

The Lower Icknield Way

By C. MORRIS, G. H. HARGREAVES AND R. P. F. PARKER

IN *Roman Roads in Britain*, 182 I. D. Margary says 'The Upper Icknield Way has all the characteristics of a trackway, following the steep escarpment of the Chiltern range, but the Lower Way is here peculiar in following a series of true alignments on the flat land in a position unlikely for a trackway and quite typical of a Roman road There can be little doubt that this part of the Icknield Way is a true Roman road.'

The continuation of the Way to the Thames near Dorchester which is the subject of this paper shows in the straight alignments and other features described below definite evidence of Roman construction (FIG. 4). Moreover, it passes through villages in all of which there are records of Roman occupation and it cannot be supposed that there was not a road linking them.¹ This is supported by records of a *straetforda* at Brightwell Baldwin, a *stretforlong* at Warborough and 'Street' field-names at Shirburn.

It is generally accepted that no roads of the solid construction and straight alignments of the Roman ways were built after the departure of the Romans until about the end of the eighteenth century and that when the Roman roads went out of use in parts they were often succeeded by tracks meandering along the lower levels, such as Hollandtide Bottom.

The course of the Romanized Lower Icknield Way **168b**. is described by Margary as far as Pyrton and he surmises that a continuation may have followed lanes and hedgerows by Cuxham and Brightwell Baldwin towards Wallingford. This surmise is now shown to be very nearly correct. The Romanized Icknield Way was directed mainly along a narrow belt of Greensand and partly on the general line of Hollandtide Bottom to the crossing of the Thames of the Margary **160** Roman road from Silchester to Alchester.

Continuing from the driveway mentioned by Margary the road crosses the A40 Oxford road and runs on the general line of a short lane shown on the map as Lower Icknield Way. There is no sign here, except that where the alignment of the Roman road would have crossed the lane at a very sharp angle the latter is raised above the level of the fields alongside. At a point

¹ I have considerable doubts on this as a general theory: there is a considerable difference between the tracks and droves (as seen in the Fens) and any sort of regular Roman road.—Ed.

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(708978) a furlong north-west of Moor Court a track turns off the modern road south-westwards. This is wide, somewhat raised and showing a considerable amount of flint. After about 400 yards it curves very slightly to the south, but the original alignment is marked beside the track by a very thin crop, the pale colour of which, when observed, contrasted vividly with the darker hue of the rest of the field. There was also a considerable scatter of flint.

The cart-track returns to its former alignment and then bends to the north-west, but the line is marked in the next field by a hedgerow and a bank 8 to 10 ft. wide and about 2 ft. high. Even allowing for the outcast from the ditch beside the hedge the bank seems too massive to be other than the vestige of the *agger*. In the field beyond the line is continued by a hedgerow, but there is no bank. An estate road which is well raised and a track mark the course of the Roman road to a brook across which there was obviously a ford at one time. On the alignment in the next field the *agger* is visible in places. A made-up track then diverges a few degrees to the west of the former alignment and this comes to an end at Knightsbridge Lane.

In early times the Upper and Lower Icknield Ways were much used and it is significant that in the eighteenth century the course described above from Moor Court to Pyrton was a through road.²

No sign appears past Home Farm (formerly Slay Farm), but then in the thick grass of a long, narrow field beginning at 68079573 deep ruts can be felt, indicating that this must at one time have been a wide trackway and a footpath still exists and continues beyond the narrow field to the Watlington-Cuxham road. On Jeffery's and Davis's maps of the late eighteenth century all this line from the above map reference onwards is shown as a road.

