

Watling Street South of Aldford

By M. ST. J. WAY

I. INTRODUCTION

LEAVING Chester by the *porta praetoria*, the Roman road to Wroxeter crossed the River Dee and travelled in a southerly direction through the small Romano-British settlement at Heronbridge and what is now the Eaton Hall estate, crossing the river again near the present-day Iron Bridge. It passed through Aldford, and south-east of Churton there was probably a branch road to the legionary works-depot at Holt. The Wroxeter road continued through Stretton, Tilston, Malpas, Grindleybrook and Brooklands to Whitchurch. The general line is shown on Figure 1.

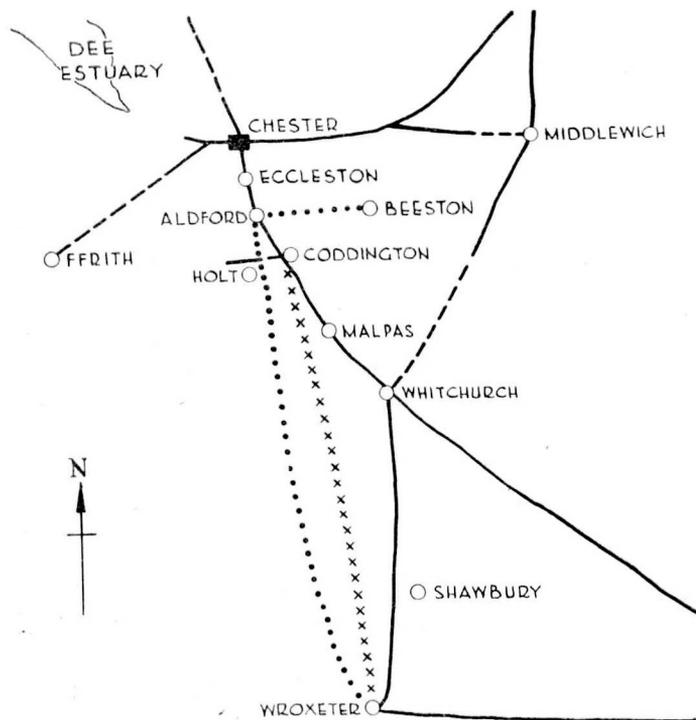


Fig. 1. General course of the Roman road from Chester to Wroxeter, and others in the area.

————— certain - - - - - Probable
 xxxxxxxx Webster¹ O'Dwyer²

¹G. Webster, *Cheshire Historian*, no. 3 [1953], p. 18.

²S. O'Dwyer, *Roman Roads of Cheshire*, [1935].

Just south of here, at Whitchurch Heath, there was a fork. One branch went in a south-easterly direction to join the main Watling Street to London, while the other continued south across Prees Heath to Moston, Shawbury, Roden and Norton, until Wroxeter is reached after $38\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Chester. This stretch is mentioned in *Iter II* of the Antonine Itinerary.

This road had considerable military significance, as its southern continuation linked Chester with another legionary fortress at Caerleon.

The route from Chester to Wroxeter via Whitchurch is not direct, and Webster,¹ among others, has suggested that a shorter road may have been built, branching to Wroxeter at approximately the position where the fork to Holt leaves the road (see fig. 1).

This paper describes excavations and fieldwork on a stretch of the Chester-Whitchurch-Wroxeter road between Aldford and Tilston. All map references are understood to be prefaced by SJ (33).

II. THE COURSE OF THE ROAD BETWEEN ALDFORD AND TILSTON (FIG. 2).

After fording the River Dee near the present Iron Bridge, it went south, passing very near Aldford Church. It then turned very slightly to the east, and its alignment crosses the B.5130 road (Chester-Farndon) at an angle of about 30° . It then runs through fields, but its course is lost until it becomes a modern grassy lane 350 yards south-east of Fordlane Farm; the whole of this lane, however, is not on its alignment. This lane ends at a field boundary, but the *agger* of the road continues in the fields beyond, following a long continuous hedgerow. After 160 yards it is followed by a parish boundary for 180 yards, and after a further 600 yards it crosses the Churton-Coddington road at a sharp double bend (map ref. 431568), which must have been caused by the position of the *agger*. After this another parish boundary follows it for nearly half a mile, to 433562, after which it runs through open fields. At 435558 the alignment joins a 220-yard length of hedge, and then crosses a lane connecting Coddington and Kings Marsh. It now runs across country to cross the A.534 road (Barton-Farndon). In three-quarters of a mile it reaches Stretton Hall, where it follows the line of the drive, and it then turns slightly south-east to follow approximately the winding modern road to Tilston.

