

THE LONDON STONE: FROM MYTH AND MYSTERY TO CONTEMPORARY PLANNING

Read by Alderman David Graves

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The London Stone is a truly remarkable object. This is all the more surprising because, to look at, it is utterly unremarkable. It is, quite literally, a lump of seemingly unworked rock, a piece of oolitic limestone, to be precise, spanning hardly more than 50 centimetres in any dimension. It could sit inside a standard bankers' box. Unusually for a lump of rock, it has an address: 111 Cannon Street, where it sits in a Portland stone cabinet at pavement level behind glass and a protective metal grille along the frontage of what is now a branch of WHSmith, with unremarkable office space above. For such an unassuming object in a similarly unassuming location, what makes the London Stone remarkable is its history. Much of its history is speculation, and could fairly be dismissed as legend, but what we know from reliable historic sources is sufficient to make this lump of rock worthy of note. The mythology goes back many thousands of years, its recorded history goes back several hundred years. As recently as 2011, the London Stone was the subject of a planning application—to move it into Minerva's adjacent Walbrook building. As the London Stone is a Grade II* Listed object, this was no straightforward matter, and the application currently lies dormant on the file at the City of London's Planning Department, although its status is recorded as "current". The official text for the Listing reads:

"Uncertain origin, possibly Roman milestone. Formerly set into the base of St Swithun's Church (on this site) which was damaged in World War II and afterwards demolished. Surround of Portland stone and iron grille, probably 19th Century."

A bronze plaque attached to the cabinet enclosing the London Stone reads as follows:

LONDON STONE

This is a fragment of the original piece of limestone once securely fixed in the ground now fronting Cannon Street Station. Removed in 1742 to the north side of the street, in 1798 it was built into the south wall of the Church of St. Swithun London Stone which stood here until it was demolished in 1962. Its origin and purpose are unknown but in 1188 there was a reference to Henry, son of Eylwin de Lundenstane, subsequently Lord Mayor of London.

By 1869 it was recorded that:

“...what was left of the London Stone measured but about a cubic foot, and that instead of a hard siliceous stone it was really an oolite, such as the Romans used extensively in their buildings, and sometimes for sepulchral monuments or for coffins. It is full of organic remains, and is of the same kind as that obtained from the quarries of Rutland and Northampton.”

Myth and Mystery

The mythological antecedents of the London Stone are diverse, and so extraordinary in the imaginative leaps involved that they can almost certainly be dismissed. This is not least because much of the myth-making is not genuinely ancient but derives from the writings of Victorian romanticists with a talent and substantial appetite for inventing history. And so it came about that the Revd Richard Williams Morgan, wrote in a book *The British Kymry or Britons of Cambria*, in 1857, (‘Kymry’ being a reference to ancient Celtic peoples) that the legendary Brutus was a historical figure and that the London Stone had been the plinth on which the original Trojan Palladium had stood, and was brought to Britain by Brutus and set up as the altar stone of the Temple of Diana in his new capital city of Trinovantum or “New Troy”. The inventiveness of writers does not end there—it has been speculated that the Stone may represent, for example, the stone from which King Arthur withdrew Excalibur.

The legend given by Hardyng writing in about 1430 is that:

“Lud, Kyng of Brytain, buylded from London Stone to Ludgate, and called that parte Lud’s towne, and after by processe was called London, by turnyng of tongues.”

Harding also suggests that the London Stone was the palladium of the city, linking that idea with claims that it has been regarded as the sacred and immovable foundation stone for the City of London.

Grant Allen thought it was an early Celtic monument preserved by the Romans. William Blake portrayed the London Stone as an altar used by druids to sacrifice their victims. The literary references to the London Stone include Shakespeare’s King Henry VI Part 2. Shakespeare described the incident in Act IV, Scene VI as follows:

“Now is Mortimer lord of this city. And here, sitting upon London Stone, I charge and command that, of the City’s cost, the pissing conduit run nothing but claret wine this first year of our reign. And now henceforward it shall be treason for any that calls me other than Lord Mortimer.”

Holinshed described the armed rebellion of 1450 under Jack Cade, also known as Lord Mortimer, and his armed incursion into the City as follows:

“He entered into London, cut the ropes of the drawbridge, and strooke his sword on London Stone, saying ‘Now is Mortimer Lord of the City.’”

The top of the stone retains three grooved ridges, said to date back to this incident, and it has been suggested that the striking of the Stone was a traditional symbol of sovereignty.

Quite simply, beyond romantic speculation, there is nothing in the historical record to support such ideas. All we can be sure of is that there is no definitive explanation for the existence of the London Stone. Who created it, when it was created and why it was created are all unknown, and we may never discover the truth. We do however have some archaeological evidence to suggest its original location, and to explain this we begin with the Roman settlement known as Londinium and latterly Augusta.

The Roman Connection

In 1586 Camden wrote of the London Stone:

“It is not far from the Walbrook called London Stone, which, from its situation in the centre of the longest diameter of the City, I take to have been a milliary, like that in the Forum at Rome, from whence all the distances were measured.”