The course through Cuxham is obscure. A turn of some degrees to the west would have been necessary to avoid the low, wet ground on the south side of the modern road through Cuxham which probably generally represents the course of the Roman road as far as Brightwell Baldwin. The *straetforda* at this place is mentioned in a Saxon charter of 887 in connection with a boundary along 'the Mead Lane between Egga's ford and Street Ford to the north of the brook'. The Eganford is mentioned in the Cuxham Charter K 691 and its situation there is clearly defined as having been where the road running north from Cuxham village crosses the stream which flows near the common boundary of Cuxham and Easington. This was obviously where the road running north crosses a stream about a furlong west of Cut's Mill. There is no stream of any size for more than a mile to the north of Eganford, thus it must be supposed that the *straetforda* was to the south. At the present

² *V.C.H. Oxon.* viii, Shirburn.

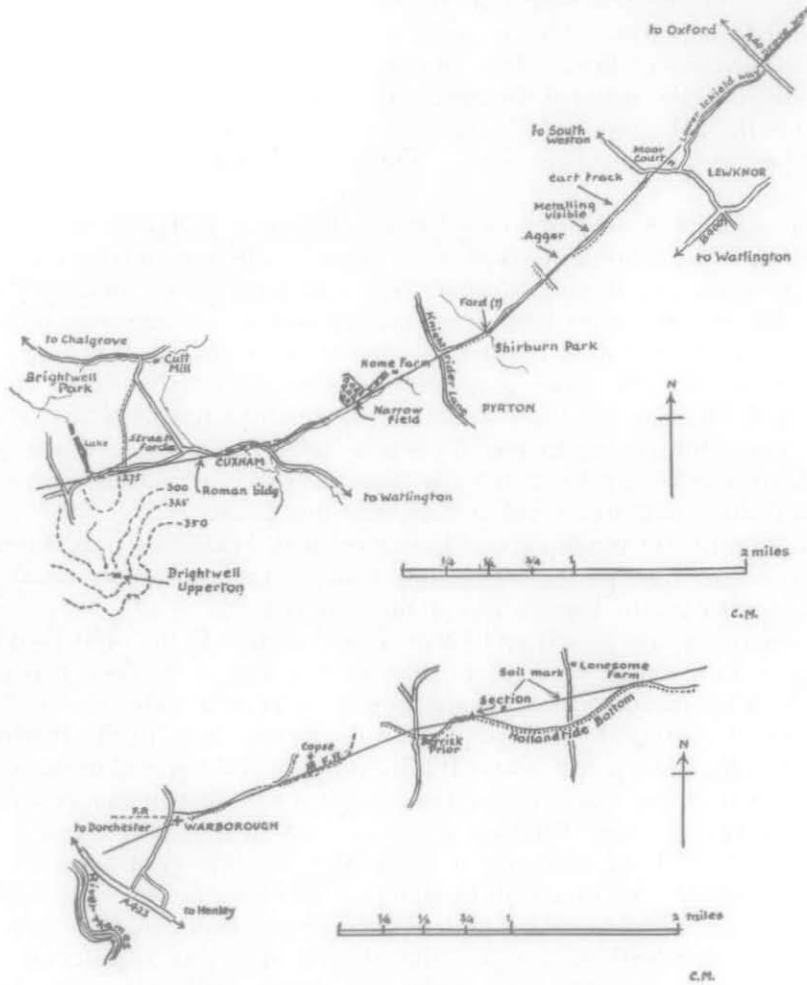


FIG. 4

time there is a narrow lake in Brightwell Park which has its outflow at the north end into a stream flowing north-westwards. From the other end a depression extends to Brightwell Upperton and it seems probable that the little stream which runs northward from that place continued and joined the other on the line of what is now the Lake, crossing the present road. This is strongly suggested by the contours and immediately on the south side

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of the road close to the Rectory there is a depression which has the appearance of having been a ford. Moreover, the road certainly existed in the 14th century³ and in medieval times a ford would certainly have continued in use and as there are records indicating Roman occupation in the two villages it is inconceivable that there was not a road giving communication between them, over the postulated ford, which strongly supports the supposition that this was the *straetforda* (FIG. 4).

