

The Roman Road in Wirral

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“The Wirral road stands much in need of authentication.”

I. A. RICHMOND.

J.R.S., vol. 48 (1958), 219.

I. INTRODUCTION

The possible existence of a Roman road in Wirral has been suspected for some time, and several alignments have been proposed by many authors. Much writing on the subject, however, contains speculation instead of fact, and the literature generally presents a confused picture. The intention of this paper is to make a critical review of the literature, and to present the results of recent fieldwork and excavation. It shows that a Roman road existed in Willaston, marked by the line of the present Street Hey Lane, and that it can be presumed to be part of a road from Chester to Birkenhead. An extension to Meols is a reasonable speculation, but neither this nor the course of the road either near Chester or between Street Hey Lane and Birkenhead has yet been proved.

Map references are understood to be prefaced by SJ(33).

II. LITERATURE SURVEY: ALIGNMENTS OTHER THAN THE STREET HEY ROAD

Apart from the alignment based on Street Hey Lane, considered in the following Sections, three other major suggestions have been made for Roman roads in Wirral:

- (a) a road from Chester to Meols along the western part of Wirral
- (b) roads in the neighbourhood of Storeton
- (c) a fragment at Poulton Lancelyn

Many writers at the end of last century and the beginning of this mention a possible Roman road from Chester to Meols along the west coast of Wirral. This suggestion is given in some detail by Watkin¹, whose line runs through Blacon Point, Neston and Greasby to Meols, “though I am not certain of its Roman origin.” Two items comprise his positive evidence. First, in 1883, workmen found traces of an older road two feet beneath the modern road from Chester to Saughall, near Blacon and aligned “a little to the right of Blacon Point.” The construction was “one or two layers of boulder stones resting on clay”, which is of interest when compared with the sections cut at Street Hey Lane in 1960 (Figures 6 and 7). Whether Watkin himself saw these traces is not clear. Secondly, he mentions a road found by a surveyor under the sand 100 yards from the river bank at Neston;

¹W. T. Watkin, *Roman Cheshire* [1886], p. 57.

this is admitted to be second-hand evidence. Sulley² brings the King's Wood Lane, or Military Road, through Saughall and Shotwick, into this suggested line. O'Dwyer³ repeats the suggestion with elaborations. In 1928 the Ordnance Survey⁴ accepted the northern end of the line near Meols, though they have later⁵ rejected it. These suggestions seem to be based on the argument that the Romans were at Chester and Meols, and that a direct link can therefore be presumed. But "pleasant discourse and ingenious speculation cannot be taken as a serious contribution to archaeological research" (H. E. Malden), and until evidence is produced which would satisfy modern archaeologists, this line can be disregarded.

There is a complex of old roads radiating from Storeton, several known locally as the "Roman road". One is Kirkup Lane, running near Bebington Church,⁶ and another runs from Storeton to Prenton.^{7 8} Some of these roads are distinguished by paving or a stone mid-rib, but they are generally agreed to be mediaeval pack-horse tracks (see Cox⁶ for a description of Kirkup Lane).

Watkin¹ notes that Ormerod mentioned an ancient road crossing the Dibben Valley at Poulton Lancelyn. In addition, Lancelyn Green⁹ reports a fragment of a paved road at Vineyard Farm, Poulton Lancelyn. Paved Roman roads are not normally found in Britain, and not particularly in Cheshire; we can therefore disregard a serious possibility of a Roman road here in the absence of more convincing evidence.

III. THE ALIGNMENT BASED ON STREET HEY LANE: LITERATURE SURVEY

This alignment is based on the straight stretch of Street Hey Lane in Willaston, and Heath Lane, its southern continuation, which together run for approximately one mile; this stretch is shown on Figure 1. On the 1-inch O.S. map the apparent direction of these lanes is direct to Chester, and lanes and footpaths through Ledsham and Mollington lie on or near this alignment.

The line was first described by O'Dwyer³ in 1935, although in 1920 Tait¹⁰ noted the significance of the place-name "Street Hey" in connection with his study of the "Blake Street" (see Section VI). O'Dwyer's suggested line is Mollington Causeway, Townfield Lane, Hill Farm, a path to Powey Lane Farm, Newhouses (Capenhurst), Ledsham village, the lane to Ledsham Hall, the lane to Heathfield, Street Hey Lane, Hargrave Cottages, Raby Hall, Vineyard Farm, Windy Harbour,

²P. Sulley, *The Hundred of Wirral* [1889], pp. 3, 117.

³S. O'Dwyer, *Roman Roads of Cheshire* [1935], p. 16.

⁴Ordnance Survey, *Map of Roman Britain*, 2nd edn. [1928].

⁵*ibid.*, 3rd edn. [1956].

⁶E. W. Cox, *T. H. Soc. Lancs. & Ches.* [1895], vol. 47, p. 248.

⁷N. Ellison, *The Wirral Peninsula* [1955], p. 200.

⁸W. Fergusson Irvine, *T. H. Soc. Lancs. & Ches.* [1895], vol. 47, p. 126.

