

XIV.—THE ROMAN ROAD FROM BOWES TO BINCHESTER.

BY R. P. WRIGHT.

[Read on 24th February 1937.]

The Roman road¹ from Bowes (*Lavatrae*) to a point three miles south of Binchester (*Vinovia*) forms a thirteen-mile link between the Scotch Corner-Carlisle road and Dere Street, the Great North Road of the Romans. The earlier evidence for its existence falls under three heads.

First, there are three significant place-names along the line. A mile and a quarter south-west of the bridge at Barnard Castle, and on the north side of the Bowes-Barnard Castle road, stands a house called Street Head. From there the road runs straight to the Tees, where the village on the Yorkshire bank is called Startforth. One of the variant forms of this name between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries was Stratford,² that is to say the place where, in mediaeval times, those who used the line of the Roman road forded the river. Continuing the same straight line for three miles to the north-east we reach Streatlam castle. This name, current about A.D. 1050 in the form Stretlea,³ means the "clearing by the Roman road."

Secondly, early antiquaries have stated that a Roman road ran from Barnard Castle towards Binchester. John

¹ See one-inch OS map, sheet 14.

² VCH, North Riding, I, 134.

³ A. Mawer: *The place-names of Northumberland and Durham* (1920), 191.

⁴ Printed by Hutchinson: *Hist. Northd.* I, 115, 118.

Warburton,⁴ in writing to Roger Gale on 21st November 1717, conjectured that a Roman road ran from Bainbridge to Old Town in Allendale; and, judging by the name Stratford, crossed the Tees at Barnard Castle. But Gale, in his reply, suggested that the road which crossed the river by this ford was aiming approximately for Bincchester.

Horsley⁵ (1732) says he observed traces of a Roman road on either side of Barnard Castle, and cites the place-names of "Stratford" and "Streetham" as evidence; he is inclined to take it "to Lanchester or to some part of our northern Watling street."

Hutchinson⁶ (1794) gives details of its course at Barnard Castle and Streatlam, and takes it to the foot of Bildershaw hill, a little south of Bishop Auckland.

Writers of the nineteenth century add further details to the course outlined by Hutchinson. H. MacLauchlan⁷ (1852) says that the road was hacked up at New Moors Pottery (which is a mile north-east of Wackerfield), and regards Hummerbeck lane as preserving the line of the road. He also mentions a causeway 4 ft. wide which appeared to continue the course of the Roman road eastwards from "Watling Street" as far as the Darlington-Durham road.

W. H. D. Longstaffe⁸ (1857) marks the general direction of the road on his map, and on the authority of the Rev. M. A. Denham quotes details for its course from Streatlam to Raby, and also reports that farmers had uprooted the road and found it four to five yards wide and built of large sandstone.

The third type of evidence is supplied by two chance discoveries of a Roman road at Barnard Castle, during extensions at the gas works on the low-lying ground be-

⁵ *Brit. Rom.*, 482.

⁶ *Hist. and Antiq. of the Co. Pal. of Durham* (ed. 1823), III, 297.

⁷ *Memoir written during a survey of the Watling Street*, 4.

⁸ *Arch. Inst.*, Newcastle volume for 1852: "Durham before the Conquest," 60-1.

tween the castle and the river. The earlier find was made on 24th June 1839, and Fordyce⁹ says that workmen "discovered a portion of this road at the depth of about 6 feet from the surface, 12 feet wide, and quite perfect. It was formed of limestone rock placed edgewise, and compacted with fragments of sandstone, probably obtained from the riverside." The later discovery, made at a depth of 6 ft. during further extensions at the gas works, was recorded in the *Teesdale Mercury* of 14th April 1886, and by Bailey.¹⁰ In addition, Mr. J. I. Dawson, town clerk of Barnard Castle, who saw the road, described it to the present writer as being about 12 ft. wide and built of paving slabs about 15 in. square, set diagonally to the course of the road.

R. E. Hooppell,¹¹ in his map and article, accepts Hummerbeck lane as certain, and marks the rest of the route to Barnard Castle as not fully traced out. J. R. Boyle¹² holds that there is little reason to doubt the Roman date of this road.

A further discovery was made in 1908 by Edward Wooler,¹³ who recorded seeing distinct traces of the road in a specified field at Wackerfield, and said two farmers remembered the road being taken up to ease ploughing and mend other highways.

