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**Stanton Upon Hine Heath, Shropshire:
An Archaeological Watching Brief**

by
S.J. Litherland
and
A.E. Jones

For further information please contact:
Simon Butoux (Manager), Peter Leach or Iain Ferris (Assistant Directors)
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
The University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT
Tel: 021 414 5513

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Introduction

During August and September 1991 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned by Severn Trent Water Limited to monitor the cutting of a stretch of water-main trench near Stanton Upon Hine Heath, Shropshire (fig.1; Grid Squares: SJ 55 25 and 26). The aim of the watching brief was to establish if the Roman road which ran from Wroxeter to Chester through this area was cut by the trench, and to assess through inspection and recording of its sections archaeological survival of this feature. Traces of a linear earthwork, identified by Forrest and Margary as the line of the Roman road (Forrest 1937-38, 91-92; Margary 1973, 298-299), can be seen on the latest edition of the Ordnance Survey six inch map running northwards from a crossing-point of the River Roden, near Harcourt Mill, and passing west of Moston.

The landscape in this area is the product of the meandering cutting-action, and associated river terraces, of the River Roden. The valley sides are quite steep to the north of Papermill Bank, a settlement located in a chine-like sub-valley made by streams feeding into the Roden at right-angles, whereas to the south the valley opens out into a wider flood plain. It is on the flood plain, to the south of Papermill Bank, that the best traces of the road can be seen; however, here modern ploughing has obliterated large sections of the road. The ground rises gently to form a ridge to the east on a sandstone outcrop, above the settlement at Papermill Bank, and it is logical that the road would have followed this course, skirting the steep inclines and flood-prone land in the valley bottom. This ridge continues northwards towards Moston, where a few more traces are found, significantly next to field boundaries which may have preserved the earthwork. North of Moston the road must have followed the course of the A49 which traverses a small set of hills through a watershed which is called Holloway, which may refer to the line of the original sunken road.

There were two pipelines cut for the water-main, the main one running east-west through Papermill Bank, with a second spur running north towards Moston from a junction to the east.

Method

Two stretches of the pipeline were selected for observation (Areas I and III), targeted to pick up the line of the Roman road; in addition a third location, to the west of the river (Area II), was also inspected following a report from the workmen that there was a zone of concentrated pebbles here. The water-main was cut using a standard trench-cutting machine which produced a trench between 0.9 metres and 1.5 metres in depth depending on the topography, and about 0.5 metres wide. One side of the excavated trench was then cleaned by hand in an attempt to define any manmade or natural features and contexts. Recording was by means of written pro-formas, drawn sections of features, and photographic record of sample sections.

Discussion

Area I

A 150-metre section of trench was monitored in Area I, where the pipeline followed an east-west aligned track just to the south of Papermill Bank. Ground observation had raised the possibility that the Roman road followed the second river terrace at this point, skirting the flood-prone river valley. This route allowed a steady incline to be made from the known course of the road to the south and in addition misses a very steep ravine to the east of Papermill Bank, which would have been very difficult to traverse. Particular attention was paid to the first approximately 50-metre section to the west of Area I, where a slight hummock was visible in the track. The earliest deposit, seen throughout the length of the trench was a dark brown/orange clay silt (1002) containing a few pebbles and occasionally greyer silt patches. This was overlain by a variable layer of mottled orange silt/sand (1001), containing a larger number of

pebbles, especially towards the bottom of the context, which was between 0.2 and 0.5 metres in depth, the increase in depth mirroring the slight slope to the east. Although an area of slightly more concentrated pebbling was found about 35 metres from the western extent of the monitored area it could not be interpreted as a manmade feature, and definitely could not represent even the ploughed-out remains of the foundation for a road, as there was no concentration derived from this scatter in the ploughsoil (1000) above. A possible explanation for the complete absence of the road in this area was found in the considerable erosion of the topsoils here probably due to the effects of ploughing, the unploughed field to the north of the pipe-trench being about a metre higher. Two sandstone outcrops were also investigated in the valley near Papermill Bank, but no definite signs of settlement were visible here.

Area II

This area was investigated after a report from the workmen that they had cut through a zone of concentrated pebbles whilst cutting the pipe-trench on the western side of the River Roden. Although the earthwork evidence clearly indicated that the Roman road ran on the east side of the river, a trench, measuring 30 metres in length, was excavated by JCB parallel to the pipe-trench in order to ascertain if this concentration was archaeological. A band of red sand/silt (2002) was encountered at a depth of 0.80 metres and contained a number of smaller pebbles, but this was overlain by a yellower sand (2001), which contained a distinct band of large, rounded glacial pebbles and rocks, sealed by a layer of ploughsoil (2000). While this layer of large pebbles was unusual there was no evidence of artifice in its composition, and it is probably a build-up of glacially-deposited, large rocks downslope of the river terrace.

Area III

A total length of c.250 metres of pipeline was watched over a period of two days in an area northwest of Moston. The earliest deposit seen throughout the trench was a dark brown compact clay silt (3002), which contained a few pebbles. This was overlain by a mottled buff-white-orange silt sand (3001) between 0.1 and 0.2 metres thick. This layer increased in depth towards the corners of the two fields inspected; again 3001

was overlain by a ploughsoil (3000) containing an increasing quantity of pebbles towards its base. A shallow gravel spread (3004) may represent the fairly even surface of a track (F1), approximately 3.5 metres wide, increasing in the depth of the make-up to the east. This track is flanked by two shallow, but fairly well-defined, ditches (F2, F3); that to the east (F3), cutting through the track surface, had a backfill (3006) comprising rounded gravel disturbed from the road surface. In addition, a lens of charcoal c.15 metres long was observed beneath the ploughsoil in the south east field, about 10 to 25 metres from the field corner; no interpretation can really be offered of this feature.

