

The Roman Riverside Wall in the City

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AFTER describing the defences on the landward side of London, William Fitzstephen, a clerk and biographer of Thomas Becket, writing in the 1170's goes on to say: "On the south, London was once walled and towered in like fashion, but the Thames, that mighty river, teeming with fish, which runs on that side with the sea's ebb and flow, has in course of time, washed away those bulwarks, undermined and cast them down."¹

Although we seem to have in Fitzstephen, a definite statement as to the former existence of a riverside wall, and, even, a number of lengths of walling discovered along Upper and Lower Thames Street since 1839 to match, the existence of a Roman riverside wall had never been conclusively proved²; never, that is, until the rescue excavations carried out by the Department of Urban Archaeology, Guildhall Museum, this January.³

The discovery of the wall resulted from a watching brief for the north wall and gateway of Baynard's Castle. Indeed, that much of the Roman wall survived must be accredited to the medieval builders of Baynard's Castle, who reused much of the wall for the foundations of their own north gateway.

During the excavations 27.96m. of actual walling (front cover) were discovered as well as a further 10.40m. of the timber pile and chalk footings, giving a total length of 38.36m., by far the largest piece yet discovered. At its highest the wall stood 4.16m. above the chalk footings. The north (landward) face of the wall was well preserved having two major offsets which coincide with the tile courses of which three survived. The south face, however, had been destroyed by the river, whose black, organic deposits had clearly eaten into and undermined the body of the wall.

The first activity on the site was unfortunately only really seen in section, and had been mainly destroyed by the Victorian sewer of the 1840's⁴. A shallow

bank of light brown clay, whose surface was at a camber, was laid. An interpretation of this feature is difficult, but the standard textbook interpretation would be a road, and if this is the case, it will be interesting to see if it fits into the known grid system of Roman London. Presumably, if it is a road, it ran north-south and went down to the Roman river fronts (of the 1st and 2nd centuries), as found at New Fresh Wharf and the Custom House excavations⁵. Although the building of the wall would have truncated this road, it could quite easily have continued to function as an access system to the wall itself.

The first stage in the construction of the wall involved the ramming of square oak piles, worked with an adze, into the natural gravels and clay (Fig. 1). The timbers, of which over one hundred were found, were arranged in five neat rows, with the longest timber placed in the outside rows. Around and above these piles a thick layer of chalk was added, 3.3m. wide. On to these footings the main body of the wall followed, comprising firstly a stratum of ragstone set in hard greenish mortar. The rest of the wall consisted of ragstone, with some flint and chalk, set in yellow mortar with flecks of crushed tile. Three double bonding courses were found composed solely of new roof tiles (*tegulae*), unlike similar courses on the land wall which are made of the usual flat "bonding tiles." The *tegulae* were laid with their flanges facing downwards, presumably to provide a better form of bonding across the width of the riverside portion of the wall which because of the nature of its foundations, was more liable to suffer stress from subsidence.

The wall had two distinct types of facing. Between the first and second tile courses the facing stones were crude pieces of ragstone, but some attempt had been made to put them into a rough herring bone pattern. In contrast, the facing stones between the

1. 'A description of London', *The Life of St. Thomas, Archbishop and Martyr*, by William, son of Stephen (written before the death of the young Henry in 1183). Translated by H. E. Butler in *Norman London* by F. M. Stenton.
2. R. Merrifield, *The Roman City of London* (1965). Gazetteer references 114, 123, 279, 311 and 354. Also P. R. V. Marsden, "The Riverside Defensive Wall of Roman London" *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* 21 (1967) 149-156
3. I would like to thank the whole staff of the Department of Urban Archaeology for their advice, help and

encouragement. My consultations with Ralph Merrifield, Tim Tatton-Brown, Hugh Chapman and others was most welcome and beneficial. Finally, I would like to thank the members of the City of London Archaeological Society who responded so magnificently to the challenge.

4. M. Millett, "A Trench across Upper Thames Street" *London Archaeol.* 2 No. 9 (1974) 232-3.
5. T. Tatton-Brown, "Excavations at The Custom House Site, City of London 1973" *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.* 25 (1974) 117-219.



Fig. 1. The foundations of the wall showing the oak piles cleared of their chalk packing; two of the tile courses are also visible.

(Photo: Trevor Hughes, Guildhall Museum, D.U.A.)

second and third tile courses were small, fairly neatly cut, ragstone blocks. None of these facing stones would have been visible in Roman times due to a massive clay bank which was added to the back of the wall.

As part of the primary build of the wall a drain was incorporated through the wall, just above the chalk footings. At some later date it was necessary to replace this drain with another at a higher level. To insert this second drain a cutting was made through the clay bank and a section of the wall had been removed. The gap thus formed in the wall was replaced by a drain and a relieving arch of tiles. The cutting through the bank was backfilled with building debris. Both drains are quite close together and there seems to have been an acute drainage problem in this sector, arguably caused by run off from a drain running alongside the earlier road.

Finally a slow, but effective, destruction of the wall occurred over a long period. In many places the black organic river deposits were seen not only to have eaten into the mortar of the wall, undermining and causing it to topple, but also to overlay the

eroded wall and cause ponding behind. This process of destruction seems to span the long period of Saxon and early medieval England. However, we know that parts, if not the whole wall, were standing in 899, from documentary evidence. Alfred granted to the Archbishop of Canterbury and Bishop of Worcester land near Queenhithe, whose southern boundary was clearly defined as the wall, on the riverside of which moorings were allowed. By the time of Fitzstephen, however, the wall was but a memory, but distinct enough for the author to assert positively its former existence.

Although a great deal of information was retrieved from this short excavation, as usual many more questions now beg answers. What, for instance, is the date of the wall? Is it earlier, later or even contemporary with the main land wall? What is the exact nature of the wall — is it a purely defensive wall or a river embankment, or even both? These and many more questions will be answered by detailed analysis in the coming months, but it can be categorically stated today that Roman London, at some stage in its history, unquestionably had a riverside wall.