

◆ What did Ivan Margary ever do for me?

AN EXCAVATION OF THE ROMAN GREENSAND WAY AT PLUMPTON

By David Millum

An account of an evaluation project of the Sussex Greensand Way at Ashurst Farm, Plumpton which confirmed Margary's inferred alignment and revealed information about the structure of the Roman road.

INTRODUCTION

Most of us take for granted that we can open an Ordnance Survey map and follow the dotted lines of the Roman roads across the landscape. But how many of us really consider the enormous achievement of plotting these routes from scratch and how much we owe the pioneers who, unlike us, were faced with a map devoid of interpreted data? In Sussex this leads us inevitably to the work of Ivan Margary (1896–1976) and his seminal volume, *Roman Ways in the Weald*, a work still relevant to current research despite being published in 1948.

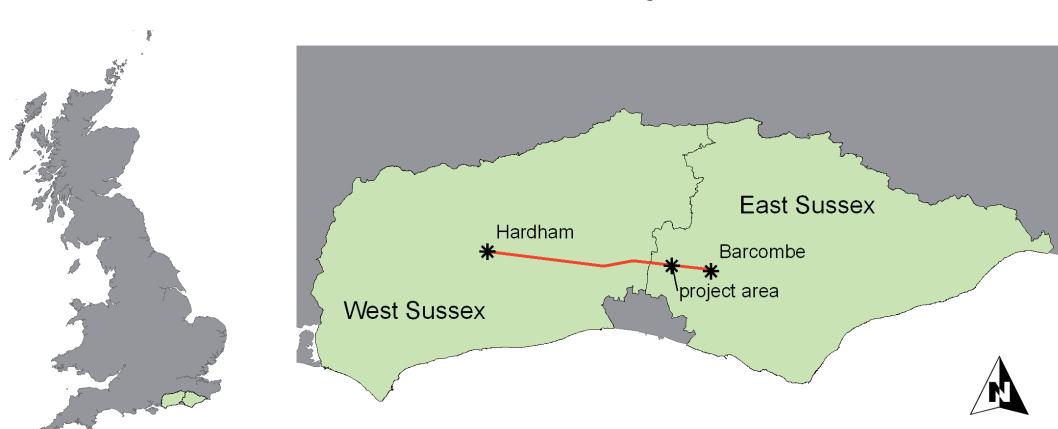
Margary's work gave me the inspiration for my evaluation project on part of the Sussex Greensand Way, a Roman road running from Hardham, on Stane Street in the west, to Barcombe in the east (Fig. 1), as the section between Streat and Green Cross, Plumpton (Fig. 2) still remained 'inferred' rather than proven (Margary 1948, 38).

This article is my attempt to impart the

requisite level of archaeological evidence on my Ashurst Farm excavation whilst producing a readable account of the human aspects of a modest archaeological project.

THE PRE-EXCAVATION WORKS

A thorough desk-based assessment and walk-over survey highlighted a little-used hay meadow, Cart House Field (TQ358154), on the Plumpton to Streat ridgeway as an ideal site for geophysical surveying and subsequent excavation (Fig. 2). This field was of interest because it was recorded in the East Sussex Historic Environment Record (ESHER) as containing a discovery of Roman pottery and tile (Garrett 1976) which might suggest when the road was in use. Unfortunately, even such reliable sources as the ESHER and *Sussex Archaeological Collections* can be misleading; the finder, Richard Wells, confirmed to me that the artefacts came from the Plumpton villa site, a kilometre to the south (Fig. 3).

