

ROMAN CAMDEN

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THE LONDON Borough of Camden was formed in 1965 by the amalgamation of the Metropolitan Boroughs of Hampstead, Holborn and St. Pancras, creating an administrative area within which it has been convenient to confine this study.

However, in any evaluation of the Roman remains within Camden, those in neighbouring Boroughs and in north London as a whole must be considered, together with the topography of this wider area.

Roman research in north London has long been neglected. Even the *Ordnance Survey Map of Roman Britain* (1956) shows a complete absence of Roman evidence in the area bounded by Watling Street, Ermine Street and the St. Albans to Colchester road, with the single exception of the well-established settlement of *Sulloniaca* on Brockley Hill.¹ In the text to the map, the Ordnance Survey stated: "The soil to the north of London is not very favourable to settlement, but equally unpromising areas elsewhere are not deserted in this way. Some kind of reserve attached to London seems to be indicated."

The distribution map of Roman finds (Fig. 1) should illustrate what an unjustified statement this now is, and that the lack of evidence is due to the lack of investigation. Probably there is much to find, if it is sought carefully and logically. The map shows over thirty Roman sites and finds in the London Boroughs of Barnet, Camden and part of Haringey, and this is only part of the allegedly barren area according to the Ordnance Survey map. In particular, mention should be made of the wealth of material that lies within the present area of the City of London, but outside the boundary of the Roman City. However, this article will deal only with those sites or finds from within the London Borough of Camden.

Topography is all too often forgotten by archaeologists in the heavily populated areas of Greater London. When assessing and theorising about the Roman occupation of north London, it is very important to remember the northern ridge running from Brockley Hill towards Enfield, on which Totteridge now stands, the Hampstead and Highgate ridge leading to Muswell Hill, and the hill of Hen-

don in between these two ridges. Another important feature, also often forgotten when considering the Roman period, is the River Fleet, arising, as it still does, on Hampstead Heath, north of the two artificial chains of the Hampstead and Highgate Ponds. More will be said of the River Fleet, but as it was navigable up to Kentish Town in the early 19th century, one can postulate that it was of importance in Roman times.

Should it appear that this paper is only a gazetteer of Roman finds, it must be remembered that this research represents, as far as can be ascertained, the first systematic study of the Roman evidence within the London Borough of Camden. Regrettably as with most of north London, the evidence is frequently hidden in obscure, incomplete references, with poor or quite absent location details. After listing the known Roman finds, an attempt will be made to place them in the wider and more realistic concept of Roman north London. The numbers which appear in the text after each Camden find refer to the map (Fig. 1).

North Camden

Starting at the north-western end of the Hampstead and Highgate ridge, a portion of late 3rd-early 4th century A.D. mortarium rim (1) of pink and grey fabric was found in 1968 in a garden at the junction of Finchley Road and Briardale Gardens, right on the northern boundary of the Borough.²

It is significant that the Hampstead and Highgate ridge leading to Muswell Hill is very rich in Roman material once it reaches Haringey. These finds, not considered in detail here, include the Roman pottery factory in Highgate Wood, a large Treasure Trove hoard from Cranley Gardens and several other finds of Roman pottery.³ It is probably due to the lack of systematic searching that the rest of this ridge, and particularly the Camden portion, is without other evidence, except for two finds in the region of Well Walk in Hampstead. The earliest of these is a burial (2) found in 1774 on a site now considered to be in the vicinity of the present Gainsborough Gardens.⁴ The find consisted of several cinery urns, pottery and lamps, and later sources

2. Unpublished. Personal communication from the owner.

3. C. Neuburg, "The Cranley Gardens Hoard." *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 23 (1972) 165.

4. *Gentleman's Magazine* (1779) 169.

*Based on a paper presented at the Archaeological Symposium held by Camden History Society on the 6th and 7th November, 1971.

1. *Ordnance Survey Map of Roman Britain* 3rd Edition (1956) 12.

