

# How do we recognise a *mansio*?

## Some thoughts from a London region viewpoint

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### Introduction

The *cursum publicum* was the system by which accredited travellers, proceeding along the roads of the Roman empire, could stay in *mansiones* ('hotels') paid for by the local community, or change vehicles or mounts at other establishments known as *mutationes*. They are often suggested as the origin of a variety of settlements on those roads. Indeed, there is often a great temptation to see some nice regular pattern of alternating *mansiones* and *mutationes* along all roads, assuming that any small settlement we know of had been one or the other. Can one assume that one can work out which is which (supposing they must have alternated) and add in 'lost' settlements between them when there is a gap? But that is to put the cart before the horse – or rather the very shaky 'theory' before the evidence.

For example, take the nine or ten main routes leaving/entering Londinium and, following the theory, it is clear that we have an awful lot of 'lost' settlements along some particular roads, plenty of potential *cursum publicum* posts on others, and on some roads at least anything but nice regular spacing between candidates. Even the distance between Londinium and the first small settlement that might have held a *cursum publicum* establishment varies greatly from road to road. Brentford is 10 Roman miles out, Ewell 14, Croydon is about 11 Roman miles from the city, Little London as much as 15, Welling and Bush Hill Park under 10 and *Sulloniacis* (near to but not at Brockley Hill)<sup>1</sup> is about 14 Roman miles (Fig 1).

I have argued elsewhere that, in part, this is due to some roads needing closer spaced official stopping places

to cater for transport convoys, while other roads needed more widely spaced provision for faster travellers or were deemed to not need much provision at all. One site – Old Ford, only three Roman miles from the city – looks more like a detached necropolis for *Londinium* than a 'normal' roadline settlement.<sup>2</sup>

### Hypocaust tiles?

However, leaving that aside, if the nice regular system of alternating *mansiones* and *mutationes* on all roads didn't exist, what should we be looking for so that we can identify a site that might have one or the other establishment? The *mansio*, surely, should be the easier one to identify because they would have had Romanised buildings and, in particular, a bath-house. They were, after all, for the use of government and army officials used to the comforts of the Roman world.

So, if one were to find hypocaust tiles at least in a small settlement where there seems to be no other reason for Romanised buildings, then, do we have a candidate for a *mansio*? Especially if the tiles can be linked to the early stages of the settlement's life, perhaps with building material or masonry present too, we might begin to see the perhaps half-timbered structure with several individual bedrooms and a small attached masonry and tile baths rising out of the ground.

But, of course, we are making assumptions. Leaving aside whether local communities could afford or be compelled to provide this level of accommodation, the biggest assumption is probably that tiles at a small roadside settlement necessarily equal a Romanised building, let alone a bath-house. Even excluding actual tile production on a site, the presence of

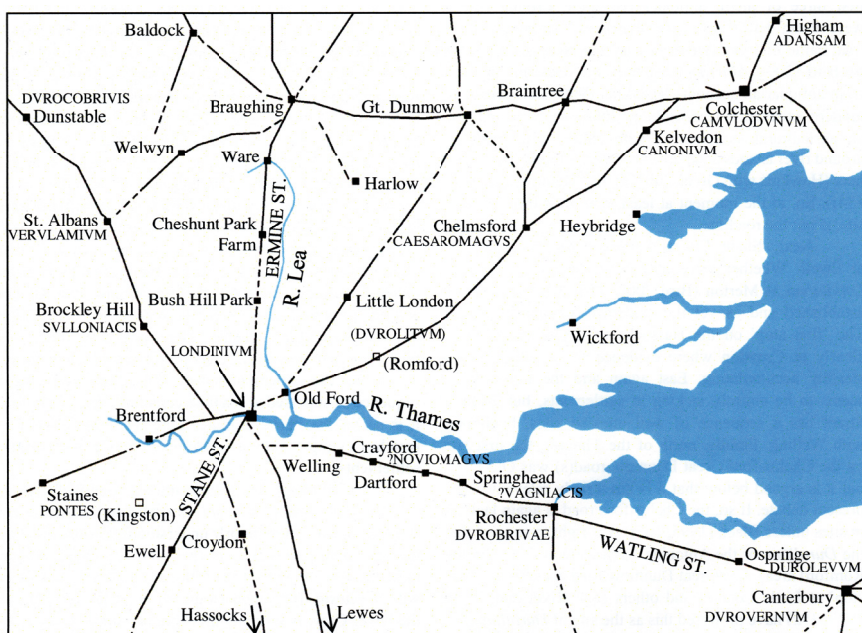


Fig 1: Roman roads and roadside settlements in the London region (open squares mark some possible but unsubstantiated sites)

