Letters

The Bronze Age 'bridge' at Vauxhall

THERE CAN BE little doubt that the unexpected discovery of the Bronze Age 'bridge' at Vauxhall has introduced a further element in our understanding of prehistoric London. As often happens, it is the chance find or discovery that can redirect archaeological thought or activity. This may well be the case with the Vauxhall bridge. This feature appears to form part of a raised routeway across the Thames floodplain, and was presumably part of an extended route linking the higher ground lying each side of the river plain. It is interesting to observe that from the early boundary and map evidence there is a historic focus towards this part of the Thames at Vauxhall and the location of the bridge. It can be noted that there is an alignment of ancient roads which converge upon Vauxhall, routes which existed before the construction of Vauxhall Bridge in 1816.

Historic emphasis is further given to this area with the alignment and route of Lambeth parish and manor boundaries. Also, there are two watercourses which flow into the Thames near the 'bridge'; the Heathbrook and the River Effra, features which may well have attracted prehistoric people and activity to this place. Evidently there are a number of historical 'points of interest' about this section of the river at Vauxhall, which might offer a context for the Bronze Age structure. Furthermore, does the existence of this structure influence or redirect the debate on the Roman river crossing, considered but not proven, to have been further north at Lambeth. Interestingly, it is worth noting that a southern projection of the alignment of Watling Street reaches the Thames opposite Vauxhall, and in the same area where a watercourse running to the south of 'Tothill Fields' enters the Thames. The use of watercourses as lines of communication are well known, and the existence of such features on both sides of the Thames at Vauxhall may have encouraged the establishment of an early route across this part of the river. Maybe the direction of Peckham Road, as it makes towards Kennington and Vauxhall, shadows the Roman route to a London crossing – if indeed such a route was created from Kent during the Roman invasion.

From my particular interest of looking at early settlement activity in south-west London, I have noticed that the pattern of known ancient roads show a directional emphasis towards the Vauxhall-Kennington area. This pattern, which extends south to the Wimbledon, Norwood and Croydon heights, is part influenced by the natural topography and local geology and reflective of past settlement activity and mobility. Also incorporated into this pattern are two Roman roads, Stane Street and the London-Brighton Road, the latter showing tentative evidence of following an earlier route on its passage through Streatham. The antiquity of many of these routes is emphasised by their use to delineate parish and manor boundaries and in some areas suggesting continuity of settlement from early times. In viewing the pattern of these roads in the light of known prehistoric activity across south London and beyond, suggests that the basic road pattern may find its origins in the prehistoric period. Moreover, I would suggest than in essence it was part of a regional trackway system, bringing people from north-east Surrey and the North Downs to the River Thames and to a favourable crossing point, possibly that represented by the Vauxhall 'bridge'.

However speculative or debatable the above may be, there is a valid argument to take a closer look at the pattern of known ancient roads, lanes and footpaths, which until suburban development of the 19th century, were an integral feature in the Greater London landscape. These historic features are given little regard, and are usually overlooked in the endeavour to place many an archaeological discovery in context; a situation unfortunately encouraged by the dearth of published material. Their very existence is a reflection of past settlement activity, whether it be prehistoric, Saxon or industrial, and their potential for identifying areas of archaeological interest has yet to be fully recognised and exploited.

Therefore, I make the point that we need to focus on this aspect of our past and suggest that a 'Greater London Historic Roads Survey' be undertaken, possibly under the direction or guidance of English Heritage. This should have the broad aim of identifying, dating and categorising all pre-suburban roads, lanes, footpaths, etc., and to designate their historical importance; considering they are in their own right 'national monuments' and an integral part of our heritage. Such a survey would need to encompass the relationship of these routes to boundaries, settlement activity, geology, topography and natural resources. If such a survey and study were undertaken, I am sure it would be an additional tool in our pursuit of understanding the archaeology and history of London.

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London Palaces

CHRIS PHILLPOTTS does good service in his thoughtful review of the metropolitan palaces of medieval London (*LA*, Autumn 1999), which is both fascinating and valuable. But perhaps I may be permitted to question just one small point? There is – surely – no need to derive the courtyard plan of the episcopal (and in due course the royal) palaces from the monastic claustral plan (p. 50). As the late Stuart Rigold once emphasised to me (somewhat forcefully): what are important in such cases are not the ***similarities*** but the ***differences***. The similarities in this instance are no more than superficial and the differences notable. The very plan used, that of Winchester Palace, Southwark, illustrates the point: the irregular – almost casual – shape of the courtyard; the absence of anything corresponding to the covered cloister walks themselves; the entirely different disposition of individual elements, determined by the very different roles of, say, monastic church and episcopal chapel or monks' refectory and bishop's great hall; the lack of anything equivalent to the chapter house.

It seems far more likely that the courtyard plan of the palaces – or other non-monastic buildings – was adopted because it was the most convenient (and, after all, a fairly obvious) was of arranging the various components of the plan. If the places copied ***anything***, it is more likely to have been the castle plans, which developed from loosely arranged buildings around a bailey to the regular courtyard plan of, say, Bodiam. Indeed, the browbeating gatehouse at Lambeth Palace (c. 1495) was almost certainly designed with at least one eye on defence in troubled times for its builder, John Morton.

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