

A ROMAN ROAD AT BELLE EAU PARK, BILSTHORPE, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

by

KEITH CHALLIS, VICKI PRIEST, CAROL ALLEN AND GAVIN KINSLEY

INTRODUCTION

This paper summarises the results of fieldwork carried out as part of the archaeological investigation of land at Belle Eau Park, near Bilsthorpe, Nottinghamshire. The report describes the results of two trenches excavated to examine cropmarks of a Roman Road and a probable trackway. Full details of the complete programme of fieldwork, the results of which are not directly relevant to the matters discussed here, have been deposited with the Nottinghamshire Sites and Monument Record (Kinsley and Brown 1997; Allen 1999; Challis *et al* 1999).

The site, which covers about 40ha, is 500m south-east of old Bilsthorpe village, centred on National Grid Reference SK660599 (Fig 1). It is located almost entirely on Mercia Mudstone, except for a small area in the east in which the underlying Sherwood Sandstone forms the immediate subsoil (Geological Survey sheet 113). The Sherwood Sandstone areas are particularly susceptible to cropmark formation while the Mercia Mudstone, which occupies the majority of the site, is much less so. Its southern edge is a lower clay formation (where cropmarks are highly unlikely to be seen), overlain by brownish micaceous sandstones alternating with red silty marls and shales. The site contains a broad central ridge climbing generally from the south-west to north-east and consists largely of gently undulating terrain.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

A number of archaeological sites and features are known in the area. Cropmark evidence plotted from aerial photographs, field observations and the earlier

research of others are collated on Fig 1 and discussed below. It is worth noting that most of the cropmark information has come from the study of vertical aerial photographs of various ages (in the collections of Nottinghamshire County Council and at the National Monument Record) rather than, as is more often the case, from oblique photographs taken for archaeological purposes.

Cropmarks on the Sherwood Sandstones, south-west of the site, indicate the presence of a group of rectilinear enclosures flanking an east/west-orientated, slightly sinuous, double-ditched trackway which crosses the southern part of the site (A on Fig 1). There is no direct dating evidence for the enclosure group or the trackway, but its form is characteristic of the later prehistoric or Romano-British periods in the region (Whimster 1989, 84).

A Roman road, clearly seen as a linear double-ditched cropmark, passes through the central part of the site (B on Fig 1). A little to the south-east of the site, a mound about 5m wide with a ditch 1m deep on the south side can be detected at the field edge about 100m from the modern road (C on Fig 1). This mound occurs at the point where the Roman Road would be expected to exist, according to the aerial photographs, and it seems very likely to be a surviving part of the embankment or *agger* of the road.

Further south, two sections of the road were observed within a drainage ditch cut through an area of gravel (D on Fig 1; Wheater 1982, 32 plates 9 and 10). Here the road was shown by a layer of gravel above orange-red clay on solid clay subsoil. In the past the course of the road was also visible as a slight ridge in the field to the south (Wheater 1982, 32 plates 9 and 10) although ploughing has now removed

