

The evidence for *Londinium's* Hadrianic 'war' reviewed

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Introduction

The archaeological study of Roman London (*Londinium*) has had two great attractions, new data are constantly challenging our perceptions and where there are gaps in the data: you can speculate about what may or may not have happened. The aim of this article is to reconsider Dominic Perring's speculative hypothesis concerning his evidence for a Hadrianic 'war' in Britain. He believes that in c. AD 125/6 there was an unsuccessful rebellion against Roman rule involving the

population of *Londinium*, which resulted in the city being deliberately set on fire possibly as one of the final acts in a civil war. After the rebellion, he argues that official retribution involved executions and the public display of decapitated heads as trophies. The Cripplegate fort was then constructed to garrison the unruly city.¹ Possibly the IXth legion *Hispana* was involved in this revolt.² His argument hinges on three main sources of evidence: the Walbrook skulls, the Hadrianic fire and the Cripplegate fort –

these need to be briefly reviewed to establish their validity.

The Walbrook Skulls

Over 300 human skulls (predominantly crania) and other disarticulated skeletal material have been recovered from the Walbrook Stream and its various channels (including managed water courses, ditches and pits, Fig 1). While the dating of some of these finds is poor, the bulk of the skulls appear to date from either the late 1st or 2nd century AD (Fig 2).³ The source of the

