

# Letters

## FORDING THE THAMES

NICHOLAS FUENTES in his article 'Of Castles and elephants', *LA* 5 no. 4 (1985) has put forward an ingenious theory for the site of an early Roman camp in the Elephant and Castle area. Such a camp would be well placed to control the south bank of the Thames and the approach to London. There seems however no evidence that it was built during the Plautian invasion campaign. It could just as well belong to the period c 50 AD when it is now agreed *Londinium* was built. The Westminster fording point is also mentioned, but again there is no evidence of any early settlement: the few Romano-British finds from Westminster are neither military nor Claudian.

The description by Cassius Dio of how Claudius and Aulus Plautius crossed the Thames concerns both a fording point where the main body of the army crossed, and a bridge upstream where a few men crossed. If however the ford was at Westminster and the bridge was near the present London Bridge, then the use of the hazardous ford seems an unnecessary procedure for an army heading east to *Camulodunum*. Why not all use the bridge?

Dio describes the crossing point as "near where the Thames empties into the ocean and at flood tide forms a lake". The Romans had landed at Richborough and fought a battle at the Medway crossing against Britons commanded by Togodumnus and Caratacus, leaders whose main territory was north of the Thames but were here evidently fighting on the south bank. It is just beyond the Medway travelling westward that the river opens into the sea and where an accumulation of silts is to be expected, forming a 'bar' behind which could be found such a lake as Dio describes. There is a high point at Higham with less marsh than further upstream and Tilbury is on the opposite bank. A ferry was operating at this point until recently. Straight roads on both banks lead to the ferry landing points and the ferry was almost certainly in use in the medieval period and probably during the Anglo-Saxon period. In the drier conditions of the Roman period the sea level was lower and a fording point might have been possible here, particularly if helped by planking or wattling over muddy areas, in the same way as those found in the Somerset levels.

Both Margaret Jones<sup>1</sup> and Christopher Hawkes<sup>2</sup> have suggested that Claudius might have taken this more direct route to *Camulodunum*. It avoids the marshes and heavy inland forests of Essex which defeated Julius Caesar a century earlier. The crossing suggested would indeed be hazardous: we are told men had to swim and others were lost in the marsh, but the local inhabitants could cross easily. This suggests that there were landmarks known to the British with their intimate knowledge of trees and stones but not obvious to the Romans.

The Tilbury crossing would save over 30 miles of marching through enemy territory, whereas the Westminster fording point would actually add mileage to the journey. The mention of a bridge upstream used by a few men could then more reasonably refer to London Bridge crossed by a small fast group of scouts ahead of the main army. Stangate Stairs is surely likely to be a landing place, one of the many in use in Tudor times, including Billingsgate, Dowgate and Whitehall Stairs among others. There are no place names with *-ford* as suffix in the vicinity of Westminster, whereas in the Tilbury area there is Stanford le Hope, and of course the settlement at Mucking is close by with evidence of native British occupation continuing into the Roman period and presumably part of the terrain held by Caratacus and Togodumnus.

Perhaps it is now time that London archaeologists rethought this myth that Claudius crossed the Thames at London when he was heading for Colchester. London's position at the furthest

point upriver affected by strong tidal water makes it ideal as a port but clearly in 43 AD the Roman ships were not yet able to navigate the entrance to the Thames and the army preferred to go overland. The modern shipping lane is kept open by dredging but the Thames estuary is still difficult for ships, due to shifting sands. Only when Roman power in Britain was well established by the submission of native chiefs and when local seamen had probably been pressed into service, was access to London by water easier and its role as a port could begin.

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1. in R. Bruce-Mitford *Recent Archaeological Excavations in Europe* (1975) 146.
2. in a lecture at Clacton, 1978.

## THE ELEPHANT AND CASTLE

'OF CASTLES AND ELEPHANTS' in the autumn issue requires a reply in respect of its remarks on the Elephant and Castle, particularly because of the acknowledgement of a source to Southwark Reference Library.

