

Tracking the Fleet River

Mark McCarthy, June 2019

Where does the Fleet run in Camden Town? As well as several books on 'the lost rivers of London', a UCL architecture team compiled a report on the history of the Fleet in 2009¹. A web page of 2010 presents the Fleet flowing northwards, which is confusing!²

Yet none of these texts gives a correct statement of the Fleet River in Camden Town.

The Fleet's headwaters are springs and (artificial) ponds between Hampstead and Highgate, and streams, which join at Kentish Town, flow down to St Pancras and onwards, in a deeper valley through Holborn. The Fleet emerges at the Thames in a gully between the two cities of London and Westminster.

A geographical study of St Pancras borough by Dr Emily Cooke in 1931 shows contours:



The main branch of the Fleet (here labelled 'Holebourne') runs from Highgate in the north. It is joined by smaller branches at Kentish Town, a Hampstead branch at Camden Town, and a small branch between Kentish Town Road and Camden Road. (The basis for these tributary lines, however, is not given.)

¹ Barton N. The lost rivers of London. 3rd Ed. Historical Publications 2016; UCL River Fleet restoration project, <https://www.camden.gov.uk/documents/20142/1458280/River+Fleet.pdf/0f0063cc-7079-32c2-5822-6306dcd56d62>

² <https://londoncanals.uk/2010/01/09/the-fleet-river-from-st-pancras-to-camden-town/>



A map from an early 'road atlas' of routes³ out of London, published in 1689, shows King's Road / St Pancras Way following the east side of the Fleet from Kentish Town to Battle Bridge (where Grays Inn Road crossed the Fleet). The road was on the rising solid ground, rather than the lower fields on the west side.

Warburton's map (1721), also in the British Museum's Crace Collection,⁴ shows a connecting road across the Fleet from Kentish town to the Hampstead Road. Of interest is the label 'Holbourne Division' (the Holbourne is another name for the Fleet river), rather than Pancras parish. Again there is only one river, flowing from Highgate. John Roque's map from around 1750, by contrast, shows the Fleet coming only from Hampstead. In both maps the Fleet makes a turn to cross under the new road presumably a bridge built at right angles, rather than the acute angle the road would otherwise need.

[John Roque's parents were probably Huguenots. He started as a surveyor when nobility and gentry in Britain were taking great interest in design and landscaping of their gardens. By 1743 he employed ten draftsmen and engravers in his shop near Piccadilly. In surveying the streets of London, despite the improved theodolite of Jonathan Sisson, Roque used a special wheelbarrow with a wheel circumference of 1/8th of a chain, taking his bearings from church steeples. His survey of the country around London to a distance of 10 miles was published between 1744 and 1746. He died in 1762.]⁵

³ <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/crace/s/zoomify88388.html>

⁴ <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/crace/a/00700000000019u00011000.html>

⁵ A Davies A, *The map of London: from 1746 to the present day* Batsford, London, 1987.



Maps showing the Fleet at Camden Town: Warburton and Roque

Where the road between Camden Town and Kentish Town crossed the Fleet is relatively flat and may have been a ford - in the words of the Catalogue of the London Metropolitan Archives "Ground formerly known as Old Watery High, to the south of where the modern Kentish Town Road crossed the Fleet Ditch" (LMA: E/CAM/178-185).



Thompson's St Pancras Parish map, 1804 (London Metropolitan Archives),

By the time of Thompson's detailed map of the whole parish of St Pancras, published in 1804 (although surveyed in the 1790s), Kentish Town Road has been widened, leading from the new Camden High Street, and contrasting with the winding Kings Road. Both tributaries are shown. There is also a straight line drawn from the Highgate branch to the Hampstead branch; and where the Hampstead branch passes under the road it is perpendicular, with a small pond on the east side. The Highgate branch, in contrast, curves round the Castle inn and meets the Kentish Town Road at an acute angle.



