

# Roman Road Research Part 1

## New sections of Roman roads found in the South West

One of the many great achievements of the Roman Empire, was the road network. Across the whole of the empire from the Caspian Sea in the east, to Portugal in the west and from the Sahara in the south to the Rhine in the north, the Romans built a network of roads linking forts and later, towns and cities.

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These roads were designed and constructed to a prescribed pattern, with a cambered surfaced agger, normally with side ditches for drainage. However, construction materials varied with the availability of stone and gravels depending on local geology. At one time it was thought that all Roman roads were set out in long straight lengths, with a change of direction on high ground where the next sighting line produced the next straight length, however research has indicated that this is not always the case.

Lines of site lengths were set out using the *groma*, with intermediate markers being placed along the line and for longer distances, sun compasses were used for the general direction. The actual route was determined by modifying the master line, to take account of the terrain over which the road had to be taken. This minimised steep gradients and valleys, and by generally keeping to high ground used the appropriate contours to keep the road as level as possible. Where descent into and ascent out of valleys was necessary, zigzagging was commonly used. However, in Britain, a number of Roman roads curve, using contours as the best method to achieve a steady gradient. The crossing of rivers and streams was frequently by bridge, although fords were used in many cases.

Roman roads in southern and southwestern Britain, including roads in the Bath area and in surrounding counties, are currently being studied by a number of people who co-operate by exchanging information and the results of investigations. The roads being studied are:

#### 1 The Lead Road (Margary No 45)

- The section of the above road from Salisbury to Charterhouse on Mendip (Margary No 45b).
- The section of the above road from Charterhouse on Mendip to Uphill, near Weston-Super-Mare. 45c (not a Margary number).

#### 2 Poole to Bath Road (Margary No 46)

- The section of the above road from Donhead St Mary to Frome (no number)
- Henhambridge Brook to Bath (Margary No 52)

#### 3 Bath to Sea Mills (Margary No 54)

#### 4 Sea Mills to Gloucester (Margary No 541)

#### 5 Charterhouse to Bitton (Margary No 540)

#### 6 Bitton to Gloucester 540a (not a Margary number)

### No1. The Lead Road (Margary No 45)

The route of this road is known with certainty and is well documented. From Winchester it goes through Salisbury to a point where it crosses a small valley, approaching Monkton Deverill from the east at NGR 867371 (Explorer 143 Warminster and Trowbridge). Its course westward from this point is uncertain, until a well defined section occurs near Long Cross on Mendip, NGR 659452 (Explorer 142 Shepton Mallet & Mendip Hills East). However it must have crossed or been crossed by the Poole to Bath road (Margary No 46), in or near Monkton Deverill. Recent studies have indicated a possible route westward towards Maiden Bradley which will be investigated during 2010, by field walking and geophysical survey (see Figure 1).

The route westward must have passed through or near Maiden Bradley, Witham Friary, Alice Street Farm and Cranmore. Its alignment is fairly certain at Brickfields near Wanstraw, as this is stated as an entry in an obscure book, "*Bennett's book of Roman Roads*", which can be found in Cambridge University Library. It was thought that the final destination of this road was the Roman Lead workings at Charterhouse on Mendip. This was probably true in the 1st Century military phase. However, a number of writers including Colt Hoare, suggested a continuation of the road from Charterhouse on



Mendip to a possible Roman port near Uphill, Weston-Super-Mare. Field work carried out over the past few years by BACAS member John Mathews has proved at least two sections of this road west from Charterhouse on Mendip at Banwell. It is thought that a Roman port did exist on the River Axe at Uphill, and is located in a field known as Borough Walls. This is an area which requires further study, field walking and a geophysical survey.

**Figure 1**  
**The lead road running west towards Maiden Bradley.**

**No2. The Poole to Bath road (Margary No 46) – Donhead St Mary to Bath.**

The route from Hamworthy Quay, Poole, which goes past Badbury Rings, is known with certainty to a point approaching Donhead Common NGR 919207 (Explorer 129 Yeovil and Sherbourne). North of this point the route is fairly certain, after crossing the A30 at Ludwell. A section of the road was uncovered in Donhead St Mary some years ago.

