

ROMANO-BRITISH SITES AND THEIR COMMUNICATIONS: THE OUSE VALLEY

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INTEREST in Roman roads has been enlivened by two recent publications of outstanding merit: Mr. I. D. Margary's *Roman Roads in Britain* and the new edition of the Ordnance Survey map of Roman Britain compiled under the direction of Mr. C. R. Phillips. From them came the chief incentive to this survey.

My intention was to examine on the ground the known Romano-British sites and to trace how they were reached one from another; to seek continuations of Roman roads where on the map they have petered out; and eventually to transform the meaningless scatter of villa-sites and red dots on the local Roman map into some sort of topographical pattern.

North Bucks. lies across the natural communication corridor from London and the ancient tribal capitals to the great Midland plain. Along this line the Ouse, Nene and Trent in turn provided easy crossings; farther east they became deep, wide and difficult. Thus over Whaddon Chase and the Brick-hill ridge run the escape lanes from invasions and infiltrations, and beside them are found the buried hoards of luckless fugitives.

Opinion differs as to the existence of an efficient road service before the Romans came, but it is certain that the Belgae-British linked their forts and townships with roads of some permanence and skill of direction. In a country-side as ours, with intersections of what must have been deep and marshy valleys, they are taken cleverly from one high point to another above the spring levels, usually with an extensive range of ground view.

In the area surveyed, the importance of Hunsbury Hill fortress as the goal of these converging roads cannot be ignored; neither can these roads be dismissed in relation to the subsequent Roman-British rural life, for evidence of it is strewn along them. Mr. S. E. Winbolt writes that "the old native embanked townships were forcibly evacuated and their inhabitants accommodated on nearby sites on lower ground in civilised fashion, preferably by a river". This might explain why the populous Hunsbury settlement was abandoned almost over night with much of the domestic equipment thrown away intact. Roman Towcester, the new garrison, rising only a few miles away would be ready to absorb them for much-needed labour.

The choice of Towcester as the gateway to the Midlands and the North decides the matrix of our local Roman road system. It is the destination of three, all of which cross North Bucks. The old roads survived where they fitted into the new way of life. In the localities of farms and settlements they were straightened, raised and metalled after the Roman manner, and may be

classified as local Roman roads, but away from population centres they seem to have been left as they always had been, flat and winding, with perhaps a packed stone surface where needed as on "Stoneway" in Salcey and the so-called "Roman road" near Stoke Goldington. They are difficult to follow unless surviving as a "green lane", or traceable by the existence of isolated sites away from the main stream of local life.

ROMAN ROADS—TOWCESTER GROUP

Watling Street is too well known for detailed observation. From Verulamium, Towcester marks the end of the first alignment, from which point it changes course.

The second road from the Solent via Winchester, Dorchester and Alchester, although seeming to make for Ircchester on the Nene, halts in Stowe Park and turns abruptly north to Towcester, as though there had been a change of plan. This change of plan is also reflected in the third road; aligned originally on to Towcester, it is deflected north-west to join the Alchester road. It may have been that, whilst these roads were under construction, the military scene had already shifted farther north, in which case the Towcester bastion would become less important and the original road system modified.

The third road was long unsuspected. It is obscure and broken. It is known only for five miles north of Fleet Marston, and is assumed that it is a link road between Akeman Street and Towcester. Since it is difficult to see the need for such a link in sparsely populated country, it may possibly be a fragment of a long-distance road from across the Thames coming up the centre of the county via High Wycombe; an interesting speculation for future reference.

The northern end of this road fades out near Claydon brook, and was the object of my first survey. Although the short lane passing Addington church falls under suspicion, I found nothing positive until at a point just north of the Thornborough Tumuli, where a trail of stones across grassland leads to a raised hedgeside track. It would appear that its line has been well maintained with only a slight incurve to avoid the Ouse tributary. Although the agger is broken, a camber is evident along parts of it, and on the crest overlooking the valley it turns sharp left. Going down-hill, the embankment on the east side is 3 to 4 ft. high, but in the river meadows, liable to floods, there is nothing; to a causeway and bridge would come the first disaster from redundancy or neglect. Alongside Foxcote Roman villa, on the opposite bank, only a slight swelling along a coincidence of field gates indicates its course to the Leckhampstead lane, but from the barn on the lane down to Foxcote Wood it is carried on a shelf overlooking a deep valley, soon to be a reservoir. Trails of stone in ploughing south and north of Akeley are found in exact line, becoming more conspicuous approaching Stockholt farm, beyond which the road protrudes through grass to the hill-top. Here it turns north and is seen along the hedgeside going to Whitehouse. Across the lane is yet another turn seen clearly when I was there, across a field of giant kale, and betrayed by stunted plants struggling through loose stone. On higher