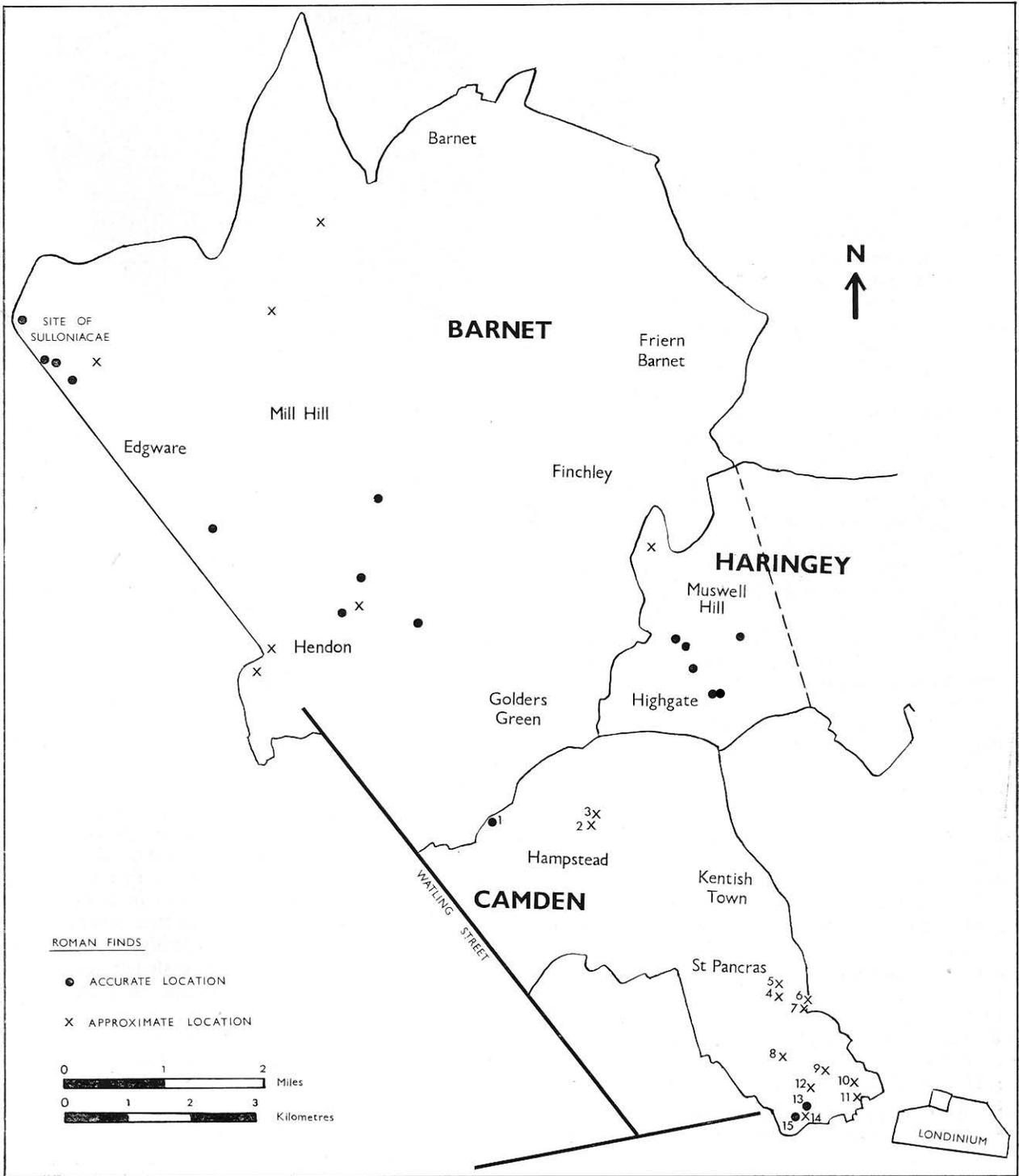


Fig. 1. Map showing distribution of Roman finds

have suggested a date of about A.D.100 for the group.⁵ Regrettably the whereabouts of these items now is unknown, as is so often the case with finds of any period. In 1882 a three-line entry in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* drew attention to two coins, one of Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 161–180) and one of Victorinus (A.D. 268–270), having been found on the Heath near Well Walk (3).⁶ Unfortunately there is no further information about this discovery, but the impression is that these two coins and the burial mentioned above are in close proximity.

The Kings Cross Area

Moving south through the borough, there is no further Roman evidence until the Kings Cross area. Here one must mention a site that tradition has long held to be Roman, but for which there is little, if any evidence. The antiquarian, William Stukeley (1687–1765) is often referred to as the founder of British field archaeology, but as he reached middle age, his careful fieldwork tended to get obscured by his fanciful theories. One of his major ‘discoveries’ was his ‘Caesar’s Camp,’ an earthwork allegedly near St. Pancras. From all Stukeley’s fantasies, it is possible, however, to elicit a few facts, but whether these really indicate a Roman origin is difficult to say, Stukeley gave many talks and published many plans of the layout of the Camp as he imagined it. However, there is one drawing, made shortly before his death, that remained unpublished until 1968.⁷ This drawing appears to show the features actually discernable on the ground and leaves out most of the fanciful ideas. It shows two rectangular earthworks, one lying under what is now St. Pancras Goods Yard (4) and the other under the gardens near St. Pancras Church (5). There can be little doubt that these earthworks existed, but their date and usage is uncertain. It has been conjectured, for example, that they were Civil War defences, but this idea, along with the Roman possibilities, remains unproven.

