

## XVI.—THE ROMAN BRANCH-ROAD FROM BINCHESTER TO THE NORTH-EAST.

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For abbreviations used, see page 351.

The Roman fort of Binchester (*Vinovia*)<sup>1</sup> formed not only a link in the line of first-century posts along the main north road, Dere Street, but also a junction for roads from the south-west and north-east. The south-west road<sup>2</sup> came from Bowes (*Lavatrae*) and joined Dere Street at Fieldon bridge, three miles south of Binchester. The route to the north-east was first observed by Dr. Hunter,<sup>3</sup> of Durham, who saw it branching off Dere Street at Willington, traced it as far as Brancepeth, and, according to Horsley, imagined that it ran to Chester-le-Street. In his letter to Gale, however, he suggests that it passed about a mile east of Chester-le-Street and continued on towards South Shields. Brayley and Britton<sup>4</sup> on their map make the road run from Willington to Chester-le-Street. Mac-Lauchlan<sup>5</sup> gives details of its course as far as Brancepeth, and states that it had recently been dug up in one of the Little White fields, along which it was still visible.

<sup>1</sup> OS 1-inch map, II.

<sup>2</sup> AA<sup>4</sup> XIV, 194-204.

<sup>3</sup> Horsley, *Brit. Rom.* 399. Hutchinson, *Hist. of Durham* (1787), II, 486, quotes Hunter's letter to Gale of 17th May 1735.

<sup>4</sup> *Beauties of England and Wales*, Durham (1805).

<sup>5</sup> *Memoir on a survey of Watling Street*, 8 (1852).

On surveying the traditional line, the present writer found remains of the road at Willington and Brandon by probing, and independently noticed the remarkable mound of the road in one of the Red Barns fields. Five sites were selected for excavation, which was done in August 1937 by the present writer on behalf of the Durham University Excavation Committee.

(a) *Willington.*

Section I (see fig. 1) was cut at Willington in field 98,<sup>6</sup> where the road branches off from Dere Street as soon as the latter has crossed the western branch of the Willington burn. The road was poorly preserved, being formed of a single layer of 8-in. sandstone blocks laid on subsoil clay; it was only 16 ft. 8 in. wide and had no defined kerbs. At section I A the east kerb was located by probing, which was sufficient in field 71 as the low mound of the road can be seen on the surface. Soon after leaving this field the road turns a few degrees north, and, after passing under the houses, is covered by the modern lane which runs to Holland Hall. Here it makes a further slight turn to the north and, passing Park View, proceeds to Park House.

(b) *Park House.*

Section II was cut in the east angle of field 186, where the farm-road in part abandons the Roman line. Beneath 8 in. of topsoil there was a well-made road with a 4-in. layer of sandstone bottoming, a 5-in. intermediate pack of clay, and a 4-in. upper layer of gravel. It had a kerb on the east and was at least 15 ft. wide; the rest of the road and west kerb were inaccessible, being covered by the modern road.

Between Park House and Brancepeth no traces of the road can now be seen. The recent road-reconstruction at Brancepeth has obscured the point where the Roman route will have crossed the Stockley Beck. On the rising ground

<sup>6</sup> The field-numbers are from the OS 25-inch maps.

north of this the road again makes a slight turn to the north and cuts obliquely across the straight sector of modern road where the side-road from Little White comes in.

(c) *Little White.*

Section III was cut in the head-rigg of the next field, no. 183. The crop did not admit of a full section, but enough trenching was done to show that there was a compact layer of medium sandstone about 6 in. below the surface and approximately 20 ft. wide. . After crossing the railway and Scription Gill the east kerb was found in field 557 (section III A).

(d) *Red Barns.*

In the next field (no. 559) the road is so well preserved as to be visible to a person passing in the train. Section IV was chosen as the site for a detailed examination of the road-structure (see fig. 2 and plate xxvi, fig. 2). Though built as one unit, the bottoming had been laid on the sub-soil clay in five divisions. For the kerbs on either side formed part of a homogeneous strip of large sandstone blocks, making a total width of 4 ft. on the west and 2 ft. on the east. In the centre of the road came a layer of similar blocks as packing to one very large block, which measured 18 by 14 by 10 inches. This projected so far into the upper layer that its top was only 3 in. below the road-surface. The fourth and fifth divisions of the bottoming were composed of smaller metalling, which filled in the gaps between the outer and the central strips.

The bottoming, which was 21 ft. 8 in. wide, was covered by a well-rammed layer of gravel and small broken sandstone, which had a pronounced camber. It is possible that a few inches of this upper layer had been scored off by the plough, because for ten feet the layer was within 8 in. of the ground-level.