ground is a conspicuous camber on ploughing, and after a brief disappearance across a valley the crown of the road is secreted between a wide double hedge which ends at Saunderscose. Down from the Deer Barn comes the Alchester-Towcester road and at this point they join.

The short, jerky direction changes over the last few miles point either to a final improvisation or to difficulty over ground, which, although now seeming innocuous, might then have been disagreeable.

IRCHESTER TO THE SOUTH

The Roman road south from Irchester is charted by the Ordnance survey and by Mr. Margary to Dungee Corner. The temptation to bring it farther along the main road, which is also a parish boundary, must be resisted, because it actually follows a continuous hedge-line and cart track from Dungee farm, with a slight angle-turn south-east, which takes it along the edge of the quarry where the Roman burials were found. Nearing Harrold village, on grassland a slight agger is apparent between interesting earthworks and in the locality of numerous finds, emerging eventually on to Harrold Green. The river crossing would probably be near the parish church, for exactly on the same alignment on the opposite side is the main street of Chellington village.

Convinced that this road came down to Magiovinium, I spent a lot of time on it, with a minute examination of the ground via Northey and Turvey Priory and beyond, but it became clear that the correct line was already committed to south-east rather than south-west. Parallel to the modern Stevington road and beside a gully are traces of a disused road with metalling in ironstone, in contrast to the prevailing soft white limestone lying around, and this continues to the hill-top, where the farmer has collected it in heaps for reinforcing muddy gateways: if this has gone on for centuries it explains why nothing is left to be seen. There is no further trace near Stevington, except possibly by the windmill, but over the ridge an existing lane toward Bromham is fairly certainly coincidental, also the short north-south bend of the main Olney-Bedford road, which in widening has revealed metalling along the east side. Thistley Lane is the continuation ahead leading up to a Roman site—surely a temple or public building in such an isolated but commanding position—with a wide deposit of massive stones and roof tiles. From here the road would seem to follow the river curve towards Elstow, but I did not pursue it. From the building site along a ploughing verge is clearly seen another road at a right angle. This is going in the direction of Magiovinium but is also disappointing, for, although it forms a parish boundary for some distance and is obviously a track of great age, it fades out just north of Cranfield on the Bucks.-Beds. border, to be seen no more.

Back at Dungee corner from where we started, an ancient way called "The Forty-foot" crosses from north-east to south-west becoming the Beds.-Northants. county boundary. Approaching Buckinghamshire at Nun Wood it straightens out, a continuous hedge crowning a camber. It passes Tinick Barn, but is not very convincing in the vague lane leading to the Bedford road; crossing it, a clear and regular agger is seen on either side of the hedge

leading toward Lavendon Grange. Here medieval earthworks confuse, but on the high artificial bank of the parish boundary beyond the Grange erosion reveals the metalling. Over the stream the ridge of the road crosses a number of plough-strips impressively increasing in height to Ashfurlong, the Roman Olney.

This site came into prominence a century ago when a Mr. Pretty, of Northampton, wrote in *Archæologia* that townspeople assembled in great numbers where grassland was turned to plough, picking up silver and brass Roman coins in such quantities that jewellers' shops were glutted. All we see now is a scatter of small sherds, but the recent cutting of a ditch beside the Lavendon road exposed a portion of wall and so much superior pottery that the field on the south side might well revive interest and a better knowledge of the site. Olney town and a sweeping river loop lie ahead, so the road must of necessity follow the ridge to Weston Underwood where it appears to be modestly raised approaching the village. From then it is difficult to say whether the course follows the modern road or retains the high ground by way of Ravenstone. In any case, it turns south, for it is seen at the southern end of Gayhurst Park turning into the Linford Lane on an unusually impressive agger up to 4 ft. high, and pursuing its original direction, clearly making for the Roman site of Hill Farm, Haversham.