⁹R. Lancelyn Green, *Poulton-Lancelyn* [1948].

¹⁰J. Tait [ed], *Pub. Chetham Soc.* [1920], new series, vol. 79, p. 99. The Chartulary or Register of the Abbey of St. Werburgh, Chester, pt. I

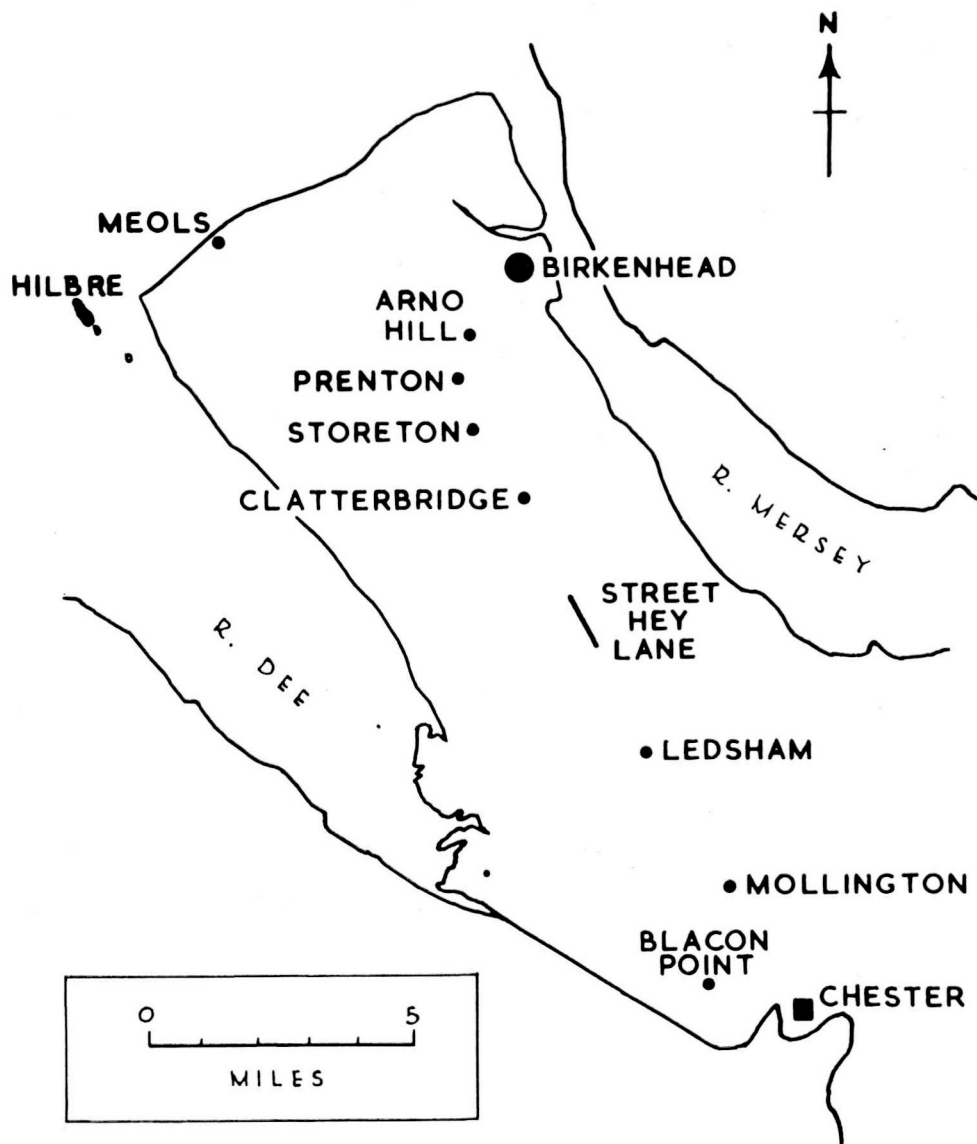


Fig. 1. Wirral, showing places of major interest to the paper.

Poulton Hey, Spital, Teehay Lane, King's Road, Brough (*sic*) Road, through Birkenhead, and by the old bridge at Bridge End towards Wallasey. He argues a Roman origin from the general straightness of the route, the many significant place-names, and a parish boundary along part of the way.

The parish boundary was along Scotchman's Lane (see Section IV). The arguments supported by the names of Borough Road and Windy Harbour, and

Mollington Causeway have been criticised respectively by Irvine¹¹ and J.H.E.B.¹² The portion north of Street Hey is speculative, but this first mention of Street Hey Lane as a possible Roman line is noteworthy.

Margary¹³ describes a line as far as Raby which is similar to O'Dwyer's. He suggests a commencement from Chester through Mollington, and by lanes and footpaths past Capenhurst to Ledsham. From here he gives a certain course by minor roads and lanes to Street Hey; near The Oaks, Ledsham, he notes a bank and line of old trees which mark the road across a field to rejoin the lane beyond. North of Street Hey he takes it by hedgerows to Rabyhouse Farm, and thence along a lane for a further half-mile, passing one mile east of Raby village.