Between this point and a confirmed section where the road crosses the railway at Semley NGR894275 (Explorer 129) (see Figure 2), the exact route is not known. A recent excavation at a stream crossing north of Donhead, indicated a possible line. However the excavation did not prove the actual course of the road satisfactorily. No other trace of the road exists northwards until East Knoyle, where a section was discovered. Recently however a section of the road has been positively identified in the grounds of Clouds House, north of the village.

From here to Kingston Deverill the route is not known. One puzzle has always been the line of the road over Cold Kitchen Hill, north of Kingston Deverill. It has been assumed, wrongly, that the Roman road crossed the River Wyllye at the ford in the village. However the steepness of the south face of the hill would have made it very difficult, if not impossible, to construct a road at this point, even if zigzagging had been used.

The first real clue to the line of the road came when the late Col. John Peddie observed the surface of the Roman road in a Wessex Water trench at Monkton Deverill. The road surface was some four feet below the present road surface and ran along the same line as the modern road. This alignment would take

**Figure 2 The Roman road crossing the railway at Semley.**



the Roman road to a point where it crossed the Wyllye, north of the village, towards Whitcliffe Farm.

If this is the case then the feature marked on the Ordnance Survey map as a “ditch”, which runs along the southwest side of Boars Bottom, could be the remains of the Roman road. This ditch gradually ascends the valley to emerge at the hilltop exactly at the point at which the road zigzags down the north face of Cold Kitchen Hill. The latest Google Earth image shows its continuation from the base of the hill to the



**Figure 3 The Roman road running up Cold Kitchen Hill.**

Woolverton road. It was the suggested line of the road in a field on Springfield Farm that encouraged the Society to carry out a geophysical survey north of the last visible trace of the track marked as “Roman Road”. This had spectacular results, finding not the road, but the outline of what is one of the largest Roman villas in this part of Britain. It was clear that the Roman road did not use this route and that the Ordnance Survey map is wrong. The line of a road marked on the map is a later Medieval road. A closer look at aerial photographs, shows clearly the “drive” into the villa from the road.

Between the newly discovered section of the road and the observable section at Abbey Farm, west of Hinton Charterhouse, the route is uncertain. The line at Abbey Farm, if extrapolated, would take the road right to the edge of a precipitous cliff known as Cleeve Rocks, overlooking the Midford Brook. Research has shown that this is exactly what the Roman road engineers did. Just before the cliff, the road turns abruptly left along what is now the parish boundary and continues down a spur to the Midford Brook. This was confirmed in an excavation by A.T. Wicks in 1933. He excavated a section of the road, including kerb stones, on the alignment from the spur. The route across the Midford Brook is not known and the Somerset coal canal, the railway line and the modern road have obliterated all traces.

However a stretch of the road has been identified crossing the field in front of and to the east of Midford Castle, where, until destroyed by ploughing, the terrace way could be seen. At the northern edge of the field the road takes a sharp left turn onto a terrace which slopes down to the valley bottom at Horsecombe Vale. A similar slope, now destroyed, took the road down the valley before resuming the straight alignment. No trace of the road could be found in the woods leading up to Beechwood Road on Combe Down, until it was realised that the parish boundary ran through the wood and was on the exact line of the road! Small scale excavation produced remnants of a constructed surface.

The remainder of the route of this road into, or around Bath, is not known, but it is thought that the line of the road ran down the spur to the west of Prior Park Road, past what has been identified as a Roman cemetery, at the current Abbey cemetery. It then went along the route of the Kennet and Avon canal, to join the Roman road from Bathampton Down which continued across the end of Great Pulteney Street and Henrietta Park, crossing the river to join the Fosseway at Walcot Street. From here the road probably ran along the line of Julian Road, through Weston Village to Bitton, (probably Roman *Trajectus*) and on to Sea Mills (*Abone*), making this a coast to coast road similar to the one from Weymouth to Crandon Bridge near Bridgewater.

It is considered that these coast to coast links were made in Roman times to reduce the considerable risks of sailing ships around the Cornish peninsula and Lands End. It is intended to undertake a programme of further research and fieldwork during 2010 and to report again in next year’s *Camerton*.

southwest of Woodcombe Farm from NGR847388 to NGR842391 (Explorer 143) (see Figure 3). From this point, through Longleat and Frome, the line of the road remains a mystery, although the Frome Society believes that part of the route runs along Friggle Street.

The current edition of the Ordnance Survey map shows a line marked “Roman Road” running from the north bank of the Henhambridge Brook towards “Chatley” on the B3110 Norton St Philip to