

London Stone

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Today, all that is left of the once-famous London Stone is no more than a block of stone set behind an iron grille in the wall of no 111 Cannon Street, a dilapidated 1960s office building soon to be demolished. A bronze plaque tells the passer-by little more than that 'Its origin and purpose are unknown'. Its origin is indeed mysterious, and whenever development of the site is proposed, the media work up the mystery – not forgetting to mention the 'belief' that if the stone is moved or destroyed, the future of London itself will be jeopardized.

However, much of what we think we know about London Stone – see for example the farrago of myth contained in the present on-line Wikipedia article – is untrue, or at best is guesswork unsupported by any evidence.

What can we be certain of? The stone itself is oolitic limestone, of a type first brought to London for building and sculptural purposes in the Roman period – but also used in Saxon and medieval times. Its original location, towards the southern edge of the medieval Candlewick Street (now Cannon Street) opposite St Swithin's church (called 'St Swithin at London Stone' by at least 1557) would place it in front of the great Roman building, often identified as the provincial Governor's palace, that stood on and to either side of the site now occupied by Cannon Street station, and it has been suggested it was originally some sort of monument erected in the palace forecourt.

On the other hand, it also stands at the centre of the grid of new streets laid out after King Alfred re-established London in 886, after Viking attacks had destroyed the original Saxon town, so it may have served some significant function for late Saxon Londoners. And it must be at this period that it received its singular name. We first read of London Stone in a document dated between 1098 and 1108, a list of London properties belonging to Canterbury Cathedral. It is the 'address' of one 'Eadwaker aet lundene stane' who had given property to the cathedral. And it is usually in this sense, as a location or neighbourhood, that it is mentioned in medieval documents. The first mayor, Henry Fitz Ailwin – son of Ailwin or Aethelwine 'of London Stone' – lived in a house on the north side of St Swithin's church.

London Stone entered national history briefly in the summer of 1450, when John or Jack Cade, leader of the Kentish rebellion against the corrupt government of Henry VI, entered London and, striking London Stone with his sword, claimed in the name of Mortimer, his adopted nom-de-guerre, to be 'lord of this city'. There is no recorded precedent for his action, and contemporary chroniclers were at a loss as to its significance. Accounts even differ as to when it occurred – when Cade first entered the city on Friday 3 July, or the following day.

Unfortunately we know the story best from Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part 2* – in which Cade seats himself on the stone as on a throne, issues proclamations, and passes swift judgement on the first unfortunate man to offend him. This is great theatre; it is also fiction – but it has led to the belief that London Stone was traditionally used for such purposes. Shakespeare's inventive genius has a lot to answer for.

In the 16th and 17th centuries London Stone was one of the tourist sights of London. John Stow provides our first description of it, in his *Survey of London* (1598): 'a great stone called London Stone, fixed in the ground very deep, fastened with bars of iron'. It seems to have been damaged by the Great Fire of 1666, which destroyed all the surrounding buildings, including St Swithin's church. By 1720 what was left of the stone was protected by a small stone cupola built over it, and in 1742 moved as a traffic hazard, to be placed, still within its protective cupola, on the north side of the street against the door of the new Wren church of St Swithin. Two further moves, in 1798 and in about 1828, placed it eventually where it was to remain for more than 100 years, built into the middle of the church's south wall. The building of the Metropolitan District Railway along Cannon Street by the cut-and-cover technique in 1884 did not directly affect London Stone or the church – but, excavated to a depth of 33 feet, the works would have totally removed any trace in the ground of the stone's original location. The Wren church was gutted by bombing in the Second World War, but the walls were left standing and London Stone remained in place until the ruins were finally demolished in 1961, when the stone was set into the wall of the new office building erected on the site.

Speculation about London Stone's origin and significance began at least as early as the 16th century. John Stow refused to offer his own opinion, but his younger friend William Camden, author of the great historical, archaeological and topographical description of Britain, published in Latin in 1586 under the title *Britannia*, provided a suitably classical hypothesis – it was a Roman 'milliarium', the central milestone from which distances in the Roman province of Britain were measured. Camden's reputation ensured that this identification was accepted by later antiquarian authors, and it is still quoted today – although there is no evidence to support it.

But John Strype, in his 1720 updated edition of John Stow's *Survey of London*, seems to have been the first to offer the alternative proposal (also still popular) that it was 'an Object, or Monument, of Heathen Worship' erected by the Druids. Thus, later, London Stone was to play an important but not always consistent role in the visionary works of William Blake, prominent among them being its identification as an altar stone upon which Druids carried out bloody sacrifices.

