

# ANCIENT CROYDON - THE WAY WE WERE -

First we had the dinosaurs, such as the handsome chap from Crystal Palace below. Then came the mammals, and that eventually included people. Waves of immigration and invasion led to ancient customs and beliefs being superseded and lost. At the dawn of the Christian era the traditions of Ancient Croydon were 'pagan' in the strict sense of 'pertaining to the countryside' and hence out of the reach of the influence of the Church authorities that sought to introduce Christianity as the state religion. The ancient practices largely went underground as the Church authorities took a stronger hold on society. While many traditions are still with us today in a modified, Christianized form (the midwinter festivities centring on Christmas are a good example), the actual physical evidence for ancient beliefs largely consists in relics from burials. However, all is not lost - some customs have been researched and revived by latterday pagans and folklorists, ensuring that many traditional practices from our past are recorded and saved for future generations.



# SETTING THE SCENE

## A POTTED HISTORY OF CROYDON

**No one could call Croydon a modern town. We may have a cluster of tall office buildings that lead lazy journalists to compare us to Manhattan and a culture seemingly based on shopping and drinking, but there's more to understanding the town than that. Let's take a stroll through Croydon's past and see what themes come to the fore.**

Water has always been important to man, and the many streams and springs of Croydon formed a focus for settlement in prehistoric times. In the early years of our era the Romans conquered Celtic Britain. Much of the North Downs had already been stripped by 'slash-and-burn' agricultural techniques before the Romans arrived, but the Weald was still densely forested. A villa was built at Beddington, and several Roman roads ran through the area. Fragments of pottery and hoards of Roman coins found during excavations in Old Town and around Croydon Clocktower have added to the evidence that there was a small Roman settlement here.

The Roman soldiers were eventually called away to protect the crumbling Roman empire. Their departure was followed by waves of Anglo-Saxon invasions, although these weren't the first Germanic peoples to get a toehold, as some had been brought in by the Romans as mercenaries. The Anglo-Saxons settled here permanently, in some places pushing out the Romano-British or Celts, and in others co-existing or even intermarrying.

Surrey was initially part of a kingdom based on London, but was later absorbed into Wessex. When the shires were formed, Surrey was split into fifteen administrative units called 'hundreds', Croydon being in Wallington

Hundred. The tables were turned many centuries later, with Wallington now just a small part of the metropolis of Croydon! Manors on the Weald had outlying land used for summer grazing, and drovers' roads leading to these later developed into today's congested thoroughfares.



Saxon woman in Croham Hurst

The Norman conquerors who arrived after the defeat of King Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 inherited an organized, mostly Christian, society, although many rural districts remained

faithful to their old beliefs. Land changed hands, with King William's Norman supporters and family members taking over chunks of land from the defeated English.

Lying on a major trade route, little Croindene slowly developed into the important market town of Croydon. The area was held by the Archbishops of Canterbury in the Norman feudal system, which required holders of land to provide men for the army or pay 'quit



Tudor gateway, Croydon Parish Church

rents' to quit them of this liability. Later some archbishops even had their own private armies.

One hundred acres of medieval Croydon were marked out by crosses, now commemorated by wall plaques set up by the Rotarians in 1977. Enclosed within this privileged area was the Archbishops' Palace, surrounded by extensive grounds with orchards and fish ponds. This was a favoured country retreat for the archbishops, away from the strains of the Court, and was also used as a staging point between their palace at Lambeth and their centre of

power in Canterbury. It was also frequently used by the archbishops' royal guests (and royal hostages!).

The town was Parliamentary during the Civil War, and the stained glass windows in the parish church were destroyed by a chap named Blese, paid half a crown a day to smash them. These were turbulent times indeed. Smuggling was rife in Croydon in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Highwaymen such as the semi-legendary Dick Turpin also made life hazardous for the wealthy traveller, and he is said to have had a safe house in Thornton Heath. But how safe was Thornton Heath with its well-used gallows by the old pond?

Prior to the Industrial Revolution the surrounding area was primarily agricultural, but with industry came urban poverty. The Old Town became overcrowded, with bawdy houses, unscrupulous landlords and crowded conditions.

