

Fig. 1: river system overlain on map of Kingston town centre with findspots

A product of its environment: revising Roman Kingston

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Introduction

In a short paper published in 1996¹ I attempted to provide an overview of the evidence for Roman settlement in the area of modern Kingston upon Thames. Subsequent archaeological fieldwork

and research, together with a re-analysis of earlier discoveries, allows this overview to be refined and expanded and earlier errors and omissions corrected.

River systems and their significance

In 1996 I suggested that rather than having once been located on an island within the Thames,² the Roman period settlement within what is today central Kingston lay on an island formed by the

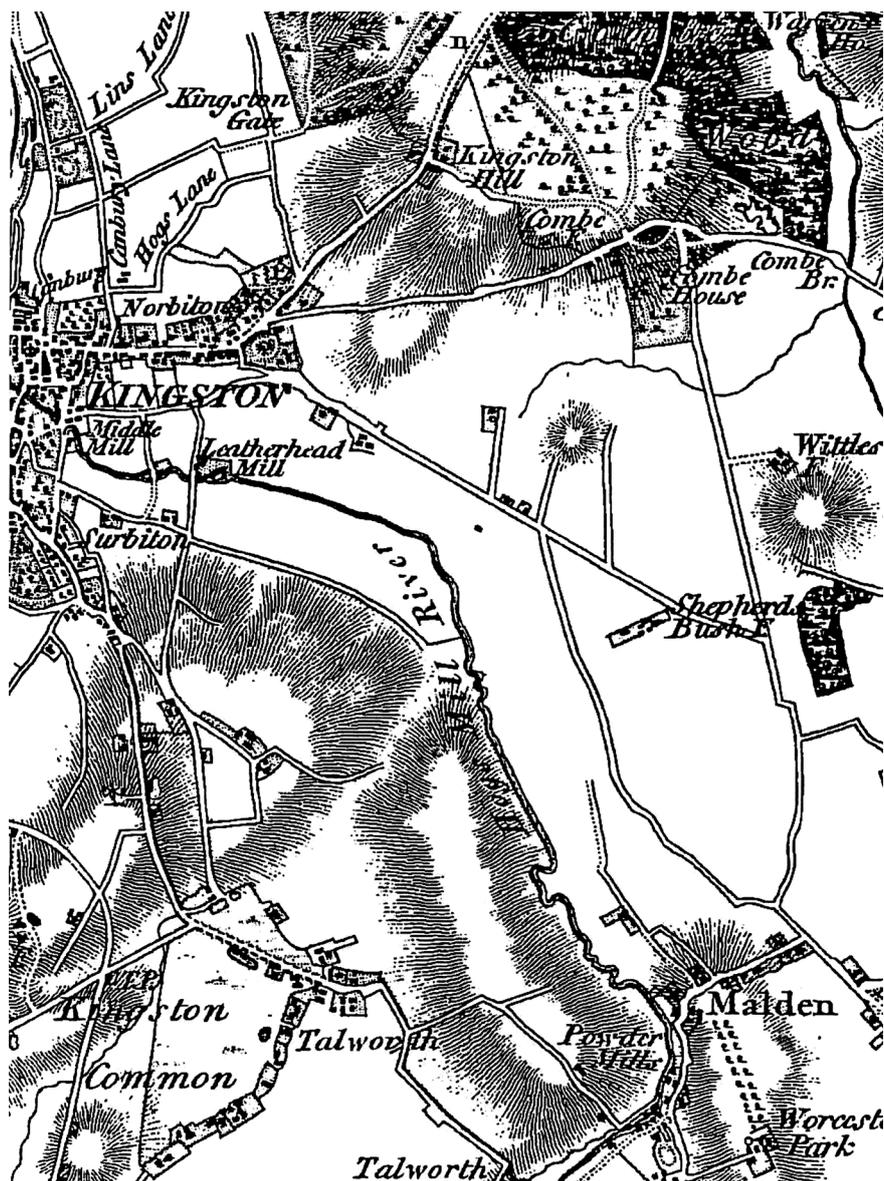


Fig. 2: extract from Ordnance Survey map of 1816

Thames on the west, its tributary the River Hogsmill on the south and east (the eastern arm probably comprising a series of braided channels) and the Latchmere Stream/Downhall Ditch on the north. The archaeological evidence for this system of channels is now overwhelming. In addition subsidiary channels and areas of wetland have been identified on the north, east and south of the 'Central Kingston island'.³ Remarkably, many of these 'lost' water courses had in fact survived up until the mid 19th century and were relatively well documented. The obituary of Alderman Frederick Gould (1817–1900),⁴ an amateur antiquarian and

public health pioneer, records his memories of the filling in of some of the channels.

