

WATLING STREET, MIDDLESEX (1)

[*Some observations on the probable line of Watling Street between Canons Park roundabout and Watford Way roundabout.*]

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AN investigation of the work of laying water-mains across Watling Street at a point 240 yards north of Canons Park roundabout in 1942² suggested that the present road, although known as Watling Street, does not in reality lie precisely on the Roman road. Interest being thus aroused, a search for the line of the Roman road was made.

The notes that follow are derived entirely from surface indications. Evidence of the construction of the roadway and the confirmation of the line suggested below still await proof by excavation.

The line of Roman roadway here described, some one and a third miles in length, starts at Canons Park roundabout and runs over Brockley Hill down to the roundabout on the Watford Way. The Roman road for the whole of this distance lies to the east of the modern road. Why the Roman road climbed Brockley Hill at all is far from clear, since a line taken some quarter of a mile eastward would have avoided this steep ascent. The hill is, however, a tremendous landmark for a long way in the approach from the south. Moreover, the presence of a native settlement on the summit would have been an attraction for provisions and shelter. Belgic sherds have been found in Pear Wood nearby.³

Starting from Canons Park roundabout, in the first field on the east, No. 1 on the map, now the sports ground of the Frigidaire Recreation Club, a low camber can be seen in the turf immediately inside the hedge and running parallel with it, the hedge in fact lying on the western edge of the Roman road. The line is lost completely for about 250 yards in the next field, No. 2, due to building development and new roadways. Field No. 3 is occupied by eight houses facing the modern road, but the line of the Roman road can be traced by the slope up to their front doors, this feature being especially noticeable in the three northernmost houses. A faint rise of the camber can be seen crossing the lane leading off Brockley Hill to Newlands, but a well marked one in the next field, No. 4, runs the full length of the field. About two-thirds of the

way along this field there is a slight change of direction, at a point near a large oak tree on one side and a shallow pond on the other. The latter is marked on the 6-inch O.S. The divergence is caused by the road having to cross a shallow natural coombe, and here a raised bank or causeway has been made (see hachures on map).

The road continues thus to the hedge of the field, where the steepest part of the ascent of Brockley Hill begins. In field No. 5 the line of the road can be seen as a slight depression or shelf in the hillside and, as it enters field No. 6, a slight camber is again apparent, but soon becomes difficult to follow. It should run on the edge of the plantation which occupies broken ground bordering the modern road. This broken ground suggests the remains of later tracks and in parts has been quarried.

On the summit of the hill the line of the road is not visible, but it should run below the site of the present wayside café. Excavations carried out in 1947 in the ground adjoining the café showed no sign of the road. In the next field, No. 7, the low camber of the road can be seen again, close to the hedge of the modern road; trees, mostly pines, are planted along it. The ornamental fish-pond, No. 8, part of the landscape gardening of a former house and estate standing on the summit of Brockley Hill, cuts right across the line of road, but lower down the hillside a raised portion on the east side of the garden in front of the farm buildings of Brockley Grange, No. 9, suggests the line, which would then run beneath the older part of this house. A long stretch of raised camber can be seen in the next field, No. 10, although nothing shows in the vegetable garden and upper part of the field. The road then reaches the Watford Way roundabout in the small area of rough grass at the south-east corner of the cross-roads. There is no sign of the continuation of the line of road on the opposite side of the modern road or in its climb into Elstree; so it may be that from this point the two roads are on the same line.

The average width of the camber of the Roman road, where well exposed, is about 18 feet.

1. Six-inch O.S. Middlesex V. S.E. and VI. S.W.

2. *Antiquaries Journal*, Vol. XXII, p. 220.

3. "Trial Excavation at Brockley Hill," 1937. F. Cottrill, M.A. *Trans. L. and Mx. Arch. Soc.*, Vol. VII, p. 686.