Kentish Town Road northwards into Kentish Town retains the curve of the old road and the terrace of houses adjacent to the Fleet, some from the eighteenth century, called Providence Place, remain to this day. Originally, by its contours, the rivers' natural course would have been into the area that became Jeffreys Street

Kentish Town Road is widened southwards, with houses on the Camden Town estate set on the east side set out as Jeffreys Terrace and Molesworth Terrace. The Fleet was ducted under the new Kentish Town Road obliquely duct from the end of Providence Place across to the Water Lane pond, where it was joined by the Hampstead branch of the Fleet, which was bridged.



The Fleet's course is also shown in two pictures by Crosby of the Castle inn at the south end of Kentish Town. The first picture shows the Castle with the Fleet marked by palings around it and the ditch to the Hampstead branch on the left hand side.



'View of the Castle Tavern and the gable of an adjoining house in Kentish Town; the palings in front of the buildings mark the course of the Fleet River', London Metropolitan Archives.

A second view, further south along the course, shows the Castle more distant and the Fleet with palings for Providence Place on the right.



View of the Castle Tavern at Kentish Town from fields to the west.

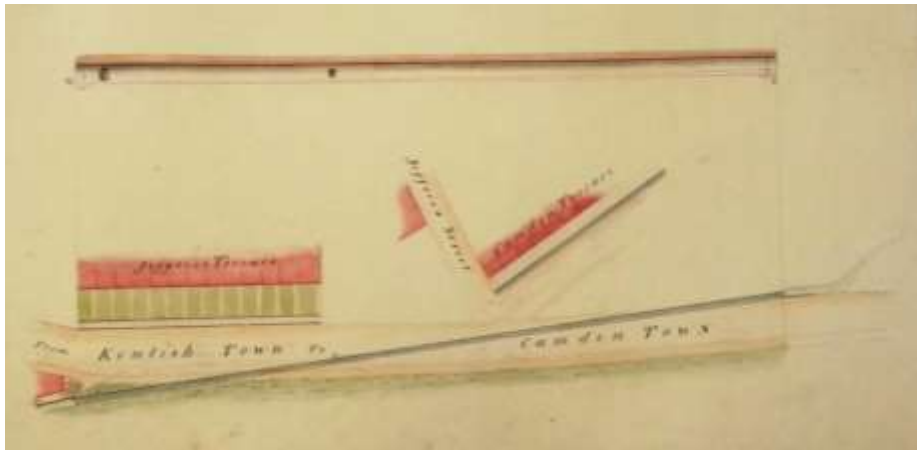
In 1817 the newly-created Commissioners of Sewers, in the primary role of protecting from floods, made a map of the full length of the Fleet. Each page has both a map and a longitudinal section.



Turning at the Castle gardens corner, the Fleet leaves a narrow branch running south while the main branch flows towards Kentish Town Road, arriving at the southern tip of Providence Place and opposite Jeffreys Terrace.



