

# King Alfred and the development of London

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Ten years ago John Clark published an article summarising the position with regard to the role of King Alfred in the early development of London, following contributions by Gustav Milne, Tony Dyson and Alan Vince.<sup>1</sup> Since then, there have been significant developments, but no fewer unresolved questions. Milne developed his original model in relation in particular to his study of the Cripplegate area; a new overview was published by Derek Keene; and the subject was briefly summarised recently.<sup>2</sup> What follows is a brief summary of a two-part study, to be published elsewhere, in which I put forward an extended hypothesis or model for the development of London and its wider historical and spatial context in the period 874–886, and which proposes a rather different course of development from that currently accepted.<sup>3</sup> It is these years which, it is argued, cover the period in which King Alfred was able to create the basis for the development of London in succeeding centuries.

Almost every commentator sees the development of Late Saxon London as beginning in 886, which assumption is predicated on a literal exegesis of the account of its 'restoration' in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for that year. This is, furthermore, based on the premise that this year marked the replacement of a Danish occupation of the city by the English<sup>4</sup>. There are reasons, however, for suggesting that King Alfred took control of London and its surrounding area, in some sort of division of interests in Mercia with the Viking appointee King Ceolwulf, after the deposition of Burgred of Mercia in 874. It can be inferred from the pattern of the minting of coins that Alfred had gained complete control by 877, using London as the main minting place for a reform of the coinage around this time.<sup>5</sup> I have argued that as a result of the so-called 'partition' of Mercia in 877 he was ousted from this position by an alliance of Ceolwulf with the Vikings, who thereafter controlled London without Alfred, and minted coins in the name of

Ceolwulf alone.<sup>6</sup> Just after this, in January 878, Alfred suffered another setback by being driven into exile into the marshes of Somerset by an attack by Guthrum's Vikings on his court at Chippenham, where he was spending Christmas. I have argued that as a result of his victory over Guthrum's forces at Edington in the following spring, Alfred was able to create a defence-in-depth of Wessex by the building of a system of *burhs*, which was described in the contemporary *Burghal Hidage* document.<sup>7</sup> This was clearly also an offensive strategy which, I suggest, was targetted against the Vikings in Mercia and London. By late 879 this system had clearly been developed sufficiently to have compelled the Vikings to vacate Mercia and London. Guthrum's army retreated to a newly-established kingdom in East Anglia, and another formidable Viking army which had occupied a strategically offensive position at Fulham to the west of London, near the Roman road leading into the heart of Wessex, also retreated back across the Channel.<sup>8</sup> It can be suggested that at this point Alfred deposed, and probably assassinated, King Ceolwulf of Mercia, whose 'obituary' in the West Saxon *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* shows him to have been a despised and hated rival and, by inference, an impediment to the development of Alfred's interests in Mercia. Thereafter London, as well as the whole of the rest of Mercia, fell under the control of Alfred alone, creating a new political entity and polity which contemporaries called the 'Kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons'.<sup>9</sup> Alfred was however quick to appoint ealdorman Aethelred, his future son-in-law, as his sub-regent in Mercia, arguably from soon after this crucial time of transition.

There are reasons for suggesting that Alfred would have lost no time in developing the walled Roman city of London as a *burh*, and that it was at this time – in late 879 or possibly early 880 – that this process was set in motion. It would have been created as a new

community within refurbished defences manned by a garrison, in which the new burghal space was reorganised and developed to include a system of planned streets, wharves and markets. This would have had as its goal the creation of both a securely-garrisoned fortress and a sustainable community which would have guaranteed the military effectiveness of the *burh* in the long term, and whose trading and other activities would have created an ongoing revenue-stream for the king.

This can be seen as being developed on the model of his new *burhs* in Wessex, for example at Winchester and other new urban foundations such as Cricklade, Wallingford and Exeter, which had been created in the previous couple of years. It would also have consolidated the king's control over territories which had previously been in the hands of the Vikings, ensuring the allegiance of the population to himself.

