

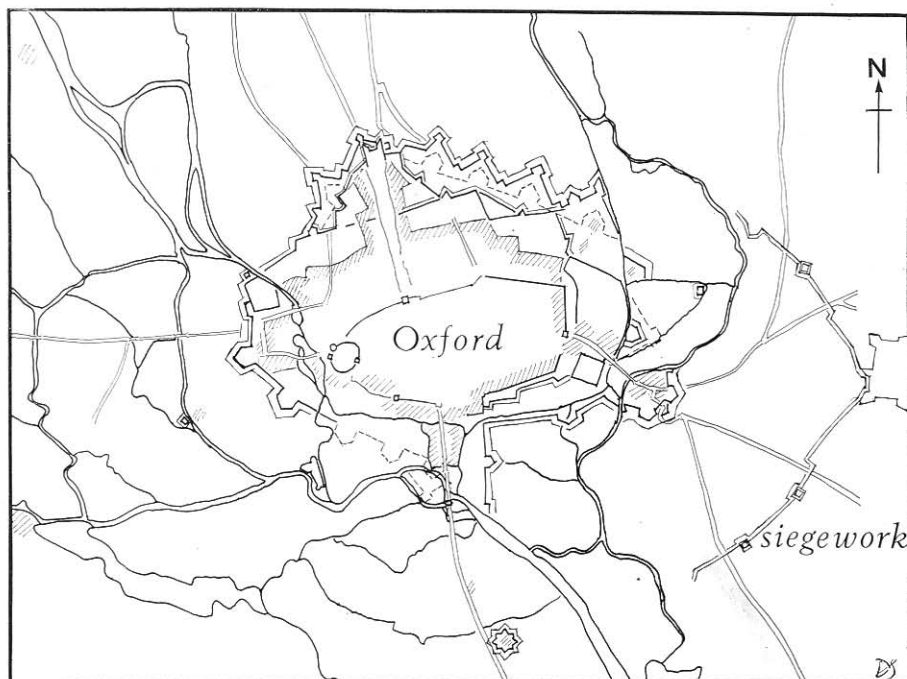
The Civil War Defences of London

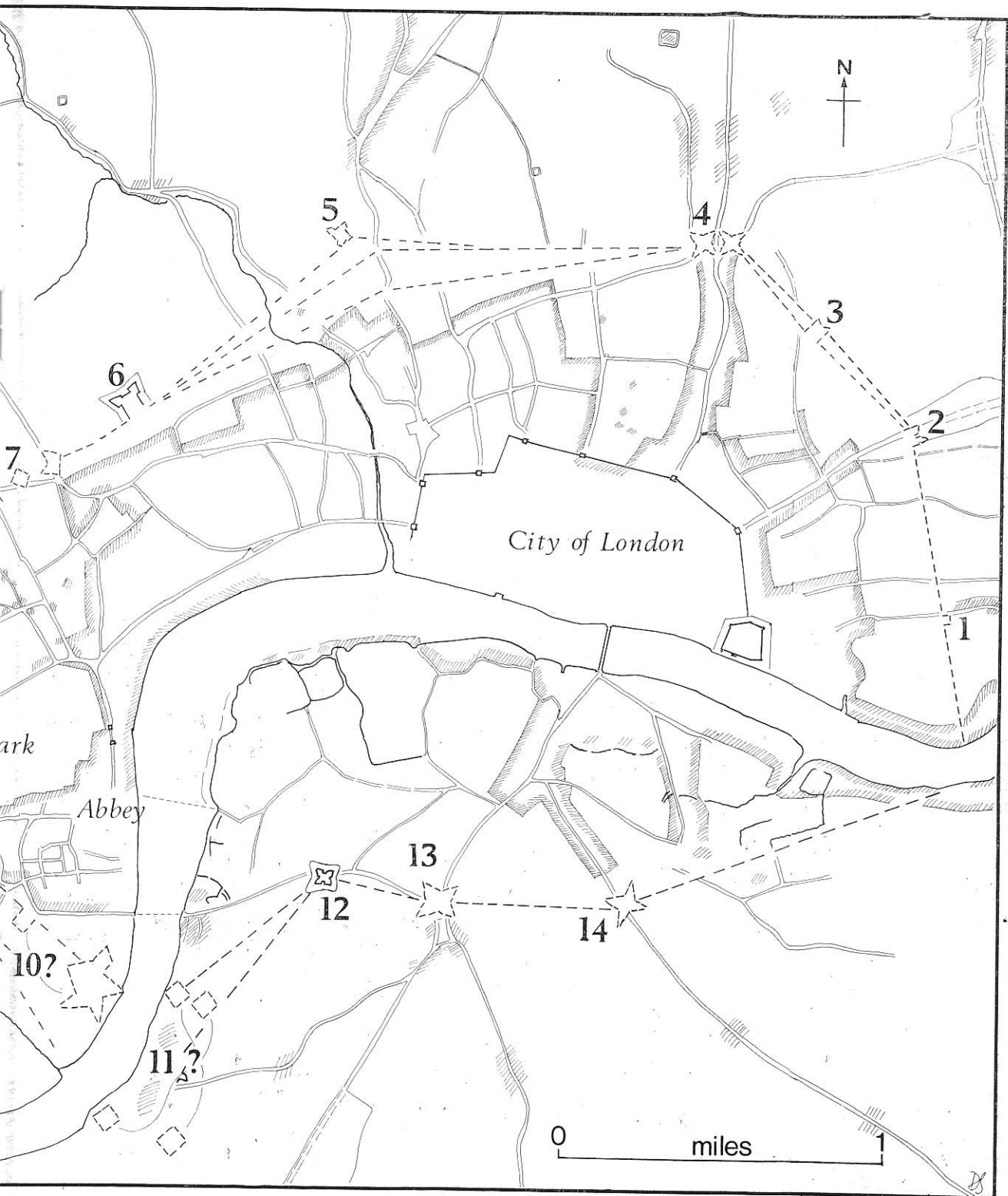
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LONDON, the Parliamentary capital in the Civil War of 1642-6, was protected by an immense circuit of 17km (11 miles) of Bank and Ditch, straddled here and there by Batteries and Forts. This line took in vast areas of fields and meadows far beyond the suburbs, and seems to have been by far the most extensive city-defence in 17th century Europe. To foreign experts it must also have seemed the most indefensible, as the Venetian ambassador reported.

