

WATLING STREET SOUTH OF CHESTER

by A. C. Waddelove, B.A., and E. Waddelove

The road from Deva southwards is considered to have passed through Heronbridge and the Eaton Hall estate to cross the River Dee North of Aldford (Fig. 1). Further South it was described (Margary, 1973, 297) as 'approaching the Churton to Coddington road, Edgerley Lane, on the west side of the hedgerow but with another row of trees on its western side indicating that this was once an enclosed lane' (Fig. 2). A portion of that hedgerow was uprooted in the Autumn of 1981 and the open drain alongside filled; the trees were felled and their stumps removed; and, in the interval before the ploughing of the enlarged field, permission was given for an excavation which lasted five days from 3 October, although heavy rain on the last three seriously impeded the work. The objective was to supplement the information gained from previous excavations northwards between here and Chester (Way, 1961, 15-23; Buchanan, Jermy and Petch, 1975, 1-13; Petch, 1975, 15-39; Mason, 1976, 24-30 and Williams, 1933, 50-55) to ascertain further details of the construction of the road.

Excavation

The excavation was located at grid reference SJ 42995691 where there had been little disturbance by the recent operations. The field had been thrown up into rigg and furr in an approximately North East to South West direction, with one rigg running across the ends, parallel to the causeway of the road and more conspicuous than it. A slight depression, in which the oaks marking the western side had been growing, separated the two (Plate 1).

A trench was cut by machine working westwards, commencing a short distance from the filled drain to minimise the risk of flooding. After the road line had been cut it was seen, not only that the depression contained a ditch to the West as expected, but that there were features further West of that again. The trench was therefore extended in that direction, and towards the end of the work it was also cut further eastwards. It thus reached a total length of 25.6m and in order to reveal the features in plan, a strip 0.6m wide was pegged out along the southern edge of the section for excavation by hand, although in the event this could be only partially completed.

The undisturbed strata were identified (Figs. 3 and 4) as a reddish brown boulder clay (19), and above this, a yellow clay (18). On the latter was a dark blue, conspicuous layer (17), of irregular outline and thickness. Its colour seemed to be due

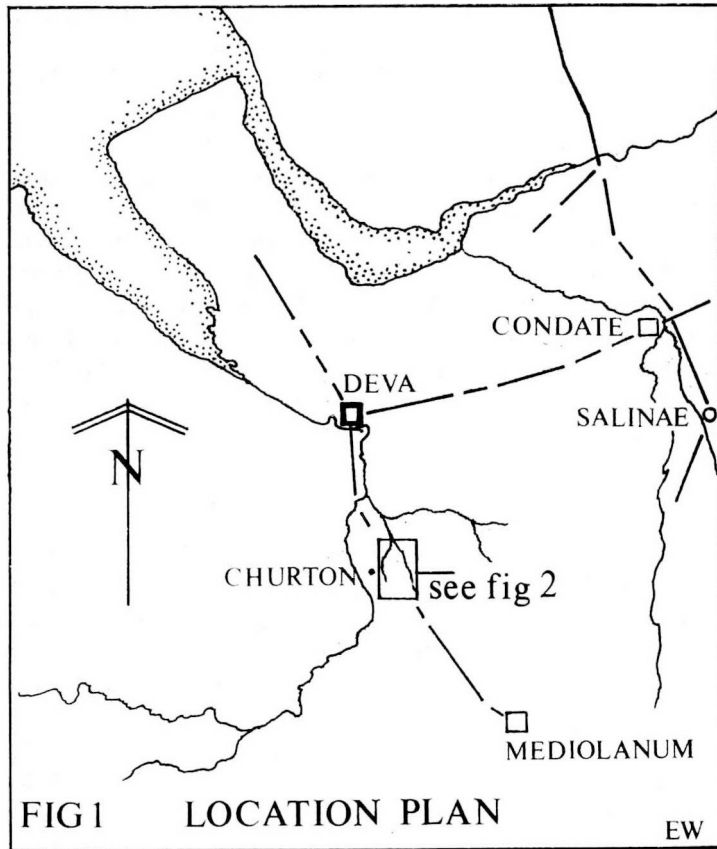




FIG 2

to the presence of organic material mixed with the yellow clay. Dimensions of features are quoted relative to the top of this layer.

