

# Books

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## **Sydenham and Forest Hill history and guide**

Joan P. Alcock

*Tempus Publishing Ltd, 2005*

128pp, 30 colour plates, £14.99 paperback

Densely packed with a wealth of knowledge of local social history and detailed archival research, Joan P. Alcock's new volume on this south London suburb can be seen as a welcome addition to earlier works on the same area, principally those of Doris Pullen in the 1970s. This volume has the supplement of guided walks around the main historical features, with accompanying anecdotal asides, illustrated with recent colour photos and archived black and white photos. The reader is taken through the early history of this apparently rather nondescript heathland to the south of the Great North Wood on the Kent/Surrey border. In the 18th century the hamlet of Sydenham found fame and limited fortune as a medicinal spa within easy reach of London, whilst the development of commuter traffic via the canal and railway passing through Forest Hill opened up this area to residential building in the 19th century. Still greater fame came with the re-siting of the Crystal Palace after the Great Exhibition of 1851 (only for it to be destroyed by fire in 1936) and the erection of the art nouveau style Horniman museum in 1901. The area endured considerable bomb damage through two world wars and the author provides many insights into everyday life amongst the ruins of suburban streets. Post-war development mixed local authority housing built on the bomb-sites with the substantial, architect-designed Victorian villas and estates, giving the area its present leafy ambience.

But what makes this area interesting to the visitor and local alike? There is certainly much to see and many famous names associated – Eleanor Marx, Sir Ernest Shackleton and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to name but three – and this volume gives an interesting overview of the uneven development of the area, impacted by wider historical events and social processes. Yet, one cannot but feel that there is more of the far distant past of Sydenham and Forest Hill that could be recreated and perhaps it is here that the author might have expanded her research. Can we conjecture about prehistoric uses of this landscape, the Roman road crossing the River

Pool at Bell Green notwithstanding? The commanding view to the north-west from the top of Sydenham Hill and Kirkdale across the Thames (the culmination of Walk 2) must have impressed ancient peoples as it does modern ones now. Why do the route ways traverse the wooded highs and heathy lows of the area as they do? Although copiously illustrated, there is little in the way of mapping evidence presented here to provide context and identify the wider links that constructed this place. The volume stands, however, as a record of the story so far, of a place still changing in the early 21st century.

Sue Harrington

## **Old London Bridge: Lost and Found**

Bruce Watson

*Museum of London Archaeology Service, 2004*

64 pages, with colour and monochrome photographs and illustrations, £7.99 paperback

Tower Bridge is one of the capital's most famous landmarks, but it is London Bridge that has made the greater contribution to London's history: this book is its biography.

The story starts in prehistory, before London existed and before the Thames was bridged at all, when the river was a routeway, barrier and shrine. The first recorded bridge was built by the Romans and was a key factor in the establishment of *Londinium*. Its subsequent decline by the 4th century is described, and reference is made to its Saxo-Norman successor. This bridge, mentioned in historical chronicles for its part in Viking raids, was eventually replaced in the 13th century by the iconic stone bridge built by Peter of Colechurch.

The author explains how the nature of this bridge's construction created the need for constant maintenance, and when writing of the dangers of the waterfall effect created between the piers, he quotes an old proverb that "London Bridge was made for wise men to go over and fools to go under". He stresses that this bridge, with its houses, shops, inns, chapel and watermills, was much more than just a river crossing, and asserts that, as the scene of many important events recounted by contemporary historians, it was a key part of London's life. He goes on to describe a number of occasions on which parts of the bridge collapsed, and explains

how the design and construction of the bridge contributed to its problems. Forty-two houses destroyed by fire in 1633 were rebuilt, only to be consumed by the Great Fire of 1666.

The book describes how further repairs were made, and how the old London Bridge continued in use until it was demolished in 1831–2 to make way for Sir John Rennie's design, which was a showcase for new engineering techniques being developed in 19th-century Britain. This London Bridge lasted until 1967–71, when it was demolished, shipped out to Arizona, and rebuilt as a tourist attraction. Mention is made of the urban myth that the Americans thought that they were buying Tower Bridge, but no confirmation of this is offered. The author concludes with details of where enthusiasts may find items that have been removed from pre-Rennie versions of London Bridge and reused elsewhere.

This book is solidly founded on academic research, yet its style and presentation suggest that it has been written with a wider readership in mind, a readership that will find it not only educational, but also entertaining.

Richard Gilpin

### **Boudica**

Vanessa Collingridge

*Ebury Press*

390 pages, b/w illustrations, £18.99 hardback

The author begins with a potted history of the Roman Empire, its origins, development and political workings. That it takes up roughly two-thirds of the book should not detract from the topic of the title, yet one does begin to wonder when she will get to the point of the subject. However, it serves to give an insight to how the Romans thought and to why they behaved as they did to the *Iceni* threat.

What is less clear is how the Britons thought, although their defence of Boudica's treatment at the hands of the invaders is understandable. The description of the revolt comprises roughly 20% of the book's volume. Collingridge acknowledges the dearth of hard facts on the person of Boudica but has drawn together the archaeological and historical threads to extrapolate the thinking and the customs of the people oppressed by the Roman invaders. Instead of adhering to the still popular Victorian idea of the Romans being the epitome of an empire-building civilisation, she veers towards the more honest view of them (as far as some Britons are concerned) as imperialistic bullies.

The last section deals with the Roman crackdown on the Britons, 'Celtomania' and the theory that Boudica's spirit is deliberately drawn on in all women of strength and power. Collingridge plays on the imagery of Boudica by introducing Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Victoria as conscious continuations of the Boudican tradition. Queen Elizabeth's speech of having the form of a 'weak feeble woman' and Queen Victoria's diminutive stature and maternal status are shown to be a part of the hard-as-nails 'Boudican' nature of their personas. Suffragettes meeting under the statue of 'Boadicea' at Westminster, Mrs. Thatcher, Princess Diana and female British Gold medallists of the 2004 Olympics are also roped in to the imagery of Boudica's 'enduring iconography'. This is probably an appeal to the feminist genre, but seems to be a somewhat contrived effort. Should one therefore regard the average quiet behind-the-scenes woman as a wimp?

The author has done her homework, even to the effort of visiting the places relevant to her subject. Her narrative style is easy, although the writing is occasionally overcome with verbosity: "Like a child letting go of a favourite blanket, it was time to leave behind our old school; histories, our emotional connection with this icon from the past, and the cultural confusion that credited the Romans with bringing us civilisation...".

Her attention to detail cannot be faulted, although archaeologists or historians are unlikely to learn anything new.

Odetta Nelson

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### **Also received**

#### **Roman Villas**

David E. Johnston

*Shire Publications*, 2004

72pp., 33 colour; 36 b/w illus., index

£5.99 (new colour edition)

#### **Irish Megalithic Tombs**

Elizabeth Shee Twohig

*Shire Publications*, 2004

72pp., 11 colour; 31 b/w illus., bib., index

£5.99 (new colour edition)

#### **Early Celtic Art in Britain and Ireland**

Ruth and Vincent Megaw

*Shire Archaeology*, 2005

80pp., 89 plates, many in colour, bib., index

£5.99