The "lane beyond" to which Margary's line of oaks leads is Scotchman's Lane, and the lane beyond Rabyhouse Farm is Hargrave Lane.

Webster¹⁴ states that the only certain Roman road in Wirral goes through Street Hey Farm, and takes a possible line north-westward from here. The Ordnance Survey⁵ includes Street Hey Lane, as do Sylvester and Nulty¹⁵. In 1957 Wilmot¹⁶ claimed that excavation in the area of Street Hey had apparently confirmed the existence of a Roman road for about two miles; this excavation, however, was made in 1934, and does not support Wilmot's conclusion (see Section V).

IV. THE ALIGNMENT BASED ON STREET HEY LANE: CONFIRMATORY AND FIELD WORK

That there was a Roman road leading from the Northgate of Chester is stated by Watkin,¹⁷ who mentions it being found in the angle between the Parkgate and Birkenhead roads, and a possible branching, one road leading towards Wilderspool. Thompson¹⁸ argues such a road from the fact that burials were often sited along main roads, and shows the two alternative sites for the cremation burial found north of the Northgate.¹⁹ The existence of a road leading from the Northgate, however, need not necessarily imply a road leading into Wirral, since the road from Chester to Wilderspool is presumed to have left the Northgate and turned towards Hoole,²⁰ where at one point it may be represented by "The Street".

Street Hey Lane in Willaston is an old lane lined by large oak trees on both sides. It is notable for its name and its general straightness, the alignment being

¹¹W. Fergusson Irvine, *Cheshire Sheaf* [1935], 3rd series, vol. 30, p. 80.

¹²J. H. E. B., *ibid.* [1940], vol. 35, p. 24.

¹³I. D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain*, vol. 2 [1957], p. 33.

¹⁴G. Webster, *Chesh. Hist.* [1953], no. 3, pp. 15—18.

¹⁵D. Sylvester and G. Nulty, *Historical Atlas of Cheshire* [1958], p. 13.

¹⁶G. F. A. Wilmot, *Chesh. Hist.* [1957], no. 7, p. 42.

¹⁷W. T. Watkin, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

¹⁸F. H. Thompson, *Deva: Roman Chester* [1959], p. 37.

¹⁹P. H. Lawson, *J.C. & N.W.A.S.* [1926], vol. 27, pt. 2, p. 185.