The field drain on the East (20) (Fig. 3) had been recut (23) at least twice (24), possibly during maintenance in relatively modern times. Its width was 1.1m and the depth 30cm. Rising from this was a foundation layer of sandstone rubble mixed in clay (3) which was laid on the dark blue band. In the upper part there were larger pieces of stone lying horizontally but no surface resembling a road was uncovered. This feature was 4.6m wide and extended to an edging in sandstone (4) which, although partially eroded and destroyed, was prominent during the opening of the section. Each segment was seen then to be 15cm wide and at least 20cm high with tapered roof shaped tops. They had been set into a trench cut 7.5cm into the blue clay. No complete blocks were recovered and no corresponding feature was apparent on the eastern side. A trench for a modern water main (2) was visible in the section. Immediately adjacent to the edging on the West was a small ditch (6) 22cm wide and 8cm deep, and from this to another ditch (7) 1.5m away was a layer of sand (5) 15cm thick. Some of this was reddish brown, as though derived from sandstone, while the remainder was yellow brown in colour. The western ditch was 0.9m wide and 45cm deep, and a modern tile drain (8) had been set on a ledge cut into the eastern side, 15cm above the deepest point. From the western edge of this ditch (Fig. 4) there was a layer of sand (11) about 22cm thick, again with different colours, containing small pieces of sandstone and extending for 3.3m. Another smaller ditch (12) 45cm wide and 22cm deep, with its deepest point off centre to the East, separated the sand from a foundation of sandstone blocks (16), 7.5m wide, of irregular shape and size. The largest were about 25cm long and stood on the dark blue clay, packed tightly, with their longest axes generally near the vertical. The layer was sharply cambered on the eastern edge and rose quickly to its maximum thickness of 30cm. On top of the sandstone were embedded pebbles (14), and these appeared to have been graded, with the smallest placed between the blocks. The western edge was different from the eastern in that the foundation thinned more gradually over the last 0.9m, there was no small ditch alongside and although there was a belt of sand, it was only a few centimetres thick and 2.1m wide. The trench was continued for another 3.3m beyond that but a further ditch was not recognised.