The Hill Farm site is extensive and interesting. On "Freeboard" sloping south, ploughing turns up a quota of coins, pottery and bronze objects every year, and has done so for a century, when the bronze steelyard weight was recorded. There is a profusion of superior Samian and Castor ware. A farm labourer during his work-time accounted to me for about sixty coins, a statuette and bronze articles he could not identify, all dispersed. The centre of the site appears to be under and around the old farm buildings. Holes recently dug for extension of a granary and for posts revealed masses of oyster shells, coins, Samian, rotted timber, nails, a piece of sheet lead, a thin bronze ring and part of a brooch. The settlement was evidently populous and by no means poor. The coin and pottery scatter reappears a mile west towards Wolverton, but the road we are following crosses the Ouse here joined by a "ridgeway" from the north, and passes Stanton Low on the existing lane beside which a large Roman villa has recently been found. Across the Newport road it is known as Rogues Lane beside which are faint traces of a wide ditch. Along here it is terraced, in places 3 or 4 ft. high above the field, and where a pipe-line has been cut, heavy base-stones, lesser limestone slabs and a top layer of gravel crunch are exposed. From Bradwell Common it is a lane no longer, but continues as a long hedge until severed by the deep and wide railway cutting. Here it would seem to have turned west to avoid low marshy ground ahead and only a pathway marks its possible course to Watling Street, four miles from Magiovinium and exactly opposite the Dovecote Roman site at Shenley Brook End.

Although the Roman bricks and tesserae of Dovecote Estate were discovered as recently as 1891 the precise spot is unknown. The modern farm and buildings are of that date, so we must assume they were under there. An old field name "Chesters" occurs in Shenley records. There are a num-

ber of earthworks of indeterminate dating, Roman burial pottery and coins fairly widely scattered. The settlement seems to be on the road we have followed rather than associated with Watling Street, but ahead the road is flat and difficult to follow, traced past Snellshall (pot of Roman coins), Whaddon (coin hoard) and apparently to Gt. Horwood and beyond, in the direction of its original alignment. One interesting feature is the distribution of ballista or sling stones the size of a tennis ball at points along this road.

BENNAVENTA-DUSTON EXTENSION

The Roman road from Bennaventa to Duston would appear to have crossed the Nene at Duston Mill, climbing up to Hunsbury, thus giving away its earlier origin. It becomes Mere Way towards Hardingstone, and where the modern road bends, an agger is seen crossing the corner of Wootton Park to the turn of the Newport-London road. The modern turnpike has no Roman features and only traces of an older road are seen along its verges, but along it is a continuous distribution of Roman finds and a villa close beside it at Piddington. Where the turnpike bends at Horton (Roman steel-yard and coins found), the camber of the original road crosses grassland to become the Ravenstone Lane. Here broad ditches accompany, and it is raised for some distance, but eventually becomes involved in a derelict railway system and impenetrable woods. It appears again near Weston Lodge, not perfectly straight but on a clear agger 2 ft. high and 15 ft wide. Here is White's Close, where a rich Roman coin hoard with pottery and skeletons were found in 1858. The Roman character of the lane changes to a hollow-way descending through Weston Underwood to the Ouse. Whether this is the precise point of the river crossing it is difficult to say, as so much stone has been removed in deep dredging. Neither is the course clear on the other side. Older inhabitants of Sherington point with apparent accuracy to the "old Roman road" above the village merging into Gun Lane, but there are only intermittent stretches by North Crawley, Cranfield and Brogborough. If it were not for considerable Roman finds at the two latter points, it would have no further interest than a pre-Roman trackway evidently connecting Hunsbury with Wheathampstead.

MAGIOVINIUM—CHERWELL VALLEY

The nature and plan of the only named Roman station in Buckinghamshire might be revealed if we had access to the grass fields around Dropshort. Unlike Towcester, it was not a walled town, and although records of finds go back many centuries, we do not know all that might be known about it. Both Dr. Bradbrook and Colonel Wyness agreed as to its approximate area from traces of a vallum more clear then than now. Recent excavations on the fringe of the site have not been fortunate except for collections of coins, pottery and bones, and evidences of Anglo-Saxon and later habitation are very much mixed up among them.

