

# Rarity and diversity – London’s Roman mosaics

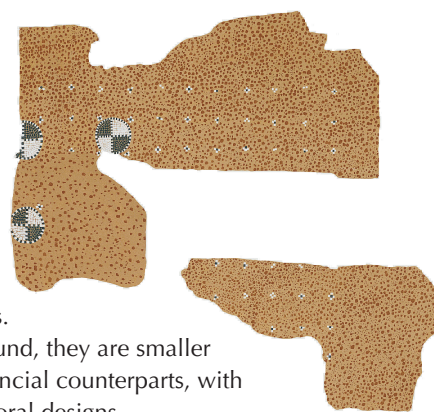
David Neal and Stephen Cosh have reached the London stage in their marathon undertaking to publish every known Romano-British mosaic. Their latest book reveals how the number, quality and date of the surviving mosaics set London and the south-east apart from the rest of Britain. Christopher Catling looks at their findings.

Because it lies closest to continental Europe, the south-east was the first area to come into contact with Roman culture, and is richest in early mosaics. Economically the south-east is different too: the second century was a period of great affluence, and the fourth century one of decline. This is reflected in the disproportionately high number of second-century pavements compared with other parts of Britain, and fewer that are datable to the fourth century.

Within an already unusual region, London is even more distinctive. In this thriving mercantile city, land was at a premium and luxurious townhouses are rare. More typical is the strip house, set at right angles to the street. The working end, consisting of shop and store, opened onto a street colonnade, while an alley

along one side of the property gave access to small private rooms extending towards the rear of the plot. Floors of beaten earth or mortar are more common than mosaics.

Where mosaics are found, they are smaller and plainer than provincial counterparts, with simple geometric or floral designs.



## Early rarities that set London apart

The earliest of London’s surviving mosaics is a very rare example of a mixture of pink *opus signinum*, made from lime, water and crushed tile, into which is set a grid of mosaic roundels and crosslets. The style is so antique that the authors have to go back to Republican-era Reims for a parallel, though the London example, found at Watling Court, remarkably dates from the first or second century AD. An adjacent Watling Court property has another early mosaic unique for Britain, consisting of a band of elongated black and white isosceles triangles above an elaborate plant-based scroll issuing from a stylised vessel, again in grey on a white background.

Monument Street has Britain’s only mosaic inscription recording the gift of a mosaic to a public building. We do not know precisely which building it was – but in Ostia, where such inscriptions are more common, they are used as a form of advertising. Merchants trading in a market hall paid for prominently sited mosaics as a sign of civic virtue that also acted as a shop sign. In the case of the London example, the Monument Street fish market is the nearest and most likely candidate.

## Variety in the second century

In the second century, London’s mosaics become more interesting, with four examples of the style of mosaic consisting of nine square panels featuring real and fabulous animals – a marine beast from Birchin

**TOP:** The Watling Court mosaic is a late 1st or early 2nd century curiosity, harking back to the antique styles of Republican Rome. *Painting: David Neal*  
**RIGHT:** Found in 1869 during the construction of Queen Victoria Street and now in the Museum of London, this 3rd-century mosaic shows the trademark barbed leaves of the Londonian acanthus workshop. *Lithograph: by R Canton, 1879.*





Lane and peacock from Fenchurch Street, for example. Set alongside these accomplished examples of the mosaicists' art is what the authors describe as a 'do-it-yourself' example from Gutter Lane – a botched job based on reused tesserae from an earlier mosaic so poorly executed as to make one appreciate the skill that is involved in laying even the simplest of mosaics.

**The Londinian Acanthus officina**

Normally mosaic making was entrusted to an *officina* (workshop), and by the third century, the mosaics of London form a distinctive group which David Smith and Peter Johnson, in works published in the 1990s, attribute to a workshop which they called the Londinian Acanthus *officina*. As the name suggests, their products are distinguished by elaborate plant forms, especially of the stylised acanthus, with barbed stalks, and leaves that terminate in roundels with lateral shading. Good examples have been found at sites in Leadenhall, Lothbury, Queen Victoria Street and Poultry. From the latter site, the style has been dated by dendrochronology to the first part of the third century.

