

# ROMAN COMMUNICATIONS BETWEEN KENT AND THE EAST SUSSEX IRONWORKS

BY IVAN D. MARGARY, F.S.A.

IRONWORKING was conducted by the Romans upon quite a large scale in the district inland of Hastings, especially around Battle and Sedlescombe, where extensive remains of the cinder deposits and considerable amounts of Roman and Romano-British pottery have been found.

It is evident that such an industry would have needed a good system of communications for the transport of its products, but this aspect of the business seems hitherto to have attracted very little attention although the ironworking sites have long been known. The district lay in what must have been a particularly remote and difficult corner of the Weald to reach, except by sea, for it is far removed from the populous and accessible Downland areas and from the good trunk roads which served them. Moreover, the country is very hilly and is intersected by deep gills which must always have been awkward obstacles to early traffic through the forests.

Two factors probably helped to mitigate these difficulties: the well-marked ridges, mainly running east-west, which must certainly have had trackways upon them from the earliest times, and the long estuaries of such rivers as the Rother and Brede, which in those days must have run, with tidal water, far inland from the sea area of what is now Romney Marsh, enabling the light shipping of the period to berth at sheltered havens well into the ironworking region.

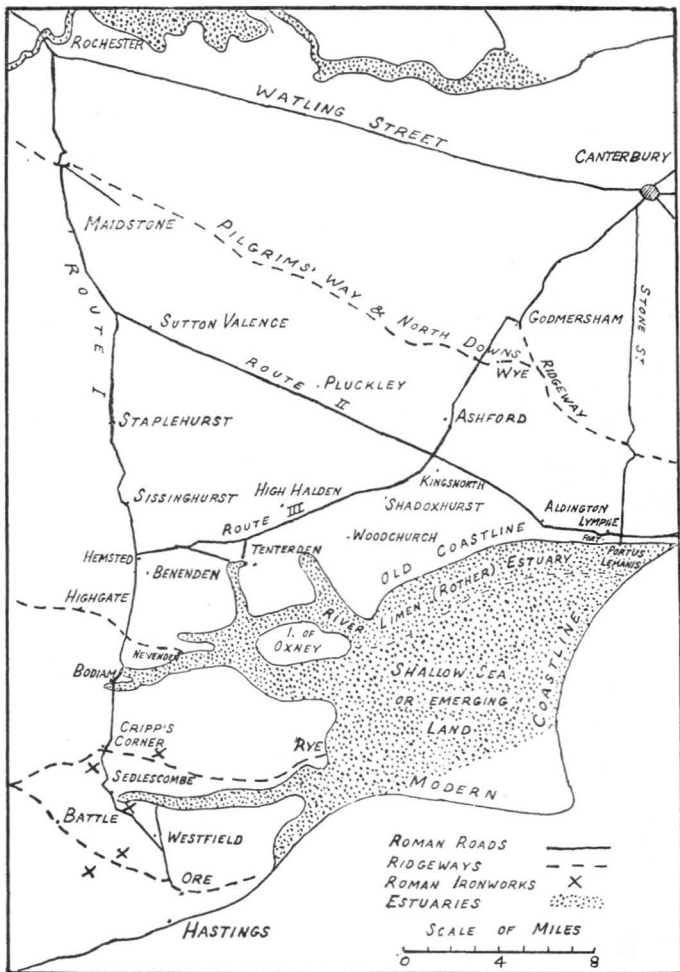
Of the ridgeways, that from Fairlight and Ore to Battle, and the central ridgeway from Rye to Cripp's Corner, Vinehall, Mountfield, Netherfield, and west to Heathfield and Uckfield, must have been strengthened and used by the Roman traffic, although as they have

remained in use to the present day no evidence of early construction is available. It will be observed that these provide for access from the north-west and west but would be of no use for traffic to or from Kent, which must at first have relied almost entirely upon waterborne transport to this area.

Since Hastings is the nearest of the ironworking areas of the Weald to the important and thickly settled Roman district of Kent, a trade in iron goods must soon have become important there. Hence it is not surprising to find that true Roman roads were laid out to provide the connexion. Two main routes were established, one from Rochester, on Watling Street, running through Maidstone and nearly due south through Staplehurst, Benenden, and Sandhurst, pointing directly towards the Hastings area; the other, an easterly branch from Benenden, running through Tenterden St. Michael's to Kingsnorth, near Ashford, where it connected with a cross-road from Maidstone to the south-east coast at Lympne and Dover, and itself continued through the Wye gap north-eastwards to Canterbury.

Parts of both these roads have been shown upon the 6-in. Ordnance Survey maps from the time of the first edition, under the somewhat unusual title, 'Track of Ancient Road', though it has long been recognized that they were, in fact, Roman. The eastern road, from Kingsnorth to near Tenterden, is mentioned in Hasted's *History of Kent*,<sup>1</sup> but otherwise the roads have attracted singularly little attention, and it would be interesting to know how they came to be marked in by the Ordnance Survey. The evidence for this was, no doubt, duly recorded in the Object Name-books of the Survey, but, most unfortunately, these were destroyed during the bombing of Southampton and the evidence is thus lost to us. The roads appear to be fairly well known to local residents, even though long lengths of them run through fields and woods completely derelict and marked only by the usual traces of buried or scattered metalling, with, in places, a visible *agger* or deserted green lane.

<sup>1</sup> 2nd edition, 1798, vol. VII. 584.



