



Fig. 1: map showing locations of sites mentioned in the text: 1. Lower Teddington Road, 2. Kingston Power Station, 3. Canbury Fields, 4. Cromwell Road, 5. Canbury Passage, 6. Bentalls, 7. Clarence Street/Thames Street, 8. 82 Eden Street, 9. Fairfield West, 10. Orchard Road, 11. Gallows, 12/ Coombe Park.
(Drawn by Alison Kain)

Roman Kingston-upon-Thames: a landscape of rural settlements

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CHANCE FINDS from the 16th to the 19th century led early historians and antiquarians to suggest that substantial Roman settlements existed downstream of the present Kingston town centre and on Kingston Hill (and around Coombe Neville). Intensive modern archaeological investigation in Kingston and its immediate hinterland has, with few exceptions, demonstrated an almost complete

absence of features attributable to the Roman period, although much artefactual material has been recovered. This has led some modern writers to doubt the presence of any significant Roman settlements at Kingston. The purpose of this paper is to review the early finds and their interpretation in the light of the modern excavated evidence.

Geology and topography

Central Kingston's geology and topography was largely shaped by the complex of river gravels laid down as drift deposits during and after the last Glaciation, some 10-13,000 years ago, forming the flood plain terrace. Overlying these is a layer of brickearth (fine ground deposits of varying origin) most noticeably between Long Ditton and Kingston. Both Kingston Hill and Coombe Hill consist of London clay with an overlying deposit of Claygate Beds. Capping the hills is a deposit of gravel, high level terrace.

Archaeological excavations at Eden Walk¹, the Bittoms², Bentalls³ and Villiers Road⁴ have identified the presence of palaeo channels which the present writer believes may be former courses of the River Hogsmill. Documentary evidence suggests that one of these palaeo channels latterly became fossilised in the medieval period as the common sewer, Town ditch and Downshall ditch⁵. An investigation at Cromwell Road⁶ may have identified a tributary of this channel. Another tributary was identified at Eden Street⁷ and possibly associated alluvial deposits at Canbury Park Road⁸.

This would suggest that areas of higher ground in central Kingston were at times isolated by these channels and by marshy ground (Fig. 1). Penn and Rolls⁹ suggest the channel identified at Eden Walk effectively made the area around All Saints Church and the market an island.

It appears therefore, that in the Roman period the Thames in this area ran through low-lying flood plain with substantial tributaries crossing to meet it.

The antiquarian finds

Leland¹⁰ writing in 1535-43 says of Kingston:

"The olde monuments of the town of Kingston be founde yn the decluyving doune from Come Parke towards the galloys: and there yn ploughyng and digging have very of ten bene founde foundation of waulles of houses, and diverse coynes of brasse, sylvar and gold,

with Romaine inscriptions, and paintid yerthen pottes, and yn one in the Cardinal Wolsey's tyme was found much Romayne mony of sylvar and plates of silvar to coyne, and massess to bete into plates to coyne, and (chay)nes of sylvar. And yn the old tyme the commune saying ys that the bridge, where the commune passage was over the Tamise at Olde Kingston, was lower on the ryvar then it is now and when man began the new town yn the Saxons tymes they toke from the very clyve of Come Parke side to builde on the Tamise side: and sette a new bridge hard by the same".

There seems to be several distinct elements here. First, the record of finds of Roman buildings and artefacts between Coombe Park (centred around the summit of Kingston Hill) and the town gallows (The location of the Gallows is uncertain¹¹ but most probably lay within what is now the Kingsnympton Estate¹²). Second, the belief of Kingston's early 16th century citizens that there had been an "Olde Kingston" in the Roman period with a bridge over the Thames, downstream of their existing town, and that the "new town" was founded in the Saxon period using material "toke from the very clyve of Come Park". This might perhaps be a reference the robbing of building material from Roman structures.

John Aubrey¹³, writing in about 1670, records:-

"East of Kingston, on the rising of the Hill, stands the gallows, in a dry gravelly ground, where they often find Roman urns. An urn was found by the gallows by Mr. Chelsham, and is in his custody, of a kind of umber — colour, black ashes up half way, and something at the bottom like coarse hair, as if it had been laid in before.

Height of it six inches, near _" thick, or rather _": diameter six inches and a _".

Aubrey appears to be describing cremation burials and his sketch of the pot suggests a Roman context is likely¹⁴, perhaps from part of an extensive urnfield. While we cannot be certain as to the precise date or contemporaneity of the Roman material recorded by Leland and Aubrey, the evidence indicates that a Roman settlement and cemetery existed in close proximity on Kingston Hill.

