

A ROMAN ROAD BETWEEN BUXTON AND MELANDRA CASTLE, GLOSSOP

By P. WROE and P. MELLOR

SUMMARY

The course of a Roman road was traced from just north of Buxton to within three miles of the Roman fort of Melandra Castle; seven sections along its line were excavated. Ten flints, probably of the Early Bronze Age, were found during the fieldwork.

The publication of this article is made possible by a generous donation from Mr. I. D. Margary.

LATE in 1970, while awaiting the progress of a gas pipeline trench being cut to the north of Buxton, we traced a length of what seemed to be the agger of a Roman road running due north from the junction of Batham Gate with the A624, the main road from Buxton to Dove Holes and beyond.

As we found out later, this length of agger was mentioned by W. Turner (1903, p. 162) as being a road heading for Melandra Castle and also "discernible to the left of the turnpike leading to Dove Holes, but is lost to the north of the great lime-ash heap there".

Some years earlier, W. Thompson Watkin (1886, p. 212) stated that "A road, of which from time to time fragments have been observed connected Buxton with the station at Melandra Castle, but no attempt has yet been made to thoroughly trace it. That it existed however is certain." This statement drew from F. Haverfield (1905, p. 251n) the wry comment, "That does not advance matters much."

However, on searching along the same alignment to the north of the ash heap the agger was found to continue, although in a somewhat damaged condition, to a point just to the south of Dove Holes railway station.

At this stage the Ordnance Survey was contacted, and they informed us that the road was known as far as Dove Holes from air photographs (CPE/UK 2598/3053-4 & 4115-6), and had been recorded as early as 1963, but there was thought to be insufficient evidence for publication.

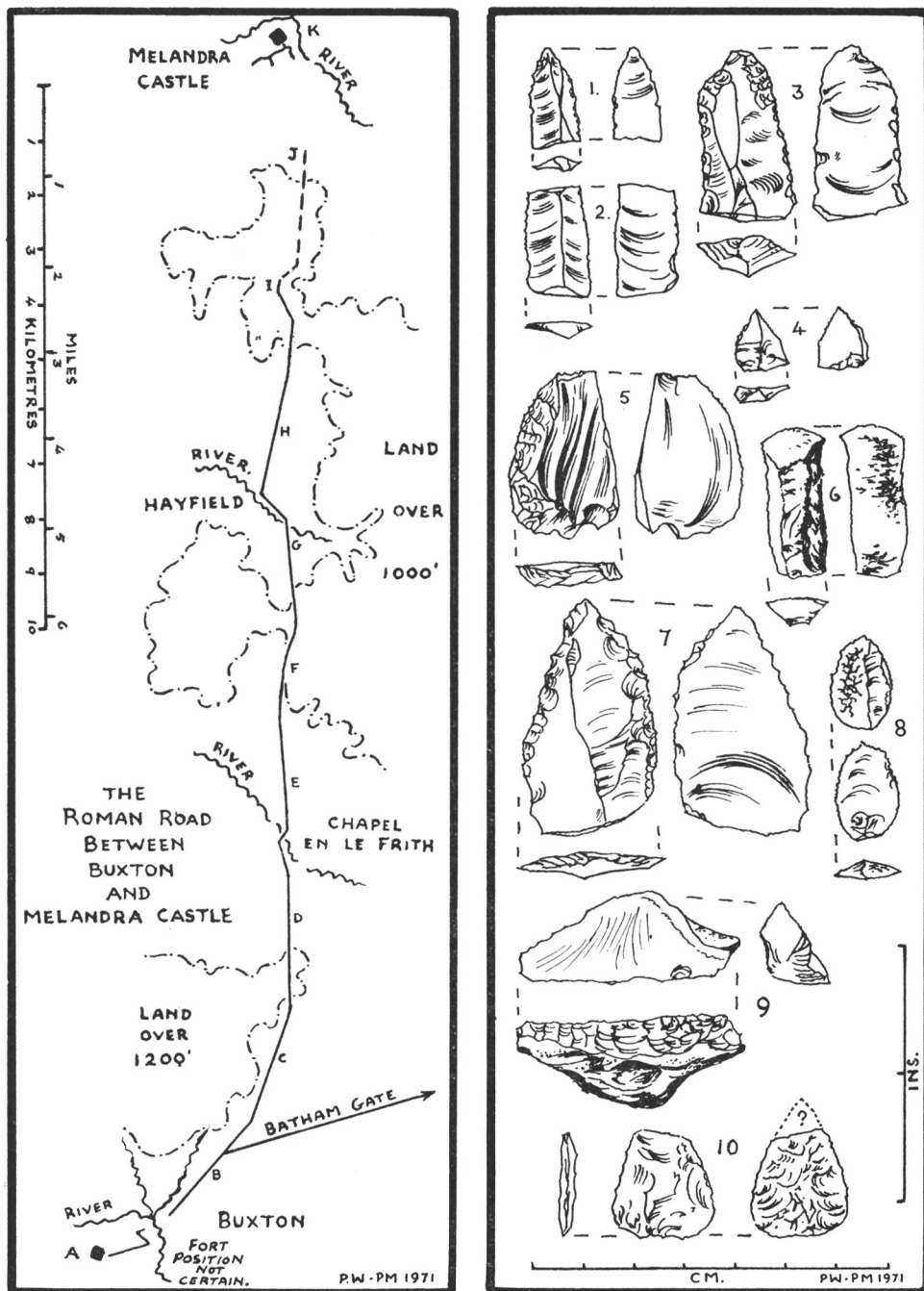


FIG. 1. Buxton-Melandra Roman road; flints found during course of fieldwork.

This was not very encouraging news, but subsequent fieldwork and excavation over the past year have shown that not only does a Roman road exist, but that it was solidly constructed, and sufficiently well preserved to enable its course to be traced to within three miles of Melandra Castle (fig. 1).

To show the course of the road the following strip maps have been prepared from the Ordnance Survey's six-inch maps of 1899. This edition has the advantage of showing many features now lost under modern development. Numbers in *italic* in the text refer to locations indicated by a number in a circle. It must be emphasised that, because this is in the nature of an interim report, only the visible portions of the road can be taken as reasonably certain, and as these are meagre, it follows that much more detailed fieldwork and excavation is needed before a certain course can be claimed for the rest.

Thanks are due to the following for their generosity in allowing access to their lands and continued interest throughout: Mr. J. Burton, Mr. and Mrs. T. Ashmore, Mr. G. E. Bagshawe, Mr. Hiles, Mr. and Mrs. Hollinrake, Mr. T. A. Goddard, Mr. H. Hallam, Mr. and Mrs. A. J. Pearson, Mr. J. R. Hallam, Mr. and Mrs. J. S. Goddard, Mr. and Mrs. H. Houghton, Mr. A. E. Pass, Mr. E. Pass, Mr. Lucas, Mr. and Mrs. L. S. Danner, Mr. D. Johnson, Mr. A. B. Richmond. Thanks are also due to I. D. Margary, M.A., F.S.A., for helpful advice and encouragement. Mr. Margary has allotted the road the route number 714 in his series.

The probable route taken by the road as it leaves Buxton, 1, has been dealt with by Edward Tristram (1916), and north of the River Wye there is a record of a pitched road and milestone found at Fairfield (Turner 1903, p. 161).