Some writers, including O'Dwyer,² Watkin,³ Codrington⁴ and Ormerod,⁵ have suggested that the road branched after crossing the River Dee at Aldford. O'Dwyer states:—

“Across the Dee to Aldford, Townfield Lands, Churton, Crew, Caldecot, Shocklach and Threapwood to Wroxeter. A branch from Aldford goes to Whitchurch by Barton, Stretton, Tilston, Kidnall and Malpas. From Aldford a cross-road seems to be indicated going by Buerton, Cold Harbour, Gates Heath, Whitegate and Newton to Beeston Castle.”

¹W. T. Watkin, *Roman Cheshire* [1886], p. 49.

⁴T. Codrington, *Roman Roads in Britain* [1903], p. 76.

⁵G. Ormerod, *History of Cheshire* [1882], pp. 2, 548.

Such descriptions, however, give little positive evidence for the course of the road, and much of the literature is at variance as to even the general course. Indeed Webster¹ marks much of the course between Aldford and Tilston as only "probable".

III. EXCAVATIONS AT ALDFORD (FIG. 3)

On visiting the line of the road just under one mile south of Aldford, the grassy

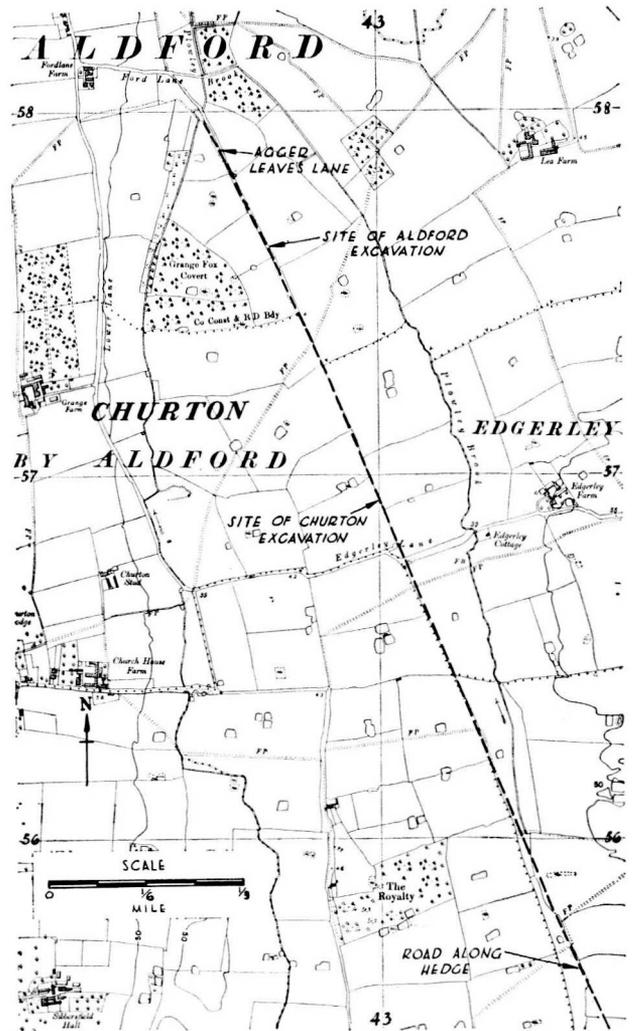
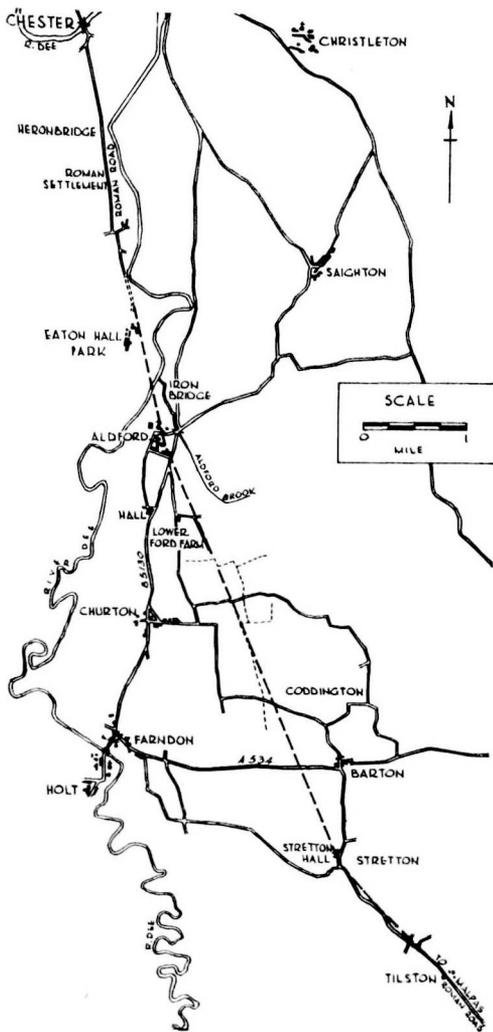