²⁰I. D. Margary, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

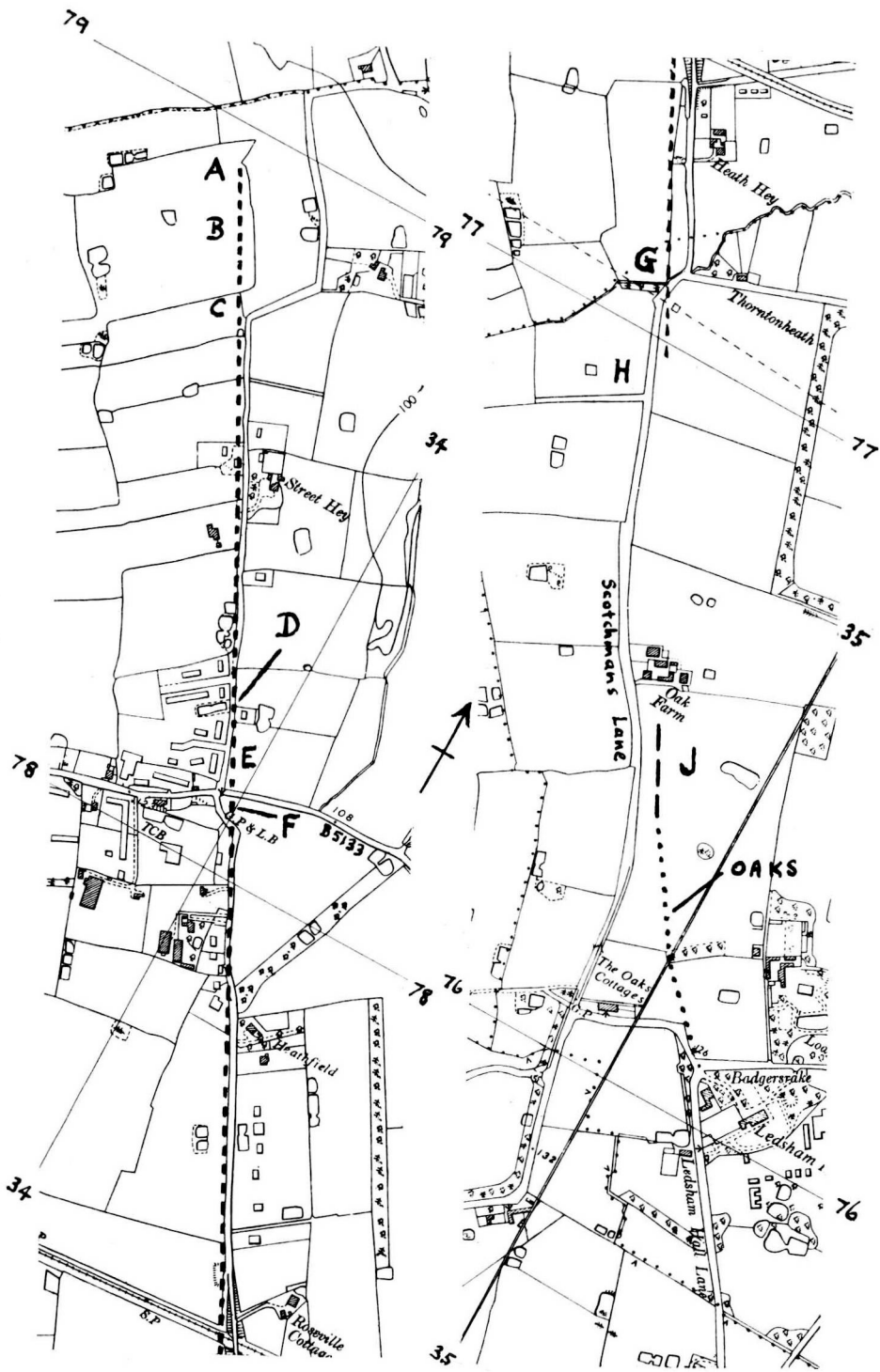


Fig. 2. Parts of the 6 in. O.S. sheets SJ 37 NW and SJ 37 NE, showing Street Hey Lane, Heath Lane and Scotchman's Lane. The dotted line from A to G is the "base line" of the Roman road.

[Reproduced from the Ordnance Survey Maps with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office. Crown Copyright reserved].

continued south of the B.5133 road (Hooton-Willaston) by a portion of Heath Lane (see Figure 2). The alignment is directed to a point 600 yards west of the Northgate of Chester. The name is analogous to Streethay, Staffs. (1262 Stretheye), meaning "enclosure on the Roman road (Ryknild Street)."²¹ The name evidence is strengthened by the fact that in 1843 one field to the west and seven to the east of the lane contained the word "street" in their names,²² as shown in Figure 3.

North of Street Hey Farm, the lane becomes a farm lane, and soon makes a turn to the north-east, near point C shown on Figure 2; after this it resumes its alignment parallel to its original course. On the assumption that it represented a possible Roman road, a continuation to the north was seen along the field boundary running to point A (map ref. 336789). West of this field boundary the edge of the field is raised about 9in. above the general field level along a strip several yards wide, marked as B; this can now be taken to be the ridge of the road. At A the ditch makes a loop around a large tree; in the bottom and banks of the ditch can be seen some two dozen stones, some embedded in roots, of size 2—9in.

South of the B.5133 road, Heath Lane continues the line of Street Hey Lane. It is straight as far as the railway bridge, and the alignment beyond here is continued by the boundary of a small, curiously shaped, triangular field. This has trees in its line, and its position must be dictated by some artificial feature, for there is no logical reason for separating this small portion from the main field to the west. The point G is the end of this field boundary.

The straight line from A to G includes most of Street Hey Lane, and can be taken as a working "base line" of a stretch of the Roman road.

Scotchman's lane continues in the same direction as Heath Lane, though not quite on the alignment of the "base line" (see Section V). A significant feature is that a parish boundary formerly ran along its length,²² although not now.

South of Oak Farm a bank and ditch²³ may be seen in the field some yards east of Scotchman's Lane (point J); these are very nearly in a direct alignment with the "base line". They continue, to join the line of old oaks which Margary¹³ takes to be on the line of the Roman road. This line of trees, however, begins to run away a little to the east of the "base line".

Beyond this point traces become meagre. A slight suspicion of a ridge may be seen in a field at 351759. Near the Welsh Road (A.550), at 354754, there is a suspicion of a hollow way in the fields to the north and south. In Ledsham village the old lane at 357746, now an overgrown hollow way, attracts attention because of its curious shape, which was the same in 1828-29.²⁴ The long and fairly straight stretch of hedgerow north of Capenhurst Lane (from 359741 to 363736) shows some disturbed ground and parch marks which may be caused by the ridge of a road.

²¹ E. Ekwall, *Oxford Dictionary of English Place-names*, 3rd edn. [1947].

²² *Tithe Map for Willaston in the Parish of Neston* [1843].

²³ Information from Dr. F. Whitwell.

²⁴ W. Swire and W. F. Hutchings, *A Map of the County Palatine of Chester, 1828 and 1829*.

None of these features, however, is sufficiently near to a prolongation of the "base line" for it to be identified with certainty as part of the Roman alignment.