The first convincing and typical surface evidence north of the river is seen in the long line of field walls heading north east past St. Peter's church towards Brook House and beyond, 2. Near a high point on the hill, Batham Gate branches off in an easterly direction. 500 yards farther on, the Melandra road changes alignment to due north and its agger can be easily seen, as noted by past observers, from the present main road. It is damaged in parts, but clearly seen also is the rise of the walls over the causeway.

North of the ash heap the agger is traceable with care through the next two fields and ends abruptly south of the small stream by Ashpiece farm, 3. There is a gap of about 75 ft. before the large agger continues on the north side, and it is probable that this stream was either culverted or crossed on a small timber bridge. From here the causeway is well preserved until it disappears under the railway, although the last part is damaged by erosion and also by a track which crosses it to gain access to a small tunnel under the railway.

For the next half mile no trace has so far been found, and this is particularly unfortunate as within this length two changes of alignment occur, one large and one small. Here there is a merging of ancient routes,

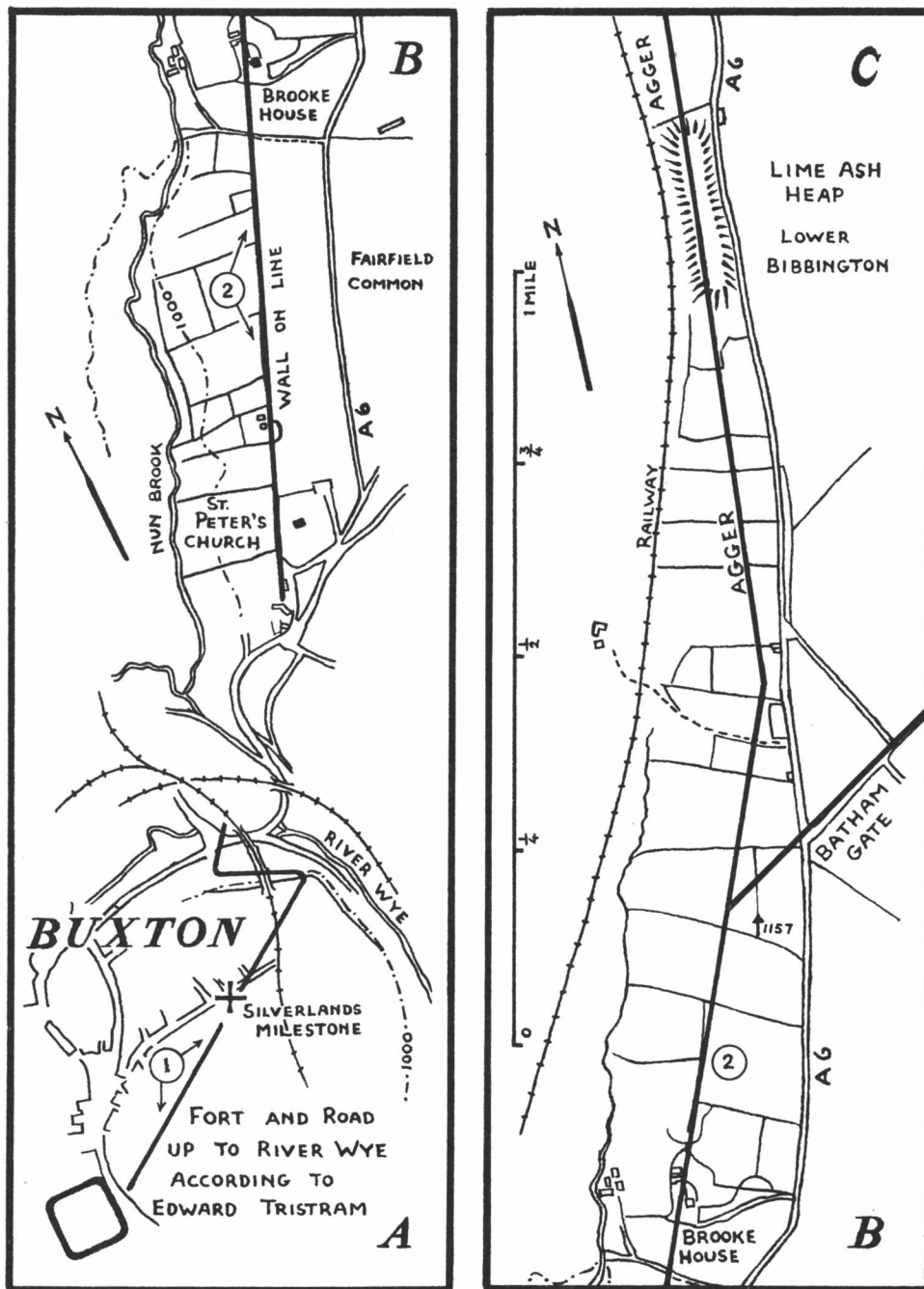


FIG. 2. Buxton-Melandra Roman road : Buxton to Bibbington.

