

Gloucester was founded by the Romans as a legionary fortress in the first century AD. They first established at Kingsholm in about 47AD, before moving to what is now the city centre in about 67AD. The fortress was some 400 x 500m. It extended 400m from here over the cross and down to Berkeley Street, and 500m from Parliament Street to St Aldate Street. We are in the middle of the south-eastern side. It was bounded initially by an earth rampart, and you are now standing in the middle of this. This was faced in turf, and reinforced internally by a mattress of oak or willow branches, laid in horizontal layers at 2ft vertical intervals, to enable the sides to be built very steep. These are represented by the black strips on the floor ●. This was an early form of reinforced earth, a technique used widely nowadays in embankment construction.

Just here the rear part of this rampart was cut into to build a house, in which we are now standing.

The army left Gloucester about 75AD, moving on to establish another fortress at Caerleon, but not before facing the wall in stone. Between 96 and 98 AD the Emperor Nerva re-founded Gloucester, or Glevum as it was then known, as a colonia for retired legionaries. By about 100 AD the city walls were rebuilt entirely in stone, with stone gates. This was partly rebuilt a number of times, and fully in the 3rd century. Facing us as we enter is the back of the 3rd century wall. This face would never have been visible, being concealed by the earth rampart. The wall is built in squared rubble in roughly alternating layers of cream oolite from the Cotswold, and blue lias limestone from the Severn Vale. It contains some re-used stones ●●. One highly polished, one has a drafted (rebated and dressed) edge ●, and one, ● has a recessed panel which would have interlocked to fit tightly with its neighbour.

The length of wall to the right ● in much larger and well-dressed blocks of squared oolite, is part of the fourth century rebuild which extends to the East Gate and some 200 – 300m beyond. ● This was founded on piles of tapered oak, driven into the Charmouth Mudstone (Lower Lias Clay), seen here exposed in the excavation for Boots' basement. It is possible that this was a rebuild of a length of wall which had previously been damaged and moved forward by a ground failure into the ditch. Unlike the earlier wall it was built on piled foundations.

Round to the far side, we see ● the 13th century bastion, built for additional defence during the Barons' Wars in about 1250. A bastion is a semicircular tower against the outer face of the wall, to give the archers a full view along the face of the wall, as well as to provide a base for defensive artillery. This one is built in roughly coursed lias limestone and rubble of oolitic limestone from the Cotswolds. ● An offset about 80cm above the floor of the chamber shows the ground level at the time.

Round the far end of the bastion ● we return to the face of the 4th century wall, where we see the blocks fitted tightly together, with a deep chamfer and hairline joints. These may have alternately raised and recessed interlocking panels on their contiguous faces.

The walls were re-used in the 8th and 9th centuries for defence when Gloucester became an important Saxon city. In the later Middle Ages they were further repaired and reinforced and were vital to the defence of the city in 1643 during the Siege of Gloucester in the Civil War.

This length of wall and bastion were discovered in an archaeological dig in 1969 prior to the King's Square redevelopment which included the shopping arcade. An enclosed chamber was constructed which was open to the public until 1990, when it was closed after a breakdown of the pump, and it has remained flooded until last

year, when the owners were persuaded to replace the pumps. The lighting has since been improved, and it is hoped improved ventilation will be installed.

Why is there a taper in the back face of the wall between the 3rd and 4th century lengths, with a lintel over it?

At the end of the 1st century the clay rampart between here and the East Gate was removed and replaced by a masonry wall only 1.3m thick, probably built in high quality ashlar*, as a "wing wall" to the East Gate. Nothing now remains of that wall. When the 3rd century wall we now see was built, it was about 1.9m thick, and built with its front face flush with the thinner wall, the back face being tapered down to 1.3m so as to match it.

When the thinner 1st century wall was replaced in the 4th century by a thicker wall, also in ashlar, (probably much of it re-used from the thinner wall) its rear face was brought up to the taper where it stopped abruptly, leaving a step in the back face. Subsequent courses of the wall, in more roughly dressed stone, were supported on a lintel to span the narrower tapered length.

*ashlar is masonry squared and dressed to a high standard, with smooth finish and close-fitting joints.

Ted Wilson, July 2017

(NB The symbol ● indicates a location to show.)

King's Walk Bastion

This is a length of the Roman city wall, dating from about 300AD, with another medieval bastion. It is a continuation of the Roman wall seen in the Eastgate viewing chamber beneath the entrance to Boots. It is accessed from the King's Walk shopping arcade.

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Ted Wilson
Last update 3.6.2016

(Phil's notes Sep 2016)

The Bastion is one of at least three towers that were added to the eastern defensive wall of Gloucester in the 13th century. These semi-circular towers gave the defenders a clear line of sight along the outer face of the wall as well as providing a platform for defensive artillery.

On February 20th 1241 "King Henry III granted to Henry, son of Richard Burgess, a little tower on the east of the town at a rent of 6 pence for him to dwell in". His new home may well have been in the one here. However there was another bastion built to the south of the East Gate approximately between the Museum of Gloucester and Boots.

A third tower was built at the corner of Parliament Street and Brunswick Road. This is probably the “turret of the King’s Wall” where the Greyfriars established a school of theology in 1246.

The defences of Gloucester were significantly improved during the 13th century. The East Gate was rebuilt with near-circular towers either side of the entrance way, and the Almersham Postern Gate was created at the north eastern corner of the wall about 1252. The Outer North Gate was also built around this time and the River Twyver between it and the Postern Gate was used as a defensive line. This probably had an earthen rampart on the bank towards the town. From the Outer North Gate the Twyver ran westwards towards the existing Alvin Gate, at the junction of Hare Lane and St Catherine Street. This would have provided a further outer defensive line which extended westwards to the now vanished third arm of the River Severn.

Gloucester’s strategic importance was at its greatest in the years leading up to and during the Barons War of 1263-5. Although the city and castle changed hands more than once during this period it seem that the town was assaulted by force on only one occasion when the precinct wall of St Peter’s Abbey was breached on its northern side.

A new ditch was dug between the South Gate and the Severn in 1265 involving the demolition of some houses in that area.

The Bastion was revealed during excavations in 1969.

The Roman stone wall was added to the earth and timber rampart of the fortress about AD 87-8 and built to a height of 17 feet or so. The wall was modified and heightened several times during the Roman period and rectangular interval towers were added to the inner face. The wall was further modified and repaired during the medieval period.

THE KING'S WALK BASTION

GLOUCESTER