Returning now to Street Hey Lane and Heath Lane, we see that the "base line" runs just to the east of these lanes at the crossing with the B.5133 road (points

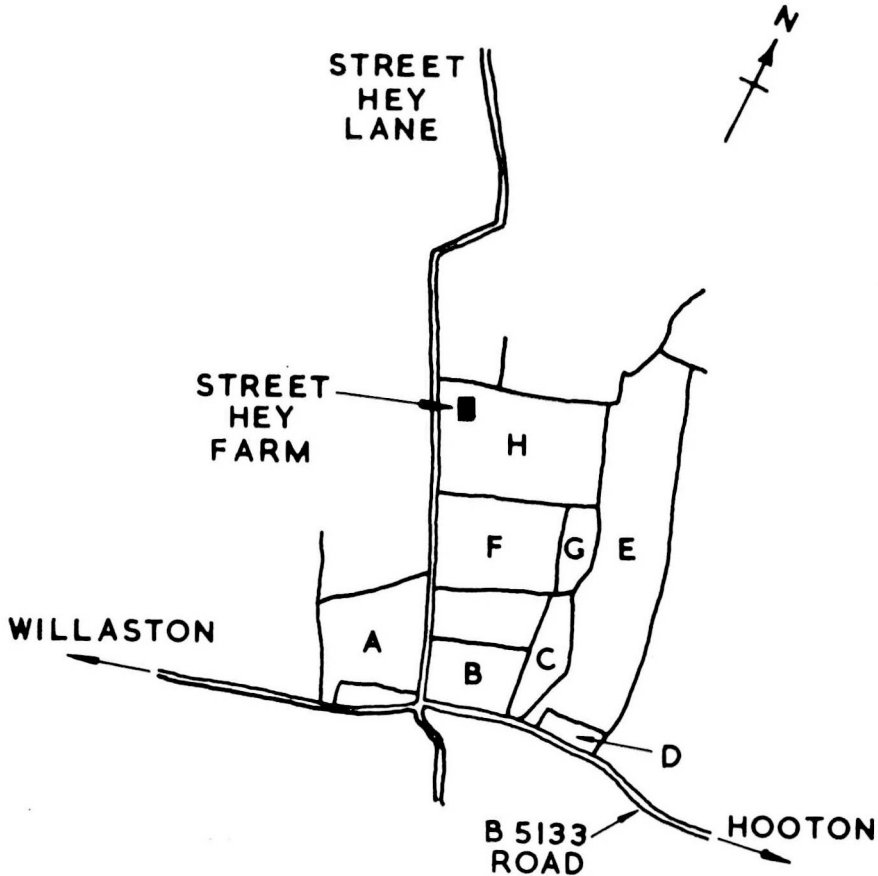


Fig. 3. Significant field names near Street Hey Lane, from the 1843 Tithe Map.

- A. Street Hay; B. Street Hay; C. Street Hay Meadow; D. Street Hey Croft;
E. Big Street Hey; F. Street Hey; G. Street Hey Meadow; H. Street Hay.

E and F). At E there is a ridge along the edge of the field, some 15in. above the general field level and 30in. above the surface of the lane. This is taken to be the line of the road, and it can be seen continuing in the field on the other side of the main road, at F.

The conclusion from this fieldwork was that excavation should be profitable at point C, just beyond the turn of Street Hey Lane. As permission to dig was not forthcoming, attention turned to the ridge at E, and the 1960 excavation was made here.

V. EXCAVATIONS TO DISCOVER THE ROMAN ROAD

The first attempt to excavate the road in the area of Street Hey Lane was made by Oakes and Jones in 1934.²⁵ Their sketch-map does not precisely locate the spot where the section was cut, but it appears to have been across Scotchman's Lane, at map ref. 346768 (at H in Figure 2). A copy of their section is given as Figure 4, and suggests no evidence for a Roman road. The fieldwork described in Section IV indicates that this section was cut some 30 yards too far to the west to strike the correct line.

The second series of excavations was made on 30th October, 1960 by the present writer, assisted by the Liverpool College Archaeological Society. Two

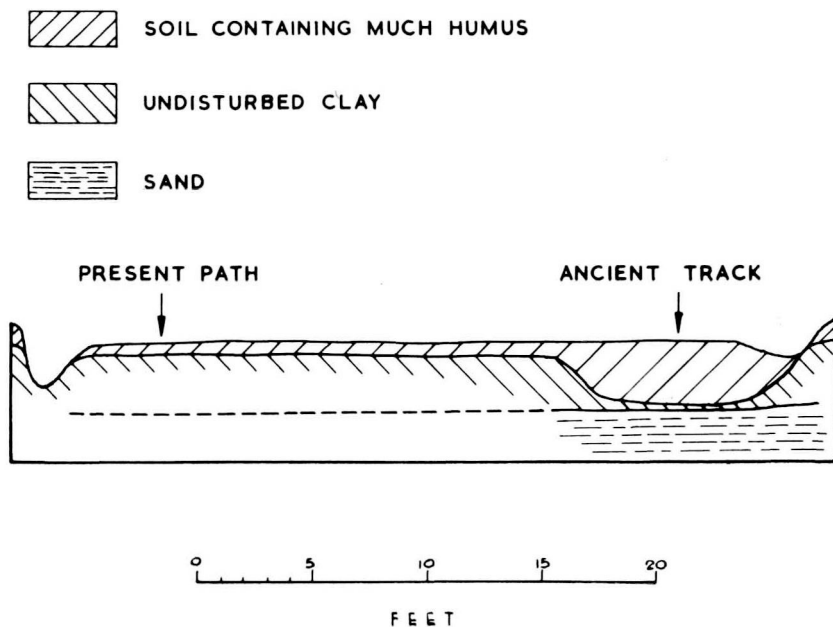


Fig. 4. Section cut by Oakes and Jones in 1934, in Scotchman's Lane [346768].

