

Roads and temples: Stane Street at Ewell

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In a recent article, Clive Orton notes that the Roman road Stane Street is a problem in Ewell; we know its course as it nears the settlement from London, and after it has left in the direction of Dorking, but we cannot join the two.¹ Attempts to find the line on its most logical course, that is one simply joining the two points, have failed. In fact the position of known or likely buildings suggests a probable course for the road but that would make it go through a double bend, which would not be required by the local topography. Orton suggests that an explanation might be provided by the possible religious importance of the King William IV site: "This use of the site helps to explain the peculiar deviation of Stane Street. Faced with local opposition to the desecration of a sacred site, it was decided expedient to take the road round it rather than through it. The local nature of the deviation, in contrast to a more widespread but gradual realignment of the road, suggests that the strength of the opposition may initially have been understated or ignored."²

A parallel with the well-known example of the temples at the east gate of Silchester is suggested and it is worth quoting in full what G C Boon had to say on this subject: "... so the alignment of the forum can colourably be said to answer that of the Roman road approaching Calleva from the east. If continued straight across the site, without need for an adjustment just north of the present parish church, as recent aerial photographs now show, this road would meet prolongations of the west and south-west highways in a simple Y-fork near the south-east corner of the future Insula XIII. Such a correspondence can hardly be accidental, but must on the contrary have been planned. That the plan was not executed is perhaps to be attributed to the existence of the sacred enclosure and temples (Insula XXX) which such a road must unavoidably have cut in two. Be this as it may, it seems likely that the forum-basilica was aligned in accordance with a proposal to extend the Roman road directly across the site; and that a *grand*

boulevard fully 12m wide was planned on the line of that road, so that it would sweep up to the main entrance of the forum like the *via praetoria* of a legionary fortress to the main entrance of the *principia*.... But, as the *temenos* of Insula XXX remained inviolate, the boulevard never took shape as planned, and the Roman road was connected to the street-plan of Flavian times by a dog-leg bend. The street opposite the forum became one of the least important in the entire town, leading nowhere."³

This theory that the road was forced to deviate still seems to be generally accepted. A brief examination of some other sites in Roman Britain and other provinces provides further backing for the idea that roads may be affected by the presence of religious sites, but it also suggests that a different explanation may be offered for the phenomenon.

As its name indicates (Old English *aewiell* = river spring), Ewell has an important spring: the source of the Hogsmill in fact.⁴ It is reasonable to assume that there will have been offerings in prehistory and in the Roman period at the spring, and this seems to have been confirmed by finds made recently when the lake at Bourne Hall was drained.⁵ In turn, this may have given rise to the development of a Roman-period religious centre, and Clive Orton's suggestion of a religious significance for the King William IV site points to one possible temple location. It may be, therefore, that we should be starting to think about Ewell as potentially more like the complex at Springhead in Kent (*Vagniacis*) than just another roadside settlement.⁶

It is thus of interest to consider the behaviour of the main road at Springhead. There, Watling Street, a road every bit as important as Stane Street, goes through a marked double bend as it passes through the site. Once again, there doesn't seem to be any particular need for it to do this. Several of the 'religious' small towns discussed