Fig. 2. Course of road between Chester and Malpas
 — — — Roman road

Fig. 3. Part of 6-in. O.S. sheet SJ 45 NW, south of Aldford.
 Parish boundaries

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lane described by Margary⁶ was seen. This is some 350 yards long and 12 yards wide, bounded on each side by a ditch and hedge, and is apparently very little used now. At the southern end of the lane some large kerbstones were found on the west side, and traced in a continuous line for about 12 feet. They were covered by less than 1in. thickness of turf, and although some were shattered, the average measurement of an intact kerbstone was 12in. x 6in. x 4in. thick (Pl. IIa). Probing towards the centre of the *agger* made contact with the road. 20 yards south from this point, the *agger* continued into the fields after being crossed diagonally by the hedge which terminates the lane. The *agger* (Pl. IIb) is clearly marked by oaks

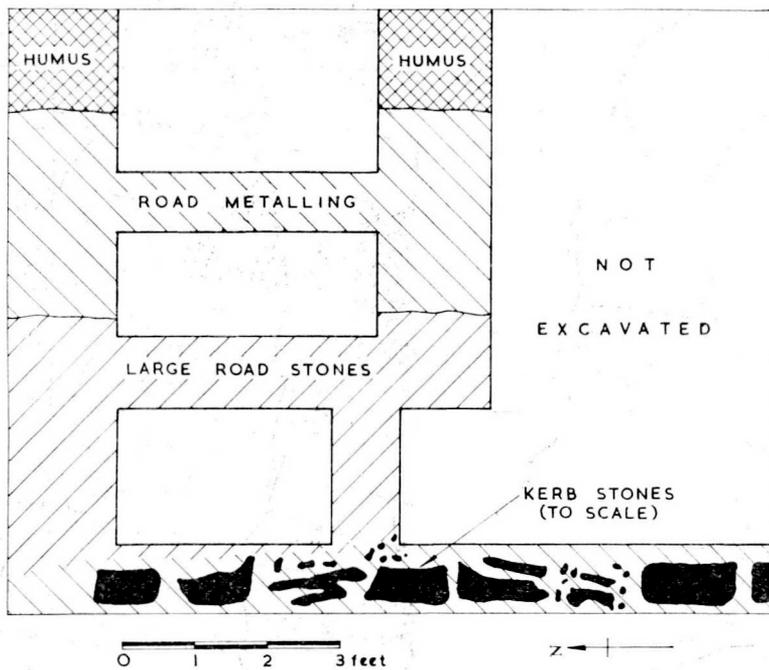


Fig. 4. Plan view of the main excavation near Aldford.

and a depression on its western side, and by a hedge and oaks on its eastern side, but is slightly lower than the general level of the field. Probing in this and the next two fields revealed little in the way of large stones, although there was a very resistant layer at a depth of 8in.