sections were cut through the ridge near point E on Figure 2. Enthusiasm for this site was heightened by learning that a band of cobbles, 6ft. wide, had been found in the garden of the house "Girston" (shown at D on Figure 2), and only at the front of the front garden. This area is in line with the ridge in the field as it falls into the line of Street Hey Lane proceeding northwards.

The trenches are shown in plan on Figure 5. Two were cut along the line of the ridge, and a "control" pit was dug in the field, away from the ridge. The sections are shown in Figures 6 and 7, and a photograph is given in Plate I.

²⁵A. Oakes and R. M. Jones, Papers in the possession of the Bromborough Society.

PLATE I.



Main trench during excavation, showing layer of cobbles [only partly uncovered] with clay below in deeper part of trench on right.

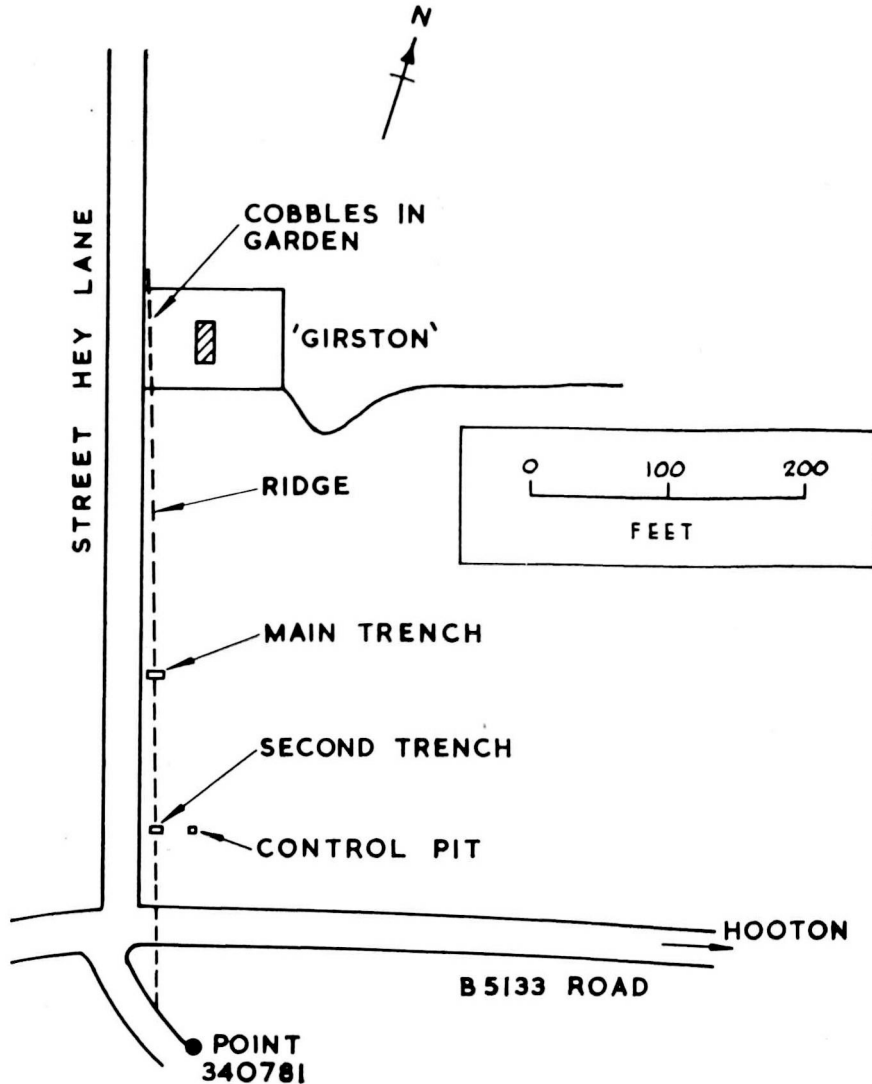


Fig. 5. Plan of 1960 excavations near Street Hey Lane ----- Line of ridge.

The main features are the continuous layers of cobbles, up to 5in. in size, placed in one case directly on top of the clean sand layer, and in the second separated from it by 3in. of soil; and the mauve-coloured turf-line.

The "control pit" disclosed the red clay, with a 2in. layer of clean yellow sand above it, at a depth of 13in., i.e. considerably nearer the field surface than in the trenches, but probably at the same absolute level when the height of the ridge is taken into account. On top of the sand a few occasional pebbles were found, but nothing of the nature of the continuous layer found in each of the trenches.

