

ROMAN STAINES

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THE EMERGENCY excavations at Staines on the first Roman Settlement to be recorded there have been brought to a successful conclusion¹. The site, at 69-71 High Street (TQ 037716), was discovered in November 1969 by the author whilst undertaking field work in the Staines area on behalf of the London Museum. First evidence of Roman occupation of the area was found by site bricklayer Steven Kerr, who discovered pottery and bones during the redevelopment work on the site.

As a result of this discovery, hurried arrangements were made with the site owners, Barclays Bank, and the contractors, Messrs. Gee & Company, Hanworth, for a constant watch to be kept on all stages of their work and, where possible, to investigate certain features by controlled excavation.

Staines has for long been the reputed site of *Pontes*, a Roman posting station, situated, according to the *Itinerarium Provinciarum Antonini Augusti*, midway between London and Silchester². The name *Pontes* indicates 'the bridges' and clearly suggests a river crossing.

The town of Staines lies on the Thames at the south-west extremity of the county of Middlesex, the river separating it from Surrey. On its northern side a branch of the River Colne, known as the Shire Ditch, separates it from Buckinghamshire. The Shire Ditch converges with the Thames just below the present Staines Bridge³.

Staines lies between 25-75 feet above sea level and is situated on deposits of Flood Plain Gravel overlying London Clay. The gravel stretches over to the Surrey side of the Thames, and Staines is the only place west of London where it is possible to cross the River Thames without leaving gravel for alluvial soils either before or after leaving the Thames, a

factor which probably accounts for the siting of the towns medieval and later bridges and possibly a crossing point for the Romans.

The site lies 21 miles west of the Roman City of London and 27 miles from the Roman town of Silchester. The projected alignment of the Roman road, (Route 4a) between these two points crosses the front portion of the site.

William Stukely, writing in 1723 about the course of the London to Silchester Roman Road wrote, 'I rode the broken part between Acton and Turnham green; it is still a narrow strait way, keeping its original direction but full of dangerous sloughs, being a clayey soil and never repaired it butts upon Stanes bridge', then according to him it passes forward in a straight line onto the Surrey side of the Thames. He also records that Staines 'was fenced round with a ditch'. Stukeley's accompanying illustration shows a profile of 'Stanes' and the course of the Roman Road on both sides of the bridge⁴.

In 1835, officers of the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, carried out a survey of the Roman Road from Silchester to Staines, their alignments agree with those of Stukeley⁵.

Very little material has been recorded from the Staines area, the most significant exceptions include; the discovery of Roman pottery of 1st century date overlying the Neolithic deposits of the Causewayed Camp at Yeoveney one mile north-west of Staines⁶; the necks of two wine vessels of late 1st-early 2nd century type, recovered in 1957 from 32 High Street⁷; finds from the Thames include a lance head⁸ and an urn of grey ware of 2nd-3rd century date⁹.

Literary references to finds include, pottery, coins and a sword having been found in or near the Angel Hotel, 26 High Street, in 1871 and of a Roman Bath

1. *London Archaeol*, 1 120.

2. Ordnance Survey, *Map of Roman Britain*, (1956).

3. *Victoria County History: Middlesex*, (1969)

4. William Stukely, *Itinerarium Curiosum*.

5. *Surrey Archaeol Collect*, 1, contains a reduced map of the survey; *Gentlemen's Magazine* (1836) 535-7 and

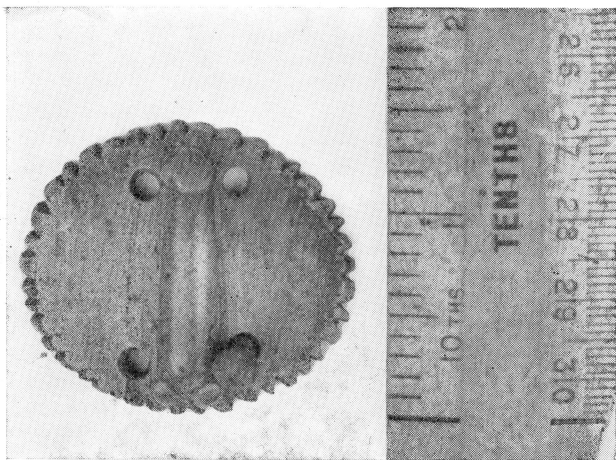
(1838) 192-5; *The United Service Journal and Naval and Military Magazine* (1836).

