

The road in the grounds of Claybury Hospital with one of the ditches showing in section.

(Photo: John Earp)



ROMAN ROAD RESEARCH — 4

The Route from London to Colchester

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SOME YEARS AGO members of the West Essex Archaeological Group became interested in an attempt to prove the line of the Dunmow-London road which is shown on the Ordnance Survey map from Dunmow to Hobb's Cross, Abridge, with another section shown at Woodford Bridge.

The area on the southern bank of the Roding is much disturbed by old gravel workings, now filled in, but an aerial photograph showed a short section between Abridge and Chigwell; this was dug in

1964 (TQ 455962) and in 1965 (TQ 454958). The former excavation yielded a small bronze coin of Marcus Aurelius in an unsealed pot-hole on the road surface.

At Easter, 1965, the road was proved to be 33 feet wide with a six inch flint surface showing no signs of repair, but appearing to have been caught by the plough on the western side. Here the metalled camber acts as a retaining wall since the land slopes towards the Roding at this point. A Samian sherd

of the late-2nd century was found in a pot-hole.

It was noticed that an extension of the line of the Roman road running North-East/South-West coincided with a dogleg in the modern Abridge-Theydon Bois road. Permission to dig was obtained from the owners of Countisbury (TQ 466877) who had a large paddock behind their house which appeared to be on the correct line.

A three foot trench was opened to cover the width of the road, probed to an approximate 30 feet. Only one and a half inches below the top surface was a poor surface of small stones, which is presumed to be a local post-medieval re-use of the line of the early road. Small pieces of glass, coal and a 16th century sherd were found at this level.

The real road surface of packed medium-sized river flints was encountered nine inches below the top surface, well cambered and needing much heavy pick work to cut a section. The road was in a sloping field and had ditches on each side, but due to the slope the upper ditch was wet and difficult to handle, whereas the lower ditch was very dry and full of a fine yellow-brown silt. There were no finds in the ditches.

A layer of large flints on the natural clay formed the foundations of both road and ditches. The layer was quite flat, the strong camber of the road being built up on it with stones and puddled clay some 18 inches thick with the top flint surface three inches deep. Above the foundations, flints had formed a 6-9 inch deeply stained iron pan.

At the edge of the lower ditch, built directly on to the flint foundation, was an "L"-shaped brick structure. This was 10 inches high, 30 inches long on each arm of the "L" and had a depression six inches by three inches in the top of the brick, with charcoal and signs of burning in it. There was an area of metallic substance in the side of the brick, but its purpose remains unknown.

Embedded in the camber on the north-west side of the road was found a small bronze object (34mm by 31mm) with a flanged section 8mm, bent at an angle of 45 degrees, through which two holes were pierced; the average thickness was 2-3mm. It was cast of bronze, hand pierced, with four large and eight small holes through it, covered with a zoomorphic design featuring three raised lion or fox heads. Hand engraved lines are incised round each of the holes. It has been identified as a late Saxon strap end (A.D. 950-1050) by David Clarke of Colchester Museum.

Two similar strap ends have been found, one at an internment at Willbury Hill, near Hitchin, on the

middle of the skeleton and the other at Ixworth, Suffolk. The Willbury Hill strap end had a thin bronze plate and rivets to attach to the leather belt, but this was missing from the Abridge find. It seems possible that the Roman road was still being used at least 800 years after it was built, since the Saxon bronze was lying on the surface of the Roman road.

Thus by 1965 the line of the road had been proved to the north of Abridge, and again to the west on each side of the Roding. Sections of the road had been seen in a number of places, in a drainage trench (TQ 444943), in a gas main trench (TQ 437933), then at TQ 437830 in an electric cable trench. Having traced the line so far it was decided to try to check the area of Claybury Hospital, at Roding Lane North.

The Hospital authorities were approached for permission to excavate, which was kindly given. The place chosen was 150 feet from the boundary fence on the south-west spur of Milmans' Hill, which is slowly being eroded by the River Roding. Here the natural is composed of London clay with clay and flints at its base.

The trench was 68 feet long by three feet wide and three feet deep to natural clay, and then five feet of the surface was exposed for examination. The road appears to have had two and possibly three building periods.

The first road was made of water-worn pebbles rammed with sand, the base being of pebbles two to three inches in diameter with the upper ones being slightly smaller. It had a maximum thickness of 14 inches close to the south-east side. The downhill side showed an extra thickness and there was no ditch and little camber.

The road was later extended to an overall width of 21 feet or 25 feet. The pebbles were again grey, water-worn, about two inches in diameter and rammed with clay. The road was now given a ditch on the uphill side, four feet wide and one and a half feet deep. It shows three infills, the last containing some pieces of tygware, but because of tree roots these might be disregarded. There was a maximum thickness of 15 inches, again on the downhill side.