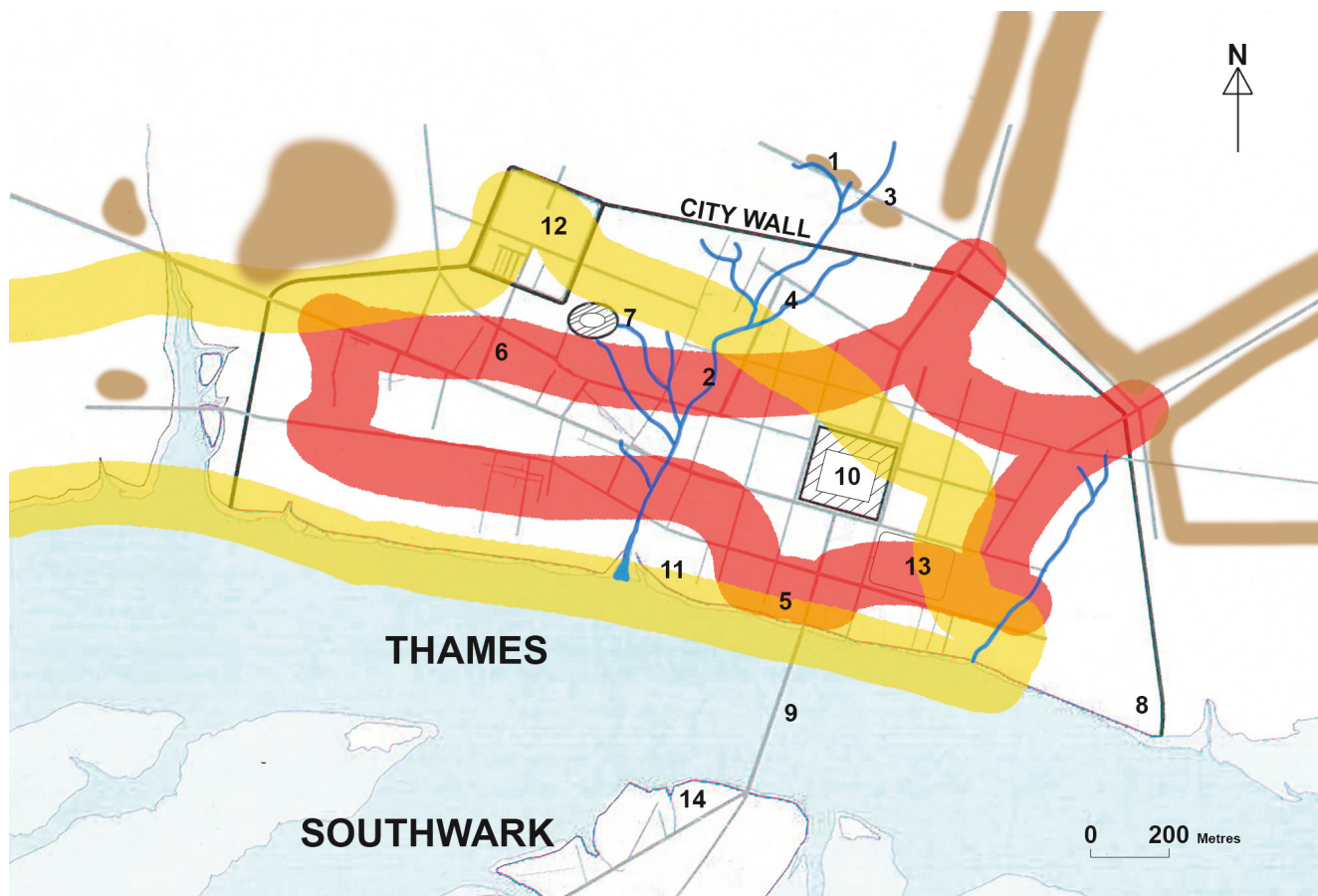


Fig 1: composite plan of Roman London, showing the extent of the landward city wall (c. AD 200), the road network, the external cemeteries, the estuarine foreshore (at high tide), watercourses and selective sites mentioned in the text.

Key: brown tone: extra-mural Roman cemeteries; red tone: estimated extent of the Hadrianic fire destruction; yellow tone: the extent of the Great Fire of 1666 (by this date the Thames waterfront was further south).

Sites: 1. Eldon Street burials; 2. Walbrook Stream; 3. Broadgate Crossrail; 4. 52–63 London Wall; 5. Regis House; 6. 10 Gresham Street; 7. Amphitheatre; 8. Inmost Ward of the Tower of London; 9. bridge; 10. basilica; 11. Cannon Street station; 12. Cripplegate fort; 13. Plantation Place fort; 14. Winchester Palace

Walbrook skeletal material has long been debated, and victims of a massacre during the Boudican revolt of AD 60/61 has been one interpretation.⁴

However, a less dramatic but more plausible interpretation is that some (but certainly not all) of this skeletal material was derived from the erosion of burials in the Broadgate and Eldon Street area (Fig 1).⁵ This is the interpretation of the disarticulated human remains deposited in a roadside ditch at Broadgate, and found during Crossrail excavations, between c. AD 90 and 160 (Fig 1:3 and Fig 4).⁶ Analysis of 39 skulls recovered from a revetted Walbrook channel and various industrial pits at 52–63 London Wall (Fig 1:4) revealed that a predominance of these individuals were young men (aged 28–35 years old), some of whom had sustained violent injuries. The infilling of these features is provisionally dated to c. AD 120–160.⁷

It has been argued that some of the Walbrook skeletal material represents unfortunate individuals who were denied a proper burial as part of their punishment. Such individuals might have been executed criminals, army deserters or even fallen gladiators from the nearby amphitheatre.⁸ According to Suetonius in AD 69, the corpse of the deposed, tortured and murdered Emperor Vitellius was dragged across Rome on a hook, and then thrown into the River Tiber, confirming that, after death, abuse of his corpse continued.⁹ Perring interprets some of the Walbrook skeletal material as evidence of head-hunting or corpse abuse, suggesting that these individuals were 'victims of Roman military judicial and military violence' after a failed rebellion.¹⁰

The Hadrianic fire

A huge conflagration which devastated a large portion of *Londinium* during AD 120–130 was first identified at Regis House in 1929–31 (Fig 1:5).¹¹ The relatively precise date of this fire was derived from a large assemblage of closely datable samian. Re-excavation of Regis House in 1994–96 has refined the date of this disaster to c. AD 125–30.¹² The dating evidence at Regis House is derived from ceramics recovered from *in-situ* destruction of a row of quayside buildings. The severity of the destruction at Regis House and the fact that some of the destroyed buildings still contained their contents

might indicate that it was close to the seat of the fire. After the demolition of devastated buildings at Regis House, extensive amounts of assorted fire debris were dumped on the site to raise the ground level prior to its redevelopment.