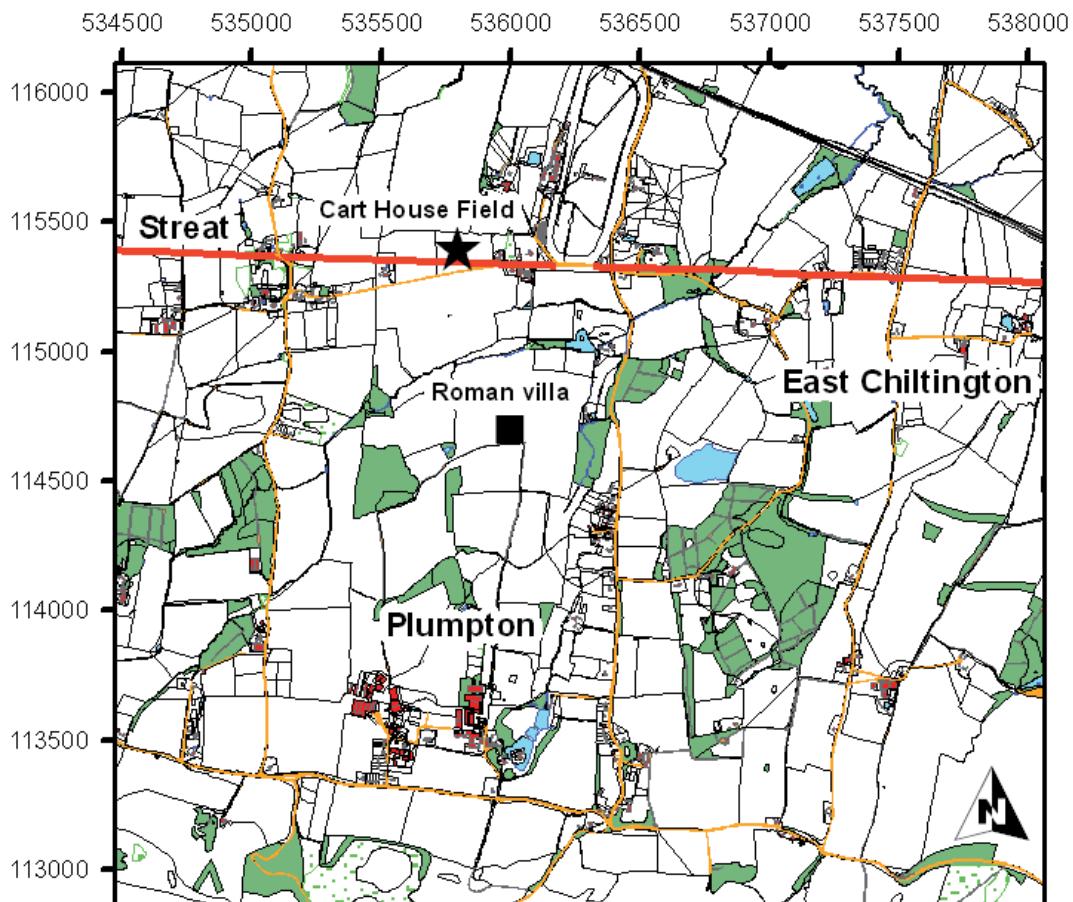


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Fig. 1. The project area and the approximate route of the Greensand Way.



Fig. 2. Margary's map of the Greensand Way showing the inferred section between Streat and Plumpton (red line) with Cart House Field (outlined blue) (after Margary 1948).



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Fig. 3. The 900-ha walk-over survey area with Cart House Field, the Roman villa and Margary's suggested route for the Greensand Way (red line) located.