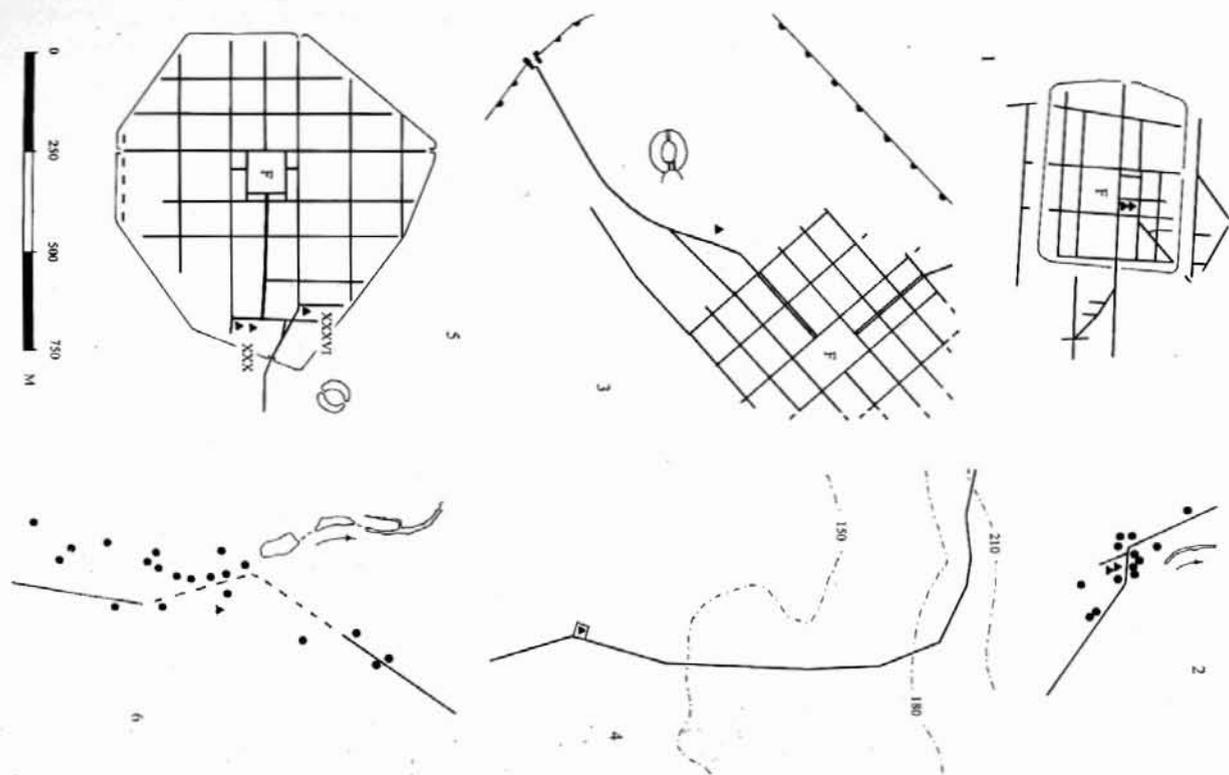


Fig. 1: All plans are to the same scale with north to the top of the page. F indicates forum; the amphitheatres are marked at Avenches and Silchester; the line of the defences at these sites and Caistor are shown; Roman roads are marked by thicker lines; temples (and the King William IV site in Ewell) are shown by triangles; in Springhead and Ewell locations of possible buildings are shown by circles; at the same sites watercourses are shown.

1 = Caistor-by-Norwich, after Burnham & Wachter *op cit* fn 6, fig 112, 248; 2 = Springhead, after Burnham & Wachter, *op cit* fn 6, fig 59, 194-5 (only two of the possible temples are marked); 3 = Avenches, after R Bedon, R Chevallier & R Pinon, *Architecture et urbanisme en Gaule Romaine*. Vol 2 (1988) 75; 4 = Titsey, after Blagg, *op cit* fn 12, fig 3, 21; 5 = Silchester, after Blagg, *op cit* fn 12, fig 1, 18; 6 = Ewell, after C Abdy & G Bierton, 'A gazetteer of Romano-British archaeological sites in Ewell', *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 84 (1997) 123-141 [map 1, 129].

by Burnham and Wachter also exhibit odd road patterns, or are at least at a major road junction. At Nettleton, they suggest that the road 'bifurcates' around the site -- yet this is the Fosse Way! The road pattern at Harlow is complex, and at Wycomb the main road seems to split around the site.⁷ It is interesting in this context to note the plan at Heybridge, where one main road seems to head straight for the sacred site until it joins another which splits to go round both sides.⁸ In this case it is possible that parts of the layout have their origins in the Late Iron Age.

The situation at the east gate at Silchester deserves closer attention. Michael Fulford has recently argued that the new Flavian period basilica and forum complex was turned to face east, towards London.⁹ In such a case it is very difficult to believe that the town planners did not notice that one of their most important roads was going to run into a problem with the sacred site to the east. No-one in the Roman world would have been unaware of the potential importance of a sacred site. Pliny the Younger even wrote to the emperor seeking guidance in such a case when he was on a special imperial commission in Bithynia and Pontus.¹⁰ It seems much more likely that if the planners had wished, they would have altered the layout to avoid the sacred complex altogether.

While accepting that the temple complex influenced the behaviour of the road, others suggest a rather different interpretation, assuming that the layout was planned. Thus David Wilson has written that "in the absence of any major temple attached to the *forum* itself it becomes plausible to suggest a long-established connexion between the *forum* and these temples, causing the line of the street to become hallowed by use as a processional way".¹¹ Tom Blagg suggests that "... it may be suspected that there was a pre-Roman sanctuary here which in part determined the laying out of the city. The temples would also have caught the eye, since they were plastered and painted red externally, and the precinct was connected to the centre of the city by a street leading directly to the entrance to the forum".¹² And John Wachter says simply that "[the sacred site] appears to have been united with the forum by a street running from the latter's entrance."¹³ It would not be unreasonable to take this interpretation to its logical conclusion, and suggest

that the aim was to focus the road, from both directions, on the sacred site, deliberately seeking to emphasise its importance.