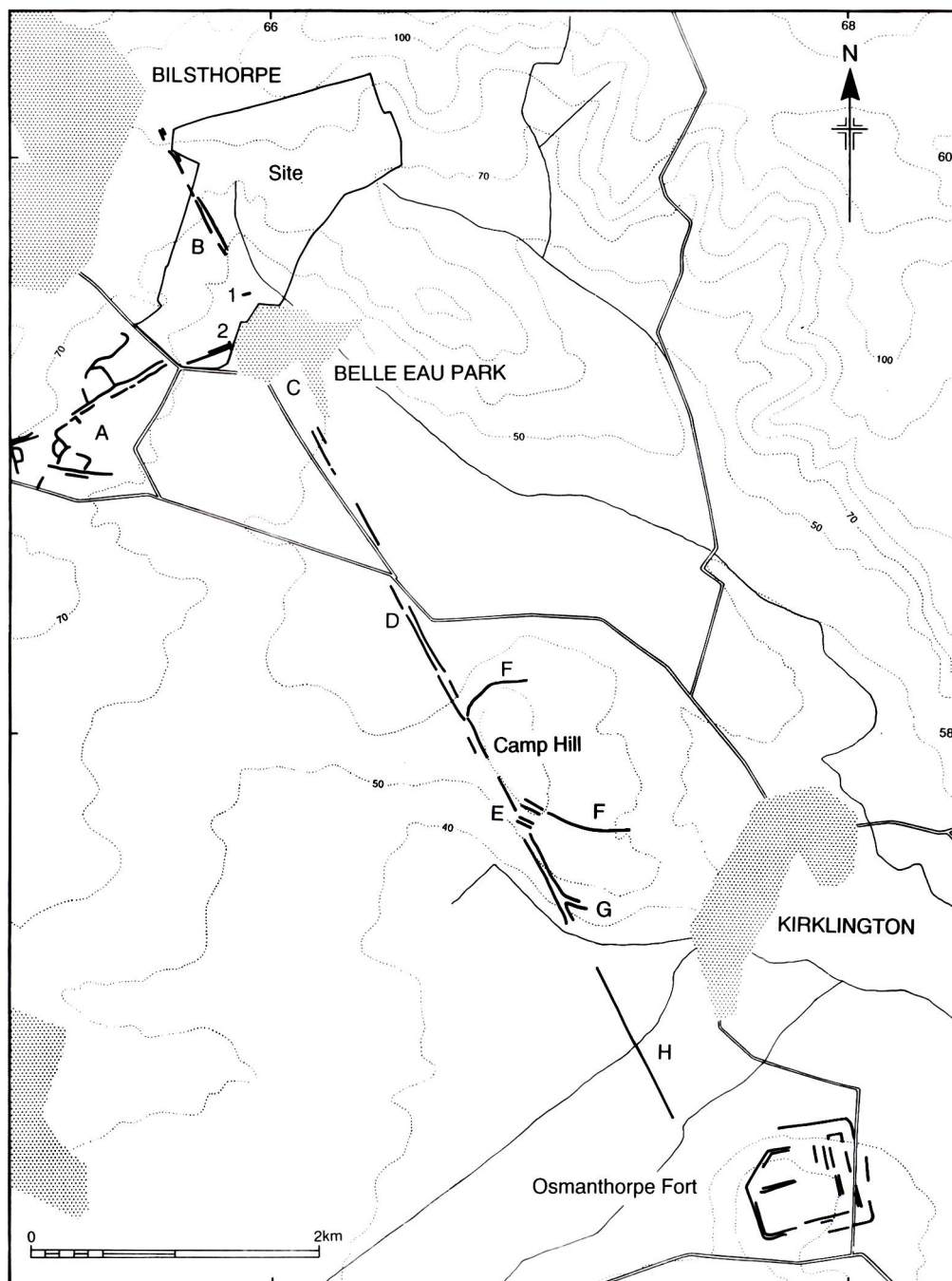


FIGURE 1. Plan showing the location of the site and its hinterland, excavation trenches 1 and 2 and cropmarks including the Roman Road, and the enclosure at Camp Hill. Contour interval is 10m. Annotations refer to text.

the earthwork. Traces of the road may, however, still be seen at the tops of drainage ditches where a band of stones and gravel can be seen lying 55m from the modern road.

To the south, the road crosses the west side of the enclosure complex at Camp Hill, Kirklington. Earthworks of this enigmatic structure were identified in woodland (E on Fig 1; Simmons 1963, 13), and cropmarks to the north and south (F on Fig 1) further indicate the perimeter of the enclosure. A gravel band 16ft (5.3m) wide was noted on the field surface south-west of the earthworks and on the projected line of the road.

South of Camp Hill there is an apparent junction off the Roman Road to the east (G on Fig 1) and south of here the line of the road is marked by a series of straight field boundaries aiming toward the vexillation fortress at Manor Farm, Osmanthorpe (Riley 1980, 330).

EXCAVATION

The Roman Road

A 16 x 3m trench was located to cross the projected line of the Roman Road at a point where no cropmark or surface earthwork was apparent (1 on Fig 1). Topsoil was removed by machine. A metalled surface of densely packed coarse gravel comprising abundant small and medium sub-rounded stones in an orange-brown clayey sand matrix (0004; c. 9m wide) was clearly visible in the centre of trench below approximately 0.2-0.25m of topsoil (Fig 2).

No ditches were visible on either side of the road and, in an attempt to locate these, a 1m wide cutting against the north facing trench section was excavated by hand in 0.1m spits through the metalling and adjacent deposits. This showed the metalled surface to be 0.1 – 0.15m thick with cambered edges flanked by side ditches to the east and west. An orange sandy-clay layer (0002) overlay the edges of the road and the side ditches (0008/14 and 0009/13) that were cut into the Mercia Mudstone bedrock (MM on Fig 2). The ditches were 'v'-shaped and shallow (approximately 0.3m deep); their fills comprised

orange brown sand and sandy clay with occasional pebbles. Both ditches had been recut once, slightly further from the road edge.