For the sake of clarity and completeness, a third supposedly Roman earthwork must be mentioned, even though it is outside Camden. It is shown on a map by Reginald Smith, and lies in the vicinity of the present Barnsbury Park.⁸ This site is also surrounded by theories, but Roman pottery is at least alleged to have been found there, although it is now lost.

However, the problems surrounding these earth-

5. R. A. Smith, “Roman Roads and the distribution of Saxon Churches in London” *Archaeologia* 68 (1916–17) 243.
6. *J. Brit Archaeol Ass* 38 (1882) 216.
7. F. Celoria, “Eighteenth Century Fieldwork in London and Middlesex; some unpublished drawings by William



Fig. 2. Part of a gravestone (6) found in 1842 at Battle Bridge

(Photo: British Museum)

works are further confused by an exhibit in the Library of Durham Cathedral;⁹ this consists of two keys and a spur. These keys appear much more medieval than Roman, but in the caption they are described as having been found on the site of a ‘Roman Camp’ between Holloway and Islington near to Kings Cross. However, these keys need not necessarily disprove a Roman date for the site. Irrespective of their period, if these items came from between Holloway and Islington, that would indicate that they came from the Barnsbury earthwork. However, as the caption states they were found near Kings Cross, thus implicating the Kings Cross earthwork, the situation is complicated further.

The Kings Cross area is rich in traditional theories and allegations of Roman material. A typical example is an 18th century legend that an elephant skeleton, found in a field near St. Pancras Workhouse, was killed there by Britons in a fight with the Roman invaders.¹⁰ There are two other finds in the neighbourhood of Battle Bridge (now Kings Cross), both of which are surrounded by confusion.

Firstly, in 1842, at Battle Bridge on the east side of Maiden Lane (now York Way), part of a gravestone was found (6), bearing an inscription quoted as being to a soldier of the 20th Legion (Fig. 2).¹¹ There is some doubt as to the real origin of this

Stukeley.” *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 22 (1968) 23.

8. R. A. Smith (1916) *Op Cit* in note 5,248
9. Personal communication from the Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral.
10. W. Hone, *The Table Book* (1827) 40.
11. R. A. Smith (1916) *Op Cit* in note 5,247.

slab, as it was discovered while serving as a paving stone in front of a door. The other find at Battle Bridge was made in 1845 when, during construction of houses in Maiden Lane, an urn, supposedly of iron, was discovered containing coins of Constantine (7)¹². Unfortunately, no further information has yet been traced.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that six Roman silver coins were found in a window-box in St. Pancras in 1954.¹³ This find is mentioned only because the soil used in the box may have been of local origin, though this seems impossible to verify.

South Camden

In Tavistock Square, in 1924, 700 Roman copper coins (8) were found during the construction of a hotel.¹⁴ This hoard appears to be of mid-4th century date, and some, but by no means all of the coins are in the British Museum. The next find is also in the reserve collection of the British Museum, and came from somewhere in Lambs Conduit Street. This is a sculptured Roman gravestone (9) found in 1911, although no accurate location details are available (Fig. 3).¹⁵

A rather vague reference to a Roman burial from the area of Millman Street, adjoining Lambs Conduit Street, should also be mentioned. Unfortunately all attempts to verify this have so far failed, and it must be considered as a possible duplication of the Lambs Conduit Street find.

