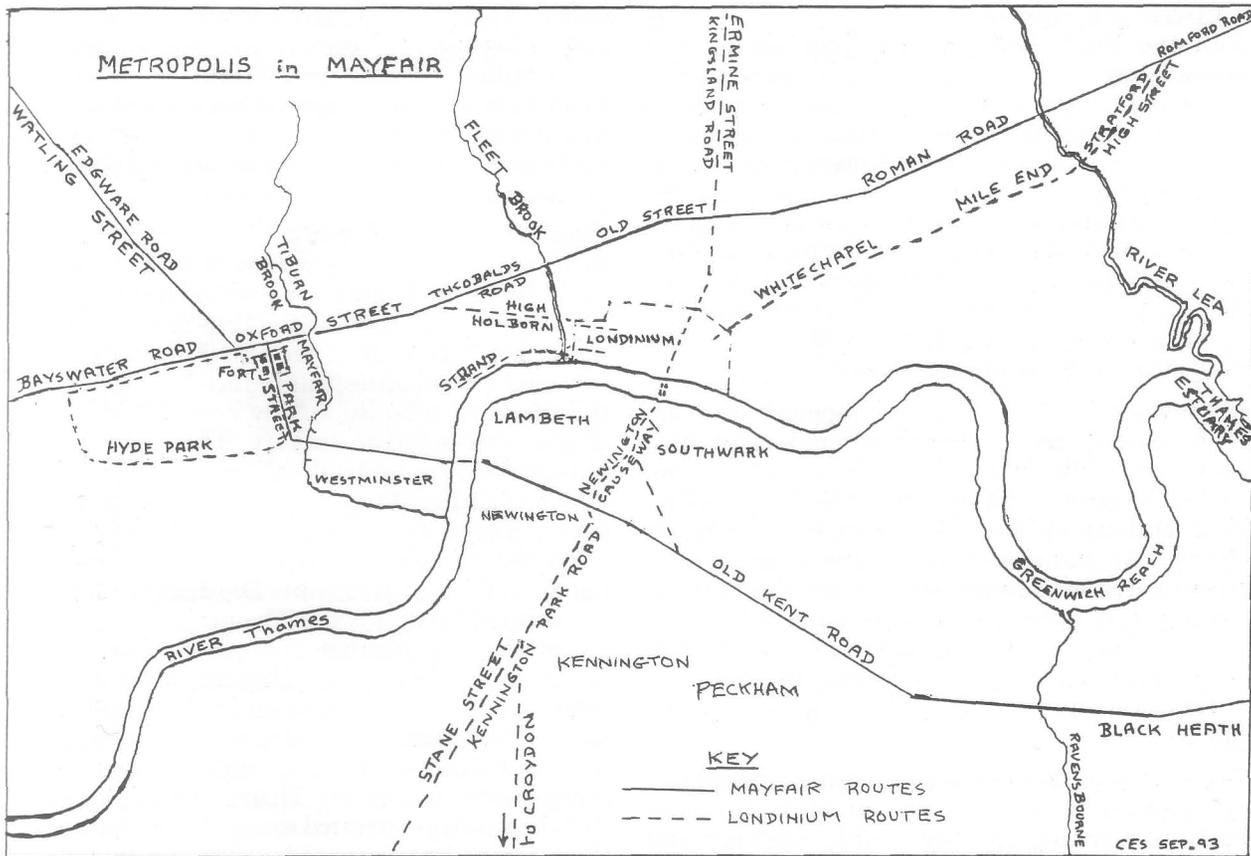


Fig. 1: map of London area in the earliest Roman period, showing primary routes (solid lines) and subsequent routes (broken lines).

couriers of the Imperial mail, were located in the Mayfair headquarters.

Additionally, a civilian suburb grew up in southwest Mayfair, initially to satisfy the requirements of the military and administrative personnel, then also to trade with the natives. This metropolis flourished and grew, but the great drawback of the erratic tidal basin became an ever-increasing handicap, and the deep-water facilities at *Londinium* began to be used by both military and civilian organisations. Finally and inevitably, the metropolis transferred to *Londinium*, where it remained for the next three hundred and fifty years.

