

# The purpose of the Cripplegate Roman fort

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## Introduction

One positive aspect of being part of an older generation of archaeologists in London is that I can review my own excavations in the 1960s in the light of later investigations in case they can contribute to matters that have arisen in subsequent years. During the 1960s, I was the Guildhall Museum's site archaeologist with no funding, but I was supported by an excellent team of volunteers known as the City of London Excavation Group and we excavated many post-war sites.

In 1965 Ralph Merrifield published his landmark book *The Roman City of London*, with an invaluable gazetteer of the then-known features of the Roman city,<sup>1</sup> and I noticed that the, as yet, undiscovered eastern defences of the Cripplegate fort were expected to lie

just inside the dog-leg angle of Aldermanbury, where the Corporation of London had a staff car-park in the basements of demolished buildings, and where the Guildhall Library now stands.

I obtained permission to dig a narrow trench there and soon found the missing fort wall and its associated ditch. I was then given permission to open up a length of the defences, with important results that mostly remain in the Museum of London's Archaeological Archive.

## The fort discovery

The fort was discovered by Prof W F Grimes in 1949,<sup>2</sup> and in time it was thought to have housed the military guard assigned to the Governor of Britain. As a consequence, the

enormous public building beneath Cannon Street Station was postulated to be the residence (or so-called palace, Fig 1) of either the Governor or the Procurator representing the provincial government.<sup>3</sup>

As time passed, I began to have doubts about this suggested association, primarily because the provincial government in London apparently began at least forty years earlier than the building of the fort. These doubts were brought into greater focus by two excellent relatively recent publications describing excavations on the fort, both by Grimes<sup>4</sup> and also by Museum of London Archaeology in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, these studies did not include my work on the Aldermanbury site as it was not part of any publication programme, hence this article.