An important evidential basis of this model is the existence of the London Monogram coinage, produced in limited quantities at this juncture to celebrate Alfred's re-capture of London and to advertise his assumption of control of Mercia, of which London had previously been the hub. At the same time, celebratory issues were also minted in Oxford and Gloucester to the new weight standard of the London Monogram coinage.<sup>10</sup> Oxford had already been incorporated into the burghal system, which, with Buckingham, included part of eastern Mercia. It can be inferred from the association of mints with *burhs* at this time and later<sup>11</sup> that Gloucester would also have been planned and laid out as a new *burh* and market at this time. The formation of new *burhs* at London and Gloucester, incorporating Oxford as a regional centre, shows that the burghal system of Wessex was extended to at least southern Mercia at this date – c. 880 – and that these *burhs* represented the direct means by which Alfred was able to exert control over his newly extended kingdom. The arguments to

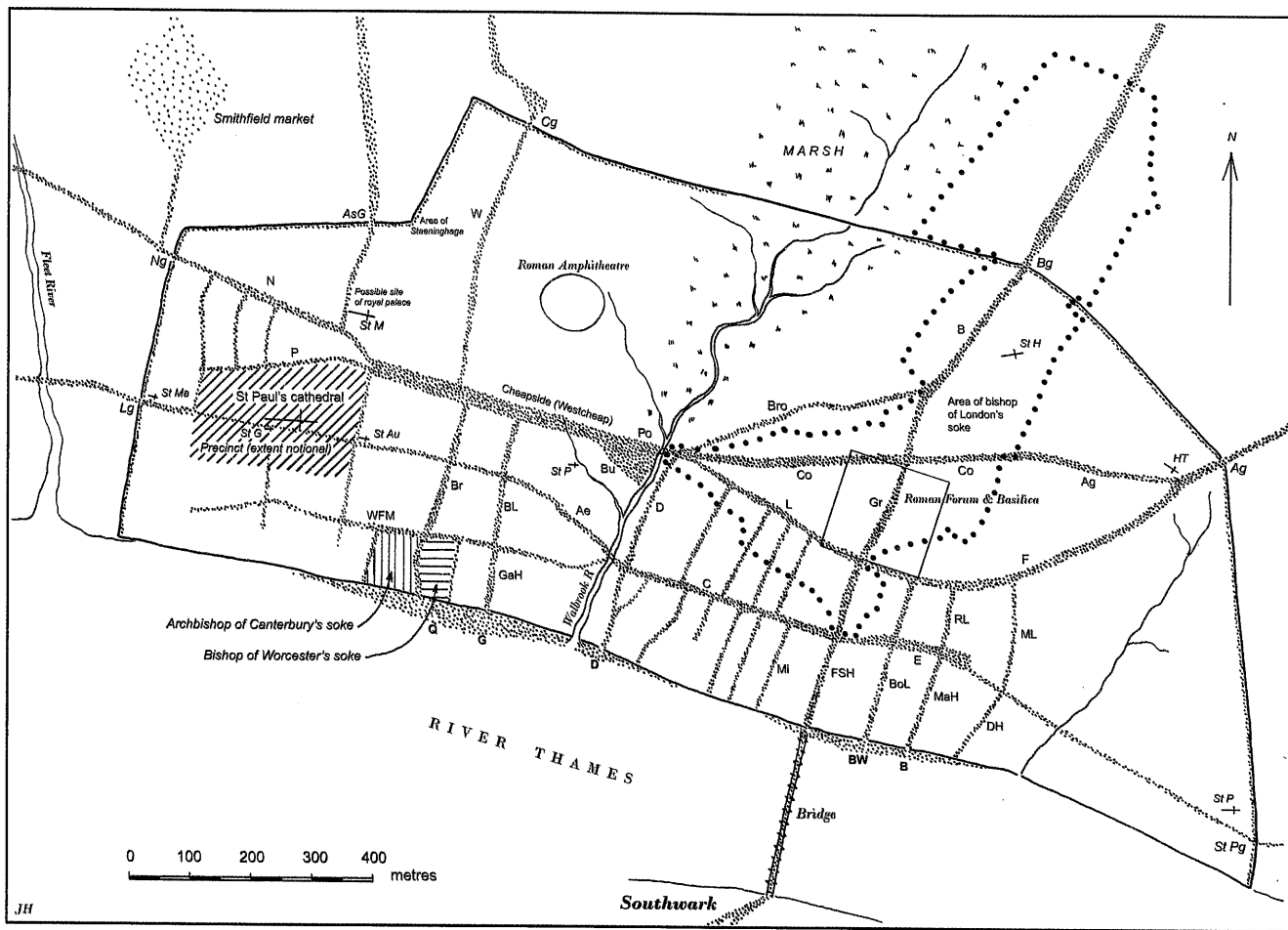


Fig. 1: London in the time of King Alfred

**Streets:**

Ae - Aetheling Street  
 Ag - Aldgate Street  
 B - Bishopsgate Street  
 BoL - Botolph Lane  
 Br - Bread Street  
 Bro - Broad Street  
 BL - Bow Lane  
 Bu - Bucklersbury  
 C - Cannon Street  
 (Candlewick street /