1. D. Serjeantson, D. Field, J. Penny and M. Shipley 'Excavations at Eden Walk II, Kingston. Environmental Reconstruction and Prehistoric Finds 1992' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 81 (1992) 71-90.
2. Museum of London unpublished report BIM90.
3. Museum of London unpublished reports BEN87, 88 and 90. DGLA (SW) summary: *London Archaeol* 6, no. 11 (1991) 304.
4. Pre-Construct Archaeology unpublished report VID95.
5. J Wakeford *Kingston's Past Rediscovered* (1990) 10-15.
6. Museum of London unpublished report CWR92.
7. Museum of London unpublished report EDE89. *London Archaeol* 6, no. 7 (1990) 190.
8. Pre-Construct Archaeology unpublished report CPR95.

9. J. S. Penn and J. D. Rolls problems in the quaternary development of the Thames Valley around Kingston 'A Framework for Archaeology' *Trans London & Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 32 (1981) 1-11.
10. John Leland (L T Smith ed.) *Itinerary in England and Wales in or about the years 1535-1543* (LTS IV, 85).
11. For a discussion of this see D. Field & S. Needham 'Evidence for Bronze Age settlement on Coombe Warren Kingston Hill' *Surrey Arch Collect* 77 (1986) 127-131.
12. *Op cit* fn 5, 33-4.
13. John Aubrey *Natural History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey* (1718-19) 17.
14. J. Wakeford 'Two walknames in the fields of Kingston' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 75 (1984) 251-6.

Leland's record of finds at Kingston and particularly the local belief of a Roman bridge, may have influenced Thomas Gale's 1709 interpretation of the Antonine Itinerary¹⁵, in which he was to identify Kingston as "Tamesa", which Gale suggested would have been a major settlement with a bridge across the Thames.

In 1722 further finds of Roman material were made on Kingston Hill¹⁶:

"In October 1722 some persons digging here found a great number of urns and other pieces of Roman antiquities."

Gibson's¹⁷ edition of Camden's *Britannia* elaborates on the earlier records of finds at Kingston Hill.

"... upon a gravelly Hill, near the road, was a burying place of the Romans; here are often found urns, and pieces of urns, which lie about two feet deep; one [that recorded by Aubrey: Author] particularly was discovered, about the year 1670, of a kind of amber colour filled up half way with black ashes and at the bottom something like coarse hair, as if it have been laid there before. At a little distance from the Thames, we see Comb-Nevil, a seat of the Harveys, where have been found medals and coins of several of the Roman Emperors, especially of Diocletian, the Maximinians, Maximus, Constantine the Great &c¹⁸."

Gough's 1789 edition of Camden's *Britannia*¹⁸ records that an urn

"full of coins of the lower Empire was dug up in a gravel pit within a mile of the town at the end of Combe Lane leading to Combe Nevill¹⁹."

While the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries had seen extensive finds of Roman material on Kingston Hill, the 19th century was to see a dramatic find in the area of Canbury Fields, downstream of the present town centre where three hundred years earlier Leland had been told "Olde Kingston" stood.

Edward Jesse¹⁹ writing in 1832 records finds made during the construction works for the present Kingston Bridge (begun in 1824) and then adds:-

"In digging for Brickearth in some fields on the Surrey side of the River, but within a short distance of the Kingston Ford, a number of skeletons have been found which occupied a considerable portion of the fields. It is evident that they must have been placed there after some tremendous engagement and that they are not the remains of a civil sepulture.

In the first place, they are all males, in the next the jaws were all perfect and the teeth those of young subjects. There were not any vestiges of womanly remain — neither boundary or inscription as might have been expected to mark a regular cemetery, but there were found some pieces of fragments of broken earthenware, very characteristic of Roman memorial styles of workmanship, deposited here and there amongst the several layers of bodies [perhaps resulting from the cemetery's use over a long period of time: Author]. Several ornaments such as jet pins and other articles were also found which have been pronounced by competent judges to be Roman²⁰."

William Biden²⁰, writing in 1852, stated:-

"In digging for the foundations of the new bridge, several Roman military weapons, consisting of spear-heads and swords of beautiful workmanship and in a good state of preservation, were found: and about the same time also were discovered several human skeletons with Roman ornaments lying near them, in a field not far from the spot on the Surrey side of the River: a brass clasp, the spring of which is as perfect and as elastic as when new may be instanced as a most interesting specimen²¹"

A further reference to these burials comes from the 1854 correspondence of Dr. Roots, a noted local Antiquary to Alderman Gould, the then Mayor of Kingston²¹.