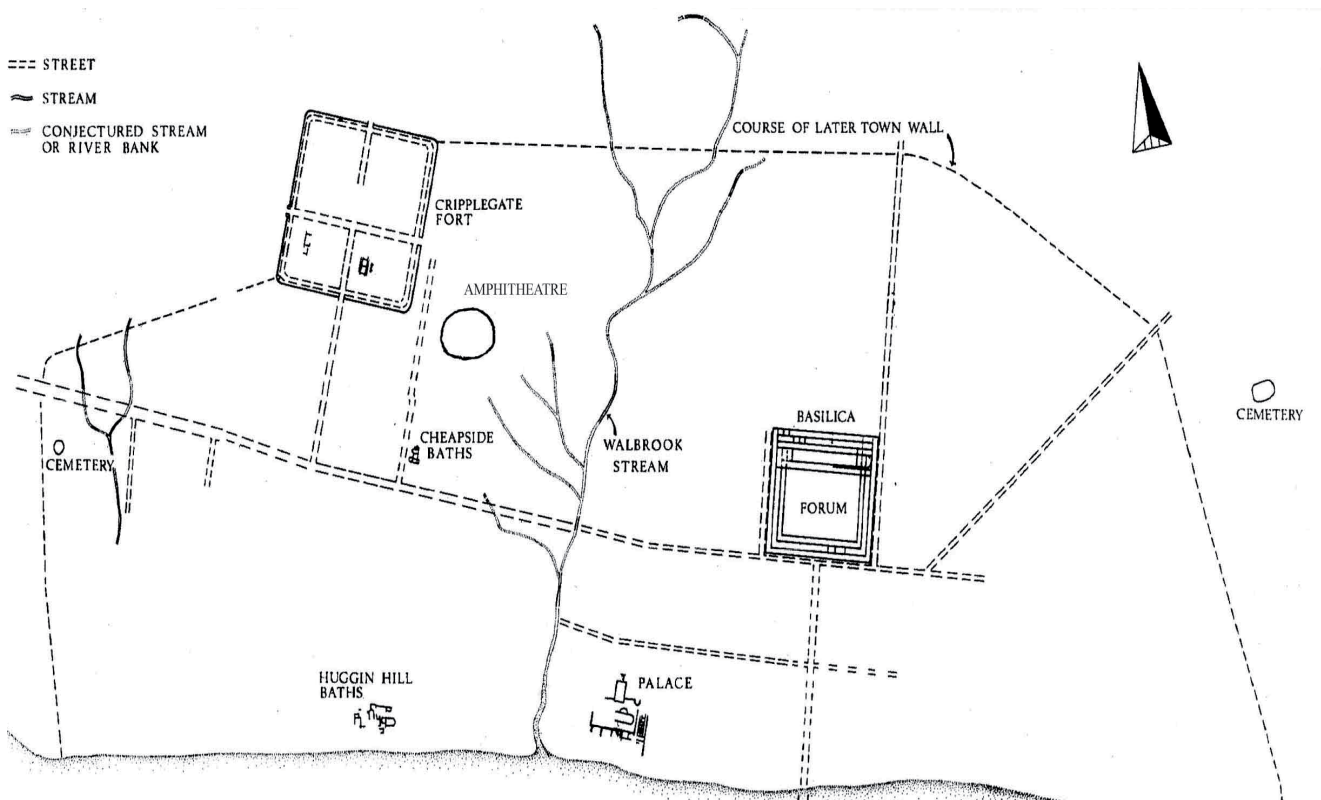


Fig 1: Roman London in the early 2nd century with major buildings referred to in this paper

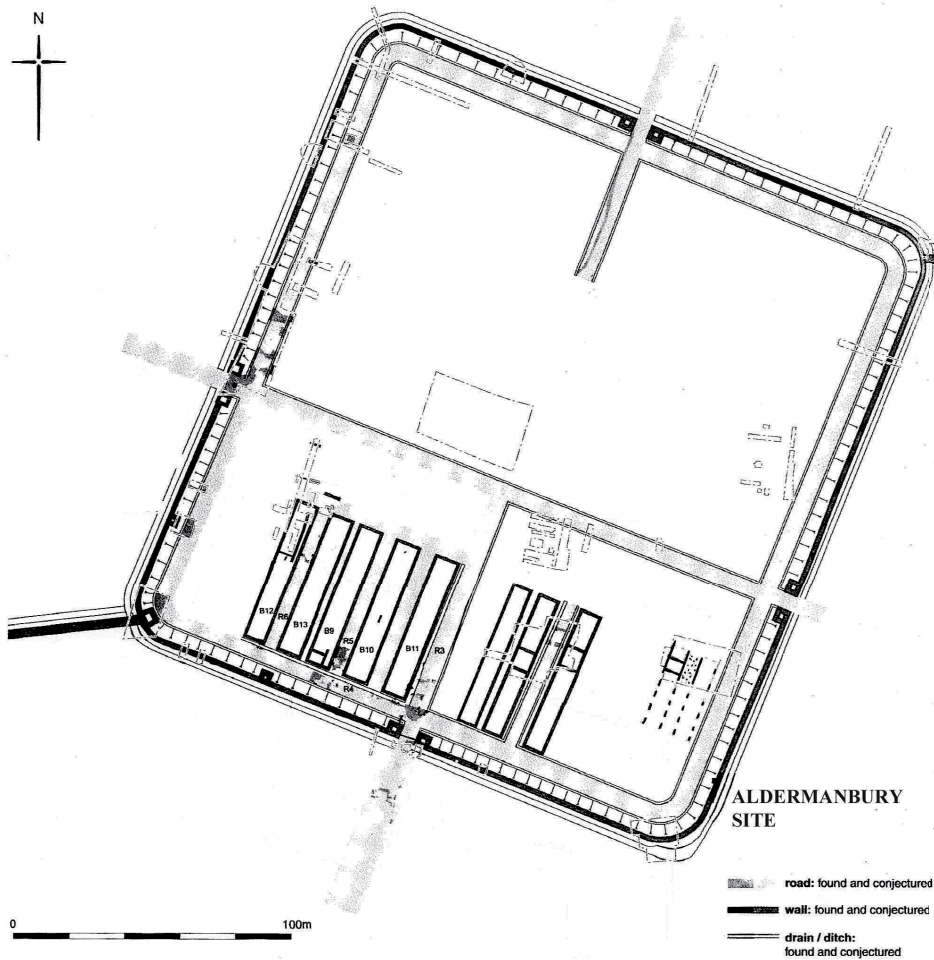


Fig 2: Cripplegate fort, plan partly reconstructed (after Shepherd 2012)

**Dating the fort**

There is general agreement that the fort was built c. AD 120, and that by c. AD 200 it had ceased to be used, its north and west walls having been incorporated into the new city defences.<sup>6</sup> The fort covered about 11 acres (4.5ha), and was not of a conventional size, so the type and purpose of its garrison were difficult to understand (Fig 2). It remains an enigma after nearly 70 years of investigation, as Mark Hassall pointed out in 2012:

‘The life of the fort during the 2nd century AD is not well documented by Grimes’s work. Indeed, it is still very difficult to determine the original complement housed in the fort itself. There is nothing among the finds assemblages here – or from the 1990s campaign – to assist in their identification’.<sup>7</sup>

Hidden away in an annual summary describing my excavations in 1965–6, is a brief report on the investigation in Aldermanbury (Fig 3), which disclosed data that we now know was not so

clearly found elsewhere, and has a bearing on the purpose of the fort.<sup>8</sup> Essentially, the excavation seemed to show that the fort’s defensive ditch, about 2.9m wide and 1.67m deep, was silting up by the middle of the 2nd century, as if the fort had only

been occupied for a short time.

