

Meeting 5: Wednesday 19th August 2026

City of London archaeological tour

I led fifteen of our members across the City to explore the many remains that lie beneath the streets, primarily Roman but with medieval and later remains also on display. The route took us right across the Roman city, from just beyond the western wall to the military fort in the north west and finally to the easternmost section at Tower Hill. At the end of this report is a map and details of the route, so if you couldn't attend, you can still follow the tour. I've also included links to more detailed articles on each point on the way.



We started at St Bride's, which is off Fleet Street, very close to City Thameslink station (Ludgate Circus exit).

Saint Bride's, Fleet Street (1) *(free access)* ([link to article](#))

The extensive crypt museum effectively displays remains from many periods in the site's history. Much of this was uncovered after the present building was bombed in WWII.

Here you can find remains of a Roman tesserae pavement from a small building that stood on the road leading from Ludgate across a bridge over the River Fleet.

Next known activity is the establishment of a very early church from the 6th C. This is believed to have been the only church from the Irish tradition in the east of England, and was dedicated to

Saint Bridget (St Bride's is a corruption of that name). Its design is similar to that of one in Kildare. The site may have been chosen because of a holy well here (reflected in the name of the adjoining street, Bridewell).

Next came a complete rebuilding in the 7th century, and then again, a Norman church in the 11th century. This was much enlarged in the 15th C and a west bell tower was added. Wynkyn de Worde set up his printing press next door in 1500 and the association with printing and newspapers has continued to this day.

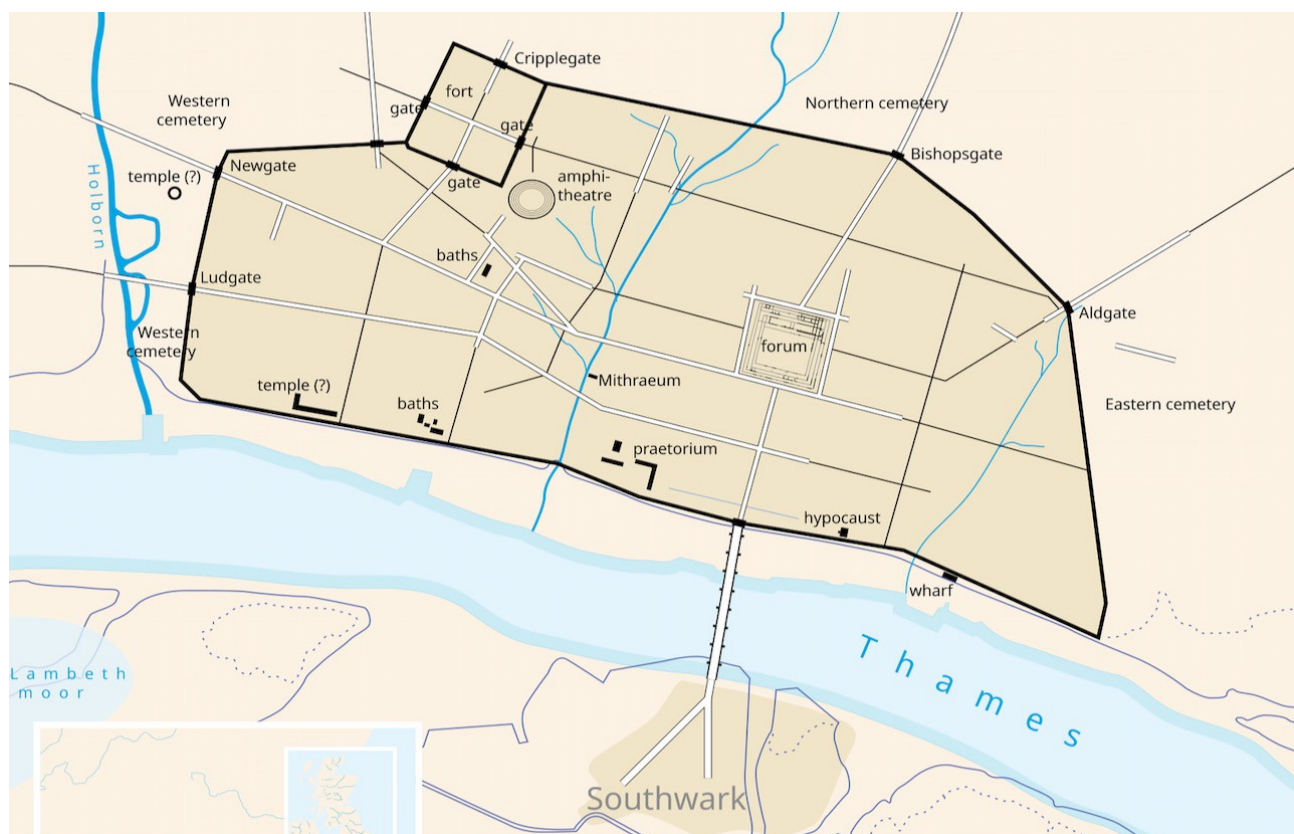
The Great Fire completely destroyed the old church and it was rebuilt by Sir Christopher Wren between 1668 and 1675, mainly on the foundations of the old church and tower. The blitz saw the gutting of the church and the interior was rebuilt in the 1950s in a collegiate format by the local newspaper magnates.

