

CONCISE HISTORY OF THE CITY OF LONDON

London is one of the oldest urban areas in the world. Currently, the city sits on River Thames' banks and serves as the capital city of the United Kingdom. London is the seat of government and, more importantly, the country's financial center. Despite its success, the city has a tumultuous history dating back to ancient times. Historical evidence shows that the Romans formed London around 43 AD, and their rule continued until about the fifth century AD. The Romans named the city Londinium during the third century. Londinium had about 50,000 people and was an important port during this period. In the subsequent years, the city experienced instability due to numerous invasions from multiple enemies, including the Vikings and Normans.¹ However, London experienced true success and stability from the fourteenth century onwards. The urban center industrialized and benefitted from maritime trade due to its role as a port. As a result, the population increased, and the economy diversified in the following centuries. However, as the city made milestones in its development, it also faced numerous challenges and setbacks. The essay will discuss the concise history of London city, beginning from the Roman invasion to the post-war era.

¹ 'History of London - The evolution of UK's capital city', *London - London Tourism and Travel Guide – London City Break*

<<https://www.londoncitybreak.com/history#:~:text=The%20city%20of%20London%20was,influence%20of%20its%20major%20port.>> [accessed 19 December 2022].

Formation of Londinium

The Romans founded the city of London. Julius Caesar and his compatriots arrived at River Thames in 54 BC. However, their settlement was problematic because there was neither an urban center nor a settlement place nearby. Despite coming in 54 BC, it was until 43 AD that the Romans began their occupation of present-day England.² Emperor Claudius played a significant role in settlement of the Romans in the new land. With the help of his army, they established Londinium, a small urban area that bordered several indigenous tribes such as the Trinovantes, Catuvellauni, Canti, and the Atrebates. Emperor Claudius restored stability in the region by combating the conflict that had adversely impacted coexistence.³ During their stay in Londinium, the Romans utilized their building skills to develop the small settlement. Notable structures that emerged included a governor's palace, a basilica for holding meetings, bathhouses, and temples. In addition, the Romans built a defensive wall that demarcated Londinium and prevented it from external aggression, as shown in figure 1. They named the defensive perimeter the London Wall.⁴ The port provided the city with the much-needed impetus for economic development. It facilitated trade and movement, enabling Londinium to thrive. However, the fall of Londinium eventually began towards the end of the 2nd century. Several aspects characterized the fall, including the settlement's contraction in size, plague, and increase in rebellion from native

² Francis Henry Wollaston Sheppard, *London: a history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 8.

³ Sheppard, p. 9-11.

⁴ Sheppard, p. 37-38.

Britons. By the 5th century, the Roman forces had abandoned Londinium.⁵ Regardless, the Romans had a critical role in laying the bedrock for establishing an urban center that would transition into modern-day London.