In complete contrast the Royalist capital, Oxford, was set in a short ring of less than 5km (3 miles) of powerful bastioned earthworks, two-thirds of which lay behind water-meadows which could be flooded at need. The line, drawn tight round the suburbs, was constantly reconstructed on the advice of the latest professional military engineers. And yet the "amateurish" defences of London were never approached by a Royalist patrol, let alone by a powerful thrust, while the massive Oxford works had to stand three hard sieges before the final surrender. The true strength of London lay no doubt in the

Fig. 1 and 2. The Civil War Defences of Oxford (left) and London (right) on the same scale, with rivers, roads, the medieval walls and gates and an indication of the built-up area. Round London are marked the medieval moated manors of (left to right) Marylebone, Tottenham Court, St. Pancras, Wenlock (on Shepherdess Walk) and Balmer (in Hackney). Intended works and the Parliamentary siege works are shown at Oxford.





citizens themselves: the Trained Bands that were so reluctant to go out on campaign, but had shown themselves so steady under fire.

These London defences, which served their purpose so perfectly, have been thoroughly forgotten. They have been studied in the 1720's and in the 1920's and parts of them are shown by chance in maps and engravings of various dates.¹ But the precise line of the greater part of the circuit is uncertain and no observation of a ditch-section or a fort-rampart has ever been made—one of the enigmas of the capital's archaeology.

This article is meant to stimulate observation and research into local topography. I am sure that at least once every year for the last century and a half a section across the Ditch has been laid open. Not one has been sketched and they are gone for ever. Equally I am sure that just as often views and maps of portions of the defence have passed unnoticed in libraries. These at least can be found again. Can we repeat this article in 5 years' time with a fuller discussion, with details from half-a-dozen early maps, with two or three archaeological sections, and with some better documentary references to the building and manning and maintenance of the defences? By then contractors will have hacked into the ditch in at least 5 places, if only we are there to clean the section.

The position at Oxford is somewhat better. Many sections of the ditches have gone; a handful were sketched (Fig. 3) and have never been published. A salvage-plan of a bastion was deposited in a museum and seems to have been lost, a surprisingly common fate for archaeological records.²

This account of the Lines must be treated as something on which any reader of the *London Archaeologist* can improve, whether idly looking down a building site or browsing in a map-collection, and all my suggestions and identifications are open to criticism and adjustment.