The yellow sand found in the trenches is interpreted as being caused by natural weathering of the red clay, and the layers of cobbles as being artificially placed.²⁶ The appearance of this layer is analogous to the scatter of pebbles on top of the clay found near Stamford Bridge on the Roman road between Chester and Manchester.²⁶ This layer of cobbles thus represents the Roman road.

The ridge through which the sections were cut, also seen at points B and J, is not the normal *agger* so often found supporting a Roman road. The sections of Figures 6 and 7 show no *agger* in the construction of this road. The ridge has probably been formed by ploughing away from the metalled road surface, so creating a feature resembling an *agger*.

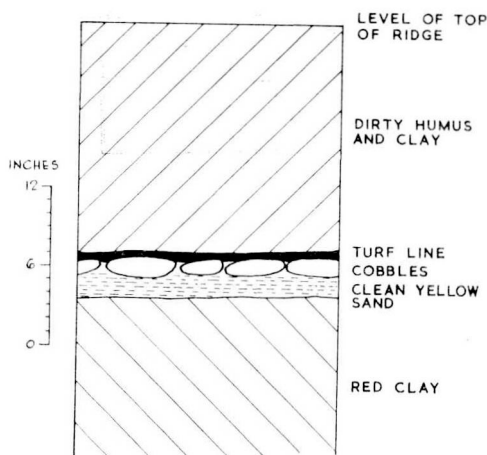


Fig. 6. Section in main trench.

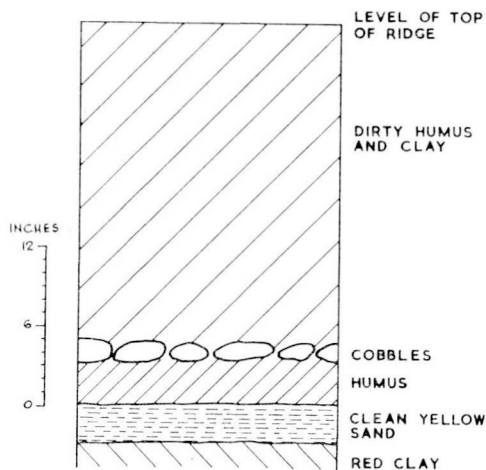


Fig. 7. Section in second trench.

VI. IDENTIFICATION OF THE ROMAN ROAD WITH THE MEDIAEVAL "BLAKE STREET"

It has been suggested that the line of the Roman road in Wirral coincides, or largely coincides, with a mediaeval way called the "Blake Street". The identification of Street Hey Lane with the Blake Street rests on a study of the area made by Irvine and Stewart-Brown¹⁰; Blake Street in 1305 ran from south to north "towards Haregrau (Hargrave)."²⁷

This immediately draws attention to another portion of the Blake Street at Cloughton in Birkenhead. Here it is described as the road which, in the fourteenth

²⁶F. H. Thompson, Private communication.

²⁷Anon. [W. Fergusson Irvine], *Cheshire Sheaf* [2 Oct., 1957], no. 10263.

century, "led to Chester and [Wallasey] pool",²⁸ and is identified with Old Bidston Road. The road was near a wood called Lasselle-field.²⁹ This field name is connected with the Lassels family of Seacombe, who in 1396 claimed that they had long held the right to a ferry from Claughton to Poulton across Wallasey Pool "from the High Street which leads through the centre of the country of Wirral to the ferry at Tokesford".²⁹ The High Street is here taken to be the Blake Street. Irvine argues a Roman oyster fishery in Wallasey Pool near this spot.³⁰ A further clue is the name "Northgate Hay" for a field in Bebington lying alongside a suggested line for the Blake Street.³¹

Lasselle-field retained its name as the "Lasses Heys," which in 1824³² were two fields adjoining Gill Brook, to its east, where it emptied into Wallasey Pool. The course of the Gill Brook is identified³³ as running north-west under the present Laird Street, turning north at about Patten Street to empty into Wallasey Pool. In 1844³⁴ the southernmost (and larger) of the two Lasses Heys could still be distinguished, and comparison with a modern map places it roughly in the area bounded by Patten Street, Corporation Road, Cavendish Street and Brassey Street (map ref. 307898).

From this area, Old Bidston Road runs towards Bridge End, which is the area towards the western end of Bridge Street (map ref. 322894, roughly). Here in 1850³⁵ were found the remains of a bridge, 100 ft. long and with mortised beams, 14 ft. deep in silt; this bridge may have been of Roman construction.^{33 35 36} No local knowledge of any other bridge existed to give the area its name. The bridge spanned Bridge End Brook, which, flowing roughly parallel with the present Conway Street, passed Camden Street and then made a wide bend northward to flow into Wallasey Pool by an inlet which is now formed into Egerton Dock.³³

Thus, within the space of one mile, we have several indications for the existence of a Roman road in Birkenhead near Wallasey Pool.

