

UNPUBLISHED ROMAN DISCOVERIES NEAR CHESTERFIELD

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The search for the lost section of Rykniel Street near Chesterfield has stimulated a good deal of work by local investigators since the first field observations were published more than a century and a half ago (Pegge, 1784; Lysons, 1817, ccxi; Glover, 1829, 288–90). In particular, the early 1950s saw keen interest among local antiquaries in the lost section of Rykniel Street and the short-lived existence of a Chesterfield Archaeological Group, led by a local schoolmaster, the late R. H. Oakley. Some of their work appeared in this *Journal* (Oakley, 1955) but other information survives only in Oakley's correspondence and papers, now in Chesterfield Reference Library. Since he was at the same time largely responsible also for the creation of the Roman section of the Derbyshire Archaeological Society's card index of archaeological features, then being established, Oakley's correspondence contains much information not included in the index, which is now housed in Derby Museum, and may be of value over a wider area than merely Chesterfield. This note, however, is confined to Roman discoveries near the presumed course of Rykniel Street.

Oakley and his fellow investigators took as their starting point John Gratton's description of Rykniel Street near Tupton in 1829 and identified the long straight hedge-line between Four Lane Ends Farm on Queen Victoria Road and Mill Lane, Wingerworth, as the likely course of the road. This area was threatened at the time by both opencast coalmining and the building of council housing south of Mill Lane, and a section was opened near the new estate to prove the line at this point (Oakley, 1955). Further excavations were conducted immediately north of Mill Lane (SK 393671; Fig. 1: No. 1), where the same hedge-line continued to strike northwards towards Hasland Green, but apart from a sketch-map showing the position of this cutting no details are recorded. The building of the Avenue Carbonisation Plant in the early 1950s destroyed all trace of archaeological remains between Mill Lane and the Rother and was no doubt a further stimulus to fieldwork at the time. Of the area between Mill Lane and Redleadmill Brook, one of Oakley's correspondents, Mr. S. L. Garlic, wrote in October 1955: 'Since writing you last much of the turf and subsoil has been cleared from the site of opencast mining on the south side of Mill Lane, Wingerworth. On the north side of the site near the lane, opposite the excavation of the road on the carbonisation site, three places have been scraped till traces of the Roman road can be seen. It is not deep enough to show the whole of the Roman road, but 14 feet of the centre portion of the road is clearly visible. It shows the camber, and is well packed with small stones lying only a few inches below the turf. About 200 yards further south the pipe line has been excavated to four feet and near the old goit the Roman road can be seen in this trench' (cf. Oakley, 1955, 147).

No definite evidence of the course of Rykniel Street north of Mill Lane has ever been published, although the hedge-line marked on pre-war maps points fairly clearly to a crossing of the Rother southwest of Hasland church and an ascent of the east bank of the river to the high ground near the Manor House at Hasland Green (Penny, 1966, 72). There have been several unpublished finds of Roman coins in this area, mostly by S. L. Garlic, including one in the Rectory garden (SK 397686; Fig. 1: No. 2) in 1938 and two



others, whose position is not exactly known, reported in the D.A.S. archaeological index. In 1955 Mr. Garlic found another coin in ploughsoil at the south end of the field to the east of Hasland Engine Shed (SK 393683; Fig. 1: No. 3), which the British Museum identified as second-century (Oakley MSS; Garlic to Oakley, 19 Jan. and 1 Feb. 1956). The building of the approach road from the A61 to the Avenue Plant produced a further find in June 1958 by Mr. E. Jermy of 12 Sales Avenue, New Tupton, identified as third-century by the British Museum, and reported to Oakley by Garlic as having been 'Picked up near a recently filled in cut in grass verge by the side of the main drive into the north end of Avenue Carbonisation Plant'. Oakley located the find-spot as SK 387680 (Fig. 1: No. 4), although the coin had probably been brought in spoil used to make up the embankment for the road from elsewhere on the Avenue site.

