

William Stukeley and the Roman town-wall of Rochester

William Stukeley travelled through Kent in October 1722, following the line of the Roman road from London to Canterbury, and then visiting the Roman forts around the Kent coast. Having completed his tour, he spent a few days at Eastwell, staying with the earl of Winchilsea. He wrote up his notes while he was there, in the form of a letter addressed to the earl; and a version of that letter was eventually published as one chapter in his "Itinerarium Curiosum" (Stukeley 1724), illustrated with drawings he had made along the way.

Stukeley was in Rochester on 4 October, when he drew a view of the castle, seen from the direction of Southgate. For any visiting antiquary, the man to see in Rochester was Dr Thorpe -- John Thorpe MD FRS -- who had been settled here since 1715. Before that, he had lived in London, moving in much the same circles as Stukeley. It does not appear that they were ever on close terms, but they had friends in common and must certainly have been acquainted. Thorpe lived in a handsome house on the north side of High Street (now the Gordon Hotel);* I assume that Stukeley called on him there. In his letter to the earl of Winchilsea he speaks of Thorpe's collection of antiquities ("Dr Thorp has great numbers of antiquitys found hereabouts" (Stukeley 1724:113); though he does not exactly say that he has seen this collection, that seems to be implied.

* So Arnold (1889:200, 1921:138) says. But Thorpe died "within the precincts of the cathedral church" (Thorpe 1769:v), and that is not true of this house.



John Thorpe and his dog showing William Stukeley an exposed stretch of the Roman town-wall of Rochester

It was Thorpe, I suspect, who took Stukeley to see a stretch of the city-wall. Stukeley decided (perhaps Thorpe had decided so

already) that the wall was Roman work. In writing to the earl of Winchilsea, this is what he had to say about Rochester:

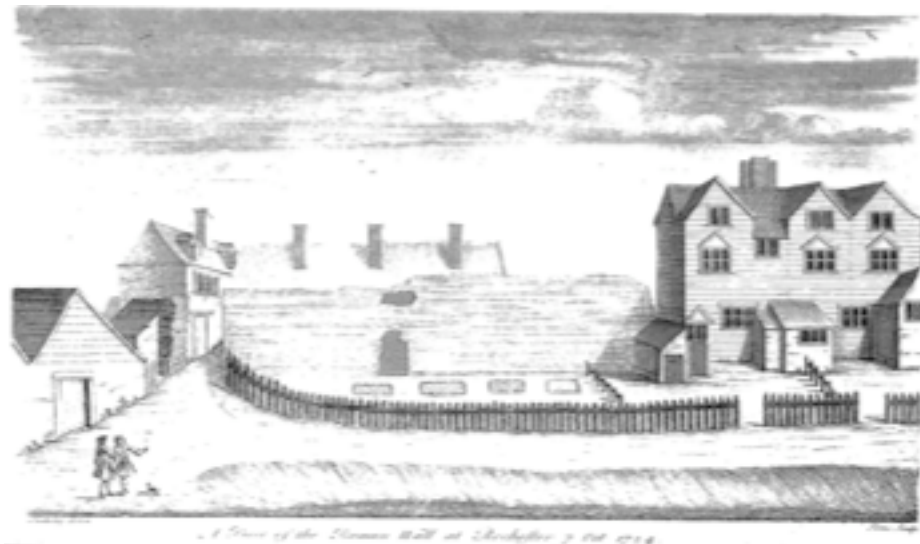
the Roman city was very strong, being wall'd about and ditch'd. near that angle below the bridg encompass'd by the river, is a large piece of Roman building of the wall, made of rubble-stone laid sloping side-ways, here and there Roman bricks. houses are built upon it, and 'tis broke thro' for a passage, in the inside much flint (Stukeley 1724:113).

As far as I know, this was the first time that anyone had said explicitly in print that the Roman town was walled, and that part of the Roman wall could still be seen.*

* Unless one counts some vague remarks by Harris (1719:251).

Two years later, Stukeley passed through Rochester again, and on this occasion he took another look at this stretch of the Roman town-wall and made a drawing of it -- "A Piece of the Roman Wall at Rochester 7 October 1724". At the bottom left-hand corner of this drawing two gentlemen are shown who seem to be sharing their thoughts about the wall. The one pointing towards it I would guess to be Thorpe; the other I would guess to be Stukeley. (The little dog, presumably, was Thorpe's.)

Though Stukeley had this drawing engraved, it was not published during his lifetime (he died in 1765). A new edition of the "Itinerarium Curiosum", issued after his death (Stukeley 1776), included a hundred plates which had never been printed before, and this Rochester drawing was one of those.



