

2. ancient london

Hard though it is to imagine, London didn't really exist before the Romans arrived in 43AD. There is some evidence of Iron and Bronze Age villages in the area north of the River Thames and many historians think that Celtic druids would have performed ceremonies and rites on sacred mounds around the modern-day city centre. But it was only once the invading army under Emperor Claudius established the settlement of Londinium that the city as we know it began to take shape. The extensive wall the Romans built around this important strategic and trading post still exists in places and the gates they established live on in the names of streets and tube stations familiar to all Londoners. Glimpses of their civilisation – and those of the Saxons and Vikings who came afterwards – can still be seen in the modern city, as this journey shows you.



Start point: Angel tube
End point: Vauxhall tube
Duration: 4.5 hours

● Come out of **Angel tube** and turn left. Cross City Road and continue down St John Street, then turn right into Rosebery Avenue. The former headquarters of the London Water Board – on the right immediately after Sadler's Wells Theatre – sits on the site of **Penton Hill**, which is one of the three sacred mounds of Ancient London. This is where it is believed Celtic druids conducted rites in the centuries before the Romans arrived in 43AD.

● Either retrace your steps to Angel tube or catch the northbound **19, 38** or **341** from the **Sadler's Wells Theatre** stop back up to the **Angel Station** stop. When you recross City Road, you are passing over the intersection of two Bronze and Iron Age roads that were used to drive horses and cattle between modern-day Highgate and Covent Garden in one direction, and from here to what is now Highbury in the other. Though records of settlement in London only go back as far as the Roman era, these tracks suggest there were Celtic villages dotted around the area.

● Once you've got off the bus, cross the road and catch the southbound **30, 73** or **476** from the identically named stop on the other side. All these buses head down Pentonville Road to the **King's Cross Station** stop. It is thought that Boudicca, Queen of the Iceni, who led her tribe in a rebellion against the Roman occupiers in 60AD, was defeated close to modern-day King's Cross. Some historians have suggested that her body lies somewhere between platforms 9 and 10.

● Get off the bus at the King's Cross Station stop, walk back down Grays Inn Road and turn left up

Caledonian Road. Cross Pentonville Road, continue up Caledonian Road, then catch the southbound **17** from the **King's Cross Station/Pentonville Road** stop. When the bus turns off Farringdon Street onto Ludgate Hill, look out for the plaque on the left that marks the location of the **Ludgate** – the westernmost gate in the Roman wall that was built around the settlement of Londinium in 200AD. The bus then continues past **St Paul's Cathedral**, first established in Saxon times by Mellitus, the first Christian bishop of London, in 604AD. According to contemporary reports, he built it on the site of a Roman temple to the Goddess Diana.

● When the bus heads along Cannon Street, look to the left as you pass number 111. Set into an alcove in the wall is the **London Stone** – which, according to legend, is part of the original altar of the temple of Diana established by Brutus of Troy, who supposedly became the first King of England after he and his brother defeated the giant Gogmagog in a wrestling match. Legend has it that he established the city – which he called Troia Nova – around 1000BC. The stone is actually thought to be a Roman milestone or part of a druidic altar.

● **London Bridge**, which the bus crosses next, has existed in various forms since the Romans forded the river around 30 metres east of the current structure in the first century AD. It is believed to have been the location of a fierce battle between Anglo-Saxon settlers and Viking invaders led by Olaf II in the early 11th century. Though the Saxons occupied the bridge and rained spears down on those beneath, Viking longboats were tied to the bridge's supports and pulled the whole thing down. The discovery of iron axes and swords beneath this

section of the Thames add weight to the theory that a mass slaughter did indeed take place here.

● Get off the bus at **London Bridge Station** and walk through the tube station to Duke Street Hill. Catch the eastbound **RV1** from the identically named stop and take the bus along Tooley Street and over Tower Bridge. Get off at **Tower Gateway**, walk back down Minories and turn right onto **Tower Hill**. This elevated spot – which roughly equates to the modern-day Trinity Square Gardens – is another of London's three sacred mounds. Referred to by early historians as the **White Mound**, it is a supposed druidic site. Remnants of a Bronze Age village have been found here, too. Tower Hill is also home to one of the best-preserved sections of the Roman wall that once completely encircled Ancient London and remained largely intact until as late as the 18th century.