We shall start from the River on the east and follow anti-clockwise through Shoreditch and Hyde

Park Corner to Vauxhall and back through the Elephant and Castle to Rotherhithe. (Fig. 2). It is not clear whether the river was blocked by a chain or commanded by a fort or tower on the early 17th century Wapping embankment. The line ran from close by Wapping Police Station, about 200m. east of Wapping Old Stairs to a Fort or Battery (1) on Radcliffe Highway directly south of St. George's in the East. This Fort lay 100-150m west of the Roman signal station on the low rise above the edge of the river-marshes, and they must have both been sited to command the river and marshland. The line ran up or close to Cannon Street Road (past Rampart Street) to a Fort (2) on Whitechapel Road, just west of the London Hospital. A broad strip of common ran on either side of the road from here to Stepney Green, and Wren's 1673 plan for developing this shows the outline of the Fort.³

The line ran to a Fort or Battery (3) under the railway or Cheshire Street just east of Brick Lane and from here through Arnold Circus to one or perhaps two Forts (4) by Shoreditch Church commanding the Kingsland Road, the main route to the North. From here the line ran just north of Old Street, but the details are very uncertain. The field-worker—(or perhaps streetwalker is a better name), looks up almost in despair at blocks of flats last year, of 10 years ago and 20 years ago. Somewhere in amongst them must have been a dozen recognizable sections of the Ditch, within three-quarters of a mile of the Guildhall Museum.

Through Clerkenwell the line is still uncertain and the most detailed topographical work has not brought up any good evidence. There was a Fort (5) round the New River Head, now the district Headquarters of the Thames Water Authority in Roseberry Avenue, and the main line may have run to this Fort or may have been as much as 400m to the south. The crossing of the Fleet River is equally obscure, as is the number of lesser batteries here.

Certainty comes with Great Ormond Street which lies on or just north of the line and the next Fort

1. The earliest plan of the defences which I have found is in W. Stukeley's 1720 notebook *British Coins*, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 613: the college generously sent a photocopy by return of post. This plan is most important and deserves publication.

A plan engraved by G. Vertue in 1738 and said to be based on fieldwork by Dr. Cromwell Mortimer was published in W. Maitland, *History of London* (First ed. 1739 Second ed. 1756) 1 369. This plan was republished in *Gentleman's Magazine* June 1749 p. 251. Both Stukeley and Vertue were among the founders of the Society of Antiquaries in 1717 and Mortimer was a later Fellow as well as Secretary of the Royal Society and the clues to the relationship (and many differences) of these plans will surely be found there.

N. G. Brett-James, "The Fortification of London in 1642/3" *London Topographical Record* 14 (1928) 1-35

was reprinted in his *The Growth of Stuart London* (1935) 268-295 with his very poor map.

V. Pearl, *London and the Outbreak of the Puritan Revolution* (1961) 262-5 ably sets the social background.

I have taken the 1658 Map by Newcourt and Fairthorne for built-in areas, but a good deal of variation is possible.

2. *Oxoniensia* 1 (1936) 161-172, 2 (1937) 207-8, 3 (1938) 175-7. F. J. Varley, *The Siege of Oxford* (1932). M. Toynbee and P. Young, *Strangers in Oxford* (1973). A classic study is Royal Commission on Hist. Mons., *Newark on Trent, The Civil War Siegeworks* (1964).
3. H. Llewellyn Smith, *History of East London* (1939) 59 copied from D. Lysons *Environs of London* 3 (1795) 447, 474-5. I imagine the original is among Private Bill Records in the House of Lords Record Office, but I have not yet seen it.

(6) lasted as a large-size garden layout (shown on many maps and plans) until 1880, when Bedford House was broken up for development. A great deal must still survive below the south side of Tavistock Square, where there are still large gardens behind the Bedford Place houses.⁴ From here the line disappears beneath the British Museum, where it has never been noted. The Museum's long projected restaurant block cuts the most likely line and could produce a crucial section of the Ditch.

A complex of Forts and Batteries (7) between Great Russell Street and Wardour Street commanded the junction of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street, the main routes to the north-west and west. Oxford Street seems to have been completely cut and traffic diverted to the alternative Knightsbridge-Piccadilly route. I have not found any evidence for the details of these Forts, nor for the line continuing across Mayfair probably near Great Marlborough Street and Maddox Street.

