

SITE 4 THE DISCOVERY OF THE LOST ROMAN TOWN OF *NOVIOMAGUS* 1966–2000

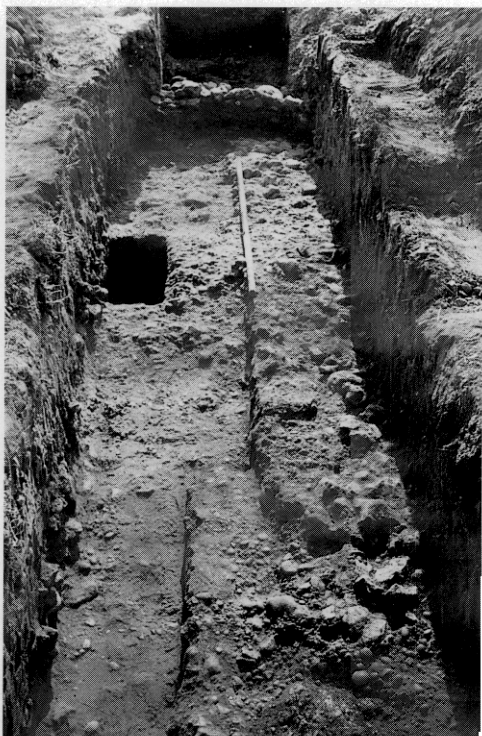
One of the best kept secrets in the long history of the CIB teams, was the discovery of another of the 'lost' Roman towns of Kent. The well-known Antonine Itinerary II, probably dating from the 3rd century A.D. lists some 36 Roman settlements on a route from Hadrian's Wall to Richborough, Kent. For over 400 years historians have tried to locate a town listed as *Noviomagus*, recorded as being 10 Roman miles from *Londinium* (now London) and 18 Roman miles from *Vagniacae* (now Springhead). The direct distance between these two towns is, however, only 18 Roman miles. Experts had claimed that the Itinerary must contain a 10 mile error and that the missing town (*Noviomagus*) was at Welling (only 8 miles) or Crayford (10 miles), both on the Roman arterial road, now known as Watling Street. At neither have very extensive Roman settlements been located.

Way back in 1966 the early-formed Bromley and West Kent Archaeological Group, began trial trenching on farmland near West Wickham church (now within Bromley Borough), across the line of another Roman road, this time one running from *Londinium* southwards towards the Sussex coast (the London—Lewes Road, Margary Route 14). The work, part of a much more extensive programme of excavation and field-walking, revealed evidence for a settlement at this point covering at least 15 acres. Small finds included 100 coins, 5,000 potsherds and traces of chalk floors, post-holes, pits, branch roads and even a blacksmith's workshop containing the iron rim of a large wooden wheel.

It did not take long to work out that this newly found Roman settlement was exactly 10 Roman miles from *Londinium* and also about 17 Roman miles from *Vagniacae*! A check on the Antonine Itinerary showed that it took a somewhat winding



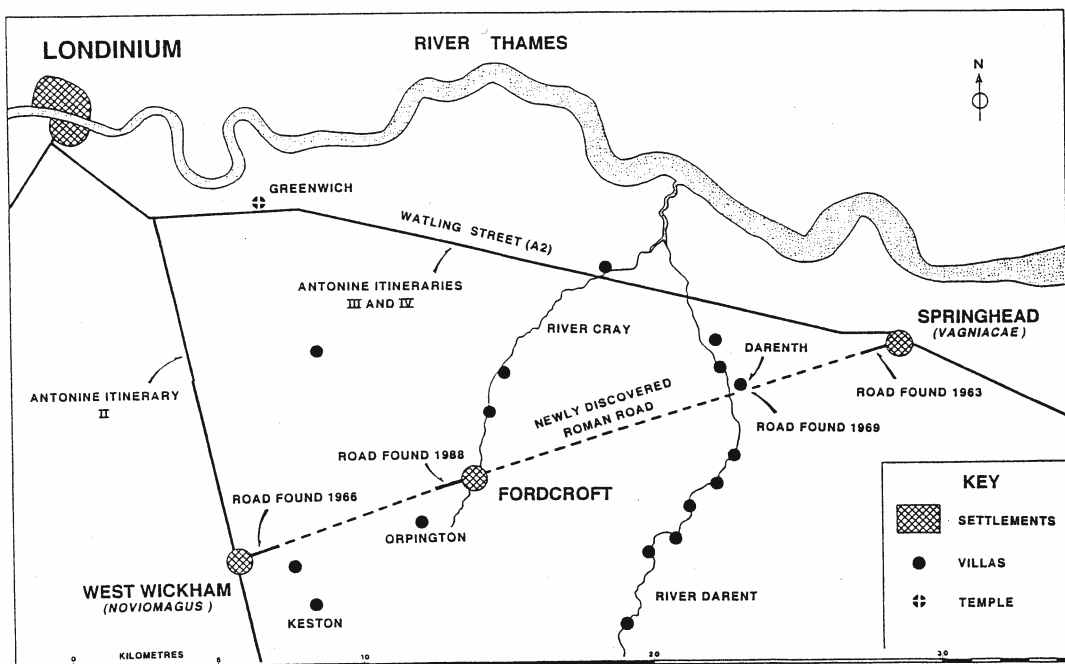
4-1 *Noviomagus*, 2000. The lost Roman town near West Wickham parish church.



4-2 Noviomagus, 1966. One of the trial-trenches across the site showing the flint and pebble metalled road inside the Roman town. Nearby were traces of timber buildings and quantities of pottery and coins. We later arranged for the site to be scheduled as an ancient Monument and thus protected from treasure hunters using metal detectors.

4-3 Noviomagus, 1981. The careful excavation of a wood-lined storage tank from which the rim of a Roman wheel had been extracted by treasure hunters. It seems likely that this had been in a blacksmith's workshop on the west side of the Roman town.





4-4 Map showing *Noviomagus* and the Roman road system from *Londinium*.

route across Britain and thus the traveller need not have travelled exclusively along Watling Street to Richborough as all historians had wrongly supposed, but could have branched off and come along the London–Lewes Road instead!

It simply remained to find a substantial Roman road joining the newly found settlement at West Wickham and that of *Vagniacae*. Part of a small branch road leading east had anyway been revealed by the trenching and a corresponding spur (heading south-west) had been found by the CIB teams at Springhead in 1964 (Site 3).

The final proof came fortuitously in 1988 when the Unit was asked to carry out a rescue-excavation at Poverest Road, Orpington, close to where there was a small Roman bath-house. The principal discovery of that work was a broad stretch of pebble metalling, in several bands and up to 7 m. in width. Related ditches all showed that the axis lay east-west and indicated the discovery of a major Roman road. It lay exactly on a line joining West Wickham and Springhead! Here, some five miles from the former, is a scattering of Roman features and structures which collectively must have formed a settlement at the crossing of the River Cray and now known as Fordcroft (or rather better, *Odasium*).

All the pieces of the puzzle were now in place. But it was not until July, 2000 that the story appeared jointly in the K.A.R. 141 and the Sunday Telegraph. The public response then, from Texas to Paris, was most encouraging. This particular secret had been kept for 34 years! Not even when I arranged for the area to be scheduled as an Ancient Monument in 1976, had the cat jumped out of the bag.

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**by
Brian Philp**

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