

THE ROMAN ROAD (ROUTE 421) TO BITTERNE

By DAVID E. JOHNSTON AND ROGER REED

ROUTE 421 linked the Roman settlements at Chichester and Bitterne, a distance of 27½ miles. For our knowledge of its course we are indebted largely to the fieldwork of O. G. S. Crawford, and to Mr. M. R. Maitland Muller, who has generously allowed us to see his unpublished manuscript notes. Its course is largely lost as it enters Southampton and approaches the eastern entrance of *Clausentum* (Bitterne), but in the summer of 1968 the opportunity arose of testing its line at two points by excavation, and this was undertaken by part-time students of the Southampton University Department of Extra-Mural Studies, directed by the writers. As we may not publish Mr. Maitland Muller's notes, a full survey of the route is impossible at this stage, and we limit ourselves here to a brief summary and an account of the two excavations.

THE ROUTE

Route 421 is a section of a connected series of Roman roads running from east to west along the south coast of Britain, from Richborough in Kent to a point some 28 miles short of Lands End. With interruptions in Sussex and the New Forest it follows the coast fairly closely. Westwards from Chichester the road takes a more or less direct line to Bitterne, skirting the complicated creeks and inlets that form Chichester Harbour. Confronted, in what is now Southampton, by the River Itchen, the traveller apparently had to make a detour inland, turning westwards again to cross the New Forest by a route that has still to be reliably traced. At Badbury Rings he would join the main trunk route to the south-west via Silchester and Old Sarum, en route to Dorchester and Exeter.

There is little to add to I. D. Margary's account¹ of the course of the road westwards from Chichester as far as Wickham. From here, recent fieldwork has modified the picture a little.

1. To the west of Wickham Common, in Fullimore's field (SU 568108) the *agger* is visible at the eastern end of the field, by the fence which crosses the line very obliquely. Three resistivity traverses near the edges of the field gave satisfactorily curves and confirmed the alignment.
2. Some 580 yards to the west of the last, in Farfield (SU 581109) the road is detectable by the western edge of the field. Resistivity traverses here and nearer the centre of the field gave promising results. Further to the west again nothing could be detected.
3. At Wickham, in 1965 it was possible to show that the line diverged markedly from that suggested by Crawford² and Margary. Following Crawford's line, Margary had identified a raised pathway through the allotments (SU 574112) as the line of the road. When the allotments became a housing estate the site was closely watched.

¹ I. D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain* (revised edition, 1967), 92-4.

² O. G. S. Crawford, *Man and His Past*, 172-3.

The first section, in a sewer trench, was reported by Mr. J. C. Draper and recorded by Mrs. M. H. Rule and Mr. A. Corney. This was, in fact, some 35 yards south of the published line. The second discovery was in a manhole pit, allowing the alignment to be accurately plotted. The contractors arranged for the mechanical excavation of a trench across both alignments, but without result. A small quantity of Roman pottery was found at the same depth as the road. The metalling consisted of dark gravel on a subsoil of yellow river gravel and London Clay. The width is calculated at 16.7 feet, and it lay at a depth of 18 inches. There was one side ditch only, to the south.