"I remember an open sewer running down Kingston Hill (part of the Latchmere Stream: Author) and another open sewer emerging from Clarence Street ...

There was another and much larger open sewer – eight or ten feet deep – running between Youngs Buildings and Eden Street (Heathen Street as it was then) and my first sanitary work was to fill it up." (apparently the last remnant of the east arm of the Hogsmill: Author)

Today the River Hogsmill and the Latchmere Stream (where the latter is visible) are minor water courses. That this was not always so has been shown by a number of archaeological

interventions. Evaluation trial trenching at the former V.P. Winery Site, Villiers Road, Kingston, east of the town centre, identified a former channel of the Hogsmill.⁵ This was oriented north-east to south-west, and at the eastern limits of investigation lay 200 m north of the modern river while at the western limits of investigation it lay adjacent to the modern river. The channel was some 5 m wide and 0.80 m deep. The investigations revealed evidence for sediment deposition under high and low energy conditions, bank erosion and overbank flooding, indicating that the Hogsmill here was subject to significant change. No dating evidence for these processes was retrieved.

Large-scale archaeological excavations at Charter Quay, Kingston between 1998 and 1999 straddled the surviving south arm of the Hogsmill.⁶ These identified the river in the 12th and 13th century to have been a substantial watercourse with a 20 m-wide mouth at its confluence with the Thames, split by a gravel bank.⁷ At this time the River Hogsmill at Kingston was called the 'Lurtebourne'. The current name Hogsmill derives from a large mill on the river, which in turn was named after its owner Jon Hog who was active at the turn of the 12th century.⁸

An archaeological evaluation at Sopwith Way in 1996,⁹ immediately north of Kingston railway station, lay directly on the line of the Latchmere Stream/Downhall Ditch channel. A series of watercourses were identified, the last of which, more than 3 m wide (the southern limits were not identified) and 1.5 m deep, had been backfilled only on construction of the Railway (1861–63). Widespread evidence of sediment deposition under high and low energy conditions (including a 'sand bar' formation and bank erosion), were revealed, with the alluvial sequence generally 1 to 1.5 m deep over the natural gravel and sealed by early modern overburden. As elsewhere in central Kingston,¹⁰ the former stream channels contained modest quantities of abraded Roman pottery and roof tile.

Archaeological investigations at Skerne Road in 2001–2002,¹¹ close to the probable confluence of the Latchmere Stream/Downhall Ditch with the east arm of the Hogsmill revealed a continuation of the alluvial deposits

seen at the Sopwith Way site, which lay 100 m to the south-east. The eastern side of the Skerne Road site was wholly occupied by sterile alluvial deposits. However, on the west of the site alluvial deposits were present only on the south. North of them was evidence for Roman activity *in situ* on slightly higher ground rising to the north from 6 m to around 7 m AOD. This Roman activity was clearly post-dated by fluvial erosion, with several Roman features being partly eroded by channel activity.

During the Roman period, we should visualise the area of modern central Kingston, between the River Thames to the west and the base of Kingston Hill on the east, as a low lying area of soft brickearths over gravel, all below 10 m AOD and declining down to the Thames. This low-lying area was dissected by numerous river and stream channels flowing from the higher ground to the south-east, east and north-east towards the Thames, around and between three areas of very slightly higher ground, representing higher 'islands' of gravel, on the south (now represented by East Lane/South Lane), centre (Market Place, All Saints Churchyard and Horsefair) and north (Skerne Road) of the modern town centre, with the central area forming an island. All of the watercourses appear to have been significantly wider than those present today, subject to course change, capable of overbank flooding and of causing bank erosion, processes that clearly continued (and perhaps worsened) in the early post-Roman period. We have no information on the level or width of the Thames at Kingston in the Roman period, though excavated evidence shows the 12th-century river to have been between 30 and 60 m wider than the existing river and significantly lower.¹² Therefore, although Roman Kingston has some topographical similarities with Roman Staines,¹³ we should perhaps envisage a more unstable riverine environment with more profound consequences from any rise in river levels.