**Candelwryhtstrete)**

DH - Dunstan's Hill  
 E - Eastcheap  
 F - Fenchurch Street  
 FSH - Fish Street Hill  
 GaH - Garlick Hill  
 Gr - Gracechurch  
 Street  
 Lo - Lombard Street  
 ML - Mincing Lane  
 Mi - Miles Lane

**MaH - St Mary's Hill**

N - Newgate Street  
 P - Paternoster Street  
 / Row  
 Po - Poultry  
 RL - Rood Lane  
 W - Wood Street  
 WFM - West Fish  
 Market

**Gates:**

Asg - Aldersgate  
 Ag - Aldgate  
 Bg - Bishopsgate  
 Cg - Cripplegate  
 Lg - Ludgate  
 Ng - Newgate  
 StPg - 'St Peter's  
 Gate'

**Churches:**

HT - Holy Trinity  
 Aldgate  
 St Au - St Augustine  
 St G - St Gregory  
 St H - St Helen's  
 Bishopsgate  
 St M - St Martin le  
 Grand  
 St P - St Peter ad  
 Vincula

**Hithes:**

B - Billingsgate  
 BW - Botolph Wharf  
 D - Dowgate  
 G - Garlickhithe  
 Q - Queenhithe  
 (Aethelred's hithe)

the effect that the *Burghal Hidage* was produced as a prescriptive document in the context of the creation of the burghal system in Wessex in the 18 months or so before late 879<sup>12</sup> explains why London was not included in the list of *burhs* it sets out.

The London Monogram coins were issued for a short period only, so it is of particular interest that three of them were recovered from excavations of the Late Saxon foreshore at Bull Wharf, adjacent to the later Queenhithe.<sup>13</sup> These finds provide direct and closely dateable evidence that trading activity was taking place on the foreshore in the early 880s, rather than only beginning at the iconic date of 886. As John

Clarke has pointed out, they "reflect the needs of a busy trading environment for small change".<sup>14</sup> The presence of imported artefacts of the early and mid-9th century in these early levels on the Bull Wharf site<sup>15</sup> shows however that this had been in use as a trading foreshore for some time before this. It is likely therefore that the streets leading up to Cheapside from the shore and the associated hithes, comprising Garlick Hill / Bow Lane and Bread Street, which have already shown archaeological evidence of an early origin in being laid directly over Roman levels and in being associated with structures of the first phase of the use of Late Saxon ceramics, were either newly laid out or

were already in existence at this time (see Fig. 2). Received opinion that these streets were only created subsequent to, and consequent upon, the gift of a soke to the bishop of Worcester by Alfred at Queenhithe in 889<sup>16</sup> must be modified to take account of the archaeological findings from Bull Wharf. These streets were also associated with other early hithes along this stretch of the Thames, such as Fishhithe, Garlickhithe and Timberhithe, which may well have been developed during this earliest phase of the development of post-Roman London.

There are reasons for arguing that these new streets were part of a *system* of streets laid out during this phase of

the creation of the new burghal space, rather than 'developed' over an extended period after 886. These streets would have included Garlick Hill / Bow Lane, Bread Street, Fish Street Hill (leading to London bridge), Botolph Lane / Philpot Lane and St Mary's Hill / Rood Lane, all leading in uninterrupted lines from wharves on the foreshore to Cheapside in the western part of the new *burh*, and to Fenchurch Street to the east of London Bridge.<sup>17</sup> Dowgate also shares these characteristics, and can be suggested as belonging to this initial street system, connecting an early trading shore with the eastern end of the great market at Cheapside. Fish Street Hill and Botolph Lane have shown evidence either of an early origin or of late-9th-century structures by their sides, and St Mary Hill is of the same topographical type.<sup>18</sup> Although both John Schofield and Tony Dyson have argued that the trading shore to the east of the position of London Bridge would only have developed from the later 10th century,<sup>19</sup> this model of the development of the burghal space implies that the wharves and foreshore trading areas which these new streets serviced would also have been developed anew as part of the Alfredian phase of the initial replanning of the new burghal space. It is likely that all these primary streets would have been connected to the internal areas by gateways in the old Roman riverside wall, which would have formed part of the defensive system of the new *burh*.

