Roads to Rome

Step into the heart of Roman London and discover the beginnings of the City
The City of London is the oldest part of London, dating back to AD50. Roman invaders built a bridge over the Thames – the only crossing into the City for 1,700 years – and created a settlement around it, named Londinium. The new settlement was well placed on the river, and traders soon flocked to Londinium to buy and sell goods, making it an important commercial centre.
Today, most of the remains of Londinium are 7 metres (23 feet) below where you stand: 2,000 years of building, fire and bombs have hidden much of the Roman settlement. Many fascinating items have been discovered during foundation works for new buildings and archaeological digs, and are kept at the Museum of London. This trail takes you to the museum via some of the remains of Roman London that still stand, and also provides the spark for you to imagine what the ancient settlement looked like.

There are two ways you can follow this trail: half-way through you can choose to either take a short-cut to the trail’s end at the Museum of London (taking approximately 90 minutes in total), or continue on for another hour to discover some of the City’s most striking Roman remains.

Start your journey at the City Information Centre. Turn right at Peter’s Hill and walk towards the Millennium Bridge; once you cross Queen Victoria Street, turn immediately left and find Cleary Garden on your right.

**Cleary Garden [1]**

This unique garden was created in the 1980s by Fred Cleary, a City businessman, and built using fragments of buildings bombed in World War II. Beneath the garden are the foundations of a large Roman building complex, part of which is a second-century Roman bathhouse that would, at the time, have been on the banks of the Thames. It was excavated between 1987-9. Cleary Garden is very cleverly designed: although the bathhouse can’t be seen, it is echoed in the Roman feel to the trellises and pillars of the garden. The plants and flowers were also carefully selected to reflect how the area may have smelt when it was the hub of London’s wine trade in the Middle Ages. Try to identify some of the scents from the plants, and imagine how ancient wine might have tasted.

Return to Queen Victoria Street and keep walking down, then bear left on Cannon Street. The ground slopes down as you walk – this is because you are heading down into the ancient valley of the now-buried small river Walbrook, which flowed into the Thames and divided Londinium. In Roman times the valley would have been much deeper, as Roman ground level was well below the present surface.

**The Temple of Mithras at Walbrook [2]**

At the junction of Cannon Street and Walbrook is the site of the Temple of Mithras, built towards the end of the second century. The area where it stood is now occupied by Bloomberg’s new headquarters, currently under construction (2014/15). It was during the construction of the previous building in 1954, that the remains of the temple were discovered. The third-century site, which stood on the east bank of the Walbrook river, was a 20th-century revelation; crowds flocked to see it, and queues stretched around the block. Mithraism was a secret mystery cult that was popular during Roman times. You can see the spectacular finds from this site and learn more about the Mithraic religion at the Museum of London at the end of this trail.

The remains of the temple were preserved in 1954 and rebuilt in the open air on a site nearby. The temple will return to its original site beneath the Bloomberg building with public access from 2017.
Continue along Cannon Street and up the other side of the Walbrook valley. This part of Cannon Street is based on one of Londinium’s main streets. Opposite Cannon Street station – under which lies the ruins of a palace-type Roman building – is the London Stone. The Stone is possibly a Roman milestone marking the centre of Londinium and the spot from which all distances to Londinium were judged; today you’ll find it preserved in a building facade (111 Cannon Street). Continue until you reach the next major junction, where you’ll see London Bridge off to your right. Cross the junction here (using the subway is best) and continue into Eastcheap to the corner of Fish Street Hill.

Fish Street Hill [3]
You’re now on one of the most important thoroughfares in Londinium. Look down Fish Street Hill to the right, and you’ll see what was probably the first street in Roman London. It led to the Roman bridge over the Thames, which is where the church of St Magnus the Martyr stands today. To the left, the street led up to the forum and basilica, the monumental Roman administration centre, on Cornhill and Leadenhall Street. If you want, pop down to St Magnus the Martyr Church (at the end of the street) and you’ll see a piece of Roman timber standing in the outside porch. This piece is from either the old Roman bridge or, more likely, one of the Roman wharves which lie beneath the church and parts of which are still being discovered today. Halfway down the street is the Monument built to commemorate the Great Fire of 1666. Fish Street Hill used to be much steeper; the slope was reduced after

From here, you can choose whether to follow the rest of the trail or take a shortcut.