This supposedly defensive ditch just outside the fort’s defensive wall, whose largely robbed foundation and part of an internal turret were also found, had been dug into the natural brickearth in two phases. In the first phase it had the usual square spade-width slot at the bottom of its V-shaped profile, but before any silting could occur it was back-filled with clean brickearth (Fig 4, layer A) which included a little pottery that was datable to the late 1st–early 2nd century AD (Finds group ER 1070, see below).

Grimes’ workmen did not find this first phase ditch on his sites 9, 12 and 14 along the south side of the fort.<sup>9</sup> This is not surprising for, had it existed there, it would have been difficult to detect, as at Aldermanbury it was only identified by occasional animal bones and a thin scatter of other items in its slightly changed brickearth fill.

Although this first cut of the ditch may have been restricted to the Aldermanbury area, it might also have been of greater extent, which may be checked by carefully cleaning and slightly deepening the fort ditch found by Grimes and exhibited at the south-west corner of the fort in Noble Street.

In its second phase, the ditch was re-dug in exactly the same place at Aldermanbury and conformed to the shape and size of the ditch that Grimes found elsewhere with the same V-shaped cross profile, but this time its bottom was U-shaped without the square-cut slot (Fig 5). Moreover,

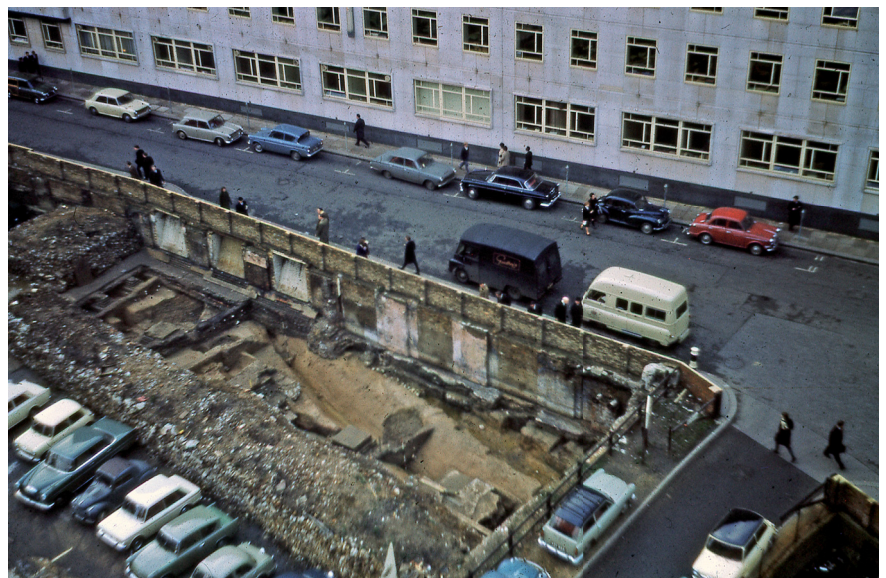


Fig 3: the fort excavation in Aldermanbury



where the ditch curved around the south-east corner of the fort, it narrowed to a U-shaped gully, only 40cm wide and 61cm deep. It was obviously only a token defence, as if the purpose of the fort was more administrative than defensive.

In order to recover the maximum amount of dating evidence from the fill, the excavation was extended along its length as far as possible (Fig 3), and these groups of finds are now in the Museum of London's Archaeological Archive where they are recorded in the Excavations Register under the numbers ER 1070–1074.

At the bottom of the second phase ditch were layers ER 1071, 1072 (Fig 4: B and C), gravel and silt deposits up to 40cm thick, derived from just beyond the east side of the ditch.

There was pottery in them from the period AD 120–30, a coin of Hadrian minted in AD 118,<sup>10</sup> and a broken tile with the ...]N of an official P.P.BR.LON stamp. During this stage, the ditch had become neglected and was allowed to silt up until it was one-quarter filled, as if the fort was no longer in use.