Cheapside also seems likely to have been laid out as a new planned street market, on a different alignment to its Roman predecessor, forming the commercial hub of the new *burh* at this time,<sup>20</sup> although it is possible that this too was incorporated into the new layout from an earlier phase of Mid-Saxon redevelopment. The recent excavations at No. 1 Poultry show that the eastern end of Cheapside widened into an open cobbled area, presumably a large open market.<sup>21</sup> This would have been connected by a new bridge over the Walbrook (again not on a Roman alignment) to a point on its eastern bank from which streets led to the gates in the eastern part of the *burh* (Lombard Street / Fenchurch Street, Cornhill / Leadenhall Street, both leading to

Aldgate, and Threadneedle Street / Bishopsgate Street, leading to Bishopsgate), their courses to some extent influenced by the survival of the structure of the Roman Forum.<sup>22</sup> These, like Cheapside, may well have been in place at an earlier period.

In addition to these new streets, the east-west streets of Trinity Lane and Knightbridge Street, to the west of Walbrook and south of Cheapside, were arguably laid out at the same time to form a rectangular grid. These converged to form a single street on the east side of Walbrook (Cannon Street, the medieval Candlewick Street) forming a coherent single plan unit (between the Walbrook to the west, Fish Street Hill to the east, the river to the south and Fenchurch Street to the north, and also extending further to the east) whose ladder-like pattern of side streets suggests contemporaneity with comparable forms of urban layout in other new towns of the period such as Winchester.<sup>23</sup> This plan-unit was however laid out on an 8-pole module, in contrast to a 16-pole module applied in the layout of Winchester.<sup>24</sup> This street continues eastwards along Eastcheap in an unbroken line to a gate which I have argued elsewhere existed in the eastern wall on the site of the later Tower of London.<sup>25</sup> Other new streets laid out as part of this planned system are likely to have included Wood Street, leading northwards in an uninterrupted line from Cheapside to a gate at Cripplegate, as well as Newgate Street itself.

This system is also likely to have included a large area at Smithfield outside the walls, approached from the north by an ancient drove road, for the supply and marketing of cattle. It is possible that royal and ecclesiastical elements could have been represented in the new *burh* by the foundation of a new minster at St Martin le Grand, which like the New Minster at Winchester may have been created adjacent to a royal residence, sited possibly near St Martin's, and the 'Old Minster' at St Paul's. Other churches were possibly created at this time – St Helen's Bishopsgate or St Peter in Cornhill, the precursor of Holy Trinity Aldgate, and St Peter ad Vincula at the later Tower of London – each with a *parochia* which appears to have been

the direct precursor to a ward, though this pattern is admittedly speculative. It was probably at this time that the bishop of London was given control of a large area or soke which comprised much of the central part of the area to the east of Walbrook.<sup>27</sup> Although this might well have had earlier origins, it could be seen as part of what might be characterised as a partnership agreement between the bishop and King Alfred which was intended to facilitate the renewal of the area.

Another essential physical and functional component of the new burghal space of Alfred's London would arguably have been the bridge. Although the received paradigm has been that London Bridge was first created on the occasion of Alfred's 'restoration' of London in 886,<sup>26</sup> recent views have cast doubt on its very existence before the end of the 10th century, when it was first mentioned in documents and when the first archaeological evidence for its presence can be recognised.<sup>28</sup> But the strategic reasons for postulating its existence at least from the foundation of the *burh* by Alfred are too important to be ignored. It would not only have made an essential connection with the already-existing *burh* at Southwark on the other side of the river; it was also the key to the domination both of passage along the Thames and of land routes which focussed on its position as the lowest crossing point of the river. As such it would have formed a crucial tactical instrument both to prevent the passage of Viking warships further upriver – which of course was a major strategic highway leading right into the heart of Alfred's new kingdom – and to facilitate movement across land of the *fyrð*, Alfred's new mobile field army. It would have had parallels with other *burh*-bridge units of the period in both England and the Frankish empire.<sup>29</sup> Its wider archaeological and topographical context, furthermore, provides strong reasons for suggesting that it would have been the successor of an earlier bridge which in all probability utilised the starlings of the first Roman bridge over the Thames. In this it has many parallels with the Roman, Saxon and early medieval bridge at Rochester.<sup>30</sup> It is this continuity of site (though not necessarily its full functional or

structural continuity in all successive periods) which would have served to have preserved the alignment of the Roman streets on both its sides.