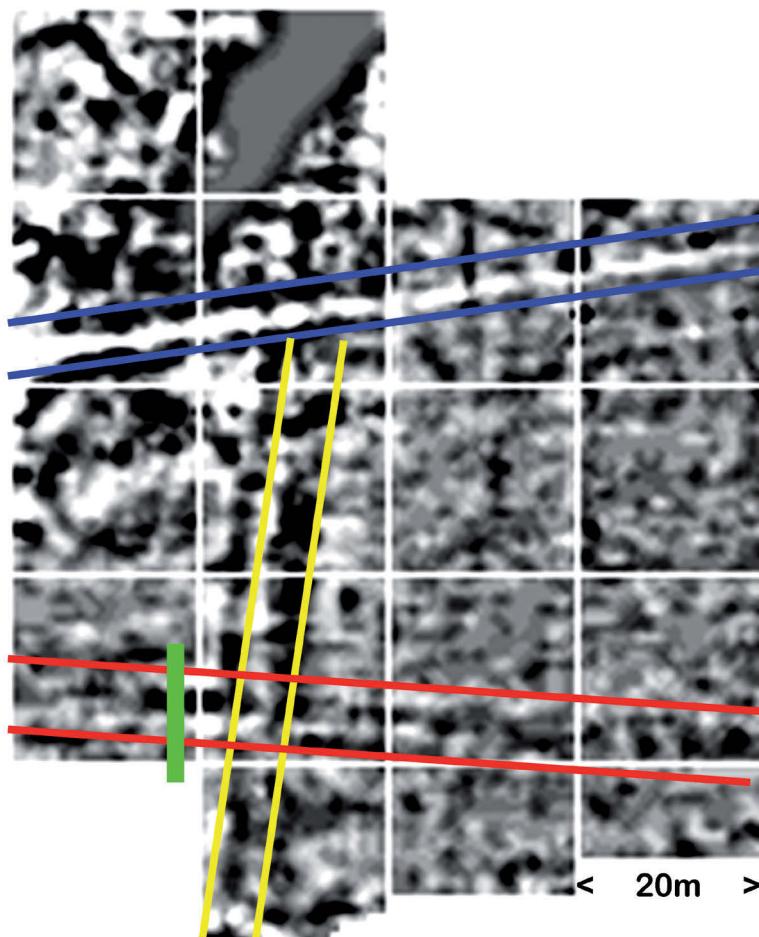


Fig. 4. The resistance survey results with road line (outlined in red), water pipe (blue), former field boundary (yellow) and proposed evaluation trench (green).

A GLIMPSE BELOW THE SURFACE (FEBRUARY 2009)

The relatively short grass of the hay meadow in February gave an excellent opportunity to carry out the geophysical survey using a Geoscan Research RM15 resistance meter. The results were well worth the effort, as a fairly clear linear feature could be seen across the bottom of the plot encouragingly close to Margary's suggested road line. The white horizontal feature above this was resolved as a Victorian water pipe, and on consulting the 1841 tithe map the dominant vertical feature proved to be a removed field boundary (Fig. 4).

From these results it appeared that the remains

of the Roman road were on Margary's suggested line and could be confirmed by excavation. An area which appeared to have the most definite markings on the geophysical plot was therefore chosen for the location of a 1m-wide evaluation trench (Fig. 4).

The project's aims could be fully resolved only by excavation because I wanted to establish the construction of the road as well as its precise location and orientation. This would also allow me to offer a range of fieldwork experience to local archaeological students and to involve the local community.



Fig. 5. Eight volunteers pitched in on the fourth day on site as Brighton and Hove Archaeological Society arrived in force.



Fig. 6. Photograph showing the flints in the southern section of the trench (2m and 250mm scales).

IN THE TRENCH (11–30 MAY 2009)

SOME NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

Excavation was undertaken by hand because an inspection of the adjacent ploughed field suggested that the archaeology could be very shallow. Modest resources and a three-week timescale limited the initial trench to 12m × 1m on a north/south

alignment across the suspected road line (Fig. 5).

In order to cause as little damage as possible, excavation was to the top of the intact archaeology except where it was imperative to section features in order to interpret the site. The method followed general stratigraphic principles, with each discrete layer, cut and important interface being given individual context numbers.

The health and safety of the site personnel and visitors were particularly important since my aim of involving the local community resulted in a trickle of sightseers which turned into a steady flow at weekends.

'SO WHICH BIT IS THE ROAD?'

Whilst all who worked on the site were pleased with what we managed to uncover, some of our visitors seemed less impressed, 'So which bit is the road?' being a favourite enquiry.

The subsoil included around 20% of disturbed fist-sized flint cobbles across the southern 6 metres of the trench which became denser and more compact in a consolidated redder and sandier layer beneath approximately 100mm deep (Fig. 6). This was of particular significance because neither context resembled the natural soil for the area and was not present in the northern half of the trench where the yellowish-brown, almost stoneless, subsoil characteristic of the Kingston Soil associations expected on the lower greensand predominated.

