

## Archaeology in Camden Town - 2

### *Palaeolithic fossils – "Brecknock Crescent"*

In her 2012 PhD "*London before London: Reconstructing a Palaeolithic Landscape*", Caroline Juby identified "a group of 7 fossils in the Wetherell Collection of Natural History Museum".

Juby states: "The assemblage was discovered in Brecknock Crescent near Camden Town around 1891. There is a Brecknock Road in the locality today, presumably near where the fossils were originally collected."

#### 8.7.4 Palaeontology

The species discovered from Camden are listed in Table 8.67.

Species	No. of specimens	% of total assemblage	Minimum number of Individuals (M.N.I.)
<b>Proboscidea</b>			
<i>Palaeoloxodon antiquus</i> (Falconer and Cautley), straight-tusked elephant	3	42.86	1
Elephantidae sp. indet elephant	1	14.29	1
<b>Artiodactyla</b>			
<i>Hippopotamus amphibius</i> L., hippopotamus	3	42.86	1
Total	7		

**Table 8.6: Species recorded from Camden Town**

I have consulted with the staff at the Natural History Museum, Kensington, and visited and inspected the fossils in March 2016.

The Natural History Museum originated from collections within the British Museum. There was a relatively unscientific approach until the mid -1850s<sup>1</sup>. The Natural History Museum Waterhouse building in Kensington was opened in the 1880s. Mammalian fossils are held there in trays arranged by place of finding, and also recorded by chronological accession number.

This photo (courtesy of Natural History Museum) shows the tray for 'Camden Town and Canning Town'. [Only two fossils, both large equine specimens, were from Canning Town.] Two groups of fossils Camden could be directly identified by registration number in relation to Camden Town, with a total of six hippopotamus and four mammoth fossils.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural\\_History\\_Museum,\\_London](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_History_Museum,_London)



With these specimens is a letter (not described in the thesis) from Nathaniel Wetherell, a surgeon and collector who lived in Highgate<sup>2</sup>, writing to [Thomas] Rupert Jones (1819 – 1911, geologist at the British Museum): 'the fragments of bone my son John brought to you were found about fifteen years ago since by some men in digging for a sewer on the side of the road leading from Holloway to Camden Town and near Brecknock Crescent'. There is also one specimen label that says 'Bracknock Arms'.

The 2011 thesis reported seven specimens, of straight-tusked elephant and hippopotamus, and dated them to 1891. However, Wetherell died in 1875. The registration dates for the specimens are 1869 and 1871. However, registration could occur later than presence in the collection. The letter's statement of 'about fifteen years since' would put the earlier group of fossils as mid 1840s.

### **Location**

The Greater London Sites and Monuments Record catalogues these fossils as "Brecknock Road/Charlton King's Road [Brecknock Crescent] Camden Town/Kentish Town, Camden {Palaeolithic mammalian fossil remains}".

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<sup>2</sup> Dr Nathaniel Thomas Wetherell (1800 - 1875) discovered at Muswell Hill a mix of rocks and fossils that led to the recognition that glaciation had affected southern England.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel\\_Wetherell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel_Wetherell)

John Jeffreys Pratt, Second Earl of Camden, was created First Marquess of Camden and Earl of Brecknock in 1812. The Brecknock title reflected his inheritance, through his mother, of lands in Brecon, Wales. His son, George Pratt, took on the title of Lord Brecknock. As the Camden Town estate developed in the first half of the nineteenth century, several rows of houses were given the name 'Brecknock' – including Brecknock Crescent for two quarter-circle terraces either side of Camden Road at the junction with St Pancras Way (earlier known as Grays Inn Road or Kings Road). Brecknock Road, then called Maiden Lane or York Way, running to the north higher, along the Camden / Islington borough boundary, was a later development. The two Brecknock Crescents were built at slightly different times: the first (south) crescent is seen in the 1827 Greenwood map.