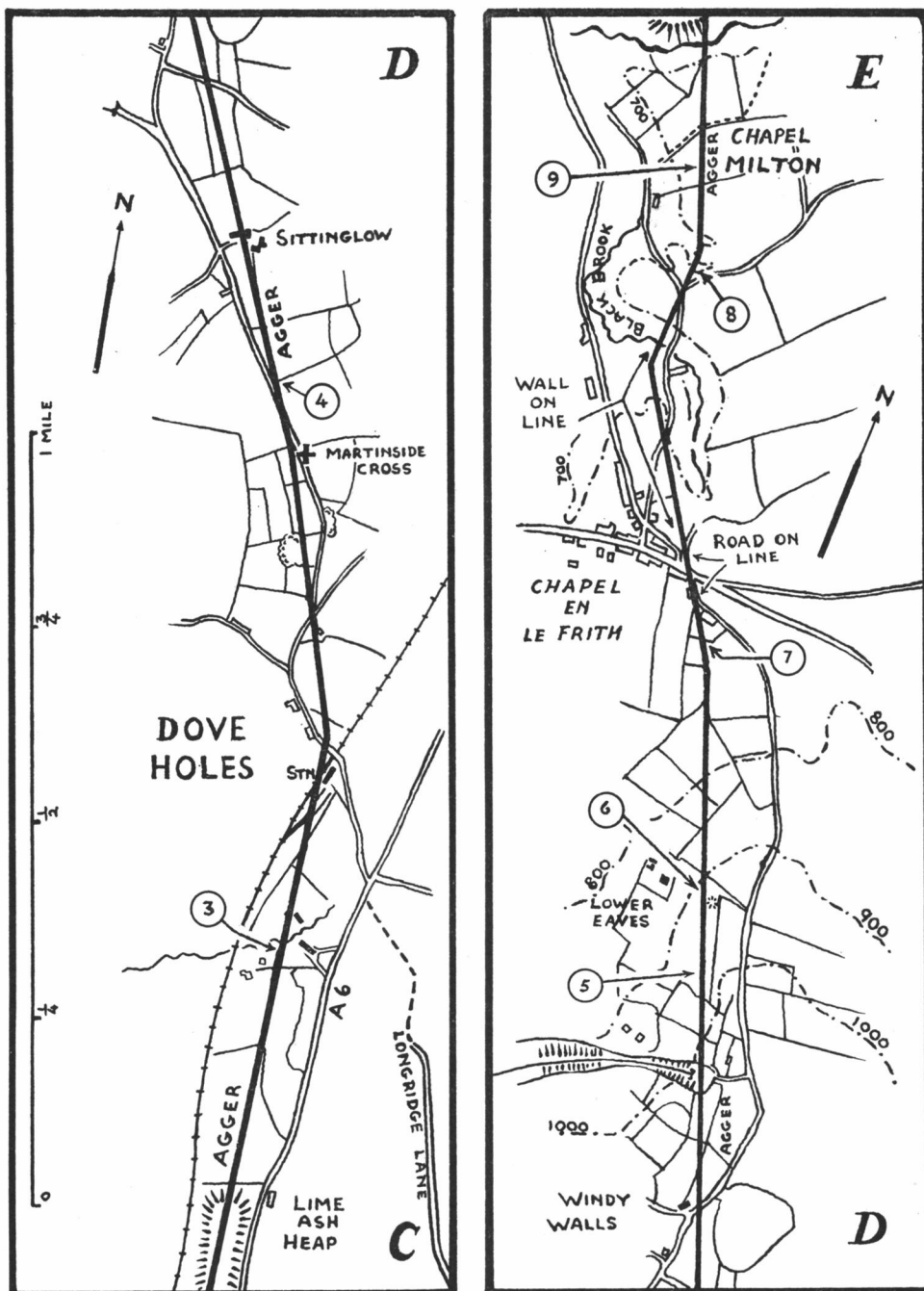


FIG. 3. Buxton-Melandra Roman road : Bibbington to Chapel Milton.

an east-west one along the north edge of Combs Moss which links up with Batham Gate, and a north-west/south-east one past Martinside Cross towards Longridge Lane (Cockerton, 1936-7). The ground, where not obscured by houses or tunnel spoil is badly rutted by hollow-ways and quarries. However, the direction in which the road is now aiming offers convincing evidence of its Roman origin and of the skill of its surveyors. The shoulder of Cown Edge which overlooks Melandra from a distance of some two miles is clearly visible from here, and this fact must have helped in the initial setting out. This alignment, of just over one mile, if projected forward, is aiming at the pass at Chinley Head, the only break in the formidable barrier of the High Peak for a road to the north. The local people here still refer to "The Roman Mile", although the true line has been forgotten.

On the top of the hill, the first visible signs of the agger are to be seen east of the present road, between Martinside Cross and Sittinglow farm. A much damaged bank emerges from under the road, 4, and proceeds towards Sittinglow farm, actually passing under the most westerly of the buildings there. All this area is again marked by many traffic ruts, and the agger has been cut through several times.

Beyond the farm, although the road is well placed on a slight natural ridge, very few signs remain until Windy Walls farm is reached. Here, beyond the present road, a wide but low agger in the first field becomes a prominent bank in the next two, being finally cut short by the railway.

Beyond the railway, running just below, and slightly diverging from a wall, a faint shelf, 5, can be seen on the hillside. The road is cleverly placed to descend the hill by a slanting route and avoids the steep gradient suffered by the present-day road.

Just above Lower Eaves farm there is a short but good length of agger, 6, by a quarry, and then few traces remain down the hill apart from slight humps in walls. Before reaching the A6 at Chapel en le Frith, a turn is made for about half a mile, to keep to the west side of the river. Another turn easterly brings the road back to its original line, conveniently crossing the river at right-angles in the process. The evidence on the ground for this is slight, but makes sense when taken together with field walls and a short length of existing road, all on the line. At 7 a hump can be detected in some iron railings, showing that the road has changed direction.

At 8 a short length of agger is pointing southwards towards the river crossing, which here, as the approach banks are low, was probably forded. The northerly end of this same agger is about to cross a deep V-shaped gully, and it seems possible that here was another small timber bridge. To the west many traffic ruts can be seen and these represent the route taken by later road users to avoid the gully. Beyond, few signs remain for the next 200 yards, and the ground is badly drained and marshy. Then once more a fine terraced agger is visible, 9, along the bottom edge of one field. This, being like a lynchet, would be doubtful evidence but for the fact that it once again is upon the same alignment as that started by Martinside

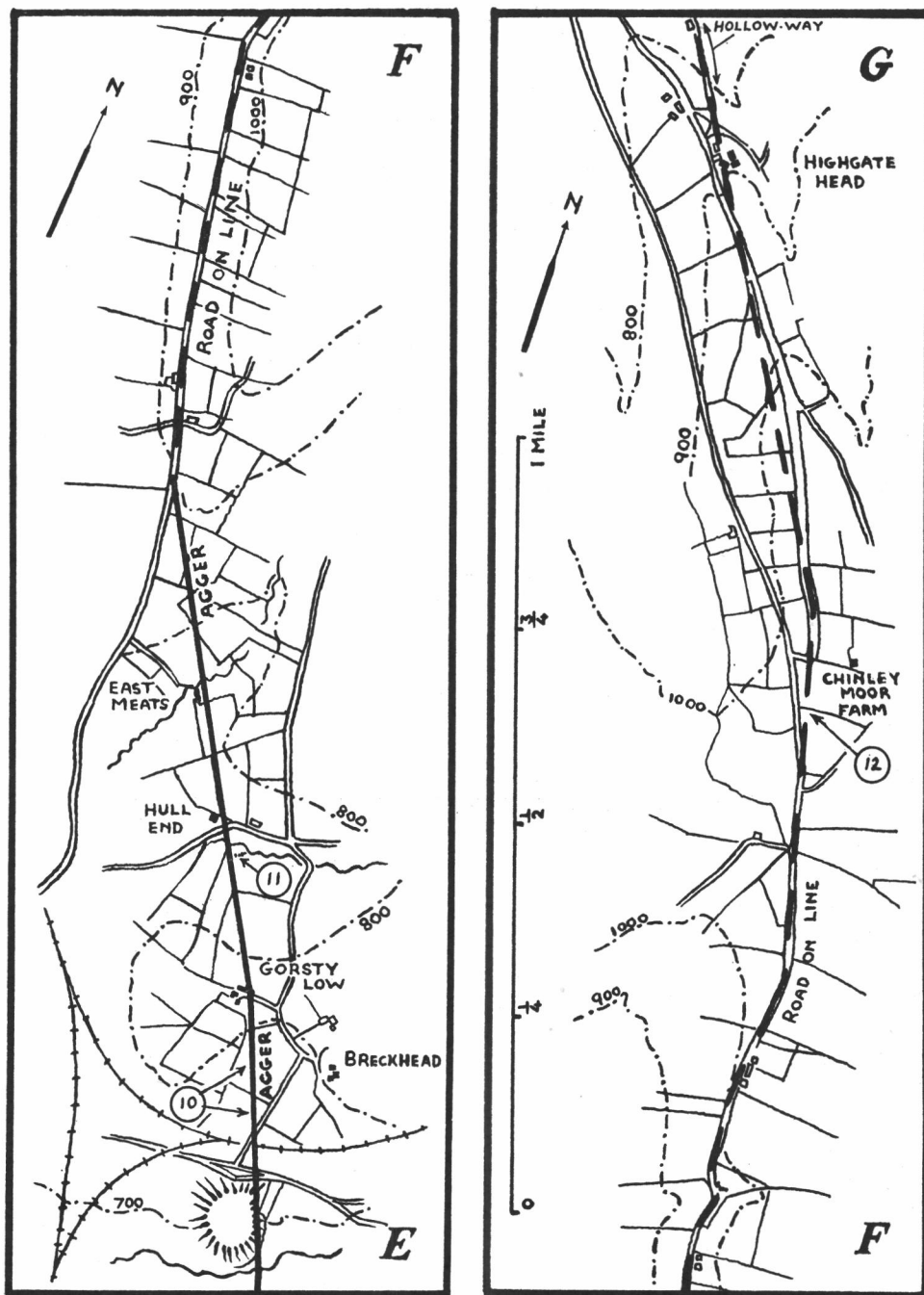


FIG. 4. Buxton-Melandra Roman road : Chapel Milton to Highgate Head.

