



From 1914 ORDNANCE SURVEY (published 1916)

A Roman vicus in Peckham?

Rosemary Warhurst

ONE PLACE name which has been well studied since the 1960s is *Wicham* with its modern forms Wickham, Wycomb, etc. When this name has the early or middle English spelling *Wicham*, it is thought to derive from the Latin *vicus*, a Roman administrative unit, together with the early Saxon settlement name *ham*. Dr Margaret Gelling, now President of the English Place Name Society, has done much work on *Wicham* names. She mentions an early *Wicham* field name in Peckham¹.

The Peckham name is found in 1224 in a law case now in the Public Record Office. Bermondsey Priory are disputing with Hamo, son of Alexander de Tychesey, about whether 4 acres of land called *le Hope* belonged to land called *Wicham* in the fields of Peckham². The Priory had refused to bury Hamo's father before they received the land.

There is more information about this land in Peckham in the Surrey Collection in Lambeth Archives Library. In a deed of 1541 land in Wickham

lay just south of the king's highway from London to Deptford. This was the Old Kent Road³. In a 1610 Court Roll, a Mr Campion Brewer was presented that "he cleanse and scoure his dyke and make a sufficient Bridge that the water may have free passage lying near Wickham"⁴. In 1636 Wickham was a 12 acre enclosed field lying south of the highway to London in Peckham⁵.

Dr Gelling has found that a large proportion of place names from *Wicham* lie near major Roman roads. So did the *Wicham* in Peckham, which lay just south of the Old Kent Road. She says "the statistical probability of wicham names coinciding with known Romano-British habitation sites is considerable"⁶.

The historian J N L Myres also talks about the Roman *vicus* and *wicham* names⁷. He says that in earlier Roman times a vicus was a small unit of local administration, a small town or substantial village. By the 4th century the word *vicus* had

Lambeth Archives Library.

5. Deed No 6799. Lambeth Archives Library.

6. *Op cit* fn 1 (1st ed.)

7. J N L Myres *The English Settlements* (1986).

1. M Gelling *Signposts to the Past* (1988) 2nd ed.

2. 1224 Curia regis roll, No 2625. Public Record Office.

3. Deed No 49. Lambeth Archives Library.

4. Court Roll. Camberwell Buckingham *et al.* Ref. 231 p2.

probably lost most of its official legal and administrative meaning but may still have been a status symbol. *Vicus* was known to the earliest Anglo Saxon settlers.

Where was the field Wickham? Peckham by the Old Kent Road stretches from Trafalgar Avenue to Pomeroy Street (Fig. 1), but the central part of this area in the 16th and 17th centuries was taken up by the common field, Peckham North Field, and would not have been Wickham. A map of 1830, made at the time the North Field was enclosed, gives the boundaries of the North Field⁸. The north-west boundary was the Grand Surrey Canal, which reached the Old Kent Road a little to the west of Peckham Park Road⁹. At the end of Frensham Street, a short cul-de-sac off Peckham Park Road, was the Western Wharf on the banks of the Canal. The eastern boundary was a ditch near Asylum Road at the point where it meets the Old Kent Road, although the map is rather smudged at this point. Thus Wickham lay either between Trafalgar Avenue and a point a little to the west of Peckham Park Road, or between Asylum Road and Pomeroy Street.

The Museum of London has found Roman material in two areas south of the Old Kent Road in Peckham since 1976. One area is around Asylum Road, the other is to the west of Peckham Park Road at Bowles Road. Bowles Road no longer

exists, and on its site is a Macdonalds and an extension of Olmar Road.

In 1976 the Museum of London found two ditches containing Romano-British pottery at 119-121 Asylum Road¹⁰. This site was probably too far south in Asylum Road to have lain in Wickham. However, in February 1993 they found stonework suggestive of the foundation of a Roman building at 4-10 Asylum Road¹¹. Asylum Road at this point was thought to be on the line of the London to Lewes Roman road¹²; this building would lie near the junction with the Old Kent Road.

At Bowles Road in the spring and summer of 1990, the Museum of London found Roman pottery of the 1st to 4th century AD, coins of the same period, many Roman tiles in one trench, iron objects and an attractive Roman intaglio made of jasper¹³. At a nearby site at Canal Bridge, they found many Roman samian pottery sherds and tiles¹⁴. In their reports on these sites the archaeologists suggest there is evidence of settlement nearby¹⁵.

Were either of these areas situated in the field *Wicham*? Bowles Road was just to the west of Peckham North Field, and so could have been in *Wicham*. The site at 4-10 Asylum Road might have been on the eastern border of the North Field. In 1610 Mr Campion Brewer has to "cleanse and scour his dyke..." (see above), so do we know of dykes near the possible sites for *Wicham*?

8. Enclosure map of Peckham North Field 1830. Southwark Archives Library.
9. *Retracing canals to Croydon and Camberwell* Living History Publications (1986).
10. *London Archaeol* 3 no 2 (1977) 56.
11. S Blatherwick 'A Roman building and gravel surface at 4-10 Asylum Road, Southwark, London' *SEIS London Archaeol* 7

- no 4 (1993) 73-6.
12. I Margary *Roman Ways in the Weald* (1968) 126.
13. W Rogers 'Mesolithic and neolithic flint tool-manufacturing areas buried beneath Roman Watling Street in Southwark' *London Archaeol* 6 no 9 (1990) 227-31.
14. *Ibid* 231; *London Archaeol* 6 no 11 (1991) 306.
15. *Op cit* fn 13, 231.

Letter

Gromaticus (*LA* 7, no 6, 1994) is right to stress the need to publish London's huge backlog of developer-funded site investigations. In many cases the *LA Round-up* summaries will remain for years the only published source.

