

# Woodcote, or Woodcote Warren, once a City, according to Tradition

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The inscription which heads this paper is taken from the Bowen Map of Surrey (c. 1760) and it has been the object of my researches to try and discover the truth behind this tradition. In the course of the following exposition a considerable part of the history of Woodcote will be described. At the same time, the study also sheds some light on the relative merits of many early writers on the antiquities of Surrey.<sup>1</sup>

The first reference to an ancient city at Woodcote is found in the *Britannia*, Camden's great geography of Britain, first published in 1586. After a reference to Croydon, Camden writes:-

Two miles south of here is a small wood on a hilltop, nowadays called Woodcote, where the remains of a town can be plainly seen, along with many wells built of flints, and the locals frequently remark on the number and wealth of its inhabitants.<sup>2</sup>

Camden is a trustworthy writer, so we can be sure that he was writing from personal experience and that such ruins actually existed. We need not necessarily accept, however, his interpretation of these remains, which runs:-

Here, in my opinion, stood the city which Ptolemy called Noiomagus and Antoninus Noviomagus. I say this for no other reason than the distances involved. For it is ten miles from London and eighteen from Vagniacae, exactly as stated in the old Itinerary. Consequently those who place Noviomagus at Buckingham or Guildford are mistaken. It was the capital city of the Regni and known to the old geographer Marinus Tyrius, although Ptolemy does censure him for placing Noviomagus within Britain climatically north of London while in his road plan it lies to the south.<sup>3</sup>

But such a statement from a respected authority has been enough for most subsequent writers, and so Woodcote has been known as the site of the Roman City of Noviomagus up until the present century.

The next reference to Woodcote comes from the diarist, John Evelyn, who wrote in a letter to Aubrey of 8 February 1676:-

I do not find you have yet made your thorough Journey about Bansted, where was the famous Woodcot, of which you shall find mention in Mr

Burton's Notes upon Antoninus's Itinerary. There are to this Day, Roman Coins, Urns, and Bricks, and co., dug up by the Rusticks.<sup>4</sup>

This implies a personal knowledge of the site, and in this context a diary entry of 27 September, 1658 may be relevant:-

... riding over these downes and discoursing with the shepherds, I found that digging about the bottome neere Sir Christopher Buckle's near Bansted, divers medailes have been found both copper and silver, with the foundations of houses, urnes, etc: and here indeede antiently stood a famous City of the Romans, se Itinerarium Antonini, ...<sup>5</sup>

However, this entry raises two problems. Firstly, Sir Christopher Buckle's place (Great Burgh House) was on the western (Epsom) side of Banstead, and about 5 miles from Woodcote, and secondly Camden is talking of a site on a hilltop, while Evelyn's is in 'the bottome'. For these reasons, I am inclined to think that Evelyn was not talking of Woodcote in this entry but, possibly, of a site on Stane Street, and that he only later identified what he had seen with what he had read about at Woodcote. So these references from Evelyn in fact tell us little more than that Woodcote was a well-known Roman site.

However, we do receive another first-hand account of the ruins in Thomas Gale's commentary on the Antonine Itinerary, published in 1709. After describing the course of the Roman road through Stretham and Croydon, he goes on to say that it then

... goes up to Woodcote Warren, i.e. Noviomagus. Established tradition and personal observation both suggest that at some time a town stood here. The following is my opinion on this matter.

I have seen there many paving stones, tiles, streets, foundations, and squared stones; nearby there are also many wells for drawing up water, which are (I deduce from one of them) incredibly deep.<sup>6</sup>

This reference is very useful since it unequivocally claims personal knowledge. But we cannot be so certain that the next author to write on this subject, John Aubrey, had also seen the ruins. He wrote, in 1718:-

In this Hunred rises the River Wandle; and on the Top of the Hill adjacent appear great tokens of an once flourishing town, which Camden takes to be the ancient Noviomagus, mentioned by Ptolemy, of which remain Ruines built of Flints, Stones, etc.<sup>7</sup>

It is, however, probable that Nicholas Salmon writing in 1736, did have first-hand knowledge. His entry on the subject is quite lengthy, and includes the sentence:-

Woodcote has been a place full of Inhabitants, as appears from the

traces of Streets, and the number of old Wells, some of which have been very deep.<sup>8</sup>

Some statements in Salmon's book are so wildly erroneous that many people nowadays just dismiss him as totally unreliable; but I am inclined to accept his observations as original since his description of the ruins at Woodcote does contain information not found elsewhere. He is also, if not perfect, at least more critical in his approach than most earlier writers, as is shown in this section:-

I would not look for Noviomagus here in the way to Dover. But this use I would make of all their observations; that Wallington, in which I include Woodcote, till better informed, was a considerable place being the residence of Romans or of Britons after the legions were drawn off from hence: That it was a Manse or Resting Place between Stane Street and London, so remarkable that the Saxons thought fit to name the Hundred from it . . .<sup>9</sup>

However, from this time on we find no more claims to have seen the ruins, and it seems likely that they were destroyed during the first half of the eighteenth century, when the land was cleared for cultivation.