Conclusions

No definite identification of the Roman road was made during the watching brief and no artefacts of any period were recovered. Clearly modern ploughing has destroyed most traces of the road in this area and as a result the plotting of its course is still reliant on the identification of remaining earthworks surviving in the landscape and interpolation between them. The erosion of the topsoils in Area I provides a possible explanation for not encountering any evidence here; however, the negative evidence from Area III is puzzling, unless the gravelled track F1 is a re-statement of an earlier, possibly Roman, course. This interpretation is supported by the alignment of the track which roughly follows the line of the southwest-northeast field boundary, a phenomenon which has been observed along other stretches of the road (Forrest 1937-38 and Margary 1973). The question of the location of a Roman roadside settlement, possibly lying in this approximate area, also remains open.

Acknowledgements

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References

- Margary, I.D. 1973 *Roman Roads in Britain*.
Forrest, H.E. 1937-38 notes in *Shrops. A. and N.H.S. Trans.*, 49, pp 91-93.

STANTON UPON HINE HEATH

Areas of Investigation I, II & III

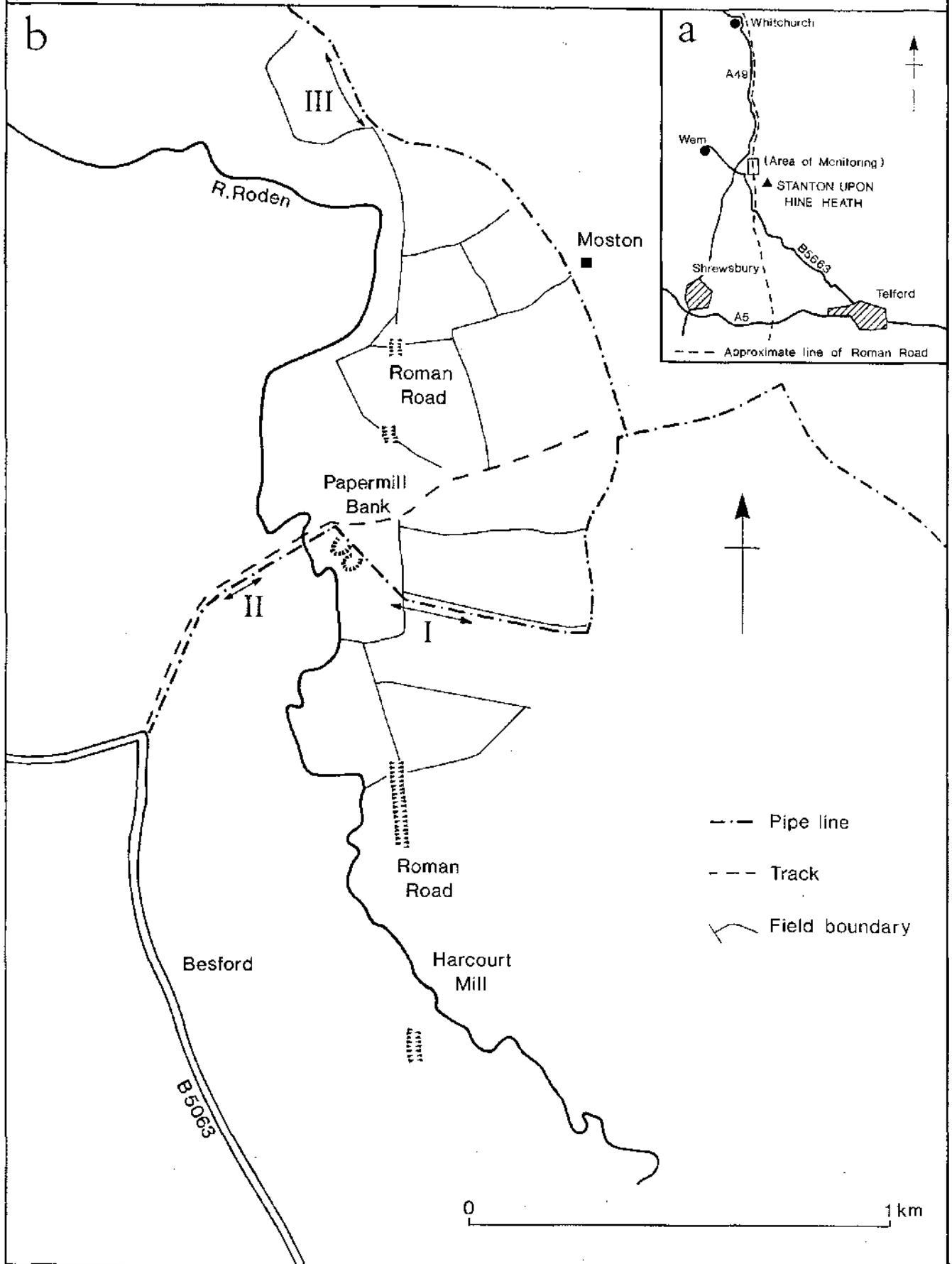


Figure 1