It is important to understand that much of the dating evidence for the Hadrianic fire is actually derived from dumped or redeposited fire debris, not *in-situ* destruction. For instance, it has been claimed at 10 Gresham Street that the fire destruction here dates to c. AD 120–40, raising the possibility that 'several devastating fires' took place over a short period of time (Fig 1:6), but the later dating of c. AD 130–40 is derived from pottery recovered from dumped fire debris (Fig 3).¹³ Alternatively, it could be argued that the debris from a single conflagration was being moved about 10 or 15 years later. It is certain that *Londinium* suffered from various localised fires, but only



Fig 2: many skulls have been found in the Walbrook stream tributaries (Museum of London)

two events – the Boudican and Hadrianic fires – have been identified with certainty in multiple locations.¹⁴

How the Hadrianic fire started is impossible to determine from the archaeological record, yet Perring claims that the evidence is 'more consistent with arson' than an accident.¹⁵ Many of the buildings of Hadrianic *Londinium* were partly of timber construction, closely-spaced and possibly thatched,¹⁶ so, given favourable weather conditions, any accidental or deliberate fire could have quickly spread. During 2–5 September 1666, the Great Fire of London spread very rapidly due to a combination of tightly-packed timber-framed buildings, dry



Fig 3: evidence of destruction by fire at 10 Gresham Street (MOLA)

conditions and a strong easterly wind, which allowed the fire to spread rapidly westwards.

The Great Fire started by accident – it was not the result of arson. Once the Great Fire was raging, the authorities quickly discovered that the only way to contain it was by creating sizeable firebreaks, which involved the extensive demolition of buildings.¹⁷ The authorities in Hadrianic *Londinium* would have faced similar problems when dealing with a major fire. William Fitz Stephen in 1170–83 observed: ‘the only plagues of London are the immoderate drinking of fools and the frequency of fires’.¹⁸ Between AD 961 and 1264, it was recorded that London was devastated by eight fires, all of which appear to have been accidental.¹⁹

After the Hadrianic fire, the redevelopment of *Londinium* appears to have taken place rapidly, implying that the city’s economy quickly recovered from this catastrophe.²⁰ By c. AD 125 *Londinium*’s timber amphitheatre had been partly dismantled and, before c. AD 130, it had been replaced by a slightly larger masonry structure, which indicates civic investment (Fig 1:7).²¹

Perring has suggested that the truncated foundations of a structure of unknown function within the Inmost Ward of the Tower of London (Fig 1:8), which incorporated two oak piles felled in the winter of AD 126/7, represent ‘a substantial jetty’, which was an official attempt to rebuild port facilities after the Hadrianic fire.²² This interpretation is extremely questionable as the location of the contemporary foreshore is uncertain, and the fact that this area was subsequently occupied by buildings implies that this structure was located a short distance north of the contemporary foreshore.

Hadrian’s visit to Britain

In AD 122 the Emperor Hadrian, who reigned AD 117–38, visited Britain as part of a tour of the provinces of the empire. At the time of his visit, he was aged about 45. Perring claims that the colossal bronze head of Hadrian dredged from the Thames in 1834, close to the site of the Roman bridge, may have been commissioned to commemorate his visit (Fig 5).²³

Actually, this head depicts the emperor aged about 30, so this statue is

very likely to have been commissioned some years earlier.²⁴ Where this statue originally stood is unknown, but two possibilities are that it either adorned the bridge across the Thames or stood in the monumental basilica on Cornhill (Fig 1:10). Interestingly, the head of this statue had been crudely hacked off its torso. This action, plus its disposal in the river instead of being sold as valuable scrap metal, are indications of iconoclasm, rebellion or deposition as a votive offering. When this statue was broken up and by whom is not known.

In the Roman world, public statues of the emperor were erected as symbols of imperial power and authority, so attacking them was a serious action of rebellion. For instance, in AD 68 when the inhabitants of Britain and France were angered by oppressive taxation, they destroyed public statues of the Emperor Nero.²⁵ The left hand and forearm of a slightly over life-size bronze statue was recovered in 2001 from the basal sediments of a pond at Blossom’s Inn in the City of London, which was subsequently infilled in c. AD 60–70 (Fig 6). The arm is assumed to have been part of a public statue of a god or emperor that was deliberately broken up, perhaps during the Boudican revolt of AD 60/1 and then discarded in a manner that would have made its recovery very difficult, and its re-instatement impossible.²⁶

It is assumed that Hadrian would have visited *Londinium* as the province’s capital, but his movements within the province are not documented. Presumably, his main priority was to inspect the troublesome northern frontier.²⁷ Assuming Hadrian visited *Londinium*, where would he, his staff, guards and entourage have stayed?