Firstly, Shakespeare's 'Elephant' refers to a site in St. Saviour's parish, Southwark, near the Globe Theatre, and *not* to the 'Elephant and Castle' at Newington, a mile to the south. Secondly, the site at Newington was *not* called Elephant Island in 1657. The site was nameless when it was granted by Court Baron in 1658 to trustees on behalf of Newington's poor. The site's only building was used as a smithy, which was subsequently called the 'White Horse'. The smithy remained into the 18th century. I have seen no evidence of a public house there named the 'Elephant and Castle' earlier than 1765. Such a date makes very good sense because it followed the opening of Westminster Bridge (1750) and the associated building of New Kent Road (in the 1750s). The traffic thus generated at Newington offered an obvious opportunity for a new hostelry. Nobody knows why the sign was chosen and I doubt if anybody ever will. It could easily have been named the Crossed Keys or the Six Bells. One can forget civil war forts, mammoths, Infantas of Castile and all the other red herrings in connection with this particular site.

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Nicholas Fuentes replies:-

RHONA HUGGINS startles one with her suggestion of a possible Higham-Tilbury ford, but the available evidence appears to offer no comfort to her.

She is correct in stating that the Roman finds from Westminster are neither military nor Claudian, but one must remember that excavations on the actual site of *Thorn ey(ot)* have been few and small. However, she does not offer any evidence of military or Claudian (or any other) Roman finds from the site of her postulated Higham-Tilbury ford.

She asks that, if some men crossed a ford at Westminster and "the bridge was near the present London Bridge", why did not all cross by that bridge. Again, she suggests that "the mention of a bridge upstream ... could ... refer to London Bridge". The rejoinder to both is that there is no evidence that the Southwark-City Roman bridge was built until AD 50. I suggested that the pre-Roman bridge was at Putney, which has a long history, in both archaeology and literary sources, as an important crossing point of the Thames.

While I agree that the Stangate Stairs was one of many used in the Tudor period, this does not explain the origin of the name nor indicate the antiquity of that particular crossing point. Again, I agree that there are no place names with *-ford* suffix in the vicinity

of Westminster, but neither are there any on the Thames in the Higham-Tilbury area (Stanford le Hope lies 3km – nearly 2 miles – inland, and is surely irrelevant).

On the question of Roman ships being able to navigate up the Thames to the later site of *Londinium*, I suggest that with nearly a century of trading (and presumably spying) between Britain and the Roman Empire, it would be surprising if no Roman merchant had made the journey. On the other hand, the arrival of an invasion fleet of some 800 ships (the number Caesar gives for his second incursion) sailing up the Thames on the tide would be another matter – a recipe for chaos and disaster.

The Westminster crossing was some 300m (330 yards) across whereas the width of the Thames today at the Higham-Tilbury postulated ford is 1km (1100 yards or  $c \frac{2}{3}$  mile), to which must be added mudflats covered at high water. For the Romans to have crossed this perilous stretch of water twice in the invasion period and to have depended upon a wide tidal ford for their communication route back to Richborough, is beyond belief. If Mrs Huggins wishes to demolish the “myth that Claudius crossed the Thames at London”, she will need to produce some hard evidence in place of the woolly contents of her letter.

I am grateful to Mr Humphreys for elucidation, as I had mistakenly assumed that all the Southwark papers in the file on the origin of the name ‘Elephant and Castle’ related to the same location. However, the situation is now clearer.

Henry IV of France received his elephant while he was besieging Noyon and a year later he gave it to Elizabeth I<sup>1</sup>. The siege of Noyon was in 1591<sup>2</sup>, the reference to the renamed Oliphant Inn in 1598 and *Twelfth Night* was written *c* 1601<sup>3</sup>. Thus the renaming of the inn could well stem from the gift received by Elizabeth and, similarly, Shakespeare’s reference may be *presumed* to relate to the same inn.

With the encumbrance of the Tudor elephant out of the way, one is left to ponder on the coincidence of the Elephant and Castle inn being established on or near the posited site of Plautius’ camp. Elsewhere, it is interesting to note that a new inn near Kings Cross was named ‘The Elephant’ after the discovery of John Conyers’ animal<sup>4</sup>.

1. D. Rybot *It began before Noah* (1972) 70-1.
2. L. Ranke *Civil Wars and Monarchy in France in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1852) Vol. 2, 313
3. G. Benham *Benham’s Book of Quotations* (1958) 321.
4. J. Larwood and J. C. Hotten *the History of Signboards from the earliest Times to the Present Day* (1866) 155-6.