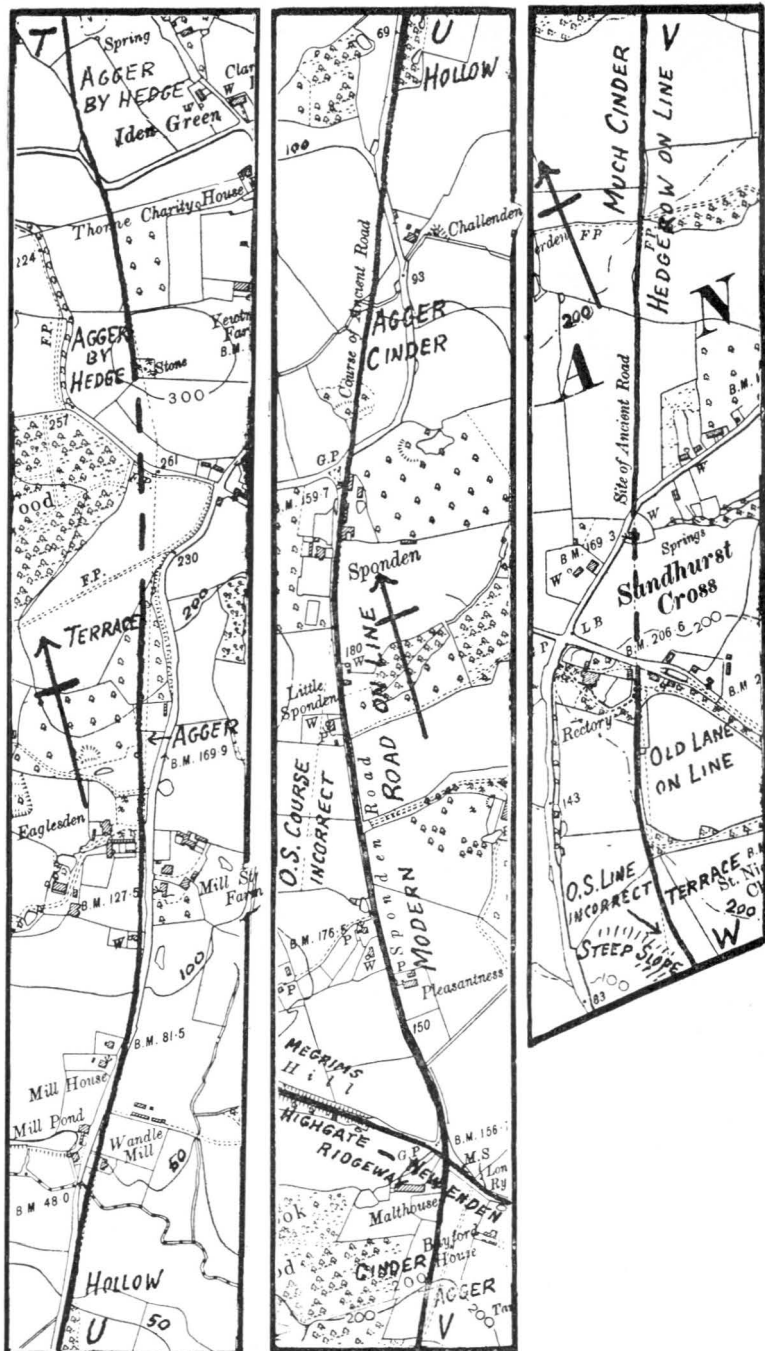
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Thus it is probable that the surveyors worked from local information, available at certain points along the routes, and endeavoured to join up these sections in what they—as untrained archaeological observers—considered the most likely manner. In fairness to the Survey the consideration of this matter is of some importance because, upon careful examination of the ground evidence, it is clear that the course of the roads as indicated needs amendment at quite a number of points, in spite of the fact that they have been shown upon the maps for many years. Experience in examining the routes has shown that the Survey's lines can only be taken as a *general* indication of the position of the roads. A corrected survey of the routes will be found in *Archaeologia Cantiana*, for the roads lie mainly in Kent.

From the standpoint of the Sussex ironworks, then, we have two known Roman roads approaching the area. One comes due south from Watling Street at Rochester, through Maidstone, Staplehurst, Benenden, and Sandhurst; the other comes from Canterbury, through Ashford and Tenterden, to join the first at Hemsted Park, near Benenden, giving direct access to East Kent.

At first sight it may now appear strange that this easterly route was directed so far inland as to join the northern one at Benenden. The reason is, of course, that tidal estuaries ran far inland at that time. The area of Romney Marsh was, to a large extent at least, still under sea, the Isle of Oxney was a true island, and estuaries extended close to the west and east of Tenterden. The ridge on which the easterly road approaches Benenden was then actually the most southern overland route available, and there is even some indication that short branch roads may have led down from it to the shores of the estuary west of Tenterden, not far from Rolvenden railway station.