Part B: geographical, archaeological and historical arguments Mayfair route system

Marble Arch sits at the junction of three undoubtedly Roman roads—Edgware Road, Bayswater Road, and Oxford Street (see Fig. 1). Edgware Road, the most obvious, leads to *Verulamium* and Chester; Bayswater Road leads to Brentford, Staines and Bath; Oxford Street is a trifle dubious but leads *via* High Holborn to Newgate and *Londinium*, and *via*

Old Street to Old Ford on the River Lea. High Holborn and Newgate would not have been built before *Londinium* was occupied *c* AD 50, therefore Oxford Street and Old Street can be said to precede High Holborn, if evidence shows that Oxford Street and Old Street are two parts of a single route; this evidence lies in the maps of Hogenberg *c* 1570 and Rocque *c* 1740. Hogenberg shows a trackway across the fields from St. Giles' to Gray's Inn Lane, and Rocque shows a trackway extension of Theobalds Row across the field to Gray's Inn Lane, and names this trackway 'The Kings Way'. It is acceptable that one section of the Roman road was lost where it crosses the Fleet Valley and is now rebuilt and called Clerkenwell Road. So the original Roman route to *Cumulodunum* commenced with Oxford Street, Theobalds Road, Old Street, Roman Road, Old Ford (or Stratford—the Ford on the Straight) and Romford Road, thence *via* Romford and Chelmsford. Thus three main invasion routes radiated from Marble Arch corner. Three main bodies of the Roman army marched out from the Hyde Park area to bring the province under Roman jurisdiction.

Central encampment

Can the Hyde Park area be presumed to be a suitable site for the encampment of ten to twenty thousand troops for a period of a month or more? Hyde Park is situated on a gravel terrace which rises gently from Grosvenor Square in the east to Notting Hill in the west, and was lightly covered with scrub and wood with areas of good pasture. Norman and Tudor kings used the park for hunting. According to the Victoria County History of Middlesex there were many wells in the park, and Tyburn Brook flowed down to Mayfair on the east; clean water is a primary need.

Why should such a large encampment leave no archaeological traces? These were temporary tented areas; any rudimentary dykes or sanitary ditches would be obliterated by time or by relatively recent landscaping, such as that by Chelsea Water Works. No old-time antiquarians seem to have investigated hereabouts, any pottery sherds if noticed by other persons would be regarded as ordinary rubbish. Modern archaeologists, in fortuitous circumstances, may yet make discoveries to authenticate (or possibly destroy) this present hypothesis.

In addition to the central encampment, peripheral encampments would have been established in places such as Kennington, Brentford, Edgware and Bethnal Green.

Military strategy

Did the capture of Hyde Park feature in the grand strategy of the Roman high command?

In contrast to the improvised expeditions of Julius Caesar, the Claudian invasion scheme had been conceived many decades previously and very thoroughly prepared and produced. This was not the brainchild of a single man, but the brilliant Aulus Plautius was selected to organise its implementation. Overall the objective was the conquest of the whole south-east lowlands, not just one kingdom. If, after the initial landing, some ford or ferry near Tilbury had been used to capture *Cumulodunum*, the lengthy left flank of the army would have been exposed, and the problem of advancing to the midlands and the west would remain to be solved. Securing a solid base north of the Thames, near the lowest practicable ford, in the heart-land of the opponents, was sound common sense. Although possessing the Mediterranean Sea in its entirety, Rome was a land-based empire rather than a maritime one; the 'ocean' was quite terrifying to them; ferrying an army even across the Straits of Dover

seemed fraught with danger, but their navy had ample strength to counter any buccaneers. Not until military forces were firmly in control of Hyde Park and had occupied *Cumulodunum*, *Verulamium*, and Silchester, did the Romans seem willing to launch a seaborne expedition from Boulogne to the Solent area.

Contemporary history

Brief accounts of the invasion of AD 43 have survived from two Roman authors: Suetonius² (*Divus Claudius*, 17) and Cassius Dio³ (*Ix*19-22, 2). Suetonius is succinct "Claudius... had fought no battles and suffered no casualties, but reduced a large part of the island to submission." By comparison, Dio is almost verbose but he does say "Then, once having crossed the river... Claudius... engaged the natives who had gathered together to repel his attack and defeated them in a pitched battle." That seems to be a sycophantic amendment, completely contradicting the version of Suetonius. Dio does not actually say that the river was the Thames, he could have meant the Lea. Neither does he say that all the camps were south of the Thames. But it was Dio who gave such a clear account of the engagement on the west bank of the Medway, and it was Dio who said that two Roman forces crossed to the other (north) side of the Thames. Dio did not say that the Romans retreated south of the Thames; on the contrary, he says that Plautius consolidated his gains with garrisons. To have foregone such a valuable strategic bridgehead would have been an act of military stupidity. If Dio aimed to mislead, he certainly has misled some famous modern authors and their trustful readers, who have looked to Blackheath and Southwark for these encampments.