The excavation was made on the 5th and 6th April, 1960, the original intention being to cut a section through the *agger* in the field and to uncover a section of the road surface near the kerbstones. Permission, however, was only forthcoming for the latter.

A section of the lane was pegged out to include all the kerbstones, on the western

⁶I. D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain*, vol. 2, p. 30.

side, and the remainder of the surface of the lane at right-angles to them; this included most of the *agger*, although part of it is probably obscured by the eastern ditch and in the adjacent field.

The first trench measured 12ft. 8in. by 8ft. 4in. (fig. 4). First the kerbstones were completely uncovered, parallel with the western ditch and about 18in. from it. They were well engineered and generally in a good state of preservation; they fitted well with their neighbours, the average gap of 1-2 in. being filled in with pebbles.

Next a 12-inch wide trench was dug to a depth of about 4 inches, parallel with and to the east of the kerbstones at a distance of 2ft. 3in. from them and for a length of 8 feet down the *agger*. This revealed large road stones, and two further trenches cut back to the kerb showed that these were continuous from the kerb. To the east, however, another trench revealed small road metalling instead. The large stones were of varied sizes up to 3 x 4 in., in a fairly good state of preservation although a little shattering had occurred. The road metalling further to the east began at 3ft. 4in. from the kerbstones and extended for 3 feet only, the further extension probably being obliterated by the nearby farm ditch.

The road was then uncovered at a point 75 yards north of the original excavation, a trench 2ft. wide by 8ft. 4in. long being pegged out right across the lane. This unearthed a mixture of large road stones and metalling, except in the eastern end. No kerbstones were found, and these had probably been robbed to use in a nearby farm drain and wall.

A small section, 3ft. by 1ft. 6in., was exposed in the southernmost part of the lane, an area where three ditches converged. This revealed only road metalling.

IV. GENERAL OBSERVATION ON THE ROAD NEAR ALDFORD

A point of interest is the difference between the road in the lane and that in the field to the south. In the lane a substantially complete road exists just below the surface, whereas probing the *agger* in the field revealed practically nothing. Moreover the *agger* in the field, and indeed the whole field, was slightly higher than the *agger* in the lane. The farmer, who has farmed the land for over half a century, remembers when the lane continued visibly into the field. Probably the continued use of the lane has counteracted the natural accumulation of soil, and hence the road is near the surface. In the field most of the surface stones may have been ploughed out in the last fifty years.

According to the present farmer, the local tradition is that the grassy lane used to be a coach road, turning east at its southern end and running at right angles in the direction of Lea Farm.

The rig-and-furrow of the mediaeval strip system can be seen clearly in the fields adjoining the road. On its western side the strips run in a west-east direction, and on its eastern side in a north-south direction. It therefore seems probable that, at one time, the grassy lane and its continuation for 150 yards into the present fields formed an access road to the large mediaeval open fields.

V. EXCAVATION AT CHURTON

This excavation was intended to provide a good cross-section of the road, and was made on the land of Church House Farm, Churton. The site (fig. 2) was at map ref. 430569, 200 yards NNW of the Churton-Coddington road (Edgerley Lane) where it makes the sharper of its two double bends (caused by the existence of the *agger*); it was four fields, i.e. just under half a mile, away from the site of the Aldford excavation described in Section II. To the north of Edgerley Lane the Roman road is still to the west of the long hedgerow, but to the south it runs on the east side of the hedge.

