

Reconstructing the forum and basilica of Roman London

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Introduction

Last year, when visiting the Roman Gallery of the Museum of London, I saw a model of a reconstruction of the second Roman basilica and forum, with an extra portico in the east and west wings and a 'walkway' across the forum courtyard (Fig 1, *left*). This interpretation is highly conjectural, but, as it is based upon two major publications, one that looked at the Leadenhall Court project of 1985–6,¹ and the other that reported an investigation of mine,² I want to clarify what was found during the earlier excavations and correct any misunderstandings or errors that led to these conclusions. This is important as the layout of the basilica and forum reflects how the Roman city council was organised and enables us to understand better how London was first self-governed almost 2000 years ago.

The date of the construction of any Roman basilica (town hall) and the adjacent forum (public market place) is a particularly important indicator of when a town first became self-governing, but in *Londinium* this is a little more complicated as it had two basilica and forum buildings on the same site, the first initially built c. AD 70–80, and the second rebuilt, in a much larger form, between c. AD 100–125. The second basilica and forum began to be found in the 19th century, but its purpose was not identified until about forty years later.

The first basilica-forum complex was provisionally identified by Ralph Merrifield during the 1960s when he plotted out the Roman walls lying beneath the second larger forum taking and making sense of the discoveries recorded in the earlier 19th and early 20th centuries.³ This was soon partly uncovered in an excavation by Brian Philp who interpreted part of it as a 'proto-forum' that was demolished to make way for the much larger second

building complex.⁴ Subsequently, my own study showed that it was all part of a regular basilica and forum.⁵

Reconstructing the forum

As a great deal of its structure has been discovered, there has since been the use of plans, pictures and models to show how it may have looked (Fig 1, *right*), the most recent being based on the work by Trevor Brigham and Naomi Crowley (Fig 1, *left*).⁶ They were the first to prepare reconstruction drawings to scale for the second basilica and forum. This was as a result of the Leadenhall excavations, drawings on which the gallery model was based. These drawings are helpful, although an inner portico to the east and west wings of the forum were included, even though, when the area was originally examined, it was found not to exist on the east wing, and it probably did not exist in the west wing either (Fig 2).⁷

It is these wings, with their second inner porticoes and the walkway across the forum courtyard that I am querying.

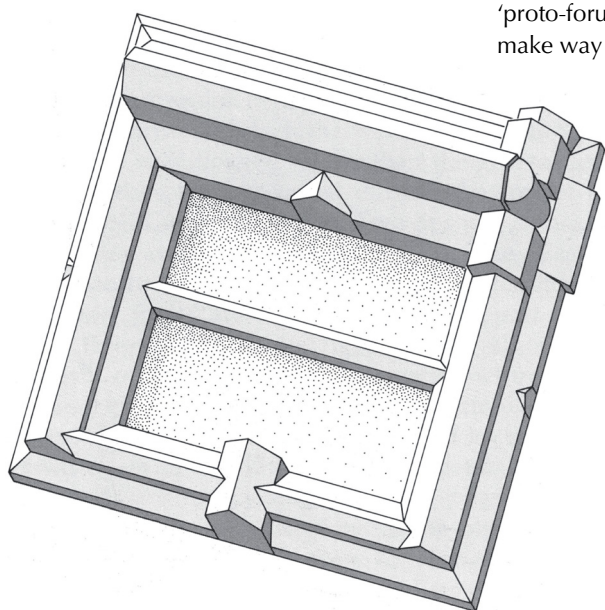


Fig 1: the later forum and basilica model as reconstructed following the Leadenhall excavations (*left*) with the cross passage 'walkway' and extra east and west inner porticoes and earlier reconstruction (*right*) showing the central 'pool' (*left*, MOLA; *right*, Ronald Embleton/MOL)