"It is true, that many of the slain, as Dr. Roots supposes in that encounter [supposedly Caesar's crossing of the Thames: Author] were exhumed a few years ago in the Canbury Field adjoining the Gas Works, and as many Roman relics were discovered mingled with the remains in the graves, Dr. Roots has little or no doubt that they were the bodies of the Romans slain in battle²²."

While we can perhaps dismiss the notion that these burials were casualties of Caesar's cross channel excursion, they do point to (on artefactual evi-

15. Thomas Gale *Augustus Antonini Iter Britanniarum Commentariis Illustratum* (1709) 66, 71, 72.
16. Rev. Owen Manning and William Bray *The History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey*, Vol. 1 (1804) 329.
17. *Britannia: or, a Chronographical Description of Great Britain and Ireland together with the Adjacent Islands written in Latin* by William Camden, Clarenceux King at Arms; And Translated into English with Additions and Improvements; by Edmund Gibson, DD late Lord Bishop of London. Fourth Edition 1772 (from the Edition of 1722). Vol. 1. 238.
18. *Britannia or a Chronographical Description of the Flourishing Kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland and the Islands*

Adjacent from the Earliest Antiquity by William Camden, translated by Richard Gough, 2nd Edition 1806, Vol. 1, 254.

19. E. Jesse *Roman Antiquities at Kingston, Gleanings in Natural History: with Local Recollections* Kingston Heritage Local History Collection Pamphlets Vol. 44 (1832).

20. W. D. Biden *The History and Antiquities of the Ancient Royal Town of Kingston Upon Thames* (1852) 1-7.

21. Dr. Roots, a manuscript letter dated 27th June 1854 from Dr. Roots to Alderman Gould, Mayor of Kingston in *Alderman Gould's Scrapbook* Kingston Heritage Local History Collection R4700 SI(900).

dence) a Roman period inhumation cemetery at Canbury Fields²². Nearly 2km separate the Canbury Field finds of c1824 and the Kingston Hill finds of the 1530s, 1670s and 1720s.

Few other finds of note were made in the 19th century, though at some uncertain point emerged from a garden in Eden Street a small Roman altar dedicated to Fortune and the Emperors of Rome. Whether the altar was dug up in the garden or had been brought into the town centre from Kingston Hill or elsewhere is unknown.

Some light on the origins of the altar may be given in Thomas Frosts 1881 Guide to Kingston Upon Thames²³.

“... at Kingston the discovery of Roman coins, sepulchral urns and other relics of the Caesarian domination have been of frequent occurrence in digging for the foundation of new buildings and at a Curiosity Shop in Eden Street some of these may be seen, besides broken weapons and implements, carvings, pottery and C. of later but still very remote times.”

The present writer has been unable to trace the “Curiosity Shop” in the town’s trade directories for the 1870s and 80s, though these are notably incom-

plete. In 1885 a coin of Constantine I was recovered at 22 Eden Street but no details of its context are known.

No further finds seem to have been made until 1926 when, during the construction of the now demolished Kingston Power Station, west of Canbury Fields and downstream of the modern town centre, a flat roof tile (dating no later than the end of the 2nd century AD) and several sherds of Roman pottery (including Samian) was identified by Finny²⁴. In 1930 Finny also recorded a piece of Roman mosaic at Coombe Neville²⁵.

The modern evidence

From the late 1960s to the present, Central Kingston has been subjected to a comprehensive programme of redevelopment. This redevelopment has been accompanied by numerous archaeological investigations of varying level by the Kingston Upon Thames Archaeological Society, the Museum of London’s Department of Greater London’s Archaeology (SW) and latterly, the Museum of London’s Archaeology Service and others.

Almost without exception these archaeological interventions revealed no trace of Roman activity *in situ*, the only evidence for the period being residual finds of pottery and very occasionally ceramic building material. These include Roman pottery and building material from the Bentalls site (recovered from within a braided channel) and Roman pottery from phase two of the Eden Walk excavation, when abraded sherds were recovered from water deposited “brickearths” in 1974 and 1976. Residual Roman tile was recovered at Clarence Street/Thames Street in 1988²⁶.

Two sites in the central Kingston area however stand out as being of high significance. In the first, undertaken in 1967 by the Kingston Upon Thames Archaeological Society on the site of the Castle Pub in Fairfield West, four post holes set in a shallow scoop associated with Iron Age and Roman pottery and Roman tile were identified²⁷.

In the Museum of London’s Department of Greater London Archaeology (SW) 1989 investigation at the rear of 82 Eden Street²⁸, a small silted-up river channel (part of the braided channel system) was revealed, into which approximately 350 Roman



Fig. 2: the Roman altar from Eden Street.

22. Marion Hinton ‘Ancient Burial Ground in Canbury Field, Kingston Upon Thames’ *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 75 (1984) 285-7.