Cross, and also can be seen continuing northwards rather faintly over the next field. Another river crossing lies ahead and just before the road descends the brow of the hill in a shallow depression, a hollow-way leaves the line and traverses westwards, evidently seeking an easier crossing. The road-approach here appears to have been eroded away by the river.

On the north side the course is overlain, first by a large spoil heap, then by the road and railway, but in the first field north of the railway, and west of the small lane which runs up to Breckhead from the spoil heap, a large agger appears. 10. Its direction is a little more westerly than before and it is clearly visible all the way up to Gorsty Low farm. It passes under the eastern end of the fine old barn which stands on the crest of the hill, and its course thereafter is aiming for Hull End and East Meats, indicating yet another slight change of direction.

The first evidence beyond the barn is a hump in the wall at the bottom of the hill. Then, by the river, to the east of the road line, there is an early mill site with pond and water channels, 11. Possibly the bank of the road has been utilized as a dam, although all evidence of this has now gone. Just north of Hull End, the agger can be seen under the wall for a few yards before fading out. South of East Meats, a faint terrace is visible, but at the little stream by this building no trace remains of its crossing. On the north side a V-shaped erosion gully follows the line of the road and this, although distorted, probably represents the washing out of one of the roadside ditches. As the road reaches higher ground, however, a well-defined agger can be traced to within a few yards of the main road from Chapel en le Frith to Hayfield. A quarry here has exposed metalling and a kerbstone. It seems clear that at last part of the Roman route has stayed in use, and this is probably broadly true for the next three miles, to a point north-west of Hayfield.

Just past Chinley Head farm the old road keeps to the higher ground and the turnpike turns away down the hillside. A short length of the old route here has been abandoned, 12, but the ground is badly disturbed and nothing can be safely deduced from the many humps and bumps visible. The old Highgate road into Hayfield, from here, is likely to represent a rather distorted Roman line, descending finally towards the ford. Beyond the ford the existing road swings north-westwards and this line projected a few hundred yards meets the next known southward alignment down the valley. It is possible that here the later diversion to avoid a tedious corner can be seen as the pre-turnpike road turns to climb higher up the flank of the hill on its way northwards. This road converges again on the Roman line at Little Hayfield.

The next stretch of Roman road is two miles in length from the turning point at Hayfield to the Abbot's Chair, where a major change again occurs. Along this two miles there are two slight changes of direction, and again credit has to be given to the surveyors for so cleverly placing the road to avoid excessive gradients and uneven ground. However, there are two streams to cross, both of them difficult obstacles, being in deep cloughs

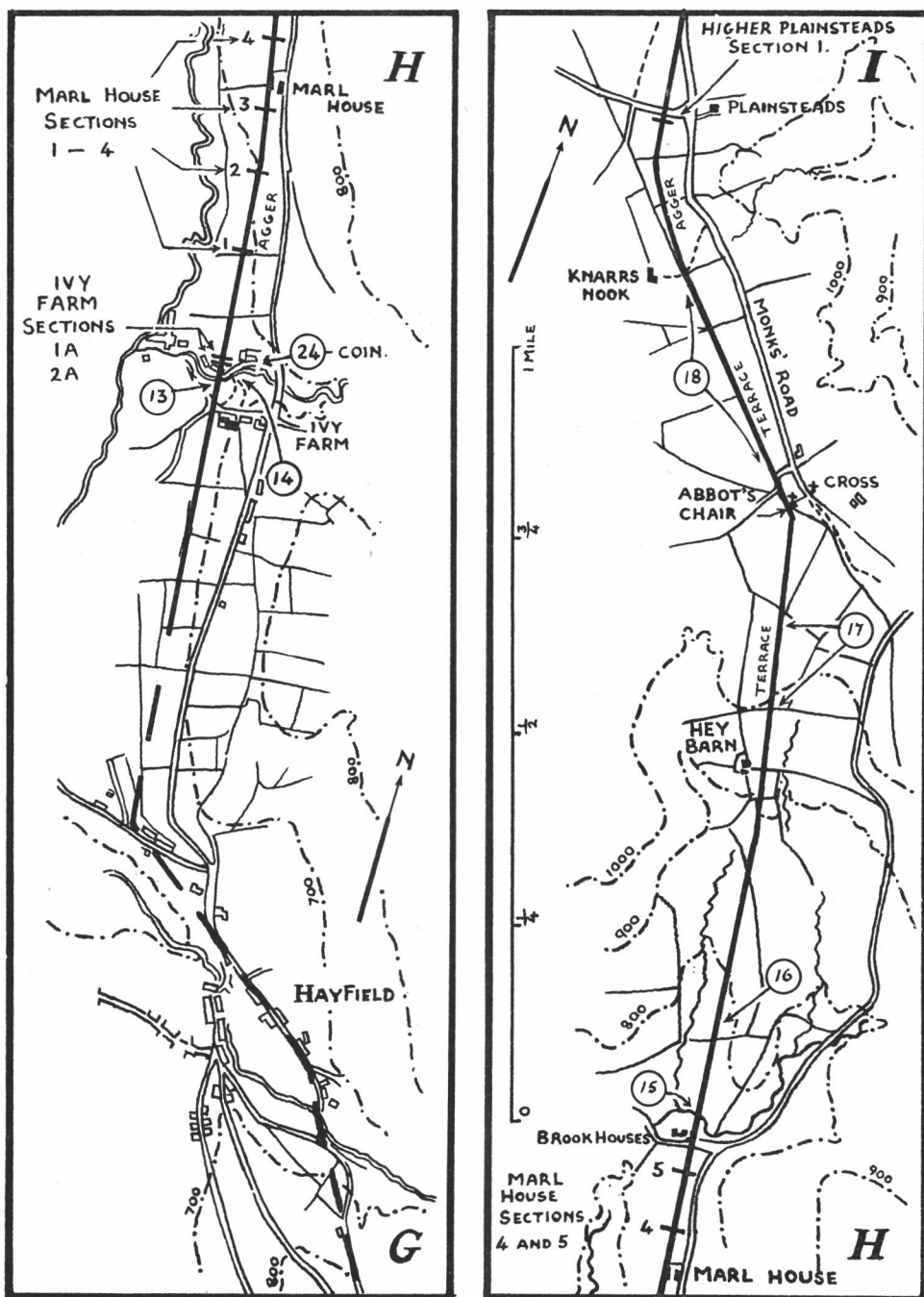


Fig. 5. Buxton-Melandra Roman road : Highgate Head to Plainsteads.

with sides of unequal height. At the first of these, 13, at Little Hayfield, the road approaches from the south, high above the stream, and the opposite bank is much lower. A section across the road, on the north bank, showed it to be some 10 ft. wider than usual. This implies that it may be the start of an approach ramp to keep the road well above the stream. Also on the north bank, a length of heavy dry-stone walling 36 ft. wide and 7 ft. high, could be the revetted end of an approach ramp. The south, high bank is very difficult to interpret, as dumping of materials has occurred from the nearby mill, and this may well have filled up any cutting necessary to get down to meet the other side on a level bridge. A hollow-way, 14, leading across the stream on the south bank, to the east of the Roman road, represents once more an upstream diversion caused by a destroyed bridge. Three old roads converge from the south towards this hollow-way, including the one from Hayfield previously mentioned.