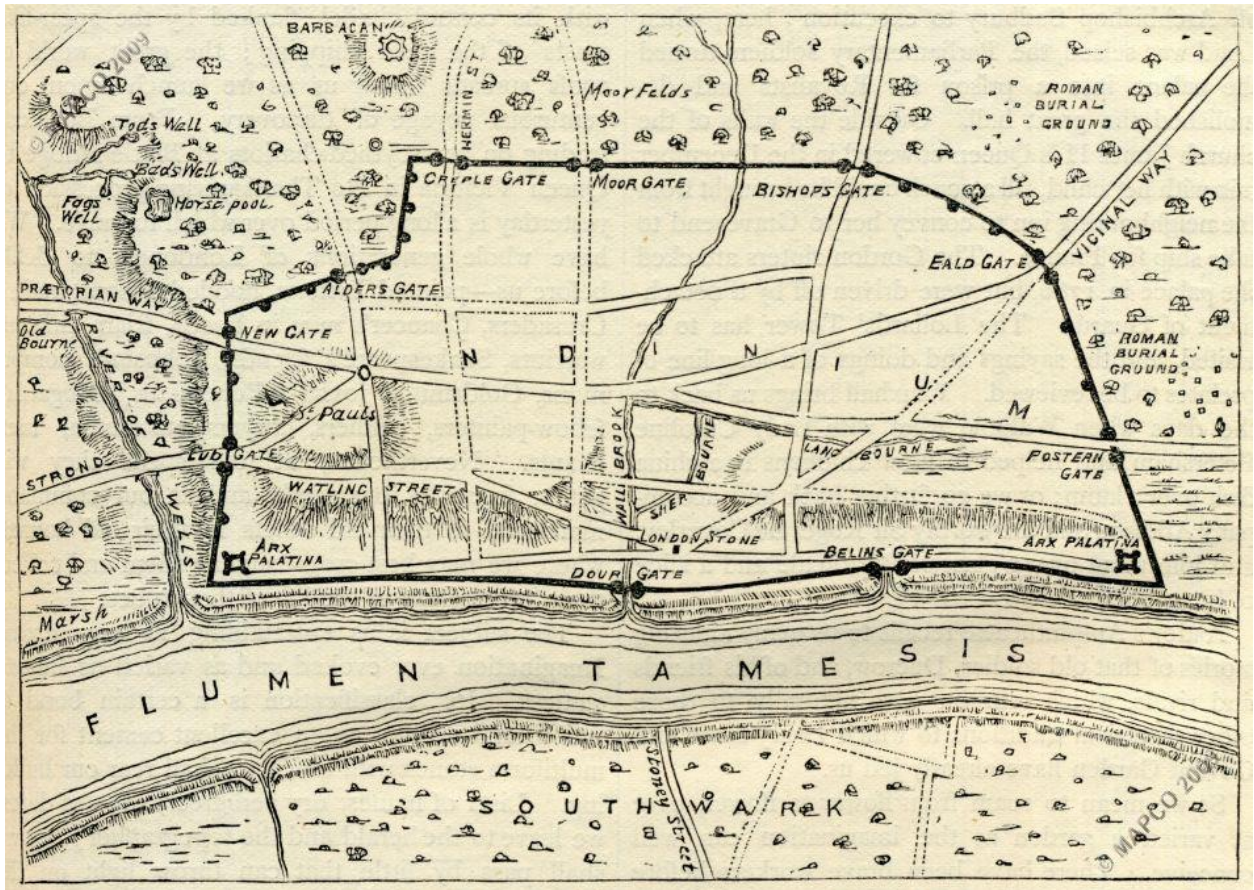


Figure 1: Map of Londinium. Adapted from 'Map Of Roman London - Post AD190.'

⁵ Shawn Thomas Norris, 'Londinium – The Beginnings of Britain's Modern Capital', *LinkedIn*, 7 July 2015 <<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/londinium-beginnings-britains-modern-capital-shawn-thomas-norris#:~:text=By%20the%20mid-5th%20Century,established%20tribal%20areas%20and%20kingdoms.>> [accessed 21 December 2022].

The Post-Roman London

After the exit of the Romans from Londinium, the Anglo-Saxons entered the vast settlement. However, unexpectedly, the Anglo-Saxons did not utilize the abandoned city or its pre-built structures. Instead, around the 7th century, they occupied the land several miles towards the west. The Anglo-Saxons used the names Ludenwic and Ludenberg to describe their territories.⁶ As the Anglo-Saxons expanded, they formed a vast region where they incorporated London as part of the Kingdom of Essex. However, the death of King Sæbert was a significant blow to Essex as a kingdom as it continued to recede while the Kingdom of Mercia expanded. Eventually, London found itself under Mercian control. Accordingly, Post-Roman London was a period of immense instability and uncertainty for London as an urban settlement.

In the subsequent years, London faced numerous challenges that almost led to its complete collapse. Beginning around 842, the Danes invaded London and raided the city in a phenomenon known as the "great slaughter." In 851, the Danes continued their attack and torched significant city sections.⁷ The continued instability for the following years led to the division of England between the Danes and the Anglo-Saxons. The Danish initially took over London's control before the Anglo-Saxons reclaimed it in 886.⁸ Under the leadership of Alfred, the Anglo-Saxons rebuilt the Roman walls, attracting foreigners, mainly the French and the

⁶John Rabon, 'Dark Age London: London After the Romans', *Londontopia*, 20 February 2020 <<https://londontopia.net/history/dark-age-london-london-after-the-romans/>> [accessed 19 December 2022].

⁷ Rabon.

⁸ Rabon.

Germans. As a result, this helped them restore London to the economic hub during the Roman era. Over the next few centuries, the Vikings and the Normans created instability that adversely affected London's prosperity. Accordingly, post-Roman London was a period of immense tension and instability.