Mr. J. A. Petch¹⁴ (1925) considers that there is little concrete evidence to encourage belief in this Roman road,

⁹ W. Fordyce: *Hist. and Antiq. of Durham* (1857), II, 15. He gives the date as July 1839, but the *Teesdale Mercury* of 14th April 1886 assigns it to 24th June 1839, and gives details from an eye-witness, who described its course as running obliquely up the bank. The newspaper account is quoted *verbatim* by J. B. Bailey in an article "Barnard Castle: a Roman station," reprinted from the *Teesdale Mercury* in September 1897, and in a revised form in 1911. The site of the discovery is marked by a stone inscription built into a wall 10 feet south-east of the smaller gas-container; it reads: "ROMAN ROAD | from Bowes to Binchester | Paved 12 Feet wide | DISCOVERED | 1839."

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, 7. See also H. M. Scarth: *Jour. Brit. Arch. Assoc.* XLIII, 132.

¹¹ *Jour. Brit. Arch. Assoc.* XLIII, 113. Hooppell, *Vinovia* (1891), 2.

¹² *The County of Durham*, 67.

¹³ PSAN³ III, 220.

¹⁴ AA⁴ I, 3.

whereas Mr. and Mrs. F. Elgee, in their map of Yorkshire¹⁵ in the Roman period, mark the road as certain from Bowes till it leaves the North Riding at Startforth.

FINDS.

Some Roman coins have been found along the line of the road. While these do not prove the existence of a road, the road might perhaps serve to explain their presence. At Barnard Castle a coin of Trajan,¹⁶ dated to A.D. 100, was found in the churchyard in 1824. Bailey states that many other coins were found in Bridge-gate, but had passed into private hands and could not be traced. He also refers to an entry in the note-book of R. W. Atkinson's father, which recorded the discovery in the castle gardens of "several small images, apparently household gods, together with several sculptured stones bearing a boar, significant of the 20th Legion."^{16a}

Longstaffe¹⁷ says that there remained in very recent times "some black oaken timbers at the presumed course of the Roman road over a beck or burn near Streatlam." In addition, a *sestertius* of Titus, A.D. 80-81, has been found somewhere at Streatlam.¹⁸ Hooppell¹⁹ marks a find of Roman coins at Startforth, but no further details appear to have been published.

¹⁵ *The Arch. of Yorks.*, map at end.

¹⁶ S. Lewis: *Top. Dict. of Eng.*, 4th ed. 1840, s.v.; Bailey: *op. cit.*, 9, gives the legend as *obv.* IMP.CAES.NERVA TRAIANUS GERM . . . *rev.* P.M.TR.P.COS.III.P.P., together with a crowned, seated figure with an olive branch in the right hand.

^{16a} As the boar was the badge not only of the 20th legion, but also of Richard, duke of Gloucester, who did building at Barnard Castle (Surtees, *Durham* IV, 91), the attribution of these stones to the Roman period seems questionable.

¹⁷ *History of Darlington* (1854), 351. Mr. James McIntyre supplied this and the following reference.

¹⁸ Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, no. 230. *Mattingly and Sydenham*, 86; cf. *Cohen*, 14.

¹⁹ *Vinovia*, map facing p. 2.

THE EXCAVATIONS.

Before making a field-survey of the road, the writer discussed the route with the Rev. Thomas Romans, to whom the district is personally well known. At his instance Mr. John Bewick, formerly head-forester to the Streatlam estate, was interviewed, and was kind enough to give detailed information about discovering the road during draining and planting. His clear recollection enabled him to mark the precise points of discovery upon the six-inch Ordnance Survey map. A field-survey followed, and distinct traces were noted both within the Great Wood at Streatlam and also in an adjacent meadow. Furthermore, in the final half-mile of the route, as it neared Dere Street, traces of metalling were visible at the side of Burnshouse lane. These two instances, combined with Wooler's report of remains at Wackerfield, seemed to justify a trial-excavation.

On behalf of the Durham University Excavation Committee, the writer tested the road by excavation at these three sites in July 1936, and did supplementary trenching near Bowes in September.

(a) Streatlam park.

Two main cross-sections were cut, numbered I and II on fig. 1. Section I was cut in meadow no. 206 (Du. XLVII 9),²⁰ which lies between the carriage-drive and the west part of the Great Wood. Large blocks of sandstone to a depth of 6 in. at the sides and 10 in. at the centre formed a well-laid bottoming upon the clay subsoil (see plate xxvi, 1). Above this there were traces of small sandstone metalling, but most of the road-metalling must have been ploughed away. The average depth of topsoil and turf was 5 in. The kerbs were well marked, and search

²⁰ OS 25-inch map, ed. 1921, of Durham. (Du.) The north kerb was 320 ft. from the north angle of the meadow, and 26 ft. west of the fence which separates it from the Great Wood.