Between this point and the second stream, 15, the agger has been sectioned several times, revealing a well built road 20 ft. wide. The revetted west edge as it approaches Little Hayfield is especially noteworthy. At the clough by Brookhouses, 15, the road has similar problems, only this time there is a high north bank. There is no visible evidence of how the crossing was effected.

North of Brookhouses one short piece of agger, 16, is left, in what is otherwise a very unconvincing length. However, in the field just to the north-east of Hey Barn a distinct terrace can be seen, 17, going under the north wall. This follows right through the next field, fading out as it reaches the wall again. No trace remains through the last field before the Abbot's Chair.

To continue with a northward alignment here would end up in a clough, so the road has to turn, and fortunately there is good evidence for such a change. From the Abbot's Chair, laid out in a north-westerly direction there is a long length of wall and alongside runs a wide terrace, 18. This can be followed until just past the track leading to Knarrs Nook farm, but from there the terrace becomes an agger and also begins to change direction, moving away from the wall.

As it reaches a point one field from the east-west lane near Plainsteads farm, it turns even more, so that it is now heading just east of north. It stays on this line until it merges with the Monks' Road, being badly cut up by traffic fanning out to climb this quite steep hill. This is the last certain part, and the course onwards for the next half mile, although promising, has not yet been tested by a full section. Trial holes have revealed as much stone off, as on, the line.

From this last position, the Monks' Road heads northwards in a fairly direct way, apart from a sharp bend to cross a boggy clough, 19. Also from this same point, a footpath leaves in a north-easterly direction following a natural ridge which leads along towards Whiteley Nab, 20, a spur lying to the east of the clough mentioned, and this is the most likely route for the Roman road. This path is in fact an early road, clearly repre-

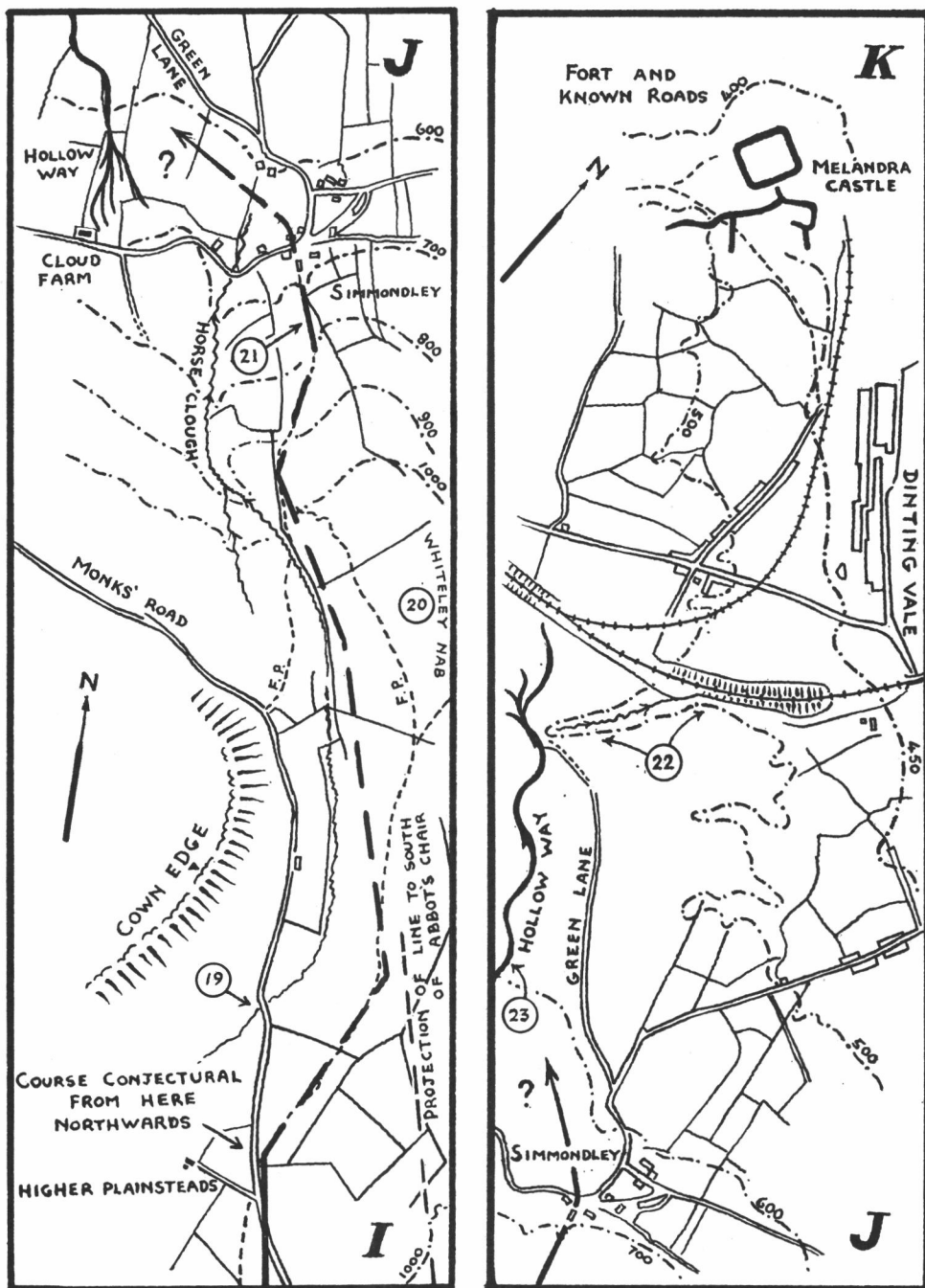


FIG. 6. Buxton-Melandra Roman road : Plainsteads to Melandra Castle.

sented by existing paths, both northwards towards Glossop and southwards to Hayfield and New Mills. All along Whiteley Nab there are many traffic ruts, a sure sign of a much used trackway. Another possible clue to the Roman route lies in the fact that if the road followed this natural ridge it would be avoiding domination by higher ground, and also would be, in effect, returning to the same alignment as that heading northwards from Hayfield. Unfortunately, all this area has not only suffered the ruts, but has also had a plantation on it, since grubbed out, so it is inevitable that the ground should be badly disturbed. The ruts are visible all the way to Simmondley, finally concentrating in a large and deep hollow-way, 21.

Between Simmondley and the fort there is a stretch of farmland, at first sight easily crossed, apart from a deep natural clough, 22, reaching from Dinting Vale well across the direct line to the fort. Green Lane heads north west from Simmondley, then turns westwards to clear the end of this clough. To the west of Green Lane there lies what is now a winding shallow valley with a stream in it, 23. This is in fact a hollow-way originating by Cloud farm, and fed by traffic coming down both east and west of Horse Clough. This is evidently the original "Green" lane, and it can be traced north-westwards beyond the end of the deep clough, to be finally cut short by the railway.