One possibility is that some of them stayed in the palatial riverside complex under Cannon Street Station, which it has been argued included the provincial governor’s palace (Fig 1:11).²⁸ Construction of the second phase of the basilica started in c. AD 120 (Fig 1:10), so it may have been partly completed in time for Hadrian’s visit.²⁹ Another possibility is that some accommodation such as a fort was specially constructed to accommodate the emperor’s entourage (Fig 1:12).³⁰ A monumental masonry building incorporating a bath-suite, excavated at the Winchester Palace,

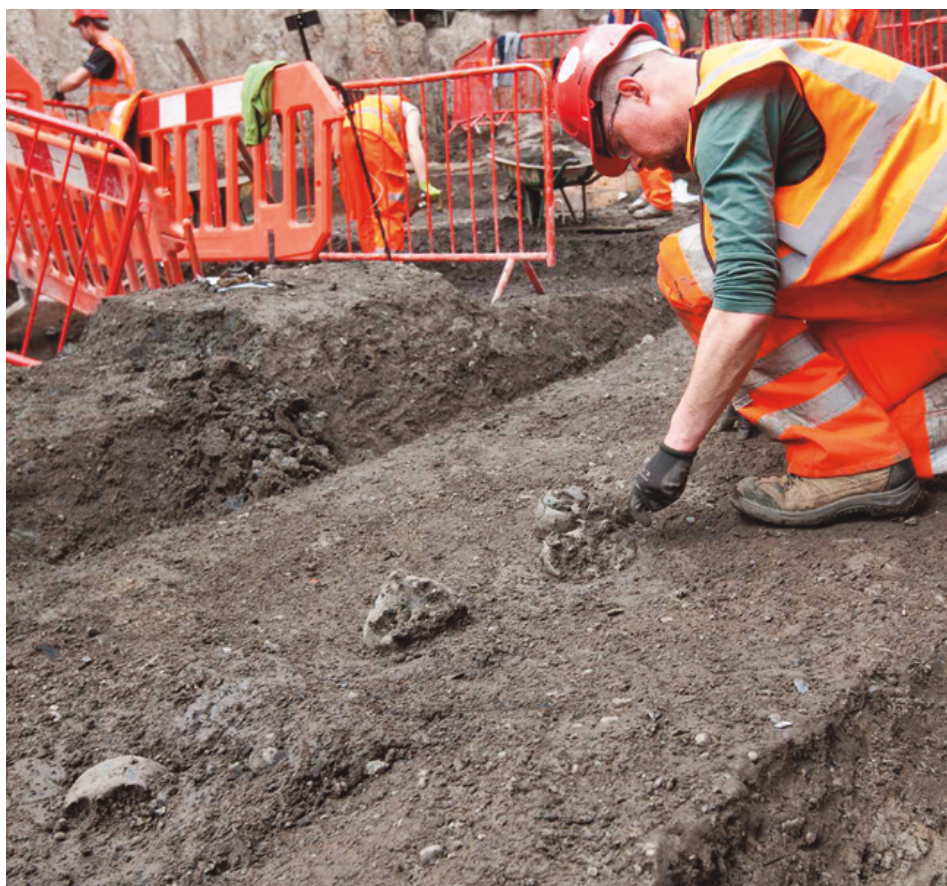


Fig 4: part of a row of roadside Roman skulls being uncovered during the MOLA Crossrail excavations at Broadgate (Crossrail)

was constructed in Southwark during the AD 120s (Fig 1:14). The presence of a marble inscription listing Roman soldiers indicates that this building was constructed by or for the provincial administration (Fig 7), so it might have been built to house part of Hadrian's entourage.³¹

The Cripplegate Roman fort

In the aftermath of the Boudican revolt, a fort was quickly constructed at Plantation Place (Fig 1: 13), probably to provide a secure base for the military personnel involved in reconstruction work, which included the construction of a port facility and the provision of a civic water supply.³² The Plantation Place fort was abandoned by c. AD 85 and its defences were levelled.³³ Perring argues that the construction of *Londinium's* second fort at Cripplegate was prompted by another conflict, while Hingley suggests that a 'military unit' based in the fort supervised the reconstruction of *Londinium* after the Hadrianic Fire.³⁴ The Cripplegate fort was built shortly after c. AD 120 close to the existing amphitheatre.³⁵ By the mid-2nd century, the fort's internal ditch was silting up and being infilled with domestic rubbish, implying that it was no longer being maintained.³⁶ Possibly as early as c. AD 160, some of the fort's internal buildings were being demolished, and the entire complex had been abandoned by AD 200.