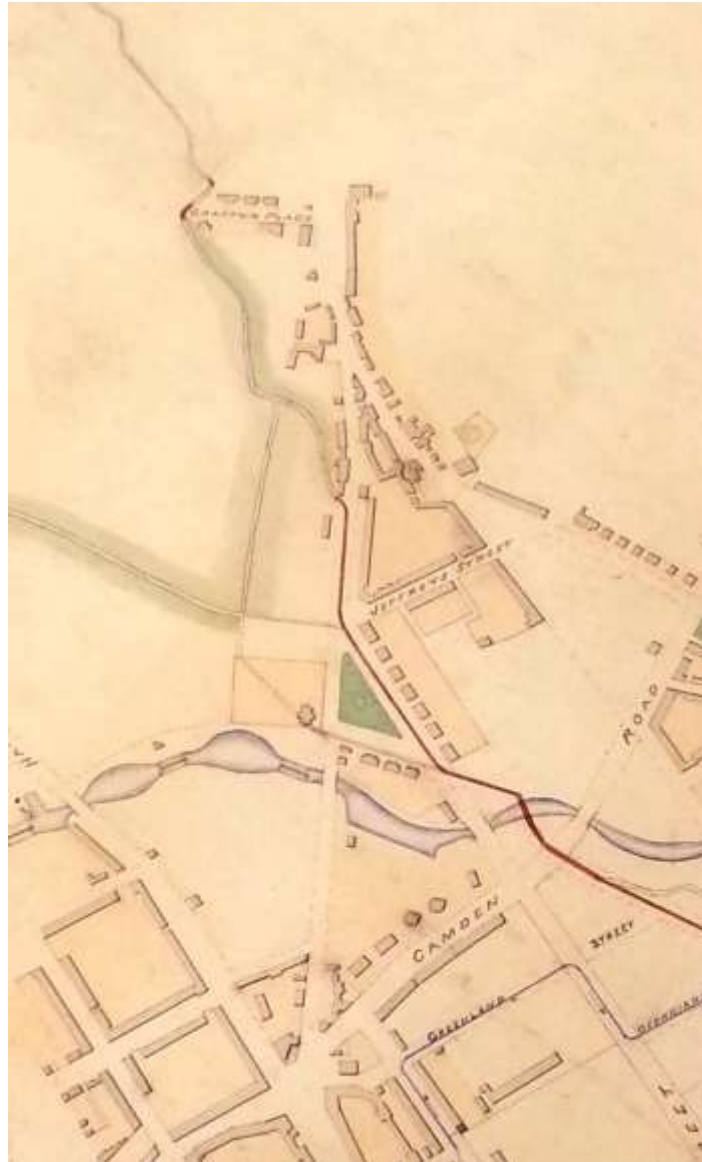
It then passes in a culvert across the road to reach the pool on the east side of the road by Camden Terrace.



A map of the early development by Sir Henry Hawley shows the line of the Fleet from Hampstead interrupted by the new building.

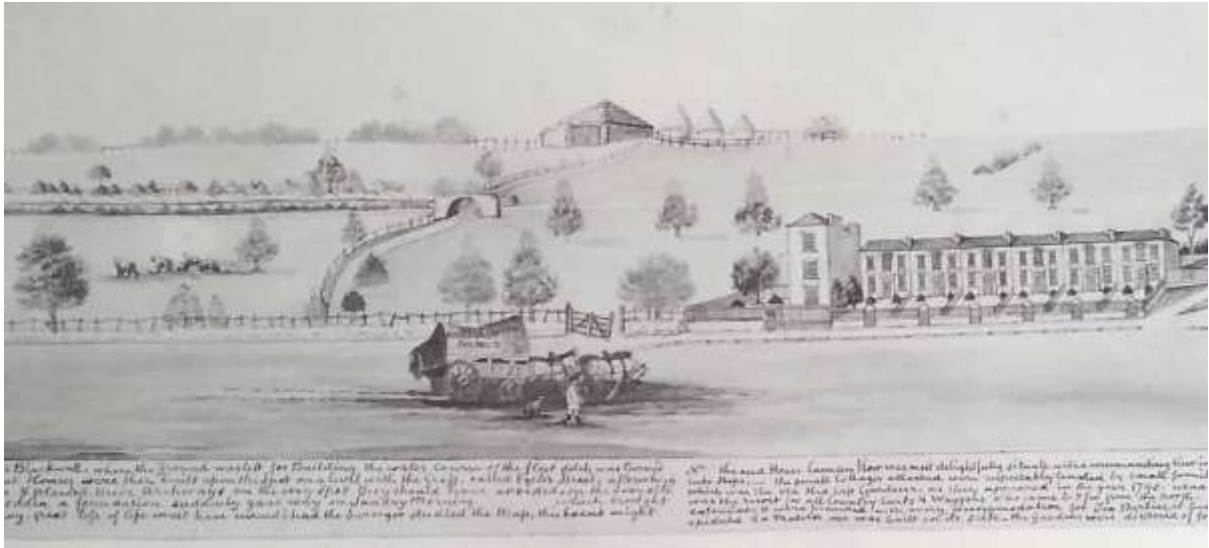


Similarly, the plan made by the Commissioners of Sewers also shows a square of the Hawley estate with the drain uncoloured




Crossing Camden Town

James King's panorama – described as the view of around 1800, although drawn and annotated (probably) in 1850 – shows the Fleet rather schematically running eastwards from the broad Kentish Town Road, and crossed by the footpath (with a bridge) from the Veterinary College to Kentish Town.



