

The Romano-British Settlement at Putney

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PUTNEY HAS AN advantage over other areas alongside the Thames in that apart from the City, it is the only place downstream of Richmond where the river touches the slopes of the gravel terraces. The locality has therefore the facility of easy communications by river without the threat of flooding. In addition there is a fertile light brown loam overlying the sand and gravel.

Professor Grimes has located the prehistoric trackway 'Old Street' as crossing the Thames at Putney¹ and it is not surprising that Neolithic man settled there². Iron Age material includes a few sherds from excavations and, from the foreshore, a piece of chariot equipment³; a mile to the south Caesar's Camp (Iron Age A) lies on the edge of Wimbledon Common⁴.

On a map the big loop of the Thames invites a crossing at Putney—the gravels of the south bank came down to the water's edge, whilst in Fulham (after the manner of City/Southwark) there is a sand bank. In the post-Roman period the importance of the Putney crossing is shown from a reference to a ferry in the Domesday Book⁵, General Fairfax building a bridge of boats during the Civil War⁶ and the first bridge across the Lower Thames outside the City being built in 1729⁷. Even today Putney Bridge

carries more traffic than any other London bridge.

The actual site of the ancient crossing place is not known, but traditionally the later ferry crossing is placed 100 yards downstream from the present bridge—Brewhouse Street on the south bank to Fulham High Street area on the north. (Fig. 3).

The re-entrant which is now Putney High Street, undoubtedly contained a stream in the Roman period—today is it culverted.

Origin

The suggestion has already been made that the moat around Fulham Palace on the north bank may owe its origin to a camp built by Aulus Plautius as a ford-head while waiting for the arrival of Claudius⁸. The most important Roman find from the area is the 1st century legionary sword with a highly decorative scabbard dredged out of the Thames in 1846; it is now in the British Museum⁹. Nothing else of a military nature has been found.

Several 1st century ditches running at right angles have been found suggesting some form of land apportionment; the ditches have been recut on one occasion. The pottery sherds from the ditches display Belgic-derived characteristics but it has not been possible to narrow down the dating. A two-vessel cremation burial group of a child (see front cover) is of the same sort of date.

A considerable amount of early pottery has been found including a stamped piece of Samian (OFBASSI—A.D.40-70). However, the earliest coin of the 30 found over the last ten years is of Vespasian or Titus (A.D.68-81). One pit has been found



Fig. 1. Two typical Roman ditches which have been cut into the natural sand, found on a recent rescue excavation.

(Photo: N. Farrant)

1. W. F. Grimes, *The Excavation of Roman and Mediaeval London* (1968) 44-6.
2. Stan Warren, "Neolithic Putney" *London Archaeol.* 1 No. 12 (1972) 276-9.
3. British Museum: *Guide to Early Iron Age Antiquities* (1925) 147. (B.M. 1863.9—17.1).
4. *Archaeol J* 102 (1945).
5. Public Record Office—Putney on fol. 30b.
6. *Victoria County History—Surrey* 1 409, 4 79.
7. Local Act 12 Geo. 1 Cap 36 (1726).
8. Keith Whitehouse, 'Early Fulham' *London Archaeol.* 1 No. 15 (1972) 346.
9. British Museum: *Antiquities of Roman Britain* (1958) 70-1 (B.M. 1883.4—7.1)

Fig. 2. Thin-walled globular beaker in black polished brown ware; parallels at Colchester are copies of Gallo-Belgic beakers. (C. F. C. Hawkes and M. R. Hull *Camulodunum*. Pl. LVIII No. 92b)

(Photo: Peter Atkins)



containing a large quantity of burnt daub and a nearly complete pot which has close parallels in design, but not fabric, to early pottery at Colchester. (A.D. 10-65). See fig. 2.

Communications

Undoubtedly the Thames was used for communications, as it was in later times, but there is no direct evidence. Putney lies seemingly isolated in the wedge between the London/Staines Road and Stane Street, but there must have been connecting feeders.

During a trial excavation on a site to the south of the South Circular road and to the west of the High Street a short length of gravel metalling some seven feet wide was encountered. It appeared to be an east-west road with a ditch on its north (downhill) side. There was definite evidence of resurfacing and both surfaces, which were about 3in. thick, had wheel ruts with 4ft. 8in. centres. The Roman pottery on the site was not associated with the road, but any other dating would seem improbable. The excavation which was in a flower bed, could not be extended. It is perhaps worth noting that this road aligns with the 500 yard-long straight stretch of the South Circular east of the Putney High Street crossing—to the west, the South Circular 'floats' downhill. Two other sites on this alignment and one just off it have produced Roman material. The obvious theory is that this is a Roman east-west road joining up with Stane Street in the vicinity of the east end of Clap-

ham Common North Side.