Finds from excavations within the fort have revealed no evidence about the type of soldiers or other personnel who occupied its barrack blocks.³⁷ It has been suggested that the fort was intended to house soldiers attached to the governor's staff as guards, messengers and staff officers, but the reasons for its construction and relatively short duration are puzzling. Surely after its abandonment, the governor would have still required guards and staff and, if this was the case, where did they stay?³⁸ Certainly the fort's construction around the time of Hadrian's visit and a devastating fire raises interesting questions about its function, which present data cannot satisfactorily answer.

Rebellion in Hadrianic Britain

By the reign of Hadrian, Roman emperors were invariably military 'strong men' as the army could easily

select or depose an emperor. So, as a broad generalisation, there were two types of rebellions within the Roman empire: disaffected subject people seeking independence and mutinous army elements seeking regime change.

At the start of Hadrian's reign, there were serious rebellions within several provinces including Britain.³⁹ The British rebellion or, more likely, an invasion of the province by the Pictish tribes living beyond its frontier, apparently took place during the governorship of Quintus Pompeius Falco (AD 118–22).⁴⁰ A 4th-century Roman history records that:

having reformed the army in the manner of a king, Hadrian set out for Britain. There he corrected many faults and was the first to build a wall 80 miles long, to separate the Romans and barbarians.⁴¹

Subsequently, probably in c. AD 123/4, another rebellion or invasion in Britain was serious enough for the emperor to dispatch an additional 3,000 troops to deal with it.

The presence of two coin hoards dating to AD 123/4 at Birdoswald Fort on Hadrian's Wall imply that this was where and when the action took place.⁴² The defeat of these 'barbarians' may have been commemorated in the minting of Hadrianic bronze coinage depicting 'Britannia subdued'.⁴³ Perring cites the issue of coins by the mint in Alexandria, depicting the winged figure of Victory (Nike), in AD 124/25 and

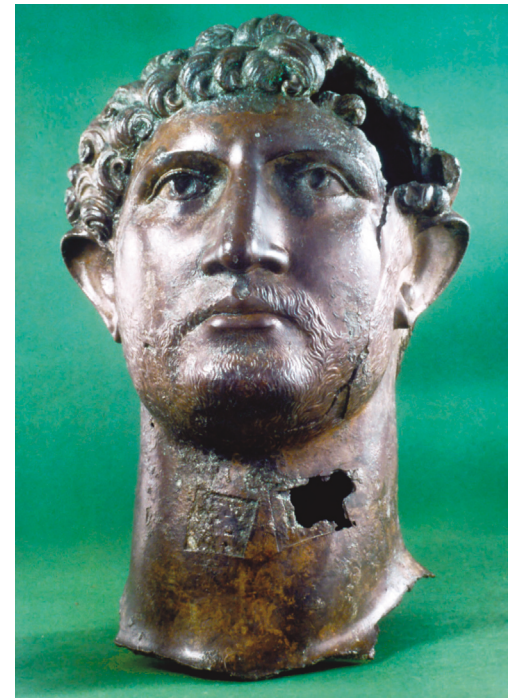


Fig 5: larger than life-size bronze head of Hadrian recovered from the Thames in 1834 (The Roman Society)

125/26⁴⁴ as possibly commemorating the suppression of a revolt in Britain involving *Londinium*, when it is more likely that these coins were commemorating the stabilisation of Britain's northern frontier.⁴⁵

So, if there was an uprising involving *Londinium* shortly after Hadrian's visit in AD 122, which type of rebellion was it? Any insurgency by the population of *Londinium* could have been quickly suppressed by the legions based in northern Britain. If a rebellion



Fig 6: the bronze arm found in the bottom of a pond at Blossom's Inn (MOLA)