The Fleet map shows the river meandering across this relatively flat land. It also shows the brickwork of a small tributary from the north, which matches the tributary defined by Dr Cooke in her 1931 geography of Camden – it would have risen in the area that became Rochester Road. And indeed there is a record of a spring at this bank.





Victoria House
Strand, Westminster
London. W.C. 2. 9th. July. 1924.

Handwritten initials
 The Sanitary Inspectors Office,
 St. Pancras Bore Council,
 Pancras Road, N.W. 1.

Dear Sir, For the attention of Mr. Sobie.

29 72, Camden Road.

With reference to the rising of water in basement at these premises, we have continued the search to ascertain the source of the spring, and discovered that all the water enters the building at one corner of the scullery where excavated, as the water is perfectly clear and a continuous flow, we propose to put in either and running trap or gully at the point and connect up to the existing drain from other gully, which now discharges direct into the washhouse chamber — we hereby make application to alter the plan accordingly.

W. G. Harding
 SURVEYOR.

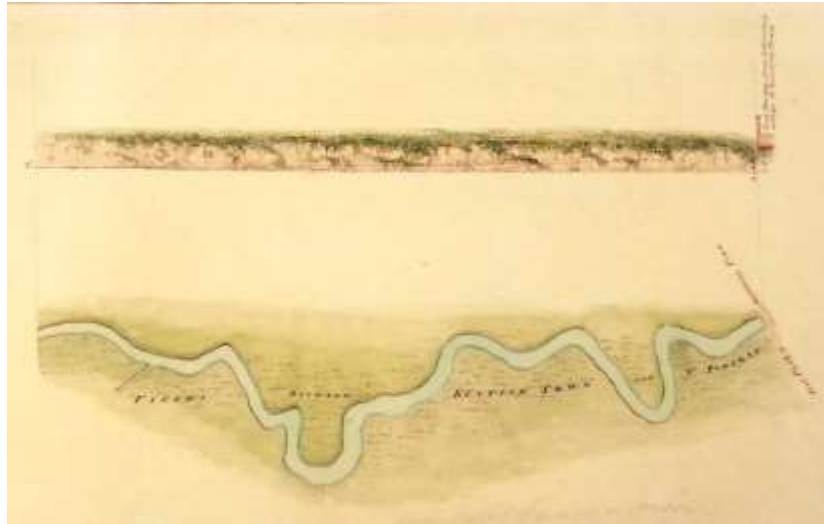
Secretary.

Commercial Manager *G.*

with hard core or broken coke breeze and finish the floor with $\frac{3}{4}$ " cement rendering and with a loose inspection cover to end of pipe. Remove sufficient floor boards to enable the water to be cleared out, and spread a layer of slaked lime over the whole surface where water has collected. Relay floor and make good. Fill in all excavations and clear away all surplus earth and rubbish.

completed as approved and Date, *22nd July. 1924*
 Inspector and Date *W. Capel 23rd July. 1924* | Engineer and Surveyor. Date.

The maps were drawn in 1817, and do not show either Camden Street or Regent's Canal crossing the Fleet. However, in the next section there is an indication of the footpath and "Footbridge from Veterinary College to Kentish Town".



