
The Lost Defences Of Leicester

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'Legecestria is a most wealthy city, and emcompassed with an indissoluble wall, of which if the foundation were strong and good, the place would be inferiour to no city whatsoever'

Matthew Paris, Lesser History, 13th century, translated by William Camden, 1695

Current re-development of Leicester's Bath Lane area is providing an opportunity to understand the evolution of the city from a late Iron Age settlement, Roman military post and civic centre, medieval market town up to the changing modern city of today. Excavations on the site of the former Harding's Dyeworks have revealed a wealth of information that charts these developments, but perhaps the greatest achievement of the fieldwork has been to locate the lost western town defences and present new evidence for their dating and sequence.

At the time of the Roman conquest the site was part of the low-lying Soar floodplain. The area was reclaimed through the dumping of clay and earth, and a turf-built rampart was constructed on the elevated area some time during the 2nd century, probably the latter half. It would appear that Bath Lane follows the line of the rampart – it was seen at Westbridge Wharf because the street had been slightly re-aligned when the railway line was built in the 1880s.

A 30m length of the later Roman town wall was revealed crossing the site, but somewhat further east than had been expected (many earlier observations of substantial masonry recorded during building works would now seem to be a Roman 'river' wall). The wall had been inserted into the front of the rampart, thus disputing previous assertions that Leicester's defences were of one period. The superstructure had been 'robbed' (dismantled) and the stone re-used during the early post-medieval period. However, the footings mostly survived, revealing a formidable structure, up to 3m wide, amongst the widest of town walls in Roman Britain.



Above: The site, looking south, showing the town wall foundations with a block of tumbled superstructure at far south. The higher deposits to the left of the wall are the remnants of the rampart defences.

Immediately adjacent to the wall, and cutting into the top of the rampart was a large circular lime kiln, with its final charge of partly burnt limestone still intact. Archaeomagnetic dating of the burnt lining provided a date of 230-270 AD for the last firing. The kiln was almost certainly producing large amounts of lime for the bonding concrete of the town wall. The limestone used in the kiln was from one of two possible locations – Barrow-on-Soar or from the Crown Hills area of Evington. The proxy date for the wall construction adds to a national body of evidence showing civic defences receiving a wall in the 3rd century, possibly indicating an official response to a national threat.

For the story of the defences in the post-Roman period one has to turn to documentary evidence, but even this is meagre. The first mention of the defences is the account of the sack of Leicester in 1173 when Henry II ordered the destruction of the castle and town defences. It is generally thought that the damage to the walls would have been localised and limited; the recorded expenditure on the demolition are two payments of only 11s 9d and 40s and there is no mention of any major reconstruction works. The recent excavations revealed a localised area of wall destruction that might be one of the 12th century breaches. The near-contemporary account by Matthew Paris describes how the walls were sapped and then toppled by burning the timber props. At the Bath Lane site the granite footings of the town wall survived intact for most of the length revealed, except for one short stretch. Here there were signs of conflagration with fire reddened earth and fire-cracked foundation stones.

In the 13th century a trench immediately outside of the wall was excavated, filled with rammed stone rubble and capped with stiff clay. It is feasible that the feature was a measure to prevent further sapping in a period of anticipated

'That the walls, being faulty in the foundations, when they were undermined, and the props burnt that supported them, fell in great pieces, which remain to this day in the shape of rocks for bigness and solidity; such was the indissoluble tenacity of the mortar'

Matthew Paris, Lesser History, describing the sack of Leicester by Henry II in 1173, quoted in William Camden, 1695

troubles such as the barons' war. The town's west wall appears to have survived until the early post-medieval period when it was completely dismantled leaving only the granite footings. Pottery from the 'robber trench' suggests the dismantling occurred around the later 16th century, according with documentary evidence for the sanctioning of stone removal on payment to the town council.

The latest deposits tell the next chapter in the story for this part of Leicester, that is the increasing use of the riverbank for industrial purposes. Documentary sources tell of the growth of the tanning and associated industries in this area from the medieval period. The archaeological evidence for this was large deposits of sheep metapodia and cattle horn cores, the waste by-products from tanning and hornworking. One 18th century deposit of cattle horns are of some interest due to their exceptionally large size, an indication that the cattle were from improved stock such as the Dishley or Leicestershire Longhorns. These were selectively bred by Thomas Bakewell in the mid 18th century, just north of Loughborough, producing animals with higher meat yields, capable of walking long distances to market and suitable for hardy draught oxen.

There is little evidence for buildings in the area until the early 19th century when there was an explosion of development, linked to the industrialisation of the waterfront area following canalisation of the river. The beginning of Leicester's modern dyeing industry was sparked by the arrival of Monsieur Etienne Gonty in the late nineteenth century who set up the first dyeworks in the Bath Lane area. The premises were taken over by Samuel Harding in the 1870s who set in place an ambitious rebuilding programme. The archaeological and architectural evidence from then and throughout the 20th century shows a palimpsest of structural evidence, reflecting the intensive industrial use of the site.

With the decline of the textile and associated industries this area of Leicester is once again undergoing a period of change. The new development sees Bath Lane taking on a more residential function, in some ways echoing the 2nd century development boom when the Romano-British inhabitants built their fine, new town houses overlooking the banks of the river Soar.

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Left: Excavating late Roman burials.

An unexpected discovery was a group of eight inhumations immediately outside of the town wall.