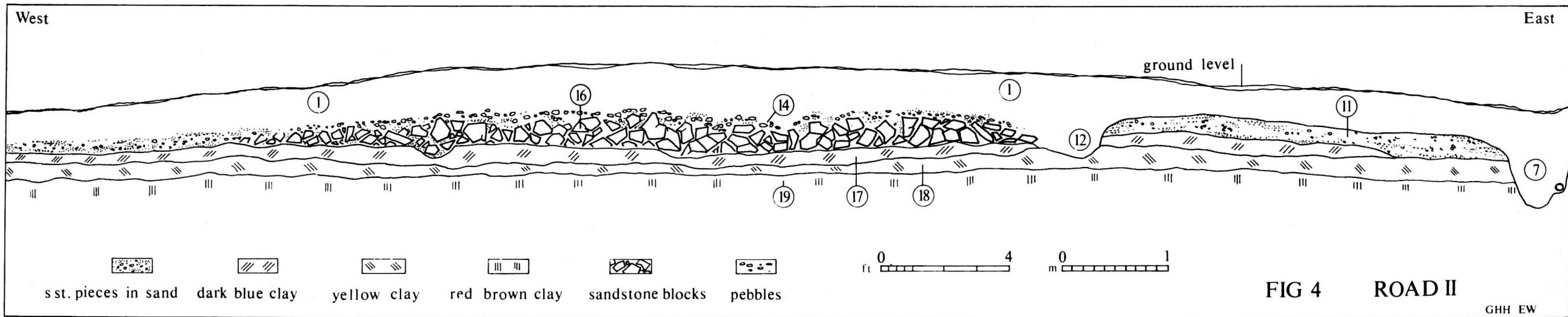
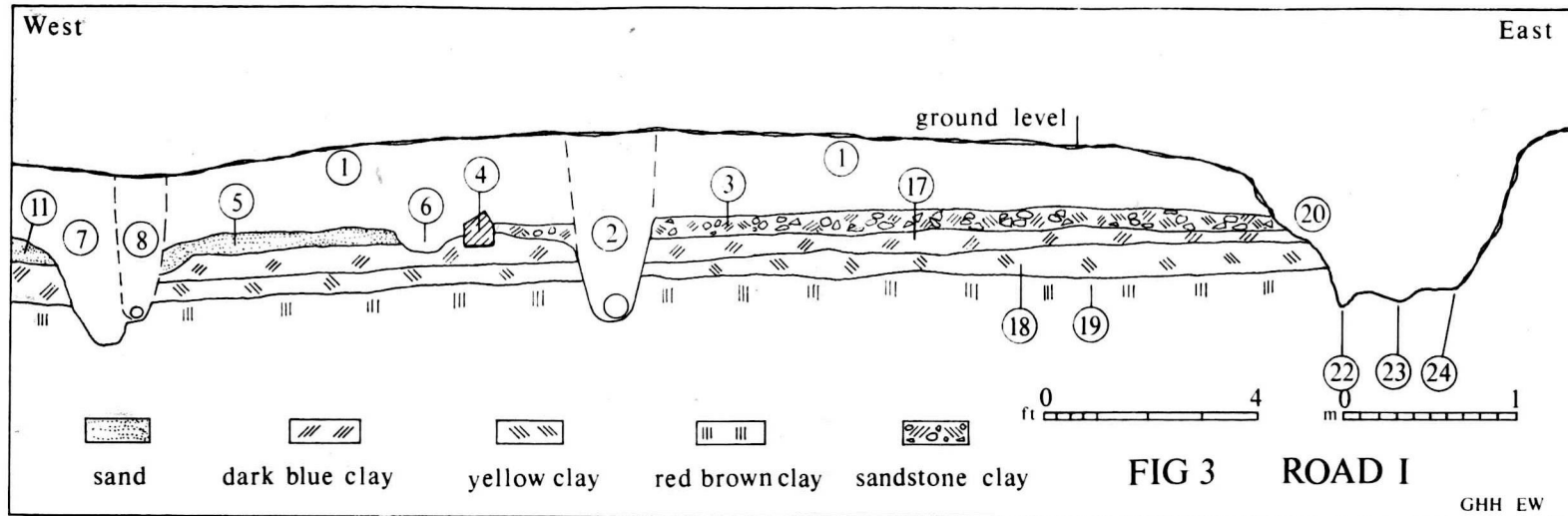
The overall width of the features was 20.4m, far in excess of anything expected, and the evidence is best explained by the existence of two roads. That constituting the line described by Margary measured about 6.7m from the field drain (20) on the East to the centre of the ditch (7) on its West. This is now referred to as Road I, while Road II lay under the supposed rigg to the West, spanning 13.7m, and was of a larger and more solid construction in all dimensions. The surfaces were between 30cm and 45cm below present day ground level and, although both profiles were reflected by separate causeways in the field above, it was noted that the highest point of neither coincided with the centres of the roads.



Plate 1 — The two causeways looking North (imperial scale).



Plate 2 — The pebble surface of Road II on the sandstone blocks (imperial scale).



The layer of blue clay (17) under both roads is tentatively identified as a brushwood fascine sub foundation intended to give buoyancy to the construction.

The modern drain (20) could have followed the Roman ditch, represented possibly by the V shape (22) at its bottom, on the eastern side of Road I, while the foundations consisted of the sandstone rubble and yellow clay mix (3) although presumably the actual surface had been removed at some period. This foundation was bounded on the West by the edging of kerbstones (4) and in view of the customary practice, it seems possible that something similar existed originally on the eastern side. The band of sand alongside a road has been identified elsewhere (Chevallier, 1976, 88-89) as a bridle path for the cavalry and this (5), on the West of Road I, was separated from the carriageway by the small ditch (6) provided to help drainage.