In the centre of the trench a narrow linear feature at an oblique angle to the road was discerned. It appeared to have a semicircular SW end and disappeared beneath the baulk to the NE. It contained a few largish flints at its base and one sherd of post-Roman pottery. A 200mm-wide, single-depth band of flints was revealed within the barren northern section which ran parallel to the suggested road alignment. At first it was thought to be an intact section of the road, a filled ditch or possibly a later field drain. It appeared to be on an intersection course with the oblique trench about half a metre to the east of the excavation, and so a 2.5m × 1m side extension was excavated to uncover this area. The aim was to find out whether one feature cut the other and thereby determine their precedence. The new trench proved remarkably barren at the anticipated crossing point, with the band of flints petering out just beyond the previous baulk whilst the oblique 'trough' proved to be just 1.25m long (Fig. 7). Both these features remain the subject of conjecture, although the 'trough' did appear to cut, and therefore post-date, the sandy layers of the road.

The four metres of trench north of the flint band were also proving disappointing until we discerned a slight change in colour and compaction in the last metre. Careful excavation revealed a shallow, linear,

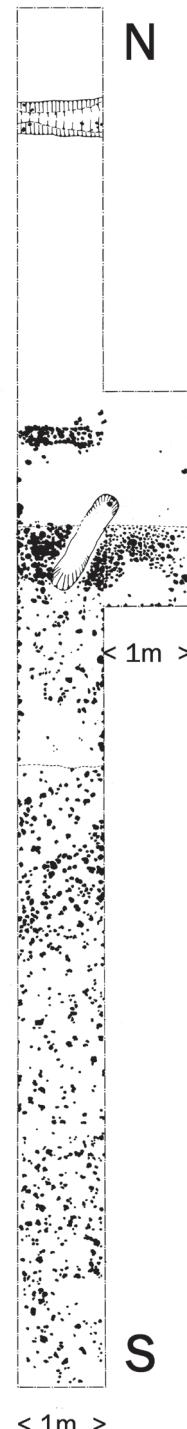


Fig. 7 Multi-layer plan of the extended, 16m-long excavation.

concave feature 0.5m wide by 125mm deep, running parallel to the road and 4.5m from its northern edge (Fig. 7). This feature appeared consistent, by its location and alignment, with being the northern boundary ditch for the road.

The side extension had a surprise in store at its southern end, as we discovered a roughly semi-circular feature of about 0.8m diameter. Where this 'pit' was truncated by the southern baulk some firmly embedded sherds of pottery were discovered, 0.5m below ground level and 400mm from the new east baulk. A soil sample was collected and subsequently wet-sieved and the resultant charcoal was retained for possible future analysis. The cut of this pit through the road layers was clearly visible in the new south section. These pot sherds proved to be our most intriguing artefacts, being basic local flint-tempered coarse-ware spot-dated by Luke Barber to the late 11th–12th centuries.

Excavation now concentrated on the adjacent area at the base of the trench, where cambered layers of compacted sand and gravel 150–200mm deep overlaid a single 40mm layer of firmly embedded flint. This layer sloped down to what we subsequently interpreted as the northern gutter of the metalled road (Figs 8 & 9) and was the only consolidated area of packed flint encountered in this otherwise badly disturbed structure. This meant that defining either the original depth of the road or any repair work was not possible.

A 3m extension to the southern end of the trench failed to establish a definite south edge to the metalled area as the archaeology was too disturbed. However, there was a change in texture from the compacted redder, sandier layer

to a more dispersed flint layer at approaching six metres south of the northern gutter, which was consistent with this being the southern edge of the central agger.

FROM THE FINDS TRAYS

Whilst artefacts from all periods were carefully recorded and retained for post-excavation analysis, no definite Roman artefact was identified (Table 1). The prehistoric worked flint and the early medieval pottery sherds were subjected to greater analysis and description.

PREHISTORIC WORKED FLINT

A total of 38 pieces of prehistoric worked flint were collected, weighing a total of 0.651kg. Of these 23 were debitage but 15 showed signs of retouching and/or utilisation. Fifty percent were of a fine black flint and formed the greater part of the Mesolithic assemblage, whilst those of late prehistoric type were predominantly grey or brown. This suggested to me that, whilst the later flint could have been acquired reasonably locally, the Mesolithic knappers had carried their purer material from a more distant and prospected source.

EARLY MEDIEVAL POTTERY

Eighty-two sherds of early medieval pottery were recovered, of a coarse, hard texture with multi-coloured 0.5–2mm grit inclusions exposed on both surfaces. Whilst this assemblage included several rim and base sherds, including 24% of the rim of a 240mm-diameter cooking pot (Fig. 10), it has not been possible to determine a date more precise than

Table 1. General list of artefacts collected in the excavation.