From this the line is through Brightwell Park just north of the church. Immediately west of the church the drive to the House borders a narrow field across which, on the alignment, is a clear *agger* (FIG. 5). The line proceeds, with Hollandtide Bottom meandering close by on the south side of it, on a course slightly south of west to Berrick Prior. Shortly after ploughing, a wide scatter of Greensand was observed on the hillside west of the lane running by Lonesome Farm. This scatter lay in a straight band almost as far as Berrick Prior. As there was no corresponding scatter on the slope to the south of Hollandtide Bottom it seems more than likely that the exposure represents the metalling of the Roman road, though it was slightly down-hill from the alignment of this, presumably due to soil-drift. About 500 yards east of Berrick Prior the Roman road and the ancient way coincide for about a furlong and here it was sectioned, revealing solid metalling (FIG. 6).

On Davis's map of 1794 and on the O.S. map of 1812 a road is shown very straight from Berrick Prior to Warborough. Though a right-of-way still exists on this line only faint traces are visible for about a quarter of a mile eastwards from a small copse at 611941 and on a footpath to the west, which after crossing a field develops into a green lane. This may be the *stretforlong* mentioned in connection with Warborough, into which place the green lane continues. On the maps the above-mentioned road is shown as beginning west of Berrick approximately where the line of the Roman road would meet it. If, as is suggested, the Roman road followed the line of this ancient way it would have made a turn of a few degrees to the south and was directed on the point where the Roman road 160 from Silchester to Alchester crosses the Thames about three-quarters of a mile south-east of Dorchester. It is a remarkable fact that this old way lies in the middle of a tongue of gravel protruding into the clay and this was, no doubt, the reason for the turn, which also makes the shortest crossing of the clay. No sign appears in the arable beyond Warborough.

From the west side of the present road through Warborough, almost opposite the church, an obviously ancient track bears off and after about

P. D. A. Harvey, *A Deserted Medieval Oxfordshire Village*, O.U.P., 1965, map p. 199.

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150 yards develops into a well-made footpath. This continues into the fields and then disappears. It is aligned on a point on the present A423 road rather more than a quarter of a mile from Dorchester and it seems likely that this footpath and the track are vestiges of a link with the Roman town.

ROMAN ASSOCIATIONS WITH THE ROAD:

Shirburn—A pot of coins found. (Stukeley, *Itinerarium Curiosum*.) 'street' field-names along the road. (Copley, *An Archaeology of South-East England*, gazeteer.)

Pyrton—Lower Icknield Way a through road from the village to Moor Court in 18th century. (*V.C.H. Oxon.* viii.)

Cuxham—Finds of pottery. Fragment of wall and tile. (*V.C.H.* i, 335.)

Brightwell Baldwin—*Straetforda* mentioned in Saxon charters. (*V.C.H.* i, 11.) Find of 500 coins. (*V.C.H.* i, 329.)

Berrick Salome—Many fragments of old tiles, ? Roman, between village and Brightwell Baldwin. (*V.C.H.* i, 332.)
Find of urns east of church. (*idem*, p. 333.)

Warborough—Coin found on Green. (*V.C.H.* i, 344.) Coin hoard 4th century. Roman industrial site? (Copley, gazeteer.) *Strete-forlonge* mentioned 13th century. (*idem*.)

Dorchester—Roman town.

No evidence has appeared on which to date the road.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SECTIONS:

Trial excavation at Brightwell Baldwin. SU 65239500. (FIG. 5.)

This was made on an *agger* across a field on the west side of the drive to the House. The *agger* about 30 ft. wide and had a wide ditch on the north side. The surface showed that there had been some disturbance. A trench 5 ft. long was opened in the side of the *agger* away from the ditch. The topsoil, of humus, had been disturbed and the original surface had been overlaid by another layer, this being indicated by small cavities. This top-soil varied in depth from 6 to 16 in., but there was no clear demarcation between it and the underlying layer, which was of sandy loam about 22 in. deep. Below this was a layer also of sandy loam with possibly an admixture of lime, which was, however, finer and more compact than the layer above. This layer was 18 to 22 in. in depth, following the camber of the *agger*.

