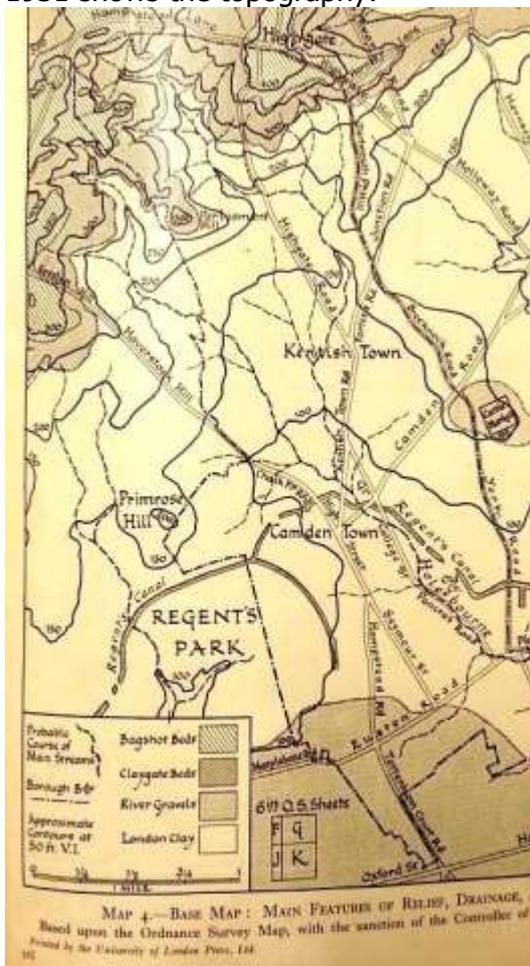


Archaeology in Camden Town – 1

Tracking the River Fleet

Where does the Fleet run? The headwaters are springs and (artificial) ponds between Hampstead and Highgate, streams which join at Kentish Town, flow down to St Pancras and onwards, in a deeper valley through Holborn and emerges at the Thames between the two cities of London and Westminster. 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, although this does not cover the mid-Fleet in much detail.

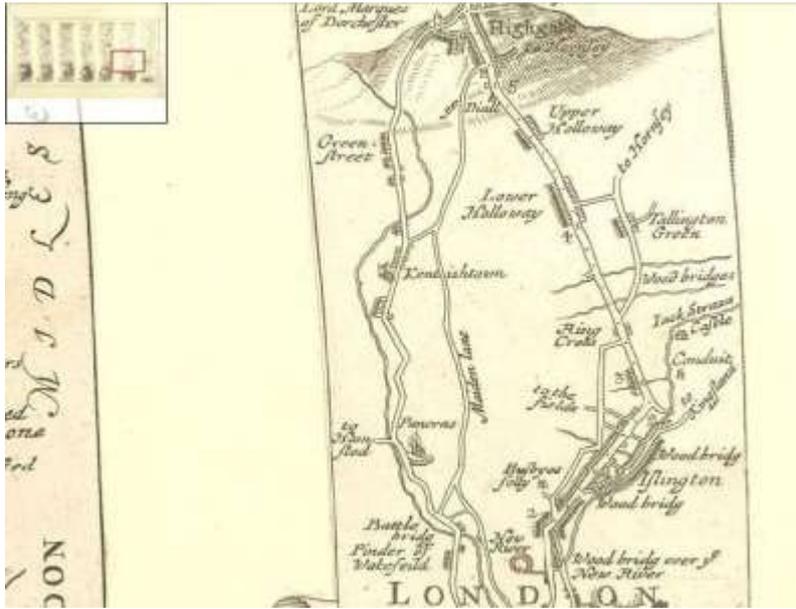
The Fleet was present before humans, agriculture or buildings, so the underlying topography is of interest. A geographical study of St Pancras borough by Dr Emily Cooke in 1931 shows the topography:



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.

¹ Barton N. The lost rivers of London. Historical Publications Ltd 1992; UCL River Fleet restoration project.

http://camden.gov.uk/theme/fc-sw2/ccm/cms-service/download/asset/?asset_id=3327412



A map from an early 'road atlas' of routes² out of London, published in 1689, shows St Pancras Way following the east side of the Fleet from Battle Bridge (where Grays Inn Road crossed the Fleet) up to Highgate.

Warburton's map (1721) in the Crace Collection has similar character, but also shows a connecting link across the Fleet from Kentish town to the (unlabelled) Halfway House / Mother Red Cap inn on Hampstead Road



Versions of Rocque's (1750s) map only shows the Fleet arriving from Hampstead Heath at Anglers Lane, and does not show the larger flow from Highgate.