There was a new spate of development to the north of St Pancras Way (Kings Road) after the marriage in 1835 of George Pratt third Earl of Camden to Harriet Murray, daughter of the Bishop of Rochester. The second Brecknock Crescent is shown on the map from the later 1840s (here overlain with a proposed route for the North London Railway). Camden Villas, Lord Camden's development of the early 1820/30s either side of Camden Road, stretched up to the Brecknock Arms (built by 1840) at the top of the hill:



1827



1849

The letter indicates the sewer was near Brecknock Crescent: the work could have been in the side roads, or a new main drain in Camden Road itself.



Digging a sewer with the River Fleet, Camden Town

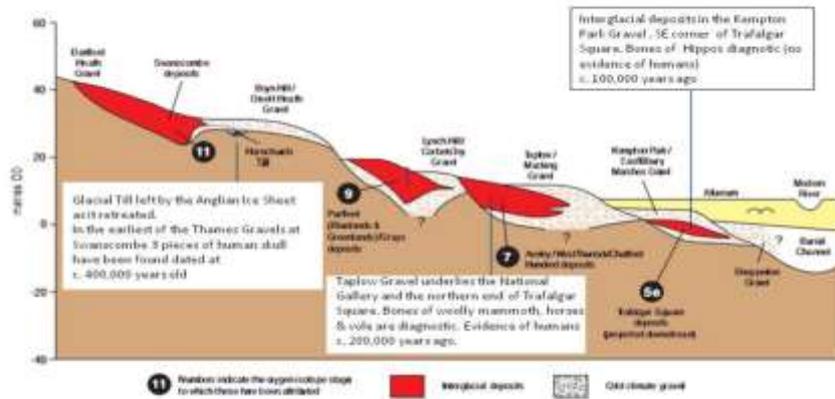
### **Geology**

Fossils of similar Palaeolithic period have been found extensively in north east London at Kempton Park in the Lea River valley and at Stamford Hill. The characteristic of Kempton Park Formation is alluvial gravel. The British Geological Survey maps the surface features, and describes the northwest inner London mainly as 'London clay'. However, the survey is only of the top formation, and – as the excavation of the Lea valley shows – river valleys can reveal differing substrata.

Greater London Authority has made a report with a detailed geological assessment of London<sup>3</sup>, describing 'river terrace deposits'.

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<sup>3</sup> Green Infrastructure and Open Environments: London's foundations: protecting the geodiversity of the capital. London Plan, 2011 implementation framework (Supplementary planning guidance, March 2012)



The Thames Terraces (modified from Schreve, 2004)

The terrace layers of gravel reflect different periods being covered by sea. Periods of cold were followed by warmer 'interglacial' periods. Kempton Park Gravel can be seen in the lowest (right-hand) level at around 30 metres above sea level – similar to Camden Road / St Pancras Way. The report says:

4.140 Each of the terraces was originally deposited on the contemporary valley floor, typically overlying bedrock ... Subsequent uplift and erosion left portions of each deposit some distance above the modern river, with the older terraces at greater altitude. Together the Thames river terraces thus take the form of a disjointed 'staircase' ...

4.141 Each terrace deposit is typically a few metres thick, lying on a step-like surface eroded into the underlying bedrock.

4.149 There are a relatively few, small, but widely distributed examples of deposits from past interglacial periods, representing deposition in temperate climates, typically warmer than at present. These are associated with the river terrace deposits and the brickearths, typically towards the 'back' of the terraces...

4.150 They are mostly sandy to clayey in nature, representing fluvial or lacustrine deposition. Many have yielded significant fossil material, including in some cases the remains of large mammals now found in Africa, and so have a greater significance than their relative rarity might suggest.

#### *Evidence - Boreholes*

There is evidence for gravel deposits in north Camden Town. The British Geological Survey keeps a database for boreholes in the UK<sup>4</sup>. In principle, data from all boreholes should be reported to it (information provided by Science Department of London Museum), although data from boreholes by commercial companies are not necessarily reported.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bgs.ac.uk/data/boreholescans/home.html>



In the screenshot, the area of north Camden Town is lacking in borehole reports.