4. No trace of the road was found at SU 545119 where a holloway was cut by a pipe trench in 1968.

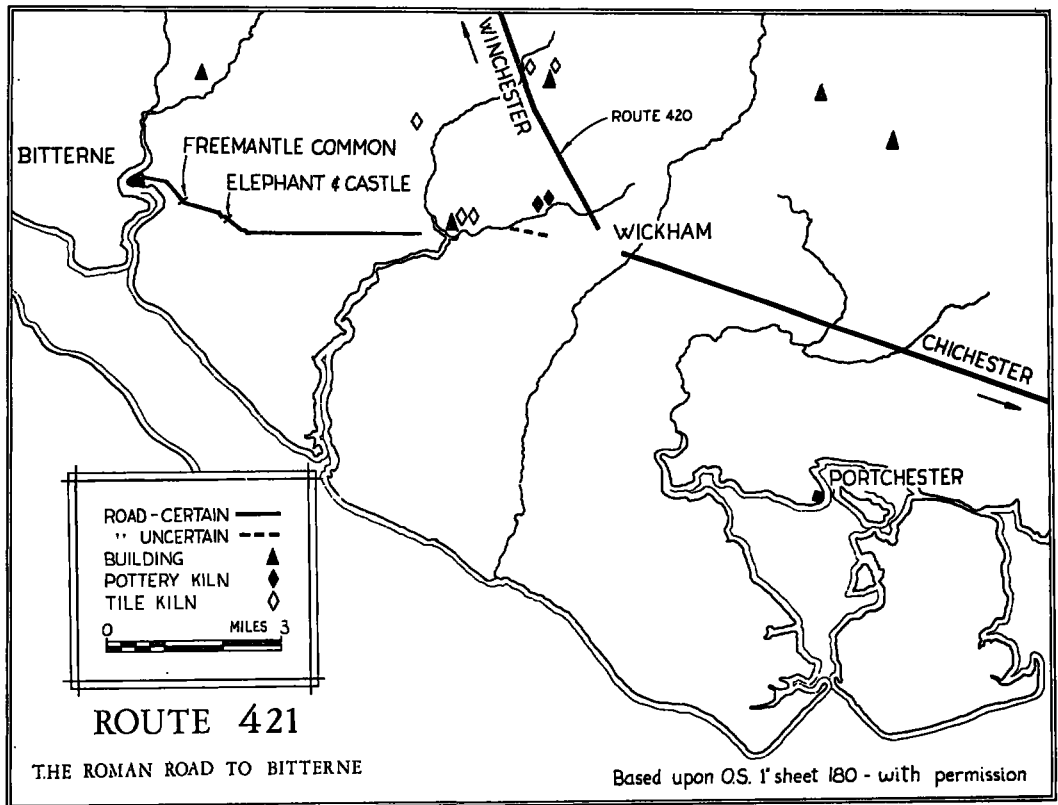


Fig. 9.

DISCUSSION

The evidence above, together with Mr. Maitland Muller's observations and our own excavations, shows that, in its western half, the road does not follow the mathematically straight course of the great military roads of the province. These minor deviations are shown on fig. 9.

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Moreover, the width apparently varied. To the west of Wickham the *agger* is recorded as about 27 feet wide at Drivett's Copse³ and 24 feet by Southwick House park. The road, if metalled, would thus be over 20 feet wide. At Wickham it was nearly 17 feet, the minimum for a main road. To the west of Wickham, however, the five sections described below give the width as a mere 12–13 feet.

Wickham is the place where the road joins route 420 travelling north-westwards towards Winchester. This, too, was quite generous in its dimensions; south of Owslebury it has a large *agger*, 33 feet wide, with wide side ditches. In other words, route 420 appears superficially to be a continuation of 421, with a narrower branch westwards towards Bitterne.

This is the route from Chichester to Winchester suggested by Margary to explain a difficulty in the mileage of the Antonine Itinerary. *Iter VII* gives the mileage from Chichester to *Clausentum* as 20 miles, and from *Clausentum* to *Venta Belgarum* as 10. In reality, these mileages are respectively 29 and 10 Roman miles, and the total of 30 miles can only be adhered to by assuming (with Margary) that the route turned off at Wickham, bypassing *Clausentum*. However, Margary was mistakenly measuring in English miles, and a straightforward emendation of the text will restore the first figure satisfactorily⁴; to accept this is easier than to believe, with Margary, that 'there was some confusion in the compiler's mind between the two routes'.