² <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/crace/s/zoomify88388.html>



<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8442616q?bt=europeanaapi>
<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/crace/a/zoomify88774.html>

The Fleet crossed the road half way between Camden Town and Kentish Town. This area is relatively flat and may have been marshy: it was known as Water Lane or, 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".



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

In this map, Kentish Town Road is apparently straight, leading from the new Camden High Street, and contrasting with the winding Kings Road.

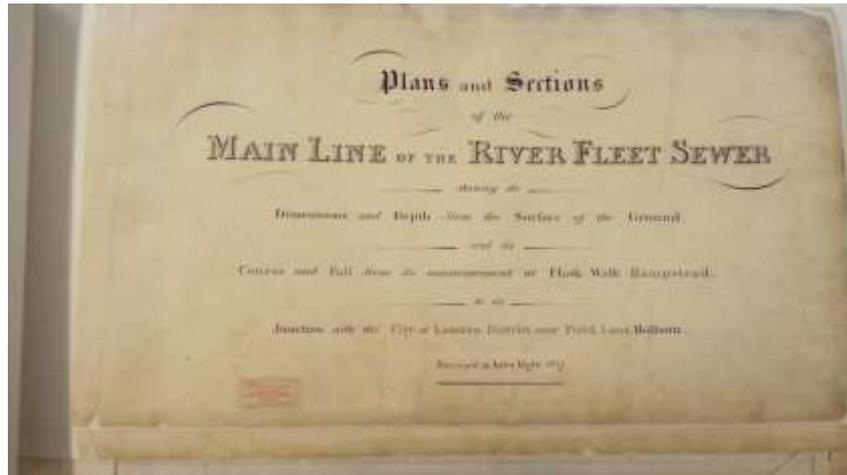


“View of the Castle Tavern and the gable of an adjoining house in Kentish Town; the palings in front of the buildings mark the course of the Fleet River. A Crosby”, London Metropolitan Archives.

A picture in the London Metropolitan Archive Crace Collection shows the Castle with the Fleet marked by palings around it. Another view (below) could possibly be the river from the Castle behind Providence Place – with fence.



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



In 1817 the newly-appointed Holborn and Finchley Commissioners of Sewers made a map of the Fleet, in its primary role of protecting from floods.

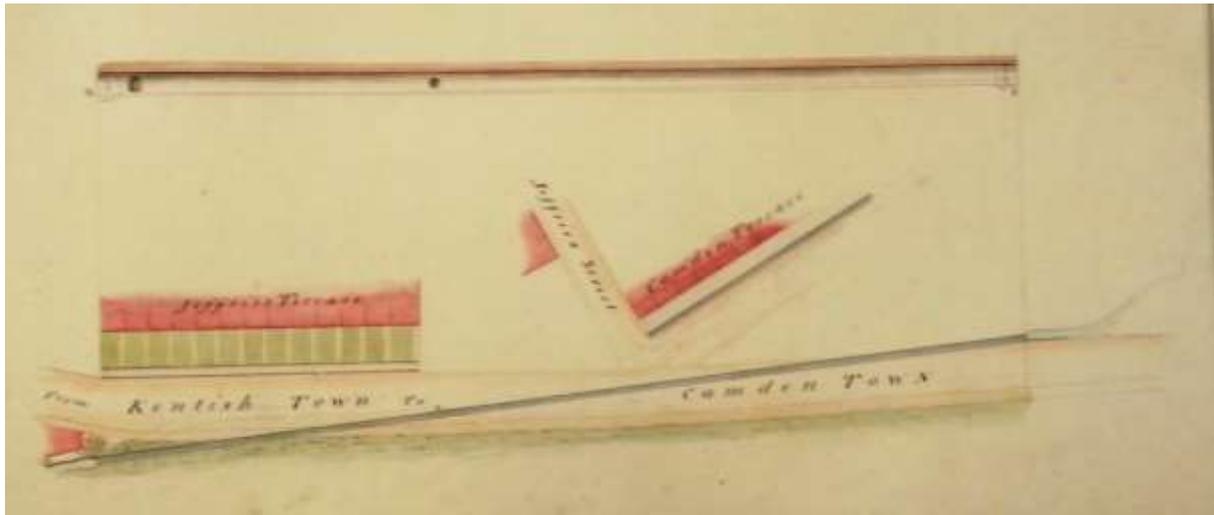
Turning the Castle Gardens corner, the Fleet leaves a narrow branch running south while the main branch flows towards Kentish Town Road, arriving at the southern tip of Providence Place and opposite Jeffreys Terrace.