The established Church of England remained powerful in local life, but the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw turbulence in religious affairs, too, as old and new dissenters gained a foothold and the Roman Catholic church experienced a revival. The Anglicans remained the single largest body of believers, but the faithful were outnumbered by Catholics, Methodists, Quakers, Spiritualists and other churches. The Enclosure Act came late to Croydon, forcing the uprooted children of rural families to seek employment in the towns after losing access to woodlands and pasture. The parish sold off common land and developed the town with the proceeds. The pace of development quickened, with local boards taking away the power of the parish, cleaning up disease-carrying streams such as the Bourne, a tributary of the Wandle, clearing Old Town slums and digging drains. They also knocked down some

buildings that we might have treasured these days. New modes of transport meant that wealthy Londoners could move out of the increasingly dirty city to large, new properties built on former church land in leafy suburbs of Croydon such as Upper Norwood.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw extensive development and redevelopment that filled in gaps between Croydon and neighbouring London boroughs, not to mention the gaps blasted out by the heavy bombardment that the town suffered during World War II. Attempts to turn Croydon into a city failed, but Croydon in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a multicultural town with extensive leisure facilities, office sites, shopping areas, a wide range of housing types, visionary transport solutions in the form of Tramlink and a sense of community, but also increasing social problems. The district demarcated by the old crosses continues to attract public houses from which drunkenness and violence spill out after closing time, with hardly a

week going by without an incident. Croydon has everything that defines a city apart from the name.

The centre of Croydon may be heavily built up, its ancient remains lost under the concrete, but the borough still has many open spaces and districts where, if you know where to look, you can see reminders of the past and get an idea of what shaped the Croydon we know today. And some of those things are just plain weird.



Alders and Whitgift's almshouses

# THE STONE AGE

**The Stone Age goes under various names, including Neolithic for the New Stone Age and Palaeolithic for the earlier period, called the Old Stone Age. In between there came the Mesolithic period. Our knowledge of this period of prehistory is limited to what archaeological remains tell us, and posters at the Tramlink stops show pictures of typical findings.**

Back in 1992 the Museum of London dig at the site of the former Philips Electronics site unearthed evidence of human activity from around 10,000 years ago. Flint flakes indicated the presence of tool-making hunters, but nothing is known of their beliefs and intellectual life.

Mesolithic hut sites were excavated by the Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society in 1968 in the northern clearing on the hill top at Croham Hurst, at a height of around 477 feet. Each had a central hole for the roof support post, and they are believed to have had turf walls. They were occupied 5000-7000 years ago, when men used to hunt wild pig, elk and wolf in this area. More Mesolithic findings come from Littleheath Woods, Riddlesdown and south Croydon.

What might have been Stone Age axes were found in Kenley in a Saxon burial ground, and finds at a Neolithic flint-working site on Pampisford Road, south Croydon, were reported to include a flint axe, round scraper, awl, and waste flakes. Another flint-working site in Haling produced a barbed and tanged arrowhead used for hunting. This is typical of the Beaker people and therefore dates from around the late

Neolithic/early Bronze Age period when metal-working Celts arrived.

# THE CELTS

**The main Celtic tribes who eventually fetched up in south-eastern Britain were the Belgae. Although they can be traced to the area now known as Belgium, their ancestors came from much further east, spreading in a series of mass migrations, pushing earlier Celts further westwards.**

The workers in bronze are believed to have arrived first, only to be replaced by more advanced Celts with a knowledge of iron-working. Each technological advance would have profited the invaders. Eventually they, too, would be pushed west by the Anglo-Saxons, another branch of the huge Celtic family of continental Europe, who got as far as Britain in historic times.

Until the later Roman invasions, the history of the Celts in Britain is still largely 'prehistoric', i.e. it is not recorded in contemporary indigenous literature. The evidence for Celtic settlement in Croydon is therefore largely archaeological and etymological, i.e. from surviving place names. The element 'coombe' occurs frequently. This derives from the Celtic 'cwm' meaning 'valley', later modified by the Anglo-Saxons to 'cumb'.

Writers have speculated that the Britons had holy places in the great woods of Haling and Waddon. The district was heavily forested and, as the oak, sacred tree of the druids, is common here, it is reasonable to assume that local oak groves would have been used by the Celtic priesthood. Croydon is still a good place for mistletoe, ranked second

behind Bromley in a survey by the London Biodiversity Partnership in 2002.