Medieval London

Although it took a long to overcome the challenges of instability, the late middle ages saw a resurgence in London's fortunes. By the 14th century, the city had already transitioned into England's central commercial hub. London established itself as the main urban area, wealthier and more extensive than its counterparts such as Bristol, Norwich, and York.⁹ Although London served as the commercial hub during the late Middle Ages, Westminster retained its position as the political and royal capital. Manufacturing was the primary economic activity in the city during this period. Artisans worked with their families in shops distributed across some of the major streets in the urban setting. The fishing industry also expanded and formed a significant part of the medieval economy in London. In addition, the port of London allowed for the free flow of commodities through imports and exports. In the mid-14th century, the Black Death reduced the country's population due to a massive loss of lives.¹⁰ The disease originated in Asia, and upon arrival in England, it devastated the population. Historians estimate that approximately half of the population died due to the pandemic. Therefore, regardless of the economic success, the Black Death was arguably one of the most significant setbacks the city experienced in the medieval period.

⁹ 'History of London - The evolution of UK's capital city'

¹⁰ 'History of London - The evolution of UK's capital city'.

The city experienced numerous improvements deep into the 14th century. Churches, palaces, and houses characterized medieval London. Permanent shops selling different types of commodities replaced the temporary stalls.¹¹ By the beginning of the 16th century, London was a gateway for approximately one-third of England's international trade. Also, the urban area had expanded to cover much more space than it had occupied under the Old Roman walls.¹² Accordingly, the medieval era was the first extended period in which London experienced massive social, political, and economic success.

Renaissance London

During the Renaissance era, London continued with its mixed bag of fortunes. It benefitted from the strategic position that elevated it to a distribution hub for foreign commodities. The textile industry expanded in the 15th century, strengthening its place as an economic hub. The maritime trade expanded between the 16th and 17th centuries.¹³ During the reign of Henry VIII, London had a population of about 100,000 people. However, by the end of the 17th century, the population had increased to more than 500,000 individuals.¹⁴ Although the city was still within the ancient walls in the mid-17th century, the leadership had embarked on large-scale urban planning. However, the poor living conditions provided the necessary conditions for the spread of the Great Plague in 1665. Statistics show that the plague

¹¹ 'In Brief – London in the Late-Middle Ages | the History of London', *The History of London* <<https://www.thehistoryoflondon.co.uk/in-brief-late-middle-ages/>> [accessed 19 December 2022].

¹² 'In Brief – London in the Late-Middle Ages | the History of London.'

¹³ 'In Brief – London in the Late-Middle Ages | the History of London.'

¹⁴ 'History of London - The evolution of UK's capital city.'

killed more than 70,000 people, a significant proportion of the population.¹⁵ The Great Fire of London destroyed massive property and structures in 1666, bringing the city to a near end. The process of reconstruction began, costing the town ten years of reconstruction. Therefore, like in any other previous period, opportunities and threats hallmarked Renaissance London.

The Victorian London

The 19th century London was another period of a mixed bag of fortune. The period is referred to as the Victorian Era, as Queen Victoria ascended to the throne at 18. Queen Victoria ruled the UK for the rest of the century until her death in 1901.¹⁶ As industrialization continued to shape the country, London was not left behind. The population grew, and many people had the opportunity to work in the industries that emerged. On the one hand, the city developed new structures and affluent development that befitted a modern urban center. However, on the other hand, the population surge also meant that overcrowded slums increased and people lived in poor conditions.¹⁷ The increase in the population caused a strain on social amenities, ushering in immense social problems. In addition, the overall poor sanitation and the waste from the

¹⁵ 'History of London - The evolution of UK's capital city.'

¹⁶ 'DailyTimesCoverage', *Web hosting - Faculty and Staff - University of Victoria* <http://web.uvic.ca/vv/student/victoria_dead/DailyTimesCoverage.htm> [accessed 20 December 2022].

¹⁷ Andrzej Diniejko, 'Slums and Slumming in Late-Victorian London', *The Victorian Web: Linking Scholarship, Teaching and Learning since 1994* <<https://victorianweb.org/history/slums.html#:~:text=In%20the%20last%20decade%20of,u nsanitary%20and%20squalid%20living%20conditions.>> [accessed 20 December 2022].

industries adversely affected the air quality.¹⁸ River Thames suffered severe infiltration due to dumping waste materials, including raw sewage. The height of the unhygienic conditions was during the summer of 1858. Queen Victoria was deeply concerned with the filth in River Thames, a phenomenon described as the Great Stink. The Times vividly reported the situation by saying, "The intense heat had driven our legislators from those portions of their buildings which overlook the river. A few members, indeed, bent upon investigating the matter to its depth, ventured into the library, but they were instantaneously driven to retreat, each man with a handkerchief to his nose."¹⁹ Therefore, despite the progress in industrialization and buildings, London contended with pollution and filthy conditions threatening people's health.

