

OBSERVATIONS ON THE WILDERSPOOL TO WIGAN ROMAN ROAD IN NEWTON-LE-WILLOWS, MERSEYSIDE, 1985-1995

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INTRODUCTION

In the decade since 1985 three opportunities have arisen in Newton-le-Willows, east of St Helens, Merseyside, to examine sections across the well-documented Roman road which ran between Wigan and Wilderspool (Figure 5). The sections allowed an examination of the construction and precise alignment of the road, and in one case produced unexpected additional evidence for both the earlier and later occupation of the area. This article presents the results of these investigations. The first part of the article covers early published evidence for the Roman road, previous archaeological work and the evidence of field names; the last part, following an account of the excavations, discusses the road in its historical and landscape context, both during the Roman period and later.

Background

The Roman road at Newton forms part of the main arterial road between Northwich and Lancaster which crosses the Mersey at Wilderspool, passes through Wigan and Preston, and may have continued into the Lake District, although this has not been confirmed (Margary 1957, 91, 99-100). This alignment is the western of the two main routes on the west side of the Pennines. The eastern route, which links Buxton with forts at Manchester, Ribchester, Overborrow, Low Borrow Bridge, Brougham and Carlisle, had been considered by some to represent the main conquest route of the Roman army in the late 70s and 80s AD. The western route has long been seen as a later addition to the road network, G.D.B. Jones placing the construction in the late Flavian/Trajanic period (c.85-117 AD) (Jones 1971, 242). However, recent discoveries in Staffordshire and Cheshire have led to this dating being challenged and a construction date in the early Flavian period (69-77 AD) has been proposed as part of the principal conquest route (Strickland 1995, 24; Rogers 1996).

Early published evidence for the Roman road

The line of the road between Wigan and Warrington has been well established since the 18th century (Figure 6). The earliest published account of the road dates to the late 18th century (Whitaker 1771). Whitaker's account was used by Revd Sibson in the following century in his detailed discussion of the road, published in 1836. At the time Sibson wrote, the road was still visible in fields through the adjacent townships of Haydock, Newton and Winwick. The

evidence took the form either of construction materials, particularly gravel and/or red sandstone, ploughed up in the fields or the line of the road visible as a broad bank. Much of the route has now been built over in Newton and Haydock but further south in Winwick the course remains open land.

Sibson observed the course of the road in Haydock in the plantation on the west side of Haydock Lodge. At that point the road was 'fourteen yards wide, and a yard in thickness. It is formed of earth, covered with a layer of red freestone, on which is a coat of gravel' (Sibson 1836, 578). He then traced the line of the road through Newton. The road was clearly visible in a field called Mather's Croft (Tithe Award field no 628), which lies opposite Lawton's Farm on Ashton Road (centred at SJ 581 966). The route crossed 'Townfield Lane', where road materials were visible in the sunken lane, then in fields at School Field, Little Rushy Hey and in the ditch between the latter and Great Rushy Hey (Tithe Award fields nos. 686, 709: here called 'Field' not 'Hey'). From there the road crossed the turnpike, Crow Lane, opposite Tanyard Barn where it was visible as a patch of gravel in waste ground and again in Tanyard Meadow (Tithe field no 1223). The next section, which is where the road was investigated in Acorn Street in 1995, is treated rather cursorily by Sibson: 'The road is again traced by a bed of stones and gravel, through the Water Meadow, and through two fields, called the Further Eight Acre, and the Middle Two Acre' (Sibson 1836, 578). The latter two can be recognised in the Far Eight Acres and Middle Two Acres of the Tithe award (1281, 1280). The course then runs through 'Moss Two Acres' (Tithe Award: Moss Pasture, no 1284, and 'Little Two Acres', no 1294), where it is 'marked by fragments of red freestone, and by a great quantity of gravel'. Sibson notes the change in alignment on the hill here (at about SJ 5848 9473), the road continuing through Four Acres (Tithe Award 'Five Acres', no 1295), and later in Brownsworth and Gable Heys (Tithe Award 'Brownsearch' no 1363; 'Upper Big Cable Hey', 'Middle Cable Hey', 'Little Cable Hey', nos. 1357, 1356, 1355) where once again gravel and stones mark the course.

Some years later in 1852, Robson notes that the road at Haydock is formed 'not of pavement, but of a substructure of rude masses of sandstone built up together six or seven yards wide, and covered with a thick bed of gravel, while in some places, the sod has been previously removed, and a layer of sand spread below. The depth of the road in the centre is between two and three feet, the stone foundation being about one-half' (Robson 1852, 203). He observes the course of the road as a bank: 'the rounded crest of the road is

