

The Wotton Roman inscribed stone – an antiquarian hoax

There are very few Roman inscribed stones recorded from the county of Surrey outside the major urban site at Southwark.¹ Those we have are either known or are suspected to originate from outside the county. The collection of four altars found at Busbridge Park near Godalming² fall into the first category as they are known to be from the western end of Hadrian's Wall and to have been brought to Surrey to form part of an 18th century landscape garden. The altar RIB 2217³ from a garden in Eden Street, Kingston upon Thames, and now in the Kingston upon Thames Heritage Centre is probably not originally from the area and, indeed, is included in Collingwood & Wright's section on 'Inscriptions attributable to Britain but otherwise unplaced'. It is inscribed *Deae Fortunae et Numinibus Augustorum* (To the Goddess Fortune and to the Deities of the Emperors) and is of a hard buff sandstone. It may well have been brought to Kingston as a souvenir being only 30×74cm. The only other recorded Roman inscribed stone is that from Wotton near Dorking which forms the subject of this note.

The Wotton inscribed stone is mentioned in the VCH⁴ as being found in the farmyard of Wotton Parsonage. Mention of an urn is also made containing ashes and half burnt bones. Two references are given, one to the MS Min Soc Antiq XIX, 406, and the second to *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1784), 403. The Surrey County Council Sites and Monuments Record card TQ14 NW7 (Antiquity Number 37), notes that an inurned cremation was discovered underneath a Roman inscribed stone (probably 1st century) when digging for a gate post at Wotton Parsonage (vicarage) farmyard in 1784.

Collingwood & Wright include the Wotton stone in their *Falsa* section with mention of further references in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in which the full story of the Wotton stone is given. These references do indeed show that the Wotton inscribed stone was an antiquarian hoax, but as the stone continues to appear in the literature as a genuine Roman inscribed stone it seemed pertinent to relate the full story as published in *The Gentleman's Magazine*.

The initial mention of the Wotton inscribed stone is made in a letter to *The Gentleman's Magazine* from the Rev Mr Williams dated from Abinger near Dorking, Surrey, 6 June 1784. The published extract of the letter tells of the discovery thus:

I take the earliest opportunity of acquainting you, that yesterday morning as a labourer was digging to lay the foundation of a gate post in a farm-yard of the Rev Mr Taylor⁵ of Wotton Parsonage, he discovered a rough stone with the following inscription, Diis manibus ob Faustulam Filiam Cariss Pos. Caius Suetonius Procos S.I.T.L. Beneath the stone was an earthen urn, which contained ashes and several pieces of bones, which were calcined or half burnt; there was also a piece or two of the bark or rind of some tree found by the urn; the outer coat of this bark was extremely thin, and I peeled some of it off before I could discover what substance it was. Counsellor Newnham, Mr Taylor, and myself, were the only persons present. Though the year that these relics were inurned cannot be precisely ascertained, yet, from the 14th annal of Tacitus, the 29th and following sections, it may be very nearly guessed at; as Suetonius carried his vast conquest against the ancient Britons [at] the very beginning of Nero's reign, and commanded here seemingly under Drusus.

I am, &c. THO. WILLIAMS

The urn was unfortunately broken by the labourers in taking it up, but the pieces with the ashes are carefully preserved.

S.I.T.L., Situs Lubens

S.T.T.L. Sit tibi terra levis'

This extract of the letter was read to the Society of Antiquaries of London by a Mr Astle.

This quite detailed and at first glance plausible account was, however, followed in the next volume of *The Gentleman's Magazine* (55 (1785), 512) by a rather acrimonious section of an anonymous letter to the editor Mr Urban stating that the inscribed stone was indeed a hoax, the relevant section reads:

'I cannot help observing on this occasion, that a Roman inscription published by you June 1784, p 403, as found at Watton [*sic*] in Surrey, is a gross imposition, fabricated to impose on the lord of the manor, who aspires to be thought an antiquarian.'

This was followed later in the year (*The Gentleman's Magazine*, 55 (1785), 680) by a letter from a correspondent who signs himself S in which he condemns the anonymous writer for an incorrect account of the events thus:

'It is a pity that one who has means to correct an error, cannot do it without petulance. Your anonymous friend, p 512, speaks of the Roman inscription, mentioned in your Magazine, vol LIV p 403, in a manner that would not be liberal if what he said was true; but it is not so: he has an imperfect knowledge of the truth. The fact is (as I think I informed you), that it was a jeu d'esprit, calculated for private amusement; but it had no reference whatever to the lord of the manor. The letter you published was written by a neighbouring curate, in pure simplicity, and without the knowledge of the parties concerned, who would not have suffered it if they had been apprized of his intention.'

One can thus assume that the inscribed stone and inurned cremation never existed and the site can therefore be removed from the list of Romano-British burials known from Surrey.⁶ The deletion of the Wotton stone from the list of inscribed stones from the county leaves no definite examples and it is probable that the lack of a suitable local stone is responsible for this dearth of Romano-British inscribed stones from Surrey.

The inscription itself, however, is still of interest and I am grateful to Mark Hassall of the Institute of Archaeology in London for the following note:

Taking the inscription to read:

diis manibus ob Faustulam filiam cariss(imam), pos(uit) Caius Suetonius proco(n)s(s)ul s(it)
t(ibi) t(erra) l(evis)

it would mean:

To the shades of the departed, Caius Suetonius the proconsul set this up on account of his dearest daughter Faustula, may the earth be light upon you.

Caius Suetonius the proconsul presumably refers to Suetonius Paulinus governor of Britain at the time of the Boudiccan revolt of AD 61 but though governors of some provinces were known as proconsuls, those in Britain were called *legati Augusti pro praetore*.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 See the annual Inscriptions summary in *Britannia*, 6 (1975), 284; 8 (1977), 426; 9 (1978), 473; 16 (1985), 317–22
- 2 Bird, J, 1973 Godalming: serendipity at Busbridge Park (SU 968 422), *SyAS Bull*, 96
- 3 RIB: Collingwood, R G & Wright, R P, 1965 *The Roman inscriptions of Britain*, I: Inscriptions on stone
- 4 VCH: *The Victoria history of the county of Surrey* (ed H E Malden), 4 (1912), 370

- 5 Thomas Taylor was rector of Wotton from 1778 until his death on 4 January 1808. He was a doctor of law, chaplain to George III and professor of Civil Law in Gresham College. He was also rector of Abinger and Archdeacon of Chichester from 1803
- 6 Gower, J L (in preparation) Romano-British inhumation and cremation burials from Surrey
- 7 Bird, D G, 1987 The Romano-British period in Surrey, in *The archaeology of Surrey to 1540* (eds D G & J Bird), SyAS

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