23. Thomas Frost *Kingston Upon Thames* (1881) II.

24. W. E. Finny ‘Roman Tile and Pottery from Kingston’ *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 38 (1929) 229.

25. KHS Accessions Card (MDA) 1984; 1089.

26. *London Archaeol* 6, no. 3 (1989) 74-5.

coins (mainly House of Constantine), jewellery and rolled lead strips (possibly curses) had been deposited. The scattered nature of the finds throughout the channel led the excavator to interpret them as votive deposits. Some building material was also recovered within the channel, including roof tiles, flue tile from a hypocaust, painted wall plaster and cut stone and ashlar blocks. Subsequent investigations at 70-76 Eden Street in 1995 revealed a pit containing Roman finds²⁹.

Outside of the central area relatively few sites have been archaeologically investigated. A small excavation at Canbury Passage³⁰ revealed Roman pottery sherds, while on Cromwell Road on the north east of the town centre, a further braided channel containing Roman pottery in its fill, along with scattered Roman pottery in a Medieval plough soil, was identified³¹. Here the excavator interpreted the evidence as suggesting that although Roman features may have existed nearby, ploughing and erosion had re-deposited the material in a general spread or washed it into deeper features such as localised channels. An archaeological evaluation at 6 Cromwall Road³² revealed a small number of Roman pot sherds and tile fragments in a post Medieval context.

Most recently an archaeological evaluation at Orchard Road revealed a similar scatter of residual Roman finds in a post-medieval context³³.

Conclusions

There is undeniably a significant body of Roman material apparently concentrated in several distinct locations in the Kingston area.

At Kingston Hill we appear to have some isolated possibly high status buildings and finds, which might be sensibly interpreted as representing the remains of a country estate rather than any nucleated settlement.

The Coombe Neville material, again consisting of at least one high-status building and many high status finds can perhaps be seen as a similar settlement. The date of these settlements is unknown, though the coins recorded by antiquarians suggest a 3rd and 4th century date. It seems likely on the available evidence that both these settlements had

small associated cemeteries, apparently containing cremations rather than inhumations.

The Canbury Fields cemetery and the assemblages of Roman pottery and tile from the power station, Canbury Passage and Cromwell Road areas can be seen as the remains of a separate, probably unenclosed, rural settlement apparently dating to the 1st to 4th centuries. Examples of small Roman rural settlements have recently been identified at Heathcote Road and at Amyand Park Road in Twickenham³⁴. There is also some suggestion of a similar settlement at Lower Teddington Road, Hampton Wick where truncated features containing mixed Roman pottery were excavated in 1990³⁵ (this site is located on the opposite bank of the Thames to Kingston town centre; adjacent to the Kingston to Hampton Wick railway line). The presence of another such settlement on Kingston's riverside, downstream of the existing town centre and stretching away from the Thames toward Kingston Hill, would, perhaps, not be surprising. The physical proximity to the Thames of the Kingston material is paralleled at Heathcote Road and Amyand Park Road. The river may have been a focus of settlement because it served as a major transport link rather than because of the presence of crossing points, though the presence of Roman material on the opposite banks of the Thames at Kingston/Hampton Wick is suggestive.

The Eden Street/Fairfield and Orchard Road material is more enigmatic. The combination of the altar find in the 19th century, Frost's record of the material on display in the Curiosity Shop in 1881 and the apparently votive material and building remains at 82 Eden Street found in 1989, is suggestive. Perhaps we have here the remnants of a 3rd/4th century settlement (perhaps high status) and/or a shrine. Intriguingly, when first recorded in AD 1315, Eden Street was known as *La Hethenstrat*, and survived as Heathen Street until the 19th century³⁶, perhaps because of frequent finds of Roman material.

Overall it would appear that while inaccurate in some ways, the traditions of the "commune" of Kingston as recorded in the 16th century by Leland, closely parallel the cumulative results of 460 years of antiquarian and archaeological endeavour in Kingston.

27. M. P. Canham 'Extracts from the Bulletins of 1967 (No's 25-36)' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 65 (1968) 124-28. Museum of London unpublished report EDN95.

29. G. Dennis (MoLAS) *pers comm*.

30. *London Archaeol* 4, no. 2 (1981) 47.

31. Museum of London unpublished report CWR92.

32. Pre-Construct Archaeology unpublished report CLD95.

33. Sutton Archaeological Services unpublished report WWE95.

34. Museum of London unpublished report APR94; S. Hoad 'Romans in Twickenham' *London Archaeol* 7, no. 14 (1995) 378-83.

35. Museum of London unpublished report LTR90.

36. *Op cit* fn 5, 24-6.