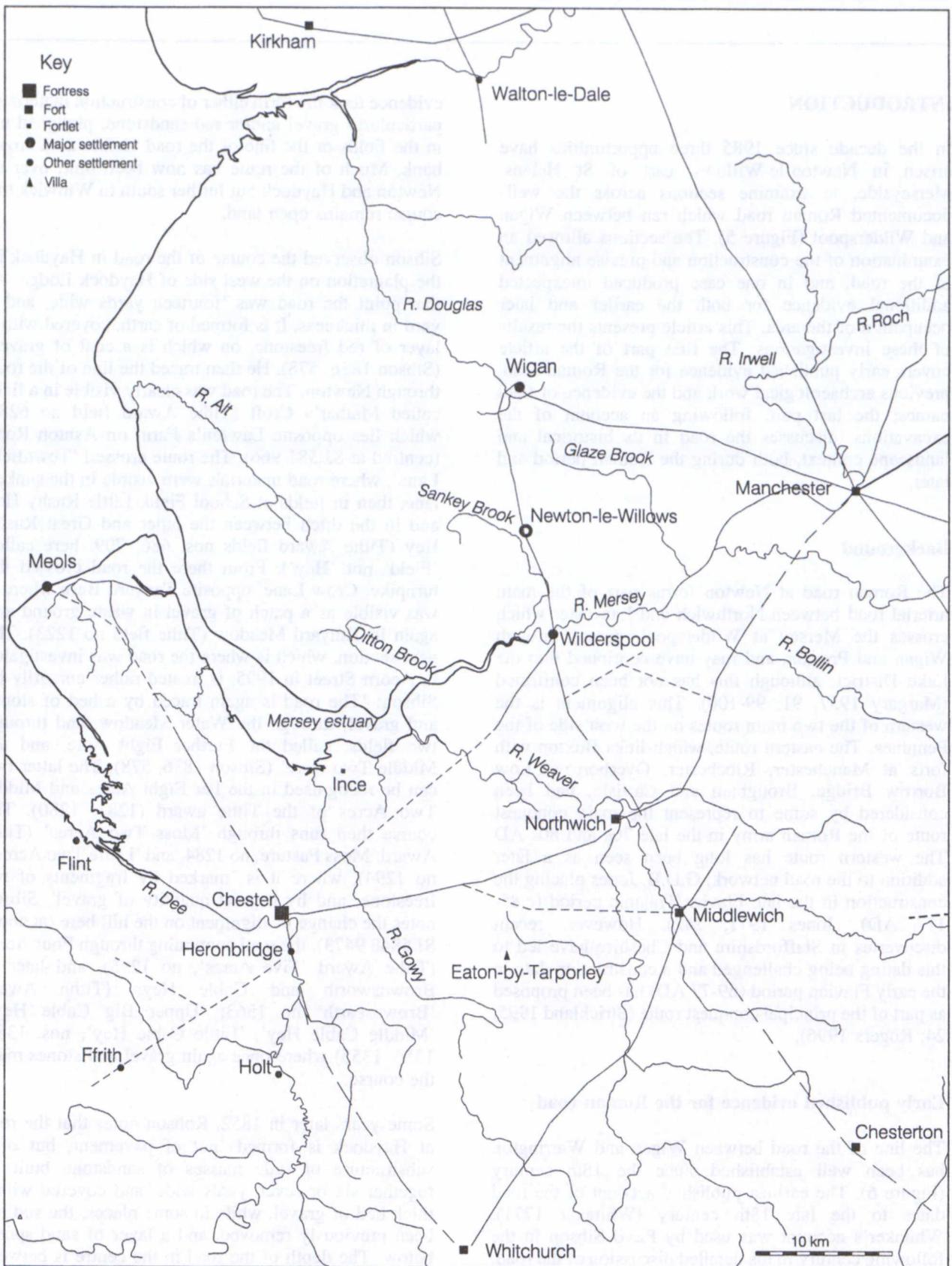


Figure 5: The Roman road network in the lowland North West showing the position of Newton-le-Willows

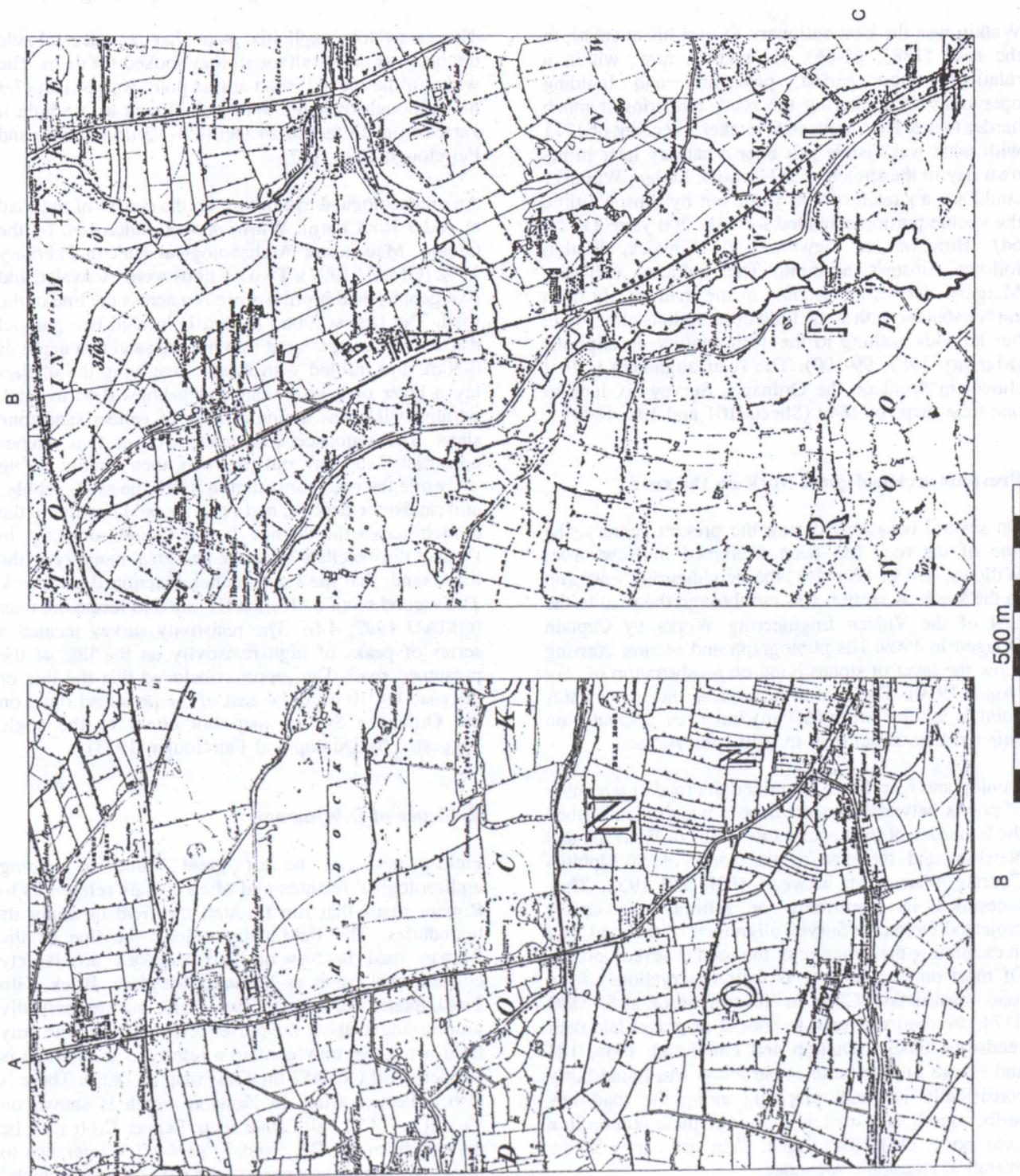


Figure 6: The route of the Roman road through Newton, reproduced from the 1849 Ordnance Survey map, 1st edition, 6": 1 mile.

often plain enough, its course generally straight, and there can be little doubt, that the road at Haydock has been a direct continuation of that at Appleton...' (Robson 1852, 203).