Material	No.	Weight (g)	Contexts	Remarks
Prehistoric worked flint	38	651	Upper contexts 1 & 2	Divided into black, brown and grey
Medieval pottery	82	556	Predominantly contexts 2 & 17 but also 1 & 6	Sherds spread over 2 but grouped in 17
Post-medieval pottery	23	132	Contexts 1 & 2	Found exclusively in disturbed upper soil layers except one sherd in 17
Ceramic building material	101	947	Contexts 1 & 2	Mostly post-medieval; only two pieces that could be Roman
Glass	9	25	Contexts 1 & 2	Post-medieval
Fire-cracked flint	1	33	Context 1	Top soil
Iron items	9	124	Contexts 1 & 2	Disturbed layers
Ferruginous sandstone	1	23	Context 1	Not generally collected
Iron slag	7	119	Contexts 1 & 2	Disturbed layers
Coal	1	2	Context 1	Top soil
Clay pipe stem	2	3	Context 1	Top soil

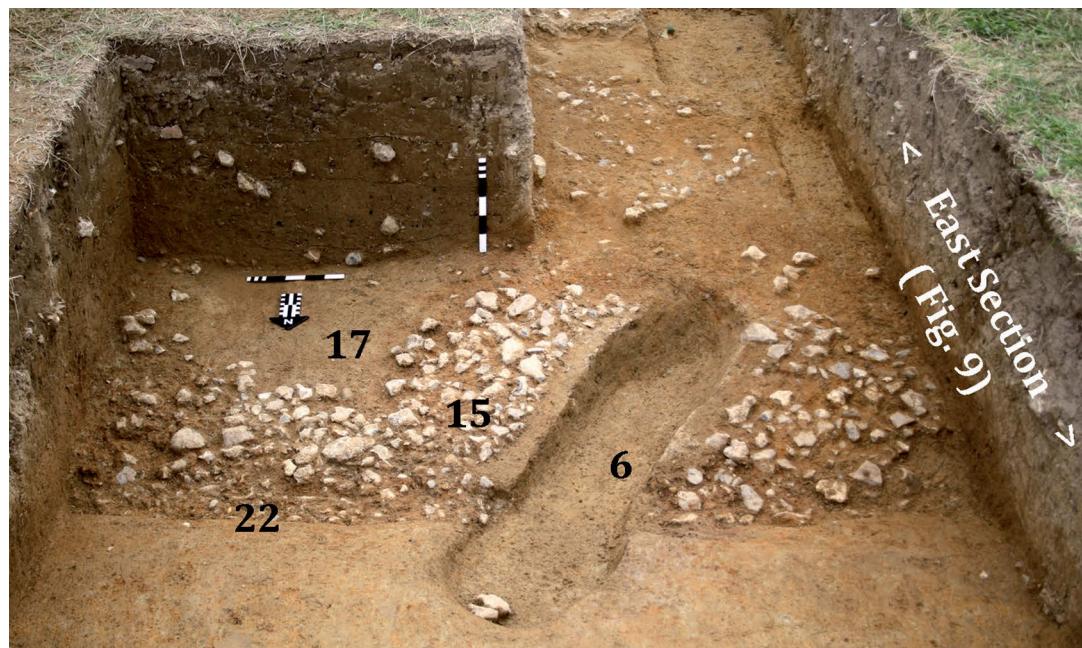


Fig. 8. The north edge of the cambered road area showing compacted flint metalling (15), gutter (22), trough (6) and pit (17) (250mm scales) (photograph: L. Fisher).