The road from Magiovinium towards Buckingham has long been suspected as Roman, and Mr. Phillips has now confirmed this from air photo-

graphy. Scarcely out of suburban Bletchley, it is seen to be well constructed, very much terraced and raised and, notwithstanding a few little kinks and bends since developed, for most of its course to Thornborough Bridge it is as impressive as Watling Street. Beyond this through Buckingham to Tingewick the present road loses its distinction, but it is difficult to see where else its course would have been. Crossing the Alcester-Towcester road at Finmere, it recaptures its Roman appearance. The original course through Aynho, Deddington and Swerford to the Rollright Stones and beyond suggests planned direction and great antiquity, but a Roman road would seem to leave it on the high ground beyond Finmere, for the finds follow the line of Evenley, Charlton and Kings Sutton possibly linking the road down from Alcester (Warwickshire) to Blacklands. Such a road appears to pass Forceleap Farm near Charlton, going through Newbottle, but it needs further inspection, for when I was there crops and grass were too high to follow its course.

CONCLUSION

Referring to the map, distinction is made in the character of the roads surveyed. Two old trackways unrelated to the Anglo-Saxon and modern pattern are interesting. One from beyond the Nene through Brayfield-on-the-Green and Horton to Gayhurst which was also known as the "Forty-foot"; the other from Borough Hill and Burnt Walls, near Daventry, comes directly down through Preston Capes and passes through our area via Radstone and Brackley down into Oxfordshire. These are two of many old roads which deserve more attention than one has time to give to them. In this survey only those with definite Roman-British associations have been included and even those fall far short of presenting a complete picture.

A survey of this nature is fascinatingly easy to start but difficult to finish; one cannot pin-point completion. In the area covered so much is still elusive and so much effaced. In a country-side so quickly changing, we are fortunate in finding so much evidence of the past whilst there is yet time.

APPENDIX

The County Museum and the County Records Office contain a substantial collection of material relating to past elections. The following list details some of the items on which this article was based.

C.R.O. indicates that the document is in the County Records Office, Aylesbury; all other papers are the property of the Buckinghamshire Archæological Society and are in the County Museum, Aylesbury.

Bribery and Corruption

Letter from a Bucks. Freeholder 1679, concerning the moving, by the Sheriff, of the Election Court from Aylesbury to Buckingham without due notice being given.

Payment for votes. Wendover, 20th November, 1740. Lists of amounts paid.
C.R.O.