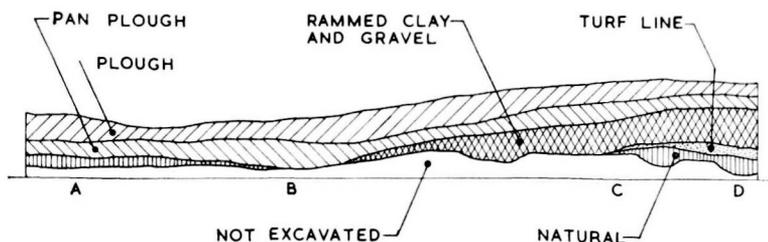


Fig. 5. Section cut near Churton (not to scale).

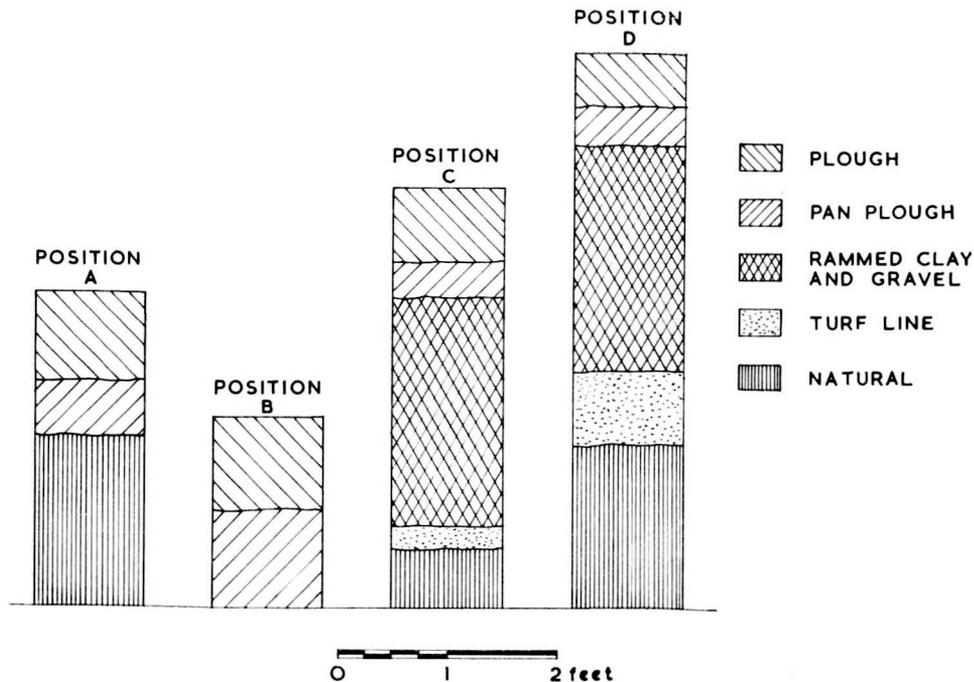


Fig. 6. Scaled portions of the section shown in Fig. 5.

Towards the southern end of the field in which the excavation was made, the hedge tends to cut the *agger* longitudinally, and the grass near this hedge in the adjoining field to the east showed slight parch marks. The excavation was therefore made towards the northern end of the field, on 25th July, 1960. A trench measuring 21 ft. x 3 ft. was cut, starting from the highest point at the centre of the *agger* and running to the west. A general view of the section is shown in fig. 5, and the layers at four points are shown to scale in fig. 6. At the centre of the *agger*, after an initial 5-in. layer of plough and pan-plough, a 12-in. layer of rammed clay and gravel was found; this had the consistency of a soft rock. Under this was a turf-line, 4 inches thick. At a point 5 ft. out from the centre the turf-line was not present, and after a further 6 ft. the layer of rammed clay and gravel was reduced to 5 inches in thickness. After a further 2 ft. this layer was not found at all, and it was first thought that this point represented the normal tailing-off of the *agger*, although this seemed to be disproved by the next discovery.

In the northern side of the trench, a few sandstone blocks were found at a depth of 8 inches, and 8 feet from the western end of the trench. This stone was followed by cutting a subsidiary trench at right-angles to the original one, $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide and extending 3 feet to the north. This revealed a great deal of sandstone, in roughly cubical blocks about 3 in. in size (Pl. IIIa).