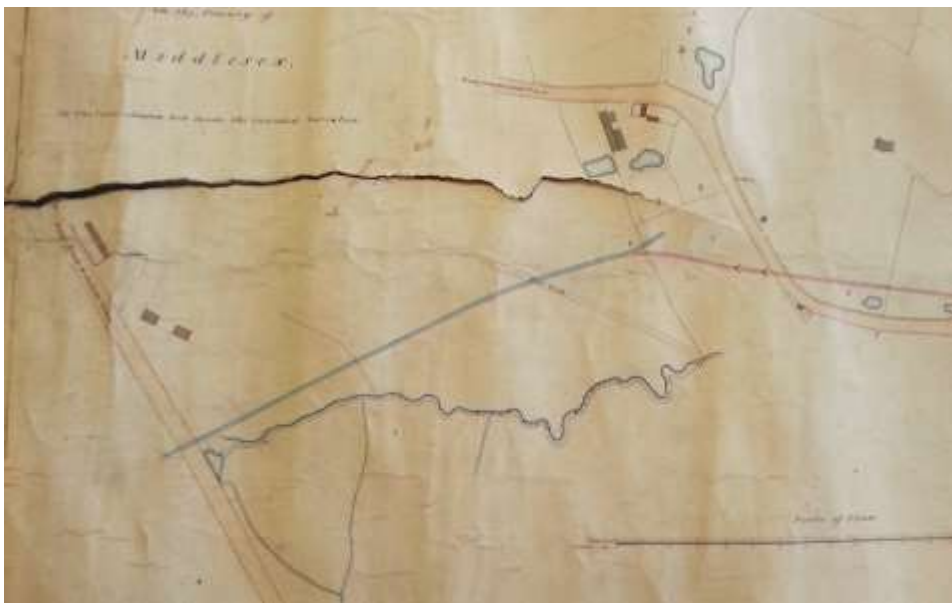
Beyond the footpath, there was a short length of culvert, and less meander as the river goes downwards toward the bank of Kings Road (St Pancras Way).



The map has a pencil-written line running from College Street to the road 'from Kentish Town' (ie Kings Road) which says 'Regents Canal to be laid down', reflecting the date just before the construction (1818) of this section of the Canal.

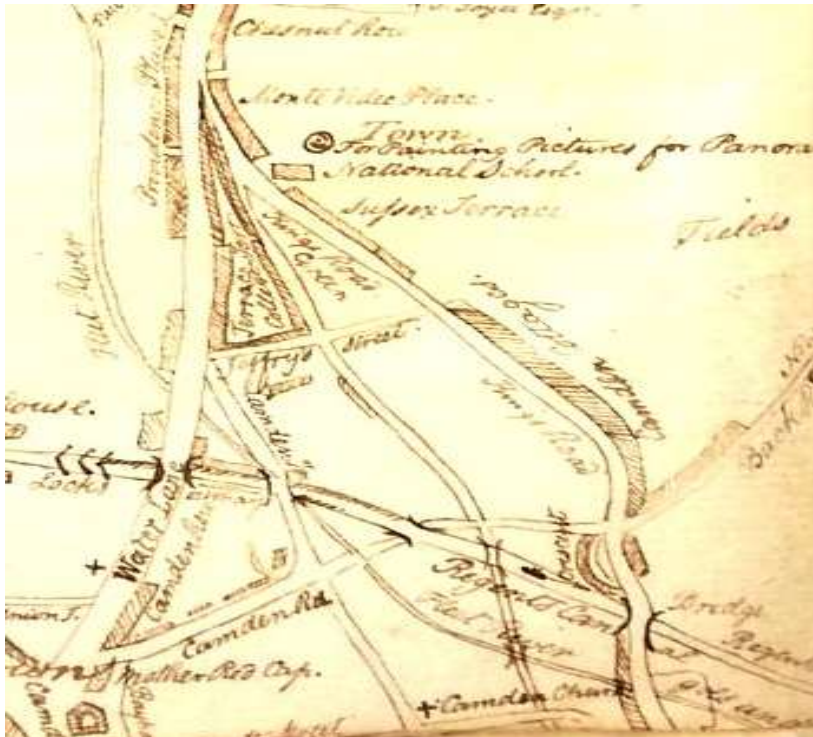
Two drawings have been retained of earlier projected lines of the canal across Mr Agar's estate, which he had bought from the Prebendary of St Pauls Cathedral in 1810. (This was historically probably St Paul's Manor, and separate from the Cantlowes' estate leased by St Pauls to Lord Camden.) The canal was built from Paddington to Camden Town in 1810-1816, but the extension onwards to the docks was more contentious, particularly as Agar was a lawyer who fought the company and sought substantial compensation for loss of his property amenities.

The first projected line swung north around the Agar property, the second continued more directly eastwards.