The presence of horses in the city during the 19th century was another source of pollution and filth. Lee Jackson, a historian and the author of "Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight against Filth," captures the state of the urban center during the Victorian Era. In his interview, Lee notes that mud and horse dung polluted the streets and the carriageways.²⁰ Regarding the horse Urine, Lee says, "Also, the shopkeepers nearby said that this ammonia was discoloring their shop fronts as well."²¹ However, in the latter stages of the century, the authorities

¹⁸ Diniejko.

¹⁹ Miriam Bibby, 'London's Great Stink - Historic UK', *Historic UK* <<https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Londons-Great-Stink/>> [accessed 20 December 2022].

²⁰ Fresh Air, 'Dirty Old London': A History of the Victorians' Infamous Filth', *NPR.org*, 12 March 2015 <<https://www.npr.org/2015/03/12/392332431/dirty-old-london-a-history-of-the-victorians-infamous-filth>> [accessed 20 December 2022].

²¹ Fresh Air.

demonstrated a desire to improve the situation. The main achievement in resolving the problem was constructing the great sewer network towards the second half of the 19th century. Lee notes that the structure's construction prevented the residents from cholera bouts, including other waterborne diseases like typhoid.²² Accordingly, this improvement was a significant success in combating the dangers of epidemics arising from pollution.

Despite the hygiene issues, the city experienced several areas of success during the Victorian era. Infrastructural development characterized the period. For instance, London had its first railway in 1836 that connected London Bridge and Greenwich.²³ Over the next few years, the city experienced a railway boom with the establishment of significant stations at Paddington, Euston, Fenchurch Street, Waterloo, and King's Cross. Also, in 1859, the government concluded the improvement of the Houses of Parliament by adding the clock tower.²⁴ In 1863, the city experienced another milestone by constructing the first underground railway. In addition, River Thames serves as a leeway for ships from different parts of the world.²⁵ During the later stages of the 19th century, London boasted many more shipyards than other cities globally. Thus, the development of structures and transport infrastructure contributed to the city's economic success as it headed into the 20th century.

London in the 20th Century

²² Fresh Air.

²³ 'History of London - Victorian London', *Britain Express* <<https://www.britainexpress.com/London/victorian-london.htm>> [accessed 20 December 2022].

²⁴ 'History of London - Victorian London'.

²⁵ 'History of London - Victorian London'.

The population growth witnessed in the Victorian era continued into the 20th century. In addition, the city experienced infrastructural developments. London had its first motor bus service in 1904.²⁶ Another critical transport system was the underground electric train constructed in 1906.²⁷ The Edwardian years also saw the emergence of the development of department stores, luxury hotels, and theatres. The early 20th century also saw the growth of London into a central entertainment hub. After the First World War, the population increased to 7.5 million.²⁸ Despite the infrastructural development in the city, the 1920s was a difficult economic period for many Londoners. For instance, in 1926, the unemployment rate hit a record high leading to the Great Strike. At the same time, the population continued to increase, especially with the surge of European Jewish immigrants.²⁹ Furthermore, the city experienced another major setback during the Second World War as almost a third suffered bombing, as illustrated in figure 2. Therefore, the global conflicts of the 20th century adversely affected London, given Britain's position in the wars.

²⁶ David Ross, 'History of London - 20th century London', *Britain Express* <<https://www.britainexpress.com/London/modern-london.htm>> [accessed 20 December 2022].

²⁷ Ross.

²⁸ Ross.

²⁹ Ross.



Figure 2: Bombing of London during the Second World War. Adapted from Ross, David, 'History of London - 20th century London.'

Other landmark developments of the 20th century included Heathrow opening to commercial flights in 1946.³⁰ In 1956, the city's transport experienced a boost with the development of double-decker buses. Beginning in 1972, the government commissioned the construction of the Thames Barrier to control flooding in the river.³¹ Lastly, the Millennium Dome was another milestone project that enhanced the culture and heritage of the Londoners.

In conclusion, London has a long history, from the Roman occupation to the 20th-century advancements. Throughout every historical phase, London experienced major successes and setbacks. As a result, the historical details provide historians with implications concerning the development of any significant town. However, the most powerful lesson is that the growth of any urban center is a work in progress. Therefore, for a city to reach London's status, the people must demonstrate resilience to overcome significant challenges.

³⁰ Ross.

³¹ Ross.

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