It is a basic premise in this model that all the topographical elements described above formed an integral *system* of physical elements – streets, routeways, gates, hithes and market areas, as well as the bridge – which related to the pre-existing framework of the Roman walls, the gates, the position of the bridge and the precinct of St Paul's, in such a way that the functions of each were complementary to the functions of all of the others. (This aspect is, however, absent from Milne's model of the development of the original *burh*).<sup>31</sup> This carries the implication that these streets and other features were laid out over a short period of time to implement a single unified plan, and that this was conceived to provide the essential framework for the organisation of the new burghal space as a sustainable community where military, social and economic effectiveness went hand in hand. The use, and loss, of the London Monogram coins on the foreshore at Queenhithe, and the association of this hithe with the primary streets leading from it to the central market area at Cheapside, anchors this process to *c.* 880. This was the very time when King Alfred would have had the means, the opportunity and the political and military reasons for creating such a *burh* at London.

The minting of these coins provides independent evidence that the *burh* was created anew (though incorporating earlier elements) as a new trading community. The development of this community is shown by the granting of a soke – that is, an area which in this case allowed its owner to operate a privileged trading franchise – to the bishop of Worcester at Queenhithe by King Alfred and Aethelred in 889. This arguably succeeded an earlier soke granted by the king to the bishop in 857 at *Ceolmundinghaga* inside the walls, which itself followed grants of trading privileges to the bishop in London from the 8th century. There are reasons for arguing that this latest grant represented the continuation on a new site within the new burghal space of a commercial outlet for the bishop's trading interests

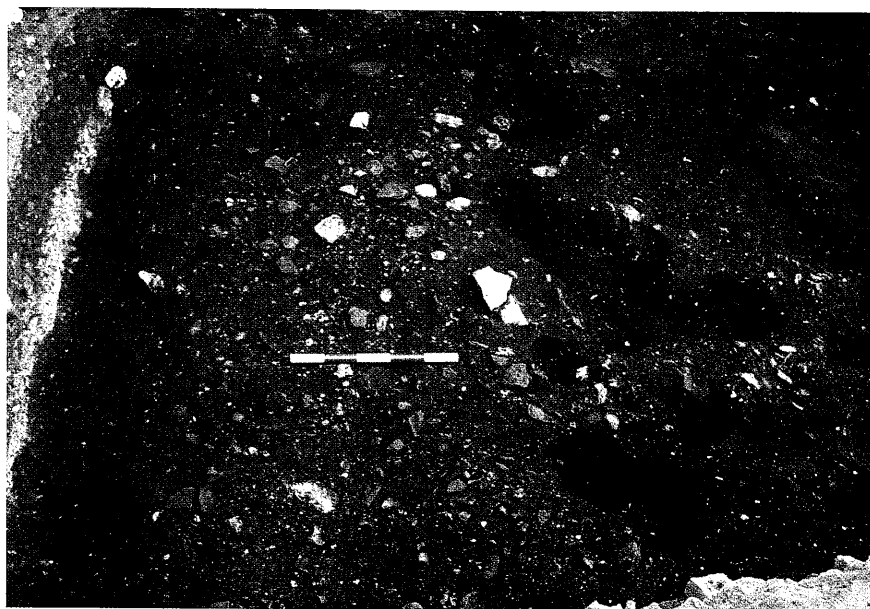


Fig. 2: an early street surface of Bow Lane, laid over dark earth (site WEL79)

Photo: Museum of London Archaeology

in salt from Droitwich, a staple commodity used in a variety of applications such as dyeing, the making of cheese and the curing of fish and meat.<sup>32</sup>