It would seem logical to assume that the main ditch (7) between the two constructions was initially on the West of Road I but later came to be used for Road II on its eastern side. The layer of sand (11) represented the bridle path along the eastern side of Road II from which it was separated by the small ditch (12), and both were on a larger scale than their Road I counterparts. The sandstone foundation (16) was the most prominent feature in the section and the pebbles (14) on top constituted a surface which had survived in remarkable condition (Plate 2). Despite the solidity of its construction, the weight of traffic had apparently depressed the surface in bands on both sides of the centrepiece, although ruts were not seen, and this effect extended downwards into the dark blue layer in which were a few pieces of the sandstone rubble. The gradual tapering of the road on the western edge was in marked contrast to the eastern, and no explanation was found.

Discussion

Since most of these features have apparently remained unrecognised during excavations in the past, a study of the earlier reports is now considered to be imperative.

In a section cut through the western half of Road I in the same field at Churton (Way, 1961, 15-23) 'a 12 inch [30cm] layer of rammed clay and gravel was found [which] had the consistency of a soft rock'. When the trench was extended westwards 'a few sandstone blocks' were uncovered and a subsidiary trench dug at right angles 'revealed a great deal of sandstone'. 'The contrast between this stone and the lack of it in the original trench was surprising'. It is evident that the eastern edge of Road II was uncovered but not recognised as such.

Two trenches were opened in Eaton Park at SJ 415613 between Eaton Stud and Garden Lodge (Buchanan, Jermy and Petch, 1975, 1-13) and under the old drive were found 'two superimposed road surfaces, the lower consisting of rammed gravel with some grey sand, and the upper containing some cobbles and sandstone fragments as well as compacted gravel set in red or brown sand'. Although not as solidly constructed as Road II at Churton, the width of 7.6m was almost the same and its metalling also 'became sparser towards the western edge'.

East of this road, in Trenches A1-6, there was 'a spread of grey sand with some gravel and cobbles which interleaved with other layers of a mixed sandy or clayey consistency containing varying amounts of gravel or cobbles'. To the excavators 'it seemed possible that an earlier road was offset somewhat to the east of the later'. However, further excavation in A1-6 and evidence from Trench B2 'combined to disprove this tentative theory conclusively', although what and how is not stated.

Also East of the road in B2 was 'a spread of brown sandy clay with cobble and gravel inclusions which could have been derived from the earliest road' (presumably the lower of the two surfaces is meant) and this capped 'various sands and clays with pockets of gravel'.

Owing to the absence of a key to the symbols used, it is not easy to understand the section drawings. However, the spread of brown sandy clay containing the cobbles and gravel appears to be 5.2m wide ending about 2.4m from a V shaped, off centre ditch which is 7.4m East of the edge of the road. No details of the last feature are given in the text, but from the drawings this ditch appears to have Roman characteristics and to be dug from the Roman layer.

In the light of this, and considering the unlikely spreading of any great quantity of cobbles and gravel 'to thin out at rather over 27 feet [8.25m]' from the road, it seems logical to think that the evidence from B2 supports the findings from A1-6, and that the first tentative theory of 'an earlier road somewhat offset to the east of the later' was, in fact, correct. It would thus have had an eastern ditch, perhaps a bridle path about 2.4m wide, and a metalled surface 5.2m wide. These dimensions compare favourably with those of Road I at Churton.

This interpretation of the evidence may explain the gully under the eastern edge of the two surfaces, for which no explanation was found at the time. This obviously predated the road, yet 'its final filling' was 'associated with the construction': it would have been the western ditch of Road I which, instead of being used as the eastern one of the later, as at Churton, was filled and built over. The differing treatment was dictated by the need here to have the main drain on the West of the new construction in order to intercept any water which might seep down the slope from that direction before it could begin to undermine the foundations. It was noted that 'heavy rain in the autumn of 1970 showed the need for good drainage, on the west of the road especially, but no signs of side ditches were identified in either section'; since it seems unlikely that the Roman engineers would have neglected to provide such a fundamental requirement, it is possible that the feature found on the West to contain a relatively modern brick drain was, in fact, originally the Roman ditch, a parallel for which was indeed found at Churton.

Pollen grains from the gully proved on analysis to be mainly from herbaceous species, with only a few from trees. The conclusion drawn, to the surprise of the excavators, was that the tree cover in the immediate pre-Roman period was slight and 'this particular part of Cheshire would not have differed so markedly in appearance from the predominantly pasture land which we know today'. However, if the road found were not the first, as is being suggested, then the trees would

have previously been cleared for a distance on either side (Chevallier, 1976, 88), allowing herbaceous and grass species to colonise the open ground. The tree cover in reality may well have been as dense as generally thought only a short distance away.