● Walk through Trinity Square Gardens and bear right onto Cooper's Row. You can see another particularly well-preserved section of the Roman wall by entering **Trinity Court**, on the right. Continue up Cooper's Row and, at the top, turn right onto Crosswall. Cross Minories, walk along Portsoken Street and turn left up Mansell Street. Catch the westbound **100** from the **Mansell Street** stop. The bus takes you past the site of the **Aldgate** – the easternmost gate in the Roman wall – which stood at the corner of what's now Minories and Duke's Place, just after Aldgate tube.

● The 100 continues past Sir Norman Foster's iconic **30 St Mary Axe** building (better-known as the Gherkin). During construction on the tower in 2003, builders came across human remains, which turned out to be the body of a teenage girl who had died in the Roman city some time between 350 and 400AD. Once the skyscraper was completed, her body was reburied according to Roman traditions and a headstone – incorporating both English and Latin inscriptions – was placed on the Bury Street side of the building.

● The bus continues along the road now called London Wall (which loosely follows the line of the original wall's northern section). Further sections of the Roman wall can be seen on the right, where Wood Street meets St Alphage Garden (which was also the site of **Cripplegate** – one of the original gates in the Roman wall); and on the left, where part of the fort that guarded the city defences is visible on Noble Street. **Aldersgate** – a gate added around 350AD – was situated where Aldersgate Street meets St Martin Le Grand, just after the bus turns left after passing the Museum of London.

● Get off the bus at the **City Thameslink Station/Ludgate Circus** stop, walk back along Ludgate Hill and turn left up Old Bailey. The junction with Newgate Street and Holborn Viaduct was the site of the **Newgate** – another of the wall's original gates – which was demolished in 1767.

● Turn right down Newgate Street, cross the road and catch the eastbound **8** from the **King Edward Street** stop. Get off at the **Wormwood Street** stop and continue up Bishopsgate until you arrive at the junction with Wormwood Street. This was the site of the

Bishopsgate – another of the original gates – which marked the beginning of Ermine Street, the Roman Road that ran from here all the way to York. The gate's location is marked by a stone bishop's mitre, which is positioned high on the building that stands at the junction.

● Turn left down Wormwood Street and right up Old Broad Street, then take the westbound **11** from the **Liverpool Street Station** bus stop. Just after you pass the **Bank Station/Queen Victoria Street** stop, look left for a sight of the third-century **Roman Temple of Mithras**, which was relocated to Temple Court in the 1950s after being unearthed during building work. The temple contained several marble effigies of Roman gods and clay figurines of the goddess Venus, and nearby was found a small lead tablet on which someone had inscribed the name Martia Martina backwards and thrown it into the River Walbrook as a way of summoning the gods to punish her. All these discoveries can be seen in the Museum of London.

● As the bus goes along Fleet Street, look left to see **St Bride's Church**. Though the current building is a 17th-century creation, there has been a Christian church here since the sixth century. This was built on top of a second-century structure that historians think was a temple associated with a sacred well – once dedicated to the Celtic fertility goddess Brigid – which still bubbles beneath the ground to the southeast of the church wall. The St Bride's crypt houses remains from this temple as well as a section of Roman pavement from a century or so earlier.

● When the bus moves onto the **Strand**, it is passing through the location of the Saxon settlement of **Lundenwic** – around a mile west of the original Roman city. This Thameside trading port stretched as far west as present-day Trafalgar Square and as far north as Oxford Street. Recent archaeological excavation around the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields – on the right-hand side just before the bus reaches Trafalgar Square – has unearthed Saxon graves dating from 500–650AD in which jewellery, as well as ceramic, glass and metal vessels were buried along with the deceased.

● Just before the bus reaches Victoria Station, look left to see the Catholic Westminster Cathedral. This has long been a spot associated with religion. It was a Benedictine priory until the time of the Reformation and, before that, it was the site of **Tothill** – the third of London's prehistoric sacred mounds.

● Get off the bus at the **Vauxhall Bridge Road/Victoria Station** stop, continue walking down the road and turn left down Vauxhall Bridge Road. Catch the southbound **2** from the Neathouse Place stop, which takes you over **Vauxhall Bridge**. If you are crossing the River Thames at low tide, look out for a huddle of poles and stumps sticking out of the mud in front of the M16 Building (to the left of the bridge). A recent *Time Team* investigation revealed these are more than 6,000 years old, and were either supports for a walkway out to an island in the river or of ceremonial significance – a kind of small-scale, wooden stonehenge. They may not be the most impressive sight in the city, but they are by far the oldest.