Stukeley's drawing -- "A Piece of the Roman Wall at Rochester 7 October 1724"

There is no obvious indication where this stretch of wall was located. Stukeley's words -- "near that angle below the bridg encompass'd by the river" -- are too vague to be helpful, and no

recognizable landmarks appear in the drawing itself. By the time that Beale Poste went looking for it, this stretch of wall had disappeared, and its location had become a mystery. According to him, it was "supposed to have been near the former St. Clement's church" (Poste 1848:34);* but I do not know how that conclusion could have been arrived at.

* Payne (1895:8) says something similar, but he is just echoing Poste; Wheeler (1932:84) says something similar again, but he is just echoing Payne.

When I first looked at this drawing of Stukeley's, many years ago, it meant nothing to me. I looked at it again quite recently, while I was making a list of the illustrations in Stukeley's book relating to places in Kent,* and found it no less baffling than before. But then, while the image was still fresh in my mind, I saw a view of Rochester drawn at around this time, and it suddenly struck me that the curved stretch of fencing which is shown in Stukeley's drawing is shown in this view as well.

* <http://durobrivis.net/library//1724-stukeley-plates.pdf>

This is the view I mean:

"An Exact Prospect of the City of ROCHESTER / taken from Finsbery Windmill by Ja: Collins." "A PROSPECT of Chatham DOCK, / from the same place." Two views on one sheet, without date or imprint. (The second line of the Chatham title is missing from some copies.) <https://artcollection.culture.gov.uk/artwork/395/>

Very little is known about the artist; there may have been more than one engraver named J. Collins active at around this time. What reason he had for making these two drawings is unclear – but make them he did, from the windmill on the Frindsbury side of the river, with the help, no doubt, of a telescope. (The mill is shown in Badeslade's view of Rochester.)

The drawings are not dated. In Rochester the new Guildhall, built in 1687, is prominently displayed: even more so than the castle and cathedral, it is very much larger than it should be. On the other hand, the new Market House built in 1706 (of which the citizens were also very proud) does not appear to be shown; so I assume, provisionally, that the drawing dates from c.1690–1700. (Perhaps the dating could be bracketed more closely, from the view of Chatham, by someone acquainted with the evolution of the dockyard.) By 1724 the plates were in the hands of the bookseller Joseph Smith, who included these views (reduced in width) in an album published that year (Smith 1724);* but they might well have been some 30 years old by then.

* Half of Rochester bridge was cropped from the right-hand edge of the upper plate, two ships from the left-hand edge of the lower plate. The copies in circulation are, it appears, mostly of this mutilated state. Let the buyer beware.

This is a detail from James Collins's view of Rochester:



and this an enlargement of the portion which seems to me to correspond with Stukeley's drawing:



In Collins's time the city wall was hidden by a shed-like building, to the left of the row of houses; by Stukeley's time that shed had been removed, and the wall was exposed to view. If the images match (and I feel sure that they do), Stukeley's words should be taken to mean that the wall was near the Common, the area of marshland north of the city, demarcated by a sharp bend of the river. And again if the images match, the lane emerging through a breach in the wall, on the left side of Stukeley's drawing, can be identified as George Lane.*

* It takes its name from the George Inn, at the High Street end of it. It was formerly called White Hart Lane: that is how it is marked on Russell's (1717) map. Does this imply that the George used to be called the White Hart? And does that imply that the documents printed by Aveling (1895) refer to this property? I wish I knew. (On the 1:500 map, the only White Hart to be found is a small pub a short distance west of the Guildhall. Totally rebuilt, the pub is still there (15 High Street); but it is no longer called the White Hart, and no longer even a pub.)

By the 1860s, when the Ordnance Survey made its 1:500 map of Rochester and its environs,* the stretch of wall just west of George Lane had been levelled.* There were buildings along this side of the lane extending across the line of it. Though nothing was visible, the base of the wall was probably still there,

underground. It is probably still there now; but this is precisely the stretch of wall which disappeared under the tarmac when a new stretch of roadway was built,* alongside the railway viaduct, so that traffic could be diverted away from the High Street.

* The map is available online. Go to <http://www.old-maps.co.uk/maps.html>, enter the coordinates "574300" and "168700", and carry on from there.

* Just east of George Lane (just left of it, from Stukeley's point of view), a section across the Roman wall was excavated by Harrison in 1974--5 (Harrison 1982:102--5).

* Though I am not exactly sure, I believe it to be true that Corporation Street existed on the drawing-board by 1906, on the ground by 1909.

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