If, then, *Iter VII* records the road from Chichester to Bitterne as a single unit, we must explain the apparent reduction in width (and, presumable, of importance) in its

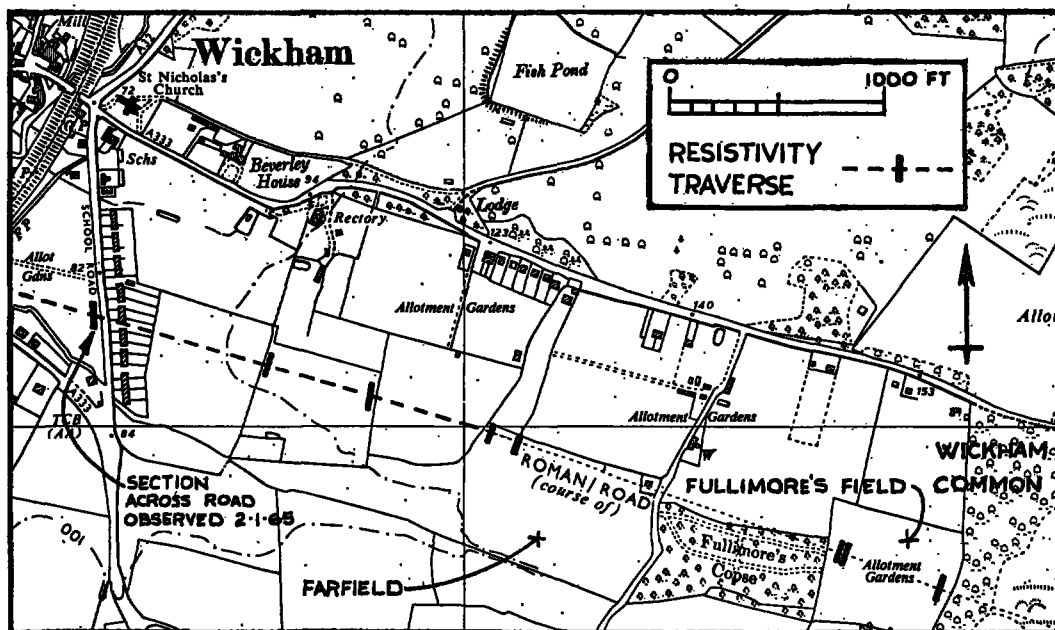


Fig. 10.

³ I. D. Margary, *ibid.*

⁴ As suggested by A. L. F. Rivet, in his lecture to

the Roman Society on 'The British Section of the Antonine Itinerary', January 1969.

western half. Now there is every likelihood that the road was laid down in the first century A.D., for there must have been a need for a road to connect the first century settlements of some importance at Chichester, Fishbourne and Bitterne. If our estimate of the width is correct, it is possible that the narrow width is the original, and that as subsequent traffic preferred to bypass *Clausentum* the shorter route was later remodelled in grander form.

THE EXCAVATIONS

A. *Freemantle Common* (fig. 11)

Fieldwork by Crawford and Maitland Muller over twenty years ago established the line of the road across Freemantle Common. In 1947 it was 'still plainly visible' as a 'flat raised causeway of gravel . . . in the angle between the Woolston and Netley Roads just south of their junction at the old lodge of Chessel'.⁵ Today, however, it is barely traceable on the surface, and as it lies within the boundaries of the City of Southampton, the Public Lands Committee, through the Town Clerk, Mr. Gordon Guest, approached the University for confirmation before erecting a plaque to mark its course. At the suggestion of Professor B. W. Cunliffe, it was excavated at four points by students of the extra-mural and W.E.A. class in archaeology at Portsmouth, directed by Mr. Johnston. The excavation, sponsored by the University Department of Extra-Mural Studies, took place on two wet weekends in July, 1968.

In a footnote to the passage quoted above Crawford records that 'soon after these words were written the better part of this Roman road was covered by a static water tank. (This has now been removed and the causeway restored under expert supervision.)'⁶ This restoration was so successful that it is now impossible to detect it; and we were saved from accidentally re-excavating it by a local resident, Mr. J. Wheatley, who showed us its approximate position, and told us that he remembered at least nine inches of original gravel metalling, with large stones as a base (a feature, incidentally, that our excavation elsewhere did not confirm). Our trenches were accordingly placed to avoid this.

Trench A (pl. I) gave the clearest section. Layer 3 is the original metalling, of slightly reddish, dirty rammed gravel laid directly upon the natural subsoil, which here is a purplish brickearth. It is likely, but not certain, that the turf and topsoil had been stripped in preparation for this. Evidence for wear is probably seen in four deep ruts, 3a, filled with rather brighter gravel, and a substantial patch of darker, dirtier gravel, 4, along the crown of the road and across the 6-foot width of our trench. This in turn had been subsequently worn to a flat top. The edges of the road were quite clear and abrupt: the road, which here sloped slightly to the west, had clearly been steeply cambered. Its width was 13 feet 6 inches.