Immediately beneath the metalled surface, an orange sandy clay layer with occasional grey mottles (0016) c.0.2m thick may be material quarried from the side ditches to form the *agger* of the road. Beneath the centre of the road, 0016 sealed a layer of orange clay with pebbles (0021), perhaps a fragment of an old land surface, buried by construction of the road and *agger*. However, no turf horizon or features obviously reminiscent of an organic soil were present within 0021 and so this material may be a further layer within the *agger*. Sediment samples were recovered from both 0016 and 0021 and their eventual analysis may clarify the origins of these deposits. Two features were cut through 0021. The most obvious of these was a large pit or hollow (0007) lying almost centrally beneath the road. The road metalling and the underlying *agger* material 0016 had partially subsided into the top of this feature. The pit was approximately 0.7m deep with a fill comprising grey and orange-brown sandy clays.

A small, roughly circular feature (0011) with a grey clay fill lay to the east of the pit, also sealed by the *agger* material and cut into the presumed old land surface 0021. A further, poorly defined irregular scoop with grey clay fill (0010), which lay between pit 0007 and 0011, was cut into the Mercia Mudstone bedrock and was only apparent after the removal of the old land surface 0021. No artefacts were recovered from any of the features or deposits within the trench.

Cropmark Ditches

A further 16 x 3m trench was excavated across the two parallel cropmarks, tentatively identified as a ditched trackway (2 on Fig 1). The topsoil, and underlying subsoil layers comprising loamy sand and gravel, were removed by machine in 0.1m spits to a depth of 0.5m. Two 0.1m spits were then removed by hand along the east facing section of the trench. No features were immediately apparent. However, after a rain shower, a feature (0020) became visible in the east facing section and the base of the trench (Fig 3). This feature appeared to be a shallow ditch (c. 0.5m deep) with an irregular base. The sides

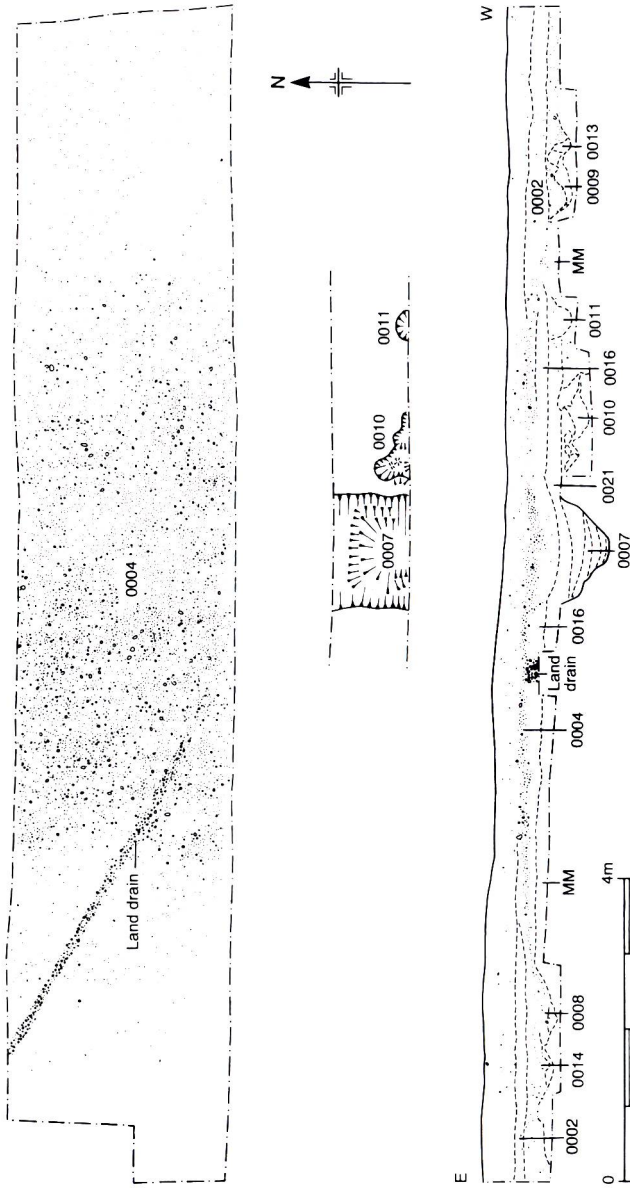


FIGURE 2. Plan and section of trench 1 showing the metalled surface of the Roman Road, side ditches and features sealed by the road metalling. Context numbers are described in the text. MM indicates Mercia Mudstone bedrock.