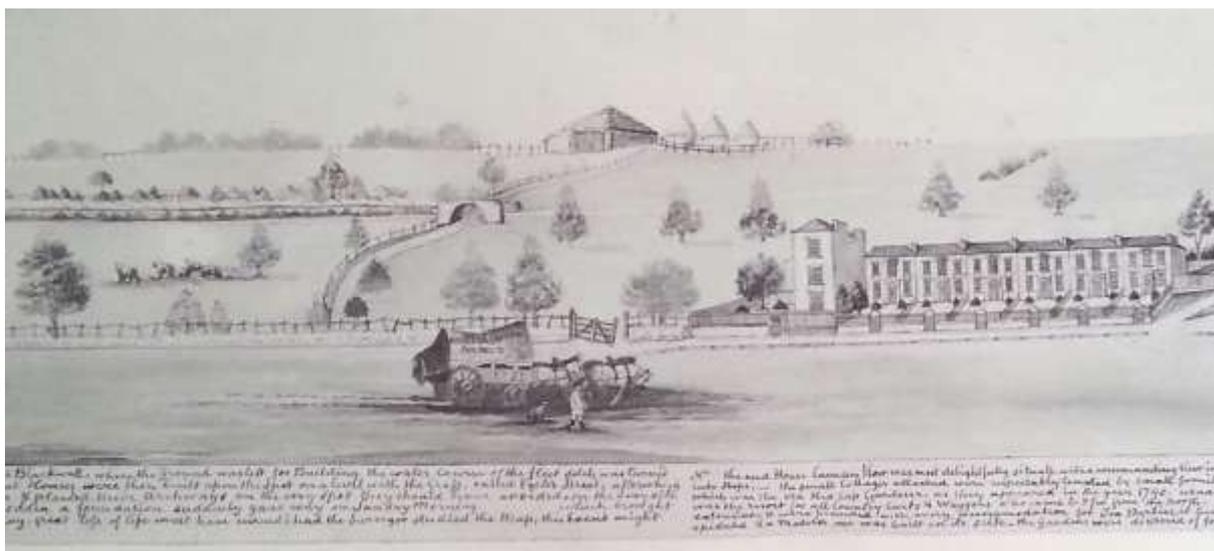
This point became the entry to Clarence Road to the west, and is now where Farrier Street crosses. Kentish Town Road is widened here, with the line of houses set out by Jeffreys Terrace and Molesworth Terrace in the early nineteenth century. Kentish Town Road northwards into Kentish Town was widened from 1880, while the terrace of original houses on the west side, adjacent to the Fleet, called Providence Place, remain to this day.

The fields on the west of Kentish Town Road, and at the entrance to Kentish Town, belonged to Lord Southampton, while those on the east were the Camden Estate. An early map of the Southampton development shows the line of the Fleet running at an angle towards Jefferys 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 is joined by the Hampstead branch of the Fleet, which was bridged. This perhaps gave the impression, shown in some maps (though not of course Rocque), that all the Fleet came from the Hampstead branch.