VII. SUGGESTIONS FOR THE PURPOSE OF THE ROAD, AND ITS POSSIBLE COURSE

Much of this Section contains speculation.

The destination of a Roman road running into Wirral from Chester could possibly have been Meols, where Roman finds in the "submerged forest" include

²⁸R. Stewart-Brown, *Birkenhead Priory and the Mersey Ferry* [1925], p. 43.

²⁹Anon. [W. Fergusson Irvine], *Cheshire Sheaf* [11 Sep., 1957], no. 10257.

³⁰W. Fergusson Irvine, *ibid.* [1949], 3rd series, vol. 44, p. 23.

³¹Anon. [W. Fergusson Irvine], *ibid.* [25 Sept., 1957], no. 10261.

³²W. Lawton, *Map of Birkenhead Estate in the County of Chester Belonging to F. R. Price, Esq.* [1824].

³³A. Maddocks, *Birkenhead News and Advertiser* [18 Feb., 1961]. "Birkenhead once had three brooks".

³⁴J. Law, *Map of the Township and Chapelry of Birkenhead in the County of Chester* [1844].

³⁵W. H. Massie, *J. Arch. Soc. Chester* [1857], vol. 1, pp. 55—60, 68—76.

³⁶E. de Maré, *The Bridges of Britain* [1954], p. 38.

fibulae, spindle-whorls, beads, pottery and coins.^{37 38} These suggest a coastal settlement in the Roman period, as also at Hilbre Island, where *fibulae*, buckles, coins, a bead and other Roman evidence have been found.³⁷⁻⁴¹ Much of the land in the neighbourhood of Meols has now vanished beneath the sea (see, e.g., Hume³⁸), and so the nature of the settlement at Meols and whether it had any connection with that on Hilbre remain problematical.

If Meols was the final destination of the road, it remains to be shown whether it went first to Birkenhead and then struck across to Meols, or whether it made two branches somewhere in Wirral, one going to Birkenhead and the other to Meols.

Suggestions for possible courses of the road to link up between Street Hey Lane in Willaston and Old Bidston Road in Birkenhead have been made by an anonymous writer (most probably W. Fergusson Irvine).^{29 31 41} In brief, they take it through Oxton, Storeton and Clatterbridge, and bring in Arno Hill where a Roman coin hoard was found in 1834.⁴²

Immediately north of Street Hey Lane, a continuation of the "base line" (Section IV) runs very near to Hargrave Lane, and this may be a clue to the course of the road towards Clatterbridge.

Two other sites would bear further investigation. One is Blakeley Road, running from Raby Hall Road in a north-westerly direction towards Raby Mere; its name may have a connection with the Blake Street.

The other is Prenton Dell Road, where a layer of cobbles, similar to those found in the 1960 excavations, was unearthed in a garden (map ref. 249863) in 1932.⁴³

Lastly, the finding of the Roman bridge at Bridge End³⁵ indicated an important Roman road running roughly in an east-west direction at Birkenhead. It has been suggested that in Roman times the Mersey was by no means as important a river as it is now; the main stream may have flowed through the valley-like country near Backford and Mollington, where the Shropshire Union Canal runs, to join the Dee at Blacon Point. The *pros* and *cons* of this argument are clearly stated by Hewitt.⁴⁴ This suggestion would give a clue for a continuation of the road east of the bridge at Bridge End, viz. across marshy ground (now, of course, the Mersey estuary) into Lancashire.

³⁷ W. T. Watkin, *op. cit.*

³⁸ A. Hume, *Ancient Meols* [1863].

³⁹ H. E. Smith, *Reliques of the Anglo-Saxon Churches of St. Bridget and St. Hildeburga, West Kirby* [1871], p. 22.

⁴⁰ R. Newstead, *T. H. Soc. Lancs. & Ches.* [1927], vol. 78.

⁴¹ Anon. [W. Fergusson Irvine], *Cheshire Sheaf* [1 Jan., 1958], no 10292.

⁴² W. T. Watkin, *op. cit.*, pp. 309—310.

⁴³ F. H. Hoblyn, Private communication.

⁴⁴ W. Hewitt, *The Wirral Peninsula* [1922], p. 56.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

The Roman road in Wirral has been substantiated along an alignment based on Street Hey Lane in Willaston, for a length of $1\frac{3}{4}$ miles.

Documentary evidence suggests that this stretch was part of a Roman road between Chester and Birkenhead.

It is conjectured that this road provided a link to a Roman coastal settlement at Meols, though whether direct from Birkenhead or by a branch road is not known. Another road may have run from Birkenhead into Lancashire.

IX. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people helped with this investigation, in particular, Liverpool College Archaeological Society and Mr. M. Way, their Secretary; Mr. F. H. Thompson of the Grosvenor Museum, Chester; Mr. J. Rigg of the Archaeology Division of the Ordnance Survey; Dr. F. Whitwell; and Mrs. Anne Anderson, Vice-President of the Bromborough Society.