As a result, later writers have contributed no new information. Some, including Dr Gough<sup>10</sup> (1806), J. C. Anderson<sup>11</sup> (1874), Maldon<sup>12</sup> (1900) and Martin<sup>13</sup> (1923) have gone all the way and identified the site as Noviomagus. But the majority of writers, including Manning and Bray<sup>14</sup> (1804), the Rev. O. F. Owen<sup>15</sup> (1856), the *Victoria County History*<sup>16</sup>, D. C. Whimster<sup>17</sup> (1931) and F. J. C. Heamshaw<sup>18</sup> (1936), only accept that there was some type of Roman settlement at Woodcote. But it is interesting to note that John Horsley, writing in 1732, talked of:-

. . . Woodcote, where Camden long ago, and Dr Gale more lately, have placed Noviomagus. And both saw some remains of an old town, but I think no proper Roman antiquities.<sup>19</sup>

Salmon also seems doubtful about the Roman attribution, when he says:-

Nor are we sure that Wallington [which he equates with Woodcote] was a town coeval with Noviomagus.<sup>20</sup>

So all we can say so far is that at Woodcote there were some remains visible between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries which might possibly be Roman. But the Noviomagus tradition initiated by Camden has become so firmly established and quoted so often, that it is essential that the truth of the matter be unearthed.

To begin with, it is necessary to establish that these authors were talking about the Woodcote near Purley. For the absence of any Roman remains at Woodcote, plus the entry in Evelyn's diary which is talking about an area

further west, has led some people to wonder whether it was not, in fact, the Woodcote near Epsom that was meant. This idea is attractive since Stane Street (the Roman road from London to Chichester) runs through Woodcote Park. Further doubt is fostered by the most commonly used English translation of Camden's *Britannia*, that of Dr Gough<sup>21</sup>, published in 1806. First of all, the order of entries in this text has been changed, so that the phrase 'two miles south from hence is a little wood, now called Woodcote' appears immediately after the description of Wimbledon. This can be taken to refer to either Woodcote. And secondly, Dr Gough, in his commentary, makes the statement 'near Woodcote is Epsom' which is disquieting. However, a look at the first edition of *Britannia*, as quoted above, makes it quite clear that Camden meant two miles south of Croydon, and this is confirmed by a map that he had published with the 6th Edition (1607)<sup>22</sup>, which only marks the Woodcote south of Croydon.

And so we come to the great question; were these remains Roman or were they from another period? One thing is certain, and that is that they were not the ruins of Noviomagus. This particular identification was based on an over-literal, but uncritical, reading of the Antonine Itinerary<sup>23</sup>. Modern authorities usually place Noviomagus at Crayford in Kent. It is, however, possible that we have an anonymous Roman settlement at Woodcote; as I have already written<sup>24</sup>, this is by no means unlikely. But doubt is thrown on the idea by the absence of any Roman finds at present day Woodcote. It is also difficult to believe that remains could have survived until the sixteenth century in a recognisable form, and then completely disappeared within two centuries. In addition we have to bear in mind that early antiquarians were fond of attributing ruins of unknown date to the Romans. So one is tempted to look round for an alternative explanation, and the most obvious candidate is a Deserted Mediaeval Village. Following this line of thought has led me to a substantial body of evidence for a mediaeval village at Woodcote and its desertion<sup>25</sup>

In the Domesday Survey<sup>26</sup> there is no mention of a village at Woodcote, unless we care to follow Salmon in speculating that the two hides held by Walter de Douai were at Woodcote.<sup>27</sup> It is, however, relevant to note that it lists the manor of Wallington as part of the Royal Domain. But in the Curia Regis Rolls of the early thirteenth century there are a good number of references to a village called Woodcote. These start with a dispute over a Will in 1202<sup>28</sup>, involving land at Beddington as well as one acre at Woodcote. Later in King John's reign we find three of four similar cases<sup>29</sup>. Then in 1223 we find a jury of 21 local men being sworn in to witness as to:-

... what dues and services ... were rendered to King Henry the grandfather of the lord King and Richard his uncle from the lands which they held in Waleton' and Wdecot ...<sup>30</sup>

Evidently a new village had been founded on the waste-lands in the southern part of the manor of Wallington; in fact the very name Woodcote, which means 'a hut in the forest'<sup>31</sup>, suggests this. This 'assart' was probably one

of the many founded in the twelfth century, notably by Henry II ('the grand-father of the lord King'), aimed at increasing the revenues of the Royal Domain. And it is only because Woodcote did remain in Royal hands that we have any records of it preserved in the Curia Regis Rolls; if it had been under any other lord such cases as we have would have been judged by him, and probably gone unrecorded.