There are similar anomalies in the plans of other major towns: for example at Wroxeter, where in fact Wachter points to a parallel with Silchester. Again a major road is affected: a temple enclosure apparently alters the course of Watling Street. It is worth considering that wherever one finds an oddity in the layout of a town it may indicate the presence of a sacred site: the north-east part of Winchester, for instance. In the same corner of Caistor-by-Norwich the layout is particularly strange; a diagonal road strikes across the regularly planned insulae until it meets the corner of one which contains temples; it is as though a situation similar to that at Silchester has been deliberately created.¹⁴

We are used to the idea of formal planning for Roman towns and cities: in the western Empire blocks of square insulae with a regular forum and basilica complex at their centre are the norm. "Climate and setting apart, nobody could possibly have mistaken Roman Trier or Silchester for Lepcis Magna or Thamugadi [Timgad]; and yet all four were near contemporary expressions of the same basic planning tradition. It was precisely in this combination of traditionalism and flexibility that the strength of the Roman system lay..... Roman building, with its axuality and artificial vistas and its awareness of the dramatic possibilities of sheer bulk, and above all of the architectural dimension of height..."¹⁵ This approach often seems to involve or even demand sacred sites and parallels to the situation at Silchester can be found elsewhere in the Roman world. It can be seen at its most splendid at Jerash, where architectural planning on a grand scale was used to disguise a realignment of the main road near the south gate but also to make it seem as though the road was heading straight for the temple of Zeus.¹⁶ Nearer to home there is a close parallel to Silchester in the plan of Avenches (*Aventicum*, in Switzerland). Here the main road to the west gate from the forum complex was made wider, obviously a formal approach (like Boon's 'grand boulevard'), but after a few blocks it bends to go round a hill (into which the amphitheatre is set) before reaching the gate. Just beyond the bend, placed so that the road is centred

on it, is a temple, and a Gallo-Roman temple at that.¹⁷

It is generally assumed that temples were a natural outcome of a particularly sacred site, but it is easy to argue that many Romano-Celtic temples were sited for effect. It has been suggested that some of the Somerset temples sited on hilltops were intervisible.¹⁸ In any case they were prominently placed; in a similar fashion the Maiden Castle temple will have been visible from Dorchester, like examples visible from Trier and Augst, and the so-called Temple of Janus from Autun.¹⁹ It is perhaps worth stressing that these temples had towers which would have been prominent in the landscape.

Road junctions seem to attract temples. The 'triangular temple' at Verulamium is sited at an important road intersection; the site apparently post-dates an earlier road layout, as though the situation became one that demanded a temple.²⁰ This often seems to be the case; examples include Silchester again (Insula XXXVI), Ashford (Westhawk Farm) in Kent and the suggested recent discovery at the Poultry site in London.²¹ There are similar temples at town gates where the

road comes in at an angle: for example the west gate at Colchester and the suggested temple at Newgate, in London.²² Here, and at sites in the countryside such as Titsey, it may be that the effect was as if the road was heading straight at the temple, or some element of the sacred site, such as a column or special tree.²³ A similar suggestion might be made for the site at Greenwich, if it was a temple.²⁴

It seems reasonable to conclude that sometimes roads are deliberately laid out to point directly at and then bend round sacred sites, while in others temples are sited to take advantage of a situation already in being. The idea seems to be to give prominence to these sites, in particular to bring them to the attention of the traveller or town-dweller. In some cases there is no doubt a connection with seeking or offering thanks for protection on a journey; temples at gates would seem particularly appropriate. In other cases the importance of the site is emphasised. In any event, it may be suggested that where it appears that sacred sites have brought about an unnecessary alteration in a road line, it is much more likely that the deviation is deliberately planned than that it is an unwanted imposition.