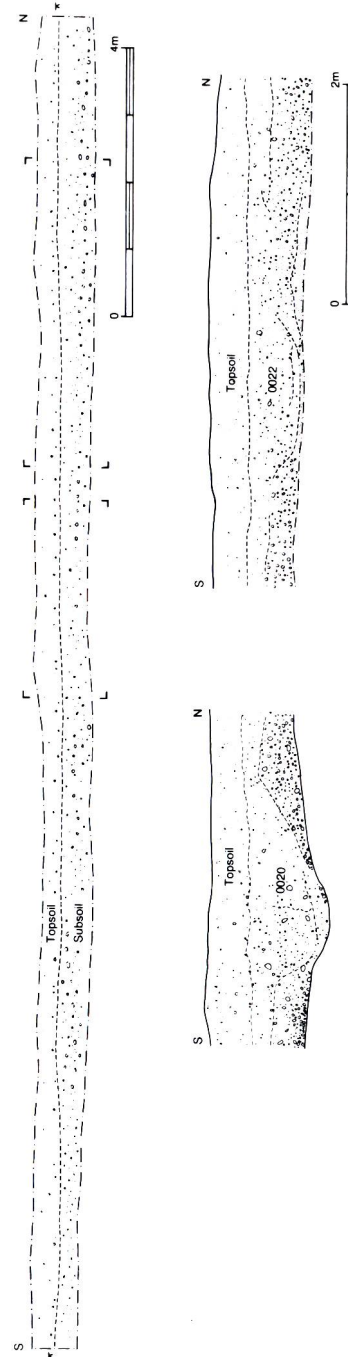


FIGURE 3. Sections of the ditches revealed in trench 2. Top, complete east facing section as initially recorded. Bottom, detailed sections of ditches 0020 and 0022 (reversed from west facing section) as revealed after weathering of section.

of the ditch were extremely ill-defined and the feature was hardly visible in the west facing trench section. A second very shallow gully (Fig 3; 0022, c. 0.25m deep) was also present in the west facing section, although no evidence could be found for it in the opposite section. As in most environments, excavation in summer when the soils are dry is fraught with difficulties; this almost led to a missing of the evidence for those features only dug into subsoil.

CONCLUSIONS

The ditches in trench 2 correspond approximately with those plotted as cropmarks. The excavation of these features produced no dating evidence and their function remains uncertain. Typologically it remains reasonable to assume that these ditches are of later prehistoric or Romano-British date, though their ephemeral nature makes further conclusions difficult to draw.

The Roman Road

The results from trench 1 confirm the location of the cropmark and its interpretation as a metalled road surface, undated by excavation, but morphologically most likely to be Roman. Cropmarks suggest that this road served the vexillation fortress at Osmanthorpe, which is linked with early military expansion north of the Trent (Todd 1991, 34) suggesting that construction probably dates to the middle years of the first century AD. The road crosses a landscape dense with early Roman military structures, including not just the fortress at Osmanthorpe, but also camps at Warsop (on its projected line to the north; Riley 1980, 333) and

Farnsfield (offline to the west; Welfare and Swan 1995, 147). To the south its projected line probably led to a crossing of the Trent by a bridge at Thorpe (Roman *Ad Pontum*; Todd 1991, 17) thus to join the Fosse Way. To the north, after passing the camp at Warsop, a logical course would be a north-westerly line aiming toward Rykniel Street.

Structurally, the metalled surface is fairly typical of a Roman Road, being approximately 9-10m wide and comprising an *agger* with a metalled surface with cambered edges and shallow flanking ditches (Margary 1967, 22). The recuts moving the ditches further away from the metalled surface suggest a slight modification during its period of use. It bears passing resemblance to the first phase of construction of the Fosse Way, as revealed in a cutting excavated at Langford (Barley 1950, 64 and Fig 1). However, the Fosse was both narrower (only 6.5m wide in its first phase) and lacked a cambered *agger*, (only introduced with the second, more substantial phase of construction).

The features sealed beneath the road are undated, although they are obviously earlier than the land surface that the road is built on and may represent isolated parts of the pre-Roman landscape preserved locally beneath the Roman Road. The apparent absence of a relict turf line in the old land surface might suggest that this area was ploughland at the time of the construction of the Roman Road. However, it is also possible that the homogenization caused by nearly two millennia of root and animal disturbance has removed any macroscopic evidence for the character of these sediments.

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