It is possible that here, as apparently in Trench B, the ground had been slightly terraced for the road. The original surface had been hollowed at each side of the road, presumably by centuries of traffic forced off the road by something coming the other way. The filling of these hollows, layer 6, was a fine purplish-brown wash from the

⁵ *Proc. Hants F.C.*, xvi (1947), 247.

⁶ Soon after *these* words were written, history repeated itself strangely; the road was further damaged

by the planting of three municipal trees. It is hoped that these will be removed and the causeway restored.

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road surface, with some fairly large pebbles. At the east edge of the road was a shallow pot-hole (not shown in the section), filled with more gravel embedded in yellow clay, and dated by a few fragments of nineteenth-century brick.

Finally, layer 7 was of clean, bright yellow gravel that had probably once been a continuous layer. Resembling the sub-soil elsewhere closely, it may be part of the general superficial gravel spread that seems to have covered this corner of the common; on the other hand, in this trench only, it bore the appearance of an attempt to widen the road. This must be a quite recent feature.

In Trench B, as in C and D, the western edge of the metalling could not be precisely defined. The subsoil was the purple-brown 'brickearth' here, too, and the metalling, 3, of very hard rammed gravel, was laid directly upon it. The east edge was quite distinct but the west edge was lost in the recent gravel spread, 4. The subsoil, 2, had apparently been terraced here, the hollow being filled with 2a, and fine silty version of 2, with some loose gravel from the road. The metalling was some 8 inches thick here, and before it was worn to its present flattened profile and sealed with topsoil and turf, it must have been very substantial and steeply cambered. Here, it cannot have been more than 12 feet wide.

In Trench C, the metalling actually forms the bare, grassless surface of the common. Its eastern edge, formed of rolled, water-worn pebbles, is very hard and distinct; and it continues northwards for three yards or so, still visible as a hard, stony 'spine'

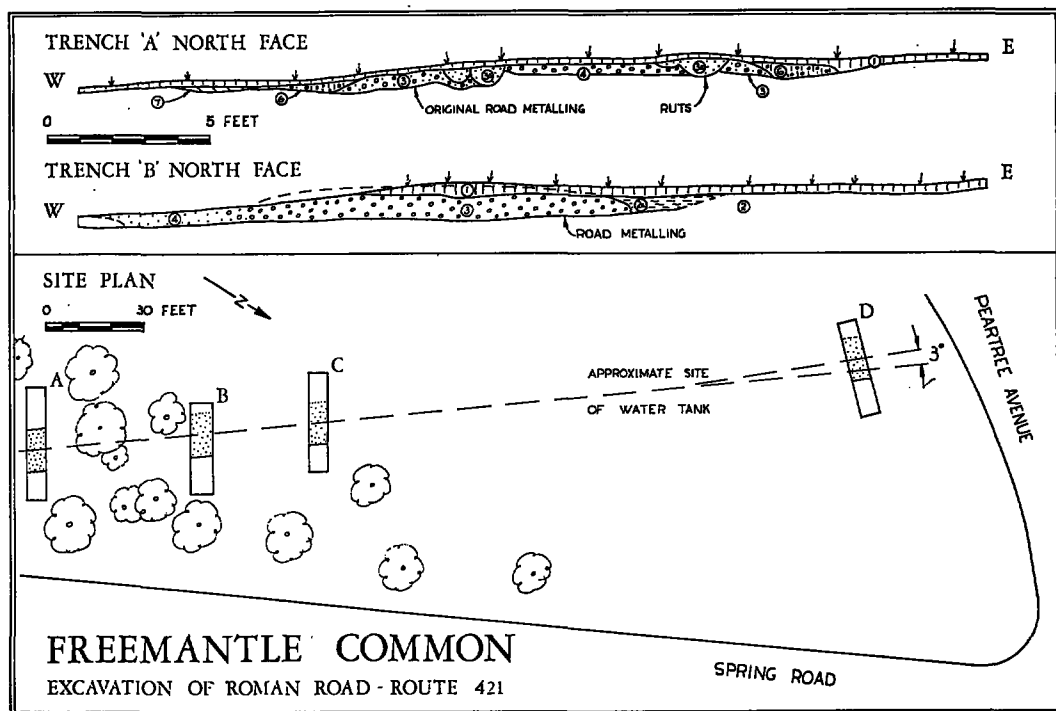


Fig. 11.