There is evidence that the London Stone was damaged and reduced in size by the Great Fire of London, but this event did provide the opportunity for Sir Christopher Wren to excavate in the vicinity of the Stone, and to develop his own theory of its origin. A book called *Parentalia or Memoirs of the Family of the Wrens* was published in 1750 by Sir Christopher’s grandson. It was based upon a manuscript of Sir Christopher’s son, and includes a report from Sir Christopher’s notes of the remains he discovered during the rebuilding of the City after the Great Fire:

“London Stone, as is generally supposed, was a pillar, in the manner of the Milliarium Aureum at Rome, from whence the account of their miles began; but the surveyor was of opinion, by reason of the large foundation, it was rather some more considerable monument in the Forum, for in the adjoining ground on the south side (upon digging for cellars after the fire) were discovered some tessellated pavements and other extensive remains of Roman workmanship and buildings.”

The suggestion is that the London Stone, although now a small fragment of a far larger monument, may itself have formed a part of an even larger and far grander structure.

Peter Marsden, in his book *Roman London* has a clear and tantalising suggestion, that the London Stone formed a part of a substantial palace, the remains of which were discovered in the course of his excavations in the 1960's. The size and grandeur of the palace were such that in Marsden's view the only official who could possibly have resided there was the representative of the Emperor—no less than the Governor of the Province. The palace was estimated to have measured 130m by 100m and to have extended down the hill from the major Roman street which ran under Cannon Street, to the waterfront just south of Upper Thames Street. The palace appears to have been terraced on three levels as it ran down to the river, with the landward entrance at the upper terrace level, on the south side of modern Cannon Street. Unfortunately, deep modern basements have destroyed almost all trace of the palace. However, the possible remains of an entrance courtyard were found leading off the main Roman street beneath Cannon Street, and it is Marsden's view that, as he says:

"...the enigmatic monolith that has been called London Stone for at least the last 800 years belonged to the palace entrance. Being part of such an important building could explain why the Stone was venerated so long ago, despite the fact that it stood as an inconvenient stump in Cannon Street roadway until 1742."

Marsden adds the comment that when the original site of the stone was plotted on to a map of the Roman Palace, it lay not only on the main axis of the garden and state rooms, but also beside the main Roman road under Cannon Street, where the entrance to the Palace may have been situated. This double coincidence makes it even more likely in his view that the Stone was part of the palace.

It must be stressed that the suggested Roman origin for the Stone, never mind that it may have a connection to the entrance to the Roman Governor's Palace, is no more than conjecture, but at least there is some tangible archaeology to refer to, albeit that its implications for the origins of the London Stone are at best ambiguous. The site for the new Bloomberg Building slightly to the north west of the present location of the London Stone has yielded some spectacularly well-preserved Roman artefacts. The ground conditions there are exceptionally favourable for the preservation of natural materials. Perhaps the area to the east of Cannon Street station will be opened up in the future.

Unsurprisingly, the historical record has nothing to say about the London Stone for a few hundred years after the Romans withdrew to continental Europe, leaving the indigenous population, and London itself, to its fate. There is nevertheless a tantalising reference to the London Stone dating its existence back in time by more than 1,000 years. The evidence for this comes from John Stowe, who when writing in 1598 had this to say about the London Stone:

“On the south side of this high street (Candlewick Street), [which was renamed Cannon Street after the Great Fire] neare unto the channell, is pitched upright a great stone called London Stone, fixed in the ground very deep, fastened with bars of iron, and otherwise so strongly set, that, if cartes do runne against it through negligence, the wheeles be broken, and the stone is left unshaken. The cause why the stone was there set, the very time when, or other memory hereof, is there none; but that the same hath long continued there is manifest, namely since (or rather before) the time of the Conquest, for in the ende of a fayre written Gospell booke given to Christes Church in Canterbury by Ethelstane, King of the West Saxons, I find noted landes or rentes in London belonging to the said church, whereof one parcell is described to ly neare Unto London Stone.”

Ethelstan, a grandson of King Alfred the Great, died in 939, but was King of the West Saxons between 924 and 927.

The *Survey of London*, first published in 1603 noted several comments which had been made about the Stone and may have formed part of the traditions around it. For example, the Survey recorded that some had said that the Stone was set as a marker in the middle of the City within the walls, but it was pointed out that the Stone stood far closer to the river Thames than to the City wall to the north. It was also said that the Stone had been a traditional place for the tendering and payment of debts as between creditors and debtors, a precursor perhaps to the latter day trading of collateralised debt obligations. The survey implies that this tradition had already lapsed, remarking that payments in later times were usually made at the font in Poules Church and most commonly by 1603 by payment at the Royal Exchange. Reference was also made to a suggestion that the Stone may have been set up by a John or Thomas of Londonstone, but as to that the survey remarks:

“...more likely it is, that such men have taken name of the stone, than the stone of them, as did John at Noke, Thomas at Stile, William at Wall or at Well, &c.”