Watkin was the next antiquary to turn his attention to the road (1883, 62-66). He records how, within a relatively short period, ploughing and building operations were altering the road, rendering it much harder to see. He compares Whitaker's account of 1771 with what was visible just over a century later in his own day in the stretch near Haydock Lodge; Whitaker could see a stretch of 600 yards but by Sibson's time the visible portion extended for only 200 yards (1883, 64). However, in Newton and Winwick, Watkin follows Sibson's account. The modern authority, Margary, derives his account of the road largely from earlier sources with some field observations of his own, but he adds nothing to the 19th century descriptions (Margary 1957, 99-100). The road alignment is first shown in detail on the Ordnance Survey six inch to one mile maps of 1849 (Sheets 101 and 108, 1849).

Previous archaeological work on the road

On several occasions during the present century, the line of the road has been examined in Newton-le-Willows, and in Winwick, the neighbouring township to the south. A section was cut through the road to the east of the Vulcan Engineering Works by Captain Doggett in 1909. His photograph and section drawing show the layer of stones lying on a substratum of clay (Anon 1910). The central section of the road at this point is 22 feet wide (6.7 m) but rises gradually on either side to about 0.30 m below the surface.

Dunlop and Fairclough examined the road at a number of points between Newton Brook, which here formed the boundary of the historic townships of Winwick and Newton, and the area to the south of St Elphin's Church, Warrington between 1928 and 1932. They succeeded in confirming or refining the earlier projected Ordnance Survey alignment of the road, and in examining the structure of the road at several points. Of most direct relevance is their observations of the road construction. Close to Newton Brook at SJ 5894 9374, the road was seen to consist of gravel laid over sandstone blocks (Dunlop and Fairclough 1935, 101 and Figure 7). The same construction was found fairly consistently in small pits dug along the road line further south in Winwick, but a complete section in a field north of Hollins Lane, Winwick, showed the overall stratigraphic sequence,

'The Road is composed of sandstone blocks roughly 8 inches in diameter and about 4½ inches thick. These blocks seem to be embedded in a very thin layer of small-stoned gravel and sand. The inequalities of the surface of the sandstone blocks were filled with larger-stoned gravel (up to 2 inches). Gravel is scattered

largely in the soil either side of the line of the road, which may account for the sandstone only having 2 inches of gravel and sand on it' (Dunlop and Fairclough 1935, 104-5, Fig. 11).

The excavators explicitly state that no trace of side ditches was noted, although they looked for them. The width of the 'paved' road at this point was 24 feet (7.3 m), although over the Winwick stretch as a whole it varied from 14 feet to 24 feet (4.3-7.3 m) (Dunlop and Fairclough 1935, 107).

An archaeological evaluation on the course of the road at Alder Root Farm, Winwick was undertaken by the Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit in February 1992 (GMAU 1992). Two sections were excavated and five geophysical profiles were run across the line of the road. The first section (Trench I) located two parallel ditches c.8.0m apart, cut into natural sand to a depth of 0.30m, and infilled with sands. Overlying the ditches lay a layer of coarse sand and pebbles 0.40 m thick within which was a single layer of yellow sandstone slabs. The sequence was interpreted as two ditches constructed to mark out the road, then rapidly silting up, while the road construction itself, the sand, pebbles and sandstone deposit, had been spread laterally by the plough across the ditches. It was thought unlikely, in view of the excellent drainage and great mobility of the local sand, that the road ditches functioned as drains. The second section (Trench II) failed to locate the road (GMAU 1992, 4-6). The resistivity survey located a series of peaks of high resistivity on the line of the presumed road. The report concluded that the line of the road lay 10 m to the east of the projected route on the Ordnance Survey map but closer to the angle suggested by Dunlop and Fairclough (1935).

Evidence of field-names

Field-names can be of great value in tracing archaeological features and often contain references to Roman roads that run through the field or along its boundaries. The field names along the line of the Roman road in Newton and Haydock are largely conventional, such as Tanyard Meadow, Brick Kiln Field, Sandy Mains and Town Field, and are markedly uninformative about the presence of the road. The only field name that may contain a reference to the road is Pepper Croft (No 657 on Tithe map of 1839). There is also a Pepper Alley in Newton which is shown on Yoxall's 1745 Legh Estate map. Pepper Croft may be derived from the OE *Pyppel* ('pebble'), a reference to the gravel which was used in the road construction and which is scattered by ploughing to become visible on the surface of fields. However, an alternative derivation is from the peppercorn rent payable on the field.

The scarcity of field-names which refer to the Roman road may be significant in that the road played little part in the landscape of medieval and later Newton (see discussion below).

Geology and topography

The drift geology of the Wargrave area consists of a blanket of reddish brown Boulder Clay containing irregular curving linear deposits of sands and gravel, which may be peri-glacial ice-wedging. The upper surface of the Boulder Clay is weathered to a yellowish colour. The Boulder Clay overlies Bunter Pebble Beds Sandstone (Geological Survey of Great Britain map Sheet 84 (Wigan), 1970).

The local topography is characterised by a gently undulating landscape, cut by meandering streams, the Sankey Brook and Newton Brook. The ground rises to the north to Crow Lane East and the High Street of Newton, where it reaches the 30 m contour, and falls gradually to the two streams to the south-west and south-east.

1: ACORN STREET, WARGRAVE, 1995

Introduction

During refurbishment of the Wargrave Council Estate in Newton-le-Willows, the landowner St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council, acting on the advice of the Merseyside Sites and Monuments Record (MSMR) Officer, commissioned an archaeological evaluation to determine the likely impact of development on any archaeological deposits which might survive from the Roman road which was shown on Ordnance Survey maps running through the garden of No 89 Acorn Street (SJ 5890 9533). The writer carried out the field evaluation and desk-based appraisal of the site for St Helens Borough Council.