By the end of the 18th century romantic writers were beginning to suggest a relationship between the survival of London Stone and the well-being of London itself – like the legendary palladium, the statue of Pallas Athene that protected the city of Troy. So Thomas Pennant, in a history of London published in the 1790s, commented 'it seems preserved like the Palladium of the city...'.

This concept received a great boost from the apparent discovery of an 'ancient saying' – 'So long as the Stone of Brutus is safe, so long will London flourish'. This first appeared in print in an article in the periodical *Notes and Queries* in 1862 – apparently no previous writer was aware of it. The article is headed, misleadingly, 'Stonehenge', and retails a supposed legend that Brutus of Troy, who first founded London as *Troia Nova* (a story derived ultimately from the 12th-century *History of the Kings of Britain* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, pseudo-historian and arch-inventor of legends), brought the stone from Troy and erected it as an altar in a temple of Diana, and that the ancient kings of Britain had sworn their oaths upon it. Again, no other author had claimed to know this legend.

The contributor to *Notes and Queries* quotes not just the 'Stone of Brutus' saying, but the supposed Welsh original of which it purports to be just a translation – 'Tra maen Prydain, Tra lled Llyndain'.

The article is signed with the pseudonym 'Mor Merrion'. This is actually a printer's error for Welsh 'Môr Meirion', 'Morgan of Merioneth', the bardic name adopted by the Rev. Richard Williams Morgan, one of the organizers of the great Llangollen eisteddfod of 1858. Morgan was a voluble campaigner for the use of the Welsh language in Welsh schools and churches, and a firm believer in the superiority of the Welsh race over the Anglo-Saxons in every way. In 1857 he had written a book *The British Kymry, or Britons of Cambria*, in which he accepted as historical fact the story of Brutus and the Trojan origins of the British race – and it is in this context that he first claimed that Brutus had brought London Stone, the plinth of the original Trojan palladium, to Britain from Troy. There can be no doubt that this story and the Welsh and English sayings added in his 1862 article are all his own invention. Sadly, though the Welsh version is forgotten, the English version is still quoted as if it were an authentic 'medieval proverb'.

In the late 19th century the folklorist George Laurence Gomme (also the first clerk to the fledgling London County Council, later knighted for his work in local government), working within the then favoured folkloric approach known as the 'doctrine of survival', put forward his opinion that London Stone was London's 'fetish stone': 'In early Aryan days, when a village was first established, a stone was set up. To this stone the head man of the village made an offering once a year. Of the many traces of this custom in England I will not speak here, but of its survival in London municipal custom there exists some curious evidence accidentally preserved, and it relates to London Stone.'

This authoritative statement by a well-respected folklorist had a great influence on other writers. In 1937 another folklorist, Lewis Spence, published a book on *Legendary London*, in which he combined a summary of the archaeological evidence for the prehistory and early development of London with his own interpretation of the 'Brutus' legend as a traditional memory of actual historic events. And in so doing he combined Gomme's 'fetish stone' with Morgan's 'Stone of Brutus'.

It is this combined 'myth' of London Stone as sacred foundation stone, central to London's existence, and site of authority and justice, that, directly or indirectly, has influenced subsequent writers, from geomantic authors who identify it as a 'mark stone' on several leylines or as London's 'omphalos', to those like Iain Sinclair, working in the fashionable 'psychogeographical' school of metropolitan literature, for whom its removal from its original location has violated the integrity of the City's sacred geometry.

The myth of London Stone continues to develop. Two 'new' legends – that it was the stone from which King Arthur pulled the sword Excalibur, and that the great 16th-century student of the occult, Dr John Dee, believed London Stone had special powers – seem both to have first been aired on a BBC-sponsored website in 2002.

An admission that we don't know the origin of London Stone (and probably never will) satisfies nobody – hence the apparent desire for a mythology that lends it great antiquity and an even greater symbolic role. The significance of London Stone, and the importance of

taking measures for its preservation, depend not on its actual origin and original function (or functions, for its role in Saxon London was probably different from any it may have first played in Roman Londinium) but on the reputation it has acquired over the years since. London Stone is truly famous just for being famous.

For further details of the history and mythology of London Stone see the following articles, which give full references to all the sources cited here:

John Clark 'Jack Cade at London Stone' in *Transactions of London and Middlesex Archaeological Society* 58 (2007) 169-89

John Clark 'London Stone: Stone of Brutus or fetish stone – making the myth' in *Folklore* 121:1 (2010) 38-60