Traffic from both roads met at Benenden, at a point close to the north-west corner of the mansion of Hemsted and proceeded southwards to Sandhurst. The course is clearly marked almost throughout, first by traces of a derelict roadway in Hemsted Park, leading to a green

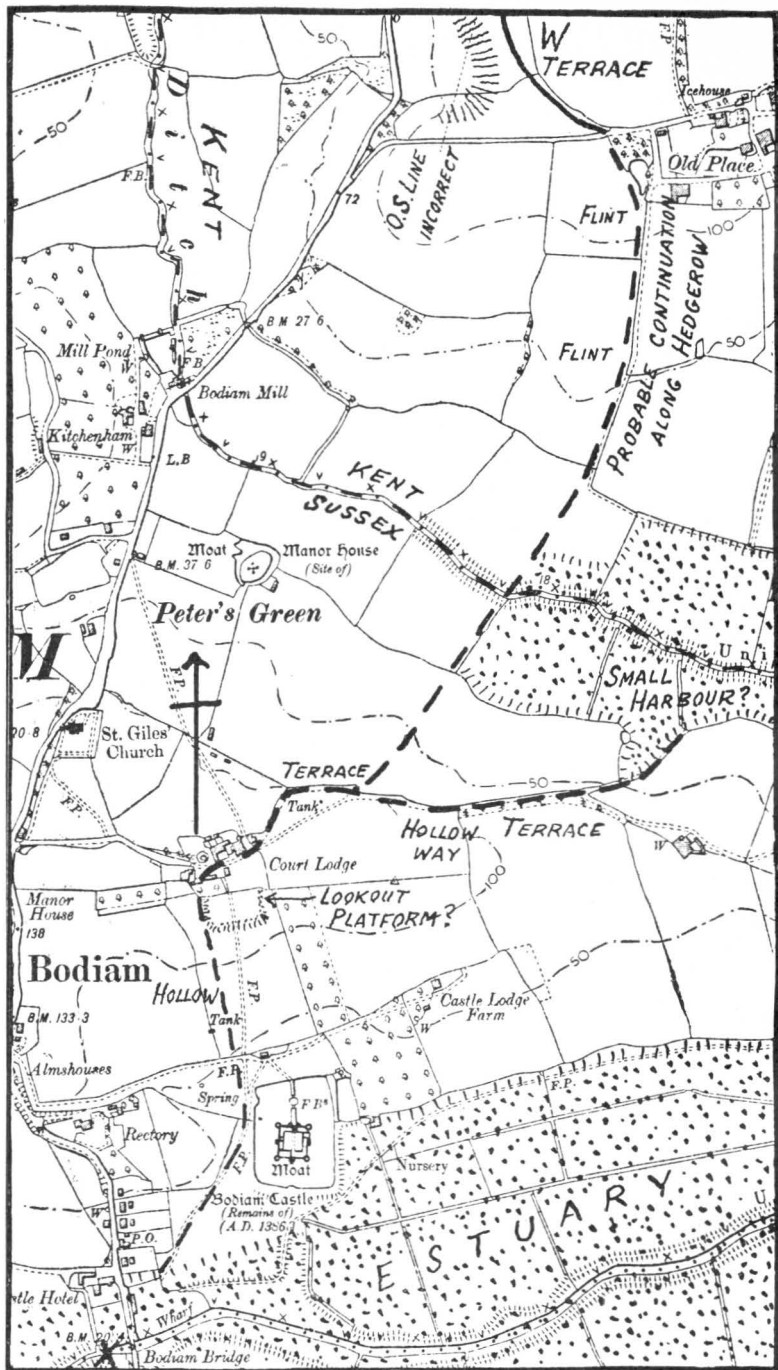


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lane which runs from Corner Cottages due south to Stream Farm, Iden Green. The lane becomes a deeply sunken waterworn hollow as we proceed. Where the stream is crossed, near the farm, a feature of great interest still remains. This is no less than a paved ford, of massive, roughly squared, blocks of local stone, in sizes of approximately  $34 \times 22$  in.,  $25 \times 15$  in.,  $22 \times 14$  in., and all about 6 in. thick. The paving now lies to the north of the present stream-bed, into which many of the outer stones have collapsed, but a substantial area of the paving still remains quite intact, though covered by turf, alongside the hedge between the stream and the farm gateway. The great age of the paving is well shown not only by the relation of its position to the present stream-bed and existing tracks, but also by the fact that a Hundred boundary stone, probably some centuries old, has been planted right in the ancient paving, one large slab of which has been uprooted to make way for it and still lies beside the boundary stone. Mr. O. G. S. Crawford, F.S.A., tells me that this ford, which he has seen and photographed, may well be unique in these islands.

From the stream the road climbed up the spine of the spur beyond, traces of an *agger* being visible farther on, passing along the west side of the little hill-top at Iden Green. Traces of its course are again visible north of Eaglesden, as a terrace through an orchard and then as a derelict *agger*. The existing road on to Challenden then lies more or less upon it, a hollow way on the east side of the road marking it south of the mill. Where the modern road curves up the hill to Sponden the course lay straight across the bend, as is shown by a trace of the *agger* and some iron cinder down near the stream. From Sponden to Sandhurst the modern road marks the course, this being one of the points at which the Ordnance Survey line is clearly at fault.

From the Sandhurst-Hawkhurst road, itself an important east-west ridgeway from Newenden, the course is very plain to Sandhurst Cross, marked by a straight line of hedgerows and a foot-path, with abundant traces of



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cinder metalling, as typical an example of these 'lost' sections of Wealden Roman roads as it could well be. The line is continued from the Cross by a derelict lane forming the eastern boundary of the Rectory garden, and the Ordnance Survey shows it as continuing straight on for a further 400 yds. to end 'in the air', pointing in the direction of Court Lodge, Bodiam.