The silting continued during the 2nd century represented by layer D, comprising deposits of fine silt, sand and dumped rubbish with animal bones, tile fragments and pottery, including three almost complete but smashed cooking pots, all dated to c. AD 140–80 (ER 1073, 1074). In the bottom was a scatter of large animal bones and a large portion of a human skull, as if dumped into the

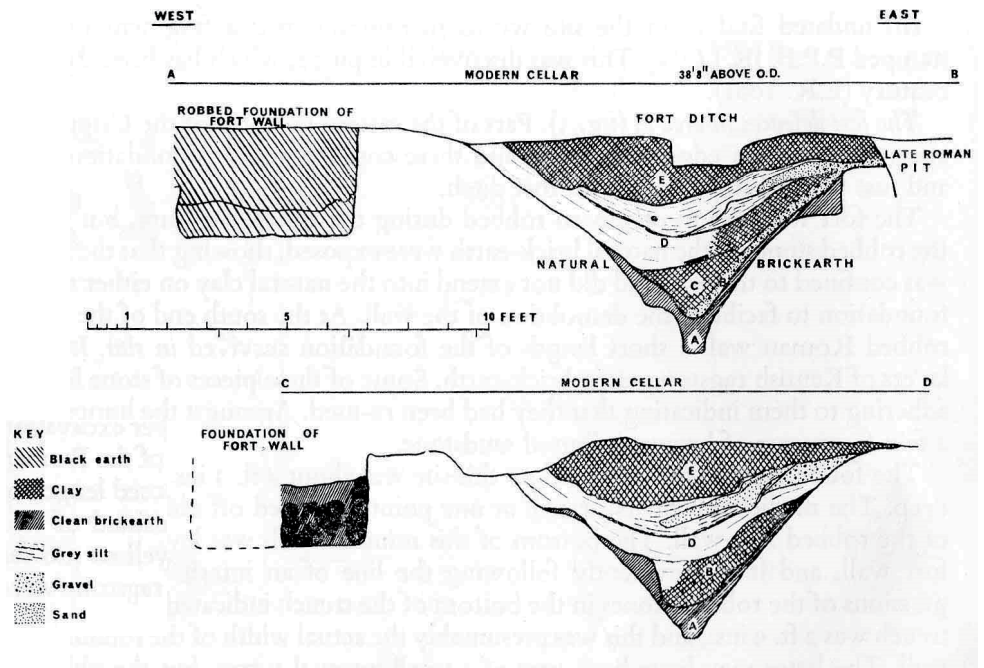


Fig 4: sections through the eastern fort defences, Aldermanbury

ditch at one time.

By the late 2nd century, the ditch was three-quarters full of silt and rubbish, and had become merely a wide hollow, which was roughly 61cm deep, in the landscape.

The final deposit, layer E, was a deliberate dump of brickearth containing much rubbish with pottery (ER 1075) and was dated to the end of the 2nd or beginning of the 3rd century. As this dating coincides with the building of the city's new defences, it is possible that the dumping could have been a deliberate act to obliterate the ditch, as if, perhaps, the fort was being demolished.

#### Dating the ditch

The dating evidence from the fort ditch in Aldermanbury accords with that found by Grimes where the evidence was not so distinct,<sup>11</sup> the lack of clarity particularly existing at the south-west corner of the fort where there was a complex of later features.<sup>12</sup>

It also accords with the result of the 1990s excavations on which it was noted that barrack building 9 had demolition debris with pottery of AD 120–60, and that the demolition debris of other buildings was rather later, being dated to AD 150–250. At 25 Gresham Street, the fill of the fort ditch was dated mid- to late 2nd century, the authors concluding that the demise of the fort occurred after AD 150 after which the partly demolished barracks were finally levelled, and 'that the lifespan of the fort may have been as little as half a century'.<sup>13</sup> It is normal to judge when a military fort became disused by the dating of the silting up of its defensive ditch, as was recently demonstrated in the post-Boudican fort of AD 60–1 at Plantation Place, Mincing Lane.<sup>14</sup>

By linking this evidence for the early neglect from the fort ditch, as if the fort was occupied for a short time, together with the fort's unusual size, and the fact that its building period does not match the dating of the presence of the provincial government in London, we should be seeking an alternative explanation for the fort's purpose.



Fig 5: fort ditch on eastern side of the Cripplegate fort, Aldermanbury

It has been noted that there is a surprisingly small amount of rubbish associated with the occupation of the Cripplegate fort compared with, say, the Plantation Place fort which was also occupied for a short time.<sup>15</sup> This can be accounted for as a reflection of the fort having had a garrison for a short time.

The obvious event that fits this chronology is that the fort was built to house the personal troops who attended Hadrian on his visit to Britain in AD 122, and that when the Emperor departed the fort became disused. As an Imperial property, it continued to stand empty, rather as military camps today can remain disused for decades. The ditch slowly silted up and the disused barrack buildings slowly decayed throughout the rest of the century. However, this enabled the fort to be re-opened if a future Emperor should visit Britain. It may even have been occupied by troops passing through London from time to time.