A lucky stroke gave me the next stretch: waiting for an order in the Map Room of the Public Record Office I glanced at a returned map on the table, which was a faded Victorian photograph of a 1717 survey of Westminster and Chelsea, and suddenly the unmistakable angled line of a Civil War defence leaped up at me. This gave me a Battery (8) "Oliver's Mount" at Mount Row (aptly named) and a good line north of Farm Street and west of Waverton Street.⁵

The next two miles are the most difficult of the whole circuit. There was a Fort (9) at Hyde Park Corner, but where? *The Gentleman's Magazine* plan shows it as a large square Fort north of Piccadilly, reaching to Curzon Street. Stukeley's Plan shows it as a large irregular Fort south of Piccadilly, stretching from the Roundabout into Green Park. I have put both alternatives on the map. The line went somewhere through Buckingham Palace and reached the Thames between Vauxhall Bridge and the Tate Gallery. Stukeley shows a very large star-fort on the River; the 1749 Plan gives us instead a square Battery in "Tothill Fields," that is, 500m away near Vincent Square. Our uncertainty is quite astonishing and a steady programme of site watching must produce some clear evidence by 1980.

Across the River was another Fort "at Vauxhall" (11). This might lie anywhere between Nine Elms Lane and Black Prince Lane over 1000m apart. Was it wiped out last year under the Vauxhall Bridge roundabout? or 10 years ago by an office-block on

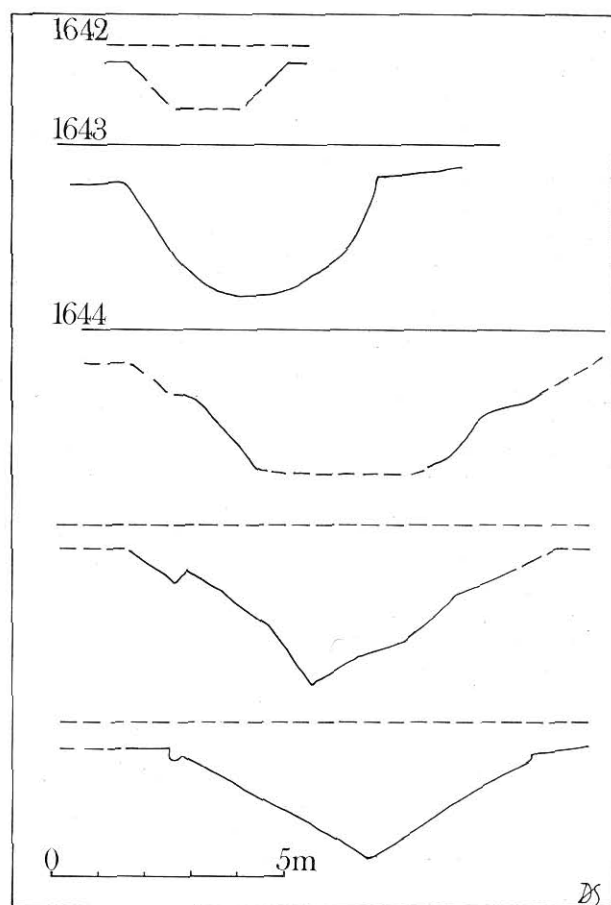


Fig. 2. Sections of Civil War defences at Oxford (rampart to left)—after various excavations.

the Albert Embankment? or is it safe under Vauxhall Park? or awaiting redevelopment on Vauxhall Walk? The plan shows the limits of the possibilities, also a likely bastion on Rocque's Map just north of Kennington Lane. This is on the Auckland Street clearance site.

This complete uncertainty suddenly meets complete certainty in the Park beside the Imperial War Museum. Here until the 19th century stood a roadside pub, the Dog and Duck, among the eroded earthworks of the next Fort (12). This offers a tremendous opportunity as the only part of the Parliamentary Defences which could provide proper large-scale archaeological evidence, with a bonus of medieval road surfaces beneath and early water-and-gas

4. 1665 *Estate Map of Bloomsbury* by J. Daynes, British Library Map Room, trace Maps XV.15 published with minor errors ("house" for "horse") in *London Topographical Record* 17 (1936) 56, Plate 3. The original is 1:1980, 10 perches to the inch. The fort, modified as a garden, is on later maps up to the first edition

(1799) of R. Horwood, *Plan of London and Westminster* at 1:2400.

5. 1717 *Survey of Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea* by J. P. Desmaretz, the 1862 photos are Public Record Office Map Room (WO78/1231). The photos are about 1:6120. I wish I could find the original of this fine map of inner West London by an expert military mapmaker.

pipes above. This Fort well deserves an article of its own.