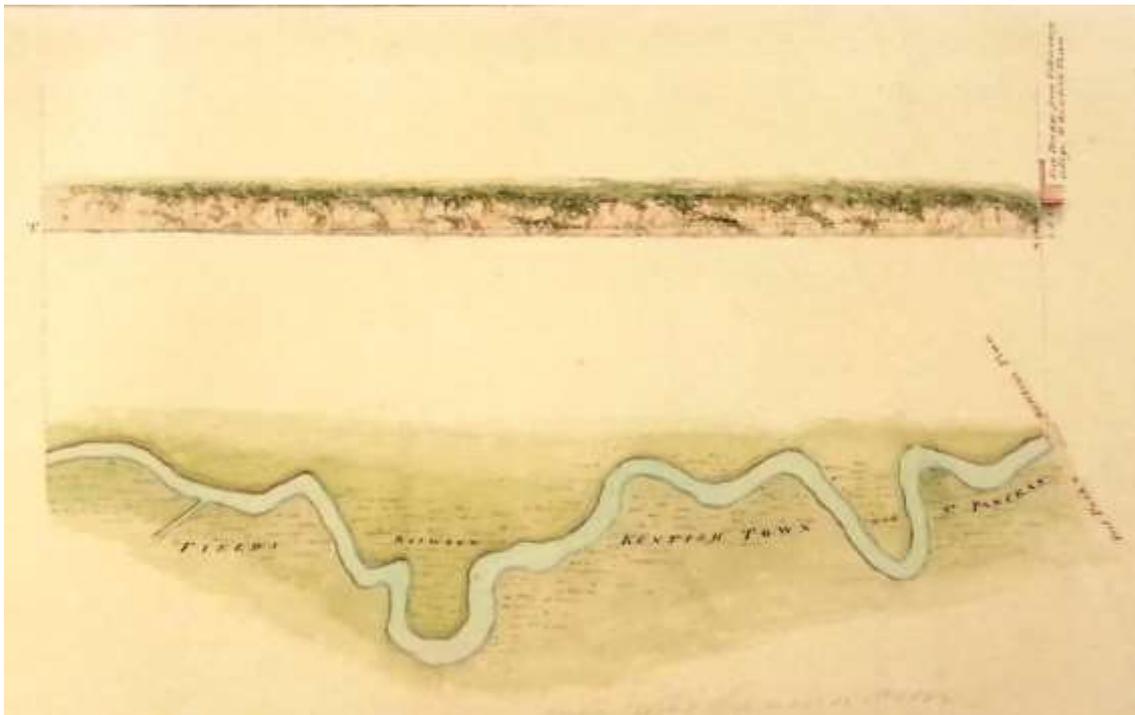
Mr King's panorama – described as the view of around 1800, although annotated (probably) in 1850 – shows the Fleet rather schematically running eastwards from the broad Kentish Town Road, and crossed by the footpath (here a proper bridge) from the Veterinary College to Kentish Town.



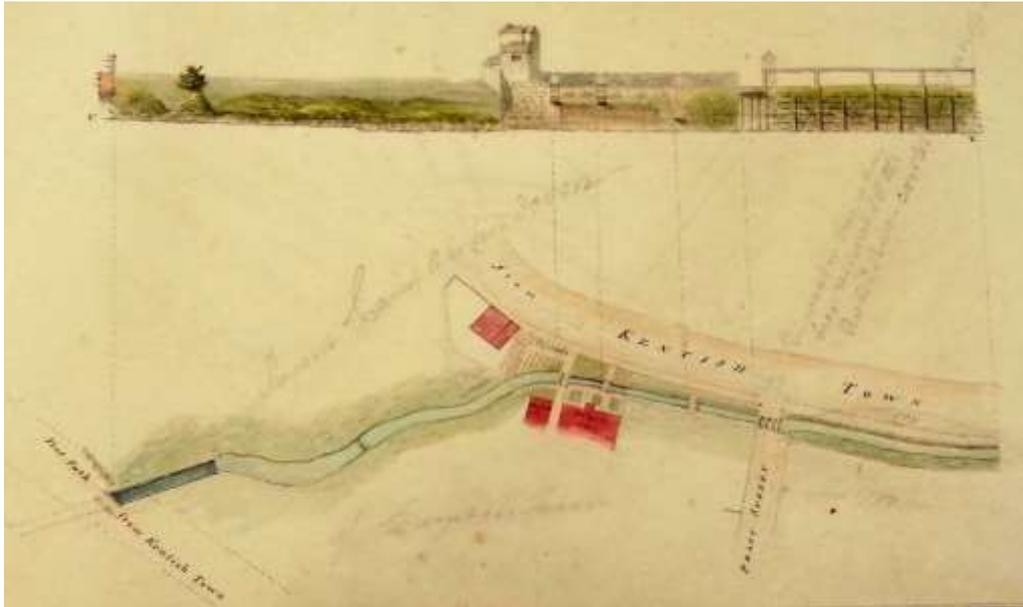
The Fleet map shows the river meandering across this relatively flat land. It also shows the brickwork of a small tributary from the north, which matches the tributary defined by Dr Cooke in her 1931 geography of Camden.



The upper section view shows that the pond here was held by a wall. This map was drawn in 1817, and shows neither Camden Street nor 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.