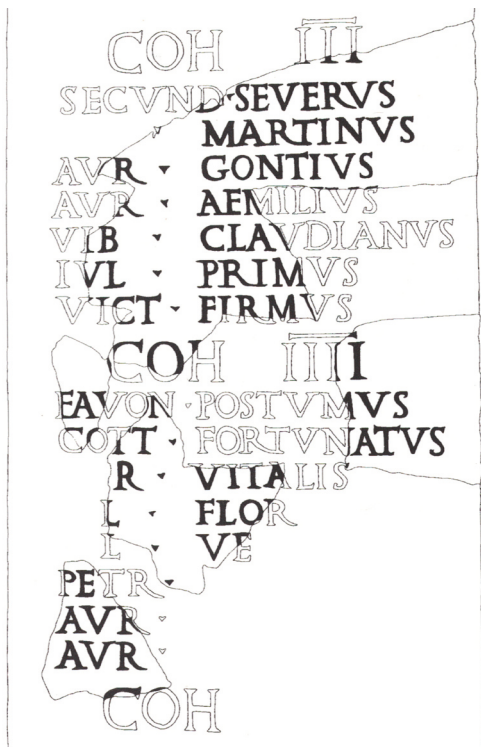


Fig 7: fragments of marble inscription indicating the military presence in Southwark (Museum of London)

in Hadrianic Britain involved elements of the army, then it presumably took place in the north where the bulk of the army was based.

Recently, it has been speculated that the IXth legion *Hispana* might have been involved in a rebellion around the time of the Hadrianic fire.⁴⁶ However, there is no real evidence for or against this hypothesis. In AD 108, an inscription places the IXth legion in York,⁴⁷ but their whereabouts in Britain are unknown after this and it has suggested that subsequently they were either transferred aboard or disbanded.

By AD 122, the VIth legion *Victrix* was based at York.⁴⁸ If elements of the IXth legion had mutinied while it was stationed in Britain, or if it suffered catastrophic casualties and a shaming defeat during the campaigns in northern Britain, then this would explain the legion's disappearance from the archaeological record. Any mutineers would have been executed and the disgraced legion disbanded or, if it had sustained a catastrophic defeat, then it might have been disbanded and any survivors re-assigned to other units.⁴⁹ Elliott is convinced by:

Perring's compelling argument that there was some sort of major event in Roman London in the AD 120s, which he dubs the Hadrianic War... I believe he makes a strong case that this did indeed occur.⁵⁰

Elliott overlooks the fundamental weakness in Perring's argument which is the fact that most of his evidence for a Hadrianic rebellion in *Londinium* can be interpreted in several ways, so his argument is very inconclusive.

Perring ignores the fact that the bulk of the archaeological evidence from southern Britain for the first quarter of the 2nd century AD indicates a period of peace and prosperity, although the highly volatile situation in northern Britain necessitated the construction of 'Hadrian's Wall' (see above).⁵¹ If a number of urban centres across southern Britain (which were then all undefended) showed evidence of contemporary Hadrianic fire destruction, then his hypothesis would be much more plausible.⁵²

Conclusion

Since Dunning first identified the Hadrianic fire 92 years ago during a watching brief, our knowledge of Roman London has been completely transformed by numerous controlled excavations, the systematic study of finds and scientific dating. However, there are still significant gaps in our knowledge of this important period of the capital's history and, without adequate evidence, care must be taken not to be biased towards one single hypothesis.

Any study of aspects of Roman London should present ideas and be prepared to challenge existing perceptions, but presenting a balanced view is surely the best way forward until further evidence comes to light.

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Bruce Watson formerly worked for MOLA and co-supervised with Trevor Brigham the fieldwork at Regis House, which sparked an interest in the Hadrianic fire. Now retired, he is Archaeological Editor of LAMAS Transactions, compiles the London Archaeologist's annual Publication Round-up and is researching British medieval bridge chapels and related monuments, plus the concealment of religious objects during the English Reformation.

1. D Perring 'London's Hadrianic War?' *Britannia* **48** (2017), 37–76.

2. S Elliott *Roman Britain's Missing Legion: what really happened to IX Hispana?* (2021), 68–97.

3. *Op cit* fn 1, Appendix, Table 1; S Ranieri and A Telfer *Outside Roman London: roadside burials by the Walbrook stream*, *Crossrail Archaeology* (2017), 120–7.