A north-south gravel road extends for over 100ft. in the middle of the known settlement; its gravel varies from one to four inches thick and has a ragged width of 12 to 16ft. Modern disturbance is always down to the gravel surface and sometimes goes through it. The alignment is parallel with the High Street re-entrant but not with the 1st century boundary ditches already mentioned. The dateable material associated with the road is meagre and suggests at present a dating of the 2nd century.

Buildings

Building materials consist of daub, roughly squared (imported) flints, all manner of bricks and tile, including flue tiles and a few large red tesserae. The amount of material is not large, perhaps amounting to two or three hundredweight. Two at least of the brick fragments are wasters suggesting the possibility of local manufacture. An unstratified fragment of mosaic with seven tesserae along with two wall sherds of well-gritted mortaria were found in a garden half a mile south (uphill) of the main known concentration of the settlement. Unfortunately it has not been possible to firmly assign the mosaic to the Roman period.

Three hearths have been found and although there are nearby postholes, no detailed building plan can be substantiated; similarly a short shallow ditch terminating in a sump has some daub *in situ*

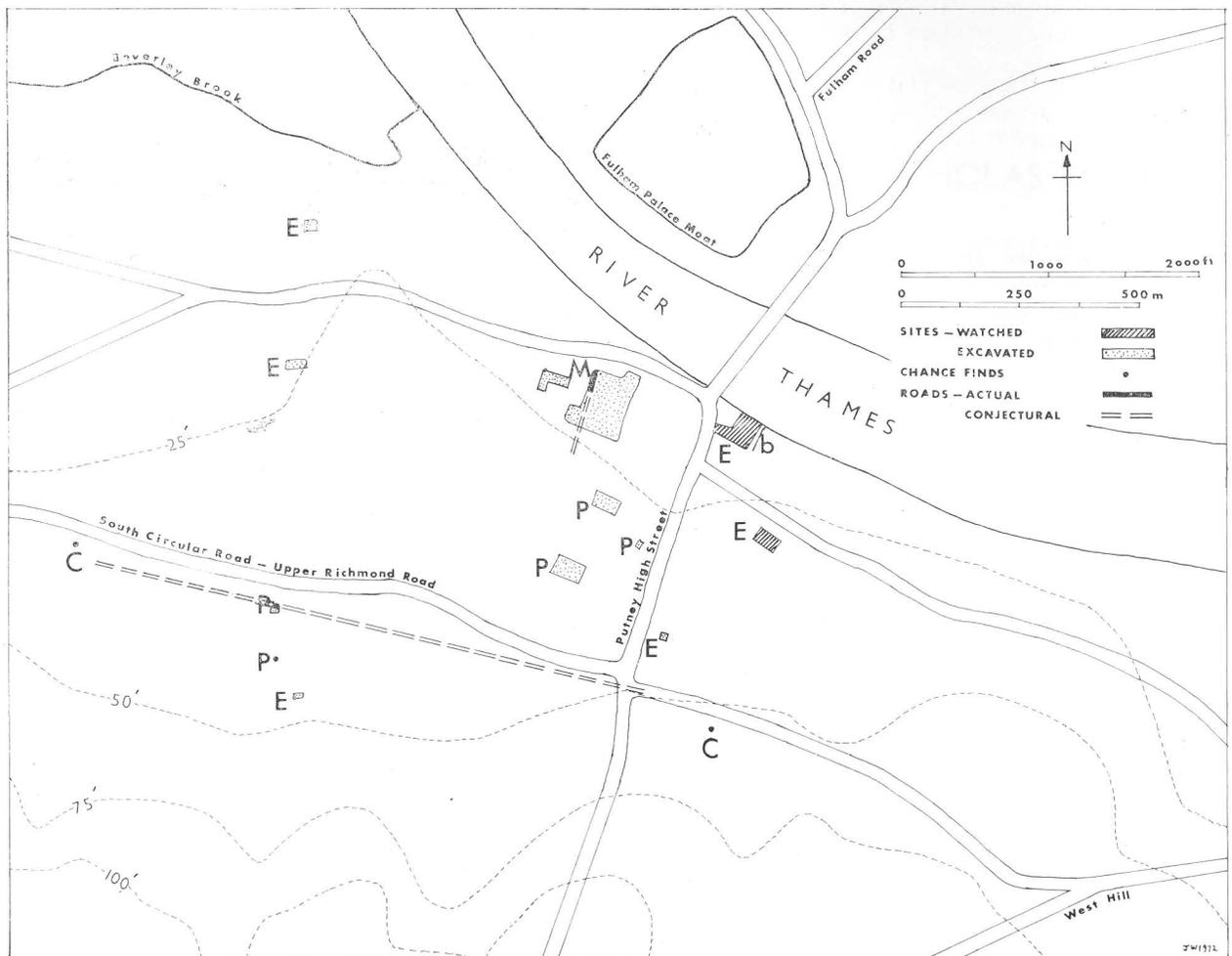


Fig. 3. Plan showing the extent of the archaeological work at Putney over the last two years. The biggest concentration of Roman material and features occurs in the main area of excavation (M); at a number of other sites (P) there has only been a very thin pottery scatter, while on others (E) no Roman material has been found; two chance finds of coins are shown (C). The traditional crossing point at Ervhouse Street is shown (b).

alongside. The general indication is that the buildings were rectangular.