The excavation

A single trench, aligned east-west and measuring 14.7 by 1.6 m, was opened with a mechanical excavator across the rear gardens of numbers 87-89 Acorn Street, with a very small extension into the rear of number 85 (Figure 7). The excavation was carried out between 7-10 March 1995 by R.A. Philpott, with the assistance of Anthony Eccles.

An air-raid shelter had destroyed a large part of the stratigraphic sequence on the northern edge of the excavation trench so efforts were concentrated on cleaning up the north-facing section of the trench which contained the full surviving sequence.

The stratigraphy (Figure 8)

?Prehistoric (Neolithic/Bronze Age) feature

The earliest recognisable feature was a post-hole measuring 0.12 m east-west by 0.15 m north-south with a neatly truncated tapering profile. The top of the feature had been truncated by the machine trench but

it contained a consistent fill of yellowish brown clay silt sand. Within the fill, at 0.15 m below the machined surface, was a prehistoric flint scraper, probably of late Neolithic or Bronze Age date (SF1). It lay with its flat surface uppermost and level in the centre of the post-hole, and gave the impression of having been deliberately placed in that position.

The presence of one flint implement does not date the post-hole with any certainty to the prehistoric period since it may have been placed, or have fallen, into the empty post-hole during the original digging of the post-hole, or after its disuse, when the object may already have been ancient. Nevertheless, the presence of the artefact provides a hint of prehistoric activity within Wargrave. The implications are discussed further below.

The Roman road

During machining a spread of compact gravel was observed and was removed to be recorded in section. The section revealed that this gravel was a thin discontinuous deposit which extended for 2.8 m in the section but was no more than 70 mm thick, composed of small rounded glacial or river pebbles with a maximum length of 50 mm but mostly between 20 and 40 mm long. The pebbles were in a silty sand matrix (Munsell colour 10YR 4/6). Only one fragment of local red sandstone was noted in the section; this measured 80 mm long. At the eastern end, the gravel dips down very slightly and ends on the outer edge with a steep-sided cut into the natural subsoil. This gravel deposit was interpreted as the base of the Roman road foundation, which had been laid on an almost level surface on top of the Boulder Clay subsoil.

West of the gravel deposit, two shallow ditches were clearly visible in the section. The base of the machine-cut trench also revealed the line of the lowest ditch fills, running north-south and parallel. The fills of the ditches were similar, and consisted largely of lenses and deposits of sand of varying texture. The primary fills of each ditch consisted of coarse sand and gravel, presumably rapid inwash from the road surface. The inner (eastern) ditch (17) survived to a depth of 0.37m below the ploughsoil, while the outer (western) ditch (16) was more heavily truncated by the ploughsoil at 0.27m deep; the surviving cut of each measured 0.98m wide. The stratigraphy demonstrated that the two ditches were open at the same time since one fill (15) lapped over into both partially silted ditches (Figure 8).

Some 0.6m east of the edge of the gravel road foundation, a third ditch was visible in section (29). It had a flattish base and measured 0.27 m deep and 0.87 m wide at the top. The fills consisted largely of sands and silty sands with some small pebbles in the base. Fills of this type are usually interpreted as rapid inwash and the source of the sand, together with the small pebbles present in some fills, is likely to have been the gravel surface of the adjacent road. The ditch appears to have been dug along the line of a 0.15 m deep, V-

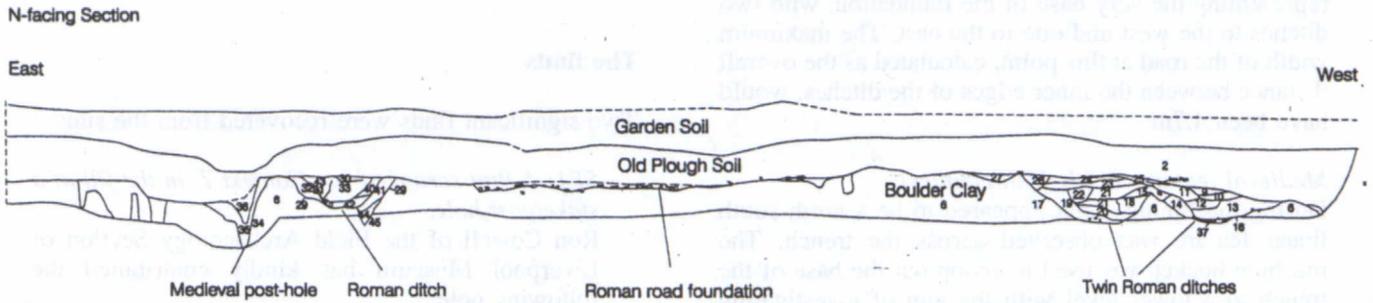


Figure 8: Section across the Roman road at nos 87-89 Acorn Street, Wargrave, 1995.

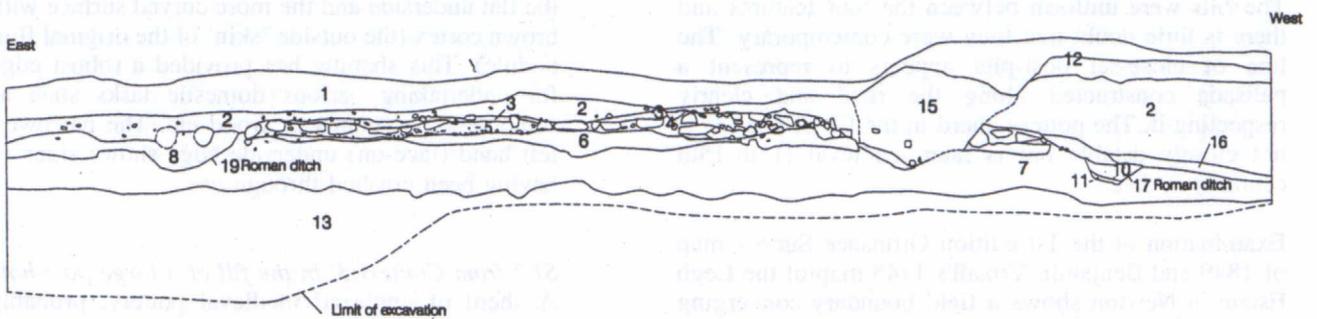


Figure 9: Section across the Roman road at Crow Lane East, Newton, 1985.

