

# Misunderstanding the Roman Wall at Tower Hill

For 40 years I have been taking people on guided walks to see the surviving Roman Wall at Tower Hill. It is a marvellous stop because the Wall tells its own story by the rich clues in its historic fabric. In addition, there is a 19th-century statue thought to be a combination of Trajan/Augustus, and a copy of the famous funerary inscription of Julius Classicianus, the best-known Procurator of the province of Britannia. However, I believe that in the 1980s some minor restoration work was carried out and completely misinterpreted the structural history of the Wall in one section.

The Covid-19 lockdown has, at last, provided me with the opportunity to point out what I consider is an error in interpretation and restoration that has annoyed me for the last 35 years. In summary, the 1980s restoration added fake Roman tile courses to a non-Roman section of the Wall. The section of the Wall in question, which is next to the Tower Hill Tube station and across the main road from the Tower of London, shows the lower section to the left is clearly Roman with horizontal Roman tile courses and regular rectangular blocks of Kentish Ragstone.

This section can be divided into two – that to the right is the core of the wall, with the facing stones robbed at some point in the past (top). The section to the left shows the original facing stones still *in situ*. This shows how the Wall would have been seen in the Roman period (except there was probably an earth bank covering this interior face). The tile courses go through the entire width of the Roman Wall, and are thought to stabilise and level the rubble core of the wall, and, perhaps to add a decorative element (centre).

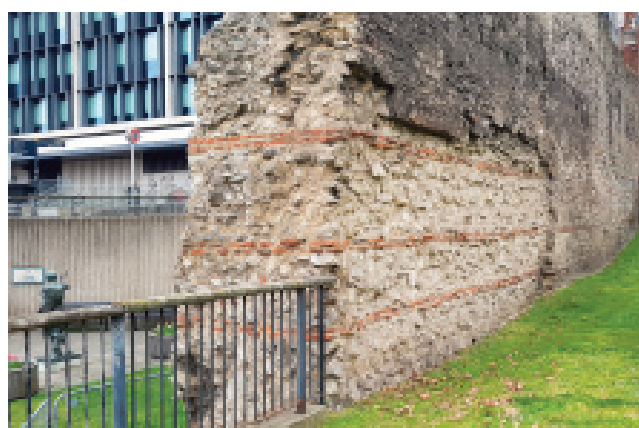
Further to the right, the stonework is much less regular, has no tile courses and is made up of re-used Roman building material, tiles and ragstone, and not laid in neat courses. It clearly post-dates the Roman period, and was probably either late Saxon or medieval. This area is similar to the upper face of the wall (on the left) and, as can be seen, the horizontal Roman tile courses do not continue through either, except for the very lowest visible tile course to the right. Close inspection shows that this anomaly must have been caused by a collapse of the inner face of the Wall and must have been rebuilt at some point without the tile courses. The lowest Roman tile course clearly survived the wall collapse.

At the end is an exposed full cross-section through the Wall (centre). Close examination shows that this line is the fault line where the wall collapsed, as discussed above. To the left, is

part of the later rebuild strictly without original Roman tile courses; to the right, the Wall is Roman with its tile courses intact. Before the restoration in the 1980s, this was clear because there were no Roman tile courses to the left – they had been swept away by the wall collapse.

In the 1980s, someone with a bucket of cement and some Roman tile fragments, added spurious tile courses to a non-Roman wall (bottom). I presume it was done by English Heritage who wanted to make the exposed wall section look properly and completely Roman, and did not notice the clear evidence of the wall collapse as an explanation for the fact that the tile courses did not go right through the width of the wall.

This is a minor issue, but it is an error, and it distorts a genuine area of post-Roman Wall and turns it into a pretend piece of Roman Wall. The mistake is also present in the ceramic panel for the London Wall Walk. Both should be put right.



**TOP:** Roman Wall and core (arrowed in red) with the later repair without tile courses (in black)

**CENTRE:** Section through the Wall and its outer face showing the tile courses

**BOTTOM:** Close-up of section through the Wall showing the real Roman tile courses to the right

Kevin Flude, London

## Response

*As one of the originators of the London Wall Walk, I have asked Kevin and Jane Sidell from Historic England to meet me on-site, once travelling is easier and when Jane can check the paperwork as to what work was done in the 1980s – Jenny Hall, Joint Ed.*