Here we must pause to consider these Ordnance Survey lines. Although based, no doubt, upon accurate information and observation of remains at certain points, there is no doubt now that they were largely marked in by extending straight alignments from such proved points, rather than by any continuous observation along the route. Although in suitable country Roman roads do run very straight, it was a particularly unfortunate method to apply here, for in this difficult Wealden country it is quite clear that the roads never ran absolutely straight for any long distance and the method was thus likely to be misleading. Particularly was this so where the lines were extended far beyond the *last* known certain portion. This led the Survey seriously astray at the Ashford end of the easterly road, where, from Stubs Cross, a quite imaginary 1,500 yds. of alignment is shown pointing towards Park Farm, Kingsnorth, although substantial traces of the road still exist along a prominent line of hedgerows a little to the west. This error has caused the true continuation of the road, by a line of foot-paths and roads, through Ashford and Kennington, and so through the Stour valley to Canterbury, to be entirely overlooked hitherto.

Again, between Sponden and Sandhurst, the northern alignment through Sponden was extended 400 yds. too far, thus missing the obvious connection by Sponden Road with the well-marked alignment to Sandhurst Cross. Indeed, these two lines, as shown upon Kent Sheet LXXVIII NE., are obviously incompatible with one another.

Consideration of these examples is important when we come to the 'loose end' south of Sandhurst Rectory. Inspection upon the ground shows that this would



involve a slantwise descent down a very steep hill-side upon a bracken-covered rough pasture which would certainly have preserved some traces of such a road had one ever existed there. On the other hand, upon ascending the hill, one finds a perfectly obvious ancient roadway, as a well-formed turfed terrace, 18 ft. wide, continuing the derelict lane from the Rectory but *curving round* the top of the hill towards the south-east, towards Old Place. It is quite obvious that this is the Roman road, which a rigid adherence to straight lines regardless of topography caused the Ordnance Surveyors to overlook.

Why did the road take this curve, and what lay beyond? The point seems to me a crucial one for the understanding of this route into Sussex. We have seen that the road was laid upon a nearly due-south course, evidently directed at the Hastings ironworking district. From Sandhurst the last certain piece of alignment points towards Bodiam village, and then comes this distinct easterly curve. Admittedly, the steep hill-side at this point makes some such bend necessary at first, but the road shows no sign of resuming its former course where it would have been free to do so. On the contrary, it clearly continues south-eastwards until it meets the farm road to Old Place just where a large pit has been excavated. From this pit a line of hedgerows runs straight down to the Kent Ditch, forming a likely continuation of the course of the road, and some scattered pebbles may possibly be traces of its metalling. The situation is on a slight spur and the gradient easy. The route meets the Kent Ditch 580 yds. below the modern road-bridge, at a point where the low ground is about 200 yds. across, just about where the head of this arm of the Rother estuary would have been.

It seems clear that this deviation of the road, deliberately taking it to a lower point for crossing the valley close to tidal water, can have only one purpose, to make contact with that water at a small haven or port. Coming from the north, this would be the nearest point at which tidal water could be reached and the supposition

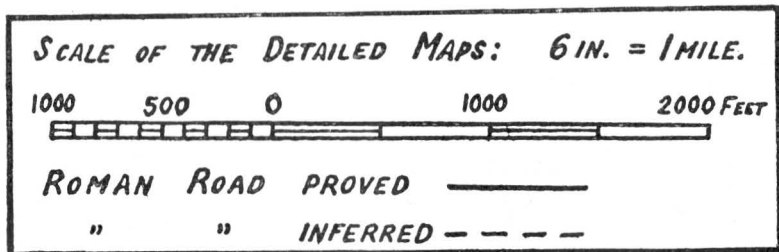
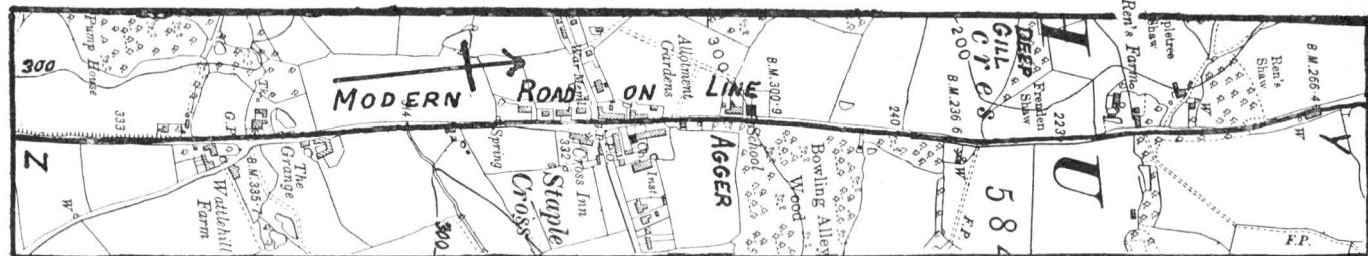
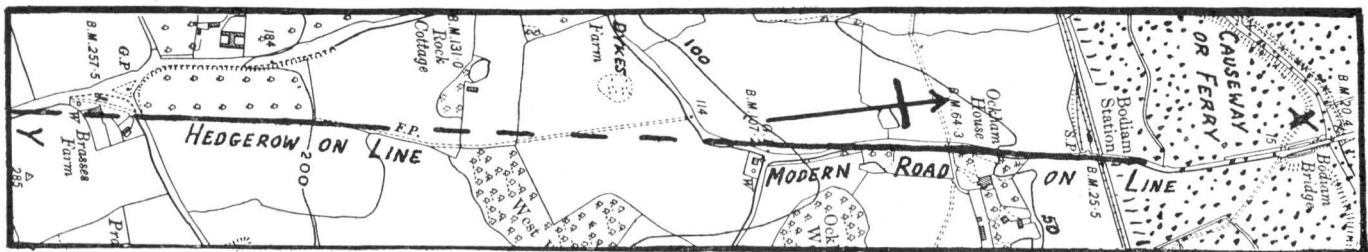
seems an entirely reasonable one. At the same time it would, I think, be very unlikely that this represents the ultimate destination of a long road aimed so clearly at the ironworks district farther on. But the existence of a port hereabouts, in the sheltered Rother estuary, conveniently adjacent to the north-south road, would obviously attract traffic to itself from those ironworks. The existence of a continuation of the road southwards is thus rendered still more likely.