The central "spine," or mass of well-squared sandstone

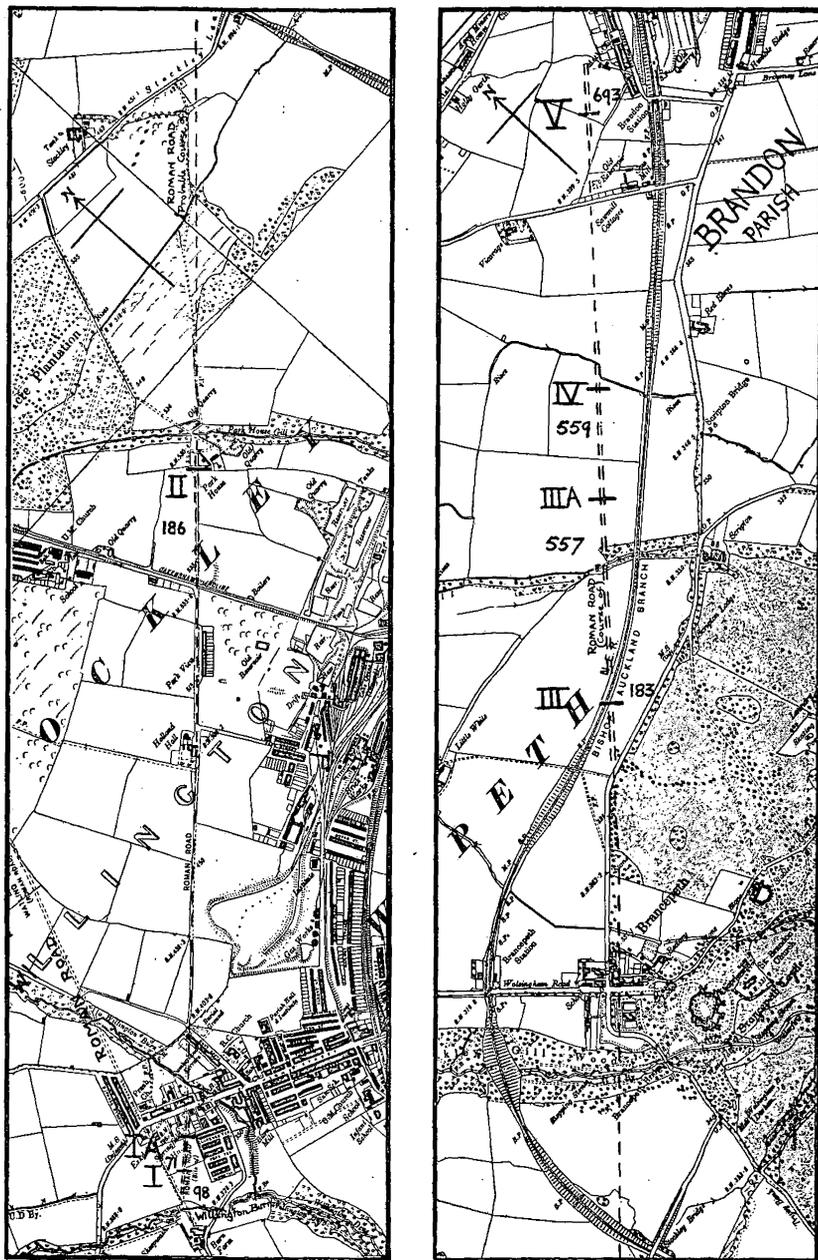


FIG. I. ROMAN ROAD FROM WILLINGTON TO BRANDON.

Scale: 3 inches to 1 mile. Reproduced from the 6-inch OS map of Durham XXVI SE, SW; XXXIV NW (ed. 1923) with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.

blocks, is not a frequent feature in Roman roads, but has its parallels.<sup>7</sup> In some of these instances the axial "central rib" belongs only to the upper surface, while in others it is part of the single layer of metalling, as on Blackstone Edge<sup>8</sup> and at White Moss.<sup>9</sup> An exact parallel, however, is provided by the road from High Rochester to Bridge of Aln,<sup>10</sup> for the cross-section cut at Holystone produced a central rib which belonged to the bottoming and yet projected into the upper layer. In the present instance it is not clear that its purpose was to give stability to the road, for "macadam" depends on homogeneity of material for its strength. Though this seems an elaborate provision, it is possible that the stones served as a gauge for the minimum height of the camber. No traces of wear were found on the surface to show whether the centre of the road was used or avoided by traffic.

(e) *Brandon.*

Section v was cut in field 693, just west of Brandon railway-station. The site was found by probing, which had revealed a hard pavement of the requisite width at a depth of one foot. On excavation (see fig. 2) the road proved to be 21 ft. 8 in. wide with good kerbs. The bottoming of 8-in. sandstone blocks was only 3 in. deep but regularly built, and carried slight traces, one inch deep, of an upper surfacing of broken sandstone. There was neither central "spine" nor camber.

The road, as found in sections III, IV, and v, is heading for a point 70 yards west of Stone Bridge, near Neville's Cross. Most of the ground between section v and this crossing of the river Browney is now occupied by houses or industrial buildings, so that further search for the road

<sup>7</sup> For references and a discussion of its purpose see I. A. Richmond in *Trans. Rochdale Lit. and Sci. Soc.* xv (1925), 60-2, and again (with Peter Hunter Blair) in PSAN<sup>4</sup> VIII, 51-2.