The topography of Kingston Hill and Coombe Hill: implications for antiquarian finds

'Kingston Hill' is the western slope and 'Coombe Hill' the southern slope of the

same mass of high ground which rises just under a kilometre east of Kingston town centre, rising from 10 m to 50 m AOD. The slope of 'Kingston Hill' is marginally less pronounced than that of 'Coombe Hill' in rising to the summit, though neither could be described as steep. Between 'Kingston Hill' and 'Coombe Hill', a small number of shallow folds or 'coombes' cut back into the high ground at between 15 and 30 m AOD. These features are difficult to detect on the ground today because of the extent of modern development. They are however clearly visible on the first edition Ordnance Survey of 1816 (Fig. 2). This is also the area of a natural spring line clearly marked as 'conduits' on Greenwood's map of 1823 (Fig. 3).

It is clear that during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, Roman finds were being made on both the slopes of 'Kingston Hill' and 'Coombe Hill' and the summit of the high ground around 'Coombe Wood' in several different locations.¹⁴ Of particular note are finds in the area of the 'conduits' and of 'Coombe House'; these, as shown in the historic maps, were located toward the base rather than the summit of the high ground.

Since 1996 it has been suggested that the Roman finds at 'Coombe Hill' might represent a temple,¹⁵ and this would certainly equate with both the elevation and nature of some of the recorded finds around Coombe Wood. However, this interpretation does not necessarily exclude other settlement forms in this general area, particularly toward the base of the hill slopes in the area of the conduits/coombes. Perhaps what was represented here was a 'dispersed complex' of buildings and structures.¹⁶ The spread of Roman finds (from several locations in an area 1.5 km square) suggests that a complex 'landscape' of Roman activity and settlement sites including both sacred and domestic elements may have existed.

Antiquarian anomalies

In Kingston Museum there is a small Roman altar inscribed *Deau/Fortunae/et/Numini/bus/Augusto/rum* – 'To the Goddess Fortune and the Deities of the Emperors'.¹⁷

The origins of the altar are quite unknown, though it was recorded as being seen in a garden in Eden Street in 1902, before its translocation to Kingston Museum some time after 1904.¹⁸ The altar is a dressed and inscribed block of quartz rich sandstone or grit c. 30 cm x 74 cm with plain sides and back. Within the focus are four rounded objects possibly fruit. At some time in the past the whole block has been painted a dull grey in colour with the lettering picked out in a dull red, and the character of the stone can be made out only in a few areas of relatively recent abrasion. Possible sources for the altar seem most likely to be found in the Palaeozoic rocks of northern or western Britain, possibly in the millstone grit or the coal measure sandstones. The author believes the altar was formerly part of the display of a 'curiosity shop', dealing in antiquities, operating in Eden Street in 1881¹⁹ and possibly for some years thereafter, and that the altar is unlikely to have arrived in Kingston before 1852,²⁰ and very probably after the building of the railway (1861–3).

Also in Kingston Museum is the so-called 'Coombe Neville' mosaic (KHS Accessions Card (MDA), 1984, 1089). It was donated to Kingston Museum in c. 1930 by Dr William Evelyn St Lawrence Finny FSA (c. 1864–1952), several times mayor of Kingston and with a claim to be Kingston's first 'modern' archaeologist. From what we know of Finny's life there appears no reason to doubt his integrity, while it is apparent that for his time he was a competent archaeologist.²¹ However, recent analysis of the mosaic fragment, part of a Guilloche border 80 x 69 mm, indicates it originated around the Mediterranean, rather than in Roman Britain.²²

I believe that rather than ever claiming to have found the mosaic at Coombe Neville, Finny acquired the piece for Kingston Museum in good faith as *having been found at Coombe Neville*. Possibly Finny may have acquired the piece from the Curiosity Shop in Eden Street or even from G.F. Lawrence, the notorious 'Stony Jack', who was engaged in cataloguing and arranging the collections in Kingston Museum in the 1930s.²³

Recent archaeological work and implications for earlier finds

Since 1996 numerous archaeological interventions have been reported or undertaken in and around Kingston Town Centre and around 'Kingston Hill' and 'Coombe Hill'. The most significant of them in interpreting and advancing earlier work on Roman Kingston have been at Skerne Road in 2001 to 2002²⁴ and Orchard Road in 1995.²⁵ At Skerne Road evidence for Roman occupation *in situ* and activity spanning the 1st to 4th centuries was revealed. A range of cut features were found; including pits backfilled with a high concentration of both ceramic roof and box flue tiles dating to the 1st to 2nd centuries AD, but deposited with 3rd-century pottery and animal bone. Associated with these finds were relatively large quantities of stone floor and roof tiles. Of particular note was a large pit, the fill of which contained a high proportion of partially articulated cattle and horse skeletons, which may indicate ritual activity.