For two miles beyond Bodiam Bridge, through Staple Cross to Wattlehill, a reasonably straight alignment of road and hedgerows does actually exist. From Ockham to Brasses Farm the modern road bends away to the west, but the line is followed throughout by a footpath and hedgerows. The route keeps conveniently upon high ground and is just what we should expect for our continuation. At Wattlehill it bends a little south-west to Cripp's Corner, thus avoiding very deep gills which run close in, first from north-west and then from south-east. The crossroads at Cripp's Corner<sup>1</sup> was a very important point, for here was the central east-west ridgeway of Sussex, from Rye to Uckfield.<sup>2</sup> It also represents the beginning of the ironworks area. Chitcombe lay two miles to the east, along the ridgeway; Footlands  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile to the south-west; and Oaklands Park, Sedlescombe,  $2\frac{1}{4}$  miles to the south; at all these there were Roman workings. It is clear that this area, at least, would have had direct communication with the road through and north of Bodiam.

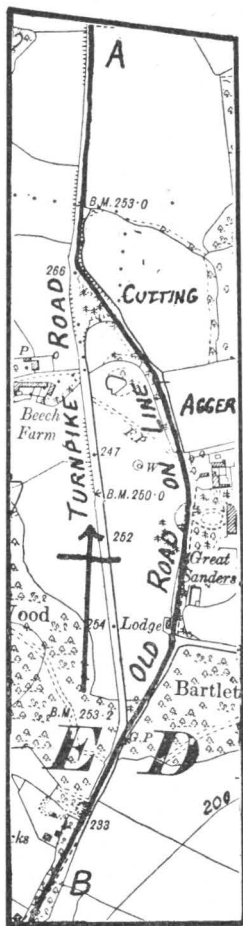
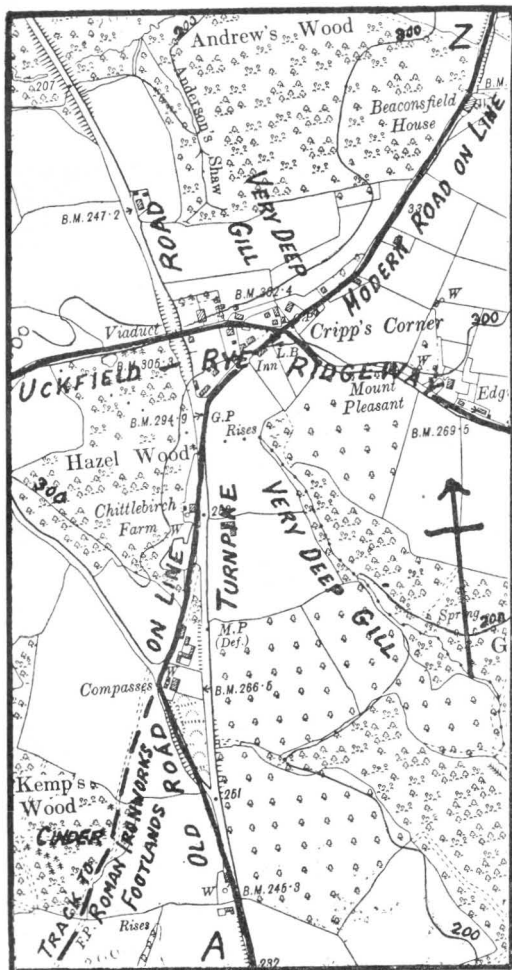
At this point a word of caution is necessary regarding the turnpike roads which form such prominent and straight features upon the map hereabouts. The older

<sup>1</sup> There is a Streetfield Wood  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile east of Cripp's Corner adjoining the south side of the Rye ridgeway at Austford, but it seems more likely that the place-name is to be associated with this ridgeway than with our route. However, it is of interest to note that in the Survey of the Manor of Robertsbridge in 1567, just published by the Sussex Record Society, the place gave its name to one of the seven 'boroughs'—Stretfelde Borowe—into which the manor was divided, and that the lands included lay not only along the Rye ridgeway from Vinehall to Chitcombe but also along our route from Cripp's Corner through Staple Cross to Bodiam Bridge, based perhaps upon some tradition of the old roads.