Other circumstantial evidence includes the presence of many streams and springs. The original settlement of Croydon was at the foot of the hill around the parish church and Waddon. Duppas Hill has been seen by some as a place where druidic rites would have been carried out, while the vale and base of the hill were well watered until relatively recently. An article in the *Croydon Times* in 1924 referred to a possible derivation of 'Duppas' from the Celtic 'dubadh', meaning pool or pond. This may be significant because running streams were regarded as the water of life in the Celtic belief system and gave access to the underworld. Sacred wells had magical properties and contained healing waters.

Many sites around Croydon still show signs of the Celts: farming systems at Farthing Down; burial sites with grave goods, evidence of later Romano-British settlements and farmsteads, including Kingswood, Sanderstead; and an intrenched camp or fort at the War Coppice, Caterham. A hoard of bronze Celtic 'potin' coins was also found in New Addington. They were believed to have been made in Kent copying the style used in Massalia (now Marseilles). The depiction of the traditional bull image was reduced to a few lines and curves, and Apollo featured on the other side.

## THE ROMANS

**The Romans under Julius Caesar arrived in Iron Age Britain in 55 BC, recording what they saw, interpreted from the point of view of an invading force.**

They didn't stay on that occasion, only finally invading in AD 43 when they weren't too busy elsewhere in their Empire. Starting at what is now Colchester, the Romans subdued the Celts and moved in. Their ability to write means that we now move into the truly historical period, even though coverage of events is still patchy and open to interpretation. They also came from cultures that were different from what they found in Britain.

Their superior building skills provide us with more evidence of lifestyles. The foundations of a Roman villa's bath house were discovered on the site of Beddington Sewage Farm as recently as 1871. A cobbled area just to the south, investigated in 1959/1960, has been interpreted as part of the villa itself. Finds included coins, pottery, hypocaust tiles, oyster shells and the bones of various small mammals and birds. A lead coffin from this site is now in St Mary's church, while a stone coffin is on view in the dovecote in Carew Manor, Beddington Park. Roman tile has also been re-used in St Mary's.

Roman roads also run through Croydon, connecting London with the coast, including one virtually on the boundary between Croydon and Bromley, and another running to Arundel through Broad Green.

Evidence for Romano-British settlements has been discovered in Kings Wood, on Coulsdon Downs, and

Croham Hurst, including burials, farmsteads and rubbish pits. The term 'Romano-British' is used to describe the period of Roman dominion, where the Celts were becoming increasingly Romanized. The Romans are also thought to have been the first inhabitants of Norbury, as they brought with them agricultural tools capable of working the heavy, clay soils. It has been suggested by some that Cold Harbour farm at the foot of Duppas Hill is evidence for Roman activity. The name signified an outstation for Roman legionaries and is said to be common in the vicinity of Roman encampments.

Coins were found in 1903 when a Corporation workman was digging a trench for drains on Wandle Road (another source says Waddon Road). The finds were in two broken pots and are thought to have numbered 3600 coins, buried in 351 AD. However, another source says the 3800 [sic] coins were from the reigns of the four emperors who succeeded Constantine the Great, making them later, and the details of only 2706 of them were recorded. Many of the coins were issued in Gaul. They were split between various museums, including Grange Wood Museum.

A further, smaller hoard of Roman coins was discovered in 1905 in South End. The 281 coins came from around 155 AD, some almost mint from the reign of Antoninus Pius, others older and more worn. Some people believe that this hoard supports the theory that Croydon was the site of the Roman *Noviomagus*, known to be 10 Roman miles south of London (but others say it was at Woodcote or even Streatham). The coins are believed to be money paid to a horse-soldier on his retirement from active life following 25 years' service. The coins were from a peaceful period for the Romans, suggesting that the soldier retired to Croydon, buried the

coins for safety, and then died.

A few Roman remains have also been found on the museum site in the Clocktower. Pieces of amphorae have been found on a site stretching from behind the waterworks in Surrey Street up to the steps leading to the High Street, and bits of old Roman tile were used in the construction of the Old Palace's walls.