The southern end of Camden is by far the richest area as regards Roman remains. This is partly to be expected, because the line of a Roman road runs along the southern boundary of the Borough, aligned on the present Oxford Street. It is important also to bear in mind that the southern tip of the borough is only about half a mile from the boundary of the Roman City of London. The wealth of material from the intervening area cannot be dealt with here in detail, but one should remember that the neighbourhood of Holborn Viaduct, Holborn Hill, Shoe Lane, Newgate and the site of the old Fleet Bridge, are all rich in Roman finds such as pottery and burials. A map in the previously mentioned article by Reginald Smith on the correlation between the line of Roman roads and the sites of Saxon churches, shows some of the then known finds from this area. The nearest of these to the borough came to light on the site of St. Andrew's Church, Holborn Circus, when work was being carried out on this originally Saxon church in the 19th century. A number of burials were found, with



Fig. 3. Gravestone (9) found in 1911 near Lambs Conduit Street

(Photo: British Museum)

associated pottery, all of a 1st century date.¹⁶

In the collection of the Guildhall Museum, are a number of items of Roman pottery discovered during the 19th century and simply catalogued as coming from Holborn.¹⁷ These are all late 1st century to early 2nd century in date and it is unclear whether they originate from inside or outside the boundaries of Camden.

Within the south-eastern corner of Camden was another burial, along the line of the westward Roman road. This consisted of a cinery urn (11) with associated bones, found on the site of the Birkbeck Bank, opposite Grays Inn Road, in 1905.¹⁸ The urn, now in the British Museum, is dark-grey

12. *Old and New London* 2 (c1880) 278.

13. *Numis Chron* 19 (1959) 15.

14. *Numis Chron* 5 () 398.

15. British Museum, Department of Prehistoric and Roman-British Antiquities. Register No. 1911.7-17.2.

16. *Royal Commission of Historical Monuments (England) and Inventory of the Historical Monuments in London, Vol. 3 Roman London*. HMSO (1928) 165.

17. Guildhall Museum, London. Accession numbers 2759, 2760, 2856, 2902, 3106.

18. *R.C.H.M. Op Cit* in note 16, 165.

and lattice patterned, dating to the middle of the 2nd century, and was found during the demolition of Southampton Buildings. Also in the same area the of Grays Inn Road, two further burial urns (10) were found in 1913.¹⁹ The precise location is unknown, but it is widely believed that they come from the Holborn end of the Grays Inn Road. Both urns are in the London Museum and are considered to date between A.D. 50-100; one is smooth grey lattice-patterned ware, and the other a buffware.

Further westward, a group of four finds is situated in relation to the line of the Roman forerunner of Oxford Street. These are a burial from Southampton Row (12), part of a tombstone from the vicinity of Barter Street (13), a burial from Endell Street (15), and an oolite figure from Drury Lane (14). The precise location of the burial in Southampton Row is uncertain, but it consisted of a grey-ware urn with low-relief rustication decoration, containing burnt bones.²⁰ It is now in the London Museum. In 1961, part of a Roman tombstone was found on the site of a new office block being constructed between Barter Street, Bloomsbury Court and High Holborn.²¹ The piece was not *in situ* and lay 25 feet below the present road surface in the backfill of a sewer trench; it is now in the British Museum. Its dedication is to a Roman born in Colchester, and the inscription states that his name was Gaius Pomponius Valens (Fig. 4).

At the north end of Endell Street, a Roman burial was found shortly before 1864.²² It consisted of burnt bones and two coins of Vespasian, enclosed in an eight inch high cylindrical lead cist (Fig. 5); this, too, is in the British Museum. The last find of this group is an oolite figure, supposedly of the Greek god Atys, found somewhere in Drury Lane.²³ It is not clear whether the find-spot is in the Cam-



Fig. 4. Part of gravestone (13) from the Barter Street area

(Photo: British Museum)



Fig. 5. Lead burial cist from Endell Street

(Photo: British Museum)

den or the Westminster portion of Drury Lane. The disposal of this find is reported as being the British Museum, but so far, attempts to trace it there have failed.

Discussion of the distribution of Roman evidence

The Roman remains of Camden can be divided roughly into three groups: the Hampstead group, the southern group (mainly associated with the westward Roman road line across the south end of Camden), and a Kings Cross group. Unfortunately, there are insufficient remains to suggest centres of occupation, although the area of the Hampstead and Highgate ridge, with the industrial complex at the eastern end, and the southern end of the Borough are strong circumstantial possibilities. The ridge leading from Hampstead to Highgate and Muswell Hill is likely to hold much more evidence of Roman occupation and will, it is hoped, turn out to be the richest Roman area between the City and the Brockley Hill settlement on the route to St. Albans. It is felt that there may be a road along this ridge, because the Briardale Gardens find is late and also some of the finds from Highgate include

19. *R.C.H.M. Op Cit* in note 16, 165.

20. *R.C.H.M. Op Cit* in note 16, 165.

21. *Antiq J* 47 (1963) 123-8.

22. *Proc Soc Antiq* (2nd Series) 2 376.