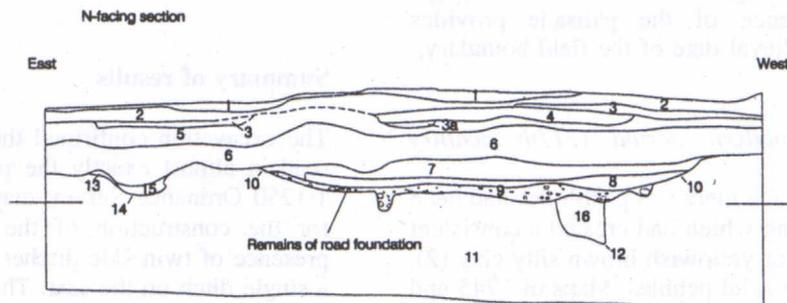


Figure 10: Section across the Roman road at Pine Avenue, Newton, 1992.

shaped furrow which was filled with sand and some iron pan, since this feature was observed running north-south across the base of the excavated trench. The precise alignment of the inner (western) edge of the ditch along the furrow suggests the latter was a marking-out furrow.

The Roman road survived as a thin deposit of pebbles, representing the very base of the foundation, with two ditches to the west and one to the east. The maximum width of the road at this point, calculated as the overall distance between the inner edges of the ditches, would have been 4.7m.

Medieval features (12th-15th century)

During machining, what appeared to be a north-south linear feature was observed across the trench. The machine bucket was used to scoop out the base of the trench to a lower level with the aim of investigating this possible ditch in the section. However, on closer examination after cleaning, the 'ditch' was seen to consist of a series of four close-set post-holes or post-pits of varying size and depth. However, the fills were a uniform mid-dark yellowish brown silty sand clay, with a few small rounded glacial pebbles. The fill of one of the features (3) produced a sherd of unglazed medieval pottery (SF2).

During machining, it was thought that these consisted of a single linear feature running parallel to the road. The fills were uniform between the four features and there is little doubt that they were contemporary. The line of close-set post-pits appears to represent a palisade constructed along the road and clearly respecting it. The pottery sherd in the fill of one (3) is not closely datable but is later medieval (13th-15th century) in date.

Examination of the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of 1849 and Benjamin Yoxall's 1745 map of the Legh Estate in Newton shows a field boundary converging with the line of the Roman road immediately south of the Liverpool-Manchester railway embankment. The boundary appears to form a major feature within the landscape, possibly subdividing the demesne attached to the hall of Newton, and boundaries of several adjacent fields all abut this feature. It may be chance that the boundary coincided with the Roman line at this point, since the two alignments otherwise converge. However, the presence of the palisade provides evidence for the medieval date of the field boundary.

The post-medieval/modern period (?17th century onwards)

The Roman road and the medieval post-holes had been truncated by ploughing which had created a consistent 0.30 m deep deposit of yellowish brown silty clay (2), with a few rounded glacial pebbles. Maps of 1745 and 1839 show that the site lay within enclosed fields and it is probable that post-medieval and later ploughing was responsible for the creation of the ploughsoil. No

finds were recovered from the ploughsoil.

The latest activity on the site is represented by a very dark brown garden soil (1) and a World War Two air-raid shelter. The houses on Acorn Street appear to date on architectural grounds to the 1930s and the formation of the topsoil will have taken place since the houses were built.

The finds

Two significant finds were recovered from the site:

SF1: A flint scraper from Context 7, in the fill of a stake/post-hole.

Ron Cowell of the Field Archaeology Section of Liverpool Museum has kindly contributed the following note:

This artefact is a flint scraper of probable Bronze Age date (c.2000-1200 bc). It is made from flint, which has come locally from the Boulder Clay, and has been made on a largely naturally-shaped blank. This had become detached from its parent nodule through frost action (traces of a 'pot-lid' fracture on the flat underside) which had provided a suitably shaped piece to hold, so that a minimum of shaping was required. This is confined solely to the edge, where about seven scars are found running between the flat underside and the more curved surface with brown cortex (the outside 'skin' of the original flint nodule). This shaping has provided a robust edge for undertaking various domestic tasks such as scraping skins, plants or wood etc. The narrower, left hand (face-on) underside edge shows signs of having been crushed through use.

SF2 from Context 3, in the fill of a large post-hole

A sherd of unglazed medieval pottery, probably from the shoulder of a jar or jug. The outer surface is gritty with a variable light grey to orange-brown colour. There is a possible knife-trimmed 'facet' on the exterior. Internally the surface is light orange. The fabric is very sandy with a light grey core. The sherd is not closely datable but is clearly medieval, of a date probably between the 13th and 15th centuries.

Summary of results

The excavation confirmed the position of the Roman road in almost exactly the place indicated on recent 1:1250 Ordnance Survey maps. It produced evidence for the construction of the road, in particular the presence of twin side ditches on the western side and a single ditch on the east. The maximum width of the road was 4.7 m. The presence of at least four post-holes on the edge of the road, one of which produced a sherd of medieval pottery, shows that the edge of the

road coincided with a field boundary at this point, possibly because here the road remained a sufficiently prominent feature to dictate the alignment and position of a palisaded boundary within the medieval landscape. Finally, it revealed unexpected traces of prehistoric activity in Wargrave in the form of a pointed stake-hole containing a worked flint.

The site had been ploughed prior to the creation of the 1930s housing estate and ploughing had destroyed the upper construction of the road, leaving only a thin spread of pebbles at the base of the road together with the ditches.

Along the base of the eastern side ditch was a narrow steep-sided V-shaped cut which ran north-south the full width of the trench and in the same alignment as the road. The fill consisted of pale buff sand and some iron concretions; a very few larger pebbles were also evident in the fill. This may have been a natural periglacial feature the line of which coincided with the ditch or much more likely a deliberate furrow, possibly marking out the road alignment.