The humus was much disturbed by roots, which also penetrated the layer below, but it was noteworthy that there was no such penetration of the bottom layer. This

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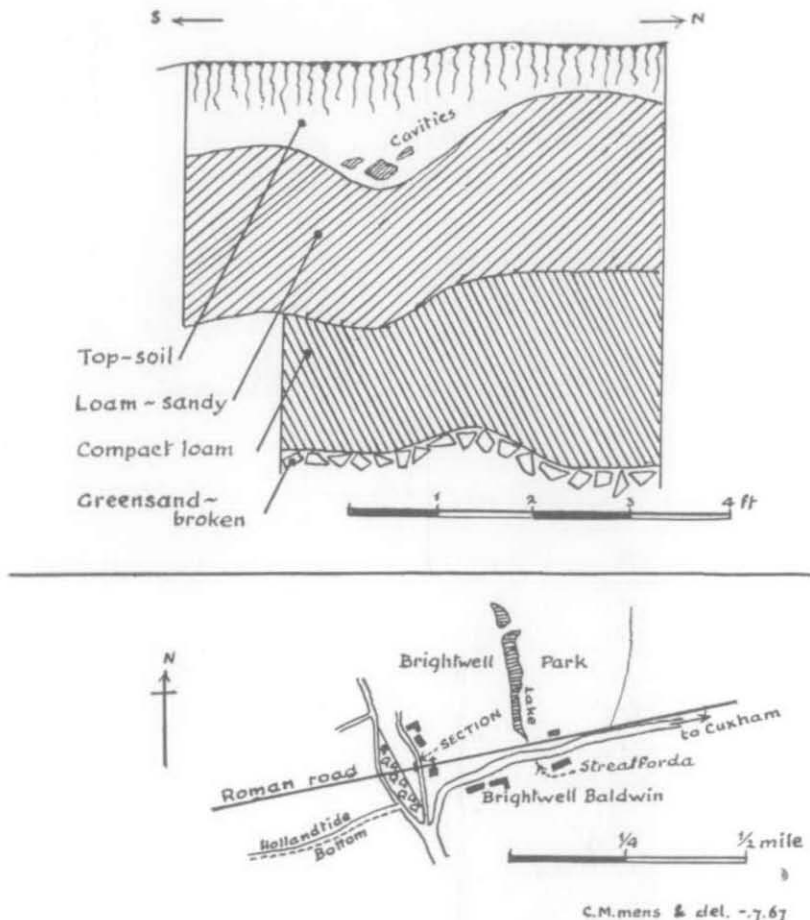


FIG. 5

rested on an irregular stratum of greensand stones, which had the appearance of being a foundation, but was not excavated. Slight traces of small greensand pieces were found on the top of the lowest layer, which may have been vestiges of surface metalling.

It was concluded that the feature was an earth *agger*. The absence of a turf layer seems to preclude the possibility that it was a medieval bank.

Section at Berrick Prior. SU 62609452. (FIG. 6.)

The site was about quarter of a mile east-north-east of the village on the ancient green lane known as Hollandtide Bottom. The axis of the road was about three yards north of that of the green lane. The top-soil of humus increased in depth

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from 6 in. for the first 9 ft. to 11 in. on the top of the camber. Below was a layer varying from 2 to 5 in. of loam containing a considerable amount of gravel. Underlying this was solid metalling of rammed flint and pebble, of which 4 ft. was excavated, showing a thickness of at least 10 in. This rested on a foundation of red sand, into which the metalling had sunk in such a way that no clear demarcation could be seen between them. A small excavation of this foundation showed it 6 to 8 in. deep and cambering steeply towards the crest of the *agger*. From this it would appear that its maximum depth might have been about 18 in. A hedgerow on the south side and a wet ditch on the other precluded further excavation in either direction, but probing in the ditch indicated that the road extended into the field beyond. The surface section of the remaining 7 ft. showed a compact layer of gravel and small pebble.

The width of the road as excavated was 18 ft. and it may well have been 6 ft. wider.