Nature of the Settlement

Bones of ox, horse, sheep and pig give an indication of the animals husbanded by the settlement; in addition, red deer antler suggests hunting. Although there is no direct evidence, it would be fair to assume that there was cereal growing. The ubiquitous oyster shell also occurs and there has been one loom weight.

A pit containing over a hundredweight of iron ore slag indicates on-site processing and therefore presumably a degree of self-sufficiency for the settlement. The source of the ore presents a problem. There is local bog ore but the concentrations dis-

covered to date do not contain a high enough proportion of iron to be productive.

The main concentration of Roman material found so far lies close to the river to the west of Putney High Street (apart from one coin, nothing Roman has been discovered to the east). Three other sites between the concentration and the east-west road have produced a thin scatter of Roman pottery — spreading muck from middens on to arable land? To the west two sites which have been extensively dug, have not produced any Roman material whatever (see map). If the muck-spreading theory is accepted, then this area may have been pasture land—there was once a small stream running past the two sites.

There is no room to list or discuss the pottery and small finds but let it suffice that they include the

usual sort of range to be found on a Romano-British site. In all, four cremation burials are known from Putney.

The evidence suggests that Putney was farmed by either tenant farmers or small holders. However, over this statement hangs the query posed by the mosaic fragment—was there a villa 'on the hill'? Surplus agricultural produce (and fish)? was presumably marketed in *Londinium*, some eight miles away.

The End

Three coins date to the 370's and a fourth appears to be one of Arcadius (A.D. 395-408); some ribbed pottery supports the latter. There is certainly no known fact why the Putney settlement should not have continued into the 5th century, although at present the evidence for beyond A.D.370 must be regarded as fragile.

It is quite possible that occupation at Putney (and elsewhere in inner London) continued much longer. A group of pewter ingots found in the Thames on the Wandsworth/Battersea borders¹⁰ have been linked with Syagrius¹¹, self-styled governor of north Gaul until killed by Clovis, King of the Franks, in A.D.484. Evidence is now accumulating to confirm that a sub-Roman occupation of *Londinium* with some pretensions of civilisation continued to the end

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of the 5th century, i.e. into Arthurian times. If this should be so, then an economic hinterland of which Putney should logically form a part, would be needed to support the city. The ingots suggest a boat or wagon load coming to grief while proceeding to some unknown destination upstream in the third quarter of the 5th century.

Summary

A Romano-British settlement existed at Putney from the middle or late 1st century to the third or fourth quarter of the 4th century, possibly longer. The settlement's economy was based on mixed farming by tenants or small holders, although the possibility of a villa cannot yet be discarded. Although the settlement had good communications, there is a degree of self-sufficiency.

The importance of the Putney settlement lies not so much in itself, but in the logical implication that it was only one out of dozens in the area supplying the needs of *Londinium*. The number of facts are equalled by the number of questions and it is therefore important that archaeological work at Putney, most of it being rescue excavation, should continue for at least another decade.

Work is fairly well advanced on preparing material for publication but no final step in this direction can be taken until the last stage of the redevelopment area by the river is completed next year. Publication is expected to take place in the *Transactions* of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society. A number of interim reports and notes have appeared in the Wandsworth Historical Society's *Newsletter* and the *Wandsworth Historian*.

Acknowledgments

The main acknowledgement must be to the hundreds of volunteers who have directed, drawn, dug, processed and otherwise helped with the 15 excavations at Putney over the last decade—the majority have been members of Wandsworth Historical Society.

On behalf of the Society I should like to thank Norman Cook, formerly Director of Guildhall Museum, who gave the green light for the first excavation, and the other members of the Museum staff who have been most helpful; Wandsworth Borough Council, particularly the Architect's and Libraries Departments, for unfailing help in providing access to sites and facilities for displays of excavated materials; various owners/occupiers for allowing excavations: Mrs. M. Engert, Mr. J. Riley, Wandsworth Borough Council (9 sites), Messrs. Montague Burton Ltd., H. G. Fairweather Ltd., Kyle and Stewart Ltd. and F. Minter Ltd.

10. *Ibid* 46-7 (B.M. 1891.2—17.1).

11. Ralph Merrifield *Roman London* (1969) 200-1.