One bore-hole was at Witcher Place (at the north end of Rochester Mews, now the University residences, TQ28SE4). It was made for the Idris mineral waters factory, a borehole for a deep well, although no water was found to 120m. The top layer to 55m is simply described as Clay and Clay Sand. (The larger Idris works at Pratt Street had a well at '242 feet' beneath chalk.)

There is a series of 6 boreholes to 30 feet at Shirley House, 25-27 Camden Road. Five of six of these show 'silty clay and gravel' below made ground, to a depth varying from 6 to 10 feet.

**TERRESEARCH LIMITED**

BOREHOLE NO. 5 TQ28 SE

Contract Name: <b>Camden Town</b>		Report No. <b>S. 808/15 1207</b>
Client: <b>S. Redd &amp; Ltd.</b>		Site Address: <b>Corner of Camden Street</b>
Engineers: <b>Leonard &amp; Partners,</b>		<b>and Camden Road,</b>
<b>344-360 South Lambeth Rd.</b>		<b>London, N.W. 1.</b>
<b>London, S.W. 8.</b>		<b>2711, 2740</b>

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Standing Water Level: <b>19.6, 65 7.45 a.m.</b>	Diameter: <b>8"</b>
Water Struck: <b>None 75'6"</b>	Method of Boring: <b>Shell/Auger</b>
Ground Level: <b>75.13</b>	Start: <b>17.6.65</b> Finish: <b>18.6.65</b>

Remarks: **2 hours breaking out at surface  
1 hour chiselling claystone.  
50' of perforated pipe installed**

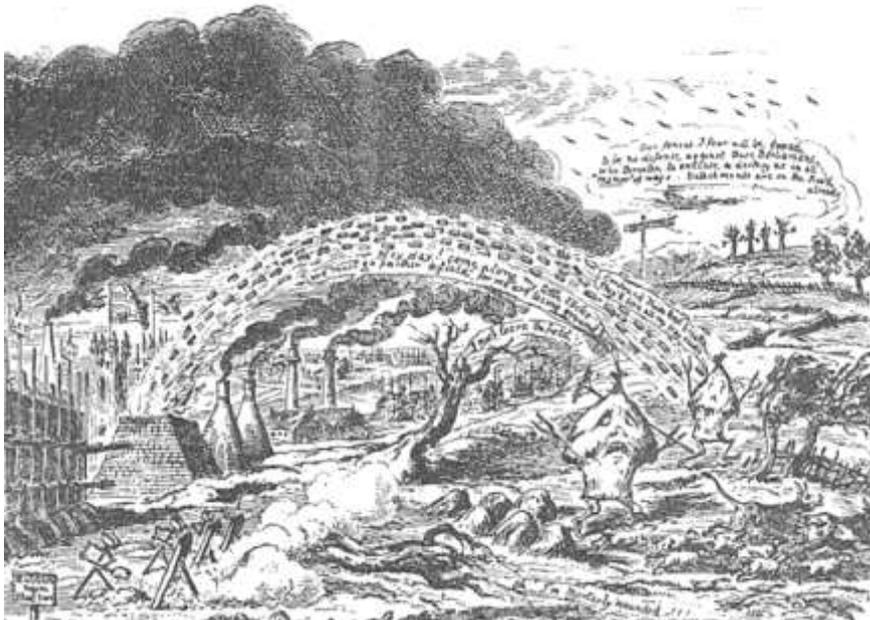
Description of Strata	Thickness	Depth	Disturbed Sample	'U' Core and 'N' P. Test
MADE: <b>Concrete</b>	0'9"	0'9"		
GROUND: <b>Soft brown silty clay with bricks and stones</b>	1'9"	2'6"	J2140 2'5"	
<b>Soft grey silty clay with gravel</b>	3'6"	6'0"	B2141 5'0"	
<b>Stiff to hard fissured mottled brown clay with occasional sulphate crystals</b>	14'6"	20'6"	J2142 7'6"	U2143 11'0"
			J2144 13'0"	U2145 15'6"
			J2146 18'0"	U2147 19'0"
<b>Stiff to hard fissured dark grey silty clay</b>	14'0"	34'6"	J2148 22'6"	U2149 24'0"
			J2150 27'6"	U2151 29'0"
			J2152 32'6"	