The Acorn Street section confirmed several points of similarity with the previous excavations across the road, in that it revealed a foundation layer of pebbles and the existence of side-ditches which had been infilled rapidly with sand and fine gravel. The width too was in the lower end of the range observed so far. However, there were points of difference from other sections. This is the first time that a double side-ditch has been observed on one side of the road, an apparent plough or marking-out furrow running along the base of the ditch was noted for the first time, and it appears to be the first occasion where medieval features have been observed apparently respecting the road. The section has therefore provided evidence for the laying out of the road, its construction and its survival in the landscape into the medieval period.

Prehistoric evidence: discussion by Ron Cowell

Very little is known of Bronze Age settlement and landuse in the area; no settlements have been located and only the occasional chance find of flint or bronze is known that may point to settlement locations. Environmental evidence suggests that landuse and farming may have been based on a mobile system which has left little trace in the landscape other than for burials. The *ad hoc* use of local flint may be part of the system, with little time spent fashioning tools in preference to the use of suitably shaped natural pieces for specific tasks and when needed, with their discard probably taking place quite soon after.

2: CROW LANE EAST, NEWTON-LE-WILLOWS, 1985

Introduction

In June 1985, through liaison with St Helens Planning Department, the then Archaeological Survey of Merseyside (part of the former Merseyside County Museums) was advised of a major housing development south of Holly House Farm, Crow Lane East, Newton-le-Willows. The 1:1250 Ordnance Survey map showed that the area lay on the line of the Roman road at NGR SJ 5832 9549.

On a visit to the site in June 1985 a deep trench excavated for sewage disposal was found to have cut across the line of the Roman road, exposing details of construction in the side of the trench. The present section lay *c.* 230 m south of Crow Lane East and approximately 60 m west of the modern road serving the two schools south of Crow Lane (Figure 7).

The stratigraphy (Figure 9)

The Roman road

The road had been constructed on an existing deposit of silt sand soil (7) (Figure 9), and had been bedded on a foundation of clean red sand (6), upon which was laid a shallow layer of small sorted pebbles up to 30 mm in diameter. Above this was a layer of flattish Bunter sandstone slabs (4), up to 0.30 m across and averaging 50-60 mm in depth, laid to form a gently cambered surface 6.2 m in width. This in turn had been covered by a thin layer of fine pebbles (3), which measured on average 20 mm in diameter. The road was flanked on either side by a shallow ditch (19, 17) approximately 0.70 m wide on the east and 0.50 m on the west, both of which had been filled with sand and pebbles washed in from the uppermost surface of the road (layer 8 in ditch 19 to the east, and layers 9, 10, 11 in ditch 17). To the west the pebble surface had been dispersed beyond the ditch by the action of water and the plough and it is this spread of gravel that has been identified in previous fieldwork on the line of the road.

Modern features

A modern ditch (15), associated with a recent trackway (12), had cut through the road surface at one point.

In autumn 1983, the surrounding fields, as they were then, were walked by Ron Cowell and W. Highcock while the ploughed surface was visible, but no evidence of land-use earlier than the 18th century was found. The area adjacent to the road was further monitored carefully, on a number of occasions during topsoil stripping and excavation of service trenches, but there was no sign of pottery or other artefacts of Roman date. There was thus no evidence of Roman occupation in the vicinity of the road at this point.

The road construction corresponds closely to that found in the sections examined by Dunlop and Fairclough in 1928 and 1929 east of Winwick Hall Lodge, although they were unable to find any trace of side ditches (Dunlop and Fairclough 1935, 104-7).

3: Pine Avenue, Newton-le-Willows, 1992 (Figure 10)

Introduction

In November 1991, the Field Archaeology Section of Liverpool Museum was notified by St Helens Borough Council of a planning application for proposed development of land at Pine Avenue, Wargrave, Newton-le-Willows, centred at NGR SJ 5844 9488 (Figs 2 and 3). As the area of the proposed development lay on the course of the Roman road, the developers, Maritime Housing Association Ltd, commissioned an archaeological investigation of the site in advance of the development. An east-west trench was excavated by machine (Figure 8) across the supposed line of the road. The trench measured 24.80 m long and 1.50 m wide, with a maximum depth of about 2.00 m. The site lay about 330 m south of the section in Acorn Street. The fieldwork was carried out by Lynn Smith and Steve Membery from 18-20 May 1992. This summary is based on the report by Lynn Smith (Smith 1992).

The stratigraphy

The only significant part of the trench section lay close to the western end. The earliest feature in the stratigraphic sequence was an irregular cut (12) into the natural clay which was filled by a light slightly mottled, yellowish-brown sand (16). It appeared in both the north- and south-facing sections and the shape and fill suggest it was a periglacial feature.

Approximately 5.40m in from the western end of the trench and visible in both sections was a compact but shallow layer of rounded white pebbles varying from 20mm to 100mm in size and set within a silty clay matrix (9). This had been embedded into the top of the natural boulder clay (11) and at several points the stones had been further depressed into the clay to form possible wheel-ruts (Figure 9). To the east the pebble layer had been slightly dispersed along the base of the gently concave cut. This was interpreted as the remains of a road or trackway. Above this stony layer a thin band of dark grey silty clay had developed which was devoid of inclusions (8). This appears to be a build up of silt on the surface.

All overlying deposits and other cut features with one undated exception (14) were 20th-century in date. The north-facing section had an additional cut (14). This was filled with a mottled green/grey/orange sand (13), similar to that found within the matrix of context (7)

on the opposite section, and a dark greyish black silty clay which contained very occasional flecks of charcoal (15). This did not appear to have any direct relationship with the roadway.