23. J. Toynbee, *Art in Britain under the Romans* (1964) 93.

3rd and 4th century items. If a road does not cross the ridge, then a road aligned north-south from the City to the Highgate area is likely. The major Roman pottery factory in Highgate Wood alone justifies a road along which its goods could be transported. A number of road lines have been suggested running out of the Roman City to serve the Camden and Haringey areas, but none has yet proved convincingly.

There is the Viatores suggested route No. 220, considered to run from Cripplegate via Islington, Highbury and Wood Green to Stevenage.²⁴ Although proven near Potters Bar, there is no archaeological evidence for it in the north London area. The second possible line to which much support is given is that from the City via Maiden Lane (now York Way and Brecknock Road) and Dartmouth Park Hill. The gravestone (6) and the urn containing coins (7), lend weight to this line, which also aligns well with the finds in the Highgate and Muswell Hill area.²⁵ A recent pottery find in Southward Lawn Road is also close to this alignment.²⁶ It should be stressed that although this alignment traverses Camden, there is as yet no archaeological evidence of its existence.

The Viatores route No. 167 is considered to run from St. Albans to London via Mill Hill and Hampstead.²⁷ Research carried out in 1967 and 1968 casts considerable doubt on the postulated road south of Golders Green, so a route through Camden has yet to be proved.²⁸ In 1916 a further route was suggested by Reginald Smith running along the line of the present East Heath Road.²⁹ Another suggested line, that could serve Camden,

Highgate and Muswell Hill, was put forward by Norden (1593) who described 'an old and ancient highway to High Barnet', via Gray's Inn, Crouch End, Muswell Hill and Whetstone.³⁰ There is, however, no archaeological evidence for this route either.

The finding of a definite Roman road line within Camden may open up many avenues of research and answer many questions about Roman occupation in the area. There may have been a road from the pottery factory in Highgate Wood to some convenient point on the River Fleet, so that pottery products could be transported by boat. The river would have been of importance in Roman times, and occupation may well be found along its original line. One cannot predict how far towards its source occupation might be found but it should be born in mind that where both sources meet, the river is quoted as being 65 feet wide at flood in 1826, and an anchor was found nearby in Kentish Town.³¹ Higher up, where it crosses Highgate Road, the river was 13 feet wide in 1825. Should a road run northwards from the City, it is felt that it would run on the east side of the Fleet valley to the Highgate and Muswell Hill ridge, without having to cross the valley itself. However, Battle Bridge (near Kings Cross) has long been held as a traditional crossing point of the river Fleet.

Patient research, chance finds and excavation may all help to build up a better picture of Roman north London. Then, when the next edition of the *Ordnance Survey map of Roman Britain* is published, Camden, as well as the other north London boroughs, will not look as barren as it does on the present edition.

24. Viatores. *Roman Roads in the South East Midlands* (1964) 165.
 25. C. Neuburg, *Op Cit* in note 3, 169.
 26. J. Barrett et al. Roman Pottery found at 37 Southwood Lawn Road, Highgate Village, *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 23 (1972) 171.

27. Viatores *Op Cit* in note 24, 117.
 28. B. Robertson, "An investigation of Roman Road Number 167" *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 22 (1970) 10.
 29. R. A. Smith (1916) *Op Cit* in note 5, 245.
 30. Norden, *Speculum Britanniae* (1593).
 31. N. Barton *The Lost Rivers of London* (1962) 27.

Excavations

City, by Guildhall Museum, Department of Urban Archaeology. A series of long term excavations. Enquiries to Brian Hobley, Chief Urban Archaeologist, Guildhall Museum, 55 Basinghall Street, E.C.2 (01-606 3030, ext. 2217).

Brentford, by the West London Archaeological Field Group. At the rear of 232 Brentford High Street (junction with St. Paul's Road). Experience not necessary. This site is adjacent to a site excavated 1970-1972. Enquiries to Alison Laws, London Museum, Kensington, W.8 (01-937 9816).

Egham, by Surrey Archaeological Society Motorway Rescue Group. Enquiries to Bernard Johnson, S.A.E.C., Montague Chambers, Montague Close, S.E.1 (01-407 1989).

Hendon, by Hendon and District Archaeological Society. Several sites in the coming months. Enquiries to Mrs. B. Grafton Green, 88 Temple Fortune Lane, NW11 7TX (01-455 9040).

Kingston, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in town centre. Further enquiries to Marion Smith, Kingston Museum, Fairfield Road, Kingston (01-546 5386).

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