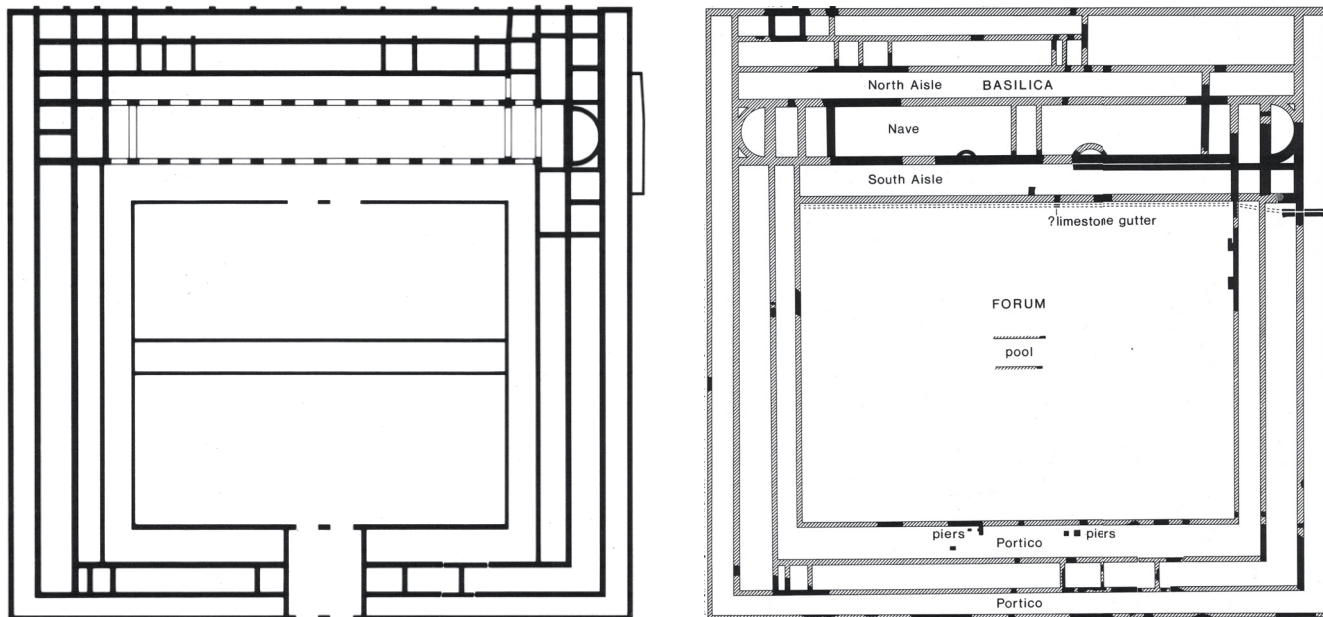


Fig 2: alternative ground plans for the second basilica and forum, showing (left) the hypothetical 'walkway' and east and west porticoes and (right) showing the pool

At present, the second inner portico is merely based on three short pieces of what may be medieval-robbed Roman walls, but which could have been the plinth bases of monuments. These could have come from imperial statues, as did a life-size bronze left hand, which had been found at one of the forum sites, 83–87 Gracechurch Street, in 1867 (Fig 3),⁸ where one of the



Fig 3: bronze hand from a statue found at 83–87 Gracechurch Street in 1867 (MOL No 2079)

robbed walls was found.⁹ A close study by Brigham of the site records of both 83–87 and 17–19 Gracechurch Street, investigated by Frank Cottrill in the 1930s,¹⁰ shows that there might well have been extra structures in the forum courtyard as reflected by medieval robbing, but these need not necessarily

have been part of another portico.¹¹

Trevor Brigham initially considered that the supposed covered walkway running east–west across the middle of the forum courtyard was a 'hypothesis', but later he concluded that ...the feature once thought to represent an ornamental pool is now seen as part of a colonnaded walkway which effectively divided the courtyard in two. These modifications were [part of] more than minor changes in the architectural form of the complex, since they clearly affected the way the forum was actually used.¹²

Excavating the evidence

The basis of these differing 'pool' and 'walkway' interpretations originated in 1977 when a tunnel was dug through the second forum courtyard by the GPO up the centre of Gracechurch Street (Fig 4). I had the task of dealing with any discoveries that might result, though, I should add that, when recording the features with John Maloney, we had to work in the narrow confines of the tunnel which was being dug by workmen, so interpretations were uncertain.

Near the centre of the courtyard, we found what seemed to be a pool because its bottom floor lay below the surface of the contemporary courtyard, and it was 7.43m wide (N–S) and was probably over 14m long (E–W) if it is assumed that it was centrally placed

(Fig 2, right). Its interpretation as a pool was because its north and south walls, 50cm thick, were backed by sticky clay as if to make them watertight, and the inner faces looking into the 'pool' were rendered with pink mortar and red tiles like the lining of cold water baths. It had also been re-floored with chalk and brown and pink mortar on a bed of 'stiff grey clay' as if to make the base of the pool watertight. I deliberately did not describe the pool as 'ornamental' because the many repairs to the courtyard surface around it suggested that it was used for the practical purpose of supplying people and animals with water rather than for architectural aesthetics.

Brigham never saw the Roman walls in the tunnel as he was only involved in the excavation of the north-east corner of the second basilica. Nevertheless, he concluded that the walls in the tunnel might have supported a walkway colonnade extending to the east and west across the forum courtyard, with entrances at each end through the east and west wings of the forum (Fig 2, left).¹³ However, few walls were found to support this view, so their purpose remains unclear as they were undated and of a different size from those found in the tunnel.