WR Lethaby in his book *London Before the Conquest* published in 1902, wrote of a tradition that the London Stone had a role in municipal procedure, as when the defendant in the Lord Mayor’s Court had to be summoned from the Stone, and that proclamations and other important business of like nature were transacted there. Referring to Jack Cade’s striking of the Stone, it was suggested that the Stone was the centre for the assembly of the citizens from Saxon times. The proximity of the Lord Mayor’s house, in which courts might have been held, is said to support the Stone’s use as a place of proclamation. We are familiar with the present home of the Lord Mayors at Mansion House—the Stone is presently located 175 yards due South from the salon inside the House, but Lord Mayors have obviously only been resident at Mansion House in comparatively recent times. It may be sheer coincidence that the first Lord Mayor lived very close to

the London Stone in what is now Oxford Court, also opposite Cannon Street station, so named after Oxford House, after the Earl of Oxford who bought the house before it was bought in turn by the Salters' Company in 1641 only to be destroyed on the second day of the Great Fire.

The London Stone has clearly enjoyed a dramatic but essentially charmed existence, throughout its long history. However illustrious its past, and despite having survived no doubt many insults, not least the great fire, the London Stone was perhaps at greater risk of extinction in the 18th Century than at any time before. The reason for this comes down to persistent complaints made to the City Authorities that the Stone had become an inconvenience. For example, at a meeting of the Court of Aldermen 1679/80 the minutes record that:

“Complaint now made by the inquest of the Ward of Walbrook of the inconvenience of the street and damage to the passengers, of London Stone as the same now stands in Cannon Street within this Ward and praying that the same may be sett higher or a new one set in the place thereof or the same removed to the other side of the street where it may stand with less inconvenience. It is by this Court wholly referred to the Alderman, Deputy and Common Councillmen of the said Ward to give such Order therein as they shall think convenient.”

No immediate action appears to have been taken, but the problem referred to clearly did not go away, as is recorded in a meeting of the Court of Aldermen in 1686/87:

“It is by this Court referred to Peter Daniel to cause London Stone in Cannon Street the gretest part whereof was broken away at the great fire to be levelled even with the ground for prevention of the frequent mischiefs occasioned thereby to passengers complained of by the Wardmote inquest of Walbrooke Ward, causing an inscription to be made upon some publick place near thereunto for preserving the memory thereof.”

Despite this clear instruction, the Stone survived. The matter was taken up over 50 years later with the City's Commissioners of Sewers and Pavements (a forerunner to our Streets and Walkways Committee, perhaps). The minutes of a meeting of that Committee, which met on 13 March 1740, record that:

“Upon a complaint this day made to this Court of the great obstruction to the publick passage in Cannon Street by the stone set up there commonly called London Stone and of much mischief occasioned thereby this Court doth therefore recommend it to the Committee of this Cities Lands to cause the said stone and the case wherein it lies to be taken away and disposed of in such manner as the said Committee shall deem most convenient.”

The meeting of the City Lands Committee on 18 March 1740 duly addressed the issue and went on to Order that:

“Mr Comptroller do acquaint the said Commissioners that it is the opinion of this Committee they are not impowered to do any Act in regard to the complaint mentioned in the said recommendation.”

Despite the refusal to become involved, action was taken and the Stone was moved on 13 December 1742 to the north side of Cannon Street.

Lambert’s *History of London* records that:

“It is very singular so much care should have been taken to preserve the stone, and so little to preserve the history of its origin...That it is now in existence at all, is in a great measure due to the interposition of Mr Thomes Maiden, of Sherbourn Lane, who, at the beginning of the year 1798, when St Swithin’s Church was about to undergo a complete repair, and this venerable relic had been nearly doomed to destruction as a nuisance by some of the parishioners, prevailed on one of the parish officers to give his consent that London Stone should be removed to the situation which it now occupies against the church wall.”

Miraculously the Stone and its case survived the bombing of the church of St Swithin, London Stone in 1941. The church was so badly damaged that it was left as a ruin until its remains were demolished in 1961 and installed into the frontage of the replacement building at 111 Cannon Street. This brings my research full circle, with one footnote to add.

The reference to contemporary planning ought to be properly explained. *The Daily Mail* ran a piece dated 25 January 2012 with the heading “Fury as Developers Plan to Move Legendary 900 year old London Stone from its Historic Site (and why it could spell doom for the Capital).” This was of course a reference to Minerva’s Planning Application (Ref 11/00664/LBC) to move the Stone a few yards to the west, so it could be displayed in a less obscure location and inside a more fitting case. The planning application included a report on the planning issues associated with the proposed relocation. English Heritage, The London Society, the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the Victorian Society all objected to the proposed move, suggesting instead that when 111 Cannon Street (also owned by Minerva) falls for redevelopment that would be the moment to consider a new display arrangement in the present location. I feel the London Stone is safe, for now.

I must offer my gratitude to the staff at the Guildhall Library and at the LMA for their help with my research for this paper, and especially to Elizabeth Scudder for facilitating my research.