6. *Archaeol News Letter* (1962) 131-4.

7. Egham Museum—Acc. No. 1/1970.

8. *Berkshire Archaeol J.* 56 (1958) 56 notes.

9. London Museum—Acc. No. 10916; also two urns Acc. Nos. 10914 and 5 from "Staines area."



An unusual carved bone brooch decorated with a phallic design—no parallel has as yet been found.

(Photo: G. Cately)

and tesserae having been found 'by' the High Street in 1880¹⁰.

The building site covered an area of nearly 3,500 square feet, approximately two thirds of which at the front of the site, were to be totally excavated down to natural soil by the contractors. This area was in fact to be the site of a Roman building, the investigation of which extended over nine weeks instead of the initial period granted by the contractors of two weeks. Because of the small size of the site, work was extremely difficult and dangerous, this was made even more so by the atrocious weather conditions which prevailed at the time.

The earliest feature on the site, was a road running in an East-West direction across the front portion of the site. Road metalling consisted of compacted gravel mixed with iron slag which had rusted together to form a solid layer 11 feet wide, the surface was cambered with a ditch on either side of the road. A thin layer of mud covering the road surface, suggests that the road was in use for a limited period of time, a black burnt layer immediately above this feature, suggestive of a major disaster, probably accounts for the roads short life.

Immediately above the burnt layer two buildings were superimposed one above the other. Because of the advanced state of the contractors work very little of the earlier building's plan could be recorded, although pottery recovered from this level indicates occupation during the latter part of the 1st century, the building was destroyed by fire. Phase Two Building. Constructed on a much larger scale than the former building, it covered an area of nearly 1,000 square feet. The plan recorded was the rear portion of a timber framed building, the remaining portion of building extending out beneath the present High Street. Walls were constructed of wattle and daub,

10. Montague Sharpe, *Middlesex in British, Roman and Saxon Times*, (1932) 115.

one of the three collapsed walls found had been plastered and decorated with a floral motif. Floors were of clay, chalk or compacted gravel. Roofing was probably of tile but very little of this material was recovered. On coin and samian evidence this building was destroyed by fire, sometime towards the end of the 2nd century.

A cremation burial was found under the floor of one of the rooms of the phase two building, the ashes having been buried in a shallow pit with grave goods set immediately above. The fragmentary remains of an adult's skull and that of an infant were recovered from one of the four refuse pits found on the site.

Two wells were discovered, one on the east and one on the southern side of the building, the type of construction was the same in both cases. Cut into the natural soil, they were 8ft. 6in. deep and 2ft. square, the walls at the base had been lined with oak planks to a height of 2ft. Considering the size of the site a vast amount of material, estimated at nearly two tons, has been recovered, which at the present time has yet to be processed, therefore this report must be of a provisional nature.

Notable among the finds so far catalogued are, a carved bone phallic brooch with bronze fastening; melon faience beads; bone spoon, dress pins and comb; a gaming counter; part of a pipe clay figurine and bronze brooches and pins. Coins found give a date range of A.D. 96-395.

No evidence of post-Roman occupation of the site was found, it appears to have remained deserted until the 19th century when Thomas Ashby built a bank upon the site. Material of third and fourth century date recovered from the topsoil overlying phase two building indicate that although this particular site was abandoned by the Romans, occupation continued in other parts of the town.

The excavation was carried out by members of the Egham-By-Runnymede Historical Society and members of the West London Archaeological Field Group, under the direction of Mrs. Maureen Rendell, Archaeological Officer, Egham Museum. The material from this excavation is at present being processed at Egham Museum

A recent excavation at the rear of 37-55 Thames Street, Staines, resulted in the discovery of a Roman Road, running in an East-West direction. This site is situated 120 yards south-west of 69-71 High Street, where an identical road was discovered in November last. Further evidence is now being recorded on a redevelopment site at the rear of 17 High Street, Staines.

Further excavations are now planned in and around the Staines area to investigate the extent of the Roman occupation of the town and whether the town was fortified. A map showing the various find spots will be published in a subsequent issue of the *London Archaeologist*.