Until a dig in 1995, central Croydon had been thought to be of Anglo-Saxon origin, so this was highly significant. It revealed Roman inhabitation on a site near the Croydon Flyover, with evidence to suggest Croydon was a staging post for the Imperial Messenger Service or a small Roman town.

A dig on Lower Coombe Street in 2005 revealed more evidence of substantial Roman activity in the centre of Croydon. Being so heavily built up, it is rare for a central site to become available for excavation, but this dig took place as part of the planning conditions for 52 flats. What the archaeologists came across in the space and time available was a Roman rubbish pit consisting of broken pottery, animal remains and domestic refuse such as broken clothing pins. The pottery fragments were freshly broken, indicating that the people discarding them had not had to walk far to the pit. An archaeologist involved in the dig believed they were just a few metres away from a substantial find. Some of the finds are expected to go on display in the British Museum.

# THE SAXONS

**The Saxons left behind uncontroverted evidence of inhabitation and commercial activity in central Croydon. They made a mark that can still be seen today, whether in terms of artefacts retrieved from archaeological digs, or in terms of centres of habitation and continuing street layouts.**

So, what brought them to Croydon? Relatively small numbers of Saxon mercenaries from other parts of the Roman Empire helped the Romans defend British shores from attack, but revolts over supplies and the final departure of the Romans in the 5<sup>th</sup> century due to trouble at home led to the influx of many invaders from all parts of Germany, not just Saxons.

Slowly the Saxons and other tribes began to push the Romano-British northwards and westwards to the Celtic fringes of Britain, although there is believed to have been an element of intermarrying, enslaving and co-existing. This movement means that the south-east became Anglo-Saxon early on, creating England, named after the tribe of the Angles. By the time of the Norman conquest in 1066, the English had battled against and defeated the Vikings and created a stable society with a complex system of government.

Many Saxon remains have been found in Croydon, including burial mounds, boundary markers and sites of farms. Several of the borough's churches had Saxon origins, including the parish church of St John the Baptist in Old Town and St Mary's in Addington village. Little evidence of housing has survived, as the Saxons largely built in

wood. They seem to have learnt little from their Roman predecessors, who built stone villas and are well-known for their plumbing. However, the term 'Dark Ages' applied to the Saxon period is a definite misnomer, for culture of all sorts flourished.

In addition to the archaeological evidence, many customs regarded as typically English have their origins in Saxon practices. The Saxons were pagans, worshipping such gods as Thor and Woden, from whom their leaders claimed direct descent over surprisingly (and impossibly) few generations. Thunderfield Common in Addington was the site of the Witanagemot, the assembly of elders, who met on the common named after Thor, Nordic god of thunder.

By the time the Northumbrian monk Bede wrote his 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People' in the early 8th century, Christianity was widespread. However, many rural areas stayed loyal to their traditions for some considerable time. This reflects the original meaning of 'pagan', i.e. 'of the countryside', relating to practices no longer known in the towns where the government and church of the day found it easier to impose their authority and stamp out what they regarded as wicked ways.

Saxon Croydon gradually grew into a market town for the surrounding area. The Domesday book, drawn up after the Norman Conquest to take stock of what possessions the invaders from Normandy had taken over, shows it as having a church, 48 villeins and 25 smallholders. As only the heads of households were counted, these figures can probably be multiplied by three or four.

The large number of Saxon settlements that stood here is shown in the etymology of various place names. Most

Saxons were illiterate, and even among those who could wield a pen spellings varied. The Domesday Book didn't help, with Saxon names recorded by French-speaking Norman clerics. Croydon itself was once written 'Crogdaen', but interpretations vary, the most likely being 'sheep valley', 'crooked valley' and 'saffron valley'. Virtually all place names in and around Croydon are of Saxon or Old English origin, with some believed to reflect a Scandinavian influence. The Efra, a stream that rises on the north-west side of Norwood Hill, is even named after a Saxon elf of the woods.

The Anglo-Saxons were beaten at the Battle of Hastings, but not routed. The Norman (but recently Viking) invaders took over the kingdom with their nouveau French ways, and for a while Norman French was the language spoken by the educated and at court. English as the vernacular developed in the dark corners of the realm, finally breaking out around the time of Chaucer and never going away again.