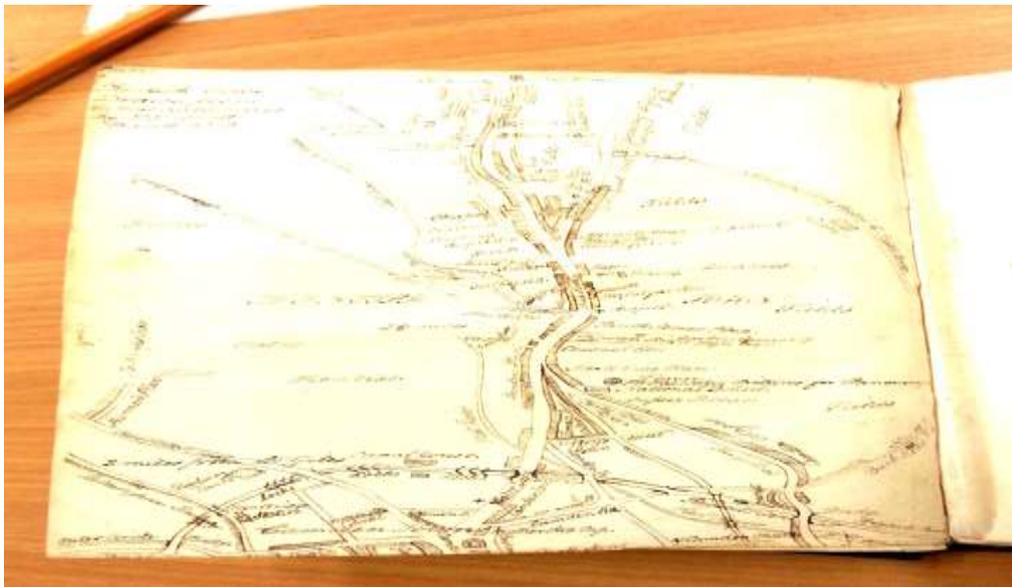
The first projected line swung north around the Agar property, the second continued more directly eastwards.





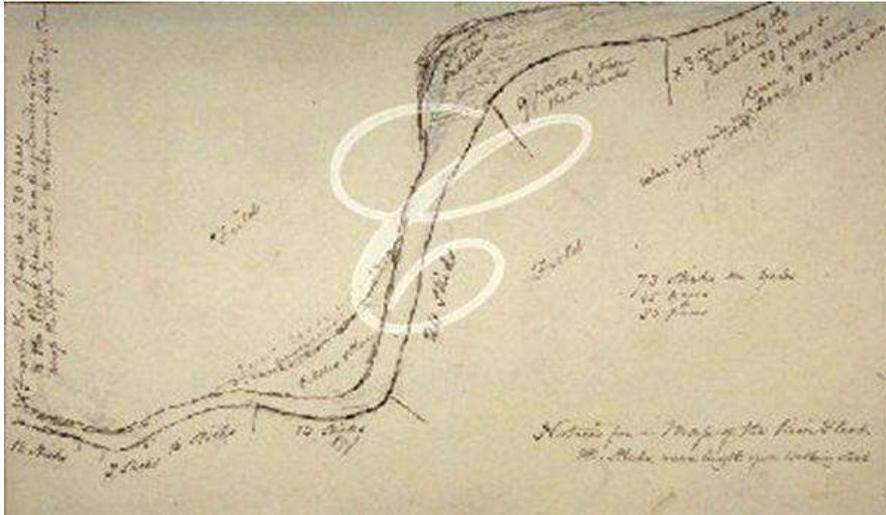
The final line of the Regent's canal, however, was a little further south and less straight. Moreover, the geography is now further obscured by the North London Railway viaduct overhead. The canal crosses under Kentish Town Road about twenty metres below the pond; it turns so as to cross each of Camden 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

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



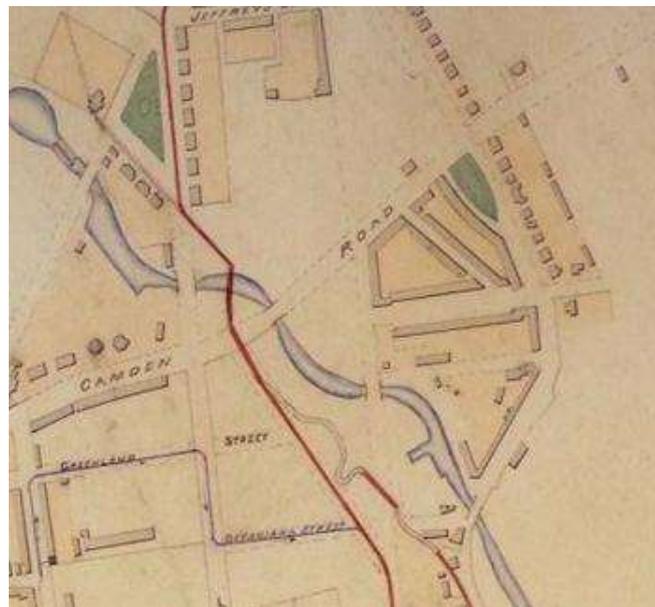
Collage collection, LMA

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 the 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' Canals 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.



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