Beyond Hasland Green both Penny (1966, 72–80) and Bestall (1974, 10–12) have considered possible routes for a Roman road on the high ground east of the Rother between Hady Hill and Balmoak Lane, Tupton, although the topographical evidence is not wholly convincing and no archaeological evidence has ever been adduced for such a route, which would bypass the first-century fort at Chesterfield (Courtney & Bourne, 1975, 4–8) by nearly a mile. In May 1956, in a hitherto unpublished note, S. L. Garlic reported a possible sighting elsewhere in Hasland: 'A few days ago a friend of mine told me that he had found a part of the Roman Road in his allotment garden ... He had only this year taken over the allotment, the garden had not been dug for six years so he dug extra deep ... about a foot down he found a lot of stones which appeared to have been placed. They were about ten feet wide for a good stretch along the garden. He thinks it continues onto the next garden. Some of the stone he has thrown out, and has now covered over the rest and set his garden. ... The site of the garden is roughly a quarter of a mile further north than the place I found the coin last year'. The allotments referred to by Garlic lie on the south side of Storforth Lane near the corner of Eyre Street (Fig. 1: 5), almost due north of the point at which the coin had been found previously. If this was indeed Rykniel Street then it is no longer possible to think in terms of an alignment from Hasland Green across Spital Brook to Hady Hill. On the contrary, it would seem more likely that the road veered northwest, rather than north, and headed towards the fort at Chesterfield on much the same line as the modern Hasland Road (A617).

The campaign of excavation which revealed traces of a Roman fort beneath the early medieval core of Chesterfield, established in the second half of the first century and abandoned in the first half of the second, has yet to be published in full but the general position of the fort, encircling the later parish church, is clear enough (Courtney and Bourne, 1975, 4–8; cf. Riden, 1977, for early medieval settlement on the site). Nothing, however, has so far been published concerning the roads which must have served the fort and it may be worth drawing attention here to a discovery, reported in the local press in 1932 and referred to briefly by Penny (1966, 82n.), but never fully published, that may provide a further clue to the lost section of Rykniel Street.

On 30 January 1932 the *Derbyshire Times* reported an 'interesting discovery' by the borough engineer at Horns Bridge (Fig. 1: No. 6) during excavations for new service trenches prior to widening the L.M.S. bridge: 'Some three feet down on the Hasland side of the bridge he has come across a paved Roman road. The stones are laid in true Roman style like the Appian Way. The paviers are of such hardness and texture as Major Vincent Smith has not come across before in Derbyshire'. In another article the paper reported that the road was 'constructed ... of blocks of exceedingly hard stone, wedged together but laid on the ordinary soil surface, with here and there what are apparently ashes deposited. The road is 24 feet wide and comes from the direction of Wingerworth and apparently in a straight line towards S. Mary's Gate'. A fortnight later further interest was aroused by a new discovery: 'What is believed to be an offshoot of the road was found on the Chesterfield side of the bridge. It runs diagonally across Hasland Road between the railway bridge and the junction with Lordsmill Street, and leads in the direction of what is surmised to have been at one time a ford over the River Hipper'. The new section was about 20 yards long and 12 feet wide, consisting of heavy blocks of stone about 8 in. long by 6 in. wide and 4 in. deep, of which 40 or 50 had been

found. They were embedded in the soil very unevenly about halfway across Hasland Road on the Chesterfield side, no trace having been discovered during the lowering of the other half of the road.

A succession of correspondents discussed these finds in following weeks. Among the most useful contributions was that from the Sheffield geologist H. F. Banks, who provided a careful and detailed description of the stone, identifying it as almost certainly local, such as might be found at Ashover, Littlemoor or Bolehill, Wingerworth. On 27 February a long letter from 'J.M.' provided the most precise account of the finds that has survived, including a dismissal of the idea that there was a 'main road' and an 'offshoot'. He wrote: 'In obtaining the necessary depth at the southeast corner of the bridge, a portion of pavement was met with, consisting of irregularly-shaped stones placed in a single layer on the original ground level, extending from near the said corner along the south side of the roadway to a distance of 15 yards from the outer masonry of the bridge. While proceeding with the clearance of the other side of the roadway a similar piece of ancient roadmaking was disclosed, but at an appreciably less depth, this strip commencing eight yards distant from the centre of the railway arch on the west, or Derby road side, throughout the total length of 15 or 16 yards which extended under the bridge, having along the left, or northeast side, a well defined finished edge of the pavement laid obliquely from a point three yards from the northwest corner to the southeast, where in constructing the bridge nearly the whole width had disappeared except where the buttress breaks back, exposing the part previously mentioned. The gradual turn southeast that this old road had taken was likely to prove very misleading, when encountered at such an angle, as it took a curve over the slightly higher ground in the upstream direction, and its angle at the bridge may be better understood if we observe that the skew is nothing like sufficient for the present road line, and at variance with the paved one'. The writer concluded by asking why the old road was not noticed when either the North Midland Railway or the Lancashire, Derbyshire and East Coast line was built at Horns Bridge, and by emphasising that what had been found was a single length of road running from Chesterfield towards Mansfield on roughly the line of the modern A617.