#### EXCAVATION REPORT: ROMAN AND SAXON SITE, ORPINGTON

I WISH TO POINT OUT that some of the comments made by Lesley and Roy Adkins in their review of the above report are totally unwarranted and trivial (*London Archaeol* 5, no. 4, Autumn 1985).

The excavation was in no way “characterised by small trenches and slots” and there is nothing in this report to give this impression. As explained, the Trench numbers are not indicative of the quantity of trenches opened; they were numbered mostly according to the house numbers in the backyards of which they were sited, prior to their demolition. As such, many of our trenches were virtually “house-size” and none were less than 10ft x

10ft. I have no clue what the reviewers are implying with “slots” as I have never used this excavation technique. If they had looked at the site plan, they would clearly see that the entire area of the building and its immediate surrounding were fully and carefully excavated in so far as access is possible. The Roman building was fully exposed (as shown on the photo) and is now well preserved and available for viewing by the public. It was necessary to cut one or two sondages in each of the three fields researched as the whole area was thickly covered in recent debris; this is a perfectly

acceptable method to avoid wasting time and manpower on areas which were unlikely to produce results.

In my view it would have been irresponsible to attempt detailed interpretation of an excavation when so small a proportion of what is probably a large site is currently accessible for investigation. Instead the report endeavours to set this important site in the context of the many other sites found in the area – a point that the reviewers seem to find amazingly difficult to grasp. The May Avenue burials have been previously published in a separate report, to which reference is made. Repetition of explanations is tedious and costly.

As the Appendices were all written by different experts, a certain degree of variation in style and accent is to be expected, but the answers to the reviewers’ queries can be found in the Report or will be self-evident with a little more careful reading.

The costs of drawing all the pottery to which reference is made would have been prohibitive, and therefore (as is normal practice) a selected sample only was drawn. Likewise it would have been impossible to have published a report on every one of the large number of burials found: it is perfectly obvious that Burial 74 was published because of the possibility of unnatural death.

It is explained why Tester’s discoveries are included on the site plan: to make the very important point of the relationship between the Saxon and Roman remains. The more recent burials found, are clearly marked on the plan and all that is required, is cross-reference between the text and the plan. It was assumed that the majority of readers of the report would be people with a basic ability to read such a Report.

The price merely reflects the cost of production of a short run of printing and in no way covers the total costs of writing and preparing a work of this nature. The comparison with the *L.A.* is neither valid nor appropriate. SUSANN PALMER  
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I HAVE DISCUSSED this letter with both the reviewers and Mrs. Palmer, and have read the report for myself. It is clear there has been misunderstanding; I shall try to set the record straight, and close the correspondence.

The site plan shows about 20 small trenches on the periphery of the site, but the building itself lies within one large trench, parts of which are numbered from T17 to T32, for reasons which Mrs. Palmer explains. The ‘slots’ are machine-dug *sondages* in the Fordcroft part of the site, and are not criticised in the review. The strategy of excavation was dictated by the nature of the site and by uncertainty about the time available. A sceptical reaction from some colleagues to Mrs. Palmer’s interpretation of the stratigraphy as four layers across the whole site might have been anticipated, and more detailed explanation might have been valuable. she says little about the problems of excavating the site, possibly to her disadvantage.

The policy of selecting pots to be drawn is not criticised, but the reviewers point out the lack of correlation between the drawings and the specialist’s report. An explanation that the published report on the May Avenue burials was not illustrated might have forestalled criticism of the apparently unrelated drawings in *this* report. It was reasonable to include Tester’s discoveries on the site plan.

The reviewers have a fair point that, at £4.00, the report is expensive. This may reflect the uneconomical format or an extremely short print run, neither of which is the author’s responsibility. The general reader (not the author or the reviewer) is the final judge of the worth of any publication, and anyone who wishes to can visit a library and consult the report. They can also inspect the building, which has been preserved by the London Borough of Bromley. I understand that it may be possible to excavate to the south of the building, in which case many questions may be answered. – *Editor*