It is probable, however, that all the topographical elements described above were either a modification of, or a development from, a new burghal space which had been created – or re-established – in the mid-9th century, probably as a response to the devastating Viking raid of 851. It is possible even that the space within the walls had been reorganised to an extent in the late 8th century under King Offa, mirroring similar processes which are rather better documented at Canterbury. Many of the high-status functions of the Mid-Saxon *wic* along the Strand appear to have been relocated in or adjacent to the intra-mural area, and the precinct around St Paul's possibly formed its own fortified *enceinte*, called *Lundenburh*, which was probably also the case at Canterbury. Other Middle Saxon elements appear to have included the use of Queenhithe as a wharf, occupation between the river at this point and St Paul's, the possible use of the old Roman amphitheatre as a public meeting place, and the development of other high-status sokes to the north of St Paul's.<sup>33</sup> Cheapside may well have been first developed at this time, and the major streets in the area east of Wallbrook connecting its

eastern end with Bishopsgate and Aldgate first laid out. The refurbished bridge across the Thames would also have been part of this arrangement. By this time the construction and upkeep of both the *burh* and the bridge would have been incumbent upon the landholders of the district. This Mid-Saxon *burh* and its rural support system would have been an attraction to the Viking army which over-wintered in London in 871–2. The essential difference between this *burh* and that created by King Alfred in *c.* 880 was the greater degree of internal organisation which would have been involved in the latter, and the more sophisticated arrangements for the defence of the town which would have been supported by the installation of a permanent garrison, as well as by obligations from land-holders within the new burghal territory.

This model of the creation of a garrisoned *burh* at London in late 879 by King Alfred is quite consistent with – and indeed provides a rather more satisfactory explanation of – events which are recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as having affected London and the Thames in the next few years. The deeply-entrenched paradigm which holds that London was not developed until 886 creates a yawning gap between 879, when the two Viking armies were driven away from London and Mercia, and the supposed

formation of a garrison in 886. The siege of the garrison in Rochester in 885 by the Vikings, the naval action against the Vikings in 885, and the presence of a Viking army in Surrey in 882, show that Viking war bands kept up a relentless hostile pressure on the general area of the Thames estuary at this time. Furthermore, the so-called 'occupation' of London by the Vikings in 883 can be interpreted as an attack on a Saxon garrison within the walls of London by Vikings who were on the outside.<sup>34</sup> In short, Alfred could not have afforded to have waited for six years or so after his assumption of control of Mercia to have attended to the defence in depth of the Thames and the routeways crossing the river by the

construction of a garrisoned *burh* at London.

What, therefore, would have been the significance of the 'events' of 886 recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*? At this time Alfred is described as having 'restored' London, as receiving a submission from the whole of the Mercian people, and as having given the safe-keeping of London to Eardorman Aethelred, his trusted sub-regent based in western Mercia.<sup>35</sup> In brief, I have argued that the process of 'restoration' should be regarded as a particular stage of a process, rather than an event, and that, because the *Chronicle* only describes events, this chance reference does not in any way demonstrate that it was this particular

year when this process was initiated; secondly, that a general submission would anyway have been required when Alfred took control of Mercia in late 879, and that the submission of 886 was therefore possibly related to some special event; and thirdly, that this special event may well have been the betrothal – even the actual marriage – of Alfred's daughter Aethelflaed to Aethelred.<sup>36</sup> Thereafter, as subsequent events showed, Aethelred appears to have been put in charge of securing the defence of the eastern flank of English Mercia against the Vikings from a base in London, which doubtless allowed King Alfred time to consolidate his interests in his new 'kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons'.

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20. Dyson *op cit* fn 1, 106–7; Schofield *op cit* fn 16, 155; Vince *op cit* fn 1, 112; D. Keene 'The character and development of the Cheapside area: an overview' in Schofield *et al op cit* fn 16, 178–9; Keene *op cit* fn 2, 245.

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# An archaeological assessment of the origins of St. Paul's Cathedral

Kathleen M. McCourt

**"There has been a Cathedral on this site dedicated to St. Paul for almost 1,400 years."** (2004 *St. Paul's Cathedral Visitor Information pamphlet*)

Although this opinion is shared by many scholars, there is no proof, and no trace of the fabric of the earliest St. Paul's has yet been found.<sup>1</sup> Its location was a reasonable assumption before the discovery of the Mid-Saxon settlement of *Lundenwic*, when archaeologists were still querying the lack of Middle Anglo-Saxon settlement evidence within the Roman City walls. The lack of Anglo-Saxon artefacts within the Roman walls of London, once puzzling, was determined to be due to the fact the Anglo-Saxons built their settlement outside the old Roman town.<sup>2</sup> They lived to the west of the Roman City, along the Thames waterfront, now known as The Strand. Here they created an emporium, or *wic*, possibly using the Roman ghost town for farming – grazing their animals and planting their crops. And they might have, if the general assumptions are true, used it for Christian worship, as well.