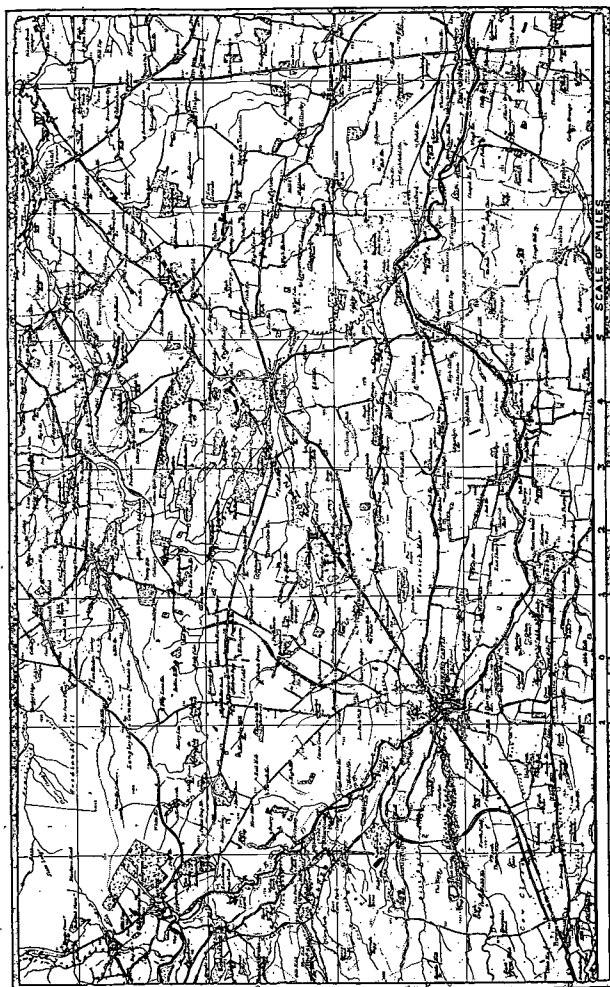


FIG. 1. THE ROMAN ROAD FROM BOWES TO BINCHESTER.
 Reproduced from the OS map with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.
 One-third scale from the 1-inch sheet 14, ed. 1925.

was made for a ditch by continuing the trench for 35 ft. north of the north kerb, but the clay had not been disturbed. A supplementary trench across the road was cut

at a point 150 ft. to the south-west, both to show the direction of the road and to verify its width. In both sections it was 24 ft. 3 in. wide.

From section I the course of the road can be traced on the surface through the west part of the Great Wood, no. 208 (Du. XLVII 9), where the road-metalling crops out as a continuous band through this plantation. About 100 yards west of the Deer Shed the road has been cut through by a drainage-ditch.²¹ After reaching this shed the line is no longer visible on the surface until the centre of the Great Wood is reached. Here the writer, in his preliminary field-survey, found a group of uprooted trees, of which one retained among its roots a mass of large stones torn up from a pavement of similar material. Section II was made at this point,²² and showed a metalled road 23 ft. 7 in. wide; both kerbs were definite, though the stones were small. Another section, 150 ft. to the south-west, verified the course of the road; but in neither section were the remains so well preserved as in the meadow, section I.

Sections I and II prove that a first-class road, with typical Roman bottoming, kerbs, and straight lay-out, runs through Streatlam park from south-west to north-east, in continuation of the three miles of straight modern road from Barnard Castle.

(b) *Wackerfield.*

Edward Wooler²³ reported that he "found distinct traces of the Roman road in the centre of the field midway between the Black Horse Inn,²⁴ Wackerfield, and the wood adjoining Hilton tile sheds." Section III (see fig. 1) was cut in the centre of this field, no. 19 (Du. XLVII 4),

²¹ Information from Mr. J. Bewick.

²² The north kerb was 430 ft. south of the northern gate, and 460 ft. east of the southern gate in the boundary-wall of the Great Wood which runs from the Deer Shed to Sudburn Beck, the measurements being taken from the nearer gate-posts.

²³ PSAN³ III, 220.

²⁴ Now Black Horse House.

at right-angles to the presumed line, and the first trench produced an excellent example of the road.²⁵

The road (see plate xxvi, 2) was formed of large sandstone bottoming, 8 in. deep, with a good kerb on the north, but less regular on the south; the width was 24 ft. 3 in., as in Streatlam park. The bottoming was even, but had a slight fall of 4 in. from south to north. Only slight traces of upper metalling were to be seen. The line of the road was proved by cutting a second trench at an interval of 380 ft. to the south-west.

In its continuation to the north-east the road at first probably kept south of Hummer beck. MacLauchlan²⁶ reports that it was found crossing the farm at New Moors Pottery. Near Bolton Garths it would cross Hummer beck and coincide with the straight sector of Hummerbeck lane. From there the lane runs practically straight till it reaches Burns House at the foot of Bildershaw hill. The slight deviations from the straight are due to its avoidance of Hummer beck.