Another body of evidence for the existence of a sizable village at Woodcote lies in the references to persons named 'de la Wodecot'. Again the Curia Regis Rolls<sup>32</sup> provide the earliest example, with 'Lucas de la Wdecot' appearing several times in 1200-01. Later in the Rolls we meet Lucas again, as well as Baldric, his wife Emma and his father Walter. Two of the jurors of 1223 are Alvred and Gilbert de Wdecot'. Then in the Chertsey Abbey Cartularies for 1241-63<sup>33</sup> we find Grayland de la Wodecote and his brother Baldric, and another Lucas Wodecote. The latest reference of this sort that I have found is in the record of a court of the Manor of Carshalton held on the morrow of Hockday in 1392 (i.e. on the 2nd Wednesday after Easter), when William Wodecote paid his dues<sup>34</sup>.

We can glean further information on the village from an assessment for a property tax, the Fifteenth, made in 1336. The assessment for Woodcote looked like this:-

From Rogero ate Grene	iijs. vijd.	ob	(3s. 7½d.)
From Baldr' Frag'	ijs.		(2s. 0d. )
From Drogone ate hozeleit'	xvjd.		( 16d. )
From Ada Pik'	ijs. vjd.		(2s. 6d. )
From Thomas le Bole	xijd.		( 12d. )
From Willelmo Snel	iijs. vjd.	ob qa	(3s. 6¾d.)
From Roberto Baudry	viijd.		( 8d. )
From Johanne Brendewode	xijd.		( 12d. )
From Willelmo de Cherlewode	iijs. vjd.	ob qa	(3s. 6¾d.)
From Waltero ate Grene	ijs. vjd.		(2s. 6d. )
From Ferand' de spaigne	vs. ix.		(5s. 9d. )
From Roberto Chekemete	viijd.		( 8d. )
From Johanne le Forester	iijs. vjd.	ob qa	(3s. 6¾d.)
From Widow Crakeford	viijd.		( 8d. )
From Willelmo le Bole	viijd.		( 8d. )
Total	xxxiijs.	ob qa	(33s. 0¾d.)

This tax was only paid by men with some personal property other than household utensils, tools, or food in store. Like Woodcote, Beddington had 15 men of sufficient substance, but Wallington could only muster 12. It is, unfortunately, impossible to deduce the total population of the village from these figures. This record is the last we have of the village of Woodcote; it is likely it was abandoned in the later fourteenth century, in the period after the Black Death when many villages were abandoned all over the country. As a relatively new settlement on comparatively poor, chalky soil, it would have been one of the first to be abandoned when the population

shrank. As mentioned above, the surname 'Wodecote' is found in the area until the end of the fourteenth century. After that time, Woodcote must have reverted to waste-land; thus it is as a 'warren' that it is known in a Surrey Feet of Fines entry for 1556<sup>36</sup>. Thirty years later Camden visited the site, and noticed ruins amongst the undergrowth.

Consequently the tradition of a Roman city at Woodcote must, with regret, be dismissed as without foundation; but we have gained a Deserted Mediaeval Village instead. The one outstanding question is, where exactly was the village? To begin with, we can be fairly certain that the village lay on the site of a later farmstead. Two pieces of evidence can be cited to support this statement. Firstly, when they were creating a farm out of land which included the site of such ruins, it seems very likely that they would have placed the new farm buildings on the same site, where building stone and hardcore were easily available. And, secondly, we have a statement from Salmon (1736) in his description of Woodcote:-

The Old Building which was called a Chapel, now a barn, may have been the Parish-Church of Wallington.<sup>37</sup>

Now, since eighteenth and nineteenth-century maps<sup>38</sup> show no detached barns in the Woodcote area it looks as if the eighteenth-century builders not only used the site of the Deserted Mediaeval Village for their farm buildings, but also took over one of the ruins intact. Now, in the area concerned, there are three habitation sites to which the name Woodcote has always been applied: Woodcote Grove, Woodcote Farm and Woodcote Lodge<sup>39</sup>. These farmsteads had all been built by 1765<sup>40</sup>, and so the building of any one of them could have been responsible for the destruction of the remains after the 1730's. But I am inclined to think that the ruins lay on the site later occupied by Woodcote Farm, for four reasons. Firstly it is the site to which the same Woodcote is most firmly attached. Secondly, it most closely fits Camden's phrase 'two miles south of here (Croydon) is . . . Woodcote'<sup>41</sup>. Thirdly, the inscription which is found on the Bowen Map of Surrey (1760)<sup>42</sup>, and which heads this paper, is written over an area which includes Woodcote Farm. And fourthly, the following entry in a travelogue of 1817 can be taken to indicate that Woodcote Farm was on the site of the ruins:-

On the left of our road, about a mile and a half before we reach Croydon is Woodcote, which is thus described by Camden:- . . . 'Woodcote is now reduced to a single farm-house'.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time we must rule out the claims of either Woodcote Grove or Woodcote Lodge, simply because there is no further evidence to support them. Thus the most likely site for our village is the site of Woodcote Farm, the area of modern Farm Lane, Purley.