Excavations in advance of the construction of the Chester Southerly By Pass, at SJ 41166304, on the East of Eaton Road (Petch, 1975, 15-39), found that the Roman road 'consisted of gravel and small cobbles set in clay and laid directly on the natural clay'. 'There was no recognisable sign of either patching or resurfacing', and it 'was in serious disrepair'; the difference in condition between that found here and the much better surface in Garden Lodge, about 1.7km away, caused some surprise. Significantly perhaps, 'one of the trenches produced sherds of pottery datable broadly to the 3rd century from a deposit laid down after the road fell out of use'. On the East was a ditch which had been recut several times, and which was separated from the actual road by a strip varying in width between 1.7m and 2.55m. The full extent of the metalled surface was not recovered since it had been destroyed on the West by a ditch bordering a plantation alongside the modern road. However, 'it must have exceeded 15 feet [4.6m]'.

Later work on both sides of Eaton Road in the same area (Mason, 1976, 24-30) extended the former northern trench, and the Roman surface was found to continue beyond the ditch and under a hedge on the East side of the modern road, giving a width of at least 12.8m. On the opposite side the foundations of a rectangular structure were discovered, which the excavator surmised might have been a store or barn with the wider than usual road being 'a forecourt or loading area for the building'. The total distance from the recut ditch on the East to the front of the structure was 22.6m, compared with 20.4m across the two roads at Churton, sufficient to accommodate Roads I and II, and space for loading. The other possible explanation offered for the extra width, the branching of a road to Holt or Ffrith, does not have anything to support it.

Combining the evidence from these two excavations, it appears that the disrepair noted was on Road I, while the modern highway overlies most of Road II. Thus the condition of the surface, inferior to that in Garden Lodge, is no longer surprising since they are different roads, and Road I, after its abandonment, could understandably have been covered by deposits containing 3rd century sherds.

In a series of excavations to the North, at Heronbridge and Green Bank (Williams, 1933, 50-55), the road was examined in eight trenches on the East of Eaton Road. Summarising the evidence from six of them, cut at intervals over a distance of 61m, northwards from SJ41076361, a picture emerges of 'a double layer of cobbles . . . resting on a foundation of sandstone rubble above the boulder clay' contained between kerbs of sandstone varying between 7.6m and 9.4m apart, while 'on a pavement of small stones and gravel was found a sestertius of Hadrian' and 'a layer of sandstone with a few cobbles . . . extended . . . for 9 feet [2.75m]' beyond which was the ditch of the Roman settlement.

From the position of the trenches as plotted by the excavator on his Key Plan, Plate XLV, it seems almost certain that two roads were involved. The modern road makes a long gentle bend between the By Pass and Heronbridge, and the evidence suggests that Road II, under Eaton Road farther South but cutting across this arc like the string of a bow, was the one mainly examined because Road I had been encroached upon by the ditch of the later settlement, for a distance of about 150m.

The remaining two trenches, sited farther North 'in the field south of Green Bank' revealed 'two cambered surfaces having a width of 12 feet [3.7m] each and separated by an interval of 5 feet [1.5m]' while in the more southern 'there were indications that a low wall of dry rubble had divided the up and down tracks'. Clearly, from the railway terminology, the excavator recognised the two roads but thought they were in use simultaneously.

Work on the East of Eaton Road in Red Lion Field at SJ 41056391 (Hartley, 1952, 1-20) revealed areas, labelled VI and VIII in Building II, which were probably unroofed and unfloored 'but had patches of cobbles and gravel'. Interestingly, these areas were on the line of Road I which was cut by the walls of later buildings, apparently set at right angles to Road II.

Further excavation at the southern end of the same site (Hartley and Kaine, 1954, 15-37) disclosed that 'in the initial occupation a hollow, presumably the valley of a stream, existed between sites II and III'. Stone walls were built later on either side, the space behind on the southern bank being filled to make 'a massive platform of rough-hewn sandstone blocks' while 'to the north a layer of sandstone rubble stretching for 30 feet [9.1m] was . . . put down'. These constructions were interpreted as, respectively, the quayside of and an access to, a dock '23 feet [7m] wide between walls' which would have been connected to the River Dee by two hypothetical locks, each at least 3m deep.