To take the shortcut to the Museum of London, walk up Gracechurch Street on the other side of the junction and stop at the junction with Cornhill. Continue the trail from [7].

All Hallows by the Tower [4]
This church displays remains of two ancient periods: an arch from the previous Anglo-Saxon church, possibly of 11th-century construction (which is the oldest standing part of a church in the City); and in the crypt, part of a plain Roman floor and traces of plastered wall found between 1928-36. This is a remarkable piece of a second-century domestic Roman house that is still at its ancient level.

Nearby in the crypt display is a model of the Roman City, and fragments of Anglo-Saxon crosses from the churchyard. Opening times: Mon-Fri, 8am-5pm.

Cross Byward Street at the traffic lights, turn right and continue until you come to Trinity Place. Take the Tower Hill underpass and find part of the Roman and medieval City Wall on your right, halfway up the steps to the underground station.
The Roman City wall at Tower Hill

The Roman City wall is the best surviving section of the old City wall that is still above ground, standing at a height of 10.6 metres (35 feet). The Roman part can be seen up to the level of where guards used to walk (the sentry walk); while most of the upper part was rebuilt in the Middle Ages, in the lower part you can see the careful Roman construction of squared stone blocks and regular triple rows of red Roman tiles. This is the building method used all along the City wall. Here you can also see the remaining fragments of two walls of a small internal tower.

In front of the wall, you’ll also find some other indications of London’s Roman past. A modern panel reproduces an inscription found here in 1852. It is from the tomb of Classicianus, a top official in the Roman administration at the time of the rebellion by Boudica (Boadicea), the queen of the Iceni tribe in East Anglia. She burned the young town of Londinium in AD61, but was soon afterwards defeated in battle and killed. Nearby, a modern statue of a Roman emperor was placed here in the 20th century. He is a curious mixture of two emperors, as he has the head of Trajan with the body of Augustus.

Go round the underground station into Trinity Square and then turn right into Cooper’s Row heading towards Fenchurch Street railway station. Follow your way into the courtyard (access via car park) of the Grange City Hotel.

Cooper’s Row [6]
The City wall survives here to a height of 10.6 metres (35 feet); the lower part is Roman, up to the sentry walk, but much of the masonry has been removed over the centuries by people using the stones for their own purposes. There are traces of a stair up to the parapet and openings for archers to shoot arrows from, which were all added in the Middle Ages. This is accessible via a courtyard off the east side of Cooper’s Row.

Continue up Cooper’s Row and cross over onto Crutched Friars, up to Aldgate. Here, beneath the traffic roundabout on your right, was Aldgate, the gate to the eastern boundary of the Roman city. Cross over and turn left down Leadenhall Street to Cornhill. This will take you past three of the City’s current architectural wonders including the Gherkin (30 St Mary Axe), where a plaque records the discovery of a burial of a Roman teenage girl, dating between AD350 and AD400 (opposite Holland House on Bury Street). Stop at the junction of Leadenhall Street and Gracechurch Street, by the entrance into Leadenhall Market, one of the City’s 19th-century markets.

The site of the Roman Basilica and Forum [7]
The basilica (city hall) and forum (market place) of Londinium lie beneath what is now Cornhill and Leadenhall Street. As a large public building, where merchants used to gather, it would have been rather like the lively Leadenhall Market you can see today. Parts of the much larger underlying Roman complex were found on various sites during building works in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Walk out of Leadenhall Market (if you come out on Gracechurch Street, turn right and then left) and continue along Cornhill Street; the Royal Exchange will be on your right.
Royal Exchange [8]
Though your surroundings are modern, stop here for a moment and look around. All the major buildings here are in a Roman style, even though they were erected in the 19th and 20th centuries. On your right is the Royal Exchange of 1841 and further down Bank junction to your left you’ll see the official accommodation for the Lord Mayor, the Mansion House, built between 1739-52. Both have frontages based on Roman temples, similar to the Pantheon in Rome. Adjacent to the Royal Exchange is the Bank of England; its south side (which you’re facing) was largely built during 1823-37.