From here we crossed the line of the River Fleet, which still flows far below the street and would have provided a second line of defence from the west. Climbing the hill there is a plaque recording the site of Ludgate (2), one of the Roman gateways that survived right through medieval times, demolished only in 1760. The line of Old Bailey follows the line of the wall. Then continued to Paternoster Square where we stopped for coffee.

Temple Bar (3) (1669-1772) (public area) ([link to article](#))

Also by Wren, this gate was placed further west where the Strand meets Fleet Street. The City was extended beyond the Roman walls in medieval times to take in the Inns of Court. It was removed in the late 19th century as a traffic obstruction and moved to a country estate, but put here opposite St Paul's as part of the redevelopment of this area in 2003.

We continued north to Noble Street. On the way we were lucky enough to get access to St Vedast, a small Wren church not often open. Another collegiate seating plan for the Goldsmiths livery company, the church has a very pleasant like colonnaded courtyard.



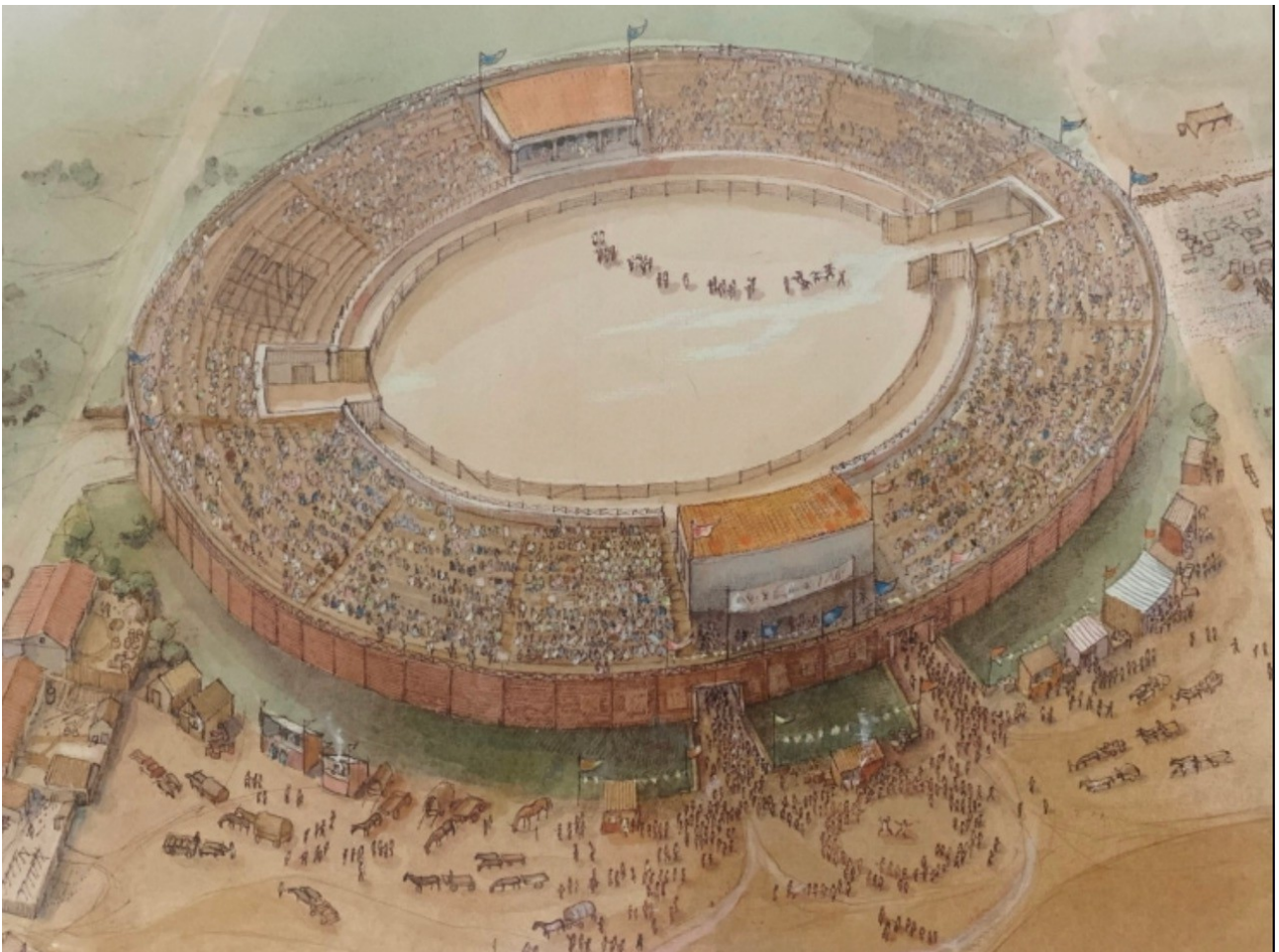
Roman Wall and Barbican (4) (public area) ([link to article](#))