amid the recent gravel spread. Likewise, the bare crown of the road can be detected on the surface by its compactness and larger stones. The subsoil here was a couple of inches of brown sandy soil over yellow 'brickearth'. We did not section the metalling here.

Trench D gave a fine exposure of the metalling, which we did not section. The subsoil here was a gravelly clay. There was a slight slope to the west, again about 6 inches, and – as before – the eastern edge was the more distinct. The value of the hard, smooth surface and steep camber was dramatically proved by the torrential rain which streamed off the surface into the hollows, which – had they been continuous – would have drained the road most effectively.

The total length examined was about 260 feet. Whereas the subsoil varied from trench to trench, the metalling remained consistent in quality. The constant features are the apparent preliminary levelling of the site, the steep camber and excessive narrowness. Ragged and broken edges made this hard to assess, but it cannot have been more than 13 feet wide throughout. A careful survey detected a slight swerve to the west – towards *Clausentum*, in other words. It was not clear whether this was a gentle curve, or whether there was an angle between Trenches C and D. In A, B and C the line appears to be true; Trench D shows an apparent shift of only 3° at the most. Such wandering is normal in minor roads; under the circumstances, the absence of side-ditches, *agger* and foundation-course need cause no surprise.

The excavation revealed very little of the history of the road. We cannot date its construction from finds. It has clearly suffered a good deal of wear, and been patched and repaired, over the centuries. In Trench A it had been either worn, or artificially cut through to the subsoil before being patched. This suggests comparatively recent, or at least post-Roman work. The maps referred to above show that it survived here as a ridge, or causeway, and perhaps as a track. When it ceased to be a right of way, and the land came into private hands (presumably Bitterne Manor) we do not know. By about 1900 it was Freemantle Common, as we know it today.

B. *Elephant and Castle*, Sholing (fig. 12)

The writers' attention was first drawn to this site by Mr. Maitland Muller. He had noted the embankment in a small Sports Field to the south of the Elephant and Castle Inn (SU 45951235). In July, 1968, the site became a housing estate, and permission was given for an emergency excavation, directed by Mr. Reed. The site is now built over, and the last traces of the road destroyed.

Before excavation all that could be seen was a low embankment; roughly 40 feet long, by 20 feet at its widest, and not more than 1 foot high. It ran from N.W. to S.E., roughly parallel to Bursledon Road (A3024), 20 feet to the N.E. of the rear boundary fence to nos. 1 and 3 Firtree Way, Sholing. The excavation, consisting of a single trench and a small trial cutting, was completed in one weekend, and was a striking confirmation of the preliminary resistivity survey.

The subsoil of the building site was gravel, varying in size and colour from dark brown to grey, and sand, varying from yellow to a medium brown.

The road metalling consisted of pinkish grey gravel which was probably obtained on the spot. It was laid directly on the subsoil with a shallow scoop to the S.W. It was

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only 12 feet wide and 4 inches thick, while the scoop was 2 feet wide and 5 inches deep.

The section shows that the impression of an *agger* is an illusion, and is the result of recent disturbance. Layer 4, for instance, probably represents the levelling of the adjacent sports ground, and was a dark brown gritty soil with only a few small stones. The disuse of the Roman road is shown by a turf and humus layer (8) with a few chips of brick. Layer 3 was entirely modern, with two patches of fine yellow gravel (3a) and a layer of builders' debris (2) composed of slate and broken brick. We were told during the excavation that about 35 years ago the remains of cattle pens, in the form of low brick walls, were visible on the site of the excavation. The section shows a modern drain which cut into the road metalling in the adjacent trial cutting, and was accompanied by the slight foundations of a brick wall.