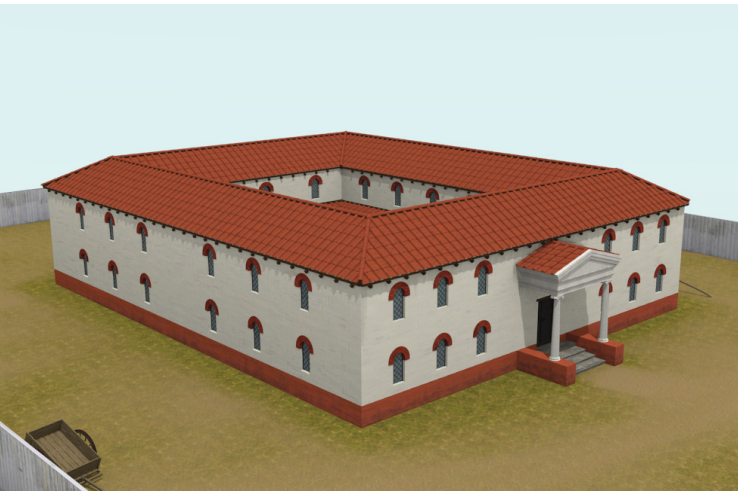


Fig 2: reconstruction of a 'typical' courtyard mansio (Neil and John Pinchbeck)

Roman tiles could indicate a range of things. At Cheshunt Park Farm in Hertfordshire, for example, which is just such a small roadside settlement on Ermine Street, they were being used to build *pilae*. However, these columns of tiles were used to support what was probably a large corn drying/malting shed's floor, and to build a large and elaborate buried heating duct for some unidentified industrial process.<sup>3</sup>

Tiles make excellent hearth bases and inverted imbrices double as gutters. In Enfield, near another small roadside settlement further south along Ermine Street, cremations in lead urns (*ossuaria*) were enclosed by *tegulae*.<sup>4</sup> Hypocaust tiles, although more specialised in origin, could also be reused. By knocking off the side of one, you can produce a door threshold or, as at Enfield, a nice flat post pad element within an open-sided industrial shed.<sup>5</sup>

It is not safe, therefore, to assume that tiles, even on a small roadside settlement, need be there because they were originally brought on to site new and complete in order to construct a building. Tiles would have been transported by road past such settlements and, even if a few were not stolen or, falling from the cart, broken, surely the opportunity was there to buy a couple to make a better-looking kitchen hearth? This is without considering the possibilities of a casual trade between settlements, especially close to a city like *Londinium*, in reusable part and whole tiles.

#### A bath-house?

Reasonably small quantities of tiles,

even hypocaust tiles, then, need not point to a Romanised structure. What we need is the *mansio* itself, or at least its baths. Immediately around *Londinium* there is only one of these, the small bath-house at Little London near Chigwell in Essex<sup>6</sup> (which may or may not have been *Durolitum*).<sup>7</sup>

Between the Roman

road to Great Dunmow and the River Roding, this looks convincing as evidence of a *mansio* in a small roadside settlement. Or does it? The problem is that we don't really know enough about the functions and economies of such places to rule out some acting as adjuncts to (villa) estates. How many were sited on roads, but were, in part, villages where estate workers and even bailiffs, of a sufficient status and wealth to have built a small bath-house, lived?

#### Does it look like a hotel?

What we really want then is a building that has the sort of accommodation that suggests 'hotel rooms' (Fig 2). But examples are rare even on large urban sites and where they have been found at settlements even nearly as small as those on the roads around *Londinium*, they may have been built in quite different circumstances (as at the fort and *vicus* at *Melandra* in Derbyshire).<sup>8</sup> Would *mansiones* in small civil settlements, especially in striking distance of *Londinium*, have looked the same? Would they have comprised subdivided buildings or maybe a cluster of smaller individual buildings, for instance?