Command headquarters

Locating the main encampment of the Roman army in the late summer of AD 43 is barely controversial, because there would be negligible lasting archaeological or historical effects. Locating of the headquarter's area accurately is important and potentially controversial because of the subsequent permanent archaeological and historical effects, so evidence, however sparse, is essential. After leaving Blackheath, any road from Canterbury and Rochester must bear to the south of Greenwich Reach and point at Westminster and Hyde Park Corner. Recent research indicates that that Thames tidal estuary reached to Lambeth and Westminster, so seemingly the marshes and river could be negotiated at low water in that area in this period. Now, there is a straight road from Hyde Park

2. Gaius Suetonius Tranquillius, c.69-140, secretary to Emperor Hadrian. 3. Cassius Dio, c.150-235, Governor of Africa and Dalmatia.

Corner to Oxford Street, called Park Street. In the absence of another explanation, any straight stretch of road which can be shown to have existed c AD 1700, feasibly is of Roman origin. Park Street is partially shown as a lane on the parliamentary map of London (1642), on Strype's map (1720) it is shown as a trackway, and on Rocque's (1746) is shown as built-up, but with the trackway to the north of Green Street. Park Street must not be confused with Park Lane, previously known as Tiburn Lane. Park Street is ancient, and can be considered as the remnant of the *via principalis* of the H.Q. fort. Assuming this fort is comparable in size to the later Cripplegate fort, its perimeter roads coincide approximately with modern Green Street, North Audley Street, Upper Grosvenor Street and Park Lane. To the junction of the three major roads at Marble Arch from the presumed north gate of the Park Street fort is a distance of a few hundred yards.

Administrative headquarters

Every Roman province had two officials appointed directly by the Emperor, the Governor and Procurator; each had essential but separate functions and each required an effective staff. Military matters, foreign affairs, implementation of laws, ensuring justice, and upkeep of roads, were the functions of the Governor. Collecting taxes, controlling the treasury, and the payment of all personnel were the functions of the Procurator. These functions had to be carried out from the moment Plautius installed his army in southern *Britannia*, even before the arrival of Claudius. Accommodation of staff of both had to be situated somewhere; Richborough was too remote, *Cumulodunum* was also remote and not yet occupied. Mayfair was central and the Park Street fort was secure — the site of the *principia* practically chose itself. It is the sheer necessity of a safe and central H.Q. that speaks in evidence for the preliminary metropolis in Mayfair.

There seems to be no evidence for the use of *Cumulodunum* as the capital for other than religious purposes after the brief tenure of the Emperor Claudius. Possibly the autocratic tendencies of the *colonia* and the resultant rebellion is some evidence of the absence of real authority there, and evidence accordingly of its presence in Mayfair and *Londinium*. Archaeology has indicated the early presence of the Procurator in *Londinium*, which could imply that the Mayfair *principia* was being abandoned within ten years of inauguration.

Commerce and services

That there was some flourishing civil and commer-

cial activity at the head of the Thames estuary by c AD 50 can hardly be disputed. To locate this nebulous town is a matter of conjecture, but it must have been within walking distance of the administrative complex, and also accessible to the tidal quays and wharves, however ramshackle they may have been.

If it is true that the *principia* was in the north-west corner of Mayfair, then this town may well have had its core in the south-west corner of Mayfair. Shipping services would have been essential to the military unit for the provision of equipment and armament; shipping services for import and export especially as trade expanded in the hinterland would bring prosperity and influence to the commercial quarter. Shipping facilities would have been severely handicapped by lack of deep water; that fact dictated the speedy removal of the metropolis to *Londinium* with its superior port availability. At once, all ports in Gaul and Germany were accessible to the importers and exporters of the relocated metropolis.

At a lower level, the usual crowd of camp followers would find ways and means for providing requirements and recreation of troops and military and administrative personnel in either town.

Subsequent route system

Londinium acquired its own road system primarily by adapting the Mayfair road system to its own needs, with later additions of main highways emanating from its own centre.

Probably the preliminary adaption was the road *via* Ludgate Hill, Fleet Street, the Strand, and Hyde Park Corner, and later *via* High Holborn to utilise Oxford Street to Marble Arch. Secondly, a diversion of the Old Kent Road from Peckham to Southwark on the line of Tabard Street (now superseded by Great Dover Street). Thirdly by a road through Whitechapel to Old Ford, although Mile End Road could be a Roman road, indicating a preferential crossing of the River Lea at Bow. Considering these three diversions in total certainly intimates that there was an influential metropolis that preceded *Londinium*.