(c) *Burnshouse lane.*

Section IV (see fig. 1) was cut in Burnshouse lane, the continuation of Hummerbeck lane, at a point half a mile south-west of Burns House,²⁷ which lies on Dere Street. When the ash-track and marginal earth-mound had been cut through, compact sandstone road-bottoming was found, 5 in. deep and 21 ft. 6 in. wide. It was bounded on either side by a slight ditch, probably modern. On the north, two kerbstones were still in position. Little trace remained of any upper metalling.

²⁵ The north kerb was 650 ft. from the north-west corner of the field, and 550 ft. from the south-west corner. The line of the road coincides with the gateway in the centre of the west fence.

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, 4.

²⁷ The trench was cut 860 yds. south-west of Burns House, just north of field no. 126 (Du. XLII 10). Between the hedges of the lane, set 33 ft. apart, runs a modern cart-way, about 9 ft. wide, made of ashes. To the south of this lies a mound of earth, about 2 ft. high at its maximum and 13 ft. wide from north to south.

This sector of the lane has not been metalled in modern times. The presence of a definite kerb, the solidity of the bottoming, and its similarity in material, construction, and width to that found at Streatlam and Wackerfield provide convincing proof of its Roman engineering.

(d) *Bowes.*

The course of the road is therefore clear from Barnard Castle to Dere Street. It is also difficult to question the first one and a quarter miles in the North Riding from Barnard Castle south-west to Street Head, since they are exactly in line with the Streatlam-Barnard Castle sector and are marked by the place-names of Street Head and Startforth. Just west of Street Head the modern road reaches the top of the long ascent from Startforth, and at the railway-bridge veers north and then keeps straight for one and a half miles till it reaches a point just north of Bowes railway-station. Here at a road-junction it turns south through nearly a right-angle, passes the station, and joins the Scotch Corner-Carlisle road at the east end of the village of Bowes. Near the road-junction north of Bowes station a broad mound begins, which keeps about forty yards south of the modern road and accompanies it eastwards for nearly a mile. As it seemed likely that this mound might represent the Roman road, the writer cut a trench²⁸ across it at the most promising point. It proved to be a bank of clay, 23 ft. wide and 3 ft. high at the centre. The central 9 ft. of the mound were left unexcavated, but no trace of metalling could be found by probing. In the northern 9 ft. there was a three-inch layer of small sandstone immediately under the turf. But there was no evidence that this mound had ever carried a road, and certainly not a massive Roman road of the type found at the three points mentioned above.

The course of this mound was also surveyed and tested

²⁸ In the large field south-east of the road-junction, 180 ft. east of its west wall, and 60 ft. south of its north wall.

by probing; its pre-enclosure date is shown by the way in which the north to south field-walls overlie it, but its course is sinuous and frequent probings to a depth of two feet failed to find any hard metalling. It is therefore not the Roman road.

There is also the possibility that the Roman road lies below the modern road along this sector. It did not, however, continue westwards beyond the road-junction, for trenches cut in the south end of the field due west of this junction gave negative results. So also, for what it is worth, did a field-survey of the ground between the road-junction and the Roman fort, a third of a mile to the south-west.

While there can be no doubt that Bowes (*Lavatrae*) was one terminus of the Roman road, there is as yet no positive evidence for the first two miles of its course from Bowes towards the north-east. After Street Head, where the modern road turns and points towards Barnard Castle, the two place-names and the alignment of the road upon the course already verified further east may be taken as satisfactory evidence for its Roman origin.

CONCLUSION.

The work at the sites in county Durham, at three widely separated points, confirms the literary statements. It is only in the first two miles from Bowes that the course is uncertain. The road is a first-class example of Roman engineering. It adopts an easy crossing of the Tees at Startforth, and then maintains an almost straight course for Dere Street. The Hummer beck forces it to diverge slightly, but otherwise it meets with no physical barriers. Although its purpose is to link Bowes to Binchester, it makes its terminus on Dere Street at a point three miles south of Binchester, thus avoiding wet ground and a superfluous crossing of the river Gaunless.

The writer wishes to thank the landowners who gave him permission to excavate : Lord Barnard for Wackerfield, Mr. Norman Field for Streatlam park, and Messrs. S. K. Bainbridge and T. Longstaffe for Bowes. He also makes grateful acknowledgment of the help given him by the tenants and other local residents. Finally, he is particularly indebted to Mr. E. R. Hanby Holmes, Mr. S. E. Harrison, Mr. J. McIntyre, and the Rev. T. Romans for local assistance of all kinds so generously placed at his disposal.



Fig. 2. ROMAN ROAD AT WACKERFIELD, FROM NORTH.



Fig. 1. ROMAN ROAD IN STREATLAM PARK, SECTION I. FROM SOUTH.