Even a baths and subdivided buildings don't necessarily equal a *mansio*. The substantial bath-house and adjacent

accommodation block excavated in the late 1990s and early 2000s at Shadwell is a case in point. The published discussion rightly ruled it out as a *mansio* because it was too close to *Londinium* (just 1.6 km to the east) and was not sited on a major Roman road.<sup>9</sup> It might also be observed that its size (the baths were comparable to those at Winchester Palace in Southwark) ought to point to use by a larger and more regular clientele than that likely provided by *cursus publicus* entitled travellers. Besides, the baths were not built until the mid-3rd century and it is very unlikely that new *mansiones* were being established by then. If Shadwell was in any way an official site, and even if it was not and was a civil inn as postulated, then its connections were surely with river traffic, not road travel.

#### How would a *mutatio* differ?

And what about *mutationes*? They are often envisaged as basically a stable block at which imperial couriers jumped off one horse and on to another. But the image of the American Pony Express may be too much in our minds. If they were just a set of stables, we may have no hope. It is bad enough trying to assign a long thin building to a stable function in a Roman fort, without something like a mucking-out drain to help, let alone to do it in a civil context. Besides stables in a settlement alongside a road hardly need necessarily have belonged to the *cursus publicus* system. But were *mutationes* just, or at all, stables?

Surely the majority of certified



Fig 3: depiction of a cart, 3rd century, Augsburg Roman Museum (CC BY-SA 3.0)<sup>22</sup>

travellers didn't gallop along at breakneck speed; they travelled at a range of paces depending on their business and mode of transport, from the slow plod of the ox cart (Fig 3) or mule train carrying official supplies, through the sedate trot of pony carts, to the perhaps medium pace of the officer on horseback returning to his unit from a spell in the capital. Many such travellers would have needed the space to park carts in secure compounds, a change of vehicles (not just horses) and pasture to 'refuel' their animals.

For a *mutatio* should we look, not for stables, but for a fair-sized compound, a secure open space to park vehicles, feed and water beasts and even for muleteers and cart drivers to camp in? Maybe the same applies to *mansiones* in fact; it seems likely that



Fig 4: harness mounts from 15–23 Southwark Street (MOLA)

they could have had the facilities of *mutationes*, just with the addition of somewhere for more senior travellers to stay in some degree of comfort. It is tempting to identify a fairly large open space in a settlement as a market place. But, unless a lot of loose change or numbers of weights are found, it is not necessarily a market place.

If it is defined by a ditch it is arguably even less likely to be. And there are small roadline settlements with such spaces. Westhawk Farm in Kent is one,<sup>10</sup> another might be within or adjacent to a ditched enclosure in the Bush Hill Park settlement at Enfield near *Londinium*,<sup>11</sup> while a third may have existed north of it on Ermine Street at Cheshunt Park Farm.<sup>12</sup>

### First find your car park....

If we are to look for evidence for the *cursus publicus* operating, in this case in the London region, we must not just make assumptions about how it might have worked and presume that it was set up like some rigid network of fast transit stations. We have to ask what we are looking for. Perhaps we should be looking not for where the travellers stayed, but where their vehicles and animals stayed – for the car park, not the hotel. And maybe not just in small settlements on roads around *Londinium*, but in the city itself. We may think too much about it as a destination, but it, too, is a settlement people will have passed through – for instance, to and from the channel ports and the militarised north of England.

The *cursus publicus* must have operated in *Londinium* and on a far more significant scale than in any small roadside settlement. So where is its *mansio* or indeed probably *mansiones*? They here would presumably be quite substantial, but, with the converse problem, in that we are not looking for evidence of Romanised buildings or baths where we wouldn't otherwise expect them. We would be looking for them in amongst all the other tile-roofed, hypocausted buildings (including inns

that might look identical) and quite possibly without baths. *Londinium* had the public baths small settlements didn't, so a *mansio* wouldn't necessarily need its own.

Once more it may be the car parks not the hotels, we should be searching for. Are there open areas, probably with delimiting ditches, probably with buildings occupying just a small fraction of them, with finds concentrations including things like hipposandals, harness fittings, vehicle parts and the bones of animals used in transport? Where they won't be, of course, is in the core of the city. They will probably be on the outskirts and likely near to the gates. Maybe, indeed, just outside the walls where grazing space was available.