4. R Merrifield *London City of the Romans* (1983), 56–7.

5. C Harwood, N Powers & S Watson *The Upper Walbrook Valley cemetery of Roman London; excavations at Finsbury Circus, City of London, 1987–2007*, *MOLA Archaeol Studies Ser* 32 (2015), 24–32.

6. Ranieri & Telfer *op cit* fn 3, 103–20.

7. D Lees, A Woodger & C Orton 'Excavations in the Walbrook Valley' *London Archaeol* **6** (1989), 115–9; R Redfern & H Bonney 'Headhunting and amphitheatre combat in Roman London, England: new evidence from the Walbrook Valley' *J Archaeol Science* **30** (2014), 1–13.

8. Redfern & Bonney *op cit* fn 7.

9. R Graves *Suetonius: the twelve Caesars* (1957), 272.

10. *Op cit* fn 1, 43–7.

11. G C Dunning 'Two fires of Roman London' *Antiq J* **25** (1945), 48–77.

12. T Brigham & B Watson forthcoming *Early Roman waterfront development: excavations at Regis House, City of London, 1994–96* MOLA ebook. For an interim report, see T Brigham & B Watson 'Current Archaeological work at Regis House in the City of London (part 2)' *London Archaeol* **8** (1996), 63–9.

13. L Casson, J Drummond-Murray & A Francis *Romano-British round houses to medieval parish: excavations at 10 Gresham Street, City of London, 1999–2002* MOLA Monogr 67 (2014), 61–7.

14. R Hingley *Londinium: A Biography; Roman London from its origins to the fifth century* (2018), 52–4, 116–20.

15. *Op cit* fn 1, 50.

16. D Goodburn *et al* 'Domestic buildings and other structures of timber' in J Hill & P Rowsome *Roman London and the Walbrook stream crossing: excavations at 1 Poultry and vicinity, City of London (part II)* MOLA Monogr 37 (2011), 414–37. Some domestic clay-

and-timber buildings were probably too flimsy to have supported the weight of a ceramic tile roof.

17. S Porter *The Great Fire of London* (1996), 29–69.

18. F Stenton *Norman London: William Fitz Stephen* (1934, reprinted 1990), 55. In 1189, the Assize of Buildings banned thatched roofs in London, and, after another conflagration in 1212, all new thatched roofs were banned.

19. G Home *Mediaeval London* (1927), 350–55.

20. *Op cit* fn 14, 121–33, 141.

21. N Bateman, C Cowan & R Wroe-Brown *London's Roman Amphitheatre; Guildhall Ward, City of London* MoLAS Monogr 35 (2008), 39–62.

22. G Parnell 'The Roman and Medieval defences and later development of the Inmost Ward, Tower of London: excavations 1955–77' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* **36** (1985), 8–9; Perring *op cit* fn 1, 52.

23. *Op cit* fn 1, 52.

24. British Museum online catalogue object 1848_1103.1 (accessed 2021); *A Guide to the*

Looking forward in a centenary year

Clive Orton, a long-term member of CADHAS, reviews the past and future of a local society celebrating its centenary

Last year marked the centenary of one of London's oldest local archaeological societies – the Carshalton and District History and Archaeology Society (CADHAS). It had been founded as the Beddington, Carshalton and Wallington Archaeological Society in November 1920 by a group of local worthies, including the MP for Mitcham and Lieut.-Colonel Bidder, who became well-known for his excavations at Merton Priory and Mitcham Saxon Cemetery. It was renamed in 2006 when it extended its catchment area to include the whole London Borough of Sutton.

Throughout its life, the Society has pursued a programme of lectures, visits and small-scale excavations. An attempt to set up a museum in the 1930s failed, and the core of a museum collection remains in store to this day. The accidental discovery of a medieval moat around Carew Manor in Beddington in 1979 focused attention on this area, and several small excavations have provided evidence for an important Tudor garden there. Other areas where extensive work has been undertaken include the neighbouring Beddington Park, Honeywood (now Honeywood Museum) in Carshalton, and The Oaks Park to the south.

