



London's current skyline is the result of its two thousand years of history

London through the ages: Architectural insights into the capital's history



A statue of Emperor Trajan stands beside the Roman wall, the oldest structure in London today.

Given the various calamities that have befallen London over the last two thousand years, it's remarkable that any of it exists today at all. This is a city that's been ravaged by fire, ridden with plague and bombed to rubble. It's encountered the wrath of angry local Boudicca, the bloodlust of the Vikings and more rebellions and riots than you can shake a pigeon at. And not only has London endured, but it's often done so curiously intact, with architectural clues to its storied past scattered just about everywhere.

First centuries AD: all roads lead to - London

Though small settlements are likely to have been established along the Thames in prehistoric times, London's true history begins with the Romans, who set up camp on the north bank of the Thames in AD 43 and named their new town Londinium. The port flourished, becoming one of the capitals of Roman Britannia and a centre of imperial trade - fitting, given that Londinium occupied roughly the area of the pres-

ent-day financial district known as The City. After a brief hiccup in 60 AD, when a native tribal leader called Boudicca razed the place (we won't get into the ins and outs, but let's just say she had a strong motive), the Romans regained control and rebuilt Londinium, this time as a planned town.

With increasing unrest across the empire, the city was fortified some time around 200 AD with a huge wall built to protect it. The outline of London Wall can be traced in many modern streets and even some segments of it remain to this day, with particularly well-preserved parts just north of the Tower of London, next to Tower Hill tube station. Nothing else from Roman London remains above street level, but you can see the outline of an amphitheatre in the Guildhall Art Gallery and a temple to the god Mithras is open to visitors underneath the Bloomberg building. At its height, Londinium had a population of at least 30,000, and possibly as much as 60,000, but as the empire began to crumble in the 5th century, the Roman legions withdrew from Britain, and by AD 410 Londinium had been abandoned.