The fact that the works of this *officina* are not found outside London suggests that the workshop was shortlived. Certainly it appears to have ceased trading by the time London's largest mosaic was laid in Old Broad Street, some time after 350 AD. This so closely matches a mosaic of similar date from Lopen in Somerset that it is clear that important London commissions were being fulfilled by mosaicists from well outside the region by the mid-fourth century.

**The biggest and the finest in Britain**

That mosaic – probably from the main reception room of a very grand private residence of a notable dignitary located on the northern side of the forum – was laid at a time when the whole of the south-east of England was affected by economic malaise and political instability. Evidence of this can be found in the decline of the region's villas, many of which had effectively ceased to be used as luxury dwellings by

the mid-fourth century; some were abandoned, others dismantled and others again were converted to grain storage and corn drying. In this context, the Broad Street mosaic looks like part of an attempt to restore confidence in the city, not unconnected with the establishment of the London mint under Magnus Maximus (AD 383–8) and London's confirmation as the diocesan capital.

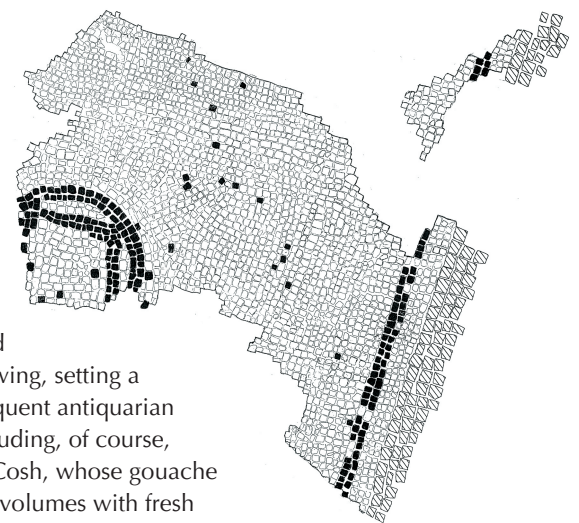
**Glass tesserae**

The materials used in creating London's mosaics include the familiar white of rock chalk and grey shale, but also stones sourced at a greater distance, including blue-grey Purbeck marble. Red tesserae are usually made from recycled brick and tile, with samian pottery reserved for richer tones and highlights in figurative mosaics. London is once again exceptional in the presence of blue and green glass, used sparingly on the whole because of the scarcity of the material, but used extensively along with coloured marble in one of the finest mosaics in Britain, the Bacchus mosaic from East India House, Leadenhall Street, found in 1803.

What survives of that mosaic is now in the British Museum: its central roundel is a powerful composition representing Bacchus reclining on the back of an animated tigress. This exceptional mosaic was probably executed by a team from the Londinian Acanthus *officina* in the third century but augmented by a mosaicist commissioned from the continent to execute the central figure – someone who brought not only exceptional skill, but also the glass tesserae that are unparalleled in Britain in such quantity, but common in the mosaics of Trier and Cologne.

**Antiquarian records**

London is also distinguished in having some of the earliest records of mosaics to be found anywhere in Britain. The earliest known depiction is that of a fragment of Bush Lane mosaic in Aubrey's manuscript version of *Monumenta //*, now in the Bodleian Library. Reproduced in this volume, it is a scientifically observed and precise cube by cube drawing, setting a standard that many subsequent antiquarian artists were to follow, including, of course, David Neal and Stephen Cosh, whose gouache paintings fill these corpus volumes with fresh jewel-like colours.



**LEFT:** Lifted by Sir John Soane, architect of the Bank of England, as the foundations of an extension to the bank were excavated in 1805, this typical Londinian school design probably dates from the 3rd century. **Painting:** David Neal  
**BELOW:** The Gutter Lane mosaic, found in 1987 and dating from late 1st or early-2nd century, was perhaps 'the work of a jobbing builder', whose skill was inadequate for even the simplest of mosaics. **Drawing:** David Neal based on excavator's tracing

*Roman Mosaics of Britain Volume III* by David Neal and Stephen Cosh is published by the Society of Antiquaries and available from Oxbow Books, 10 Hythe Bridge Street, Oxford, OX1 2EW, [oxbowbooks.com/bookinfo.cfm/ID/84246](http://oxbowbooks.com/bookinfo.cfm/ID/84246).