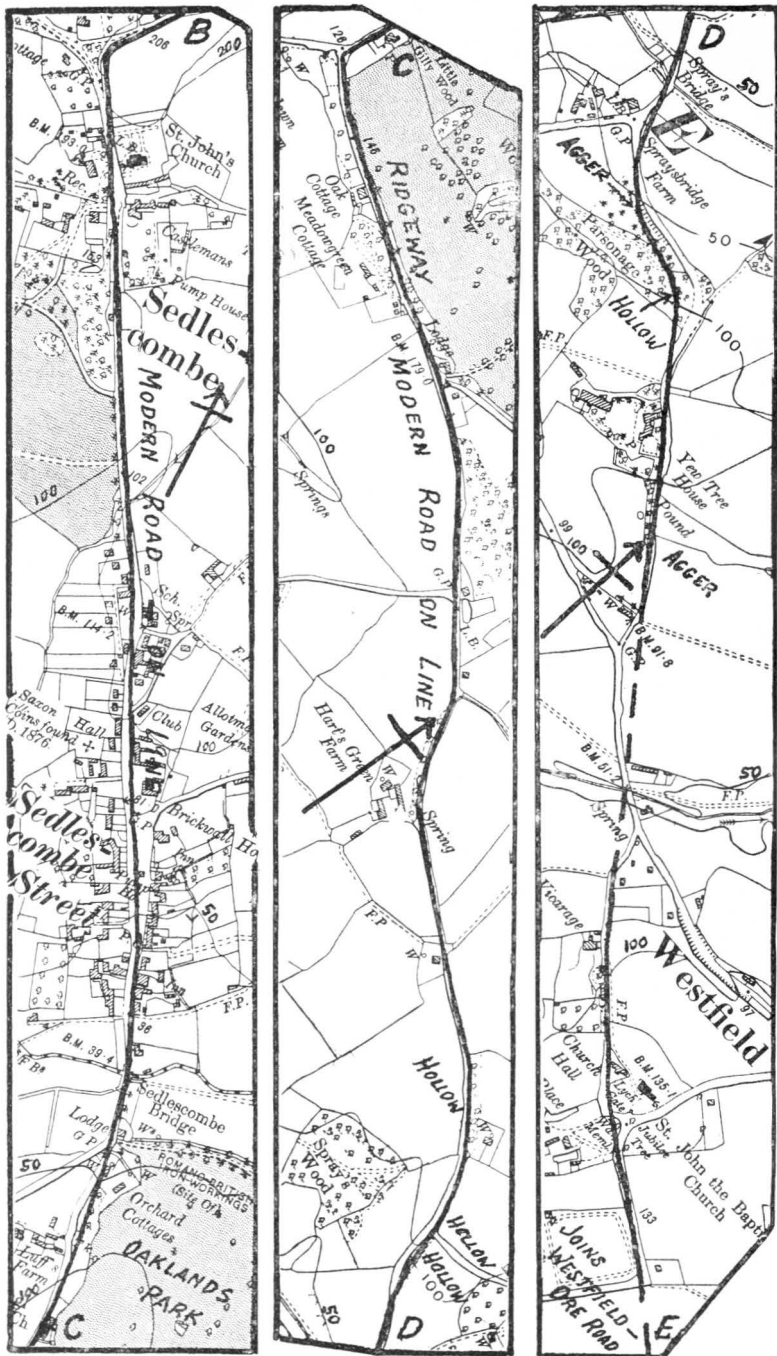
<sup>2</sup> E. Straker, 'A Wealden Ridgeway', *S.N.Q.*, vol. VI. 171.



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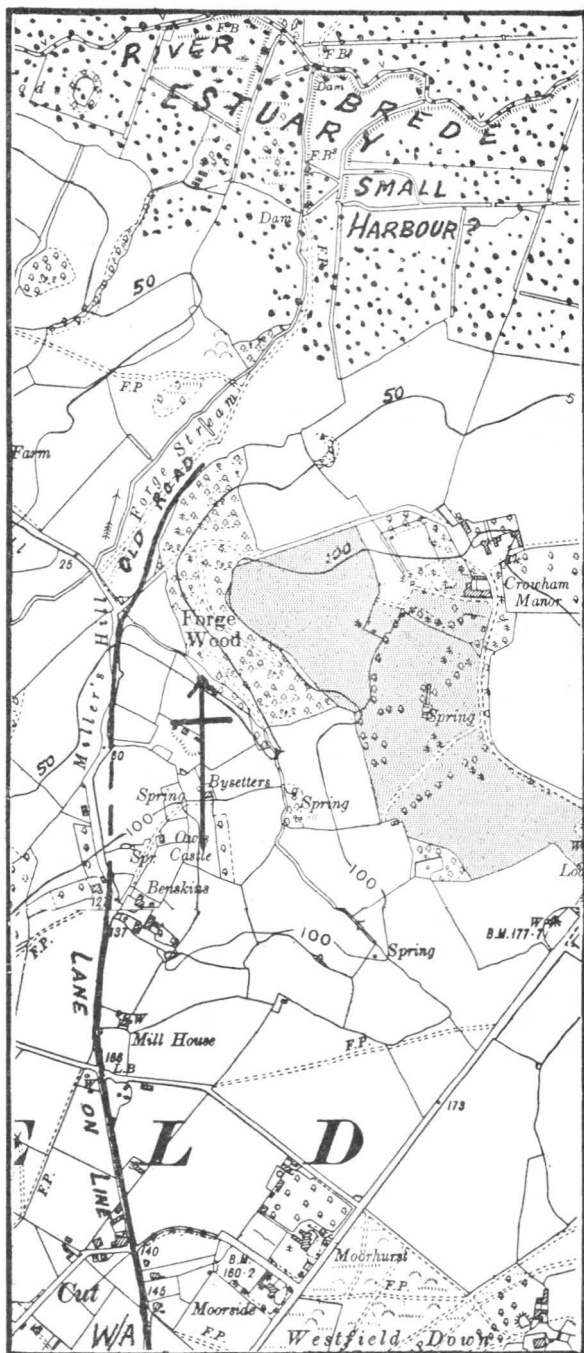


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roads seem to have been extensively reconstructed here and the alignments of these turnpikes might well be misleading. Inspection will soon show, however, the modern character of their large cuttings and embankments, which are quite in railway style. One such road joins us at Cripp's Corner and its straight course towards Sedlescombe must not mislead us. The older road ran first south-west behind Compasses, and then south-east past Great Sanders, where its older, pre-turnpike, form as a distinct *agger*, quite considerable north of Great Sanders, can be well seen; it is, of course, a ridgeway here, as the ground requires, and is not an aligned road.

