Investigation of Stane Street at South Holmwood, near Dorking

Introduction

The Roman Studies Group of the Surrey Archaeological Society conducted a small exploratory excavation of Stane Street at Folly Farm, South Holmwood, near Dorking, on 19–20 April, 2003 with a view to determining the nature of the remains of a known Roman road in farmland in preparation for a programme of tracing other possible roads within the county.

The route of the Roman road from Chichester to London is known for much of its course from Chichester as far as Thirty Acre Barn to the south of Ashtead and the general alignments thereafter are known in outline. The alignment between Ockley Green and Bentsbrook Farm to the south of Dorking is certain and, over the years, the remains of substantial portions have been seen on the ground as relict aggers and terraces.

Fig 1 Stane Street, South Holmwood: site location. (© Crown Copyright. NC/2004/33611)
A number of authorities have charted the course in published works over the years. The earliest detailed description was by Winbolt (1936, 118–46) and Margary referred substantially to this work in his later description of the route (Margary 1948, 64–7) although he had probably seen much of the remains with his own eyes. Belloc (1913, 258–65) and Grant (1922, 31–40) described the course in more general terms.

The site chosen for the excavation is a natural terrace in the field to the immediate north-west of Folly Farm, to the east of the southern hedgerow and 56m south of the southern boundary of Redlands Wood (TQ 1649 4526). The OS map (fig 1) shows the course of the road as running to the east of this hedgerow. At this point the road lies approximately 300m east of the boundary of the Lower Greensand of Abinger Forest with the Weald Clay and is presently used for cattle farming. It has not been ploughed within living memory and the sandy topsoil consists of hill wash which is thought to be of insufficient depth to have supported arable crops except in marginal circumstances. The site is bounded to the west by a field hedge and a drainage ditch which was cut to the east of the hedge in the 1940s and recut in the late 1990s. Random sandstone and flint nodules can be seen in this ditch.

The excavation (figs 2 and 3)

A 3 x 2m trench was cut 0.8m to the east of the drainage ditch. Immediately under the turf lay a 30mm band of yellow Weald Clay with occasional nodules of flint and sandstone of varying sizes up to 0.3m. The band had a ‘lens-like’ cross section and appeared to be the upcast from cutting the adjacent ditch that filled a shallow hollow over the course of the road. The lower part of this layer contained organic remains which were probably a buried turf surface.

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**Spring**

Redlands Wood

Folly Farm

Metalling seen in section

Excavation site

**Fig 2** Stane Street, South Holmwood: trench location and probable course of the Roman road.
The underlying topsoil consisted of sandy soils washed down from up-slope mixed with Weald Clay and occasional small (30–100mm) nodules of flint and sandstone within the matrix that suggested disturbance of the road surface.

The south-western corner of the trench revealed a compacted layer (1 x 1m) of flints with some sandstone, which was truncated to the north by a cut filled with topsoil and a very few flints and sandstone pieces. To the east there appeared to be a deliberate cut or edge.

Time and resources did not permit the full excavation of these features but a sondage, 0.3m wide and 0.3m deep across the southern elevation revealed a clear stratigraphy:

1. the underlying natural Weald Clay had been cut away on the downhill (eastern) side to produce a classic agger profile. The clay removed had not been used in building up the agger at this point but, it may be surmised, was used nearby for this purpose;
2. the trench contained the eastern edge only of the agger (contexts 106 and 107), the remainder of which probably underlies the western boundary hedge and extends into the next field;
3. a dark primary silt (context 110) had built up over the constructional cutting (context 109);
4. subsequently the whole had been covered by hill wash (contexts 105 and 103).

The drainage ditch to the west of the trench runs northwards into Redlands Wood and down slope to a stream running west–east. This crosses an old bank within the wood which marks an earlier boundary to the present field. Immediately to the north of this boundary, and 150m north of the excavation, the ditch section revealed what appeared to be the undisturbed metalling of the road as a 0.25m-thick layer of flint nodules and sandstone blocks lying 0.3m below the present ground surface. Probing the surrounding area indicated that this metalling continued for at least a further 100m northwards and its alignment suggested that the excavation was located over the western edge of the road with the field hedge lying approximately over the centre line of the road.

**Conclusion**

The lens-like profile of the upcast clay overlying the site indicates that the course of the road had previously been marked by a hollow, which is a common pointer to a road that has been robbed of its surface. This interpretation is strengthened by the general absence of larger stone metalling, the cut into the agger and comparison with the section seen in the ditch in Redlands Wood. This latter area is likely to contain the relatively undisturbed remains of the road, albeit cut by a drainage ditch.

**Fig 3** Stane Street, South Holmwood: southern section of the trench.
It was not possible to determine whether the compacted layer of stones overlying the agger was the ‘leavings’ of the robbers or an undisturbed shallow metalling at the margin of the agger.

The presence of so much flint in the metalling was unexpected as flint is not natural to the locale and the nearest source of this material is the downland to the north of Dorking. It is reasonable to suppose that this section of Stane Street was constructed in a north–south direction with the newly made road being used for the transport of the flint.

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