Here remains of the Roman wall are visible, many feet below present day street level. A fort was established soon after the Roman invasion in 43, on higher ground to the north west, originally in timber, then replaced with a substantial stone structure in 120-150. Later the walls were extended in the 2nd-early 3rd C to completely encircle the city (including a wall along the river front). It's not known why, but may be due to Germanic raids. The entire wall was 2 miles long and typically 8-10 feet thick and 20 feet high, with 22 bastions (projecting towers – remains of one are behind the old London Museum building). Outside this was a *fossa* or ditch 6.5 feet deep, and 16 feet wide. The area within was never completely built over.

We continued to the Guildhall yard.

Amphitheatre (5) (free access via the art gallery) ([link to article](#) inc. other parts of Guildhall complex)

Remains of the amphitheatre were discovered in 1988 during construction work for the City Art Gallery, in the basement of which it is now displayed. Access is free via the gallery. An earlier wood amphitheatre built in 70 was replaced in the early 2nd Century by a stone structure that could hold 6000, about a quarter of the population (*impression below*). Remains of walls, animal pens and underground wooden drainage are well displayed. A curving black stone line in the paving of the Guildhall yard above indicates the original extent of the amphitheatre.



Turning back to Cheapside, the medieval market area, we passed through Bucklersbury Passage through the postmodern development I Poultry, to the Bloomberg Building. Facing Mansion House is the entrance to the Mithraeum.

The Mithraeum (6) (*free but you have to book – see link*)([link to website](#))

The mysterious cult of Mithras, started in Rome in the 1st C and small temples were built, mostly underground like this one, which was built into the bank of the Walbrook, a now hidden stream that ran through the middle of the city. The temple was rectangular with lines of columns leading to an apse with an altar, where the cult image would have stood. It is thought that banquets and other ritual events were held there, and a sophisticated display attempts to give an impression of the hall. The small museum also includes an excellent display of finds from the site of the Bloomberg Building. The remains of the Mithraeum were exposed by the Blitz bombing and moved in the 1950s to a site nearby, but returned to their original location as part of the Bloomberg development.

We continued south to Cannon Street, where we looked at the London Stone. This unprepossessing remnant was very significant in medieval times (*see illustration below, 1550s*), sometimes said to be the centre of London, with almost magical qualities. Its origin is unknown but it was already being venerated in the 1100s. Jack Cade, who raised a rebellion against Henry VI, struck his sword on it and declared himself 'Lord of this City'.



London Bridge (*public access to Monument exterior and portico*) ([link to: London Bridge article, St Magnus site](#))

Just east we passed London Bridge. The modern bridge is 30m west of the original line of the Roman bridge, and the medieval bridge kept this line until the 1820s. The bridge at the narrowest crossing point of the river, determined the layout of the city, which was on two raised hills (Cornhill and Ludgate Hill, with the Walbrook stream between). In fact, London owes its existence to the bridge: before it was built there was virtually nothing here. South of the river, roads fanned out to the south, to Canterbury and the coast. On the north side the road continued straight ahead (modern Gracechurch Street) to the Forum, then to a north gate, continuing as one of the major military roads due north (the modern A10 through Bishopsgate, Hackney and Tottenham) and beyond, to Lincoln, York and Hadrian's Wall. The Monument (8) was sited right beside it and traffic passed right through the portico under the tower of St Magnus the Martyr church (9), which is still there today (a section of wood from the Roman wharf nearby is shown in the portico). Again we were lucky in that the church was open on the day. Inside there is a huge model of old London Bridge, well worth a visit if you get the chance. The church itself, another Wren building, is well worth a visit, very light and airy.

