

Notes on Roman Roads in Cheshire

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DURING 1960, three investigations were carried out on Roman roads in Cheshire in addition to the work which has already been described. One was a deliberate attempt by Messrs. David and Hugh Evans to solve a particular problem and the other two were incidental observations made by the Grosvenor Museum as the result of commercial excavation. It has been thought appropriate to present the various findings as an appendix to the foregoing papers.

i. The general course of Watling Street south from Chester as far as the village of Aldford is reasonably certain¹ and it seems clear that it crossed the Dee just downstream of the Iron Bridge in Eaton Park (Nat. Grid Ref. 418602). A statement that the river crossing was by means of a ford² had never been confirmed and in July, 1960, David Evans carried out soundings of the river bed in the hope of obtaining definite proof. At a distance of 30 yards downstream from the Iron Bridge, a mud bottom was found at a depth of 11 ft. in the centre and 9 ft. at the sides. However, 18 yards downstream from the bridge a distinct change in the river bed was noted to sandstone flagging at a depth of 5½ ft. in the centre, 4½ ft. near the right bank and 5 ft. near the left. A further series of soundings across the river established that the sandstone formed a platform about 12 ft. wide with gravel shoulders shelving away to the normal mud bottom.

Thus, it seems highly probable that this is the site of the supposed ford. To the objection that the water would have been too deep for comfort, it can be argued that the present level is higher than in Roman times before the construction of the weir at Chester; the effect of the tide would have been felt much further upstream than today and at low water the ford would have been perfectly negotiable.

ii. In its eastward course from Chester to Manchester, Watling Street follows fairly closely the line of the modern road (A.51) as far as Stamford Bridge.³ At Heathfield House, just beyond Vicar's Cross (Nat. Grid Ref. 450670) the modern road diverges slightly to the north of the Roman road, the *agger* of which can be clearly seen in the adjoining fields. In October, 1960, the cutting of a deep trench for a water pipe-line across the line of the road, 250 ft. east of the lane to Guilden Sutton (Nat. Grid Ref. 458672), gave an opportunity for an examination of the *agger* structure.

The trench was excavated mechanically to a considerable depth in the natural brown boulder-clay of the area. No traces of a complex *agger* structure, composed of graded materials, were noted. Normally, there was a direct transition from dark

¹cf. I. D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain* ii, pp. 30—31, quoting previous references.

²W. T. Watkin, *Roman Cheshire* (1886), p. 49.

³Margary, *op. cit.* p. 33.

humus to boulder-clay; the surface of the latter displayed a characteristic yellow-buff weathered surface. 120 ft. south of the south kerb of the modern road, a scatter of fist-sized pebbles was noted on the surface of the clay and it must be assumed that this is all that survives of the original metalling, any heavier material having been removed by local farmers in the past.

iii. The line of the Roman road known as King Street, between Sandbach and the site at Wilderspool, near Warrington, is well established⁴ and during the 19th century it was exposed at various points between Stretton and Wilderspool.⁵ It had an average width of 18ft. and the construction near Wilderspool itself was stated to be a top metalling of gravel on a layer of sandstone slabbing, which rested on a sand layer on the natural clay.

In March, 1960, the laying of a petrol pipe-line from the Stanlow refinery to Manchester afforded a fresh opportunity for an examination of the road structure. The pipe-trench was mechanically excavated and crossed the line of King Street, approximately at right-angles, at a point 300 yards north of Stretton Church (Nat. Grid Ref. 619831 on sheet 101). The road appeared clearly in section in the sides of the trench; it was 18 ft. wide and its western edge coincided with the hedge-line which here runs parallel with it. Beneath 9 in. of dark plough-soil a gently cambered surface of pebbles and sandstone chips rested on a layer of brown sand, 4 in. thick. This in turn rested, for rather more than half the width on the west side, on a thin black layer (? brushwood), beneath which appeared a thin layer of light grey clay, characteristic of an old ground surface on boulder clay. To the east, the underlying boulder-clay fell sharply away into a sand-filled ditch, presumably for drainage, though it was difficult to determine its precise dimensions in the section. On the west, there was a similar but shallower scoop; this however was filled with plough-soil and more probably represents the silted ditch associated with the hedge. The cutting of this ditch may have disturbed the west edge of the road, so that 18 ft. can only be the minimum width of the road, though it is unlikely to have been very much more.

In many respects this newly observed section equates with previously recorded exposures, though there was no indication of a heavy sandstone pitching, as farther north, and the suggested brushwood layer is a new phenomenon.

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⁴cf. Margary, *op. cit.*, pp. 35—6.

⁵Watkin, *op. cit.*, pp. 65—7.