The final line of the Regent's canal, however, was a little further south and less straight. Moreover, the geography is now further obscured by the North London Railway viaduct overhead. The canal crosses under Kentish Town Road about twenty metres below the pond; it turns so as to cross each of Camden Street, Camden Road and College Street perpendicularly; and then goes more directly straight meeting Kings Road (St Pancras Way) and Mr Agar's property at a more oblique angle.

In a hand-drawn map accompanying his book on Kentish Town published in 1821, Bennett calls the Fleet a 'River' on the west side of Kentish Town, but a 'Fleet Sewer' where it has passed under Camden Road:

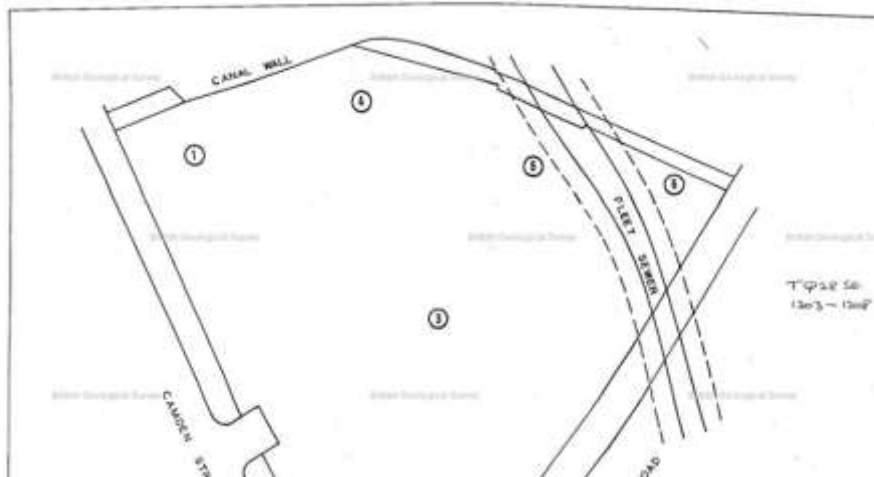


Camden Local Studies Archive, Bennett diary.

The position of the 'Fleet sewer' under Camden Road is indicated differently in two current plans drawn for building developments

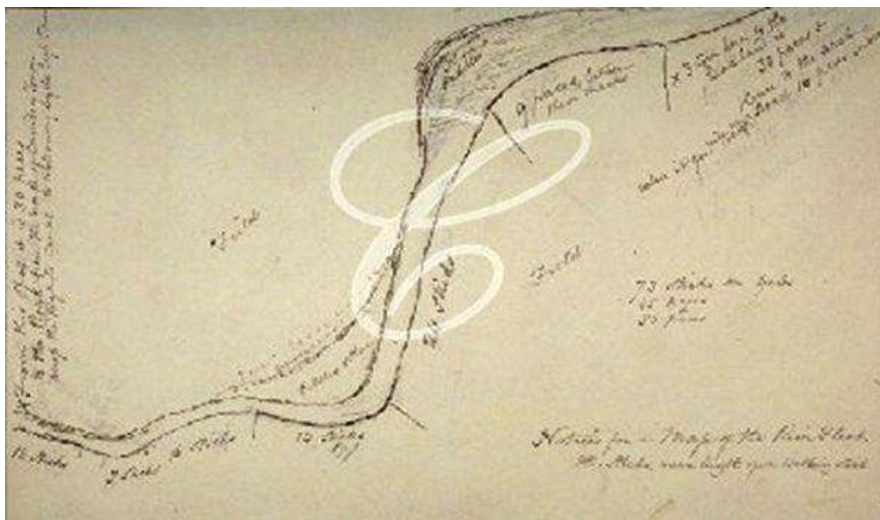


Plan of land blocks for Twyman House, 31-39 Camden Road, 2007



Plan of boreholes on Twyman House, Camden Road

Crosby not only made drawings of the Fleet and houses alongside, but also a few schematic drawings. One shows the meanders of the Fleet.