From here we walked down to the Embankment, past Billingsgate former fish market and the Custom House, to the Tower, where we turned up to:

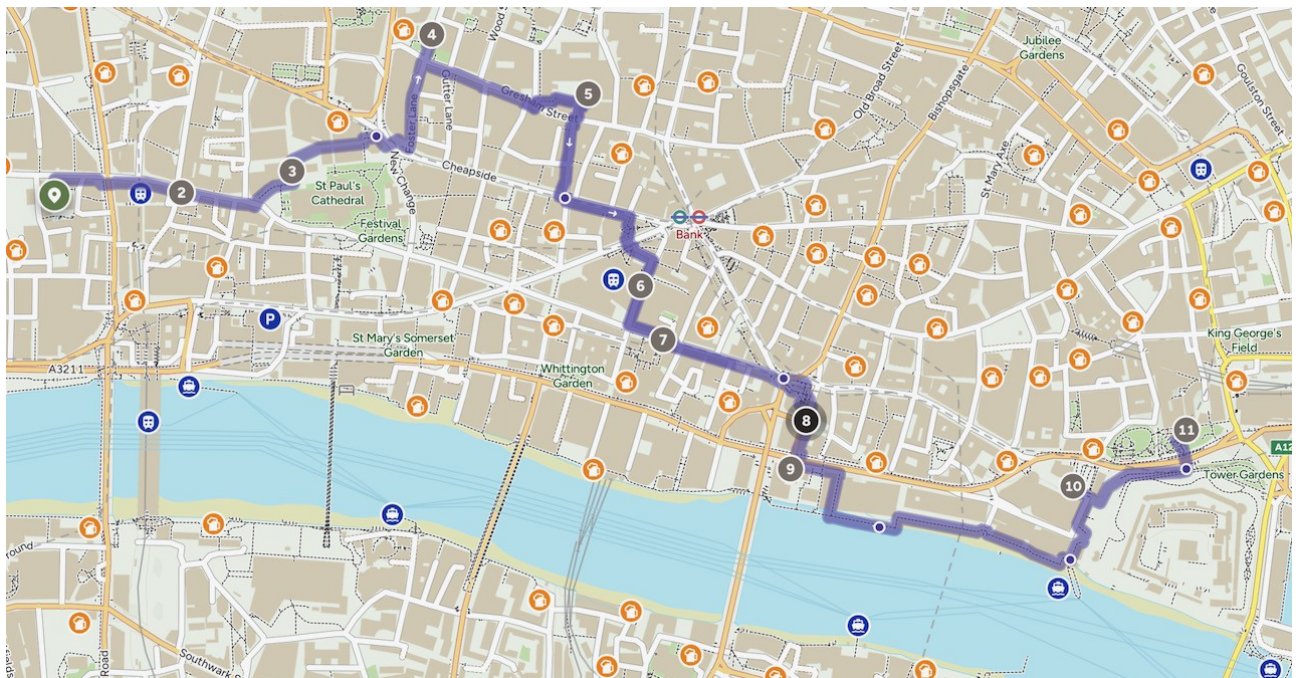
All-Hallows-by-the-Tower (10)

Claiming to be founded in 675, the church survived the Great Fire, but was gutted on the same night as St Bride's, two of 1500 fires in London on 29th December 1940. The church has a Saxon arch and the outer walls survive from the 15th C. The crypt holds an eclectic collection of relics from all ages, including Roman tesserae again, 11th C stone crosses and medieval pottery.

You can continue from here to Tower Hill station, following the moat of the Tower. Just by the station behind the Citizen M hotel is another particularly well preserved section of the Roman wall (11). It survived because it became a party wall between two buildings. The lower section is characteristic of Roman wall construction, with courses of tiles between the ragstone. Above is later medieval construction.

Roman timeline

- 43 Invasion; temp fort at London
- 47-53 Foundation of London, became important because of land/sea connection
Bridge established
- 60 Population 10,000
- 60-1 Destroyed by Boudicca, revolt suppressed
- 100-120 Major rebuild: forum, stone amphitheatre and fort (Barbican)
- 122 Hadrian visits (rare) and tours Britannia
- 150 Rebuild after fire destroyed much of the city
- ~275 Rest of the wall built
- ~300 Wall built along the river
- ~300 Decline: forum and basilica demolished
- 313 Christianity arrived. Church built near Tower of London
- 350 Walls strengthened
- 400-410 Roman withdrawal
- 457 City abandoned. Not occupied for next 200 years



The route: numbers refer to the text

Next month

On Friday 18th September we are visiting Reading Museum for a visit to their archaeological collection, which has strong Roman section, focused on excavations at Silchester; and a guided tour of their Bayeux Tapestry replica made in Victorian times. Details of how to get there will be circulated shortly. The cost of the tour is £10 per person. Please bring cash. Members will be required to make their own arrangements to get there and back. This will be limited to 15 members but there are still a few places available.

Later proposed events are listed on our webpage: [click link here](#).

Keith Mason
27 August 2026