In fact, where the structures that

suggest the presence of *mansiones* have been found at medium-sized towns, this is where they lay, and it was one of the reasons why Cowan interpreted buildings at 15–23 Southwark Street in the 1980s as a *mansio*.<sup>13</sup> Here a later 1st-century building with substantial masonry foundations seems to have featured rooms leading off an ambulatory round a possible courtyard. Situated at the southern approach to the city, close to the junction of two roads probably ultimately leading towards the south coast, and with military finds, including horse harness items (Fig 4), this is just the sort of site we should be looking for.

However, can we perhaps find other *mansiones* without the structural evidence? When the Crossrail excavations at Liverpool Street uncovered a number of burials from the northern cemetery with evidence of the skulls washed out by the nearby Walbrook stream,<sup>14</sup> they also found a metalled road running west/east and used by sufficient road traffic to have wheel ruts worn into it. At its eastern end, the road may have joined with Ermine Street and it is conjectured to have crossed the Walbrook, joining with three other roads possibly heading north, and serving as a by-pass around the northern edge of the Roman town.

Among finds from the roadside ditch, an assemblage of seventeen hipposandals<sup>15</sup> (Fig 5) and other items associated with transport were recovered. There are also a number of hipposandals from Finsbury Circus held in the Museum of London; and the area had a larger percentage of horse remains than was usual. It seems that previous excavations in the Finsbury Circus area, in the upper Walbrook valley, showed a similar amount of horse bone and it was suggested that horses were being grazed in the hinterland.<sup>16</sup>

### Smaller settlements

Returning to smaller settlements in the London region, a site like Ware in Hertfordshire, on Ermine Street and at a river crossing, is the sort of candidate settlement for a *mansio* or at least *mutatio* site we might focus on and here again the finds evidence is interesting. Almost 100 hipposandal fragments associated with the roadline have been recovered.<sup>17</sup>

Further south on the same road, the Bush Hill Park settlement has also produced finds that are worth noting. Again, there are several hipposandals, including, intriguingly, a miniature one; there are lynch pins, a nave hoop and horse harness fittings.<sup>18</sup> Numerically they are not as yet sufficient on their own to take as evidence for a *cursus publicus* establishment. However, as already noted, this is one of the small roadline settlements where a fairly large open area, perhaps within a ditched enclosure, may be present.

The roadline settlement at Bush Hill Park, which has been the primary focus of archaeological work in Enfield since 1966, occupied around 5 hectares, comprising a strip of land about 100m wide along the line of, but clearly set back from, the (still not precisely located) west side of Ermine Street. It was established in the earlier Flavian period, beginning as perhaps a site of 0.75 hectares at the northern end of its eventual extent, sited on very slightly raised ground. Probably linked to Ermine Street by a slip road, much of its core was occupied by a large ditched and gated enclosure (where there were indications of the demolition of a partly stone built structure).<sup>19</sup>

The enclosure remained in existence into the later Roman period and featured an extensive gravelled surface. Arguably the gated entrance, blocked in some phases, served to access a separate industrial area, and the surface itself could have served as

a vehicle park. But possibly still within the ditched enclosure, yet nearer to Ermine Street, was a substantial unsurfaced area. It was in use from the beginning, as an isolated early roundhouse, (and possible sill beam trench fragments), show, but for much of the lifetime of the settlement, its use is indicated only by rubbish pits. Could this then be the necessary pasturage for the oxen and mules of supply convoys and the camping site for their drivers? Is this what a *mutatio* looks like in the archaeological record?

With *London Archaeologist* celebrating its 50th year, it is interesting to note that the location of such roadside services formed the basis of one of the earliest articles, then looking at the spacing of posting-stations along Stane Street,<sup>20</sup> and it continues to be a recurring subject for discussion although perhaps, this time, looking at it from a different perspective. The intention here has not been to identify *cursus publicus* establishments as such, but to briefly examine what they might look like in the archaeological record.

As commercial archaeology uncovers more details of roadline settlements, such as that at Welling,<sup>21</sup> we will need to ask ourselves what roles they played in the infrastructure of



Fig 5: example of hipposandal (length 15.8 cm) from the Crossrail excavations (MOLA/Andy Chopping)

the region. More so, as we wrestle with the data generated by decades of work in and around the city, it is important that we critically examine what we can and can't identify as indicating any given aspect of its functioning as a settlement. The *cursus publicus* is just one amongst many of these, but we need to have the debate about what constitutes evidence for each, before we make identifications.

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