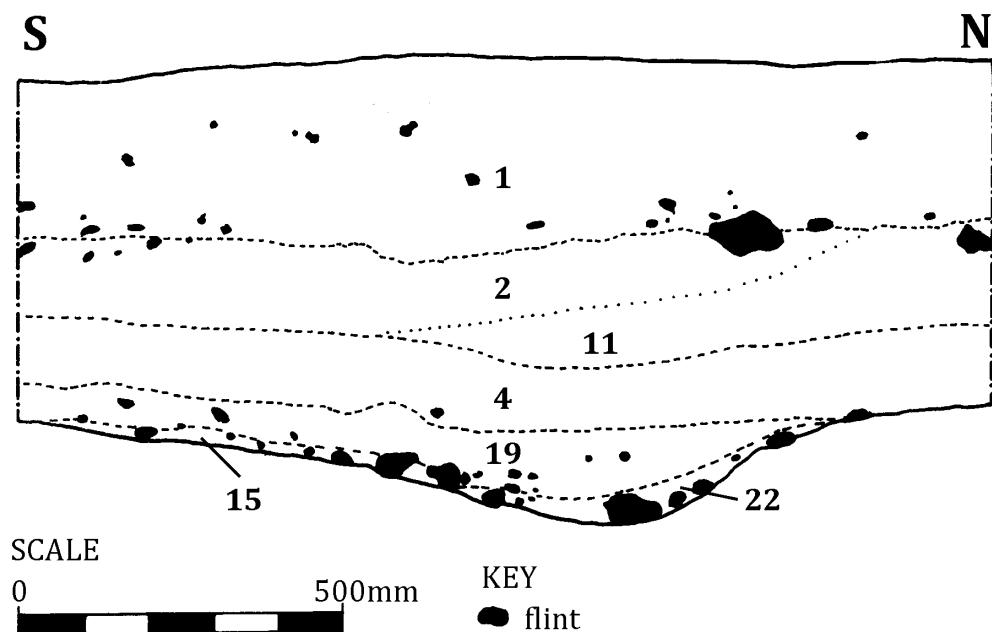


Fig. 9. East section of the west baulk showing the overburden of disturbed contexts (1 and 2) and sand and gravel layers (4 and 19) above the cambered flint layer (15) and gutter (22) at the north edge of the central metalled area.

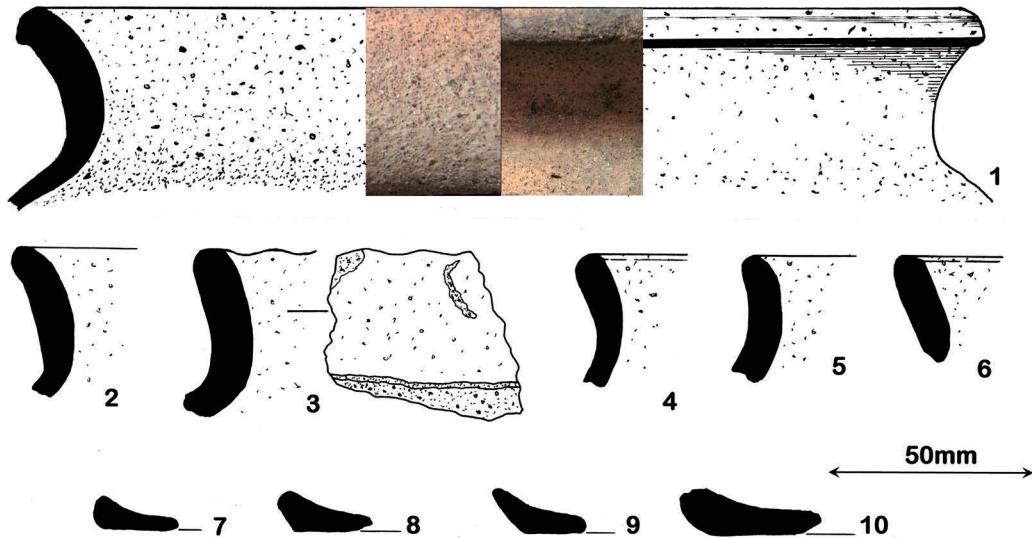


Fig. 10. Rim and base sherds of the early medieval pottery.

a probable general period of mid 11–12th century (Luke Barber *pers. comm.*).

Figure 10, No.1 has inset images of the internal and external fabric surfaces. The multi-coloured grit-tempered fabric ranged from a brown to pale brown core (Munsell 7.5YR 4/3 to 10YR 6/3) with reddish-brown to light brown exterior (Munsell 5YR 5/4 to 7.5YR 6/4) and red to pink interior surfaces (Munsell 2.5YR 5/6 to 7.5YR 7/4).