An earlier substrata recording is found in Whitaker<sup>5</sup> (Memoirs of the Geological Survey, The Geology of London Vol II, 1889) for "Camden Station London & Northwestern Railway":

Made Ground	9
Loam and Gravel	6
Black Earth	3
London Clay	144 (goes to Chalk)

*Brick earth.*

Many of the Palaeontological findings for London were in Brick Earth. Bricks were locally-made in Camden in the first half of the nineteenth century – 'London stock'. The classic Cruickshank cartoon from the 1820s<sup>6</sup>, the March of Bricks, shows brick kilns by Camden Town shooting bricks over to fields across the Fleet River. Higher up, to the right, are the fields of St Pancras Way, under threat for next development.



Cruickshank 1829

A parish map from the 1801 shows, alongside the (then) Grays Inn [or King's] Road, a series of five ponds suggesting a water-line on the eastern bank of the Fleet. One of these ponds continues to the present day (flooding in winter) at the southwest corner of Rochester Terrace Gardens.

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<sup>5</sup> Clements D. Personal communication, 2016. William Whitaker FRS (1836-1925) was a hydro-geologist.

<sup>6</sup> <http://londonist.com/2013/11/the-secret-history-of-the-london-brick>



[‘Grays Inn Road’ joining Kentish Town - viewed here with North to the right]  
Thompson map 1801, London Metropolitan Archive

Kentish Town was on a spring line: there is a road called spring lane. A letter in 1924 from Mssrs Hilger to St Pancras Public Health Officer (responsible for drainage) notifies that a spring was found at 79 Camden Road during excavation for the scullery. Similarly, more recently, Basement Impact Statements in Kentish Town Road and Rochester Place have reported boreholes filling with water.

Much of the nineteenth century London palaeontology was done at the time of construction of buildings. North Camden Town was being built in the 1820s to 1850s. The several findings of fossils in the mid *twentieth* century in Holborn and Trafalgar Square were made from piling – at levels much deeper - during periods of site re-building.

London Thames geology<sup>7</sup> has looked primarily at the main river basin, and with the Lea Valley in east London. Fossils have been found in the lower sections around Holborn, while the geology of Hampstead Heath is also described<sup>8</sup>. But there has been no specific investigation of the middle section of the Fleet.

A basement impact survey for re building Hawley Wharf in 2015 provides a sewer map showing the main line from behind Providence Place, crossing Kentish Town Road and turning down Camden Street.

<sup>7</sup> <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-3009>

<sup>8</sup> Clements D. Itinerary Three - the geology of London from Hampstead Heath. The Geology of London. Geologists’ Association Guide No 68. The Geologists’s Association 2010, pp38-55.



The main sewer line at Kentish Town Road is joined by an oblique 'spur', along the former line of the Fleet, from behind at Farrier Street and runs down Camden Street, turning further east to pass beneath the Regent's Canal. This course is confirmed by a map from development of the site at 25 Camden Road (Shirley House, currently British Transport Police offices), which is between the triangle of Regent's Canal, Camden Street and Camden Road



However, OpenStreetMap shows a line of the Fleet continuing on the west side of Kentish Town Road, passing under the railway viaduct, then turning to pass under the canal at one of its bends, between Kentish Town Road and Camden Street.



<http://www.openstreetmap.org/way/102014399#map=17/51.54158/-0.13869>