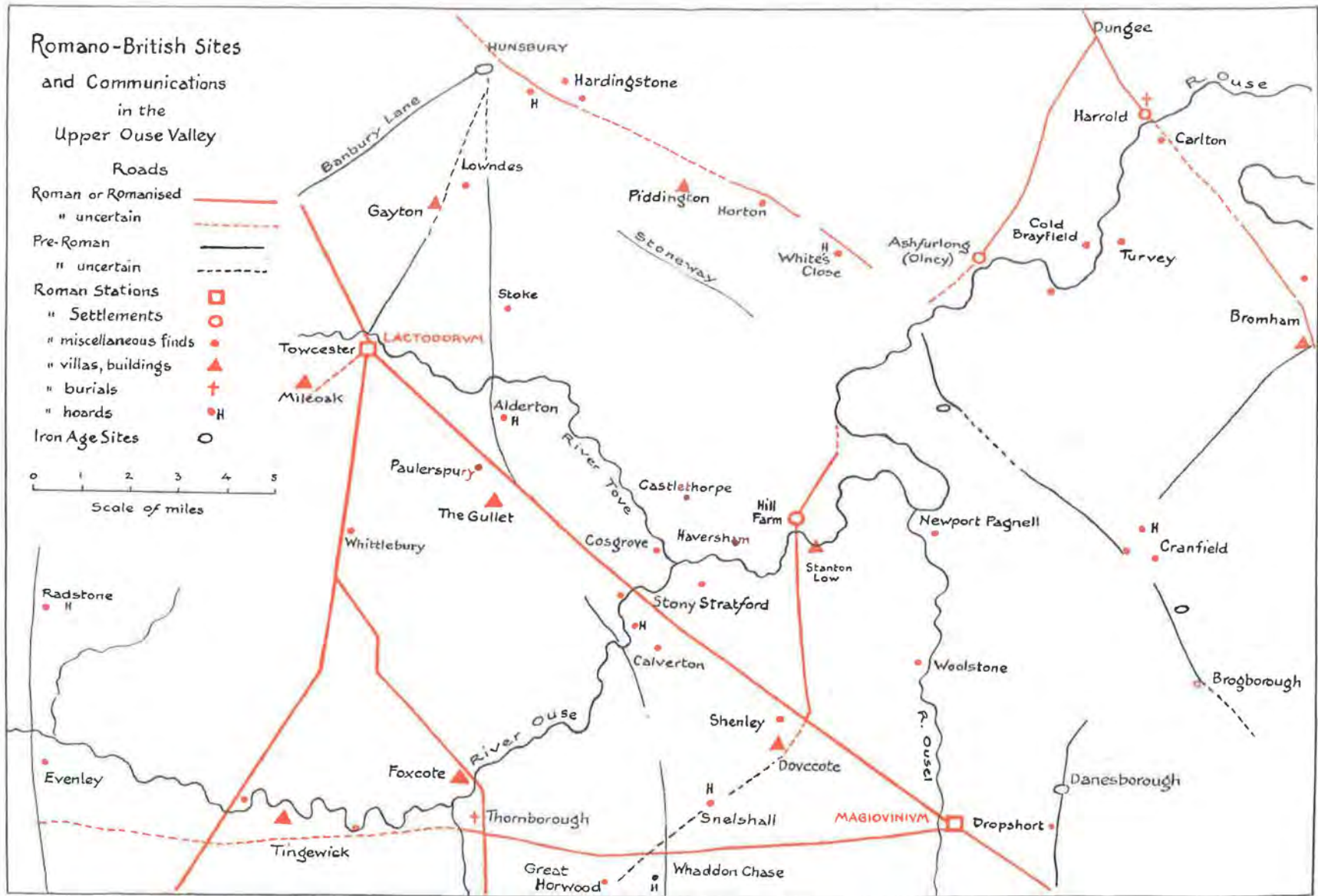


PLATE 6.

Notice delivered to candidates in 1747 Wendover election—requesting no bribery, C.R.O.

Letter from Eyre Coote to Sir Wm. Lee, February, 1768—complaining about probable financial cost of coming election.

Agent's Notebook. September, 1779—Chipping Wycombe—Mr. Grenville's Canvass—promises of votes; dinners, etc. C.R.O.

Letter to Woolwich blacksmith—offering free transport to Aylesbury to vote. 1784. C.R.O.

8s. tickets for food and drink in Aylesbury. 1797 and 1802.

Minutes of evidence given in the House of Lords on the Aylesbury Bill, 8th and 11th June, 1804. (Referring to bribery and corruption in 1802.) C.R.O.

Bucks. Advertiser and Aylesbury News—1859 cutting referring to 1802 election.

1818 Committee Account. The Hon. C. C. Cavendish debtor to John Fowler for dinners, etc., Aylesbury election.

General

Poll books—various (in both archives), early eighteenth cent. onwards.

Register of electors, borough of Buckingham, 1845-6.

Marlow polling list, 1784.

Election cards—various, including one for 1876 which reminds voters that they need not fear landlord intimidation.

1780, Constables' Oaths, Amersham election.

Instructions to officials for election procedure, Wendover.

Indenture, 1756. Returning members for Amersham—signed by John Wilkes, Sheriff.

Election addresses, 1818. C.R.O.

St. James's Chronicle, 4th and 7th June, 1763.

The London Gazette, 11th and 14th April, 1761.

Reports on various boroughs, 1831 and 1867, with maps.

Posters

Close of poll, 9th May, 1831 (plumpers shown). C.R.O.

Close of poll, 1818 county election.

State of the poll—first day—Aylesbury election.

How to Treat Boroughmongers.

1859 *Buckington Spring Meeting.*

1859 *Buckingham Handicap.*

Tractarianism.

Also various cartoons and songs.