It is likely that the Roman road lies somewhere along the line of this hollow-way, but so much erosion has now occurred that the original ground level over a large part of it has completely altered.

The roads found during recent excavation (Webster, 1967; Webster, 1969; Webster, 1971) near Melandra are, unfortunately, not much help. Only the middle one is pointing to Simmondley, but the line is not a good one, following low uneven ground, and for the present the last lap of this fine road remains lost.

THE EXCAVATED SECTIONS, figs. 7-10

It might be thought that to cut seven trenches within so short a stretch of road is unnecessary labour. In fact, doing so has proved highly rewarding in the gain of information of just how the construction can vary.

Ivy Farm, Sections 1a and 2a (fig. 7)

These sections were done in an attempt to find out how the crossing of the clough was effected: as the road line ends in a considerable hump at this point, a bridge abutment was suspected. The sections, only 19 ft. apart, did reveal that the agger here was 10 ft. wider than normal, and in one section at least, very heavily constructed indeed. Section 1a has two distinct top layers, but as the other sections do not, it seems most likely that this does represent heavier initial build-up, or a subsequent repair. The sections also showed that the road was descending on a gradient of 1 in 11, and it is possible that it was the start of an approach ramp, leading to a bridge. Work on the south bank may supply the answer here. Both these sections have a wide, shallow, scoop ditch on the east side, partly filled during construction by the foundation layer.

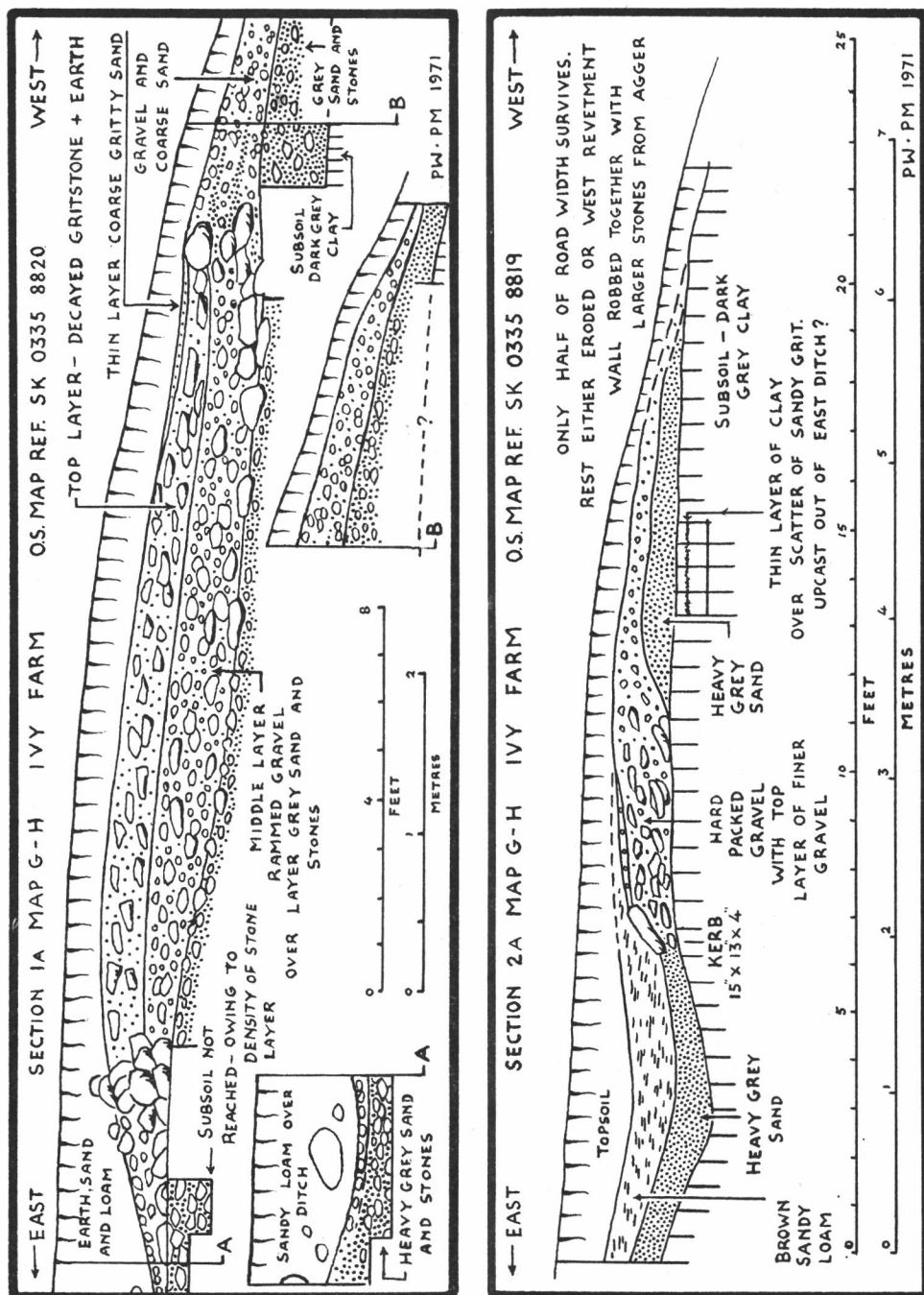


Fig. 7. Buxton-Melandra Roman road, sections 1A and 2A near Ivy Farm (fig. 5, map G-H).