The Emperor's personal bodyguard, the elite Praetorian Guard, travelled with him wherever he went and was presumably based in *Londinium* during Hadrian's visit as that was the centre of provincial government.<sup>16</sup> The only known fort of the Praetorian Guard is the *Castra Praetoria* in Rome, which had roughly the same playing card shape of military forts generally, and covered 16.72ha, with the usual streets between its gates in the middle of each side, though its interior buildings are largely unknown. In time, three of its four walls were incorporated into the later Aurelian defences of Rome, rather as the Cripplegate fort became part of London's city defences.<sup>17</sup> The Cripplegate fort was smaller, at 4.5ha, but large enough to accommodate the guard travelling with the Emperor.



**Fig 6: head of Hadrian from the River Thames near London Bridge (The Roman Society)**

Even though the fort was apparently used for a short time, which in other circumstances could have justified it being built of timber and earth, as was the fort at Plantation Place, its construction in stone could have been part of the Emperor's aim to impress the citizens of London. Many of these were Roman merchants from other parts of the Empire, just as international businesses in the City of London today boast buildings designed to impress.

Hadrian was famous for his travels throughout the Empire, causing public buildings to be erected, and the civic government of London appears to have recognised his support by erecting a bronze statue of him, whose head, found in the River Thames near London Bridge, is now in the British Museum (Fig 6). This implies that he caused public buildings to be constructed in London, such as, possibly, the

enormous second basilica and forum that was apparently so out of proportion to the needs of Londoners that it was being neglected only a century later.<sup>18</sup> A second possible building project was the rebuilding in stone during the AD 120s of the Flavian amphitheatre that, perhaps significantly, lay adjacent to the Cripplegate fort.<sup>19</sup>

### Conclusion

The purpose of this short paper is to introduce further evidence to join that from other sites. It proposes an alternative explanation for the purpose of the Cripplegate fort that is more closely akin to the growing body of archaeological evidence. This might be tested by future excavation and finds analysis.

This paper also makes a plea for a project to be funded for the publication of summaries of my investigations in the 1960s and early 1970s, such as this site in Aldermanbury, so that they can be made more easily accessible for future research and to ensure that valuable information is not overlooked.

*Peter Marsden spent most of his working life at the Guildhall Museum, and then the Museum of London, from 1959 to 2000. Having excavated the Blackfriars Roman ship and later wrecks, he has specialised in nautical archaeology through his career.*

*After leaving the museum, he was involved with the Dover Bronze Age boat and then the Mary Rose Trust. He has published books on the Mary Rose's history and structure and is currently finishing a book developing the Mary Rose story of 1545.*

1. R Merrifield *The Roman city of London* (1965).

2. W F Grimes *The Excavation of Roman and Mediaeval London* (1968).

3. R Merrifield *London, City of the Romans* (1983) 77–83; P Marsden 'The excavation of a Roman palace site in London, 1961–72' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 26 (1975) 1–102; T Brigham and A Woodger *Roman and medieval townhouses on the London waterfront* MOLAS Monogr 9 (2001) 47–8.

4. J Shepherd *The discovery of the Roman fort at Cripplegate, City of London, excavations by W F Grimes 1947–68* (2012) MOLA.

5. E Howe and D Lakin *Roman and medieval Cripplegate, City of London* MOLAS Monogr 21 (2004).

6. Howe and Lakin *op cit* fn 5, 39; Shepherd *op cit* fn 4, 154.

7. M Hassall in Shepherd *op cit* fn 4 162–3.

8. Peter Marsden 'Archaeological Finds in the City of London 1965–6' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 22 (1968) 4–10.

9. *Op cit* fn 4, 90, 106, 109.

10. H Mattingley and E Sydenham *Roman Imperial Coinage* 2 (1926) Hadrian 557.

11. *Op cit* fn 4, 108–112.

12. *Op cit* fn 4, 88–102.

13. *Op cit* fn 5, 42, 44, 46–47.

14. L Dunwoodie, C Harward and K Pitt *An early*

*Roman fort and urban development on Londinium's eastern hill: excavations at Plantation Place, City of London, 1997–2003* MOLA Monogr 65 (2015) 56–58.

15. *Ibid*, 157.

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18. T Brigham 'Civic centre redevelopment, forum and basilica reassessed' in G Milne [ed] *From Roman Basilica to medieval market* (1992), 81, 93.

19. N Bateman *Roman London's amphitheatre* MOLA (2011, rev edn) 31.