In this locality it would have been difficult to maintain a supply of water, sufficient to fill, continuously, the supposed locks and dock, since the catchment area of the stream is small. Therefore, and also because the harbour at Deva was so near, a better understanding of all the evidence might be either that the walls, platform and access were the abutments of, and approaches to, a bridge for Road I, the line of which they appear to cross, or stone revetments erected for an unknown purpose when industrial activities developed in the area.

Perhaps it should also be noted that a Roman road was seen in 1884 (Watkin, 1886, 47) to the North of Green Bank 'formed of a layer of boulder stones, from 4 inches [10cm] to a foot [30cm] in size, resting in hard clay and above them a layer of coarse gravel', since there seems to be a strong resemblance to the structure of Road II in this description.

The evidence from the reports of the excavations undertaken previously appears at first sight to be contradictory: the road is made of gravel or cobbles set in clay in one location, while, a short distance away, it apparently consists of cobbles or coarse gravel on sandstone blocks. It is also variable in width, from about 5m to 7.6m or more. The discoveries caused difficulties of interpretation and confounded

the excavators in many ways. Recognition, however, that the evidence relates to separate roads would seem to solve many of the problems and eliminate most of the surprises.

Conclusion

Thus, while the findings at Churton which originally prompted this study were unexpected, it would now appear reasonable to conclude that two roads existed side by side for at least 8km, although the points at which they begin and end remain undetermined.

The reason why an entirely new road would have been constructed alongside another could be explained partially by the slightness of the foundation which appears to have been laid originally. It seems reasonable to suppose that Road I was the earlier, being superseded by the more solid Road II as the importance of Deva grew and its traffic increased. Perhaps then it became apparent that Road I would eventually disintegrate under the weight. However, the greater width required for a new carriageway, and its two bridle paths, would have necessitated filling the original ditches, risking problems with subsidence. Thus only a new and solid foundation would meet the revised needs.

Nevertheless, it seems strange that it is the line of Road I which has been preserved in this locality by hedges, ditches, an enclosed lane and a stretch of parish boundary while the much larger causeway of Road II has gone unremarked.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank Eaton Estate Manager Mr. B. S. Bowden, for readily giving permission on behalf of His Grace the Duke of Westminster for the excavation, and making available farm machinery which proved invaluable; Grosvenor Museum Field Officer, Mr. T. J. Strickland for his advice; and members of the Border Counties Archaeological Group, especially Mr. G. H. Holme, who helped on site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Buchanan, Jermy and Petch, 1975 M. Buchanan, K. E. Jermy and D. F. Petch, 'Watling Street in the grounds of Eaton Hall: excavations north of Garden Lodge 1970-71', *J.C.A.S.*, 58, 1975, 1-13
- Chevallier, 1976 R. Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, 1976
- Hartley, 1952 B. R. Hartley, 'Excavations at Heronbridge 1947-48', *J.C.A.S.*, 39, 1952, 1-20
- Hartley and Kaine, 1954 B. R. Hartley and K. F. Kaine, 'Roman Dock and Buildings', *J.C.A.S.*, 41, 1954, 15-37
- Margary, 1973 I. D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain*, 1973
- Mason, 1976 D. Mason, 'Chester Southerly By-Pass 1975', *J.C.A.S.*, 59, 1976, 24-30
- Petch, 1975 D. F. Petch, 'Excavations in Eaton Road, Eccleston, Chester, 1972', *J.C.A.S.*, 58, 1975, 15-39
- Watkin, 1886 W. Thompson Watkin, *Roman Cheshire*, 1886, reprinted with new introduction by D. F. Petch, 1974
- Way, 1961 M. St. J. Way, 'Watling Street South of Aldford', *J.C.A.S.*, 48, 1961, 15-23
- Williams, 1933 W. J. Williams, 'The Watling Street at Heronbridge', *J.C.A.S.*, 30, part 1, 1933, 50-55