The evidence cited by Brigham in favour of this being a walkway was that he thought that there was a drop in the level of the forum courtyard; that the walls of the courtyard could have

supported a colonnade; that walls found to the west might have been an extension of the walkway and that there could have been entrances in the east and west wings of the forum. He also thought that the forum courtyard was terraced at the walkway, and although the courtyard surfaces were found to the north, the forum floor was also found oversailing the south wall of the pool indicating that the courtyard was level and not terraced (Fig 5).¹⁴ Just south of the pool, I noted that 'the tunnel was dug at a downward incline below the surfaces, so as to pass beneath the modern sewers at the junction of Gracechurch Street and Lombard Street. Consequently, there is no information about the southern part of the [forum] courtyard'.¹⁵

Away from the forum tunnel, there was apparently possible further 'evidence' for the walkway, in the form of the walls recorded by Frank Cottrillon in 17–19 Gracechurch Street in 1934–5.¹⁶ Not only are they of a different size to those found in the tunnel, but it is also not possible to



Fig 4: John Maloney recording archaeological features in the GPO tunnel under Gracechurch Street in 1977 (MOLA)

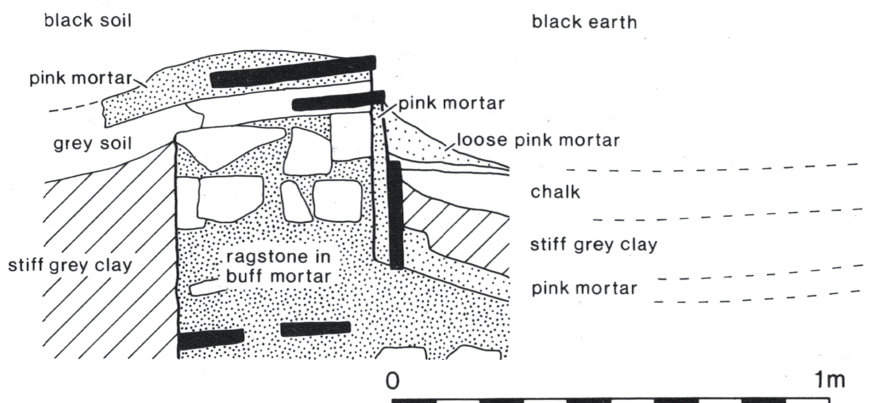


Fig 5: Section across the south wall of the 'pool' with the pink mortar floor over the top

demonstrate that they had the same construction or were even of Roman date. Brigham partly based his interpretations on the Ordnance Datum levels of ancient features, but as Frank Cottrill recorded the level of the walls at 83–87 Gracechurch Street relative to the depth below the recent basement, there remains some uncertainty about their actual depth.¹⁷

Entrances in the sides of the forum might have existed, but these too have not been found, and so can be dismissed, especially as the supposed terrace and colonnade would have created practical problems by dividing the forum into two halves. Maybe this is why no parallels are cited for a walkway anywhere else in the Roman Empire.

Conclusion

Archaeology is a constantly changing science and subject to different interpretations over time depending on the evidence. It is clear that important new information about the second basilica has been recovered by Brigham and his colleagues, and that this has led to a reassessment of how the second basilica and forum should be reconstructed in their entirety. Nevertheless, it is important to keep to what is either known or is likely, particularly as many aspects still need clarification. Until that happens I would

urge that future representations of the layout of the second basilica and forum omit the supposed inner porticoes and the walkway until clearer and more definite evidence for its existence is forthcoming.

There should also be future discussions on other matters relating to this important public building complex such as whether or not there was an apse at the west end of the basilica similar to that at the east end, for this was where leaders of the city council might have sat.

However, I would also like to point out that the plan of the walls and the dating evidence at the north-east corner of the basilica excavated by Milne and his colleagues, are significant additions to our knowledge of the layout of this important building, and about the beginnings of local government in London. The recent excavations show that the basilica was in a ruinous state in the early 4th century AD, so one wonders where the Roman city council met in that century?

Peter Marsden spent most of his working life at the Guildhall Museum, and then the Museum of London, from 1959–2000. He has specialised in nautical archaeology throughout his career, but continues to follow London's more recent excavations that relate to his own earlier work.

1. G Milne (ed) *From Roman basilica to medieval market* (1992) 88, 92 and figs 31 and 40.
 2. P Marsden *The Roman forum site in London* (1987) 64–65 and fig 26.
 3. R Merrifield *The Roman City of London* (1965) 132–40; for earlier records of forum walls, see also P Marsden *op cit* fn 2, 79–150.
 4. B Philp 'The Forum of Roman London' in *Britannia* 8 (1977) 1–64.
 5. *Op cit* fn 2.

6. *Op cit* fn 1, 96–105.
 7. *Op cit* fn 2, fig 26.
 8. MoL accession no: 2079; P Coombe, F Grew, K Hayward and M Henig *Roman Sculpture from London and the South-East Corpus of Sculpture of the Roman World Great Britain I Fasc 10* (2015) 118 no 218 and pl 81.
 9. 83–87 Gracechurch Street, site code: GM70; see *op cit* fn 2, 119–29 and *op cit* fn 3, 229–31.
 10. *Ibid* and 17–19 Gracechurch Street, site code

GM68: see *op cit* fn 2, 106–16 and *op cit* fn 3, Gazetteer nos 234–6 and 238.
 11. *Op cit* fn 1, 91–2.
 12. *Ibid*, 88.
 13. *Ibid*, 91–2.
 14. *Op cit* fn 2, fig 55.
 15. *Ibid*, 106 and 113.
 16. *Op cit* fn 10 and 11.
 17. *Op cit* fn 2, 107.