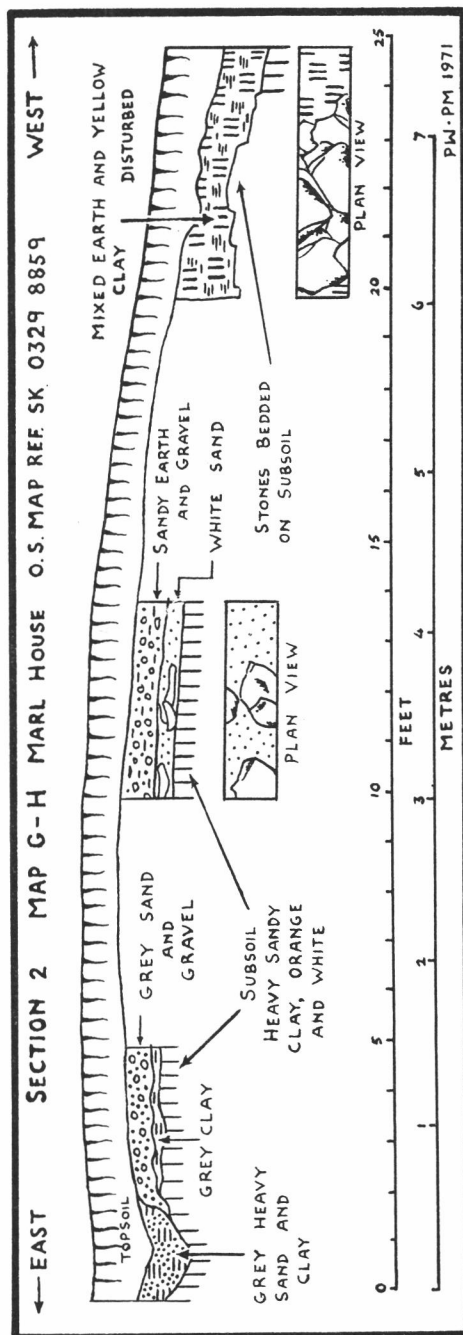
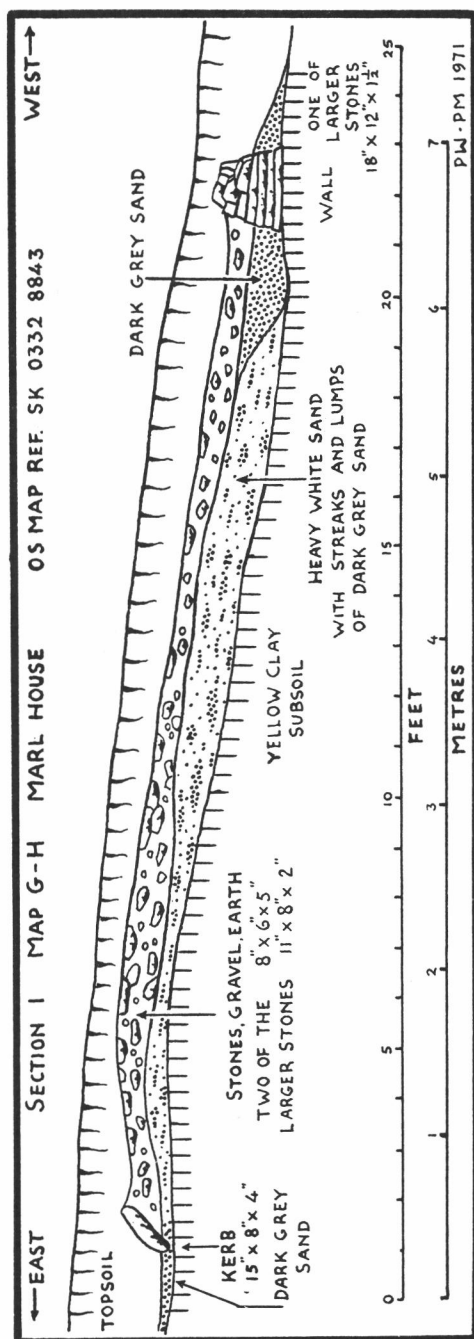


FIG. 8. Buxton-Melandra Roman road, sections 1 and 2 near Marl House (fig. 5, map G-H).

Marl House, Section 2 (fig. 8)

A mass of heavy stones was encountered under the lower, western side, with disturbed soil and clay above. Possibly a retaining wall has been robbed out here. Just north of this section some 90 ft. of the agger has been eroded away, and a few yards west of this there is a well which is still in use. Very probably this was a watercourse at right-angles to the line of the road and culverted. This could explain the apparently recut uphill ditch in Section 2, as an attempt to improve drainage towards such a feature.

All the sections, except the one at Higher Plainsteads, have certain similarities. In each case the turf, if originally present, seems to have been removed, and the subsoil was then scooped up from one or other of the sides towards the centre. A thick layer of sand, stiffened occasionally with heavy stones, was then laid with a camber, the whole topped with river gravel retained by kerbing, either of single stones or small walls of carefully laid stonework.

So far no dating evidence for the road has been found, although both its alignments and its destinations offer proof of Roman origin. It is of typical Roman military type (cf. Hayes and Rutter 1964, 84-8), and this heavy construction and careful layout implies an important supply route. Although no Roman material turned up during digging, some interesting pre-Roman finds were made (fig. 1). One Roman item of note was brought to us while digging at Little Hayfield, which had been found in a garden in Clough Lane, 24, fig. 5, G-H, a few years ago. This was a fine, little worn denarius of Antoninus Pius dated A.D. 154, a significant date for this area, being the year in which unrest is believed to have broken out amongst the Brigantes (Frere 1967, 152).

FLINT ARTIFACTS, fig. 1

1. Greyish brown. Found in grey sand filling east ditch of Ivy Farm, Section 2a, Map G-H. N.G.R. SK 0335 8819.
2. Greyish brown. Found unstratified in spoil out of Ivy Farm, Section 2a, Map G-H.
3. Greyish fawn scraper. Found in gravel layer of Marl House, Section 3, Map G-H. N.G.R. SK 0328 8873.
4. Greyish. Found lying on stony ground after moorland fire, Map I-J, Whiteley Nab. N.G.R. SK 0255 9250.
5. Dark brown scraper. Found as 4.
6. Light brown. Found as 4.
7. Greyish fawn. Knife ? Found as 4.
8. Fawn. Found as 4.
9. Greyish black slug knife. Found as 4.
10. Dirty grey leaf-shaped arrowhead. Found as 4.

Dr. P. A. Mellars, of the University of Sheffield, kindly examined nos. 4-9, and considered them to be probably of the Early Bronze Age. Nos. 1-9 are in the possession of P. Wroe.

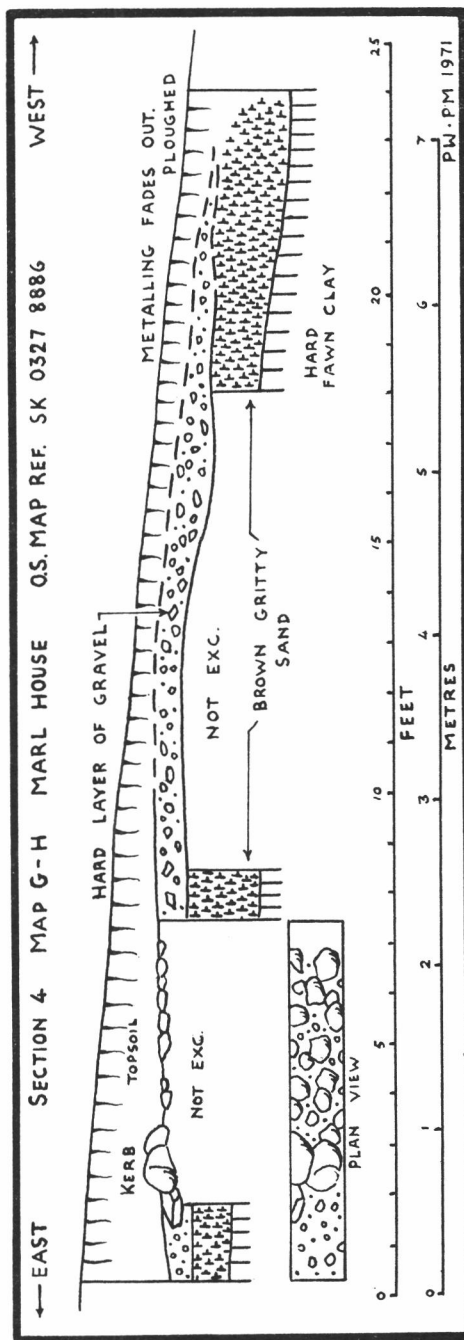
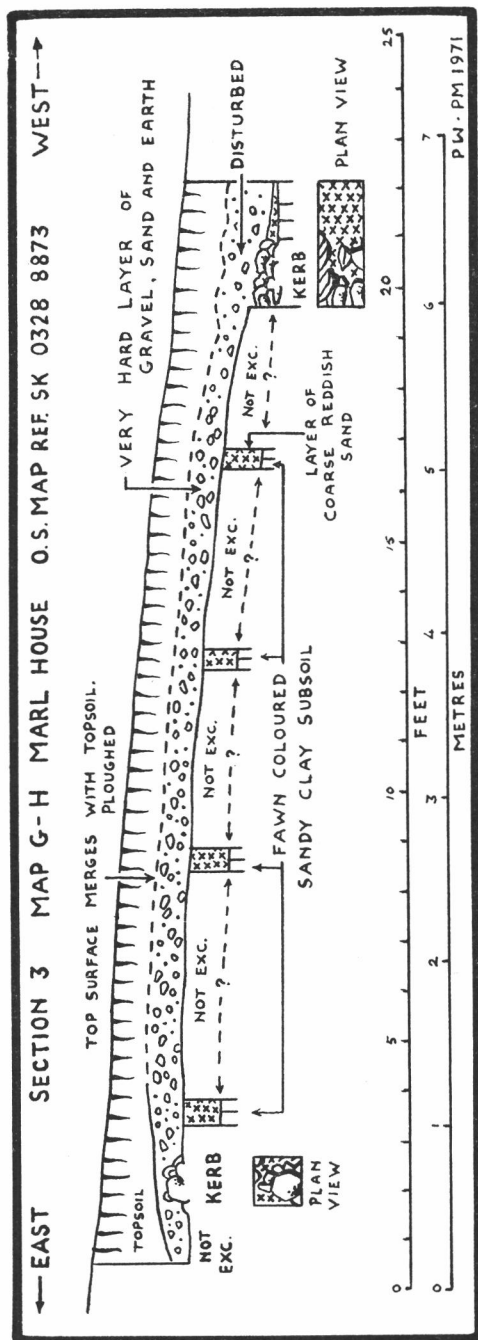