Turn right along Prince’s Street and left into Gresham Street. Once you reach the church of St Lawrence Jewry, turn right into Guildhall Yard.

Cross Guildhall Yard and turn right into Aldermanbury; take the first left into Love Lane. Turn right along Wood Street and cross London Wall at the lights. Continue on Wood Street and turn right into St Alphage Garden (during refurbishment works of Roman House and London Wall Place due to be completed between 2014-16, please follow temporary road signs to access the garden).

St Alphage Garden [10]
Wood Street, which you have just walked along, sits on the central street through a Roman fort which was built here in around AD120, right at the north-west corner of Londinium. The imposing section of City wall in this garden originally formed the northern wall of the fort and was later incorporated into the Roman City wall which wrapped round two sides of the fort. Here is the best surviving evidence for the medieval repairs to the Roman wall. During the Wars of the Roses in 1477, the then Lord Mayor of London, Ralph Joceline, ordered the wall to be repaired between Aldgate and Aldersgate, and the top of the wall was rebuilt in brick. Some of the diamond patterns in darker bricks can still be seen today.

The Roman Amphitheatre [9]
In 1988, excavations undertaken ahead of the construction of the Guildhall Art Gallery on the east side of the Yard found, to everybody’s surprise, that a Roman amphitheatre formerly stood here. A city of Londinium’s importance must have had one, but it had never been discovered. The remains of the east entrance of the amphitheatre are conserved below the Art Gallery, and the arena is outlined in the Yard’s pavement. Watch out for Roman gladiators!

Open: Mon-Sat 10am-5pm, Sun 12 noon-4pm.
Return to Wood Street, turn left back the way you came, and on your right just before the junction with London Wall take the escalator up to the high walk. Turn right along the high walk until you can see the Roman and medieval City wall with its towers below on your right.

West gate of the Roman fort and City wall north of London Wall [11]
The base of the wall here is Roman but the interval towers you see were added in the Middle Ages. The street called London Wall was built in 1959, and is named after the wall whose route it follows. Before the street was built, excavations on this site revealed the west gate of a Roman fort from around AD120. It had twin entrance ways and two flanking square towers. You can still see the northern tower in a chamber below London Wall on a tour, see below. Running north from this tower is the wall of the fort. The gate was eventually blocked with stones, possibly in the troubled years of the fourth century near the end of Roman rule in Britain, and the layers of the blocking can still be seen.

The Museum of London organises fort gate tours; for details, including booking, visit www.museumoflondon.org.uk

Before you go on to your final destination at the Museum of London, take the high walk to the left for a short detour to Noble Street, across London Wall (the street). Go down the stairs to street level and walk around to the right into Noble Street.

Noble Street [12]
Here is a line of ruined 19th-century buildings destroyed in the Blitz during World War II. They are based on the Roman City wall which you can see at the base of what stands today. At the south end of the site are the remains of a small rectangular stone building – this was the corner tower at the south-west part of the second-century Roman fort discovered in 1950.

Illustration of the Roman City and fort, © Peter Frost

The Museum of London tells the history of the capital from 450,000 BC to today. It includes the Roman Gallery which captures the story of the creation of Londinium on the banks of the River Thames 2,000 years ago. Here you can explore thousands of objects that speak of daily life in this vibrant port city, from a still-full jar of second-century face cream to an inscription that is the first to record ‘Londoners’ by name. Open: daily 10am-6pm.
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As a custodian of London’s heritage, the City provides stewardship for a huge collection of books, archives, pictures, photographs, prints and other materials, which constitute a major part of the recorded memory of London, including Londinium.

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The City of London Archaeological Trust

The City of London Archaeological Trust (CoLAT) is a charity whose purpose is to support and initiate archaeological work in the City of London and its environs. It has partnered with the City of London Corporation to produce this publication.

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