The pits with ceramic building material and bone at Skerne Road recall two potentially similar pits recorded at 2 Clarence Street, Kingston in 1988.²⁶ The Roman material from these pits was thought by Merrifield in 1996 to represent residual Roman material in a later context. Clearly these must now be re-considered in the light of the Skerne Road material.

The evidence of possible ritual activity at Skerne Road may be paralleled at 2 Clarence Street and perhaps gives an additional context to the assemblage of 355 coins²⁷ and (the often overlooked) associated finds including jewellery, lead strips, smelting waste, iron nails (in large numbers) and "Various animal bones including a substantial part of the skeleton of a horse or cow" recovered from the edge of a stream channel (possibly part of the braided east arm of the Hogsmill) at 82 Eden Street in 1989.²⁸

The Roman finds at Skerne Road may well vindicate 19th-century records of a 'Roman inhumation

cemetery' found in the area of 'Canbury fields' (of which the modern Skerne Road forms a part)²⁹ together with later writers who supported this identification.³⁰

The evidence for an inhumation cemetery at 'Canbury Fields' has perhaps been too readily dismissed in the past because the description of the finds in most 19th-century accounts is mixed in with that of finds of supposedly 'Roman Military Weapons'³¹ from the (completely separate) site of Kingston's road bridge over the Thames. No doubt the 'weapons' comprised part of the large and important body of late Prehistoric metalwork recovered from the Thames at Kingston.

The Orchard Road site investigated in 1995, although very small in scale,

appears to have identified a modest late prehistoric/early Roman activity and settlement site. This may be a continuation of the 1967 evidence for late Iron Age and Roman activity evidenced from Fairfield West.³² Orchard Road abuts Fairfield West on the south-west. Taken together these finds might perhaps indicate a modest farmstead on marginally higher ground (around 6m AOD) just east of the 'east arm of the Hogsmill' channel now represented by Brook Street. The Orchard Road and Fairfield West finds lay close by the finds at 82 Eden Street.

Elsewhere in Kingston Town Centre and its immediate hinterland; and around the slopes of 'Kingston Hill' and 'Coombe Hill' numerous archaeological investigations since 1996 have produced little evidence for Roman