Fig. 9. Buxton-Melandra Roman road, sections 3 and 4 near Marl House (fig. 5, map G-H).

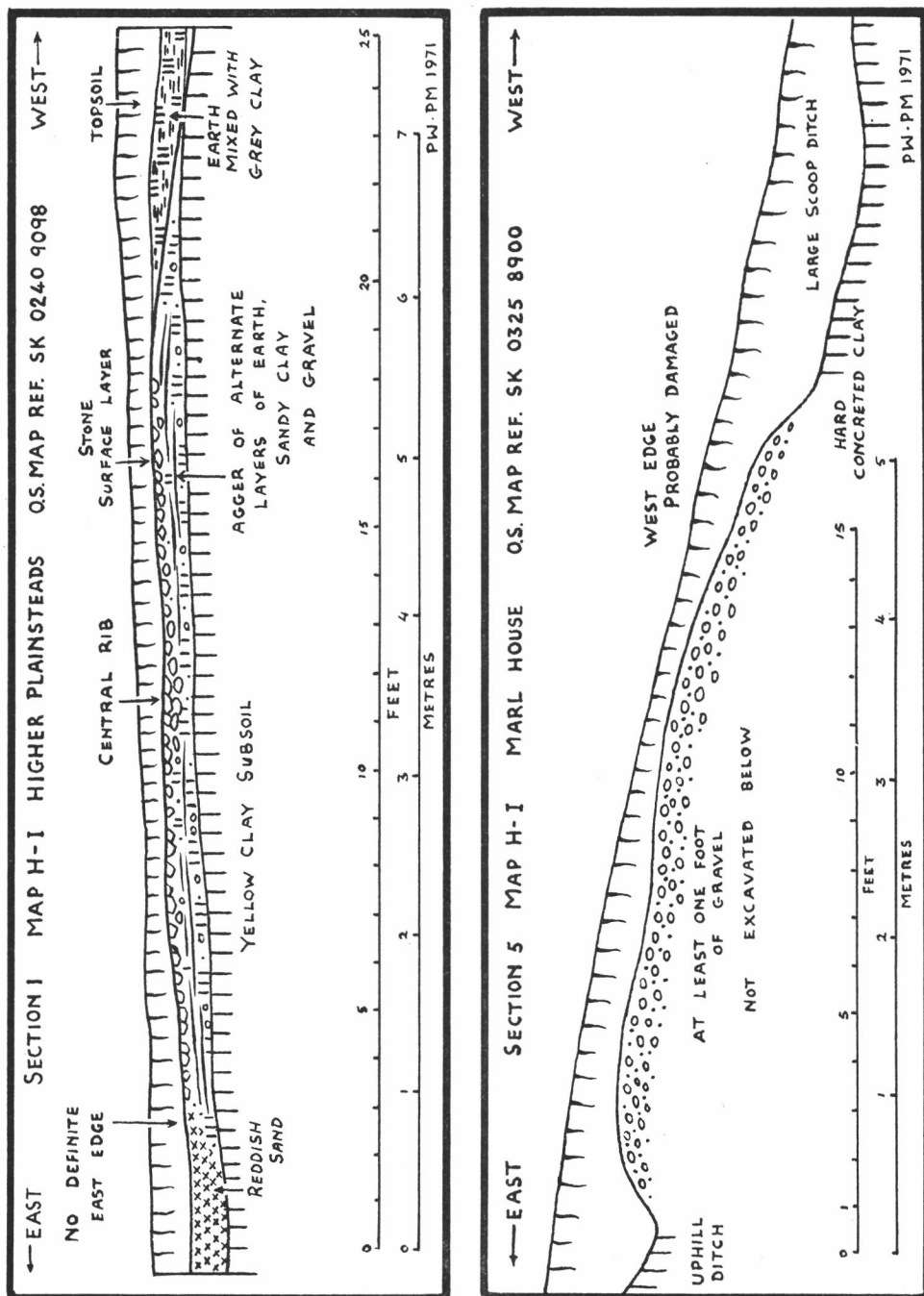


FIG. 10. Buxton-Melandra Roman road, section 5 near Marl House and section 1 at Higher Plainsteads (fig. 5, map H-I).

REFERENCES

- COCKERTON, R. W. P., 1936-7. "A Prehistoric Trackway", *Derbyshire Countryside*, no. 24, October 1936, 77-8; *ibid.*, no. 25, January 1937, 18-9.
- FRERE, S. S., 1967. *Britannia*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- HAVERFIELD, F., 1905. "Roman Derbyshire", *Victoria County History of Derbyshire*, vol. i, 191-263.
- HAYES, R. H. and RUTTER, J. G., 1964. *Wades Causeway*.
- THOMPSON WATKIN, W., 1886. "The Roman Minor Settlements, Camps, Discoveries of Coins, etc., and Roads in Derbyshire", *D.A.J.*, viii, 190-215.
- TRISTRAM, E., 1916. "Roman Buxton", *D.A.J.*, xxxviii, 84-104.
- TURNER, W., 1903. "Notes on Old Buxton and District", *D.A.J.*, xxv, 159-63.
- WEBSTER, P. V., 1967. "Melandra Castle Excavations 1966", *D.A.J.*, lxxxvii, 161-2.
- WEBSTER, P. V., 1969. "Excavations at Melandra Castle, Derbyshire, 1969", *D.A.J.*, lxxxix, 96-8.
- WEBSTER, P. V., 1971. "Melandra Castle Roman Fort : Excavations in the Civil Settlement 1966-9", *D.A.J.*, xci, 58-118 (present volume).