To conclude this paper, I would like to say a few words about how such a shrewd and critical observer as Camden was led astray, thus initiating the erroneous tradition. At about the time Camden started on his travels a

certain Robert Talbot had published a Commentary on the Antonine Itinerary<sup>44</sup>. Now all commentators on this work are faced with the difficulty that the sum of the distances given between the stations on the road from Canterbury to London (see Itinerary II) does not equal the total distance between the two towns as given elsewhere (in Itineraries III and IV).<sup>45</sup> To resolve this discrepancy, he postulated

a longer road than the other, but one going through more densely populated and flatter areas, and better able to carry an army . . . Thus on the first day they went from London to Croydon (Noviomagus), on the second to Otford (Vagniacae), which is situated on this road, on the third to Maidstone (Dunobriuae), on the fourth to Charing (Durolevum), and on the fifth day to Canterbury (Durovennum)<sup>46</sup>.

Evidently, as a result of this, Camden came into this corner of Surrey consciously looking for Roman ruins, and having failed to find them in Croydon, the site Talbot had suggested, was only too ready to jump to conclusions when he found ruins 'two miles south from hence'<sup>47</sup>. Thus Woodcote gained a place in the histories of Roman Britain to which it had no right, and which it has kept until the present century.

## REFERENCES

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6. Gale, Thomas. *Antonini Iter Britanniarum Commentariis illustratum* (1709), 78; author's translation.
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14. M. & B., I, 267-70 and III, app. xviii.
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  19. Horsley, J. *Britannia Romana* (1732). In the opinion of the late R. G. Collingwood this book 'may be regarded as the first and in many ways still the best book on Roman Britain as a whole'.
  20. Salmon, *op. cit.*, 45.
  21. Dr Gough, *op. cit.*, 244-5.
  22. Camden, W. *Britannia* (6th Ed., 1607), map between pages 212 and 213.
  23. For a map giving the details and latest interpretations of the Antonine Itinerary see Fig. 2 of the Ordnance Survey *Map of Roman Britain* (1956).
  24. Bourne Society. *Local History Records*, X (1971), 6-8.
  25. I should like to thank Mr D. J. V. Fisher of Jesus College, Cambridge for his advice and assistance in collecting and assessing the material used in the following two paragraphs.
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  27. Salmon, *op. cit.* He produces no evidence.
  28. Michaelmas Term, 4 John (m. 3) p. 107 (1202).
  29. See:-  
Easter Term, 4 John (m. 11d) p. 248 (1203)  
Trinity Term, 5 John (m. 6d) p. 280 (1203)  
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Michaelmas Term, 9 John (m. 6) p. 111 (1207)  
Michaelmas Term, 10 John (m. 1) p. 310 (1208).
  30. See:-  
Hilary Term, 7 Henry III (m. 2) (1223)  
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  31. Ekwall, E. *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place Names* (4th. Ed., 1960), 124, 530-1.
  32. See references 28, 29 and 30.
  33. *Chertsey Abbey Cartularies (1241-63)*, Surrey R.S., (1958), II, Pt. 1.
  34. *The Court Rolls of the Manor of Carshalton*, Surrey R.S., (1916), 32-3.
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36. *The Surrey Feet of Fines, 1509-58*, Surrey R.S., (1946); see 2 & 3, Philip and Mary (1556), No. 832.
37. Salmon, *op. cit.*, 45.
38. e.g. Rocque's Map (1765); Ordnance Survey 1 inch Map, 1st Series (1816); or the Beddington Parish Tithe Map (1842).
39. Rather confusingly called 'Little Woodcote' on the Ordnance Survey 1 inch Map, 1st Series (1816).
40. They all appear on Rocque's Map (1765).
41. Camden, *op. cit.*; 1st Edition, 152.
42. A facsimile of this map is appended to the Surrey County Council's *Antiquities of Surrey* (1965).
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45. For a full exposition of the problem see Mr Burton's commentary (1658), as transcribed in Aubrey, *op. cit.*; see also the Ordnance Survey *Map of Roman Britain* (1956), Fig. 2.
46. Talbot, *op. cit.*; author's translation.
47. Camden, *op. cit.*; trans. Dr Gough (1806), I, 244.