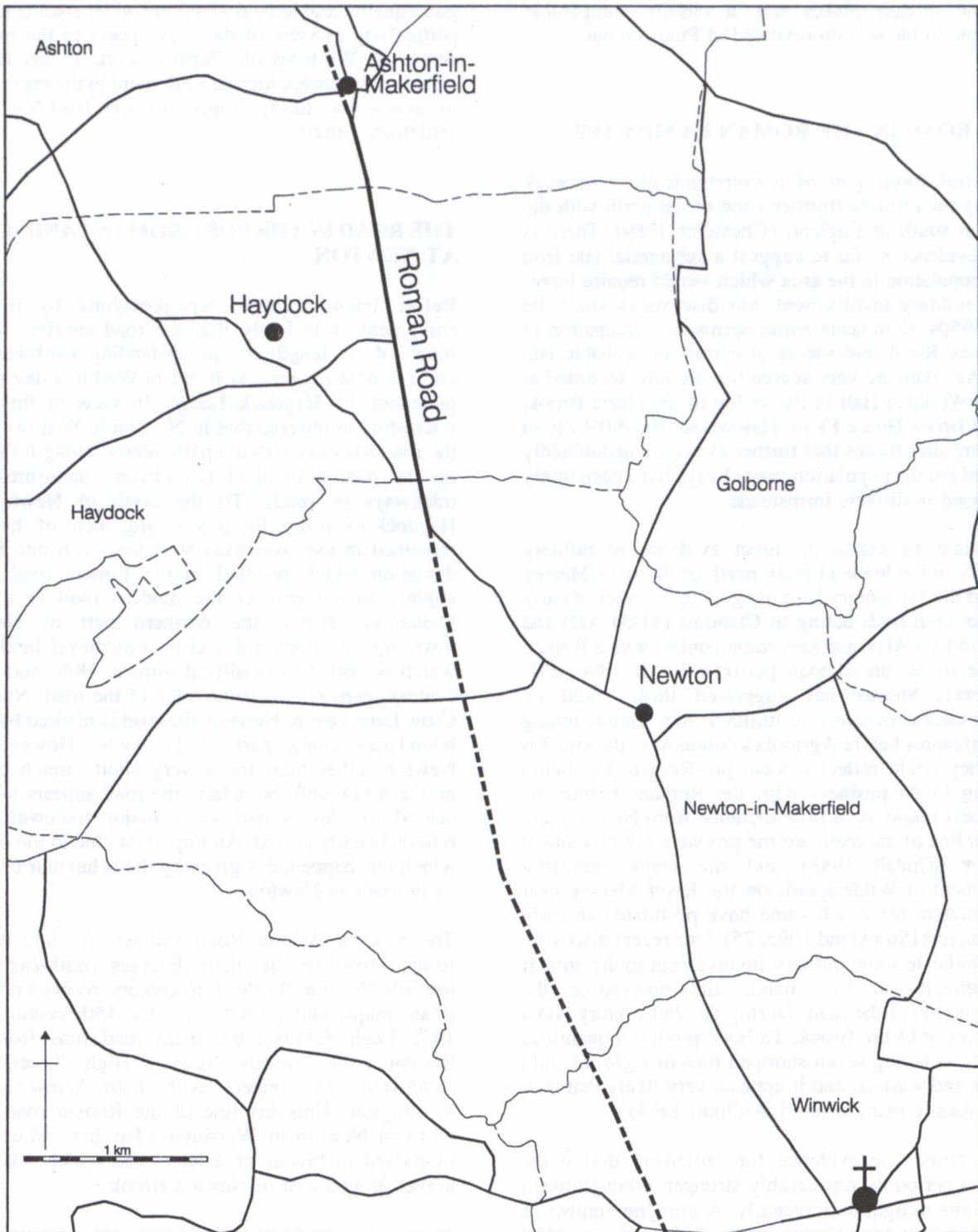
Finds were almost completely absent from the trench as a whole. Only one single small fragment of intrusive window glass was recovered from the south-facing section, below context 9, and appears to have been redeposited by the JCB.

Discussion

The pebble layer (9) was interpreted as a road or track. However, the markedly concave base to the pebble deposit, lying in a shallow scoop, gave the feature the appearance of a shallow hollow-way (10). The line of the road at Pine Avenue proved to be approximately 13m to the west of that marked by the Ordnance Survey (see Figure 11). No side ditches were observed in the boulder clay at this point.

It is uncertain whether the hollow which was cut into the pebble deposit was an original feature of the construction of the road or track or whether it was a secondary development. The first possibility, that the shallow scoop was original, is on balance less likely than the suggestion that the road in its present form is a result of later modification. The reasons are as follows: in the well-preserved sequence at Crow Lane East and also at Acorn Street the base of the road is virtually level, implying a shallow broad cut made into the top of either the natural boulder clay at Acorn Street or a soil horizon at Crow Lane East. The basal deposit at Acorn Street is a pebble layer, while at Crow Lane it is a red sand overlain by pebbles. If it is correct to assume the construction would have been broadly similar, then the hollow is likely to represent the wear of the road by the passage of traffic, following the removal by weathering or wear of the upper surface. The surviving pebble deposit may therefore represent the remains of the compressed and sunken base of the road, or even a later repair or attempted consolidation of the surface by re-laying pebbles. The latter alternative is supported by the presence of a shallow silt deposit over the pebbles, indicating that before it fell out of use and silted up, any original overlying sandstone or gravel road metal had disappeared. Either way little survives of the original construction, and it is uncertain if in its present form the surviving remains represent the Roman road or a later track continuing the same alignment.

The form of the pebble spread at Pine Avenue and the absence of side ditches, is very similar to Doggett's section of 1909, east of the Vulcan Engineering Works (NGR SJ 5877 9410). His photograph and section drawing show the layer of pebbles lying on a substratum of clay (Anon. 1910). The central section of the road at this point is 22 feet wide (nearly 7 m) but rises gradually on either side to about one foot (0.30m)



- ✚ Anglo-Saxon parish church
- Anglo-Saxon settlement
- - - Township boundary
- Principal roads by 19th century
- - - Roman road
- - - Roman road (disused)

Figure 11: The Roman road with township boundaries, pre-Domesday settlements and the principal post-medieval roads (the road network follows the 1st edn 6" OS map of 1849)

below the surface. This fact coupled with the absence of side ditches makes this a closely comparable example to the section revealed at Pine Avenue.

THE ROAD IN THE ROMAN LANDSCAPE

The road forms part of a communications network linking the military frontier zone of the north with the civilian south of England (Chevalier 1989). There is little evidence so far to suggest a substantial late Iron Age population in the area which would require large-scale military involvement, but discoveries since the mid 1980s do indicate some permanent occupation in the area. Rural settlements of certain or probable late Iron Age date are very scarce but are now recorded at Great Woolden Hall in the valley of the Glaze Brook, and at Brook House Farm, Halewood. The difficulty in locating sites means that further examples undoubtedly existed but the population may always have been thinly dispersed in discrete farmsteads.