There is a further unpublished group that the Museum of London has recently abandoned, I hope only temporarily. They are the sites in the City that were investigated in the 1960s by myself and Ivor Noel Hume as permanent members of the staff of the Guildhall Museum, then a department of the Corporation of London. They were carried out with Corporation funding and mostly on Corporation sites — and include the City defences on the Museum of London site, Roman fort defences and a medieval church on the Corporation's offices at Guildhall, the late medieval and Tudor palace of Baynard's Castle, and the Roman bath and dwelling at Billingsgate. They were part of a permanent archaeological commitment by the

museum and the Corporation, and not of a unit like the DUA or MOLAS with separate funding.

But with my enforced 'early retirement' last year, no provision was made for these sites. The Director of the Museum of London, successor to the Guildhall Museum, accepts that provision should be made, but as time passes I feel increasingly sad that my work may join that of Dunning, Cottrill and Grimes, to be itself 'rescued' and written up after my death by someone else who never knew the sites. I am keenly aware of the difficulties in interpreting other people's records, and of the consequent loss of information.

A solution exists, in that having 'retired', it is now possible for me to undertake the publication at half the cost, since there would be none of MOLAS' overhead charges. Perhaps the way forward generally is for several people to tackle London's backlog on a grant-aided consultancy basis, leaving MOLAS to handle current and future sites. At a stroke the cost would be reduced by 50%.

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Nicholas Barton traces the river Peck flowing near Asylum Road where it reaches the Old Kent Road¹⁶. This watercourse was more a stream than a river, and could have been the dyke which Mr Campion had to bridge.

This raises the question of whether in the 17th century there was a stream flowing near Bowles Road. In the Surrey Collection in the Lambeth Archives Library there is a map of the Estate of William Shard in 1775¹⁷. The Shards were Peckham landowners, and this map shows all the small strip fields which William Shard held in Peckham North field. The western boundary of the North field is shown as a watercourse flowing north across the road from Kent to London, and called at that date a "common sewer". Six small meadows belonging to Mr Shard are shown stretching eastwards at right angles to the common sewer, and they are all called Willow Brook. This must mean that the "common sewer" had been a stream called the Willow Brook, and the fields and later a road were named after it.

Since in the 1830 enclosure map of the North Field, the Grand Surrey Canal is given as the north-west boundary of the North Field, it is likely that the Canal at this point was dug on the bed of an existing stream. (The only problem is that someone drew the line of the canal onto the Shard map at an unknown date after the Peckham branch was

16. N Barton *The Lost Rivers of London* (1962).

17. Estate of William Shard 1775. Map. Lambeth Archives Library 10/1775/MF.

18. *Op cit* fn 16.

opened in May 1826, and it is within rather than on the boundary of the North Field, but the enclosure map is probably more accurate in this respect.)

"Common sewers" are also shown as the eastern and northern boundaries of the Shard fields. These waterways are probably the Peck and the Earls Sliuce as described by Nicholas Barton¹⁸.

Thus in 1610 there was a stream flowing near Bowles Road across the Old Kent Road. This could have been the dyke which Mr Campion Brewer had to bridge.

Summary

Place name evidence suggests there was a Roman vicus in Peckham just south of the Old Kent Road. Excavations by the Museum of London have produced evidence of probable Roman settlement near Bowles Road, and some Roman activity at Asylum Road. The position of the Bowles Road excavation, between Trafalgar Avenue and a point to the west of Peckham Park Road, and the presence of a stream there, suggests that the field Wicham could have been here. Further research and excavation may show whether this was a *vicus*.

Acknowledgements

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Excavations and post-excavation work

City of London. Enquiries to Museum of London Archaeology Service, Number One, London Wall, London EC2Y 5EA (071-972 9111).

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 were also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Mrs Muriel Shaw, 28 Lismore Road, South Croydon, CR2 7QA (081-688 2720).

Greater London (except north-east and south-east London), by Museum of London Archaeology Service. Excavations and processing in all areas. General enquiries to MOLAS, Number One, London Wall, London EC2Y 5EA (071-972 9111).

Borough of Greenwich. Cataloguing of excavated and other archaeological material, the majority from sites in the borough. For further information contact Greenwich Borough Museum, 232 Plumstead High Street, London SE18 1JT (081-855 3240).

Hammersmith & Fulham, by Fulham Archaeological Rescue Group. Processing of material from Fulham Palace. Tuesdays, 7.45 p.m.-10 p.m. at Fulham Palace, Bishop's Avenue, Fulham Palace Road, SW6. Contact Keith Whitehouse, 86 Clancarty Road, SW6 (071-731 4498).

Kingston, by Kingston upon Thames Archaeological Society. Rescue sites in the town centre. Enquiries to Kingston Heritage Centre, Fairfield Road, Kingston (081-546 5386).

North-east London, by Passmore Edwards Museum. Enquiries to Pat Wilkinson, Newham Museum Service, Archaeology and Local History Centre, 31 Stock Street, E13 0BX (081-472 4785).

Surrey, by Surrey County Archaeological Unit. Enquiries to Rob Poulton, Archaeological Unit Manager, Planning Department, Pelham Lodge, Kingston, Surrey (081-541 9457).

Vauxhall Pottery, by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society. Processing of excavated material continues three nights a week. Enquiries to S.L.A.S., c/o Cuming Museum, 155 Walworth Road, SE17 (071-703 3324).

Individual membership of the Council for British Archaeology includes 10 issues a year of British Archaeological News, as well as the supplement CBA Briefing, which gives details of conferences, extra-mural courses, summer schools, training excavations and sites where volunteers are needed. The subscription of £18 p.a. includes postage, and should be sent to C.B.A., Bowes Morrell House, 111 Walmgate, York, YO1 2UA (0904 671417).