The 25 sherds from Context 17 included a close grouping which suggested a more strategic deposition of rubbish into this pit than the wider scattering in other contexts which implied dispersal by ploughing or manuring. These artefacts added another period of interest to a site where no early medieval finds had been recorded previously.

A PERSONAL INTERPRETATION

The limited timescale prohibited further excavation to discover the full extent of the probable pit (17), but the trench location was recorded accurately and therefore can be revisited in the future. My main regret is not having the time to continue the excavation down to subsoil across the full width of the road, as recommended as a secondary stage by Margary (1948, 34), although this would have meant destroying the compacted flint layer at the road's northern edge.

The stratigraphic method allowed us to see in plan as well as in section evidence for the construction of the road in the series of sand and grit layers on a flint base laid on an agger constructed in the natural soil, despite the disturbed nature of the structure. Time and effort spent trying to find the expected roadside ditches proved conclusively that they were never there, as presumably the shallow gutter provided sufficient drainage on a road passing along a ridge of slowly permeable greensand.

Our discovery of the modest northern boundary ditch was significant because these outlying features are often hard to detect (Davies 2002, 71). Geophysics and dowsing indicated a similar ditch to the south and, although this was not discernible in the excavation, I believe the road was symmetrical, with a central metalled area of approaching 6m wide. This equates quite closely to 20 Roman pedes, the most common width of metalling according to Davies (2002, 74). This would give a total width of the road including side lanes and boundary ditches of 16m.

It has been observed on other roads that all three lanes can be metalled when traffic pressure or soil conditions necessitate (Davies 2002, 71). The evidence from this section of the Greensand Way suggests that, despite being an important east-west route, the 6m metalled surface was deemed adequate for wheeled and winter users, allowing



Fig. 11. Making it all worthwhile: Adrian gains his first experience of archaeological excavation (photograph: R. Barter).

the side lanes to remain unmetalled for use by foot and hoofed traffic.

The main Roman road network should be viewed in terms of a modern rail or motorway system, providing fast and straight routes between major civic and military centres. Whilst the primary network was built for military use during the period of conquest, the Greensand Way would have been part of a second phase built to facilitate trade and thereby generate commodities and income for the Empire. The road accessed two important resources, forming a southern link for the arterial roads servicing the iron industry of the High Weald and flanking the agricultural producers north of the Downs. Its building would have had a pronounced social and economic impact on the local area, connecting formerly isolated communities to the wider world and instigating the foundation of new settlements and relocation of others.

Margary (1948, 20) suggested that roads that continued in use during the late Roman and subsequent periods are likely to be less well preserved due to lack of maintenance, and this could account for some of the damage to this section. Its shallow depth has also made it susceptible to plough damage and erosion, although Mr White, a former owner of the farm, confirmed that this field had escaped post-war deep-ploughing. Another cause of its poor

structure, particularly at the southern side, could be the construction of the ridgeway just to the south in order to provide a more direct route to the medieval parish church at Streat, as the Roman road would have offered a convenient supply of building material.

IN CONCLUSION

I had resolved to keep the aims of the project modest and thereby achievable as it was my first solo directorship and fulfilled a requirement of my MA in Field Archaeology at the University of Sussex.

Margary's road alignment between Streat and Plumpton is now proven, and the basic construction and preservation information has been collected and recorded, and a report lodged in the society's museum at Barbican House and with the ESHER. Evidence for activity during other periods both prehistoric and medieval has been discovered, opening new avenues for future research. But arguably the real value of the project was the involvement of the wider community by actively encouraging local residents, of all ages, to come and take part or just inspect. This action was fully justified on seeing the obvious delight mixed with concentration on the face of the project's youngest volunteer (Fig. 11).

In the early 1970s I had visited the exposed section of the London–Lewes road at Holtye. This first experience of the archaeology of Roman roads fostered a lifelong interest in the rail-like network. And so we arrive back at Ivan Margary, for although I didn't know it then, it was inevitably Margary who had mapped and then excavated this section of road.

All who study archaeology know its fascination, and it is our responsibility to spread

the joy and knowledge of our subject at every opportunity; in a way, that's really what Ivan Margary did for me!

Acknowledgements

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