The line runs to the Elephant and Castle, where a large Fort (13) seems to have gone without trace and on to another Fort (14) somewhere near the New Kent Road-Old Kent Road Flyover. Have both these forts been destroyed by recent roadworks, or is there still something left? The final stretch through Bermondsey to the River at Rotherhithe is full of uncertainties. Was there a regular Bank-and-Ditch or did they rely on the many deep drainage-streams here? Did the line run across the Abbey Precinct at Bermondsey, or link up to the Precinct-wall? Was the Precinct-wall, for that matter, where we assume⁶? Even the end of the line is uncertain, as the beginning. Some accounts give us a Fort at "Redriff," others miss it out. Was there a tower?, or a boom across the River?

There are still other puzzles. The water-supplies were unevenly safeguarded. The main reservoir of New River Head had a Fort (5) built round it, but the channel itself could be cut at the first moment of siege. Of the main older systems only the northern Whitehall Palace "Hardwater" system (from Piccadilly Circus and Trafalgar Square) lay within the defences. The other Whitehall "Softwater" system and the Abbey Main lay 500m beyond the Fort (9) at Hyde Park Corner. The old City conduits around Stratford Place, Oxford Street, the Christ's Hospital supply (that had been Greyfriars) from Queen Square and the White Conduit which supplied Charterhouse were all a similar distance beyond the Defences.

6. Described in A. R. Martin, The . . . Abbey . . . at Bermondsey, *J. Brit. Arch. Ass. Second Series* 32 (1926) 195-6 and plotted by W. F. Grimes, *The Excavation of Roman and Mediaeval London* (1968) 212 Fig. 51. This may be open to a good deal of adjustment.
7. *1718 Survey of the Conduits of Whitehall*, British Library Map Room, K Top. XXI.1.3 (probably meant to be 1:3600). *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol.*

There must have been alternative sources, many springs and wells, the Tyburn, the Fleet, the Walbrook and the Thames itself.⁷ The existing river-defences such as Tilbury Fort were clearly kept in a state of readiness but less seems to be known about the outworks on the other sides.

Finally the London defences were put to the test, and failed, when the victors squabbled among themselves. In August 1647 the Army marched on London. "The great forts which the Citizens had lately made round about the City, which were thought by many impregnable, were all fortified against them." But London proved to be a paper tiger against 20,000 Roundheads under Fairfax and the bloodless siege lasted only four days.

After that the defences were dismantled. "The Forts and Workes about the Citty slighted and pulled downe, and laid levell with the grounde, that these Villians might ride up and downe at their pleasures," as an old Londoner wrote in the back of his Stow's Chronicle.⁸

Postscript

I have overemphasised the new Earthworks and not said enough about the real and emotional value of the City Wall. Professor W. F. Grimes has very kindly reminded that that his section of the Ditch at St. Alphage⁹ showed a recutting about this time, although elsewhere the Ditch was already culverted. That the citizens thought in terms of defence in depth is shown by the many references to chains to bar the streets.

- Soc.* 8 (1911-3) 9-59 (City Supply). *Archaeologia* 61 part 2 (1909) 347-356 also 56 part 2 (1899) 251-266 and 67 (1916) 18-26 (Christ's Hospital). *Archaeologia* 58 (1902) 293-312 (Charterhouse).
8. W. Harrison, *Description of England* 4 (1908) 211 (ed. F. J. Furnivall, New Shakespears Soc).
9. *The Excavations of Roman and Mediaeval London* by W. F. Grimes (1968) 83-88.

Excavations

City, by Museum of London, Department of Urban Archaeology (City). A series of long term excavations. Enquiries to Brian Hobley, Chief Urban Archaeologist, Guildhall Museum, 55 Basinghall Street, E.C.2 (01-606 3030 ext 2217).

Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Two sites in the grounds of Fulham Palace producing Neolithic to early medieval material and features. Enquiries to Keith Whitehouse, 56 Tamworth Street, S.W.6. (01-385 6038).

Kingston, by Kingston-upon-Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Marion Smith, Kingston Museum, Fairfield Road, Kingston (01-546 5386).

Southwark, Southwark Archaeological Excavation Committee. Several sites from the Roman period onwards. En-

quiries to Harvey Sheldon, S.A.E.C., Montague Chambers, Montague Close, S.E.1. (01-407 1989).

Staines, by London and Middlesex Archaeological Society. A Roman site at the Friends' Burial Ground, Thames Street. Enquiries to Kevin Crouch, (01-560 3880 day or 09-328 62874 evening).

GENERAL EXCAVATIONS

THE Council for British Archaeology produces a monthly Calendar of Excavations from March to September, with an extra issue in November and a final issue in January summarising the main results of fieldwork. The Calendar gives details of extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The annual subscription is £1.25, post-free, which should be made payable to C.B.A., 7 Marylebone Road, N.W.1.