The contrast between this stone and the lack of it in the original trench was surprising. A search was therefore made for more stone in parts of the *agger* some distance away, and road-surface metalling was uncovered in two small sections taken near the centre of the *agger*.

The varied nature of the stone found in different places is probably a result of the field having been ploughed.

An interesting find was made when the excavation of the trench was complete. This was a circular patch of light earth, of radius $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches, 8ft. from the western end of the trench and 1 ft. from the northern side (Pl. IIIb). The patch was plain to see, and must have commenced at a depth of 10 inches below the present surface. It was just under the Roman turf-line, and was undoubtedly a Roman post-hole, probably used in the initial surveying of the road.

VI. FIELDWORK ON WATLING STREET

An attempt was made by field archaeology to establish the course of the road north and south of the stretch where the excavations were made, i.e. between the crossing of the Dee and Tilston.

Little was found in the vicinity of the Iron Bridge. By taking an alignment from the proven section of the road near Eaton Hall, it appears that the Dee was forded at an angle of slightly less than 45° with its present line, at a point some 50 yards downstream of the Iron Bridge. No sign of the ford could be found, although the paving of the ford was reported to have been seen 50 years ago.* Immediately

* for recent work on the ford, see page 25.

north of the river, the *agger* cannot be distinguished on the ground, as a result of the extensive landscape gardening in the grounds of Eaton Hall.

South of the river crossing, the course of the road could not be located in the marshy land between the Dee and Aldford Brook. Margary⁵ states that the course runs near Aldford Church, and because of the marshy nature of much of the surrounding land, this seems to be its only possible course. Exploration of the fields between the northern end of the grassy lane (where the first excavation was made) and Aldford Church gave no sign of the road, and its course here appears to be lost. At the northern end of the lane, however, the *agger* is seen clearly at map ref. 426578, falling into the line of the lane. This is illustrated in fig. 3, which also shows the sites of the two excavations.

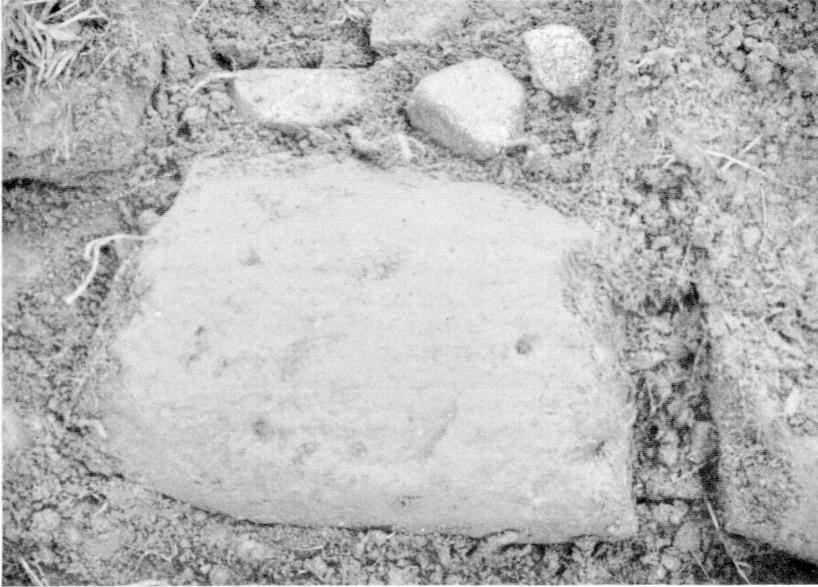
Fieldwork south of the Churton-Coddington road (Edgerley Lane) was more rewarding. Some of the results are marked on fig. 3. From the sharp bend in the road, the *agger* runs down the east side of a long straight hedge for a distance of 350 yards, being accompanied by a parish boundary. For a further 250 yards it follows the west side of the hedge, still accompanied by the parish boundary. It then leaves the hedge and parish boundary, and its line is marked by a rough track for a further 250 yards. It then runs across the fields to join another hedge and footpath at map ref. 435558; this hedge forms part of a curiously shaped field, which implies that its line was dictated by a pre-existing feature. After this the *agger* travels across open fields, displaying rig-and-furrow, to cross the lane connecting King's Marsh and Coddington (Marsh Lane) at map ref. 438551. There is little trace of it to the crossing of the A.534 road between Barton and Farndon, and after a further three-quarters of a mile it reaches Stretton Hall, the drive of which is on its line (Margary⁶). The *agger* can then be seen following the winding road to Tilston, and after here the present road to Malpas is on the line of the Roman road for most of its length, followed again by parish boundaries for a good deal of the way.