The cleaned surface had a large repair across the junction of two building periods that rose some four inches above the rest of the road; a smaller, unrepaired pothole was partly exposed next to the baulk. The stones of the second building period curved around and under leached clay and sand found in the section, which seems to indicate that the sand and clay may have been a large repair in the final

road surface, in which case the larger width of 25 feet applies.

There were few finds associated with this excavation. On the surface of the first road, covered by leached clay and sand were some pieces of the side and a turn of the base of an early gritted Romano-British pot. Embedded in the surface of the final stone-built road were two pieces of horseshoe and sundry post-medieval finds. (Also at this level was a prepared gun flint.)

Concentrating on the line of this road led to a close examination of the surrounding area. In 1845 Gould recorded a number of Romano-British cremation burials and one inhumation in an area to the east of Woolston Hall, the Co-operative Sports Ground. He also found ring cups and Samian type 63. This was close to what is now known as the line of the Roman road, but gravel digging since 1845 has destroyed most of the area. In the autumn of 1969 a small pipe-line was laid towards the Roding and examination of this led to further cremation burials of the same type being found—eleven inches below ground in brick cists accompanied by inverted pots and with reddened clay and signs of burning in the cists. The road is 100 feet to the north of the burials. Further work will be undertaken here when permission is obtained.

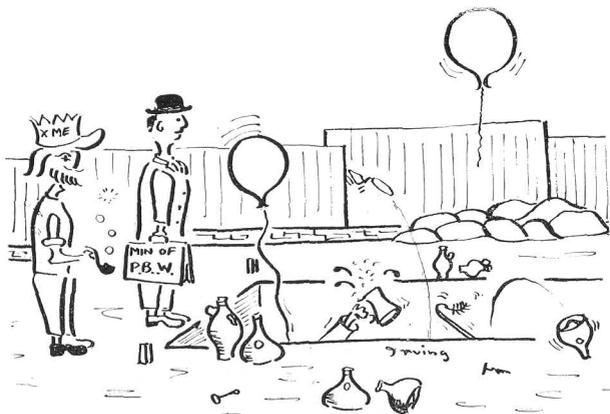
At Hill Farm, Abridge, which lies to the northeast of Abridge, a field showed interesting signs from

an aerial photograph. Field walking brought a number of heavy roof tiles and some fragments of Roman pot; trial trenches showed a heavy layer of tile and plaster at 14 inches depth. The field was excavated for a fortnight in 1968, and a small complex of buildings were uncovered, dating from A.D. 100 to 350. They appear to be part of a farm or villa, but more work will have to be done in the future to be sure of their function. Once again the road is in the vicinity, about 400 yards to the north.

Tracing this main road into East London has brought valuable side-finds and no doubt more will turn up along other parts of the road. After the last section at Claybury Hospital, the road proceeds downhill towards the River Roding, but because of the heavy suburban housing and the many alterations to the river's course, it seems unlikely that the point of crossing will ever be found. Only open spaces such as Wanstead Park may give another clue to the final miles of the road's progress into London. The remainder may well have to be surmised which so often is the fate of Roman roads overtaken by the deep foundations of factories and tower blocks. At least the Group have tried to prove by careful sections that the road exists where they claim it is.

The reports on the various excavations together with the finds have been deposited in the Passmore Edwards Museum.

IN A HOLE



“We’ve found a late-medieval wine cellar!”

Current Excavations

Bow, by the London Museum. Site of Romano-British area of occupation and a Roman road on the alignment Aldgate/London Bridge (see article in this issue). Excavation will continue for a further short period under Harvey Sheldon. All inquiries to R. A. Canham, London Museum, Kensington Palace, W.8 (WES 9816).

Mucking, by the Ministry of Public Building and Works. Ranges from a ditch of the late Bronze Age to Saxon huts (see *the London Archaeologist* No. 1). Excavation takes place seven days a week. Inquiries to Excavation Supervisor for M.P.B.W., Mucking Excavations, Stanford-le-Hope, Essex.

Northolt, by Northolt Archaeological and Historical Research Group. The site is the medieval Manor but there is also an important early Saxon phase. Work continues on Saturday afternoons throughout the year. Inquiries to C. H. Keene, 21 Islip Gardens, Northolt, Middlesex.

Putney, by Wandsworth Historical Society. Trial trenches on the site in Sefton Street have produced decorated Neolithic pottery and flints. Excavation takes place on Sundays under the direction of Stan Warren, to whom inquiries should be addressed at 10 Dunganven Avenue, S.W.15 (PRO 3596).