Limitations of storage space have brought excavation to a halt, but has allowed the Society

to catch up on its backlog of post-excavation work and publication, adding to its important series of *Occasional Papers* (18 in total, nine since 2016), and a new series of *Local History Notes*, started to celebrate the Centenary, and already up to No 10. Details are on the CADHAS website (<http://cadhas.org.uk/>).

Like many of our local societies, CADHAS faces an uncertain future, with a declining and ageing membership. However, there is much interest locally in the history of the area, which needs to be encouraged, focused and channelled for the common good. This should be explored as an extension to the role of local societies, using their expertise to help others bring to light new aspects of their local past.

ABOVE Members of the Society in 1922 outside Hall Place, Mitcham, the home of Sir Cato Worsfold, MP, a founder member.

BELOW Members of the Society on an excursion to Chichester in 1956.



Antiquities of Roman Britain in the Department of British & Mediaeval Antiquities, British Museum (1922), 78.

25. E Cary (trans) *Dio's Roman History* (Books LXI–LXX) (1961), 173, 181.

26. J Bayley, B Croxford, M Henig & B Watson 2009 'A gilt-bronze arm from London' *Britannia* **40** (2009), 151–62.

27. E P Graafstal 'Hadrian's haste; a priority programme for the wall' *Archaeol Aeliana* (series 5) **41** (2012), 126–7, 136–8. He argues that there was a personal inspection of the defences by the emperor.

28. *Op cit* fn 14, 81–4.

29. T Brigham 'A reassessment of the second basilica in London, AD 100–400: excavations at Leadenhall Court, 1984–86' *Britannia* **21** (1990), 81.

30. P Marsden 'The purpose of the Cripplegate fort' *London Archaeol* **15** (2018), 137–40.

31. B Yule *A Prestigious Roman Building Complex on the Southwark Waterfront: Excavations at Winchester Palace, London, 1983–90* MoLAS Monogr 23 (2005), 52–86.

32. I Blair *et al* 'Wells and Bucket-Chains; unforeseen elements of water supply in early Roman London' *Britannia* **37** (2006), 1–52. One of the well shafts was constructed in c. AD 63. The Neronian quay at Regis

House was constructed of oak trees felled in the winter or spring of AD 63, see Brigham & Watson forthcoming *op cit* fn 12.

33. L Dunwoodie, C Harward & 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), 41–50, 62–5.

34. *Op cit* fn 14, 120; Perring *op cit* fn 1, 54–5.

35. *Op cit* fn 14, 128–31; E Howe & D Lakin *Roman and Medieval Cripplegate, City of London: archaeological excavations 1992–8* MoLAS Monogr 21 (2004), 25–41.

36. *Op cit* fn 30, 139.

37. Howe & Lakin *op cit* fn 35, 41–2; 57–9.

38. *Op cit* fn 14, 130.

39. S Ireland *Roman Britain: a sourcebook* (second edition, 1996), 87. At the start of Hadrian's reign, it is recorded that: 'for one and the same time those peoples Trajan has subjugated were in revolt, the Moors started making attacks, the Sarmatae were waging war, the Britons could not be kept under Roman control ...'

40. *Op cit* fn 27, 123–4; P Salway *A History of Roman Britain* (1993), 131.

41. *Op cit* fn 39, 87. It appears that construction of Hadrian's Wall had started in c. AD 118/9 shortly before the emperor's arrival, but that his visit prompted a redesign. This decision implies that the recent 'rebellion' involved a landward invasion of the province from the north.

42. *Op cit* fn 27, 123–4.

43. *Op cit* fn 39, 88.

44. J Casey 'The coinage of Alexandria and the chronology of Hadrian' in H Huvelin *et al* (eds) *Mélanges de numismatique offerts à Pierre Bastien à l'occasion de son 75e anniversaire*, Wetteren (1987), 65–72.

45. *Op cit* fn 27, 124; *op cit* fn 1, 59–60.

46. *Op cit* fn 2, 68–97.

47. *Op cit* fn 39, 85–6.

48. *Op cit* fn 2, 62–3, 98–105.

49. *Op cit* fn 2, 55–67.

50. *Op cit* fn 2, 97.

51. *Op cit* fn 40, 113–4, 144.

52. *Op cit* fn 1, 60, Perring mentions this lack of evidence.