It is impossible to establish more details of this discovery over forty years ago. Not only was the L.M.S. railway bridge realigned in 1932 but the layout of road and railway bridges at Horns Bridge has recently been changed again, making it practically impossible to set out J.M.'s measurements on a modern plan. If the borough engineer of the day made a plan of the discoveries himself, then neither it nor any other papers concerning the works at Horns Bridge in 1932 have survived in his office. All that does remain, apart from newspaper reports, are two photographs of the old road, taken by Seamans of Irongate, and not previously published (Plates 1-2). These confirm the accuracy of the newspaper accounts of the finds but are hardly sufficient alone to establish the road as Roman. On the other hand, the two independent descriptions of a road composed of heavy stone blocks irregularly embedded on natural subsoil, with 'here and there what are apparently ashes deposited', corresponds reasonably closely to reports of Rykniel Street at New Tupton (O'Brien and Todd, 1976), Higham (Saunders, 1959) and Mill Lane (Oakley, 1955), where in each case the excavators commented on the discovery of coal dust on the road surface and in the ditches alongside. Could the 'ashes' found in 1932 not in fact be a further indication of traffic in coal along the Roman road?

Although none of the evidence in this note is conclusive in establishing the course of Rykniel Street between Mill Lane and Chesterfield, it is probably sufficient to be worth mapping (Figure 1). The most reasonable conclusion to be drawn from this material is that Rykniel Street continued from Mill Lane along the hedge-line now submerged beneath the Avenue Plant to a river crossing at SK 394681 and climbed up to Hasland Green at SK 393689. It then swung NNW to pass through the allotments at SK 391694 and was more or less aligned with the later road from Chesterfield to Nottingham (A617) as it ran in a straight line down to the site of the discoveries of 1932 at Horns Bridge (SK 387705). Presumably from there to the fort (SK 385711) the Roman



Plate 1 Possible sighting of Ryknield Street at Horns Bridge, Chesterfield, 1932.



Plate 2 Possible sighting of Ryknield Street at Horns Bridge, Chesterfield, 1932.

road followed much the same course as the medieval *Southergate*, now Lordsmill Street and St Mary's Gate. Such a route has the advantage over lines previously proposed through Hady Hill and Tapton of fitting what archaeological evidence there is and running directly to the known site of the fort at Chesterfield. Most previous projections of the lost course of Ryknield Street have been based on the false assumption that the small medieval moated site at Castle Hill, Tapton (Bestall, 1974, 10) was the Roman fort, and have ignored the strategic advantages of a site beneath the medieval town centre. Finally, there is the problem of the course of Ryknield Street between Chesterfield and the fort at Templeborough, near Rotherham, for which there is even less evidence than for the stretch south of Chesterfield (Penny, 1966, 72–80). One scrap of information, recorded in the notebooks of another local historian of the 1950s, the late W. E. Godfrey, may be worth mentioning. Godfrey noted that 'Alderman Edward Eastwood in 1909 said that the Roman Road passed his place (presumably Eastwood's Wagon Works on the Brimington Road, near Tapton). It appeared that about 1866 he had occasion to excavate a trench to lay a pipe from his works to the Rother and at a depth of two feet six inches struck a paved road' (Chesterfield Reference Library, Godfrey MSS, XII.75). The site of the discovery was presumably somewhere between Brimington Road (A619) and the river near the former wagon works (Fig. 1: 7) on the Midland Railway north of Chesterfield Station (SK 388718). There is no positive evidence that this was a Roman road but if this was the case, it suggests that north of the fort Ryknield Street continued on much the same line as the medieval Tapton Lane, crossed the Rother near the present Brimington Road bridge and continued on its east bank towards Tapton. As with the section south of the fort, the Roman road network near Chesterfield may be represented to a greater degree than previously thought by those modern roads serving the town which can be shown to have been medieval highways.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Mr. S. L. Garlic and to the representatives of the late R. H. Oakley and W. E. Godfrey for permission to print extracts from their letters and papers, and to the Derbyshire County Librarian to publish Plates 1–2.

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