The road leads straight through Sedlescombe village to the bridge over the Brede, here easily crossable. The ironworks in Oaklands Park lay close to the bridge. It seems clear that the road climbed the hill beyond, along the west side of the park, for the lower road is only a modern branch of the big turnpike to the west, and both of them go through low wet ground which must then have been marshland, although farther from tidal water than the crossings at Bodiam. Having regained the high ground, the only likely continuation seems to be by the south-easterly road, by Spray's Bridge, to Westfield. This road keeps to high ground as much as possible, and its course is very direct, although it now appears to be such a winding lane. Its age is shown by hollow ways beside it north-west of Spray's Bridge, while in Parsonage Wood, to the south-east, there are distinct traces of an older and more direct course through the wood, cutting across the present elbow which eases the hill there, first as a slight *agger* beside the lane and then as a cutting higher up the hill pointing to the further course of the lane past Yew Tree House. Just beyond this house, where the lane crosses the head of a little eastward gill, the road runs upon a decided embankment.

But, it may well be asked, why to Westfield? The answer appears to lie in the very straight north-south lane that runs from Great Ridge, Ore, through Westfield to the shore of the Brede estuary west of Crowham Manor. This lane, leading to nowhere in particular,



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avoiding even the old centre of Westfield, and ending at a remote point where an inlet of the Brede was formed by a small tributary,<sup>1</sup> is remarkably direct for lanes in these parts. At its southern end where it joins the Ore ridgeway, close to the old church, it is particularly noteworthy that the ridgeway follows its alignment for 250 yds., before turning off sharply to resume its course along the ridge. The ridgeway all along here has almost certainly been Romanized for use through the ironworking district for the sites near Battle, and thus it seems probable, to say the least, that this sharp turn and the northern lane with which it is associated were contemporary. It may well be that the lane led direct to another small port situated somewhere at its northern end, upon the Brede estuary.

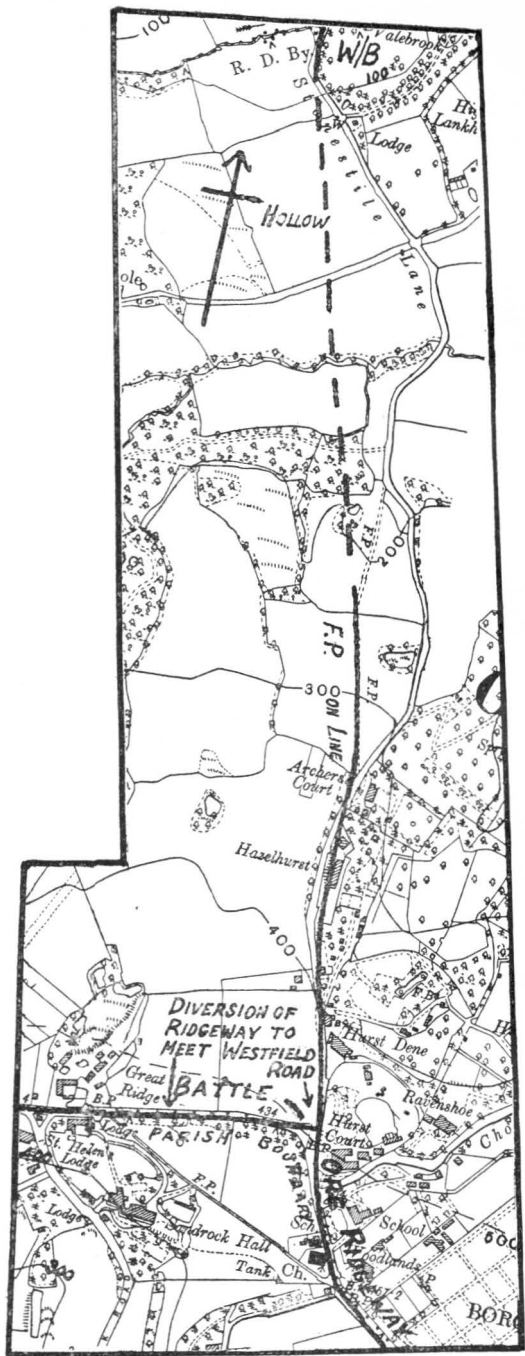
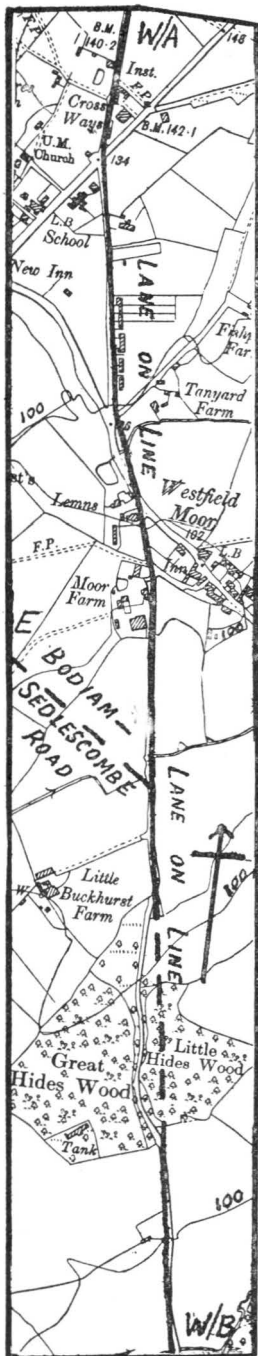
Thus it would be both natural, and convenient, to join the route through Sedlescombe with this road. The road through Westfield would provide the most convenient means of doing so, and, further, would thus account for the peculiar layout of the present road with its sharp bends near the church.