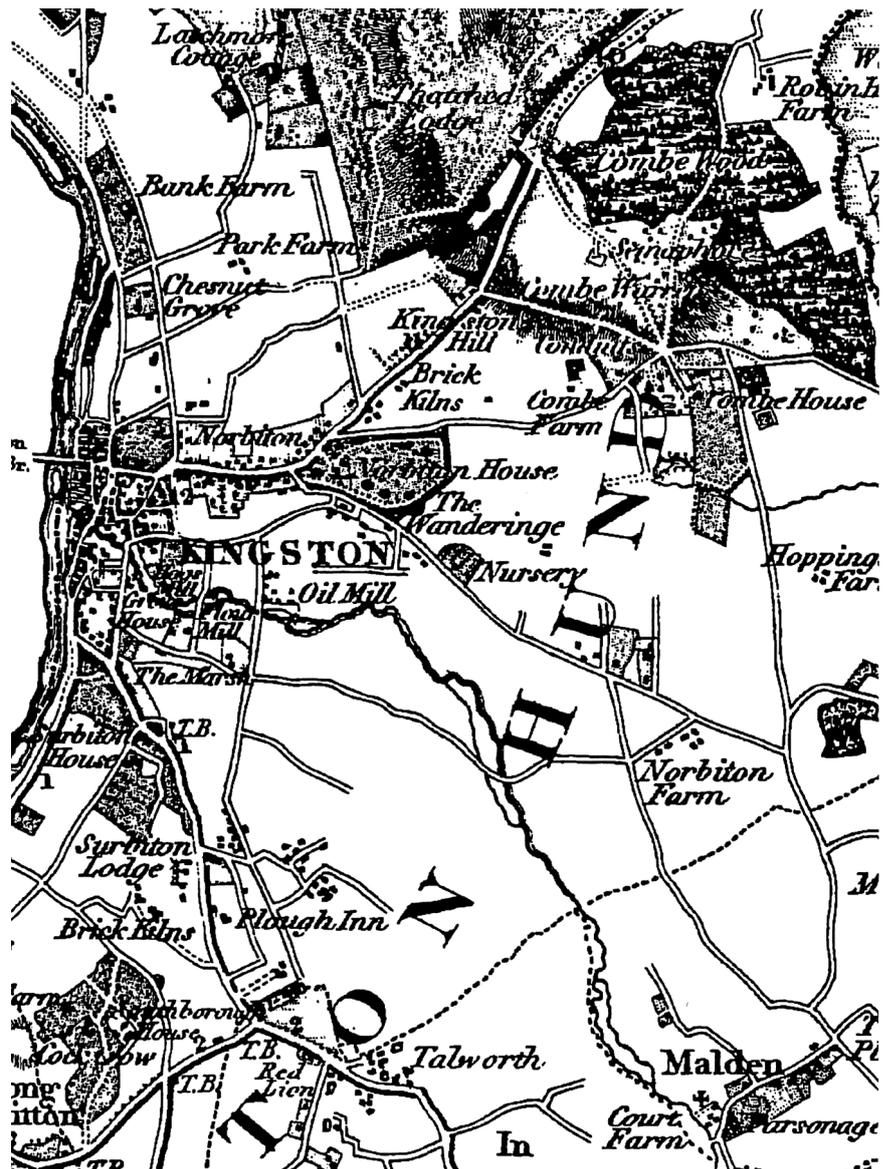


Fig. 3: extract from Greenwood's map of 1823

activity, other than a 'handful' of abraded Roman pottery sherds and ceramic building material fragments, even during large-scale interventions.

Discussion

The emerging picture of Roman Kingston remains one of a landscape of rural settlements. The settlement in the area of 'Canbury Fields' represented by the recent Skerne Road finds and the inhumation cemetery recorded in the 19th century may well be a "settlement larger than a farm or two"³³ but is perhaps unlikely to have been much more than a riverside hamlet with its economy based on agriculture. The animal bone from Skerne Road, Eden Street and Clarence Street perhaps indicates a community engaged in stock raising, appropriate to the generally heavy soils of the Kingston area.

While the quantities of ceramic and stone tile recovered at Skerne Road and Eden Street could indicate substantial buildings nearby more probably they would have formed components for humbler structures relating to rural settlement and agriculture. Increasingly we should perhaps see the box flue tile

as the 'breeze block' of Roman Britain, particularly in locations such as Kingston where there is no natural building stone.

The Eden Street site may well be one of a number of "local sites regarded as sacred which would not have had temples",³⁴ although this site could perhaps now be seen as part of a pattern of relatively widespread ritual activity at Kingston by agricultural communities scattered around an extensive network of rivers and streams.

The existence of a Roman settlement and possible religious centre at the headwaters of the Hogsmill at Ewell,³⁵ a mere 8 km up the Hogsmill Valley from Kingston, should however not be overlooked in this context. The Hogsmill Valley may have been important for the movement of stock between the downland pastures around Ewell and the river valley meadows around Kingston, perhaps via the emerging Roman activity site at Old Malden, (halfway up the Hogsmill Valley between Kingston and Ewell – shown as 'Malden' in Figs 2 and 3), a successor to an earlier Iron Age

settlement where the scale and number of 'enclosures' now identified surely suggests sophisticated stock management.³⁶ In the context of this potential agricultural linkage of the Roman settlements of the Hogsmill valley there may have been shared ritual activity reflecting the importance of the river in sustaining agriculture in general and perhaps stock raising in particular.

Conclusions

It is nearly twenty years since it could be honestly written that:

"considerable excavation and site watching in present day towns such as Kingston ... have produced no evidence for Roman settlement."³⁷

In those years archaeological investigation has significantly advanced our understanding of the ancient topography of the Kingston area and the nature of Roman activity and settlement. While, on the available evidence, there is certainly no substantial Roman settlement at Kingston there is a complex of rural settlements and activity sites, which are perhaps best understood in the context of wider settlement and activity along the Hogsmill and Thames valleys.

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16. E.g. *op cit* fn. 15 (ref. 2) 87–88.

17. R.P. Wright *Roman Inscriptions in Britain Volume I, Inscriptions on Stone* (1995) 691.

18. *Op cit* fn. 1, 49.

19. T. Frost *Kingston upon Thames* (1881) 11.

20. The year in which W.D. Biden's *The History and Antiquities of the Ancient Royal Town of Kingston upon Thames* was published.

21. See for example, W.E. Finny 'Roman tile and pottery from Kingston' *Surrey Archaeol Collect* 38 (1929) 229.

22. David Neal, *pers. comm.*

23. J. MacDonald 'Stony Jack's Roman London' in J. Bird, M. Hassall and H. Sheldon (eds) *Interpreting Roman London Papers in memory of Hugh Chapman* (1996) 245.

24. *Op cit* fn. 11.

25. WVE95, unpublished report. Geoff Perry, Sutton Archaeological Services.

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35. D. Bird 'Roads and Temples, Stane Street at Ewell' *London Archaeol* 10, no. 2 (2002) 41–45.

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