The road was therefore a simple affair, comparable to that on Freemantle Common in its narrowness and lack of *agger*. The single scoop was similar, too, being filled with gravel washed from the cambered surface (11) and black stoneless humus (10). The road could not be dated, but the degree of wear can be gauged from the section.

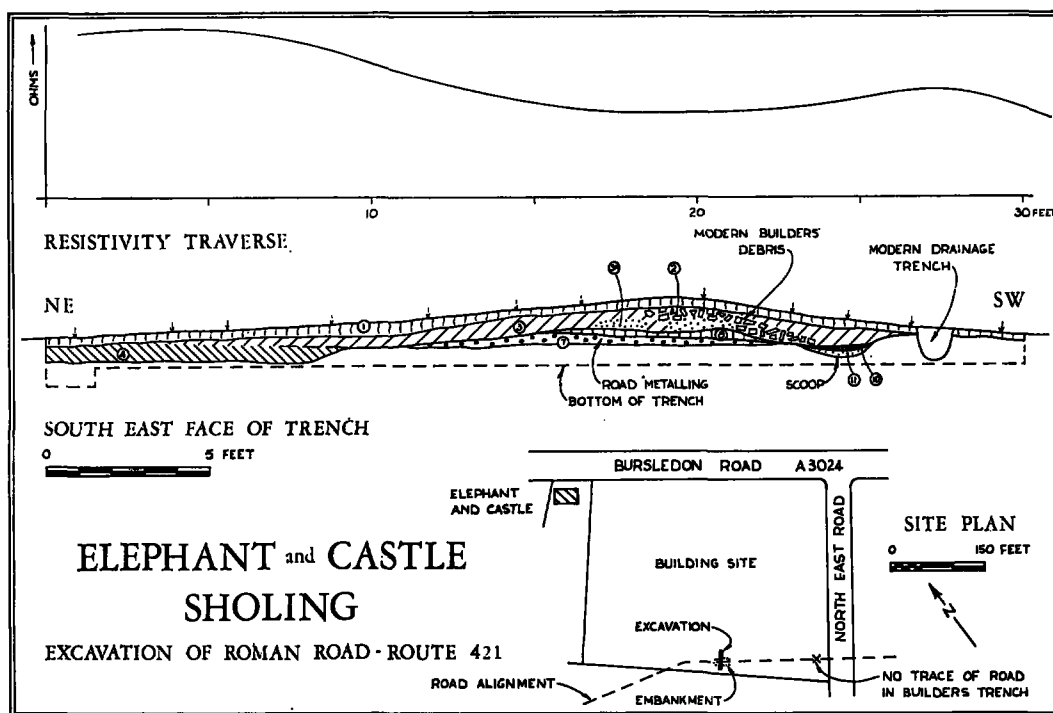


Fig. 12.

Acknowledgements

First, we would thank the University of Southampton Departments of Extra-Mural Studies and Archaeology, the first of whom provided the volunteer diggers and the second much valuable archaeological equipment. We are equally indebted to the

PROCEEDINGS FOR THE YEAR 1968

Town Clerk and Corporation of the County Borough of Southampton, whose Engineers' Department showed us the same consideration they have shown to archaeologists in the past, and offered us a remarkable choice of road-making paraphernalia; in particular, to Mr. E. Paddick, Resident Foreman of the Woolston Depôt, for a base during the Freemantle Common excavation.

Mr. B. J. Deacon, of Deacon Properties, kindly allowed us to dig at short notice on the Elephant and Castle site while development work was actually in progress.

Mr. A. L. F. Rivet kindly allowed us to discuss his work in the *Itinerary* before publication, and saved us from more than one misunderstanding. Our indebtedness to Mr. M. R. Maitland Muller has been made clear in the text. But the work would have been impossible without the enthusiastic help of many individual diggers, especially of Mr. John Billing, who was present throughout both operations. And, finally, we must thank the residents of Freemantle Common for tolerating the disturbance of their Common, and for offering much helpful information while the work was in progress.