

EARLY CDAS FIELDWORK - LOOKING FOR ROMAN ROADS

At the second AGM in 1992, a suggestion was made that money should be put aside to cover the costs of future fieldwork, but the Treasurer said he thought that it was too soon to consider this - the society needed to accumulate more funds before it could be undertaken.

By 1995 the Excavation sub-committee (as it was then called) had started looking at air photographs and had spotted clear crop marks running from Chichester to Dell Quay on the extended line of Stane Street. However the following year they reported that it was now realised that the crop marks were the result of laying a gas pipeline - which followed the extended line of Stane Street exactly!

In that year - 1996 - Molly Vernon-Cullen noticed some parallel line crop marks on an air photo of Hunston Common - which might be the suspected Roman road running south from Chichester - probably towards Selsey. The farmer was friendly and so in 1997 a trench 25m long and 1.5m wide was dug across the line - with wonderful results! The road was about ½ metre down, 9m wide and with 2 side-ditches 15m apart. Amazingly the diggers found several RB pot sherds and 2 Roman coins dating from the 1st and 3rd centuries - and all that in 1.5m of road!!

Sadly this dig was also the last time that the remaining members of Alec Down's team of volunteers were able to play an active role - they were Wilf Shannon, Geoff Busbridge and Molly Vernon-Cullen. Unfortunately, Molly was too ill to take part, but was carried on the site to see the excavated road. Sadly she died not long afterwards.

This left the society with very few members with excavating experience and so, not surprisingly, it was a few years before James Kenny - the Chichester District archaeologist - felt able to allow us to continue with fieldwork. In 2000 James accepted that we were unlikely to cause any significant damage by digging trenches across roads and so in 2001 we started seriously looking for evidence of 3 of the possible Roman roads leaving Chichester - those going to the north-west, west and south.

The road going north-west to Silchester via Iping Common is still visible today as a bank about 3km north of Lavant, but the section between there and Chichester Northgate had not been found. An air photo of 1946 showed clear double lines in the fields along the west side of Lavant Road, but this area is now under the gardens of houses. Two house owners in Lavant Road with fairly large lawns along the line were approached and they agreed to let us conduct Resistivity Surveys with the help of the Brighton and Hove Archaeological Society in 2001. The results from the two quite small areas did show some patches of high resistance, but unfortunately there was no really clear indication of the road or ditches. This may be due to ploughing which had scattered the remains after 1946.

The course of the Roman road to the west had been confidently shown on many maps prior to 1961 as going from Westgate, through Fishbourne and along the A259. However this belief was shattered by the discovery of Fishbourne Roman Palace right on the line - so where did the road go? It was definitely known from Havant westwards and it was very unlikely to have run to the south of the Palace as the Palace gardens went down to the probable shoreline.

A good suggestion was the line of Hook Dyke, which is a drainage ditch running in a north-westerly direction just north of Bishop Luffa school and about 0.4km north of the Roman Palace. It is shown on ancient maps, is a public footpath today, forms the boundary of Fishbourne Parish, has a very obvious bank running along its north side - and projecting the

line eastwards brings it exactly to Westgate. It looked just right. Could this be the route, with one of its ditches still in use?



Once again the land owner was helpful and we put a trench through the bank and out to where the other ditch might have been. In spite of our high hopes, the section showed that the bank was simply the spoil heap resulting from clearing out the ditch from time to time - and there was no sign of any road metalling or of a second side-ditch.

After two unsuccessful searches in one year, we decided to go back to the south road again. By drawing a line on the map between the section at Hunston Common and the position of the Roman South gate, we found the nearest available place to Chichester which we could look at was at the end of Grosvenor Road in Stockbridge. A trench which eventually reached 28m in length was dug across the line in a summer heatwave - and revealed nothing at all! 2001 had definitely not been a good year for CDAS fieldwork!

We field-walked almost the entire length of the line of the road from Hunston Common up to Chichester, but found nothing of significance. However, further examination of the air photos showed a very faint line across fields to the west of Hunston village and so in 2002 we tried again about 1.5km north of the Hunston Common excavation. At last our luck changed and we found it!

Once again it was about 9m wide, but there did not appear to be any side-ditches associated with the road and no significant finds were discovered. Like the section at Hunston Common, the main constituent of the road was beach pebbles, but this time there were also 2 pieces of Mixon stone, from the Mixon rocks south of Selsey. This strongly suggested that the road was built starting from the sea end, allowing more material to be brought along the road as it was being constructed.



We had one last fling with the south Roman road. The Hunston dig in 2002 showed that the centre line was a few metres to the west of the predicted line and this implied that the position at Stockbridge was likely to be some 10m west of where we had dug in 2001. This would also mean that it would line up with the modern Southgate, not the Roman South Gate which is thought to be a few metres to the east.

So we went back to the field at the end of Grosvenor Road to have another look. One of our members - Denis Carter, who died earlier this year - kindly offered the use of a JCB and his son as driver and so in 2003 in one day we dug and refilled a long and deep trench - but without finding any trace of the missing road!

Also in 2003 we broadened our scope and carried out our first area excavation at Itchenor Park Farm to look for the remains of the earlier farmhouse shown on the 1839 Tithe map - but that is a story for another day.

So in the first 6 years of fieldwork we tried but failed to find traces of either the north-west or west Roman roads from Chichester but we definitely showed that the southwards road was real and was Roman. All this work laid the foundations for a more experienced group of diggers who then took on a much wider range of fieldwork than had previously been possible.

I would like to make it clear that all the fieldwork I have mentioned was done with the help of James Kenny, who also directed all the excavations.

John Magilton took over as Director of the Chichester District Archaeological Unit after Alec Down retired and in his report for 1991 John said that CDAS had been founded and that “I hope that it will become an active society taking part in fieldwork and not exist solely for the entertainment of its members”. Sadly, John died in March, but I would like to think that he had been pleased with the way in which CDAS has developed.

KEITH LAWSON

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