But what if, in AD 604, King Ethelbert of Kent and the Roman missionary Mellitus founded a church named for the patron saint of London in the blossoming market settlement of *Lundenwic*, instead? The populace of *Lundenwic* was growing, though it was not yet the "metropolis" described by Bede when he was writing in the 8th century. Pope Gregory sent Mellitus and other missionaries from Rome with explicit instructions to try to found churches on the sites of pagan worship, making conversion easier for the pagans: why would the Anglo-Saxons put a sacred place of worship in a deserted, wasted city where they did not want to live themselves?

Historical records tell us that no more than a dozen years after the founding of St. Paul's, Mellitus was thrown out of the bishop's see by a resurgence of paganism after the deaths

of the newly converted Christian kings, Ethelberht and his nephew Saeberht.<sup>3</sup> So Christianity had an uncertain start in Britain; it was unlikely that mass conversion to Christianity would be instantaneous. If the original St. Paul's was a small stone or timber-framed church in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, it would be impossible to tell if it was torn down in the pagan uprising of c. 617, whether in *Lundenwic* or the City. The church would not have been rebuilt, or re-occupied, until the 650s, when King Sigeberht the Good of Essex restored Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the next historical documentation about St. Paul's after Bede comes from the much later *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, stating that it was razed by fire in 962: over 300 years of history is missing.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this study is to examine the evidence compiled thus far about the origins of St. Paul's Cathedral. By looking at other Anglo-Saxon churches and cathedrals of the Middle Anglo-Saxon period, it is possible to get an idea of what the original church might have looked like, and therefore

what archaeologists should be looking for in future excavations. If one cannot find the fabric of the building, one might be able to find the bones of its congregation, as burials are one indication that a church stood nearby. The next task is to examine the burials of *Lundenwic*. By deciphering the burials in their context, one might be able to decide whether they represent a Christian burial ground that may have at one point been the resting-place of the congregation of St. Paul's.

Perhaps the tourist pamphlet was correct about the origins of St. Paul's Cathedral. Or perhaps something has been taken for granted, but unproven, because St. Paul's Cathedral is one of the most recognisable sites of London, and has given the city pride for centuries (Fig. 1).

## St. Paul's within the Walls: a possible model

Perhaps the reason why no one ever questioned St. Paul's location is that there is a good possibility that it has not moved. A few hundred years of Roman

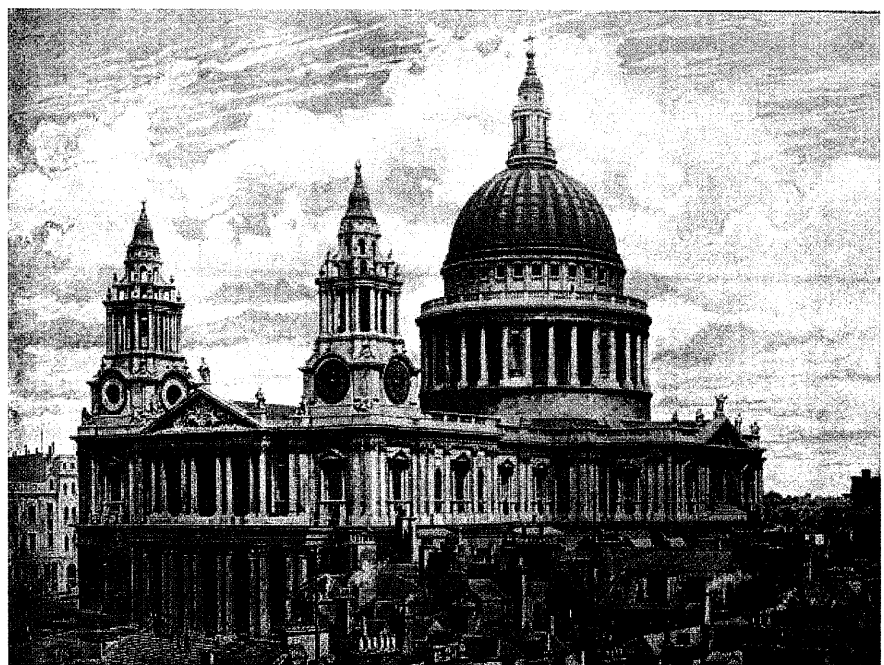


Fig. 1: Wren's St. Paul's Cathedral in 1896