VII. FIELDWORK ON THE ALTERNATIVE ROUTE TO WROXETER

In Sections I and II the possibility of a shorter route to Wroxeter, to the west of Whitchurch, has been mentioned. Examination of the 6-in. O.S. map suggested a possible alignment for this. From Woodhouse Farm, Aldford, there is a 280-yard stretch of straight footpath running slightly west of south, which, after crossing a minor road, continues as a straight hedgerow for a further 380 yards. Here the hedge turns, but the possible line could continue through fields, through a large wood at Townfield Lands, through fields again, through Speed's Plantation, until it linked up with a 450-yard length of hedge. After crossing Sourbutt's Covert, it could join with a hedge and parish boundary for 550 yards. This would bring it on to the land of Stannage Farm—itsself a significant place-name. After crossing a track it could follow a 250-yard hedgerow and after that a 350-yard footpath, about 500 yards west of Churton village.

An afternoon spent visiting various spots on this alignment, and probing, however, revealed no other evidence for a Roman road than the alignment just described.

PLATE II.



(a) Roman kerbstone, measuring 12 x 6 x 4 in., uncovered during the Aldford excavations.

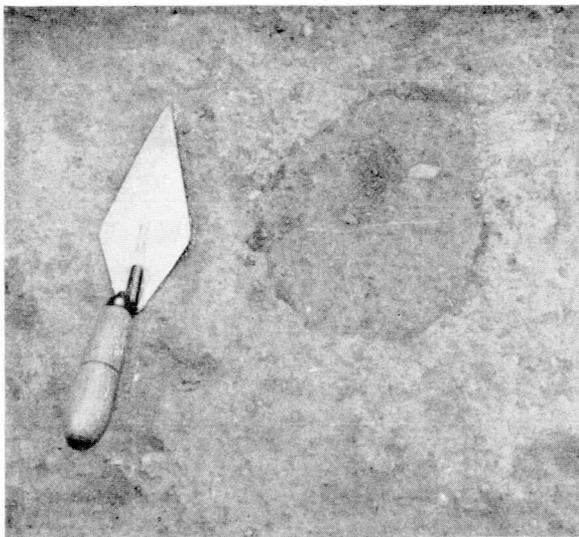


(b) The *agger* of the road south of the lane at Aldford (map ref. 428575).

PLATE III.



(a) Excavation at Churton, showing large road stone in the extension of the cut.



(b) Post-hole in the section at Churton.

Such a brief examination, however, is not sufficient to decide for or against the existence of a Roman road. This is one of the many stretches of possible Roman roads in Cheshire which require further investigation, a job that could well be done by amateurs.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

It is surprising that the stretch of Roman road between Aldford and a point just over a mile south-east of Churton, whose course is so plain on the ground, was not described in detail until recorded by Margary.⁶ Our excavations have positively confirmed the existence of the road near Aldford and near Churton, and fieldwork has given sufficient evidence to show that it continued through Tilston and Malpas.

The road appears to have been about 27 feet wide and 3 feet high, having layers of large stone and surface metalling on an *agger* of rammed clay and gravel. The road itself had kerbstones. All these features point to an important, well-made road, which is what we should expect between Chester and Wroxeter.

Some confirmation for various authors' suggestions of an alternative, shorter route from Chester to Wroxeter, passing west of Whitchurch, appears to exist from an alignment deduced from the 6-in. O.S. map, but so far fieldwork has not substantiated this alignment.

IX. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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