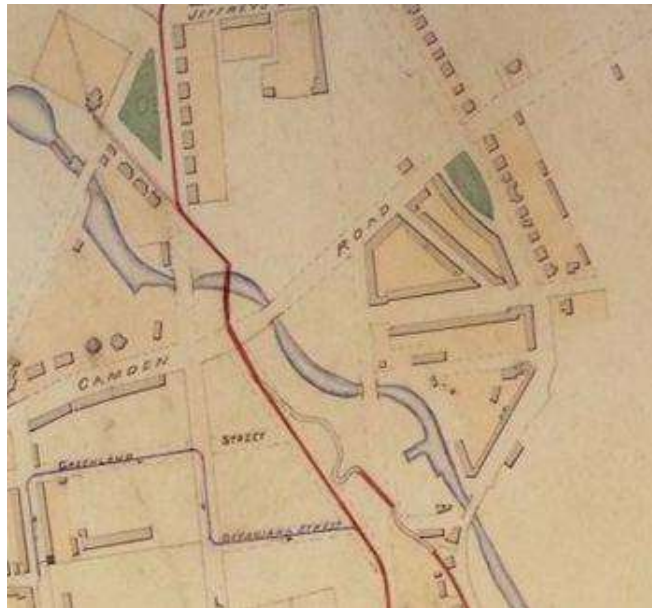
Collage collection, LMA

At the left hand side, the words are: "From this spot it is 30 paces to the Road from the north of Camden Town across the Regents Canal to Holloway by the Eagle Tavern". The Eagle Tavern was where Camden Road Station is now, so the drawing shows the river as after it emerges from under canal and Camden Road.

Unfortunately, no plans have been identified showing the construction of the canal over the river. But Crosby made a further drawing titled 'View of shorings for a new sewer, from the arch through which the Fleet River runs under the Regent's Canal at Camden Town to the sewer in College Street'.



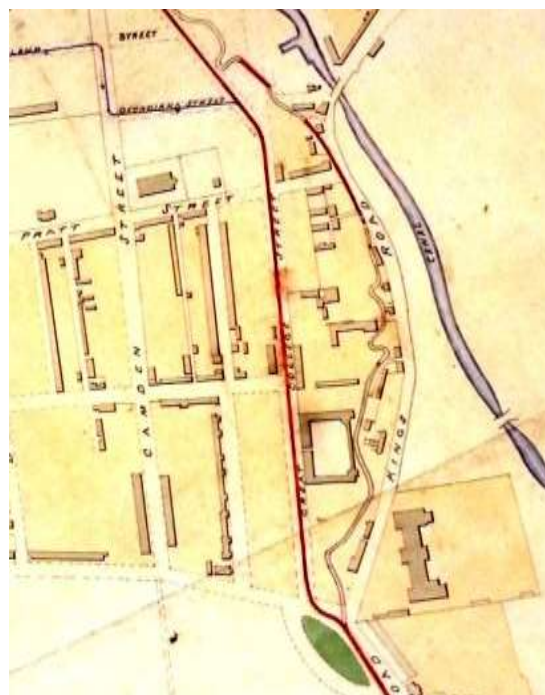
Crosby A. LMA, Collage Collection



Holborn & Finsbury Commissioner, 1839, LMA.

The Crosby drawing matches a map of the Fleet drawn for the Holborn and Finsbury Commissioners of Sewers in 1839 (London Metropolitan Museum): just below Camden Road, the sewer divides from the Fleet. The sewer passes along the newly-built (and for that purpose) Lyme Street to join Royal College Street, while the Fleet retains a slightly more eastern path, crossing (under) Royal College Street to run next to Kings Road (St Pancras Way). The central part of this route is probably seen in this further picture.

The plan also shows how the sewer was built down Great College Street while the Fleet remained open beside Kings Road into the 1840s



And Crosby's picture is probably taken from the Kings Road where the Fleet touches:



A Crosby (1838). 'View of the River Fleet in the vicinity on Camden Town.' London Metropolitan Archives Collage 24498.

The later sections of John Ogilvie's 1817 maps, beside Kings Road running down to St Pancras Church.