1. C Orton 'Excavations at the King William IV site, Ewell, 1976-77' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 84 (1997) 89-122 [115-7].
2. Orton *op cit* fn 1, 119.
3. G C Boon *Silchester: the Roman town of Calleva* (1974) 55.
4. J E B Gover, A Mawer & F M Stenton *The place-names of Surrey* (1934) 75.
5. Finds included many coins, both Iron Age and Roman, brooches and a model spearhead (*pers. comm.* Jon Cotton).
6. B C Burnham & J Wacher *The 'small towns' of Roman Britain* (1990) 192-8. The two apparent roots of Springhead's name are acceptable for the obvious meaning, reinforcing the parallel. Ewell is unlikely to have been an official *mansio* site as this is more likely to have been at Merton (D G Bird 'The environs of Londinium: roads, roadside settlements and the countryside' in I Haynes, H Sheldon & L Hannigan (eds) *London Under Ground* (2000) 151-74 [156]).
7. Burnham & Wacher *op cit* fn 6, 194-5 (Springhead); 189 (Nettleton); 184 (Harlow); 199 (Wycomb).
8. M Atkinson & S J Preston 'The Late Iron Age and Roman settlement at Elms Farm, Heybridge, Essex, excavations 1993-5: an interim report' *Britannia* 29 (1998) 85-110 [103].
9. M Fulford 'Synthesis' in M Fulford & J Timby *Late Iron Age and Roman Silchester. Excavations on the site of the Forum-Basilica 1977, 1980-6* Britannia monograph series 15 (2000) 545-81 [571].
10. *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, trans. B Radice (1963) 277 (10, 49): "...an ancient temple of the Great Mother [Cybele] which needs to be rebuilt or moved to a new site...". Trajan's reply suggests that moving a temple was quite acceptable: 'You need have no religious scruple ... about moving the temple of the Mother of the Gods to a more convenient place if a change of site seems desirable ...' (10, 50).
11. D R Wilson 'Temples in Britain: a topographical survey' *Caesarodunum* 8 (1973) 24-44 [28].

12. T Blagg 'Roman religious sites in the British landscape' *Landscape History* 8 (1996) 15-25 [19].
13. J Wachter *The towns of Roman Britain* (2nd ed 1995) 276; on 281 he notes that one of the temples is the largest Romano-Celtic temple in Britain. Perhaps this is a pointer to its importance.
14. Wachter *op cit* fn 13, 369 (Wroxeter); 294 (Winchester); 248 (Caistor).
15. J B Ward-Perkins *Cities of Ancient Greece and Italy. Planning in classical antiquity* (1974) 31.
16. I Browning *Jerash and the Decapolis* (1982) 81 fig 25; 83 map 3.
17. W Drack & R Fellmann *Die Römer in der Schweiz* (1988) 337-48.
18. A Woodward *Shrines and sacrifice* (1992) 23-4.
19. I Fauduet *Les temples de tradition Celtique en Gaule Romaine* (1993) 25; M Pinette & A Rebourg *Autun. Ville Gallo-Romaine* (1986) 52-3: the plan suggests that the Autun temple also had a road diverted round it.
20. M Henig *Religion in Roman Britain* (1984) 159.
21. Blagg *op cit* fn 12, fig 1, 18; P Booth & S Lawrence, 'Ashford, Westhawk Farm' *Current Archaeol* 14.12 (2000) 478-81 [480]; P Rowsome *Heart of the City. Roman, medieval and modern London revealed by archaeology at 1 Poultry* (2000) 45. On this basis it seems reasonable to suggest that if the road layout shown in another article by Rowsome is correct, then we may expect that at least one of the triangular insula created not far to the east of the forum in London will have been home to a temple of some sort (P Rowsome 'The development of the town plan of early Roman London' in B Watson (ed) *Roman London, recent archaeological work* J. Roman Archaeol supplementary series 24 (1998) 35-46 [36].
22. Wachter *op cit* fn 13, 115; I Haynes 'Religion in Roman London' in Haynes *et al op cit* fn 6, 85-101 [93].
23. Blagg *op cit* fn 12, fig 3, 21. For a very good Gallic example (at Saint-Maur (Oise)) see Fauduet *op cit* fn 19, 27.
24. H Swain & H Sheldon 'Roman Greenwich' *Current Archaeol* 14.11 (2000) 440. In such a case the hill presumably acted as an aiming point for the road and the building might be secondary, to take the opportunity for so prominent a setting. In view of the unusual finds from the site, consideration might however be given to the suggestion that it was some sort of official monument rather than a temple (which would also explain the presence of PPBRON tiles). See also B Wallower 'Roman temple complex in Greenwich Park? Part 1' *London Archaeol* 10, no 2 (2002) 46-54.

Excavations and post-excavation work

London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre, Mortimer Wheeler House, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7EE. Contact Archive Manager, John Shepherd (020 7566 9317).

Croydon & District, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collection of fabric types, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Jim Davison, 28 Blenheim Park Road, South Croydon, CR2 6BB.

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