As might be expected, direct evidence of military activity in the lowland plain north of the river Mersey during the 1st century is lacking. A thin scatter of early Roman coin finds dating to Claudius (41-54 AD) and Nero (54-68 AD) indicates some contact with a Roman source in the pre-Flavian period (Shotter 1990, 231). However, Shotter has suggested these could be interpreted as evidence of military intervention among the Brigantes before Agricola's conquest in the late 70s but they could reflect a local pro-Roman population willing to do business with the Romans before the conquest phase. At a little distance from Newton, and on the line of the road, are the probable military site at Wigan (Tindall 1983) and the major industrial settlement at Wilderspool, on the River Mersey near Warrington, for which some have postulated an early Roman fort (Strickland 1995, 25). One recent discovery does indicate some military involvement in the area, if not directly at first hand, and post-dating the construction of the road. During the 2nd century AD a rural site at Ochre Brook, Tarbock produced quantities of tile, including seven stamped tiles of *legio XX*, kiln debris and wasters, and it appears very likely that they were locally manufactured (Philpott 1994).

By contrast, the evidence for settlement during the Roman period is considerably stronger although much has come to light only recently. A growing number of cropmark enclosures has been recorded in aerial photography in the last decade (Cowell *et al.* forthcoming) and together with the evidence of other finds is beginning to suggest a number of settlement sites were established in the countryside *de novo* in the Romano-British period. Many cropmark sites remain undated but excavation and fieldwalking has indicated a 2nd-century date for one site at Croft near Winwick while Great Woolden Hall produced a phase of Roman occupation (Nevell 1988). The presence of the road is likely to have played an important role in stimulating

clearance and settlement on well drained sites close to good quality arable land along the wider road corridor, particularly in view of the easy access to the market centre at Wilderspool. Further work is needed to establish the chronology of settlement in the region and to assess the likely impact of the road on local settlement patterns.

THE ROAD IN THE POST-ROMAN LANDSCAPE AT NEWTON

Before intensive and deep ploughing by modern equipment, it is likely that the road survived along much of its length as an upstanding earthwork or embankment (*agger*), as it did in Watkin's day in the plantation by Haydock Lodge. In view of this it is interesting to observe that in Newton-le-Willows itself the road has not exerted a particularly strong influence on the pattern of field boundaries, enclosures and trackways or roads. To the north of Newton, in Haydock township, the precise alignment of the road remained in use over long stretches, with one minor deviation which resulted in the Roman road lying slightly to the east of the modern road in a later plantation. Within the northern part of Newton township, the medieval and post-medieval landscape which is visible in fossilised form in 18th- and 19th-century maps retains some trace of the road. North of Crow Lane East in Newton, the road is marked by field boundaries along part of its route. However, in Newton, other than for a very short stretch at the northern township boundary, the road appears to have ceased to play a part as a major routeway at a relatively early period. An important clue to the date at which this happened is given by the behaviour of other early roads in Newton.

The modern Ashton Road follows the line of the Roman road so far, then diverges south-eastwards towards Newton. By the 18th century, as evidenced by estate maps, and probably by the 15th century (the 1465 Legh Survey), the main road runs from the Roman road towards Newton High Street, then southwards to connect with both Winwick and Warrington. Thus the line of the Roman road from northern Newton to Warrington has been effectively by-passed in favour of a later road which takes the higher ground east of Newton Brook.

The decline and disuse of the southern section of Roman road therefore resulted from the development of two important regional centres some way away from the line of the road by the later Anglo-Saxon period. At Newton itself, a 'new tun', the new manor or farm, was created as a royal administrative centre and head of a shire or hundred. The creation of the hundredal system took place after the Mercian conquest in the first quarter of the 10th century AD (Farrer and Brownbill 1908, 7) and may have led to the foundation of the new focus of settlement on good agricultural

land some way from the Roman road. A second centre further off the Roman road alignment is Winwick, a wealthy ecclesiastical site mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086 but earlier in origin, as demonstrated by a 10th-century sculpture at the church of St Oswald.

The failure of the section of the road south of Crow Lane to influence the pattern of field boundaries and local trackways suggests that it no longer played a role in the medieval landscape. The excavation in Acorn Street suggests that a palisade had been constructed along one edge of the road, probably in the medieval period (broadly between the 12th and 15th centuries AD), implying that the road was still a visible feature at that date. However, the enclosure pattern which can first be seen mapped in the mid 18th century (Benjamin Yoxall's map of 1745), shows that by this time the field boundaries ignore the road and it appears to have ceased to have even the status of a field track. In part this may reflect the land-use of the area. During the medieval period the land through which the road passed was probably farmed from different estates. Some land west of Newton Hall was probably demesne, farmed from the Hall estate, while in the southern part of Newton another estate with its focus at Old Hey close to the Sankey Brook held a discrete block of land. The line of the Roman road might have cut across the grain of local traffic at this point, rather than assisting it.

CONCLUSIONS

The three sections achieved the objectives of establishing the position and construction of the road. They demonstrated differential survival of the road in different parts of Newton owing largely to modern ploughing and other disturbance. Incidentally, the excavation at Acorn Street showed that good quality archaeological deposits may survive the construction of modern housing estates.

The sections demonstrated some variation in the construction of the road and of its ditches, presumably reflecting the local geological and topographical considerations of availability of raw materials and local drainage which the road builders had to take into account. The overall alignment of the road as revealed by the three sections indicates that the Ordnance Survey alignment is accurate to within a maximum of 13 m at Pine Avenue. The sections recorded also help to confirm accounts of the road construction from earlier this century and serve to extend our knowledge of the Roman and post-Roman use of the landscape.

The site archives

The archives for all three sites are housed in the Field Archaeology Section of Liverpool Museum. Nos. 87-89 Acorn Street has the site code 45 and Merseyside Sites and Monuments Record (MSMR) No 5895-58; Pine

Avenue has the site code 29 and MSMR No 5894-15; Crow Lane East has the MSMR reference no. 5895-4.

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Abbreviations

GMAU Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit
 NGR National Grid Reference
 NMGM National Museums & Galleries on Merseyside
 OE Old English
 OS Ordnance Survey
 SF Special find