Two highways, obviously Roman, emanate directly from *Londinium* — Stane Street *via* London Bridge to Chichester, and Ermine Street *via* Bishopsgate and Tottenham to Godmanchester on the Lincoln highway. Archaeological dating of these two roads is not at present conclusive enough to provide dating for *Londinium*. Conversely, the dating of *Londinium* implies that both roads were built later than AD 50.

Conclusion

Casius Dio must be admired for his clear concise account of the opening phases of the Roman invasion under the leadership of Aulus Plautius. His flattery of the Emperor may be abhorrent but understandable, and must be counter-balanced in the analysis of the passage regarding the presence of Claudius.

Any sound theory must fit the facts of the subject, and the prominent facts are the extant roads in the

immediate environs of Mayfair, which apparently disclose the location of the metropolis before the transfer to the present site.

There seems little chance of further archaeological or historical evidence emerging to sway opinion; reassessment of current knowledge could authenticate the hypothesis that the burgeoning metropolis of *Britannia* was located in Mayfair for several years before its establishment in *Londinium*.

Editorial comment

I FEEL THAT some explanation of the circumstances surrounding the publication of this article is needed. I would have preferred to publish an article concentrating on the archaeological evidence, with as little of the historical background as possible, subject to the need to set the archaeology in context. However, I have failed to reach agreement with the author on this, and am therefore publishing the article in its original form, as modified by the author to take account of editorial comments. I believe it to be worth publishing because it contains one of the most original ideas on Roman London for a generation. Much of the recent work on Roman London has tried to answer specific questions of detail — important detail, to be sure — such as “was there a riverside wall?” “where exactly was the Thames crossing?” “and the amphitheatre?” and so on. Here we see a radically new idea on the origins of Roman London, which resolves problems that have increasingly baffled archaeologists for the last 40 years.

From the 1950s onwards, it became gradually accepted that the earliest Roman road system in the area by-passed *Londinium* and crossed the Thames at Westminster¹. Bill Sole’s contribution, obvious with the benefit of hindsight, is to realise that this pattern must have been influenced by the location of settlements, both military and civilian. A road pattern must be based on a settlement pattern. Working backwards from the road pattern, he infers a primary settlement in the Mayfair area. One of the main arguments against this is the main north-south route through the London area (Stane Street to the south and Ermine Street to the north),

once thought to be primary. However, the northern stretch of Stane Street is aligned on London Bridge, and is therefore unlikely to be earlier than c AD 50². Merrifield has argued that Ermine Street was not laid out until after the initial planning of *Londinium*³.

The second strand of the argument is based on the likely strategy of the Roman invasion force. Most current thinking places the base camp south of the Thames, for example in the Elephant and Castle area⁴. The author’s reasons for locating this camp north of the Thames are logical, and apparently consistent with Dio. However, we must remember that the military mind is not *always* logical, and not rely too much on *a priori* arguments.

The ultimate test of this hypothesis must lie in the ground. A settlement of this size, even if only of a few years’ duration, must have left traces which can be detected archaeologically. Unfortunately, there has been very little archaeological activity in this area in recent years. In 1961 Francis Celoria recorded a stretch of an apparently Roman road (but not belonging to the primary routes) near Marble Arch⁵. He also mentions that the Thames Basin Archaeological Observers Group “kept an eye on exposures in Park Lane and its vicinity between 1958 and 1965... but nothing more ancient than 18th-century elm water pipes could be observed.” Without knowledge of the exact locations of these exposures, it is difficult to assess their relevance to the present hypothesis. What is clear is that this area merits close archaeological attention in the future.

Clive Orton

1. See I. D. Margary *Roman Roads in Britain* (1955) 47; H. L. Sheldon ‘The 1972-74 excavations: their contribution to Southwark’s history’ in *Excavations in Southwark 1972-74* (1978) 25; P. Marsden *Roman London* (1980) 13-14.

2. R. Merrifield *London City of the Romans* (1983) 120.

3. *Ibid.*, 122.

4. N. Fuentes ‘Of castles and elephants’ *London Archaeol* 5 no 4 (1985) 90-4, 106-8.

5. F. Celoria ‘Traces of a possible east-west road surface near London’s Marble Arch (TQ 2771 8093 to 2782 8094)’ *London Studies* 1 (1974) 93-7.