<sup>8</sup> *Trans. Rochdale Lit. and Sci. Soc.*, *loc. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> *Cumb. and West. Trans.*, ser.-1, xiii, 461.

<sup>10</sup> PSAN, *loc. cit.*

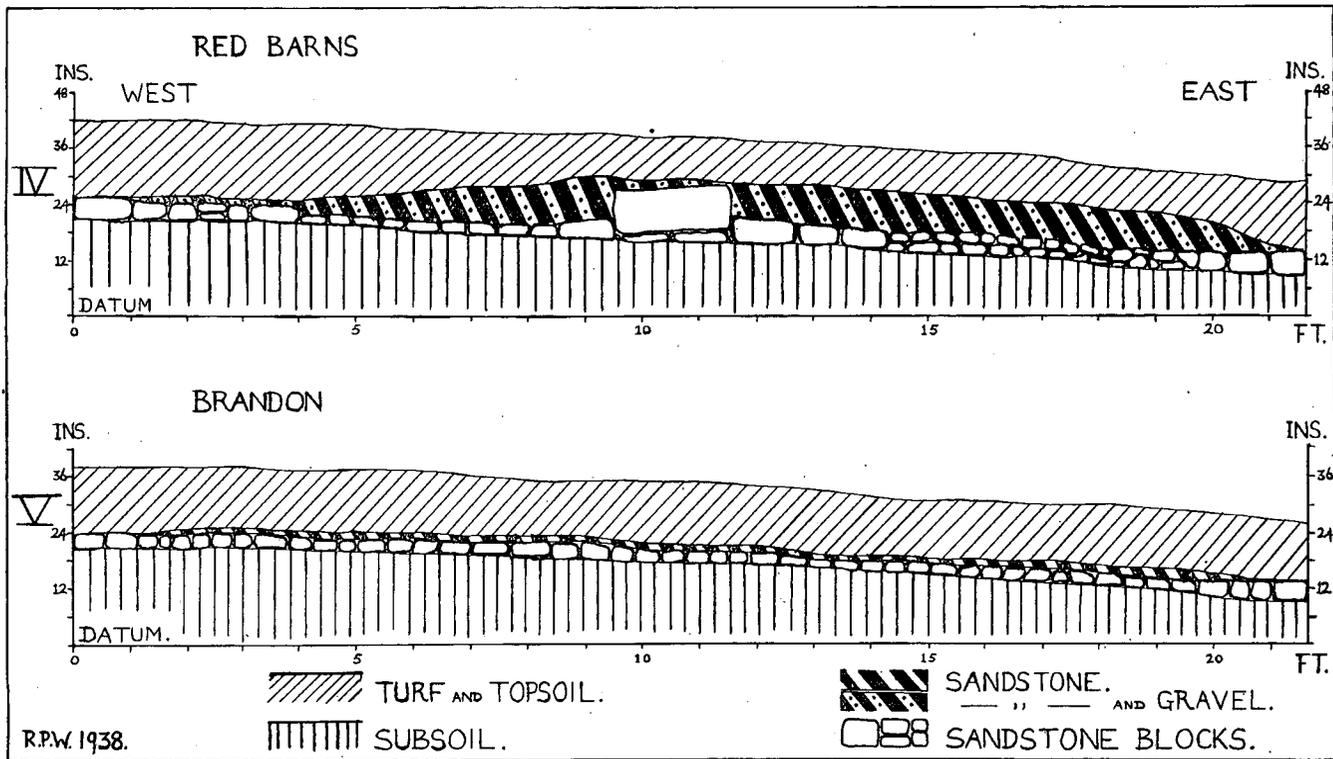


FIG. 2. CROSS-SECTIONS OF ROMAN ROAD FROM WILLINGTON TO BRANDON.

is difficult. Stone Bridge has long been a bridge-site,<sup>11</sup> and it seems likely that the Romans availed themselves of some nearby crossing-point. Once the Deerness and Browney valleys were crossed the road could swing north and head for Chester-le-Street. Though there is no positive evidence for this course, it seems almost certain that the road must have headed for the fort at Chester-le-Street, which was probably of first-century date, like Binchester. On this view, the road proves to be a link between Binchester and Chester-le-Street; it carefully skirts the Wear valley and adopts an easy crossing of the rivers Deerness and Browney, which form the only obstacles in its well-planned course.

The writer wishes to thank the Hon. G. L. Hamilton-Russell and Messrs. Strakers and Love Ltd. for giving permission to excavate at Willington, Park House, Little White, Red Barns, and Brandon, and also is grateful to the tenants concerned for consenting to the work and granting full facilities for it.

<sup>11</sup> Mr. J. McIntyre pointed out its possible significance. Surtees, *Durham*, iv, part 2, 133, cites a charter of 1614 which mentions Stone Bridge and also a ford a little west of it.



Fig. 1. ROMAN ROAD, COBS CAUSEWAY, NEAR RYAL,  
LOOKING WEST.



Fig. 2. ROMAN ROAD AT RED BARNS, Co. DURHAM,  
LOOKING WEST.