Now that we have seen what lies to the south, we must return to the Rother crossing at Bodiam and consider certain problems that arise at that point. First of all, we must bear in mind that this was the head of the most important estuary in the district, and, further, that it is known historically that in earlier times the main stream of the Rother ran north of the Isle of Oxney. In medieval times the river ran thus to Appledore and turned thence south-east along the course of the Rhee Wall to discharge at what was then the harbour of New Romney. But, earlier still, there is evidence that the Rother went still farther east, on the course later occupied by the residuary stream of the Limen (which is the old name of the Rother itself) to discharge at West Hythe, the Roman *Portus Lemanis*.

Thus it is practically certain that, to whatever extent the initial formation of Romney Marsh had begun in Roman times, there must have been at least a wide tidal

<sup>1</sup> The Forge Stream, so called from an ironworking site in use in Tudor times.





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river running parallel with the coast for a long distance. Such a course would have provided a sheltered route for coastal shipping, and, even if the Marsh had not then begun to form, the course of the Rother emerging at Appledore from the shelter of Oxney would have greatly shortened the journey to East Kent by open sea as compared with that from the Brede estuary or Rye.

Thus the position of Bodiam, and also of Newenden at the end of its ridgeway, had an importance for waterborne traffic eastwards which is by no means apparent to-day. The marshes along the river right up to Bodiam are of extremely recent formation. At Bodiam Bridge the crossing is about 430 yds. wide, not a width to present any great difficulty to Roman traffic, though it seems possible that there was never more than a ferry-crossing here, for the modern causeway is a weak structure and in earlier times there would probably have been a greatly increased tidal scour and possibly water of considerable depth.

The southern road alignment from Bodiam to Staple Cross appears to have been laid out from Court Lodge farm, on the ridge 250 yds. south-east of Bodiam Church. The alignment of the northern road, past Sandhurst, would also reach this ridge between the church and the farm, so that it seems quite likely that both were laid out as parts of a through route. Nevertheless, the deviation eastwards near Old Place, referred to above, is indisputable, and we can only assume that local considerations modified the general layout of the road here. If, as is probable, the line of hedgerows running down to the Kent Ditch represents the road, the low ground to be crossed is only just over 200 yds. wide, probably close to the head of this branch of the estuary. A convenient spur beyond would allow of an easy gradient up to the prominent ridge of Court Lodge; this ground is under intensive hop cultivation and there is now no trace of any track across it, but at the top of the field, just where an old track along the north side of the ridge is reached, the entrance to the field, deeply sunken, suggests the age of the approach at this point, as also does the trackway

thence into the farm. The track along the north of the ridge, deeply sunken in parts and in others a well-made terrace, slants down by an easy gradient to reach the edge of the marsh beside a curious inlet. The position is a most remote one, for the two valleys bar all approach from the east and the amount of traffic must have been inconsiderable—unless it were from traffic by sea. It seems to me very probable that this inlet, 300 yds. below the assumed crossing-place of the Roman road, may represent the silted remains of a small haven, lying conveniently under the shelter of the tip of the Court Lodge ridge, three-quarters of a mile from the main Rother estuary. Its presence here would explain the reason for the course of the road perfectly.

South of Court Lodge past Bodiam Castle there is little to be seen. A faint hollow runs directly from the farm-house towards the western bank of the moat and may represent the old road, but the proximity of the castle and its construction may well have obliterated any earlier traces. One point of interest, however, is the faint outline of a rectangular embanked area on the crest of the hill, immediately south of the farm-house, about  $210 \times 150$  ft. in extent. The probable course of the road is along its western side. The position is ideal for views over the head of the Rother estuary and it might well have served as a lookout or signal station. In this connection mention should be made here of the site of Castle Toll, which is situated in a position somewhat remarkably similar with respect to Newenden, two miles farther down the estuary. The main site is a very extensive promontory fort, probably of Iron Age date, but within it, at the most prominent corner overlooking the estuary, is a highly raised square embanked area, almost certainly a later addition and hence quite possibly a Roman work.

Thus it seems probable that the development of communications with Kent from the East Sussex ironworks went through several stages:

- (i) Ironworking near the Sussex coast behind Hast-

ings, and the products transported by sea from the south coast and from the Brede estuary.

- (ii) Working farther inland, with local roadways and ridgeways to serve the workings, leading to havens on the Brede and Rother estuaries for sea transport.
- (iii) Engineered roads laid out to connect the area by land directly with East Kent and with London via Rochester.